

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
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Chapter One

HOLT

“I’m drunk.”

“Is this place spinning?”

“Oooh, patty melts. Fuck yes.”

Carson and Knox, my two best friends, sit across from me while Jason, our catcher, is two nuzzles to my shoulder away from passing out next to me.

The diner booth is crowded given our large, very manly, muscular bodies—so masculine, the most masculine you’ll ever see—and tons of testosterone, and big dicks and balls . . . big dicks and balls. Hashtag . . . check out those nut-sacks.

Where was I going with that? Uh . . . oh yeah, it’s crowded, we look ridiculous in this tiny booth made for four regular-sized people—not men with the giant scrots—and thanks to Jason’s hometown friends, we’re drunk off our asses.

School starts in two weeks, and since we’re heading into our junior year—the most important year for a college baseball player because of the chance to get drafted after the season—we all decided to come back to Brentwood University early to have some fun before academics and training absorb our every waking hour.

If I’m honest—whispers softly in your ear—we couldn’t stand Jason’s never-ending badgering to show us a good time, so we gave in.

Thankfully, we all live in the baseball loft that’s right off campus, so we didn’t have to worry about dorms opening up or being homeless.

And since we're responsible college men, we've kept up with our workout routines and had daily practices in the cages. At night, we get piss-ass drunk, then we sweat out the booze the next morning on an easy two-mile run along Lake Michigan.

If you smell a trail of whiskey and Coke in the mornings near Lakeview Drive, it's just us . . . the guys with the big balls.

Speaking of the male genitalia . . .

"Have you tried that new underwear I bought you?" I ask Carson, who is thumbing through the sugar packets for no apparent reason.

"It's a thong, man. I'm not wearing that shit."

"You got Carson a thong?" Knox asks, eyes hazy. He's a lightweight, always has been. Three beers and he's dancing to his own music; five and he sits in a chair and giggles constantly. He's had a comfortable four, so we're not quite at the giggle phase yet. "Why didn't you get me a thong?"

"Because Carson was complaining about his dick bouncing around too much during our runs. Thongs keep your junk close together but also give your ass cheeks air. It's fucking breezy down there, man."

"You wear thongs?" Knox asks.

"Mmm . . . thongs," Jason mumbles, despite being more or less passed out on my shoulder.

"Yeah, I do. You have a problem with that?"

Knox gives me a lazy once-over. "How come I've never seen you in one in the locker room?"

"Because I don't walk around buck-ass naked like Romeo."

"Want to talk about a guy who should be wearing a thong?" Carson taps his nose. "Romeo. His ass is the best on the team."

"I take offense—*hiccup*—to that," Jason groans, then moves his cheek against my shoulder, getting comfortable. Being the catcher, Jason has made it known amongst everyone on the team that if there was a best-ass award, it would belong to him, but we all secretly profess it's Romeo's.

"Try the thong," I say. "It'll give your penis great bounce."

"What can I . . ." a female voice at the end of the table starts. At the same time, Knox, Carson, and I turn to see a waitress garbed in a yellow diner dress, pad in hand, pen poised, standing at the end of our table. Uh, I can come back."

As if she's not standing right there, Carson asks, "Did she hear you say 'penis'?"

Knox shakes his head. “No, she came after he was talking about the bouncing urinator.” He laughs. “That’s a superhero I could get behind. The Bouncing Urinator.”

“I certainly wouldn’t want to be *in front* of a bouncing urinator . . .” I mutter.

We all start laughing as the girl clears her throat. “I heard you talk about your penis.”

Our laughter stops and even though my eyes struggle to focus completely, I still notice the beautiful chestnut color of her hair, deep chocolate of her eyes, and the pretty honey tone of her skin, which indicates she’s been in the sun all summer when not in the diner.

She’s stunning. From the nametag crookedly hooked right above her breast, I figure out her name is Harmony.

I could be a detective. *Especially if I were sober.*

“We were talking about man thongs,” Carson clarifies as I continue to admire the girl in front of us.

Not short, but not tall either, she has to be about five six, and even though she has a small chest and waist, her dress barely fits over the swell of her hips and the bubble of her butt.

I think we’ve a new winner for the best-ass award . . . from what I can see.

Would it be rude to ask her to turn around so I can make a better assessment?

“I don’t wear them,” Carson says, pointing in my direction. “Holt wears them. Says it’s breezy.”

Harmony lifts her brow and checks me out. She looks . . . *unimpressed*. I puff my chest while she peruses, tempted to take off my shirt for a full show. “You wear thongs?”

“Man thongs, to be clear, and I only really wear them when we have to go for long runs, and during practice, which is all the time, but I change after practice into boxer briefs. But, yeah . . . man thongs.” I knock the table with my knuckles and cheese it up for her.

Her eyes narrow and she gives our table a curt sweep as recognition dawns on her. “Ah, you’re on the baseball team.”

“Please, no autographs,” Knox jokingly says while holding up his hand, just as Jason lets out a roar of a snore, causing us to all buckle over with laughter. The boisterous sound wakes him and he perks up quickly, looking

around. Then he burps, and his eyes widen.

Oh shit.

Harmony sees the impending disaster, steps aside, and points behind her with her pen. “Bathroom is that way.”

Without another word, Jason cups his mouth and sprints off harder than any of us have ever seen. If only he did that during practice.

Carson addresses the situation and adds poetically, “Once he ralphs, I’m sure he’ll want a patty melt like the rest of us. But he’ll take the sweet potato fries.”

“Four patty melts, then?” Harmony asks, with a little more attitude in her voice than before.

“That would be—”

“Is there something wrong?” I ask, interrupting Knox before he can say something douchey like “that would be lovely.”

“Nope.” She pops the *P* with a snap of her lips and refuses to look at any of us.

“Then the patty melts would be—”

“Do you have something against us being on the baseball team?” I ask, turning my entire body toward her. Carson groans. He becomes “ravenous” when he’s drunk, and I know all he wants is his patty melt with a plateful of fries, but I want some answers first.

The stigma on campus is that the players on the Brentwood baseball team are entitled assholes—which might be true for some of the players who’ve worked through the system, but not for us. There’s also a good chance, at least once a day, that we run into a student on campus who hates us. Didn’t think it would happen before school started.

“Dude, you’re so aggressive right now,” Knox says. “Maybe she just—”

“Yeah, I do.” Harmony props her hand on her hip.

“Okay, never mind.” Knox leans back in his booth and folds his arms over his chest.

“Let me guess,” I say in an irritated and affronted tone. “You think we’re a bunch of entitled assholes who rule the campus and don’t deserve half the benefits we receive for being on the team.”

She folds her arms as well and with a whole lot of sass, she says, “Yeah, I do. Your expensive stadium, equipment, staff, and full-ride scholarships eat up half the tuition on this campus, leaving nothing for us peasants. You’re obnoxious, self-righteous, and think the world revolves around you.

Meanwhile, the rest of the students around you work at shitty diners, earning low wages, serving drunk morons like you at all hours of the night, just to put ourselves through college so we can earn a degree, graduate to a shitty job that won't pay for our student loans, and wind up in debt with the rest of the country.”

Yikes.

Silence falls. What do you say to that?

Clearly, she's bitter, and with the passion flaming in her eyes and the claws ready to shoot from her fingertips, I think I should slowly back away.

Jason takes that moment to return from the bathroom, and he sits with a resounding plop. He glances around and asks, “Did you order me a patty melt?”

Rolling her eyes, Harmony takes off toward the kitchen, leaving us concerned. Is she going to put in our order? *Because we want our patty melts.*

Chapter Two

HARMONY

“Switch tables,” I say when I reach the computer where we enter orders.

Priya shakes her head, picks up her tray of waters, and starts to walk away.

“Please, Priya,” I call out. “I’m begging you.”

“Last time we did that, Coral got pissed and threatened to fire both of us. I love you, but, no. Deal with them.”

Sighing, I lean against the sticky wall of the diner in which I’ve worked countless hours over the last two and a half years. Coral, our manager, is a stickler when it comes to our sections. She’s a control freak and watches over each of our tables, making sure everyone is happy despite the shitty food and the appalling conditions of the diner.

Yeah, Five and Dime is popular because it’s located across from frat row, diagonal from the baseball loft, and is a quick walk from campus, making it the hangover destination for every college student at Brentwood. Well, hangover or currently smashed.

And for some reason, I seem to serve every campus athlete. They always fall under my section, and I get to hear about their limitless dining cards, their really nice dorm rooms, the free athletic gear they get from Brentwood, and the extensions they’re always granted from professors. It’s tiresome and totally infuriating, especially for a girl who lives paycheck to paycheck, and in order to get at least one meal a day, eats the diner’s shitty food.

Arrogant assholes.

Succumbing to my misfortune, I start entering patty melts into the system, one with sweet potato fries. I'm tempted to fuck with their order but know it'll only result in extra work on my end.

Finishing up, I press enter and start filling up waters for each guy just as Priya comes back from her table. She sets her tray down and looks over the glass partition before saying, "Wow, you got the kings of the diamond tonight. Knox Gentry, Carson Stone, and the one and only Holt Green."

"Jason Orson is over there too."

"Oh, I think he was the blur I saw racing to the bathroom a few minutes ago."

I roll my eyes. "That would be his second trip."

"Sounds about right."

"Took me a second to recognize them since they're not in their gear, but once I did, I felt my skin start to crawl. And of course, they called me out on my distaste for them."

Priya scoffs. "Of course they did. Only confident assholes do that. Please tell me you shut them down."

"Easily." I set the last glass of water on my tray and turn toward Priya, irritation creeping over me. "Do you know what really makes me angry? They don't seem the least bit sorry about how they walk around Brentwood like they own everything. My tuition is paying for theirs."

"Not necessarily true. It could be paying for the academic counselor who keeps giving you sass about the classes you want to take."

"Both are a kick to the crotch." I hoist the tray over my shoulder and pat Priya on the ass as I walk by. "Tomorrow can't come soon enough." My much-needed break by the water. "I can't wait."

"I'm taking the snacks. You bring the sunscreen."

We've been planning our beach day for the last few weeks, lining up our days off to coincide with the cover band contest concert that's taking place tomorrow. I'd been saving every last penny to purchase a cute bathing suit I'd had my eye on at a boutique a few shops down from the diner. Every time I passed the window display, I reminded myself of my silly goal.

Two days ago, I bought the bathing suit—on sale because the end of summer is looming—and I look damn good in the tiny yellow bikini. I can't wait to show it off.

Putting on a fake smile, I reach the baseball table and hand out drinks. Their eyes are glued to my every move. I'm not surprised, given the mouthful

I spat at them before.

Ignoring the awkwardness between us, I say, “I assumed you wanted water, but if you want something else to drink, let me know. Your patty melts are being cooked right now.”

I lower the tray to my side and take in the table. In the middle is a small notepad with tic-tac-toe boards all over it. Each guy—besides Jason, since he’s in the bathroom . . . again—has a pen in their hands and a stupid look on their faces as if they’ve been caught doing something bad.

“Am I interrupting something?”

“As a matter of fact, you are,” Holt says, looking at me with disdain, like the privileged ass that he is.

Why do I dislike this guy so much? Maybe because he comes from the incredibly rich Green family of New York City. They have a house in the Hamptons, a penthouse in the city, an apartment in a skyscraper in Chicago, and I believe a cottage in Tennessee. At least, that’s what I’ve been told. The guy oozes money with his pretty-boy looks, non-pilling clothes, and fancy BMW that I always seem to see zooming around campus. And no, I don’t have a thing against rich people. What I have a thing against is a rich person getting a full-ride scholarship when they could have easily paid for their tuition and not seen a dent in their bank account.

Sure, he’s talented, one of the best left fielders to ever walk this campus, so he earned that scholarship, but as a parent with all that money, wouldn’t you think, *hey, let’s take that scholarship money and give it to another student?*

Rolling my teeth over my bottom lip, I ask, “And what might I be interrupting?”

“Tickety-tock-toesies,” Jason says, coming up from behind me and sitting down. He picks up his napkin and dabs his forehead. “Okay, I think I’m good to go with that patty melt now.”

Tickety-tock-toesies? I barely hold in my snort of laughter.

“What did we tell you about calling it that?” Holt says through clenched teeth.

“But that’s what we call it,” Jason says, looking confused.

“Not in public, dipshit,” Carson chimes in.

“Oh.” Jason smiles up at me. “We play manly sports on a tiny notepad. Dungeons and Dragons. Her-ahhhhh,” he wails obnoxiously, but only for a second, because Holt knocks him in the arm to shut him up.

“Dungeons and Dragons is even worse.” Holt shakes his head and addresses Knox and Carson. “This is why we shouldn’t have hung out with someone younger than us.”

“Isn’t he only a year younger?” I ask, letting my Brentwood baseball knowledge slip, and because Holt is the bastard he is, he doesn’t let it go.

“So, you know what years we are, huh? Interesting. I thought you hated baseball.”

“I don’t hate baseball,” I say, tucking my tray more securely under my arm. “I hate Brentwood athletes.”

“You can’t like the sport but hate the players. That makes no sense.”

“Not true.” I shake my head. “I grew up watching the Bobbies, and I enjoyed the atmosphere and the sport. I would give the team a cheer every now and again. And Hendrix on the mound.” I clutch my heart. “He’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

All the boys sneer as if I just said I thought an ogre was the most attractive person I’ve ever seen.

“Hendrix?” Holt asks. “Gary Hendrix, the lefty?”

“Yeah. Gary. So dreamy.”

“He throws up before every game, sometimes on the mound, claims it’s from adrenaline, and always has bubblegum stuck in his weed-like beard. He’s filthy.”

“Yes, the gum and vomiting don’t give him checks in the attractive box, but his beard, his tattoos, and the ice-blue eyes under his brim do. Plus, I’ve seen him with his shirt off, and he’s ripped.”

Holt glares at me. “Beard and tattoos are your thing?”

I nod very slowly.

Knox laughs and says, “You have no shot at scoring her number now, Holt. You’re as clean-cut as they come.”

Scoring my number? That’s interesting.

When I see Holt’s cheeks burn with embarrassment, I realize there’s some truth to that, and I wonder what they said when I left the table.

Probably something about my ass—it’s my best attribute, after all. But they probably spoke more about my uncouth mouth that ran on longer than even I expected. A woman who holds nothing back.

I know that love story. She challenges him. She’s different. She’s unlike anyone he’s ever met, blah, blah, blah. I don’t want to be someone’s challenge.

I actually don't want to be someone's anything.

I'm here at Brentwood for one reason: to earn a degree in journalism and then get the hell out of here.

Two more years. I'm so close.

Chapter Three

HOLT

“Are you going to be sour for the rest of the night?” Knox asks, kicking me from under the table.

I pick at my French fries, salty as fuck. Me, not the fries, although they could benefit from a little seasoning.

“You didn’t have to fucking say I was trying to score her number,” I hiss at my friends, who laugh. “I was kidding.”

“Nah, I saw the way you were checking out her butt when she walked away,” Carson says. “You want her number. Want me to ask her for it for you?”

“Fuck off. I was not checking her out.”

Carson and Knox exchange glances and mock me with their boisterous laughter.

Meanwhile, Jason taps me on the shoulder and asks, “Do you think they make sweet potato fries just like regular ones?”

I try not to punch the guy in the face for such an idiotic question. He’s not dumb as rocks like he seems. He’s the sensitive one, the guy who loves to grill for the team, the mother hen of the group . . . and the idiot when he’s drunk.

“I suggest you lower the fry, dude,” Carson says from across the table. “Holt looks as if he’s about to plow his fist through your face.”

“Why are you getting so angry? You’re usually chill.”

“Because”—I push my plate away—“that girl is judging us for all the

wrong reasons. She doesn't know the hours it takes to play at the elite level we play at. She doesn't understand the stress of it all, the time devoted just to baseball. She has no fucking clue and that's pissing me off."

"Then why don't you tell her?" Knox whispers as Harmony steps up to our table.

She lays a check on the table and says, "Whenever you're ready, no rush. Please, stay here as long as you want." Sarcasm drips from her voice. "Throw up in our toilets a little more."

Jason presses his palm to his stomach. "I'm feeling much better, thank you."

"She didn't ask," Carson mutters with an eye roll.

I pull my wallet from my back pocket and throw down a few twenties. "We're all set. Come on, boys." I push Jason out of the booth and Knox and Carson follow closely behind. We're halfway to the door when Harmony pulls me by the arm.

"You left too much." She holds up the twenties I threw down.

"Your service was impeccable." I start to move forward again when she tugs on my shirt.

"I don't need your charity."

"It's not charity."

"A sixty-dollar tip for a forty-dollar meal is charity. I don't need you flashing your wealth at me."

"I'm not flashing it. I'm trying to be nice, and frankly, it's insulting that you're even questioning my tip. Be grateful rather than argue with me about it."

Before she can answer, I pull away again just as Carson says, "He wants your number too, in case you were wondering."

"I'm going to murder you," I say under my breath as we head out of the diner, the bell above the door ringing at our departure. I push Carson on the sidewalk and ask, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"With me?" He points to his chest as he walks backward, talking to me. "What's wrong with you? That girl was hot and clearly you're interested, so why not ask for her number?"

"Maybe because she hates me. She didn't keep her feelings to herself when it comes to Brentwood athletes."

"Which is why you should prove her wrong," Knox says, joining in. "Those who don't worship us on campus think we're assholes because of all

the perks and breaks we get, but they don't really know everything we do to earn them, nor do they see all the hours of community service we put in. Show her we're good people."

"Nah." I shake my head, glancing back at the diner, where I catch a brief glimpse of Harmony clearing our table. "It's not worth my time. I know girls like her, and she's never going to change her mind. She has one opinion and that's all that matters."

"Such a shame," Jason says. "You two would have been a good couple."

"Why do you say that? You don't even know her."

Jason casually shrugs. "You both seem to have the same kind of fiery passion—granted, about different things, but still, it's there—which means you'd probably have the best sex of your life with her."

"Yeah, I agree," Carson says.

"He has a good point." Knox nudges me with his shoulder.

I shake them off. "Might be good, but not worth my time. She'd only hurt my fragile soul in the end."

Everyone laughs and keeps walking toward the baseball loft, while I consider actually going back to the diner to get her number.

I like fire. I like passion. And I like a girl who's not afraid to tell me to stick it up my ass.

I might put up a front of indifference, but with each moment that passes, I'm thinking she's totally worth my time.



COFFEE IN HAND, a day off ahead of us, I lean back in my desk chair and wait for my computer to turn on. Slightly hungover from last night, I popped some Ibuprofen, downed a frozen breakfast burrito—heated in the microwave, of course—and made myself the biggest cup of coffee I could find. It's nine in the morning and all the guys are still sleeping, which gives me time to do what I wanted to do last night before I flopped on my bed and passed out, pants halfway off my legs.

Classy as fuck.

After signing in to my computer, I pull up the student registry, sort by first name, and start scrolling through the *H* names. There can't be many Harmonys in the—*Two*.

I smile to myself and look at their graduation year. Harmony Styles is the winner.

Because I'm the creep that I am, I pull up Instagram, hoping she doesn't have her profile set to private, and type in her name.

When I see her grid of pictures, I snicker. *This almost seems too easy.*

In the *about me* section, there's some hoity-toity Shakespeare quote that does nothing for me, followed by a bunch of emojis.

Brazilian flag. Okay, that explains that sexy ass.

Peanut. Huh, either a nickname or she likes peanuts.

A pen. Is she a writer? That would explain the Shakespeare quote.

Flamenco dancer. Does she like to dance?

I scan her pictures quickly and find one of her wearing a short, glittery, pink dress that accentuates her every curve, and laughing while a beefy-looking guy spins her around.

Is that her boyfriend?

I scan the date. It's several months ago and there's not another picture with him. Okay, maybe not a boyfriend.

I go back up to the top and click on her stories to see if she's up to anything today.

There's a boomerang of her in her waitress uniform with a comment that says, "Another day serving up grease."

It's the best grease in town.

The next one is of her coffee mug with a timestamp of seven this morning, followed by her drinking the coffee with massive bedhead.

Fuck, she looks sexy in an off-the-shoulder sweater, hair falling over one eye. Yeah, we'd have some passionate sex, that's for damn sure.

The last story nearly shakes me out of my shorts. It's a full body shot of her in a yellow bikini, blowing a kiss to the camera, with the comment "41st Street Beach all day!"

I smile to myself, knowing exactly what I'll be doing today . . . scanning the 41st Street Beach for a hot yellow bikini and an opinionated, sexy-as-hell Brazilian. "Coming for you, sweet Harmony. Game on."

Chapter Four

HARMONY

“Thank God that band is done. That was torture,” Priya says next to me while adjusting her floppy hat.

“I thought you had to audition to play today.”

“Apparently not.” Priya applies more sunscreen. “Covering Vince Gill and Randy Travis songs should be criminal. Hopefully the next band has more up-to-date music. I wouldn’t mind a little Sam Smith remix at this point.”

“You wouldn’t mind a Sam Smith remix at any point in time.”

“His voice is just so smooth.”

Chuckling, I drink the rest of my lemonade and stand. “I’m going to get another lemonade, and I think one of those funnel cakes I keep smelling.” I pull out a twenty from my bra cup and say, “Thanks to Holt Green, I have some extra food cash. Want another drink?”

“I’m good, but I hope you plan on sharing that funnel cake.”

“It’s the size of a dinner plate. Of course I’m sharing it.” Cash in hand, reusable cup in the other, I trot across the sand toward the concession stand to grab the very healthy lunch I have planned for myself. After Holt left me a sixty-dollar tip, I told myself I’d only use twenty of it for food. I set some cash aside for a few drinks, but now that I have a little more, I can skip the cheap protein bar I packed for myself and indulge a little.

Even though the tip was outrageous and confirmed the self-righteous attitude I thought of when it came to those guys, I also didn’t want to push

too hard to give it back to him, because sixty dollars felt like two hundred in my hand last night.

It seemed wrong, pocketing the huge tip, but I convinced myself I earned it after serving those guys, not that they were hard to deal with. Holt was rude, but I still had to put up with them, and that alone is worth sixty dollars.

Thankfully the beach isn't too crowded, so the line for the concession stand isn't terribly long. Just like everyone else in line, I rely on my phone to keep me company and start going through Instagram and all my friends' stories. A lot of end-of-summer parties in Nebraska, parties I couldn't attend because driving back and forth from Nebraska costs a lot in gas and takes forever. I don't have forever, especially with my job. I take all the hours I can get and then hoard my cash. I'm on a partial scholarship, because my parents make next to nothing and my grades are pretty good, and I have a small loan for the other half of my tuition and books, but I'm paying it off as I go, never wanting to be one of those students who graduates one hundred thousand dollars in debt.

But today . . . today is my day, and I'm grateful for the much-needed time off. It's sunny with a light breeze coming off the water, the music is good—with the exception of that last band—and I'm about to go into a sugar coma. Nothing could ruin this.

“Did you leave the other half of your bathing suit at home?”

I still.

That voice.

How do I know that voice?

A strong presence overshadows me and, as I slowly turn around, I realize I thought too soon. Here's something that could ruin my day, after all.

Holt Green.

Wearing nothing but a pair of hot-pink trunks and black Ray-Bans, he looks like a catalogue model straight from the eighties, but ripped with stacks upon stacks of muscles covering his biceps, his pecs, and his stomach.

He's been hiding a world of sexy under his jersey.

How annoying. Couldn't he at least be hideous without a shirt on? It's only fair. Talented, rich, smart, *and* incredibly good-looking—did God spend all His time making Holt Green and give the rest of the men in his birth month the cold shoulder?

Arms folded and giving him the best scowl I can muster, I say, “Is that really how you're going to talk to a woman? Address her lack of clothing?”

Ever think we can wear whatever the hell we want without the approval of the male species?"

"Wasn't giving you my approval."

"Then what was the point of your comment?"

"Conversation starter."

The line moves and we both fall in step, inching closer to the concession stand.

"That's a terrible conversation starter, because all it did was piss me off."

"Yeah, but it got you talking." He smiles smugly. "After our attempt at conversation last night, I wasn't sure you'd even take the time to speak to me, so figured I'd trigger a response out of you."

"Wow, that's a terrible idea, because now all I want to do is kick you in the crotch."

The arrogant ass cups his junk and says, "Balls of steel, baby. Take your best shot."

My mouth falls open and my leg itches to rear back. "You did not just grab your balls in front of me."

He laughs. "I grab my balls in front of thousands of people all the time. Jockstraps will do that to you."

Studying him, arms still folded, I say, "You're really annoying, you know that?"

"People actually find me to be quite charming."

"Clearly they haven't seen this side of you." I gesture to his body, which only causes him to flex in many different ways as he glances down to take himself in.

"Not many people are privileged to see me with my shirt off. Consider yourself lucky."

Okay, that's it. I'm done with this conversation.

Full of himself, arrogant . . . annoying, no thanks. This is my day off—my only day off in I don't know how long—and I'm not going to spend it getting agitated with a Brentwood baseball player who thinks he walks on gold-speckled water.

With a roll of my eyes, I spin back around and take another step forward. Two people away; I can ignore him for that long.

What are the chances that I'd run into him here? Shouldn't he be training or something? He doesn't seem like a cover band kind of guy, more like someone who'd be pumping themselves up for the Billy Eilish concert

tonight at the United Center.

“You know, if you want to talk about something else, that’s all you need to do. You don’t need to give me the cold shoulder.” He leans over, his chest so close to my back that I can feel his heat burn my skin.

The proximity ignites a flame inside me, the whisper of his voice throwing fuel onto that flame. Unfortunately, there’s no denying the way my body reacts to him. His masculinity is overpowering, obvious in every move he makes, every word he speaks. Confidence consumes him, which is a big turn-on but also extremely annoying.

Without turning around, I say, “You must not be very perceptive. The last thing I want is for you to talk to me. It’s why I turned my back.”

“Oh, I thought it was because you wanted to give me a better view of your delicious ass.”

“Keep your hands to yourself.”

He holds his hands up, his large palms facing me. “Wouldn’t dream of touching you without your permission, but I’m not going to lie, my eyes are fucking you right now.”

Men . . .

“Could you be any more cliché?”

“I can.” He leans in closer, his lips so close to my ear that goosebumps spread up and down my arms and legs. “Did you just fall from heaven? Because you’re an angel.”

I shake my head.

“Are you from Tennessee? Because you’re the only ten I see.”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“Do you believe in love at first sight, or should I walk by again?”

“Pathetic.” I hold back my laugh.

“Do you have a map? Because I keep getting lost in your eyes.”

“You don’t even know what color they are.”

He steps up even closer, his rock-hard chest pressing against my back as his hand falls to my exposed hipbone. “They’re brown, but not just any kind of brown. They’re a dark chocolate, so dark that I can’t decipher where your pupils begin and end. They’re mysterious, and if you took off your sunglasses right now, I know I’d get lost in them for at least the next five minutes.”

Warning bells are going off in my head, alerting me to step away, to flee the premises, because, ladies . . . we have a very smooth talker. A talker who easily gets you out of your pants with an additional flash of a roguish

eyebrow. A talker who gives you the most passionate night of your life, only to make you wake up on your own. A talker who's detrimental to any woman's will.

Bad news, that's what Holt Green is.

There's no way he should have turned me on with the press of his hand and a whisper of how he'd get lost in my eyes, but he did. My skin tingles for his touch, my legs ready to part if he asked, my lips wet and slick, excited at the thought of his mouth on mine. Basically, he's turned me into a harlot with one slick answer to a question I thought I'd stump him on.

Swallowing hard, I say, "I thought you said you wouldn't touch me without my permission."

In an even deeper voice, he says, "I lied," just as his thumb strokes along my hipbone.

And just like that my nipples are hard, pressing desperately against the small triangles of my bathing suit top.

If he notices, I'm so screwed.

Unsure what else to do, I gear up and shoot my ass back into him in one smooth push. He releases my hip and buckles over . . . just in time for me to step up to the concession stand and place my order.

There, that should do the trick.

Chapter Five

HOLT

The reason I'm still bent over as Harmony places her order is because I have one hell of a hard-on, and not because she toppled me over.

Fuck . . . she smells sweet like vanilla and coconut, and she looks like a wet dream in that bathing suit.

She looked hot as shit in her Instagram story, but the photo didn't do her justice. Her smooth skin shines under the blinding sun, enticing me to slide on my sunglasses and stare for hours. The yellow bottoms barely cover her curved ass, giving every guy in the area a great view of the two round globes, and in the front, her small breasts are accentuated by the thin straps of fabric just covering her nipples.

She's proud of her body and has no problem showing it off.

And honestly, I want to write her a thank-you note for giving us all a sensational view today.

I haven't felt this kind of attraction to a woman in . . . forever. I've had my fair share of one-night stands and a few girlfriends in high school, but they've never lit me up like Harmony does with one glance in my direction.

Instead of chasing after her, I give myself a second to recover and carefully watch where she settles with her funnel cake and lemonade. Not too far from where I parked my towel and backpack. Easy transfer. Surely, she didn't think I was done after her slight *push*. If anything, knowing how fucking good her ass felt—if only briefly—on my dick, I'm even more determined. The girl has sass and fire. I like it.

Once I feel it's appropriate for me to stand, I order myself a brat and a bag of chips. During my wait, I observe Harmony from a distance. She's leaning in, talking to her friend, who looks familiar—I think the other waitress from the diner—no doubt telling her about her run-in with me.

I might be borderline insane, possibly stalkerish—okay, very stalkerish—but I want to get to know this girl. There's something about her besides her gorgeous looks and up-front attitude that's drawing me toward her, and I want to figure it out.

Backpack slung over my shoulder and towel draped across my arm, I take my food over to their setup. Without saying a word, I lay out my towel next to hers and make myself comfortable. When her friend spots me, her mouth falls open, and I smile as she lifts her hand to point behind Harmony.

“Why are you pointing? Do you see him?” Harmony asks. “Is he looking at me?”

“Can't take my eyes off you,” I answer.

In the blink of an eye, she snaps her head to the side. “Wh-what the hell do you think you're doing?”

“Finding a comfortable place to sit.” I observe our surroundings. “Crowded, wouldn't you say?”

She looks around as well and says, “There are at least a dozen other spots you could claim.”

“Yeah, but not with the view this one provides.” I glance down her body and then back up.

“You're a pig.”

“Because I can appreciate beauty in the wild? That makes me a pig?”

She shakes her head, her natural curls bouncing around her face. “Oh no, don't you dare spin this. You're being an intrusive male, and I don't appreciate it.”

“I actually think that beauty comment was sweet,” her friend says.

“Priya,” Harmony scolds.

“Why, thank you,” I say while leaning over Harmony and holding out my hand to her friend. “Holt. It's very nice to meet you . . . Priya, is it?”

“Yup.” She fluffs her black hair over her shoulder. “It's nice to meet you. Harmony hasn't stopped talking about you since last night.”

“Is that right?” I ask, a giant smile on my face.

Giving in, Harmony sits up and crosses her legs, setting her funnel cake in her lap. “Don't get your hopes up. It was out of pure hatred.”

“You know what they say . . .” I shrug.

Harmony tilts her head in my direction. “Is there an end to that sentence?”

“I was hoping you’d finish it for me, but I see you’re being stubborn today.” I stretch my legs out over my towel and pick up my brat. Before taking a bite, I say, “You know what they say . . . hate often turns into love.”

Harmony snorts. “Ha, okay. Yup. That’s what this is, the start of the greatest love story of all time.”

“I’m glad you see it that way too.”

“Oh, he’s charming.” Priya tries to pluck a piece of funnel cake off the plate, but Harmony swats her hand away. So of course, Priya keeps digging her own grave, casting me in a beautiful light. “It’s hard to look past the rippling muscles. I mean, who knew there was sinew that wrapped around ribs?”

“It takes a lot of protein and vegetables to get those—brat excluded today,” I say with a wink.

“I believe it. And what about that *V* in your hips that’s directing my wandering eyes straight to your crotch?”

“You are so embarrassing,” Harmony says, but I catch her glance at my crotch for a brief second.

Look all you want, sweetheart.

“That’s from ab work. Lots of oblique workouts.”

“Would you say you spend a lot of time in the gym?” Priya asks, tapping her chin with interest. I’m pretty sure Priya is doing this on purpose, torturing her friend with questions about me, and I honestly couldn’t ask for a better wing-woman.

“A lot of time. But also a lot of time in the library and on the field. You see, Priya, us baseball players, we’re not the stuck-up assholes everyone thinks we are.”

“Guilty.” Priya raises her hand. “I’m one of those people.”

“I’m not going to say that doesn’t hurt, but I can see that you’re open to a change of heart.”

“Jesus Christ.” Harmony keeps her head down and continues to tear apart her funnel cake, getting powdered sugar all over her fingers. What I wouldn’t give to lick some of it off, especially the light dusting that’s fallen on her legs.

“So open. Please, Holt, change my way of thinking.” Priya props her chin

up and blinks rapidly. If I wasn't so enamored with the brick wall erected next to me—I'm talking about Harmony, did you get that?—then I'd consider making a move on Priya. She's fucking funny.

But alas, I'm caught up on the girl in the yellow bikini. Which means I spend the next ten minutes describing our practices, our workout routines, our community service, our study halls, private lessons with coaches, and pretty much everything that goes into being a Brentwood baseball player.

When I'm done, I take a sip of my water and pop open my chips, letting Priya and Harmony mull it over.

Impressed, Priya smiles broadly while Harmony stares at the water, her funnel cake long gone now.

I can't read the purse of her lips or the tension in her shoulders. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Is she annoyed that I proved her wrong and showed her that we actually are good people? Is she upset she has to give in to liking me? Is she irritated because we're in public, and all she wants to do is jump my bones?

I'm hoping for the latter.

Jump all you want, Harmony. There'll be no protest on my end.

Finally, she rolls her head to the side and says, "I still think you're a bunch of arrogant assholes who don't deserve everything that's handed to you."

Well, there goes my dream of slipping off to somewhere private.

"Pfft." Priya leans over Harmony and talks to me as if she isn't lying on Harmony's lap. "She's lying. She has this telltale sign when she lies. Her ears move."

"No, they don't."

"Fine, her boobs twitch."

"They do not," Harmony says, and I force myself not to stare at her breasts, looking for a lying tick.

"Okay, so she doesn't have a tell, but I know as her best friend that what she just said was a lie. She's putting up a front right now because she finds you attractive and dangerous."

"Attractive, yes," I say. "But dangerous? Nah, I'm a clean-cut boy, remember?"

"On the outside," Harmony says, looking me over. "But on the inside, you're all kinds of danger. Not interested."

"Well, who's to say I'm interested in you?" I counter, leaning back on my

hands.

“You.” Harmony sits up straight. “You’ve said you’re interested. For the last hour, that’s all you’ve been—interested.”

Yeah. No. In the last hour I’ve been horny, amused, horny . . . and well, horny.

“Clearly, you don’t know how to read people. I’m not the slightest bit interested in you sexually. Now if you want to add me to your friends list, someone you call upon when you need your pussy licked, then by all means, add me to the list.”

She groans and flips to her stomach, lying across her towel and resting her cheek on her hands. “You’re exhausting.”

Priya shyly raises her hand. “Uh, can I get added to that friends list?”

“Self-respect, Priya,” Harmony mutters. “Good God.”

Chapter Six

HOLT

“I’m going to grab a drink. Do you guys need anything?” Priya asks as she stands. From the corner of my eye, past my sunglasses, I see Harmony watch my every move, as if to see if I’m checking out her friend as she stands and shakes sand from her body.

But I’m better than that.

“I’m good,” I say, my eyes trained on Harmony’s backside.

“I’m good too,” Harmony answers. Once Priya is out of earshot, she addresses my line of vision. “So, are you just going to check me out for the rest of the day?”

“You’re lying on your stomach and your bikini bottoms barely cover your backside. Of course I’m going to stare—that is, until it gets to be too painful.”

“Too painful?”

“Yeah, boners hurt if not taken care of, Harmony.” I adjust my glasses and catch her staring at my crotch. “I don’t have a boner right now.”

“But you said . . .”

“Just to get you to check out my penis.”

Groaning, she turns away.

“It’s okay, you know. To hate me but crush on me.”

“I’m not crushing on you, and what happened to the evil asshole from last night?” she asks, soaking up the warmth of the sun on her back.

“He was drunk, so this is the real me.”

“I think I’d rather be talking to the other version of you. He was less annoying. Marginally,” she mutters.

“If I down a six-pack, will that make you feel better?” I ask, lying down with her but keeping my head facing her direction. When I poke her with my finger, she groans again and faces me, giving me a view of her pouty, mauve lips. Full on the top, slightly thinner on the bottom, and perfectly heart-shaped. I could think of some pretty sinister things to do with those lips.

“Yes, please go do that. Maybe you’ll forget where I am.”

“Nah.” I tap my nose. “I’ve got the nose of a bloodhound; I’d be able to find your scent anywhere.”

“Why does that sound so skeevy?”

“Are you picturing me with my nose in your crotch, like other dogs? Because it wouldn’t be my nose between your legs . . .”

“Yeah, I get it. You’d fuck me if I said yes.”

I chuckle. “Yup. But you’d do the same if I gave you the thumbs up.”

She sits up on her elbows, her chest prominently displayed, and I might be seeing things, but is that a shadow of her nipple?

“Please. You have a thumbs up tattooed to your forehead.”

“You’d be surprised how long I can hold out.”

“Is that right?” She pats my forearm and says, “Then let’s have a competition; the first to give the thumbs up loses.” She rolls to her side, shifting just enough that I can see the entire front of her body. “Trust me when I say you’re going to lose.”

“Can’t argue there, because I’m mentally giving you more than just a thumbs up right now.”

“You know, if you want in my pants, the best way to make it happen is to get to know me, rather than bombarding me with sexual innuendos and lewd once-overs.”

“I would hardly say they’ve been lewd once-overs, more like inquisitive.”

“Either way, wouldn’t hurt you to actually talk about something other than my body.”

“If that’s the case, the same things goes for you. Ever since I laid down my towel, I’ve been scandalized by your incessant staring at my crotch. The poor fella is so nervous that he’s started to crawl inside my taint, and if you’ve ever had that happen to you, you’d know that it’s incredibly uncomfortable.”

“Fortunately, I haven’t had that happen to me, given I don’t have a taint.”

“Not true. Women have taints,” I say just as Priya shows up again.

“What the hell did you guys talk about while I was gone?”

I motion to Harmony. “Your friend here doesn’t think she has a taint.”

“Aren’t guys the only ones with taints?” Harmony asks, confused now.

Priya shakes her head and sets her drink in her cupholder that’s buried in the sand. “No, girls have them. It’s between the anus and the vagina.”

“If you spread your legs, I can show you exactly where, Harmony,” I suggest, taking one for the team.

She rolls her eyes. “Once again, walked right into that one. It’s fine. I’ll just feel around for it later tonight when I’m thinking about a shirtless Hendrix.”

Priya sighs before taking a sip of her drink. “Ah, Hendrix. God, he’s so handsome. What I wouldn’t do to ride his face. I want to know what it feels like to have that beard between my thighs.”

Mind exploding over the obsession with Gary Hendrix, because I honestly don’t see it, I ask, “You like Hendrix too? What’s with you two? The guy always has dirt under his fingernails.”

“I’m sure you do too,” Harmony counters.

I hold my hand out to her, flashing my nails. “Clean as fuck.”

“Did you get a manicure?”

“Fuck, no. I might be clean-cut, but I don’t get that shit. I’m a ballplayer.”

She waves her hand about. “Oh, heaven forbid you show an ounce of femininity. It could make your penis smaller.”

I pretend to think about it. “You know, wouldn’t hurt to lose an inch; maybe I ought to get a manicure, after all.”

Priya snickers while Harmony turns away again.

“So, I take it you’re not going to go with me to get one?”

“No way in hell.”

Chapter Seven

HARMONY

Is there a catalog where I can order a new best friend? Those exist, right? You can pick them out based on loyalty, drama . . . snark.

Because I'm in the market for a new one. Ever since Holt sat down next to me, Priya's been fawning over him. What happened to "I hate baseball players too"?

In all my twenty years of being on this earth, I have never met someone with as quick-witted a tongue as Holt Green.

He has a response for everything—but not just a response, it's a comeback, a smart one—and it's slowly driving me crazy. I want to stump him, but with every chance I take, he always bests me.

And the most annoying part of our bickering is that I'm beginning to like it.

I enjoy the repartee, the back and forth, the stupid challenge he presents. I shouldn't. I should be running for my apartment, trying to get as far away from this man as possible, and yet, I keep engaging, wanting to see what comes out of his mouth next. Enjoying that he has no shame in staring at my boobs or my ass. That, with him scooting closer and closer until I can practically feel his skin on mine.

Nor can I ignore the way he's engaging with Priya, how he's included her despite being interested in me. Even more surprising is that he hasn't been checking her out. Priya is gorgeous, and her body is divine. It's rare for any guy to not take a second or third look at Priya when she's with me. I have to

admit, I like that. He's not as lewd as I thought he was, because a true asshole wouldn't deny himself a second-option eyeball at my best friend. Surprisingly, he's smooth and smart and far too handsome for his own good. *And maybe for mine.*

Rummaging through his backpack, he pulls out a bag of sour gummy worms and tears it open. He holds the bag out to me and Priya and asks, "Do you want one?"

Priya cringes just like I knew she would. "I can't stand the things, but they're Harmony's favorite. She keeps a package in her room at all times."

"Is that so?" Holt asks, a huge grin on his face. Great. Now he's going to think we're sour-gummy-worm friends or some stupid thing like that.

"Don't make a big deal out of it," I warn, taking a few from the bag, happy with any of the flavors. I'm not picky.

"How could I not make a big deal out of it? If this doesn't say we're meant to be married, I don't know what does."

"Couldn't agree more," Priya says just as a text message beeps on her phone. She opens the message and says, "Oh, Miranda is here. I'm going to go say hi. Think you two can behave yourselves?"

"I can," Holt says. "But I can't make any guarantees for your bestie. She seems to be trying to entice me with her hard nipples. Frankly, it's uncalled for."

Jesus.

Christ.

This guy. Where did he come from and why did he choose to encroach on my day off?

And why do I like it?

"My nipples will be fine. Tell Miranda I said hi."

Priya takes off, cup in hand, and bounces to the music as she makes her way across the beach. The crowd has grown as time has passed, and I'm thankful we got here early so we could claim this spot. While the sky was clear earlier, clouds have begun to gather in front of the sun, so it's not as hot as it was before, hence the hard nipples. I'm starting to feel a chill from the wind coming off the water.

I go through my backpack and find my see-through coverall, which won't do much to keep me warm. What was I thinking?

"Cold?" Holt asks.

"Just a little," I admit.

“I brought an extra shirt. Want to borrow it?”

I consider saying no, but who am I kidding? I’m chilly, and I want to know what his laundry smells like. There’s nothing better than smelling a guy’s shirt and having that scent stay on you for the rest of the day. Not that I want Holt’s scent imprinting on me, but I’m curious.

“Sure,” I say, trying not to look too eager.

He pulls out a black T-shirt, which will be far too big for me, but when I take it in my hands, I’m mesmerized with how soft it is. Does he use fabric softener? That’s a luxury I can’t afford.

I quickly put the shirt on, and I’m swaddled in a fresh mountain scent that has me feeling woozy and turned on simultaneously.

God, this smells good.

One sniff and I can feel myself doing some really inappropriate things, such as giving in to his charm and comments about getting between my legs.

“Thank you.” I straighten the shirt out. “Are you sure you’re not going to need it?”

He shakes his head. “And even if I did, there’s no way I’d ask for it now.”

“Why? Afraid of my cooties?”

“Nope, you look too damn good in it. I couldn’t take it back even if I wanted to.”

“It’s just a black—” I glance down at the Brentwood Baseball logo and inwardly swear. “Oh, you’re loving this, aren’t you? Me wearing a Brentwood shirt.”

“Kind of am.” He leans back, his abs rippling with every move. “But you do look good in it.”

“Your flattery is working.”

“Yeah?” he asks, his brows shooting up in surprise. “I thought you were getting sick of the blatant flirting and innuendos.”

“That was more of a sincere compliment, so I’ll accept that one.”

“Fair enough.” He nods at me. “Where are you from, Harmony?”

“Nebraska, in the middle of the corn. Really small town no one even knows exists until they pass through it in a blink of an eye.”

“I like small towns. Often wish I grew up in one. New York City felt too clogged after a while. And life moved fast there. I felt like I never got the chance to actually sit and enjoy a light breeze, unless I was standing in the outfield waiting for the pitcher to pitch.”

“But there’s so much you could do in the city. The fun we had in

Gunderson, Nebraska, was counting how many cars passed by but never stopped.”

“Sounds enchanting.”

“It wasn’t. But my parents had solid jobs that paid the bills, and they were too afraid to move outside their comfort zones, so that’s where we stayed. My graduating class was fifty-two kids, and we knew everything about each other. Dating was impossible, given the small amount of people to actually date, and then everyone being in your business.”

“Are you telling me you haven’t dated much?”

“Not really.” I twist the hem of the shirt on my finger. “I mean, I’ve had two boyfriends. One in high school. One my freshman year in college, but he didn’t understand my work ethic and dumped me after we had sex.”

“Wow, classy.” Holt frowns. “Guys like that really give us a bad name. Wait . . . was he a baseball player?”

“Football.”

“Ah,” he says in understanding, slowly nodding. “So, let me guess. You’ve lumped us all together as giant assholes.”

“Pretty much,” I answer with zero shame. “You date one, you date them all. And I’m not the first girl who’s suffered the pump-and-dump from an athlete on campus. Seems to be a regular thing around here.”

His jaw grows tight as he works it slowly back and forth. “Yeah, I know what you’re talking about. Some of the guys on my team do that. They use their status on campus to get a girl, get what they want, and then leave her in the dust. It’s disgusting, and honestly, I don’t associate with any of them. Women aren’t to be used. They’re to be cherished.”

I’ve known this guy for less than twenty-four hours, but I know, deep in my bones, what he just said came straight from the heart. There was no winning smile at the end of his speech, no flirtatious wink, and no lewd ogle of my body. He was serious, his tone of voice not even close to joking, which tells me one thing: he’s genuine. And I think that’s more dangerous than anything.

His strong will reminds me of my dad, oddly enough. I’ll never settle with any guy who doesn’t look at me with the same love, adoration, and respect that my dad does my mom. *Why should I?*

“So you’ve never used your status on campus to get a girl into your bed?”

“Never.” He answers with such intensity that I’m speechless, caught off guard. “I know what you must think of me, Harmony. Rich boy from New

York City, has everything he ever wanted, has never been told no, thrives off his popularity. Well, that couldn't be further from the truth. I might have grown up with money, but we were raised to be humble, giving, and gracious. I don't flaunt it—"

"You drive a BMW around campus."

"So does half the campus. It's a rich school, so you're going to see BMWs. And guess what? My uncle owns a dealership and gave me the discount of a lifetime. It was cheaper than any regular car. You see what you want to see on the outside, but you won't know the truth until you actually dig deeper. Don't judge me, Harmony, and actually try to get to know me."

His words strike hard, because I've said that to many people before, asked them to get to know me rather than judge me for my past-season's clothes or my rinky-dink car that needs help being pushed up hills. Attending a rich college surrounded by a posh town hasn't been easy, but I came to Brentwood to earn one of the best degrees in the country and then to move on to my next chapter in life—writing.

"Okay," I say, shifting on my towel so I catch a brief whiff of his shirt. So good. It makes me want to weep. "You want me to get to know you?"

"Yeah. Test me."

"Fine." I point to a little sliver of ink I keep seeing past his waistband. "You say you're clean-cut, but I don't believe you. Is that a tattoo?"

He smiles broadly. "Staring at my crotch?"

This man is impossible. One serious moment and then we're back to his teasing. I'll tell you this—having a conversation with Holt is like dodging landmines of jokes and seeking out the true meaning of what he's trying to say.

"Yup, that's me, constantly staring at other humans' privates. Can't get enough of those dongs and tacos."

His head tilts back as he roars with laughter, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, his stomach contracting. It's one of the most erotic things I've ever seen—the way his body flexes and relaxes, the shake of his shoulders, the sultry sound of his laughter flowing past his lips. The combination has me yearning to reach out and touch him, run my fingers down his washboard abs, and explore what's below his waistline.

"Dongs and tacos." He chuckles. "Yeah, me either."

"What are you hiding? Is it a birthmark?"

He shakes his head and slowly lowers his waistline just enough that I can

tell he manscapes. And, I wonder, just how far down does he manscape?

His voice pulls me from my thoughts, and my eyes focus on the small baseball stitching covering up a scar. It starts at his hipbone and seems to wrap around his hip. "I was mugged in high school after practice one day on the way to the subway. Had the shit beaten out of me, and when I fought back, they grabbed a knife, got me good in the hip, took all my shit, and then fled. One of my teammates found me and called 911. Lost a lot of blood and had to have a transfusion. After I graduated, I wanted to turn the scar into something positive, rather than a reminder of that day, so I got the baseball stitching added."

Holy.

Shit.

"You were mugged?" I asked, bewildered.

"Yeah, New York City really isn't all it's cracked up to be sometimes."

Unable to stop myself, I lean forward and run my finger over the nasty scar, taking in the bumps and ripples of the raised skin. How scary. I can't imagine what it would be like to be mugged, or even in a fight, for that matter. Taking a punch to the face? No, thank you. Although, there aren't many people who would say "yes, please" either. But to have that attitude at eighteen . . . to use something horrible and put a positive spin on it . . .

Who is this man?

Someone so totally different than what you thought, Styles.

His body twitches under my touch and when I look up at him, his eyes are narrowed, his breathing heavier. "Keep touching me there and you might get yourself in trouble."

"Oh." I extract my fingers. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. If you want to keep touching, go ahead, but I suggest moving to the right and down a bit."

My lips thin. "You mean so I'm touching your penis?"

"I mean, if you're already down there . . ."

I roll my eyes. "Seriously, can you think of anything besides sex?"

"Totally. Just don't want to."

I study him as he pulls his waistband up again and casually leans back, the sun reflecting off his Ray-Bans. "Do you know what I'm wondering?"

"How long? Ten inches, babe."

"Seriously?"

He casually shrugs. "It's inherent. Can't stop it."

“Obviously.” I bring my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around the tops of my shins. “I was wondering why I haven’t gotten up and left. Why have I stayed here this entire time, enduring your torture? Clearly, I’m not a huge fan of athletes or cocky guys, and yet, here I am, still talking to you.”

“Because despite wanting to ignore me and push me away, you’re intrigued.”

“Ehh . . .” I wave my hand.

“Okay, it’s the view. Can’t get enough of these nipples.” He motions to said nipples with two fingers while whistling.

Speaking in a monotone voice, I say, “Yup, you caught me. I’m hell-bent on soaking up your nipples as much as possible. God, if only I could suck on them. It’s what I’ve been thinking about ever since you sat down.”

He adjusts his glasses and looks out toward the water. “I know, sweet cheeks. It’s written all over your face.” He faces me and dips his sunglasses so I spot his hazel eyes. “Want to go to my car where you can suckle on them all you want in private?” *Yes, I do, but I won’t tell Mr. Humble Hottie I thought that.*

“I’d rather stick my head in the porta-potty hole.”

Chapter Eight

HOLT

“How was Miranda?” Harmony asks when Priya sits back down and starts putting on a long-sleeved shirt.

“She’s good—” A small smile graces Priya’s lips as her eyes zero in on the shirt Harmony is wearing. “My, oh, my, what are you wearing?”

“It was cold, and I didn’t have anything.”

“Uh-huh.” Priya leans past Harmony to speak to me. “This is where it starts, you know? A borrow of your T-shirt and next it’s going to be a private walk along the wharf wall.”

That’s not a bad idea actually.

Because I’m a little chilly myself, I slip on my other T-shirt, my plain one that doesn’t blatantly label me as a Brentwood baseball player. “Stretching out my legs sounds like a good idea.” I stand and hold out my hand to Harmony. “Care to join me for a walk?”

