

The Rules of Love

THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

The Virgin Rule Book

LAUREN BLAKELY

The Virgin Game Plan

LAUREN BLAKELY

The Virgin Replay

LAUREN BLAKELY

The Virgin Score-Card

LAUREN BLAKELY

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

LAUREN
BLAKELY

THE RULES OF LOVE COLLECTION

LAUREN BLAKELY



COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Lauren Blakely

LaurenBlakely.com

Cover Design by © Kate Farlow

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

CONTENTS

Did you know?

About

The Virgin Rule Book

Copyright

About

The Virgin Rule Book

Prologue

The Virgin Rule Book

Prologue

1. Crosby.

2. Nadia

3. Crosby.

4. Nadia

5. Nadia

6. Crosby.

7. Crosby.

8. Crosby.

9. Nadia

10. Crosby.

11. Nadia

12. Nadia

13. Crosby.

14. Nadia

15. Crosby.

16. Nadia

17. Crosby.

18. Crosby.

19. Nadia

20. Nadia

21. Nadia

22. Crosby.

23. Nadia

24. Crosby.

25. [Nadia](#)

26. [Nadia](#)

27. [Crosby](#)

28. [Nadia](#)

29. [Crosby](#)

30. [Nadia](#)

31. [Crosby](#)

32. [Crosby](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Another Epilogue](#)

[Be A Lovely](#)

[The Virgin Game Plan](#)

[About](#)

[Copyright](#)

[The Virgin Game Plan](#)

[Preface](#)

[Present Day](#)

[Prelude](#)

1. [Reese](#)

2. [Holden](#)

3. [Reese](#)

4. [Holden](#)

5. [Reese](#)

6. [Holden](#)

[Interlude](#)

7. [Holden](#)

8. [Holden](#)

9. [Reese](#)

[Present Day](#)

10. [Reese](#)

11. [Reese](#)

12. [Holden](#)

13. [Holden](#)

14. [Reese](#)
15. [Holden](#)
16. [Reese](#)
17. [Reese](#)
18. [Reese](#)
19. [Holden](#)
20. [Reese](#)
21. [Reese](#)
22. [Holden](#)
23. [Reese](#)
24. [Holden](#)
25. [Reese](#)
26. [Holden](#)
27. [Reese](#)
28. [Holden](#)
29. [Reese](#)
30. [Reese](#)
31. [Holden](#)
32. [Holden](#)
33. [Holden](#)
34. [Reese](#)
35. [Grant](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Another Epilogue](#)

[The Final Epilogue](#)

[Be A Lovely.](#)

[The Virgin Replay.](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About](#)

[The Virgin Replay.](#)

[Preface](#)

[Her Prologue](#)

[His Prologue](#)

1. [Sierra](#)

2. Chance
3. Sierra
4. Chance
5. Sierra
6. Chance
7. Sierra
8. Chance
9. Chance
10. Sierra
11. Sierra
12. Chance
13. Chance
14. Sierra
15. Chance
16. Sierra
17. Chance
18. Chance
19. Sierra
20. Chance
21. Chance
22. Sierra
23. Chance
24. Sierra
25. Chance
26. Chance
27. Sierra
28. Chance
29. Chance
30. Sierra
31. Sierra

Epilogue

Epilogue

Be A Lovely.

The Virgin Scorecard

Copyright

About

Preface

The Virgin Scorecard

Mr. Right Now

1. Shane
2. Clementine
3. Clementine
4. Shane
5. Shane
6. Clementine
7. Shane
8. Clementine
9. Clementine
10. Shane
11. Clementine
12. Shane
13. Clementine
14. Shane

Chapter 15

Epilogue

Captain Romance

Prologue

1. Sullivan
2. Erin
3. Sullivan
4. Erin
5. Sullivan
6. Erin
7. Sullivan
8. Sullivan
9. Erin
10. Sullivan

Epilogue

Kiss Your Tulips

1. Drew
2. Frankie
3. Drew
4. Frankie
5. Drew

Limo Bang

1. Marlow
2. Hudson
3. Marlow
4. Hudson
5. Marlow
6. Marlow
7. Hudson

Dog Fishing

Nova

Be A Lovely.

Contact

More Books by Lauren

DID YOU KNOW?

To be the first to find out when all of my upcoming books go live [click here!](#)

PRO TIP: Add lauren@laurenblakely.com to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!

For content warnings for this title, go to [my site](#).

ABOUT

A spicy, swoony collection of standalone sports romances! The Rules of Love includes your favorite tropes from brother's best friend to coach's daughter to teammate's sister standalones, with second chance romance and only one bed in the room!

THE VIRGIN RULE BOOK...

Let me make a few things clear. I didn't go to the wedding intending to dance with my brother's best friend, to dare him to show me a very sexy pic on his phone, or to accidentally kiss him in the hotel elevator after the reception ended.

But you know how it goes. Things just happen at weddings...

THE VIRGIN GAME PLAN...

I had an excuse two years ago when I met the sexy but innocent reporter on campus.

She interviewed me for a story on major league baseball's rising stars, and we shared a hot, passionate night that ended

far too soon.

Now I know the woman I can't stop thinking about is the coach's daughter...

THE VIRGIN REPLAY...

Following rules shot me to the top of my game as an all-star baseball player, and the golden rule is this — don't hookup with your teammate's sister.

But ask her to be your fake date when you desperately need one for a family wedding in Hawaii? Then, the hotel books us into the same suite.

THE VIRGIN SCORECARD...

I'm done hunting for Mr. Right. I'm ready for Mr. Right Now.

When I go out with my friends for a night on the town, I bump into the perfect candidate – the one who got away.

Mister Right Now is a novella in a collection of novellas and short stories...

THE VIRGIN RULE BOOK

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Lauren Blakely

LaurenBlakely.com

Cover Design by © Kate Farlow, interior illustration by Laura Moore

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

ABOUT

A sexy, brother's best friend sports romance from #1 *New York Times* bestseller Lauren Blakely!

Let me make a few things clear. I didn't go to the wedding intending to dance with the best man, to dare him to show me a very sexy pic on his phone, or to accidentally kiss him in the hotel elevator after the reception ended.

But things just happen at weddings...

The next day, Crosby and I agree to put all those shenanigans behind us. The fun-loving, stupidly gorgeous, all-star baseball player might be my brother's best friend, but he's my good friend too and has been for years.

I can't risk losing him even though now I can't stop thinking about how much I want him to be my first.

After he takes me to a gala, I make him a proposition. A few nights of friends with benefits, and the benefits are lots and lots of Os. The biggest rule of all? We walk away friends.

But the more nights we spend together, the more I start to feel for my friend. What will happen to our friendship if we rip up the rulebook?

THE VIRGIN RULE BOOK

By Lauren Blakely

To be the first to find out when all of my upcoming books go live [click here!](#)

PRO TIP: Add lauren@laurenblakely.com to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!



The Virgin Rule Book

The logo for 'The Virgin Rule Book' features the title in a large, bubbly, light blue font. The word 'The' is smaller and positioned above 'Virgin'. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black suit and high heels, is sitting on the 'V' of 'Virgin'. A man with short brown hair, wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans, is sitting on the 'B' of 'Book'.

THE VIRGIN RULE BOOK

PROLOGUE

Nadia

A woman needs three things in her purse when she's out with her friends for the night: tissues, lipstick, and a Leatherman multi-tool.

Just the thing for picking the lock on a bathroom door if, say, your bestie gets stuck in the ladies' room at The Extravagant hotel right before the sold-out concert you're there to see.

Who only needed forty-five seconds and that Swiss Army knife for lumberjacks to spring Scarlett in time for the opening song?

This girl.

But when morning rolls around, it's time to change out the handbag arsenal.

Because by day, every badass businesswoman must have three weapons at her disposal when she marches into the boardroom.

Not lipstick. Please, gloss works just fine for nine to five.

Definitely not tissues, because I don't ever let a business associate see me cry.

And save the Leatherman, because wits matter more in the bright light of day.

What's in my purse when I meet with the guys is this: my ovaries of steel, my ultimate poker face, and one hell of a mantra to navigate any conference room or sports arena where I'm the only one who doesn't pee standing up.

Don't be afraid to speak up.

I'm not one bit hesitant to use my voice.

My father instilled sky-high confidence in me, whether it comes to school, to life, or to running the football team he gave me before he died a year ago.

He prepped me to fill his big shoes since I could walk, since I could talk, since I could fly down the street on my bike like the wild child I was. *Look, Ma, no hands!* That was me.

He taught me to be a squeaky wheel, and I aim to get the grease.

I'll tell you when your fly is down, when you've ticked me off, and when you have made my day with your awesomeness.

I'll be your biggest champion, and I'll *also* be the one to let you know when you've stepped in mud.

That's how I am in business and in friendship.

But there's another side to every woman.

The secret side.

I have mine. Oh hell, do I ever. I have a drawerful of classified intel on *moi*.

And when it comes to dating and mating and other forms of associating, I rarely share any hush-hush info. First date, second date—I can't remember when I last had a third—I've never been one to spill the insider scoop on the heart, mind, and body of Nadia Harlowe.

And that's how it's been. Until my brother's wedding, when I asked to see the best man's dick pic.

With that, my secret starts to unravel, and once it does, there's no reeling it back in.

CROSBY

It's official.

I'm radioactive.

My relationship fiascos have gotten so bad that they belong on a BuzzFeed Top Five list. Actually, I'm lucky no wiseass has made one.

Confronted with the final bill from my lawyer, I take a hard look at the results of my latest belly flop into the dating pool. My cousin Rachel introduced me to Daria, a motivational speaker who was highly motivated to sell a racy shot of my favorite body part to a sleazy publication.

Fine, fine. I shouldn't have sent Daria the dirty pic in the first place, but you should have seen the one she sent me.

Along with a dare: *Ball's in your court.*

And my balls very nearly wound up in court as evidence of her malfeasance.

That was fun.

And costly. From my comfy couch, I hit send on the payment to Bentley & Cohen Partners and heave a sigh.

"Good riddance, Daria," I mutter. I ended that fling months ago, but the wreckage took this long to clean up.

Rachel blames herself for the Daria debacle, and she's been texting daily to ask how I am or to send a picture of her kittens chasing their tails, or to forward me a particularly witty column from my favorite political satire site.

But she thinks a new woman will make up for the last one being a rotten egg.

How about Rosemary the schoolteacher? What about Marisa the boutique owner?

And this latest one that just arrived:

Rachel: Can I set you up with my fabulous friend Sasha? She's a nurse! She loves baseball, rescue animals, and hiking in Muir Woods, just like you do. Plus, she's a sweetheart.

She's included a picture of her friend—a gorgeous redhead smiling at the top of a mountain she just climbed—but I'm not even tempted.

Okay, I'm a *little* tempted. I'm not made of iron, and Rachel's hiking pal is smoking hot.

But I'm turning over a new leaf.

I stand, grab my keys, and tap out a reply as I leave my pad in Pacific Heights.

Crosby: Love ya, Rach, but I'm benching myself. I am out of the running for dates, setups, hookups, situationships, or more.

Rachel: Really? Are you just saying that? I swear, she's nothing like Daria. I still feel terrible.

Crosby: We're all good. And yes, really. If I kept hitting into double plays or striking out looking, my manager would bench me. So I'm doing the same to myself.

Rachel: Has there ever been a time when you couldn't use a baseball analogy?

Crosby: Life is baseball.

Rachel: Ah. So, what if you miss a shot at a home run with this woman while you're benched?

Crosby: That's a chance I'll take. Gotta run—tux fitting with Eric in ten minutes.

Rachel: You'll meet someone soon who's a sweetheart. I just know it! Keep the faith.

I respond with a noncommittal smiley face. Rachel's a good one, but she's dead wrong. I don't meet sweethearts. I meet bad girls.

I *like* bad girls. And bad girls like me.

But they haven't been *good* for me. Hence, it's time for a change.

Tucking my phone into my jeans pocket, I zip up my fleece—San Francisco is fuck-all cold in February—and make my way up Fillmore Street to Gabriel's Tuxedos, feeling solid with my dating game plan.

The *zero*-date plan.

In baseball, a player sometimes needs to sit out a few innings to reset. And I figure if that works in baseball, it must work for anything else, including dating.

I meet my longtime bud outside the tuxedo shop, knock fists, then head for the changing rooms in the back, where Gabriel shows us the wedding duds.

He's my regular supplier, and he takes care of the guys on my team too. I've got my own tuxes—every pro athlete does—but Eric's bride loves the color blue, so I needed a new one for his nuptials.

I change into a navy-blue tux, then step out to check my dapper reflection in the three-way mirror. "Can't help it. I was born to make tuxes look good."

Eric smooths a hand over his lapel. "Need Gabriel to find a bigger door for your ego when we leave?"

"The loading doors are in the back," the shop owner says, straight-faced.

"Double-wide for my pal's head, I hope," Eric says.

“On it.” A new customer walks in, and Gabriel excuses himself to take care of them. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do.” I turn to Eric as Gabriel moves off. “You didn’t give me a chance to share the love. I was going to say you look like a cool cat too. We both look good.”

“Thanks, that was heartfelt,” Eric says dryly.

“That’s what the best man is for. Moral support and the occasional compliment.”

“Everything I could ever want.”

I adjust my cuff links in the mirror, catching Eric’s gaze more seriously. I need to tell him I’ve decided to hand over the keys to the dating car for the next stretch of road. That I need a designated driver because I can’t be trusted behind the wheel.

“Speaking of moral support ...” I clear my throat. “Remember that time in eleventh grade when I vowed not to send Avery Forrester a bouquet of flowers from a secret admirer, aka me?”

Eric laughs, shaking his head as he fiddles with his sleeves. “Knew she was bad news when she claimed you copied her F. Scott Fitzgerald essay to cover for copying yours. And yet you still wanted to bone her.”

I narrow my eyes as he serves up my teenage woes. But, fact is, I need the reminder. “So you do remember.”

“You’ve been the king of bad judgment for ages when it comes to women.” Eric knots his bow tie. “Just like I remember that time last fall when you told me to take your phone away for the day so you’d abstain from calling Camille Hawthorne.”

I wince at the cruel memory. “She stole my best socks. The ones with the giraffes. Those were my lucky socks. I needed them back.”

“Dude, all your socks are lucky. At least that’s what you tell me.” Eric adopts a lower tone, imitating me. “*I wore the hedgehog socks when I won the ESPY. I wore the wolf socks*

when I won MVP. I wore the penguin socks when I hit my fortieth homer of the season.”

I smile, cocky bastard that I am, as he rattles off my accomplishments. “Thank you, Almanac of Crosby Cash.”

“I’m the protector of your socks too. If I hadn’t kept you from caving and calling Camille, surely she would have stolen the penguin ones next.”

I bring a hand to my heart. “And I love you for looking out for my weak ass when it comes to the ladies.” I tug up the hem of my blue tux pants, showing him my footwear. “By the way, I got the giraffes back. Wearing them today as my Eric-is-getting-hitched good luck socks.”

He peers at the long-necked animals on my feet. “How did you retrieve them?” He holds up a stop-sign hand. “Wait. Do I want to know? Does it involve you and Holden breaking into Camille’s apartment for an elaborate heist?”

“Ha.” Holden is also a good friend, despite the fact that he was just traded from Los Angeles to San Francisco to play second base for the city’s *other* major league team. The enemy team, so to speak. But rivals can be buds. “O ye of little faith.” I wiggle a brow at Eric. “It involves your sister.”

He hums doubtfully. “How did Nadia get involved? She’s not here in San Francisco yet.”

“Got ’em back right before Christmas. Camille was in Vegas then, and she loves magic, so I arranged for a trade. And Nadia had a good laugh when I asked her to score a pair of tickets for a new magic act in the city for Camille—the ransom price for my favorite socks.”

Eric shakes his head, laughing. “Two tickets to a magic show for the woman who held your socks hostage? You could have bought another pair, you know. There’s this thing called the internet—you say, ‘Google, find me purple socks with giraffes on them.’”

I scoff. “I wore these when we went to the playoffs two years ago. Don’t you remember my walk-off homer in game two? These are irreplaceable.”

Eric rolls his eyes. “You are a special kind of superstitious. Also, you’re aware that you have the worst taste in women?”

“Well aware. That’s my point, man. I can’t risk losing my lucky socks—or worse, my sanity—by getting involved with the wrong woman again. Camille was bad news. Daria was worse. They are all bad news, and I am drawn to bad-news ladies.” I punch his arm. “So, just like you asked me to stand up for you and be your best man, I need you to be my best bud and keep me far away from women. *All women.*”

He strokes his chin, nodding thoughtfully. “So you need an accountability partner again? This is bigger than holding your phone for the day. You need me to be your sponsor?”

A reel of images flickers before my eyes—my personal BuzzFeed list of my top dating woes. The stolen socks, the contraband dick pic, the missing car, the disappearing dough, and the Cabo vacation that nearly got me tossed into a Mexican jail.

It’s the easiest answer I’ve ever given. “I do, man. I really do. I’m swearing off women for the next several weeks. Through spring training.”

Eric lets out a loud, barking laugh. “Oh, that’s rich.”

I square my shoulders. “I can do it.”

“I doubt it,” Eric says.

“I have to do something. Women are my kryptonite, man.”

He nods. “And you’re toxic right now.” His dark eyes hold my gaze, like he’s weighing whether I’m serious. “No take backs? No excuses?”

I hold up my right hand and avow, “I am nuclear, and I need to change.”

“Then I’ll be the rubber band on your wrist, and I’ll snap like a son of a bitch if you get near anyone.”

“So I’m entering Ladies’ Men Anonymous through spring training,” I announce grandly.

Staring in the mirror, I consider that challenge. I do like women.

Scratch that. I *love* women.

Serial monogamy is kind of my thing. I dig dating when I'm in town and when I'm out of town, dating during the season and during the off-season. I relish the company of women, and I'm a people person who loves getting to know someone.

Can I seriously go a whole two months without a date?

I draw a fortifying breath, staring at my reflection like I'm staring at the pitcher's mound.

Patience.

I am the king of patience at the plate, and I know how to wait for my pitch.

Fuck yes, I can do this.

I'm a goddamn athlete. I've spent my whole life as a devotee of self-discipline—early morning workouts, diet regimens, training, training, and more training.

If I can resist an outside pitch, I can resist women.

"I can do it," I tell Eric emphatically as Gabriel heads our way. "From now through spring training. I can't risk losing another pair of socks, or someone snapping a shot of my prized baseball bat," I say, gesturing to my crotch.

"I'm holding you to it, bro." Eric holds up a palm for me to smack, and I do.

The shop owner reaches us, his lips twitching like he's holding in a laugh, then he clears his throat. "Everything good?"

I give him a suspicious stare. "You were laughing at me too," I accuse, wagging a finger at him. "You don't think I can do it either."

Gabriel adopts an expression as serious as a priest's. "Every man has his Achilles' heel."

Eric's eyes twinkle with mischief as he chimes in, "Crosby, even Gabriel knows of your weakness."

"Seriously? How do you know this is my Achilles' heel?" I ask Gabriel, indignant.

Gabriel smiles sympathetically. "Remember when you and Holden were here in December buying tuxes for the New Year's Eve gala?"

"Yes," I mutter. "One of my former Tinder dates called while we were here."

"And she said she'd lost her diamond earrings in your apartment," Gabriel continues, even-keeled. "Said she needed them to pay for a medical procedure for her sister. Asked if you had seen them or could replace them."

Can I just grab a paper bag to cover my face? Chagrin, thy name is Crosby.

"Dude," Eric says, chiding me.

"I didn't fall for it," I insist.

Gabriel pats my shoulder. "You didn't. Because Holden and I told you it was a known scam."

"You *almost* fell for that?" Eric asks incredulously.

"Fine," I grumble. "I have a soft spot. I wanted to help her."

"And we want to help you," Eric says. "You need it, man. Not only are you a magnet for trouble, your heart is too squishy."

"That's not a bad thing," I say, but combined with my terrible taste, maybe it is.

I toss up my hands in defeat. I've got nothing left in the protest tank because they're both right. Time to man up. "Fine. I'm doing this. Whole-hog, cold-turkey, full-on woman ban through spring training. Hell, better make it until Opening Day."

The shop owner whistles.

Eric claps.

I take a bow.

“You heard it here first,” Gabriel quips. “Would you like me to let Holden know when he stops by to pick up his tux later today?”

I roll my eyes. “Spread the word, why don’t you? Hire a skywriter. Hoist a banner.”

“We’ll all be your no-date sponsors, Crosby,” Eric says with a grin.

That’s what I need.

Backup.

Accountability.

My guys to have my back.

“Fair enough. You can all call me out if I slip.”

Eric stares at me. “No slipping.”

“It’s for your own good,” Gabriel adds, then snickers under his breath, “Diamond earrings.”

Eric shakes his head, amused. “Did you even sleep with the diamond earrings chick?”

“No,” I practically shout.

Eric holds out his arms in a wide *there you have it* shrug. I could caption this pic, *I told you so*.

“I get it. She was never even in my apartment. But I felt bad for her.”

“You’re a good one. That’s why you’re going to need a team of men to back you up. I want daily reports.”

“And when he’s on his honeymoon, you can report in here,” Gabriel puts in.

“Fair enough.” I’ve got a trainer for fitness, one who whips me into tip-top shape with ruthless sprints, squats, and crunches. I’ll enlist these guys as my no-love trainers. “Also, Gabriel, I’ll be sure to give your store a shout-out on my social

media.” I run a finger along the suit jacket. “Because this tux is dope.”

“Thanks again for finding these blue ones,” Eric adds, taking off his jacket to hang it up. “Mariana will be thrilled.”

“Happy wife, happy life,” Gabriel says with a smile. “I’ll meet you at the register when you’re ready.”

I shuck off my own jacket and undo my shirt buttons, turning to Eric. “Speaking of your nuptials, I don’t need to bring anyone, do I? Since obviously, with the detox, I’d rather go solo.”

“I hear ya, but fair warning—Mariana does have a ton of single friends.” Eric taps his chin, lost in thought for a moment. “That might be like serving cupcakes at a meeting of the cupcake resistance. What do we need to do so you can just say no?”

It’s a valid question. I take a deep breath and noodle on the dilemma. Then the answer arrives in a flash.

I have a genius idea to avoid the cupcake temptation. But to pull it off, I’m going to need the help of Eric’s sister once again.

NADIA

Who authorized all this stuff?

We're talking boxes, shelves, drawers, racks, and hangers upon hangers of clothes. Stacks upon stacks of sweaters.

"My sweaters have been self-propagating. That's the only explanation," I declare from the middle of my walk-in closet.

Scarlett studies the scene, humming thoughtfully before she answers, "It's hard to argue with that." She meets my gaze, her green eyes flashing question marks. "But how do you know your sweaters are replicating themselves and not just mating with each other when you're not looking?"

Snapping my fingers, I point at her. "Maybe it's both," I say, gesturing wildly to the clothes. All the clothes. "I can't possibly have *bought* so many things. It's impossible that I purchased so many shoes."

Though the evidence suggests otherwise—floor to ceiling shelves full of heels, sandals, flats, boots.

My heart thumps harder as I gaze at my pretties. Is there anything better than shoes?

But before I get lost in the beauty of all those pairs, I've got to get to the bottom of this bedeviling closet.

I tap my chin. "I heard a podcast recently about possible scientific developments in nanotechnology involving machines and tubes and rays and *stuff* that would enable DNA and RNA to self-replicate. What if that happened to my clothes?" I run my hand along a fire-engine-red cashmere V-neck that I wore

to a December meeting last year. It's folded on top of a cherry-red twinset, on top of a cranberry turtleneck, perched on a burgundy crewneck. "Evidence, clearly evidence. What if my clothes are on the frontier of experimentation?"

"Yes, that could very well explain your closet," my friend says, then purses her lips together like she's trying to rein in a laugh.

"Right? But that's not all." I march out of the closet, ushering Scarlett with me. I point to the pile of silk, wool, and fleece ascending into a Mount Kilimanjaro of scarves on my bed—scarves I tossed there earlier while packing. I stab my finger in the direction of the offending mound, winding myself up even more, because, oh mama, I am wound tight right now. "I have *sixty-seven* scarves. It's simply not possible that I purchased sixty-seven scarves. Either they're replicating, or someone has been sneaking scarves in here to make me look like a shopaholic."

Scarlett doesn't even try to stifle a laugh this time. "Would that person be you?"

Aghast, I shirk back. Indignant. Utterly indignant. For ... *reasons*. "No. Of course not. I would never do that. Because I can't possibly own that many scarves."

"How do you know there are sixty-seven? Did you actually count the number of scarves?"

"Yes! And I was annoyed that it wasn't sixty-nine."

"Understandable." She fingers the thin emerald-green silk number tossed jauntily around her neck. "I'd contribute to your pile, but alas, that would only get you to sixty-eight."

"Sixty-eight is a sad number, and an embarrassing one," I say, flopping onto the bed, moaning like I'm a balloon running out of air.

Petering out.

Because of that word.

Embarrassing.

It cuts me to the core.

I'm coated in embarrassment courtesy of one stinking email.

An email that's the sour cherry on top of my ice-cream sundae of worry.

"But are you actually stressed about the number of scarves and shoes and sweaters you have?" Scarlett asks gently, setting a hand on my knee. "Or maybe, possibly, is something else going on?"

There she goes, seeing through me like I'm made of Saran Wrap. Or maybe she knows me that well.

Releasing a long, sad sigh, I pick up a scarf, dropping it listlessly around my neck. "I'm moaning in embarrassment. I have too much stuff. I simply can't move all this from Las Vegas to San Francisco, and I'm gross for having bought so much. Just gross."

This minimalism fail is a fraction of the swirl of emotions tangling me up as I prepare to move back to my hometown to run the football team I own.

Home, where I want to be.

Home, with all its complications.

A mother who wants me to find Mr. Right.

An older sister who wants every damn person in a three-hundred-mile radius to love the team.

A brother who worries I work too much, just like our dad.

And a football team that I've moved back to its original city. A city full of angry fans who detest the franchise for moving to Vegas in the first place, and adoring fans with sky-high expectations because we're finally coming home.

Scarlett offers a hand and tugs me up. "Let's tackle this one at a time. Let's donate some of your clothes. That's easy enough. I'll help you sort it all."

"But you're leaving soon. Let's not waste our time sorting clothes and stuff." I make a feeble protest, though I would love

some help. “You’re going back to Paris soon. This will take a year.”

“We can sort everything in a few hours. I’m highly efficient, and I want to help. This is how I want to spend my time with you. Moving is a big deal.”

I try to inhale some of her steadiness, slightly more relaxed now that Scarlett has to-do-listed my clothes. “Winnowing down my wardrobe is a good idea.”

“Yes. But is that going to settle your ...” She lowers her voice, shifts her gaze from side to side, then whispers, “Nerves?”

Ugh.

Nerves.

I hate them.

Scarlett is my best friend, and though I don’t see her often, since she lives in another country, she knows my heart and I know hers. But she doesn’t know what I’ve been up to for the last year.

She doesn’t know one of the secrets in my drawer of them.

And this one aches a little bit today.

I blurt it out. “I failed.”

She rubs my shoulder in soothing circles. “What on earth are you talking about?”

I head to the living room, waving her along. From the coffee table, I grab my phone. Cheeks burning, I click on my email and find the offending message from Samantha Valentine, otherwise known as the most successful matchmaker for discerning men and women in this city.

I show her note to Scarlett.

“Read it out loud,” I grit out. “Hearing the words again will remind me that I’m better off alone.”

Scarlett sighs sympathetically then reads the note.

Dear Nadia,

Thank you again for your business. You've been a pleasure to work with, and I'm delighted to have had the opportunity to seek a match for you. You're a wonderful, intelligent, vivacious woman, and I know you'll find just the right man someday. However, your situation is simply too vexing, and I find that I'm going to have to bow out of playing your Cupid. You're quite particular (as you should be!), but I also simply can't seem to find a man who meets your criteria.

You're a wee bit direct, you like to tell it like it is, and you have, as it turns out, more money than most men I represent. That tends to scare men away. Perhaps consider donating your riches to charity? It might be easier to find a suitable mate then.

Wishing you all the best,

Samantha

Scarlett flares her nostrils. Her eyebrows shoot to the stratosphere. "Seriously? A matchmaker just broke up with you, told you to donate your money, and then settle for a man who's not man enough to handle you the way you are?"

In a nutshell. "Yes! Can you believe it?"

"Who the hell does she think she is? Are we still in the twenty-first century or have I traveled back in time? This is ridiculous and insulting, and I refuse to believe so many men are intimidated by successful women."

"I'd like to believe that too," I say, gesturing broadly to encompass Vegas and everyone in it. "Only this city's men chewed me up and spit me out like so much gristle." And I'm annoyed to the bone about it, but also resigned. "I'm afraid she's right though. Most men don't want a woman who owns a football team. And it's all mine now too." I recently bought out my co-owner, Eliza. She wanted the funds to purchase a basketball team, so we did a deal, and now I'm the sole owner. "Samantha secured me six dates in a year. Six measly dates,

and none of them resulted in a second or third. I am one hundred percent undatable.”

“That’s crazy. What kind of man is intimidated by a successful woman?”

“Let me share a few gems.” I count off on my fingers. “*One*, a well-known hedge fund owner said thanks but no thanks to a second date because he prefers to have the biggest wallet in the room. *Two*, a land developer said he had no interest in seeing me again as long as my title remained CEO. *Three*, a personal injury attorney, who has a gazillion dollars because he sues everyone and wins, said one date with me was enough to remind him he wants to wear the pants in his house. And this after I wore a skirt on our date too. My cute red pencil skirt with white polka dots. It was fashionable and adorable.”

Her nose crinkles. “And he didn’t deserve it. Any man meeting *you* while you’re wearing *that* should thank the goddesses of luck for even giving him a shot at a brilliant, bold babe.”

“Three Bs? Whoa.”

She gives an approving nod. “You’re B cubed, and some man someday will recognize your exponential awesomeness. Then you can bestow upon him your red-and-white polka dots and he’ll fall to his knees in gratitude.”

I crack up at the image she paints. But soon my laughter fades and my shoulders slump again. “Maybe someday.”

I’m back to latent frustration, topped with a dollop of where-did-I-go-wrong. Samantha’s note was like a shot of *unconfidence*. “And look, I know this is a mega first world problem. Don’t cry for me, Argentina, and all that. But it seems men don’t want to date a woman who makes more than they do, or who is used to ordering men around. I have fifty-three guys on my active roster, but sheesh, it’s not like I’m a dominatrix.” I screw up the corner of my lips in a rueful half smile. “At least, I don’t think so. You probably need to have sex to be a dominatrix. But even so, I’m pretty sure I’m not.”

“Nothing wrong with it if you are,” Scarlett says. “But I don’t think you’re one either.”

“Exactly. I’m a virgin.” It’s not a secret with Scarlett. This isn’t my woe-is-my-lonely-hymen speech. My friend knows me, knows why I’ve waited. My virginity isn’t an albatross, simply a choice that I made. “But I wasn’t using a matchmaker to ditch my V card. I was using one because I wanted some companionship. But alas, I’ll be heading to the West Coast virginity intact, and that’s fine.”

“Of course it’s fine. You’ll be ready when you’re ready.”

Since it seems to be my confessional hour, I sweep my hand out to indicate the scarves in the bedroom and the shoes beyond. “So that’s why I have all this stuff. I went a little shopping crazy in the last year. Every time I was dateless, every time a date flopped, every time Samantha emailed to say she was ‘still working on it,’ I bought shoes. Or scarves. Or sweaters.” I dip my head, frowning. “I’m the worst.”

Scarlett wraps her arms around me. “You’re not the worst. But I think you’re particularly stressed out today over everything going on—the move, your dad’s legacy, and your expensive, elite matchmaker being a useless twit.”

She’s right. Moving is stressful in itself, but add in my belief that this was my dad’s dying wish and my dating woes, and I’m extra twisted and tangled up.

I don’t expect anyone to feel sorry for me. I’m an heiress after all. I have wealth and material riches, and I’m very grateful for that. But I want to do right by my dad.

I want to do right by the fans.

And someday, yes, I want what my parents had—love, happiness, respect, partnership.

The trouble is, all those desires are slamming together like carnival bumper cars.

And that was before Samantha’s smackdown made me a woman on edge.

I'm uprooting my life from Las Vegas. Not only do I feel it's what my father would have wanted, it's what I want. My father's biggest regret was moving the team away from his hometown. He missed the San Francisco fans, and he wanted his wife—my mom—to be happy. Her entire family is from the Bay Area, so he vowed to return the team there so she could be near her brother and sisters again.

Then, he fell ill so I'm finishing the job for him. The job of bringing the Hawks home. After he died, I wasn't sure if I was ready to move it back, so I kept the team in Vegas. But when I saw my mom at my brother's engagement party, everything clicked. And I knew it was time to get out the U-Haul.

I worked my ass off campaigning to move the team, to win approval from the NFL and the city. Plus, it makes business sense. Attendance has been dipping here because Vegas is the land of endless entertaining distractions.

I pulled it off, and now I'm bringing the Hawks to a city where the team is both hated and loved.

But at least I can see my mother, sister, and brother more regularly.

That is, when I'm not working. I have a ton of events already lined up in San Francisco, back-to-back meetings with the city regarding tax breaks, appointments with legal counsel over business operations, and interviews with a slew of candidates for the position of general manager.

Can you say *busy*?

I want to do my father proud. When he died, he split his businesses down the middle, leaving them to his three kids—Eric runs the private equity firm, Brooke oversees the real estate holdings, and I've got the team.

I need to go to San Francisco ready to tackle the job and that's all. I don't need sixty-seven scarves to pull that off.

Or countless shoes.

I need to shed the reminders of my datelessness.

Decisively, I snap, “You know what? Screw Samantha Valentine. I don’t need a man. My job is to bring the Lombardi Trophy to the Hawks.”

Scarlett waves imaginary pom-poms. “Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? Nadia!”

I thrust a hand in the air like an orator. “I’m going to San Francisco embracing singlehood. I’ve tried dating for the past year, but I’m moving on. I have bigger fish to fry,” I declare. “And it shall begin with a culling of the clothes.”

“Brava,” Scarlett says, clapping.

Emboldened by her friendship and by my newfound determination, I saunter into my bedroom, tossing my phone on the edge of the bed then heading for the closet, where I grab a pair of black heels. “Shoes are only a sublimation. Shoes are better than necklaces, better than earrings, better than sex, or so I’ve heard, but it’s time to say goodbye.”

Scarlett clucks her tongue. “Hmm. I’m going to have to disagree on that last one. But regardless, let’s donate that pair of heels.” She motions to a pair of silver heels with a slim strap. “How about those too? They look brand-new, but I was with you when you bought them a year ago. Have they even been worn?”

I square my shoulders, owning it. “I bought those as solace after Samantha told me the land developer also didn’t care for me having—*gasp!*—opinions.”

“Opinions are sooo dangerous,” she says, her voice dripping with mockery. “Just keep them to yourself, you pretty little thing.” She tucks the silver shoes under her arm and points to a pair of red stilettos that look fresh out of the box. “What’s their story?”

“If memory serves, I purchased those shoes after my fifty-ninth dateless night in a row. That was the lull between the *quit your job* guy and an off-the-Strip casino owner who wanted to know if I would use a sperm donor if I didn’t find a man soon.”

My friend's jaw crashes to the floor, then the one below it, maybe even to the underground parking garage of my skyscraper. "Please tell me you put him in his place. Please, please, please."

My lips curve up in a grin. "I said, 'If I do, I'll be asking for a man with a high IQ and a big heart. Basically, the opposite of you,'" I say with fiendish glee. "I came up with that on the spot."

"You zinged a deserving target. Nice." She frowns in disgust, shaking her head as she adds the red heels to the donation collection. "And these are a definite donation. We're getting rid of all the pity shoes, because there is no pity needed in your life."

When we're done, the pile on my bed has grown ceiling-high, a mountain of donatable goods.

"This is good," Scarlett says. "You're cleaning house. Starting fresh."

Buoyed by her support, I nod enthusiastically. "I'm going to San Francisco ready to conquer the world of football and franchises and getting back to the Super Bowl. I don't care about dating. I don't care about anything but a few pairs of shoes for the events I need to go to. I will take the city by storm, bring home the Lombardi Trophy, and do my father proud."

She grabs her phone, clicks on her music app, and belts out the first anthemic notes of Beyoncé's "Run the World" as it blasts through my penthouse.

We rock out to the woman-power anthem as we scoop up my clothes, shoes, scarves, and purses, folding them neatly, then tucking them into shopping bags to take to Dress for Success, a fantastic non-profit that helps women get back on their feet with the right clothes for job hunting.

When the tune ends, I'm ready to state my intention with Scarlett as witness. "From now on, no more matchmaking, no more shoe sublimating. There's just the team."

“I’m rooting for you,” she says. “You can do anything you set your mind to.”

Maybe, but there’s one thing I need to sort through still.

“Do I have to get rid of my large family of vibrators?”

“Hate to break it to you, but no one takes those for donation,” she says in a stage whisper.

I roll my eyes. “I know that. I’m simply wondering if I should cull them as part of this house cleaning?” But I dismiss that crazy thought stat. “Pretend I didn’t say that. I would never do such a terrible thing. Let’s go sort the little darlings.”

Scarlett gives me a look that says *oh no you didn’t*.

“News flash. I wasn’t asking you to touch them,” I say.

“News flash. I wasn’t going to touch the vibrators,” she retorts.

I slide open the nightstand then pack up my friends. “I have a feeling I’m going to be needing these the day I arrive.” I raise my favorite pink rabbit in my right hand, and pledge, “I hereby declare my allegiance to vibrators and only vibrators. All of them. We have a polyamory thing going on.”

“A little reverse harem with your battery-operated friends?” Scarlett asks with a quirk of her brow.

“I am their queen, and they live to serve me.” As I pack the pink one, my phone beeps from the bed. “Can you grab that?”

She does and scans the screen. “Crosby. It’s a text.”

My lips curve up in a grin at the mention of my brother’s best friend. “Read it to me, please.”

She adopts a masculine tone. “*Hey, Wild Girl, want to buddy up at your bro’s wedding?*”

I laugh at her imitation. Crosby called in a favor a few months ago, and I was happy to help. He’s Eric’s friend, but I’ve always had a good time with him.

Her eyes twinkle as she meets my gaze. “Wild Girl? He calls you Wild Girl?”

I wave a hand dismissively. “He called me that when I was younger. He means nothing by it,” I say, even as my cheeks flush, even as my skin heats. “I’ve known him for years.”

“And he wants to ‘buddy up’?” She sketches air quotes.

I roll my eyes. “It’s not code for sex. I’ve known Crosby since he and Eric were ten and built dams in the stream behind our house in San Rafael. Since they were twelve, filming themselves with lightsabers doing *Star Wars* moves in the garage. That’s why it says ‘buddy up.’ I’m his buddy too.”

“Why are your cheeks flushing, then?” she asks, amused. No, utterly delighted.

I raise a hand to my cheek as if to hide the heat.

But it’s spreading.

“It’s just ... hot in here,” I mutter.

Her eyebrows wiggle. Her lips twitch. “Is that so? Or is this Crosby a McHottie? I just can’t remember from the last time you mentioned him,” she says, egging me on. “Let me refresh my recollection of the man you’ve known for so long.” She taps around on my phone for a moment, then gasps. “Aha! He is!”

She shows me Crosby’s team headshot as if she’s never seen his image before either, but obviously I know what he looks like too. Heck, there are photos of him and Eric in our family home. Pics of Crosby, Eric, Brooke, and me. He’s a feature in our lives.

But damn, does he ever look good in his team headshot, with his ball cap on and his uniform snug across his broad chest, the short sleeves showing off those hard-won biceps and those pants hugging his muscular thighs.

My God, baseball uniforms are just delish.

Of all the sports uniforms, those are my favorite.

But the best part is he’s cracking a hint of a smile, his jaw is lined with his trademark stubble, and his blue eyes are sparkling with the promise of naughty secrets.

He's got the whole sexy-athlete vibe working overtime.

And Scarlett knows it. "Have fun *buddying up* with the hottest player in Major League Baseball at your brother's wedding."

Buddies.

We're just buddies.

That's all.

As soon as she leaves, I pounce on my phone and call him back so fast.

"Hey, Wild Girl," he says in a voice that makes me feel like he can deliver on the promise of those blue eyes.

CROSBY

Wild Girl.

It's hard for me to call her anything but the nickname I gave her when we were kids.

Ever since I met her when we were in grade school, Nadia Harlowe's been a Tasmanian devil. A whirling dervish of energy, spark, and all kinds of sass.

Two years younger than I am, she was the definition of the word *spitfire*. She was always joining Eric and me for sports in the park, swinging a bat or playing running back in a flag football game. At home, she loved to blast her music loud in her bedroom, pretend she was singing into a hairbrush, and challenge us to sing-offs, usually Kelly Clarkson, Gwen Stefani, or Lifehouse. Full of confidence and smarts, Nadia was never quiet at the dinner table. Over chicken and rice, she'd rattle off questions about the electoral college, equal pay, or famous female scientists.

She made every meal at the Harlowe house an engaging debate, and that fiery spirit traveled with her out of the house too.

One weekend when I was seventeen and she was fifteen, her family took me skiing with them in Tahoe. Fearless to the max, Nadia raced down the trails at Sugar Bowl on her snowboard, schussing over moguls, cruising around bends, and tackling every kind of terrain.

Always ready to do it again.

That's why she's the Wild Girl, the name I gave her in my phone.

While walking down Fillmore, passing a boutique with scarves and wrap thingamajigs in the window, my phone rings and a picture of her flashes across the screen.

It's a shot of her from the LGO Excellence in Sports Awards Gala last year. We both attended—her for the football awards, me for baseball. When I saw her at the gala, I marched up to her, wrapped her in my arms, kissed her cheek, and said, “Please tell me you saved a spot on your dance card for me.”

She laughed, hugged me back, and said, “If they ever have dancing at these awards, I'm outta here.”

We grabbed a drink instead, caught up, and toasted to next year, since neither of us had won that night.

But damn, did she look good. And I'm glad I took that shot of her decked out in a ruby-red dress that worshipped her curves, her dark hair pinned up in one of those fancy buns and her eyes looking all smoky.

I smile when smokey-eyed, red-dress-wearing Nadia appears on my screen.

“Wild Girl,” I say, nice and easy when I answer.

“Wannabe All-Star,” she tosses back, using her nickname for me when we were younger and I was all hopes, dreams, and bright-eyed bravado.

“You do know you can just call me All-Star now? You can drop the ‘wannabe’ part,” I say as I adjust the phone against my ear.

“Hmm. But I do like keeping you on your toes. If I don't, who will?”

Considering what just went down at Gabriel's, a whole damn menagerie of dudes will. But I don't want to think about the guys while talking to a woman who makes red dresses look like they throw themselves at her feet and beg for the chance to grace her curves. “You're the only one, Nadia. So keep it up.”

“Speaking of your toes, how are your lucky socks faring?”

Stopping at the corner, I wiggle them in my shoes. “Happy as clams to be home and safe with their keeper. I even have on my purple ones today.”

“And is it your lucky day?”

With a grin that she can’t see but I bet she can hear, I say, “I’m on the phone with you. How could I be anything but the luckiest?”

“Perfect answer, Mr. Purple Socks,” she says, her laughter floating across the phone line.

“Tell me stuff,” I say as the light changes and I cross the street. “Are you stoked to come back to San Francisco?”

“I am counting down the days,” she says, but her tone is mixed—a little too cheery, and a little bit melancholy.

“Bullshit,” I say as I stride down the hill, making my way to the gym a few blocks away. “I hear a little reticence in your voice.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“Because you’re a Vegas woman,” I say as my gaze catches on the window display in the lingerie shop I’m passing—red lacy bras and white teddies and all sorts of itty-bitty numbers that would look fabulous on—

Whoa.

Stop, brain. Stop thinking about women. I force my amphibian mind away from pretty underthings and lovely curves, from soft skin and the scent of a woman.

“You’re going to miss Vegas, Nadia. You love to gamble. You love the neon and the billboards. You love to clean up at the poker table.”

“That is true. I do kill it at poker. Maybe I’ll just have to start my own game in San Francisco, open a casino, bring the high rollers there.”

I can see that perfectly, can picture her doing precisely that. “I’ve got all sorts of teammates who would love a high

stakes game of poker.”

“Fantastic. Molly’s Game will be my next gig,” she says, then she sighs, but it sounds contented. “And truth be told, I’ll miss my friends here, but I’m excited to return to the Bay Area. It’s been a while, but it’s always good to be home, even though I have a ton on my plate when I arrive.”

“Let me know if you need anything when you get here, okay?”

“I will. I promise.”

“I’m holding you to it. And it’ll be good to have you here. It’s been way too long,” I say.

“That’s why I did a crazy thing. I called as a reply to your text. Isn’t that wild?”

“Among the many reasons you’re the Wild Girl,” I say. “I mean, hell. Who does that? Calling in response to a text? You’re all about shaking things up.”

“That’s me,” she says lightly, then shifts her tone to a bit more serious. “But tell me something about this ‘buddy up’ request. Last time we talked when I was in Paris for business, you said you weren’t sure if you were bringing anyone to Eric’s wedding. Did something change?”

Do I tell her or not? Do I let her know I’ve sworn off women? “I’m not bringing anyone,” I say, not entirely answering, since I’m not entirely sure what to tell her. Instead, I seize the chance to needle her. “You just had to drop that you were in Paris for business.”

She laughs. “I’m not just dropping it in. I *was* actually there. I’m trying to expand the NFL into Europe more, and I had meetings with marketers.”

I hum appreciatively as I reach the next block. “It is so sexy when you talk about marketing and expanding sports to other places. Can you please do that for baseball too?”

“If I owned a baseball team, I damn well would,” she says.

Does she have any idea how hot it is that she owns a team? That is equator-level heat. A powerful woman. A confident

woman. A brilliant woman. Nadia Harlowe has got it going on.

Wait.

Don't do that either, brain. Do not think about your buddy's sister like that. Hell, do not think about any woman like that right now. You're in time-out with the ladies.

"Then buy a baseball team," I say, sticking to the conversation rather than the director's track of innuendo running through my mind.

She laughs. "Rules. The NFL has them. If I buy a baseball team, it has to be in San Francisco, so do you want me to buy your team or the Dragons?"

I wince. "Ouch. Don't talk about buying my local rival."

"How about I just move back to San Francisco and run the football team?"

"Fine, be that way. But you know you love baseball more."

"I love both sports, and I love interesting stories. So what's the story with you suddenly wanting to buddy up? And are you enlisting me as a fill-in date? Is this like the start of a romantic comedy where we agree to plus-one each other? Ooh, can we call our story *Plus-Oneing with the Best Man*?"

"Let's sell the movie rights and make a mint," I quip. Then I answer truthfully. "Yes, I was hoping you can plus-one the best man, since I'm not bringing anyone. In fact, I am taking a break from dating. I am officially off the market from now through spring training. Probably beyond too."

She laughs as I head down the next block. "I'm sure there's a fabulous story behind that. But I'm going to wait to hear it in person."

"You're already ordering up the entertainment you want from me at the wedding table? I hope I can deliver."

"I sure hope you can too, Crosby."

"I'll be prepping all of my best jokes for you. All of my best stories. I'm going to be thoroughly entertaining in my

blue tux. Did you know Mariana has a thing for blue?”

“Hello? Bridesmaid here. Yes, I knew that. And I have a blue dress ready for the event. Mariana has great taste in bridesmaids’ dresses, and this one is quite pretty.”

“So is my blue tux. It’s got some badass ruffles on it and bell-bottoms.”

She makes a husky growling sound low in her throat. “Mmm. Hold me back.”

I blink, processing that sound. Did Nadia always sound this ... sexy? Maybe? Possibly. Hell, she looks sexy, so it stands to reason she sounds that way too.

“It’ll be hard to hold anyone back once you see me in my wedding ruffles,” I tease. “Consider this your fair warning, because I look pretty damn handsome in it.”

“So you think I won’t be able to keep my hands off you? Because I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” she says, a little flirtier than usual.

But perhaps I’m reading into her tone, hearing things that shouldn’t be there. She and I have always had fun together. Have always indulged in a flirty, friendly vibe.

That’s just who we are. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I guess we’ll just have to see about that. Maybe I won’t be able to keep my hands off of you,” I toss back, and then I want to smack myself as I near the gym.

She chuckles lightly, in a sort of challenging tone, as if her laugh is saying *just try me*. “We’ll just have to see when it comes to the big day,” she says.

“I guess we’ll see who’s best at hands-off.”

“We will indeed.”

Why am I talking to her like this? Like I’m going to be touching her? I’m not. We are friends. She’s my buddy’s sister. I’ve known her forever. I’m not going to touch her. Ever. She’s my plus-one at her brother’s wedding. That’s what I need her for.

I reach Total Body Fitness, a little reluctant to end this conversation. It's so easy to talk to her. Always has been. "Hey," I say, gentler.

"Hey to you."

"I'm glad you're coming back to town," I say, speaking from my heart, not my need to serve up sarcasm. "It's been a while."

"It has been. Too long, Crosby," she says, her voice warm and tender.

And there we go. We're us again. Like we've always been. Two good friends. A man and a woman who've known each other forever.

"And I appreciate you being my plus-one. It'll be good to see you," I say.

"And it'll be good for me to keep you from dating," she says.

"True. That is true," I say with a smile. I'm about to push open the door to the gym when an idea flashes before me. "Do I get to see this blue dress beforehand? You know, if I need to get you a corsage."

"It's a wedding. It's not prom. But a corsage and boutonniere do sound kind of fun." She takes a beat, humming. "Actually, Mariana is big on flowers. She always wants people to have the flowers they like best. And I'm pretty sure my mom said the other bridesmaids were going to have them and they were picking out their own, so yes, let's do it."

"I'm on it. Let's do it up. You better send me a picture of your dress so I know exactly what color to get when I go to the florist's shop," I say.

"Consider it done."

We say goodbye, and I head into the gym, more excited than I expected to be to go to my best friend's wedding.

And not simply because I'm happy as hell to see my best friend get hitched.

There's a spring in my step as I imagine his sister in a blue dress.

How it might dip between her breasts. How it might swing on her hips. Land on her knees.

But that's dangerous. I shouldn't think of her like that.

Even so, when a picture lands on my phone as I'm working my quads, my breath hitches.

The air rushes from my lungs.

And it's not from the extra weight. It's not from the workout.

It's from this goddamn dress and the way she looks in it.

She didn't merely send me a shot of her dress, artfully laid out on the bed.

She sent me a picture of her in a boutique somewhere in Vegas, trying on the dress. It's a mirror selfie, and it is smoking.

Nadia's all done up, her lips pursed like she's about to blow a kiss, and she is wearing the fuck out of a sapphire-blue dress that clings to her trim, toned body.

This dress defies any notion of hideous bridesmaid's attire.

This dress is all sex appeal and secrets.

It looks like exactly the type of dress that's going to make it hard for me to sit next to Nadia Harlowe.

But that's the kind of thinking I can't entertain.

Instead, I entertain the triceps machine and do my best to push the forbidden thoughts of this woman out of my head.

NADIA

One week later, Eric picks me up at the airport.

“It’s the blushing groom,” I say as I sail past security into a big-brother hug.

“Yes, that’s me,” he says, wrapping his arm around me, then letting go. “I’m all nervous and atwitter before the wedding.”

“Aww.” I pat his shoulder. “Do you want me to make sure you get a foot rub and a massage before the big day? So you can relax?” I ask, hoisting my purse onto my shoulder as he takes my carry-on and we weave through the crowds.

“That sounds perfect. Why don’t you and I spend a day at the spa? Get our hair done.” He slides a hand through his dark-brown hair, the same shade as mine. “We’ll relax and get hot stone treatments or something.”

“Perfect. I want to make sure you’re totally relaxed before you walk down the aisle,” I say, squeezing his arm playfully as we make our way through the SFO airport.

He shakes his head, amused. “You do know that Mariana is actually walking down the aisle toward me?”

“Oh my God, I had no idea. Thanks for clarifying,” I add.

Eric raises his gaze ceilingward, then says, over-the-top aggrieved, “My fiancée, my older sister, and my younger sister give me a hard time every single day.”

“Of course we do. And you wouldn’t want it any other way,” I say, bopping his nose.

“Speaking of walking down the aisle, Mariana wants you and Crosby to walk together.”

That piques my interest.

Makes my skin tingle a little bit.

Just from the mention of his name.

Exactly the reaction I can’t have.

“Why’s that?” I ask, focusing on the wedding plan, not the tingles plan. “Crosby is the best man, and Mariana’s sister is the maid of honor.”

Eric holds up a making-a-point finger. “But Mariana’s sister’s husband is a groomsman, and Mariana thought they’d enjoy walking together, so she put you and Crosby together.”

I smile widely. “What Mariana wants, Mariana shall have.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the secret to a happy marriage. But,” he says, his tone downshifting to serious as we reach the exit, “no dating him.”

A cough bursts from me. “Did you seriously just warn me not to date your best friend? Doesn’t it usually go the other way around?”

Eric shakes his head, his dark-brown eyes intense. “Crosby is in time-out right now. I’m personally in charge of making sure all women stay far, far away from him.”

I scoff. “I have no interest in dating Crosby or anyone.”

That’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but.

“Good. Because it’s my duty to keep him on the wagon. No dating, no women, no nothing.”

“Trust me, not dating Crosby will be just like ... how it’s always been. Crosby and I are friends.”

“Good. Then you’ll do your part to keep him woman-free too,” he says.

“Of course,” I say quickly, because he’s definitely a friend, so I’m definitely down with the program.

As we slide into the town car, I tell myself that heeding Eric’s warning will be as easy as a quarterback lobbing a pass to a wide-open receiver.

And the receiver running it in for a touchdown.

Except there will be no scoring with Crosby.

Mark my words.

* * *

At the night-before-the wedding dinner the next Friday, I walk into the private room at one of San Francisco’s swankiest celebrity chef restaurants, my eyes scanning the place for all the people I love—my mom, my sister, my brother, his bride, and all my extended family.

Warmth spreads through me at the sight of all this family. I say hi to my mom, sister, brother, and Mariana, looking gorgeous with her waves of brown hair, and her olive skin.

There’s no sign of Crosby, until a hand clasps my shoulder.

And the faint scent of pine mixed with soap wafts past my nose.

For a sliver of a second, I close my eyes.

Then I open them, turn around, and ignore the hell out of the swoopy sensations in my stomach.

Crosby’s here, looking as handsome as he did at the LGO Excellence in Sports Awards Gala.

But he’s always been handsome, and I’ve always handled it just fine.

Because we’re just friends.

“A hundred bucks says your brother’s teary-eyed by the end of the night when he gives his toast,” he says in that

gravelly, sexy voice that sends a dangerous zing down my spine.

Zero in on the way we are.

“You’re already throwing down bets? The dinner hasn’t even started.”

He lifts a shoulder, all casual and confident. “I know your brother well.”

“As do I. So why would I bet against him?”

Crosby’s blue eyes gleam with mischief. “How about we lay down a bet on how long into his speech it takes for him to tear up?”

“You’re so cruel,” I say with mischievous delight, then lower my voice. “But I love it.”

I look at my watch, a slim platinum band that my father gave me when he asked me to take over the team. My heart clenches as I hear the echo of his voice, the somber intensity in his request, and the inscription I read daily. *It’s your turn.*

I wear a ruby ring he and my mom gave me too, a gift when I graduated from my master’s program. They remind me of him, of them, of their love.

I wish he were here tonight.

But if he were, he’d want us all to have fun. To enjoy friends and family to the fullest.

That’s what I vow to do.

I raise my chin, dig into the analytical portion of my brain, and lay down my bet. Bets are fun. Bets are friendly. “Twenty seconds.”

Crosby’s grin goes crooked. “You don’t have a lot of hope in your big brother.”

I narrow my eyes. “Who’s to say that’s not hopeful? Maybe I like his sweet and soft side.”

“Fair enough. But I’m going with forty seconds,” he whispers.

I offer him a hand to shake. He takes it, then he jerks me closer so I'm inches away. "How about a hug, Wild Girl?"

My breath catches. I'm nearly flush against a wall of muscle. His chest is so broad, so sturdy. I'm near enough for his scent to drift past my nose, and my nose likes the way he smells.

"So we're sealing our bet with a hug instead of a handshake?" I ask, evening my tone. I don't want to let on that this proximity is scrambling parts of my brain.

Parts I didn't expect to be scrambled so soon.

"Hell yeah. Best way to bet." Crosby wraps those major league arms around me, bracketing me in. I steal another inhale of that fresh scent of wood and freshly showered man, and my traitorous body does a salsa dance.

I sternly lecture all those tingles trying to take over my mind.

It's nothing.

He simply smells good.

Intrinsically, objectively good, like a cologne ad in a magazine.

That's it. He's simply one of those eau de manliness spreads in GQ. You'd feel this way about any handsome man. It's only logical, considering how long it's been.

When he lets go, I punch him on the shoulder to keep us in the pals zone. "Then we're on. One hundred dollars. But for the record," I say, lifting my chin, "there's nothing wrong with a man getting a little emotional about getting married."

"Did I say there was?" he asks. Around us, guests mill about, lifting champagne flutes, catching up, snagging stuffed mushroom appetizers and avocado sushi from the waiters circling by.

"No. But you seem to be mocking him."

"That's literally my job as his best friend," he deadpans.

I point to my chest. "Hey, that's my job too, as his sister."

He leans in, his face near mine, his voice turning a bit ... naughty. "Then, should we spend the night mocking him together?"

That rumble in his voice makes the little hairs on the back of my neck rise, like they're sashaying closer to him.

What is up with my body's reaction to him? Settle down, hormones.

"I think we should definitely mock Eric," I whisper conspiratorially. Talking about my brother *has* to alleviate these Crosby-induced heat flutters.

So that's what we do during dinner—playfully mock my brother like we did when we were younger.

Trouble is, all this teasing—leaning close, whispering jokes, laughing together—brings back memories of growing up. Memories and emotions that I shelved, happy to ignore them.

Like the crush I had on him way back when.

Yes, that memory, which struts to the forefront of my mind and brings along with it little flutter kicks to join the tingles still ignoring my lectures.

These are the same flutters I felt for Crosby when he was my older brother's best friend in high school.

You're older now.

You're not the sophomore to his senior.

You're not the girl watching the prom king go to the dance with another girl.

I straighten my shoulders, letting all those old memories fall away. I don't have crushes. No matter how good the crushee smells.

At the end of the meal, my brother stands, taps his glass, and clears his throat. "Here we go," Crosby whispers in my ear, and I rein in the shiver.

"Thank you all for coming," Eric says, smiling as he surveys the table. "It means the world to me to see so many of

our friends and family here. I look around this room and know that I'm a man who wants for nothing." He takes a beat though, licking his lips. "The only thing I'm missing is my dad."

Eric's voice cracks. I'm right on time, twenty seconds in, but I'm not enjoying victory. Too many hard emotions swell in me too.

My heart clenches, and grief tightens my throat. I cover my mouth, and Crosby reaches for my free hand under the table, squeezing it.

He's quiet, but that squeeze speaks volumes. *I know this is hard. I know you all miss him. I know you all wanted him to be here.*

Eric goes on, and when he's done, I turn to my seatmate and coconspirator, and say, "Thank you. And don't worry about the bet. I'm not planning to collect."

"You better," he says with a sharp stare.

I shake my head. "I can't. And you didn't win, so it's my call. Don't try to negotiate with me." I keep my tone soft but firm.

"Fine, then you'll have to let me take you out to dinner sometime," he says.

"Sounds like a deal."

But not a date. Not between us. It can't be.

As we make our way out of the rehearsal dinner, Crosby collects my jacket at the coat check then slides it onto my arms. "I'm picking up that corsage tomorrow, Nadia," he says. "You're going to look like a prom queen."

I laugh. Laughter is safer than all these other feelings. "And you'll look like the prom king you were."

He shoots me that cocky grin that charms his fans. That charms me. "And together we'll be wedding buddies."

Yes.

Buddies.

That's what we are. My teenage crush was just that, long forgotten.

Friendship is fine. Better than fine because friendship is all I have room for in my life, and I like having room for Crosby.

NADIA

Those tissues I tuck into my purse for a girls' night out? That's nothing compared to what I pack for a wedding.

Weddings make me cry.

Okay, *fine*. Blubber is more like it.

I can replenish vanishing seas at wedding ceremonies.

I cry when the music begins, when the groom sees the bride's face, when the vows are exchanged.

That is not entirely surprising, considering I cry over dog food commercials. One of the Hawks' biggest sponsors is an organic dog food company, and every time I see that sweet collie patiently wagging his tail while waiting to be adopted by his forever person, we're talking buckets of tears.

That's why I grab an extra packet the next day, snagging it from a drawer in the bathroom of my new penthouse in Cow Hollow, on top of a hill with a gorgeous view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the San Francisco Bay, and the glittering Pacific Ocean.

I've been here for a week now, and I'm fully moved in. I've been working hard, running back and forth to meetings with the city, interviewing general manager candidates.

This weekend, I'm off, focused solely on Eric's nuptials.

Wearing a sapphire-blue dress too, my sister, Brooke, reads *Percy Jackson* to her eight-year-old daughter, Audrey, who's convinced she wants to attend Camp Half-Blood, like the

characters. They're smushed into the corner of my new dove-gray couch, surrounded by purple pillows.

After Brooke finishes a chapter and closes the book, she waggles a well-manicured finger in my direction. "I saw that you only packed two packets of tissues, Nadia. That's not going to be enough for you. Don't forget you needed a towel at my wedding."

Her daughter snickers. "A towel? Why did you need a towel?"

Brooke nuzzles her daughter. "Your Aunt Nadia cries at every single event. She cried at my high school graduation. I was soooo embarrassed," she says.

I sneer at my big sister. "Thank you for teasing me for *caring* about your rite of passage."

Brooke flings me an evil grin. She's particularly good at boomeranging those in my direction. "That was nothing compared to how much you cried at my wedding," she says.

"I was sixteen! I was hyperemotional. My big sister was getting married. Plus, you met your husband in China, and he moved to the US to be with you. That's amazing," I say, then arch a haughty brow. "Or maybe I was happy you were finally moving out of the house."

"Ouch," Brooke says, wincing in over-the-top pain. "I see you still have the zinger spirit, Nadia."

"And I see you still have the crushing spirit of an older sister," I tease.

My mom clicks across the floor, setting a hand on Brooke's shoulder, ever the peacemaker. "And I see you both have the spirit of totally loving each other."

I point at Brooke. "Yes, but I have a heart made of sponge cake and hers is carved from ice."

Brooke launches a saucy look at me. "Just call me Elsa."

Audrey and Brooke break into the famous song from *Frozen*, then they both laugh. "You know I love you. And all your cakey heart sponginess," Brooke says.

Audrey bounces up from the couch, her sleek black hair, thanks to her dad's genes, braided down her back. "I'm ready to see Mariana in her princess dress and then to eat all the cake."

"Me too," I say, offering a hand for high-fiving to my niece. She smacks back. "Cake is the best part of weddings. But vanilla wedding cake, not heart cake."

"And on that note, we agree." Brooke tips her forehead to the door. "I'll be downstairs in the limo with David. See you there in a few minutes."

She takes off with her kiddo to join her husband, and just to be safe, I grab one more packet of tissues, wielding it at my mom. "One more for the road for me."

"Grab an extra for me too, sweetheart," my mom says in a confessional whisper.

"You're not a crier," I say suspiciously. My mother isn't a cold woman, but she's more steady, steady.

Dad was always the crier. Tough as nails in business and a total marshmallow when it came to family.

He was the one with tears rolling down his cheeks when he walked Brooke down the aisle nine years ago.

He was the one with the trembling bottom lip when my mother received an award for all her philanthropic work in San Francisco.

He was the one whose voice broke when Eric told him two years ago that he'd just met the woman he was going to marry.

"Do you miss him?" I ask my mom.

She nods, her voice tight. "I do."

"You wanted him here today," I say, and it's a statement, not a question.

"So much. He'd be so proud of Eric. All he wanted for his son was for him to fall in love."

"He wanted Eric to have what the two of you had," I say, rubbing her arm.

Her eyes well with tears, and I draw her into a hug. “I miss him a lot too,” I say when I let her go. “But I know it’s harder for you. He was your one true love.”

She pulls back, giving me a sad smile. “He was. But I also believe that we can have more than one true love.”

I tilt my head, surprised. She’s always seemed so *rah-rah soulmate-y*. “You do?”

“I’m not looking right now, but I loved love. I loved being in love. And I’m only sixty-five. I’d like to think some of my best years are still ahead of me. And I wouldn’t mind being in love again.”

My heart glows at that thought. At the idea that somebody who lost the man she was married to for more than thirty years has a heart that’s open enough to love again.

It’s an unexpected thought, but one that makes perfect sense now that she’s voiced it. “I bet you’ll find someone,” I say.

She laughs dubiously. “You think it’s easy at sixty-five?”

“Well, it’s hard at twenty-five,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Sweetheart, I’m winning this battle. There’s nothing as hard as dating at sixty-five.”

“Fine. You win, but then again, I wouldn’t know what dating’s like at twenty-five. Or twenty-four, or twenty-three.”

“You’ve never really been in love, have you?”

I shrug, grabbing my silver clutch as we head to the door. “It felt like love a few times. But looking back, no. I liked my high school boyfriends, but it wasn’t love. And being at an all-girls college, I never really met anybody there I fell for. I honestly don’t think I’ve ever been serious enough with anyone to feel that way. Maybe that’s why I cry at weddings. It all feels wonderful and magical and sort of far away.”

She squeezes my hand. “It won’t always be far away.”

* * *

But it doesn't matter if my time is near or far away.

Today isn't about me. It's about my brother.

When we reach the Luxe Hotel atop Nob Hill, I find Eric in the suite next to the ballroom, fiddling with his bow tie, the other groomsmen milling about in the hall.

"For a brother, you look fantastic," I say with a smile.

"For a sister, you look decent," he says.

As we leave and make our way toward the groomsmen, Eric lowers his voice and says, "Don't forget what I said the other day. About Crosby."

My brow knits. "Why are you reminding me right now?"

He gives me a look that says *you know why*. "You've kind of had a crush on him, haven't you?"

My jaw drops. I shake my head in adamant denial. Vociferous denial. "No. Of course not. Not at all. Not one bit."

A dubious brow lifts. "Nadia, I saw how you looked at him when you were younger."

I growl. "You must be confusing me with literally every other woman who crossed his path."

Eric shrugs, smoothing his lapels. "Maybe I'm remembering it wrong." He scrunches his brow, like he's trying to recall something. He tilts his head. "Or maybe he had a crush on you?"

I blink, stopping in my tracks, as the floor imitates a tilt-a-whirl. He did not say that. "What are you talking about?"

"Just seemed that way when we were younger," Eric says, like this yummy nugget is on the same level as remembering a test junior year that he earned an A on. Something mundane and ordinary, when it's actually the opposite. It's big and fascinating. "But what difference does it make now?" Eric asks philosophically. "He's off the market anyway, and I'm

going to make sure he stays that way. I promised him I would.”

“I’m off the market too,” I say, since I need to remember that. I need to underline it, bold it, highlight it.

“Good. Just making sure. You both have way too much going on in your lives for anything to happen. But you’re back in the same city now, and I know days like today make people do crazy things. I met Mariana at a wedding, so I know what happens at weddings.”

I roll my eyes. Then I roll them once more all the way to the back of my head and around. “Nothing is going to happen at your wedding,” I whisper.

I repeat that mantra as the ceremony begins.

I say it a few times as Eric walks down the aisle to the front of the ballroom.

I imprint it on my brain several times.

When the music begins for the bridal party, I clutch a few tissues strategically around my bouquet, ready to dab my eyes.

But it turns out, I don’t feel like crying when I spot Crosby outside the ballroom.

The opposite occurs as he strides over to me, proffering a corsage, then the words, “For you.”

Blue roses bloom brilliantly, and he slides it onto my wrist, next to my watch. My breath hitches as his fingers graze my skin.

Nothing is going to happen at the wedding.

My skin seems to feel otherwise though, all lit up and electric from the barest touch.

“Gorgeous,” I whisper as I stare at the roses, then at my ruby ring, which seems to catch their reflection. I tear my gaze away to take the matching boutonniere and affix it to his lapel. My fingers are steady, but my senses are frantic, out-of-whack radars that are going haywire as I slide the pin through the back of the boutonniere. A faint hint of his aftershave drifts

past my nose, the scent woodsy and clean, and it scrambles my brain, sending those wild neurons into hyperdrive.

He smells so enticing.

And he looks like he belongs on a magazine cover beneath the headline “Rugged All-American Athlete.”

The suit, the five-o’ clock shadow, the twinkling eyes.

Everything.

Just everything.

I step back. “Excellent flower choice,” I say, doing my best to sound friendly.

“Glad you approve.”

He offers his arm, and I drink in the sight of him once more.

My libido roars, rises up, taps my shoulder, and whispers like the she-devil she is in my ear, *He looks crazy hot, doesn't he?*

Yes, Crosby Cash looks insanely yummy in that non-ruffled, non-bell-bottomed blue tux that hugs his muscles and shows off his flat stomach and makes me want to climb him like a tree.

He looks incredible with his dark hair that demands fingers be run through it, with his stubble that begs for hands to roam over it.

And those eyes ...

Those eyes that simply say he’s imagining a woman naked.

He gazes at me with those eyes right this second.

My skin heats everywhere.

Dear God, my rabbit is going to be working overtime tonight.

Especially when Crosby flashes his grin at me. That easygoing grin on his stupidly gorgeous face.

When he links arms with me, a hot shiver rushes over my skin, pulses between my legs.

He leans in closer and whispers, “That dress.”

That’s all he says.

Two words that if written down, if placed in the middle of a poster on a wall, wouldn’t inherently seem like a lusty, sexy compliment.

But from his mouth, in this moment, with heat in his eyes, they feel like the sexiest thing anyone has ever said.

As we walk down the aisle arm in arm, I don’t feel friendly.

I feel something else entirely. Something I haven’t felt in ages.

Maybe ever.

A dangerous desire.

CROSBY

Two weeks.

My turn-off-the-nuclear-reactor-of-my-love-life experiment is fourteen days strong, and I haven't texted an ex or swiped right.

Hell, I killed my Tinder account.

I deleted all my exes' contact info from my phone.

Total reboot. Clean fucking sweep.

But now the real work begins.

No matter how good my best friend's sister looks, smells, or feels with her arm linked through mine, I won't move her from the friend zone to the I-am-dying-to-take-you-to-bed-tonight zone.

But standing next to her is an unexpected test of my Ladies' Men Anonymous resolve.

With each step down the aisle, my mind narrows to thoughts of her.

She smells like ... a whispered moment, like the hint of a kiss.

And it's going to my head.

The faint scent of something tropical, a juicy mango or a lush flower, is tickling my nose, teasing my senses.

To make matters harder, she looks like a jewel. That sapphire dress hugs her lithe body in all the right places, while

letting my overactive imagination do its favorite thing—picture what's underneath that material.

Halfway down the aisle, she steals a quick glance my way, her eyes flashing me a smile under her lashes, as she hooks her arm more tightly through mine.

My heart pounds a little harder.

How can one person look this good, smell this good, *feel* this good?

I have no answers.

We reach the justice of the peace, and I breathe a quiet sigh of relief as we fan to opposite sides—me with the groom, her with the bride.

Thank fuck for the ceremony.

The vows and promises will take my mind off the sensory overload in my body.

But that's easier said than done.

As the justice of the peace speaks, my mind wanders, tripping back in time, making a few quick stops along the way at the LGO Excellence in Sports Awards Gala last year, at the Sports Network Awards the year before, at a local hospital's big fundraiser for pediatric cancer a few years back. All these events where I've chatted with her, shared a joke or a drink.

The images of us laughing flicker before me.

As the justice of the peace talks about Eric and Mariana, my mind stretches further, reaches further into the past, landing on Nadia's senior prom.

I'd just come home from college at the end of my sophomore year to find her going to the dance with Charlie Duncan, a senior too, captain of the debate team and one of those guys who looked like he'd be cast as the best friend in a Netflix Christmas special.

Inoffensively handsome and completely forgettable.

Nadia was the opposite.

She'd practically floated down the stairs and through the living room in an emerald dress, with her chestnut hair in a twist, several strands framing her face in loose, curled tendrils.

Her lips were bright, slick with pink lip gloss.

But her eyes did me in. They knocked the breath straight from my lungs.

I couldn't get enough air.

Had her eyes always been so can't-look-away-from? So brown and warm? So big and open?

Or had I only just noticed?

I was parked on the couch, watching a ball game with Eric and his dad. The bases were loaded, and I didn't care.

She walked over to us on confident feet, the heels making her taller.

"Hey, Wild Girl," I'd said, my voice dry and husky.

I needed a bottle of water. I needed ten gallons. My throat was the Sahara.

"Hey, Wannabe All-Star," she'd said, then I stood and leaned in for a hug.

I was a thief, all right, stealing that embrace. As my arms wrapped around her, the force of my own crush—it had come out of nowhere—hit me like a wild pitch slamming into my thigh.

She was stunning.

And some asshole was going to reap the rewards.

But then, nothing happened with Mr. Netflix, because she came home before midnight, made some popcorn, and invited Eric and me to join her in the kitchen.

Eric said he'd be right there after SportsCenter, but I was all too willing to leave the sports news behind.

"How was prom?" I asked, gritting my teeth, hoping her early return meant Charlie had been cast in the role of the too-boring-to-get-another-date role.

She rolled her eyes. “All he wanted to talk about was himself.”

My shoulders relaxed. I had to fight off a smile. “I take it that’s not on your list of favorite topics?”

She shook her head, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she kicked off her heels. “I want someone to laugh with, make fun of the world with, talk about the world with. Charlie has the conversation range of a biscuit.”

With a straight face, I said, “Biscuits, I’m told, are not known for their sparkling wit.”

“Sparkling wit is a prerequisite. I haven’t been on a ton of dates, but I know this much—without sparkling wit, I have zero interest,” she said, then offered me some of the popcorn. I took a handful, popped it into my mouth, and chewed.

“Because you give good sparkles. You give good wit. And obviously, you have top-notch taste,” I said, then pointed to the popcorn, maybe so I wouldn’t be completely transparent.

She smiled, big and wide. “I do have good taste.”

I upped the ante. “The best.”

Her eyes locked with mine for a beat, maybe more. She nibbled on the corner of her lip, then drew a shuddery breath. “Who won the game?”

That was the end of the moment—a terribly brief one.

At the time, I didn’t think much of our conversation. I filed it away in the drawer of Nadia intel.

But in retrospect, it feels like it was the start of something.

At least for me.

Maybe the start of seeing her as something more than my friend’s sister.

Seeing her as a woman. With desires, with interests, with dates.

When the ceremony ends and we exit the ballroom, heading into the hotel hallway, waiting for the pics to begin, I

want to know what her dating situation is.

Scratch that. I *need* to know. It feels important. In the same way that it felt important to know how prom went.

What if she's seeing someone?

I dive right in. "Now that you're back, are you going to break all the hearts in San Francisco? Like Charlie Duncan's was surely broken the night you declared him duller than a biscuit."

She laughs. "That's a name I haven't heard in ages."

"Your prom date," I supply.

"Yeah, I know. He was sort of ..." She looks me over, her gaze landing on the lapel of my jacket. "About as interesting as a pocket square."

I tug on mine. "I'd say, 'Poor Charlie,' but I can't muster any sympathy for a dude on the same level as a piece of ornamental clothing."

She laughs. "At least I didn't call him a hanky."

"I might have felt bad for him then."

She shakes her head. "Nah, I don't think you would have."

"You're probably right," I say, then return to getting the info I want. "So you must have left behind a trail of broken hearts, then, in Las Vegas."

She scoffs. "Not even a nicked heart, Crosby."

"How about paper cuts? Did you administer all sorts of paper cuts on the hearts of the men of Vegas?"

With a sliver of a sad smile, she shakes her head. "Not even the tiniest little ache or bruise, I swear."

This I find hard to believe. "Are you really telling me that you've been single the whole time?"

"The entire time."

Whoa.

How is it possible that a babe of the highest order does not leave behind a trail of shattered hearts?

I scratch my jaw, furrow my brow, and part my lips, trying to figure out what to say, because this is insane. “How is that possible?” I ask, taking my time with each word like I’m speaking in a foreign language, but this is foreign to me. And hell, it ought to be foreign to everyone.

I eye her from stem to stern. From knee to breast.

She’s gorgeous and brilliant and fascinating.

She clears her throat. “My eyes are up here, Crosby,” she says, pointing to those big brown irises that are like pools of the warmest color, with gold flecks at the edges, drawing me in.

Busted.

But I’m cool with that.

It was simply a friendly assessment of the sitch.

“And they are a beautiful brown. I was just doing my due diligence. Assessing everything that you just said. Trying to figure out what kind of fucktangular insanity is happening to the men in Las Vegas?”

“Actually, it’s frocktagonal insanity, but to-may-toe, to-mah-toe.”

I laugh. “I forgot—you don’t swear.”

She flutters her lashes. “I’m such a good girl.”

Is she though?

My mind wanders once again to images of this good girl being bad. *Shake it off, man.* “Of course you are.” I narrow my eyes, goading her. “But someday I’ll get you to swear.”

“You’ll have to work really *forking* hard at that,” she says, all saucy as she throws down a challenge.

“You’re on,” I say, offering her a hand to shake on it.

She shakes back, then gestures to my eyes. “So that whole slide-your-gaze-up-and-down is due diligence? Is that what it’s

called?” Her lips corkscrew in an *I’ve caught you* smile.

I square my shoulders, owning it. “Yes. Indeed it is. I’m all about gathering empirical evidence. And I’ve gathered it with eyes, ears, and brain. You are a goddess, and the fact that men in Vegas do not know this leads me to arrive at only one conclusion. Men in Las Vegas are clearly douche trumpets.”

“I was going to go with dingle nuggets, but yours works too,” she says.

I snap my fingers. “Dammit.”

“Nice try though, getting me to cave,” she says in a sexy taunt.

“But is ‘douche’ actually a swear?”

“Would you say it in a boardroom?” she counters. “That was my father’s logic. If you won’t say it in a boardroom, don’t say it.”

“Ah, I don’t hang out in boardrooms. Locker rooms for this guy.”

“And boardrooms for this gal. So it’s ‘dingles,’ ‘forks,’ and ‘sons of a mailbox’ for me,” she says, tapping her chest. “Rather than ‘sons of you-know-what.’”

“That’s perfect—the men of Vegas are sons of mailboxes.”

She inches closer, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Or have you considered I scare them off with my anti-man perfume?”

“Like mosquito repellent but for dudes?” I ask, like I’m processing this new development. Dipping my hand into the front pocket of my suit pants, I grab my phone, click on my Amazon app, then speak into it. “Alexa, show me anti-man repellent.”

The coolly robotic voice asks if I want mosquito repellent.

Nadia shakes her head, wagging her finger. “You’ve got to ask her for anti-man repellent on discount. Don’t you want a deal?”

I nod, big and long. “Yes. You know me so well.” I clear my throat and speak more slowly. “Alexa, show me your Deal of the Day anti-man repellent.”

“I did not understand. Please repeat that request,” the voice from my phone chirps.

“Hold on. I’ve got this.” Nadia leans in closer. “Show me douche biscuit repellent.”

The phone is quiet for a few seconds, then Alexa speaks. “Here are the results for goose biscuit pellets.”

I cringe, shuddering.

Nadia joins me, full-on horror-movie-style. “Who is buying goose biscuit pellets?”

“And are they for the goose or the eater of the goose?” I ask.

“Are they even organic?”

“Organic goose eggbeaters. Here are more results,” the phone voice chimes in, picking up on words we both said.

Nadia doubles over, cracking up. “I refuse to believe that’s a thing.”

“Alexa said it. You cannot argue with Alexa,” I say, turning off the app and tucking the phone into my pocket.

“I can, and I will,” Nadia says. “Especially since Alexa can’t find the anti-man perfume that I clearly bought on Subscribe and Save a few months ago. I mean, how else to explain my absolute terrible luck?”

“Want me to test your perfume? See if it works?”

“You’re not worried it might scare you away?” Her voice dips low, to a tone that suggests I’d be in danger if my nose goes near her.

“I’ve got this. Hold my beer,” I say, handing her an imaginary can.

I draw a deep breath, shake out my arms, and stretch my neck, limbering up like I’m going to battle.

She waggles her fingers by her neck and lifts her chin, giving me room. That is a gorgeous image—her leaning in, offering her neck.

Setting a hand on the bare skin of her arm, I congratulate myself for finding an excuse to move closer to her.

But even so, this is all fun and games.

No matter how sexy she is, we are just friends having a good time.

A damn good time.

I play along with the teasing mood, dipping closer. My nose brushes faintly across her skin. My eyes close. A rumble works its way up my throat, and my senses go haywire.

My fuses trip, nerves fraying like an electrical wire about to snap.

Nadia Harlowe smells better than any fantasy I've ever had.

And I don't want this dream to end.

So I linger, my nose skating along the delicate skin of her throat, getting high off the scent of her.

Like a summer day, but with a hint of something floral under it.

Like a tropical bloom after a summer rainstorm, the kind of afternoon shower that leaves droplets of water clinging to your skin, roaming over soft, dewy flesh.

That's what she smells like.

Like she's wearing a bikini and a little sarong thing, like we've been wandering through the emerald-green gardens on Kauai, stealing kisses on a hot day as the sun beats down and we hunt for shade.

My mind is officially elsewhere. It's in vacationland with Nadia. It's in Lustville. In Fantasy Arena.

Isn't this the problem? Isn't this my kryptonite? The very thing I vowed to stop at the tux store?

But then, maybe it's not.

Because Nadia and I aren't the problem.

She's not the type of woman I need to resist. She's not an ex, she's not bad news, she's not trouble.

She's the opposite.

A friend.

A damn good one.

And I can be pals with a sexy-as-sin woman. Doesn't mean I'm caving.

In fact, I'm doing just fine on my diet.

Sure, my friend smells mind-bendingly delicious. But I'm not giving her the keys to my car, the code to my bank account, or any piece of my heart.

And boom. Done. Snapped myself out of a Nadia-induced trance just like that. By zeroing in on the friendship. I keep that up, doing my best impression of a cat hacking up a hair ball, Puss-in-Boots-in-*Shrek*-style. Fake retching, I cringe like I'm repulsed by her scent. "Yep, that's it. You're clearly anathema to men."

She swats my shoulder with her bouquet. But I'm a fast motherfucker. Reflexes—I've got them.

I catch her wrist, the one without the corsage, circling my fingers around her. As my hand curls, her breath hitches. She swallows.

Ah, hell.

That's too hard to resist. Even for a friend.

I plant a kiss on her wrist. Soft, gentle, and maybe with a hint of my tropical fantasies.

Then I meet her eyes. "My due diligence is done."

"And what have you decided?" she asks, a little breathy, a lot sexy.

Without letting go of her beautiful brown-eyed gaze, I give her my honest assessment. "Men in Vegas have achieved top

marks in the field of dipshittery. And I hereby welcome you to San Francisco on behalf of all the men in the city, such as myself, who were raised to appreciate smart, confident, outgoing, kick-ass, and gorgeous women.”

A blush travels slowly across her skin and up her chest, spreading twin spots of pink to her cheeks.

“Thank you, Crosby. I needed that. I truly appreciate that,” she says, her voice warm and affectionate. Then she takes a breath, seeming to center herself. She squares her shoulders, and I take that as my cue to let go of her wrist.

She taps my chest with the flowers. “And don’t forget, you owe me stories. I want to be fully entertained during the reception with all of your tales. I need to know all about your dating break. We’re buddies.”

Exactly.

We’re buddies.

She gets it. I get it. It’s all good.

I salute her. “Ready to entertain you,” I say, then her sister steps into my line of sight, waves her hand, earth-to-Nadia-style, then shoots us a stare. “Come on, lovebirds. It’s picture time,” Brooke says, her husband and daughter a few feet behind her.

“Lovebirds,” I whisper to Nadia, adding a scoff.

“That’s as ridiculous as goose biscuit pellets.”

We join the wedding party, and as the photographer snaps the first shot, I slide my arm around her waist.

It fits perfectly on the curve of her hips. So perfectly I don’t want to let go.

At all.

Not one bit.

And the wrecking ball of obvious slams into my gut.

I am insanely attracted to my best friend’s little sister.

But the corollary to that is that absolutely nothing is going to come of it.

I'm okay with that.

I'm okay with that.

I swear I'm okay with it.

CROSBY

I'm heading to the reception when a voice booms from around the corner. "Number twenty-two. A word."

That's all I get before a jacket covers my head, arms wrap around my torso, and my world turns dark.

I'm jerked into what's presumably a conference room in the hotel, but the lights stay off and the cover stays on, even after I'm led to a chair to sit in. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

The question comes out like a drill sergeant is speaking, but I know the voice. That's Holden, who plays for the city's other team. Known this guy for a couple years, and though he was only introduced to the rest of our crew since moving up here to San Francisco to join the rival team in the city – the so-called *enemies* – he's fit right in. He's an insane workout partner, since he's so damn regimented. On the field, he takes no prisoners at the plate, and he tells it like it is to the press. To me too. "You're playing with fire, twenty-two," Holden rumbles.

Another voice cuts in, calm, affable. The steady rudder of the Cougars.

"Let's give the man a chance to explain himself," Grant puts in, the easygoing one among the pair. "There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all that flirting. Like maybe Crosby's been enlisted to teach a course for friends who are in time-out but want to flirt. Right, Crosby? Isn't that right?"

Grant is the Cougars' catcher. The guy all the pitchers rely on behind the plate, the one who's always looking on the bright side. Every glass is half full for Grant, even when he's dripping with sarcasm. Like now.

"As a matter of fact, you do have some of it right. *Friends* being the operative word," I say.

"You think we believe that? You're a regular Colbert," Holden says.

"It's the truth," I say with a casual shrug, leaning back in my chair like this is no big deal, my head covered with one of their jackets, subject to this Dude-quisition.

But I do need to convince them that they've got this upside down.

Because they do.

They're reading Nadia and me all wrong. They think my harmless flirting with her is something to worry about.

When it's not.

It's going to keep being harmless. No matter how good she smells.

Those flashbacks during the ceremony? To how hot she looked for prom? That was merely the male brain processing a few sexy images it found in the drawers of memory.

I've sorted them out and tucked the pics back into Friendship Town after my brief pit stop in Fantasy Arena. And I want the guys to know. We rely on each other, look out for each other. I have their backs when they need me, and they have mine, so I say, "C'mon. I'm dead serious on this one. I didn't slip. I'm making it to the start of the season with a clean record. I've been reporting in for the last two weeks to you guys, and I'm reporting in today." I take a beat, then punctuate each word. "*I've. Been. Good.*"

"You better be," Grant adds. "Because I don't want to have to take myself out of commission just to keep you on the up-and-up."

“There is no need for that kind of solidarity,” I say. “But I do appreciate your willingness to lock it up.”

“How hard would that be, Grant?” Holden challenges.

“Sooooo hard. But I’d do it to support a teammate who’s tempted by trouble,” Grant adds.

I roll my eyes from under the fabric. There will be no trouble with Nadia. I’ve merely buddied up with a buddy. “Nadia is a longtime friend and only that.”

“So you know her name,” Holden says, like a detective in a hard-boiled novel.

I toss my hands up in the air, cracking up. “Yeah, fuck biscuit. You know her name too. We all do. She’s Eric’s sister. And nothing is going to happen.”

Grant hums. Holden growls.

“All right. Let’s give him the benny of the doubt,” Grant says, the first of the pair to relent, naturally.

“Fine, but I’m watching you,” Holden barks.

“We’re both watching out for our guy,” Grant says as they let go of the jacket, tugging it off my head. “That’s our job. But he’s passed the test.”

My eyes scan the room quickly, adjusting to the dark even in the middle of the day. Holden is the jacketless one. I swipe my hands over my arms as if I’m wiping off dirt or lint from him.

“Had a feeling that was yours,” I say, my nose crinkling in-over-the-top disgust. “That jacket smelled like Drakkar Noir. You probably doused yourself in it 1980s-style and came here to scam on women.”

“Scam?” Holden asks, narrowing his eyes, then shaking a finger in my direction. “Do not even try to turn this around. I *am* allowed to scam. You are not. You made an unbreakable promise to Eric and Gabe, then they enlisted us to have your back,” Holden adds, gesturing between him and Grant.

Grant claps me on the shoulder, shooting a smile in my direction. “You can do this, buddy.” He drops his voice. “Just don’t make me regret supporting you.”

“You can clean out my locker and steal all my clothes if I cave.”

Grant taps his chin, his eyes going wide with delight, from the look of the twinkle in his baby blues. “That would be hella amusing, but I think we’d rather you admit on national TV that we’re both better than you at the best sport ever.”

“Yes. That. I want that, twenty-two,” Holden says, too gleeful for my taste. Especially since he’s on our rival team.

I wave the white flag. “Fine. You’ve got it. I’ll admit that on TV if I fall, but I won’t fall. I’ve got this. And the tuxes are on me, dickwads. As a thank you for your service.”

“Wow. You’re so generous. All I’ve ever wanted is a free tux,” Holden says, flinging a hand to his heart.

I flip him the bird as I hop up from the chair. “News flash. I’ve gone two weeks avoiding the sock thief and amateur photogs of my past. I’ve got this, just like I’ve got the hanging curveballs,” I say, since those are my favorite pitches to go long on.

Holden arches a doubtful brow. “Nadia is a hanging curveball?”

Grant scratches his jaw. “Not sure that’s right. Hanging curveballs are your temptation. You can’t resist them. You swing at them every time.”

“And I hit them,” I say. “I swing at hanging curveballs because I can motherfucking hit them over the fence and into the San Francisco Bay.” I pump a fist. “Booyah. Who hit a homer all the way over the bleacher seats and into the Bay last year?” That shit is hard to do, and I pulled it off.

Grant taps his chest. “Did you forget that I hit one out there too?”

I clear my throat. “Listen, this is not an issue. There is nothing to worry about. Nadia and I are friends, and we have

been forever. I'm hanging out with her. We're having a nice time. I'm in time-out. She's in time-out," I say, a little worked up because how are they not getting it? How do they not see the obvious? "Therefore, nothing can happen between us." I flap my arm outside the room in the general direction of Nadia, then back at myself. I smooth a hand down my jacket. "And now if you'll excuse me, I have a reception to go to."

I leave, joining Nadia at the table. She smells so damn good, but I am not giving into the temptation.

I've got this.

CROSBY

I blame chia seeds.

And kale.

Blueberries are definitely responsible too. They made me the organic monster I am when it comes to food.

My mom, though, is the biggest reason, since she fed me all that before I could walk. She was and is the queen of all things organic, and started her own organic café in San Rafael when I was in grade school.

When the waiter swings by with the chicken entrée, my knee-jerk reaction is to ask the usual question. “Is the chicken organic?”

With a light bow of his head, he answers, “Yes, it is, sir.”

As he deposits the plates in front of the other guests, Nadia pats my shoulder. “You’re safe here, Crosby. We know you and your mango-loving heart.”

“Mangoes and me are like that,” I say, crossing my index and middle finger. “Anyway, old habits,” I say with a shrug and a smile, because this is what I’m talking about—Nadia and I know each other, down to our families and the nitty-gritty of our food preferences.

Nadia tips her forehead in the direction of my mom, a few tables away, her curly red hair falling down her back.

“How is Sunny?” she asks.

My mom is parked next to Nadia's mom, listening to her intently.

That's my mom. The only way she knows how to listen is intently.

The universe gave us one mouth and two ears, she likes to say.

"She and Kana opened a ninth location of Green Goddess," I say, then gesture to the woman next to my mom, a regal-looking lady hailing from Japan, with sleek black hair. They've been a thing for a few years now, and they're holding hands at the table. "And it's going well."

"And that's going well too, I take it?" Her tone says she's asking about my mom's romantic interest.

Seeing my mom happy again ignites a smile on my face and warmth in my chest. "Oh yeah. Big time. I keep telling Sunny to lock that down, but she insists, '*Everything happens according to its own lunar calendar,*'" I say, imitating my mom and her soothing tone for dispensing adages.

The thing she loves to serve up most, right along with kale and quinoa.

"That sounds exactly like your mom. She has a mantra for everything," Nadia says after taking a bite of her chicken dish.

"She does. And it absolutely rubbed off on me. I'm a big fan of mantras," I say, because mantras are seeing me through this lady diet right now. On that note, maybe I should start thinking of Nadia as sugar. And cake. And cookies.

All the verboten treats that won't touch my lips.

Resist cookies. Resist Nadia.

There. Perfect.

She lifts her wineglass and takes a drink, her brow knitting as if she's deep in thought. "Is it hard getting used to her with someone else?"

I shake my head. "Nah, she's happy. Honestly, she's just as happy as when she was with my dad," I say, since my mom's

always been an affectionate person. She was that way with my dad before he died when I was in college after a quick battle with pancreatic cancer.

“Did it surprise you? That she’d fallen in love with a woman?”

I flash back to the night Mom told my sister and me. In her usual fashion, Sunny was up-front, straightforward. She didn’t clear her throat and say, *I have an announcement to make*. She simply took Haley and me out for dinner after an afternoon game and told us that she’d fallen for Kana, and was happy that Aphrodite had smiled on her again.

“Maybe for about two seconds,” I say. “But when Sunny said she was pansexual, it just tracked.”

Nadia smiles as she spears another piece of the yardbird. “I can see that about her. Knowing how she is with people and how she’s always seemed more attracted to hearts than anything else.”

“Exactly,” I say, digging that Nadia gets it in a way few others have. When Daria met Sunny last year, she couldn’t fathom that my mom had been with my dad for a couple decades before falling for a woman. Daria’s not the only girlfriend I’ve had whose expression went all furrowed and confused when they met Sunny. “That was what Haley and I said to each other the night Sunny told us. We kind of looked at each other and said, ‘Yep, that makes perfect sense. Pass the blueberries.’” I take a bite of the chicken, chew, then ask, “What about you?”

Nadia brings a hand to her chest, her brow knitting in confusion. “Am I pansexual?”

I laugh, shaking my head. Then I think better of it. “Are you? I guess I sort of assumed from our conversation earlier that you weren’t, but maybe you are. I try to operate under the assumption that I don’t assume anyone’s orientation at all—it’s not up to me to try to glean who people love.”

She shakes her head. “I like men, despite the few sons of mailboxes.”

“The douches,” I say, since she won’t. “Or as you might say, the duckweeds.”

A smile spreads nice and easy across her face. “You’ve got it.”

“So you’re really done with men?”

“Confession time,” she says in a whisper. “I tried a matchmaker in Vegas, and it was a disaster. We’re talking category five hurricane level.”

“Does that mean you were caught in the eye of a storm of men?”

Laughing, she shakes her head. “Maybe that was the wrong analogy. More like a black hole. The vacuum of deep space. She couldn’t really find anyone for me,” she says, with a *what can you do* sigh.

But that shocks the hell out of me. No sighing here. Just a drop of the jaw. “Men ought to be falling all over themselves to get to you.”

“I wish I could tell you I was tripping over a long line of men,” she says. “It was more like a Tampa Bay baseball game,” she says, and I laugh at the comparison to the team with the worst attendance in the Majors. We’re talking rows upon rows of empty seats.

“Why on earth would they not want to be set up with you?”

Nadia takes a sip of wine. “Let’s just say they were more interested in their own ability to buy tickets for a fancy suite at the football game than going on a date with the owner.”

Shock rings through me.

What the hell is wrong with some people? “That doesn’t even compute in my world. My dad was an easygoing dude who took a few years off to raise us when Mom was building her business, then he went back to his accounting practice. And my mom’s always just been open-minded about everything.”

Nadia nudges my arm with her elbow, tossing me an appreciative smile. “And they rubbed off on you.” Then she smiles. “But honestly, it doesn’t matter. Maybe in the end I was meant to come to San Francisco and be single.”

Maybe she was.

Maybe I like that plan.

Because it’s easier to hang out with her, I mean.

And hell, it’s good that she’s as on board with her singletude as I am with mine.

“You think the universe was doing you a favor?” I ask.

“I have so much to focus on with building the team, and I want that to be my priority. Maybe that’s why the matchmaker couldn’t find anyone for me. Perhaps it was meant to be like this,” she says, sweeping her arm out widely to indicate the reception, and maybe this moment too, her and me, hanging out.

Whether it was the universe or bad luck, who knows?

However you slice this night, I’m glad to be here with her, and I want her to know that. She beats me to the punch when she says, “By the way, it’s nice to catch up with you.”

The grin she flashes me throws me off-kilter for a few seconds. It makes me want to touch her arm, tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, and whisper, *Same*.

I do one of those three.

“Same,” I tell her. “Same here.”

NADIA

I love champagne.

It makes me feel so ... floaty.

So effervescent.

Like everything is coated in a warm, delicious glow.

Glowers are great. Absolutely, officially great.

I would like to commission a glow to surround me wherever I go.

Tonight I'm glowing after the ceremony, after the toasts, after the cake that Crosby didn't touch, of course.

After the moment in the hallway earlier, when he roamed his nose over my neck, like he was drinking in my smell, and then after that fantastic get-to-know-you-even-better chat at the table.

Now we're dancing, along with the rest of the wedding party.

"You promised stories. I need the tales," I say.

He arches a brow. "Are you sure you can handle them?"

"Oh, I'm sure. I love anti-fairy tales."

"That's all I've got when it comes to romance," he says, spinning me in a circle, then bringing me close again, but not plastered-up-against-each-other close. The music is fast enough to shimmy, but slow enough for me to keep my hands on his shoulders.

Translation: we aren't doing that melt-into-each-other slow dance.

His lips curve up in that delicious lopsided grin that he wears so well. That easygoing, lighthearted one. "Let's start with Alabama."

"As in the state?"

"As in the name."

"Her name was Alabama?"

"Yes indeed. Alabama Venus."

I grin. "Where did you meet Alabama Venus? Kinda sounds like a stripper name," I say, then shake my head, thinking better of it. I bring my fingers to my lips, like I'm shushing myself. "Pretend I didn't say that," I whisper.

His blue eyes twinkle with delight. "Oh, you said it, Wild Girl. I heard it. And I sure hope you're not insinuating that only strippers are named after states. Or that there's anything wrong with dating a stripper."

I slap his shoulder playfully. "I have zero issues with stripping. In fact, I'll have you know that I led a campaign to make sure that strip club workers qualified for health insurance in Las Vegas."

"Whoa, look at you, Miss Progressive."

"But the name does sound ... *deliberately sexy*," I explain as we twirl past other couples on the dance floor, including my brother, who gives us those *I'm watching you* eyes, like Robert De Niro gave Ben Stiller in *Meet the Parents*.

Crosby and I both laugh at the groom.

Friends, I mouth.

Buddies, Crosby adds.

It feels true enough for now.

"Yes, her name does sound overtly sexy," Crosby says. "And I suppose she had stripper tendencies, as you'll learn, but she was actually a fortune-teller."

A laugh bursts from me. “Did you ask her to look into your crystal ... balls?”

The twinkle in his eye turns into a naughty gleam. “Keep this up. I like this risqué side of you.”

Funny thing is, I do too.

I can say things to Crosby that I don’t normally say to men. Maybe because I haven’t had the chance, since my dating life has been anemic—going to an all-girls college, then heading straight into a master’s program where all you do is study, study, study, can do that to a woman who digs men.

But perhaps it’s the champagne loosening my lips.

The other option is ... it’s him.

“Maybe you bring it out in me,” I suggest, a touch flirty.

“I’ll do my best to ... *keep it up*,” he says, wiggling his brows, making me grin. “And to answer your question, I met Alabama Venus at Whole Foods.”

I snort-laugh. “Wait, wait! Were you fighting over who got the last basket of organic raspberries?”

“I guess you do have a crystal ball,” he says, then dives into the story. “She was an organic food fiend too. Maybe not the best of commonalities, but there it was. We dated for a while. Seemed to be going well enough. So we went to Cabo, and one night she wanted to go dancing. We went to a club, and we danced our asses off.”

Perhaps powered by the “risqué” comment, I jerk back, one hand sliding off his shoulder and landing on his hip, so I can give his rear a quick once-over. Sneaking a peek at his butt, I remark, “It’s still here. Did you lose your rear in Cabo then get it back?”

He wiggles a brow. “I had a butt transplant.”

I laugh, and as I do, my hand seems to have a mind of its own. Emboldened by champagne, or the wedding, or Crosby’s stories.

What if my palm just grazed his rear?

Just a little.

That's all.

We're on the far corner of the dance floor, his backside out of view of the crowd.

And my hand *is* on his hip. I can sort of slide it down a little lower.

The she-devil in me wins, my hand skimming the top of one firm, squeezable cheek.

His eyes widen as my hand travels lower, then lower still.

Oh, thank you, champagne.

I'm feeling floaty indeed.

His eyes darken, a flicker of desire in them, chased with that teasing glint. "Nadia, are you checking out my butt transplant?" he asks, but he doesn't sound like he's busting me.

More like he's ... inviting me.

Still, heat flushes across my cheeks. I tug my hand away, raising it again to curl over his shoulder. "Sorry. I'm so sorry. It was sort of an accidental squeeze, powered by champagne and dancing," I say, tripping over my apology.

Ugh, that's a lie.

I hate lying.

It was not accidental.

It was deliberate and deliberately sneaky.

His voice dips low, a rough whisper just for me. "Was it? Accidental?"

His sexy tone sends a flare of sparks through my chest. A shiver that makes my whole body tingle.

"Or maybe it was ... curiosity?" I posit, a little breathy.

"By all means, indulge your curiosity," he murmurs.

My breathing quickens, rushing from my lungs in an unexpected burst that sends prickles of heat along my skin.

“This isn’t my normal MO,” I whisper, coming close, but not too close, to my virginity confession. Crosby doesn’t know I’ve never had sex. I don’t blast that little fact on a billboard. But the least I can do is let him know that I’m not a regular butt squeezer. “Just wanted you to know that. I don’t go around accidentally squeezing butts. Or deliberately.”

He takes a moment, licking the corner of his lips. “All the more reason to check it out. Deliberately,” he says, so warm and sexy on that last word.

Sneaking a glance behind me to confirm the rest of the guests are caught up in their own world, I snake my hand down to his butt once more.

Cover his firm cheek with my hand.

My insides handspring. My pulse spikes.

His butt feels fantastic.

I squeeze it harder, murmuring my appreciation.

He rumbles his in return, a low growl in his throat that lights me up. “Yeah, it’s better when it’s not accidental,” he says.

“I have to agree,” I say, unsure how I’m forming words right now.

Unsure, too, what happens next.

Because the mood has shifted once again.

But when the music switches to Ella Fitzgerald and a love song so swoony you have to sway with your lover, we separate.

Untangling quickly.

“Drink?” I ask, my voice feathery, uncertain. “After all, I need the rest of the dance-your-ass-off tale.”

“Let’s do it.”

We make our way to a bar in the other corner of the room, away from most of the festivities, and order two more champagnes.

After the bartender serves us, we raise our glasses to toast. “To my wedding buddy,” I say.

He smiles back. “And to mine.”

We clink, and I feel mildly recalibrated.

Only mildly.

“So, Alabama the fortune-teller was a bit of an exhibitionist,” he says, returning to the tale. “And when we were dancing, ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun’ came on. She decided to take off all her clothes, right down to her red thong underwear.”

My jaw drops. “Are you serious?”

“One hundred percent.”

“I guess she did want to have fun.”

“When I gave her my shirt to cover her up, that’s right when the cops came into the club, and they thought I was involved in her striptease.”

I wince, a little nervous. “How did you get out of it?”

“My teammates.”

My brow furrows. “They were with you?”

“Nope. But like most ballplayers, I have plenty of teammates who are Latino and speak Spanish. So I made it my mission over the last few years to learn the language. I talk to Juan, one of my starting pitchers in Spanish all the time. So when I was in Mexico, I gave my best effort in talking to the police, and I think they appreciated that. One of them said I should find a nice girl, not a crazy one.”

“And what happened to the crazy one?”

He makes a whooshing sound, his arm dipping in the universal sign for an airplane flying. “I flew her home that night. Literally got on the next plane with her, and then I caught a flight to Anchorage. I went whale watching the rest of our vacation. *Solo.*”

My smile spreads to my cheeks. “I can picture that perfectly. I bet you loved it.”

“It was so peaceful. Very zen and, I am not afraid to admit, quite emotional,” he says. “Watching the whales surfacing out there on the water. Seeing glaciers calve. Being in the midst of all that wilderness. It was everything I needed.”

As we drink our champagne, he dives into his other tales of woe, rattling off a story about a woman who tried to steal his World Series ring, then another who attempted to make off with his Tesla one night, only to forget to charge it, so she ran out of power on the Golden Gate Bridge.

I giggle as he entertains me with his stories.

Then I school my expression. “Level with me, Crosby. Do you think you’re attracted to thieves?”

His eyes turn intensely serious. “The evidence would indeed seem to suggest as much. As well as trouble. My cousin Rachel set me up with the last woman I went out with, and she still feels horrible about it. Not her fault, and Rachel’s a sweetheart who likes to keep herself busy, since she has a jerk of an ex and I swear she tries to make up for it by setting up others. Sometimes, though, she doesn’t make the best matches,” he says as I take the last sip of my drink. “Considering the last woman she set me up with tried to sell my dick pic.”

The bubbles tickle my nose. They make me cough. But maybe they also go to my head, because rather than laughing, the next words that come out of my mouth surprise me.

“Can I see it?”

CROSBY

That was not what I expected to hear from Nadia.

Not at all.

She's surprising me in all sorts of ways tonight, but then again, maybe I shouldn't be surprised, because she's always been bold.

But about this? About squeezing my ass and seeing my cock?

This is brand-new terrain, and fine, it's *not* friendship territory, but I can't resist trekking across it. Achilles' heel, here I go.

She is it tonight.

She's my weakness, and I take another hit.

"The pic," I say, taking my time, slow and easy, letting my meaning register. "Or my dick?"

With cheeks flushed, she purses her lips, looking right, then looking left. She whispers, her voice edging up in a question, "Both?"

Holy fuck.

She meant it, it seems.

My throat goes dry. My skin sparks. And my mind is all kinds of intrigued with this woman. "Are you serious?" I ask, because I need to know if we're playing jokes, or if we're playing with fire.

She swallows, like she's gulping, then she blinks and breathes out hard. "I shouldn't have asked that. That's crazy. I should *not* have asked that."

"I'm not offended," I say, reaching out and touching her arm just to emphasize my point. "Not one bit."

She lets out a sigh of relief. "I'm not the kind of woman who asks to see that. I swear. Honestly, I don't even think I like those pics."

I can't resist that tidbit either. "But do you like dicks?"

"Didn't I already tell you that? Now stop embarrassing me even more," she says, with a playful stomp of her foot.

"You're truly embarrassed?" I ask softly.

"You're a friend, and I asked for *that*, and I shouldn't have." She waves her hand in the air. "Please just pretend I didn't do that. It was the champagne talking."

But can I actually pretend that she didn't say that?

Didn't seem like just an offhand comment. Or a joke. Seemed like there was a part of her that wanted to see the pic.

And I would have shown her the shot that I paid good money to keep out of the papers.

What the hell is that about?

Am I some kind of dick-swinging pervert?

Why the fuck would I show Nadia a picture of my cock when I am clearly in time-out? Why would I show her at any time, for that matter?

But an answer flickers before my eyes. I *like* the idea of sharing that kind of naughtiness with her. I like the idea that she wanted to see the pic.

In fact, I'm pretty sure—wait for it—I like her.

And because I do, I want to smooth the landing for her, lest she berate herself more. I lean on our favorite word of the night. "If it makes you feel better, I could just *accidentally* show you the dick pic."

Rolling her eyes, she laughs, some of her embarrassment seeming to slink away. “Thanks. Story of the night—accidental butt squeeze, accidental ... eggplant pic.”

My brain takes a two-second delay to connect the dots, and when I do, I give her a *c'mon* look. “You don't say ‘dick’?”

She flutters her lashes ever so innocently. “Maybe I don't. Maybe I do.”

“Maybe I'll find out. Accidentally. Now, about that eggplant ...”

I grab my phone from my pocket.

“Crosby,” she says, her tone worried.

But this ought to assuage her embarrassment. I unlock my phone, slide my thumb across the screen, and wiggle a brow, like I'm up to something terribly naughty.

And I kind of am.

I hunt for the perfect shot as she protests, “Crosby, I swear, I was just having—”

I brandish the screen at her.

She flinches.

Steps back.

Then a chuckle burst from her lips. “Sam Spade. That's brilliant.”

“He's a private dick,” I say, turning the phone back to check out the picture of the private dick that Humphrey Bogart played in *The Maltese Falcon*.

“You are the best,” she says, then moves in for a hug.

With my phone in one hand, I wrap my arms around her, enjoying the feel of her in my embrace.

I steal one final inhale of her neck, then let go, and as I do, my boutonniere grazes the strap of her dress, threatening to grab hold of it.

That won't do.

I curl my hand over her shoulder. “Hold still. Let me make sure my boutonniere doesn’t cause a nip slip,” I say, carefully releasing the pin from the slim blue strap.

She breathes a sigh of relief as I detach my accessory from her strap.

“My nipples and I thank you,” she says as we pull apart. She waggles her arm, showing off the corsage. “This made the outfit, right?”

“No doubt. The corsage is a winner.”

“And your boutonniere is fire,” she says. “Even if it tried to mate with my dress.”

“Smart boutonniere.” I fiddle with it. “It is pretty spiffy, and it’s holding up well. I might even be able to use it again at the Sports Network Awards this week.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to that. I have to present an award there.”

A smile takes over my face. A plan takes over my mind. “What do you know? So do I,” I say, and the gears click. “Are you soloing it?”

“Stag all the way.”

I wiggle an eyebrow. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

She glances around the reception, like she’s scanning for options, then she taps her chin. “I could take Brooke, or her daughter, or my mom, or your mom. Is that what you had in mind?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “We can put our corsage and boutonniere to good use. Buddy up again?”

Her grin is electric. “We’re awesome at it. Let’s make it a doubleheader.”

I hum appreciatively. “I love when you use baseball analogies. And yes, I’m thinking you and I pair up again before I have to go to spring training,” I say, just to make it

clear what I have in mind. “We can be, like, each other’s event dates.”

“Sort of like escorts for various functions?”

I can’t resist that. “Do you want the full package of escort services?” I ask, low and dirty.

She nibbles on the corner of her lips, adopting a saucy smile. “Depends on the fee.” Then she turns businesslike. “But while you’re offering, and since you’re off the market, want to be my plus-one at a charity event next weekend? I have a golf thing I’m attending.”

I make a purring sound. “Mmm. Golf. Every pro athlete’s addiction. Yes, please.”

“We’ll plus-one each other.”

“We have to, especially since Hollywood is making our rom-com—*Plus-Oneing with the Best Man*.”

“And I’m glad the best man will be my plus-one,” she says.

My chest warms and my mind buzzes at the prospect of another event with her.

Another plus-one.

It’s both a terrific opportunity and a bit of a conundrum.

I spend the rest of the wedding trying to figure out what to do with the fact that I like my buddy’s sister.

* * *

As the night winds down, Eric pulls me aside, clapping my shoulder. “Don’t forget I have eyes everywhere. Just because I’ll be in the Maldives doesn’t mean I won’t be watching you. And you asked me to,” he says, stern, like he was in the tux shop.

I did ask him. I do know what’s good for me. And hey, nothing *has* happened. So I’m still on the wagon.

“And I was already interrogated by your henchmen,” I say.

“Good. They’ll be keeping their eyes on you while I’m gone,” he says, then tips his head to Holden and Grant, who are drinking beers at the bar. Holden is chatting with a woman in a peach dress, Grant with a bearded dude.

“Yeah, they look super focused on their mission to keep me in line,” I tease.

“They’re focused enough. Nine more days till spring training. You can do it. And then you’ll behave during spring training because you’ll be busy all the time.”

“I’ve so got this. And you go on your honeymoon. Worship your wife. Fuck your brains out. Drink piña coladas. I will be fine,” I tell him, and it feels mostly true.

Until I get in the elevator alone with Nadia at the end of the evening.

NADIA

I'm not into dick pics.

That's not because I'm a prude. And it's not because I still carry my V card. It's because when I watch porn—and I do watch it, thank you very much, incognito mode—I'm not simply interested in the dick.

I want to know what the man does with it. How it makes the woman feel. But also how she *appears* to feel when he's doing other things for her. Going down on her, kissing her breasts, worshipping her body.

So why does my brain keep planting images of what Crosby's dick might look like?

Not helpful.

As in it's not helpful to staying plus-one-ers.

Especially since he's on a dating diet.

Maybe I need to reassure him that I'm not some kind of perv who's dying for him to whip out his schlong for the camera.

That I'm his friend. That I support his anti-dating quest.

As the elevator shoots us up to my floor, since I booked a room for the night, I set my hand on his arm. "I just want you to know, as we embark on *plus-oneing with the best man*, that I will behave like your friend as we planned. There will be no deliberate or even accidental taking of dick pics, and no

deliberate or even accidental asking for them. And I would never attempt to sell them.”

He wipes a hand across his forehead in a *whew* gesture.

“Because I live by the belief that friends shouldn’t ask friends for dick pics. And they shouldn’t take them either,” I say, raising my finger to make a point.

He laughs. “I do believe I’ve seen that on a bumper sticker somewhere. Along with *Friends don’t ask friends to bang* and *Friends don’t ask friends for boob shots*,” he says as the elevator stops at my floor. We step out, and as we walk down the hall, he drapes an arm around me, pals-style. “Also, told you I’d find out if you said ‘dick.’ I’m pretty confident I can get you to say ‘fuck’ now.”

I fling my hand across my mouth, Bette-Boop-style, playing it up. “Oops! Did I say ...” I take my time, making him wait for it, before I finish with “*Dick?*”

He licks his lips and growls sexily. “Better than ‘eggplant.’ Soon you’ll be saying ‘cock.’”

I have nothing against *cock*.

Hell, I have nothing at all against cocks.

Someday I’d like to enjoy a cock against me.

But since I don’t say those words in the boardroom, and since I haven’t had the chance to say them in the bedroom, how it feels on my tongue is truly virgin territory.

“You never know,” I say with a flirty shrug. “For now, be happy I said ‘dick,’ since it’s way better than ‘wiener pic.’”

“How about ‘shaft shot’?”

“Oh, that’s good. But what about ... ‘member pic’?”

He taps his chin, murmuring his approval. “I like that because it’s so euphemistic, the perfect amount of innuendo.”

“‘Member pic’ it is,” I declare, banging an imaginary gavel.

“You can accidentally ask me to show you a member pic anytime,” he says with a laugh, then the laughter fades as I dip my hand into my clutch purse, fishing out the key card when we reach my door.

He meets my gaze. His irises are rich with possibilities. “You know, if this were *Plus-Oneing with the Best Man*, this would be the scene where he accidentally shows her a member pic, they double over in laughter, she stumbles forward, and he catches her,” he says.

The movie reel of that moment unspools before my eyes.

And I like it.

I like it a lot.

Heat flares through me, a match striking. “I wonder what that would look like. The stumbling part.”

“And the catching part,” he adds.

“And whatever comes next,” I say in a softer voice.

Like we’re both tempting fate.

Testing possibilities.

“In a plus-one situation, it’s important to know those things,” he says, his voice husky, a bare scrape of want and wishes.

“I’d definitely like to know,” I say, taking my time with each word.

His blue eyes blaze. The vein in his neck pulses. His lips part, and he stares hungrily at mine. “I imagine after she stumbles, there’s an accidental kiss.”

Those words.

Accidental kiss.

They ignite a riot in my chest. They send flurries of sparks across my skin. They light up my insides.

My heart beats like a wild drum. “I wonder what that looks like.”

He lifts a brow, his voice all smoky. “Or feels like.”

“A lot like a real kiss?” I ask, my stomach flipping.

There’s a charge between us. Ions and atoms are self-replicating, multiplying at an exponential rate, and that electricity tugs me closer to him. “But maybe we should just test it out to be sure. After all, we tested the accidental butt squeeze,” I say.

For a few seconds, I wonder who this bold woman is inside me. Who this woman is who’s trying to have a kiss with this man. Is it the champagne? Is it him? Is it me? And most of all, will I regret this in the morning? But I don’t regret the dancing, I don’t regret the talking, and I definitely don’t regret the butt squeeze. That was not at all accidental, but totally deliberate.

And because I don’t really believe in accidents—I believe in doing things on purpose—I decide to do just that.

If we’ve made it through this night so far as buddies who flirt, as buddies who squeeze, as buddies who tease and toy, then surely we can weather a kiss.

Taking a step, I pretend to stumble.

Crosby catches me, steadying me. He runs his hands down my arms, brushes my hair off my shoulder, and then presses the sexiest, most tender kiss to the hollow of my throat, murmuring, “You smell so good. All night long. You’ve been in my senses.”

My eyes float closed, and my body screams, *Touch me.*

I whisper, “You’re definitely in mine.”

His lips travel softly along my neck, closer to my jaw, brushing there and making me shiver. He cups my cheek. “This is what an accidental kiss looks like in the movies,” he says.

Then he sweeps his lips across mine.

I melt.

We’re talking tingles everywhere.

Along my arms, down my chest, between my legs.

Tingles of desire and longing as he kisses me in a kiss to end all kisses.

It's a kiss that lights up the sky. A kiss that makes you want to write down every detail, record every second, imprint it on your mind for all posterity, so you can recall later on what it felt like to be kissed like this.

It feels like how kissing was meant to be.

A delicious, decadent good-night kiss.

His lips brush mine gently at first, a whisper of a kiss. His breath is soft, a needy exhale, like he's wanted this all night.

And my God, so have I.

I've been craving it while denying it, but I don't want to deny anything now.

Not the tender sweep of his lips, not the delicious exploration, not the way he flicks his tongue across the corner of my mouth.

Mmm, that tantalizing moment sends a wild thrill through my cells.

We linger in the kiss, lips and mouths taking their time, getting to know each other. Savoring every lush second.

His lips are magic.

They make my body perform all sorts of tricks, like the disappearing act of my willpower.

It's vanished, gone like a rabbit in a hat.

And I don't care.

This kiss spreads from the center of my chest to the tips of my fingers. It lights me up from head to toe.

It makes me want him desperately.

Then want him even more when he kisses me deeply.

Hungrily.

Giving me exactly the type of kiss we needed to try out tonight. Like he knows this is the only kind of kiss we ought to

have.

A promise.

But it's more than a promise. This cracks open a whole new world of possibility.

And it ends before we let it go too far.

For that, I'm grateful too.

He runs his hand down my arm, giving me a dopey smile. "Just so you know, I like accidental kisses even better than accidental butt squeezes."

Feeling emboldened, I reach a hand around and I squeeze his butt one more time. "Same here, but I do like both."

His grin is all kinds of crooked.

I can't resist. Leaning in, I drop a quick kiss onto his lips, then spin around. I slide the key card across the reader, open the door, and head inside. But before the door shuts, I pop my head back out, needing the reassurance. "We're still friends, right?"

He rolls his eyes like that's the craziest thing anyone has ever said. He reaches for my cheek, sliding a thumb across my jaw. "We're absolutely friends, even though I would very much like to kiss you deliberately again."

My heart hammers.

My body pulses.

Oh yes, I want all the deliberate kisses.

Everywhere.

And I'm pretty sure that's what's called friends with benefits. Because I'm the kind of woman who says what's on her mind, who likes clarity, I do just that. "That was a friends-with-benefits kind of a kiss, right?"

"And it was a very good benefit of our friendship, wouldn't you say?"

I can't stop smiling. "I would definitely say so."

This time I wave goodbye for real, shut the door, sigh ever so happily, lean my head back against the wall, and close my eyes.

I just kissed the best man.

And it was spectacular.

NADIA

Flopping down onto the soft couch, one arm hanging off the side, I can't stop grinning.

It's just not possible. This smile can't be erased.

Running my finger across my lower lip, I let the reel play before my eyes once more.

The way he swept his thumb over my jaw, held my face, explored my lips.

With a contented sigh, I savor the aftereffects of the knee-weakening kiss with the man I've crushed on since I was a teenager.

My skin tingles, and as I close my eyes, the movie screen shows me *A Kiss with Crosby* over and over.

It's a fantastic double feature.

* * *

Morning sun streaks through the window. A heavy breath pulls from my chest. A yawn tugs at my mouth as I rouse.

A slow glance down reveals I fell asleep in my dress. Must have kicked off my shoes, but otherwise I'm still in bridesmaid couture.

Dragging myself up from the couch, I head to the bathroom, brush my teeth, and shimmy out of my dress. I

return to the suite, tug a T-shirt from my overnight bag, and find my phone on the table.

I call Scarlett on FaceTime. Her eyes widen the second she sees me. “Someone slept with her makeup on and her hair still done up bridesmaid-style,” she says, an *I know what you did last night* grin lighting up her face.

I feign innocence. “And yet I still look fabulous, right?”

“Yes, you look like you were fucked fabulously,” she says, mincing no words.

“Is it a good look?” I ask playfully, patting my day-after do. It’s a wild mess, hair sticking up everywhere.

“Cover-worthy of a Joy Delivered catalog. *That* fantastic.” Scarlett waves a hand airily as she strolls along the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the sixth arrondissement, its gorgeous spires reaching just out of sight of the phone camera. “Now give me the bang report. It’s time. You’re wearing all the evidence. Look at your hair, woman. It’s a wild mess.” She peers at the screen, as if hunting for someone else behind me. “Where is he?”

Laughing, I fling myself onto the couch. “We did not bang. Neither dick banging nor finger banging,” I say, since I can definitely go full filth with my girlfriends. But girl talk is cone-of-silence-level vault.

“Tongue banging?” she asks, a hopeful pitch in her voice.

A daring tremble runs through me at the prospect of Crosby’s tongue exploring me all over.

But now’s not the time to daydream about his downtown skills.

Though I want to. Oh hell, do I want to. I may be a virgin, but my imagination is very sexually active.

“We kissed, and it was fantastic,” I say in a wild, wondrous confession. “And kissing as in first base.”

She blinks several times. “Whoa. I was sort of joking. But sort of not. You really did kiss your wedding date? The one you were just going to go with as friends?”

“Yes,” I say, humming as I knit my brow. “Should I feel bad?”

A smidge of guilt wedges into my chest. We were supposed to be buddies. Just friends.

I violated our friendship pact.

“Was it a bad kiss?”

My jaw drops. “Wash your mouth out with soap. It was amazing. Like Paris-lit-up-at-Christmastime amazing. Like kisses-under-the-streetlamp-along-the-Seine amazing,” I say, using terms near and dear to my friend.

She brings her hand to her heart. “So it was the perfect kiss?”

“Exactly,” I say, then I share more details of the night—the talking, the teasing, the dancing. The dick pic I never saw, the nip slip that didn’t happen, our accidental jokes.

Still, was it a terrible mistake to kick things up to the kiss level?

But we didn’t let the genie out of the bottle.

The genie is still in the lamp, I’m sure.

“The kiss was quite intentional though?” Scarlett asks, as if needing to confirm it.

“It was.”

She sighs. “Interesting.”

I sit up, skin prickling, spidey-senses on alert. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you went from going as friends to ending the night with a kiss. That’s interesting.” She stops at a street corner, the sound of a bus rumbling along the boulevard landing on my ears.

“Interesting good, or interesting bad?” Nerves speckle my voice. My anxiety resurfaces. Did I mess things up? “Should I be worried about something?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “No. At least I don’t think so. But how did you end things with him?”

My heart beats faster with worry. Like I did something wrong by tiptoeing across that line. Maybe we both did. “I’m seeing him later this week because he’s going to be my plus-one at the Sports Network Awards. Why do you sound like you’re worried about me? Should I be worried?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not, my friend. You’re a badass woman. An adult. A formidable force of nature and the toughest owner in the NFL.” She draws a deep breath as she crosses the street. “But you also entertained a spectacular kiss with a man you want last night.”

“Right, but we agreed to be friends with benefits. We were both on the same page. Besides, he has spring training in a little more than a week, so he’ll be gone. It’s not like there’s even a chance for this to continue,” I say, telling her and reminding myself. Sure, we crossed the line, but we both agreed to, both wanted to, and both know we can handle it. “We’re simply going to two events together, and if something happens, fine. But it’s not like we made any plans to kiss again per se.”

Though as I give that voice, the words sound odd—like I’m convincing myself.

“Ah, it’s the friends-with-benefits plan. That ought to be *quite uncomplicated*,” she says, nodding as she marches past a chocolate shop.

The sight of it makes my mouth water, even as her dry words make my stomach churn. “You think I’m being foolish?”

She laughs gently. “I don’t think you’re being foolish,” she says, taking her time, speaking slowly. “But I also think you should be realistic about what this is. Friends with benefits is risky—both to the benefits and the friendship. Even with the expiration date.”

I sit up straighter, absorbing her words. “Of course,” I say, drawing on my stores of confidence, my internal strength. “I

know that. I'll remember it. I swear. And the expiration date just makes sense."

"Good. You always remember your first," she says.

I blink. "I'm not thinking about sleeping with him."

Scarlett laughs, arching a dubious brow. "Did you hear how high-pitched your voice just went?"

"Because I wanted you to know how I feel."

"Yes, how do you feel after kissing him?"

I narrow my eyes. "You're trying to trick me."

She laughs, but it's a reassuring sound. "Fine, maybe *you're* not thinking about it, but I'm thinking about it for you. And I just want you to think things through. Just know the score, Nadia. And go in prepared for ... *anything*."

"I will. I promise," I say, both to her and to myself, and try not to think of first times with Crosby.

We talk more, and she catches me up on life in Paris with the dashing and charming Englishman she fell in love with recently.

"Things are fantastic with Daniel," she says. "Since we finished our acquisition of the boutique hotels, we celebrated by going to Amsterdam for the weekend and indulged in dancing, food, and all sorts of decadence."

"Happy sigh," I say, as she entertains me with more tales of her European life and love. They checked out the castles, took a boat tour, and savored every second together.

It all sounds too good to be true, except it's real and she worked hard for her happily ever after. Plus, given how her first husband julienned her heart, she deserves it.

I believe that good people do deserve love.

Scarlett is one of the best people I know, and she's found true love.

Like my parents had.

Like Brooke has with her husband.

Like Eric seems to have with Mariana.

I love that kind of love. I want that kind ... someday. The forever kind. The true kind.

But not now. I have too much on my plate, and Crosby isn't keen on dating, so there's no reason why two old friends who've known each other for a long time shouldn't enjoy the benefits of our friendship.

I say goodbye to Scarlett, determined to be prepared for anything that comes my way.

That's all I have to do when I see Crosby again. Just be prepared.

I head to the bathroom to take a shower, checking my phone one last time before I get in. A text from Crosby blinks at me.

Crosby: Just so you know, I slept hard last night. It was an accidental sleep. But it was the best accidental sleep I've ever had. In fact, I think last night was full of all sorts of terrific accidents that should be repeated.

I practically squeeze the phone against my chest, shimmy my shoulders, and fox-trot across the tiles before I reply.

Nadia: Is "repeat" a dirty word?

Crosby: Maybe it is. We'll find out. PS: feel free to send me any pics of what you're going to wear to the event. You know, for my corsage shopping. Think I'm going to get you a new one.

Nadia: When I decide, I'll snap a pic.

Crosby: Can't wait.

I can't either.

I'm giddy and electrified the rest of the day. I return home to finish organizing my new place, including sorting out my *little darlings*—though some are quite large, *big darlings* sounds so gauche. Setting down a satiny piece of fabric in my nightstand drawer, I arrange my favorites, then charge some others in the bathroom.

Another mantra of mine—*there's no excuse for an uncharged vibrator*.

I learned that lesson the hard way one night when I was craving some time with my favorite dolphin.

He sputtered, petered out, and then went dead.

Never again, I said.

That night, the dolphin rises to the occasion.

Oh yes, he does.

And I'm giddy all over again, and in a much naughtier way.

But the next morning, I'm all business.

As I head into the executive offices in the Hawks stadium on the edge of the city, I sweep Crosby from my mind.

It's business time.

I've got my purse, my ovaries of steel, my ultimate poker face, and my *don't be afraid to speak up* mantra.

That serves me well as I meet with my CEO, general counsel, director of college recruiting, and others. They all relocated here from Vegas, but our general manager did not. In the conference room, I set the agenda and expectations for the year ahead, including hiring a new GM—the most important position when it comes to player contracts and hirings and firings.

Then I add as we wrap up, “There's only one thing to do going forward. The Super Bowl was played earlier this month. The fact that we weren't there is all that matters. Next year I want this team to be flying to Miami to win back the Lombardi Trophy,” I tell them.

Once the rest of the execs leave the conference room, my right-hand man, Matthew Harris, leans back in his leather chair, looking like a cat who charmed all the pussycats.

With a do-tell grin, I meet his stare, both of us waiting for the other to break first. It's our thing. He's not only the team CEO; he's also a great friend, and the rare Brit who prefers football played on a gridiron. American football.

I drop my chin in my hand and study him, waiting, waiting.

He whistles, then huffs. "Fine, you win."

I make a rolling gesture with my hand. "Spill. What's the tea, as the kids say these days?"

"I might have a solution to the GM situation. I've got some leads on a GM. Some nontraditional candidates."

Color me intrigued. "Keep talking."

With a satisfied glint in his green eyes, he says, "Word on the street is there's a certain woman who rose through the ranks in Dallas and might fancy a post here."

I sit up straight, excitement tripping through me. "Kim Lee?"

"The one and only."

"She's one of the highest-ranking female executives in the NFL. Hiring her as GM would be a huge coup. Plus, she's brilliant."

"Bloody brilliant, some might say."

"Yes. Get her," I say, then press my palms together. "Pretty please."

"I'll make a call. She'd be fantastic."

"I'd tell you you're my favorite person here, but ..."

He scoffs, like that's old hat. "I know that already. You tell me that all the time."

"It's true, plus you require compliments," I say.

Dragging a hand through his dark-blond hair, he smiles in admission. “I do indeed. The lifeblood of anyone who is a sports exec is a thick skin and an obsessive devotion to praise,” he quips, adjusting his tie. The man is the definition of dapper—he wears three-piece suits every day to work, and the vest look is just so spiffy.

“Speaking of compliments, want to order some lunch and work on our plan for Kim?”

“As if I’d want to do anything else.”

We order in, devising a strategy, and the focus energizes me. Matthew too, it seems, which makes me happy, since he moved here even though the woman he was dating in Vegas didn’t want him to. “How’s everything with Phoebe?” I ask.

He heaves a sigh. “Good? Sort of? I think.”

I frown. “What’s wrong, friend? Is she having a hard time with you being here?”

“Seems she is. Every day we talk, she makes sure to let me know how displeased she is,” he says, then shrugs, chasing it with a sigh.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say, a smidge of guilt wiggling around in me. “I feel responsible.”

“Don’t be sorry. I chose to move. Plus, you should be with someone who supports your career rather than holds it back.” He takes a beat, his lips curving into a grin. “Isn’t that what I told you last year when you went through your parade of horrid men?”

“Sons of mailboxes,” I say with a smile, thinking of Crosby’s saying.

Matthew furrows his brow. “Please tell me that’s not a new American saying I need to learn? I’ve barely come to terms with ‘balling,’ ‘chilling,’ and ‘slay.’”

“It’s something Crosby said to refer to the men in Vegas.”

He arches a brow. “Crosby Cash? The baseball player?”

“Yes. We went to my brother’s wedding together.”

“Oh, did you now?” His eyebrows shoot into his hairline.

“We’re friends,” I say, but I try to rein in the grin that comes with that.

“Right. Sure.”

“I swear,” I say, though the kiss didn’t feel friendly at all. “And we’re going to the awards gala this week.”

“Interesting,” he says, all catlike once again. “Very interesting.”

I wag a finger. “Don’t get any ideas about us.”

But truth be told, all the ideas about Crosby are mine.

Delicious, tempting ideas.

Ideas I want to act on.

Good thing I have a busy day with Matthew, rolling up our sleeves and making a plan for the next season.

At the end of the day, I’m kicking ass and taking names.

I don’t go home till well past ten, after a dinner with the city managers, where I lay the groundwork for expansion plans for the stadium.

Home at eleven, I strip out of my clothes, remove my ring and watch, sink into the tub, and relax.

I’ve got this.

I can be Nadia Harlowe, my father’s daughter by day, and Crosby’s plus-one by night.

CROSBY

Send the runner home.

That's the goal.

I curl a hand over Jacob's shoulder as he digs a cleat into third base.

The batter at home plate takes a couple practice swings. "If he connects, you just go. Got it? Game is on the line."

Jacob gives me a crisp, eager nod. "Got it, Coach Cash."

I laugh. "Crosby. Just Crosby."

Jacob flashes a smile at me. "Coach Cash."

Across the diamond, Grant mans the first base, while our closing pitcher Chance waits by the dugout, watching the action in the final out in the final inning.

It's pitcher versus batter, mano a mano. The fierce and mighty fourth grader goes into his windup and unleashes a wicked fastball, sending it right across the plate. The ten-year-old batter connects on the first swing, launching a screaming line drive.

My pulse spikes. "Go, go, go, go, go!"

But Jacob barely needs my direction. He's tearing down the third baseline, hell-bent on crossing home plate. The ball screams past the shortstop, skittering across the grass, as Jacob hoofs it. I cup my hands in front of my mouth. "You got it! You got it! Just go, go, go!"

Jacob crosses the plate with the winning run, victorious as the rest of his team pours out of the dugout right as the batter lands on first base.

Grant gives the batter a fist bump. I trot toward home plate, and when the kids break apart from their cheering fiesta, Jacob heads straight for me, a gleaming smile across his young face.

“Thank you, Coach Cash.”

“It was nothing,” I say, high-fiving the kid.

But it wasn't nothing. I know the coaching mattered to Jacob. To these other kids. That's why we're here. These grade-schoolers have worked hard all season, and they pulled it off, winning their local league championship.

They make my heart swell with pride. I point at Jacob's chest, stabbing a finger into his sternum. “You're the man.”

He shakes his head. “You're the man.”

I shake mine. “No, you're the man.”

Grant jogs over to us, arriving at home plate with a huge grin. “Maybe I'm the man,” he says, smacking palms with the kids, then me.

Chance saunters over, joining the celebration. “Yes, it all goes to you, Grant. We couldn't do anything without you,” Chance says to the guy who's the steady force behind the plate in our major league games. They are a tough pitcher-catcher combo, one of the best pairings in all of pro baseball, with the kind of tempo that Posada and Rivera had with the Yankees back in the day.

After we congratulate the kids, help them pack up their equipment, and straighten up the diamond, the three of us leave the field where we've served as honorary coaches, playing with a local team of fourth graders in a rougher section of the city.

The kids needed equipment, a field, and some *go get 'em* spirit. So the three of us volunteered to do it, buying their equipment and pitching in as coaches.

Once we leave the field, heading for my cherry-red Tesla, Grant points to the front seat. “Shotgun.”

Chance rolls his eyes. “Back seat has plenty of leg room too. You always think you’re pulling one over on me, don’t you?”

Grant winks at him. “Front seat is better. You can try to justify it. But the truth is I’m just faster.”

Chance lifts a brow, his dark eyes taunting. “That’s what she said about you.”

Grant shoots him a look. He clears his throat. “Maybe that’s what she said about *you*. But no man has ever said that about me.”

Chance hums doubtfully, his dark eyes narrowing. “I dunno. Weren’t you in and out in, like, fifteen minutes with your Grindr hookup the last time we went out?”

Grant shoots deadly laser rays straight at Chance. “Dude. That was DoorDash. I fucking ordered DoorDash.”

“You hooked up with the DoorDash guy? Damn, Grant,” he says, whistling.

Grant huffs. “I was on DoorDash ordering some Thai food for when I got home. I’m not even on Grindr, man.” He reaches into his back pocket, then tosses his phone across the roof of the car to Chance.

Chance grabs it with one hand. “Cool. You want me to sign you up for it now? Should I put you down as In-and-Out-in-Five Guy?”

Grant rolls his eyes. “I don’t have a single dating app on there. Because, wait for it, I don’t need ’em.”

Chance winks. “Right. Sure. *DoorDash* is your dating app.”

Grant cracks up, shaking his head. “It’s a miracle you’ve ever had a date.”

I reach the driver’s side door, gesturing to the two-man comedy act. “Please tell me we’re not going to spend the

entire car ride with the two of you debating your prowess in the bedroom with your conquests.”

Grant and Chance shoot each other confused looks. “What else would we talk about?” Grant asks.

Chance scratches his jaw. “That’s literally our only conversational fodder,” he says as he slides into the back seat. “If we can’t thump our chests and mock each other, I don’t know what we would discuss. So maybe shut your mouth, Crosby.”

I hold up a hand in surrender as I slide into the car. “Anyway, that was a helluva good game. A good season too. Glad you clowns didn’t fuck it up for me.”

Grant squeezes my cheek. “Aw, do we usually fuck it up for you, little Crosby?”

I bat him away. “Sometimes you do. But fair play,” I say, shifting to a slightly serious tone as I start the engine. “You fuckers did good today. Did you see how Carson connected on his at-bat in the fourth?”

Grant beams, a grin that makes his blue eyes sparkle. “That was dope. I was so damn proud of him. He’s come so far this season.”

Chance pats Grant’s shoulder. “He’s a helluva catcher too. I can see him following in your footsteps, man.”

Grant offers him a fist for knocking. “Right back ‘atcha. Christian, Vance, Marco—all the pitchers you coached made serious strides this season. Christian is going to be as fearsome at cleaning up the messes on the mound as you are, man.”

It’s Chance’s turn to smile like a fool. “Thanks. Appreciate that.”

As the Cougars’ closing pitcher, Chance is indeed our cleanup guy on the mound. He’s the one we trust to get us out of jams. Bases loaded, no outs? Tough leftie at the plate? Winning run on third? Chance is the man. The team’s radio announcers nicknamed him Last Chance Train Is Pulling Out of the Station because of the way he freezes out opponents when he takes the mound at the bottom of the ninth.

His skills with a ninety-eight-mile-an-hour cut fastball are unparalleled, but so is his smile. His laugh. He actually chuckles and grins while on the mound, twin traits that are about as unnerving as his arm speed.

“It’s cute to see you two getting along every now and then,” I remark as I check the mirrors, then pull out of the parking spot and into traffic.

“It’s been known to happen from time to time,” Chance says with a shrug.

“Because we’re awesome and so are the kids we coach,” I say. “And that’s why you two will treat me to beers tonight.”

“I’m down for that.” Grant taps out a drumbeat on the dashboard, then checks out the time. Close to six thirty. “Where do you want to go?”

“Spotted Zebra?” I suggest.

“Good answer. We’ve got to support my sister,” Grant says. “Did you know her bar was named the hippest in Hayes Valley in *SF Weekly*?”

Chance chimes in from the back seat, “Plus, you like to pick up guys at the Spotted Zebra.”

Grant shoots us a wicked grin. “I can’t help it if the bar draws an eclectic mix of hot men, and even hotter men who are wildly attracted to me.”

“You do know the bar attracts women too?” Chance puts in.

Grant waves a hand dismissively. “Yeah. I mean, sure. Have at them.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that,” Chance says dryly.

Grant, the wiseass, adopts a disdainful look. “You don’t see me going after the same opportunities you’re pursuing. I would think you’d be stoked that I’m not trying to horn in on your territory.”

I glance in the rearview mirror at Chance. “Yeah, aren’t you so glad we don’t have to compete with this ugly fucker for

the ladies?”

