

AMANDA CHAPERON

Every Rule Worth Breaking



FALLING IN LOVE
IS THEIR GREATEST
DEFIANCE OF ALL

Every Rule
Worth Breaking

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Amanda Chaperon

Munising, Michigan

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ON THE EVENING OF February 13, 2023, a shooter opened Michigan State University students. That night, the safety and sanctity campus and city I once called home—and still consider as such—was away from the current students, faculty, staff, and residents. One sense from a cowardly man changed millions of lives in an instant.

The Spartan community is a strong one, including a tight-knit community spread across the globe. I've always been proud to be a S receiving my degree from MSU's school of journalism is one of my ; and proudest accomplishments. In the days that followed this horrific i was of great comfort to me to see our alumni community band toge became more and more evident why the phrase "Spartans Will' commonly spoken in MSU circles. Typically, it's reserved for success in the wake of this tragedy, it's taken on a new meaning, at least for m

Spartans Will protect each other.

Spartans Will mourn together.

Spartans Will be strong.

From the near-immediate response of law enforcement officials, medical personnel to the scene and nearby Sparrow Hospital where they were rushed and treated, and not just locally but from agencies across the state, to the outpouring of love, support, grief, devastation, sadness, and sympathy from not only our community but those of our rivals, “Spartan Strong” became a rally cry. As an alum, it means to the world to see so many students with us. Because we *are* strong. And we will endure. I just wish it were necessary.

We’ll never understand why this happened, or what was going through the shooter’s mind when he decided to end the lives of three young adults who hadn’t even really begun—and critically injure five more—and do something I think all of us will struggle with for the rest of our own lives. On these pages, Kenzie and Aiden are lucky enough to live in a universe where MSU is safe, where the buildings and sidewalks and dorms and classrooms aren’t tainted with the memories of gunshots or students cowering under desks to protect themselves. They are able to walk into the University of Berkeley Hall without thinking of their fallen classmates. They don’t think, “it could’ve been me.”

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for those on campus that night, and three members of my Spartan family lost their lives far too soon: Brian Fraser, Alexandria Verner, and Arielle Anderson—I’m so sorry I failed you. I remember you, today and everyday. I hope and pray that your deaths will not be in vain. I hope another community will not have to experience the life-altering shockwaves of a similar tragedy.

Before you read, whether it’s an early copy, on release day, or in the months, and years that follow, I hope you’ll take a second to send a love and good thoughts to the families of these three. If you’re reading t

als and you're a Spartan like me, please reach out. It would make me so happy to hear from you.

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you're a Spartan like me, please reach out. It would make me so happy to hear from you.

As always, Go Green, forever and ever.

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BEFORE YOU READ

THIS BOOK CONTAINS AN anxiety-ridden main character who from several—some small, some larger—on-page anxiety and panic. Please take care of yourself while reading. As a sufferer of anxiety, Kenzie's own mental health struggles are modeled after my own. anxiety isn't one-size fits all, but I hope those of you who also struggle yourself in her and on these pages. And please, don't hesitate to reach out if you need to.

There is also strong language and explicit sex. Readers be advised.

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BEFORE YOU READ

THIS BOOK CONTAINS AN anxiety-ridden main character who suffers from several—some small, some larger—on-page anxiety and panic attacks. Please take care of yourself while reading. As a sufferer of anxiety myself, Kenzie's own mental health struggles are modeled after my own. I know anxiety isn't one-size fits all, but I hope those of you who also struggle see yourself in her and on these pages. And please, don't hesitate to reach out to chat if you need to.

There is also strong language and explicit sex. Readers be advised.

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For anyone who's ever felt like a prisoner in their own mind.

Breathe. You got this.

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APRIL 4, 2023

MACKENZIE JEAN'S HANDS SHOOK as she withdrew the envelope from her mailbox and raced to the elevator bank. It took her tries of stabbing at the up button before she managed to call the cab when the doors slid open, she rushed inside and punched the number floor.

She wanted to tear into the envelope right where she stood, but she herself to wait. To occupy her hands and mind, she flipped through the pieces of mail in the stack, ripping open some bills from utility companies and mentally reminding herself to enroll in paperless billing.

Finally, what seemed like eons later, the elevator lurched to a stop doors parted with a *ding*, spitting her out onto the grey carpeted hallway led to her condo.

Once she was safely ensconced inside, she tossed the remainder of the letters on her large kitchen island and sat on a bar stool.

The tremors in her fingers grew with each inch she opened the envelope. The contents shook like leaves on a particularly windy day as she waded through them.

She closed her eyes, sent up a silent prayer, took a deep, steadying breath, and began to read.

Dear Ms. Jean:

After careful review of your application, we are pleased to grant you a transfer admission to Michigan State University starting the Fall of 2020.

With a huge sigh of relief, Kenzie threw the papers in the air in celebration and let out an excited yell as they floated down to the floor around her.

She'd done it.

She was going back to college.

The idea to complete her degree had taken root the previous fall when, at Berkeley, her big brother Brent's wife, had decided to go back to school to fully pursue her dream of becoming a sports agent.

Since she'd moved to Detroit, FLEX had grown from a mom-and-pop business she and Brent operated out of the office in his condo to a nationally recognized brand, thanks in no small part to her. As a woman in her thirties, she certainly had her finger on the pulse of what was trending in the fitness industry.

social media marketing played a huge role in generating sales. Once she'd convinced Brent to bring on a select group of influencers to act as brand ambassadors instead of spending an ungodly amount of money on advertising campaigns people would ignore, FLEX became a top-tier activewear brand.

ier mail The real-world, hands-on experience she'd gained by working full-
FLEX with her brother's genius business mind at her side was irreplace-
velope. Sure, a lot of the success was because her brother was *Brent Jean*, but
ithdrew had also worked endless hours with designers, textile companies,
designers, and marketing representatives to launch FLEX in
breath, stratosphere. Brent's name may have been the reason people gave
company a second look, but Kenzie's dogged promotion of their product
converted those looks to sales. She was of the mind that if people saw
something enough times, they'd be intrigued enough to try it for them-
nt you And what one man or woman had, others wanted. It became a domina-
23... when one sale led to two more, led to five more, led to ten more, and
bration and so forth, until the Jean siblings had been able to rent out a small
space and hire help.

Kenzie loved the advertising and marketing aspects of business. She
quickly realized it was something for which she had a knack. Suddenly
l, when two years in this role that had been incredibly lucrative for her, and had
ool and her ten times the experience her peers had at her age, she felt pulled in
direction, compelled to take a new path.

nd-pop A path that, maybe, no longer included FLEX.

ionally- But she didn't want to get ahead of herself.

r early- Quietly, without telling anyone, Kenzie had set about gathering
dy, and transcripts from NYU, filling out the application, and submitting it to
e she'd brother's alma mater.

s brand And she'd done it. She'd been accepted.

ertising It wasn't exactly surprising, but it was a weight off her shoulders.

rand. However, going back to school meant she'd have to make some lifestyle
changes. For starters, while she was focusing on school, that would lead

time ontime for FLEX, which in her opinion wasn't a bad thing. In fact, it v
iceable. *best* thing. Kenzie felt urged to turn the page and enter a new chapter
Kenzielife.

website Without thinking twice, Kenzie lifted her phone and dialed a r
ito thehoping the person she called wasn't with a patient.

re their "Hello, Mackenzie."

roducts No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her therapist to c
le saw *Kenzie*.

rselves. "I got in," she said, feigning calm.

o effect, "That's wonderful!" Dr. Mathews said. "I knew you would. But wh
d so onyou sound more excited?"

l office "I have to tell Brent," Kenzie said with a sigh.

"I think you need to give your brother more credit, Mackenzie. I kr
ss, andgoing to be an adjustment, but he's your brother. He loves you and
y, afterwhat's best for you."

d given "I think he *will* be happy for me...eventually. But when I tell h
1 a newleaving FLEX? He won't take that well."

The simple thought of telling her brother she wanted to leave the cc
they'd poured so much blood, sweat, and tears into had Kenzie
breaking out in hives. Her breath hitched, shadows appearing at the e
ng herher vision.

: to her She was quiet for long enough that Dr. Mathews understood wh
happening, because she said, "It's okay, Mackenzie. Just breathe."

Kenzie did as she was told, in and out slowly, making her inhales
than her exhales until she no longer felt like she was suffocating.

ifestyle Anxiety was such a bitch.

ave less "Look," Dr. Mathews said, and Kenzie perked up, ready for the v

was the woman was about to drop. “I know I’m an advocate for always staying true to your truth, but I know how heavily this weighs on you, and we’re trying to combat your anxiety, not contribute to it. What if, for now, you simply number him you want to step back from FLEX while in school? That gives you freedom, gets him used to the idea that you’re leaving, and gives you time to figure out how to fully break from the company. Plus, who knows. Maybe in two years, you won’t actually want to leave.”

Kenzie considered this, considered saying it was a terrible idea and that she would fight through her nerves to tell Brent now. But...she couldn’t. The weight that suddenly lifted off her chest with Dr. Mathews’ suggestion and she found herself agreeing with the idea.

For now, she’d make due with a half-truth.

Now it’s

what she



“I’m going back to school,” Kenzie announced at dinner that night, braced herself for the explosion.

She, Brent, Berkley, and Berkley’s best friend Lexie were gathered around the table in Brent and Berkley’s dining room, a spread of chicken thighs, garlic bread, salad, and soup laid out in front of them.

The three of them stared at Kenzie as though she’d sprouted a second head, and to her surprise, it was Lexie who recovered first.

“That’s great, Kenz! Where are you going to go?”

“Your alma mater,” she said proudly.

“You got into State?” Berkley asked, her smile growing to match Kenzie’s, stretching across Kenzie’s face.

wisdom

peaking “Sure did,” she said. “I start classes in the fall.”

ying to “That’s amazing, Kenz!” Berkley said, popping up from her seat and rushing around the table to wrap her arms around Kenzie’s shoulders.

u some Lexie grinned. “You’re going to *love* it. Not only is it the best university time to the world, but East Lansing is uh-may-zing,” she said, drawing out the word dramatically.

Kenzie giggled, but sobered when she glanced at her brother, who since she had not spoken, his face a carefully constructed mask of calm.