With one tip of her head, she looks at my hand and says, “I’m good, thanks.”

“No, you’re not.” Priya pushes Harmony with her foot, nudging her off her towel. “Go on a walk with the man. The least you can do is keep him company when he’s keeping you warm with his shirt.”

Did I say I like Priya? Because I like her a lot.

“She has a point. If you don’t go on the walk, then I might have to start charging you for every second you’re wearing my shirt, and I don’t run cheap.”

“Blackmail? And here I thought so much more highly of you.”

“I’m not opposed to doing pretty much anything so I can spend more time with you.” Am I being truthful? Yep. But do I offer Harmony a small smirk to hide that from her? Also, yep. The girl is skittish and very strong-willed, but I now see that her anger toward me—toward the baseball team—isn’t based on naïve stereotyping. She’s been hurt, made to feel as less, possibly because of her upbringing, especially at an elite school like Brentwood. She’s smart enough to be here, so that tells me something, too. I’m beginning to think that underneath that cool façade, there’s a girl worth getting to know. I reach out my hand again. “What do you say?”

With a resounding sigh, she takes my hand in hers, hops up from her towel, and slips her sandals on.

“Have fun,” Priya says, waving her fingers in our direction.

“Oh, we will.” I shoot her a thankful wink and then drape my arm over Harmony’s shoulder, guiding her toward the water and the stone wharf.

“You don’t have to hold me, you know.”

“Yeah, but I’m nervous you might trip and fall. My arm over your shoulder is for your own protection.”

“Is that so?” Doubt is in her voice. “So, if I tripped and fell right now, how would you stop me from falling forward?”

“Simple,” I say. “Grab you by your hair and yank you back up like a yo-yo.”

She pauses, her right eyebrow nearly kissing her hairline. “You’d yank me up like a yo-yo?”

“Yup.” I give her my best smile.

“Wow, how . . . chivalrous.”

I squeeze her shoulder. “They don’t make them like me anymore. One of a kind.”

“Yeah, one of a kind, for sure,” she says sarcastically.

Making our way through the crowd is proving to be tougher than expected, since the amount of people gathered around the stage has doubled and pushed people out toward the more open spaces. It’s fine by me, though, because it means I get to hold Harmony closer.

“Holt, what’s up, man?” Pax, a running back on the football team, steps in front of me and holds out his hand. I reluctantly let go of Harmony and shake it.

“Hey, Pax. Rare off day?”

Pax glances at Harmony—recognition on his face—and I hope to Christ that Pax isn't the douche that pumped and dumped Harmony. That would make things extremely awkward, because I'd have a really hard time not burying his face in the dirt. I get why any man would be attracted to Harmony. She's stunning. But I stand by the words I said earlier. No woman should *ever* be disrespected. Thank fuck all the guys I'm friends with think the same. *Guess that's why we're friends.* But this guy . . .

"Yeah, off day," he says, studying Harmony. He tilts his head to the side and asks, "Do we know each other?"

Fuck.

Even worse. He fucked her and can't even remember her. Now I'm going to have to stretch his scrotum over his head, something I didn't prepare myself to do today. Although, is there ever really enough prepping one can do when forced to stretch out a scrotum?

"Yeah, you do know me."

Jesus.

I flex my fingers and loosen my shoulders. Here we go. A swift punch to the gut will buckle him over into the sand, bury his head, pull down his pants . . . and then stretch. I have it all planned out and ready to attack.

"I thought so. Hermione, right?"

"Harmony, you fucking asshat," I say, grabbing him by the shoulder, arm cocked back. "And next time you go to fuck someone—"

Harmony grabs hold of my arm and pulls me back. "Holt, stop. We're just joking. Pax and I are friends."

"Yeah, dude. Shit." Pax nervously laughs. "Jesus Christ, I thought you were about to decapitate me."

"What?" I ask, my adrenaline pumping, my breathing erratic. "You know each other?"

"Yeah, I'm the idiot who introduced her to the guy we don't talk about. But I've paid my penance in fro-yo over the years."

"But . . ." I look at Harmony. "You hate athletes."

She shrugs and fluffs her hair. "I tolerate Pax, but that's because we suffered through a British lit class together first semester of our freshman year. The only reason I still talk to him is because I like frozen yogurt, and he buys it for me at least once a month, if not twice."

"It's the price I pay for introducing her to a douche. But it was tough to get back into her good graces, so fair warning . . . don't fuck with her. Just

about broke my heart when she shut me out. Excellent at the cold shoulder, highly effective at throwing shade, and boss level at ignoring texts and phone calls.” Pax pats me on the shoulder. “Trust me, man. Be careful with this one.”

Yikes. Noted.

But because I like to act like a confident motherfucker, I say, “Ah, I think I have her wrapped around my finger. No worries here.”

Harmony snorts next to me. “Okay. Keep telling yourself that, Green.”

I smirk at Pax. “I’m not worried.”

He assesses both of us, most likely putting his confidence in Harmony’s court. Then again, I have wheedled myself into her day, and she still has yet to truly ask me to leave . . . so look who’s already winning.

This guy—did you picture me motioning to myself with two thumbs? Because in my head, I totally did.

“I don’t know, man.” Pax shakes his head. “She’s tough, but if anyone can crack her shell, it’ll be you.” See, Pax knows where it’s at. “Are you guys going to the football house later? Beer and chips, that’s the theme. Just beer and chips.”

“You guys really do use your tiny, damaged brains to be creative, don’t you?” Harmony asks next to me, causing me to snort.

It’s no secret that the football team throws the lamest parties amongst all the sports teams. There’s usually no originality behind the parties whatsoever besides drinking beer. That’s it. Beer.

The baseball team, on the other hand—thanks to our resident party planner, Jason—throws the best parties on campus. There’s almost always a theme, unless it’s during the season and we’re being lazy. Even then we still serve up more than beer, and because we’re decent guys who love the Earth, we make sure every plastic cup used at the party is recycled. That right there should tell you we’re doing our part. For the record, we usually make people bring their own cups so we’re not being extra wasteful, but there’s always a moron here and there who forgets one.

The football team despises Mother Nature.

That’s not on the record, but more of an assessment on my end since they always have plastic cups scattered over their front yard, being blown around by the winds off the water.

Pax chuckles and says, “I think we’ve come to the realization that we’re never going to be able to compete with the baseball team, and we’ve resigned

ourselves to events based on beers and chips, and that's it."

"At least you know your place," I say with a laugh.

"That we do. So, are you two coming?"

"Nah." I wrap my arm around Harmony's stiffening shoulders. "We've some things to do. You know"—I lean forward and shout-whisper—"some lover-type things."

"What?" Harmony protests. "We are not doing lover things." Addressing Pax, she says, "We're not doing lover things."

"That's what she thinks." I tug her toward the wharf. "Come on, sweet buns. She likes it when I call her that—"

"I do not. What is wrong with you?"

Laughing, Pax gives me a wave and calls out, "And I thought you had your hands full, man. Looks as though Harmony has met her match. Have fun, you two, and don't get caught doing your lover things in public."

"We're not—" Harmony growls in frustration. "Let go of me."

"You know"—I pause—"I really don't want to. I like holding your tense, very corpse-like body. Makes me feel all warm inside."

She pushes past me and picks up her walking pace. In about two steps, I've cut the distance and tug on her hand. "Where do you think you're going? We're enjoying a walk together."

"You might be, but I'm not. I need to get away from you."

"Hmm, is this about the lovers thing?"

She stops and spins to face me. Eyes blazing, a deep frown creasing her brow, and small locks of hair sticking to her ChapStick-covered lips.

I have one word for the look: spectacular.

I know. Call me crazy, but I love an irked woman. I love seeing the fire blazing in her eyes while her hands itch at her sides, begging to do some damage. And when she licks her lips, wets the pink of her mouth, it gets me high knowing I'm about to get a tongue-lashing.

I can't wait for it.

"This is about the entire day." Hands on her hips, she asks, "Why are you even here? Did you come with friends, or did you just stalk me and figure out where I was going today so you could annoy me on one of my only days off?"

I mistakenly wince at the stalking thing, because you and I both know that's precisely the dirty truth. Hoping Harmony never knows the creepy sleuthing I did to get here.

“Wait.” She holds up her hand. “Did you stalk me?”

“You know”—I tap my chin—“stalking is such a powerful word. I wouldn’t necessarily put it that way.”

“Then how would you put it?” she growls. If she were a cat, the hairs on her back would be sticking straight up and she’d be on her tippy-toes, moving back and forth, hissing.

I fold my arms over my chest and give it thought. “Well, it was more like expert-level sleuthing.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Throwing her arms up in frustration, she charges past me back toward Priya, but she doesn’t get too far before I stop her again.

“Let’s talk about this.”

“Talk about what? The fact that you followed me home and then staked out all night to see where I was going the next morning? Don’t you have better things to do with your life?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask, my brow pinched. “Fuck that. I don’t sleep outside, let alone in some college girl’s bushes—plants bushes, not pussy bush . . . Do you have a bush?”

Her arm raises and I see it coming—the slap across my face—so I quickly lace my fingers with hers and lower her hand. She tries to pull away, but I don’t let her. Instead, I pull her closer into my chest, wrap my other hand around her back, and start dancing to the cover of “Free Fallin’” by Tom Petty.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Dancing. What does it look like?”

Her voice drips with venom when she says, “Does it look like I want to dance with you right now?”

“Your eyes are definitely saying ‘get the fuck away from me,’ but your hand is wrapped around my waist, holding on tight. It’s hard to decipher when you’re giving me mixed messages. I’m going to go with . . . apprehensive, but slightly into it.”

“You’re the most annoying guy I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

“It wasn’t a compliment,” she says, her head now resting on my chest. She’s such a fraud, it’s comical.

Said in girly voice: *Ooo, get away from me. Pee-yew. Boys, yuck. I don’t want you near me, Holt.*

Yeah, fucking right. This girl is so into me. You might be wondering why I'm saying that. I know you are. But here's why: she's holding on to *me*. Beneath that snark and attitude, the feisty independence and strength, this girl is leaning *into my* hold, and fuck if she doesn't feel right being there. She could have kneed me in the nuts. She *could* have run. But I can feel the smile against my chest. For some totally insane reason, this girl digs my brand of crazy.

"So . . ." she says, looking up as I guide her in circles across the dipping and diving sand under our feet.

"So, what?"

"So how did you find out I was here if you didn't stake out my house?"

"First of all, no one does that. Second of all, technology has really changed how we find people. I looked up your first name in the school database, found your last name, and then trolled Instagram. Thanks for not making your profile private, by the way. It was really helpful."

She mutters under her breath, but I can't quite decipher what the slew of swear words are.

"I'll be honest, the yellow bikini picture really got me excited to see you this morning. Also took care of my morning wood."

"Ew. Are you serious?"

Head tilted back, I let out a hearty laugh while shaking my head. "No, but glad you think it's 'ew' for me to masturbate, given every guy does it at least three times a week, if not a day."

"Men are disgusting."

"Are you saying you don't masturbate?"

"No, I do."

That's hot.

"But I don't masturbate to someone I met the night before. Have some self-respect and masturbate to porn like the rest of us."

Another bout of laughter hits me. See? My kind of crazy.

"Jesus Christ, that's amazing." I stop dancing, and with her hand in mine, I walk her out to the wharf, the concrete chilly under our feet. "What's your favorite type of porn? Girl on girl?"

"Why would you say that?"

I shrug. "Just seemed like a good fit."

"No." We take a seat along the edge, the water lapping against the concrete but not quite hitting us. Straight across from us is the Chicago

skyline, beautiful as ever with the sun starting to make its descent. There'll be a few more hours of sunlight, plenty of time to hang out with Harmony. "I don't like anything in particular, nor do I watch it often, but when I do, I just search what I'm feeling that night."

"So you're a nighttime diddler? Nice. I like a good stroke at night too."

"I'm sure you do." She pauses then says, "And before you ask, no."

"No, what?" I chuckle.

"I think I can tell what your next comeback will be. Tell me if I'm wrong, but the next thing that was going to come out of your mouth was to ask if I wanted to go back to your place, so we could diddle and stroke each other."

"No. Pfft, you don't know me at all."

Her brow raises.

"I was going to suggest your place, not mine. I assume your sheets are more comfortable."

She rolls her eyes and then plays with her hands in her lap. "Why would you assume my sheets are better?"

"Duh, because you're a girl and girls always have soft things."

"Not when you live paycheck to paycheck. My sheets are like cardboard boxes."

"Cardboard is comfortable. Can't get enough of that brown stuff."

"Stop it." She laughs and shoves my shoulder.

"Okay, so my place, because of the possibility of a dangerous papercut from a box. But I'll warn you, if it's my place, there'll be a bunch of prying eyes. Hmm, you know, the more I think about it, how about I grab sheets from my place and bring them to yours, chuck the cardboard boxes to the side for later if we want to make a fort, and then we diddle each other? I really like it when a girl plays with my balls, just a heads-up."

Quietly she laughs, and there's a slight shake to her head. "You're so weirdly confident and say the dumbest shit."

"But it's making you laugh, so that's all that matters to me."

"Is that so? Didn't seem like it last night. You were on the defensive, big time."

"You weren't necessarily pleasant either."

"Yeah, but you're the one who came chasing." She challenges me with her stare.

"Because I had a question to ask you."

"Is that right?"

I nod enthusiastically.

“Okay, so you stalked me, came down here, and spent almost the whole day with me to ask me a question?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, what’s the question?”

“I made a mistake with my tip. Can I have my change back?”

Her mouth falls open and then spreads into a wide grin. She pushes my shoulder, sending me slightly to the side, but not by much. She doesn’t have much muscle on her.

I’m a bison to her squirrel—does that make sense? It did in my head. You get the picture. She’s a pipsqueak, and I’m all man muscle and glory.

“You didn’t come here to get your money back, and I wouldn’t give it back to you at this point anyway. I gave you your chance, and you were a pompous ass and denied it, so it’s mine now.”

“A pompous ass? For giving you a nice tip? Maybe I was just trying to be a nice guy.”

“No one is ever simply nice like that.”

There’s a heavy statement. One I wish I could dissect to find the true meaning behind it. This isn’t just about her distaste for athletes; this is deeper than that. Someone hurt her, maybe many people, but there’s a guard she’s wearing, a protective shield that she seems to erect any time I try to get an inch closer. And that’s fine. *For now*. Just means I need to slowly take it down. And God, I sound just like Jason, the feelings man. *He’ll be excited about that*.

Growing serious, I reach over and tip her cheek with my finger so she has to look me in the eyes. “I’m like that, Harmony. I’m a nice guy. I might be obnoxious most of the time with my joking and innuendo, but when it comes down to it, I’m genuine.”

Her full lashes flutter right before she says, “Intentions can be genuine, but the soul can also be greedy.”

“This soul is anything but that.”

“Is that what you think? Well, you took my only day off away from me because you had an agenda. Is that not greedy?”

She speaks with such weight in her words that I really want to know what’s behind those dark eyes, and what or who made her the jaded person she is today.

“It’s not,” I answer.

“No?” she asks, a question in her facial features.

I shake my head. “Not when I know you’ve probably laughed more today than you have in, what . . . months?”

She looks away, and I know I’m right.

“You’ve had fun. Yes, we’ve had great banter back and forth, and we’ve argued and bickered, but we’ve also laughed . . . a lot. You’ve gotten your fair share of eye candy”—she snorts—“and I’ve seen a great deal of your ass, which I’m eternally grateful for. This hasn’t been a one-sided, greedy, ill-intentioned day. It might have started off with a hint of greed, but I saw something between us that I wanted to explore. Today has been a day full of new friendships and enjoying one of the last days of the summer before school starts back up.”

“Friendship—is that all you want?”

A loose strand of hair falls in front of her face and before she can tuck it away, I reach out and drag it behind her ear for her. “No, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“What if I say I’m good on friends right now?”

“I’d say you’re lying. There’s always room for more friends in this world. Plus, after today, I’m not sure you can get rid of me.”

“You’re so confident.”

I bring her against my side with a tug on her shoulder and say, “I have to be. If I wasn’t confident, I would never be where I am today.” And that, my friends, is the absolute truth. And more than anything, I want Harmony Styles to like that about me too.

Chapter Nine

HOLT

“Did you guys ride together?” I ask Priya and Harmony, who are folding their towels.

“Yeah, I drove,” Priya says. We make eye contact, a silent conversation happening between us. I know she gets it the minute she adds, “But I actually have to run a few errands before tomorrow. Holt, do you think you could drive Harmony home for me?”

See? I told you I liked Priya. I mentally give her a high five.

“What?” Harmony protests, just like I knew she would. “No, that’s okay. I can run errands with you.”

“I know you can, but I don’t want you to. These are private affairs,” Priya says with her head held high.

Harmony doesn’t buy it. “Private affairs? I’ve been in the room while you got your vagina waxed, so nothing is private between us.”

Talk about friendship. If Knox or Carson asked me to be in the room when they got the hair ripped from their balls, I would have told them to go fuck themselves. I’m all about being there for a friend in need, but waxing . . . yeah, I’ll pass.

“This is more private than that. Real sensitive, top-secret stuff.”

“Yeah, okay.” Harmony rolls her eyes and turns toward me. “Where are you parked?”

I smile brightly and hold out my arm for her to take. “Right this way, madam.”

She refuses to take my arm and starts walking toward the parking lot. I shoot Priya a quick look of thanks, which she returns with a wink, and catch up to Harmony, who seems to be on a mission to get the hell out of here.

Silently we walk to my car, the crowd around us seeming to part as we walk by. I'm not sure if it's because Harmony has her head down, ready to plow people over, or if it's because they notice my desperation to keep up with her and are giving a guy a break. Either way, we make it back to my car in record time.

"Knew which one was mine, huh?"

"It's the only BMW in this part of the parking lot. Hard to miss."

She has a point. I take her things from her and open the door, and as her body innocently brushes against mine as she takes a seat, I pray to the Lord above to give me self-control.

After we spent a few more minutes at the wharf, we went to the concession stand, grabbed some burgers, and took them back to Priya. We shared a small dinner together, and Harmony and I ate some more gummy worms while Priya indulged in her own little stash of vanilla wafer cookies.

We talked, I flirted, Harmony ignored me, but on occasion, I caught her checking me out, and that's what spurred me to keep going. Those little glances.

Now that the sun has fallen and there isn't much light in the area, it's the perfect time to leave.

I stuff my things in the trunk of my car and then get in the driver's side, pushing the start button and letting the car rumble to life.

"Where to?" I ask her, hoping she doesn't say home.

She stares out the window, not answering right away, but instead, giving her answer some thought. She's still wearing my T-shirt, her hair is pulled back into a bun on the top of her head, and the sunglasses she was wearing all day are tucked away in her backpack. So now, I get to look her into the eyes.

I'm about to ask her again when she finally leans back against the seat and says, "Anywhere but home."

Her statement sounds troubled, as though she wants an escape, and if that's the case, then that's exactly what I'll give her. It's still early in the night, and Chicago is a city full of possibilities, but there's one place I know she'll appreciate, if anything, just for the peace and quiet.

"Buckle up." I put the car in reverse and take off, blazing through the streets with the radio filling the silence between us as her attention is

captured anywhere but with me.

That's okay, though. She needs time to process. She seems to be someone who goes with her gut, who makes decisions after some thought rather than just spur-of-the-moment. I want her to put thought into who I am, the type of man she's witnessed all day. Fun and outgoing, but also protective and genuine.

At least, that's how I hope she sees me.

When we get to our destination, I valet the car and open her door, but when I offer her my hand, she doesn't take it. Instead her eyes scan over the building behind me.

"Are you insane?" she whispers. The valet is patiently waiting for her to get out. "We can't go in there. I'm in a bathing suit."

Chuckling, I squat down to her level and place my hand on her uncovered leg. "Don't worry, we're not going into that restaurant, because you're right, they wouldn't let us step a foot inside. We're going behind it."

"Promise?"

I nod. "Promise. I wouldn't lie to you, Harmony, or embarrass you like that. Now, take my hand." I stand and watch carefully as she places her hand in mine, giving me her trust. Based on the fleeting vulnerable moments I've seen from her today, I'm guessing putting her trust in someone else isn't easy, so I'm going to guard it with everything in me.

I give the valet a curt wave and then walk past the restaurant and into a dark alley.

"So, this is how I die," she whispers. "And after all the times my parents told me not to go down an alley with a stranger."

"You know, that hurts. I'm not a stranger. I'm your second-best friend, Priya clearly being the number-one choice."

"You're so incredibly optimistic that it's almost scary."

"Optimism brings you joy, so why not strive for all the positivity you can get?" And I believe that wholeheartedly. If I wasn't optimistic, I might not have come back from my mugging as well as I did. I could have given up after the horrible infection I suffered from the wound not healing properly. I remember the days in the hospital, wondering if they'd have to amputate, but I never let my mind go down the rabbit hole of negativity. Instead, I kept thinking positive thoughts, filling my body with reassurance that everything would be okay.

Do I believe my positivity cured me? No, I'm not an idiot. The good

doctors and nurses that worked at my bedside every day and night are the reason I'm here. But not letting my mind reach the negative, that's what helped me heal mentally. And it's the reason I'm here today.

"When you have money, it's easy to be optimistic," she counters as we reach the back gate.

I shoot off a quick text to my friend before I respond, "When you have faith in yourself and the people you surround yourself with, then it's easy to be optimistic."

I push open the gate to the small, empty courtyard owned by the fancy Italian restaurant we bypassed. My friend Jim from my engineering class works at the restaurant and told me about the seldom-used courtyard one day after class. He said it's a great place to go if you want to escape. I've been here a few times after classes when the guys in the loft are being too loud. It's pretty close to the loft so I walk down, text Jim to let him know I'm there, and then find peace.

Harmony steps through, and I watch her carefully as she takes in the tiny, confined space. There's one way in and one way out, and we just used it. Shaped by the tall buildings surrounding the area, the courtyard is a small square with three seating options: a metal bistro table with chairs, two armchairs in front of a cut-off tree trunk coffee table, and my favorite spot, a hammock attached from one building to the other. Vines, reaching at least fifteen feet overhead, creep up the old brick walls, and along the edges are potted plants and trees, creating a serene, jungle-like atmosphere in the midst of a cold, cement-bound city.

"Wow," she whispers, walking over to a large purple flower in bloom. "This place is incredible. How do you know about it?"

"A friend from one of my engineering classes told me about it."

"Engineering?" she asks, completely surprised.

"Not just all beauty." I motion to my body from head to toe. "There's brains in there too, babe."

The back door to the restaurant pops open and Jim sticks his head out, looking to the right and then to the left, where he spots me. "Hey, man." He keeps the door propped open with his leg and offers me a handshake that I return quickly. "Good to see you."

"You too. Gearing up for junior year?"

"Yeah, took on a heavy course load."

I pat him on the shoulder. "You always do. Hey, how's your mom doing?"

Did she like the flowers?”

Jim laughs. “Yeah, you could say that. She bragged to all the nurses that she received flowers from a future baseball star. It made her day. Thanks, man. And she’s doing better. She’s slowly getting back into the swing of things and is changing her diet, so we’re hopeful she’ll make a full recovery.”

“That’s great to hear. Send her my best.”

“No problem.” He reaches behind him and holds out a tray bearing two glasses of their homemade lemonade, a basket of freshly made bread, butter, pesto sauce, and a cheese platter. My mouth starts to water. “Here. Let me know if you need refills.”

“Thanks, Jim. You didn’t have to do this.”

“And you didn’t have to keep checking up on me and my family, but you did. It’s the least I can do. Have fun.” He reaches behind him and flips a switch, turning on the big bulb lights, which are zigzagged above the space. “Enjoy.” He shuts the door and leaves me with Harmony, who’s standing there with both her hands joined together, staring at me.

“Their bread will change your world. Are you—” I pause as she continues to give me an inquisitive stare. “What?”

She shakes her head and walks over to the bistro table. “Nothing.”

I set the food down and bring my chair closer to her. “How come I don’t believe you?”

“Maybe because I was pretty unconvincing.” She sips the lemonade and makes an appreciative sound.

“Okay, so, spill. I know I’m handsome, but that can’t possibly be the reason you were looking at me like that, as if you were trying to peel back a layer to better understand me.”

“You just surprise me, that’s all. You’re not like the other athletes I know. You’re actually nice.”

“Pax is nice.”

She picks up some bread and tears off a piece for herself before handing me the other half. “Pax has his moments, but he also can be a giant asshole. I’ve seen it. Maybe not with me, but with others. Take that Jim guy. You didn’t seem to expect him to offer you things because of who you are as a celebrity. You’re obviously friends, and by the sounds of it, you care about him and his family.”

“Because that’s the good thing to do.” I dip my bread in the pesto sauce and say, “It’s second nature. I don’t even have to think about it. My parents

both modeled to me *and* expected me to care for others, and that's what I do. Do you want me to be an asshole to you? Is that what you're used to?"

"No." She laughs. "I prefer the nice guy with the hot car."

"Ha." I point at her. "I know you really meant the hot guy with the nice car. You're forgiven."

She shrugs and shakes her head, and then makes a beautiful sound in the back of her throat when she tastes the bread for the first time. "Oh my God, this is so good."

"Keep making that sound and my dick is going to be tapping you on the leg, looking for a friend."

"Your dick is going to be vastly disappointed, because there are no friends over here." She pops the rest of her bread in her mouth and wipes her hands with a napkin.

"Not even a friend for a lonely penis? That's harsh."

"Harsh is my middle name."

"Harmony Harsh. It has a nice ring to it."

"It does, doesn't it?" She gives me a small smile before taking another look around the space. "So how many girls have you brought here?"

"None," I answer with complete honesty. "It's very rare for me to even have a date, let alone hang out with someone of the opposite sex."

"Puh-lease."

"It's true. I can probably count on one hand the number of dates I've had since coming to Brentwood. Most of the girls I meet on campus ask me to take them to the locker room."

She laughs out loud. "Seriously? Why are women so desperate? The locker room doesn't hold special orgasm powers. It probably holds a plethora of ringworm bacteria, though."

For those of you who might be confused, let me explain. The Brentwood baseball locker room is sacred . . . according to the players. Legend has it, if you take a girl back to the locker room to bang, you'll get married within five years. There hasn't been one player who has proved this theory wrong. Because of that, the only girls allowed in the locker room must be serious, life-partner prospects, and we all must respect the rule.

Do I believe in it?

Hell yeah, I do.

And I can't wait for the time when I invite a girl into the locker room and blow her goddamn mind with all the sex.

“For your information, we keep the locker room very clean.”

“You, or the janitors?”

“It’s a group effort.” I hand her another piece of bread. “Try the butter. You’ll never know life after it.”

“If that’s the case . . .” She picks up a knife, spreads the soft butter across her piece of bread, and then takes an impressive bite. Her eyes widen when she looks at me. Mouth full, she says, “Holy shit. That is good.”

“See? Now life as you know it has completely changed. You’re seeing life in color now, aren’t you?”

“Such vivid color. Who knew your face was actually green?”

“Aw.” I poke her side. “Look at you joking around.”

“I can be fun.”

“I saw that today. This might be super lame, but thanks for letting me hang out with you all day. You could have told me to beat it right away, but instead, you let me stay and, as you like to put it, annoy you.”

“It was good entertainment.” She leans back in her chair and studies the lights above us. “I wish I could have days like this more often, when I can relax and enjoy the small things like a lazy day in the sun, or a good six-pack.”

“Working on an eight,” I say with a wink.

“Keep eating that bread and you’ll never get there.”

“Bread or eight-pack? Pretty sure bread will always win.”

“I’m the same way. Take away my rights as a human, but don’t take away my carbs.”

“That’s the kind of flair for dramatics I like.” I stick another piece of bread in my mouth and nod toward the hammock. “Want to swing?”

She eyes the hammock, most likely trying to see how it would work with both of us. “Am I supposed to lie on top of you?”

“You’re more than welcome to do that, but we can also sit in it. That’s what I usually do when I’m here, and then I rest my computer on my lap.”

She smiles bashfully and takes a piece of bread as she stands. “That makes more sense.” She slathers some butter on the bread before moving to the hammock. I follow right behind her and hold the hammock still as she climbs in, her legs dangling off the edge. I join her and lightly swing us back and forth. She holds out the piece of bread and without even thinking about it, I lean forward and take a bite.

“Hey,” she says. “That was a huge bite.”

“I’m a growing boy.”

“And your mouth is all over it now.”

Laughter rumbles in my chest. “If you’re afraid of my mouth being all over your bread, then you’re not going to want to know where my mouth has been in my thoughts.”

“Oh yeah? Let me guess. It’s been up and down my body, sucking on my nipples, tugging, pulling, making me whimper. You then slowly moved your mouth down my abdomen, playing with my belly button until you reached my pussy, where you spread me with two fingers and licked me until I was reeling, begging for you to make me come. Am I right?”

Gulp.

Blinks.

Shifts shorts.

“Uh . . . what? Can you repeat that?”

“Oh my God.” She goes to shove my shoulder, but I move in time to capture her in my arms, pressing her back to my chest.

I lower my mouth to her ear and whisper, “You were very accurate, but you forgot one thing. I don’t give in easily, so when you’re begging to come, I make you earn it.” My hand spans across her stomach, causing her to gasp out loud. “My touch, my kisses, my attentiveness, they’re all well thought out for your pleasure. Every move I make has intention, and when you think you’re about to fall into bliss, I’ll pull away and start all over again, edging you to the point that you’re unsure you’ll ever reach pleasure. That’s when I’ll send you into a tailspin of white-hot euphoria. And in the midst of it all, you won’t be begging . . . you’ll be screaming my name.”

Chapter Ten

HARMONY

Oh dear . . . God.

His whisper, the way it travels down my neck to my limbs . . .

His hold on my stomach, how his thumb gently strokes over my T-shirt-covered skin . . .

And the hard surface of his body under me, the concrete chest and abs that oddly feel comforting . . .

It's all swirling together, turning my mind into mush, which is a bad thing, because when my mind is mush, I make bad decisions. Very bad decisions.

Breath heavy, I drop the bread and reach up behind me to tightly cup the back of Holt's neck. My other hand travels to where his hand rests on my stomach.

He sucks in a breath when I entwine our hands and move them up and under my shirt to my bare skin.

"You make me do stupid things," I say as I lower our hands to just above my waistband and then back up. "Really stupid things." I lower our joined hands again and this time our fingers graze over the waistband of my bikini bottoms.

"This doesn't seem stupid to me." His free hand reaches up and grazes the back of my arm, his fingers like feathers igniting my skin.

My back arches as I lower our hands again, this time reaching past the waistband and skimming the top of my pubic bone, teasing myself. My legs

spread wide as I push against his chest.

“We’re in public,” I say, lowering our hands again but quickly bringing them back up my stomach to just below my breasts. I release his neck and my arm slips down, my hand landing on his thick thigh. His muscles twitch under my touch, and his chest rises and falls more rapidly against my back.

Feeling how much just my hand to his thigh affected him, I move my hand to his inner thigh, and he sucks in a harsh breath.

“Harmony, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Something I shouldn’t, but I can’t seem to stop myself.” I bring my fingers to his waistband, just as I lower our hands to my pubic bone. Legs spread, I flatten his hand against my mound and leave it there as I slip my other hand inside his shorts, my fingers connecting with the tip of his already-hard cock.

Whispering in my ear, he says, “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

“I always finish,” I say before wrapping my hand around his thick cock.

“Jesus, fuck,” he mutters as his fingers curl over my bikini bottoms and then lift up and slide across my bare pussy and over my slit. “Christ, Harmony.”

Cocking my elbow to the side for better leverage, I start to pump Holt’s length, impressed with just how long and thick he is. Handsome, athletic, genuine, and a giant cock . . . he’s really not making this easy on me.

“You’re so fucking sexy, the way you spread your legs like this, so wet for me. I did that to you,” he says, low and authoritative as two fingers slide over my clit. “This yearning you have, the urge to run your hand up and down my cock like that, I did that to you.” He nibbles on my earlobe and my entire body spasms as my hips jolt.

Pressure builds between my legs and pools at the base of my spine, my orgasm arriving surprisingly quicker than I’ve ever experienced. I’m unsure if it’s because of the setting with the lights above us, the possibility of someone walking out on us, or if it’s the man behind me with his large hands and powerful body that seems to be rocking me into a new world, one that’s positively terrifying.

Remembering what he told me at the beach, I lower my palm to his balls and gently start to massage them with my fingers.

“Ahh, fuck,” he growls into my ear, his chest flying forward as he buckles over and then moves his legs farther apart. “Goddamn, Harmony. You’re going to make me embarrass myself.”

“Good.”

Determined to see him come before me, I move my palm against the base of his cock while I tease his balls, dragging my finger over the soft surface, back and forth, back and forth, working my way back to that special spot that I know will have him flying off this hammock.

“Fuck, okay. Give me . . . fuck,” he pants in my ear. He slips two fingers inside me while his thumb plays with my clit, quickly rubbing it with just enough pressure that my skins breaks out in goosebumps and the pressure between my legs builds to an apex.

No, not yet.

I beg my body to hold off. I try to think of anything else but the pleasure searing through my veins, but it’s next to impossible. He’s too good, and before I can think about bringing my hand back to his cock to really pump it, my hips are bucking against his hand as my free hand grips the hammock desperately.

“Oh God, I’m coming, Holt,” I moan, pure pleasure ripping through me. I ride his fingers, pulling out every last sensation until I can’t take it anymore and remove his hand. Out of breath, I turn to face him, careful not to swing us too much, and then I bring my attention to his cock.

So thick, so ready. Pre-cum coats the tip, so I drag my palm over the top and use it as lubrication to rub him up and down. I drag my thumb along the sensitive vein along the underside of his length, making sure to play with the spot below the head before descending again.

He isn’t very vocal, but his body speaks for itself in the way his muscles contract, the veins in his neck pop, and the stiffness in his thighs. He’s close.

“Are you going to come hard?” I ask, squeezing him.

He lets out a harsh breath as his head falls back.

“Are you there? Or do you need more of this?” I reach back and take his balls in my palm again. Playing with every sensation, I take great pride in the way he’s breathing erratically, in the unfiltered groans falling past his lips.

“Fuck, Harmony. Ahhh, fuck, I’m going to come.”

I pump even harder, and just like he said, he comes, his roar echoing over the bricks and dying against the walls, never bouncing farther than the secluded square we’re in.

My hand slows and when I fully pull away, he lets out a hearty laugh and opens his eyes to glance at his shirt.

“I fucking knew it.”

“What?”

“You made me come all over my only shirt. Which means one thing. I’m going to need my shirt back.”

In his dreams.

Chapter Eleven

HOLT

Have I ever ejaculated in a hammock before?

That's what you're wondering, right?

The answer is no.

No, I have not.

I've never ejaculated in public if we're getting technical. Never in a car either. It's always been under a roof. Boring, I know, so to say my mind was blown just now is an understatement. But not because of the setting, because of the girl sitting next to me in my car.

I wasn't planning on getting my hands . . . well, fingers wet. I was hoping for a possible goodnight kiss, a hug if anything. But a fucking orgasm in a hammock? Free access to her sweet spot to get her off? *Hottest fucking moment of my life*. What the hell did I do to deserve that?

And this wasn't some ordinary orgasm. This was—looks around—this was groundbreaking shit. Things I've never even done with myself. She touched things I wasn't sure were worth touching, things that have me wondering if I need to bring a mirror between my legs and examine that special button down there she was tapping.

"So, uh . . . you're good at hand jobs," I say awkwardly as we drive toward her apartment.

"That's how you're going to break the silence?"

I grip the back of my neck and face her when I stop at a red light. "I might be this smart and refined male, but when it comes down to it, a

beautiful girl just played with my ding-dong, and it's all I can think about. So, yeah . . . you're good at hand jobs."

She chuckles, her smile a work of art as it pulls at her full lips. "Cosmopolitan has really good tips. A girl at work always has one with her and when I'm on my break, I read them."

"Well, can you thank her for me? Because, Christ, woman, you touched places I wasn't sure even mattered."

"Yeah, really got you going there."

Am I blushing? I feel like I'm blushing. I shouldn't be. I talk about sex all the time, but hearing her boast about pleasuring me until I come makes me shy.

Probably because I came really fucking hard, and because of that, I'm now shirtless and driving her home.

"You did, but I wasn't the only one with their eyes rolled in the back of their head, crying out like a feral cat in heat."

Her head tilts to the side in disagreement. "I was not crying out like a feral cat."

"Your pussy sure was."

"You know, when you say shit like that, it reminds me that you're just another idiot jock who thinks with his penis rather than his head."

"Right now, the penis is in control. He's wondering where his new friend just ran off to." I lean over, eyes still on the road, and whisper, "That new friend is your hand."

"I got it." She laughs and shakes her head. "God, why didn't I tell you to get a life this morning when you first came over?"

"Because you knew something great was brewing between us and you want to see where it goes."

"No, that's not it."

I take a right and slow the car down, knowing I'm getting close to her place. "Is it on the right or the left?"

"The right, up past the black Mercedes."

What I know of Harmony isn't much, but I do know she doesn't seem to like rich people, and yet, she's living in one of the wealthier parts of town. I park behind the Mercedes and say, "This area is really nice."

"Yeah, not my choice of living, but Priya and I want the security and splitting it in half has really cut down on the costs. Plus, it's safe, and I'd rather pay extra to be safe than save money and live in a place where I share a

toilet with cockroaches.”

“Smart. I heard cockroaches can be bossy.”

Sighing, she reaches for the hem of my shirt but I still her arms.

“Give it to me another day.”

“Who’s to say I’m going to see you again?”

“Me.” I take out my phone, unlock it, and hand it to her. “Enter your phone number so I can bug you with texts.”

“What if I want this to be a one-day thing?”

“I don’t suggest that.” I wiggle my fingers in front of her face. “Remember how these little fellas made you feel?”

“I seriously can’t stand you,” she says. She enters her number into my phone and texts herself, the sound vibrating in her purse. Good, she didn’t fake number me. “Don’t be obnoxious with my number, you hear me?” She points her dainty finger at me. I lean over and kiss it.

“I won’t.”

She reaches for the handle of the car but then turns around to look at me. I still, waiting for her to lean into me, looking for a kiss. “I might be hard around the edges, but I know a good guy when I see one, and you’re one of them. Thank you for a great day.”

“You’re welcome.” She opens the door, and I’m desperate, so I’m almost all the way across the center console when I say, “No goodbye kiss?”

She shakes her head, while standing from the car but then ducks down so I can see her. “I don’t kiss on the first date.”

“Oh, but you give hand jobs?”

“Exactly.” She laughs, the sound so goddamn beautiful that I want to leap across the car and pull her back in.

“I would have rather had the kiss.”

“Liar.”

“One thing you should know about me is that I never lie.”

“Somehow I believe you.” She gives me a small wave. “Good night, Holt.”

“Good night, Harmony.”

She shuts the door, spins on her heel, and jogs up the steps to her apartment. With one last glance, she smiles over her shoulder and then disappears inside.

And that’s the last time I ever see her . . .

Well, that’s being dramatic. It feels like forever after all the unanswered

texts, missed calls, and ignoring me on campus.

It's the last time I see her . . . for two weeks.

Chapter Twelve

HARMONY

Buzz.

I glance over at my phone on the couch between me and Priya, quickly snapping it away from her eyes, but from the way she folds her arms across her chest, ready to spar, I'm guessing she saw the name on my screen.

"Are you going to answer him?"

I tuck my phone under one leg and turn my attention back to the Hallmark movie on TV. It's a good one. *Love Struck Café*. It's about a young architect named Megan Quinn who's sent to her hometown to convince the townspeople to sell so her company can develop an entertainment center there. I think we all know what's going to happen.

Megan falls in love.

Her jaded, big-city thoughts are squashed.

And she rallies with the townspeople.

Classic, wholesome Hallmark.

Just what I need.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Priya says, reaching around and snagging my phone from me. She has my phone unlocked and she's reading the text message before I can even figure out what kind of ninja move she just performed. "Oh my God, look at all of these unanswered text messages, Harmony."

"What?" I grab my phone from her and check out the latest one. *You think*

ignoring me is going to stop me from contacting you? You clearly don't know me at all. I exit out of the text and turn my attention back to the TV.

“What is wrong with you? Holt Green is everything you could ask for in a guy. Including magic fingers.”

“I told you that when I was drunk. I didn't mean it.”

“Liar,” Priya says, poking me. “You said he made you come harder and faster than any guy has before.”

Facts, but I don't need her using that against me.

“I know that you're my best friend and all, but I think you need to stay out of this one. I know what I'm doing.”

“And what exactly are you doing?”

“Trying not to get caught up in a fantasy,” I say.

“A fantasy? How is Holt Green a fantasy?”

“How is he not a fantasy?” I groan while slouching on the couch. “Attractive, athletic, funny, smart, extremely kind, big dick . . . likes me. That's a fantasy. Men like that don't actually exist. He has heartbreak written all over him.”

“Or he has *good guy* written all over him and you're too scared to take the leap.”

That too.

“You don't know he's a good guy,” I counter while twisting a strand of my hair around my finger.

She laughs. Hard. “Oh, he's a good guy. Did you know he's come into the diner twice now looking for you? Instead of leaving, he sat at one of my tables and talked to me.”

Uh . . . no.

“And did you know he's been by the house to try to talk to you, but you've been gone? And instead of badgering me, we went for a walk around the block.”

Did not know that.

“And did you know not once did he boast about himself, or try to hit on me. Ever.”

I nibble on my bottom lip.

“And did you know—”

“Okay, okay. Enough.” I sigh. “Why have you kept that a secret?”

“Because I was hoping you'd be able to pull your own head out of your ass and realize what a great guy he is. Apparently, I had more faith in you

than I should have.” Turning toward me, Priya nudges me with her foot. “Seriously, Harmony, give him a chance. I think he’d be really good for you. Loosen you up.”

“I don’t need to be loosened up.”

“Ha, *okay*.”

I push at her foot. “I don’t.”

“I’ve known you for a few years now, Harmony, and I’ve seen you when you’re having fun and relaxed. That’s not you right now. And I know . . . I know you have a lot going on with trying to find an internship, paying for school, and keeping solid hours at the diner while attending classes. You’re keeping it all together and trying not to fall apart, but you also need to have some fun and, if anything, Holt is fun. You even said it yourself—the day you spent with him was one of the best you’ve had in a while.”

“That was because of the music.”

“You’re such a liar.” Priya laughs.

Standing from the couch and taking my phone with me, I say, “I’m just not into *fun* right now.”

“You’re scared of fun.”

“That too,” I admit. “Thanks for trying, though. I’m going to make dinner and then get some sleep. With classes starting tomorrow, I’m going to need all the sleep I can get.”

Gesturing to the TV, Priya asks, “Don’t you want to see what happens to Megan Quinn?”

“It’s Hallmark. I’m pretty sure she’s going to have a change of heart and save the town from the evil corporation.”

“Ugh. Why did you have to go and ruin that for me?” Priya groans with a smile.

“I’m making some delicious Top Ramen. Want any?”

She pats her stomach. “Had some for lunch. I’ll be digging into the rice cakes for dinner tonight.”

“Look at us living large.” I chuckle and head into our tiny kitchen to fix myself dinner.

Chicken flavoring today. Got to get that pretend protein in.

Once I pop it in the microwave, I lean against the counter and unlock my phone. I scroll through the text messages from Holt. One after the other unanswered.

Holt: *Hey beautiful, care to talk to me today?*

Holt: *Did you know the color yellow makes me hard every time I see it?*

Holt: *I'm eating a giant vat of gummy worms. Care to join me?*

I close my messages and set my phone down. Gripping the counter, I take a deep breath and remind myself why I'm putting up a wall.

He's not real.

He's a heartbreak waiting to happen.

You had way too much fun with him. He could ruin you.

Satisfied with those answers, I grab a fork, and when the microwave beeps, I serve myself dinner.



"HARMONY, YOU FORGOT YOUR NOTEBOOK," Nicole says, coming up behind me.

"Oh, shoot. Thank you." I take the battered notebook from her and clutch it to my chest.

"No problem. I'll see you on Wednesday." She waves and takes off toward the events center.

Nicole is on the soccer team. I've known her since freshman year, when we shared an English class together and were paired up to correct each other's papers. From there, we became class buddies. We never hang out outside of class or studying, which is kind of weird, but we're good friends inside the walls of the school. I think it's because she's busy with training and I'm busy with trying to stay afloat.

With a break between classes, I plan to head to the student union to enjoy my packed lunch. Just as I turn in that direction, I look up to see Holt Green casually sitting on the bench in front of me, long, muscular arms stretched along the back, staring me down with a "gotcha" smile spread across his face.

Damn it.

Pushing off the bench, he walks toward me, the swagger in his step eating up the pavement. God, he looks good. Worn jeans, a black Brentwood Baseball shirt stretched across his thick chest, and just enough scruff caressing his handsome face to make a girl weak in the knees.

There's only one reason Holt Green would be waiting outside my classroom on the first day of school, and she just so happens to be my roommate. I'm so not making breakfast for Priya tomorrow.

“What a coincidence that I would find you here,” Holt says with a cocky grin.

Still clutching my notebook, I look him up and down and then say, “What do you want?”

He holds out his hand. “Let me see your phone.”

“What? No.”

“You can either hand me your phone,” he says in a stern, no-nonsense tone, “or I can make a scene. And trust me when I say I’m *very* good at making scenes.”

Not giving in right away, I study him. Not sure if he means it or not . . .

He smiles and then says loudly, “Holy shit, Harmony, is that you? I haven’t seen you since you wore—”

“Okay, fine,” I say, pushing my phone against his chest, not wanting to know where he was going with that sentence, given what we did the last time I saw him.

With a satisfied smile, he points the face recognition at me and then thumbs around in my phone until he nods. “Just what I thought—my texts were getting to you. You just chose to ignore them. Why is that, Harmony?”

“As much fun as this seems, I’m hungry and have only an hour between classes. So, if you’ll step—”

“Perfect, I’m starving too.” He drapes his arm over my shoulder and starts walking me toward the student union. “We can have lunch together. I had a pretty strenuous workout this morning and I’m ravenous.”

“I wasn’t inviting you to lunch.”

“Wasn’t looking for an invitation. We’ve some catching up to do.”

How could I possibly forget how determined this man is?

Succumbing to his presence, I walk with him to the student union, but I slip from under his hold and keep a good foot of distance between us. I might be having lunch with him, but I don’t need to fall victim to his aphrodisiacal scent.

“You know, I thought we made all this progress after we had our hands down each other’s pants, but here you are, skittish all over again.”

“I see you haven’t lost your candor.”

“That’s innate, baby.”

I glance at him and he winks at me, causing me to heavily roll my eyes. “I don’t think I had enough coffee this morning to get through an interaction with you.”

“I’m more than willing to breathe some life into you.” He tugs on my hand and pulls me against his chest, stopping us in the middle of the walkway. His thumb pulls down on my chin and he says, “Open wide. This will only take a minute.”

Chuckling—unfortunately—I push him away and hurry to the student union, where I reach for the door, but I’m too slow and Holt beats me to it. He ushers me in, and when I turn toward the tables, he grabs me by the hand.

“Food is over there.” He gestures to the sectioned-off food court with its multiple cuisines, such as Chinese food, American, a salad bar, and my favorite, the pizza bar.

“I brought my own lunch,” I say, the smell of the pizza making my stomach lurch toward the food court.

“What did you bring?”

“Does it matter?” I ask.

“Is it better than the pepperoni pizza I know you’re eyeing?”

Damn it, he’s observant.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say, leaving him and going to a table in the corner while he heads to the food court. The pizza might smell amazing, but my wallet doesn’t think it smells good enough.

I set my backpack on the table, quickly pull up my messages on my phone, and send a text to Priya.

Harmony: *I can’t believe you told Holt where I would be.*

Luckily, she texts back right away.

Priya: *Oh, I gave him your entire schedule. Not even sorry.*

Harmony: *Priya, what the hell were you thinking?*

Priya: *I was thinking that my friend needed some fun in her life.*

Harmony: *I’m not making you breakfast tomorrow.*

Priya: *Good thing Holt is delivering me a month’s supply of Pop-Tarts tonight.*

Harmony: *Sellout.*

Priya: *Like I said, not even sorry. Love you, sweet cheeks.*

Grumbling, I set my phone down just in time for a tray of pizza to land in front of me. Holt takes a seat in the bench across from me with his own tray of pizza and a Powerade.

“Eat up, babe,” he says while situating himself in his bench.

“I told you I brought lunch.”

He looks up at me and tilts his head. “And what exactly do you have for

lunch?”

I twist my lips to the side. “Peanut butter and jelly.”

He chuckles. “Eat the pizza.”

“I don’t want your charity,” I say, sounding more ungrateful than I want to.

This is the reason I’ve put him off for the last two weeks. I know that Holt is a good man, but at this stage in my life, I need to stay focused. My future, my chance to leave the cycle of relative poverty, is determined by my GPA. I need to work to stay in school. So there isn’t much time left in my life, and to give my time—*possibly my heart*—to Holt will derail that.

His affectionate eyes flash at me. “I would never consider you charity. I’m trying to win you over so when I ask you out on a date, my chances of you saying ‘yes’ are higher.” He picks up a slice of pizza. “A thank-you would be sufficient.”

Feeling bad, I push my backpack to the side and move the tray in front of me. “Thank you.”

“Attagirl.” He winks. “Now tell me everything I’ve missed over the past two weeks. Start with the men in your life. Have any?”

“Do you really think I have time for a man in my life?”

“For the right man.” He smirks as I lift up the pizza and take a bite.

Ugh, it’s so good. Greasy and cheesy with just enough pepperoni to add that special kick.

I can’t help it. I moan.

Holt laughs out loud. “Hell yeah. I think my chances of scoring a date are high.”

“I’d rather go on a date with this pizza than *you* right now.”

His brow raises when I look at him over my slice. “I stand corrected. Don’t worry, I’m not afraid of a triangular piece of food. I’m thinking by the end of this date, I’ll be scoring another.”

“Who says this is a date?”

“Me.”

Chapter Thirteen

HOLT

Slow down, man. Don't scare her away.

I'm having a hard time reining it in, though.

When I spotted her walking outside of the South Building, I felt my heart stutter in my chest. It's been two weeks since I've seen her. Two weeks of trying to contact her, trying to catch her at the diner or at her house, and falling short every single time. With my training schedule and school starting up, it was difficult to time my pursuit. After failing to find Harmony at the diner on my latest attempt, but instead running into Priya, I enlisted the roommate's help.

Thankfully Priya was more than willing to help. We exchanged phone numbers and she texted me Harmony's class schedule.

Did I feel like a stalker waiting outside for her?

Maybe a little.

But, then again, I'm eating lunch with her, aren't I? Maybe it was a good move, after all. Now I just need to figure out how to get her to go out with me.

"So, you never told me what you're majoring in," I say, wiping my mouth with my napkin.

"You never asked. You were too busy planning out your next sexual innuendo the last time we saw each other."

"Cute that you think I plan those out. They just come naturally."

"Lucky me." She rolls her eyes.

This is not going well. I can feel her reluctance to be near me. The pizza has granted me some time, but not much. I have to impress, and quickly.

“Seriously.” I nudge her under the table. “What are you majoring in?”

She sets her pizza down and leans back in her booth, her eyes trained on me the entire time. After a bout of silence, she finally answers, “Journalism.”

“Really? That’s pretty cool. What do you like to write about?”

She shrugs. “Whatever pops up.”

“Not buying it. There’s something you’re passionate about, and you’re not telling me.”

“What makes you think that?” she asks.

“I see it in your eyes, in your body language, in the way you’ve ignored me over the past two weeks. You don’t just write whatever pops up. You don’t seem to be that kind of person. There’s something burning inside of you, propelling you to take school seriously, to not get distracted, to avoid a guy like me. So, what is it, Harmony?”

The smallest of smirks pulls at the corner of her mouth, but before I can commit it to memory, it disappears. “It’s unnerving how perceptive you are.”

“Can’t hide anything with me, babe.” I take a sip from my drink and say, “Go on, tell me what you’re passionate about.”