Grant cuts in. “All I’m saying is, I don’t think you cats appreciate what I do for your odds. A thank you would be nice.”

Chance leans forward, his hand curling over the back of Grant’s seat. “Wow. Thank you so much for digging men so we don’t have to compete with you.”

Grant nods, long and confident. “That’s what I’m talking about. You are most welcome.”

“By that same token, you’re welcome too,” Chance says, all offhand and casual.

“For what?” Grant asks, puzzled.

I slow to a stop at the light, amused by the pitcher and catcher spurring each other on. That’s their style. Thick as thieves on the field, prickly as lions in warring prides off it. In the mirror I catch Chance batting his eyelashes as he says. “That I don’t ruin your odds.”

Grant cracks up. “Well played, bro. Well played.”

“And while we’re playing,” Chance adds, all cool and cucumber-y, “If you ever want to see who can rack up more numbers, you just let me know.”

“For real? You think you can pull more babes than I can pull dudes?”

“I think I can.”

Grant barks out a laugh. “Love you man, but you do not know dudes. So don’t even attempt that or you will be schooled.”

I cast a glance back at the pitcher. “Grant has a point. You ever seen the way they flock to him? Time to step down, my friend.”

“Fine, fine.” Chance huffs, then strokes his chin. “Maybe I’ll just chat with Sierra then.”

Grant whips his head around all the way to the back seat, staring at the closing pitcher. “Do not. Do not go near Sierra.

Do not. Do not. Do not.”

Chance grins wickedly. “Maybe I should tonight. What do you think about that, Grant?”

Grant leans back in his seat, closes his eyes, and drags his hand down his face. “You can score as many digits as I can. Just stay away from Sierra,” Grant mutters, then turns to me, his tone shifting. “Speaking of sisters, what the hell happened at the wedding with you and Eric’s sister?”

“Yeah, how does that dog collar fit around your neck, Crosby?” Chance asks. “Is it nice and tight, keeping you in line?”

I tug at an imaginary collar as I merge into the right lane so I can turn. “It’s keeping me away from the women on the other side of the electrical fence.”

“Except Nadia. You two looked pretty tight out on the dance floor,” Chance says, his tone doubtful. “I couldn’t join the guys for the inquisition because I had to talk to my agent then. But it sure looked like you were cozying up with her the rest of the night.”

I flip the signal, turning right, and avoiding the question. “As cozy as Grant looked the other night when he met—who was that you met the last time we were at the Spotted Zebra?”

Chance clears his throat. “Crosby, don’t deflect. We need to report back to Eric. We’re his proxies. What’s the story with Nadia?”

As I drive, I flash back to Saturday night at the wedding.

To the elevator, the hallway, the kiss outside her hotel room door.

The way Nadia melted in my arms, her lips all soft and lush against mine, her body like a dream, her scent invading my mind.

Then I replay our texts the next morning.

Do I confess?

Do I tell them we kissed?

But there's nothing to confess.

Not a thing.

We simply made plans to attend an event together that we were both already invited to. Potentially, we're going to enjoy some more perks.

That's not breaking the pact. The pact was not to date. I'm not dating her. I'm only ... *benefiting* with her.

Ergo, it's all good.

"We're going to the Sports Network Awards later this week. Just like we went to the wedding. We're going as friends," I say, cool and even.

Grant's eyes widen. "As friends?"

"As friends," I repeat.

"Do you actually know how to be friends with a woman?" Chance posits from the back seat.

"Yes, I do, turkey burger. I have been friends with Nadia for years. Since we were teenagers. Since we were even younger. I know how to be friends with her quite well, thank you very much."

"I'm not sure I believe you," Chance says, his tone brimming with skepticism.

"Look, it's all for the best. She's new in town, she doesn't know a ton of people, and she's the owner of the football team, so it's good for her to be seen out and about with somebody when she goes to these events. Likewise, it's good for me to be seen with someone who's not—"

"A train wreck?" Grant supplies.

"A criminal?" Chance puts in.

"Convicted for insider trading?" Chance continues, his voice going all serious. "Do you think maybe you have a problem with picking the wrong type of women?"

I roll my eyes as we near the Spotted Zebra and I hunt for a parking space. "Gee. I wonder if I do."

Grant lets out a sympathetic sigh. “You just let people in too soon. That’s all. Got to protect that heart.” He smacks my chest. “Trust me.”

For a second, Grant’s tone is deadly serious, and a little sad.

“Speaking from experience?” I ask, no teasing this time, no mocking.

Chance leans in closer, his tone low and menacing. “Yeah, did some dude hurt you? Because I will cut that fucker.”

Grant shrugs like it’s no big deal. “I’m all good now. It was a while ago. Right before my rookie season.”

“Who was he?” I ask, since I’m not buying the no-big-deal routine.

Grant waves a hand dismissively. “No one.”

“He hurt you, and he’s *no one*? Was he a spring training hookup?” Chance asks.

“Yeah, he was.”

“Were you in love?” Chance presses.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Grant work his jaw, clench it, then let go. “Doesn’t matter. I was young and foolish. It’s in the past. No biggie now.”

“You sure?” I push.

“Positive,” Grant says with a crisp nod, slicing off this line of questioning. “Anyway, back to Crosby.” He taps his sternum. “You need to watch out for your ticker.”

“So Crosby should keep women at a distance?” Chance asks.

“Hello? I’m still here,” I point out.

“Whatever,” Chance says. “Let your bros have your back.”

“Fine. What sage advice would my bros give me tonight, then?” I ask as I pull into a spot.

“Here’s the advice I’ll give you. Be careful. Be very careful who you let in. You’ll keep your heart safe that way,”

Grant says, as I parallel park in three perfect moves.

When I cut the engine, I go a little more serious. “Everything is chill with Nadia. We’re going as friends, and that’s all it is. Honestly, it’d be the same as if, say, Grant went with your brother to some type of event,” I say to Chance.

Grant cringes as he swings open the door. “Are you fucking kidding me? TJ? You think I should date his twin?”

“Yeah,” I suggest, egging him on. “Like, maybe if you needed a date. A plus-one for an event. Why not take TJ?”

Grant’s jaw drops. It comes unhinged. It falls to the sidewalk. He gives me a *duh* look. “He looks exactly like Chance. No way could I kiss someone who looks like my friend.”

“Aww. We’re friends now,” Chance says, bringing his hand to his heart. “I’m touched.”

Grant flips him the bird. “Yes, asshole. We’re friends. But I’m not dating your brother. That is too weird.”

The notion is indeed weird. But it’s also distracting.

The debate over dating a friend’s twin occupies the two of them for the next hour as we go into Grant’s sister’s bar, order beers, and shoot the breeze.

Neither one of them even tries to score any numbers. They’re too deep in their bar debate.

They decide Grant’s chances of dating TJ are less than zero.

Are those the same as my chances with Nadia?

They *should* be zero.

But when I click open my text messages after I finish my brew, a photo loads.

Two pics, actually.

The first is a shot of some silky fabric on her bed, a close-up of her dress. It’s the color of wine, and a growl forms in my throat as I imagine how that dress will look on her body.

The next pic, though, knocks the breath clear from my lungs.

She sent me a shot of her feet in a sexy-as-sin pair of heels.

My mind springs several steps ahead, picturing those legs curled over my shoulders.

Wrapped around my waist.

Spread open on the bed for me.

Ah hell.

The chances of me resisting her are not zero.

Not even close.

NADIA

I'll see Crosby in less than forty-eight hours.

I am most definitely counting down.

I'm not even going to pretend I'm not.

I'm counting down, and I'm shopping.

Since I've bought shoes when dates have gone awry, I'm damn well going to buy shoes in advance of one that I'm sure will go fantastically.

Okay, fine. It's not a date. It's an event where we're pairing up. Still, events require shoes.

With a pair of red heels in her hand, my mother settles onto a plush pink cushion on a chair at one of our favorite shops on Union Street.

My mother and I bond over many things, shopping among them. Because shopping is great for talking, and that's something we've always done well. We talk, and we share.

"Over a week on the job back in San Francisco. What's your verdict?"

I peer out the window of the store. "It's ... foggy here."

She laughs as she slides on the shoes.

My lips form an O as I check out the new footwear. "My verdict on those shoes is they are a must buy," I say, pointing decisively at the beauties on her feet.

“I do love them,” she says, pursing her lips as she studies the way they fit. “Where would I wear them though?”

“Anywhere,” I say, as the sales associate returns with a gorgeous pair of amethyst velvet shoes for me. I thank her, then continue my ode to Mom’s cherry-red pumps. “Everywhere. Gardening. Jigsaw puzzling. Shopping. Going out for tea. Heck, I’d wear those babies walking around the house. And I’d stop and admire my feet in the mirror every time I walked past one.”

She taps her chin. “All good ideas. I wonder if I should ...”

The light bulb goes off. “Wait. Are they for a date?”

She dips her head, her shy smile giving me the answer I need. She confirms it with a nod and a soft, barely audible squeal.

I sit down next to her, grabbing the jewel-like shoes from the box and sliding my left foot into one. “Tell me everything, you secret keeper.”

She lifts her face, sporting a smile she can’t contain. “I have a dinner date this weekend in Napa.”

“With who?” I ask, desperately needing the answer.

“Crosby’s mom is setting me up with a man she knows,” she says, borderline giggling. It’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.

“Who is he? Is he an upstanding citizen? Does he recycle? Does he have a decent job? Did he go to college?” I ask, peppering her with the same sort of questions she’d pepper me with. “And, most important, does he like dogs?”

I fasten the strap of the shoes as I wait for her answers.

“He’s originally from Sydney. He owns a couple of vineyards.”

I smile. “Great. So he likes wine. Point in his favor.”

“He donates to a local animal shelter. In fact, he’s one of the biggest donors.”

Nice, I mouth approvingly.

“He came here for college. Went to UCSF. He recycles *and* composts.”

I sigh dreamily. “And I bet he has a dog.”

She holds up two fingers. “Both rescue mutts. And he likes live music.”

I glance at the ceiling, hands up, like angels have sent this man from on high. “Let me guess. James Taylor, Melissa Etheridge, and Jackson Browne. Am I right?”

She smacks my leg. “I’m not *that* old.”

“You’re right. Melissa Etheridge is not quite as old as those guys.”

“Did you think someone my age would prefer Katy Perry?”

“No. You’re so not a Katy Perry person. But you are *so* a Jackson Browne person.” I raise a finger to make a point. “And therefore you are exactly *that* old.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, fine. I love Jackson Browne. My ’70s heart is pitter-pattering. I can’t help myself.”

“Is he taking you to that Jackson Browne concert this weekend? I heard there’s one in downtown Napa.”

She shoots me an *I’m so impressed* look. “Yes, that’s where our date is. You know everything.”

“Hey, it’s my job to be knowledgeable about all things Bay Area. Also, I’m talking to a number of people for the GM job and one of the people I interviewed this week lives there, and he mentioned that he’s going to it too.”

“How is the quest for a GM going?”

As I try on the shoes, I tell her about the candidates I’ve met so far this week and the others to come in the weeks ahead. “I want to find someone who can negotiate the trades and the personnel changes I need to make a big splash. Someone who knows exactly how to bring the Lombardi

Trophy back to the Hawks. I want to live up to Dad's reputation."

She pats my leg, flashing me a warm smile. "He would be proud of you, holding your own in the job. You've done a great job the last few years, and you'll keep doing it."

A lump forms in my throat. "Thanks, Mom. I needed to hear that. Some days are hard and busy." I gesture to the shoes. "But shoes make hard days easier. You need to buy those shoes. Actually, I'm going to get them for you as a gift for your date."

She smiles. "Thank you. That's very sweet of you." Then her expression falters, her smile fading away. "Nadia, do you think it's terrible that I'm dating again? Would he be upset?"

I squeeze her shoulder, shaking my head adamantly. "He loved you so. He'd want you to be happy. Don't forget that note he wrote."

She brings her hand to her mouth. A tear slides down her cheek.

Tears well in my eyes too as a memory flickers before me. My father's decline was fast and furious. In some ways that was for the best. He didn't have to suffer for long. When I was at the hospital with him, he asked me to help him write a note for his wife.

He wanted her to be happy again. He wanted her to go out and find love. The kind that they'd had.

"Don't let your mother mourn me for too long. She's young and vibrant. She'll want to love again. And you need to keep reminding her that that's what I would want for her," he told me.

We wrote a brief instructional manual for me to give any man dating her after he passed. Though, not on a first date.

Instructions for dating my wife: You must keep up with her, like puzzles, enjoy gardening, recycle as much of everything as possible, be able to banter about the news, cook a meal now and then, but also take her out to the best restaurants in the city, as well as a dive bar occasionally because she loves

those. It helps, too, if you can bake, because she has quite a sweet tooth. Most importantly, she has the biggest heart in the world, and if you break it, I will haunt you forever.

I memorized every beautiful word. Replaying them in my head brings a surge of emotion to my heart. A lump to my throat.

“He doesn’t want to have to haunt this guy,” I whisper, fishing in my purse for my handy tissues to dab the threat of tears. “So yes, Mom, he’d be very happy.”

She nods a few times, a small smile playing across her lips, rearranging her frown. “I think he would too.” She takes a beat to compose herself. “What about you and Crosby? You seemed to enjoy each other at the wedding.”

Enjoy is putting it mildly.

I savored it.

I fantasized about it.

I’ve gotten off to it.

But I’m not telling *that* to my mom.

I zoom in on the practical matters of Crosby and me. “We’re going to the Sports Network Awards later this week. I’m looking forward to it,” I say, trying desperately to maintain a straight face even though I’m giddy with excitement about seeing him in less than forty-eight hours.

She arches a wry brow. “Are you dating him?”

I kind of wish I were.

But there’s no space in my life for it. It’s for the best that he’s already erected walls. “He’s taking a break from dating. I’m focused on work. Truly, I’m just going as his friend.” *Friends with benefits perhaps*, I add silently, reminding my lips not to curve into a naughty grin as I imagine some of the benefits.

More kisses?

More than kisses?

Kisses all over?

A shiver runs through me ...

Pressing her palms together, my mom gazes ceilingward. "Someday you might date him."

I swat her playfully. "Don't be silly. I just said neither one of us is in the market for a relationship. I'm busy with the team. He has spring training and then, you know, the regular season. Which lasts for six long months."

"To that I say—*blah, blah, blah.*"

I laugh. "Glad you have your own opinion."

"I do indeed. And I've been rooting for you two ever since he looked at you the night you went to prom."

I jerk my head back. "What? How did he look at me?"

"Like he wished *he* were Charlie Duncan." She shrugs, a little devilishly. "I saw something in his eyes then."

I'm still for a moment, flashing back not to eight years ago, but to a few nights ago. At Eric's wedding, Crosby mentioned Charlie and his *broken heart*. Is my mother right? Did Crosby look at me like he wished he'd taken me to prom eight years ago?

Just as quickly as it arrived, I wave off the galloping-away thought.

That was the past.

But in the present, is he wanting more than our *plus-one*?

We *did* leave the door open.

Does he want to kick it all the way open?

Do I want to?

My stomach flips as I imagine his hand on my face again, his lips sweeping over mine, our breath mingling.

And more. So much more.

I return to the moment. "And I saw something in *your* eyes when you gazed at these shoes." I point at the red pumps.

“Let’s go buy them.”

* * *

A few hours later, I take a sip of chardonnay, enjoying how it warms me.

How it fuels thoughts of *benefits*.

What type of benefits are on the table?

Sinking onto my plush duvet, my mind indulges in a meander down friends-with-benefits lane, checking out the scenery. Right there are the words Crosby said to me the other night. *We’re absolutely friends, even though I would very much like to kiss you deliberately again.*

I wander around the bend to check out his text from the next morning. *In fact, I think last night was full of all sorts of terrific accidents that should be repeated.*

What comes around the next curve in the lane?

What do I want to come next?

I’m not entirely sure, but I know this much—I want more.

As I scroll through our recent texts, I land on one where he invited me to send him a pic of what I’m wearing to this weekend’s event.

Why not?

I set down the wine, slide on the shoes, and arrange myself on the bed.

This will be fun. Just more of *plus-oneing with the best man*.

I send him a picture.

Me in bed, wearing these shoes, my feet crossed at the ankles.

Along with a few words.

Nadia: I bought these for our event, my plus-one.

His reply arrives lightning fast.

Crosby: I didn't have a foot fetish, but now I do. I really fucking do.

Nadia: I like this fetish of yours.

Crosby: And I would like to kiss your ankles very much.

I tremble, picturing his lips on my ankles, him brushing his mouth along my skin. It's not a *plus-one* type of response from him. It's so much better.

Nadia: I think I'd like that.

Crosby: You know what I'd like?

Nadia: What would you like?

As I wait for his reply, I savor the sensations floating through me, the shivers running up and down my body, the tingle in my chest. It feels so good to flirt. So good to kick us up beyond *plus-one*.

Crosby: I would like to slowly, deliciously unbuckle them, take them off you, and kiss my way up to your knees.

Fire flickers through me, scorching my veins. My God, did it get red-hot in here all of a sudden? Yes, it did.

Nadia: I bet that would feel so damn good.

I'm no expert at flirting, and I hope I'm doing this right. But the speed of his reply tells me that I'm doing it exactly as we both want.

Crosby: Kiss you behind your knee, lick you along your thighs, press my lips to your legs.

Nadia: I'm ...

Crosby: You're what?

I draw a deep breath.

Am I doing this?

Smashing past this friendship wall? Knocking it down?
Sending this banter into officially naughty terrain?

I squirm, my body hot, my center pulsing.

Yes. Yes, I am doing this.

I type out my greatest wish right now. I feel daring and bold as I write it, no matter how risky this might be. We've sped up to sixty miles per hour in the span of one hot picture of my feet in heels.

But maybe that was all we needed, a match to our kindling.

Nadia: I'm wanting you to kiss me all over.

Crosby: Fuck, Nadia. I'd love to. You're going to look so damn good in those shoes. And I bet you taste so good everywhere. Every inch of you.

I wave a hand in front of my face, as if that will lower my temperature. But my skin is flushed, hot with lust and need. I'm dangerously wet and wickedly turned on.

There's only one solution.

Nadia: On that note, I need a moment. Be right back.

Letting go of the phone, I slide down my panties, kicking them to the floor. Opening the nightstand drawer, I grab my most favorite rabbit. Turning it on, I lift up my knees, then let them fall apart as I close my eyes.

The rabbit's ears buzz, tantalizing my wet clit.

A gasp falls from my lips, hungry and wild.

I glide the rabbit's head through my hot center. It moves easily. I'm that slick, that aroused.

That ready for Crosby.

My skin tingles all over, cells bursting with electricity, sparking with pleasure as I rub.

My legs part farther, and I hike up the speed, seeking friction, sweet friction, as I chase relief. I breathe harder, rocking my hips, abandoning myself to the feelings igniting in me.

To the tendrils of desire curling in my toes, coiling in my stomach, pulsing in my aching center.

As I imagine Crosby.

His face. His mouth. His lips. I breathe his name on a harsh pant.

"Crosby."

Then I say it again, loving how it feels on my tongue in the heat of the moment, what it does to my body, the way it makes me ravenous with lust everywhere. How I'm hot with the prospect of bliss. I punch up my hips, pushing the rabbit into me.

I moan, letting my legs fall open wider as the silicone shaft sinks deeper and I imagine it's Crosby.

Pushing, sinking, thrusting, until he fills me all the way and I gasp.

Crosby.

Oh God.

Please.

Yes. More.

Like that, fucking myself with the rabbit, its ears wildly caressing my clit at rocket speed, I moan and groan. I writhe and melt.

I picture. I imagine.

My mind plays dirty image after dirtier image, switching ruthlessly between him licking me, eating me, then fucking me.

The thing I've never had. The thing I want desperately now.

Sex, gorgeous, beautiful, hot, hard sex.

I want him inside me.

Taking me, having me, fucking me.

I detonate, coming hard and fierce as I call out his name.

It sounds so incredibly right. I picture him leaning over me, braced on strong arms, dipping his head, brushing a soft, gentle kiss to my lips.

Telling me how incredible that was for him too.

All of that. I want all of that. I want more than plus-oneing with the best man.

* * *

After the rabbit's gone back into its burrow, I pick up my phone. Read a new message.

Crosby: What kind of moment did you need? Everything okay? Did I cross a line?

I reply, as more than a friend.

Nadia: I needed a moment ... to cross all sorts of lines myself.

Crosby: Are you saying what I think you're saying?

Nadia: I'm saying I'm feeling very satisfied right now.

Crosby: And I bet that was not an accident at all.

Nadia: It was very deliberate satisfaction.

CROSBY

After a gallons-of-sweat-inducing StairMaster workout, some pretzel-like stretching worthy of a YouTube yogini, and a punishing session with my personal trainer at the gym—because sessions with personal trainers should always be punishing—a quick glance at the clock tells me I’m seven hours away from seeing Nadia.

I grab my water bottle and zip up my hoodie, tipping my chin to one of my workout partners. Juan, a pitcher on my team. He’s tearing up the treadmill. He yanks an AirPods from his ear.

“You almost done?”

“Do I look like I’m almost done?” he fires back, breathing hard, attacking the machine with ferocity.

“Looks like you’re taking a walk in the park.”

He laughs, then flips me the bird. “Fuck off.”

“Fuck off to you too.”

“Hey! You want to babysit again?”

“Anytime. You let me know.”

“Thanks, man.”

I turn to Holden. “Over and out for you?” I ask as he tugs on his LA Bandits sweatshirt, his former team.

“I am. Logged my four miles already this morning. So this was just extra.”

“Show-off.”

“You could work harder too. Might make your stats better,” he says, an evil glint in his eyes.

“My stats destroy your stats.”

He scoffs, then laughs. “You wish. Ready for some grub?”

“You sure you can fit it in your schedule? You probably have a one o’clock session with a sandwich, then a two o’clock to do your laundry.”

“You’re right. I’ll dine alone.”

I clap his shoulder. “Let’s go. Lunch with you will kill an hour.”

He rolls his eyes. “Thanks. Glad I’m a way for you to pass the time.”

“That is indeed one of your benefits. Along with the occasional display of friendship and support,” I say with an *I’m a smart-ass* wink. I gesture to his sweatshirt. “Any word from your agent or from the team about whether the Dragons have a new manager yet?”

He shakes his head, sighing heavily. Holden joined the Dragons after a recent trade. Once the city’s vaunted baseball franchise, the longtime team is now the scourge of Major League Baseball after a sign-stealing scandal that would put a certain Texas team to shame. Our fans call The Dragons our mortal enemies, saying the city isn’t big enough for two teams, when one’s best known for cheating. The cheating ran up and down the lineup, with the manager enlisting players, pitchers, pinch hitters, bat boys, camera operators, field crew, and more in an elaborate ruse to steal opposing teams’ catcher signs to rack up ill-gotten wins. So many wins and so many sign thefts that the team won two World Series in a row.

Two *tainted* championships one right after the other.

When an enterprising sports reporter broke news of the scandal, the Dragons owner was an apoplectic-level of livid. He cleaned house like a biohazard crew on steroids, gutting the organization with a stem to stern roster shake-up.

Every player on the cheating lineup got the hook. Every coach too, from manager down to first base, third base, pitching, and so on. The owner brought in new talent, like Holden.

But one of the last pieces to fall into place is a new skipper.

“No idea when that’s going to come. It’d be nice to know who’s going to be determining the batting lineup,” Holden says as we head up Fillmore.

“What’s the vibe like so far with the new players? Any idea yet from talking to the guys?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’ve only met a handful. They seem decent and as disgusted with the sign-stealing as they should be.”

“Hell yeah. If I were the baseball commissioner, I’d ban the entire former team for life.”

“Ban them right now. Right the hell now.” He shakes his head in obvious disgust. “Consider yourself lucky that you’re on the team in the city with a squeaky-clean image.”

We stop at the light. “I definitely consider myself lucky for that. In fact, I might have to get a new pair of lucky socks just to celebrate being on a fine-ass team.”

On that note we pop into Gabriel’s Tuxedos on the next block. “I need a new pair for tonight. Every event needs its own inaugural socks,” I say, heading for a display of the sartorial item in question. Flicking through pairs, I find one that suits my fancy. Fox socks. “I deem these my new lucky socks.”

I hold the pair above my head, Simba-style.

“Those are ugly as sin, so they’re perfect for you,” Holden says.

“Or maybe I’m just a fox and they match me.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

At the register, Gabe says hello then shoots me a *give me news* stare. “How’s it going with the plan?”

“Yes, inquiring minds want to know,” Holden adds with avid eyes of his own. The man knows my temptation. My *particular* one.

But I haven’t fallen too far off the wagon. I’m holding on to the wheels. I give them two thumbs up. “I am all good.”

“You’re being a good boy?” Gabe asks, wanting to be sure.

“So good.”

That feels true enough for now.

We take off with my socks in hand, heading to my favorite salad-and-grain-bowl spot for lunch. As we eat, Holden and I chat more about his season ahead, and what he wants to do differently to distance himself from the old guard.

“I feel for you, man. It can’t be easy. But I have faith that you’re going to do a great job. You just have to work on your media persona,” I say, since he’s not known for being a smiley-faced favorite among reporters.

He sneers, then narrows his eyes. “That’s going to be one tough task. Last time I sat down with a local sports reporter in Seattle it didn’t go so well.”

“Did he burn you?”

“More like stabbed me in the back, made shit up and totally invaded my family’s privacy.”

“Ah, so that did it. That’s why you don’t like talking to the media?”

“I don’t have many warm fuzzies for the press.”

“I hear ya. It’s a balance, man. It’s part of the job though. Helps with sponsorships.”

“True. And my agent says the same. So I’m sure I need to work on it. Someday.” As he takes a bite of his lunch, his brow furrows. “Hey, if you said at the wedding that nothing was happening with Nadia, then why the hell are you counting down the time until the awards ceremony tonight?” He strokes

his chin, like a detective cracking the case. “I sense a plot twist, Watson.”

“No twist. The answer is as simple as the evidence in front of you.”

“What evidence?”

I lean in closer, adopting a satisfied smile. “She’s prettier to look at than you.”

He lifts a forkful of his chicken salad. “No argument there. She’s gorgeous.”

I bristle, but don’t disagree.

Facts are facts.

* * *

Six hours later, I’m in my black tux. I pull on my new lucky socks, adjust my bow tie, and grab the corsage and boutonniere from the fridge.

I frown at the plastic container in my hand. This is cheesy, right?

Like extra-slices-melting-down-the-burger-patty levels of cheese.

Does she really want this for each event?

It’s kind of ... teenager-y. It was kind of funny when it was required at the wedding.

But tonight? For a gala?

We don’t need to walk down Prom Memory Lane.

Fuck these flowers. Nadia is a sexy, sophisticated woman. I’m going to get her something to match her mystique.

I check the time on my phone then open the picture she sent me of her dress fabric, and then hightail it out of my house, googling the nearest stores as I go.

Bounding down the front steps, I reach the limo door just as the driver steps out.

“Good evening, Mr. Cash.”

“Hey, Jasper,” I say. “Can you take me to that store on Fillmore that sells those things women wear around their shoulders?”

“Wraps, sir?”

I snap my fingers. “Yep. Those.”

He doesn’t even blink—probably not even close to the strangest request he’s gotten. “Right away.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I slide into the back of the limo. When I click on the text from my cousin, attached is a photo of a cute blonde with a heart-shaped face.

Rachel: How about Caitlin? She teaches preschool! And fosters kittens! She’s soooooo good.

Crosby: Rach, I love you, but I’m not interested. Plus, I’m taking my old friend Nadia to the Sports Network Awards tonight.

Rachel: OMG!

Crosby: It’s nothing. I swear it’s nothing.

Rachel: Squee! I want a report!

Crosby: I will give you no such thing. But hey, maybe I should find a guy for you. Payback, cousin!

Rachel: You say that like it’s a bad thing, you setting me up with someone. I’m pretty sure you know some fabulous men. Ideally, I’d like a man who loves his job, likes to unwind with something quirky and creative, and would be passionately, madly devoted to me, talking and trying to make the best of a life together.

Crosby: I’m on it.

I tuck the phone into my pocket when we reach the store I passed the other week, the one with scarves and shit in the window.

“Be right back,” I tell Jasper, and race in. I show the dress fabric to a sales associate, and three minutes later, I walk out with a gift for my ... old friend Nadia.

Hardly seems like the way to describe her though.

I’m back in the limo when Rachel replies with another message.

Rachel: But back to you and Nadia. All I will say is I’m so excited for you, but please be careful. You let people in too soon.

Crosby: Funny. Grant said that too the other day. I promise I’ll be careful.

But at Nadia’s door a few minutes later, I don’t know that I feel *careful*.

Hungry—that’s what I feel when she opens the door.

A dress the color of a rich merlot hugs her curves and shows off her fantastic breasts, which are dusted with some sort of shimmery powder. All that glimmering skin makes me want to haul her against me, bury my face in the valley of her breasts, and kiss her every-fucking-where, starting with those lips, all sensual, pink, and glossy.

Her chestnut hair falls loose over her shoulders in thick waves I want to run my hands through. And her face. Those cheekbones. That mouth. Those big brown eyes.

My brain kicks into an overdrive of desire. My breath catches, and lust hums in my bones.

“Nadia Harlowe,” I say, “there is nothing accidental about how sexy you look, or how much I want to kiss you right now.”

Her lips part, her tongue flicking across her bottom lip, and she shudders. “Kiss me,” she whispers.

I set the gift bag on the entryway table.

This time, I'm careful about one thing only. *Don't mess up her hair.*

I step inside, kick the door closed, and cup her cheeks. I haul her close. With a groan already rumbling up my throat, I cover her lips with mine and kiss her so goddamn deliberately.

The opposite of our first kiss.

A kiss stoked from fire.

One forged from the flames of lust licking between us, fanned by nights of flirty, dirty texts.

Or maybe, just maybe, from years of latent feelings.

Whatever it is, I need to touch her, consume her, taste those lips crushed against mine. Her tropical island scent dances in my head, making me dizzy, buzzed on her.

I kiss her like I can't get enough of her. Like we're both pouring years of longing into this moment. Like our kiss is fueled by bone-deep need to surrender to this desire.

To this kiss.

To this connection.

I run my thumb along her jaw as I kiss her rougher, more passionately, my tongue exploring her mouth, my lips brushing over hers, our breaths mingling.

She sighs and murmurs, kissing me back just as fiercely, her hands traveling up my chest, spreading over my pecs like she wants to own my body.

Hell yes.

Have at it.

I drop one hand from her face, sliding it down over the curve of her breast. She trembles as my fingers roam around her and down her spine till my palm curls over her ass, and I jerk her against me so she can feel the outline of my cock.

“Oh!” she gasps.

It's so goddamn sexy, that one syllable and the way she says it, tinged with desperation.

I break the kiss, panting hard.

“I think I need a moment,” I say, echoing her line from the other night.

“I think I need a moment too,” she says.

We both grin like we share a secret, and we do—the truth of how we feel for each other.

But there’s no time to explore these feelings now.

She glances at her watch and shoots me a rueful smile. “I think we better go. I do have to present an award,” she says, her breath still uneven, laced with desire.

“Me too.” Gently, I run my fingers along a soft curl of her hair. “But know this—I’d love nothing more than to play hooky, unzip your dress, strip you down to nothing, and kiss every inch of your naked body.” I meet her gaze again, locking eyes with her so she can see in mine how much I want her. Reaching for her wrist, I run my thumb over it and feel her shudder under my touch. “I’d love nothing more than to kiss you, touch you, fuck you.”

She shivers, her eyes fluttering closed for a second. “I want that too,” she whispers, and I don’t know how I’m going to make it through the next few hours.

“We better go,” I growl. “Or I’m going to take you right now.”

“Can’t have that,” she says, sexy and teasing.

Somehow we separate for real this time.

No touching.

She grabs her purse, lifting a brow as she checks its contents. “I don’t need my Leatherman, but I do need these two necessities.” She takes out a tissue to wipe away her smeared gloss, then leans into me and dabs my lips too, a delighted grin on her gorgeous face. “There. Now you don’t quite look like you were kissed six ways to Sunday.”

“But I was. I definitely was.”

She tosses the tissue into the trash can, snags her lipstick, and reapplies it.

I raise a hand. “Um, back up a sec though. Leatherman?”

“Every woman should carry one. How else would I remove a porcupine quill if I’m out hiking?”

“There you go.”

She snags her keys and drops them into her purse. “Let me grab a wrap.”

I grin. “Let me.”

She shoots me a curious look as I reach behind her for the small shopping bag.

“I ditched the corsage. Tonight isn’t the prom. It’s a gala, and this seemed more fitting.” I hand her the bag, anticipation skating over my skin, along with the hope that she’ll like it.

Pulling out the tissue paper, she dips her hand inside and tugs a length of wine-colored fabric from the bag. “It’s one of those wrap thingamajigs,” I say. It comes out gravelly and a little awkward.

A smile lights up her face. “You can just call it a wrap,” she says, then runs her hand over the soft fabric. “It’s silky and gorgeous.”

My heart thumps at the compliment. “Glad you like it.”

She tosses it around her shoulders and hugs it across her breasts. I breathe out hard, groaning my appreciation for how goddamn good she looks in everything—especially in something I got her.

“Gorgeous. Like you.”

“Thank you,” she says, all whispery and sexy, and I am dying with desire for her.

We step out into the hall, and she shuts the door behind us. In the elevator, she turns to me, her expression pensive but determined.

She steps closer, fiddles with my tie, then meets my eyes.
“Before we do any of those things you said, there’s something
I want you to know.”

NADIA

Funny, I don't normally tell a guy the status of my V card on a second date.

Not on a third or fourth date either.

For the longest time, I thought my virginity was a whispery secret, a closely guarded little nugget of privacy. Right now, right here, I'm seeing it for what it is—not a secret, but a fact.

Having sex or not having sex says nothing about who I am, what I want as a woman, or what I want in bed.

I flash back to my choices with other men.

By the time I was ready to have sex, the men I dated were uninspiring. In college, I never dated anyone long enough to want to give him the keys. Then, in my master's program, I liked a guy well enough, but when my pants were off for the first time, he groped me like I was a Thanksgiving turkey.

Kind of a turnoff.

I didn't want any more with him or the others.

So I never told them I was a virgin.

No one has earned need-to-know status yet, because I've never met anyone I wanted to sleep with.

Until now.

I want the man standing across from me in a tux.

My friend.

My friend with benefits.

My brother's best friend.

I want him, unequivocally, passionately, and so damned soon.

This awareness dawns on me all at once, like the lights turned on in a house that's been dark.

Switch.

Every room illuminated.

And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I want to have sex with him.

And so, I'm not confessing my virginity. I'm sharing it.

As the elevator doors whisk shut, I meet Crosby's gaze. "So, everything you just said to me—take me, have me, have sex with me?"

His eyes widen, sparkling with the desire I've seen in him since he showed up at my door tonight. "Yes?" His voice is full of anticipation.

I draw a breath but find it's remarkably easy to tell him. Maybe because we've known each other for years, or because we're friends.

Or maybe because we've been up-front about what we are.

Friends with benefits.

I finish the thought. "I want that. I'd really like to have sex for the first time ever. And to have it with you."

That was easy.

As easy as buying shoes, as easy as talking to a friend, as easy as being with family.

"Tonight," I add. It's a relief to say because I want this so badly. I want it with every part of me, and I want it with him.

But Crosby is frozen.

He breathes out. Breathes in.

Fine, he blinks a bit.

But that is all.

I laugh, a nervous sound. “Maybe I do need a Leatherman to get you to talk.” The nerves missing before now clobber me over the head like a criminal sneaking up on me in an alley, and I twist my fingers together. “Crosby? Say something, won’t you?”

That’s what I ask.

And then I wait, terribly, awfully worried that I’ve broken him.

CROSBY

Why am I not freaking out about deflowering my best friend's sister?

Maybe because resisting Nadia has never been about her being Eric's sister. It's because I asked Eric to be my no-sex sponsor.

But Eric's not here.

And I'm so damn grateful because I don't want to stop.

I want to say to her, *Absolutely, let's go right this fucking second.*

All right, her truth bomb does knock the breath out of me, and I have to get it back before I can answer her. She's vibrating with nerves, and I can't leave her like this.

"Yes." I knock the side of my head, kick-starting my shock-stalled brain. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

Her shoulders relax, and she lets out a laugh, chased with a long sigh of relief. Then she smiles like a sexy and innocent vixen.

That's what surprises me the most. Nadia is a conundrum. "I wasn't expecting you to say that. You're so ..." I have to hunt for the right word. "Bold and confident. You're a woman who knows her own mind. You're so ... sexual. I didn't expect you to be a virgin. You don't seem innocent."

The elevator doors open, and she steps out first. "I'm not innocent, Crosby. I'm simply inexperienced. But nothing is

virginal up here.” She taps her temple.

I would love to know all her filthy thoughts, and I’m dying to know if they match mine. “What’s in there, Wild Girl? Tell me. I want to know every dirty thing.”

Her smile is devilish. “The other night? When I took a moment?”

I nod, my neck hot, the collar of my shirt suddenly too tight. “Yeah, I remember perfectly.”

“I imagined you on me, over me, in me. I want to feel all of that with you.”

I drag a hand over the back of my neck, letting out a low groan, my temperature shooting up to dangerous levels. With my other hand on the small of her back, I guide her out of the lobby and into the waiting limo. I tell the driver where we’re heading then raise the partition so we’re alone in the vast back seat.

I take her hand, linking my fingers through hers. “I want you so fucking much. But this is big. This is huge. I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

She furrows her brow, glancing down at our clasped hands, then back up. “Regret is not what I’m feeling now.”

I laugh lightly. “Me neither. But I don’t want you to feel it later.”

Funny, how telling Nadia how I feel is so much easier than anything I’ve ever done with any other woman, light-years easier than talking to anyone else has ever been.

“I want to do everything with you, for you, to you. I want it to be spectacular for you. You deserve that. You deserve to feel incredible,” I say.

Her eyes shine with lust and a warm kind of happiness. The sort of happiness that comes from within, from someone knowing you, understanding you.

“I’d like to feel that way,” she says in a tempting whisper.

My God, she is my undoing—so sweet and still so bold.

I run a hand down her arm, savoring the way she shivers. My other hand squeezes her fingers more tightly, and I don't want to stop touching her. I don't want to break this connection. "You deserve to feel like a queen being adored. A goddess being worshipped. A woman being consumed."

Her eyes float closed, and her breath catches. When she opens those big chocolate eyes again, they're glittering with desire. She parts her lips, her voice a little softer, innocent and hopeful, as she asks, "Will you consume me, Crosby?"

"Will I? That's not even a question," I rasp out.

Every inch of me is burning up with a lust so strong, so powerful, it feels like madness.

I gaze at the sensual curve of her mouth, at the inviting skin of her sensual shoulders, at the tops of her soft and wondrous breasts. I want to touch her, taste her, please her. But we should talk about expectations.

I trail a finger down the top of her hand. "Let's just set the rules first."

She waggles a brow. "We're both in sports. Rules are good."

My grin goes crooked. "We'll call this the Virgin Rule Book."

"Can rule number one be we have sex?"

I laugh hard. "Yes, woman. But let's set the less obvious ones. Look, we're friends, right?"

"Obviously."

"You want to stay friends?"

She rolls her eyes. "Of course. And you aren't interested in dating, so we're just friends with benefits. I'm down with that. Is that the second rule? We stay friends?"

"Yes. Let's make that rule number two."

She makes a check mark. "Friends with benefits now. Friends always."

“Good. I like that rule a lot.” It means I won’t lose her.

I won’t fuck this up. Because I *can’t* fuck this up. I won’t let someone in too fast, because she’s already in. Ergo, this thing brewing between us doesn’t count as a relapse. This isn’t me cheating on my cleanse.

This is the opposite. This is safe. This is fine. This is so much more than fine. This is a call to service.

To service her. And I can’t deny my duty.

“This is part of the whole plus-one thing,” I say.

“Is that a rule, though, or more of an addendum?”

“It’s an addendum.”

“The Friends with Benefits clause.” Her expression is confident, professional. Probably the same way she looks when she’s negotiating deals.

Reluctantly, I tell her, “But rule number three is no sex tonight.”

She pushes out her bottom lip, giving me a big ol’ frown. “Why not?”

Damn, this is hard.

Pun intended. I glance down at my crotch. My dick is as hard as granite. Yeah, this is rock-fucking-hard. But there can be no wavering on this.

She matters to me. In ten years, I’ll still be her first. And in ten years, I still want to be her friend.

“I care too much about you. You’re so damn important to me. I want nothing more than to fuck you right this very second and to make love to you later tonight, but I want to make sure that you’ll have no regrets. And I want it to be special for you,” I say, my hand roaming over her shoulder and down her back.

She trembles in its wake, then nods. “I get that. But I kind of hate you for being right, because I’m so ridiculously turned on right now.” Her fingers thread through mine even tighter,

her grip getting needier. Desperate, even. The look in her eyes is completely wild.

A groan works its way up my throat. “Maybe I could do something about that so you won’t hate me.”

“What do you have in mind?”

I dip my face, kissing her bare shoulder. “Rule number four. I get to make you come. A lot.”

Shuddering, she gasps. Her voice is smoky, full of longing. “Like, right now?”

I growl a *yes*.

Then I heed the call to action, tugging on the skirt of her dress, yanking it up higher, then higher still. There. Perfect. “Why don’t you climb onto my lap and rock that beautiful body against my cock while I play with your pussy?”

She bites her lip, grinning like she won two tickets for a trip to the moon.

That’s exactly what I intend to give her.

CROSBY

With her dress bunched up by her waist and her legs straddling mine, I savor my first glimpse of the woman's panties.

Let the record reflect that Nadia could wear granny underwear, boring gray ones that go all the way above her belly button, and I'd still want her.

But instead, the lace matches her dress. *Burgundy*. They're lace, tiny, and the color of desire, as enticing as the rest of her.

Every inch of her.

With one hand gripping her hip, I slide my other hand between her legs, the pad of my thumb touching that delicious wet spot on the cotton panel.

A throaty gasp rewards me.

"Ohhhh."

Her hands fly to my shoulders. She steadies herself, curling her fingers around them, gripping more tightly.

A grin breaks across my face. I love that she's holding on for dear life. That she's taking charge already, rocking against me, rubbing her sweet, hot center against the ridge of my cock.

The only issue is ... my pants.

"Gimme one second," I say, unzipping my tux pants, since, well, I don't want to walk into the event with a wet spot on them. I push them down but leave my boxer briefs on, thinking it's a little presumptuous to just whip out my cock for her riding pleasure.

Besides, it's hotter like this anyway.

I tug her hips back down on the outline of my dick, rubbing her against my erection.

She groans when we make contact again, then swivels her hips.

"You feel so fucking good," I growl as we work in tandem, rocking, rubbing, thrusting.

My hand coils more tightly around her hip. She tilts her pelvis, seeking the friction that she needs, using the outline of my erection as her pleasure device.

Fine by me.

"Use me, Wild Girl. Use my cock to get off. It's all for you."

She nods wildly, panting, letting her face fall into the crook of my neck as she whispers, "Please touch me now."

"Touch you where?" I ask, teasing. "I'm waiting."

But Nadia doesn't hesitate. "My pussy," she whispers.

My skin sizzles. My dick hardens impossibly more. "God, it's so fucking sexy when you say dirty words." I dip my fingers below the lace, pushing it to the side and touching her flesh for the very first time.

My fingers travel over tufts of soft hair, finding her hard clit.

I shudder with lust.

She trembles with desire.

This is bliss, perfect fucking bliss, this evidence of her arousal in the delicious rise of her clit.

She's so wet, so slick. Her moans are like jolts of electricity as I stroke her, traveling along her soft, wet folds.

She pants and moans. "Yes, do that. I've never ..." But she doesn't finish the thought.

My ears perk up, hearing what's unsaid.

Never.

Does that mean what I think it does?

Her pace riding my cock quickens, as her breath comes faster, her groans and moans more frenzied.

With one hand still gripping her hip, my other hand delights in the paradise of her sweet, wet pussy. I follow her noises, touching her clit exactly the way she seems to want.

A way that makes her murmur and sigh, moan and writhe.

She's a sight to behold as she chases her pleasure.

An absolute sensual beauty rocking on me.

My dick is a steel rod in my boxer briefs. Hell, it's her fucking dildo right now, and as horny as I am, as turned on as I am, I'm so fucking happy she's using me like this, like a horse she wants to ride. May she gallop away on me into the sunset of a massive orgasm.

"Use me for whatever you need, baby," I say, urging her on as she grinds and dips and fucks. I kiss my way up to her ear. "Love the noises you make. Love the way you ride me."

She gasps, words seeming out of reach as she treats me like her bucking bronco.

I'm a furnace, but I don't care if I overheat—all I want is for her to shatter. She lifts her face from my shoulder. Her jaw is tight, her eyes squeezed shut. When she opens them, they're glazed over with lust.

Pushing harder against my dick, she drops her lips onto mine, kissing me savagely, then so damn sloppily. "Yes, oh God, I'm coming."

With another stroke of my fingers, another rub over her diamond clit, she trembles and shakes, crying out her release.

Her whole body seems to flush with pleasure. And God knows mine is too. She raises her face and meets my eyes, looking so damn happy.

She smiles the most wonderful smile I've ever seen, and God, I'm horny as a lion in heat. I grit my teeth because we'll

be at the gala soon and I need to rein this in.

Time to picture baby animals.

Ducklings floating across the pond, kittens nursing on their mamas, anything to forget that all my blood has rushed south of the border.

But then Nadia slides off me, drops between my legs, and gets to her knees.

I barely have time to think.

Hell, I don't *want* to think.

She looks up at me as she sets a hand on the steel outline of my cock in my boxer briefs. "Can I?"

Well, I'm not saying no.

I'm saying, "Fuck yes."

I shove my briefs down, freeing my cock.

Her eyes widen, and her grin turns fully wicked. "I like your cock."

I pump a fist. "I knew you'd say 'cock.'"

"I can say 'cock,' and I can suck your cock," she says. My dick twitches its thanks.

She draws the head between her lips, then I groan as she takes me in farther. My hips jerk up. My muscles tense with pleasure. She wraps a hand around the base and licks a long teasing stripe up my shaft.

"Yes," I rasp.

And then everything becomes a blur of lips and heat.

Of pleasure and lust.

I thread my fingers through her curls, careful with her hair. I wrap my other hand around the back of her neck, letting her set the pace. I won't need much. I'm already on the edge. I'm already primed, ready to shoot.

She doesn't need to deep throat me. Her mouth covering most of me is all I need, and she gives me that as she sucks

and kisses and licks. Sensations sizzle down my spine like an electrical wire snapping with a burst of sparks.

I hit the edge in seconds, my orgasm blasting through me at breakneck speed, and I grunt, “*Coming.*”

My friend, my plus-one, the virgin on her knees, sucks me down, drinks my come, then lets me fall from her lips with a loud, wet pop as she runs a tongue over her bottom lip.

I bring my hand to the bridge of my nose, pinching it in delicious disbelief.

She’s a woman who knows her mind and her body. She’s the sexiest innocent vixen ever, and I want to experience all of her.

I reach for her hand, pull her up next to me, wrap my arms around her, then press a kiss to her lips. “You’re stunning, and now I want you even more.”

“Funny how that works. I want you too.”

I swipe her hair away from her face, helping to straighten it. “Question for you though. You said ‘never’ when I was touching you. Have you never come like that before?”

She grins, then gives an impish little shrug. “Others have tried. Others have failed. This was another first.”

Pride suffuses me. But it’s more than pride.

It’s something else entirely.

Delight?

No.

Happiness?

That seems too obvious.

Maybe I’m simply happy to give this woman so many firsts.

She deserves them, yes. But I love, too, that she’s experiencing them with me.

She finds some mouthwash in the limo—props to the driver for being well stocked—and we straighten up

thoroughly then step out of the limo, put together once more.

On the street, she eyes me up and down. “Looking good, twenty-two. No one would suspect we’ve been up to anything.”

“Exactly. Just that we’ve been following all the rules.”

She chuckles like we have a private joke, and we do. “We have definitely been following *our* rules,” she whispers.

“Our rules are important,” I add.

She turns to head into the hotel then spins around again, her gaze roaming over my face.

“Wait,” she says, stopping to neaten an errant strand of hair on my forehead. Her fingers brush lightly over my skin. Her soft touch feels unexpectedly familiar, like we do this when we go out, like she fixes my tie or smooths my hair, and like I’d do the same for her.

So I do, tucking a chestnut curl behind her ear.

She raises her chin, her eyes meeting mine. A charge rushes through the air, but it’s not buzzing with lust this time.

It’s humming with ... something else entirely.

She flashes me a soft smile. “You look good, Crosby,” she says, and her words send an unexpected tingle down my spine.

That tingle—it doesn’t feel sexual. It feels ... warm, and I don’t know what to make of that either.

So, I offer her my arm, and she takes it. As we enter the gala together, my heart beats a little faster. A little harder.

A rhythm that’s less like we’re friends with benefits and more like that other thing.

The thing I don’t know how to name.

But it feels hopeful.

And it feels dangerous.

NADIA

An attendant scurries up, asking to take my wrap.

A private thrill rushes through me—my wrap.

My gift from Crosby.

“Thank you.” I hand it to her as she gives me a ticket, which I drop into my purse.

Next, a woman in a silver dress and cute red glasses strides over to us, an iPad in her hand.

She can only be a publicist.

“Hello, Ms. Harlowe and Mr. Cash. We’d love to take your photo on the red carpet.”

Crosby shoots her a smile, then me. “Of course.”

“That would be great,” I echo, though my shoulders tense briefly.

How will we look together with lights flashing?

In many ways, this picture is no different than the wedding photos from last weekend.

And at the same time, it’s a universe apart.

We just *came together* in the car.

Mouthwash and neatened hair aside, do I have an orgasm aura about me?

I want to lean in close to Crosby, to whisper, “Do I look ... *obvious?*”

But then, I'm not sure I want to let on to him, either, that I'm still floating on a cloud of climax dust.

Just smile for the camera.

The silver-sequined, no-nonsense publicist guides us along the red carpet to a backdrop splashed with the Sports Network Awards logo.

A young photographer with a Russell Wilson charm greets us with a quick hello then lifts his Nikon. "Let's get one of the woman who's going to bring us a Super Bowl victory."

I grin. "That's the goal."

He snaps a few shots of me. "Fantastic. And now one of the Cougars best known for ..." He stops, flashes an evil grin at Crosby, and continues, "His long ball."

Crosby rolls his eyes. "Thanks, Leo."

The photographer shrugs. "I call it like I see it. But then, no one saw it. Such a shame."

"Ah, you're so sweet, Leo. Missed you so much," Crosby says, smiling for the guy he clearly knows.

"And now how about a few of beauty and the beast together?"

Crosby points to Leo. "He's a regular Seinfeld."

"*Hey, what's the deal with dick pics?*" the photographer asks, imitating the famous comic.

"I don't know. Why don't I send you one later?" Crosby fires back, and the barbs delight me, the way they juggle them like lit torches.

"Let the countdown begin," Leo says, then gestures for us to move closer together. "There. Pretend you like him, Ms. Harlowe. Act like you can stand him."

Laughing, I inch even closer.

He has no idea that I'm not playing make-believe at all.

Snap, snap, snap.

“Perfect. Just one more. Put your arm around her waist, Crosby. Sorry, Ms. Harlowe. I promise this will only hurt for a second.”

“No pain, no gain,” I say as we smile for the camera.

When he’s done, Leo waves us on. “Next season, I need you to go long more often. It’d help my fantasy stats,” he says to Crosby.

“Fantasy and you, Leo. The two go hand in hand,” Crosby says, then returns the guy’s wave.

As we enter the reception area, I say, “You two were friendly. How do you know him?”

“He’s a freelance photog. He snapped our team headshots last year. Leo’s a good guy. Takes the time to actually get to know everyone, which is why I can rib him like that,” he says.

I hum then nudge his elbow, dropping my voice to a whisper. “Hate to break it to you, but I think he did the ribbing, Crosby. And well too.”

He smiles in acknowledgment. “He did. But guess what? I got the last word. Or the last laugh, rather, since those pictures gave me another chance to get my hands on you.”

Sparks shimmy over my skin as we head to the bar.

Orgasm aura indeed.

* * *

The thing I like best about the Sports Network Awards is that it includes fans. Most awards galas are industry only—players, agents, owners, publicists, and so on.

But every year the sports network makes tickets available to a handful of regular folks, usually via charity auctions.

It gives the fete a different energy, makes it more real. Keeps you on your toes.

On one hand, a bunch of thirtysomething investment bankers dropped to their knees and gave me a *Wayne’s World*

“We’re not worthy” welcome, thanking me for bringing the Hawks back to California. On the other hand, I was serenaded with John Denver’s “Fly Away,” the words changed to “Fly away, Hawks.” Message received.

The team is both loved and reviled.

That’s sports for you. Little else can engender such passion, and that passion is why I love my job.

Heck, it’s why I have a job.

“Safe to say it’s a love-hate thing here,” Matthew says, leaning casually against the bar as we snag a few minutes to chat post-serenade.

“Don’t I know it,” I say.

“But it’s all in a day’s work,” he says, squeezing my shoulder.

“Exactly. It’s just part of the job. And that’s what we’re doing.”

“Speaking of *doing*,” he says, dipping his voice, “are you on the pull tonight?”

“What?” I whisper, shocked.

He rolls his eyes. “Oh, come now, Nadia. We know each other well. You can’t fool me. There’s something happening with Mr. Interesting from the wedding. I saw the way you looked at him too when he presented an award earlier. So, is there?” he asks, with a nod toward my ... date.

Yes, Crosby feels like my date.

My eyes roam to the man I want. He’s chatting with Holden, as well as Juan Rodriguez, one of the Cougars’ starting pitchers. I love how close he is with his teammates, how they’re good friends and look out for each other. He told me recently that he and Chance babysat Juan’s toddler son when Juan wanted to take his wife out to dinner.

As I check out the man I shared a limo ride with, I fight off a grin, then change the subject. Matthew’s my friend, but what’s happening between Crosby and me is private right now.

“You never know,” I say evasively. “What’s going on with Phoebe? Has she changed her tune at all?”

“The opposite. She’s turned up the volume on her complaints.”

“Let’s hope it’s just a rough patch,” I say.

“I have a feeling it’s more like a rough road to the breakup,” he says, and I frown, but he waves it off. “It was probably destined to happen anyway. And look, when she throws me in the rubbish bin officially, I fully intend to take up wine and painting.”

I laugh. “Why’s that?”

“Well, can you think of a better way for me to meet a lovely woman in San Francisco than to go to one of those wine-and-painting classes?”

I burst into laughter. “Gee. I hadn’t thought about your backup plan. But clearly *you* have.”

“I’m truly joking. I don’t actually have a plan. And I certainly don’t have a plan involving wine and painting.”

“For now,” I say.

He gestures to the stage, then taps his watch. “Better get on, love. It’s nearly your turn to present.”

I head backstage, waiting for my chance to present an award.

A voice booms from the podium—the pretty, confident soprano voice of Lily Whiting, the main anchor at The Sports Network. I’ve met Lily in Vegas a few times. She’s a fantastic reporter who was recently married, but went back to using her professional name rather than her married name. I admire that about her. It’s not easy being a strong woman in a high position and she wants to stand on her own merits. She’s proof you can be ridiculously in love and be your own woman in business.

“And now presenting the award for the best sportsman or sportswoman is a woman I admire greatly,” Lily says. “A woman who fights hard for equal pay for other women in this

male-dominated field, who's making strides at bringing more women into sports and who has already brought a top team back to the Bay Area. She embraces community with her team's involvement in local charities. I am so proud to welcome back one of our own with the return of the Hawks to San Francisco, helmed by Nadia Harlowe."

I stride onto the stage, thank Lily, then head to the mic to present the award.

As I gaze out at the audience of team owners, reporters, athletes from all over the country, and plenty of fans, I smile, imagining my father watching over me. I send a silent wish to him that I'm honoring his vision, what he built from the ground up with the fortune that he'd amassed in other fields before pursuing his dream of owning a football team.

I am so lucky to have inherited it from him, and I want to always make him proud.

That's what I hold on to so I can flash a smile at the crowd. My eyes lock ever so briefly on the friendliest of faces, and Crosby grins back at me, mouthing, *You've got it.*

I wasn't looking for encouragement, but it sure is nice to know that man has my back. I haven't felt that before in this setting, but I relish the sense of partnership.

It fuels me. It's another first.

"It's an honor to return to the city I love," I say.

A boo rings through the audience. "Go back to Vegas with the showgirls!"

"Quiet down!" another voice shouts.

"Women can't run teams."

"Women *do* run teams."

I simply grin. It is what it is. Even at an awards ceremony, there is heckling, and it's a reminder of the work I need to do.

"I know to some of you the Hawks are still interlopers, but I fully intend to do this city proud. San Francisco is big

enough for many sports teams. After all, I bet we have Cougars fans here. And Dragons ones as well.”

Next to Crosby, Holden claps.

“But this isn’t about me,” I continue. “This moment is about an award that means a lot to so many of us. That perhaps is the highest honor. This is an award for the man or woman who exemplifies giving back. And tonight I am thrilled to share that the recipient of the Best Sportsman award goes to ...” I stop to slide a finger under the envelope flap, then take out the embossed card.

I grin when I see the name. One of Crosby’s good friends and teammates. “Grant Blackwood, catcher for the San Francisco Cougars, who exemplifies giving back with his volunteer efforts for several local charities, including supporting underprivileged young athletes and LGBTQ athletes. Congratulations, Grant.”

I clap as the catcher jogs to the stage, a grin lighting up his eyes. The man is damned handsome, all-American, from the dark-blond hair, to the sky-blue eyes, to his friendly, outgoing personality. I shake his hand once he’s onstage, but he pulls me in for a big hug and swipes a kiss onto my cheek. “Thank you. But keep your damned hands off my third baseman,” he says in a deliberately teasing tone.

I laugh, pat him on the shoulder, and say, “I promise to do my absolute best.”

I move aside as Grant gives a quick and heartfelt thanks from the podium. When he’s through, I clap for him once more, then head backstage with him before I exit into the crowd again, looking for Crosby.

Before I find him, though, a tall, dark, and handsome creature leans back from a clutch of athletes and agents, catches my eye, and winks.

“Declan!” I beam, closing the final feet to the tuxedoed shortstop for the New York Comets. He steps away from his crew to meet me.

“Future Baseball Team Owner,” he says in that sexy guy-next-door voice of his, then yanks me in for a hug.

I laugh, throwing my arms around him. “Why are all the men in my life trying to get me to buy a baseball team?”

“What?” he asks as we separate. “I’m not the only man in your life? Who is he? Who’s this other guy?”

I swat him as I roll my eyes. “Please. You’re the only one,” I say, teasing my friend, a guy who’s most decidedly only ever been a friend. We met a few years ago when I was in New York for business and hit it off, bonding at a party over a shared love for breakfast food and the same loud rock music.

“How long are you in town?” I ask.

He looks at his watch as if it includes his calendar. “I take off tomorrow afternoon.”

I shoot him a wide-eyed glare. “Hello. Why are you not on my schedule for breakfast tomorrow?”

“I could say the same to you.”

“You, me, tomorrow. Let’s do it.”

“All I heard was you’re taking me out for the best omelets in the city,” he says.

“You have such selective hearing. And I’ll text you a breakfast spot.”

I give him a kiss on the cheek and resume my hunt for Crosby. I spot him at the edge of the ballroom, and head over. He’s hanging out with Holden, who’s slung his tux jacket over his arm and rolled up his shirtsleeves. A tattoo adorns his forearm, an illustration of a tree extending over his muscles down to his wrist.

Holden offers a fist for knocking. “Well said, Nadia. I dug the bit about room for both teams.”

“Thank you,” I say, knocking back.

“It’s hard when you feel like you’re ten steps behind from the start.”

“It is. But I find it’s best to try not to let the negative comments affect how you do your job.” I tilt my head, studying his face. “I take it you’re dealing with some of the fallout from the Dragons’ cheating scandal?”

“So much of it.” He sighs heavily, dragging a hand over the back of his neck. “The media constantly wants to talk about it, even in the off-season.”

Crosby gestures to his friend. “I keep telling him that he needs someone to help him handle the media. Someone beyond the team.”

I meet Holden’s green-eyed gaze. “What do you think, Holden?”

With a scratch of his jaw, he shrugs. “I guess I’ll see about that when the season starts.”

I give him a sympathetic smile. “Let me know if I can help. I know some sharpshooters who can give you lots of tips.”

His eyes glimmer with the hint of a smile. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Holden turns to Crosby, tipping his forehead toward me. “She’s cool. Maybe I’ll let this one slide,” he says.

Crosby’s brow furrows. “Let what slide?”

Holden rolls his eyes, claps Crosby on the shoulder, and says, “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow. For now, don’t do anything in front of me that’ll require a call to the Maldives.”

He saunters away. Once he’s out of earshot, Crosby leans closer, his voice warm and tantalizing near my ear, making me shiver. “But privately, I’d like to do all sorts of things to you.”

Pleasure zings through my body, and I can’t wait for this event to end.

Soon, it does, and we make our way out of the ballroom. Lily Whiting catches us, stopping Crosby to ask if he’ll do an interview before he leaves for spring training.

“Absolutely,” he tells her.

“Great. I’ll be in touch to set it up.”

As she leaves, Crosby turns back to me. “See? I’m good with the media.”

“If I were your team’s owner, I’d be very proud of you.”

“If you were my team’s owner, I’d still want to bang you,” he whispers.

I laugh, shaking my head.

“I mean it. Your job is hot. Smart women are hot. Powerful women are hot. Also, *you’re* hot.”

I am indeed, thanks to his compliments—ones that are the polar opposite of what I heard my last year dating in Vegas.

Crosby is the opposite of so many men, and I love that he’s not threatened by me. That he admires me rather, and supports me.

Still, once we’re outside, I put on my big-girl pants and say the hard thing.

NADIA

Outside the event hotel, I take a step closer to my plus-one and slow the train even though I don't entirely want to. "I want to invite you over, but I think I'd break rule number three," I say, my voice low and just for him as I tug my wrap a little tighter around my shoulders, the mercury dipping as the stars twinkle in the night sky.

Crosby heaves a sigh then nods in agreement. "You read my mind. If I'm alone with you tonight, I'm going to have the hardest time keeping my hands off you."

"It's not your hands I'm worried about," I say in a flirty tone as the limo pulls up.

He lets his gaze drift downward, straight to his crotch. "Aw, that's so sweet of you to worry about my cock."

"Oh, I'm not *worried* about your cock at all," I toss back.

Crosby grabs the door before the driver gets out, shaking his head in admiration as I slide into the long black car. "You're a woman unleashed. As soon as you say one swear, you're saying them all."

"That's poppy ... *cock*," I say with a wicked grin.

"Speaking of ... let's go get a *cocktail*."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we walk into the Spotted Zebra.

The fun decor fits the name perfectly. One wall is pink. Another is black. Yet another is brick. Alt rock plays on the sound system, and hip bartenders and servers in monochrome uniforms circle the joint with drinks.

Low couches with black-and-white stripes beckon patrons, inviting them to lounge.

We swing by the bar, saying hello to Sierra, Grant's sister, who flashes a grin at us as she tucks a pink-streaked strand of her blonde hair back into its messy bun.

"Hey there." Ink dances up and down her right arm, and both her earlobes are pierced many times over.

"Hi, Sierra," I say. "Good to see you."

"Welcome back, prodigal daughter," she says dryly, then leans in to give me a quick hug across the bar.

"Ha. That'll be my new nickname."

She waves her hand dismissively. "Don't let the boos get you down. We'll play the Hawks games here." She nods to the TV blasting a hockey game in the corner. "Well, when it's not hockey season."

"Hello? How about baseball?" Crosby chimes in.

Sierra yawns, big and over-the-top. "Baseball is sooo boring."

Crosby clutches his heart. "You're killing me."

Sierra slaps some napkins down on the bar. "What can I get you two?"

Crosby orders me a wine, then a beer for himself, and when Sierra hands us the drinks, we grab a spot in the corner, settling onto a striped couch.

He already shed his jacket and bow tie in the car, so now he rolls up his shirtsleeves, showing off his strong forearms. I admire the sight of them for a second, imagining how they'd look with him braced over me, his arms pinning me.

Wild sensations kick through me, a hot rush of adrenaline. I cross my legs, trying to keep my desires in check.

He lifts his glass. “Let’s drink to ...”

“To not calling the Maldives?”

His lips curve up in a naughty grin. “So tempting though.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I take a sip of the wine, then set it down. He does the same with his beer. “I was impressed by you onstage,” he says. “You are poise personified.”

I beam, grateful for the compliment. “Thank you. That means a lot to me. Especially considering what other men have thought about my job.”

“Fuck them,” he scoffs. And that’s all. That’s literally all he has to say. “You have your plate full, and you still handle yourself like the badass you’ve always been.”

I smile. “Stop, or you’ll make me blush.”

He shakes his head. “You’re not a blusher. I know you.”

“True. I’m not a blusher at all.”

He leans a little closer, his voice dipping to that low and husky range that I love. “But are you a blusher in the bedroom?”

Tingles spread across my shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe we’ll both find out.”

He laughs, then moves a little closer. But rather than whisper, he clears his throat. “So, have you never met a man you wanted to have sex with? Were you waiting for a relationship? Or was the timing never right? Or was it something else entirely? Which, of course, I guess raises the question of ... *why now?*”

I love the lack of judgment, the genuine interest in the elephant in the room—the *why*.

But I slide in with a joke first. “You mean other than your prowess and pure masculine raw sex appeal?”

He gives a casual shrug. “Well, yeah, obviously that.”

I tell him the basics, about college and the lack of men there, then about my focus on classes during my master's program, and finally about the matchmaker woes last year, though he mostly knows those details.

“But more than that,” I finish, “I’ve never wanted to go there with anyone before. I never felt the desire intensely enough. Don’t get me wrong though—I have *a lot* of sexual desire.”

His eyes glint. “I can tell.”

“And there are plenty of things I want to do. There are plenty of things I fantasize about. And, hey, my toys get quite a workout.”

He drags a hand across his brow as if wiping off sweat. “You’re not helping with keeping rule number three tonight.”

I lean my head back and laugh. “Trust me, it’s hard for me too. Whatever the case before, I’m very interested in sex now. And I’m very interested in sex with you.”

He waves a napkin like a white flag. “I surrender.”

I swat his arm playfully. “What I’m trying to say is this—I wasn’t holding on to my virginity because it’s some precious thing, or because I have some notion that I’ll walk down the aisle in five years, or whenever, still a virgin.”

“Five years? Is that the wedding plan?”

A surge of embarrassment rushes blood to my cheeks. “I don’t have a wedding plan. I was just throwing that out there.”

“So no pressure, then, for you or your future hubs.” His grin is playful, but he catches my gaze on those last couple of words, almost like he’s testing them out.

I wince a bit, not entirely sure why that gnaws at me—*future hubs*. “Sure,” I say. “He can just deflower me on our wedding night,” I say, making a big old joke about whoever the future hubs might be because that’s easier than dealing with this nagging sensation. Instead, I turn more serious. “But yes, I do want, someday, what my parents had. Not now, but down the road. I want what your parents had. What Brooke

and Eric have.” I draw a breath, letting it fill me. “Right now though? I have my work cut out for me with the team, so I like this thing you and I have. And I don’t want to keep having sex with myself anymore,” I say, our eyes locking with want flaring between us, like a shimmering heat mirage.

“Like I said, rule number three is very hard to resist tonight. But I can wait for you. I *want* to wait,” he says, his dark-blue eyes locked with mine, and I can’t look away. I don’t want to, because the way he says *want to wait* makes my heart catch in my throat. Another odd feeling I should truly ignore. Too bad it feels so good.

I take another drink, turning the tables on him, since these boomeranging emotions in me are a ping-pong game I don’t want to play. “And you? What’s your story? You seem drawn to dating. Not like you’re a player, but more like you enjoy having girlfriends. Fair to say?”

Nodding thoughtfully, he lifts his beer, drinks more of it, then sets down the glass. “I suppose I’m the same as you, Nadia. I’d like what my parents had. Hell, what my mom has now with Kana.”

My chest warms, my heart feeling *glow-y* from that lovely sentiment, one you don’t hear as often as you’d like, from women or from men. “Most people are afraid to admit they want that—love, connection, intimacy. I like that you just put it out there. In general. I like that you’re saying it in general,” I add quickly, since I don’t want him to worry that I have ulterior motives. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to get all clingy. I understand the rules. *We stay friends*. Rule number two,” I add, like I’m proud of myself for recalling the laws we laid down.

He gives me a reassuring smile. “I wasn’t worried. At all,” he says, lifting a hand to squeeze my shoulder. A sort of friendly squeeze.

Hmm.

Is it weird that I want a non-friendly squeeze right now?

But I keep going, glad he's on the same page. Truly, it's good that he's not worried. I do want to stay friends after we work our way through the Virgin Rule Book. I absolutely want to remain buddies. I shake away any wayward notions that extend beyond friendship.

This *plus-one plan* is fantastic. Besides, I'm lucky to be friends with someone who's so easygoing and so open at the same time. And someone who's so ... bangable.

"It's kind of heartwarming when anyone admits they want what we all truly want," I say.

Smiling in acknowledgment, he knocks back some of his beer. "I hear ya. I blame it on my mom. She was all about being in touch with your emotions. '*Don't be afraid of your feelings. A real man can admit when he's fallen,*'" he says, imitating his mother.

"Funny, you sound just like her."

"I suppose I'm glad she's like that. Trouble is, I'm not so good at following her advice."

My brow creases. "What do you mean?"

He exhales heavily, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck. "My dating woes? All those ex-girlfriend stories? They're all my fault."

"Why do you say that? You just ..." I trail off though, unsure how to finish the thought fairly. *Pick the wrong women?* I don't need to say that—he knows it.

"Choose the wrong women?" he supplies.

"You said it," I say, laughing.

"It's my Achilles' heel. Grant and my cousin are right when they say I don't take my time getting to know a woman before I let her in. They say I trust too soon. That's true, and it's all on me." He holds up his right hand like he's taking an oath in court. "Swear on it. Like I told your brother. I happen to have horrible taste. I'm kind of drawn to bad girls."

My stomach dips with worry.

He reaches out a hand, clasping mine. “I *was* drawn to bad girls. Present company excluded.”

“I have nothing against bad girls, but I don’t think I’m one,” I say, perhaps a little apologetically.

He squeezes my hand harder. “You’re not a bad girl, and I’m wildly attracted to you. Maybe my taste is changing.”

I hope it is. “Perhaps,” I say noncommittally, not sure what else to say.

“Or maybe I’ve always had a thing for you,” he says with a shrug. “Maybe you’re the only good girl I’ve ever wanted.”

“Is that good or bad?” I ask, genuinely curious.

He runs a finger over the top of my hand, making my skin heat up.

“Feels good right now,” he says. “And this thing between us *is* good. We already know each other.”

“We do,” I echo, and as if to prove it, the conversation sails away on its own while we catch the end of the hockey game, complaining about some calls, cheering about others, debating who’s going to win as we finish our drinks and then make our way out of the bar after saying goodbye to Sierra.

Crosby takes me home, gets out of the limo, and walks me to the front door of my building. He stops before I unlock it, dipping his hands in his pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels.

It’s the *what’s next* moment. Nerves thrum through me.

“So,” he begins. “We have the golf thing this weekend. Before I jet off to Arizona.”

“Cactus league time,” I say, using the insider lingo, the term for baseball teams who do their spring training in Arizona.

“I’m leaving on Monday,” he says.

I try not to dwell on him leaving. Who cares that he’s leaving after all? He’s coming back. Spring training doesn’t

last forever. Nor does friends-with-benefits, so there's no need to be all moony.

"But there's plenty of days on the calendar before then," he adds, and it comes out like an invitation, a little flirty.

"So very true," I say, waiting, hoping he wants the same thing.

He inches closer, dips his face to my neck, and breathes me in. I tremble as his nose runs along my neck, traveling up to my ear, where he nibbles ever so gently on my earlobe then pulls back. "I don't want to wait till the golf thing to see you again."

My heart tap-dances across a Broadway stage. "I don't either."

He murmurs as he brushes decadent kisses along my skin. "Invite me over tomorrow night, Nadia."

My body is throwing an *I'm ready* parade. "Come over tomorrow," I say.

He separates from me, his gaze roaming over my figure one last time. "I'll bring dinner."

"I'll bring an appetite," I say.

"I'll see you at eight, then, Wild Woman."

He returns to his limo and drives away, having bestowed a new nickname on me.

Am I a wild woman?

Maybe we'll find out.

I can't wait for tomorrow. Though, as I head inside, I'm also missing having him here tonight.

A lot.

NADIA

Brooke bats first, with a text message flashing like a neon sign as I apply makeup the next morning.

Brooke: Called it. Lovebirds. Like I said at the wedding.

What is she talking about?

As the new album from my favorite singer ever—Stone Zenith—blasts through my bathroom, I set down my mascara wand and click open the photo Brooke sent.

My chest flutters. My lips form a stupid grin.

“The Guy in the Picture” fills the bathroom, the love song echoing across the tiled walls as I stare at a shot of Crosby and me from the red carpet posted on the Sports Network Instagram feed.

I zoom in on the image, and a barrage of questions slams into me.

Was his hand really wrapped possessively around my waist like that?

Were his eyes staring at me like I’m the only woman for him?

Was his grin telegraphing how much he wanted to follow rule number one? To sleep with me?

My stomach sashays, then does a rumba. Maybe a samba too. Hell, it could be taking a Zumba class for all I know.

This photo is a damning piece of evidence that shows two people who are *into* each other. Really into each other.

Because I'm looking at him like he's the only one I want with me.

Last night, tonight, any night.

My heart beats faster and music floods my ears as Stone reaches the chorus.

The song takes over my senses, lodges itself into my heart and mind.

Something is happening between Crosby and me.

Something that's more than friendship.

And I don't know what to do about it.

I've tried to deny it.

I've played the logic card.

But logic has slipped away, and emotions are dealing the deck now.

That man just does something to me.

Something that's not only physical.

That's why I want to see him tonight, why I want to have sex with him. Not because I'm horny, not because I'm friends with him, not because I'm attracted to him.

I'm attracted to him because I like him.

The phone slips from my hand, clattering to the floor with a bang.

With a loud sigh, I stumble back, grab hold of the wall, and proceed to freak the hell out.

For about ten seconds. Then I get my act together, pick up my phone, turn down the music, and dial Scarlett.

"Emergency," I say the second she answers.

“What is it?”

“This,” I say, then send her the image. “Check your texts.”

A few seconds later, she says, “Ohhhh. That looks complicated.”

“I know,” I say, pacing to the tub, sitting on the edge, and dropping my head in my hand. “I think something is brewing ... No, that’s wrong,” I say, quickly correcting myself.

I lift my face, inhale deeply, and lean on the boardroom side of me. The woman who speaks up.

“I don’t think—I *know*. I like him so very much.”

The admission is both a relief and a brand-new burden.

Scarlett’s words and tone are kind. “So, what are you going to do about this friends-with-benefits thing, then?”

It’s a great question. As I picture tonight, him coming over, us connecting, I can’t see a path to resistance. Not one I want to take. Once more, I go with the full truth. “I suppose I’m going to sleep with him, and deal with whether it’ll hurt my heart later.”

I can hear a sympathetic smile on her face when she says, “At least you have your eyes wide open.”

I suppose I do.

I say goodbye as a new text lands on my phone.

Mom: Looks like you had a great time last night.

Nadia: I did. I absolutely did.

Mom: Is that someday coming soon?

I close my texts, because how can I answer whether the someday of us dating—the someday she envisions—is coming?

I have no idea.

I finish getting dressed, then head to a nearby café for breakfast with Declan, where we catch up about life and love in New York.

“So, what’s the latest? Any new, hot, brainy men in your life who rock your world?” I ask as I lift my cinnamon latte and waggle a brow.

He shakes his head. “I’ve kind of been taking a break.”

That surprises me. He’s always seemed like such a serial monogamist. “A break? Like, from dating in general?”

“Yep. Last time I even saw someone was more than a year ago.”

I can’t *not* ask. “Is there a reason for the break?”

“Just trying to make some changes in my life.”

Well, now I really have to know. “Good changes?”

“Let’s just say if I was a superstitious guy I’d be wearing lucky socks,” he says with a hopeful glint in his expression.

I laugh. “Funny, I know someone just like that.” I take a beat, study my friend, try to read his eyes, and see what’s going on behind them. “So these *hypothetical* lucky socks. Would you be wearing them, if you *were* wearing them, in the hopes of finding that someone special?”

He smiles. “You’re getting warmer.”

And I think I know why. “Wasn’t there *once* someone special?” I ask. I had the sense once upon a time that he’d fallen hard for someone. He’d never shared the details though, and I hadn’t pried. Maybe that’s the reason he’s taking a break?

“Yes.” His answer is emphatic. For a moment he seems lost in time, then he returns to the here and now. “Someone very special. Maybe he will be again.”

A smile takes over my face. “There’s nothing quite like finding your someone special, is there?”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He lifts his coffee, takes a drink, then asks thoughtfully. “And you?”

“I haven’t had anyone special before.”

“And do you now?”

A grin dances across my lips. “Maybe,” I say into the latte.

“Elaborate,” he instructs.

I don’t give him the sordid details. I don’t divulge name, batting average, or uniform number. Declan’s a ballplayer too, but even if he weren’t, I wouldn’t serve up the personal intel.

But I give him enough.

“I hope he’s your someone special,” he says as he knocks back the rest of his coffee.

“We’ll see,” I say, trying to hide the smile that won’t go away.

* * *

After breakfast, I head to the stadium and bury myself in work. Matthew and I interview the fantastic woman named Kim who’s been an assistant GM for two other teams. She’s sharp, smart, and confident, and she knows her way around arbitration, analytics, and scouting.

The three of us talk for two hours, and during that span of one hundred twenty minutes, I don’t think about tonight at all.

It’s a wonderful slice of time.

It reminds me that I can do my job. I can do what I came here to do.

Sure, even if I get my emotions bruised, even if my heart is knocked around, I’ll be fine.

I’ll come out on the other side of friends-with-benefits unscathed.

Surely I will.

When I say goodbye to Kim and let her know we’ll be in touch soon, Matthew and I conduct a postmortem.

“She’s great. We should offer her more than you make,” I say, teasing.

But he flashes a warm smile and nods. “If that’s what it takes, do it.”

I scoff. “Matthew, I’m joking.”

“I’m not,” he says, intense, serious. “I’m not sitting around counting who makes more money. Or who has the bigger post. I just want what’s best for the team.”

I sigh happily. “I would like to clone you for literally every job I ever need to fill.”

“I’d like to clone myself sometime. Can I send one of my clones out to eat cake and pie all day long, while I stay fit and trim?”

“I want one of those clones too,” I say with a laugh.

“In any case, we’ve got a few more candidates for the job, but we should make sure we know exactly what Kim wants. And then offer it to her.”

“It’s like we share a brain.”

He narrows his eyes. “Sometimes. But, call me crazy, I think it’s for the best that we can’t read each other’s mind.”

With a laugh, I agree. “Truer words.”

I’m glad no one else has access to my thoughts when I check my phone a little later.

Anticipation zips through me when I see Crosby’s name on the screen.

Just flies through my body, lighting me up.

Crosby: Don’t know about you, but I’ve spent the morning getting harassed about that pic Leo took of us. I mean, in the harassers’ defense, I do look like I want to devour you. So fair’s fair. I want to, and I plan to, and I will be doing just that tonight. Before then, I need to know—do you want pasta, Thai, or a grain bowl from Mom’s café tonight?

Leaning back in my chair, I grin like a fool as lust roars through me.

This man turns me on and makes me laugh.

That's the problem.

I write back, asking for the grain bowl. At least that much is easy.

CROSBY

I toss the question to my priest. “Am I supposed to confess?”

Raj taps his chin, his brow furrowing as I work through the insane number of crunches he ordered me to do.

“In situations like this, I ask myself, ‘What would Kenneth do?’”

“Who?” I ask as I twist my obliques.

“Kenneth from *30 Rock*. He’s my point of reference for decision-making,” Raj says, crouching next to me at the gym.

“Kenneth? The ultimate good guy? The sweet, innocent Kenneth who’s basically a proxy for Mister Rogers and Kermit the Frog?”

Raj grins, his white teeth gleaming, as he nods. The former Bollywood stuntman is now a kick-ass personal trainer, and I was lucky enough to snag a spot on his client list. “Yep. And hey, those guys all knew how to make good choices.”

“So you’re saying I should tell my buds I fell off the wagon?”

Raj rolls his eyes, grabs his phone, and brandishes the shot from last night at me. “Do pictures lie, man? Switch to bicycle crunches stat.”

“Everyone has shown that to me,” I say, taking my phone from the floor, opening it, and shoving it at him before I shift to the new exercise. “Open my messages.”

He clicks on them, then cracks up, his hand flying to his belly. “Dude.”

“I know,” I say, rolling my eyes as I twist my elbow to my opposite knee, then the other, and so on.

Raj clears his throat, reading out loud. “From Grant at nine thirty: *Dude. I know she didn't steal your socks, your ring, or your car, but have you no self-control?* From Chance at nine forty-five: *Dude. Busted.* From Holden at ten fifteen: *Dude. Guess who's admitting on TV that we're better at the world's greatest sport?*”

Raj flops down on the mat. “Looks like you don't need to confess, Cros. They figured you out.”

“From a picture. What the hell is so obvious about that pic?”

“Switch to side planks,” he says, studying the shot. “Oh, I see.”

“What is it?” I ask as I hold myself up on my right side, left arm straight up in the air.

“It's the eyes,” he says, tapping on the phone, then showing me a close-up of my peepers. “Do you see it?”

“What am I looking for?”

“You look at her like you're falling for her.”

I fall on my hip, slipping out of the plank, landing splat on my side with an *oof*.

Recovering quickly, I ask, “What are you talking about?”

As I pull myself up, he sits crisscross next to me then proceeds to explain in detail how my eyes give everything away.

“Huh,” I say, studying the picture, the way I'm gazing at Nadia, how my lips are crooked into a grin, how my hand is curled tightly around her waist.

Maybe I do look at her that way.

Maybe I am falling for her.

Holy fuck.

It's like I just learned that a pitcher I've batted against for years is now throwing a knuckleball.

And I don't know how to hit it.

The rest of the day, I try to figure out what the hell to do with this knuckleball of Nadia's.

The situation gets worse when I stop by my mom's café in the city to pick up dinner.

She hands me a paper bag full of food. "So how are you going to deal with the fact that everyone seems to think you have it bad for Eric's sister?"

"Because of the photo?"

She laughs softly, shakes her head, and sits me down at a table. "It's not because of a photo, sweetie." She shoots me a knowing grin. "It's because of years."

NADIA

I pace my home.

Set my hand on my chest.

Breathe in, breathe out.

It's T-minus one hour till ... hymen send-off?

But no, that ship went bye-bye a long time ago. I mean, I don't know for sure, but my family of little darlings and big darlings surely broke my maidenhead long ago.

Ugh.

Maidenhead.

Who says "maidenhead"?

Who says "hymen" for that matter?

But hey, maybe those ridiculous words will calm me down.

"Maidenhead, maidenhead, maidenhead," I mutter, but still, the word repetition does nothing to settle the overdrive my body's in.

My heart skitters.

It's like a rabbit in my chest, racing in circles, frantically beating.

Settle down.

I flop down on my couch, drop my head into my hands, and try to breathe.

My lungs won't fill.

My breath is short, sharp.

Nothing is working.

I'm going to jump out of my skin. And why?

Why am I so wound up?

I want this. I want him. I'm ready.

But tell that to my nerves that are jackhammering in my cells.

I head to the bathroom and turn on the tap for the tub. I planned to shower anyway, but maybe a bath is what I need.

A little relaxation session.

I strip out of my clothes, turn the temperature to hot, and toss in a tropical island bath bomb.

I close my eyes, letting the steam swirl around me as the marble tub fills. I step into the bath when it's nearly full, dancing the oh-my-God-it's-so-hot hula for a few seconds before I gingerly lower myself into the water.

And I burn.

I'm broiling.

Whose idea was it to make this so forking hot?

I stand, step out, grab a towel, and wrap the fluffy material around me.

I sneer at the cauldron.

Draining the tub, I head to the shower stall, turn the water to lukewarm, then take a shower.

Baths are officially not relaxing.

Five minutes later, I'm out of the shower, but my heart is still trying to run away from me.

Music? Do I need music?

Should I take up yoga real quick?

Maybe champagne would do the trick?

On my way home from work tonight, I picked up a bottle. Organic, naturally. But I can't pop it open without him.

So, as I slather on lotion, then get dressed in jeans and a casual pink blouse, I try—truly try—to figure out what'll ease my nerves.

Not a hot soak.

Not a drink.

And not some more girl time.

I look in the mirror, studying my face, asking the hard questions.

What do you want? What do you need?

I want the man.

And I want to know we're good. I want to know we've got this. I want to talk to him, or text with him.

So I pick up my phone, open our text thread, and write him a note.

Something that'll set the mood.

The mood of who we are.

Nadia: Remember that time I asked to see your dick pic?

I put the phone down on the bathroom counter as I swipe on some powder and blush and then mascara, feeling a little more settled already. He writes back quickly, for which I'm grateful.

Crosby: You're changing your mind about tonight and you want a pic instead of the real thing? I SUPPOSE I can live with that. But the bigger question is—do you still want the grain bowl?

Nadia: I wanted to say I'm secretly glad you didn't show the picture to me, because I liked experiencing it live last night.

Crosby: Whew. So you want the grain bowl *and* the sausage? Good thing, because I'm on my way over with both.

Nadia: Excellent. I'll be ready with this ...

I step away from the mirror, unbutton my shirt to a scandalous degree, then send him a picture.

Of the tops of my breasts.

His reply is instantaneous.

Crosby: Did you hear that? It was the sound of me tripping and falling flat on my face from the ABSOLUTE HOTNESS of you. I hope you have a Band-Aid for my nose.

Nadia: I have Band-Aids with foxes on them. I know you love your cute animal socks, so these will match.

Crosby: You do know me well. Also, thank you for the world's sexiest image.

Nadia: You can see them live in a few minutes.

Crosby: I intend to, Wild Woman. I fully intend to see, touch, feel, lick, kiss, and devour them.

Nadia: Mmmm ...

Already, my pulse is slowing, warmth returns to my cheeks, and my mind is calm, but eager.

And because talking to him seems to settle my nerves, I'm guessing that making him laugh might do the trick even more, so I do a quick Google search.

Then I send him a shot of a cat lounging seductively across a bed.

Nadia: Here's a naughty shot for you.

Seconds later, my phone pings.

Crosby: Meow! Also, here's your shaft shot.

Crosby: I meant, here's your wiener pic.

I crack up as the shot of a dachshund fills the screen.

I am officially relaxed. All I needed was *this*. This banter, this connection, this fun.

When the clock strikes eight, he texts that he's in the lobby. I buzz him up, and a minute later, I open the door.

"Hey, you," he says in a tender voice that sends a charge down my spine.

"Hey to you too."

I'm still nervous.

But I'm also ready.

* * *

Champagne and food help.

My chest flutters as I take another bite of the food, another sip of the champagne.

"Did you know this is organic?" I ask, holding up my flute.

He takes a bite of his dinner then smiles, speaking when he finishes chewing. "You might have mentioned it a few times."

"Oh, right," I say, waving a hand. But I'm still rattling off randomness about champagne. "See, when I went to the store this afternoon, I wanted to make sure it would work for you. The champagne. It's made without sulfites. And no chemicals either. Also, it's made from sustainable grapes. Hey, what are sustainable grapes? Are there unsustainable grapes? What makes a grape unsustainable?"

He sets down his fork and reaches for my hand. “It’s a grape that’s wildly nervous.”

I let out a long, heavy breath. “I’m not nervous,” I say, lying, patently lying.

“We don’t have to do this, Nadia.”

Tension slices through me as I stare daggers at him. “Don’t say something so awful.”

He smiles, stands, and offers me his hand. “Come with me.”

“But the table is a mess,” I say, grasping at straws.

“We’ll clean it up later.”

He takes my hand, guides me to the couch, and gently sweeps out his hand for me to sit. I do.

He goes back for the champagne flutes then sits next to me, reaching for my hand, running his thumb across the top of it. “If you’re not ready, no hard feelings.”

I swallow roughly. “I am ready, I’m just ...”

“Nervous?” he supplies.

I nod, admitting it at last. “I am.”

“Do you want to talk about why?”

I take a sip of my drink then set down the glass, waiting for the floaty feeling to kick in.

But champagne isn’t the answer.

Crosby sets his glass on the table next to mine, waiting for me to tell him the truth I’m holding in.

I part my lips, draw a shaky breath, then blurt out, “I don’t want to be bad in bed.”

A laugh bursts from his chest. “Nadia,” he says softly, then weaves his fingers through mine. “Would you think it’s crazy if I said the same thing?”

I scoff. “There’s no way you could think that.”

He gives a *but I do* shrug.

My jaw drops. “Do you really worry about that?”

He inches closer, clasping my hand tighter. “I want this to be good for you. Fuck, that’s wrong,” he says, dragging a hand through his hair. He stops like he’s collecting his thoughts, then his blue eyes lock with mine. His blaze with heat, but something else too—something sweet, something vulnerable. “I want it to be spectacular.”

My heart lodges in my throat, and I swallow past a lump that appears out of nowhere.

What the fuck?

Now is not the time for my crying-on-cue gland to activate. I draw a steadying breath. “I don’t want to be unspectacular,” I admit, feeling terribly vulnerable too. “I want you to feel good as well.”

He cups my face in his hands and presses his forehead to mine. “It’ll feel good because it’s you, and it’s me, and it’s us.” His heady whisper sends me spinning into a whirlwind of lust and longing and something else too—something that feels dangerously close to another *L* word.

He brushes his lips against mine, a hint of a kiss, then he pulls back. “But we can put the brakes on this for now. Or forever, if you want. There’s no pressure. Hell, if you want to play poker or watch SportsCenter or scroll through Netflix in the hopes of finding a new comedy you haven’t seen, we can do that.”

I shake my head. “I do like poker, but I don’t want to do that. I think ...” I do a status check, and my heart is finally beating normally. “I think I just needed to talk to you first. I feel better now.”

“We can talk all night if you want. I meant what I said last night. No regrets. No pressure.” He sweeps some hair off my shoulder, making me shudder. “Do you want to talk more now?”

The truth is ... I do. Because talking to him settles me. This connection with Crosby is what I like. This is why I want to be with him tonight. My eyes drift down his body, taking

him in again—his navy-blue Henley stretched snug across his firm pecs and showing off his strong biceps, his faded blue jeans fitting him just so, then finally his ... corgis?

I peer at his purple socks, then up at him, arching one *are you serious* brow. “Are there corgi butts on your socks?”

He waggles a foot. “Why, yes, there are. These are my new lucky socks. Bought them today.”

I laugh, truly laugh, from deep within. “So a dog’s rear end? Those are your getting-lucky socks?”

He slides his foot up my leg. “What’s hotter than corgi butts?” he asks, his covered toe reaching my knee.

I laugh harder, pushing his foot away. “You really love your good-luck charms.”

“I’m a superstitious mofo.”

“So without the new socks, nothing would happen tonight?”

He slides his arms around my waist and shakes his head, the mood shifting, intensifying. “Honestly, Nadia, I just like socks a lot. They’re kind of my thing. And maybe the ritual makes me feel calm, makes me feel centered.”

“Do you feel calm right now?”

He licks his lips. “I feel certain.”

My body hums at his words, at his gaze, all possessive and open at the same time. “Certain about what?”

“About you,” he says, a husky sound that ignites a shiver of sparks down my spine.

“What about me?” I ask breathily.

“This.” He leans in close again, takes my face in his hands once more, and reconnects with my lips.

He’s torturously slow and deliberately gentle, like he’s kissing me in slow motion.

He flicks his tongue across my bottom lip, and I shudder. We’re talking full-body tremble here, pleasure spinning

through my veins.

He's achingly tender, kissing me like he's luxuriating in every second, like he's exploring my mouth in the most unhurried way. He slides his tongue across it, then nips on the corner, sucking my bottom lip between his teeth.

"Ohhh," I moan, and the melting begins.

It starts as a warm, hazy sensation gliding over my skin. Then it becomes more intense with each brush of his lips, with each sensual graze of his mouth on mine.

I go boneless, my knees weakening even though I'm sitting, as he cups my face and kisses me like I'm the answer to every question.

His hands slide into my hair, his fingers tangling through the strands as he deepens the kiss.

And I deepen it right back, kissing him the way he kisses me.

Because he's the answer too. He's the answer to all my questions about sex, about intimacy.

Especially, maybe, about why I waited.

I waited for *this*.

This connection.

This sense that we're the only ones in the world, that our kisses are all that exist.

That no one has ever touched the way we touch.

These are endless, floating, hungry kisses that become full-body experiences. Soon, he's shifting, stretching me out on the couch, sliding next to me, taking me in his arms.

We don't stop making out.

We go at each other's mouths more intensely, breaths coming faster, legs wrapping around each other, bodies tangling.

His hard-on presses against my pelvis, and the feel of him sends a wild, erotic thrill whirling through me, settling

between my legs.

Yes, I have officially melted in his arms.

And at long last, we break the kiss, coming up for air. His lips are red, and his eyes are shimmering with something more than desire.

Something wildly powerful.

Maybe the same thing I feel.

I grab his shirt collar and own this moment. "I'm not nervous. Not anymore."

"So, the corgi butts worked," he murmurs.

I laugh softly then run my hand over the back of his head, my fingers curling into his hair. "Crosby?"

"Yes?"

I gaze up at him, speaking from the heart. I don't want games, or plus-ones. "You're the one I want. I want this with you. You know that, right?"

A grin tugs at his lips, playful and happy.

Wildly happy.

"I do," he whispers. "I do know that."

"Good." All those nerves are long gone, and I'm so here, so ready.

So sure.

"And I want it to be so good for you," he says. "Do you know why?"

"Why?" I ask, feeling like we're hovering on the edge of something new.

He's quiet at first, then he licks his lips. "Because this doesn't feel like just friends with benefits, Nadia," he says, unexpectedly intense. "Not at all, not anymore."

My breath hitches, and tingles light up my body from head to toe. But they aren't just tingles from desire. They're from

my heart. From the possibility that he feels the exact same way.

My chest is glowing, my heart is squeezing. And the rest of me? The rest of me is wanting.

Craving.

I tug on his hair, dragging him closer. “I’m aching for you.”

His lips crook up. “Let me take care of that.”

He sits up and unbuttons my blouse, keeping his gaze pinned on me the whole time. “I want to taste you first, sweetheart,” he says, and I arch my back, arching into that new word.

Sweetheart.

I’m no longer Wild Girl, or Wild Woman.

I’m *sweetheart*, and the significance isn’t lost on me.

The affectionate name, the possessive tone.

“I want that.” I help him along, unbuttoning my jeans, unzipping them. “But I have to warn you about something.”

He shoots me a curious look as I shimmy down my jeans. “What’s that?”

I take a beat, smiling wickedly, because I might be virginal, but I’m not innocent. “I’m outrageously wet right now.”

The groan that falls from his lips is carnal, and somehow it makes me even wetter.

We’re a blur of clothes and nudity as he tugs off my jeans and I push down my lace panties.

He slides down the couch, moving to the end, kneeling between my thighs as he parts my legs and gazes at me like I’m his next meal.

And I am.

“Fuck, you’re soaked, sweetheart.”

I have nothing else to say.

Nor does he.

Talking is overrated when there's *this*.

This man sliding his hands up my thighs then pressing the most decadent kiss to my center.

CROSBY

The instant I brush my lips over her heat, she trembles.

And she moans.

It's the most fantastic sound ever, the kind of *ohhh* that says her toes are curling.

Hell, maybe mine are too.

Because ... my God.

She tastes spectacular.

So slick and soft and aroused.

I want to bury my face in her sweet pussy, but I want to take my time too, to savor every second of the unraveling of Nadia Harlowe.

She's a delicious conundrum, and unwrapping her sexuality is the best gift I've ever received.

As I kiss her wetness, I groan, an electric charge zapping through me. My God, she's incredible, and so damn responsive.

Writhing.

Moaning.

Sighing.

I want to imprint each sound she makes, every lift of her hips. My hands run along her thighs as I kiss her, letting her scent go to my head, flood all my senses. She tastes like

longing, like lust, like that dreamy escape into a tropical garden.

It's wild and heady, and I want so much more. But I need to pace myself with Nadia, so I press gentle, tender kisses to her pussy, my hands traveling up and down the soft skin of her thighs. When I flick my tongue across that delicious rise of her clit, she arches her back and unleashes a strangled *oh God*. Her hands fly to my head, her palms curling around my skull.

Oh yes, sweetheart. Grab my fucking face. Grab me hard.

I will happily spend hours devouring her pussy.

With a wicked grin, I listen to her cues, giving her more kisses, more flicks of my tongue, and long, lingering licks as I lap up all the flavors of her desire.

Sweet, salty, desperate.

She tastes like the woman I've been craving.

She ropes her fingers tighter into my hair as I press a little harder, kiss her more deeply.

My hands travel behind her legs, over her ass, curving over her flesh.

That sends her reeling. Her hips jerk, and her voice hits the ceiling in a long, loud "Yessssss."

So my Nadia likes a little ass attention. I'm down with that. I'm definitely down with that.

As I worship at the altar of her clit, I grip her flesh, squeezing her cheeks harder.

"Please," she murmurs.

Consider it done, sweetheart.

I knead her ass as I devour her wetness, kissing her harder, licking her faster, and squeezing this most fine ass as I go.

Hard as steel, my cock throbs in my boxer briefs. Hell, my dick is leaking, and I don't fucking care, because she's losing it. Arching and moaning. Crying out and rocking her hips.

It's beautiful and wanton, the way she seeks her pleasure.

She's so shameless.

So bold.

And I love that I'm the lucky recipient of all her desire.

All her want.

She spreads her legs wider, opening herself up, a debauched invitation to consume her flesh.

Why, yes, I will gladly accept.

I break contact for a second, raising my face. My mouth is covered in her slickness. "Fuck my face, sweetheart. Go wild on me," I rasp.

She gazes down at me, her brown eyes glimmering with darkening desire. She parts her lips, licks them, then locks eyes with me. "I'll fuck your face," she whispers, saying that filthy word for the first time.

Letting go of her ass for a second, I run my hand up her body and brush a finger over her lips. "Your naughty mouth."

She nips my finger. "Fuck me with your naughty mouth," she murmurs, and I nearly die of being ridiculously turned on.

This woman. Her words. Her need.

She delivers.

I return my hands to her ass, my face to her pussy.

And we go wild.

She lets go, rocking and thrusting, having a field day. I'm her toy now, my tongue is her vibrator, and she's using me fiercely, expertly, her hips arching up, up, up.

As my tongue goes flick, flick, flick.

As my hands grip her ass, digging in deeper, squeezing her.

"Yes, oh God, yes," she moans, her fingers gripping my skull.

We work together to find her bliss. Hands, hips, mouth, tongue, and sweet, frenzied friction.

That's what she needs.

That's what I give her as she begs for release.

She cries out, a delirious, keening sound that's half my name and half "*Coming.*"

And wholly hot as fuck.

She tenses, then shudders, her thighs squeezing my face as she comes on my tongue, my lips, my mouth.

I devour her climax, losing my mind at the taste of her release.

At her moans.

Her pants.

Her *oh Gods* as she comes down from the high.

When she lets out a soft laugh, I take it that she's hit a wall, that she's too sensitive. Letting go of her ass, I look up, meet her gaze, and smile like a happy fool.

Because, fuck, that's what I am.

I'm so damn happy with her.

She's blissed out, her hair wild, her smile gloriously filthy, and her cheeks flushed orgasm-pink.

"Hi," she whispers.

My heart slams against my chest.

My cock thumps inside my jeans.

For the first time in a long time, the two organs are utterly in sync, working in tandem, and that's terribly dangerous.

But it's a risk I'm taking.

I need more of her.

Wiping a hand across my face, I crawl up her, brace myself on my palms above her, and meet her gaze. "Hi."

A smile comes my way. "Which rule number was that? I can't think."

I wiggle a brow. “Rule number four, sweetheart. And it’s still in effect.”

“Right.” Her sex-drunk frown is adorable. “And rule number four says ...”

“Rule number four,” I say, “says that I get to make you come.” I pause. “A lot.”

I push back onto my knees, then offer her a hand. She takes it, and I tug her up. “And now I’m going to take you to your bed, where I’m going to fuck you and make love to you,” I tell her.

She lets out a satisfied sigh, her lips twitching in a grin. “Thank God for the lucky corgi butts.”

* * *

In her bedroom, Nadia tugs on the hem of my shirt, her heated gaze drifting downward, checking out my clothes.

I’m still dressed. She’s half naked, which mostly works for me. That blouse needs to go. The bra too.

Stat.

“Do I get to undress you now?” she asks, playing with the fabric of my Henley, lifting it a few inches so her fingertips trail over my abs.

Her touch ignites goose bumps across my flesh. I want to feel those hands all over me, turning me on, making me crazy.

“Take it off. Take it all off.” I want everything off. Her clothes. Mine. I want to get naked and roll around with her all night long, arms and legs wrapped around each other. I want to feel her bare skin. Explore every inch, discover every reflex.

Laughing, she pulls the fabric over my head. “Don’t you want to admire my candlelit seduction, roses, and soft music?” She gestures to her bedroom as she tosses my shirt on the floor.

With a quick glance, I appraise her decor—no candles, no flowers, no tunes. Her bedroom is simple—a cranberry-red cover on her king-size bed and gobs and gobs of pillows.

“Woman, where is the seduction? How do you expect me to get turned on without rose petals all over the place?”

She spreads her palms over my chest, and I draw in a sharp, hot breath as sparks shoot through me.

Her touch is electric, and it short-circuits my brain.

“I don’t know. Are you turned on, Crosby?”

My eyes narrow as I rope a hand around her bare waist, jerking her against the ridge of my cock. “You tell me.”

She murmurs, “Seems so.” Then her busy hands continue their journey, traveling over the planes of my stomach on a path for the button of my jeans.

Working the snap open, she heads for the zipper next.

I waste no time either, fiddling with the rest of the buttons on her pink shirt, spreading it open, revealing the tops of those luscious tits I’ve only sneaked a peek at.

Tonight I get to gawk. I get to indulge in them.

She lets go of my jeans to shrug out of her shirt. I help the nudity cause by unhooking her bra, letting the white lace fall to where-the-fuck-ever.

“Fuck me,” I groan as I free her tits—gorgeous, perky breasts with dusky rose nipples that stand at attention. I cup one in each hand, and she lets out a throaty gasp, arching her back, pushing into my touch as I knead these beauties.

“I like that,” she purrs.

My dick tries to wrestle its way out of my jeans, jerking against my clothes, doing a skyscraper impression to get some attention.

But fuck my dick.

Because ... these breasts.

I drop my face between them, nuzzling, licking, sucking.

Groaning too. I could spend all day here. I could get lost in the valley of her breasts. Don't bother with a search and rescue crew; I'm not leaving.

Doesn't seem she wants me to either. Nadia grips my hair, tugs me closer, urges me to lavish attention on her gorgeous globes.

"Yes, Crosby. God, yes," she says, but then a few seconds later, her hands still, and she whispers, "Hey."

At the sound of her alarm, I instantly look up, searching her face.

"I love second base," she whispers, not actually alarmed at all, but encouraging, it turns out, as she says, "but I kinda wanna get to home plate."

I grin, then laugh, shaking my head. "What's wrong with me? Getting all stalled out on second, when it's clearly time to score." I clear my throat and lecture sternly, "For the record, though, the rule book dictates that I get to return to second base and spend all night here. There's so much I want to do to these beautiful tits."

"And so much I want you to do with your ... baseball bat?" she asks as she cups my hard-on.

"Dick, shaft, cock." I cover her hand with mine, pressing hers more firmly against my erection.

Ah, yes. Fucking yes. That feels so good.

With a mischievous grin, she mutters, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I sigh happily, at her words, her deeds, her palm stroking my dick through my jeans. She's where I want her to be.

Well, I do want to move us horizontal.

Gently removing her hand, I bend to take off my socks, because no woman should see a man in only his lucky socks—that's how they become *unlucky*.

Next go the jeans, and soon she's shoving off my boxer briefs and my dick is greeting her with a hello and a *Let's get intimately acquainted right this second*.

Her breath rushes out sharply, and she goes still, standing in front of me with her hands at her sides.

“You okay, sweetheart?” I ask, worried at how awkward she suddenly seems.

She presses her lips together then takes an audible breath. “It just hit me. I don’t know what to do next.”

Her voice is small, but not shy, not nervous. It’s an admission and a request for guidance.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” I whisper. All I want is to be her guide.

But then, as I lead her to the bed, gently laying her on it, I know that’s a lie. I want to be more.

More than her friend.

More than a fuck buddy.

I want to be her man.

Why the hell did I have to be in self-prescribed time-out when I reconnected with the woman of my dreams?

Because I’m pretty sure that’s what Nadia Harlowe is.

Bold and beautiful, open and vulnerable, spread out on her red bedcover and waiting for me to make love to her for the first time.

As I crawl over her, reaching for a condom, I stop, cup her cheek, and ask, “You still sure?”

Her brown eyes are so deep, so beautiful as she locks them with mine. In those irises I see trust, certainty, maybe even ... *years*.

“I think I’ve been ready for this for a while,” she whispers, reaching for me, curling her hands lightly over my shoulders. “With you,” she adds, and my dumb heart trips over itself, racing to get closer to her.

That’s what I want.

To be close to her.

Maybe it's what I've always wanted. Maybe this wish has been knocking around in the back of my mind for a long time.

Only now, she's front and center.

I'm not sure she can stay there, but that's where I want her. For tonight and beyond.

I drop a soft kiss onto her lips, whispering, "That's why I want it to be good for you. Because this is so much more than sex."

She trembles all over, and it's a beautiful sight.

Even more beautiful is the way the happiness spreads to her eyes.

A happiness that says we're in this together.

The question isn't are we ready to screw, but are we ready to stay together?

NADIA

Goodbye, virginity. Hello, better-than-my-rabbit action.

At least, I'm pretty sure the real thing will be better than silicone. Though, in defense of that plastic material, sex toy manufacturers can mold some seriously lifelike schlongs.

Girth-wise, my rabbit isn't that far off from this man, or his length either. Which means, yes, Crosby could be a cock model.

The thought brings a smile to my face.

But the smile disappears when he moves closer, settling between my legs, making it all much more real. I swallow roughly. "What do you want me to do?" My voice pitches up, threaded with nerves once again.

"Just relax, sweetheart. I'll go slow. It'll probably hurt for a bit. But I'll stop anytime you want, okay?"

I nod a few times, my hands curving over his shoulders. "Okay." I gulp, taking a breath. "Leave my hands here?"

"That's perfect. You can put your hands anywhere, but shoulders work," he says, then he settles between my legs, rubs the head of his cock against me, and I jump.

But it's a good jump.

A pleasure jump.

My pulse spikes, and my heart skips a beat at the intoxicating feel of his dick on me—of hardness against wetness.

Breathing in purposefully, deeply, I let the air fill my lungs, my whole body. And I imagine relaxation flooding me.

My legs fall open wide as he continues rubbing the head against me. I stare down at us, mesmerized, utterly mesmerized, by the erotic sight—his big hand curled around the base of his cock, the slow and sensual way he rubs the crown through my wet folds, then how he presses it against my clit.

A blast of pleasure smashes into me, and I curl my hands tighter around his strong shoulders, digging into his muscles, his flesh.

“Feels so good,” I murmur.

A smile curves his lips. “You fucking bet it does.”

His eyes darken, arousal coming over them, but passion too—passion for me.

I feel it.

I sense it.

This is not just sex.

We’re not just fucking.

We’re connecting.

Anticipation ignites a fresh rush of tingles down my spine. Pleasure rolls through me as he pushes in.

My thighs clamp, tightening for a second, gripping his hips. Then I laugh, letting go. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he says, bracing himself on his palms. “You good?”

“So good,” I whisper as I hook one leg over the back of his thigh, tugging him a little closer, a little deeper.

He sinks in another inch, and I arch up, savoring at once the utter intoxication of him starting to fill me at the same time as I bite back a burn.

He goes deeper, and I’m being stretched.

It’s good, but uncomfortable too.

So much pressure, so much pushing, like an invasion.

My fingers dig in. I need to grip him, and as I grasp him tighter, he groans, a long, slow sensual sound that sends a wave of hot sparks across my skin.

From his reaction.

From his unrestrained response to sinking into me.

His noises help me to relax, and relaxing helps me to take him in.

He's halfway there, maybe more, and I coax him deeper, my thigh hooking more tightly around him as I grit my teeth momentarily.

His eyes lock with mine. "Nadia, it's hurting you. I can tell."

Shaking my head, I breathe in, out. "It's a good hurt. Let me feel it."

"Are you sure?" His question is desperate, like his eyes, like his expression.

He wants this as much as I do. He wants me like I want him.

And I do want him.

In every way.

Deep in my bones, far into my heart.

Thank God I am a toy aficionado.

I've done this, I've been here.

Yes, the real thing is different, but I can handle this, and I want to.

I want to so much. I wrap both legs around him, hooking them over his firm ass, then I jerk him closer so he sinks deeper into me.

"Oh God," I gasp.

"Fuck, sweetheart," he groans, then grits his teeth, clenches his jaw.

The realization that he's as affected, as lost, as I am unravels me.

It wrecks me and takes me apart.

I inhale deeply, slide my hands down his body, cover his ass, and hold on tight, closing my eyes as he sinks all the way in.

All. The. Way.

I tense, tremble, bite my lip at a rush of pain.

It radiates in my center, a burn, and a sting.

But I breathe through it, again, again.

And soon, the pain ebbs, like a tide flowing out to sea and leaving a gentle lull in its wake.

A tender push, a delicious pull.

And the sensation of being filled, of being one.

That's how I feel with Crosby.

Connected.

And also insanely turned on.

I lift my hips, seek him out, ask for more.

He grits his teeth, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. He pulls out, inch by inch, until he's almost all the way out, then he swivels his hips and sinks back into me.

"Oh!" I gasp, arching into him.

"Yes," he grunts, then eases out, pauses, and slides back in, his shaft grazing my clit as he goes.

And that right there is better than a bunny.

Hotter than a dolphin.

And way more intense than any battery-operated little darling.

I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers playing with his hair as my legs slide up his body, my thighs gripping his ass.

He lowers himself onto his rippling forearms, his muscles taut. His expression is torture and bliss all at once, but then soon it's sensual determination as we find a rhythm, hit a pace, and move together.

I moan, writhing under him, gripping him, loving *this*.

Savoring this connection.

What I love most of all is when he dips his face, brushes his lips against mine, and then sighs a needy, dreamy sigh, like he can't get enough of me either.

My whole body is coated in bliss.

Dusted in desire.

I don't want this to end, but I desperately crave the explosion of an epic orgasm.

And I think I'm going to need a little help to get there.

I lean my head back, part my lips, and ask for what I want. "Will you touch me? Play with me till I come?"

"Fuck yes," he rasps out, then pushes up on one strong arm and slides the other down my body, between my legs.

Strokes me.

Oh God.

Yes.

That.

His fingers slide across my clit, and he rubs me where I want him most, faster, then faster still, pushing me, pressing, and taking me closer to the edge.

As he rolls his hips, as he fucks deeper, he strokes me, and I grip him. In a flash, the pleasure crackles in my veins, bursts like bright neon lights, and then flares all at once.

A bright, hot, powerful surge inside me.

I cry out as my whole body succumbs to beautiful, newfound bliss.

Coming with the man I'm falling in love with.

Part of me feels like an utter cliché—the virgin falling for the first guy she sleeps with.

Another part feels like the luckiest woman in the world.

And still another part is completely frustrated. Not over the sex, but over the absolute inconvenience of these feelings.

The terrible timing of my emotions.

Why now?

He's leaving for spring training in a few more days.

He's off the market.

I'm up to my earlobes in responsibility.

But those worries fade away as these luxurious sensations steal my senses, and I gladly let them go.

NADIA

I have a million questions.

But only one answer.

There is only ever one answer when life gets too complicated.

Okay, fine. Two answers—shoes and ice cream.

But since it's late and shops are closed, Crosby and I are on my couch, cuddled in a blanket, sharing sea salt with caramel ribbons ice cream from Salt & Straw after he dashed down the street to fetch a pint.

Which certainly doesn't make me want him any less.

Should I stop wanting him? Every logical part of me says yes, and every other part says I don't want to stop anything.

The trouble is—I'm not sure where we go from here.

From cozy on a couch, noshing on post-sex dessert, to whatever's next.

We're a whirlwind. My brother's wedding was only a week ago. I went into that feeling knocked flat and stomped on by Cupid, rejected even by the top matchmaker in Las Vegas. Now I'm having the time of my life with my good friend and new lover.

This is what I've wanted—the real deal.

I wanted *this* with a friend.

And I'm having it.

But can we trust something that ignited in a week? A week when we were supposed to be off the market?

Crosby dips his spoon in one more time. “Best ice cream ever?”

I consider the pint container, then I’m floored. “Wait. Is this even organic?”

He wiggles his brow and lifts a finger to his lips. “*Shhh*. I’m breaking all the rules tonight.”

Maybe that’s what we’re doing. A little rule bending, then we’ll return to the way we were.

But when we put the ice cream away, he tugs me close and loops an arm around my waist. “Ask me to spend the night. Hint: I’ll say yes.”

I grin from the depths of my soul. “Spend the night.”

“Yes.”

He takes me to bed, tugs my back to his chest, and asks if I want to go again.

“Hell yes.”

This time he slides behind me, hooks my leg over his thigh, and enters me like that, taking the lush and scenic route to pleasure. He makes love to me as we spoon, until I’m coming, and he’s coming, and it feels like we’re new lovers, old lovers, true lovers.

Especially when he draws me close afterward. When he threads his hands in my hair. And when he whispers, “You do make me break all the rules. I’m pretty sure rule number five was don’t fall for each other.” He shrugs, his lips curving into a *what can you do* grin. “But I broke that.”

My heart leapfrogs over itself. My smile won’t be denied. “Guess I broke that one too.”

Problem is, the rules don’t say what happens now.

* * *

In the morning, I know I want this much to happen: food and orgasms.

We shower together, and when Crosby asks me to turn around so he can wash my hair, I shoot him a dubious look.

“Is that code for something?”

“You think I’m going to do something naughty to you while I wash your hair?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No, but maybe once you rinse out the shampoo, I’ll want you to,” I say, dragging a hand down his pecs and over his abs before he turns me around. “Or maybe now.”

He presses a kiss to the back of my neck, making me shiver. I murmur as his lips sweep over my skin, down my back, along my spine. The sound of his knees touching the tile echoes in the steamy shower stall.

He brushes his mouth over the curve of my ass, then nibbles on my flesh.

And oh my.

That feels ... incredible.

I had no idea butt-biting was *the best*.

But it is. Oh, holy hell, it is.

He works his mouth over my ass cheeks, biting and nipping.

A storm gathers inside me, building in intensity as he nibbles.

I moan and groan, louder and even louder, as his tongue maps my flesh, as his teeth mark my skin.

A pulse beats between my legs, insistently, exquisitely.

I’m pretty sure he’s discovering that my ass is an erogenous zone. I’m discovering it too, because I had no idea. Now I do, and I like it.

I like the attention he's giving to my rear. I love his hands on my flesh, his mouth on my skin, his teeth sucking and biting.

Is he going to take my ass someday?

Dear God.

What's come over me? I tossed my V card into the bonfire of pleasure, and now I'm going to give up my ass virginity too?

Also, hey, isn't he supposed to be washing my hair?

But who cares about clean hair when his tongue is caressing the outline of my cheek right where it meets my thigh, right where it feels spectacular?

He travels along the seam of my ass, and I'm pretty sure my bones turn molten and my blood is lava.

"Is it supposed to feel so good?" I moan.

Crosby growls then nibbles on my butt again. "Had a hunch you'd like that," he whispers, then rises up and slaps my ass.

I yelp and I smile at the same damn time as a delicious cocktail of pleasure and pain wings through my cells. "You did? How did you know?"

Lips land on my shoulder. Hands slide up my stomach, traveling to my breasts. Firm arms cage me in. "Because you loved when I played with your ass last night while I went down on you," he whispers. "When I squeezed you hard as I ate your pussy."

A shudder rips through me, igniting an intense, powerful wave of sparks. Like fire shooting through my veins.

I gasp, aching for him. "Can you do that again? Knead my ass as you finger me? I think I'll love that too."

His teeth land on my neck, possessive and hungry, chased with a groan that sounds like it was ripped from his chest. "I love how you ask for what you want, Nadia. You're so damn bold. It turns me on so much. Everything about you turns me

on,” he rasps, pushing his cock against my ass, the hard length of him pressing against my cheeks.

“I like asking you for what I want. I love that I can,” I say, opening up to him in yet another way.

I shudder against him, then he lets go of me, spins me around, and meets my gaze. His eyes darken to midnight blue, shimmering with wild arousal. “You can ask me for anything. I want you to. I want to give it to you.”

“Thank you.” I loop my arms around his neck. “I mean it. I’ve had all these desires, all these wants. And to act on them with you ...” My voice catches, and I’m not entirely sure how to finish. We’re talking about sex, but we’re also talking about intimacy.

True and real intimacy.

That’s what I feel with Crosby.

Dipping his face, he drops his lips to my jaw, bites me, then pulls back. “I want you to share them with me. Your desires. Your wants,” he says, his tone edging toward desperate. He sounds as lost as I feel. “Share them anytime. I’ll give them to you.”

I shake with the emotions and lust surging through me all at once, twining together like strands of a rope. “I will.”

“Good,” he says, low and smoky. “Now, let me give you what you asked for.”

He backs me into the shower wall, dragging one hand down my body to glide between my legs while the other snakes around to my ass.

Panting, I rock my hips, seeking out his touch in an act of sheer desperation. His fingers connect with me in a burst of heat. The fire in me licks higher, burns brighter.

He works me over, stroking my clit, squeezing my ass, then slamming those lips to mine.

I’m hemmed in by desire, by the sweet torment of touch everywhere. Of the way he drives mad pleasure through me, and the way I need it, crave it.

Lust claws at me.

I feel out of control, wild and animalistic.

I feel like I'm losing my mind. Losing my reason, my logic, my inhibitions.

I feel like I never want any of them back.

As he crushes his lips to mine, thrusts his fingers inside me, sweeps his thumb across my clit, and grabs my ass, I nearly die of bliss.

My climax seizes me, taking hold of my body, my mind.

It shakes me to my bones. He breaks the kiss, and I cry out, gasping his name, God's name, every name.

I don't even know what I'm saying.

I'm only feeling.

Feeling ecstasy vibrating from my core out through every cell.

At some point, who knows when, we separate, and I am a noodle.

A spent noodle.

I blink up at him, and he stares at me with a new intensity in his dark-blue eyes.

Yes, that was intense.

But it was intense because I trust him. Because he's discovering me. We're discovering how we are together.

He swallows roughly, his eyes flickering with passion. "What have you done to me?"

My throat tightens with emotion, with the need to touch him, to be touched. "What have *you* done to *me*?"

He shakes his head, maybe in disbelief, then he dips his face near my ear, brushing his cheek against mine. "Need to get close to you right now, sweetheart. Want to be inside you."

Desire squeezes my chest. "Yes. Please. God, yes."

He steps out of the shower, grabs a condom, and returns to me.

The water still beats down on us as he slides the condom on his cock, wraps my leg around his hip, and tells me to hold on.

Then he slides into me.

We gasp at the same time.

We stare at each other in the same way.

And when he sinks into me, we're both feeling it—something else. Something new.

I might not know much about sex.

I might never have been in love.

But I know this much. Somehow I've fallen for him. Hard, fast, relentlessly.

I'm pretty sure it's the same way for him.

That's how he fucks me in the shower.

Like he wants me, like he needs me, and like he's as utterly floored by what's happened in a week as I am.

When he reaches the edge and I follow him there, coming again, coming together, I don't want to stop.

I don't want *us* to stop.

And I don't want to pretend at all, not one bit.

Maybe he doesn't either, since he cups my cheeks, presses his forehead to mine, and whispers, "I'm so crazy about you, Nadia."

My heart flutters wildly. "I'm pretty mad about you, Crosby. And there's nothing accidental about it."

He laughs softly, then his laughter fades. "What the hell are we going to do about this?"

I shrug. "Wash my hair, then let's get some breakfast and figure out what kind of frocktangular mess we've made of our friends-with-benefits plan."

“It’s a fuckerrific mess, that’s for sure.”

CROSBY

I know three things right now.

These eggs at Helen's Organic Café around the corner from Nadia's place are moan-inducing.

The tea is life-giving.

And the woman across from me is quite possibly the reason I've picked the wrong women for ages.

Was I waiting for Nadia all along? Had I already met the right woman when we were younger, so I torpedoed everything else with terrible choices?

I'd bet I did. Everything about Nadia feels right.

We laugh. We talk. We connect. We share.

And we smolder.

She's a friend and a lover.

This thing we're doing right now? Eating breakfast after making love? After that kind of sex, that kind of soul-deep intimacy?

Hell, I want it. I want it with her—badly.

But something nags at me from the back of my mind.

Several *somethings*.

The deal I made with her brother. The same one I made with Gabe and the guys too.

It's the same promise I made to myself. A few weeks ago, I was so fed up with my own poor judgment that I asked my friends to be the rubber band I snap on my wrist to break my bad habit. Because I'm tired of wading through my own relationship wreckage.

I know I don't make the best choices.

That's the crux of the issue.

What if *this choice*—wanting to be with Nadia—is another disastrous decision, only I don't know it yet? Like I didn't realize Camille was bad news? Like I didn't know Daria would be terrible for me?

Here I am untangling from the remnants of girlfriends past, and while Nadia isn't one bit like my ex-girlfriends, I'm still me. I'm the one who needs fixing, needs a hard reset.

I don't want whatever this thing is with Nadia to backfire simply because I have a bad track record.

I set down my fork, then drag a hand through my hair. "I don't know what to do."

She blinks, as if shifting mental gears, but she asks, "About what?" like she already suspects the answer. Maybe she's been thinking in the same circles.

"About how the hell we became a *we* in a week."

She shrugs a little helplessly. "I know. I came to town to focus on the team. You needed a break from relationships." She scoffs lightly. "And now look at us."

I slide my hand across the table, gripping hers. "I don't know if I should trust myself. A few weeks ago, I was telling your brother how I was radioactive. That I needed to detox. And that's what scares the shit out of me."

"Detoxing?" she asks, a little confused.

I shake my head. "No. That I needed to do one thing, but I did the opposite. I *intoxxed*. I *intoxxed* you." My heart fills and empties at the same time. "I'm falling so hard for you, Nadia," I say, and it feels wonderful to give her the truth of my heart, but terrible too.

“I’m completely falling for you,” she says. In her voice I hear the same kind of hope I feel, and a thread of the same worry too.

That’s the trouble. Is this a false hope?

“But the last thing I want in the whole entire universe is to screw this up, Nadia,” I say.

She nods slowly in understanding, maybe even agreement. “Because it’s happening so fast?”

“It’s like a wild roller-coaster ride we’re on, and I don’t know how to pull the brake, or if we even should. I want to be with you, but I also don’t want to ruin this by rushing things when the timing is wrong, or the timing is against us?”

She winces, but nods too, taking it on the chin. “I feel the same. I wanted nothing to do with a relationship when I moved back, and now ...”

I finish the thought. “We’re practically having one?” It comes out heavily.

So does her reply. “We are. Instant relationship, just add water.”

I scrub a hand over my jaw. I’m pretty sure falling in love should make you stupidly happy, not constantly worried you’ll torch the best thing that ever happened to you with one false move.

But maybe there’s a way to pull this off. Maybe we can pull *us* off the way we originally planned.

There has to be a way to get back on track. To salvage our initial intent. If it’s friends-only or lose her completely, I’ll do it.

I brace myself for what I’m about to propose. “I know what we should do.”

Her eyes flick to mine, hopeful. “You do? Please tell me.”

“The plan was to stay friends, right? We need to adult the fuck out of this. We need to adult it for real this time. We

never truly tried to buddy up. We said we would, but we didn't."

She jumps in, picking up the thread like we're solving a business problem. "You're right. We planned to buddy up, and instead we fell into bed."

"We're supposed to try being friends. Try for real. Not get all wrapped up in each other."

"Exactly," she says, agreeing, her brown eyes intense, how I suspect she is at work. "We can't just get together that quickly. That's not how relationships work."

"We need to do this the smart way. The measured way. We need to be patient."

She lifts her mug, taking a long drink of her coffee, like she's giving herself time to analyze the problem. When she sets down her cup, her brows are knit, her words slow and serious, almost cautious. "Did we just agree to be friends?"

I look down at her hand, still joined with mine, and then let go. Friends don't hold hands like they're crazy for each other. Friends eat breakfast and go their separate ways. They don't text each other later in the day, and they don't ask when they'll see each other again.

My heart pinches like a rope is tied around it, tightening it.

I don't want to be *just* friends.

I don't want to level down with Nadia Harlowe.

And I sure as shit don't want to be less than lovers with her.

But being friends without benefits feels like the first responsible decision I've made about this woman in weeks.

It's what I *need* to do.

"I leave on Monday for spring training. I'm going early this year to get in some extra workouts when pitchers and catchers report. Then I'm gone for a little over a month anyway." I can't quite fathom how I'm willingly ending

something that has barely begun. But I have to do this. I have to know I'm not nuclear any longer.

I force myself to think with my head rather than the pathetic organ in my chest that wants to smother her with kisses, hide out with her in bed the rest of the day, and never let her go.

Brain, you're at bat.

Just take a fucking swing.

"And while I'm in training, since we can't be together," I continue, doing my damndest to be rational, "maybe we use the time to be apart. To take it slow and measured. To be patient." I swallow roughly. "We can go to the golf event tomorrow as friends," I offer, like I'm dying to go platonic with her.

Being just friends only sounds like a forking awful consolation prize, but it's the opposite of my past mistakes, and that's what I need to do.

"Sure," Nadia says, a little uncertain. But she takes a shuddery breath and seems more resolved. "It's what we were supposed to do anyway. Besides, I need to focus on finding a new GM, and all my plans for the team. There's no lack of work for me to do," she says, crisp and professional.

In a similar tone, I say, "Then we'll see how things are after spring training. After we've done the friendship thing for real." I sound much more decisive than I feel. "We'll wait for our pitch. That'll be our new rule. Rule number six."

She gives me a faint smile, drains her coffee, then nods like it's all settled. "Friends."

"For now," I agree. We're not calling it relationship-quits forever. We're just sensibly slowing down.

So why do I feel like we just broke up?

NADIA

My niece, Audrey, brandishes a paperback in each hand, wagging one then the other.

“Girl spy or girl warrior?” she asks, debating her purchase as we peruse the shelves at An Open Book.

I screw up my lips, tapping my finger on my chin, studying each cover. “That’s a good question. But with books, you truly can have it all. I vote for both,” I declare.

She nods resolutely, her black ponytail bouncing. “You’re right. I’ll ask my dad to buy me both.”

This is one of my favorite bookstores in the city, perched at the edge of the Marina, a soaring view of the Golden Gate Bridge beyond. I scan the titles and tip a copy of a sports biography into my hand. “While you’re at it, maybe add this one. Girl athletes are cool.”

She takes it with eager hands, reads the back jacket, then glances up at me with inquisitive eyes. “Will you ever have a girl athlete on your team?”

“There have been some female kickers. You never know. We might have one in the NFL someday. But you want to hear something cool?”

“I do.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “I think I might hire a female general manager.”

“You’re so cool, Aunt Nadia.” She spins on her heel and rushes off to find her father in the travel section, thrusting the books at him.

An elbow nudges my side. “Did I just hear you say you’re hiring a female GM?”

I turn to my sister, Brooke, who’s joined me in the kids’ section, some new thrillers tucked under her arm. “It’s looking that way. She’s the leading candidate.”

“Dad worked hard to create equal opportunities and build a diverse workforce. He’d be proud of you for carrying that on.”

“Thanks,” I say, a lump sticking in my throat. Emotions are riding me like I’m a surfboard today.

Breaking up with a guy you weren’t technically dating is the worst.

Especially when you’re falling hard for him.

Brooke studies my face. “You don’t seem as happy about that as I’d expect. What’s going on?”

That’s my sister, seeing right through me.

“Nothing is going on,” I say with fake cheer.

Cheer she bludgeons with one sharp snort. “Right. I don’t buy that. What’s the story with *the man*?”

I sigh heavily, slumping against the Jenny Hans. “I wish there were a story.” My voice is tight, my chest heavy. But I’m not one to dwell, to go all “woe is me” over a man. Then again, I’ve never experienced a man like Crosby.

Brooke sets her hand on my arm, squeezing gently. “What happened?”

I’m not sure I want to open the wound again. This morning’s adulting session at the café felt necessary, but in the way a dental exam is. You need it, even if it hurts like hell when the hygienist gets that tooth scalpel thingie out and scrapes off any plaque, all while chatting cheerily about her day. “Nothing happened,” I say, though, really, a tooth scalpel thingie isn’t nothing.

She grabs my arm. “Oh no, you don’t.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to dismiss all these feelings I didn’t want to face when I returned to town. I simply wanted to be Take Charge Nadia. Boss Nadia. Nadia with her Leatherman that can open any door. My father’s daughter. I didn’t want to be Nadia with a soft, squishy heart that could be stepped on, smooshed, and stomped into a pulpy mess.

“Is this about Crosby?” Brooke asks, a little too insightful. I shake my head, and she rolls her eyes. “You can’t fool me, buttercup. You two are in love. What’s going on?”

Those words are a burst of sunlight in my chest. *In love*. She’s not wrong. But the timing is. It’s utterly and completely wrong.

“Timing is a tooth scalpel,” I say.

She arches a *what the hell* brow.

“It can hurt like a son of a banshee, but sometimes the timing doesn’t work out.”

“That’s just an excuse, Nadia.”

My shoulders sag, and a kernel of sadness expands in my chest, the roots extending throughout my body.

Am I upset with Crosby?

Maybe I am.

But maybe I shouldn’t be.

He might have dealt the fatal blow to our *benefits*, but I agreed with him from the beginning to the middle to the end.

His choice was smart.

Logical.

Right.

I would have made the same one.

I think.

“Look, I tried the whole dating thing in Vegas.” I square my shoulders, digging into my metaphorical purse for my ovaries of steel. “It didn’t pan out. But that’s okay. The universe clearly wants me to be single and to focus on the team right now.”

Brooke clears her throat, her eyes drifting pointedly to the front of the store. David is laughing with Audrey as they reach the counter and she plops down the three titles. He ruffles her black hair. She tosses her head back and laughs.

“I’m in love, and I can focus on work,” Brooke points out.

My heart lurches at her words then squeezes as David tosses Brooke an *I love you* grin.

From all the way across the store.

She throws one right back at him.

It’s everything.

Everything I’ve ever wanted.

That kind of love. That kind of trust. A relationship that’s born from talking, falling, caring.

Like my parents had.

But I bet they didn’t start as friends with benefits.

Relationships should start the right way, in a proper sequence and specific order. They shouldn’t begin with a request for a dick pic, then turn into an accidental kiss in a doorway, then morph into a virgin rule book for defining friends-with-benefits behavior.

Ugh. I did everything upside down and backward.

I should have known better.

“But you and David met through a friend when you were working in China. You went on dates all over Beijing. You romanced each other. He proposed to you before you moved back to California. That’s how it should be,” I point out.

Brooke shakes her head. “There is no rule for how good relationships start.”

“There should be,” I say in a dead voice.

“Do you truly believe that?”

“I do.” But I don’t really know what I believe. All I know is that I miss Crosby, and I have a mountain of work to climb tonight.

I join Brooke and her family for lunch, try to be decent company, then head for the office, where I blast my friend Stone’s latest single and get to work.

This is why I’m here after all.

Nothing more.

CROSBY

Holden tosses up the ball at home plate, swings, and connects with it, sending it down the third baseline.

Jacob fields it perfectly for the hundredth time in a row.

I clap his shoulder. “Dude, keep that up. You’ve got this.”

The kid grins at me. “Can we go a few more times?”

I cup my hands over my mouth and shout to Holden at home plate, “Give us a few more screamers!”

My bud nods crisply and hits another ball down the third baseline.

Jacob fields it again neatly.

“You barely need me to tell you what to do,” I say, proud of this dude.

He shoots me a dubious stare. “Maybe you forget how many line drives I missed at the start of the season?”

“Are you saying my memory stinks?” I ask.

“Maybe a little,” he ribs me back.

We wrap up, and as we head off the field, the kid thanks us. “I’m glad you remembered enough that I could convince you to give me some extra practice.”

“We’ve got you addicted now, is that right?” I ask.

“I think so,” he says. “I can go again tomorrow.”

“That’s the way to do it, man,” I say, clapping his shoulder. “Practice like it’s all you ever want to do. Right, Holden?”

“That’s what it takes,” Holden adds sagely. “That’s what I did when I was your age. Practice, practice, practice. That’s what I still do.”

“That’s the key to success,” I say. “Gotta put in the hours before the season if you want to have a shot at the pennant at the end.”

That’s where I went wrong with Nadia—not putting in the hours. Not dating properly, not taking my time. And when I realized things were moving too fast, I should have slowed down.

But nope. It’s like I’ve learned nothing whatso-fucking-ever from my mistakes. I’m still diving headfirst off the relationship cliff. And what has that ever gotten me? Legal fees, stolen socks, the prospect of jail time in a foreign country.

And I can’t fix it, can’t go back and date her properly, because I’m leaving for Arizona in two days, and that’s that.

Holden and I walk Jacob home, then I call a Lyft from outside his house, zipping up my hoodie as we wait, and cursing the cold-as-balls weather. “I won’t miss San Francisco in February, that’s for sure. Give me the Arizona desert, I say.”

“Bet you’ll miss something about here,” Holden says dryly.

I lift a brow. “Yeah?”

He gives me a look as we pile into the car, heading back across the city. “*Yeah*,” he says, imitating me dead-on.

“Dude.”

“Why are you *duding* me? I’ve been waiting for a report. You and Eric’s sister. What’s the deal? Obviously you have it bad for her.”

“And obviously I made a pact to do nothing about it,” I say defensively.

Holden laughs, shaking his head. “I don’t give a shit about your deal.”

“C’mon. You kidnapped me a week ago. You Drakkar Noir jacket-boarded me.”

He lifts an imaginary violin, pretending to play it. “Poor Crosby.”

I flip him the bird. “Goose biscuit,” I mutter.

“Goose biscuit? What the fuck? You can’t even swear properly?”

“Evidently I can’t. And I paid for your tuxes. I’ll honor the deal. I know I blew it.”

“Whoa. I’m not saying this to get you to cash in.”

“Then why are you saying it?” I fire off, pissed at him, at myself, at the whole damn universe.

“Someone is testy.”

I drag a hand down my face, breathing out hard, trying to let go of all my frustrations bubbling up inside me. “Sorry, man. That’s on me.”

“No worries,” he says as the driver heads into Grant’s hood, swinging past a coffee shop I know.

“Can we stop here? I need a pick-me-up. They have organic black tea,” I say, a little embarrassed.

“No problem,” the driver says, pulling in front of Doctor Insomnia’s Coffee and Tea Emporium.

Once we’re out of the car, I level with Holden. “Look, there was something going on with Nadia. But now it’s nothing.”

He scoffs. “It didn’t look like nothing the other night.”

“What did it look like?”

He takes a beat, then locks eyes with me, like I’m the target. “Everything. It looked like everything.”

My chest seizes up. Were we that obvious? Maybe we were. Because it felt like everything with Nadia. “But that’s

the problem. I need to slow the fuck down. I need to practice being single,” I say as I head into the shop, order a tea, thank the barista, then head back out with the steaming cup.

“But do you truly need to practice being single?” Holden asks as we walk up the street.

“Hello? Have you met me? You guys all lit into me the other night about my horrible taste,” I say, then take a scalding sip.

The tea burns my tongue.

“We’ve all made mistakes though. Maybe you just need to recognize when something isn’t a mistake.” Holden scratches his jaw as he turns philosophical.

I go pensive too, considering his words of wisdom. Trying to understand what is and isn’t a mistake.

“How do you know though?” I ask, wanting his advice now, no longer testy.

“Maybe when you can’t get her out of your system,” he says, stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets. “Because there’s always a woman like that, right? The one you can’t get out of your head? Maybe you had one night with her, one kiss, one conversation. Your what-if woman.”

“You’re talking from experience, aren’t you?”

“It was a while ago,” he says as we cross the street.

“Who is she?” I ask, more intrigued now by his sitch than mine.

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t even know what she’s up to anymore.”

“You going to look her up?”

“Maybe,” he says with a shrug, then a shake of his head. “But maybe I should just focus on the team.”

I nod, getting it, understanding confusion completely. “That’s what I’m talking about. That’s what I need to do too. But in the meantime, tell me more about your what-if girl.”

He cracks a smile. “She’s definitely the what-if woman. It was one night. A couple years ago.”

“The one-night stand you can’t get out of your mind?”

He doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t scoff. He only sighs wistfully. “Almost. But not exactly. It wasn’t even a one-night stand. More like a great conversation and an out-of-this-world kiss, a great time. Kind of crazy, right?”

We turn the corner, and then I stop in my tracks when I spot a familiar face. It’s Declan, ducking out of another coffee shop—this neighborhood has them springing up like baby bunnies. He’s got a Hawks ball cap on his head, and a cup in his hand. He lifts his chin in greeting. “Hey, guys.”

I give him a curious look. “You’re still in town? Figured you had left.”

“I’ve got friends and family here,” he says. “I stayed an extra night, but I’m catching a flight back to New York in two hours.”

“Was it good to see peeps?” Holden asks.

Declan’s lips twitch, maybe with the hint of a grin. “Yeah. Mostly.” Distracted, he looks at his watch. “I should go. I’ll catch you on the first home stand. You’ll be on my turf, and we plan to destroy you,” he says to me.

Ah, that’s the Declan I know. He’s the most competitive bastard in the league.

“As if the Comets can do anything but choke on our dust,” I say.

“You’ll be choking at the plate,” he says with a wicked grin, then tugs on the bill of his cap before he tips his forehead in the direction of the airport. “Gotta take off.”

“See you,” Holden says.

Declan takes off, and we head up the block and around the corner, ready to rap on Grant’s door. But he’s already bounding down the steps in his workout clothes, his hair a wild mess, like he stuck his finger in an electrical socket.

I shoot him a look. “You’ve been DoorDashing on a Saturday afternoon?”

He rolls his eyes, flipping me the bird. “Yeah, I had a burger and a blow job. Let’s go hit the gym.”

We do, and the three of us all seem a little lost in our own worlds as we’re working out.

As for me, I can’t stop thinking about Holden’s comments.

Not the ones about what-if women.

The ones about recognizing mistakes.

NADIA

Back when I was in my matchmaker phase, I read dating columns religiously—articles on the latest trends in dating, on where to go, ideal topics for discussion on the first date, and how to read between the lines.

And I want to issue a complaint right now.

Someone needs to pen a column on how utterly awkward it is to be friends with the guy you gave your virginity to the night before last.

Here we are at a golf course on the edge of the city, making small talk.