Kenzie knew that look, knew that something was churning beneath the surface, waiting to spout free like Old Faithful, taking them all by surprise.

“Bee?” Kenzie asked quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Kenzie rolled her eyes. Leave it to her brother to jump right past the “I’m proud of you, kid,” or, “Congratulations, little sis,” and straight to the accusations.

it, then “I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it until it was a sure thing.”

“What if you hadn’t gotten in?” Brent asked. “Would you have mentioned anything then?”

alfredo, Kenzie considered that. Would she have mentioned it? Probably not. The problem with her brother—both of them, actually—was that they were overachievers. Brent had known he wanted to be a professional hockey player since he was a teenager, and he’d worked his ass off in the intervening years to become one of the NHL’s top forwards. In comparison, around the same time Brent realized he was good at hockey, her other brother Nick discovered he wanted to be a doctor—and was currently an orthopedic surgery resident at the University of Michigan.

So if Kenzie had failed to gain admission? No, she wouldn’t have.

anything. As the baby and only female among her siblings, she felt like an odd one out frequently enough that she'd rather avoid having conversation with her family.

University in Berkeley saved them all by saying, "Well, that doesn't matter, because she got in!" She raised her glass of wine above the table and said, "To Mackenzie!"

Everyone followed suit, although Kenzie didn't miss the way her brother hesitated before lifting his own to clink against the other three.

After dinner, Brent and Kenzie sat in Brent's office, him behind the desk and her in the plush armchair across from him. With the walls lined with bookshelves filled to capacity with books and awards, she felt more like she was in a grand library than an office in a suburban Detroit home.

All her life, her brother had been a master at maintaining his silence in tense situations until Kenzie was squirming and eventually blurted out whatever he wanted to hear.

Tonight was no different.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was applying to school," she said finally. "You know you can talk to me about anything," he said, his voice softening. "I don't understand why you kept this from me."

"It's exactly like I said. I didn't want to make it a thing until I was accepted into hockey."

Brent studied her for a moment, then said, "I am proud of you, you know." She gave him a small smile. "Thanks, Bee."

"But we're going to have to figure out what this means for your academic time." "If you're going back to college, you're finishing your degree in five years."

Kenzie knew he was right—she had obviously given that pa-

like the dilemma a fair amount of consideration herself—but his tone still
ing that “Okay, dad.”

Brent glared. “I’m serious. What do you want to do? Do you want to
do it? part time, full time? Completely remove yourself from the picture
and said, you’re done with school? I’m good with whatever you want, Kenz.”

As someone who suffered from pretty severe anxiety—often exacerbated
by taking on too much at once—Kenzie knew the only way she’d survive
to make a clean break. And after her earlier conversation with Dr. Miller
at the desk, her path forward was crystal clear. The fact that Brent had offered it up
as a shelf option of his own free will made having this conversation much easier
than some she’d anticipated.

“I want to take an administrative leave,” she said. Brent’s mouth
dropped and his eyes darkened to the color of a storm surge. He clearly
didn’t expect her to take him up on the offer of leaving, and she felt compelled
to soften the blow by tacking on, “At least during the school year. But I think
I’m going to do this whole college thing, I need to give it my full attention
and my money.”

Brent was familiar with her mental health struggles. She’d long
suffered from some of his own but was too afraid, or too *manly*, to
discuss it. She knew he’d understand her desire to step back, to lessen her load
and ensure she could handle it. Her brother nodded. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

She’d gotten exactly what she wanted, but still she frowned. “Are you
going to be able to handle everything?”

“We’re going to have to bring a couple more people on,” he said. “I’ll
handle it with you.”

Kenzie sighed, her shoulders drooping in relief.

“What exactly are you going to study?” he asked.

“Marketing...” she said, and he nodded approvingly. “And advertising.”

chafed. Brent may approve now, but he wouldn't take so kindly to the motivation behind those majors. On the surface, they seemed ideal to work with FLEX. The truth, however, was rooted in the fact that her time with FLEX was quickly coming to an end—and in what she wanted next. If she were honest with him, this conversation would take a different turn, and she didn't have the mental capacity to deal with it now; her nerves were already completely frayed.

Later. She would tell him everything *later*.

Brent raised an eyebrow. "Dual major? That's a lot of work."

And he would know, considering he'd managed to graduate on time with degrees in business and finance, all while playing hockey at the college level.

Kenzie shrugged. "Go big or go home."

A niggling voice in the back of her mind whispered, *Famous last words*.

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Brent may approve now, but he wouldn't take so kindly to the real motivation behind those majors. On the surface, they seemed ideal for her work with FLEX. The truth, however, was rooted in the fact that her time with FLEX was quickly coming to an end—and in what she wanted to do next. If she were honest with him, this conversation would take a sharp southern turn, and she didn't have the mental capacity to deal with it right now; her nerves were already completely frayed.

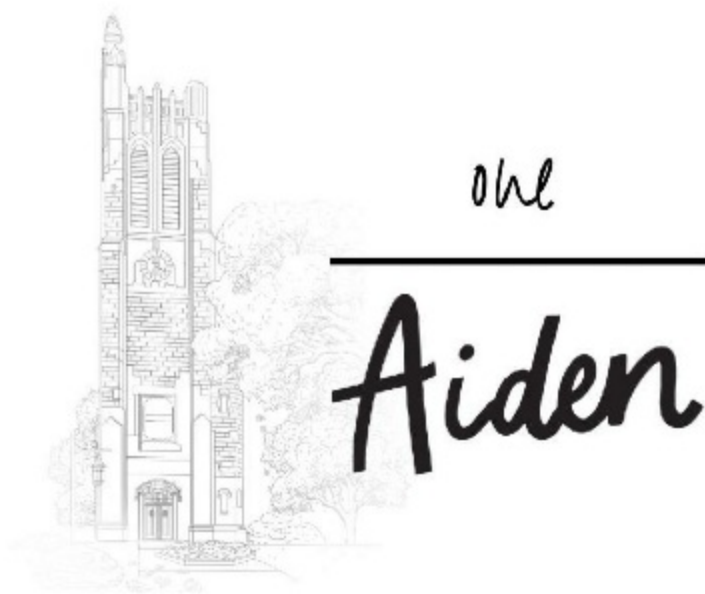
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THE NUMBER ONE RULE of Michigan State University hockey is simple: never turn down a dare.

That was the first thing Aiden Fuller learned the second he stepped onto campus four years ago. Dares were always to be obeyed, whether one wanted to or not.

And right now, Aiden definitely did *not*.

Aiden and his teammates were gathered at the south entrance of the arena, the names of all the Spartan greats that had come before them were written down from the walls.

Briefly, he wondered how many of them had done dumb shit like what he was about to do.

“Just go out there and give them a show,” his classmate and starting goaltender Jack DeLuca said. “You’re a hot ass college player. Time to act like it.”

Aiden glared at Jack. “You are so fucking weird.”

Jack tilted his head to the side and gave Aiden a smile. "I know."

"Where exactly do I have to run again?" Aiden asked.

"Through the doors, across Munn Field, which should be fun because I think the field hockey team is practicing right now. Then you need to turn right on Shaw, loop in front of Case and the football building, come back on Shaw, go past Ralph Young and the football stadium, and then down the sidewalk until you can cross back to the arena."

Aiden groaned. "That's so fucking far, dude."

Jack shrugged and looked over his shoulder at their other teammates who had gathered behind him. "Too late to back out now, unless you want to suffer the consequences. We can give you your punishment right now."

Aiden vigorously shook his head; he had never in his entire tenure as a member of this hockey team refused a dare, and he wasn't about to do so today. "And we agreed, no cameras, right?"

Each of his teammates patted themselves down as if to prove they didn't have phones in the locker room. Half of them were shirtless anyway, thank you very much, sticky, late-August weather.

Jack raised three fingers and said, "Scout's honor. No one has phones in Munn Field."

"Let's go, Fuller," Captain Lucas Hayes said, tapping his Apple Watch.

"We don't have all day."

He was right, as usual. They'd arrived early for training today so they could complete this dare.

Running a loop through one of the busiest parts of campus might not seem like much of a dare to some people.

But doing it naked? *That* was Aiden's worst nightmare.

At Luke's prodding, and with a resigned sigh, Aiden shrugged his shoulders.

and dropped his shorts and boxers to his ankles before stepping out and kicking them away. Instinctively, he covered his junk with his hands because his ass remained bare, and his teammates instantly erupted into obnoxious crosscatcalls and whistles of appreciation.

Thankfully, Jack was right about him being a hot ass hockey player. He might only be twenty-three, but after nearly fifteen years of competitive hockey, his body detailed his hard work and commitment to his sport. He stood six feet, three inches tall, with thick, blue-black hair that waved over his eyes, which framed his head. After spending most of his summer outside, working construction with his uncle and boating on Lake Michigan with his friends, his skin was perfectly bronzed, making the muscles he'd worked so hard for look like a better. Not to mention his entire left arm was engulfed in ink, from shoulder to wrist. He'd heard from several viable sources—a.k.a. hookups—that tattoos made him infinitely more attractive.

He glanced down at his body appreciatively. This dare might not be the idea of a good time, but he had no reason to be embarrassed.

“Alright, Fuller,” he said quietly, pumping himself up. “Let’s do this.” And he was off.

Running across the expanse of Munn Field was the easy part. The Watch hockey team was indeed on Forest Akers practice field, running in preparation of their upcoming season. Aiden ran by, not turning his attention to Aiden in their direction, trying to keep his balance as his sandals slipped along the dewy grass.

Then he came upon Shaw Lane, where he'd have to cross four lanes of traffic to reach the other side. He stood, bouncing on the balls of his feet, his dick cupped in his hand, waiting for a break in the cars whizzing by. As a t-shirt cherry-red Bronco sped by, the girl behind the wheel honking and g

of them with her friend in the passenger seat, both shouting sexually sug
nd, but comments at him. Aiden responded in kind...by raising one ha
noxious flipping them a middle finger.

Finally, traffic paused long enough that he was able to sprint acr
yer. He road and onto the sidewalk in front of the fire station before taking a le
petitive This was where Aiden had protested this chosen route the most. Ca
ort. Hea residence hall, but it also housed one of the campus cafeterias. As
l across centrally located to all of the sports complexes, most Spartan athle
truction either here or at Brody, which was now at Aiden's back.

kin was He wasn't even remotely surprised to find a mass of people millin
k eventhe sidewalks, coming in and out of the building, and every last one o
chest to stopped and stared.

hat his Upon realizing what was happening, the cell phones emerged.