“You tell me first,” she challenges with a nod of her head in my direction. “And don’t bullshit me with a clever response.”

“Easy. I’m passionate for life,” I answer, growing serious. “I’m passionate for every breath I take, for being able to sit here, on this sticky booth bench, sitting across from a beautiful girl and enjoying a greasy piece of pizza that I’m going to have to run off later. I’m passionate for every damn day I wake up because there was a time when I wasn’t sure I was going to wake up the next day. And I don’t take that for granted.”

Her eyes soften and her posture becomes less defensive. “Because of your mugging, right?”

I nod.

“It was really bad in the hospital?”

“Yeah.” I grip the back of my neck. “I overheard my parents at one point talking about a funeral. I can still see my mom crying into my dad’s shoulder, her frail body shaking against his. I might have been in and out of it during that time, but those memories are branded on my brain. It seemed like heaven wasn’t ready for this handsome face yet,” I joke to ease the mood.

Thankfully, she chuckles.

“So, you’re passionate about life.” She slowly agrees to that with a nod. “I can appreciate that.”

“Your turn.”

She sighs heavily and looks toward the food court, clearly avoiding eye contact with me while she speaks her truth. “The good,” she quietly says.

“The good?” I ask, feeling like I might know what she’s talking about, but wanting her to clarify.

“Yes, the good. There’s so much negative in the world. Those stories are covered. I feel as though reporters feed off the drama of the negative, froth at the mouth, hoping they can break the next story about what shitty thing is happening in the world.” She shakes her head and then looks me in the eyes. “I’m not that person. I want to write stories about people being lifted up, about the boy across the street that started a philanthropic business mowing lawns for the elderly. I want to talk about the accomplishments made by those who have struggled, who have hustled, who have run the marathon of life and prevailed. I want to shine light on those who are feeding the homeless, clothing the unemployed, who are bestowing grand gestures of empathy.”

“You want to bring more love—more *hope*—into the world.”

Her eyes connect with mine. “Yes, I do.”

I slowly nod while considering her passion. It’s impressive. *She’s impressive.* I don’t know anyone else with such an altruistic heart. With such fierce humility. “You’re incredible.” Before she can knock my compliment away, I add, “Well, if your goal was to push me away, you did a shitty job. Because I very well might have just fallen for you.”

She smirks. “Confessing your love already? Doesn’t that seem a little premature?”

I tap my chin thoughtfully. “Let’s see. You have the kind of sass that turns me on, you’re smart, your mind is a beautiful thing, and you know how to give one hell of a hand job. Yeah, I might be falling for you,” I joke.

She chuckles and shakes her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

With that laugh, I know I have her.

Before she can change the mood, I go in for the kill. “Go out with me, Harmony.”

She’s staring at her pizza, picking a pepperoni off the cheese. “I don’t know.”

“Give me a chance. One date.”

Her lashes flutter as she glances in my direction. “I’m not a fancy girl. I don’t need to be impressed by what’s in your wallet.”

“That’s not how I roll. My parents might have money, but I have a bigger heart. Give me a chance.”

Her teeth move over her bottom lip as she returns back to her pizza. “Okay. One date.”

I can’t contain the smile that spreads from my small victory.

“One date is all I need.”

“Awfully confident.”

“When I set my mind on something, I accomplish it. Making you see me for the man I am, not the façade, is the goal. I think I’m one step closer.”



“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING?” Knox asks, sounding irritated.

“Huh?” I ask, looking up from my phone.

“Who the hell are you texting?”

“No one.” I pocket my phone and turn my attention to Knox, who looks annoyed. I wasn’t texting. I was trying to figure out the best way to spend a date with Harmony. She wants simple, and I can do simple, but I need to do it in a Holt kind of way.

After we parted at the student union—no hug or kiss goodbye, but that’s fine—she texted me later that night and laid out her schedule. She’s pretty busy at the diner but she does have Thursday night off, which I laid claim to. I let her know that I get out of practice around five, and I’ll pick her up after I shower and get cleaned up.

That was the last correspondence I had with her.

“Doesn’t seem like no one. You’re buried in your phone.”

As we make our way down to the stadium, I reach out and tickle the underside of Knox’s chin. “Are you feeling neglected, Knoxy Poo?”

He swats his hand away. “Don’t fucking call me that.”

I chuckle. “Tell me what has you so distraught.”

“Not distraught, just wondering why you’ve gone missing lately. It’s as if your head isn’t in this friendship.”

“Aw, you’re feeling neglected. Want me to cook you dinner tonight? I can wine and dine you.”

“I wouldn’t pass up a burger, but seriously, dude, what’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on,” I say, not wanting to dive deep into what’s happening with me and Harmony.

For one, I’m superstitious, and it feels like if I speak about Harmony, the date might not happen. Childish thinking? Maybe. But I also have lived off superstitions my entire life, and I’m not about to stop now.

Also, I don’t feel like getting into it with my buddies. They will find out at some point, but while I’m trying to get a good grip on Harmony, I want to keep that to myself.

“You’re lying to me,” Knox points out. “But I’ll let it go for now only because I’m trying to figure out how I can capture Emory’s attention.”

“Hmm.” I give it some thought. “From the brief interaction I had with her, I would say she doesn’t like douchebags.” I pat Knox on the shoulder as we reach the entrance to the stadium. “I think you’re shit out of luck there.”

“Wow, you’re fucking helpful.”

I chuckle and we make our way down the hallways of the coveted Brentwood baseball stadium. The walls are decorated with past legends—legends who have gone on to play professional baseball and have had long-lasting careers. It’s the reason I’m here at Brentwood. To earn a degree and to move on through the baseball system and become a professional one day. If I learned two things from my mugging, it’s to never take one day for granted and do what your heart wants.

My heart wants to be out on the field, the grass beneath my feet, surrounded by seven-foot walls that I’ve spent my life learning to scale to steal homeruns. My heart wants the thrill of a first inning, a hopeful crowd cheering on the home team. I want to feel the vibration of my bat through my bones as I make contact with the ball. I want the excitement of diving into home while the catcher tries to tag me out.

Nothing is more exhilarating.

Nothing makes my heart beat faster.

Nothing will make me feel more at home than baseball.

“Are you headed to the trainer?” Knox asks as we make our way into the locker room.

“Yeah, just dropping off my things and changing.”

“Do you have to get tested today?”

I set my backpack down in my locker and start putting on my Under Armour compression shorts, followed by my mesh shorts and Brentwood

Baseball T-shirt.

“Yeah,” I say as a wave of unexpected nerves hits me.

“Are you feeling good?” Knox asks, concern in his voice.

“Feeling pretty good. I think the training we did this summer proved that I’ll be okay.”

“Good.” He eyes me. “And you’d tell me if you weren’t okay?”

I tie my shoes and stand from my locker. “Don’t baby me, Knox.”

“I’m not. Just being a concerned friend.”

“I would tell you if something was wrong, okay?”

“Just like when you didn’t tell me last year and I was rushing you to the hospital?”

I fill up my water bottle at the refill station and say, “That was stubborn pride. Won’t happen again. Plus, Disik wouldn’t let it happen again.”

“Will he be there?”

I nod. “Yup. Always is.” I head toward the locker room door and say, “Catch you at practice.”

“Good luck,” I hear him call out before I head down the hallway toward the training room.

Brentwood University is known for its superior athletic facilities, mainly, its multiple baseball facilities. We have state-of-the-art training rooms and trainers, as well as coaches, and weight-training staff. If anything were to happen, they would be able to handle it.

I enter the training room and immediately see Coach Disik talking with our trainer, Dan, next to the treadmill and ECG machine.

They glance up and Disik immediately greets me. “Green, feeling good today?”

“Yes, Coach,” I answer. “Feeling great.”

He nods to my shirt. “Then let’s get this test over and done with.”

I reach behind my head to grab my shirt and pull it off and toss it on one of the training tables. I walk up to Dan, who starts putting sticky electrodes on my chest. It’s not my first ECG test and it won’t be my last.

Not as long as I continue to train my body like I do. Not as long as I keep reaching for my goals.

I can feel Disik’s eyes on me, staring me down, like he always does.

Not looking him in the eyes, I reiterate, “I’m good, Coach. Promise.”

“We’ll let the test and Dan make that assessment.”

Fair enough.



HOLT: *How was your day?*

Harmony: *On my break at the diner. I just served some of your freshmen. I feel bad for their parents.*

Holt: *LOL! Why?*

Harmony: *To know you raised such idiots? Must be heartbreaking.*

Holt: *I thought you were in the business of finding love in this world.*

Harmony: *You're right. They were pretty good-looking even though they had bricks for brains.*

Holt: *Watch it. You're only supposed to have eyes for me.*

Harmony: *Didn't realize when I agreed to a date that I was signing an exclusivity contract.*

Holt: *Did I not mention that? Hmm, must have slipped my mind. I'll scan you over the details, but, yes, you are in fact exclusive to me.*

Harmony: *I see, and are you exclusive to me?*

Holt: *Baby, I've been exclusive to you ever since I saw you in that yellow bikini.*

Harmony: *You're on top of your charm game tonight.*

Holt: *Got some good news. Feeling spicy.*

Harmony: *What kind of good news?*

Holt: *Nothing too riveting. Just baseball stuff. Now I have a question for you. What kind of food are you craving?*

Harmony: *Is this for the date?*

Holt: *It could be for any time. Just give me the word and I'll be at your front door in an instant.*

Harmony: *You're starting to sound desperate.*

Holt: *Desperate for you.*

Harmony: *As much as I would enjoy watching you beg your way into my house with food, I need to get some studying done tonight.*

Holt: *Fair enough. Wouldn't want to take you away from your studies. What about the date? Can I offer you sausage? I happen to know a place where you can find a girthy link.*

Harmony: *Dear God, are you talking about your penis?*

Holt: *What? Never. But . . . does that mean you consider me to be girthy?*

Harmony: *I have about two minutes of my break left. Is this how you want to spend it?*

Holt: Reminding you of my dong? Uh, yeah. Sounds productive to me. Now, remember when you were stroking it? What did that feel like?

Harmony: Uncomfortably bumpy.

Holt: Oof, low blow—pun intended.

Harmony: Are we done here?

Holt: No. What are you craving food wise?

Harmony: Chinese. I love beef and broccoli.

Holt: A woman who knows what she wants. I like that.

Harmony: Is that all?

Holt: That's it. Have a good rest of your shift, babe.

Harmony: Thanks. Talk to you later.

Chapter Fourteen

HARMONY

“Oooh, girl. You look good,” Priya says as I walk down the stairs and into our shared living room.

“I don’t look too slutty?” I adjust my cutoff jean shorts, pulling on the hem.

“A little slutty, but a classy slutty. Like, you don’t mean to look slutty, but your cleavage and shorts length beg to differ.”

I nervously tug on my hair. “Should I go change?”

Priya vehemently shakes her head. “No way. You’re going to blow his mind.”

I turn toward the mirror in our entryway and scan my reflection. Red, tight-fitting T-shirt with a deep V-neck that shows off my cleavage, tucked into a pair of high-waisted jean shorts that barely cover my ass. I paired the outfit with a pair of white Chuck Taylors to be safe and pulled my hair half up and curled the ends. Casual, but looking better than when I go to classes or work at the diner.

I’ve no idea what we’re doing tonight; all I know is that we could possibly be having Chinese food. I was texting with Holt this morning in between classes. It felt so natural, and we were going back and forth about our favorite episodes from *The Big Bang Theory*. I claimed Amy as my favorite character. He claimed Sheldon, which then made him go off on a tailspin of how we’re meant to be together. It was ridiculous, but it also made me smile, something I feel like I haven’t done in a while.

“Will you stop messing with your shorts?” Priya asks in an annoyed tone. “It’s not the first time you’ve worn them, but this is the first time you’re self-conscious in them.”

“I know,” I groan and then take a deep breath, turning away from the mirror. It’s stupid, really. He saw more of my ass in my yellow bikini, and let’s not forget he’s had his hand down my pants already. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t care about this stuff.”

A large smile plays across Priya’s lips. “Ahh, that’s because you like this guy.”

Trying to stay as casual as possible, I say, “No, I don’t.”

Priya lets out a laugh just as there’s a knock at the door. “Oh, there he is. Lover boy.”

Looking my friend dead in the eyes, I say, “I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Taking a deep breath, I open the door to our modest townhome and come face to face with Holt Green.

He’s dressed up, hair styled, looking sinfully handsome, and I realize in this moment, I have no chance of brushing this guy off. Not when I’m greeted with a whiff of his cologne and a sexy smirk.

Slowly, his eyes scan my legs, up my torso, and to my face. His eyes burn with lust. I can see it in the way he rubs his palms together and licks his lips, as if I’m the main dish for tonight.

Hell, I very well might be.

He might be the appetizer dressed like that. Jeans and a simple black T-shirt that clings to all the right places, he’s dressed down like me—thank God—but my heart rate still picks up at the sight of him.

“Looking fine, babe,” he says, leaning in and placing his hand on my waist as he presses a chaste kiss to the corner of my mouth. Over my shoulder, he waves to Priya. “Hey, Priya.”

“She’s nervous. Be kind to her,” Priya calls out before turning back to her phone.

Nostrils flared, I say to Holt, “I’m not nervous.”

“She’s nervous she looks too slutty.”

Why are friends like this?

Holt gives me another once-over and smirks as he says, “Nah, you look fucking good.” He takes my hand in his. “I’ll have her back at a decent hour.”

Priya waves while still looking at her phone. “Have fun, you two.”

Holt leads me out of the townhome, shutting the door behind us, and opens up the passenger side door to his BMW. I slip into the luxurious car, loving the feel of the smooth leather beneath me. I'm not a car person, nor am I ever impressed by cars, but there's something about Holt's two-door, sporty black car that has my stomach flipping.

After Holt gets in the vehicle and we've both buckled up, he presses the ignition button and then places his hand on my leg, resting it there as he drives.

It's a territorial move, something I would expect once you claim the titles of boyfriend and girlfriend. Not something I would expect for the first date.

Or would this be considered the second date?

Maybe third?

Who knows?

"I can practically smell the gears in your head working overtime." He squeezes my leg as we come to a stoplight. "Relax, Harmony. I'm not going to bite . . . at least, not right away." He winks.

"Uh, how was practice?"

"Same old, same old. Ran a lot, worked on ball tracking techniques, lost my pants sliding into third, hit some bombs—"

"Wait, you lost your pants?"

He chuckles and makes a right at a stop sign, heading toward the lake. "It's common for me. The first time it happened was my freshman year. I hit a triple down the right field line and booked it around the bases, the throw was close, and I was motioned to hit the dirt. I did some sort of side leap in the air, and when I landed on my stomach, my belt caught on the ground. As I propelled forward, my pants slid down my legs, rendering me pantless, ass up, and exposed. I ended up looking like a bare-ass ostrich reaching for the base. The third baseman whipped his gloved hand back with the tag and nailed me right in the back of the balls."

I laugh out loud, picturing the entire thing in my head. "Oh my God, let me guess—there's no video of this."

He shakes his head, humor in his voice. "No, but if there were, I would be showing it to everyone I knew. In case you were wondering, I was safe. I held on to the base even though I was pummeled in the nuts."

"What a hero," I joke.

"That day, I was. We ended up winning the game because I was hit in with the winning run after I recovered. But a pants slip happens often for me.

Not sure why it's my thing, but it is. If you come to my games, you'll be in for quite a show."

"Is this you trying to get me to come root you on?"

"Wouldn't hurt to have a fan in the stands. My parents make a few games during the season, but their schedules are pretty busy. Might be nice to have a local there wearing my jersey, boobs bouncing up and down in excitement as my pants get stripped from my ass while I slide into third."

I lightly snort. "There's something seriously wrong with you."

"Possibly. Or do I just like to have fun?" he asks as he slides into one of many parking lots that look over Lake Michigan.

"I think you're insane."

He turns toward me once we're parked and wiggles his eyebrows. "And yet, you're on a date with me. What does that say about you?"

"That I've lost my mind completely."

"Glad you can admit that." He gives my leg another squeeze. "Wait right here."

He hops out of the car, rounds the front, and then opens my door for me while holding out his hand. I stare at it for a brief second, the width of his palm sturdy and inviting. Holt, a gentleman? If I saw him from afar I'm not sure I would believe he'd open doors on a date, but after getting a brief glimpse into his life, I find it very fitting . . . and endearing.

And sexy.

I take his hand and he helps me from the car, shutting the door behind me.

He takes me to the trunk and asks, "Are you okay with carrying some things?"

"Yeah." I chuckle. "Who would say no to that?"

He shrugs and pops his trunk open, revealing an insulated cooler, a large blanket, and a smaller cooler, which I'm assuming has drinks in it. He hands me the blanket, and with a teasing glint, he asks, "Can you handle that?"

"I carry drinks on a tray for a living. I can handle a blanket." A blanket that smells like absolute heaven. I need to know the kind of laundry detergent this guy uses because it smells like a dream.

"You're right." He reaches out and squeezes my bicep. "Look at those Arnolds popping."

"Arnolds?" I ask as he pulls out the coolers and another small bag and then shuts his trunk. I take the small bag while he picks up the coolers.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger. Tool bags usually refer to their biceps as

Arnolds.”

“Ah, and since you’re a tool bag . . .”

He winks. “Precisely.”

Chuckling, we walk toward the lake and find a secluded spot nestled under a threesome of trees that offers just enough shade from the descending warm summer sun. Holt sets the coolers down and takes the blanket from me. Quietly he unfolds the blanket and lays it out on the grass. When I glance toward the lake, I notice the Chicago skyline in front of us. It's a beautifully crisp backdrop, and for the first time in a while, I can feel excitement bloom in the pit of my stomach.

When was the last time I went out on a date? I can’t even remember, and I don’t think I’ve ever had a man open a car door for me, either.

I watch Holt set up the picnic himself, not wanting to step in and help him because it seems as though he has a process. But as I stand there, watching him, I can’t help but wonder why he’d be so interested in a girl like me.

Not to sound like a Debbie Downer, but he seems to have it all. The future, the talent, the charisma. Holt Green is the type of guy that you just know is going to make something of his life. I, on the other hand, don’t have a lot of promise. Look at my background, where I come from. The cards aren’t stacked in my favor, and the only thing I really have going for me is pure determination to make something of myself.

I guess that has to account for something.

“Hey, what’s with the crease in your brow?” Holt asks, standing after he set everything up.

“Nothing.” I shake off the negative thoughts and plaster on a smile. “So, is this how you impress girls?”

He doesn’t answer right away, but instead studies me, and I’m nervous he’s about to call me out, but instead of diving deep into my mood shifts, he says, “Girl.”

“Huh?”

“This is how I try to impress a girl. Singular. One girl. You.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, please. As if you haven’t dated other people.”

“I have. But I’ve never worked this hard on a date before. In the past I’ve taken girls to a restaurant and left it at that. This is different. *You* are different.”

There’s no teasing tone.

There’s no smirk.

He's dead serious, and that makes me uneasy.

Like I said to Priya earlier, he's too perfect. He's going to break my heart. I can feel it already, because with every smart comeback, every smile, every time he even looks in my direction, I feel my pulse pick up, and I can sense my body wanting to lean in toward him, soak him up.

But I don't know him. I don't know what his plans are. I don't know what his track record is when it comes to girls. Is he looking for a relationship? Is he looking for a one-night stand? Relationships scare me, but one night with Holt Green I fear would never be enough.

Before I can stop myself, I ask, "What are your intentions?"

He chuckles. "Are you playing the role of the protective father *and* the girl I'm trying to date? Because that would be a first for me."

"I'm being serious, Holt. Before I sit down and get swept up into whatever you have planned, I need to know your end goal here. Is this a one-night thing for you? If so, please be honest so I can get in the right frame of mind for it."

Taking a step forward with his eyes sincere and intent upon me, he cups my cheek and says, "This is *not* a one-night thing for me. This is me wanting to spend time with you, wanting to get to know you more, with no hope to take it any further than that tonight. Okay?"

"Sooo, your intent is to date me?"

He chuckles lightly as his thumb rubs over my cheek. "Yes, Harmony. My intent is to date you. Hopefully multiple times—that's if I can win you over." He glances at the picnic setup. "How am I doing so far?"

I take in the setup. As I predicted, Chinese food in carryout boxes is lined up next to the insulated cooler, which has a small bud vase of flowers on top. The Brentwood Baseball logo screen-printed on the blanket reminds me exactly who I'm on a date with, but instead of being intimidated or annoyed, I'm in awe.

I was so quick to judge Holt when I first met him at the diner. He was the epitome of everything I despise here on campus. The entitled jocks.

But he's anything but that, and I'm seeing that more and more with every second I spend with him.

"I think you're doing a pretty good job so far."

He gives himself a fist pump like a dork and then takes my hand in his, linking our fingers. "Are we good with the overprotective father questions, or do you have more?"

“I think we’re good.”

“So, can we enjoy our date now? Because I’m starving.”

“Me too.”

He tugs me down to the blanket. I sit cross-legged, and Holt stretches out his long legs. Wanting to be more comfortable, I slip off my shoes and set them to the side while Holt goes through the different takeout boxes.

“Beef and broccoli for the lady,” he says, handing me a takeout carton. “Are you sophisticated enough to use chopsticks?” His brow raises in curiosity that makes me laugh.

“I’m going to disappoint and say I need a fork.”

“Ah, I knew there was a flaw in there somewhere, but it’s an easy flaw we can fix.”

He whips out two sets of chopsticks and tears them apart. He then rubs them together a few times, examines the sticks, and then holds out a pair to me.

“What do you expect me to do with those?”

“Learn.” He holds up a pair for himself. “I’m going to teach you how to use them in one minute. It won’t be hard, and then when you show up at your next fancy outing, you’ll dazzle your friends with your talents.”

That makes me laugh out loud. “Pretty sure my friends couldn’t care less if I know how to use chopsticks.”

“Then maybe a future skill when you’re at your fancy business meetings speaking about all the positive things in the world.” He nudges me. “Humor me.”

“I hate that you might be right.”

“I’m proud of you for not being so stubborn.” He reaches out and takes one chopstick from me. “Now take this one and pinch it with your thumb and index finger.” I do what he says. “Perfect. And see this little hole you made? Slip the other chopstick through it like this.” He slips it through. “Now take your middle finger and press against it. That’s your base, and you use the top chopstick to move around and grip.”

I test it out and it feels really awkward, but I see what he’s saying.

“Yeah, just like that.” He hands me the carton of beef and broccoli and says, “Now go in it at an angle, never up and down. Scoop and pinch.”

I dip the chopsticks into the carton and awkwardly fumble with a piece of broccoli a few times before I grip it. In surprise, I look up at Holt. “I did it.”

He genuinely smiles. “You did. Now bring it up to your mouth and eat.”

Nervous it's going to fall, I dip my head and meet my hand halfway. I take hold of the broccoli and bite down.

Holt laughs and claps at the same time. "There you go, babe. You did it." He nudges my leg. "Don't you feel accomplished?"

"A little, yeah." I shyly look him in the eyes. "Thank you for teaching me."

He wiggles his eyebrows. "I can teach you more things that involve your hands."

I roll my eyes. "Should have seen that coming."

"In all seriousness, you're welcome. I take kisses as tips." He puckers his lips and closes his eyes, moving in closer to me. I plant my palm against his face and push him away.

"You're going to have to try harder to get a kiss."

He motions to the picnic he set up. "This isn't worthy of a kiss?"

"It is, but you have to hold thoughtful conversation with me to seal the deal. Not constantly allude to sexual things."

"Ah, you want to tap into my intellect." He picks up his chopsticks and pops open a carton that seems to have some sort of chicken in it. "I can do that. What do you want to talk about?"

I give it a thought and then ask, "What's something you've always wanted to try but haven't yet?"

His brow raises in surprise. "Okay, jumping right in, I see." He pops a piece of chicken into his mouth and chews while he thinks. Once he swallows, he says, "I have two things. Want the immature one first?"

"Yes, let's get that out of the way."

"It's nothing sexual, if that's what you're thinking."

"Shocking."

Laughing, he hands me a water and a napkin that he didn't hand me earlier. I take a sip from the water as he says, "Disik is a total bastard."

"Your head coach, right?"

He nods. "Yeah. He's the best coach in the country, hands down. But a total bastard, and any guy who has ever played with him would agree with that statement. I've never seen the man smile. He always looks as if he's permanently trying to squeeze a fart out."

I laugh out loud and cover my mouth. "Oh my God, you're right. I've seen pics of him and that's a very accurate statement. His face is always scrunched up."

“Doesn’t change, ever,” Holt says before handing me an eggroll. It seems so natural, so casual, as if we’ve been eating meals together for years. “The only time I think he knows joy is when we’re conditioning.”

“He doesn’t smile when you win?”

Holt shakes his head. “No. He expects wins. Winning doesn’t make him happy. Winning ensures he’s not angry.”

“Well, that must be fun.”

He shrugs. “You get used to it. There weren’t many coaches I grew up with that treaded on the kind side. Always pushing, always asking for more.”

“Okay, so what does this have to do with the question I asked you?” I ask before taking a bite of my eggroll, and oh my God, is that good. I need to find out where he got this food from.

“What’s one thing I’ve never done that I wish I could do? Easy, tell Disik to fuck off when we’re running foul poles.”

I nearly choke on my eggroll when I let out an uproarious laugh. I cover my nose and take a deep breath before saying, “Wow, I was not expecting that.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like working out.” And it shows. “But Disik gets in these moods where he just wants to torture us for no reason. We’ll sometimes spend an entire practice just conditioning. He makes us run foul pole to foul pole, either sprinting or doing burpees or bear crawls, or whatever maniacal thing he came up with that day. And in those moments, I want to stand up, look him dead in the eye, and tell him to fuck off.”

I chuckle. “Why can I see it so vividly in my head?”

“Probably because I’m two more burpee foul poles from doing it.”

“Okay, so that was your immature response. What’s your mature one?”

He takes a sip of his drink and looks me in the eyes. In a deep, serious tone, he says, “Fall in love.”

“Oh,” I answer while swallowing hard.

Dear.

God.

I was not expecting such a guileless answer from Holt.

The fuck-off answer—yeah, I can see it. Goes with his smart-ass attitude. But falling in love? And for the first time? It adds a layer to Holt I don’t think I was ready for.

Yes, Harmony. My intent is to date you. Hopefully multiple times—that’s if I can win you over.

Is he looking for a serious relationship?

From what he said earlier and the answer to his question now, I'm thinking that he might.

Does he think he can find that with me?

Do I want a serious relationship with him?

I glance up at his hazel eyes, and a wave of butterflies flutters in my stomach. He could have given up on me. I've been a cold fish toward him. Distant. Aloof. Made him work hard for one simple outing with me. A relative nobody in the scheme of things. And yet . . . he's made this date something unique. *For me.*

Yes. Maybe I do want something more with Holt. Maybe I do.

Chapter Fifteen

HOLT

Fuck, she's beautiful.

And funny. So fucking funny.

And she takes my teasing like a goddamn champ and throws it right back at me.

We filled up on Chinese and now we're sitting next to each other, watching the mini waves from the lake lap at the shore.

"We've been to the lake before," I say. "But I like this date better."

"I wouldn't consider the first time a date. More like intruding on a pre-planned girls' day."

"It ended like a date," I say with a wink.

"That's not how I usually end dates. You caught me in a weak moment."

"Not going to complain about it. And just so you know, there are no expectations for tonight. Well, there's one."

"One?" she asks, pushing her hair behind her shoulder. "And what would that be?"

"Hoping to find out what your lips taste like."

"You're going to have to work a little harder to find that out," she says with a cheeky grin.

"I've no problem with working harder." Leaning back on my hands and looking up toward the dimming sky, I ask her, "What's been the best day you've had so far in your life? Besides our beach day, of course."

She rolls her eyes cutely. "Of course." Pausing, she pulls her legs against

her chest and hugs them. “Best day so far in my life? That’s a hard question. And a day came to mind but it’s going to make me sound ungrateful.”

“Lay it on me.”

“I want to preface this with saying I love my parents. So much. They’ve given me a modest yet beautiful life and I’m grateful, but I think one of my best days was moving here.”

“Starting a new chapter?” I ask, knowing the feeling.

She nods. “Yeah. I grew up in a small town, which has its pluses and minuses. But I watched my parents live in the same house and never do anything outside of their bubble. We never traveled. We never went on vacation. We never saw anything outside of the fifty-mile radius we lived in. I wanted so much more, and leaving was the way to find what I was looking for.”

“So, you’ve found it?” I ask.

She lets out a dry chuckle. “Not sure. My naïve eighteen-year-old self thought moving away was going to solve all my problems, but I’m starting to find out that’s not the case. Sometimes I have to face my problems head on even if they scare me.”

“And what would be a problem you’re facing head on?”

She turns her head and looks at me with those beautiful brown eyes. “You.”

“Me?” I point to my chest. “Nah, I’m not a problem, baby. I’m a solution.”

She chuckles. “And that’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’re too smooth. I was swept up by a guy like you before—”

“I’m not the asshole who—”

“I know.” She places her hand on my leg. “I know, Holt. But the problem is, I’m trying to convince myself of that. Just like you, I’ve never been in love. I thought I was at one point in high school, but it was more infatuation than anything. And then when I got to college, I was introduced to a different kind of guy. The college boy who doesn’t care about much anything else except his dick. So, I’ve avoided dating, until you.”

“What made you give me a chance?”

“Your persistence.” I laugh. “And I think you’re a nice guy. In spite of the sarcastic façade you try to hide behind, there’s a nice guy beneath the pomp and circumstance that is Holt Green.”

“I wouldn’t call it sarcasm. I just like to have fun with people. Found out

that life is too short to be serious and angry all the time.”

“From your mugging,” she asks.

“Yeah, something like that,” I answer with a sigh. After watching the sun start to head toward the horizon, I turn to her and say, “Truth or dare?”

She keeps her eyes trained on me as if she wants to dive deeper into my nonchalant answer, and I wait for it. I wait for her to press me, but she doesn’t. Instead she tips her head back, exposing her beautiful neck as she says, “Truth, because I feel like your dare is going to be something lame like . . . ‘kiss me.’”

“How is that lame?”

Her head rolls to the side so her eyes connect with mine. “It’s lame because you can find a better way to lay your lips on mine.”

Hell.

I’ll fucking do it right now.

I’ve been thinking about those lips all night.

No, scratch that, I’ve been thinking about those lips for more than two weeks.

I’ve been thinking about how lush they are, how soft and inviting. I’ve considered how they would taste, like watermelon or cherry. I’ve wondered if they would open for me easily, or if she’d make me work for it. Given how our interactions have been, I’d say she’d make me work for it.

“Pfft, I’m smoother than that.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You’re really not.”

Chuckling, I say, “Got to enjoy being brought down a peg or two by the girl you’re pursuing.”

“Pursuing—I like the sound of that.”

“You would.”

She laughs and nudges my foot with hers. “Ask your question.”

“What are your top three turn-ons?”

I watch as a sexy smile spreads across her face. “Taking notes, Green?”

“You can bet your perfect ass that I am.”

She pushes some hair behind her ear and says, “Turn-ons . . . Well, clearly someone with muscles. That’s how I found my hand down your pants on our first non-date.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll be sure my penis writes a thank-you note to my muscles.”

“You’re so stupid.” She chuckles. “I’m also a sucker for a guy who

knows how to use his hands.”

I flash my fingers at her, wiggling them. “I believe we’re both in the know when it comes to the magic that rests in my hands. Your pussy knows quite well.”

“I swear you asked this question to torture me.”

“I would never,” I say, full of sarcasm. “Come on. One more answer.”

“Okay, one more turn-on . . . Uh . . . a nice dick. And I know all my answers were physical, but I figured that’s what we were going for.”

“Define nice dick.”

“Doesn’t have to be big, but it has to be well maintained. Girth and length are a bonus.”

“Ahh . . . so my dick.”

“Eh, yours is decent.”

That makes me straight-up guffaw. “Okay, yeah, sure . . . decent.” I roll my eyes.

Ignoring me, she asks, “Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” I answer.

A chill shakes her, and without giving it a second thought, I reach over and tug her so she’s sitting between my legs.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Keeping you warm.” I encircle her with my legs and arms, bringing her back to my chest and the back of her head to my shoulder. Her arms are cold, so I wrap my arms around her shoulders and attempt to bring her warmth. Whispering into her ear, I ask, “Are you comfortable?”

“I am,” she says, almost in awe.

“Good. Now I think you owe me a question.”

“I do.” She pauses and her head nuzzles against my shoulder. I hear her take in a deep breath, and then she asks, “What laundry detergent do you use?”

“That’s your question?” I ask while laughing.

“Yeah, it is. And don’t bullshit me. Tell me the real stuff. Dryer sheets and all.”

I chuckle some more. “Just Tide Sport. Nothing too fancy.”

“Then what cologne do you use?”

“I believe that’s two questions.”

She looks back at me. “Humor me.”

“Armani Code,” I answer. “Why, you think I smell good, Harmony?”

“Not good. Amazing. Add that to my turn-on list.”

“Noted.” I want to kiss her cheek so bad, feel her skin against my lips, but I hold off and say, “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Really scared of the dare, huh?”

She shakes her head lightly against my shoulder. “No, I’ll do a dare when I think I’m ready. Maybe it’s best you get to know me right now.”

“I do want to get to know you.” I give my question some thought. I want to ask her something that she has to put some reflection into. Something that will get her mind spinning. “Okay, what’s the biggest lie you’ve ever told?”

“Oh, good one.”

I feel her lean into me more and I have to say, as I take in the picturesque skyline in front of us, I think this is what contentment feels like. I loved our beach day, but I fucking love this calm, serene moment so much more.

“Biggest lie I ever told . . . hmm . . .” She pauses, and then she answers, “Most recently? Probably when I told Priya that I wasn’t interested in you.”

“Really?” I ask, dragging the word out. Interesting. I never would have expected that answer, especially since she’s always poking at my ego. All that did was inflate it some more. “That doesn’t seem like a big lie, more like avoidance.”

“Probably, but I couldn’t think of anything. I’ve always been truthful with my parents. I’m sure there’s some sort of lie I told a friend back in the day, but I can’t think of any. That’s the most recent thing that came to mind. Trust me, it pained me saying it.”

I chuckle. “And why’s that?”

“Because I don’t want you getting the impression that I like you.”

“But you do.”

“Yes, but I don’t need you knowing that. I’m still not one hundred percent sold on you.”

“That’s fair. How can I change your mind?”

“Time,” she answers. “That and another truth or dare.”

“Truth, then.”

Stiffening, she asks, “Have you ever cheated on anyone?”

“Never,” I answer. She looks back at me and my eyes connect with hers, emanating the truth. “Not once. The thought has never crossed my mind.”

“Good to know.” She starts to look away, but I place my fingers on her chin and force her to look at me again.

“And I have no plans of ever cheating. It’s not in my blood.” Her eyes search mine and I decide to elaborate. “I know what it looks like. I’m the charming frat boy who puts on a front but then screws the girls over in the long run. That’s how you first saw me, right?”

“Maybe a little,” she says, guilt heavy in her voice.

“I get it. I really do. But I want you to know, I’m not that guy. I’m loyal as they come, and when I’m serious about a person, I don’t fuck around.” I actually hate that this is something Harmony questions. I’m *not* a man who would stay with someone if things aren’t working. I’m also *not* a guy who looks at other girls and wonders if the proverbial grass is greener on the other side. *This* girl has caught my attention. I pinch her chin. “I have my eyes set on you, Harmony, and I don’t plan on changing that.”



THE SUN IS KISSING the horizon now. We’ve moved our picnic to the base of one of the trio of trees, using part of the blanket to keep us warm as Harmony leans against me and I lean against the tree. It’s comfortable. Feels natural. As if she’s meant to be in my arms.

“When did you start playing baseball?” she asks while bringing her legs up against her chest.

“Young. I was rambunctious as a kid and my dad thought it would be a good idea to teach me patience. So, when I was five, he signed me up for tee ball. He has videos of me running all around the field, being *that* kid, while the others try to play the game. Parents hated me. I heard my dad get in an argument with one about my behavior. Didn’t change what I was doing.”

“You, a hellion? Nooo,” she says with humor.

“It took me two seasons to calm down and start to develop patience. And that’s when I started falling in love with the sport.”

“Was it challenging playing baseball and growing up in the city?”

I wince. “Well, we had private cages where we went to for practice.”

“So, you were very lucky.”

“Pretty much.”

“Since you grew up in the city, are you a Yankees or a Mets fan?”

“As if that’s even a question. Yankees. I was just old enough to be able to fall in love with Derek Jeter at shortstop. Caught some games with Mo on the

mound. But even though Dad had the money for the fancy seats behind home plate, he enjoyed watching the games with the rowdy fans. We hung out in right field and on occasion Dad would grab seats with the bleacher creatures, but that wasn't until I was older and Dad didn't mind me hearing all the taunting and bad language."

"Let me guess—you taunted as well?"

"Hell yeah. It's what you do when you're a Yankees fan. You're loud, you're obnoxious, and you expect wins."

"You plan on going pro, right?"

"Yeah, hoping to get drafted at the end of this year," I answer, slowly rubbing my thumb over her exposed arm.

"So, when you play and someone heckles you, do you think you can handle it?"

"If I can handle your snark, I'm pretty sure I can handle a fan in the stands."

She chuckles. "I'm not that snarky."

"Snarky enough, babe."

"I get it from my mom. She's always had a level of snark I've aspired to."

"And what level are you at now compared to your mom?"

"I would say I'm about two levels higher than her, so you should be scared."

I shiver under her. "Shaking in my skin."

She laughs and then sighs. "I should probably get going. It's getting late and I have early classes, followed by studying and a long shift at the diner."

"Let me steal a few more minutes," I say softly.

She turns so her eyes connect with mine. "Steal a few more minutes?"

I nod and tip her chin up. "Just a few more. Please."

Her smile is sweet, addicting. "Only because you asked politely." She goes to turn her gaze back to the lake, but I stop her and help her shift so she's leaning against one of my arms rather than my chest. I want to be able to look at her beautiful face, at least for a few more minutes.

"Tell me, Harmony, what's a difficulty in your life right now?"

"A difficulty? Why do you ask? Are you going to help solve it?"

"Maybe. Or I can just help you talk through it. That's what relationships are about."

"So, we're in a relationship now?" Her brows raise.

I shrug my shoulders. "Yeah, why not? I like you, and you're clearly

infatuated with me. Might as well make it official.”

“You’re far too sure of yourself.”

“Tell me you don’t like me.”

Her lips seal up and I chuckle.

“That’s what I thought. Now, tell me about a difficulty so your handsome and smells-good boyfriend can help you.”

“Wow.” She shakes her head in humor. “You forgot to add delusional in there.”

“Just talk to me.”

Sighing heavily, she says, “Fine. I’ve been having a hard time finding an internship. The only ones that seem to have open positions are asking for heavy hours that I can’t fulfill because of my job.”

“Shit, that sucks. Are they paid internships?”

She shakes her head. “No. But are there any paid internships out there? Especially for journalism?”

“Maybe.” I shrug while my mind starts to reel with possibilities. “I would keep looking. Who knows? Something might land on your lap.”

Her hand lifts to my cheek and her fingers drag along my jaw. “You’re cute for being so positive.”

“You hit a roadblock. No need to throw in the towel.”

“Not throwing in the towel. Just need a breather for a second before I dive back into the pool of rejection.”

“Within that pool, there’s an acceptance somewhere. I know it.”

She tilts her head to the side, studying me. “Holt Green, it scares me how good you are for me.”

That comment puts a smile on my face. “Don’t be scared, babe, be happy.” I lift my hand to her jaw and stroke her cheek with my thumb. “There was a reason you served my table that fateful drunken night. We were meant to meet.”

“Jumping the gun,” she whispers as I bring her closer in my arms.

“Overly confident. I know what I like, and I like you.” I rest my forehead against hers and continue to stroke her cheek. “Tell me you like me.”

Quietly, she says, “I like you, Holt.”

That’s all I need. Angling her mouth toward mine, I brush my lips against hers, testing out her reaction, and when she doesn’t pull away, I kiss her.

I fucking kiss her.

Harmony.

This girl who hasn't left my mind since I met her.

My mouth finally tastes hers, and it's the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. Like a goddamn spring day. Yeah, I said it—a spring day.

Joy sparks through me as I pull her closer, molding our mouths together, opening for her when her tongue swipes against my bottom lip. My hand climbs up her spine to the back of her head and I hold her in place, my fingers tangling through her thick, dark strands.

Her palm finds my cheeks and she grips me tightly, holding me in place, angling me better. I follow her lead, giving her this moment to explore me. I have plenty of time to explore her.

So much fucking time, because I know deep in my soul, we were brought together for a reason, and this magnetic kiss is confirming that notion.

Erotically, her tongue swipes against mine, spurring me on, so I turn her body completely and she straddles my lap. Holding her tight, I lay her down on the blanket and watch as her hair fans out against the soft fabric. I take a moment to stare at her, to take in her beauty, to remind myself just how lucky I am she said yes to a date.

Slowly, I lower back down and find her mouth again. This time, I'm more demanding. This time, I'm the one who takes charge. The one who dances his tongue across hers. The one who runs his hands up and down her sides. The one who moans in her mouth when her hand crawls under my shirt and hooks her fingers into the waistband of my jeans.

Fuck, I want her.

I want all of her.

I want her beautiful mind.

I want her witty comments.

I want her body.

"God, Holt," she says when my mouth moves to her jaw and then down her neck. Her body arches against mine while one of her legs hooks around me, holding me in place.

"You taste amazing," I say, moving across her collarbone and sucking hard on her velvety skin.

"Mark me," she says, keeping me in place.

Not needing her to repeat herself, I move the fabric of her shirt to the side and kiss her skin, sucking, nibbling, laying claim to this irresistible woman so everyone else knows she's mine.

Her hands dig into my shoulders and I move my mouth back up her neck

to her lips. She parts her delicious mouth and our tongues meet again.

I'm getting lost, spiraling into a pleasurable abyss as her tongue tangles with mine and her grip grows tighter and tighter, as if she can't get close enough. I've had a good amount of first kisses in my lifetime, but this one, this electric connection I feel when Harmony is around . . . it's different. It's powerful. It's consuming.

It's terrifying.

It's exhilarating.

I slow down my movements, wanting to sink into this position forever. I feel a rain drop on the top of my head. Then another.

I pull away just enough to see a rainstorm forming quickly.

"Shit," I mutter. I lift off her and pull her up by her hand. "We should get to the car."

Dazed, she blinks a few times while lightly pressing her fingers to her lips in disbelief.

More raindrops fall down around us.

"Hey." I lift her chin up. "It's raining, babe."

She blinks again and then nods. Almost robotically, she helps collect our things, and we run to the car, where we throw everything into the trunk and find shelter on our respective sides just as it starts to rain harder.

I turn toward her and ask, "Are you okay?"

She's staring ahead, hands in lap, silent. Resigned, she turns to me and says, "I've never been kissed like that before."

Seeing the vulnerability and uncertainty in her eyes, I hold back a snarky comment and take her hand in mine. I bring her knuckles to my lips and press a gentle kiss.

"Neither have I, babe."



I FLOP BACK on my bed and stare at the white ceiling of my bedroom. I live in the baseball loft with quite a few of my teammates, including Carson and Knox. Everyone was studying when I came home, so I was able to escape their questioning as to where I'd been.

Thank God, because I don't think I could talk about what happened tonight with them.

There's only one person I know I can talk to. One person who I know has felt like this before.

From my pocket, I grab my phone and dial up my dad.

The phone rings twice and then his voice comes on the line. "Holt, how are you, son?"

"Hey, Dad. I'm doing good. Really good."

"You sound good. Got your text about your heart test. Coach Disik is happy?"

"He is. Very happy."

"I'm glad to hear it. You know I worry about you."

"I know, Dad. But everything checked out great."

After my minor episode last year, my parents have been on me about taking care of myself and making sure I'm eating healthy, working out properly, and communicating how I'm feeling. I don't blame them. I think I put a bit of fear into everyone last year when I was carted off to the hospital with heart pain.

"I'm glad. So, what's been going on other than losing your pants at third once again?"

I chuckle. Can you tell I'm close with my parents? We text every day. "So, I kind of met someone."

"Kind of met someone? You either did or you didn't. Which is it?"

"I did."

"What's her name? Or his name? I'm open to everything."

"*Her* name is Harmony."

"Harmony—that's a beautiful name. What's she like?"

Shifting on my bed, I close my eyes and picture her in my head. "She's incredibly smart, Dad. Quick-witted, funny, and, hell . . . drop-dead gorgeous. I met her a few weeks ago and I've been working my ass off to convince her to go out with me."

"I like her already." Dad laughs. "Putting my son to work. That's what I like to hear."

"We had our first date tonight and it just solidified everything I suspected. I like this girl, a lot."

"Dare I say my son has butterflies?"

"Yeah, a whole lot of them."

"Tell me about the date."

Twisting my finger through my hair, I say, "Took her to have a picnic at

Lake Michigan. She made it quite clear she didn't want to be impressed with what was in my wallet."

"Smart girl."

"We shared Chinese and just talked. We asked each other questions. We dove a little deeper, getting to know each other. It was really nice, and then toward the end of the date, I kissed her. Dad," I sigh, pulling on the strands now. "It was the best kiss I've ever had."

"Ah . . . are you saying this might be the girl? You know Green men are known for being able to pick out their soulmate with one kiss."

"Yeah, I know. It's why I called you. I think she might be the one, but I feel stupid saying that. I've hung out with her twice. How can someone possibly know after two dates?"

"There's no magic amount of time when it comes to love, Holt. Sometimes, you just know, and there's no shame in that. The key is making sure you see past the lust and dive deep into her soul. Get to know her. Get to know what's important to her. What makes her laugh. What makes her happy. What brings her sadness. I might have been dead set on knowing your mother was the one for me after one date, but I put in the time. I put in the work." And that is why I am calling my dad about this. My parents' marriage is the model I base my own future marriage on. All I've ever seen is healthy, self-sacrificial love, which has always made me feel secure, but has also made for a safe and loving home. *Relationship goals. Put in the effort.*

"I plan on doing the same, because I think she might have the same feelings."

"What makes you think that?" Dad asks.

"After we kissed, she seemed dazed, and when I asked if she was okay, she nodded and said she'd never been kissed like that before."

"Was it a good never been kissed before, or bad like . . . 'I didn't know you had a lizard tongue and you surprised me'?" Dad chuckles at his own joke.

"Good never been kissed," I say in feigned aggravation.

"Just checking. Well, if that's the case, looks as though you need to start nursing the relationship."

"And how do I do that?"

"Do what I said. Pay attention. Make her feel special. Dig deep. Make it so she can see the same connection that you see. And have fun. The more fun, the more you're building trust."

“I can do that.”

The phone falls silent for a second, and then Dad asks, “So you really like her?”

“A lot, Dad.” I sigh like a fool. “I can’t stop thinking about her. Ever since I’ve met her, she’s been on my mind. It took me two weeks to get a date with her and now I feel as if I’m floating on cloud nine.”

Dad laughs. “Oh boy. Cupid struck you in the ass.”

“And it didn’t even hurt.”

He laughs some more. “Well, I look forward to hearing how she keeps you on your toes. What’s she majoring in?”

“Journalism,” I say, as a thought strikes me. “Hey, Dad, want to help me score some brownie points?”

“I don’t know. You haven’t told me you love me lately.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “I love you, Dad.”

“Ah, I’ll never get tired of hearing those words from your mouth.”

“Have you had too many sweets today?” I tease.

“As a matter of fact, I had a piece of cake and pie today, but don’t tell your mother. Anyway, what can I do to help you out?”

“What kind of pie?”

“Blueberry.”

“Damn.” My mouth waters.

“Got you covered, boy. I’ll send some out to the loft.”

“The boys will love you for it, but they aren’t the ones I’m trying to impress. It’s Harmony, and she’s been searching for a journalism internship. She can’t find anything that works with her hours at the diner. I didn’t know if you had anything available with the website.” Dad has many businesses, but one of his pet projects is a popular website that’s based around love for the city. It’s a tourism site that has proven to be successful for New Yorkers and visitors by showcasing the many off-the-wall parts of New York City. The unknown places. The true New Yorker’s point of view. If you want an authentic experience, my dad’s website is the place to go.

“Has she ever been to New York?”

I wince. “Uh, I don’t think so. She said her parents didn’t really move outside of their small-town circle. But she could edit, I bet. At least something that gives her some experience. And I know you pay your interns, which means she wouldn’t have to work at the diner and she could come watch me play baseball.”

“Ah, I see what you want. A fan in the stands, huh?”

I laugh. “You know it’s more than that. It would be great if she could come to my games, but it would be better if she gained experience. I asked her what was something difficult she was dealing with and she said finding an internship. I know you’re always looking for help. Can’t you find something for her?”

“You know, this is the first time you’ve ever asked me for something like this. I’m impressed. You’re dropping the big ask on a girl. She really must be the one.”

“I think she is, Dad.”

He lightly chuckles. “Okay, I’ll email you Fifer’s email. She’s our hiring manager for interns. I’m sure she can find something for your Harmony.”

“Thanks, Dad. I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, yeah. How about those three words again?”

Rolling my eyes, even though he can’t see me, I say, “I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, son.”

Chapter Sixteen

HARMONY

Holt: *It's been a week. I want to see you.*

I stare down at the text and nibble on my bottom lip. Behind me, the grill hisses as the cook slaps fresh patties on the hot surface.

“What are you looking at?” Priya asks, looking over my shoulder.

“Nothing.” I pocket my phone and go back to the computer screen to finish typing up my table’s order.

“That didn’t look like nothing. That looked like a message from Holt.”

“Can you not be so nosey?” I press enter and then flip my notebook shut and stuff it in the front pocket of my apron.

“Duty as a best friend to a stubborn friend is to be nosey.” She walks over to the drink station and fills up a glass of water. “I’m headed out on my break. You’ve got table seven. They wanted a water.” She hands me the water and takes off toward the back, untying her apron as she walks away.

“Sure, no problem,” I say sarcastically as I take the glass of water to table seven. When I spot the booth, I stop and catch the handsome smile of Holt Green, arms draped over the back of the booth seat, staring me down.

I should have known.

Holding back my smirk, I take him his drink and set it down in front of him. Pulling my notebook from my apron, I poise my pen and ask, “What can I get you?”

“Another date would be great.” He flashes his pearly white teeth and I feel my body go weak.

“I’m sorry, sir, that’s not on the menu.”

He lays down the sticky, plastic-sheathed menu on the table and points to a small piece of tape with the words, *Date with Harmony* written on it. “It’s there on my menu.”

I reach down and take off the piece of tape and stick it in my apron. “Must have been an error.”

He chuckles and swings his legs off the end of the booth, facing me now. Hands clenched together, he stares up at me. “Truth or dare?”

I look off to the side, catching a few people looking our way, only to turn back to their food when I make eye contact with them. “Now isn’t the time, Holt.”

“Truth or dare, Harmony,” he says with more of a stern voice.

Sighing, I say, “Truth.”

“Why have you been avoiding me?”

“I haven’t been—”

“Don’t lie to me.” His eyes narrow and I know he’s right. I can’t lie to him. Not because he’s a human lie detector, but because he’s been honest and upfront with me since the beginning.

Shifting on my feet, I say, “Our last date scared me. That kiss was intense.”

“It was fucking amazing.”

That it was.

It was so amazing that when he dropped me off at home, I practically ran out of the car and up to my place to avoid another one. I felt burned, marked, claimed. All I could feel for the rest of the night were his lips, the scruff of his cheeks against my skin, the hot trail of his kisses across my collarbone. The next morning, I moved my shirt to the side and saw the imprint he left. I was tempted to text him a picture, but thought differently.

I’m feeling too much and too fast. It’s why I had to step away, keep my distance, let myself take a deep breath, and get my head on straight.

But the longer I didn’t talk to him, the longer I missed his quick-witted tongue.

And seeing him now, in person, I realize just how much I’ve missed him over the past week.

