

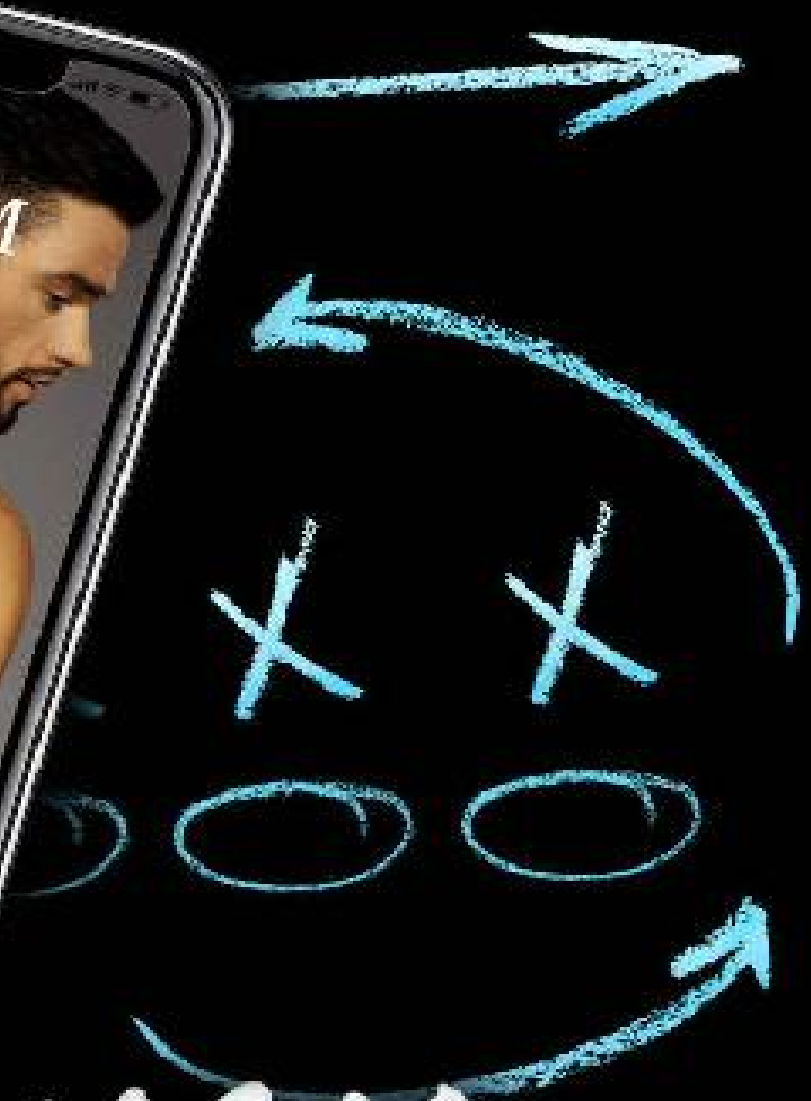


YOU

BROKE

ME FIRST

MICHAELA SAWYER



YOU BROKE ME FIRST

SECOND CHANCE SPORTS ROMANCE

MICHAELA SAWYER



*To anyone who's felt they needed to hide behind big clothes
and messy hair to be invisible.*

You are beautiful!

To anyone who was ever made to feel like they were less...

You are enough!

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ONE

MADDOX

I slipped on my letterman's jacket as I walked the back hallways of Riverview High School toward Coach Beckham's office. I got a text to report to his office first thing that morning, and no other details. Judging by my being the only one who received the text, I'd say I was in trouble. Again.

Looking down, I straightened my jacket, slamming into something with my right shoulder. The object flew back and hit the ground.

"Oh," she stuttered, peering up through her thick, wide-framed glasses. I couldn't remember her name, but she was also a student here. I'd seen her around. "I'm sorry." Cheeks pink, she pushed her glasses further up her nose.

"Watch where you're going, dork." I scowled, not bothering to hide the irritation in my voice as I dusted myself off like she'd gotten me dirty. She was the epitome of the word dork. Her dark hair was a wavy mess, her eyes hidden behind thick glasses, and her clothes at least two sizes too big, not to mention three years out of style.

"Parker," Coach yelled, his head sticking through his bright red office door.

Without a second glance, I left the girl on the ground and stormed toward him. I had more pressing matters to deal with than some girl who couldn't see me standing right in front of her.

"What's up, Coach?" I slid into one of his worn office chairs. Even though most of the school was upgraded last year,

Coach preferred his old, outdated desk and furniture along with his own filing system. Between the two, his office always looked like an unorganized mess.

“There’s no easy way to say this, son.” He hesitated, pulling off his red team ball cap, revealing his shaggy silver hair, and dropping it on his cluttered desk. “You’re on the bench next Friday.”

“What?” I shoved out of the chair to my feet. “You can’t do that. You need me.”

“We do,” he agreed, nodding. “But my hands are tied. Ms. Hanford reported your D, and unless you bring it up by Thursday, you are on the bench.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” I ran a hand down my face. “Math isn’t my subject, and Ms. Hanford is a terrible teacher.” The only emotion I was able to register was anger. Ms. Handford knew how important football was to me. I’d gone to her several times for help, but she was literally the worst teacher at the school and it didn’t help that she hated jocks.

“I don’t know that you can,” he said. “But I found a tutor to help you, so we don’t have this issue in the future.”

“No,” I barked. “I’m playing Friday. It’s the first game.”

“Then get that grade up,” he said, shrugging a shoulder.

“Who’s the tutor and when do we start?”

“Her name is Addy,” he said. “She is the best, so don’t ruin this, and she can start on Monday.”

“Monday?” I snapped. “No, we start today.”

“Sorry.” He sighed, offering an apologetic smile. “She said she was busy until Monday.” He paused, placing his hands on his hips. “You could try to convince her to start earlier.”

“Yes,” I nodded. I could convince girls to do just about anything. I could undoubtedly persuade her to start earlier. “I can do that. Where do I find her?”

“You just knocked her on her ass,” he said, pointing out his window to the spot where the girl had slammed into me.

Fuck. That was my tutor?

Well, this would be easier than I thought. Tutor girl had some little schoolgirl crush on me. I’d seen her watching me at practices. Or staring at me in class or during lunch. I’d ignored it and her because I wasn’t interested in pursuing her. She wasn’t my type, and girls who have schoolgirl crushes end up being stage 5 clingers. I didn’t have time for that.

“Gotta go, Coach,” I said, bolting out of the office. I wasn’t sure why I was in such a hurry. I had no idea where she was or how to find her.

I bolted out the door, storming through the halls like a man on a mission. The problem was I had no idea where to start looking for her. Even though I’d seen her around the school, I didn’t know anything about her except she was apparently a good tutor in such high demand that she couldn’t start until Monday.

Stopping at my locker, I spun the combination lock.

“What’s up, man?” Bentley asked, slamming his locker, right next to mine, shut. I inwardly groaned as I pulled out my backpack, tossed it over my shoulder, and slammed my locker closed.

“Rough morning?” Bentley laughed, pulling his black team cap over his short, dark hair.

Royce and Asher strolled up behind Bentley. Asher, Royce, and Bentley were all part of the offensive line, and since this was our senior year, getting as much play time as possible was necessary if we wanted to be recruited. The four of us grew up together and had been playing together since I moved to this town.

“Ms. Hanford got me benched for the first game,” I muttered, “if I don’t bring my grade up by Thursday.”

“Ms. Hanford’s got it out for you this year,” Asher said, pulling a white cap over his dark curly hair. “She got me benched twice last year. I had to get a tutor.”

“Yeah,” I groaned. “Coach set me up with one.”

“Who?” Asher asked, narrowing his dark blue eyes as he slid into his letterman jacket.

“Uh, I think he said her name was Addy.”

Asher huffed out a humorless laugh. “Good luck with her.”

“Yeah,” Royce chimed in. “She’s a prude.”

“Total ball buster.” Bentley laughed.

“She is,” Asher agreed. “She wouldn’t even show me her tits. I can’t learn like that.”

“Why would you want to see them?” I asked. “She’s a dork.”

“Just think about it, man,” Royce said. “No one has ever seen what’s under that gigantic sweatshirt. No one. I’m curious what she’s got under there.”

“Yeah, like, are they a handful?” Asher mused, using his hands to demonstrate the size. “Or more.”

“And for a nerd, she’s kind of hot,” Bentley added. I’d never looked that hard at her, but I didn’t see anything attractive about her.

“Well, every girl wants to show me her tits.” I laughed. “I’m sure tutor girl will be no different.”

“Wanna bet?” Asher mocked, a taunting smirk pulling at the corners of his lips. “Unless you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” I said. “You’re on. What are we betting for?”

“If you lose, you have to fake an injury on scout day,” Asher said.

“That’s the day all the college scouts will be there,” I said. “I’ll ruin my chances of playing college ball.”

“Oh.” He laughed. “So, you can’t do it then?”

“Not only will I get her to show me her tits,” I smirked, “I’ll get her to suck my dick.” No girl at this school could

resist my charm, and this girl would be no different. “I’m not fucking her, though; I have standards.”

“And how will you prove it?” Royce asked, drawing my attention to him.

“Pictures or videos.”

“You have until one week before scout day,” Asher said. “And you have to send the pictures to the entire school.”

“Yeah,” Royce agreed. “That way, everyone sees what’s under that sweatshirt.”

“Fine,” I said, a smile pulling at the corners of my lips. “You’re on, but first, I need to convince her to do my work for me so I can bring up my grade and play Friday.”

“That’s not going to work for Hanford’s class,” Bentley warned. “Hanford doesn’t grade homework or classwork. You’ll have to pass her test.”

Fuck.

“Well, I need to find this girl now and get started,” I said. “I got six days to bring that D up to a C.”

“She’s probably in the library,” Royce said. “She’s always in the library.”

“I’ll catch y’all later,” I said and darted towards the library.

TWO

ADDISON

Shoving my Air Pods in my ears, I thumbed through my playlist and decided I was in the mood for a surprise. I hit the shuffle button, and “Dream On” by Aerosmith blared through the tiny speakers.

Perfect!

I pushed the cart full of books down the aisle, swaying my hips to the music and humming along to the words. I was in the quiet library, but it didn't matter; I was the only one there for the following two classes. Grabbing a book from the cart, I searched for its home, running my fingers over the books before shoving it in its place and grabbing another. Spinning around, I caught something in my peripheral view and dropped the book. My head snapped around while I jerked both of my headphones out.

I swallowed hard at the sight of Maddox Parker propped against the bookcase, watching me. All six foot plus of perfection, watching me with his deep blue eyes.

“What are you doing in here?” I snapped, not bothering to hide my irritation. He'd run into me, knocked me to the ground, and called me a dork. Then, to top it off, didn't even bother to help me up.

“What are you listening to?” He smirked, avoiding my question.

“None of your business.” I rubbed my damp hands down my jeans. “Now, what are you doing here?”

“I came to be tutored.” He pushed off the bookcase with his shoulder. “So, tutor me.”

“I told your coach I couldn’t start until Monday.” I leaned over and picking up the book I dropped. “And I meant it.” I didn’t want to tutor him at all, but his coach made me feel half bad, and I wasn’t even sure how he did that because I did not feel bad for this entitled jerk—a gorgeous, entitled jerk who didn’t even know I existed until I ran into him today.

“Listen,” he said, following me out of the bookcases. “What will it take to get you to start today?” He dropped his backpack on the wooden squared student table.

“Nothing.” Averting my gaze, I pulled at the hem of my oversized sweatshirt as my heart pounded wildly. “I’m busy today.”

Maddox made me nervous. He was everything I was not. He was popular with lots of friends and girls were literally falling at his feet. I had one friend, and I’d never had a boyfriend. I’d never even been kissed. He was into sports, and I was into books and art. We had zero in common, yet I’d been secretly in love with him since the first grade. Before today, I’d never spoken a word to him, and now, we had an entire conversation, and I was also supposed to sit next to him and help him pass math.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He flashed an all-white perfect smile that made the girls do whatever he wanted. “Everyone has a price. What’s yours?”

“I don’t.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m willing to help you, but I can’t start until Monday.”

The truth was I didn’t have plans. I needed this time to mentally prepare myself to be in such close proximity to him and not embarrass myself.

“I’m desperate,” he pleaded, his entire facial expression and tone changed. “I have to pass two tests by Thursday, and I have six days to prepare.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “If I don’t pass, I can’t play, and I don’t just let myself down, I let my team down. So, please.”

Sucking in a heavy breath, I caved. “Okay,” I said on a heavy exhale, dropping my shoulders. “We can start after school today.”

“Thank you,” he said, his eyes locked on mine. Maddox Parker was stupid hot. Tall, and every inch of his perfect body was a chiseled masterpiece. His dark hair made his piercing blue eyes stand out. His strong, chiseled jawline and full lips were pure perfection.

“We’ll meet here at 2:15,” I said, breaking eye contact. “Don’t be late.”

The first-period dismissal bell rang, and he grabbed his bag from the table and left.

“You can do this,” I muttered, falling into a chair and leaning my head against the table. “It’s not going to be that bad. Who knows? Maybe we’ll become friends.”

“What’s that, dear?” Ms. Holloway asked, passing by on her way to her office.

“Nothing,” I said, jumping out of the chair. “Just talking to myself.”

I spent most of my days in the library. Technically, I had enough credits to graduate early, but I felt like I would be missing out on something if I did. It was my last chance to experience prom, homecoming, and all the other special things about high school that you never get another chance to experience. Plus, I had nothing else to do, so I had two elective classes and spent the rest of the day in the library, completing community service hours, tutoring, and finishing my college applications.

The last bell of the day rang, dismissing students to their buses or cars, and I set up a table to work with Maddox.

Sitting there waiting, I nervously chewed on the end of my pen, watching the front doors to the library. He strolled in five minutes early and sucked every ounce of air out of my lungs. I’d watched him every day since first grade when he’d moved into town, and the sight of him could still steal my breath away. He was gorgeous with dark hair that was curly when he

grew it out, and a smile that would literally melt your insides. He was tall, tanned, and toned. Maddox usually wore a red hat twisted backward, jeans, a t-shirt, and his letterman's jacket.

“Ready?” He smiled, dropping his bag on the table.

As ready as I'll ever be.

“Why don't you start by showing me what chapters of the book you'll be tested on?” I smiled, shoving the textbook towards him.

“Chapters one through four,” he said without looking at the book. He leaned back in his chair with his legs spread and eyes locked on me. Pulling the textbook back, I bit down on my bottom lip, trying to remain calm.

Get it together, Addy.

“And are you struggling with all four chapters?” I nervously clicked my pen.

“Yes,” he said. “I bombed both tests. Luckily, she will let me retake them since I'm working with you.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let's start with chapter one.”

We started with chapter one, and surprisingly, he was brilliant, and I admired how incredibly hard he worked. I'd worked with a lot of football players and never had one so determined to learn. Before I knew it, we had been sitting shoulder to shoulder for almost three hours.

“I don't get it,” I said. He raised his eyebrows. “Why am I tutoring you? You pick stuff up quickly.”

“Because I have Ms. Hanford.” He groaned. “And she doesn't teach but expects us to learn from textbooks, and I don't learn that way.”

“Not many people do.” I laughed. “You wouldn't believe how many students I tutor for her classes.”

“Wow,” he said, glancing at his watch. “I didn't realize how long we've been here. I have to go.”

“Yeah,” I said, gathering my things. “I have to go, too.” I didn't have to go. I would rather stay here with him all night

than go home. He stood, throwing his bag over his shoulder.

“It’s Friday night,” he said. “You got big plans?”

“Uh, yeah,” I stuttered. “No, I mean. I’m not sure yet.” I didn’t have plans. I never had plans.

“There’s a party tonight at Bentley’s house,” he said. “You should come.”

My smile faded. I’d never been invited to a party, and I was sure he was only asking me now to be nice. Nonetheless, it was nice to be asked.

“Thanks,” I said. “Maybe.”

“So, tomorrow?” he asked. I looked up, raising my brows. *Tomorrow?* I racked my brain, trying to remember what tomorrow was. “What time do you want to meet for tutoring tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday.” I smiled, shoving a textbook back on the shelf behind me. “I don’t usually tutor on Saturday.” He opened his mouth to argue or smooth talk me, but I stopped him. “Tomorrow evening, I’m free.” Spending time with Maddox away from school was a dream come true.

He smirked. “Your house?”

“No,” I snapped, my head shooting up. “Not my house.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “How about I pick you up around 6:00 p.m., and we can study at my house.” The library wouldn’t be open that late, so his house would have to do.

“Okay,” I agreed, pulling my phone out of my bag to text Karly, my best friend, to pick me up.

“Do you need a ride home?”

“No,” I shook my head, not bothering to look up from my phone. “And tomorrow, you can pick me up at the diner. I’ll be ready by six.” He nodded, snatching my phone out of my hand. “Hey.” He hit a few buttons, and then his phone buzzed.

“I added my number,” he said, handing my phone back. “Text me if anything changes.” I nodded, staring down at my

phone. Maddox Parker just gave me his number. “See you tomorrow, Addy.”

My heart skipped a beat at the sound of my name on his lips.

THREE

MADDOX

“Oh fuck,” Maddy cried out. My hand slapped over her mouth to muffle her screams. I loved it when they were loud, but we were at a party, and I was fucking her against the side of the house just feet away from our classmates. I wouldn’t typically care, but I didn’t want any video evidence of this encounter.

“Shhh...” I dropped my hand to get a better grip on her hips. Pounding her harder, I rocked her hips into the side of the house.

“Harder,” she yelled. Fuck. “I’m going to come.” My hand clapped back over her mouth. I just wanted her to shut the fuck up so I could get off and get back to the party. Her head tipped back. She moaned into my hand and rocked her hips against me.

I’m not waiting for her to come; I don’t care.

With one hard thrust, I exploded into the condom. Every ounce of tension I’d been carrying throughout the day was released, and my body relaxed. I needed that release.

“I gotta go,” I said, discarding the condom and shoving myself into my pants. She slid her panties up and situated her skirt. I strolled off, tugging up my zipper as I walked away, leaving her to finish cleaning herself up.

Shoving through the door to the house, I searched the room for Asher, Royce, or Bentley. The music was loud, too loud. The bass vibrated the windows, and I gave it less than an hour before the cops showed up. I turned my nose up as I passed a

room where the smell of stale weed and cheap liquor wafted out.

“Mad Dog,” Asher called out, announcing my arrival in the kitchen. “‘Bout time you got here.” I’d been there for over an hour. He was just too drunk to remember.

“How did it go with your tutor girl?” Bentley laughed, leaning against the kitchen counter with his legs crossed at the ankles. “She’s a prude, right?”

“She’s already eating out of the palm of my hand.” I smirked. “I invited her tonight.”

“She won’t come,” Asher yelled over the music, pouring himself another drink of something clear. “She’s never come to a party.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I shrugged. “I got time.” We still had six weeks until scout day. That was plenty of time to get her right where I wanted her.

“Actually,” Asher said, pressing his lips into a tight line, “I talked to coach today, and they moved it up two weeks, and you have to have the pictures a week before, so...” He trailed off, a cocky smirk playing at his lips. He underestimated me. I would have her naked in three weeks.

“Well, then,” I said, matching his cocky grin, “I guess I should go find her tonight.”

“Who are you talking about?” Isabella asked, hanging on Royce’s arm. Isabella and Royce had never labeled their relationship, but she was the closest thing to a serious girlfriend Royce had ever had. I didn’t know if they were exclusive, but they were always together.

“Addy,” Asher answered for me.

“Oh.” Isabella smiled. “She’s covering for me at the diner tonight so I could come here.” She smiled up at Royce.

“Thanks, Izzy,” I said. “I’m out. See y’all Monday.”

“Good luck, bro,” Royce laughed, pulling Izzy tighter to him.



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I was pulling into the Riverview Diner. Riverview was a small town where everyone knew everyone, and the Riverview Diner was the only restaurant in it.

Pushing through the glass door covered in red and blue neon lights, I found a seat at the counter and searched for Addy, spotting her at the opposite end of the long counter, checking someone out.

Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, but other than that, she looked the same as when I left her at school. She was still wearing the same enormous sweatshirt that hung down to the middle of her thighs.

She didn't notice me immediately, but when she did, she strolled down, setting a menu in front of me.

"I thought you were going to a party tonight?" She smiled, clearing off the dirty dishes next to me.

"I thought you were coming to the party tonight." I smirked, not taking my eyes off her.

"I had to work," she said, grabbing a towel and wiping the counter down.

"No, you didn't," I said. "You picked this shift up."

"Parties aren't really my thing." She pulled out a new placemat, setting it on the counter next to me.

"What is your thing?" I asked. Her green eyes searched mine as she bit down on her lip. She couldn't tell if I was seriously asking her or not. She must have decided I wasn't because she turned. I reached out, wrapping my fingers around her wrist and stopping her. "Seriously, what's your thing?"

"I get off in a few." She hesitated. "I could show you."

Yes! I nodded, trying to keep cool, hiding my excitement that I'd gotten her to cave a little more, to bring down those thick walls, and she was going to show me something I suspected she hadn't shown many people.

At exactly nine, she untied her apron and tossed it underneath the cash register.

"See you tomorrow," Addy said, waving to a blonde co-worker. Her eyes locked with mine. "Ready?"

"I'll drive."

"No need," she said. "It's just around the corner." There was nothing around the corner, only the old railroad yard where train cars went to retire.

I followed her for the short walk and slipped through the fence into the restricted train yard area. If we were caught here, we'd be arrested for trespassing.

She pulled out her phone to use the flashlight to light our path. It was pitch black, with only the occasional glow from the streetlights.

"You come out here at night by yourself?" I asked. "Seems a little dangerous." It didn't seem dangerous, it was dangerous. This area was a known gang hangout, and I didn't know much about Addy, but I highly doubted she was in a gang.

"Safer than my house," she muttered, but she must have immediately regretted it. Her head snapped up to me, and her mouth dropped open. "I mean, uh, I..." I didn't know what she meant by that, but she didn't want to talk about it.

"So, what are we doing here?" I changed the subject. I would ask her about it later once she was more comfortable with me.

"Over here," she said, stepping up to an old train car. One side of the car was lit up from the streetlight. It was covered in colorful, artistic street art. "This is my thing." She held her hands out toward the art.

"You did this?" I asked in pure astonishment. "Street art is your thing?" She nodded. "Who are you?" She laughed,

shrugging. “Do you do other art?”

“I take a few art classes.” She shrugged, her eyes locked on her art. “But this is my outlet.” I couldn’t help but wonder what demons she had hidden in her closet. She leaned over, tugging on a blue tarp and uncovering spray paint. “Here.” She tossed me a can.

“Oh no,” I said, looking at the can of white paint. “I’m no artist.”

“You don’t have to be.” She smiled. “You just paint what you feel.”

“I think I’ll just watch,” I said, setting the can down. “If that’s okay with you.”

She nodded, putting her can on wooden pallets stacked to the side of the train car. She placed her glasses next to her can of paint and pulled out her hair tie; she flipped her hair over, pulled it up into a messy bun, then grabbed the bottom of her oversized sweatshirt and pulled it over her head.

My mouth dropped; I wasn’t prepared for what was underneath that sweatshirt. She wore a tight black tank that perfectly hugged every curve of her torso. She was small, smaller than anyone could have guessed from the enormous sweatshirt. Her full, round perky tits were a little more than a handful for even my large hands. Her tight jeans sat low on her hips, hugging the perfect curves of her ass. Why was she hiding all this under that hideous sweatshirt?

I could not wait to see every inch of her naked.

I would tell the guys tomorrow, but there was no way anyone would believe that was what was hiding under that sweatshirt. I considered snapping a picture, but she’d see the flash in this darkness.

She stretched her body up, slashing a yellow strip across an empty spot on the train car. Her shirt hiked up with her movement, revealing smooth skin, and I was pretty sure I saw evidence of a tattoo.

Tattoos, street art, trespassing, who was this girl?

Definitely not who I thought she was.

I spent the next hour watching her do her thing, and by her thing, I meant she worked on her street art while I secretly checked her out.

“We should probably get out of here,” she said, organizing her spray paints and tossing the tarp over them.

“I’ll give you a ride,” I said, watching her grab her sweatshirt and situate it to pull over her head. I wanted to stop her. I wanted to burn that fucking sweatshirt, but for some reason, it was a security blanket of some kind for her, and I couldn’t take that away from her. Not yet, anyway.

“No thanks,” she said once the sweatshirt was over her head. “I’ll walk.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said, following her out of the train yard. “Plus, it’s dark and late.”

“I walk home all the time,” she reassured me.

“Addy,” I snapped, gripping her wrist and pulling her to face me. “You’re not walking home by yourself tonight. I can either walk with you or give you a ride home. Your choice.”

She finally agreed to a ride home, and ten minutes later, I watched her walk through her front door.

Tonight had been entirely unexpected. Addy was not who I thought she was. She was nothing like anyone thought. She was fun to be around, not to mention smoking hot.

FOUR

ADDISON

A glance at my watch said Maddox was thirty minutes late. Standing outside the diner, I pulled my hands inside the sleeves of my sweatshirt and wrapped my arms around myself. My gaze flicked left and then right, but still no sign of Maddox.

A sleek black, topless Ford Mustang convertible pulled up to the curb.

“Hey,” Karly said. “What are you still doing here?”

“I’m waiting for Maddox,” I said. When she narrowed her eyes, I figured I needed to explain why I was waiting for the most popular guy in school to pick me up from work. “I’m tutoring him.” Even though Karly was my best friend, I hadn’t told her I was tutoring Maddox yet.

“On a Saturday night?” she teased.

“It’s a long story,” I mumbled. “What are you doing here? I thought you were going to that party at Chaz’s house tonight.” Chaz Davidson was also a baller, but he played baseball, and Karly had the biggest crush on him. I tutored him once a week, and he was crushing on her just as much as she was on him. Chaz was always asking about her, and I couldn’t blame him. He would be lucky to get a girl like Karly. She wasn’t just beautiful. She was also the sweetest, kindest person I knew and incredibly smart and funny. She was the whole package, and she wanted to be my friend for some reason. We were the complete opposites of each, but that’s why we made such great friends.

“I snuck out to pick up some wings.” She rolled her eyes. “They have no food at the party. How can you drink without food?” I shrugged. I didn’t know how to answer that. I’d never had a drink of alcohol before. “Do you need a ride?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll give him a few more minutes.”

“Maddox is at the party, Addy,” Karly said. Of course, he was. He’d completely forgotten about me. I should have walked home and not let this get to me, but I was mad he had wasted my time after I told him I didn’t tutor on Saturdays.

“Can I ride to the party with you?” I asked. I had no idea what I would do once I got there or if I’d even have the courage to confront him, but I was mad enough right now to think I was going to do something.

“Seriously?” she asked, not bothering to hide the shock that washed over her face. “You want to go to the party?” I nodded. “Hell yeah, about time.” She reached across the passenger seat and pushed the door open.

Panic set in on the short ride to Chaz’s house. I’d never been to a party. Maddox’s invite was the first time I’d been invited to one by anyone besides Karly, who always begged me to go. But I never went.

I didn’t fit in with the typical party crowd. The girls were cruel, and the guys, well, they were guys and were all perverts.

Following Karly into the party, I turtled into myself, trying to be invisible, and it worked because no one noticed me. No one.

“Hey,” Karly said, flashing a flirty all-white smile at Chaz when we walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, girl,” Chaz said. “I was wondering where you went.”

“I picked up some food,” she said, sliding the huge container of wings we’d picked up on the way back onto the counter.

“Seriously?” he asked, lifting the lid to see what was under it. “You are the best.”

“Do you know where Maddox is?” I asked. I wanted to find him, tell him off, and leave.

“Oh, hey, Addy.” Chaz smiled. “Do you want a drink?”

“Uh, no, thanks,” I said. “I’m looking for Maddox.”

“I think he’s out back in the pool house,” Chaz said, pointing out the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. “He’s pretty trashed.”

I didn’t bother with salutations; I just slid the door open and pushed through the crowd toward the pool house.

Stepping into the pool house, I rubbed my damp palms down my jeans. The music was loud, and it was super dark. Black lights were the only illumination in the room, making it hard to make out faces unless you were close. While the music was much louder in the pool house, there weren’t as many people, and they were all stationary and not moving around the room. If I had to guess, I would say they were all stoned. It was hard to see, but people spread throughout the small living space: on the floor, on the couch, and sitting at a small dining table.

Slowly making my way through the living room, I searched faces for Maddox. Everything inside me screamed to turn around and leave, but I was still mad and had made it this far; no reason to quit now.

Stepping over two people making out on the floor, I avoided looking down at them because I was pretty sure they were doing more than kissing. Gross. Who does that on the floor in front of everyone? Glancing around the dark room, it dawned on me that this was the sex room. Everyone was coupled up; some took the time to cover themselves with blankets, and others didn’t.

Omigod... What the fuck did I walk into?

I put my foot down on the other side of the couple on the floor at the exact time the person under the blanket moved,

and I tripped forward, catching myself on the couch. My hand slapped the bare skin of...

Of Maddy Taylor...

Maddy Taylor was naked on her knees with her head positioned between... My gaze moved up the long, strong legs.

The legs of Maddox Parker...

My expression fell flat. This was a bad idea.

Maddox's head rested on the back of the couch, his lips parted. Maddy popped up, her gaze locking on mine. Panic rushed through me. My eyes snapped shut when his dick sprung to life, standing at attention right in front of my face.

This was the worst idea I'd ever had.

"Hey," Maddy yelled, shoving me backward. "Watch where you are going?"

"Addy," Maddox said, pinching his face as he leaned forward, shoving Maddy to the side. My eyes flicked open, locking on his for a brief moment before I bolted. Storming out the front door, I moved as fast as my short legs would take me without running. That asshole stood me up for a blow job.

"Addy, stop," Maddox ordered. I didn't listen. I didn't bother turning around. His long, quick strides closed in on me. "Addy." His fingers wrapped around my arm, jerking me to a stop. I whipped around to face him.

"Let me go," I hissed, pulling hard against his grip.

"What are you doing here, Addy?" Maddox slurred. He was trashed.

"Leaving," I said, trying to hide the hurt from my expression. I didn't look up; I couldn't look him in the eyes. My gaze was glued to the ground. I shouldn't have come.

"Are you jealous?" he teased, a cocky smirk pulling at the corners of his lips.

"No," I snapped. I would never admit it, but I was jealous. More than jealous, I was hurt. What hurt the most was that I'd

let him see a different side of me last night. I shared a piece of me that I'd never shared with anyone, not even Karly. I thought we were starting a possible friendship, but he'd cared so little about me that he didn't even remember he had me waiting for him out in the dark while he got off. Or maybe he didn't care. "I'm pissed that you wasted my time so that you could get your dick sucked." His entire body language and expression changed. His gaze moved to my mouth as he bit down on his bottom lip. "Let me go." I pulled against his grip again with no luck. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Say that again," he purred, leaning into me.

"Say what?" I hissed, glancing around to see if we'd drawn attention to ourselves, but no one was paying any attention.

"Something about that pretty mouth saying such dirty things is beyond hot," he breathed against my lips. The sweet smell of alcohol fanned across my lips. My heart pounded against my chest.

"Are you hitting on me?" I scowled, shoving him out of my personal space once I came to my senses. "After I just saw your dick in another girl's mouth?"

"Hey loser," Maddy yelled from the front of the pool house. She was still topless. "We were in the middle of something."

"Fuck off, Maddy," Maddox growled.

"Are you serious right now, Maddox?" Maddy said. "We were in the middle of something."

"You should go back and finish what you were doing," I said dryly. "I'm leaving." I looked down to where his fingers were still wrapped around my arm. "Let me go, please." He released my arm, turned, and vomited on the ground next to his feet.

I didn't hang out to find out his next move; I didn't care.

I walked the two miles home.

It was only eight o'clock when I entered the front door, but time had no bearing on whether or not my mother was drunk. I

pulled the lit cigarette from between her fingers, pressed it into the ashtray, then grabbed the empty wine glass from her other hand and took it to the kitchen.

My mother was a nonfunctional alcoholic. She used to work as a nurse for many years as a functional alcoholic, but after my dad died, she slowly lost her battle with alcoholism, and now it completely consumed her life. She spent all her time drunk at home or in bars, occasionally bringing home a stray man.

Closing the door to my bedroom, I locked it behind me. Luckily, my mother was between boyfriends right now, but better safe than sorry because when it came to my mom and men, you never knew what kind she would pick. But consistently, she chose some sort of loser.

My phone vibrated.

Maddox: Addy? Where are you?

I left him on read and went to bed.

FIVE

MADDOX

Sitting on Asher's pool patio in the shade, I was still hungover from the night before. Rapidly bouncing my leg, I flipped my phone open, looking through my text messages for a reply from Addy for the 400th time in the last twenty minutes. Nothing. I slammed my phone face down on my leg, clenching my jaw. She'd left my first fifteen messages on read, but she hadn't even bothered to open my last fifteen. I wasn't sure which was worst, being left on read or being completely ignored.

I'd been texting her all day, and now it was close to sunset, and she still hadn't answered.

"Maddox," Maddy called from the other side of Asher's pool deck. "Come do a TikTok with us." I ignored her, flipping my phone open again. Nothing. Fuck!

Slouching forward in the lawn chair, I rested my elbows on my knees and placed my face in my hands. I fucked up big time.

Typically, I wouldn't care, but I needed Addy for more than one reason. If I didn't pass these tests in two days and keep my grade up, I would be permanently benched, plus the whole bet thing. I wasn't going to blow my chances of playing college ball. No girl was worth that.

"We need to talk about homecoming," Maddy said, standing directly in front of me. I leaned back, looking up at her. She was all legs and tits in her tiny fluorescent orange string bikini. Normally, that would do something for me, but I

was in panic mode right now. “If we are going to win, king and queen, we need to come up with a plan.”

“Not now, Maddy,” I groaned, flipping open my phone again. Nothing. The last thing I was worried about right now was homecoming. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go at all.

“Who has your panties in a bunch?” Maddy whined, leaning over to see my phone screen.

“Yeah, Maddox,” Asher teased, sitting on the pool’s edge with his feet in the water. “Who has your panties in a bunch?”

“No one,” I snapped, realizing Addy had left me on read again. Jumping to my feet, I growled, chucking my phone across the yard. Fuck. It was worse to be left on read. Asher’s chuckles only added to my anger, and I wanted to punch him in the throat.

“Is she still not answering, bro?” Asher laughed.

“Who?” Maddy asked, grabbing a towel off the table beside me.

“Addy,” Asher said at the same time I said, “No one.”

“What does that loser have to do with anything?” Maddy asked, her face pinched.

“Without her, Maddox can’t play ball,” Bentley answered for Asher, who was too busy taunting me.

“I have to go,” I said, storming out to find my phone and pushing Asher into the water with my foot as I passed.

I needed to find Addy and talk to her face-to-face.



FIGURING I had about a 95 percent chance that Addy was at either the diner or the old train yard, I parked my truck in the diner’s parking lot and watched through the window for Addy.

After fifteen minutes of no sign of her, I figured it was a safe bet she wasn't working tonight, so I walked the short distance to the train yard.

I watched her from the shadows. The gust of air echoed through the silent night from the paint spray cans as she blew the colors across the train car. My gaze raked over all her curves, and standing off in the distance, this was the first time I could see her in her element without her knowing anyone could see her. She was hot. She hid it behind oversized glasses, messy hair, and enormous clothing. But right now, hidden in the darkness with a small amount of light from the streetlights, she felt confident enough to remove what she hid behind.

Addy stretched to her full height, which wasn't very tall, to paint as high up as she could. Her light-colored tank top rode up her back, revealing more of her tattoo, and when my gaze moved down to her short cutoff shorts, my dick twitched against the denim of my pants.

My eyes shot to the ground as I tried to shake the image out of my head. I needed to get my head in the game. Addy was different, and I would have to take a different approach to get her to forgive me. I would have to do something I hated doing and open up to her.

"Addy," I said, stepping out of the shadows. She froze briefly, gripping the spray can tighter before she started painting again. "Addy, I know you don't owe me anything, but please, if you could just give me two minutes." When she didn't say 'fuck off,' I took that as permission to continue. I shoved my hand through my tousled hair. "Look, I don't really share personal stuff about my family, so this isn't easy for me."

That got her attention. She stopped, her arm dropping to her side. She turned, her big green eyes locking on mine.

"I didn't expect yesterday to hit me like it did." I sighed. "Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of my sister's death." Her eyes softened, and I could see the pity covering her facial features. Pity I didn't want. "After her death, my family fell

apart, and my dad announced yesterday morning that his new girlfriend is pregnant.” I paused, briefly shaking my head. “She’s three years older than me.” I took a step forward. “Between the anniversary and the announcement, I kind of lost it. I was only going to have one drink and...” I trailed off.

“And a blow job.” She smirked.

“And so many drinks I couldn’t even feel the blow job.” I groaned. “I was trying to drink away all of my feelings, and I ended up hurting you.” I took another step forward, stopping right in front of her. “There’s no excuse for what I did, and I’m truly sorry.”

We stood silently for several long seconds. I was starting to think she wasn’t going to forgive me when she handed me her can of spray paint. She grabbed another can and turned back to the train car.

“I don’t want to ruin your art,” I said, holding out the spray can.

“You can’t ruin it.” She smiled. She sprayed a streak of yellow paint across the empty canvas. “Why did you tell me all of that?”

“Because I need you,” I said, kneeling to a blank spot on the bottom of the train car and blowing a lime green streak over it. “Football is to me what art is to you.” *An escape.*

She stopped, her gaze dropping to me, realization washing over her. She nodded before going back to painting.

“I’ve never really talked about this to anyone,” I mumbled. “I’m a private person.” She nodded, and I knew she understood that I didn’t want everyone to know my business.

“I forgive you.” She smiled, not bothering to look at me. “As long as you promise never to do it again. If you need a blow job, just text me and let me know.” Her hand flew up, clapping over her mouth, eyes wide, realizing how that sounded. “That’s not what I meant. I mean, you don’t have to text me that. Omigod.”

I fell backward, laughing, hitting my ass on the pavement, knowing that wasn’t what she meant, and after a few minutes,

she laughed too.

SIX

ADDISON

At lunchtime, Maddox found me in the library to tell me he had practice after school and asked if we could move out our session. I didn't have to work, so it wasn't like I had anything else going on.

My phone vibrated against my butt from my back pocket.

Maddox: Come watch my practice today.

Addison: Can't. I'm tutoring someone.

The swim coach asked me if I could fit in a session today to help Parker Douglas with his English paper that he'd gotten a second extension on and still wasn't done with.

Maddox: Who?

Addison: Does it matter?

Maddox: Who?

Okay, this is weird. Why did he care who I was tutoring?

Addison: Tutor/Student confidentiality

Maddox: Girl? Or boy?

Addison: Sorry, that would violate Tutor/Student confidentiality privileges.

I chuckled at my joke that he probably wouldn't think was funny.

Maddox: Addy!

I sent a laughing emoji and shoved my phone into my pocket. Even though there was no such thing as Tutor/Student confidentiality, I didn't like telling other people's business. Some people were sensitive to the fact that they struggled with something that other people picked up right away, and I wasn't going to be the one to make anyone else feel uncomfortable, even if they did it to me all the time.

Walking out of the bookcases, I set up the table and flipped through social media while waiting for Parker to show up.

My eyes went wide when Maddox pushed through the library door, fully decked out in his black and gold practice gear.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pushing out of my seat.

"Parker's not going to make it," he said.

"Wait, how..." I started.

"I know things," he interrupted, a smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth. I didn't believe at all that he knew things. However, how he found out it was Parker so quickly and why he cared was still unknown. I would table it for a conversation another day. "Now, you can come watch my practice."

"Um," I said. I didn't have a good excuse not to anymore. "Okay." I'd never admit it to him, but I loved watching him on the field. The field was where he shined. It was his first love, and there was no hiding that when his feet hit that field. His dream was to go pro, but he had his eyes set on college right now. During scout week, he would be the top pick, and everyone knew it.

"Do you tutor all the athletes at this school," Maddox asked, leading me straight to the field.

“Not all of them,” I said, shrugging. “But I have tutored most of the athletes at one point or another. “Why?”

He shrugged and dropped the subject.

“Sit here.” He smiled proudly, grabbing my shoulders and leading me to the bench before easing me down. “Front row seats to watch me play.”

As he ran off to meet his team, I could feel the eyes behind me burning through the back of my head. Maddy and her gang of mean girls, aka the cheerleading squad, were behind me in the bleachers.

I tried to focus on Maddox and his team, but it was harder, with the girls behind me making nasty comments about everything from my hair to my clothes. I’d learned over the years not to let them get to me, but it was easier when I kept myself hidden from them. I avoided the lunchroom and common areas where students gather. But now, right here on display in front of them, it hit differently.

The sun beating down was suffocating under my sweatshirt, but I would rather die from heat exhaustion than remove it. I wasn’t giving them any new ammo to terrorize me. My sweatshirt was my security blanket that hid all my insecurities. I knew I wasn’t as pretty or as skinny as Maddy and her cheerleader friends. I knew because they’d told me every day since the first grade.

Shoving my AirPods in my ears to drown out the bullies, I focused my attention on the field that Maddox dominated. They ran a few organized, structured plays before stripping out of their gear and running drills.

Maddox was designed personally by the gods. He ran shirtless across the field, every inch of his perfectly tanned and toned body flexing with his movements. Sweat glistening on his chiseled abs was nothing short of a masterpiece. I drew in a deep breath as I watched the muscles flex in his arms when he stretched to catch the ball. Holy fuck!

Watching him in his atmosphere, half-naked and covered in sweat and dirt, did something to me, and I was having

difficulty hiding it.

Thankfully, practice ended early when black clouds rolled in, and the wind picked up.

“I’m going to go change, and I’ll meet you at my truck,” Maddox said, running up to me and pulling off his helmet. Sweat streamed down the side of his face. “We can study at my place since the library is closed.”

“Actually, it’s open,” I said, trying to keep my tone normal. The library hosted a meeting on Monday evenings, so it stayed open longer.

“Okay.” He smiled, walking backward. “I’ll meet you in the library then.” He ran off, following the rest of the guys into the locker room.



BY THE TIME Maddox made it to the library, I had everything set up and ready to go. We made a schedule for the rest of the week and then got to work.

Before we knew it, we had been studying for three hours, and the Monday meetings were getting ready to start.

“We should call it a day,” I said, closing the textbook. “The meeting will start soon, and it can get crowded and loud.”

“We can go to my place.” He smiled. “We can grab a pizza on the way.”

“I should probably head home,” I lied. I didn’t want to go home.

“Please,” he pleaded, pushing out from the table and tossing his bag over his shoulder. “I only have a few days left.”

My shoulders dropped as I blew out a sigh. “Okay, but only for an hour,” I said.

Twenty minutes later, we headed up the driveway to his house with a pizza and drinks in tow, but we didn't turn towards the house. He veered right toward a detached two-story garage. He hit a button on his key ring, and the garage door slid open.

"You live here?" I asked, following behind him with the drinks in my hands.

"I live upstairs," he said, flipping on a light to the garage with his elbow. "We'll go upstairs and eat and then find a place to study." Following him up the narrow staircase, nerves bubbled in my stomach. I was walking into Maddox's apartment with him alone.

Who am I kidding?

Maddox would never think of me in a way that would cause me to be nervous. I was his tutor. No more, no less.

SEVEN

MADDOX

No way in hell was I wasting this time studying. We'd been doing that for hours, and I finally had her in the privacy of my home. I needed to work on getting her out of the hideous sweatshirt and topless, and I had no idea how long that would take.

Time wasn't on my side.

If Addy was like other girls, I'd already have fucked her and moved on by now, but she wasn't.

"You live here alone?" she asked, strolling around and inspecting the living space. I lived in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment on top of my parent's garage. It used to be my mother's art studio, but when she stopped painting, we remodeled it into an apartment, and when my older brother turned sixteen, he moved into it.

The main house was toxic. It always had been. My mother suffered from depression, and my dad suffered from trying-to-keep-his-dick-in-his-pants syndrome, which only added to my mom's depression. I moved into the garage apartment shortly before my parents decided to separate. Moving out here gave me space from the fighting, the crying, the memories.

"Yeah," I said, flopping a slice of pizza on a plate and handing it to her. "My older brother used to stay with me, but he left for college at the beginning of this year." She took the plate and slid onto the stool next to mine.

"Why don't you live in the main house?" She situated herself on her stool.

“Why is it safer at that train yard than at your house?” I asked, not missing a beat. I suspected we both grew up in toxic households, and if I was sharing, so was she. She took a bite of her pizza and took her time chewing it. Her eyes didn’t leave the plate in front of her.

“Maddy isn’t going to be upset that I’m up here alone with you?” Addy changed the subject.

“Maddy isn’t my girlfriend,” I leaned forward, ripping a paper towel from the rack, and wiping the grease off my fingers.

“Does she know that?” She laughed, dropping the crust to her plate.

“What about you?” I spun my stool towards her so my knees were against her stool. “Do you have someone who will be mad that you’re here alone with me?”

“Uh, no.” She snorted a laugh.

“Why is that so funny?” I was curious to know if she’d ever had a boyfriend or been on a date. “Who was your first boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” she choked, rubbing her forehead and hiding her eyes from me. “Boys don’t date dorks.”

“Who was your first kiss?” I narrowed my eyes and cocked my head to the side.

“Boys don’t kiss dorks.” Cheeks pink, she slid an unruly piece of hair behind her ear and nervously chewed on her bottom lip.

“Wait,” I said, knitting my eyebrows. “Are you saying you’ve never been kissed?” She shrugged. I didn’t know why that both shocked and excited me—something about the fact that another man had never kissed her was beyond hot. She was so innocent and pure; I wanted to destroy that.

“We should get started,” she said, sliding off the stool and moving into the living room.

“Oh no,” I said, hooking an arm around her waist and pulling her to me. I wasn’t going to waste an opportunity like

this. “You can’t just drop that and walk away.”

“Drop what?” She shrugged, twisting in my arms to face me. My hands settled on her hips. “That I’ve never been kissed.” She shrugged, looking up at me. “It is what it is, right?”

“Oh no.” I smirked, gripping her hips and hoisting her up. She squealed, grabbing my arms, and I dropped her on the counter where we had been eating. “I think we should fix that.”

“Fix what?” she scowled, her hands slapping onto the marble countertop.

“You are, what?” I brushed my thumb over her blushing cheek. “Almost eighteen, and you’ve never been kissed.”

“I *am* eighteen,” she mumbled, avoiding eye contact. I swept my thumb across her bottom lip, and her pretty green eyes locked on mine.

“Do you trust me?” I held her gaze. Her lips twisted as she studied me. She hesitated briefly before nodding. “Good.” I reached up, pulling her glasses off.

“Wait,” she stopped me. Her small hand wrapped around my wrist, and all I could think about was that soft hand wrapped around my cock. I swallowed hard. “I can’t see without my glasses.”

“Close your eyes,” I whispered and finished pulling her glasses off and setting them on the counter beside her. “Keep them closed.” Grabbing my phone out of my pocket, I flipped it open, set it to record, and propped it against the wall at an angle that would catch everything.

She shouldn’t trust me.

Grabbing the hem of the hideous sweatshirt, I pulled it over her head and dropped it on the floor. Her tiny low-cut top underneath that sweatshirt did not disappoint. Her chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths. I restrained the urge to touch her tits. My mouth watered with the thought of touching, teasing, tasting them.

Putting a hand between her knees, I shoved them apart and situated myself between her thighs. My cock strained painfully against the denim of my jeans.

A rush of exhilaration surged through me as I ran my tongue over her bottom lip before my mouth crashed against her soft, full lips. I grabbed her face with both hands, pulling her mouth harder against mine. I was suddenly desperate for more.

Her mouth opened, and my tongue slid in, tasting her. She arched into me, and I dug my fingers into the soft skin of her hips; I jerked her to the edge of the counter and pressed my erection into her. She moaned into my mouth as I slowly ground against her, and I thought I might come to the sound of her soft moans.

Everything about her was intoxicating... her smell, her taste, her sounds. All of her sucked me in, and I needed more.

I wanted more.

“You did this,” I whispered against her lips. My hand tangled into her hair, pulling back to give me access to the soft skin of her neck. She gasped as my lips grazed down her throat, searching for the perfect spot and drawing in the soft skin, sucking and nipping.

I didn't care about the bet in that moment. I just wanted more of her.

All of her.

I wanted her to know that she did this to me. That she was making me crazy for her.

Grinding myself against her, I took her mouth with mine as white-hot electricity surged through me. My hands moved to her waist, sliding the hem of her tank top up.

“I should go,” she breathed, breaking from the kiss and pushing against my chest. I took a step back, pressing my lips together tightly, trying to regain control of myself. She readjusted her shirt, drawing in long, slow breaths.

“Yeah.” I nodded, slowing my breathing down. My gaze darted between her and the phone recording on the counter next to her. I’d almost forgotten it was there. “Here, let me help you down.” I offered her a hand, spinning her slightly away from the direction of the phone so that I could grab it with the other hand without her seeing. Without bothering to turn it off, I shoved it in my pocket.

She reached down, grabbed her sweatshirt, and quickly pulled it back on. I handed her glasses to her, and we headed out without another word.

The short ride to Addy’s house was silent. A strange, awkward tension filled the truck, and I couldn’t quite pinpoint whether she or I felt uncomfortable or maybe both of us.

“Library tomorrow after school?” I swerved the truck into her driveway. She nodded, slid out, and shut the door. I inwardly smiled as I watched her walk to the house. This was going to be easier than I thought.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I flipped it on and rewatched the video, trying to decide whether to share any of this with the guys or keep her to myself a little longer. If everyone knew what was hiding beneath her security blanket and how hot she was, on top of the fact that she was almost completely untouched, they’d be all over her, and I couldn’t risk that yet.

EIGHT

ADDISON

Maddox Parker kissed me. Like a real kiss. My first kiss.

Standing against the closed bathroom door, I aimlessly ran my fingers over my swollen lips. My chest swelled, and my stomach fluttered as the memories rushed back. It was so much better than I could have imagined. I'd dreamed about my first kiss, and in those dreams, it was always with Maddox. The location changed, the timing, our ages, everything but the person, but even in my wildest dreams, I never thought it would actually happen.

I'd been in love with Maddox since he moved to our small town the summer before first grade. He was the cutest boy I'd ever seen, but even back then, he didn't notice me.

Today, he noticed me. I was so excited I felt like I could burst.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

Maddox: Good night, dork.

A grin spread across my face. Maddox Parker was flirting with me. He followed his message with a winky kissy emoji.

Addison: Good night.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I floated through the day on cloud nine. I couldn't wait to see Maddox after school, but first, I had to get through the rest of my day.

“Hey.” I smiled at Chaz as he strolled up to my tutoring table in the library. Almost every day since high school started, I'd tutored Chaz. This year was no different; I tutored him during his third-period study hall in the library. Tutoring was part of my community service hours, but I really did it because it was about ninety percent of my socialization. I was kind of a loner.

“Hey.” He smiled back. “I just wanted to let you know that I won't be here for tutoring anymore. Karly offered to help me after school.”

“That's great, Chaz,” I said sincerely. “Let me know if anything changes, and I'll add you back to my schedule.”

I didn't think anything was weird about Chaz getting help from Karly until the next period when another student canceled. Then again, the next period, which continued throughout the day until I no longer tutored a single athlete in the school except Maddox. I had no idea what was going on. Maybe all my athletes canceling on the same day was just a coincidence—a weird coincidence but nonetheless a coincidence.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. A smile spread across my face at the sight of his name on my screen.

Maddox: Library after school?

Drawing in a breath, my chest swelled as the memories from last night washed over me. I knew that Maddox Parker could have any girl he wanted, but last night, the girl he wanted was me. I was aware that he didn't typically date, but I

also knew something about our chemistry was different. He made me feel not just comfortable but special, like no one ever had before.

Addison: Yes!



AT EXACTLY TWO-TEN, Maddox pushed through the front doors of the library.

“Can you fit me into your schedule tomorrow during third and fifth period?” Maddox asked, dropping his bag on the floor beside the table.

I narrowed my eyes. He didn’t make eye contact as he slid into his chair and reached for the textbook across the table, flipping it open to the chapter we were starting today. Another coincidence? Now, I wasn’t so sure. The two periods I tutored during study halls were now available for more time with Maddox.

“Yes.” I smirked. “I had several cancellations today.”

“Several?” His gaze avoided mine, staying locked on the textbook in front of him as he tensed ever so slightly. “Weird.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Especially since I’ve tutored most of them since ninth grade.” I had an inkling that he was behind this somehow, but I wasn’t going to push it. I liked being around Maddox, and how could I be upset if he wanted to spend more time with me?

We spent the next several hours studying.

“I’m starving,” Maddox said, slouching back in his chair. “We should go get food.”

“We still have a whole chapter we haven’t gotten to yet,” I reminded him, tapping a finger on the textbook in front of

him.

“We’ve been working for hours,” he muttered. “And we still have tomorrow.”

“I can’t tonight. I have to leave here in,” I paused to glance at my watch, “fifteen minutes. I have to work tonight.”

“Okay.” He smirked. “How about we work another thirteen minutes, and then you show me your tattoo.” My eyes snapped up, meeting his. I kept my expression blank. How did he know I had a tattoo? “I saw a hint of it when you were painting the other night. I want to see the whole thing.”

“Why?” My eyes narrowed on him.

“Why not?” he shrugged, leaning forward, so close his mouth was mere centimeters from mine.

“It’s a part of you I haven’t seen, and I want to see it.” His breath fanned across my lips as a blush crept over my cheeks. My eyes locked on his lips as they curved into a devilish smile; all I could think about was kissing him again. “So?”

“Okay,” flew out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying. I’d never shown anyone my tattoo. It had meaning behind it that was so personal that it wasn’t something I shared with anyone. Not even Karly. But something about Maddox made my walls crumble when I was with him, and I couldn’t explain why.

Maddox twisted in his seat and leaned forward, diving back into the textbook and starting the next problem. Before I knew it, more than fifteen minutes had passed. Being around Maddox caused me to lose all sense of time—all sense of everything.

Maddox’s phone buzzed against the wooden table.

“Shit,” he muttered, glancing at his phone. “I have to go.” He jumped up quickly, gathering his things. “I’ll text you.” And he was gone.

Well, that was easier than I thought getting out of showing him my tattoo would be.

NINE

ADDISON

It was after ten when I got home from work, and I was exhausted. I slipped out of my clothes and into an oversized shirt before crashing into my bed.

Pulling my comforter up, I reached over to flip off the dim night light on the nightstand beside my bed when my phone buzzing distracted me. It was Maddox. I couldn't even pretend not to be excited every time his name popped up.

Maddox: Are you awake?

Addison: Yes.

Maddox: Good. Can I come in?

What? I reread the text, thinking I had read it wrong. Come in where? He obviously had the wrong number.

Maddox: Open your bedroom window.

He definitely had the wrong number.

Addison: Wrong person.

Maddox: Not the wrong person. Which window is yours?

Oh no, he's here. Maddox Parker is at my house, and he wants me to let him into my bedroom.

I sprang out of bed, frantically grabbing dirty clothes from the ground and shoving them into a laundry basket. Thankfully, my room wasn't that bad. I gave my room one more glance before opening the window.

"Can I come in," Maddox whispered when he saw. Dressed casually in black joggers and a fitted grey tank, he leaned down and put his hand on his thighs so we were face to face.

"Like into my room?" Gaping at him, my mouth opened and snapped shut in shock. Was he serious? "Now?" He nodded. "Why?" He didn't answer, only widened his smile. "Um, I guess."

There I go, agreeing to something only he could convince me to do.