Did he mention it was Welcome Weekend? And campus was c
: be his with new and returning students in the process of moving in?

I am so fucked.

s." He made it past Case and stood on the corner of Shaw and Cl
waiting for the walk sign to change so he could begin his loop back
ie fieldthe arena.

lrills in "Hey, Fuller!" someone yelled from behind him. A *female* someone
ttention ass!"

nd slid Another said, "I want to lick your tattoos!"

Creepy.

anes of And honestly, *fuck* his teammates.

et with Well, mostly Jack. This dare had been all his idea.

past. A Aiden ignored the group gathered at his back as they laughed, hoot
jiggling hollering and catcalling, until the light blessedly turned green and he

gestive across the road. In front of the Skandalaris Football Center, the crowd and much thinner, and Aiden's burning cheeks cooled a bit as he once waited to cross Shaw.

cross the When the light changed again, he took off at a dead sprint, bobbing and weaving between people on the sidewalks, not slowing until he could once again cross Chestnut near the side entrance to Munn.

it was The group of his teammates who had followed his streak raced after him, following through the door, where they walked along the concourse until they reached Aiden's pile of clothes.

g about "I didn't think there were going to be that many people out there," he said, bending at the waist to catch his breath after running and laughing hard.

Aiden angrily pulled on his boxers, then shorts, before picking up a rawling shirt and snapping it in Jack's direction. "Did you see how many people were in front of Case? If Coach sees a video, I'm screwed."

"Don't worry," Jack said, dropping a sweat-sticky palm on Aiden's chestnut shoulder. "Coach isn't on any social media, remember? How would he see it?"

Jack had a point, but that didn't loosen the ball of nerves and anxiety. "Nice Aiden's chest."

Welcome Weekend at MSU was in full swing, and the last thing Aiden wanted to do after showing off every inch of his body to campus was to relax on Friday night with the boys.

But Jack had made it impossible to say no.

ing and hustled "All I'm saying is the last thing I need right now is a bunch of bunnies all up in my business because they got a good look at what"

word was all the gear,” Aiden had said, gesturing to his body, where his cutie again clung to his sweaty chest and his dark green athletic shorts hung low hips. After a hellish afternoon of training, his skin had glistened withing and making his tattoos stand out in stark relief. “I want to enjoy a quiet night once Jack had rolled his eyes. “Bro, it’s Welcome Weekend. You *have* to out. In fact...” His goalie had paused for dramatic effect, and Aiden up and exactly what that glint in his eyes meant. “I dare you.”

until they “Fuck you,” Aiden had said on an exhale, and Jack had cackled.

That’s how Aiden found himself at Rick’s that evening, a bottle of Jack Light sweating in his hand.

Thing so Rick’s had been an East Lansing staple for over four decades. It was the classiest bar or club in the city, but it was the most popular. Separating his two sides—one well lit with booths and a full-length bar, the other dimly lit with more booths and random tables, the dance floor, and the bathrooms—was unassuming. The floors were sticky, the drinks inexpensive. It was a naked-frills kind of place, the perfect spot for athletes to unwind without ever mobbed by adoring fans.

Tucked into an alcove near the bathrooms, the MSU hockey players were in court. They weren’t as popular as the football or basketball players, but they spent enough time at Rick’s to be easily recognized.

Tonight’s group was small. It was relatively early yet, but Jack liked to go out earlier than normal people. His philosophy was, “The earlier I go out, the sooner I can start drinking, and the sooner I start drinking, the sooner I can get drunk.”

Aiden found it hard to argue. He was squeezed onto a padded bench with a deep tear that had been taped over several times. On his left sat one of the team’s best defenders.

-off tee Asher Rhodes. Asher had curly, dirty-blond hair and pale green eyes
7 on his he first arrived on campus three years ago as a true freshman, his ar
1 sweat, legs were toothpick thin, his torso long and skinny. They'd all been l
ht in." those days. Thanks to their rigorous training regimen, the kid had fil
o comenically, going from a dorky freshman to a senior who had the atten
n knew several females around campus.

On Aiden's right sat Luke and Jack, the former taking a shot with a
of girls standing across from them and the latter with his face buried
of Budneck of the big-breasted brunette on his lap.

"I'm going to get another drink," he said to no one in particular. N
sn't the them would miss him anyway.

ed into Aiden pushed his way through the crowd until he was belly up to
im withdrawing the remainder of his Bud Light before setting the empty
-Rick's counter and signaling for another. The girl working—a slim blonde
as a no high ponytail long enough to swish between her shoulder blades
t being moved—winked and spun toward the beer fridge. A moment later she
bottle in front of him and said, "On the house."

ers held Aiden grinned widely before bringing the bottle to his lips.

out they "Men," a feminine voice to his left groaned. It was loud enough in
that Aiden knew she purposely said it with enough volume to reach his
d to go He turned toward her, and found himself looking down at an a
out, the height, athletically-built brunette with piercing blue eyes. The girl re
er I get Aiden vaguely of someone he'd seen before, but he couldn't quite
finger on who.

It didn't matter, because the second their gazes locked, Aiden kne
en duct do whatever it took to find out.

seman, "Why am I the bad guy in this scenario?" he asked, grinning down a

. When “You just buy right into the stereotype!” she said. “You don’t even
ms and little bit bad about using all of this—” she gestured at his entire perso
anky in get what you want.”

lled out “I would gladly pay,” Aiden said. “But why mess with a good thing’
tion of “You’re disgusting,” she said, but he didn’t miss the way her lips t
slightly before she flattened them again.

a group “You know, you could easily get your own free drinks,” he sai
l in the scanning her from head to toe.

“And how would I do that?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

None of Did this girl really have no idea?

“Use your feminine wiles, of course. I mean, you’re sexy as hell
the bar, shouldn’t be too hard.”

on the A blush crept into her cheeks at his compliment, and Aiden’s pulse
with his fingers itched to feel that heat against his skin.

as she He desperately wanted to learn what else he could do or say to el
set the same reaction.

“I don’t think—”

“I dare you,” Aiden blurted, cutting her off mid-sentence. Somethi
the bar Aiden this girl wouldn’t back down from a direct challenge. He may n
ears. know her name yet, but he’d seen a glint of fire in her eyes.

verage- He was rewarded a moment later when she determinedly set her j
minded turned her body to the bar, catching the eye of the male bartender.

put his Aiden watched with rapt attention as the girl worked her magic, th
receding from her cheeks as she turned on the charm, flirting shan
w he’d with the guy—whose name Aiden knew was, ironically, Rick.

The guy practically had hearts in his eyes as he asked, “What can I
it her. to drink?”

n feel a “A vodka cranberry would be great,” she said, batting her lashes and
n “—toseductively on her lower lip.

That attention wasn’t even turned on Aiden and suddenly he was spiraling
?” halfie. What would she do to him if she turned that charm his way?
ilted up This girl was a mystery Aiden wanted to unravel.

A moment later, the bartender returned with her drink and slid it across the
d, eyesbar with a wink, his number scrawled on the napkin underneath.

Aiden smirked knowingly. “One of those girls, huh?”

The brunette looked at him quizzically. “One of those girls? What are you
supposed to mean?”

ll, so it “You’re drinking vodka cranberry because you’re counting calories
because of some other dumb health-related reason that I can assure you
sped ashe gave her another obvious head-to-toe appraisal “—you do *not* need
worried about.”

licit the The girl leaned an elbow against the bar top and folded her arms over
chest, pinning him with a glare. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe I
don’t like the taste of beer? Or that I’m allergic?”

ing told Aiden gave her a wide grin. “Not for a second. Girls with bodies like
ot evendo not get them by not caring about what they eat.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve worked my ass off for this body,” she said with a
aw andan edge to her words that had Aiden cowering a little under her gaze
even if I hadn’t, it’s not up to you to make comments on what I do or don’t
e blushput into it.”

relessly Now it was Aiden’s turn to blush.

Briefly, he considered apologizing, but he had a feeling it would do nothing to
get youhim any points.

The pair stood in fraught silence for a long moment before Aiden cr

After taking a fortifying sip of beer, hoping the cool liquid would soothe his burning skin, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Kenzie," she said.

"Aiden," he replied. "Are you new here?"

"That obvious?" A nervous laugh escaped her.

Aiden studied her again. As an athlete of one of the big three sports universities, and as someone who had been running around this town campus going on four years now, he'd interacted with his fair share of the student population. One thing he had quickly learned was that every weekend at Rick's was filled with the same people. New faces rarely made their way down the stairs into the basement bar, and if they did, it wasn't with you—"good fake ID and an older friend dragging them along. Aiden could tell it was Kenzie's first time here based on the way her eyes darted around, widening at the debauchery surrounding them.

"I've never seen you around before," he said with a shrug.

"Would you have remembered if you had?"

"I never forget a pretty face."

That blush crept back, and this time, Aiden reached out and traced his fingers over her cheekbone, tucking an errant lock of hair behind her ear. It was a bold move, far more forward than he typically ever was—or ever would be—with women. But something about this girl intrigued him.

"Well, yes," Kenzie finally said after a large gulp of her drink. "I'm a first year here."

"You should give me your number," Aiden said, withdrawing his hand from his pocket and unlocking it before holding it out to her.

"Oh, I should?"

Aiden grinned. He liked this girl, liked that she wasn't tripping on

soothe herself to get on his good side. “Sure,” he said. “I can show you around

“What makes you think I need a tour guide?”

“You just said it’s your first year here. This campus is huge and it’s get lost.”

Kenzie looked as though she wanted to argue, but snatched his phone at this quickly punched in her information.

“No last name?” Aiden asked when she handed it back.

“Nah,” she said, taking a long pull of her drink, and Aiden found himself fixated on her lips—painted in a matte lipstick several shades darker than what he guessed was her natural color—as they wrapped around the thin red straws. “I’m like Cher. Or Madonna.”

Aiden snorted, considering it a win that she’d given him her number. Well, he thought she had. To be sure, he tapped the call button on her phone, satisfied when her phone lit up with his number.

“Alright, *Kenzie*,” he said. “What are you planning to study?”