“First kisses aren’t supposed to be like that.” I look him in the eyes. “It was startling.”

“Startled me too, baby.” He reaches out and takes my hand in his. “But

you don't see me running from it. Instead, I'm running toward it. I want to know what else there is between us." When I don't answer, he tugs on my hand. "Don't you want to find out?"

"Yes and no," I answer truthfully.

"That's fair." He stands from the booth and pulls out a piece of paper from his jeans pocket. He holds it up between his index and middle finger. "This is for you." When I don't take it, he slips the paper into my apron and then leans over and presses a kiss to my cheek. Staying close, he whispers, "Text me later, babe."

And then he takes off. I watch his retreating back—muscular and beautiful—as he struts toward the door, leaving me with a rapidly beating heart and a yearning for his arms.

Catching my breath, I go back to the waitress station. I remove the paper from my apron and open it up. Expecting to see some witty date proposal, I'm surprised to find something completely different.

Fifer Parson, Hiring Intern Manager for New York, New York is expecting your call.

There's a number provided along with a smiley face and a heart.

New York, New York . . . what's that?

I pull out my phone quickly and search for *New York, New York*. The first thing that comes up is a website. I click on it and my eyes start to wander, taking in the touristy blog. On the About page I see that it was started by Green Enterprises because of their love for New York.

Holt's family.

At the bottom of the page, there's links to careers and internships. I click on the internships link and quickly scan the requirements. I meet all of them. Then I see words that give me chills: paid internship.

But . . . I don't live in New York.

Flipping to my messages, I type out a text to Holt.

Harmony: *Can you explain this piece of paper?*

"Harmony, order is up for table five," our line cook calls out.

Ugh.

In record time, I deliver the food, refill their drinks, take an order for another group that sat down, and then retreat back to the waitress station where I check my phone.

Holt: *Spoke with my dad. They have a remote intern position to fill. Proofreading articles. It isn't writing, but it's a start. Give Fifer a call.*

He can't be serious.

A remote, paid internship. That's . . . that's a dream.

But I didn't do anything to even possibly earn it other than . . . hell.

Shaking my head, I text him back.

Harmony: *Thank you for the offer, but I can't take your charity.*

Before he can respond, I stuff my phone into my apron pocket and lean against the cream wall of the waitress station. I squeeze my eyes shut and take deep breaths.

I'm not going to take advantage of a friendship to find an internship. That's not how I roll. I made it here on my own steam, and I'm determined to use that same drive to find an internship. It just doesn't feel right to be given an advantage, because if I accept it, I won't know if I got the position because of my skills, my knowledge, or my contacts. It might have been a genuine and thoughtful gesture on his end, but it feels icky on mine. *Sorry, Holt. I can't be that girl who says yes to every step-up handout you give.* I'm not that girl.



I OPEN MY FRONT DOOR, my feet aching, my back pulsing with pain, and my head completely scrambled with thoughts of Holt. I spent the rest of my shift trying not to cry, and I had no reason why I wanted to cry.

It was my gut instinct to just break down and sob in one of our booths. But I held it together, mindlessly worked around the diner, and when my shift was over, I fled as quickly as I could. Needing a shower and my bed, I don't bother turning on any lights since it's past eleven, and I head straight for the stairs.

"Harmony."

"Ah," I scream, and whip my arm ninja-like into the black abyss.

"Baby, it's me." A side lamp turns on and I spot Holt sitting on the couch.

Hand to heart, I say, "Oh my God, what are you doing sitting in the dark?"

"Waiting for you. Priya let me in."

I look toward the street, not remembering seeing his car parked out there, but then again, I wasn't paying attention to anything.

Catching my breath, I ask, "What are you doing here, Holt?"

"I want to talk to you." He stands, and there's a serious tone to his voice.

When he steps closer, I see the smile he usually wears is absent. As is his humor. He's subdued, and it's startling to see him like this. He takes my hand and asks, "Will you talk with me for a second?"

"I smell like a diner." As if that matters, but it's the only thing I can think of to say.

"I don't care. This is important."

Taking my hand, he guides me to the couch, where we both sit. He pushes his free hand through his hair, which seems to be sticking up all on end, as if he's been doing that motion all night.

"I need you to listen to me." He looks me in the eyes. "Can you do that for me?"

I wet my lips, my nerves starting to cripple me and turn my stomach. "Yes."

He nods somberly and then says, "I spoke with Priya—"

"Holt—"

"I know, I know. But listen, when you shut me out, I have the right to figure out why. I like you, Harmony, a lot. And I'm not about to just let you shut down and ignore me."

I'm irritated. Priya isn't the person he's trying to date, nor should she be spilling all my information. I know she's trying to be a friend, but she also needs to show me some loyalty.

"Don't go to Priya for information about me," I say, taking my hand away. "We aren't in a relationship, Holt. If I decide not to text you, that's my choice. That doesn't mean you go running to my loose-lipped best friend."

He pulls on the back of his neck, the boulder in his bicep flexing, stretching the sleeve of his T-shirt. "I'm sorry. Fuck . . ." He breathes out heavily and then looks me in the eyes. "I'm sorry, Harmony. I'm fucking this up, and I can feel you slipping away but I don't know how to stop it. I don't understand what I'm doing wrong. We had a great fucking date the other night. Our kiss was the best fucking kiss I've ever experienced, and then you stop talking to me. I try to do something nice for you and once again I'm pushed away. I don't get it. Please tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"I'm not ready," I answer automatically, but when I hear the words, they start to make sense in my head. "I'm . . . I'm not ready for this." I motion between us. "For this all-consuming feeling I feel when I'm around you. It's powerful, and I just don't think I can handle it on top of everything right now."

“Isn’t it harder to deny?”

“No,” I answer, even though that feels like a lie.

He slowly nods and presses his large palms to his legs. “Okay.” He takes a deep breath and says, “Well, I just wanted to say I was sorry, and it wasn’t my intention to make you feel bad in any way. I thought I was helping. Clearly, you didn’t take it that way.” He stands from the couch and starts to walk toward the door, but then stops. Hand in hair, he says, “You know, there are times in life when we need to do things on our own, when we need to prove our worth to this world.” His eyes connect with mine. “And then there are times when we need to be smart and take advantage of our resources so we can continue to succeed on our own. I was trying to lend a hand, not *offering charity*. My guess is any other friend finding you such a great opportunity would be greeted with thanks.” He continues to walk toward the door. Right before he opens it, he says, “Have a good night, Harmony.”

And then he’s gone.

A lump develops in my throat.

Tears form in my eyes.

Sorrow hits me hard in the chest.

His words strike me more intensely than I expected.

Standing from the couch, I gather myself and head up the stairs to Priya’s room. Without knocking, I open her door and find her in bed, the lights off.

“Harmony?”

“Stop talking to Holt about me. Do you understand? *I’m* your friend. You need to show loyalty to me, not him.”

I go to shut the door, but she sits up and stops me. “You’re being a dumbass.”

“Excuse me?”

She flips on the light next to her bed, illuminating her room. “You’re being a dumbass, Harmony. Maybe you’re right and I’m overstepping a boundary by trying to help him get to know you, but if he was after me and I had doubts but you saw only the good? I’d hope you’d go into bat for me like I am for you. You’re pushing away a man who could be great for you. You’re pushing away an opportunity because you’re worried of how it came about. Stop fucking worrying and live your damn life. I understand pride, but pride also makes you stupid. You think successful people got where they are through hard work alone?” She shakes her head. “They had helping hands along the way. This is your helping hand. Take it. And when it comes to Holt,

he's your guiding light, your fun. You'd be stupid not to get involved with him."

The tears welling in my eyes spill down my cheeks. "I'm not ready."

"Are we ever ready for the unknown?"

"There's too much there, Priya. It's too strong of a connection."

"Ah, yes, so that means you push it aside. That makes sense." She rolls her eyes.

"I don't want to get lost in him."

"Do you really think Holt Green is the kind of guy who's going to let you get lost in him? From what I've seen already, he's the kind of guy who lifts you up, not stuffs you away so he can shine. You're not being fair. You're being an idiot, and I'm sure everyone else who knew the situation would agree with me." She flips off her light, and the comforter rustles as she gets comfortable again. "Do whatever you want, but I'm telling you right now, Holt will be the best thing that ever walks into your life and pushing him away will be your biggest regret. Now get out of here, I need my sleep."

Without another word, I shut her door and walk down the hall to my bedroom, where I slink to the floor. From my pocket, I pull out the piece of paper Holt handed me and stare down at the numbers.

Am I being stupid?

In the back of my head, I hear . . . YUP.

Hell.



"HEY, MOM," I say when she answers the phone.

"Harmony, I wasn't expecting a call from you today. It's so great to hear your voice. How's the big city?"

Smiling softly, I say, "It's great, Mom. Still riddled with people and tourists."

"I don't know how you do it, but good for you. Your father went down to the gas station for the newspaper so he's not here right now."

Every Saturday morning, Dad walks to the gas station, grabs a cup of coffee, the newspaper, and an apple fritter for him and my mom and then walks back home. It's a tradition that makes him very happy, and I love him for the simplicity of it.

“I figured. I kind of wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?”

“Um, I mean, yeah. I guess I’m just confused.”

“Okay, well, let’s talk it out.” Hearing my mom’s voice has already put me at ease. Even though I don’t want the life they’ve had, the changeless and unvarying routine, I still respect the hell out of my parents. Perhaps it’s because they’re content that makes that possible. So many people aren’t content. *Myself included*. But I know I want to find that. Somehow.

Sitting in my studying chair—that’s what I call the comfy chair in the corner of my room—I pull my legs in close to my chest and wrap my arm around them. “So, I kind of met this guy.”

“Oh, it’s *that* kind of conversation.”

“Sort of,” I answer, feeling shy. “He’s a baseball player here at Brentwood. Umm . . . Holt Green. Have you heard of him?”

“I don’t believe so, but from what you’ve told me about the athletes at Brentwood, they’re not to be considered someone my daughter should be interested in.”

“I know. I know,” I groan. “And this is going to sound clichéd, but I think Holt is different.”

Hell, I don’t think—I *know* he’s different.

“Different how?”

“He’s honest, for one. His intentions are true. He wants to get to know me, actually date me. He’s kind and thoughtful. Attentive. Sweet. Annoyingly funny.”

“Okay.” Mom laughs. “So, what’s the problem? Because from what you’ve said, he seems like a great guy.”

“That’s the point, Mom. He’s too great. He’s too good. He’s too perfect.”

“I’m sure there’s a flaw in there somewhere.”

Yeah, his penis might be too big.

“We don’t come from the same background. He’s New York City elite.”

“Opposites do attract, you know,” she counters.

“And he’s relentless when it comes to wanting to date me.”

“Perfect for you and interested? Wow, what a hardship.” Mockery drips from her voice.

“I wasn’t expecting to start a relationship, Mom.”

“Sometimes the right person comes out of nowhere. When you’re not looking for love is sometimes when you actually find it.”

“You aren’t being helpful.”

She laughs. “I don’t know what you want me to say, sweetie. He sounds like a great guy, and you sound like you’re being stubborn.”

“He found me an internship. A paid one. With a top blog site in New York City. I would work remotely.”

“Well, damn him all to hell,” Mom says with as much feigned anger as she can muster. “How dare he? I’d file a lawsuit against him. I don’t know what for, but you need to take him to court for such an outrageous action.”

I chuckle and groan at the same time. “Mom, you don’t understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t. It seems as though there’s a nice guy who’s interested in my daughter and who’s offered to help her find an internship she’s spent months looking for. I can’t fathom why this is a problem.”

“I want to earn this on my own.”

“You could do that. Or you could take the olive branch and possibly live a happier life. You know I love you, Harmony, and you know I hate that you moved away, but watching you from afar, working your tail off to put yourself through an expensive private college so you can earn a degree that matters to you—that makes me a very proud mother. Don’t go down the bumpy path just to prove a point. There’s no point needing to be proven, not with me, not with your father. You don’t need to prove anything. You’ve put in the hard work, you’ve made the big decisions, and you’re carrying yourself through this next chapter in life. It’s time you allow yourself to look up for a second and experience life. Let the guy woo you. Let him date you. Let him show you what being in your twenties and in college is all about. And for God’s sake, take the internship.”

I laugh even though tears are streaming down my face. “I don’t have it yet. I have to call a number.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Do you have other opportunities lined up?”

“No.”

“Then be smart about this. He clearly wants to help, so let him help. You never know. This could be lifechanging.”

“I have a feeling that’s exactly what he is.”

Mom is silent for a few beats, and then she says, “You know, I had big dreams before I met your father. I thought I was going to live in New York City one day and be like Audrey Hepburn.”

“Really?” I ask. “You never told me that.”

“Because that dream was replaced when I met your father. He helped me realize exactly what I wanted, and that was to have a small family, in a quaint town, with a wonderfully simple life. Looking back on it, I wouldn’t have been happy in a big city. It wasn’t me; it was what I saw in the movies. My life might be a little too simple for the dreams you have, but without your father, I might have never recognized exactly what I wanted.”

“Mom, I would never insult your life.”

“Oh, I know, sweetie. But I want you to know that life throws us roadblocks, and sometimes we have to stop before leaping over them and wonder why exactly this roadblock is here. Holt is a roadblock. Before passing up on the opportunity, give it some thought.”

I wipe away a stray tear that falls down my cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course. Now, I’m on my computer and I searched Holt Green while we were talking. I must say, he’s very handsome, Harmony.”

I smile to myself. “He is.”

“Look at that jawline and his eyes. You two would make a beautiful couple.”

“You don’t think he’s too pretty for me?”

She laughs. “Never, but if I do happen to ever meet him—which I hope I do—you might find your mom clamming up. Just found a picture of him holding a bat—quite the forearms.”

“Mom, stop right now.”

“You know, you’re right. I’m blushing.”

“Oh my God, I’m hanging up.”

She laughs. “Before you go . . . Just give it some thought, okay? You deserve someone who’s going to work hard to find ways to care for you. It seems as though Holt is willing and wanting to do just that, even if you’re not ready for a relationship. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I hang up and drop my phone on my lap. I lay my head back on the chair and close my eyes. Holt, Priya, and my mom are basically saying the same thing. *It’s okay to accept a hand when it’s given genuinely.* Is it just pride stopping me? And if so, I need to work out why I’m clinging to that so fiercely. It got me to Brentwood. *Tick.* It helped me get a job at the diner. *Tick.* It has pushed me to work hard and get damn good grades. *Tick.* And I have a fantastic best friend and roommate . . . who thinks I’m a dumbass. *Tick.* And *tick.*

Don't go down the bumpy path just to prove a point.

Is that what I'm doing?

I swipe at a tear, hating that the tears are there in the first place, because two people I trust are telling me my determination to succeed only on my own laurels isn't right in this instance.

But then I think of the look on Holt's face, and my heart aches. I hurt him. *I'm fucking this up, and I can feel you slipping away but I don't know how to stop it. I don't understand what I'm doing wrong.* No. He's wrong. God, I hate he thinks that because of my actions. I'm the one fucking this up. How do I change that? Is it as simple as saying *thank you* and calling Fifer Parson? Or is it more about opening myself up to two amazing possibilities? Holt Green *and* an internship at *New York, New York*?

Am I ready for either?

I don't think so. But, then again, I'm not sure I'll ever be ready for someone as generous in spirit, as kind and breathtaking, as Holt Green.

Chapter Seventeen

HOLT

“Dude, slow down,” Knox says, coming up to me. “The faster you go, the faster the back of the line has to go, and you know Jason is struggling today.”

Disik has us running foul pole to foul pole for fifteen minutes to end practice. There’s a timer on the scoreboard, and every time I look up at it, I swear it’s only been a minute. We had a shitty practice, and I know a lot of that has to do with me. My head hasn’t been in it lately because of Harmony and our last interaction. I never even considered that she’d be insulted by my offer to help her with an internship, and the more I think about it, the more I loathe myself for even taking that initiative. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Harmony, it’s that she’s independent and prideful. She’s not after handouts.

I fucked up. And I have no idea how to fix it.

“Seriously, Holt, slow down.” Knox nudges me and I back off on the pace. One of the things Disik is particular about is us all staying in a line. And he always chooses one of the fastest guys to lead the line. Today is my day. When I look over my shoulder, I see Jason struggling to keep up and guilt washes over me.

“Shit,” I mutter, really bringing down the pace. “Sorry.”

We spend the next seven minutes going back and forth, back and forth, and when the timer stops, we all plant ourselves in place and catch our breath.

“Hit the showers and show up tomorrow, or you’re doing foul poles until

ten at night,” Disik yells across the field and then disappears with our assistant coaches.

“Fuck,” Knox says, lying down on the turf. “I shouldn’t have had that burger for lunch.”

“What the hell, man?” Jason says, hobbling over to me while holding his ass. “You know I have junk in the trunk and it’s harder for me to keep up.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” I lift up my hat and spin it around on my head so it’s facing backwards. “My head wasn’t right today.”

“You have subjected me to an ice bath.” He points his finger at me. “When my balls are shriveled up and unrecognizable, I’ll be thinking of ways to get you back for this.”

“I’ll buy you lunch tomorrow.”

Jason gives it some thought. “Does that include a cookie?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course.”

“Deal.” Still clutching his ass, he hobbles toward the locker room with the rest of the team, leaving me with Knox and Carson.

“Want to talk about it?” Carson asks.

I shake my head and take a seat on the turf, letting my hands prop me up from behind. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Are you? Because you almost ran us into the ground and you’ve been pretty quiet the last few days.” Carson is right, but I’m not ready to get into it.

“I’m good. Just working through some things.” I nod toward the locker room. “Go on. I’ll meet you in there.”

“Are you sure?” Knox asks.

“Yeah. Positive.”

Wearily, they both stand and exchange a look before heading off toward the locker room, leaving me with my thoughts and the outfield, my second home. I lie all the way down on the turf, letting the prickly surface dig into my skin while I stare at the domed ceiling of our baseball field. Brentwood is blessed with major donors, and because our program is so successful, we bring a lot of fans to the stands, increasing the revenue to our program. We’re lucky, I get that, something I’ll never take for granted.

“What the hell am I going to do?” I mutter.

I can’t stop thinking about her. That’s obvious from the shit practice I had, and I can’t keep having bad practices, because not only will my teammates be punished for it, but Disik will bench me. He’s done it before, and I wouldn’t put it past him to do it again.

But I don't know how to get her out of my head. Probably because I feel guilty. I feel as if I unintentionally insulted her, and I was already on thin ice.

Skittish, stubborn, beautifully self-sufficient.

I'm not sure she's going to give me another chance, and that's something I'm going to have to come to terms with.

With a deep breath, I stand from the outfield and head toward the locker room. Since we have equipment managers, I don't bother grabbing my gloves, but head straight to the showers, where I find a stall in the far back corner. I'm the last one to leave the showers, and after drying off and getting dressed, I'm left with an empty locker room to myself before I take off.

I flip the hood to my sweatshirt over my head, throw my backpack over my shoulders, grab my keys, and make my way toward the parking lot. Out of pure desperation, I look at my phone, hoping for a glimpse of communication, but as I push through the doors leading outside, I'm once again disappointed. *Nothing from Harmony*. Just a text from my mom saying she sent some bagels from my favorite bagel place to the loft.

At least I have that to look forward to.

I pocket my phone and look up toward my car. I stop immediately.

Blinking a few times, I swear my eyes are deceiving me, but when the figure in front of my car stands, I know I'm not dreaming.

"Harmony, how long have you been out here?"

"An hour," she says, quietly.

"An hour? Are you cold?"

Her teeth chatter. "A little."

She's wearing a pair of leggings and a T-shirt, so I quickly take off my backpack, followed by my hoodie, which I hand to her.

"Put this on."

I unlock my car, help her into the passenger seat, and then jog to the driver's side. I put my backpack in the back seat and then I turn on the car, blasting the heat.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I wanted to talk to you," she says, her teeth still chattering. "I wasn't sure, after how we left things, if you'd answer my call or texts."

Little does she know I've been desperate for them. But I doubt she'd appreciate it if I say that to her.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" she asks.

"Where do you want to go?"

“Would you mind driving me back to my place?”

“Not at all. Can we stop somewhere so I can pick something up to eat? I’m starving.”

She nods while keeping her hands stuffed in the pocket of my hoodie.

“I’m hungry too.”

“Burgers and fries?”

“Perfect.” She smiles, but it’s shaky. Unsure what this conversation will hold, I carefully reach over to her seatbelt and buckle her in so she doesn’t have to move her warming hands.

“Safety first, babe,” I say, wincing at the nickname. I try to gauge her reaction but she doesn’t seem to have one, so I let out a pent-up breath and put the car in drive.

I don’t know what she wants to talk about, but I’m hoping it’s good news.



“IS PRIYA HOME?” I ask as we walk into her townhome.

Harmony flips on the light and says, “No, she took my shift tonight. She bought some shoes and needs to pay them off, and I wanted to talk to you, so it worked out.”

I follow her to the small, two-person dining table and we both take a seat as I set the bag of food between us. We both got burgers and decided to share fries. I shouldn’t be eating this shit, but then again, I’ve been eating my feelings lately and if she tells me bad news, at least I know I’ll be leaving her with a belly full of burger and fries.

Harmony divvies out the food, and then, in silence, we unwrap our meals and both take bites. The atmosphere feels melancholy, almost as if we’re sharing a meal before a funeral.

“These fries are good,” Harmony says, popping a few more in her mouth.

“Yeah, Frangos is a hole in the wall, but the boys and I love going there. Great burgers, close to campus, and amazing fries.” I pick up a few and bite down.

“Yeah, this burger is good too.” She takes another bite.

Fuck, it’s awkward.

I almost wish I hadn’t said anything about eating because, clearly, we’re not going to talk about anything substantial until the meal is over. With that

now in my mind, I buckle down and focus on eating. Luckily, we both ordered small burgers, so we eat pretty quickly, especially since we're silent, and when I finish, I lean back in my chair and take a sip of the sports drink I ordered.

Harmony wipes her mouth and sips on her Diet Coke, avoiding eye contact with me.

I'm a chatty guy, the one who doesn't let silence fall in a group. I have a lineup of questions always geared up, ready to be asked, so nobody has to experience an awkward silence, but not this time. I don't want to be the one who talks. I don't want to be the one who fucks this up even more.

I want to listen.

I want to find out why I'm here, not dig myself a deeper grave.

So, I stay silent even though it's challenging and painful.

After what feels like half an hour, she looks up at me and says, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I ask, confused.

"Can we maybe have this conversation somewhere more comfortable?" she asks.

"Of course. You lead the way."

Together we dispose of our trash, and then we walk over to the couch, where we both take a seat. I drape one arm over the back and face her, trying to act as casual as possible, even when it feels as if she's twisting and turning my nerves with a rusty pitchfork.

Scooting closer to me, she looks me in the eyes and says, "I'm sorry for the way I've been treating you. You've been nothing but sweet and caring, and I've tried to brush you off every chance I get."

"You don't need to apologize—"

"I do. You didn't deserve that kind of behavior."

"Not that you need to apologize, but thanks, I guess."

She twists her hands together as she says, "I . . . uh . . . I called Fifer."

My brow creases in shock. "You did?"

I was not expecting her to say that. Hell, I didn't know what I expected in coming to her place tonight. An apology and hearing about a call to Fifer wasn't on the top of my list of possibilities.

"I did. I spoke with my mom and she told me I was being a stubborn idiot."

"She said that?" I laugh.

“Well, she alluded to it without using those words.” She glances up at me. “I’m so used to making things happen for my future by myself. Yes, my parents have always been by my side supporting me, but I made the right steps to get where I am right now. I’m not used to help, so if I sounded ungrateful, it’s because I was angry at myself for having to lean on someone else for help.”

“You don’t have to do everything on your own,” I say. “It’s okay to ask for help, Harmony.”

“I’m starting to figure that out.” She takes a deep breath. “Anyway, I spoke with Fifer for over two hours. She thought I would be a great fit for the paid internship program. I start next week. They’re going to train me online, and I’m going to work closely with the head editor. It’s going to be great experience. I spoke with the diner and cut down my hours drastically so I can focus on this internship. I’ll be able to pick up shifts here and there, but I can rely on the internship to help pay the bills while I focus on my education.”

“That’s great,” I say, feeling excited for her. “I’m happy for you, Harmony.”

“You didn’t have to connect me with Fifer, you know. That was really above and beyond, Holt.”

I shrug. “I just got you the contact. You sold yourself.”

“I’m sure you had more of an impact than that. Either way, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I answer, wondering if this conversation is going anywhere else.

The vulnerability shining in her eyes does nothing to push me away. Instead, it intrigues me. I want to know what else makes her vulnerable, what makes her worry her lip, what creates the concerned pinch between her eyes, and then I want to help her fix it. The draw I have to this girl is strong. It’s potent. It’s not something I want to let go of.

I just hope I’m here because she wants to try again.

To my surprise, she reaches out and takes my hand in hers. My heart is immediately put at ease—that is, until she says, “I’m not ready for a relationship, Holt.”

Fuck.

“Okay,” I say softly, my eyes falling to our connected hands. Talk about taking all the wind out of my sails.

Her fingers reach up and lift my chin so my eyes are locked on hers. “But I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Thump.

My heart sputters in my chest, hope blooms, and I find it increasingly hard to breathe as I recount what she said.

“I wasn’t looking for anything other than ways to propel my future forward, and then you came along and shifted everything.”

“If it helps, I wasn’t looking for anything either, but here I am, hoping you give me a chance,” I say, hoping I don’t sound like a desperate asshole.

She scoots a little closer and entwines our fingers together. “I think it would be more distracting on my end to try to ignore the pull I have toward you.” Her eyes meet mine. They register as scared, hesitant, but also hopeful. She takes a deep breath and then asks, “Holt, will you go out with me?”

Fuck, I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face.

It’s an easy answer for me. “Hell, yeah, baby.”

I pull her onto my lap so she’s straddling me, and I grip her waist, holding her in place.

She chuckles and places her hands on my shoulders. “Jumping right into it, I see.”

“We have to make up for lost time.”

“You act as if it’s been months.”

“Felt like it,” I answer while sliding my thumbs over her hips. “You really want to go out with me?”

“Unfortunately,” she answers with a smile. “Don’t make me regret it.”

“Nah, once you’ve been in these arms, there’s no way you’ll regret it.”

“You seem awfully sure of that.” Her hands slide up my neck to my cheeks and she lowers her head.

“I’ve been able to keep you around for this long, just wait. Now that you’ve given in, you’re done for.”

She chuckles and shifts her hips on my lap before connecting her forehead with mine. “I’m sorry for being awful earlier.”

Feeling the shift in conversation, I carefully bring my hands to her sides, a more intimate hold. I want her to know it’s okay to be honest with me, that she can trust me, that I’m here for all the right reasons and have no intentions of hurting her. “I’m sorry if I insulted you in any way. That wasn’t my intention. I should have asked you if you needed help, instead of assuming.”

She lightly shakes her head against mine. “Don’t apologize, Holt. You were being thoughtful.”

“How about we both accept that we’re sorry and move on? No use

running around in circles about it.”

“I know. I just—I don’t want you to think I’m a ratchet bitch.”

My head falls back as a hearty laugh rumbles out of me. “Babe, if I thought that, I would not be here right now,” I say when my laughter dies down. I give her a little shake. “All is forgiven.”

“Okay.” She nibbles on her bottom lip. “I still feel bad.”

“Well, there is a way you can make it up to me.” I wiggle my brows, and she chuckles. She relaxes against me, covering my body with hers, and rests her head on my shoulder. Her arms snake around my body. I loop my arms around her and hold her close. She fits perfectly.

“I feel awkward,” she admits.

“Why?” I rub my hand up and down her back.

“I just do. I still feel as though there’s an elephant in the room.”

“No elephant, babe,” I say, kissing the top of her head. “How about this? Tell me about your day.”

“It was full of anxiety, waiting to talk to you.”

“I can imagine. I liked the surprise of seeing you at my car, though. I had a shit practice and seeing you waiting for me turned around my day.”

She nuzzles her cheek against my shoulder. “Did you have to run foul poles?”

“Yup. Fifteen minutes of foul poles. My head wasn’t in practice today.”

“Was it because of me?”

“Maybe. But don’t feel bad about it because I know better than to let outside factors affect my mental game. I wasn’t focused, and we ran because of it. All my fault.”

“Was this supposed to make me feel better?”

I chuckle. “For a second, I thought it would. Looking back now, probably not a smart topic.” Luckily, she laughs into my shoulder. I continue to stroke her back. “Maybe we start over tomorrow and spend the rest of the night just like this?”

“A subdued Holt Green? I didn’t know such a thing existed.”

I give her a squeeze. I act like a loon a lot of the time, but there are times I’m subdued. *Like when the girl I want to date gives me the cold shoulder and rejects my good intentions.* But we’re here now. She’s worth me putting on a brave face so I can convince her that we can juggle this. *Us.* “I got all I need right here. I’m content.”

“You’re too good for me.”

“Nah, babe. I’m perfect for you.”



HOLT: *Good morning, baby. How did you sleep?*

Harmony: *Horny.*

Holt: *LOL! You know I have ways of fixing that, right?*

Harmony: *Yeah, and that kiss you left me with did nothing but heighten the issue.*

Holt: *Why didn’t you say anything?*

Harmony: *Because I didn’t want you to think I asked you out because of the physical.*

Holt: *As if that’s a bad thing . . .*

Harmony: *Your body is hot, but your brain is what hooked me.*

Holt: *Is this what flirting is like with you? I think I could get used this this. *leans back and places hand behind head**

Harmony: *You’re even obnoxious in text messages.*

Holt: *There’s no avoiding it.*

Harmony: *Clearly.*

Holt: *What are you up to today? Any chance I get to see your beautiful face?*

Harmony: *Booked solid with classes, studying, Zoom training with Fifer, and then a shift at the diner. It’s like that for the next few days.*

Holt: *Well, damn. And here I thought I was the one with the busy schedule. So, when do I get to see you next?*

Harmony: *Sunday?*

Holt: *Sunday? Are you out of your damn mind? That’s five days away.*

Harmony: *I’m aware.*

Holt: *Are you aware that you asked me out? And that I’m expecting you to wine and dine me? Five days of not seeing you isn’t boding well for you.*

Harmony: *Sorry, sugar plum.*

Holt: *Not sure on the nickname. Let me mull that over. I prefer something more masculine, like metal balls, but we can work on it. I’m more concerned about seeing you.*

Harmony: *I’m not calling you metal balls.*

Holt: *I said we can work on it.*

Harmony: *Well, metal balls isn't a good starting point.*

Holt: *As if sugar plum is?*

Harmony: *Could be worse. I could call you Harry Dingleberry.*

Holt: *What? Are you . . . drunk?*

Harmony: *It would make these conversations easier if I were.*

Holt: *Oof, you're spicy this morning. If only I were there to lick that spice right off you.*

Harmony: *Why would you say that when you know I'm horny?*

Holt: *Bringing it full circle, babe.*

Harmony: *I have to get to class. I'll text you later, okay?*

Holt: *Fine. Send me a picture of you to at least hold me over.*

Harmony: *Maybe I will.*



"HELL," I mutter, staring down at the picture of Harmony on my phone. It's a mirror selfie. She's wearing some kind of sinful red dress that falls just below her ass and shows off her killer rack. Her hair is spiraled in curls, and she's wearing what looks like four-inch red heels and fire-engine-red lipstick. It's a tempting picture and it reminds me just how much I want to see her.

The last two days she's sent me a picture of her to "hold me over" but they've done nothing but intensify my need to be around her.

I glance at the time on my phone and realize I could quickly meet her outside her class before I have to head to training. I scroll through my phone to the schedule Priya sent me and remind myself where her class is. I could get there quickly.

Pocketing my phone, I take off toward the west part of campus, which works out because it's on my way to the stadium. Walking through campus is always interesting because everyone knows me. My face is all over the place just like the other baseball players. We're easy to spot in a crowd, and we're stopped often for high fives or bro hugs. Knowing I don't have much time to spare, I keep my head down and walk fast as I make my way through the throng of students.

I arrive at her building just as the doors open and people flood into the open courtyard. Almost every student has their face buried in their phones as they expertly maneuver around each other. I keep my eyes peeled for my girl,

hoping I don't miss her. After a few moments, I worry that she snuck past me, and then I see her. Hair pulled up into a ponytail, wearing my Brentwood Baseball sweatshirt, looking cute as shit in leggings and sneakers. She's on her phone, so when she starts to walk past me, I snag her arm.

Protest is on her lips as she looks up, but when she spots me, a smile breaks out over her beautiful face and her arms go around my waist.

I pull her in for a hug as we step off to the side, and I turn my back to the crowd, hopefully blocking my identity for a few stolen moments with my girl.

"Hey," she says into my chest.

"Hey, babe." I kiss the top of her head.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, looking up at me.

"Had a few spare moments. Wanted to see you."

"Just a few spare moments?"

I nod. "I have conditioning. Want to walk with me?"

Her eyes study me. "I don't know which is worse: this sensitive, romantic side of you, or the witty, banter-filled side."

"Both." I wink and take her hand in mine. "Come on. Just for a couple of minutes."

"Can't say no to that." Together, we walk hand in hand toward the stadium and I feel fucking good.

This. Walking with her. Knowing she's letting me in. It makes me feel as though I really didn't fuck this up. That I've been able to hold on to her.

"How was class?"

"Boring." She chuckles. "I know I shouldn't say that, but, God, the professor was stuck on making a point about compromised principles even though no one was arguing with him. It was as if he was arguing with himself but wasn't listening to his own self talk. Just rambling."

"Did you daydream about me?"

"No," she answers quickly, making me laugh.

"Liar."

"I didn't. I was reading the text messages of the guy in front of me. He was trying to figure out how to tell this girl that he likes her. His buddy wasn't giving good advice."

"What was he saying?"

"Stupid shit like invite her to a party but don't hang out with her. Ease into letting her know you're available."

We walk past a few girls who lift their heads from their phones and eye us, their expressions morphing into surprise. I ignore them and ask, “How do you suggest he tell her?”

“Uh, just be honest. Say ‘I like you. Will you go out with me?’”

I stop her and tug on her hand so she turns toward me. “I like you. Will you go out with me?”

Her smile is endearing when she says, “You know I’m already attached to you. You don’t need to ask.”

“I might ask every day just to make sure I’m not dreaming.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes her hand against my chest. “Lame, Green.”

I chuckle and pull her into a hug. “Okay, I have to run the rest of the way or I’m going to be late.” I lift her chin and press a chaste kiss against her lips. “Shit,” I sigh. “I should not have done that.” I press my lips to hers again, but this time a little harder, a little longer, as my hand snakes up to the back of her head, holding her in place. “Fuck, you taste so good.” I go in for more, but she pushes at my chest.

“You’re going to be late.” She pushes me farther away. “Go on.”

I push my hand through my hair in aggravation. “Fucking Disik.” I pull her in for one more quick kiss and then I release her before I get myself in trouble. “You look hot as fuck in my sweatshirt, by the way. Catch you later, baby.”

Before I can tempt myself to stay longer, I take off at a brisk jog toward the stadium. I’m going to make it just in time.



HOLT: I was tempted to come into the diner tonight, but I knew I would eat like shit, and I need to stick to my diet.

***Harmony:** Stick to your diet? Really? For your manly figure?*

***Holt:** That, and other things.*

***Harmony:** Other things?*

***Holt:** Not a text message question.*

***Harmony:** Okay, now you have me worried.*

***Holt:** No need to worry, baby. My willpower sucks right now, so I’m trying to keep it together.*

***Harmony:** You know I eat healthy too, right? We don’t have to always*

get burgers and fries.

Holt: Why did you have to say that? You were my excuse to have fries.

Harmony: LOL. Sorry but I do have to watch my girly figure.

Holt: Weird question, and not that it matters, but do you work out?

Harmony: I go on a run every morning, or at least try to. It's only around the block and adds up to 1.87 miles, but it works for me. I'm sure that's a mere warmup for you.

Holt: I like that you know the exact distance. Maybe I can go on the run with you at some point.

Harmony: So you can humiliate me with your pace?

Holt: No, so I can watch your tits jiggle in a sports bra.

Harmony: What is wrong with you?

Holt: Nothing. Just really like your tits.

Harmony: You haven't even seen them.

Holt: And whose fault is that?

Harmony: No one's. I'm fine with it.

Holt: You're selfish.

Harmony: I just snorted. You're lucky I'm on my break, or else someone could have gotten snot in their food.

Holt: Ooo, a juicy snorter. I like it.

Harmony: Seriously, what is wrong with you?

Holt: Like I said above . . . nothing. I'm perfect, babe. Doesn't get more ideal than this.

Harmony: We'll see about that. I still have a lot to test out to make sure you're a good fit.

Holt: I promise you, I'm going to fit damn well. Maybe a little snug, but you'll get used to it.

Harmony: I think it's best if I go. You're too much right now.

Holt: That's what you might say in bed too, but just breathe, babe. It's supposed to feel good.

Harmony: Annnd we're done. Goodnight.

Holt: Wait . . .

Harmony: What?

Holt: Send me a picture of you.

Harmony: Ughhhh

Harmony: [Picture]

Holt: Fuck, babe. You're so goddamn hot.

Harmony: *I'm wearing a diner dress.*

Holt: *You could wear a trash bag and I'd still want to hold your hand.*

Harmony: *Interesting that you said hold my hand and not fuck me.*

Holt: *I know when to be funny and when to be romantic. That was romantic. Miss those lips, babe.*

Harmony: *^^ And that's exactly why I can't seem to shake you away.*

Holt: *Can't shake Velcro.*

Harmony: *Are you saying you're Velcro?*

Holt: *We both are. That's why it works. *Wink emoji* Have a good night.*

Chapter Eighteen

HARMONY

“Oh, you’re smiling.” Priya leans forward and snaps a picture of me with her phone. “I’m sending that to Holt, because I’m assuming that’s who you’re texting right now.”

I set my phone down and lean my head back against the sofa. “Yeah,” I sigh.

Freaking sigh.

When have I ever been a sigher over a boy?

Never.

Never in my entire life have I sighed over a boy.

But that’s what Holt does to me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Just stupid shit. He’s in study hall right now,” I answer.

“Daredevil. Texting during study hall? I heard the baseball team’s study hall is strict.”

“He said Knox is running it, and since Holt apparently has really good grades, he doesn’t have to be there, but he shows up for support.”

“And texts? That’s a great example.” Priya laughs.

“I questioned that as well. He said he’s ‘looking for a book.’”

“Smart.” Priya takes a seat on the couch next to me and says, “So, how’s it going with him?”

“It’s fine,” I answer casually.

“Oh my God, you’re such a liar. But I get it. You don’t want to talk about

it. Tell me about this internship that's taking you away from me."

"We're still living together."

She twists her dark hair around her finger. "Yes, but the diner doesn't feel right without you, and picking up shifts here and there isn't the same. We won't be suffering together anymore."

I laugh. "I'll still suffer with you. I worked there for two years. I'll be able to keep up on the commiserating."

"I guess so." She shifts on the couch, pulling her leg up. "Tell me about the internship, though. Is it everything you hoped for?"

"I mean, not everything I hoped for. I'm not writing articles for them, but I am editing, and it's really great experience. I just got done with training. I have to take a test in a few days to make sure I'm ready to take on the articles."

"A test?" Priya shakes her head. "That would feel like too much pressure for a job."

"I'm pretty confident about it. Fifer, my trainer, says I have a great eye so far and thinks I'm going to ace it."

"Well, that's good news."

I nod. "Yeah, and it pays more than working at the diner, so I can spring for something other than Top Ramen for dinner on occasion."

"Are you saying . . . we could splurge on cheesy bread one night?"

"There's a great possibility we can."

She raises her hands to the sky. "Praise the pizza gods."

Her phone rings next to her, and she glances down at the screen. "Weekly call with the parents."

"Have fun. I'm going to head up to my room."

She blows me a kiss, answers her phone, and starts walking toward her room. When she's out of sight, I pick up my phone and look at the text waiting for me.

Holt: *That picture Priya sent me of you reading my texts . . . Yeah, you have me by the fucking balls right now.*

I chuckle and text him back.

Harmony: *Don't worry, I'll be gentle.*

After I send the text, I go to the kitchen and fill up my water bottle, turn off the lights, and head to the stairs just as my phone beeps again.

Holt: *Open your front door.*

I glance up at the front door as a wave of butterflies takes off in my

stomach. I walk up to it, hoping he's standing on the other side, but knowing he's probably still in study hall.

Without looking through the peephole, I open the door and find Holt with a single flower in his hand. His handsome face is decorated with a smile and a little more scruff than I'm used to.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey," I say, unable to hold back my excitement.

"This is for you." He holds out the flower and I take it. I give it a sniff because it seems like the thing to do.

"Thank you."

"Of course." He winks. "Well, I should get going."

"What? No way." I grab his hand and pull him into the house, his laugh filling the quiet apartment. When I shut the door, I reach up and circle the back of his neck to bring his lips to mine for a passionate, much-needed kiss.

His large hands fall to my waist and he grips me tightly, holding me as though I belong to him.

When I pull away, I say, "I'm so glad you came by."

"Me too. Are you done with studying for the night? Work?"

I nod. "Yeah, I'm pretty free. What about you?"

"Done for the night. It's why I wanted to catch a glimpse of you."

I slip my hand into his. "Then come upstairs and hang out with me."

"Upstairs, huh? You better not take advantage of me."

I head toward my room, the stairs creaking under our feet. "In your dreams, Green."

"Hey, you were the one who said you were horny the other night."

"I don't know why I said that. The minute I said it, I knew you were never going to let me live it down."

"Correct. That's filed away under important information to keep."

Chuckling, I open the door to my modest bedroom and let him in. I watch as he takes it all in, from my bed, to my desk, to the chair in the corner.

"More girly than I expected," he says, running his fingers over my light pink velvet comforter. "Given your upfront personality, I didn't expect such soft colors."

White walls, gold accents, light pink with touches of green here and there—I guess it does seem softer than what some people might expect.

"It's because you haven't gotten to know the softer side of me. When I'm in my space, I want to be comforted, soothed. That's what these colors do for

me.”

“I like that.” He kicks his shoes off and takes a seat in my special chair in the corner. He moves his hands behind his head and smiles at me. “Surprise me with something I don’t know about you.”

“Hmm.” I lean against the door to my bedroom and stare him down. “I hate putting on makeup but I don’t feel like I can leave the house without it.”

“Why?”

“Classic mindfuckery in high school by mean girls.”

“Then don’t wear it. Fuck them. You’re beautiful without it.”

I smirk. “You’ve never seen me without makeup.”

“Don’t need to see you without it. I know you’re beautiful. Lipstick isn’t going to change my mind. Do you even have anything on right now?”

“Just mascara. It’s the one thing I can’t live without.”

“Maybe one day you’ll show me that beautiful face without mascara.”

“If you’re lucky.” I nod to him. “Now you tell me something.”

I keep my distance for many reasons. One of them being he smells entirely too good right now. Another—he’s wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt that’s molded to his arms and chest, and it’s causing me to have dirty thoughts. Very, very dirty thoughts.

“I have a heart condition.”

“What?” I ask, pushing off the door, not expecting that. Is that why he was talking about a diet the other day? But he’s so healthy. “You have a heart condition?”

“Long QT Syndrome. They found it when I was in the hospital. Another reason why I was oddly grateful for the mugging.”

I want to be near him. I cross to the chair and he shifts, reaching for me. He pulls me onto his lap, and my hand falls at once to his heart.

“What’s long . . . Uh, what did you say?”

He lightly chuckles as one of his hands plays with the silky strands of my hair. “Long QT Syndrome. Basically, it can cause irregular or dangerous heart rhythms, usually under stress.”

“Are you serious? Is it fatal?”

“Can be,” he answers casually. “My symptoms are pretty mild. And I’m monitored constantly by Disik, the training staff, and my doctors back home. There are a few professional and collegiate athletes who have the same thing as me. But to keep an eye on it, Disik organizes regular ECGs, and I’m required to have a conversation with Disik every month about how I’m

feeling.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

“No one did. Not until last year.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, my palm feeling the heavy, steady beating of his heart.

“I didn’t disclose my condition to Disik because I didn’t want him rethinking his scholarship offer. I told my parents I told him, though. Everything was fine until I got into an argument with some douchebag fan after a tough loss. I was stressed with school and keeping my starting position, and I had terrible chest pain and had to be rushed to the hospital. Knox was there. He was scared shitless. Disik met with my parents and they went over everything they thought I’d told him. I was close to losing my scholarship after that. Not because of my heart condition, but because I neglected to inform my coach about my health, and his top priority is keeping us safe. I had to agree to Disik’s monitoring terms in order to come back this year. He kept a close eye on me all summer, and a few weeks ago, he ran me through a test. I passed with flying colors. But, yeah, something I deal with on the daily.”

I shake my head, having a hard time comprehending Holt having a heart problem. “You seem so strong.”

His hand rubs up and down my leg. “I am strong, babe. Just because I have a heart disease doesn’t make me weak.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I say quickly.

“I know. But don’t treat me differently. I’m the same annoyingly obnoxious guy you decided to give a chance.”

I smile softly, but the humor isn’t fully there as I smooth my hand over his heart. “Does it ever hurt?”

“Only when you bruise my ego.” He smirks.

“I’m being serious.”

“Nah. At this point, I honestly forget that I have it. I can train the same, lift the same, run the same. The only reason I remember it most of the time is because of my diet.”

“What’s your diet?”

“Lots of veggies and protein is the norm for an athlete, so that’s where I focus. But I also eat potassium-rich foods like bananas, spinach, broccoli, sweet potatoes, mushrooms, and I try to stay away from caffeine, fizzy drinks and of course, energy drinks. More to help me stay balanced and as healthy

as possible. But you'll notice, I have days when I indulge."

No wonder his body is so ripped. The man barely has any fat on him.

He squeezes my leg. "Any other questions?"

I bite my bottom lip. "Are you, you know . . . able to exert yourself?"

He lifts a brow. "On the field, or in bed?"

I feel a blush creep over my cheeks. "Both."

He lightly chuckles. "Both. Curious to put me to the test?"

"No." I shake my head, even though I don't mean it. It's the furthest thing from the truth actually. The minute I saw Holt on my doorstep, I knew I needed him right then and there. I wanted to feel his lips on mine, his body taking charge, his hands roaming, touching, feeling. But I don't know if now is the time. I'm not sure if he came over for that. Clearing my throat, I say, "So, you're okay, then? Do I need to worry about your heart?"

"Leave the worrying to me. I'm good."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Good." I get up from his lap and stretch my arms above my head. "It's getting late."

"Yeah, I should probably get home."

"No, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant I wanted to change into something else."

His eyes scan me. "You're wearing sweats and a sweatshirt. How could you be any more comfortable than that?"

"I'm wearing a leotard underneath."

"What?" He laughs. "Why?"

"Zoom training. I wanted to look nice up top, but kept it casual on the bottom with my sweatpants."

"So you wore a leotard? Like a ballerina?"

"No." I chuckle and take off my sweatshirt, showing the stylish V-neck tank leotard I bought on sale. "Usually, people wear them tucked into dress pants. I wore a cardigan with it, but skipped the dress pants and opted for sweatpants."

His eyes are zeroed in on my cleavage. "You wore *that* to a Zoom meeting?"

"I had a cardigan on."

"Even with a cardigan, your tits don't go away."

"It's not *that* revealing." I nudge his foot.

“My penis begs to differ.” He motions to my hip. “It’s cut high. I can see skin.”

I glance down at my low-riding sweatpants and then back at him. “You’re supposed to wear high-waisted dress pants with them.”

“I don’t care what you’re supposed to wear with it. I care how you look in it right now, and you look hot.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s a leotard, nothing special about it, but I need to get out of it.” I push my sweatpants down and toss them in the hamper

“Baby.” I hear Holt shift in the chair and when I turn in his direction, he’s sitting forward, hands clasped in front of him, his eyes trained on me.

“What?”

“You’re killing me.”

“In this?” I motion to my leotard.

He leans back and rubs his hands over his thighs. “Yeah, in that.”

My heart trips as his teeth roll over his bottom lip in this sexy, *come hither* way. It shoots a wave of lust and confidence through me in a matter of seconds. Before I can stop myself, I walk over to him, push him all the way back, and then straddle his lap. He sucks in a sharp breath as he smooths his hands up my legs to my hips.

I lean forward and press my breasts to his chest as I bring my lips to his neck and kiss up the strong, muscular column.

“Jesus,” he sighs as his hands float to the back of my leotard and connect with the high line of the fabric that leads to the thong back. “Is this . . . a thong?” He sounds amazed.

“Can’t be having panty lines in those dress pants,” I say, my mouth traveling up to his jaw.

“Let me see,” he barely chokes out.

Smiling, I lift off him and stand. His eyes are hazy, half-lidded, as if I just drugged him with my kisses. Seeing him like this just spurs on my confidence, so I turn around for him, spread my legs, and bend at the waist.

“Shit,” he mutters.

He doesn’t get to say much more before I’m backing up on his lap again and pressing my back to his chest. I take one of his hands and place it on my stomach to hold me in place as I slowly start to roll my hips over his already hardened cock.

God, that feels amazing. Knowing I turned on this man, this fun-loving, sexy-as-hell man.

“What are you doing to me, baby?” he whispers, his lips dancing across my ear, sending a wave of chills down my arms.

“Having some fun.” I slide his hand up and across my cleavage for a brief second and then bring it back down to my stomach. He sucks in a sharp breath and I can feel my nipples harden from his warm breath across my neck.

I continue to roll my hips over his lap. Then I bring his hand up to my right breast, separate his fingers, and close them around my nipple so he pinches it. I arch into him from the pressure of his fingers and then let him have free rein as I grip the back of his neck for better leverage.

“Hell, you’re hot.” He slips his hand to my cleavage, and when I think he’s going to roam to my other breast, he slips his hand under the fabric and grips my bare breast. His large palm cups me while his fingers find my nipple, and he pinches again, but this time, a touch harder.

A bolt of lust sears through me, pooling between my legs, creating an inferno of need. I need him, but I want to please him even more. I want to know what it feels like to have his mouth all over me, his hands roaming my body, my mouth on him.

I want to know what he tastes like, what it feels like to have him in my mouth, running my tongue up and down his length.

I want to pleasure him. I want to watch as he becomes unhinged, as he can’t take the way I bring him to climax and finally gives in.

I want to make him feel crazy. Satisfied. As if he can’t get enough. How I feel.

Rolling my hips, I press down farther, feeling just how hard he is, but I want to feel him in my palm. I want to feel his bare cock and run my tongue up his thick length.

Desire desperately takes over me as I move his hand away from my breast and slide down between his legs. I kneel before him and reach up to his waistband to undo his jeans. Staring down at me, heavy eyes connected with mine, his teeth rolling over his bottom lip, it’s one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen.

I slip my fingers under the waistbands of his boxer briefs and jeans and pull down. He lifts up, assisting me, and as I pull them down, I keep my eyes trained on his cock and watch as it strains toward his stomach when released.

My mouth waters.

My legs shake beneath me.

My hands beg for a feel.

From behind, Holt pulls his shirt over his head, revealing his corded chest and the thick muscles stretching from his shoulders to his defined pecs, to his perfectly indented abs and the tight V in his hips. And then he reaches down and wraps his large hand around his cock. Starting at the base, he begins to stroke himself, and I watch.

Like a voyeur.

My eyes are trained on his thick shaft, the way it grows stiff in his hand, the veins that pop and become more and more defined with every stroke.

I marvel at the pre-cum at the tip of his cock and the strain in his muscles as he remains self-controlled. *How do I change that? How do I make him unhinged?*

I wet my lips as my hands glide up his thighs. They bunch under the feel of my nails dragging over his skin, and when I reach his center, I don't take over. Instead, I reach for his balls with one hand and carefully roll them in my hand.

"Babe," he says in a weak voice.