Small talk is painful. Hell, it's worse than having your plaque scraped. *Loudly.*

“So, you’re looking forward to spring training?”

“Absolutely. I love it,” Crosby says, all chipper and upbeat.

“It must feel like everything is possible,” I offer, equally peppy so I don’t think of him doing bad things to me or whispering sweet everythings in my ear.

“Yes, that’s exactly it. The world is your oyster,” he says as we chat by a golf cart as the event is winding down. “We have a lot to work on with our oyster, but I’m stoked to do the work. It’s always good to get back in the saddle.”

Ugh, I want to gag.

He's talking to me like he's chatting with a reporter at the end of the game.

I chuckle, but it's mirthless, maybe even frustrated.

Crosby arches a brow. "What's that for?"

Should I just let it go? Screw it. "You just sounded like you were giving me a PR answer," I say.

He laughs. "I guess I did. The truth is, I'm kind of ridiculously excited. I always feel a little bit like a lion pacing in a cage, or maybe a bit of a lost soul, without baseball."

"See? That's a better answer. Because you love it," I say, glad to be talking honestly now.

His smile is magnetic, genuine. Like a kid riding a bike for the first time. "I do. It's definitely my first love," he says.

In some ways maybe I should feel jealous. But I don't. I'm glad he has something that he loves that much. That baseball is *it* for him. "That's how it is for me too. I'm not out on the field playing, obviously, but I grew up with a football-is-life worldview because of my dad. I can't imagine doing anything else. Is it crazy that even when I was a little girl, I wanted to run my dad's football team?"

"No *frogging* way," he says, smiling widely.

"I see I've rubbed off on you."

"In more ways than one," he says, wistful, his eyes a little lost.

I feel the same. My God, I feel the same.

"It was good to talk to you," I say, gesturing from him to me. "Like this."

"It was, Nadia. It was great," he says, and we both shuffle closer.

It's that awkward moment when you don't know if you should hug or not.

We go for the full awkward embrace, and the scent of him, the mind-bending, knee-weakening soapy scent of him, makes

me feel lost all over again.

My heart is empty, but I know exactly how it would feel full again.

* * *

When I return home, I'm ready to write to the dating sites and tell them what to say. How to deal with this *frogging* mess.

Deal with it by saying it.

I want the friendship.

I want the love. I want to be the girl warrior and the woman who falls hard for the man. I want to have it all. Is that so crazy?

I send a note to Scarlett.

Nadia: Is it insane to think we can actually have it all?

The hour is late in Paris, and she doesn't answer, but that's okay. I think I know the answer.

* * *

I grab a late dinner with my mom that evening.

After we order yellowtail and edamame at my favorite sushi restaurant, I give her a wide-eyed look. "So, did Jackson Browne grease the wheels for you this weekend, Mama?"

A flush crawls up her cheeks, and my jaw goes slack. "Are you kidding me, Mom? For real?"

"That's not what I'm saying," she says, hushing me, but it's a half-hearted denial.

"So what *are* you saying, Mommykins?" I bat my lashes.

She lifts her green tea and takes a sip, her brown eyes sparkling with the kind of delight I haven't seen in them in a while.

“What I'm saying is I had a lovely time and I'm going to see him again. I want to see what happens. It seems kind of foolish not to.”

I repeat her words in my head—*kind of foolish not to*.

They feel true.

They feel important.

They feel like one of those statements someone makes that stays with you.

That becomes a brand-new mantra.

More powerful than the one about speaking up.

Or maybe it's the perfect corollary. “Are those words to live by?”

“I think they are,” she says, then tilts her head, studying me. “Is there something you'd be foolish not to do?”

The answer is as obvious as knowing who I want to hire for the GM.

As instinctive as selecting what pair of shoes to wear.

As simple as talking to my mom.

I know what I want.

“I fell in love with Crosby,” I confess, my throat catching, “and I think the timing is all wrong.”

“But you think you'd be foolish not to try to make it work?”

A tear slides down my cheek. “I do. I want to have it all. And really, why be a fool?”

She lifts her mug and clinks it to my glass.

That night when I slide into my bed, two messages light up my phone.

One is a reply from my friend in Europe.

Scarlett: You should have it all. And if something is getting in the way, figure out how to get rid of it and go get your all.

Then a note from my brother.

Eric: Just landed. Anything interesting happen while I was in the Maldives?

I run my thumb over his message. Should I tell him? Well, not that I discovered I love when Crosby plays with my ass.

But rather that I'm in love with his best friend?

I flash back to the mantra that has served me well.

Don't be afraid to speak up.

I answer Eric with three words.

Nadia: Yes. Crosby happened.

CROSBY

I cut the engine in my mom's driveway, grateful that she stayed up for me. I head up the steps to her lemon-yellow Victorian house, lined up amid the painted ladies on Steiner Street, and the second I reach the top, she opens the door with a soft whoosh.

She lifts a finger to her lips, letting me know Kana's asleep. I nod and slip out of my shoes as I go inside. We pad quietly to the sunroom at the back of her house on the far side from the bedrooms.

Starlight streams through the windows, and I grab a seat on the rattan couch, tossing my keys on the table. Mom pats my leg. "Want some tea? Some sliced mango? Kale soup?"

Laughing quietly, I shake my head. "Nope. Just good old-fashioned advice."

"Ah, that's a piece of carrot cake," she says, then pats my leg again. "I assume this is about Nadia?"

"How did you know?" I ask, but truthfully, I'm not surprised.

"Like I said the other night, it's been years."

"Yeah, what did you mean by that?"

She licks her lips, a sign that she's thinking. "It means I always saw something between you two. But especially you. You were so ... enchanted with her."

My heart warms like the sun. "Sounds about right."

“You loved listening to her tell stories, you loved talking to her, and you were nearly impossible to pull away from her when you were at their house,” she adds.

I groan, dropping my head into my hand. “What am I going to do?”

Her soft laugh fills the room. “Stop being so superstitious, I presume?”

I look up. “Why do you assume I’m being superstitious?”

“Because I raised you. You always liked your routine, everything in order. Practice at a certain time. Putting in so much work. Wearing your lucky socks. If you had a bad game, you’d figure out what you’d done differently and try to undo it,” she says, calm and knowing.

I push out a forced laugh. “Sounds like me.”

She smiles like it’s a fond memory. “And you’d analyze every game. See what you could learn from it. Do better. It’s served you well in baseball, all the way to the major leagues.” She squeezes my leg. “But I suspect you’re not worried about baseball right now.”

I slump back against the couch, heave a sigh, and scrub a hand over the back of my neck. “No. I’m here about the woman. The one who *enchants* me.”

She chuckles knowingly. “Well then.”

I cock my head, meeting her eyes. “Well then, what?”

She rolls her eyes, something she rarely does. “I feel as if your question has already been answered.”

I frown, trying to unpack her meaning.

But then I stop.

I stop analyzing, and I listen to what she just said.

I can’t apply baseball logic to women. I can’t force superstitions on love. And I definitely can’t expect lucky-sock reasoning to apply to my past.

Or my present.

Or the future I want to have.

“So what if I swore off women?” I say, straightening. “So what if I was taking a break?” I stand to pace the room. “Who cares if I *should* take things slow, or if the timing is wrong? None of that matters.”

Mom simply grins.

I grab my keys from the table. “This isn’t about being smart or measured or patient. This is about not being a dumbass who lets the woman who enchants me pass me by.”

She stands, clasping my shoulders. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

I hug her hard, kiss her cheek, then get the hell out of there, dialing Eric from the car.

He starts speaking as soon as he picks up. “Well, I bet you ___”

“Listen, I broke the pact. I don’t care. I’m in love with your sister. Some people aren’t meant to be just friends.”

He coughs, sputters, then laughs. “I’m not in the least bit surprised.”

Ten minutes later, I pull up to the curb outside Nadia’s house, turn off the car, and call her as soon as I hit the sidewalk.

She answers right away, sounding breathless. “Hi, what’s going on?”

“Wait. Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m in the elevator. I was going to see you.”

I grin like it’s going out of style. “Talk about lucky socks. I’m right here, waiting for you to buzz me in.”

Thirty seconds later, I see her through the glass door, coming through the small lobby, a wild smile on her face.

She lets me in, and I lift her in my arms, kiss her gorgeous mouth, and say what I should have said yesterday morning. “Screw adulting. I’m in love with you.”

CROSBY

Nadia wraps around me like a koala, her legs around my hips, her ankles hooking over each other behind my back, her arms around my neck.

I couldn't be happier to have her go all marsupial on me.

Still, I tip her back so I can look her over. She's absolutely adorable in a peach hoodie, jeans, and Converse sneakers.

"Were you going to catch a Lyft or something?"

She nods, laughing and smiling. "Told you I was going to see you. And yes, I better cancel the Lyft. But first I just want to say, adulting sucks." She drops a kiss onto my lips. "And I am stupid in love with you. I don't care about timing or how things are supposed to happen. I don't care about dating in a certain way or certain order."

The beautiful admission spills out of her in a fantastic rush.

A rush that makes my heart thunder, and my happiness meter redlines, going off the charts. "You're taking the words right out of my mouth, sweetheart. I don't care either. I was so caught up in my old mistakes that I didn't realize till tonight that leaving things between us as just friends would've been the biggest mistake of all."

"I'm so glad you're here," she says, roping her arms even tighter around my neck. "I was going after you to tell you that too, because I'd be a fool to let you go without saying how I feel."

"Let's not be fools," I say softly.

She kisses the corner of my lips. “Let’s not.” She pulls back, a brow arching. “But I should cancel the Lyft.”

I set her down, she grabs her phone from her back pocket, and a few taps later, she proclaims, “Done!” and slams her body against mine, snuggling up against me. Holy hell, I love this woman’s affection. I love how she wants to get close.

“Do that again,” I murmur.

“I want to do everything with you.” She presses harder against me, then gazes up at me, her tone going all vulnerable and thoroughly sweet. “This is what I realized this weekend—I wanted a relationship like Eric and Mariana have, or Brooke and David, or my mom and dad. I thought we needed to do it that way. How they did.” She pauses, takes a breath, and smiles once more. “But you and me, we can do things our own way.”

“We sure can, sweetheart,” I say, buzzing with possibility as I brush another kiss to her lips, savoring the moment, the contact, the connection. “We can do everything our way. And I just hope you’ll forgive me for being so stupid yesterday,” I say, sliding my hands up her back, never wanting to stop touching her.

“There’s nothing to forgive. I agreed to be all adult about it too. What a ridiculous idea,” she says with the most adorable eye roll.

I laugh. “So ridiculous.”

My right hand slides into her hair. “God, I love your hair. It’s so soft and fantastic, and I just want to touch it and touch you and kiss you and taste you and make love to you.”

“Well, you went pretty quickly from ‘so ridiculous’ to wanting to bang me,” she says, a little saucy. Or maybe a lot.

“That’s the thing, Nadia,” I say, squeezing her hips. “I want everything with you. I want all the things. And I can’t believe I thought we had to stop. But I hope you know the reason was that I love you so damn much. So much that I was terrified of messing this up.” I watch her, making sure she knows that, though we can have fun anytime, I’m dead serious

now. “I let you go because I wanted to ensure we could have something someday. I didn’t want to risk messing up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” I lift a hand, stroking her cheek. “You’re the best thing, and you have been happening to me for *years*.”

This is the truth I’ve learned in the last week with her. I was drawn to bad girls, but only because I’d been missing a piece of my heart for the longest time.

I’d surrendered it when this gorgeous woman went to prom with another man. When I felt the first inkling of jealousy over the mere possibility of something.

Ever since, I’ve been looking for that *something* in all the wrong places. But ever since Nadia gazed at me with those wide, vulnerable eyes, I’ve known that she’s the lost treasure I’ve been searching for.

“It’s been years for me too.” She cups my face, sliding her thumb along my jaw. In those brown irises, I see my long search reflected back at me, all my hopes echoed. “It hit me at the rehearsal dinner—I’ve had a big crush on you for a long, long time.” She sounds giddy with happiness. Her eyes glisten with it.

I lift my thumb, swiping away the hint of a tear. “Don’t cry, sweetheart.”

“It’s because I’m happy. Because this is crazy and amazing and wonderful. That’s what I realized at the dinner—how much I care for you, how much I feel for you. And I’ve kept realizing it over and over again. But it’s not teenage you. It’s who you are now, the man I’ve come to know in the last week. It’s the way you talk to me and laugh with me and tease me and take care of me. It’s the way you touch me and hold me and want me. It’s the way you understand me.”

I beam from deep within. “I love everything about you, Nadia. And I’ve loved getting to know the woman you are now. That’s the woman I’m in love with. So the last thing I want to do is get on that plane tomorrow morning with us on hold. I don’t care if I’m gone for a month. And I know I’m on

the road a lot, but I want you to be mine and I want to be yours, no matter what.”

Laughing, she presses another kiss to my lips. “There’s FaceTime, and sexting, and phone calls. And then when you come home from a week on the road, there’s super-hot homecoming sex.”

I growl, my eyes narrowing, lust tearing through my body. “I love your dirty plans for us.”

“I’ve got dirty plans for us tonight too.”

I thread my hands through her hair. “Ask me to spend the night, and I’ll say yes.”

“Spend the night.”

It’s more of an order than an ask, but I’ll take it.

* * *

Even though we nixed the whole friends-with-benefits scheme, we’re definitely friends still, and we’re definitely enjoying the benefits.

For instance, my cock is benefiting right now from Nadia’s eagerness to try a new position. She climbs over me in bed, having already stripped me to nothing in record time. Straddling me, she sets her hands on my chest. Then she slides her wet pussy against the hard ridge of my cock. Back and forth, silky and hot. Over and over. Closing my eyes, I groan in pleasure. “You better not tease me all night long, sweetheart.”

“But what if I do?” she purrs.

And really, what if she does? “Fine, fine. Tease me all night. I’m yours.”

She rocks her hips up and down along my shaft, her breasts swaying, her hair flowing. She’s an eager vixen, ready to explore all this new terrain.

Electricity sparks along my neurons as heat builds and builds with each luxurious swivel.

But then she slows her moves and presses her hands harder against my chest, clearing her throat. “Do you have any tips for this position?”

I love that she’s unafraid to ask questions. It does remind me, too, that sometimes I might need to teach her. Don’t mind that at all.

“Go slow when you take me in,” I tell her, running my thumb over her lower lip.

She nips my skin. “Okay, I can do that.”

“Because it’s new to you. That’s all. And if you don’t like it, just tell me. We’ll adjust. I’ll adjust.”

With a relieved nod, she reaches for a condom on the nightstand. She scoots down me, opens the wrapper, then stares at it like it’s a one-thousand-piece puzzle, one of those brain-breaking ones where every piece is the same color.

With a laugh, I take it from her. “We’ll practice condom stuff another time. For now, I’ll take care of wrapping it up,” I say, rolling the protection down my shaft.

“Maybe next time we won’t need it,” she says in a sultry bedroom voice. “I’m going on birth control.”

I jolt with pleasure at the prospect of fucking her bare. But fucking her covered is a gift too.

I hold the base of my dick, offering it to her. She moves over me, gripping my length at the same time then rubbing the head against her center.

Her eyes flutter closed, and a soft groan falls from her lips. “Feels so good,” she whispers as she takes me in the slightest bit.

Then more.

Inch by inch, she lowers onto me, her pussy like a tight glove.

My body shakes as she drops down.

We both gasp at how good this feels, how close we're connected, how much we want this.

Shuddering, she draws a deep breath, her hands gripping my chest, her fingers playing with my nipples. She's quiet at first, and still. Adjusting maybe.

Or possibly savoring, judging by how her eyes darken, float closed, then open again. How her breath stutters.

Then, she bends closer.

Moving and swaying, taking and giving.

As my body heats up, I let her set the pace, let her find the rhythm that she needs.

Because I've got everything I want right now. I've got her, on me, with me.

Soon enough, we're moving in tandem, gasping and grunting, sweat slicking between us, skin burning up. Her noises intensify, pitching up, lasting longer, her moans like a dirty song, like filthy music to my ears as she rides me.

My hands slide up and down her back, traveling along her soft skin, threading through her hair.

As we tangle together, I'm grateful, so damn grateful, that we're here tonight, before I leave, enjoying every second of loving and fucking, fucking and loving.

And coming as one. That's what we do, reaching the edge, blasting off, a blur of heat and pleasure, of sounds and cries. Of bodies and hearts crashing into each other.

After we both gasp and laugh and pant, I let out a long, happy sigh. "Even though we're not doing the friends-with-benefits thing anymore, I want you to know I have never enjoyed the benefits as much as I do with you."

Her eyes twinkle with mischief. "Maybe that's because we're friends and lovers."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's why. And there's nothing accidental about that."

A little later, she falls asleep in my arms, something I hope she'll do every night when I'm in town. That's how I want this to be with us. This new *us*. Every day, every night.

* * *

In the morning I wake at the crack of dawn, take a quick shower, and pull on my clothes. She's brushing her teeth as I zip up my jeans.

Seeing me dressed, she spits out the toothpaste. "So, I guess this is it?"

I look at my watch, my heart heavy because I have to go but full because, well, we're in love and it is fucking awesome. "I've got a plane to catch."

She turns off the faucet, sets down the toothpaste, and walks over to me, sliding her hands up my chest. "So, this is us? We're, like, a thing now?"

I grin, beyond confident when I tell her, "You're mine. Don't even try to get out of it. I'm going to call you and text you from Arizona every day. When I get back here, I am going to be so goddamn horny and wound up that I'm probably going to spend the entire night going down on you, fingering you, fucking you, making love to you."

She shimmies her hips. "It'll be more than a month, so I'll pretty much be like a virgin again."

I laugh, cup her cheek, and kiss her mouth. "I love you, Wild Woman."

"I love you too, All-Star."

* * *

Three hours later I'm at the airport, duffel checked. I walk to the gate where the team plane is parked.

Lily Whiting, the reporter from the Sports Network waits, press pass around her neck. She's here to interview some of

the team before we head to spring training.

Good. I've got something I need to say on camera. When Lily strides over to me and asks if I'm ready, I say yes.

Her camera guy mics me up, then Lily asks me a few questions about the upcoming season. As Chance and Grant wait a few feet away, arms crossed, watching intently, I tell her the things I want to work on, what the team needs to do to win, what I'm most looking forward to. Then I make good on my promise.

"And mostly what I'm looking forward to, Lily, is working with Chance Ashford and Grant Blackwood," I say, gesturing to my teammates. "Have I mentioned that those guys are absolutely the most talented players in all of baseball? And so is Holden Kingsley of the San Francisco Dragons. They're the best. They're better than me," I say, since those were the terms of the pact. The one that I broke. The one I'm damn glad I broke.

Lily gives me a curious stare. "Those are things you don't hear very often from athletes about other players, especially their rivals."

I meet the eyes of my friends, who are slack-jawed but clearly amused.

"True. But sometimes when you know the truth, you've just got to say it aloud. And they are the absolute best." I grin, grateful to be giving this confession because of what it means. What I have because of it.

She turns to the camera. "And there you have it."

I thank her and head onto the team plane with my guys. Grant claps me on the back as we walk down the Jetway. "So, we're the best?"

Chance cuts in. "He said it. He must mean it."

"Of course I mean it," I say as we step into the galley.

Grant shoots me a skeptical look. "Or maybe you're just madly in love."

I toss a glance at my teammates, shrugging, smiling, owning it. “There’s no ‘maybe’ about it. I absolutely am.”

Soon the plane takes off. I glance at my feet and tense when I realize I forgot to pick out a pair of lucky socks for today. I’m wearing basic, ordinary dress socks with my suit pants.

But then I relax because that’s okay. Because socks don’t make the luck. You make your own by finding what you love and making sure you’re not too superstitious to let it get away.

I send a text to the woman I adore.

Crosby: Just so you know, I’m not crediting the corgi butts for the way I feel for you. It’s you. I am crazy in love with you. Also, your butt is cuter than any corgi’s.

EPILOGUE

Nadia

About A Month Later

Here's the other issue I have with dating sites.

Nowhere do they mention that long-distance love affairs are worse than dental exams.

Okay, fine. There are a *few* benefits. The first time you have Skype sex is crazy hot.

And okay, the second, third, fourth, and fifth times are incendiary too. I have a family of little darlings and big darlings, and Crosby likes watching me use them all. Maybe I'm shameless, or maybe I just know what I like, but this show-and-tell does the trick for me along with his words as he urges me on, as he talks dirty to me and sends me over the bunny-hopping cliff.

Plus, in his hotel room on the other end of the camera, my boyfriend looks smoking hot when he takes his thick cock in his hand, slides his fist up and down, and gets himself all the way off, telling me the things he wants to do to me when he returns to San Francisco.

I haven't visited him in Arizona. The timing hasn't lined up. My work schedule prepping for the next season has been insane, but Matthew and I hired the GM we wanted, and Kim is doing a fantastic job.

One evening over a late dinner, my English friend and I toast to how we're slowly but surely winning new fans before the season even starts, thanks in part to Kim's masterful chess play with athletes and the deals she's inked for a new rising star tight end and a fantastic defensive lineman, among others.

"Admit it, we're brilliant for hiring her," I say, lifting my wineglass.

"We are the most brilliant," Matthew quips.

"And we're going to deliver a Super Bowl win, and then just imagine—you won't have to take wine-and-painting classes to meet new women," I say, before taking a drink of the chardonnay. "They'll fling themselves at the Hawks CEO."

He cracks up, then sets down his glass of red, his expression suddenly serious. "Maybe I won't have to wait till then to meet someone new."

My eyes widen. "So, does that mean Phoebe's history officially?" I knew it was ending, winding down every day, it seemed. But I hadn't yet heard that his relationship was on the chopping block.

"Don't look so happy. But yes. Earlier this week she said she'd had enough, but truth be told, I had too. She hated my job. She wanted me to quit." He sounds matter-of-fact, but I know it's not easy.

I narrow my eyes, huffing. "I'll never let you go."

"You better not. Because I don't want to go."

"Good. I'll just have to make it my mission to find you a fantastic new woman in this city."

"You really think I should start dating again?" He sounds skeptical. "I was mostly joking about the wine-and-painting thing. I'd honestly just go for me."

"I get why you wouldn't want to date again. But I know you. You like being with someone. When it's right, that is."

"And how would I know if it's right?"

I smile, answering from the heart. “If it feels too good to be true, but it’s completely true.”

“Sounds like a movie.”

“Yes, and sometimes stories like in the movies come true. If you put yourself back out there.”

He takes a beat, perhaps considering it, then nods. “Maybe I will, then.”

I clap once, glad for my friend. “Let’s see. Where do I know a fun, chatty, bighearted single woman?”

He laughs. “Nowhere, because they don’t exist.”

“Hush.” I hum thoughtfully. “Maybe Crosby knows someone.”

Matthew laughs doubtfully, a twinkle in his green eyes. “I’m sure your baseball star beau knows loads of single women.”

He has a fair point. Except wait a second. “I might know someone.” I lean closer and whisper, “I’ll find out if she likes wine and painting.”

“You do that.”

* * *

The day that spring training ends and my guy boards a flight back to the Bay Area, I’m a certifiable jackie-in-the-box, ready to spring with desire the second I see him. Just a few more hours now.

It’s a Friday night, and I head out to dinner with my family. Eric and Mariana. Brooke and David. My mom and her new beau, Craig, who loves to chat about ’70s music and is completely adorable.

Over apps and dinner at a restaurant near my place, we catch up on what everyone’s been up to for the last few weeks. During dessert, Eric lifts his fork to take a bite of the tiramisu,

then clears his throat, meeting my gaze. “I guess all you’re waiting for is to see my best friend tonight?”

With a delicious grin, I nod. “I am indeed.”

Brooke laughs. “Yeah, she’s only been checking her phone the entire meal.”

I shoot her a stern look. “I have not been doing that.”

My mom purses her lips like she’s holding in a smile. “You kind of have, Nadia.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Do you blame me?”

“No. I completely understand,” Brooke says, sliding her hand down her husband’s arm.

David blushes then drops a kiss onto her cheek. “I don’t blame you for wanting your hands on me.”

My family is full of perverts, apparently.

Including yours truly.

At the end of the meal, I nearly jump out of my seat, that much closer to seeing Crosby. I make my goodbyes and walk the few blocks home, enjoying the night air, the hint of a warm breeze as March nears its end in San Francisco.

I relish being home. I thought I would miss Vegas, but I don’t. This is where I was meant to be.

With family, with new friends, with a job I absolutely stinking love.

And with a guy I’ve known for so many years but am getting to understand in a new and incredibly wonderful way.

Maybe this is what the universe had in mind after all.

Or maybe, just maybe, I made sure I wasn’t fool enough to miss my chance when it came.

An hour later, the blue-eyed, crooked-grin-sporting, steady-handed third baseman and all-around good guy strides through my door, cups my cheeks, and kisses the hell out of me.

I melt into his arms, kissing him back just as hard, just as hungry.

Just as desperately.

It feels so damn good to share this wild, wonderful want with him. I tug on his shirt, drag him to the bedroom, and rip off his clothes.

“I guess I know what you missed the most,” he says, his voice a naughty rasp.

“Find out just how much,” I say, my hands racing over his skin.

And oh, he does find out. He moves over me, sliding into me, and, for the first time ever, filling me with no barriers between us.

We’re even closer like this, even more connected. It’s electric bliss, it’s supercharged lust, and it’s mad, passionate love as we come together.

When we’re done with round one, I drag a hand down his chest. “About your cousin Rachel,” I say.

“What about her?” He tilts his head, curious.

“Well, you said she had a jerk of an ex and liked to keep herself busy by setting other people up.”

“I did say that.”

“I happen to have a very good friend who’s newly single and is a great guy.”

“You don’t say,” he says, catching my meaning.

“Maybe the matchmaker needs us to play matchmaker,” I say, then I tell him more about Matthew and he tells me more about Rachel, and we decide they’d be perfect for each other.

He sends her a text, and I send one to Matthew, and a few minutes later, we’ve arranged a blind date for them.

“Now that we’ve accomplished that, I was thinking we might need some new rules for us,” I say with a smile.

He kisses my shoulder, dragging his lips along my warm skin. “And what would those be?”

“That we have lots of sex,” I say.

“Rule one,” he says with a roll of his eyes.

“That we keep asking for what we want,” I add.

“Rule two.”

“And that maybe I buy your team,” I say.

He cracks up. “You’re joking?”

I laugh too. “I am.”

“Okay, here’s my rule, then,” he says, his tone going serious.

I push up on my elbows, letting him know I’m paying attention. “Hit me up.”

He strokes my hair then grazes his thumb over my jaw. “You let me keep on loving you.”

I kiss his lips, whispering the only possible answer. “Yes.”

Then, I get out of bed and grab a gift from the bureau. Sinking back onto the mattress, I give him a pair of chipmunk socks. “For the season. They’ll be your new lucky socks. Just don’t wear them during sex.”

He cracks up. “Why would I wear lucky socks when I’m already getting lucky?”

Sounds like we have a deal.

EPILOGUE

Holden

It's a beautiful night in April when Crosby swings by and picks me up to head to an event at the Legion of Honor. Chance is with him too, so we make our way over to the cocktail party benefitting a number of local charities.

Along the way, my agent calls to let me know the Dragons finally hired a new manager.

"Perfect timing. Opening Day is only . . . tomorrow."

"Better late than never," he says, then gives me details on the guy. He has a good resumé, and I met him once. He made quite an impact.

Something that had been weighing on me just turned into something awesome. "Excellent choice," I say to Josh.

As I head into the Legion of Honor with my buds, I tell them all about the new manager.

"Sounds like the baseball buddha," Crosby says.

I'm grateful to have made good friends in town, and to be playing for a team that's looking up. I'm determined to do everything I can to keep up the hard work. Nothing can get in my way.

Except, once I head into the event, a familiar silhouette walks into my line of vision.

Blue eyes. Blonde hair. Full lips that I know so well. Lips I explored late one night nearly two years ago. Is it really her? My what-if woman? The one I haven't been able to stop thinking about. I take a step closer. She turns to me. Eyes lock. Skin tingles. It's her. In the flesh. In person. In the same damn town once again. This feels like the start of a second chance.

The woman I've never been able to get out of my head.

ANOTHER EPILOGUE

Crosby

A year later

It's been a hell of a year, and I can't complain.

I didn't even need lucky socks to make this fantastic season happen.

I still wear my chipmunks, only they're not the be-all and end-all anymore. They're just fun, something I enjoy.

Chipmunk socks, flamingo socks, donkey-wearing-glasses (aka the "smart-ass") socks ... Nadia gives me a new pair every month. I give her gifts too.

Every time we go to an event, I give her a new wrap.

Other occasions call for lacy lingerie.

And sometimes she opens a box of shoes from me, since I'm pretty damn good at picking out sexy-as-fuck heels for my woman to wear.

Like, say, when I bend her over the bed, the couch, or the table.

Life is good. We make ample use of her toys, her furniture, and all my tuxes—because we have lots of events to attend.

We're one of those *well-known couples*. The billionaire team owner and her all-star boyfriend. I don't mind playing

second fiddle to this power broker. I happen to find power in a woman an aphrodisiac.

Other men might be intimidated by the size of her ... wallet.

Other men are not me.

Besides, I know what I do to her in the bedroom—and out of it. She lets me take care of her in every way, and that's all I want.

Tonight, I don the chipmunks with my tux for the awards ceremony where Nadia's general manager will be honored. Nadia couldn't be prouder. Kim has accomplished a ton in the past year—logging a terrific season, snagging wonderful players, and winning back tons of old fans while gaining new ones.

I drop my phone into my jacket pocket and head to the front door of her place, picking up her purse for her as she scurries to join me.

I stop in the doorway, then smack my forehead, like I forgot something.

“We can't leave without me giving you the gift I picked up for you for the awards event,” I tell her, all bossy.

She's frazzled, rushing, wanting to get out of here. “Okay. But can I open it in the car?”

I shake my head. “Nope. You've got to open it now because you're going to want to wear it to the event.”

She laughs. “You're right,” she says, glancing at her bare shoulders. “It's cold in San Francisco, and you always give me the best wraps.”

“I do indeed.”

But I don't have a wrap for her tonight.

Instead, in her doorway, the same place where I kissed her ravenously the night we set the rules, I drop down to one knee, take her hand in mine, and speak from the heart. “Nadia, do

you remember that night a year ago when we went to the Sports Network Awards?”

She blinks, whispering, “I do.” Her voice trembles, and I love that sound, love the way she wears her emotions so visibly.

“That was the night we really came together,” I say, vulnerability in my tone. But certainty too. “That night we started to acknowledge everything that was happening between the two of us,” I say, my chest filling with warmth, with clarity. “That was the night we admitted we felt something for each other, and we didn’t stop. We didn’t let things like rules or guidelines get in the way. We made our own rules every single day.”

With a smile that could light up the city, she squeezes my hand. “We sure did make our own rules.”

I draw a steadying breath. “I want to keep making up rules and breaking them with you. I want to keep loving you and making you happy. I want you to be my plus-one, my partner, my friend, my lover, and my wife. Will you marry me?”

With tears already streaming down her gorgeous face, she falls to her knees, wraps her arms around me, and says, “Yes. I have been so ready to marry you for a long, long time.”

“Good,” I say, glowing, joy filling every cell as I take out the box from my pocket, flip it open, and enjoy the hell out of the way she gawks.

It’s quite a ring.

It’s big, bright, and contains all kinds of carats.

It fits her.

She’s a woman of the city. When she goes to meetings, to conferences, to dinners, doing her badass thing, I want everyone to know she’s taken in a big way.

The way I’m taken too.

With her.

I slide the ring on her finger, and she stares at it, awestruck. “So now I’ll be plus-oneing with my groom? Is that the romantic comedy that Hollywood is going to make about us?”

“They are,” I say. “And spoiler alert—it has a happy ending. Every day and every night, it has a very happy ending.”

Just like us.

THE END

Who is Holden’s what if woman? Find out in his wildly forbidden romance in *The Virgin Game Plan*. **Available for FREE in KU! Binge the entire Rules of Love series now in KU! Turn the page!**

BE A LOVELY

Want to be the first to know of sales, new releases, special deals and giveaways? Sign up for [my newsletter](#) today! And [click here for a bonus short story about Matthew!](#)

Want to be part of a fun, feel-good place to talk about books and romance, and get sneak peeks of covers and advance copies of my books? [Be a Lovely!](#)

If you're looking for Grant's romance you can find it in [Scoring with Him](#).

THE VIRGIN GAME PLAN

ABOUT

She's the one who got away...and the coach's daughter.

I had an excuse two years ago when I met the sexy but innocent reporter on campus.

She interviewed me for a story on major league baseball's rising stars, and we shared a hot, passionate night that ended far too soon.

Now I know the woman I can't stop thinking about *is* the coach's daughter.

Since her dad is the guy who determines if I bat fourth or ride the bench, I do everything I can to resist the reporter-turned-sports publicist when I run into her again in San Francisco.

Trouble is I'm the grumpy ballplayer and the team needs to be sunshine-y.

My agent pairs me up with her to work on my people skills, but pretty soon we're working on bedroom skills too.

And the more time I spend with her, the harder I fall.

This is going to be so bad for my baseball career especially since letting her slip through my fingers again feels like a rookie mistake.

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Lauren Blakely

LaurenBlakely.com

Cover Design by © Kate Farlow, interior illustration by Laura Moore

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

THE VIRGIN GAME PLAN

By Lauren Blakely

To be the first to find out when all of my upcoming books go live [click here!](#)

PRO TIP: Add lauren@laurenblakely.com to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!



The
Virgin
Game
Plan

The logo for "The Virgin Game Plan" features the title in a bold, orange, serif font. The word "The" is positioned above "Virgin". A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red top and black skirt, is perched on the left side of the "V" in "Virgin". The word "Game" is written below "Virgin", and a man with dark hair, wearing a green shirt and blue pants, is standing on the right side of the "e" in "Game". The word "Plan" is written below "Game".

PRESENT DAY

His Prologue

I'm the guy with a plan.

I know what my days look like, what my nights have in store.

I have a road map for every practice, an agenda for every game, and a strategy for every at bat. I know dates of each home stand and out-of-town series of the season and can tell you where we're playing in July and what's on the schedule for September.

When it comes to sports, I leave nothing to chance. I'm the guy who does the research, who hits the hay by eleven, gets up at six, and logs four miles while the sun is rising.

It's made me who I am today, and I'm pretty damn happy about that.

Games, seasons, championships—those are won with determination, discipline, and heart, for sure.

But never without a plan.

Dating is kind of like that too. It's good to know where you're going for dinner, or how to get to your seats at a concert, or who serves the best cocktails in town. Why wing it and worry when, with a little bit of homework, you can show up confident of a good evening?

The way I see it, preparation is about respect. Respect for the game, respect for the woman, and respect for yourself.

My father instilled that philosophy, my mother reinforced it, and so far, that principle has served me well in every aspect of my life.

Nearly every aspect.

There's one glaring exception.

Chemistry.

Not the kind that adheres to rules and gives predictable results, the kind you can study in a lab and shows you what to expect in life. I mean the other kind, which doesn't repeat patterns or generate statistics to analyze. The kind that defies your careful plans and laughs at any strategy.

That chemistry doesn't give a flying fuck about schedules. It happens when you have something else entirely on your agenda.

At least, it did the day I met Reese.

I got up that morning with one goal. But then I met her, ditched my plans for the afternoon, and spent it with her instead. When I kissed her at the edge of campus, beneath the twilight sky, under a canopy of trees, the night felt young and *possible*.

Even though we weren't. We were worlds apart, absolutely *impossible*.

That's how she became my what-if girl.

Not the one who got away, or the one where I fucked up a good thing. We were never a *thing* to fuck up. We only had one day—hell, less than that.

It was one afternoon. One moment that stays lodged in my mind.

What if I met her at a different time, a different place? What if our paths hadn't crossed going in opposite directions?

Even almost two years later, I still sometimes wondered what she was doing, where she was, and what the odds were

I'd ever meet her again.

Then, incredibly, I do.

And I learn there's a bigger obstacle between us.

So I have to plan to keep her in the "what-if" category.

Then, Reese reveals a deliciously dirty secret, and all my plans where she's concerned fall apart in filthy, spectacular style.

* * *

Her Prologue

I didn't go to the party looking for *that guy*. The one I couldn't forget. The one whose kisses ruined me for all other kisses.

I went there for work, to make some contacts. See some new people, forge connections and all that.

Most of all, to do some good, since that's kind of my thing—why I do what I do.

But then I spotted *that guy*. Watching, observing, listening. There's a curve to his lips and an intensity in his dark-green eyes, mixed with some of the vulnerability he showed me that day.

A day I've longed to recapture.

Except days aren't driver's tests—you can't retake them. They aren't video games where you can play again from the save point.

But some guys deserve a retake, are worth a do-over.

That's certainly the case with Holden Kingsley, the guy who showed me exactly what a knee-weakening, bone-melting kiss could be like. *Should* be like.

The night I meet him again, I want to think we're getting a fresh start. That we get a magical do-over, maybe with better timing, a different outcome.

Maybe *that guy* doesn't have to be simply a fantastic memory.

He can be my present. We can give in to the lust and the longing, the rabid desire that electrifies us both when we're together.

We can explore the intense connection, the irresistible pull his heart has on me.

I have big plans for Holden Kingsley. Indeed, I do.

At least, I did.

But there's more than bad timing standing between us now, and I don't know if any strategy will be enough to keep us together.

PRELUDE

Nearly Two Years Ago

REESE

This is the biggest score ever.

So big, so good, so cool that I could squeal.

But I don't.

Squealing would draw good-natured shaming from my girlfriends, and no one wants their picture taken with a sign saying, "I turn into Minnie Mouse at good news." Certainly not more than once.

I'm not a Disney character on helium.

I'm a twenty-two-year-old almost graduate with honors from a prestigious university.

So, no squealing, just a centering breath before I tug on my pink V-neck tee and twist my mostly dry blonde hair into a messy bun on top of my head, vibrating with quiet excitement the whole time.

Yup.

This is happening.

It is on.

I grab my jeans from the locker, pull them on, then retrieve my cell and reread the email to make sure it hasn't changed. But there it is, the same words imprinted on my memory.

Yes. Hell yes. Absolutely yes.

It delights me wildly that major league second baseman Holden Kingsley replied to my email request with not just a

yes, but a jet-fueled quad-shot-latte of a confirmation.

Grinning privately, I set the phone on the bench beside me, staring at the message as I lace up my Converse sneakers. I don't realize how absorbed I am in spinning out the possibilities until I hear Layla deadpan, "From your rapt attention, there must be some breaking news rocking the sports world. Let me guess—the LA Bandits star pitcher has a hangnail? Some minor league prospect was called up to the majors?"

The pure sass comes from our volleyball team's star spiker. She could host a master class in sarcasm, and her resting bitch face is top-shelf. I swear she can cut glass with her stare.

"Or is your favorite retro clothing store having a flash sale?" our teammate and friend Tia teases me as she ties a paisley bandana around her sleek black hair, arching a brow. "Because it can't be a Tinder hookup that has you all giddy."

Layla nudges her. "You know what would? A professor who wants Reese to do extra credit."

"You know me so well," I say. Any of those things would rev my engine—Tinder hookups excepted. But their teasing can't dampen my enthusiasm for this score.

An interview with a Major League Baseball rising star.

Excitement buzzes inside me like I swallowed Diet Coke and Mentos. I want to crow in victory until it reverberates throughout the locker room. But the rest of my college volleyball team wouldn't appreciate that, and bragging is best shared with a friend or two, who will add their congratulations to your own.

So, I tuck my phone—and the news—into my pocket, shut my locker, and redirect. "Maybe I'm just excited about half-price fries at the new Mediterranean café on the edge of campus. But only for the next fifteen minutes. So, c'mon, women. Skedaddle," I say, waving them along.

Tia snorts, yanking a tunic over her yoga pants. "I'm down, but I don't think fries make you grin like that."

"I dunno. Fries make me pretty happy," I say.

“Fries make everyone happy.” Layla slides her feet into flats, then shuts her locker. “So it’s not fries.”

“Exactly,” Tia agrees, mischief in her eyes. “I think Reese has got something more exciting on her phone than sports stats, extra credit, or cute clothes.”

She’s right—on my phone is the equivalent of a winning lottery ticket for a woman with my aspirations.

I wiggle an eyebrow at Layla. She arches one of her own in an intrigued *Is that so?*

My sharp nod says *That is so.*

Tia glances between us in avid curiosity, stopping on me with a silent *Really?*

The three of us have been friends long enough to master communication through a code of raised brows, expressive side-eyes, and telling quirks of the lips.

“I’ll tell you as soon as we leave,” I whisper, hoping it will hurry them up.

I’m barely able to contain my excitement until we’re outside, where I grab my phone again and waggle it at them. “Here it is, in black-and-white pixels. Proof that I am *the bomb*. The goddess of sports podcasts.”

This is what I couldn’t do in front of the others in the locker room. It sounds obnoxiously cocky.

Because I *am* cocky, but only about things that I’ve worked my ass off for.

Volleyball.

Asking hard questions.

And making a plan for the future.

“Holden Kingsley,” I say, giddy about the opportunity that I made happen.

Through gumption.

Through going for it.

“I nabbed an interview for my little old college podcast with the second baseman for the LA Bandits. It’s his second year in the majors, and he crushed it in his first,” I say, feeling like I could blast off to the moon without a rocket.

Layla—whose name fits her perfectly, as if her parents knew they were going to pop out a six-foot-two volleyball star—squeals. “Shut the front door!” All sarcasm and resting bitch face vanish.

Tia stops in her tracks, blinking. “For real?”

I hold up a hand and swear, “One hundred ten percent.”

Layla demands more with a *dish it out* wiggle of her perfectly manicured fingers—polished with silver sparkles and barely a nick. How she manages that while playing volleyball, I don’t know. It’s one of her many superpowers. She’s also gorgeous, with carved cheekbones and amber skin that’s always radiant. “All right. Tell us all the deets.”

I give them as we walk along the athletic fields en route to the new café, saying casually, “I tracked down Holden’s email.”

“Through your dad?” Tia asks.

I sneer then wretch dramatically. “*Please*. I’d never do that. Plus, they don’t know each other. And I didn’t ask Grant either.”

“Grant would give it to you in a heartbeat,” Tia says.

“And I’d do the same for him. He’s like a brother to me. But nope, I didn’t call in any favors. I tracked him down through his agent, wrote a fantastic pitch letter that I sent via his people, and then, voilà, he replied directly to me.”

“Damn,” Layla says, shaking her head. “I’m kind of in awe that you snagged an interview, and all with a little good old-fashioned elbow grease.”

I shake my hips as we walk past the spring flowering of cherry blossoms. “I did indeed.”

Tia holds up a *hang on a sec* finger. “So, help those of us who haven’t memorized the major league rosters. Holden

Kingsley is the one who went here a few years ago?”

I nod again, so excited my smile could span the entire campus. “Yep. College superstar, drafted in the eighth round, played in the minors for two years, and was called up last year. That’s him. Also, hello? Did you see his note to me?” I clear my throat and quote like I’m performing Hamlet, “‘Yes, Hell yes. Absolutely yes.’ I mean, is there any more enthusiasm than a triple yes?”

Tia taps her chin thoughtfully. “That depends. Does he normally communicate in threes? Like, do you think when he ejaculates, he says, ‘I’m coming. Oh God, I’m coming. Oh God, I’m really, really coming’?”

I swat her, laughing. “You’re so bad.” Layla laughs, and I wag my finger at her too. “Don’t encourage her. It’s like feeding the lions at the zoo.”

“I’m hardly encouraging her,” Layla says, with a dismissive wave of her sparkling fingers. “I have no idea what guys do when they finish that thing they do.”

“*Come*,” Tia says pointedly, staring sharply at Layla. “It’s called *come*. Just like you do when you finish that thing you do with girls.”

I signal for a time-out. “Can we please not talk about coming right now?” There are a million reasons I don’t want to talk about any of our sex lives, especially mine, since it’s a cipher. “This interview has nothing to do with sex.”

“Everything is about sex, honey,” Tia says, patting my shoulder.

“That is not true,” I point out, but this is a futile argument. Tia, a psych major, insists sex is the underpinning of everything. I contend that humans possess enough higher brain function to set sex aside.

Sometimes.

“Generally, I agree with Tia on this,” says Layla, then pats her flat stomach. “But I’m starving, and sex won’t fill my belly. But food will. Plus, as we dine, we can talk about Reese

being all badass with her podcast. You went from just the two of us listening to... a whole nation?"

Laughing, I roll my eyes. "Definitely not a whole nation, but I have several thousand listeners now. The show is really helping me make a name for myself."

That's all I've ever wanted.

To make my own name.

To have my own reputation, my own thing, where I'm not just my father's daughter.

Plus, the podcast will open job doors for me in sports marketing when I graduate. An interview with a big-name athlete will be publicity for the show and more experience for my résumé.

We turn onto a side street that leads to the latest new spot I found. Layla grabs her phone, taps on the screen, then clears her throat. "Ahem. Look at this—Holden Kingsley, with his arms of steel, his swoony green eyes, and his panty-incinerating grin, tops the Hottest Young Athletes Twenty-Five and Under list."

"Ooh. So he's not too old for Reese," Tia singsongs.

"Please. That's so not the point," I say, because that's crazy and not at all what the interview is about.

"That *might* be the point. Wait. This press release says he's coming to campus," Layla says, gesturing to the screen like a game-show hostess. "You're not just doing a phone interview. You're talking to him in person, aren't you?"

"Yes! It was his idea!" The temptation to squeal rises again, but I dial it down. I'd better not squeal when I'm with Holden in person. "He's doing an alumni roundtable event with some other former student-athletes, so he said he wanted to do it face-to-face."

"Do it," Tia snickers as Layla opens the door for us.

"There truly is a twelve-year-old boy inhabiting you, isn't there?" I ask.

Layla waves for attention. “Hello? I can be perverted too.”

“I’m well aware. But you’re not as bad as her.”

“I guess that gives me goals, then,” Layla says dryly as we walk into the café.

I glance around at the simple decor—dark reds and golds with a few sparse flourishes, like teapots with curved handles, and soft music to set the mood—then say hello to the woman at the counter. “This place looks great.”

“Thanks. We just opened a few weeks ago. Let me know when you’re ready,” the waitress says, then steps aside and presses some buttons that make the spaceship-like coffee machine whir to life.

As I consider the options on the menu above the counter, even though I’ve memorized it from the website, I notice Tia studying me like I’m a science experiment.

“Is there something on my face?”

Her dark-brown eyes lock intensely with mine. “Wear your red blouse,” she pronounces decisively. “The cap-sleeve one with the black pearl buttons.”

“It’s an interview, not a date,” I say, like she’s suggested something crazy.

Tia laughs. “Duh, that’s why I’m telling you to wear the red one. It’s professional.”

Then she cocks her head and studies me again, and Layla joins her in staring as if she can see right through me, the way best friends can. “You’re blushing,” Tia says with a hum of satisfaction.

Layla cackles, pointing at me. “You have a crush on Holden ‘Arms of Steel’ Kingsley.”

“I do not,” I say, vigorously denying the accusation. I don’t have a thing for an athlete, and the heat rushing to my face is not a blush. That’d be ridiculous.

Tia shoots me an *I caught you* grin. “Are you sure? Because that pink in your cheeks seems to say you’re getting a

little hot and bothered thinking of a certain ballplayer.” She glances around and then lowers her voice. “Do you think he might be *the one*?”

My eyes pop, and I stare at her, aghast. “He’s certainly not the one,” I whisper vehemently.

“But, if you like guys,” Layla says, “he’s an appealing option for punching your V card, right?”

Oh, hell no.

That’s not happening.

For a ton of reasons.

I shush them frantically and mime zipping my lips. We are going to shut the hell up about my V card in this public place. “It’s an interview for my podcast,” I murmur as low as I can. “Not for the job of chief deflowering executive.”

“Maybe not *yet*,” Layla says.

“He definitely seems like your type,” Tia adds. “Why wait for love when you could just get under that smoking-hot bod?”

“I can’t take you two anywhere,” I say, tossing up my hands in defeat.

“That is true,” Layla adds, “but we’re glad you brought us here for half-price fries.”

We order said fries, along with the hummus and baba ghanoush plate to split, and find a table.

Once we sit down, Layla drops the teasing tone. “This could really be your big break.”

“I know.” I flush, proud that I didn’t need to call in favors from Dad to do it. “A break I need. Some of us aren’t going on to play professional volleyball.”

“Si, this is true,” Tia says, laying on a heavy Italian accent, since Layla’s been recruited to play in the land of pasta and Renaissance art next year.

“Listen,” Layla says, softening and patting my hand. “I was just having fun about him being *the one*. I know that’s

important to you, and I know, too, that this interview is an awesome career thing.”

“Certifiably awesome,” Tia agrees, adjusting her bandana. “But it doesn’t change the fact that he is smoking hot—if you’re into that whole tall, dark, handsome, tatted, and athletic look. And who isn’t?”

Layla raises her hand, sarcastically poker-faced. “But if you like muscles—and we know a certain someone does ...” She trails off, pitching up at the end to egg me on. “Admit it. He’s so your type.”

The heat returns to my cheeks. “I don’t have a type.”

That’s mostly true.

In high school, I dated one guy, and he was the class clown. He made me laugh, plus he was taller than I was. In college, I went out once with a science geek, twice with an exchange student from Greece, and three times with a history major who was uber-intellectual.

They all had one thing in common.

None of them had sex with me.

Call me old-fashioned, but I want sex to mean something.

They also had another thing in common—none were jocks. I’ve avoided athletes entirely.

So, sure, I can appreciate a firm AF physique, but I can’t imagine that Holden Kingsley is even my speed.

* * *

The first time I fell in love was with volleyball.

I’ve always been good at the sport. A natural, even.

But I also knew that college was as far as I was going to go. But something else, something *more*, came of my love of the game—a love of *other* sports and a voracious hunger to learn everything about them.

Their history, their opportunities, their place in the sporting pantheon ...

I became a sports scholar as well as a sports lover, and that has served me well in my strategy for the future.

Planning ahead is something I learned from my mom, along with some other gems.

Don't forget to send a thank-you card.

The answer is always no till you ask.

And then this one: *know your limits.*

She learned that from experience, and I did too, right along with her.

That's why I've been so goal-oriented since I stepped foot on campus. The podcast is part of that.

And so, the next week I take Tia's advice.

Buttoning up the short-sleeved red blouse with the cute black pearl buttons, I consider my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

The blouse is professional enough, but also it doesn't make me look like I'm playing dress-up. I look like who I am—a college woman who takes herself seriously, but who isn't pretending she's at the helm of a news desk already.

I pair the blouse with jeans, then slide on flats.

There.

I look dressy, but casual too.

Trouble is my hair.

I can't decide what to do with it.

I snap a selfie and send it to my BFF for life. Grant and I grew up on the same block, and since our grandmas were besties, naturally we were too. Grant is also the catcher for the San Francisco Cougars, the team we rooted for religiously in high school.

Reese: Should I wear my hair up or down?

Grant: Did you really just ask me for fashion advice?

Reese: I come to you for advice on literally everything and have since I was five. And you've given me hair advice before, so don't act so surprised!

Grant: I'll tell you what I always do—wear it down. Straight guys like it down.

Reese: This is for a podcast interview!

Grant: My bad. I thought you were going on a date. Who is the interview with?

Reese: You might know him. Holden Kingsley. Plays for the LA Bandits.

Grant: Damn, woman! Of course I know him. He better give you a good interview. If he doesn't, he has me to answer to.

Reese: You're so weirdly protective.

Grant: You're so weirdly like a sister to me.

Reese: You're my weird sorta brother.

Grant: True. And everyone in your life better be good to you.

Laughing, I close the text thread, figuring it's best to keep the interview details to myself, just in case Holden turns out to be rude or unhelpful. I can only imagine how that'd irk my buddy.

Leaving my hair down, I exit my apartment to head to Helen Williams Hall, the marketing and communications department building, where Holden's roundtable discussion is taking place.

Along the way, I think about Tia and Layla's teasing last week.

I do *not* have a thing for Holden. How could I? I've never met him.

I'm picky with men. The world's most overprotective father trained me to keep them out of my pants, but it was my mother's advice that had more influence on that. She told me it's best to wait for someone special to me.

So, I've waited, and I'm fine with that. I want to know someone, care for someone—hell, I want to love someone—before I let him into my body.

Nothing wrong with that, as far as I can tell.

When I arrive at the building, my nerves clamor at me, but I shut them down. This interview is a vital step on the ladder of my goals, but I can handle it. I've made a plan, outlined my questions. And thanks to years of playing sports and hosting interviews, I have plenty of poise and chutzpah.

But when I enter the auditorium, all that falls to the wayside. No planning or poise could prepare me for how charismatic Holden Kingsley is in person.

I spot the Bandits second baseman onstage, answering one of the moderator's questions—forest-green eyes, thick dark hair, and a smile that lights up the room as he talks. He's wearing a navy-blue button-down shirt, rolled up once at the cuffs. Casual, but still well-dressed.

When the session ends, he scans the auditorium, and his eyes meet mine where I'm sitting in the front row.

He lingers for a beat, maybe more, that gaze taking a leisurely stroll up and down my frame. There's something in that look—the first tantalizing flickers of pleasure, the promise of moments to come, of kisses, of touches ...

Or maybe I'm reading too much into one hot gaze.

He steps off the stage, strides up to me, and offers a big hand. "You must be Reese Fallon."

There aren't enough nets in the world to catch all the butterflies fluttering inside me right now.

I'm pretty sure that Holden Kingsley is precisely my type of guy.

HOLDEN

I'm not immune to pretty women. I've never pretended or wanted to be.

The thing is, though, women—especially the brainy, confident, and beautiful ones—are a temptation, and temptation gets in the way of things like, say, winning.

If not winning, then doing my best every single day.

That's what I need to do to achieve everything I've dreamed of. Not just for me, but for my family.

As I head down the steps and off the stage, I spot a woman I recognize instantly from her picture on the podcast web page. Once I lock eyes with her—a pair of eyes so light blue and pure they're like crystal—I try to activate my defenses.

Don't be lured by her gorgeous looks.

Don't get sucked into the vortex of those cheekbones, that thick blonde hair, those bow-shaped lips, all red and cherry-ripe.

Women are distracting.

Focus on the plan, the schedule you made for today.

Do the interview. Snag a workout. Go to bed early. Catch the morning flight to Dallas and crush the ever-loving hell out of the Texas Scoundrels in a three-game series.

That's what I'm going to do.

But after I check her out. She's just too beautiful not to appreciate.

When I reach her, I flash my most professional, headshot-worthy grin, then extend a hand. "You must be Reese Fallon."

She gives me a firm, confident handshake. "And you must be—wait, let me guess—Holden Kingsley."

"Damn good intuition there."

"It kicks in now and then," she says, much more self-assured than I'd have expected from a college student. Then again, she's a senior, and I was pretty confident when I was finishing up three years ago too.

She nods toward the stage, empty now as the other speakers mill about, chatting with audience members. "Did you enjoy your roundtable?"

I crook a grin. "I did, but there was no table. What's the deal with that?"

Her mouth falls open in faux outrage, and lips-wide-open is a damn good look on her.

Don't get distracted, Kingsley.

"That is so deceptive," she says, parking her hands on her hips with a tsk of indignation. "Who hosts a roundtable without a table?"

"Right? That's what I thought." I like this vibe—easygoing and as satisfying as catching a lazy pop fly. We'll chat, we'll make harmless small talk, then I'll be on my way.

"I hope you were able to roll with it," she says.

I shrug. "That kind of stuff can throw other men off their game. Not this guy."

A twinkle of mischief flickers in those blue eyes. "So you were able to handle that ... curveball?"

I groan at the pun, but then shake my head and say, "Well-played."

She gestures to the auditorium exit, starting us on our way up past the seats, her tone turning more professional. “The media rooms in Spark are great for interviews. I thought we could do the sit-down for the podcast in one of the soundproof booths before we do the walk-around portion of it?”

“That sounds fantastic. No curveballs there,” I say, adding a wink. Because why not?

“And you are adept at connecting with curveballs,” she says.

The woman knows the kind of pitches I can hit? Damn. That is impressive. “Seems you’ve done your homework.”

She gives a casual shrug and a bright smile, then rattles off some of my minor league stats and then my major league ones. “I know a thing or two about baseball,” she adds.

That makes her even more appealing.

No surprise there, since I’m a sucker for women who dig sports. No surprise, since my world and my goals revolve around them. Still, it’s hot as hell when a woman knows the difference between finding a gap in the outfield and finding a hole in the infield.

I could start a list of all the ways she appeals—confidence, smarts, and a stunning face, and it’s only been five minutes—but best to stay in the charming zone. Easy in, easy out.

As we cross the building’s foyer, I lower my voice and lean in slightly. “Confession: I study the opposing team and practice hitting what they’re likely to throw to me. So let’s hope that reputation continues.” I rap my knuckles on the door before I open it, dropping us onto the quad. “Knock on wood.”

With a curious glint in those crystal irises, she asks, “Are you superstitious, Holden?”

“Hey! If you start your questions now, what will we do for the actual interview?”

“I’ll ask again, but you’ll be ready,” she says as we fall into quick matching step, walking across campus.

I take a beat, unable to resist. “I’m always ready,” I say.

“That’s ... a very good skill,” she says, a flicker of delight in those ice-blue eyes. “I’ve been reading up on you, but there’s not a ton of material out there about you—just you as a guy. You don’t do that many interviews, do you?”

“New guy,” I say, tapping my chest. “I kept my head down last season. I was a rookie who didn’t want to make rookie mistakes with the press. And this year, I haven’t been asked to do that many.”

“Is that why you said yes to mine? Because you aren’t asked a lot?”

Her questions are so straightforward that I don’t reach for the usual tricks I’ve learned from publicists—smile, nod, give generic “just want to help the team” answers. I’m digging her style as we walk and talk. “I said yes because I was damn impressed that you reached out directly to me. I like that. And because I know what it’s like to work that little bit harder to get what you want. To ask for what you need from professors or your coach.” She bristles at that, but I keep going. “For me, it was to ask for extra practice. To start early or work late. Or both.”

She leans a little closer, almost like she’s going to bump her shoulder with mine. “Stop saying all your good stuff now, or we’re not going to have anything left for the interview.”

I’m tempted to nudge her elbow in response. To throw a crooked grin her way. “But I thought we were just practicing? That you liked preparation too?”

My tone is way more flirtatious than I expected.

But there it is. So be it.

A sliver of a smile touches her lips. “Maybe I do. I suppose this is like a dress rehearsal?”

“Exactly. We’ll be so damn ready when we get into that soundproof booth.” I swear I’m *not* trying to sound flirty, but it comes out like that anyway.

Probably because I want to flirt with her.

I'd say it was a bad idea—distractions and all that—but, hey, one interview won't last too long. Might as well have fun for the next hour. It won't derail my plans for the day.

“You sure seem ready, Reese. Knowing my stats and whatnot,” I say.

“I've done so much homework on you, I think I know your shoe size,” she says, and an appreciative rumble works its way up my chest.

Shoe size is innocent, but also ... not.

Does she realize we're both playing with the fire of innuendo?

She flashes a grin at me, and that sexy smile is dashed with something extra, something a bit spicier than that confidence I saw in the auditorium. Yep, it's flirtation, and I like the look of it. I like it too, though, when she turns more serious, meeting my gaze and holding it earnestly. “Thank you for taking time to do this interview, Holden. It means a lot to me.”

“It's my pleasure.” We walk past trees bursting with cherry blossoms; Spark Hall looms fifty feet away. “Plus, I was impressed that you wrote. Like I said, it takes a lot of guts just to reach out to someone and say what you want.”

“So, you saw yourself reflected back at you?” she asks with a knowing grin.

This woman, she can read between all sorts of lines, the way she seems to understand people, their motivations.

Yet another mark in the appealing column.

She has too many for my peace of mind.

“That's fair to say,” I answer as I open the door, gesturing for her to go in first. “I appreciate you doing your homework.”

“I try to be a self-made woman,” she says.

“That's why I said yes right away.”

“I'm so glad you did.”

“Me too.” The truth of that hits me in the solar plexus. It’s not just a polite response—I’m genuinely glad to be here talking with her.

Five minutes in, and I already have the hots for this woman.

Good thing I’ll be gone soon.

She smiles a thank-you back at me. Then we head down a corridor of media rooms and soundproof booths. She opens the door to one, and I follow her in, where she settles at the desk, unzipping her fire-engine-red messenger bag. It’s the same color as her blouse. The same color as her lips.

Her lush, full lips.

My throat goes dry as I stare at her sensual mouth while she takes out her laptop. A flicker of heat travels across my skin.

“You like red.” It’s the height of obviousness, and my voice dropped a little lower. I hope neither of those things gives me away.

She looks up from her laptop screen, her eyes cutting to mine. “I call it my power color.”

And I’m all sorts of intrigued. “Why is that?”

“A woman in sports needs a locus of power,” she says, sure of herself, a trait that’s a crazy turn-on.

Seems everything about her is a turn-on to me.

I wiggle my fingers. “All right. I need to know about this power philosophy.”

She gives an easy shrug, chased by a smile. “It’s a male-dominated field. We need to stay strong. There aren’t as many of us.” She says it matter-of-factly, but clearly, she’s thought this through.

“This is something you take quite seriously,” I say.

“I do.” She plucks at the fabric of her shirt. “I like red. It makes me feel confident,” she says, then laughs self-deprecatingly, pointing at me. “Now I’m revealing all my

secrets to you, Holden. I'd better be careful, or I'll tell you everything."

Ah, hell. She's got me in her thrall, and I don't want to be anyplace else right now. Fuck resistance. "Maybe I want to know everything."

She nibbles on the corner of her red lips, and I stifle a groan. "Starting with?" she asks.

Swallowing roughly, I try to form words. Words that aren't *How do you like to be kissed?*

I scan the desk for a diversion and spot a photo of Reese and two women on her laptop background. "Your friends?"

"That's Layla and Tia. We met freshman year on the volleyball team. Layla is going to Italy to play professionally. She's practically as tall as you," she says, of the woman with the braids. Then, she points to the one with the sleek black hair. "Tia is a psych major. She said I should wear red today."

"Because it's your power color?"

"Yes, and she said it looked professional," she says, handing me a pair of headphones.

I try to glance away, but hell, we're talking about how she looks. "You do. Look professional," I say, trying to steer this conversation that's wiggling away from me. "And I think it's even better that you figured out what you need and want to succeed in this field. I like that you use red. It's like you've weaponized a color."

There. That's professional.

At least, I think it is.

As she clicks on a software program, she purses her lips together, then almost—maybe subtly, or maybe not—presses them together then releases them, like she's blowing a kiss. "I have."

My breath hitches. I clench my jaw and swallow a groan, like that'll hide how much I want to taste her red lipstick, kiss her lips.

I try to focus, pulling on the headphones as she does the same. She sets up mics, then says, “Are you ready, Holden Kingsley?”

My name on her cherry-red lips sounds dangerously good, like she’s weaponizing my name. Hell, she can use it against me anytime.

The plan, man. Stick to the plan. Do the interview and only the interview.

I slap on my game face, square my shoulders, and dig in like I’m at the plate. “I’m always ready,” I say.

They feel like famous last words.

She counts down. “Three, two, one ... Hey there, sports fans. I’m your host, Reese Fallon, with another deep-dive interview into sports, the business of it, and the personalities behind it. Today, I have a very special guest—second baseman for the Los Angeles Bandits, Holden Kingsley, who also happens to be an alum of our very own university. Thank you so much, Holden, for coming here today. I’m ecstatic to have you as a guest.”

Ignore the innuendo. All of it. Doesn’t mean anything.

“I assure you, the ecstasy goes both ways,” I say. And wow. Fuck. That was dirty, and I need to remember I’m not on a date.

“Ecstasy abounds here on my show,” she says with a smile that’s borderline naughty. Then she dives into the questions, asking about my sophomore season so far, the biggest challenges, what pitcher has the nastiest stuff, my first baseball memory, the best coach I’ve worked with, and what the sport means to me.

“Baseball means everything,” I say, speaking from the heart. “I have the chance to do the thing I love most, and I hope to take care of my family. When I was growing up in Seattle, my mom and dad rearranged their lives for me, making sure I made it to every practice, every game. They made everything possible, and I want to live up to their trust and faith in me.”

She sets a hand on her heart. “I love your honesty. I can hear it in your voice. And thank you for saying that. Some celebrities can be all about the fame and forget the people. Saying you owe it to your family—that’s what a lot of young athletes need to hear.”

“I couldn’t have done it without them, so it’s the truth and nothing but.”

“Now, final question—since you grew up in Seattle, I have to ask this. What’s your favorite coffee drink?”

That’s easy. “Cortado,” I say.

“I’m a macchiato person myself, but I’m down with a cortado.”

“Good to know,” I say.

See, we’re coffee buddies now.

I’m hardly thinking about those gorgeous lips anymore.

Well, not much.

She turns back to the mic. “You heard it here first. If you ever run into this guy at your local coffee shop, buy him a cortado.”

She clicks off the mic and pulls off her headphones. As I remove mine, I observe, “You interview like a pro. Is that what you want to do? As a career?”

I’m fascinated with Reese “I Weaponize Red” Fallon, even more so after the interview.

“No, actually, I don’t.”

I’m genuinely surprised. “You don’t? You’re a natural.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I love the podcast, and I definitely want to keep doing it. I’ve always wanted to do my own thing with sports,” she says as she slides her laptop back into her bag. “But mostly, I started it because I want to gain experience with media. I want to work in nonprofits that advocate for athletes who don’t have the same opportunities as others. Female athletes in some cases. Athletes with special needs, or with disabilities, and especially LGBTQ athletes. I have a lot

of friends who play sports and are queer, and who you love should never limit your career or advancement. It shouldn't be a thing at all," she says, obviously passionate about the subject.

She's smart, sexy, and has a big heart?

I might as well throw in the towel.

Plus, I agree with her. "I'm glad the major leagues are making strides in acceptance. It's great to play alongside out athletes. And I think it's terrific that you want to make it your career," I say.

"Well, I love sports," she says with a grin. "I've played volleyball my whole life. It's given me my closest friends, the chance to go to this school, and some hard-won truths about winning, losing, and dealing with it. Athletics can give you so many tools and skills in life. So I think what I really want to do is sports marketing or advocacy with an outreach angle."

Hot damn, this woman has her shit together. If I'm not careful, I might fall for her in the span of an hour.

"So, the podcast is a vehicle for that," I say.

"Absolutely. It's a chance for me to gain experience and make a name for myself. I interviewed an athlete in Spanish and English once, and that interview had a ton of downloads."

"You speak Spanish too."

"Double major," she says, with a twinkle of well-earned pride.

I shake my head, impressed. "You've really got it together. Will you miss volleyball?"

"We had our final game last week." Her voice goes all wistful at the end, her eyes a little dreamy. "I'll miss it, but I'll keep playing. For fun. With friends." She angles her head to study me as she asks, "Do you think you would play baseball if you weren't playing professionally?"

I mime stabbing my chest. "Way to wound me, Reese, making me consider a reality so horrible."

“I’m so cruel.” She pats me on the thigh. It’s a fun, playful gesture, but it’s also incredibly flirty.

My eyes drift down to her hand. Maybe she’ll keep it there, but nope, it’s a quick move, and it ends too soon.

“But you don’t have to think about that,” she adds.

I wipe my hand across my forehead. “Thank God.”

I’m enjoying her too much to stick with my *get in, get out* plan. I’m glad we have the walk-and-talk part of the interview left, but I don’t know if that will be enough. I don’t want the part of my day assigned to Reese to end.

Time to upend my own damn schedule.

Besides, one day won’t distract me from my goals.

Hell, I spent my entire rookie season with blinders on, lasered in on the game. Now it’s my second year in the majors, but I’m still all about the focus. This afternoon is a reprieve from the eat, sleep, breathe round-the-clockness of pro ball.

I want to devour this afternoon with her.

“You ready to do the walk-around-campus thing so you can show me all your favorite places here and share your favorite memories?” she asks.

I flash her a grin, feeling it deep inside my soul. “I’d be ecstatic to show you everything.”

A faint blush crawls across her cheeks, a sexy splash of pink. “Let’s do it, Holden.”

Yeah, she gives good banter too.

Already today is shaping up to be one of my favorite memories of this place.

That was not in the plan at all.

But it is absolutely in the chemistry.

REESE

The man has a mouth for innuendo and lips made for dirty talk. Words seem to fall from his tongue laced with seduction.

And I can't *not* give him a hard time about the particular word he just used.

"Ecstasy?" I say as we leave the media booth. "Is that your favorite word now?"

"Seems it's yours," he counters.

"I did start it," I admit.

"And I continued it. So, apparently, for today, it is my favorite word," he says, all playful.

"Do you think listeners will know you kind of blushed when you said it there at the start of the interview?"

"I did not blush," he says, like he's highly affronted.

I shoot him a doubtful look. "You're kind of blushing now too." He's so easy to tease. Maybe because he seems to love the push-pull, the back-and-forth.

"I don't blush," he insists, lifting his chin, handsome even when indignant.

I laugh, admitting the truth. "I know. It's ridiculously fun—and easy—to tease you."

"And you seem to be ridiculously good at it, Reese," he says in a low rumble that rolls down my spine, slow and lazy, leaving heat in its wake.

We near the exit, and he swings the door open for me then holds out his arm, saying *ladies first*.

“Such a gentleman,” I remark.

He narrows his eyes and says as I pass, “Not always.”

My breath catches, and there’s a part of me—an aching, hungry part—that wants to grab hold of that remark. To clutch it against my breasts and ask when he’s *not* a gentleman, whether he’s a bossy guy at times.

A kick of possibility intrigues me. Is that my type of guy? Do I want a potent combination of charming, kind, and bossy? Do I like gentlemen who flirt by day and go rough at night? I wish I knew. I wish I’d have the chance to know Holden so much better.

When he speaks again, he’s gone back to lightly, irresistibly provocative. “Or maybe it’s not my favorite word, just the right word. Maybe I was truly ecstatic.”

Was he? Ecstatic? And what’s he like, then, when he is lost in the throes of ecstasy?

I shouldn’t be thinking this.

But it seems the dirty-thought train has left the station and I’ve booked a first-class ticket.

“Were you really? Enjoying it that much?” I ask, my voice feathery.

“I was,” he says in a low rasp. “I enjoyed talking to you very much.”

“Same. Same for me.” He turns toward the quad, but I stop him with a hand on his arm. “Actually, we’re headed this way —”

Oh, holy guns. That is one fine mountain of muscle right there.

I am kind of a touchy person. And he doesn’t seem to mind that I’m touching him. But still, I drop my hand, reluctantly.

I try to collect my thoughts, to narrow my focus to the task as we walk to the main building where I want to start. “I’m

glad you've enjoyed the interview so far. I appreciate how open you were. You spoke honestly, it seemed. Some sports stars are so... sanitized. Do you know what I mean?"

He nods as if he knows exactly. "They all learned from the Crash Davis School of Public Relations?"

I cock my head. "The minor league player who logged a record fifty doubles in one season with the Durham Bulls?"

His jaw drops. "Tell me you're showing off and you do realize I mean the main character in the greatest baseball movie ever."

I shrug, biting back a smile. I knew what he meant, but I was also showing off a little. "I haven't seen that movie."

He brings his hand to his heart. "How can you call yourself a baseball fan, woman?"

I give another casual shrug. "It's kind of old. It's from, what, the eighties?"

"It's a classic. I've seen it, and I'm not that much older than you."

"I figured you weren't." I know all his baseball stats; of course I know how old he is. But he seems to be emphasizing a point, one that I definitely get.

"I'm twenty-five," he says, and it comes out like an invitation, like he's saying he's just the right age for me.

My skin prickles with the awareness that he's telling me something, not for the interview, but for me alone. And maybe he's asking something too.

"I'm twenty-two," I offer, letting him know I might be in college, but I'm well above legal in every single way. Besides, I graduate in a week.

His heated gaze lingers on me. "Good to know."

"Is it? Good to know?" I ask, all breathy, my skin tingling from his tone, his words, his confident gaze that travels up and down my body.

"So very good to know," he says.

We've paused in our walk, and before the moment veers too far into dangerous territory, I shift back into motion and back to the topic of the movie, trying to keep this interview professional. *Mostly*. "So, this old movie. Tell me about it."

He rolls his eyes. "Old movie, my ass," he mumbles, like I'm just too much. He clears his throat. "In the flick, Crash Davis is teaching the new pitcher how to interact with reporters. All you have to say is this: 'I'm just happy to be here. Hope I can help the ball club. I just want to give it my best shot.' It's basically a bunch of platitudes."

I laugh. "Yes, you're the opposite of Crash Davis. It was so refreshing to see that you're so very ... real."

A smile spreads across his face. His handsome, chiseled face. His stubbled jawline. His strong cheekbones. His piercing eyes. They're the most arresting shade—forest green flecked with gold.

But he's so much more than a handsome face. So much more than a strong, firm, muscled frame.

Holden Kingsley is not what I expected. Yes, I expected the intensity. But I didn't anticipate he'd be charming, clever, passionate, and ... interested.

The second that word touches down in my brain, I can't stop thinking it.

He seems interested.

Incredibly interested.

As interested as I am.

Another spark of pleasure ignites in my chest.

A dangerous, tempting spark.

That's a sign that I should focus on the interview. So I grab my podcast recorder, turn it on, then I say, "Now it's time for my favorite part of the show."

He rubs his hands together. "Lay it on me," he says, all eager and ready to go.

"Lay it on?" I quirk a brow.

He shoots me a *don't give me a hard time* look. "I didn't mean any innuendo by that, I swear," he says, holding up his hands.

"I'll let it go just this once," I say, because I do want him to be lacing innuendo in his words.

I like his innuendo.

His flirting.

His whole confident but friendly vibe. He's just my style, and I didn't realize I'd be into a guy like him till now. But I am. Oh hell, am I ever.

"Let's talk about your favorite places on campus," I say.

* * *

We roam around campus for the next hour, laughing, joking, talking. Holden goes wistful at times, telling me about some of the classes he took, the escapades he and his friends got into, the games he won and lost. It's a blast traveling down memory lane with him.

"Coming here is almost like a class reunion for you, isn't it?" I ask.

"Hey, it's not even my five-year one. Don't age me up yet, Reese," he teases.

We've ended the tour on the steps of the history building, where we linger, taking a seat while I put the equipment away in my messenger bag.

"Don't worry. I heard you when you said you were twenty-five," I volley, my skin tingling. Those forest-green eyes of his pin me for a hot second, then another one, then a few more. He licks his lips, tilts his head, seems to run his gaze over my face.

"I'm only saying that because I want to make the most of my years in baseball," he says.

“I’ve no doubt you will. I can’t wait to see one of your Bandits games.”

His eyes glint. “I’d love to see you in the stands.”

“I’ll be there,” I say, as I stow my headphones then zip my bag.

This is the moment when the day should end. The sun is fading into the early evening. Our work is over. He’s free to go.

But he’s not moving.

Nor am I.

We’re sitting like couples do all over campus—stretched out together on building steps, hanging out in nooks in the library.

That’s how *this* feels.

Like a guy and a gal grabbing time together and wanting more.

The air between us is charged. Atoms and ions vibrate between us.

“Did you love it here?” I ask. I want this time to keep unfurling.

“I did. I was here on scholarship, so I busted my ass, but I did my best to have fun and love it. They say college is the best four years of your life. Or however many,” he says with a shrug, pressing his palms behind him on the steps, long legs stretched out.

“Right. You finished in three so you could go into the draft earlier.”

“Sports favor the young, so I did summer school to graduate sooner. So I guess I should say, the best three years of your life.”

“Do you believe that? Doesn’t sound like you do.”

His lips curve up in a deliciously dirty grin. “I don’t know. I’m pretty happy right now.”

His eyes hold mine, and his gaze makes my stomach pirouette.

His smile goes to my head, makes me all hazy and breathless.

I'm pretty sure he's not talking about life in the majors. I'm pretty sure he means this second, this moment, the two of us.

That *this* connection is making him happy.

"Me too," I say under my breath. Anticipation zaps through my body, turning me warm and buzzy everywhere.

"And you, Reese? What was your favorite part of college?" Holden asks.

"My friends. The opportunities. And what I'm doing right now," I say, feeling daring with him. I want to squeeze as much yumminess from this time with him as I can.

It's only been one day. Less than a day. I feel the ticking of the clock and know this interlude is ending soon.

His lips curve up in a crooked grin. "Is that so?"

My chest flips, a warm, shimmery sensation rushing through me. "I'm happy right now."

He sighs, and I tense, dreading what it means. I'm too aware of the sun taunting us as it brings the curtain down on today. "Do you have to go?"

Please say no.

His tone is soft, his hand sliding closer on the concrete until his fingers are inches away from mine. "I don't want to," he whispers.

"I don't want you to either," I say.

This interview has veered so quickly away from professional, but I don't care. I want all the next things with him as his eyes search my face.

I melt into a puddle of hope. I'm hoping so hard for a kiss. Longing so desperately for him to sweep his lips across mine.

His hand moves a little closer, and I do the same until soon our pinkies hook around each other. Jolts of pleasure burst inside my body. Sparks lick across my skin.

On the steps of the history building, my hand touching his, his touching mine, he dips his head closer as he asks, “Would you like to have dinner with me, Reese?”

His voice betrays his nerves a bit, enough that I can tell this isn’t his norm. He doesn’t ask out every woman he meets, talks to, interviews with.

At least, I hope not.

“I would love to,” I say. Then I lick my lips and go for broke. “But I’d also really like to ...”

He threads his fingers through mine, squeezes them more tightly, then dips his face closer and closer to finish the thought. “To kiss?”

My answer comes out in a breathy, lust-drenched whisper. “Yes.”

Electricity crackles between us as Holden inches closer.

Stops.

Holds my gaze.

I swallow, my throat dry. I long to taste his mouth, to know if he’s salty-sweet. He leans in closer, and my breath shallows as my chest squeezes.

Once again, he halts.

My heartbeat staggers, and I ache everywhere.

Please kiss me.

He lifts a hand, hovering it close to my face, and I’m trapped in suspended anticipation, caught in a heady, teasing snare.

I half want to stay here, in this limbo between the prospect of a kiss and the kiss itself. But I desperately crave the contact. Crave it like I’ve never craved a kiss before.

His thumb makes contact with my jawline. Slow. Agonizingly slow and deliciously tender. Leaning into his hand, I nearly combust. A throaty gasp escapes my lips.

My God, who is this man who can turn me inside out with barely a touch? I'm sparkling, lit up like a carnival game going wild for the winner.

His thumb skims along my face, all while his green-eyed gaze darkens, turns hotter as he stares at me, then stares harder at my lips.

He moves closer again. His lips are dangerously near. I part mine, waiting, hoping.

Longing.

It pulls me into his sexual orbit, my skin humming.

I can't take it anymore. I need his touch. Now. "Kiss me, please," I whisper, almost begging.

Pretty sure he wanted me to plead, since his mouth crooks up in a grin. "Since you asked so nicely," he says in a sultry tone that makes my libido sing. We're talking crawl across the baby grand, grab the mic, and croon a torch song.

At last, at long last, Holden brushes his lips to mine.

My breath catches, and my world tunnels to this moment, this touch. Nothing exists but the way he makes me feel. Sparks burst inside every cell, taking me hostage as his confident lips travel over mine.

He's gentle but determined, exploring the terrain of my mouth like he's mapping me with his desire.

My stomach swoops with every millimeter, every inch. *Melting* takes on a whole new meaning as all my cells go hot, as if I'm glowing like an incandescent lamp.

Maybe I am.

He kisses me that way—like he can light me up from head to toe, like he can ignite every molecule. His hands get in on the action too, as he slides his thumb more roughly along my

jaw, possessively, even. One big hand cups my cheek, holding me in place.

All that anticipation crests, then careens down, rushing into full-blown desire, blasting into a new kind of need, here on the steps of the history building, under a canopy of trees, the sun dipping in the sky.

What have I become?

I've gone from a professional, focused woman to turn-me-inside-out Reese.

With one daring kiss.

Holden doesn't let go. His hand slides into my hair, his strong fingers threading through my strands as his mouth discovers how I like to be kissed.

As I discover it too.

At the same time, we're learning ... *me*.

He's tender in his touch but somehow commanding too, like he knows my after-dark dreams and wants to fulfill them.

And maybe he alone can.

I'm sure I'm reading too much into one kiss.

But then, I've never had a kiss like this before, one that reverberates in my marrow, that scrambles every thought.

It's a kiss that doesn't stop.

Instead, he changes tempo. He slows the pace, kissing slow and hot and deep. Then he shifts, gliding his mouth along my jawline, to my neck, to my ear, and I'm utterly lost.

Lost in the thrill of the best kiss in the world. His hands rope into my hair, his lips travel over my face, and his sexy sighs fill my ears.

"Holden," I murmur, and his name is like melting chocolate on my tongue.

"Mmm." That's his response. Just a long, sexy hum as he flicks the tip of his tongue along the shell of my ear.

Tugging my earlobe between his teeth, he nips, biting down. For a second, I tense everywhere as a sharp pain blooms, but then it dissipates into a delicious, dizzying sensation.

He breaks the kiss, pulls back, and sweeps his gaze over me. His eyes are dark, glimmering with satisfaction and the promise of more pleasure. “So ... want dinner?”

Dinner?

No.

I. Want. Him.

Fuck food.

I want Holden Kingsley with a wild kind of desperation.

I want him more than I've ever wanted anyone.

Maybe I don't need to be in love.

Maybe I don't need to be in a serious relationship. Maybe I simply needed to meet the right guy at the right time.

Because I feel ready. So damn ready.

But should I tell him? Should I let him know I'm dying to experience things with him I've never felt before? That his kissing has unlocked a fervent wish in me? That, after twenty-two years and counting, I'm considering throwing in the towel tonight, if he'll have me.

Curiosity has taken the wheel.

If he can kiss like that, I'm dying to know how he makes love.

Do I say that to him?

Should I say that?

That's probably too much, too soon.

I need to think about what to say, how to ask for what I truly want.

Or whether I should say anything at all.

I lean in close, feeling as bold as I did when I asked him for the interview. “I would love to have dinner now.”

Can he hear the subtext in my voice?

He growls, and that’s close enough to a yes for me.

HOLDEN

This was not in the plan.

But I'm writing a new one for the next few hours.

Instead of returning to my hotel room, studying up on the Texas Scoundrels starting pitcher, then hitting the sack early, I'm going to enjoy the hell out of this time with the most captivating woman I've ever met.

Even though a nagging voice in the back of my mind warns that I should resist her—because I don't do hookups, and this can't go anywhere.

But I want it to.

Oh hell, do I want it to.

That's unexpected; I didn't think I wanted anything more than casual for a while. Not after the way my college girlfriend, Olivia, kicked me to the curb shortly after I was drafted to the minors in the unremarkable eighth round.

We'd made plans to stay together after graduation, but her plan, it seemed, wasn't to date a minor leaguer.

A guy whose career was in flux.

Translation: *why the hell couldn't I have scored a fat signing bonus in the first round?*

She walked away, and I vowed to focus on the game and only the game.

But fuck the past.

Screw plans.

Here I am.

All thanks to chemistry.

Only, there's more going on with Reese than that. This thing brewing between us isn't merely about hormones. There's a connection that makes me want to get to know her, to understand her.

This attraction feels like a winning streak at the plate, and every good ballplayer knows the golden rule of the game—you don't mess with a streak.

You honor the hell out of it.

So, we go to a nearby diner, an old-school one with green Formica counters and a sign beckoning in neon. "I loved this place when I went to school here."

She agrees. "It hits me right in my retro-loving side."

"Is that the side that's wearing that red blouse?" I ask, my eyes swinging to her shirt.

She runs her fingers over the black buttons, a thoroughly distracting move. "You recognize the style."

"You wear it well."

"Thank you. I have a thing for vintage tops, and retro diners, and also trendy new clothes and the hippest new eateries."

"So you like to hedge your bets. Make sure you've got a horse in every race."

She laughs too. "Apparently. Or maybe I'm just a woman of varied tastes."

"An excellent way to be," I say.

We grab a booth near the back. I order the Asian chicken salad and she opts for the Cobb, then we return the menus to their spot behind the napkin holder. "Now and then you gotta go for a salad—athlete habit, right?"

With a sheepish grin, she shrugs. "Athlete habits die hard."

“No need for them to die. You’re still an athlete,” I point out. “You said you’ll always play volleyball.”

“True. You’ll have to drag me kicking and screaming away from the court, so I’m all about greens, protein, and new cuisines. Except,” she says, lifting a finger, “I’ll always make an exception for fries.”

“Ah, the universal french fry rule,” I say, adopting a wise man tone.

“It’s the ultimate exemption.”

“The grandfather clause of food.”

“Thou shalt not resist fries.”

“Wouldn’t that be a commandment?” I posit.

“Of course. Fries are on a biblical level.” She shoots me a curious glance from under her sexy lashes before her gaze drifts down. There’s a hint of a secret there, maybe even shyness.

She’s quiet for a beat, longer than I’ve heard from her. I tilt my head, trying to understand her. “Hey, Reese,” I whisper.

She lifts her pretty face, and for a flash of a second, she’s all wide-eyed innocence.

That expression slams into me.

Whatever happens tonight, I realize I need to let her set the pace. I don’t want to forget that for an instant.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

She’s still for another moment, then her lips curve into a grin that lands this side of naughty. The innocence is all gone, erased in a heartbeat.

“I’m very okay,” she says, a little breathy. “I’m having a great time. I had a great time on the steps too.”

“What do you know? So did I.” I grin just thinking about the kiss that boggled my brain, that turned my temperature up to incinerator heat.

She slides her elbows closer to my side of the table, looks left, looks right. Hardly anyone is here, but I get the sense she values privacy. “I think I can still feel your kiss.”

A groan works its way up my chest. “Good. That’s how you should be kissed. So you don’t forget how it feels when my lips touch you.”

“I don’t think I can or ever will.”

I reach across the table, taking her hand in mine. “Don’t. Because I’m planning on kissing you again, Reese. A long, passionate good-night kiss that you’ll feel in your knees.”

That hint of innocence flickers across her eyes once more, then it’s chased by heat. “I’ll hold you to it.”

I’d like to hold her against me all night long.

With my free hand, I scrub the back of my neck, blowing out a long stream of air. “If we keep talking about kissing, I won’t be able to focus on anything else. How to use a fork, where I keep my credit card, remembering my fucking name,” I say, and she grins wickedly. I clear my throat, shifting gears. “But I want to know you more too. What will you do when you graduate? Do you have a job lined up?”

She holds up her right hand, her index and forefinger crossed. “I’m supposed to be getting a job offer this week in San Francisco. I’m from there, and my mom still lives there. It’s entry-level at a publicity firm that works with different charities. Not all the charities are sports-related, but it’s a decent start.”

“That’s fantastic. I hope you lock that up,” I say, and I can’t believe the routine-centric portion of my brain is already whispering, *San Francisco isn’t that far from Los Angeles. You could see her again during the season. Maybe date her.*

Then, my logical side says, *Yeah, dipshit, and you’re on the road half the year. When are you going to fit in a long-distance girlfriend?*

I tell both those sides to fuck off because tonight isn’t about plans. It’s about here and now. That’s all that matters

anyway. This out-of-this-world chemistry with Reese Fallon. “You’re close with your mom?” I continue.

She beams. “Definitely. She’s great. She’s a nurse practitioner. I have an older sister too. Kelsey. She’s in San Diego, finishing her residency. She’s a doctor. So I’m the black sheep of the family.”

I arch a skeptical brow. “Somehow I doubt that,” I say, then it registers—she didn’t mention a father. That might be a sore topic for many reasons. He might have passed on. He might not have been involved at all. “And is your dad around? In the picture? Out of the picture?”

Her jaw ticks. Her eyes go hard. That seems to be answer enough. “He’s around, but ...” She sighs, then smiles. “Let’s not talk about my dad.”

“Fair enough,” I say, not wanting to press.

“What about you? Are you close with your family? Your parents are still in Seattle?”

“Yup. Where I grew up, where I live during the off-season. We all get along great. I have two little brothers. They give me a hard time about literally everything, but I love the knuckleheads. And my parents are both teachers. English and math.”

“So you had no excuse to be bad at either subject.”

I tap my nose. “Bingo. Homework first, then sports.”

“Not a bad mantra. Seems to have worked out.”

Our food arrives shortly. While we eat, Reese and I chat about my time in the minor leagues, about when I got called up. We discuss her favorite professor, my friends, her friends, and how awesome this diner that never changes is.

When we finish, I glance at the time on my phone.

“Do you need to go?” Her voice is pitched with nerves.

“No. My flight is in the morning.”

She dips her head again, and that demure look flickers across her face. “Are you shy, Reese?” I ask, teasing. “Reese

who asked me to kiss her on the steps of the building where I learned all about early American history?"

She laughs. "And do you remember all the details from History 101?"

"Every single critical fact. But don't try to distract me. Are you shy about something? Nervous?" I ask, stretching out my arm, swiping a lock of hair that hides her lovely eyes.

"Do you think I'm shy?"

I shake my head. "No, but I think you have something on your mind."

With a nibble on the corner of her lips, she nods almost imperceptibly. "I do."

Those two words latch onto my heart. They sound ... worried, but also *not*.

Like she's concerned, but brave too.

"Do you want me to go?"

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head in a second. "No. Please don't go."

The tension in my chest eases, but that voice still asks, *Are you doing this, man? Are you throwing your own rules by the wayside?*

That's the question. After things with Olivia ended a few years ago, I've been devoutly single and intensely focused on baseball. I don't mean single and swinging my dick around.

I mean single and swinging the bat.

I've dated here and there, but nothing that made me want a whole lot more. I haven't been a monk, nor have I indulged in notching names on my bedpost.

Something about Reese feels right though.

Like maybe we could see each other again.

Like maybe the whole long-distance thing isn't a terrible idea.

Maybe with her, I could make a new plan.

I slide out of the booth, move over to her side, and scoot in next to her. Wrapping an arm around her, I run my hand over her shoulder. Playing with the strands of her hair, I whisper, “Good. Because I don’t want to go.”

She shudders, her hand sliding up the front of my shirt. Her nimble touch heats my skin, and her voice turns me on as she says, “Good.” Locking her eyes with mine, she draws a breath, like she needs it for courage. “Holden?”

My name on her lips seems to hold a myriad of questions in it, but also an answer.

“Yes?” I ask, waiting, patiently waiting for whatever comes next.

“I want you,” she says, and something about the way those words come out—fresh, vulnerable—makes me think it’s the first time she’s spoken them to a man.

My God, they sound so enticing.

So tempting.

I’m a goner for her. “Reese,” I begin, laying it on the line. “I don’t do hookups.”

“Oh,” she says, as if the floor dropped out from under her. “I’m—”

I press a finger to her lips. “Let me finish.”

“Okay.”

I slide my fingers through her hair. “What I’m saying is I don’t do hookups because I don’t want one-time things. And that means I want to see you again. Beyond tonight.”

She looks like I’ve just said I want to travel to Mars.

On a space horse.

“You ... do?”

“I do,” I say, getting fully in the saddle. “I think you’re fantastic. And maybe this sounds crazy. Maybe it sounds too soon, but I don’t care. I know what I want. I’d love to see you again. That’s not a line. It’s the God’s honest truth. You’re

going to be working in San Francisco. I play in San Francisco a couple of times a year. And Los Angeles isn't that far away," I say, even though I'm only there during the season. "I'd love to see you again. Would you like to go out with me another time?"

She looks like she's about to rocket to the moon. "Yes. I want that. Yes. Absolutely. And yes."

I laugh softly. "You answered in threes."

"Just like you said yes in threes in your email."

"What can I say? I was eager."

She wiggles a brow. "Same here. For me. Right now."

I grin, then press my forehead to hers. "I want to kiss you again tonight. And we can take it slow. No pressure," I say. I don't want her to think I'm handing her a line. "I'm not trying to get you into bed tonight by saying that. I swear I'm good with just kissing these gorgeous lips."

Her mouth curves into the most tantalizing smile ever. She's all Cheshire Cat for a few seconds, then coy and flirty. Mischief dances in her eyes. "But what if I want to get you into my bed?"

A jolt of pleasure slides down my spine, making my pulse surge.

That whole thing about not doing hookups?

It just flew out the window.

But this is not a hookup—this is the start of something.

"My roommates aren't home tonight," she says. "It's just me."

I pay the bill, guide her out of the diner, and set a hand on her back as I walk her back to her place.

I don't stand a chance at resisting Reese Fallon.

* * *

I follow her up the steps to her third-floor apartment, savoring the view with each step.

Her ass is spectacular. Round, firm, and incredibly squeezable. Highly spankable.

I could stare at her ass for ten flights, twenty, make it one hundred.

But then, I need to devote ample attention to those legs too. Lean, strong, and so long. I bet they'd look terrific wrapped around my face.

Wait. Can't forget her hair—all those blonde waves. I'll be tugging, stroking, getting that hair all messed up.

She flicks her gaze back to me. "I don't do hookups either," she says, lifting her chin, her voice firm as she returns to the topic from dinner. "I should have said something at the diner, but I was sort of in shock."

"Glad to hear this isn't the norm for you."

"It's the opposite of the norm," she says when we reach the landing. Fishing around in her purse, she grabs her keys, opens the door, then shuts it behind us, spinning around to meet my eyes. "Tell me something, Holden."

"*Something*," I answer playfully, stepping into her home. It's small but cozy, with pillows everywhere.

With a laugh, she tugs at my shirt, jerking me closer. "How are you not a hookup guy?"

"Does that mean you think all athletes have hookups?"

"No. I just think ... *many* do, and *many* guys do. I was surprised."

"Ah, you said you were shocked."

"I was. Let's be honest. It's unusual."

"A bad unusual?" I ask, hoping she says no, hoping she's good with this score.

"A very good unusual," she says, dropping her purse on a table.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

She moves closer to me, pressing her body against mine.

“I like that you like unusual a whole helluva lot,” I murmur as I loop a hand around her waist, moaning softly at the lush feel of her body, the hint of her delicate flesh under her blouse. My fingers tease along her back right above her jeans.

“You didn’t answer the question,” she says, sliding her hands up my chest, spreading them over the fabric of my shirt.

I groan from her touch, from the curious and eager way she explores my body. “You love to ask questions.”

“I do,” she whispers, all sultry and enticing as she covers my pecs with those hands. “So, why are you not a hookup guy?”

“I prefer getting to know a woman,” I say, dipping my face to her neck, dusting my lips there as I inhale her scent. No perfume, no lotion or potion. Just that showery goodness, and it’s my kryptonite. “I prefer to have a connection. Everything’s sexier, better, more ... real.” I press a kiss to the hollow of her throat. A needy gasp falls from her mouth. “And honestly, I’m not interested in being a playboy. It’s not my scene. It holds no appeal,” I tell her as I travel up the gorgeous column of her neck, savoring the sounds of her arousal, the rush of breath, the soft sighs.

“This is appealing though,” she says, all feathery light.

“So appealing,” I say as I catalog the way she responds, how her hips arch against me, how her hands grip my chest harder.

The way she moves makes me want to discover more of her. All of her.

I thread my fingers through those lush strands of her hair, giving it a quick tug.

“You’re a very interesting man,” she says, then travels back down, playing with my abs through my shirt but stopping there.

“Interesting is sexy,” I say.

“It’s very sexy,” she counters, her fingers close, so damn close to undoing my jeans.

The prospect of her hand dipping into my briefs, grabbing my cock, touching, stroking, is electrifying.

But I want to get her naked first. I slide my hands through her hair, let it fall through my fingers, then lift her chin. Meet her gaze straight-on. “This would be even more interesting if we were in bed,” I say in a low voice.

She shivers, all eager and desperate. “Yes. Bed. Now.”

I laugh as I trail my fingers down the bare skin of her arm. “Good. Because I have all sorts of plans for your body. Plans that involve you and a bed and many, many orgasms.”

She rewards me with a throaty moan. “Yes, please, yes.”

As I kiss the shell of her ear, my hand slides down the back of her jeans. Groaning, I make contact with the ass I admired on the steps. I curl my palm over the soft skin of her rear. She trembles, a desperate cry falling from those red lips.

“I want to undress you,” I rasp in her ear. “Spread you out on the bed so I can kiss you everywhere.”

Her knees wobble, and I wrap an arm tighter, squeeze harder. Hold on to the woman who’s rocking my world.

I pull back so I can meet her gorgeous blue eyes. Hers are glassy, lust drunk. “And I want to taste you. Feel you on my tongue.”

She shudders, her shoulders heaving, her breath stuttering. “Please, Holden,” she says, and the need in her voice undoes me even more. “I can’t take the teasing anymore.”

Good. That’s where I want her.

Desperate. Begging.

Needing.

I grab her hand, tip my forehead to the room that clearly has a bed, then guide her to it.

She flicks on a bedside lamp, which bathes the room in a soft glow. “I want to see your body.”

“The feeling is completely mutual,” I say, then we begin the slow seduction of taking off clothes.

I go first, undressing her.

Unbuttoning each black button on her blouse.

Touching her soft skin.

Savoring the way goose bumps rise in the wake of my fingers.

Sliding off the red fabric.

Letting it fall to the floor.

“My God, you’re stunning,” I say as I regard the beauty in front of me wearing a red lace bra. “Look at you. Still in your power color.”

She bites her lips, nodding. “Is it working?”

“I feel powerless in front of you,” I say, speaking from the truth of my bottomless desire for her.

Her eyes journey down my frame, landing on the outline of my cock through my jeans. “Funny, Holden. You don’t seem powerless at all.”

I groan savagely as she stares at my erection.

We’re both still for a minute, drinking each other in, gawking shamelessly.

Then we fly.

Clothes come off in a flurry. I tug at my shirt, tossing it onto the floor.

Her eyes pop, and she licks her lips, staring at my chest, my arms, then the small tattoo on my forearm—a tree illustration. “I like that,” she whispers, staring at my ink.

I give her a thorough once-over. “I like everything,” I say as she unhooks her bra, letting it land somewhere.

Her tits are perky and perfect for my hands.

My throat is dry, my chest is a furnace, and I need to get her completely naked. My phone is wedged into my pocket, so I take it out, put it on the nightstand, and then unzip her jeans.

She helps me along, kicking them off, and my God, she's an angel of sex.

With strong arms, a flat stomach, and toned legs, she's every bit the athletic type I can't get enough of. A woman who knows how to use her body hits all my buttons. I want to explore every inch of her curves and muscles. "Your body needs worshipping. With my tongue," I say, then I pick her up, carry her to the bed, and set her down.

She points at me, making a circle with her finger. "Can you make those jeans disappear?"

I wiggle my brow. "What do you know? That's one of my many tricks."

A few seconds later, my jeans pool on the floor, my boxer briefs joining them as my cock reports for duty.

Her mouth falls open, like my dick transfixes her.

I'm well aware that men are obsessed with what hangs between their legs. That we think we can command cars, rockets, and the world's nuclear arsenals with our cocks.

But there is nothing sexier than when the woman you want stares at your hard cock, knowing she made it that way, that this hard-on is a compliment to her.

Reese gazes at my dick like she appreciates the salute my erection is giving her for turning me all the fuck on.

Well, I sure as shit appreciate revving her engine. We both do that to each other, judging by the flush on her chest, the heat in her eyes.

And, as she shimmies down her panties, by the glistening wetness between her legs.

Yes. That's where I want to be.

I climb over her, bury my face between her breasts, and kiss these beauties as I plan to make my way down her body

so that I can devour all that arousal.

This is no hookup.

This is the start of something I know I'm going to want again and again.

REESE

I'll tell him I'm a virgin.

Soon.

In the next few minutes, I swear.

But right now, it's too hard to talk because he's on me and I'm in the moment. Speech is hard. Thoughts start to crumble in my brain, falling to dust.

Right now, I just want to indulge in the masterful way he touches me.

I don't know *where* to feel.

Or think.

Or focus.

Because everything is just so earth-shatteringly good.

Is this how sex is supposed to feel? Is this why everyone craves it so much? I haven't even had it yet, haven't even had his mouth on me where I want it, but already my body is a neon sign, beckoning him to come inside.

As the moonlight streaks through the window, Holden's hands skim along my waist, curving over my hips. Kissing me as he goes, the man gives me a double dose of pleasure from the sensory overload of his hands and lips.

His fingers graze along my skin, setting off wave after wave of goose bumps in their wake. I'm on fire, all the cells in

my body fanning themselves from the heat, melting like a woman in a sauna.

As he goes, he marks me with lips and tongue and sound too.

The noises he makes are so masculine, so hungry. They're the most erotic music I've ever heard—soft moans and dirty rumbles as he kisses my stomach, as he flicks his tongue over my belly button.

His voice grows deeper, more gravelly, as he whispers dirty words against my skin. "You taste so good," he murmurs, then dips lower.

He hisses out a filthy rasp, "*Fuck, Reese.*"

I shudder, shaking everywhere with rampant desire, trembling from the intensity of his touch, from the vibrations inside me.

But unsure what he means.

"What? What is it?" I ask, equal parts nervous and wildly turned on. "Is everything okay?"

He lifts his face, his eyes darkened with arousal. "So fucking okay. So much more than okay," he says, then returns to his ministrations.

Licking and kissing my hips, teasing along the V of my legs, traveling closer, tantalizingly closer to my center. Making me moan and arch with his every move.

If scientists tested my blood right now, they'd find off the chart arousal. They'd say they'd never seen levels so high. They'll need a new scale to measure the lust coursing through me.

This is everything I imagined. This is more than I imagined.

His hands curl possessively around my hips, gripping me. He runs his nose along my mound, then breathes out. "God, you taste so good. And you smell so fucking incredible," he says, then kisses me.

Right there.

Where I want him.

Groaning savagely as he licks my wetness, Holden flicks his tongue up and down my center, then sucks on the hard nub of my clit, driving me wild.

Gah.

My brain is fried. My thoughts are toast.

I just can't.

I can't do anything but give in, let go, and move my body in tandem with his mouth, his noises, his hands.

My legs fall open, and my hands fly to my head, like that's how I'm going to hold on to earth as he sends me soaring into the stratosphere.

I arch. I writhe.

Panting loudly, I cry out as I rock my hips against his face, shoving my hands deeper into my hair, holding on for dear life.

I can barely withstand the onslaught of pleasure.

"I've never ..." I moan, but it's barely audible.

I can't form words.

I can't—physically can't—tell him I've never come with another person before.

Assembling syllables in an order that makes sense is impossible given the way he's undoing me, how he's taking me apart, lick by lick, kiss by kiss, flick by flick.

I had no idea this was possible.

This man devours me, kissing me like I'm the reason he woke up today.

Like I'm the reward at the end of every day.

My hands, my fingers, the things I do to myself at night are nothing compared to what he's doing to me now.

The softness of his tongue, the caress of his lips, and the moans that fall from his mouth. The murmurs, the *my Gods*, and the deep, filthy masculine rumbles.

I'm his breakfast, his lunch, his dinner, and his dessert.

Hell, I'm his late-night snack right now, and he's ravenous. I gaze down at the fantastic image between my legs, the sight in front of me.

His broad shoulders, his strong arms, that thick mess of hair.

This gorgeous man between my legs, kissing my pussy, worshipping my body, as he wraps those major league arms around my thighs, tugging me closer to his mouth, impossibly closer.

Bliss spins in me, adrenaline tripping through my veins.

My hands slide down my body, roaming over my breasts, my belly, then finding his hair once again. I thread my fingers through those locks, curling my hands over his head. "Is this okay?" I whisper.

He moans against me, lifting his face for a second, murmuring, "Yeah, do that. Grab me. Tug me against you. Fucking use me."

Pleasure bursts inside me, a promise of what's to come, a hint of what's just over the horizon as he continues his relentless quest for my orgasm.

I can feel it, just out of reach, hovering on the other side. I want it desperately. I want everything with him.

He moans against my wetness, and I cry out as he takes me higher, pushes further, gives more.

His mouth is a one-man band, his tongue an instrument of pleasure, his lips making music as he plays me. Ecstasy throbs inside of me with every sweep of his tongue, every kiss of his lips, and every grip of his fingers into my hips.

"Oh God, I'm close, so close."

And then I'm there.

I'm breaking apart, falling into pieces, coming undone in a constellation of pleasure, like starlight, like a supernova.

My cries are endless.

My orgasm ravages me.

My body quakes.

Aftershocks radiate inside me, pulses of lingering bliss, the remnants of the most fantastic climax in the universe.

Like the fading notes of a song, they spread to the tips of my fingers, to the ends of my hair.

Holden moves over me, bracing himself on strong arms, that tattoo on display. The stylized tree design is so artfully drawn, and I'm dying to know what it means to him.

But there are other topics to tackle first.

Especially since this night isn't ending. It's only beginning, and I want the rest of it. All of it.

He stares down at me with need flickering in his irises. He's such a sight. His green eyes blaze with desire. His lips are hungry.

And the best part? The sexiest part is *this*—his hard cock pushing against my thigh.

A visceral reminder that I want him inside me.

That I need to tell him that he'll be my first.

I lift my arms, my hands holding his face, where his jaw is still wet.

With me.

A tremble rushes through me. "Holden," I begin, sounding all breathy and blissed out.

He shakes his head—in amazement, I think. "Reese, you're incredible. Absolutely incredible. You're so responsive."

"Because of how you touch me. I think you've reduced me to a very primal level. I could barely speak."

“Good. Speaking is overrated when there’s touch,” he says ironically, because the man loves to talk even as he touches me.

He dips his mouth to my face, whispering a kiss to my lips. Then a soft, satisfied “Hi” against my cheek.

But now isn’t the time to linger in the aftereffects. Drawing a breath, I push gently on his shoulders so he meets my gaze.

“I need to tell you something,” I say, my lips a straight line.

“Of course,” he says, going serious, intense.

I picture myself in a volleyball game, prepping to serve.

No room for fear.

Just say it.

“That was the first time I’ve had an orgasm through oral.” That seems like a good way to start.

His grin is cocky, delighted. It’s a great look on his handsome face.

He’s damn pleased, but he’s pleased *for me*. Not because he’s going to thump his chest in victory. He’s happy to have done this *for me*.

“I want to give you every type of orgasm,” he says.

I shiver at the way he talks to me, filthy and full of adoration at the same time.

“I want all of them,” I continue. “And I want all of you.”

I slide my hand down his chest, over the hard planes of his abs, one straight shot for his cock, as if to make my point clear.

I grip his length, stroking it, thrilling at the feel of his dick twitching in my hand.

Wow. Just wow.

This is all-new too. And it’s hot as hell.

He gives a small sigh that's chased by a carnal groan as I grip him harder.

I don't want to stop touching him now that I've started. One second, and I'm addicted.

I squeeze the base, then slide my hand back up, savoring the velvet smoothness.

I'm no maestro of dick, no conductor of cock. But the feel of him, hard and thick, is extraordinary.

"I want you so much, beautiful."

I smile, my heart tripping with a giddy kind of happiness as he gives me a term of endearment.

That's why he's the one I want to lose it to. But I need to finish the confession.

Will he turn away? Will he say no? Will I scare him?

"Holden, I'm—"

AC/DC blares.

I furrow my brow, drop his dick, and push up on my elbows as the opening notes of "Highway to Hell" blast from his phone.

He groans, a long, annoyed sigh of frustration.

"That's the head of travel," he says.

It takes me a few seconds to register his meaning as he rolls off me and grabs his phone from the nightstand.

"Hey, MJ. What's up?"

There's a pause, and his eyes close, his jaw ticks. "For real?"

Another pause.

I can't make out what MJ is saying, but Holden gives a resigned sigh as he opens his eyes. "Yeah. I'll be there in about an hour."

My throat tightens, and so do my shoulders. All the yummy sensations inside me disappear, just like that.

With his phone still in his hand, he sinks deeper into the pillow, drags his other hand through his hair, then turns to face me. “Weather people predict a thunderstorm coming in the middle of the night in Texas. I was supposed to be on the morning flight, but apparently, that flight is canceled, so the head of travel just put me on a plane that leaves in an hour and twenty minutes.” He winces like he’s in pain. “I’m so sorry.”

Disappointment just might overwhelm me, but I take the news like a big girl. “I’m sorry that you have to go.” On so many levels. Sorry doesn’t begin to cover it.

He heaves another sigh, the most frustrated one yet.

Rolling out of bed, he reaches for his clothes on the floor, pulling on his boxer briefs. All my plans for the night speed away, tearing out the door without even a second glance.

This tryst is over. My heart feels like a bag of sand.

But there are practical matters to attend to. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, head straight for my bureau, and pull on a pair of fresh underwear then a T-shirt and my jeans.

By the time I’m done, Holden is fully dressed too. He turns to me with intense contrition on his face and sets his hands on my shoulders. “I want to see you again. I *need* to see you again. Will you give me your number?”

“Of course.”

He types my number into his phone then sends me a text so I’ll have his. I don’t look at it yet though.

“Holden,” I say, lifting my chin, tearing off the Band-Aid. “The thing I started to tell you?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a virgin.”

HOLDEN

That was not what I thought she'd say.

It takes me a few seconds to process that information, to reroute my thoughts. But in that time, everything clicks into place.

The *I've never*.

The flashes of innocence and the flickers of shyness, chased by longing, followed by lust.

The way she responded like everything was new to her.

What a gift. What an absolute gift.

I'd be lying if I said her virginity doesn't turn me on.

Oh hell, does it ever.

And I need to tell her that, but not so she thinks I have a virgin fetish. Because that's weird.

I step closer and place a kiss on her soft lips. Then I pull back, holding her gaze, my voice intensely serious. "That is a complete gift, and I want to be your first. I'd be honored, Reese."

A smile comes my way, then a sigh that stretches across the state, one of pure relief.

"You do?"

There she is. All innocence again.

I clasp her shoulders. "I absolutely do. I told you I don't do hookups. You don't feel like one. *We* don't feel like one. Sex

isn't a game to me. I'm so drawn to you—all of you—and I want to explore everything with you.”

She grins with excitement, with possibility. “You’re turning me on even more now.”

“Goes both ways, beautiful,” I say. “And we’re going to see each other again. I don’t know when, because I’m heading to Texas, then Florida, then Georgia. But we’ll make a plan, okay?”

She nibbles on the corner of her lip. “It’s a deal.”

“Hold me to it.”

“I will. I definitely will. I absolutely will,” she says, imitating me again from my email. “See, I can’t stop talking in threes now.”

I cup her chin, dragging a finger across it. “Sassy, and I like it.”

She stands on tiptoe, drops a kiss onto my lips, then gestures to the door. “Be on your way.”

I leave, emotions warring in me. On the one hand, I feel like I struck gold with her. On the other hand, I feel like I’m a kid and I just lost my favorite book, the dog-eared dragon adventure tale I carried with me everywhere as a grade-schooler.

I stop at the hotel to grab my bag. At the airport, I check the text I sent Reese when I was at her place—the one that said *I can't wait to see you again*—and smile at her reply.

Reese: I’m already replaying today. And tonight too.

Holden: Same here. Let’s make more replays very soon.

After settling into my seat, I grab a book of puzzles from my backpack, crack open the word scramble, and get to work on six-letter words, breaking them down into a range of solutions.

Word games are good for the brain, and baseball is as much a mental exercise as a physical one.

But as I work through combos, my thoughts keep returning to Reese.

To the delicious, alluring word she shared with me.

Virgin.

I run through a scramble of it in my head, but I keep returning to that word.

Twenty-two and still a virgin. And she wanted me. She *still* wants me.

I want her too, with an insistent ferocity, one I didn't expect when I started the day. It digs into my heart and sets up camp in my brain.

In Texas, we play a killer series against the Scoundrels, and I have a handful of killer nights as Reese and I exchange texts at all hours.

Texts that turn me on.

That make me smile.

That make me hope.

Then comes the night when she sends a note that knocks the breath straight out of me, but in the worst way.

Reese: Hi. I wish I weren't saying this, but I'm also excited to tell you something amazing. Which means this note contains both good news and bad news. I got a job offer with a great international organization that's focused on teaching all sorts of skills to girls, both in the US and abroad, as part of its focus on gender equality. It wasn't even on my radar, but this organization heard the interview I did with you and listened to some of my others. They offered me an internship to teach media skills, like podcasting and sound editing, to teenage girls in South America, since I speak Spanish. This is everything I've wanted to do, and I'm going to be traveling to various countries there. I'm leaving in a week. I'll miss

picking up where we left off, and I'll definitely miss our *second date* and the chance to get to know you more.

In my hotel room after a game, my heart sinks and fills at the same time.

I'm thrilled for her.

And I'm bummed for us.

Holden: I'm so happy for you. That's tremendous, and you're going to do so much good. I bet you'll love it.

That's the truth. I am happy for Reese, even as she fades from my life. She has to. She's going to be roaming around in another hemisphere, through small towns with barely any cell service. And I'm trying to make a name for myself in the major leagues.

That's what I vow to do, focusing on the game more and more, and wondering less and less what would have happened if we'd met at a different time.

But we didn't. We met at this time. This is how it played out, and no amount of wondering would change that.

INTERLUDE

Three Months Later

HOLDEN

It's one of those rare days in Seattle when the roof isn't covering the stadium.

No rain—just a clear night sky.

Two men are on. Two men are out. We're behind by one. It's the top of the ninth.

Xavier Munoz, the Seattle Storm Chasers' closer, paces the pitcher's mound, then stops on the rubber. He tugs on the bill of his cap while he stares at the catcher behind me for the pitch signal.

Xavier throws fastballs 99 percent of the time. The challenge is whether it's a cut fastball or a sinker, a wicked pitch that drops once it's over the plate. Our center fielder once said hitting a Munoz sinker is about as tricky as slicing a log while it's falling from the sky—chances are good that your ax will be kissing air.

He's not wrong.

But baseball is a mind game as much as a physical one, and over the last year, I've learned to home in on the mental preparation. Knowing what's coming. Studying the opposition. Religiously, relentlessly, committing their strategies to memory.

That's the thing about athletes.

We love routine. We might think we like to change it up, surprise the opponent. But most of the time, we are servants to the familiar.

That is never truer than with pitchers.

Xavier kicks his leg, goes into the windup, and unleashes a fireball. I swear there's smoke coming off the ball as it careens toward home plate.

I swing the bat, but when the ball dips just out of the strike zone, I check the motion just in time. I swung at his sinker twice already and missed.

Not doing it again.

"Ball," the umpire barks, making the count three-two.

This is it.

My jaw tightens, then I take a deep breath. I step away from the plate, adjust my glove, return to my stance, and lift the bat again.

I narrow in on Xavier on the mound. He peers at the catcher. Shakes his head. Normally, I'd expect Xavier to go with the sinker once more, since he snuck that fucker past me two times in this at bat.

But I'm betting on the cut fastball, since he loves to serve those up when there's a full count.

That's what I get. Rocket fuel down the middle. I shift my weight to my back foot, rotate my hips, and swing with precision and force.

Thwack.

The crack of the bat is the most satisfying sound.

The ball soars.

Head down, I run like hell along the baseline as that little white orb keeps on flying, soaring gloriously over the fence in my hometown.

I punch the air.

A rush of satisfaction races through my bones as I round the bases, high-fiving the third base coach, then the two teammates I sent home who are waiting for me at the plate.

No time to bask in the glory, though, because we've got a job to do—shut them down in the bottom of the ninth inning.

That's what Shane Walker, our rookie closer, does—he seals the win for us, putting a fork in the series against Seattle, the team I grew up rooting for.

High-fives abound in the locker room as I congratulate Shane. He's a Brit with a baseball pedigree—an English mom and an American dad who played for years in the majors before he went into the Hall of Fame. Shane's one of only a handful of British players ever, but he's already making a name for himself with his fearless style of nailing saves.

“Keep up that good shit and we'll have to give you a nickname other than *bloke*,” I tell him, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Iceman, please,” he says.

“You don't get to pick your nickname. We do,” I say, gesturing from me to our center fielder, whose locker is next to Shane's.

“Rules. Gotta follow 'em,” Antonio calls out as the pitcher grabs his leather jacket. “Hey! Leatherman! How about that?”

I scoff. “Antonio, we are not naming him after a tool.”

“But he's got so many wicked pitches; he's like a Leatherman.”

I turn to Shane, hold up my hands like I'm framing him, then ask, “Leatherman?”

Shane's expressionless, but I bet that poker face is saying, *Please don't nickname me Leatherman.*

“Flamethrower!” Antonio shouts.

I shake my head. “Fireman could work though.”

Shane gives a small smile. “That's not bad.”

“Shush,” Antonio says, then he snaps his fingers as he stares at Shane's black jacket. “The British Bad Boy of Baseball.”

I screw up the corner of my lips. “A little long, don’t you think?”

“That’s what she said,” Antonio quips with a wiggle of his brows.

I roll my eyes, then turn back to Shane. “We’ll let you know when it’s official.”

“I’ll be waiting with bated breath.”

“What the hell is ‘bated breath’? Does anyone know?” Antonio holds his arms out wide in question.

“I believe it’s from Shakespeare. That’s what my mom told me once. She teaches English,” I offer. “But I don’t remember which play.”

“The *Merchant of Venice*,” Shane says. “‘Shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key, With bated breath and whispering humbleness.’”

Antonio blinks, then a wicked glint crosses his eyes. He whips his gaze to me. “I do believe we have a nickname.”

I grin, clapping Shane on the shoulder. “Welcome to the club, Shakespeare.”

Shane laughs, then shrugs. “I could do worse. Thanks... *mates*,” he says, then takes off.

After a shower, I change into jeans and a Henley, then make my way out of the locker room, when Antonio stops me, hand on my arm. “We’re hitting a bar on Capitol Hill. Should be a good time. Carson has a bunch of friends who are bringing some friends, if you know what I mean.”

He winks, but I know exactly what he means without it—babes will abound.

“Nah,” I say, tipping my forehead to the exit. “The ’rents are here.”

He rolls his eyes. “Always an excuse with you.”

He’s not wrong.

I don't party. I don't cruise the bars. I *do* like to go out with my teammates, but I'm usually the guy nursing an iced tea, making sure the others don't make stupid decisions.

Well, as much as I can control that, which is not much. Success at an early age often means you make a lot of stupid decisions.

Besides, that scene can lead to distractions.

I don't need any.

This last year has been all about baseball. The focus has paid off.

My batting average plus on-base percentage is a thing of beauty. I'm racking up RBIs. And our team has a winning record.

One more year like this at the major league minimum, and I can lock in a hefty raise in arbitration next year—a raise that'll likely go a long way to making my family secure for life.

I glance down at the ink on my forearm as I leave.

Taking care of my family—that's how I keep my eye on the prize.

* * *

My parents wait for me in the ballpark corridor, my dad looking every bit the teacher with his horn-rimmed glasses, trim beard, and cardigan. My mom, on the other hand, dresses like a fangirl in her Holden Kingsley jersey, an LA Bandits ball cap, and a foam finger. It's embarrassingly adorable.

She waves the giant blue finger at me.

"Be careful with that weapon," I tease. I hug my mom, then my dad, then my sixteen-year-old brothers.

"I see you brought these two troublemakers along." I pat the twins on their blond heads because it drives them batty,

and I believe in driving my brothers batty, especially because both of them are five inches shorter than my six foot two.

“Kids. You can’t leave them behind *all the time*,” my dad quips.

“Hey, what happened to you in the first inning when you struck out looking?” Cody asks.

“Aww, did I ruin your fantasy baseball stats, sparky?”

He scoffs. “As if I play fantasy baseball.” Sports aren’t his thing. He prefers building skyscrapers out of toothpicks. A good habit to have if you want to be an architect, and he does.

“But I do,” Mason chimes in. “And I like good players. Ergo, *you’re* not on my team.”

“Good to see you too.” I catch Cody’s brown-eyed gaze. “And to answer your oh-so-sweet question, did you not see the game-winning homer I hit? Why are you giving me a hard time about my first at bat? Also, in my second at bat, I did get to first base,” I point out.

Cody’s about to answer when another voice cuts in. “Ah, glory over consistency. The age-old dilemma.”

The comment echoes from down the hall, coming from a clear and confident voice.

It’s Edward Thompson, striding toward us in his crisp button-down and charcoal slacks. He was a minor league manager, a major league utility player, then a hitting coach for Seattle. Now he’s the play-by-play analyst for The Sports Network, and he has the experience to back up every opinion.

I straighten my spine before I reply. Edward Thompson is that kind of man. “Which do you think is best, sir?”

He scratches his jaw, considering the question. “Both. I look for both in a player.”

“But how many have that?” my mom asks. She’s never met a question she’s afraid to ask or a person she won’t strike up a conversation with.

“Depends on the player,” Edward says, in that calm, centered voice he’s known for on-air and, reportedly, in the dugout. “Sometimes you need someone who plays for glory. Most of the time, you need someone consistent.”

My dad points to me. “And what about Holden? Has he got both?”

I roll my eyes at my father. “Dad ...” Now is not the time to suck up to the man.

“Seriously. It’s a legitimate question.” My dad is a lot like my mom in this—inquisitive until the end of the world but likely to kill me with embarrassment long before that.

Thompson studies me, eyes narrow and thoughtful. “What I look for are the little things. The way a player stands. Whether he’s putting enough weight in the back foot. Getting enough rotation in the hips. All of those things can make a difference. Can add another ten points to your batting average.”

I stare at him, unsure if he’s giving me advice or criticism or just an observation. Before I can decide, he gives us a tip of an imaginary cap and walks the other way, saying to me, “Have a good season.”

As he retreats, Mom mutters under her breath, “Cryptic much?”

“Just a little,” my dad says.

She grabs his arm, saying in excitement, “He’s like one of those guys in a Webflix Christmas movie, Charlie.”

“Exactly. One of those wise old men who pop out of nowhere and offer sage advice to the hero.”

Mason rolls his eyes. “These two are so obsessed with Webflix holiday movies, even when it’s not Christmastime.”

My mom smiles. “What can I say? We like what we like. We’ve even been known to watch them during the summer. Like the other night.”

“You two sure know how to have a rocking time,” I say as we make our way to the exit.

“You got a problem with that?” my dad challenges, full of fire in that playful way of his.

I hold up my hands in surrender. I know better than to argue with my parents. If they want to watch Christmas movies in July, then they damn well should. I want them to have everything they crave, including being able to retire when they want.

The more success I have in the majors, the more of those things I can give them.

* * *

We head to our favorite diner in Ballard, near our home. My folks study the menu like it might have changed in the decades since we’ve been coming here, and Cody opts for his usual—burger and fries.

That one word—*fries*—lingers in my mind.

Takes me back in time to another night at another diner, a night that led to so much sexiness, so many kisses, and so many possibilities that ended too soon.

When we’ve ordered and the waiter leaves, I drum my fingers on the table, a little lost in time still. “Did you know that french fries are the exemption to every food rule?”

My mom furrows her brow. “Is that a quote from a movie?”

“Or maybe a TV show,” my dad suggests.

“Ooh! It’s from *How I Met Your Mother*,” Cody says, shooting his hand up, a grin spreading across his face.

I snap my gaze to him. “How old are you? Thirty? You watch *How I Met Your Mother*?”

He gives me an epic eye roll. “Retro TV shows are so in. Don’t you know anything?” He shakes his head like I’m a pop-culture traitor for not keeping up with what decade-old TV show is popular again.

“Whatever you say, Cody.”

“So, the french fry rule isn’t a line from a TV show,” my mom continues after the waiter drops off our drinks. She’s hunting for a reference that she won’t get. Best to end this pursuit.

“It’s just something someone said to me once. No biggie.” I take a sip of my iced tea, hoping the small little smile that tugs at my lips isn’t obvious.

But my mother can see through anything. She leans in closer. “What’s that faraway look in your eyes?”

I shake my head, putting on my game face. “It’s nothing.”

She wags a finger at me. “No, it’s something. You definitely have a look. Like you were thinking of *someone*.”

She should be a detective.

“I swear it’s nothing.”

“You met a woman, didn’t you? You’re holding out on us. Who is she?” My mother’s apparently a pit bull too.

Time to adamantly deny her speculation. And by adamantly deny, I mean move the hell on like my ass is on fire.

“I am hopelessly devoted to the baseball diamond.” I shift my focus to my dad, since he’s easier to distract. “Now tell me, Dad, did you listen to that new podcast about Charles Manson?”

His eyes light up. “I did. Amazing stuff.”

We proceed to deep-dive into his other obsession, and with that, I successfully shove the memory of Reese Fallon out of my mind.

Yet again.

I’ve become particularly good at this since she’s been out of the country and out of my life.

It’s for the best. It was only one night.

* * *

But what lasts longer is the advice Edward Thompson gave me.

Advice that's not so cryptic to me as it was to my parents.

For the next few weeks, I focus on little adjustments at the plate—a shift of my hips, a small switch in my stance.

By the end of the season, I've padded my batting average by ten points, finishing with .319—one of the best batting averages in the major leagues, and not too shabby for a guy in his second season.

That bright spot, though, is marred by a post-season interview that goes sideways.

HOLDEN

The day after my sophomore season ends, a reporter from a Seattle paper asks the team's publicist about interviewing me for a profile piece—a local-boy-makes-good kind of thing. I agree to meet the guy at Doctor Insomnia's Tea and Coffee Emporium in Capitol Hill while I'm visiting my parents in Washington.

Carlotta can't make it to the interview, since she's in Los Angeles, but we review talking points in advance—focus on the season, goals for next year, and all the things I love about the city.

"It'll be a puff piece," she says. "Just go on and on about the Space Needle."

I groan. "I hate the Space Needle. No one from Seattle likes it."

"Don't say that to Vince," she says. "How about the Gum Wall? Everyone Instagrams that."

"Chewed gum pasted on a wall is nasty. No self-described Seattleite likes it."

"Don't mention that either, then. What *do* you like in your hometown?"

"Lots of stuff. The Ballard Locks. They help salmon swim upstream. Also, coffee. And walking around the city with my parents."

"Perfect. Talk about fish, caffeine, and family."

“Easy enough.”

Famous last words.

The day of the interview, I head into the coffee shop, looking for a bearded guy with glasses, someone who matches the headshot that runs with his articles. I spot him in the corner, laptop open, watching the door. As I make my way over, he rises, flashes a grin, and says hello. “Cortado for you, Holden? That’s your favorite, right?”

He must have listened to Reese’s podcast. That was the first time anyone asked me about my drink of choice. Suddenly, I’m picturing her face, her lips, her smile.

“It is. And that’d be great.”

He heads to the counter while I trip back in time, to that one perfect day.

The honesty and the connection, the banter and the real talk.

And the sparks that flew like an electrical wire.

What is she up to in South America? What is she doing? Does she still wear a lot of red? Does she keep in touch with her friends? Does she dig teaching kids about media and podcasting?

A smile tips my lips as I remember my what-if woman.

I haven’t googled her in ages. I did at first, right after I met her. I found exactly what I thought I would—pics of her with her friends on her Instagram and her podcast website.

Last time I checked her feed, she’d posted a shot of a pair of teenage girls in Bogotá who’d started a podcast about art heists, with a caption that said, *Proud of these two!*

That was it.

I haven’t checked since then. There’s no point.

A few minutes later, Vince returns with my drink—espresso and a bit of warm milk—along with a soy latte for himself.

“Knew about the cortado from the college interview. The one with the podcaster. Good stuff there,” he says, and I try to give nothing away, to keep the smile spreading inside me from showing too much. “Helped me a lot with background info.”

“We had a good chat,” I say, keeping things friendly but kind of generic, like Carlotta said.

“Thanks for doing this interview. I always like talking to local personalities. Getting to know them. Seeing why they love the city.”

“Can’t beat the rain. Well, as long as there are retractable roofs for playing ball.” Not a bad platitude. This is going to be easier than I thought.

He smiles then dives into the meat of the interview, asking standard questions about the game, why I love it, what I want for next season.

Then he peppers me with questions about growing up here. I keep it vague but positive, giving him some nuggets about the Ballard Locks and my favorite coffee haunts for color, but keeping my life and family close to the vest. Because family is private.

Except when it’s not.

When the piece runs the next week, it’s a dissection of my parents—how they met, where they teach, where they live. It might as well include a picture of their house and the route my brothers take to school.

Oh, because that’s in there too. “When Kingsley was called up to the major leagues,” Vince writes, “the first thing he did was yank his younger brothers from public school, putting them in one of the city’s swank and high-priced private high schools. He believes those are better than the public schools he attended, citing woeful inadequacy in public education.”

I see red.

I call Carlotta. “I said none of this. He must have dug up all this info on my parents and then made up this shit about my brothers. I said nothing of the sort.”

“I’ll talk to Vince.”

But the damage is done.

This article makes me look like a bougie prick in my hometown. My brothers don’t say much, but Mom lets it slip that they got hassled at school for being little chess pieces in my life.

The press can fuck off.

I’m done with talking to the media.

From now on, it’s baseball and only baseball. That is all.

* * *

Over the next year, I keep my head down and avoid the media. I become good at barking “No comment” to nearly every request, because that’s the only thing I have to say.

My life is baseball—the game and my friendships with other players, guys on my team, like Shane, and guys on other teams, like Crosby Cash, who mans third base for the San Francisco Cougars.

Crosby and I trade a few hitting tips at the All-Star Game, and I pass on Edward Thompson’s advice.

I absorb it even deeper too, continuing to make a few more adjustments at the plate. Little ones, shifting by increments. It works—I pop my batting average up six more points, finishing the year with some of the best stats in the league.

Trouble is, it’s not enough for my team.

The LA Bandits are sagging, well out of playoff contention.

But other teams are noticing me.

That’s what Josh Summers, my shark of an agent, keeps telling me. I’m trade bait, apparently.

“You’re getting lots of interest, Holden,” he tells me at the end of October when we meet in New York.

“Keep me posted.” There’s not much else to say. Being traded isn’t up to me.

When my cell buzzes in late December while I’m vacationing with my family in Costa Rica, I’ve got a feeling I know why Josh is calling.

“What’s up, Summers?”

“You. As in your baseball stock. It’s been rising. How would you feel about going to the San Francisco Dragons?”

I wince. “The team that’s best known for cheating its way to two World Series in the last five years?”

“Yep,” he says.

“Then I feel like they’re pretty much the scourge of baseball.” But the question is rhetorical; I don’t actually have a choice in the matter. Still, I have to try—anywhere but the Dragons. “How about the New York Comets? That’d be awesome. Or Seattle.”

“We’ll work on that for the future. For now, keep this in mind—the Dragons *were* the scourge of baseball. The organization has completely cleaned house. They just brought in a new partial owner with some deep pockets. Plus, with the year you had and the money they have, we should be able to avoid arbitration and get you a fat raise.”

That piques my interest.

I pace along the beach, watching my little brothers tackle the waves. Horribly. They tackle the waves absolutely horribly. But they do it fearlessly, getting back on their surfboards again and again, going over and over.

Having a blast.

They’ll be going to college soon.

College isn’t cheap, and I don’t know if they’ll get scholarships like I did.

Players get traded all the time early in their careers. I don’t have enough service to have a no-trade clause, no matter how little I want to play for a team known for their roster-wide

sign-stealing scandal. Blatant, shameless sign-stealing, with team staffers banging trash can lids in the stands to signal the pitches—pitches they knew were coming thanks to cameras surreptitiously installed in the ballpark.

“All the players who were part of the cheating scandal are gone,” Josh continues. “The coaches are all gone. The organization did a complete overhaul from stem to stern. And they want a clean-up hitter, and your name is among the possibilities.”

My shoulders straighten. I’ve been batting sixth. There is no more prestigious spot in the lineup than fourth. “For real?”

“That’s how they’re looking at you. They want someone who could anchor their lineup for several years. They’re bringing in all-new players. Guys with good reps. Solid backgrounds. No cheating. They’re conducting a nationwide search for a new manager too.”

Scrubbing a hand across the back of my neck, I nod a few times, liking the sound of this more and more. “That seems promising.”

“So, what do you want me to tell them?”

I give a dry laugh. “I have a feeling I don’t really have much of a say.”

Josh clears his throat. “No. They’re trading you, Holden.”

That doesn’t make sense. “But I’m still cheap. I’m not a salary drag.”

“True, but the Bandits want prospects, and more than that, the Dragons want a star player. So it works for both teams. And I think it’s a good move.”

I stare out at the waves crashing against the shore as my parents read under their umbrellas, enjoying their life, enjoying this trip that I made possible.

What difference does it make if I play for the losing LA Bandits or a pockmarked team in San Francisco? I’ll go because that’s the job, and the job is what I’m devoted to.

Besides, I've got friends in San Francisco on the other team, and it'll be good to see them.

I fasten on a smile. This is what I signed up for. "I guess I better pack my bags for San Francisco."

There's one more thing about San Francisco. It surfaces from my subconscious and demands attention, no matter how hard I try not to consider the fact that San Francisco is Reese Fallon's hometown.

It doesn't matter. It's a big world, and has been almost two years since the day we met and parted ways. If she's not still in South America, she could be anywhere, and as long as she's happy, that's fine with me.

And if she is back in California, what are the odds a woman like her is still single?

REESE

As I roll up my retro blouses, tucking them neatly into my suitcase, I FaceTime with my mom back in San Francisco.

“I hope I can still recognize you when I pick you up at the airport,” she teases. “You’ve been gone so long, who knows?”

“Well, you are looking at me right now, so that might help,” I point out.

She taps her chin, studying me as she stirs a pot on the stove. Dan dan noodles—she’s currently addicted, thanks to her favorite food blogs. She promised she’d make them for me when I return. “I suppose that’s true. I’ll look for someone who looks like you.”

“Excellent plan, Mom.” I roll up a pair of jeans next. “Did anything change while I was gone? Golden Gate Bridge is still there for tourists to photograph when they’re not on the trolley?”

“Sounds about right. But what I want to know is this—will you miss Peru and Colombia when you’re back here?”

That’s an excellent question. I’ve loved my time here in these countries and Chile as well. My adventurous heart adored exploring the city of Lima and walking along a paved path overlooking the Pacific Ocean from the edge of a cliff. On weekends I visited the botanic gardens in Bogotá and went snowboarding in the Andes near Santiago. Every day, I checked out markets, food trucks, and street vendors as part of my life’s mission to sample new flavors and cuisines.

But more than that, I learned tons from the work.

I'd like to think the girls I taught learned a lot as well, not just about broadcast and new media. Discovery goes both ways—that's what my counterparts who've traveled to the US have said as well.

I'll miss the eager eyes and the ravenous hearts of so many of the teenagers, like the girls in Bogotá who started an art heist podcast that's becoming trendy.

But I've scored a great job back home, and a place to live, which is no small thing in San Francisco. It's an attached studio off a home that Tia's family owns in the city, and I'll get to see my mom again and my sister in San Diego from time to time. Plus, it'll be a touch easier to do my podcast when I'm stateside, though keeping it up abroad wasn't difficult.

"I'll miss it here," I tell Mom, "but it'll be good to be home. I can't wait to see you, and Layla and Tia, and Grant. I've missed everyone. I'm ready to start the next phase of my life," I say, with a deep but resolute inhalation. I'm twenty-four, with a birthday in the fall. "I'll be glad to be in San Francisco when I turn a quarter century."

"Good," she says with a motherly smile. Then her expression turns serious. "I wanted to let you know something though."

My heart stops, then starts up again, rabbit-fast. "That's not a good way to start a conversation. What's going on?"

"It's not bad. Just that your father is moving back to town."

My brow furrows. "He is? Last time we talked, he was in Atlanta."

"True, but he and ..." She frowns, trying to remember the name of wife number three. "He and Becky are moving back here. She's having a baby."

I groan and slump down on the bed in my tiny apartment in Lima. "For real?"

My heart squeezes, making a painful knot in my chest, and I'm not even sure why. Maybe because my relationship with my father isn't simply strained—it's painful at times.

“Yes. For real. I thought you'd want to know.”

I nod, my head aching. “Does that mean I have to, I dunno, go to a baby shower?”

My mom's quiet for a second, then she adopts a big toothy smile. A big, uncomfortable toothy smile. “You don't *have* to do anything.”

I scoff, chasing it with a light laugh. “One of your many adages. *You can always say no.*”

“Exactly. So say no if you want,” Mom says breezily. “But an invitation is probably forthcoming. He's spoken to your sister, though Kelsey doesn't know if she'll make it up from San Diego. But I imagine you'll get an invite too.”

My stomach twists.

I haven't seen my dad since high school, when he brought the woman he'd been cheating on wife number two with to my graduation ceremony and then to my graduation dinner.

“Did you really need to bring Vanya here?” I'd hissed at him, tossing an acrid stare her way as we moved to the corner of the auditorium, the tassel from my cap falling in my eyes.

“Sweetheart, that isn't a nice way to talk to the woman I'm going to ask to marry me.”

Vanya clutched his arm and shot me a simpering smile.

I hated her on sight. Hated her white-blonde hair, her stick-thin body, her Barbie-pink lipstick.

“We'll become friends, Reese,” she cooed.

I rolled my eyes all the way to France. “We will never be friends.”

“Reese, give her a chance, please,” he pleaded as he pulled me aside after telling her he'd be back in a minute. “I think she's the love of my life.”

“Dad, you say that about every woman. Every woman you cheated on Mom with,” I pointed out.

He blanched like I was crazy, like I was a revisionist historian. “That’s not true,” he said. “I didn’t cheat on your mother. I fell in love with someone else.”

“That’s literally cheating,” I hissed.

“It’s not the same.” That’s my dad—he could massage anything to fit his point of view. “So, please, try to be nice to Vanya tonight.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I did not, in fact, do my best. I ignored her at dinner.

My father and I barely spoke when I went to college, with me sending occasional emails as he moved to Atlanta with Butterscotch, or Capricorn, or whoever his next woman was. Not Vanya though. He split from the supposed love of his life a few weeks after I met her.

Then, sometime in the last few years, he met Becky, and now they’re coming home.

“So, what brings him back to San Francisco?” I ask Mom.

“I think Becky has a job in the city. She works for some biotech company.”

My jaw tightens, and my shoulders tense. This is how I always react to my dad.

But I try to put him out of my mind.

My dad is who he is. I am who I am.

He’s barely in my life at all.

I plaster on a smile. “It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine,” I assure her. “Now, when I get back, I want diner food first. A salad and fries.”

She laughs. “That’s not diner food.”

“In my book, it is.”

* * *

On the flight home the next day, my mind returns to my dad, to Becky, and to the invitation I suspect is winging my way.

Odd that after all the affairs and girlfriends, he never fathered more children. Now, I'm nearly a quarter century, and I'm going to have a half-sibling.

My gut churns with the weirdness of it all.

With music blasting from my phone, I turn to the window, resting my cheek against it, staring at the sea far below.

I'll have a half brother or half sister.

It's a strange notion, and I'd rather not think about my dad.

My brain helpfully, or not so helpfully, replaces those thoughts with images of Holden.

From time to time over most of the last two years, I've meandered to the man who captivated me. I've checked in on his career every few months. He's taken baseball by storm, jacking in runs, fielding like he has a golden glove, and staying out of the public eye.

I've found little on him, but that's okay. I never dig for long, since I don't want to be a stalker.

A virgin stalker, at that.

I didn't meet anyone abroad. No surprise—I didn't go to South America to find a boyfriend.

But a rising baseball star? Even for a guy who's not into hookups, I bet he's had women by the truckload since our night together.

Hell, he's probably even paired up. I bet he's found a girlfriend.

Maybe even a wife.

I close my eyes, willing the thoughts of him to quietly slink off.

But they don't.

They set up camp.

When I land and my cell service returns, I do something I haven't done in months.