“Advertising and marketing,” she said quickly, but didn’t elaborate.

Aiden smiled. “I’m in journalism.”

“So what, you want to be a writer?”

“More like a broadcast personality.”

“Radio or TV?”

“Definitely TV.”

Kenzie studied him for a moment, turning her head this way and that, though viewing him from different angles. Finally, she said, “I’ve heard that radio broadcasters were supposed to be at least semi-good looking.”

Aiden boomed out a laugh and stepped closer, leaning into her. “I wasn’t very nice,” he whispered.

He didn’t miss the way she shivered when his lips brushed the shell

d.” ear, and he grinned wider.

“Maybe I’m not a nice girl,” she said.

easy to Aiden pulled away, studying her face for an indication of how he react to that statement. But Kenzie’s cool, calm, collected exterior re one and in place, her face passive under his scrutiny.

“Be honest,” he said. “Would you kick me out of bed?”

Without hesitation, Kenzie said, “Definitely.” Aiden frowned, and himself laughed, adding, “But not before we had a little fun first.”

er than *HA!* he thought. *She is attracted to me. I can work with that.*

he two “So let’s get out of here,” he said, low enough for only her to hear.

It wouldn’t be the first time Aiden picked a girl up in this very l r at all. brought her home. After all, he had a well-earned reputation as a lady contact, Or, what was the term they used nowadays? Fuckboy? Playboy? wasn’t always proud of it, but either one would describe him perfectly.

Although, it had been several months since he’d taken anyone Between his summer job and summer training, sex had been the last t his mind.

Now, though? With this girl standing in front of him? It was all h think about.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, teeth sawing at her bott

Aiden was gripped by the urge to pull her flush against him and that a tongue over that spot.

thought “I only live a few blocks away,” he said, reaching out to settle his h her hips.

. “That “I just met you,” she said, but her pulse tripped in her throat, a deep brushing the tips of her breasts against his chest. She wasn’t wearing l of her and her nipples hardened under his gaze—a lot like his dick under hers

Women rarely played hard to get with him. As a rule, Aiden never girls; *they* pursued *him*. But something about this girl had him war shouldbreak his rules. Like some invisible string was pulling them together. mained On a whim, and simply because he couldn't hold himself back, he b brushed his mouth against hers, a barely-there slide of his lips, an appe things to come, running his tongue along her full bottom lip. Then he Kenzieaway to study her, gauge her reaction, and found her pupils blown ocean-blue eyes now dark and stormy.

“Come on, you know you want—”

His sentence was cut off as Jack stumbled through the crowd and bar and into him, bumping Aiden's side painfully into the bar. Aiden released 's man on Kenzie's hips to shove Jack away.

Aiden By the time he turned back to apologize for his teammate's ru . Kenzie was gone.

home. Aiden raised onto the tips of his toes and searched the crowd for a : hing on brunette hair and a white tank top, but found none.

“What're you looking for?” Jack asked.

e could “That girl I was talking to before you so rudely interrupted,” Aiden shrugging off the arm Jack had slung around his shoulders.

om lip. “Was she hot?”

run his Aiden rolled his eyes. “Yes, she was hot. She seemed...innocent, b That doesn't make any sense. She flirted with me, and I asked her t and on home with me, but she seemed unsure. She told me she's a freshman s business or something.”

o inhale “And let me guess,” Jack said, taking a slug of beer. “You were g g a bra, give her the business?”

s. Jack gave Aiden a suggestive eyebrow wiggle, and Aiden punch

chased playfully in the shoulder.

Aiden ignored the implication, though Jack was spot-on. “Maybe I wanted to get to know her better. She didn’t seem to recognize me.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You say that like it’s a good thing.”

“It is a good thing,” Aiden insisted. “When was the last time you were backed by a female who wasn’t trying to get in your pants because you play hockey on a wide, this university?”

Jack squinted his eyes and scrunched his nose up in an exaggerated thinking face before he said, “I honestly couldn’t tell you.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s cute that you’re interested in this girl after a single ten-minute conversation and all, but I think you’re forgetting something here.”

Aiden hadn’t mentioned the kiss. Jack didn’t need more ammunition to chirp him.

“What’s that?”

“She disappeared,” Jack pointed out. “And you have no way of finding out who she is. Did you even get her name?”

“Kenzie,” Aiden said immediately. “And I have her phone number.”

“Okay, we have a name and a number. But only a first name. And considering we are high schoolers, it’s a nickname for something like Mackenzie or Kensington, right? There’s no chance she’ll respond to your messages if you reach out.”

“Kensington?” Aiden asked with an arched brow.

“Okay, I’ll admit that’s a stretch,” Jack said with a laugh. “The population of this campus is huge. And if she’s a freshman, the chances of you bumping into her again are slim.”

“It can’t be that hard to find her,” Aiden protested. “We live in the modern media age. I guarantee I find her before the end of the week.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Christ, you’re about to go all Prince Charmi
e I justthat fucking glass slipper, aren’t you? Only that girl was less Cinder
more...runaway puck bunny.”

“Dude, I just told you she didn’t even recognize me. I think it’s saf
1 met ashe’s not a puck bunny.”

Jack shrugged, unbothered. “It sounds good though, doesn’t it?”

Aiden glared at his teammate, who held up his hands in sui
gerated“Consider it a working title, then. Project Runaway Puck Bunny.”

Aiden snorted a laugh and hooked his arm around Jack’s neck. “I’ll
under advisement.”

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Jack rolled his eyes. “Christ, you’re about to go all Prince Charming with that fucking glass slipper, aren’t you? Only that girl was less Cinderella and more...runaway puck bunny.”

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Aiden glared at his teammate, who held up his hands in surrender. “Consider it a working title, then. Project Runaway Puck Bunny.”

Aiden snorted a laugh and hooked his arm around Jack’s neck. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

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“WHY EXACTLY COULDN’T YOU continue to commute from D Brent asked his sister as he and their brother Nate hauled her couch up flight of stairs from the elevator en route to her new apartment.

Because, naturally, Kenzie had leased the penthouse.

She stood in the open doorway of her rental, arms crossed over her chest as she watched her brothers—one of whom was a professional athlete—struggle with half of her large, cushy sectional. The other half was still in the back of the illegally parked U-Haul.

A cop had already come by to tell them to move it or they’d be fined. Brent Jean, being who he was, talked him out of giving them a ticket.

Kenzie’s first week of classes at Michigan State were wrapped, and she’d only made the drive from Detroit to East Lansing and back twice. It had been enough. She didn’t even want to consider what that stretch would be like in the winter.

“I want the full college experience,” Kenzie said, finally responding.

brother's question.

"You already had two years of the *full college experience*," Nate reher through labored breaths.

"That was in New York City," she reminded him, moving out of t so he and Brent could move the couch through the door. "It's impos feel like you're in college when the campus isn't all in one spot, and t is massive. Here I can walk from one end to the other in a half hour every crosswalk light perfectly."

"What does that have to do with living in East Lansing?" Brent aske and Nate dropped the piece of furniture in the center of Kenzie's larg room, where she'd already unrolled a shaggy area rug to go underneath

"You've lived here," she said. "You tell me."

etroit?" Brent studied her for a moment, and Kenzie resisted the urge to a shortThe eight years between them often felt like millions when he turne she referred to as his *dad gaze* on her.

"You're here to study and finish your degree," he said with a chest asfinger. "You're not here to fuck around and party."

struggle Nate and Kenzie let out matching sighs of exasperation, and Brent back ofdarted between the two of them. "Cut her some slack, Brent," Na

"She's not a kid anymore, and it's not like you were a saint while you ied, butschool."

"I was in a serious relationship for over half my time here," Brent sa though "That may be true, but you were still a fuckboy before Ashley e, it hadaround. And you were a fuckboy after."

ould be Brent's cheeks reddened with anger and embarrassment, and wouldn't be surprised if steam started pouring from his ears any secur g to herWith only two years separating them, her brothers tended to butt head

often than not. As much as Kenzie hated to admit it—and refused to mind about it—Brent’s antics as a bachelor had been well-documented, especially after he became an NHL phenom.

he way “I’m not here to *fuck around*, as you so eloquently put it,” she said to Brent. “But I’m also not here to be some nerd who spends all of his time holed up within these four walls, studying and not having any kind of life. I want to finish my degree, but I want to have fun, too.” Brent opened his mouth to speak, but she raised a hand to cut him off. “Those things are up to you as to whether you think it’s necessary or not. When I dropped out of NYU and moved to Detroit, I was only twenty. I hadn’t given myself the chance to truly experience the things I *should* have been experiencing at that stage of my life. This is my opportunity to right some of those wrongs.”

squirm. “Such as?” Nate asked.

and what “Such as going to a real college party,” she said, avoiding Brent’s gaze. “And going to football, hockey, and basketball games with friends. Going on day trips to wineries or cider mills. All of those quintessential Michigan college experiences.”

’s glare Brent looked unconvinced, but before he could rebut, Nate elbowed him and said, “Let’s go get the other half of this couch.”

were in Kenzie mouthed *thank you* to him as they left.