He popped the screen off my window and climbed through. "Is that what you sleep in?" he whispered, his gaze sweeping up and down my body.

Oh my god! I'd been so worried about my room being dirty that I had forgotten what I was wearing. I wrapped my arms around myself in an attempt to cover up.

"What are you doing here," I whisper-hissed, tugging on the hem of my long t-shirt.

"You said you'd show me your tattoo." He smirked.

"Maddox, it's after ten," I scolded. "You thought now was a good time to do that?"

"Are you going to show me?" he asked, sinking onto my bed. My tattoo was just below my rib cage on my back, and I had no pants on.

"Let me get dressed," I said, but he wrapped his hand around my wrist, pulling me to him and positioning me between his legs, facing him as his hands slid around the back of my bare thighs, pulling me closer. My heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest as it rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths. My eyes locked with his deep blue eyes looking up at me through long dark lashes, and I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was mesmerizing. His perfect full lips

curved up in a smile that said I want to do bad things with you and his blue eyes begged for permission. He was hypnotizing.

Twisting in his arms, I closed my eyes as heat flooded me. He grabbed the hem of my oversized tee and glided it up, exposing my hip, bare ass, and tattoo. Goosebumps broke out, covering my entire body.

My tattoo read, 'Broken.' With an emphasis on the OK. The OK stood out bolder and bigger. Even though I felt broken on the inside most days, I was still ok. I would survive whatever life threw at me.

I missed my dad. He had always kept my mom from falling over the edge, and now that he was gone, it was like I'd lost her, too. Then, to add to all that, the constant in and out of pervy older men that my mom didn't protect me from only made things worse. And after all that, the small amount of self-esteem I had left the mean girls at school made sure to destroy. I used to wish my dad had taken me with him, but I knew without me, my mom wouldn't have anyone to look after her.

Ever since Maddox forced himself into my life, things felt different.

Without uttering a single word, he brushed the pad of his thumb over the dark ink. He was taking in the word that was tattooed over my skin. He probably thought I was a freak, but his expression said something completely different when I opened my eyes and my gaze drifted to meet his. I saw understanding and compassion carved into his features.

When he dropped my shirt, I shifted to sit on the bed next to him.

"Why is the train yard safer than your house?" he asked after several long minutes of silence.

"Maddox," I sighed. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Addy, I'm not going to call child protective services. I just want to know." I wasn't worried about who would call; I was over the age of eighteen. They couldn't remove me from

the home anymore. I didn't want to get anyone else involved in the drama. I also didn't want anyone's pity.

"My dad passed away a few years ago," I said, falling back onto my bed. "After that, my mom lost her battle with alcoholism. She pretty much stays drunk. She brings men home from the bar a lot. Some stay for a while, and some don't."

"Do they hurt you?" he asked, turning his head towards me. I didn't look at him, though. I couldn't. "Addy?" I didn't answer; I just pointed to all the extra bolts and locks I added to my bedroom door.

"You should probably go," I whispered, exhaling a shaky breath. Tears stung the back of my eyes, but I forced myself to hold them back. I hated talking about this kind of stuff. "Don't you have like a curfew or something?"

"No," he whispered. "My mom likes men, too. She usually doesn't bring them home; she doesn't usually come home at all." He shoved up from the bed. "Addy, if you ever need a safe place to crash, you can always crash with me."

"Thanks," I sighed. "I'll be fine."

We both stood from the bed, making our way toward the open window. He paused, turning to me like he needed to say something. His eyes said he wanted to kiss me, but he didn't. He climbed out the window without another word, and I wondered if I had done something wrong.

TEN

ADDISON

The next day was the day before Maddox's test. We'd studied every free period he had, including lunch, and he was struggling for the first time since we'd started tutoring. He was struggling with the concept of how to evaluate parametric equations. We'd studied the entire chapter, and he was no closer to grasping the concept than when we'd started.

"Hey." Maddox smiled, leaning against the bookcase, his hands shoved in his pockets. I glanced at my watch: one-fifty-five. He was early for tutoring. "Coach called a mandatory practice. Come watch me, and we can go to my place after and finish studying."

"No thanks." I smiled politely. It wasn't that I didn't want to go because I definitely did. I didn't want to be put on display for the mean girls again. I'd prefer to hide in my safe place where the mean girls never came—the library.

"I wasn't asking." He smirked, crossing his arms over his chest and cocking his head to the side. "You can come willingly, or I can tote you over my shoulder out to the field." He wouldn't. Would he? No, of course, he wouldn't.

"I have a few..." I didn't finish my sentence before his arms dropped to his side, and he charged at me like a linebacker. He leaned over, grabbed me, and tossed me over his shoulder. "Maddox, put me down." I struggled against him, but he only tightened his grip. "I'll go."

"Too late, now." I could hear the smirk in his cocky tone.

“Why do I need to watch your practice?” I groaned, gripping his shirt to steady myself as he pushed through the library doors.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t watch my practices, Addy.” He laughed. “I’ve seen you under the bleachers.” My cheeks burned with embarrassment. He’d seen me watching him all these years. “Now, you don’t have to hide anymore. We’re friends, right?”

“Friends,” I repeated. We were friends. Maddox Parker was my friend.

He carried me effortlessly through the halls, still filled with students, and out to the field, every head turning to watch along the way. All their wide-eyed stares wondered why the most popular guy in school was carrying the biggest nobody like a rag doll. Most of them probably didn’t even know I existed until right now.



AFTER PRACTICE, Maddox and I settled on his living room floor to study. We’d been working on the same chapter all day, but Maddox still struggled to grasp the concept.

“There’s no way I’m going to get this by tomorrow.” He blew out an exasperated sigh, slouching back against the sofa.

“Look, trigonometry is hard,” I reassured him. “You will get it. It just takes time.”

“I don’t have time,” he groaned. “Tomorrow is my test.”

He was stressing, only making it worse, and I wasn’t sure how to help him. Stressing was only going to cause him to shut down, and if he shut down, he would go into that test tomorrow with zero confidence and fail.

“How about an incentive.” I smiled. “You get it right and...” I trailed off, my eyes darting around the room,

thinking of what I could use to entice him not to give up.

“How about,” he cut me off, his deep voice lowered as he leaned forward, “for every question I get right, you remove an article of clothing.” My breath hitched. That was not the direction I was expecting this to go, but I knew football was as important to him as art was to me. He would lose his outlet if he couldn’t play, and I didn’t want that for him. Without art, I didn’t know where I would be today.

“Deal.” I smiled. Even though I would be uncomfortable, it would take his mind off the test and he’d focus on getting me out of my clothes or, even better, keeping his clothes on. “But for every question you get wrong, you have to remove an article of clothing.” I leaned forward, my words coming out more confident than I felt.

“Deal.” He said it so quickly that I realized he wasn’t concerned about being naked.

Question one. He put his pencil on the paper and went through the problem, but it was wrong. I explained where he went wrong, and he reached back and removed his shirt. I swallowed hard at the sight of his bare torso. Maybe I didn’t think this through. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to process a complete thought with him so close and so naked.

He went on to the next question. This time, he slowed down, double-checking his work as he went, and he got it right. I removed my sweatshirt, dropping it beside his shirt. The following five questions he got right. I removed both my shoes and socks and slid out of my pants.

He got the next problem wrong. He wasn’t wearing shoes or socks, so he slid his pants off. One more problem left. If he got it wrong, he would lose his boxers; if he got it right, I would lose my tank top. He leaned in to concentrate. He took his time double-checking his work, and he got it right.

Grabbing the hem of my shirt, I reached up, pulling it over my head. Sinking his teeth into his bottom lip, his gaze slowly took in every inch of my bare skin. I was almost completely naked, sitting in front of him, and I didn’t feel the least bit

awkward. Something about the way his eyes swept over me made me feel beautiful.

Maddox twisted to his knees. “You are so fucking hot,” he breathed, leaning over me and brushing his lips across mine. Closing my eyes, I let this all sink in: Maddox Parker thinks I’m hot. I let myself pretend I’m not the nobody I am; I’m not the dork with no friends, but instead, I’m the type of girl that Maddox Parker falls for. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?” The heat from his breath sent chills racing over my body as his lips grazed my jawline, moving down my neck. My head fell back, desperate to have his mouth on my skin. Heat flooded over me, settling between my thighs. I wanted him.

“Maddox,” a female voice called from the doorway downstairs. “Are you home?”

“Fuck,” he hissed, scrambling to grab his pants. “It’s my mom.” He tossed me my pants, and I grabbed my shirt and darted for the bathroom while he headed down the staircase. “Yeah, coming.”

A few seconds later, a knock sounded at the door. I opened the door and was greeted by a still-shirtless Maddox.

“Sorry about that.” He averted his gaze. “I should probably get you home.”

ELEVEN

MADDOX

Tossing and turning in bed, I tried desperately to shove the images of Addy's half-naked body out of my brain, but it wasn't working, and my dick was hard as a rock. I couldn't help but wonder, if my mom hadn't shown up, would Addy have let me fuck her?

My plan worked perfectly today. I'd pretended to struggle with evaluating parametric equations, and she'd fallen right down that rabbit hole. But even better, she'd also talked me out of my clothes.

Leaning up, I reached over to grab my phone off the nightstand. It was after eleven. Addy probably wasn't still awake, but I decided to text her anyway.

Maddox: You awake?

I waited a few minutes for the bubble to pop up, insinuating she was responding. Nothing. I'd almost given up when it appeared.

Addison: Yes. You're not at my house again, are you?

I wished I was. I wished I was crawling through her window to rip off that oversized tee and tiny pair of lacy panties. All I could think about was her bare skin against mine, my mouth on her body, tasting and teasing her. I blew out a breath, shoving my hand through my hair. This girl was making me crazy. I'd never laid awake fantasizing over a girl before, but this one was driving me mad.

Maddox: No. Wish I was?

Addison: You have a big test tomorrow. You should be sleeping.

She'd avoided the question. She definitely wished I was there. I hoped I was driving her just as insane as she was driving me.

Maddox: Can't sleep.

Addison: Why not?

I stared at her question, contemplating whether I should tell her why. I decided I should.

Maddox: I can't stop thinking about what's under that pretty bra you were wearing tonight.

Addison: Are you sexting me right now?

I choked out a laugh. This girl was so different from any other girl I'd ever messed with before, and if I was being honest, I liked it. I liked her. Not that I would ever admit that to anyone.

Maddox: And if I am? Would you sext back?

She didn't respond, and a smile spread across my face as I pictured her freaking out. I decided to throw the first line and see where she took it.

Maddox: What are you wearing?

A few seconds passed, and an image came through. The picture showed Addy standing in front of a full-length mirror in an oversized tee, her dark hair pulled into a messy knot on top of her head, her legs and feet bare, and no glasses covering her big green eyes. Addy was incredibly sexy, and the best part was that she didn't even know it.

Maddox: You are so fucking hot!

I didn't want to push too far, but I also couldn't control myself.

Maddox: What's under the shirt?

A few more seconds passed, and another image came through. When the image finished downloading and popped up, my cock strained painfully against the thin fabric of my boxers. Addy sent another picture in the same position, this time without the oversized tee. Just a pink lacy bra and matching panties.

Holding the camera over me, I clicked a quick pic of the length of my body, including my bare torso, boxers, and very prominent erection.

Maddox: See why I can't sleep?

Flipping back to the picture, I slid my hand underneath the elastic of my boxers, wrapping my hand around my throbbing erection. I was so painfully hard that I felt like I was going to explode.

I was still looking at the picture when a video came through. Clicking on the video, I watched Addy unhook her pink lacy bra and slowly let it slide down her shoulders, revealing her perfect perky tits and hardened nipples as the bra dropped to the floor. Fuck... I watched the video again, stroking myself from root to tip using the liquid from my head to quicken each stroke. I replayed it again and again as I pumped harder and faster. Gripping myself tighter, I played it again, fantasizing about her riding my cock raw as her pussy clenched around me and her tits bounced up and down in my face. I pumped harder, faster, the fantasy almost too real. Releasing a groan, my entire body tensed as I released myself into my hand.

This girl was going to be the end of me.

After cleaning myself up, I checked to see if Addy replied again, and when she hadn't, I wondered if she was touching herself. Fuck, why did I just do that to myself? Now the images of her touching herself were front and center.

Maddox: Are you touching yourself?

I waited several minutes, and when she didn't respond immediately, I knew she was. I hoped she was.

Maddox: Are you fantasizing it's me touching you?

Addison: You should get some sleep. Big test tomorrow.

She wasn't comfortable with dirty talk yet. I would change that soon enough.

Maddox: Good night, Addy.

Addison: Good night.

I watched the video again. I did it. The bet was over and faster than I expected. I won. The only problem was that I didn't want to share her with anyone else. It was like I knew about a secret treasure chest no one else knew about. If I told everyone, they would want a piece, too, and I didn't want to share. In fact, I didn't even want her to tutor another guy. She was mine. For now, anyway.

Eventually, I'd have to share, though. I liked her, but I wouldn't blow my chances of getting out of this shitty small town or playing college ball. No one was worth messing that opportunity up. Maybe once I fucked her, that would clear my system, and I wouldn't have this insanely possessive feeling over her. The same feeling urged me to threaten every male athlete she tutored to drop her and find someone else. I blamed it on the fact that I didn't want anyone else to discover this hidden gem before I had the opportunity to nail her, but it was more than that, even if I was having trouble admitting it to myself.

TWELVE

ADDISON

I glanced at the school clock high on the library wall when the last bell of the day rang. Maddox would be leaving 7th period and heading to Ms. Hanford's trig class to take his tests.

I gathered my things and tossed my bag over my shoulder before heading towards the exit, but before I could reach for the door, Maddox was shoving his broad shoulders through it.

"What are you doing here?" I scowled, thinking the worst. Either he was trying to ditch out of the test, or Hanford had changed her mind. "You should be in Ms. Hanford's class."

"I'm heading there now." He smiled. "Where are you going?"

"I'm heading home," I said.

"Can you stay?" he asked, his eyes pleading with me. "Please?"

"Yeah." I smiled. "I'll be here in the library when you're done."



EVEN THOUGH MORE THAN an hour had passed, it felt like time was standing still. I'd never been so nervous for someone I tutored. I'd never been so invested before, but I was

one hundred percent in this with Maddox and him being able to play the sport he loved.

My legs bounced rapidly as I watched the double doors to the library for any sign of Maddox. I heard his hand hit the metal handle before I saw the door open. Jumping to my feet, I watched an emotionless Maddox storm through the library, charging right for me. He didn't look happy. Panic set in. He looked angry.

Swallowing past the panic, I felt my entire body tense. "Maddox," I said, starting to apologize.

"Addy," he yelled, a smile spreading across his face as he wrapped his arms around my waist, lifting me off the ground and spinning me. "I passed."

"Omigod," I yelled as he wrapped my arms around his neck. "I knew you could do it." I blew out a sigh of relief. "You tricked me." I laughed.

"I have to go let Coach know," he said, letting me slide against his body to the ground. Maddox had the sexiest smile I'd ever seen. The kind of smile that, with one curve of his lips, could convince you to do things you would never do. He had a sexy mouth. The corners of his lips curved naturally up along with his full lips, perfect dimples, deep blue eyes, and chiseled jaw; it sucked you in, making it hard to breathe. "Meet me at my truck. I wanna celebrate tonight." I nodded, still completely entranced by his smile. He leaned in, pressing his perfect lips to mine before disappearing from the library.

It took me a minute to come back from wherever I'd disappeared to in my mind, but when I did, I practically skipped out of the library.

"Addy," Chaz's panicked voice called out from down the hall. "Thank God you're still here." Of course, I was here. I didn't have anywhere else to be.

"What's up, Chaz?" I asked, offering a polite smile.

"Karly won't come out of the girl's bathroom over in the senior's hallway," he said, his eyes wide with panic.

“Is she okay,” I asked, already storming toward the bathroom. He shrugged, stepping in beside me. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shoving a hand through his thick dark hair. “I was supposed to drive her home today. She didn’t have her car, so I looked for her when she didn’t show up. Someone told me she was in the bathroom, but she wouldn’t let me in or talk to me. I don’t know if I did something wrong.” He looked sincerely hurt.

Stopping in front of the girl’s bathroom, I placed a hand on the door and turned to look over my shoulder. “Why don’t you go get your car?” I started.

“No,” he interrupted. “I’m waiting right here.” I nodded, pushing open the door to the girl’s bathroom.

“Karly,” I called softly, not wanting to startle her.

“Addy,” she cried out, opening the stall door and peeking out. Her tear-streaked cheeks were red, her eyes swollen and puffy. She’d been in here crying for way too long.

“Karly,” I said, another wave of panic coursed through me. Standing at arm’s length, I looked her over for any signs of her being hurt physically, but nothing was evident. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Sucking in a breath, she lifted her hand, holding a white stick with a pink tip. It took me a minute to realize it was a positive pregnancy test. My eyes flashed to hers as my mouth parted in shock, and tears started streaming down her face again. Forcing the shock off my face, I snapped my mouth closed.

Karly was my best friend, my only friend, but right here, right now, I had no idea what to say to her. I couldn’t tell her everything would be all right because I didn’t know if it would be. I didn’t know what this meant for her and her future. So, I did the only thing I could think of—I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. I let her cry on my shoulder until she was out of tears.

Karly came from an extremely religious household. Her parents were strict with very conservative points of view. Sex wasn't something you did before marriage, and a baby out of wedlock was out of the question. I had no idea how her parents would react to the news that Karly was unwed and pregnant. Her mother might die of a heart attack, and her father was probably going to try to kill the father of the baby, whom I assumed was Chaz.

Karly and I shared most things, but sex wasn't something we talked about. I'd never had sex, so there wasn't a whole lot for me to talk about, and to her, sex was private, and I respected that.

"I don't know what to do," Karly sniffled, pulling out of the embrace. "I don't know how to tell Chaz I ruined our lives."

"Hey," I snapped, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her slightly to get her attention. "You didn't do this by yourself, and I seriously doubt Chaz will see it that way either."

"What should I do?" she cried out, using her hand to wipe away another streaming tear.

"I don't know, Karly," I said. "But a guy is standing on the other side of that door beating himself up because he thinks he did something to hurt you. I think you should start by talking to him. Maybe you guys can figure this out together."

"My parents are going to kill me," she said, her head falling into her hand.

"You don't have to tell them today," I said. "You don't even have to tell Chaz today if you're not ready. You can take some time to wrap your head around all of this. We can go back to my house and hang out if you want. I'll order pizza."

"No." She smiled, shaking her head. "I need to talk to Chaz." She moved in front of the sink and grabbed a paper towel to dab at her eyes. "Chaz is amazing, isn't he?"

"Yeah." I smiled, nodding. "He's pretty great."

"I'm going to go talk to him," she smiled. "Thank you, Addy. I'm lucky to have you as a friend." She darted forward,

throwing her arms around me in an unexpected hug. Her arm bumped my hand, sending my phone flying behind me. “Oh, shit, Addy.” We turned to see my phone lying at the bottom of the girl’s bathroom sink, which was still full of water from a clog two days ago. Ewww... “Addy, I’m sorry.” She reached in, grabbed my phone, and dropped it on a paper towel.

“It’s okay,” I forced a smile. “I was probably due for a new one anyway.” I was about two years overdue for a new one, but I didn’t have the money to replace it. “We should go.” I wrapped my phone in the paper towel and shoved it into my bag.

I followed her out the door and smiled as Chaz wrapped an arm around her, and they strolled off together.

I glanced at my watch and realized I’d been with Karly for almost forty minutes. Sprinting out of the school to the student parking lot, I came to a quick halt when I reached Maddox’s empty parking spot. Patting my pockets for my phone, I remembered it was fried. Shit!

THIRTEEN

ADDISON

I picked up my phone and attempted to turn it on one last time. Nothing. Maddox was probably out partying, celebrating his success without a second thought about me, and I was positive it was Maddy who he was celebrating with. Not that I could blame him. He probably thought I ditched him. With a sigh, I sunk back against the chair at my desk in my bedroom.

Spinning in my chair, I dropped my broken phone on my desk when a soft tap sounded from my window. My gaze flicked to my window as I narrowed my eyes.

Was I hearing things?

Then another tap, this time louder. Nope, I wasn't hearing things.

Shoving the curtains to the side, I smiled at the sight of Maddox on the opposite side. His lips curved into that smile that made my insides melt. His hair was damp, making it look longer, and he was dressed casually in a tight black fitted tank that hugged his perfectly chiseled torso and showed off his large muscular arms and a pair of grey gym shorts.

“Can I come in?” he whispered once I pushed the window up. I nodded, stepping back so he could climb his large frame through the window.

“Why aren't you answering my calls?” he asked, eyes scanning my room as if someone else might be there.

Pointing to my phone on my desk, I shrugged. “It's broken. Dropped it in water today.”

“Why did you ghost me?”

“I didn’t ghost you,” I said. “I had an emergency, and you were gone by the time I made it out to your truck.”

“Someone told me they saw you leave with Chaz.” There was no playfulness in his tone. He took a step forward, and I took a step back.

“Wait,” I said, bumping into my dresser, my hands gripping the dresser to steady myself. “What?”

“Did you leave with Chaz?” He leaned into me, placing his palms flat on top of the dresser, caging me in. I almost lost my train of thought breathing in his intoxicating scent. “Did you ditch me for him?”

“Chaz?” I repeated, furrowing my brows. “Karly’s boyfriend, Chaz? Karly, who is my best friend.” I shook my head, pressing my lips tightly together to hide my amusement. He was angry, and it was seriously cute. “I didn’t leave with Chaz. Karly was having a meltdown, and he asked for my help.” I placed the palm of my hand flat against his chest. “I was helping my friend.” I offered a soft smile. “Are you jealous?” I teased.

Straightening to his full height, he dropped his arms to his side as a wave of relief washed over him, his eyes narrowing on me as he considered the question.

“Yes,” he finally said. “And just in case there’s any confusion.” He leaned in, brushing his lips against mine as he grabbed my hips, hoisting me up and setting me down on the dresser. “You are mine, Addy.” With one hand on my hip and the other sliding into my hair, his mouth came down hard on mine, but just as quickly, it was gone, and I immediately missed it.

“I can’t stay.” He smiled, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. “Coach ordered a mandatory curfew tonight for the big game.” He took a step back, offering a hand to help me down. “You’re coming tomorrow, right?”

“To the game?” I pulled at the hem of my T-shirt. He nodded. “I don’t normally go to games.” Friday night football

games were always packed with fans, and I wasn't fond of crowds.

"You kind of have to go now." He smiled, snaking an arm around my waist and pulling me into him. I cocked an eyebrow in confusion. "That's what girlfriends do." He shrugged with a cocky smirk. "They go to their boyfriend's games and support them." Girlfriend? Boyfriend?

"Okay," I said, a smile spreading across my face. "I'll be there."

"I'll pick you up for school in the morning," he said, throwing a leg out the window. "Be ready by 6:30 a.m." Before he pushed the rest of his body through the window frame, he curled his fingers into my shirt and pulled me in for one last kiss goodnight.

Once he was gone and the window closed, I squealed, two-stepping around my bedroom. I was Maddox Parker's girlfriend. Me, Addison Wright, was Maddox Parker's girlfriend. I couldn't even pretend to contain my excitement.



THE NEXT MORNING, Maddox was parked on the road in front of my driveway before 6:30 a.m., waiting for me. I was too excited to sleep, so I was running a little late.

"What are you wearing?" Maddox scowled when I opened the door to climb into his truck. I immediately coiled self-consciously, stopping to look down at my clothes. I was wearing the same thing I always wore. Jeans and a sweatshirt. He must have seen my confusion because he quickly recovered his statement. "You look beautiful, but it's game day. You should be in pride colors."

"Oh." I frowned down at my clothes. It never crossed my mind to wear his team colors. I knew the entire school would

be decked out in black and gold school colors today. “I didn’t think about it. Should I go change?”

“No.” He laughed. “I have a better idea.” He hopped out of the truck and sprinted to the passenger side, where I was still standing. Stopping in front of me, he removed his letterman’s jacket, revealing his black and gold jersey with the number 17 on it. “Here.” He held it out to me. “You can wear this.” I didn’t know for sure because I was in shock, but I was pretty sure my mouth dropped open as I reached for it. Wearing his jacket made it official. It made us official. “Actually.” He pulled the jacket back. My heart sank. “I’ll trade you.” He pointed to my sweatshirt. “It’s too hot for you to wear both.” I nodded quickly, pulling off the sweatshirt and trading him. “Much better.”

We made it to school right on time, and when we entered the school together, I was wearing his letterman’s jacket with his hand tangled into mine. All eyes were on us, including Maddy Taylor, who looked like her head was going to explode. Even more, than I hated crowds, I hated conflict, and I knew I was even higher up on Maddy’s shit list now. Torturing me would now be her sole purpose for living. My gaze flicked from my hand holding Maddox’s to his face, and I decided it was totally worth it. Or, at least for the moment, it was.

FOURTEEN

ADDISON

“I’ll meet you after school at my truck,” Maddox said, tossing his water bottle into the trash on his way out of the library.

The day had flown by. Maddox met me for his regular tutoring session during his study hall, then hung out and ate lunch with me in the library. I’d managed to avoid Maddy for the entire day, but I was pretty sure that wouldn’t last through the game. She was a cheerleader, so of course, she’d be there.

The last bell of the day sounded. Shit! I left the library a little early to go to the restroom before anyone else. I hated getting stuck in the girl’s bathroom with mean girls. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and for some reason, once that bathroom door closed, it gave every mean girl the confidence to level up their mean girl status. There were no witnesses behind these doors and only one way out. It was literally the worst place in the world to get stuck.

Straightening my clothes, I reached for the bathroom stall lock when I heard the door squeak open. Hopping onto the toilet seat, I tried to make myself invisible, clenching my bag to my chest and balancing myself on the toilet seat.

“Who did you get?” a girl asked. I recognized her voice. It was Kasey Davis. She was a popular Varsity cheerleader. She was also team mean girl.

“I got Asher,” a different girl squealed. I recognized her voice, too. It was Riley Mathers, also a popular Varsity cheerleader and mean girl. “What about you?”

“I got T.J.,” Kasey squealed. Their feet shuffled around the floor, and I was pretty sure they were jumping up and down.

“Omigod, he’s so hot,” Riley said. “I heard he has a massive dick.” She made a smacking sound with her lips. Maybe she was applying lipstick. “Who got Maddox Parker?”

“I would assume, Maddy,” Kasey answered. “She always gets Maddox.”

“Doesn’t he like have a girlfriend or something now?” Riley asked, and I could hear her smacking her gum. Gag!

“So?” Kasey laughed. “Before-game, blow jobs are a Rally girls’ job, not a girlfriend. Not that I really believe Maddox Parker, the hottest guy ever, is actually dating that nobody dork. Do you even know her name?”

“No,” Riley smacked. “She must have something on him.” My chest tightened at the thought of Maddy giving Maddox a blow job before the game tonight. Was she his rally girl? I didn’t even know what a rally girl was, but I didn’t want her to be anything to Maddox.

“I think he just feels sorry for her,” Kasey said. “She was like tutoring him, and you know she doesn’t have any friends.” I tried to ignore their hurtful words. Shifting on the toilet seat, trying not to make a sound or fall, I pretended their opinions meant nothing, but they did. The possibility of Maddox dating me because he felt sorry for me was unbearably painful.

The door to the bathroom squeaked open, and I squeezed my eyes shut, praying they were leaving and it wasn’t more cheerleaders coming to talk about Maddox Parker’s new dork of a girlfriend. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hover over the toilet.

The door slammed shut, and the two girls’ loud cackles faded down the hall.

Swallowing the knot forming in my throat and pushing my thoughts to the back of my head, I rushed out of the girls’ bathroom and to the student parking lot.

Rows of cars sat bumper to bumper, inching their way toward the school one-way out exit gate. I weaved through the

line of vehicles and spotted Maddox leaning against his truck, talking. Straining my neck and taking another step forward, I spotted Maddy smiling her bright white smile at Maddox. She flipped her long, shiny, white blonde hair over her narrow shoulder.

I wasn't sure whether to turn and run in the opposite direction or pick up my pace and confront them both. I hated drama and Maddox came with a ton of it.

Standing frozen in place, I watched as Maddy placed a hand on Maddox's arms crossed over his chest. They looked like they belonged together. He was dressed in jeans and his black and gold jersey, and she matched him in her black and gold cheer uniform. But as I continued to watch, I realized Maddox wasn't returning her flirtatious gestures; in fact, he looked annoyed, but I couldn't help but wonder what they were talking about. Was she telling him she would be servicing him before the game? Were they making plans to meet after he dropped me off?

{{{{HONK}}}}

{{{{HONK}}}}

"Get out of the way, dork," a student in a black Toyota Tundra shouted, startling me from my thoughts and sending me jumping into the air, drawing the attention of everyone in the parking lot, including Maddy and Maddox.

"Addy." Maddox smiled, pushing off his truck. Everything about his body language relaxed when he saw me, and I realized I wasn't just some girl he felt sorry for. He didn't even give Maddy a second look as he walked toward me. I wasn't sure what this was, but one thing I knew for sure: it wasn't pity. The next thing I knew for sure was that Maddy would not be giving Maddox a before-game blow job. If he'd already had one before he made it back to school, he wouldn't need another one, right?

"Hey." he smiled. "You ready?" I nodded as I tried to hide the panic coursing through me. "Let's go chill at my place until it's time to leave for the game." I nodded again as he opened my door. "Are you hungry?" I shook my head. I could

force words out of my mouth. He slammed the door and jogged around to the other side. I attempted to shake the panic out of me. I'd never even seen a real dick before I fell on top of Maddox's at the party, and now, I was planning to stick it in my mouth.

"You okay?" Maddox asked, pulling himself up into the truck.

"Yes," I said quicker than I'd intended. "Why?"

"You look like something is wrong," he said, tensing as his gaze scanned over me. "Did someone hurt you?" His tone completely changed. The possessive Maddox that climbed through my window last night was back.

"No," I smiled, laying a hand on his to reassure him. "I'm fine. I promise." His body relaxed, and so did I.

I was ready for this.

I wanted him.

FIFTEEN

ADDISON

The afternoon hadn't gone as planned. On the way back to Maddox's place, one of his friends called needing help because he blew a tire and was stuck on the side of the road. I thought it was great that Maddox was willing to help a friend, but it halted my plans. Once the tire was changed, we didn't have time to go to Maddox's house. Now we were in his truck headed back to the school, where Maddy would be waiting for him.

Staring aimlessly out the window into the darkness, all I could think about was Maddy waiting to give him his pre-game blow job while I sat in the stands waiting for the game to start wearing his letterman's jacket.

"What's up with you?" Maddox asked. "You seem off this afternoon." Continuing to stare out the window, I shook my head, avoiding eye contact. Tapping the brakes, Maddox swerved the truck off the road before coming to a complete stop.

"What are you doing?" I snapped, leaning forward to search for why we were pulling over.

"What's going on, Addy?" He twisted in his seat, balancing his arm on the steering wheel.

He wasn't going to drop it.

I blew out a breath. "I overheard some girls in the bathroom talking about rally girls and blow jobs."

"So?" He shrugged, his brow furrowing.

“So,” I said, drawing out the word. “Is that like actually a thing?”

“Yeah.” He laughed.

“Is Maddy your rally girl?” I said, chewing on my bottom lip.

“You’re cute when you’re jealous; you know that, right?” He smirked.

“Maddox,” I groaned.

“Addy,” he interrupted. “Look, Maddy has been my rally girl since I was in 9th grade and made Varsity.” He leaned forward. “This.” He waved his hand, gesturing to him and me. “Is new.” I wasn’t sure if he was suggesting I should be okay with this or where he was going.

“I’m not following,” I said. His gaze moved past me out the window like he was contemplating his next words.

“Before game blow-jobs are a tradition,” he said matter-of-factly, a cocky grin tugging at his lips. “You could be my rally girl.” He fell back against his seat. “My dick is all yours.”

That was my cue. This wasn’t how I planned it, but if he was going to get a blow job tonight, it would be from me, his girlfriend.

Reaching across myself to unbuckle my seatbelt, I glanced out the window. Even though it was barely six o’clock, it was already dark outside. Luckily, it was that time of the year, plus we were on a back road that wasn’t used very often. I winced at the sharp sound of my seatbelt popping against the window when I released it.

“Addy, I’m just kidding.” He laughed, shifting the truck into drive. He shifted his body to look for oncoming traffic before he pulled back onto the road.

“I’m not,” I breathed, twisting in my seat and pulling myself onto my knees. He cut a look my way as he shifted the truck back into park. His eyes sized me up, trying to determine if I was joking or not. I wasn’t. I didn’t know where this courage came from. Maybe the thought of Maddy pleasing

him gave me that extra push, but I was doing this. “I’m not kidding,” I repeated.

My heart pounded in my ears, waiting for his response.

“If you want it,” he said, hitting the automatic button on the side of the seat and sliding his seat back, “come get it.”

My heart pounded, and my stomach fluttered as I shifted in my seat to lean over the truck’s center console, pressing my lip in a thin line.

“Take that off,” Maddox whispered, tugging at the sleeve of his letterman’s jacket. Leaning back on my knees, I slid the jacket off, letting it fall behind me before repositioning myself over the console.

My gaze locked with his as I situated myself. A cocky smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth as his eyes trailed over me bent over. It was beyond sexy.

Maddox reached forward, sliding my glasses off, closing them, and dropping them in a pocket in the door.

A wave of nerves washed over me as my trembling hands reached out, flicked open the button on his jeans, and slowly slid the zipper down. Maddox lifted his hip, tugging his jeans just enough to set his rock-hard cock free. I sucked in a breath. He was big, intimidatingly big.

Heat burned low in my belly at the realization that Maddox was rock-hard for me.

My hand wrapped around his thick girth. He sucked in a sharp breath as I stroked him from base to tip, slowly rolling my wrist as I moved. Trying to hide my nerves, I focused on him and the sounds he made.

Lowering myself over his lap, I continued my movements, picking up the pacing with each stroke. His chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths.

Gripping him firmly at the base, I leaned forward, brushing my lips across the tip before licking my lips and tasting the warm, salty liquid. I flicked my tongue out, tasting more of him.

I had zero clue what I was doing, and as if sensing my apprehension, he fisted his hand into my hair, guiding my lips where he wanted them.

“Open,” he breathed. I opened my mouth, sliding the tip of his cock between my lips and rolling my tongue around his swollen head. He sucked in a deep breath as his abs flexed and his body tensed.

His deep breaths and low groans made me think I was doing this right, which ignited my confidence.

“Suck,” he growled, thrusting his hips forward and pushing himself deeper.

Finding a rhythm, I eagerly pumped and sucked with each thrust, taking him in a little deeper. I clenched my thighs tighter with each sound he made. I’d never been so turned on.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his grip tightening in my hair. He bucked his hips forward, thrusting himself deeper before pulling my head back as I continued to roll my tongue around his head.

“Addy,” he grunted as I continued my slow, deliberate torture with my tongue. His head fell back as his body shuddered, and I knew he was close to losing control.

He thrust his hips forward, hitting the back of my throat, eliciting a low groan from him. I continued sucking him with quick, deep pulls. He gasped, and the overwhelming sensation of it all almost sent me over the edge.

His hand fisted tighter in my hair, and I steadied myself on his thigh as he thrust his hips forward; simultaneously, he pushed my head down, shoving his cock deep down my throat.

“Fuck,” he growled, his body tensed as he held me in place. I gagged as I felt the warm, salty liquid shoot down the back of my throat.

He released my hair, and I leaned back on my knees. Running my tongue over my swollen lips and adjusting my aching jaw, I watched Maddox pull in long, slow, ragged breaths, and I felt a sense of power. A whole new level of

confidence. The look of sexual satisfaction on his face was because of me. I did that!

“Just so you know,” he said, shoving himself back into his pants and pulling his zipper up, “I was never going to let Maddy blow me tonight. I told her no today in the parking lot before you came out.” My eyes locked on his as a giant smile spread across my face.

SIXTEEN

ADDISON

I absolutely loved watching Maddox on the field. Football was his true love, which showed when he was in the game. He was a completely different person on the field.

A horn blew, and the crowd cheered chaotically, jumping from their seats, dancing, shouting, and screaming.

They won! The first game of the season.

The crowd, still chanting, stormed down the bleachers toward the field to celebrate with the team, and I followed. Even though I was a senior, I'd never gone to a football game. It was no secret that I watched him from under the bleachers during practices, but this was a whole different experience. It was easy to get swept up in the bright lights and excitement of the crowd.

Pushing up on my toes, I tried to search over the crowds for Maddox, but almost everyone was taller than me. You never realize how massive the football field is until you're standing on it.

A smile spread across my face when my eyes locked with his. He charged toward me with a huge grin plastered across his face. With his helmet in one hand, he hooked the other around the back of my thigh, hoisting me up. He was drenched in sweat, but I didn't care. I threw my arms and legs around him.

He carried me out of the crowd, off the field, to the track that circled the football field before dropping me to my feet.

“I’m going to go change, and I’ll meet you at my truck.” Maddox smiled, reaching up to shove his wet dark hair out of his eyes. “We are going to a party.” He leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine in a quick goodbye, see you soon kiss before running off to catch up with his team. My gaze followed him and his team until they disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel leading to the locker rooms before I started the long walk to the parking lot to find Maddox’s truck.

“Look at her,” Maddy laughed from behind me. Inwardly, I groaned, rolling my eyes. I scanned the parking lot. There was nowhere to escape. The parking lot was empty except for us. Everyone was still celebrating on the field. “She thinks she’s so special.” A loud squeal of girls laughing followed Maddy’s sarcastic cackle. I was determined to keep walking and ignore them. “It’s kind of sad. She actually believes she is Maddox’s girlfriend.” Their laughter got louder as if the thought of it was so outrageously funny.

“She must be a virgin.” Brooke laughed. They were closing in on me. I picked up my pace.

“Of course she is,” Maddy scoffed. “Look at her. Who would want to touch that?” That was it. I’d had enough. Stopping, I whipped around, squaring my shoulders ready for a fight.

“What is your problem, Madison?” I hissed, drawing out her full name as I spun to face the leader of the group of mean girls.

“You,” Maddy said, pushing a finger into my shoulder hard enough to shove me backward. “Maddox Parker is mine. He may wander occasionally, but he always comes back to me.” I knew she was right. Maddox and Maddy had been on again, off again for as far back as I could remember. But I also knew things had changed, and now Maddox was with me. Maybe he was tired of his toxic relationship with Maddy, and now he truly enjoyed my company. Or perhaps he tolerated her because she was easy—a relationship of convenience.

“Why would you want that?” I asked, honestly feeling sorry for her. I would never understand why a girl would let a man treat her like that. Maddy was beautiful on the outside, not so much on the inside. She had long blonde hair with icy blue eyes, lean and tall with long legs that looked even longer in her tiny cheer uniform. She could have anyone; why would she want someone who didn’t want her?

“Maddox is going places,” Maddy said, flipping her straight hair over her shoulder. “And when he gets there, I’ll be the one on his arm. He’s my way out of this shitty town.” She didn’t want to be with him because she loved him. She wanted to be with him because she thought he was her ticket to bigger and better.

“If you say so.” I shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

“Don’t fool yourself, Addy,” Maddy hissed, fisting her hands on her hips as she leaned into me. “You are just another tally in his book of virgins.” The corners of her lips turned up as she turned to look at her friends. “How many of you lost your virginity to Maddox Parker?” Every single girl raised her hand, including Maddy. I fought to keep my face flat and not show my emotions, but I wasn’t sure it was working. “You didn’t know he had a thing for virgins, did you?” She barked out a laugh. “Which is the reason he’s suddenly interested in you.” She frowned dramatically, acting sad. “You’re a short-term goal for him. I’m his long-term. He already asked me to homecoming. So, he obviously wasn’t planning on you sticking around.” My chest clenched at her words, but I tried desperately to hide the hurt in my eyes. I didn’t know if she was telling the truth, but I knew they were running together for homecoming queen and king. So, it wouldn’t be hard to believe they were going together as a couple. “So do us all a favor and fuck him. Get it over with so he can move on, and you can stop making a fool out of yourself prancing around the school in his jacket like anyone here actually believes you are his girl.”

Maddy knew she was getting to me; it was written all over her face. I had no response to anything she said. I had no idea if she was telling the truth or not. So, I did the only thing I

could and spun away from them, storming towards Maddox's truck.

I stood silently staring into space, waiting for Maddox to come out, replaying everything Maddy said repeatedly. I didn't want to let anything she said bother me, but it did. Still, Maddox deserved the right to defend himself, to tell me his truth. This new fear, thanks to Maddy, was that he wasn't being honest with me even though I had no reason to believe he wasn't.

SEVENTEEN

MADDOX

Standing around the pool deck, I couldn't take my eyes off Addy, who was still wearing my letterman's jacket. If you'd told me a week ago that I would be attracted to Addy, I would have laughed, and yet here I was, watching her laugh with Brooks and Bailey as flashbacks of what happened in my truck before the game came flooding back.

"Did you hear me, Maddox?" Maddy asked, snapping my attention back to her.

"Yes, Maddy," I lied. I hadn't heard a word she'd said, and I didn't care to either. "I have to go." I was ready to leave and spend some one-on-one time with Addy. I was tired of sharing her.

"Mad Dog," Brooks chanted when I stepped into their circle, throwing a possessive arm across Addy's shoulder.

"We are heading out," I said to Brooks.

"What?" he scowled. "The party's just starting." He handed Addy a red solo cup. "Try this." He'd been feeding her drinks to try all night after finding out she'd never had an alcoholic beverage before.

"We are headed back to my place," I said, watching Addy take a sip of the drink and turn up her nose like it smelled bad.

"Man," Brooks smiled, slapping me on the back, "y'all go upstairs, pound it out, and then come back to the party." He was drunk. He didn't usually talk like that.

“Yeah, Maddox,” Addy slurred. “Why don’t you take me upstairs, pop my cherry, and get it over with.” My eyes blinked wide, flashing from Addy to Brooks and back to Addy. What the fuck was up with her tonight?

“I think you’ve had enough,” I snatched her cup out of her hand and dropped it on the ground. I had no idea what was going on with her. “We’re leaving.” I offered a tight smile before wrapping an arm around Addy’s waist and practically carrying her out. She’d been acting off all night, hell, all day. I thought we’d squashed everything before the game, but she’d only gotten weirder after.

“What was that about?” I asked once we were in the privacy of my truck. She didn’t answer. “Addy?”

“Do you have a book of virgins?” she snapped. A laugh started to bubble up at the pure ridiculousness of the question, but I choked on it when I realized she was dead serious.

“Addy,” I said, trying to keep a straight face. “Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds?”

“That’s not a denial,” she accused.

“No,” I snapped. “I don’t have a book of virgins or any other sexual escapades.”

“Do you have a thing for virgins?”

“What?” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Who told you this?” She shrugged. I didn’t even know where to start. “Addy, I’m not into you because you’re a virgin. I couldn’t even tell you how many girls that I’ve slept with were virgins except one, and that’s because we lost our virginity to each other.” She visibly relaxed. “Addy.” I reached for her hand, pulling it to me. “I like you, and it has nothing to do with you being a virgin.”

“I’m sorry.” She sighed.

“Addy, don’t let your insecurities ruin a good thing,” I said, treading carefully. “You have to trust me if this is going to work.”

“Are you going to homecoming with Maddy?”

I pressed my lips into a thin, tight line. I'd forgotten about homecoming. Of course, it wouldn't matter by then. Scout's week was before homecoming, and once I sent the pictures out, Addy wouldn't have anything to do with me anymore.

"I never officially agreed to go with her," I said. "But we are running together, so I guess it was probably implied that I was going with her." I shoved my hand through my hair, pushing it out of my face. "I'm not going with her," I lied. I didn't want to go with Maddy, but I knew I would end up going with her, and we would win king and queen.

"I trust you," she whispered, and something in my chest clenched at her words.

"Let's get you home," I said as the truck roared to life.

Somewhere between the party and Addy's house, she passed out. "Addy," I said, laying a hand on her hip, cocked up against the truck's center console. Her head, propped up on the window, turned as she half opened her eyes. "We are at your house." I parked in the street so I didn't wake anyone at home. She slowly sat up, and I hopped out of the truck, running around to open the door and help her out, quickly realizing she wasn't going to make it into the house by herself. "Is your bedroom window unlocked?"

"We can go in through the front door," she slurred. "My mom hasn't been home for a week, and I don't expect her back anytime soon."

"Where did she go?" I led her up the driveway.

"Who knows?" she muttered. "She probably found a new boyfriend, and she doesn't want him to know she has a kid, so..." She trailed off, not finishing her sentence. Not that I needed her to. I understood where the story was going. Addy wasn't typically this open about her personal life. I usually had to pull everything out of her. I blamed the alcohol.

Pushing through the front door, I searched in complete darkness for a light switch, feeling around the walls with one hand and my other holding Addy up.

“Where’s the light?” I muttered at the same time my hand swept across the switch. I flipped the switch up, and nothing happened. “Shit.” Pulling out my phone, I hit the flashlight and used it to light a path to the living room, where I dropped Addy on the couch before searching for a different light. I tried another one. Nothing. I tried another one. Still nothing. “Addy, I think your power is out.” I slid the curtains to the side, noticing all the neighbors still had power and it was only Addy’s house that didn’t.

“It’s complicated,” Addy slurred.

“What’s complicated?” I asked. “Why don’t you have power?”

“Because I had to make a choice this month,” she said, pushing herself to a sitting position on the couch. “Rent or electric.”

“*You* had to make a choice?”

“My mom is a non-functioning alcoholic. She doesn’t work,” she said. “I work at the diner to pay the bills here, and I didn’t make enough to pay both the rent and the electric.” She sank back into the couch. “I figured a roof with no electric was better than electric with no roof.” I nodded, letting her words sink in.

“Come on,” I said. “You’re staying at my place tonight. We can figure the rest of this out in the morning.”

EIGHTEEN

ADDISON

Days turned into weeks, and I couldn't say I'd ever been happier. The insecurities that kept me hidden for many years slowly started disappearing.

Maddox made me feel special, even beautiful.

I stopped wearing the giant sweatshirt, which was permanently replaced with Maddox's letterman jacket, but I wasn't afraid to take it off anymore, even if it was only in private with Maddox. Baby steps. Maddox made it clear he was attracted to all of me, not just my body or my virginity.

The morning of my first-ever hangover, I made the decision to trust Maddox. I had no reason not to. I decided not to let Maddy and her pack of mean girls ruin this for me like I'd let them do with so many other things. I chose not to hide anymore.

I'd still try my best to avoid them because of how ruthless they could be, but when I couldn't, I'd offer a polite smile, shove in my headphones, and ignore them and their relentless attempts to break us up.

There was no point in arguing with any of them. I had what Maddy wanted, and she would never give that fight up. Not to me, anyway. Her giving Maddox over to the nobody dork was a slap in the face to Maddy, and she took it personally.

"How about I order out for dinner tonight?" Maddox said, looking through his fridge.

Maddox and I had come back to his place to study for his upcoming math test. If he didn't pass it, he wouldn't play next week during Scouts Week; if he couldn't play, he would lose his last opportunity for a scholarship.

"I'm not really hungry," I said, shoving my books in my bag.

"Are you leaving?" His brows pinched together, closing the fridge door and straightening to his full height. My gaze raked over his half-naked body. God, he was hot. I bit down on my bottom lip to keep from drooling.

"Uh, yeah," I mumbled, focusing my gaze down on my bag so I could form a coherent thought. "I should probably get home. I have some things I need to take care of." I didn't have anything to take care of, but I'd spent almost every night for a week with Maddox, and I didn't want him to get tired of me. Plus, I probably needed to check on my mom.

My mom had a new boyfriend, who had turned the power back on for us. He didn't seem as creepy as most of the guys she brought home, but Maddox didn't like him and didn't want me to stay there when Ben was there. But if this guy was normal, he wouldn't last long. My mom's toxic relationship with alcohol would ruin it quicker than it started because ordinary people don't want all the baggage that comes with alcoholism, and I couldn't blame them.

"How about I take you home," he said, stopping in front of me. "You take care of whatever you need to take care of, and then I bring you back here."

"Maddox." I cupped the side of his face. "I have to go home sometimes."

"Are you tired of me?" He leaned in and brushed his lips across mine.

"No." I laughed, and I meant it. I could spend every waking minute with him and never get tired of him. "I don't want you to get tired of me, though."

"I could never get tired of being around you." He smiled, grabbing my hips and pulling me into him. "One more night,

and then I'll take you home tomorrow if you want.”

“Deal.” I sighed and dropped my bag down on the couch. “Don't forget I'm going with Karly after your practice tomorrow.” He nodded. The corners of his mouth turned up into a devilish smile. The kind of smile that screamed I'm up to no good with a look that made my heart skip a beat.

A look that said we probably weren't leaving to go to my house.

Maddox's fingers curled into my hips, pulling me against him as he led me across the room and into his bedroom. The room was dark, and he didn't bother to turn on the light. If there had been any confusion about the look in his eyes before, it was gone now. Swallowing hard, my head spun as the back of my legs hit his bed.

My mind raced. Was I ready for this?

I was.

I wanted him.

Sliding my hands from his waist, I searched for the button to his jeans, flicking it open when I found it and then shoving his zipper down. I had no idea what I was doing, but I hoped this gesture let him know how far I wanted to go tonight. The sound of his pants hitting the ground echoed through the silent room.

Grabbing the hem of my shirt, his eyes locked on mine, searching for any sign that I didn't want this. He wouldn't find it. He pulled my shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor before reaching back and doing the same to my bra.

Sweeping his tongue across his bottom lip, his hungry stare raked over my bare chest, and I didn't flinch. I didn't try to hide. The look in his eyes said he liked what he saw.

His lips captured mine as his arm slid around my waist, lifting me up. Wrapping my legs around him, he climbed onto the bed, pressing his body weight into me as his hips ground against mine. His tongue thrust through my parted lips as I moaned at the feeling of his thick erection pressing hard

against my core each time his hips ground a little harder, hitting my clit with each movement.

Pulling out of the kiss, he stood, tugging down my pants and panties and dropping them to the floor. A rush of adrenaline surged through me as he climbed back on top of me. Both fear and excitement twisted together, sitting in the pit of my stomach. I'd never wanted anything as badly as I wanted him right now.

“Are you sure?” he whispered against my lips.

“Yes,” I breathed. His body weight lifted off me, and I was not sure what he was doing until I heard foil tearing. My pulse pounded in my ears. We were really going to do this. My heart tightened at the thought that tomorrow would be different, and I didn't know whether it would be a good-different or a bad-different. I guessed that would depend on Maddox.

He twisted his hips and settled himself back between my legs as he hovered over me. Stroking his thick erection through my slick flesh, I sucked in a breath as he positioned himself at my entrance, preparing myself for the invasion.

Still holding my breath, Maddox inched inside me, stopping to allow me time to adjust with each movement. My eyes squeezed shut as I sucked in a breath at the stinging pain, and he stilled. A strangled groan escaped his lips as he steadied himself, his fist balled into the sheets beside my head.

“Are you okay?” he breathed.

I'd overheard lots of girls talk over the years about losing their virginity and how it gets better after the first time. I needed to push through the pain and get this first time over with, so the next time would be better.

“Yes,” I whispered, bucking my hips up, grinding him deeper in me. He grunted as his head fell against my shoulder. “I'm ready.” That was all he needed to hear. He pulled out and drove himself deeper; this time, there was no gentleness. I bit down hard on my lip as pain surged through my body, but slowly, with each thrust, the pain subsided.

“Fuck,” he groaned as he ground his hips against me. I thrust my hips forward, ready to match his pace, when he paused. His head snapped up. The faint sound of something motorized sounded from below us. “Fuck, it’s my mom.” It was the garage door opening. We both jumped up, scrambling to find our clothes.

By the time his mom pounded up the stairs, we were sitting at the bar staring at our books like we weren’t just having sex. Well, except for the flush of embarrassment covering my face.

NINETEEN

ADDISON

Sitting on the bench on the 50-yard line, I watched Maddox on the field, thankful Maddy's entire squad had detention, so they weren't here to torment me. Practice was over, and Maddox stood on the opposite side of the field with Asher.

Asher leaned into Maddox, talking through clenched teeth. Their body language was tense, which said they were arguing. They were too far for me to hear, but this wasn't normal behavior for the two. They usually celebrated and goofed off after a good practice, but Maddox had seemed off today. He wasn't his normal flirty, playful self, and I wasn't sure if it was because of last night or something else.

Maddox disagreed with whatever Asher said with his fist clenched at his side. They were definitely arguing about something. Maddox's gaze flashed to me, and Asher's followed. Were they arguing about me? I huffed out a laugh because that wasn't possible. The three of us had nothing in common for them to fight about.

This wasn't the time for either of them to be arguing. Scouts' week was next week, and all athletes needed to be physically and mentally ready. If the most minor thing threw them off, they could lose the opportunity for a full ride to the college of their choice. They both needed to squash whatever this tiff was.

The two parted ways, both heaving with anger, but by the time Maddox stopped in front of me, his anger was gone like nothing had ever happened.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as he leaned forward, grabbing a bottle of water.

“Yeah,” he said. “Why?”

“You and Asher seemed upset,” I said, handing him a white towel.

“It’s nothing,” he panted, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

He released a heavy sigh. “Asher and I made a deal a few weeks ago,” he smiled, “and I don’t think I can follow through with it anymore.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated,” he said, “but I don’t think it’s in anyone’s best interest anymore.”

“Is it about football?”

“Yes, Addy.” He laughed. “It’s about football.”

I was relieved that whatever was causing the rift between the friends wasn’t about me. I wanted to know what, but he didn’t seem to want to tell me, so I dropped it. I trusted him. He would tell me when he wanted to.

“Well, you guys better settle it before next week,” I teased.

“It’s settled.” He smiled. “Asher and I are good.”

“Good.”

“I’m going to hit the shower,” he said. “You coming back to my place tonight? My mom is gone with her boyfriend, and I would really like to make last night up to you.” I almost laughed at the memory of frantically throwing on clothes and tripping over each other to get out of the room. His mom invited us to the main house to eat, and she’d kept us over there pretty much all night. She’d told me he’d never brought a girl back to the apartment before, but he’d only introduced me as his tutor, not his girlfriend.

“I can’t.” I smiled. “I’m meeting Karly.” I needed to talk all this out with someone, or my mind was going to explode. I held up my wrist to check my watch. “Actually, I gotta go. I’m meeting her in just a few.”

“Call me when you get home,” he said before jogging toward the locker room.

I strolled toward the front of the school with my head in the clouds, almost completely oblivious to my surroundings. Today was club day, and mixed with after-school sports, the school’s campus was packed.

I made it to the sidewalk that led to the student parking lot a little early. Karly asked me to meet her here, and we’d walk to her car together. I was excited to catch up with Karly. We hadn’t exchanged more than a few words in person since she found out she was pregnant.

“Damn, Addy,” Dash said, walking behind me. His eyes swept over my body, making me feel exposed and uncomfortably vulnerable. I’d never spoken one word to Dash in all my years of school, and we’d been in the same school since Kindergarten. “We didn’t know you were hiding all that under there.” He pulled at Maddox’s jacket, and I swatted at his hand. “Now we all see why you’re wearing Mad Dog’s jacket.”

“Don’t touch me.” I sneered, wrapping Maddox’s jacket tighter around me.

“Don’t worry, I can wait my turn.” He smirked. “You can wear my jacket next, though.” What was he talking about? My gaze scanned the parking lot. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on me. What was going on?

TWENTY

ADDISON

I spun in a circle as crowds of my classmates gathered around me.

“Addy,” Karly yelled, charging toward me. Chaz followed closely behind her.