I google Holden Kingsley.

PRESENT DAY

End of March

REESE

I launch myself at Tia, hugging the hell out of her, octopus-style, in her doorway.

And I squeal. Shamelessly.

She squeals too, and we become a cacophony of *oh my God, I missed you so much, it's so good to see you again.*

When we eventually tear ourselves apart, I park my hands on my hips. "You're in so much trouble."

She jerks her head back. "How did I get in hot water while you were out of the country?"

"You're in trouble for not telling me vital facts."

She holds up a stop-sign hand. "You're renting the studio next to my boyfriend and me, and the first thing out of your mouth is that I'm in trouble?"

"Yes. Also, say hi to Wayne, wherever he is."

"I'll pass on your regards to my man." She rolls her eyes. "Now, please let me know what I *allegedly* did."

As she shuts the door, I set down my bag and walk into the tiny living room of her home in Hayes Valley, which is owned by her aunt, a wildly successful art dealer in the city.

"You didn't tell me that Holden was in town."

She scrunches up her face. "Holden?"

"Hello?" I give her a look. A *how on earth can you not remember Holden* look.

Still, she draws a blank.

“You really don’t know who I’m talking about?”

“No idea.”

“The guy I interviewed,” I prompt. “The last interview I did at the end of our senior year, just before graduation.”

Still nothing.

I make a rolling gesture with my hand. “The red blouse with the black pearl buttons.”

Her face lights up with recognition. “Oh! The professional one that also happened to make you look like you were on a date.”

“You’re evil,” I say, laughing.

The doorbell rings, and I follow her because it can only be Layla. Yanking the door open, Tia adds, “The interview was with the guy who gave you the tongue lashing of a lifetime the week before you left for South America.”

Layla stands in the doorway, tall and goddess-like. Her brown eyes twinkle with questions. “I walked in at the right time, clearly.”

She’s in town because it’s volleyball off-season, but she’ll be returning to Turkey soon. It’s her other home, since she fell in love with a Turkish woman on another team there.

“Yes,” Tia tells her. “We were talking about a guy who made her knees shake. Her belly flip.”

“The only guy who did that to her?” Layla asks.

My cheeks flame red. “Yes. Holden. The baseball player. And neither one of you told me he was traded to the San Francisco Dragons at the end of last year.”

Layla stares sharply at me. “One, good to see you too. Two, how the hell would I have known?”

I wave it off. I’m only messing with them anyway. I wrap Layla in a hug that lasts a whole minute. “It’s so good to see you both,” I say with a happy sigh.

“Same,” Layla says.

“Double same,” Tia echoes.

When I pull away, Tia arches a brow. “Now, back to your unfair accusation. Why would you think I would know that he’d been traded? I’ve been in my master’s program, not tracking Major League Baseball trades. And Layla was in Turkey, falling in love and playing her heart out. Plus, you went on one date with him.”

Layla clears her throat. “Exactly. I haven’t been reading up on the off-season baseball trades.”

I heave an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. So you guys aren’t doing the stalking work that best friends should do. I guess I can forgive you.” I fling myself onto the couch in the living room as Tia grabs a bottle of wine and a corkscrew. Layla snags three glasses from the kitchen and sits next to me.

Once Tia joins us and we all have full glasses, she asks, “So, did you look him up? Is that how you know he’s in town?”

Layla nudges me. “You checked out his social media, I bet.”

I dip my head in shame. “Yes. I did.”

“And is there a girlfriend in the picture?” Tia asks.

“I have no idea. His Instagram feed is the occasional baseball pic amid coffee shots and images of the Golden Gate Bridge covered in fog.”

Layla tries to stifle a laugh. “Is he an amateur photographer?”

I laugh. “Apparently, he likes moody pictures of the city.”

“Ooh la la. Isn’t he just an onion of a man?” Tia says, shimmying her shoulders.

“Speaking of men, did you meet anyone in South America?” Layla asks, batting her dark eyes like a cartoon character floating on hearts and flowers.

I fire her a look like she's crazy. "You think I met someone and didn't tell you? Hello! We texted. We FaceTimed. I would have told you if I'd gotten so much as tongue."

Layla shrugs saucily. "I didn't want to presume, in case you were keeping secrets."

"I didn't meet anyone." I wasn't looking. And I wasn't tempted when I went out with the others in my media program. "Dating was just complicated with the job and moving to three different countries and working all the time. But I didn't miss it." It's the truth—I didn't date once, and I was *mostly* good with that. "Is that crazy?"

Layla laughs. "I didn't date either."

I shove her shoulder. "No, you just went and fell in love with the first woman you met."

"It happens. Love at first sight."

Tia rolls her eyes. "You and your perfect international romance."

"What can I say? Some women have got it going on," Layla says, blowing on her nails, too hot to handle. Then she swings her gaze to me, her lips going ruler-straight, her eyes thoughtful. "But you know, it makes sense that you didn't meet anyone. You didn't go there for a man. You went there for you," she says, tapping my sternum. "And you didn't let Holden 'Arms of Steel' Kingsley hold you back from going either."

Tia lifts her chin to the ceiling and imitates a lioness. "You are woman. Hear you roar."

I join in, roaring too.

Layla gets in on the big catcall as well.

We crack up, and I loop an arm around one, then the other. "You're the best. I missed you two. And you're right. I didn't let some hot-ass man stop me from making my big-girl career choices, and look where I am now. I have an awesome new job as a manager at a publicity firm—all because I have unique experience and my own damn podcast. Yay, me."

“You know it, friend.”

“And besides, I moved on in my own way, focusing on work and myself. I’m sure Holden did too. He probably has a girlfriend. I’m not going to reach out.” I wave a hand airily. “Who cares, right?”

“I will drink to that,” Tia says.

We lift our glasses and toast, then Tia shoots me a knowing look. “And if anyone deserves time-out for not telling you, it should be Grant. He’ll be here in about fifteen minutes.”

* * *

After the requisite hug, I shove my BFF on the chest.

News flash—Grant doesn’t move. He’s made of brick.

“What the hell?”

Tia waves a hand in my direction. “Good luck dealing with her ire. She’s already put us through the wringer.” She grabs Layla by the arm. “Let’s go get some food going while Reese tortures Grant.”

“May the force be with you, Grant,” Layla calls out as she sails into the kitchen.

The four of us were all friends in college, even though Grant is two years older. But the running joke was that he and I were a package deal.

Grant and I have known each other pretty much our whole lives. We played sports together, grew up together. Escaped our homes together when the fighting between my parents or his parents became too much. We’d take refuge in my grandparents’ house or his. It didn’t matter, since our grandmothers were besties.

Grant and I discovered boys together too.

He took a little longer to decide he *only* liked boys. He dated a few girls in high school, but the reports when he

returned home from the movies, or coffee, or pizza were all, *It was so-so*, or *It was whatever*, or *I'm just not that into her*.

When he came out to me as gay at the end of high school, I was so happy for him to be living his authentic life, though that was an intense time for him.

As we flop onto the couch, he drags a hand through his messy dark-blond hair. "So, what did I do wrong?"

I peer at him, playing at being over-the-top annoyed. "*Holden Kingsley*." I pause like a cross-examiner waiting for a response, even though I'm the one who has a confession to make. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

He raises his hands in surrender. "I didn't do him. He's straight as an arrow."

I roll my eyes. "I know that! The issue is you didn't tell me that he was traded to the San Francisco Dragons."

He raises a curious brow. "Should I have? There were about a hundred other trades in the off-season that I didn't tell you about either. But if you want me to keep you apprised, we can discuss a revision to our friendship pact along those lines. *Grant Blackwood is hereby responsible for keeping Reese Fallon informed of all Major League Baseball trades. This may be exhausting, ridiculous, and downright silly, but if she deems it important, Grant will do it.*"

"Thank you. That's how our friendship works."

He laughs, shaking his head. Then he stops, quirks up his lips, and studies me. "Hold on a minute, girl. Did you fail to mention something about that day with Holden? Did you get more than an interview with him and not dish the dirt?"

And that's my confession. I never told him about that night. I wince, a tiny smidge of guilt for keeping that to myself.

My gut twists as I serve up the truth. "Holden and I had a thing the night of the interview. It was amazing, but I didn't tell you, because I didn't want anything to affect how you saw him as a player, an opponent, or a teammate if he ever became one."

His eyes narrow, and he growls. “You’re in trouble.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you everything, but I truly didn’t want you to go all overprotective big brother if you decided you didn’t like him or if it didn’t work out with him and me.” I sigh. “But then it didn’t work out anyway because I went to South America.”

His expression shifts from mildly annoyed to six ways of delighted. “You banged him. You lost your V-card to Holden Kingsley, and you never told me. Who’s in trouble now?”

I nip that falsehood in the bud. “We didn’t bang. I swear. We, um . . .”

Do I tell him? Does he want those details?

He gives me big blue *I’m waiting* eyes. “I can handle it. I’m not afraid of anything about the female anatomy. I’m not gonna make an *eww* face.”

“I know you’re not. I can still recall the night you let me take a bath in your hotel room before your first Major League opening day.”

He rolls his eyes. “I didn’t watch you take a bath.”

“Well, obviously. Also, I still miss that tub.”

He makes a rolling gesture with his hand. “Spill.”

I huff, then relent. “We kissed and . . .”

“You can say it.” He drops his voice to a stage whisper. “Was it second base or”—he gasps—“third base?”

I swat his shoulder, then whisper, “Third base.”

That earns me a high-five. “And how was it? Did you fake it? Fall asleep during it? Or did he send you to Orgasm Falls?”

I laugh. “Is that a new location in Candy Land?”

“It is. You’ll find it a little east of Blow Job Commons. Just south of Lollipop Woods.”

“Are those two of your favorite locations in the board game?”

He licks his lips salaciously. “Among them. But I also like Hand Job House, which is a hop, skip, and a lick away from Rim Job Lagoon, another great place to visit.”

I smack my hand again on his made-of-steel shoulder. “I almost forgot how naughty you are.”

“Should I have sanitized my mouth for you? Eased you in gently? Maybe left the rimming mention till dessert or coffee?”

“No way. I’ve missed your pure, unfiltered mouth.” I dip my voice to a whisper. “Even though I *know* you talk a good game. Need I remind you of what you told me the last time we all went dancing?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, I gave you my confession that I’m hardly the player everyone thinks I am.” He brings his finger to his lips. “I have secrets to keep.”

For a few seconds, his eyes darken, and his tone goes more intense than I’d expect. Like his secrets are deeper than the ones he’s shared already. Ones about his first time. About how he still sometimes misses that guy.

But maybe now about something else?

I might be reading into his expression, but I swear there’s something new in his eyes. A new secret.

“Speaking of unfiltered mouths,” he says, interrupting my meandering thoughts as he makes a rolling gesture with his hand. “You went there with Kingsley?”

“That night nearly two years ago, we went there. Tongue Palace, I believe it’s called. And it was earth-shatteringly, toe-curlingly, knee-weakeningly good.” I draw a deep breath. “We also made plans that night to get together a second time. To see each other again.”

“Even though it was long-distance?”

“Yes. And we texted for a week until I left the country.”

“Damn. You guys really liked each other,” he says, his tone serious now.

A smile forms, unbidden, at the memory. “Yes. Are you surprised?”

“Not that he liked you. You’re awesome and fantastic, and any man who goes out with you should want to marry you. I just haven’t been able to get a read on him when it comes to dating and women.”

Something doesn’t compute. “How would you get a read on him?”

“He’s buds with Crosby, my third baseman. I’ve hung out with him and Crosby a few times since he moved to town.”

Ohhhhhhh.

This could be useful. Way more revealing than social media.

“So, is he seeing anyone?” My voice pitches upward with hope.

But Grant dashes that quickly with a scoff. “No clue. We’re not super tight. More like workout buds who debate random shit, like whether Harrison Ford was better as Indy or Han Solo.”

I stare sharply at him. “Indy. Always Indy. Brilliant archaeologist by day, Nazi-fighter by night.”

“Han. Had a better love story,” he answers decisively. Opinions, we have ’em.

Grant leans back into the couch cushion, looking all casual and cool in his jeans and tight gray T-shirt. “Anyway, why are you asking if he’s seeing anyone? What’s going on for real, Reese? Are you still hung up on him because of what happened a couple of years ago?”

When he phrases it like that, I shake my head, thinking I should pry the man loose from my mind. “No, but I have fond memories because I was going to have sex with him. I was going to sleep with someone for the first time, but then the night ended too soon. His flight was canceled, and he had to catch an earlier plane. I probably think about him more because of that. Do you know what I mean?”

His blue eyes twinkle with understanding. “I absolutely understand the fond memories of your first time,” he says, the slightest bit wistful. Is he still hung up on the shortstop for the New York Comets like he was for a while? A long, long while.

Understandably.

I study his expression, then ask softly, “Have you heard from him lately? Declan?”

Grant nibbles on the corner of his lips. “Yes.”

My eyes pop. “Tell me.”

He sighs heavily. “I’m not sure it’s my story to tell right now.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just that. Bear with me, okay?”

I huff. “Seriously?”

He nods, his eyes intense. “Yeah, I promise.”

I’m dying to know what’s up, but I also respect that he may not be ready to tell me.

The last time we talked about Declan was before I left the country, when Grant went dancing with Layla, Tia and me. At the club, he admitted just to me that he still missed Declan. I was surprised since he’d seemed so low-key about his ex at that point. But then, he definitely wasn’t low-key after his first spring training.

“But how about you tell me more. Why did it feel right with Holden?”

“Feeling right” was a topic the two of us discussed over late nights in my dorm or his dorm, or the commons. How would I know when it was right? We could debate it endlessly as we considered the guys at college. Considered then often dismissed them. No one floated my boat. Or his. We were such peas in a pod.

As for Grant, he waited until he was twenty-two.

I was twenty-two when I met Holden.

Maybe that was the magic age for both of us.

“It felt right at the time, even though we hardly knew each other,” I explain. “I liked Holden a lot, even in such a short time. He was respectful. He was interested in me as a person. And we just ... connected. This might sound crazy, but I felt like I knew him. Do you know what I mean?”

Grant squeezes my thigh, a reassuring touch. “I know exactly what you mean.”

I scoot closer. “Is that how it was with Declan that first time?”

He takes a few seconds, maybe falling back in time, into memories. “It felt right,” he says softly. “It always felt right.”

Right.

That’s how my one night with Holden felt.

“That makes sense. I felt that too—like I’d have no regrets with Holden,” I say. “Even if I didn’t see him again. But then when we talked about seeing each other again, it felt even more right. Almost ... fated. But fate had other plans.” Time to let go of thoughts of my almost first time once and for all. I fasten on a bright smile. “So, when I meet the next guy that feels right, I’ll know what to look for—someone I’ll have no regrets with.”

“That sounds like a game plan.”

We shift gears and talk about work, with his season kicking off in a few days. This week, I’m starting my new gig with a sports marketing firm in the city that does some great work with nonprofits.

We chat about that, then join Layla and Tia for dinner.

Here I am, together again with my closest friends.

In the same city as my mom.

Sharing food, laughs, and hugs, chatting about all the little things we didn’t talk about over FaceTime or text during the last couple of years.

Tia tells us about a new podcast she is in *mad love with* called *Badass Babe*. It's for women and by women, and it's all about being productive, successful, and taking no shit, she says.

I download it immediately to my phone.

Layla confesses that though she loves Istanbul, she feels a little lost not knowing the language well enough, and she misses home. It's a rare moment of vulnerability for her.

“Well, I personally wouldn't complain if you were in San Francisco,” I add, then turn to Grant. “And give me all the details you didn't share when I was gone. What have you been up to?”

Narrowing his blue eyes, he hums as if deep in thought. “Not much, to be honest. Just busy with work, you know.” He takes a beat, raises his left hand, and strokes his chin.

Oh, so blatant.

“Oh! I remember. I did win a World Series,” he adds.

Like I didn't know. Still, I grab his hand and gawk appropriately at the gaudy thing.

It's so good to be back.

To have this time with these people.

This is what matters most.

Not the man who might happen to be in this city too.

REESE

On Monday morning, everything feels new.

I put on a cute black-and-white pindot blouse, pair it with simple black slacks, and slide on a jacket.

As I walk to my first day on the job as a PR manager, I savor the sprinkling of early spring warmth as I go, with the sun jostling its way to the forefront of the sky, shoving aside the fog rolling through the city.

I cherished my time in Peru, in Colombia, in Chile. But Dorothy was right when she said there's no place like home. I'm clicking my ruby-red slippers the whole way to work. I turn onto the block where my new office is housed.

While I was abroad, I applied for jobs here in town and snagged an online interview with a progressive and innovative publicity firm that works with local businesses on their nonprofit initiatives, especially sports-centric ones. In short—my dream job.

As I near the building, I pass a quirky stationery shop, then a wine and painting place. I bet it's bustling in the evenings with San Franciscans on dates. Maybe someday I'll go there with some new guy.

The guy who feels right. The one I'll want to be serious with.

But not today.

Not tonight.

And not tomorrow.

I haven't moved here to look for a man. I'm here for the next phase of my career.

I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and work with some awesome women who exemplify what it means to be a lady boss.

I reach the office building right at the edge of Hayes Valley, next to a vegan ice cream shop and a pop-up shop advertising twenty-seven varieties of french fries.

Oh, Dorothy, it is good to be home indeed.

I push open the doors, a tiny bit nervous but still ready to tackle whatever comes my way. Inside, the office manager shows me around then introduces me to the woman who owns Moore Media.

"So good to meet you in person," Jillian says. She's the former VP of publicity for the San Francisco Renegades, one of the city's two football teams. A gorgeous Chinese-American woman, she's also the wife of the Renegades' star receiver, Jones Beckett. She left the franchise and started this firm on her own. In a few years, it's become one of the most successful PR shops in the city.

"And I'm thrilled to have you on board. Have you adjusted to being back in the Bay Area?" Jillian asks.

"I carry a light jacket with me wherever I go, and I'm ready to eat trendy food at a moment's notice," I say with a smile.

Laughing, she tucks a strand of sleek black hair behind her ear. "I'd say that's all you need."

We sit down on her cushy couch, along with the VP of marketing I'll be reporting to. That's Adriana. She talks a mile a minute, but I'm digging the way her rat-a-tat-tat style keeps me on my toes. Her pretty voice has a faint trace of a Colombian accent in it. She was raised there, then moved to California when she was ten, I'd learned during our FaceTime interview.

Now together in person, the three of us chat about the clients and projects they want me to work on. I take notes and offer suggestions, enlivened already by the work I'll be doing. Building podcasts, crafting videos, expanding the social media presence for outreach initiatives from various nonprofits.

Athletes with disabilities. Shelter dogs. The Rainbow Alliance.

It's everything my heart loves.

"And tomorrow night, one of our clients—a former Olympic skier—is hosting a cocktail soiree at the Legion of Honor, a casual sort of silent fundraiser for various organizations that they work with," Adriana says, giving more details, then adding, "I would love for you to go. I'll be there too, and can introduce you to athletes, supporters, press, and so on."

I say yes, thrilled for the chance.

When the day ends, I call my mom and update her on everything, then make plans to see her this weekend. That evening, Tia and I hit the Marina with Layla to play a pickup game of volleyball.

On the way home, we say goodbye to Layla, then Tia and I pop into CVS to grab some face masks. Back at my place, we slather on pink charcoal goop to clear out our pores.

"Question. How the hell did charcoal become the *it* thing?" I ask as I flop down on the couch.

"Charcoal lobbied before the Cool Council. Got its blessing."

"Ah, makes perfect sense. Same council that gave the blessing to avocado toast and porkpie hats a few years back?"

"Obvs."

Then she turns on the newest episode of *Badass Babe*, and we listen together as the charcoal does its thing.

Old times are new again, and I'm a happy camper.

A little later, Tia's boyfriend returns from work and whisks her and her glowing face upstairs. I'm guessing he'll be making her glow in other ways.

Good for her.

As for me, I'm all good too. I definitely don't need a man. Not at all.

* * *

The next night, I'm getting ready for the cocktail party, touching up my mascara, when my phone rings.

A bolt of tension slides down my back as I see the name on the screen.

Do I answer it now? Hit ignore? But I can't ignore him forever, so I might as well take the call.

"Hi, Dad," I say tightly.

"Hey, sweetie bear," he says, making me cringe with the nickname he gave me when I was ten.

Let it go. It's no big deal. Who cares that it's been years since you spoke? He's still your dad.

"How's everything? How's Becky? I hear you guys have some exciting news." I brace myself for him to share how wonderfully excited he is to bring new life into the world, though he'll probably cheat on Becky too, and divorce her as soon as the kid is potty-trained.

Or becomes a teenager.

Depends on how long it takes till he's caught sticking his dick someplace else.

He chatters on about the pregnancy, serving up details that I don't care about.

"How wonderful that the baby is the size of a honeydew melon." My phone buzzes, thank God, and a quick check of the screen tells me my Lyft is here. "Dad, I have to go to an event for work."

“Are you free tomorrow? I’d love to talk more. Maybe invite you to a ball game.”

Right. That’s what I want to do. Go see baseball with my pops. Grab some popcorn and peanuts and talk about which pitcher has the best fastball.

Ugh.

“Sure, call me tomorrow.”

Hanging up, I do my best to put him out of my mind.

* * *

I arrive at the Legion of Honor, the museum hosting the event, and it’s a whirlwind of canapés and conversation.

I join Adriana, and we network our hearts and feet out, meeting clients, talking to athletes, and chatting with everyone. I’m *on* for three hours with her. When the event starts to wind down, she shoots me a smile, grabs her purse, and pats her big pregnant belly.

“On that note, this baby and I need to curl up with our full-body pillow and crash. You’re welcome to take off anytime or to hang and eat more shishito peppers and ricotta toast.”

“It’s hard to beat those shishito peppers,” I say.

She narrows her eyes and faux hisses. “I’m jealous. I can’t eat anything yummy without getting heartburn. Oh wait, I can’t eat *anything* without getting heartburn.”

“My mistake. What I meant to say is the peppers were awful and the ricotta was dreadful,” I say, with an exaggerated yuck face.

Adriana nods wisely. “That’s what I thought you said.” She gestures to the exit. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

I spend another half hour circulating, chatting and not stuffing my face. The food is great, but my job here isn’t to scrape together enough apps for a meal.

When the soiree continues to wind down, I spot some late arrivals.

One of them looks like the third baseman for the Cougars.
Crosby Cash.

Right behind him is Chance Ashford, the closing pitcher.

Then, my heart stops. All the air in my lungs rushes out.

Dark hair. Broad shoulders. A strong back I dragged my hands down. Clothes can't hide the muscles. The man is toned everywhere.

But can that be him?

There's no way that can be Holden.

There's no way I'm running into him already.

It's an optical illusion. That is someone else.

Then he turns around, scans the room, and his eyes lock on mine.

This is not a drill.

There's an entire orchestra playing in my chest, hosting a concert celebrating his return.

Years seem to melt away.

And I know. I just know.

He doesn't have a girlfriend.

He says something to his friends, and then he walks toward me.

HOLDEN

What the hell?

The text from my agent lands on my phone as I finish my four-mile run a block away from my gym, sweat-soaked but full of adrenaline, and now vinegar.

I stare at the note one more time, willing it away.

Josh: Dragons just nixed their manager. Hiring a new one for the start of the season.

I heave all the sighs in the fucking city as I dial him. After a quick exchange, I dive into the deep and murky end. “Opening Day is literally tomorrow. I just returned from spring training.” I drag my hand across my jaw, annoyed as fuck. “What kind of club does this? Fire the manager right before the season starts? Wouldn’t this have been better, say, before spring training?”

“It would indeed,” Josh says diplomatically, with a light laugh. “But these are the growing pains of the reorganization and the new management. They’re trying to make changes. They have deep pockets now, thanks to the new ownership structure. We need to remember that, Holden, and we need to remember that too because they were able to fork over some good money for you.”

“Fine. I get it.” I take a deep breath, settling myself. He’s right. As annoying as it is, the Dragons ponied up when it

came to negotiations. The contract I snagged this year will go a long way toward changing my family's life. Hell, it'll pay for my brothers' college. Times two.

"I'll do everything to get an answer from them quickly," Josh says, reassuring me as I reach the gym. "And listen, now that you've called, I'm getting some bites for sponsorships, but ... here's the thing."

I stop in my tracks outside the door, bracing my hand on the brick wall. *Here's the thing* is the prelude to a kiss of death. "What's the thing?" I ask.

"You might want to be ..." He trails off like he's searching for the word.

"Be what?" I bite out.

"More outspoken," he says.

That's odd. "About what? What kind of sponsors want me to be *more* outspoken? On issues, you mean? You want me to write in my Twitter bio that I recycle, I support marriage equality, I like adopting shelter dogs?"

"All good causes, but not exactly what I had in mind. I mean, talk to the press more. You're kind of the king of 'no comment,' Kingsley."

"And you damn well know why, Summers."

"I do know why. But it's good when the watchmaker or the dog food company or the sneaker maker sees you talking to the media. Even platitudes like 'It was a great game' or 'I'm just happy to be here.' That's literally all you have to do."

"And when they turn that into 'My mom snorts lines with her latte every Thursday night,' what should I do then? I hate lying, so it's easier just to say, 'No comment.'"

"Just try. Try saying something about playing. About loving baseball."

"Talking to the press is my least favorite thing to do," I spit out. The memory of the Seattle hatchet job still stings.

“But is it really? You’d rather, say, have your balls waxed than talk to the press? You’d rather do sprinting drills, burpees, bear crawls?”

“Yes, to all four.”

Josh laughs. “You are a special kind of ornery. Think about it, Holden. Just think about it.”

“I will,” I tell Josh, then end the call.

I wasn’t always ornery when talking to the media.

I was the opposite.

But I don’t think about the press when I head into the gym to hit the weights.

Instead, I work on word games in my head. I toss out a six-letter word, and I make as many combos as I can while I lift.

I like to work my mind at the same time as I train my body. It’s one of the tricks and techniques I’ve perfected over the last few years. Rather than turning my mind into a blank, I ask it to work as hard as it can.

Then, when I’m at the plate, I can zero in on details like possible pitches, where they’ll land, where they might go.

Same thing applies to when I’m fielding second base.

All of that thinking helps my body and mind to work together on the diamond.

To focus all my energy on baseball.

It’s my special skill—No Distractions Holden.

The press is a distraction. So, I don’t think about it.

* * *

Later that evening, I grab some chow with Crosby before the event he talked me into attending with him. He drags along Chance too, his closing pitcher on the Cougars.

We’ve just arrived at the Legion of Honor, and Crosby has just turned his car over to the valet, when my phone rings with

a call from Josh.

I answer at the speed of light. “What’s the story?”

“The manager is in, and the news is golden.”

That piques my interest. “Yeah? Who is he?”

Crosby’s eyes are wide—he can hear Josh’s end of the conversation.

“Former major league utility player. He was a minor league manager, and he’s been a sportscaster for the last few years. Great track record. Edward Thompson.”

A grin takes over my face. Something terrible just turned into something awesome. “Excellent choice.”

I thank Josh for the news, then turn to my friends. “Thompson is the guy who gave me this great piece of advice a couple of years ago when I was in Seattle. I’m indebted to him.” I scratch my jaw, amazed at the luck and coincidence. I tell Crosby and Chance about that Webflix-movie moment in the Seattle ballpark. Who’d have thought he’d wind up as my manager?

“He sounds like a Baseball Buddha,” Crosby says, unruffled as always.

“That’s exactly what he was. In thirty seconds, he knew precisely what I needed to do to improve my game.”

Chance taps his chin, his dark eyes going thoughtful. “I’d like to meet this wise man. See if he can tell me how to pick up two miles per hour on my fastball. I’d be throwing at Mach speed then.”

In a much better mood, I bound up the steps. The guys and I are hitting the tail end of the cocktail party, but that ought to be just enough socialization for me. Behind me, Crosby tells Chance, “You’d be unhittable, man,” and rubs his palms together at the prospect.

Chance raises his chin. “You mean even more unhittable. Especially if you’re Holden.” Chance shoots me a smirk. “If memory serves, aren’t you oh-and-ten against me at the plate?”

I threw to you when you were on the Bandits. Got you out every single at bat.”

I sneer. “I hit you once.”

“Fine. Once, but it was a tiny little piddle to first,” the confident closer says with a laugh. “I got out of the inning unscathed.”

Crosby laughs, clapping Chance on the shoulder. “Never, never leave the Cougars. You’re our secret weapon.”

“Not so secret though. Everyone knows this guy is one of the most vicious closing pitchers in the league,” I say as we make our way through the lobby and into the room where the cocktail fete is winding down.

I give myself a new mission between now and when we face the Cougars—work on hitting the unhittable Chance Ashford.

Already I’m devising a plan to study his games and his pitches, ask one of our pitchers to—

I stop thinking about strategy. I stop thinking about *sports*, which I didn’t imagine was possible.

My skin buzzes. The air crackles.

I’m seeing a mirage, an oasis in the desert.

A motherfucking vision.

Nearly two years after I saw her last, Reese is as beautiful as she was that day. Maybe more.

My body has forgotten nothing about Reese Fallon as my pulse spikes and a grin spreads unbidden on my face.

Everything else fades away. The party. My friends. The music. “Be right back,” I mutter to the guys, and then I head to the woman I could never completely force out of my mind, no matter how hard I tried.

HOLDEN

I go first with a “Hey.”

“Hi,” she says, all soft and breathy.

The sound of her voice is an elixir I didn’t even know I was looking for, but one I want to swallow down whole.

“How are you?”

I can’t stop looking at her. My body is floating, my brain is singing. How the hell could I spend one day with her and still feel this way nearly two years later?

This must be the chemistry talking. That’s the only explanation.

“I’m great.” She can’t seem to stop smiling either, the sexiest grin I’ve ever seen on anyone. “How are you, Holden?”

The way she says my name sends hot sparks down my spine. She says it like she’s thinking of me the same damn way I’m thinking of her.

“Good. Yeah. Really good,” I reply.

Wow. Talk much, asshole?

“What are you doing here?” I ask, trying to form questions, intelligent ones, not grunts and *yeahs* and *wows*.

But I am floored by her.

By her presence in this longitude and latitude.

In this city.

In this room.

The music grows louder, and I gesture to a nearby alcove, away from the hustle and bustle. It's quiet here, and more private.

"I work for a PR firm in town," Reese answers.

My mind spins like a Tilt-A-Whirl. She can't have said that—*in town*. No way is that possible. "You work in San Francisco now?" I hold all the breath in the world. That would be too good to be true.

She probably has a boyfriend.

She can't possibly be single.

Lightning doesn't strike the same spot twice.

"I do. I just returned a few days ago. I got this amazing job here, and I'm still doing my podcast."

My eyes widen. "You're really back," I say with wonder. Yeah, can't make long sentences, can't hide that I'm awestruck. Nothing to do but forge ahead. "How was it?"

"Amazing. Life-changing. I learned so much. I feel like I can tackle anything, even things I don't know how to do yet. But that's the biggest skill I've learned." She grins, then waves a dismissive hand. "I'm going on and on."

"I want to hear all about it though. It sounds amazing."

"It was. And you've been playing great." She gestures to me, her hand nearly grazing my chest. *Let it graze me, beautiful*. "I check in on your stats from time to time."

I square my shoulders, pride spreading through me. "It's been a good two years when it comes to baseball."

"Seems like it."

I stare, mesmerized, drinking in those blonde waves, those crystal blue eyes, those lush red lips.

"You're still wearing red," I say, low and husky.

She tries to rein in a grin, but then she nods, her voice sensual, inviting. "I am."

Lust trips through my veins.

“You look ...”

But before I finish the thought with *spectacular, gorgeous, like a dream come true*, I stop because—what if she’s involved?

She reads my thoughts though. She must because she blurts, “Holden, I’m single,” like it’s a thing she’s been dying to tell me.

Well, it’s the thing I’ve been dying to know.

I inch closer. We’re maybe a foot away from each other here in this nook, away from the party. “Me too.”

“Yeah?” She licks her lips.

“Yes.”

Everything buzzes. Everything is electric. “I feel like I’ve gone back in time.”

“Like it’s that night again,” she says, her words sizzling over my skin.

“Maybe it can be,” I offer.

“What happens next?”

“Want me to tell you or show you?”

“Show me,” she says, so irresistible.

I close the distance, cup her cheek in my hand, then lock eyes with her.

I bring my face close to hers. The stutter of her breath makes me hot, turned all the way on. Dusting my lips across her forehead, I tease her, pressing a kiss there, inhaling her scent.

I move down to her eyelids.

Leaving gentle kisses there.

She whimpers.

I take my time, letting her know how I have missed this. She responds with body language, inching closer, shuddering,

sighing. I drag my thumb down her cheek.

“So soft, so sexy,” I whisper.

“Kiss me, please,” she says as she trembles.

“I’m getting there,” I say as I kiss her jaw, inching along her gorgeous face. Then I pull back, taking in her expression.

It’s one of exquisite torture.

Her lips part. Her breath comes fast.

I need to have her.

I capture her mouth with mine, and I kiss those red lips.

Moaning and sighing, we consume each other like lovers reunited.

She tastes sweet and sultry, like the woman I couldn’t get enough of. I drag her against me, hauling her as close as can be, feeling the press of her body as I kiss her with the same ferocity I felt that night.

Is this lust?

Desire?

Two years of horniness, pent-up and unleashed?

Who knows? Who cares?

All I know is this kiss is going to my head.

We kiss hard and passionately, then slow and soft, and when we break apart, I laugh softly—a relieved, joyful laugh.

“Nice to see you again,” I whisper.

“It’s very good to see you,” she says, and that mix of sexy yet still innocent is such a delicious cocktail. A drink that makes me want more, makes me want to get closer to her.

I play with a strand of her hair. “Want to pick up where we left off?”

“I do.”

“Good. Because I want to see you, take you out, take you home with me. I want to start up again,” I tell her, determined

to make this happen. When your What-If Woman walks back into your life, you don't let her go. Especially since we've got the same click, the same connection as before. Or maybe, a connection that's even stronger.

One we both want to nurture.

"I want all that too," she says, seeming giddy over the prospect of an *us*. The *us* we wanted to have before—the chance to date, to be a thing, to be more than one night.

We were never going to be a hookup then, and we aren't now either.

Funny how I was with my college girlfriend for a year and never felt this intensity. But with Reese, I feel so much damn certainty, so much possibility.

I won't let her slip away this time.

No way.

Here in the alcove, we talk, catching up on life, as she tells me about her friends and her new job, then asks me more questions about baseball and what I've been up to.

I tell her the good news I got just before the party about the new manager. "I've been on edge, hoping for a great new manager. Someone to help revamp the team. And this guy is terrific. I even met him a year or so ago, randomly in Seattle. And he gave me a great piece of advice about my stance that changed my game."

"That's awesome," she says, eyes alight with excitement. "Who is he?"

"Edward Thompson," I say, still stoked that he's coming to town. "He has a great reputation from what I know of him. Solid utility player over eight years. Terrific minor league manager. Amazing broadcaster."

All the color drains from her face. She gulps. Winces. Clears her throat.

"What's wrong, beautiful?"

A deep line creases her forehead. "He's my father."

REESE

That's my father for you.

He can ruin a night faster than a speeding bullet, crush new romance more powerfully than a locomotive, and destroy hope in a single headline.

He's Super Dream Destroyer.

So typical of the man to find a way to steal my joy yet again. I bet this is the real reason he returned to California, not for Becky's job. I bet he's been squirreling away this little nugget of news to spring whenever it suited him, never thinking how it would affect anyone else.

Clenching my jaw, I start to grind my teeth, something I haven't done since I was younger.

Something I did when I was thirteen, when I discovered he was cheating. I'd gone one evening to a minor league game he was coaching—at his invitation. Attending was no hardship because I loved baseball—loved it to the marrow of my bones.

My mom was working late at the hospital, so I went alone. My volleyball game was canceled, so I left San Francisco early, catching a bus to Sacramento. When I arrived at the ballpark, I found him locked in an embrace with a woman who was not my mother, his wife.

Tears stinging my eyes, hurt squeezing my chest, I turned around, caught another bus home, and told him later I'd never made it to the ballpark.

I could barely sleep that night.

And the next, and the next.

In bed, nothing drowned out the siege of questions. *Do I tell Mom? Do I tell Dad I know? Do I tell my sister?*

After a few weeks of teeth-grinding, tossing, and turning, I finally decided to tell my mom. But when I sat down to say the hardest words I'd ever have to say, she looked at me with sympathy and kindness in her bright blue eyes. "I know, sweetie. I've known for a few months."

At age thirteen, already taller than she and all kinds of gawky, I crawled into her lap and sobbed.

We both did, comforting each other over his infidelity.

A few days later, he moved out.

A few weeks later, he moved in with that woman.

I didn't go to another one of his games for a long time. For months, I turned my back on baseball too. Part of me wanted to hate the sport. To vilify the game.

But Grant was playing in his first high school championship, and when I begrudgingly went to the series to root for my friend, I realized that baseball was so much more than my father. It was my friends. It was my own love of sports.

I refused to let my father destroy the game I'd loved since I was a little girl. I wouldn't let him take that from me too.

I made baseball my own, separate from him, starting with my name, jettisoning his for my mother's.

For more than a decade, he drifted in and out of my life like the wind.

Now he's grafted himself back on to me.

Holden's eyes are lined with misery. He swallows, parts his lips, and finally manages to speak. "He's your father? For real?" he croaks, like each word tastes bitter and acrid, like burned food, or the taste of metal.

"Yes," I say coolly. "I am Edward Thompson's daughter. And I don't use his last name. I haven't used it ever since he

—”

I cut myself off. I could so easily launch into a litany of all the reasons I don't like my father. But the look in Holden's eyes mere seconds ago when he told me about his new manager says I'd be hurting Holden. If I finished my sentence the way I want—*haven't used it ever since he cheated on my mom repeatedly*—I'd be serving up a detail that isn't going to help Holden do his job.

I can't hurt him that way.

I have to protect him from the truth of my father.

My dad *is* an amazing manager. He's revered by players. He's an incredible broadcaster.

He's a baseball wizard.

That's all Holden needs to know. He doesn't need to know how my father treats women.

“I don't use his last name. *Obviously*,” I say, forcing out a laugh even though it's not really funny.

He scratches his jaw. “Yeah, I kind of figured that out pretty quickly. And I had no idea you were related.”

“But how would you know?” I ask gently. He sounds like he's beating himself up. “You said you only heard today that he became manager, so why would you have been looking him up? You'd have to dig pretty deep in his bio to find any connection to his daughters.”

The man who kissed me minutes ago shakes his head several times, still stuck in disbelief. “I can't believe you're the ...”

“The coach's daughter,” I supply. It's best to deal with facts. And rules. If you mess with the coach's daughter and it doesn't work out, then the coach might bench you, drop you in the lineup, or worse, recommend you to the general manager for a trade. To top it off, there's the perception issue—how the press might view us, how the press might spin it to fans, how my boss might see things. “Which means I'm *off-limits*,

according to the athlete code. I'm *forbidden fruit*. We'd be gossip blog fodder."

"Fuck. We would, and they might," he mutters, dragging a hand through his hair. "And my agent wants me to work on my rep with the press." Another anguished groan comes from his lips, and I make a mental note to ask him later about his agent's wishes. Now's not the time. Especially when he clenches his jaw and grits out a long, frustrated sigh. "I can't believe this, Reese. I want to see you. I want to take you out. I want to be with you, but ..."

I love his words madly, but they slice me to the core too.

Because of the *but*.

Because of the inevitable pressure of public opinion.

Doesn't matter that I'm not close to my dad.

Doesn't matter if my father cares or not if I date one of his players.

For the record, I have no idea if he'd care. But I doubt it because he only cares about his own relationships.

The ones he can get away with.

None of that matters, though, when the perception is so fraught with whispers, with secrets, with the possibility of the forbidden.

I suppose I've always been forbidden fruit to players; it's just never been an issue till now.

I was the teammate's daughter when my father eked out an unremarkable career as a pinch hitter and bench warmer for eight teams over eight years. As a manager, he worked his way up through the minors before segueing briefly to the sportscaster job and then landing this, his first major league manager gig.

"I'm the player's daughter. I'm the broadcaster's daughter. And yes, I'm the coach's daughter," I state plainly. I don't need to give him power by *not* saying his name, by dancing around the problem. Best to know what we're up against—the

way *this* would look, especially for him. “Edward Thompson is my father. We aren’t close, but still.”

Holden pinches the bridge of his nose.

Heaviness descends on us.

“Reese,” he says, his voice like doom.

But I’ve already known the hatchet was coming down on us.

“I know,” I say, setting a hand on his arm. “I know, Holden. There is no picking up where we left off.”

“I want to. You have to know I want to,” he says, his eyes tormented, his tone imploring, like he desperately wants me to know.

I desperately like knowing. “I want that too. I *wanted* it,” I correct. “But I get it.”

“Worst news ever,” he mutters, swaying closer to me, dusting one last kiss on my forehead.

A kiss that makes me shiver from head to toe.

Then he pulls back.

I want to say that we can be friends. But Holden and I were never friends. We were a match set to kindling. We were instant attraction. We were passion and respect, igniting all at once. We were destined for one path and one path only.

He was always supposed to be my first. He always felt like more than just a guy I wanted. He was on the boyfriend track.

A heavy sigh comes from him as he scrubs a hand over the back of his neck. “I can’t believe this. These last few hours—learning he was the manager before the party, running into you—made me feel like I was the luckiest guy in the world. And the kiss. My God. That kiss, and us, and everything.” He sounds lost in the possibilities that were unfurling mere moments ago. “And listen, I’ve been pretty lucky the last few years. The only thing I’ve had to complain about is the media.”

I tilt my head, going all RCA dog. That piques my interest. “The media? What do you mean? You mentioned working on your rep. Is that the issue?” I ask, since he can’t simply be talking about gossip. Or the potential media fodder that dating me would be. He must be talking about something else.

“Ah. The black mark of me,” he says, faux darkly. “I’m terrible with the press. And the upshot is I don’t have any sponsorship deals. Those would go a long way to gain future security for my family and me.”

My right eyebrow raises in question. “You were so great with me though. I refuse to believe that.”

“Believe it. Definitely believe it.”

“What happened?”

He swallows roughly, then tells me about a reporter who invented facts about his family.

The story makes my gut churn and my head hurt. “That’s terrible to twist things around. On behalf of all reporters and podcasters, I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“Me too.”

But before we can commiserate further, a voice booms over the loudspeaker.

“Thank you so much for attending. The Legion of Honor will be closing in a few minutes. Please make your way to the exit.”

That’s the end of the night. My reunion with the guy who got away is now on ice once again.

“You came here with friends? I think I saw you with Crosby Cash and Chance Ashford,” I say, trying to shift gears.

He grins, seeming delighted that I know who they are. “Those are my buds. Met them recently, but they’re good guys.”

“And Grant Blackwood as well,” I add.

He quirks a brow. “I don’t know him well yet, but we’ve hung out a few times at the gym. How did you know that?”

“He’s only my best friend, and has been forever,” I say in a conspiratorial whisper.

Holden groans, an amused sound. “Woman, how do you have so many baseball connections?”

I shrug. “I love the game. And Grant didn’t know a thing about what happened between us until a few nights ago. But he’s been my friend since we were kids. Our grandmas are BFFs and have a weekly poker club together. It’s adorable.”

“That sounds adorable. And he’s a cool guy. We kidnapped Crosby together at his best friend’s wedding a couple of months ago.”

I laugh, loving the anecdote, loving how quickly Holden became buds with those two. “That sounds ... *fun for you*, rather than Crosby.”

“We had no choice. He enlisted us in a pact to keep him in check. He was trying to avoid women, but then he went and fell in love with his best friend’s sister, Nadia Harlowe.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. My romantic heart loves that,” I say.

He shoots me the swooniest smile, one that suggests he’s a romantic too. “I’m happy for him. I know Grant is too.”

“And speaking of Grant, I hope you don’t mind that I said something to him. I swear I only told him good things. Because there are only good things to say.”

He groans. “You’re making this hard. So damn hard. I want to take you home, and kiss you all night, and take you out. Over and over.” With a deep sigh, he seems to reroute his thoughts. “And of course I don’t mind that you told Grant. He’s a good one, from the little I know. And if you trust him, I do too.”

I nudge his elbow as we shuffle toward the lobby, taking our time. “So you’re consorting with the enemy. Hanging out with all the Cougars. Your bitter rivals.”

He puts his finger to his lips. “Shh. Don’t tell anyone I’m the Dragon who hangs out with the Cougars. The golden team of the city, when we’re sworn enemies on the field.”

“Funny that the expansion team has become the favorite child,” I say, but it’s not entirely a surprise—the Cougars won the World Series last year.

“Meanwhile, we’re more tarnished than an old set of candlesticks. We’re not anything but reviled. But I hope that changes with the new personnel, all-new players, new coaching staff. Spring training was good, and the guys on the team seem cool,” he says as he grabs his phone from his pocket. “I should check and see if Crosby is still around, since he drove.”

After he slides his phone open, he stops in his tracks, laughing at the message. “No surprise. They took off already. They say I can find my own damn ride home,” he says.

“They are ruthless.”

“It’s a guy thing.”

I laugh. “Yeah. I kind of know how guys are.”

He freezes, his eyes popping to planet size. “Oh. What do you mean? You know how guys are what?” he asks, stumbling over every syllable.

“Not like that,” I lower my voice to reassure him before we reach the lobby and the crowds. It’s still just us, so I say, “In fact, I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

The look in his eyes is pure joy, chased by heat. He blows out a long stream of air, then another. “Reese Fallon, what am I going to do with you?”

“Nothing,” I say softly. “Unfortunately.”

“I know.” He steps closer, glances around to make sure no one can see us, then wraps a hand around my arm. “I haven’t been with anyone either.”

I tremble, a full-body shudder traveling through me. “Not at all?”

He shakes his head. “No one, Reese.”

My head spins. I don’t know what to make of that—*two years*. “Was there a reason for that?”

With those green eyes pinning me, the man simply shrugs. “I don’t do hookups. And I didn’t meet anyone who made me sit up and take notice. You know me—I prefer *connection*,” he says, a refrain of the words he said the night we met.

Words that make my bones hum, my blood sear.

“Everything’s sexier that way. Better that way,” I say softly, repeating his words back to him.

“More real. Like this,” he says, and the warmth, the heat, the absolute fire between us crackles.

Electricity sparks like a power grid lit up after an outage, charging the whole city.

We stay like that, staring, gazing, like we’re about to crash into each other and combust. The two of us are a chemical reaction. We were before; we’re more so now.

The way his eyes travel up and down my body, the way his glittering irises linger on my lips turn me liquid.

I want him even more than I did the first time around.

But I can’t have him.

Thanks, Dad.

You suck.

I tear myself away though. Otherwise, I’ll climb him like a tree. “We should go.”

“Yes, we should,” he seconds, and a sadness clobbers my chest. This will probably be our last time doing anything.

“You’re my what-if guy,” I say.

“You were always my what-if woman, Reese. I even told Crosby that earlier this year.”

“You told him about me?” I ask, a smile tipping my lips, because I love that.

“Nothing private. Nothing personal. Just that there was this woman I couldn’t get out of my mind.”

My skin warms, and my heart flip-flops. This man makes me swoon over and over. “We really better go now, or we’ll

both do something we regret.”

“I wouldn’t bet on me regretting it,” he says.

I arch a brow. “Are you sure there? I think you would.”

Dragging a hand through his hair, he sighs. “Stop knowing me so well already.”

I give him a soft, resigned smile.

“But for the record, I would not regret being with you. I’d regret crossing a line I shouldn’t.”

They’re pretty much one and the same, but I don’t point that out.

We reach the lobby at last. There, a woman with lush red hair whips her gaze our way, then flashes a grin at Holden. A local sports reporter, she seizes the chance. “Holden, good to see you. Exciting news about the Dragons and the new manager. With you on the team, and now Thompson, what do you think about the Dragons’ chances? You bring such a great presence to the club.”

He scoffs then says in a surly voice, nearly under his breath, “I love baseball, but I’m nobody’s savior. I just want to play.”

Oh no.

My shoulders straighten.

My radar pings.

That’s going to sound terrible in the press. All they’re going to run is a fat headline that says “Lone Wolf Kingsley.”

“Excuse me?” she asks. I’m not sure if she missed his grumble or if she’s surprised by what he said, but I take it for the lifeline it is.

I don’t wait for permission. I don’t care that he isn’t my client, isn’t my boyfriend. He’s a guy I care about, and that’s all the reason I need to help him.

I lean close to Holden and whisper, “Tell her this: ‘I’m excited about all the changes on the team and happy to be a

part of it. Thank you so much.””

Holden repeats after me, and that’s enough for the redhead.
“Thank you, Holden.”

Once we’re outside, we stop on the steps, and I turn to him. Holden Kingsley has more to worry about than how the media would spin him sleeping with the coach’s daughter. Right now, he’s his own worst enemy.

“You need some lessons in how to talk to the press. And I know just the person to help.”

HOLDEN

Four miles down.

A healthy breakfast.

A full round of weights.

Time to go to work for Opening Day.

I head out of my building, ready to snag a ride with Crosby to the Dragons' ballpark before he goes to the Cougars'.

Dude likes to drive. More power to him, though I don't get it. The best thing about San Francisco versus Los Angeles? Never needing my own wheels here is at the top of my list.

Crosby's outside my place in Pacific Heights, tossing his keys up and down in his palm.

Grant leans casually against the passenger side door of Crosby's red Tesla. "For the millionth time, a hot dog is not a sandwich."

Crosby scoffs. "Two pieces of bread. Something in the middle. That's a sandwich, man," he says.

As I bound down the steps, Grant whips his head back and forth. "It's *folded* bread. It's rolled. That's not a sandwich. Not a sandwich on any planet."

I clear my throat. "Pretty sure on Planet Inedible, a hot dog *is* indeed a sandwich. But on this planet, can we agree it's on the same level with muffins?"

“Thank you,” Grant says, gesturing to me like I’ve vindicated his very presence on earth. “Thank you very much.” He turns back to Crosby. “Muffins and hot dogs don’t belong anywhere.”

Crosby holds up his hands. “Dude, I don’t eat either of those things. It was a semantics debate. Not a which-tastes-better-because-neither-does debate.”

“And the debate rages on,” I say as I slide into the back seat, Grant into the front.

It’s funny, seeing Grant in a brand-new light as Reese’s longtime friend. I don’t know him well, beyond agreeing on the wrongness of hot dogs, but I’ve always thought he’s a good guy, so I can understand why she’d be tight with him.

As Crosby turns on the ignition, he tosses me a glance in the rearview mirror. “How long do I have to be your chauffeur? You’re not even on our team.”

Grant speaks to him in a reassuring tone. “Now, now. We need to be nice to the poor Dragon. It’s tough that he’s not on a team as good as ours, Crosby. We should be magnanimous to the little guys.”

I have no choice but to flip them both the bird. I start with Grant. “This is for you.” Then the driver. “And this one is for you.”

Crosby adopts a simpering smile. “Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

Grant makes a time-out gesture. “Clarification, for semantics and all. Is that the side where you’re with someone or where you’re all alone?”

“Alone. I bet you know nothing about waking up alone, tomcat,” Crosby says to Grant.

Grant flubs his lips. “Please. You think I’d let some rando sleep over?”

“Wait, so no one sleeps over at your place?” I lean closer to the front, interest piqued. “Are you a bed hog, or are you just one hundred percent against relationships?”

The Cougars catcher shudders. “No. I’m not against relationships at all. The issue is this.” He jerks his head around to level me with a stare. “Did you know most guys want to cuddle? So much. Like, all night long.”

“I didn’t know *that*. But I know *this*,” Crosby puts in, hooking a thumb at himself before he turns the next corner. “I fucking love it. So yeah, I’m not surprised. I had a hunch most guys were secret cuddlers.”

“I am here to out them. I’m outing them all. Guys like to cuddle!” Grant slams a hand on the dashboard for emphasis.

“I’m not ashamed to admit I’m a cuddle monster,” Crosby says. “I wrap my arms around Nadia all night long and don’t let her go. Space? Fuck that. I want her against me, and I want to be against her.”

“That’s my point,” Grant says, pointing at him. “But no one will admit it.”

“There are so many negative images of men in the media. *Guys don’t like affection. Guys don’t have feelings. Guys don’t like relationships.* Fuck that. I love all of the above,” Crosby says.

“Holden, what about you? Cuddle monster or solo sleep rider?” Grant asks, intensely serious.

I snort. “Who knows? It’s been a while.”

“Are you fasting, man?” Grant asks. “Like a woman diet?”

I shrug. “Seems that way.”

Crosby clears his throat as he turns on Van Ness. “But wait a sec, Grant. Didn’t you just disparage other dudes for cuddling?”

Grant nods. “I’m not disparaging dudes for wanting to cuddle or wanting to cuddle *with me*. I mean, I fully understand why they’d want to. Look at me. I’m the Mount Everest of cuddling,” he says, gesturing to his frame.

I laugh. “You want some coffee with that extra dose of cockiness you took this morning?”

“Nah. I’m full up. But thanks for the offer,” he deadpans, then continues. “But the thing is—I’m particular.”

“So you’re saving all your stores of pent-up cuddle energy for Mr. Right?” I ask.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Mr. Right gets all my cuddles,” he says playfully, then shifts gears lickety-split. “But now is not the time for cuddle convos. It is time for baseball and only baseball. Opening Day, men. Are we ready?”

“Always ready. I’ve even got my talking points handy for all the press.” Crosby slides into a gregarious tone. “It’s a brand-new season. And I’m ready to give my all every single day, every single game.”

Grant picks up the baton, dipping into his most affable voice. “Do I think we have a chance at the World Series again? Of course we do, but it’s a long season, and you’ve got to play every at bat with your heart, mind, and body. That’s all you can do. Especially since every team wants the same thing.”

Crosby whistles. “You’re the poster boy of media quotes.”

Grant flashes another grin. “The press loves me. The media had been champing at the bit for pro athletes to come out for years. For the longest time, sports were the last bastion of *let’s pretend there are no queer players*. Because *that’s* logical.”

“Of the seven hundred fifty pro baseball players, it made so much sense that none were gay,” Crosby says dryly. “Or any of the other majors.”

“Exactly. Then everything changed when Sandy Hildebrand bought the Dallas football team fifteen years ago,” Grant says.

Hildebrand was the first openly gay team owner, and once he started having Pride nights at the stadium and working with queer men and women who ran TV networks and big businesses, things started to change, both in college and the pros. Sponsorship opportunities poured in, the leagues opened up.

“That got the ball rolling,” I say, since I know the history he’s talking about too.

“Exactly. More athletes came out of the closet and the media flocked to them. Fans too,” Grant continues. “So now, I’m like a reporter’s wet dream.”

“Not if you say *that* to a reporter. ‘Wet dream,’” Crosby snorts.

“Maybe consider using ‘nocturnal emission,’” I deadpan.

“Duly noted,” Grant says.

“Meanwhile, I’m the opposite—the king of ‘no comment,’” I say.

“You weren’t last night,” Crosby points out.

I frown. He’d already gone when the reporter ambushed me and Reese helped me with what to say. “How did you know?”

“Nadia saw a quote this morning when she was scanning the press clippings. It was in a local athletes’ roundup thing.”

My heart rate surges.

Please let it be good.

I grab my phone, hunting first through my scads of messages. Good or bad, I’m willing to bet Josh texted me.

Yup, he did.

I open his note.

Josh: This is what I’m talking about. Quotes like this! “I’m excited about all the changes on the team and happy to be a part of it. Thank you so much.” Keep that shit up. We could even get you a press person just to keep you on point like that. More of that, man!

Holden: I’m on it. I’m meeting with somebody this week.

Josh: Great. You will soon master the art and science of saying nothing useful with a smile.

Holden: I hate lying.

Josh: It's not lying. It's spinning.

Holden: It's lying because they can tell I don't want to talk to them.

Josh: You did it last night. Do it again. Keep doing it. Got it?

Holden: Yes, Daddy.

I put the phone away, and Crosby glances in the rearview mirror as he nears the ballpark. "What's the story?"

"He wants me to have some media training. So I can keep saying shit like 'Everything's coming up roses.'"

Crosby jumps on this. "Dude, that's what I was telling you before. I think that'd be an excellent idea. All you need is a coaching session, and you'll be spinning words into sponsorship gold like G and me do," he says, clapping Grant, who has more endorsement deals than even Crosby, on the shoulder.

There is no more golden boy in baseball than Grant Blackwood.

But do I tell them that Reese offered to help me out last night? That I've got a meeting with her this weekend? To go over some media tips, then practice them in a quick follow-up interview for her podcast.

Before I can say a word, though, Crosby barks at his phone.

"Hey Google, call Nadia." As it's ringing, he says to me, "She just started working with this new press firm on all her charitable stuff. The woman who runs it is great. I'm sure she's got someone who can give you a quick coaching session."

Yup. Better to tell him. "I've already got—"

But I don't snag a chance to finish the sentence, since Crosby is talking into the speakerphone to his girlfriend. "Hey,

sweetheart. Can you hook my helpless friend Holden up with a one-on-one session with someone over at Moore Media?”

“Of course. Jillian has a new hire who’ll be perfect for him. Reese Fallon. I think she even interviewed him a couple of years ago.”

I pipe in before this gets out of hand. “I’ve already got a meeting with her. It’s all good. Thank you, Nadia.”

“I’m so glad to hear that, Holden,” she says to me. “Jillian was so excited to hire her. She started one of the fastest-growing new sports podcasts in recent memory.”

“She still does her podcast,” I say, pride in my tone because I am damn proud of her. “It’s terrific.”

“I’m glad you two are working together,” Nadia says.

“It’s not really work. I’m doing a quick follow-up interview for her podcast—a ‘where are you now’ thing. And then she’s just helping me out with tips. As friends,” I point out, since we aren’t athlete and client.

But are we truly friends?

We’re sort of professional, but we’re more like ... almost lovers.

When Crosby pulls into the lot to drop me off, he takes the phone off speaker and lowers his voice for Nadia.

As they talk quietly, Grant swivels around, a smile on his face but lasers in his eyes. “Whatever happens with Reese, do not break her heart. Or I will no longer be Mr. Nice Guy.”

I blink, surprised at first, but then I nod, understanding him completely. “The last thing I want to do is hurt her.”

“She’s like a sister to me,” he adds tightly.

“You have nothing to worry about. Because nothing can happen between us.”

I leave and walk into the clubhouse.

* * *

As I pull on my uniform, I'm chatting with the guys on the team when Edward Thompson strides in.

The energy shifts in the room.

The guys straighten their shoulders, stand taller, and lower their voices as they wait to hear from the new skipper.

I tuck my shirt into my pants and turn around as the man, salt-and-pepper in his hair, an inviting smile on his face, moves down the line of lockers.

He shakes the hand of one of our starting pitchers. "So good to see you, Dante. How's Macy?"

"Excellent," he says. "She just released a new mystery novel."

"Good for her. Her last one was riveting."

He continues his walk. Shakes the hand of our closing pitcher. "Good to see you, John. How's your mom doing with her knee?"

"Surgery went well. She's much better."

"Beautiful. So good to hear."

He makes his way to me. Offers a hand. Clasps mine. "Holden Kingsley. Nice to see you again."

Does he actually remember me from that thirty-second encounter in Seattle? "Good to see you again too, sir," I say, admiration in my tone.

He keeps holding my hand, his grip firm. "How's your family? Your mom? Your dad? Your brothers? They're twins, right?"

And the answer is—he does. "Wonderful. They're in college now."

"That's great. And I saw you made some adjustments after we met."

“I did. They made a big difference.”

“They took your game from good to great.”

As he chats with the rest of the guys, a warmth spreads through my chest. Damn, that compliment felt good.

When he’s done, he clears his throat, stopping at the front of the locker room. “Let’s treat this as a new day. We’re a brand-new organization with a clean slate. Forget the past. Start over, starting today,” he says, stabbing the air for emphasis.

He talks a little more, and when he’s done, he returns to me. “You’re batting fourth.”

Excitement tears through me. I’ve been batting fifth and sixth. Batting cleanup is huge.

Batting cleanup *and* cleaning up my media image? Josh is right. This is what I need to take my career to the next level.

“Thank you, sir.”

He leaves, and I vow not to think about his daughter.

Well, until the end of the game, at least.

And it works.

We win the first game. The next two games as well.

When I meet Reese on Saturday morning for coffee at the Ferry Building, I’m confident my baseball laser focus will serve me well.

But as I enter the terminal, my heart stops and stutters the second I see her.

Resistance is going to be so much harder than I’d thought.

REESE

Jillian knocks on my cube. “Knock, knock,” she says, flashing that bright grin she’s known for.

I swivel away from my laptop and the plan I’m developing for a shelter dog organization that works closely with football players.

“Hey, Jillian. How’s everything?”

“Fabulous. Especially since I just got a call from Nadia Harlowe.”

I sit up straighter, ears pricking with curiosity. “She owns the Hawks football team. She’s amazing. One of my heroines in sports.”

“She’s fantastic, a good friend of mine too. She said that her boyfriend asked if she could hook up a Dragons player with a press person. Then she mentioned that you were already meeting with Holden this weekend,” she says, like she’s fishing for more details, intrigued and curious.

I tense. Shoot. Am I not allowed to still do interviews? Jillian said when she hired me that she liked my podcast. She even raved about an episode with Asher St. James, the recently retired American soccer star who tore it up in the Champions League in Europe before he launched his second career as a high-end photographer. The man is the ultimate charmer, and on my podcast, he told me a dishy story about a date he’d gone on. So I hope Jillian hasn’t changed her mind. And I definitely hope I didn’t overstep when I offered to help Holden with some tips.

Tension swirls inside me, settling heavily in my gut. “Do you want me to cancel it? I saw him at the party last night, and I did an interview with him a few years ago, so I thought it’d be good to do a follow-up with where he’s at now. And then maybe give him some media tips.” I gulp, realizing my misstep. She probably doesn’t want me giving free advice. “But I can see that might be an issue, since he’s not a client. And I’m so sorry,” I say, contrition in my tone.

I’m on week one of the job, and I already messed up. Worry slides down my spine.

Jillian laughs, shaking her head, quickly dismissing my concerns. “Please. Don’t worry for a second. Both are fine. This is a tit-for-tat world. Have a cup of coffee, give some tips, yada yada. It’s great that you’re taking the initiative. Might lay the groundwork for a new client down the road, know what I mean?”

Ohhhhhh.

Perhaps I misread her excitement. “You want me to pitch Holden on becoming a client of the firm?” I ask, though the thought makes me queasy.

Banging a client is a definite no-no.

But you’re not banging him, silly. And you won’t be.

Jillian shrugs happily. “Don’t pitch him. Just do your thing. But you never know who might be a great fit if one of our organizations needs a spokesperson, you know? It’s good to know athletes for that reason. We can pair clients with the right athletes and the best nonprofits.”

I breathe a little easier. “Of course. That makes sense.”

But I also don’t breathe more easily.

Because on the flip side, isn’t she saying athletes are off-limits?

Nothing is going to happen with him, woman. Settle down.

She leaves, and an icky feeling descends on me, like I’m doing something wrong.

But is having feelings for him wrong?

No. Though doing something about those would be wrong.

Or it *might* be.

Might be wrong.

* * *

I do my best to set all my feelings aside when my father calls that evening to say that he won't be able to take me to a game, because he's now the manager. "I got the offer after we spoke yesterday. It all came together so quickly. Aren't you excited for me? I finally got a job managing a team."

"I'm so happy for you, Dad," I say, like a trained marionette, a puppeteer moving my mouth.

"Can we meet on Sunday morning before our game? I'd like to introduce you to Becky."

I agree reluctantly. I'll have to do it eventually. Might as well rip off that bikini wax strip sooner rather than later.

* * *

When Saturday morning rolls around, I shower and shave my legs.

Not because anyone is going to see them.

Just because it's time to shave.

That's all.

Once I'm dried off, I put on an aqua-blue short-sleeve sweater, twinset-style.

Because I like it.

Not because it's date attire.

It's just *me attire*.

That's all.

I blow-dry my hair, put on some blush and mascara, then grab my purse and a jacket.

I find Tia in her kitchen, making a pot of tea. Yawning, she arches a brow when she sees me. “You look *good*,” she says, dragging out the last word.

Prickles of guilt nag at me. Best to dive into the deep end and discuss it. “Tia. I need to know. Am I crossing a line by seeing Holden?”

“Are you going to bang him today?” she asks point-blank. “Is that what the cute top is about?”

I sigh. “I just want to look good.”

“Naturally, but to my point: Are you going to go horizontal with him today?”

“Because everything’s about sex?” I ask with a light laugh, maybe to cover up the whirl of questions inside me.

“It is indeed.” She casts her gaze to the teapot, perhaps willing it to steep faster. “Except sex. Sex is about power,” she adds, going full wise shrink-to-be.

But how does that help me? “So, seeing Holden is about sex?”

She lifts a brow in question. “Do you want to sleep with him?”

I flash back to the other night when my bones melted just being near him, and my pulse soared past the stratosphere. “Yes. But I’m not seeing him to sleep with him. I’m seeing him because I want to help him.”

“Because you want to sleep with him?”

I groan. “No. I mean, yes. I mean, you’re too smart now that you have a master’s degree.”

She laughs, leaning even more casually against the counter. “As long as you don’t bang at the Ferry Building, it’s fine.”

“Seriously,” I press, wringing my hands.

“Do you think it might lead to something more?”

I shake my head, reminding myself of the score. “It can’t lead to anything more. It definitely won’t lead to anything more. It absolutely won’t.”

“You’re speaking in threes. Like he did in that email,” she says with a sly little smile.

I manage a small laugh at the memory. “Tell me if this is a bad idea.”

“He’s not your boss. He’s not your client. He’s just this guy you’re tangled up with, but not in a terrible way. Take each moment as it comes and listen to your gut. Do you know that humans are the only animals who don’t trust their instincts?”

I file that intel away. I have a feeling I’ll need it sooner or later.

Like when I can’t hear what my instincts are saying.

“Okay, I’ll try to listen to them.”

“And if you need to talk about it, I’m here to listen and not to judge. I don’t think you’re crossing a line, for what it’s worth. But the therapist in me says if you feel that way, it’s worth acknowledging that. Then decide whether you should listen to it or not,” she says, more serious this time, then she gives me a hug.

I need it.

As I head across the city to meet him, my head is a swirl of podcast ideas, and naughty ideas, and Holden ideas, and work ideas.

And ideas about lines.

And whether to cross them.

Once I enter the Ferry Building, I feel like I’m right back where I was on Tuesday night, feeling like he’s my guy.

That is the most dangerous feeling in the world.

Trouble is, it’s kind of a weirdly wonderful feeling too.

REESE

Outside is safer.

Outside, he won't be as tempting.

As I wander through the San Francisco Ferry Building on Saturday morning, I feel calm and centered.

Meeting Holden here is perfect. I picked a brand-new coffee shop. I read about it on a coffee blog—it's known for its cortados and its crowds. We'll be surrounded by Saturday morning shoppers, and by young parents pushing their toddlers in jogging strollers, dangling mango slices in front of them, offering soy milk in sippy cups, and buying decaf half-skim mocha coffees at the café around the corner.

This is so safe.

If I were secretly, or even subconsciously, wanting to tango with him, I'd have picked a bar.

Chosen to meet at eight.

Worn something slinky that sloped off my shoulder.

Or I'd have met him near the house so that we could ever-so-conveniently rush back to my studio if we needed to get horizontal.

But nope. I'm miles away from my home, right on the edge of the bay, the cool breeze skipping across the water, and people wandering everywhere. Surely neither one of us will be tempted like we were at the Legion of Honor.

Okay, fine. We were surrounded by people at the Legion of Honor too, and we still found an alcove to sneak into.

But there aren't any alcoves at the Ferry Building. It's 100 percent nook-free. Plus, I don't think he lives near here either.

That raises a good question.

Where does Holden live?

That's a good beginner question. Plus, if I ask him that, I won't start our convo by saying how yummy he looks in that dark-blue Henley and how those jeans show off his muscular thighs so deliciously.

He strolls down the corridor, heading toward me as I wait near a gelato stand. The Henley shows off his ripped arms.

Good thing I'm not an arm woman.

Except wait. I'm kind of salivating. Yep. Gawking now. Mouth is watering too. Oh, holy hell, I am such an arm woman.

And that man is a purveyor of arm porn.

He reaches me, stops, and flashes a grin. "Fancy meeting you here on a Saturday morning."

"Where do you live?" I blurt out. "I never asked you the other night."

"I live in Pacific Heights," he answers. "It's kind of, like, baseball player central over there."

"True." I gesture toward the nearby coffee shop, and we head to it. "Grant is there."

"Crosby too. I guess we all like it in that area. And I suppose that's no surprise to you. I didn't talk about where I lived because we were discussing so very many other interesting things." His eyes glimmer as he lets that sentence fall from his naughty tongue.

"Yes, if memory serves, we had a ... *great conversation*," I say, matching him flirt for flirt as we reach the shop and get in line.

He licks his lips, then lowers his voice. “There was definitely some discussing going on ... and there was also some ... *not discussing* going on,” he says, making the *not* sound so delicious, so tantalizing on his lips, as that word becomes a synonym for everything else we did with our mouths. All that kissing.

“But there were some discussions in my brain,” I add coyly, tapping my skull.

We shuffle toward the front of the line. “What *was* going through your head, Reese?”

Less than a minute, and we’re back to the way we were.

Maybe we need to get the flirting out of our system by doing it. “I was wondering whether you kissed as well as you did the first time,” I say, a rush of tingles spreading through me as we dive into the topic we both seem to like the most—each other.

This is what happens to me near him. I transform into Reese amped-up. Flirty Reese. Vixen Reese. Reese who feels wildly sexy.

I love this side of me.

It’s such a different side than Work Reese or Daughter Reese or Friend Reese.

He arches a brow. “And what was the verdict? Did I live up to, well, me?”

I let a small smile play on my lips. I don’t want to give away entirely how much he lived up to the memories. “Yes, you definitely did. And then some.”

I guess I did give it away. It’s hard for me *not* to be honest with him.

We’ve always been wonderfully honest with each other since the day we met. One of the things I liked the most about Holden was I felt like I could be myself with him. Like I could speak from my heart. That was another reason why I wanted him to be my first.

I felt like *me* with him.

I felt understood.

No secrets, no hiding, no lies.

Perhaps that's why it seems like I know him well, even though this is only the third time I've seen him. Every time we're together, we connect like we've known each other forever.

We play zero games.

Except flirting, and even that game is all truth with him. It's our truth.

So, I suppose I *do* know him well.

"And what about me? Did I live up to the memory?" I squeeze my eyes shut, wincing at my own boldness. Was that too much? Too needy? I open my eyes, nervous. "Silly question. That assumes you were even thinking about that time."

There. *That time* makes our night together seem like any other night.

He leans a little closer. "I thought about you so much."

"You did?" My chest flips.

"I told you, Reese. I haven't been with anyone since you. I haven't kissed anyone since you. I didn't want to."

A shiver runs down my spine. Our night together wasn't like any other night. For either one of us, it seems.

"And to answer your question, you kissed like a dream."

I want to grab the neck of his shirt, yank him in close, and kiss him once more. But I've got to let go of that desire. I've got to treat this morning for what it is—a simple business meeting on a Saturday at the Ferry Building.

A bright voice chirps. "What can I get you?"

Saved by the barista.

"Cortado?" I ask Holden.

His lips curve up in a lopsided grin. "And a macchiato for you?"

“Indeed.”

We order, and as we wait, his gaze swings down to my sweater. “You still have a thing for vintage style, I see,” he says.

I pluck at my buttons as if I just noticed the top. “I suppose I do.”

He tips his forehead to the coffee shop. “And researching cafés and hip little spots to eat and drink,” he adds, and I can’t even try to hide a grin.

“I still do,” I say, too charmed by him.

He smiles, and it’s the kind that disarms and undresses me at the same damn time.

“I like,” he says, the words rolling around on his tongue like a cherry that tastes so good.

And I want to whisper back *I like* too, but it might come out as *Gah, I like you, and I’d like you to take me right now.*

I don’t say anything, and soon the barista hands us our drinks. “Do you want to walk and talk?” I ask.

“I do.”

We wander through the Ferry Building, and he takes a drink of his cortado then makes a satisfied sound.

“Look at you, loving your cortado still,” I say with a laugh.

“Look at you, remembering my drink after nearly two years. Should I make something of the fact that you remember it?”

My mind catches on his comment, cycling back to Tia’s recent report on a book that kept her up well past bedtime. *And the hero remembered every little thing about the heroine when they reunited, from how she takes her lattes, to her most played Spotify tune, to her favorite poem, and it was almost creepery, but mostly swoony.*

“The funny thing is, in some books that’s the sign that a man hasn’t forgotten a woman—remembering her coffee order,” I tell Holden.

A light scoff comes from him. “Beautiful, I remember so much more than your coffee order,” he rumbles.

“Hopefully not in a creepery way,” I say, laughing at the private memory.

“Creepery? That’s creepery? Maybe you’re the creeper, since you remembered mine,” he says, teasing me right back.

“It reminded me of something Tia said,” I tell him, then explain the story.

“Ah, so maybe I won’t tell you the other things I remember,” he says, like he’s tucking those little details in his pocket for safekeeping.

“Try me,” I insist. “I want to know.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Don’t want to be creepery.”

“C’mon,” I say, pouting. “Tell me something you remember.”

He’s adamant though, digging in his heels. “Nah. I’m going to err on the side of swoony by keeping it to myself.”

I frown. “What if I tell you something I remember?”

He stops, stroking his chin. “I’ll consider it then. The floor is yours.”

I lick my lips, cycling through so many moments, so many little details as I savor the view in front of me—the man I’ve most wanted to see again for the longest time. One particular memory flashes before me as I take him in. “I remember how your hair feels when I run my fingers through it.”

His darkened gaze hints of sex and desire, his voice going smoky, enticing. “How does it feel?”

I lift my free hand, lightly brushing the side of his head, stealing a touch of his hair. “Mmm. So good.”

His breath hisses, and he leans a little closer to my palm. “So this is swoony, not creepery?”

“Definitely swoony,” I whisper, then lift my mug and take a drink, the cup hiding my wild grin. After I take a sip, I say,

“Now it’s your turn.”

He stares in the distance briefly, then returns to me. “If you want a sign that a man hasn’t forgotten a woman, I’d look for something bigger than remembering she likes macchiatos.”

Bigger.

Is he making a sex joke or something else? “Like what?”

“Like I told you. The fact that he hasn’t been with anyone else in two years,” he says, and it’s a mic-drop moment.

His words come out so strong.

My chest flutters.

It almost feels like he’s telling me more than he said the night at the Legion of Honor. As if there’s more at play than simply *not meeting* someone else.

I want to dive into the why, to ask more questions, but if I go down that hill, I’ll be tumbling straight into an avalanche of desire.

“Why did I think seeing you today would be easy?” I ask, a little breathy.

“It’s not easy. It’s not easy one bit. But it sure is fun, Reese,” he says, in a voice that makes me feel like we’re in a private cocoon. He clears his throat, straightening his shoulders. “But for the rest of the morning, I’m going to behave. I vow to behave.”

“Fine. If you’re going to behave, I’ll behave too,” I say, bumping my hip to his as proof.

Well, proof of something, but maybe not good behavior.

REESE

We both sip our drinks and then turn back into the building. Walking past the Imperial Tea Court, I slide into business. “I checked out some of your press clippings. And I know this is going to sound strange, but I think the problem is you’re almost too honest and too forthright.”

His brow furrows. “This reminds me of a job interview where they ask what your flaw is, and you give them a flaw that’s actually an asset, like ‘I’m too meticulous.’ Or ‘I pay too much attention to detail.’”

I arch a skeptical brow. “When have you ever had a traditional job interview?”

“Hey now. My parents made me practice in case this baseball thing didn’t work out.”

Laughing, I toss my head back. “Looks like ‘this baseball thing’ did work out. Which means now you have to talk to the press about baseball,” I say lightly, then turn serious, getting to the heart of the matter. “The trouble is, Holden, it’s not just that you don’t enjoy talking to the press. It’s clear from how you talk that you actively dislike them.”

“Ouch,” he says, and he winces too.

I pat his shoulder in sympathy—his very strong and muscular shoulder. “So I think we have to deal with whether it makes sense to be that straightforward. That honest.”

He stops in front of a bakery, leveling me with an intense stare. “I don’t want to be a liar, Reese. That’s not who I want

to be.”

His green eyes are etched with strength, with certainty. This matters to him. The kind of person he is is important to him. That is so damn sexy.

“It’s a balancing act. You want to be yourself, but you want to present your best self,” I say.

He bristles. “I feel like honesty is part of my best self.”

“But it might not be the best approach with the media.”

He’s quick to answer with “That’s why I’ve been so focused on ‘No comment.’ Because I don’t want to pretend to be someone else. I don’t want to talk to the media then have it be twisted. And I don’t want to talk to them and spout platitudes that feel like lies.”

His concerns seem legitimate given what happened to him with that reporter. And I want him to know I understand where he’s coming from. “So, you want to present a better image to the press, but you also don’t want to feel like a liar?” I ask.

“Exactly. That’s not who I want to be,” he says with a new intensity, like he’s delivering an impassioned speech, as we resume our pace through the terminal. “I wasn’t raised that way by my parents. I was raised to be open and honest and forthright.”

“And those are all good things,” I reassure him, touching his shoulder again.

His gaze drifts down to my hand on him. “Are you going to keep doing that?”

“Should I stop?”

“No. Please don’t,” he says in a low voice. “But fair warning—that makes me want to do the same to you.”

“I wouldn’t object.”

He brushes a strand of hair off my shoulder, and sparks flame all over my skin. I’m *this close* to becoming a bonfire, so I return to safe ground. But ground that I enjoy traversing—the getting-to-know-you terrain.

“What are they like? Your parents?” I ask as we head outside, toward the railing by the bay, stopping there and wrapping our hands around it. I take a sip of my macchiato as he answers, pushing up the sleeve of his shirt, revealing his ink.

“They’re definitely *honesty is the best policy* kind of people. Another truism of theirs is *If you tell the truth, you don’t have to keep track of a lie*. More than anything, that’s why I struggle with the so-called Crash Davis School of Public Relations.”

That says a lot about him. It yanks the window wide open onto Holden Kingsley, and I like the view. A whole helluva lot. “You’re a lot like your parents.”

“I hope so. Hell, they’re why I have this tattoo,” he says, his gaze drifting down to the elegant tree on his forearm.

It’s a strong, sturdy tree, more stylized than realistic. “Tree for family,” I say, getting the meaning instantly.

“Exactly. I got it when I was drafted.”

“Right before you started in the minors? Why then?” I ask, curious to understand him even more. Every conversation reveals more of the *onion of the man*, as Tia put it.

“It was the next phase of my life. And I wanted to stay centered. To make sure I didn’t lose sight of my goals. It’s easy to be distracted by fame or riches. Though, to be fair, I had no idea if I’d have either,” he says with a laugh. “Or success, for that matter.”

“So you did this,” I say, tracing the trunk of the tree lightly with my free hand, “to stay focused.”

His green eyes swing to my fingers on his skin, then back up to me. “Yes. Have to keep my eye on the prize.” It comes out a little rough, a little gravelly.

There’s another layer to his words, as if they carry over to me. Like maybe I distract him from the prize—career, family, success.

Or perhaps I'm reading something into nothing. Perhaps I'm wishing to see something that isn't there.

But still, knowing how close he is to them will help me keep *my* eye on the prize of helping him.

My brain cycles through various approaches for Holden with the press. But I'm not entirely sure yet, so I keep asking questions. "They sound like great people. You're still close to them, aren't you?"

A smile spreads across his handsome face. "I am. We actually FaceTime and Zoom every weekend, and we talk a lot after my games. They watch nearly every one."

My heart warms. "Do they give you feedback?"

"Not anymore. They just talk about what they enjoyed. When I was younger, my dad liked to give me a little bit of feedback, like 'Take your time and have patience,' and my mom did that too. Maybe even more so than my dad."

I arch a brow. "Your mom? You don't hear that often."

His eyes shine with what's clearly a fond memory. "My mom is a baseball fanatic. My parents actually met at a baseball game," he says, lighting up as he reveals more of himself.

"Stop. That's too adorable. Now you must tell me the whole story," I insist with a demanding grin.

"You're the one press person who can get me to talk about anything," he says, shaking his head in amusement. In that low, smoky tone, he adds, "I think that's your special skill."

I inch a little closer. "Because I'm not trying to screw you over."

He arches a brow, his green eyes glinting with dirty deeds. "Reese, be careful what you wish for."

I swat his shoulder, even though I love his innuendo. "You're naughty."

He slides closer, his mouth near my ear, his breath sending a wave of heat along my skin. "If memory serves, you like that

side of me.”

I shiver, then draw a shuddery breath. Being near him is dangerous. “If memory serves, I like all sides of you. Now, give me the side where you tell me about your parents.”

“If you insist, but first ...” he says, then snaps a shot of a ferry lumbering into the dock. Another moody shot for his Instagram, I suspect.

When he lowers the phone, his lips curve up. He’s not flirty or fiery, just earnest, as he says, “Can I take a picture of you?”

I’m taken aback. “To post?”

He shakes his head. “No. For me. Just for me.”

My chest flips, and I say yes. I lean against the railing. “Smile or not?”

“Whatever works for you.”

He lifts the phone, and I do smile. Because I’m looking at him. Because this day is better than I imagined. Because this man makes me feel like the only woman in the whole damn city.

Hell, make that the hemisphere, given what he told me earlier.

When he lowers the phone and tucks it in his pocket, he sets a hand on my back. “Like I said, that’s just for me.”

Tingles. Everywhere.

We head back inside, walking past a chocolate shop. My eyes swing briefly to the displays at Lulu’s.

“Oh, does somebody like chocolate?” he asks, like he’s taunting me with treats.

“Just a little bit,” I say, holding up my thumb and forefinger a sliver apart.

“What’s your favorite kind?”

I gesture to the shop. “They have these little chocolate drops. They’re these tiny dimes of chocolate that melt on your

tongue.” I point to the bag of chocolate drops as I moan the slightest bit, imagining how good they are.

“Hold my cortado,” he says, handing me his drink. He grabs a bag, heads to the register, and hands me the chocolate upon his return.

“Should I just pop the chocolate in my mouth and think about you?” I ask, dropping the gift into my purse, then slinging my purse back up on my shoulder.

“Does the chocolate taste good?” he asks, gravelly again.

That rumble spreads down my chest, causing my pulse to surge.

“It does,” I say, trying not to sound desperately breathy.

But failing. Utterly failing.

“Then yes, please think about me.”

I blink, the temperature in me soaring well above one hundred degrees. I flap my hand in front of my face, needing to cool off. “Okay. Can we go back to your parents so I’m not thinking about how good the chocolate is going to taste and how much I’m melting from all the things you’re saying to me?”

“You’re melting?” he asks, clearly loving that I am.

I stare at him. Intensely. “Holden, you make me melt. And you know that.”

“I better change the topic, then. For both our sakes.”

“Yes, please.” I laugh, then whisper, “I think.”

He laughs too. “Just to be safe.” He clears his throat. “So, my parents met at a Seattle Storm Chasers game many, many years ago. She was in the stands, yelling at the umpire. He was yelling at the opposing team. The rest is history.”

“That is awesome. A perfect ‘how they met’ story for baseball parents. What about your brothers? Do they play baseball at all?”

He shakes his head. “Neither one of them is into the game.”

“Do your parents love that you play?”

“They do. But the thing is, they’re just as proud of my brothers for their abilities. For their interests in architecture and engineering. They didn’t treat me like I was a favorite or anything just because I played the sport they loved.”

My smile grows wider. “My mom was like that. She’s a nurse, as I told you, and my sister always wanted to go into medicine. I was more of the sporty, outgoing one. But my mom encouraged and supported both of us, and I never felt like my sister was more important because her profession was more closely aligned with my mother’s,” I say, successfully avoiding the topic of my father. I don’t want to talk about his influence on my life. I’m keenly aware that Holden has spent more time with him in the last three days than I have in three years. But sports were always mine. And my mom supported me in them just as much as my father did.

“We’re lucky in some ways,” Holden says, and I love, too, that he hasn’t said a word about my dad either.

We have so much else we can talk about.

We chat more about his family, and I share more about my mom and sister and grandparents.

We finish our drinks, return the mugs to the coffee shop, and head outside, staring at the water as the waves go out choppily and a ferry glides in, its horn bleating as it nears the dock.

My ideas for him take shape. “I have a plan for you. An approach that I think might help.”

He waggles his fingers, beckoning me to serve it up. “Hit me up, Reese.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s all a matter of how you frame your answers and how you approach talking to the media.”

Considering what he just shared about himself, I’m convinced this strategy will help him.

“Keep going.”

“Think of it like this—what part of yourself are you giving to the press?” I gesture to him, my hand dangerously near his chest. That broad, firm chest that I love running my hands up and down. “Here’s this man, Holden Kingsley, and he’s a lot of things, right?”

“That’s the goal.”

“You’re a great athlete. You’re a good teammate. You’re focused and disciplined. You’re a good friend. You’re an upstanding guy,” I say, as I list his attributes.

His lips curve into a delicious smile, almost an embarrassed one.

“And you’re also a guy who doesn’t want to see yourself as lying to the press.”

“All of that is true.”

“So, what you need to do is reframe how you think about it. Don’t think of it as lying when you give them an answer about how you’re nobody’s savior. That’s true, and believing that helps you remember winning isn’t about one man. So rather than say, ‘I’m nobody’s savior,’ reframe your response as ‘I just want to help the team.’”

He nods, like he’s absorbing this. “Sure. Makes sense.”

“And when you answer their questions, remember you’re only giving a piece of you. You’re giving *one truthful* portion of yourself. You don’t have to show them all your cards. Even if you’re saying things that might feel empty to you, you’re still speaking *your truth*. Because it’s true that you want what’s best for the team,” I say, never wavering, because I believe this. I truly believe we can and maybe even need to only share parts of ourselves. I don’t serve up my family story to everyone I meet. I’m still honest with Holden even if I don’t tell him how I feel about his manager, so I lean on that philosophy now. “It *is* true that every game is a good game in its own way. It *is* true that you play your heart out, and you leave it on the field, and you respect your opponents, right?”

He nods vigorously, his green eyes intense, honest. “Absolutely. I completely do.”

“You don’t have to cringe and feel like you’re lying. Because those are honest answers. You can’t control if someone lies or makes up facts. You have to let that go. But you can control what you show them. You can let them only see the part of you that truly does want to help the team. Give them the part of you that believes you take each game as it comes. Because you do believe that, right?”

“Absolutely. I have a plan for every game. Every day.” He grins and gestures with his arms wide as he shares his routine. “I do my four-mile run every morning. Work out. Play my brain games—word searches and word jumbles,” he says, and that is, yet again, adorable. Holden and his word games.

A grin tugs at my lips as I soldier on. “Then talk about your plan for each game. How you approach each opponent. And when they ask you a question, like ‘How do you feel about your chances this season?’ you say something along the lines of ‘I’ve got a plan for every game, and I’m just grateful to get on the field and see if it’ll play out.’”

He nods as if he digs this idea. “You’re right. They don’t get to have every part of me. But I also don’t have to lie.”

“Yes. Most people don’t deserve all parts of us. Most people only get a small part of you.”

“Woman, you’re brilliant.”

We spend the next hour reviewing questions and answers.

It’s all going so incredibly well that I think maybe we can do *this*.

Maybe we can be friends.

I love talking to Holden.

I love his honesty. I love his earnestness.

I don’t want him out of my life.

When the hour winds down and he glances at his watch, my heart lurches.

Disappointment washes over me that this slice of time has unspooled.

“Do you have to go?” I ask, pitch rising.

“No, I just wanted to check the time. In case you had to go.”

I dip my head, smiling. I press my lips together, then ask, “What are your plans? You’re the guy with the plans after all.”

“I didn’t make any for today.” It sounds a little like a confession, like he’s waiting for me to ask why.

I go for it. “Why did you leave your day unplanned?”

He scratches his jaw, his expression showing a hint of vulnerability that’s so appealing. “That whole thing you were just saying about speaking the truth? About giving people a part of yourself or more?”

I nod, my chest tightening with anticipation.

“Can I just speak the whole truth to you right now?”

“Of course.” My answer is all breathy, betraying my heart.

But I don’t care.

He reaches for my arm, squeezing it. “Talking to you is one of the easiest things I’ve ever done, Reese. It was easy the first time we met. It was easy the other day. Even though you’ve been out of my life for so long, it feels like whenever we talk, like the other night, like today, it’s so easy for us to fall into step, isn’t it?”

“Confession: I was thinking the same thing.”

His smile is electric. “Were you?”

“Don’t I look like I was?” I ask playfully.

He shoots me one of those deliciously cocky grins. “I don’t know. Sometimes you look at me like you’re thinking *other things* entirely. Things about...*not discussing*,” he says, moving a little closer, using our synonym, his voice going to that husky zone that tells me his mind is heading down another track.

A track I like.

A track I wanted to get on the other night, wanted to get on two years ago.

A track I still want to take.

“Sometimes I am thinking *that*.”

His eyes roam up and down me, making my skin sizzle. “You want to know what I’m thinking right now?”

So much. “I do.”

“I’m thinking *this* is a risk,” he says, pointing from him to me. “I’m thinking of all the things we talked about at the Legion of Honor. How this might be trouble. How this might be spun. But I’m also thinking right now I can’t find it in me to care. I want to be with you more than I can let myself care about any of those things.”

My heart flies on widespread wings, even though nothing has truly changed.

We can’t be together in the way we want. The score hasn’t switched. The stakes haven’t shifted.

But maybe the difference is that with more time together, we feel more desire. So the weight of the decision shifts to the *now*. To *today*. To wants and wishes and desires, rather than sense and wisdom and prudence.

“I’m thinking the same things,” I confess in a whisper.

“I’m thinking it’s a great plan,” he says, in a sexy, sensual offering.

“It is.”

Heat rises in me, licking my skin, leading me on. Pushing me past all the reasons to say no. We’re off-limits. We’re forbidden. Someday he could be a client.

And the big reason for him—I’m the coach’s daughter.

But he doesn’t make me feel that way.

I’ve only ever felt like the woman he desperately wants. I like being that woman. “So, you really don’t have any plans

for the rest of the day, Holden?”

“Not till my game.” His answer is husky, suggesting he might not have plans, but he has lots of ideas.

I twirl a strand of my hair. “Is there a reason you didn’t make plans?”

“I’m looking at that reason.”

I light up, sparklers shining brightly.

I lift my chin, brazen, bold. “What do you want to do with me?”

“I want to take you back to my place, spread you out on my bed, kiss you all over, pick up where we left off.”

It’s a terrible idea, I know that. But it also sounds like the best idea ever.

A few minutes later, he’s ordered a Lyft, we’re sliding into the back seat, and he takes my hand, threads his fingers through mine, then runs his thumb over my wrist. His touch sends my pulse into overdrive, igniting every cell in my body.

Humans don’t always listen to their instincts. Sometimes that’s a good thing. Sometimes it’s not.

I know where this day is heading, and I still don’t have any regrets about listening to my instincts right now.

HOLDEN

There are no candles. No soft music. No flowers to set the mood.

Don't need those.

We set the mood nearly two years ago the afternoon we met. The afternoon we sparked.

Chemistry—it only grows stronger between this woman and me. We might have faded to embers while we were apart, but we're roaring again, a fire lit with one glance, one touch, one day together.

Just like before. That's all it seems to take between us.

A little bit of time.

A few hours together, and *boom*.

We combust from each other. From the getting-to-know-you, from the flirting, from the feeling.

All I want now is to feel Reese against me.

The second the door shuts, I haul her close, kissing her hard and fierce, the way I wanted to kiss her in the Lyft.

I capture her mouth with mine, and she moans the instant we make glorious, mind-bending contact. She arches against me, slinking her arms around my neck, her fingers playing with the ends of my hair.

I'm acutely aware that she's a virgin, but she's no blushing innocent. She's all woman, completely attuned to her own

sexuality, to her own needs. There's heat and hunger in her sounds and in the way she knows her body—the way she wants to know my body too.

This kiss is urgent and hungry, stoked by need.

We aren't teasing or lingering anymore.

We're pent-up, and the rumbles that fall from my lips let her know how much I want her.

When we break the kiss, both of us are panting. Even though she's given her permission by being here, I still want to make sure she's on board every step of the way. "Are you good with this, Reese?"

"With *this* and with whatever happens next," she adds, fire blazing in those crystal irises.

I slide a thumb along her jaw. "Then tell me what you want next, and I'll give it to you."

"The same thing I wanted that first night with you," she says in a daring tone. "You, inside me."

I growl, running my hand down the front of her sweater, my fingers tracing the outline of her breasts as I slide lower to her belly. "You feel even better than the other night. And you felt pretty spectacular then."

She rises on tiptoe, leans in toward my ear, and whispers, "Do you think I'd feel even better with my ... clothes off?"

"Yes. Fucking yes." My entire body shudders with lust. I hold her face. Stare into her eyes. "You're a woman who knows her mind, right?"

She nods. "I am."

"Then tell me, beautiful. Have you thought about how you want me to make love to you? Do you want me on top? Do you want to ride me? We can sit on my bed, and you can be in my lap," I say, stopping to take a breath, because holy fuck, that sounds hot. Her eyes blaze, and I'm guessing she likes that too. "How do you want to do this? Because I want it to feel incredible for you."

She nibbles on her lower lip. “Well, the one thing I want is for it to be with you.”

I laugh, lean in, and kiss her nose. “You’ve got that, beautiful.”

Then I pull back and wait.

She lifts her chin. “This is where I confess that I’m a bit of a researcher when it comes to sex.”

I arch a brow. That’s interesting. “What do you research? Do you mean porn? Or do you mean articles on sex? Or something else entirely?”

“I read a lot. I’ve kind of studied up on it.”

I shake my head, amazed, and turned on even more. I want to know everything about this woman and what makes her tick. “Tell me what you looked up,” I say, sliding my hand down her side, savoring the feel of her.

“Articles and info on what feels good. Tips for the first time. Tips for the best positions for a woman’s pleasure.”

I blow out a stream of air. Damn. “That’s incredibly sexy that you’re so attuned to your body and your wishes that you’re researching it.”

Her fingers play with the ends of my hair. “Want to know what I learned?”

I lean in closer, kissing the corner of her mouth. “I absolutely do.”

“I’m pretty simple. I want to be spread out on your bed, look up at you, and feel you move inside me. I want to be underneath you and feel the weight of your body on mine.”

A blast of heat rips through me as those tantalizing images flicker before my eyes, beautiful and beckoning. “I’ll give you everything you want.” I reach for her hand and guide her to the bedroom in the back of my home.

I take my time, unbuttoning then sliding off her top, kissing her bare skin as I reveal it—her shoulder, her stomach, her breasts as I remove her bra. Savoring the softness of her

skin, I move lower, kissing her belly button, licking that strip of flesh right above the top of her jeans before I undo the button.

She murmurs, “I’m so turned on by you.”

“Turned on barely covers what you do to me. You make me so hard,” I say as I slide her jeans down over her hips to her thighs, my breath rattling in my lungs when I see her panties.

I expected red. But she’s not dressed in that shade. “I thought you’d have on your power color,” I say, mesmerized.

She gives a coquettish smile as she shakes her head. “I guess I was feeling like white today. When I woke up, maybe I knew that white was the right color. That you’d take it from me,” she says, and her meaning is crystal clear.

“Oh, I will. I absolutely will.” I slide down the white lace panties with a pink bow right in the center. I lean in close, nipping the little bow. It looks like candy. The kind you can’t get enough of, where you need more and then another and then just one more. That’s how I feel with Reese.

I can’t get enough of her.

I slide the white lace down her legs till the panties hit her ankles and she steps out of them.

Then I kiss my way up her legs, along her calves, her knees, and her thighs, savoring the way she trembles as I caress her skin with my lips.

I reach her mound and press a kiss there, inhaling the sexy scent of her wetness, the spice of her arousal.

“I want you to do that to me again,” she says in a breathy whisper. “To go down on me like you did that first night. That was so intense, Holden. I think about your mouth on me all the time.”

She doesn’t have to ask twice, because I’m so ridiculously aroused that she asked once for what she wants.

I stand up, loop a hand around her waist, and bring her to the bed, stretching her out on the mattress, then climbing over

her. “What do you know? I think about that all the time too. I get off to you,” I say in my own dirty confession.

She arches her back just from my words, then dances a hand down her body. “I picture it, and I touch myself. I play with myself. And I imagine what you did to me. I imagine you doing it again.”

My body heats up, rocketing to supernova levels from the images that she paints before my eyes. Her laid out on her bed, naked, just like she is now, touching herself.

“Someday I want you to do that,” I say as I tug off my shirt, tossing it onto the floor. “I want to walk into the room, find you here, and see your hand between your legs, your other hand on your tits. Playing with yourself, eyes closed, head thrown back, moaning and groaning in pleasure.”

She slides her hand between her legs, playing with her clit. “Just like this?”

My breath staggers. “My God, you’re so fucking incredible.”

I move over her, planting a kiss on her sexy mouth, biting her lower lip, drawing it between my teeth. “I can’t believe you haven’t been with anyone else.”

She scoffs lightly. “Why is it so hard to believe?”

“You’re so fucking beautiful. You’re so fascinating. You’re so smart. You’re ... *everything*,” I say, and then I stop myself because, my God, I sound like a man who’s falling hard for a woman.

But then, I suppose that’s what I am.

“Believe it, Holden,” she whispers.

“I do,” I say, giving in to whatever this is as I kiss my way down her body. Then I go down on her like a man who’s falling so ridiculously hard. I spread her legs, pushing her knees open, and I kiss her sweet pussy.

My head swims with pleasure from the scent of her, the taste of her. My skin sizzles everywhere. Electricity pops and

crackles down my spine as I caress the paradise between her thighs.

My sensual woman cries out, then bucks her hips.

And in seconds, we are off to the races, her hands curling around my head, her fingers spearing through my hair, and her hips going to town on my face.

She thrusts and moans, rocking her hips, letting her knees fall onto the covers.

She is a woman who knows what she wants, and what she wants is me. It's such a gift, the way she chases pleasure.

She's fearless as she lets go, writhing against my mouth, yanking me closer. My face is buried between her legs, my hands gripping her hips, then sliding up her stomach, playing with her tits, mapping her body, as her arousal coats my jaw.

I don't want to leave.

She's everything—temptation and exquisite torture all at once, and every kiss, every suck of her clit stokes my own need for her.

For her pleasure.

For her passion.

For the moans she can't stop making.

Oh God.

Yes.

I'm close.

I am lost in the taste of her, drowning in desire as she floods my tongue.

Soon, she's calling my name and coming undone, the taste of her climax driving me insane.

I kiss her through her orgasm, licking and devouring as she grips my head even tighter, her moans and groans the most wonderful soundtrack I've ever heard. When she laughs lightly, then gently pushes me away because she's become too

sensitive, I stop, rise up on my knees, and regard the blonde beauty in my bed.

She is a hot, sexy mess, her hair a wild tangle, her cheeks flushed.

Hints of red in them.

I wipe off my mouth and press my lips to her cheek.

“I see you’ve got some red in your cheeks. Your power color. Because your sexuality is so fucking powerful,” I say.

“Then let me share it with you,” she says. “That’s all I’ve wanted.”

“Same here. Now, let me see how you look on top of me,” I tell her, commanding her like she wants. Like I want too. “Because I’m going to want that next.”

She wiggles out from under me, moves over me, pushes my shoulders down, and straddles me.

I love the way she’s looking at me right now, and I know that the second time we do this, I’m going to want her to ride me so fucking hard.

I shouldn’t be thinking of second times. But I shouldn’t be thinking of first times either.

And I am.

Fuck regret.

Besides, she looks so good like this. So damn good that she needs to know. “Beautiful, the next time we make love, you need to get on top of me, slide onto my cock, and ride the fuck out of me because this is the hottest image I have ever seen in my entire life,” I say, gripping her hips tightly, gazing at the hot as sin woman on me.

“I’m down for that. And do you know why?”

I reach for her face, stroking my thumb over her cheek. “Tell me.”

“Because I have no regrets with you,” she says, intense, certain.

It feels important. Like her words are a promise to herself, of something private and personal. Like she's just now sharing it with another person.

"I would never regret you," I say, even though she's a line I shouldn't cross.

But fuck lines. I cannot resist Reese Fallon.

She's the risk I'm willing to take.

I slide out from under her, shed my clothes, leave them on the floor, then reach into my wallet for a condom.

She lies down, her hair fanning out over the pillow, like a goddess.

When I return to the bed, she lifts a hand, holding my face, her blue eyes full of trust and heat at the same damn time. "I wanted it to be you for so long."

A spark sizzles down my spine and shoots into my heart too. "Me too. I wanted this too."

And I suppose this is why I didn't see anyone else. Because I was somehow waiting for her too.

REESE

This may be my first time, but I'm pretty sure I know what I like.

I've talked plenty about sex with my guy friends and girlfriends. I've read countless articles and scoured tons of websites. I've experimented with toys too. When I traveled to South America, I made sure I was equipped for those lonely nights out of the country with more than just my fingers.

Most of the time, my fingers work quite well in tandem with my imagination, and I don't need a ton more. I like to linger in the pleasure, to take my time, to make it last.

But there were other nights when I was tired, when I was exhausted, yet I still wanted that rush of a climax to send me into slumber. That's where bullet vibrators came in, little silver things that would buzz and shake in all the right ways.

Now and then, I took a dolphin or a rabbit out for a ride and savored that sensation of being filled. Of having something long and thick and hard inside me.

I learned I like it deep. I like it luxurious. I like going slow and *feeling* the thrust.

So I'm not worried about penetration.

I'm just ready.

In every way. Body, mind, and—surprisingly—my heart.

I tell him how I like it. "I want you to take your time. Make it linger. Long, deep, slow," I say.

“Consider it done,” he says.

By some measures, I barely know this man, but that’s only if the yardstick is hours or days.

With Holden, I measure by the quality of the time. Every second with him has mattered.

As he opens the foil, I watch, licking my lips in anticipation. My skin heats up again as he rolls the condom down his cock, covering his thick length.

Even that turns me on. “Is it weird I think it’s hot that you’re putting on a condom?”

A sexy grin comes my way. “No. It’s not weird because it means I’m going to be inside you in a few seconds. Exactly where I want to be.”

I draw a deep breath as he settles between my legs. I lift my arms, sliding my hands up his pecs as he presses the head of his cock against my clit. I’m already sensitive from what he just did to me, but the sensation is so incredible, it sends a lightning bolt of lust through my body.

He rubs the head up and down my wetness, and I moan, trembling with a new wave of desire. As I run my hands down his chest, savoring the feel of his firm muscles, then the ladder of his abs, he lifts his face, meets my eyes, and asks, “Is this good?”

I nod, breathing out, as my whole body tingles from the promise of pleasure. “It’s *so* good.”

I love saying what I want. I love telling him my desires. I get a thrill out of asking for my own pleasure. My hands travel lower, roaming through the hair on his abdomen. “I want you inside me,” I whisper. “And I want you to tell me what to do next. Because that turns me on.”

He clenches his jaw, draws a deep breath, then whispers in the dirtiest voice I’ve heard from him, “Spread your legs, beautiful. Let your knees fall open more.”

I do as he asks, giving him room between my thighs.

“And watch me. Watch me as I slide into you,” he says, and pleasure ripples down my spine from his dirty words.

“I think I like a dirty talker,” I say as I stare down at his hand on his cock.

“Then you’ve got one,” he says as he nudges the head against my wet center, then pushes in the slightest bit.

I’m so aroused, but I’m still expecting it to hurt, so I tense.

My knees rise up, closing.

He stops. “You okay?”

I nod, but a prickle of fear wedges into my chest, and I can’t quite relax again.

This is Holden. This is the man you’ve waited for.

It might hurt for a minute. But it probably won’t after that. I let my legs fall open again, and he slides in an inch or so.

It hurts, and it feels good.

I gasp, my breath hitching. “Oh.”

“Does it hurt?” He sounds terribly worried.

I shake my head. “Only a tiny bit.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I shake my head. “Please don’t stop. Just go slow.”

“I will. I’ll give you anything you need.”

As he fills me a little more, a small spark of pain shoots through my center. Even as the sliver of tension works its way inside me, I feel a bloom of pleasure too—the sensation of being filled, of him going deeper.

Of the prospect of bliss and delicious sensations radiating through my body.

“Reese, tell me if you want me to stop. Are you sure it doesn’t hurt?”

“Just take it slow. Just like you’re doing. Everything you’re doing is perfect,” I say.

“Anything for you,” he whispers. Then he lowers his face, brushes a soft kiss to my jaw, and says it again. “Anything for you, beautiful.”

From anyone else, it would feel like a lie.

From another man, it would feel like a lie.

But from him, it feels all true, every word of it, every breath of it.

And like that, I relax fully. I tell myself to breathe—just breathe. I wrap my legs around him, inviting him in, and the tension slinks away, leaving only this bone-deep connection and the promise of more.

I roam my hands down his back then curl them over his ass.

Holy buns of steel.

I let out a carnal groan. “Oh my God.”

He gives me a cocky grin. “What’s that for?”

“Your ass is made of iron,” I say, squeezing it, kneading it. “It’s hard as a rock.”

He laughs. “Glad the workouts are effective.”

“Oh, they are. They definitely are,” I say, squeezing harder. Not only does he feel amazing, but this touch also lets me control the penetration. I tug him a little deeper. He slides in farther, his eyes locked on me as if making sure I’m good.

I am so good.

I am so unbelievably good with Holden Kingsley making love to me.

He fills me all the way, bottoming out. Reflexively, I draw a sharp intake of breath, but not from pain, from the intensity, the tightness. And the awareness—at last, here we are, where I want to be. I wriggle, letting myself adjust to the intrusion, to the feel of a man inside me all the way at last.

I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer.

“How you doin’?”

I smile and nod, my arms wrapping around his neck now. “Pretty damn good,” I whisper.

He drops the softest kiss to my neck, chased by a nibble that’s somehow both sweet and possessive. It’s tender and fierce, and that’s exactly who he is and precisely why I’m falling for a man I can’t possibly be with.

Not the way I want.

Except he is all I want right now.

I want him so badly that the pleasure blots out the world beyond this room. He rocks into me, a little deeper, nice and long and slow, and do I ever enjoy it. Because that’s the point of sex. I’m learning for the first time why everybody wants *this*. Why people will beg, borrow, or steal for it.

And I’m learning, too, why some people wait for it, and some people don’t. Because sex like this is both worth waiting for and worth having whenever you’re ready for it.

Sparks of desire tear through me as Holden moves in me, finding a delicious and luxurious rhythm.

One thrust, two, then a long, tantalizing one as he fucks me deep like I asked for.

Bracing on his forearms, his chest almost flush with mine, he swivels his hips, going deeper. Then he glides out, nearly all the way, his cock sliding over my clit deliciously as he moves, bringing me pleasure.

So much pleasure that I’m bathing in it, an ocean of bliss.

And I will happily float here all day long on these ecstatic waves.

We bask in that pace for a bit, and the sounds too—the slide of our skin, our moans and murmurs. My name on his lips, carnal and hungry, paired with my *ohs* and *yeses*.

The sounds of our pleasure light me up, making my toes curl.

I don’t want this moment to end. But I also want that sheet-grabbing, window-shattering crush.

He seems to sense my wants, that I'm on the edge, eager to feel everything. "Play with yourself. Let me see how you got yourself off to those thoughts of me."

"So many times," I moan.

He nods savagely, pushing deep, making my back bow. "Same for me with you," he confesses. "Show me, beautiful. Show me now."

He rises up, giving me room. I slide a hand between my breasts, down my stomach, on a fast track to between my thighs.

I touch my clit, rubbing it, arching up into my own hand, as the pleasure spirals deep inside me.

His eyes are feral as he drives a little harder. And I like that. I like the possession in his touch, the heat in his voice. "My God, fucking you is incredible," he groans.

His dirty words, rather than sweet ones, do me in. The swears are an injection of intensity up and down my spine, to my legs, to my toes.

"Yes. Do that again. Say that again."

"You feel so fucking good," he grunts.

And I rub harder, faster.

"I want to fuck you again and again," he rasps out.

Ecstasy coils deep inside me from those words, filthy and beautiful.

The pleasure runs wild, gallops inside me, intense and electric, winding tight then spreading everywhere inside me and taking over every molecule.

And I burst, shuddering as I come—thanks to him, thanks to me, thanks to both of us taking us there.

It gets even better when he pushes my right knee up higher, against my chest, giving himself more room as he pumps deeper, buries his face in my neck, and growls my name savagely as he hits his own release, grunting. "Reese,

you make me come so fucking hard,” he says, his big body shaking on top of me as his climax seems to shatter him too.

When he stops shaking, I run my hands down his back, feeling the sheen of sweat on him.

Hearing the stuttering pants of his breath.

Sensing the rapid beat of his pulse.

And wanting him again.

I’m pretty sure this is exactly how sex is supposed to feel.

I know why I waited so long. In college, I was waiting for the right guy, and then I met him right at the end.

There was no need for anybody else—he is the right guy for me.

And I don’t want *us* to stop, even though I fear it’s inevitable that we will.

Soon.

But for now, I let the bliss carry me away.

REESE

His shirt falls to the top of my thighs.

He can't stop looking at me in his clothes.

But then, I can't stop looking at him as he sautés mushrooms, carrots, and peppers while wearing gym shorts and a gray T-shirt.

It's a good view, the baseball player cooking, as he whips up a quick fried rice dish, adding some sesame oil.

Holden seems to enjoy the view of me too, in his T-shirt from our alma mater. He tossed it my way when I said I was hungry, and he said he'd cook for me if I didn't get fully dressed.

Seemed like a fair deal.

Also, I've learned this—sex makes me ravenous.

As I lean against the counter in his clean, immaculate kitchen, my stomach rumbles again.

He rolls his eyes. "I'm working on it, woman."

"Sorry. Not sorry. You worked up an appetite in me."

He gives me a crooked, satisfied grin. "Good," he murmurs as the veggies sizzle. "So. Sex. What's your score?"

I stare at the ceiling, screwing up the corner of my lips. "What's the scale? I need to know how I'm measuring it."

"One to ... *Give me more of that good shit right fucking now,*" he says as he turns down the heat on the pan.

“*That.*” I point, indicating the latter. “That’s how I rate it; that’s what I want. Well, after I eat, of course.”

He winks. “Good answer,” he says, adding some soy sauce then plating the food and setting it on the table.

He grabs forks and cloth napkins, then pulls out my chair.

“Such a gentleman,” I say.

“Except in bed,” he whispers, all low and smoky, sending a shiver down my spine.

“And I like that you’re not entirely a gentleman in bed.” I pick up my fork and dig in. I moan around the first bite like a Food Network host. “You have won the favor of my belly.”

He wiggles a brow. “So, I’m in the good graces of your pussy and your belly. Nice to know.”

I crack up. “Yes, Holden. You have won over my vagina. Aren’t you pleased?”

“As fucking punch,” he says in a sexy rumble. “But the stomach too?” He blows on his nails. “Damn, I’m good.” He takes another bite of the lunch.

“You are very, very good,” I say slowly, seductively, so the compliment sinks in.

When he’s done chewing, he leans closer, kisses my cheek, then whispers, “Thank you.”

My chest flips. “For what?”

He pulls back, sitting up straight. “Just thank you.”

I smile, dipping my head, knowing what he means. He’s thanking me for giving him the keys to my body for the first time.

Hell, I’m thanking me too.

I chose well.

Yay, me. “Let me get this straight,” I begin, loving this moment, the après sex where we can flirt and tease as if the world doesn’t exist beyond this home. “You can cook. You like your parents. You’re smart. You play word games. You’re

a hard worker. And you don't do hookups. What exactly *is* wrong with you?"

Of course, I know the answer—nothing. But there's something wrong with the situation, the thing that's hanging over our heads.

The salacious tabloid fodder we'd be.

The sheer juiciness of *us* is a problem for a man trying to carve out a new golden boy rep with the press. A few words here or there on social media, a spin to the left by the press, a spin to the right by the public, and we'd be the golden boy Home Run Hitter and the sweet-as-apple-pie Coach's Daughter one day. But the next day Twitter would chew us up and spit us out with memes about Holden nailing his spot in the lineup by nailing me.

We'd be trashed.

Ugh.

Perception.

It's a wonderful thing, and a terrible thing,

Your star can either shoot to the stratosphere or dim out based on how the public sees you on any given day. I love and hate the world I work in, but I understand it, and so this tryst between us exists in a mini vacation, a contained moment in time. When this afternoon ends, he'll head to the ballpark, ending the spell.

But right now, behind closed doors, we're in a cocoon of food and sex and laughter.

"You forgot on your list of pros that I'm good in bed," he points out.

"But *are you*? I don't have any benchmark," I tease.

He narrows his eyes, his voice dipping deeper. "And I like it that way."

"You're a little possessive."

"Yes. I like being your first. Call me primal. Call me possessive. Call me whatever you want. I just like it."

“And I like it too,” I say.

After we finish eating, I help clean up, and then he tugs at the bottom of the shirt I’m wearing. “Don’t go,” he says, his tone vulnerable and commanding at the same time.

My heart pirouettes, delighted that his appetite for me is ravenous. “I do have to interview you for the podcast follow-up,” I say playfully, though I know that’s not why he wants me to stay.

“Yes, interview me, and then still don’t go.”

I laugh, feeling light and happy inside.

“Spend the rest of the day with me. Tell me you don’t have to go,” he implores.

I wrap my arms around his neck. “I don’t have to go.”

He loops his around my waist, yanks me close, and meets my eyes. “Good, because I want to fuck you, and make love to you, and spend the day with you.”

Gooseflesh rises on my skin. “You don’t have to sell me on it. With you, I’m sold,” I whisper.

A kiss is his answer.

A kiss that makes my knees wobble.

The kind of kiss I want over and over.

We break it and head to the living room, settling into the couch. Grabbing my recorder from my purse, I do a quick follow-up interview for my podcast.

It’s brief, under ten minutes, and we touch on what he’s been up to since the last time he was on my show.

I’m open and forthright, and he’s the same, a marked contrast for the “no comment” king.

When we finish, I turn off the device and tell him he is going to be a model media baseball player. “So long as you stay away from the—*gasp*—forbidden fruit of me,” I add in my best soap-star voice. But though I’m treating it lightly, it’s not a light situation. There *is* a world beyond these walls.

A world that would see this afternoon only one way.

And I'd be a fool to pretend there isn't.

“Seems I'm oh-for-three at resisting the forbidden fruit,” he says with a crooked grin, and I wish we were only joking. I wish we weren't truly tangoing with trouble.

His eyes drift to my recorder. “Can I take my turn interviewing you?”

“You're into table-turning, and I'm just learning this?”

“Maybe I am,” he says.

“Then try me.”

I sit cross-legged, fold my hands in my lap, and adopt a good-girl look. “Let's see if you give a good interview.”

“The challenge is on.”

But he doesn't pick up the device. Instead, he clears his throat and dives into the question pool, turning the tables on me immediately. “So, Reese, tell me the best piece of advice you've ever been given.”

I sit up a little straighter, answering from the heart. “My mom likes to say, ‘The answer is always no, unless you ask, so don't be afraid to ask for what you want.’ She said that to me when I was growing up as a way to instill confidence in me.”

He arches a brow. “You're confident? I had no idea,” he says, rolling his eyes.

I swat him. “You say that like it's a bad thing.”

He smiles. “It's an excellent thing. And it's good insight into you, into why you're such a go-getter. Because you are.”

“She also taught me to know my limits. And I think that's just as important.”

His brow furrows. “Makes sense, but what does that mean to you? Why did it resonate?”

“It means something to me because it meant something to her,” I begin, careful not to tread too close to the elephant in the room—my dad. “She was a woman who learned hers. She

was a woman who knew when she'd reached them," I say, dread curling in my veins as we sway close to the reason this afternoon can only be an afternoon.

Without even saying it, we both know how today ends.

It ends without any more plans. It ends without a game plan for us.

It ends with him going to the ballpark to work for my father.

I swallow the bitterness coating my throat. "And to know myself. Like knowing that I would only go so far in volleyball. Like knowing what I want and what to expect from myself in a relationship."

I put that out there, not afraid to tell him what I want, even if I can't have it. "I'm a relationship gal," I say. "And it's good to know your limits."

He's quiet for a beat. Maybe I've touched on a spot that's sorer than I thought.

His limits.

HOLDEN

I tense at the reminder of limits.

We have them.

Soon, I'll hit hers. I'll bump up against the elasticity. Because I can't give her what she deserves. I can't give her what I want to give.

Best to shift. "What are your goals?" I ask as I continue to mock-interview, hoping to jump to less dangerous terrain.

"Simple. Change the world."

I laugh, loving her lightness even as she embarks on a big mission. "You know yourself so well at age twenty-five. How is that possible?"

She pushes on my shoulder. "Hey, I'm twenty-four. Don't age me up."

"So young. When's your birthday?"

She gives me the date. It's in the fall. "And I suppose I know what I want because I'm surrounded by strong women and strong friends, and also because I learned when I was a teenager exactly what I *don't* want," she says, her tone darkening, right along with those crystal blue eyes. "I learned what I find unacceptable."

I've got a feeling she learned it through her dad leaving. She's never said why he left, but it's easy to read between the lines. He hurt her mom. He probably cheated on her. I wish I didn't know that.

I swallow roughly. “Know your limits,” I repeat, heavily too.

“Yes. Exactly.”

I look at the clock. I’ll need to leave in a couple of hours for batting practice.

Maybe I know my own limits. Maybe I’m reaching them.

“Enough of this pretend microphone,” I say, then reach for her shirt, dragging her close to me.

“Yeah, enough of all that,” she says, her eyes floating closed, her lips asking for a kiss.

We move past the tension of the unspoken.

We move to a zone that feels limitless.

The physical.

I kiss her tenderly, exploring her lips, kissing her jaw, teasing her the way she likes. The way that gets her all worked up. The way that drives me wild too. When she’s wiggling and squirming, panting and shuddering, I take her hand, lead her to the bedroom, and tug off her shirt. I shuck off my clothes, reach for a condom, and give her an order.

“Get on me,” I tell her.

“If you insist.”

I open the condom wrapper, then slide on the protection. She straddles me, then rises, takes my shaft in her hand, and rubs the head against her wetness.

“That’s so fucking good,” I groan.

Her shoulders shudder. “It’s the best.”

She keeps up the rhythm, rubbing, pressing, preparing.

And then she brings the head of my cock inside her.

I’m rewarded with a gasp.

A sexy intake of breath.

When she lowers herself onto my length, I want to freeze time.

I want to live in the exquisite torture of this moment, of the mind-bending pleasure of this intimacy.

She takes me in deeper. A lightning bolt of pleasure cracks inside me. Her heat envelops my shaft. Lust sparks across my skin as I indulge in the sight in front of me, like a series of snapshots of sensations.

Her noises.

Her trembles.

Her sexy fucking body.

Her tits bouncing.

Her hands as she parks them on my chest.

All of it is so intense, so electric.

The world spirals away once more as she seeks her friction, hunts down her pleasure, uses my body to find her bliss.

“That’s right. Keep doing that, beautiful. Ride me so hard.”

“Mmm. This feels so good. I think I love this position more.”

I growl, pleasure zapping through me, as I pump up into her. “Let me make you feel fantastic,” I say, gripping her hips, helping her along.

I’ve learned a little help goes a long way with her, so I bring my thumb between her legs, gliding it over her hard clit. She moans, gripping my chest even harder, riding me faster, finding the pace that she wants as her body seeks release.

And that—that I can give her unequivocally.

No lines. Nothing held back. Everything she deserves.

I take her there, rubbing and stroking and fucking up into her until she shatters, bursting into pleasure as she calls out my name.

I follow her over the cliff, succumbing to the ecstasy of my own orgasm, then holding her close, wrapping my arms around her, and kissing her like this is the only time.

And I'm pretty sure it is.

* * *

After a shower, she puts on her clothes, and I tug on mine, getting ready for the ballpark.

She gathers her purse, slips on her jacket, and walks to the door.

A heaviness descends, the sharp reality that this perfect day is drawing to a close.

She flashes me a *go get 'em, slugger* grin. "Good luck tonight against the Miami Aces." She raises a finger, her voice going intense. "And don't forget, Diaz loves to hit screamers into the hole. You need to be on your guard when he's at bat."

I smile, loving that she knows her baseball. Loving that she wants to make sure I can field my position. "I'll have my head in the game. Any other tips?"

She taps her chin, looking a little playful. "Their closer is one of the toughest in baseball. So if you're up against him, just pray."

"Excellent advice. And should I wink or something when I'm digging into my first at bat to let you know that I'm thinking of you?"

Her smile tap-dances across her face. "Yes. Do that," she says, reaching for the knob.

I'm keenly aware that she is leaving.

Well, duh.

Of course she's leaving. That's why she's at the motherfucking door.

But I'm keenly aware that I can't do what I want to do, which is to ask her for *more*. Ask her to come to the game, to sit on the first baseline, to be there for me.

The same damn thing I wanted at the Legion of Honor.

An *us*.

I'm not a hookup guy. I don't want a one-time thing. I want *her* in my life.

My stomach twists. "Reese?"

She turns. "Yes?"

"Can I call you again?" I ask stupidly.

So fucking stupidly.

I need to let her go, need to stop clutching at straws.

Just as she's embarking on the next phase of her career, the last thing she needs is undue attention because of her private life.

I don't want her to be subjected to social media bullshit, to the twisted way the press might spin us.

Not to mention, I have no fucking clue what Thompson might think. None whatsoever. Would he bench me? Drop me to ninth? Lobby for a trade?

No way of knowing.

I barely know him.

But I know this much—I don't want to test his limits, not when my career is on a red-hot rise.

"Of course I want you to call." She sighs, a sad sound. "But is that a good idea?"

My shoulders sag. "Does it push your limits?"

Her expression is serious, her voice soft as she answers, "It might. I want to talk to you, Holden. But I don't want us to become the thing that the media talks about. Not when you're trying to make this big change with the press."

"And not when you're trying to do all the things you're doing. To change the world," I say.

"We'd be the focus of your season instead of how you play."

I sigh heavily. “Yep. I get it.” I reach for her arm, squeezing it. “Thanks for helping me today with the media tips. You’re a lifesaver.”

She flashes me a grin that warms my heart. “It was my pleasure. You’ve got this,” she says. “One session at the Reese Fallon School of Media Training, and you’ll be a regular Crash Davis. I promise.”

“One session. Too bad I don’t need more,” I say.

“It’s a damn shame you’re such a quick study.”

She gives me a quick, soft goodbye kiss on my lips, then leaves. I watch her head down the steps, down the block, then out of sight.

My heart clutches. My chest tightens.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Get it together, man.

* * *

A little later, I catch a Lyft to the park, calling my parents as I go.

A chat will reset me. Especially when my mom says she needs to grade papers tomorrow.

Soon, she won’t have to. I can help them retire, buy a nicer home, make their future completely secure. That’s what I want to do. Take care of them.

I’m only in my fourth year playing ball, but for the first time, I’m making big money.

Enough to make a difference.

I’ve got to focus on the prize.

Avoid trouble.

Avoid gossip.

“How’s that new skipper of yours?” my father asks.

I close my eyes, gritting my teeth, as the Nissan Sentra eases through traffic on Lombard Street.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “Great. He’s great.”

* * *

Two hours later, I’m at the ballpark, and Edward Thompson calls me aside by the dugout before the game begins. He motions for the starting pitcher and the catcher to join us as well. We talk about the kind of small ball the Aces have been executing recently, what we need to do to beat them.

“And that’s the game plan,” he says when he finishes.

We high-five, knock fists, and I make my way to the dugout to get ready for the game. Thompson sets a hand on my shoulder. I turn around, tension whipping through me as he says, “A word, Kingsley.”

Does he know? Did someone tip him off that I slept with his daughter? My gut twists, knotting around itself. My throat is sand.

“Yes?” I ask in my best poker voice, hoping he can’t read the motherfucking guilt in my tone.

But his dark eyes are warm, with no signs of looming revenge. “Watch out for Diaz. His bat’s on fire, and he loves to hit them up the middle,” he says in a teacherly tone, imparting wisdom.

I smile, recalling Reese’s words too. “Yes, he does.”

Then he slides into family talk. “How are your parents doing?”

“Good, good,” I say, relieved as I breathe again.

“And how’s everything with you? Is there a woman on the horizon?” he asks purely with curiosity, like a friendly relative would at the holidays.

I hope.

My lungs stop again. I can't breathe once more. But then somehow my organs start up again. "Nope," I bite out.

"Someday there will be," he says, then walks off.

I try to shake off the encounter, to focus on the game. I lob a single, I field Diaz perfectly, but we lose the game by a score of 2 to 1.

When I go home that night, I feel like it was both the best day ever and a bit shitty too.

Then I remember I forgot to wink at Reese during my first at bat.

This is why I can't have nice things.

Because balancing them is fucking impossible.

REESE

This isn't awkward at all, walking up the steps of my father's new home overlooking Richardson Bay, across the city in the heart of Sausalito.

It's one of those picturesque seaside towns with curving streets and gentle waves lolling against the rocks on the shore.

The view of the Golden Gate Bridge is priceless.

I love this pretty little town, but I wish I were simply wandering through Sausalito about to pop into an ice cream shop or stop in a boutique to pick up a gift, an apron with a funny saying on it maybe, or a Christmas ornament with cutout cats.

Instead, I'm walking into my father's house, about to have breakfast with him and his newest wife.

I haven't seen the man who gave me half my genes since I spent the summer interning in the city after my junior year of college. He took me out to sushi one night.

That was all.

When I reach the top step, I push the buzzer, my stomach dipping and rising like a roller coaster. I offer up a faint prayer to the universe that perhaps he isn't here. Perhaps he was called away to a baseball emergency.

Someone corked a bat.

Or a glove is missing.

Maybe the starting pitcher has a case of butterflies.

Wouldn't that be great? As my nerves roil and sway, I hope for the most once-in-a-blue-moon of all options—the last-minute cancellation of our breakfast.

That would solve a ton of problems right now.

Mainly my blankness.

I don't know how to feel.

How to think.

And yet I also think a million things all at once.

I think it's been several years.

I think I saw him on TV last night.

I think I'm falling for his cleanup hitter.

But I don't know how to look at my father without thinking about that day I caught a bus to Sacramento and discovered who he really was.

Who he probably still is.

A cheater.

I think another thing—this isn't how a relationship should go between a father and a daughter.

This isn't what I wanted with him. To be unsure of how to respect him or how to love him.

He opens the door, his face wrinkled, but his eyes and his smile as magnetic as they were when I was growing up. They're as welcoming as when he lived at home and read bedtime stories to me and taught me how to serve a ball over the net and tended to bruised knees and scraped elbows.

The memories rattle past me.

Another dip. Another roll.

"Sweetie bear," he says.

Before I have a chance to respond, his arms rope around me, and he's hugging me like no time has passed. Like the last time we had father-daughter sushi—unagi and mackerel rolls, seaweed salad and yellowtail—was only yesterday.

Like we didn't have painful, awkward words at my high school graduation.

Like he was a regular part of the people I contacted when I was in South America.

Instead, the truth is I haven't said much to my father since he left home more than a decade ago.

We drifted an ocean apart.

"Come inside. Let's catch up. I want to hear all about South America, and your new job, and how Tia and Layla are doing." That's my dad. He remembers everything.

Those right-hand men who walk behind presidents and politicians and whisper details about every dignitary they meet? *Ambassador Williams's oldest daughter just graduated from Smith with a degree in French languages. Congressman Johnson's wife just beat breast cancer.*

My dad would never need that person.

"I'm great," I say, my voice pitching up. "Tia is great. Layla is great. My new job is great. San Francisco is great. Everything is wonderful."

I won't reward him with the truth. He has only earned platitudes.

A redhead turns the corner and walks into the living room. "Oh, hello there!"

Becky.

She's attractive in a put-together, well-dressed, blow-dried way. She looks exactly like my father's type—a little bit younger than him and a lot pretty.

Beyond that, I don't know what to make of her except that she's poised and wildly pregnant. Stopping in front of me, she extends a hand and says in a warm, intelligent voice, "It's so good to meet you, Reese."

I part my lips, hunting for words, peering under the couch for them, searching under pillows, scouring drawers. "It's

great to meet you too,” I say, and I do sound like Minnie Mouse.

I don’t know why my voice is so high.

I don’t know why I can’t jerk it back to my normal range.

I also can’t stop staring at her stomach. It’s gigantic. And it’s filled with—

I pump the brakes on that thought, on the bizarre reality that she’s carrying my half brother or half sister in her belly.

My father’s DNA twined with hers, and now there’s a person growing inside her who is closely related to me.

If I need a kidney, I’d have to ask my sister or this person.

Dip, sway, plummet.

“We’re so thrilled to have you here, Reese,” Becky says.

“Same,” I say, though that’s not true.

My dad says, “Come on. Come in.” He gestures to the couch in the living room. It seems comfy and cushy, and it overlooks a window with a perfect view of the water.

I head in there and sit down, cycling through topics. I’m not sure if I should ask how her pregnancy is going, or comment on them moving back to San Francisco, or remark on my new job.

Or my friends, or the view, or this home.

I go to the one thing that my father and I can always talk about.

Baseball.

The universal lubricant of our father-daughter conversations.

“Bummer of a game last night. It was so close,” I say, sitting on the edge of the couch. Settling comfortably into these soft cushions would be too weird.

His face falls, but in an *aw-shucks, we almost had it way*. “So close, wasn’t it?” Becky sits next to him, and he takes her hand, threading their fingers together. “It’s always hard to lose

by one run. But we're three-for-one so far this year, and the guys are playing great."

The guys. I know one of those guys carnally.

"They are." I paste on a smile. "What do you think of the team, Becky?"

My mom taught me to be polite. It's polite to ask Becky what she thinks.

She flashes a grin. "I'm more of a hockey fan myself, but I'm delighted the Dragons have a winning record. Would you like some tea? Green, mint, black?"

"Black tea, please," I say, relief washing over me. We'll have something to center the awkward around—tea, and then soon, food.

Becky pushes up with an *oomph*, but my dad shakes his head, pats her thigh, and says, "I've got it."

She sinks into the couch. "Thanks, hon."

Hon. They have nicknames for each other.

As he heads to the open kitchen, he tosses out to me, "You always loved your caffeine, sweetie bear."

My brow knits. "I didn't drink tea or coffee when ..."

When you lived with us.

"Diet Coke, sweetie bear," he adds quickly. "You loved it."

Yeah, when he used to take me out for Diet Coke and veggie burgers after my volleyball games.

I can't even go there.

Time to turn on my media skills.

Dial 'em up.

Crank them well past one hundred.

"What made you decide to take the job with the Dragons?" I ask like he's on my podcast. This is how I'll get through the morning.

“The offer came in at the last minute. I wasn’t expecting it, since they had someone during spring training, but I got a call the day before the first game. I was looking for something in sports broadcasting. I didn’t think I’d get such a great opportunity to be a major league manager though. It seemed like serendipity, since we’d already moved back here for Becky.”

“And I’m so glad we did. It’s so great to be near family,” Becky chimes in as my dad heats the kettle.

Next question, Reese. You can do it. I turn to the redhead carrying my half-sibling. “Do you have family here?”

“Two older sisters. They’re all here with their families. Janie runs an animal rescue, and Cassie is a vet. I guess I’m the odd woman out,” she says with a laugh.

“Oh? Why’s that? Are you a corporate lawyer?” I say, opting for lightness. At least, I think it’s lightness.

“I work at a genetic research company. Doing all sorts of research on genetic diseases and developing therapies for them.” Her expression is animated, her eyes alight with excitement. She must love her job. I know that feeling.

My dad beams as the kettle whistles. “Becky has a doctorate in science. She heads up a research department. She’s whip-smart.”

Great. Just great. She has a fascinating job, she’s a woman working in science, she’s close with her sisters, she loves her career. I want to hate her, but I can’t.

“And when did you meet?” I ask with a smile, marching down the interview path.

“Twelve months ago,” she says.

I do the math. He wasn’t married twelve months ago. Maybe, just maybe, he didn’t cheat.

When he returns with the tea, I pepper Becky with more questions—that, I can do forever. As I sip the English breakfast, I learn that she volunteers at her sister’s animal shelter, walking dogs and cleaning kennels.

“But not much heavy cleaning at the moment,” she says, gesturing to her bump. “Which means mostly I just talk to the dogs and cuddle them.”

“They must love that,” I say.

“They aren’t the only ones,” Becky says.

I learn, too, that she and my dad go for a two-mile walk every morning before her workday begins. Most of the time, they talk, but now and then, she listens to her favorite podcast while he listens to leadership skills audiobooks.

“Which podcast is that? Your favorite?”

“One of my girlfriends told me about it, and we’re addicted now. It’s called *Badass Babe*,” she says.

I blink. Swallow. This feels like the moment in a movie when a critical clue falls into the heroine’s lap. But she isn’t sure what to make of the evidence. “My friend Tia listens to that podcast,” I blurt out, the first thing I’ve said other than a question in a while.

“Do you listen to it too? It’s so empowering.”

“I’ve listened to a couple of episodes. And it’s great.” I half-wish that I hated it. That we didn’t agree on something badass. That I weren’t living in an alternate world where Becky and I have anything in common, where we have similar tastes, views, perspectives.

She’s supposed to be ... an airhead.

A homewrecker.

A bitch.

Instead, she’s ... interesting, progressive, positive.

There must be something wrong with her.

Maybe she’s too young.

That has to be it. She’s got to be my age. I can hate her for that. “How old are you?”

“Forty,” she says, with a smile and a shrug, then a downward glance at her belly. And a look crosses her eyes that

says, *I'm on the older side for a first-time mom, and I hope it goes well.*

She's older than me by a decade and a half.

She's still much younger than my dad's fifty-six years, but not by a gross, hairball-retching amount.

I turn to my father, ready to employ the same bluntness I've leaned on when talking to women, when talking to my friends, when talking to Grant.

Even when talking to Holden.

I want to ask my father how he reconciles this life, this home, this second chance he has to be a good father.

I want to say so many things.

How could you cheat on your wife? How do you feel about having a kid at fifty-six? How do you feel about the fact that you've been unfaithful many times over? How do you feel about the fact that you moved out of our home? That you left me when I was in middle school? That I had to figure everything out without you?

But when I look at the man I used to depend on, the man I looked up to, the man I revered, my throat tightens.

Words don't come.

I'm voiceless.

Once again, I'm thirteen, and I've found him at the ballpark kissing another woman, and I don't know what to say.

When we move to the table, and Dad serves up a simple breakfast of bagels and fruit, I focus entirely on Becky.

We banter about science, research, future remedies.

As I take a bite of blueberries, Becky spreads a hand across her belly. "Oh!"

Concern paints my father's face. "Everything okay, sweetheart?"

She's glowing. "He's enjoying breakfast too."

He's.

I choke down the blueberries.

I'm going to have a little brother.

Tears prick the back of my eyes.

Becky waves a hand. "Where was I?" She collects her thoughts and returns to the topic of genomes.

As I finish the fruit, I'm grateful for her because she gives me an excuse not to talk to my father again.

I still don't know what to say to him. He's still the part of my life that doesn't make sense.

But he's also the thing that stands in the way of the romance I want to have.

And I can't wait to leave. On the way out, Becky mentions the shower. "I'd love to have you attend, but if you don't want to, I understand," she says, gentle and kind.

A knot rises in my throat. She'll be a good mom. Already she's sharing her heart but giving space too.

"Thanks. I'll let you know."

Once I shut the door behind me, I let out a shaky, shuddery breath.

There is so much I should say to my father.

But right now, I want to talk to Holden.

He's the one I want to turn to. He's the one I want to call, to curl up with, to talk to about my awkward morning.

But I can't say a word to him.

That hurts more than the breakfast with my father.

So much more.

HOLDEN

With a clutch RBI in one game and a blowout in the next, we finish off the Aces, winning the home stand 2 to 1.

I knock fists with Dante, who started the game on the mound, and with John, who finished it, as well as Gunnar, our third baseman, who clobbered a homer in the seventh. He's new this year too and playing well. "Good work, guys," I say as we walk off the diamond. "Let's keep this shit up when we go to New York."

Tomorrow's a travel day, and we play the Comets on Wednesday.

Gunnar wiggles his fingers. "Ooh, intel time. Need you to give up all the goods, man. Isn't the closer there your former teammate? Shane Walker?"

"I call him Shakespeare. And yeah, we were both traded at the end of last season," I say as we head to the dugout.

Gunnar gives me *bummer for you* eyes, coupled with a ridiculous sympathetic nod. "Sucks, man. When they have to get rid of the dead weight."

"Did I say, 'Good work'? I was referring to Dante and John."

"Fine, fine. You're decent at the plate. Now tell me everything." He rubs his palms together. "I want all the dirt on their closer. That guy is *wicked* on the mound. Did he strike a deal with the devil for that fastball?"

"I do believe Shakespeare did."

“And so—to swing at his fastball or not to swing at his fastball? That is the question,” Gunnar asks in a most Bard-like tone, stroking his bearded jaw.

Chuckling, I clap him on the back. “All the world’s a baseball game. And in this case, the answer depends on whether you want to strike out swinging or looking.”

“Ouch,” Gunnar says with a wince.

“Yeah, the dude has fire in his pitches. Actual fire. I kid you not.”

“Then the answer is swinging, then. Always go down swinging,” Gunnar declares. “Go big or go home, right?”

“Only way to play.”

Before we hit the dugout, a confident young voice calls out, “Hello, Holden? Got a minute for KRGO?”

Tension shoots down my spine as I recognize Erin Madison, a TV reporter. My fists clench. But then I remember Reese’s insight.

Give them some of the truth, not all of it.

I turn around, flash a smile to the local sports journalist who’s been making a name for herself, then answer a few simple questions about the game.

“Great question, Erin. The Aces are always a tough opponent, and we played hard till the end of the ninth,” I start with, then finish with “And we’re looking forward to seeing what the Comets have this season. Thanks so much.”

“Thank you, Holden.”

As I head into the tunnel leading to the locker rooms, Gunnar gives me an approving nod. “Someone’s not so grumpy anymore with the press. Getting laid, bro?”

I bark out a laugh. “If only that were the reason,” I say.

Though, in a way, it is.

Only, Reese has always been more than sex.

She's the woman I met at the wrong time. Then, at the wrong time again. Emptiness settles into my chest, taking up camp there. A persistent reminder that though I want so much more than sex with her, I shouldn't have anything with her at all.

Trouble is, the only thing I want right now is to text Reese, tell her thanks, let her know her training is working.

Hell, I want to go to her place, curl up with her, and give her the download on how I'm no longer the king of "no comment," thanks to her.

But I don't do that, because I *can't* do that.

I *could* text her about the interview, let her know it went well. But that would lead to flirting, and flirting is what I have to resist.

After a shower, and a round of *good jobs* from Thompson, I get dressed, ready to hit the sack a little early, play some word games, and try not to think of a certain blonde.

Besides, rest before the cross-country flight tomorrow is a wise idea.

That's my plan, at least, until my phone buzzes in my locker.

Crosby's calling, so I pick up, and he dives right in. "I know you don't like going out, but you're coming with us tonight."

"Who said I don't like to go out?" I say, buttoning my shirt.

"I bet you were just making plans to play a word game or something. Admit it—you were gonna curl up with your phone and try to find 'stipend' or 'vitriol' upside down or diagonal or inside out."