What she didn’t—and wouldn’t—tell her brothers was that she was finally getting a chance to let loose in very real and messy ways. Owing FLEX was a great thing, but some of the shine had worn off, and she’d spent the last year feeling like she was dying, both creatively and emotionally. Kenzie had felt caged for so long. It was time she pried the gate open and set herself free.

and now. Up until now, her anxiety had marshaled her life. It was high time she took back the power.

to think Earlier in the week, when Kenzie and Dr. Mathews had discussed special nerves over starting over in a place where no one knew her, and how t she was about walking into her first class, Dr. Mathews said something said to struck a major chord with her: “Your comfort zone will kill you.”

er time It was time to get uncomfortable.

f social Last weekend, Kenzie had gone out to the bars with Berkley’s y ned his sister, Jessica, and crashed at her place after. The night life in East I re true, was worlds away from what she’d experienced in NYC, and ŹU and immediately known she’d made the right decision coming back to sch ance to choosing Michigan State.

stage of All her life, Kenzie had struggled with anxiety. During her senior high school, she had a mental breakdown that necessitated complet final semester from home.

s gaze. That was how she met Dr. Mathews.

oing on Dropping out of college had been a rash decision, but ultimately fidwestone for the sake of her mental health. Her family hadn’t entirely und the motivation behind it, but they had supported her.

ed him But Kenzie was once again on the precipice of losing her mir coming back to school was her way of taking the heat off herself. The completely overhaul her life had started, exactly as it had two years be anted a The time from when she’d moved to Detroit until now had been s s great, the company of real adults, attending business meetings, attending ing like and outings with potential partners, and generally living inside the l, and it bubble. She hadn’t made friends outside of Brent and Berkley’s socia and had spent the bulk of her time holed up in her condo, eyes gluec he took computer screen or phone, exercising when she needed a break ar getting right back to it.

sed her Movement was medicine for her, and the hours she'd spent s
errified training and doing cardio had done wonders for her, not only physic
ing that also mentally. To her, a healthy body equaled a healthy mind, and a
episode at the end of high school had left her down and out of it for r
she had needed all the help she could get. It was only after a frie
youngers suggested she join him at the gym one day—and then another and a
Lansing until she began looking forward to it—that she started to feel like
she'd again.

ool and She wasn't sure when her role at FLEX had started to feel more
chore she dreaded than something she genuinely enjoyed participating
year of she saw it for what it was: a sign that things needed to change.

ing her Her brothers returned with the other half of her sectional five minute
pulling her from her reverie.

Once the couch was perfectly positioned—after Kenzie made her b
a good shift it around several times, prompting a ridiculous number of ex
erstood from them both—the three of them dropped onto the deep cushio
opposite ends—Brent on one and she and Nate on the other—the
id, and siblings silently chugged the bottles of water Kenzie had passed around
itch to “I'm all for you getting the college experience you dream of, Kenz
fore. said after several long moments, wiping his mouth with the back of hi
spent in “but I can't understand why you gave up your condo with that stunnin
dinners of the Detroit River for...this.”

FLEX Nate lazily swept his arm out at the view. Kenzie didn't see w
l circle, problem was. Her apartment faced south, looking out across downtow
l to her Lansing, Grand River, and the fringes of campus beyond. The view,
id then not as stellar as the one from her condo in Detroit, was still pretty inc

But it wasn't why she'd leased this place. No, she'd leased it because

strength located at the epicenter of East Lansing nightlife, and campus was only a few blocks away.

After the “I wanted to be within walking distance to classes,” she said. “Before months, I didn’t give up my Detroit condo. I’m subletting it.”

and had She likely would never move back in, but again...that was a conversation for another day.

herself “I’m sure that’s it,” Nate replied. “It has nothing to do with the fact that there are like ten bars within spitting distance, one of which is on the same floor of this building.”

in, but “You should have told me this was where you found a place,” Brent

“Why, so you could’ve talked me out of it?”

as later, “Exactly,” her oldest brother replied. “The last thing I need is to be

about some creep trailing you home from the bar and knowing exactly where you live because it’s so damn close. I have enough going on.”

pletives Kenzie’s sister senses perked up. Brent and Berkley had gotten married a month ago. At previous month. For all intents and purposes, they should still be in their honeymoon phase.

d. “What’s going on?” Nate asked, picking up on the same note of sorrow as Kenzie.

is hand, “I...” Brent trailed off and carded his fingers through his thick brown hair.

ing view “Are you okay? Is it Berkley?” Kenzie prompted.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better if you just let it out,” Nate said.

hat the “Berkley’s pregnant!” Brent blurted.

even East Nate let out a whoop of laughter and launched himself at their heads. Though Nate, their stoic, avoid-touchy-feely-shit-at-all-costs brother, was

credible. hugging Brent, compounded by the bomb Brent had just dropped on them, it was had Kenzie rooted to her spot on the couch, mouth gaping in shock.

y a few When Nate broke away from Brent, he sat next to him with his arms
across Brent's shoulders, both of them staring at Kenzie, smiling—
sides, broad and unchecked, Brent's small and sheepish.

“Well? What do you think, kid?” Brent asked. “You ready to be an a
ersation “Holy fuck,” she said quietly. “I’m going to be an aunt.”

“Damn, that kid hit the genetic lottery,” Nate said with a laugh. “W
act that it is, you’re going to have your hands full.”

ie main As if understanding that Kenzie needed some time to process, and t
would catch up eventually, Brent and Nate began chatting about w
said. new life would mean for all of them.

Kenzie was undeniably excited for her brother, and Berkley, who
worried-sweetest girl alive and had somehow managed to turn her overb
/ where-overprotective big brother into a giant cinnamon roll. But she couldn
wondering what becoming a dad would mean for Brent and his relat
ried the with FLEX. Hockey already took up a vast majority of his time from
in the through May—and then beyond if the Warriors made a deep playoff r
they had this past summer.

nothing While he and Berkley had been dating, he'd still been very hands-o
that he was married, though? With a child on the way? Kenzie was
n hair. her plans to pull back from FLEX and leave the company entirely w
be so easy now that Baby Jean had entered the picture. She may curre
lying to him about her wants and needs and intentions, but she couldn
her brother in the lurch.

rother. Her chest tightened as her pulse spiked, adrenaline coating her ve
illingly ice as her anxiety ratcheted up several notches. She'd barely started
n them, and things were already far more messy than she wanted or needed t
be.

Kenzie took deep breaths, inhaling for six seconds, holding for two seconds, and exhaling for five, exactly as Dr. Mathews had taught her. Across the

Brent glanced at her quickly before returning his attention to Nate. "Aunt?" Kenzie silently thanked him for not drawing more attention to her friend.

A few more breathing exercises had her heart rate slowing to normal and the spots receding from the edges of her vision.

The baby wouldn't be here for several months yet, which was plenty of time for her, Brent, and Berkley to sit down and come up with some plan that worked for everyone. Maybe in that time, she'd find a way to

be truthful with her brother. For now, though, it was business as usual. As it was meant, for the time being, Kenzie wouldn't be involved with FLEX training. She wanted to help, and knew her brother well enough to know he wouldn't help her offer of such, but she couldn't make herself speak the words. No relationship the mere thought threatened to send her into a tailspin once again.

August Finally, Kenzie stood on shaky legs and walked to her brothers, climbing onto their laps exactly as she had when she was a child. Their arms were entangled until they were one giant ball of Jean siblings twisted together. Now Kenzie's couch.

worried "I'm so happy for you, Bee," Kenzie told him honestly, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I can't wait to be Auntie Kenz!"

eventually be "You guys can't tell anyone you know yet," he said. "We just found out."

't leave "How far along is she?" Nate asked.

"Three months..." Brent said, trailing off.

ins like Kenzie and Nate were quiet as they did the math.

school "Holy shit," Nate breathed. "She was pregnant at your wedding?"

hem to Brent nodded solemnly. "She was really sick after. Like...more than a normal hangover. So she decided to take a test, and surprised me with

vo, and results on our honeymoon.”

the room, Brent’s grin grew as he told them the story of how, on their last night in Croatia, they had a quiet dinner on the balcony of their room, and I had presented him with a tissue wrapped pregnancy test.

“She started crying before I could even open it,” he said with a laugh. “I stopped opening it to comfort her, and she yelled at me!”

Kenzie and Nate chuckled, both easily able to picture their sister sort of yelling at Brent for wanting to hold her while she cried, when in fact she was crying because she was afraid of his reaction upon seeing the positive result. “Are you excited?” Nate asked.

“Of course I am!” Brent said. “I hope we have a little girl just like I expected.”

Nate reached around Kenzie and gave Brent’s shoulder a squeeze. “Whatever it is, you’re going to be the best dad.”

Kenzie nodded in emphatic agreement. If there was one thing Brent had been good at his entire life, it was taking care of people. His teammates, his siblings, their parents, Berkley and her friends. Fatherhood would come naturally to him.

Later, Kenzie stood in the middle of her closet, surrounded by boxes of clothes, when her phone trilled from somewhere in her bedroom. She stumbled into the space, which currently sat in disarray, with a desk and chair haphazardly pushed against one wall, her bed frame—thankfully put together but without the mattresses stacked on top—leaning against the opposite wall, and her nightstand several feet away in front of the window.

When she finally reached her phone, which had been buried under a pile of sheets on the floor, Kenzie found a missed call from Jessica.

“Hey!” Jessica shouted when Kenzie’s return call connected. “What are you doing?”

Berkley Kenzie could barely hear her over the noise in the background, so she spoke loudly, “I could ask you the same thing!”

h. “So I’m at HopCat and then we’re going bar hopping!”

“But it’s like...early still!” Kenzie protested.

her-in-law “Girlfriend, it’s nine o’clock.”

she was Kenzie whipped her gaze to the window, surprised to find that dusk had indeed settled over the city. Several blocks away, campus glowed under the street lights, and on the road below her building, masses of people like her from one place to the next, enjoying the East Lansing nightlife.

“Holy shit,” Kenzie said with a laugh. “I’ve been so busy unpacking I hadn’t even realized.”

The noise level behind Jessica suddenly cut off, as though she’d stepped outside. In fact...Jessica stood on the street corner in front of the bar/restaurant that occupied the main floors of Kenzie’s building.

“Get your cute butt down here!” Jessica said, craning her neck to look at the residences over her head, as though she could see Kenzie.

“Oh, Jess,” Kenzie said. “I’m a wreck. I’ve spent all day moving!”

“I don’t care,” Jessica said, turning her teacher voice on. “It’s late at night. You’re sweaty out here anyway, so no one is going to give a damn. You should get ready for your first week of classes, Kenz! It’s time to come out, meet some people, and celebrate. Put some dry shampoo in your hair, change your clothes, swipe on some deodorant, and meet me down here. I’m giving you five minutes!”

“Five minutes!” Kenzie protested. “Have you met me? I can’t pick an outfit in five minutes!”

That are Jessica sighed and said, “Okay, fair. Buzz me up, and I’ll help you.”

Kenzie walked into the living room and pressed the button on the phone next to her front door, unlocking the one in the lobby for Jessica. “I’m on the top floor,” she said. “The door is unlocked!”

Jessica disconnected, and Kenzie hurried into her bathroom, unpacked her bags and digging through boxes, searching for her makeup, dry shampoo, and a hair tie. It was the first weekend of September, and now that she was in a new city and—mostly—settled, it was time to start enjoying herself. Think about what she’d come here for, wasn’t it? To experience life as a run-of-the-mill college student, in a place where no one knew her.