“What is going on?” I snapped. “Why is everyone acting so...”

“Addy,” Karly panted, cutting me off. She lifted her phone, and playing on the screen was the video I’d sent to Maddox of me topless. My hand jerked up, shoving her phone down.

“Where did you get that?” I whisper-hissed, but I already knew the answer. Only one person had that video. Only one person could have sent it.

“It came from Maddox’s number,” Karly said.

“We all got it,” Chaz said. “I think the whole school did.” We all looked around at all the pointed stares and whispers directed at me. My chest tightened as I struggled to catch my breath.

How could he? I trusted him.

I stood paralyzed, my heart shattering into a million little pieces, but I couldn’t fall apart. Not here, not in front of everyone.

“Addy,” Maddox’s voice echoed from a distance. He was still wearing his practice gear. I swallowed hard as panic set in. I didn’t want to talk to him. I searched for a place to run somewhere hide.

“Go,” Karly said, pushing me.

“We’ll block him,” Chaz said.

I took off running, my chest burned, and tears stung the back of my eyes.

“Addy,” Maddox yelled from behind me. “Stop, please.” I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop, not for him. I found a corner of the school, tucking myself into the back walkway that was rarely used so he couldn’t see me when he drove by. I would hide here until the campus cleared out.

Pressing my back against the red brick, I fought to catch my breath and blinked back the tears threatening to fall.

“I tried to warn you.” Maddy smirked. Oh, for fuck’s sake. Of course, the hallway I was hiding in was the back walkway that was only ever used by students released from detention.

“Fuck off, Maddy,” I hissed. I wasn’t in the mood. Not today, not now.

“You were nothing but a bet between him and Asher.” She laughed. I let her words sink in. A bet between him and Asher.

They were arguing about me.

My head started to spin as my pulse thrummed in my ears, drowning out the mean girls cackling around me. My chest tightened, and my stomach churned as hurt turned to anger. I was nothing to him—just a bet.

“She thought she was special.” Maddy laughed.

I’d had enough of Madison Taylor. I’d had enough of all of them. Rearing my clenched fist back, I slammed it forward into Maddy’s nose. The crunching under my blow echoed over their sudden silence as the blood splatter projected all over me and anyone close to her.

“What the fuck?” Maddy cried out, grabbing her gushing nose.

“I said fuck off,” I hissed before spinning to walk away. Looking down, I sucked in a breath at the sight of Maddy’s blood splattered on Maddox’s jacket.

“You know what,” I said, slipping out of the jacket and tossing it to Maddy, who let go of her nose to catch the jacket. “You want him; you can have him. This is yours.”

“Addy,” Karly yelled from Chaz’s truck window. She shoved the door open when she saw me storming toward the truck. “Get in.”

“Omigod,” Karly squealed. “What happened?” She opened the center console and pulled out napkins. “Is that your blood?”

“No,” I said dryly. I reached out, taking the napkins from her. “I punched Maddy in the nose.”

“Bout time.” Chaz smiled, making eye contact through the rearview mirror. “She’s had that coming for a long time.”

“Maddox is texting me,” Karly said, staring at her phone.

As I stared forward, a sense of numbness washed over me. I suddenly couldn’t feel anything: no pain, no anger, nothing.

“Tell him I never want to see him or talk to him again,” I said. There was no anger in my voice. No tears behind my words. I never wanted to see him again, and I meant it. “Then block him.” She nodded.

“What are you going to do?” Chaz asked. “You’ll see him at school tomorrow.”

I was going to do what I should have done to begin with this year, but I’d hoped for a chance for just one good year of high school. One where I get to go to the dances and football games. One where I was just a normal teenage girl. But I wasn’t normal. I was a dork.

“I’m going to call the school and let them know I would like to graduate early.” My gaze blinked to stare out the window. “Maybe I can start college in the spring.”

TWENTY-ONE

ADDISON

“All clear,” Karly whispered, peeking her head out the double doors of the entrance of the school. “Chaz is keeping watch in the main hall.” I didn’t want to be here today, but the school was forcing me to come in and withdraw to get my transcripts to send to college.

Yesterday morning, I hadn’t made up my mind about which college I was going to. By that afternoon, I knew I wanted to get as far away from this town and Maddox as I could, so I contacted Florida Southern University, which was over a thousand miles away. The academic advisor said I could start early in a couple of fast-track classes if I hurried. So, tomorrow, I would get on a bus to Florida, and I hoped never to return to this town or see Maddox Parker again.

“Are you okay?” Karly asked as we walked from the front entrance to the main office. I wasn’t okay. Not even close. But right now, I couldn’t talk about it. I couldn’t put my actual feelings into words. So, I forced a smile and nodded.

“I’m leaving for Florida tomorrow morning.”

“Shit,” Karly muttered, her gaze darting around the empty hallway. Something caught my attention at the end of the hallway. It was Chaz. “Someone is coming.”

Chaz waved his hands; his face screamed abort mission, and I knew with every ounce of my being that Maddox Parker was about to round that corner. I froze, my chest tightening as panic surged through me. “Get in here.” Karly shoved me hard through the bathroom door, letting it close behind me. I blew

out a breath as my heart pounded in my chest. Had he seen me?

“Karly,” Maddox’s voice boomed from across the hallway. I was right; it was him. I leaned against the cold bathroom door, straining to listen.

“Go away, Maddox,” she snapped.

“Karly, please,” Maddox begged. I couldn’t see what was happening, but I imagined Karly was silently telling him to fuck off.

“You should go, Maddox,” Chaz warned. “What you did was fucked up.”

“Look, I did fuck up,” Maddox said. “I know I did, but it’s not what you think. Please, I need to talk to Addy, and she’s not at school today.”

“She’s not coming back,” Karly said. “And even if she was, she never wants to talk to you again. You should move on.”

“Could you give her this?” Maddox asked. *Give me what?* Not being able to see was making me crazy.

“No,” Karly snapped.

“Please,” he begged. “Just give it to her. If she doesn’t want to read it, fine, but please give it to her.” A note? A book? What was it?

“Fine,” Karly said with a sigh. “But under one condition.”

“Anything,” Maddox said.

“I give her this, and you never contact her again,” Karly demanded. “You don’t go to her house. You don’t try to find her number. You leave her alone.”

“Okay,” he said. “Thank you.”

Everything went silent for several minutes before Karly ushered me out of the bathroom.

“He’s gone.” She smiled. My gaze trailed down to the white envelope in her hand. “He wanted me to give this to

you.” She raised her arm, holding out the envelope. I didn’t take it. I wasn’t sure I could.

“Just throw it away,” I finally said after several long seconds.

“Addy,” Karly said, her tone softer than it had been all morning. My eyes locked with hers. “I told him I would give this to you, and in exchange, he would never bother you again.” She shook the envelope. “So, I’m giving it to you. If you want to read it later, you can. If you want to throw it away, that’s your choice. If you want to shove it away somewhere to maybe read someday down the road, that’s up to you. But it should be you who does it.”

She was right. This letter was a form of closure, and it was my decision how I would close this chapter of my life. Swallowing hard, I reached out, taking the letter from her. My gaze was fixed on the white envelope that said ‘Addy’ in Maddox’s handwriting.

“You ready?” Karly asked. I nodded, shoving the envelope deep into my bag.

“Let’s get this over with,” I muttered.

TWENTY-TWO

ADDISON

Four years later.

Tapping my pen on my old wooden desk, I scanned this week's tutoring schedule for errors before posting it. A grin spread across my face when I realized, for the first time in a long time, I didn't have to write *his* name on the schedule.

Maddox fired the last tutor available to him last week, and now he was off the schedule.

I'd like to say that I hadn't given him a second thought in the last four years, but that would be a lie. The pain from what happened was still raw, even though I'd buried it deep. I might have been able to forget him by now and move on past all the pain, but for some reason, out of all the schools in America, Maddox chose Florida Southern University to attend. Now I had to see him occasionally, and every time I did, it brought back all the hurt and pain he'd caused.

He didn't choose this school because of me. I knew that because he didn't know where I went. In fact, I passed him on campus several times, and he'd not once recognized me. Not that we'd exactly made eye contact, and I did go out of my way to avoid being noticed.

I'd changed over the years. I no longer wore glasses or giant clothing, my dark hair was now blonde and longer, I was thinner and finally filled out in my chest area, and the Florida sun gave my pale skin a perfect summer glow. I'd learned how to do my makeup and felt more confident in my appearance.

Part of me was thankful he didn't recognize me, but the other part hated him for it. I hated that I'd loved him, and now he didn't even know who I was when I passed him in the halls.

A soft tap sounded from the doorway of my small office, pulling me out of my thoughts. My gaze flicked up, and my mouth curved into a smile at the sight of Chance Brown, aka Coach Brown. Not only was he the head coach, but he was also the director of the tutoring center and he was kind of my boyfriend even though we had to keep everything hush-hush because I was a student, and that kind of thing was frowned upon.

Chance was one of those coaches that woman came to the game to see. They didn't watch the game. They watched him, and I couldn't blame them. He was tall and lean with dark hair and eyes. His skin was tanned from all the time he spent on the football field, and he had recently grown a beard that only added to my attraction for him.

"Hey." I smiled, but it quickly faded when I saw he wasn't smiling back. His dark eyes were full of stress. His strong jawline flexed. It was football season, and this was what he looked like during the season. "Is everything okay?"

"Not exactly," he said, sinking into the chair across from my desk. "I kind of need a favor, and I hate to ask, but at this point, I'm desperate."

"Okay," I said, drawing out the word. He should know by now that I would do anything for him.

"I need you to tutor Maddox Parker."

Well, anything but that. Chance didn't know what happened between Maddox and me, and I hoped never to have to tell him. I'd refused to tutor Maddox on several occasions, blaming it on my full schedule or the fact that I wasn't wasting my time on athletes who didn't want to help themselves, and Maddox didn't want to help himself.

Maddox wasn't the same person I knew in high school, or at least the person I thought I knew. He was wild and reckless now. He was passing the time to go pro and, in the process,

letting everyone around him down, and he didn't seem to care.

"I'm sorry, Chance," I apologized. "I can't. My schedule is full right now."

"You're the head of the athletic tutoring department," he reminded me. A job he'd personally promoted me to. "Change the schedule around."

"I'm not going to do that." I sighed. "I have too many athletes who want to work hard to raise their grades, and Maddox doesn't."

"Addison," he emphasized my name, leaning forward. "I'm desperate. Maddox is my one chance of winning this season, and I need this win. If he doesn't bring up his grades, he's out. He'll lose his scholarship, and I'll lose my one chance at a championship." I didn't see a problem with any of this. He'd go pro if he lost his scholarship, and I wouldn't have to see him up close ever again. Sounded like a win for me. Chance was being dramatic. If Maddox left, he'd find another player to replace him who he wouldn't have to stress over constantly.

"Chance," I started.

"Please, Addison," he pleaded. "I will double your pay and your vacation and sick time." *Wait, he can do that?*

Sucking in a deep breath, I blew out a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry, Chance," I said, shaking my head. "But I can't tutor Maddox, but I will find him the best tutor whose sole focus will be to tutor Maddox."

"There is no one else." He sighed, falling back against the chair.

"Trust me." I smiled. "I will find someone for him." I had no idea where I would find another tutor for him, but I would if it meant that I didn't have to do it.

"You'll let me know who you find by tomorrow?" I nodded. "Okay." He pushed out of the chair.

"You coming over tonight?" I whispered.

“I can’t,” he said. “I have some deadlines I have to meet, and I haven’t even started. Rain check?” I nodded, trying not to let my disappointment show. “I gotta go. I’ll call you.”

I glanced at the clock. “Shit,” I muttered. I had class in ten minutes on the opposite end of the campus. Grabbing my book and bag, I stormed out the door and headed for class.

TWENTY-THREE

ADDISON

Pushing through my office door, I gasped, stumbling backward and tossing my things into the air. Asher Owens was lounging back with his feet propped on my old wooden desk.

I wasn't fortunate enough to only get one of my high school mortal enemies, but three, Maddox, Asher, and Maddy, all followed me to FSU. I rarely saw Maddy or Maddox, but Asher was a constant pain in my ass.

"What are you doing here?" I snapped, my lip curled into a snarl. I hated Asher more than Maddox. I wasn't entirely sure why, but I did, and it probably had something to do with the cocky smirk plastered across his face.

"Good to see you too, Addy," he feigned hurt, clutching his chest. Not only had I asked him to stay away from me a million times, but I'd explained to him hundreds of times that I didn't go by Addy anymore.

"It's Addison," I hissed, slapping his expensive shoes off my desk. "What do you want, Asher?"

"Coach said you refused to tutor Maddox."

"Yeah, so?" I shrugged. "I won't tutor you either." I tilted my head, flashing an arrogant smile.

"Look, *Addy*." He smirked, leaning forward, resting his arms on the desk, and tapping his fingers together.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from telling him off.

"I didn't want to have to do this, but it looks like I have no choice." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, then fixed his

gaze on the screen.

“I don’t have time for your games today, Asher,” I snapped. “You should go.” I pointed towards the door.

“Maddox is failing most of his classes,” he continued, ignoring my demands. “And if he gets kicked out, the season will go to shit because our second-string quarterback fucking sucks, and that affects me.” I rolled my eyes. Asher was one of the most selfish people I’d ever met. He literally thought the world revolved around him.

“I don’t know what any of this has to do with me,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and cocking my hip out.

“See, that’s exactly what it has to do with—you,” he said, his gaze locking on mine. “Maddox can’t fail because we will start losing, and I’m not a loser. You are going to tutor him.” He was the epitome of the word loser.

“No, I’m not!”

“Okay.” He shrugged, clicking something on his phone. “Your choice.” He turned the phone to face me. My ears rang, and my heart pounded as a video of me sucking Maddox’s dick in his truck played on the screen. I fought hard not to show any emotion. My chest tightened as I struggled not to break down. I didn’t even know he’d taken a video.

“It would be a shame for the whole school to see this.” He smirked. The whole school. That was about 45,000 students. “And staff,” he added. “We wouldn’t want to leave out Coach, would we?”

“What do you want?” I swatted the phone out of my face.

“You want this not to go viral?” I didn’t answer because we both knew I didn’t. “You clear your schedule for Maddox. You are on call for him anytime, and you travel with him. You make sure he not only passes his class but also makes the dean’s list.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I muttered. “Plus, I have my own classes.”

“Figure it out.” He shrugged. “Or the first person I send it to is Coach.” I didn’t want Chance or anyone else to see that video.

“Okay.” I sighed.

“I knew you’d see it my way.” He smiled. “Call coach and let him know you’ve changed your mind.” He stepped out from behind my desk. “Hey, you’ll get a raise out of it too.”

“If I do this,” I said, stopping him before he left. “The video gets deleted.”

“No.” He laughed, shaking his head, and disappeared out the door.

Falling into my chair, I felt physically sick. My stomach churned at the thought of going through what I did in high school again. I didn’t want to deal with Maddox, but even more than that, I didn’t want anyone to see that video.

Maybe I would get lucky, and Maddox wouldn’t realize who I was until this was all over.

TWENTY-FOUR

ADDISON

Staring down at the outdated off-white office phone on my desk, I gritted my teeth. Four years ago, I left to get away from this exact situation, and now, this time, I couldn't run. I could transfer, but my life was established here, and I wouldn't let them do that to me again. That video going viral could ruin my future because once it was out on the World Wide Web there was no containing it. Who would want to hire a porn star?

Wrapping my fingers around the phone, I squeezed the handle tightly as I placed it against my ear before hitting Chance's number.

"Hey," he said, picking up after the first ring. "I was just thinking about you." He sounded like he was in a better mood. I wished I could say the same for myself.

"All good, I hope," I said, trying to match his energy.

"Always," he said. "You have good news for me, I hope?"

"Yeah." I forced a smile even though he couldn't see it. "I thought about it and decided to clear my schedule to work with Maddox."

"That's great, Addison," he said, not sounding surprised. He knew I'd do anything for him, so this probably wasn't a shock. "When can you start?"

"When do you need me to start?"

"We have an away game this week. I assume you'll be traveling with us?"

“Yep,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Whatever Maddox needs, I’m here.” My stomach churned, and my fists clenched as the words rolled out.

“Perfect.” I could hear his smile through the phone. “Bus leaves at noon. Don’t be late.”

“See you tomorrow,” I said before slamming the phone against the base hard enough to send pieces of it flying across the room. “Shit.” I dropped my face into my hands.

“Addison,” a soft voice called from the doorway. I blinked up to see Kelsey Peterson, one of our newest tutors, standing in the doorway. I forced a smile because I was afraid I might cry if I opened my mouth. “Ashlyn called out sick, and she had an appointment now. We are all booked. Can you take her?”

“Yes.” I nodded, still forcing a smile. “Send her my way when she gets here.”

“She’s here.” Kelsey smiled, waving the girl in, and when Maddy Taylor walked through my office door, I thought my head might explode, but before I could protest, Kelsey was gone.

“I can’t do this with you today, Maddy,” I muttered, rubbing my forehead. “You’ll have to reschedule.” I turned to grab my office phone to call Kelsey back before remembering it was broken. “I’ll have Ashlyn contact you once she’s back.”

“Addy,” Maddy begged. “Please.”

“It’s Addison,” I reminded her. Maddy and I had only spoken a handful of times since she started needing tutoring, but it had been enough times for her to remember that I went by Addison now.

“Sorry, Addison, please,” she pleaded. “I need help today, or I will fail my anatomy test in the morning. If I fail, I’ll be benched the next game, which is also tomorrow.” She clenched her books tighter to her chest. “Please!”

Maddy was here on a cheer scholarship; if she failed, she would also lose her scholarship, and I knew how scary that could be, but it also wasn’t my problem.

“I can’t help you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

I shrugged. I’d always been professional when it came to Maddy and tutoring because it was my job, and Maddy had tried to apologize several times for her behavior in high school, but today, I was over all of them—Asher, Maddox, and Maddy.

“Look, I know you don’t owe me anything, and honestly, if I were you, I would tell me to fuck off. But I really need your help, and I wouldn’t ask if you weren’t the only one available.”

Blowing out a heavy sigh, I slumped back in my chair. “I have an hour,” I muttered, pointing to the round table in my office. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, sliding into one of the chairs.

Maddy and I worked on Anatomy I, Chapter 2, Cells and Tissue, for over an hour before I realized what time it was.

“We’ll have to stop here for today.” I smiled. “But I think you’re ready for your test tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Addison.” She collected her things.

“I’ll make sure Ashlyn gets you on her schedule next week.” I pushed out of my chair and walked to my desk. “Good luck tomorrow.”

She smiled, throwing her bag over her shoulder. “I owe you an apology.” My eyes flashed up, locking on hers. “From high school.”

“It’s fine, Maddy,” I forced a smile.

“No, it’s not,” she said. “You didn’t deserve how I treated you, and you definitely didn’t deserve what Maddox did.”

I should have accepted her apology and sent her on her way, but for some reason, I needed this.

“Why?” I asked, straightening to my full height. “Why did you treat me like that?”

“Truthfully?” She sighed. “I don’t know why it started, but when you and Maddox started dating, I was jealous.” She shrugged. “I was young and dumb and thought I deserved Maddox.”

“Why, though?” I asked. “You knew it was all a bet, didn’t you?”

“It may have started a bet,” she said. “But Maddox was different with you. The way he looked at you.”

“It wasn’t real, Maddy.” I huffed out a humorless laugh.

“Maddox...”

“He didn’t care about me,” I interrupted, not wanting to hear whatever bullshit she was about to spew. I’d already come to terms with what I was to Maddox, and I wasn’t going down that road again. “I was no one to him.”

She shook her head. “No, you weren’t.” She shrugged. “Maddox wasn’t the same after you left.”

“How was homecoming?” I smirked, remembering how she told me he was going with her.

“It sucked.” She sighed. “Maddox and I won king and queen, but Maddox didn’t show up to pick me up that night. It all ended up working out for the best, though.” I wasn’t sure what to say to her. I knew that had been important to her, but at the same time, she deserved everything she got. “I’ve grown up a lot over the past few years, and I’m not the same girl I was.” I didn’t know why, but for some reason, I believed her. “I even have a new boyfriend now, and he’s amazing. He’s older and more mature.”

“That’s great, Maddy.” I smiled sincerely.

“I should go,” she said, nodding towards the door. “I’m really sorry, and I hope we can at least be friendly.”

“No reason to dwell on the past,” I smiled, and I meant it. The way Maddy treated me in high school was wrong, but we were also kids then and weren’t anymore. She returned the smile before disappearing out the door.

I wished my encounters with Asher and Maddox would be that easy.

TWENTY-FIVE

ADDISON

Splashing my hands under the icy water, I attempted to wash them, but the only nightclub in town was a shithole and had no soap or paper towels in the bathroom. This was only the second time I'd been there, and it wasn't my favorite place, but I needed a night out, and even though I wasn't much of a drinker, these circumstances called for liquor.

I gave myself a once over in the foggy bathroom mirror, checking my makeup and clothes. I wasn't here to attract men, but I knew there was a possibility that Chance would be here sometime tonight. Even though he had deadlines to meet, he would want to keep an eye on his players who went out partying the night before they left town. Or at least that's what he always told me anyway.

Spinning, I glanced back at my ass before walking out of the restroom. I wanted to make him wish he'd come to my place. I wanted to make him leave here with me tonight.

Scanning the club, I almost immediately spotted Chance on the second floor overlooking the dance floor. With a drink in his hand, he laughed with one of his players, his gaze focused on something on the dance floor. He'd traded in his coaching attire for a pair of dark jeans and a blue tee. His usually slicked-back dark hair was a tousled mess. He was hot, and every girl in the club had their eyes on him.

He hadn't noticed me.

A smile spread across my face as a rush of liquid courage washed over me. I made a pit stop at the bar, throwing back

two shots before making it to the dance floor.

I didn't bother looking up. I knew he'd see me. He couldn't do anything here in a crowd of local college students, but I wanted him to wish he could. I needed him to drag me out of here and fuck me until Maddox had no place in my mind anymore.

The minute my feet hit the dance floor, I let the rhythm of the pounding music flow through me. The two shots hit quickly, mixed with the other three I'd already had, and my body relaxed, making it the perfect amount of loose. Whisper-singing the words, I closed my eyes and let my body move to the music's slow, seductive rhythm.

Three songs later, I fought hard to keep my eyes closed and not look up to search for Chance. Instead, I kept moving my body, swaying my hips to the beat, hoping his eyes were on me. Then, I wasn't alone. Someone was behind me; his large body moved in rhythm with mine as he closed the gap between us. Warmth surrounded me as his large hands curled around my hips, pulling me harder against him as we moved together. My hips ground against his.

Was it Chance? If it was, he was feeling brave tonight. If it wasn't, then he was watching.

The mystery man tangled his fingers into mine, wrapping his arms around me without missing a sway, our bodies flush against each other. His head fell into the nape of my neck, and his accelerated breaths fanned across my sensitive skin—the sweet smell of liquor on his breath. Even though my skin was slick with sweat, chills raged over my body as my already-pounding heart seemed to skip a beat, and my stomach fluttered.

I hadn't felt like this in years. Not since him!

The song changed, and the beat was slower. We moved slower; each sway of our hips was seductive foreplay, creating an ache between my legs; I was desperate for more. It was as if we were alone and not in the middle of hundreds of people on the dance floor of a club.

I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to know if it was Chance. My eyes flashed open, flicking up to where Chance had been before I'd walked onto the floor. My gaze immediately locked with his flat expression.

It wasn't Chance... But he was watching... Along with the entire football team.

My mystery man's hands released mine as they slid over my body, stopping at the small amount of bare skin on my stomach. Sliding under my shirt, he placed his large palm flat against my stomach while his other hand slid over the front of my thigh, gripping the denim fabric painted against my skin right below my V; I let my eyes roll back at the aggressive feeling of his touch. I gasped as his thumb brushed against the denim, covering my panties with every sway of my hips. He smiled against my neck. He knew what he was doing, and I wanted more. I'd almost completely forgotten about Chance.

With his hands still on me, I spun in his arms, and my heart sank when my wide eyes landed on Maddox. He was taller, with more defined muscles and tattoos covering his arms, but other than that, he looked exactly the same. He was still breathtakingly gorgeous, standing in front of me in his jeans and a fitted black tee. A smile spread across his face. He still had that same perfect smile that sucked you in, stealing your breath.

A wave of panic washed over me. Did he recognize me?

I shook my head; no, he didn't. He was trashed, and it was dark. Shoving out of his arms, I bolted for the door.

"Wait," he slurred, reaching for me. I didn't stop, dodging his hands. I picked up my pace, going as fast as I could without running.

Feeling suddenly sober, I pushed through the club's front doors, storming across the dark parking lot. It never crossed my mind that it would be Maddox. I hadn't even seen him there.

"Wait," he slurred again, stumbling behind me. He probably wouldn't remember any of this in the morning. I

hoped he wouldn't remember any of this in the morning.

"Maddox," Chance's voice boomed from behind me. Chance had followed us. I stopped spinning to see him. "You're trashed. Go home."

"Coach," Maddox said, his smile fading like he knew his plans were about to be squashed. "I'm fine."

"Go home, Maddox," Chance warned. "Or your entire team will do burpees at 6 a.m. because of you." I didn't know what a burpee was, but it was obvious he didn't want to be responsible for that.

Maddox's gaze flicked to me, and I dropped my chin, hoping between the darkness, an abundance of alcohol, and hiding my face, he wouldn't recognize me.

Maddox threw up his hands. "Fine."

"Have someone take you home," Chance yelled as he watched Maddox leave before stepping up to me. "That was quite the show you put on out there." Chance laughed, but there was no humor in his tone. He was jealous.

"It wasn't a show," I lied, offering him my most innocent smile. "I was dancing."

"Let's go," he groaned, wrapping his fingers around my upper arm. "I'm taking you home."

"Oh no," I gasped dramatically, using my free hand to press my palm flat against my chest. "Can't do that; someone might see you." I was being melodramatic, but it was hard dating someone you had to hide; having a relationship, you couldn't put labels on because if you did, someone could lose their job. He was my boyfriend only in the privacy of my home. When he left, we were both single.

"Would you shut up?" he growled under his breath, dragging me to his truck. I had become the girl I hated. The loud, annoying drunk girl. "I'm only taking my drunk employee home. No more, no less."

"Whatever you say, Boss." I hiccupped a laugh. He slammed my door and jogged to his side, quickly jumping in.

“Are you going to punish me?” Apparently, I wasn’t as sober as I thought. We’d been dating for two years, and I’d never talked to him like that before, but I’d also never attempted to make anyone jealous either. This whole Maddox situation was making me a crazy person.

He leaned over the center console, twisting his fingers into the front of my shirt and jerking me to him, “I’m going to remind you who you belong to,” he breathed against my lips, and I suddenly forgot all about Maddox.

TWENTY-SIX

ADDISON

When I awoke the next morning, Chance was gone. Even though I'd hoped he wouldn't be, I knew the drill, and this was how it would be as long as I was a student. I didn't like it, but I accepted it.

I was still hungover when I made it just in time to load onto a bus full of cheerleaders. Even though it was the afternoon, I wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone, much less a group of loud, excited cheerleaders.

Shoving my AirPods in my ears, I pulled my hoodie over my head and sank back into the seat, getting comfortable for the long ride.



“ADDISON,” Chance called out, gently shaking me.

“Is she dead?” a girl asked.

“No,” he barked. “Go inside.”

“Addison,” he said again as my eyes eased open. I must have dozed off sometime during the long bus ride. “This is why you shouldn't stay out all night partying.” He smirked, offering me a hand.

“I was home before midnight,” I muttered, taking his hand and letting him pull me up. “Something else kept me up all morning.”

“I hope it was worth it,” he teased, the corners of his mouth curved up.

“It most definitely was,” I smirked. Chance was amazing both in and out of bed, but it always felt like something was missing. Maddox had ruined me. The chemistry Maddox and I had was out of this world, and I knew nothing would ever compare to that. It was all fake, though. I kept telling myself that chemistry would grow once I graduated and we could go public with our relationship, but I didn’t honestly believe that.

“Come on, sleepy head,” he said. “Let’s get you checked in.”

I followed Chance into the hotel lobby, stepping into the check-in line beside him.

“Here’s Maddox’s schedule for this weekend,” he said, holding out a white sheet of paper. “It includes his tutoring times and locations.” I scanned over the paper. “I’ve already given him his copy and a lecture about the importance of bringing up his grades.”

“Great,” I muttered, sounding more sarcastic than I’d intended, but it didn’t seem to faze him.

“The team will go out to dinner tonight.” He smiled. “You are welcome to join us if you’d like.”

“No, thank you.” I forced a polite smile.

“After that, everyone will come back for curfew,” he said, stepping up to the counter. “Maddox will have his first one-hour session then.” I nodded, and his gaze flicked from me to the dark-haired male receptionist standing behind the tall counter. “Room for Addison Wright.”

The receptionist clicked away on his keyboard, his dark brown eyes fixed on his computer screen. “I’m sorry, there’s no reservation under that name.”

“Maybe she put it under the teams’ rooms,” Chance said. “Can you see if there’s an extra room for the team?”

He clicked away, scowling at the screen, “I’m sorry, no rooms are available.”

“Are you sure?” Chance asked, his brows furrowed. The receptionist nodded apologetically. “Okay, can we book a room now?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “All of our rooms are full tonight.”

“Thanks.” He sighed, stepping out of the check-in line. “Something must have gotten confused in communication.” Chance pulled his clipboard up. “You’ll have to share with—” He paused, trailing his finger down the clipboard. Stopping, his eyes flashed up, locking on mine. “Maddox.”

“Are you kidding me?” I huffed out a humorless laugh. “No fucking way. I’ll stay with you.”

“You can’t, Addison,” he whispered, his eyes darting around the room before locking with mine. “You know you can’t.”

“No one will know,” I whispered. “We’ll be super careful.”

“Addison,” he said, his tone firmer. “You can’t...”

I gaped at him. I couldn’t believe my boyfriend was encouraging me to stay in a hotel room with another man.

I couldn’t stay in Maddox’s room. I couldn’t be stuck in such close proximity to him for a whole two nights. My eyes darted around the lobby, desperately looking for a solution; at the same time, the elevator door chimed open, and Maddy stepped out.

“Maddy,” I called out. She stopped searching for who had called her name. “Maddy.” I waved her over when I caught her eye.

“Hey, Coach,” Maddy flashed him a flirtatious smile. “What’s up, Addison?” Her brows furrowed.

“Can I please share your room?” I begged. “They lost my reservation, and the only bed available is in Maddox’s room.” Her eyes went wide.

“Yeah,” she said. “My roommate is out with an injury, so I’m alone anyway.” My entire body relaxed as I blew out a sigh of relief. “Come on. I’ll take you up.”

“Thanks.” I smiled once we were riding the elevator up.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest and narrowing her eyes on me.

“I’m tutoring Maddox,” I muttered, avoiding eye contact.

“What?” she snapped. “Why?”

“Because it’s my job,” I answered. She narrowed her eyes at me. She didn’t believe me.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “There’s no way you would tutor him again willingly. It’s no secret that you’ve refused to tutor him several times.” She was right. I shrugged, hoping she would drop the subject, and thankfully she did.

“Well, I’m sure Maddox will be happy to have you as his tutor again.” Maddy smiled. I rolled my eyes, but she didn’t seem to notice. “You know he’s never said anything about seeing you here on campus.”

“That’s because he doesn’t recognize me,” I muttered. “And I would like to keep it that way for as long as possible.”

“Maybe he hasn’t seen you yet,” she said when the doors chimed open.

“He’s seen me,” I corrected her, following her out of the elevator.

She laughed. “Addison, just because he’s looked your way doesn’t mean he’s truly seen you.” She flashed her key card in front of the lock, which flashed green. “Maddox hasn’t really seen anyone since you left. I know you don’t believe me, or maybe you don’t care, but he was pretty fucked up after you left.” *Here we go again.* “Not that he didn’t deserve it because he did.” I rolled my eyes. I didn’t believe her. If Maddox was

fucked up after I left, it had nothing to do with me. “Who knows, maybe you’ll be able to bring back the old Maddox.”

I scoffed, falling back on the vacant bed and staring up at the white popcorn ceiling. I wasn’t sure how Maddox would react when he did recognize me, but I doubted he would be happy to see me. The old Maddox wasn’t real. He was a figment of our imagination, a scam, a fake. This was the real Maddox, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

TWENTY-SEVEN

ADDISON

Chewing on my lip, I sat at a small table in the lobby, waiting for Maddox. My legs bounced rapidly as I scanned the room, thinking he might not realize who he was meeting, but he was nowhere to be seen.

My heart pounding against my rib cage, I grabbed the schedule and scanned it again for the fifth time tonight, making sure I had the right time and place, and it said the same thing as the last four times I checked. He was late. Thirty minutes late.

I dropped my head to the glass table. A mixture of relief and annoyance that Maddox hadn't bothered to show up washed over me.

"What are you doing down here?" Asher hissed. My head snapped up to see Asher standing shirtless in the lobby. Annoyance covered his facial features. I opened my mouth to answer, but he didn't give me a chance to get a word out. "Where's Maddox?" I shrugged, opening my mouth again, but he cut me off. "You're supposed to keep him in line, Addy."

"I didn't agree to that." I scowled. "I agreed to tutor him, not babysit him, and I can't tutor him if he doesn't show up."

He huffed out a laugh. "I don't think you willingly agreed to any of this, but we both know what the consequences of not doing what I tell you are, don't we?"

I clenched my jaw. "This wasn't part of the deal, Asher."

He laughed, "Deal?" There was no humor in his tone. "There's no deal; either you do what I tell you, or you know

what will happen.” He slapped his palm flat against the glass table and I jumped. “Curfew is in fifteen. We will pay if Coach does bed checks and he’s not there. If I have to pay, you will have to pay.” I swallowed hard.

“Asher,” I said. “How am I supposed to control him?”

“I don’t care,” he muttered. “It’s not my problem.”

He stormed off, disappearing into the stairwell.

I didn’t even know where to start looking for Maddox or what I would do when I found him.

Pushing out of my chair, I froze when my eyes locked on Maddy’s. Had she been there the whole time?

“What are you doing here?” I scowled. My pulse raced. Had she heard Asher?

“What’s going on, Addison?” she asked. “Why is Asher threatening you?”

Mystery solved, she’d definitely heard.

“He’s not,” I lied.

“You’re lying,” she challenged me. “I heard everything.”

Fuck! I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Well, if you heard everything, then you know I don’t have time to explain,” I groaned. “I need to find Maddox, like now.”

Sucking in a deep breath, she looked down the hall and then back at me before saying, “I’ll help, but you’re going to tell me what’s going on.”

“I have no idea where he would be.” I shrugged. “I don’t know where to start.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.” Maddy nodded toward the front entrance, and I whipped around to see Maddox stumbling through the double sliding glass doors. “He’s trashed,” Maddy said. “Let’s get him upstairs before Coach sees him.” I nodded.

“Hey, Maddox.” Maddy smiled. Maddox’s glazed-over eyes flashed up to see her.

“Fuck off, Maddy,” Maddox groaned, stumbling forward.

“Wish I could,” she muttered, pulling one of his arms over his shoulders.

“We need to get you to your room before Coach Brown does room checks,” I said. “So, move quick.” He stumbled forward, almost bringing himself and Maddy down, but I jumped in, grabbing his other arm to help steady him.

“Do I know you?” he slurred.

“Nope.”

“You look familiar,” he continued. Maddy laughed, and my eyes snapped to hers, widening in a warning. Her smile dropped as she cleared the laugh out of her throat.

“Sorry,” she mouthed as we carried Maddox towards the elevator.

“You’re hot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Save it, Casanova,” I muttered. “I’m not interested.”

“That’s what they all say,” he said. “But they’re all interested.” He was just as confident and cocky as I remembered.

We managed to get him to his room and bed before bed checks.

“I have to go. Coach can’t catch me in this room,” she whispered. “He’ll flip.”

I wished I could say the same, but apparently, Chance didn’t care if I shared a room with Maddox.

“I’m going to stay and make sure Romeo doesn’t get any wild ideas to leave,” I whispered. “I’ll try to be quiet when I come in.”

“I won’t be back to the room tonight.” She smirked. “I have plans after room checks.” She opened the door. “I’ll be back before morning, though.”

“Have fun.” I smiled. She closed the door, and I spun to see Maddox passed out. His large frame covered most of the bed. Swallowing hard, I shoved back the memories of us threatening to push through. I wasn’t going to do this. Those memories weren’t real.

Sliding down the wall to the floor, I decided to sit and wait for Coach to do room checks, and then I’d leave.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ADDISON

Peeling my eyes open, I winced at the harsh light radiating through the large window directly across from me. Before my eyes fully adjusted to the bright sunlight beaming in, I jumped up, realizing where I was. I'd never left Maddox's room last night. A flood of panic surged over me as I searched the room. Maddox's bed was empty. The room was empty.

My gaze flashed to the bathroom door to my right when it creaked open. My mouth parted as heat radiated through my chest and face when Maddox strolled through the open doorway in nothing but a white towel. A white towel that sat dangerously low on his hips. My breath caught in my throat as my gaze traveled over every perfect part of his tatted torso down to the very defined v that led to his... I shook my head. It didn't matter what it led to. I wasn't interested. I would never go down that road again.

"Good, you're up," Maddox said, not bothering to look at me. "Hiring a babysitter is a whole new level of neurotic for Coach." He leaned forward, digging through his suitcase. The muscles in his back flexed as he moved.

"Not a babysitter," I muttered, pulling up my black hoodie. "I'm your tutor." I didn't want him to recognize me.

He twisted to face me, and I froze, my entire body tensing.

"Do you always sleep on your students' hotel room floor?" he asked. Swallowing hard, I shook my head. I started to avert my gaze to prevent him from recognizing me, but he wasn't really looking at me. Maddy was right. Even though his eyes

were on me, he didn't see me. He was looking straight through me. My body relaxed. He wouldn't recognize me as long as he didn't see me, which made the job I had to do a little easier even though I didn't want to.

"You missed your session last night," I said. "You were trashed, and I helped you to your room."

"Look." He paused. It took me a minute to realize he was trying to remember if he knew my name.

"Addison," I said, helping him out.

"Addison," he continued. "I'm not really interested in a tutor right now."

"Too bad," I interrupted, my tone laced with annoyance. "You're failing, and your team depends on you, so grow up and don't be late for your next session." I didn't wait for a response; I stormed out of the room without looking back.

When I got to the elevator, I fell forward, grabbing my knees and blowing out a heavy breath as my heart pounded hard against my chest.

A range of emotions punched through me as a tear streamed down my cheek. Trying to slow my racing heart rate, I drew in long, slow breaths, fighting hard to hold back any more tears from escaping. I knew this would be hard, but I hadn't realized how hard. I'd been numb to all my feelings about Maddox for so long that seeing him up close and speaking to him opened the gates to all the suppressed emotions.

I hated Maddox Parker. I hated what he did to me. I hated how he made me feel and then hurt me. I hated that he made me trust him only to destroy that trust. I hated that he broke me even more than I was already broken. Most of all, I hated how my body still reacted to his mere presence.

Standing up, I hit the button for the elevator. I had to push past all of my feelings, setting them aside so that I could do what I needed to do.

It was going to be okay. I wasn't going to give Maddox the option to fire me. I couldn't. I couldn't risk Asher sending out

that video to the entire school. I would take control of this situation. If he didn't show up for his next session, I would ensure I brought his session to him.

TWENTY-NINE

MADDOX

Sitting in the campus cafeteria, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, quickly checking the time.

“You coming to Buster’s with us tonight?” Andrew asked, slamming his textbook closed.

“I can’t.” I groaned, dropping my phone to my lap and shoving a hand through my hair. “I’m meeting my new tutor.”

“Who is it?” Cody asked, leaning back against his chair. I shrugged. I didn’t remember her name.

“Addison,” Maddy answered, looking up from her textbook. “She tutors me, too.”

“Yeah, me too,” Andrew smirked. “She’s fucking hot.” I couldn’t remember if she was or wasn’t, but it didn’t matter; I wasn’t going down that road again. I’d learned my lesson.

“Wait,” Cody said. “I thought Coach said she refused to tutor you.” My eyes snapped up, meeting his, and my brows furrowed. “Wonder why she changed her mind?”

I wondered why she refused in the first place.

“She refused to tutor me?” I repeated, ensuring I heard him correctly.

“Yeah, she’s the best,” Cody said. “Coach has asked her several times, and she’s said no every time.”

I tried to remember her face from that morning in my hotel room but couldn’t. I didn’t pay that much attention. But if she didn’t want to tutor me, I would ensure she didn’t.

“Change of plans, man,” I said, leaning forward. “I’m going out.”

“What?” Maddy snapped, narrowing her eyes on me. “What about tutoring?”

“What about it?” I smirked, shrugging her off.

“Maddox, you’re going to fail,” she scolded me. “And Coach is going to lose his shit.”

“Mind your own business, Maddy,” I hissed. “I’m not your problem anymore.”

“Thank god,” she muttered, shoving out of her chair and gathering her things.

“We aren’t even friends, for that matter,” I scoffed. “Why are you even here?”

“Hey, man,” Andrew said. “Chill, Maddy didn’t do anything.”

“You have no idea,” I growled, my gaze locked on her. Maddy and I weren’t friends anymore; in fact, I didn’t like her, but for some reason, she was always around.

“I’m out of here,” Maddy muttered before storming off.

“Man, that was harsh,” Cody said.

“Trust me,” I said. “She deserves worse.” I pushed out of my chair. “I’m headed back to change, and I’ll meet you at Buster’s around nine.”



BY EIGHT P.M., I had showered, dressed, and was almost ready to leave when a pounding sounded from the front door.

“I said I’d meet you ther...” I trailed off when I flung the door open and realized it wasn’t Andrew or Cody. It was her—tutor girl.

“Our session started thirty minutes ago,” she scolded, pushing past me into my apartment.

“Uh,” I said, my wide eyes following her into my living area. “What are you doing here?”

“Tutoring you.” She smiled sarcastically, pulling her books out of her bag and setting them on the rectangular coffee table in front of my couch.

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, finally getting my senses back. “I have plans.” I stormed past her toward the back of the apartment where my bedroom was.

“Yes, I know,” she said right on my heels. I opened my top dresser drawer, searching for the cash I’d hidden in there. “Tutoring. With me.” Metal slapped around my wrist. Handcuffs. My eyes flashed from the metal wrapped around my wrist to hers. It took a minute for my brain to completely process what was happening. My gaze flicked back down to my wrist, following the short chain that led to the same metal wrapped around her wrist. My eyes flashed wide, flicking up to meet hers. She’d fucking handcuffed herself to me. “What the fuck? Are you insane?”

“You have no idea,” she muttered.

“This is kidnapping.” I jerked against the cuffs, pulling her into me. A laugh bubbled up at the pure audacity of the situation. Tutor girl thought she’d be able to control me with handcuffs. I was twice her size.

“I don’t like this any more than you do,” she hissed, pushing off me. “But you need to bring up your grades, and I need to do my job.” I huffed out a laugh as I jerked her wrist forward to dig through my sock drawer. “I don’t like you, and you don’t have to like me, but we are doing this, Maddox.”

My breath hitched at the sound of my name on her lips. *Addy*. She sounded just like her. I shook it off, unwilling to let my mind play tricks.

“You don’t like me?” I scoffed, grabbed the wad of cash, and stormed out of the bedroom, dragging her behind me. “Look, if this is about me not calling after a hook-up or

something, I'm upfront in the beginning. I don't do relationships."

She choked out a sarcastic laugh. I stopped spinning to face her. I thought back, trying to remember hooking up with her or whatever I did to piss off this girl. My gaze shifted to her full pink lips, and I froze; my gaze immediately darted away because, just like every girl for the last four years, all I could see was her. My chest tightened as memories of Addy flooded back. But no one had ever reminded me of Addy as much as this chick.

"Where's the key?" I hissed, avoiding eye contact.

"Hidden." She smirked. "Can we get started now?"

I barked out a laugh. "Last chance to uncuff me." She didn't move. I shrugged, "Okay, suit yourself. We are going out tonight." I didn't wait for a response. I jerked my arm, and she yelped as she stumbled forward, falling into me. Throwing the front door open, I wrapped my uncuffed arm around her waist, hoisting her over my shoulder and carrying her out the door.

If she wanted to play, then we'd play...

THIRTY

MADDOX

“Two shots of tequila,” I shouted to the man behind the bar over the music. My gaze flicked down to the pretty blonde handcuffed to me. This could be a lot of fun if she didn’t hate me so much. “Make it four shots.”

Buster’s was the only local college bar within walking distance of the campus. It stayed packed most nights, and tonight was no different.

“Here,” I said, sliding two shots down to her before throwing back one of mine. Maybe a couple of shots would pull the stick out of her ass.

“No, thanks,” she muttered, pushing the shots away. “I would like to leave.”

“You could uncuff me.” I smirked, leaning against the bar.

“I can’t,” she mocked my smirk, narrowing her eyes on me. “It’s in my purse back at your place.” I shrugged, throwing back the other shot.

“Might as well drink up,” I said, pushing the shot back to her. “It’s going to be a long night.” She blew out an exasperated sigh before grabbing the shots and throwing them back.

I couldn’t remember why this girl didn’t like me, but we were cuffed together tonight, so there was no escape for either of us. Tonight, I would convince her that she was wrong about me. Before the night was over, I would have her eating out of the palm of my hands, even if that meant I needed to feed her more drinks to get her to loosen up.

And that's just what I did...

I ordered drink after drink.

Andrew and Cody showed up after about the third round of drinks, and having them there seemed to lighten her mood. She was friendly with them, making small talk and even smiling at them.

"So, tutor girl," I slurred, sliding her another drink. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Ye..." She trailed off, scrunching her face like the question was confusing. I raised my eyebrows. "Yes, I do have a boyfriend."

"Why isn't he here with you?" I asked, sliding off the stool and into her personal space and purposely brushing my body against hers, which didn't have the impact on her that it usually did on women.

"It's complicated," she slurred. Hmm... Complicated sounded like she was single.

"I want to dance," I said, jerking her off the stool and dragging her toward the dance floor.

"I'm not dancing with you," she snapped, pulling hard against the cuffs.

"You shouldn't have cuffed yourself to me then." I smirked, giving another hard jerk. She stumbled forward, falling into me. Spinning her under my arm, I looped our connected arms around her, pressing her back to my front.

She struggled against my grip, her entire body tensed against mine as my other hand landed on her hip.

"Give it up, tutor girl," I whispered. "You are stuck with me tonight, and I'm in charge." I ground my hips against her ass, moving to the rhythm of the music. "So, relax and enjoy the ride."

Two songs later, the abundance of alcohol set in, and her body relaxed against mine. Her ass ground against me, and she not only had my attention, but my also my cocks. I slipped my

hand under her shirt, and her body went rigid before she spun out of my grasp so quickly I couldn't stop her.

I inwardly groaned as I rolled my eyes. *What is with this chick?*

"I wasn't done dancing," I muttered, pulling her back to me.

"I am." She pushed off me, taking an extra step back and stretching out our arms.

"Don't care." I jerked my arm, pulling hard against the cuffs, and she cried out, reaching for her wrist.

Fuck!

I'd meant to make her regret handcuffing herself to me, but I didn't want to hurt her. Blowing out a sigh, I grabbed her wrist. "Let me see."

Even in the darkness of the bar, I could see it was red and swollen. My chest tightened; I had no idea what had gotten into me. She was only trying to do her job, and I'd physically hurt her. She winced when I brushed my thumb over the red markings, and a wave of guilt washed over me.

"Come on," I sighed. "Let's head back to my place and get these off you." She nodded, rubbing her wrist.

I shoved my way through the crowd, careful not to pull against her swollen wrist. A drunk girl stumbled backward, bumping into me and causing me to pull against her wrist. She winced.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, tangling my fingers into hers.

"What are you doing?" she scowled, fighting my hold.

"Chill, tutor girl." I smirked. "I'm not making a move. I'm trying to save your wrist from any more damage." She looked down at our hands. "If I'm holding your hand, it will prevent our arms from being jerked away from each other."

"Fine," she groaned. "Let's just go."

Pushing open the front door, my smile faded when my eyes locked with Coach's. I inwardly groaned. His eyes

flashed between the tutor girl and me before noticing the handcuffs. She tried to shake her hand out of mine, but my grip tightened possessively.

“Maddox,” he hissed. “Take those handcuffs off her right now.”

“I would,” I smirked, pulling our hands up, “but she’s in charge of the key, Boss.” His eyes flashed to hers, growing wider as what I meant set in.

“Coach,” she stuttered. He shook his head, and her mouth snapped shut. He’d just shut her up with a look. I needed to learn that trick.

Coach side-stepped us, storming off without another word.

I knew he was her boss, but he seemed madder at her than with me, which was a pleasant change. It was always me he was angry with.

“You’re probably going to get fired tomorrow,” I said as we strolled down the sidewalk toward my apartment.

“Why didn’t you let my hand go?” she groaned. I didn’t know why I refused to let her hand go, but I wanted him to know she was leaving with me. Maybe it was because he’d forced her on me, or perhaps it was because I knew Coach had a thing for pretty young blondes.

I shrugged. I was sure Coach could care less about whose hand I was holding, anyway. He was worried about the press seeing me handcuffed to a girl and what headline they’d spin.

“Where’s the key?” I shut the door to my apartment.

“My purse.” She pulled me towards the living room where she’d dropped her things. Grabbing her purse, she dug through it. I tapped my foot impatiently, waiting for her to find it. As fun as this was, I was ready for some freedom.

She dumped the contents of her purse on the table, frantically searching through everything. “I put it in my purse.” She stood patting down her thighs, double-checking

her pockets. Nothing. She twisted to search the floor around the table, yelping when she jerked against the cuffs.

“Stop,” I ordered, taking hold of her hand. “Let me see your wrist.” I brushed my fingers down her arm to the markings on her wrist, examining them.

“Don’t touch me,” she bit out, jerking her hand from me. I threw my other hand in the air, “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I groaned, leaning into her. “What did I do to you?” She huffed out a laugh. “You know what?” I folded my hand into hers to keep from hurting her, knowing she’d fight it. “Never mind.” I stormed towards the room, dragging her with me.

“Where are we going?” she asked, using all her weight to stop me. I coughed out a laugh, tightening my grip on her hand and pulling her with me. “I need to find the key.”

“I’m tired,” I grunted. “I’m going to bed. We’ll find it in the morning.”

“Maddox,” she snapped. I froze at my bedside, squeezing my eyes shut. Every time she said my name, I could hear Addy so clearly. I’d had too much to drink. “I’m not sleeping here with you in the same bed.” She pulled against my hand, but I didn’t budge.

“Relax, princess,” I muttered, rolling my eyes, scooping her up, and dropping her in my bed. “You’re not my type either. I prefer them a lot easier.” And I didn’t mean sexually. I climbed in beside her. She blew out an exasperated breath, knowing she wouldn’t win this one.

Closing my eyes, I sucked in a deep breath as I laid the back of my head on my free hand and then slowly released it. After all this time, every time I closed my eyes, I still saw her and the hurt I’d caused her covering her face, and for some reason, tutor girl was a trigger for all the old memories.

THIRTY-ONE

MADDOX

I startled awake, my eyes flashing open at the piercing scream of my alarm. I groaned, rolling over to slap it, and felt the tug of the cuffs, reminding me that last night wasn't a bad dream.

"Wake up," I grunted, spotting the button on the alarm and slapping it. "We need to find tha..." I swallowed my words when my gaze flashed over to an empty bed trailing up my arm. "No fucking way!" She was gone, and I was cuffed to the headboard. I yanked hard on the cuff, growling in frustration.

I patted the bed around me, searching for my phone. Nothing. She was going to leave me there to die.

My pillow vibrated, and I felt around quickly, finding my phone.

Unknown #: Good morning, Casanova.

My lips curled into a snarl. I didn't need to ask who it was. I knew.

Maddox: Where's the key, tutor girl?

I added an angry emoji to express my emotion through the text. Not that she would care.

Tutor Girl: I will only tell if you agree to a 3 o'clock tutoring session today.

I growled at the phone.

Tutor girl: Or you can stay cuffed to the bed until I meet you there at 3—your choice.

She'd backed me into a corner. I didn't have a choice but to agree.

Maddox: Fine. Where's the key?

Tutor girl: Under your alarm clock. See you at 3.

She added a smiley face emoji, and I almost threw the phone.

Stretching out, I slid the alarm clock up to find the key underneath.

Tutor girl was going to pay for this!



TWO HOURS LATER, I was still brooding when I aggressively plopped down into the chair in the University cafeteria between Andrew and Cody. Maddy was directly across from me, picking at a salad while she flipped through a book, and Asher was standing beside Andrew, scrolling through his phone.

“Rough night?” Asher mumbled, not looking up from his phone. I huffed out a sarcastic laugh. That was an understatement.

“So, are you going to tell us why you were handcuffed to your tutor last night at the bar?” Andrew asked before shoving a chicken tender in his mouth.

“Because she’s fucking impossible,” I hissed, still bitter about being handcuffed to the bed. My gaze flicked up to Asher when he chuckled, and I wasn’t sure if it was at our conversation or something funny on his phone because his

eyes never looked up. “I don’t get her. I’ve tried to be nice and friendly. I tried being charming, but she hates me, and I can’t figure out why.”

“Wait,” Asher’s gaze blinked up from his phone, flicking from me to Maddy. “Is he for real?” He jerked his head towards me, his eyes still locked on Maddy. Maddy’s eyes went wide in warning. What the fuck? Maddy gave a subtle shake that was so discreet I thought I’d imagined it.

What was I missing?

Asher’s eyes flicked back to me.

“Asher,” Maddy warned, dropping her fork. “Stay out of it.”

“Oh, no way.” Asher laughed, but it was humorless. “She hates you because Addison, aka Addy,” he drew out her name, “hasn’t forgiven your little stunt from high school.” It took me a minute to realize what he was saying to fully process everything.

Addison, aka tutor girl, was actually Addy. Holy fuck. That made so much sense. Every time I was around her, all I could think about, hear, and see was Addy because she was Addy.

My eyes flashed from Asher to Maddy’s, who confirmed that what he was saying was true.

A rush of anger pumped through me. “You knew,” I growled, shoving out of my chair so fast and hard it flew backward. My anger was directed toward Maddy, and she knew why.

“Maddox,” she whispered. “You don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand?” I huffed a sarcastic laugh. “Stay the fuck away from me, Maddy.” I stormed toward the exit. I was going to confront tutor girl.

“Maddox,” Maddy barked in a tone I’d never heard from her. I stopped. “I didn’t tell you because Addison asked me not to.”

“You knew how I felt about her,” I growled through gritted teeth. “You knew how much I missed her.”

“She still feels the same as the day she left high school, Maddox.” She shrugged.

“Then maybe it’s time you told her the truth, Maddy,” I snarled.

“Maddox,” she hissed, stepping into me. “I was on the complete opposite end of campus that day, and Addison knows it.” She looked off into the distance like she was recalling that day. “It was the day she punched me in the nose.” She shrugged. “I deserved it. If you want Addy’s forgiveness you’re going to have to take the blame for your part in everything that went down that day.”

I wasn’t sure what to believe anymore.

“If you want back in Addison’s life, you can’t scream at her right now because she didn’t tell you,” Maddy scolded. “You need to remind her why she liked you in the first place and then grovel and beg for her forgiveness.”

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I blew out a deep breath. She was right.

“Maddox.” She sighed. “Even if you truly didn’t send that video, you still have a lot to apologize for.”