I scoff, denying the stone-cold truth. "Maybe I was going to watch SportsCenter at the local bar with my teammates."

He laughs. "Oh, come on. You're such a homebody. You were not."

“Is there a reason you called? Or is giving me shit reason enough?”

“It is absolutely reason enough. Also, I’m calling to demand your presence. You’re coming with us because we’re going to the Spotted Zebra. Cougs won tonight, and so did your team. How often is it that we both win at the same time at home?”

“Hard to say because this is the first time I’m playing for the same team in the same city as you,” I say.

“Just show up. That’s all you need to know. You’re lucky we let you be friends with us.”

“I’m so grateful.”

So that’s where Gunnar and I go on a Monday night.

Two nights post-Reese.

Three games post-Reese.

Fifty-six hours post-Reese.

Not that I’m measuring time by her.

Oh hell. I totally am.

Maybe a night out with the guys will take my mind off her. Distract me from the reel playing on a loop in my head.

We catch a Lyft and head from the ballpark to Grant’s sister’s establishment in the heart of Hayes Valley.

Chance is standing by the bar, an elbow on it, a crooked grin on his face as he chats with Sierra, his whole demeanor saying one thing and one thing only. I can read him from a mile away. He’s into Grant’s sister. Which is a damn good thing. The dude’s wife put him through a hell of a divorce last year, Crosby told me, so it’s good to see him getting out there.

I stride over to him first as Gunnar motions he’ll join Crosby, who’s chatting with Grant at a corner table.

“Sounds good,” I say to Gunnar, then head over to Chance.

The tall, deep-voiced, and intimidating closer swivels around, lifts a brow, then shoots me a cocky grin. “Well, well,

well, if it isn't the enemy."

I laugh. "Is that who I am to you guys now?"

"What else would you be?"

I shake my head, amused. "So that's why you guys invited me here? To celebrate with the enemy?"

"Don't you know the saying?" He drops his voice to a stage whisper. "*Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*"

Sierra rolls her brown eyes, cutting in. "Just ignore him. He's ridiculous. Also, *nobody* is ever an enemy at my bar, Holden."

"Thank you very much, Sierra. I appreciate that." I slug Chance on his thick slab of an arm, then gesture to Sierra. "See? She welcomes me. She likes me."

Yup, these two are quite a distraction. They're like a sideshow, thanks to Chance.

Sierra flashes a bright smile then flicks a strand of her pink-tipped hair off her shoulder. "Everyone at the Spotted Zebra is a friend."

I drum my fingers on the bar, checking out the chalkboard menu of cocktails, but cocktails aren't my speed. "What do you recommend tonight that's on tap, Sierra?"

She studies me with intense eyes, sizing me up like she's reading what kind of drink I want.

Chance deals me a *don't you dare go for her* look.

"I say you're in the mood for a pale ale," she says, issuing her official decree.

"I never disagree with the bartender."

She heads over to the taps to fill a beer, and I turn to Chance, having a blast calling him out. "Do you actually think I'm flirting with Grant's sister?"

Chance has the good sense to act shocked. "Why would you think I was even thinking about how you were talking to

her?”

I crack up. “That was some doublespeak right there. But I would think it from the look that you just dealt me. Like you wanted to slice me to pieces in a deli meat cutter.”

“I didn’t give you a look,” he says, jerking back. “And I don’t like deli meat.”

“My point exactly.” I laugh, rolling my eyes. “You definitely gave me a look.”

“There were zero looks delivered from me to you.”

“You gave me a look that said, *Why the hell are you flirting with my woman?*”

A laugh bursts from his chest. “She’s not mine, so I’d have no problem with you flirting with her. Why would you even think I’d have a problem with you flirting with Grant’s sister?”

“Because you’re into her,” I say, emphasizing my point.

His brow knits, and he rearranges his features into a most skeptical stare. “Everyone knows you don’t bang a teammate’s sister.”

Ouch. Now we’re tangoing too close for comfort. This convo isn’t helping my efforts to put Reese out of my mind. “I didn’t say you were banging her. I said you were into her.”

“And you know where being into someone leads to. It leads to banging. You know the rules,” Chance says, counting off on his fingers. “You don’t bang a teammate’s sister. You don’t bang a coach’s sister. You don’t bang the coach’s daughter. You don’t bang a teammate’s mom. You just don’t cross those lines, so I’m definitely not doing that.”

Ouch, double ouch, triple whammy motherfucker ouch.

He’s right, but I’m not going to confess that I’m guilty on one of those charges.

And that I want to be guilty again.

My fingers itch with the desire to call Reese. My lips ache to talk to her. My mind returns to her over and over again.

Sierra returns with my drink as Grant strolls over, joining us.

“Isn’t this so typical—all the guys flocking to my sister?” he says, sounding like a lion watching over his pride.

Sierra rolls her eyes in his direction. “You think it might have something to do with the fact that I’m pouring the drinks?”

Grant flashes her his winning grin. “Well, obviously. Why else would it be?”

“Gee, thanks, Grant,” she says, then flips him the bird. “I guess I won’t mention the smoke show who came by last night and asked for your number.”

“Sounds like a regular night for you then,” he says, leaning back against the bar. “All the hotties trying to find me and whatnot.”

She sticks out her chin, giving him a taunting look. “And maybe I’m *not* going to give you any details on the Chris Hemsworth look-alike who wanted me to pass along his digits to my supposed hottie brother.”

“Ooh, Thor. He’s your fave, isn’t he?” Chance asks, ribbing Grant.

“If I liked straight guys, he’d be my fave.”

“So you’re going to call this dude who left his number?” I ask, admittedly a little curious as to Grant’s strategy. Does he really pick up guys at his sister’s bar?

Grant shakes his head, swings his gaze to Sierra. “Nah. But listen, I do appreciate you handling the sorting of the dudes for me.”

Sierra shoots him the kind of dirty look only a sister can dole out. “Why do I even let you have drinks here? I am not your social secretary.”

“And you may have noticed, I *never* ask for numbers from the dudes who pass them on to you,” Grant points out.

“Why’s that, G-Man? Just waiting for Mr. Right and the all-night Cuddle Fest you’re hoping for?” I tease.

Grant cracks up. “Yup. It’s on my Vision Board.” He sweeps out his hand. “The Great Cuddle Fest is coming soon.”

“You have a date in mind?” I ask.

“May? June? Who the hell knows? A man can dream,” Grant says, with a wink, then turns back to his sister. “But I will pay for everyone’s drinks as my way of thanking you for the hard labor of being my first line of defense.”

“Wait. You pay for drinks?” I deadpan, acting shocked.

“Pretty sure that never happens,” Chance puts in.

“And I thought you were my friends,” Grant says. “Thanks, assholes.”

Chance gives him a sympathetic smile. “Sorry to hear you labored under that delusion,” he says, then settles onto the stool and flashes a grin at Sierra. “I will happily take over buying drinks for your brother.”

As Sierra says thanks, I mutter, “You are so transparent,” to Chance, but I’m glad the guy seems happier again than he was in the dark days immediately following his split. I amble away with Grant, joining him, Crosby, and Gunnar on a black-and-white striped couch at a table in the corner.

Crosby knocks back some of his beer, then parks his elbows on the table. “Do you two Lizard Kings want to give us any tips on the team you just played, since we’re playing them next?”

“Lizard Kings? That’s what you’re calling us now?” Gunnar asks with a laugh. “Maybe we’ll call you the Kitty Cats? Wait. No. The House Cats. Hold on. I have a better one.” He takes a pregnant pause worthy of a stand-up comic. “The Mousers.”

“You might think that’s an insult, but barn cats are motherfucking killers, so thank you for the compliment,” Crosby says. “Now, what’s the name of your team, then? Geckos? Chameleons? Moray Eels?”

I lean back against the cushions. “And to think I abandoned a hot new word search for this abuse.”

Crosby winks. “Salamanders. That’s it. Anyway, give us the deets on the Aces. Whose bat is hot, whose bat is not?”

“Ah, so that’s why you invited me here tonight,” I add.

“You didn’t think it was just to see your face?” Crosby posits, his expression intensely serious.

I shake my head. “Nope. Never. Also, by the way, Daniel Craig was the best Bond.”

He mimes slamming a buzzer. “Wrong. Sean Connery.”

That ignites an epic argument between Grant, Gunnar, and Crosby not only on who’s the best Bond, but which flick was the best of all-time.

Casino Royale is the verdict.

Obviously.

It’s another hour I shave off the *don’t think of Reese* agenda.

As the clock ticks closer to midnight, Nadia sails in, derailing all of Crosby’s attention as he smothers her in kisses.

When she joins us, we catch up on her football team briefly before she and Crosby head to the bar to grab fresh drinks.

Gunnar yawns, saying he needs to take off.

“See you on the plane tomorrow,” I say, then I catch the tail end of a SportsCenter segment on tonight’s hot plays. Grant stares at the screen too, uttering a *whoa* when the shortstop for the Comets wins the honor of Play of the Night with a fierce vertical jump to nab a scorching line drive. He shoots airborne four or five feet, leaping over the sliding runner to glove the ball.

“Hot damn, that was a helluva play,” I say in admiration of the man’s epic fielding.

“Yeah. It sure was,” Grant says, his voice far away.

It's not a tone I hear from him often.

He sounds almost lost in time.

I snap my gaze to him and find that he's watching the replay as SportsCenter serves it up from multiple angles.

The volume is down, but the words flash across the screen in subtitles.

Declan Steele shows all of Major League Baseball why he's following in Derek Jeter's footsteps. Nearly a decade in the bigs, and the Comets shortstop is still at the top of his game.

"Top of his game indeed," Grant repeats, and he's somewhere else entirely.

I nod as the screen shifts to a slow-mo. "Damn. I'm going to have to pay for grub when I see him. Pretty sure I bet that he wouldn't be Play of the Night so soon."

"That so?" Grant still sounds like he's in another world.

What's that about?

I furrow my brow as a memory resurfaces. Several weeks ago, at the Sports Network Awards where Grant received a trophy for best sportsman, I chatted with Declan at the event. He was only supposed to be in town for a night, but he wound up staying longer than he'd planned. The morning he was taking off for New York, Crosby and I bumped into him a block or two away from Grant's house. "Oh, right. When he was in town, I saw him at that coffee shop near your ..."

My remark jolts Grant from his daydream before I can say *house*.

He snaps his gaze to me, intensity written in his eyes, almost like his irises are begging me to be quiet.

In a heartbeat, I connect the dots. I don't know his romantic history, but I'd be willing to bet it involves Declan Steele. "Yeah," Grant says, answering my unfinished question. "We got coffee."

Pretty sure whatever happened with Grant and Declan wasn't just coffee.

But it's not my place to say. "Got it. That place has good joe."

"The best." Grant grabs his beer, knocks some back, and seems to reroute his thoughts. "What's happening with Reese?"

Probably best to tread carefully here. "Has she said anything to you?"

"Is there anything to say?" he counters.

I sigh. "Look, you know the deal. I'm crazy about her, but it'd be risky as hell."

A small smile tugs at his lips. "Crazy about her?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," I say.

He shrugs casually. "Don't be so sure. I might believe it." He straightens his shoulders, his eyes intense. "Just be careful with her heart, okay? She's strong on the outside, but she's had some shit to deal with. I just want you to think about that."

I want to tell him we're not anything, but I've got a feeling that Grant wouldn't be fooled, just like I wasn't fooled by his *we got coffee*.

"She's kind of all I think about. Well, besides baseball."

He gives me a sympathetic smile. "Sounds like your head's a mess. I know how that can be."

"I guess it's a good thing I'm getting out of town."

"You're heading to New York next? To play the Comets?" Grant asks, fiddling with the label on his beer bottle, sounding like he's fishing for info because he damn well knows I'm off to New York.

But the guy's been good to me, so I decide to toss him a line. "Yeah. I'll probably grab a bite with Declan. But don't worry, man," I say, tipping my forehead to the screen where Declan last appeared. "That'll stay between us."

His eyes are etched with relief. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

For a conversation where little was said, I feel like we both understand each other completely.

And I understand myself all too well, since the first thing I do when I land in New York is click on the picture I took of Reese by San Francisco Bay, the wind blowing her hair, the ferry docking behind her, right before I bought her the chocolates.

My heart squeezes.

I wish I were seeing her when I return to California, bringing her chocolates as a gift.

I wish she were at my games, the good ones and the bad ones.

I wish I were by her side at her events, supporting her.

What the hell is happening to me?

I throw out the plan of resisting Reese, and I listen to my instincts, the ones that say *talk to her*, and I send Reese a text.

REESE

Like a kid sliding across the hardwoods on Christmas morning, Jillian practically skids down the hall, stopping sharply at my workspace.

“Come, come,” she says, waving me out of my cube. “Adriana has big news.”

I jump out of my chair. “She’s about to deliver?”

Jillian laughs, shaking her head. “No. But I can’t wait to meet her little daughter in another month.” My heart grows two sizes at the thought. I barely know Adriana, but I’m looking forward to her sweetie pie arriving soon. I’m not even a baby person, but suddenly I’m surrounded by preggers women, and I’m looking forward to all the coming-soon baby snuggles.

I follow Jillian to the VP’s office.

Adriana is doing a victory dance, shimmying and shaking, arms in the air, but all belly, just like Becky.

An image of my father’s wife carrying my half brother seizes my attention, along with the invite to the baby shower.

I still haven’t RSVP’d, and time is getting short.

Work comes first. I need to focus on that.

Hell, I’ve *been* focusing on that. I had my moment with Holden, and that’s all it was—a moment in time.

Nothing will come of it.

So I keep putting one foot in front of the other. My job, my friends, my life.

That's all.

Adriana clears her throat, adopting a grand-marshal-for-a-parade stance. "Ladies, as you know, we work with Webflix, and the streaming giant is also the corporate sponsor for USA Hockey's Disabled Hockey Festival, and they want to do a calendar with their athletes and ... wait for it ..." She spreads her hands wide like she's lighting up a marquee, then she finishes with a flourish, "Rescue dogs."

Cue the squealing.

The three of us lose our minds with glee because ... dogs.

"That is the cutest thing ever," I say, brimming with excitement. "That's, like ... everything."

"Dogs are life. Jones and I have a Chihuahua mix named Cletus," Jillian says, whipping out her phone and showing us a picture of a little dog leaping over an agility seesaw. "Jones does dog agility training with him, and it's the cutest thing in the entire universe."

I bring my hand to my heart, sighing happily at the photo. "That is one hundred percent certified adorable."

"But you know what is cute too?" Jillian asks, with a waggle of her brows. "Rafe Wilson has a rescue dog as well. And he's going to be in the calendar," she says, mentioning the sled hockey player who's become an advocate for athletes with disabilities. "Reese, I want you to work on this project. You could maybe even interview him for your podcast."

"Actually, I have talked to him," I say, lighting up. Rafe and I connected on the phone for my show a year ago while I was in Chile. "He's fantastic. Well-spoken. Funny. So intelligent."

"And *so* single," Adriana adds, then licks her lips. "Oops. I'm sorry, was that inappropriate? I know I shouldn't say that, but the man really is a hottie."

Jillian shoots me a *love is in the air* look. “Maybe you’ll work on the calendar with him and fall head over heels.”

I blink. Did she just authorize love on the job?

Adriana points at Jillian. “Like you and your hubs did.”

Holy smokes.

She did.

She’s not drawing lines; she’s firing Cupid’s arrows.

Ones I wasn’t asking for. Ones I didn’t expect to fly.

I turn to my boss. “I didn’t know you and Jones were one of those work-together-on-a-calendar-and-fall-in-love stories. Those are the best.”

She shrugs sheepishly, smiling the whole time. “It was rescue dogs and cats. We didn’t stand a chance of resisting. Anyway, I was the publicist for the Renegades then, and he was, and still is, the star receiver. So we kind of dated secretly at first.”

Suddenly, I need to know everything. I *have* to know. All along, I’ve assumed I’d be playing with fire at work if I dated Holden. But was that a wrong assumption?

“Was there any issue at the organization once that came out? Did you lose your job?” How did she navigate that patch of thorns? Now’s as good a time as any to ask. Even though Holden faces the bigger issue, I still want to know how a woman I admire managed that work-love conflict.

“I told my boss when I realized I’d fallen in love with Jones. I thought she’d want me to tender my resignation. But instead, she said to be prepared to handle myself with grace in the public eye, since I was about to be in the middle of it. She was right. And she had faith in me—in my track record with the team, and in my ability to handle the scrutiny. I was damn lucky to work for such a lady boss.”

“That was it?” I ask bluntly.

Why is it that I’m able to talk to women so easily, to dive right into the heart of things, and speak the straightforward

truth, but I can't do this with my father?

Jillian wags a finger at me, all conspiratorial. "Do you like Rafe? Is that why you're asking—you want to date him? Because I would have no problem with that. I'm not here to police who you date."

I'm silent at first, processing the words *no problem*.

Aloud, they make perfect sense, but I didn't think they were words I'd hear.

I *assumed* they weren't, and my assumptions were false.

My boss wouldn't care if I dated Holden, and a weight lifts from my shoulders, vanishing into thin air.

I feel lighter already. So light I laugh, both wildly grateful for her forward-thinking answer and eager to correct *her* assumption. "I think Rafe is fantastic, and he'd probably be wonderful, but I wasn't angling to date him."

Adriana gives me a *serve up the goods* look. "Someone else, then? Another athlete?"

A kernel of hope blooms inside me. I picture dates, and daytime, and snaps of the two of us at the Ferry Building.

A reel flickers before me of more than nights—*of days*.

"Maybe," I say, lingering on the word long enough to make it clear my answer is actually yes. "But I don't think anything will happen," I add quickly. I'd do well to remind myself of the score.

Know your limits.

Holden and I have plenty of limits.

Namely, I don't fit into his life.

Even if my limits are gone, even if I'm free to see him, *his* hurdles haven't disappeared.

He didn't vault over them in a few short days.

Nor is he likely to. His case is vastly different than mine.

Jillian might be able to wave a magic wand of coolness and ease my worries, but she can't click her ruby-red slippers

and wish away the media circus Holden could face.

Or the consequences my dad might dole out.

Or the perception of the public.

No one can control that, and perception is important to his goals, his career, his family's future.

Jillian frowns. "Why? Doesn't he feel the same way?"

"He does. But it's a complicated situation," I say, though we aren't even in a relationship, Holden and me. We aren't in a holding pattern either. We're ... nothing.

Still, it's a relief to give voice to what's on my mind, to share it with smart women, even if I can't serve up the details. "He's not a client," I add, quick to dismiss that as a concern. "But someone I'm connected to nonetheless."

"Love is rarely easy," Jillian says, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear. "Sometimes we meet someone, and it feels all twisted up and knotted with other things, and we think we can't make it work."

She's talking my language, speaking straight to my bruised heart. A heart that misses that man. "So what do you do about that?" I ask, even though I don't hold the cards here with Holden. He does.

"My belief is as long as two adults consent and treat each other with respect, who am I to ever put a line on love?"

"We're kind of a *love triumphs all* sort of place," Adriana chimes in.

Gah. Now I'm in love with my job even more. "That's one of the things I like about working here," I say, though the organ in my chest still aches. It still misses him.

"And look," Jillian adds. "The reality is, when you work in this industry, you often meet people you might want to date in sports. And sometimes they're athletes."

Did she ever hit the nail on the head. "That's what happened to me," I confess. Relief flows through me. That day with Holden was incredible, and I don't need to shout it to the

office, but it's good to at least admit—without details—that I fell for someone. “And I just wanted to say I really appreciate that I feel comfortable enough to ask you these questions.”

She waves a hand as if to say it's no big deal. But it is a big deal. I wasn't looking for her permission, but I'm damn glad I have it.

Especially since Holden texts me that night.

I read it several times, debating whether to write back, asking myself if this contact tests my limits.

I wish I knew his limits and if they've changed.

And I decide that talking to him doesn't test them or break them. I know my limits, but I also know when they've changed.

Mine stretch further now. They're more accommodating. I have room for a little something more.

I write back with a clear mind and a hopeful heart.

As for his limits, there's no way to know if they've changed unless I talk to the man.

Maybe, just maybe, he's seeing how far he can push.

* * *

Holden: Did you ever have the chocolate, and if so, how was it?

In my apartment, I take the bag out of my purse and pop a disc in my mouth.

Reese: Indulging now. It's as delish as I expected. And what do you know? It makes me think of you.

Holden: Mission accomplished. Also, I bet your lips taste incredible.

I lick them, then write back.

Reese: Well, they taste like chocolate, so I'm confident that I taste yummy. I believe it's called the Chocolate Clause, since chocolate is always good.

Holden: Just like the French Fry Exemption.

Reese: French fries and chocolate—clauses, loopholes, and exemptions abound for them.

Holden: Like a hall pass.

Reese: Grant and I used to make a list of hall passes back in college. Fair warning – Chris Hemsworth was top of our list.

Holden: Funny. His sister mentioned that someone looking like Thor was asking for him. But he was decidedly uninterested.

Reese: Ah, well, some crushes you get over. This is where I confess as much as I love Chris, I'm over him. I suspect Grant is too.

Holden: Is that why you guys are so close? Crushing at the same time?

Reese: Nah. That's just fun stuff. We were close long before boys came into the picture. We connected because, well, things were sometimes tense at my house and at his growing up. So, we went to our grandparents' and hung out with each other.

My phone is quiet for a spell, and I wonder if I've said too much. If I was too frank. But talking around the topic of family is exhausting. I don't want to dance around issues with Holden. I want to be real with him, even as I try to figure out what *this* is with us.

Holden: Reese?

Reese: Yes?

Holden: Sometimes I think you want to say something about your dad and then you don't. Maybe you hold back because of my relationship with him. But I understand that your ties with him are different than mine. I'm not asking you to tell me things you don't want to share. But I'm saying you don't have to treat the issue with kid gloves around me.

My heart thumps harder at the way he gets it. At how he somehow knew I needed to hear that.

Reese: Thanks. I'm not sure I'll say anything, but I appreciate you telling me I don't have to sugarcoat it.

Holden: No Sugarcoat Loophole, beautiful. I like you as you are. I want you as you are.

I close my eyes, clutching the phone, wishing he could have me as I am. That I could have him too.

Now isn't the time to push him. Not over the phone. If he wants more, he'll have to decide that on his own.

I sink deeper into my bed, sidestepping my feelings—the emotions that surge whenever Holden and I connect.

Reese: As for Grant, he was my rock growing up, and I was his. That's why we're so close.

Holden: He's like your brother.

My throat tightens. What will it feel like when I have a half brother? Will I be able to tell Holden how I feel about having a brand-new sibling soon? How *do* I feel? I'm not even sure. I dodge my own emotions.

Reese: Where are you right now?

Holden: Team hotel. The Luxe, overlooking Park Avenue. I should get to sleep soon. It's almost two a.m. But I'm thinking of you. I'm taking a pic now and posting it on Instagram. You're the only one who'll know what I was thinking when I took this shot.

Reese: Sweet dreams.

Holden: They will be now. It was great chatting with you. Can I text you tomorrow?

I click over to his Instagram. A moody shot of a New York City street after midnight hits the top of his feed. There are only two words: *Craving chocolate*.

My heart flutters and then thumps harder as I stare at his last question, wondering how there could be any answer but yes.

HOLDEN

We keep up like that, chatting and texting.

As I go through the next day, I fire off questions before our game.

Holden: New York? Love it or leave it?

Reese: Love it, of course. Think about all the trendy, hip, and divey eateries I could check out.

Holden: You'd have an endless supply.

Reese: I'd roam around the city listening to the *Badass Babe* podcast and soaking in everything New York has to offer.

Holden: You seem like a New York kind of gal. Badass and loving it.

Reese: That's me!

Holden: I'm running along Fifth Avenue now, passing the Met. Your feelings on museums? Thumbs-up or down?

Reese: What do you take me for? A philistine? Of course I love museums. BUT I'd much rather spend the day in Central Park, playing volleyball or softball on the sports fields.

Holden: You are my kind of woman.

Then I return to my podcast app, click to her show, and peel off another couple miles as I catch up on some of her newest

episodes—an interview with a top college player in women’s basketball, another with an Olympic snowboarder, and then a popular episode from a few months ago with Asher St. James, the so-called American golden boy of soccer—a retired American star in the most European of sports.

“Moment of truth—how did it feel to play the most popular sport in the world?” she asks.

He laughs deeply. “Finally, someone understands that soccer *is* the best sport there is.”

“I said ‘most popular.’ Not ‘best.’ My heart belongs to the baseball diamond,” she answers playfully.

Asher sighs dramatically. “And I thought you were a kindred spirit. But I’ll answer anyway. It was spectacular, and I miss it, even the regular explanations of the differences between football and soccer.”

“Did that happen a lot?”

“Daily. Some guy I went out with the other month thought I was a fullback. And played on a *field*,” he says, with an exaggerated huff. “When I said ‘striker,’ he was terribly confused.”

“I take it there was no second date?”

“Oh, well, he was quite cute, so I didn’t hold soccer ignorance against him.”

They both laugh, then Reese continues her questions. “If you had to pick another sport to play besides soccer, what would it be?”

“If you made me choose, it’d be karaoke. I challenge anyone to out-karaoke me when it comes to ‘Livin’ on a Prayer.’”

I laugh as I finish the episode, then text Reese.

Holden: I will see St. James’s Bon Jovi challenge and raise it.

Reese: You do karaoke, and I’m just learning this?

Holden: I'm excellent at Elvis. Also, "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Reese: Adele or Lady Gaga for this woman.

Holden: You pull out the big guns.

Reese: I don't fuck around when it comes to my tune choices. Also, I can't believe you listened to that episode! I'm flattered.

Holden: I've listened to several. Your podcast is great, but that's no surprise.

Reese: Thank you. That makes me so happy to hear.

We text more that night after my game, and I catch her up on the conversations I've had with my parents, the latest Christmas movie they watched on Webflix, and my brothers.

We talk about Crosby too, how he is utterly besotted with Nadia, and Reese tells me more about Tia and Wayne, and Layla and her fiancée.

She shares details of her coworkers, of Adriana's burgeoning belly and fiery attitude, of Jillian's upbeat, take-no-prisoners style, and I tell her about the guys on the team, like Gunnar with his deadpan wit and Dante with his laser focus.

As I take the subway to the ballpark in the Bronx on Thursday with some of the guys, the car filling with more rowdy fans the closer we get, she texts me about her work projects and the calendar she's putting together.

With one arm looped around a pole and my cap pulled low, I read her latest text.

Reese: And then Jillian asked if I found Rafe Wilson attractive.

A dragon of jealousy roars inside me—bellows fucking fire. I google this guy, and I'm no expert on dude attractiveness, but I

can tell he's got it going on—strong jaw, thick hair, muscular arms.

I reply.

Holden: And your answer was “He’s fine, but he’s not Holden Kingsley”?

I swear I can feel her laughter vibrate across the country as she types.

Reese: Actually, that’s not far from the truth.

A knot of worry tightens my spine, but curiosity leads me on.

Holden: Okay, I’ll bite. What happened?

Reese: Don’t worry. I didn’t say I had a thing for you. But when we were discussing the calendar, my boss told me she doesn’t have a problem with employees dating athletes. She said she doesn’t put restrictions on that. Which means my worries about how dating you might look for my career aren’t really a thing. So, there’s that.

I inhale sharply, letting the enormity of that intel sink in. She’s ... free.

Entirely free.

There are no issues for her.

The issues are mine, all fucking mine.

I breathe out hard through my nostrils, tension tightening in my shoulders, wishing my manager would say, “Cool, sure, date my daughter,” or my agent would say, “Everyone will love that!”

But those are pie-in-the-sky dreams.

Those are homers at every bat.

That doesn't happen.

Still, as I read her text, possibilities start to press on my mind. Nascent ideas. Burgeoning options.

I don't know which ones to pursue or what to do next.

All I know is everything is in my hands.

But she's putting zero pressure on me.

She's simply letting me know the score.

I write back.

Holden: Don't date Rafe. Or anyone else. Please. Just give me some time.

I stare at the text before I hit send, rereading it as the train slaloms into the Bronx, slowing down as we near the stop for the storied ballpark.

Time.

Am I doing this?

Am I asking for this?

What the hell am I going to do with this time?

No clue, but I need to start to figure it out.

Because these conversations Reese and I have feel like ones we could have every day and every night.

I feel like I could be flying home to see her after these games.

It feels like we *are* together.

Reese: You have nothing to worry about in that regard.

But she won't wait forever.

I say goodbye when I get to the ballpark because it's time for baseball and only baseball.

That night, Declan goes on a tear. The star shortstop destroys Dante in an epic twenty pitch at bat, swinging and fouling, swinging and fouling, staying alive at the plate until he slams a three-run homer over the left-field fence. He rounds the bases, chin up, and I curse the motherfucker because that's a hell of a hole to put us in.

We don't climb out of it, especially when Shane sews up the win for the Comets with his shut-the-front-door dominance in the ninth, striking out the side on nine pitches only.

Including Gunnar.

My third baseman flings his batting glove on the dirt when he watches a nearly invisible fastball fly past him.

Game over.

I clap my teammate on the back as we head into the locker room. "Told you. The dude pelts fireballs from the mound."

"You did not lie. I swear I saw smoke come off that last strike."

The next morning, I tell Shane as much when I meet up with him and Declan for a run in Central Park.

"I think it's time to change your name to the Fireman," I tell the English closer.

"Not a chance, Romeo. Shakespeare is working just fine for me on the field and in the pickup scene, thank you very much," he says. "And it's so much better than the British Bad Boy of Baseball."

Declan snort-laughs. "Yeah, that's a mouthful. Glad to hear that Holden settled on the right name for you because if you'd have come to New York with the other one, I would have ripped it apart."

“Duly noted. But if I ever need another one, Fire Starter is an excellent option,” he says to me.

“Either that or Game Over,” I add.

As we round the Reservoir, we talk shop, shooting the breeze.

Declan tosses me a look as we head into our third mile. “And how the hell is it out there with the Dragons? New coach treating you well?”

“He’s the Baseball Buddha. The man knows the game, knows what we need, knows how to motivate,” I say, singing Thompson’s praises.

“Except when you’re playing against us,” Declan says dryly.

I growl. “We’ll destroy you tonight. Rest assured.”

Shane laughs out a “Don’t bet against us,” but his words are cut short when his phone rings. He grabs it from his shorts pocket, glances at the screen, and says, “My agent. I’ll catch up with you in a few.”

He falls behind as Declan and I continue at our pace, chatting briefly about family. Declan’s a private guy, and has never said much about his parents. I gather his dad is out of the picture, though I’ve no idea why. But he’s close with his mom and his stepdad. “How’s your mom and her hubs? Is she doing well?”

He flashes a smile. “They’re great. They still come to a lot of my games. I fly them out here often. But I miss San Francisco a lot.”

Does he miss someone in particular? But it’s not my place to ask.

“What about you?” he asks. “Are you still all nose to the grindstone, focused only on baseball?”

I arch a brow as we climb a hill. “Takes one to know one. You’re the same way.”

He scoffs. “Maybe that’s true. Or maybe it *was* true. And if memory serves, last time I saw you, you hadn’t had a date in a long, long time.”

I flash back to our last convo—other than at the Sports Network Awards, it must have been in the fall when I played his team as a Bandit and we grabbed some grub after. No point lying. “Fine, you got me there. I haven’t seen anyone for the last two years. Well, except for this one woman,” I admit, and it feels good to say it, even though Reese and I aren’t technically anything.

We could be. But for now, I don’t know what we are.

Text buddies?

No.

Work friends?

Not that.

One-time lovers?

That feels all wrong.

Declan arches a brow. “So there is someone?”

“Sort of,” I say with a shrug.

He shoots me a skeptical stare. “Why is that a ‘sort of’? You either know or you don’t know.”

I scrub a hand over the back of my neck as we hit the straightaway in the path. “She’s somebody I knew before, and then I ran into her again.”

“Ah, the plot thickens. Is she the reason you didn’t date anyone for two years?”

When he puts it like that, direct and frank, there is no other way to answer but with the truth. I nod, absorbing the intensity of the realization, saying it aloud maybe for the first time. “She’s the reason. I’m not sure I was entirely aware of that as it was happening. But yes, she’s definitely the reason. She was out of the country. Crazy, because I didn’t even know her that well, but now I do. So, yeah, in some ways, I was waiting for her to come back.”

“And waiting to get to know her more?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“And she’s back?”

“She is.”

He whistles appreciatively. “Man, you’ve got a second chance with someone you waited two years for and you’re only on the *sort of* path with her?”

I swallow roughly, his bluntness cutting me to the core. “It’s not that simple.”

“Second chances never are, but if you’ve got one, don’t squander it. Do everything to make it happen,” he says, his tone more intense than his hitting last night. “You don’t always get a second chance. If you get one, don’t let it slip by. Trust me on this.” He shoots me a meaningful stare with his dark eyes, waiting for an answer.

Maybe I’m not ready to give one. I toss the ball back to him instead. “I’ll take your word for it. After all, a man can hope.”

“I hope it works out for you.”

“Me too.”

I’ve got a ton of hope. Trouble is, I don’t know how to channel it. What to do with it. How to weigh it against everything else.

The sound of sneakers slapping on the dirt grows louder, and seconds later, Shane returns, clapping Declan on the back, then me. “I don’t just have speed on my fastball. I’ve got it in my feet. I am motherfucking Hermes. I am the winged god.” He thrusts his arms skyward.

“Glad to see you still have an ego the size of Jupiter, Shakespeare.”

“No other way to be, mate.”

* * *

That night, Declan's words hang over me. And Saturday morning too, until I get on a plane that afternoon heading back to San Francisco.

Before we take off, I think about second chances, about moving on, about what-ifs.

I replay the day I met her, how our first night was cut short. We made plans, but those were scrubbed too when she moved to South America. Then she came back to the States, and I ran into her again, only to find out who she was. That stopped us, but only for a few days.

Fate keeps bringing us together.

Maybe it's time to let fate take the wheel.

I text Reese. I don't have a plan. I don't know what's next. But I know this much—it's not time to move on.

It's time to go for it.

Whatever the hell that entails.

Holden: I'll be back tonight. Is there any chance I could see you? Because there is nothing I want more.

REESE

I lock the front door just as Tia and Wayne walk up the steps. They snap their gazes at me, twin suspicious and intrigued reactions.

“Hey, girl,” Wayne says, a curious lilt in his voice.

Tia doesn't need words. She knows I'm up to something, and she gives me an eyebrow arch. It holds ten thousand questions, but especially these few:

Where are you going at nine thirty at night?

Why are you wearing something other than yoga pants and a sweatshirt?

Specifically, those sexy skinny jeans and the top that slides off your shoulder?

Also, how about that mascara?

Tell me everything, especially about that oversized purse on your shoulder that I just know is full of a change of clothes.

At last, she speaks. “Let me guess. Arms of Steel?”

I dip my head, hiding almost, like I'm doing something wrong.

But I talk myself back from that feeling. There's nothing wrong with seeing Holden. We're not hurting anyone. I like him. He likes me.

Except what's happening between us is so much more than like.

I lift my chin. "I'm going to see Holden," I say, as strong and certain as I feel inside.

She wiggles a brow. "Like I said, everything is about sex."

Wayne shoots her a dirty look. "Can we go have some everything, then, babe?"

She laughs. "Go inside. I'll see you in a minute."

"For everything?"

"For everything."

He pumps his fist, then, like a dutiful boyfriend who's ready to get what he wants, he walks into the house.

Once he's inside, Tia grabs my wrist.

"Is this when you give me some words of wisdom?" I ask.

She laughs. "No. I just remember what you said the last time we talked about this."

She's privy to the details, but the limits have changed. "Right. But I told you what Jillian and Adriana said. They're fine with ..."

Well, with whatever this could be, I suppose.

She sighs softly, squeezing my arm. "They're fine with it, but are you?"

I furrow my brow. "With what?"

She flaps her hand. "With whatever it is?"

"That's the thing. I don't know what it is. We're trying to figure it out. He asked for time, and I don't mind giving it to him. I don't want to pressure him to do something that could blow up in the media."

"Of course, of course," she says hastily. "I get that it's a delicate situation with your dad and all. I just want to make sure you're fine with everything."

I flash back to the last few nights of conversations with Holden, to the way he makes me feel, and I smile softly. "I'm fine with this. I promise."

“Good. And if it starts to feel ... *not fine*, I’m here to talk.”

I bring her in for a hug. “I know,” I say, but I don’t want to think about the *not fine* possibility.

I want to forget about the complications just for tonight.

Even so, my chest twinges briefly with a sliver of guilt, like I’m keeping a secret.

Though I’m not, so I shake that errant thought away.

“I’m so good. I swear,” I add, meaning it. “We’ve been talking and texting all week. I told him what happened at work, and he wants to see me. He just asked for time to figure out a plan, and that sounds more than fair.”

Still, it sounds like I’m defending him.

From what though? From my friend?

Tia gives me a small grin. “It does sound reasonable. And I’m not judging you. I’m looking out for you. I know you have real feelings for him.”

“That’s why I’m going. Because I do have feelings for him.”

“And he has real feelings for you, so just be aware of that,” she says.

“But if everything’s about sex, then we shouldn’t have to worry about feelings, should we?” I ask playfully.

She’s not in the mood for my double-talk. She’s all serious when she says, “Oftentimes sex leads to feelings. It seems that happened to you.”

In the Lyft on the way over, I noodle on all these species of feelings, the city whipping by as I go.

But once I reach his home, I’m not thinking much at all.

I’m tingling.

I’m buzzing.

I’m sizzling.

The second my foot lands on the top step, he swings open the door, eager, waiting for me.

His green eyes sweep over me from head to toe. He licks his lips, brushes a strand of hair off my shoulder, then loops one strong arm around my waist, yanking me flush against him into the foyer of his home.

His lips are inches from mine. “Mmm. Missed you so much,” he murmurs, then dips his face to my neck, inhaling me.

That’s the Holden I know.

The master of the tease.

I shudder as he runs his nose along my skin, then as he feathers a barely-there kiss against my throat.

His voice is husky, commanding. “Get inside. Get inside now.”

He slams the door shut, and in seconds I drop my bag and we’re kissing. Like there’s nothing else in the world.

His lips explore mine. He holds my face like it’s been years, like he cherishes touching me. Like he can’t stop kissing me or tasting me.

And I feel consumed by him.

I want the consumption.

I want him more than I’ve wanted anyone.

This is how chemistry should be—want and heat and desire. Sex should be frenzied and electric.

That’s how we kiss and touch, endlessly, like it’s been months since our last kiss rather than days.

Like it’s been forever and we’re dying for the nourishment of a kiss.

He moans and sighs and draws me impossibly closer, his hands clasping my face like he doesn’t want to let me go.

I don’t want to be let go.

I press and grind against his strong, muscular frame, the friction stoking the fire in me, making me hot, making me want to climb him. I snake a hand between the seal of our bodies, rubbing it across the hard outline of his cock. He groans, all broken and ravaged.

Our mouths fall apart as a staggered breath falls from his lips.

As I squeeze his length through his jeans, I grin, wiggle a brow, then whisper, "My turn."

"Reese," he growls, a filthy warning and invitation all at once.

Then I'm on my knees, unzipping, pushing his jeans down a few inches, along with his briefs, freeing his gorgeous cock.

His shaft greets me at attention, ready for me. I swirl my tongue over the head, eliciting a carnal, needy growl from my man.

I'm no pro, no expert at blow jobs, so I don't try to wow him with a technique I don't have. What I do have is an overdose of desire and the *wish* to touch him, taste him, play with him.

I draw him in more, and he rasps out, "So good."

His reaction heats me up, fans the flames of lust tearing through my body. Sliding my tongue over the head, I lap up the liquid drop of arousal, savoring the taste of his desire.

"That's so fucking good," he mutters as his hands thread into my hair. More words of praise come my way. "Your mouth, beautiful. Your mouth is so fucking incredible."

Those words ignite me, setting off a chain reaction of sparks all over my skin.

I pulse between my legs, hot and needy, as he pushes in farther.

I let him experience more of my mouth as I take him in more than halfway, my hand curled around the base, my other hand sliding between his legs to cup his balls.

I squeeze them gently.

“Oh fuck,” he groans, and that seems to send him into a flurry of pleasure because he pumps his hips, coils his hands around my skull, and bites off a string of curse words before he slows his pace for a second. “Was that too much?”

I drop him from my lips and shake my head. “I can handle you. I want to handle you. I’ve been dreaming about this.”

His eyes are hooded, darkened with desire.

He slides a thumb along my jaw, then over my lips. “Show me what’s on your mind. Show me now,” he urges, a plaintive plea. I love the sound of his need, crave it, so I suck his cock back into my throat, hauling him in deeper.

Not too far, not to choking levels.

But I find a rhythm that works for this newbie.

I don’t deep throat him, because I’m sure that takes practice, but I’m sure, too, that I’ll *have* practice with him.

Instead, I suck him like I’ve missed him, and that’s the easiest thing in the world to do because it’s all true. It’s all real. And it’s how I feel.

He pumps slowly into my mouth like he’s taking his time with me, like he did when we first made love. He’s patient, and he listens to my body, my moves. He fucks my mouth like he’s crazy for me. Maybe that’s strange to say about a blow job, but that’s Holden, that’s how he treats me—with tender hands and fierce passion. With genuine adoration and red-hot lust.

And with all of that as he fucks my face with his cock and my mind with his words.

You.

You’re so beautiful.

Missed you so much.

Need you so much.

God, that’s so fucking good.

And it *is* good. It's so good that I'm rocking my hips, groaning against his shaft, soaking my panties.

I suck hard and another salty drop slides down my throat.

"Ahhhh," he murmurs as his dick jerks in my mouth, then he gives a strangled "Fuuuuck."

He stops.

Freezes.

Curled his hand around my head. "If you do that another second, I'll come."

I let him fall from my mouth, shooting a naughty smile up at him. "That was kind of the point," I say in a sexy whisper.

"The point is I need to be inside you, and I need it now."

Lust swirls in my veins, and the ache between my legs intensifies.

An ache he's going to soothe in seconds.

He yanks up his jeans, scoops me into his arms, and carries me to his bedroom.

In seconds, our clothes are off, and he grabs a condom from the nightstand, then pulls me into his lap on the bed. He slides a hand between my legs.

"Holden," I murmur as he strokes me, his fingers sliding through the slick heat.

"You're so wet," he says, mesmerized as he rubs.

"You turn me on so much," I whisper.

He grips his cock, slides his hand down his length, then says, "You do the same to me."

I tremble, pleasure rushing all over my body as his fingers glide between my legs in sync with his moans, like he's discovering a new land.

I arch my back, my hips rolling. "God, please, please fuck me. Please make love to me."

“It’s both. It’s absolutely both.” His grin goes crooked as he stops, rolls the condom down his length, then pulls me on top of him, arranging my legs around his hips so I’m sitting in his lap.

Like lotus lovers.

He pushes into me.

“Oh God,” I gasp as I rope my arms tighter around his neck.

I’m so aroused, so ready, as he fills me in one tantalizing move.

We’re here.

Together again.

His hands travel to my ass, and he tugs me even closer as he goes deep into me.

We become a blur of breath and limbs and heat, of bodies moving, pressing, tangling together.

I rock with him, the friction driving me wild.

His hands are everywhere.

My hair, my breasts, my hips. Like he can’t settle down, can’t decide which part of me to traverse next.

But I know where I want him.

I guide his hand between my legs, where I need him.

“Touch me,” I whisper.

“Yes,” he grunts, as his fingers stroke my clit, as his cock drives into me, as our shuddery breaths fill the air.

He rocks and strokes, and my mind melts.

My bones liquefy.

Pleasure tightens inside me, coils, then explodes as I fall to pieces on him, with him, for him.

Seconds later, he’s growling and grunting and joining me on the other side of bliss.

We're quiet for a bit, just panting and breathing, our arms wrapped tight around each other as our bodies seek the sheen of each other's skin. As we can't seem to let go.

He kisses my neck, my shoulders, my throat, worshipping my skin like he's adoring me after sex.

And I feel cherished.

I have no benchmark, no comparison. But I know intrinsically that this is how intimacy should be—trusting, loving, wanting.

Full of wonder, full of tenderness, he looks at me, his eyes all dreamy. "What am I going to do with you?"

It's a valid question. "I could ask the same about you."

He strokes my cheek, his green gaze holding mine, his eyes full of passion, but something more.

It's not just physical.

It's never just been physical between the two of us. Not since the very first day we met.

"I mean it, Reese. I'm crazy for you."

My heart thunders. "It's just the sex talking," I joke. Right now, that's easier than facing the enormity of what's happening between us.

He shakes his head. "I don't think so. It's not just sex for me. Say it isn't just sex for you." He sounds desperate, needy.

I shiver, a tremble that sparks the possibility of deep and potent joy.

But that joy is tempered by the fact that we're here in this apartment, behind closed doors. I'm feeling this *thing* between us, but I want to give him the time and space to figure out what to do and say. "Yeah," I say, sounding dopey with happiness. "I'm kind of crazy for you too."

He cups my cheeks, presses his forehead to mine. "I'm falling for you."

My heart flaps its wings and flies high up into the night sky. “I’m falling for you too.”

We kiss until his stomach growls.

I laugh as we break apart. “I guess sex worked up your appetite.”

“Seems it did.”

This time, I play après-sex chef. I make him a sandwich and take a few bites too, before we get back in bed.

I drag a hand down the ladder of his firm abs, my fingers making their way to his happy trail. “Now, let me take my turn all the way.”

“Like I could ever deny you,” he says in a naughty whisper.

I finish what I started earlier, taking him in my mouth, savoring the taste, drinking him down.

After that, he grabs my hips, drags me up his body, and gives me an order. “Now sit on my face and fuck my mouth.”

I shudder, knowing it won’t take me long, not with those dirty words, not with the commands he gives me as I sit on his face and rock my hips against him, moaning and groaning and obliging.

I’m all too happy to take my turn too.

I come again in a rush of pleasure, a burst of ecstasy, and then I collapse next to him.

He runs his fingers down my arm. “Spend the night,” he says.

“I’m one step ahead of you. I already packed clothes for tomorrow.”

“You should pack work clothes for tomorrow night too. And maybe the next one?” he says, his voice pitching up with nerves, his eyes etched with so much hope.

I have so much hope inside me too.

I say yes, and my hope is that I'm not a fool for falling for him.

* * *

I see him that next night after his Sunday evening game, curling up together for a hot and dirty session between the sheets.

Then we watch a little bit of *Bull Durham*. “Yep, it’s definitely an old movie.” But I tap his nose, and I say, “But you? You have become a master at talking to the press. I’ve seen your post-game comments on the local station.”

His eyes go wide, eager for my verdict. “And?”

“You’re doing well.”

“So my Crash Davis training worked?”

“I’d say so. How do you feel about it?”

He shrugs but smiles too. “I still want to be myself, but I keep saying, *It’s a true part of me.*”

“And then I get to have the other parts.”

He thrusts up his hips. “You can definitely have that part,” he says, all gravelly. He draws me in for a kiss, then whispers, “And all the other parts too.”

“Good. I want all of you,” I say.

“Have me,” he says, his voice vulnerable and all true.

Like he is offering his whole self to me.

He clears his throat and meets my gaze, his expression turning serious. “I meant what I said in New York. I’m working on a plan for us.”

“Ooh, is it called the What-if Woman Loophole?”

He laughs, but only briefly. “Something like that.”

“So what is it? The plan?”

“My agent is coming to town in a few days. I’m going to talk to him. Figure out the best way to navigate this whole ...” He trails off, scrunching his brow. “Coming out thing?”

I laugh at his wording. “That works. And so does your plan.”

“You think so?”

“I think talking to your agent is exactly the right way to do this. He sounds smart and strategic,” I say, wanting to be supportive through and through. I don’t want him to feel any pressure from me. His agent knows how to handle these situations much better than I do.

But the fact that he has a plan thrills me.

So, too, do these nights together. With Kevin Costner and Susan Sarandon playing faintly in the background, he asks me how the calendar is going.

“I’ve started meeting with the sponsor and some of the athletes, including Rafe, who has the most adorable rescue mutt—it’s some kind of Norwegian elkhound crossed with a Chihuahua, so it looks like a little fox. I kinda wanted to scour all the rescues for one just like it.”

His expression turns intensely serious. “Question. Do you think the dad was the elkhound or the Chihuahua?”

I stare at the ceiling, taking a deep breath. “I don’t know, but I like to think the mama dog was the elkhound and maybe the Chihuahua dad had a footstool or something for easy mounting,” I say.

Holden barks out a laugh, slapping his hand against the mattress. “Yes, he carries it around when he meets the tall lady hounds. He likes to be prepared for any encounter, large or small.”

“Exactly. That’s why he’s so popular as a dog sire. The women find it quite considerate. Sometimes he brings biscuits too,” I say, and he loops his arm tighter around me.

“He sounds perfect.”

“They love him for his biscuits and his considerate humping style.”

“You seem happy with the new gig. It’s your two-week anniversary there, right?”

My eyebrows lift, and I smile. “Someone’s trying to impress me with his memory.”

“Prepare to be astonished by this fact—I also know it’s your birthday in early October,” he says, tapping my nose with his finger.

“Doubly impressed.”

“But I got you a very early present,” he says with a devilish grin, obviously pleased with himself.

“Holden, orgasms don’t count as presents.”

As he reaches for a small gift bag on the nightstand, he says, “Gifts are gifts. Orgasms are mandatory.”

Well, I can’t argue with that.

Nor can I argue with the gift.

I take a white short-sleeve sweater out of the bag. A pair of cherries are embroidered on the breast.

“White for you. And red because it’s your power color.”

I hold it up, grinning. “I have a meeting on Friday. It’ll be perfect for that.”

“Excellent. Let’s keep the sweater here so you have to keep coming back every night till then.”

“So sneaky,” I say, then set it down in the bag and kiss him, and the kiss turns into much more.

* * *

On my way to work the next morning, my phone pings with a text.

Grant: Do you know what this weekend is?

Reese: Obviously.

Grant: And who are you rooting for in the first Dragons versus Cougars series of the year?

Reese: That is an excellent question. Can I plead the fifth?

Grant: Only if you don't want tickets for the first baseline.

I nearly jump for joy, squealing with excitement.

Reese: The Cougars. Definitely the Cougars.

Grant: That was the right answer. I've got four tix for you. By the way, how's everything with you-know-who? Do I dare to ask?

Reese: We're seeing each other.

Grant: Oh, so it's all official now?

Reese: Kind of. Almost. Soon it will be.

Grant: Ah, got it. Think you'll level up?

Reese: I do. I hope so. At least, that's the plan.

I send the text, then stare at it. Why do I sound like I'm trying to convince him?

Or am I trying to convince myself?

* * *

The next afternoon, I meet my mom during my lunch break, and we grab Indian food at a street vendor she's been wanting to try. As she moans in culinary delight over the chana masala, she asks me how everything's going at work.

"Jillian is a mile a minute. Adriana is hilarious. They're both smart and strong and fun." I want to add that neither

ascribes to rules that would limit love, but that's not entirely the point of this mother-daughter talk.

"It's so great to work with good people," she says. We sit at a picnic table in Hayes Valley, and she digs into the dish. "It's good to have a job that speaks to your heart. Because sometimes when other things aren't working, you need that—your career—to find your way through."

I pause my fork in midair. "Is that another one of your adages? Words to live by?"

"When things were tough with your dad, I was honestly glad I had my job. It centered me, gave me focus."

"I'm glad I have my job too." A voice in the back of my head asks if I'll be glad I have it when things go sideways with Holden. Then I dismiss it. There's no reason to think things will go in any direction but forward. That's the plan.

My mom asks more questions, wanting to know how Tia is, how Layla is, how Grant is. I answer all of them, updating her on my friends. "And this weekend, the Dragons are playing the Cougars. Do you want to go with me? Grant got four tickets. Or would that be weird, with Dad coaching and all?"

She shoots me a *don't be silly* look. "I still like baseball. Don't worry. Your father didn't ruin baseball for me. And he definitely didn't ruin spending time with you and your friends. I would love to be your baseball date."

I smile, glad she's up for it. But at the same time, I want to ask her more—like should I root for the Dragons or the Cougars? Should I root for the guy I'm falling for, or should I root for my best friend?

Instead, I guide the conversation to other topics. That's so much easier than telling her about the guy I'm kind of dating and kind of not.

But not telling her makes him feel like a secret.

And I hate secrets.

HOLDEN

The next afternoon, I meet Josh at a dive joint near the ballpark to grab a light meal before the game. We sit at the counter, and after we order, he dives into business. “And now, do you want to know why I’m really in town?”

I flash him my best pro-baller grin. “Because you missed me?”

“That and I have news for you,” he says with a glint in his eyes. “Potential good news for you.”

Now’s my opening. “I have news for you too.”

His shoulders tense. “You better not be dropping me.”

I crack up. “Paranoid much?”

“Damn straight. Every good agent is.”

“Relax. I’m not dropping you. But you go first.”

With a satisfied grin, he points at me. “You are doing damn fine work with your media image.”

I give a slight bow of my head. “Thank you.”

“So much so that advertisers are noticing.”

That piques my interest, and I sit up straighter. “Tell me more.”

“I’ve had a few meetings about you. About potential deals for a range of clients.”

He shares a few more details until the food arrives, and when he wraps up, I give him a small smile. “Good to hear.”

“We’re not going to celebrate yet, but it looks promising. I knew once you worked on your surly media attitude, we’d have more interest from sponsors, and it’s started to happen already. You did some fast work. Now you just need to maintain your choirboy rep.”

I nearly choke on my chicken sandwich.

I grab my glass of water, down some, and take a breath.

It’s now or never.

When I’m breathing fine again, he lifts a brow. “Since you’re not dying, want to give me your news?”

I expected this to be hard.

I figured I’d need an extra serving of guts to tell him my news.

I don’t though.

Turns out I’ve been prepping for this my whole life. Every night, I get into the batter’s box as a man on the mound launches fireballs at me.

I’ve got this. I’ve so got this.

“I met a woman,” I say.

Josh beams, waving his hand in my direction. “Excellent. You’ve got a bit of that man-in-love vibe about you.”

I smile. Wait till he hears who the woman is. “Yeah, that’s a fair assessment. She’s amazing, and I’ve absolutely fallen in love with her.”

“This is fantastic. I couldn’t be happier,” he says, then takes a bite of his burger.

The pitch flies over the plate. I swing. “She’s Edward Thompson’s daughter.”

And it’s my agent’s turn to nearly choke on his lunch. After a few coughs and sputters, he gives me an anguished look. “Say that again?”

“I met her a few years ago. Didn’t know she was his daughter. We reconnected right before Opening Day. I started

seeing her. I'm in love with her," I say, and I haven't said those words to Reese exactly, but it feels fantastic to voice them aloud.

Only, Josh doesn't seem thrilled.

He grimaces, sweeping his arm out to indicate the city of San Francisco. "Of all the women in this city, did you really have to fall in love with the coach's daughter?"

"Seems I did."

He drops his forehead into his palm. "Dear Lord, why are you testing me like this?"

I laugh. "Sorry. Not sorry."

"Does Thompson know?"

"Not yet," I say, my stomach curling. I know that conversation won't be easy. But it'll be necessary.

"Dude ..." Josh says heavily.

"You think he'll bench me? Trade me?"

Dragging a hand down his face, he groans. "I don't know, but I don't think so. Because you have one thing going for you in that regard."

"What's that?"

"You're not a playboy. You haven't dated anyone publicly in a long time, so that's good. If you were swinging your dick around town, that'd be an issue."

"No dick swinging here. In that regard, I *have* been a choirboy."

"Good. But still." He raises his face. "The optics of this, man."

"Optics? Can you just speak English?"

"If this comes out the wrong way, it could look bad."

"Sure. I understand that, but why is it inherently wrong?"

The second I give that voice, something in me transforms. The concerns vanish because there's nothing wrong with

Reese and me.

I square my shoulders and speak from the heart. “I mean, I get that there’s this whole taboo around it, but we’re both adults. We’re both making this choice. She’s not some off-limits seventeen-year-old siren. She’ll be twenty-five in the fall. I’m twenty-seven. We met through an interview for her podcast. We fell for each other. And when she left the country, I didn’t date anyone else. Nor did she. Now she’s back. What is so bad about this?” I say again, getting heated, pushing him for an answer beyond *optics*.

A small smile tugs at his lips. “See, when you put it that way, it’s great. But you know as well as anyone that the media doesn’t always frame it the way you intend. That’s all.”

I stab my finger against the counter. “So we control the story. We give them a part of us. A true part of us. We don’t have to give them every detail. But we give them *a* truth, because there is nothing wrong with the truth of me falling in love with her.”

I sound like I’m giving a speech.

And holy hell.

I fucking am.

Reese’s advice hasn’t just sunk in. It’s become a part of me. I don’t want to be the king of “no comment.” I don’t want to hide. And I don’t want to worry about optics.

I want to be honest.

I want the public to know who I am. Maybe not all of me. Maybe not every part.

But Reese was right—I can share a true part of me, and that’s what I want to share.

This true part.

“Fuck optics,” I say. “There’s nothing wrong with falling for the coach’s daughter if you love her and treat her right.”

Josh stares at me, barely blinking. Then he shakes his head and slow claps. “You have my vote.”

I furrow my brow. “So that means ...?”

“It means you make excellent points. *But*,” he says, turning that one-syllable word into ten, “would you just do me the solid of giving me a couple of days to figure out how to pull this off? I’ve got a ton of meetings in Los Angeles and an event to go to, but then we’ll put our heads together and do this right, okay?”

I sigh but nod. “So I’ve sold you on this?”

He stares at me. “If it were up to me, you’d date a figure skater who has zero connection to baseball. Or a professor of, I don’t know, French literature. But love doesn’t work that way. You like who you like, and you love who you love. My job, man, is to make sure you come across smelling like a million dollars. So give me some time to line up cologne that smells like money and good deals.”

“Fair enough.”

“And then you can post a ton of shots of you and Thompson’s daughter making googly eyes at each other as you drink coffees by the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Are you mocking my Instagram feed?”

“I am indeed.”

That I can handle. “A few more days is fine,” I say.

Tonight, I’ll tell Reese that I’m getting closer.

* * *

Before batting practice, Thompson strides into the locker room. Everyone goes quiet. We know why this series with the Storm Chasers is so important. They’re the last team the Dragons beat in the World Series a couple of years ago.

The series where the Dragons cheated. When they stole signs.

The series that would later reveal them to be the frauds they were.

“Storm Chasers are here. They want blood.” Thompson paces the room. “But we’re going to show them we’re not the same team. We didn’t cheat. We’re not the ones who defiled the glorious game of baseball.”

The guys nod and murmur their agreement.

“So, when they trash talk you when they’re on first base, when they mutter and swear when they’re at the plate, what are you going to do?”

“Keep our chins up,” I say. That’s true for the game and true for when I have my man-to-man with Thompson. But those sorts of convos don’t occur before games. The unwritten code is that game time, and the moments before it, is sacred.

You don’t air your dirty laundry.

You don’t ask for forgiveness.

You put your goddamn game face on.

He points at me. “That’s exactly right. Be better than that. They’re angry. They want revenge. But it’s not against you men. It’s against the organization—the idea of cheating. We’re moving past that. Hold your heads up high and don’t give in.”

But the Storm Chasers are surprisingly chill.

For the most part.

The first baseman lays a hard tag on Gunnar in his first at bat, but that’s all.

Beyond that, they don’t play dirty. They play clean, winning the first game.

That sucks, but my post-game plans don’t.

I see Reese that night at my place and give her the download on the Josh meeting in the afternoon, including what I realized.

“And it hit me—the training you gave me was what I needed. Everything you said made sense. This only looks bad if we let it look bad. But saying it, making it public, telling the true story matters,” I say, clasping her hand tightly for emphasis.

She beams. “I love that you feel that way. And that you have your agent’s support.”

“He wants me to wait a few more days. Just so he can mull over what it’ll mean for the deals he’s working.”

“Sounds smart.” She draws a deep breath. “So, does this mean you’re going to say something to my father?” Her voice is thin, threaded with nerves.

“That’s the only way to do it, right?”

She sighs, then nods. “It is. But *you’re* telling him, right? We don’t need to do it together?”

“Of course. I need to be the one to do it. It’s my issue, and he’s my manager. That’s what you want?”

She squeezes my hand harder. “I do.”

“Good.” I pull her close. “Want to know what else I told Josh?”

“Sure,” she says, a smile still on her beautiful face.

I slide a hand through her hair and say the easiest words ever. “That I’m in love with you.”

Her eyes brighten to the most gorgeous shade of blue. “Oh, Holden, I’m so in love with you.”

We kiss, and I don’t care that we lost the game. I don’t care at all.

Not with her here in my arms.

Not as we head to the bedroom, strip down to nothing, and tangle our bodies together. She pulls me close, asking me to be on top. “I want to be underneath you. I love feeling the weight of you,” she whispers, reminding me of the night she let me be her first, the words she shared.

“What do you know? I love that too. And you, beautiful.”

Like that, I make love to her, and it feels like another first time.

And I suppose it is.

* * *

The second game is rougher. The Storm Chasers leadoff hitter gets on base, then dives into third, his right hand going straight for Gunnar's ankle like he's trying to knock him flat.

Motherfucker.

"What the hell?" Gunnar shouts.

The umpire takes a step closer to Gunnar, and from my spot, I can tell the ump is repeating "Safe."

"No way," Gunnar says, and I trot over to third, setting a hand on his arm.

"Let it go, bud. If it's an issue, let it go to instant replay."

Gunnar huffs through his nostrils.

The guy is chill and cool most of the time, a jokester with his teammates and even when the opposing players end up on his base. But wind him up? Cross him? There is indeed a dragon underneath.

Tonight's not the night, though, to unleash the fury.

Gunnar breathes out heavily. "Fine. It's gone," he says, and we go on to win the game.

* * *

In my second at bat in the last game, the pitcher fires off some chin music.

In a split second, I jump away from the plate, getting as far out of the way of the ninety-five-mile-an-hour bowling ball as I can.

Gritting my teeth, I step out of the box, adjust my glove, adjust my bat, take a few practice swings, and return, digging in.

In baseball, you can't be afraid of the ball. The difference between major leaguers and everyone else is that we aren't

afraid of a six-ounce ball whipping by us in less than 0.4 seconds.

That also means you've got the blink of an eye to get out of the way of a pitch coming at you.

When the pitcher lets loose a slider, I pivot, turning away from the ball coming at me.

I curse as the ball slams into my ass, sending shockwaves of pain up and down my body. Hell, my teeth rattle.

But it hits a soft spot rather than bone, and that's all that matters.

I drop the bat and trot down to first base. Getting hit by a pitch is literally my least favorite way of getting on base, but here I am, though my body is shouting, *You fucking son of a bitch.*

I shake off the pain—the last thing I'll let a pitcher think is that his stuff hurts. I want the Storm Chasers to think the opposite.

That it didn't hurt.

That I'm unfazed.

When I spot an opening, I steal second, then move to third when I tag up on a deep fly to right field. Home plate comes my way on a clean single to left.

When I head into the dugout, I don't let on that my ass is screaming. I just high-five the guys then lean against the dugout fence as the pain radiates.

In the seventh inning, the game turns messier. As Gunnar slides into second to break up a double play, the Storm Chasers shortstop loses his shit, accusing Gunnar of a dirty slide.

In seconds, the two men are shouting, then fists fly.

I run straight for Gunnar, pulling him off the shortstop, breaking up the fight.

"It's not about you, man. It's *not* about you," I say.

“Seems like it is,” he growls.

“Buddy, just let it go.”

“Don’t want to ...” he grunts, but his anger cools a few degrees.

“You got it now?”

“Fine,” he grits out.

He breathes hard and heavy, and I walk him off the field, where he’s promptly ejected for the rest of the game, along with the shortstop.

It’s a tense few innings, but we eke out a win.

When I find him in the locker room after the game, his face is etched with contrition. “Shit, man. I’m sorry. That just stirred up everything,” he says.

I give him a one-armed hug. “I hear ya. Just remember, I’ve got your back.”

“Means the world to me,” he says, in a rare show of vulnerability. All his usual clowning around is gone.

“Anytime. Just try to keep it off the field.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

Thompson nods at me as I head to my locker. He doesn’t acknowledge the hit pitch—unwritten code and all. Besides, the fight overshadowed it. “You’re doing great, Kingsley. Glad you’re here to lead this team.”

Am I leading these guys?

I’m just keeping my head down and playing the game.

“Thanks, sir.”

“Appreciate what you did there in the seventh. It’s easy to start a fight. Harder to break it up. That’s important.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling weird taking compliments from him, knowing what I’ll be sharing with him soon.

Part of me wishes I could tell him now.

But now sure as shit isn’t the time.

Tempers are high, and nerves are raw.
Soon, I'll tell him.
Tonight, I just want to go home and see my woman.

* * *

In the Lyft, I FaceTime with my parents.

“Does your butt still hurt?” my father asks.

I shoot him a look. “Dad. I'm fine.”

“Oh, please. Don't play those games with me. No need to be macho, Holden.”

I heave a sigh. “Fine. A little bit. But I've had worse.”

“That was some kind of retaliation pitch. A little misdirected,” my mother says.

“Yeah, you think?”

“But you showed them. Messy series, but you played a good game,” she says. “I saw your post-game interview too. You were diplomatic about the Storm Chasers. How they play hard and tough, but that's just the game.”

“Josh wants me to be chattier with the press,” I say. “He might be sewing up a new sponsorship deal for me. Guess the company likes the press-friendly image.”

My dad flashes a cheesy grin. “As do I. You'll get me the Bugatti I've always wanted then?”

My mom cracks up, slugging his arm. “As if you even know what a Bugatti is.”

“It's a fast car.”

“You love your Honda.”

He shrugs. “Fine, fine, I love my little Honda. I wouldn't even know what to do with a Bugatti.” He turns back to me. “How's everything going out there? Are you settling in?”

“I am. Life is good, and I—” I say, but then stop myself from setting free the words on the tip of my tongue. *I met someone, there’s this woman, I want to tell you about her.*

I desperately want to tell them. I don’t just talk to my parents about baseball. We talk about life. We talk about hopes and dreams. Reese feels like one of those.

But to sort this out properly, I need to be patient.

* * *

“Does it hurt?” Those are the first words out of Reese’s beautiful red lips.

Truth is, my ass hurts like a Bugatti rammed into it on the autobahn. “It hurt the whole game, but I don’t give a fuck,” I say, reaching for her hand, pulling her close once I shut the door.

I try to kiss her, but she’ll have none of that. “Did you put ice on it?”

“On my ass? I won’t even answer that.”

“Holden. Did you?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I’ve been hit with a pitch many times. I’m not icing my ass.”

She rolls her eyes as we head to the kitchen. “Stop being so tough. You’re going to have some serious bruising tomorrow.”

“It’s already bruised. It’s just my glute. He didn’t hit me with his chin music,” I say.

She shoots me a sharp stare. “Don’t joke about that. This is serious, Holden.”

I soften, my heart *thump-thumping* harder at her concern. “Nobody likes getting hit by a pitch. But it’s part of the game. It’s been part of the game since Little League. Everyone gets hit.”

“And everyone acts like it’s fine on the field and in front of the guys. You’re not on the field now, and you’re not with the guys. And there’s no fight now at second where the dugouts empty because everyone’s pissed about the past,” she says.

I huff. “Fine. It still hurts,” I mutter.

“Then let’s ice it because you’re going to have some kind of goose egg tomorrow.”

She leads me to the living room, sets down her purse, and tells me to sit on my right cheek. I do, giving her the evil eye the whole time. “I’d rather be fucking you.”

“Ice first, sex second.”

“Sex first,” I call out as she heads to the kitchen to grab an ice pack.

When she returns, she asks where it hurts. I pull an Indiana Jones and tap my lip.

“Your ass, silly,” she says with an eye roll.

“You can kiss that too.”

She laughs. “Where on your ass?”

I point to the spot.

She sets the pack on it, and I scowl at her. “It’s cold.”

“Cold is good.”

“Hot would be better. I bet your mouth is hot,” I say, wiggling my brows.

“You’re incorrigible.” She holds the ice pack in place as it freezes my ass to igloo temps.

“C’mon, beautiful. Kiss me while you ice me,” I say, offering my lips.

“You’re relentless.”

“I know what I want, and it’s not ice. And I know what I need, and it’s not ice either.”

“Yeah? What is that?”

I lean closer, sweeping my mouth over hers. “You.”

She trembles slightly, her lips parting.

Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. "I feel better now." I lift a hand and cup her cheek.

"Holden," she says, but when I capture her lips in a kiss, her protests turn into sighs.

Moans.

Gaspings breaths.

Then I shove the pack off my ass, lie down on the couch, and bring her on top of me.

I don't give a flying fuck about the bruise.

Her eyes swing to my butt, worry in her gaze.

"Nothing hurts when your lips are on me. Trust me," I say, answering her unspoken question.

"You are such a cheeseball," she says.

"I'm a hornball. Now, you know the rules," I say, all flirty now.

"What rules?"

"When a man gets hit by a pitch, his woman rides him till she comes hard and he comes hard."

She laughs while rocking against my thickening cock. "Am I your woman?"

I nod, tugging her close. "I love you, Reese. What else would you be?"

She just shrugs, her expression suddenly distant, her mouth falling into a straight line. She swallows, looking away briefly.

"What's wrong?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing."

"Something is wrong."

"Nothing, it's just ..."

"You don't think you're my woman?"

She shrugs. "Well. Sometimes we just feel like a secret."

My heart squeezes, and it's double the pain of the pitch. I bring her close. "Not for long. I need you. I love you. I'll call Josh tomorrow and tell him it's time."

She shakes her head. "Forget I said anything. We'll sort it out later."

She shifts me to my side so I'm not parked on my bruised ass, then she kisses me, soft and gentle.

Her lips are a tender caress.

I've got to do something soon.

I have to keep her.

That thundering in my heart? It's rain and a hurricane. It's a Category 5 barreling down on me.

This is what I want. This tenderness. This concern. This care.

Tomorrow, when my head clears, I'll get on this stat.

Call Josh. Move the timetable up.

Tonight, I do what we've become particularly adept at. I strip her down to nothing and pull her close. We're side by side, her naked body rubbing against mine, my cock sliding between her legs.

Soon, the realization strikes me. That's her bare flesh against mine.

I break the kiss, panting hard. "We need a condom."

Do we? My eyes twinkle. "But then again, I haven't been with anyone but you in two years. And if you're on protection—I don't know if you are, and I don't want to assume anything, but if you are ..."

She stops me, pressing a finger to my lips. "I'm not, but I could start it. I could get on it."

"That would be amazing," I say, groaning in anticipation of fucking her bare.

That seems to seal the deal. Seems to say we're doing this. We're in this.

Grabbing a condom from her purse, she rolls the protection down on me, then slides under me, tugging me on top. She guides me between her thighs, and I sink into heaven.

As we make love, my certainty only intensifies.

She's the one for me.

I know that as we come together, as we move to the bedroom, as we get under the covers.

I know, too, that I'm ready to move this relationship into the spotlight, no matter what.

There's Josh and the sponsorship deal, and there's my career and the coach. And there's my chance with this new team.

But here is this woman in my arms, curling up with me in my bed.

She falls asleep, but I don't.

I grab my phone and find a message from my agent.

He's back in town tomorrow, and we'll talk after the game.

Good.

I'm ready to move beyond these four walls, to stop worrying about what the media will say if they find out I'm the guy dating the coach's daughter.

I just want to be the guy who's in love with Reese Fallon.

I kiss her cheek and close my eyes. Tomorrow, I'll talk to Josh and figure out how to tell Thompson.

I'll devise a game plan.

For now, what Declan said in New York rings true.

There is no *sort of* with this kind of second chance.

REESE

I wake in Holden's arms, but he's still sound asleep. My phone buzzes in my purse on the nightstand, and I reach over to grab it from the outside pocket, stretching past the gift bag with the sweater Holden gave me. I wore it yesterday to a meeting and love it as much as when I first saw it.

Grabbing my phone, I slide open a text from my mother.

Mom: What do I wear to this baseball game? It's been ages. Cougars gear, right?

Reese: Of course! We're sitting in Cougar seats! Grant got me the tix. Tia and Layla are coming too.

Mom: I don't want to crash your girl time at the game. You sure you want your mom there?

Reese: Yes. Obvs. We just won't talk about sex.

Mom: Good plan. By the way, is that your way of telling me you have a boyfriend?

My face flushes.

Is it?

I glance at Holden, sound asleep.

I want to tell her everything.

I want her to know who he is to me.

I want to be his woman, and I want him to be my man.

Right now, he's my ...

I shudder, unable to say the word.

Sidepiece.

I write back.

Reese: Ha. No. See you later.

Guilt spreads deep into my cells and fills me with dread, with shame.

It's all too familiar. It reminds me of who I was that day in Sacramento—wordless, voiceless, powerless.

That's the opposite of what I want to be.

I haven't said a word to my mother about Holden, about how I spent the last week with him. Granted, I'm an adult. I'm not required to tell her. But I'm holding back because Holden and I don't exist beyond nighttime yet. I'm not going to the ballpark for the Cougars-Dragons game as his girlfriend. I'm going as Grant's friend.

Even if things will be different soon, they aren't different now.

That leaves a sour taste in my mouth, and it twists my stomach.

I close the text thread, sit up in bed, and I know.

With a bone-deep certainty, I know.

I skipped a step.

An absolutely critical one.

A step I've been skipping since I was thirteen.

There's something I need to take care of. Something that has nothing to do with Holden.

He flips to his back, still breathing deeply.

Sound asleep.

I swing my legs over the bed, pad to the bathroom, shut the door, and turn on the shower. Twisting my hair into a bun, I step under the steam, wash up, and dress quickly, pulling on fresh clothes from my overnight bag.

When I return to the bedroom, Holden stirs, rubs his eyes, and yawns. I sit on the edge of the bed, and he props himself up on his elbow, squinting at me. “You okay?”

I’m a coiled wire of nerves. “No. I’m not.”

He rubs my arm. “What’s wrong, beautiful?”

I don’t mince words. “I haven’t told my mom about you. We don’t see my friends. I’m going to the game today, but I’m there as Grant’s good friend. And I’m not asking you to make a declaration. I’m not asking you to change the plan you’ve made with Josh. I know you’re doing this carefully and as quickly as you can, but there’s something I need to do for me, on my side, before I can move forward with you.”

“What is it?” he asks, concern in his deep voice.

“Something I should have done years ago. Because I feel like I’m sneaking around. I’ve been there, done that, and it’s awful.” My voice threatens to break, but I swallow and go on. “It reminds me of everything that hurt when I was thirteen. And I can’t be in that place anymore.” I choke up and—holy shit—that’s the closest I’ve come to telling someone my dad cheated on my mom and I found him doing it, and I did not mean to say that.

But maybe I did.

Maybe I needed to say it.

Holden pulls me close, kisses my forehead. “I’m sorry you feel that way, beautiful.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and I nod.

But this isn’t about him. It’s not about what he needs to do. It’s about the woman I want to be and the daughter I have to

be.

“I need to go. There’s something I needed to do years ago,” I say.

I grab my things, and I go to Sausalito.

REESE

I stand at my father's door, uninvited and unexpected. But here I am anyway.

This is not awkward. It's hard.

But it's also ... *not*.

Maybe because it's necessary, and has been for more than a decade.

I knock decisively, and a few moments later, a face appears in the glass panel that runs alongside the door—red hair, a basketball belly, and a delighted smile.

Becky swings open the door. "Reese! So good to see you."

I clear my throat. "Good to see you too." And it's true—she is likable. My eyes stray down to her stomach. "How's the baby?"

She groans, but it's an affectionate sound as she pats her stomach. "He seems to have taken over all the real estate in my belly."

"I guess babies do that." I take a beat before changing gears. "I didn't call first, but I was hoping to talk to my—"

Footsteps on the stairs behind me interrupt, and I turn to see my dad coming up. He's wearing a tracksuit, and his face is flushed.

"Hey there! I just ran through downtown. What a nice surprise to see you, Reese. Did you want to join us for breakfast?"

I shake my head. My stomach roils. But I dig deep. I've got this.

“Dad, can we talk instead? In private?”

His expression turns serious. “Of course.” We head inside, and he shuts the door behind us.

Becky smiles graciously. “Do you want tea? Coffee?”

I shake my head. “I'm okay.” I set my purse and the gift bag on the table by the door, and my dad guides me out to the deck overlooking the water.

We stand at the railing, overlooking Richardson Bay on a crystal clear Saturday with the sun climbing high in the sky. “What's on your mind, sweetie bear?”

There's a rock the size of the sea cliffs in my throat, but I push past it. I felt small years ago. I felt voiceless. Too young to have known what I knew. But I'm not thirteen anymore.

I'm a woman.

A daughter.

A friend.

A girlfriend.

A sports fan.

A food lover.

A badass babe.

I went to South America and lived abroad for two years. I helped teach young girls how to use their voices.

Time to use mine.

“Do you remember when I was thirteen and went to Sacramento to watch your game after my volleyball match?”

His brow knits, his memory perhaps tripping back in time. “You didn't go though. You said the bus ...”

Shaking my head, I tell him the truth. “I *did* go. I took the bus. And I saw you and that woman.”

He winces. His face becomes a map of expressions. Confusion. Shock. And most of all, shame.

“You did?” His question is full of potholes.

The affable Teflon father from my high school graduation has left the building.

He sounds contrite. Most of all, he sounds human.

Real.

I soldier on.

“I *was* there. I did show up. And when I saw you in her arms, kissing her, holding her, *touching* her, I was devastated. It hurt so much. I cried the whole way home,” I say, recalling that day vividly.

I expect to cry again, to relive that horrid rush of uncontrollable sadness, of painful, aching tears that ravaged my entire body. I expect to feel the same way I did on that lonely bus, my forehead pressed against the glass, heading down the California highway, my family breaking apart as the road whipped by.

But I don't.

Mostly, I feel in control. *Everything* I didn't feel then.

He takes a breath and says, “I'm so sorry.”

I turn those three words over in my head.

Was that what I thought I'd hear?

Was that what I wanted? An actual apology?

I catalog my emotions. They're steady, certain, calm.

Perhaps it's what I needed but didn't dare let myself hope for.

My father continues, his voice stripped bare, “I know it doesn't begin to cover it. I know it doesn't change the mistakes of the past. But that's all I know to say. I'm so very sorry, Reese.”

The honesty in his voice works its way inside me, gives me strength to keep going, set my hurt free.

“When I started to tell Mom a few weeks later, she already knew. We cried together on the couch, and she told me she’d asked you for a divorce. But even so, I hated discovering you with another woman. Hated it.” The words rip at my throat, and I need to get them out, to purge myself of them.

He rubs the back of his neck, his breath stuttering as if he’s taking this all on the chin. “Reese, I was not a good husband.”

I stiffen, muttering, “I’d say.”

But wait—

Did he just admit it? The thing I’ve known my whole life? The thing he seemed oblivious to? His utter cluelessness?

I stare at him like he’s a picture turned inside out, a carbon copy of himself.

“I was a terrible husband,” he goes on. “I was unfaithful. As you know.”

I’m floored.

He’s not making excuses—not saying he couldn’t help it, protesting that he was in love—like he did when I was in high school.

He’s speaking the unvarnished truth.

Somehow that frees me even more. “I saw you. I saw you kissing that woman. It was terrible, Dad.”

He winces. “I can only imagine. I can’t make it right, can’t undo it. All I can say is I messed up. And I don’t ever want to do that again.”

I breathe hard, so hard it hurts, but then the pain starts to ebb, begins to ease.

The pain came from carrying those secrets for so long. Secrets that weren’t mine. The secret that ruined my relationship with him, when I saw with my own eyes who he is.

But maybe ... who he *was*?

Perhaps it *is* the past.

“I’m sorry you saw that,” he says. “I’m sorry I put myself first. I’m trying to do things differently.”

“You are?” I ask softly.

He nods, a determined look in his eyes. “Look,” he says dragging a hand through his hair. “I know we grew apart. I wasn’t there for you and your sister. But here we are now. And I meant it when I reached out to you and said I hoped we could reconnect. I don’t expect you to believe me. I don’t expect you to show up every Friday for supper or anything like that. I was a pretty shitty dad, and I was a terrible husband. But I’ve been seeing a shrink, and I’m going to meetings. And I hope things can start to change. I’d like them to.”

I snap my head up. “Meetings?”

Does he mean, like, addiction recovery?

He answers for me though. “Love addiction.”

My head spins. Is that a thing? I’ve heard of being in love with love, and if he is working on his issues, that’s good.

“So, what does Becky think about that?”

He shakes his head. “She’s giving me a chance, and I want it. I want to do right by her and the baby.”

My chest stings, a quick pinprick of envy that he’s directing all his emotions, all his change of heart at the baby in Becky’s belly.

That he’s only just now getting it.

That he’s actually trying to change but for a new family.

I turn and stare at the water, the expanse of dark blue, the chop of the light waves, the burnished bridge that spans the bay.

But as I gaze at the water, the sting abates. I don’t have to feel jealousy. This is a good thing.

So, I get out of my own way, and I choose hope.

Hope that he’s changing. That his new child is the chance he’s wanted, perhaps needed. The chance to do better, to love

faithfully.

I let go of anger, jealousy, and petty annoyance. In their place, I feel relief.

Not that he's an addict.

Not that he's in therapy.

Relief that I'm not pretending around him any longer.

"I hope it all works out with her," I say, and I mean that too. Then I step toward him, open my arms, and give him a hug.

His arms wrap around me.

Warm and safe.

The way he felt when I was growing up. The way I wanted him to be even after he moved out. But that's the past.

This is the present.

I can't keep holding on to what I saw, what I wished, what didn't happen. This is what I have in front of me now, and I can either take it or leave it.

I choose to take it.

We break the embrace. "I'm glad we talked," I tell him.

He smiles, and it's so genuine that it warms my heart a little bit. "So am I, Reese, so am I."

I head back inside. Becky's in the kitchen, pouring herself a mug of something steamy. When she puts it down on the counter, she sets a hand on her belly and says, "Oh!"

I head over to her, a moth to a light, and feel my brother kick.

A sob ratchets up inside me. "Hey, little brother," I whisper.

She clasps her hand over mine briefly, squeezing before she lets me go. "Thanks for coming by. Do you want some tea?"

"I would love some."

We sit down in the living room, have a cup, and talk about baby names. “I like Trevor or Jason,” she says.

“I like Norman or Baxter,” my father puts in, deadpan.

I turn to him and hiss. “You do not.”

His smile is delightful and evil. “Got you there.”

“You sure did.”

We talk more about names, due dates, and the shower next week. After I finish the tea, I walk to the door, my father following me.

“Good luck tonight. I might root for the Cougars though,” I add in a sassy little whisper.

He slams his fist against his chest, huffing. “You wound me.”

I sling my purse onto my shoulder and reach for the doorknob, but I find I have more to say. There’s no point holding back. “I met a great guy,” I tell them both. Becky’s eyes light up, twinkling.

My father arches a brow. “He treats you well?”

“He’s amazing. I’m in love with him. It’s wonderful.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Becky says, smiling warmly.

“Maybe I’ll meet him someday,” my father says.

“I have a feeling you will.”

I leave the house, and the past behind with it.

HOLDEN

I call Josh as I grab my keys to head out for my morning run.

No more waiting.

Time to put all these plans into motion.

But as I bound down the steps, the call goes to voicemail. I drop the device into my pocket as I shift into a light jog, heading up Fillmore. When I hit the top of the street, I catch up with Chance, Crosby, and Grant, joining them as I often do on Saturday mornings.

As we run toward the Marina, Grant looks at a watch he doesn't wear. "So, anyone up for bowling tonight? Or maybe a round of pool?"

"Or we could see the new Marvel flick," Crosby offers, deadpan.

"All good ideas. Since there's nothing else happening today," Chance weighs in.

"Nothing whatsoever," I say, keeping up the ruse.

Chance clears his throat. "So, Holden. I'm concerned about your gluteus maximus. Everything okay?"

Truth be told, my ass still hurts.

But not enough to care.

Especially when Reese is dealing with serious shit right now. "Guys," I say, clearing my throat. "I have to tell my

manager tonight that I'm in love with his daughter. Any words of wisdom?"

Grant shoots me a satisfied grin, then holds out a fist for knocking. "That is excellent news."

"Holy shit, man. Go for it," Crosby says, high-fiving me.

Chance flashes a grin. "Guess your ass is just fine. Which means ... sometimes you just have to say the hard thing."

"You know what to do," Grant adds.

The thing is, I do know—just say it. But there's someone else I need to talk to first. And it's not Josh. And it's not my friends. When we finish the run, I wave them off so I can ring a number in Seattle.

"Hey, I need to talk to you, Dad."

"Everything okay?"

I sink onto a park bench, my breathing evening out. "Everything is great, but I want to tell you, I met someone. She's wonderful, and I'm absolutely in love with her."

"That's terrific. But why does it sound like you're confessing something?"

"Because what if things don't go the way I planned? With my job?" I ask, then I give him the details on who Reese is. "Trouble is, I have no idea what to expect. Or what this might mean for my career."

"You're happy? You love her?"

"So much. But I also want to be in a position to help you and Mom."

He laughs. "You always have to have a plan, don't you? But maybe we have plans too."

"What do you mean?"

"We're going to be okay. We have retirement accounts. We don't expect you to take care of us. Maybe you want to level us up, and sure, that's nice. But we're regular people – we don't need to live in a mansion our son buys us or go to Fiji.

We're happy with our lives as they are. And you don't have to worry about us. All we want is your love. Take care of your woman. That's the plan you ought to be working on."

As soon as he says that, I know where I need to be right now. Not talking to him. Not trying to find Josh. Not thinking about Edward Thompson.

Jumping up from the bench, I end the call and ring Reese, walking in the direction of her neighborhood. "How did it go, beautiful?"

"I'm on my way home." She sounds tired, but hopeful.

"Was it hard?"

"Yes. But it was good."

"Do you need a hug?"

"I'd love one," she says.

"Then stop hiding your address from me, woman," I say with a smile. "So I can give you a big hug."

She laughs and texts me her address, and twenty minutes later, I bound up the steps of her house and knock on the door.

She swings it open, and I step inside.

In the foyer, I wrap her in my arms, gathering her close, inhaling her hair, feeling like whatever happens next, it's going to be just fine because here we are.

But there's someone else here too. Someone clearing her throat. I break the embrace and see a woman with jet-black hair staring at us expectantly, with humorous impatience.

"Holden, this is Tia," Reese says, gesturing to her friend.

I step toward Tia to shake her hand. "I've heard so much about you. It's great to meet you."

"You'll meet Layla at the game tonight too," Reese says, then turns back to Tia. "And Tia, this is Holden, my boyfriend."

Tia smiles widely. "Finally, I get to meet the man whose arms I've been hearing about for the last two years."

“I hope all of me lives up to what she’s been saying.”

“I hope so too,” she says dryly. I take that as a warning as she heads into the other room.

Reese leads me to her studio on the other side of the house. We sit on the bed, and I reach for her hand. “Do you want to tell me about it? What happened this morning? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

She sighs, but it’s the sound of her opening up, not closing me out. “Actually, I do want to tell you. It’s weird not to. When I was thirteen, I found my dad with another woman. He didn’t know I saw him, since I never told him. My mom knew what was going on though, and she left him a few weeks later.”

When she pauses for a strengthening breath, I just wait. So far, this isn’t unexpected information, that her father cheated. It must have been hard to voice, let alone live through, but she sounds relieved to have said it. “So, I talked to him today and told him that I’d seen him. He apologized for a lot of things, which surprised me. And I think maybe he is changing. I guess that’s all that really matters.”

I squeeze her hand harder. “I’m glad to hear that.”

She glances at the clock on the wall. “When do you have to go to the ballpark?”

“A little later. I’m free if you want to watch the rest of *Bull Durham*,” I tease.

She pulls a face. “Do we have to?”

“No, beautiful. We can go to this new Vietnamese food truck I’ve heard about.”

“Now you’re talking my language.”

We leave, get some noodles, and talk. After, I take her hand, and we walk along the streets of San Francisco like that.

I’m not famous. There aren’t paparazzi waiting and watching my every move.

But still, holding her hand like this, I feel free.

Free to be together.

To know that we need each other.

When we reach her block, I tug her close, thread my hands through her hair, and kiss the breath out of her.

As I let go, she sighs with a “Wow.”

But then, something catches my eye, the way something familiar cues you to pay attention.

A car pulls away from the curb in front of Reese’s place. There’s a red-haired woman in the passenger seat. And behind the wheel is my coach.

HOLDEN

This is not how I wanted him to find out about me and Reese.

Not at all.

I scrub a hand over my jaw. “Do you think he knows?”

What a dumbass question.

She nods to one of the front steps, where I spot the bag with the sweater I gave her. Reese gives me a soft, indulgent smile, and then a gentle whisper. “I think he does now, since that was him dropping off my sweater. I must have left it at his place earlier.”

“Fuck,” I groan. “Do you think he’s pissed?”

“I don’t know him—the man he is now—very well, but he surprised me this morning. And I think he’ll be fine with it. I told him I’d met someone. I didn’t tell him it was you, just that it was someone who made me wildly happy.”

And all the tension melts away. She must feel the shift because she asks, “Are you okay?”

Am I?

At first, I didn’t think I was.

But as I stare at this woman I love, there is only one answer.

Yes.

Thompson just found out sooner rather than later.

“I’m so good,” I say. Then I clasp her face, gaze into her eyes, and tell her, “I’m so incredibly good.”

All other thoughts fade away. Because this right here? This is what matters—standing outside with her.

Being fearless.

Knowing it’s our time.

Knowing this is our chance and we’re taking it.

“Want to know why?” I ask.

“Tell me.”

“Two years ago, all I wanted was to find a way to be with you. I was willing to fly around the country to see you in between games.”

“I wanted that too.”

“Then you had your great opportunity and you took it and that was amazing and I was happy for you. A few weeks ago, I ran into you again. And everything felt right. All I wanted was to find a way to see you more.”

“I wanted that too, Holden.”

“And you know what? We finally have that, after wanting it since we met. I’m not letting this slip through my fingers because of fear. Not because my plans are different, or the timing is wrong. You’re no longer my what-if woman. You are just my woman, and I’m letting go of all of the what-ifs.”

She loops her arms around my neck and threads her fingers into my hair, playing with the strands. “Then you better give me a red-hot kiss before you head to the ballpark, slugger.”

That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. To have her like this, kissing on the front steps of her place before I leave for a game. I drop my lips to hers and give her a good, long, lingering kiss. It’s deep and passionate and true. It’s everything.

“See you at the ballpark,” I say before I go.

I don't have a plan for what I'll say to her father tonight, and I'm okay with that.

I've spent so much of my career putting plans in motion, running on a routine, being ruled by an inflexible agenda of goals and expectations.

But the problem is I've worried too much about what others would think. What the press would think. What the public would think. What my coach would think.

I've been hemmed in by a road map, but even more so by my fear of deviating from it.

I put this pressure on myself to achieve as a thank-you to my parents, but that's not why they did what they did.

That's not why they went to every game, made sure I had every opportunity to reach my potential. They didn't do it for me to give them something in return. They did it because they love me.

I'm so damn lucky to see that for what it is. Their time isn't a debt that I have to repay. It's a gift they gave me. A gift that made my life possible.

After I head home, I grab my things for the ballpark and call my folks one more time, getting them both on the call.

"Mom, Dad, I just want to tell you I'm so grateful for everything you did for me growing up. Everything you made possible. And I love you both so much."

"I know," my mom says. "We love you too."

"We love you so much," my dad echoes.

That's it. That's all. As I near the ballpark, I call Josh.

He answers on the first ring. "Hey, sorry, I was in a meeting earlier."

"Cool. Listen, I know you wanted time to figure this out, but I'm telling Thompson tonight. I have to do this now."

There's silence. A clearing of his throat.

“Okay,” he says slowly, carefully. He draws a deep breath, then I swear I can hear the faint stretch of a smile as he says, “A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

* * *

When I reach the park, I head straight for the manager’s office, rapping on the door.

But the hall reverberates with the sound of silence. I push the door open slightly. The office is empty. Thompson’s not here. I grab a sheet of paper, scrawl out a note, and leave it on his desk.

Then I head into the locker room.

He’s not there either.

That’s odd.

When I hit the field for batting practice, he’s nowhere to be seen.

So, I do what I’m here to do. We take batting practice, and my bat is on fire. Gunnar is the same way. He lights up dinger after dinger.

When we walk off the field, I say to him, “You doing okay after last night?”

“Yeah, man. New day, new chance.”

“Sounds like something Crash Davis would say, but it’s also true.”

“It absolutely is.”

We head inside so the Cougars can have their turn at batting practice. Once more, I hunt for Thompson to no avail.

Shortly before game time, he finally appears in the locker room for a pregame pep talk. “Dragons, you know this is an important series. And I want you to play clean, just like you did with the Storm Chasers. Give it your all. Show them that we can be San Francisco’s favorite team again.”

He immediately jets, and I follow him into the corridor, then pause.

Should I chill? Wait till later?

Fuck it.

I'm so tired of waiting for the perfect moment. I call down the hall, "Sir."

He spins around. "Kingsley. You were looking for me earlier, but I was busy. My wife thought she was having the baby."

I blink. "Oh, you're having a baby?"

"Yeah, you didn't know?"

"I didn't, sir. You didn't mention it."

"Ah, I thought Reese might have told you."

"No, she didn't," I say, and holy shit, did he just say that?

Something casual about my girlfriend?

But that's not what Reese and I talk about. And that's not for her to tell me.

"But everything's good. My wife is fine. It was just Braxton Hicks, and she's actually here watching the game. You should come meet her later."

"Thanks, I'd like that, sir," I say, wondering what the hell is going on.

He hooks his thumb toward the baseball diamond. "I have to go talk to the pitching coach. But I'll catch you later."

All I can do is go play the game.

And I do. I play my heart out. There is something invigorating about the fact that my woman's here, on the first baseline, watching me.

So damned exhilarating that in my first at bat, I do the thing I meant to do a few weeks ago. I meet her gaze. Give her a wink. Then, like the cheeseball I can sometimes be, I blow her a kiss and mouth, *I love you*.

She smiles, grins, and waves right back at me.

I don't know if the cameras caught that, or if anyone watching the broadcast will figure out what I said and to whom.

But I also don't care.

* * *

After the game, Thompson catches up to me as I come off the field with the rest of the team, sweaty and exhilarated from our win. "Kingsley, before the game, you said you have something to tell me?"

"I do." I try to look sober about it, but a smile keeps breaking out. "I suspect you know what—who, rather—it's about, since I saw you this afternoon leaving her house." He looks like he might reply, but I don't give him the chance. "I'm seeing your daughter, and I love her. But before we chat, I need to go over to the first baseline and give the woman I love a kiss."

I give up holding back a big, blissful grin. I know where I want to be right now, and it feels great to be so certain.

"Good plan," says my coach.

On my way, Erin Madison flags me and calls out a question. "Holden, how do you think the first game against the Cougars went?"

I slow down to answer. "You know what, Erin? I think it went great. It's always good to play your local rivals. And to play your heart out. By the way, have I mentioned that I'm dating Reese Fallon? She's a local sports marketer and former college athlete. She has a podcast. We went to the same university. She's smart and passionate about sports accessibility, and she's amazing."

Erin's lips quirk up in a curious grin. "That's terrific. Thanks for sharing the news that you're involved with Coach Thompson's family. I appreciate the heads-up."

“Glad to share it. She’s putting together a calendar right now highlighting athletes with disabilities, along with their rescue dogs. Did you know that Rafe Wilson has a Norwegian elkhound–Chihuahua mix?”

The reporter laughs, shaking her head. “I’m learning so much talking to you.”

“Cute pooch. Thanks again for your questions. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to pay a visit to the woman I love.”

“Have a good night, Holden.”

“You too, Erin.”

Finally, I reach where Reese is in the stands, grinning in a way that matches how I feel—exhilarated, besotted, blissfully happy. She laughs as I lift her over the barrier, pull her onto the field, and kiss her right there on the baseball diamond.

Best place ever for a kiss.

All is well without a plan.

HOLDEN

Before the game the next day, Thompson summons me to his office.

Gunnar delivers the message in a low voice. “Skipper wants to see you. Guess I can say I knew you when?”

My stomach nose-dives, but I do my best to keep a stony face. “It was fun while it lasted,” I say, and saunter out of the locker room. Alone outside the coach’s door, though, I draw a calming breath, square my shoulders, and rap my knuckles on the frame.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Kingsley, sit,” he says, gesturing to the chair across from him. He’s as warm as he’s ever been, but I don’t know what to make of it.

So, I sit, waiting for him to go first.

“We didn’t have much time to talk last night,” he begins, leaning back in his chair and steeping his fingers.

“That is true.”

“But now what I want to say is this. I know you make my daughter happy. I know she thinks you’re the cat’s meow. And I’m glad you seem taken with her too,” he says, then pauses.

That’s my cue, but it’s not a line when I tell him, “I’m more than taken, sir.”

“Good.” Then he shifts his weight forward and stares at me hard, our eyes locked. “But I also want you to know that, even

though I may not have been the best father or husband, I expect more from you as my daughter's boyfriend."

"Of course," I say.

He points at me. "I expect you to give her your all. To put your whole heart into your relationship the same way you do to the game. Anything less is unacceptable."

I nod crisply. "Yes, sir."

"Do you understand me?"

He's not the Baseball Buddha now. He's not the wise old man in the Webflix Christmas special. He's simply a dad looking out for his girl.

"I promise, sir. I will give her everything." That is absolutely my plan, and a promise I can keep.

* * *

"And then he went all gruff and said, 'Treat her like a queen,'" I tell Reese later that night, recounting my heart-to-heart with her father.

She snuggles closer to me, her hair spilling over my chest and shoulder. "When he decides to dad up, he dads up."

"He does indeed."

"And what did you say?" She shifts around so she can prop her head in her hand and meet my eyes.

I run my fingers down her bare arm, watching the gooseflesh rise in their wake. "I told him that would not be a problem at all. I've got this covered." Then I draw her in for a long, hot kiss that goes to my head.

When we break the kiss, she taps her fingers on my chest. "So, you're off to Chicago next week for a series."

"I am. You angling to line up some phone sex with me while I'm on the road?" I arch a brow, flicking my tongue along my lips.

“Maybe I am,” she says, all coy.

“Maybe I can fit you in,” I tease.

“Hey, treat me like a queen,” she says, laughing.

I tug her close, kissing her cheek. “Always, beautiful. Always.”

She sighs happily. “And what about Josh and your sponsorship deals? Are any coming through?”

I shrug. “He’s still working on them. It’ll happen when it happens.”

“Look at you. So laid-back and chill,” she says.

“I play a game for a living, and I found a wonderful woman to spend my days and nights with. What more could a man ask for?”

She arches a brow. “A World Series?”

“Well, duh.”

* * *

A couple days later, she drops a kiss to my lips before she leaves for work. “Good luck on the road. See you this weekend?”

“You will.” I yawn and sit up, then I grab a bag from the nightstand and hand it to her.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

She opens a small bag and lets her tongue loll out. “Chocolate. You must really want me to think of you while you’re gone.”

“I do, Reese. I really do.”

I kiss her once more and tell her I hope she has a great day at work then watch her go, knowing I could get used to doing this every single day.

REESE

The next week, I go over the game plan with Layla and Tia as we pile into a Lyft to head to Sausalito. “If anyone asks us when Holden and I are having babies, what do we say?” I quiz as I click my seat belt.

“We’re not sure yet. We haven’t moved past the *we’re having too much fun trying* part,” Tia fires off.

Layla squares her shoulders, clearing her throat. “My favorite line I like to use is, ‘My fiancée and I are aiming for July twenty-third at three thirty a.m.’ How’s that?”

“My go-to is ‘We’re thinking of getting a cat first,’” I put in.

Tia adds, “Or you could say, ‘I’m going to have a cow if another person asks me about babies.’”

“Oh, that’s a good one,” I say. “Keep that one in your back pocket.”

“Seriously, though,” Layla asks, “do people really ask that at a baby shower?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. This is my first one, since neither of you has made me an honorary aunt or is likely to anytime soon.” I add a sassy wink so they know I’m not adding to societal pressure to procreate.

But it turns out, no one at the baby shower asks us those questions. Becky’s sisters instead want to know how we became friends, how hard it was when we were apart, and if we’ll be sad when Layla returns to Turkey soon.

Those answers don't need rehearsal: through athletics, terribly hard, and yes.

We share the stories of our friendship, then chat more with Becky's friends and sisters, her mom and her aunts.

Is it the most fun I've ever had?

No.

But when my own sister, Kelsey, gets there, I throw myself at her, overjoyed. "It's been so long. Stop avoiding me."

She hugs me tight. "Yes. I've been ignoring you in the ER," she teases.

"I knew it." When I let her go, I cast my eyes to Becky. "Check her out. She's got our little brother parked inside her. Weird but cool."

"Funny, that's how I always described you growing up," she says.

"Sisters. The ribbing never ends."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way."

"Truer words."

We have a great time, drinking mimosas—virgin mimosas for the mom-to-be—playing baby word games, and opening gifts containing onesies, bottles, and cloth books.

When the shower winds down, I give Becky a hug and thank her for the invite.

"No, thank you. It means the world to me that you came," she says with a squeeze of my arm.

I wave goodbye to her big bump.

Two weeks later, my half brother arrives, and when I visit him for the first time, my heart rises into my throat and lodges there.

As tears slip down my cheeks, I give him a soft kiss on the forehead, inhale his baby scent, and understand my father a little more.

Second chances—I get it.

I'm glad he has one.

In a way, I found my second chance with Holden.

If you're lucky enough to get one, I figure you better not let it pass you by.

My father is embracing his, and I'm loving mine.

* * *

One night in May, Holden takes me out to a fantastic Korean restaurant by the Ferry Building, where we dine on bibimbap and kimchi. After dinner, we walk along the water, heading to the spot where he took that first picture of me.

"Let me take another shot of you," he says.

"Is this for your moody picture collection on Insta?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "As always, it's for me. Me and my lonely nights on the road without you."

He takes the pic then tucks the phone into his pocket and wraps an arm around me as we walk away.

"Do you really look at the pictures of me when you're out of town?" I ask.

"Hell yeah."

"Weirdo," I tease.

"I know. It's so strange to check out pictures of the woman I live with."

I arch a brow, slowing my pace. "Live with?"

He flashes a winning grin. "Power of positive thinking. I was thinking how nice it would be if you lived with me."

My heart dances a happy jig. "Live with the new face of the Katt phone, with all its fantastic selfie improvements?" Teasing him about the sponsorship gig that Josh nabbed for him never gets old.

A partnership with a cell phone maker to tout its camera is perfect for Holden. But the company also hired him for how

he plays the game of baseball—like a leader.

When he landed the deal, he told me, “They were impressed that I broke up the fight with the Storm Chasers, rather than started it.”

I love that he scored a sponsorship for his character. For a part of him that’s true and real and one of the many reasons I love him.

I went to his photo shoot last week on Marshall’s Beach by the Pacific, with a stunning view of the Golden Gate Bridge. That was a blast, seeing my guy in action off the field. Plus, it was fun because Asher was hired by the phone company to shoot the pics of him, and I got to catch up with the soccer player turned photographer at the end of the session.

“Reese, what do I have to do to convince you that soccer is the best sport?” he’d asked with a glint in his hazel eyes.

I tapped my chin, pretending to consider. “Well, tickets to your former team’s game next time I’m on the continent,” I teased.

“Consider it done,” he said.

The funny thing is I barely know Asher, but I have a feeling he would get me tickets. He’s one of those guys who charms anyone, remembers everyone’s name, and captivates a room when he enters. I was almost tempted to try to set him up with Grant, but something tells me Asher doesn’t need anyone playing matchmaker in his life. I suspect he’s doing just fine on his own. Plus, I’m pretty sure Grant’s heart is still caught in the past.

As for my heart, it’s most decidedly loving the present. And living with my guy? That sounds damn good to me.

“I’d say living with you sounds like a lot more fun than having one drawer,” I pout.

“Hey now,” he protests. “You have two.” Then he kisses me, smiling against my lips. “But sharing everything sounds better.”

It absolutely does.

* * *

Later that month, Holden goes with me to a silent auction charity event. It's for an organization both Grant and I are involved in. I helped with some of the social media, and the event is glittery, held at a trendy art gallery with a terrific view of the bay. Pop music plays, and pretty pink drinks abound.

At the end of the night, when the music shifts to a slow song, Holden and I dance. As I loop my arms around his neck, I glance at Grant, who's in the corner of the gallery. He's been distracted most of the night, checking his phone more than usual. That's unlike him. I try to flash him a smile right when a dark-haired man with a trim beard walks in.

A man I'd recognize anywhere.

My breath catches, and I whisper to Holden, "Declan's here."

Wait. Shoot. Was I not supposed to say that out loud?

But it's hard not to react.

Declan only has eyes for Grant. They laser in on my friend, and in their shared gaze I *see* so much longing. So much passion. Or maybe I'm just hoping that's there since my heart still wants my best friend to find his way back to that man.

Holden shifts on the dance floor so I catch sight of the two tall, broad, strapping ballplayers who were once upon a time tangled up together.

GRANT

No fucking way.

He's the last person I expected to see here tonight.

Or anywhere for that matter.

I go completely still. The hair on the back of my neck prickles. My mouth is dry as I take in the man mere feet away—the guy who was once mine.

He looks at me with eyes that still seem to know me.

Eyes that say he came here to find me.

But why? And most of all, *why now?*

I don't know, but I want to know. I *need* to know.

I let my body decide as my feet move, and I walk to Declan, just as he walks to me.

I swallow roughly, stopping in front of him. “What are you doing here?”

He's quiet as his shoulders rise and fall, his lips part. Then he says, “I'll tell you everything.”

My one-time lover tips his forehead toward the door and, a moment later, I leave with him.

I don't look back.

EPILOGUE

Reese

I move into Holden's place that summer, and the rest of the season rushes by in a blur of nights apart and nights together, of baseball games won and lost, of calendars finished and events planned, of podcasts and photos, of walks through the city, of text messages exchanged all day long, and of friends coming and going.

We go to sports awards ceremonies together, including one with Jillian, where I not only meet her husband, but also his friends – including the football team's running back-turned-receiver – Harlan. The man is outgoing and charming, with warm brown eyes, and I learn he's single, and the father of an adorable little girl.

“What a pleasure to finally meet you, Reese. Jillian has been raving about you since she hired you.”

I beam. “Thank you. That makes me very happy to hear.”

“And we all want to keep Jillian happy. She's the queen of San Francisco,” he says with a playful wink. “By the way, Jillian, did you get an invite to a certain wedding?”

Jillian's eyes pop. “I did. We must catch up on that sometime soon.”

“And on that note, I have to go pick up the world's cutest kid and read her a bedtime story,” Harlan says to Jillian, then turns to me. “And it was a delight meeting you.”

When he leaves, Jillian and I chat about options for him, who we might want to set him up with. I suppose that happens when you fall in love. You want everyone else to fall too.

Holden and I also spend time at the Spotted Zebra, where Chance denies he has a thing for Sierra.

And at the tea and coffee shop near our home, where Grant and I catch up on *all the things*.

And before long, we're at a new Japanese restaurant to celebrate with Crosby when he asks Nadia to marry him. As we raise our sake to toast the first of the guy friends to put a ring on it, my gaze travels around the table to the others, all of our friends.

Who'll be next?

Tia and Wayne?

Gunnar and someone?

Grant's sister?

I nudge Grant. "What's the over-under on Chance and Sierra?"

He sneers at me. "Things that'll never happen."

I shrug happily. "But really, you never know what might happen. After all, the past doesn't always stay in the past."

ANOTHER EPILOGUE

Holden

At Crosby's wedding a few months later, Reese and I dance one more time. As I spin her around, I catch glimpses of our friends.

Crosby and Nadia looking happier than any bride and groom.

Nadia's brother and his pregnant wife, sharing a slice of cake.

Jillian and her husband shimmying in a corner of the dance floor.

Chance smiling, looking happy.

So many other ballplayers are here too – guys from the Cougars like Sullivan and Miguel, as well as some of the Dragons like Gunnar and Dante. Shane is here as well.

I can't help but wonder about everyone's love story.

Everything feels possible.

THE FINAL EPILOGUE

Reese

Later

The invitation arrives as most do these days—via email.

It's from my alma mater, asking if I'd like to lead a roundtable discussion on media careers for college athletes post-university.

Hell yes.

I wave my phone at Holden over breakfast on a Saturday morning.

“Check this out,” I say, showing him the letter.

Reading it, he grins at me, pleased. “That is a damn fine idea for a roundtable, and you are an excellent choice to lead it. Also, you better get me a ticket.”

I laugh. “Bet I can sneak you in for free, but I'm sure you'll be playing.”

He peers at the date. “I can make it. That's an off day. I'm going to cheer you on. Question is, will there be any tables at this roundtable?”

I shrug. “One of life's many mysteries.”

* * *

We rent a car and drive the two hours to our college, savoring the time away from the city and the view through the winding hills on the way to the university.

Once there, we wander around campus together then head to the event.

Holden grabs a seat in the second row, listening intently as I interview former college athletes who've moved on to other work after graduation. It's a fascinating talk, illuminating all sorts of possibilities for life after sports.

When we're done, I chat with some of the attendees then leave with Holden.

He takes my hand. "There was still no table."

"I noticed that. If they had asked me, I would have insisted on one."

"That's my woman, rocking the establishment with her newfangled ideas."

We walk across the quad, passing students stretched out on the lawn, sitting against trees, tossing Frisbees. Holden gestures toward the history building. "Remember when we took a tour of my favorite places?"

"Of course I do." I squeeze his hand, threading my fingers more tightly through his. "And your favorite memories of school too?"

He stops in front of the steps where we first kissed, going quiet for a beat. "There's a favorite memory I didn't tell you about."

"What's that?" I ask.

He swallows, his gaze locking with mine. "That day. Meeting you. I knew then that it would be a favorite memory."

I smile from deep inside my soul. "I knew then too. I think I always knew with you."

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Want to know what else I knew?"

"Sure."

He drops to one knee, and I gasp.

Holding my hand in his, he gazes up at me. “I knew then that I’d want to be with you for the rest of my life. And since we’ve been together that has become clearer every single day.”

My throat hitches, and I press my lips together, but holding back the tears is pointless. They’re already slip-sliding down my cheeks.

“I fell hard for you, Reese. I waited for you. I hoped for you. And when you came back into my life, I couldn’t stay away.” He reaches into his pocket, taking out a velvet box. “You’re funny and caring and fierce and loyal, and I admire you so much. Who you are, what you believe in, *who* you believe in. And most of all, how you love—with your whole heart.”

Yup. Full on waterfall now as I clasp his hand tighter. “You’re easy to love,” I whisper.

“Good. Then will you let me keep on loving you for the rest of our lives?”

“I will,” I say, kneeling too, and throwing my arms around him, smothering him in kisses.

When I pull away, he slides a gorgeous diamond solitaire on my finger.

“I love you so much,” I say through happy tears. “And this is my new favorite memory.”

“And it’s mine too, Reese.”

Then he kisses me, and we come full circle to the moment I knew he’d always been part of my game plan.

And this moment, this ring, this promise will always be part of ours.

* * *

Be sure to grab Chance’s fake dating romance with Grant’s sister Sierra for **FREE in KU in *The Virgin Replay***. Get ready

for a some fake dating at a wedding on an island getaway trip!

Binge the entire Rules of Love series now in KU! Turn the page!

BE A LOVELY

Want to be the first to know of sales, new releases, special deals and giveaways? Sign up for [my newsletter](#) today!

Want to be part of a fun, feel-good place to talk about books and romance, and get sneak peeks of covers and advance copies of my books? [Be a Lovely!](#)

If you're looking for Grant's romance you can find it in [Scoring with Him](#).

THE VIRGIN REPLAY

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Lauren Blakely

LaurenBlakely.com

Cover Design by © Kate Farlow, interior illustration by Laura Moore

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

ABOUT

A virgin, an athlete, a fake romance, and only one bed in the hotel room.

Following rules shot me to the top of my game as an all-star baseball player, and the golden rule is this — don't hookup with your teammate's sister.

But ask her to be your fake date when you desperately need one for a family wedding? Nothing in the guy code against that. Plus, the flirty, feisty Sierra's my friend too, so why the hell not pretend we're madly in lust for two days in Hawaii?

No hardship in a make believe kiss here, a fake smooch there, as long as we don't cross any dangerous lines.

Then, the hotel books us into the same suite. Which means she's showering near me, putting on itty bitty bikinis in the same room, sliding into that king-size bed wearing only a black lace cami.

But I resist...until the night she tells me she's been waiting for me to be her first. And there's nothing fake about my desire to say yes...

Or about the feelings I'm starting to catch...

THE VIRGIN REPLAY

By Lauren Blakely

To be the first to find out when all of my upcoming books go live [click here!](#)

PRO TIP: Add lauren@laurenblakely.com to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!



HER PROLOGUE

Some women collect postcards from their travels. Some collect colorful apothecary jars.

Me? I have a thing for . . . pretty little things.

Scraps of lace.

Bits of satin.

Snippets of silk.

I don't even believe in saving them for dates, or for men, or for, *gasp*, sex.

I wear sexy matching lingerie every damn day of the week.

Red, black, pink. Striped, polka dotted, floral. Bring on the hip-hugging, breast-boosting secret luxuries.

They make me feel so many things—mostly like a badass babe in charge of my own destiny.

That's not something I had when I was younger, but I've craved it over the years. I've sought out control in nearly every aspect of my life. Control over my choices, control over romance, and I suppose, control over men.

I don't mean dominatrix-style control.

All I mean is that I'm *picky*. I don't trust easily. Trust is hard won, and when it comes to romance, I haven't experienced it at all.

Trouble is, I'd very much like to have the other things that come with romance. The red-hot tangles in the sheets. The

wild, sexy nights.

And I'd like to have them with a certain someone.

Admittedly, I've been weighing the option of *this guy* for the last year.

As in, every time a certain tall, dark, handsome, and charming man walks into my bar, I imagine his face if he undressed me and glimpsed what I wore next to my skin.

Which tells me . . . it's finally time for this badass babe to make a daring proposition.

HIS PROLOGUE

Two things I always knew I wanted to be when I grew up—a ballplayer and a guy my teammates could rely on.

Baseball is hard, but the rules are straightforward: throw the ball, hit the ball, catch the ball.

It helps to have a ninety-eight-mile-an-hour fastball and wicked control. It's a bonus that I play well with others. That's how I've become one of the top closers in the Major Leagues.

As long as you follow the rules, being a good teammate off the field doesn't have to be complicated either.

One: don't run off at the mouth like a dipshit. Especially not in front of reporters, fans, the public, or anyone with a cell phone camera. Which is everyone these days.

Two: don't be a dick, and don't *show* your dick online.

Three: don't post pictures of yourself skunk-faced trashed, and maybe don't get so trashed that it seems like a good idea in the first place.

Finally, don't hook up within two degrees of separation from a teammate.

No moms, daughters, or sisters.

Fortunately, I've had zero temptation and zero trouble. My mouth doesn't lead me into trouble, and my dick hasn't either, since I was married and faithful for ten years.

But thanks to one helluva vicious heartbreak and a brutal divorce, I've been single for 365 days and 365 nights of

solitude.

Lately, though, I wouldn't mind the company of one woman in particular. A woman who's fierce, stunning, and fantastically sarcastic.

I'd like to take her out.

Take her home.

Indulge in a few hot dates of the all-night-long variety.

But I don't slide into Sierra's DMs with a hookup request. Why?

Because the woman I want isn't merely the bar owner around the corner.

She's a teammate's sister.

And good guys don't ask a teammate's sister for hot, sweaty, forget-the-world sex.

Until I discover a way to bend this guideline. *With her.*

Maybe I'm a good guy with a secret bad boy streak.

SIERRA

I'm pretty good at reading people—comes with being a bartender. But there's one customer I haven't been able to get a read on in the last year.

The guy who's putting the pool cues away in the game room at my bar.

At least, I can't get a read as to whether he'll ever ask me out.

Or ask me to go home with him.

With everyone else gone for the night and The Spotted Zebra already closed, I steal a moment to check out Chance Ashford as he lifts his multimillion-dollar right arm to place the sticks in the holder on the wall.

I'm enjoying the view of him *a lot*. Every time he comes by, I enjoy the view a little more. And then I wonder . . .

When he's done, the tall drink of a man turns around, wipes one palm across the other, and flashes me a winning grin. "That's done."

Best to keep things friendly, as they've always been, till I know where we might go from here. "Watch out. I just might enlist you in mopping and cleaning up," I say breezily.

His chocolate-brown eyes twinkle. "I just might say yes."

I laugh, then hook my thumb in the direction of the door. "Hit the road, Chance. You've got playoffs to rest up for."

Chance is the closing pitcher for the San Francisco Cougars, my second-favorite baseball team in the city. Since my brother became their starting catcher, the team has grown on me. Some of the guys on the team have become close friends over the last few years, stopping by my bar after games.

Like this man.

Chance is obviously far and away my favorite of the guys who stop by. He's easy to talk to and so damn easy on the eyes.

"I don't mind helping. Our first playoff game isn't for a couple days, so I don't have an early bedtime tonight. Besides, I'm still amped up from clinching."

I reach for a couple shot glasses left on the pool table. "But it's late, and star closers need their beauty sleep."

"That is true. Sleep is a beautiful thing. But I'll still help you finish up."

I can do it myself, but the team stayed late. The crowd was boisterous, and I won't turn down an extra pair of hands at this post-midnight hour.

And those hands . . .

As he gathers the beer bottles from the pool table, I study his long strong fingers and big palms that can wrap around a baseball. And perhaps a woman's hips.

Mmm, I like that image.

And what are you going to do about it, Sierra?

"Take these to the kitchen?"

I blink. Look up. Meet his eyes. A flush crawls up my chest as it takes me a few seconds to process his question.

"Yes, thanks," I say, my throat a little dry.

Good thing he didn't entirely catch me staring.

Chance takes the empties to the kitchen, places the bottles in the recycling, then sets the glasses in the sink. As we make

quick work of washing and drying, I do my best to reroute my thoughts.

I can't keep crushing on him like this.

Or is it lusting?

Probably a little of both.

Chance finishes setting the chairs on the tables, and I decide that tonight, it's a crush. When I'm ready to say goodnight to The Spotted Zebra, I grab my purse from behind the counter and head for the door.

He holds it open for me.

"Thanks again. I appreciate it. You didn't have to stay behind," I say as I lock up the bar.

"I know I didn't have to. I wanted to," he says, his sexy voice a delicious rumble.

The crushy, lusty feeling definitely includes affection too. How can I help it when Chance looks at me with such genuine kindness, like it truly was his pleasure to help me out?

Kindness in a man I lust after? That would be potent.

He glances at his wrist even though he doesn't wear a watch. "It's late. Are you calling a Lyft or walking?"

I gesture in the direction of my apartment a few blocks away. "I don't live far. I'll walk."

He gives a crisp nod. "Then I'll walk you. And don't say I don't have to."

With a laugh, I gesture to the sidewalk. "I won't say that."

As we head down the block, we pass a group of fans decked out in Cougars gear, still a little rowdy from the team's victory, which secured them a Wild Card spot. A guy in glasses recognizes Chance, thrusts an arm in the air, and shouts, "Go, Cougs."

"Go, Cougs," Chance replies.

"So, I'm a little torn on something," I say once we turn on the next block.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Who to root for in the playoffs.”

He strokes his bearded jaw as if he’s deep in thought. “Oh. Of course. That sounds like such a difficult dilemma.”

I shrug. “It’s not so easy. I’ve always been a Dragons woman.”

He staggers, clasping a hand over his heart. “You did not just say that.”

“I did,” I say cheekily as we walk on. “More to the point, haven’t you noticed my brother and I love to bicker about team versus family loyalty?”

Chance shakes his head in disbelief. “Grant is my catcher. How can you *not* be a Cougars fan? I assumed you were simply giving your sibling some sass.”

“You know what they say about making assumptions,” I tease.

He shakes a finger at me. “That’s a reasonable expectation, woman.”

“Maybe it is. But one should always ask.”

“Fine. You have me there. So, I’ll ask now—why are you breaking my heart, Sierra?”

“I grew up a Dragons fan. I loved them when I was younger and old habits die hard,” I admit with a shrug.

“Tell me, then, what’s it going to take to fully convert you to the good side? Even the World Series victory last year wasn’t enough?” His diamond-studded ring glints in the light from the streetlamps along my block.

I flash back to that glorious game—and the night I started having dirty dreams about Chance. I was at the ballpark for the game, and I’d hugged him after the win. His divorce had just been finalized and he was fully single, so maybe that’s why I started thinking about him in all new ways after one celebratory embrace.

“Fine,” I say. “Winning it all last year did help a smidge.”

We stop in front of my place. “Then, Sierra, I will just have to keep trying to convince you.”

His eyes flicker with mischief.

Perhaps, dirty mischief?

Ohhh. I hope that’s a yes. That my people-reading skills are on the ball right now.

Because even in the dark, I’m pretty sure I can read heat in his eyes—speculation in the way they travel up and down my body. The man wants me to ask him up.

And holy hell.

I want to invite him in.

No more noodling over possibilities, no more wondering.

I like the way he looks at me—*a lot*. His hot gaze sends a zing down my body.

We’re on the brink of something. A crossroads in our friendship where maybe we both want it to go to the next level.

Only, I want to be absolutely positive.

Don’t want to make a mistake. To misread a man again.

I’m the opposite of impulsive. I plan my outfits down to my panties. I schedule my days and the drinks I’ll make at night. And I definitely don’t jump into bed with men.

Even though, I’m pretty sure I finally know where I want all this attraction with Chance to go. I can see the destination and I want to savor the journey. Each fun, flirty step to the bedroom for the very first time.

“Yes, you should keep trying,” I say, officially flirting.

“Then I will,” he says, giving it right back.

I wiggle my fingers in goodbye. “Good night, Chance. Good luck in the playoffs. Maybe I’ll root for you.”

He hums, tossing me a crooked grin. “Maybe I’ll stop by The Spotted Zebra again.”

“Ah, now you’re being convincing.”

“That’s exactly what I want to be,” he says.

And his arms are exactly what I want to feel around me.

So, I slide in for a quick hug, enjoying his warmth, the woodsy clean scent of him. I linger for a little longer and, oh yes, he does too.

When he ends the hug, he gestures to where my blonde hair curls over my shoulder. “By the way, nice pink streak. Glad you changed it from Dragons purple.”

Reflexively, I lift a hand, smoothing the splash of color.

“But pink isn’t the Cougars color,” I point out.

“But it’s not the Dragons color anymore either. So, I’ll take it as a sign to keep up my *Be a Cougars Fan* campaign,” he says with a grin.

“Keep campaigning, Chance.”

“Count on it,” he says, his voice a little husky.

“And thank you for walking me home. You’re a good guy,” I say as I push open the door to my building.

“And I’m a convincing one,” he says.

And as of tonight, I think he could be a promising one.

It’s a late September evening, and with the way his eyes sparkled in the night, I’m pretty sure I know who I want to be my first.

The man walking away from me.

CHANCE

A few weeks later

My favorite way to finish a game?

Record a save.

My least favorite?

Sitting on my ass and twiddling my thumbs because my team doesn't even need to call me to the bullpen to warm up.

I'm slumped over on the bench in the world's quietest dugout. It's October, the seventh inning of game six of the divisionals.

The Cougars don't need me to save the game since there's no win to save. We are down by a grotesque nine runs.

Yup. The Texas Scoundrels are clobbering us in our home park in front of forty thousand fans.

Unless fortune smiles on us in a big way, I won't be going to the bullpen. I won't be doing anything but heading home far too early in the postseason.

Two innings later, the Scoundrels' closer shuts down the big bats in our lineup, the team advances in the playoffs and celebrates on our diamond.

I curse along with my teammates. Safe to say there are no happy campers among the Cougars tonight. We won the World Series last year, but the clock starts over every season. This

time, we failed in our one and only goal—to be the last men standing.

I trudge to the locker room, shower, get dressed, then gather my shit. The season is officially over.

But one of my rules is: *don't be a sore loser.*

Stay strong.

I man up, clap my teammates on their backs, and tell them it was a good year. The guys and I exchange a bunch of halfhearted *see you next years*, and *have a good off-seasons*, and then I head to the door.

I make my way through the corridor of the ballpark then out into the San Francisco night, leaving the game behind.

Once I'm outside, I scan for a familiar face—one I see in the mirror every morning. Ah, there he is. My twin brother leans against a lamppost, AirPods in, singing under his breath.

TJ is the king of finding new, obscure bands nobody's heard of, so I don't bother asking what he's listening to—I won't have a fucking clue.

He takes his earbuds out and offers, with sympathy, “Want me to pretend I'm you so you don't have to hear every single person we're about to see tell you how bummed they are by the loss?”

I perk up. Now *that* is a save. “Yes. Fucking yes.”

“Consider it done.”

TJ calls a Lyft, and a few minutes later we slide into the Prius that arrives for us. In the backseat, we trade shirts, a necessity since TJ dresses better than I do. I'm the king of T-shirts and pullovers, but as a writer, my brother can pull off a cool hipster style. That's how I find myself wearing a short-sleeved beige shirt in a fabric patterned with cartoonish mushrooms—psychedelic ones, I'm sure—in shades of orange and brown and yellow.

“You do know I hate mushrooms,” I point out.

“Good. Then the shirt is ironic too,” he says, then gestures to my gray T-shirt. “And I hate boring clothes. So we’re even.”

“Fair enough.” I take a quick glance at TJ in my clothes.

Almost there.

I tug my World Series ring off my finger and give it to him with a warning. “Be nice to my precious.”

“Of course, Gollum.” TJ slides the beauty on, the symbol of one of my greatest professional accomplishments. He waggles his hand, letting the diamonds and sapphires catch the streetlights as the car cruises to the Mission. “Thank you, little bro. And see you later. I have an auction to attend. Gonna see if I can find me a buyer for this bad boy.”

I slam a hand on his shoulder. “And if you do that, I won’t hesitate to tell all your adoring fans that you don’t actually believe in happily-ever-afters.”

Growling, he narrows his dark eyes. “Blasphemy! You wouldn’t dare.”

“Just try me if you fence my ring.”

A few minutes later, the Lyft arrives at The Lucky Spot in the Mission. “Thanks, man,” I say to the driver, then we head into the bar. Normally, I’d go to The Spotted Zebra after games with my teammates. But if I do, I’ll flirt with the bartender, and that’s not cool to do when my big brother—by five minutes—is in town.

Once inside, I ask for a booth, and the host does a double take.

“Mr. Ashford?” he asks, his eyes flicking from TJ to me and back.

TJ and I point at each other.

We both laugh. Can’t help it.

Our twin swap still cracks me up. It cracked us up when we were five years old and tricked our parents at dinner.

We fooled teachers at school too, when we were in the mood to be little jackasses.

Our tricks were harder to pull off as we grew older and developed different talents. Since I couldn't send him in to sub for me on the mound, and he couldn't lean on me to sign books for fans while chatting about their favorite kissing scene in his romantic tales, we don't have many chances to play the old switcheroo.

But this right here is the perfect moment.

"I'll show you to your booth. That was a tough loss," the host says to TJ as he guides us through the bar.

"Yeah, that was such a bummer. I cried in the dugout," TJ says as me, with such a beleaguered sigh, I kind of want to smack him.

"Dude, I cried too," the host says as we reach the booth.

My brother slides in. I sit across from him, glad to be out of the crossfire of random fan sympathy even as TJ hams it up with his reply: "Baseball is life. All I wanted was to bring life back into that game tonight."

"I'm telling you, if you'd have gotten in, Chance, we'd have locked that series up. Sent the Scoundrels packing back to Texas," the host says.

"You bet your San Francisco Cougars ninety-eight-mile-an-hour fastball ass my bro would have shut them down," I put in.

TJ strokes his bearded jaw. Damn good thing I grew out my beard in the postseason. TJ and I match completely. "I had my best pitch all lined up too," he says. "I was ready to throw fire from my hands like the Devil himself."

The host smiles sympathetically. "I wish you'd been able to break out your cutter, Chance," the guy says. "I still remember when you struck out that Miami Ace last year. Don't let this time get you down though. You are our World Series champions, and we will always love you."

TJ affects a choked-up sob, clasps his heart. "Means the world to me. Thanks, man."

The host turns my way, flashes a courteous grin. “You must be the romance writer.”

“Roses are red, violets are blue, romance is awesome, except when it’s not,” I quip, and holy fuck it’s hard to come up with rhymes on the spot.

TJ lowers his head, laughing. “Please tell me that’s not going in your next book.”

I grin wider. “You know what I am going to put in my next book? A guy who has really big feet. He wears really big shoes. His name is going to be ...”

“Longfellow?” the host asks, helpfully.

“Nope. Bigfoot,” I say deadpan.

The guy laughs, then hands us the menus. “Let me know when you’re ready, Mr. Ashford and Mr. Ashford,” he says, then sets a sympathetic hand on TJ’s shoulder. “Until next season.”

The man smiles and walks away.

I stare at my brother with an arched brow. “Seriously? You cried in the dugout?”

“Just be glad that I waxed on and on about your sport instead of saying roses are red and violets are blue. Also, I am not putting Bigfoot in my book.”

“But I bet your hero will have *big feet*,” I say, sketching air quotes.

“All romance heroes have *big feet*. That’s like saying he’ll have carved abs and drink scotch.”

“Wait. You mean he’ll look just like me?” I ask, then yank up the mushroom shirt and flash my six-pack.

TJ rolls his eyes. “You’re so modest, Chance. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that you aren’t a paragon of humility.”

“I won’t,” I say.

TJ leans back in the booth, a slow and satisfied grin spreading on his face. “It worked.”

“What worked?” I ask.

TJ points at me. “Me playing you. It got your mind off the game.”

I smile. “It did. Thanks. Appreciate it.” I sigh heavily. “I know I have no right to be upset, but damn, I wanted to advance.”

“Course you did. You’re a take-no-prisoners competitor. Losing sucks, no two ways about it. But at least there are burgers and beer.”

“And that’ll have to do,” I say, then peruse the menu.

When the server swings by, we order, and once he leaves, TJ dives into music talk, telling me about a new band he’s into called Secret Frog Lovers Mate in the Night.

“What is it about bands these days? Why can’t they just have normal names?” I ask.

“There are no normal names anymore,” he says.

I snap my fingers. “Normal Name. That would be a good name for a band.”

TJ arches a brow. “You sure about that? Would you listen to a band called Normal Name?”

He has a point. “No, but only because, unlike you, I already listen to music artists people have heard of. Shawn Mendes. Justin Timberlake. Post Malone.”

“Word of advice—either develop taste or turn to me for playlists to impress the ladies.”

Another excellent point, but I won’t concede. “Yeah, count on that never. Besides, I’ve had no lady to impress in ages.”

He nods in understanding, then asks, “Anyway, what are your plans for the off-season?”

“I’ve got a couple events with sponsors in the next few weeks before I go to New York in November for a big shoot with a watchmaker. I’ll be the new face of Victoire watches.”

“Do you mean you’ll be the *new wrist* of Victoire?”

“Pretty sure they want this face too,” I say, gesturing to my cheek. “We’re a package deal.”

“Want me to fill in, since I’m the more handsome one? I could probably sell more watches than you.”

“Speaking of modesty,” I say, laughing. It’s true—no one takes my mind off bad games like my brother.

The server stops by with our beers; we thank him, then we toast to French watchmakers and big feet.

“Anyway, the watch thing sounds like a sweet gig,” TJ says after he sets down his beer. “Are you going right after the wedding?”

No clue what he’s talking about. “What wedding?”

The golden flecks in TJ’s brown eyes glimmer. “Blake’s wedding,” he says. “Cousin Blake. Mom’s sister’s son. Blake, the Hot Tub King.”

Ohhhhhhhhh.

I groan, put the glass on the table, and slump down in the booth. “Yes, I know who Cousin Blake is, but seriously? He’s getting married *next* month?”

“Yes. The save-the-date cards were sent out ages ago,” TJ says.

“I know, I know. But I haven’t received my invite yet, and my brain erased it.” I drag a hand over my face. “In fact, it was preventing a horrible future memory. It’s like the start of a reward. It’s a pre-ward. My brain was giving me a pre-ward for forgetting it.”

TJ holds up a wait-a-minute finger then grabs his phone, dictating into it. “Book note: character makes a joke about a pre-ward before he gets a sex *reward*.”

“Hey! I want royalties for that.”

TJ winks. “Sure. You can have them when you give me ten percent of your bank for all the times I caught fastballs in the backyard growing up. Anyway, Blake’s a good guy. He’s fun. He’s the life of the party, and he’s using all that hot tub dough

to host a sweet tropical destination wedding for him and Trish. Why don't you want to go?"

I stare at my brother. He can't be serious. "Gee, can you think of a single reason I don't want to go? Like, maybe . . . a bridesmaid?"

Realization dawns at the mention of my ex-wife's role in the wedding. "Shit, man. I genuinely did forget about that. Want me to pretend to be you?" he offers.

I press my hands together in prayer. "Please. Would you go as me?"

TJ stares at the ceiling, maybe considering it, then lets out a sad sigh. "I would. There's only one little problem. I already RSVP'd, so Blake and Trish know *I'll* be there," he says, tapping his chest. "If I go as you, I'm the asshole—me, as in TJ—who didn't show."

"Got it. Makes sense. But man, I do not want to see Natasha." There's no way around that. We're all interconnected—Blake, Natasha, and me. Trish, the bride, is my ex-wife's stepsister, and Natasha introduced her to Blake, my cousin, at one of my baseball games.

Natasha, who ran me through the wringer in our divorce.

Who did her best to paint me as the distant, absent, always-on-the-road spouse.

And since I didn't want to draw any more media attention to my imploding personal life and her very public *lament for the end of her marriage to All-Star Major Leaguer Chance Ashford*, all I could do was keep my head down and ride it out.

Even when, a week before the divorce was finalized, I learned she'd been cheating on me for the past three years.

The irony is enough to make anyone bitter. Natasha's a lifestyle coach and purveyor of platitudes under the brand *Notes to Self*.

Our split gave her endless inspiration. Nothing like seeing the private details of your disintegrating marriage on Instagram, captioned with banal affirmations over a picture of

a breakfast smoothie. If I never again see a filtered photo of avocado toast—*It's not selfish to care for yourself*—it'll be too soon.

Note to me: relationships suck.

“Look,” TJ says, “if you really want, I can say something came up. I’ll tell them my book is overdue—which is true—and my publisher is breathing down my neck—also true—and I just can’t go. Then I’ll go as you.” My brother scratches his jaw. “Honestly, it might be a little cathartic getting to zing your ex-wife in your place. I can even come up with a whole list of digs, so I’m prepared.”

I smile, grateful for the offer. But that’s too much to ask anyone, even my twin. “Appreciate it, but I can’t have you do that. Also, you hate Natasha, so you’d snap and then the jig would be up. Mom would be furious at both of us, and Dad would try to make everyone happy.”

I shudder at the thought of ticking off either of them—or anyone, really.

“Just like they did when they split.” TJ stares thoughtfully out the window. “Okay, scratch that. We don’t need to deal with that again.” Then he jerks his gaze back to me as if an idea jolted him. “You could take a date.”

How do dates even work anymore? “I haven’t had a date in a year. Are you taking someone?”

TJ scoffs. “No way. There’s no dude I want to be holed up with in Hawaii for a weekend. Romance and me broke up. I am single all the way. Like, in perpetuity.”

“Perpetually single is the way to go,” I say, offering a fist for bumping.

Our burgers arrive, and after a few delicious bites, I set down the food, a fantastic thought dipping into my brain. “Maybe my invitation was lost. Or maybe Blake isn’t inviting me on account of Natasha being there. Maybe he’s being pre-thoughtful? That’s possible.”

TJ smiles as he chews. “You’ve always been the big dreamer between the two of us.”

I shrug, owning it. "I'm going to hold on tight to this dream. I am going to cup it in my hands and squeeze it until it comes true."

* * *

I dream that the invitation was lost in the mail. I wish that it were sent to Mars. I imagine an eagle swooped down and plucked it out of the mail carrier's bag like a fish from a river. But my dreams die a painful death when I open the mailbox a few days later after returning from a morning workout. Outside my home in Pacific Heights, my hands clasp a white envelope. With embossed writing, my name in silver taunts me.

Three days in Maui.

Three days seeing Natasha with the man she left me for. The man she cheated on me with.

Three days with family asking how I'm doing, if I'm sad, how I'm handling the end of my marriage, if I'm moving on.

The answer? I've moved on, closed up the heart, and taken myself out of the falling-in-love rotation.

But I'd rather not see their sympathetic faces. Hear the *good for yous*.

My chest tightens with knots, like how I feel when I face a terrifying batter. A leftie with tree trunks for arms.

But do I back away from vicious lefties who try to chew up closing pitchers like they're chicken bones?

Nope.

I stare down those fuckers and throw them the nastiest stuff.

I snap the invitation against my palm, TJ's advice ringing loud and clear in my ears.

Take a date.

It's not a bad idea.

After keeping on my game face while Natasha, her adoring fans, and random strangers painted me as the bad guy, I'd like to let the world know I've moved on. I've finally climbed out of the "smile and wave as my marriage implodes on social media" phase of my life, and I don't want to go down that road again.

Showing up to support my cousin despite Natasha being in the wedding party will let the world know I'm a good sport.

Hell, I'm a goddamn good guy.

Just like I've always wanted to be.

All I need is a date for the wedding.

But asking the woman I have in mind will require some finesse and a little research.

Time to see what Google has to say on the subject.

SIERRA

Today calls for . . . fuchsia.

It's my sixth, twenty-ninth, or maybe one-hundredth day in a row running on coffee and determination, but I'm giving exhaustion the middle finger while blasting Ariana Grande as I get dressed for work.

You know what? This day doesn't just call for fuchsia.

It requires a fuchsia satin bra with a black bow between the breasts.

I grab that sexiest of sexy numbers from the padded hanger in my closet, snap it on, and consider my reflection.

"Sierra Blackwood, you get a thumbs-up for your devotion to satin," I tell myself as my playlist switches to Katy Perry.

Girl power.

It's what I need to conquer the night.

I tug on a black T-shirt that slopes off one shoulder and shows off the cherry tree ink on my arm—always a perfect conversation starter with patrons—pull on skinny jeans, then slide into a pair of black leather ankle boots and I'm ready to go.

In the living room, I grab a leather jacket and my purse. Tom dozes luxuriously on the purple couch—my big tuxedo rescue does *cat* incredibly well. Scratching his soft chin, I coo, "Don't look so happy. You'll make me jealous, love."

He stretches his neck, giving me even more room to stroke his chin. “Hedonist. That’s what you are.”

My main man purrs like an earthquake, then stretches his legs out in all directions. “I swear you’re mocking me,” I tell him.

Watch me . . . sleep. Watch me . . . rest. Watch me . . . do nothing.

I’d like to be reincarnated as my cat.

What? Where did *that* come from. He’s a man of leisure. I’m a woman of work. What would I even do if I were brought back as the king of relaxation?

Nice thought though.

Definitely a nice thought.

“I’ll miss you tonight.” I kiss his furry black and white head, then grab my keys, stopping along the way to the door to sniff a vase of orange calla lilies. Mmm. These smell soft and clean, with hints of jasmine.

But there’s no time to linger.

I grab a stick of cinnamon gum and pop it in my mouth as I leave my building and walk to work. The sharp, strong flavor is like a hit of adrenaline. A damn necessary one too.