Your comfort zone will kill you.

She couldn’t live her life holed up in her room, pretending the world didn’t exist. In order to master her anxiety, she had to go out and experience life. Every day, she had to actively force herself into situations in order to overcome them. At first, Kenzie struggled with Mathews’ advice, unsure of how sound it was to intentionally trigger anxiety. But, as usual, her doctor was right.

As she whipped her milk-chocolate brown hair into a sleek ponytail, coating her roots in a pound of dry shampoo and using one of those sticks to tame her flyaways—she considered the taste of college life she’d gotten the weekend before. The girls in East Lansing were stunning, and the new boys were the very definition of eye candy. Since high school, Kenzie hadn’t been in a serious relationship. It was difficult to find the courage to open your heart to someone when her own mind constantly rebelled against her. She had a few flings, but nothing worth mentioning. At the moment, she wasn’t looking, but if the right boy came along...

Jessica burst into Kenzie’s apartment as she was putting the fi

touches on her makeup, which was really only a swipe of mascara
e panel through her eyebrows, topped with a bit of bronzer and tinted chapst
1 on the Jess chattered about who was waiting for them downstairs—her boy
for one, who Kenzie was excited to finally meet after hearing so muc
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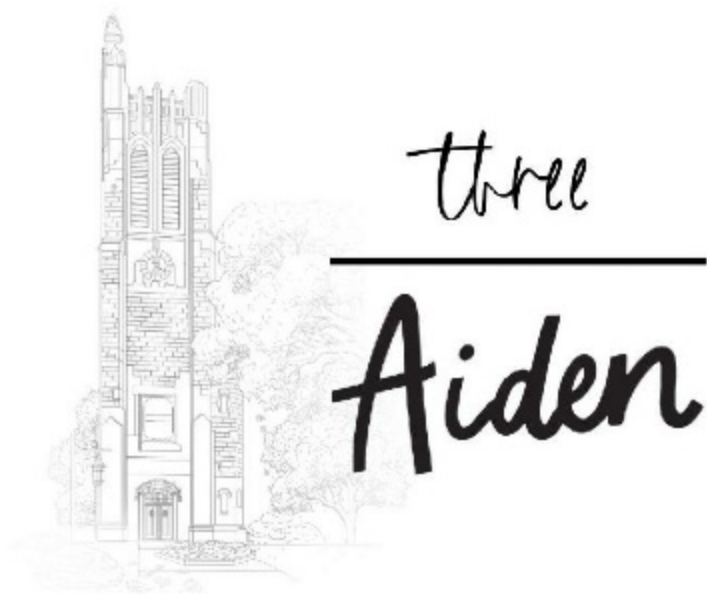
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touches on her makeup, which was really only a swipe of mascara and gel through her eyebrows, topped with a bit of bronzer and tinted chapstick. As Jess chattered about who was waiting for them downstairs—her boyfriend, for one, who Kenzie was excited to finally meet after hearing so much about him—Kenzie couldn't help the way her mind drifted back to the boy she'd met at Rick's the weekend before, and the way he'd had her wanting to do things completely at odds with the good girl reputation she typically maintained.

With Aiden, she'd been bold, explicitly telling him what she wanted with no fear of judgement. The reaction he'd elicited within her body was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before, and she'd been more than ready to take their instant, mutual attraction from the crowded bar to quieter, more private places.

Then his teammate had walked up, and Kenzie had instantly sobered.

Because Mackenzie Jean's number one rule? *Don't date hockey players.*



SEVERAL VIDEOS OF AIDEN had circulated around the campus scene, but a few weeks had gone by now, and none of his coaches had heard about his streaking escapade. He was flying high as he walked into the gym on Tuesday morning for strength and conditioning. Classes had started, and over the course of the team's practice and training schedules were incredibly bogged down with tutoring sessions and media engagements in addition to keeping on top of their game. Aiden felt amazing physically, and was itching for the season to start.

Not to mention, he couldn't stop thinking about Kenzie. He'd been seeing her at irregular intervals since the night they met, but he had yet to give her a response. If she had stuck around, she would've learned he was a player, and thus had the ability to doggedly pursue the things that interested him.

And Kenzie certainly interested him.

He'd wear her down. It was simply a matter of time.

All that to say, things were looking pretty good from where he was standing.

So of course, the absolute last thing he expected was for Coach to come out of his office as soon as Aiden set foot in the locker room and point a menacing finger in his direction.

Aiden's heart sank as he glanced around the room at his teammates all suddenly found their shoes or the ceiling far more interesting than he was.

"What's up, Coach?" Aiden asked as he sat down in the creaky chair across from him.

"I don't exactly know how to say this, Fuller, but...well, it's come to my attention that you were videotaped streaking across campus a few days ago."

gossip Fuck. How had he found out?

He found "My daughter showed me the video, in case you were wondering, she's a Munnseventeen-year-old daughter."

He found, so of Aiden hung his head. This was bad. *Very* bad.

hectic, "So what happens now?" he asked, raising his head to look his coach in the eye.

he was "The university wanted to come down hard on you. I'm talking parking charges, police involvement, the works. Thankfully, I talked them out of it. But, of course, we can't let you get away with this without some form of punishment."

hockey Aiden nodded and swallowed hard. "Whatever it is, sir, I can take it." "We've agreed to suspend you."

"How long?"

"The first five weekends of the season."

Aiden ground his teeth together, mentally flipping through their schedule.

he was Five weekends meant he wouldn't be able to play until their first s
November. That meant ten games of his senior season, lost to his stupi
o come "Fine," he said finally.

crook a "I know this isn't ideal," Coach said. "It's your senior season, and
got your future to think about. But I promise, if you keep your head do
es, whodon't fuck up anymore, your talent will more than speak for itself.
him. I have a player that works harder than you, Fuller. And we're going
y chairhurting without you out there. But that's the price you have to pay."

"I understand," he said, standing to shake Coach's hand before ex
e to mythe locker room.

weeks He quietly padded over to his stall and sat hard on the seat in fro
dropping his head into his hands.

"How long?" Jack asked quietly as he sat next to him, echoing
ng. Mywords to their coach minutes before.

Aiden didn't have to ask what he meant, only replied, "Five weeken

A collective groan went up from his teammates. "Fuck, man, I'm
h in theJack said. "I can go in there right now and take some of the heat off
you want."

ressing Aiden lifted his head and gave Jack a wobbly but grateful smile.
off thatthe dumbest idea you've ever had. We can't leave the boys with
me sortstarting goalie."

Jack surprised Aiden by not making some self-indulgent commen
." how talented he was.

"Five weekends," Aiden said. "I feel like that means I can basica
any shot at a rookie contract goodbye."

His chest tightened with the thought; everything he'd been worki
hedule.gone in an instant, all because he couldn't turn down some ridiculous :

eries indare.

dity. During his senior season of high school, Aiden had entered the NHI

That summer, he'd been selected in the third round by the Detroit W
you'veand every single day since had been spent in preparation of going pro
wn andgraduated college.

I don't At the end of the previous season, he'd been approached to j
g to beWarriors' farm team in Toledo, but had turned them down. While
eager to start his professional career—which would hopefully be lo
iting tosuccessful—he'd felt he still had a lot to learn by playing college for
year. Plus, he wasn't ready to leave his teammates, and he wa
nt of it,complete his degree.

“Not so fast, Fuller,” Luke said, walking up to drop a reassuring h
Aiden'sAiden's shoulder. “Your career thus far speaks for itself. And once
you back out there, you'll have plenty of chances to show the Warri
ds.” how stupid they'd be not to sign you.”

sorry,” “He's right,” Jack said, walking into the middle of the roo
f you ifpositioning himself so he was dead center below the Spartan helmet
ceiling. “We're all to blame for Aiden getting suspended,” he said
“That's“Which means now we're all paying for it. With him out for the fi
out ourweekends of the season, we're going to have to work extra hard to m
for that loss in offensive output. And off the ice, we're going to make :
t aboutdo everything possible to keep him out of more trouble. So I'm instit
rule: Aiden Fuller does not get dared for the entire season.”

lly kiss Everyone gasped. Dares were a cornerstone of MSU hockey, and
didn't simply get a free pass without a damn good reason.

ing for, Aiden supposed being suspended as the result of one of those dare
fuckingdamn good reason.

“What if it’s something super small?” one of the freshmen
Draft. “Something that won’t cause a scene or get him in any more trouble?”
Warriors, Jack placed his forefinger in the cleft at the center of his chin, the
once he of thoughtfulness as he considered the rookie’s question. “Fair enou

we’ll make an amendment: Fuller can take dares that won’t get him in
oin thewith the powers that be.” Jack cut his gaze to Aiden. “You on boa
he wasthat?”

ng and “Am I on board with not having to show my cock and balls and as
anotherentire campus again? Fuck yeah, I am.”

nted to His teammates laughed, and Jack raised his arm, a silent comm.
everyone to gather around him.

and on “Go Green, on three,” he said when they’d all assembled.

we get “One, two, three, GO GREEN!” they shouted in unison, then disper
ors just

That afternoon, as Aiden sat in his advertising class, his mi
m and decidedly absent, his professor’s lecture no more than the dull buzz o
on the in his ear.

loudly. Ten games was nearly a quarter of the season. It wasn’t simply tha
rst five would miss out on playing time—and all those chances to learn and gr
ake up player—that was tripping him up. It was also the fact that once he finall
sure we play again, he’d have to catch up in the stats rankings not only w
tuting a teammates, but with the entire country.

Mentally, he began a checklist of everything he needed to do in c
players return at the top of his game, if such a thing was possible.

That list included, but was not limited to, extra time in the weigh
s was a two-a-day skating sessions, keeping a very strict diet, and being there
teammates every step of the way, even if he couldn’t contribute l

asked. wanted. On top of it all, he had to keep his ass out of trouble, and that with paying attention in class.

picture Aiden shook his head and refocused on the room in front of him. Sigh. So athletes at Michigan State were required to sit in the first three rows of troublehalls and the front two of smaller classrooms. Aiden was in the third with flanked on one side by Jack and the other by Asher. The professor droned about some sort of project they would each need to complete before the semester ended. Aiden had a feeling he hadn't missed much.