I didn’t send that video out, but I had no way to prove it. That was why Asher was arguing with me that day on the field because I refused to send the videos or anything else, but Maddy was right; I had a lot to apologize for. I should have come clean that day about everything. I should have protected her, ensuring no one could access those videos. I should have never had them in the first place.

“I would focus on starting new and not dwelling on the past,” Maddy suggested. “You’re both two different people now. Addison is not the same girl that left high school.”

Since the day I found out Addy left for college, I’d taken out my anger on Maddy because I’d always assumed it was her who got into my phone during practice and sent the video for several reasons: one - Maddy was the only person who

knew the code to my phone; two Maddy was the only one who wanted to destroy Addy; three it was something her and her friends would do.

But now I wasn't sure it was Maddy.

THIRTY-TWO

MADDOX

Maddy had been right about everything, and truthfully, I didn't know Addison anymore, but I knew some parts of Addy still had to be there. To stand a chance of winning her back, I had to play my cards just right, and to play those cards right, I needed to know who Addison was and prove I wasn't the same dumb kid I was four years ago.

Maddox: Change of plans, tutor girl. Meet me at my place at 3.

I dropped my phone on the dresser. If my plan was going to work, I needed privacy, and the student center wouldn't work.

Tutor girl: That wasn't part of the deal—the student center at 3.

Maddox: Take it or leave it. I'll be at my place at 3 if you'd like to tutor me.

After sending my address in case she forgot, I turned my phone off and played every scenario of tonight in my head. She wouldn't want to come, but she would because she didn't want to lose her job, and maybe it was wrong, but I was playing that card. I had no doubt in my mind that if she weren't being forced to be around me right now, she wouldn't be.

At precisely three, I buzzed her into the apartment complex, letting her know the door was unlocked.

I listened from my bedroom as the front door creaked open and then clicked closed. I heard her bag dropping onto the dining room table, echoing through the quiet apartment.

“Maddox,” she called out. I didn’t answer. I wasn’t ready to answer. My heart pounding against my chest, I sucked in a deep breath.

It was now or never.

“Are you ready to get started?” she muttered, not bothering to look up when I shuffled into the kitchen. I had zero interest in tutoring today but knew it was the only way to get her here.

“Go ahead,” I said, leaning on the counter behind her. Crossing my arms over my chest and my feet at my ankles, my gaze locked on her. Even though she was turned away from me, it gave me a minute to take her in. She no longer hid behind the massive clothes and large glasses. Her clothes fit better, tighter, showing off everything I already knew she had. Her hair was shorter and lighter, and she’d definitely spent some time in the sun, but I still couldn’t understand how I didn’t recognize her, Addy, before now. “Tutor me, tutor girl.”

Whipping around, she was ready to lay into me but swallowed her words when her gaze landed on my bare torso. The corner of my mouth curved up, knowing I still had that effect on her. I’d purposely picked this outfit, grey joggers and no shirt, hoping it would have the same impact it did all those years ago. Shaking her head, she shook it off, snapping back to reality.

“We had a deal,” she hissed, averting her gaze to anything but me.

“No.” I smirked. “You blackmailed me, and I’m keeping my end. I’m here.”

“Maddox,” she warned.

“Addy,” I said, matching her energy, and immediately regretted it. Sucking in a deep breath, her wide eyes snapped up, locking on mine. She was wondering if I knew. I could see it in her eyes, but she didn’t dare say anything. If I didn’t know, she wasn’t going to give it away.

Shit! This hadn't been part of the plan. I'd planned on playing along with her little game. I'd intended to win her over the same way I'd done four years ago. If I'd done it once, I could do it again.

I contemplated for a long minute how I wanted to play this. Should I just clear the air? Tell her I knew and apologize, or did I let this game keep going and hope I could win Addison over the same way I won Addy over? I had to play my cards perfectly because if I didn't, she would run, and I'd lose what was probably my last chance.

My heart was pounding; I didn't break eye contact. I had no idea which path was the right one to take. Did I tell her I know and hope for the best, or play this off and try to continue with my plan?

"Maddy told you, didn't she?" Addison muttered, her tone laced with disappointment like she'd been betrayed again.

Problem solved; she'd picked the path for me. There was no going back now.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Maddy didn't tell me anything." I pushed off the counter. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wanted to avoid the bullshit 'I'm sorry' and excuses for why you did what you did." She groaned. "I just want to tutor you and go home."

Maddy was right; Addy still hated me as much as the day she left. She wanted nothing to do with me; if this weren't her job, she wouldn't be here. Every plan I'd had just went out the window, and I was going to resort to playing dirty. It would be the only chance I had. Blackmail.

"There lies the problem," I muttered, shrugging my shoulders. "I don't want to be tutored."

"I'm going to lose my job." She groaned. "You being able to play is incredibly important to Coach, who happens to be my boss, and if I'm not successful in my job, then you can't play. If you can't play, that affects him, and you see where this is going."

“And what do I get?” I smirked, sliding into the chair next to her.

“You get to pass your freaking classes,” she hissed.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I don’t care about that.”

“Well, maybe you should.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I don’t. I could go pro now without passing any classes, and Coach knows it.”

“What do you want, Maddox?” She sighed, realizing where this was going. She crossed her arms over her chest; her bright green eyes focused on me.

“Another chance,” I said, coming out more as a plea than I’d intended. “A real chance to prove I’m not that same douchebag I was in high school. For you to give me a chance to redeem myself.”

“Maddox, I have a boyfriend now,” she said. I’d forgotten about the boyfriend. I’d deal with that little issue later. “Not only would he not like that, but I’m not the same person I was in high school.”

“As friends,” I lied. “I just want a chance to be your friend again.”

“Why?” She scowled.

Because there hasn’t been a day since you left that I haven’t thought about you. Because I’ve missed you every day. Because I was in love with you. But I couldn’t say any of that. She wouldn’t believe me if I did.

“Because I want the chance to redeem myself,” I said. “I fucked up big time and want the chance to fix it.”

“And you think blackmailing me will fix it?” She rolled her eyes.

“It’s all I got.” I shrugged.

Closing her eyes, she blew out an exaggerated breath.

“If I agree,” she said, “you’ll work hard at everything: school, tutoring, and football? You’ll stop playing around and

take it all seriously? You'll stop giving Coach problems?"

"I promise," I said, nodding.

"There are ten weeks left of the season," she said. "What happens after that?"

"That's up to you." I smiled. This was working. Ten weeks was plenty of time to change her mind. "If I haven't proven to you that I've changed, I'll walk away and never bother you again."

"Okay." She sighed after several long seconds. "Friends by blackmail." She twisted in her seat back to the books on the table. "Let's get started."

"Okay."

For now, I would be on my best behavior, giving her time to come around to the idea of being friends again while I figured out who this boyfriend was.

THIRTY-THREE

ADDISON

Chance was officially avoiding me, and I was officially annoyed.

We hadn't spoken since the night outside the club when I was cuffed to Maddox. He'd managed to dodge all my calls every day since, and we traveled four hours on the same bus, but his eyes never met mine. Irritation radiated through me. He was acting like a child.

Scanning my hotel key card across the black key reader, I pushed open the door and stepped in, pulling my luggage behind me.

"Wow," I muttered, glancing around the massive luxury hotel room. It was twice the size of the last one, with a full kitchen, dining room, and living area. I strolled down the short, narrow hallway, opening a door on the left to a large master bedroom with an attached master bathroom equipped with a full-size walk-in shower and jetted tub. "Hell yeah!" I could definitely spend the next two nights in this.

Stepping out of the room, I noticed a closed door at the end of the hall, but before I had the chance to explore it. Chance pushed through the door. A smile spread across my face. He'd arranged for us to have connecting rooms. But my smile immediately faded when Maddox stepped in behind him, squashing all dreams.

"You guys will have to share a living space," Chance stated mostly to Maddox. "But you'll have your own room and bathroom." I clenched my jaw. Chance pretending he didn't

even see me was beyond aggravating. “That should make your tutoring sessions easy.” What he really meant was that it would be easier for me to babysit his star baller.

“Hey, buddy.” Maddox smirked. My gaze flashed between the two as I crossed my arms over my chest. I had a feeling this was his doing.

“I’ll let you two get settled,” Chance said before disappearing.

“Here’s my schedule, tutor girl,” Maddox smirked, but I wasn’t in the mood for him.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered, not bothering to take the schedule.

“If you’re going to complain about the living arrangements,” Maddox called out as I walked away. “It’s too late.” I rolled my eyes.

The truth was that having Maddox close made life a little easier for me. I could keep an eye on him and ensure he wasn’t getting in trouble. I just had to remind myself that I hated him even if I was pretending to be his friend to do what I had to.

I stormed after Chance, hoping to catch him before he caught the elevator. I rounded the corner, and there he was, all six feet of him, facing the elevator.

“I didn’t do anything wrong, Chance,” I snapped. He twisted to see me. “Maddox is stubborn, and I’m trying to do what you asked.”

“Addison,” he spun around, “I’m not mad at you. I don’t have time for clingy right now. It’s football season, and my head is in the game. I need this win, and right now, I need you to do your job.”

“I am.” I wasn’t sure if I felt relieved or sad. This wasn’t our first football season together, but it was the first time he’d acted like this.

“Great,” he snapped, backing into the elevator, eyes locked on mine. “Maddox has two midterms he has to pass next

week.” The elevator door started to close. “Make sure he passes them.”

Blowing out a breath, I stood staring at the closed doors, confused, hurt, and somewhat relieved.

By the time I made it back to the room, Maddox had made himself comfortable shirtless and kicked back on the sofa. My gaze trailed down his perfectly sculpted torso, now covered in black ink. When his gaze flashed up, meeting mine, and his lips curled into the same smile I loved when we were teens, I realized I needed space and lots of it.

“I’m going to unpack,” I muttered. I couldn’t deal with him right now. I couldn’t deal with any of them right now. I just wanted to hide in my room for the rest of the night, but I knew to keep my job and prevent those pictures from going viral, I had to work with Maddox tonight.

THIRTY-FOUR

ADDISON

It was after dark when I finally emerged from my room feeling rejuvenated from a bubble bath, and ready to tackle the thorn in my side, also known as Maddox.

When I rounded the doorway, I gasped. Maddox stood in the entranceway with a plastic bag, dressed in black slacks and a white button-up that was open at the collar. I quickly grabbed my chest, trying to play it off as if he scared me, but really, his presence consumed all the oxygen in the room. The boy Maddox had been was hot, but the man he'd become was breathtaking. The kind of breathtaking that sent fire straight through you and down to your core.

“Sorry,” he apologized, flashing that perfect all-white smile, and I was thankful he'd fallen for it.

“Why are you all dressed up?” I muttered, quickly pulling myself back to reality and averting my gaze to anything other than him.

“I just got back from dinner,” he answered.

Shit! I'd forgotten about the team dinner. I was planning on going, hoping to get another opportunity to talk to Chance since I'd given up trying to contact him by phone.

“I brought you some food.” Maddox smiled, holding up the plastic bag. “You still like wings?” My heart squeezed. He remembered my favorite food. I nodded with a smile. Chance still didn't know my favorite food because we never went out. We couldn't. If we got caught, he could lose everything.

“We should probably get started,” I suggested. “So, you can get a good night’s sleep before the game tomorrow.”

“Eat,” he said, setting my food on the table. “I’m gonna go change, and I’ll be right back.”

By the time he returned, I was done eating and had everything set up, ready to work. Maddox took longer than a girl to get changed.

He slid into the seat beside me, and I breathed in his manly scent. A scent that sent me straight to the past. I mentally reminded myself that Maddox wasn’t my friend and that I had a boyfriend.

“We’ll start with Chemistry,” I scanned his syllabus to see what would be covered on his midterm. “We’ll start at the beginning and see how far we make it.” He nodded, sliding his chair closer to see the book. His leg brushed against mine, and even that tiny contact made my heart flutter.



IN JUST UNDER AN HOUR, we’d managed to comb through all the material for one of his mid-terms. Maddox worked hard when he wanted to, and tonight was a good night. He’d been flirty, and for some reason, I didn’t stop it. I didn’t know why; maybe I was starved for that kind of attention because I’d rarely gotten it from Chance, but whatever the reason, I knew it had to stop. It was wrong. Right?

“I think we have enough time to at least start on math tonight,” I stated, twisting away from him and leaning down to dig the textbook out of my bag. Jerking the book out, I leaned up. “I’m not...” My words were cut short when I twisted back, and Maddox’s lips claimed mine.

Every part of me wanted to melt into him, but I immediately jerked away instead. Flashbacks of high school

flashed through my head. NO! I was not doing this with him again. NO!

“Maddox.” I scowled. “No.” I shoved out of the chair, standing up.

“Okay,” he mumbled. “I completely misread that.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “You can’t do that. I have a boyfriend.” Not to mention, it confused all of my senses. Even in that short moment, I felt it. I felt that chemistry that I longed for.

He sighed heavily, leaning back in his chair. “Do you actually have a boyfriend?” he questioned. His facial expression and tone said he didn’t believe me. “Your phone hasn’t gone off once in the entire hour we’ve been sitting here, and on the bus, I was two rows back directly across from you. No one texted or called.” My mouth fell open. “So either you really don’t have a boyfriend, or he’s here with you, and I would know if it was someone on the team.”

“How would you know?” I scowled, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Guys talk.” He shrugged, cocking his head to the side.

“Not all guys,” I corrected him.

“All guys,” he stated. “They either talk about their girl or talk about fucking a girl. Either way, they all talk.”

“Boys talk.” I sneered. “Not men.” He barked out a laugh.

“That’s not true.” He laughed. “But even if it were, no guy in his right mind would let me share a living space with his girl.” He was right, and I hated it. I hated that Chance was practically throwing me to Maddox. “So, if you actually have a boyfriend, you deserve better.”

“Like you?” I scoffed.

“No,” his tone turned serious. “You deserved way better than me.” His eyes locked on mine. “Or at least that version of me.”

“I’m going to bed,” I snapped. I couldn’t do this with him. “You should get some sleep.”

“Sweet dreams, Addy,” he whispered, and I froze in the doorway, squeezing my eyes shut, thankful I was out of sight. Why did he affect me like this? My body reacted to him in ways it shouldn’t because I hated him, yet I had to keep reminding myself of that.

THIRTY-FIVE

ADDISON

Sitting on the window seat in the living room, staring aimlessly out the window, I was lost in the beauty of the flickering city lights—my mind racing with so many thoughts that I couldn't sleep. Maddox was right. I didn't have a boyfriend. I had a booty call, or that's what it had become over the years; I just hadn't seen it until now. I could blame it all on Chance and being unable to go public with our relationship, but that would just be an easy out.

The truth was that a lot of it was because of me and the fact that I still longed to feel the way I did the first time Maddox kissed me, and that wasn't realistic. Maddox and I were just stupid teenagers. He was my first crush, my first kiss, my first boyfriend. What Maddox and I had wasn't real, but I couldn't convince my heart of that. My body and soul still desired to feel the way Maddox made me think I felt.

“What are you doing up?” My gaze turned to see Maddox standing in the darkness. I'd been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't heard him come in.

“I couldn't sleep.” I sighed. “What about you?”

“It's four a.m.” He smiled, flicking on a light in the kitchen. I narrowed my eyes. He said that like I should know what that meant. “I go to the gym at four a.m.”

“Every day?”

He nodded. “You want to come?” he smiled.

“Oh, no,” I shook my head. “I don't really work out.”

“It would help you sleep,” he said. “And it would help you with all that built-up tension.”

“You know what,” I said, twisting my feet to the floor. “Why not?” He was right; I needed a release, and maybe working out was my only chance to do that.

“Go get dressed while I finish my protein shakes.” He smirked.

I hadn’t intended on going to the gym, so all I had close to workout clothes was a pair of tight spandex shorts and a t-shirt. I quickly threw them on and met Maddox at the door.



APPARENTLY, four a.m. was the time to go to the gym if you wanted to be alone because the place was empty. I’d never worked out before, so figuring out what to do and how to do it was a little bit intimidating. Maddox must have noticed because he asked, “Do you want to work out with me?” I should have said no and figured this out on my own, but I didn’t.

“First, we’ll start with the treadmill,” he said, walking towards the row of treadmills. “Only for about ten minutes to get our blood pumping.” I hopped on, and he showed me how to set my speed and how to stop before jumping on his. I kept my pace low to reserve energy for whatever else Maddox had planned.

“Do you still do art?” Maddox asked, increasing his speed.

“No,” I said, focusing on my steps. I hadn’t put paint on paper since the day I left. It wasn’t the same anymore. The love I’d had for art left the moment I saw those pictures on Karly’s phone.

“You know there’s an old abandoned...”

“Maddox,” I snapped, cutting him off. I knew where this was going, and I couldn’t do this with him. He wasn’t going to fix this or us by finding me a new place to paint because my heart wasn’t in it anymore. “If you want this friendship to stand a chance, you can’t do this.” Our friendship didn’t stand a chance anyway, but I needed him to stop bringing up the past—the old me.

My heart squeezed when hurt flashed across his face, but then it was gone. Pressing his lips into a thin line, he nodded before shoving his AirPods in his ears to finish his walk.

We walked our ten minutes in silence, and I was thankful when it was over, and so was the silent treatment. I shouldn’t care that I hurt his feelings, but I did.

We moved from workout to workout, and before I knew it, I’d forgotten about our argument. I’d forgotten that I hated him. We laughed and talked as he taught me how to use each piece of equipment—neither of us spoke another word about the past.

“Can you do a pull-up?” he asked, wiping the sweat from his face.

“No.” I scowled, looking over to the pull-up bar that I was pretty sure I couldn’t reach at all.

“Come here.” He jerked his head towards the bar. I followed him, stopping underneath it.

“I can’t reach it,” I said, stretching to reach up to the bar. I flinched, jumping back when I felt his hands curl around my waist.

“I was just going to help.” He laughed, throwing his hands up, surrendering.

“Nothing else,” I asked. After last night, my trust in his motives was almost nonexistent.

“I’m sorry about last night.” He sighed. “I shouldn’t have kissed you, and I promise I won’t do it again.” I narrowed my eyes, not wholly convinced. “Well, unless you ask me to.” He laughed, and I smiled.

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes, lifting my arms to the bar. “But no funny business.” His hands curled around my waist, lifting me effortlessly to the bar. I wrapped my hands tightly around the bar, and Maddox dropped his hands.

“Okay, now pull yourself up.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” It was harder than I thought, but before I could say another word, Maddox jumped, grabbing hold of the bar. The same bar I was hanging from. His mouth was so close I could smell the mint on his breath. “What are you doing?”

“Helping.” He laughed playfully. “No funny business.” He wrapped his legs around my thighs, locking his feet behind me. I started to protest but snapped my mouth shut when he said, “Now pull.” I did, and with his help, I did my first pull-up.

“Is this how Coach taught you to do pull-ups?” I laughed. My gaze raked over his strong muscular arms and the muscles flexing as he moved.

“Pull,” he ordered, and I did, but this time, it was different. The humor in all this was gone. My gaze locked on his mouth as it moved closer. His tongue swept out, wetting his dry lips. With every move, our bodies drew closer together. Our lips were mere inches away. A bead of sweat streamed down his face. Why the hell was that so hot? My heart pounded as my gaze flicked between his deep blue eyes and lips. It was suddenly hard to breathe, like he’d sucked all the air out of my lungs. The past suddenly disappeared, and all I wanted was to kiss him.

And just like that, he dropped his legs before falling to the ground. He wrapped his arms around my thighs. “Let go.” I did, my hands dropping to his muscular shoulder. He held me tight against him as I slid down his body until my feet hit the floor. The friction between our two bodies left an ache between my thighs. An ache I hadn’t felt in a long time. An ache I never thought I’d have for him again. Swallowing hard, I placed a hand on his bare chest. A warning hand that this was

going too far. My head knew that, but my heart was saying the complete opposite.

But Maddox dropped his arms, taking a step back. “You should come to the game today.” He smiled. If he was as worked up as I was, he hid it well. I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady my breathing. “You used to love watching football.”

And we are back to the past.

“It wasn’t football I loved to watch,” I muttered. Squeezing my eyes shut, I instantly regretted saying it out loud. I didn’t want to keep going back there.

THIRTY-SIX

MADDOX

Pushing through the door to my hotel room, I dropped my bag in the doorway. I was disappointed Addy didn't come to the game; I knew she'd felt the chemistry between us today, and for some reason, I thought she'd come, but maybe that was why she didn't.

"Addison," I called out. Nothing. I searched the room, but she was gone. Where could she be? There was no team dinner tonight. Everyone was splitting up to go out and celebrate our big win today, but I wanted to be with her. I wanted to celebrate with her. My chest tightened, and my jaw clenched at the thought of her being with her boyfriend. I shouldn't be angry. She wasn't mine, or at least not yet. I needed to figure out who the boyfriend was.

After a quick shower, I sunk into the couch to wait for Addison. Pulling out my phone, I flipped open Facebook. If there was anywhere to dig up info on someone, it was social media. Typing in her name, I hit enter. Millions of Addison Wrights came up, but not one of them was her.

"Hmm," I glared at the phone. "No social media account."

My phone vibrated, and Maddy's name popped up.

Maddy: How quickly can you get to Nightlife?

I rolled my eyes at the phone. Maddy and I didn't text; hell, we rarely talked. I hadn't hung out alone with her since before Addison left, and we weren't about to start now.

Maddox: I'm not going out tonight.

I clicked my phone closed, figuring that would be the end of the conversation, but I was wrong.

Maddy: Addison is here, and she's trashed.

I typed Nightlife into the maps on my phone and clicked the walking man button—5-minute walk.

Maddox: Be there in 5.

It took me exactly six minutes to walk from the hotel to Nightlife.

“Hey,” Maddy yelled when she saw me. “I have to go, and I didn't want to leave her like that.” She twisted, pointing to Addison on the dance floor. “She's really drunk. Maybe you can get the bartender to cut her off.” She shrugged. “I have to go.” I nodded, not taking my eyes off Addy.

“Maddy,” I called out over the music. She turned, raising her eyebrows. “Who is she dating?” If anyone knew anything about whom Addison was dating, it would be Maddy, and what she didn't know, she'd find out.

“Addison?” she asked, pinching her brows together. I nodded. “I don't know, but I can ask around if you want.” My eyes flicked from her to Addy and then back. I needed to know. I needed to know who my competition was. I nodded, and she smiled before turning to leave.

After Maddy left, I watched Addison on the dance floor. The sexy way she moved her hips to the music sent a rush straight to my cock. The realization struck me that she wasn't the same girl she used to be. The old Addy wouldn't be dressed in the tight-fitted jeans that hugged every perfect curve of her ass and thighs and a backless top that told everyone she was braless. The old Addy wouldn't be on the dance floor moving her body in a way that left every man in here picturing what she'd look like on top of them. But too bad for them; she was going with me even if we'd be sleeping in separate rooms.

The old Addy had been pretty, even though I didn't notice at first, but Addison was beyond sexy on a whole new level.

"Maddox," Addison yelled over the music when she spotted me. I hadn't even realized I gravitated closer to her. She reached out, grabbed my arm, and pulled me further onto the dance floor. "Dance with me." She flashed me a sexy, intoxicating smile, and there was literally nothing I'd rather do at that moment.

She turned, and my fingers curled into her hips, jerking her back against me. Her hips swayed with the beat, and I quickly matched her rhythm, moving my hips with hers. With every sway of her hips, I knew she could feel me growing harder through the denim of my pants, but it didn't slow her down.

The next song came on; it was slower, and when she slowed her movement to match the music, I thought I was going to explode. If she were any other girl, I'd drag her to the bathroom and fuck her against the wall, but I couldn't do that with Addison. If she were sober, it might be different, but she wasn't, and sober Addison wouldn't let me go that far, not yet, anyway.

God, I wanted so badly to feel her, to touch her. I slid my hand around, slipping it under her shirt. Her head fell back against my chest as my fingers trailed over the soft skin of her stomach. The music was blaring, but I was pretty sure I heard her moan. Certainly, her boyfriend didn't leave her this sexually frustrated, did he? Or maybe there really wasn't a boyfriend.

Closing my eyes, I savored the feeling of her against me. The feel of her skin under my finger as my hand slid up. I stopped as a weird sensation of déjà vu wrapped around me, gripping me tight. I'd done this before.

I scanned my memories for several long seconds before it hit me. It was Addison I'd danced with and chased out of the club the night coach sent me home. She ran when she realized it was me.

It all made sense now. It had been the first girl who'd made me feel anything since the day Addy left. How could I not

have realized then?

My hand slid up, stroking under her tits, and I knew this had to stop before it went too far. I wanted her, but I didn't want the drunk version that would hate me tomorrow.

"We should get you home," I whispered in her ear.



SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE club and the hotel, Addison passed out in my arms and went from drunk weight to dead weight, but somehow, I managed to get into the hotel room with my hands full.

Carrying her into the living room, I laid her on the couch and then slipped off her sandals.

"You were right," she whispered as I dropped the blanket over her. I hadn't realized she'd woken up. I sank onto the coffee table across from her. This ought to be good.

"About?" I leaned forward, leaning my arms on my legs.

"My boyfriend."

"So you don't have one?" I cocked a brow at her.

"I do have a boyfriend, but the complicated part of it makes it messy," she said. "He likes to keep things private, so we don't make things public."

"That has cheater written all over it," I muttered, glaring at her. Why someone would want to keep her private didn't make sense unless he was a cheater. Addison had it all. She was sexy but didn't know it; she was smart and funny. So, keeping her a secret didn't make sense.

"It's not like that." She sighed, pushing herself to a sitting position. "The complicated part is me." Her gaze flicked up to the ceiling as she pressed her lips into a thin line. Sucking in a

deep breath, her eyes flashed down to me. “Maddox, I need you to kiss me.”

“Uh,” I scowled, “you’re going to have to explain because not even twenty-four hours ago, I promised you I’d never kiss you again.”

“I need to know that the chemistry we had wasn’t real,” she said. “I need to convince myself that what we had as kids wasn’t real life.” Was she serious? Everything we had was real. She just didn’t believe it anymore because of what I did.

“Are you saying there’s no chemistry between you and your boyfriend?”

“I compare everything to what I felt when I was with you,” she said. “And it’s ruining my relationship. I need my heart to know it wasn’t real.”

“Let me get this straight.” I scoffed, pushing to my feet. “You want me to kiss you to fix your relationship with him.” Her eyes softened as she nodded. “What the fuck?” Anger colored my tone. “You are not going to use me to get back at your boyfriend or whatever you’re trying to do.”

“Maddox,” she started.

“No,” I growled, my chest heaving with fury. “I’m going to brush this off as you’re drunk right now and go to bed.” She was drunk, but every word that came out of her mouth was real. The alcohol only gave her the courage to say it to me.

“Can’t you do one decent thing?” she cried out, jumping to her feet. Anger pumped through my veins like toxic venom. “And let me go.”

“I did,” I growled through my teeth, storming toward her so fast she stumbled back. “I told Karly I would walk away if she gave you that letter. That I wouldn’t pursue you, and I didn’t. Even though it killed me. I didn’t.” I continued stepping forward until her back slammed into the wall. “But what’s meant to be, will be, and now it’s a whole new ball game, baby.”

I placed a hand on both sides of her head, trapping her. I leaned into her, pressing my nose into her cheek. “I could fuck

every girl in this school, and it still wouldn't change the way you make me feel, and me kissing you isn't going to change your feelings for me."

Her breathing hitched as my breath fanned across her sensitive skin. I ran my nose up the column of her throat, breathing her in. "Tell me you feel nothing right now, Addison." I grabbed her waist, spun her, and pressed my hips into her, pinning her against the wall. "You feel that?" I pushed my throbbing erection into her ass. Wrapping her ponytail around my fist, I jerked her head back, giving me access to her ear.

"Tell me that at night when you are all alone, and you touch yourself that it's not me you're fantasizing about," I breathed against her ear. "Tell me your pussy's not throbbing to have me between your legs again. Tell me that every part of your body right now is not begging me to fuck you against this wall right now." She didn't say anything, but I didn't need her to; her heart pounding against my chest gave it all away.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." I pushed off the wall, and she quickly flipped to her back. Her chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths. "I know I fucked up in 101 ways with you, and when you're ready, we can talk about that, but if you want someone to fix your relationship, find someone else because now I'm his fucking competition." I stormed to the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind me.

THIRTY-SEVEN

MADDOX

If she wanted a war, she would get one.

All deals were off. I told her I wouldn't kiss her again unless she asked. Well, she just asked. When the time was right, I would kiss her again, and not that peck on the lips bullshit—a kiss that would make her toes curl. A kiss that would make her realize she was mine.

The clock flashed three-thirty when I snuck into the kitchen. I was still too angry to deal with her this morning. Grabbing my bag, I slipped out the door without a sound.

Shoving the door open to the stairwell, I headed down to the gym, taking the steps a little slower this morning.

Addison was so determined not to feel anything for me that she was ignoring the fact that her boyfriend was obviously an asswipe.

As I passed the door to the 6th floor, something caught my eye in the small window. Stopping and backing up, I peered through the window to see Addison standing in the hallway, half-dressed, talking through a doorway.

“Who the fuck is on the 6th floor?” I mumbled. All the team was on my floor, and all the cheerleaders were on the 8th floor. Did her boyfriend make the drive to see her? Turning the knob, I quietly shoved the door open.

“Chance,” she barked. Chance. As in Coach Chance Brown. Why the fuck would she be down here half-naked to talk to Coach, and why was she calling him by his first name?

“You need to get back to your room,” Coach ordered, leaning shirtless out the doorway. “Before someone sees you. We can talk later.”

I let the door click closed as I took the steps two at a time back to the room, my mind racing. She’d left with him that night at the club. It never crossed my mind because, at the time, I didn’t know it was her. She was dating Coach. My chest tightened, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. I stopped, leaning forward with my hands on my knees to keep myself from tumbling forward. I had to be wrong.

I made it back to the room just a few minutes before she did. When I heard the door open, I quickly busied myself with putting another protein shake together.

“Oh my god.” She jerked back, grabbing her chest. “I didn’t know you were up.” I didn’t say anything; I just let my eyes trail over her baggy T-shirt and bare-tanned legs. I couldn’t say anything because all I felt was anger. Had she begged me to kiss her, then snuck out to fuck him? She’d let me work her up and then fucked him. Swallowed down the lump in my throat, I flicked my gaze back to my shake.

“Are you still mad at me?” she asked.

Rolling my eyes, I turned to face her, but I still couldn’t put words together, so I shoved past her to grab my bag. She sighed and stormed to her room, leaving her cell phone on the counter.

I shouldn’t... But I needed to know. I grabbed the phone, punching in the code I’d watched her put in over and over on the long bus ride here. I clicked open her messages and clicked on Coach, and I had my answer. He was her boyfriend.

Coach Brown was a dog, but I couldn’t tell her that. I’d only be the jealous ex. My stomach churned remembering his talk about his newest fuck toy. Was it her? Had he been talking about Addison? I’d be damned if he was ever going to touch her again.

I needed to work off some of this aggression before I dealt with her this morning, so I set her phone back where she had

left it and headed to the gym.

THIRTY-EIGHT

MADDOX

I thought I was calmer after I'd worked out all my aggression in the gym, but when the elevator stopped on the 6th floor on my ride down to the main floor, the doors slid open to Addison standing side by side with Coach. I thought I might blow fire.

"What's up, Maddox?" Coach nodded. Addison stepped into the elevator, pulling her luggage behind her. Jaw clenching, I didn't respond to him; I couldn't. Not that he noticed. "Shit." He patted the pockets of his jeans. "I'll meet you guys at the bus. I forgot my phone." He backed out of the elevator, and I slammed the 'door close' button.

"I guess you're still mad," Addison muttered once the doors were closed.

You know what, fuck this...

I punched the emergency stop button so hard I thought my fist might go straight through.

"What are you doing?" she snapped when the elevator jolted to a stop. Tilting her head, she glared at me.

"Coach," I growled, leaning down so close our noses almost touched. Confusion contorted her face. "You're fucking the coach." I wasn't asking her. Her eyes went wide.

"It's none of your business who I'm fucking," she snapped when the shock wore off. She leaned around me to search for the go button, but I threw my arm out, stopping her. "He's my boyfriend." I wanted to correct her and tell her he couldn't be her boyfriend. He was a professional player. Not to mention, he was her boss.

“Let me make this clear,” I hissed. “If you let him touch you, our deal is off, and I will take the next offer to go pro. I know how important I am to your boyfriend and his career. On my way out, I’ll make sure the school knows that their coach is fucking his students.”

“You’re not playing fair, Maddox.” She scowled, shoving me back.

“I stopped playing fair when you asked me to kiss you,” I pinned her with a cold glare. “You heard me. You let him touch you, and the deal is over.” I punched the button, and the elevator jerked into motion. “Just out of curiosity, does he know that when you fuck yourself, you scream my name?” I didn’t know for a fact that she fantasized about me, but I was going to push the buttons that pissed her off anyway.

“Oh please,” she snapped, surprising me when she punched the emergency stop button, stopping the elevator again. “Do not flatter yourself by thinking I stay awake at night fantasizing about the half-a-fuck you gave me back in high school. I had to find someone to finish what you couldn’t.” Holy fuck, she was hot. Her green eyes pierced through me with pure hatred. She was taking low blows, but I was up for the challenge because that’s just what she made this. “I don’t owe you anything. In fact, you should be on your knees begging for my forgiveness.”

“You want me on my knees for you, baby,” I rasped, moving towards her. I could make that fantasy real here and now. My fingers curled around her hips, and I jerked her body flush against mine. “I’ll get on my knees for you, and I’ll show you just how sorry I am.” A smug smirk twisted on my lips.

She opened her mouth but snapped it shut when the elevator jerked back into motion. I released her as the doors chimed open, and she stormed out.

Stopping on the other side of the doors, she turned back and said, “Fuck you.”

“Name the time and place.” I smirked.

“Addison,” Coach called out, waving her over, but before she could move, I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, jerking her to a stop.

“Remember what I said,” I warned.

“Don’t touch me,” she growled, jerking her arm out of my grasp and storming off. She could be as mad as she wanted. She’d get over it when she learned who Coach Brown really was.

Now the one I really needed to scare was him, but I’d wait until we got back to town. He’d be easy. He had too much to lose.

THIRTY-NINE

ADDISON

Tapping my knuckles on Chance's office door, I didn't wait for him to answer before I shoved the door open.

"Addison," he said dryly. Chance had his long legs kicked back on his desk, and Asher sat across from him.

"I need to talk to you," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "Now." My gaze flicked to Asher. "Alone."

"That's cool," Asher said, pushing out of the chair, a stupid cocky grin plastered across his face.

"What is it, Addison?" Chance asked once the door clicked closed.

"With everything going on, I feel like I need to clear the air." I sighed. I was tired of the tension between us. I wanted to be honest with him about Maddox kissing me. "There's nothing going on with Maddox and me." I would ease him into the whole kiss part.

His eyes locked on mine, and a look of amusement covered his facial features. I was being silly. I was sure he didn't believe I was actually fucking Maddox. He dropped his feet to the floor before pushing out of his chair and strolling around to the front of his desk, and I felt a sense of relief that he was coming to reassure me that he knew.

"Maddox has shown up to every practice early. He's hitting the gym every day. He played the best game I've seen him play in years last game. His grades aren't just passing; he could actually make the dean's list." A slow smile spread

across my face. “So, if fucking him is what you need to do to keep this going, then do.”

My smile faded, and my mouth dropped open. “Wait, what?” I’d heard him wrong. It sounded like he was whoring me out to his player.

“You heard me, Addison,” he muttered. “Keep Maddox happy or...” He paused, cocking his head to the side and shrugging his shoulders. “I guess you know the consequences.”

“I am not your whore,” I hissed. “Do not threaten me.”

His head fell back on a laugh, but when it snapped back up, something dark flashed in his eyes—something I’d never seen before. “Let me make this clear. You keep Maddox happy, or your little video goes viral.”

All the air in my lungs exhaled so violently I thought I’d been hit. My head started to spin, and I had to grab the chair to keep from falling.

“You knew?”

“Of course, I knew.” He scoffed, strolling back to the chair behind his desk. “Whose idea do you think it was?”

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. My chest squeezed painfully tight at the thought of the man I slept with plotting against me.

“Asher told me all about high school.” His gaze locked on mine. His eyes were completely void of any humanity. “He told me what Maddox did to you and how Maddox would do anything to fix it.”

“So you used me?” I choked out.

“Girls like you are a dime a dozen.” He shrugged. “Throwing themselves at me. So eager to be with a man that you can’t see what’s right in front of you.” He huffed out a humorless laugh. “You were never my girlfriend, Addison. Just another whore to pass the time.” He sank into his chair, his gaze focused on his computer like I was boring him. “Tomorrow, there will be a new one.” His gaze snapped back

up to me. “So do your job, and right now, your job is to do whatever keeps Maddox happy and on his A game. Understood?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. I didn’t know what to say. I was completely blindsided by a man I trusted. Storming out of his office, I managed to hold myself together until I was in the privacy of my own office when it all came rushing to the surface.

Falling forward, I grabbed my knees as a rush of air left my lungs, and tears streaked my face. Two years I wasted on him. A man who was now blackmailing me with a video Maddox took in high school. My chest tightened painfully at the memories.

“Addison,” Maddy called out, not waiting for me to answer before shoving my door open. “Omigod, Addy.” Maddy rushed over, and for some reason, I lost the little bit of control I had left, and tears turned to ugly crying. “Sit.” She guided me into a chair. “Addison, what happened?” I couldn’t form words through my sobs. “Did someone hurt you?” Physically, no, but emotionally, yes. Everyone I ever trusted always hurt me. All this was just too much. “I’m going to get help.”

“No,” I snapped, grabbing hold of her shirt. “No, please.”

“Okay.” She sighed, sliding into the chair beside me. “Do you want to talk about it?” Sucking in a deep breath, I let it all out. I told her about Asher, the video text, and I told her about Chance without telling her who Chance was. I told her everything.

Maddy hung on my every word. I couldn’t believe I was confiding in the person who single-handedly made it her life’s mission to destroy me in high school, but I didn’t have anyone else.

People changed, right?

“You’re dating a baller,” Maddy scoffed. “A football player on Maddox’s team.” I wasn’t going to answer that. I was a terrible liar and wasn’t ready to admit that it was

Maddox's coach and my boss. So, I forced a smile and dramatically shrugged. I'd let her believe what she wanted for now.

"I don't know what to do," I whined, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

"I think you should tell Maddox what's going on," Maddy said. "He would beat the shit out of Asher."

"And that's exactly what I don't need." I groaned. "If I piss off Asher, he will make that video go viral and..." My voice trailed off, not wanting to finish my sentence. "Plus, this is all his fault, to begin with. He sent those videos out."

Maddy's big brown eyes softened as they filled with pity.

"Then we should sneak into the locker room and steal Asher's phone," Maddy suggested, clapping her hands together. "We can delete it; problem solved."

"Not exactly," I muttered, and Maddy dropped her hands to her lap. "Who knows where else he's saved that video?"

"Hmm," she hummed, twirling her finger around her short blonde ponytail, staring aimlessly past me. "What if I know someone who could help us?" The corner of Maddy's lips twisted up into a smirk.

"Help how?" I narrowed my eyes on her. I wasn't sure anyone could help right now.

"I have a friend who can hack into anything," she said, dropping her ponytail and leaning forward. "She can hack into Asher's stuff and delete the video from everything. She can even check your ex's devices to ensure he doesn't have copies." My stomach clenched, and my heart squeezed painfully tight at the thought of Chance having those videos to hold them against me.

"What if other people have the video?" I asked.

"Like who?" She shrugged. "Who else would be involved in this?"

"I don't know if this is a good idea."

“You’re going to have to decide how badly you want your freedom back,” she said. “Because even after the season ends, I do not believe Asher will delete that video, and nothing is saying he won’t send it out anyway.”

She was right. Asher was a disgusting human being, and so was Chance.

“Do you trust him?” I asked.

“I trust *her* with my life.” She smiled.

“Make the call,” I said. I was willing to take the chance at this point.

She pulled out her phone and clicked a few buttons before setting it down. “I sent her a text to call me.” I nodded. “I need to know, though, were you dating someone on the team?” I didn’t answer; I just glared at her. “You were. Who was it?” I shook my head. I didn’t want to talk about it. “Girl code, you have to warn others about the assholes.”

I opened my mouth, but my phone vibrated across the table before I could explain. The area code was from back home.

“Sorry.” I sighed. “I need to take this.” Maddy nodded, flipping open her textbook.

“Hello,” I said, pulling the phone to my ear.

“Addison Wright,” the woman asked.

“This is her.”

“Addison, my name is LeAnn Reed, and I’m a nurse with...”

“Is my mom okay?” I cut her off, pushing out of my chair. Maddy’s attention flashed to me.

“How soon can you get here?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I can leave now, but probably a day or two.”

“She’s very ill,” Nurse Reed warned. “I’m not sure how long she’ll hang on for.”

“I’m on my way.” I disconnected. “I have to go. My mom is sick.” I grabbed my bag. “I have to go back home.”

“Oh no, Addy,” Maddy followed behind me. “Can I help?”

“No.” I forced a smile. “Could you let Coach know, please? I’ll be gone for the week.” She nodded, and I stormed out of the building.

I didn’t have enough money for a plane ticket, and my car wouldn’t make the drive, so I’d have to take a bus and pray I made it in time.

FORTY

MADDOX

I had three hours before meeting Addison to go over a term paper that I hadn't even started. Sucking in a deep breath, I scanned the books scattered on the large table in front of me. Addison and I weren't on the best of terms. She was pissed, and I'd have to live with that if it meant keeping her away from Coach. I did a shitty job protecting her before. This time, I wouldn't make the same mistake. I knew Addy would get over it once she realized who Coach truly was, but until then, I had to show her that I wasn't the same stupid kid I was in high school.

"Maddox," Maddy whisper-hissed from behind me.

I shook my head, "I don't have the energy for you today, Maddy," I said dryly, grabbing one of the books and flipping it to the table of content to see if I could use it.

"Maddox," she snapped, sliding into the chair beside me. I didn't bother looking up. I had too much to do in a very short time, so whatever she needed would have to wait. She snatched the book out of my hand. "Maddox, it's Addison." My jaw clenched as my gaze snapped to hers, but when my gaze met hers, my eyes softened. Something was wrong.

"What's wrong?" I snapped, pushing out of the chair. "Is she okay?"

"I couldn't hear everything through the phone, but her mom is sick," she whispered. "It didn't sound good, and she's headed home. She's taking a bus, and I don't think she'll make it in time." I knew that Addy's relationship with her mom was

rocky, but I knew she'd regret not making it to see her if something happened and she passed. "Maddox, she has no one but her mom." Maddy was right. Addison's dad died when she was younger; she had no siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins. She had no family left.

"Do me a favor," I said, collecting my things. "Go pick her up and tell her you're going to give her a ride and meet me at my place."

"How am I supposed to get her to agree to that?" She scowled.

"Tell her you're giving her a ride to the station," I said. "My place is on the way anyway, so she won't notice." She nodded and took off.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I was packed with two tickets booked home, standing in the parking lot with my bag, when Maddy pulled up with Addison.

"I don't have time for whatever this is," Addison growled, throwing open the car door. "My bus leaves soon."

"You're right," I said, opening the back passenger seat door and tossing my bag in. "Our plane leaves in an hour, and we still need to get through security."

"Plane? Our? I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Truce," I called. "I know I'm your least favorite person right now, but please let me help you. If you take a bus, it will take what? Three days?" She nodded. "I can get you there tonight." Her facial expression softened a few seconds before she nodded. "Let's go."

"Wait," she stopped me. "What about football and coach?"

“I’ve got that covered,” Maddy smiled, leaning on the hood of her car. “Just make sure you’re at the game on Saturday.” Maddox nodded, sliding into the car. “Now, let’s go.”

The ride to the airport was silent, and all I could think about was that Addison and I were flying back home to where it all started. It wasn’t under the best circumstances, but if she needed me, I’d be there.

FORTY-ONE

MADDOX

Shifting in my seat, I ran my damp hands down the top of my legs, trying to stop them from bouncing rapidly.

I hated hospitals: the bright fluorescent lights, the smells, the beeping sounds. Everything about a hospital made me nervous.

I brought Addison straight to the hospital from the airport and dropped her off at the door. She'd told me I didn't need to wait, but leaving her felt wrong, especially not knowing her mom's condition.

That was two hours ago.

"Excuse me." A young blonde nurse in dark blue scrubs smiled.

"Yes," I said, pushing to my feet.

"Are you here with Ms. Wright?" she asked.

"Addison," I answered. She nodded. "Yes."

"She shouldn't be alone right now," she said. I jerked forward to head to her but stopped. I had no idea what I was walking into. I didn't want to interrupt her time with her mother.

"Is her mother awake?" I asked. She shook her head, sorrow covering her face.

"Room 2224," she said, pointing towards the open hallway.

When I reached the open doorway, there was no beeping machine, no doctors or nurses, only her mother's lifeless body and Addison standing next to her.

"Addison," I whispered, stepping into the room. My chest ached for her. Her mom and she weren't close, or at least they hadn't been, and if she hadn't gotten the chance to by now, she never would.

Her gaze twisted over her shoulder. My heart squeezed at the pain etched into her face.

"She's gone," Addison whispered, her gaze turning back to her mom. "I don't even know what to do." I was behind her before I even realized I'd moved. Sliding an arm over her shoulder, I twisted her into me.

"We'll figure that out," I said, sliding my hand into her hair and holding her tight against me. I'd never lost a parent or anyone. I had no idea what to do either, but I wouldn't let her figure it out alone.

"Addison Wright," a woman said, stepping into the room.

"Yes," she sniffed. "That's me."

"Hi, Addison," she smiled. "My name is Crystal Fuller, and I was your mother's hospice nurse." She reached into her bag. "Your mother asked me to speak with you after she passed." She pulled a large envelope out of the bag. "Do you want to talk now?"

"Yes." Addison sighed. "Please."

"You're mom found out she had stage 4 renal failure right after a few months ago."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"She didn't want you to know because she didn't want you to come back to take care of her. She said you'd had to do that for too long, and she wouldn't do that to you this time."

"She'd stopped drinking..."

"Yes." Crystal nodded. "But it was too late. Your mom was very proud of you. She wanted me to give this to you." She

handed her the envelope. “She also wanted me to let you know that all her arrangements have been taken care of, and the paperwork is all in that envelope. She wanted to ensure you didn’t have to take care of her anymore.” Addison’s throat flexed on a hard swallow. “The landlord where you grew up agreed to give you until Friday to get anything out you may want. Anything you don’t want, just leave it. Your mother hired a cleaning crew to take care of the rest on Friday.”

“Thank you.” Addison forced a smile.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Crystal said. “Your mother was one of the sweetest people I’ve ever worked with. She will be missed. My card is in the envelope if you have any questions later.”

Crystal left, and I knew they would soon be here to remove her mother’s body.

“So that’s it,” she said, her gaze meeting mine. A tear streaked down her cheek. “I just leave her here, and she has everything already taken care of.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. Reaching out for her, I pulled her into me. “If you need a minute, I can wait outside,” I whispered. “And tonight, I’ll go through everything with you.”

“No.” She sniffled, pushing off my chest and turning back to her mother. “I got to say my goodbyes before she left.” I swiped the tear off her cheek with the pad of my thumb. “I want to go.” I nodded, wrapping an arm across her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” I asked as we walked out of the hospital.

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I think I’m still in shock.” I nodded. “Thanks for staying.” Her gaze flicked up to me, and I smiled. There was nowhere else I would be right now. Everything would sink in in the next few days, and she would need a friend.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, opening her car door. She hadn’t eaten anything all day.

“No,” she shook her head, sliding into the car. “But if you are...”

“I’m good right now.” I slammed her door and jogged to the driver’s side, quickly sliding in. “Where do you want to stay while we are here?” Her gaze snapped up, meeting mine; a brief flash of confusion flickered through her eyes like this was the first time she’d thought about that. “We can stay at your mom’s, or we can stay in my old apartment above the garage, or I can book a hotel room.”

“I don’t want to stay at my mom’s,” she said, her gaze flicking out the window. “Not tonight anyway, and I don’t want you to pay for a hotel, so your place if that’s okay.”

“Yeah.” I smiled, shoving the car into drive.

I was taking her back to stay where it all started. Her first kiss, our first kiss. This could go really good or dredge up all the bad memories and go terribly wrong.

FORTY-TWO

ADDISON

Rounding the corner, my gaze caught a glimpse of Maddox's bare torso coming out of the stairwell as I used a dark blue towel to dry my damp hair.

"I got food." Maddox smiled, holding up the plastic bag filled with black food containers. I wasn't hungry, but I forced a smile. He dropped the bag on the counter before opening and digging through it. "I figured we could eat and go over your mom's paperwork if you wanted to."

"I don't need to go through the envelope," I said, sliding onto the barstool across from Maddox.

He froze, his gaze narrowing on me. "How will you know when the funeral is?"

"My mother didn't believe in funerals," I answered, crossing my arms over the cold granite countertop. "I already know what I'll find in that envelope." I shrugged.

"There was no funeral when your father passed?" Maddox asked.

"No." I shook my head. "She believed funerals were just something to throw money at, and at the time, she didn't have that kind of money." I cleared my throat. "So, he was cremated and put into a two-compartment gold urn, and since the urn had a place for her ashes, I would assume that was her final wish." Maddox nodded, shoving a box of food across the countertop. I flicked the box open. "The only thing I'm unsure about is what happens to the urn. Do I pick it up, or did she buy a plot to bury it?"

“I’m sure it’s in the papers,” Maddox said, strolling around the counter and sliding onto the stool beside me. “If you want, I can go through them for you.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, pushing the fork through my food. I couldn’t explain why, but I wasn’t ready to open that envelope even though it was time-sensitive.

Sitting quietly at the counter, a wave of déjà vu washed over me like I’d been here before in this situation.

I had four years ago. Not this exact situation, but here at this countertop eating with Maddox. The first time Maddox brought me here. Memories of my first kiss pushed forward, the first kiss that happened right here on this countertop. It had been everything I’d dreamed of at the time. My chest fluttered at the memories. The feelings and emotions of how he’d made me feel all flooded to the surface. I cut a sideways glance at Maddox, curious if he even remembered.

Flattening my palm over the cool granite, I slid my hand over the smooth surface. The surface where he’d grabbed me, picked me up, and put me right before he kissed me. A rush of heat surged through me at the vivid memory.

“It’s weird, right?” he muttered, not looking up from his food. “Thinking about what happened on this countertop all those years ago.” Swallowing hard, I squeezed my eyes closed. He did remember. Opening my eyes, I nodded. He had been all I ever wanted. My gaze flicked up to meet his pained stare. His deep blue eyes scanned mine, but I wasn’t entirely sure what he was searching for.

“Thanks for being here,” I said. “I’m not sure what I would have done if you hadn’t been.” I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to truly trust Maddox again, but maybe being friends was a start. It would never be like it was, but maybe starting over, it could be something else.

“Are you tired?” Maddox asked, closing up his food container. Staring at my food, I shook my head. “Do you want to watch a movie?” I thought about the question for a minute. It wasn’t that I didn’t, but there was something I felt like I wanted to do more.

“Actually.” I smiled, sliding off my stool. My gaze flicked up to meet his. “If you’re up for it, there’s somewhere I want to go.”

Sliding off his stool, he reached over the counter, grabbed his keys, and tossed them to me. “Let’s go.” They weren’t the keys to the rental. They were the keys to his truck. The same truck we’d spent so much time in. The same truck I’d given my first blow job in.

“You’re going to let me drive?” I asked, a smile spreading across my face. He nodded. “Okay, you ready?”

“Let’s go!”

FORTY-THREE

ADDISON

Swerving his truck into the abandoned old diner parking lot, I sighed. So much had changed in four years. The once small town had expanded, and now the old mom-and-pop diner was replaced with fancy chain restaurants.

“Are you still hungry?” Maddox cocked a dark brow shoving his door open. I shook my head no as I slipped out of the truck. I wasn’t hungry, but I felt like I needed to get something off my chest.

I followed the path I’d walked many times throughout high school, pushed the old chain link fence to the side, and slipped into the old train yard. Maddox followed without saying a word. Memories flooded back to the first night he’d followed me out here. The night I thought Maddox and I had become friends.

I was wrong.

We stopped in front of my old train car, still covered with the paint I’d put there so many years ago.

“I started painting after my dad died.” I stared at my faded artwork. It had been my own form of therapy. My chest squeezed painfully tight as I remembered the first time I’d come here and why. “It became my release. My way to escape reality. The one place I could come and forget about everything going wrong in my world.” It was my way to channel all my pent-up emotions into something healing, a way to free myself from the pain, and I’d let Maddox steal that from me.

Maddox slid onto one of the old stacked pallets of wood beside me. “The first time I came out here was the summer after my dad died. She started drowning her sorrows in whatever clear liquid she could find, and it wasn’t long before she started to bring strange men home.” Maddox knew some of this already, but I felt like I needed to get it out, to say it out loud, and he was here. “She brought a man home that night, and he found his way to my bed, and she was too drunk to protect me.” My heart clenched at the memory, and my voice began to shake. “I escaped him and his grubby hands.” I shrugged. “This is where I ended up.”

“You came out here to escape home,” he said more as a statement than a question.

“Yeah.” I nodded, and a flicker of pain shot through me. I swallowed past the lump forming in my throat. “And now she’s gone.” I paused as a tidal wave of emotions washed over me. Sadness. Anger. Frustration. Fear but mostly Anger. “I’m angry.” My voice trembled as my vision blurred with tears threatening to fall. “So angry that now I will never get the chance to tell her that what she did was so fucked up.” Maddox reached for me, but I threw a hand out, stopping him. I didn’t want his comfort right now. “Now, I’ll never get to fix what was broken between us. I’ll never get that closure I needed.” I twisted to face him. “I let what happened here, between us, keep me from coming back here after I left.”

“I wasn’t here.” He scowled. “I was in Florida with you.”

“I know.” I smiled. “But coming back here meant remembering, and all I wanted to do was forget.”

“Addison,” he sighed, “I’m sorry...”

“No, Maddox.” I forced a smile. “I’m not telling you any of this because I want you to apologize. I’m telling you because I can’t let what happened between my mom and me happen to us. I can’t let another unresolved issue go without dealing with it and lose the chance to resolve it.”

“Okay,” Maddox said, pushing to his feet. My gaze trailed up, locking on his. “Let’s resolve this then.”

Here went nothing...

“You hurt me,” I unleashed every painful emotion I’d been holding in. “I loved you, and you destroyed me.”

Pain flickered in his eyes as his expression softened. “I’m so sor—” he whispered apologetically.

“But I can’t let what happened all those years ago hold me back anymore,” I said, cutting him off and not giving him a chance to make excuses. I didn’t want his apology. I just wanted to move past this. “I forgive you.” I didn’t know if I would ever be able to forget what he did or trust him again, but I needed to forgive him. Not for him but for me. “I heard everything you said at the hotel, but all I can offer you is friendship.” I wiped away the one tear that managed to escape.

“I’ll take it.” He smiled, reaching down and grabbing an old paint can. “What do you say?” He tossed me the can of paint.

A smile spread across my face as I caught the can. “I think this paint is old and probably doesn’t work anymore.”

“I think you might be surprised.” He waggled his brows. Pressing down on the tiny cap, it blew red paint across the train. My questioning gaze snapped up to his. “Every time I came home, I replaced the paint.” His throat bobbed on a hard swallow. “I guess I hoped I’d run into you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I left a message for you every time I came.” His phone lit up the artwork, revealing all the messages he’d left for me over the years.

I was in shock, completely lost for words as I gaped at the wall. At all the words he’d written to me.