When I reach The Spotted Zebra, I spit out the gum in a trash can, unlock the door to my bar. Even though I’m running on fumes, I relish the quiet as I head behind the bar, set down my purse, and then seize the few minutes of solitude to whip up some cocktail chemistry.

Ever since that night he walked me home, I’ve had the idea to create a new drink – liquid courage, so to speak.

For me.

I haven’t been able to stop thinking of Chance, and all the things I want to do with him. Over the past few weeks, I’ve been snagging time here and there to perfect a new drink.

Making it bolsters my confidence. I’m in my element crafting cocktails—playing with liquors and mixes, with

measurements and proportions.

And hell, will I ever need an extra dose of confidence when I finally see him again.

When I ask him my question.

As I stir in the tequila, I'm pretty sure I've finally got the perfect mix.

I take a small sip.

Mmm. Yes.

This is the "please take my V-card" drink.

It's sweet and bold, everything I need to ask a question that has my nerves jumping like grasshoppers.

But a good drink should settle me.

Perhaps it's time to nudge this along.

I grab my phone and tap out a text. Nothing too bold. Just a simple note, serving the ball into his court.

Sierra: I'm still not sold on the benefits of being a Cougars fan.

Seconds after I hit send, three dots appear.

Chance: I'm working on a very convincing argument. I promise to stop by and wow you with it.

A burst of excitement flares inside me. Maybe he'll swing by tonight. If he does, I'll say damn the butterflies and serve him this drink. Then, I'll finally woman up and ask him to help me out of my lingerie sometime.

Sometime very soon.

* * *

A few hours later, the joint is jumping, just the way I like it. Alt-rock plays at the perfect volume to soundtrack a conversation, but not so loud as to require yelling. Patrons lounge on black-and-white striped couches and pink chaise

lounges. A chalkboard menu lists my signature drinks, as well as my new creation, which I also posted on Instagram.

At the bar, I slide the concoction to Trish. I call it *Wild Chemistry*, and it's a little bit tequila, and a little bit tropical, and a lot sexy. As she reaches for the glass, she flicks her jet-black waves from her shoulder, parts her perfectly lip-glossed pink lips, then declares, "This is the best."

"You haven't even tried it yet," I say, giving a smile to one of my most loyal patrons. A woman who put my bar on the map. I love her madly.

"Doesn't matter," Trish says with a breezy shrug, then shows the variation on a piña colada to our friend Clementine. "How much do you want to bet this will be the best cocktail ever?"

Clementine drums silver fingernails on the counter then dips her pretty voice to a stage whisper. "I won't bet against Sierra. Her drinks are the bestest of the best. Plus, I had a *Wild Chemistry* before you arrived, Trish, and they're divine."

"Shhh. Don't tell her all our secrets," I say to Clementine Rose, whose name is the perfect kind of perky for the elite pet trainer with a renowned client roster, and a year-long waiting list. The pixie cut and a whirling dervish of a personality complete the promise of her name.

"Clem, you started celebrating Thursday night without me." Trish pouts.

Clementine did indeed start early, and now she's returned to her signature drink, so she lifts a martini in a toast. "Yes, I did! Because Thursday is a fabulous night, and I always have great dreams on Thursday because tomorrow is Friday. Like, dreams where my star Chihuahua pupils perform pirouettes, or I ride a Pegasus across the sky."

And I think I just growled in jealousy. "Those are your dreams?"

She beams. "Yes, but sometimes I also have simpler dreams. Just your average fantasies. Like, say, there's a revival

of *Chess* on Broadway starring Hugh Jackman and I have front-row seats.”

I wish. “Oh, yeah, that.”

Trish rolls her eyes. “Can I have your dream rather than the one I had last night where the seamstress tailored my wedding dress to . . . *vaginal length*.”

Clementine cringes. “That’s terrible. But just think positive thoughts before bed, Trish, and you’ll be fine.”

I clear my throat. “I beg to differ. I think about sex before bed, and I still dream that I’m late for the first day of school, stumbling into English class with my teeth falling out and no underwear on, not knowing the lines to the sonnet I had to memorize. Or I show up at The Spotted Zebra well past happy hour and customers are lined up outside, tossing overripe bananas at the window.”

Clementine blinks, her jaw falling open in horror. “Girl, that’s not a dream. That’s a nightmare.”

“I know,” I say, crinkling my nose.

Trish sets a gentle hand on mine. “But that’s also a sign you’re working too hard, Sierra.”

I shrug, dismissing the notion. It’s just a dream. And if dreams meant something, I’d be running from zombies all day long too.

“You’re always here, though,” Clementine adds, concern etched in her green irises. “It’s like I tell the companions of the dogs I train—you have to rest, or you won’t be a good dog person.”

“And nothing is more important than being a good dog person,” Trish says, reciting Clementine’s business logo.

“Except hiring good talent who can help you be a rock star,” Clementine says lifting her glass high in a rocker salute and somehow still managing not to spill a single drop. Then she sets down her martini and turns to the bride. “All right, Miss Miyoshi, but not for long,” she says to Trish. “Let’s catch

up on all the plans. Do you have everything you need for the big day?"

"I think I do." Trish rattles off wedding plans as I scan the bar. Spotting a goateed patron in need of a refill, I head over and mix him another gin and tonic, making small talk. I'm proud of the establishment I've built in only three years. Proud, especially, that my Major League baseball brother loaned me the money to buy this bar and it's been successful enough to pay him back in less than three years.

This place is all mine now.

A lot of that has to do with Trish, a benefactor of sorts who became a friend.

About two and a half years ago, the tastemaker among tastemakers strolled in, ordered a *Long-Distance Lover*, then talked up The Spotted Zebra on her cocktail review show that has about a gazillion YouTube followers.

I am so stinking lucky she discovered my place and fell in love with it.

Lucky, too, since she and her friends are pretty cool, and now they're my peeps too.

I hand the gin and tonic to the goateed guy, then swivel around to restock some liquor. But as I grab another bottle of gin from the back room, an SUV of a yawn drives into my mouth and parks there.

That's embarrassing. I hope no one saw that.

My eyes flutter for a second. Red spikes of pain needle them, that tired sensation. Maybe it's that conversation about dreams that's dragging me down.

That has to be it. A glance at the clock tells me it's only nine, and normally I've got gallons and gallons of energy to make it through a night.

I leave the back room, return to the bar, and mix a drink for another customer, who wants to know the best fun things to do in the city. The answer is easy-peasy. "You've got to try neon bowling at Pin-Up Lanes in the Marina and karaoke in

Japan Town,” I say, then it happens again. Another Subaru-size yawn I have to stifle.

What is wrong with me?

Work is my life force.

This bar is my fuel.

But when I return to chat more with Trish and Clementine, I feel like I’m in the hot back seat of a car on a long road trip, fighting to stay awake.

This is not the Sierra in fuchsia who kicks ass and takes names. This is not a woman wearing a black satin bow between her tits.

This is a woman who’s . . . absolutely fucking zonked.

I can’t remember the last time I took a day off. I’m sure it was in the Joe era, so, more than a year ago. A wasted day, since my ex turned out to be the worst.

I pour myself an iced tea, guzzle it, and power through the rest of the night, saying goodbye to Trish and Clementine when they take off.

My eyes are glued to the entrance of the bar the rest of the time, hoping Chance will want to wow me tonight.

Every time the door opens, I steal a glance until I start to feel like a stalker in my own bar.

By the time eleven rolls around, my shoulders sag. Fine, he didn’t promise he’d make an appearance, but I do wish he’d swung by. I’m not bold enough to seek him out to ask my question. I want to do it on my home turf, where I feel naturally gutsy.

For now, I shove the baseball star from my mind. Besides, if he had come by tonight, I might have yawned in his fabulous face as I served him the *Wild Chemistry* and asked him to cash in my V-card.

He’s the ideal man for my project. A man I know and trust. A man who’s a friend. A man I’m attracted to. A man who doesn’t seem keen on anything serious.

I finish up work, closing The Spotted Zebra at one. After I say goodbye to the last employee to leave, I check the inventory, then head to the black-and-white couch by the window. Curling up there, I tally the night's receipts on my laptop, then review my expansion plans for the bar as I watch the last of San Francisco go to sleep.

Soon, the streets are quiet.

And it's so comfy on this couch.

So cozy and warm in here.

The tables on this spreadsheet are just a little fuzzy. Maybe they'd be a little less fuzzy if I shut my eyes.

* * *

A bell clangs.

Rings loud and painfully in my ears.

Another one joins in. Like angry church bells in a movie scene with a chorus of clocks ringing.

My eyes fly open.

I've got to get to The Spotted Zebra.

Can't miss opening the bar.

Customers might be lined up.

Happy hour is such a busy time, and I can't be late. Because of the bananas. The overripe bananas.

Except, why is it so bright at happy hour?

Peering out the window, I startle as big blue eyes stare back at me in a cherub-like face framed by blonde ringlets. A tiara is perched on the hair of . . . a three-year-old?

I blink.

A little girl wearing a pink tutu is pointing at me, laughing, then tugging her mom's hand.

Bleary-eyed, I offer a pathetic smile and wave at the mom and young child walking past The Spotted Zebra on a Friday morning at seven.

Great. Just great.

I fell asleep at work.

And I slept for five and a half hours.

It's the most solid block of sleep I've had in . . .

Actually, I can't remember the last time I got five and a half hours in a row. With a yawn, I drag myself through the bar, grab my purse from my office, and root around for a toothbrush. I head into the bathroom and brush my teeth.

Yanking my hair into a true messy bun—there's nothing artful about this nest on my head—I return to the couch, grab my laptop, and finish the work I left undone last night.

Then, I grab my purse, and lock up at the ridiculous hour of eight fifteen when I should be home, snug under my purple duvet, fighting off dreams of losing my teeth.

I don't even like to go to Pilates at this time of day.

I like to *sleep*.

As I walk, I pop my earbuds in to listen to one of my favorite female comedians riffing about her great accomplishment in adulting recently—buying a towel.

I laugh, wishing I were worried about how to buy linen. Instead, I'm obsessed with expansion plans.

When I turn the corner, I blink as the picture of perkiness comes into view. Platinum-blond Clementine, who's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in her sapphire blue yoga pants and matching top, is walking with her speed-demon Papillon.

She flashes a huge grin as she calls out, "Woman!"

"Woman to you," I say, a little half-heartedly.

My friend stops in front of me, parks a hand on her hip, then sizes me up in a split second. "I know your dirty little

secret,” she says, wagging a perfectly manicured finger. There’s a tiny painted Papillon on the silver nail.

My face flushes for a hot second at the mention of my crush on my brother’s teammate. “I know you do. But why are you bringing it up now?”

Clem tilts her head in question, her brow knitting. “Because look at you. You’re wearing the same clothes as last night. You slept at the bar last night. And you’re in big trouble.”

Oh. That secret.

Not the *I want Chance to take me* one. I groan. “I suck. I know. What is wrong with me?”

“Well, for starters, you’re married to the bar,” she says matter-of-factly. “You work yourself to the bone because you’re so damn focused on the next thing and then the thing after that. You don’t date even after Joe turned out to be such a gigantic asshat. And you’re horny. That’s all.”

Yes. That’s all. I’m just on a path to burnout and I’m barely twenty-five. “And you dream of unicorns. Fuck you.”

She pouts.

“C’mon. You know that was an affectionate fuck you,” I say with as much of a smile as I can muster.

“Obviously. But I’m worried about you, Sierra,” she says, then bends to pick up her brown and white pooch, who’s wagging his paw at me. “And so is Magnus. We are very concerned.”

I am too. Trouble is, I don’t know how to combat exhaustion. I never learned that skill in my *do everything well for yourself since your parents sucked* crash course I’ve been taking for years.

I heave a sigh and shrug helplessly as I stroke Magnus’s soft head. “Me too. But I don’t know what to do,” I say, since go-go-go is my speed.

“You need a vacation, Sierra,” Clementine says. “No ifs, ands, or buts.”

She's not wrong. But I can't afford to get away for more than a night. I already moved heaven and earth to snag one night off for Trish's wedding in Hawaii.

I kind of can't wait for those twenty-four hours away from work.

Twenty-four hours in paradise.

"Maybe, but I don't know how to pull it off."

She taps her temple. "Leave it to your friend Clem. A plan is coming together. But now, I've got to work on Magnus's pole-weaving skills. Bye for now. More later."

With a wave, she heads toward her home, and I make my way to mine. As I go, my mind drifts to flowers and gardens and tropical scents. When I turn on my block, my brother's standing outside my building, decked out in running gear, stretching his quads, his T-shirt a little sweaty.

That's odd. Not the sight of Grant in motion, since that pretty much describes him, but his presence at my door.

"Are you stalking me?" I call out.

"Yes. It's my new hobby in the off-season."

"Cool. Mine is . . . talking to my cat and dreaming of Hawaii," I say drily.

"You and me both. Well, for the last one. Deck and I are going there in a few weeks." He's not going to attend Trish's wedding. He and his boyfriend are headed to Kauai for a well-deserved vacation several days before I take off for Maui.

"You've only told me twenty times," I say, then stop, quirking my head as I study my brother, trying to figure out why he's here. "What are you up to?"

"I just went for a run, and I'm going to meet Chance and some of the guys at the gym in about an hour."

But that doesn't answer the question. "So . . . were you just waiting for me to come home?"

Grant stares at me like I've lost my marbles. "Um, way to make your brother feel welcome. Hello? We had a breakfast

date at eight-thirty. In between my run and the gym. You said to meet you outside your place.”

I groan, drop my head in my palm. “I forgot. Also, I fell asleep at work. I suck.”

He wraps an arm around me, gives me a gentle hug, but laughs too. “Girl, what am I going to do with you?”

It’s a valid question.

One that’s starting to weigh on me.

On the one hand, I’ve succeeded at not becoming my parents—I’m twenty-five, a business owner, a college graduate, and a virgin. My parents didn’t go to college. They got pregnant in high school. They flitted from job to job. They avoided all responsibility. They left Grant and me with my mom’s parents. Best decision they ever made, since my grandparents rock. But I don’t want to risk a chance of being like my irresponsible folks.

So, I bust my ass every damn day.

Then at night, I fashion expansion plans.

Just in case it all goes belly up.

Yay me.

I’m also running on fumes.

Something’s gotta give.

As Grant and I settle into a booth at the café around the corner and I peruse the offerings, I wish the answer were on the menu.

CHANCE

Google and I need to stop meeting like this.

The search engine knows far too much about me.

Like: *Is Tinder a good idea?*

Worst things that happened on Tinder.

How to cancel my Tinder account before I use it.

Like right fucking now because that shit is scary. Scarier than spiders.

Spiders that live in bathrooms.

Spiders that can kill you.

Are all spiders deadly?

Something to take my mind off spiders...Like, is dating even called dating anymore? Is it grabbing a coffee? Or is it...chilling? Hanging?

How to ask a woman to hang out with you.

Is there anything that sounds douchier than asking a woman to hang out with you?

Ohhhhh. Asking her to have low-key coffee.

Got it.

Thanks, Google.

But wait. There's one more thing to ask the engine of the Web.

How to ask a woman to be your wedding date when you haven't been on a date in ten years.

What the hell do I say to Sierra? I contemplated stopping by last night when she texted, but I need to get my talking points in order first. Wait. Is that what they're even called? Fuck, it's hard navigating dating terrain after a decade-long marriage.

I met my ex-wife at our freshmen orientation in college and we were together for more than ten years. I've never been on Tinder. I've never met a woman at a bar. I've never picked up a gal at the gym.

Hell, I've never banged a fan, since I've been steadfastly single for the last year, and monking it up.

And my brother was right. I need a date to the wedding. I try again with Google. And I get a lot more specific.

How to ask a woman to be your fake date at a wedding.

After all, I can't ask her for a real date. Team Bro Code Rules and all.

As I whip up protein pancakes for breakfast, Google serves up the simplest of solutions to my dating query—find an interesting conversation starter, be friendly, and most of all, be direct about the need for the fake date.

Piece of cake. I can do that no problem. I ponder great conversation starters as I eat.

Cocktails? No.

Baseball? She's probably had enough baseball talk to last a lifetime.

I glance around my place. Plants? Doubtful she wants to shoot the breeze about my green thumb.

I finish my breakfast and clean up, then water my succulents. "What would you do, Mariano?" But I answer my question quickly. "Of course that's what you'd do. You'd find a killer opening line."

Next, I feed the panda plant on the windowsill, then give some H2O to the aloe plant, Trevor Hoffman, then, the jade, Dennis Eckersley.

Three of the greatest closers of all time. I owe them all a huge debt, and I've got to represent the position. A closer can motherfucking close.

* * *

At the gym an hour later, with opening lines on my mind, I join today's workout crew. Grant's here, along with Shane Walker, a pitcher for the New York Comets, and Harlan Taylor, a wide receiver on the Renegades.

I move behind Grant on the bench press, spotting him as Harlan does squats.

"Question of the workout: What's the most embarrassing place you ever fell asleep?" Grant tosses out as he pushes up the weight bar.

I answer as I spot my catcher while he lifts. "I fell asleep at the barbershop the other week, getting a shave and a haircut. My guy is such a pro, though, he didn't even nick my chin while I did the head slump."

Shane chuckles as he lifts free weights in front of the mirror. "Thought for sure you were going to say while shagging," says the Brit.

"Spoken from experience?" I fire back. Shane—also a closing pitcher—has been in town visiting family, so we've adopted him as our workout buddy for the week.

"Bet that happens to you a lot, Shakespeare," Harlan quips as he switches to lunges. "Maybe try being better in bed."

Shane scoffs. "Please. If I were better, I'd attain god-like status in the sheets. As it is, women say sex with me is rather transcendent."

Grant sets down the bar, sits up, rubs his hands along his shorts. "Transcendent as in they have to escape to another

plane of reality to make it through even your two pumps?”

The Brit laughs it off. “Even if I were a two-pumper, those two pumps would be enough to give her multiples from another world.”

I shake my head. “You are too cocky even for a pro athlete, Shakespeare.”

“And that level is pretty much maximum-ego already,” Harlan says. “To answer your question—I fell asleep on Abby’s giant teddy bear the other night.”

I laugh at the mention of his young daughter. “That doesn’t sound so odd. Cute, but not odd.”

Harlan looks up, pauses his lunges, his brown eyes twinkling. “Oh, did I mention the teddy bear was in the living room and Abby had three kindergartners over, and they decided to paint Daddy’s toenails while he was asleep.”

We all crack up. When Harlan unties his sneaker and wiggles his rainbow-colored toes, we laugh harder.

“You’ve got a budding pedicurist on your hands,” Grant says.

Harlan pats his light brown locks. “I’m just glad she’s not a budding hairdresser.”

The football player puts his sneaker back on as Shane scratches his chin then gestures to Grant. “And what’s the most embarrassing place you’ve had a lie-in, Grant?”

“Dugout. In between innings last year. I was zonked from our travel schedule, so I caught a few winks while the end of the lineup was at the plate. Anyway, I guess it runs in the family. Sierra told me she crashed at work last night. Fell asleep on the couch at her bar.”

Yes!

That’s the perfect conversation starter to pop the *will you pretend to be mine at the wedding* question.

It’s personal, it’s fun, it says I know her.

I send her a text that I hope is flirty, and I don't even have to google how to flirt.

This'll be as easy as throwing a fastball for a strike.

SIERRA

On the way to work, I pop into my favorite florist, grab a bouquet of dahlias, and thank Frankie.

“You’re the best with blooms,” I tell the woman who owns the shop by my home.

“And you are aces with compliments,” she replies.

I head to the bar, and when I set the pink dahlias on the counter, already the place feels even more like my home.

I smell the blooms and have just begun my prep for the evening when my phone pings with a text. It’s in the Clementine and Trish chat.

Trish: I heard. I hereby officially am ordering you to spend two nights at my wedding instead of one. Who spends one night in Hawaii???? Only workaholic robots like YOU. Turns out our room block has an extra room, so I’m using it as a gift-y for you! You can’t say no!

Clementine: I HAD A DREAM YOU SAID YES, SO I’M MAKING IT COME TRUE WITH MY MILES! MILES! I’M GIVING YOU MILES!

But I have so much to do to prep for my expansion. After Trish’s wedding, I have an overnight trip to Vegas to check out a potential new hire. Plus, I already booked my ticket to Maui for her nuptials and made my plans. I fly in the night before, and I’ll join the gals in the afternoon for hair and nail prep, then attend the ceremony and reception. I’ll catch a red-eye

home that night, sleep on the plane, and be back in San Francisco well in advance of happy hour.

I planned it to the minute.

I'm about to reply with a *thanks but I can't accept this* when my phone pings with another text.

Chance: Save the best seat at the bar for me tonight—I'll be stopping by later. Let the great Cougars convincing begin. P.S. Are you still going to Trish and Blake's wedding?

I am, I am, I am!

Because I have no game, I write back stat.

Sierra: I've got Maui on my mind. And you know I always save the best seat for you. Let's see if you can convince me.

Chance: Just as a tease—the Cougars have awesome hats. And on that note, I'll count down the hours till this evening. Look for me around eight-thirty.

My stomach flips. *A time.* He gave a time. Who gives a time unless he's flirting?

Who says he's *counting down the hours* unless he feels a spark too?

I don't believe in signs, except maybe *this* one.

Maybe I should say yes to Trish and Clem. What if I *can* swing one more night in Hawaii? One more night where this man will be.

Could that night be my opportunity with Chance?

I turn around and hunt for my manager, Zoey. She's at the chalkboard, writing the names of the drink specials, her red hair piled high in an artful bun. "Zoey, what are the chances you could fill in for me—"

"Yes."

"But you don't even know when—"

"Yes. It's a blanket yes."

She lowers her arm. With chalk in hand, she sets her palm on my shoulder. "Sierra, you need a break. Whenever you

need me to fill in, the answer is yes.”

So, it’s that obvious.

Huh.

Maybe this trip is everything I need to recharge.

And to finally have sex.

A twofer?

“Thank you,” I say, then give her the date.

“Consider it done.”

The stars are aligning, and all I have to do is take a big breath and lay my panties on the line with the man I want.

I write back to Trish and Clem and tell them I’ll take them up on their fabulous offer.

* * *

At 8:28, the door swings open.

Chance strides in, taking up all the space in my mind.

Dark, wavy brown hair. A bearded jaw that I bet would feel fantastic rubbing against my face, and elsewhere. And that smile. Confident, and a little dirty.

My skin flashes hot.

Should I ask him my big question tonight or at the wedding? If I ask him in Hawaii, we both might be feeling the Maui magic as the ocean waves gently loll against the shore. The soft night breeze will kick up the scent of tropical flowers and the sea as we grab champagne and toast to the happy couple. Then I can ask the man if he’d please deflower me.

I’ve known he’s the one I wanted since the night he walked me home.

I don’t want to have a one-night stand with a stranger. I want the first man I sleep with to be a guy I like. But he should also be a guy who won’t expect anything more.

I'm married to work. I have nothing more to give.

Chance is the same with his job. That makes him perfect for my *I'm ready* plans.

Just the thought of what he might do to me in bed sends a hot shiver through me, reminding me what I'm wearing.

Black lace.

If he only knew what I wanted him to do to my lingerie.

As he heads to the bar, he flashes me a smile that's both sexy and sweet. He holds a pink cap in his hand, and I'm pretty sure that's for me.

Screw waiting. I'm going to ask the man tonight.

CHANCE

I shower that evening. I want to look my best when I make my be-my-date-with-a-twist request, so I tug on a gray Henley, since that's what the guys in TJ's books usually wear.

The one universal theme in the books—well, besides love conquers all and everyone likes big cocks—seems to be that dudes look best in Henleys, so I am decked out in my finest.

I leave my place with enough time to make a pitstop at the Cougars team store. I don't need Google to tell me to show up with a gift. That's just common sense. I grab something that makes me think of Sierra, catch a Lyft to Hayes Valley, then get out at The Spotted Zebra.

I'm a man on a mission.

But as I push open the door, I'm greeted by an upbeat love song and...the quickening of my pulse. Sure, it's been a long ass time since I've been on the market. But I've got this, so I talk back to doubt.

Dude, you threw the final pitch in the World Series a year ago. That can't be tougher than asking a woman to be your wedding date.

Gift in hand, I make my way to the bar, catching Sierra's gaze as I go. Her brown eyes laser in on me, flickering with mischief. Like something is on her mind too.

She gestures to the stool in front of her. "The best seat in the house."

“It definitely is,” I say as I grab the stool, flash her a grin, and set down the gift. A pink Cougars cap with the big cat logo in sparkles.

“A Cougars hat. And it is *fine*.”

“It matches your streak, and the sparkles are badass like you.”

She dons the hat and models it like a pro. “Don’t you just know the way to my heart—calling me a badass.”

I pump a virtual fist. Yes, I can do this. “What can I say? I call ’em, like I see ’em, and I’m pretty sure you’re a badass babe.”

“Oh, stop, stop. I won’t switch allegiance so easily.”

I lean closer, lower my voice. “Have I mentioned we have the best closing pitcher in all of baseball? A team needs a man who can seal the deal.”

And I’m gonna be that guy tonight too.

Her breath catches. “So does a woman.”

Oh yes. I like that response a lot. “So, I’ve convinced you to root for the Cougars?”

She leans in close too, her voice feathery. “You’re getting there.”

“Excellent. And I hope I’m not breaking the rules by showing up without my teammates,” I say, my tone making it clear that I’m enjoying their absence.

The fiery blonde behind the bar arches a brow, slaps a napkin in front of me, then says, “Depends on whether you like breaking rules, Chance Ashford.”

“Maybe I like bending them too,” I say.

“Do you now?” Sierra parks her palms on the bar, a move that has the fortunate effect of pushing up her tits. Mmm. Tits. The ultimate distraction, but hey, so’s a runner on second base.

I maintain my flirting focus. “But breaking them can be fun too,” I add.

“Then, you can be a rule bender or breaker at The Spotted Zebra anytime. Now, what can I get for you? Lager? Gin and tonic? The Best Mojito in the City?”

She just rattled off my last three drink orders. That has to be a good sign she’ll say yes to my request. “Someone remembers what I order.”

Her lips curve into a grin. “Well, I *am* a bartender. There’s also my new drink to consider. *Wild Chemistry*,” she says, sounding even flirtier when she names that cocktail.

“What would you recommend?”

“Whatever you like.”

Your company in Hawaii for a couple days. That’s what I’d like.

But I’ve got to ease into my unconventional request, and a drink would smooth the way. Drumming my fingers on the bar, I flash back to TJ’s last book. What did the hero drink? Ah, yes. He asked for scotch, naturally. As a hero does—Scotch, Henleys, and big cocks.

“Scotch please,” I say, then add smoothly, “Macallan.”

Her grin widens. She leans even closer, so damn close I catch a faint whiff of her body lotion or shampoo—blackberry. “Has someone been reading *Come Again*?”

Busted. And I like it.

“C’mon. Easton Ford can’t be the only man who asks for a Macallan,” I say, naming the hero from that book.

She smiles, sets a hand on my arm. “I’m just giving you a hard time.”

I’d like to give her a hard time.

Except...This is a fake date request. You don’t hookup with a teammate’s sister. A teammate’s sister is the kind of woman you take home to meet your mom. Time to settle the fuck down.

“Hard times are good,” I say, and that feels like just the right amount of flirt for our...situation.

“One Macallan coming right up,” she says, then pours a couple fingers worth.

A quick scan of the bar tells me it’s now or never. The place isn’t too crowded yet. She has other servers handling other patrons.

When she sets the glass in front of me, I whip out my conversation starter. “So, Sierra, word on the street says napping is your favorite hobby,” I say playfully.

She tilts her head, puzzled, then awareness flickers in her eyes. “Oh my God, did my brother tell you what happened?”

I shoot her a grin. “Grant did indeed. He just can’t keep secrets.”

“I can’t believe he told you that. But I also can’t believe I fell asleep here. It was so embarrassing.” She points to the couch by the window. “I woke up at seven with a little girl and her mom pointing at me like I was an animal at the zoo.”

“I’m a big believer in naps. Relaxation is a very good thing.”

“It wasn’t a nap, Chance. It was a full-on Rip Van Winkle session,” she says, then she takes a beat, flicks some blonde strands off her shoulder, and seems to shift gears. Her voice even goes a little smoky. “And, for the record, I’d much prefer to have been sleeping soundly on satin sheets wearing a lace teddy.”

Hello! Did she just say what I think she said? “A lace teddy?” I ask, a little gravelly. Or maybe a lot gravelly.

“Or a nightie,” she says, with a coquettish shrug.

My throat is the Sahara right now. Lifting my glass, I knock back some of the liquor. Setting the glass down, I clear my throat. “So I have a proposition for you. About the wedding.”

Her soft-brown eyes flicker with excitement. “Oh good, because I have one for you. Also about the wedding.”

I gesture to the floor so she knows it’s hers. “Ladies first, after all.”

She straightens her shoulders, then removes her hat, setting it behind the bar. Taking a glance around the room, she seems to assess the situation, then swings her gaze back to me. She parts her lips, like she's about to say something, but seems to reconsider it. "Actually, you go first."

That seems fair enough. A gentleman should ask, especially since she seems nervous. Squaring my shoulders, I dive into the deep end. "So, Trish and Blake's wedding. How would you feel about going as my date?"

A smile lights up her face as she says, "I would feel great." She nibbles on the corner of her lips, and I take that as a sign to serve up the rest of the details.

"But like a pretend date. No pressure or anything like that," I finish, wishing Google had better instructions for this request, but I'm winging it, and hoping for the best.

She's quiet for several long seconds. "Ah, we'd fake date."

"It's sort of an ex emergency," I explain. "I thought since I'm going and you're going, maybe we could go together. Natasha is one of the bridesmaids, and I would love to be with . . . a friendly face. The divorce was pretty brutal online—at least, the way she painted it on her feed. Everyone's going to ask me a ton of questions, and if I'm with you, they won't."

Doesn't hurt that Sierra is gorgeous, successful, and also fun as hell, but I'm not sure if I should say that yet. Google didn't shed any light on the nuances of pretend romance.

"Ohhhhh. You need a fake date," Sierra says.

"We can pretend to be together for the night. Maybe take a few pics. You'd help my social cred, which took a beating in the last year."

"Through no fault of your own," she says, crossing her arms, a tough girl vibe radiating off her.

That's just . . . hot.

"Thank you for saying that."

“Well, I don’t like that she tried to portray you as a callous ex-husband,” Sierra says, and I bet she’s wearing black leather boots to match her fiery attitude. A quick peek behind the bar confirms my suspicions, and damn, she looks good. “When we all know what really happened.”

I tap my nose. “Bingo. That was *not* fun, smiling and waving like nothing bothered me.”

But that was what my agent told me to do. *Best not to engage with Natasha. Keep your chin up and stay out of it*, Haven said.

I listened. I didn’t engage.

Online, I kept my focus on baseball, volunteer work, my sponsors, and my friendships. And it worked. Staying out of the mess online helped me keep my sponsorships.

Sierra hisses, narrowing her eyes. “I wanted to punch every stupid Instagram post of hers, especially that one where she slapped up a shot of herself without makeup. *This is what starting over looks like. Being brave. Showing the world who you are.*” She gags dramatically.

I laugh, a little bitterly. “I distinctly recall Crosby telling me we were going to post a pic that day of the baseball game we played with kids for charity.”

“Smart counter-strategy.” She takes a deep breath. “So, the wedding is kind of the same.”

“In a way, yes. Since I can’t ask you out for real since you’re Grant’s sister,” I add.

One pretty brow arches. “That’s the issue? My brother?”

Well, the *other* issue is I have zero interest in relationships. Only good times. But I’d be a dick if I asked her to bang, especially since I need her help. “Bro code rules. Gotta follow them,” I say.

“And the rules say you can’t ask me out for real, but you can for pretend?”

“Bro code is a strange beast. It operates by its own rules. We could also just go as friends since we *are* friends.”

She shoots me a look of fierce determination. “Damn straight we are. And so, as your friend, I say, fuck your ex-wife. You’ve got yourself a wedding date.” She extends her hand.

“Great,” I say, grinning wildly as we shake.

She lets go of my hand. “But the Blackwood code says I’m going to tell my brother we’re pretend dates. Otherwise, he might hear, and then you’d have the *bro code* to answer to.”

It comes out a little saucy, like maybe she’s mocking the dude rules.

Honestly, the guy guidelines may deserve mocking, but without them, I’m pretty sure the Cougars would fall to pieces. After all, Grant is the guy I’m closest to on the team. He’s the one who catches every single pitch I throw.

“Fair enough,” I say. “No one wants *that*.”

So, why do I feel unsettled? Maybe because she had something to ask me. I return to that. “By the way, what was your proposition?”

She takes a beat like she’s trying to remember. “What do you know? I was going to ask the same thing. If you wanted to go as friends. Just friends. Nothing more. So, this whole pretend date works out perfectly.”

And we’re officially on the same page. Except it doesn’t entirely feel that way and I’m not sure why.

I pick up my glass, drain it, and set it down.

“Want another?”

Scanning the board, I consider the options. Should I try the new drink she mentioned? “How’s the *Wild Chemistry*?”

“Try it and find out,” she says.

“I’ll take a *Wild Chemistry*.”

She spins around and whips up a cocktail, then sets it in front of me. I lift it and take a drink. “Mmm. It’s a little tropical, and the tequila is just right. And is it crazy to say it tastes a bit sexy?”

Her lips twitch with the hint of a smile, then the smile disappears. “Not crazy at all.”

“Is there a story behind the drink?”

She shakes her head. “Sometimes a drink is just a drink.”

Sierra turns and heads the other way to help other customers, and soon I leave. I’m feeling both excited for our fake date, but also a little frustrated that it’s not real.

Imagine that.

SIERRA

You don't always get what you want.

And you damn well don't cry about it.

"Do you, Tom?" I ask the next morning as I join my cat on his lounging couch.

Technically, it's *my* couch. But we both know the truth. His hair tells the story of ownership of this piece of furniture. Tom flops to his back, allowing for more belly rubs. I happily bestow them.

"See? You didn't caterwaul when I gave you organic chicken instead of the wild turkey that I know you prefer. But the organic chicken is better for your kitty belly," I say.

My man purrs louder, letting me know he understands how the world works. You get what you get, and you don't hiss about it.

"So I'm *not* upset that Chance didn't offer to toss me over his shoulder, carry me up here two steps at a time, kick the door down, then yank off all my clothes and bang me over the kitchen table," I tell the cat. "Are you?"

A louder purr is my answer.

Sure, I had other plans for him. But I said yes to Chance's fake date request because I know his pain.

Been there, done that.

Chance and I are kindred spirits in that department. We haven't talked about our pasts in detail, but I saw how Natasha

spun self-care gold out of her divorce. More like a self-care empire of absolute bullshit.

I'm convinced there's a special kind of relationship torture waiting for people who cheat and lie. Like, maybe they can never have orgasms again.

Or maybe they're doomed to only kiss people who have wilted-lettuce breath. I certainly hope that's Natasha's fate.

And I hope my ex-boyfriend is racking up more than his fair share of limp lettuce lip-locks and blue-balled nights. If there's romantic justice in the universe, Joe's jeans will be too tight in the crotch for all eternity. Come to think of it, I'd like to wish an uncomfortable thong on Natasha for all her days.

If the tables were turned, and I needed a hot-as-sin, charming, wildly successful man by my side at an event, I wouldn't hesitate to ask Chance Ashford. And I'd march right into the thick of the party and show that hottie off like the arm candy, eye candy, and brain candy that he is.

That's what I'll do in Maui on our fake date, since cheating exes are the worst. My last serious boyfriend seemed as sweet as a cinnamon roll. Fitting that Joe was a baker, that supposedly adorable sweetheart of a man.

Turned out, the baker bamboozled the bartender.

I met Joe three years ago when we were both twenty-two, both virgins. We had a fantastic first date, strolling along the Marina, savoring the bay. We enjoyed several more fabulous dates with the swooniest goodnight kisses ever.

I wanted a little more. He said he wanted to wait until marriage. That was how he was raised, and it mattered to him.

Not my preference, but I'd waited twenty-two years at that point. I could wait longer.

Besides, I loved the guy. Loved his attention, the snickerdoodles he baked just for me, and his foot rubs.

Plus, our *almost-sex* life was mostly good enough.

Sometimes good enough.

Fine, some nights I was crawling up the walls. I desperately wanted to have sex. Would it be as hot, sexy, and naughty as I fantasized?

I was ready to find out finally. I'd held onto my V-card till my twenties because I'd made a promise to myself when I was in high school to live differently from my parents.

No sex in high school.

No sex in college.

And, evidently, no sex with Joe.

Then I discovered that after two years of *everything but* with him, he was giving *everything* to someone else.

Guess that was what mattered to him after all.

I kicked him out, cried ten rivers with Tom and my friends, then wiped my tears and buried my emotions in work, work, and more work.

Now, a year later, I'm well over Joe.

But I've also learned my lessons.

I have zero interest in dating. I don't want to get hurt. Don't want to get burned. And don't want to be made to feel a fool.

I am very interested in sex, though.

I'd like to feel pleasure. And I'm quite sure that knee-weakening, toe-curling, pull-my-hair, slap-my-ass-please sex would be the perfect cure to my burnout.

Yep. I've read books. I've watched dirty videos. I'm not afraid to explore my fantasies online, to check out all sort of adult content to learn what I like. I'm a subscriber to Joy Delivered's monthly O-box of battery-operated friends. This woman knows her mind and her body very much.

And I want that all with Chance Ashford.

But I also know this—I won't let an injustice take place on my watch.

So, fuck "Notes to Self" Natasha.

Fuck Cinnamon Roll Joe.

Even if Chance doesn't want a hot night with me because of a code, I'll gladly be his fake wedding date.

As I pet my cat, I send Grant a quick text.

Sierra: You know that wedding I'm going to in a couple weeks? Chance will be there as well, and I'm going as his date. But don't go all chest-thumping big brother on me. Don't spout the rules about dating a teammate's sister. His awful ex will be there, so we're only going to pretend to be dating so he can avoid the fire of dating questions.

Grant: I can't believe you think I'm a chest thumper.

Sierra: I can't believe you think you're anything but.

Grant: Look, I think it's cool that you're going to be by his side. And I don't have an issue with the whole teammate's sister thing. Just don't want to see you get your heart broken. Not by anyone. It's my job as your big brother to look out for you.

I laugh, rolling my eyes. He's such a big brother.

Sierra: You don't have a thing to worry about. My heart is not in the equation.

Because I won't let it be.

* * *

The next day, I power-walk with Clementine, though our pace is closer to a jog thanks to Magnus. He won a national dog agility competition last year that went viral and became known as Flying Magnus, the country's fastest little dog—busting records as he weaved through poles, raced through tunnels, and climbed up and down seesaws.

As we attempt to keep pace with Super Dog, I give my friend the download on the wedding date with Chance.

When we hit the corner of California, Clementine tugs gently on the leash, and Magnus sits instantly, waiting to cross

till he gets a command. “You’re going to pretend date the guy you’ve been lusting after? Just want to make sure I’m getting all the cray-cray details just right.”

Is it crazy, though? Seems more like I’m being helpful. “Yes, but it’s only for one event, and it’s for solidarity.”

With a laugh, she says *go* to the pooch, and we cross the street at a fast clip. “That is so sweet of you to provide a solidarity fake date to the guy you want to bang.”

“That’s what fake dates are. Expressions of solidarity and friendship. No one should face the inquisition of the ex alone.”

“Ah, it’s a great gesture of good will too?”

“I suppose it is.”

“And will you dance with him?”

That’s a good question. But it’s a wedding. Hard to imagine we won’t. “Probably.”

Clementine bumps me with her hip. “Oh, baby. You’ll get to feel that big, baseball body up against you. *Yum.*”

I roll my eyes. “Are you trying to tempt me?”

“I highly doubt I need to tempt you. I think you’re already tempted, Sierra. Just imagine dancing with that hunk of a man when he’s wearing a suit. Wait. Will he wear a suit to a Hawaii wedding? Oh, will he have a Hawaiian shirt on and linen pants? Who cares! Either will be smoking.”

I try to picture what Chance might be decked out in, and honestly, anything would look good on that man. “Exactly. He can wear whatever he wants.”

“Athletes just look hot in *anything.*”

“Does someone have a thing for athletes?”

Clementine bats her lashes, waves a demure hand. “You know there’s a certain someone in my past. But it doesn’t matter. I’m off the market, and we’re talking about *you, you, you,*” she says. “So you’ll probably dance with Last Chance Train.” That’s the nickname sports talk hosts gave Chance years ago. Opponents like to say the last chance train is pulling

out of the station when he takes the mound, since he's so hard to eke a hit off. "You'll shimmy with the hottie. Put a hand on one of those sexy biceps. He'll wrap his arm around you. Maybe you'll plant a kiss on his cheek."

She's painting an awfully alluring portrait of the wedding. One I doubt will bear any semblance to reality. I narrow my eyes at her. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

"Is it driving you crazy? I bet that's how you're going to feel at the wedding. Because that does sound kind of hot and bothery," she says as we march along Jackson Street.

I huff. "You're not helpful."

"I know. But, confession time—I'm more excited for your fake date with that hottie pants than I am for Trish's real wedding. And I'm ten thousand times excited for her. But don't you dare tell her I'm ten thousand and one times excited for you." Clementine wags a finger at me.

I mime zipping my lips. "I won't. And I'm glad you're looking forward to my fake date, but I assure you there won't be a real one since he's Mr. Rules, and apparently his main rule is you don't date a teammate's sister." I heave a sigh, then raise a finger. "Wait. Idea. I'm going to temporarily emancipate myself from Grant."

My friend's green eyes sparkle with excitement. "Yes, girl, yes. I fully support you. This brotherly emancipation will be good for your lady parts. But you're still going to stay an extra night in Hawaii, right? You need it even for a hot fake date."

"You and Trish made a convincing argument. And really, I can't rush out at midnight. So yes, I will."

We reach the curb and stand stock still as Magnus sits like a proper dog. "You can laze around in a hammock. Watch a sunset. Take a dip in the pool."

That does sound appealing. "I'm glad you bullied me into the extra night. I'm looking forward to it."

Maybe not as much as I'd enjoy the room if it were the site of my fucking-for-the-first-time fantasies. But I'm pretty sure I'll enjoy being Chance's fake date too.

When we finish our almost-jog, I give Magnus a kiss on the head, then tell Clementine I'll see her soon.

She blows a kiss, then tells the dog to wave.

He lifts a tiny paw.

“Gah. Who needs a man when you have a perfect dog?” I call out.

She spins around, then spins back right in the middle of the crosswalk as a gray-haired lady passes her. “One more thing. Maybe consider telling Chance you want to bang him on his balcony.”

My friend. Is she for real? As the lady snaps her gaze back to Clementine, I try to rein in a laugh. “Could you be any louder?”

She cups a hand around her mouth. “Yes, I can!”

I stare at her, shaking my head, shrugging *sorry* at the woman who has probably suffered whiplash. “And no, I won't say that to him. Rules and all.”

She shrugs airily. “Bet he'd do it. Bet he'd bend that one.”

Bet I'd like to know.

CHANCE

A few weeks later

I might not be an expert on fake dates, but I'm familiar with a few key guidelines since I do read my brother's books from cover to cover. In *Mister Benefits*, when the hero needed a fake fiancée to pull off a business deal, he enlisted his female best friend. As part of the ruse, he booked a table at the best restaurant in the city for one of their dinners.

So, when Sierra tells me over text that her friends are using their miles to change her flight, I tell her I have more miles than anyone, and it would be my honor to upgrade her ticket.

Sierra: You don't have to do that.

Chance: I want to. And no fake date of mine is going to sit in coach when I'm in first class. Also, my legs are too long for coach. So really, first class is the only way to fly with me.

Sierra: Twist my arm, why don't you?

Chance: See you at SFO tomorrow. Can't wait.

That's how you treat a fake date. You make sure she travels in style.

* * *

I arrive at the gate early and scan the room for Sierra. As I look for waves of thick blonde hair, high cheekbones, and lush lips, my pulse surges.

A few seconds later, I spot her lounging in a leather chair, looking like she couldn't possibly belong anywhere else but waiting for me in the first-class lounge. My pulse zooms from surge to skyrocket.

Thanks, attraction. This is going to be a hard trip.

There's nothing fake about the way I react to her. But I'm going to have to fake my way through the next forty-eight hours and pretend I don't want to share a room with her, strip her down to nothing, tie her up, pin her down, take her, have her, lavish her in orgasms.

When I reach her, I pull out my cool and calm persona, the one I use on the mound.

"If it isn't the budding Cougars fan," I say.

A smile brightens her face. "Close, but you haven't convinced me yet, Chance."

"But I will."

And as hard as it may be to fake it with her, hard also feels pretty fucking good.

I haven't felt good with a woman in a long time.

* * *

As the plane fills, the flight attendant brings us mango cocktails. We thank her, then I lift my glass, and Sierra does the same. "Here's to weddings, to dates, and to never letting an ex see you sweat," Sierra says.

I clink my glass to hers. "I'll drink to that."

We each take a sip, then set the glasses down in the console between our cushy leather seats in the second row. This is as good a time as any. I rub my palms together. "We

have five hours on the plane. We should get our details straight in case anyone asks . . . so, is this our first date?”

She hums as if considering the question while she twirls the pink-streaked strands in her hair. “I think we probably went on a couple dates in San Francisco, don’t you think?”

I nod my approval. “We definitely did. Best dates ever, if memory serves?”

She tosses a sexy grin my way. “Of course they were. We hit it off. In fact, I think you asked me out just maybe a few weeks ago?”

“Damn right I did. It was that night I walked into your bar and ordered a scotch.”

“And after that you had the *Wild Chemistry*.” She lifts her drink, knocks back a little more.

I can’t stop staring at her lips on the glass. And then directly at her lips when she puts down the cocktail. Those lush pink lips. “And I felt some kind of wild chemistry. That’s what inspired me to ask you out that damn night. Something I’ve been wanting to do for a long time,” I say, spinning the tale of our first date that’s hardly a fable at all.

“I’d been wanting you to for the longest time,” she says, all smoky and sexy and so damn believable.

Why not go for broke? In this fake dating scenario, why shouldn’t our backstory be as electric as it could be? I tell the next chapter. “When you said yes, all I could think was—dirty dreams do come true. But we couldn’t even really wait for our date, could we?”

She runs her fingertips along her collarbone. “That’s right. I left work early. My manager took over.”

I pick up the thread and paint the next scene. “I took you to my place,” I say, my voice going lower as the temperature in me shoots higher.

She moves a bit closer, parts her lips, takes her time. “You could barely even wait till the door closed.”

This paint-by-numbers sex-capade is getting out of hand, and I fucking love it. “I’d only been fantasizing about it for the last year,” I say, my husky tone surely giving away my truth. But I’m not sure I care right now about anything but this fake story that feels deliciously real.

“And I was glad you didn’t waste any time. There’s something so wild about hot, up-against-the-door sex, don’t you think?”

Hell fucking yes. “So very hot and electric,” I say, wanting to have that with her now.

Tonight.

Tomorrow.

She runs the tip of her tongue along her teeth, licks her lips, then says, “The first of many times. It sure seemed like we couldn’t stop once we got started.”

“It’s a wonder we’re not fucking right now,” I whisper.

Yep. It’s the eighth wonder of the modern sex world.

“Can I interest you in a pineapple macadamia nut salad once we’re airborne?”

I blink, reconnecting with reality as I swing my gaze to the cheery, redhead flight attendant asking the question.

“Sure,” I say, my voice still a little rough from the dirty flirting.

“And for you?” the woman asks my partner-in-hypothetical-crime.

“Yes, please,” Sierra answers, and it sounds like she’s having a hard time clearing the fog too.

When the attendant moves on to the next row, my eyes connect with Sierra’s again. Hers seem to be flickering with heat. “But, no one’s going to be asking us about our fake sex life,” she says, with a light laugh.

“Yeah. That’d be way too personal,” I say.

She clears her throat. “I think we could just say you asked me out that night, we went out a few times, and we were really into each other.”

That feels true enough, but it’s nowhere near as enticing.

CHANCE

Somewhere over the Pacific, I catch Sierra studying me, her head tilted as if I'm a puzzle, and I pause the movie and pop out my earbud. "What? Do I have pineapple in my beard?"

"No, I was just wondering—at the risk of asking you the question you've been dreading—are you still hung up on Natasha?"

Whoa. That came out of nowhere. "Do I not seem over her? I'm definitely over her."

I'm over her so much I'm way into you, gorgeous.

The pretty blonde lounging by the window levels me with a direct stare. "You did ask me to be your wedding date in case people asked about her. I thought maybe the relationship was still a sore spot, which would be understandable because you were together for a long time." Her voice softens, along with her brown eyes. It's only the two of us in this row, but with her gentle tone and the hum of the plane, it almost feels like we're all alone in the cocoon of this conversation. "And I'm asking you as your friend."

I take a beat, weighing her question. I want to answer her honestly, as a friend, but also as a man who's interested in her.

"I asked you to be my date because I'm definitely over her, but people have a way of *not* believing that. Know what I mean?"

"I do."

“And having you there will help them believe. I’ll still answer all the *how are you doing* and *are you okay* questions people will ask because they’re concerned. My mom’s cousin, and her sisters. And Blake, since he worries about everyone’s happiness. My dad might. My mom won’t, since she’s been endlessly asking me how I’m doing and trusts me when I say I’m good. But she’s always been open about it, and we’ve talked frankly about my split.”

“That’s good, to be able to talk to her.”

“Yeah, she’s sort of insistent on talking. It’s her thing. Along with people using her first name. So, call her Penny.”

Sierra taps her temple. “Noted.”

“But as for others . . . eh, I don’t want to deal with it. Sort of like when we lost the playoffs, and TJ pretended to be me at The Lucky Spot so I wouldn’t have to field the fan sympathy.”

She gapes. Her hand flies to her mouth. When she lowers it, she asks in a hushed whisper, “You guys did that?”

I wiggle a brow, playing up my devilish side. “Sometimes, we misbehave badly. It’s a twin thing.”

“Have you ever done that with dates?”

I meet her gaze dead on. “You do know TJ and I have different tastes? I’m pretty sure you and I have already had that whole *hey, we both like plants, have gay brothers, and enjoy bingeing on British comedies* talk, right?”

She gives me a *duh* look. “Yes, I’m aware we have lots in common, baseball allegiances notwithstanding. But my point is, identical twins can pull off all sorts of shenanigans. And it’s not like you or he would be kissing one of your dates. But if you missed a date because of a game, or if he missed one because he was on deadline . . . you could pretend,” she suggests with a twinkle in her eyes. A twinkle that does make me wonder if Sierra has a naughty side. One that likes bedroom games.

I go along with the vibe. “I don’t mind a little make-believe. Under the right circumstances.”

The corner of her lip twitches. “Is that so?”

“I’m pretty open-minded. To all sorts of things.” *Like taking you against the wall.*

“Good to know,” she says, her voice a little breathy.

“But to answer your question, I never pretended to be TJ on a date or vice versa. But if he ever needed me to dump some dude who’d been a total douche to him, I’d be all over that in a heartbeat.”

She laughs lightly. “Okay, it’s seriously adorable that you’d do that for him.”

“We’re pretty tight. He actually offered to play me this weekend at the wedding if I really wanted to get out of it.”

“He did? I love that, how you look out for each other.”

“Me too,” I say, then I tap her arm. A friendly bit of affection. Well, mostly friendly. “But I’m stoked to be going with you. It’ll be a blast. And, yeah, I *also* don’t want to be seen as a bridesmaid’s ex. I’m in a new era of my life, if you will, and . . .” I stop, breathe out hard, laugh at myself. “Whoa. Did I just sound like a social media douche or what?”

“Like you have an Instagram feed where you spout platitudes about life phases and stuff,” she says, laughing.

I drag a hand down my face, making light of it all. “That’s it. You can’t take me anywhere.”

“I’ll tell the pilot to turn this jet around. I’ll let him know you’re retiring from all social interaction. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“It’s the only recourse for what I just said.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds, then drums her unpolished nails against the console between us. “Seriously, though, I get it. You want to go as Chance Ashford, not as Chance who was once part of Chance and Natasha. But can I ask you a question?”

“Isn’t that kind of what you’ve been doing all along? Why stop now?”

Sierra takes a deep breath, gearing up for something. “How are you doing, Chance? In all seriousness.”

As her brown eyes lock with mine again, the rest of the plane seems to disappear, like it’s just us two in this metal tube traveling across the sky.

Her question is a good one.

How *am* I doing?

At the moment, I’m flying over the ocean in first class with a gorgeous woman I’ve been insanely interested in for a year—the *only* woman who’s caught my eye since I’ve been single. A woman I want. A woman I can’t have, but even so, I’m doing great. “I feel fantastic. Especially right now.”

Her eyes sparkle. “Good. That’s good.”

“And listen,” I say, preemptively, since I want to share *this* too. “You know I was married for a while. And yes, you know how it ended. It was public and frustrating, and it sucked like losing the playoffs suck. But the truth is...the end of my marriage didn’t surprise me. Was I hurt? Yes. But we’d been growing apart for some time.”

“It’s sad when that happens.” She squeezes my arm and it feels a whole lot of nice having her soft hand on me.

“She wasn’t happy with my job and hadn’t been for a long time. She didn’t care for how often I was gone.”

Sierra flinches. “Really? She didn’t like the baseball-wife lifestyle?”

“She hated me being on the road. She said I was married to the game.”

“Do you think you were?” The question comes out earnestly, not as an accusation. That makes it easy to answer truthfully.

“To some degree, yes. It’s hard to compete at the top level without being married to the sport. So, I probably was. I probably still am. And since Natasha and I were together in college, it’s easy to say *that’s what she signed up for*. But that’s not entirely fair either. At the time we got married, she was

fine with it, or said she was. But then she changed, and she wanted different things. She wanted more of me. And I couldn't give that to her."

"Do you wish you'd been able to? Do you regret anything?"

"No, but I believe in quality of time, not quantity. If you devote your whole heart to something, like a romance, you can make it work. You might not be able to see each other every day, but you can talk on the phone, you can text, and you can stay in touch."

"Exactly. You can be close to each other even if you aren't in the same house every second." Her eyes spark with intensity. "Grant is like that with Declan. They're both constantly traveling, as you know, and they don't see each other that often, but they're so connected even when they're apart. Then when they're together, it's . . . magic."

Her smile is fucking magic. A wide, genuine one for her brother.

Grant and his boyfriend are obviously happy. They aren't together too frequently during the season, but when they are, everyone can tell how much they care for each other. "They make the best of it when they're together. Those two guys are couple goals."

"Definitely." Sierra sinks back into the leather chair, like she's basking both in the comfort of the plane and in the happiness her brother has found. "Seeing them together—it makes me feel like anything is possible. They make the best of everything. That's what I would want in a relationship."

Who wouldn't?

Except, not me, and not now.

Too bad it seems Sierra's on a different path at the moment. "You're looking for something serious? Like they have?"

A cough seems to burst from her chest. "No way. Well, not now. Maybe at some point down the road, but at the moment I'm not looking for a relationship *at all*."

Shut the front door.

All the lights flash bright at once.

The buzzers ring.

Is she saying she wants fun without strings? “You’re not looking for a boyfriend?” I ask, full of a new, wild hope.

She scoffs. “I got out of a long-term one a year ago. I’m kind of married to The Spotted Zebra. All I want is to enjoy myself while I can.”

And I want to enjoy her. All night long.

“Nothing wrong with that,” I say, with a big smile and perhaps a new goal.

For now, I’m just going to let her enticing words—*enjoy myself*—marinate for a little longer in my mind. Figure out what to do with them. That’s my new mission for the rest of the day. Understand her even more.

And since we’re on the topic of relationships and exes, there’s something I’ve been wondering about. “What about Joe?”

She gives a confused look. “Joe who?”

“Really? That’s it? Joe who? Your ex.”

“Oh. Him. He’s ancient history.” She flaps a hand dismissively behind her. “He’s eons and eras and entire epochs away.”

That’s very good to know too. She’s not on the rebound. She’s just doing what she wants. Like me. The same-page-ness of us makes me very, very happy. “Good. I like that.”

She smiles softly. “Me too.”

I feel this moment tipping into something more than friends or flirting, imagine the heat turning from simmering to scorching.

But then Sierra yawns, a reminder that the woman needs to relax. “Put your feet up. Lie back. Rest.”

“Mmm. That sounds perfect.” She lowers the seat, turns her head to the side, and closes her eyes. Then, she stretches her arm lazily across the console, rests her hand on my bicep, and snoozes just like that.

She sleeps the rest of the way to Hawaii, and something about it feels a lot like a real date and only a little like a fake one.

SIERRA

We step off the plane as a warm, ocean breeze drifts gently by. Hawaiian music plays overhead in the open walkways of the terminal.

Tropical air warms my skin, and my heart.

We are not in San Francisco anymore, and I love it.

After we grab our luggage, the car Chance ordered arrives at the curb. I give the sleek black vehicle a once-over, adding an appreciative whistle. “Ooh la-la, traveling in style.”

Chance winks. “Told you I’d convince you.”

“That you travel well? Consider me convinced,” I say as the driver hoists our bags into the trunk and Chance thanks him.

“Hey, I want you to be convinced to be a fan too. So consider this part of me being a Cougars ambassador.”

“Well, Mister Ambassador,” I say as I slide into the back seat, “I enjoy first-class travel. A fancy town car with leather seats. I love it.”

Chance gets in next to me. “Good. Because I want my date to enjoy every second of this weekend.”

You have no idea how much your date wants to enjoy this weekend.

“I intend to,” I say, keeping it light.

We chat about the view and the island as we cruise along the highway, the ocean unfurling as we go. Waves crest as surfers ride them, and families play on the sand.

Everything about this island relaxes me.

It's a far cry from my bar, the chores, and all the things I need to do as I expand. But I don't mind this getaway, and I'm so glad I flew in earlier than planned.

I wish Chance and I were here for real, enjoying each other in every way on this tropical escape, and for a moment, I thought maybe we might have been. Playing sexy make-believe on the plane here was fun.

But when he spoke about Natasha, he reminded me what I really am—his cover, and what we really have—a blossoming friendship that I'm starting to treasure.

* * *

At the hotel, my *date* heads to the VIP check-in. I gesture to the regular line. "I should go to the other one. I'm not a VIP."

Chance laughs, tips his forehead toward his line. "Sierra, of course you are."

"I'm not. I just have a regular room."

"It's cool. You're with me. You can check in with the VIP too."

Who am I to turn down his baller lifestyle? I go along with the man, loving the perks. A few seconds later, a perky Hawaiian woman at the concierge desk calls us over. With crisp efficiency, she checks Chance into the Luau Suite.

"That comes complete with a king-size bed, a mini fridge, a terrace balcony, an ocean view, a living room with a pullout couch, and complimentary coffee, tea, and fruit for breakfast," she says.

He turns to me, gives a shrug. "What can I say? I do like my comforts."

I raise a finger. “Never apologize for that.”

“Then I never will.”

When it’s my turn, I give her my name. “Sierra Blackwood. I just have a regular room.”

“Fantastic. I’ll check you in too.” She taps away on the keyboard, peering intently at the computer screen, her glasses sliding down her nose. “Ohhhh.” Her brow knits as she pushes the glasses back up.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She taps some more. Clears her throat. Looks up from the screen. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Blackwood. It appears there’s been a mix-up.”

That doesn’t sound good. “What sort of mix-up?”

“The extra room. We don’t actually have one anymore. It looks like it went back into the room block and was then booked to someone else.”

No big deal. That can’t be the only room in the hotel. “I’ll just take another room. Whatever you have available will be fine.”

The woman winces, her kind eyes revealing her disappointment. “That’s the issue.”

Tension slides down my spine. “What do you mean?”

“I’m so sorry but we’re fully booked.”

Frustration kicks in. I don’t want to search for another hotel. Or hunt for an Airbnb. I just want to get in a hammock and relax.

But I can’t.

Chin up, Sierra. Deal like you deal with every little thing at the bar.

“I’ll just find another hotel,” I say with forced cheer, grabbing my phone from my pocket and tapping away. Chance sets a hand on my arm. “I have a suite. You take the bed. I’ll take the pullout couch.”

My gaze meets his. His brown eyes are serious, his expression intense. “Let me do this for you. I want to,” he adds, brooking no argument.

That’s all. No pile of reasons. No long explanations. Just an *I want to*.

And sometimes, that’s enough.

Part of me thinks I should decline. Insist on finding another room come hell or high water. Staying with Chance is playing with fire—he’s already made it clear that his guy code rules apply to me.

Rules I respect.

But the way he’s looking at me makes my heart beat faster. It warms my skin.

And makes me suspect the code might be crumbling a bit for him.

I want to say yes so badly.

So, I do.

SIERRA

This is what couples do on honeymoons and romantic getaways.

Walk into a luxurious, sex-drenched suite and gawk at it together.

Just look at that bed.

It's king-size, maybe even bigger. It's more like *fuck me all night long* size and it sports a white, fluffy duvet that makes me want to fall onto it like a naughty angel. To ask him how he thinks I look in burgundy lace, stretched out on this pure white bed.

The whole ensemble screams "take me now."

Right now.

Or maybe that's what my body is saying.

The smells are an aphrodisiac too—gardenia and coconut, pineapple and luxury. Right along with a salty breeze billowing through softly blowing curtains. The sliding glass doors open to a terrace with a spectacular view of the endless ocean.

But the bed keeps pulling my focus.

It has its own heartbeat. It's the pulse of the room. Maybe it even has a voice too, like it's daring us to explore it.

Come lie down . . .

Since the bedroom is not quite a bedroom—it's more like an extension of the living room. I can't shut the door on him tonight and hide out in the bedroom, and nor do I want to.

Especially since the thought of Chance, and his big, long athletic frame trying to fit comfortably on that pullout couch nags at me.

I don't like that image at all.

I want him to feel as good as I bet I'll feel in bed tonight.

Chance sets down his bag on the tiled floor in the living room, then turns to me, a look in his brown eyes that's both inviting and nervous. "So, Sierra? Is this suite better than camping on the beach?"

I drop my bag on the floor, then throw my arms around him impulsively. "You are my hero." I'm so relieved, so grateful. "I didn't want to find another place," I tell him as I bury my face in his neck, inhaling the scent of his woody aftershave that's fading as the day goes on.

Still, he smells so damn good.

There's nothing quite like the scent of a man who turns you on.

As I hold him a little more tightly, a gruff noise falls from his throat as he murmurs, "I didn't want you to either."

He loops his strong arms around my waist, tugging me a little closer.

The tropical breeze mingles with his hair. Here in his suite—no, *our* suite—we must seem exactly like a couple on a romantic escape.

We feel like one to me.

Maybe to him too?

His hand rubs gently against the small of my back. He murmurs as he brings me close. Perhaps this isn't fake for him at all.

Nothing feels like pretend, and neither one of us is breaking this embrace that's zoomed well past friendly. This

hug is living firmly in prelude-to-more land, complete with roaming palms and deep, sexy sighs.

I flash back to my *Wild Chemistry* drink. To all my reasons for concocting it—to lay my wishes on the line with Chance.

I didn't that night, of course.

But now sure as hell feels like the moment to voice my request.

The pull between us feels completely mutual.

And totally inescapable.

The intensity of this newfound awareness is like a low, steady drumbeat that soundtracks my desire.

A desire that's growing stronger by the minute.

Maybe this is the time to serve up the metaphorical drink and extend an invitation to get in my pants.

I break the embrace, curling a hand over his shoulder. "So, Chance . . ."

"Yes?"

The heat in his eyes tells me to go for it, but there's a flicker of nerves there too. Maybe some understandable reservations.

Before I can jump in and tell him all the things I'd like for him to do to me tonight, the planner in me shoves the impulsive part clear out of the way.

I need to get my bearings. I know what I want, but this man has a code. I've waited this long. I can wait a little longer to make sure he's truly ready to break his rules.

Chance works with my brother, and I don't want to mess things up for either one of them.

Sex can ruin a friendship—any relationship, really. It can derail your whole damn future.

Best to be certain.

I put on my best *everything is cool* face, tipping my head to indicate the rest of the suite. "Do you want to explore?" I

ask, as if that's what I meant to say all along.

"Let's do it," he says.

As we check out the suite, he walks past the bed, pats it, and says, "You'll sleep so damn soundly tonight."

Impulsive me wants to add, "And there's enough room for you to sleep next to me," but his phone buzzes.

That's a relief for planner me.

Chance grabs it from his pocket, slides open the screen, then says, "It's TJ. He says the party's going to start in about an hour."

I look at my attire, wrinkled from the plane. I glance in the nearby mirror. My hair needs some va-va-voom. My face needs a freshening up. Saved by circumstance. "I should . . . shower."

Chance looks down at himself, backs up. "Same."

I am dying to say *shower with me*.

Instead, I purse my lips so I don't blurt out that tantalizing invitation.

I'm so damn good at holding in my desires.

He clears his throat. "Why don't you take the first shower?"

"Good idea." I grab my toiletries from my bag, some fresh lingerie, and a sundress, then head into the bathroom, shutting the door.

I sink against it.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

My pulse races. My face is flush. And my panties are soaked.

I have no clue how I'm going to survive being near the man I madly crave.

A few deep breaths.

I try to center myself, fanning my face to cool down.

Then I pull myself away from the door.

I don't lock it, though. Chance is a gentleman and I know he won't come in, but there's something so deliciously naughty about the idea that he could.

And I like naughty.

I'd like to invite it into my life this weekend.

But now isn't that time.

CHANCE

The shower beats a tantalizing rhythm of desire.

I make my way to the balcony, curling my hands over the railing, gripping it tightly.

Holding on takes sheer iron will.

I want to head into the bathroom, open the door, shed all my clothes, step inside the shower. Kiss the breath out of her as hot water pours over both of us.

Instead, I white-knuckle it through the next few minutes, staring at the ocean, trying desperately to key in on anything but the images racing through my head.

Water sliding over her lush body. Soap glistening on her skin, her hands in her hair as she tips her head back under the stream.

I grip harder. It's a wonder I don't break this railing.

These two nights are going to be torture.

But I want the torture. The torture makes me feel wildly alive. I haven't felt like this in ages, and the rush of lust is incredible. The only thing that comes close is striding across the field, taking the mound in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded.

The moment when I'm the one thing that stands between the other team winning or losing.

I get that same wild thrill as I imagine all these filthy possibilities with Sierra Blackwood.

Ten minutes later, she emerges from the bathroom. I turn around as she makes her way to the terrace, stops in the doorway.

A dark pink sundress hugs her breasts, then falls softly down her body, flaring out from her waist, stopping at her knees. Purple and red flowers twist in a pattern across the fabric. Cherry blossom ink dances down her arm, looking brighter post-shower. Or maybe it's my imagination. Maybe everything about her is turned up several degrees. Her hair is still wet and impossibly sexy. She holds a hairdryer.

I can barely breathe. But breathing is overrated when I'm near her.

I can't mince words. I can't fucking fake a thing now. I scrub a hand down my face as I say, "Wow. You look . . . incredible."

She smiles, soft and inviting. "Thank you. I'm glad you like your *date*." The words come out more sensually than before.

A groan escapes my lips. "I like my date a lot," I say in a rough whisper.

I like her so much I have to walk right past her, fists clenched, and head to the bathroom before I do something dangerous.

Like draw her in close and plant a hot, scorching kiss on those lips.

I lock the bathroom door behind me and seriously consider whacking off as I turn on the shower.

Between the steam enrobing the room, the scent of berry lingering from her body wash, and the smell of her that's every-fucking-where, I'd go from zero to blast off in under two minutes, no doubt.

But I've got to get these feelings under control.

And I *have* control.

That's what makes me millions of dollars a year. I have so much fucking control and I need it to get a handle on tonight.

Or . . . do I?

My mind flicks back to her comments on the plane.

She's not interested in a relationship.

She doesn't want to get serious.

Maybe tonight, we can bend the golden rule.

I've been refusing to think of her sexually—well, more than I already do—because I don't want a messy entanglement with a teammate's sister. But if she doesn't want to get serious, then that rule doesn't apply.

Especially when two adults might want the same damn thing—for dirty dreams to come true, like we said on the plane.

This wedding date started as a show-the-world-you're-a-good-sport plan. Maybe it's still that. But what if it's a two-way road, and we're headed to the same place?

The bedroom.

My new agenda for tonight? Find the fuck out.

* * *

Island music floats through the open door as the sun dips toward the edge of the ocean.

Sierra gazes at the sea, resting on her elbows.

Her hair is dry now, curling softly over her shoulders, and she's still barefoot. As I walk through the living room, past the coffee table with the hairdryer on it, I catch a glimpse of a pink cotton bra strap peeking out from the strap of her sundress.

I rein in a groan of desire when I join her on the terrace. As she removes her AirPods, she takes in my attire with an approving nod at my blue linen shirt and khaki shorts. "You're looking good."

"I'm a fashion rock star." I nod to her phone. "Listening to anything interesting?"

“Rearranging Your Sock Drawer in Five Simple Steps,” she deadpans.

“Excellent. Next we’ll have you listening to How to Organize your Utensils.”

“I’ve got that queued up and ready to go.” As she tucks her phone and AirPods into her purse, she says, “Actually, I was listening to Lulu Rhodes. This female comic I found. She talks about the challenges of dating and adulting. Very self-deprecating. I’m actually thinking of expanding The Spotted Zebra and having stand-up comedy once a week. Some of my favorite lady comics.”

“That’s fantastic. Save me a seat in the front row at your comedy nights,” I say, flashing forward to life back in San Francisco. If we indulged in a fling here, would I still be able to go to her bar with the guys next season after games? To her comedy nights? Hell yeah. We’re both adults. We could handle that. “How is it going, finding the talent?” I ask.

“My friends and I are on the hunt. Clementine, Trish, Erin, and I like to check out clubs in the city and see some of the women,” Sierra says as she brushes some hair off her shoulder. “Plus, after I return from this wedding, I’m going to Vegas for two days to check out Lulu in person and also a bartender who supposedly makes both amazing drinks and does those fantastic bar tricks.” She mimes flipping a cocktail bottle.

“Two trips in a row,” I say. “I’d say you’re taking relaxing seriously, but it sounds like you’re still as relentless as ever.”

“Relentless is my middle name.” Sierra picks up her purse. “So, this whole fake date thing. Part of the plan was we need a picture, right?”

It sure was. But I didn’t script the photo or plan the caption in advance. Now that we’re doing it, questions flash before me.

How far are we pushing this fake date narrative online? What do I call her on social? Do I make sure we look . . . affectionate?

“So, I just post a pic of us and say you’re my date? Confession: I’m not a pro at dating. Or posting personal stuff online.”

She touches my biceps, her hand nice and soft. “I’m not either. But my friends are great at the whole live-my-life-online, so we just keep it simple and fun.”

That’s the order of this fake date business.

And we should do it now to get out in front of this pretend fling. If we don’t, a guest at the hotel could recognize me and post something. If I’ve learned anything from Natasha’s online persona, it’s that nothing stays private for long.

I’m here with a brilliant, successful, passionate, badass babe and I don’t mind showing her off. I fish my phone from my pocket, and we line up by the terrace. I slide in next to her. She inches closer, and yeah, that’s another clue—the way she presses her body right next to me. Then, she lets loose a soft, low hum.

I stretch out my arm and snap a selfie of us.

Not a single thing about this picture feels fake at all.

When I check the image of her curled up by my side, looking both sweet and sexy, it sure as hell seems like we’re on a date.

Feels like we are too.

I write up a draft and show her the caption: *Not a bad start to the off-season. Hawaii, pre-wedding party with my gorgeous, brilliant date—life is good.*

I’m no wordsmith like my brother, but this feels just right. Hope she thinks so too.

“Ohhh,” Sierra says in a purr as she reads. “Flattery is the way to my heart.”

I level her with a stare, then swallow roughly. “It’s not flattery. It’s all true,” I say.

Her eyes stay locked on mine. She nibbles the corner of her lips. “Good,” she whispers. “Same.”

And the answer to whether Sierra wants to level up seems to be *yes*.

“And here’s my confession,” she says, glancing around the suite. “Thank you for insisting I stay with you. I kind of can’t wait to go to bed tonight.”

I stifle a cough. The thought of her in bed is going to be the death of my control.

“Let’s get you away from that temptation right now,” I say.

But maybe later we can give in. All the way.

I’m pretty sure I won’t even have to throw out my good-guy card if we do.

Since these vibes I’m getting from her—the long embrace and the lingering gazes—are telling me to go ahead and exercise that loophole.

CHANCE

As we walk through the hotel, possibilities for tonight unfold in my mind.

After the party. Coming together. Crashing into each other.

That moment when you both look at each other and you just know that all the tension between the two of you is about to snap in the most delicious way.

I can't wait.

But I have to, so we chat about surfing—she wants to go, I'm prohibited by my contract—as we cross along the pool to the garden area, filled with tables and servers and family members. As we walk over the grass, I reach for her hand, thread my fingers through hers, and squeeze.

Sierra smiles, and as we hold hands, the temptation intensifies.

The only thing saving me from acting on it is that we're here at the rehearsal party.

And it's a crush of people.

Including my mom.

When her gaze catches mine, she rushes past palm trees and picnic tables to toss her arms around me. "My baby boy. I haven't seen you in ages."

"Hmm. Then was it my other mother I saw last month right before the playoff game we lost?" I ask, teasing her when I disentangle myself.

Mom peers at me through her cherry-red glasses. “Well, it feels like ages. That’s just how it goes for a mom. Also, next year, your team needs to remember to hit the ball, dear. I’ve told you that. You can’t record those saves if there’s nothing to save.”

I laugh. “I know. Trust me, I know.”

She pats my head, something she’s good at since TJ and I got our height from her—she’s six feet tall, and our dad is two inches shorter.

“Want me to remind them?” Mom says it playfully, but the truth is, she’d do it—issue orders to the Cougars lineup. Mom is a fixer—she runs a business consultancy and tells other businesses how to fix their shit. She’s just that way.

She was direct with us growing up. She didn’t tell TJ his stories were perfect—she challenged him to make every word better. Same for me with baseball. She rooted for me every step of the way, and also urged me to improve when I needed to, to give it my all when I wasn’t doing that.

She’s a straight shooter, and I always know where I stand with her.

Mom smiles, swings her gaze to Sierra. “Hello there. You must be Sierra. I love your ink. And your little pink streak.”

“Thank you so much,” Sierra says, patting her hair. “Pleasure to meet you . . . Penny.”

Mom’s green eyes twinkle as they snap to me. “Well done, Chance.”

“You only beat it into my head a million times . . . *Penny*.”

Mom waves a dismissive hand at me as she addresses Sierra. “My sons are full of sass, especially this one. Now, are you liking Hawaii? Did you know there are sea turtles right along the edge of the property?”

“I didn’t but I’d love to see them.”

“I’ll show you,” she says, and tugs my date away from the crowd. And I already miss her.

A hand comes down on my shoulder. “Shocking. Mom making friends with people right away.”

It’s TJ.

I turn to my brother, then heave an aggrieved sigh, flapping my hand at his get-up. Shorts and a blue shirt. “Are you kidding me? You’re wearing the same color. We look like fucking twins.”

His eyebrows wiggle. “Newsflash—we are. Also, I hate to break it to you, but these are not even remotely the same color.” He wags a finger at his shirt, then at mine. “You’re wearing a sky blue, solid color shirt, and it fits like a sack. Translation—*boring*.” He plucks at his shirt. “This is teal and it’s form-fitting.” He shakes his head like he can’t believe my fashion mistake. “Plus, do you not see the tiny mini skulls with daisies in the eyes? My shirt has a badass pattern.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “I can’t keep up with you and your clothes.”

TJ eyes me up and down dubiously. “I gathered that. Just remember this—I’m the height of understated, thrifted, fashion fun. It’s a thing. You, baby boy, are . . . Target. Just Target.”

“I like Target.”

“That’s coming through loud and clear. But hey, it works for you. Just didn’t want you to worry we look alike, because I assure you, we do not.”

“I’ll trust you on this.”

“Yes. Yes, you will.” TJ tips his gaze to Mom, pointing out sea turtles as she walks along the grounds with Sierra. “What’s the story? Is this a real date now? It was fake when we last talked, but seeing you together makes me think you leveled up. You looked cozy.”

I breathe heavily, pinch the bridge of my nose, try to sort through the zing of emotion and sensation. “It felt cozy to me too.”

TJ has always understood relationship nuances and complexities. They’re his stock and trade. He’s exactly who I

need to talk to right now.

I scrub a hand across my beard and motion for him to step a few feet away from the crowd, where Hawaiian music plays softly from the speakers on the ground.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask quietly.

“Can I stop you?” TJ jokes, then turns serious. “You know you can. Anytime.”

I’ve mostly worked this out for myself, but if I’m going to step over a big, fat line, I want a second opinion. Validation that I’m doing the right thing, or least not doing a wrong one. “Am I breaking the rule if she’s not interested in a relationship either?”

His brow knits. “Which rule?”

“The ‘Don’t hook up with a teammate’s sister’ rule.”

“That’s a thing?” he asks, confusion knitting his brow.

“It’s the ballplayer’s bro code. If you fall for a teammate’s sister, you damn well better want to put a ring on it . . . They’re like best-friend’s sisters, or the coach’s daughter—off-limits unless you’re serious. Unless they’re women you bring home to mom.”

TJ clears his throat, then subtly points to Mom and Sierra. “Mom, as in, the person Sierra is talking to right now?”

I shoot him a look. “You know what I mean.”

He nods, indicating he does. “I do, but does Grant give a shit about those rules?”

Good question. Grant is very much a live-free-and-be-happy kind of guy. Hell, he’s probably happier than he’s ever been over in Kauai right now with Declan. “He’s very protective of the ladies in his life. He doesn’t want to see them with guys who’ll break their hearts. But regardless, *I* care about the rules. I don’t want to rock the boat at all. So I want to make sure I’m not doing something stupid.”

“This is like your pre-ward thing! It’s a pre-check. No, wait, you’re getting pre-approval for a sex procedure from

your insurance company, aka your brother, fount of wisdom on all life issues,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Let’s hope it doesn’t *feel* like a procedure. *If* we do that.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he says, lifting an imaginary glass. “May sex be spontaneous, passionate and procedure-free.” TJ wraps an arm around my shoulders. “But seriously, Chance, you like to make sure everyone’s going to be okay before you do something. You’ve always wanted everyone to be happy. That’s how you were when Mom and Dad got divorced—making sure Mom was happy, that Dad was doing okay.”

I flash back to age fourteen, to the night they told us. They were straightforward, open and supportive of each other. The epitome of an *amicable divorce*.

“Yes, that sounds like me,” I admit with a shrug. “But weren’t you like that then? Wanting to make sure everyone was all good?”

TJ scoffs. “No. I was too caught up in what was happening to me. Maybe that makes me selfish, but it’s true.”

“I never once thought you were selfish,” I tell him.

TJ came out to me when we were fifteen. We were on the hunt for a new burger joint in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, our hometown. As we walked, his gaze strayed to a guy maybe a year or two older than us.

“You know him?” I asked.

TJ shook his head. He met my eyes for a weighty beat, then said, “No, but I want to.”

“Oh,” I said as I processed his meaning. I was only taken aback for the briefest moment, maybe because of the ease with which he’d said it. “You think he’s cute?”

TJ gave a small smile, a little embarrassed. “I do.”

“That’s cool,” I said, smiling too. I was psyched for him, that he knew who he was and what he wanted. “Does anyone else know?”

“You’re the first person I’ve told.” He blew out a long, relieved breath. “I’ve been wanting to tell you for so long.”

I was grateful to be trusted. “I’m glad you said it, and I’m glad you told me.” Then I stopped walking and dragged him in for a hug. When I let go, I asked, “Will you tell Mom and Dad soon?”

“Definitely.” He swallowed, looking a little nervous. “I’d appreciate it if you were there. Will you be?”

I clapped his back, reassuring him, happy that we had this kind of relationship. Teachers, coaches, and friends have always been fascinated by our twin connection—do we have twin telepathy? A special bond where we feel each other’s pain or joy?

Nah.

Nothing like that. We *do* have a deep bond, but I don’t think it’s a twin thing. We’re connected because we give a shit about each other.

I shake off the memory, returning to here and now. “But do you think I just want people to get along? And that I’m doing that here—smoothing the way before I pursue what I want?”

TJ gives a sharp nod. “You want others around you to be good with your choices. Dad’s the same. I mean, c’mon, even when they divorced, he tried to do the whole co-living thing. He wanted Mom to like him even as his ex. That’s just his thing.”

A dentist with a pediatric practice, our father’s job is literally to win over people who want to run from him.

Maybe I’ve always been trying to be like him—the guy who can hold it together for everyone.

But is that who I want to be?

Or do I want to be the man who walks up to Sierra Blackwood, spins her around, and tells her I’m dying to spend the night with her? We’re both adults. We don’t need to be in love. We don’t need to be anything. We can just . . . be.

“Should I—”

But before I can finish the question, I spot Blake, all broad shoulders and wide grin. He closes the distance to us in seconds, brings TJ and I both in for a hug. “My favorite cousins,” he says, then lets us go. “Can you believe it? I’m getting hitched. Me! The guy who was terrified to ask a girl to the high school prom.”

“Pretty sure we were all terrified of that,” I say.

“Seconded,” TJ says. Then he pats our cousin’s chest. “But you have come into your own, Blake. Happy for you.”

“So happy you’ll buy a hot tub?” Blake asks playfully.

I roll my eyes. “This again, Hot Tub King?”

Blake holds out his hands wide. “C’mon. I’m a salesman. I can’t *not* try to get you to buy a hot tub of love.”

“You’re hardly the salesman,” I point out as I scratch my head. “More like, gee, what’s it called? The CEO of A Hot Tub for Everyone.”

“It’s my motto and my mission. Hot tubs are like a lubricant for love. You guys both need them,” Blake says. “I’m like a love salesman.”

“Sorry, Mr. Love Salesman, I don’t have room for hot tubs or love in my one-bedroom in Chelsea,” TJ says, not sounding a bit sorry.

“Someday you will.” Blake laughs, then turns to me, his twinkle disappearing, replaced with concern. “Enough about bubbles. How the hell are you doing, Chance? Is it hard being here? I made sure you’re not at *her* table.”

And here we go.

Dread tightens my neck and shoulders . . . but then I let it go. Who cares about Natasha?

TJ clears his throat, points subtly at our mom, next to Sierra. “Blake, my little bro is here with Trish’s friend Sierra. Just make sure Chance is next to the gorgeous, friendly, badass babe he brought with him. Can you do that?”

Yup. This is the twin connection—looking out for each other.

Blake beams. “I can do that.” He raps his knuckles on my sternum. “And you’re next, Chance. You better be next. And then you,” he says to TJ. “And then everyone!” The Hot Tub King raises his arms with this royal decree, then spots someone in the distance and waves. “I gotta chat with Marie and Stephanie.”

He takes off, and when he’s out of earshot, TJ laughs. “He’s not even married yet and he’s preaching the gospel of love.”

“He’s high on life,” I say, my eyes returning to Sierra.

As I drink in the view, all thoughts of others fade away.

I feel good.

So damn good that I don’t push TJ again for his opinion. I don’t need to double-check the decision. I know what I want—to explore this loophole tonight with my date, and I’m pretty sure she does too.

We won’t rock the boat either.

We’ll rock the bed instead.

Can it be the end of the party now, please?

TJ nudges me. “I’m going to catch up with Dad. You good?”

“Very good,” I say as I stare lustfully at Sierra, enjoying the sight of her silhouetted against the Pacific Ocean, her dress blowing gently around her legs, her hair swishing in the light wind.

Then I spot a flash of scarlet, an alert that the redhead I used to call my wife is striding in my direction.

I wait for annoyance to kick in.

Frustration.

Something.

But it turns out . . . I feel nothing, even when I see sympathy and purpose in Natasha's green eyes.

She stops in front of me. "Hello, Chance. You look . . . well."

"Yeah? I feel well," I tell her, and it's the goddamn truth.

And it has everything to do with someone very much not-her.

She cocks her head, wearing her concern written large on her features. She's "Notes to Self" Natasha through and through as she says, "Glad to hear. But are you sure? You seem distracted."

She probably thinks this is about her. But I don't care. "I'm great," I say.

Then an arm wraps around my waist, a gorgeous body presses to mine, and I feel Sierra's soft lips on my cheek, catch a whiff of her blackberry scent.

It drives me wild.

Natasha's eyes pop to saucer size.

But I don't care one bit about my ex or her reaction. I'm indulging in the attention from Sierra and the soft, sweet feel of her close to me.

I only care about the rightness of this moment.

"Hey, gorgeous," I say to her. Then to Natasha, I add, "This is Sierra. My date." Sierra waggles her fingertips, says hello, then brushes a sexy, seductive kiss along my jawline.

She lingers, then murmurs against my face.

And right then and there, I have the final clue to the puzzle.

Neither one of us believes that this date is fake.

SIERRA

His hands pretty much stay on me for the next few hours.

My waist, my hip, my arm.

Chance barely disconnects from me during the pre-wedding party, as waiters and waitresses serve tapas and appetizers to guests in the garden area. He keeps me close, going into full-on *you're my date* mode as we chat with friends like Trish and Clementine, and family too, like TJ and Chance's dad.

That seems to be evidence enough that he's tipping into fuck-the-code territory.

I savor every second of his touch, but I also want to speed up time.

To find out what happens when the door to the Luau Suite closes behind us in a few hours.

If this spark will combust into a fire.

Because that's all we're doing—sparking.

After we nibble on watermelon cubes topped with feta, he brushes my hair from my shoulder. "So, is your weekend getaway living up to your expectations?"

"It's exceeding them," I say.

And you're exceeding them too.

"Does this mean you're convinced?"

"Oh, was this part of your Cougars campaign?" I toss out.

“Maybe it was.” He wiggles a brow and drops a kiss to my cheek. A tingle spreads down my chest, and my eyes flutter closed.

When I open them, I meet his fiery gaze. I lower my voice to a bare whisper. “You’re awfully good at this pretend date thing,” I murmur.

His lips curve into a sexy grin. “So are you.”

It’s not pretend for me.

It’s not for him either.

In my head, I practice the words I’ll say to him when we reach the room.

* * *

A little later, waiters circulate with trays of chocolate-covered strawberries and mini coconut cakes.

Chance darts out a hand, grabs a couple strawberries. “My favorite,” he says sheepishly.

“Want me to grab some extras just for you? I’ll pretend they’re for me,” I tease.

“Would you?”

Laughing, I oblige, setting the treats on a small plate I’m holding. “You have a chocolate-covered strawberry fetish?”

He bites into one, moans lasciviously. When he’s done with the fruit, he nods. “Yes. And I need you to snag as many as possible so I can have them tomorrow for breakfast.”

“I’m on it. Just call me a strawberry thief.”

“You’re a goddess,” he says, then devours another one.

I laugh as he moans around the food.

“You’re mocking me,” he says.

I shrug. “Well, you’re kind of making love to a strawberry.”

“Mmm. I am shameless. Here. Try one.” He holds it out, and I nibble on the end. The juices spread on my tongue, joined by sinfully rich chocolate.

“Fine. It’s thievery-worthy,” I say.

Chance raises a hand, gently moves it toward my face, then swipes his thumb across my lower lip.

I shiver.

His eyes glitter with lust. “You had a little chocolate,” he says, raspy.

“Thanks. I guess they’re my downfall too, it seems,” I say, but truly, this man might be mine.

Blake clinks his glass. The moment shatters. He’s standing at the edge of the garden area, and when he clears his throat, all eyes turn to him.

“Thank you everyone. I just want to say—” The groom stops. Chokes up.

Chance dips his face near my ear, his stubbly jaw coasting along my cheek. “He’s a big old teddy bear.”

“I figured that out,” I say, then Chance slides his arm around my shoulder, his fingertips tracing the cherries on my ink.

I tremble. Don’t even try to hide it anymore.

He’s got to notice it.

He’s got to be feeling the same thing. Still, I want to know what changed for him since the night he asked me to be his fake date.

Why he seems willing to tango suddenly.

The bro code doesn’t seem to matter to this man tonight, and I couldn’t be happier. But I do want to know why. I don’t want him to have regrets if we sleep together.

Blake draws a deep breath, then tries again. “Thank you so much for coming. Nothing makes me happier than to celebrate the love of my life with all of my friends.”

The groom lifts his glass to toast, and the guests give a *cheers*, then a big bear of a man wobbles next to Blake, clasps his shoulder, then shouts happily, “And nothing could make me happier than to be by my brother’s side. Except a new hot tub! Hot tubs make me happy! A hot tub for everyone!”

Chance groans.

I wince.

My date dips his mouth near my ear. “And he’s probably only had one or two drinks. Jordy gets sloshed after one glass.”

Several minutes later as the guests finish with dessert, Jordy weaves across the grass, laughing loudly, spilling a pineapple daiquiri. Chance shoots me an apologetic frown. “I should get him back to his room.”

“Of course,” I say with false cheer.

Sure, I’m happy that Jordy is getting an escort.

But I was hoping Chance and I would be heading back together.

Instead, after I say goodbye to Clementine, Trish, Penny, and TJ, I head through the hotel alone, down the hall to our suite.

I slide the key in, open the door, close it.

Sigh.

All the flirting on the terrace and the moments at the party had me hoping we’d stumble in together and Chance would push me against the wall.

Slam his body to mine.

Take me hard.

Then I’d tell him I want him to take my V-card, rip it the fuck up, and throw me down on the bed.

I shake my head, trying to shake off this disappointment.

He’s helping a family member. I need to stop thinking of only my libido.

I set down my purse and phone on the nightstand, kick off my shoes, and head to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

When I've changed my panties and pulled on a white cotton camisole, he's still not here.

I slide into bed and turn off the light.

* * *

The door jolts open.

I flip to my side, blink, yawn. The clock reads eleven. I've been asleep for . . . twenty minutes.

Chance takes off his shoes, then pads quietly to the bathroom, clearly trying not to wake me.

When he exits a minute later, he's unbuttoning his shirt. I sit up in bed, wide awake now, eager to see him. Ready to tell him. "Hey."

He jerks his gaze to me as he reaches the last button. Damn, the man looks handsome in the dark with the moonlight casting shadows across his face. "I didn't realize you were awake."

"I am. Is Jordy okay?"

Chance seesaws his hand. "He will be. TJ helped me get him to his room, and then he collapsed while singing 'Rolling in the Deep.'"

I tilt my head. "He doesn't strike me as an Adele fan."

"She's mega popular, Sierra," he says.

"I love her," I say, then I draw a deep breath, take an imaginary shot of liquid courage, and say, "But I don't want to talk about music."

Worry etches his brow. "What do you want to talk about?"

There's no time like the present. I'm ready. He's eager. Time to jump. Even as nerves wing through me, so does excitement. "Chance?"

“Yes?”

I push the covers down a little bit, an invitation. “I don’t think you should sleep on the couch.”

Chance says nothing for the longest time. Just stares at me with desire in his gaze.

“I don’t think I should either.” He closes the distance, takes off his shirt, strips out of his shorts, and gets into bed with me.

CHANCE

There is a time for talking.

And a time for doing.

Sure, we should chat about what this means, what changed, and all that jazz.

But I don't need to dissect any sort of agenda this second.

I've been invited to the only place I want to be.

With her.

So as I slide under the covers, my hand coasts along her hip.

Such a sensual creature, Sierra arches as I trace the curves and dips of her gorgeous body. "You sure don't feel like a fake date, Sierra," I murmur, my fingers delighting in the silk of her skin.

She moves with me, shifting slightly to her side, her brown eyes shimmering. "I don't feel like playing make-believe anymore," she says.

"Me neither." My hand glides across her stomach, so soft and enticing to the touch. I could worship this stomach. With my lips. My hands. My tongue.

I dip my face to her belly, push up the cotton of her camisole, and press a kiss to her skin, moaning as I inhale her.

She lets out the most fantastic whimper in the world. "Oh God, that feels good."

Her words embolden me. I kiss my way up her stomach, pleasure jolting through my body as my lips travel along her warm skin, landing right under her breasts.

I look up. I fully intend to ravage these beauties.

But it would be rude not to taste her lips first. I move, shifting my weight so that I'm still on my side but my chest covers her, my forearms braced on either side of her body.

She loops her hands around my head, threads her fingers into my hair, and stares into my eyes. "Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to kiss you?"

Pride suffuses me. I grin. "No idea. Why don't you tell me?" I brush my lips across her collarbone, my eyes falling shut from the heady taste of her skin. So sexy and feminine and tropical—she makes my mouth water and my dick throb.

Sierra runs her fingers through my hair, then lifts my face. "Chance, I've been thinking about doing this for a long time. Been thinking about kissing you. Getting you naked." She takes a beat. Swallows. "And asking you something."

My chest heats like the sun. My God, is there anything hotter than when a woman tells you what she wants?

"Ask me anything," I rasp out as my lips travel along her jawline. It's impossible not to touch her.

Her breath catches as I go, but then she pushes up higher in bed, scooting away from me.

This seems a little serious. I sit too, focus on her mood completely. "You okay? Is anything wrong?"

"I'm great," she says, then exhales. "But I just want to know what changed for you, Chance. From the night you invited me. I don't want you to regret anything. What about your code?"

And maybe we do need to talk after all. She's right to take a breather. "I swear I won't regret a second of this," I say.

"But why? What's different?"

I give her nothing but the truth. “You seem to feel the same way I do.”

“You mean since neither one of us wants a relationship?”

“Yes. I’m not interested in one and you said you aren’t either. And you and me, we seem to have some kind of crazy chemistry.”

“Wild chemistry, I call it,” she says with a grin.

“Like your drink,” I add.

“Exactly. I made it for you. Because I want you. So much.”

“This is officially the sexiest night of my life,” I declare. “And I am putting in my order for that drink when we return.”

She laughs, then turns a touch serious once more. “So you can break the code if we’re having a fling?”

I shrug, adding a smile. “Seems like a good reason to bend it. I’m so into you, Sierra. I want to make you feel incredible in bed.”

Humming, she shoots me a flirty grin. “Want to know what I want?”

“I really fucking do.”

“Your honesty. Your body. Your straightforward interest in me. No strings attached.”

Have I died and gone to dirty heaven?

I believe I have.

“Yes, to all of the above,” I say as my hand coasts along her side, over the fabric of her cami and down to the curves of her waist. My whole body vibrates with the need to touch her everywhere. And if she wants honesty, she’ll get it. “Sierra, I wanted you the night I walked into the bar and asked you to come here with me. I wanted you the night I walked you home. I’ve been wanting you for months. And I’ve been resisting you. And I don’t want to resist you any longer.”

She shudders, a sensual full-body tremble. “Don’t resist me. Chance, I want to sleep with you tonight. And I don’t

want you to be gentle with me.”

A naughty grin curves my lips as I brush my fingers through her hair. “So you like it a little rough?”

She nods, naughty glee in her eyes. “I think so.”

“You like it a little hard? A little dirty?”

Her breath comes in a harsh pant. “I do. I don’t want to be treated like a flower. I want to be treated like a woman. Like a woman who’s not breakable.”

I haven’t had sex like that in ages. Passionate, can’t-get-enough-of-each-other, clawing-at-the-sheets sex. And I want it with Sierra.

A groan works its way up my chest as I drag a hand through her hair. I give a quick tug to test her limits. She gasps, shuddering.

I groan. “You came to the right man. I have only one mission in bed.”

“What’s that?”

I slide my hands down her body, journeying to her breasts, and I squeeze those beauties too.

She arches her back, her lips parting in an “Oh, yes . . .”

“To give you orgasm after orgasm. For you to be drenched in pleasure. For you to come so beautifully hard that you can’t form words.” I bend my face to her neck, lick the hollow of her throat. “Because you’re the woman I can’t get out of my mind.”

She wraps her hands around my head, drags me closer so her lips are millimeters from mine. The air around us crackles as she whispers in a seductive voice, “Kiss me hard. Make it ruthless.”

What the lady wants . . .

I drop my lips to hers, and my body ignites.

It’s been years since I felt anything electric. Since I felt passion and heat.

Lust and desire.

And reckless need.

The second our lips connect, I feel all that, all the way down to my toes. I feel it in the pit of my stomach, coiling with need. The desire to touch her everywhere and to give her everything intensifies.

I'm dying to make her feel good and to feel good in return.

I kiss her hard, a deep, long kiss. Sucking on her bottom lip, I tug it between my teeth and yank her closer. There is nothing delicate about our kiss. It's all fire and possession. And the way she claws at my shoulders, jerking me nearer, greedily asking for more, more, more, is all I need to know.

We are so much on the same page with everything.

Fiercely, I claim her mouth, making sure that my beard leaves marks across her skin. She seems to devour my kisses, to hungrily lap them up as she whimpers and moans. I move on top of her, pressing the full length of my body over hers, letting her feel the weight of me, the length of me.

That's what she seems to want. And she takes that as I give it to her. She parts her legs, urging me to press and grind against her panties.

In my boxer briefs, I rock and thrust. She arches and moans. My head swims with lust and my body thrums with the promise of so much passion.

Her hands press against my chest, then she pushes me up. "Chance, I need you to know something," she says, breathy, but there are no nerves in her tone. Just determination in her eyes.

"What is it, gorgeous?"

"I've never had sex before," she says, direct and confident. "And for the longest time I've been wanting you to be the first man to fuck me."

The world slows.

I need a few seconds to process what she's said.

She's a virgin.

But that's all it takes.

I don't need any more time since there is nothing uncertain about Sierra Blackwood's intensity. There's nothing unclear about her statement or her heated gaze.

And when the woman you want asks you to fuck her hard and good, what other answer is there?

I coast a hand down her body. "I would love to fuck you hard and good all night long, gorgeous." Then I dip my face to her neck, sucking hard, making her moan before I let go.

She rocks up against me. "Well, you can start by getting me naked."

SIERRA

Finally.

I'm a horse at the races, raring to go.

But seriously?

After all these years, after all these nights, after all my planning,

I'm wearing freaking white.

The utter irony.

I wanted black lace. Pink satin. Or a sexy red teddy. Something hot and fiery to match my desire.

I certainly don't feel virginal.

Wildly curious is more like it.

And yet, I'm in white cotton panties and a cami. The color of innocence.

But then, as I gaze down at my erect nipples poking through the fabric, my panties already soaked, perhaps white is insanelly sexy.

Since it reveals all my desire for this man.

A man who gazes at me like he plans to ravage me all night long.

Except . . . his expression shifts.

Uh-oh. Why does he look like someone told him he could never have chocolate-covered strawberries again in his life?

His brow pinches. “I don’t have a condom, Sierra. But I’ll go to the concierge right now and get one,” he says, sliding to the edge of the bed at Mach speed.

I grab his arm right as he reaches for his shorts, stopping him. “I’ve been wanting to sleep with you for a year, Chance Ashford. I am one hundred percent prepared,” I say, like a woman in charge of her pleasure.

He growls. It’s the hottest sound I’ve ever heard.

“I’ve got everything we need,” I add. “I brought a bunch, in fact.”

Chance breathes out hard, shuddering. “That is the sexiest thing any woman has ever said to a man in the history of the universe.”

With wicked glee rushing through my veins, I hop out of bed, grab my purse, and return with it in a second. I unzip it with excited fingers. Maybe too excited. As I root around in the inside pocket, I miss the condom I’m aiming for. I laugh, embarrassed. “I guess I’m a little nervous,” I admit.

Moving behind me on the mattress, he dips his face to my neck, brushing my hair out of the way. He presses a soft, tender kiss to my nape that makes me swoon. My eyes float closed, and I relish the warm tingles that spread over my skin.

“I can take it slow, Sierra,” he says softly as he kisses me.

I take a beat, savoring the haze of bliss surrounding me. Then I grab the protection from the pocket, set the purse down on the nightstand, and swivel around, crawling onto the bed. I thrust the wrapper at him. “Don’t you dare take it slow,” I say, giving a clear command.

He threads his hand through my hair, gripping the back of my head. “You sure you know what you like?”

“I do.”

Chance tugs on my hair again, pulling me closer. His possessive touch sends small pinpricks of blissful pain through my body—a pain I crave.

He loosens the grip. “Tell me then. I’m game for anything you want.”

Images dance through my head. The array of videos I’ve watched over the years. “So many things turn me on,” I admit.

His grin is wicked as he pulls me onto his lap, wrapping my legs around his waist, urging me to grind against his hard-on.

“I’m listening,” he says in a low rumble as his hands curl tightly over my hips, his thumbs digging into my bones. This man already knows to manhandle me and that makes me hot. A man who listens, a man who wants to give me my fantasies.

My ex had no interest in my pleasure. He had no curiosities about my dirty dreams. We never talked about sex in detail.

So, this is a first too, and I damn well want Chance to know. “I’ve never said these things out loud to a man,” I confess as I rub my center shamelessly against the firm length of his cock.

“Good. Tell me, Sierra. I want to hear them, want to know your wishes,” he murmurs, sounding desperate as he lavishes open-mouthed kisses along my neck, nipping my flesh as he goes.

He pulls back, meets my gaze, and patiently waits.

I unravel my desires for him. “I want to ride you. Hard and fast and fearlessly.”

His jaw goes slack. Breath stutters. “Check,” he says.

“I want you to pull my hair like you’ve been doing. Smack my ass. Bite my tits,” I say, lust whipping through me.

His murmurs turn into a savage groan. “Done. Consider it fucking done.”

My hands clasp his shoulders tightly as I rock against him. “Want you to rip off my panties.”

Moaning, he slides a hand down my stomach, between our bodies. He wedges the heel of his palm against the panel of my

panties, rubbing hard. “You mean these soaked panties? The ones that are absolutely useless because you’re already so fucking wet?”

Lust radiates from my core out to my limbs as I pant a *yes*. “Those panties,” I murmur, then, tell him another fantasy. “And I want you to fuck me on all fours.”

“Woman.” Chance drags a hand over his face. “We’re going to need more than a few nights to make it through this Christmas list.”

Yes, we will.

And I can’t wait for all the naughty gifts.

Chance reaches for my cami, yanks it off in one rough tug, tosses it carelessly to the floor. “Your tits . . . I’ve got to worship them, Sierra.”

He lowers his face to my chest, draws a nipple into his mouth and sucks. A sharp, hot jolt of pleasure shoots through my body, racing through my veins.

Grabbing his head, I jerk him against me, relishing the closeness. He rewards me with a nip of his teeth, and I shudder.

“Yes,” I whisper, craving more.

I can feel him smile, like he’s so damn pleased to know how much I enjoy his rough touch. He licks and drags his teeth over my sensitive skin, then bites down harder.

“Oh God,” I rasp out.

I am a live wire. I am shaking everywhere. My whole body pulses.

He raises his face and grabs my hips.

I expect him to gently shift me off him, to set me on my back. Instead, he lifts me, then simply tosses me onto my stomach.

Oh. Oh yes. I like being manhandled very much.

He gets off the bed, stands at the foot. “Watch me,” he says, giving a rough command.

Raising my face, I stay in place like that, on my stomach, the center of my body aching as I stare at this gorgeous man, tall, built, rippling with muscles. His chest is covered with a fine dusting of hair that travels down in a delicious happy trail to where his hands go next—the waistband of his black boxer briefs.

A drop of liquid darkens the fabric. That thrills me, knowing he’s so turned on that his dick is leaking for me.

He pushes the boxers down and his cock springs free. Hard, long, and hungry for me. Wrapping a hand around his shaft, he strokes down, once, twice. Heat pools between my legs as I stare shamelessly at his cock.

“You like that,” he says. “Me stroking myself for you.”

“So much,” I moan. He moves from the foot of the bed around to the side. Craning my neck, I watch as he slides his hand down my back, stopping at my panties. He pulls hard on the cotton fabric, then laughs. “Sorry, Sierra. I don’t think I’m going to be able to rip these off tonight. If you have lace, I can rip that tomorrow night.”

“I do,” I say, as a thrill rushes through me over these plans—plans for more sex, more playing.

“Good. Then for now I’ll do this,” he says, then lowers his face, drags the edge of my panties between his teeth, and tugs them down over my ass.

With his mouth.

I nearly die from the sexiness of the moment. When he has the panties at the edge of my ass, he presses a kiss to one cheek, then the other, before he nips my butt.

I groan like an animal. “Ahh, that feels so good.”

Grabbing the fabric, he tugs them off the rest of the way, and throws them on the floor. He pushes me farther up on the bed, spreads my legs and kneads my ass. “I’m going to fuck

you like this. With you on your stomach, me driving deep into you.”

Climbing on the mattress, he covers me with his body, his hard cock sliding against my ass.

I tremble, pleasure ripping through me like a current. “I want that,” I say, utterly desperate for his passion, his abandon.

Chance yanks me up on all fours, kneels behind me, and plants another kiss on my cheek as he slides a hand between my thighs. I gush, heat flooding my center. I’m outrageously wet.

“Oh, gorgeous,” he moans as his fingers slide through my slickness. My back bows and I move with him, seeking more of his touch.

“Please,” I groan.

“You’re soaked. So fucking slippery. So hot,” he says, praising me as he teases my clit. Sparks shoot through me everywhere, and I’m floating high above the earth.

My mind spins, pleasure traveling through every cell as he strokes me all while kissing my ass, nipping the flesh.

Desire swirls in me.

I feel out of control.

Wild.

Desperate.

I rock into his touch. “A little harder,” I urge him on. He goes faster, rougher, then he slides a finger into me.

I gasp.

“You like that?”

“I do.”

Another finger, another crook of it inside me. I clench, shaking as I claw at the sheets.

He keeps that up, rubbing my clit, stroking my pussy, nipping my flesh. Ecstasy throbs in me as my climax nears,

then arrives boldly, bursting through my body in a hot blur of pleasure.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I shout, shaking everywhere, falling into a heap of satisfaction on the king-size bed.

Yet I’m still hungry for more.

A few seconds later, he scoops me up, pulls me into his arms, and kisses me.

It’s a slow, lush kiss that makes my head feel hazy.

My chest goes woozy.

I feel drunk on pleasure.

When he breaks the kiss, he settles onto his back on the bed, grabs his cock, and slides a thumb over the head, moving a drop of liquid arousal around the crown. His eyes are hooded, glimmering with desire.

“I want to see you fuck my cock, Sierra.”

Dear God. I hit the jackpot. This good guy is a filthy fucker in bed, like I’ve always wanted.

“I’m ready,” I say, straddling him.

He reaches for the condom, opens it, slides it down his length, then pulls me to him. But before I can line up and take a man inside me for the first time in my life, he curls a hand around my face, draws me close and kisses me again. Tender and gentle. He murmurs softly as his lips explore mine. When he lets go, he whispers, “I’ll fuck you hard and good, but sometimes I want to kiss you soft and gentle. Because that’s how I feel for you,” he says, his tone hooking into my heart.

I’ve chosen wisely.

I know too that I’ve chosen a man who doesn’t just want to fuck. He feels something for me. Perhaps the same something I feel for him.

Is it just desire? Only wild lust? Or something else?

For a flash of a second, he looks at me like *this* could be more. Like there’s longing. Like there’s possibility.

As I straddle him, possibilities spark all through my veins, my mind, my body.

Possibilities of nights and days.

But that's all too much to consider.

Right now, I want to feel all the dirty things.

Pleasure. Just pleasure. That's all I can handle.

Taking his thick cock in my hand, I rub him against my wetness, then draw a sharp inhale.

His hand slides down my arm. "We can stop anytime if it hurts," he says.

My heart beats harder. "I love that you say that. I love that you're concerned."

"I mean it, Sierra. I want to give you everything you want, but if something doesn't feel right to you, just tell me. You mean more to me than sex," he says, so earnest that my chest squeezes.

And I feel that possibility once again. It scares me but it also electrifies me.

I look into his eyes, nodding as I lick my lips. "I promise."

To say that feels just as good as this bliss does.

Then I lower myself onto him, my breath hitching.

The first inch is full and delicious. Like when I take vibrators into my body. Then I slide down more, bring him deeper. The sensations intensify. Some are good; some are bad. I close my eyes. For a few seconds, everything in the center of my body hurts, a painful stretch.

Chance seems to sense it. "Take it slow, gorgeous," he says.

I nod, adjusting, getting used to him. To the odd sensation of being stretched wide open.

Another breath.

Letting the air fill my body and relax me, I sink down the rest of the way. It's still strange, still intense. But soon, the

pain ebbs, melts into pleasure.

Only pleasure.

And I ache for more of him.

I set my hands on his pecs. His big palms wrap tight around my hips as his gaze stays locked on my face. “Set the pace, gorgeous. Whatever you want.”

I rock my hips back and forth.

Thrusting.

Swaying.

Taking.

Feeling.

So, this is sex.

So, this is fucking.

And it feels as good as it looked all those years.

That’s because of the man I’m with. A man I want to get closer to. I rock and I move, swiveling my hips as he grabs me, pulling me closer.

“You feel incredible,” I whisper.

His eyes are hazy, fiery. “No, you do. You feel so fucking good,” he grits out.

“We do, then,” I correct.

“Yeah,” he says on a moan as he squeezes my ass, kneads the flesh in just the way I’ve been wanting.

He hauls me in for a deep, possessive kiss. Pleasure shoots through me everywhere, coiling in the center of my body, flinging itself through my veins out to my toes, to my fingertips.

I feel good everywhere. So good I sense my climax isn’t far away. But I want to make sure it happens. So I break the kiss, rise up, set a hand on his chest. “I’m going to play with myself,” I tell him.

He groans, a savage, wild sound that echoes through the room. “Do it. I want to watch.”

I slide my hand between my legs, teasing at my clit, savoring the tight, hot knot of sensations. I’ve had plenty of orgasms. I’ve given myself countless ones. He already gave me one tonight.

And I know my body, so I can tell the next one isn’t far off. The exquisite ache between my legs intensifies and I stroke faster, knowing exactly how to get there.

But even though I *can* get there on my own, Chance is with me completely, thrusting deep inside my body as I rub my clit.

He’s in every moment with me.

Wanting my pleasure.

Chasing it desperately too.

Sensation seizes me, commands my cells, tightens every muscle. I gasp, freezing as I shatter, bliss cascading everywhere inside me in a wild, intense orgasm that blots out the world.

I shout, calling his name, shaking.

When I’m about to collapse on him, he grabs my hips, flips me to my back, and shoves my knees up practically near my shoulders. He drives deep into me, like an animal. “Need to fuck you hard. Say it’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay,” I say, and he fucks me hard, making me feel incredible all over again as he groans, grits his teeth, then grunts, “Coming.”

The man shudders.

He’s always been beautiful to me.

But he’s beautiful in a whole new way as he loses control inside me, coming hard, then collapsing onto me.

I smile, thrilled at the decadence, the deliciousness.

And how good we feel together. “You convinced me,” I whisper playfully.

He takes a few seconds, then laughs. “All I ever wanted,” he says, then hugs me tight. “And so’s this.”

CHANCE

In the shower a little later, I pour tropical body wash into my palm, then roam my hands across her shoulders, down her arms, along her stomach, smiling stupidly as I go.

She laughs softly. “Why are you grinning like that?”

I shrug, still hopped up on endorphins. “Great sex has that effect,” I say.

She’s quiet, and I hope that wasn’t the wrong thing to say. “It *was* great,” I add, reassuring her.

“Was it for you, though?” Her voice pitches up, hopeful.

Ah, she has no barometer for how a man reacts. “You were amazing. You are absolutely amazing, and the sex was incredible.” I hope she loved it as much as I did. It was electric. “You don’t believe me?”

Sierra takes the body wash then cleans up, keeping her hair out of the stream as she goes. “It’s just all new to me,” she says. “But I’m only human. I want it to be as good for you as it was for me. Because that was dream-come-true sex for me.”

It’s official. I can die now having completed my mission on earth—to please a woman that well. I rope a hand around her waist, haul her body against mine. “It was *earth-shattering*. Hell, I’m pretty sure my toes curled.”

She grins, the kind of smile that shines in her eyes, and I’m glad I hit the right note at last. “You made my knees weak, Chance.”

Pretty sure she did the same to me. And fair's fair—since she's been so open with me about her sex life, the least I can do is be the same way about mine. “To be honest, I haven't had sex like that . . .” I drift off, but my memory comes up empty. There's nothing to compare tonight to. “Honestly, I've *never* had sex like that, Sierra. Ever. It was intense. Insanely passionate.”

Her eyes go soft. Her lips part. “It felt that way to me too, Chance,” she says, vulnerability coloring her tone as well, and the sound causes my heart to thrum harder for her.

“Good. I wanted you to feel incredible. That was all I wanted,” I say.

She loops her hands around my neck, her fingertips playing with my wet hair. “I've watched a lot of videos. Read a lot about sex. I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted. But being with you felt better than I even imagined.”

Being with you.

Those words reverberate. “Same for me, gorgeous. That was better than I imagined. And trust me, I've thought a lot about sleeping with you.”

Her eyes sparkle with delight.

I have more to say, though, tonight is a time for total honesty, it seems. “You're only the second woman I've been with,” I tell her.

Her mouth falls open. “Wow. I had no idea.”

Talking about Natasha isn't my favorite thing to do. But these details feel important for Sierra to know, especially given what she's shared with me. “My ex and I met in college. We were together for a long time. We were each other's firsts. But the sex faded a lot the last few years we were together, and honestly, even before then, it was never like that.” I wave in the direction of the bed—the scene of the white-hot crime of . . . fantastic sex.

As the water beats down on us, Sierra arches a dubious brow. “Never? Really?”

I hold up a hand. “Scout’s honor.”

She shoves me gently on my wet pecs. “You were never a Boy Scout.”

“Pitcher’s honor, then,” I say, wiggling a brow. “Closing pitcher’s honor, to be precise.”

Tilting her head, a little saucily, she smiles. “Fine. I believe you now.”

“Good. You should.”

I take the soap and wash up, sharing even more with her. “But I’ve wanted that kind of abandon in bed. To be rough, be wild. Your fantasies match mine. But I never had the chance to act on them till you.”

Sierra takes a breath, maybe gearing up to say something hard. “I want to sleep with you again. What do you think? Want a couple encores?”

What I think is I’ve won the World Series again. I think I’ve struck sex gold. “Hmm. Seems just like I convinced you to root for the Cougars, and you’ve convinced me to go for seconds and thirds,” I tease.

She rolls her eyes, swats my shoulder this time. “*Chance.*”

I pull her close. “I want you again and again, Sierra.”

“Sounds like a great plan for the next twenty-four or so hours,” she says.

I freeze under the hot water.

Twenty-four hours?

That’s it? Give or take, that’s all I have with her?

Of course it is. We’re both leaving the morning after the wedding. Returning to being...part of the same circle.

And yet I already know I want this fling to last beyond two nights in paradise. I’ll have to figure out how the hell to maneuver that.

For now, though, I’m going to enjoy the fuck out of spending the night with her close to me.

I stop the water, and we dry off then get into bed. Under the covers, with the terrace door open and the rhythmic sounds of the ocean lapping against the shore, I run a hand along her arm. I'm unable to stop touching her. "That couch did look ridiculously uncomfortable."

She gives me a flirty, dirty look. "Confession: you were never going to sleep on that couch," she whispers. "From the moment we walked into this suite today, I had plans for you, Chance. I've wanted it to be you for a lot longer than just today."

I eat up her compliments. "How long?"

She stares at the ceiling, taps her chin. "Remember the night you walked me home?"

"Hell, yeah. I was so damn tempted to invite myself up," I say.

"I knew for sure then that I wanted you to be my first," she says, reminiscing, tripping back to a happy memory.

I'm all warm and buzzy. "But I think we needed to get *here*, in Hawaii, for it to happen."

"True, but I've had my eye on you for a while, Chance," she says, settling into the pillows, like it's a relief to admit this attraction at last.

Hell, it is to me too. For months, the desire has brewed inside me. "I would come by The Spotted Zebra with the guys, but I always wanted to see you."

"We could chat about the day or baseball or books or comedies."

She grins, propping her head into her hand as she shifts to her side. "Everything was so easy with us. Still is."

Easy. This is just nice and easy here in bed, and then we'll return to nice and easy in San Francisco too.

But still, I'm not sure twenty-four hours will satiate me. For now though, I'll take what I can get.

CHANCE

The next morning, I rouse as the sun filters in, its rays luring me from slumber. The other side of the bed is empty. My gaze sails around the suite.

Sierra stands at the terrace, drinking in the view of the ocean, looking peaceful.

I swing my legs out of bed, pull on a pair of shorts, and join her on the deck. She wears a bikini top and a sarong, looking like a vacation goddess. It's a good view. No idea where we go from here, or what happens next. But for now, I move behind her, brush her hair from her neck, kiss her there. She sighs happily and rests her head against my shoulder. "Good morning, handsome," she says.

"Now it is," I say, as I loop my arms around her waist and stare at the ocean spreading all the way to the horizon. "What a view."

"I like *that* view too." She points to the beach below us and a little lagoon at the edge of the resort. A woman in a red one-piece suit drags surfboards into the small cove, setting them on the water so they float peacefully. "It's surfboard yoga and it's calling my name."

"Huh. What do you know? Mine too. My contract forbids me from going surfing. But I could do surfboard yoga." I squeeze her butt. "I like your sense of adventure."

"I'm quite adventurous, Chance," she says, with a twinkle in her eyes.

“I noticed that last night.”

And I want to experience her again.

As I put on board shorts, I work through options that might earn us an extension on our arrangement past Hawaii. Maybe I need to talk to TJ, or to Google, and ask how to keep a fling going beyond the initial time frame and still return to friendship when it's over.

For now, though, it's time to yoga the fuck out of a surfboard.

* * *

I do my damndest to stretch like a cat, a cow, a downward-facing dog. But on an upward dog, I stumble, splashing into the water. Sierra cracks up and offers me a hand, but I shake it off. I pop back up on the board, all wet, and thoroughly determined to nail this pose.

I get on my hands and feet, arching my spine. The view is distracting, though, because Sierra looks phenomenal in her purple bikini, showing off her moves on that surfboard.

I get in the zone, though, and apply my laser focus to the pose. But I find a way to multitask, sneaking peeks at the woman by my side who is sharing a perfect day with me.

I want another day like this. Hell, make it a few more.

How to get them is the question.

* * *

When we finish the class, we go for a hike on a nearby trail, walking through the lush resort gardens. Sierra's wearing the pink cap I bought her, and if a hat can make me feel possessive of a woman, this one is doing the trick.

Decked out in a gift I got her, she feels a bit like mine, and I don't mind this feeling.

As we meander through the foliage, she tells me about the flowers we see, rattling off details on the hibiscus and birds of paradise. “I have a big thing for flowers,” she says with a little shrug.

“You always have a fresh bouquet at the bar. Right there at the corner, every night.”

She wings a smile my way. “You’re observant.”

“It happens when you have a thing for the bar owner,” I say. And wow, it’s like a weight has been lifted. I’m free to say these things to her that have been on my mind for months.

“Right back atcha, handsome,” she says. Her compliment comes out nice and easy, like maybe she’s exercising the same freedom.

Maybe it’s a damn good sign she’d be open to a sex fling addendum—the addition of extra days and then we return to how we were. *Friends and teammate’s sister.*

I make a rolling gesture, signaling for her to keep talking as we walk along the path lined with ferns and hibiscus flowers. “So, tell me more about your love of all things floral.”

“Well, if I was going to go all amateur psychologist on myself, I’d say it’s probably because I work all the time, so I snag my little indulgences where I can—lotions and potions that smell yummy, pretty flowers, sexy lingerie.”

“Mmm. I believe lace is on the menu tonight,” I say.

“And you’ll get it. But it’s also because I just love pretty things,” she says with an unapologetic grin. “And pretty-smelling things.” Stopping, she points to a white flower. “Like those gardenias. Want to test your nose? Tell me what you smell.”

The competitor in me takes the stage as I bend to inhale the scent. “Kind of velvety and fragrant.”

“Velvety is right. Let’s see. How else can I put your nose to the test?”

I rope an arm around her waist, yanking her back to my chest so I can run my nose through her soft hair. “How’s this?”

You smell like blackberry, a hint of pineapple, and all my dirty thoughts.”

“You’re passing with flying colors.”

I spin her around and steal a kiss in the middle of the flowers.

“Mmm,” she says, returning the favor. “And you have that soapy, woody, I-want-you-to-bend-me-over-the-bed smell.”

I laugh. “And we officially have aced the nose test.”

She turns, and we continue on the path. I gesture to some plants along the way. “Want me to wow you with my plant knowledge? *Boom*—plumeria.”

She slow claps. “Your new nickname is Chance ‘Green Thumb’ Ashford.”

I raise a finger to make a point. “I’ll have you know I take excellent care of an entire bullpen of succulents at my place.”

A brow lifts in question. “A bullpen?”

Am I doing this? Telling her about one of my quirks?

And the answer is yes. This conversation is more fun than I’ve had in ages. “Yes, they’re named Mariano, Trevor Hoffman and Dennis Eckersley. The three greatest closers of all time.”

“But only Mariano goes by just his first name?”

I scoff, like *isn’t it obvious*. “Of course. He’s one-name-only worthy. The best of all time. But I named them all since I believe in paying homage to the greats who make my life possible.”

“And you do that by naming plants after them? That’s insanely adorable.”

“Please don’t tell opposing batters I’m adorable,” I say with a growl.

She stops to pat my cheek. “I will keep all your secrets, you chocolate-covered-strawberry-loving, plant-naming, pink-

hat-buying, fearsome closing pitcher who strikes fear into his opponents when he stalks to the mound in the ninth inning.”

I narrow my eyes, adopt the sternest expression in the history of stony looks. “Just like that,” I say, in a low rumble.

“If they only knew you were a softie underneath,” she teases.

I grab her arm and yank her against me, her lush body pressed to mine. “You will tell no one that I name plants.” I drop my voice to a bare whisper. “Or that I talk to them.”

“Shut up. You talk to your plants?”

“I ask them to watch over me as I pitch,” I whisper.

“The fact that you talk to your plants is my new favorite thing about you.” She coasts her hands up my chest, cupping my face. “You. Are. Criminally. Cute.”

I crack up, and we kiss again, laughing as we do.

That’s a great way to kiss, I’m discovering. Kissing and laughing, feeling like you connect with someone. It warms my jaded, bruised heart. Makes me feel like we can have this fling, and go right back to friendship and guy codes and all the good things.

But first, I’d like a few more nights please. No reason for a sex fling to only last two short nights, after all.

Maybe that’s how I’ll make my pitch to tack on some extra days. A *why not?* proposition.

Striking out the side with the bases loaded is easier than figuring out how to broach my desire for more of her. I have zero experience in navigating unconventional arrangements with a woman.

But sex? That’s throwing a fastball down the middle, so I laser in on that when we return to the suite. I bend her over the bed, take her again, and give her an epic orgasm, enjoying one helluva climax myself.

Afterward, we fall onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, sweat, and breath.

I love Hawaii.

* * *

When Sierra and I head down to the beach for Trish and Blake's sunset ceremony, we hold hands, like we did last night.

When I get my first chance during the reception, I snag a minute away from her. I grab my brother, catching TJ up on the details.

"So you want to have a longer sex fling?" he asks.

It sounds so crass when he puts it like that. *Sex fling*. But I'm not entirely sure how to put into words what I want, so I try to keep it simple. "I'd like to spend more time with her. Yes."

A soft chuckle is his answer. "Sex. More time," he says, like tomato, toe-mah-toe. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, baby bro. Point being, you want a longer . . . *fling*." TJ sketches air quotes.

I want an extension. For sex, yes, but also for going on hikes and talking about plants and flowers. Which sounds like . . . exactly what I can't say to anyone, even my brother.

"Yes, a longer fling," I reply.

With a thoughtful sigh, he scrubs his jaw. "None of this one-night-only stuff. Right?"

"Exactly."

Like he's the relationship guru, TJ parks a hand on my shoulder. "Here's what I'd do if I were writing this scene in a book. I'd have the hero figure out what's in it for her. How to make it work in her life. Because the last thing you want is to come across like a horny, sex-starved, walking boner who just wants to get laid."

Whoa. "Tell me what you really think."

He smirks. "Then don't come across that way to her."

I'm still not in the market for anything permanent, but last night with Sierra felt like sex, passion, and intimacy.

It felt like a real connection. Like we understood each other's needs.

And right then, I know how to ask for what I want.

SIERRA

Staring is not acceptable at most social gatherings, but it's required at weddings.

I gawk happily at the bride as Trish sways with Blake on the dance floor under the tent by the edge of the Pacific.

In her flowy wedding dress, with hibiscuses in her hair, the bride laughs, then presses a kiss to Blake's lips.

My heart patters. Hell, maybe it pitters too. From my spot at the bar, I sigh happily, drinking a glass of wine while Chance chats with his parents and his brother on the lawn. I can't imagine my parents behaving well with each other at someone else's wedding.

But then, my parents are the epitome of behaving badly. Always fighting. Shouting insults.

They didn't get along with each other when Grant and I were growing up. I doubt they could be in the same venue now without hissing at each other like two alley cats. Meanwhile, the past and present Ashfords are laughing and toasting. They're all good guys and good women.

Maybe that's why Chance is so focused on his code. That's all he knows, all he's seen. He could teach a class in how to get along with everyone.

But then, he sure as hell tossed out that code in sinful style last night.

And I am damn glad we exercised the bro code loophole.

Slivers of the two of us coming together flash before my eyes—skin, bodies, moans. Names whispered at the edge of passion.

I draw a sharp breath, heating up.

“Busted!” a bright voice chirps in my ear.

Startled, I turn to the platinum-haired maid of honor, all big green eyes and a yellow dress. I flap my hand at Clementine’s attire. “You’re the only person in the universe who can wear yellow and look good.”

“It’s almost a fashion injustice,” another voice chimes in, smooth and alto. That’s Skyler, another one of our crew from San Francisco who flew down for the wedding. I haven’t seen her in a while, so I pull her close for a hug.

“Good to see you,” I say to the personal stylist. Skyler shops for people who hate shopping. Translation—she has a long client list.

“You too. And you look fabulous, as well, in your sexy pink dress,” she says, taking in the dusty-rose sundress that swirls just below my knees.

Clementine steps closer. “And I think I know why our Sierra looks so good,” she says in a cat-ate-the-canary tone.

I grin, since it’s useless to hide my smile, though I play it coy as I ask, “And why’s that, Clem?”

My dog-loving friend nudges my elbow. “Is someone getting some?”

A wiggle of Skyler’s brows comes next. “Tell us everything.”

I grab their arms, pull them away from the bar and toward a hammock at the edge of the grounds. “Yes, is it obvious?”

Skyler studies my face and nods sagely. “You have a very just-been-fucked look about you,” she deadpans.

A dirty thrill rushes through me, and I touch my cheek. “And what is that exactly?”

Clementine grins like a naughty kid. “You’re all glowy. Dewy. Shiny.”

I crack up. “You sound like a face cream commercial.”

“Sex is good for the skin,” Skyler deadpans.

“Then I better have an amazing complexion,” I whisper.

“Get it, girl,” Clementine says, then makes a rolling gesture with her hands. “Spill the tea. How was it?”

A zip of pleasure rushes through me from the memory of last night and this afternoon. I’m bursting to tell my girlfriends. “It was amazing. I never knew sex could be so incredible. It’s basically better than . . . well, music, food, drinks, and even cats.”

Clementine throws her arms around me and we all squeal.

“Sex is the best,” Skyler says when Clementine and I separate. “Fine, it’s been a year for me, but if memory serves, it was something I rather enjoyed . . .”

“It’s something I *want* to enjoy,” Clementine puts in.

I meet her gaze and deliver the best advice a recently deflowered gal can give. “And you should enjoy it to the fullest. And find a man who wants to give you what you ask for. I basically told Chance what I wanted, and he delivered. Sex is awesome with a man you like. A man who listens. A man who wants to please you.”

Clementine dances a jig. “A man who listens? He’s a keeper for sure.”

I tense at that word. *Keeper* cuts the moment in half, slicing away the lightness, hitting pause on my happy-go-horny mood. “He’s not a keeper. I didn’t mean it like that. He’s not interested in anything long-term,” I say, my voice a little wobblier than I’d like.

But why is it hard to speak the truth? I shouldn’t be bothered to voice the backbone of our arrangement. Neither one of us wants more than a quick fling. That’s what we agreed to.

Except I'm starting to wonder what *more* would look like.

Skyler sighs, gives a sympathetic look. "Bummer."

I shake my head, dismissing her worries. "Oh, it's totally fine. I don't want anything long-term either," I say, though I wouldn't mind more days with Chance, more time with him. Last night was everything I imagined. But today? The time with him wandering along the hiking trail, checking out flowers and plants, was even better. I never knew it was possible to make love like that, and then to laugh, tease, and play so easily.

My heart warms as my gaze wanders to Chance once again, standing at the edge of the tent. He tosses his head back, laughing at something his mom says. A smile takes over my whole being, unbidden. He's just so good with people. He's good with me. He's the sexiest, funniest, sweetest guy I know.

I tear my gaze away and turn back to my friends so I don't get lost in this new haze of longing. "Anyway, it's all good. Chance and I have an arrangement, and we agreed on it," I say, as chipper as I can be and focused on the facts. Just the facts.

Not these flutters of feelings.

"Good thing you agree," Skyler says, going along with it. "Yay you then!"

But Clementine seems suspicious, tilting her head as she peers at me. "You're truly fine with it, Sierra? I always thought you had a big crush on him. And that's risky in these situationships."

"Well, I did have a crush," I say, then backpedal, trying to make sense of this new bloom of emotions. "I mean, I do. Wait. Is it still a crush if you're sleeping with him in said situationship?"

We're all quiet, the three of us looking back and forth at each other, then drifting off to the ocean for answers.

Is this still a crush?

Has it already turned into something else? My rushing pulse and squishy heart suggest it has.

But what?

I don't know what *this* is, or what it should be. I have no answers to the question of what to do with my runaway feelings.

Clementine clears her throat, more solemn than usual as she says, "You'll know it was a crush if it doesn't truly hurt when it ends."

Skyler nods immediately, her tone a little heavy too. "Truer words."

Great. Just great. Now I'm thinking of endings and hurting rather than good times and pleasure. The goddamn point of this no-strings fling is that we won't hurt each other. "Then it's simply a crush," I say, chin up, brave face on, trying to remember the rules of engagement. "Let's go back."

I gesture to the tent, and we return to the party. When I reach the dance floor, a hand touches my arm, feeling familiar, but not quite.

I spin around—the face of the man is familiar too. The face of the man I slept with. But I meet his eyes and, though almost identical, I spot the difference.

But it's not Chance. It's TJ.

"Hey, Sierra," he says with only a sliver of a smile. "Want to dance?"

"Sure," I say, but the truth is . . . I'm unsure. He looks more intense than I'd expect.

We head out to the dance floor, shaking it to a fast song, making small talk about one of his books. "My favorite scene in *Come Again* is the one in the bakery—when he takes her to Piece of Cake, and she's moaning and groaning around the mouthful like it's foreplay."

"She wasn't wrong," he deadpans.

"Nor were you. I love that you can get inside the mind of both a man and a woman."

“Thank you,” he says, clearly sincere. “That means a lot to me. Truly it does.”

I screw up the corner of my lips. “Funny—you and Chance sound a lot alike, but I can tell your voices apart by the way you speak, how the sentences come together. Yours are almost more . . . observational. Which sort of makes sense, since that’s what you do.”

He smiles for a second. “That does make sense.” But then his humor vanishes as the song winds down. TJ locks his eyes with mine like I’m in his crosshairs. “So listen, Sierra . . .”

Nerves prickle through me from the intensity that’s purely TJ. “Yes?”

“You seem great. I like you. So does Chance.”

“I like him too,” I say. Where is he going with this?

“Good.” He takes a beat. “Don’t break his heart, then.” It’s an order, crisp and clear from the minutes-older brother. Then TJ brushes a kiss onto my cheek. “Good dancing with you and chatting books. I look forward to grabbing a drink at your bar when I’m in the city.”

He walks away.

What was the deal with that warning? Is he simply being a big brother? Or is there something more at play? I don’t have much time to contemplate, because his twin heads my way, smiling like he has a secret. This is whiplash, even though I’m wildly happy to see Chance. My bones hum as he nears me. My chest flips. I am so into him, it’s crazy.

This feeling is wild and wonderful, and I want to embrace it.

Chance reaches me as the music shifts to a slow song. “May I have this dance?”

“You may,” I say, feeling fluttery and warm.

I let TJ’s warning fade away as Chance wraps his hands around my waist. We dance to the love song under the Hawaiian sky. His eyes twinkle, and he sure looks like he has an ace up his sleeve.

I'm about to ask what's up when Chance spins me around, dips me, then says, "I have a proposition for you."

Color me intrigued. "Hit me up," I say, my hair spilling toward the floor.

He yanks me up, running a hand along the cherry tattoo on my arm. "You said you were going to Las Vegas when you return."

"Yes, I did," I say, curious as to why he's asking.

"At the risk of inviting myself along, I'd love to invite myself along. I could spend more time with you as you check out your bartender and comic. Get us a luxury suite at The Extravagant if you'd like. Treat you to another few days of the vacation you deserve. Go to clubs if you want. Soak in the jacuzzi. Order room service and then lavish you in orgasms all night long." He takes a beat, twirls me, then drags me in close, his big body pressed to mine.

My skin tingles. My heart trips along.

That invitation sounds like we're zooming well past the crush zone. We're racing into more than a fling.

Every single thing he's suggesting tantalizes me. I do need a vacation. A few more days treating myself—or really, being treated—would be good for me.

But that's not why I want to take him up on his offer.

I want as much of Chance as I can get. I want to gobble up all the time he's offering. To indulge in as much of my crush as possible.

Even if it'll hurt when it ends.

"I'd say that's the best self-invitation I've ever heard. I will RSVP right now."

A rumble coasts across his lips as I grab the collar of his shirt and bring him close for a tropical kiss. A kiss that makes me want to drag him away from the wedding right now. But we can't escape till later.

So after the cake and more toasts and more dancing, I seize the opportunity I desperately want to be alone with him. “Want to get out of here?”

Chance’s eyes flicker. “More than I’ve ever wanted any chocolate-covered strawberry in my life.”

High praise, indeed.

CHANCE

My mission is singular—make myself scarce ASAP.

As we walk around the tent, I acquire the target—a path winding between the palm trees that leads to the hotel entrance, aka, our escape hatch.

Which leads to our suite.

That's where I want to be.

With Sierra's hand in mine, I walk quickly.

Avoiding my parents.

Avoiding Natasha.

Avoiding everyone.

But when I reach the edge of the spongy grass, footsteps crunch in the night. I snap my gaze to my left. Jordy ambles over, bright gratitude in his blue eyes. Stopping at my side, he spreads his arms out wide. “You save baseball games, and you saved my sorry ass last night. Rockstar closer,” he booms. “Bring it in.”

Damn. I want to be in the fucking room. Instead, I give my cousin a hug and he hugs me back harder. “What would I have done without you?”

“Spent the night puking in the plumeria?” I suggest.

“Exactly. I owe you big time, bud.”

We break apart, and I slug his shoulder. “You're all good, man,” I say, and flash him a grin.

Sierra does the same. “Glad you’re feeling better, Jordy.”

His bushy eyebrows shoot into his hairline. “Oh, my bad! You’re with your lady. Sorry, big-ass sorry!” He eyes Sierra up and down and hums approvingly. “Way to upgrade, Chance. Very, very nice.”

I bristle. “Don’t talk that way about women. They aren’t cars.”

Jordy shrugs with a smile. “It was a compliment. I like cars and I like babes.” He turns to Sierra. “You’re prettier than his ex. And you’re also nicer. She never once asked if I was feeling better after a glass of wine.”

“Well, thank you for the compliment. I enjoy cars as well. And I’m glad you’re having a good time,” she says, handling Jordy like the bartender pro she is—smooth and good-natured, a kind word for everyone.

But Sierra *truly* is this person. She legitimately cares. She’s the opposite of Natasha, who was all farce, all online persona.

Sierra is the same woman behind the bar and away from it—fiery and clever, loving and fierce, kind and strong. A person who gives a shit about people.

She’s the real deal.

My heart kicks a little faster.

I will it to settle down. Now isn’t the time for flutters. Or for adding up all her pros. “We’re having a great time,” I put in.

“Best wedding ever,” Jordy adds, not to be outdone. He claps me on the shoulder, his expression turning a touch concerned. “And you’re doing well, my man. You’re obviously over . . . *the Bitchy McWitch*.” He dips his voice. “But how was it seeing Trish walk down the aisle with Natasha right there? And with that Doofus McDickhead she’s with now watching from his seat?” He mimes gagging. “I have to see my ex at work all the time and it’s brutal. Carve my heart up with a chainsaw. But you—you doing okay?”

I traveled to Hawaii expecting this question.

I prepped for it.

Hell, *that* question is the very reason Sierra's here. As a shield for people like Jordy who have no filter.

But the answer is remarkably easy, just like it was when Blake asked last night. Like it was when Natasha poked her head out at the party too. Turns out seeing the woman I devoted a decade of my life to feels a lot like . . . nothing.

Just nothing.

And that's wonderful.

"You know, I feel great," I tell Jordy from the heart.

A heart that's filling up again, making space for someone else.

I loop an arm around Sierra's waist, tugging her close. This contact isn't make-believe, though. I don't do it to show off a fake date.

I'm touching her because I want to.

Because she makes a day great and a night even better.

Turned out I didn't need protection from uncomfortable questions. I've been over my ex for a long time. Since well before we divorced.

Maybe what I truly needed was an excuse to finally ask Sierra out.

After we say goodbye to Jordy, Sierra and I head into the hotel. Like I've drunk too much caffeine, I'm jazzed to tell her what I just realized. "Funny thing," I say, my words spilling out. "I thought I would need you here as a buffer. I thought it would really bug me if people asked me about her."

"Does it?"

I shake my head. "Not one single bit."

"Because I'm here?"

"Yes, and because . . ." I shrug, big and wide. "I don't care if anyone asks about her. I've been over her for a long time."

They can say whatever they want. It's like when someone says *sucks that you lost the playoffs.*"

A slow smile spreads across her face. "It's just life."

"Just one of those things, and it's fine."

"So you didn't *need* me after all," she says, bright and cheery, like she's proud of me.

But my *personal growth* isn't the point I want to make with Sierra.

I stop in the hall, meet her gaze, run a hand down her cherry tree ink. This isn't what I planned. I don't know how this thing with us will play out in a few more days. But for now, I need to say *this*. "No, I didn't need you as a fake date. But it turns out I *want* you . . . as a real date."

In her gaze, I see new possibilities. I see so much more than I expected when we got on that plane yesterday. And I've no idea where our flight is headed.

"That's all I want too," she says softly.

It feels like we're traveling to a new destination. But it's entirely a mystery where we're going.

CHANCE

When we reach the suite, I open the door at the speed of sound, then kick it closed.

I shove her up against the wall and devour her mouth. Sierra laid out her desires from the start. She wants it a little rough, a bit commanding. She wants her man to take her as soon as we walk into the hotel room.

That's what she'll get from me.

As I claim her lips, she utters a plaintive, needy sound that drives me on. My tongue explores her mouth with possession, with the kind of intensity the two of us want to have together. I suck her bottom lip between mine, giving her a hot kiss that sends fire through my veins.

She rocks against me, her hips seeking me out. That's my cue to break the kiss so I can hike up her dress, yank it over her head.

"Gorgeous," I say reverently as I step back to admire the sight in front of me—Sierra Blackwood in matching bra and panties, a dusty rose shade of lace. A groan works its way up my chest as I flick my fingers against the fabric of her panties. "I do believe I promised I would rip these off."