I move my thumb down the seam of his balls, applying just enough pressure so it's stimulating and not tickling him. When I reach the bottom, I circle around his scrotum and return to the seam, repeating the movement as if I'm tracing a figure eight. I glance up in time to catch his eyes rolling to the back of his head. His legs widen even more and his hand pumps harder.

Fascinated by his reaction, I continue the movement. Pausing mid stroke, counting to three, and then continuing. He wiggles under me and his breathing grows heavier, so I release him and bring my hands back to his inner thighs.

"Fuck, baby. Please keep touching me."

I smile. I love that I've made him desperate. I love that he calls me baby. I love the control I have in this moment, and I'm going to take advantage of it. I move my hands inwards again, and when I grow close to his balls, I draw my thumbs over the seam, one right after the other, as I continue moving my hands inwards.

"Hell," he mutters, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and emitting a hiss as I apply more pressure.

"That okay?" I ask.

"Fucking phenomenal."

Pleased, I keep going, drawing away and then moving in, slower and

slower, letting him get used to the pattern. The entire time, I watch his hand dragging up his thick cock. He pauses and rubs his thumb over the tip, and then his hand falls back down to the base. His forearm flexes, the muscles firing off as he brings himself pleasure.

“How often do you jack off, Holt?”

“More often since you’ve walked into my life,” he answers, his voice strained.

“Think about me?”

“All the goddamn time.”

Wanting to touch him, to be the one who makes him come, I take his hand and slowly remove it from his cock, which twitches against his stomach as I grow closer. Pre-cum slides onto his stomach, and I swipe it up with my finger and slowly move it along the length of him. It’s a light touch, but it still causes his cock to jump. Needy, desperate for more.

“You have such a hot dick,” I say, moving more between his legs, adrenaline starting to pump through me as I wet my lips again and lower my head.

I grip his cock and bring it to my mouth. I trace my lips with the head and then open my mouth just enough to take in the tip. My tongue swirls around the top as my right hand falls to the base and starts pumping.

“Jesus, fuck,” he mutters, pressing his hand over his eyes. “Baby, that feels so fucking good.”

His encouragement spurs me on, and I bring him deeper into my mouth, just deep enough that he touches the back of my throat for a second before I pull back. He makes a muffled sound, so I repeat the movement.

I get lost in the feel of him sliding over my tongue, in the way I have to open up wider than I ever have before. I live for the groans falling past his lips and for the way my hand slides up and down his shaft.

I’m mesmerized by the way his hand slips into my hair, the pass of his thumb across my cheek while I suck on his length, pumping him, making him take sharp breath of air.

A rush of excitement builds deep inside me as his head rolls back, his muscles tense, and his breath becomes extremely labored.

I suck harder.

I squeeze tighter.

I pass my free hand over his balls again, moving my fingers underneath them and drawing a smooth line over the seam, back and forth. Back and

forth.

Sucking.

Squeezing.

Teasing.

More and more and more . . .

“Fucking hell, baby. I’m going to come.”

I don’t let up. I keep my pace. I want to taste him. I want to see him lose all control.

“Babe . . . ahhh, fuck.” His legs tense under me. His cock swells in my mouth, and then he comes.

He comes hard, the sound of him turning me on more than I expected.

I continue to suck and pump him until he’s completely sated and depleted of all strength.

“Mother . . . fucker,” he says on a heavy breath.

I stand and head to my attached bathroom, where I grab a washcloth and wet it down. I return to him and smile to myself as I watch him trying to catch his breath, his cock still impressively hard, his hands dragging over his face, as I lean down and clean his cock.

I head back toward the bathroom, but he calls out, “What are you doing?”

“Getting changed while you pull it together.” Smirking, I shut the bathroom door and lean against the wall. I push my hands through my hair and stare at myself in the mirror.

Oh my God, I can’t believe I just did that.

My cheeks are flushed. My lips are red from sucking. My limbs are shaking with adrenaline.

Wanting to calm myself down, I get ready for bed. Stripping down to nothing, I pull on the Brentwood Baseball shirt Holt let me borrow at the beach the first time we hung out, use the toilet, wash my face, and finally brush my teeth.

When I leave the bathroom, Holt is sitting on my bed. His shirt is on now, his briefs and pants are pulled up, and his arms rest on his legs.

Is he planning on leaving?

He must catch the wave of insecurity that flashes through me because he says, “I don’t know what you want me to do. You were in there for a while. I hope . . .”

“I was getting ready for bed.” I walk toward him. “Are you, uh, leaving?”

“Do you want me to leave?”

I shake my head. "I was hoping you'd stay the night."

He smiles. "Good answer." He reaches behind his head and shucks his shirt, dropping it to the ground, along with his jeans and socks. I stare him down, hand on my hip.

"What do you think you're doing?"

He scoots back on my bed and flips the covers down. "Getting comfortable."

His vulnerable side has been hidden and he's back to his teasing, joking self. But the look in his eyes when my mouth was on his cock, the white flag he flew, surrendering his body to me . . . that will be tattooed onto my brain, reminding me how much more of that side of Holt I want.

I turn off my overhead light, and the moon shines through the window, providing just enough brightness in the room for me to see Holt's handsome, chiseled face as I fall into my bed. He slips under the covers as well, and we face each other as we lie down on my pillows.

He reaches out and cups my cheek. In a serious tone, he says, "You know how to blow a cock." I laugh out loud and his grip tightens. "Baby, I'm not kidding. That was the best blow job of my entire life."

"And how many have you have?"

"Doesn't even matter. I can't remember a damn one. But what you just did to me . . . hell, I'll be a sixty-year-old man with damaged knees remembering the time my girl blew all previous blow jobs right out of my mind."

"Damn right, I did."

His hand slides down my shoulder. "This shirt looks really hot on you."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah," he says, his hand moving down to my hip. "You wear it just for me?"

"I wear it almost every night."

His brows rise in shock. "Really?"

I nod, not worrying that my admission might make me look desperate. I think we're past that by now.

"Reminds me of you." I shrug.

"Babe." He reaches around to my ass and he pulls me closer. "You make it seem as though you actually really like me."

"Maybe I do."

His hand lowers to my thigh and then slides up and under the shirt. To his

surprise, he realizes I'm not wearing anything underneath.

"Hell," he mutters. "If you expect me to keep my hands to myself, you might want to ask me to leave right now."

"I have no rules in this bed."

"None?" he asks, his eyes narrowing, almost turning sinister.

I swallow and wet my lips. "None."

He smirks, and then in a deep, commanding voice, he says, "On your stomach, baby."

"What?"

"Lay your pretty body on your stomach." He pulls my hip toward him and lays me flat on the bed. His hand runs over the curve of my back as he says, "I'm going to make you come like you made me." His voice spreads a whisper of arousal over my skin as his hand meets the hem of the shirt and starts to drag it up. "Get on all fours."

The command in his voice has me obeying immediately, even though I'm unsure what he has in mind.

"Perfect." He drags the hem of my shirt all the way up to the back of my neck, exposing my backside and breasts. I feel his eyes scan my body before he moves and inserts his head under my chest, just below my breasts. "Hell, baby, your tits are so goddamn hot."

Unable to see what he's doing, only feel, my nipples harden right before I feel a light swipe of his tongue. From the unexpected touch, I suck in a sharp breath, my stomach hollowing out.

"You okay, babe?"

"Yes," I say, sounding more desperate than anything.

"You trust me?"

"I do."

"Good." And then he pinches my nipple.

"Oh God." My head falls forward and arousal spikes down my spine, straight to the spot between my legs.

With one hand, he rolls my right nipple, while his mouth works the left, light flicks, tiny sucks, teasing me. Having him beneath me like this, playing with my breasts, but touching nothing else . . . it's erotic, a position I've never been in before, and a position I'm sure I'll remember for a long time.

His free hand presses against my stomach. The warmth of his rough palm causes my stomach to hollow out as he slowly moves it south, past my belly button, right above my pubic bone, and that's where he keeps it as he

switches his mouth to my other breast.

Hot and wet, he sucks me in, and my back arches, bringing my chest closer to him, begging for more. My arms start to slowly shake beneath me, wavering, not from being tired, but from the way Holt is making me feel, the way he's carefully and intricately playing with my body.

He rolls my nipple between his fingers over and over again and his mouth labors on my other nipple, sucking, nibbling, pulling gently with his lips.

"Yes," I mutter, just as his hand trails down farther to my slit. His finger slides to the crest, where he lightly flicks against my burning skin. "More."

His lips suck me in harder, and I cry out in pleasure as his finger slips across my clit.

"So fucking wet, baby. This just for me?"

"Only for you," I say as he keeps moving south.

"Spread your legs more."

The tenor and command of his voice has me shaking as I spread wider for him, exposing myself to his touch. I can feel how turned on I am from the way his fingers move so easily over my clit. He plays with my clit for a few seconds, rubbing it, causing me to catch my breath with every pass, and then he inserts one finger while pinching my nipple at the same time. The combined sensations have me falling forward.

"Oh my God," I say, as he pushes in and out, pinching and rolling. "Holt, I can't—"

"Tired, babe?"

I nod. "My arms are shaking."

Releasing me, he slides out from beneath me, and I'm about to protest when he pushes my chest down but keeps my ass in the air. His hand smooths over my backside. I can feel the trail of my arousal against my skin as he sits up on his knees.

"Anything goes?" he asks.

"Wh-what do you have planned?" I ask.

"You trust me?"

"Yes," I answer without even having to think about it.

"Then don't ask questions, just answer. Anything goes?"

Going in blind, needing him to touch me again, I say, "Yes."

"Good. Spread a little more for me, baby." As I spread, he reaches for my pillows and props them under my stomach, offering me support. "Comfortable?"

“Yes.”

As he smooths his hand over my rear end, down the back, until his thumb connects with my arousal, he says, “I want to hear you. I want to know I’m making you feel good or if you don’t like something. Do you understand?”

Nerves bloom in my stomach as I nod.

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

He strokes me with his thumb, still sliding easily in and out, and then lifts away, so air is the only thing touching me.

And it’s arousing.

Waiting for him, feeling his warmth near me but not touching me.

Knowing he wants to make me come, but not sure how he plans on doing it.

I feel him shift behind me just before his hands fall to my ass.

I’m exposed to him, spread wide for him, and not one ounce of shame floats through me, because I feel safe, I feel sexy, and I feel as though this is where I belong—with him. And he’s the one who has done that. He’s the one who has made me feel deserving.

His thumb finds my clit again and he rubs me slowly, methodically, as if he knows exactly how to make me whimper for more, because that’s exactly what I do.

“Yes, Holt. It’s so good.”

“Keep talking to me, baby. How does this feel?”

He drags his fingers down to my entrance and pushes in slowly.

“So good. I want more.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Still inside me, he glides his thumb up until it’s at my other entrance, and before I can say anything, he’s slipping his thumb inside, lubricated by my own arousal.

“Oh . . . God,” I moan louder than I was expecting. “Oh my God, Holt.”

“Breathe, baby. Relax.”

My hands clench around the comforter beneath me as I take deep breaths, and with every exhale he pushes in a little farther until I’m so full I can’t focus on anything else but what he’s doing.

“Holt . . . so . . . full.”

“Does it feel good?”

“So good.”

“Want my tongue on your pussy?”

“Y-yes.” I stutter from the thought.

“Correct answer, because I fucking have to taste you,” he growls. *God. So turned on.*

From the dip of the bed, I can tell he’s getting in position. I wait with bated breath, and then . . . the lightest flick of his tongue flies over my clit and I nearly combust. I don’t know how he’s doing it, how he’s keeping his hands where they are and eating me out at the same time, but he is and it’s bliss.

His tongue peeks out again, this time with more pressure as he slides his fingers in and out, pumping me very, very slowly, but forming enough heat that I can’t feel anything but my core. My legs are numb, my arms don’t feel as though they’re attached, and as I lie here, I wonder if there’s anything better than this moment.

Probably, and it would consist of Holt deep inside me.

But this is second best, and I’ll take it.

“You taste so fucking good,” he says before his tongue presses harder against my clit.

A bolt of arousal spikes through me as I feel the early sensations of an orgasm climbing up my spine.

“God, yes,” I say as his tongue vibrates against my clit. He flicks faster, pumps harder. I clench around him, my stomach bottoming out as a rush of euphoria hits me like a tsunami.

A light sweat breaks out over my skin as I throb for him.

“Holt, right there. God, right there.”

My pelvis moves, seeking more, searching for the end as my body climbs, my eyes squeeze shut, and my entire body starts to shudder.

“Yes, Holt. Oh, yes,” I say louder and louder as his tongue continues to press against my clit, flicking with abandon.

All my pleasure pulls to the center, my orgasm building, driving forward. My pussy starts to contract around his fingers, and a desperate need to yell, to scream, to jolt and convulse takes over my body as he flicks and flicks and—

“Holy fuck,” I scream. My orgasm blasts through me so harshly that all I can do is ride it out and let my body take over.

Wave after wave of pleasure pulses, igniting my veins, burning my soul, imprinting this moment in my brain, the absolute rapture beating inside of me.

“Oh . . . Holt,” I say, my voice raspy as my pussy convulses around him. My hips are still rotating, absorbing every last thrust of his tongue until I’m completely spent.

My fists unclench.

My lungs start to fill with air again.

And my body begins its descent from the clouds.

He presses a few kisses against my arousal and then slowly pulls away, one hand at a time. When he releases me, I can’t help but feel completely and utterly fucked as I relax my body against the pillows he propped under me.

The bed dips again and then I hear him in the bathroom cleaning up. Next thing I know, he’s pressing a warm washcloth against me, soothing my backside. When he’s finished and returns from dropping off the washcloth, he removes the pillows, adjusts my shirt, and then climbs under the covers with me.

He pulls me close against his chest and rests his hand behind me as I lean into his hold, my cheek on his chest.

“You okay, babe?”

“Yeah,” I sigh while wrapping my arm around his waist. “I’m *blissfully* okay.”

He chuckles. “Watching you come on my tongue was really fucking hot.”

“What you did to me was hot. I’ve, uh, never done something like that before.”

“You can say it. Never had a finger in your butt before.”

I feel my face flame and I’m grateful for the dark of night masking my reaction. “Yes. That.”

“Did you like it?”

“Are we really talking about this?”

“Absolutely,” he says with confidence. “Babe, you have to talk about it. Then you know what your partner likes and doesn’t like. Communication is key. So, did you like it?”

Cheeks burning, I lick my lips and say, “Yeah, I did.”

“Good, because there’s a lot more where that came from. I didn’t do too much because I didn’t have lube, but if you’re into it, we can get *really* creative.”

“How, uh, creative?”

He kisses the top of my head. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“M-kay,” I think I say before lethargy takes me.

Chapter Nineteen

HOLT

“Good morning,” Harmony says as her hand strokes my cock.

My eyes flutter open as my balls start to tighten. Holy fuck, what is happening?

I catch sight of Harmony sitting by my side as I lie on my back. The sun is blaring through her windows. And I’m just about ready to come.

“Hope you don’t mind. It was poking me, so figured I’d take care of it for you.”

“Jesus,” I say as she strokes me harder, faster. “Fuck, baby.”

Numbness spreads from the tips of my toes upward as everything tightens in my body, pulling and tugging toward my groin. My breathing becomes labored and I can feel the strain in my muscles as my body prepares to come.

“Ah, you’re close.”

“Yeah,” I say through clenched teeth. Her hand stops. “Baby,” I protest, sitting up, feeling delirious, still trying to understand what’s going on. And then she’s straddling me so her pussy lines up with my face and her mouth lines up with my cock.

Oh, fuck yes.

I spread her and catch her dripping with arousal as her mouth takes me in. I’m not going to last more than a minute with her hot mouth on me, so I make quick work of pressing my tongue against her clit just how I know she likes it. Her mouth hums in approval on my cock, and together, we please each other. Egging one another on, I move faster and so does she until we’re both

panting, our bodies tensing and—

“Fuck,” I grunt against her clit as I come in her mouth. Spurt after spurt, she sucks me in, and I lose track of the fucking time of day and what I’m doing for a few seconds. But once I’m brought back to reality, I lift my tongue up to her tight hole, the one I played with last night, and lick around the ring. She moans against the head of my cock. I do it a few more times before returning to her clit. All it takes is one flick and she’s coming on my face.

She rides out her orgasm and when she’s done, she rolls off me and takes a deep breath.

“This isn’t good.”

“What isn’t?” I ask, sitting up, my cock half hard and lying on my stomach, wet from her mouth.

“This.” She motions between us. “I’m growing addicted to your tongue.”

I smile. “Nah, babe, it’s not good, it’s fucking amazing.”

I lift her up from the bed and take her to the bathroom, where we both clean up. I slip my jeans on, and then together we walk down to the kitchen, where I watch her tiptoe around in my shirt, making us coffee. Fucking best morning ever.

Leaning against the counter, I grip it as I stare her down, my libido already gearing back up, ready to go, as I watch her shirt ride up high on her ass, giving me sneak peeks.

She presses the start button and then turns towards me, catching me staring at her. Her cheeks brilliantly light up with a pink hue as her hands twist in front of her.

“What?” she asks.

“You’re cute,” I answer.

She walks over to me, smiling, and loops her arms around me, pressing her cheek to my bare chest. I release one of my hands from the counter and run it down her back to her ass, where I slip it under her shirt and gently cup her bare cheek.

“It’s Sunday,” I whisper.

“It is.”

“Which means we both have the day off.”

“I have a study group this afternoon, but other than that, I have it off.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I’ll be your study group. Stay here, in bed with me.”

“I can’t. It’s for points in my class. There are a bunch of athletes in my group, though. You could come hang out in the library with me.”

“Yeah? We could do that.”

“Good morning.” Priya stands in the doorway of the kitchen, glasses perched on her nose, hair a disaster, sticking out on all ends, and wearing a pair of blue shorts and an Aerosmith T-shirt. “Have a fun night?”

I release Harmony’s ass and smooth my hand up her back as she tries to pull away, but I hold her close.

“We did,” I answer. “How could you tell?”

“Oh, you know. Just lots of screaming coming from the room last night. At first, I thought maybe she was having an exorcist moment because I had no idea there was a male in our home. But when she started chanting your name, it all made sense. Congrats on the high praise. I’ve never heard her have that much fun in her room before.”

“Have you had a lot of company in there?” I ask her, lifting her chin so I can see her horrified eyes.

The coffee beeps and Priya helps herself to a cup. “Not many. Just a couple. But I didn’t even know she was a vocal lover until you.” Then she casually walks over to the fridge and pulls out a bottle of creamer.

“Thank you for your insight, Priya,” Harmony says while pushing off me and going to the coffeemaker, where she pours a cup of coffee. She adds a dash of creamer as well, then walks over to me and rests her back against my chest. I drape my arm over her shoulder and grip her breast, making Priya laugh while Harmony slaps my hand away.

“Oh, don’t let me get in the way. Feel her up all you want.”

“Thank you,” I say then tilt my head. I reach for Harmony’s boob again, but she sidesteps me and moves to the other side of the kitchen. “Hmm, that’s not what she did last night.” I tap my chin. “Then again, I didn’t squeeze her boob. I was rolling her nipples and sucking on them.”

“Oh yeah? That’s why she was squealing. I get it.”

“Hope you two have a fun time in hell together,” Harmony says, clearly irritated as she walks back to the stairs and up to her room.

I chuckle along with Priya and say, “I’m probably going to pay for that one.”

“I think we both are. But you do have a lot more to lose than me if last night was any indication.”

“You’re telling me.” I lean over and give Priya a high five. “Thanks for

being a solid wing-woman. I really like her.”

“I know you do.” Priya smiles. “I could tell. It’s why I helped you.”

I look over to the stairs and back at Priya. “Really like her.” I grip the back of my neck. “She’s amazing, Priya. I’m sure you know that, but I’ve never met another girl like her. Fucking sassy, smart, goal-oriented and determined, but there’s a softer side of her that she’s let me see, and it’s beautiful. Fuck, I like her.”

Priya smiles widely. “You’re something else, Holt Green.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say Harmony is lucky she found you. She deserves a man like you. Normally, as the best friend, I would say don’t hurt her, but I know you won’t. I just know it.”

“I won’t.” I push my hand through my hair and whisper, “She’s it for me. I can feel it deep in my bones. She was brought into my life for a reason, and I’m here to prove to her why.” I wink and then take off toward the stairs. “Talk to you later, Priya.”

From over her coffee mug, she says, “Bye, Holt.”

I take the stairs two at a time and jog to her door, expecting it to be locked, so when the handle turns, I’m surprised to find her sitting in the chair, one leg crossed over the other, drinking her coffee.

There’s my girl.

I shut the door behind me and walk over to the chair, where I pull her up, sit down on the chair, and have her sit on my lap.

She offers me the cup and I take a sip while my hand finds its way under her shirt.

“I like you,” I say, quietly.

“I heard,” she says softly, lifting my chin. “I heard everything you said.” Leaning in, she presses her lips softly across mine, making me fall even harder for this girl. “I like you, too, Holt.”



“I’M GOING to be over there.” Harmony points to a table where there are a few athletes I know, gathering. “Are you going to handle being by yourself?”

“I might wither away. You better just use me as a chair. I’ll be subtle. No one will notice.”

We're tucked into a corner near the entrance of the library. She's pinned against a wall right next to a bulletin board that seems as though it never gets looked at. None of the tear-off numbers on the flyers are missing, and neither are the notices and advertisements windblown from the opening and closing of the main doors.

She reaches out and tugs on the hem of my shirt as I lean one hand against the wall behind her and hold her hip. "Think you can let me sit on your lap for two hours and not get a boner?"

"Pfft, piece of cake."

"Liar." She chuckles. "I know this because my hand accidentally brushed your crotch earlier and it stood at attention in seconds."

"The referees reviewed the tapes and that was no accident, babe. Ruling on the field was intentional cock swiping."

"You're obnoxious."

"You love it." I lean forward and press a kiss to her lips that she reciprocates, and then she pushes at my chest.

"Okay, I have to get some studying done. Don't bother me." She points her finger. "Got it?"

"Got it. But after studying, you're all mine, right?"

"Only if you're good."

"For what I have planned after this, I'm going to be a motherfucking saint."

She chuckles, pats my chest, and then takes off toward the table. She's dressed in purple leggings and a black sweater that shows her bare, flat stomach if she moves a certain way, and I watch the sway of her ass as she greets her fellow studiers.

And then I fucking sigh.

Yup.

I have it bad.

Really fucking bad.

Because all I want to do is go up to her, take her hand, and announce to the group that she's mine. I'm desperate to make it known to every man in the library—hell, every man on campus—that they need not bother, because she's taken.

But I'm pretty sure she wouldn't take too kindly to that, so instead, I hitch my backpack onto my shoulder and head toward the individual study section of the library. Being the planner that I am, I packed a bag for myself just in

case Harmony was willing to have me spend the night last night. Luckily, she was more than willing.

When I drove to her place last night, I wasn't expecting much. Maybe a make-out session on her couch if I was lucky. Never in my wildest dreams did I envision coming multiple times in her mouth.

Multiple.

The woman has a sinister mouth. Her tongue is fucking magic, her skills unlike anything I've ever experienced, and her willingness to strip me out of my briefs is fucking phenomenal. In the past twenty-four hours I've come four times, and I'm pretty sure I blacked out twice.

Poor Priya.

Right before we left for the library, I groaned so loud, I felt the echo in Harmony's room. Priya texted Harmony and said she wouldn't be able to get my groan out of her head for the rest of the night. Harmony was mortified. I told her to be proud of her skills. It's not every day you hear a grown man create the pornographic sounds she pulls from me when she has her mouth on my cock.

She didn't appreciate that.

But it's okay. I made up for it when I ate her out for the fifth time.

Feeling an extra bounce in my step, I find an empty table and set down my backpack. I don't have much to do, just some reading that could put me ahead in my classes, which would be clutch since I foresee some lost studying time from being between Harmony's legs. Might as well jump ahead when I can.

I unzip my backpack and pull out *Computer Graphics for Engineering* and a green highlighter, along with a notebook and a pen. I set everything up, flip open to the next chapter in the book, and poise my pen just as a shadow walks up to my table.

I glance to the right to find a plaid skirt, tight button-up shirt, and a stack of books.

Smiling, I say, "What's up, Emory?"

"Weren't you here last night with the baseball team?" she asks.

My boy Knox is obsessed with Emory Ealson. He's been trying to win her affection since day one of classes. Actually, I think she was at a baseball party before classes started, if I recall correctly. I've been so occupied with my own pursuit that I can't quite remember the details. All I know is she's been giving Knox a run for his money, and I fucking love it.

“Keeping tabs?” I ask while putting my pen behind my ear.

“No, just making sure Knox didn’t send you here to spy on me.” She glances around the library as if looking for him. She interns here, and it’s the perfect place for Knox to come and disturb her whenever he wants.

“Nah, I’m here spying on my own girl.”

“Oh?” she says, a bit surprised. Since we share a class together, we’re pretty familiar with each other, so it’s no surprise when she props a hip on the side of my table. “Is that who you’re always texting in class?”

“I don’t text and tell, Emory.”

She laughs. “Uh-huh.” She glances around again. “Who is it?”

“No way. You’re going to tell Knox.”

“First of all, I think you should realize by now I’m trying to avoid that man—”

“Because you’re in denial.” I wink. “He’ll wear you down, trust me. When he has his eyes set on something, he always wins.”

“And second of all,” she continues, ignoring me, “you can trust me.”

“And how do I know that?”

She smirks. “Because I’m trustworthy.”

“Oh, that’s really convincing,” I say sarcastically.

“Yeah, it fell dead on my ears too.” She sighs. “Let me guess, you wore this girl down? Seems as if you baseball players know how to do that well.”

“You telling me Knox is getting closer to his goal?”

“I don’t suffer and tell,” she replies with a hint of sass.

“Fair enough.” I lean back in my chair. “For what it’s worth, he’s a great guy. He’d treat you well, Emory.”

She glances at the ground.

“Not many like him, but I’m sure you know that, right?”

“Yeah, I have some experience with shitty boyfriends, but we don’t need to get into that.” She looks up at me. “Hey, do you think you can do me a favor?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Can you not tell Knox we spoke?”

“Why?”

“Just don’t want to give him hope, since I really don’t know what I’m doing at this point.”

“That’s fair.” I lean forward and stare up at her. “But just so you know, he’s worth the time. Okay?”

She nods. “Okay.” She stands from the desk and nudges me with her foot. “Good luck with your spying.”

“Thanks.” I wink and she gives me a short wave before taking off.

Normally, I would reach for my phone and text Knox that I saw his girl, but I refrain. A promise is a promise, after all.



HOLT: *Babe, where are you?*

I’m at the entrance of the library. Her study session has cleared out, and there isn’t a Harmony in sight.

My phone buzzes in my hand and I glance down to her text.

Harmony: *At your car.*

Confused, I tell her I’ll be right there. I quickly hustle out of the library and head toward the parking lot, where we scored a pretty sweet spot up front. Sure enough, she’s leaning against the passenger side door, arms crossed at her chest, her backpack hanging on her shoulders.

I jog up to her and ask, “Hey, everything okay?”

She looks up from her phone and I note the crease in her brow.

No, everything is not okay.

“Can you let me in?” she asks.

“Sure.” I unlock the car and open the door for her. I watch her slide in quickly and then let out a big breath.

Feeling uneasy, I shut her door. Then I hurry around to the driver’s seat, depositing my bag in the back. I don’t start the car right away, but instead turn to her and hope for the best when I ask, “What’s going on?”

She fidgets with her hands and says, “Just stupid shit.”

“Okay. Well, do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” she says but then looks me in the eye. “But I’m assuming we’re going to talk about it at some point, so might as well get it over with, right?”

“Uh . . . yeah,” I say, cautiously.

She turns in the seat and because she’s small enough, she can lean her back against the door and pull her legs in toward her chest. “It wasn’t the best study session.”

“Why not?”

“Chet McKay was there.”

“McKay, from the football team?” I ask, confused. Dude is a total meathead. A lineman who thinks he’s hot shit, but in reality, his grades suck, his reputation is shitty at best, and he’s a flat-out dick. Does Harmony know him?

“Yeah. I didn’t think he was going to be there, but apparently he needs the study group badly and showed up.”

“Did he bother you?”

Harmony tilts her head to the side and looks me in the eyes. “He’s the football player I was talking about, Holt.”

As if she just threw gasoline onto flames, my body rages into an inferno. “McKay?” I grip the steering wheel, my vision turning black. “Chet fucking pumped and dumped you? I’m going to kill him.”

I reach for the door handle just as Harmony stretches over the console and grabs my hand.

“Let go, Harmony,” I say, my voice dripping with anger.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Going to find the asshole. It’s Sunday night. He’s either at the dining hall or his house. Only one way to find out.”

“I don’t need you to fight my battles for me,” she says, struggling to hold me in place.

“Uh, as your boyfriend—and yes, I’m your fucking boyfriend—it’s my job to fight your battles.”

“That’s awfully barbaric of you, don’t you think?”

Hand still on the door handle, I look at her over my shoulder and say, “You’re my girl. I’m supposed to protect you. He did you wrong, and I’m going to rectify that.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Harmony, I’m not fucking kidding.”

“Neither am I,” she says in a stern voice. “Leave this car and don’t plan on seeing me again.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, letting go of the handle. “You can’t just throw down like that.”

“When I’m this serious, yes, I can,” she counters, sitting back into her seat, seeming to recognize she has me by the balls.

“Is that how this is going to be? You’re going to threaten to give up on this, on us, every time you don’t agree with something?”

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to talk about this.” She shakes her head as she twists forward in her seat and buckles up. “Just take me home, Holt.”

“My pleasure,” I say angrily.

I start the car and put it in reverse, zooming out of the parking spot faster than expected. I spin the wheel and take off toward her townhome. The entire time, my hands practically rip the leather off my steering wheel as I think about McKay fucking over Harmony. Sure, I’ll take her home, and then I’ll drive straight to the football house looking for the piece of shit.

The drive is deathly silent, both of us stewing, so when I pull up to her townhome, I’m not surprised when she abruptly opens the door and unbuckles herself.

She’s halfway out the door when she says, “Turn off the car, Holt.”

“What?”

From over her shoulder, she says, “You think I’m stupid? I know you’re planning on finding Chet once you drop me off. Turn off the car and get out.”

Damn it.

I switch off the car and grumpily get out. I follow closely behind her as she walks into her townhome. The place is empty since Priya is working at the diner, but Harmony doesn’t bother switching on any lights. She heads straight up to her room. I stay put.

“What am I supposed to do? Follow you to your room?”

“Yup,” she says, her voice laced with attitude.

“What if I don’t fucking want to?”

She pauses and then walks down the stairs again so she can see me. “Get upstairs, Holt.”

I fold my arms over my chest, anger still pouring through me, controlling my actions. “No.”

Her eyes narrow, and her nostrils flare. Stomping toward me, she snags my hand and tries to drag me up the stairs behind her, but I don’t budge. “Holt, stop.”

“You stop.”

She spins around. “Is this really how fights are going to be? You’re going to act like a child?”

“How the hell am I acting like a child?” I ask, agitated. “Because I want to defend my girl, I’m acting like a child?”

“I don’t need you defending me. I need you comforting me,” she yells, and those words switch my entire mindset.

Shit.

She's right.

I am completely neglecting how seeing him might have affected her. I'm focused on *my* feelings, *my* anger.

"Fuck," I say quietly while pulling her in close by the hand. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Can we just go upstairs?" Her voice shakes.

"Yes," I say, taking her hand in mine and following closely behind her as we make our way to her room.

She heads straight for her chair as I shut the door behind me. She should know by now that she can't sit in that by herself. Her ass barely touches the cushion before I'm pulling her up and sitting down first, only to sit her on my lap once I'm settled. I slip my hand under the back of her sweater and rub her back while my other hand grips her thigh.

"I'm sorry, Harmony," I say. "That was fucked up of me, to bypass your feelings. I just, hell, I saw red and I needed to do something about it."

Still stiff in my arms, she says, "Do you really mean that?"

"Mean what?" I ask.

"That you wanted to do something about it."

"Babe, I'm vibrating with anger, and I think the only way to get rid of that is a confrontation with McKay. Of course I mean that."

She twists her hands in her lap, and I see there's something else she's not telling me. I shake her leg.

"Hey, what's going on?"

She bites down on the corner of her lip before she says, "I saw you talking with that girl in the library. You looked . . . flirty, and I know that sounds stupid and territorial, but it was already a shitty night with Chet there, and then when I saw you talking to her, I got self-conscious, and I couldn't get it out of my head."

"You saw me talking with Emory?"

"The one in the schoolgirl outfit. You know her?"

"Yeah." I try not to chuckle. "I have a class with her."

"Oh." Her shoulders droop some more, and I hate seeing my strong, confident girl like this.

"And my buddy Knox is obsessed with her." Harmony's eyes lift to mine. I rub her leg soothingly. "We were talking about how he likes her the entire time and I was convincing her to give him a shot. Spoiler alert—I think she

might.”

She looks away and exhales. “Ugh, I hate myself.” She tries to get off me but I hold her in place. She drops her head in her hands. “I’m not this girl. I’m not the jealous type or the one who worries about her man. I don’t have trust issues.” She takes a deep breath and looks at me. “But for some reason, I do with you, and not by your doing. I just think . . . ugh, this is so stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. Talk to me.”

“You’re just—I feel as though you’re too good to be true. I’m waiting for the ball to drop, so to speak.”

Wanting to make things as crystal clear as possible, I tilt her head toward mine with two fingers to her chin. Looking her in the eyes, I say, “Do you remember what I said earlier to Priya in the kitchen?”

She nods. “I do.”

“I meant it. I really fucking like you, Harmony.” Looking her square in the eyes, I say, “You have nothing to worry about when it comes to me. I’m all yours, babe. You’re all I want. You’re all I’ve wanted for a while and now that I have you, I can’t get enough. You’re going to have to do a whole hell of a lot to get rid of me.”

She lets out a deep breath. “I know. Ugh.” She pushes her hands through her hair. “I know. I’m sorry. God, I feel stupid.”

“Don’t.” I twist her so she’s straddling my lap and forced to face me. “This is new for both of us, and I think our connection is stronger than either of us anticipated.”

“It is.” Her hands fall to my chest, where they play with the fabric of my shirt. “It’s why I avoided you for so long, because the draw I feel toward you scares me.”

“It scares me too, babe. But we can work through it together.”

She smiles softly. “You know, I’ve never had someone like you in my life. I’ve had friends, of course, but a guy who cares about me the way you do . . . A guy so open and honest, so up front. It’s cool knowing I can rely on you.”

“And you can. Anything you need, I’m there for you.”

“Anything?”

“Of course.”

A wicked smile crosses her face as she reaches behind herself and unsnaps her bra. She does some trickery with her sleeves and then pulls out her bra and drops it on the floor. My mouth waters, knowing what’s right

below her crop-top sweater.

She takes my hands in hers and places them on her stomach.

Yup, I'll give her anything she wants. Fucking anything.

Slowly, she moves my hands up her stomach, over her ribs, to right below her breasts. The undersides rub against my knuckles and I feel myself go hard underneath her. That's all it takes—a small graze—and my dick is raring to go. Her hips rotate on my lap and I'm in heaven.

Being in this chair, all the memories from last night come flooding to my mind as all the blood in my body shoots straight to my dick.

“Don't get into it with Chet,” she says, moving my hands farther under her sweater so I'm now cupping her bare breasts.

“Huh?”

She rolls her hips again, and I swear my mind goes blank.

She pauses as my fingers start toying with her nipples. She tips my chin up and forces me to look her in the eyes. “Chet.”

“What about the fucker?”

“Don't get into it with him.”

“Baby—”

“I'm not kidding, Holt.” She grows incredibly serious and stops what she started. “I don't need you fighting a fight that doesn't need to be fought.”

I grind my teeth together for many reasons. Because I'm turned on and don't want to be having this conversation. Because I would love nothing more than to give McKay exactly what he deserves. *Because he hurt a beautiful, confident girl.* Because he hurt my girl.

HE NEEDS to know that what he did was cruel and fucking wrong. All women are precious and deserve more than that. But most importantly, Harmony needs to know that I am the person who will always have her back. Will always protect her.

Because that is what she deserves.

“I want to protect you,” I say.

“You don't need to protect me from the past. Focus on the present, Holt.”

“The present—that's exactly what I'm doing. He made you feel like shit today. That doesn't fly with me.”

Looking me in the eyes, she reaches for the hem of her sweater and pulls it over her head, revealing her tits, and, fuck, I'm so gone. They're

surprisingly bigger than I initially thought, and her sweet, dark nipples are pebbled, waiting for my mouth. Hell, begging for my mouth.

She brings my hands back to her tits, and I take that moment to roll her nipples between my fingers, tweaking them just enough for her to inhale sharply before leaning forward and pressing her hand to my chest.

“Do you love my tits, Holt?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“You love playing with my nipples?”

“Yes.” I squeeze them and her head falls back, pressing her chest farther into my hands.

“Do you love hearing me moan when you do that?”

“Hell, babe, I love everything about being intimate with you.”

She lifts back up and lowers her mouth to mine. Talking softly, she says, “Then stay away from Chet.”

“Or what?” I ask, lifting one of her breasts and bringing it to my mouth.

“Or you won’t be sucking on my nipples.”

I pause. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious. Drop it, Holt.”

I mull it over. My pride is telling me I need to take care of McKay, but my heart is telling me I need to listen to Harmony. If I want to keep this girl in my life, I need to listen to her.

Pay attention. Make her feel special. Dig deep.

Hearing my dad’s words again, I swallow my pride and say, “I’ll drop it.”

Seeming shocked, she asks, “Really?”

I cup her cheek. “Really.”

A beautiful smile spreads across her face. “Thank you.”

When I reach for a kiss, she slinks down between my legs and starts undoing my pants. She pulls on the waistband, along with my briefs, and I’m immediately brought back to last night as her tongue slips past her luscious lips and licks the head of my cock.

Hell . . .

Chapter Twenty

HARMONY

Holt: *Not to sound like a dickhead, but happy one-month anniversary, babe.*

Harmony: *How would that make you sound like a dickhead?*

Holt: *Not sure many guys remember that kind of shit.*

Harmony: *It's cute.*

Holt: *You're cute.*

Harmony: *Have any celebratory plans?*

Holt: *I wish. Disik is being an asshole and making us stay late for batting practice, because he doesn't want to be embarrassed this weekend.*

Harmony: *So, I'll be spending the night with my vibrator?*

Holt: *I can give you the real deal, babe. Just say the word, and I'll be over there later tonight.*

Harmony: *Hmm, I think I prefer the vibrator.*

Holt: *You know how to cut me deep.*

Harmony: *Keeping you grounded is the right thing to do.*

Holt: *Is that why we haven't truly had sex yet? Because you think my ego will explode once I show you how magical my cock is?*

Harmony: *Complaining about how you're receiving your orgasms?*

Holt: *I'll come in your mouth any fucking day, but you know I want to claim your pussy. My mouth has become well acquainted, and my dick wants a turn.*

Harmony: *Patience.*

Holt: *You know I'll wait as long as you want me to, right? Don't want*

you to think I'm pressuring you.

Harmony: *If I've learned anything about you these last few weeks, it's that you're incredibly patient.*

Holt: *Are you flirting with me?*

Harmony: *I also learned it's hard to compliment you without getting a teasing remark in return.*

Holt: *Yeah, not the best at compliments. But thank you.*

Harmony: *That's better.*

Holt: *Got to get to class. Meet me for lunch, at least?*

Harmony: *I'll try. I have a few articles I have to get through for the internship, and you know I like to run through them three times so I don't miss anything.*

Holt: *A working lunch. I promise I won't bother you. Just want to hold your hand.*

Harmony: *Can't say no to that. Text you later.*

Holt: *K. Bye, baby.*



"HEY, MOM," I say, answering the phone, happy for the reprieve from work. My eyes were starting to blur.

"You're alive. I considered calling in the National Guard to look for you."

"Sorry." I chuckle and press my hand to my forehead. "Been a bit busy."

"Uh-huh. Have you been busy with a certain someone? Because, you know, I never got a follow-up on how that's all going. But I'm assuming from the lack of phone calls that things are going well?"

I smile to myself, thinking about how Holt came over last night, and how we cuddled together on the couch and watched a movie. He held my hand, something he loves doing, we tossed popcorn in each other's mouths, and even hung out with Priya when she got back from her shift at the diner. It was nice. Relaxing. It felt right.

"Yeah. So Holt and I are dating."

She laughs. "I thought so. Well, that's great, sweetie. How are things going?"

"Good." I hold back my girlish sigh. "He's amazing, Mom."

She laughs. “Oh, dear. I can hear the smile on your face.”

“Yeah, I can’t help but smile when I’m around him. We’ve been going out for over a month now and we really haven’t told anyone, so don’t get upset. We’re happy with how things are—”

“Harmony, you don’t need to explain anything to me. I know what it’s like to want to keep something special to yourself. I’m just glad you’re happy.”

“Very happy.” I bite my lip and look out my living room window. “I think he could be the one, Mom. I know that sounds crazy, but there’s this strong connection between us. Like we were pulled together for a reason.”

“I can understand that. That’s how I felt with your father. Sometimes when you know, you know. There’s no time frame for when you’re supposed to fall in love. There’s no agenda when it comes to the heart. If he’s the one for you, then nurture your relationship, help it grow, and let yourself love.” When I’m silent, she asks, “Do you love him?”

“It feels so crazy to say yes to something like that. It’s been a whirlwind this last month. Could I really love someone that quickly?”

“Yes,” Mom answers matter-of-factly. “You can. I knew after three weeks of being with your father that I loved him.”

“How do I know what I’m feeling isn’t just lust?”

“Well, tell me something about him that you like. And not something on the surface. Something that matters.”

I don’t even have to think about it. “He has this ability to make a bad situation great. He’s full of endless positivity. I find myself craving him when I’m having a bad day because I know he’ll make it better with either his quick wit, holding my hand, or a sweet gesture like surprising me with ice cream. He can read me so well. It’s as if he knows exactly what I need from him in each moment. He makes me smile, Mom.”

“Then that’s how you know it isn’t just lust. He’s taken the time to learn those things about you, to make what *you* need from him a priority. I’d say you’re extremely lucky. Does that scare you?”

“A little,” I admit. “But only because it’s uncharted territory for me. Not because it’s with him. And I also don’t know if he feels the same way.”

“It’s okay to enjoy this moment in your feelings. I believe society puts pressure on us to let our feelings be known, to shout them from the rooftops. But it’s okay to know that you love this man and hold that close to your heart, because that love will continue to grow, and when the time is right, you’ll tell

him. But don't feel the pressure to speak your truth about your feelings just because you've realized them. Just enjoy them. Enjoy him."

Feeling at ease, I say, "Thank you, Mom. I'm glad you called."

"I'm glad I called too. Now tell me . . . when do I get to meet him?"

I chuckle. "Maybe I'll FaceTime with him sometime soon. How does that sound?"

"It sounds perfect, sweetie."



HOLT: *Where are you?*

Harmony: *Home, working on some things.*

Holt: *Can I come over?*

Harmony: *Do you even have to ask?*

Holt: *Be there in a few minutes.*

I scan the scattered papers strewn across the dining room table and consider cleaning them up but then realize Holt won't care. I throw my hair up into a messy bun on the top of my head and shout up to Priya, "Holt's on his way."

Priya jogs down the stairs in a pair of sweats and a Brentwood University T-shirt. "Are you two going to bang? I got those new noise-cancelling headphones and I want to see if they work."

"That's not weird at all."

She heads into the kitchen. "You guys are loud. I want to put those puppies to the test."

"We aren't that loud," I mutter.

"Uh, yeah, you are." I hear the fridge close, and she joins me at the table with a yogurt and spoon. "Honestly, how many packages of condoms have you gone through so far?"

"None."

Her eyes widen. "You're not using protection?"

"We haven't done it, done it."

"Wait." She sits taller in her chair and points her spoon at me. "Are you telling me you haven't had sex? Just fingers and mouths?"

"Yeah." I feel my cheeks flame.

"Holy. Shit." She shakes her head. "Okay, well, when you plan on

actually doing it, please give me a heads-up. I'd like to make sure I'm not around because I can't imagine what that's going to sound like."

Just then there's a knock on the door and Holt walks in. We're at that comfort level at this point. When he spots us at the table, he has a big smile on his face. He holds up a bag of takeout and says, "I brought Chinese food for dinner. Hope you girls are hungry."

When we don't say anything because, frankly, I'm a little mortified, Holt asks, "Uh, did I walk in on something?"

Without saying anything, Priya sets down her yogurt and spoon and starts slow clapping. Holt looks at me, confused, and I bury my head in my hands.

"What's going on?" I can hear humor in his voice. Thank God for that.

"I knew you were good, Holt Green," Priya says. "But I was completely unaware of your mastery. All I ask is that you give my future man pointers." Then she stands from the table. "I'll get plates and drinks."

While she's in the kitchen, Holt walks over to me, sets the food on the table, and then leans down and presses a kiss to my cheek. "What was that about?"

"She just found out we've never had sex, and she's impressed because of how loud we've been."

A deep rumble comes from his chest. "Ah, I see." Standing tall, he calls to Priya. "It's all about the tongue, Priya. I can teach your man a thing or two."

She pops her head out. "It would be much appreciated."

"I want to die," I say into my hands.

Chuckling, Holt pulls out a seat next to mine and says, "Can I help you straighten up these papers? I don't want to get food on them."

"I got it." I start gathering everything and putting it in neat piles when I feel Holt's eyes on me. I pause and turn to meet his heavy stare. "What?" I ask, tilting my head.

He smiles and says, "You're beautiful." The townhome seems to fall silent as our eyes connect. He reaches out and cups my cheek, his thumb passing over my skin gently. "Really fucking beautiful." And that's when I remember I'm not wearing any makeup. It didn't even occur to me to put any on. That's how comfortable Holt has made me feel in my skin.

"Thank you," I say as I lean forward and wrap my hand around the back of his head, pulling him in closer. I connect my forehead with his and take a deep breath.

I love him.

I love him so freaking much, and even though I'm scared to say those words out loud, I'm grateful to feel them deep in my bones.

Slowly, I press my lips to his and allow myself to get lost in his touch, in having this consuming man all to myself. His mouth barely parts, letting his tongue peek out for a brief moment before he dives deeper. I strain toward him.

Needing more.

Wanting more.

"Ahem." Priya clears her voice behind us.

Holt quickly pulls away and smiles up at Priya, while I feel as if I'm stuck in a haze. Hearts and romance float all around me, drugging me, making me feel uneasy and exhilarated all at the same time.

"Sorry, Priya. My girl is just looking exceptionally good tonight."

Setting the plates, silverware, and drinks down, she says, "I can see why you moan the way you do. The man is lethal."

I glance over at him. "He is."

He winks and then dips into the bag, pulling out the food as if he hasn't just altered my reality with his compliments. With his focused, earnest attention. *How? How am I that lucky?*

After we finish dinner and spend some time with Priya, we clean up and head to my bedroom, where we both lie in my bed, facing each other. His eyes are sleepy, but there's also something in them that's different. As if he's been waiting to tell me something.

I smooth my hand up his shirt and rest my palm on his abs. "You never said why you came over. It seems like you have something to talk to me about."

"I do," he says, working his hand under my shirt, as well.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Everything is fine, baby." He smooths his thumb reassuringly over my skin. "I wanted to talk to you about my game this weekend. It's just fall ball, but you can still go, right?"

"Of course. Priya is coming with me. She was able to get the time off."

"Good." He wets his lips. "Uh, I just found out my parents are flying in and are going to be there."

"Oh. Do you not want me to go to the game?"

"What?" His brow pinches together. "No. I want you there, babe. I was

hoping you'd go out to dinner with us after. If you're comfortable with that."

"With your parents?"

"Yeah." He smiles. "I've been telling them all about you, and now they really want to meet you. I know it might be too soon, so I get if you're not comfortable meeting them."

"Are you comfortable with me meeting them?" I ask.

He chuckles. "I wouldn't mention it if I wasn't." He squeezes my side. "I'd love for you to meet them. My parents are great people, and, as I want you in my life, I want them to get to know my girl. You're important to me, and I know you'll be just as important to my parents."

I smile softly. "You're important to me too, Holt."

"So, you'll go out to dinner with us?"

"I would love to."

"Thanks, Harmony," he says, using my name, something he rarely does.

"You don't need to thank me, silly."

"No, I feel as though I do." He looks away and then cutely says, "This is going to be really lame, but thanks for giving me a chance, babe. You make me really happy."

His eyes flash up to mine and my heart trips in my chest.

I love you.

I want to whisper it.

Shout it.

Kiss it into him.

Show him how much he makes me happy. How much he's changed this semester for me already.

I swallow hard, tamping down my feelings. "You make me happy, too, Holt."

"Yeah? You know I want to check in every once in a while, make sure you really are happy."

"I'd let you know if I wasn't happy. Do you not remember our fight about Chet?"

His jaw tightens. "Yeah, I haven't forgotten about that."

I smooth my hand up to his chest and try to soothe the anger that's boiling inside him. When it doesn't seem to work, I work my hand in the opposite direction and slip it underneath his sweatpants and into his briefs, where I grip his length.

His eyes turn heavy as he bites on his lower lip. "What do you think

you're doing?"

I stroke him a few times. "Distracting you. Is it working?"

"What do you think?" He rolls to his back and places one hand behind his head as his cock grows in my hand.

"I think it is." I let go of his length and he starts to protest, but then I take off my shirt and toss it to the side. His eyes light up when he catches sight of my red, see-through lace bra.

"Ba-abe." He sits up on his elbows. "What is that bra?"

"Oh, do you like it?"

He swallows hard. "Uh, you could say that."

I slip off my sweatpants and say, "Then you'll like the matching thong."

He drags his hand over his face as I reach for his briefs and sweatpants and pull them off his legs. I straddle his lap, lining up his cock with my center. Hands on his stomach, I ride him, the thin fabric of my thong our only barrier.

"Ah, fuck, babe. I'm not going to last, seeing you like this."

My center pulses with every stroke over his hard cock. "Me either."

"Then we better make it good." He flips me onto my back, removes his shirt, and then, in his naked glory, he thrusts against me, over and over again, his cock rubbing in just the right spot, emulating sex, but still keeping that last, single barrier between us.

I'm ready to have sex with him. I've been ready, but exploring each other like this, trying new things, pleasing each other in different ways, is exciting. I don't want that excitement to end, especially since he's completely naked right now, driving against me, but still, there's a sense of secrecy between us.

I don't know what it's like to have him inside me.

He doesn't know what it feels like to drive his cock into me. I don't know what it feels like to have a man inside me *who I love* . . . and from what he said about having never been in love before, he doesn't know what it's like to be inside someone he loves.

But when it finally does happen, it's going to be explosive. It *will* be worth the wait. Worth allowing each other into our very deepest parts, knowing we're with who we want to be with forever. *I hope*.

He flips the cups of my bra down, exposing my nipples, then he leans down to suck on them.

The entire time, I let him take charge, working my body into a frenzy, and while he does that, all I can think about is how much I love this man.

“HOW MANY TIMES are you going to check your reflection?” Priya asks as I adjust my lipstick in her car mirror.

“This is the second time,” I say, smacking my lips together.

“Yeah, and you’re going to a baseball game. You’re not meeting the Queen of England.”

“But I’m meeting his parents. They’re in a different social class than me. I need to look put together.”

“Doubt they’d care. I’m pretty sure they only care about Holt’s happiness, not your family’s wealth. It’s not the eighteen hundreds anymore.”

I snap my purse shut and let out a deep breath. “I know. I just want to make a good impression.”

We get out of Priya’s car and head toward the stadium gates, where crowds are surging in. Brentwood baseball draws in just as much of a fandom as the Bobbies and Rebels here in Chicago, even in their practice fall ball season. The tickets are free for students, garnering a crazier following, especially since tickets are on a lottery basis now. The only reason Priya and I have seats is because Holt got us a pair of tickets behind the first-base dugout.

“You’re worried about your appearance, you want to make a good impression, and you can’t stop talking about Holt. You know, I’m beginning to think you might love this guy.”