{{I miss you.}}

{{I’m sorry for hurting you.}}

{{I still love you.}}

{{You deserved so much more.}}

{{There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about you.}}

“I really didn’t mean to hurt you,” he whispered, rolling a can of paint in his hands. “I was a dumb kid, and I’m not the same person anymore.”

I believed him for some reason. A raindrop fell from the black sky, hitting my forehead. “We should go before it storms,” I said, looking up.

As I followed him out of the train yard, I felt a sense of relief, like I’d let go of all the hardship I’d been harboring for the last four years.

FORTY-FOUR

ADDISON

“You ready for this?” Maddox asked, staring up at the old wood-framed house. Sucking in a deep breath, I nodded. I wanted to get this over with, and I was glad I didn’t have to do it alone.

Maddox shoved open the front door, and I stepped inside. My gaze flashed around the room. It looked the same as the day I left, minus the ashtrays piled high with half-smoked cigarettes and stacked beer and liquor bottles scattered around the room.

“Where do you want to start?” Maddox asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I replayed the question. This wasn’t the house where I grew up. This wasn’t the house filled with happy memories. This was the house we got stuck with after my dad passed. I wasn’t sure there was anything in this house that I would want.

After my dad died, my mother pawned everything of value to feed her addiction, and I knew that none of our family memories ever made it to this house. She’d been too drunk on moving day and left everything behind. So, where did I want to start?

“My room.” I forced a smile.

Maddox’s phone chimed. “Shit, I gotta take this.” I nodded. He walked out the front door, closing it behind him, and I strolled down the hall toward my old bedroom.

Twisting the knob, I stepped inside, and the only memory that flashed back was the night Maddox showed up at my window. A smile spread across my face as my gaze flashed from the window to the dresser he'd pinned me against. It was the night he'd told me I was his. Standing in front of the dresser, I wrapped my arms around myself protectively.

"Don't do this to yourself," I mumbled. Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes briefly, pushing away the memories. I didn't have the energy to deal with them right now.

Running my hand over the empty dresser, I realized I'd cleaned out everything the day I left for school. Pulling out one of the dresser drawers, I sucked in a deep breath as my gaze landed on the only thing left—a plain white envelope with my name on it in Maddox's handwriting. I'd never opened the letter. I couldn't. It hurt too much to read his words then, but now...

Now, my curiosity outweighed the hurt, and I needed to know. I needed to know what the man who'd traveled home with me and stood by my side during all this had to say all those years ago.

Ripping the envelope out of the drawer, I tore it open. Sliding down to the floor, I unfolded the white sheet of paper.

Addy

I don't know if you'll ever read this, but I need to say this, even if it's not out loud and in person like I wanted to do.

I should have told you the truth weeks ago, but I was scared of losing you.

Before I met you, I was this stupid prick who never expected you to walk in and shake up my entire world the way you did. See, my perspective on everything was so different, but then I met you. I kissed you. I felt you. I fell in love with you, and you changed my entire world.

My breath hitched as my eyes blurred with tears.

At the beginning of the season, I made the stupidest decision of my life. I made a bet that I deeply regretted long before today. I told Asher the bet was off in a weak attempt to redeem myself. To try to make it disappear, and instead, I hurt the one person I cared about the most.

I'm sorry, Addy.

I don't know if you'll ever speak to me again, and I know I fucked up by ever making that bet to begin with, but I need you to know that I

*DID NOT send that video out. I
would never do that to you.*

*I never expected to meet my
soulmate at eighteen years old.*

*I never deserved you... But I
will always love you.*

Maddox

My lungs seized painfully tight as if all the air was sucked out of the room, and my chest ached reading each and every word, wondering if it was true. If he really meant it.

“Sorry about tha...” Maddox trailed off. I twisted around, and my gaze snapped up to meet his. “What’s that?” His gaze lingered on the letter.

“Did you really mean all of this?” I croaked, a single tear escaping. His throat flexed on a hard swallow as his gaze flashed back up to mine.

“Every. Single. Word.” He looked so serious that I actually believed him even though I knew I shouldn’t. The last time I trusted him, he broke me. “And I still mean them.”

I can’t do this with him. Not again.

Clearing my throat, I wiped away the tears. “You really didn’t send that video?” I asked, deciding to ignore everything else he’d said in the letter. A flicker of pain flashed in his eyes, but he shook his head. “Then who did?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Maddox sighed, strolling over to my bed and sitting. “For a long time, I thought it was Maddy, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Why did you think it was Maddy?” I narrowed my eyes. The thought of it being Maddy, the girl I was now trusting with all my secrets, cut a little too deep.

“She was the only person who knew the password to my phone,” he said, eyes locked on mine. “She was also pissed about us and had the most reason to want to hurt you.” I nodded. “But she swears she was in detention on the opposite end of the campus.”

“She was,” I admitted, remembering our encounter that day. “I doubt she could have made it from one end of the campus to the other by the time I saw her. What about Asher?” I thought back to how mad Asher seemed that day, storming off the field.

He shrugged. “It’s possible, I guess, but I was right behind him.”

I folded the letter, shoving it back in the envelope. It didn’t matter anymore who sent them. It happened years ago, and I’d already decided to let it go. Hopefully, Maddy’s friend would be able to end this once and for all.

Pushing off the floor, I stood staring around the empty room. I didn’t want to be here anymore. There was nothing I wanted in this house.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asked as if he’d read my mind.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “Yeah.”



MADDOX SWERVED his truck down a long dirt driveway an hour later, passing a massive remodeled old plantation home. Everything about the property was breathtaking: the huge old oak trees, perfectly manicured lawn, and the lake with a small dock.

Maddox backed the truck up to the lake, put it in park, and killed the engine.

“Where are we?” I smiled, taking in the gorgeous scenery. I’d lived here my whole life and never knew this place existed.

“One of my favorite places back home.” He smiled, sliding out of the truck. He met me at his tailgate. “The main house up at the front of the property belonged to my parents until they divorced, and now my dad and his new wife live there.” He popped the tailgate, dropping it down. “When he married Daniella, I stopped coming out here.”

“Do they know we are here?” My gaze followed Maddox as he hopped into the back of the truck?

“Yes,” he said, throwing out a blanket. “They are in Greece and won’t be back until after we’re gone.” He seemed relieved. He leaned over, offering me a hand and pulling me into the back of the truck. He pulled a few pillows and a cooler out of the truck box.

“Well, don’t you come prepared.” I laughed. He smirked, shrugging dramatically. He’d totally planned this.

“We have dinner,” he said, pulling out two containers of food and handing me one. “And we have drinks.” He pulled out a bottle of beer. “Beer?”

“Thank you.” I took the bottle.

We watched the sunset as we ate, talking about everything and nothing. We laughed as we drank, and before I knew it, I was buzzed and carefree. I’d always been a lightweight when it came to alcohol.

“Truth or dare?” I fell back on the pillows beside him, staring up at the stars in the sky.

“Seriously?” The corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement. I nodded, smiling. “Truth.”

“Hmm,” I hummed. “How many girls have you brought out here?”

“No one,” he said; the seriousness in his tone told me he was telling the truth. “This was my escape after my sister died, maybe even before. I didn’t want to share it with anyone.” I nodded, understanding that. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth.” I smiled.

We sat in silence for a long moment while he decided what to ask. “Do you hate me?” he whispered. My head snapped to the side at the same time his did. Lying face to face, our eyes locked, my chest tightened. Swallowing hard, I shook my head. I probably should have hated him, but I didn’t. Hate took too much energy, and I didn’t have that kind of energy anymore.

Something had shifted between us. The air was thick with something I couldn’t quite pinpoint. Maddox’s words from the letter played back through my head, mixed with all the emotions of him being here with me, and it was all confusing my head and heart.

“Truth or dare?” It wasn’t his turn, but I didn’t care. My stomach fluttered as my eyes lingered on his mouth, and at that moment, all I could think about was kissing him. I wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol or the desperate need to feel him again, but the need was outweighing every other logical thought I had.

“Dare,” I whispered, rolling over to my side. He did the same. Our bodies were so close I could feel the heat radiating from him. I drew in a slow, deep breath as my heart began to race in anticipation.

The tip of his tongue swept across his lips as his gaze dropped to my mouth. A bolt of heat rushed over me as he leaned closer. “Kiss me,” he breathed against my lips, but he didn’t wait for me to come to him. Instead, his mouth captured mine so hard he stole my breath. His hand slid into my hair, pulling my mouth harder against his. His tongue pushed through, devouring every inch of my mouth and making me forget everything, both past and present; I only wanted him. Our bodies flush against each other, he rolled, pinning me underneath him. Closing my eyes, I ached to feel him as heat overtook my body, settling between my thighs.

I might regret this tomorrow, but at that moment, it didn’t matter.

I. Needed. This.

I needed him. I wanted him.

His mouth released mine long enough to rip his shirt over his head before his lips claimed mine in a desperate and frantic kiss. His hands were everywhere as he pulled and tugged at my clothing, frantically tearing them from my body until we were both naked. His lips slid down my throat as his hips pushed into mine, allowing me to feel every inch of his arousal.

Wrapping my legs around him, I sunk my nails into his back. Not enough to break his perfect skin but enough to get his attention. His fingers dug into my flesh as his hot breath hit the cool skin of my throat. He slid his thick erection through the slickness between my thighs, and I moaned with each stroke of his wide head hitting my clit.

“Maddox,” I cried out, needing to feel him. I thrust my hips forward, meeting his as my core throbbed, desperate for him to fill me.

His cock nudged my entrance as he slid his nose up the column of my throat, and with one swift thrust, he filled me. I cried out, and his mouth claimed mine, stealing my moan and swallowing it whole. My pussy walls flexed around him as he stilled, allowing me time to adjust to him.

Rocking my hips, I gasped when he pulled out, driving back in deeper. He pumped in and out, each thrust growing more intense.

“Fuck,” he groaned into my neck as he thrust harder and deeper, grinding into me. His speed picked up as he started fucking me hard and fast, rolling his hips. My pussy clenched along with my entire body as my body started to vibrate.

I needed more.

Thrusting my hips forward, I met his. Heat built low in my stomach, spreading through my body and threatening to explode. His head dropped to my shoulder as every muscle in his body tightened. He was close. I rolled my hips, matching each of his vicious thrusts.

He grunted as he drove himself deeper, grinding himself hard against me and teasing my clit. My entire body stiffened as my orgasm ripped through me, and I exploded in an orgasmic rush so severe every ounce of air exhaled from my lungs as I screamed his name. With one more hard, deep thrust, he emptied himself inside me.

He stilled as his entire body went limp, falling against mine.

As we lay in silence under the stars, the realization of what just happened sunk in. Oddly, I didn't regret it, but I did worry that it would mean something entirely different to him than it did me.

FORTY-FIVE

MADDOX

Our plane didn't fly out until the following evening, and since the annual Riverview County Fair was in town, we decided to get out of the small apartment and have a little fun.

As I walked side by side with Addison through the fairgrounds, I wasn't sure how to read her. She'd been off all morning, and I couldn't help but wonder if it had anything to do with what happened last night.

She'd seemed fine after sex. We'd fallen asleep together in the back of the truck, but her entire mood shifted once we got back to change and make plans for the day. I knew what happened in the back of that truck didn't mean the entire past was gone and she'd not only forgiven me but also forgotten about it, but I'd hoped it meant more than just a casual fuck.

"I used to come here every year," I said, trying to make conversation.

"I've never been." She smiled.

"Wait," I said, stopping her. "You've never been to the fair?" She shook her head. "You've never had funnel cake?" Narrowing her eyes, she shook her head again. "Well, I know what we are doing first."

"Addy," a woman called out behind us. We both twisted around to see Karly standing behind us. "Omigod, it is you!"

"Karly," Addison screamed, and the two tackled each other in a hug. "Omigod, how are you? Where's baby Chaz? Where's big Chaz?" Addison's questions were coming fast and furious.

“They are playing a game.” She laughed, throwing a thumb over her shoulder. “I just came to grab a drink.” Karly’s eyes cut to me and then back to Addison. She didn’t seem surprised to see me with Addison. “I didn’t realize you were home.”

“Only for a few days,” Addison said. “We leave tomorrow night.” She didn’t say anything about her mom or why we were here, and I couldn’t help but wonder why.

“Well, I got Maddy’s message, and I was going to fly out there this weekend, but since you’re here.” I narrowed my eyes, and so did Addison. “You did ask Maddy to call me to help, right?”

“Help with what?” Addison asked.

“She said you needed me to hack into some devices to get rid of those videos,” she paused, her gaze flicking to me, “that he sent out.” Wait, what? “She said they were black—”

“Oh,” Addison cut her off, her eyes cut over to me before quickly snapping back to Karly. “Uh yeah. That.” Karly narrowed her eyes. “Um.”

“What the fuck is going on?” I growled.

Karly’s eyes flashed between us. “He doesn’t know?” Addison cleared her throat before shaking her head. “Oh fuck, I’m sorry, Addison. I—” she trailed off when her phone chimed. “Shit, I have to go. Come by tomorrow before you leave, and we can see what we need to do.” Addison nodded as we watched Karly disappear into the crowd.

“What’s going on, Addison?” I hissed, stepping in front of her. “What the fuck is she talking about?”

“Maddox,” she snapped, sidestepping me. “I need you to let this go, please.” She stormed towards the exit, but I was right on her heels. Karly didn’t finish her sentence, but I knew what she was about to say. Someone was blackmailing Addison, but who and with what? She’d said videos that he sent. Did she mean me?

“Not a chance in hell,” I snarled. I let her make it to the parking lot before I wrapped my fingers around her upper arm

and jerked her to a stop. “Who?”

“Who, what?”

“Who is blackmailing you?” I growled. “And why?”

“Maddox, please,” she pleaded. My gut twisted as I took in the sheer panic covering her face. “You’ll only make this worse.” My heart clenched at the thought of someone hurting her.

“Addison,” I snapped, starting to lose my patience. “Who?”

“It’s your best buddy,” a familiar female voice said from behind me. When I twisted around, I expected to see Maddy, but I didn’t. I saw Karly. My brows pinched with confusion because I knew it was Maddy’s voice I heard. Karly turned her phone around, and Maddy’s face illuminated the screen.

“My best buddy,” I mouthed, blinking in confusion. What best buddy?

“Stop it,” Addison yelled at Maddy. Her tone mixed with panic and anger. “Stop it.” She grabbed my wrist. “Maddox, if you get involved in this, it could ruin my life again for the second time. So, please, just let me handle this.”

Digging between the lines of her words, I muttered. “Asher.” Was Asher holding that old video over her head again? Who else could it be? “I’ll kill him.”

“Stop it, Maddox,” Karly growled, shoving a finger into my chest. “If you do anything, you take the chance of a repeat of high school, so chill and let me handle this.”

“My plane leaves in a few hours,” Maddy said through the speaker. “I have everything you need, Karly.” Karly smiled at the phone, then disconnected.

“This ends tomorrow.” Karly smirked. “Be at my house tomorrow around eleven. I’ll get Maddy from the airport tonight and see you two tomorrow.”

We both watched Karly disappear into the crowd of people.

“I promise not to interfere,” I lied. Of course, I wouldn’t interfere today or tomorrow, but Asher was dead once I knew this was over. “But please tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Sitting on the tailgate of my truck, she told me everything—every last detail.

“So, Asher is forcing you to tutor me, and if you don’t, he’ll send out the video.” She nodded. It all made sense now. She’d refused to tutor me for years, and all of a sudden, she was agreeable to it, and now I knew why. “What video?”

“The video of us in your truck,” she whispered. “The one I didn’t know you’d taken.” I fought the wave of embarrassment rushing over me as the realization of what she was saying sank in; another one of my stupid choices in high school was haunting her.

I’d forgotten all about that video. It hadn’t been sent out, so I deleted it immediately to ensure it wasn’t. I didn’t realize anyone had it.

“Addy, I’m so sorry,” I apologized. “I was—”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Maddox,” she cut me off, shooting me a cold glare. “What’s done is done, and now we need to move forward, but first, I need Karly to get rid of those videos.”

A wide range of conflicting emotions washed over me as I nodded. I knew nothing tied her to me after those videos were gone. She’d only agreed to tutor me because she was forced to because of something I did four years ago. Once they were gone, she’d be free, and I’d probably never see her again. My heart squeezed painfully, knowing that if that happened, I’d have to let her go.

FORTY-SIX

ADDISON

At exactly 11:30, we knocked on Karly's front door. Then we spent thirty minutes catching up before Karly finally dragged us to her first-floor office.

"Why did you tell him it was Asher?" I hissed, slapping Maddy's arm when Maddox excused himself from the room.

"Ow." She sneered, grabbing her arm. "The cat was out of the bag, Addison." She shrugged. "He wasn't going to let it go." I knew she was right, and even I would have caved under enough pressure.

"I'm sorry." Karly sighed, leaning back in her chair. "It's my fault. I assumed he knew, especially since this was all because of him."

"I didn't tell him because I didn't want him to make the situation worse," I said, my gaze flashing to the other side of the sliding glass door where Maddox was. "But so far, he seems to be handling it okay."

"I'll be right back," Karly said, pushing out of her fluorescent pink and black gaming chair. "I need to grab something." She disappeared through the door, and I sank onto the small black leather loveseat.

"Was Coach pissed Maddox wasn't at practice?" I asked.

Maddy snorted a laugh. "No," she shook her head. "He's had bigger fish to fry." I narrowed my eyes cocking my head to the side. "Look, you didn't hear this from me, okay?" I nodded, my eyes urging her to continue. "His wife found out

he's been having an affair." My face dropped as her words sank in.

"Wife?" I repeated. My lungs seized with realization, and my chest constricted. Chance was married?

"Yeah." She laughed. "He had Asher wipe all of his hard drives. Apparently, she only found out about one, and he'd had several."

"Wife?" I repeated again, this time louder.

"Yeah," she said, her brows pinched. "You didn't know he was married?" I shook my head, a mixture of dread and anxiety twisting in my gut. "She's eight months pregnant with his third daughter." I felt sick as my stomach churned with disgust. "She comes to all his games."

"I don't go to the games," I mumbled. How could I not have known Chance was married with kids? We dated—scratch that—we fucked for two years.

"Okay," Karly said, swinging around the corner. "Let's do this." I forced a smile as she dropped into her chair. I didn't have time to deal with the emotions swirling through my head.

"So, to be safe," Maddy said, handing Karly a folded paper. "I got the IP Addresses for the entire team."

"This could take a while," Karly's gaze flashed up from her list, locking on mine. "So if you have to leave, just let me know."

"I'm staying," I said, pushing off the couch and strolling towards them. "I'll let Maddox know he can go back so he doesn't miss the game."

"What's up with him?" Karly asked, jutting her chin towards the sliding glass door leading to the patio where Maddox was sitting, staring aimlessly into the distance.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "He hasn't really said much since we left the fair last night." Sucking in a deep breath, I bit my bottom lip as my gaze trailed over Maddox, who was obviously bothered by something. "You guys, go ahead and get started. I'm going to talk to him."

Sliding the glass door open, I stepped out into the cool air. Maddox was so deep in his thoughts he didn't notice me.

"Hey," I said, sliding into the chair beside him. I waited a minute for a response, but it never came. "Karly said this could take a while, so I'm going to stay."

"I changed the tickets this morning," he said dryly, staring off into the distance. "We'll fly into Buffalo tomorrow morning for the game and ride back with the team."

"You don't have to stay." I leaned forward in the chair, my gaze fixed on him.

"I'm staying."

Biting down on my bottom lip, I nodded. Something was bothering him, and I couldn't figure out what it was. Was he mad about having to stay or that he'd caused all this?

"You want to talk about whatever's bothering you?" He shook his head, still staring off into space. "Maddox."

"What?" He shrugged, finally making eye contact.

"What's going on?"

Biting down on his bottom lip, he sucked in a deep breath. "What happens once the videos are gone?" I narrowed my eyes. I wasn't sure what he was asking. "Do I need to find a new tutor?" Realization washed over me. I was only tutoring him because I was being forced to, but I didn't have to once the videos were gone.

"I committed to tutoring you for the rest of this season." I smiled. "And I'm honoring that commitment. I will tutor you until the season is over."

"And after?" He raised a brow.

"That's all I can give you, Maddox." I shrugged. "We are friends." I cleared my throat.

"And what about last night?" He shoved his hand through his thick, dark hair.

"Look, I didn't want to get into this here, but that probably shouldn't happen again."

He laughed. Who was I kidding? No one. It would happen again even if I tried to fight it.

“Friends with benefits, I guess, but that’s all I can give you.”

His lips curled into a smile as he nodded. “If that’s all I get, then I’ll take it.”

FORTY-SEVEN

MADDOX

Nine hours.

That's how long Karly had been working on clearing any evidence that those videos ever existed from each and every device. It made my stomach roll at the thought of Asher sending that video out to everyone on the team—well, everyone but me.

Glancing at my watch, I realized Addison had been gone for over an hour. She'd said she needed air, and since we were all hungry, we sent her for pizza. I imagined it was all overwhelming for her, the thought of guys she tutored every day having those videos, but so far, the only devices with the videos were Ashers, and they were gone now.

“That's it,” Karly announced proudly, falling back in her seat. “That's all the devices here; only one had the videos.”

“So that's it?” I pushed out of my chair.

Karly nodded.

“Almost,” Maddy sighed. I narrowed my eyes. “There's still the boyfriend, or well, ex-boyfriend.”

“Who?”

“I don't know who he is.” Maddy shrugged. “I just know he threatened her with the videos.”

“Are you talking about Coach?” I muttered.

“No, Maddox,” Maddy scowled. “I'm talking about the douche that just dumped her and threatened to use those

vid..." She trailed off, her face falling in realization. "Wait, is it Coach?" It hit us at the same time that we were talking about the same thing. Coach was her ex, and he'd threatened her.

I was going to get kicked off the team and out of school when I get back. I'd promised Addison I wouldn't do anything as long as those videos were out there to hang over her head, but once the videos were gone, so was that promise.

"Pizza," Addison called from outside the doorway, and when she stepped through, all eyes were locked on her. "What's up?" She pinched her brows together, sensing we were talking about her.

"We're done," Karly said a little too quickly.

"Well, almost," Maddox said.

"Yeah," Maddy interrupted. "There's one more."

"Who?" Addison asked. Maddy's eyes shifted to me, and Addison's followed.

"Me?" I pointed to myself. "I deleted everything after Addy left." My gaze shifted to Karly. I hadn't wanted to because it was all I'd had left of her, but I didn't want to risk anything else getting out there.

"He did." Karly sighed. "I was with him when he did it." Addison narrowed her questioning eyes on Karly, but whatever question she had, she didn't ask.

"But here," I said, pulling my phone out of my pocket and holding it out to Addison. "Check. My laptop and tablet are back at the apartment if you want to go through those, too."

"Maybe you two should talk this out in private," Karly suggested. Addison bit down on her bottom lip as she nodded.

"Pizza's in the kitchen," Addison said before disappearing out the door with Karly following.

"I thought you said he might have the videos?" I whispered once I knew she was out of hearing range.

"If it's Coach," she said more as a question. I nodded, confirming that I knew it was Coach. "Then Asher already did

that for us. He was wiping coach's hard drive before I left."

"How do you know he didn't resend it?"

"Trust me," Maddy snorted a laugh. "Coach doesn't want to get caught with those videos right now."

"His wife," I muttered. She nodded. Anger raced through my veins as it sank in what the two of them had been doing to her. My best friend and my coach. "I'm going to kill both of them."

"Maddox," Maddy snapped. "You've got one chance to make this right. Don't fuck it up." I knew what she meant. Addison and I were 'friends,' and now the videos were gone, and now Addison could be Addison without all the added pressure. I just had to remind her why she liked me to begin with.

"Pizza's getting cold," Karly yelled down the hallway.

"Let's eat." Maddy smiled, strolling toward the door.

"Maddy?" She stopped twisting to see me. "How did Asher get those videos?" It just dawned on me that the only video sent out that day in high school was the one of Addy removing her bra. None of the other videos or pictures were sent to anyone, but Asher had them all.

"I think that would be a question for Asher," Maddy whispered, but the guilt covering her face told me she knew how. So my only questions were how did she know, and was she part of it?

I decided not to ask any more questions for the night. If Maddy did have something to do with it, she wouldn't admit it. I'd questioned her hundreds of times over the last few years, and never once had she given any clue that she might have been involved.

Maddy and Addison's loud laughs distracted me from my thoughts, pulling my attention to the three girls. Anger bloomed in my chest as my gaze fixed on Maddy. If Maddy was part of those videos going viral, she could still have copies now.

There was no point in calling her out now. She only had her cell phone, and letting her know I was suspicious would only lead to panic. When we got back, I would have Karly hack Maddy's devices and make sure they were clear, too.

It was midnight before we said our goodbyes and left. We both had to catch a flight to Buffalo in three hours. Pulling out my phone, I sent Karly a quick text warning her Maddy could have the videos before opening my truck door and pulling myself in.

FORTY-EIGHT

ADDISON

It was the first time I'd been to a game since high school. It was ten times bigger than the high school field where I used to watch him, but it still gave me all the same feels. Before Maddox left the hotel room, he'd laid out a jersey with his name and number on it. It took me thirty minutes to decide whether or not to wear it, but eventually, I gave in and slid into the jersey. Wearing a man's jersey that he gave you in college was equivalent to wearing his letterman's jacket in high school, but I decided I'd boldly drawn the line between us. He understood we were friends.

Blowing out an exasperated sigh, I shook my head. I wasn't sure if I was trying harder to convince myself or him that this was no more than a friendship. My head knew that was how it had to be, but my heart was confused. Maddox was right. He wasn't the same kid who'd hurt me. He was a man who'd been there when I needed someone, but I wasn't sure I could convince my mind that he wouldn't hurt me again like he did back then.

I shook my head again, focusing my attention back on the field. Thirty seconds were left in the fourth quarter, and we were leading by seven points, but it was the opposing team's ball. Scooting to the edge of my seat, my gaze focused on their quarterback as he threw the ball. Sucking in a heavy breath, I watched the ball fly through the air. A player from our team, the Hawks, soared through the air, catching the ball and tucking it tightly against him as he tumbled to the ground.

Interception.

The crowd roared, with fans screaming, cheering, and chanting.

Game over.

The Hawks didn't get another touchdown, but their fans didn't care; they'd won. I let the crowds thin down before leaving my seat. I was meeting Maddox by the back exit near the locker rooms, and it would be a while before he was done. I'd agreed to a dinner outside the hotel, and then he'd consented to an hour of tutoring.

I watched as, one by one, players from both teams pushed through the exit. My phone vibrated in my hand, distracting me.

Maddox: Got tied up, be out in a few.

Addison: Hurry up, I'm starving.

Maddox: You look good in my jersey.

A smile spread across my face as my gaze flashed up toward the exit, but it wasn't Maddox exiting. I froze as my smile faded when my eyes locked on Chance. I don't know why it never crossed my mind that I might run into him waiting for Maddox, but it didn't.

His gaze dropped down to the jersey I wore, and there was no mistaking the flash of anger in his eyes. Fuck.

"You're wearing his jersey," he muttered, anger coloring his tone. "Are you Maddox's little slut now?"

"Fuck you, Chance," I hissed, crossing my arms over my chest. "What do you care? You told me to do whatever I needed to do." I shrugged.

He stepped into my personal space, dropping his duffle bag. "Careful, little girl." His tone was low and threatening. My jaw clenched as I swallowed my fear. We were in the middle of a parking lot. A parking lot that should have been crowded with ballers was empty. "Don't forget who's in control here. I will ruin you."

The fear of those videos surfacing was gone, and I felt like, for the first time, I could stand up for myself.

“Get off me,” I hissed, shoving him out of my space. “Or maybe I should have a chat with your wife.”

Every bit of air was violently exhaled from my lungs when he slammed his body hard against mine, pinning me against Maddox’s truck. His fingers fisted into my hair, and I cried out in pain when he jerked my head back so forcefully I thought he might rip my hair out.

“Don’t you fucking threaten me, bitch,” he growled, his hot breath fanning across my cheek.

“Chance,” I pleaded as his fingers curled around my neck.

“You’re probably the little whore who called my wife,” he growled.

“I didn’t...” My words were cut off as his grip tightened around my throat. My hands pulled and scratched frantically at his hands and wrist, trying to loosen his grip. Chance had lost it. He was going to kill me. My eyes locked on his, desperately pleading with him to let me go, but it was pointless. His eyes were dark and hollow, soulless.

Just as my body started succumbing to the darkness, his hand was gone, and I collapsed to my knees, coughing, desperate to draw a deep breath.

My gaze flashed up, searching for Chance, praying he was gone, but he was no longer standing. Maddox had him on his knees in a chokehold.

“Maddox,” I gasped. He was going to ruin his dreams. He would be kicked off the team, maybe even out of the school. Chance’s face paled as Maddox dropped his head to Chance’s ear, whispering something I couldn’t hear. “Maddox!” Maddox’s gaze flashed up, meeting mine. Anger rolled off him in violent waves as he dropped his arms, shoving Chance forward simultaneously, then extending to his full height.

I expected Chance to retaliate, but he didn’t. Instead, he scrambled to his feet, bolting for his vehicle, not even bothering to grab the bag he’d dropped at my feet.

“Are you okay?” Maddox asked, his face lined with worry. I nodded.

“He’s going to kick you off the team,” I muttered as he pulled me to my feet.

“Don’t worry about him,” he said, pulling me into him. “He won’t be a problem anymore.”

I hoped he was right.

FORTY-NINE

ADDISON

It had been three days since Chance attacked me in the parking lot, and my hands still trembled at the thought of seeing him again. He was my boss. It was only a matter of time before we came face to face. A chill raced up my spine at the thought of what could have happened if Maddox hadn't come out when he did.

I yelped, jumping out of my skin when a tap sounded on my office door. My gaze flashed up, expecting to see Chance.

"I'm sorry, Addison," Karen Peterson exclaimed, stepping into my office. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Sucking in a deep breath, I shook my head before blowing it out to steady myself. "No, you're fine," I reassured her, placing my hand over my heart. "How can I help you?" Ms. Peterson was Chance's boss in the tutoring department, and I rarely dealt with her directly.

"Well, dear, I was hoping for a favor." She smiled a polite smile. "Coach Brown resigned this morning, effective immediately." My face fell as my eyes went wide. "I know it was a surprise to everyone, but he does have a new baby due any day now, so we completely understand him accepting a job closer to home, but that leaves us with a vacancy here at the tutoring center." She slid into the seat across from my desk. "I was hoping you could fill the position until you graduate at the end of this semester."

"Me?"

She nodded. “I know you only have three classes,” she said.

“Two,” I corrected her. I’d started college early, and now I only needed two classes to graduate with a Bachelor’s in Communications with a minor in Sports Media.

“Sorry, two.” She smiled apologetically. “And I figured you could use the raise that would come with it.”

Pressing my lips into a tight line, I thought hard about her offer. It would be an amazing opportunity, especially to add the title of supervisor to my resume, but it also meant cutting down my caseload of tutoring. The only student I currently tutored was Maddox, and I promised him I would continue to tutor him until the end of the season. Of course, I would be able to continue tutoring him. However, I wouldn’t be able to travel with him anymore, and I wouldn’t be available on demand.

“Why don’t you think about it?” She smiled, pushing out of the chair. “Let me know by tomorrow evening.”

“What about the head coaching position?”

“Coach Taylor, our assistant coach, will be stepping into the position,” she said, standing in the doorway. “Let me know what you decide tomorrow.” Then, with one last smile, she disappeared.

I picked up my phone to text Maddox, but he’d already texted me.

Maddox: I’m in class, and I can’t focus.

He must have already heard about Coach.

Addison: Why is that?

Maddox: I keep thinking about the way you looked in my jersey.

Oh... That wasn’t what I expected at all. A smile spread across my face.

Addison: Are you flirting with me?

The bubble popped up and then disappeared. Then came back and then disappeared. He didn't know how to respond, which made me smile. It suddenly felt like high school again, but I knew better than to send a picture of me in said jersey this time.

Maddox: 100% yes.

I laughed.

Addison: I need to talk to you. When is your last class, and do you have practice today?

Maddox: Is that what we are calling it?

I narrowed my eyes at the screen as I reread the text out loud.

Maddox: "Talk?"

Then he added two winky faces. He was still flirting. I laughed as I typed out a response, but he beat me.

Maddox: No practice tonight, and my last class is now.

Maddox: I can come pick you up.

Addison: I'll be waiting outside.

A huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. The videos being deleted had helped, but knowing Chance was gone and I'd never have to see him or speak to him again was what finally set me free. I was completely freed from every part of my past that had tied me down and free to make a whole new set of bad decisions.

Quickly gathering my things, I stormed toward the exit. Maddox had science today, and the science building was

directly behind the student center, so it wouldn't take him long to meet me.

FIFTY

ADDISON

Settling into a shady spot in the park near campus, Maddox handed me a food container we'd picked up on our way out here. Neither of us had any more obligations for the day, so we'd decided to take our food out to the park to eat and talk.

"So, what's up?" Maddox asked, handing me a water bottle.

I had planned to tell Maddox that Chance had resigned and discuss my new job offer, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Maddox had something to do with Chance's resignation.

"What did you say to Coach?" I asked, opening my water bottle. His face pinched as his gaze locked on mine. "After your game when he attacked me."

"Nothing much." He shrugged.

"Maddox," I warned. "We agreed to be honest with each other. No more secrets or lies. That's the only way this works."

Sucking in a deep breath, he nodded with a sigh. "I told him that if he ever so much as looked in your direction again, this video would be the one going viral," he said. "And if he ever threatened you again, after I killed him, the mugshot of me smiling would go viral."

"What video?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"The video of him hurting you."

"You got that on video?" I snapped.

“No.” He shook his head. “I didn’t have time. When I came out, he already had his hands wrapped around your throat. But he didn’t know I didn’t get a video of it, and that was all that mattered. Plus, he knew I found out about him threatening you.”

“He’ll probably tell Asher,” I said.

“Good, I hope he’s terrified, wondering what I’ll do.”

“Coach resigned this morning,” I said, a slow smile spreading across my face. “But you already knew that, didn’t you.”

He nodded. “Look, since we are talking about all this right now, I should probably tell you,” he paused, clearing his throat. “I threatened Coach after I found out about the two of you. He was mad, and he took it out on you.” He pressed his lips into a thin line, waiting for me to yell at him, but I wasn’t going to.

“You knew he was married?”

“I did,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you wouldn’t have believed me.” He shrugged. “You would have thought I was lying to ruin the perfect relationship you thought you had.” Sucking in a deep breath and slowly exhaling, I knew he was right. At that point, I wouldn’t have believed Maddox over Chance. I nodded. “There’s more...”

“More,” I repeated, my eyebrows raising. He nodded. “Okay?”

“When we were at Karly’s, it dawned on me that Asher had every one of the videos and pictures I’d taken,” he said, and I nodded, not exactly following where he was going with this. “Only one video was sent out in high school. Asher had all of them.”

“Okay.” I scowled, drawing out the word, still not following him.

“I asked Maddy how Asher got all of them,” he said. “And she said that was a question I should ask Asher.”

“Maddox, I’m not understanding.”

“Maddy knew how he got them,” he snapped. “I don’t know if she was part of it or she found out after, but she knew. Guilt was written all over her face.”

“Maddox, we already determined that Maddy was on the other end of the campus,” I reminded him. “There’s no way she could have sent them from your phone.”

“Yeah, we did, but that’s where this gets interesting,” he said. “After we left Karly’s, I texted Karly and told her I thought Maddy was involved somehow back then, and since Maddy was staying with her, she was able to dig through Maddy’s devices while she slept to see if Maddy had any of the pictures or videos that Asher had.”

My chest tightened painfully. Maddy and I were friends. I trusted her. “And?”

“There weren’t any pictures,” he said, and I blew out a breath. “But after having a conversation with Karly, I realized that it had to have been Maddy who sent that video out. Asher was involved too, but the person who hit send that day was Maddy.”

“Okay,” I said. “Again, I don’t know how it could have been her.”

“Karly broke it down for me,” he said. “See, after I explained to her that I made it into the locker room mere seconds after Asher, we realized it couldn’t have been Asher. I was at my locker when the video was sent out, and what I didn’t think was weird then that I do now is that I got a message alert at the exact same time as everyone else from my number.”

“Wait,” I scowled. “Are you saying that your phone was texted the video from your phone?”

“It wasn’t from my phone, but it was from my number,” he explained. “Karly explained that whoever it was used a texting

app. They sent the video from my number using an app to make it look like I sent it.”

“Maddy,” I muttered. He nodded.

“She had the means and definitely the motives,” he said. “She was the only one who knew the passcode to my phone, and she was pissed, especially after she saw you wearing my jacket.” He shrugged. “It was definitely her, and I’m telling you because I don’t know if she’s also behind all of this.”

“How did she get the pictures, though?”

“I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “But she must have gotten a hold of my phone at some point and sent herself everything.”

“She’s been helping me,” I whispered.

“I know,” he said, brushing a loose strand of hair out of my face. “And maybe she’s trying to make up for what she did, but it’s hard to believe that someone so vindictive back then has changed.”

FIFTY-ONE

ADDISON

The Knights had just won another home game, and not only were the fans going wild, but also the girls.

“We love you, Maddox,” a group of girls chanted from the stadium stands. He flashed an all-white smile up to them, and they swooned.

My stomach fluttered as I watched him flash his perfect smile for the camera as he gave his after-game interview for not only the school but also the local and national news. His hair was slick with sweat, but the excitement in his bright blue eyes and smile said it all.

“Rumor has it the NFL has their eyes on you,” a reporter said. “Any truth to that?”

Maddox laughed. “I still have a few weeks left in this season to get through.”

Good answer, Maddox.

“Maddox, will you marry me?” a young blonde screamed from the bleachers, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“The ladies love you,” Cole, one of our school reporters, smiled. “What is your current dating status?”

Maddox’s gaze shifted to me for a brief moment before turning back to the crowd of reporters.

“I’m interested in someone.” Maddox smiled as his gaze shifted back to me, and everyone within earshot of Maddox’s interview followed his eyes to me, wearing his jersey. Shit.

Every girl in the stadium stands voiced their disappointment in a dramatic wave of sighs. A bolt of anger surged through me as I realized not only had their gazes shifted but also their cameras.

Even though he didn't say the word, the world would now label me as Maddox Parker's girlfriend. But I was not his girlfriend. I was his tutor, maybe even his friend, but girlfriend, no. Those four words would ruin any chance I had of a dating life.

"That's all, guys." Maddox smiled before heading over to me. Pressing my lips into a thin line, my eyes flashed between Maddox's and the rolling cameras and reporters. My chest tightened as a wave of panic washed over me, and I bolted toward the tunnel. Maddox talking to me in front of the camera would only solidify that I was the girl he was talking about.

"Addison," Maddox called out behind me, but I didn't stop; I kept going. "Addison." His firm grip wrapped around my wrist, jerking me to a stop.

"What, Maddox?" I snapped, glaring at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his brows pinched together.

"What's wrong?" I repeated sarcastically. My chest tightened with anger. "Why would you tell everyone you're interested in me?"

"I didn't," he corrected me, looking so serious. "I told them I was interested in someone. The rest they figured out for themselves."

"Why would you insinuate that you're interested in me?"

"Because I am," he said matter-of-factly. My lungs constricted so tightly that it was hard to breathe. "What's the big deal?"

"Maddox," I growled, jerking my wrist out of his grasp. "You know exactly what you did, and now..." His hands grabbed my face, and his mouth crashed against mine, cutting off my words. His kiss was so insanely intense that every ounce of fear and panic faded, and I melted into him.

In that moment, nothing mattered but his soft lips against mine. The chemistry between us was explosive, and even though I knew I shouldn't, I couldn't help but want what I thought we had then.

“I told them there was someone I was interested in,” he said, cupping my face and forcing me to look at him after breaking from the kiss. “Because I’m interested, and I’m not going to pretend I’m not anymore.” Swallowing hard, I nodded. “I know what I want, and it’s you. It’s always been you, so I’m going after what I want with every ounce of my being.”

“But I said...”

“I know what you said,” he cut me off, dropping his hands to his side. “If you decide you still want to walk away at the end of the season, I’ll let you go, but I’ve got you for another few weeks, and I’m all in.” His words tore through me. He was ‘all in.’

Without another word, he stormed toward the locker room, leaving me alone in the dark tunnel.

What the fuck just happened?

FIFTY-TWO

ADDISON

Holding my hands out, I let the heat from the bonfire warm them as I tried to keep my eyes focused on the fire and not Maddox across the lawn, smiling his perfect smile at some blonde. He hadn't said much to me since we'd left the stadium. He'd offered to take me home, but I didn't want to go home, not with him upset with me. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to say I wanted him to, and if he had been anyone else, I would have already, but he wasn't someone else, and what happened all those years ago still left burn marks on my heart.

"So," Maddy squealed, stepping up beside me. Forcing a smile without taking my eyes off Maddox, I crossed my arms over my chest. "I saw Maddox after-game interview." She bumped me with her shoulder. "I guess it's finally official, then?" Sucking in a deep breath, I shrugged, sighing as I dropped my shoulders. "What?" She pinched her brows. "You are taking playing hard to get to a whole new level." She laughed.

Forcing a smile, I twisted away from the fire to face her. I hadn't seen Maddy since we left Karly's house, and I needed to clear the air before I discussed anything personal with her.

"Maddy, I need to ask you a question." She twisted to face me. Her expression shifted like she knew what was coming. She sucked in a deep breath as her eyes met mine and nodded. "Did you steal the photos of me from Maddox in high school?" Closing her eyes, she groaned. "Whatever you say stays between us. I'm not going to tell Maddox."

“Why not?” she asked, opening her eyes.

“It’s not my story to tell,” I smiled. “But you will eventually have to answer to him too.” She nodded, her gaze flicking back to the fire.

“No, I didn’t steal the pictures.” Somehow, I already knew that, but I knew there was more to the story.

“But?” I narrowed my eyes.

“But,” she sighed, “I gave Asher the password to steal them from Maddox’s phone, and I sent them out to everyone.” Her gaze flicked back to me. “I’m sorry, Addison. I didn’t know there were more pictures or videos and that Asher had them until you told me.” I nodded, believing her. “I swear I’m not the same person I was back then, and I really want to make it up to you now.”

“Why did you do it?” Even though I knew the answer, I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Because you had what I thought I wanted.” She shrugged. “And I thought you were standing in my way of having him, but the truth is, even if it wasn’t you, he still would never look at me the way he looks at you.”

“I forgive you.” I sighed after several long seconds. I was done holding on to this, and forgiveness was the first step, right? My gaze shifted from Maddy back to Maddox. “Do you think he’d take her home if I wasn’t here?”

“No.” She scowled. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“What’s that?”

“Maddox is obsessed with you. I don’t know what’s going on right now, but he’s not leaving with anyone but you.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “Do you want him to take her home?”

“Honestly,” I shrugged, “I don’t know what I want. Maybe it would be easier if he did.”

“How come you can forgive me but not him?” Maddy asked.

“Because I wasn’t in love with you,” I whispered. “Because I didn’t give you my trust only to have you break it.”

“Addison, we aren’t the same people we were in high school.” She smiled, her face softening. “And you owe it to yourself to see what this is.” She waved her finger between Maddox and me.

“And what if he destroys me again?”

“And what if he doesn’t?” She shrugged, and my gaze blinked from Maddox up to her. She was right. What if he didn’t this time? “Plus, I think the only one who has the possibility of being destroyed is him.”

I huffed out a laugh. “You think I could hurt him?”

“I think you could destroy him.” Her tone was so earnest I almost believed her. My gaze flashed back to Maddox, who was still talking with the same blonde. I didn’t know if what Maddy said was true, but she was right. I did owe it to myself to see what, if anything, this chemistry was between Maddox and me. I needed to know that if I chose to walk away at the end of the season, there would be no question about my decision, and I could move forward without ever looking back.

“I’ll see you later, Maddy.” I flashed her a smile before storming towards Maddox.

“You’re so funny.” The blonde fake laughed at whatever joke Maddox had told, and I couldn’t stop my eyes from rolling.

“Hey.” I smiled, inserting myself between them.

“Excuse me,” the blonde sneered, “we were in the middle of a conversation.”

“I’m sorry,” I said to Maddox, ignoring the blonde. “Take me home.”

“Bitch,” the blonde hissed, trying to step around me.

Twisting around to face her, I forced a fake smile. “Look, I know you totally thought he was going home with you tonight, and I’m so sorry I let you believe that for as long as I did.”

“What?” She narrowed her eyes.

“I’m all in,” I said, twisting back around to him. His mouth curved into a smile as he reached out, cupping my jaw. My breathing hitched as he leaned in, pressing his full, soft lips against mine.

“What the fuck ever,” the blonde groaned, giving up.

“Let’s get out of here,” he breathed against my lips. Then, slipping his hand into mine, I let him lead me to the truck.

“See you guys tomorrow.” Maddy smirked, still standing in front of the fire.

I bit back a smile as my eyes met hers. “Thank you,” I mouthed, and she nodded. We strolled toward his truck hand in hand.

“Your place or mine?” Maddox asked, sliding into the driver’s side and slamming the door shut behind him. Neither, I wanted him now. His truck was tucked into the darkness of a field. No one could see unless they were looking too hard.

I gripped his shirt, bunching the material in my fingers as I pulled myself over, straddling his lap. The skirt to my dress hiked up as I spread my legs over him. Maddox held his hands up in surrender as his wide eyes watched me sink onto his lap.

Leaning in, I brushed my lips against his ear as his hands settled on my hips. “I want you to fuck me,” I breathed, letting the heat from my breath fan across the shell of his ear. “Right here, right no...” His hand tangled in my hair, jerking my head back. His lips slammed into mine, cutting off my words.

A low growl vibrated deep in his throat as his hand tightened in my hair, holding me in place. My lips parted, and his tongue thrust through as I met him stroke for stroke, our tongues tangling together. His arm curled around my waist, pulling me closer as his fingertips dug into the sensitive skin.

Reaching down, I hiked my skirt up around my waist, giving me the freedom to situate myself over him so I could feel every inch of his throbbing erection through the cloth of his pants. Releasing my hair, his hands reached for the straps of my dress, jerking it down past my bra.

Breaking from the kiss, I gasped for air as his lips trailed over my jawline, throat, neck, and collarbone, teasing and tasting every bit of skin he could reach. Grinding myself against the hardness in his pants, my head fell back on a moan as I gripped the headrest behind him, giving him better access to my throat. He unhooked my bra, and I let it fall off, tossing it to the side.

“Holy fuck,” I moaned as his mouth closed over my nipple rolling his tongue and flicking the taut bud. I rolled my hips hard against him.

His fingers curled into my ass, pulling me hard against his erection. My toes curled, and my eyes rolled back as my fingernails dug into the headrest, holding on for dear life as I sailed closer to the edge. His hips thrust up as he guided me back and forth over him, grinding my center into him, each stroke hitting my clit until I was close to coming undone.

Reaching back, he pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it to the side with my bra. I let my gaze trail over every perfect inch of his chiseled body.

His hand wrapped around the back of my neck as his lips collided with mine in a kiss so fierce it stole the air from my lungs. His other hand worked frantically at his pants until he'd freed himself.

Rolling my hips over him, I'm ready. I needed him inside of me. He hooked a finger through the side of my thin lace panties, sliding it over my soaking wet pussy. I moaned into his mouth, and he swallowed it whole. Then, hooking my panties in one finger, he jerked them to the side, guiding me over his length.

Sliding my hand into his hair, my fingers curled into his hair, pulling his face hard into my chest as I slid over him, coating him with my arousal and crying out every time his wide head stroked my clit.

Eyes on me, he adjusted himself, and I lifted my hips, ready for him. I didn't waste any time sinking onto him with a throaty groan as he stretched me. My head fell back as he covered my chest and collarbone with a trail of hot, wet kisses.

My core tightened as I inched closer and closer, grinding myself deep and hard against him.

“Fuck me, baby,” his voice was a low and raspy whisper, and I did as I was told. I rolled my hips as his fingers curled into my ass. Riding him, I let the sensation of him take control. I gripped the headrest, letting my eyes close. His hips lifted, and I ground myself harder against him. His cock twitched, and my clit found the friction it needed sending a wave of rushing heat through me, and I started to vibrate with pleasure.

I whimpered as his fingers dug into my flesh, and I rolled my hips as my pussy clenched around him. I was so close, so fucking close. He leaned forward, his body pressing into mine as his arms wrapped around me. His hips pumped up and down, meeting my thrust, and with one hard deep thrust, I ground myself against him, stroking my clit against him until my body tensed and I came undone. “Maddox,” I cried out as I exploded in an orgasmic rush of heat.

“Fuck,” he murmured, his entire body tensing as he followed behind me. His hand slid into my hair, pulling my mouth against his in a white-hot, earth-shattering kiss that made my toes curl.

We sat in that position for several long minutes as we came down from our high. When I finally slid over to my seat, it took us a few minutes to pull ourselves back together.

“Now,” he breathed, “your place or mine?”

“Yours.” I smiled.

FIFTY-THREE

MADDOX

It had been close to a month since Addison decided she was all in, and everything seemed easier now that our past wasn't hanging over our heads. The videos were gone, and the only person left to deal with was Asher, but that would have to wait until the end of the season.

Even though Addison said she was all in, I knew that only meant until the end of the season unless I convinced her otherwise, and killing Asher now would end the season early.

“Stop playing around,” she ordered cocking her hip to the side. “You have a test tomorrow that you need to pass.”

“I could focus a little more,” I explained, my lips curling into a smirk, “if you were naked.”

“Focus more on what,” she laughed, “my boobs?” I shrugged, reaching out and pulling her into me. “How about a game?”

“I like games.” I smirked, brushing my lips across hers.

Pushing out of my embrace, she pressed her pointer finger to her perfect, full pink lips and narrowed her eyes like she was thinking incredibly hard.

Fuck, she was hot. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head, no makeup, wearing glasses, and she was still the prettiest girl I'd ever seen.

“How about I give you ten problems to solve,” she said. “Every problem you get correct gets you one step closer to a

sexual favor of your choice.” A smile spread across her face. “But if you get one wrong, you lose a step.”

“Oh, I’m so in.” I stepped into her, and she stepped back, shaking her finger at me.

“Each problem you get right, I will remove an article of clothing.” She smiled. “If you remove all my clothes, I will do whatever you want.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you go to bed alone tonight.”

“Maybe I don’t want to play.” I pressed my lips into a thin line. I let my gaze trail over her. She didn’t have much on—a tank top, shorts, panties, and a bra. Surely, I could get five questions right. “You’re on.”

She sank onto the couch before pulling the book to her, but then she froze, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. “Maddox,” she sighed, her big green eyes blinking up to meet mine, “your phone.” I pinched my brows. Did she think I was going to cheat?

“It’s in my pocket,” I scoffed a laugh before it sank in.

“Turn it off, please,” she whispered. “And give it to me.” She still didn’t trust me. She wasn’t willing to take the chance of me videoing our exchange again, and I couldn’t blame her. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my phone and powered it off before handing it to her. Taking the phone, she visibly relaxed as she shoved it under a stack of papers on the small coffee table. “You ready?” She smiled. I nodded.

She scratched out a problem and handed it to me. I read it and worked it out before finally jotting down my answer.

“Wrong,” she said. I pursed my lips. Statistics and Probability sucked.

She slowly broke the problem down for me and then pointed to the next one. Sucking in a deep breath, I focused on the new problem. I read through it, working through it, trying to recall what she explained. Finally, I scratched the answer down and pushed the paper to her.

“Correct,” she said, and when my gaze flicked up to her, she grabbed the hem of her pink tank and pulled it over her head. I let my eyes trail over her full tits spilling out of her light purple lace bra and down to her tight and toned stomach. This was going to be harder than I thought because now all I could think about was touching and tasting her.

Okay, Maddox, focus. Do not let the topless women next to you distract you from your end goal. The end goal was her naked in my bed.

“Next,” I groaned, and she slid another problem to me. Twisting so I couldn’t see her in my peripheral view, I focused on the question, slowly working through it again, recalling everything she’d taught me before I scratched down the answer.

“Correct.” She smiled, pushing to her feet and slowly sliding out of her shorts.

“I fucking love this game,” I said, my gaze roaming over her tanned legs and heart-shaped ass. She laughed before sinking back onto the couch beside me. “Next.” She was coming out of that bra next. She scratched out the problem and slid it to me.

I worked through the next problem, but her bare skin brushing against mine was a major distraction. When I thought I had it, I scratched out the answer and slid it to her.

“Wrong.” She sighed, reaching down and pulling back on her tight pink tank.

“What the fuck?” I muttered. “I fucking hate this game.”

“Focus.” She laughed. “Try this one.”

Okay, Parker, question five. You’ve got this! You want to see them boobies.

I answered the next two questions right, and as long as I kept my eyes focused on the paper and away from her naked chest, I was going to knock this out of the park, and we were going to my room.

“Two more.” She smirked. “I’ll be naked, and you can tell me exactly what you want me to do to you,” she whispered against my ear like someone else was in the room to hear us. There wasn’t, but now I was more determined than ever.

Next question... “Correct.” Fuck yeah! Last question... “Correct.”

I didn’t waste a second pushing off the couch. I twisted around and grabbed her by her naked waist, throwing her bare ass over my shoulder. She squealed as I stormed towards my bedroom, trying to decide exactly what I wanted to do with her.

FIFTY-FOUR

ADDISON

Tomorrow was my final class before I had all one-hundred and twenty credits required to graduate with my Bachelor's in Communication with a Minor in Sports Media with a 4.0 GPA. I still had one last graduation requirement to meet before I could walk in the Spring. A requirement that was becoming harder and harder to reach.

A twelve-week internship, and I was running out of time if I wanted to graduate on time.

I found out today that I didn't get the internship I hoped for at a local sports broadcasting company. I'd applied to about half a dozen internships but hadn't been any of their first picks in a male-dominated industry. I knew this would be a complicated field, but I never expected to have zero internship offers months before graduation.

So, it looked like I'd continue working as the Supervisor over the tutoring department and helping with the School's sports broadcasting occasionally until another opportunity presented itself. I was hoping and praying something else came up, or I wouldn't walk with my class in the Spring.

Curling up on the couch, I flicked on the TV to watch Maddox's game since I couldn't be there. The game was hours ago, and I already knew they won, but I'd been working, so I couldn't watch it then.

My phone chimed, and I reached forward, grabbing it off the table. A slow smile spread across my face when I saw Maddox's name pop up on the screen.

Maddox: I wish you were here.

He'd left for Jersey three days ago. It was the longest we'd been apart since he'd come back into my life.

I started to type out a response, but my phone vibrated with another message.

Maddox: WYD?

Addison: Watching your game.

Maddox: Alone?

Addison: Yes.

Maddox: Do you miss me?

I did miss him, more than I'd like to admit even to myself, and it was terrifying.

Addison: Maybe... Although, it has been nice not having to wrestle the covers from a blanket thief every night.

That part was partly nice, but the truth was my bed was cold and lonely without him. Before him, I didn't know any different. Chance never stayed the night. We never went out. I was the ultimate booty call, and I hadn't even realized it.

Maddox: The only blanket thief in this relationship is you...

He added three laughing emojis, and I couldn't help but smile.

Maddox: What are you wearing?

My smile faded as I reread the text. It was a simple, playful, flirtatious question. It was a question that most couples asked, but for me, it just brought back memories of the past, the past where Maddox betrayed my trust, and as badly

as I wanted to forgive and forget about that part of my past, in times like this, I couldn't. Even knowing it wasn't him that sent it out. It started with him and a bet, and it only happened because of videos he held on to for that purpose.