"And you better make good on it," she says.

I drop down to my knees, tug at the fabric, jerking it away from her body. I rip it right along the seams, and it tears with a satisfying sound.

She gasps.

Dirty delight fills my mind as I pull the remains of her panties down to the floor, then bury my face between her thighs.

She grabs my head, rocks her hips against my mouth.

My whole body vibrates as I lick and suck, flicking my tongue along the delicious rise of her clit. Digging my thumbs into her hip bones, I eat her like a starving man. She is all I need for sustenance. Her taste floods my tongue as she thrusts against me, curling her fingers tighter around my head as she murmurs words of bliss.

Yes.

Oh God.

That. Do that.

Her moans tell me to keep going. To keep giving her everything she wants. My body vibrates with the desire to please her, to send her over the edge.

I lick and suck and French kiss her pussy until her legs are shaking, until her cries of pleasure echo across the property.

She jerks me harder and fucks my face till she calls out, "*Coming.*"

Bliss runs rampant as I taste her pleasure on my tongue.

It drives me wild, and I can't stop moaning as I lap her up.

But soon, I let go, grip her hips to steady her, then rise. I plant a soft, tender kiss on her neck and travel to her ear. "You taste incredible," I whisper.

She breathes out heavily, her eyes glossy, her face flushed. "I want to know how you taste."

"That can be arranged," I say, and I'm giddy, fucking giddy, about the pending blow job. I don't think I've ever been more excited for one.

I can't wait to experience her mouth.

Because it's Sierra.

A minute later, my clothes are on the floor. Don't know where, don't care. Sinking onto the edge of the bed, I spread my legs as she gets down on her knees.

Such a beautiful position for this woman and me.

“Confession: I've been thinking about sucking your cock for a long time,” she says, so deliciously dirty as she stares at my face then my aching cock.

I whimper. Is this my life? Can this decadence never end? “Let's find out if doing is better than thinking,” I say, toying with the lush strands of her hair.

“Let's.” She dips her face to my dick, and the second she wraps a hand around the base and licks the head, I have the answer—doing is infinitely better than imagining.

Especially when Sierra draws me into her mouth, licking as she takes me in.

My whimpers turn to moans, then wild grunts as I shake with pleasure. “That's so fucking good,” I rasp out.

It's not going to take me long at all. I'm so amped up from going down on her. So aroused from being near her all night long.

I'm already close as she gazes up at me. Fire sparks in those light brown eyes as she grins wickedly.

With a hand around her head, I gently urge her to take me a little deeper. Her naughty smile grows wider as she swallows me farther.

I shudder at the sight. “That's right, gorgeous. You look so good like that,” I tell the beauty at my feet.

The woman seems to want to show off, licking and sucking with fervor as she runs her palms up and down my thighs, watching my face the whole time.

She doesn't look away, and her filthy gaze turns me on more.

With a firm hand cupped around the back of her head, I thrust a little harder, pump a little deeper. The pleasure

intensifies, coiling tightly in my stomach, then just bursts through my body. I don't even have time to warn her as my climax barrels down my spine.

But she doesn't seem to need one. She swallows my release with a throaty purr, and I groan for days. Starbursts spark behind my eyes as I pant and gasp, bathing in the truly fantastic orgasm.

Sierra lets go of me with a loud pop, climbs up, then wraps her arms around me. I toss her on her back. "Can I kiss you?"

"Of course." She laughs.

We taste like the kind of deep, wild connection I've never had. I don't know what we are, or what we're doing. All I know is I don't want us to end.

Closing a game is so much easier than figuring out how to have the woman I want, and follow my code too.

SIERRA

There's one hour till I leave for the city of sin, so as I prep food and cat litter in my apartment, I give my main man some love.

"Lynn will pop by tonight, so behave. Be a gentleman for the cat sitter," I tell Tom as I set his favorite kibble on the counter.

He purrs louder, rubbing his side against my legs.

"I know it's hard for you to be good with the ladies, but do your best. Maybe she'll introduce you to her new foster cat. I met her—and Lady Cat is gorgeous."

His rumbles intensify.

"But she'll probably find a home soon," I tell him. Lynn lives down the hall and fosters for a local rescue. Her newest is a gorgeous Siamese kitty. "I bet you wouldn't be able to keep your paws off her if you saw her," I coo.

He presses his side against my calf, which is cat for, *You're soooo right.*

I bend to scratch his chin. "Of course I'll miss you. But I'll be back soon and"—I drop my voice to a conspiratorial whisper—"I got you a new catnip mouse."

Tom cranks up the purr-o-meter. I kiss his head, sighing happily. "You're a good boy. And thank you for understanding I need a little downtime."

He lifts his front paws, setting them on my legs, asking for me to pick him up. I give in, naturally, nuzzling him for a few minutes. “Okay, love. Soon it’ll be you and me. For now, I’m going to pack.”

Zoey is in charge of the bar while I’m gone, like we planned when I scheduled the trip. Last night at The Spotted Zebra, she grabbed me by the shoulders, pushed me out the door, and said, “Don’t come back until after Vegas. And I mean that lovingly.”

As I grab my suitcase, now empty of bikinis and sundresses, my phone trills. Chance’s name flashes on the screen. A spark of heat zips through me.

“Hey there.”

“Hey. Want to pack together?”

“On the phone?” I ask.

“Yes. On the phone.”

My heart thunders. He is too sweet. “Let’s do it,” I say, delighted over this invitation to do such a pedestrian thing together.

As I move through my apartment, setting teddies and bras, little dresses, and sexy boots into my luggage, I cradle the phone against my ear, talking to him. “I’m almost done,” I say, a little sassy.

“Beat ya! I tossed in another Henley. I’m done. Packed.”

“Show-off,” I say with a huff. “Also, I didn’t know it was a packing race, and I’m still loading up my bag with little lacy numbers.”

“Keep going. Add more,” he says intensely, like a coach encouraging me.

I yank open a drawer and grab a red bra. I snap a pic and send it to him. “Check your texts, handsome.”

A few seconds later, a groan comes my way. “Pack. That. Now.”

“I. Will.” I drop the lace into my carry-on. “Have you talked to your bullpen? Sung lullabies to the jades and the aloes before you take off for a couple of days?”

Maybe prepping like this is risky, since it makes me feel so *couple-y* with him. That’s dangerous. But he sure seems like he can’t stay away from me, and I can’t stay away from him. We texted all day long yesterday and saw each other last night. He came over when I closed up The Spotted Zebra, bringing Chinese food and condoms. Once inside my place, he bent me over the kitchen table and fucked the long day straight out of my mind. Then we curled up on the couch and ate cold noodles and moo shu pancakes while scrolling through Webflix as Tom stretched across Chance’s legs, purring.

We never watched a show though. Sleep won over, and in the morning, Chance took off early to work out with Crosby and Harlan.

Now, here we are again.

Talking, like we do this on the reg.

I add another pair of heels as he answers me about the plants. “I reassured them all that I won’t be gone any longer than I normally am during the season,” he says. “They’re very hardy. They don’t need that much from me,” he says. “But I did remind them I’m going to New York straight from Vegas so they aren’t surprised when I don’t return right away.”

The morning I leave Vegas to return home, he jets off to New York for an event with a watchmaker. We’ll spend two nights together then say goodbye.

But what happens *after* Vegas?

No idea.

I focus on the here and now. “You sound like me talking to my cat, giving him all the details of my life. Who needs more reassurance though? Dennis, Trevor or Mariano?”

He laughs. “Actually, Sandy does.”

As I zip up my bag, I cycle through famous closing pitchers. I don’t want to be baseball illiterate, but I come up

short. “Fine. I’ll just admit it. I can’t think of any closers named Sandy.”

“Aha. That’s because Sandy isn’t a closer.”

Wait. Does he mean the greatest pitcher ever? “Sandy Koufax? The one and only? You named a plant after a starter? You tricked me.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me and that you’ll understand I had to ease you into my plant collection slowly.” He takes a deep breath, making an audible show of girding himself to say something hard. “But now you should know, I also have an entire starting pitcher lineup,” he confesses.

I laugh, my hand flying to my mouth. “That’s seriously even cuter.”

“So I’m cute *and* I’m adorable. Hmm.”

“The cutest and the most adorable.”

He sighs happily. “Some men might be bothered by those adjectives, but I asked Google if it’s a compliment that a beautiful, brilliant babe calls you cute and it said yes.”

“Did you really ask Google?”

“I did.”

Okay, that’s even more adorable. He’s almost too delicious. “Tell me more about your starting lineup right now. I need to know everything. Who is in it?”

As I wheel my suitcase to the door, he rattles off the details. “I’ve got a hens-and-chicks named Don Drysdale. I have a burro’s tail named Nolan Ryan. And the aloe vera is Pedro Martinez.”

“And do you talk to them as well? Ask them to watch over you on the mound?” I ask, hoping he says yes. That’d be another thing we have in common—I talk to my cat, he talks to his plants.

“Actually, I ask them to help me be a good teammate. Something I strive to do every day.” His tone is serious, a marked shift from seconds ago.

That's so sweet that I murmur an *aww*. "That's lovely, Chance. And I suspect you're a great teammate," I say, my heart beating a little faster as he opens up to me about his career.

I flash back to the comments he made about Natasha on the plane. How she didn't support his job. But I do, and I want him to know that. "I bet all the guys see you that way too. They rely on you. You bring so much to the team."

He's quiet for a few seconds. "I hope so. I hope what's happening between you and me doesn't change things."

What's happening.

I want to clutch those words, hold them close to my heart. They seem to mean so much more than a fling. They seem to suggest something special is *what's happening*.

But those aren't the words I key in on first.

A knot of tension winds tighter in me. "Change things with my brother? Is that what you mean? Change things with all the Cougars?"

"Yes," he says heavily. "I don't want to be the guy who rocks the boat, you know? Who messes with the team chemistry?"

"We're not doing anything wrong. We're still on the same page, Chance. And really, what changed? Grant already knows we went to the wedding together on a fake date," I say, but I don't feel convinced from my words.

This isn't fake dating with Chance.

This is real dating. And we both know it.

"But it's not fake anymore, Sierra," he says, calling me on that. "That's why I worry."

If he's looking to me for reassurance that this fling is okay, I don't know that I can give it to him. I do my best, though. "But we both know the score, right? Just a few more nights together," I say, but can't bring myself to add *since neither one of us wants more*.

Since, well, I want more.

Another pause. Another heavy breath. “Of course we do,” he says, like he’s injecting cheer into his voice. “And we’re going to have a great time in Vegas.”

“We’re going to have the best time. And speaking of, I’ll swing by in the Lyft and pick you up on the way,” I say.

“Can’t wait to see you.”

After I hang up, I return to his comments about the team and how he wants to do right by the guys. Wants to follow his code. Should I let my brother know that his teammate and I are taking a trip? I certainly don’t need to disclose we slept together. That’s private and none of Grant’s business. But am I keeping a secret if I don’t tell my brother we’re heading out of town for a few days?

I hover my thumb over my text thread with Grant. He’s still in Hawaii on his first vacation with Declan. I don’t want to bother him with my stuff.

And really, does Grant need to know about Vegas?

No. I’m a grown woman. I’m allowed to take a trip with his teammate.

Besides, Chance and I have an expiration date. Surely, this situationship will end of its own accord when we return from Vegas.

Ugh.

The thought is a punch in the gut, and I need a friend to soothe the pain. I switch over to my texts with Clementine.

Sierra: Hey . . . I need to talk to you.

Clementine: Uh-oh. What’s up?

I close my eyes, set a hand on my heart, try to calm it down. Then I open my eyes and type.

Sierra: I think I really like Chance.

Two seconds later, my phone rings. In the background, a warbly voice announces the next flight is leaving Maui in

twenty minutes. She must be on her way home from the wedding.

“Hey,” I say. “Sorry to bug you while you’re at the airport.”

“Nonsense. I always have time for you. So you really like him,” she repeats.

“I do, and we’re about to go to Vegas,” I say, swallowing past the knot in my throat.

“And it makes you sad? You sound really sad, sweetie.”

“I feel that way right now,” I say, but I also feel foolish. I shouldn’t have any fluttery feelings about a sex getaway. That’s all this is. Yet it hardly seems like one now.

“You can still have fun with him. Just focus on that. But are you sure he doesn’t want anything more?”

“That’s what he said. That’s what I said too. So, I’ve got to take him at his word.”

She sighs heavily. “Just guard your heart then. But you’ve always been good at that. It’s second nature for you.”

“Is it?” I ask, surprised by her swift assessment.

She scoffs. “Sierra, you’ve been like that ever since I’ve known you. You learned early how to keep your guard up. And you use it wisely. I never worry about you getting hurt. You’re so tough.”

I’ve had to be tough because of my parents. Because of the way I grew up. They’re the reason I’m not impulsive. They’re the reason I work my ass off. They’re the reason I’m always looking out for myself.

Going away with Chance is impulsive, though, and I like this impulsive part of me.

I like this part of me that cares about another person. I like the part of me that’s starting to have feelings for him.

Because I do want a little more.

I want more than sex.

I want *him*.

My throat tightens with emotion. This was supposed to be a crush, but after only a few short days in Hawaii, I'm already longing for something deeper.

Trouble is, I'm not sure he'll let himself move beyond a fling with me.

So, I'll go to Vegas and do my best to live in the here and now. If Chance and I won't last beyond this tryst, I'll make sure to savor every last second with him.

I wipe away my emotions.

I am in the Vegas zone.

CHANCE

As I lock the door to my home and head out, the sweet soprano voice of a six-year-old floats up from the street. “Silver! We can do silver this time, Daddy.”

“*We? We*, sweetheart? There was no *we* about that. That was a sleep sneak attack by *you*,” Harlan says to his daughter.

“And you loved it. You left the color on all week.”

“Because it looked darn fine,” he says proudly.

As I bound down the steps, I lift a hand to say hi to my friend and his kid. They live a block away, so I run into them often. “How about gold, Abby? Do you think your dad’s toes would look good in gold?”

Her bright eyes light up. “Gold. And silver, and bronze, and rose gold,” she adds, counting off.

Harlan just shrugs easily, gesturing to the end of the street. “We’re going shopping for nail polish now.”

Abby squares her tiny shoulders. “So I can give Daddy a manicure too,” she declares.

I bend to get eye-level with the curly-haired brunette. “Be sure to buy scissors. Cut his hair next,” I whisper.

She claps. “Ooh, that’s such a good idea. Daddy, I’m going to cut your hair today.”

Harlan shoots me a searing stare. “Thanks, man. Thanks a lot.” His gaze drifts to my overnight bag. “You out of town again?”

“Off to Vegas for a couple nights. And then to New York straight from there.”

“Ooh, can I water your plants while you’re gone?” Abby offers as a red Nissan turns onto the block. My Spidey senses tingle—I have a feeling that’s Sierra’s Lyft.

I’ll only be gone for five days, but Abby loves to take care of the pitching corps. “That would be fantastic. Can you do that on Wednesday? Is she with you on Wednesday?” I ask Harlan.

He nods. “Indeed she is. I have a game this weekend, so she’ll be with her mom after that. But Wednesday is good.”

I turn back to Abby. “You still have the door code from last time?”

She recites her personal code.

“Brilliant,” I say, then tap her code into the Nest to activate it for the next week. “But don’t polish their leaves.”

She laughs. “You’re so silly. I’d never do that.”

“Thanks for helping out.”

“I can’t wait,” she says with so much spirit she could run a cheer squad.

“Good luck with the hair and nails,” I say as the Lyft slows to a stop. I turn my gaze to the woman in the back seat and a smile spreads on my face. *Hey there*, I mouth.

Harlan’s eyes drift to the car, then to me. “Does Grant know you’re seeing his sister?”

Talk about direct. A kernel of tension tightens in my gut. “Yes,” I say, but that’s not entirely true. “Mostly, I mean.”

Harlan chuckles, scratching his chin. “Mostly isn’t yes, my friend.”

“Trust me, I know. But Grant’s on vacay and . . .”

He nods a few times. “I hear ya. And hey, you like who you like. Just, maybe, tell him when you can.”

That knot twists my stomach. “It’s just a getaway trip. Nothing more.”

With a doubtful expression, Harlan pats my shoulder. “Didn’t look like just a getaway trip when you stared stupidly at her two seconds ago like you were falling for her,” he says, then wheels around, picks up his daughter, and lifts her onto his shoulders. “And now, we’re off to the store.”

“Yay! It’s a Daddy-back ride,” Abby declares, then blows me a kiss as she’s carried off.

I take a few seconds to collect my thoughts. To process that word he flung my way.

Falling.

Yes, I like Sierra. Yes, maybe I’m thinking about more than a fling. But falling? No way can that be happening so quickly.

Just no way.

I’m not that kind of guy. She’s not that kind of woman. That just won’t happen to us, no matter how stupidly I stare or how fast my heart hammers when I see her.

I slide into the back seat, kiss her soft cheek, and head to the airport.

* * *

Tight black jeans.

Short gray boots.

A slinky silver top that slopes off her shoulder.

Mmm. I am living my best life here in Vegas as I admire my date. I retrieve my credit card from the bill at the sushi joint as she returns from the restroom, gloss reapplied, her lips all pink and even more kissable.

“Stop being so distracting, woman. I can’t concentrate on anything but you,” I say as I fill in the tip amount then stand.

“Maybe I don’t want you to concentrate on anything else,” she says, stopping in front of me, then letting her fingers travel along the buttons of my shirt.

I clasp her hand and we leave the restaurant. “And now let’s see Lulu.”

“I can’t wait to check her out. And I definitely want your opinion, okay?” Sierra asks, and it makes me happy, too, to be a part of her professional life. “I trust your judgement.”

“We will do a thorough post-mortem,” I say as we head through the concourse of The Extravagant, soundtracked by the cha-ching of slot machines, the clink of glasses, and the whir of the roulette wheel.

“Do you want to play later?” I ask.

“Slots? Blackjack? Poker?”

“Any of the above. Though, honestly, you don’t strike me as a gambler,” I say as we weave past the craps tables.

“I’m not really. You might have noticed—I’m *not* the most impulsive person,” she says in a stage whisper.

“Yeah, I might have noticed. You like to take your time. Noodle on things. Contemplate them.”

“That’s me to a T.” She lets out a long exhale then meets my gaze even as we walk. “That’s why I waited so long to have sex.”

I never asked why she’d waited. Asking would imply there was something wrong with her taking her time. Some people just wait. Sometimes you’re not ready. Sometimes circumstances hold you back. Sometimes you simply don’t meet the right person at the right time.

But I do want to know.

“You waited because you’re not impulsive?” I ask.

“Yes, and that’s because of my parents. They did what they wanted when they wanted. They didn’t care about consequences. They had Grant when they were sixteen and me when they were eighteen, and they weren’t interested in us,”

she says, matter-of-factly, but I bet it took her a long time to get to the place where she could be so direct about that.

“And your grandparents mostly raised you then? Grant’s talked about them, introduced me to them. But I never knew the details.”

“Our parents fought a ton when we were growing up. They were hotheaded and foul-mouthed. It was really hard on Grant since he’s a couple years older, and he bore the brunt of it,” she says as we walk past a man in a suit who shouts *Jackpot*, one fist in the air. Seems I’m not the only one getting lucky in Vegas.

We follow the signs for the comedy club as she shares: “They were so focused on their own things. My mom’s a singer; Dad’s a guitar player. They were interested in club gigs way more than raising us, so they were barely even around, but when they were around, they fought. We were afterthoughts.”

That hurts my heart. I wish she hadn’t gone through that pain. “I’m so sorry you had to deal with that,” I say, squeezing her hand.

She squeezes back. “Thanks. But I’m lucky. My grandparents pretty much raised me, and I love them like crazy.” Her soft smile spreads as her eyes flicker with happiness, perhaps inspired by memories of those two. “But still, I didn’t want to be distracted from my goals. I wanted to go to college, do well, save money. So I put sex on the back burner until after I finished studying.”

This speaks volumes about Sierra—her work ethic, her focus, hell, even her matching panties.

“You want to live life on your own terms,” I say, as we reach the club. We stop outside the entrance, and I tug her into a quiet corner of the hallway to chat more. “And for sex, that meant you wanted to wait. Those were *your* terms.”

Her shoulders seem to lighten, like she’s relieved to share her reason. “I needed the right man, the right time. I wanted to be an adult. That’s what I needed,” she says, laying bare her

wishes for me, and I love being let in so deeply. It's a rush to get to know her more. To hear what's going on in her mind.

"And how are you handling it?" I ask.

She shoots me a shy smile. "Pretty damn well," she says, then runs a hand down my shirt again. "I'm glad I waited. Glad I wasn't impulsive. But . . . that also means I kind of want to be that way this weekend. I've spent so many nights focused on the bar, building it to be one of the best in the city. I've been lasered in on work responsibilities and paying off loans. But now? On this trip? I kind of want to let loose and forget my bar baby. It's safe with Zoey babysitting, so I can go out and have all the fun. Gamble. Take chances. Dance, stay out late, play blackjack. I feel like I can be impulsive with you."

She sounds delighted with the prospect of doing it up in the city of sin, and hell, I am too. But what I like even more is that what she's really saying is that she trusts me. Proof that we can return to the way we were when Vegas ends. "Count me in for all that."

"I will," she promises, and we make our way to the club door.

A throat clears, and I turn. A young woman with lush brown hair and olive skin flashes me a tentative grin. "Excuse me. Are you Last Chance Train?" She squeezes her shoulders like she's on pins and needles for my answer.

"That's me," I say.

"Ah! I thought it might be you. I'm a huge Cougars fan, and I was at the ballpark when you threw the final pitch of the World Series last year. It was amazing." She presses her hand to her heart as if the memory lives there, then turns to Sierra. "Wasn't it?"

"It was incredible," Sierra agrees.

The woman bounces in her Converse sneakers. "Can I take a pic?"

"Of course," I say.

“Do you want me to take it?” Sierra offers.

“Oh my God, that would be amazing,” she says. “By the way, I’m Bianca.”

“Nice to meet you, Bianca,” I say as I line up next to her.

Sierra snaps a picture. Bianca looks on the back of the camera, then thanks us before she practically skips down the hall.

My date shoots me an approving grin. “Look at you with your baller lifestyle, getting recognized and all.”

That’s the trouble, though.

I’m not wildly famous, but I’m known well enough that someone else might spot us, might take another picture.

A shot with a fan is one thing. But a candid snap of Sierra and me? Is that how I want Grant to find out I’m here with her?

Hell, no.

There are loopholes in the bro code, and then there’s flagrant disregard, and I need to be on the right side of that line.

“I should tell Grant we’re here. Just in case someone else sees us,” I say.

Worry flickers in Sierra’s eyes, then she nods. “Of course.”

Once inside the club, we grab a table, and I tap out a note to Grant on my phone.

Chance: Hey. Just wanted you to know I’m hanging out with your sister in Vegas for a few days. We had a great time in Hawaii, so we’re spending more time together.

I show it to her. “Straightforward,” she says diplomatically.

Yeah, the text is direct. It covers the facts, not the feelings. But at least I’ve said something to my friend. I probably should say more, but not tonight.

I turn the phone on silent, slip it into my front pocket, and wrap my arm around Sierra’s shoulder, pulling her close. “By

the way, this is not hanging out. This is a helluva lot more.”

She nestles closer, something like a shudder moving through her. “It is for me too, Chance.”

We settle in and watch the show, enjoying the show, enjoying each other.

The trouble is, I’m pretty sure Harlan was dead right, and I have no clue what that means for the code, for my rules, and for the man I want to be.

All I know is this—I want to be with Sierra well beyond Las Vegas, whatever that may look like.

However that might play out.

SIERRA

I never knew how I'd feel about morning sex.

As the sun rises above the horizon, rosy light streaming through the window, Chance murmurs a sultry *good morning*, then tugs me against him.

In all of two seconds, I decide I very much want to find out if I like morning sex.

He pulls my back to his chest, peppers kisses all along my neck, and into my hair. Whispering sweet nothings like *beautiful, so soft, so gorgeous*.

“Love your hair and this sexy, pink strand,” he whispers as he runs a finger along that colorful lock of my hair. “It’s so very you.”

I smile into his touches, enjoying that he’s already figuring me out. But mostly enjoying the way he’s touching me, those big, strong hands roaming up my stomach, making me shiver.

Chance cups my breasts, squeezing them, drawing out a long, low moan from my throat. He presses his body harder against me, his thick cock announcing its intentions right up against my ass.

I wiggle against his erection as a burst of lust swirls through me. “Mmm. I want you.”

“Let me grab a condom,” he says, reaching for one on the nightstand.

As he covers himself, my hand drifts down between my thighs, and I stroke. “I’m so turned on already,” I whisper, and my God, it’s freeing to say what I want to someone I trust. A man I want. A man I can share my fantasies with.

“Good. Me too,” he rasps against my neck. “I’m turned on just from waking up next to you.”

“Your kisses got me all worked up.” I stroke a little faster, savoring the wetness—the slick, hot feel of already being this aroused.

Pushing my thigh up toward my chest, he rubs the head of his cock against my center.

I groan, closing my eyes, relishing the sleepy morning sexy times. He eases inside, and I gasp, thrilling at the feel of him, sliding inch by delicious inch into my body.

Once he’s all the way there, he moves in slow, luxurious strokes, like we have all the time in the world. Like he wants to revel in my body. His hands travel everywhere, coasting up and down my skin, always returning to my breasts. “Grab them harder,” I tell him, urging him on.

He growls against my neck, biting down on my skin as he grips my breasts. “Like that?”

“Yes. Just like that.”

He squeezes while he rocks into me. “I want it all with you. I just do.”

I want it all with him too.

More than sex.

More than these nights in Las Vegas.

Seconds later, we come together. It’s rough and passionate, and then, he’s soft and tender as he kisses my shoulder, murmuring, “You’re incredible. You’ve gone to my head, Sierra.” His voice is stripped bare and vulnerable, and I feel like we’re both tiptoeing closer to a brand-new reality. One that scares the hell out of me and maybe him too.

What if this thing between us is becoming the very thing we both sought to avoid?

* * *

The rest of the day, we indulge.

We play poker, we go to a magic show, we buy chocolate-covered strawberries, and we play slots.

Late in the afternoon, while we're parked at an *Aladdin* machine, Chance's phone vibrates in his pocket. He takes it out, squints, then winces. "It's Grant."

"Go ahead. Read it," I say, hoping that whatever Grant writes isn't going to make Chance withdraw, or worry we're doing something wrong.

I've known all along that my brother's not the real issue, but the code is for Chance, and Grant's connected to that.

Chance shows me the message.

Grant: Thanks for the heads up. You better be good to her. That is all I have to say.

It's permission, in a way. Maybe an acknowledgment that this trip doesn't violate the code. "So how does that make you feel?"

Chance mulls it over, letting go of a long breath and some of the tension that crept in when he saw Grant had replied. "Better. I feel like as long as I'm good to you, I can have the things I'm looking for."

"You are good to me," I reassure him.

But will I still think that when this ends? When our deadline expires tomorrow morning? When he goes to New York and I head home to The Spotted Zebra?

I don't think he's bad news, or that he'll treat me badly. But I do fear the end of us could be hard on me. That letting him in so deeply brings so many risks, no matter how good he is.

“Why is the code so important to you?”

He inhales deep, contemplating the question. “Why do I love baseball?” he muses. “Why do I talk to plants? That’s just who I am. I’m a guy who believes in rules and the benefits of them. I want people to be happy. I’ve always been that way, and after my parents split, I probably became even more like that. At the wedding, TJ pointed out that I was always the guy who tried to make sure everyone got along.”

That sounds exactly like Chance. Grant told me how, back when he joined the team, Chance had been one of the first guys to truly welcome him to the Cougars.

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing,” I say. “I’ve also noticed TJ has a lot of opinions. At the wedding, he told *me* not to break your heart.” I put that out there to gauge how Chance might react to the idea of his heart being at stake.

His lips curve into a grin. “Is that so? He gave you the big brother warning?”

“Oh, yes. He sure did.”

Chance swallows roughly, then tugs me closer. “I’d like to second that. Don’t break my heart, Sierra,” he whispers, his voice tight with emotion.

Whoa.

I wasn’t expecting that. Maybe this is a new stage of the code—saying without words that we both want more. That we’re going to give dating a shot beyond Vegas.

“I promise,” I say.

It feels like we’re in a cocoon of bliss, of possibilities. Possibilities that I desperately want.

* * *

That evening, we go to The Cosmopolitan to see the bartender I wanted to check out. Her bar tricks are movie-level amazing, with breathtaking long-pours and bottle-flips. It’s impossible to look away.

But enjoying her drinks?

The opposite of impossible. They're as good as her tricks and as strong as her talent.

After a couple of cocktails, my head buzzes. My skin tingles. Everything feels warm and fantastic.

The world is gleaming silver and gold, and Chance and I can't stop touching and kissing and drinking.

When we leave the bar, he gestures to a sign for a night club. "In the mood to dirty dance?"

"Always."

In the club, we order more drinks, under the smoky haze and purple lights, we grind against each other, letting loose to the music.

As I float on the high of this night, I feel a million miles away from work and responsibilities. I'm breaking all the rules, shedding the last year of workaholism, and it's spectacular.

It's freedom and sensuality.

It's indulgence.

In the middle of a particularly dirty bump and grind, while the club is pulsing and we are swaying, a woman and a man rush to the center of the dance floor. The couple sports *Just Married* T-shirts, and they thrust their hands into the air, wild glee in their eyes.

I look at Chance, wiggle an eyebrow.

"That's so very impulsive," he says, nodding at their shirts.

"So very Vegas," I second.

He leans closer, shouting in my ear. "What Vegas trip is complete without a spontaneous wedding?"

None.

That sounds wicked. Thrilling. And utterly out of character.

"It's a must-do," I shout.

He locks eyes with me, his dark and hooded, more intense than they've ever been. "Let's get married."

CHANCE

That's what this adventure is all about—fun.

Letting go.

Saying yes.

Sierra and I make a fast exit for the car line at the front of the hotel. This is the best idea ever. It's so good it's bad, because I'm not a good guy. I'm a bad one.

I've had enough of codes, enough of coloring within the lines.

I'm done with them for tonight. I want to throw out the good guy rules in spectacular style.

We step out into the Nevada night, and I shout, "Screw the code." Even in Vegas, I'm noticeably loud. People spin and stare, eyes roaming over us.

I bring my finger to my lips. "Oops." I say, then tiptoe over-dramatically to the car service I ordered, Sierra laughing as we go.

We slide into the vehicle holding each other up, holding our sides. But the laughing stops once we leave the hotel. We make out the whole way to the Las Vegas Marriage License office.

* * *

Two hours later, we stumble through our hotel lobby, holding hands, wearing our *Just Married* sashes and matching rings glinting on our fingers. We pass crowds of guests, including the friendly woman from last night.

“Bianca! We’re married,” I call out to her as she wanders past an *Avengers* slot machine.

Sierra waggles the flowers as evidence. “Mr. and Mrs!”

“Eeek! Yay! I love weddings! Congrats,” the brunette says, then throws her arms around both of us and hugs hard.

We say goodbye and make our way up the elevator then down our hall. I scoop Sierra up, carry her over the threshold and kick the door closed.

The lust that’s been running hot all night hits a new level.

I bring her to the bed and drop her onto the mattress, ready to have her. Seconds later, we’re stripped down to nothing.

I push her knees wide open and bury my face in the paradise between her thighs, kissing and licking and working her over till she’s begging for me inside her.

“Please, Chance. Now.”

I rise and grab a condom, suiting up. “Get those sexy legs over my shoulders because I want to fuck my wife hard on the bed.”

She does as I ask, and soon, I’m sliding home. Once I’m there, I’m sure coming to Vegas with her was the craziest decision I’ve made, at least recently, but maybe the best one too.

I lower my chest to hers, and we find just the right rhythm.

She moans and I groan, and we move in tandem. Her fingers play with my hair. “God, it’s so good with you. Everything feels so good with you,” she murmurs.

Those words—all of them—hook into my heart. They dig into my mind. They make me feel incredible.

And I want to feel connected too.

No—even more connected. I slow down, look into her eyes, and the enormity of the moment crashes over me.

I'm sleeping with my wife.

And everything feels right.

I wrap my arms under and around her shoulders.

“Chance,” she whispers. It sounds full of all sorts of beauty and wonder. “I’m falling for you.”

A dam breaks somewhere inside me. I’m so relieved she said it first. So glad I can say it too.

“Oh, Sierra, I’m already there,” I reply, and then I bury my face in her neck as we come together, all limbs and sweat and promises made in the city of sin after midnight.

CHANCE

Sunlight streams cruelly through the windows.

A sledgehammer hits my head.

Not just once, but over and over.

I blink my eyes as far open as a squint.

I haven't seen the inside of a hangover in years, and I'm seeing the inside, outside and upside-down of one right now.

An obnoxious ring blares from my phone.

Again.

And again.

Fumbling for it, I find it on the nightstand and hit snooze.

Sierra doesn't rustle.

I trudge to the bathroom, hunt for some ibuprofen, down them, and return to bed.

Curling up next to Sierra, I conk out for another twenty minutes.

* * *

The alarm blasts again.

Loud.

Insistent.

What time is it?

“Oh crap.” Sierra’s worry registers, and I push up on my elbows, yawning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, catching a glimpse of gold on my finger.

Oh.

Right.

Yup.

We had the bright idea last night to get hitched.

Which was crazy, but hell, did it feel good at the time.

I think?

I scratch my head. Everything feels fuzzy.

“Your flight. It leaves in an hour and twenty. Mine leaves in an hour and ten. Shit, shit, shit!” She flies out of bed, naked as the day she was born.

She slams the bathroom door shut, and seconds later, the faucet is running.

The sound of furious teeth brushing accompanies me as I jump out of bed, hoof it to my bag for some boxer briefs, and quickly get dressed.

Two minutes later, Sierra swings open the door. “We need to go ASAP.”

“I know,” I say, as my head pounds again, and I groan in frustration.

“I’m annoyed too,” she mutters as she grabs her clothes from the bed, wheeling around to snag more from the floor.

“That annoyed voice was for my . . . headache. It’s like a murder went down in my brain,” I say as I head to the bathroom with my bag.

“I think my brain was an accessory to the crime. Maybe an alibi,” she says, stuffing shoes into her bag.

Checking the time again, I speed-brush my teeth, scoop all my toiletries into my arms and dump them in my carry-on. I grab some ibuprofen and pour a glass of water, then bring it to her. “Here. This should help. My headache is a little better already.”

Her shoulders relax as she pops the pills in her mouth then swallows them. “Thanks,” she says, and she sets the cup on the bureau.

I scan the room for stray belongings and grab my watch from the nightstand, along with my phone charger. As Sierra stuffs her feet into flats, I dump everything into my bag, stopping when I find the *Just Married* sashes poking out from under the bed.

What do I do with these? They’re hardly a souvenir.

But I can’t bring myself to toss them, so I stuff them into my suitcase.

“I’ll call a Lyft,” I say, entering the info in my app.

Fifteen minutes after we get up, we rush out of the suite, Mr. and Mrs. I Have No Fucking Clue What Is Happening.

In the elevator, I turn to face her. “So . . .”

“Yeah . . . so.” She gazes down at her hand, staring at it like her ring-finger has turned blue.

“I guess we got married last night,” I say, heavily.

What the hell kind of insane idea was that? Caught up in the night and the feelings, that’s what I came up with? A Vegas wedding?

How about: *I’m falling in love with you. Let’s stay together and date.*

Instead, I blurted out *let’s get married* because that’s . . . fun?

I should have turned to Google.

To TJ.

To my own brain.

Instead, I went with my drunken heart.

Sierra sighs too, raising her left hand. “I guess we did.”

The elevator arrives at the ground floor with a *ding*.

Vegas is an empty stage in the morning—lights up, artifice exposed. The magic of the neon nights vanishes at dawn. What’s left is overturned glasses, big bets lost, and decisions bathed in regret.

I steal a glance at Sierra. Does she regret last night? “So, um,” I begin, my throat raspy from the shouting at the club. “Do we just get . . .” I break away, barely able to voice the words. But I have to say them. “. . . an annulment?”

She winces like the thought causes physical pain. She lifts her hand to her head, sets her palm on her forehead, and lets out a low, plaintive moan.

“Your head still hurts?”

She nods, cringing like she’s trying to fight off the pain.

“We can talk about this another time,” I say gently.

But can we? And when? What the hell do we do to fix this? To undo this?

Once we’re at the entrance, I spot our Lyft quickly. I set our bags in the trunk before the driver can and slide inside.

“Airport, right?”

“Yup,” I say as I buckle in and Sierra does the same.

She lifts her face, sighs. “Yes to the annulment,” she says, returning to the issue. “I mean, that seems the simplest. Maybe the airport has a booth for annulments?”

I laugh humorlessly. “They have slot machines. Seems they ought to have quickie divorce options.”

Divorce.

That word tastes like spoiled milk.

“They definitely should.” She looks down at her phone. “It’ll be close, but we should make it.”

“Good, good.” I don’t know what else to say.

Hey, let’s not get annulled.

Let’s go out on more dates.

I search for annulments at the airport but come up empty.
“I guess they don’t offer—”

She interrupts with a muttered, “Oh God.”

“What’s wrong now?”

Brandishing her phone, she shows me a picture.

A photo of us with our *Just Married* sashes on.

Dread coils in me. If she’s got that picture, everyone does. That means everyone’s going to know I broke the rules. I violated the code. I’m *not* a good guy.

“Where’s that from?” I ask nervously.

“Clementine sent it to me. She said, *Congratulations, you little stinker. Next time I want to be there.* Said she saw it on Insta. And here’s another one, from my friend Erin. *Omg that is so epic.* And my brother. *Something you want to tell me?*”

With a groan, I click open my phone, and like Sierra’s, my texts light up.

Shane: You sneaky, cheeky fucker! Congrats!

Harlan: Guess you did realize you were falling after all!

TJ: Details. Now.

Grant: I go away to Hawaii, you pretend to date my sister, take her to Vegas, and then get married. Okayyyy!????

One more click over to Instagram confirms that Bianca tagged us in a photo at the hotel last night. I don’t even remember her taking one. But clearly, I don’t recall a lot of last night.

I meet Sierra’s gaze and shrug helplessly. “I guess we were impulsive last night,” I say in the biggest of understatement.

“Just a little bit.” Her tone is strained.

A few minutes later, the car pulls up at the airport. There's no time to dwell on our next step, though—a quick ride up the escalator reveals a long line at security.

“TSA pre-check,” Sierra says, pointing and race walking.

That line isn't short either. But after fifteen minutes of raw nerves and *c'mons* muttered under my breath, we make it to the other side.

My phone flashes with an alert that my flight to New York is boarding now.

She shows me hers. Her flight is already boarding group C.

“I need to go,” she says, sounding as lost as I feel.

I part my lips, but no words come.

My head is a mess, a scattered jumble of nonsense.

Saying “Let's get divorced and date,” sounds dumb. Saying “Let's stay married but just date,” sounds even dumber.

That's ridiculous.

Completely and utterly ridiculous.

I lean in, dust a kiss onto her cheek, then say, “I'll take care of this, I promise.”

When we break apart, her brow is knit with worry. “Take care of this?”

I flap a hand in the direction of the city. “You know. Last night.” Tension winds in me like a too-tight instrument. “I meant everything. I'm crazy about you, but I need to go.”

“Me too,” she says, wistful.

I turn and run down the concourse, swipe my boarding pass at the gate, then step onto the jetway.

I turn around for one last look, like this is a movie and she'll run after me. Or I'd rush after her instead, calling, “Wait, I made a terrible mistake,” planting a tender kiss on her lips when I reach her.

Then I'd tell her I'm in love with her.

But this isn't a movie—this is the real world.

And the reality is, I fucked up.

Badly.

SIERRA

“And it all happened so quickly!”

The petite brunette at the bar chirps as she flips her hand back and forth. I’m surprised she can lift it at all, what with the weight of the robin’s egg on her finger. “He asked me to marry him after only a month!”

She snuggles up against her fiancé, a strapping lumberjack type as he flashes a grin. “When you know, you know.”

I shoot them a practiced smile as I slide over their margaritas. “Congratulations. That’s so wonderful. And truly, I’m honored that you met here.”

She coos, stroking the bar. “I love The Spotted Zebra so much. This is our special place, isn’t it, baby?”

He runs a thumb along her jaw. “Always, honey.”

They’re too much. Too perfect. Too in love.

But they’re also proof—one month is fast.

One week, then, is crazy.

Which makes five nights *certifiable*.

What was I thinking? I seriously can’t believe I did that—got married in Vegas. That was just so . . . *not me*.

So out of character.

And yet, I’m so freaking blue listening to this happy couple toast their love and my bar.

“To The Spotted Zebra! All great loves begin here,” the brunette says.

I laugh to cover up the bubble of sadness threatening to burst inside me, and I glance around. This place has always cheered me up. It’s like my kid, making me feel proud and happy at the same time. The bar is the reason I didn’t want to get serious. Hell, it’s the reason I felt so dumb the other morning for getting married on a whim.

But as I look around at the busy joint—it’s jumping—all I see are the spots where Chance and I began.

Right here at the counter, a year ago, when we chatted and I felt those first sparks.

Then back in April, he came here with the guys but spent the whole evening talking to me.

Another visit, over the summer, he stayed late and we played a game of pool.

What did we discuss?

Music, TV, our families, our days.

It’s always just been so easy with Chance. Everything clicked.

And now, when I survey my home away from home, a new thought occurs to me.

This—Chance and me—didn’t happen in five days.

It happened slowly, day by day, night by night.

And damn it, I should have been responsible. Should have just told him I wanted to, well, date like normal adults. Instead, we both went crazy and flew straight at the sun in one wild moment.

The result? We burned too brightly, turning into ash.

I stare down at my hand, my naked finger.

My ring is at home.

All alone.

I take a deep breath, force away the regrets, and slap on a smile for the next round of customers.

* * *

When I return to my place, I slump onto the couch. Tom struts across the floor and hops up to join me.

“Meow?”

He’s asking if I’m okay.

“I don’t know. Yes. No. Maybe?” I answer, then I reach for the gold band I left on the coffee table. Tom parks himself on my lap, stretching out and purring.

I turn the ring over in my fingers, like it holds vital answers. But to what questions? Was it crazy to get married? Were we fools? Was Chance falling in love with me too? Or was what we said after we tied the knot all smoke and mirrors?

Was anything real?

I’ve no idea.

I rub my thumb over the ring. It’s just a piece of metal, meaningless now.

Chance will *take care of it* and end our joke of a marriage.

My phone buzzes, and I click open my texts, hoping it’s him. But of course, it’s three in the morning in Manhattan.

Clementine: Are you okay? Do you want some violet and sage leaf candles? I have a new face mask that’s incredible. Or . . . wine! How about flowers? I picked up some pretty lilies from Frankie’s. I can come over!

Sierra: It’s after midnight, but thank you.

Clementine: Breakfast, then? Let me cheer you up. It’s my special skill.

I smile half-heartedly. It *is* her skill. She’s amazingly happy. And I could use some of that.

I say yes, then I curl up with Tom, wrapping my arms around my cat therapist.

“I just miss Chance, and I feel so stupid,” I tell him, my voice wobbly. “And I think I fucked everything up.”

Tom sets a paw on my chest.

He understands me completely.

CHANCE

I have a new twenty-thousand-dollar watch.

Yay.

And my agent just re-upped me with Victoire and told me *my wife's* matching watch is in the mail, and that it'd have been with me sooner, but she had no idea I was getting married.

Point taken, loud and clear.

As I head to meet Shane for lunch in Gramercy Park, the same sense of what-the-hell-do-I-do hangs over me like a cloud of bad cologne.

I stride down Park Avenue, trying to savor November in New York City. I've always loved Manhattan, from its energy to its take-no-prisoners vibe. From the plethora of food, to the panoply of people, this city gives me life.

This afternoon, though?

I feel . . . regret. For days, it's been swirling in my gut like thick tar, weighing me down.

When I reach the sushi bar, I try to shuck off the feeling.

Don't be a Doug Downer.

Inside, my British friend has already claimed a spot at the bar, and he raises a hand to get my attention. When I reach him, Shane stands, claps me on the back. "How's it going, mate?"

“Great,” I say, mustering enthusiasm I don’t have. Happiness I haven’t located since I messed up royally in the land of big eff-ups.

But I should find some energy. Friends are important. Showing up for them matters. Shane said he has news, so I need to get in the supportive friend zone.

“This place has the best unagi,” he says. “And the scallops will make you want to marry them.”

I shudder.

He chuckles. “Did you have a row with scallops once upon a time?”

“No. Sorry. Gut reaction.”

“Ah. The marriage thing.” He smacks my shoulder. “But you should be happy now. The ex is in the rearview mirror, and you’ve got a lovely new bride. Cheers, mate. We need to celebrate.”

The regret sinks deeper in my stomach.

But what the hell do I regret, exactly? Marrying Sierra? Or is it how I bungled the morning after?

Or maybe, it’s everything.

Every damn thing I did wrong.

Like going about falling in love backward.

But there’s no time to ponder my epic fail any more than I already have—that is, for nearly every waking second since I left Las Vegas—because a waitress arrives and asks if we’d like a drink.

Shane orders a sake, so when in Rome . . .

When the server leaves, Shane arches a brow. “So, marriage. Is it all that the second time around? You seem much happier, judging from that photo.”

I wince, scrub a hand across my jaw. “It’s . . . complicated.”

Shane takes a beat, his brow furrowing, then he seems to put two and two together. “Oh, you’re getting a divorce? It was one of those pissed-in-Vegas-marriage-lark moments, and now you’ve seen the light of day?”

That sounds awful too. “Sort of. I don’t know.”

“This does sound complicated. What’s the story?” He wiggles his fingers. “Serve it up to Shakespeare.”

Sighing, I slump back in the chair, rub my palm across the back of my neck. I’m tired of keeping all this inside. TJ’s been out of town and just returned today, so I won’t see him till later this afternoon. It’ll be good to get this mess of feelings off my chest. “Let’s see. She and I went to my cousin’s wedding as fake dates, leveled-up to real dating, took a spontaneous trip to Vegas, then got married after five days of real/fake dating, but she never wanted a serious relationship and I didn’t think I did either. And now we’re married and need to get divorced. Also, everything sucks.”

It’s a relief to say that out loud after wearing my *everything-is-fantastic* smile around sponsors for the last two days.

Shane takes a deep breath. “That’s a little crazy. I’ll grant you that.”

“Yup.”

The waitress returns with our sakes and I thank her. We order sushi, and when she leaves, I take a drink.

It tastes horrid.

It reminds me of my hangover. I’m never drinking again—add that to my list of regrets. So much for all my rules on how to behave. *Don’t get skunk-faced drunk and post pictures on social.*

Well, I *didn’t* post the pic. But that’s little consolation.

“But,” Shane adds, “I have one little question.”

I try to shove off the personal pity party I’m throwing in my head. “Yeah? What’s that?”

He clears his throat. “You said she never wanted a serious relationship and you *didn’t think* you did either.” He takes a beat. “But do you now?”

There’s no question. “I do.”

“Then start with that as you try to solve *this* problem. Maybe see if she does now too,” he says.

“See if she wants a relationship?”

“Yes. That.”

It’s so simple.

And it’s not a bad idea. In fact, it’s an excellent one. But *how* is the question.

I’ll noodle on it today. Grateful to focus on someone else, I rap my knuckles on the bar. “Tell me your news.”

He grins. “There’s a good chance you’ll be seeing more of me in San Francisco. My agent is in talks with the Dragons about a potential trade. I miss California, so cross your fingers it’ll go through.”

“Holy shit! That’d be awesome, man. So the city would have the best closer in the game in me, and . . . someone sort of decent . . . in you,” I say with a wicked smile.

“You’re such a delight, Chance. I’m so glad I gave you romance advice. You can fuck off with it now,” he says, laughing.

“I hope it comes through. It’ll be good to see you around, Shakespeare,” I add.

And I mean it.

Friends in the same field are golden. That’s why I need to make good with Grant. Make sure I haven’t fucked things up too badly.

When lunch is over, I say goodbye and head to meet TJ. All the way there, I cogitate on an idea that has taken hold of my brain—a plan that could fix this whole situation.

At least, that’s my hope.

* * *

“That’s your plan?” my brother asks, arching a skeptical brow after I give him the details.

“Well, yeah.”

TJ shakes his head as he gathers an iced tea for me and a coffee for himself at Doctor Insomnia’s on Columbus Avenue.

“Wrong.”

“Why is that wrong?”

“You’re in love with Sierra. Right?” he asks as we head to a table.

“Yes, like you kinda guessed at the wedding.”

“So, your plan is to just return to the city, see Grant and tell him, then go to The Spotted Zebra to see her.” He recaps like he wants to make sure he understood exactly what I just said.

But my plan seemed reasonable enough to me. Practical.
“Yes.”

He hums doubtfully and takes a swallow of his coffee.
“And . . . what then? Because that’s a terrible idea.”

Bristling, I lift my mug, take a drink. “I don’t know why you think it’s such a bad idea. It’s practical, like a plan should be.”

Rolling his eyes, he laughs. “Chance, little brother. You’re looking at this the wrong way. You fucked up badly. It’s not time for a *practical* plan. It’s big gesture time. With *the* woman. Go big or go home.”

I wince, that regret turning into a tornado inside me again.
“So that means?”

TJ stares at me, like he’s waiting for me to figure out the answer. “Time to own it.”

I let his words echo and expand in my head.

Own it.

Own my feelings.

Own my choices.

And own my trouble.

In a flash, I see a different ending to our story.

I've been looking at the problem in the wrong light. Just like when I'm on the mound—there's more than one pitch to get you out of a jam.

Some sticky situations call for a blazing fastball. Others require a cutter. Now and then, you need a changeup.

The best closers in the game don't rely on only one pitch to solve a bases-loaded quandary.

I've been throwing the wrong stuff at my bro code. No wonder it blew up spectacularly in Vegas.

Now, I need a better game plan, starting with my catcher.

I smile for the first time since I woke up married to the woman I love.

CHANCE

Back at my hotel, I call Grant on video. This is an in-person convo, but it can't wait, so FaceTime will have to do.

Grant answers after a couple rings, his face appearing on the screen, his hair a mess. He's in his living room, stretched out on his couch. A pair of feet rests on his thighs, just at the edge of the screen. Declan's feet.

"Hey. What's up . . . brother-in-law?" Grant asks, a little wary, but still his usual affable self.

"Hey, Grant. Hello, Declan's feet."

"Hi, Chance," Declan says from off-camera. "Proceed."

I laugh nervously. "Thanks. I guess you guys know what this is about?"

Grant scratches his chin. "I'm not really a mind reader. But I suspect it's about what went down in Vegas?"

No time to waste. I dive in, taking TJ's advice, owning it. "Listen. I feel like a jackass. I know I violated the golden rule—don't hook up with a teammate's sister."

Declan laughs. "Is that a rule?"

Grant looks at his guy. "Not for you, sweetheart." Then he turns back to me. "Okay. I mean, I'm not sure that's a rule per se. But go on."

"It's a rule I *wanted* to follow," I say, emphasis on the past tense. I take a soldiering breath. "I *didn't* want to create problems with the team or the chemistry or anything like that.

And that's why I avoided the reality that I've been falling for your sister over the last year. I didn't want conflicts, or for anything to be awkward."

Grant nods.

"And the thing is, I'm done with that."

"You are?" he asks carefully.

This is what I learned tonight when all the lights went on in my head. It's crystal clear now what has been holding me back.

Me.

My rigid adherence to a code.

But some rules need to be bent. Some need to be broken. And some, you just have to let go of entirely.

I'm done with getting in my own way.

Goodbye, code. Hello, life.

"I was focused on the wrong thing," I tell Grant, feeling lighter already, like I'm shucking off the regret that stymied me the last few days. "I was worried about the team. I didn't want to rock the boat. But you know what was happening?"

Grant chuckles softly, shaking his head. "No, clue me in."

Declan pops into view. "I kinda want to hear this too."

I can't believe I'm about to say something so damn obvious. I should have it emblazoned on a T-shirt. "It was never about you," I tell Grant.

Grant wags a finger at me as he smiles. "Aha, Sherlock. You figured it out."

"I was using you as an excuse because I was terrified of getting involved again. Of seeing my life dragged through the online mud again. Of getting hurt. Of everything." I serve up all my fears on a silver platter. And I *own them*, finally, which means, I hope, that I can change what I do about them. "I didn't realize I was doing it, but I held tight to that code. Clutched it like I was dangling from the windowsill of a thirty-

story building and I didn't want to die. But I learned something today."

"Go on," Grant says, enthused.

"You were never the problem. I was. I was afraid of falling in love, of wanting to be with someone. Of caring about someone so much I might get my heart broken again." I swallow roughly as emotions rise in me. "And I'm done with being afraid."

"Sounds a lot like the real thing," he says, and his arm shifts, maybe to hold hands with Declan.

"It is."

Grant turns to Declan. "Am I the relationship oracle today, or what?"

Declan laughs. "Seems so."

I tilt my head. "What does that mean?"

"Don't worry about that. So, what next?" Grant asks.

It's a good question. But I'm pretty sure I know the answer.

And it lies in San Francisco.

SIERRA

A little earlier that same day

Clementine arrives in the morning with a knock and a bright *ding-dong*.

I swing open the door, invite her in. She carries a pink box on her palm, like a waiter in a fancy restaurant. “Breakfast, aka cupcakes.”

“The breakfast of champions,” I say as we head to the kitchen. She’s so cheery, I refuse to stay in my funk.

She sets the box down on the counter, then slides a canvas bag off her shoulder, reaching in to extract a bouquet of lilies.

“As promised,” she says.

Grabbing a vase from a shelf, I fill it with water and pop in the flowers. “Gorgeous,” I declare.

“See? Flowers make everything a little better,” she says.

I have a flash of a memory of me as a little girl, traipsing through a field of flowers.

Huh.

I always thought I loved flowers as an adult because they were lovely. But maybe I’ve always known they make a day better. I needed that when I was younger.

Maybe my love of flowers as a woman has never been about pretty little things, but more about necessary things.

About the happy things we find when we're kids to get us through tough times. Through days when we don't feel loved and wanted.

I sought that out in the world, looking for it in beauty, but I found it in other places too—my grandparents, my brother, my friends.

Myself.

I have all that now and more.

Friends, a cat, a business I adore. And today, sweets.

Clementine gestures to the box. "Chocolate buttercream or vanilla dream?"

I scoff. "Is that a trick question? Both. We split them."

She smiles brightly. "Perfect answer."

We break the cupcakes in half, and I stuff a bite of the vanilla in my mouth. "Mmm. This is delish," I say after I chew.

"Best therapy ever," she says once she's done. Then her smile disappears. "Spill. You fell in love and are afraid to tell him, right?"

Whoa. Someone doesn't mince words. I gulp then head for the fridge and pour a glass of milk. I down it, then face the music.

"Yes. That's true," I admit.

She nods sympathetically. "It's your armor, girl. That's what's holding you back. The question is—are you going to let it?"

It's an excellent question.

Am I ready to go after more than friends, a cat, a business I adore, and sweets?

* * *

Tom follows me around all that morning, alternating between meowing and purring.

The cat seems determined to tell me something. As I dress for work, he rubs against my leg, kicking up his motor to another level entirely. I've never heard him this loud.

I bend down. "What is it, love?"

He answers with more purring then stretches his front legs along my calves. I scoop him into my arms. "Did you just want to snuggle?"

The cat rubs his head against me. I laugh. "I swear, all you ever want is . . ."

I break off, startled by the obvious.

He's a love bug.

He just wants love.

Maybe he has the right idea.

Am I going to take love advice from a cat?

Well, first I have to head into work to open for an early happy hour. But along the way, I text Grant and make a request.

* * *

I unlock the door to The Spotted Zebra. We open in an hour and a half, but I've mastered doing the prep work in less than sixty minutes. I bust my butt in a flurry of activity, readying the place I love for another night.

Last night, I felt so disconnected from my bar baby. Today, I'm connected again, and it feels so good.

The breakfast with Clementine reset me. The message from the cat perhaps did too. I'm pretty sure it's time to woman up and rip off my armor, but I want to talk to someone else first.

Before we open, Grant strolls in.

“To what do you owe the honor of my presence?” he asks, then I blink.

I point.

Gawk.

My jaw hits the floor. “Is that a . . .?”

I can’t even finish.

He flashes his left hand at me, grinning. “Oh, this?”

“Yes,” I blurt out, flustered. “Is that a band? An engagement ring?”

His grin takes over the city. “Why, yes. I did get engaged in Hawaii.”

My hand flies to my mouth and tears rain down my cheeks. They don’t stop as I run to my brother, fling my arms around him, and cry the happiest tears I’ve ever cried. It took him five years and a lot of heartbreak to find his way back to Declan.

But he’s here, on the other side of heartache.

On *this* side of love.

And I’m not sure I have any more questions. “I am so happy for you,” I say in a broken voice—but from joy, not from pain.

“Thanks. Me too,” he says, brimming with cheer. “Now, what about you? What the hell is going on? What do you need? You seemed distraught when you texted.”

I swipe my tears away. “I was for a while. I was all mixed up about Mom and Dad, and the way I’ve tried to live differently from them,” I say, my breath steadying into place again after the excitement. “But . . .” I shrug, letting go of all that in one fell swoop. It’s time to say goodbye to the past. None of those issues seem to matter anymore. “You’re engaged. You’re happy. You didn’t let them hold you back. And I shouldn’t let them hold me back either.”

He laughs and spreads his hands out wide. “Check me out. I walk into a bar, and I don’t even have to say anything. I’m an

instant problem solver.”

“You are,” I say, but truly, love is the problem solver.

* * *

Later, I slip out to run an errand, and at the end of the night, I send Chance a text.

Sierra: Miss you! Want to come over when you return tomorrow night? I would love to see you.

Well after midnight there’s a knock on my door.

SIERRA

Always wear pretty panties if a man calls late at night.

Sounds like a good rule.

I'm wearing basic pink cotton underthings and a cami because I'm *not* expecting anyone.

Fear prickles down my spine, but I act quickly.

I grab the baseball bat I keep under my bed, snag my phone from the nightstand, and swing my legs out from under the sheets.

Just as I'm poised to dial 911, because who the fuck knocks at this hour, my phone beeps with a call.

“Oh!”

It's Chance.

I answer with a whisper. “Hello?”

“It's me. At your door. I'm a day early. Will you let me in?”

He's supposed to be in New York. But he's here. A thrill rushes through me. *He's here!*

“Yes, of course,” I say, keeping the phone pressed to my ear as I walk to the door, peer through the peephole, and nearly fly through the roof with excitement.

What is happening to me?

I've prided myself on being cool and collected. On being a badass babe. And I am positively giddy at the sight of the man

who wants to divorce me.

But maybe he doesn't want to end us?

"Hi. I'll let you in," I say.

He smiles like a loon. A loon I love. "Thanks. I'll be right here," he teases.

I end the call, unlock the door, and yank it open.

"Hey," he says, soft and tender, then his brow knits as he points at the bat in my hand. "Don't get me wrong. You holding a baseball bat is insanely sexy, but do you want to put it down?"

I didn't realize I was still clutching it. I set it against the wall and open the door wider. "Come in," I say, and though I have no idea why he's here, I have a feeling that a visit after midnight is a good thing.

I shut the door, and he steps inside, determination in his deep brown eyes as he meets my gaze. "I love you, Sierra Blackwood. And the only thing I want to take care of is finding a way to stay together."

My breath catches.

I can't believe what he said.

It's exactly what I feel.

I step closer, cup his cheeks. "I love you too," I tell him, holding his face, my voice trembling.

When did I become such an emotional gal?

Oh, right. Maybe when I learned to embrace happiness as it comes. Something I'm learning literally this second.

"You do?" he asks, laughing incredulously, but joyfully too.

"I do," I say, giddy like my veins are filled with starlight and my heart contains the whole entire sky. "I started to fall for you in Hawaii, and I went head over heels in love in Vegas. And I want to date you. I want to stay with you. I want to be impulsive with you, and to be in love with you."

His lips twitch in a delicious smile, then he brings me close for a kiss I feel in my toes. I zing everywhere.

When he breaks the kiss, he nibbles on the corner of his lips, then says, "Let's be impulsive."

Then, he drops to one knee.

I gasp.

He reaches into his pocket, takes out a jewelry box, and flips it open.

"Oh my God," I whisper, awed. Utterly awed.

The diamond is an enchanting emerald-cut I never imagined he'd give me tonight.

Chance meets my gaze, vulnerability flickering in his eyes. "How about a replay on the Mr. and Mrs.? I want to be with you, and that means asking for your hand properly. I'm in love with you, and maybe it seems like it happened in five days, and maybe it did," he says, emotion threaded through every word. "But I think it's been happening for the last year, every time we saw each other. At least, that's how it's been for me, almost like we were dating without knowing we were dating. And I don't want a halfway relationship with you," he adds, his voice strong. "I want it all, and I truly hope you do too."

I can't help it.

This non-crier cries again. Tears well and fall as I kneel in front of him, clasping his handsome face. "I want to be with you. It's the same for me, Chance. I've been falling in love with you for the last year too, just getting to know you. And I want to keep loving you."

"I do love you. So much," he whispers, then hauls me in for another kiss before he laughs, a little embarrassed.

"What is it?"

"I need to put this ring on you, and *then* I can get lost in kissing you," he says, and I hold out my hand.

He slides it on.

And wow.

Just wow.

I'm engaged to be married to my husband, and that sounds crazy, but it feels totally right and absolutely wonderful.

"I love it," I say, staring at the thing of beauty, then dipping my head, hiding my face. "And that makes my gift look pretty silly."

"You got me a gift?" He sounds utterly delighted.

"I did." I rise and head to the kitchen. He joins me and I reach for a tiny plant. "It's a zebra cactus for your plant collection. I texted you because I wanted to see you when you returned tomorrow and tell you I love you and give you a plant."

I hand him the little green thing.

He coos at it. "Awww. I love it. Can I call it Sierra?"

Scrunching my brow, I shake my head. "No way. How about we name it . . . Jordy?"

Chance cracks up. "I suppose he did sort of play a part in us getting together. And this plant is not silly. It's awesome. And I love it. And I love you."

This is all too wonderful, but I'm dying to know something. "What happened? What changed for you? I thought your code and the team and my brother and all that was the issue."

"It was, but then it wasn't." He sets the plant on the counter, his expression turning serious. "I realized that I'd been wrong. I thought your brother was the obstacle. But *I* was the problem. I was afraid of getting hurt, and I used the code as an excuse."

"Don't be afraid with me," I say gently. "I won't hurt you. After all, I told TJ I won't break your heart, and I meant it."

"I won't break yours, Sierra. And I told your brother as much today, as well, when I talked to him. But now I'm telling you."

There's something else I need to tell him too, though. "I was worried about relationships and time and balancing it all, but I already love dating you because it's not hard to make time for you. Like we talked about on the flight to Hawaii—it's quality, not quantity. I truly believe that," I say. "And everything is quality with you."

"Everything is the best with us."

His eyes flood with emotions—the same ones I feel, I suspect, as he grabs my hand and tugs me close, my breasts flush with his chest. My fiancé sighs happily then runs his fingers through my hair. "Missed you," he murmurs, then dusts his lips over mine.

"Missed you too," I whisper against his lips, as my cat rubs against my leg.

I laugh, separating. "Tom is in a lovey mood today," I say, my gaze sailing to my black and white beast.

"It's going around." Chance bends down to scratch Tom's chin, and I fall a little more for the man.

When Chance stands, he wiggles a brow, then scoops me into his arms. "And now I'd like to make love to my fiancée," he says.

Heat flares through me. "So impulsive of you."

In a minute, we're in my room, stripped down to nothing, and the man I'm engaged—*engaged!*—to puts on a condom and slides into me. I gasp, pleasure flowing through every cell.

"Mmm. You feel incredible," he murmurs as he sinks in all the way, filling me to the hilt. I lift my knees toward my chest, giving him permission to take me the way I want him to.

The way he wants to.

"Have me," I urge.

And he does, fucking me hard and deep, with so much passion that I'm racing toward the edge in mere minutes, bliss and lust twisting beautifully inside me.

He's rough at the same time that he's tender, and it's everything I ever wanted sex to be and so much more.

It's with the man I love.

Who also happens to be my husband, and now, my fiancé.

Life can be funny like that, if you just give in to happiness.

* * *

Later, as we curl up under the covers, Tom tucks his paws under his chest, a serene look on his furry face.

EPILOGUE

Chance

A little later

TJ rakes his gaze over my attire, studying me with intense eyes.

“What? You picked the suit. You damn well better like it,” I say, trying to figure out what’s wrong.

He shakes his head. “It’s so easy to wind you up. Just one look and you’re worried.”

I roll my eyes. “It is my wedding day.”

He pats my shoulder. “I know. I shouldn’t enjoy messing with you so much, yet I do.”

“I can’t wait to mess with you on your wedding day.”

A cough bursts from him. “You’re killing me.”

“Like that’s so implausible?” I ask.

“It’s a little implausible, me getting hitched. Love is not in the cards for this guy. Anyway, you look good,” he says, then pulls me in for a hug. “I’m happy for you, Chance.”

I smile into the embrace. “Me too. Thanks for being here for me. For everything.”

When we separate, he nods solemnly. “Always.”

We leave my place—soon to be mine and Sierra’s—and head to The Spotted Zebra.

As soon as we step inside, I spot my beautiful, brilliant bride. She’s perched on a bar stool, decked out in a simple white wedding dress that hits her knees. Nothing fancy, just those spaghetti straps and, I bet, white lace underneath.

Oh yes.

I can’t wait to undress my wife on our wedding night.

A second time around.

The bar opens in thirty minutes on a mid-January Saturday night. Zoey and the new bartender from Vegas will be serving—both the regular patrons and the private party of the Blackwood-Ashford wedding.

It’s a small affair. Just close friends and close family.

But that’s what matters.

I make my way to the woman I’ve dated for the last couple months. We’ve gone out to dinner, played pool, sang karaoke, and we’ve stayed in watching British comedies, watering plants, and arranging flowers.

I’ve also ripped off countless pairs of panties and dismantled plenty of bras.

And replaced them.

My fiancée-wife has an overstuffed lingerie drawer, and that makes the both of us happy.

But what makes me happier is heading into the game room, where an officiant waits for us.

Everyone gathers around—Grant and Declan, Crosby and Nadia, Holden and Reese, Clementine and Skyler, Trish and Blake, TJ, Frankie, Erin, Harlan and his little daughter Abby, as well as Sierra’s grandparents and my own parents.

The officiant begins, and soon, she’s asking, “And do you, Chance Ashford, take this woman to be your wife, to love and cherish for the rest of your days?”

Easiest answer ever. “I do,” I say, looking into Sierra’s eyes and feeling certainty and love.

“And do you, Sierra Blackwood, take this man to be your husband, to love and cherish for the rest of your days?”

My fiancée grins at me, her eyes already shining with tears. “I do.”

“You may kiss the bride.”

I kiss my bride for the second time around.

It’s a wedding do-over—a replay of sorts.

Yet it feels new and completely meant to be as my wife who became my fiancée becomes my wife once again.

We separate, grinning like the happily married fools we are, then enjoy chocolate-covered strawberries and cake with our close friends and family.

Later that night, we don our *Just Married* sashes that I saved from Vegas. They are one helluva souvenir of the first wedding to my incredible wife.

I take a picture of my bride and me and post it.

Just married to the love of my life!

That about sums it up.

When we return to her place that night, we find a note under the door from her neighbor.

The cat sitter.

EPILOGUE

Tom

A cat love story

Ah, humans.

The dilemmas they faced.

Like, moving.

Tom suspected they'd be relocating any day. The boxes gave it away. There were boxes everywhere in his home.

He surmised all that talking was over moving.

Perhaps they'd even discussed how the cat would handle moving across town.

Please.

People.

The cat could handle it fine.

Cats could handle anything.

Humans invested every little decision with such monumentality. And there was always so much talking, as if that were the solution to anything, when actually, that was rarely the case.

Typical of the lesser species.

Cats had already evolved well beyond humans. They could speak in a more beautiful tongue. They could communicate everything in hisses, meows, and well-placed purrs.

After all, the great gift of purring had made all the difference for Tom a few months ago when he'd discovered a certain someone. Just the thought of the Siamese next door made him kick up his motor.

She revved his engine, all right.

Lady Cat.

Talk about a sexy feline.

She had it going on with that tail—lush, long, and fluffy.

The second he'd spotted that majestic tail, one afternoon while his mistress was gone, his kitty heart beat faster.

Raced harder.

Tom had been snoozing in the sun on the windowsill—naturally—when she'd walked by across the garden rooftop.

The sight of such a lovely lady had roused him from his seventh nap of the day.

He'd slinked under the half-open window to outside, eager to make her furry acquaintance.

Meow . . .

It was love at first tail.

She'd twined hers around his, and their purr boxes went wild.

He fell for her paw over collar.

Little did his person know what he'd been up to during the days and, truth be told, the nights.

When the woman departed for that thing she called work, leaving Tom with those sweet little orders to be good, to behave, he'd done the opposite.

He'd been a very bad boy.

Sauntering out the open window.

Sidling up to Lady Cat.

Getting to know the lovely Siamese better and better each afternoon and evening. They'd napped together.

Oh, dear God, those naps.

Afternoons in the sun followed by evenings under the stars.

They could sleep all day, it seemed.

Probably all night too.

Sometimes his person asked why he was so happy.

He'd tried to tell her that day when she was distraught. The day he'd rubbed relentlessly, pushing his body against her leg, purring louder than he'd ever purred before.

Love was the answer.

He'd found it in Lady Cat.

He'd wanted his person to find it too.

And she had, it seemed, in the big, tall man.

But now, if they moved, what would happen to the beauty Tom enjoyed all those rooftop trysts with?

Admittedly, the cat was worried.

Worry was unfamiliar to him.

Cats didn't worry, except about where the next slices of tuna might come from.

But he was anxious too about that note that had arrived by a secret doorway whoosh a few hours ago when the woman was gone.

What did it say?

Was it an invitation from Lady Cat to slip away somewhere?

Later that night, the woman and the man stumbled into the home, giggling, whispering sweet nothings.

“Oh,” the woman said, stopping to pick up the note. “It’s from Lynn.”

The man beamed. “Is it what I think it is?”

“I hope so,” the woman said, opening the note then clutching her heart. “She’s ours, Chance. She’s ours.”

The man raised a hand in the air, victorious. “Yes!”

“The shelter approved our application to adopt Lady Cat.”

Meow?

What were they saying? What was the news?

The woman bent down, scratched his chin, stroked his head. “You want to come live with Chance and me and Lady Cat at his place?”

Please, let it be good news. He couldn’t bear to part with Lady Cat.

Perhaps there was a way for Tom and his love to have a few more hours together. He could only hope.

Later that night, he jumped onto the humans’ bed and purred, doing his best to tell them his wishes—*bring the Siamese*.

Please, oh kitty please.

Everything was easier if you purred more.

Didn’t they understand? If they were cats, they certainly would.

He spent the rest of the night pacing. He couldn’t even enjoy the boxes properly. Couldn’t even jump into them, let alone out again.

What would happen to his Lady Cat?

But in the morning, he heard the pretty meow he’d come to love.

“She’s here,” the woman called out. Tom opened one eye, perked up an ear, and leapt out of bed.

He’d fallen asleep after all. It happened to cats.

But now, he was wide awake and ready.

He stretched his lithe body, lifted his lush tail, and sashayed to the front door where the woman held—be still, his beating heart—the love of his furry life.

Roar!

Lady Cat was here.

The woman set her down, and it was love at first tail all over again.

Much like it had been for the humans.

* * *

A few days later, they moved into the man's place where he puttered around talking to plants and cooking meals for his woman, and the two of them curled up together on the couch to watch comedies where they talked in funny voices.

Then they curled up together on the bed to do other things.

Tom understood. Sometimes a man just wanted to snuggle up with his woman.

Tom did just that, cuddling with Lady Cat, as the man and the woman laughed, and sighed, and kissed.

And lived happily ever after.

* * *

You won't believe what goes down when Harlan runs into a jilted bride from his past! Find out in [A WILD CARD KISS](#), available right now for FREE in KU! **You can also binge the entire Rules of Love series now in KU! Turn the page!**

BE A LOVELY

Want to be the first to know of sales, new releases, special deals and giveaways? Sign up for [my newsletter](#) today!

Want to be part of a fun, feel-good place to talk about books and romance, and get sneak peeks of covers and advance copies of my books? [Be a Lovely!](#)

Curious about TJ? His epic love story comes in the roomies to lovers to enemies romance [HOPELESSLY BROMANTIC!](#)

THE VIRGIN SCORECARD

A COLLECTION OF NOVELLAS

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Lauren Blakely

LaurenBlakely.com

Cover Design by © Kate Farlow, interior illustration by Laura Moore

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

ABOUT

Mr. Right Now

I've got a problem. After a dozen failed dates - but who's counting - I'm done hunting for Mr. Right. I'm more than ready to cash in my V-card, and at this point I'll gladly hand it over to Mr. Right Now. When I go out with my friends for a night on the town, I bump into the perfect candidate. A guy from my past who kissed like a dream but took off before we could say goodbye. The swoony, charming pro athlete is back in the city and he's as ready to help me with my project as he is to win baseball games. The next morning, I'm deliciously satisfied and I know I've chosen wisely. But when he leaves again, I can't stop wondering — what if Mr. Right Now is actually Mr. Right? And how do I get him back?

Captain Romance

I don't have luck on my side when it comes to romance. That's why I'm laser focused on my career as a sports reporter and making a mark as a woman in this tough field.

When one of the city's baseball stars asks me to spend a night on the town, I have to draw the line. Just friends, I say.

He's good with that.

Very good with that.

So good that I start falling for my new friend.

Of all the swoony, charming, thoughtful men in this big city, why is the one I want thoroughly off-limits? But if I want

a chance with the guy they call Captain Romance, I'm going to have to put more than my heart on the line.

This collection also includes Kiss Your Tulips, Limo Bang, and DogFishing, three stories set in the Rules of Love world.

PREFACE



THE VIRGIN SCORECARD

A COLLECTION OF NOVELLAS

By Lauren Blakely

To be the first to find out when all of my upcoming books go live [click here!](#)

PRO TIP: Add lauren@laurenblakely.com to your contacts before signing up to make sure the emails go to your inbox!

Did you know this book is also available in audio and paperback on all major retailers? Go to my [website](#) for links!

MR. RIGHT NOW

A VIRGIN SCORECARD NOVELLA

SHANE

New city. Fresh start.

That's what I'm about these days.

If I were a betting man—I'm not—I'd wager all my chips at the tables tonight. Everything's been going my way since I got on the plane in New York six hours ago. We took off bang on time, I landed in my once-upon-a-time hometown early, and now my luggage is popping out of the baggage carousel first.

I grab the black bag and head to the Lyft already waiting outside the airport.

Yep, bet it all on red.

The driver scurries out of the sleek black car, but I wave him off. I traveled light—always do. Baggage isn't my style.

"I'm all good, mate. I'll just set it in the back seat," I tell him as I toss my bag in the car.

The bearded man with the San Francisco Dragons ball cap peers at me a little longer than a driver normally would. His brown eyes flicker a few seconds later.

Given the telltale hat, I've got a hunch why.

He points at me, a delighted smile curving his weathered face. "Are you ... Shakespeare?"

I laugh as I slide into the seat. "I am indeed."

“Holy fireman,” he says, then rushes to the driver’s side, starts the engine, and peels off into traffic. “Dude. You are everything we need, Shakespeare. I am so stoked the team traded for you.”

I smile as I pop my seat belt on. “I’m pretty chuffed too.”

“Chuffed,” he snickers. “I can’t get enough of it. The British-isms. By the way, huge Dragons fan.”

“I gathered as much,” I say, gesturing to the purple air freshener in the shape of the team’s logo. It hangs from the rearview mirror.

“But I’ve seen more heat in a toaster than in the Dragons bullpen. Been writing letters to Ms. Winters for the last year, begging her to get us a fireman,” he says, naming the team owner for the baseball franchise as he cruises away from the airport. “Everyone knows you can’t go all the way unless you have a fireman.” He slaps a meaty paw against the dash to make his point. Can’t say I disagree. He peers in the rearview mirror, a grin lighting his face. “And we got one. Shakespeare the Fireman. Hey, can I call you that?”

“Have at it. I pretty much answer to any variation of Shakespeare,” I say, since that’s the nickname that’s stuck with me since I played for the LA Bandits three years ago. I started with that team, then was traded to the New York Comets for a stretch, and now I’ll be suiting up for the Dragons. “The only variation I’m not fond of is ‘Shakespeare, you suck,’ which is what opposing teams’ fans call me.”

“Screw them. You’re our Bard now,” the driver says, proud and possessive.

“Thank you. I also answer to Shane.”

He cracks up as he steers the car onto the 101. “Shane, you’re *our* anomaly. Brilliant, chuffed, bloody fabulous,” he says, imitating my accent.

Not well, but that’s beside the point.

Also, I don’t care if a fan talks *British* to me, as has become the saying among the so-called Shakespeare crew. It’s part of my *anomaly factor*, and I don’t mind it.

“You’re the twenty-ninth English dude ever to play in the majors,” he remarks, almost as if he’s citing intel from my Wikipedia entry.

“That is correct,” I say, and since he’s a fan, I don’t need to dive into my story. It’s a simple one, and like many good stories, it’s a love story. My father is a Hall-of-Fame American pitcher—Jedd Walker. He led the league in shutouts and innings pitched thirty years ago, won a couple of Cy Youngs and a World Series. When he retired, he traveled to England, met a brilliant woman in a pub, fell in love, and shackled up with her in London.

And the birds and the bees made me a little later—helped along by a pint or two, I’m sure.

After thirteen years in London, my parents moved back here so I could play baseball in America, a decision that served me well, that gave me the team skills to become a major leaguer.

The driver and I chat more about the Dragons’ chances this season as he cruises the car into the city, the lights of San Francisco flickering like fireflies against the night sky.

I draw a deep breath, energized to be here again, where I lived as a teenager.

I had my first kiss here—under the bleachers at a ballpark with a charming, adorable pixie of a blonde, the kind of girl you could lose your mind for. The kind I nearly gave my heart to. Probably would have if we’d had more time.

What’s she up to these days?

Does Clementine still live here?

I shake the thought away. I’m not here to track down my high school sweetheart. In fact, I ought to stay far, far away from women and romance, given my recent track record.

Best to focus on work.

“Good to be back,” I say, gazing out the window into the night.

It's also good to be out of New York and the troubles I escaped from. Trouble with an ex.

So much trouble my agent sat me down at The Lucky Spot in Chelsea and told me a few weeks ago, "Romance and baseball don't always mix. You're heading into the arbitration end of this season, so when you return to San Francisco, maybe don't hit the concert scene, since everyone you meet there is bad news."

Well, one person was bad news, so I get where his worry comes from. It's his job to worry, and romance has a way of knocking a man off-kilter. Especially when it goes tits up.

So I won't do the concert thing, even though finding new bands is a hobby of mine. But that's fine. I take off for spring training in a few days, so I won't have time to attract trouble before I go.

The driver exits the 101 into the city, and I breathe a sigh of ... second chances.

Maybe my agent is right.

It's always best to focus on work, especially when you're entering a contract year and you have new employers to impress. Like Marlow Winters, the no-nonsense owner of the San Francisco Dragons.

My goal is to make sure Marlow and the rest of management can't imagine a team future without me. I'll convince them with my steely attitude in the ninth inning, my wicked right arm, and the fireballs I can pelt over the plate.

That's all I need—strikeouts and saves.

We reach my new home in the Marina, a third-floor beauty overlooking the bay with a fantastic view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The driver pulls up to the curb.

"Had a blast driving you tonight, Shakespeare," he says, scuttling around to open the door and grab my bag. "Screw your courage to the sticking place," he booms, quoting *Macbeth*.

It's a thing some fans do.

And I love it.

“And we’ll not fail,” I say, completing the quote. “Have a good night.”

As he pulls away into traffic, I head to the gleaming white door of my new pad. I tap in the code and go inside, then head up the stairs to my floor.

I snagged this place last month, right after I learned of the trade. Already feels like home.

It’s modern and clean, with black and gray furniture and framed posters of my favorite bands. I hung them up when I was here last month visiting friends before I officially moved.

Setting the bag down, I flick on the rest of the lights and wander through my new home, heading to the bedroom to savor the view of the bay—one of this rental’s many selling points, as well as the young, hip neighborhood.

Another benefit? It’s an entire country away from Tinsley.

I shudder at the thought of my ex.

The night we met at a club at the end of last season, I’d fallen for her, hook, line, and sinker. But she had only fallen for my *rising star*, and soon enough, the gossip-talk-show host latched on to bigger stars, landing an A-list actor and ditching me.

In. That. Order.

She’s history as of a few weeks ago, and I hope I’ve learned my lesson. Don’t give your heart away to people who’ll stomp on it.

Heading to the kitchen to grab a glass of water, I unlock my phone.

I’m antsy. I don’t relish being alone. I like company and friends, going out, having a good time.

I open a group text to some of my local mates.

Shane: I have arrived. Let the fun begin.

Drew: Gee, I was waiting for you. Twiddling my thumbs. And here you are, saving the day.

Sullivan: Life has been sad and empty without you ... *Not.*

Shane: Figured as much. But that all changes tomorrow.

Sullivan: Yes, this new band is in town. Secret Frog Lovers Mate in the Night. Wanna check them out?

Shane: Would love to, but alas, I can't. Promised my agent, like I told you. But the comedy club you suggested still works.

Drew: Seriously? Are we really sticking to that plan?

Shane: Do you not like to laugh? A comedy club is the perfect way to welcome me back to town.

Sullivan: Yes, Drew, we're going to the comedy club. Case closed.

Shane: Listen to the Cougar.

Sullivan: You wish you'd been traded to the Cougars.

He's not wrong. I'd lose my mind to play for the team that won the World Series a little more than a year ago. And I'd love to have a ring like Sullivan. Someday.

For now, though, I want to do three things. Have a good time. Impress my employers. Don't fall in love again.

That's it.

That's all *this* ballplayer can ask for.

CLEMENTINE

I have a theory that one of the best spots to meet a hip, cool guy is at a comedy club. But not just any night of the week. I'd like to meet this dream man the night a female comic performs.

It's a litmus test. A lot of guys subscribe to the patently false idea that only men can be funny.

As if.

So if a man's digging a comedy show headlined by the fairer sex, he's passed the first test.

No sexist pigs need apply to date me.

Or bang me either, but one step at a time.

At my home in Cow Hollow, I lift a glass of champagne to toast with my lady pack as Taylor Swift serenades us from my phone.

"To the best dates anyone could ever ask for," I tell Erin, Frankie, and Nova.

Because even though I'm going to Stella's Comedy Attic *tonight* to celebrate the next phase of my dating life, that new era starts *tomorrow*. I don't expect to meet a leading candidate to deflower me while at a comedy club with my girlfriends on Galentine's Day.

Taylor hits a high note, and Magnus yips.

He's part of the pack—the only boy member.

I bend down to scoop up my Papillon rescue into my arms. I smooch the six-pound beast's soft, silky head. He licks my cheek.

“So this makes us an official foursome tonight?” Erin deadpans, tipping her glass against mine as she flicks a strand of chestnut hair from her shoulder.

Peering over her red heart-shaped glasses, Frankie lifts her flute too. “What else is Galentine’s Day for but a foursome?” she chimes in with a sly grin. “Come to think of it, I believe someone wrote that on a card today at my shop.”

I laugh. “What sort of flowers did they order for that?”

“Stargazer lilies, of course. They work best in fours,” Frankie says, deadpan, as if she gets this request at her flower shop all the time.

Nova clinks her glass to mine. “I’ll say this though—foursomes are tough, friends. We’re talking lots of choreography.”

Laughing, I knock back some bubbly, grateful to spend this silly love day with my best friends before I put a saddle on the dating horse tomorrow. “I’ll trust you. Besides, who needs a boyfriend? Not this gal,” I shout as my playlist shifts to P!nk, the ultimate girl-power singer.

“Not this gal either, that’s for sure,” Nova says dryly. Nova does everything dryly. She’s the queen of deadpan.

“I know, babes, so no gal-hunting for you tonight,” I tell her, wagging a finger.

She rolls her dark-blue eyes. “I’m out with the three of you. Who is going to hit on me?”

“You never know. And if someone hits on *me*, I’ll be all *Nope, not tonight, not any guy, no how*,” I say, since I’m ready for what tomorrow might bring.

The wreckage of the last few years of dating disasters is behind me.

I won’t let the litany of over-and-out men from the apps get me down. Not the guy who dated me so he could store

Omaha Steaks in my freezer, not the dude who asked me to shave his balls after we'd only had one latte—I told him ball shaving required a five-course meal plus a delish dessert—and not the fella who showed me photos of all his ex-girlfriends.

Who happened to look like my long-lost twins. Ew.

Over the last few years, I've never made it to the five-date mark with a single one of them. That's my demarcation point for getting busy between the sheets.

Or really, it *was*.

But I'm turning over a new leaf, and after tonight's celebration with my besties, I'll put myself out there again. I'll get back on the apps and roll back the five-date line to just ... one.

Fine, maybe two.

Three at the most.

I swallow more bubbly. "I'm done with waiting for the right guy for a relationship. Clearly the five-date rule is a lie. After Galentine's Day"—I glance at the black cat clock on the wall, its tail keeping time—"I'm implementing the one-to-three date rule."

Nova rolls her eyes. "Just do it, Clem. Just get some dick once and for all."

"Dick down, dick down, dick down," Frankie chants, and my jaw falls open.

"Sources say our heroine is ready to hit the apps tomorrow night," Erin booms in her best on-air voice, a thing she uses a lot since, well, she's a sports reporter. "All witty, dog-loving five-and-ups in the looks department in the city of San Francisco ... on your marks."

"Five-and-ups," Nova says with an approving nod. "You're casting a wide net, Clem."

"I'm open-minded. I'm not obsessed with looks. I just want a nice guy with a big heart. I even told Sierra to keep her eyes peeled for me at her bar. Well, when she gets back from her Valentine's Day trip with her hubs," I say.

Erin places a finger on her lips. “Shhh. Do not speak of Valentine’s Day tonight. It is *only* Galentine’s Day.”

I take another drink. “Or really, the *eve* of my new dating plans. And this time on the dating merry-go-round, I’m not looking to get serious or to have a relationship. But if he’s a good guy, I *might* let him into my pants,” I say, shimmying my hips suggestively.

Erin bumps her hip with mine. “Someone is determined to rip up her V-card any day now.”

I’m ready to say goodbye to my virginity. I’ve banged enough vibrators to know I want the real thing at last. And I’ve dated enough duds to know I just don’t need to wait for big love anymore.

I set down my glass to shake my fist at the sky. “Thanks, Stephen Scott. Hope you’re enjoying having ditched me.”

Frankie looks at me, concern painted in her eyes.

“I’m kidding, hon. I’m so over my ex. He’s history. One in a long string of terrible ... dates. But I am the queen of terrible dates no more,” I call out.

Erin clears her throat. “And we got you a sash to that effect.”

I blink. “Seriously? You got me a sash?”

“Yes. This is your one-month celebration.” Erin whirls around, grabs her purse, and fishes around in it till she locates a white ribbon. “Ta-da.”

“No, you didn’t,” I say, holding up a stop-sign hand, since did she really?

And the answer is ... yes, she did.

“Wear it, girl. Wear it with pride. Own it,” Erin says, brandishing the sash.

I can’t even with my friends. But a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.

I step into the center of the circle of awesome and dip my head.

Erin clears her throat. “By the power vested in me as one of the fab foursome, I pronounce you DTF.”

“Woo-hoo. Clem is Down to Fuck,” Frankie adds.

I arch a brow at the crudely drawn words written in lipstick on the white material. ““Screw Mr. Right. I’m looking for Mr. Right Now,”” I read aloud.

Yep. Sounds about right.

Let the new era of dating begin.

CLEMENTINE

My parents have a great marriage, and so does my older sister. And I read a dating survey a few years ago that said the longer you wait to have sex, the longer the relationship. So I'd deemed the fifth date as the ideal time for me to have everything I might want in romance—sex and love in the same person.

A win-win!

Double first name notwithstanding, Stephen Scott seemed like Mr. Right. I was sure he'd be the one to cross the line to get in my pants. But with my schedule training dogs and his schedule as the king of the outdoors, our first four dates were spread over several months, since he'd embarked on a Mount Everest climb. When the fifth date approached upon his return from the summit, he declared he'd had an epiphany at the top of the world—he *only* wanted to use his body for *more noble pursuits*.

“My body is a temple, and I won't soil it with sex,” he'd announced.

Fabulous.

Fucking fabulous.

Between that and the fact that he didn't dote on Magnus as much as I'd have liked—fine, he scratched the guy's chin, but he never kissed him—it was clear he was not the man for me.

Men like him are my past.

I set Magnus on the couch so we can take off for the club. “Be the best boy in the world,” I tell him.

He folds his paws then lets his tongue loll out. Gah. Could I have a better dog? I think not.

I scratch his chin. “Yes, I know you are the best boy.”

He tilts his face, and I drop another kiss to his head, then we leave and make our way to the club.

Once we sweep into Stella’s, I take off the sash. It’s adorable, but I’d rather not advertise my hot-to-trot status.

We grab a table near the stage, and after the waiter asks us for our drink order, Erin gasps.

“What?”

She drops her voice to the barest whisper. “That’s Hudson Tanner,” she mouths.

“Who’s that?” Frankie asks, crinkling her freckled nose.

“I swear you never know a thing about sports,” Erin says with a laugh.

Frankie arches a wry brow. “You never know a thing about flowers,” she tosses back.

Nova drags a hand through her thick red hair. “Which is why we’re all such a fab foursome. We support each other.”

“Anyway, he’s the Cougars owner,” I say to Frankie.

“And look who he’s with,” Nova whispers. “Marlow Winters. She owns the Dragons, and she’s a fox.”

Nova’s spot on. The billionaire brunette is quite pretty, in a classy, I-own-a-private-jet-drive-a-Bugatti-and-live-in-a-mansion way.

But soon, the server returns with our drinks—Diet Coke for me right now—and we turn to the stage. After the opening act warms us up, the headliner strides onto the stage, looking all Zooey Deschanel quirky cute as she entertains us with tales of the challenges of dating in a swipe-right culture.

“Has this ever happened to you?” Matilda begins. “You check out someone’s dating profile, look at their pics, and oh my God, you see the cutest shots. I mean, I fell in love with this one image. You would too. I swear you would. He was brown and tan, had big bat ears. What? It could happen to you. Chihuahua min pins are so cute.”

I crack up.

And I’m not alone.

Across the room comes a loud, deep snort.

I whip my gaze in its direction.

All I can make out is the profile of a tall twentysomething man sitting several tables away. He holds his belly, laughing.

He reminds me of someone, but I can’t quite make out who with the light dimmed for the set.

“Hey, it happens. Dog fishing is a real thing,” Matilda says, finishing the joke.

The guy snorts even louder.

I wish the lights were brighter, but I put him out of my mind.

I’m not here for a man—I’m here for my gals. So I sit back and enjoy the rest of the set with my friends.

* * *

When the set ends, Nova spots someone she interviewed for her Badass Babe podcast, so she drags Frankie over to say hi.

I grab Erin’s arm, and we make our way to the bar. “Promise me you won’t let me talk to any of the total cuties, the hotties, or the even remotely good-looking guys who didn’t think Matilda was the funniest act ever,” I tell her. “I refuse to be swayed by a man with no sense of humor.”

“A good sense of humor is basically kryptonite,” Erin says.

“I know! That’s why I liked Stephen Scott. He was funny enough—until he got all enlightened.”

Erin makes a shushing gesture with her hand, snapping it like a duck’s bill. “No ex talk. It’s forbidden.”

I mime zipping my lips. Then I throw away the key.

“Good. Now, repeat after me,” Erin says.

I pretend to reach for the key and unzip my lips again. “Am I allowed to speak now?”

“Yes, but no talk of exes who decided to put their body to more noble use,” Erin says.

“You’re right. You’re so right. Because do you know what the most noble use of all is?” I ask, then take a dramatic beat. “Sex. So much sex.”

She rolls her eyes, laughing. “You’re the most perverted virgin I know.”

“Why, thank you very much, and yes, I am. But I will *not* give it up to an unfunny guy.”

My friend arches a brow. “You want me to put handcuffs on you right now? So you don’t accidentally pick up someone here who doesn’t share your sense of humor?”

“Do you carry your own handcuffs? I always suspected you were the type of girl who was prepared for kink at a moment’s notice, you naughty vixen.”

“As if. But: confession. I like to keep a scarf in my purse, so I figure that’ll do if I need to be tied up pronto.”

“A thin little scrap of silk that you could toss around your neck but also be tied to the headboard with. Cha-ching. That’s what I’m talking about,” I say, licking the tip of my finger and touching the air so it sizzles.

When we reach the bar, I do a double take. Wait, make that a triple take. Then my pulse speeds up as my gaze lands on a pair of warm hazel eyes.

My mind races back in time. Images flicker before me. Memories of red-hot kisses behind the bleachers.

Sexy stolen moments after baseball games.

A touch here, a caress there.

A man I haven't seen in more than seven years.

The guy at the end of the bar with the dark-blond hair and mischievous gaze crooks his lips up into a grin.

Before I even have time to take a breath, he's striding toward me, closing the distance in a heartbeat.

Shane Walker.

"Of all the comedy clubs in the city," he says when he reaches me, and ... that voice.

Fuck me with a high-powered fourteen-speed dolphin that rocks my world.

His accent is even sexier than it was when we were in high school.

Duh. I hope so. He's got seven years on the eighteen-year-old hottie that he was.

The British baseball player.

The flirty, dirty, gorgeous guy with the accent *and* the prowess on the diamond.

Now, he's even sexier, his voice rumblier, his whole look just ... hotter.

"Shane Walker, you're supposed to be on the other side of the country," I say, wagging a finger at him.

"And I was. For a bit. Now I'm here. How the bloody hell are you? You look fantastic, Clementine."

The way he says my name with that British lilt is like a dose of lust, and it goes straight to my panties.

Hey, libido, settle down. We're not getting off the bench till tomorrow.

Erin clears her throat. "Hi there."

I straighten my shoulders, recovering some composure. "This is my friend Erin. This is Shane Walker. He was a

pitcher at my high school.”

Erin smiles. “I certainly know who he is now. The former closer for the New York Comets. Brand-new closer for the Dragons—something the team desperately needs.”

“And I am at their service.”

“I hope they have many opportunities to use you,” Erin says. Then she whispers to me, “I hope you can use him too.”

I swat her, but she just giggles.

Erin excuses herself for the ladies’ room and makes like the wind, while Shane turns his hazel-eyed gaze just on me. “That was a fantastic show tonight. Did you enjoy Matilda? I legit laugh-snorted through most of it.”

My eyes widen. “Are you serious? Was that you? The snorter?”

Shane shrugs, owning it. “Yep. I am a certified snorter. I’m that person.”

“I heard you straight across the club. I kept wondering who had the adorable laugh-snort.”

“Oh, it’s fetching, I’m sure,” he says doubtfully. “That’s what you dream of, right? Finding a bloke who snorts when he laughs.”

Honestly, I kind of do. I dream of a funny bone. A big, inviting sense of humor. A huge heart. But though I’m a dreamer, I know better than to serve all that up, so I keep my answer simple. “I do,” I say.

Shane smiles. “You found him.”

My heart flutters unexpectedly as his eyes lock with mine. “Good. And the laugh-snort is totally fetching. Completely,” I say with a flirty grin, then a happy sigh.

“Then it’s my lucky night.” He looks at me a little like he did years ago, yet in a whole new way too.

Like how a man looks at a woman he wants.

I flash back to our plans, to our teenage dreams that didn't come true.

I have definitely dreamed of what might have been with this sexy man.

And I'm not sure I want to wait for tomorrow to get started on my new dating plans.

SHANE

My *almost* prom date looks absolutely fantastic. Her big green eyes are welcoming, with a saucy sparkle in them. Her hair is short, platinum blonde, and held back with a little hair clip. I sneak a glance at it—a small dog with big butterfly ears is emblazoned on the side.

Definitely must ask her more about that later.

Tight jeans cling to fantastic legs, and a black top slopes off her shoulder, revealing creamy skin with a constellation of freckles that I would like to trace with my tongue.

Clementine Rose was the kind of pretty in high school that made me sneak glances at her behind me in calculus. Now, she's the kind of pretty that makes it impossible to look elsewhere.

She's all grown up and deliciously sexy.

“So what have you been up to? It's been ages since we said we were going to go to prom,” I say, since that was the last time we talked.

She frowns. “There was no prom at the Carter Club for us.”

I smile, a little wistful too, and it's not because I wish I went to that cheesy event space with her. “And I still wish there had been.”

“But you had such a wonderful opportunity. And look where it landed you. Now you're a superstar,” she says.

“I’m not sure I’d say superstar,” I say. I’m not being falsely humble—that’s true. Yes, I am rising in the sport of baseball, but I’m only three years in. I might be cocky with my teammates, since that’s how we roll, but outside of the locker room, I’m more of a realist.

“You don’t have to. I did. And I’m not wrong. I can smell it on you like a cologne,” she says playfully, sniffing the air.

“Yes, I did douse myself in Superstar before leaving my home. Smells like ...” I wave a hand, casting about for an analogy for the fake cologne brand I just made up, then snap my fingers. “Ten-thousand-dollar bills.”

“Hey, do they even still make those?”

“Why did they ever make them?” I ask. “Literally, what is the point of a ten-thousand-dollar bill? Who wants to carry one around? Do you want to be the chump who leaves your ten-thousand-dollar bill in the cab or the loo?”

“The point of them is to show that you have it. It’s like the monetary equivalent of unzipping your pants and whipping out a monster cock. Amusing, eye-opening, perhaps even highly entertaining.” She raises a finger to finish her point. “But a totally unnecessary sideshow.”

I crack up. “Did you just say ‘monster cock’? Did you truly just say that?”

Her pink lips part in an O, and she clasps her hand to her mouth. “I did. How utterly naughty of me. Wash my mouth out with soap.”

Bloody hell. Clementine is flirty. Clementine is also dirty. Maybe even bawdy. Was she this naughty in high school? Or is this a new thing?

“You have a naughty side, Clementine,” I say.

“Does it bother you, Shane? Would you prefer I be more ... dainty?” She’s like a strawberry cocktail, chased by a shot of tequila—sweetness and fire.

“I prefer *you*,” I say, since two can play at this flirting game.

That's all this is.

Simple bar flirting.

Nothing more.

There's no time in my life for *more* anyway, but maybe tonight I can enjoy a few moments with her.

The girl who got away once upon a time.

I gesture to the bar. "Drink, love?"

She nibbles on the corner of her lips, a soft laugh falling from her lush mouth.

"What are you laughing at?" I ask.

"You still say 'love.'"

I shrug, a little helpless. "You can take the boy out of England, but you can't take the England out of the boy."

"Good. I like the England in the boy," she says, then cocks her head to the side, appraising me. "Or, really, the man."

Is this happening? Did I truly walk into a comedy club on Valentine's Day and bump into the one woman who never quite left my mind?

I wasn't planning to meet anyone tonight. I was planning to do the opposite—*not* meet anyone.

"And this man likes being right here, right now," I tell the flirty blast from my past.

"Good. Very, very good, you *snorter*."

I laugh, something I haven't done a lot of when it comes to dating, and women, and romance.

Brilliant. Fucking brilliant.

I'm already thinking of her in ways I shouldn't.

Romantic ways.

I should say, *Nice to see you. I start spring training in a day*, but then again, what's the harm in chatting with an old friend from school?

This is simple catching up. There's no harm.

None at all.

But there's one little matter I need to be clear on.

“So, when we order this drink, will your boyfriend show up in a few minutes, and is he a six-foot-ten professional MMA fighter who will toss me out of here?”

“Don't be silly. He's over seven feet, and he's also a bounty hunter.”

“No problem, then.”

She sets a hand on my arm. “Besides, you can just throw him one of those wicked fastballs of yours.”

“Ah, I'll challenge him to a baseball duel. Perfect.”

She smiles, full wattage, an all-the-stars-in-the-sky grin. “And your girlfriend?”

“Like your giant fake boyfriend, she doesn't exist. So can I get you a drink?”

“I'd love a martini.”

“And I'll have the same,” I say, and we move to a spot at the far end of the bar. When I catch the gaze of a blonde bartender, I raise two fingers.

She strides over, flashing a grin. “What can I get you?”

Her voice is full of my home country, but now's not the time to chitchat with the bartender from London. I place our order, then the woman turns to my ... friend.

Who feels immediately like my date.

“Your hair clip is the cutest thing ever. Is that a Papillon?”

With a delighted smile, Clementine lifts her hand, running a finger across it. “I'm in mad love with them. I have a rescue Papillon, and he's the love of my life.”

“As it should be with a dog,” the bartender says, then taps the counter. “I'll get to work on your drinks.”

She heads down the bar, and I turn to Clementine, eager to hear all about her. “So, what are you up to now?”

“Try not to be shocked,” she says, deadpan.

I square my shoulders, schooling my expression. “I’m putting on my *unsurprised* face.”

“I’m a pet trainer, mostly dogs,” she says proudly.

I tip my forehead to the clip. “That’s perfect for you. Didn’t you have ten dogs growing up? A whole passel?”

She shoves my elbow. “Just two. Nowhere near enough.”

“Naturally. One can’t have enough dogs.”

“You get me.”

“And business is ...”

“It’s great,” she says, then whips out her phone, clicks to Instagram, and shows me her feed—picture after picture of her working with small beasts.

Leading classes.

Teaching agility.

Wow. She’s not simply a dog trainer.

She’s a celeb of sorts. Her feed is brimming with local influencers, sports stars, news anchors, tech wunderkinds. “You’re the dog trainer to the stars,” I remark.

“I work with everyone. I just have a few high-profile clients,” she says, downplaying what’s clearly a booming business.

I click on one of the pics and scroll through the comments. I arch a brow. “And it says you have a waiting list several weeks long. Good on you, Clem.”

She smiles graciously. “I can’t complain. Work has been good to me. And it’s been good to you, Mister Wicked Fastball. To think, it all started with your championship game senior year.” She punches my right arm.

A pang of sadness digs into my chest, but it’s chased by happiness—that’s how I felt as we were winding down at the

end of high school. She was the only thing I missed when I took off for an unplanned baseball tournament, and the chance to start college early that summer.

“I can’t believe I had a championship game clear across the country the weekend I’d asked you to prom,” I say with a sigh.

I’m back in time, eighteen again, finishing school, sneaking off to kiss a beautiful girl after a game. Clementine and I went out a few times, made out a couple more times, and made plans.

The woman in front of me pouts, over-the-top and adorable, as her pink lips curve down. “And to think I was left all alone, standing in the corner of the Carter Club ballroom in my emerald-green dress, no one to dance with.”

The image is beautiful and breaks my teenage heart all at the same time. I tuck a finger under her chin. “Somehow I doubt you were left standing all John-Hughes-rom-com-movie-style in the corner.”

Clementine shrugs, a little coquettishly, those big green eyes full of mischief. “What do you think happened, then?”

“No doubt all the blokes asked you to dance,” I say, imagining the scene now. A long line of hopeless and undoubtedly horny boys, eager for a shot at the most captivating girl in school. Eighteen-year-old me is weirdly jealous of those sad sacks, even seven fucking years later.

“Ha,” she says with a laugh. “Not exactly. Also, aren’t John Hughes flicks a little old for you?”

“Yes. But I’ve spent enough time on planes and in hotels in the majors that I’ve tried to watch pretty much every film made in the last thirty to forty years.”

“That’s some serious commitment to sampling entertainment.”

“Music, movies, and books are kind of my thing. But what about you, calling me out? Isn’t John Hughes too old for you too?” I counter.

“Yes! But my parents went on and on about those movies when I was growing up, so finally, for a girls’ night last year, my friends and I tried watching the holy triumvirate—that’s *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Breakfast Club*.”

“The verdict?”

“We turned them off and watched *The Adventures of Mister Orgasm* instead.”

“You can never go wrong with a fictional cartoon hero committed to a woman’s pleasure,” I say as the bartender returns with our drinks.

“Here you go,” she says, and I pay for them straightaway, thanking the blonde behind the bar. Then I turn to Clementine, lifting my drink.

“Something we couldn’t have done in high school,” I say.

She leans a little closer, dipping her voice to a whisper. “Unless we were very sneaky.”

“We were kind of sneaky, weren’t we?”

“We had our moments, slipping behind the bleachers for no particular reason other than that it was fun to kiss there,” she says.

I pick up the thread easily, warmth skimming down my body from the memories, or perhaps it’s from the present moment with her. Maybe both. “Stealing a kiss before the bell rang,” I murmur.

“See? We might have been sneaky at prom too,” she says, her tone a little seductive.

“Were you going to slip a flask between your breasts?” I ask, taking the liberty to set a hand on her forearm.

Her breath catches as her gaze drifts down to my hand. Then her eyes swing back up, meeting mine. Her irises shimmer with desire.

“Shane Walker, you naughty man.” She glances around, checking our surroundings, then lowers her voice more.

“Maybe I was. Just for you to discover. Does that make you miss prom even more now?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” I tell her, stroking her wrist. She trembles as I touch her, and her reaction makes me never want to stop.

“Such a shame, then,” she says, a little breathy.

We’re both talking about the night we missed and about the here and now.

Funny how I came to this club to avoid the temptation of meeting a woman at a concert.

And here I am, reconnecting instantly with *this* woman.

She inches closer. “And there was no John Hughes moment for me at prom. In the end, I didn’t go. I went out with girlfriends instead. We did karaoke in Japantown, then went to a diner, and we had a blast.”

“Good,” I say, and now it’s not eighteen-year-old me who’s relieved—it’s *this* me.

What the hell is going on? Do I truly care that much about my high school girlfriend’s whereabouts one night in June seven years ago?

Maybe I do.

“So you don’t have to worry about the long line of tongue-wagging teenage boys wanting to hit on your ex,” she adds.

Busted.

Thoroughly and completely.

Though she doesn’t quite seem like an ex. An ex is someone you broke up with or who dumped you. Clementine and I wanted to continue, but circumstance pulled us apart.

“Was it that obvious that I’m a jealous bastard?”

Her eyes swing down to my hand again, touching her wrist, then return to my face. “Completely. But rest assured, there were no stolen kisses, no flasks, and no third base in the Carter Club coatroom, complete with mothballs.”

A rumble works its way up my chest. “Clementine Rose, you’re reminding me of all my favorite teenage memories with you. Except for the mothballs.”

“Mine too,” she says, then shifts her hand, palm up, inviting me to thread my fingers through hers.

I do, our fingers sliding together, sending an erotic charge straight down my spine.

I can only imagine what trouble we’d have gotten into at prom. And I can definitely picture the best kind of trouble tonight. “We were good at the good kind of trouble,” I say, lifting my martini glass with my free hand.

She clinks her glass to mine. “Should we toast to good trouble?”

But that hardly seems enough. This night is sparkling with possibility, teasing me with the prospect of the best kind of evenings.

“To good trouble and to stealing kisses,” I offer.

She licks her lips, flicking her tongue along the corner of her mouth.

I groan, unbidden.

Let there be good trouble tonight.

Surely I can handle good trouble.

It’s only love I need to avoid.

That’s what I tell myself as we toast.

“I’ll drink to both of those,” she says, with a sexy smile that makes my heart flip.

Harder than just a good-time flip.

SHANE

One martini later, and her hand is still in mine.

And our fingers and thumbs are practically fucking.

Okay, not exactly.

Fingers fuck in other ways. But the way she skims her soft hand along mine fries my brain.

Trips my senses.

Reminds me of all the other what-ifs we missed.

Not simply prom.

But something else we talked about then ...

She was going to come to my championship game, but the tournament was switched at the last minute from San Francisco to Miami. I spent two weeks there before heading off to college, also in Florida. Two weeks I was going to spend with her.

Circumstance, the cockblocker.

“I missed seeing you at the championship game too. It was supposed to be held right here in the city. I was looking forward to that. Which makes me a selfish fucker, I suppose.”

She lifts a brow in question as she settles into a seat at the bar. “You wanted me at your game?”

I’ve only had one drink. So it’s not the martini going to my head. It’s her. “I wanted *you*.”

“I wanted to be there, Shane. At the ballpark by the water. Cheering for you,” she whispers.

“I would have loved that,” I say, clasping her hand tighter as we inch closer.

“You always seemed to enjoy it when I went to your games,” she says, taking me back to some of my favorite memories.

Back then, when I had romance *and* baseball. When my favorite thing—the sport I loved—was tied up with the girl I was quickly falling for. The two hadn’t become dangerously entangled like they did last season with Tinsley in the bad kind of trouble. The kind of trouble that turned into distraction, lies, and heartbreak.

Tinsley’s the last thing I want to think of though.

And it’s remarkably easy to shove her out of my mind, since I only have room in it for Clementine right now. In fact, in this corner of the bar, it feels like we’re the only two people in the world.

“I used to love closing out a game and finding you in the stands after a save,” I tell her.

“Kissing me after your victory,” she recounts, and she is talking my language.

“I missed that most when we won the championship. Can you believe that? I had everything I thought I wanted then—a fast track to the majors—but I was dying, fucking dying, to kiss you after that win,” I say, and it all spills out in a heap of wishes and wants.

Ones that her eyes seem to reflect back at me. They shimmer with hope.

“Mmm. I loved your kisses, Shane Walker. I wanted more of them. I wanted ... other things with you too,” she says, letting me connect the dots, and I absolutely do.

“Fine. I wanted to do much more than kiss you too,” I say, a dirty hum in my throat.

“Mmm. You mean ... more than third base?” She nibbles on the corner of her lips.

I laugh, then loop a hand around her waist. “My lovely Clementine, I wanted to hit a home run with you,” I whisper.

“I wanted that too,” she whispers, then in a softer, barely-there voice, she adds, “Want that tonight.”

And I wave the white flag.

Not that I was doing a good job resisting her, but I’ve zero intention of that now. “Can I kiss you?”

“You better,” she says, squeezing my fingers harder, tugging me closer here at the bar, guiding my hands to her hips. Happy to have them there.

It’s so public, and we’re on display.

But I don’t care one bit about that.

I stand, and she stays seated on the stool, parting her legs ever so slightly.

I move in between the V of her thighs, sliding closer, enjoying the heat radiating between our bodies. I gaze into her green eyes, shimmering with lust.

Then I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb along her jaw.

Her breath comes in a quick pant.

And all at once, I recall perfectly how she likes to be kissed.

Clementine Rose likes to be taken.

Holding her face, I drop my lips to hers. A soft murmur greets me as I shut my eyes and capture her mouth with mine.

She stretches her neck, giving herself, offering her mouth.

And I take it, kissing her gently.

Her body melts under my touch, her hands looping around my neck.

She’s like an old-time Hollywood starlet, all glitter and dreams.

And that's the kind of kiss I give her—a silver-screen one.
The kind where the heroine leans back and lets the hero lead.

But her hands play with the ends of my hair, and her sexy
little sighs say, *Keep going, give me more.*

Her subtle body language asks to be swept away.

To be consumed.

That's exactly what I want to do with my high school
sweetheart, especially since kissing her feels not quite like
coming home ... but more like stealing home.

She's a dream to kiss, a woman wanting all that I have to
give.

And I want to give.

I want to give her anything she wants.

Not because I'm magnanimous.

Please.

I'm a man lusting after a woman, craving her body, her
lips, her pleasure.

Her.

I want to give her everything because I'm greedy too. I
want all the things she seems to be offering by the way she's
moving, arching her body, sliding her tongue tenderly along
my bottom lip, then whispering, "*More,*" against my mouth.

That's my cue to go full black-and-white movie with her. I
kiss her like she's the woman I've come home to after all this
time.

Like we're crossing the years, erasing them.

We're reconnecting with our lips and mouths, with breath
and touch.

With heat and desire.

I deepen the kiss, stroking my tongue against hers,
exploring her. I lose myself in the sweet, decadent taste of her
mouth and all her vibrant Clementine-ness.

She pulls me closer, her fingers tangling in my hair, her lips hungry.

In a heartbeat, she sits up higher, then scoots off the stool. And holy fuck, she drops her hands from my hair, grabs my waist, and jerks me close. In a quick switch, she's suddenly kissing me hard and hungry, like she'd be devastated if we didn't fuck tonight.

Join the club, Clementine.

Fucking join it.

I've got to have her.

She presses her lithe body against mine, groaning into my mouth when she rubs against my erection, and yes.

Time to go.

Absolutely time to ditch this bar.

I'm about to break the kiss, catch my breath, and invite her home when she wrenches apart from me, then says, "Come over tonight."

And I'd like to thank the baseball gods for trading me to San Francisco.

"Yes," I say. That's the only answer.

But not quite so fast.

"I need to say goodbye to my friends," she says, sounding like she's coming up for air, collecting her thoughts.

"I suppose I should do the same," I say, though Sullivan and Drew won't give a flying fuck.

Still, when Clementine strolls to the tables near the stage, that gives me a chance to sit down, let the blood divert to other parts of my body.

Perhaps the brain.

There. A minute or two later, I'm not sporting the evidence of her effect on me, so I make my way to say goodbye to my mates.

I reach their table, interrupting a debate on Elmore Leonard versus Raymond Chandler.

“Chandler,” I declare, since bar debates can be entered at any moment.

“Give your reason,” Sullivan demands, sounding and looking like Ryan Reynolds.

“He was an American and a Brit. Naturalized as a British subject,” I say.

The darker-haired Drew scoffs. “That’s a selfish reason. It’s all about you, isn’t it, Shakespeare?”

“Speaking of me,” I say with a wicked grin, since why hide the thrill of tonight? “I’ll see you at spring training. Well, you,” I say, pointing to Drew, since he’s my Dragons teammate. I pat Sullivan on the shoulder. “And we’ll see this poor tosser when we destroy him on the field.”

“There will be no destruction of the best team in baseball,” Sullivan says, then tips his forehead in the direction of Clementine, who’s chatting with three women. “Didn’t take you long to decide romance was back in the cards, bud?”

Drew sets a hand on his heart. “So cute that you found a woman on Valentine’s Day. I’m gonna write a poem for you.”

I play it cool, scoffing. “Who said anything about romance?”

Sullivan rolls his eyes. “You’re so pathetic. You’re smiling like you just saw your long-lost lover.”

Am I that transparent?

Perhaps I am.

Maybe I need to remind myself that I’m sitting on the bench.

Love isn’t part of my San Francisco plan. I refuse to fall for anyone. No matter how easy it’d be to fall for her. I’ll have to tell her I’m not in the market for romance. That I need to focus *only* on baseball. That tonight is just one night.

I'll tell her in the Lyft, and if she's looking for something longer, I'll say goodbye to her at her door, à la gentleman that I am, then head on home. Only fair to put my cards on the table.

"I've got everything under control," I tell the guys. "Just like I do when I come into the ninth inning."

"Always cocky underneath that *I'm so likable* exterior," Drew teases.

"All right, fuck off, you sad sacks," I say, then smile when Clementine weaves through the crowd on her way to me.

"Dude, you're so far gone already. Look at your goofy grin," Sullivan says, too loudly for my taste.

"See you at spring training, arseholes," I say, then start to head to the exit. But before I turn away, Drew catches the eye of a brunette, then says to Sullivan, "Hey, that's Erin Madison. The local sports reporter you've been hot for for the last year."

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline. "And the plot thickens," I say to the guys, then shift gears when Clementine arrives by my side.

"Ready?" I ask the woman I want to spend the entire night with.

And maybe more.

Settle down, heart. You're taking a break.

But my heart thumps harder when her eyes lock with mine, and she answers me with "More than you can ever know."

Pretty sure my plans are going tits up.

In every way.

CLEMENTINE

Clearly, fate is my friend tonight.

My brand-new bestie.

There's no other explanation for kismet dropping *this* man into my orbit twenty-four hours before my plans to fling myself into the Battle Royale of Tinder dating and mating.

Sure, I'll still enter the ring, but bumping into Shane Walker on *Dating Eve* is like drawing a winning hand in Vegas.

He's not only an ace—he's all four of them.

But I also know it's only fair to give him the 411 on my lady sitch. Sure, my virginity is truly *only* my business, but I'm also big on honesty. It's not a secret I want to hide from him. I'd like him to know, just in case sex gets weird.

Nerves prickle across my skin, racing up my neck as we slide into the Lyft, and I gird myself. I practice what to say like I practice my dog training tips before seeing a new client.

I've been training dogs for years, but every pooch is unique.

Don't worry. He'll get the hang of it.

What a good boy!

Yup. I'll just mix them up a bit.

I've been training with vibrators for years, but I bet your dick is one in a million.

Don't worry. I'll get the hang of it.

What a big cock!

There. I can do that. I can definitely say all that.

Except ... Shane is kind of a ten. Fine, he's totally an eleven.

Ugh, will he be turned off?

Turned on?

Freaked out?

I have no idea.

Guys are strange. Sometimes I do think they are aliens, wrapped occasionally in hunky packages and shot in pods from the hulls of spaceships to vex straight ladies here on Earth. Like, can we possibly ever figure out how to talk to men in the same language?

I swear dogs are easier to understand.

But I've got to try with Shane.

I want my bad luck streak to end, and I want it to end tonight.

Trouble is, my throat is dry now that we're zipping through the city, hell-bent on Pound Town.

He's quiet too, looking a little lost in thought as we sail along Bay Street.

That's not good for a V-card partner.

"So," I begin, hunting for words as I scan the too familiar sights.

"So," he adds, sounding a little awkward too.

Oh shoot.

Is he getting cold feet?

That would be just my luck.

"Did you, um, miss the city?" I ask, then want to smack myself. I've spent the last hour with him making flirty, dirty

talk. Now, I'm regressing to *small talk*?

"I did. It's good to be back," he says, then rubs his palms along his jeans. A sign of nerves too.

Yup. He's losing interest.

We've entered the small-talk zone. Where sex dreams go to die.

Shane clears his throat. Here it comes. The letdown. *Three, two, one.*

He points out the window at the Luxe Hotel, a gorgeous, chi-chi place that opened a year ago. Maybe he wants to escape in his pod and fly to a room there on the top floor. "Wait. Wasn't that ...?"

Ah, that's easy enough to answer. Perfect conversation topic to get the flow going again. "Yes, that was the once-upon-a-time Carter Club. They razed it when the Luxe Hotel came to town. No more mothballs. No more seventies cheese. All the shag carpets in the hall are gone. Now it's trendy and hip, with purple velvet chairs in the lobby and too-cool-for-school artwork and low lights, and there's a lounge with all sorts of fantastic cocktails with names like Gold Rush and Mining Country," I say, and fuck a duck. I'm going on about a hotel now.

Shut up, Clem.

"So clever," he says, adding a chuckle, and that feels fake.

The flow is not flowing.

How has this delicious night gone to hell already?

What happened?

I retrace our steps, trying to pinpoint the moment we turned into the Awkward Zone. Let's see. Back at the club, after our swoony kiss to end all kisses, I said come over, he said yes, we saw our friends, and we got in a car.

Wait, did something happen with his friends?

Maybe that's it?

“Anyway, where do you live?” he asks, breaking the awkward with ... more awkward. Since it’s his Lyft app we used. We entered my address into his freaking app. He knows where I live.

I fix on a friendly smile. “Cow Hollow,” I say, gesturing to the driver’s phone. “You know, where we’re going and all.”

He smacks his forehead, a little embarrassed. “Right, right. Of course. A bit daft for a second there,” he says, and he’s not the Shane of ten minutes ago.

He’s someone else.

A male alien. A male-lien.

Or maybe he’s like Steak Guy, and he wants to check out my freezer first for meat storage before he lets me down.

What would I do if a dog training sesh went off the rails?

Think, Clem, think.

I got it!

“That’s okay. We can try again,” I say, in my best peppy trainer voice, like I’m talking to a stubborn Chihuahua.

Shane jerks his gaze to me. A line creases his brow. “What?”

Oops. That was the wrong strategy too.

Nothing is working. No wonder I’m the queen of terrible dates. *I am a terrible date.*

“I don’t have a big freezer,” I blurt out.

And fuck ten million ducks.

It’s official. I’m clearly the reason I don’t make it to the fifth date. Here I am on the first date with an amazing guy, and I don’t know how to handle a single thing, including ... *talking.*

But maybe my former high school boyfriend does, since a sly smile sneaks across his handsome face. “Do you need to freeze something, Clementine? Or is that just your secret code for wanting to stop and get some ice cream?”

In one quick retort, he's back to fun, flirty Shane.

A cue for me to return to fun, saucy Clem?

But the foot I shoved in my mouth is still lodged uncomfortably in the back of my throat, and as the Lyft driver—a lovely brunette who doesn't speak—slows at the light, I unspool all the worries I've built up in the last several minutes.

"I'm the queen of terrible dates," I confess, all the words spilling out. "I've had a string of comically bad dates for the last few years. So bad they belong in a joke book. I dated a guy who wanted to check out my freezer for steak storage. Someone else asked for a twofer—he wanted to take me out for a latte *and* get dog training advice for an unruly Yorkie. Another guy brought his mom on the first date. I kid you not," I say, holding up a hand like I'm swearing an oath.

Shane exhales, all calm and cool. Then he places a palm on my leg, and oh, that's nice. I like his touch. It's easing my nerves.

"Let's tackle each of those," he says. "My mom already met you at a baseball game years ago. Thought you were great, so she won't be popping over tonight. Plus, not my style. Second, I don't have pets, so don't need a training twofer, but someday I'd like a cat, and I plan to name him or her Lennon, and if he or she poses any trouble, I'll just ask the internet what to do. And three, I promise I have a very large freezer and zero interest in ice-cold steaks."

I let out a huge breath of relief for all of that, for every word of his lovely reassurance, but I'm not done. Not even close. "Good. But those guys are nothing compared to the last guy I went out with. Everything was going swimmingly with him. I liked him a lot, then he climbed Mount Everest, said he wanted to use his body for more noble pursuits, and he no longer wanted to have sex at all with anyone," I spit out. "And that really bummed me because I think I would like sex. Like, *a lot*."

Shane's hazel eyes brim with shock. "I can't even imagine a more noble pursuit than sex. Or, frankly, than the pursuit of female pleasure." Then he stops, lifts a hand, blinks several

times, and shakes his head. “Wait. Hold the bloody hell on. Did you just say you *think* you’d like sex?”

That question makes landfall right as the world’s most silent rideshare driver pulls to the curb. She shoots us a cheery grin in the rearview mirror. “Here we are. Good luck with your sex talk. I hope this drive was as good for you as it was for me. How about a five for five?”

I guess she makes up for in listening what she lacks in talking.

“Thanks. I’ll be sure to give you five stars,” Shane says, then we unbuckle and scoot out of the car, standing under a streetlamp outside my home. My maybe-sorta-I-don’t-know-what-he-is-anymore date lasers his eyes on mine. “Let me ask that again, Clem, now that it’s just us. Did you just say you think you’d like sex?”

And ... he hates virgins.

Clearly.

We’re no longer heading straight for Planet Bed, where the male-lien and the Earth girl will play *Take Me to Your Penis*.

Still, I’m a woman who knows her mind, and it’s time to woman up. No more galloping brain or blurry mouth.

I know what I want.

Honesty, trust, and a little nooky.

Time to say the whole truth.

I square my shoulders, lift my chin, and take a breath. “Yes, I did say that, because I like the idea of sex. I think about sex a lot. I like to watch videos of men making women feel incredible in bed. I like to get off to thoughts of what that might feel like when someone else does that. I want to know what sex feels like. Ideally, good sex. I’m a virgin, but I’m not innocent. Not one bit.” I tap my temple. “So yes, I think about sex a lot, and I also think I’d *really, really* like it.”

I expel a big breath, a lot relieved, but there’s more to say. I gear up for round two as a smile tips the corner of his lips.

That emboldens me and so do his words when he rasps out in a smoky, knee-weakening voice, “You don’t sound too innocent, Clementine. Not one bit.”

That’s all I need to keep going. “I just haven’t met the right guy—someone I want to sleep with. I want someone who’s funny and thoughtful and reasonably attractive, but I’m not looking for a relationship. Not at all. So please don’t think I’m waiting for Mr. Right,” I say, borderline imploring both for him and for me. I can’t quite read his response though—a furrow creases his brow, and his eyes turn more intense, but he stays focused, clearly listening. “I’ve been there, done that. I’ve tried. I’m so over trying, Shane. Honestly, at this point, all I truly want is Mr. Right Now. I’m twenty-five, and I thought I wanted to wait to have sex till I was in a serious relationship, but I can see that isn’t going to happen, and I’m super okay with that.” I smile and shrug lightly, easily, so he knows how very okay I am with no strings. “I don’t need more, I don’t need commitment, but I would like more of your body tonight. I’m still incredibly turned on from how you kissed me, and I’d really like to sleep with you with no expectations.” I take a beat, draw a final, fortifying breath, then finish with my official request. “If you’d like to sleep with me too.”

There.

I did it.

I put myself out there in a big, scary way.

That was harder than writing a dating profile.

Than swiping right.

Than sliding into a guy’s DMs.

That was telling my truth to a guy I—*gasp*—actually care about.

I wait for his response, but not for long.

His smile is a constellation lighting up the night sky. “I would love to be your first. I’m pretty sure I’d be great at being Mr. Right Now, because I was going to tell you, too, that I’m not in the market for a relationship. I wasn’t quite sure

how to say it, and that's why I went a little quiet in the car. I'm sorry if that worried you."

That's why he went silent. That makes sense now.

"I'm not worried," I say, my shoulders relaxing, my overactive pulse settling. I'm curious, though, so I stay silent, waiting and hoping he shares more.

"It's just ... well, you've been so patently honest with me, and I want to be the same," he says, and it sounds like this is hard for him, and I want to tell him it's okay, I'll listen. Instead, I do that—listen. "I just got out of a bad relationship in New York. Where my heart was a little bit broken. She didn't think I was good enough, or rich enough, and she left me for someone with a bigger star and a bigger name, and I don't want to go through that again," he tells me, vulnerability coloring his tone, and I just want to hug him, and to hiss at her. Who would do that to this fantastic catch of a man? "I can't tell you how refreshing it is, Clementine, that you just put what you want on the table." An embarrassed laugh bursts from him. "Holy hell, I'm spitting out words too." He scrubs his jaw, laughing.

I giggle, bouncing on my toes. "It's infectious, isn't it? Confessing what you really want?"

"Evidently it is," he says, then loops a strong arm around my waist. "So I hope you're good with all that."

I tap my chin. "Gee, sounds like neither one of us wants strings. I'd say we're on the same page, and that's very, very good."

He grins. "Yes, but let's correct one thing."

I slide closer to him, savoring the connection again. "What's that?"

He strokes my jaw, sending a shiver through me. "Reasonably attractive? I'm reasonably attractive?"

I laugh, then shake my head. "The only one more handsome than you is my dog."

He hums. “I accept. Now, let me take you upstairs because I think you’ll *really, really* like sex too, because I *really, really* want to sleep with you and introduce you to the joys of fucking.”

“Let’s go,” I say, and neither one of us is speaking male-
lien.

After all these years, all those duds, I’m finally ready to lose my virginity.

Bring it on, Mr. Right Now.

SHANE

That didn't help matters at all.

Wait. Back that up.

Her confession helped matters in my trousers. But I didn't need a leg up there. I was, and still am, ready to go in that department.

The trouble is my stupid heart.

It's beating faster for Clementine.

Thumping harder.

It's not fucking supposed to. I told my heart to stay in time-out. It's wounded. It's taking a break. It's on the bench.

Yet it's hungry for this woman.

For more than no strings.

As I follow her up the steps, I ought to just focus on the gorgeous sex offer she laid out. The one I accepted. Only, I like everything she just said so much. I like *that* she said it. Her openness is an allure. Honesty is such a turn-on, for my dick evidently. But, inconveniently, it flips the switch on the organ in my chest too.

Settle down, heart.

There. A stern talking-to will do the trick.

I wish.

She's just so easy to like. Easy to fall for. When she reaches the door, she swivels around, an impish look in her

pretty eyes. “Oh. I have to warn you, if my dog doesn’t like you, it’s lights out.”

“Your canine holds the key to your knickers?”

She laughs. “Well, that’s fair, right? If he doesn’t like you, there’s a clear reason.”

She’s not wrong. Dogs are excellent judges of character. “Clearly. I’ll do my best to gain his approval.”

As she opens the door, there’s a scratching sound behind it, then a happy whine once it swings open.

The whimpers grow louder, and a tiny beast jumps up and down on his back legs, greeting his person. “Hey, big guy. Of course I missed you,” she says, scooping up the white-and-brown fluffball and kissing him. She turns to me. “This is Magnus.”

The tiny Papillon tilts his head and opens his snout like he’s considering giving me a verbal dressing down. “Be good,” she warns him.

And he behaves, sitting taller in her arms, closing his snout.

“Hey there, Magnus,” I say, then stroke his chin.

His tongue lolls out, and since when in Rome ... I bend and drop a kiss to his silky head.

He answers by licking my cheek. A sloppy dog lick from jawline all the way to my eye.

Converted!

Clementine hoots. “Shut the front door! You’re in.” She steps back, wagging a finger. “Admit it. You clearly covered your face in liverwurst.”

“It was bacon.” Then I gesture to the hook that holds a leather leash. “I presume he needs to go to the loo. Let’s take him for a walk down the street?”

That earns me a preposterously large grin from the pixie blonde. “Are you trying to get in my pants by being good to my dog?”

Stroking my chin, I study the ceiling for a few seconds. “Well, you already promised me your knickers, so at this point, I’d say I’m just that great a guy.”

She rises on her tiptoes and brushes her lips to my other cheek. “You are.”

Then, she hooks a leash on her pup, and we head back the way we came. As we wander down the pavement, we chat, catching up more as we go.

“So if your ex was a jerk, because she totally was for saying you’re not good enough, since you’re freaking amazing,” she says, “and all my dates were jerks, does that mean we’re each other’s only good exes?”

“Funny, I was thinking something along those lines at the club.”

“You were?”

Magnus stops to sniff a tree, and we both slow our pace. “Yes, except ... we aren’t truly exes, are we?”

She tilts her head in question. “We’re not?”

I nudge her with my elbow. “We never actually broke up. Life got in the way.”

“Hmm,” she says, seeming to noodle on that as Magnus finishes and we spin around. “You’re right. There was no dumping. So no anger or true heartbreak.”

I wouldn’t say no heartbreak, but now’s not the time to protest on that count. “And honestly, we probably would have kept going,” I say, then I catch my breath, a little surprised I said that. “Did I just get ahead of myself by presuming we’d have kept on?”

She laughs, setting a hand on my arm. “Shane, we would have kept on in every way, especially at prom. I wanted to keep seeing you, and I also wanted to see you naked,” she says, then waves her hand at my chest. Her voice goes low, seductive. “I wanted all this unreasonably attractive hotness. And I still want it now.”

We practically race back to her place.

Five minutes later, she unclips the dog's leash and sends him to the couch. "Stay, Magnus."

Obediently, he curls up in a dog ball.

"Bye-bye," she says, waving to the beast, then she pulls me into her room and shuts the door.

She slides her hands up my chest. "Hi, you."

"Hi to you, Clementine Rose," I murmur, then dip my face to her neck, pressing a kiss to her soft skin. She smells like oranges and honey. The former is fitting for her name, the latter for her personality. I can't get enough of her scent, and I kiss her neck so thoroughly, she's sighing and moaning when I reach her ear and nip on her earlobe.

"Shane," she whispers on a breathless pant.

I pull back, meet her heady gaze, then run a finger across her lips. "I'm so damn glad I ran into you this evening."

"Me too. Can you please undress me and take me tonight? Now. I can't wait any longer."

She removes her hair clip, and I make quick work of her top, then undo her jeans. She helps me along, sliding them down her legs, stepping out of her boots. I step back and whistle in appreciation for her lacy black panties and matching bra. The set is so damn sexy, it's almost a shame to remove them.

But it's time for them to go.

I roam my hands around her back and undo the bra, all while I dust tender kisses on her lips and eyelids, then let the fabric fall to the floor.

I haul in a harsh breath at the lovely sight in front of me. Perky tits, soft, creamy skin, and a flush down her chest.

The best part though?

The way she bites her lips then gasps as I cup her tits. Groaning at the glorious feel of her flesh in my hands, I knead harder, teasing at her already firm nipples.

Her hands fly to my hips, grabbing me tight. “Can I take your clothes off too?”

“Seems fair,” I tease, and in seconds, I’m down to my boxer briefs.

She tugs at the waistband, a fantastically filthy look in her green eyes. A look that turns hotter, needier when she squeezes my hard-on.

“Oh fuck, that feels good,” I grunt as she strokes my dick over my briefs.

She grins like she’s won the lottery. “Monster cock,” she whispers with the wildest grin.

I crack up. “If you say so.”

“I do, I do, I do.”

Then she handles the rest of the stripping, yanking on my boxers till they’re gone. Her lips part in a wild O as her gaze lands on my cock—thick, hard, and pulsing for her.

“You seriously have a ... beautiful dick,” she says, her voice husky, her eyes reckless.

“I’m so glad you approve of my package,” I tease. “Now, enough admiring of me. I need to worship your pussy with my mouth.”

“Let the service begin,” she says, and flops onto the bed.

I climb over her, shimmy those knickers down her ankles, then moan in lusty appreciation at the sight.

My Clementine is soaked.

She’s fucking glistening, and I need to savor all that sweetness. I kneel between her legs, spread her thighs, and run my hands along the soft flesh. “You’re so fucking edible,” I growl as I stare at her sweet, hot, and perfect pink center.

As she arches her back, her hips rise. Already, she’s asking for me with her body, and her need makes my dick thump hard.

But the pursuit of her pleasure comes before mine.

I lower my face and kiss her legs, dusting soft lips along her thighs, inching closer to the heady paradise. Taking my time, I lavish soft kisses on her thighs, her mound, then closer, and so much closer.

When I'm there at last, she's begging, gasping, and finally, I press a kiss to her pussy.

We both groan at the same time.

She tastes incredible—all desire and bare need.

I lap up her wetness, swirling my tongue around her clit, drawing dizzying circles that make her rock and arch against me.

Her hands fly to my hair. She grips me, tugging me closer.

I love how in touch she is with her own body. With her own lust.

It drives me—her noises, her gasps, her fingers that curl around my head.

“Yes, oh God, yes,” she cries out as I suck on her clit, flicking my tongue against the delicious rise.

Then I press an openmouthed kiss to her, devouring her with my lips as she moans and writhes.

Soon, she thrusts with wild abandon, and I kiss her like crazy as her voice reaches the night sky.

In one long, glorious gasp, she calls out, “Yes.”

Then comes, shuddering beautifully.

As her taste floods my tongue, I kiss her gently till she seems to come down from the cliff of bliss. Then I let go, sweeping my lips along her mound, her stomach, her pert breasts.

I raise my face, meeting her eyes.

They're shimmering with lust, and satisfaction too. “That was a joy indeed.”

“More joy where that came from, love,” I rasp out.

A faint blush spreads on her cheeks from the term of endearment.

Or maybe from the orgasm.

Hard to say, and really, who cares right now?

I push up on my elbows. “Have you thought about how you want it for your first time?”

“I want you on top of me. Just like this. And I have condoms.”

“It’s good to be prepared,” I say, as she reaches into the nightstand and produces one.

I shift to my knees, but before I slide it on, she sits up, reaches for my cock, then curls her fist around it.

Lust surges down my spine.

“Like I said, monster cock, and I can understand the appeal of the ten-thousand-dollar bill now,” she says with a grin.

I crack up, loving that we can laugh in this moment.

It’s amazing and wildly dangerous because laughing like this leads to falling.

Falling fast.

CLEMENTINE

Breathe.

Just breathe.

But I also stare, since, well, there's a gorgeous man between my legs.

Hallelujah.

He's so much more than looks though. So much more than his carved jaw, strong cheekbones, than his warm eyes and lush lips, than his ten-thousand-dollar cock.

Shane Walker is a man who's caring, witty, and honest, and who treats me like he adores me.

That's what I want.

This kind of man.

Or, really, *this* man.

The man I wanted once upon a time when I was younger.

The one I'm about to have now.

Maybe this is why I waited. He was always the one I wanted.

But I can't get ahead of myself. I'm not looking for strings, and he's not either.

This can't go anywhere. Just enjoy it for tonight.

I am so damn ready to enjoy every second of him tonight.

Once the condom is on, Shane settles between my legs, meeting my eyes. “Still good?”

“So good,” I say, parting my legs farther.

A wild groan seems to be ripped from his throat. “You’re so fucking pretty,” he says, then rubs the head of his cock against me.

My body crackles, sparking with lust. I arch against him, needing more.

“I want you,” I whisper. I love saying those words, thrilled by speaking my dirty mind to a willing and eager sex accomplice at last.

Tingles race down my chest, and a new awareness hits me.

I love telling him what I want in bed.

Him. His cock. Our intimacy.

I meant it when I said I’m not innocent.

I have a sexual heart and mind, and I’m putting them to use tonight.

When he pushes in, my breath comes in a sharp gasp, and I tense from the intrusion.

“Okay?”

I nod. “Yes.”

He sinks in more, and I wince.

“I can stop, love. Do you want me to stop?”

Narrowing my eyes, I growl. “Don’t you dare.”

A soft laugh comes from the man. He’s braced on his arms, his big hands pressed into the mattress by my sides. I slide my palms up his arms, traveling along his muscles as I breathe again, in, out, then deeper.

Let myself relax.

I’m ready.

“More,” I say, urging him on.

And he gives.

Oh hell, does he ever.

He sinks all the way in.

I squeeze my eyes shut, adjusting, shifting, trying to relax into this foreign but almost fantastic sensation.

“Talk to me, love,” he whispers.

Does he even know he says that in the heat of the moment? *Love*? Is he aware of what it does to my heart? It does things that Mr. Right Now shouldn't do for me.

It makes my heart sing.

The temporary pain washes away, and I linger in the goodness of *this*, in the rightness of him, in the truly fantastic sensation he's bringing me.

In this unexpected night of reconnection with my teenage boyfriend.

The guy I nearly fell in love with seven years ago.

I gaze up at him, our eyes locking, our bodies tangling. He looks at me like he cherishes me already, and surely it's the endorphins talking, but I like what they have to say. “Show me the joys of fucking and making love,” I whisper.

“Both. I'll show you both,” he says in a bedroom promise that sends sparks flying across my skin.

I let him know how joyfully I want it as I wrap my legs around his firm ass, curl my hands over his shoulders, and move with my brand-new lover.

My one-and-only lover.

We find a rhythm, a sexy, indulgent pace that lights me up everywhere.

That's hotter than my fantasies.

More electric than any solo ride with a fourteen-speed vibe.

He hits me just right, his throbbing length sliding over my clit as he pumps and thrusts. He swivels his hips just so, and

the languid, sexy move sends a current through my whole body.

Down my spine, all the way to my toes.

Dear God, my toes are actually curling, my body is melting, and pleasure coils in my belly.

Soon, I'm on the cusp of another orgasm. I can feel it just out of reach. It's almost there, on the horizon.

And I don't want to lose it, don't want to miss the chance to come again.

So I slide a hand between my legs and help myself along.

"Yes, fucking yes. That's so damn sexy," he says, encouraging me. "Play with yourself."