I can feel my ears heat up from her realization.

“What if I did?” I ask quietly, stopping Priya in her tracks.

Hand to my arm, she looks me in the eyes and asks, “Are you serious?”

I shrug. “I mean . . . yeah.”

“Oh my God, Harmony.” She pulls me into a hug. “Have you told him?”

I shake my head. “God, no. I don’t think he’s ready for that.”

She laughs out loud and keeps walking toward the gates, but now with her arm looped through mine. “Oh, Harmony. I think that boy has been in love with you since he laid eyes on you.”

The corner of my lips turn up. I’m not sure there’s much truth to her statement, but it still makes me happy thinking there’s a slight chance she could be right.

We hand over our tickets to the ticket collector and she ushers us through a lower tunnel where we’re greeted by another ticket handler.

“Seats one and two,” he says, pointing to two seats in the first row.

“Oh, damn,” Priya whispers into my ear. “Yeah, the boy loves you, all right, especially if he’s springing for these seats.”

We both sit down, and I scan the field for number thirty-three. Most of the players are in the outfield stretching and warming up their legs, and there are two guys tossing the ball around.

“Do you see him?” I ask.

Priya looks around. “I don’t. Oh boy, look at Knox Gentry bending over, though. Hell-oh. And Carson Stone—see him over there, stretching his leg? Yum. Not to mention Jason Orson. He claims to have the best butt on the team, and I must agree. And then Gunner Klein and Brock Romero have a piece of my heart, as well.”

I blink a few times, staring down my friend. “Uh, when did you become a fan of the baseball team? I thought we were against all athletes.”

“You might have been, but not this girl. I was playing along to make you happy. But I secretly like a piece of man meat in baseball pants.”

“I feel like I don’t even know you.”

“Oh, look, there he is.” Priya points and I see number thirty-three heading away from the dugout toward the outfield to stretch.

Well . . .

It seems as though I’ve been a fool, because I should have been coming to these games a lot sooner.

Dear Jesus, Holt in a uniform is an experience in itself.

Unlike some of the players I see on TV, he wears his uniform like a glove. Tight pants that show off every last inch of his lower half, socks pulled high, and his belt firmly cinched around his narrow waist, reminding me of the tight V between his hips. Then there’s his actual jersey, stretching against his thick chest and round biceps. His shoulder blades poke at the fabric, and his sleeves are just high enough to reveal his chiseled arms. There’s a sweatband wrapped around his left forearm adding to his sex appeal.

“Girl, you’re gawking,” Priya whispers, and I quickly realize my mouth is hanging open.

I snap it shut and adjust my position in my seat so I’m leaning closer to Priya. Talking quietly, I ask, “Um, is it just me or is he exponentially hotter in the uniform?”

“It’s not just you.” She nods toward the right-field seats, where there are droves of girls calling out names of the players, holding signs, and doing

everything in their ability to get the players' attention.

Lucky for me, Holt doesn't even notice them. Instead, he talks with Carson and Knox, and then picks up his glove to warm up his arm.

I watch in fascination as he starts close to his catching partner and continuously backs up until he's throwing across the outfield with what looks like ease.

"God, baseball is hot."

Priya chuckles next to me. "You're a changed woman."

"I am." I sit back in my seat, getting comfortable, and take a sip of the complementary lemonade a seat attendant gave us when we sat down. I watch my man. I study him. I don't take my eyes off him as he finishes warming up. During the national anthem, I keep my eyes on his back, and when he's introduced onto the field, I watch him sprint to left field, where he takes his position.

"There are so many thirsty girls here," Priya says, looking around the stadium as the game gets going. Gunner is on the mound, Jason is behind the plate, and the dynamic duo of Knox and Carson are at shortstop and second. I can only imagine why there are so many thirsty girls here.

"You being one of them."

"I'm not thirsty, just observing. There's a difference. I'm not waving my shirt over my head, begging for attention. I'm casually observing and fantasizing about what it would be like to bounce a quarter off Jason Orson's ass. Think it would bounce high?"

"Not sure. I haven't really checked him out."

The crack of the bat rings through the noisy stadium and the ball sails out to left field. My breath catches in my chest as I watch Holt sprint toward the wall. As he closes in, his hand reaches out toward the padding, and then he perfectly times a jump as he snatches the ball away from going over the wall.

Before I know what I'm doing, I stand up with the rest of the crowd and cheer my little heart out as the announcer gives a shout out to Holt and a slow-motion replay shows his catch on the big screen for the third out of the inning. Hands clasped, I watch the intensity in his eyes as he zones in on the ball, leaps, and makes the catch.

Dear Jesus, my ovaries are ready to explode.

"Hell, I think I just had an orgasm watching that," Priya says, sitting down.

"Hey, that's my boyfriend."

“Yeah, and I lusted for a second. Forgive me.”

Chuckling, I sip my lemonade but nearly choke on it when Holt pops out of the dugout and stands right in front of us, helmet on his head, bat in hand. He picks up some sort of cylindrical device and puts it on his bat.

I take in his muscular backside as he tracks the pitcher and swings his bat. When he’s ready, he turns toward us, knocks his bat on the ground, removing the cylinder, and then looks me in the eyes. He winks—sending my heart into a complete frenzy—and he says, “You look hot, babe.”

Then he takes off toward the batter’s box as the announcer calls out Holt’s name.

Priya grips my hand and stiffly says, “Be still my heart. I think I just died watching that. Are you breathing?”

Heart in my throat, I squeak out, “Barely.”

Stunned, my heart beating a mile a minute for the man who owns it, I watch him get comfortable in the batter’s box, and then with the first pitch, he swings, sending the ball into the outfield. He takes off, his legs propelling him faster than I ever imagined possible as he rounds first and heads to second, where he dives head first and the umpire calls him safe.

I lose my shit and scream for my man.

And in that moment, as he flips his belt over, letting the dirt that gathered fall to the ground, I have a flash of the future. Me watching him in a professional stadium. Pregnant with his baby. A ring on my finger. A full heart.

I can see it all.

Me and him.

A future.

There’s no doubt in my mind he’s it for me, which makes me think again about my mom’s words from weeks ago. They’ve stayed with me, and I think I understand them more now.

“You’re carrying yourself through this next chapter in life, and it’s time you allow yourself to look up for a second and experience life.”

I’m doing that now . . . with the man who showed me how.

Chapter Twenty-One

HOLT

“Three for four, man,” Carson says, shampooing his head. “That have anything to do with the girl sitting in the front row, eyeing you the entire time?”

I squirt some body soap into my hand and start washing every inch of my body. “Was she eyeing me the whole game?”

“Uh, every time I saw her, she was.”

“Good.” I smile to myself, thinking about the game and how amazing it felt to have Harmony there, watching me. A sense of pride hit me hard as I knew my girl was cheering me on. Made me want to do even better, try even harder. And I had my best game so far this fall season.

It has everything to do with being a macho idiot and wanting to impress a girl, and I’m not even sorry about it.

“So, when are you going to tell us more about this girl? All you’ve said is she’s locker-room material and you met her over the summer. Care to elaborate?”

I shrug. “She’s meeting my parents tonight.”

“Dude, seriously?” Carson asks. “Why haven’t you said anything?”

“Because Knox was going through shit trying to win over Emory, and I liked keeping her to myself. I liked not having to report back to you guys.”

“Well, we knew something was up since you’re never home and you’re always buried in your phone. You’re not that good at hiding it.”

“Good enough,” I say, rinsing off and grabbing my towel from the short

shower stall.

“When do we get to meet her?” Carson asks, rinsing off as well.

“When I feel like it, and I don’t feel like it right now. I like having her to myself.”

As I start to walk away, Carson calls out, “Good luck with the parents tonight.”

“No luck needed; I know they’re going to love her.”

When I get back to my locker, I quickly get changed, style my hair, and slip on some of the cologne that I know Harmony goes crazy for. I told her to meet me by the door that leads to the parking lot, so I quickly pocket my wallet and phone and snag my keys. On my way out, I toss out a few high fives, and then I jog down the hallway to the parking lot door. When I open it, I don’t see my girl at first, but then when I turn the corner, she’s leaning against the wall, looking down at her phone.

She’s wearing a pair of black skinny jeans, black high heels, and a deep purple off-the-shoulder shirt that clings to her chest and waist and makes my mouth water. Her hair is curled and draped over her shoulders, and she looks fucking phenomenal. She changed clothes, because she sure as hell wasn’t wearing that at the game. She’d been wearing one of my jersey shirts I gave her. But this . . . hell, this outfit is going to be torn off later.

“Hey, baby,” I say, walking up to her. She glances up and smiles brightly at me, then presses her hands to my chest, runs them up to the back of my neck, and clings to me as her lips find mine. It’s the kind of greeting I’ve envisioned many nights since meeting her.

“God, you smell good,” she says, pulling away. She cups my cheek. “You were so sexy out there today.”

“Yeah?” I ask, brows raised.

She nibbles on her bottom lip. “Oh yeah.”

I grip her hips and pull her in closer. “Were you turned on watching me?”

“I was happy knowing all these girls were pining after you, but I was the one going home with you.”

“Damn right, you are.” I tip her chin up and press my mouth to her lips one more time, reveling in how soft they are. I could stay here all night. Hell, if I had it my way, I’d take her back to her place and let her know just how much she’s my girl, but my parents are waiting. Reluctantly, I pull away and slip my hand in hers. “We should get going. I don’t want to keep my parents waiting too long.”

“Yes, of course.” She straightens her shirt and pushes her hair behind her ear. “Do I look okay?”

“You look gorgeous, babe. I’m a lucky man.” I kiss the back of her hand and lead her to the car. I open the door for her and wait until she’s settled to shut it. Then I quickly get in on my side, and we both buckle up before I start the car.

I take off toward the restaurant, Tony’s Italian Eatery, my parents’ favorite, and I rest my hand on Harmony’s leg. “So, tell me more about how you were orgasming while watching me.”

“I was not orgasming.”

“Are you sure? There were reports in the dugout about a girl matching your description who was causing a scene in the front row. Mindlessly shaking, tongue wagging, panting, and at one point, someone said there might have been a low chanting of moans.”

“Are you required to get your smart-assery out before you have dinner with your parents? Is that what this is?”

I hold up my hand in defense. “Hey, just trying to get to the bottom of the orgasming girl. Just checking the boxes and doing my duties. So, was it you?”

“I have no problem getting an Uber back to my place.”

I chuckle. “I’m going to take that as a ‘no.’ Hmm . . . was it Priya?”

“Now, that I can’t confirm or deny. She was ogling, big time. I had no idea she loved baseball so much, let alone knew of most of the guys on the team.”

“Oh yeah?” I put on my right blinker and wait at a stoplight. “There are quite a few single guys on the team. I could see if they’re interested.”

“She wouldn’t have time. She’s more of a ‘fling’ kind of girl, and I’ve learned not to get involved in her flings. She’s very particular and bases her hookups by how she’s feeling in the moment. I just let her do her own thing despite her butting into my personal life.”

“Hey, I’m pretty damn happy she butted in. Best wing-woman ever. She scored me a nice piece of ass.”

Harmony swats at my arm, making me laugh. “What is wrong with you? You really think that’s something I want to hear?”

“That’s love speaking,” I say. The car falls silent, and I realize what I just said.

Oh shit.

Uh . . .

Fuck.

The light in front of me turns red and I try to backtrack. “I mean, umm . . . that’s *like* speaking. Not love. *Like*. You know, because I *like* you.” When she remains silent, I start to sweat. “I mean, I more than like you. I really like you.” The restaurant is just ahead, so I find a spot on the side of the road, pull up next to the curb, and put the car in park. I quickly turn toward her and catch her gaze focused on her lap. “I really like you, a lot.”

She takes a deep breath and unbuckles her seatbelt, and my heart fucking falls as I realize I might have just screwed everything up. But when she turns toward me, puts her hands in mine, and looks me in the eyes, that initial nervousness starts to disappear. “I more than like you too, Holt.” Her thumbs rub over my knuckles. “I love you.”

She . . . what?

I blink.

My mouth parts.

Shock freezes my brain.

My girl—she . . . loves me?

“You don’t have to say it back. Don’t feel as though you need to. I’ve been feeling this way for a little bit and I just thought you should know. It might be too soon, but—”

“I love you, baby.”

Her eyes snap to mine as they fill up with tears. “Really?”

I nod. “Fuck yeah, really.” I reach up and cup her cheek. “Jesus, I’ve been holding it in, not wanting to scare the fuck out of you, but I love you, babe. I love you fucking hard.”

The tears that welled fall down her cheeks. I quickly wipe them away with my thumbs.

“Why are you crying?” I ask.

“Just happy.” She smiles and leans in to kiss me before resting her forehead against mine. “I feel as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, finally saying that. It’s so freeing.”

“Tell me about it.”

Our eyes connect, and we both laugh.

“God, we’re sickening,” she says.

“We are.” I give her one more chaste kiss and then squeeze her hand. “Come on, I want to show my girlfriend off.”

MOM AND DAD ordered a deep-dish pizza for all of us to share. They checked with me beforehand to make sure Harmony was okay with pepperoni, so when we arrive, we don't have to worry about menus. We can just get to know each other.

"Mr. and Mrs. Green, how long are you visiting?" Harmony asks. We're sitting in a booth, Harmony and me on one side, my parents on the other. She's holding my hand under the table and I detect the smallest shake in her hand. She's nervous, and I'd normally pull her in close and try to ease the nerves out of her, but I'm sure she doesn't want me hanging all over her in front of my parents, so I just hold her hand tight.

"Oh, just tonight. We fly home after dinner," Mom answers. "We're lucky enough to fly privately so we can visit Holt pretty often."

"That's great," Harmony says, and I know she must have just experienced culture shock. I'm pretty sure she only sees her parents during the holidays because plane tickets are too expensive. "So, how many games do you get to catch?"

"As many as work allows," Dad answers. "If it were up to me, we'd be at every game. At least when he's playing professionally, we'll be able to watch him on TV." Dad crosses his fingers. "We're hoping for an East Coast team."

"I'll take any team," I say. "I just want to be drafted."

"You will be," Dad says with a wink and then turns to Harmony. "Tell us, how are you liking the internship? I've heard nothing but great things about your work from Fifer. The entire team is really impressed."

"Thank you. It's been great, actually. And thank you again for the opportunity to interview. I've learned so much, especially the ins and outs of a published website."

"No need to thank us. You earned that internship on your own."

Growing quiet, Harmony says, "It really changed this semester for me. I don't have to work at the diner as much. I pick up a shift here and there, but it's freed up a lot of my time to focus on what I want to do. I truly am grateful."

The table falls silent, and then Mom says, "Well, I can see why you like Harmony so much. She's beautifully honest."

I can't help it—I lift our clasped hands and press a kiss to her knuckles. "Yeah, she's kind of got me by the balls."

Harmony's eyes widen in horror, while my mom groans, and my dad laughs.

I wiggle my eyebrows at Harmony, and I swear in this moment, if she did have me by the actual balls, she'd put them through a meatgrinder without even giving it a second thought.

"Ignore our inappropriate son. He got it from his father," Mom says.

"He did not," Dad counters. "You're the pervert in this marriage."

And just like that, our freak flag is waving in front of Harmony. Took all of five minutes.

Harmony chuckles next to me, and I pull her in close. "Don't let them fool you. They're both perverts."

My parents stare each other down, smirks on their faces, and even after all these years of marriage, they still look at each other with so much love and affection. I hope that's how it'll be with Harmony. I hope we can have a long-lasting relationship like my parents', because I can't imagine being with anyone else. Sharing this life with anyone else.

She's it.

Like my dad said—when you know, you know.

And I've never been surer of anything in my life.



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Harmony asks as I stand inside her bedroom doorway, staring at my girl. She kicked off her heels and is removing the necklace I learned her parents gave her before she left for college. A tiny silver heart to remind her that they're always with her.

Gripping the frame, I say, "I told you I love you today."

Her smile lights up the room. "Yes, you did."

"And you told me you loved me."

"That's correct." She chuckles. "Thanks for laying out the events of the evening. Want to talk about the pizza we ate too?"

"I said I love you, Harmony. If I walk into this room, I'm going to want you. Want all of you."

Realization crosses her face, and then the smallest of smiles graces her lips. Eyes trained on me, her hands go to her jeans, which she unbuckles and pushes off her legs. Next, she removes her top, leaving her in a strapless bra

and thong. Like the fucking sexy piece of ass that she is, she struts toward me and grips me by the shirt, pulling me into her room and shutting the door behind me.

I reach over my head and pull off my shirt, excited and nervous about where this is going. Up until now, we've fucked around with each other, trying every which way to make each other come, but right now, the mood is different. The electricity between us is sparking, but it has a more intimate tone.

We're about to make love.

We aren't going to fuck.

This is going to be slow and deliberate.

Her hands fall to my jeans, and I watch her unbuckle and then push them off my body. I step out of them, along with my shoes and socks.

She closes the distance between us, and her hand falls to my hip where my scar is. Her finger traces the stitched tattoo and then her soulful eyes connect with mine. "I don't know what I would have done if this happened when we were together."

"What do you mean?"

"I care so much about you, Holt." Her finger continues to trace my scar. "I would have been a mess seeing you at the hospital, not knowing if you were going to be okay."

"I'm pretty indestructible. It would have taken a lot more to bring me to my knees."

"You were really sick."

"And now I'm better." I grip her chin. "No need to worry about me, baby."

"I am worried." She smooths her hands up my chest. "Besides my parents, I've never cared about someone like I care about you. And it happened fast, which is even scarier."

I move my hands to her back to unhook her bra. While undoing the clasp, I say, "Sometimes the best things happen to us when we're least expecting them." I let her bra drop to the ground and bring my hands to her breasts. I cup both of them, letting my thumbs pass over her hardened nipples.

Her head rolls to the side as her breathing picks up. "I want you, Holt." Her eyes connect with mine. "I want nothing between us."

"Nothing is between us."

She shakes her head and lowers her thong to the ground, and then she

pulls down on my boxer briefs, freeing my cock from its confines. She curls her hand around my length and starts to stroke. “I want you bare, inside of me.”

Oh.

Ohhh.

Fuck. I swear I grow ten times bigger just from the knowledge that I could be inside her with nothing between us.

“I’m on birth control, and I’m clean.” She continues to stroke me, pretty much giving me the green light. A green light I’ve never had. Not that I’d want it with anyone else. When I don’t answer right away, she stops her hand and says in a nervous voice. “I’m really on birth control. I’m not trying to trap you or anything.”

My brows pull together. “Harmony, I’d never think that of you.”

“I’m sure you get offers like this, but it’s because I love you and I—”

I press my finger to her lips, silencing her. “You don’t need to explain yourself. I was just stunned. Stunned that you’d want me bare. That you’d give me that kind of gift.”

Hand to my chest, she guides me to her bed, where I sit down. She leans forward and presses a kiss to my mouth before kneeling between my legs and bringing my cock to her mouth.

“Babe.” I cup her cheek. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I love your cock in my mouth, and I want every last piece of you tonight.” Then she opens her mouth and takes me deep to the back of her throat. I nearly choke on my own saliva as my head falls back and my hands fall behind me to support my torso.

Fuck, her mouth is amazing. Soft, warm. It lights me up inside with the way she sucks me in hard, swirls her tongue, then slowly releases me. Hell . . .

“That feels so damn good.”

She releases me and then slowly drags her tongue up my shaft, right below the head, where she flicks the underside, hitting just the right spot to send my cock jolting upward. A shot of lust shoots up my spine, and the early stirrings of an orgasm hit me harder and faster than expected.

No way. Not fucking yet.

I grip her chin and slowly guide her to her feet. Questions lace her eyes, so I say, “You’re going to make me come too fast. Can’t have that. Not when I want to come inside of you.”

She smirks, and I lay her down on the bed and spread her legs, exposing her beautiful pussy. I position myself between her legs and bring my thumb to her clit. Carefully, I rub against it, loving how goddamn wet she is. At this point, I know exactly what works for her, and I know how long it'll take for her to come. This position—a few seconds.

I rub her clit in short circles and watch as her body starts to tense, her legs spread even wider, her torso rises and falls, and her eyes squeeze shut.

“Yes, Holt. Yes, right there,” she starts to chant as her hands fly up to each side of her head, gripping the comforter beneath her, twisting the fabric as I work her. “God, keep going. Oh my God, Holt.”

Her teeth roll over her bottom lip right before her mouth drops open, her orgasm right at the precipice. I pull away and smooth my fingers to her entrance, where I insert two.

“Fu-uck,” she says, her eyes popping open in surprise. I reach over to the nightstand, where I know she keeps her lube now, and I put some on my fingers before I go back to her entrance. I slip one finger inside her and then I move my other finger to her back hole, curling up. “Oh shit.” Her pelvis moves toward my hand. “I love it when you do this,” she moans. “I love it so fucking much.”

“One day, I will claim this ass,” I say, growing harder just thinking about it. “Not tonight, though. That’s for another night. But for now, this works.” I lower my mouth to her pussy and I flick my tongue across her clit.

“Holt, I won’t last.” Her head moves to the side. I flick again. “I’m serious. I’m about to come, just from your fingers.” I flick once more. “Holt . . . oh fuck. Fuck. I’m going to come. Please, I want you inside me.”

“Come, baby. Come on my tongue and fingers.” I vibrate my tongue against her clit, and in seconds, she’s calling out my name as her body convulses against me, her orgasm ripping through her.

It’s sexy.

It’s intoxicating watching her lose control like that, shamelessly moaning and letting me know how much I can please her. It makes me feel all kinds of things, mostly like I’m the man she deserves.

As her orgasm slows, I slow down my tongue. Removing my fingers first, I continue to slowly lap at her clit until she’s not moving at all, but instead lying still, catching her breath.

Satisfied, I pull away and quickly grip my aching cock. I give it a few strokes, allowing some of the tension in my body to ease. I stare down at my

girl, her beautiful body spread over her bed, nipples hard, skin flushed and dewy. I've never seen anything more perfect in my life.

"Press your tits together."

Her eyes open, and she lazily smiles as she does what I say. I slide up her body, my legs straddling her, and I bring my cock to her cleavage. "Hold them there," I say while I bring my cock between them, and I slowly, very slowly, pump my length through her soft cleavage. "Hell," I mutter while I lean forward, grabbing the headboard for support.

"This is hot," she says, pushing her boobs together every time I thrust forward.

"It feels fucking amazing," I say, starting to move faster, realizing that if I keep at it, I'm going to come.

I bite the inside of my cheek, holding off the immediate bolt of lust that goes straight to my cock when her fingers graze the tip.

I lower myself down her body, then place my hands on either side of her shoulders and press my torso to hers. My mouth descends, and I slowly work my lips over hers. With zero urgency, I allow myself to get lost in her kiss, in the feel of her warm body pressing against mine. Her fingers drag up my back to my neck, and then weave through my hair, tugging occasionally, scraping, signaling her need, her want for me.

"I love you," I whisper against her lips.

I feel her lips tilt up as she says, "I love you, too."

With my knee, I spread her legs more and allow my cock to rest near her pussy, the head gradually rubbing against her. She sighs against my lips and reaches down between us. Gripping my length, she purposefully moves the tip over her slit, sliding me up and down. Her arousal makes the movement easy, her kisses ignite my veins, and her moans cause a sweat to break out over my back as my body starts to build closer and closer.

"In you," I mutter, feeling dazed. "I want in you."

She positions me at her entrance and says, "Take me, Holt."

"Fuck," I grunt. I've been waiting for this moment for what seems like forever. And since we've waited until we knew we loved each other, it makes it that much more special as I slowly push inside her tight, greedy hole.

She gasps and clings to my shoulders tightly.

"You okay, babe?"

"Oh . . . yeah," she says, relaxing and allowing me to slide in more. "Oh my God, yes. So full, Holt."

I keep pushing in until I can't go any farther, and then I pause, feeling how she contracts around me, how she breathes heavily, how she adjusts.

"I want all of you, Harmony," I say, looking her in the eyes.

"You have me, Holt."

I lean my elbows and forearms on the bed and bring my hands to her face, where I gently rub her cheeks before connecting our mouths and getting lost. Her tongue swipes against mine and I open wider for her, letting her take charge of our mouths, but keeping control over the pace of our connection, occasionally thrusting in, then slowly pulling out. It's passionate lovemaking, the kind of sex I've never had before, the kind of sex I've craved.

"You're all I want," I say when I drag my mouth across her jaw and down her neck.

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me in closer. "I need you to move faster," she says, desperate. "I want you to make me come."

"You there, baby?"

She nods as tears well in her eyes.

Concerned, I ask, "Are you okay?"

She nods. "Happy tears."

Smiling, I press a kiss to each of her eyes and then angle up for a better position, better leverage. "I want to take you from behind so fucking badly, but I need to see your face when you come."

"You've seen me come many times. I want to feel you from behind. I want you deeper."

I press a quick kiss against her lips, and then I slip out of her and turn her over so she's on all fours. Gripping her ass, I slowly slide into her again, this time going deeper, and fuck, it's sweet.

"Hell, baby." I lean over her so my chest is at her back, and with one arm, I grip the headboard, while the other snakes around her stomach, holding her in place as I start to pump into her.

Her head falls forward as she breathes out a heavy sigh. "Yes, Holt. Just like that."

My hand that's wrapped around her inches up to her breasts and I cautiously roll her nipples with my fingers, loving how quickly they turn into hard pebbles. Her pelvis pushes against mine as I rock into her, sending me deeper, farther.

"Shit . . . God, you feel phenomenal," I grunt out, pinching her nipple now, pulling a pleased scream past her lips. Her pace picks up and so does

mine. Together, we create enough friction to build on the base of pleasure we already created, and before I can catch my next breath, my vision starts to tunnel as all feeling pulls to our connection.

“So good, Holt.” Her voice sounds borderline in tears. “More, more.”

I release her breasts and the headboard. I quickly grab some lube and spread it over her backside. I slip my thumb in as I continue to pump inside her, and she moans so loudly, the sound echoes off the wall as I drive into her farther and farther.

“Shit, babe.” My toes start to go numb. A wave of tingling pleasure roars up the backs of my legs and pools in my stomach, my body on the verge of exploring. “Fuck, I’m there—”

Her pussy contracts around my cock as she screams out my name. She comes in a fury of heat, her pussy tugging on me, milking me, spasming to the point that my balls tighten, my cock swells, and I come. Hard.

White-hot pleasure sears through me as I moan. My cock pumps over and over again, taking over every last feeling I have inside of me. Pleasure wraps around me, heating up my bones, my muscles, pulling and tugging my nerves. Euphoria swirls around me, pulling me into a deep cocoon I don’t want to leave.

Together, we ride out our orgasms, slowly floating back down to life together until we’re both spent and there’s nothing left but to collapse on the mattress. I roll off her and pull her back against my chest, where I cling to her and bury my head in her hair.

“Fuck, baby,” I breathe heavily. “That was— There are no fucking words.”

She catches her breath as well and she starts to chuckle. She turns in my arms to face me and smiles. “What the hell were we waiting for?”

I smile at her. “I don’t know, but I love that we waited. Made it hotter. More intense.” I press a soft kiss to her nose.

I’m a guy. I’ve wanted inside her for months, and if I’m honest, waiting was fucking hard. But that only came from the desire to find out how good we were going to be together. Knowing I’d found the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with made that yearning harder. But yet . . . I’m glad this was our first night. In love. After winning. After meeting my parents — who *loved* her. I just hope my *enthusiasm* wasn’t too much for her. “I wasn’t too rough, was I?” “

“You were perfect.” She slides a leg over mine, drawing in closer, my

half-hard cock resting against her pussy. “There’s no way you’re leaving this bed without more of that.”

I chuckle. “I knew you were going to become addicted to my dick. It was only a matter of time.”

She rolls her eyes and starts giggling as I attack her neck and start kissing her all over again.

“I love you, Harmony.”

She cups the back of my head as I work my mouth down to her breasts. On a beautiful sigh, she says, “I love you, Holt.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

HARMONY

“Do you see that guy over there?” Priya asks. “Booth twelve.”

I glance over the divider wall and spot a man who seems to be in his mid-thirties lounging in his booth, staring down at his phone.

“Yeah. Do you know him?”

Priya nods casually. “He’s the guy I fucked last night.”

“What?” I ask, surprised. “Where did you meet him?”

“Here, at the diner. He’s pretty chill. He has an amazing loft apartment. He ate cake off my body last night. It was hot.”

“Uh . . .” I blink a few times. “Were you safe?”

“Of course.” She waves her hand at me. “Listen, you two horndogs have been going at it all week, and frankly, I’m getting jealous *and* turned on. I met Harry last night and he showed me a good time.”

“Is he here for another good time?”

She nods. “Yup. He’s waiting for me to get off work.”

“That’s in an hour. He’s going to wait that long?”

“Looks like it.” She leans against the wall and holds a tray to her chest. “Thought it would be nice to give you and Holt some privacy too. I always feel weird, like I’m bothering you two.”

“What?” I shake my head. “No way. We love hanging out with you.”

“So, you’re saying the other night wasn’t awkward, when we were all sitting on the couch, watching a Hallmark movie, sharing a bowl of popcorn?”

I laugh. “No. That was fun.” I nudge her. “Holt thinks you’re awesome.”

“I know.” She smirks. “I mean, I *am* the reason you two are together. I just feel like the third wheel most of the time, and since you two said the big *I love yous*, I figured you’d want some time to enjoy that.”

“You don’t need to have sex with a random stranger to give us space.”

She shrugs. “It’s nice. Plus, he’s helping me with my English paper.”

“Seriously?” I laugh.

“Oh yeah. The guy loves papers. Kind of a hot-nerd type. I’m all for it.”

“Well, as long as you’re being careful. Make sure he’s not a murderer or anything.”

She pulls her phone from her apron and scrolls through it until she finds what she wants and flashes it to me. “My brother ran a background check. Harry gets the thumbs-up as an upstanding citizen.”

Priya’s brother works for the FBI, and that’s as much as I know. She can’t talk about his job much, but he’s very protective and always runs background checks on the guys she takes home or goes home with. From what I’ve seen, it’s been quite a few background checks. Her poor brother.

“Well, then, have fun with Harry.”

“Thanks. What are you and Holt up to tonight?”

“He has study hall with the boys. I don’t think I’ll see him.”

She glances over at her tables to make sure they’re doing fine, and then she asks, “Not to make things weird, but do you think it’s odd that Holt is always over at our place? Like, how come you haven’t met his friends yet?”

“I mean . . . I don’t care. I like how things are.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think he should want his friends to meet you and vice versa?”

“Maybe.” I grab a few glasses and fill them with water. I picked up an extra shift today knowing Holt would be in study hall and that Priya was working. “It’s not like we’re hiding it. He’s openly affectionate in public.”

“Okay. Just seems weird is all. Like he’s hiding something.”

I put the filled glasses on a tray and turn toward her. “I thought you were Team Holt.”

“I am,” she says quickly. “I think he’s amazing. Just think it’s kind of weird that you haven’t met the guys yet.”

“I didn’t think much of it, honestly.”

“Well, as long as you’re cool with it.” She glances over at Harry’s table. “I’m going to see if he needs anything.”

“Okay.”

She takes off, and I lift the tray to my shoulder and head out to the booth of soccer players who came in after a long practice. Thankfully they took showers before they came in. There have been some athletes who haven't bothered to shower and, God, it's like sticking your head in their jockstrap when you're serving them. “Your food should be out shortly,” I say. “Do you need anything until then?”

“Your number,” one of the guys says.

“Dude.” The guy next to him slaps him on the chest. “That's Green's girl.”

“Oh shit, really?” The douche holds up his hands. “Sorry. Didn't mean anything by it.”

Confused, I say, “It's not a problem.” And because I'm curious, I ask, “How do you know that?”

The one who called me *Green's girl* says, “I have an engineering class with Holt. He talks about you nonstop. He showed me a picture of you the other day.”

God, the smile that crosses my face. “Oh.” I don't know how to respond to that, so I grip the tray to my side. “Well, let me know if you need anything.”

I head back to the waitress stand, and the small sliver of doubt that crept into my head from Priya's question is tamped down. The anxiety about my relationship with Holt isn't there. Now I'm just curious.



HARMONY: *Done with study hall?*

Holt: *Nah. Coach has us staying longer because one of the freshmen has shit grades.*

Harmony: *That sucks. You can't leave even if you have good grades?*

Holt: *Coach is all about team unity. Knox is actually working with the freshman right now while I hide behind my backpack and text you. Done with your shift?*

Harmony: *Yeah. Just laying in bed now. Wishing you were here.*

Holt: *Ugh. Send me a pic.*

Smiling, I turn the camera toward me and make a kissy face. I'm naked in

bed and make sure to angle the phone so he can tell but without showing anything. I press send and wait.

Holt: *Baby.*

Holt: *Are you naked?*

Harmony: *Yeah. I was hoping you could come over. I heard something nice about you today and wanted to reward you for being an amazing boyfriend.*

Holt: *I know I'm pretty damn amazing, but tell me what I did anyway.*

Harmony: *Some players from the soccer team were at the diner today. One of the guys hit on me and the other one stopped him and told him I was Green's girl.*

Holt: *Who the fuck hit on you?*

Harmony: *Doesn't matter. He was set straight. But the guy said you talk about me all the time in your engineering class.*

Holt: *Who was it? Who hit on you?*

Harmony: *Oh my God. Holt, it doesn't matter.*

Holt: *Matters to me.*

Harmony: *Are you really doing this right now?*

Holt: *I have the right to know.*

Harmony: *Are you hearing yourself? I'm trying to tell you how amazing you are, but I'm about to take that back. And honestly, how was the guy supposed to know? It's not as if you flaunt me around.*

I press send out of anger, knowing it's not the right thing to say, but is he really getting mad about this? How ridiculous.

Holt: *What's that supposed to mean? I thought you were fine with how things are.*

Harmony: *I am. But you can't be a dick about a guy asking for my number when we haven't made anything publicly official.*

Holt: *Is that what you want? A public service announcement?*

Harmony: *Why are you being an ass?*

Holt: *I'm not. I'm just frustrated. Why won't you tell me who it is?*

Harmony: *What does it matter?*

Holt: *You're my girl. That's what matters.*

Harmony: *I understand that, but I'm telling you it was no big deal. The guy apologized. What good will it do if I tell you who it was? Are you going to go beat him up because he spoke to me?*

Holt: *Just a man-to-man chat.*

Harmony: *You know, there are a lot of good qualities about you, Holt, so it's surprising that you're acting like an ignorant caveman.*

Holt: *I'm going to pretend you didn't say that.*

Harmony: *How about we pretend this conversation never happened?*

I toss my phone to the side and grunt in frustration.

Well, that wasn't what I was expecting when I sent him a text.

Asshole.



"YOU OWE ME," I hear Priya say sleepily before her bedroom door shuts and mine creaks open.

I should have known.

I don't even bother to turn in bed to see him walk in. Instead, I listen as he takes off his shoes, followed by what I'm assuming are his pants and shirt. He sets his phone on my nightstand like he always does, and then he lifts the covers to my bed and slips in.

The first thing he does is press a kiss to my bare shoulder. When I don't respond, he slips his hand over my stomach. Still naked, I lie there, unmoving.

"Harmony," he whispers, "I know you're awake."

"What do you want?" I ask, still facing away.

"I want to talk to you."

"Oh, are you being rational now?"

He sighs heavily and pulls on me so I roll to my back and am forced to look at his stupid, handsome face. His hair isn't styled, probably didn't bother with it after his shower, and his face has extra scruff on it, my undoing—normally. Right now, I'm holding strong, even though normally I wouldn't. *I never hold back with Holt.*

And yet, I don't know his friends. I *shouldn't* be bothered by this, but Priya's words have snuck under my defenses. When I first met Holt and his boys, I was terribly rude to them. I wasn't exactly shy when I told them how incensed it made me that so much money was thrown at the baseball team. It's why I pushed Holt away for so long. And Priya was right—he is often here. Are they angry with me? Do they not like me because of how things began? *Is Holt embarrassed by me? Not to mention where I'm from.* Is that

what this is?

“I’m sorry,” he says. He drags his hand over his face. “I don’t know what my deal is. I’m not that guy. I’ve never been that guy. But, fuck, babe, I’m so goddamn territorial when it comes to you, I just . . . black out, don’t think, and end up acting like an ass.”

His finger lazily draws up my stomach and between my cleavage, sending a wave of chills down my arm.

Trying not to be affected by his touch, I say, “It wasn’t a big deal, Holt.”

“It was to me,” he says softly, his finger inching closer to my breast, only to circle my nipple. In seconds, my nipple is hard, and I feel my body’s arousal.

And even though I want him, this is not how we have a conversation.

I stop his hand, and then I wiggle out from under him, go to my dresser, where I find one of his old shirts, and I throw it over my head.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Covering up. I’m not about to have a serious conversation with you while you try to turn me on.”

“I was just feeling you. Trying to stay connected. Do you know how fucking frustrating it was, texting you and not getting a response back? I was itching to leave study hall so I could come here.”

“And what? Trick me by having sex with me?”

“What?” he asks, his brows drawn together. “When have I ever tricked you into having sex with me?”

I push my hand to my forehead. “That’s not what I’m saying.” Taking a deep breath, I say, “You can’t control every interaction I have with the opposite sex. It’s not going to bode well for you if you try to.”

“So, because I care about my girl, you’re going to break up with me?”

“Oh my God, Holt. Are you hearing yourself? Is this why I haven’t met any of your friends? Because you’re afraid they might talk to me?”

“No. You said you were good with not meeting them.”

“Well, maybe I’m not.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“Where’s this all coming from?” He stands and, in the moonlight, I can see the anger vibrating off him, the tension in his shoulders, the flex in his chest. “I thought we were good.”

“So did I. But apparently we live in the seventeen hundreds and I’m not allowed to talk to other guys.”

“Do you want to talk to other guys?” he asks, his voice growing louder.

Pretty sure Priya is regretting letting him in now.

Feeling as if we're going in circles, I say, "Maybe you should leave. We clearly aren't in a position to have an adult conversation about this."

As he stares me down, I see his jaw work to the side, and then without a word, he moves past me and starts putting on his clothes, followed by his shoes. My stomach plummets as he walks toward the door and throws it open.

I know I told him to leave, but I didn't actually think he would. I thought there'd be more fight in him.

He crosses the threshold of my room and then stops, his hand reaching up to the doorjamb. With his back to me, he says, "I love you." And then he takes off down the stairs and out our front door.

Stunned, I walk over to my bed and sit down.

I blink back a few tears and then reach for my phone. That's when I notice he left his. I pick it up, and the screen lights up with a picture of me. I'm smiling at the camera, and in text, "my baby" is written on the picture.

I nibble on my bottom lip and then reach for my phone to open up his texts that went unanswered.

Holt: *We need to have this conversation.*

Holt: *Harmony.*

Holt: *Don't fucking go silent on me. We need to talk about this.*

Holt: *I know I'm a possessive asshole. I get it. But I'm not going to apologize for loving you.*

Holt: *I can see you're not going to respond. I'm in my car, headed to your place right now to talk this out.*

Sighing, I set my phone down just as the door opens, scaring me. Holt stands in the doorway, hands in his pockets, a remorseful look on his face. He sticks his hand in his hair and pulls on the strands.

"I'm sorry."

I stand from the bed and walk over to him. I gently place my hand on his chest, and he exhales, as if a weight was just lifted off him.

"I'm sorry for asking you to leave. I shouldn't have done that."

His hands fall to my hips and he grips me tightly. "This is consuming. You and me. I'm not sure how to navigate these feelings." His eyes meet with mine. "I can't have you leave me."

"I'm not leaving you, Holt. It would take a lot more to get rid of me."

He shuts the door behind him and kicks off his shoes before pulling his

shirt over his head and tossing it on the ground. He moves me back to my bed, where he lays me down. He climbs on top of me and lies down on his side to not squash me with his weight. One of his hands starts stroking my hair as he says, "Not getting rid of you." His eyes search mine. "I'm going to try to rein in the alpha-like behavior."

I smooth my hand over his shoulder. "Save it for the bedroom. But outside of the bedroom, know nothing is going to take me away from you."

"Not even some punk at a diner?"

I chuckle. "No, not some punk at the diner."

He sighs and then says, "I was telling Carson about you tonight."

"Really?" I ask, surprised.

He nods. "Yeah. He was asking why I was being such a bastard, and I told him. He asked why I haven't said much about you."

"What did you say?"

"I'm superstitious. Afraid if I talk about it, something shitty would happen."

Confused, I say, "But you told that soccer guy in your class."

"That's different." He sighs heavily.

"How is it different?"

"How do I explain this without sounding crazy?" He drags his hand down his face. "Hell, either way, I'm going to sound crazy."

I chuckle. "Then just tell me."

He looks off to the side and shakes his head in humor. "Jesus. Don't judge me. But a few weeks ago, I accidentally let our relationship slip after practice, while we were getting changed. Knox was talking about Emory, and I sort of said you were locker-room material."

"What does that mean?"

"Have you ever heard of the baseball locker room rumors?"

"Uh . . . not really. Remember, I steered clear of all athletes and sports on campus before you came along."

"True." He twirls a piece of my hair in his finger and says, "Rumor on campus has been if a guy on the baseball team invites a girl to the locker room to get it on, they're going to be together forever."

I stare at him for a few seconds and then I bust out in laughter. "You have got to be kidding."

He doesn't smirk. Instead, he's incredibly serious when he answers, "I'm not kidding. Every guy who has taken a girl to the locker room has wound up

marrying her.”

“Every guy?”

“Every. Guy.”

I swallow, realization hitting me harder than expected. “Wait, and you said I’m locker-room material?”

He nods. “Yeah, babe. You are.”

“Oh.”

Oh!

“Soo . . . what you’re trying to say is that you think you jinxed us, and now you’re trying not to talk about us in case you jinx us some more?”

“Precisely.”

I stare up at him and after a few heartbeats, I say jokingly, “What a load of crap.”

He laughs and tickles my side, making me squirm beneath him. “It’s not a load of crap. You’re messing with fate, and that’s not something I take lightly.”

“You’re telling me there isn’t something else that’s been holding you back?” I ask, seeing a flash of vulnerability behind his eyes. “There is, isn’t there?”

He glances to the side and exhales. “I’m not that guy who lets the past dictate my future.”

“But you are, aren’t you?”

“It was after I was mugged,” he says softly. “There was a girl I was crushing on hard. My buddies knew it and I was planning on asking her out that weekend, but when I was laid up in the hospital, one of the guys moved in on her.”

Oh God.

“That’s really shitty, Holt. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, so it’s made me protective, which then makes me act like a complete asshole, apparently. And like I said, I don’t like it when the past comes back to impact choices for your future. I guess I let it slip in before I could stop it.” He rubs my side. “I promise to be better.”

“Thank you.” I lift up and press a kiss to his lips. “So, what did Carson say when you told him all of this?”

“He called me crazy.”

I chuckle. “Sounds like Carson and I would be good friends.”

“You would.” He smooths his hand up my shirt to just below my breast.

“Want to meet him?”

“Really?” I ask.

He nods. “Yeah. He’s one of my best friends. I think I could spare one guy and not jinx us.”

“You realize how ridiculous that sounds, right?”

“Not ridiculous at all, because it’s true.” His thumb rubs the underside of my breast.

“I would love to meet him. In a controlled environment, where we don’t run into any black cats or walk under any ladders—”

“Real fucking funny,” he says, moving my shirt up my body until he’s pulling it over my head.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Make-up sex,” he answers, taking off his pants and boxers, revealing his already hard erection. When did that happen? Maybe I’m not the only one who’s turned on easily. “We fought, and now we make up. Simple.”

I press my hand to his chest.

“But are we really okay?”

“We’re good, babe.”

“And your whole-alpha-macho-man-don’t-look-at-my-girlfriend attitude? Where do we stand on that?”

His lips find my neck. “I’m going to get it together.”

“And your jealousy?” I ask as I part my legs for him.

“Tamped down.” He grips his cock and rubs it along my clit.

“No more freaking out on me if I say a guy looked at me.”

“He hit on you.” He presses his cock to my entrance and I thrust my hips toward him, ensuring he enters with ease. He grunts something under his breath and then says, “Big difference between looking at you and hitting on you.”

“Either way.” I force him to look me in the eyes as he pushes deep inside me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He smirks. “Damn right, you’re not. You love my cock too much.”

“It’s sub par.”

“Bullshit. Your mouth is on my cock more than my hand was all last year.”

My eyes widen in shock and he laughs out loud, pushing into me harder.

“Oh my God—”

“I know. So good, right, babe?”

I push at his chest. “I can’t believe you said that.”

He pauses and stares me down. “Is it not true?”

I bite my bottom lip. “I don’t know. I’m unaware of the number of times you’ve masturbated.”

“Here, this should help. Think of how many times you’ve sucked my cock, and then cut that in half.”

I push at him again, but he takes my hands and pins them above my head. His mouth falls to my breasts, and his lips and tongue work over my nipples. My outrage quickly fades into the darkness, and I get lost in the man who owns every last piece of me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HOLT

“Dude, stop fidgeting,” Carson says as we make our way out of Frankie Donuts. “You’re driving me fucking crazy.”

“I’m not fidgeting.”

“You’ve touched your hair at least two dozen times since we picked up the donuts.”

“Making sure it’s not out of place.”

“It’s not,” Carson says, annoyed. “What do you think is going to happen today? Do you think I’m going to embarrass you?”

“I really have no fucking clue, man.”

We make our way toward Lake Michigan to an open picnic table, me carrying the box of donuts, Carson carrying the coffees. Harmony is meeting us here. We had early morning conditioning and we earned the calories that are packed in the box. Normally we have weekends off now that our fall training is over, but thanks to some freshman getting in trouble with a professor, we were blessed with the opportunity to wake up early on Saturday and listen to our coach berate us while we ran up and down our turf field. After we were done, Knox pulled the freshman to the side and spoke with him.

“You know we already met her, right? At the diner. What’s the big deal?”

We both take a seat, and I say, “She’s special, okay? Really fucking special. And I’ve wanted to keep her to myself. Have you ever had anything so important and different in your life that you want to hold on to it for as

long as you can? That's how I feel about her. We've been in a bubble. I'm not ready for the bubble to burst."

"Then why am I here?"

"I think she's starting to get antsy about not meeting anyone. We had a fight the other night and she mentioned it. I know she wouldn't have mentioned it if it didn't actually bother her. We're closing in on winter break, and I'm not sure what she plans on doing, but I want the best chance of being able to invite her to New York for at least a few days. Take her to some Broadway shows. Watch her experience New York during the Christmas season."

"Romantic, man. You've never offered to take me—" His voice trails off when his eyes connect with something behind me. "Holy shit, dude."

"What?" I glance behind me and see Harmony walking toward us. She's wearing blue jeans with holes in the knees, a black sweater, and black boots. Her hair is in soft, natural waves around her shoulders, and she has a huge smile on her face when her eyes connect with mine.

"I can see why you kept her a secret. Damn, man."

Damn is right.

I stand from the picnic table and meet her halfway. My hand connects with her hip, and her perfume floats up, intoxicating me. Fuck, what I wouldn't give for some privacy right now.

"Babe, you look fucking good." I lift her chin and press a soft kiss to her lips. I feel her smile against my mouth right before she returns the kiss.

Then quietly she says. "I tried for casual. I didn't want to look too dressed up."

"You look amazing." I take her hand in mine and we turn toward Carson, who stands as we approach the table.

He walks to Harmony and pulls her into a hug. He wiggles his eyebrows when he looks at me, and I know he's kidding, but it still makes me want to kick him in the balls.

"Harmony, it's great to meet you properly, not while I'm drunk and looking for a patty melt."

Carson pulls away as Harmony says, "Not your best showing."

He chuckles, and we all take a seat. "Are you saying you're a princess when you're drunk?"

"People bow to me in the streets."

Carson smiles brightly and looks at me. "Yeah, I can see exactly why you

kept her to yourself.”

Feeling so much goddamn pride, I scoot in close to Harmony and hand her a coffee. “I’ve never seen her drunk, but you should catch the show when she wakes up in the morning. I never knew dragons were real until I slept over the first night.”

Casually Harmony sips her coffee. “That just cost you a blow job.”

Carson clutches his heart. “Oof, man. Way to dig yourself a hole right off the bat.”

“Not worried. I know the way to my girl’s heart.”

She flips open the donut box and scans the assortment. “No apple fritters? You clearly don’t.”

Carson claps his hands and laughs.

I wrap my arm around her waist and bring my mouth to her ear. “Fucking smart-ass.”

She chuckles and picks up a strawberry lemonade donut, one I know she loves. “So, tell me what it’s like to live with Holt. Is he messy?”

“That’s right. You’ve never been to the baseball loft.”

Harmony shakes her head, and I now feel guilty that she’s never seen my place. “I haven’t, so I need you to tell me what it’s like.”

Carson eyes me and then says, “He’s the neat freak in the loft.”

Surprised, Harmony glances at me. “Really? Because you couldn’t care less about my room when you toss your clothes around as if it’s a giant hamper.”

“When I’m taking my clothes off, I usually have a raging boner. Not about to stop what I’m in pursuit of to fold my clothes.”

“Hey, there’s always time to fold your clothes,” Carson says.

“Then you’re not having mind-consuming sex,” I say.

“I’m not having sex at all,” Carson counters. “So, I wouldn’t know.” He picks up a donut and shoves half of it in his mouth.

“Hook him up with Priya.” I nudge Harmony.

“Who’s Priya?” Carson asks.

“My roommate. She’s actually seeing this guy. Well, sort of seeing. More like having fun.”

“Is that why she hasn’t been around lately?” I ask.

“Yeah. Also, Priya is often a lone wolf. She doesn’t do relationships at all. I’ve never seen her in one since we’ve known each other. But lots of hookups.”

“She wouldn’t be good for Carson, then. He’s totally relationship material.”

“How would you know?” Carson asks. “You’ve never asked me about my love life.”

“That fact that you said *love life* labels you as a relationship guy,” I say, making Harmony laugh.

“I want to impress you,” Harmony says, “but Holt has a point.”

“Can’t blame you for being honest. So, enough about me. Tell me why you think this guy is the one you want to spend your time with.”

“I told you already,” I say with a smile. “She’s addicted to my dick.”

“I’m going to murder you,” Harmony says through clenched teeth, causing me to throw my head back and laugh.

“You know, I’ve seen his penis in the locker room before. It’s not bad,” Carson says. “Mine is better.”

My eyes snap to his. “Watch it.”

Carson and Harmony now laugh together.

“I’ve always dreamed of two men fighting over me with their cocks.” Harmony slips her hand over my thigh, easing my tension, showing me that even though she’s joking, I’m still very much hers.

“Why did I just envision us whipping our pants down and swording it out?” Carson asks.

I catch the large smile on Harmony’s face. She says, “Now that’s something I don’t mind sitting back and watching. Although, I fear you might get poked in the eye, Carson.”

Carson looks at me. “You taking cheap shots with fingers to the eye?”

“I think she’s referring to my massive cock.”

Carson glances at Harmony.

She shrugs. “I mean, I’ve been poked a few times.”

Laughing, Carson smirks and says, “Looks like I’ve found another best friend.”



“IT’S CLEANER in here than I expected,” Harmony says, walking through the baseball loft. Most of the guys are at a party at the football house, something I chose to skip. I’d rather spend time with my girl. “Did you clean up just for

me?”

Yes. I plowed through here with a vacuum, mop, and bucket of cleaning supplies. It smelled like rotten shoes in here this morning, but now it smells like a field of lavender. I know that because that’s the scent of the cleaning spray I was using.

“No, not really,” I answer. “We keep it pretty clean.”

She chuckles softly. “How come I don’t believe you?”

“Trust issues? Can’t blame me for that, babe.”

She needles me in the side, and I take her hand in mine to walk her toward the back of the loft, where my room is. I spent even more time cleaning my room—*pristinely*—making sure I dusted—yeah, fucking dusted—and I even re-folded my clothes in my dresser just in case she popped open one of the drawers.