I had spent my entire eighteen years hiding my body, only for him and his friends to decide they had a right to show it to everyone. Even if, in the end, he couldn't go through with it, I still had trust issues with all men now because of that one stupid high school bet...well, and a college football coach who lied to me our entire relationship.

Clearing my throat, I decided to brush it off with humor.

Addison: Are you trying to sext me?

Maddox: Absolutely. Is it working?

Addison: Aren't you out with your friends celebrating?

Maddox: Yes, but all I can think about is you.

Addison: Well, keep thinking, buddy. I'll see you tomorrow.

Maddox: Good night, Addison.

Things were good with us. He made me feel things no one else could, but whenever the past came back to haunt me, everything got more complicated, and I couldn't help but wonder if that would ever go away. Would I ever truly be able to trust him again?

FIFTY-FIVE

ADDISON

“Congratulations to everyone who passed.” Mr. Webster smiled. “This is officially your last class. I wish you all the luck in your future.”

That was it. My final class was over.

Pushing out of my seat, I collected my things, shoving them in my bag.

“Hey, Addison,” Mr. Webster, my professor, called from the front of the classroom. My gaze flashed up to see the middle-aged man with greying hair. “Can you hang back for a minute?” My eyes narrowed as confusion twisted my face. Today was the last day of my finals. I wouldn’t actually graduate until the end of Spring, but I was officially done with classes. Mr. Webster had never asked me to stay after class before, and it made it weirder because I was done, but I tossed my bag over my shoulder and made my way to the front of the classroom.

“What’s up?” I asked when I reached the front of the room, offering a polite smile.

“A friend of mine contacted me the other day because BBN is looking for an intern in their sports department,” he smiled as excitement flickered in his grey eyes. BBN was one of the largest sports broadcasting companies in the industry. Unfortunately, it was also an industry that only offered internships to two students from around the country every year. “I would like to drop your name for the position.”

“Omigod,” I squealed, jumping up and nearly dropping everything. “Seriously?” An opportunity like that could open the door for my future career.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “You are the only student I have this year with an interest in the sports side of journalism, and you have such an amazing future ahead of you. I think you would be amazing for the position. So, are you interested?”

“Yes!” I didn’t even hesitate. An opportunity like this might never come again. There was no way I could pass this up.

“Great.” He smiled. “Because I dropped your name two weeks ago, they are interested. “It’s a sixteen-week internship, so you’ll be back to walk with your class for graduation if you want.” I nodded, unable to speak. “I don’t need to tell you that this could lead to a full-time job after you finish the sixteen weeks, do I?” I shook my head. He didn’t need to tell me.

“Where is the internship?”

“New York City.” He smiled, shuffling a stack of papers on his desk. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” I snapped. “It’s just my job at the tutoring center.”

“Well, you won’t be able to give them two weeks.” He sighed. “But I’m sure they will understand. If you want, I can speak to your boss and let her know what’s going on. This is an amazing opportunity, and it’s paid, so you won’t have to worry about trying to support yourself too.” Wow, a paid internship was almost unheard of. “They will also provide housing during the internship. This could be your last opportunity this year.”

I nodded. “When do I leave?”

“Make your arrangements. You’ll fly out on Monday. Jennifer Peterson will email you all the information you’ll need.”

That was three days from now.

I’d promised Maddox I’d be here until the end of the season, and he still had one game left—a game I’d promised

I'd be at. But I couldn't pass up this opportunity, not even for Maddox. This would help me graduate and give me that foot in the door I needed to get a job.

I knew what I had to do; all I could do was hope that Maddox understood.

FIFTY-SIX

ADDISON

Tipping the heavy clear liquor bottle up, I poured myself another shot as I watched the sun slowly set from Maddox's patio, completely consumed with my thoughts. I threw back the shot, wincing as the harsh burn slid down the back of my throat.

"Rough day?" Maddox asked, stepping out onto the patio freshly showered. Slamming the shot glass down, my gaze flicked up to see Maddox shirtless with a pair of black gym shorts hanging low on his hips. His hair was still damp, and his tanned and toned stomach and broad shoulders were covered in tiny beads of water from the shower.

"No." I smiled. It wasn't a rough day; it was a great one, but for some reason, I felt like shit about it.

"Want to talk about it?" He smiled, sliding onto the chaise lounge chair behind me. I poured two more shots and handed one to him.

"No." I didn't want to talk about it tonight. I wanted to be with him tonight because tomorrow, I would have to tell him I was leaving, and then the next few days of my life would be consumed with making arrangements to leave. So tonight, I just wanted to be with him without worrying about what tomorrow would bring and how Maddox would handle the news of me leaving for five months and breaking my promise to him.

We both threw the shots back, and I twisted as his large hands curled around my waist, pulling me between his legs.

With my back against him, I relaxed into him, my head on his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around me. We lay silently curled together until the sun was gone and the moon rose.

“Do you believe in what’s meant to be will always be?” I asked, my gaze focused on the full moon.

“Yeah,” he said, leaning his chin on my head. “I guess I do.” His chest rose and fell with a deep breath. “Do you think we would have ended up back together without Asher blackmailing you into tutoring me?”

I thought about the question for a minute. Before Asher blackmailed me with the videos, I had avoided Maddox for almost four years. I’d passed him numerous times in the hall, on campus, in the cafeteria, and during practices, and he’d never noticed me. It’s hard to think that would have changed.

“No.” I sighed. On top of the fact that it had been four years, I knew we wouldn’t have because I’d hated him. I would never have given him that second chance if Asher hadn’t forced me to. “I think I would still be some girl you didn’t recognize.” If the saying ‘what’s meant to be will always be’ were true, even if those pictures didn’t exist, something else would have brought us together, but I didn’t believe that. “What about you? Do you think we would have ended up back in each other’s lives?”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate on his ‘yes’ as his arms tightened around me. “So, you don’t believe in what’s meant to be will always be?”

I wanted to believe in it. I was leaving soon and wanted to believe we could survive the distance because we were truly meant to be.

“Honestly,” I sighed. “I don’t know if I believe in fate.” I flipped over on top of him. My eyes trailed over his face down to his perfect lips. “But I know there has to be some cosmic force out there that pulled us back together.” He leaned forward, brushing his lips against mine.

“You and I were meant to be,” he breathed against my lips. “There’s never been anyone else. It’s always been you.”

Pushing all my thoughts away, I kissed him. I kissed him like I would never see him again, like this was the last time I would ever feel his lips pressed to mine. Without breaking from the kiss, I climbed up, straddling him.

I gasped for air when he broke from the kiss. “Hey,” he breathed, both hands gripping my face, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “Is everything okay?” He could feel it, too, but I couldn’t answer that because I wouldn’t know until I told him I was leaving, and I couldn’t do that tonight.

“Yes,” I whispered because, in this moment, it was okay. I pulled my face into his in a kiss that stole the air from my lungs.

My hands slid around the back of his neck, pulling his mouth harder against mine as his hand found the hem of my shirt. Gasping, we broke from the kiss as he ripped my shirt over my head. His lips trailed over my neck and down to my collarbone as his fingertip glided over my bare back. I had only been wearing his large T-shirt and black lace panties. My fingers curled into his hair, holding his hot, wet mouth against my heated skin as his teeth grazed my throat.

“Your phone,” I breathed.

“It’s on the charger in my room,” he breathed, the heat from his words feathering across my throat. I froze. He froze. “What?” His gaze searched mine. “Addison, I swear. My phone is in my room, dead on the charger.”

It shouldn’t be like this.

But the worry of whether I’d ever be able to trust him someday left as his hand slid between my thighs and under the lace of my panties. Pulling my bottom lip between his teeth, his fingers slid through my slick flesh as I gripped his shoulders, balancing myself over his hand. My head fell back on a moan as his thumb circled my clit, stroking with precision as his finger circled my entrance.

As I rolled my hips, my chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths. I needed more of him, all of him. His teeth

grazed my throat as his finger slid inside me, slowly pumping in and out before adding another finger, stretching me.

“Fuck,” he groaned against my skin as my hips thrust forward, and I started to ride his hand. My lips parted with a moan as I tangled my fingers into his hair, pulling his face hard against my chest. My speed picked up. “That’s it, baby. Ride my fucking hands like you’re going to ride my cock.”

My fingers tightened in his hair, jerking his head back. Our gazes collided. His heated stare roamed over my face, watching me as I came close to falling to pieces on his fingers. “Come for me, baby.” He groaned as I ground myself harder against his hand, hitting my clit with each roll of my hips. “Come all over my hand, baby.” And I did as my fingernails dug into the skin of broad shoulders and cried out his name. My hips slowed as I came down from my high, his eyes still locked on mine. “Fuck.”

Pulling his hand out of me, covered in the evidence of my orgasm, I sucked in a deep breath as he brought his fingers to his lips, sucking each of them clean.

“Fuck me,” I moaned before pulling his mouth hard against mine. My heart pounded between my thighs, desperate to feel him inside me. Our tongues collided in white hot heat that consumed my soul while he worked himself free. He pulled my thong to the side and positioned himself at my entrance.

My hands curled into his shoulders as I sank onto him, filling myself as a shudder bolted through me. His fingers dug into the sensitive skin of my ass as I rolled my hips, grinding myself against him.

My gaze met his as I took in every feature of his perfect face. His full lips as he bit down on his bottom lip, icy blue eyes, sharp jawline, knowing this could be the last time I see it like this.

Closing my eyes, I pressed my lips to his as I threaded my fingers into his hair, pulling him hard against me as his hips pushed up, meeting mine as I rode him, finding the perfect rhythm that pushed me closer to the edge.

My pussy clenched around him as my legs quivered. I broke from the kiss with a moan. My eyes closed, and his hand tangled into my hair, pulling me, so I arched into him, giving him access to my throat and naked chest.

His mouth closed over my hardened nipple, and when his tongue flicked the taut bud, my body vibrated with pleasure as I cried out, “Maddox.”

Releasing my hair, his arm wrapped tightly around me as he lifted and flipped me, so he was on top. I wasn’t sure how much more my body could take, but he didn’t give me a chance to think about it as his hip thrust hard into mine.

His mouth claimed mine in a messy, sloppy kiss as he laced our fingers together above my head. His hips snapped, and I raised my hips, meeting him thrust for thrust.

My core tightened around him as he ground his hips against mine. Burying his face in my neck, our breathing accelerated, our bodies tensed, and my eyes squeezed shut as pleasure washed over me as his hot liquid filled me.

He collapsed on top of me, and I welcomed the weight of his body—the feel of his skin against mine.

We lay silently for several long minutes, savoring every minute, knowing that tomorrow, everything could change.

FIFTY-SEVEN

MADDOX

Leaning against the kitchen counter, I watched Addison typing away on her laptop in my living room. Addison had been unusually quiet today. She'd seemed distracted most of the day. The chemistry between us last night was on fire, but something was off. I could feel it and knew why; she still didn't trust me.

"So," I started, crossing my arms over my bare chest and staring at her sitting on the couch. She was so entranced in what she was doing that she didn't see me stroll up beside her. "Are we going to address the elephant in the room?" Her body tensed as her head snapped up, gaze locking on mine. Addison still didn't trust me, and I felt like we needed to clear the air on this subject if we were ever going to be able to move past it. Relationships were based on trust and communication, and we seemed to be lacking in both areas. I trusted her, but I wasn't sure how much she trusted me, if at all. She needed to hear me say the words that I would never cross the lines I crossed in high school again, and I needed to know if she would ever be able to trust me again.

"Elephant?" she said, her eyes still wide. Sucking in a deep breath, her face softened as she exhaled heavily. Her throat bobbed on a hard swallow as her entire expression changed. She reached out, closing her laptop. "I was going to talk to you about it over dinner, but I guess it's best we get it over with." She pushed off the couch and twisted her body to face mine. "Yesterday, I was offered an internship in New York, and I'm leaving Monday."

I blinked in temporary shock. Did she say she was leaving? Like, leaving for good? “Wait, what?” I scowled, my arms dropping to my sides. “You’re leaving?” There was no way I heard her right.

“Yes, wait,” she pinched her brows, “what elephant were you talking about?”

“Trust,” I hissed. “The fact that you still don’t trust me, but this all makes sense now, why you were acting so weird last night. It wasn’t because you didn’t trust me. It was because you already knew you were leaving me.” I twisted away from her, shoving a hand through my hair as I stared aimlessly at the ground. “I could feel something was different.”

“Maddox,” she started. “It doesn’t have to be like that. It’s only for four months.”

“Months,” I hissed, drawing out the word. “New York is over a thousand miles away, and you will be gone for months.” I spun to face her. “How are we supposed to build trust when you live a thousand miles away, Addison?”

“Honestly, Maddox, I may never be able to truly trust you again,” she breathed, pain flickering across her face. “You broke that a long time ago.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “You broke me, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be fixed again.”

My heart squeezed painfully tight. She was wrong. She would trust me again, but that would never happen if she lived over a thousand miles away for months. If she left now, when the relationship was so new and vulnerable, it wouldn’t survive. I wouldn’t survive.

“Addison, please,” I pleaded, dropping to my knees in front of her. “Don’t do this again. Don’t run away from me again.”

“Maddox, I’m not leaving under the same circumstance,” she said.

“Maybe not exactly the same, but it’s still the same,” I said, pushing to my feet. “You are running away from us.”

“I have to go, Maddox.” She sighed. “I need this internship to graduate, to get a job, to get a foot in the door.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“You said you were all in,” I muttered. “You promised you’d be here until the end of the season.”

“I was, I am,” she corrected. “And the season is over next weekend.”

Our relationship was still too new to survive her in New York and me in Florida. If she left, I knew it was over. I’d never see her again, and I wasn’t sure my heart could handle that kind of pain again.

My gaze scanned her face for something, anything. Sadness twisted her features, and then it all sank in. “Was this all part of your plan?” My chest tightened with anger. “To make me fall for you all over to break me this time. To make me pay for what I did?”

“What?” she stammered. “Maddox, no.”

“If you leave,” I warned, a slight edge to my tone, “I won’t chase you. I will move on with my life.” My chest clenched as a lump formed in my throat, praying she would choose me.

“Maddox.” She paused as if the words jammed in her throat. A tear streamed down her cheek, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. I squeezed my eyes shut as a swell of pain flowed through me at the sight of her. I wanted to hold her and wipe away her tears. “I understand.”

She grabbed her laptop and stormed out.

The room spun around me, and my gut twisted with nausea.

That was it.

She was gone again.

FIFTY-EIGHT

ADDISON

I managed to control my emotions until I made it home, but the minute I pushed through the front door, letting it close behind, everything came rushing to the surface. My swollen and puffy eyes burned with tears as I slid against the door to the floor.

Maddox was wrong. There was no revenge. I never meant to hurt him, but I couldn't help but wonder if, somewhere deep down, I knew this would never work. I knew that, eventually, I would walk away from him because I could never trust him again. Because I would never be able to get past the hurt I felt that day or the pain I felt all over again when Asher showed me videos I didn't even know existed.

Picking up my phone, I clicked on Maddox's name. I wanted to text him to tell him I was sorry, but his words replayed in my head. If I chose this internship, we would be over. He was done.

How could he ask me to choose between him and my future? Would he give up football for me? No, but I would never ask him to, either. Maybe once he calmed down, he would realize what he was doing. That he was asking me to give up everything I'd worked so hard for to follow him and his dreams.

A knock sounded on the door behind me, and I jumped to my feet.

He'd changed his mind.

He'd come after me.

I threw the door open, exhaling deeply with disappointment when I saw Maddy.

“Good to see you too.” She scowled, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sorry, I thought you were Maddox.”

“Well, I just got done with tutoring, and Leslie, my new tutor, said you were leaving.” She shoved her fist on her hips. “Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?” A laugh bubbled up as tears streamed down my cheeks. “Woah, I was just kiddin’, Addison.”

“I just got done telling Maddox,” I said, stepping out of the doorway so she could come in. Then, throwing the door closed, I wiped away my tears. “He didn’t take it well.”

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “Are you okay?” I nodded. “He’s angry now, but once he comes down off his angry high, I’m sure he’ll call you. He’s in love with you.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said.

“When do you leave?” she asked.

“Monday.”

“Holy shit,” she snapped. “Monday.” I nodded. “Is it a good opportunity?”

A slow smile spread across my face as I nodded. “It’s an amazing opportunity.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it over drinks?” She smiled.

We spent the next two hours finishing any liquor I had in the house as I told her about my new job. We talked about Maddox, and she spoke of her boyfriend. We made plans to keep in touch, and I promised I’d return for graduation, even though I wasn’t entirely sure I’d keep that promise.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we both woke up hungover and regretting our decision to drink so much.

“I’m going to run home,” Maddy slurred. “I’ll shower and change, and I’ll be back to help you finish packing. You can crash at my place tonight, and I’ll take you to the airport tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Maddy.”

She left, and I forced myself to shower and change.

When Maddy pushed through the front door, I was sitting at the counter staring at my phone, trying to decide if I should send Maddox a text. A text that left the door open if he ever wanted to come back into my life.

“Oh, thank goodness you made coffee,” Maddy said. She grabbed one of the only mugs not packed and poured herself a cup. “Where is all your stuff going?”

“Storage,” I said, not taking my eyes off Maddox’s name on my phone. “It will stay there until I get back and figure out where I’m going to live since I’m letting this place go.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, sliding into the stool beside me.

“Trying to decide if I should text him.” I sighed. “You know, a text that leaves this open if he wanted to contact me again.” I dropped my phone on the countertop. “It’s stupid.”

Maddy picked my phone up and slid it back into my hand. “It’s not stupid.” She smiled. “I’m going to go work on packing. You take as much time as you need.”

I stared at the phone for several long minutes, trying to decide what to say before finally making up my mind.

Addison: I don't know what our future holds, but I know I want you in mine.

I decided to leave it there.

My gaze snapped up at the sound of something crashing to the floor. Shit. I closed my phone and rushed to help Maddy.

Flinging myself around the door frame to my bedroom, I froze, seeing Maddy on the floor, covered in all my clothes. Laughter erupted from both of us simultaneously.

We spent the day finishing everything, and I decided I wouldn't obsess about Maddox texting me back. The ball was in his court now. I wouldn't open my messages from him ever again unless he texted me.

That text that I sent Maddox never felt so real. I didn't know what my future held; I knew I wanted Maddox and Maddy in it. I just hoped Maddox would realize he wanted me in his future, too.

The following day, I waved to Maddy as she drove off from the airport terminal, and I checked my phone one last time.

Nothing.

Clicking on my message, I swiped left, deleting Maddox's messages before powering off my phone.

I couldn't let him consume my future. If he was going to move on, I had to, too, even if I wasn't sure that's what I wanted.

We both had different dreams, and they didn't coincide at this point in our lives, but who knew what our futures held?

Holding my head up high, a slow smile spread across my face. I was about to board a plane to New York City to intern for a company I'd only dreamed about working for, and I knew everything was going to be okay.

FIFTY-NINE

MADDOX

It was four a.m., and the gym was empty. Addison was gone. I'd planned to take out every ounce of my aggression on the weights but it wasn't working. I didn't want to throw weights around; I wanted to hit something, and hard.

I'd just gotten her back and now she was gone again. I'd lost her again. The tightness in my chest was a mixture of pain and sadness because I knew I'd just let the love of my life slip through my fingers again.

The gym door flung open, and my gaze flashed up as Asher strolled through in gym shorts, a t-shirt, and his black team gym bag over his shoulder. The pain shifted to anger, and without a moment's hesitation, I knew exactly what I wanted to hit when his eyes locked with mine.

"Hey, what's up, man?" Asher smirked. His gaze shifted back to his gym bag as he placed it on the ground. Anger raced through my veins as I dropped the weights to the ground and strolled toward Asher. I was pretty sure that by now, Asher knew that I was aware he'd been blackmailing Addy, yet he seemed completely confident that we were still best friends.

We weren't...

If I was giving off any vibes that I was furious, Asher didn't seem to notice, but that shouldn't have surprised me. Asher was too self-absorbed to notice anything beyond himself.

He didn't even see it coming when I reared back and cracked my fist against his jaw.

“What the...” Asher growled, grabbing his jaw.

“That was for Addy,” I snarled, stepping forward back into his space. He didn’t even defend himself when I threw another punch and the sound of bone meeting bone filled the silent room. “That’s for Addison.”

“They’re the same fucking person,” he gritted out.

“True.” I smirked and slammed my fist into his nose. Blood splattered his shirt and my fist. “That’s for fucking me over.”

He dragged his fist across his bottom lip, smearing the blood. A menacing glare darkened in his eyes, and a sly smirk pulled at his lips. Anger twisted my insides as my chest heaved. I was ready to take out every ounce of fury I’d been holding back on him because, right now, everything was his fault. “You can be mad at me if you want, but I did what I had to do.”

I shoved my hands into his chest, pushing him backwards. “Why didn’t you just fucking tell me she was here at the same school as me?” My chest tightened with a mixture of rage and sadness. We’d been at this school for four years. She’d been right under my nose this whole time, and I couldn’t pull my head out of my ass long enough to recognize her. It hurt thinking of all the time I’d wasted and all the missed opportunities. And now she was gone.

He shrugged. “I didn’t know that you didn’t know.” Of course he didn’t because Asher only cared about Asher, and since Addy being here had nothing to do with him, why would he care?

Stepping into his space, I bumped his chest with mine asserting dominance. “If I ever find out that those videos or pictures pop up again,” I growled, “I will put you under the ground after I break your face.”

He took a step back, and I let him. “We still have to play together for the rest of the season.”

I huffed out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, the new coach heard all about you and Coach Brown’s little blackmail stunt,

and it turns out blackmail is a hard no for him. I think you'll find yourself off the team sometime today."

"You wouldn't..."

"I did..." I smirked. "Go to fucking hell, Asher, because if we ever cross paths again, I promise you'll regret living." I shoved past him and walked out of the gym.

Shoving through the gym door, I sucked in a harsh breath of the cool morning air. Asher and I had been friends since the summer before first grade. Our families were friends. I'd always thought of him more like a brother, but that part of my life was over now.

SIXTY

ADDISON

2 years later...

I'd finally made it; I sighed, sinking back in my chair and admiring my small office. After my sixteen-week internship, I was offered an entry-level position, and now, two years later, I'd slowly worked my way up to a brand new role created for me with a pay increase that meant I didn't have to work three jobs to survive here in New York City.

I'd worked my butt off the last two years, and even though this wasn't the position I'd hoped for, it was still a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, I sometimes had to take what I could get in this male-dominated industry, but I still considered this a huge win. I still had a long way to go before I met my end goal, but it was closer than ever. I only had to prove myself in this position first.

I was the new gossip girl of BBN Sports.

For the last three months, I'd built this new venture for the company. I'd worked hard blogging and building up their social media, covering anything that brought in more viewers. I knew that if I succeeded, I would earn the respect I needed to get my dream job.

"Addison." My gaze snapped up to see Jacob Frazier's large frame filling the doorway. Jacob was a retired baller; technically, he was my boss, even though he didn't call the shots around here. "I have a new assignment for you."

My eyes and face lit up. Jerking my desk drawer open, I pulled out a pen and pad of paper while trying to control my

excitement.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, as you know,” he smirked, sliding into the chair opposite me, “we are trying to connect more with the teams and each of their players on a personal level.” I nodded. That was a nice way to put it. I already knew where this was going, even though I’d hoped it was something more than a gossip-girl assignment. I was there to attract more women to the show, but it didn’t matter. This was my foot in the door. “There’s a baller who’s recently been of particular interest to the media, and we were hoping you could talk him into an interview.”

“Who’s the baller?” I asked, my gaze flicking down to my paper.

“Maddox Parker.” He smiled. My head snapped up. My gaze locked on his. “You know him, right?”

Shit! I shouldn’t be surprised. Maddox had been a hot topic for the last year in sports gossip, but I’d managed to keep his name and face off my page, and so far, I’d managed to run a highly successful page without him in it.

“Maddox doesn’t do private interviews anymore.” I groaned. I’d heard reports whining about him not doing interviews and even saw the clip where his manager explained to the media that Maddox would only do after-game prearranged interviews. “He hasn’t for over a year.”

“Your job is to convince him.” He shrugged, pushing out of the chair.

I’d followed Maddox’s sports career over the last two years but tried hard not to follow his personal life. It hurt too much. The last I’d heard, he was dating Becca Kingsley, a supermodel, and it was serious. After that, I’d cut his personal life out of my life.

I knew, eventually, our paths would cross again someday. He was a pro baller, and I was a sports journalist. I didn’t expect it to be this soon, and I hoped it was to discuss his

future in football and not his personal life, which was the last thing I wanted to hear about.

“Can you handle this, Wright?” He glared, his lips pinched.

“Of course.” I forced a smile. “I will get started today.”

“Maddox is only in town this weekend for the game on Sunday,” he informed me. “You should be able to find him at the stadium practicing. I also heard he is staying at the Belmont Suites, which is right down from your place. He probably uses their gym.”

“Thanks, boss.” I forced a smile. He disappeared, and my head dropped to my desk.

“Fuck,” I muttered. This might be the first time I’d be unable to complete my assignment in my career, but I was going to try anyway.

SIXTY-ONE

ADDISON

Standing near the rear exit, I waited for the visiting team to exit the stadium. I knew Maddox's team was in town this weekend for a game, and after the game, he'd be gone, making that interview a little harder.

So it was now or never...

Shoving my fidgeting hands into the pocket of my black slacks, I watched as player after player pushed through the door. The anxiety coiled low in my gut and kicked up a few notches every time that door opened, knowing it could be him this time.

When he pushed through the exit, I sucked in a deep breath, and anxiety flooded my stomach as my chest tightened. He was even hotter now than he was two years ago, and I wasn't sure how that was possible. His dark hair was covered with a backward baseball cap, and his face was covered in dark stubble that he didn't have before. The scruffy look worked for him. He wore black joggers and a team t-shirt with his bag thrown over his broad shoulders.

He didn't notice me as he strolled to his vehicle, and I started to wonder if this would go the same direction it did in college when he didn't recognize me, but then his gaze blinked up and locked on mine. His cold expression made my throat close.

"Addison," he said dryly, and my heart felt like he was ripped out of my chest and stomped on. It shouldn't feel like this. I'd made the choice to walk away.

“Hey.” I smiled, trying to hide the nervous tremble in my voice.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his gaze flicking down to the press pass around my neck. His eyes and jaw hardened as they blinked back up at me.

I wanted to hug and ask him to have a drink and catch up, but it was obvious from his expression that we weren’t old friends. There was no point in beating around the bush. “I was hoping for an interview with you.”

His expression pinched. “I guess no one told you I don’t do private interviews anymore,” he said, his tone clipped.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “They did, but I was hoping...” I trailed off. What was I hoping? I was hoping that even though we had a complicated, heartbreaking history, he’d be able to look past everything and do the interview for me because I needed this.

“You were hoping that since it was you, I would do it?”

“No, yes, no, maybe,” I stammered. “I didn’t exactly volunteer for this. It’s my job, and I’m brand new.” I stopped. It was entirely unnecessary to babble.

“Why don’t you give me your card?” he said, his gaze flicking over my shoulder like he was in a hurry. “And I’ll call you if I want to do an interview.” He wanted an out, and this was it. I would give him my card and pray he’d call to do the interview, but we both knew he was pacifying me so he could get away with no intention of ever having to see me again.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. I hated that this was where we were. He was still angry with me, or maybe he hated me. It was probably closer to he didn’t even care enough to hate me. He’d moved on with his life.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out one of my brand-new shiny business cards. He snatched it, and without another word, he walked away without a second glance.

I wanted to call out to him, to say something, anything, but I couldn’t. I stood frozen in place, watching him as he disappeared into his truck.

I knew this would be tough, but I never anticipated the heartbreak I would feel—like the pain was still as raw as the day we said goodbye.

SIXTY-TWO

MADDOX

Sliding into my car, my gaze flashed up to the rearview mirror to see Addison still standing frozen where I'd left her, her gaze locked on my truck. Her hair was dark again, like back in high school. My breath caught in my throat. She was even more beautiful than she was the day she walked away, and my body still had the same reaction to her now that it did then. That pissed me off.

It had been two years, and I hadn't heard a single word from her, and now she was back because she wanted an interview.

Fuck that, and fuck her.

I couldn't go down that road with her again. I couldn't even go near that road; it hurt too much. I'd kept my promise. If she walked away, I wouldn't chase her even though every ounce of my being wanted to. Even two years later, there wasn't a day that passed that I didn't think about calling her. I'd even caved a few times and Googled her. Maybe it was more than a few times. Maybe it was closer to an embarrassing amount of times.

Growing up, she'd never had much to do with social media, but now she had a massive following through her sports gossip girl column, written for women by a woman covering all the sports-related gossip, which mainly consisted of the hottest players with the hottest dirt.

Even though I watched a few of her live videos to hear her voice and see her pretty face, I wanted nothing to do with that

column. I'd already had my fair share of scandals in my two short years in the NFL, and my reputation was still recovering. The media and I weren't friends, nor were Addison and me.

Starting the truck, I pulled away. I had zero intention of doing an interview for her. In fact, it was in my best interest never to see or speak to her again. I wasn't sure if my heart could take another round with her. I wasn't sure if I could be that close to her and not kiss her.

Fuck, I needed a drink. It had been a shitty day that only got worse when I walked out of that stadium, and my eyes landed on the lead actress in all my dreams.

I found the first bar and hunkered down, carefully concealing my identity the best I could.

Three hours later, I was halfway to trashed. I hadn't been this drunk in public in over a year, and I'd swore I'd never do it again after the press published pictures of me in a compromising position with Elle Davidson in the public bathroom of a popular nightclub. I didn't make the best decisions when alcohol clouded my judgment.

Pulling my hood over my ball cap, I tried to keep my identity concealed before ordering another round.

"Hey baby," a short blonde smiled flirtatiously. I could take her home. I could fuck her. Who was I kidding? I could fuck every girl in here, and it wouldn't change the fact that I was still in love with Addison. Fuck.

"Not tonight." I scowled, turning my back to her.

"Your loss, baby," she purred, and I rolled my eyes.

I'd sworn to Addison I would move on with my life if she left, but I couldn't, even though I'd tried.

Pulling out my phone, I dug through my pocket, found Addison's business card, and punched her number into my messages.

Maddox: You have some nerve showing up after all these years and asking for an interview.

I stared at the phone for several long minutes before the bubble popped up, insinuating that she was responding.

Addison: I know. I'm sorry. I completely understand if you don't want to do the interview.

Anger ripped through me. She didn't get to be understanding. I punched the call button and pulled the phone to my ear.

"Hello," her soft voice sounded through the speaker, and I closed my eyes as my chest tightened. That voice had haunted my dreams for the last two years.

"Why now, Addison?" I slurred, my tone filled with anger.

"Maddox," she questioned. "Are you drunk?"

"Trashed," I answered.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Don't act like you care now," I muttered.

"Maddox, is there someone with you that can get you home quietly and safely?" she asked.

"I'm not your problem anymore, Addison," I slurred. "I'll do the interview." I paused, trying to stop myself, but I couldn't. "For anyone but you." I disconnected and shoved my phone in my pocket before ordering another round.

SIXTY-THREE

ADDISON

My phone rang, and I quickly clicked the green answer button, thinking it was Maddox again.

“Addison,” the deep voice boomed through the phone before I could say hello.

“Jacob.” I scowled. It wasn’t Maddox, and it caught me off guard. It was my boss.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he said. “I got a tip; your boy is at a bar right down from your house on 10th Street. I heard he’s wasted and making bad decisions.” The sound of excitement in his tone made me want to throw up. “If you hurry, you can get the story first. This could be huge for your career, Addison.” I rolled my eyes. I hated that this was what I had to do to move forward in my career. “Get lots of pictures.”

“Sure thing,” I muttered, disconnecting. If I hurried, I might be able to keep this from going public, but if Jacob knew about it, others would soon.

I didn’t bother changing out of my black leggings, t-shirt, and UGG house slippers. I jerked my purse off the counter, threw open the front door, and bolted for the bar.

There was only one bar on 10th street, and it was directly across from the hotel I assumed Maddox and his team were staying in, and lucky it was only about a two-minute walk from my apartment.

By the time I reached the bar, I was sweating and out of breath. Pushing through the door, I spotted Maddox almost immediately with his tongue shoved down a blonde’s throat in

a dark corner of the bar, but thankfully, the bar wasn't crowded yet.

If I had time to feel something, it would probably hurt to see him with someone else, but I didn't have time. I probably only had a few minutes to get him out of this bar before it was swarmed with the press, so I didn't waste any time.

"Maddox," I yelled over the blaring music, storming up to him and stopping directly beside him and his make-out buddy. Nothing. I leaned in so he could hear me better. "Maddox." Nothing. "Maddox." I shoved my finger into his shoulder.

Breaking from the kiss, his gaze flashed to me. His hazy glare said he was three sheets to the wind.

"Find your own man," the blonde hissed, pressing herself harder against him like she was marking her territory. I also didn't have time to argue with a Jersey Chasing Slut.

"Maddox," I snapped, ignoring the blonde. "We have to go."

"Addy?" he asked, narrowing his eyes like he was trying to focus.

"Yes," I hissed, grabbing his hand and jerking on his arm. "Maddox, come on, we have to go now."

"Bitch," the blonde snarled. "Find your own man."

I opened my mouth to tell her to sit down and shut up, but Maddox cut me off. "Don't talk to her like that." He jerked away from her. He pushed off the stool and stumbled into me, and by into me, I mean I was supporting almost all his weight.

"What the fuck ever," she muttered, storming off.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, making it easier to support his weight. Now, what am I going to do? There was no way I could carry him out of here, and I didn't have time to call for help.

"Addison," someone called from behind me. "Addison, what are you doing?" It was Brandon. He owned the bar, and we'd become friends since I lived right down the road.

“Thank god,” I muttered, using all my strength to hold Maddox up. “I need help, please.”

“Yeah,” he said, grabbing Maddox’s arm and pulling it over his shoulder to support Maddox’s weight.

“I need to get him out of here,” I said, reaching up and flipping Maddox’s backward cap forward to shade his face. “Like now.”

“You’re so pretty,” Maddox stuttered. “Do you want to go home with me?” I ignored him and the way it made me feel being so close to him.

“Where to?” Brandon asked, widening his legs. Where do I take him?

“Maddox,” I said. “Where are you staying? What hotel?”

“Blue,” he murmured, his head bobbling. He was going to pass out soon.

“Blue, what,” I asked, shaking him. No hotels in the area had the word blue in it. He shrugged. I didn’t have time for this. “We’ll take him to my apartment.”

“Do you know this guy?” Brandon asked, concern twisting his facial features.

I sighed. “Yes.” I nodded. “We are old friends.” A commotion erupted near the front entrance, and I knew it was too late. My gaze flashed up to see familiar faces searching the bar for Maddox. “Do you have a back exit?” Brandon nodded. “Great, let’s go that way.” I pulled Maddox’s hoodie over his ball cap, covering his face. “Keep your head down, Maddox.”

“What’s going on?” Brandon asked as we moved quickly toward the back of the bar.

“I’ll explain later,” I said, pushing open the doors and holding them so Brandon could guide Maddox through them.

I sucked in a heavy breath when we made it through the back exit and out into the cool night air. It took a little longer than two minutes to drag Maddox’s drunk ass back to my apartment. Luckily, he was a happy drunk, a very friendly drunk.

I unlocked my front door and held it open while Brandon dragged Maddox in and dropped him on my couch.

“What was that about?” Brandon asked, shoving a hand through his dark hair.

“You don’t recognize him?” I asked, sliding off my slippers and dropping my purse on the counter. Brandon leaned back, his gaze flicking to Maddox on the couch.

“Maddox Parker,” he said, his gaze snapping back to me. I nodded.

“The press knew he was there,” I said. “And if I didn’t get him out of there, he would have been in the headlines before midnight.”

“Aren’t you the press?” He smirked.

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “but I can’t do that to him.”

He nodded. “Are you sure you’ll be okay with him here?” Brandon asked. Brandon and I were friends, but he wanted more. He knew I wasn’t ready for anything serious, though. My heart was still healing from Maddox, and I was busy with my career, but if I were going to date, I would have given him a chance. He was attractive and a nice guy.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Thank you for your help.”

“Call me if you need anything,” Brandon said. I smiled and pulled the front door open for him, and once he was gone, I closed it and checked on Maddox, who was passed out and snoring. I pulled off his shoes, tossed a blanket on him, and then curled up on the other couch to finish the article I was working on before I left to get Maddox.

SIXTY-FOUR

ADDISON

My eyes snapped open, and panic surged through me at the sound of someone stomping around my apartment, but when Maddox trudged into view, I remembered he had stayed over.

“I guess you got your story,” Maddox hissed, pulling on his shirt. At some point during the night, Maddox had removed his hoodie and t-shirt. I pressed my lips into a thin line as my gaze raked over him involuntarily.

It took me a minute to shake the fog of sleepiness to realize what he was talking about. My gaze followed him as he stomped around the room, fist clenched at his side, pissed as hell, looking for something.

“Where is my phone?” he growled. “The last thing I want is to be here when your story leaks.” I didn’t know where his phone was. I knew he had it at the bar when he called me, but I never saw it when I got there.

Digging into the couch cushion, I pulled my cell phone out. “Here,” I yawned. He paused, his gaze flicking from me to the phone, confusion contorting his face. “Check it.” I rose from the couch, strolling to stand in front of him. “There is no story. I didn’t take any pictures and made sure no one knew you were here.” He narrowed his eyes on the phone. “Take it.” I shoved it into his chest. “The password is 112200.” He punched in the password, and I turned away.

“Addison,” he muttered, and I glanced over my shoulder to see him holding my phone out and Big Boss lighting up the screen.

“Shit,” I muttered, twisting to snatch my phone. “I have to take this.” I stepped towards my room but stopped spinning on my heels back towards him. “There’s coffee in the kitchen if you want to hang for a minute, but I understand if you need to go. Either way, I promise you there is no story.” He nodded, and I bolted to my bedroom before sliding right to answer the call.

“Good morning,” I said, hitting the speaker button.

“Tell me you got something good for me,” Jacob sang into the phone.

Shit! How do I talk myself off this ledge?

“Sorry, he wasn’t there,” I said more confidently than I felt. “There was a guy at the bar in a hoodie who looked like him, but it wasn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Too bad.” He sighed. “That could have been your big break.” I rolled my eyes. I hated that I had to throw someone else under the bus to get my big break. “Anyway, how’s the interview coming along?”

“Honestly,” I sighed, “I think you may be better off getting someone else for this job.”

“Addison,” he snapped. “You need this interview.” He cleared his throat. “Sports Gossip needs this interview. Do you understand what I’m saying?” *Loud and clear. Get the interview, or we’ll replace you with someone who can get it.*

“Yes, sir,” I swallowed hard. We disconnected, and I sank onto my bed and dropped my head.

“You weren’t lying,” Maddox’s voice said from the doorway. My head snapped up.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

He shrugged, leaning on the door frame with his hands in his pockets. “Sports gossip, huh?” I rolled my eyes, dropping

my head into my hands. “I thought you wanted to be a sports broadcaster. So why are you their new gossip girl?”

“Because I’m a girl.” I groaned. “And that’s all girls can do is gossip.” My gaze blinked up, meeting his. “I don’t want to do it, but it’s the only way I’ll ever get to do what I do want.”

He sucked in a heavy breath before slowly releasing it. “I’ll do it.” He sighed. “I owe you big for saving my ass.” He pushed off the door frame and strolled to the bed. “I’ve spent the last year trying to fix my reputation, and I almost threw it away last night. So, tell me how I can help you?”

“You’ll do an interview?” I asked, a smile spreading across my face.

“Is that what you need to make your career happen?”

I thought about his question. One interview would be a stepping stone in the right direction, but an exclusive into his private life would set me above everyone else.

“An eight-week exclusive into the life of Maddox Parker.”

His full lips pursed, and his eyes narrowed on me like he was contemplating the request, and I chewed nervously on my lip. “Define exclusive,” he said after several long seconds.

“Just what I said. I will follow you around for eight weeks. Kind of like a reality show, but you won’t have a camera on you all the time. We’d do live interviews for fans, and I get exclusives to practices, dates, workouts, everything, but everything would go through you for approval first.”

“And if I don’t approve of something?” he asked.

“I scratch it.”

“Six weeks,” he countered.

“Deal.”

“Okay,” he said, pausing for a brief moment. “I’ll do this under one condition.” I nodded, my gaze locked on his. “After the six weeks, you walk away and never look back.” My chest squeezed. “I don’t want to be your friend. This is a business

deal, and when the business deal is over, this is over.” That wasn’t what I was expecting him to say. I was right; he hated me. Swallowing hard, I nodded, trying to fight the tears from swelling in my eyes. “If my name comes across your desk again, you decline the job no matter what.”

“If that’s what you want,” I said, trying to keep the pain from showing all over my face. “Then it’s a deal.”

“Pack a bag, Addy.” He sighed. “We fly out tonight.”

“Fly?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“A six-week exclusive means you’ll have to move to Florida with me,” he said. “I have a spare bedroom you can stay in, and I’ll work on travel arrangements for the games.”

I didn’t think this through completely. Luckily, my remote job allowed me to work from anywhere at any time, so that wouldn’t be an issue. I didn’t have much of a social life, so no one would miss me.

Pushing off the bed, I leaned down, pulling a suitcase out from under my bed.

“I’ll need a minute to run this by my boss.” I smiled. “But I’ll pack while I talk to him.”

I called Jacob while I packed while Maddox searched my living room for his phone.

Six weeks with Maddox, and then I had to say goodbye again. Sucking in a deep breath, I took a minute to prepare myself mentally. Maybe this would be the closure I needed to move on with my life.

SIXTY-FIVE

ADDISON

After a long flight, the two-hour drive from the airport to Maddox's house, and getting unpacked, I was exhausted. Maddox and I had managed to hash out the minor details of our agreement, but other than that, we hadn't spoken. He'd made it perfectly clear we weren't friends, and he didn't want to be, but I couldn't help but wonder if it would be better to clear the air and bring up the last time we saw each other. Would it make our current arrangement less awkward? Probably not.

Maddox had disappeared shortly after we got to his house. He'd said he'd only be gone an hour, but now the sun was close to setting, and I was starting to think he wouldn't keep up his end of the deal.

Maddox's home was exactly what I would imagine an NFL star quarterback's house would look like. It was massive and luxurious, and I couldn't wait to explore it. The guest room I was staying in was bigger than my whole apartment, with a large walk-in closet that I could never afford to fill with clothes, a large bay window that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico, and, the best part, a private bathroom.

I strolled around the house, taking a few pictures for the blog while waiting for Maddox to return. The house didn't look lived in. It looked like a place where he slept in passing. The house was dull with no personalization, but it nearly stole my breath away when I stepped out onto the back patio, which overlooked the bay and the breathtaking sunset.

Sinking onto the concrete patio ground, I slipped my feet into the pool's cold water when my phone chimed.

It was Maddy.

"Hey," I said, pulling the phone to my ear.

"I'm in desperate need of retail therapy," she said, not bothering with pleasantries. "Can you meet me downtown in twenty? We can do dinner after?"

After Maddy graduated, she moved to New York and into the same apartment complex as me, and we were pretty much inseparable. She started her own business in fashion about six months ago after working for one of the best designers in New York, and she was pretty successful. She was currently dating an NBA superstar, but it was still new, and they were keeping it quiet.

"I can't." I groaned. "I'm in Florida."

"Florida?" she repeated. "What the hell for?"

"Work," I said, trying to avoid explaining the details.

"Hmmm," she said, and I could see her face pinching with suspicion. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping she wouldn't push the subject. I typically told Maddy everything, but I knew she would be excited that I was here to see Maddox. Even though we didn't discuss it much, I knew Maddy believed Maddox was my soulmate, but I knew better. This was just another job, and after I would never see him again. "What story is in Florida?" I inwardly groaned. She was too nosey not to ask, and I was sure she knew Maddox was in Florida.

I might as well come clean. She followed all my social media, so she would find out soon anyway.

"I'm doing a six-week exclusive with Maddox."

"What?" she said, her tone filled with excitement. "No way."

"It's not what you think, Maddy," I warned, picturing her jumping in little circles like she did when she was excited. "Trust me; it's not."

“Whatever you say, Addison,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “Tell Maddox I said hi, and you better call me every day with the details.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. Have fun shopping.”

We disconnected, and I stared into the sunset, kicking my feet in the water. I didn’t have the heart to tell her Maddox hated me. I honestly wasn’t sure I could say the words out loud without breaking into tears.

The sun had disappeared entirely before Maddox finally showed up.

“This deal isn’t going to work if you cut me out of everything,” I said dryly when I felt his presence behind me.

“I had something I had to take care of privately,” he said, and I twisted to face him, pulling my legs out of the water. “But now I’m an open book.” I nodded as he strolled towards me, sinking onto one of the lawn chairs beside me. “There is something I left out of the agreement that I need to bring up before we officially start.”

“Okay,” I said, drawing out the word, mentally preparing myself for whatever he was about to throw at me.

“As you know, the media has taken a huge interest in me this last year, and when they get word or hear rumors that we are,” he paused, pressing his lips into a thin line as he searched for the right words, “a couple, or friends or I don’t know, if they think you have access to me, they will stop at nothing to get the story.”

“Maddox,” I chuckled, “I am the press. I think I can handle a few reporters.”

“I don’t think you understand, Addy,” he said, his brows pinched as he leaned forward, placing his forearms on his legs and folding his hands together in front of him. “These reporters are relentless and will stop at nothing to get their story. So, I would prefer that you don’t go anywhere alone while you are here.”

“Maddox, I think you’re being a little dramatic.”

“They ran Becca off the road to get to me,” he snapped, and my mouth fell open. “Yes, I’m sure.” He answered my unasked question. “And if something happened to you because of me, I would never forgive myself. So, for the next six weeks while you are here with me or on the road, I would prefer you didn’t go anywhere alone.” Did that mean we would spend every waking minute together, and what about games when he was playing? I wasn’t sure how that would work. “I have a security team for times when I’m not with you or if you need a break from me.”

“Okay,” I agreed. We sat silently for several minutes when it hit me—his girlfriend, Becca. Would she be pissed I was living here? “What about Becca? Is she going to be upset I’m staying here because I’m not really into girl drama.”

“Becca and I broke up a while ago,” he said. “She wasn’t the one for me.” His gaze flicked from the starry night sky to me. “I’m surprised you didn’t know that. What kind of gossip girl are you?”

“Not a very good one.” I laughed. “Well, not when he comes to you, anyway. I’ve avoided your name on my blog for the last year and made it a point to stay out of your personal life.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Respect for you, I guess. I hate gossip. It always feels so wrong, but it’s the job. It’s bad enough I have to gossip about other people, but I couldn’t do it to you.” That wasn’t the whole truth, but there was no need to tell him that it hurt too much seeing him happy with someone else.

“But you can now?”

“I don’t have a choice.” I sighed. “And I’m doing my best to do it under your terms. I have no intentions of painting you to be a bad guy.” He smiled, his gaze flicking back out to the ocean. “So, tell me, boss, where do we start?”

“I have a date tonight,” he smiled, his gaze locking on mine. “Will you be joining us?”

Shit. That was exactly where I didn’t want to start.

SIXTY-SIX

ADDISON

Sliding onto the bar stool, I glanced over my shoulder at Maddox and his date, Victoria. Even though I knew I shouldn't torture myself, my gaze trailed over them. She was exactly the type of woman I'd expect him to be with, tall, thin, blonde, expensive store-bought boobs, tanned skin, full red lips, and a smile that matched his. She was beautiful. She wore a tight, short, sparkling silver dress, and he wore a black suit with a white button-up open at the collar. They looked like they belonged together, and I looked like I couldn't even afford to eat here.

"What can I get you?" the tall, dark-haired bartender asked.

"A shot of something strong, please," I muttered, twisting back to glance at Maddox and his beautiful date in the dark corner booth. I knew I shouldn't drink liquor. I should stick to sipping a beer or a mixed drink, but I needed something to help me get through this night.

If I could make it through this, the rest of the six weeks should be a piece of cake, right? Well, unless he brought her home, because then I'd need something a lot stronger.

"Any preference?" the bartender asked. My gaze flicked back to him as I shook my head. He grabbed a shot glass and filled it with something clear. I threw the shot back, wincing as I let the liquor burn my throat, slammed the glass down, and asked for another.

“Keep ‘em coming.” I smiled before my gaze flicked back to Maddox and his blonde-haired, blue-eyed date. She leaned into him, flashing a perfect white smile, and I was almost certain he could see her massive fake boobs down her ridiculously low-cut top.

Pulling out my phone, I flicked a couple of pictures that made the two look intimate but not inappropriate.

“Is this seat taken?” a deep voice asked, and my gaze flicked to a dark-haired older man. He was a few inches taller than me and thin with dark brown eyes and a heavy five-o’clock shadow. He was attractive, but he lacked that sex appeal that Maddox oozed. *There I go again, comparing another man to Maddox.* It was something I’d done since I walked away from him in high school. A habit I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to break.

“No,” I said, sliding my purse and drinks out of his way.

“Why is such a pretty girl here all by herself?” he asked, and I realized he was flirting. Typically, I would get up and walk away because I wasn’t interested, and I still wasn’t, but maybe some company tonight would be nice to help ease the pain of watching Maddox with his date. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“No.” I smiled.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asked, and I nodded. He ordered two drinks once he caught the bartender’s attention. “So, do you live around here?”

“No,” I answered before taking a sip of my drink. “I’m here on business. You?”

“I’m here on business too.” He smiled, raising his glass before taking a sip. “Where are you from?”

“New York,” I said, fighting the urge to look back at Maddox. I’d gotten my pictures; I didn’t need to torture myself anymore. “You?”

“Chicago,” he said. “I’m Daniel.”

“Addison.”

Daniel and I swapped career stories, discussed our likes and interests, and about three drinks ago, he increased his flirt level to a ten, but I didn't mind. It was nice to feel like someone wanted me, even for only one night.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asked. “I have a room across the street.”

Sex.

His offer was clear even if he didn't say it. He was asking if I wanted to have sex with him. I wanted to have sex, but unfortunately, I didn't think it was him I wanted to have it with.

Maddox and I hadn't discussed my dating or personal life, but I assumed it would be nonexistent during this job because Maddox asked me not to go anywhere alone, which would be uncomfortable for everyone.

SIXTY-SEVEN

MADDOX

“Maddox,” Victoria snapped. “Did you hear me?”

“What,” I said, my gaze flicking back to her. “Yes, I heard you.” I hadn’t heard her. I was hyper-focused on Addison and her new friend at the bar. I shouldn’t care that he was leaning into her, breathing in her scent. I shouldn’t care that she was smiling at him the way she used to smile at me, but I did.

“Maddox,” Victoria snapped again when my gaze flicked back toward the bar. “Am I boring you?” The answer was yes; she was boring me. I’d been out with Victoria before, and the only reason I’d asked her back out tonight was that I knew she’d say yes, and I wanted Addison to see that I moved on without her, but since Mr. too fucking handsy slid in next to her she hadn’t even looked back.

“Look,” I forced an apologetic smile, “I’m not feeling well. Why don’t I get you an Uber, and we can do this again another night?”

Victoria’s gaze followed my line of sight. “I can get my own Uber,” she hissed, sliding out of the booth and storming off.

“Good,” I muttered; some of the tension in my shoulders relaxed as I slid out and strolled towards Addy.

“Addison,” I said, stepping up behind her.

“Oh,” she hiccuped, twisting her shoulders to see me. Her full pink lips curled into a smile. “Hey, Maddox.” My gaze flicked from her to the man leaning too close to her. “This is...” She trailed off. The corners of my lips curled into a

smirk. She couldn't remember his name, and this poor fool thought he was getting lucky tonight.

Not a fucking chance.

"Daniel," he finished for her.

"Yeah," she slurred. "Danny. This is Danny."

"We should go," I said, more as a command than a suggestion.

"Oh." She pouted an apologetic smile when her hazy gaze flicked back to him. "I gotta go."

"Hey," he raised his voice, pushing out of his chair, "I thought we were hanging out tonight." I expected his rash tone to be directed toward me, but my entire posture changed when it was directed at her.

Stepping between Addison and Danny, I leaned in so only he could hear me. "Lower your voice when you speak to her." He leaned back, eyes wide as the threat sank in. "Because I give zero fucks about wearing orange for the rest of my life." I huffed a laugh, stepping back and cocking my head to the side. "Besides, Danny Boy, you didn't really think a girl like her was going home with you, did you?"

"I..." he trailed off as his jaw clenched and face tightened with anger.

"But thanks for keeping her company for me, Danny Boy." I winked, slapping him on the shoulder before I slid an arm around Addison's waist, pulling her out of her chair.

"I think I maybe had too much to drink," Addy slurred. "They were really good drinks, though. They tasted like candy." My gaze flicked down to her as her tongue swept across her lips. I wanted to taste her, to taste the drink of her lips, but I knew I couldn't. I couldn't go down that road with her again.

Clearing my throat, I led her to my truck, helping her in before we headed back to my place.

Part of me was relieved she was passed out when we got home, but the other part knew I'd have to carry her inside.

Which meant her body pressed against mine.

This wasn't how I saw the night going.

Carrying her into the house, I held my breath, careful not to breathe in her scent. I laid her on the sofa, threw a blanket over her, and sank onto the couch across from her. Kicking off my shoes and putting my feet up, I relaxed, my gaze locked on Addy. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the couch.

The next six weeks were going to be torture. I shouldn't have agreed to this. I should have given her an interview and continued with my life, but a small part of me wasn't ready to say goodbye again.

"Hey, Maddox," she slurred.

"Hmm," I hummed, not bothering to open my eyes.

"I missed you," she whispered, and my heart clenched. Lifting my head, my gaze locked on her, and as if I was pulled to her by some magnetic force, I pushed off the couch, moving to her without even realizing what I was doing.

My chest rose and fell with deep, slow breaths as our gazes locked and her lips parted. My hands twitched with a desperate need to touch her, to brush the dark strand of hair out of her face, grab her face, and kiss her so hard I stole all the air from her lungs.

Clenching my fist at my side, I twisted away from her and stormed to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

I couldn't do this again.

SIXTY-EIGHT

ADDISON

“I can’t believe you let me sleep all morning,” I muttered, sliding into the stool and dropping my things on the granite countertop of the kitchen island. “We were supposed to do our first live during your morning workout.”

“You snooze, you lose.” Maddox chuckled, shrugging his bare shoulders. He knew exactly what he’d done. I gave him the tentative schedule before we left last night. My gaze flicked past him to where it hung on the fridge.

“What’s the plan for tonight?”

“Rice is throwing a pregame party tonight at his place,” Maddox said. “I have to make an appearance. They know you’re coming with me. You can ask for pictures but no video, and make sure you clarify any conversation that will be on the record.”

“Deal.” I flipped open my iPad and set up my area to work. “Since we missed the first live this morning. I’m sending out a tweet to my followers that I will go live in an hour with a huge surprise. Is that good for you?”

“Yeah,” he groaned, flipping a dish towel over his shoulder. He placed his palms flat on the countertop across from me, and I fought the urge to let my gaze rake down his naked torso. “I don’t know why we have to go live.”

“Trust me.” I smiled, clicking away on my keyboard. “It won’t be that bad. It can be fun interacting with your fans.” He cocked a grin at me. “We’ll set up outside on your patio. It’s beautiful out there.”

It took us every bit of an hour to set up outside and prep Maddox for the process.

“You ready?” I smiled at Maddox, who stood in front of me and behind the camera. He nodded, and I let my gaze rake over his naked torso. I started to tell him he might want to put on a shirt but then decided that shirtless was in the show’s best interest.

I hit the button, and the screen filled with Maddox’s patio with the beautiful ocean view.