Don't need to tell me that twice. I'm there, rubbing and chasing my bliss as the guy who got away drives me to the edge of pleasure.

"I missed you, Clem. Fucking missed you so much," he rasps out on a broken pant, and his words send me flying.

Right over the edge as I call out his name when I shatter.

He's there with me, thrusting and grunting, and then he stills, groaning for what feels like forever.

In his arms, I'm keenly aware of three things.

I love sex.

I love sex with him.

And I want more than tonight.

But I know that I can't have it.

CLEMENTINE

When I shut the front door the next morning, the clock cat's tail mocks me.

It says, *Time is running out.*

I try to tear my gaze away from its mockery as I unclip Magnus's leash, then set down the two cups I just snagged at the shop on the corner when I took my guy for a morning bathroom break. I also caught up with Erin on my walk, but I'm going to need more girlfriend time later, since she had quite a night.

Now, though, I want to enjoy the little time I have left with the man in my bed. After our epic nooky, he asked to stay the night. No idea if that's normal for deflowering, but I like it.

My pooch barks, and it sounds like he's asking, *Where's Shane?*

The answer comes a few seconds later when he strolls out of the bedroom, hair still sleep-rumpled, and looking like all of my morning sex fantasies.

My brain pops.

Neurons mix with hormones, and my libido practically purrs.

He runs a hand through his hair, leans against the doorway, and stretches, looking like sin and dessert all in one package—he's wearing jeans and nothing else.

I would like to lick the grooves of all his abs.

“Morning, love,” he says, then yawns.

I die.

I just die.

There is nothing left of me but my desire.

“Hi,” I say, and it comes out all strangled, since what I really want to say is *Oh my God, can we please screw again against the kitchen counter? Because holy hell, you look like every dirty Tumblr video ever.*

Magnus takes off, running to the man, yipping and dancing.

Shane laughs, then bends down. “Is this the doggie dance?”

Oh hell.

That’s it.

The strings are starting to attach.

“I think he likes you,” I say, a little wistful, since what I want to say is *He’s not the only one.*

Shane scoops him up in his arms, pets his head, then peers at me. “I hope he’s not the only one.”

My heart. It jackhammers.

Not fair, not fair, not fair.

I grab the cup of tea, thrust it in his direction. “I got you English breakfast.” I lift the other cup. “And a coffee. Black. No presumptions, but I didn’t know which you liked. Me? I’m, like, blood-type O with caffeine. I’ll take it in all forms. You pick.”

“Tea. Like I said, you can take the boy out of England ...” With my tiny dog in his arms, snuggled against his bare chest, he strides across the floor to the kitchen, then drops a kiss to my cheek. His breath is minty fresh, and I dance a virtual jig, since I love fresh breath in the morning.

Love it so much I want more of it.

I turn my face so I can catch his lips.

“Mmm,” he murmurs, then kisses me soft and gentle—a tender morning kiss. But one that doesn’t end. One that feels dangerously like foreplay. Like a prelude. He lingers on my lips, brushing barely-there kisses against me like he’s seducing me with slow, tantalizing touches.

It’s working, Shane. It’s working.

I’m outrageously aroused already. I’d go through ten panty changes a day if he were mine.

What?

Mine?

That’s not happening.

That’s not on the table.

I find the will to break the kiss, and when we separate, a scratchy pink tongue licks my face.

Saved by the dog.

I reach for my pooch, then take my boy in my arms. “This is not helping.”

“What’s not helping?”

I wave at him. “You being all shirtless and holding my dog and kissing me. That’s why I took him from you.”

He grins wickedly. “Maybe I wasn’t trying to be helpful. Maybe I was trying to get you back in bed.”

“Well, it’s working,” I say with a laugh.

“Excellent.” He lifts the tea, takes a drink. “That was thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

I shrug with a smile. “I can be thoughtful.”

“I know,” he says, and then just gazes at me, his lips curving into a grin.

And I can’t look away. I don’t want to do anything but stare stupidly back at his face.

My stomach flips. It handsprings.

And I wish this weren’t ending.

I put my dog on the floor, trying desperately to break the spell of last night and this morning. I grab my coffee and knock some back. “So, you leave for spring training soon?”

He jerks his gaze to the cat clock. “Yes, in about eight hours.”

I blink. “Oh. Do you need to go?”

He takes another drink, then sets down the tea. “Not yet. I have time.”

I take one more fueling drink of coffee, then I put it down.

And I crash into him. We kiss madly. Desperately. In a collision of lips and teeth and bodies.

He reads my wants, senses my needs, but still, he asks, “Are you sure?”

“Do you mean, can I handle your monster cock again?”

Shaking his head, he laughs. “Just making sure you feel good.”

“I feel great,” I say, and in a minute, I’m up on the counter, skirt hiked up, panties gone, and legs spread.

He finds a condom in his wallet, then shoves down his jeans to his thighs and slides on the protection.

Seconds later, he’s in me, and I’m a little bit tender from last night, but I don’t care.

I want him again, just like this. Fucking me, taking me, having me.

And it’s like a dream.

Only better, so much better. Because it’s all real as we moan and rock and murmur.

And with our bodies speaking the same language, my mind gets ahead of me. Picturing him and us, and third times and fourth times. Then my mouth takes over. “I want this again. Want you again,” I plead.

With a deep thrust, he groans, eyes meeting mine. “Want you again, too, love. Want you so much.”

That's all it takes. Soon, we're both breathless and gasping, coming together, reaching for each other.

After, I grab him harder, hold him closer, and he does the same to me. Stroking my hair, whispering in my ear. "I'm so glad I ran into you," he murmurs, then like the moment has gotten the better of him, too, he says, "I'm going to miss you. I swear I'll miss you more than I want to."

I can hear what he's not saying.

Don't break my heart.

SHANE

I don't want to leave her, so I stretch out the hours I have. We go for a walk in her neighborhood, taking turns holding the dog's leash.

We catch up on her dog training, and she tells me about her clients, the challenges, and the victories. She asks me about my job, too, how it feels to have been traded so many times already.

"I suppose it might make someone feel unwanted," I joke.

She swats me playfully. "The opposite, silly. You're very wanted."

I kiss her cheek as we reach the corner. "Yes, seems that way. And I like it."

We're talking about baseball and also *not* talking about baseball.

As we wander along Polk Street, the world's fastest small dog leading the way, I ask about her family. "Mom and Dad are still grotesquely happy. My sister too. They truly set such a bad example for everyone," she deadpans.

"The worst," I echo.

"And your family?"

"Same, same. Dad is taking Mum to the Galápagos Islands right now. She loves to travel, so they're spending loads of time just gallivanting."

“Gallivanting. I feel like those are life goals,” she says, then she startles at the sound of a beep. “Oh, that must be Erin again. She had an interesting night.”

I lift a brow in question as she takes out her phone from her pocket, swipes open the screen, then smiles. “I’ll answer it later,” she says as she tucks it away again. “But I think it’s safe to say someone has a crush.”

“Erin, you mean?” I ask.

She knits her brow. “Who else would I mean?”

I laugh, a little embarrassed, almost like I’ve been caught red-handed.

I meant me.

Ah, hell.

I’m leaving in a few hours. No point truly being so guarded. It’s not as if she can break my heart when I’m gone. “Well, it seems I have one too.”

Her green eyes twinkle with delight. Maybe something else too. Something deeper? Perhaps hope?

She reaches for my hand and threads her fingers through mine. “Join the club.”

* * *

We grab lunch, then return to her place and her bed once more. After that, we shower together, and then I truly do have to go.

“You better not miss your flight. I want to cheer for the Dragons on Opening Day, but if their brand-new closer is in trouble for being late to spring training, I won’t be able to,” she says, wagging a finger.

I grab her finger, nibbling on it. “I have excellent timing,” I say, then I glance at her fingernail. It’s polished with silver, and a Papillon is painted on it. “You found a nail salon that can do dog designs,” I say with a bit of wonder in my voice.

“Of course I did. You say that like I’d do anything else.”

She is adorable, and naughty, and open, and kind, and far too risky for my heart.

“All right, stop distracting me. Now I truly have to leave,” I say, but I’m not letting go of her either.

I give her one more kiss, and as my lips brush hers, images and ideas flash past me. Future days and nights. Possibilities.

But last night, we agreed to no strings.

Crush or not, she doesn’t want something serious.

And I need to look out for myself.

That’s why I don’t ask for her number. It’s why she doesn’t ask for mine.

Instead, I tear myself away from her and say goodbye, then I leave to head to Arizona.

I’m leaving her for baseball once again.

CLEMENTINE

A week later

I'm tempted to flip the bird at the cat clock when I leave for class one morning a week later.

But it's not the inanimate cat's fault that I'm counting the hours.

And for what?

What am I counting down to?

"Ugh. I'm the worst," I tell Magnus as I say goodbye at the door.

His little floofy tail whips back and forth, his butterfly ears standing tall, cocked in curiosity.

"Why? Because I'm ... well ..." I flap a hand. "I'm all ... just a mess."

I kneel in front of him, and he puts his little paws on my chest.

"I don't even know why," I answer his unasked question.

He licks my nose.

"Fine, fine," I huff, since he's wearing me down. "I guess I hoped . . . I dunno."

I can't even say it.

It's so silly.

Such a virgin thing to wish for, I'm sure.

“So typical of the virgin. Wanting more. Falling for the first guy, right?” I ask.

He jumps a few times, a sign he wants to be held. “You’re such a love monster,” I say with a laugh, sinking down to my butt and cuddling my dude. He rubs his head against my chest, then nuzzles my face. “Ravenous, I tell you. That’s what you are.”

But maybe I am too. I feel greedy. And wildly hungry. Like I haven’t eaten for days, and I’m starving. For more affection, more kisses, more fucking, and more ... time.

But I told him *no strings*.

I meant *no strings*.

At least, at the time I did.

I say goodbye to Magnus, pop in my earbuds, and listen to the original Broadway recording of *Fun Home* as I head to teach an agility class.

Usually show tunes cheer me up.

But this time, they aren’t quite doing the trick.

* * *

Later that night, I go out with my friends to dinner. For one of the first times ever, I’m not *the cheery one*.

I’m in a bit of a funk, and Erin notices, pulling me aside after sushi. “Are you okay? You’re usually more ... ebullient.”

“Nice five-dollar word,” I say approvingly.

“Please. That’s a ten-dollar word. But seriously.”

I sigh heavily. She knows the details. “It’s silly. I just wish that maybe Shane and I could have another shot. That maybe he wanted to as well.”

Her eyes are thoughtful, her tone kind. “Do you know for sure he doesn’t?”

“He said that,” I tell her, but that doesn’t feel entirely true either.

His kisses said more. But it was his eyes, and the way he looked at me when he left that said so much—that said he’d missed me, that he already longed for me.

At least, that was how I read him.

SHANE

A couple weeks later

Some say spring training games don't matter. There's a lot of truth to that for the guys who've already made the roster.

My spot is guaranteed.

I'll be ready for Opening Day, should there be a victory to save.

But guarantee or not, my father taught me that every game matters. You play hard, you pitch well, and you give your all.

That's how he played during his career, and that's what he taught me when I was growing up in England and then later in the States.

You never know who's watching.

You never know who needs you on your team.

But you should also play well for you. If you don't, you become complacent.

That's why my spring training stats rock.

I refuse to accept less than my personal best.

It's how I was raised. It's who I am.

We've only just started playing games against other teams here in Arizona, but already I'm putting up strikeouts and saves. Just like I plan to do in the regular season.

These are the type of stats that'll impress the owner.

After I close out a game with three strikeouts in a row, I stride off the field.

Drew trots over to me from the backstop, tapping his glove to mine. "Nice save, Shakespeare," he says. "Or should I say, *fourth* nice save."

I shoot him a satisfied smile. "You should definitely say that."

That's a good thing. That's what my agent wanted. For me to focus on baseball, not romance. Though, admittedly, romance hasn't been far from my mind since that last night in San Francisco.

At night when I get in bed, I think of Clementine.

When I wake up, she's on my mind.

When I'm alone, I imagine her.

And I *miss* her.

Good thing I'm not alone too often.

I shake thoughts of her away, focus on the here and now. The game. My teammates.

The shortstop and second baseman—Declan Steele and Holden Kingsley—knock fists with me as they head to the dugout. "Keep that up during the regular season, Shakespeare," Declan says.

"Count on it," I say as we continue on to the locker room.

"Dude, you are the epitome of cool on the mound," Drew remarks. "I'm telling you, when I'm playing, I have no chill."

I laugh at his tell-it-like-it-is attitude. "Because you're the catcher. You're allowed to be full of emotion. I have to be ice."

Drew furrows his brow. "Why don't we call you Iceman, then?"

"Excellent question to ponder," I say.

"How about we ponder it over burgers?"

“I’m in.”

That night, we head to the Cactus Club, meeting up with Sullivan from the Cougars.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the comedy club crew,” Sullivan jokes as we join him at the bar. “That was a helluva night.”

He’s reminiscing about one night out from a few weeks ago?

Interesting. What was so special about that one time?

I arch a questioning brow. “I take it you’re not simply talking about the comic?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

Drew stares at him, then waggles his fingers. “Spill.”

Sullivan shakes his head, taking a drink of his beer. “Not my story to tell, but suffice to say, I can’t wait to get back to San Francisco.” He lifts his hand, crossing his fingers. “That’s all I’ll say.”

“Well, you’re fun,” Drew deadpans. “I can’t wait to get back to the city either, but at least I told you assholes why.”

“You did, and you’re so bloody adorable, all heart aflutter and whatnot,” I say, teasing him.

He scoffs. “You’re one to talk. You’ve been moony-eyed since that night too. I’m pretty sure your high school sweetheart is more than just some rando.”

I tilt my head. Scratch my jaw. “I didn’t tell you she was my high school sweetheart.”

Drew cracks up, shaking his head. “I know. But I have sources.”

“And what do your sources tell you?” I ask, and that piques my interest. “Are you talking about Clementine’s friends?”

He shakes his head in slo-mo. “I’m telling you nothing. But you might want to check yourself later and figure out why

you're so ... *not chill* at the mere mention of her.”

I heave a sigh, then order a beer, ignoring his remark.

He doesn't ask again, but as Drew and Sullivan chat about their favorite spots in San Francisco, then debate dream cars before arguing over whether the beach or the mountains is a better spot for a vacation, my mind drifts back in time once again.

To that night with her.

Images flash before my eyes.

Enticing, delicious ones.

But sweet ones too.

Laughing, teasing, talking.

Most of all, how she opened up to me.

How I opened up to her.

Then, I skip forward, imagining future days. What would they look like?

Would they be better with her in them?

I'm not the most open guy with my teammates, preferring to keep things light. But Drew seems more upbeat than I've seen him before, so maybe there's room to crack open this conversation.

Clearing my throat, I toss out my contribution to the bar debate. “Do you think romance and baseball can ever work?”

Sullivan laughs to himself.

Drew whistles.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

Sullivan arches a brow. “Dude, look around at your team and ask yourself that question.” He rattles off the names of my Dragons teammates who've fallen in love lately.

Holden, Declan.

Then he gestures to himself. “My team too. All the guys are falling hard. Crosby. Chance. Grant.”

Drew taps his chest, weighing in. “And so is *this* guy on your team too. In fact, I need to get back to my room for a little FaceTime date. So I’d say the answer is yes.”

I wish I knew for sure if the answer was *yes* for me.

CLEMENTINE

I flop onto a black-and-white-striped couch in The Spotted Zebra a few nights later, checking the time on my phone.

My friends should be here soon, but Sierra—the bar owner—swings by, drops down next to me, and squeezes my shoulder.

“Do I need to dangle cupcakes in front of you to bring you to your Clementine senses?”

I pout at my friend. “It’s that obvious?”

She rolls her eyes. “Normally, you’re the happiest camper in the land. You ride in on your Pegasus,” she says, rocking her head and making a *clip-clop* sound like she’s on a horse. “And you fire rainbows from your dog-decorated fingers and sing to chipmunks.”

“I am not a Disney princess,” I say, insisting.

“Oh yes, you are!”

I turn to see Nova sashay in, all tall and leathery—well, she’s wearing leather. She’s not wrinkly. She’s in a leather skirt and a leather vest, and the whole look is sex-ay.

“Badass babe! Whoa! Is it Leather Day?”

Nova casts me a *don’t be silly* face. “Vegan here. I don’t wear real leather. This is fake. It’s made from tires or something,” she says, gesturing to her outfit.

“Well, you look hot in tires or something,” I say, as Erin and Frankie follow her in and join her on the couch across

from mine. “And I’m not a princess.”

Erin chuckles under her breath, her brown hair spilling across her face.

I kick her playfully. “I’m not.” Then I peer at her. “Also, you look . . . happier.”

She grins, wide and satisfied. “I am.” Erin beckons us closer, then gives us the inside scoop on what she’s been up to.

I’m kinda floored by her plans, yet they also make perfect sense. And I’ll support her, of course, as she takes this chance.

I squeeze her knee. “I’m happy for you.”

“Speaking of happy . . .” Sierra lets the sentence hang deliberately open before she casts a glance back to the bar. “I need to return to serving all my happy customers, so can you all tell Ms. Happy Till She’s Not about our new plan for her?”

I let my jaw fall open in mock annoyance as Sierra takes off for the bar.

I turn to the others. “What have you been up to?”

Frankie smiles, pushing her glasses up her nose. “Sometimes you have to take a chance. Especially when you want something.”

Erin nods a few times too. “You do, friend. You really do.”

Nova crosses one leg over the other. “Putting yourself out there can mean more than just dating again. It can mean putting yourself out there for *one* person,” she says, and my throat tightens.

Emotions arise in me, a slew of them. Missing Shane, wanting Shane, but also loving these ladies for knowing me so well. “I’m like cellophane. You can see right through me,” I say, a knot of feelings tightening in my chest.

“Like the song from *Chicago*,” Frankie adds, then pats my knee.

“Yes, you get me,” I say, my voice shaky.

But why? Why am I so emotional? Oh, maybe because I have amazing friends who want the best for me?

“I want to talk to him again. To see him again,” I confess, blurting out my true, messy heart.

“We thought as much,” Erin says with a grin.

“But I don’t even have his number. We didn’t exchange numbers. We just said goodbye, agreeing it was for the best,” I say, practically pleading to the universe to help me.

Erin barks out a laugh. “Friend, I got you. Gimme your phone. I tracked it down for you, so I’ll enter it.”

As my heart races—with hope—I hand her my phone. Thrilled that she went hunting. More thrilled that she *knew* I needed it. Knew I wanted it.

She enters his info, then hands the device back to me.

I crack up as I read the name she’s typed in.

The Deflowerer.

Later, I open my phone to send him a text. But I startle when I see one from him.

SHANE

An hour earlier

Another day, another save.

Drew high-fives me in the locker room after a game against the Minotaurs. “You’re the secret weapon,” he calls out.

Bemused, I shake my head. “I’m just one piece of the puzzle.”

“The missing piece,” Holden shouts, then claps me on the back. “By the way, it is good to be reunited with you.”

“Same to you,” I say, since we played together on the Bandits before the team’s owners unloaded a ton of players a few years ago.

“And we are going to have an epic Opening Day. The goal, gentleman?” he booms, speaking to the whole team now in the locker room.

The guys turn around and quiet down, no doubt thanks to Holden’s commanding presence.

“The goal,” he repeats, then claps my shoulder, “is to get this man on the mound every goddamn game. If we see Shakespeare coming in from the bullpen, it’s a damn good day.”

“Truer words,” Declan seconds, leading a round of clapping.

They're not wrong.

I only show up if we're winning. If we need to close out a victory. "I hope to make many, many appearances," I say, and I long to show all these guys what I can do.

I also want to live up to my father's legacy.

I want to win the owner's trust.

And I want to enter arbitration in a great spot.

But as I leave the locker room that afternoon, my thoughts drift once again.

To Opening Day.

To something else I want.

To romance *and* baseball.

To one woman.

She hasn't left my mind since I've been here in Arizona. I'm not sure I want to play the whole season possessed by the idea of her. It seems that whether we're dating or not, my mind is on her—so why not try to play it another way?

With her in my life.

All the way in it.

As I leave, I call Drew aside. "That person you've been FaceTiming with? Think you can call in a favor, mate?"

"Name it."

"Can you slip me Clementine's number?"

He thumps me on the arm. "You dog. I fucking can. Look at you. Guess you're not just ice. You've got fire in there too."

I laugh.

Perhaps he's right.

Or maybe I just miss the woman far too much to deny these feelings any longer.

I suppose the heart is like that.

It wants what it wants.

And I want her.

No matter the risk.

From the Texts of Shane and Clementine

That night

Shane: Hello, love. I can't stop thinking about you. You're literally in my thoughts all the time. You're so much more than a crush.

Clementine: I SOUND LIKE A COPYCAT, BUT SAME, SAME, SAME. YOU ARE SO MUCH MORE THAN A CRUSH TOO!

Shane: Well, then, would you like to come to Opening Day when I return to San Francisco? And by come to Opening Day, I mean, would you like to be there in the stands as my date? Because the night before I want to take you to "adult prom." Go ahead, ask me what adult prom is.

Clementine: I'll bite. What's adult prom? Also, hi!!! I can't stop thinking about you either—just had to say that again.

Shane: Thank fuck for that. God, my head is full of you. I've replayed that night about ten million times. All of it.

Clementine: Twenty million for me.

Shane: Show-off.

Clementine: I know. Now tell me!

Shane: Adult prom will be held this year at the former site of the Carter Club. Aka the Luxe Hotel. Just you and me. I'd love

to take you there, spend the night with you, and keep lavishing on you all the joys of fucking and making love.

Clementine: Adult prom sounds like the best thing ever! I say yes.

Shane: I can't wait to see you again and sweep you into my arms.

EPILOGUE

Clementine

Adult Prom

There's a knock on my door.

Magnus barks.

I run to the door, hopped up on jet fuel, driven by desire.

I swing it open and beam.

Then melt.

Then soar when Shane steps inside, hauls me against him, and kisses the breath out of me.

It's a passionate, soul-deep kiss, full of fire and longing.

And promise too.

It's a kiss that says, *I missed you so fucking much.*

And I kiss him back the same way.

When we come up for air, he tugs me close and runs a hand along my cheek. "I'm not letting you get away this time. Screw circumstance. You're not becoming an ex. You're mine. Say you're mine. I want you to be mine."

I laugh, bursting with joy and emotion as Magnus jumps at our feet. "I'm yours. You're not Mr. Right Now. I'm pretty

sure you're Mr. Right." Then my hand flies to my mouth.

Shoot.

Did I say that aloud?

Will that scare him away?

But he drags me closer, brushes another kiss to my lips, then says, "Good. That's who I want to be to you. Your Mr. Right."

Goodbye, Queen of Terrible Dates.

I'm the queen of my own romance story, and I'm writing it with this guy—the guy I'm not letting get away.

I say goodbye to my pup, then we leave, head to the Luxe Hotel, and slow dance in the corner of the bar.

"Better than prom," he says.

"Big fan of adult prom," I say.

"Want to know what I like best?"

"Of course I do."

He roams a hand up my back, keeping his gaze locked on mine. "That I'm falling for you."

My heart sails away. "I'm falling so hard for you."

Then he takes me to a room and makes love to me.

And it's even better than the first time.

And the second time.

The third too.

Sheesh, we had a lot of sex that night.

But I really, really like sex with him.

Wait. Nope.

I love it.

Pretty sure I love him too.

But I also love my dog, so when I get up at six to go home and let him out, I whisper goodbye to my guy, figuring he'll

stay in bed.

Instead, he joins me, and we take my dog for a walk together, then go back to sleep at my place.

Best adult prom ever.

* * *

That afternoon, I go to Opening Day and cheer him on. He saves the game and kisses me in the stands when it's finished.

And this is how we start over.

Remaking the past, shaping it into our brand-new present.

THE END

CAPTAIN ROMANCE

A VIRGIN SCORECARD NOVELLA

PROLOGUE

Sullivan

The October before that Valentine's Day

Women fascinate me.

Ever since I discovered the allure of curves, soft skin, and lush hair, I've been drawn to the fairer sex.

But it's not just the way women look. I'm wildly attracted to the minds of women too, and I desperately want to understand what makes women tick.

I've turned to many sources over the years in the pursuit of that knowledge. Psychology in college, then magazines and articles in my early twenties—anything to gain insight into my favorite subject.

I've devoured memoirs, podcasts, and novels too.

Romance novels, to be precise.

Just call me Captain Romance. I like to pop in my earbuds on the San Francisco Cougars team plane and get lost in a world where the endings are always wins and no one strikes out looking in his last at bat.

I've learned a lot from these stories.

For the most part, women like a guy who listens. Who treats her like a queen. Who has rock-hard abs. And who can go all night long.

Check. Check. Check. And more check.

I've learned, too, that women are like snowflakes. No two are the same, so no matter how much research I do on my own, there's no substitute for hands-on study.

And I sure as hell would like to conduct some research with a smart, sexy, fantastic woman I see nearly every day.

Trouble is, she's the reporter who covers my team.

Which probably makes me off-limits to her.

So, I'll need some extra strategy to win her over.

SULLIVAN

True fact about being a Major League pitcher: the fans either love you or hate you, and the needle swings based on your latest game.

Deliver a shutout?

You're a god.

Serve up more than a couple runs?

You're washed up, over the hill, and ready for pasture.

That's especially true as a reliever. Your task is to either hold the other team down or to staunch the bleeding. You come in, get the guys out, send your team back to the dugout.

And you damn well better do it as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

It's a thankless job, so thank fuck it's no longer mine. After four seasons in the bullpen, I switched last year to the starting lineup, so I pitch every fifth game. I started and won game six in the World Series—a victory that gave us our first championship trophy.

I'd like to get us to the Fall Classic this season too.

But first, the divisionals.

I arrive at the ballpark for game five, warming up with Grant, my catcher, on the diamond. When we're done, I stride off the mound and meet him at home plate. He taps his glove against mine, as has been our ritual since the two of us came

up together in the minors in Bakersfield, California, nearly six years ago.

“Let’s make it a double,” I say.

“That’s the one and only plan,” Grant says.

As we walk along the spongy grass, I do my best to avoid staring at the brunette babe on the third baseline.

Erin Madison, the spitfire of a reporter, knows her baseball history and isn’t afraid to pitch a tough question, not even to our manager. She’s talking to him right this second, likely lobbing a hardball at him.

She’s so fearless that it’s hot.

Ah, hell.

I steal a glance after all, cataloging her brown hair curling over her shoulders, her trim figure, and the intensity in her eyes as she ends the interview, nodding her thanks.

I’m stepping into the dugout when she catches my eye and calls out, “Hey, Sullivan. Got a second for your favorite network?”

“Run, Sully, run,” Grant teases under his breath.

I roll my eyes at my catcher. “I do not run when she calls my name. I strut.”

Waving me off, he laughs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I leave him behind and head along the third baseline to the woman who revs my engine, and has for some time.

I flash a smile, wishing she were anyone but the beat reporter. Pretty sure it’d be a mess for her if she went on a date with an athlete she covered. Might look like she’d slept her way to insight, to team secrets, to answers.

Stop thinking about sleeping with her.

The thing is, I want to do more than take her to bed. I want to spend time with her. Get to know her more. *Talk.*

I meet her blue-eyed gaze and decide to have some fun. “Hey, Erin, how do you feel about our chances tonight?”

She smiles, laughing lightly. “Good, as always, but why don’t you let me ask the questions?”

Maybe I’m just a hopeful guy, but I’m hearing some flirting in her voice too.

I’ll take what I can get.

I give an easy shrug. “Just like to keep you on your toes,” I say, my gaze straying down to her shoes—red ballet flats.

“Which is what you’ll aim to do against the Texas Scoundrels tonight. Keep them on their toes. But their bats have been on fire lately,” she segues, then asks some questions about expectations for the game.

I answer them all, every damn one.

“So, what’s the one key thing the Cougars must do to pull off back-to-back World Series victories?” That’s been the theme of every interview for the Cougars in this postseason. Can we make it all the way again? “Is that on your mind a lot, Sullivan?”

“Yes. But you can only play one game at a time. So that’s what I focus on—the game I’m in now.”

She nods, seeming satisfied with that answer as she clicks off her camera. When she lowers her mic, she whispers, “Good luck tonight. I’ll be rooting for you.”

Not gonna lie. Those words make my chest swell with pride. They send a sizzle over my skin. I sure do like that she’s a closet fan of the team too.

I give her my best crooked grin. “I’ll keep your fangirl secret safe,” I whisper.

“Yes, please do that,” she says.

Sure, I want to do well for her, but I want to do well for the fans, the team, and my family too. All those factors fuel me that night, and I shut down the Scoundrels for the first four innings, then allow them one run before shutting them down again through the eighth.

Our closing pitcher comes in and seals the victory, so the Cougars are tied up in the divisionals against the Scoundrels. Tomorrow night, we can advance to the championship series if we win, and as we leave the field, I'm sure I see a look of relief in a certain sports reporter's eyes.

* * *

Trouble is, the next night, our starting pitcher for game six struggles on the mound, and all our relievers can do is stop the bleeding. We still lose by a disgusting nine runs. Our chances to advance die right alongside our repeat World Series hopes.

None of the Cougars are happy when the game ends. I trudge into the locker room, shower, and grab my phone and wallet. I say my goodbyes to the guys and take off.

As I head toward the ballpark's exit, I weigh my options for taking my mind off our shitty end to the baseball year. Then I spot Erin up ahead in the corridor, her backpack sliding down her shoulder, her tripod slipping out of her arms.

I bolt over. "Let me help you."

She waves me off, shrugging the bag back onto her shoulder. "I'm used to doing it by myself."

"But I don't mind," I insist, reaching for the tripod to see if she'll let me help. "I can definitely walk you to your car."

She seems to consider that for a moment, then nods, smiling at me. "I won't fight you on this one."

She lets me have the unruly tripod, and I rest it on my shoulder like a bat. "Then I am at your service," I say.

And as we head toward her car, I can't help but wish I could be at her service in other ways.

But maybe spending more time with her off the field will help convince her that I am a risk worth taking.

ERIN

I'm pretty self-sufficient.

I always carry my own gear. I've never had a camera guy. Don't need one. That's how it goes now with sports reporting.

You've got to learn to do it all on your own.

I've been doing it for the last four years, covering baseball in this city since I graduated from college with a journalism degree.

But I definitely don't mind a little help from number twelve on the Cougars.

Fine, fine, it doesn't hurt that Sullivan Fitzgerald is mega easy on the eyes. Sandy-brown hair, warm brown eyes, all California beachgoing charm, with sun-kissed skin and a smile for days.

But Sullivan's so much more than a looker.

The outgoing, curious, open-minded pitcher has always seemed interested in talking.

Talking *to me*.

Interviews with him last longer than they do with other guys. We chat about motivation, emotion, feelings. And every time I've run into him at an event, we wind up going down the rabbit hole of baseball history.

He's such a student of the game, and so am I.

Same goes for the city we love. Sometimes when I turn off the mic, we keep going, sharing quirky observations about the city by the bay.

He's ... a little addictive.

As we exit the ballpark, I jump at the chance to chat with him some more. He always seems to dig the deeper questions, and I relish the opportunity to understand a player beyond the PR-friendly answers.

I want to understand the man after a game like tonight's.

I turn to face him, our gazes connecting under the lights in the parking lot. "No cameras. This is totally off the record. But ... how are you truly feeling this evening?"

He lifts one brow high. "Is this where you want me to tell you how utterly heartbroken I am?"

Funny, but he doesn't sound devastated. Perhaps he's covering it up, but he sounds ... balanced. "Sometimes you seem like you want to talk about it," I say, hoping I'm reading him right.

He slows his pace. "Actually, I'm glad you asked."

"Whew," I breathe out hard, teasing a little, but mostly making sure I didn't cross a line. "Thought you were going to recommend a banishment from the press room."

He scoffs, shaking his head. "Never. Hardly anyone ever asks something that actually digs a little deeper into feelings."

That's interesting, but maybe this question is also an opportunity to feed a certain restless hunger I've been experiencing lately. I'm not sure what it is, or where it's coming from, but this last season, I've been wanting to dig deeper at work—to indulge in a five-course meal now and then, rather than living off the bite-size stories I have to churn out daily.

"I truly want to know," I tell Sullivan. His eyes swing to mine like he's measuring my answer in them, making sure I mean it. Many pro athletes, understandably, don't open up much with reporters. The media is often the enemy. Best to put

him at ease. “I want to know for me though. Off the record. As ... *friends*,” I say, testing out that word. It feels right with him, like we’ve become amiable with each other this season.

His casual smile reassures me, or perhaps both of us, that we understand each other. “As friends, then, Erin, the answer is ... of course I wish we’d won. I wanted it desperately. Always do. Every game. Every time I’m on the mound. It’s a kind of madness and has been with me since I can remember. But a good madness, I like to think.”

“The madness that motivates you to do the work?” I ask, following the thread.

“Exactly. To put in the hours every single day. The madness gives me focus.” It comes out as a growl, straight from his heart. “I can feel it in my bones with every pitch. If I ever lost that feeling, it’d probably be a sign to quit.”

“Don’t quit,” I tease.

“Ha. No worries there. I definitely felt that intensity when I pitched last night. Tonight, too, in the dugout. But it’s not just about chalking up the W. I want the win for my team. I want to pull together for them and to play the sport as best I can.” He takes a pause, dialing down the ferocity. “But the secret is, if I truly give everything I have, I can handle it when we *don’t* win,” he says as we walk down the next row in the lot.

I gobble up his words, savoring every morsel. “Giving it your all means you can live with whatever the outcome is.”

“Yes. Exactly. When I’ve played my absolute best, I can leave the emotions behind and move on. That’s why I feel fine. Though, truth be told,” he says, letting his eyes take a quick tour of my frame before coming up to meet mine, “I also feel pretty good right this second.”

Another spark ignites inside me from his sultry gaze. But this one fans my body rather than my mind.

“Glad you feel good,” I say, though I’m not sure what to do with his flirtiness. I like it so very much, yet it’s risky.

I collect myself, taking a deep breath, then we continue to my car. “So, if you had won tonight, you’d be celebrating with the team. When you don’t win, what happens? Do you go home in a funk?”

Asking questions is easier than figuring out the risk of flirting with a player I cover.

He levels a steely stare my way, all over-the-top. “Are you ready for the scoop?”

I laugh. “So ready.”

“And we’re off the record?” he confirms as we reach my car.

“I pinky swear.” I lift my little finger, and he sets down the tripod to wrap his around mine, making me laugh. But my laughter stops quickly as a tingle has the audacity to slide down my chest, just from our fingers touching.

What the hell, body? Pinky swears aren’t supposed to feel this good.

Yes, Sullivan’s attractive.

Yes, I’ve always liked talking to him.

But I’m not supposed to feel anything remotely sparky for a man I report on for a living.

We unwrap our fingers, and I try to focus on talking rather than on feeling. “Are you going to tell me now?”

“I like to walk through the city. To wander around San Francisco or wherever I am.”

That’s a fantastic image. The pro athlete becomes the nomad at night. “You walk it off,” I say, letting that little detail about him whirl around my brain. “That sounds cathartic.”

“It actually helps me stay kind of balanced about the good madness.”

“And it’s why you can handle things when you don’t win. You have your strategies.” I nod my understanding, then click open the trunk to stow my gear. When I’m done, I turn back to him. “So, will you walk tonight?”

“I will,” he says as the stars flicker in the night sky. “Do you want to join me?”

Something about his invitation feels a little risky. But it’s only risky if I cross a line.

And I won’t. I simply won’t. A walk is just a walk.

I’m enjoying this new insight into players—into *him*—so why shouldn’t I head out into this city we both love and educate myself some more?

“I would love to,” I reply.

We leave my car behind and go.

SULLIVAN

This is my chance—time with this intriguing woman. A chance to get to know my friend a little better.

I even have a hunch what she might like.

“First stop. North Beach.”

That’s what I tell Erin when we exit the parking lot, strolling in front of the ballpark, the crowds having thinned out for the night.

With a curve on her lips, she arches a brow. “North Beach? Let me guess. You’re a Joe DiMaggio fan? Is that why we’re heading there?”

Ah, she is good. The one-time Yankees star did hail from that neighborhood. “Yes, but I’m not taking you to his usual stomping grounds.” I know all of them, from the church where he married his first wife to the ballparks he sponsored over the years. But Erin’s obsessed with the city’s history, and a few weeks ago at a charity event, she mentioned she’d never seen some of the murals in the North Beach neighborhood. That’s where I want to take her tonight, since, well, I’m hoping she likes a guy who listens. “I have something else in mind. How do you feel about surprises?”

With a twinkle in her blue eyes, she nods. “I’m pretty good with them. I feel like my entire job is a surprise. So, whatever you have in mind, Mister Walk It Off, I am good with it,” she says, adding a bring-it-on lift of her chin.

Oh man, that doesn't help alleviate my crush on her. Her can-do attitude fans the flames.

It's another thing I like about her. She's open-minded and spontaneous—she rolls with the punches.

Maybe tonight will surprise us both.

Perhaps the travels through the city will help her see what we have in common. That I'm a guy worth considering, even if I'm a risk for her.

I could be a risk worth taking. I'm not interested in playing the field. I'm interested in finding the right woman for me.

Someone who wants the same things I do—passion, connection, intimacy.

I swear, there's something flickering between us, and I want to convince her to take a chance with me.

“And to answer your question, I'm obviously a fan of Joe DiMaggio, but I'm taking you someplace else in North Beach. Someplace completely unrelated to baseball.”

“Well, I'm excited for your tour. And did you know DiMaggio is one of what I call the Originals?” she asks, tossing that out there with a sassy wink—one that says she wants to play the game of Stump Each Other.

Since I'm a competitive guy, I'm down for that. “I'll bite. By Originals, do you mean he was the first hundred-thousand-dollar man?” The New York Yankee was the first baseball player to earn that milestone salary back in 1949.

She whistles in appreciation as we turn the corner, heading to the vibrant nearby hood. “I'm duly impressed. But that's not what I mean,” she says. “By Originals, I mean he was one of the first pro athletes to buy a home for his parents. In 1939, he bought them a house in the Marina.”

“Ah, was he the one who started that trend?” I ask. It has kind of become a thing in professional sports. Lots of guys buy their parents a new home when they hit certain milestones.

“Maybe he was. He bought it for them after he won his fourth World Series,” she says, rattling off details about

DiMaggio's gift to his parents.

Hmm. Interesting that Erin sounds so enthused about this act of generosity. Maybe this is a clue to her heart.

"You've got to give back. I actually paid off the mortgage for my parents in San Diego a couple of years ago." I might as well let her know I'm a generous guy too. Maybe that'll help smooth my way past this sorta work, sorta friendship zone.

As we walk through the San Francisco night, she beams at me. "How did they react? I want all the details," she says, rubbing her palms together.

My mind flashes back to that day, the memory flickering in Technicolor. "When I landed my first big contract after my third year, I went home to San Diego in the off-season. The first day I was there, I headed to the bank. My financial advisor worked out all the details behind the scenes to pay off the mortgage with the company that held it for the bank. So, I just went in and signed and paid ... then I took them out to dinner to their favorite Italian restaurant. I had a gift inside a box with a ribbon around it. I took it out over cannoli."

Under the streetlamps, her irises sparkle, like every detail feeds her appetite for more. "And then what?"

I recall the curious look in their eyes, my pride that I'd been able to do this for them—the sense of accomplishment. "I handed them the box. Mom opened it with nervous but eager fingers and found the title to the house in it. I told them they owned their home free and clear. And then I said thank you," I say, a hitch in my own voice at the memory. "Mom got up from the table and threw her arms around me, wrapping me in the biggest hug. She cried. Dad did too."

Erin flings her hand to her heart. "That's beautiful," she says, caught up in the emotion too. "Was it something you'd always wanted to do?"

"It was a dream, but a far-off one that I wasn't sure was possible. At first, when I was in the minors, I just wanted to make it to the show. And I wasn't even sure if I'd make the

roster my first spring training in Arizona. I definitely had some wobbly games.”

“Everyone does though. That’s normal.”

“True, but you’re only allowed so many.” I shake my head, relieved that I worked past mine. “I didn’t do it alone. Grant helped a ton. When I had a couple bad games, he did extra practice with me, then rounded up some of the other guys the next morning too. Crosby was there. Declan too, when he played for us. They helped me get my feet back under me ... and the rest is history.”

“See? These are the kinds of stories I want to tell someday. It’s beyond the stats. It’s a great tale of teamwork.”

I nudge her arm with my elbow. “And I thought this night was off the record. Now I learn you’re just trying to get my best stories out of me,” I tease as we near Columbus Avenue, the street that cuts through the heart of North Beach.

She gives me a deliberately evil grin. “Are there more? Gimme, gimme, gimme.”

I lean my head back, laughing. “Apparently, all you have to do is take me for a walk and I spill my secrets.”

“I want all your secrets, Sullivan,” she says. “We’ll walk all night long if that’s what it takes.”

Is that a hint of flirt in her voice?

I don’t have time to decide. “So, your parents. The house,” she prompts. “Was it a dream of yours?”

I scrub a hand along my nape, thinking back. “It was definitely my goal to make their lives easier. My parents worked hard when I was growing up, running a nonprofit that provided counseling services for those who couldn’t afford it, and I knew I could make a difference for them. Hell, they made a difference for me. They took me to all my games, all my practices. My mom sat in the bleachers with her computer, reviewing programs and donations during my games. So, it was fitting that I should give back to them.”

Erin sighs happily and shoots me a swoony smile. “You’re too sweet.” She takes a deep breath. “Now, moment of truth. Did you cry too, when you gave them the title?”

A fair question, and I wouldn’t be ashamed if I had. But telling the truth has gotten me this far with Erin—spending more time with her, out of the pressroom, away from the field. Best to stick with that.

“I’m not a crier,” I say. “Unless my football team loses. That shit makes me sad. And I’m sad a lot because I’m from San Diego. So now I root for the Hawks.”

“Smart move, switching to a team that wins,” she says.

I tap my temple. “Brilliant, I know.” Then, I shrug. “Honestly, I’m not a crier. Probably because I’m in my head most of the time.”

She hums, like she’s processing that tidbit. “You know, that makes a lot of sense. You need to be more cerebral than emotional to do your job.”

We turn onto Columbus, walking past a café that reeks of garlic and pesto. “You’ve hit the nail on the head,” I say, appreciating the way she understands my role on the mound.

“That’s probably why you were able to handle a starting pitcher change. Some of the best guys in the game are those who are able to separate their game from their emotions. Sometimes you just need to be both in your mind and your body but not really in your heart.”

“Yes. There’s a time and a place for emotions on a baseball field,” I agree. “But I imagine it’s the same for you as a reporter. If you were covering a player who was injured, for instance.”

Her eyes widen, and she grabs my arm like a lifeline. “Like earlier this year when Manuel Rosa broke his leg during a game,” she says, mentioning the Storm Chasers center fielder.

I shudder at the memory. She does too.

But then my eyes drift down to her hand on my biceps. That feels pretty damn good, and I log new data in my Erin file—she’s a toucher. She has an emotional side. She’s full of energy. She can barely stop moving.

Damn it. She’s so fucking right for me.

She doesn’t let go of my arm as she jumps back to the topic. “Confession: I kind of am a crier. I went home that night Rosa was hurt, and I was heartbroken for him. It just looked so bad. I interviewed him a few days later, and he was devastated.”

A pang lodges in my chest. I’m lucky I haven’t had that kind of injury. “I can’t imagine. Hell, I don’t want to imagine.”

I turn from that distressing idea, shifting the tone to something lighter. “My turn with the questions, Miss Reporter Who Never Stops Asking Questions.” I grab an imaginary mic and hold it in front of her as we walk. “You heard my story about my parents. Give me one of yours.”

“Fine, fine,” she says with a huff. Then she straightens her shoulders, like she’s getting all serious. “Let’s see. I didn’t buy them a house. But I do give them cute thank-you cards when a story of mine goes viral.”

I gesture for her to go on. “More. Details. Now.”

“So demanding,” she says, bumping her shoulder to mine—though it’s more like her shoulder to my biceps. “I send them cards that my friend Frankie makes. She’s a florist, but the cards are her side hustle. They’re all fruit themed—like an illustration of bananas winking, and it says, *Thanks a bunch*. Or a peach smiling, and it’ll say, *I a-peach-i-ate you*.”

“Certifiably adorable,” I say. “But we are not done, woman. Why do you thank them?”

She cracks up, then clears her throat. “They didn’t want me to have any student debt, so they made sure when I went to college that it was completely paid for. I feel incredibly lucky, so I try to thank them by doing a great job. It kind of drives me every day, the fact that they worked so hard with that goal in mind.”

My heart thumps stronger for her, filling up with more feelings, more interest. I'm both touched and a little saddened. It's awesome that she feels this way, and it reminds me what I'm up against in my pursuit of her. She loves her work fiercely, and she's motivated by her family. Yet her work—and my role in it—is our biggest obstacle.

It's also what I admire so much about her.

"You love what you do," I say, putting it plainly. The pure simplicity of it.

"Mostly," she says with a note of longing. "I want to do more with it though. I love telling stories—the kind I don't quite get to tell."

"What kind?"

She sighs deeply. "Stories that show the people behind the game. Or even just people in general. Human interest stories about the city, about sports, about icons."

"You want to dive into what makes someone tick," I say.

She flashes a blinding smile. "Exactly. Don't get me wrong—I'm crazy about my work. Borderline obsessed. But I also think I could do more with it."

"Personally, I think that sounds perfect for you. This whole walk, you've been digging into me," I say, jamming my fist against my chest like I'm scooping out the insides.

"Aww, did it hurt?"

"Only a little bit."

"Will you survive?" she asks with exaggerated concern.

"It's highly debatable," I deadpan. Then I turn a touch more serious. "But I hope you can do the work you want someday. You'll be the best at that too. And I mean that."

"Thanks. That's what I want," she says. "To do my best."

She wants to be tops at her job. Can she, though, if she gets involved with me? Is that a line she can't cross?

There's only one way to know. I'm going to ask her.

Now.

Fucking now.

It's time.

I take a breath, bracing myself. "Hey, Erin. Would you ever—"

Her hand darts out, grabbing my arm and yanking me close.

She drops her voice to a whisper. "That's Hudson Tanner's limo over there."

I jerk my gaze toward the sleek black vehicle idling at the light. Hudson Tanner's the owner of my team.

"Don't look!" she hisses. "Rumor has it that if he runs into any of his players on the street, he will just talk and talk and talk about the last game. He likes to discuss everything that went wrong."

Yup. She heard right. "All too true. Grant said he got cornered by him once after a game. And since the last thing I want to do is shoot the shit with the owner about how our team belched up a victory tonight . . . there's only one solution."

I grab her hand and tug her down an alley.

We run like hell.

And this woman, holy fuck. She's got lungs and legs on her, keeping up a good clip till we're well out of view.

We slow our pace, stopping, panting from the unexpected sprint down—I scan our surroundings—Jack Kerouac Alley.

She runs a hand through her hair, catching her breath.

Damn, she looks good in the starlight.

So incredibly good that I'm dying to tell her that she's been the object of my daydreams for a while now.

Everything about the last hour has clarified what I want.

I want to pursue a relationship with Erin.

Starting tonight.

ERIN

The temptation is strong.

The desire to step over the line thrums in my chest, taunts my better judgment.

Kiss him.

I'm pretty good at reading people. It's part of the job—listening, paying attention. I've been doing that all night, and I know one thing. Players don't hang out with reporters this long. It's just not typical.

Men do. Men who are interested in women. And women who are interested in men do the same.

They go for late-night strolls. They hang out after midnight. They tempt fate.

I want Sullivan Fitzgerald. But can I truly take that kind of chance, dating an athlete? How would that look to my network? To the public? While I wouldn't be the first reporter to date a sports star, I'm not sure it's the best move at age twenty-five, still growing and learning.

I don't want future employers to say I dated my way up.

I don't want athletes on other teams to decline to talk to me.

And I'm not sure I'm ready to take the risk of this going wrong.

If a romance with Sullivan doesn't work out, it would be messy. I follow the team. I travel with the team. I'm the one

covering their schedule, reporting on the trades, interviewing the players before and after games. It's exhausting and wonderful, energizing and tiring, and it's part of who I am.

Work is all-encompassing. Getting ahead is the focus.

But right now, my body is the focus, and my lust is the epicenter of me. It's telling me to get closer, maybe even a little closer still, and to ask for a kiss.

Because, my God, his lips.

They look so soft and pillowy and lush. Sullivan has a fantastic mouth, one I can't stop looking at, and deep brown eyes I could get lost in. Eyes that gaze at me like he wants to crowd me against the wall and kiss me deeply into the night.

He licks the corner of his lips, like that's why he pulled me into this alley—to kiss in the moonlight. I want to so badly. Want *him* so badly.

Sullivan swallows roughly. "Erin," he begins, all husky and sexy.

"Yes?" My voice feels like it's hanging on a thread of desire.

"This might sound ... out of the blue," he says. That confidence he carries onto the mound is gone. He's pure vulnerability now, and it's so enticing. "I would love to take you out again."

Oh God.

There it is.

The ask.

My chest aches with longing.

"I want to. I truly do," I say, and for a spell, his eyes glimmer with excitement, with all sorts of possibilities. I have to squash those. I can't give in. Even though when I look at him, I can feel the sizzle, the connection, but the raw danger too.

Don't date an athlete on your beat.

In my four years as a reporter, I've followed that unwritten guideline faithfully. Hell, I've pretty much followed a no-dating guideline, though unintentionally.

I shove my hands into my pockets so I'm not tempted to grab him, to feel his big frame against mine.

I need to be careful, to remember my parents paying for my school, the opportunities I have in front of me. I shouldn't squander them because of this intense attraction.

"You do?" he asks, snagging on my last words. "Because I do, so much. I want to get to know you better. Spend time with you."

Dear God, he makes that sound amazing—the chance to pursue this attraction that's physical and mental and emotional.

Trouble is, I can't. "I want all that too, Sullivan. But it's too much of a risk to my career," I say, sounding desperate—feeling a little desperate too. "I'd have to disclose it at work with HR, and then I worry that players and management would talk about me and treat me differently."

And work truly is everything to me. It's why I haven't invested much energy in men before. Hell, it's why I'm still a virgin.

His shoulders sag for a moment, but his expression is resolute. He nods crisply. "I understand completely. I don't want that burden to fall on you."

I heave a sigh, wishing there were another option.

Wishing I could take this risk.

But this thing flickering between us is too new.

Too fragile.

"Thank you for understanding," I say, fixing on a smile to lighten the mood. "But I would truly like to be friends with you. I don't mean *let's just be friends*. I mean, I think you and I could actually be friends. Real friends."

My hands feel clammy. Nerves twist, waiting for his reaction to my offer.

Maybe he doesn't want friendship.

Maybe he'll move on right now, find another woman to pursue. Pickings aren't slim for a guy like him—a major leaguer with a fat contract, a ring, a heart of gold.

A face for movie posters.

I feel like I'm waiting an eternity for an answer. Maybe because this question feels as risky, in its own way, as saying I want to date you.

Because I'm saying, *I like you. Are you interested enough to just hang out with me?*

A second later, Sullivan smiles, a crooked grin that reaches his eyes. "I'm good with that, Erin," he says, and I breathe again, relieved and excited. "For what it's worth, I think it's ridiculous that society judges women so harshly and lets athletes get away with all kinds of shit. But how about this? Let me show you the murals I wanted to give you a tour of."

"How did you know ...?" I stop myself, remembering, and I grin. "I told you at the charity event."

He winks. "I listen, Erin. I definitely listen."

I do love a listener.

SULLIVAN

I've been friend-zoned.

Not my first choice, but not totally unexpected either.

I can handle it.

The friend zone is like coming into the seventh inning against a tough left-handed batter.

Sometimes you strike him out; sometimes he homers off you. But you take your chances.

This is an opportunity, so I seize it.

Under the streetlamps of this city, I take her on a walking tour of some of the newest murals in North Beach, showing her a recent addition in this alley that celebrates some of the city's Asian heritage with illustrations and inscriptions. She devours them, reciting the words, then we move to the wall of the Vesuvio Café, debating the poem written on the bricks and its closing line: *It's time for another martini.*

"Words to live by," I say.

"Definitely."

We check out a few more, and when the clock strikes two, my stomach growls.

She pats it, and oh, yes, I like her hand on my stomach. A lot. I wish she'd keep it there, yank up my shirt, trace my skin with her tongue.

Someday ...

“Pancakes?” I ask.

“There is only ever one answer to that question,” she says, and we find a twenty-four-hour diner and tuck into our meal.

When we’re done, she lets out a yawn the size of a container ship.

“Bedtime for you,” I say, then call a Lyft to take us back to the ballpark.

On the ride, she yawns again, her eyelids fluttering. “I should warn you—I’m a little bit in love with sleep.”

That settles it. “I’m going to drive you home, then,” I tell her.

“You don’t have to,” she says on another yawn.

But this isn’t about obligation. “I want to,” I insist, and with good reason. She looks ready to crash, and I don’t want that to be literal.

When we reach her car in the lot, I hold out my hand for her keys. “Shotgun for you, Erin.”

She raises her hands in surrender. “I won’t protest.”

I drive her home, then grab her gear and walk her to the front door of her building.

She perks up a bit, giving me a soft, wistful sigh. “Tonight was amazing.”

I couldn’t agree more. It was amazing and enlightening. It solidified what had been just speculation. There is something brewing between us, and I want a chance to prove I’m worth the risk.

But that starts with listening to her. Respecting her wants and wishes. Being friendly. “What are you doing next week? Since we’re friends, I was thinking we could hang out as friends. Maybe check out some more hidden gems in the city?”

She smiles brightly. “I would love to do that.”

I give her a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Well, sort of chaste. I do linger, inhaling the faint traces of coconut on her skin, maybe from her lotion.

I draw a long inhale, then whisper, “Good night.”

She shivers, then steps back. “See you next week.”

ERIN***The Off-Season***

My heart shimmies as I read the text message from Sullivan the next Saturday morning.

Sullivan: Agree/disagree—you're never too old for a slide.

Erin: All the way agree.

Sullivan: I thought you might feel that way.

Erin: And why's that?

Sullivan: You've got a "Sure, I'll go skydiving" attitude.

Erin: Um, hate to break it to you, but I've never gone skydiving.

Sullivan: But I bet you'd consider it. I bet you've gone hang gliding, rock climbing, and white-water rafting.

Erin: Are you reading my high school journals? Yes, all three.

Sullivan: There. I'm right. Anyway, I'll pick you up at six p.m. tonight. A twilight *friend date*.

I settle into my couch, setting down my phone. He really meant it when he accepted my friend offer. He actually wants—*gasp*—to be friends. And I can't stop smiling as I work on a piece to pitch to my network.

When evening rolls around, I close my laptop, shower, put on makeup, and get ready to ... well, ride on my ass down a

slide.

Whatever he has in mind, I'm going to like it.

* * *

I don't mind his emerald-green McLaren.

Not one bit.

Especially since he blasts hip-hop music. "Loved this playlist when I was a rookie," he says. "Still do."

"Some things never change," I muse, then tap the dash. "Like good tunes."

As he cruises into the Noe Valley neighborhood, he offers a fist for knocking and I accept.

We're buddies, and I like it.

A few minutes later, we arrive at the Seward Street Slides, and he parks the car.

"Yes! I was hoping we were going adult sliding here," I say, pumping a fist.

"I even brought the cardboard," he says, grabbing the thick pieces of a box from the trunk.

"We're going down the butt ramp," I say.

"Warning—I might scream like a dude going down a slide."

I nod approvingly. "Points for not saying scream like a girl."

He scoffs. "As if I'd say that. Not a sexist pig, Erin."

I bump my shoulder to his. "I know, and I like it."

"Good. You should," he says, kind of sexy and rumbly. Or maybe that's just how everything he says sounds to me—like I want to take off my clothes and roll around in it.

Or I would, if we were something other than *just friends*.

We traipse through the park, heading to the slides—two long, steep concrete chutes down a hillside.

“A hidden gem in San Francisco,” he says when we reach the top.

“You are such a San Francisco historian,” I tell him. “And I’m into that.”

“Had a feeling you might be.”

I eye the slide, and a kernel of worry digs into my chest. “Are you even allowed to do this, contractually?”

He presses his finger to his lips. “Shhh. Keep my secret, Erin.”

I pretend to zip my lips as he sets down a piece of cardboard. “Ladies first,” he says.

“You want me to die first, clearly,” I tease.

“Ha. More like I want you to have the first slide-gasm.”

I can’t resist. I step a little closer, giving him a smile. “Slide-gasm. Nice. Very nice.”

His eyes darken for a few seconds, lingering on my lips. “There’s more where that came from.”

“I bet,” I say, loving his flirt even though I know I shouldn’t.

Instead of indulging in more of that temptation, I park my booty on the cardboard and fly.

I scream in glee.

Soon, I’m at the bottom, bouncing up, breathless and thrilled, but thinking quickly. Grabbing my phone from my front pocket, I turn on the camera and snap a shot of the starting pitcher as he careens down the slide, his face shining with joy in the twilight.

He hits the bottom, jumps up, and thrusts his arms in the air. “Slide-gasm for this guy,” he says.

I lift a hand to high-five. We smack palms. “I felt it too,” I say playfully, but I don’t let go of his hand.

He doesn't let go either. Instead, he curls his fingers tighter, wrapping his hand around mine. My breath comes faster. My pulse surges.

And we stay like that for a few more seconds, our gazes caught.

I squeeze his hand. This is all I'll allow—this little touch after the fun we had.

He rubs his thumb along my wrist. "You liked it?" he asks.

"So much," I say, but I'm talking about him too.

* * *

A couple weeks later, I make a plan for the Filbert Steps.

I like climbs, and since Sullivan works his body for a living, he can handle it.

I tell him as much in our text.

Erin: Next friend date—all the stairs!

Sullivan: Bring it on.

Erin: You're known for your love of stairs. That's what your journals told me. Wink, wink.

Sullivan: They were right. There are no stairs I can't handle.

Erin: Same here.

Sullivan: Damn, woman, you do like to throw down.

Erin: Confession: I love stair workouts.

Sullivan: Confession: I. Do. Too.

We meet on a Sunday, tackling the long set of stairs up to Coit Tower. They're perfect for exercise, and maybe that'll take my mind off the kisses I can't have with Sullivan. It should help my focus on keeping my heart rate up.

We wind our way through the neighborhood, heading for the steps.

He takes the first step, then turns to me. “Hey, are we still off the record?”

I roll my eyes. “Dude, we’ve been off the record for a while.”

“Good. Then I’ll tell you officially I wasn’t supposed to go adult sliding a couple weeks ago. It’s against my contract,” he whispers.

My mouth forms an O. “Just as I suspected. And you are so naughty.”

“I’m an outlaw, Erin,” he teases as we climb. “Good thing we’re always off the record.”

“Since my phone and I did witness you living on the wild side,” I tease, patting my back pocket.

“But I trust you with my secrets. Especially the ones that could bite me in the ass.”

Too hard to resist. I peer around at him, like I’m checking out his rear. “You do have a cute ass, Sullivan.”

He growls lightly, and the sound sends tingles along my skin, especially when he murmurs, “So do you.”

Soon, the steps turn into wooden stairs, then we reach a street sign for Napier Lane, a quiet block.

And it’s ... gorgeous, bursting with gardens and flowers and plants. “This is like a hamlet in the city,” I say as we wander past several little cottages then along more gardens.

A bird squawks in a nearby tree. I point to the green-and-orange-winged creature. “I love the parrots of Telegraph Hill,” I say.

He smiles at me, sunlight casting a dreamy afternoon glow across his handsome face. “Funny, I’ve heard about them, but never learned the story.”

I square my shoulders, pride suffusing me. “I can tell you. Want to know?”

“Tell me a story, Erin,” he says in that sultry tone that sends sparks down my chest.

“The parrot flock started in 1990 when a pair of small cherry-headed conures escaped and flew here.”

“Where’d they escape from?”

I shrug. “Who knows? That’s what I love about the story. No one truly knows, but everyone has a theory where the parrots came from.”

I toss out some of my ideas:

Alcatraz.

Pier 39.

The Apple headquarters.

Sullivan jumps in, suggesting the Sutro Baths, Google, and Danielle Steel’s house.

We wander down the block, trading tales about the wild parrots in the middle of a city.

“It’s a parrot jungle in the metropolis,” he remarks. “A conundrum—completely what you don’t expect.”

That tugs on the restless part of my mind, the part that craves deeper stories. “See? That’s what I’d love to report on too. Finding the unexpected tale. The quirky little detail in a story that makes you sit up and take notice.”

“Like when a baseball play doesn’t go the way you think. When the shortstop appears out of nowhere and is suddenly fielding a ball on the first baseline,” he muses.

“Or when a pitcher is good enough to be the designated hitter too, and he belts in the game-winning home run. Why is he so good at the plate too? Turns out he had to learn to hit, and if he hadn’t, he never would have been able to play in his home country,” I say.

We trade on and off like that, and then we do it again a few weeks later when we check out the Crissy Field stairs leading to the Golden Gate Bridge. On our next outing, we visit the Instagrammable tiled steps on Sixteenth Avenue that take us to a food truck where we devour tacos and talk more and more.

Like that, we discover the city, and we become better friends each weekend and on weeknights too—texting and talking.

Soon, fall turns into winter, and in January, our friend dates become more like lunches and dinners.

One night in early February, we head to an Italian restaurant in North Beach, and when he pulls out my chair, it feels more like a date-date.

And that feels risky. But the more time I spend with him, the more I'm embracing the risk.

The more I'm wanting something beyond friendship.

SULLIVAN

If I was grading myself, I'd give me an A.

Maybe that makes me cocky.

But I'm pretty sure it's accurate.

I've been an excellent student in the subject of Erin Madison.

And I've enjoyed every second of our friend dates. The stairs, the slides, the meals, the walks.

The wanderings.

Tonight at dinner is as good a time as any to let her in on a secret.

After we order and the waiter pours the wine, I offer my glass in a toast. "To friendship," I say, though that's not the secret.

"To friendship," she echoes, her voice warm, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

Exactly how I feel when I'm with her.

I take a drink of the wine, and she does the same, then licks her lips.

I narrow my eyes, humming my approval. "Mmm. You look good doing that."

She dips her head, blushing. "So do you when you do that," she says when she looks at me again.

My chest heats from the compliment. "Glad you think so."

“But then, I find you attractive all the time,” she says.

And yup, I’m hot everywhere now. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Give it up, Sullivan,” she says with a naughty twinkle in her eyes. I fucking love how she goes from sweet to dirty in a heartbeat.

“I love to read romance novels,” I say, squaring my shoulders, owning it.

She laughs lightly, setting a hand on my forearm. A shiver rushes over my skin. Damn, I like it so much when she touches me.

“No one knows?” she asks.

“I keep it to myself. But I thought you’d enjoy knowing it.”

“I do like that. I like all the details of you,” she says.

And I am a certified goner for Erin Madison.

“Maybe someday you can do a story on Captain Romance,” I say, then scoff at myself. “I call myself that. In my head.”

She leans back in her chair, stifling a smile. “That’s too cute.”

Growling, I pretend to be mad. “Don’t make me regret telling you.”

“Hey! I *like* cute,” she says, her eyes holding mine.

“So do I,” I say, and it feels like we’re talking about each other, about these feelings blooming between us, this friendship that’s teetering on the verge of romance.

I hope.

I hope so damn much.

“Tell me your favorite romances,” she says, and I do, sharing the details of some of the stories I’ve devoured.

“I detect a theme,” Erin says, tapping her chin.

“And what’s that?”

“They all have forbidden love, but they end in a happily ever after.”

That’s the great thing about stories—you can write the endings however you want.

But this is real life. I can imagine a romance with her—and maybe I am—but that doesn’t bring me any closer to it happening.

When dinner ends, we walk through North Beach again, and I imagine doing this in a month, a few more months, a year.

Yes, I want to be friends with her.

I definitely want her in my life.

But I’m falling for her.

She’s in my head, in my life, and in my heart.

Like we did that night in October, we meander, talking about the coming season. We talk about my friend Shane’s trade from the New York Comets to the San Francisco Dragons, where he’ll be playing with my buddy Drew, their catcher. Then we talk more about her job, and how she still wants to tell bigger stories. But we move on from work, chatting about music and friends as Stella’s Comedy Attic comes into view.

She stops in front of it, checking out the marquee and the list of upcoming acts. “Matilda Barker is going to be here this month,” she says, pointing to the list of comics. “She’s fabulous, and all my girlfriends love her. Clementine, Frankie, Nova ...”

“You should go with them,” I say, with some flirt in my tone.

“You should go too,” she says, equally playful.

“Should we pretend to be surprised if we see each other?”

“We both love surprises,” she says. Then she tilts her head, considering. “So, we’ll act surprised.”

“Great. If I run into you, I’ll be shocked.”

“It’s a plan.”

We turn away from the club, and I walk her home. My gaze keeps drifting to her hand, and the desire to hold it deepens, tunnels into my chest.

Drives me on.

“Can I hold your hand?” I ask, hopeful, but determined too.

She steals a glance at me, almost as if this moment is forbidden. “I was hoping you would.”

I reach out, thread my fingers through hers, and murmur, “Nice.”

“Very, very nice,” she says, shooting me a sexy look.

Holding hands has never felt this right, or this intimate.

When we reach her home, I’m full of hope, wanting this night to be different, this chance to be the one.

It’s time to tell her more. To lay my heart on the line.

On the front steps of her building, I imagine I’m heading out to the mound.

Determined, focused, ready.

The outcome of the game rests on my shoulders, and so does my future with Erin.

I draw a deep breath and then jump. “Erin, I don’t want to put you in an uncomfortable situation, but I just want to tell you that I love being friends with you, and I also would love to take you out. On a regular basis. Not like a one-time thing.” I go on, buoyed by the sparks in her blue eyes. “I want to be your man. Your boyfriend, if you’ll have me. I’m not asking for a one-night stand, or a one-and-done date. I’m asking for you. And I know all the risk falls on you, but I’ll be here for you to navigate those pitfalls. I’ll be by your side however you need me, if you’ll take that chance.”

Her shoulders shudder slightly, maybe with happiness. Her hand flies to her mouth, then she lets go. “Oh God,” she gasps in wonder. “Really?”

“Yes. Does that surprise you?” I ask with a laugh.

“It just makes me happy.”

This seems like a chance worth taking. “You make me happy, Erin. And this whole wander-through-the-city thing feels like it could be you and me. Think about it. Think about us, okay?” I ask, and I just hope.

I hope so damn hard.

“I think about you all the time, Sullivan,” she confesses.

Then, she’s wildly fast. She rises up on tiptoe, and I expect a chaste kiss like I’ve given her many times before. But instead, she goes straight for my mouth—dives right in and kisses me.

It’s soft at first, an exploration, her soft lips gliding across mine. I let her lead because that’s what she seems to want and because I’m not entirely sure where we’re going. But this woman knows her mind. And evidently her body too. She inches closer, a mere heartbeat away, then she sets her hands on my face.

Ah, hell.

I reach for her hips, jerk her against me, and explore her mouth. My tongue skates against hers, our sighs mingling, and the one-time impossibility of us falls away as we kiss against the night. In the span of these delicious seconds, I’m imagining new scenarios for us, possibilities where this could be real.

When she breaks the kiss, I wait for her to take the lead again.

“I had to know,” she says, a teasing light in her eyes.

“Had to know what?”

“If kissing you was as worth it as I’d hoped it would be.”

I laugh. “And? Conclusion?”

“It feels like the start of a new story,” she says. “I kind of want to spend all night with you. But I think I know what would happen if I did.”

“What would happen?”

“I’d do all the naughty things I can’t do quite yet.”

“When, then?” I ask. I’m desperate, but thrilled, waiting on the edge of the world for her.

“I promise I’ll tell you soon.”

* * *

“Soon” comes by way of a text a week later, shortly before Valentine’s Day.

Erin: I’m going to Stella’s with my friends. I’ll act surprised.

Sullivan: I’ll do the same.

It feels like the end of our friend dates and the beginning of a real one.

SULLIVAN

My buddy Shane texts me that he'll be arriving in the city the next day. Since he's now a Dragon, he'll be moving here before we all take off for spring training.

Sullivan: Want a welcome parade? I'll see if I can round up your biggest fans. Wait, that's no one.

Shane: Guess I'll settle for a pint, then, with my mates. NOT YOU.

Drew jumps into the text fray.

Drew: I'll pretend to be your bud, Shakespeare, if you pay for the drinks.

Shane: What a wildly generous offer.

After that, we get around to planning a welcome-back-to-town night that just happens to fall on February 14th. I mention the comedy club, but the day before the event, I suggest a concert too, knowing Shane will say no, since he's staying away from the club scene.

It's all a ruse.

On Valentine's Day, the three of us head to Stella's, catching up on the new Marvel flick releasing next week, and discussing whether we want to see it or not during spring training, which leads to a debate on the best superheroes, since we live for arguments.

It's good to see the guys, but my mind keeps jumping ahead as we walk to the club.

To Erin.

To tonight.

To what might happen, and whether we'll indulge in another kiss or maybe more.

Please let it be more.

Once we're seated in Stella's and the headliner takes the stage, my gaze catches on a table not far away.

There she is—the woman I spent so many days and nights with during the off-season.

Time spent getting to know her.

Getting to like her.

Falling for her.

As friends.

And now, I'm determined to be so much more than that.

We could be everything.

I just want to be worth the risk for her.

* * *

Matilda Barker strolls across the stage, mic in hand. "This last date I went on was great. When I said sit, they sat. When I said come ..." She stops, smiling coyly. "Oh, please. It happens that way in romance novels. When the man goes all alpha commanding in bed and says, 'Come for me.'" Matilda rolls her eyes. "And the woman's like, 'Oh yes, yes, yes.' As if that works."

Erin chuckles from across the room. So does a tall redhead sitting beside her.

Shane snorts next to me.

Or maybe it's a laugh-snort.

I shoot him a look.

He just shrugs, then we return our focus to the stage as Matilda scans the audience, giving us an innocent look. “Anyway, he came when I said come ... What? I wasn’t gonna miss a chance with the brown-and-tan min pin.” Matilda slides into the next bit. “The breakup took me a little longer. The person I was dating said, *I think you’re just dating me for my dog.*” She stops, shrugging. “I mean ... that’s not wrong.”

Shane snorts again, which makes me laugh harder, then I peer across the room, curious if Erin’s still laughing too. She is.

That makes me smile.

When the set ends, I take out my phone to text her, but there’s a note from her already blinking at me.

Erin: I need *and* want to talk to my friends for a bit, but I’m dying to see you. I have something to tell you soon. Don’t leave.

Sullivan: Can’t wait to hear, and I’ll be here.

I spend the next hour debating Drew on the merits of Elmore Leonard versus Raymond Chandler.

After Shane and Clementine, one of Erin’s friends, take off, Erin shoots me a secret smile, then mouths, *Hi*.

The timing seems right. I tip my chin toward Drew. “Need to go talk to someone,” I tell him.

“Would that be Erin Madison?” he asks, ever so innocently.

I shoot him a stare. “Yes, why?”

He shrugs like he’s got a big, juicy secret. “Nothing. Except for the fact that you were staring at her throughout the whole set.”

I rein in a grin, my lips twitching. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know why you’re denying it. Dude, I get that you like her. And she’s great. Just talk to her.”

“I wasn’t really looking for permission.” I’ve been giving it to myself for some time now.

He arches a dubious brow. “Oh, you weren’t? My mistake. I’ll just ignore how you’ve been sitting here for hours, distracted as fuck, trying to figure out how to make your move after all this time.”

My friend looks serene and smug, confident in his ability to read the situation. He’s not far off, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that yet.

“Well, on that note,” I say, “I’m heading over.”

Once I’m walking to her table, though, sudden nerves cause a knot in my chest. Nothing has officially changed since the last time I saw her, but it feels like everything is about to.

I reach the table, and all the ladies look up at me. “Hey, Erin,” I say.

A redhead smirks.

A woman with heart-shaped glasses smiles coyly.

Erin flashes a wildly delighted grin as she runs her hand through her hair. “Hey, Sullivan.”

“Did you enjoy the show?”

“I did.”

“And it sure seems like my friend Shane enjoyed chatting with Clementine,” I say, gesturing to the door.

The redhead chimes in with a pointed question. “Is that why you’re coming to talk to Erin?”

Erin gestures to her auburn-haired friend. “This is Nova. She’s in charge of pretty much everything,” Erin says as she rolls her eyes.

Nova waves hello at me. The woman in the glasses introduces herself as Frankie, and I swear her eyes drift over to the table where I was, almost like she’s connecting with Drew.

But maybe the romance novels I listen to are putting those ideas into my head.

Either way, I need to rely on instinct for my romance right the fuck now. Captain Romance is here. “Erin, can I steal you

away?”

“I was hoping you would,” she says, then tells her friends goodbye.

“Get it, girl,” Nova says.

“If you talk to Clementine, tell her I’ll catch her up on everything,” Erin says.

As we leave, I arch a brow. “Everything? I’m intrigued.”

“Good. It involves you,” she says, wrapping her hand around my arm.

I practically race out of the club. “Serve it up. I want to know everything, *friend*,” I say as we hit the sidewalk.

“Walk with me,” she says, and I’ll follow her anywhere. “Want to know what I did during the off-season?”

“Hung out with me?”

“Besides that.”

I’m champing at the bit. “Yes, I really do.”

“I explored the city,” she says, almost like she’s a little bit shy or maybe nervous to tell me that. Like she’s opening herself up to me. Sharing something private—even though I was with her on some of those explorations.

“Beyond where we went together?”

She nods. “Every day, I visited off-the-beaten-path spots. Hidden gems. Researched the places I didn’t know. Learned the history. And then I made my pitch.”

I’m buzzed, and I haven’t had a single drop of alcohol. This story is going somewhere. Somewhere good.

Somewhere incredible.

I feel it in my bones. In my gut. “What’s the pitch? I do love pitches.”

She stops in her tracks, and I stop too. Reaching for my shirt collar, Erin tugs me close. “I’m no longer the beat reporter for the Cougars. I’m now hosting and producing documentaries for my network.”

My jaw drops.

Surprising me is hard. But she just did it. “You are?” It comes out staccato with shock.

“I am. I start in two weeks. I was making mini documentaries on my own about sports and the city and local icons. The network loved them, and they’re making a new job for me.” She wraps her arms around my neck, playing with the ends of my hair. “They told me yesterday, and I wanted to tell you tonight. You’re not a conflict of interest anymore, because I won’t be covering your team every day. I can be with you, if you’ll have me.”

I’m so jazzed up, I can barely stand still. I can barely think. I can only feel. And I feel great. “Will you be mine?”

She just smiles, soft and shy. “Yes. I’m yours. Will you take me home tonight?”

We’re gone in a heartbeat.

ERIN

I'm not making this change for him.

It's for me.

I'm doing this because I learned something that night we spent together at the end of last season. I learned what I truly want in my career. I learned, too, that you have to go after what you want. What makes you happy in life, love, and work.

But I'm the kind of person who needs evidence and proof.

I needed to know what my own restlessness was all about.

I started to discover the answer when Sullivan told me stories about his family, then showed me parts of the city I didn't know. I began to connect the dots, to figure out what I'd been yearning for.

As we explored more, I assembled the clues, determined I was ready for a chance. I knew I wanted to shift away from the day-in-and-day-out grind, and to tell the human-interest tales.

I proved myself, producing and reporting on my own, developing a portfolio, then showing it to my boss.

I loved every second of the work, and she did too.

But the best part is this—getting the guy.

Having it all.

Tonight, though, I'd like something in particular.

Sex, for the first time.

When we reach my home, I tug him into my place, shut the door, then set my hands on his shoulders.

I'm not embarrassed.

I'm not ashamed.

But I want him to know who I am.

"I'm a virgin, and I really want you to be my first, Sullivan Fitzgerald."

His eyes go hazy and wildly sexy. "I want that so much."

SULLIVAN

But there's more to say than *yes*. When I take Erin to the bedroom and strip off her shirt, reveling in her tight, toned athletic frame, I set the record straight.

"I want you so much, and I need you to know I will be making love to you," I tell the woman I'm mad about. "You want to know why?"

She trembles, a shudder running through her body. "Why?"

I cup her cheek, thrilling in the privilege of touching her like this at last. "Because I'm in love with you, Erin Madison. I fell in love with you when we were friends. When we roamed the city. When we did everything."

Her eyes shine. "And I fell in love with you."

And now we fall into bed, clothes flying all the way off as we go.

We kiss madly, and it's like a whole new type of kissing. It's deep and long and needy. It feels like it won't end, like it's a brand-new beginning as we come together like this.

We've been hoping for this. Craving each other.

I don't want it to end, so I don't stop kissing as my hands roam down her body, traveling over her breasts. They journey along the soft flesh of her stomach then between her legs, where I happily, so damn happily, slide my fingers through her silky wetness.

I groan as I touch her.

Her hands grab at my pecs when I trace her heat.

And we are off to the races as I touch her like I cherish her.

She writhes as my hands explore her, her reactions making my cock harder, my need wilder.

She responds like a dream, moaning into my kisses, then breaking apart, calling my name as she bucks and thrusts into my hand.

Soon she's coming on my fingers, shuddering beautifully.

I savor all of her pleasure, and a minute later, she's gazing at me, her eyes lust-drunk as she thrusts a condom my way and then gives me an order. "On your back."

I do love a woman who knows her mind and body. "Yes, ma'am."

I oblige, flopping onto my back, running a fist down my cock, then covering myself with protection.

Straddling me, she looks like a determined goddess. She rubs the head of my dick against her, tossing her head back, her neck stretching. She moans a sexy *oh God*.

Then she stares hotly at me.

"I've thought about you fucking me a lot, Sullivan. Thought about your cock filling me," she rasps.

Holy fuck. My Erin is a sexy vixen, and I love it. "What a filthy, beautiful mouth you have."

"I have a dirty mind, and I'm not afraid to use it."

"Use me. Use my dick all you want," I urge her, holding the base, offering my shaft for her to ride.

"I will," she says, then she goes slowly, lowers herself, and takes just the tip.

She tenses. Her expression shifts to one of pain.

"You okay, baby?" I ask.

She nods, her lips tight. "I'll be okay."

“Take it slow,” I tell her gently.

“I will,” she says, and she draws a deep breath, then exhales, sinking deeper.

Her jaw ticks. She draws another breath, then she’s all the way on me.

And she feels incredible. “You feel so fucking good, baby.”

“So do you,” she says on a shudder.

I grip her hips, holding her as she sets the pace, slow and easy at first—nice and tender. I lift my face, kissing her lush lips as she finds a rhythm.

As we move together, we kiss like we’re making up for all that time. Making it up in kisses and sex, in sex and kisses.

We’re tangled together, moaning and thrusting, fucking and loving.

And the woman I proved myself to is coming on top of me.

It’s glorious and loud and so damn good.

I follow her there, blissed out and in love.

This is the way to start a new season.

With a friend and a lover, all in one.

EPILOGUE

Erin

The next morning, with spring training beginning, I stay behind in the city, and that feels just right.

So does going to see my friends at Doctor Insomnia, where I catch them up on my new job over coffee.

“You are a badass babe,” Nova declares.

Clementine gives me a fist bump.

Frankie hoots. “Sometimes you just have to go after what you want,” she says. “Trust me on this.”

“Oh, I do trust you. Because you’re all about that,” I say, since Frankie shared some secrets with me over text today.

Nova pats my knee. “You seem happy. Less ... restless.”

I beam. “Yes! Exactly. This is what I really want. And the time I spent with Sullivan helped me to see that.”

“I’m so stinking happy for you,” Frankie says, and all my friends echo her sentiment.

“I’m happy too,” I say, feeling so much more than content.

Feeling just right about everything.

* * *

When Sullivan returns from spring training, I don't go to his season opener as a reporter.

I go in the capacity of my brand-new job, making documentaries on sports, and people, and this city.

Not him.

Not the Cougars.

And it's wonderful to have it all.

He wins the first game, and afterward we wander through the city.

But not for too long.

Because I learned something else I love doing after midnight.

Getting naked with the man I love.

THE END

KISS YOUR TULIPS

A FRANKIE AND DREW SHORT STORY

DREW

If I weren't a ball player, I could be a doctor.

Why?

I'm not squeamish.

I've got a good bedside manner—well, I have good manners in bed, and that has to count.

And my handwriting is atrocious.

I mean, consider the to-do list I wrote myself last night.

I take it from the magnet on the fridge and pour my morning joe, trying to read my writing.

Gut pony ...

What on earth is a gut pony?

I shudder at the thought of the poor equine and his tummy trouble as I take a thirsty gulp of my brew. I need the coffee to sharpen my brain as I try to decipher the next item on my to-do list. Does that say . . .

Muddy tools?

Did I plan a home improvement project before I conked out last night? Sure, I like to putter around my home and build birdhouses, but I don't need dirty tools for that.

But why would I write *this*?

Piss ice.

I didn't even drink last night.

Fine, I had one glass of wine with my best friend, Jenna.

Still, this shit is weird, even for me.

Yet clearly, this was important enough to write down. Admittedly, it was a late night. Jenna was bummed, so I took her out for dinner, wine, and all the cake, just like she did for me a couple years ago when Holly dumped me.

It's a thing—we've helped each other through breakups and makeups and everything else since we were kids. Her douche-nozzle of a dickweed ex-husband cheated on her, and now she's facing the hellscape of online dating.

Maybe this note was about her?

Think like a detective, Drew.

I study my handwriting again.

“Ah, yes! You are Sam Spade,” I say.

Get peonies, maybe tulips, possibly irises.

Yup. Call me Robert Langdon. I'm a motherfucking code breaker—and the world's best childhood bud. Jenna loves flowers, so it's time to cheer her up with some petals.

Valentine's Day is in seven days, and I'm going to take her mind off her snake of an ex.

After I shower and get dressed, I Google “flower delivery,” but then kill that idea. I've no idea what kind to get her.

I know nothing about flowers.

But there's a cute flower shop next to the hardware store I frequent. Can't remember its name, but I can ask the florist there for advice.

On my way from my place in Pacific Heights, I swing past Doctor Insomnia's Tea And Coffee Emporium, where I spot some familiar faces—my teammates from the Dragons Declan and Holden, along with Declan's husband, Grant, who catches for the Cougars.

I pop in to say hello to the trio and they draw me into their discussion of the upcoming season. “This year, we're going to

win it all,” I say to Declan and Holden.

“We damn well better,” Declan says.

“We’re going all the way,” Holden agrees.

“I can feel it in my bones.” Sure, I’m Mister Optimistic—it’s the only way to be when you play a game for a living.

Grant shakes his head. “Don’t be so cocky. I’d bet on the Cougars.”

“Of course you would.” I scoff at the rival backstop. After some good-natured smack-talk, I take off, telling Declan and Holden I’ll see them in a week.

Spring is the best time of year—the earth seems to wake from its long winter’s nap, pitchers and catchers report for training, and baseball begins anew.

It’s a world full of promise.

A season for new starts.

I’ve been catching for the Dragons for four seasons now, and every year, I’m sure we’re going to win it all.

I head down Fillmore, and soon I spot the shop I’m after. The place is teeming with buds, the curbside display bursting with buckets of flowers, full of pink and orange and fiery petals. They are gorgeous and I know zip about them.

But hey, that’s what florists are for.

I read the cute wooden sign hanging on a chain under a green awning.

Kiss Your Tulips.

Sounds like my kind of flower shop. I love a good pun. I walk inside, inhaling the scent of—I’m guessing here—roses, lilies, and carnations. Then my eyes land on a vivacious spark of a woman amid the blooms.

And I take my sweet time cataloging *her*.

The woman behind the counter.

The first thing I notice is her smile.

It's inviting. Kind. A little clever, too, as she interacts with the customers.

Then there's her glasses, candy-apple red, and heart-shaped, and her hair, long and silky, falling in black waves along her shoulders.

A pink apron cinched at her waist says *I lilac you* in embroidery across the bib.

Yup. Already, I lilac her style.

She arranges some brilliant orange and sun-yellow flowers in a mint-green vase, chatting with an older lady. "If you want to set your mouth on fire, get the Super Spicy Eggplant Tofu. Your lips will go up in flames." She shares a conspiratorial smile along with the recommendation. "What more could you ask for on Valentine's Day than fire and spice?"

What do you know? I love spicy eggplant tofu. Spicy eggplant steak. Spicy veggies drizzled in hot sauce. Spice is the spice of life.

The customer thanks her for the tip and then heads to the door, a bell tinkling as she exits.

I step up to the green wooden counter, read the spice lover's name tag, and flash a grin.

I'm Mister Optimistic, after all, and I'm hoping she's as clever as she is cute.

"Hey, there, Frankie. I'm Drew, and I'm clueless about flowers."

She meets my gaze, her smile both flirty and a bit devilish. "Then it's a good thing you met me."

It sure feels that way.

FRANKIE

When people learn I own a flower shop, they almost always make the same observation, sometimes phrased as a question.

You must really love flowers, right?

Well, yeah. Would I open a cupcake shop if I didn't love treats?

(Newsflash—I adore treats. I'm not a monster.)

I love lots of things—frosting, sunrise, good friends, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee, food so spicy it burns, wordplay, and raucous laughter. I love fishnet stockings like the burgundy pair I'm wearing right now, kick-ass lace-up boots, plus sex, orgasms, and men with humor and brains who can deliver the latter.

Also, I love flowers.

Flowers are a medium for people to connect.

They're a way to say *I'm thinking of you*, to cheer up someone who's sad, to show sympathy for someone's loss.

They're an explosion of color to celebrate a friend's accomplishment.

I love, too, when people buy flowers for themselves, just because they're pretty, just because they want to be surrounded by beauty.

Flowers are one of the best *just because*s out there.

Most of all, I love when flowers are an expression of love.

That's why Valentine's Day is one of my favorite times of the year. The seven days before it I call "Eye Candy Week," when hot guy after hotter guy wanders into my store on a tell-someone-I-love-them mission.

Guys like Drew, with those sea-blue eyes, that thick, dark hair, those full lips, and that jawline that belongs on a magazine cover. I swear, there is something in the water in this neighborhood, and it's growing beautiful men.

I sure hope the water company keeps using it, since I do love the view.

But first, business.

"So, Drew, tell me all about your botanical needs, and I can help you *once and floral*," I say.

He chuckles. "You give good pun."

I cup the side of my mouth. "Insider secret—I memorized all the good flower puns when I opened the shop."

"An excellent use of your time, since I imagine you *rose to the occasion*."

Be still, my flirty, dirty beating heart.

He's all silver-tongued and sexy.

"Of course I did," I say, trying like hell to contain a grin, but finding that impossible. I kinda can't resist a word-flinger. But, resist I must. "Now, what are you looking for?"

"A bouquet a day for the next week," he says.

Holy romance. Drew has it going on.

"But can you help me pick them out? I am batting zero when it comes to flowers."

"No worries," I say. "I'll make your *daisy* with my selection."

He slow-claps. "Damn, Frankie. You are the goddess of flower puns."

"Speaking of goddesses ... the iris is fitting." I gesture to a framed photo of a gorgeous garden full of irises on the wall

behind me. “She’s the goddess of rainbows, so those flowers can be quite regal, though not entirely a Valentine’s bloom. Personally, I love tulips in all shades, but you can’t go wrong this time of year with gerbera daisies, lilies, carnations, or”—I motion to our cold case of roses bursting with red, pink, and white petals—“the classic rose.”

Tapping his chin, he studies the selection. “I want something other than roses. Something that says I did my research with the florist,” he says, giving me a wink.

And that wink sends a tingle down my chest.

Oh, how very wrong of me to feel all tingly for a customer who’s likely buying flowers for another woman.

I wheel around to the next case, but before I can show him the lilies, his attention catches on a wire rack of greeting cards illustrated with fruit, veggies, and flowers. Laughing, he points to a drawing of an eggplant, reading the caption. “*Are you checking out my junk?*” His eyes meet mine. “Is that a popular card you send with flowers?”

I pick up the ivory card with the purple veggie. “It’s actually one of my top sellers. Never underestimate the value of a naughty note to go with a beautiful bouquet,” I tell him.

“Big fan of naughty notes,” he says with a rasp to his voice, like he’s downshifted to a sexy tone.

Come to think of it, he’s kind of sounded like sex the whole time he’s been here—another reason why my skin is a little toasty near this hottie. “Then you should hear what I *almost* put on that card,” I whisper.

He shoots me a dirty grin. “Serve it up, Frankie.”

Should I go for it? Ah, what the hell. I hold up the card that caught his attention and quote myself. ““The eggplant often wondered if it should return to its original name—the *dick fruit*.””

Drew bursts into laughter. Peals of it. “Dick fruit. Damn, woman. You have a beautifully dirty mind.”

I tap the side of my temple. “And I don’t waste it.” I show him another eggplant card that says, “*Nice junk.*”

“I approve of this selection of cards,” he says, picking up a banana one. “*The first rule of eating a banana—don’t make eye contact.*” The man with the sea-blue eyes shoots me the naughtiest stare. “But I’m all for eye contact, Frankie.”

And the sizzle turns into a flame. His gaze lights me up. Yup, I like spicy things, like the fire in his blue eyes. Like the way he stares at me.

Like the ...

Snap out of it, Frankie!

He’s a customer.

I fix on a professional grin, erasing the last few minutes, and change the mood. “So, what flowers would you like for the first day?”

He sighs a little wistfully. “I’m not sure. See, there’s this girl. We’ve been best friends forever, and the flowers are for her.”

Knew it. He was too good to be true. Though, why would he give me sex eyes when he’s sending flowers to someone else? Ugh. Men are more confusing than math sometimes.

He hands the banana card to me. “Maybe we should start with the message first.”

“Sure. Would you like a pen to write a note to your *friend?*”

Oops. That might have come out sarcastically.

Who cares if he made an eye-contact comment sound seductive? He’s not doing anything wrong. *Just settle down and be the cupid you are. Don’t cock block him.*

Drew gives me pleading eyes. “I was hoping you could write the note. I have the world’s worst handwriting.”

I arch a brow. “The worst? I’ve seen some pretty bad handwriting, mister.”

“Oh, trust me.” He fishes a crinkled Post-it note from his jeans pocket, unfolds the yellow paper, and shows it to me.

I study it, untangling the letters like solving a word jumble.

“Get peonies. Maybe tulips. Possibly irises.” I pause like that’s my *Jeopardy!* answer and I’m waiting for the official ruling.

His eyes widen. His jaw comes unhinged. Then he mimes an explosion. “You are a rock star at handwriting deciphering,” he says.

I laugh. “It’s one of my many skills. I’m also really good at puzzles, logic problems, and crosswords, so I consider handwriting interpretation in the same family of sleuthing.”

“Moment of truth—did you love Nancy Drew or The Hardy Boys when you were growing up?”

“Please. That’s child’s play. I teathed on them. By the time I was ten, I was Hercule Poirot all the way. Agatha Christie is my jam.”

Drew clutches his chest like he’s thrilled. “I’m a Dashiell Hammett man, myself,” he says. “Sam Spade is my guy.”

A reader. How delicious. He’s going to make this woman so very happy. “Women really do like a man who enjoys books,” I say.

“I’m excellent at compliments too,” he says, and nods to the card. “This is what I want to say to her: *You are brilliant and amazing*. Can you add *Love, Drew?*”

I’m already swooning on her behalf as I return to the counter to ring up his purchase and write his card. “I can definitely do that. And what kind of flowers do you want?”

“What kind would *you* like to get?”

“Oh,” I say, stopping behind the counter. “Hardly anyone asks me that. They mostly just want me to be a flower matchmaker—or maybe a psychic—and tell them what the other person would want.”

He shoots me a warm grin. “Then tell me what flowers you like. Jenna likes everything.”

Lucky Jenna. She gets flowers and a witty guy with eyes that melt me. I mean, *her*. I bet those eyes melt her.

And her panties.

“Gerbera daisies are a good bet,” I say.

“Daisies it is.”

“And for the rest of the week? Do you want to place your orders for those now?”

“Good question. The alternative is coming in each day to pick?”

“Yes. We get deliveries each day, so you might spot something you love. But I’m happy to take all the orders now.”

He waits a beat, strokes his chin. “I’m a let-the-mood-strike-me kind of guy, so let’s do it every morning,” he says, and I try not to think of doing *him* each morning.

Even though ... *morning sex*. Yum.

“Sounds like a plan.” I write on the card and show it to him.

“Your handwriting is as good as your instinct to forgo the dick-fruit joke,” he says, with a wink.

A wink that I wish was truly for me.

“Someday, the dick fruit will have its moment in the sun,” I say solemnly.

“But if a dick were out in the sun, is that indecent exposure?”

I laugh. “The very definition of it.”

“I thought it might be. See you tomorrow, Frankie,” he says.

Already, I wish it were tomorrow. Looks like Eye Candy Week is living up to its reputation.

DREW

For the record, I don't believe in love at first sight when it comes to anything except baseball.

Okay, fine. Maybe books. I have definitely fallen in love with books from the first page.

And movies from the opening shot.

Also, shit. Songs from the beginning notes.

But women? I don't fall quickly for a woman. I like to take my time getting to know her, to understand her.

And by her, I mean Frankie, the naughty florist.

I stroll inside Kiss Your Tulips the next morning, get in line, and wait my turn.

Frankie bustles behind the counter, arranging a bouquet of lilies, I think, as she chats with an elderly gentleman. "She's going to be so happy when she gets these, Mr. Caruso," she says.

"Mrs. Caruso makes me happy every day," he says.

"And that's why you bring home her favorite stargazers. It's simpatico," she says.

"It absolutely is," he says.

Frankie's grin lights up the store—no, the whole damn block—as she smiles then pushes her glasses up higher on her nose.

The glasses are so very her. Quirky, flirty, and fun.

Dammit. I'm getting ahead of myself. I know nothing about Frankie. Maybe she's married, or she doesn't like dick fruit.

As she finishes with Mr. Caruso, I flick through the cards.

"Someday, you'll find your very own person who makes you happy every day," he says.

Oh, Fate. Hello.

I listen intently.

"Someday, indeed. I haven't met him yet, but I bet he's out there," she says, and I want to kiss the sky.

Single, and she's a fan of dick fruit. Yay me.

Pleased with my easy detective work, I pick a new card for Jenna—an illustration of a pineapple and the words, "*You are one fine apple.*"

When it's my turn at the counter, I meet her brown-eyed gaze. "Good morning, Frankie. We have to stop meeting like this," I say, teasing.

"I do get the impression you're *stalking* this place," she says as she holds up the stalk of a sunflower.

"Damn. You can organize bouquets like nobody's business and come up with the puns like that." I snap my fingers.

"I told you it's one of my skills."

"And you won't ever get ... *clover* it," I say.

Her eyes sparkle. "The student is becoming the expert."

"I'm a fast learner. Also, this card is gold." I set it on the counter. "Was your first draft something about how drinking pineapple juice every day makes all that eye contact taste better?"

"*Shhh.*" She places a finger on her lips. "Who's naughty now?"

I shrug. "It's my middle name. Drew Naughty McBride."

"How prescient of your parents."

“I like to think so,” I say, then tap the card. “I trust this is your brainchild? Since it’s a little bit naughty.”

She gives a coquettish little bob of her shoulder. “All mine.”

“So, you draw the cards too? You’re a triple threat?”

“How does that add up? I count flower arranging and illustrating cards. What’s the third threat?”

I scoff then point to the cup of pens on the counter. “Don’t sell yourself short, Frankie. You’ve got hella good handwriting.”

She flicks strands of silky black hair off her shoulder. “I should enter the Penmanship World Championship.”

“You know what? You joke about that, but I bet there is a Penmanship World Championship.”

She lifts a dubious brow. “Are you sure about that? That seems really specific.”

“Want to bet on it?”

“What are we betting for?”

“Bragging rights,” I say, like it’s obvious.

“Okay, fine,” she says, laughing, waving in my direction. “Do it. Google ‘Penmanship World Championship.’”

I whip out my phone, tap that into Google, and show it to her. “See? There is one.”

She peers from the screen to me, narrowing her eyes. “Huh. Not bad. But how do I know you didn’t come in here prepped to set me up?”

“If I did, I should get a major gold star for planning ahead. Because *I* only mentioned handwriting. *You* wanted to be World Champion.”

“Hmm. That *would* be some serious commitment, preparing a punchline for any scenario,” she says. Then she takes a deep breath, flashes me a professional smile. “What do you want to send your friend today?”

Checking out the flower displays, I pocket my phone. “Can you pick again? Maybe your favorites? Or second favorites.”

“I happen to love lilies,” she says.

“Lilies it is,” I agree, then hand her a pen from the cup. “And on this card can you write: *You couldn't be any more pear-fect?*”

Frankie shoots me an approving grin. “Who’s the king of puns now?”

I hold up a hand in surrender. “Fine, fine. I might have Googled fruit puns too.”

“I’m giving you points *and* gold stars for using Google to the fullest today.”

I take a bow. “Thank you. Thank you very much.” As she arranges the flowers, I tell her how much Jenna loved the first bouquet. “She’ll love these too. I just really want to make her happy, you know?”

Frankie tilts her head and shoots me a soft smile. “That’s really sweet—that you feel that way.”

She writes the card and gets it ready to be couriered to Jenna’s house.

That night, Jenna tells me how much better she’s feeling already.

And my week goes on like that.

I go to the store every day. I ask Frankie to pick out her favorite flowers. I chat and flirt with her, getting to know her a little bit more.

A woman like that, who’s clever and open, who loves the meaning behind flowers and loves plays on words, who likes to make bawdy jokes, and who always has a kind word for customers?

She’s the kind of a woman who deserves a big gesture early on.

FRANKIE

I am the worst. That's what I tell my bestie, Nova, two nights before Valentine's Day as I flop onto a couch beside her at The Spotted Zebra. "I'm totally crushing on this customer who's sending notes to his"—I stop to sketch air quotes—"best friend."

Nova's blue eyes spark with curiosity as she takes a swallow of her mojito. "All right, confessional time. Tell your high priestess. I want to know everything that's going on with this forbidden fruit."

I give her the lowdown on Drew, the blue-eyed babe. "He's witty and funny and a little bit dirty."

Nova gives an approving nod. "We dirty girls like the dirty ones," she says.

I high-five her. "I love a man who comes across like he has no weird sex rules, or dating rules, and that's totally the vibe I get from him."

She raises both hands. "Preach it. Well, I like a woman that way."

I laugh. "I know, and you reel 'em in."

"True, I do," she says, all confident, and with good reason.

"Plus, we have these great conversations, but he's clearly taken because he's sending flowers every day to the same woman."

"That is so berry sweet," she says, playing up the sap.

I shove her shoulder. “Why do you always make fun of me?”

“Because it’s easy.” She sets down her mojito, her expression going serious. “But I want details. Tell me more about the notes.”

“They’re very endearing. But so is he. And I’m falling into a crush that’s surely going nowhere,” I say, grabbing her drink and downing the rest of it.

She pulls a face. “Maybe so, but *you* are going to the bar to get me a new drink.”

I head to the bar, grab two more mojitos, and we toast to single men and women who are dirty, flirty, and loyal.

* * *

The next morning, like clockwork, Drew’s at the shop, looking sexy in jeans and a navy-blue Henley, his magazine-cover face knocking the breath out of me.

Yup, he’s now on that list of things I like.

I’m going to need a new fantasy, stat, since I took him for a ride in my dirty dreams last night.

Drew rubs his palms together like a coach gearing up for the big game. “All right, this is the last one, Frankie. What should I send her?”

I take a deep breath, focusing on just the right flowers for his lucky friend. “Well, you said Jenna likes anything.”

“Yes, but I really want to know what *you* would want,” he says, pointing at me.

My stomach flutters. My chest flips. Why does he have to be taken? “I love all flowers, but I like tulips the best.”

He rocks back and forth on his heels. “Why’s that?”

Ah, the chance to wax on about something I love. This is easy. “Because you can use tulips to say *I’m falling for you*. You can use tulips to say *I love you*. You can use them to say *I*

want to get you naked right now. You can use them to say You make my heart flutter."

His lips twitch in a knowing grin. His blue eyes twinkle with possibilities. I am in this crush so damn deep. "And what if you want to ask somebody out on a date?"

Ugh, it's like a gut punch. I knew all along that was what he'd been leading up to with Jenna, but it still hurts to hear it. "I would send pink ones then."

"Sold." He turns to flick through the cards and picks one with a simple picture of a cherry. Inside it, he asks me to write this down.

You're funny. You're fabulous. You're beautiful. Would you like to go out with me sometime?

With my heart both jumping and plummeting, I write that down, then meet his eyes. "She's going to say yes," I tell him, smiling and doing my best to mean it.

"And why do you say that?"

I'm sure my expression is full of this helpless longing I feel for him. "It's a no-brainer. I would love to be romanced like this."

That smile of his grows wider and wider. "Good to know."

My chest twists. "Same address as the other ones? To Jenna?" An embarrassing lump forms in my throat. It's so ridiculous that I've formed this attachment to this man.

Drew shakes his head. "Nope. Let me get the address. Be right back."

What the . . . ?

I blink as he heads for the street, the bell tinkling as he exits. He stands in front of the shop, peers up above the door, then ...

Walks back in.

Straight to me.

He stops at the counter, and he rattles off this address.

I stop mid-letter, pen frozen in hand. “Here?” It comes out in a squeak of surprise.

“Yes, and please address them to Frankie.”

A riot ignites in my heart. “Yes! I say yes!”

DREW

That night, I wait for her outside the restaurant, grinning when I spot her. She walks up looking sexy and quirky and cute in an off the shoulder top, a short skirt, biker boots, and black stockings that worship the sexiest legs I've ever had the pleasure of viewing.

I stare shamelessly, and her eyes tell me she's got plenty of dirty ideas in her head too.

"A peony for your thoughts?" she asks.

I loop a hand around her hip. "You're simply *iris-istible*."

"Ditto. Also, you win the best ask-out ever."

That's reason enough to kiss her. Well, kiss her cheek. Manners and all. I brush my lips across her soft skin, whispering, "Good. Because a week ago, I met this woman I really wanted to impress. And I'm so glad you said yes to this Valentine's Eve date."

We head into the restaurant and indulge in spicy eggplant tofu.

The date is fantastic.

We dine and talk, laugh and tease. She asks me about Jenna, and I tell her how she's doing.

"The flowers definitely cheered her up after her big breakup. She's a great friend. We grew up together on the same block, and we've always had each other's back."

Frankie sighs like she's relieved. "Confession: I thought you were romancing her with the flowers."

The idea surprises a laugh out of me. "No. She's truly a friend. And I have a confession too: I wanted to romance you from the second I walked into your shop."

"Good. I like your brand of romance," she says, then she asks what I do for a living, and when I tell her I play pro ball, her jaw drops. "I had no idea. I know nothing about sports."

"Good. Very good."

"Why?"

"It means you said yes because you like my ... *junk mail*."

She eyes me suspiciously. "But I haven't seen your junk mail, Drew." Then she leans across the table. "I want to though. And I'm kind of into eye contact, so I was thinking maybe we could ..."

I jump on that. No way am I letting this chance pass me by. "Go back to my place?"

She smiles widely, nodding. "And do you think you could give me a couple orgasms? I really like orgasms."

"What do you know? I really like giving them."

* * *

But first things first.

Like kisses.

After dinner, out on the street, I cup her face. As a small rush of air escapes her lips, I move closer and press a soft kiss to her mouth. But soft only works for so long. Soon, the kiss darts up to another level. It's hotter and hungrier as my hand loops into her hair, wrapping those lush strands around my fingers.

She kisses me back with fierce determination. I raise the stakes—more roughness, more heat. I back her up against the brick building, my hands traveling down her sides.

She moves with me, all hands and lips too. She yanks me closer, sealing her body against mine, letting me know she wants all the same things I do.

When she lets go, she whispers, “Like I said, tulips can mean *I want to get you naked right now.*”

This is even better than baseball.

Better than spring training.

Better than winning.

Thirty minutes later, we’re in my home, naked and tangled in my sheets, and I am the luckiest fucker in all of San Francisco because Frankie is between my legs, sucking me off, and I am dying from pleasure. Just dying with lust as she stares at me while she takes me deep.

But I won’t ruin the night by coming too soon.

So as much as it pains me, I stop her, bring her close, and tell her it’s time for me to give her my version of a triple threat.

“Is that three orgasms?”

“It absolutely is.”

I deliver the first with my tongue, the second with my fingers, and I intend to give her the third with my cock.

Just how I think she’ll like it.

“On your hands and knees, Frankie,” I tell her.

She practically purrs her answer, “You know my naughty side.”

“Know it. Want to feed it. Fucking love it.” I move behind her, cover myself, and slide into her sweet heat, savoring the tight, hot feel of her. And we fuck, and nothing about it is the one-night stand variety.

We indulge in sex that’s hot and uninhibited. That’s shameless and wild. That involves tongues and teeth and dirty words.

Sex that lasts all night long.

That leaves me exhausted.

But not so much I forget my manners.

I ask before I pull her hair, before I spank her, before I squeeze and knead her ass.

And Frankie's answers are the best ever.

She says *yes, oh God, yes, and please, yes.*

In the morning, on Valentine's Day, I tell her I'm going to a comedy club with some of my friends tonight and ask if she'd like to meet up.

"I'd love to see you and your dick fruit again."

"Baby, I'm gonna need more of your sweet peaches," I say, and we laugh.

Then I take her out for breakfast, walk her to her store, and wish her a happy Valentine's Day.

* * *

I steal glances at Frankie throughout the comic's set, including when Matilda slides into her bit about online dating and dog fishing. "The breakup took me a little longer. The person I was dating said *I think you're just dating me for my dog.*" She stops, shrugs. "I mean ... that's not wrong."

My teammate Shane snort-laughes, and I mock him for it.

But this comic is gold, so I get it.

I'm laughing too.

And, huh, so is the owner of my team—Marlow Winters, who's here with ... holy shit ... Hudson Tanner, the dude who owns the Cougars.

There might be a story there, and I file it away to consider later. Right now, I focus on Frankie. She's laughing and having a good time with her friends, and at the end of the evening, she's smiling when I walk over and ask if she wants to spend the night with me.

“Only if you promise to spank me hard again.”

Like I said, a naughty mind is a terrible thing to waste.

* * *

The next six weeks, we text and talk and FaceTime during spring training. I catch up with Jenna too. She tells me she met a nice guy and is happier. She demands to know everything about Frankie, so I tell her about the woman I’m falling for.

When I return to San Francisco, I invite the naughty florist to my first game.

After our win, I take Frankie out for spicy food and hot kisses. I’ve missed her so damn much. On the street, as the spring breeze blows past us, I pull her in close. “I’m falling in love with you.”

“Good. Because I’m already there.”

I take her home that night, glad I figured out that my *two lips* were the key to her heart.

THE END

LIMO BANG

A BILLIONAIRE BETS SHORT STORY

MARLOW

A year ago

The night of the Sports Network Awards

When I bought the beleaguered, scandal-ridden San Francisco Dragons, I expected the biggest challenge of my career.

I had to turn around a team that had become the scourge of pro sports.

They'd won two tainted World Series' all because they were cheaters.

I hate cheaters.

Like, oh, say, my ex-husband.

But he's history, and I came out ahead in the divorce thanks to my shark of an attorney, who made sure I had the one thing all lady billionaires need before they get hitched—an iron-clad prenup.

My ex didn't get a single red cent.

My reward for kicking him to the curb a few years ago?

This team.

I'd always wanted to own a baseball team, ever since I was a little girl and my parents took me to see the New York Comets.

I rooted for the men in pinstripes, learned how to keep score at a game, and studied the farm system for the organization.

Once I made my first ten billion, thanks to launching one of the world's biggest online retailers, I set my sights on acquiring a baseball team.

The Dragons came up for sale, and now, they're mine.

My prize.

My passion.

My reward.

And I'm doing my damndest to turn this team around, to rebuild its reputation and make it the glory of baseball again.

Which means the last thing I need is the distraction of a man.

Trouble is ... *that guy over there.*

The one across the glittery ballroom at this awards gala, owner of the other baseball team in San Francisco.

My rival.

Hudson Tanner is decked out in his tux, all suave and sexy. His dark eyes pin me from his spot in the corner.

He stares at me like he doesn't just want to undress me, but like he already knows what I look like naked.

My friend Nadia leans closer and whispers, "Is it just me, or is Hudson Tanner looking at you like you're his dessert?"

A shiver runs down my spine at the possibility.

The very dangerous possibility.

"And he's going to eat me with a cherry on top," I murmur back.

Nadia fans her face. "*Someone* has an elaborate fantasy," she teases softly.

And the thing is ... I do.

I have, ever since I met him a year ago at a charity event, shortly after I moved to town. Hudson introduced himself in a voice like honey and whiskey that sent sparks straight between my legs.

But it isn't his voice alone. It's what he does with it, the words that fall from his tongue when he's near me. The man is an incorrigible flirt. The ultimate charmer. And he seems determined to get me into bed.

"Maybe," I tell Nadia. "But I have a baseball team to turn around, and the last thing I need is a distraction, especially one who's my rival, wrapped in a custom-made tux."

"Bet you're thinking how he'd look out of that tux," she teases.

I give a little shrug and reach for my glass of champagne, meeting my friend's knowing gaze. "I am. I definitely am. And I should absolutely stop."

She tips her glass to mine, clinking. "But will you?"

I draw a deep breath. "That's an excellent question."

But if I do stop, it won't be now because Hudson's walking in my direction with purposeful strides.

Intensity etches his strong jawline, and determination darkens his deep brown eyes.

Hudson Tanner drips with sex appeal, money, and cocky charm.

And I won't be swayed. My focus is on my team and only my team.

Though my surging pulse suggests otherwise.

HUDSON

My single-minded goal since I met Marlow has been to take her home with me.

To spend the night with this brunette beauty who has curves for days.

She's everything that revs my engine. She's fire and brilliance. She has a sharp mind, a ruthless competitive heart, and a mouth made for sin.

And tonight, she'll be mine.

I cross the ballroom with that in mind, weaving my way to the siren in the gold dress that clings to her irresistible shape. She tries to look away, but it's futile. Her fierce, green-eyed gaze swings around the room then settles again on me.

My path takes me by some of my players here tonight—Crosby Cash, my third baseman; Chance Ashford, my closer; Grant Blackwood, my catcher. These guys do me proud—they won a World Series for me last fall, and I sure as hell enjoy the ring on my finger.

“Good to see you,” I tell Grant as I pass. Then to Chance, “Hope you're having a great night.” Crosby gets a “See you at spring training soon.”

But I've got Marlow in my crosshairs the whole time.

When I'm ten feet away, her friend peels away.

I stop, standing next to Marlow, my rival and the object of all my desires. This woman who's resisted all my flirtation.

But that's going to change tonight. Because she may act impervious to this spark between us, but I have a wager to offer her, one I bet Marlow Winters will find irresistible.

"What a pleasure to see you, Marlow," I say.

Her fingers touch her throat. "It's always good to see you, Hudson."

"You look absolutely ... enchanting," I tell her.

"That's exactly what I was going for," she deadpans.

"No doubt," I say dryly.

"And you're so very debonair."

I run a finger down the lapel of my jacket, my eyes pinned on the woman I crave. It's simple, in some ways, this desire. The moment I met Marlow at a charity luncheon last year, my pulse spiked and my blood heated. But the more I got to know her, the higher the desire spiraled. She's intensely competitive—something I learned at a team owner's meeting in Las Vegas last month.

We played poker until well past midnight, betting, then betting some more. By the end of the night, after she'd cleaned up at the table, she gathered her winnings, winked, and said good night.

She's everything I want under me.

How to win her is the question, and I'm pretty sure that competitive streak is the answer.

I glance around the room, grandly decorated for the occasion. "I see both our teams and players are up for some awards tonight."

She stares at me like I've casually mentioned that water is wet, which of course, figuratively, I have.

"Yes, Hudson. They are. Best Sportsmanship, Best Comeback, Excellence in Performance. The list goes on," she says, flicking some strands of that lush chestnut hair from her shoulders.

“Indeed, it does,” I agree, not so subtly running my forefinger on my right hand over the World Series ring on my left.

Marlow’s gaze swings to the thing she covets the most.

Victory.

And the symbol of it.

Yes, Marlow, I’ve got a ring. I know you want one.

Which leads me to this ... “How about we place a bet?”

She nibbles at the bait. “On what, exactly?”

I nod to the stage where the presentation will take place. “Whose team wins the most awards.”

She raises her chin, her lips parting in a smile. “So easy, Hudson. You know I’ll win. You must want to lose.”

“I never want to lose,” I say.

Unless it’s a bet with a fantastic woman.

“What are the stakes? That ring you can’t stop taunting me with?”

“Oh, does it bother you that I have one?”

“Not in the least,” she retorts.

She’s lying. I can see it in the set of her jaw. Of course she’s lying, because of course she wants this.

“Great,” I say. “Then when my team wins more, why don’t you join me for a nightcap? We can take my limo. Have some champagne.”

“And why do you want that? A drink with me?”

I don’t mince words, and I don’t play coy. That’s not who I am.

I lift a hand, roam my fingers along the soft strands of her hair, then lay my desire on the line. “Because I want you, Marlow. I have since I met you. I want to show you how good I can make you feel.”

She's quiet for a few seconds, her lips parting, her skin flushing. It's a gorgeous look, the color rising from her breasts up her chest to her throat, where she teased me moments ago with her fingers.

A throat I want to kiss and lick.

"What makes you think I might want that?" Her question comes out breathy.

I give an easy shrug. "Hope. Just hope."

As I let go of her hair, she studies my face, gaging whether I'm serious. "And if my team wins the tally?"

"Well, what would you like?" I ask easily.

She hums, her eyes twinkling. "Your closing pitcher."

A laugh bursts from me. "Chance Ashford isn't for sale."

She shrugs, turns away. "Then I'm not sure you have anything I want."

Oh, I bet I do.

Time to show her I'm determined. "You can have my limo. I know you like it. You mentioned as much when we played cards."

Her eyes twinkle. "I do like your stretch limo, and I need a new one." After a token pause for consideration, she extends a hand, and we shake. "It's a bet."

An hour later, my team cleans up, my players winning four awards to her two.

MARLOW

Three words.

I want you.

They echo in my mind all through the gala.

They sweep down my body, become an aching pulse between my legs.

That daring, tempting man.

The man who makes me hot, who winds me up, who ... wants me.

I can't possibly consider a tryst with the owner of the city's *other* baseball team. You don't play bedroom games with your competitor, with the man who's gunning for the same prize and the same fans, day in and day out.

But I never renege on a bet, so when the fête winds down, I gather my wrap, meet my rival at the door, and we walk down the steps to his waiting limo.

Hudson slides in after me and thanks the driver, who then shuts the door.

A bottle of champagne chills on ice. Cristal. My favorite brand.

Music pipes through the sound system—Sam Smith. My favorite artist.

A small table pops out of the console. A deck of cards lies on the black velvet surface, alongside a stack of chips.

Someone well and truly has my number.

“Interesting, Hudson. I see you’ve got all my favorite things,” I say as the car pulls away from the Luxe Hotel.

His grin is sly—devilish in fact. Just this side of satisfied. “I pay attention, Marlow.”

He lifts the bottle, asks with his eyes if he can pour it.

“I do love champagne,” I say.

His eyes twinkle. “Like I said—I pay attention.”

He pours two flutes, then hands me one, and we clink glasses. “To this limo you covet.”

I scoff. “I wouldn’t say *covet*.”

“What would you say?”

I run a hand along the buttery leather seat. “It’s simply a car. I have my own.” I knock back some of the bubbly.

“But you like mine. Especially since I have all the things you like in it,” he says.

Which makes me wonder. “Did you know you were going to win?”

He wiggles a brow.

My jaw drops. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t say I knew.”

I set down the glass, building up a head of steam. “You got an inside tip, I bet. From the network. That’s why you had all these ... accouterments,” I say, gesturing around the limo. “I can’t believe you deceived me.”

Then, with a quick burst of anger, I reach for his bow tie, grab it, tug it hard. “You tricked me.”

And I’m ... closer than I’ve ever been to Hudson Tanner. I catch a quick whiff of his expensive cologne, and the woody cedar scent goes to my head, mixes with the taste of the champagne.

“I wanted to win,” he says without an ounce of guilt. With only ... pleasure.

“So badly you got a tip just to snag a ride with me?”

His dark gaze holds mine, his eyes shimmering with desire and intensity. With gamesmanship. “I want what I want. And I want you,” he says, all low and gravelly and far too sexy. A shiver runs down my spine, and I simply won’t let go of his tie. Because I want him too. And I haven’t been able to eradicate this craving.

Perhaps the way over it is through it.

I tug him toward me, our lips perilously close. “Then take a kiss,” I hiss.

“With pleasure,” he says, and he seals his mouth to mine.

His lips claim me.

They sweep over mine as he takes my mouth, and my whole damn sense of control. He’s commanding and powerful, kissing deep and hard. His hand slides into my hair, curls around my skull, and he holds me in place.

I’m made only of arousal.

Of wild desire, so strong it has its own pulse, its own heartbeat.

Just once.

Just tonight.

Just in this limo.

As his lips explore mine, he murmurs and moans, his tongue stroking inside my mouth, and all my systems go into overdrive.

My skin sizzles, and I’m hot everywhere.

He breaks away to say, “Let me kiss you between those gorgeous legs. Let me make you come hard on my lips.”

I blame Sam Smith. As the chorus to his tune plays, I’m enrapt, enthralled by my rival. “You have five minutes,” I tell him.

He stares at me, his eyes smoldering and full of desire.
“Consider it done.”

I’m vibrating with lust as he stretches me out, pushes up my skirt, spreads my legs.

“Mmm. Nothing underneath, Marlow. How did I know you’d be this daring?” he says, hooking my legs over his shoulders.

“I like to take risks.”

And then I shut the hell up when the man in the tux presses his full, lush lips to my pussy, kissing me like I am all the desserts.

I’m going to go off like a rocket. He already has me so on edge, racing toward the finish line.

He presses his mouth against me, and I groan. Nothing has ever felt like this, like he’s worshiping me. His moans are obscene and alluring at the same time as he licks and kisses and sends me flying.

Soon, my legs are shaking and I’m falling, breaking.

As I come down from the high, he crawls up me and whispers in my ear, “Next time we make a bet, I want you to come on my cock.”

Then he takes me to my home, presses a kiss on top of my hand, and says goodnight.

I go inside.

What the hell just happened?

HUDSON

The Start of the Season

Romance is like baseball.

You have to be in it for the whole damn season.

For the endless stretch of 162 games.

That's what I do.

Whenever I cross paths with Marlow during the season, our games continue. As I make opportunities to see her more often, our bets increase. We up the ante.

We don't bet on outcomes of games. And we never bet on who'll win on the field.

But our wagers are related.

Whose team will have better attendance. Whose team will win the fan vote for best new uniforms. Who'll sell the most jerseys at the team store.

Our games are sex games.

Bedroom bets.

Illicit trysts.

When the Dragons beat the Cougars in the series, and surpasses the attendance from last year's series, she wins my limo fair and square, and I have it delivered to her mansion.

That night, she swings by my ballpark, lowers the window of my erstwhile automobile, and asks if I need a ride.

When I get in, I've hardly closed the door before she pounces on me, shoves off my jacket, unzips my pants, and frees my cock.

"What got you so hard so quickly, Hudson?" she asks.

The way this gorgeous woman wants to devour my dick, that's what. "You. Just you."

"You do want me," she murmurs.

"I want you to suck my cock. Take me deep, Marlow. Make it so I don't regret losing this car to you."

Getting on her knees, she licks a stripe up the underside of my dick. "You don't regret anything except bad trades and losing games," she says, then draws the head between her lips, licking and sucking with fervor.

"I bet you can finish me off in two minutes. That'd give me plenty of time to eat your sweet pussy for a good, long while," I tell her.

And that gets Marlow going.

I've never met a woman who loves being licked more than Marlow. She craves it shamelessly, demands oral loving from me, throws down crazy bets with her sweet, hot center as the prize.

But tonight, she treats my cock like a treat, sucking me down, licking my hard length with long, intense swirls, drawing me deep, so damn deep I hit the back of her throat.

My body shudders. My thighs shake, and the billionaire I crave takes my cock all the way into her mouth, lavishing blissful attention all along it as pleasure rumbles through my body, taking over my world.

The heady promise of a climax blasts through my cells as I grip her head, fuck her mouth, and warn her. "Coming now. Take it all."

And she does, like a beautifully obedient rival on her knees as I come down her throat.

* * *

A little later, we play another game of poker as we cruise over the Golden Gate Bridge.

“What’s it going to be this time?” she asks, sweeping her arm out to indicate our wheels. “Since I already won your favorite car.”

I laugh lightly, shaking my head. “This isn’t my favorite, honey.”

She arches a brow. “It’s not?”

I lean in close, cup her cheek, and whisper softly against her face, “I got a cherry-red Bugatti last week. That one’s my favorite.”

She hums, her eyes narrowing. “Then I want that. And you can have my condo in Napa.”

Color me intrigued.

She does have a stunning condo overlooking a vineyard.

“This time, we bet on the playoffs,” I say, feeling confident. After all, I own the reigning World Series champions. Surely, we’ll not only bring in the fans, but sell more beer. A bet on beer—yes, that feels just right. “The owner of whichever team sells the most wins.”

* * *

October ...

Nine runs.

Nine fucking runs.

We lose game six of the divisionals by a rout.

I put on my best *there's always next year* face as I leave the ballpark, say goodnight to some of the players in the lot, then I stop in my tracks.

Outside the ballpark, my old limo is idling.

Marlow leans against the side of it, wearing a short skirt, high heels, and a red silk blouse. She looks devilishly pleased.

No wonder.

She's about to get another car from me. Turns out, fans of losing teams don't want much beer. Guess they'll drown their sorrows in other ways.

In her hand, she holds a bottle of Cristal. Raises it. "Should have sold champagne, Hudson. Maybe try that next time. But I thought I'd make it easy for you." With her other hand, she pats the side of my—dammit, *her*—limo. "Decided to give you a ride. We can go fetch your Bugatti now. And I even brought champagne to toast to my Dragons going further than your Cougars."

Goddammit. She's so sexy it's killing me, even when she's full-on gloating.

I stride right up to her.

"You taunt me, Marlow. You make me want to kiss you madly—right here, so everyone knows you get on your knees for your rival."

She lifts her chin. "You wouldn't dare."

I scoff, reaching up to run my thumb along her jawline. "I think you know I'm up for any dare."

She stares at me, refusing to break eye contact. "I dare you to tie me up and fuck me in the back of ... *my* limo as you take me to your Bugatti."

I reach for the door, open it. "Get inside. I'm going to claim *my* prize."

MARLOW

I wore this skirt for a reason.

In one minute, it's bunched up around my waist.

My wrists are bound above my head, knotted with his silk tie.

And Hudson slides his long, thick shaft inside me.

Ruthlessly, the way I like it.

"Fuck me hard, Hudson. Make me scream," I tell him as a sharp, hot spike of pleasure hits my center.

I ache for more.

More fucking.

More orgasms.

More games.

Roughly, he grabs my thighs, digs his fingers into my flesh, and hikes my leg around his hips.

And he goes deeper.

He fucks me without mercy as we cruise through the city on the way to my brand-new car.

I let out a long, lingering moan. "I'm thinking of my new sports car," I murmur, taunting him.

"I'll fuck you in that too," he growls.

"You better," I say.

And then words cease as we drive through San Francisco and he drives relentlessly into me, sending me into a world of lust and heat and passion. I come ridiculously hard. He groans like an animal, unleashing himself inside me.

Panting my name.

Whispering in my ear.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he murmurs.

I press a soft kiss to his face. “So are you.”

We straighten up, adjusting clothes, making ourselves presentable as we roll along Columbus Avenue in North Beach.

When I glance to my side, I spot a familiar couple on the streets. “Isn’t that Sullivan Fitzgerald and Erin Madison?” I point out the tinted window.

He peers in the same direction. “Normally, I’d want to talk to him after a game.”

I laugh. “Do I distract you from chatting with your players?”

Hudson turns back to me, those dark eyes flaming with desire. “You do. You distract and fascinate,” he says, pouring bubbly for us, handing me a glass. “So much that I can’t get you out of my head. Haven’t all year. Haven’t since the gala. You’re the only woman I think about.”

His words are dangerous, because they make my heart want to get closer to him.

That’s the true risk, isn’t it?

“Surely, there are others,” I say.

His gaze holds mine. “You’re the only one.”

My breath hitches. “It’s the same for me.”

Something shifts then, and we don’t go to his home right away. We drive and talk, and we get to know each other. I learn more about the man behind the tux, the man who likes to fuck and bet and win.

And when we reach his home, I invite him back to mine.

That is, if he's willing to ride shotgun in my brand-new Bugatti.

MARLOW

Late Fall

The off-season isn't off for me at all.

It's wildly busy with trades and deals.

My team made it further in the playoffs, but not far enough. I have the big bats, like Holden Kingsley and Declan Steele, and I have a fantastic catcher in Drew McBride. I have some great starting pitchers too.

But I covet more aces.

That's always what you need in this game—the starters who can go the distance on the mound, and then the one who can shut the motherfucking door.

I want a World Series desperately.

I want it with an ache that lives deep in my bones.

So, I spend my days working with my general manager to find the right fireman to close out our games.

And I spend my nights in the limo with Hudson.

Sometimes, though, we take my Bugatti, and we drive up to Wine Country. But we don't dine at Napa's three-star restaurants.

Turns out we both like dive bars.

And burger joints.

Napa has plenty of those too.

Hudson also likes to play pool. What do you know? So do I. And I'm better at it than he is.

So, one night, we play for tips.

Insider trade tips.

When I beat him, I set my chin on the cue, and tell him to give me his best trade tip. He scratches his jaw, beckons me closer, so close I catch a whiff of the cedar scent that drives me wild. "There's literally nothing I can do with this intel since I already have an all-star closer, but Shane Walker from the Comets is on the trading block."

I roll my eyes. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Aww, you thought that's what I would do? Give you a real tip?"

"So now we play for fake tips?"

"We can play for players, for cars, for homes. Never for tips," he says.

That's fair. I wouldn't have given him one either.

But I do give him a blow job that night on the side of the road.

And in the morning, I finish the deal I started a few weeks ago—trading for Shane Walker.

* * *

Soon, my nights with Hudson grow longer, turning into mornings too.

The man can make excellent pancakes, and I do like carbs at sunrise. I also like orgasms, so we strike a deal.

He can spend the nights if he gives me both.

And he does.

In fact, I like our nights and our mornings, our bets and our sex, our barbs and our fire so much that I don't want to stop.

He hasn't distracted me one bit from my work.

He's energized me.

The competition fires me up. The desire to beat my lover at the game of baseball motivates me every day.

But there's something else I want.

One night in January, after he shoves me onto his cock, tells me to ride him reverse cowgirl in my limo, and makes me come so hard I see stars, I challenge him to poker as we cruise along the 101.

"I have new stakes this time," I tell him as I deal.

"Lay it on me," he says.

"If I win, I want you to bring my favorite comedian to town."

He furrows his brow, parts his lips, but says nothing.

I've surprised him as I hoped I would.

"Why would you want that?" he finally asks.

"I like Matilda Barker. I want to see her perform. If I win, you'll get her for me, and take me on a date."

The grin that spreads on his face is easy, clever, and knowing.

He loses the game, and he does it deliberately.

It's as obvious as my desire to date him for real.

HUDSON

On Valentine's Day, I swing by Marlow's mansion in my new wheels—a sleek, white limo that's longer than hers.

I head to her gate, enter my code, and walk up the steps right as she opens the front door.

Beautiful.

She's all casual but still sexy as fuck in jeans and a tight red sweater with buttons I want to tear off with my teeth.

“I have something you'll want to see,” I tell her.

I take her hand, and she lets out an appreciative murmur. “Who knew you were a hand holder?”

“Who knew you loved comedy clubs?”

She brings her finger to her red lips. “Keep my secrets, Hudson.”

“I do, honey. I absolutely do.”

She jerks on my hand, stops in her tracks in front of my car. “You. Did. Not.”

I shoot her a crooked grin. “Like my new limo?”

She growls. “It's bigger than mine.”

“Huh. What do you know? It is.”

She shakes her head at me. “You always try to beat me.”

“And you wouldn't have it any other way. Plus, there's more room to fuck you hard in this limo. Just the way you like

it.”

That’s what I do on the drive to the comedy club for the date I arranged for her, to see the comic I brought to town.

Once there, I savor every second of Marlow’s laughter, of her company.

During the set, I gesture subtly at some of the other patrons and whisper in her ear. “I see your new closer, your catcher, and one of my pitchers,” I say softly, eyeing the table with Shane Walker, Drew McBride, and Sullivan Fitzgerald.

Her gaze follows mine. “I noticed. And they can’t seem to keep their eyes off that table of gorgeous women.”

“Bet we’re not the only ones fucking tonight,” I tell her.

“Bet they all are,” she whispers.

“Too bad we can’t bet on that, though, since we’ll be too busy enjoying ourselves to see what happens.”

“Then how about we both bet on orgasms in your limo tonight?”

I lean back in my chair, laughing, then tug her close. “Honey, that’s a guarantee.”

THE END

DOG FISHING

AN EPILOGUE

NOVA

Here's the truest thing of all—looks fade, but humor lasts.

Don't get me wrong.

I love a hot babe as much as the next woman.

But the way to my heart and my panties is definitely through my funny bone.

Tonight, though, let's start with panties, since I wouldn't mind getting in *hers*.

The ones belonging to that sexy, clever, naughty gal on the stage.

The woman making me laugh with her dog-fishing jokes.

Matilda's careful with pronouns. She doesn't use them at first, just says *they* as she strides across the stage, her mic in hand. But I've got a feeling she likes the same things I do.

“This last date I went on was great. When I said sit, they sat. When I said come ...” She stops, flashes a grin at the audience. “Oh, please. It happens that way in romance novels. When the man goes all alpha commanding in bed and says ‘Come for me.’” The adorable, curly-haired comic with the big eyes and bow-shaped lips smiles coyly. “And the woman's like ‘Oh yes, yes, yes’ As if that works.”

She turns the other way, taking a beat, then finishing. “I don't know, though, because it never worked that way for me. But if a tall, commanding, hot AF *badass babe* said that to me?” Matilda begins ... and I blink.

Did she just use the name of my podcast?

I mean, it's not a unique name, per se.

But still, it *is* the name of my show.

I sit up straighter, skin tingling.

“Then, I just might,” Matilda adds with a sly smile thrown my way. Or maybe I just want to catch it.

And *her*.

“So that's why it took me longer to break up with that gal. Her dog was too adorable. He sat on command and came when called and was basically perf. But I learned a valuable lesson.” She wags her finger. “Fall for the person before the pooch.”

When the set ends, I chat with my friends for a few minutes, but not too long. As soon as Matilda makes her way from backstage and into the lounge area, I'm up on my high-heeled boots, heading to her.

“I have a dog you might fall for,” I tell her.

“Oh, do you now?” she says, so fucking cute and adorable. “A Great Dane, I bet?”

I laugh. “Or maybe a Mastiff.”

She laughs too. “Are you going to show me a pic?”

I grab my phone, open the photos, and show her a shot of my Border Collie mix.

Matilda coos then meets my gaze. “But you're-dog fishing me now, aren't you?”

I wiggle a brow. “So, it's working, then? It's making you want me? The dog pics?”

Matilda thoughtfully screws up the corner of her lips, eyes me up and down. “I wouldn't say the dog pics did it. But they help. What truly did it was that ... you're *the* badass babe.”

I laugh, a little vindicated, then I let down my guard. “Do you really listen to my show?”

Matilda gives me the flirtiest eyes I've ever seen. “I recognized you in the audience from your pic on your podcast

site. Dropped that line in just for you.”

And my nipples tingle.

“So maybe *I* was fishing for *you*, Nova Badass Babe,” Matilda says.

I tip my forehead to the bar. “Can I buy you a drink?”

She slides an arm around my waist. “You can definitely buy me a drink. And maybe more.”

At the bar, Matilda asks for a bourbon on the rocks, and I think I might be a little bit in love.

“Not to be a copycat, but I’ll have the same,” I tell the blonde bartender.

“Coming right up,” she says in a pretty British accent, then to Matilda, she adds, “And thank you for bringing the crowds tonight. You were fantastic.”

“It was my pleasure,” she says. When the bartender leaves, Matilda gives me a naughty stare. “Bet that won’t be my *only* pleasure.”

I laugh, set a hand on her arm, and whisper in my best sultry voice, “I can promise you that.”

An hour later, we’re in a Lyft, kissing like crazy, hands sliding into hair, making out.

And then, back at my place, we’re doing a whole lot more.

* * *

The next day, I meet my lady-pack for coffee. Turns out we all got some good loving on Valentine’s Day.

And six weeks later, I take my girlfriend, Matilda, to a baseball game as my friends watch their guys play.

“To think, you almost fell for me just because of my dog,” I say, and I kiss her cheek.

She kisses me back. “Well, I do like your dog. But I like you too, Nova.”

That works for me.

It definitely works for me.

And it looks like Valentine's Day worked for everyone.

It makes me wonder if it's Cupid bringing us together. What cinches the idea, though, is how when my gaze swings to the owner's box, Marlow Winters is kissing Hudson Tanner.

Kissing like maybe they're in love now too.

Just like the rest of us.

THE END

**I can't wait to share my next sports romance with you!
Don't miss the sexy single dad football star Harlan and his
forbidden romance with jilted bride Katie! It's available
FOR FREE in KU in [A Wild Card Kiss!](#)**

BE A LOVELY

Want to be the first to know of sales, new releases, special deals and giveaways? Sign up for [my newsletter](#) today!

Want to be part of a fun, feel-good place to talk about books and romance, and get sneak peeks of covers and advance copies of my books? [Be a Lovely!](#)

CONTACT

I love hearing from readers! You can find me on TikTok at [LaurenBlakelyBooks](#), Instagram at [LaurenBlakelyBooks](#), Facebook at [LaurenBlakelyBooks](#), or online at [LaurenBlakely.com](#). You can also email me at laurenblakelybooks@gmail.com

MORE BOOKS BY LAUREN

I've written more than 100 books! **All of these titles below are FREE in Kindle Unlimited!**

Double Pucked

A sexy, outrageous MFM hockey romantic comedy!

Puck Yes

A fake marriage, spicy MFM hockey rom com!

The Virgin Society Series

Meet the Virgin Society – great friends who'd do anything for each other. Indulge in these forbidden, emotionally-charged, and wildly sexy age-gap romances!

The RSVP

The Tryst

The Tease

The Dating Games Series

A fun, sexy romantic comedy series about friends in the city and their dating mishaps!

The Virgin Next Door

Two A Day

The Good Guy Challenge

How To Date Series (New and ongoing)

Four great friends. Four chances to learn how to date again. Four standalone romantic comedies full of love, sex and meet-cute shenanigans.

My So-Called Sex Life

Plays Well With Others

Boyfriend Material

Four fabulous heroines. Four outrageous proposals. Four chances at love in this sexy rom-com series!

Asking For a Friend

Sex and Other Shiny Objects

One Night Stand-In

Overnight Service

Big Rock Series

My #1 New York Times Bestselling sexy as sin, irreverent, male-POV romantic comedy!

Big Rock

Mister O

Well Hung

Full Package

[Joy Ride](#)

[Hard Wood](#)

Happy Endings Series

Romance starts with a bang in this series of standalones following a group of friends seeking and avoiding love!

[Come Again](#)

[Shut Up and Kiss Me](#)

[Kismet](#)

[My Single-Versary](#)

Ballers And Babes

Sexy sports romance standalones guaranteed to make you hot!

[Most Valuable Playboy](#)

[Most Likely to Score](#)

[A Wild Card Kiss](#)

Rules of Love Series

Athlete, virgins and weddings!

[The Virgin Rule Book](#)

[The Virgin Game Plan](#)

[The Virgin Replay](#)

[The Virgin Scorecard](#)

The Extravagant Series

Bodyguards, billionaires and hoteliers in this sexy, high-stakes series of standalones!

[One Night Only](#)

[One Exquisite Touch](#)

[My One-Week Husband](#)

The Guys Who Got Away Series

Friends in New York City and California fall in love in this fun and hot rom-com series!

[Birthday Suit](#)

[Dear Sexy Ex-Boyfriend](#)

[The What If Guy](#)

[Thanks for Last Night](#)

[The Dream Guy Next Door](#)

Always Satisfied Series

A group of friends in New York City find love and laughter in this series of sexy standalones!

[Satisfaction Guaranteed](#)

[Never Have I Ever](#)

[Instant Gratification](#)

[PS It's Always Been You](#)

The Gift Series

An after dark series of standalones! Explore your fantasies!

[The Engagement Gift](#)

[The Virgin Gift](#)

[The Decadent Gift](#)

The Heartbreakers Series

Three brothers. Three rockers. Three standalone sexy romantic comedies.

[Once Upon a Real Good Time](#)

[Once Upon a Sure Thing](#)

[Once Upon a Wild Fling](#)

Sinful Men

A high-stakes, high-octane, sexy-as-sin romantic suspense series!

[My Sinful Nights](#)

[My Sinful Desire](#)

[My Sinful Longing](#)

[My Sinful Love](#)

[My Sinful Temptation](#)

From Paris With Love

Swoony, sweeping romances set in Paris!

[Wanderlust](#)

[Part-Time Lover](#)

One Love Series

A group of friends in New York falls in love one by one in this sexy rom-com series!

[The Sexy One](#)

[The Hot One](#)

[The Knocked Up Plan](#)

[Come As You Are](#)

Lucky In Love Series

A small town romance full of heat and blue collar heroes and sexy heroines!

[Best Laid Plans](#)

[The Feel Good Factor](#)

[Nobody Does It Better](#)

[Unzipped](#)

No Regrets

An angsty, sexy, emotional, new adult trilogy about one young couple fighting to break free of their pasts!

[The Start of Us](#)

[The Thrill of It](#)

[Every Second With You](#)

The Caught Up in Love Series

A group of friends finds love!

[The Pretending Plot](#)

[The Dating Proposal](#)

[The Second Chance Plan](#)

[The Private Rehearsal](#)

Seductive Nights Series

A high heat series full of danger and spice!

[Night After Night](#)

[After This Night](#)

[One More Night](#)

[A Wildly Seductive Night](#)

Joy Delivered Duet

A high-heat, wickedly sexy series of standalones that will set your sheets on fire!

[Nights With Him](#)

[Forbidden Nights](#)

[Unbreak My Heart](#)

A standalone second chance emotional roller coaster of a romance

[The Muse](#)

A magical realism romance set in Paris

[Good Love Series of sexy rom-coms co-written with Lili Valente!](#)

I also write MM romance under the name L. Blakely!

Hopelessly Bromantic Duet (MM)

Roomies to lovers to enemies to fake boyfriends

[Hopelessly Bromantic](#)

[Here Comes My Man](#)

Men of Summer Series (MM)

Two baseball players on the same team fall in love in a forbidden romance spanning five epic years

[Scoring With Him](#)

[Winning With Him](#)

All In With Him

MM Standalone Novels

A Guy Walks Into My Bar

The Bromance Zone

One Time Only

The Best Men (Co-written with Sarina Bowen)

Winner Takes All Series (MM)

A series of emotionally-charged and irresistibly sexy standalone MM sports romances!

The Boyfriend Comeback

Turn Me On

A Very Filthy Game

Limited Edition Husband

Manhandled

If you want a personalized recommendation, email me at
laurenblakelybooks@gmail.com!