Still, he turned to Jack and whispered, "What is he talking about?" and for "Big semester-long project," Jack, who was also a senior and preparing to graduate in May, said. "He said he's going to email us the specifics. It sounds pretty grueling. Bet you're happy you don't have to worry about hockey until November."

Aiden glared daggers at Jack out of the corner of his eye and, with clenched teeth, said, "I will always worry about hockey. And in case you forgot, your dumbass is the reason I'm in this mess." Aiden paused a moment, then narrowed his gaze on his goalie. "Why am I even in this mess? I'm not even an ad major."

Jack raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry, bro," he said. "I offered to take some of the heat off you, in case you forgot. And you're here because you waited too long to fill this requirement, and I talked you into it."

"You have a habit of talking me into doing stupid shit," Aiden pointed to Jack. "And I hate you for all of it."

"Boys!" The professor called in their direction, pulling them from the conversation. "I understand you athletes think you're gods around here, but in my class there is no special treatment. I suggest you pay attention if you want to pass." Now he

started to pass and keep playing whatever precious sport ball game it is that you admission to this university.”

student- Aiden’s cheeks heated as he nodded his acquiescence. “Sorry,” he and the lecture mumbled together.

rd row, The professor spared them with one last withering glance before returned on his lecture.

ore the When class was over, as Aiden joined the queue of students filtering out of the room, he caught a flash of brunette hair hurrying through the crowd.

aring to Hair he thought he recognized, though he’d only spent ten minutes with her, but it girl’s presence three weeks ago.

7 about After class, he had a break before evening practice, so Aiden headed to the cafeteria to read over the specifics of his advertising project.

through Mostly, he wanted to stalk the class list to see if he shared it with anyone named Kenzie.

d for a Once he settled at a table tucked into the corner of the dining hall, he shielded himself from prying eyes, and settled his oversized Beats headphones over his ears. Then he logged into his advertising class’s online platform.

to take The online platform was exactly as it sounded: a place where the professor could upload pertinent class information such as the syllabus, make announcements to his students about things such as cancellations, and post due dates. And, luckily for Aiden, it was also where he could view the class roster.

m their His eyes darted back and forth across the screen as he scrolled through the list, but in scanning the names.

ou wish Finally, he came across one that held promise: *Mackenzie Jean*.
Mackenzie Jean? She couldn’t possibly be...

gained Well, there was only one way to find out. Aiden swiped his phone table, tapped into his Instagram app, and typed the name into the search and Jack There she was, the top result.

As Aiden thumbed through Kenzie's pictures, he paused on one sumingstanding between two tall, incredibly good-looking men. The gro posed on the deck of a boat, the three all dark hair and bronzed ig fromsparkling body of water spreading out around them. Aiden couldr wd andzooming in, studying the contours of Kenzie's abdominal muscl rounded edges of her quads, the long, sleek column of her throat. H s in thebreasts filled out her bikini top perfectly, the high-cut leg holes bottoms accentuating her lean legs.

d to the She hadn't been lying; she'd worked hard for her body. Muscles l didn't come from only good genes.

h a girl Then he studied the men bracketing her. The one to Kenzie's l slimmer than the other; still chiseled, but softer. His hair was shorn c l, awayhis scalp on the sides and longer on the top, flopping onto his forehe is ears,into crystal blue eyes that were squinted against the sun.

The other man? Aiden recognized him quite well, as he passed e theirpicture every time he walked into Munn.

us, and *Boat day with my bros*, the caption read, followed by a string of st ons andrelated emojis.

ie class Mackenzie Jean, his runaway puck bunny, was the younger sister legendary Spartan, Brent Jean.

hrough, "Holy fuck," Aiden breathed.

"What?" Jack asked as he dropped his body onto the chair across Aiden.

"I figured out who she is."

off the “Who? Your runaway puck bunny?”
h bar. “Yeah, and I was right about her not being a puck bunny, so you c
calling her that.”

of her “I’ll bite,” Jack said, resting his elbows on the table and steepl
up wasfingers under his chin, waiting. “Who is she?”

skin, a “Mackenzie Jean.”

i’t help The world stilled a beat as Jack connected the dots.

es, the “As in...”

ow her “Brent Jean,” Aiden confirmed. “Yeah.”

of her “Holy fuck,” Jack said, leaning back and sifting his fingers thro
floppy blond hair.

ike that “Exactly,” Aiden said.

“I didn’t even know Jean had a sister,” Jack said, and they
eft wasmomentarily joined by Asher and Luke.

close to The four of them typically met on campus in between classes and c
ead andskate, liking to have what they referred to as *family dinner*.

Not only were they his teammates, but they were also Aiden’s best
by hisand if he was going to figure out what to do about Mackenzie Jean, he
their advice, no matter how bad or stupid it was sure to be.

immer- “What’re you two talking about?” Asher asked as he sat in the seat
Aiden, his dinner tray falling hard onto the table as his backpack c
of theonto Aiden’s foot.

“God,” Aiden grumbled, kicking the offending bag out of the way.
do you have in there, bricks?”

ss from “No,” Asher responded, shoveling some sort of quinoa salad i
mouth. “Although my Econ textbook is quite heavy.”

Aiden rolled his eyes, and Jack and Luke chuckled.

“For real, though,” Luke said. “What were you guys talking about when you were all looking at that stoplooked sort of shaken up when we got here.”

“Remember Fuller’s runaway puck bunny?” Jack asked.
Asher and Luke both nodded.

“You’ll never guess her last name.”

“Lewinsky!” Asher shouted, a piece of steamed broccoli falling from his mouth and bouncing across the table.

“Manners, Rhodes,” Jack said. “And really? Lewinsky? As in Monica Lewinsky?”
Asher shrugged and swallowed. “I was watching a documentary about his Clinton administration the other day.”

Aiden chuckled. Even after four years with these guys, they still managed to surprise him.

“No, dipshit, her last name isn’t Lewinsky,” Aiden said. “It’s Jean.”

He paused, gaze flitting back and forth between Luke and Asher, scanning their expressions, waiting for the moment when understanding dawned.

It was Luke who caught on first. “As in...Brent?”
Aiden and Jack nodded solemnly.

“Holy shit. *That* girl is Brent Jean’s little sister?”

“The very same,” Aiden confirmed.

“Damn...” Asher said. “I’ve seen mentions of her in press about her dropping stuff, but when you think *little* sister, you certainly don’t think of someone in a bar.”

“What?” “How old is she?” Jack asked.

“I’m not sure,” Aiden said, shrugging. “She told me it’s her first year, so she’s either a freshman or a transfer.”

“My bet is transfer,” Luke said. “I can’t imagine Fuller going all gawky-eyed over some freshman.”

it? You “I’m not googly-eyed,” Aiden protested, reclining in his chair to cross his arms over his chest and level each of his teammates with a glare.

Jack barked out a laugh. “Fuller, get real. You’re so googly-eyed, practically that scene in *The Mask* where Jim Carrey’s eyes literally burst out of his head.”

From his Aiden smacked Jack upside the head and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

ca?” “It doesn’t matter,” he said, flipping his hat onto the table and tucking his fingers into his hair.

“And why is that?” Asher mumbled through what sounded like a mouthful of food...again.

Aiden lifted his head and locked eyes with him. “Because I can’t expect her to text me back.”

studying “Send her a dick pic,” Jack suggested. “That’ll get a reaction out of her.”

l. “You do realize that public nudity is what got me suspended, right?”

“Yeah, but this wouldn’t be public,” Luke pointed out. When he narrowed his eyes at his captain, Luke added, “I’m not saying it’s a bad idea. Just stating a fact.”

“It’s *not* a good idea,” Aiden said with a laugh. “It’s terrible.”

him and “How many texts have you sent her?”

the hottie Aiden’s cheeks heated. “A few...”

“How many is a few?” Jack asked.

“Like...twenty?”

was here, “Fuck.”

“Shit.”

googly- “You’re an idiot.”

“Thanks, guys,” Aiden said. “Really appreciate the confidence.”

cross his “It’s just...” Jack trailed off. “You know there’s texting etiquette i
for a reason, Fuller!”

you’re “I know, I know,” Aiden said, returning his head to his hands. “But
ilge outtake them back now.”

“You just have to give her something to make it worth her while.
ing hisout why she ran away from you at the bar, why she’s avoiding you no
either fix the problem, or find a way to make her see there isn’t one.”
ling his Aiden looked up at Luke, surprised by the helpfulness and normalcy
bit of advice.

outhful Aiden turned his attention inward as his teammates carried
conversation around him, giving him space to mull over his options.

ven get It didn’t make sense, his fixation on this girl. She’d run away fro
leaving him with nothing more than a nickname and a phone numbe
her.” that he knew her full name, he could get to know more about her fr
, social media, but where was the fun in that?

Aiden No, Aiden wanted to get to know Kenzie in the flesh, where he cou
a goodher in the eye when he asked her questions, where he could touch her.

The fact that she had the upper hand in this situation didn’t sit we
Aiden, who was used to being the one in control in all of his relatic
This girl, who was related to one of the National Hockey League’s
stars, wasn’t even remotely impressed by Aiden Fuller, and why sho
be?

Of course, his *relationships* never amounted to anything more than
of one and two night stands. Aside from his family, hockey had be
always would be—his top priority. It was a hard and fast rule of his
didn’t do relationships. There was only room for one great love in l

in place and it required skates. A long-term, committed relationship with any emotional intimacy wasn't even on the table.

I can't The simple fact of the matter was that he was extremely good looking with an impressive physical presence and a hockey player's stamina. Figure no slouch in bed, and the women of Michigan State knew it.

Now, and But Aiden was also a nice guy, and always upfront with girls every time they hooked up. There were boundaries, and both parties always knew what was going on. They'd have a few nights of fun together then go their separate ways. No drama, no focus being pulled away from hockey.

It was a satisfaction all around.

It was a rule he'd set for himself years ago and never broken.

But Mackenzie Jean might prove to be an exception, if only because she never walked away from a challenge.

"Well, well," Jack said, emitting a low whistle. "Look who just walked in." Aiden's head snapped up, gaze instantly zeroing in on the brunet with the wild look walking across the cafeteria.

"Are you going to go talk to her?" Asher asked Aiden.

"You totally should," Luke said. "Get her to go on a date with you."