I waited a few minutes with nothing in view of the camera except the beautiful scenery. After five full minutes, I stepped into view, sinking into the chair.

1.2k watching... That was fast.

“Hey guys,” I smiled. “It’s Addison, and I know some of you have noticed that I’ve been MIA for a few days. I’ve been working hard behind the scenes to bring you guys a huge surprise.”

1.5k watching...

My gaze flicked over the top of my iPad to Maddox, whose eyes were locked on me, watching me work.

“Okay, so are you guys ready?” I asked the screen, but I was mostly talking to Maddox. “For the next six weeks, I will be working side-by-side with everyone’s favorite baller, Maddox Parker.”

2.0k watching...

I typed in the hashtag #maddoxparker and hit enter.

“Maddox Parker has agreed to a six-week exclusive into his personal life. BBN Sports Gossip will be there for everything and report it back to you.”

3.2k watching...

“He will be answering your questions live starting today.” I smiled. “So, how about we get Maddox out here?”

Maddox stepped into view of the camera, sinking into the seat beside me.

3.8k watching...

“What’s up?” Maddox smiled for the camera.

“Okay, guys,” I said. “If you’re not following me on all my socials, make sure you do that now so you don’t miss any of Maddox’s live interviews. We’ll tour his house tomorrow before leaving for the game in Detroit.”

4.5k watching... *Holy shit! It’s working.*

“How about we have Maddox answer a few questions?” Leaning forward, I scrolled through the feed.

Maddox, I love you!

Maddox, will you marry me?

Does Maddox have a girlfriend? Nothing is more personal than that.

“Does Maddox have a girlfriend?” I asked.

“No,” he answered, his gaze flicking to me briefly before smiling for the camera.

“Okay, next questions.” I narrowed my eyes at the screen. “How do you know Maddox?” I read the question out loud. I knew better than to do that. You screened your questions first; I knew this.

“We are old friends from high school,” Maddox answered hesitantly. I didn’t expect the questions to go this way. They weren’t supposed to be about me or me and Maddox. “We also went to college together.”

8.6K watching...

The comment section went wild.

Maddox leaned in, his eyes narrowing on the screen. “Addison, did you and Maddox date?” Maddox’s gaze flicked back to me. “Addison?”

Swallowing hard, my gaze flicked from Maddox to the screen. I hadn’t realized my personal life might also be up for grabs during the exclusive. Clearing my throat, I nodded, forcing a smile. “We dated very briefly but decided we were

better as friends.” I wasn’t prepared to answer questions about myself and Maddox’s past, and it caught me off guard.

15k watching...

“Well, guys, that’s all we have time for today. Make sure you are following me so you don’t miss our next live tomorrow.” I hit the button, ending the live.

“Well, that went in a direction I wasn’t prepared for,” I mumbled. Maddox pushed out of the chair and stormed toward the house. He was angry. No, his posture didn’t scream anger, but he was upset. “Maddox.” He didn’t answer as he slid the glass door open, walked inside, and closed it behind him. “What the fuck just happened?”



HOURS AFTER THE INTERVIEW, Maddox finally surfaced from his room, fully dressed in dark faded jeans and a black team t-shirt that fit snugly against his broad chest.

“Are you ready?” he mumbled.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. He didn’t answer. “Maddox, did I do something wrong?” He opened the fridge, pulled out a water bottle, and closed the refrigerator. “I don’t know if you don’t tell me.”

“You really want to know?” He sneered. I nodded. “We didn’t decide we were better as friends. We didn’t decide anything. You left.” Okay, so we were going to do this now.

“Maddox, I’m sorry if what I said upset you.” I sighed. “But I wasn’t prepared for questions about us. It actually never crossed my mind that people might be curious about us.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He shrugged.

“So what should I have told them?” I asked, sliding off the stool and strolling around the kitchen island, stopping in front

of him. “Should I have told them the truth? Do you want our entire history out in the world to be dissected by millions of people?” He stepped back like I was too close, and it hurt.

“I don’t know.” He sighed, dragging his hand down his face. His gaze flicked down to me as he sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. “What you said was probably the best thing to say, but we should have our story together for the next live so there are no surprises for either of us.”

“I’ll make sure I screen the questions better next time, too.”

“We should go,” he said, and I nodded. “Remember the rules. Everything is off the record unless you clarify beforehand.”

“I remember.” I smiled.

The drive to Rice’s house was silent, and once he’d brought me inside, he’d disappeared with his famous ‘I’ll be right back’ line I was starting to get used to.

I wandered around the party, completely invisible to everyone around me. I was used to that, though.

“You don’t have a drink,” a deep male voice said when I strolled into the kitchen. “What can I get you?”

“A beer.” I smiled. He reached into the fridge, pulled out a bottle, opened it, and handed it to me.

“I don’t recognize you.” He narrowed his deep blue eyes. “Are you here with someone?”

“Uh yeah,” I said. “I came with Maddox.”

“Ahhh.” He smiled. “So you’re the sports gossip girl.”

“That’s me.” I laughed. “And you are Derek Brady.” Of course, I knew who he was. Derek Brady was one of the hottest eligible bachelors in the NFL, right behind Maddox. What kind of sports gossip girl would I be if I didn’t know who my single ballers were? Thankfully, I hadn’t reported anything bad about him, mostly because the guy was clean. He was your typical playboy baller, and I was sure he had lots of hookups, but he kept everything on the DL, making it hard for

me to gossip. There had never been an angry girl willing to spill it all after a hookup, which told me he wasn't a complete dog. He never got caught out in public with his pants down. He was only ever caught in public during charity events and a couple of times outside his church with his very proud mother.

"That's me." He smiled an all-white perfect smile that I was sure had melted girls' panties off. "But whatever you heard is a lie."

"All good things." I smiled.

"Good," he said, his gaze raking over me as his tongue swept along his bottom lip. "I was heading out to the fire. Do you want to join me?"

"Yes." I smiled, and I meant it. Derek moved faster than I was used to. He grabbed my hand, pulling me behind him through the crowds of people, only letting it go when we were in front of the fire.

"So I have to ask," he said. "Are you and Parker a thing?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "No, in fact, I think he hates me."

"No." He shook his head. "Parker doesn't do private interviews anymore. There's no way he would do one for someone he hates. Especially for six weeks."

"It's complicated." I sighed.

"Complicated like you are his or complicated like you used to be."

"Complicated like it's a long story neither of us has time for right now."

"Well, then I will take that as an invitation to ask you out," he smiled, "so that we have time for more." The corner of his lip twitched with amusement. "Would you have dinner with me?"

"Like a date?" I asked. He nodded. I pressed my lips into a thin line. I wanted to say yes, but my gaze flicked past him to where Maddox stood in the corner with a small blonde. "This

job with Maddox has me tied up, and I'm not sure when I'll have any free time."

"Okay," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone. "Then we'll exchange numbers, and if you get a free night, you call me, and if not, you text me before you head back to New York so I can convince you to stay here in Florida." He handed me his phone, and I added my name and number before handing it back to him. I didn't actually expect him to call. He was a playboy who had women throwing themselves at him. Why would he wait for me?

The sound of glass breaking cut through the night, and our gazes flicked to Maddox and the woman.

"Who is that?" I asked, my gaze locked on the angry, short blonde.

"That is Casey Davis," he said. "His agent, and by the looks of it, she had no idea he was doing your interview." I shrugged. I didn't know what she knew. I didn't know anything about her. "Don't be surprised if once she's done with him, she doesn't rip you a new one, too."

"Wonderful," I muttered, and as if on cue, she spun on her heels, storming towards me.

"Oh shit." Derek groaned, stepping in front of me, shielding me from the fury Casey was spitting from her eyes. Maddox's gaze narrowed on Derek as he stormed behind her.

"If you fuck him over," Casey growled, pointing her long slim finger in my face. "I will hurt you."

"That's enough, Casey," Derek said. "It's a party. We're here to have fun."

"I'm serious, bitch," she snarled. "You went behind my back to do this..."

"That's enough, Casey," Maddox barked, and her mouth snapped shut. "Do not talk to her like that."

"Maddox," she scowled, "I'm the only one looking out for your best interest."

“You should go.” He pointed to the front of the house. Her jaw flexed like she was going to argue, but she threw her hands up and stormed away.

“That was intense.” Derek laughed. Maddox’s gaze flicked between Derek and me.

“Let’s go, Addison,” Maddox muttered.

“You guys just got here.” Derek smiled, his gaze locked on me.

“Let’s go, Addison,” Maddox repeated; this time, his tone was deadly and aimed toward Derek.

“I gotta go.” I smiled.

“I’ll text you my number.” He smiled. I nodded, offering a tight smile because Maddox was shooting daggers.

He opened my car door, and I hopped in. Maddox jogged to the driver’s side, slid in, slammed the door, and started his truck, but he didn’t move.

“Did he ask you out?” Maddox said, his hands gripping the steering wheel as he stared straight forward.

“Derek?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. He nodded. “Yes, but I told him I was busy right now.”

“You gave him your number?” he asked.

“Yes, he said if I had any downtime to call him and we could meet up.”

His gaze flicked to me, and if I didn’t know any better, I would have thought I saw a challenge accepted flash across his face, but I knew he didn’t care about me. Not anymore.

SIXTY-NINE

MADDOX

Addison followed me through the front door; I kicked my shoes off and strolled into the kitchen. It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. My agent was furious that I'd agreed to this exclusive with Addison. She thought it would end badly with my reputation on the line, but I trusted Addison. Even with our complicated past, I knew she wouldn't purposely hurt my career or reputation.

Addison's phone chimed, and I glanced at the phone on the counter. It was an unknown text.

Addison strolled into the kitchen, pulling her long dark hair up into a ponytail, already changed into a tiny tank and a pair of short, pink boxer shorts.

She reached across the counter, her full tits spilling out of the top of her tank when she leaned forward on her forearms, clicking on her phone. It took every ounce of willpower to restrain myself from reaching out and touching her.

She smiled at the phone, and I knew it was him. Brady texted her. He was a smooth talker, and he wouldn't waste any time if he was interested in her. She would be too busy to have time for him or anyone else. For the next six weeks, she was all mine.

I dropped a heavy stainless steel pan on the granite, and she jumped, her gaze flicking up and locking on mine. Derek didn't know our past. He didn't know I'd been in love with Addison since our first kiss. Hell, I didn't even know, but I

needed them to know. I needed them to know she was off-limits.

“Set everything up,” I muttered, not bothering to hide my annoyance. “We’re doing a live-in ten.”

“Now?” she snapped, checking the time on her phone. “It’s after ten p.m.”

“No, in ten minutes,” I corrected her. “We are going to discuss us and our past.”

“What?” She scowled. “Why would we do that? My followers aren’t expecting me to go live until tomorrow morning.”

“Then it will be a surprise.” I smirked.

“But, why, Maddox?” she snapped. “This exclusive isn’t about us. It’s about you.”

I opened my mouth but then snapped it shut, pressing my lips into a thin line because I couldn’t tell her the real reason. I couldn’t tell her I wanted the whole world to know she was mine, even if she wasn’t right now. “I think transparency is the best way to go with this.”

She shook her head, and I twisted, grabbing her iPad off the counter and sliding it over to her.

“The media is going to dig into this now that it’s out there.” I sighed. “It’s better if we get ahead of this now so we can spin this how we want to.” Some of that was true, but mostly, I wanted everyone to know she had been mine and that we had an unfinished past.

“So, this was your agent’s idea.” She scowled. I didn’t answer. Casey wanted me to kick her out and never speak to her again. “So you want to tell everything: the pictures, the hurt, the heartbreak? You want to come clean about everything.”

“Yes.” This was going to piss Casey off, but I didn’t care.

“I’m not dressed anymore.” She crossed her arms over her chest shoving her tits higher.

“You look beautiful,” I said, my gaze locked on hers. “But if you want to change, you have ten minutes.”

“Maddox.” She sighed. Pausing her gaze locked on me as she bit her lip. God, I wanted to pull her into me and claim that lip she was chewing on. “You’re right. Let me get everything ready. Is the patio good?” I nodded. “Do you want to go over our story before we go live?” I shook my head. “So, the truth.” I nodded.

Twenty minutes later, we were sitting side by side on the patio in front of her iPad.

“You ready?” Addison asked. “I’m going to let you take the lead on this. You can give as much or as little information as you want.”

“Let’s do it.” I nodded.

She leaned forward, clicking the button to go live, and we waited silently for several long minutes.

“Hey guys, it’s Addison, and we are doing a surprise live tonight,” she said, brushing a strand of loose hair from her face. The ocean breeze was strong tonight. “Maddox and I realized there might be some questions about our past, so we decided to do a live to answer those questions.”

1.9k watching...

“So Maddox is going to tell you a little about how we met, and I’ll try to catch some of your questions as we go.” Addison’s gaze flicked to me. I hated being in front of the camera.

“Addison and I met in high school.” I smiled. “I was on the football team, and she was my tutor.”

3.2k watching...

My gaze flicked over to her. “She was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen.” Her gaze locked on mine as a soft smile played on her lips. The wind blew the loose strand into her face, and I reached out, sliding it behind her ear and, for a brief minute, her eyes closed, and she leaned into my touch. “But I was a stupid teenager and broke her heart.”

5.5k watching...

“Fast forward four years, and we are in the same situation. I played football, and she was my tutor, and she was still the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. We made up, and then she got an internship over a thousand miles away. She left and broke my heart.”

8.2k watching...

“Why don’t we take a couple of questions?” Addison said. I leaned forward and scrolled through the millions of comments.

“Okay, the first question is for Addison. Are you living in Maddox’s house?”

“Yes, I am. I’m with Maddox every waking minute,” she paused, her gaze flicking to me and then back to the screen, “with a few exceptions. This is an all-exclusive interview. We want to learn who the real Maddox Parker is.”

“Next question,” I said, scrolling again. “Will you do the next live during his shower?”

17.1k watching...

“The bathroom and his bedroom are part of those exceptions.” Addison smiled.

“Are you still in love with Addison?” I read, and my mouth parted. I couldn’t answer that. I couldn’t say the words out loud because then it was out there, and it would crush me if she didn’t feel the same.

65.7k watching...

“Well, guys, that’s all the time we have for tonight,” Addison interrupted. “Be sure to log in tomorrow morning for Maddox’s early morning workout.” She hit the button, ending the live.

She opened her social media page and gasped. “Holy shit, Maddox.” She jumped up, and I followed her.

“What?”

“I just hit one million followers,” she squealed, throwing her arms around me.

“That’s good, I guess,” I said, distracted by her scent. She smelled like the ocean breeze mixed with a hint of vanilla.

“That’s amazing,” she squealed, pulling out of the embrace. I didn’t want to let go, but I did, dropping my arms to my side. “I struggled to break five hundred thousand, and now I’m at one million.” Her smile was contagious, and I found myself matching her energy. “We should get some sleep. I don’t want to miss your workout tomorrow.” I nodded, and she collected her things before disappearing into the house.

Sitting underneath the starry night sky, watching her through the large window put away her things in the kitchen, I decided I wanted her back. I didn’t want to share her, and I had six weeks to remind her how she felt about me—six weeks to bring back all the feelings we had for each other.

SEVENTY

MADDOX

I got up and ready for the gym before sunrise, just like I did every day. Pushing through the kitchen doorway, I was surprised to see Addison already up and working on her iPad, her legs curled up in the chair as she sipped her coffee.

She was fucking beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head, with no makeup, her large black framed glasses covering her eyes, and she wore an oversized t-shirt and very short gym shorts.

“Good morning.” She smiled when she spotted me.

“You’re up early,” I said, reaching for the blender to mix my protein shake.

“Didn’t want to miss out on anything this morning,” she said, focused on her screen. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“I’ll be doing my workout this morning,” I said. “And then packing. We have to be at the airport by one p.m. to catch the flight.”

“I was going to do a live tour of your house today, but I’ll do a live of your workout routine and then a few questions. Maybe we can go live again after we land and settle into our rooms.” She pushed out of her chair and strolled toward the sink. Her tanned and toned legs were bare. She rinsed and washed her coffee cup before setting it on the drying rack. “I’m excited to get pictures for the site today so your fans can see what it’s like traveling with you.”

“Are you ready?” I smirked. I had a plan for today, and I hoped it worked.

Twenty minutes later, Addison was set up and hitting the live button.

“Hey guys.” Addison smiled into the camera. “I know it’s early, but you will not regret waking up to join us this morning.” I popped into view shirtless. “This morning, Maddox Parker is giving us an up close and personal view of his workout routine.” Her gaze flicked to me. “You ready, Maddox?”

2.5k watching...

“Actually, I have a better idea.” I smirked, my gaze flicking from Addison to the camera. “How about we get Addison out here to work out with me this morning? Who wants to see Addison work out with me?”

6.7k watching...

“What? No.” She laughed. “You guys don’t want to see me make a fool out of myself.”

The comment section exploded.

“Looks like they do.” I smirked, my gaze flicking from the screen to Addison. Rolling her eyes, she blew out a sigh.

12.3k watching...

“Oh, why not.” She shrugged. “But you guys have to promise not to laugh if I embarrass myself.” She pointed to the camera as she pulled her glasses off and set them on the table, holding the iPad. “Where do we start?”

“We start with cardio to get the heart pumping.” I smiled, pointing to the treadmill. Addison twisted the camera so that we would still be in view.

Addison stepped onto the treadmill, and I stepped on behind her. I expected her to flinch or question my motives, but she didn’t. I set the treadmill to a fast walk. She held onto the treadmill railing, and I curled my fingers around her hips like my hands were made for them.

Five minutes into the workout, Addison shredded the t-shirt, wearing only a sports bra and her tiny workout shorts. Part of me wanted to go all caveman and end the live, throw her over my shoulder, carry her into the house, and fuck her until she remembered that it was me she wanted. I didn't want to share her with the world, but this was her job, and she wasn't mine, not yet, anyway.

“Okay, sit,” I said, straddling the weight-lifting bench. “We’re going to do curls.” She threw a leg over and dropped down onto the bench in front of me. My hands curled around her waist as I jerked her back flush against me. My gaze raked over the delicate curve of her throat as a bead of sweat trailed down. Fuck, I wanted her, but I couldn't not unless she was mine. I couldn't put myself through that again if she wasn't truly all in. “Take the weight,” I breathed against the side of her face. Her breath hitched, but I wasn't sure if it was me or the impact of the weight in her hand. “Curl.” My hands slid down her arm past her elbows to her wrists as I helped her curl the weight.

We spent the next hour going through my entire workout routine. Every chance I had to touch her, I did. Every chance I had to hold her against me, I took it, but she didn't seem fazed by the contact, and I wasn't sure if it was because of the camera or if I didn't have the same effect on her that I used to have.

105.2k watching...

“That’s a wrap, guys.” Addison panted, wiping the sweat from her forehead. “Sorry we don't have time for any questions this morning, but if we get a chance later, we'll try to pop on and grab some of those questions. Thanks for watching. If you're not following me yet, make sure you do so you don't miss any of our surprise lives.” She pressed the towel to her neck. “Keep an eye out for a picture dump in the next few days as I travel with Maddox to St. Louis for their next big game. Bye, guys.”

230k watching...

She ended the live.

“Wow,” Addison said, a smile spreading across her face. “At five in the morning, two hundred and thirty thousand people logged in to watch you work out.”

“I need a shower,” I said, throwing my towel over my shoulder. “And we need to get packed. We need to leave here by 11:30.”

“Why don’t you shower, and I’ll put something together for breakfast since I’m already packed?”

“Sounds delicious,” I said, following her into the main house. It felt so right being here with her like this.

Addison pushed open the door to the kitchen and stopped so quickly that I slammed into the back of her.

“What the...” I muttered, wrapping an arm around her waist to keep her from falling. At the same time, I steadied myself, and that was when I saw her.

Casey Davis.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped.

“I saw the live.” She forced a sarcastic smile. “It was cute.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You guys have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

My gaze flashed from Casey to Addison, who stood beside me, before flashing back to Casey.

“What are you talking about?”

“This little all about Maddox Parker exclusive.” She sneered, waving her perfectly manicured hands around. “Just turned into an Addison and Maddox special.” My brows pinched. I had no idea what that meant. “The public doesn’t give a rat’s ass about you and your career. They want to see how you and little miss-sport-gossip-girls relationship unfolds.”

“No.” Addison scowled, shaking her head. “That’s not what this is.”

“Yeah,” Casey frowned. “The whole world saw how he looked at you during your live last night. The whole world saw

how he touched you today. Whether it actually meant what it looked like is irrelevant to the public. Do you know what's going to happen in six weeks when you go back to New York and Maddox stays here and the public doesn't get their conclusion to the Addison and Maddox show?" Addison shook her head. "Let's just hope it doesn't destroy your career."

"Okay, Casey," I snapped. "If that's the case, we'll give them the conclusion they want. We'll figure it out." What I meant by that was I hoped Addison wouldn't be returning to New York; hopefully, she'd be moving her stuff into my bedroom by the end of the six weeks.

SEVENTY-ONE

ADDISON

The day had gone from good to hectic quickly once we reached the airport. I did a lot of traveling in my career, but it never consisted of traveling with so many men pumped for a game. Between the long plane ride, the bus ride to the hotel, and getting checked in, I was exhausted, and I still needed to upload the photos of my trip to my socials and see if Maddox's was up for a short live before bed.

All of their rooms were booked well in advance of the season. Maddox tried to get us a joining room or even rooms that were close, but unfortunately, there was a convention, and they were already overbooked. So, we would share this trip.

I followed Maddox into the room; pulling my stuff behind me, I let the door slam. We both froze when we saw the king bed in the middle of the room. Maddox asked for two beds. I guess she didn't hear him.

Maddox pulled his luggage to the opposite side of the room, setting it in a corner.

"You can take the bed, and I'll take the floor," Maddox said, jerking a pillow off the bed and tossing it to the floor. Annoyance coloring his tone.

"Don't be ridiculous." I forced a smile, pulling my suitcase to the opposite corner. "I'll take the floor."

"Don't insult my manhood." He groaned. "The discussion is over. I'll take the floor."

"Maddox, you have to be up early tomorrow," I snapped, and he shrugged me off. "Fine, we can share the bed. It's not

like we haven't shared a bed before." His gaze snapped up, meeting mine. Anger illuminated his face.

"I'm not sharing a bed with you," he hissed. Every ounce of air exhaled from my lungs like he'd just sucker-punched me in the gut. I wished he had; it would have been less painful. He hated me so much that he wouldn't even sleep in the same bed as me. "I'm getting a shower." He disappeared into the bathroom, and I felt like the walls were closing in on me.

I needed air. Pushing through the hotel door into the hallway, I ran to the elevator and rode it down to the first floor, bolting towards the pool exit. Pushing through the door and into the cool air, I sucked in a deep breath as I fought the tears stinging my eyes. I knew this would be hard, but I didn't think it would be this hard. I never expected him to harbor so much hate for me, and I never expected that it would cut so deep.

I strolled around the pool deck, pulling in long, slow breaths when something in my peripheral view moved. My gaze snapped over, and I caught the first flashing light of a paparazzi camera. Shit.

I twisted to head back towards the exit, but I underestimated their need for a story because I was swarmed before I had two full steps as they threw questions at me.

"Are you dating Maddox Parker?"

"How long have you known Maddox Parker?"

"Rumors have it he was your first?"

"Is it true that you caused the breakup between him and his long-time girlfriend?"

I stood, mouth gaping. I was the press, and it was like I completely froze. *Pull yourself together, Addison.*

"No comment," I muttered, trying to shove my way through them, but I realized I didn't bring my key with me, and I couldn't get into the building. "Back up, please." Their bright lights flashed in my face as they continued barking questions.

The door swung open, and large hands wrapped around my arm as Maddox jerked me inside, dragging me out of sight of the windows.

“I told you not to go anywhere without security,” he yelled, his tone cold and clipped, filled with anger.

“I didn’t think about it,” I shouted back, fighting my tears. I hadn’t thought about it. I’d needed air, and it never crossed my mind that I might be swarmed with paparazzi on the pool deck of his hotel.

“I told you the media is relentless,” he snapped. “And they will stop at nothing to get their story. You should know this.” I didn’t know why that statement cut so deep, but it did. It was like he took a dagger, stabbed it through my heart, and twisted it; that was how he meant it.

“I’m sorry,” I cried out. “I’m sorry I left. I’m sorry I didn’t choose you.” A tear streamed down my face. “I get it. I understand why you hate me.”

“You think I hate you?” he snapped, his brows pinched. A pained look covered his face.

“I know you do,” I choked. “You can’t even sleep in the same bed as me.”

“I don’t hate you,” he growled. “You don’t get it, do you?” He surged forward, invading my space. I took a step back, my back hitting the wall. He stood so close I could feel the heat radiating off him. “I love you. I want you.” His hands curled around my waist as he pressed his body firmly against mine. “I don’t want to share a bed with you because I can’t do that and not keep you.” My gaze flashed up, meeting his as another tear streamed down my cheek. “I can’t go through losing you again. I can’t kiss you and hold you. I can’t touch you and fall down that rabbit hole only for you to walk away from me again because I’m not sure I could survive it.”

I opened my mouth, but he’d rendered me speechless.

“So unless you are here to stay,” he said, brushing his lips against mine, “forever as my girl, I can’t do those things with you.”

I nodded.

“I know I broke you first,” he breathed. “But you broke me when you left.”

“You told me you were going to move on if I left.” I swallowed hard. “I wanted to call so many times, but I remembered what you said.”

He stepped back, his gaze locked on mine. Sucking in a deep breath, his chest rose and fell slowly when he exhaled.

“I should never have said any of that to you.” He sighed. “I should never have made you choose between me and your career, and I’m sorry for that, but it doesn’t change anything. My heart still wants you, which is why I said that once this interview is over, you walk away and never come into my life again because as long as you are in it, I’ll never stand a chance of moving on.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Unless you feel the same and you plan to stay forever.” I wiped away my tears with the back of my hand. “I would do anything for another chance, but I also know your life is in New York, and right now, mine is Florida, and I wouldn’t ask you to give anything up, but the ball is in your court now.”

He twisted away from me, heading toward the elevator.

“There hasn’t been a single day I haven’t thought about you,” I said so softly that I wasn’t sure I’d said it aloud. He froze. “I still love you, Maddox, but I’m not sure how to do this, and I’m scared of feeling that heartbreak again, too.” He twisted his deep blue eyes, locking on mine.

“Don’t play with me, Addy,” he said.

I shook my head. “I’m not playing with...” He stormed forward, grabbing my face and slamming his mouth against mine, cutting off my words, and I melted into him like he was everything familiar. He broke from the kiss; his forehead pressed against mine.

“Let’s go to bed.”

I nodded.

SEVENTY-TWO

MADDOX

Pulling back the blanket, I slid into the bed beside Addison before clicking off the light.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to sleep on the floor?” Addison asked again for the fourth time since we’d gotten back into the room. “I really don’t mind if you are uncomfortable.”

I rolled my eyes. “No,” I grunted, situating myself in the bed and shoving my hand behind my head. “Stop asking.”

I stared through the darkness at the ceiling. The only sound in the room was Addison’s shallow breathing. I thought she’d fallen asleep.

“Maddox,” she whispered, her tone so soft it got the attention of my dick.

“Hmm,” I hummed.

“Why did you do it?” My head twisted, and I cocked a brow like she could see me in the darkness. She couldn’t, just like I couldn’t make out her facial expression. “Why did you make that bet in high school?”

Sucking in a deep breath, I blew it out slowly. “Because I was a stupid kid, and it’s sad, but I didn’t realize how amazing you were until I got to know you. I still, to this day, wish I’d never made that bet. I wish I’d never taken those pictures.”

“You should have told me. I thought we were friends.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “If I could go back, I would, and I would change a lot of stupid things I did.”

“Would you change meeting me?”

“What?” I snapped, rolling to my side to face her even though I couldn’t see her. “Addison, the only thing I would change about us is all the stupid things I did to push you away.” I reached out to touch her face, sliding my hand against the warm skin of her cheek, and a smile spread across my face when she leaned into my touch. “I would change everything I did to hurt you. I would change that I didn’t come after you the night you left. The night I made you choose between me and your future. Also, stupid.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked. “We could have tried to make it work.”

“That night, all I heard was ‘I’m leaving you,’” I said, still remembering exactly how I’d felt in that moment. “And now, thinking back, that wasn’t what you said at all, but that was all I heard, and I fucked up.” My hand slid down her bare shoulder. “Why didn’t you come back for graduation?”

“Because I got the job offer for my own segment,” she said. “And I was so excited that I didn’t even realize what it was until later, not that it would have changed anything. I still would have taken it.”

“I think Maddy was disappointed you didn’t come back.”

“She knew I wasn’t coming back,” she said. The bed shook as she shifted.

“Wait.” I scowled. “You were still talking to Maddy?”

“Yeah.” I could hear her smile. “She moved in with me two days after graduation and stayed with me until her apartment was ready. We are still friends.”

“No shit.” I laughed.

“When was the last time you talked to her?”

“Graduation day,” I said, recalling the exact conversation I had with Maddy. “I asked her if you were here. She told me you weren’t coming, and that was it.” I stared off into the darkness as my chest tightened. “I still blame Maddy for those

pictures getting out, and I wonder how different everything might have been if they hadn't."

I had no idea she and Maddy were still friends. I knew I should let go of the grudge I'd held over Maddy's head for the last six years, but it was hard even though I knew I really only had myself to blame.

"Maddox, I know you said you didn't want to be friends, but can we just try and see how it goes? No strings attached, no broken promises, no expectations, just friends."

I thought about the questions for several long minutes. I knew that I could never just be friends with Addison Wright. She was the one who got away, the only girl I ever loved, but I also knew this would be the last time I saw her if she walked away again, and that thought was more painful than only having a friendship with her.

"Let's start over." I smiled. "And see what happens."

She paused for so long that I thought she might have fallen asleep before she finally spoke again.

"I'm Addison Wright," she said. "I love books and art, but I have a soft spot for sports, mostly football. When I was a kid, I used to watch this boy from the bleachers. He was the cutest boy I'd ever seen, and that's where my love for football started."

I decided to play along. "How old were you?"

"I was seven," she said in a low whisper.

Seven.

She was seven.

Was she still talking about me?

I started playing youth football when I was six. Then it dawned on me Addison was the little blonde who stood every game under the bleachers. Asher noticed her first; we were in different schools at the time, and by the time we were in middle school together, I didn't recognize her.

I knew she'd watched most days under the bleachers in high school. We'd all seen her, but neither Asher nor I put it together that she was the same girl who'd watched us play rain or shine when we were kids.

"Addy." I sighed.

"It's your turn," she cut me off. "To introduce yourself."

"I'm Maddox Parker," I said. "Growing up, I was a major tool until I met this girl who made me want to be a better person, not only for her but for myself. But like most things, I managed to fuck it up." My hand found hers, and I tangled our fingers together. "I didn't realize it until it was too late, but I was in love with her and still am. If I ever get that second chance, I will hold on and never let go."

"So are you saying you are emotionally unavailable?" she asked, her breath fanning across my lips. I hadn't realized we had moved closer to each other in the large bed.

"Yeah," I sighed, brushing my lips across hers. "To anyone other than her."

"Can you tell me what you'd do if you had her in your bed right now?" she whispered.

Swallowing hard, my chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to kiss her so hard that I stole the air from her lungs. I wanted to fuck her until she was screaming my name, but I also wanted to keep her, and I didn't know if she was ready for that.

"We should get some sleep," I said. I couldn't do friends with benefits with her. I wanted it all.

"Maddox," she whispered after a few long seconds. I thought about not answering her and pretending to be asleep, but I couldn't.

"Yes."

"In high school, were you the reason everyone canceled their tutoring sessions with me?"

I narrowed my eyes but then laughed as I remembered. "You're not going to kill me, are you?"

“I knew it.”

“I threatened all the guys.” I smiled. “I wanted more time with you, and I was jealous they were spending time with you. I wish I could say I regretted that, but the truth is I’d do it exactly the same if given the opportunity again.”

“Good night, Maddox,” she whispered.

“Good night, Addison.”

SEVENTY-THREE

ADDISON

The following two weeks flew by. Maddox kept a hectic schedule during football season. Between working out, fundraisers, physical therapy, interviews, marketing ads for products he represented, and volunteer work, we almost didn't have time to sleep. Of course, none of that included practices, games, and sports-related functions like pregame parties and team dinners.

After the first week, we managed to get into a groove, and living together and spending every waking second together had become more comfortable than I'd like to admit.

"Are you ready?" I yawned as my gaze followed him around the kitchen. We'd been going since four a.m. that morning, and I was ready to get the live over with and crash hard.

"Yes," he said, rounding the corner of the kitchen island. "We doing it in here tonight?" I nodded. He cocked his head to the side as his gaze narrowed on my face. "You look tired."

"I am." I yawned again. "You run a tight ship, Parker."

He laughed, sliding onto the stool beside me. "What are we discussing tonight?"

I leaned forward, shoving my glasses further up my nose as I narrowed my eyes on the white paper pad beside my iPad.

"We should talk about the fundraiser you're hosting tomorrow," I said, trailing my pink pen down the list to ensure I was not missing anything. "That's all I have for tonight, so

we can just wing it, answer a few questions, and call it an early night.” My gaze flicked over to him for his approval.

“Let’s do this.” His lips twitched into a smirk as he crossed his arms over his bare chest. Pursing my lips, my eyes narrowed on him. He was up to something. He hated lives, and he was way too eager tonight.

“What’s going on?” His brows pinched as he shrugged his broad shoulders. “Are you up to something?” He shook his head, but his silence spoke volumes. He was definitely up to no good. Unfortunately, I was too tired to fight him. He nodded toward the iPad, and I rolled my eyes before I hit the button to go live.

I waited a few minutes as I watched the number of people joining rise.

“Hey guys,” I forced a smile, hoping it didn’t look forced since we had a decent amount of people watching. “It’s Addison, and as usual, Maddox Parker is with me.” Maddox leaned in, waving to the camera. “Tomorrow, Maddox has a massive fundraising event he’s going to talk about tonight, and after, he’s going to answer your questions. So get those questions ready and start sending them our way.”

8.1k watching...

My gaze flicked to Maddox, letting him know he was up.

“Hey, what’s up?” Maddox smiled. He was a natural in front of the camera, but I guess they prepared them for this kind of thing in his line of work. “Tomorrow evening, I will be hosting a massive fundraiser to raise money for The Maddox Parker Youth Foundation. For those of you who don’t know, my organization raises money to help those kids most at risk for dropping out of school, joining a gang, or going to jail and helps them channel that energy into sports and other hobbies they love. We have hundreds of volunteers who work with our kids, helping them find their passions, and we are always looking for more volunteers.”

50.8k watching...

“The event will be live tomorrow, and we will be accepting online donations as well as online volunteer applications.”

88.3k watching...

“So log in tomorrow evening and join me.” Maddox smiled. “If you can’t donate or volunteer, log in and share the event with everyone you know.”

“The event starts at seven p.m.” I smiled at the camera. “And will run through the night.” My gaze flicked back to Maddox. “Anything else you want to tell them?”

“Actually...” He smirked, and my jaw clenched. *Here it goes. Whatever he was planning.* “I need their help.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. He nodded. “With what?”

1.2m watching...

“I do not have a date for tomorrow’s event,” he said, the corners of his lips curled into a smirk. “And I was hoping they could help me convince you to be my date for the evening.” He knew I’d say no, so he put me on the spot. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to go. I didn’t have anything formal to wear. “Can you guys help me with that?”

The comments exploded...

3.8m watching...

“Let’s see,” Maddox said, narrowing his eyes at the screen. “Ashlyn says, ‘Say yes, Addison.’” His gaze flicked to me.

4.8m watching... Holy cow... Who were all these people?

“Tell her it will be fun, guys,” Maddox said, not taking his eyes off me. “Food and dancing.”

“I do not know how to dance,” I muttered. “And...”

“Woah,” Maddox said, his brows slamming together. “You don’t know how to dance?” I flashed him a warning look because I knew where this was going.

“No.”

“Should I teach her?” His gaze flashed back to the screen as he read through the millions of comments coming through.

“Looks like they want to see me teach you.” His gaze flashed back to me. “What kind of live would this be if we didn’t give the fans what they want?”

A forced smile spread across my face as I shook my head. He had me, and he knew it. He shoved out of his chair, offering me a hand.

“Why not?” I sighed, placing my hand in his.

My gaze raked over him as he led me away from the counter but still in the camera’s view. He was only wearing a pair of dark grey sweatpants that hung low on his narrow hips. The girls watching this were going wild right now. This was a side of Maddox that not many people got to see.

“Stay there,” he ordered as he jogged into the living room and grabbed a remote.

When he returned, he clicked on his stereo system surround sound, and of course, it was a slow song.

“Perfect,” he whispered so low I was sure only I heard him.

“What are you doing?” I whispered as his large hands wrapped around my hips. Swallowing hard, my gaze trailed up, meeting his as my chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths.

Leaning down, he whispered, “Dancing.” I sucked in a harsh breath as the heat of his breath fanned across my cheek, making me forget millions of people were watching us. His fingertips curled tighter into the bare flesh of my hips as he pulled me flush against him.

“Maddox,” I whispered.

“Just move with me, Addy,” he breathed against my throat as his hips swayed and his hands guided mine to follow his movements. We moved together, finding our own rhythm to the beat of the music. I let the heat of his body consume me as I melted into him. My eyes closed as my stomach fluttered, but when he pressed his lips to the nape of my neck, I jolted back to reality.

“Omigod,” I whisper-breathed, pushing him back as my gaze snapped back to the iPad still rolling. Shit!

And then, as if my prayers were answered, the power flicked off, and we lost internet connection.

“What the hell was that?” I hissed, twisting around to see him standing right where I left him, masked in darkness. “Everyone saw that.”

“I just asked you to dance.” He shrugged. “There’s no hiding the chemistry we have, Addison. I don’t know why you’re trying.”

“This is work for me, Maddox,” I muttered. “And it looks unprofessional. Everyone is going to think I sleep with everyone I interview now.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“Fuck you,” I growled, rearing my hand back to slap him, but I wasn’t fast enough and he caught my wrist, jerking me into him.

“Then who fucking cares?” he growled against my lips as he pressed his face into mine.

My head felt heavy as his hot breath brushed across my lips as he held me in place. The room was thick with anticipation as the only sound was our labored breathing echoing through the silent house in the darkness.

“I want to kiss you,” he purred.

“But you won’t,” I said.

“No,” he said as his heavy breathing evened out. “Because I can’t kiss you and not keep you.”

“Maddox,” I said as his grip loosened and he backed away.

“I’m going to bed,” he said, cutting me off and twisting away from me.

Lightening flashed, and thunder shook the house.

“Maddox,” I cried out. I hated storms. I hated being alone during them, but was it fair for me to ask him to come back?

“It’s just a storm, Addy,” he said from the doorway, a slight edge to his tone. “It will pass soon. Do you want a flashlight?”

“Uh,” I stammered—another flash, this one closer, followed by floor-shaking thunder.

“Addy,” Maddox said, his tone completely shifted. I could hear his concern laced in his words.

“I’m—” I started, but another flash and another loud boom made me choke on my words.

“You’re scared of storms,” he said more as a statement than a question. Swallowing hard, I shook my head, trying to hide it. Blowing out a heavy sigh, he strolled back to me. “Yes, you are. How did I not know this?” My gaze met his as I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’ll be okay,” I said.

“Come on.” He smirked. “I’ll protect you from the big bad thunder.”

He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me into the living room before the sky parted and the rain fell. Maddox lit the candle on the coffee table in front of us.

“Are you cold?” he asked, sinking onto the couch beside me, but he didn’t wait for me to answer as he ripped the grey throw blanket off the back of the couch and threw it over us.

“How long have you been scared of storms?” he asked after several minutes of silence. I shrugged. “Tell me.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I blew it out slowly. “Since I was a little girl. My dad would tell me stories to distract me, and eventually, I would fall asleep. He would sleep on my bedroom floor if it stormed all night just in case I got scared again.” I smiled at the memories. “The night he died, it was storming really bad, and I guess I blamed the storm for taking him from me.”

“Car accident?” Maddox asked, and I nodded.

Another flash and another boom rattled the house, and I jumped, nearly slamming into the side of Maddox. His chest

bounced, and I knew he was chuckling.

“You think this is funny, don’t you?” I muttered.

“Nope,” he said, but I could hear his grin. “Come on.” He shoved an arm behind my head and pulled me tight against him. “I’m not really much of a storyteller, but maybe I can find another way to distract you.”

“How..?” Lightning flashed, and thunder cracked, cutting off my words. My eyes squeezed shut, and before I knew what was happening, Maddox had a tight hold on my hips as he jerked and twisted me, and when I opened my eyes, I was pinned under him.

“But, I thought—” I whispered.

“Shh.” His lips brushed against mine. “The only thing you get to say right now is stop, and if you want me to stop, you should say it now, Addy.”

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

“Addison,” he breathed, the heat from his breath fanning across my lips. “Last chance, Addy. Tell me to stop.” His lips brushed along my jawline. “Tell me to stop now, or I’m going to fuck you right here.”

“Do it,” I whispered as heat filled my chest.

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“It most certainly...” His mouth slammed against mine, silencing my words. His kiss was so insanely intense that I lost the ability to breathe. The kiss is both desperate and frantic, like kissing me gave him the air to survive.

His hands captured my wrist, pinning them over my head, possessively holding them in place. He ground his hips into mine, and I swallowed his savage groan.

White hot heat surged through me as he captured my bottom lip with his teeth, drawing it into his mouth, sucking and biting the tender flesh. I can no longer form a coherent thought. Logically, I knew this could end badly, that both of us

could end up hurt again, but it didn't matter. All I could focus on was how badly I needed to feel him inside me.

Releasing my hands, his hot raspy breath fanned across my neck as he shifted his body to the side and shoved his hand down my shorts, cupping my pussy.

A low groan slipped past his lips as he slid a finger through my slick flesh. "You're so fucking wet for me, baby," he purred. I rocked my hips, grinding myself against his finger. His smile spread against my throat. His hot breath, mixed with the stubble on his face, sent chills raging over my skin. "My baby is so needy."

Adrenaline coursed through us as we ripped and tore off each other's clothing until we were both naked and desperate for each other. Kneeling between my thighs, his heated gaze raked over my exposed body, taking in every curve before falling forward and settling between my thighs.

I whimpered, desperate for him to alleviate the mounting pressure building between my thighs when he slid his cock through my soaking flesh.

"Tell me you're mine, Addy," he breathed against my lips. His tone is a breathy, possessive demand. I was his, whether or not I knew it or not, in that moment. I would always be his. Even if I went back to New York after it was all said and done, I would still be his.

"I'm yours."

His mouth claimed mine as he fisted himself, dragging his cock through my drenched slit before the head of his cock nudged my entrance. Desire and need raced through me as I bucked my hips forward, silently begging him to fuck me.

"Maddox," I said in a breathy moan. It was a plea to end the torture.

With a raspy groan, his hips thrust forward, filling me. My fingernails dug into the heated skin of his toned back as my back arched into him and my legs wrapped around the back of his thighs.

He drew back, completely withdrawing before his hips thrust forward again. I expected him to fuck me fast and hard. I expected his need to be as desperate as mine, but his strokes were slow and deliberate. His hips rocked forward as his teeth grazed my throat.

He was teasing me. It was a slow, torturous tease that nearly drove me mad, and he knew exactly what he was doing. Whimpering, I bucked my hips forward, meeting his.

“Maddox,” I pleaded again.

“Beg,” he groaned, nipping at my bottom lip. “Beg me to make you come.”

“Please,” was all I could get out before his speed picked up as he pumped in and out. I arched my entire body into him as my lips parted, and I panted while he fucked me rough and fast.

That was what I wanted; no, it was what I needed.

A throaty groan rumbled deep in his chest as he assaulted my mouth with violent, messy kisses. I no longer heard anything but our labored breathing and the wet sounds of our sweaty bodies colliding.

He withdrew and plunged back in hard and fast, hitting that spot that set my body on fire. Pleasure rolled over me, and I desperately rocked my hips forward, meeting him thrust for thrust.

I was close.

So fucking close.

I couldn't even remember the last time someone made my body feel like this. I couldn't remember the last time I'd wanted someone this desperately.

My whole body vibrated in spasms as I cried out. “Maddox.” And I came so hard my breath lodged in my throat, my abs clenched, and I literally saw stars.

Every muscle in his body tightened. “Fuck.” His hand curled into my thigh, his fingernails digging into the tender

flesh as he rolled his hips, withdrew, and with one last hard thrust, he filled me with his hot liquid.

He collapsed on top of me, and I welcomed his weight, his heat. I'd missed feeling him skin to naked skin. I'd missed everything about him—his touch, his kiss, his smile, his laugh, and I didn't want to give it up again, but I also didn't know if either of us was ready to dive in head first.

SEVENTY-FOUR

ADDISON

Unfamiliar muffled voices pulled me out of my sleep, and when my eyes eased open and came into focus, and it wasn't Maddox standing in front of me, panic surged through me, and I bolted up.

"I can definitely work with that." A tall, thin, blonde man smirked, rubbing his chin as his gaze trailed over me. My brows furrowed as I followed his line of sight to my naked body.

"Shit," I muttered, scrambling with the blanket to cover myself. I was still naked on the couch where I'd passed out the night before with Maddox, but Maddox was gone.

"Good morning." The man smiled. He wore all black and stood beside a short, black-haired woman dressed in every color of the rainbow.

"What the fuck?" I yelled, clutching the blanket around me. "Maddox."

Maddox strolled in from the back of the house shirtless, covered in sweat, in a pair of low-hanging black gym shorts. I probably would have drooled a little if I wasn't naked in the living room with strangers, but the strangers didn't miss the opportunity to ogle him.

"Morning." He smiled, wrapping the white towel in his hand around the back of his neck, and while the strangers were hypnotized, I wasn't so much at the moment.

Maddox's lack of panic at the two strangers in his house said he was aware they were there.

“Who the hell are they?” I hissed, pointing between Rainbow Bright and Darth Vader with my free hand.

“Your stylist team.” Maddox smirked. “This is Pacey.” Maddox pointed to Darth Vader. “He is an amazing... What’s the word you use?”

“Fashionista.” Darth Vader beamed, cocking his hip out.

“And this is Carmen,” Maddox pointed to Rainbow Bright. “She is an amazing hair stylist and makeup artist, and they will be helping you get ready for tonight.”

“What? No,” I muttered. “I can get myself ready.”

“Come on, Addy,” Maddox’s brow pinched. “You don’t want to deny Pacey and Carmen a paycheck, do you?” My gaze flashed to the strangers.

“I have three kids in college.” Pacey, aka Darth Vader, scowled.

“I don’t have any kids,” Carmen, aka Rainbow Bright, said dryly. Her personality didn’t fit her clothing. In fact, it seemed like they’d swapped personalities for the day based on their clothing. “But I like money.”

“See,” Maddox said, shrugging his broad shoulders. “You are one decision away from deciding whether or not they are unemployed today.”

“Oh geez,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Fine, but let me get dressed.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was dressed, Maddox was gone, and I was left with Carmen and Pacey. Sitting on a barstool, my eyes flicked between them as their judging gaze narrowed.

They stood with arms crossed, heads cocked, and brows pinched as their gazes raked over me.

“What is Maddox wearing?” Carmen finally spoke.

“Black tux,” Pacey said, his gaze trailing over my shoulder and down my waist. “I’m thinking black lace for her.” ‘Her’ didn’t really like dresses at all.

“Her’ name is Addison.” I scowled. “And ‘her’ doesn’t like lace.”

His lips curled into a smirk. “Her doesn’t know what looks best on her.”

“He’s right.” Carmen shrugged, dropping her arms. “We should get started.”

Carmen and Pacey worked their magic for the next several hours, and by the time they were done, I felt like I’d gone through a torture chamber.

“Do you two dress all of Maddox’s dates?” I chuckled, pushing off the stool and looking myself over.

“We are Maddox’s stylist,” Pacey said, his gaze focused on my dress. “He’s never asked us to get a date ready before.” He straightened to his full height, a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. Shoving his fist on his hips, he seemed satisfied with the dress. “You must be special.”

“All finished.” Carmen smiled. It was the first time she’d smiled. They both took a step back, examining their work, and I was praying I still looked like me. “Okay, your turn. Close your eyes.”

“Seriously?” I scowled. She frowned and nodded. Rolling my eyes, I closed them, and Carmen grabbed my shoulders, spinning me.

“Open,” Carmen said. I eased my eyes open.

“Wow!” My dress was long with black lace covering a gold shimmering material. It was low-cut and completely backless. My long dark hair was down in soft curls, and my makeup was simple, not overdone. “You guys are amazing.”

“You are a natural beauty, my dear,” Carmen said, her lips curling into a smile.

“Hey, Addison,” Maddox yelled from the kitchen. “If you want to do a live, we need to do it now.”

“Give me five,” I shouted to Maddox before returning my attention to Carmen and Pacey. “Thank you. Will you guys be attending the fundraiser?”

“We wouldn’t miss it.”

Carmen and Pacey left me to help Maddox with his finishing touches while I set everything up for the live.

“Maddox,” I shouted. “I’m going to start the live. Just come when you are done.” He called something unintelligible back, but I assumed he was saying okay.

I clicked the button, and I appeared on the screen. Almost immediately, we had people jumping into the live.

“Hey guys.” I smiled. “We’ll be getting started in about five minutes.”

12.3k watching...

I waited five minutes and decided to start without Maddox. I knew he wouldn’t be much longer.

“Hey guys, it’s Addison.” I waved at the camera. “I wanted to give all of you a sneak peek of Maddox all dressed up for tonight’s event. He’s still with the fashion fairies, but he will join us shortly. I wanted to remind everyone about tonight’s fundraiser.”

“Wow,” Maddox said from behind me. I twisted around. “Wow.” His heated gaze trailed over me before locking with mine. “You look beautiful.”

34.8k watching...

“Thank you.” I smiled, my cheeks heating. His gaze flicked over my shoulder to the iPad.

“Right, guys?” he said, sliding up beside me. “She looks amazing.” There was no more hiding the chemistry between us. It was out there for the world to see, and for the first time, I was okay with that. He leaned in, dropping his lips to my cheek, and I knew that was the PG version of what he wanted to do. Or at least it was the PG version of what I wanted him to do.

67k watching...

With his hand still on my back, his gaze flicked back to the iPad. I forced a smile, trying to hide the way his touch affected

me as his fingertips caressed the sensitive skin of my bare lower back. “We are super late, so we’ll see you guys at the event tonight.” He waved goodbye as he hit the end button.

His hands settled on my hips, and he dropped his head to my ear. “You have no idea how badly I want to rip this dress off you,” he breathed. “And fuck you on this countertop.” My breath caught in my throat as his head lifted and his heated gaze met mine. “But Carmen and Pacey would kill me if I messed up their work.”

“We should definitely come back to that later, though,” I choked out. Between his touch, his words, and the stubble on his chin brushing against my ear, I was finding it hard to form a coherent thought.

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing my hand. “The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave.”

SEVENTY-FIVE

ADDISON

Several hours into the fundraiser, Maddox had already raised close to a million dollars. Maddox hired a team to provide live coverage during the event, and we managed a quick live on my feed to give everyone the link to join us.

I hadn't seen Maddox in the last hour.

"Can I have this dance?" Derek smiled, offering me his hand. My lips curled into a smile as I nodded and took his hand.

His hands curled around my waist, and I placed my hands on his shoulders as we started to sway to the music.

"Has anyone told you how absolutely beautiful you look this evening?" Derek said, the heat of his breath fanning across my cheek.

"I think I heard someone say something about that." I chuckled.

"Good because you are undoubtedly the most beautiful woman in the room," he said, and my cheeks heated.

"You're quite the charmer, Mr. Brady." I laughed. His lips curled into a smirk as he pulled me a little closer to him. "You clean up pretty nicely yourself."

"What?" He scowled sarcastically. "This old thing. I had to knock the dust off before putting it on." Derek was dressed in a custom-tailored Armani black tuxedo that I was sure was specially made for him for this event.

"Well, it cleaned up nicely." I smiled.

After several long seconds of silence Derek spoke again.

Derek cleared his throat. “I caught your last couple of lives with Maddox,” he said, leading me around the dance floor. “You weren’t kidding when you said it was complicated.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Maddox and I have a pretty complicated past, and there are still some unresolved feelings. I guess more than I realized.” We swayed to the music, twisting and turning as couples danced around us.

“Yeah, I got that from the live.” He laughed. “And from the way he’s looking at me like he wants to kill me right now.”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “It’s hard to explain.”

“You’re blind if you think it’s not like that,” Derek leaned back, his gaze locking on mine. “I’ve only known Maddox a few years, but he never looked at Becca the way he looks at you.” I forced a smile. “Let’s do a little test.” His hand wrapped around my arms, guiding them tighter around his neck.

“A test?”

“Yes.” He smirked. “If my test works, Maddox will walk away from smooth-talking his donors, storm over here, and ask to cut in.” I wasn’t interested in playing games with Maddox, especially not here, but he didn’t give me a chance to argue. His hand slid around, and he placed his palm flat against the bare skin of my back just above my ass and jerked me flush against him as we continued swaying to the music. “Well, that didn’t take as long as I thought,” he whispered. “He’s on his way.” I twisted to look, but Derek stopped me, holding me in place against him. “If it doesn’t work out with Maddox, you have my number.”

I didn’t have a chance to respond before Maddox spoke.

“Mind if I cut in?” Maddox said, a sharp edge to his tone.

Derek released me and stepped back. “See you later, Addison.” Derek winked before handing me off to Maddox. Maddox tangled his fingers into mine, leading me off the dance floor, through the banquet area, and into a dark, quiet

room in the back of the building that appeared to be a storage room for the banquet tables.

“Maddox,” I snapped. “What are we doing?”

“I don’t want to play games, Addison,” Maddox growled, pushing me flat against the wall and placing a hand on either side of my head, caging me in.

“Maddox,” I started.

“I was serious last night, Addy,” he said, dropping his head to mine. His tone was low and threatening. “You are mine. I don’t want to share.” He pressed his body into mine. “If Derek or anyone else touches you like that again, I’ll break their fucking fingers.”

“We were just dancing, Maddox,” I breathed.

“You are mine, Addy,” he growled, his tone low and raspy. My chest swelled as all the memories from the past flooded forward, and the words lodged in my throat. “Say it.” He dropped his hands, and his fingertips curled possessively around my hips, digging into the sensitive flesh. “Say you’re mine, Addy.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to tell him that neither of us was ready to go down this road again. Neither of us was prepared to make promises like that because we both knew that I would return home to New York at the end of the six weeks, and he would stay in Florida. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t know if I’d be able to walk away again.

“I’m yours,” I breathed, and I was. I didn’t know yet how this would work, but I was his, and he was mine.

His mouth claimed mine in a possessive, dominating kiss that was so intense, so consuming that it stole the air from my lungs, and I lost the ability to breathe. His hand curled around the back of my neck, holding me in place as we shifted and twisted without breaking from the kiss.

My pulse kicked up when his grip tightened around my neck; he broke from the kiss as our labored breathing filled the quiet room. He twisted me around, his hand still tight on my neck while the other snaked around my hip, holding me in

place. “I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name and then fill you with my cum,” he breathed against my ear, and I sucked in a sharp breath. He was marking his territory. “Then every time you feel my cum dripping out of you tonight, you’ll remember who you belong to.” White hot heat surged through me at his vulgar words. Holy fuck, grown-up Maddox had a dirty mouth, and it made my insides turn to liquid heat, shooting straight down and pulsing between my thighs. He shoved me forward by the neck, bending me over the only table in the dark room. I squeezed my thighs together to help alleviate the pulsing pressure building between them.