I open the door to my bedroom and let her walk in first. I have one of the rare windows in the loft that provides a lake view. It’s small, but it’s there. My queen-sized bed is neatly made with a navy-blue comforter and white sheets. My desk is immaculately organized with my laptop front and center. My mounted TV is turned toward my bed, with my Xbox tucked away. There aren’t many decorations on my walls, just some Brentwood Baseball pennants. Compared to Harmony’s room, it’s pretty bland, but it’s worked for me so far.

As I shut the door, I watch her take in the space. Her finger runs across my comforter as she goes to the window to look out. When she turns around, her smile is bigger and brighter than ever. “You totally cleaned for me.”

I pull on the back of my neck. “I mean, I straightened up.”

She bends at the waist and sniffs my comforter. “This is freshly washed.”

“Laundry day and you coming over here happened to line up.”

She runs her finger along the top of my dresser. “You dusted.”

“We don’t get dust.”

She chuckles and walks over to me. “It’s cute that you care, but I would have taken you in your filth.”

“It wasn’t filthy. Just . . . you know . . . lived in. I am the neatest one in the loft, remember?”

With a smile, she takes my hand in hers and leads me to my bed, where we both lie back. “It’s really plain in here.”

“Yeah. Nothing special about my room. It’s why I like your place so much. It’s comfortable. Whenever I come back here, it feels like a jail cell.”

“I wouldn’t say it has jail-cell vibes, but it wouldn’t hurt to bring a plant in here.”

“I thought about adding something homier after I was in your room, but what’s the point? I leave after this year, and I have your place I can hang out at.”

She lifts up and looks at me. “What do you mean, you leave after this year?”

“The draft, baby.

“But you’re a junior.”

I sit up as well, seeing the real concern in her eyes. Hell, I thought she knew this. “As a junior, it’s the first year I’m eligible for the draft. Shit, I thought I told you that.”

She shakes her head. “No. I had no clue.” She worries on her lower lip. “So, after next semester, you could be going somewhere else?”

I swallow hard, my pulse increasing, my nerves creeping up my spine, sending warning signals to my heart to brace for impact. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” She sits up all the way now and swings her legs off the edge of the bed, turning away from me. “Silly me. I assumed we’d graduate together.”

Shit.

I don’t know what to say, how to handle this. Being the dumbass that I am, I just thought she’d know how the baseball system works. But now that I think about it, why would she know? She’s spent her entire time here at Brentwood avoiding athletes.

“Babe.” I reach for her but she stands from the bed, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

“You’re leaving.”

Knowing this isn’t the truth, I still want to at least calm her so I can talk to her. I say, “It’s not a guarantee that I’ll get drafted.”

Lie.

That’s an easy lie. Disik was telling me the other day how I could be in the top ten of prospects, along with Knox and Carson.

She spins around, looking stressed and uneasy. “I might not know a lot about baseball, Holt, but I know you’re good, and if you’re up to be drafted this spring, then you’re getting drafted.”

Yeah, wasn’t sure if that was going to work or not.

“Listen, we can figure something out. It’s nothing we need to talk about right now.”

“Yes, it is something we need to talk about,” she shoots back. “I’m not about to get involved further in this relationship if it’s just going to end in spring. How is that fair to me?”

What?

End?

Is she serious?

My throat tightens, and I stand from the bed, wanting to be close to her, but she takes a step back.

“Don’t you think that’s something you should have told me before we went down the *I love you* path? Like a disclaimer. ‘Heads-up. I won’t be here next year.’”

“I wasn’t sure this was going anywhere at first.” When her eyes flash at me in anger, I realize quite quickly that wasn’t the right thing to say. Not even close. How the fuck do I rescue this situation? *How did we get to this level of animosity so quickly, too?* Although, if I think about it—if she told me today that she was leaving at the end of the school year and I hadn’t known about it? Knowing how angry I get when a guy hits on her, I’m sure I’d be fuming right now. But I’ve no fucking clue how to salvage this. She’s my everything.

“So, what was I? A conquest?”

“No. Fuck.” I drag my hand over my face. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

I push my hand through my hair out of frustration and pure panic. “I was just trying to get you to go on a date with me initially. I liked you. Liked your spice, your sense of humor. I wanted to get to know you better. I wasn’t thinking long-term.”

“And when you started thinking *long-term*, don’t you think that’s something you should have said? You know, when I met your parents, or maybe after we started hanging out longer. Or maybe when I let you make love to me with nothing between us. Or hell, even the first time I put my mouth on you. You had plenty of opportunities to say something.”

“I know. Fuck, Harmony. I just figured—”

“Figured what? That you could have your fun and then just move on with your life when bigger and better things came along?” A tear streams down her face that she quickly wipes away.

“What? No.” My brow creases. “Baby, come here.” I reach for her but she takes another step back.

“Don’t ‘baby’ me. You don’t get to call me that when you’re breaking my heart.” She sucks in a sharp breath as more tears stream down her face, snapping me in half and sending my damn heart into a tailspin. “Unbelievable.” She shakes her head. She heads toward the door and I quickly press my hand against it before she can leave.

“You’re not leaving.”

She folds her arms over her chest. “What’s the point, Holt? Why should I stay? You’re clearly saying there’s no future between us.”

“What? No, I’m not.”

“So, when you’re drafted, you’re going to want to continue dating me?” she asks, her tone sarcastic.

“Uh . . . yeah.”

She goes to respond but then stops. Her mouth closes and her eyes frantically search mine. “Wait, what?”

I lean against the door, utterly confused. “I . . . huh?”

“Hold on.” She takes a deep breath then wipes at her cheeks, her body language still standoffish.

“YOU’RE GETTING DRAFTED in the spring. And your chances of moving to another state are significantly high since there is one minor league team nearby.”

“Correct,” I say, following this logic.

“And I’ll be here, at Brentwood, finishing my degree. But you don’t have any plans of breaking up with me. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Why the hell would I break up with you?”

She twists her hands together. “Because you’re leaving. Because you don’t want to be tied down. Because it might be too hard for you.” I have no idea why Harmony would think having a long-distance relationship with her would be worse than breaking up. This girl *is* my future. Alongside baseball, God willing. But I now see that she may not be willing to go the distance with me. I *now* see why she’s in pain.

“Is it too hard for you?” I ask.

Her eyes connect with mine as she slowly shakes her head. “No. It’s not.” *Thank. Fuck.*

In this moment, she looks so unsure of herself. Her shoulders are turned in, her teeth keep worrying over her lip, and her tearstained cheeks are still

wet, glistening against the dim light in my room.

How could she possibly think I want anything else? How could she possibly think that I could leave her behind, that we were done?

Treading cautiously, I close the space between us and take her hand in mine. I press a kiss to her knuckles and say, “I had zero intention of breaking up with you, Harmony. In fact, all I’ve thought about for months is that I can see you years from now. You’re my future. Makes me aware that I want this to be hard, because I know when we make it through the tough times, we’re going to be able to make it through anything.”

“You sure?” she asks. “I don’t know what it’s like out on the road, but I can only imagine it’s similar to here at Brentwood. Girls vying for your attention. I know you’re loyal, but even the guys with the best of intentions might find themselves in a situation where they wish they were single.”

“I’m not that guy. You should know that by now.”

Her lashes flutter and another wave of tears fall down her cheeks. I quickly wipe them away.

“Harmony.” Her eyes connect with mine. “I want you. Only you. I just assumed when I was drafted, we were going to make it work. You’d fly out to be with me over the summer, still work the internship, and when school started back up, we’d only have a few months before the season is over and I can come back here to be with you until spring training. Hell, we’d only be separated from each other for a few months and then we could be together.”

“You’d want me to stay with you over the summer?”

“Fuck yeah.” My energy is coming back, excitement blooming. “I’m not saying it’ll be the nicest of dwellings, but we’ll make it work. You can write, edit, do what you need to do remotely, but still be with me.”

“Oh.” Her lips turn up. “So, then I guess . . . we’re good.”

I laugh. “Yes, babe. We’re good.”

Trying to be as nonchalant as possible, she nods casually and says, “Okay. Cool.”

I laugh even harder and then tackle her to the bed. Her beautiful hair fans out underneath her as I pin her hands to the mattress.

“What the hell just happened?”

“Horrible miscommunication.”

“I’d say.” I lean down and rub my nose along her jaw, followed by sweet, soft kisses. “Jesus, for a second, I thought you were walking out of my life. Hell, I was panicked, babe.”

Her legs part beneath me, making room for my body. “I was planning on making sure Priya was home so I could cry on her shoulder.”

“That escalated quickly.”

She chuckles. “Yeah, I’m sorry, Holt. For some reason, I think I got spooked by the whole *not knowing your friends* issue. I think adding that together with this sudden knowledge that you were leaving just didn’t mesh well. But we’re good now, I promise.”

I press a kiss against her lips. “Good.” I lift off her and sit at the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Breaking in my room.” I pull her to a sitting position and then nod toward the center of my room. “Strip for me, baby.”

Not saying a word, she stands from my bed and positions herself right in front of me. I keep my hands in my lap and my eyes trained on her as she lifts her shirt up and over her head, revealing a light-purple bra that compliments her skin tone. Her breasts are full, lifted, and looking especially sexy tonight. She then kicks off her shoes, peels her socks off, and takes off her pants, dropping them with the rest of her clothes. She’s left in her bra and light-purple lace thong.

I swivel my finger in a circle. “Spin for me.”

Slowly, she pushes her hands through her hair and turns. My mouth waters while I take in the curves of her body.

“So goddamn sexy.” I scoot back and hold my hand out. She takes it and I slowly lower her so her stomach is lying across my lap. I smooth my hand over her backside and then up her spine to the clasp of her bra. I unsnap it with a flick of my fingers.

Knowing exactly what I want, I smooth my hand down her back and under the strap of her thong, then glide my hand between her cheeks, where I find her already wet pussy.

“Yes,” she whispers while relaxing across my lap. “Yes, Holt.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

HARMONY

“Hi, Mom,” I say, waving to her on FaceTime.

“Hi, sweetie.” She’s sitting in her favorite chair. My guess is she’s knitting something because I can faintly hear Dolly Parton in the background, and there’s a flicker of light on her face coming from the fireplace. “How are you?”

“Good,” I answer. “I wanted to tell you that I’ll be coming home for Thanksgiving.”

“What?” Her eyes widen. “Harmony, how? I thought you were saving your money for your ticket home for Christmas.”

I glance to the side and then look back at the phone. “Uh, I’d like you to meet someone.”

Holt scoots in, and my mom’s hand lands on her chest as she says, “Oh my goodness, this must be Holt.”

“Hi, Mrs. Styles.” Holt waves. “It’s great to finally meet you.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine.” Mom attempts to fix her hair and sit up straighter. It makes me giggle. She’s actually flustered. “I’ve heard so much about you. All good. Harmony seems to be smitten with you.”

Holt smiles and looks at me. “I’m pretty smitten with her as well.”

“Oh, dear heavens. Well, this is wonderful.” And then, as if there’s a megaphone attached to her mouth, she shouts, “Bob. Bob, get out here. Harmony is on the phone with her boyfriend.” When Dad doesn’t answer, Mom presses her hand to her forehead. “Oh jeez, I forgot. He’s at the store

getting apple pie. He had a craving.”

I laugh, and Holt chuckles next to me.

“Mom, are you okay?”

She shakes her head and tears start to well up in her eyes.

“Mom?”

She waves her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. I’m overwhelmed.” She takes a deep breath. “So you’re coming home for Thanksgiving?”

Unsure of what’s going on with my mom, I nod. “Yes. Even though I told him no many times, Holt is going to fly us home. I was hoping it would be okay if I bring him with me.”

“Oh, my goodness. Of course. We’d love to meet you in person.”

“I’m not crashing your family Thanksgiving?” Holt asks.

“Not at all.” Mom glances around the house. “Oh goodness, I’m going to have to do a deep cleaning of this house before you get here.”

“Mom, that’s not necessary.”

She waves me off. “I’ve been needing an excuse to go through your dad’s sock drawer and get rid of some old socks.”

“Mom, you don’t need to filter out old socks before we get there. Holt isn’t even interested in socks.”

“Zero interest in socks,” he says next to me. “I’m more concerned about underwear. How are the holes on that end?”

I nudge him, and my mom laughs. “Oh dear. Well, aren’t we going to have fun this Thanksgiving?” She takes a deep breath. “I can’t wait.” She tears up again. “Thank you, Holt, for bringing our girl home. It means a lot to us.”

“I’m excited to see where Harmony grew up and to meet you and Mr. Styles.”

“And your parents are okay with you coming to our place?”

“Yes. They’re actually head chairs at a food bank in New York City. Thanksgiving hasn’t really been a family holiday, more like a time to give back. I asked them if it was okay if I took the moment to meet you both, and they thought it was important that I did. As long as you’re okay with me coming.”

“It’ll be a wonderful addition. How long will you be here?”

“Just two days. I have a shift at the diner that I couldn’t get out of,” I answer.

“Two days will do, then. Well, I’m excited to see you two. What a

wonderful surprise.”



“GET ready for a lot of hugs from my mom,” I say, getting out of the rental car Holt insisted on getting for us.

“I’m excited.” He glances up at our modest ranch house. The trees have lost their leaves, the grass is dead, and there are mums hanging from plant hooks along the porch. Those are new. It makes me smile. Mom is trying.

Holt goes to the back of the car, where he grabs our suitcases and sets them on the ground before shutting the trunk. The front door opens just as Holt presses a kiss to my head. I glance over to find my mom standing on the porch, holding her hands to her chest.

“She’s going to gush all over you,” I say quietly. “Beware.”

“Hi,” Mom says, waving. I walk up to her and give her a big hug, which is short-lived, because she’s quickly moving me to the side to get to my man. “And you must be Holt.” Mom opens her arms and Holt bends down to give her a hug. “Oh, it’s so nice to meet you. And you’re even more handsome in person.”

“It’s great to meet you, Mrs. Styles.”

“Is that my Harmony?” Dad asks, walking toward us in his classic plaid long-sleeve and jeans.

“Hey, Dad,” I say as he pulls me into a hug. When he releases me, he turns to Holt and holds out his hand. “Holt Green, it’s great to meet you.”

Holt gives my dad a firm handshake. “Mr. Styles, the pleasure is mine. Thank you for having me. I know Thanksgiving can be a sacred family time, so I’m quite grateful to be here.”

“No thanks needed.” Dad pats his stomach. “As long as you’re ready to eat, then you’re welcome.”

“Oh, I can eat,” Holt says.

“Well, then let’s get in the house.” Mom claps her hands. Dad follows in behind her, and Holt grabs our bags, taking both of them in.

I smile up at him, grateful my parents already seem to like him, although I’m not terribly surprised. My mom? A total pushover—and *she swooned*. My dad? Ever practical and kindhearted, he’ll learn about Holt by possibly saying little. *Time will tell.*

One thing that was very clear when I met his parents was their wealth. Their wealth to be able to fly out for a baseball game. My parents can't even afford to travel to Chicago, and haven't in the three years I've been there. I need to put a stop to those thoughts, though, and just hope that Holt is as genuine as I think he is and not going to think less of my parents.

Again, time will tell.



"I CAN'T BELIEVE my parents aren't making you sleep on the couch," I say as we take our suitcases to my childhood room.

After we spent the evening playing games and eating pizza, the classic night-before-Thanksgiving meal, we talked by the fire while Holt held my hand the entire time. My parents asked Holt about baseball, what his thoughts were on his upcoming draft, his major, and how he planned on finishing his degree if he was drafted. He patiently answered each and every question, he spoke about me and how impressed his dad and Fifer are with the work I've done on *New York, New York*, and he even admitted to me giving him a run for his money—that *he* was grateful I gave *him* a chance.

Now that we're retiring for the night, I asked about blankets for Holt, and they told me to not pretend and to just take him back to my room. To say I was shocked is an understatement. Also, slightly embarrassed. I know I'm older now, but I still assumed they'd have Holt sleep somewhere other than my room.

"I won them over," Holt whispers. "They have no problem sending their daughter into the teenage cave of boy-band love with her boyfriend."

"There's no boy-band love," I say as I open the door to my plain bedroom.

Holt steps into the room and glances around. "Huh. I was expecting a lot more than this."

I shut the door behind him. "Trust me, it used to be covered in collages and posters. This past summer, I took down all the embarrassing posters and my trophies and gave my parents a proper guestroom for when their siblings visit."

A few items of memorabilia remain on my dresser, but other than that, it's new sheets, new comforter, new paint. Erased the old and gave my

parents something new.

“Well, damn. I wish I saw it in its glory.”

“Such a shame.” I smile up at him.

“Should we get ready for bed?”

I nod and grab my suitcase from him. We take our turns getting ready in the hall bathroom. I let him go first, and when I come back in the room from brushing my teeth and using the toilet, I find him sitting on the edge of my bed, hands in his lap, wearing a pair of sweatpants and a shirt. His eyes sweep over me and he chuckles.

“What’s so funny?”

“I think this is the most clothing we’ve ever worn to bed together.”

I glance down at my matching nightshirt and pants and chuckle. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve worn these since I’ve met you.”

“I sure as hell haven’t seen them. Now, your thongs . . . I’m well acquainted with those.”

Rolling my eyes, I set down my toiletry bag next to my suitcase and go to the bed, where I pull down the comforter and sheets. Holt hops in with me and spoons me once we’re settled. His hand goes to my stomach, where he holds me tightly.

“How are you feeling, baby?”

His hand travels a little lower, and he holds me gently.

“Okay. A little nauseous, but okay.”

“Need me to go get you anything?”

I shake my head. “Just hold me. Hold us.”

He snuggles in even closer and kisses the side of my head. “What do you think your parents are going to say tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.” My mind starts to whirl with possibilities.

Four days ago, we found out I was pregnant. We’re still trying to figure out how it happened. Well, we know how it happened, but we don’t know how my birth control failed. Holt likes to think it’s his powerful sperm that broke through the barricade of sperm blockers. He’s been walking around with his chest puffed out.

When I realized I missed my period, I knew right away I was pregnant. We’ve had way too much sex for me not to be. When the pee stick was positive, there was shock. But, strangely, there was no outrage. And that has a lot to do with Holt. Despite the enormous changes it put on us as a couple, our future trajectory, he was elated. It gave me more confidence in our

relationship, that he didn't once seem disappointed.

"I would never have thought that becoming a dad in my early twenties would be something I'd be excited about. But it's with you, Harmony. We've created something wonderful. It's simply an earlier kickstart on our forever, baby. We've got this."

We've got this.

A peace settled over us, and those words have been on repeat since. At no point have I felt this is detrimental to *my* plans, and that has amazed me. *I'm no longer just Harmony Styles against the world, forging my own path.*

I have a partner in crime now.

And when I asked Holt if we could go home for Thanksgiving to tell my parents, he was completely on board. He set up everything and was able to find flights that get us back to Chicago Friday night for an appointment Saturday with an OBGYN that happened to be open—thankfully. I told my mom I had a shift at work, but that was to cover up for the appointment.

"Are you scared?" he asks.

"A little, yeah. They're going to ask questions and I don't think we have any answers."

"What do you think they'll ask? Let's think of the answers now so we're prepared tomorrow."

I turn in his arms and face him. "Can you take this off?" I tug on his shirt.

"Anything you want," he says before pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it to the side. My hand immediately goes to his bare skin to soak up his warmth. Instantly I start to feel better. More at ease.

His hand snakes under my shirt and runs to my back, where he holds me tightly. "Ask me the questions."

"Okay." I take a deep breath. "Are you planning on keeping the baby?"

Looking me in the eyes, Holt says, "Yes."

"Are you still going to enter yourself into the draft?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do when you get drafted?" I ask the one question that's been on my mind since we found out.

"Well, I haven't spoken to Harmony about this yet," he says, as though he's talking to my parents, and it makes me love him that much more, going along with this crazy plan. "But I've been doing some research, and with the help of my advisor, I was able to find out she can complete her degree online."

“What?” I ask. “Really?”

“Yeah. I have all the information on the program in my backpack.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

He grips me tightly when he says, “You might have been saying you’re okay, but I know you, babe. I can tell when you’re nervous. I didn’t want to spring this on you unless you were ready for it. Seems as though the time is here. But if you want to stay at Brentwood, attend in person, we can figure something out.”

I shake my head and reach my hands to his cheeks. “No, I want to be with you. Wait, that’s what you’re saying, right? That I can go with you?”

“Yes.” He laughs. “I’ll be traveling so I won’t be there every day, but I won’t be that far away. We can find a small apartment together, you can work on your internship as well as school, and when the time comes, we can take care of the baby.”

“You really want me with you?”

“Yes, Harmony,” he says, looking me dead in the eyes. “I want you with me . . . always.”

“And you’re not scared of being a dad?”

His hand smooths up my side. “I mean, I’m not confident, but I know there’s time to learn. My dad’s awesome, so I feel I have a really good role model. We’re going to make a great team, Harmony. And, yeah, it won’t be perfect. We’re volatile and wear our emotions on our sleeves, so, we’ll get into fights and there will be times when you can’t stand me, as we’ve seen a few times already in our relationship. And I think we’ve also seen that we always ensure we reconcile rather than stay angry.” He pauses and combs his fingers through my hair, something I’ve grown to love. “How we work together to move past things that rankle us makes me trust you even more, Harmony. I’m in this, with you, *with us*, for the long haul. In my mind, there’s no other option. I love you. Period.”

“You realize you don’t speak like the average college man?”

“When have I ever been average, babe?” He rubs my stomach. “I think we have proof of that.”

“Oh my God.” I laugh as he presses a kiss to my lips. “Please, for the love of God, don’t talk about your powerful sperm to my dad, okay?”

“Why not? My nut-sack is carrying actual medical marvels inside of it. That’s something your dad should know.”

“I don’t understand how you got me hooked.”

He chuckles. “Well, it started with showing my fun side. Then my sexy side, then my caring side. It’s a process. A well-thought-out equation to snag the elusive Harmony Styles.”

“Glad you’ve thought it through.”

His hand floats farther up my shirt to my breast. He lightly passes his thumb over the hardened nub. “Still sensitive?”

Lips locked together, I nod.

“Still horny?”

I nod again.

“Good, because I’m really craving your pussy.”

“No way. My parents will hear us. You know I’m not quiet.”

His hand releases my breast and trails down to my slit, where he slides a finger over it easily. “Ah, fuck, babe. You’re so wet. Please let me take care of this for you.”

My legs part against my will. “Just your fingers,” I say. “And cover my mouth.”

He chuckles. “Easy, babe.”



“SURE YOU’RE READY?” Holt asks as he puts his shirt on.

Last night, after I came on his fingers, I gave him a quick—and I mean *quick*—hand job before we both passed out. I woke up this morning feeling good, no morning sickness—luckily—and I think we need to take advantage of that.

I nod. “Better now than after my morning sickness hits me.”

“True.” He walks over to me, his hair sticking up on all ends, a lazy smile on his face. No one has ever been more handsome than my man, especially when he has love in his eyes for me. He grips my hips and places a kiss on my forehead. “Then let’s do this.”

He takes my hand in his and together, we walk to the kitchen, where both my parents are in their robes, going over their Thanksgiving Day game plan. They take meal prep very seriously.

“Good morning,” I say, a bout of nerves hitting me all at once. I squeeze Holt’s hand to make sure he’s there with me. He squeezes back.

Mom and Dad both look up. “Good morning. How did you sleep?”

“Great,” Holt answers. “How about you?”

“Couldn’t stop thinking about the turkey,” Dad answers. “We’re frying it, and I’m not sure I have enough oil.”

“You have plenty of oil.” Mom pats his shoulder and gestures to the table. “Muffins and orange juice. Help yourself.”

Holt and I both take a seat at the table and as he pours me a glass of orange juice, he nudges me under the table.

I clear my throat and say, “Uh, could you guys set the meal planning to the side for a second? I want to talk to you about something.”

Mom lowers her reading glasses and asks, “Oh? Is everything okay?”

Oh God.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

“Yeah.” My stomach churns. “Um, we kind of wanted to tell you that . . . uh . . .” I look to Holt, who smiles at me, giving me the courage. “Umm, I wanted to say . . .” My teeth chatter. My stomach quivers. I can’t seem to find the words.

“Harmony is pregnant,” Holt says for me, placing his hand on my thigh reassuringly.

Mom and Dad both sit back in their chairs, stunned.

Okay, they really weren’t expecting that. But who was?

I was the girl who wanted nothing more than to get out of the small town she was living in and make something of herself. I’ve never shown interest in babies. In starting a family of my own. I never even attempted a babysitting job.

And yeah, I’m young.

So, I can understand why they might be shocked.

“You’re pregnant?” Mom finally asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“How . . . how far along are you?”

“Not sure. We have an appointment on Saturday.” Okay, I can do this. These questions are easy.

Dad straightens in his chair and looks Holt in the eyes. “Are you planning on marrying my daughter?”

Okay, maybe these questions aren’t as easy as—

“Yes,” Holt answers.

Uh . . . say what?”

I turn to Holt. “Excuse me?”

Not addressing me, but my father instead, he says, “I’ve been planning on marrying your daughter since a month into dating her. It’s been a no-brainer for me from the beginning, Mr. Styles. Getting pregnant jumps the gun on my plans, but it doesn’t change anything. I’m in love with her and I can’t imagine being with anyone else but her.”

Oh . . . dear . . . God.

“And I know you’re concerned about Harmony finishing school, but I already spoke with an advisor and she can finish her degree online. So, if I’m drafted in the spring, she can come with me. I’ll be able to provide for us and be there for her as much as I can when I’m not on the road. I have every intention of taking care of Harmony and our baby.”

This man.

The fun-loving, teasing, irritating man I met before school started. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever thought he’d speak so passionately about me. Nor would I have ever thought we’d be in love and expecting a baby.

But here we are, and in this moment, I don’t think I could be luckier.

“Well,” Dad says, scratching behind his ear. “I don’t know what to say to that, other than you’re a good man, Holt Green.”

“Yeah?” he asks, surprised. I don’t think he was prepared for such a response.

Neither was I.

“You’re really pregnant?” Mom asks, tears in her eyes.

“I am.” My eyes well up too.

“I wasn’t expecting to be a grandma this young, but I’ll take what I can get.” Mom stands from her chair. She comes over to me and pulls me out of my seat and into a hug. Quietly she asks, “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“Yes,” I answer, tears falling down my cheeks.

Dad joins us and pulls me into a hug as Mom hugs Holt. Whispering, he says, “He loves you. I can see it in his eyes.”

“I know, Dad. I love him too.”

“Sometimes love is all you need to build a beautiful future on.” He kisses me on the head and holds me tight.

And this is one of the many reasons I love and respect my parents so much. They know it’s been my dream to leave small-town life and make something of myself. It’s driven me for the last three years. And even though my plans now look as if they’ll be derailed—or perhaps, will take longer to

come to fruition—all they care about is that their baby girl is cared for and happy. To be content . . . just like Mom said she has been all these years. *God, I'm so lucky.* After a few seconds, Dad pulls away and reaches out to Holt. Taking his hand, he says, "I'm trusting you to take care of her."

Holt looks my dad in the eyes. "You have my word."



"YOU OKAY, BABY?" Holt asks, rubbing my back as I lean over the toilet.

I let out a breath and sit back, my stomach starting to settle down. "Yeah. I think so." I lean against the wall, letting my head fall back. "Who knew Thanksgiving dinner would have this kind of effect on me?"

"Yams will never be the same for me."

I chuckle and lean against him. He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. "Thank you for watching me puke."

"Not sure I've ever been thanked for that before, but I'll take it." He picks up the cold washcloth and presses it against my head. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. The nausea is gone."

"Good." He presses another kiss to my head. "Now that you're feeling better, I'm going to be honest—watching you get sick scares me. I hate seeing you like that."

"Because you *love* me?" I ask in a teasing tone. "Because you want to *marry* me?"

He tickles my side. "Don't make fun of me."

"So, you can dish it but not take it?"

"Nah, I can take all the fucking teasing, but not when it comes to you and what we have."

"Can I ask you something?" I turn to look at him.

"Anything."

"Were you serious, that a month in, you knew you wanted to marry me?"

"No question in my mind," he answers.

"And when were you going to talk to me about this?"

"When the time was right," he answers softly.

"And when will the time be right? Because I don't want—"

"Not anytime soon." His voice is soothing. "One step at a time. We've

got plenty of time to make things legal. You're mine in my heart and that's all that matters. Let's just make sure you're healthy. Okay?"

"Okay," I answer, a smile on my face, because strangely, I am okay. And I can definitely see how much I've changed. A few months ago, I wouldn't have called Fifer about an internship *because* Holt Green set it up. Knowing that, once again, Holt has found alternative pathways for me to finish my degree *and* the internship shows such respect and love. So, yeah, my life is looking different, but I'm okay.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HOLT

“I still can’t believe it,” I say, staring at the picture of our little peanut.

Harmony chuckles as she sleepily cuddles into her pillow. We spent the afternoon at the doctor’s and waited on test results to confirm her pregnancy. Afterward, we snuck by the diner and grabbed milkshakes to go, courtesy of Priya, and then came back to Harmony’s place, where she’s been resting.

I smooth my hand over her forehead and watch as her eyes drift shut. She’s been extremely tired lately, which the doctor said is normal. As much as I want to talk to her right now, I need to let her rest.

July twenty-fourth is her due date.

Fucking July twenty-fourth.

Why is that such an issue?

Because that’s the exact time when I’d be sent off to a club if drafted. For some reason, I thought we’d have more time, but to think that she’s going to possibly have the baby when I can’t be there to hold her hand makes me physically ill. I knew the baby would come during the season, but it never fully clicked until today.

Harmony said something about a summer birthday being fun because we could go on vacations, but I honestly can’t remember because all I could think about was how this summer was going to go down. I honestly have no fucking clue who’s going to draft me, but being drafted is inevitable. I would consider skipping the draft this year and going next year, but with a baby on the way, I want to be able to start my career as quickly as possible so I don’t

have to rely on my trust fund to support my family. I want to be able to support my family on my own.

The trust fund will help for the first few years while I'm making shit in the minors, and I'm grateful for the fund, because wherever we move, I'll make sure we move to a nice place. It doesn't have to be fancy, but it doesn't have to be a shithole like I know a lot of minor league players live in.

But what if we're not close to her family? I know her mom will want to be a part of this baby's life. Should I fly her out to be with Harmony? Would her mom be able to take off enough work to be with her? I know my parents will help, but Harmony isn't that close with them yet. When we told them the news this morning over FaceTime, they were clearly apprehensive, but were also excited at the same time.

Dad texted me after and told me priority number one is my family.

Priority number two is baseball.

I need to find a way to put Harmony first, but I'm struggling with how to do that when I also need to focus on baseball so I can make something of myself.

The distinct feeling of anxiety starts to creep up the back of my neck. How the fuck am I going to do this? My future is going to take me away from Harmony for weeks on end at times. Is she going to resent me for that? Does she resent me now because she's having to change her dreams, her future, because of me? Because I couldn't keep my hands off her?

We haven't really talked about her future as much as mine. I've geared everything around what's going to happen in the spring. I never asked her what her actual plans were. I just figured it all out on my own.

My finger continues to sweep across her forehead. I'd give it all up for her.

I fucking would.

Baseball has been my happy place. Baseball has been my home.

But over the last few months, home has started to change into something else. It's started to become Harmony's arms. Harmony's smile. Harmony's brilliant wit. She's the one who makes me feel as though I'm home.

And I would give up anything for her. Fucking anything.

She shifts closer to me and quietly says, "I can hear you thinking."

"What?" I laugh.

Her eyes sleepily pop open. "You're worried."

"Worried? Nah, babe, I'm not worried," I say as calmly as I can.

“Don’t lie to me, Holt. I saw the second you became worried in the doctor’s office. Your mind is churning, so instead of holding it in, talk to me.”

Hell.

She knows me too well at this point.

There’s no way in hell I’m going to put my worries on her, though. That’s the last thing she needs. But there is one thing I have to know.

Moving my thumb to her cheek, I continue to stroke her soft skin as I say, “I’d give it all up for you, Harmony.”

Her brow creases. “Give up what?”

“Baseball.”

“What?” Her eyes widen. “Why would you say that?”

“When we found out you were pregnant, I assumed you’d be the one who would set your life to the side. I assumed you’d put your dreams on hold while I pursued mine. I planned it all out. I found out how you could follow me. I didn’t even discuss it with you, I just laid it out, as if I had the solution. But that was no solution, because you were the one doing all the compromising. It was more of a dictatorship.”

She sits up and crosses her legs, facing me. “Don’t be ridiculous, Holt. You didn’t dictate to me what was going to happen.”

“You didn’t have a say in it.” I take her hand in mine. “I love you, Harmony. You’re it for me. And five years down the road, when we’re married and somewhere random that baseball has brought us, a four-year-old running around our house, I don’t want you to sit back and regret your life because it wasn’t how you planned it. I don’t want you to resent me for changing the plans you had in your head. Baseball has been my life for as long as I can remember, but that’s changing. You’re becoming my life now, you and the baby. I need to put you first.”

She sighs as her hair falls over her face. I reach out and push it behind her ear for her. When she looks up at me, she says, “I called my mom a while back, when I wasn’t sure about our relationship, when I was trying to figure it all out. I wasn’t expecting to start a relationship this year, let alone fall madly in love with someone. But it happened, and at first, it was hard for me to grasp, so I talked to my mom about it. Do you know what she said?”

“What?” I ask, keeping her hand in mine, needing the connection.

“She told me she’d had plans too. She was going to live in New York City and find her purpose in the big city. I never would have guessed in a

million years that's what she'd wanted when she was young. But then she met my dad, and that all changed. Everything she thought she'd wanted changed. Now she can't imagine her life any other way. She loves living in a small town. She loves staying in her radius and sticking to her routine." She wets her lips and looks me in the eyes. "You're everything I want. What I previously thought was the life I wanted has rotated to include you and your dreams. I can bring the positive in many ways. I can work remotely. I can still make my goals a reality. You're different. You have to play the game in order to accomplish your dreams. Don't think of me as following you. Think of me as being a cheerleader by your side."

Grateful emotions clog my throat, making it feel tight. "Fuck," I mutter as I reach up and cup her cheek. "How did I get so lucky?"

"Mad persistence."

I chuckle and gently lay her down on the bed. I slip my hand under her shirt and press my hand to her stomach. Looking her in the eyes, I say, "I love you, baby."

"I love you." She reaches up and presses the spot between my eyes. "Next time, talk to me. Okay? You don't have to keep everything in. I was waiting to see if you were going to say something when we got home. I know when you're upset, Holt. Don't hide it from me. This is what I'm here for."

"You're dealing with a lot. I'm not about to worry you some more."

"Your worries are my worries. Okay?"

I nod, even though in the back of my head, I realize I'm hiding my concerns from her. She's pregnant as a junior in college and the baby daddy's life is about to be rocked in the spring. Those are concerns she doesn't need to worry about. Those are on me. And I'll be damn sure to make certain everything works out.

That she's protected.

That she has everything she needs.

That she's happy.



KNOX: *Dude, where are you?*

Carson: *One guess: with his girl.*

Knox: *Yeah, Carson told me he met her. What the hell, man?*

Holt: I'm at her house right now.

Knox: Spending the night? Dude, we never get to see you anymore.

Carson: You're one to talk. You're always with Emory. With the two of you off with your girls, I've had to spend more time with Jason, and his drama queen ways are starting to wear on me. I find myself getting outraged over filthy condiment bottles in the dining hall like he does. It's not a good look on me.

Knox: At least I bring Emory to the loft. Holt doesn't bring his girl over here.

Holt: For obvious reasons. Harmony has a nicer place with a roommate who's never home anymore. It's called privacy.

Knox: She has a name! Harmony . . . Wait, is she the girl from the diner?

Carson: You're so far behind, it's embarrassing.

Holt: Was there a point to this thread?

Knox: Just wondering where you've been. I'm worried. You've been pretty quiet lately.

Carson: I'll second that. When you're around, you always have a creased brow, as if you're trying to figure out the world's hardest equation.

Knox: You know we're here if you need to talk to us.

Holt: Yeah, I know. But I'm good.

Carson: Are you sure?

Holt: Yes, Mom.

Knox: At least come hang out with us on Friday. The guys want to have a party before finals. Celebrate before we all leave for winter break.

Carson: Yeah. Have a beer with us before we come back to school in the new year to be tortured by Disik.

Holt: This Friday?

Carson: Yeah.

Holt: Harmony has a study group so I'll probably be at the loft anyway.

Knox: Well, don't sound too excited about hanging out with us.

Carson: We might not have an ass like your girl, but we aren't too shabby to look at.

Holt: Eh, you're all right.

Knox: Friday night it is.

Carson: And hey, good luck on your test tomorrow. Feeling good?

Holt: Yup, feeling good. See you in the weight room.

□

KNOCK. *Knock.*

“Come in,” Coach Disik says, his voice gruff, agitated.

I push through his office door and say, “Hey, Coach.”

“Take a seat,” he says, as he pushes some papers to the side.

I had my ECG test this morning. My breath felt more labored than normal, but I kept up with the speed. Afterwards, Disik told me to join the team in the weight room, where we finished our strength training. Before I left, Disik told me to meet him in his office after I took my shower. I’ve never been called into his office after a test before, so my palms are sweating, to say the least.

Disik’s weathered eyes bore through me as he says, “What’s going on?”

“Uh . . . what do you mean?” I ask, shifting in my chair to get comfortable. No position is going to work. I can feel it already. Shots are being fired, and I’m going to need to defend myself.

Disik picks up a piece of paper and pushes it closer to me. It’s my test results.

“The chart on the bottom is from last month. The chart above is from this morning. Care to explain why they’re vastly different?”

I quickly compare the charts, although there is no real need. I knew going through the stress test that I wasn’t feeling great this morning. Clearing my throat, I say, “Bad night of sleep. Test me tomorrow. I’ll do better.”

Disik rocks slowly back and forth in his desk chair. “Do you really think I’m stupid, Green?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Then don’t insult me with goddamn lies.” He jabs his finger on the desk and says, “You have one chance to tell me the truth, or your ass will be riding the bench for the entire season, and don’t think I won’t do it.”

Shit.

I can’t afford to ride the bench, not with the draft coming up. But what the hell is Disik going to say when I tell him what’s been keeping me up at night? I guess there’s only one way to find out.

I chew on the side of my lip and quickly say, “My girlfriend is pregnant.”

“Jesus . . . Christ,” he mutters while lifting his baseball hat and rubbing his hand over his forehead. “How long have you been dating?”

“Since the beginning of the school year.”

He tosses his hat on the desk. It's no secret Disik doesn't take kindly to his players dating, but them getting a girl pregnant? Pretty sure he might have a coronary.

"What have I told you dickheads from the very beginning? Wrap it up. Twice, three times. Don't get anyone pregnant." Continuing to rub his forehead, he says, "Between you and Gentry, I'm going to have a goddamn heart attack this season."

"I love her," I say, wanting him to know where I stand. "She's it for me, Coach."

He lifts an eyebrow in question. "You love her?"

"Yes. I would do anything for her, even give up baseball."

"Mother of God." He looks up toward the ceiling, as if he's praying to the baseball gods for guidance. "You don't give up baseball for women, especially not for a relationship that just started this summer. Have you lost your goddamn mind?"

"I didn't say I *was* giving it up. I was saying I *would*. That's where I stand with this girl." Disik's glare sends a wave of fear up my spine. "We plan on keeping the baby, and she's going to come with me when I'm drafted."

He nods slowly. "What's her name?"

"Harmony Styles," I answer.

"What's she majoring in?"

"Journalism."

"I'm going to assume she's a junior."

I nod.

"And what does she plan on doing about finishing her degree?"

I push up the long sleeves of my shirt. "I spoke with my advisor and found that she can complete her degree online. She's going to finish out the year in person, and then move to virtual."

"And you've spoken to her about this? How she feels about raising a baseball player's baby? She's aware that you will have to travel? That there will be many times where you're on the road, and she's stuck at home by herself, trying to get her degree done while nursing a baby?"

I nod as another wave of anxiety hits me.

"And she knows that even though you're drafted by a team, there's no guarantee you will stay with that team? That you can be traded multiple times, uprooting your family constantly?"

I swallow hard. “Yes, Coach.”

“And she’s okay with giving up her dreams, her goals—if she has any—to help you achieve yours?”

“We had that conversation this past weekend. She’s fully aware of what it means to be with me.”

“And she loves you?”

“She does, Coach.”

He looks off to the side and picks up a pen. He twirls it between his fingers. “So then what are you worried about?”

“Huh?” I ask, confused by the change in his tone.

He taps my test results. “Why the fuck are you stressing if everything seems to be fine between you and your girl?”

“Um, I don’t know. She’s having pretty rough morning sickness. I usually have to leave her for strength and conditioning while she’s bent over the toilet in the morning. It’s not easy seeing the girl you love really sick.”

Disik nods slowly. “Baseball is ninety percent mental, Green. You should know how to block out any outside factors before you step inside this stadium, and as an upperclassman and a leader on this team, I expect you to uphold the standards of mental toughness on this team. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Coach,” I answer as my leg starts to bounce beneath my hand.

“I’m sorry your girlfriend is sick, but being a man in his twenties, you should know the implications of having sex, the possibility of getting pregnant. The team shouldn’t suffer because of your decisions. We need you in the outfield, and we need you healthy. Figure out how to deal with this. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

He sits up and reaches into his desk. He rifles through some cards and then tosses one toward me. “That’s the number to Dr. Cotton. Six years ago, when Gerald Banks was going through some mental blocks because his girlfriend was pregnant as well—none of you jackasses listen to me—Dr. Cotton helped him. He might be able to help you.”

I pick up the card and take a look at the name.

“This is your warning, Green. Don’t let me see this shit come in this stadium again, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Coach.” I stand from my chair and pocket the card. “Is that it?”

“Yes. Get your shit together, and when you’re back at Brentwood after the holidays, I expect a better test. Do you understand?”

I nod and duck out of his office. I shut the door behind me.
I lean against the painted cinderblock wall and take a deep breath.
Fuck.

I need to get it together.

Too much is at stake.

There's too much to lose. In some ways, I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. I'm stressed, so my heart suffers and Coach sees it. I'm stressed that if my game suffers, I won't get the future I need to support Harmony and our baby. I take a deep breath, and another, when I still feel jittery.

"Why the fuck are you stressing if everything seems to be fine between you and your girl?"

Is it that simple? If Harmony's okay with this, with a future no longer mapped out how she'd wanted it, why am I slowly losing it?

Because I need to step up into a role I haven't prepared for. Trained for. One I don't know inside out.

You should know how to block out any outside factors before you step in this stadium, as an upperclassman and a leader on this team.

But what if I can't?



"HEY, HOLT, WAKE UP." Harmony shakes my shoulders and I'm pulled out of my sleep, my heart racing, my mind whirling.

I grasp the sheets, looking around, trying to gain my bearings.

"Hey." She smooths her hand over my bare chest. "It's okay. I'm here."

I press my hand against hers and take a few deep breaths.

Shit.

"So-sorry," I say, tripping over my words.

"Holt, your heart is going a mile a minute." She shifts, getting closer. The blanket slides from her chest, exposing her bare breasts.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," I say, mad at myself for putting that worried expression in her eyes.

She pushes me back on the bed so I'm lying down, staring up at her beautiful face. "What's going on?"

"Just a bad dream, is all." I can feel my heart beating, the *thud, thud* of it taking over, crawling up to my throat.

“Holt, this is the third time this week. Usually people don’t wake up in the middle of the night like this.”

“Yeah.” I sweep my hand over my head. “Just a lot on my mind, is all.”

“Talk to me about it.”

I tug on her arm, bringing her closer to my chest. “Nah, nothing you need to worry about.”

“Holt, remember what I said? Don’t hold it in.”

“It’s baseball stuff, babe. You don’t need to worry about my stupid baseball shit.”

“When has it ever been stupid baseball shit?” She tries to sit up but I hold her in place. “Holt, I’m serious.”

“So am I.” I smooth my hand over her backside, loving that she has no qualms about sleeping naked with me. Not a single one. “It’s nothing, okay? Just relax and get some sleep. I’m sorry I woke you up. You need your rest.”

I kiss the top of her head and continue to stroke her back, hoping that will soothe her.

Thankfully, she doesn’t put up a fight. Instead she kisses my jaw and then snuggles in close, wrapping one of her legs around mine.

Any other night, I would have easily gotten hard with her pussy so close to my cock. But my head isn’t on straight. My mind isn’t where it should be, and all I can think about is what I just woke up from.

Harmony, walking in the middle of traffic, and me screaming at her to stop, to get out of the road, but her not listening. I’ve no fucking clue why she’s walking in traffic, but it’s the third dream this week where I feel as though I’m losing her and there’s nothing I can do about it. Not a single damn thing.

Control is slipping through my fingers, and I don’t know how to stop it.

My head goes to the card that Coach Disik gave me.

Do I really need to talk to a doctor?

I’ve never been one to lean on a therapist for help, not that there’s anything wrong with doing that, but I also like to solve problems myself.

And that’s what this is about—figuring out how I can be there for my girl and also play baseball.

I just need a routine. A schedule.

I vow to work on something this weekend, when my head is clear.

CARSON: *Have you checked on Jason?*

Knox: *He's still really upset. Holt, dude, what happened?*

Holt: *Shit, I don't know.*

Carson: *Granted, Jason is more sensitive than the rest of us, but I caught the tail end of you blowing up on him. He said you slammed him against the wall.*

Knox: *What? Holt, you know as captain I can't allow that shit.*

Holt: *I know. Fuck, I know. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

Carson: *Remember when I said we're here to listen to you if you need to talk?*

Holt: *I'm good.*

Knox: *You don't seem good, man.*

Carson: *You seem like you're ready to snap at any moment. The guys are starting to notice.*

Holt: *I just need a second to breathe. Tonight will be good. Tonight will be the break that I need.*

Knox: *Are you sure? Because we can cancel and go hang out, just us.*

Carson: *^^ Might be a good idea.*

Holt: *No. The party will be what I need. I have to get to class. I'll be sure to apologize to Jason later. Won't happen again.*



“OKAY, well, if you get done early, let me know and I’ll meet you at your place. Okay?” I say into the phone as the music pumps just outside my door.

“Stop worrying about me.”

“You threw up all day and missed class. I’m worried, Harmony.” My foot bounces up and down rapidly as I consider throwing on a sweatshirt and going to the library to find her.

“I’m feeling much better and I’ve had some food. I think the nausea medicine the doctor prescribed is working now. No hint of nausea.”

“Then let’s just skip the party and study group and hang out. I can bring over some food, we can watch something on Netflix—”

“No, Holt. You’re going to the party and I’m going to my study session. You need this.”

“I need you,” I reply, agitated. I had no idea she was sick all day until a

few moments ago. Nor did I know she went to urgent care for medicine to help with the nausea. To say I'm irritated is an understatement.

"You need to let loose, have some fun, forget about the responsibilities for a second."

"You don't get to tell me what I need. Okay?" I snap at her, instantly regretting it. "Shit, I'm sorry." I drag my hand over my face. "I'm sorry, babe. I'm just—"

"Hell bent on trying to solve everything," she answers for me. "Well, this is a partnership, Holt, which means we both have a say in what happens, and tonight, I'm the one making the decisions. I'm going to my study group because I need to catch up and you're going to hang out with your friends because you need to take a breather. Do you understand?"

My teeth grind together as I push off my bed and pace my room. "Why didn't you tell me about being sick earlier?"

"We aren't getting into this right now. I'm cold and standing outside of the library talking to you."

"Well, fuck, Harmony. Just let me come get you. I won't bother you—"

"No. I swear, Holt, if you come here, you won't see me at all. Got it? Stay at your place, have fun, and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I'm not going to see you at all tonight?"

"No. I'm going. I love you. Bye."

Before I can say bye, she hangs up. I chuck my phone at my bed and push both of my hands through my hair.

Fuck.

"Fuck," I shout just as there's a knock on my door.

"Dude, you coming out?" It's Carson.

Done with the night, I throw open my door to a surprised Carson and say, "I need a beer, now."

"Uh . . . You look like you need a pint of ice cream and a long talk more. I have ears and ice cream; care to try that?"

I shoot him a look and he holds up his hands.

"Beer it is."

Together we walk over to the kitchen, where a few freshmen are pouring the drinks. They hand me and Carson one, and then we step over to the back of the loft, away from the crowd and the beer pong tables.

"So, you seem to be in a good mood," Carson says, nudging my shoulder.

"Don't poke the bear, man."

“Will you just talk to me?” Carson says, exasperated.

I bring my cup to my mouth and take a few giant gulps before lowering it and saying, “Harmony is pregnant.”

“Uh . . . what?” Carson asks.

“And don’t fucking tell anyone.” I look him in the eyes. “I’m not kidding. This stays between us. Don’t even tell Knox.”

“Yeah, sure.” He blinks a few times. “Dude, she’s pregnant?”

“Due July twenty-fourth.”

“Whoa, you’re going to be drafted by then and in the minors. What the hell are you going to do?”

“That’s the million-dollar question that’s been on my mind,” I say, taking another drink from my cup. “I love her. She’s going to come with me, but I’m worried about how it’s all going to work. I’m worried I’m going to take her to some Podunk town where she’s going to have to raise our baby, alone. I’m worried she’s going to resent me even though she said she’s not. I’m worried that she’s sick all the fucking time. That her skin is pale and the life that’s usually in her eyes is gone. I’m fucking worried,” I gasp and Carson puts his hand on my back. “Shit . . . sorry.”

“Hey.” He takes my cup from me and sets it to the side. “Why don’t we go sit down?”

I shake my head, leaning my hands on my knees. “I just need to catch my breath.”

“Holt, seriously. Come on. I can cover for you. We can go up to the rooftop, just hang, talk it through. Forget the beer. Let’s grab some water and —”

“What the fuck is he doing here?” I say as my eyes catch a familiar face in the crowd.

“Who?” Carson asks.

I stand, my breath coming in shallow gasps, barely filling my lungs. “He shouldn’t be here. He has no right in being here.”

“Dude, you’re breaking out in a sweat. Can you just sit down for a goddamn second?”

I start to move forward and Carson grabs my arm. “Let me go,” I say through clenched teeth.

“No fucking way. Not until you calm down.”

My muscles tense as I clench my fist. “Let me the fuck go, Carson,” I yell, pushing him off me and charging toward Chet McKay.

Big mistake coming here.
Fucking huge.
And he's about to find out why.

Chapter Twenty-Six

HARMONY

“Oh my God, it’s freezing out,” Nicole says as she drops her bag on the table. “Hey, girl, I missed you in class the other day.”

I smile up at her, even though I don’t feel like smiling. I don’t feel like being here at all. I wish I were at home, snuggled up with Holt, enjoying whatever food he decided to get us this time. I hate fighting with him. I hate knowing he’s upset, that there’s a possibility he could do something stupid because we aren’t on the same page.

But he needs this. He’s been tense all week, even though he’s said he hasn’t been. He’s been overprotective, and he hasn’t touched me intimately once in six days. Very unlike him. Even when I come to bed naked, wanting him, he turns me down.

There’s something wrong, and he’s not telling me what it is.

Maybe a night with his boys will help him relax.

That’s what I’m hoping, at least.

“It’s so cold,” I say. “I don’t think I was ready for the chill factor today.”

“I got a few texts from the group saying people are going to be late because their cars are having a hard time starting. They asked if we could wait.”

“Oh yeah, not a problem.”

Nicole thumbs over her shoulder and says, “I’m going to go say a quick hi to my teammate. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure, I’ll hold down the fort.”

When she takes off, I check my phone, where I see texts from people in our group and then one from Priya.

Priya: *Dude, I thought we were having a threesome tonight. Where are you and Holt?*

I glance around. Not a study group member in sight, so I text her back.

Harmony: *I'm in a study group, and Holt is at a party at the baseball house.*

Priya: *That's unlike him. When was the last time he was at a party?*

Harmony: *I made him go.*

Priya: *Oh-kay. Care to tell me what's going on? Other than you two are having a baby together and now you're pushing him away?*

I was going to try to keep the pregnancy a secret as much as I could, but when Priya heard me throwing up the other day, she didn't even have to ask. She knew right away. She was . . . weird about it. Not happy for us, not precisely concerned, just . . . observant, I guess.

Harmony: *I'm not pushing him away. I'm trying to get him to relax. He's been weird all week.*

Priya: *How so?*

Harmony: *We haven't had sex.*

Priya: *Uh . . . what? How is that possible? I thought you had sex every freaking night. I thought it had been quiet, but then again, I wasn't sure if your moans have become an everyday sound to me, like birds chirping.*

Harmony: *No, he hasn't even come close to touching me sexually, and he's been waking up with these night terrors. I think he's freaking out about the baby but won't say anything to me.*

Priya: *He doesn't seem like he's scared about the baby. He seemed really excited when I talked to him about it. Are you sure it's not something else?*

Harmony: *If it is something else, he's not telling me, even though I've asked several times.*

Priya: *Want me to ask him?*

Harmony: *No, he'll just get mad that I told you something is up. I told him I would see him tomorrow. Hopefully he'll have a clear head by then.*

Priya: *Okay, well, if you need anything, let me know. When are you going to be home?*

Harmony: *Probably nine. I'll text you. Maybe I can pick us up some milkshakes or something.*

Priya: *You know I would never turn one down. Text me when you're on*

your way.

Harmony: *Okay. XOXO*

I set my phone to the side just as Nicole comes back and a few of the people from our group show up. Nicole looks around and says, “I think that’s it.”

“Where’s Chet?” Roger, a guy on the football team, asks.

Nicole pulls her notebook out of her backpack and says, “Oh, he’s at the baseball party. He asked me to cover for him, but I told him he could kiss my ass. If he wants credit for attending, he needs to attend.”

“Wait . . . where is he?” I ask, fear prickling at the back of my neck.

“The baseball team is having a party at their loft tonight. A little farewell thing before finals.”

Oh God.

Oh no.

I stand from my chair quickly and say, “Uh, I need to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

The table looks at me funny, but I don’t bother to explain. Instead, I race to the bathroom, phone in hand, a horrible, sickening feeling creeping into my veins.

When I’m out of sight and tucked into a corner where I won’t get yelled at for being on the phone, I call Holt. I shift back and forth on my feet as it rings and rings . . . and rings.

“Hey, this is Holt. Leave a message.”

“Shit,” I say while hanging up.

Maybe he couldn’t hear it ring. I type out a text to him.

Harmony: *Hey, give me a call. Everything is fine with the baby. I just need to talk to you.*

I stare down at my phone, willing it to ring. Praying that he’ll text me back, call me, anything before he finds out Chet is there.

But after five minutes, six minutes, seven, I realize I have no choice but to head back to the study group. Otherwise, they’ll think something is wrong with me.

With a stomach full of nerves, I sit back down at the table and pick up where they are, but everything they say is in one ear, out the other.

This is unlike Holt; he doesn’t miss a call. He doesn’t let a text go unanswered for this long.

I worry my lower lip, my mind racing, spinning, careening with

possibilities.

If only I had Carson's number. Do I know anyone else who'd be there? I glance around at the table. Anyone who would be there that I know is sitting here with me, studying.

"What do you think, Harmony?" Nicole asks.

"Huh? What?" I shake my head. "I'm sorry. My head is—"

"Oh shit. Chet got into a fight at the baseball loft."

My stomach drops.

The walls around me fade to black as the room starts to slowly spin. My pulse picks up, thumping so hard that I can feel it in the back of my throat.

"Of course he would. He's such a douche," one of the guys says. "Who did he fight with?"

"Not sure," Roger says. "Fisher just texted me and said Chet got in a fight and had to be escorted out by the baseball team. Apparently got his face creamed."

I start to hyperventilate.

I glance down at my phone, and still nothing. It can't be Holt. I asked him—begged him—not to go near Chet. He promised he wouldn't.

So why do I have this awful, terrible feeling that the reason Chet was escorted out of the baseball loft was because of my boyfriend?

"He's a douche and deserved it," Nicole says while checking her phone. "I feel like our attention span has reached its limit. Should we call it early?"

"Yes," I say before everyone else, already packing up my bag.

Nicole laughs. "Well, then I guess we'll call it a night. No one tell our TA."

Everyone laughs—everyone except me, because it feels like my heart is in my throat right now—and we all finish packing. I give everyone a halfhearted goodbye and quickly hurry out of the library. I try calling Holt again, but he doesn't pick up. I hang up and dial Priya.

"Oh, please tell me you got out early and you're on your way."

"Chet was at the baseball loft," I say in a panic as I quickly walk to the parking lot, the cold night air stinging my lungs.

"What? Chet McKay?"

"Yes. He was at the party. So was Holt."

"Okay," she says skeptically.

"Priya, a guy in my study group said Chet got in a fight at the baseball loft and had to be escorted out."

“Oh shit.”

“Exactly. I tried calling and texting Holt and he hasn’t answered. Tell me I’m freaking out and I should just come home rather than drive over to the loft to see if he’s okay.”

“Come home. I’m sure it’s—”

Beep.

I glance at my phone. Holt’s name shows on the screen. “He’s calling. I’ll call you back.” I hang up quickly and answer Holt’s call. “Holt, hey.”

“Uh, Harmony?”

That’s not Holt’s voice. I slow down. I see my car a few feet away but can’t seem to make it there as the worst possible scenario passes through my mind.

“Who’s this?” I ask.

“It’s Carson.” He’s whispering. “I was told not to call you, but I’m pretty sure you’d want to know what’s going on.”

My hand falls to the car next to me to hold me up. “What’s going on, Carson?”

“Holt got in a fight. He, uh . . . he passed out in his room while I was taking care of his knuckles. We think it’s his heart.”

And just like that, the night sky swirls around me as my weary stomach tumbles to the ground. “Is he . . . is he okay?”

“He’s getting some tests done. I called his parents. They asked if I’d called you. So that’s what I’m doing.”

My throat closes up, making it next to impossible to talk, as my brain tries to process what’s happening.

“Harmony, you there?” In the background I can hear a doctor being called to the OR.

I swallow hard. “Ye-yeah.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called. You have enough—”

“Where are you?” I say, my feet starting to move forward again.

“He’s not going to want you here.”

Fuck that. I’m his girlfriend. I’m having his baby.

“Where the hell is he, Carson?” I snap at him.

“The emergency room at General,” he says quickly, and then he mutters, “Holt is going to kill me.”

I hang up before he can say anything else. I shoot a text to Priya to let her know what’s going on, and then I head straight to the hospital.

I PACE the lobby of the emergency room, trying not to stare at the guy with a finger in an ice bag, or the woman who keeps throwing up in the corner. With my arms wrapped around my waist, I keep to myself, waiting and waiting, until . . .

“Harmony.”

Carson is standing at the door, waving me in. I quickly walk over to him and follow him to a curtained-off section of the ER. He pulls back the curtain, revealing Holt lying on the bed, propped up, shirt off, monitors attached to his chest, his knuckles bandaged up, and an IV hooked up to his arm. He rolls his head to the side, and when he makes eye contact with me, his eyes narrow at Carson.

“What the fuck, man?”

“Don’t even think about yelling at him,” I say, stepping up to his bed.

“Uh, I’ll give you two some privacy. Don’t forget, curtains are your walls.”

Carson disappears, and Holt says, “This is nothing. They’re just making sure everything is fine.”

A flood of emotions hits me all at once, and before I can stop myself, tears flood my eyes and trickle down my cheeks.

“Baby, come here.”

Holt holds out his hand, but I don’t take it. Instead, I stand in front of him, crying, my body shaking.

“Harmony, I can’t get up. Please come here.”

I take a step forward, and he pulls me down onto the bed so I’m seated next to him. He then tugs me even closer so I’m lying on the bed with him.

“Shh,” he coos into my ear. “I’m okay.”

I cling to him, my hand falling to his chest, my emotions completely overwhelming, tying my tongue in knots. I want to yell at him. I want to tell him how mad I am at him for putting himself in this situation. But I can’t seem to get anything out as I listen to his heart monitor beep in the background, reminding me that he’s okay.

I faintly hear a nurse come in and talk to Holt, and I hear him tell her that I’m his pregnant girlfriend and that I’m okay, just upset. The nurse removes the heart monitor, and he’s left to wait for the doctor.

I’m not sure how long it is, but I know I fall asleep at one point, and I’m

in and out of it until the doctor pushes through the curtain. He takes a look at Holt's chart and says, "Run over the night. What happened?"

Holt shifts, but keeps his arm wrapped around me. "Uh, was a bit stressed earlier on, was triggered, and, uh, last thing I knew, my buddy Carson was driving me to the hospital."

The doctor studies Holt and then looks at me. "You know, she really shouldn't be in here, but we've made an exception. If you can't be honest with me, then I'm going to have to ask her to leave so that you're honest."

I start to lift off him, but he holds me tight, not letting me go anywhere. "This is my girlfriend. She's pregnant. I've been stressed out about the future and what we're going to do in the spring. I had a stress test done on Monday with my trainer and coach, something we do every month, and my results were higher than normal."

What? Why didn't he tell me this? I stiffen against him and he holds me down, keeping me close.

"I've been worried about Harmony, today was a stressful day, and I felt shortness of breath at times."

"What?" I say faintly, unable to comprehend what he's saying.

Shortness of breath? We were on the phone only a few hours ago and he didn't even mention feeling out of sorts. Why wouldn't he say anything?

"And I was triggered at a party tonight. I got in a fight and last thing I knew, I was being driven to the hospital with my friend. He knows I have Long QT Syndrome, and since I had a similar situation last year, he was covering all bases by bringing me here."

I feel ill.

The thought that something terrible could have happened to Holt, to his heart . . . it's too consuming. Too overwhelming.

"I'm glad he brought you in. Given your medical history, it's always good to check in on these things," the doctor says casually, as if my anxiety isn't about to drown me in fear. "We looked over the chart and readings of your heart and everything seems to be normal if slightly elevated, but nothing to keep you here longer. Taking in what you've been going through recently and your body's responses, it seems as though you may have had a panic attack, which would have caused the shortness of breath and possible fainting. When our bodies are stressed, worried, or pushed to the max, which I'm assuming yours has been, given your status on the Brentwood baseball team, it's very plausible that this is a signal. Your body is trying to tell you to

relax.”

“Yeah, easier said than done,” Holt says, pushing his hand through his hair.

“I suggest you find a way.” The doctor shuts the chart.

“Everything with my heart is okay, though?”

“Everything checks out fine. I’d like you to follow up with your doctor in a few days just to make sure everything is good, but you’re free to go.” The doctor stands. “And some advice coming from a fellow young parent—my girlfriend was pregnant at nineteen. Communicate. Even if the conversation is hard, always communicate.” He taps Holt’s chart on the bed. “The nurse will be in shortly with your discharge papers.”

When he disappears behind the curtain, I lift up from the bed and look Holt in the eyes. My mind is racing. How could he? How could he possibly think it’s okay to keep this all a secret? Especially when I’ve asked him multiple times if everything is okay. Does he not trust me? I thought we were in this together.

He drags his hand down my arm. “Listen—”

I hold up my hand, not wanting to hear a goddamn thing he has to say. “I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

And then I take off without another word. I can’t get into it with him with only curtains surrounding us. Not with what I have to say, not with the shattering anger that’s piercing through me.

As I retreat, I hear him mutter, “Fuck.”

Fuck is right.



“TAKE IT EASY ON HIM,” Carson says after watching me pace the lobby for ten minutes.

“Take it easy on him?” I ask, stopping in front of Carson and looking up at him as he casually steps back and sticks his hands in his pockets. “What does that even mean?”

“He’s been a mess lately.”

“Yeah, and he should have told me that.” Gesturing toward the exam rooms, I ask, “Did you know he had an elevated stress test with your coach this week?”

Carson's eyes narrow. "No."

"Yeah, neither did I. And as the mother to his unborn baby, don't you think that's something I should have known?"

Carson doesn't get a chance to answer because Holt walks into the lobby, carrying a few papers in the hand that isn't wrapped up. I take one look at him, shake my head, and then head out to the parking lot.

"Harmony, wait," he says, chasing after me.

When we reach outside, he tugs on my arm, but I shake him off, charging toward my car.

"Harmony, please. Let's just talk."

"Uh, do you want me to wait for you?" Carson asks.

"Nah, I'll get a ride with Harmony."

Turning around and addressing Carson, I say, "I suggest if you don't want your friend walking home, you wait for him."

Eyes wide, Carson says, "I'll, uh, wait in my car. Three rows over, bud."

I continue moving toward my car, and just as I reach it, Holt charges in front of me and blocks me from getting in. My anger is a visceral thing, making me red-hot and shaky.

"Can you just stop for a second?" Holt holds out his hand. "Let me explain."

I glance up at him, my eyes meeting his, and I can't hold back. The anger comes pouring out of me. The fear, the nerves, the anxiety that wrapped around my lungs as I drove toward the hospital, unsure if he was okay. It pours out of me like a tidal wave. "How dare you," I say, my voice a menacing tone. "How dare you put yourself at risk like that when there are two people depending on you?" I take a step forward and poke him in the chest. "How dare you not tell me about your test earlier this week, or neglect to tell me what's been going on? Do you think I'm stupid? That I haven't noticed the shift? That I haven't noticed your reluctance to touch me? To kiss me like you used to?"

"Harmony—"

"No," I snap at him. "I begged you to talk to me. To tell me what was on your mind. You neglected to do so. I pleaded with you to leave Chet alone, to not approach him. I asked you to always love me, and this week, it was as if I repelled you. Do you know how much it hurt knowing that you didn't even want to touch me?"

"My head hasn't been in it," he yells. "I can't fuck you if my head isn't in

it.”

I stand back, his harsh words shocking. “When have you ever fucked me, Holt?”

He drags his hand down his face. “You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t. I’ve no idea what’s happening to you right now. In the matter of a week, you’ve turned into a completely different person.”

“I’ve been going through some shit, Harmony.”

“As if I haven’t?” I ask, pointing to my chest. “I spend every morning hunkered over the toilet, feeling ill until the point that my stomach has nothing left in it. I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to take care of a newborn while finishing a degree and an internship in an entirely new place. It hasn’t been easy on me, Holt. But I’ve talked with you, I’ve—”

“Have you?” he shoots back. “Because I’m pretty sure you went to urgent care without telling me today.”

“Because you were about to fly off the deep end. I haven’t been able to approach you about anything out of fear that you’re going to lose it. Your night terrors, your elusiveness. What the hell was I supposed to say?”

“The truth, Harmony. You were supposed to tell me the truth.”

“Like you’ve told me the truth this week? You’re such a hypocrite.” I toss my hand to the side, my breath lighting up against the cold air. “How did it happen?”

“How did what happen?” Holt asks, confused.

“The fight, Holt. How did it start?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters. I want to know. Did you go up to him, trying to defend my honor, after I specifically told you not to?”

He grips the back of his neck but doesn’t say anything.

“Tell me. How did it happen?”

“I just lost it, okay?” he says, yelling at me now. “Everything piled up over the week, and when I saw him at the party, I saw red. I went up to him, asked him if he fucked with you. He smirked, and I nailed him in the face before tackling him to the ground. He got a shot to my side, but I got him in the face a few times before I was pulled away and he was dragged out of the loft. Happy?”

Bile rises in my throat and I hold it back, tamping it down as I stare at Holt.

This shell of a man in front of me.

I don't recognize him.

And that terrifies me.

I shake my head. "No, I'm not happy, Holt."

His anger slowly morphs into understanding. "Listen, I think we need to take a second—"

"We need more than a second." I push past him and unlock my car door before opening it up. "I don't even know who you are right now." I look up at him as panic crosses over his eyes. "I'm pregnant and will be twenty-one in a month. That wasn't my plan, but I was going to make it work because I love you, Holt." My teeth turn over my bottom lip. "But I look at you right now, and I realize, I can't have this baby with someone unstable. Someone who can't take time to talk to me—"

"I didn't want to stress you out," he says quickly, grabbing hold of the top of my car door. "I was protecting you."

"I don't need your protection, Holt. I need you by my side. I need you healthy. I need you even-tempered. I need the fun-loving guy I fell in love with." I give him a once-over. "You're not that man. The man you are right now, I want nothing to do with."

I sit in my seat and try to shut my door, but he prevents me from escaping as he squats in front of me. "It was a bad night, okay?"

"It's been more than a bad night." Tears fall down my cheeks as agony overtakes my heart.

I love this man, I truly do. But I can't live life feeling as though he considers me fragile. I'm a strong, resilient, and intelligent woman, and as much as he's said things that show me he sees that, I don't think he believes it. He's leapt to my defense unnecessarily several times, he's avoided talking to me about serious things, and a healthy relationship cannot be sustained with that level of doubt and fretting. If there's one thing I've learned from my parents, it's that they're equals. Holt loves me, I've no doubt, but I'm not sure he's ready to trust *in* me. I was prepared to let him be my anchor, but I don't feel he's ready to be mine. And that, to me, is vital.

I don't think we'll survive.

Fuck.

He was wrong, thinking I'd resent him for his baseball career. I'll resent him for suffocating me and not trusting in my strengths. I'll resent him for hiding vital truths that could actually either save his life—like they did through Carson's intuition tonight—or kill him if I'm in the dark about his

health.

He withholds his heart, his concerns, and his body.

That's not love.

I wipe at a tear and stare straight in front of me, out the window. "It's over, Holt."

"The fuck it is," he says back, taking my hand. "Harmony, you can't end this just because of one night."

"It isn't just one night, Holt," I yell. "It's been a culmination of things. And how can I honestly think you're going to be able to rein in your anger and still raise this baby?"

"I'm not that angry, for fuck's sake. It was one fight."

"You're angry in the wrong moments," I shoot back. "And that's what matters. Now let me go or I'm going to start screaming."

"Harmony—"

"Move," I yell, pulling at the door.

"Jesus." He stands and stares down at me. "Baby, pl-please." I hear the fear in his voice, the emotion clogging his throat.

I pull on the door, and he scoots out of the way so I can click it shut. I lock the doors, turn the car on, and then wipe at my eyes.

"Don't drive upset," I hear him yell, both hands on his head. "Please don't fucking drive."

I pull out of the parking spot and drive off, tears clouding my eyes, my breath coming in spurts. I stop at a stop sign and gather myself. Getting in an accident would not help the situation.

I pull out my phone and dial Priya.

"Hello? Is everything okay?"

Sucking in a sob, I say, "I just broke up with Holt."

"Oh shit. Okay, where are you?"

"About to drive home."

"Want me to come get you? We can worry about your car later."

I take a deep breath. "No, I think I'm okay. Just talk to me while I drive. Talk about anything other than Holt."

"Okay, okay. Uh . . . a pigeon tried to eat my foot on the way to the diner today."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

HOLT

“I fucked up,” I say, sliding into the passenger seat of Carson’s car.

“Yeah, I could see that coming.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, pressing my palms to my eyes. “Fuck, man.”

“What happened?”

Biting on my lower lip, I run through her last words, trying to comprehend them, trying desperately to wish they weren’t true.

“I think she broke up with me.”

“Seriously?”

“Do you think that’s something I would joke around about?”

“I guess not. Shit, man. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” I lean my head against the headrest. “I really don’t fucking know. I love her. I don’t want to lose her.”

“What happened?”

Glancing out the window, hoping she gets home safely, I say, “Everything. I wasn’t honest with her. My anger, apparently.” I turn to Carson. “Do you think I’m angry?”

“No,” he answers but then adds, “only when something means a lot to you. You gear up when an umpire calls something wrong. When someone is wronged, you turn red. With Harmony and Chet, I’m pretty sure you blacked out. You’re not an angry guy, but when something triggers your anger, yes, you lose it. Harmony is an obvious trigger for you.”

“Shit. I’ve never thought about it that way, but . . . you’re right. When it

matters to me, truly matters, I go from zero to sixty.”

“I’ve only seen it a few times, but times I have seen it . . . not going to lie, man. It’s scary.”

I sigh and slouch down. “What the fuck am I going to do?”

Carson starts the car. “I don’t know, man. I’m not good with this shit. Hence, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Staring out the window, I say, “Thanks for taking me to the hospital to make sure I was okay.”

“Yeah, sorry that I called Harmony.”

“Nah, it’s good that you did. I can’t keep hiding things from her. Maybe it’s good all this blew up in my face.”

We drive back to the loft in silence. The party is over, shockingly. Pretty much killed the atmosphere with the fight. I give the guys a quick apology and then head to my room, where I pull out my phone along with the phone number one of the guys gave me. I type up a text and wait patiently for a response.

Holt: *This is Holt Green. Wanted to say sorry about attacking you tonight. I shouldn’t have lost my cool.*

Luckily Chet responds quickly.

Chet: *Good right hook. So, you’re dating, Harmony, huh?*

Holt: *Yeah.*

Chet: *One of my biggest regrets. I was a dick to her. I deserved the jaw-jarring.*

Holt: *Glad you see it that way. I am sorry, though.*

Chet: *We’re cool, man.*

Satisfied with that, I get ready for bed and remove the wrapping around my hand. My knuckles are bruised, but I can move my fingers, which is all that matters. It’ll be sore, but at least nothing is broken. That would make this situation a thousand times worse.

Flopping back on my bed, I stare at my phone and the picture I have of Harmony as my wallpaper. Gorgeous smile, love in her eyes, heartfelt joy. It’s not the same look she gave me tonight. She was more terrified than anything, and that’s a look I never want to be on the receiving end of when it comes to my girl.

Am I really that unstable? When triggered, do I lose it, like Carson said?

“You’re angry in the wrong moments.”

What does that mean? Aren’t I meant to make sure she’s safe? Knows

she's loved? *Secure*. Aren't I meant to protect the women I love so she—

"I don't need your protection, Holt. I need you by my side. I need you healthy. I need you even-tempered . . ."

Fuck. I'm doing every fucking thing wrong. How the hell am I meant to fix this? *All of this?*

The doctor said I'm not to be stressed, but I don't know how to calm the fuck down. *What the hell am I doing so wrong?*

I won't let her go. I *cannot* let her go. This is not over. I am that man she wants. The one who is fun-loving, will stay connected, stable, and healthy. I will.

I go to our text exchange and type out a text.

Holt: *Hey, baby. I know I'm the last person you want to talk to but I need to know that you got home okay. Even if you don't want to text me, please have Priya text me. I'm sorry about everything. I love you so damn much.*

I set my phone on my chest and stare up at the ceiling. It can't be over. There's no fucking way I'll let it be over, not when I know she's the one I'm supposed to be with. Not when we're going to have a baby. My phone beeps and I quickly pick it up from my chest.

Priya: *She's home. Dude, you have some groveling to do.*

My stomach bottoms out and I type back to her.

Holt: *Tell me I have a chance.*

Priya: *Honestly, I've never seen her like this. I have no clue.*

"Fuck," I softly say while pressing my palm to my eye.



HOLT: *Did she have morning sickness today?*

Priya: *I'm guessing she's not answering you so that's why you're texting me.*

Holt: *I didn't even try. I know she won't answer. Please, Priya. She's carrying my baby. I need to make sure she's okay.*

Priya: *Ugh, you pulled the baby card.*

Holt: *Figured "she's the love of my life" wasn't strong enough to crack you.*

Priya: *You're right. Fine . . . she didn't have any morning sickness. The medicine she got at urgent care seems to be helping.*

Holt: *Is she eating?*

Priya: *I'm not giving you the play-by-play. I'm still loyal to her.*

Holt: *I get it. Thanks, Priya.*

HOLT: *Still no morning sickness?*

Priya: *No.*

Holt: *Is she still crying?*

Priya: *No*

Holt: *Do you think she's giving up on us?*

Priya: *I have no clue. She's closed off. Isn't even talking to me.*

Holt: *Fuck. Is she going to class tomorrow?*

Priya: *She has to. She missed last week because of not feeling well.*

Holt: *Okay. Thanks, Priya.*

Priya: *Don't do something stupid.*

STUDENTS START FILTERING out of the lecture hall, and I keep my eyes trained on the door, waiting for a caramel-haired beauty to appear. Leaning against a tree, I tamp down the fear of rejection that's signaling the flight response. I gave her the weekend, but that's enough. Two days was way too fucking long to not talk to my girl. To not hold her. To not hear her addictive laugh. To not let her bust my balls.

This ends now.

I spot her funnel through the doors. I push off the tree, and make a beeline for her. Her head is buried in her phone, and she won't notice me if I don't go after her.

"Hey," I say when I reach her.

Startled, she looks up at me, and for a second, I see life in her eyes, only for it to be suffocated by . . . nothing.

Instead of saying anything, she stuffs her hands in her jacket and continues to move forward.

"Harmony, please talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about," she says, making her way to the parking

lot.

“So, you’re telling me you don’t love me, just like that? You’re done with me?” When she doesn’t answer, I tug on her arm gently so she stops and is forced to face me. “Say it, Harmony. Say you don’t love me.”

Her eyes search mine. “It doesn’t work like that, Holt. I can’t just stop loving you.”

“So then why are you giving up on us?”

“Because I can love you but also know that you might not be right for me.”

Trying not to grow frustrated, I say, “Because of one fight? You’re going to throw this all away because of a fight?”

“Because of the way you made me feel,” she says, her voice breaking. “Do you realize when I was in my study group, I heard Chet was at the baseball loft? Did you know I called you and texted you multiple times, trying to let you know? And I didn’t hear anything. The entire time I was aching with uncertainty. The entire week you were pulling away, which was the buildup to Friday. The moment I heard he was there, I knew something was going to happen. So, I sat there, waiting, and waiting, my stomach churning, my mind racing. And then . . . I heard there was a fight at the loft with Chet. I’ve never felt so ill in my life until Carson called me to tell me you were in the hospital.” Tears stream down her face. “That was terrifying, Holt. I already have fear in my heart because of your condition, but knowing you were in the hospital for it . . . it brought me to my knees.” She wipes at her tears, and I try to reach for her but she steps back. “And do you know what the worst part about all of it was? It was all avoidable. All you had to do was talk to me. All you had to do was fucking talk to me,” she says, pushing at my shoulder, more tears streaming down her face.

“I fucked up, Harmony.”

“You did.” She nods. “You fucked up big time and I’m not sure there’s any way to repair it.”

On that, she turns away from me and continues to make her way to her car, leaving me at a loss. I don’t know how to fix this.

And that’s what’s scaring me the most.



“GREEN, MY OFFICE. NOW.”

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath as I get up from my locker, all eyes on me, and head toward Coach Disik’s office. I think everyone in the locker room knows exactly what this is about. It’s hard to get anything past our coach.

When I reach his office, I shut the door and take a seat. Coach Disik is holding a pencil and tapping the side of his cheek with it. The silence is deafening, an intimidation tactic that works well. He wouldn’t be as scary if he didn’t hold your future in his hands.

Not even bothering to look at me, he says, “I’ll give you one chance to come clean, and I suggest that you do.”

Yup, nothing gets past him.

“I got in a fight Friday night,” I say, not giving him the runaround. “I was stressed about Harmony, about the test results, about the future, and I saw a guy who did her wrong. I took it out on him, had a panic attack, and wound up in the emergency room because Carson was worried something was going on with my heart. They ran an ECG and everything checked out fine.”

Disik runs his tongue over his teeth and then leans forward on his desk, facing me. “Give me one reason why I don’t drop you from this team right fucking now.”

I swallow hard. “Because I need this. I need this future. I need baseball. I need Harmony to know I’m not a goddamn loser who can’t figure out his life. I need to show my baby that I’m worth something.” I’ve never cried in front of Coach Disik before but, fuck, I’m close.

“Are you worth something?” he asks. “Because right now, you’re worth nothing to me, Green.”

I wet my lips. “I am.” My throat closes tight. “I swear, Coach, I’m worth something.”

“In the last week, I’ve found out you got a girl pregnant, you’re not protecting your health, you got into a fight, and had another scare in the hospital. Tell me how that’s worth my time.”

My jaw clenches, my molars chattering as I see my future slip from my grasp. “I . . . I don’t fucking know.” I press my hand to my head, never feeling more worthless than in this moment.

Disik tips back in his chair. “Get the fuck out of my office,” he shouts.

I stand and go to the door, where I stop and look over my shoulder, seeing a disappointed Disik staring at my back. “I need someone to give me a

second chance, Coach.”

His jaw works to the side. “You say that as if your girl is done with you.”

“She is,” I say softly.

“I see.” He tosses his pencil in his pencil holder and turns toward his computer. He moves his mouse around and then types something on his keyboard. I’m about to leave when he says, “When you come back from winter break, there better not be one fuck-up, or you’re done. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Fix it, Green. I’ve given you too many chances.”

“I know.”

He nods toward the door. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

I leave his office. Head down, I walk toward my locker as my teammates whisper in hushed tones. When I reach my locker, I sink back into the cubby and draw my legs to my chest. Hands propped on my knees, I lower my head.

An hour later, I dial the number I should have dialed before now.

“Hey son, how are you? How’s Harmony?” my dad says, and fuck it’s good to hear his voice.

“Dad, I fucked up. I think I lost Harmony. I think I lost her for good.”

“Tell me everything.”

And I do.

And I cry.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HARMONY

“Celebratory donuts!” Priya says, coming into the house holding a box of Frankie Donuts. “And I got all plain glazed because it’s what you’ve been craving.” She sets down the box and then pulls out a jar of Nutella from her purse. “And for dipping purposes, some Nutella.” She flops on the couch next to me. “God, I’m such a good husband.”

I chuckle softly, but it falls flat on my ears. The last two weeks, Priya has been by my side, taking care of me, making sure I’m eating and taking my nausea medicine. She’s been there to hold my hand when I feel numb inside, which almost feels like every part of the day now. And she’s done her best to get me to smile, as well.

But even with her best efforts, every day that goes by that I don’t hear from Holt, the pain—*the regret*—digs deeper and deeper into my soul.

The last time I heard from him was at school, after class. And I’ve replayed that conversation over and over in my head, simmering over my words, mulling them over to the point that I’ve started to regret them. I’ve started to hate myself for saying them. I’m slowly breaking as I realize that the best thing that’s happened to me has vanished from my life.

And nothing can replace that.

Not Priya.

Not this baby.

Not even a quick-fix donut with Nutella for dipping.

I pushed him away and he listened.

There was no fight left in him, and I can't be upset about that because I'm the one who said we were done.

I was the one who ended it.

I left him falling, tumbling to rock bottom with no way to climb back up.

Priya nudges my foot, which is when I notice she's holding the box open to me.

"Oh, sorry." I pick up a donut, but instead of taking a bite, I just hold it in my hand and stare at the blank TV.

"Uh, your face doesn't scream *celebrating finals are over*."

"Sorry." I sigh. "I don't really feel like celebrating."

"Is this because you were supposed to go to New York for Christmas?"

Tears well in my eyes. "I miss him." I shake my head, upset with myself. "I'm so stupid. I shouldn't have pushed him away. I was scared and upset. Fear clung to me that I cared so much about him, a man I'd built up as indestructible in my head. It terrified me. I should never have pushed him away."

Priya takes a bite of her donut and says, "No, I think you did the right thing."

"You think I should have broken up with him?"

"Oh yeah," Priya says casually while opening up the Nutella jar. "Come on, take a dip." She holds the jar out to me.

I don't move. I stare at my friend, who doesn't seem to be showing any emotional turmoil. Not that this is her life, but still, I thought she'd feel sad for me after my admission. She almost seems . . . happy.

"Did you not like Holt?" I ask her, confused.

"No, I love the guy."

I blink a few times. "I'm confused."

"You two needed to break up," she says, taking another bite of her donut. "You needed a break from each other. It all happened too fast. You fell in love fast, you got pregnant way before you should have, and things were rolling at lightning speed. This breakup was needed so you can take a breather from the love whirlwind you were in."

"Just because it happened fast doesn't mean our feelings are any less validated," I say, feeling defensive.

"Not saying they are. I'm saying this gives you a second to reflect. To pause. To realize if you really want a future with the man or if you were swept up into a tidal wave you weren't expecting." She turns toward me with

a smile. “So, do you want him?”

“I . . .” Hell, she’s rendered me speechless. I never thought about it that way. To slow down, take a step back, and intently look at the relationship we created. The pull between us has never been this strong—hell, I don’t think I’ve ever felt this kind of pull with another human. When he’s around, I feel happy, exhilarated, challenged, and just . . . content. He’s changed the way I look at relationships, the give and take. He’s made me see that there’s more to life than just what you want. He showed me that you can want someone else’s dreams. That your goals can match up with someone else’s. He’s shown me what a partnership is, what a loving comradery can be. He’s shown me how I can love not just someone, but my best friend. He’s given me the opportunity to open my heart, and I know, deep in my soul, no one else will ever do that for me.

He’s also caused me pain. Made me doubt myself because he couldn’t be honest and open with me. Made me fear that he wasn’t taking his health seriously, *which led to fear he wouldn’t take our future seriously*. He leaps to anger too quickly. He’s irrational.

But here’s the thing. Am I perfect? Do I have everything together and react perfectly to every stressor thrown my way? *No. I absolutely do not*. Am I not irrational in different moments too?

Isn’t pain the correct response to things wrong in a relationship? *Yes*. But . . . that’s the sign that you love deeply.

And that’s when you dig deep to work through issues rather than running from them, allowing insecurities—and immaturity—to rule.

We can survive this. We can work harder to thrive.

“I want him,” I say with a whisper.

“Well, duh.” Priya rolls her eyes. “I just wanted to make sure you knew that.” She chuckles and leans back on the couch. “God, you guys are sickening.”

“What do you mean?”

Smiling, she says, “He texts me every day, multiple times a day.”

“What?” I sit taller. “You’ve been talking to him?”

“Yup. Boy has been doing some work in the last two weeks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not my story to tell. But you know, I do believe he said he’s going to be down by the lake today. He leaves tomorrow for New York and he wanted to at least feel close to you before he left, so he went to the tree where you had

your first date.” Priya clutches her chest. “How romantic.”

“Wait, he told you that?”

She nods. “Oh yeah. The boy has been a freaking mess. I met up with him the other day. Never seen him so depressed. He grew a beard.”

“Stop. He did not.”

She slowly nods. “Yup. He’s Mr. Beard now. Really hot on him.”

I can see it in my head, and my gut churns even more from the mere thought of it. “Why did you meet up with him?”

“He wanted to give me your Christmas present. He assumed you weren’t going to bother opening it or see him over break. Wanted to give you space. But he plans on trying to talk to you after break.” Priya shrugs. “I don’t know, if it were me writing this story, I would have you two make up before winter break and not go on some crazy relationship hiatus. Remember that Hallmark movie where the couple was split up for eight years? What kind of crap is that? Basic torture from the screenwriters.” She snaps her finger. “Make up and give the people what they want.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Getting sick of being the middleman. You two clearly want each other. You have some shit to work through but nothing that should keep you apart. For the love of God, end everyone’s misery and give us the happily ever after we’re expecting.”

“You think he’d want to see me?” I ask nervously.

She laughs. “Oh yeah. Trust me.”

I nervously nibble on the side of my cheek. “He’s down by the tree?”

“Yup.” She stands from the couch and heads to the entryway closet, where she pulls out a small box. She hands it to me and says, “It’s your Christmas present. Might be cool for him to see you open it.”

I clutch the box to my chest, impressed with the wrapping job, and look at my best friend.

“You think I should go?”

“I think you need to go.”



I PUT my car in park right next to Holt’s BMW. I glance out the window toward the tree and see his figure leaning against the trunk, a blanket

underneath him. He's wearing a backwards hat, and his shoulders look sunk in, depressed.

I know my posture would mirror his if I saw it.

With a deep breath, I exit my car with the present tucked under my arm, fix my winter hat over my ears, and walk toward him.

It isn't until I'm a few feet away from him that he turns his head to the side, and that's when I see his emerging beard, his sunken eyes, and the lost look on his face.

That is, until he registers it's me standing above him. He quickly stands and adjusts his hat. "Harmony," he says softly, almost in awe.

"Priya said you'd be here."

Holt sees the present in my arms and I watch the little hope he had in his eyes disappear. "Oh, are you here to give me my present back?"

My heart clenches from the tone in his voice, the total despair rolling off him. Swallowing, I shake my head. "No. I came to see you."

"Oh." He doesn't know what to do, so I help him out.

"Maybe we can sit down and talk?"

"Sure, yeah." He looks down at the blanket and says, "Is the blanket okay, or do you want to find a bench or go to my car? Are you cold? Are you feeling okay? Shit, I don't have a drink or anything. Are you thirsty?"

God . . . I love him.

This is why I fell in love with him.

He's so present. Observant. Caring.

"I'm good, and the blanket will be fine."

"Okay." He spreads out the blanket some more and offers me his hand to help me down. I slip my fingers over his, and his hand clasps around me tightly. He lets me have the tree trunk and then sits across from me, bringing his long legs against his chest. Eying me cautiously, he asks, "Are you really feeling okay?"

I nod. "Yes, the medicine has been working. I haven't had any more morning sickness."

"I'm glad to hear that." He shifts and clasps his hands together in front of his legs, holding them in place.

Awkward silence falls between us, and I honestly don't know how to start this conversation. How do I go from pushing him away, to finding the right words to bring him back?

"I've been seeing someone," he says, startling me.

“You . . . what?” I ask, my heart in my throat. “You’re seeing someone?”

His eyes widen and he quickly says, “A therapist. I’ve been seeing a therapist. Shit, sorry. That came out wrong.”

The panic that rose like a broken dam tamps down mildly. I was about to kill Priya for sending me here when he was seeing someone else.

“Oh,” I say, trying to appear casual, even though I’m torn up inside.

“Coach gave me his information. He’s been helping me work out some of the anxieties I have and has given me some tools to deal with my anger. I’ve only had three sessions, but we’re going to continue to talk over break through Zoom. I like him. He’s pretty cool.”

“That’s great,” I say.

“Yeah.” He glances at me. “I know . . .” He clears his throat. “I know you said it was over, and I get your reasoning after giving it a lot of thought and talking to Dr. Cotton about it, but I want you to know, I’m not ready to let you go. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to let you go, but I want you to know my intentions.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m working on my anger and how to communicate better, because I want to be in your life, Harmony. And not just as the father of your baby, I want to be your man. I want to be the guy that earns the right to hold your hand, to call you baby. I want to be your partner, your cheerleader, your confidant. I want to hold you at night, remind you how loved you are, how fucking special you are. It’s not over for us, and that might scare you, but it can’t be fucking over for me.” He shakes his head and quietly says, “It can’t be over.”

I press my lips together and tell myself this is it.

This is where you take a leap.

You can either take back what you desperately want. Or you can chicken out and cower with fear. Either way, now is the time to make the decision.

I came out here for a reason, and even though being here, seeing him again, reminds me of the deep-rooted fear I have of something happening to him, I know I would rather sit with that fear than not have him at all.

“It’s not over, Holt.”

His head lifts, his eyes meeting mine. “It’s not?”

I shake my head as tears well in my eyes once again. I blame my insane hormones. “I came here to tell you I still love you and that I’m sorry for pushing you away when I should’ve held on to you tighter.”

“Fuck.” He presses his hand to his eye. “Are you serious, baby? Please tell me this isn’t a joke.”

“It’s not a joke.” I wipe a tear off my face. He takes the opportunity to scoot in closer and take my hand in his. “I love you, Holt. I’ll never stop loving you, and that terrifies me because something could happen to you. It scared me that something did happen to you.”

“I fucked up, Harmony. I fucked up and learned my lesson immediately. Losing you . . . it was a goddamn wakeup call. It was what I needed. I needed to know I could lose you, that what we have isn’t forever, that I need to work at it, that I need to not shoulder all the responsibility, but do it together, work as a team.” He kisses the back of my knuckles. “I’m just so protective when it comes to you. I now understand that I felt as if I needed to shield you from everything, when in reality, you’re right. You don’t need that. And in some ways, you’re the one who’s protecting me.”

“We protect each other, Holt.”

He kisses my hand again while he holds onto it tightly. “We do.” Looking me in the eyes, he says, “Please tell me again.”

“It isn’t over.”

“Hell yeah.” He lets out a big breath. “Can I hug you?”

I lift up onto my knees and push his legs down to straddle him. His hands go around my waist, and he leans his forehead against mine.

“Fuck, I thought I’d lost you forever.”

My hands float up to the back of his neck and I grip him tightly, holding him in place. “I’m sorry. I should have talked to you instead of pushing you away.”

He shakes his head. “We needed this time. I needed a moment to check myself.” He lifts up and looks me in the eyes. “I knew I wanted you, but now I know you’re a necessity in my life. I can’t do this life thing without you, baby. I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to either,” I say as his hands travel up my back.

“I love you, Harmony.”

“I love you,” I reply right as his mouth descends on mine.

The roughness of his beard is a new addition to delight in as I get lost in his lips, in the way his mouth takes control of mine.

Possessive.

Territorial.

Claiming what’s his.

This is how I want him to express those feelings—through kisses, through affection. Not through anger. I melt into his hold, into his touch, and when

his tongue swipes against my lower lip, I open up for him, matching each and every stroke until he pulls away and cups my cheeks.

“Fuck, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

“You and me, that’s all we need. You and me.”

“And the baby.”

He smiles against my lips. “And the baby.” He lays me back on the blanket and moves his hand down to my stomach. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m much better now,” I answer.

His smile nearly splits me in two. I love this man. I couldn’t live without him in my life. This cocky, sure-of-himself man whittled his way into my world, broke down my walls, and quickly took up residence in my heart. If, at the beginning of the summer, you had told that I would fall in love with a Brentwood baseball player, I would have told you you were crazy. That any athlete who wanted to date me would strike out, but somehow, someway, Holt Green was made for me.

He’s my man.

My everything.

“Do I get to open my present now?” I ask.

He smiles right before pressing his lips to my jaw. “Hell, no. You have to wait until Christmas like the rest of us.” He moves his mouth to mine and thrusts his hips. “But I’ve a present I can give you right now.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “Could you be any cheesier?”

“You know I love a challenge, babe.”

I push at his chest, laughing as his mouth continues to work over my neck and jaw. This is what happiness feels like. Relief. True joy.

Priya was right, we needed that moment apart to appreciate what we have together. Because it’s unlike anything else. Our relationship, despite being slow at the start, took off very quickly by most standards. And that’s part of our characters, in some respects. But so is working through the tough times, and that will only ever make us stronger.

Epilogue

HOLT

“Oh my God, Holt,” Harmony whisper cries. “Yes, right there. Keep going.”

I pump into her from behind, gripping her ass tightly, sweat dripping down my back, the idea that someone could walk in at any moment spurring me on.

“Babe, you there?”

“Yes, God, yes.” She bends lower, which deepens my angle, and that’s all it takes. Her pussy contracts around my cock, and together, we both orgasm, hushing our moans so they don’t echo through the empty space.

I slow my hips as we both regulate our breathing. I pull out of my girl and quickly remove and tie off my condom as she pulls up her underwear and rights her leggings. When she turns toward me, I smile and press my hand to her growing belly.

I right my boxer briefs and jeans as she says, “Condom was a smart idea for easy clean up.”

I tap the side of my head. “Always thinking.” I toss the condom in the trashcan and then look around the empty locker room. “You realize what we just did, right?”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t make a big deal over it.”

“Oh, I’m making it a big deal.” I pinch her chin and bring her mouth to mine. “You just solidified your future with me. Legend has it, within five years we’ll be married.”

“I thought it was three years.”

“Oh damn, rushing me to the altar. Okay, I’m all for it.”

She rolls her eyes and presses her palm to my face. “I honestly can’t believe I let you convince me to do this.”

“Is that what you’re calling it? Convincing you? I don’t recall you putting up much of a fight.”

“I was horny.” She shrugs, and I laugh out loud.

That’s an understatement.

We spent winter break together, splitting our time between New York City and her parents’ place. I took Harmony around the city, showing her all of my favorite spots, giving her time to delight in the touristy parts as well. We caught *White Christmas* on Broadway with my parents, we took a picture in front of the Rockefeller Center tree, and I took her to the holiday shops at Bryant Park, where she found some presents for her parents and a few handcrafted paintings of gender-neutral animals for the baby’s room. We also strode through Central Park almost every night when we were there, taking in the lit-up trees and faint Christmas music playing in the background. It was one of her favorite parts of the trip.

We celebrated Christmas with my parents, but then flew to see Harmony’s parents the next day to celebrate with them. We played games, talked about possible baby names, and discussed how they could be with Harmony when her due date nears. It was one of the biggest concerns I had—that Harmony would be alone when the baby came along. But after talking to my parents and hers, they both reassured me that between the four of them, that wouldn’t happen. They’d be there for us, something I should have believed from the very beginning. In fact, when Dad told me *family first, baseball second*, I should have been completely convinced.

We just returned back from winter break, and the first thing I had to do was report back to Coach and do a stress test. I passed with flying colors and told him everything was good with Harmony. He acted as though he didn’t care, but I could see the settled look in his eyes when I told him about the baby and the plans we have for when Harmony’s due date comes along. Coach Disik might be a dick most of the time, and he teaches lessons at boss level, but he does care about us, in an offhand, threatening way. But he’s prepping us for the real world, for ball clubs that don’t care about anything except homeruns and jersey sales. His approach is brash, hard, and blunt, but it’s only a small taste of what we’ll get when we move to the big leagues. I was grateful for the lesson, but even more grateful I don’t have to fall to his

wrath again.

Before I left my meeting with Coach Disik, he informed me he got a call from California. The Saints are very interested in me. Their farm system is in California, meaning we very well might have a California baby. I told Harmony right away, and she slowly nodded and said she could get used to the prospect of living in California. My babe out on the beach in a two-piece . . . yeah, I could get used to that. Things would come full circle for us.

But back to the horny thing.

Harmony has been clawing at me for weeks now. She can't get enough.

Every time I even look at her, she wants me. She's pulling my pants down. I'm not complaining, but, hell, she's wearing me out. I finally had to shave my beard because I realized that was a major source of her infatuation. She loved the way it felt between her legs. She craved it.

To save my own sanity, I got rid of it.

And, oh boy, was she not happy.

That was a big fight, but I then made it up to her by bending her over her desk and taking her from behind, her new favorite position.

"God, I feel good," she says, flipping her hair behind her ear. "I'm ready to eat."

"You know, I'm noticing a trend with you. You always want to eat after we have sex."

"You make me ravenous." She stands on her toes and presses a kiss to my lips. "Can we get pizza?"

"Anything you want, baby." I take her hand in mine and head toward the door, just as it opens.

Coach Disik walks in but stops when he catches me and Harmony right in front of him. He looks at our hands, then his eyes travel up our bodies. "Jesus Christ," he mutters before pushing past us.

"Don't you want to meet Harmony?" I call out.

Instead of answering, all he says is, "You better not have left a goddamn mess."

Harmony buries her head in my shoulder, completely mortified.

"Used a condom, Coach—"

Harmony smacks my stomach. "Oh my God, Holt."

I chuckle. "Trust me, babe. You're probably not the first girl he's seen in the locker room and most likely won't be the last, either." I press a kiss to her hand and walk her out to the parking lot to my BMW.

“Are you going to tell the guys? I know how conquests like that are required to be shared.”

“Nah, I’m not that guy.” I open the door for her, but she stands in front of it and doesn’t get in.

“You know, you could tell them.”

Confused, I ask, “Do you want me to tell them?”

Her hand plays with the hem of my shirt. “Yeah.” Her eyes connect with mine. “I want them to know for certain where we’re headed.”

I smile. “Claiming me, babe?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.” She presses a kiss to my lips and I reciprocate, snagging my hand around her waist.

I will never understand how I was able to shift this girl’s axis and become someone vital in her life. But I know with absolute certainty, the day I decided to look past a prickly façade and see something in a beautiful girl’s anger—*and look her up in the school database*—was the day I made the best decision of my life.

THE END

Keep reading for a link to an EXTENDED EPILOGUE about Holt and Harmony and for an excerpt from **The Wedding Game**.

More from the Brentwood Boys:

[The Locker Room](#)

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Excerpt - The Wedding Game

Prologue

THADDEUS

First things first: this story isn't about me.

Well . . . technically, it is about me, but it isn't about *me*.

It's about my brother, Alec Baxter. Ever hear of the gorgeous bastard? He's the top divorce lawyer in New York City.

Cunning, devilishly handsome—just like me—has big hands, and scowls at almost any mention of a hot dog. Not a fan—he doesn't get it, never will.

He's my best friend, my partner in crime, the guy I look up to, and my one and only hero . . . despite talking to him maybe every three months, barely seeing him on holidays, and waiting weeks just for a simple response to a text message.

Sounds like a one-sided brother-ship, right? Kind of is, but hey, that's okay. The man is busy. And he spent most of our childhood making sure I wasn't completely scarred by our parents and their inability to shield their children from their awful marriage. They really had a habit of airing out their grievances like dirty panties on laundry day.

I can still remember Alec charging into my room whenever our parents started going at it, then leading me down the fire escape of our Park Avenue apartment and taking me to the bakery down the street. We would share a cannoli and just stare at each other, both knowing what was happening a mere block away but never talking about it.

But enough with the sob fest—that’s not what this story is about. No, it’s about the complete and utter betrayal I’ve suffered at the hands of the aforementioned brother. My own kin, my own blood, my hero . . .

He may be my best friend, but he’s betrayed me in every way possible.

Hefty words, right?

Fighting words.

Well, I speak the truth.

What happened? Let me give you a little prelude to the disaster that my life has turned into.

It all started when I found out my beautiful fiancée, Naomi, is pregnant. I had to make some hard decisions, and the wedding of my dreams—yes, *my* dreams—had to be swapped out for a wedding on a budget. I needed to save for a home, not the event of the century.

It was a tough pill to swallow. I may have hyperventilated into the drawer of my office desk a few times as I tried to come to terms with it all.

But then one day, after a good breathing session into beautifully stained mahogany, I thought of something: freebies.

I’m a corporate-event planner for Golf Galaxy, Manhattan’s premier golf range and party center for executives. For all your corporate-event needs, please contact Thaddeus Baxter.

I rub elbows with the wealthy on a daily basis, and I figured, why not take advantage of that. Ask around, see if I can find any perks from my job.

Unfortunately, all the asses I’ve been kissing for the past few years want nothing to do with me. Can’t possibly see why. I’m charming—slightly dramatic, perhaps—but I can make the best margarita when pressed to, and I’ll even shake my maracas when handing it over. And when I say *maracas*, I mean my burly balls. Ahem, my nutsac.

An absolute delight of a gentleman. That’s me.

So, once again reduced to a deeply depressed state, I found myself hunched over my computer—leftover margarita from an event in hand, scanning through wedding websites—when I saw it.

The answer to all my prayers.

It was as if God had parted the clouds and, with his lightning-striking finger, booped me on the nose and pointed me in the right direction.

The Wedding Game *was casting*.

TV’s favorite wedding reality show was looking for couples to take on the challenge of creating a wedding on a budget. Tulle, roses, bunting, tea

lights, tuxes—all there, ready to be pulled together into the best wedding ever.

Sign me up.

But being in the spotlight of every bridezilla's dream wasn't my main reason for filling out the application.

You can bet your belly button—caressing tits there was a prize.

You'll never guess what it was. I'm not even going to give you a chance to figure it out.

It wasn't your typical Sandals destination honeymoon with all-you-can-eat buffets.

Nope. It was a GD penthouse in New York City.

Penthouse!

The dream of all dreams.

Before I even read the fine print, I had the application filled out and ready to send.

So what does this have to do with the kind of betrayal that would make the *Game of Thrones* cast blush?

The number one rule of *The Wedding Game*: you have to have at least one family member on your team. Given my childhood's emotional baggage, there was only one person I could rely on.

Alec.

And that, my friends, is where the betrayal comes in.

Don't believe my brother could be so coldhearted as to deceitfully ensnare his own flesh and blood?

Guess again.

He did.

Just see for yourself . . .

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