“Maddox,” I whimpered. My stomach clenched as he shoved my dress over my ass. His fingers tangled in the delicate lace of my thong, and with a hard jerk, he shredded it and discarded it to the floor. My fingers curl into the silky tablecloth, bunching it into my fist. His belt rattled, and then his zipper dropped.

I inhaled deeply when he slid his wide head through my slick flesh, positioning himself at my entrance. “Spread your legs,” he ordered, his voice coarse and sharp. My belly clenched in anticipation as I did what I was told.

“Maddox. Please.” I needed him now. I needed him to alleviate the throbbing pressure. He doesn’t make me beg again. A sharp breath left me when he thrust his hips forward, filling me. The way his body fit with mine was like we were meant to be one. We were each a separate piece of the puzzle, broken when apart but whole when we were together.

He held himself deep, pinning my hips to the table, allowing me time to adjust to the massive intrusion. When I rocked my hips, begging for more, he withdrew and drove back inside me harder and deeper. He fucked me in quick deep brutal strokes, each snap of his hips more vicious than the last. It was both a punishment and a reward—a punishment for dancing with Derek but a reward for being his.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins like I was high on drugs and spiraling out of control. I was addicted. We were in a dark back room with a massive fundraising event on the other side of the door. Anyone could walk in, but I didn’t care.

He groaned as his hips snapped forward. His hand released the back of my neck as it slid around my throat. He pulled me up, and his chest dropped to my back as he pushed himself so deep. Chills raced over my skin as his hot, raspy breath brushed against my shoulder.

He pumped in and out fast, harder, deeper, hitting that spot that set my body on fire, making my body vibrate against him. A desperate, pleading moan escaped my lips.

I was so close.

“You are mine, Addison,” he breathed. “This pussy is mine. It was made for me.” I rocked my hips until we found a rhythm that made me moan like a feral animal—the room filled with the wet sounds of our slick bodies and labored breathing.

I cried out with another ruthless snap of his hips that sent me over the edge with an orgasm so potent that I exhaled all the air from my lungs, crying out his name, and with one more hard, deep thrust and a harsh grunt, he filled me with his hot liquid just like he promised.

SEVENTY-SIX

ADDISON

Standing in the darkness behind the house, I inhaled a deep breath of fresh air and let the cold air cool my heated skin as memories of what just happened flooded over me.

Maddox was inside, working his magic with his guest, and I needed the fresh air and a minute of silence.

“Beautiful night,” a woman’s soft voice said from behind me. I twisted, glancing over my shoulder to see Casey Davis standing behind me.

“It is,” I agreed, my gaze flicking forward as she stepped beside me. “Did you need something?” Casey didn’t like me, and there was no reason to pretend she did.

“What are you doing, Addison?” she asked, a slight edge to her tone. I wasn’t exactly sure if she meant what I was doing outside, what I was doing here at this fundraiser, or what I was doing with Maddox.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I said dryly.

“Here.” My gaze blinked over to her. She held my black shredded lace panties out in front of her. I refrained from panicking and snatching the panties out of her hand. I thought Maddox had picked them up, but I was wrong.

I wish I could say I was embarrassed that she knew what we’d done, but I wasn’t. The corners of my lips curled into a smirk as I reached out, took the panties, and shoved them in my purse. “You don’t get it, do you?” I didn’t respond, not that she wanted me to anyway. “Maddox has spent the last few months trying to rebuild his reputation, and you will be why it

is ruined again.” She was only partially right. I didn’t force him into that room, but I also didn’t stop him. We could have been caught, which would have damaged our careers, but neither of us cared in the heat of the moment. Looking back, it was reckless, but there was no use admitting it. What was done was done.

My gaze scanned her face, and a wave of realization washed over me as the undeniable expression of jealousy flickered in her eyes.

I cocked my head to the side as I narrowed my eyes. “You’re fucking him,” flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. Her brows furrowed as shock covered her face. “Yeah, I’ve seen that look before.” I had seen that look before on a much younger face. Maddy. “It’s the same look she gave me in high school because she blamed me for not being with him. When in reality, it had nothing to do with me. He’s just really not that into you.” Her lip curled into a snarl, and she squared her narrow shoulders. I should have stopped there, but I couldn’t. “If a man wants you, he’ll stop at nothing to keep you.” I laughed sarcastically, holding my hands out and spinning in a circle dramatically. “He’s not here fighting for you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she hissed. “I’ve had Maddox’s back for two years now. I’ve tried to protect his reputation.” This had nothing to do with his reputation. She thought I swooped in and stole him from her.

“So you’re not fucking him then?” I cut her off, crossing my arms over my chest and cocking my hip to the side. I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer, but it was too late to back down. When she didn’t answer, I knew I was right. “Maybe you should work out your shit with Maddox and leave me out of it.”

I spun on my heel, storming back toward the venue at the same time Maddox was stepping outside.

“Oh, hey.” Maddox smiled, stepping off the pool deck and onto the grass. “I was...” I brushed past him, not stopping. “Addison?” I ignored him, storming into the house and

straight towards the exit. I'd had enough for one night. "Addison!" Maddox's fingers curled around my wrist, jerking me to a stop in the front foyer. I whipped around. "What the hell, Addison?"

"You need to deal with your shit, Maddox," I growled, shoving my finger into his chest. "We are too old for this high school drama."

"Addy, I have no idea what you're talking about?"

"Are you fucking Casey?" His eyes widened as his jaw dropped. "Yeah, that's what I thought." I jerked my wrist out of his grasp, twisting to leave, but he caught me by the waist.

"I'm not fucking her," he whispered in a low growl pulling my body flush with his. "But... We have... fucked!"

I huffed out a laugh. "Really?" I placed my palms flat on his chest to hold him at a distance. "Because she seems to think differently."

"You've got it wrong."

"Okay," I cocked my head to the side. "When was the last time?" I prepared for him to say years or at least months ago, and then I would feel ridiculous for being so angry, but I hated nothing more than being the fool.

His throat flexed on a hard swallow. "The first night you came back with me. I was with her when I disappeared." My head snapped up as my brows slammed together.

"Wait," I hissed. "What?" My gaze flicked around rapidly as I replayed the night. "You mean while I was sitting at your house alone?" He nodded. "You were fucking her?"

"Addison, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was a mess, and it didn't mean anything."

"No," I cut him off. "NO!" I shoved him away. "No wonder she thinks the way she does." He reached for me, but I dodged him and bolted towards the door.

"Addison, please, do not run away again. Let's talk about this."

I didn't respond as I stormed straight up to Maddox's driver, who was still standing in front of his limo.

"I would like to leave now, please," I demanded. Maddox's driver flicked a look over my shoulder, and I knew he was looking for permission from Maddox.

"Addison," Maddox sighed. "Please don't leave like this."

"Maddox, tell him to take me home, or I'll call an Uber and have it take me to the airport." His dark blue eyes locked on mine as his jaw flexed, but after several long seconds, he nodded to his driver.

"Take her home," Maddox said, and the driver opened the door for me, and I slid in. "I'll get a ride with Cas..." My gaze snapped up as he cut off his words. "I mean, come back once you drop her off. I'll be ready by then." I wrapped my hand around the door handle and jerked it closed.

I wasn't entirely sure why I was mad. We weren't together when that happened. In fact, he'd been very clear. He didn't even want to be my friend. He was free to fuck whoever he wanted, but I hated being in the dark. I guess I felt like Maddox hadn't grown up over the years that he was playing the same stupid games.

The limo's engine purred to life. My gaze flicked out the window, locking on Maddox with his hands shoved into the pockets of his slacks, watching as the limo pulled away, a mixture of anger and sadness wrapped tightly in his brows.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

ADDISON

By the time I returned to Maddox's house, all I could think about was getting out of that dress and heels. I was still angry; I'd been made the fool again, but not as mad as when I'd gotten in the limo. That was the funny thing about anger; it faded over time.

Maddox and I had a complicated history, and I wasn't sure that I was ever going to be able to let the past go and move into the future with him. I was tired of being the fool when it came to Maddox Parker. I was tired of that constant feeling of dread, knowing that I was not good enough for him. I never was. I was tired of waiting for the imaginary rug to be ripped out from beneath me to feel the same hurt I did when I saw those pictures in high school when he betrayed me. I thought I'd let those feelings go a long time ago, but that was exactly how I felt tonight to find out he'd slept with her the same night he'd brought me home, and I knew nothing about it. I knew the thoughts and feelings were irrational in my head, but convincing my heart was more of a struggle. Convincing my heart that Maddox was truly in this was so much more complicated than I thought it would be, even all these years later.

How do I convince myself that I am enough? Sometimes, when I looked in the mirror, I still saw that dorky girl with glasses who wore too big clothes to hide her body, to hide herself from the rest of the world, to be invisible.

After changing into something more comfortable, I stepped out of my room. Maddox hadn't made it back yet. Not

that I expected him to. There was still over an hour left of the fundraiser.

Strolling down the long, dark, quiet hallway, I passed Maddox's bedroom door and froze. It was the only room in the house I hadn't been inside yet. Pressing my lips into a thin line, my gaze fixed on the doorknob as I contemplated whether I should open it.

"That's an invasion of privacy, Addison," I scolded myself, but my hand still reached out, twisting the knob before pushing the door open. My heart began to race, knowing what I was doing was wrong, but even knowing that, I couldn't stop myself. My gaze flicked around the dark room as I stepped inside.

His room was neat and organized, but it looked the same as the rest of the house—like no one lived there. Everything was grey and white, even his bedding. There were no pictures or anything personalizing the bedroom. It looked more like an Airbnb rental than a lived-in house.

I flicked on the lamp beside his bed so I could see before I started to snoop through his things. I wasn't sure what I was looking for or what I was expecting to find. Maybe I thought I would find something to confirm my suspicion that Maddox was a player just like he'd been in high school. Something that would confirm I wasn't good enough, but I didn't. I opened each drawer on his nightstand, plundered through his closet, and each of his dresser drawers, but there was nothing. There were no drawers full of women's panties or condoms. There was no little black book full of women's names and numbers. There was nothing!

"What are you doing, Addison?" I scolded myself again. Blowing out a heavy sigh, I sank onto his bed when something caught my eye, hanging off the edge of his bed that was coming from under his pillow. Lifting his pillow, I sucked in a sharp breath as my gaze landed on my old ratty sweatshirt from high school. He'd given me his jacket, and I'd given him my sweatshirt. He still had it. My chest swelled as my eyes filled with tears. He slept with it.

Everything changed in that moment; any anger or sadness I'd harbored dissipated. Any doubts I had that he wasn't in this were gone, along with all doubts about my own self-worth.

His past was his past, but his future was with me. I had to stop doubting that; I had to stop doubting him.

Grabbing the shirt, I closed up his room and strolled out to the patio, where I sat watching the moonlight dance across the water for the next hour for him to come home.

If I hadn't been listening so hard, the sound of the sliding glass door opening would have been masked by the waves crashing against the sea wall, but I'd been waiting an hour for this moment.

"Hey," Maddox said, stepping out onto the patio and sinking on the patio chair beside me. His tone was laced with sorrow, wrapped tightly with fear.

"Hey." I forced a smile, trying to ease his fear.

"You want to talk?" I shook my head. He didn't owe me an explanation. "Are you still angry?" I wasn't.

"Do you love me, Maddox? I mean, are you still in love with me?"

"Yes," he breathed. "I never stopped loving you, never."

"Then I don't care what happened before me," I said. "But Casey deserves to hear the truth from you."

"So, you're not leaving?" His brows furrowed, and I shook my head. His eyes closed as he blew out a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

"I need to confess something," I said before biting my lip.

"I don't want to know."

"No, I need to tell you." He froze. I swallowed hard as my chest tightened. I wasn't sure how angry he would be that I snooped through his things. "I kind of went snooping in your room." He blew out a heavy sigh followed by a laugh. "That's it? That's what you needed to tell me?" I nodded. "Addison, what's mine is yours. I was actually hoping you would stay in

my room.” I ignored his question for a moment because I wasn’t finished with my confession.

“I found this,” I said, pulling the old ratty sweatshirt up. His gaze flicked to the sweatshirt as his lips curled into a smile. “You kept it.”

“I did.” He sighed. “Other than pictures, it was all I had.” He pushed to his full height, and I copied his movements. He stepped forward into my space. “Addison, you may have loved me since the first grade, but I have been in love with you since our first kiss. I was too stupid to realize it, but I’m not now, and I do not want to lose you again.”

“What happens after our six weeks are up?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We still have several more to go, so how about we figure that out later?”

He cupped my face, dropping his lips to mine.

“Take me to bed,” I breathed, pulling out of the kiss. His lips curled into a smirk as he leaned forward, scooping me into his arms.

“My bed?” he asked. I nodded, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Good, because I have plans to worship every inch of your perfect body tonight.”

SEVENTY-EIGHT

MADDOX

Standing behind Addison with my front flush against her back, one hand wrapped around her throat and the other flat against her lower stomach, just below her belly button, I held her tight against me. I brushed her long dark hair off her neck and over her shoulder, letting the light touch of my fingertips tease the skin of her shoulder and the back of her neck. Her head tilted, moving with my touch, giving me better access to her neck.

The room was dark except for the moonlight shining in from the large bay window overlooking the ocean, where we stood almost completely naked.

My hand left her throat, sliding down and cupping her breast. A whimper pushed past Addison's pretty lips as I ran my tongue over the spot just below her ear on her throat before sucking the sensitive flesh into my mouth. At the same time, my fingers slid underneath the lace of her panties. Heat pulled at my groin as my fingers slipped through her slick flesh, coating them with her arousal. She was already soaking wet for me.

"Maddox," she breathed in a breathy moan as I teased her clit. I wanted to taste her.

"Put your palms flat on the window for me, baby," I ordered, my tone low and raspy as I placed my palm flat between her shoulder blades, shoving her forward. Her palms smacked against the glass.

Hooking my fingers into the sides of her panties, I dropped to my knees as I tore them down her legs, and she stepped out

before I discarded them.

“Spread your legs.” I grunted, palming her ass in my hands, ready to spread her open. She did as she was told, spreading them wide, and I dug my fingertips into her ass, spreading her cheeks. Dropping my head, I buried my face in her pussy. Breathing in her sweet scent as my tongue slid through her slit savoring her sweetness. I wanted to do this every day for the rest of my life.

The tip of my tongue stroked her swollen clit teasing the bud, and she rocked her hips into my face. Heat bloomed in my chest, working its way down until it spread through my cock. She cried out when I sucked the sensitive bud into my mouth, sucking and pulling until her legs trembled.

“Maddox,” she moaned, rocking her pussy against my face and coating it with her orgasm as she exploded in ecstasy.

Finding her entrance, I circled it before sliding my tongue deep inside her, lapping up her orgasm. A moan escaped her lips as my tongue pumped in and out of her. My fingers tightened, spreading her wider and pulling her hips hard into my face, giving me better access to her pussy.

“Maddox, please,” she pleaded.

“Please what, baby?” I hummed against her pussy.

“Fuck me!” She didn’t have to ask me twice.

Raising to my feet, I shoved my boxer briefs down as I gripped the base of my cock and slid it through her wet flesh and coating it with the orgasm I’d induced. She bucked her hips back, begging for more. Positioning myself at her entrance, I teased her, pushing my swollen head in, and withdrew before repeating the action.

“Maddox,” she growled, frustration thick in her tone. Her hand dropped from the window, reached around, and gripped my ass, pulling me into her. She gasped, her nails digging into my flesh as I slipped inside her tight warmth, filling her.

My fingers curled around her hips, holding her in place. My chest rose and fell with deep, ragged breaths as I held

myself deep inside her, feeling her pussy walls clench around me.

Withdrawing, I snapped my hips forward, filling her again, jutting her hips forward, pinning her naked body flat against the glass window as I pumped in and out of her.

“I want everyone to know you are mine.” I moaned against her ear, pressing her tighter against the glass. “I want everyone to know that this pussy was made for me.”

“Oh, god!” she cried out as my speed increased. Our heated breaths fogged the window, and her fingers curled against the glass.

“Say it, Addison,” I breathed. “I need to hear you say this pussy is mine. No one else will ever touch you again.”

“It’s yours,” she moaned. “I’m yours.”

I pumped in and out, each snap of my hips more vicious than the last. Her breathy moans and our wet bodies slapping together filled the quiet room.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned as her body vibrated against mine.

“That’s it, baby,” I grunted, raking my teeth against her throat. “Come all over my cock.”

Her body tensed, and my muscles clenched. Her pussy wall clenched around me, and every inch of my body trembled as she cried out in ecstasy, and I came so hard my breath caught in my throat.

Her body went limp between mine and the window. I knew at that moment that I would do whatever it took to keep her. I knew I wanted to wake up to her every morning and go to bed with her every night. I knew I wanted to repeat what happened every day in every position she’d let me. I wanted to spend the rest of my life making her smile. I just had to convince her that she wanted the same.

SEVENTY-NINE

MADDOX

I sat on the edge of the bench in the locker room as sweat dripped down my face.

“I think Coach is trying to kill us,” Brady said, pulling his towel tighter around his waist. Training during the season was always brutal, but it seemed like Coach was taking out an old grudge out on the entire team today. Which was strange, considering we were undefeated so far this season.

“Hey, Parker,” Warner called out. My head snapped up to see him standing in a towel at his locker. Warner and I had a personality conflict. We didn’t like each other. We played well together on the field, but there was no friendship like I had with most of the team off the field. I raised my brows, acknowledging him, but I didn’t bother hiding the annoyance on my face. “What’s up with the reporter following you around?” I rolled my eyes. I had no intention of discussing Addison with him.

“She’s doing an exclusive six-week special on him,” Stokes answered for me.

“She’s fucking hot,” Warner said, the corner of his lip curled up, and mine curled into a snarl. “When you’re done with her, send her my way, and I’ll finish what you started.”

Until today, I’d never been in a fight in the locker room, even in high school. But he’d just made Addison into some football groupie whore. A bolt of rage zipped through my veins as I surged forward, throwing all my weight into him, and a whoosh of air left him when his back slammed into his

locker. The shouting in the background was muffled by the white-hot rage pounding in my ears. His fist connected with my jaw, but I couldn't feel anything. The anger made me numb. We rolled to the ground as my fist cracked against his nose.

“What the fuck, Parker?” someone growled, jerking me off him. “You want to get benched for the entire season or fined?”

“He started it,” I panted, my chest heaving with anger.

“Well, it's over now,” Brady hissed. “Get the fuck out of here and cool off. We have a game on Monday. So get it together by then, both of you.”

I jerked out of his grasp, grabbed my things, and stormed out of the locker room, still dressed in my practice gear.

Addison was right; I'd made everyone think she was some team whore.

“Omigod,” Addison screeched as I brushed past her. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” I pushed through the exit.

“You're bleeding from your face. It's obviously not nothing.”

I stopped twisting to face her. “I'm sorry.” Her brows knitted. “I don't want this,” I gestured between us, “to be some dirty little secret.”

“Maddox, what happened?”

“I want the world to know that you are mine.”

She blew out a heavy sigh. “You're going to have to explain where this is coming from.”

“You were right. I made you into some team whore. I made everyone watching think you were easy.”

She smiled. “I don't care what other people think.”

“No, Addison, you're not understanding me.” I shoved my hand through my wet hair. “No, I don't want anyone to think

like that about you, but that's not why. I want to make this official. I want the world to know you are mine."

"There are still so many things up in the air right now." She raised her shoulders. "I think it could complicate things."

"Complicate things?" My brows raised. "You mean if we end this again?" She nodded, and I shook my head. Ending things again wasn't an option. My heart couldn't take her leaving again.

"Maddox."

"No, Addison, are you in this, or do you still have reservations about us?"

"I don't have reservations about us. I have reservations about how this will work. You live here, and I live in New York. We both have our own separate lives. Right now, it's easy because you are my job, but after that." She shrugged. "I don't know how it will work."

"We will make it work." I'd thought a lot about this since she came back into my life. "I will sell my house here, and we can buy something in New York. I'll buy a small condo here in Florida to stay in during the season, and I can travel back and forth during breaks, or you can visit me during the season. We *can* make this work."

"You've thought about this." Her voice cracked. I nodded. "So, we're really doing this?" I nodded again. She raised her shoulders. "Okay, let's make it official. We can do a live tonight."

A wave of relief washed over me. Addison was mine, and I was never letting her go again.

EIGHTY

MADDOX

My gaze flicked over my shoulder, expecting to see Addison, when the sound of the sliding glass door shoved open and slammed shut, but it wasn't Addison. It was Casey.

“We need to talk, Maddox. Is Addison here?”

“No, she's at the store,” I said, redirecting my gaze to the Sailboat out in the bay. “You're going to have to start knocking before you come in. Actually, you should call before you come over.”

“I've never knocked.”

“Now that Addison is living here, things need to change a little bit.”

“She's living here? Like permanently.”

“Cas, you know what happened with us was casual, right? You do remember why it happened in the first place, right?”

“Yes, Maddox. It happened because we were in New York, and you were devastated when you saw her with someone else. Do you remember that?” I didn't respond because the past didn't matter. I didn't care who that guy was because she was mine now. “You wanted to go out and get trashed and destroy what you'd worked so hard to fix, but instead, you stayed in with me, and we had an amazing night.” She twisted in her chair to face me.

“It never should have happened.”

“Maybe not, but it did, and the reason was because of her, which proves my point. She is bad for you. You make bad

decisions when it comes to her.”

“I don’t care.”

“A friend showed me your new TikTok videos.” Her jaw flexed, and I rolled my eyes. “The videos you didn’t get approved by me.” I wanted to tell her to go to hell, but technically, it was in our contract that I got approval from her. When I’d fallen off the deep end, making bad decision after bad decision, Casey was going to drop me, and at that time, I needed her. The only way I could keep her was to agree to her terms. I didn’t need that anymore because my career had taken off, and I would have no issue replacing Casey if I needed to. “The ones of you and Addison basically fucking each other with your clothes on.” She was being dramatic. We were learning the newest trendy TikTok dance, and we let our fans see our bloopers. Were some of them intimate? Yes, but they were real. They were us.

“I think it’s time for a new contract. I don’t need you in the same way I did.”

“That’s bullshit, Maddox.” She pushed out of her chair. “You’re making the same stupid mistakes you did back then, but now you’re going to sink her career with yours.” Cocking her hip to the side, she crossed her arms over her chest. “She’s going to lose her creditability as a journalist.” Her tongue swept out, wetting her lips. “I hate to say it, but it makes her look like she sleeps her way to the top.”

“That’s why we are making our relationship public tonight.” I sank back into my chair.

“And you think that’s going to make it better? You think then the media won’t have a field day the next time you leave her panties on the floor at an event?”

I tried to fight the smile pulling at my lips as the memories of her bent over that table surface and failed. “I don’t care about the media. In fact, I don’t think this is working.”

“Are you going to fire me?”

“No.” I frowned. “But we need to make some changes. First, the contract changes.” Back then, I wasn’t bringing in

the money like I am now, and she couldn't afford to lose me. "And I need to be careful not to put myself in a situation that would make Addison question my loyalty to her, and if she does, then I will have to let you go."

"We were friends long before we ever slept together."

"I can live without you, Cas. But I can't live without her."

"Maddox, she will be the reason your career ends."

"Casey, I don't think you understand." I leaned forward in my chair. "I would give up football for her. If I had to choose, I would always choose her."

She dropped her arms. "You're serious, aren't you?" I nodded. "I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Okay," she said on a heavy exhale. "I get it."

"Oh, and if I find out, you threaten Addison with ruining my career again," I said dryly. "I won't just fire you. I'll ruin you. You'll never work in this industry again."

"I know you don't believe me, but I really am just trying to protect you. It's part of the job." I did know that. It made things complicated because we'd been intimate, and truthfully, it might still come down to me having to choose between Casey and Addison, and everyone knew who I'd choose.

"Am I interrupting something?" Addison said behind me.

EIGHTY-ONE

ADDISON

I trusted Maddox. There was no way he worked this hard for us to throw everything away for her, but it didn't change the fact that I felt a strange mixture of uneasiness and jealousy coil deep in my gut seeing Maddox and Casey together, alone.

I had to get past this feeling because she worked for Maddox, and they would be alone in the future, especially once I had to go back to New York or when he traveled for games, and I couldn't tag along.

"Casey was just leaving." Maddox pushed to his feet from the patio chair.

"Actually." Casey crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. "I was hoping to talk to Addison for a minute."

Maddox's questioning gaze flashed to me. If I was ever going to be able to move past this, then we needed to have a conversation, and I was also curious about what she had to say since our last discussion alone didn't go well.

"I'll be inside in a minute," I smiled.

He hesitated for a long minute as his gaze ping-ponged between me and her, but he finally nodded as he strolled towards me. "I'll be inside if you need me." He dropped his head, pressing his soft lips to mine. That one kiss said so much. It told me I had nothing to worry about and that he was mine. It said he was in love with me. That kiss sent a wave of confidence washing over me, confidence in myself, in him, and in our relationship.

He disappeared inside the house.

“What is it, Casey?” I held her gaze. “If you’re worried I’m going to ask Maddox to let you go; I’m not.”

“No.” She shook her head, a sincere smile spreading across her face. “I wanted to apologize. It’s part of my job to protect Maddox’s reputation, but I overstepped with you. It wasn’t my place to get involved in your relationship.”

I didn’t have it in me to hate her, not that I really had a reason. What happened between her and Maddox was before me, before us, and I couldn’t hold that against her. “Apology accepted.” I doubted she and I would ever be besties like me and Maddy I, but I thought we could manage a friendly relationship. “Are you sure that you can keep the relationship professional?”

She nodded. “Yes. Maddox made himself clear tonight. He’s in love with you, and I assume you are in love with him?”

“I am. I have been. Even when I wanted to, I never stopped loving him.”

“Then I assume you’ll want what’s best for him, too.” I nodded. “So, no more fundraiser sex.” A laugh bubbled up that turned into a full fit of laughter, and she joined in. She was right. We needed to be more careful. Neither of us wanted our bare asses to go viral.

“Deal.”

“I should go.” Casey pulled her expensive handbag higher on her shoulder. “Let Maddox know I’ll be in touch sometime this week to discuss his upcoming events.” Flashing her a smile, I nodded. She returned the smile, mutual respect shared between us as she passed to leave.

I waited until she was gone and then pulled out my cell phone and clicked on Maddy’s picture.

“Hey,” she squealed into the phone after the first ring. “How’s Florida? Omigod, how’s Maddox? Tell me everything.”

Hearing her voice made me realize how much I needed a friend and even more how much I'd missed her. Since she moved to New York, we hadn't gone more than two, maybe three days without seeing each other.

"I need a friend."

"Girl, that's all you had to say. I'll be there tomorrow morning."

"Really?"

"Yes. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just need some retail therapy." Retail therapy was Maddy's thing. She usually called me once a week, and even though Maddy loved to shop, it was really a reason for us to hang out and talk about everything in our lives. She'd vent about her job and love life, and I'd vent about the last sports gossip or my latest terrible dating experience. It was just our thing.

She laughed. "You hate shopping. It must be serious. I'll get my flight booked now and text you the info. Send me a few hotels in the area, and I'll get one booked."

"I'll take care of your sleeping arrangements." If Maddox didn't want her to stay here, I'd take a personal day to stay with her.

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

We disconnected, and I couldn't help but smile. Who would have thought that Maddy Taylor would be the person I'd called when I needed a friend?

Maddox and I hadn't talked much about Maddy, but I knew how he felt about her. She was a sore spot for him. He blamed her for what happened in high school. He blamed her for me leaving, and he had every right to because if she hadn't been part of sending those pictures out, I never would have left, but high school was a long time ago, and it was time to squash it and move into the future because I didn't want to have to choose between them.

I wasn't sure how he would feel about her coming to town or how he would react when I told him she'd be here tomorrow, but this wasn't about him. Maddy was my friend, and I needed her right now. So, much had happened in the short time since I'd come to Florida with Maddox, and I needed someone to organize my thoughts with. Someone who didn't have an opinion on the matter.

I knew Maddy was still rooting for Maddox and me to end up together because she believed in her heart that he was my person, and I did, too.

I finished setting up my iPad on the patio, adding a ring light for a little extra because the moonless sky made it a little darker.

The sliding glass door opened, and I peered up as Maddox stepped out.

"You ready to make this official?" He handed me a water bottle before dropping into the seat beside me.

I pushed the enter button on my iPad and leaned back in my chair. "I need to talk to you before we do this."

He drew in a deep breath as his body tensed and his brows knitted. "Okay?"

"It's nothing bad." I flashed him a genuine smile, and his shoulder sank as he visibly relaxed. "Maddy is flying in tomorrow."

"Maddy?" He drew her name out as he raised his brows. "Why?"

"Because she's my best friend, and I asked her too."

"Of all the people in the world," he muttered, a hint of annoyance in his tone, "you chose Maddy as your best friend?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "I didn't really choose it; it just kind of happened."

"You bonded over her love of destroying you?" He rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide his sarcasm.

“Maddy isn’t the same person she was in high school. Just like you aren’t the same person you were in high school. We all grew up.”

“So you invited her here?” His throat flexed on a hard swallow. “To visit?”

“Yes, and her flight lands early tomorrow morning, and once we get done with the live tonight, I will find her a place to stay.”

“Okay?” His head shook as he attempted to hide the irritation etched on his face.

“I planned to go stay with her for a few days.”

“What?” He leaned forward in his chair. “What about the Maddox Parker exclusive?”

“I need some personal days.”

“Addy, our relationship isn’t a job. You can’t just take a day off.”

“I’m not taking a day off from us. I’m taking a day off from the job. Plus, I want you and Maddy to make amends. She’s my best friend, and you’re my boyfriend, so...”

“So you want me to forgive what she did to me...To us?”

“I have. We were kids, Maddox.”

He slumped back into his seat. “I don’t want you to leave. Maddy can stay here, and we will see how it goes.”

“Are you sure?”

“There’s plenty of room.” He sighed, nodding. “So, yes.”

“And you’ll try to be nice to her?”

His lip curled into a snarl as his teeth clenched and jaw flexed. “Yes.”

I knew he didn’t want to do this, but I was happy he was willing to try mending things with Maddy for me. These next few days would be interesting, with Maddy and Maddox under the same roof.

“Then let’s let the world know our secret.” I smiled. “You ready?”

EIGHTY-TWO

MADDOX

I couldn't hide that I was bitter that Maddy was coming here and that she'd be staying in my house. Hate wasn't a strong enough word for what I felt for Maddy. Everything that happened was because of her, and while she went on to live her charmed life, mine ended when I saw the pain in Addy's eyes the day Maddy sent out those photos, and she did it so that Addy would believe it was me. It might have been different if she'd taken the blame instead of letting me take the fall, but she didn't. Instead, she'd let Addison believe that I betrayed her for years.

"How do you want to do this?" Addison asked, her gaze fixed on the iPad as she fumbled with something.

"I'll do the talking." Her gaze flicked over her shoulder as her eyes narrowed on me.

"Like all the talking?"

I nodded. "Is there anything you don't want me to talk about?"

She shook her head. "Nope." Her gaze flicked back to the iPad. "You ready?"

"Let's do it."

She hit a button and leaned back in her chair. "Hey guys, it's Addison, and I'm here with Maddox Parker. Maddox has some news, and then we will answer some questions." Her gaze flicked to me, flashing me a smile.

“What’s up, everyone? There have been many questions lately about Addison and me and our past and future, so I wanted to clear up some rumors before they got out of hand.” I scooted forward in my chair. “I met Addison in high school. She was my tutor, and we started dating. I fell head over heels in love with her pretty fast, but I made some stupid choices that ended up hurting her. She left, and I didn’t see her again until she started tutoring me again in college. We started dating again in college, and life took us on separate paths. It wasn’t anyone’s fault our futures just took us in separate directions. She left for New York, where she became an amazing sports journalist, and I was drafted into the NFL. This exclusive brought us back together, and even though we live completely separate lives, we both realized we are still in love with each other.” I didn’t want to give out too much information, but I wanted to clear up some confusion. “I asked Addison to be my girlfriend.” I flashed her a smile.

“And I said yes.” The comment section blew up. Comments came in so fast that it was hard to read them. “We have time for a few questions.” Addison leaned forward. “Maddox, did you cheat on Addison?”

“No.” I wasn’t elaborating on what I did or what happened in high school.

“We love you, Addison!” Addison smiled. “Aw, I love you guys, too!” She ran her finger up the screen, scrolling up. “Maddox,” Addison read the next comment. “Will you move to New York with Addison?”

“We are still working out all the details, but I will go wherever she is.”

“Will this end the exclusive early?” Addison read.

“Nope.” Addison’s phone chimed, and I didn’t bother stopping because I figured it was Maddy with her flight details. “The exclusive will continue for the rest of the six weeks.”

Addison glared at her phone. “Sorry guys, that’s all we have time for today, but we’ll be back tomorrow.” Addison cut the live.

“What’s wrong?” My brows furrowed as my gaze flicked between her and her phone.

“That was my boss, and he saw the live, and wants me to call him now.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but I’d bet our big reveal pissed him off.”

“Why would he care?”

“Trust me, he cares.” She blew out a heavy sigh. “I should call him back.” I nodded, and she pushed out of her chair, heading into the house.

As I watched her disappear into the house, dread twisted in my gut, and I hoped Casey wasn’t right about everything. If I was the reason Addison lost her job, I wasn’t sure how she’d react. She could blame me for pushing this and leave again.

My gaze fixed on her through the sliding glass door; I watched her as I drew in long, deep breaths and tried to read her facial expressions, hoping I hadn’t messed this up again.

EIGHTY-THREE

ADDISON

Pulling the phone to my ear, I pressed my lips into a tight line as I waited for Jacob to answer. It never crossed my mind that our announcement might piss off my boss, but if he was calling me this late during a live, he was pissed. The question was how pissed, just a little or enough to fire me?

“What the fuck, Addison?” Jacob barked, and I flinched at the anger radiating through the phone. Well, that answered my question. He was definitely mad enough to fire me. I decided playing dumb was the best way to go in this situation.

“What?”

“BBN Sports is not your personal platform for dating announcements.”

“Well, sir,” I tried to keep my irritation out of my tone because I really didn’t want to get fired, “with all due respect, this special is an exclusive into the life of Maddox Parker, and I am part of that life. So wouldn’t it make sense for us to make our announcement live for the world to know during his exclusive?”

“Absolutely not,” he hissed. “It’s unprofessional to start, and you should have cleared it with me before you did it, and second, this should be an exclusive into his sports career, not his fucking personal life, Addison.”

“No offense, but this is a gossip vlog, and the people watching want to know about Maddox’s personal life.”

“Again, this is not a personal platform for you to use however you want.”

I understood where this was going. When I was first hired full-time to BBN before Jacob was my boss, he'd asked me out every day for three weeks, and I'd declined because I wasn't interested, and I still wasn't to this day.

"Would this have been a problem if we'd announced he was dating someone else? Or just me, Jacob?"

"Don't start, Addison."

"No, really, Jacob. I'm interested in your answer because everyone knows I dish out the latest sports gossip, including their personal lives. Now that I'm doing an exclusive with Maddox, personal lives are off limits?"

"Pack your things and come back to New York, Addison."

"What? No, Jacob. I have to finish this exclusive."

"We'll be sending someone else out to finish."

"Am I being fired?"

"No." He paused, releasing a heavy sigh. "You're being promoted to Sports Anchor." My jaw dropped. This was what I worked so hard for. This was my dream job. "We will send one of our veteran interns down to finish the exclusive with Maddox." I wanted to scream and dance but knew this meant leaving Maddox again.

"What if I want to finish the exclusive with Maddox?"

"Then you're blowing this opportunity that may never come around again. They'll hire someone else." He was right. Sports Anchor jobs rarely come open, and when they did, they were almost always offered to a male anchor. If I passed this offer up, I would never get the chance again.

"When do I have to be back?"

"Monday." It was Thursday, which meant I had the weekend to wrap everything up and spend with Maddox and Maddy. I could fly back with Maddy on Sunday.

"So, what is it, Addison? Are you accepting the job offer?"

I hesitated as I swallowed hard. I couldn't pass up this opportunity. "Yes." I should have talked to Maddox about this

first, but he said we would make this work, and right now, making it work meant I was going back to New York earlier than planned. My chest tightened as memories flashed forward of the last time I told him I was leaving for New York. My gaze flicked out the window to Maddox. He was still sitting exactly where I had left him. His gaze locked on me with worry creasing his forehead.

“Do you need us to make the flight arrangements?”

“No, I’ll handle it.”

“See you Monday morning, Addison.” He disconnected.

Déjà vu surfaced like I’d been in this exact place doing this exact thing before. Dread twisted in my gut, knowing I had to go tell Maddox that I was leaving again.

EIGHTY-FOUR

MADDOX

Addison ended her call, and I could see the bad news written all over her face. I didn't want to be the reason Addison got fired, but I couldn't lie if she wanted to quit; it would make things a lot easier for us. Not that I would suggest it because that has to be her decision.

“What happened? Did you get fired?”

With a sad smile, she shook her head as she sucked in a deep breath. “I got a promotion.” Her voice is soft and sad. Which was confusing, considering she said she was offered a promotion. “They offered me my dream job as a sports anchor.”

“That's amazing.” I pushed out of my chair with excitement. “Congratulations!” My eyes narrowed when she didn't seem to share my enthusiasm. That was good news, but she looked like someone just killed her puppy. “So why are you upset?”

“I have to fly back with Maddy on Sunday.” Her voice trembled with sadness or fear, maybe both.

“So, you were promoted to anchor but fired from my exclusive.”

She nodded. “They are sending someone new to take over.”

“Okay.” I drew out the word. I had zero intention of doing the exclusive for anyone else. I only did it to begin with because it was Addison who asked, but there was no need to explain that now. We had bigger fish to fry, and I didn't want

my decision to affect her decisions or her bosses. I didn't know how he would react if I canceled or if Addison would pay the consequences. There was no written contract between me and the company, only a verbal agreement between Addison and me. I had no obligation to BBN Sports News.

"It doesn't have to be like last time, Maddox."

"It's not going to be like last time." I cut her off, and I meant it. This wasn't going down the same way it did last time. "We just have to figure this out a little sooner than we planned."

"So you're not angry?" I wasn't angry; I was disappointed that she had to leave so soon, but no way was I making the same mistake I did last time and letting her get away again. I might not have this opportunity again, but I didn't want her to have to choose between her career and me, so we'd figure it out. I'd hoped we'd have until the end of the season, and then I would be able to go back with her.

My lips curved into a smile as I stepped into her space. "No. As long as you're not running away, I'm not angry." My hands cupped her face, and her eyes closed as she leaned into my touch. "We will figure this out, Addy." Her eyes opened. Her gaze held mine as her lips curled into a grin at the sound of her nickname. "How about I grab a couple of beers, and we can make a plan A and a plan B."

Smiling, she nodded. I pressed my mouth to her full, pouty lips, and she melted into me. I hated that in a few days, I wouldn't be able to do this every day, but I had to push those emotions aside for now so I could enjoy the time I had left.

After I grabbed two beers, Addison and I settled into a patio lounge on the patio edge overlooking the ocean underneath the moonlight with her back to my front. We talked and laughed and drank until the sun came up, and the only plan we managed to come up with was that no matter what, we would make this work and that we would both fly back and forth during downtime until we could manage a more long-term solution.



“DAMN,” a female voice shouted, and my eyes flashed open. “You guys couldn’t save the party until I got here.”

Shit! We’d fallen asleep on the patio together in the lounge. Addison shot off the lounge, stumbling to her feet. “What time is it?” I muttered, pushing to my feet.

“My flight landed three hours ago.”

“Omigod, Maddy. I’m so sorry.” Addison apologized.

“It’s fine.” Maddy shrugged. “I got an Uber, and thankfully, Maddox’s address was easy to figure out. But I could really use a shower and a drink. Oh, and you should really lock your front door.” *Note to self, always double-check that doors are locked.*

“I’ll show you to your room.” Addison wrapped her hand around the handle of Maddy’s Louis Vuitton luggage and twisted to head to the house, dragging it behind her, but Maddy didn’t follow. Our gazes locked.

“It’s good to see you, Maddox.” Her gaze shifted, flicking over the view. “Your place is amazing.”

I nodded a thank you because, for some reason, words eluded me at that moment. She smiled and turned to follow Addison. My hate for Maddy wasn’t as intense as I expected it to be. In fact, I wasn’t even sure it was hate anymore. Maybe Addison was right; it was a long time ago, and we were kids. Or maybe it was because Maddy wasn’t solely to blame. I was the one who betrayed Addison, and she’d forgiven both of us.

Addison and Maddy disappeared inside the house, and I collapsed onto the lounge.

That was less awkward than I figured it would be. Something about Maddy being stranded at the airport and

waking us up in a panic made that initial greeting easy. Hopefully, the rest of the time went just as smoothly.

I spent the rest of the morning cleaning the beer bottles and planning dinner for the three of us while Addison and Maddy played catch up in each other's lives. For some reason, Maddy was important to Addison now, and Addison was important to me, so it was time to squash the past once and for all so we could all move forward into the future.

EIGHTY-FIVE

MADDOX

I'd wanted to make a special dinner for all of us, but Addison and Maddy wanted pizza, wings, and beer. I expected simple from Addison because that's who she was and who she'd always been, but Maddy had never been simple. She was shallow and superficial, more of a steak, lobster, and wine kind of girl. That's who she'd always been, but maybe that's not who she was with Addy. Maybe she had grown up some. Only time would tell.

For the last three hours, we'd sat on the patio eating, drinking, and catching up. No one had brought up high school or what happened because they had already worked through their feelings, but I hadn't.

"I'm going to grab more beer," Addison said, pushing out of her chair. "And use the little girl's room. Does anyone else need a refill?"

"I'm good," I told her.

"I'll take another one," Maddy said, holding up her empty beer bottle.

Addison disappeared inside the house, leaving Maddy and me alone. The minute that sliding door closed, an awkward silence filled the open space.

"Your team is killing it this season," Maddy said, attempting to break that silence.

"We don't have to do this," I said dryly. Maddy raised her brows. "We can cut the small talk. We aren't friends."

Huffing out a heavy sigh, she leaned forward in her chair, crossing her arms on the table in front of her. “So, what will it take to get past this, Maddox.” My gaze snapped to hers as she cocked her head. “We are both important to Addison, and we need to find a way to move past what happened in high school.”

I knew she was right, but sitting here with her brought back every feeling of hatred I’d ever had for her. I knew that I shouldn’t have taken the pictures, to begin with, but it was ultimately Maddy who took all that time away from me.

“Do you want me to tell you what happened?” I shook my head. Playing it all out again wasn’t going to help anything heal. “I’m sorry, Maddox.” Her eyes softened, and I knew without a doubt that she meant it. “I’m sorry for what I did to you and the pain I caused. I’m sorry I hurt Addison. I’m sorry for my part in everything that happened between you two, but I am not the same kid I was back then.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I nodded on a heavy exhale. “I believe you, and I’m thankful you helped Addison with Asher.”

“It was partly my fault.” My gaze narrowed. Was she saying she had something to do with what happened in college with Coach and Asher? She shook her head like she was reading my mind. “No, that’s not what I meant. I meant it was my fault he had the pictures to blackmail her, to begin with.”

I nodded. I did have one question I needed answered before I could even attempt to lay this issue to rest. “Why?” I shrugged. “Why did you do that to her, to me?”

“Because I could see you falling in love with her, and I was jealous.” She swallowed hard. “It was stupid, and I don’t know why, but I thought I needed you. I thought you were my ticket out of the shitty town and away from my shitty mom.” My gaze widened in understanding. I didn’t know a lot about Maddy, but I knew her mom was a piece of work. I knew she preferred men over her children. “And I knew I didn’t stand a chance as long as Addison loved you. It took me a long time to

realize I never stood a chance even before Addison was in the picture, did I?"

My tongue swept out, wetting my dry lips as I shook my head. "No, but you didn't really want me anyway. You wanted what you thought I could do for you."

"Yeah, and it wasn't until I met Zayn that I realized I'm not sure I even liked you or myself, for that matter."

My lips quirked up. "Zayn Hart?" She nodded. I didn't know much about Zayn other than he was a year older and attended our rival school.

"I am sorry, Maddox. Do you think we can find a way to get along for Addison's sake?" I nodded as Addison slid the door open and stepped out. I had no idea what the future held at this point, and I wasn't sure we'd ever be real friends, but oddly, I did somewhat understand why Maddy did what she did. Even though I disagreed with it, I understood.

EIGHTY-SIX

ADDISON

The weekend had gone better than expected. I wasn't sure if Maddox had completely forgiven Maddy, but they had managed to work out their difference, and he had moved past the hate he'd harbored for her. We ended up having an amazing weekend, but now it was over, and we had to say our goodbyes. Maddox had a flight this afternoon, and Maddy and I had a plane to catch this morning.

I walked between Maddox and Maddy through the airport as he pulled our luggage behind him. The drive to the airport had been almost silent. The truck had been filled with a nauseating mixture of dread, anxiety, and fear.

After Maddy had gone to bed last night, Maddox and I spent the rest of the night making a plan; we were determined to make it work, but the fear of the unknown coiled through us even if no one said it aloud.

"I'm going to head to the terminal." Maddy smiled. "Maddox, I'm sure I'll see you in New York once the season is over, and good luck with the rest of your season." Maddox smiled. "Addison, I'll see you at the gate." Maddy took her suitcase from Maddox and disappeared into the crowd of travelers.

"I guess this is it." I sighed.

"Hey." He smirked as his hands cupped my face, forcing me to look at him. "This isn't goodbye. There are only a few weeks left in the season, and between now and then, I will get

everything ready to move to New York. I was thinking maybe you could start house hunting for us.”

My eyes widened. “You want to buy a house with me?”

“I do.” I opened my mouth, but he must have sensed my hesitation. “Just think about it.” My mouth snapped shut as I nodded. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to live with Maddox, but we hadn’t really had a chance to date. Every time we started, something always got in the way. I knew without a doubt that he was my person. I was just still worried I wasn’t his. Which was crazy, but I still didn’t understand how this wildly hot, perfect man liked me.

“I should go.”

Sucking in a deep breath, he nodded. “I love you, Addison. I always have. I always will.”

My chest swelled as tears blurred my vision. “I love you too, Maddox.” He dropped his head and pressed his lips to mine in a tender goodbye kiss. A kiss that said everything. It said he didn’t want me to leave, but it also said we would make this work. It said he was in love with me.

Pulling out of the kiss, he dropped his forehead to mine. His eyes closed as he took a deep breath. “Go.” He dropped his hands to his side and stood to his full height. “Go before I throw you over my shoulder, kidnap you, lock you in my basement, and never let you leave.” I choked out a laugh.

“I’ll text you as soon as I land.” By the time I landed, Maddox would be in the air, so he wouldn’t get the text until he landed. “Call me once you make it to Texas.”

With one more kiss, I walked away from Maddox, refusing to look back at him. I was too afraid I’d lose what little bit of self-control I had, and I would break down into tears. Even though we’d both made it clear this time was not the end, the fear of never seeing him again was real. The fear that he might change his mind once I’m gone was real.

I made it through security, stopped for a coffee, and then found Maddy at our terminal.

“You okay?” she asked as I sank into the seat beside her. I shrugged. I didn’t know if I was okay. I wouldn’t know until I saw him again. Maddy cocked a brow as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“What?” I knew that look. It meant she was going to give me unsolicited advice whether I wanted it or not.

“Nothing.” She sighed dramatically.

“Spill it, Maddy.” I rolled my eyes.

“You are about to fly home to be promoted into a job you’ve dreamed about being offered since before you moved to New York. A job you truly never thought you’d get because you’re a woman.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, why do you look so miserable?”

She was right. I was miserable. I didn’t want to leave Maddox again. Even if we did make this work, I didn’t want to be away from him. I also knew this was probably the only opportunity I would ever get as a sports anchor. “Because I had to give up one dream for another.” Or that’s what it felt like, anyway.

“Well, maybe you picked the wrong dream to give up then.”

My gaze snapped up to meet hers. She shrugged, and I realized she was right. “Omigod.” I shot out of my seat. “You’re right.” My brows pinched. “I picked the wrong dream. I have to go.” Maddy lips spread into a smile. “I’ll call you later.” I twisted to leave, then stopped. “My luggage is on the plane.”

“I’ll get it when I land in New York and take it to your place. Now go get your man.”

My heart pounded as I mouthed a thank you before I bolted back to where I’d left Maddox, but he wasn’t there. Not that I expected him to be. “Okay, Addison, calm down and think.” Maddox had told me his plans. He wasn’t going to leave the airport. He was going to eat. “Okay, where was he

going to eat?” I found the airport directory and scanned over everything. Thankfully, the airport wasn’t too big. My finger scanned over the map until it stopped at the Brunch cafe. “That’s it.”

I ran through the crowds of people towards the cafe, only stopping once because someone ran out in front of me and again because I spotted Maddox sitting at a table inside the cafe, drinking his coffee and flipping through his phone. He was wearing a team baseball cap and his team hoodie with the hood pulled up over his head to help hide his identity.

All the dread and anxiety disappeared as I stood there watching him, and I realized this was the right choice. He was the right choice for me.

I strolled into the cafe, stopping beside him. His mouth opened; I assumed he thought I was a fan. Our gazes collided, and his face shifted from annoyance to shock. “Addison? What are you doing? You’re going to miss your flight?”

“I’m not getting on that plane today or any day. I’m not leaving you again.”

“What about your dream job?”

I swallowed hard. “You are my dream. You’ve always been my dream. What happened in high school derailed it slightly, but I know you are what I want. Who knows? Maybe I’ll get a better offer here in Florida.”

He pushed out of his seat, pulling me into him. “Addison, are you sure?” His face was lined with worry as he cupped my face. “I don’t want you to end up resenting me for giving up your dream job.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” I could feel it in the way my heart still fluttered, standing here with him, that I was making the right choice.

“I’m not going to let you go again,” he warned.

“I’m not going anywhere. From here on out, we make all our decisions together.” He nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. “I don’t know what I’ll do for work, but I have

a little bit of savings to cover me for a little while until I figure it out.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Money isn’t something you need to worry about. Take your time and figure out what you want. You don’t have to settle. I got you!” I narrowed my eyes. “I’m saying I got you covered financially until you find your dream job or,” he shrugged his shoulders as a devious smile twitched at his lips, “if you decide you want to have lots of my babies and stay home. I got you!”

“Lots of babies?” I asked, my eyes widened. “Like how many babies?”

He laughed. “We can figure that out later.”

There was still a ton of stuff to work out, and it sucked that Maddox had to leave for a game, but now we had the rest of our lives to figure it all out.

EPILOGUE

Six Weeks Later...

I SWIPED AWAY the bead of sweat beading along my brow as my other hand flipped the tiny ring box over and over in my pocket. I'd never been so nervous in my life. My leg bounced rapidly as the stage lights beamed down on me.

The season was over, and Addison and I had flown to Vegas together for a live on-air interview with Kelly Kelsey. Addison didn't know it, but I was going to propose live for all her fans to see her. It was what they'd been waiting for since the day we did our first live.

When Addison didn't show up in New York, BBN fired her, and her fans were livid. Everyone wanted to know what happened. They needed their HEA. BBN didn't realize how loved Addison was by her fans. They received so much hate mail that they ended up offering Addison her position back, but she'd declined and started her own sports gossip blog, sponsored by several high-dollar companies.

"So Maddox," Kelly said, squaring her shoulders. "Are we going to be able to talk Addison into joining us on stage today?" Kelly was in on the plan. The entire Kelly Kelsey Show crew was in on it. I'd been waiting for the perfect moment, but I knew when the show's producer contacted Casey that was where I was going to propose.

My lips curled into a smile as my gaze flicked out into the audience, where Addison stood, watching the show next to the

cameraman. Addison shook her head and mouth no way. “Come on, Addison. Get your butt up here.”

Addison pressed her lips into a thin line as her eyes went wide, silently screaming at me to stop her, but I wasn't going to do that. I jerked my head in a come-on motion, and her shoulders sank in defeat before caving and strolling up on the stage, where she took her seat beside me.

“Okay, Addison.” Kelly smiled. “I'm dying to know if there's going to be an exclusive on MLB's newest hottest single recruit.”

“Are you asking about Conner Pierce?” Addison asked. Kelly nodded. “He's on my list, but I haven't gotten him to commit to an interview yet.”

“Darn.” Kelly scowled, snapping her fingers. “For those of you who don't recognize this pretty face. This is Addison, and she runs the hottest sports gossip blog.” Addison smiled, her cheeks flushed. “And the long-time girlfriend of the lucky man sitting beside her. So what's next for the blog?”

“Well, we have a special interview in line for next week to kick off baseball season, but I can't give away the details yet. So make sure you check in for updates.”

“Okay, well, I'm sure the audience is dying to know what's going on with you two.” She waved her finger between Addison and me.

Addison didn't know she was part of the show, and because of that, I couldn't ask her what she was willing to discuss on the show. And since our relationship was a huge part of her blog, I didn't want to give too much away. “Well, Addison is officially a resident of Florida.”

“And are you two officially moved in together?”

“We are.” Addison smiled.

“And we are officially redecorating the house.”

“Will there be a nursery soon?” Kelly asked.

“No,” Addison said a little too quickly. “We have a few more steps to take before we get there.”

“Speaking of those steps,” I said, flipping the box in my pocket again. “I have an announcement.” Addison’s gaze flicked to me as her eyes narrowed. “Well, actually, it’s a question for Addison.” I slid to the floor, kneeling on one knee in front of her. Her lips parted, and her eyes went wide. “Addison.” My heart pounded so hard against my chest that I thought I might throw up before I got the question out. I had no reason to think she’d say no, but there was always that possibility that she wasn’t ready yet. “I know without a doubt that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

I pulled the tiny box out and opened it to display the four-carat princess-cut diamond, saying a silent prayer she’d say yes.

She nodded, swallowing hard. “Yes,” she choked out. “Yes, I will marry you.” A happy tear streamed down her cheek as she held her hand out for me to put the ring on her finger.

“I love you, Addison, and I can’t wait for you to be my wife.” I slid the ring on her finger.

“I love you, too.” She pulled me up to my feet and into a hug.

“Alright, girl,” Kelly squealed. “Let us see that ring.” I released her, twisting to the side so she could show off her ring. “Look at that rock, guys.” Kelly looked at the ring and then turned it to show the cameras. “Congratulations, you two. I better get an invite to the wedding.”

“Of course.” I smiled.

“Well, that’s all we have time for today.” Kelly finished her sign-off and congratulated us again before we all said goodbye.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Addison said as we strolled towards the exit. “Did everyone know but me?”

“Everyone,” Maddy squealed from behind us.

Addison whipped around. “Omigod, what are you doing here?” Addison threw her arms around Maddy.

“Maddox called me last week and filled me in, and I couldn’t miss it.”

Addison pulled out of the hug and twisted to face me. “You called Maddy?” I nodded. “Thank you.” I nodded again.

I stood silently watching Addison and Maddy laugh and gawk over the ring and realized we’d managed to find our way back to each other after everything we’d gone through. I thought back to the night before she left for New York when she asked if I believed the saying ‘What’s meant to be will be.’ I’d said yes then, and I still believed that today. Addison and I were truly meant to be. She was and will always be my person!

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AFTERWORD

If you're interested in Maddy's story check it out on Kindle Vella

<https://www.amazon.com/kindle-vella/episode/B0C7PLTDFE>

Maddy's story starts on episode 108 and is currently on going...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michaela Sawyer is an author of New Adult Dark and Contemporary Romance. She was born and raised in Florida where she still lives with her husband and four daughters.

She was a Culinary Arts teacher for ten years before deciding to resign to follow her dreams of becoming a full-time romance author.

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