"That's a good idea," Jack said, turning a borderline-sadistic grin on his face. "Biggest as he raised a finger in the air, like a conductor ready to begin a concert." Before the words even left his mouth, Aiden knew what was coming.

He groaned as Jack said, "I dare you to get Mackenzie Jean to go on a date with you."

Then—and

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KENZIE MOVED FROM THE lecture hall as quickly as the crowd allow, hoping the crush of bodies would keep her hidden until she could get outside and away from the building.

“Hey!”

The voice rang out behind her, but Kenzie kept moving, positive she wasn't speaking to her.

“Hey!” the voice said again, this time louder, more insistent, and she glanced over her shoulder to see a girl rushing after her, holding Kenzie's leather-bound date planner out.

When Kenzie stopped and the girl reached her side, she said, “You're doing this,” through labored breaths. “Damn girl, you move fast.”

Kenzie laughed and took her proffered planner. “I'm sorry,” she said. “Thank you so much for rushing after me. I would've been so lost without this.”

The girl patted her bag. “Trust me, I get it.”

Kenzie thrust out her hand. “Mackenzie Jean,” she said.

The girl slid her hand into Kenzie’s. “Sofia Kinsey,” she said.

“I love your bag,” Kenzie gushed, eyeing up the tote resting on the slim shoulder.

Sofia looked down, surprised, and gave Kenzie a small smile. “T.J. Maxx is my favorite.”

Kenzie nodded. “Me, too. And thrift stores.” She glanced down at her outfit, which featured high-waisted Levi’s shorts and an oversized leopard tee she’d thrifted back in New York. It may have been October, but the heat of summer still clung to the city like glue, and she would enjoy every second until fall took hold.

“Thrift stores are the *best*,” Sofia agreed.

“I haven’t had a chance to go anywhere around here,” Kenzie said, realizing how much time situating herself in East Lansing had consumed.

“Oh my gosh, really?” Sofia asked with a gasp. “There’s this one town you absolutely *have* to check out. We should go together sometime.”

“That would be amazing!” Kenzie said.

They continued to walk in the same direction, chatting about their favorite pieces. Sofia was, in a word, stunning. With deep brown hair and skin the color of a cup of coffee with a splash of cream in it, she turned heads everywhere she went. Kenzie had seen her on campus before, and she’d been mesmerized every time. Sofia practically floated along the sidewalks, her ambience missing nothing, always dressed to kill. Though, she and Kenzie had different styles. Where Kenzie favored oversized band tees and flannels with tight shorts and leggings, feet usually stuffed into combat boots or her favorite sandals, Sofia preferred pastels, each shade in a rain

colors complementing her dark skin perfectly. Today, she wore a cream-colored skirt and a pale-blue crop top with cute little cap sleeves. The girl's assortment of golden chains adorned her neck, and platform shoes showcased her bright-pink toenail polish.

Thanks! Where Kenzie was comfort personified, Sofie screamed *fashionista*. Kenzie immediately liked her.

Wait at her "So wait, your last name is Jean? As in *Brent Jean*?" Sofia asked. "Deflike...so hot."

Kenzie's smile turned down. "Gross, that's my brother."

Sofia laughed, a high, melodic note. "Okay, sorry," she said. "But you like twenty-three? Shouldn't you have graduated by now?"

Kenzie took a deep breath, her mind racing, searching for a reasonable answer. Telling people she'd dropped out of college at twenty wasn't the best idea to make a good impression, so she settled for, "I took some time off in Old FLEX off the ground. Brent and I decided now was a good time for me!"

Kenzie took a deep breath, her mind racing, searching for a reasonable answer. Telling people she'd dropped out of college at twenty wasn't the best idea to make a good impression, so she settled for, "I took some time off in Old FLEX off the ground. Brent and I decided now was a good time for me!"

It was close enough to the truth that it rolled easily off her tongue. "I love FLEX," Sofia said wistfully. "It's basically my entire wardrobe."

Kenzie was caught off guard by this admission, and infinitely flattered. "Thank you," she said with a smile. "That's wonderful to hear."

They reached a crosswalk, and Sofia nodded toward the right, her eyes fixed on the street. "Well, I'm heading this way. Another class to get to. See you around!"

And she was gone, breezing across the street, apparently unaware that a group of men's people watched her every move.

Kenzie shook her head, a small smile on her lips as she paused to take in her surroundings.

in a short, Despite the balmy air, the leaves had started to change on the trees. Anmaples, the deep green of the pine trees growing bolder, readying wedgescolder months when it was their time to shine.

For a moment, she dropped onto a nearby bench and simply breathe

Coming back to college was no joke, and she waged a daily battle between letting her anxiety pull her under and fighting through to swim ashore. “He had always been important to her, and these days they were her best friend. Sofia couldn’t understand what returning her date planner truly meant to Kenzie.

Her stomach grumbled, and she checked her watch, confirming she had another hour and a half before her next class. Kenzie pulled out her phone to consult the campus map, orienting herself. Much to her surprise and disappointment she discovered she was across the street from Case Hall and its adjacent cafeteria. When she’d signed up for classes and moved to East Lansing, she’d sprung for a campus meal plan, deciding it was a necessary expense given her chaotic schedule.

East Lansing and Michigan State’s campus couldn’t be more different from NYU and everything she’d left behind in New York City.

She shouldn’t be surprised by this, and yet, she was. While campus was bustling with thousands of people from all walks of life, hurrying in and out of buildings to classes and meetings, things moved slower here. There was no saying that same sense of urgency she’d experienced every time she walked the streets of Greenwich Village, where NYU’s main campus was located. Brooklyn had been a nice respite from the fast-paced lifestyle of the city, but it still hadn’t given her what she wanted.

In New York, she’d constantly been compelled to keep *moving*, and that wasn’t ideal for someone who suffered from anxiety. Even on bad

owering health days, she hadn't been comfortable enough with her "friends" for them that what she *really* needed was to indulge in her well-practiced of spending all day in bed with a book. Those people hadn't discussed health struggles; they simply powered through as though nothing b etween them. It had been exhausting for a number of reasons.

e. Lists It was understandable that, in a fit of desperation, she'd moved clear friend. the country.

Want to Coming back to school was her chance to finally live out her fantasies. She'd grown up listening to Brent talk endlessly about how she had he'd loved it here, how amazing the campus and East Lansing were, a hone to his four years as a Spartan were some of the best of his life.

leasure, She wanted some of that magic for herself.

ttached As she rose from her bench, her phone buzzed in her pocket, and Berkley, she'd name showed on the screen.

with her "Hi, Berk."

fferent "Hi!" Berkley said. "Just calling to check in. How are you holding up?" "I'm...okay," Kenzie said honestly.

Kenzie "That's...good?"

was still Kenzie laughed at her sister-in-law's confusion. "Yes, it's good. I and out adjusting, but I love it here."

wasn't "It really is the best place on the planet. Although, I'm still shocked the wanted to go back to school. You were set for life with FLEX."

. Living Kenzie sighed heavily. "When I had that...episode...and missed the city, half of my senior year, I felt so untethered. I was terrified to show my town. Everyone thought I was crazy, and a lot of the time, I believed which You've only known me as this anxious version of myself, but I wasn't mentallike this. I used to be so much more carefree and confident. And I h

' to tell good days now, but...NYU should've been a fresh start, free from the routine drama. Somehow, I curled in on myself. Physically, I was out doing a mental things with my friends. Getting tattoos and nose piercings in Williams and hitting the clubs in SoHo on the weekends. But all of it just made so empty. I was always bracing myself for the thing that would trigger across next attack. Moving to Detroit helped a lot, and you and Brent and friends welcoming me with open arms means more to me than I can even college. But I never saw myself as some corporate type, spending my whole life much owning a company with my brother, always in his shadow. And how "I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm giving myself another chance at a fresh start. I'm hoping being here will help me find myself again. The person I used to be is trapped inside me somewhere, and I miss her. I think it's like Berkley's we reunited."

Berkley was silent for so long, Kenzie was worried she'd hung up. A sniffle filtered through the line, and finally Berkley said, "That's been a long time, right?" Kenz. And I'm so proud of you. I know your brother is, too."

Kenzie smiled, the edges of her lips wobbling. "Thanks, Berkley. My stomach groaned again, and desperate for a change of subject, she said "I'm still in Case any good?"

"It's one of the best cafs on campus, next to Brody. Why?" "I'm across the street, and I'm starving."

Berkley laughed and said, "Well, go eat! I'll talk to you later."

Before her sister-in-law could hang up, Kenzie said, "Hey, Berk?"

face in "Yes?"

d them. "Thank you."

always "Anytime, little sis." And then she hung up.

ave my Walking into Case cafeteria was a bit of a shock to her senses; it was

Albany brightly lit, and *very* crowded. Tables and booths were spread out around these centrally located food counters. The options included classic Arnsburg cuisine like burgers and fries, pizza, pasta bowls, sushi, soups, and some feel. After she'd swiped her student ID to gain entrance—the guy working my computer gave her a little smirk, and whether it was because he recognized your last name or because he found her attractive, she'd never know—she never say a moment to wander around and take it all in.

life co- Finally, she settled on a black bean burger and fries from Brimstone and a chocolate chip cookie from Bliss. Once she'd scanned the room and found an empty two-person table, she set up camp and dug into her food.

at girl I She inhaled her burger in record time, leaving only her fries. She pulled her laptop from her backpack and looked over the homework schedule for her advertising class she'd had that morning.

Then a The advertising class whose roster happened to include Aiden Fuller was beautiful, Kenzie groaned under her breath, thoughts drifting back to when she had met him at Rick's.

κ.” Her Right off the bat, she should've known he was a hockey player, or at least, “Hey, very least, an athlete. She had spent the bulk of her life around both, the boys and her brothers. Average twenty-something men didn't look the way he looked. They didn't fill out a simple black t-shirt the way he had, his muscles testing the limits of the sleeves when he'd folded his arms over his chest while studying her from head to toe.

They certainly weren't *ridiculously* tall with wavy, blue-black hair and deep, chocolate-brown eyes.

And they *definitely* didn't make Kenzie's toes curl against the material of her sandals when they grinned, dimples deep enough to show as loud, fingers into appearing in both cheeks.

and the The instant attraction, the way she'd felt like she was glowing under American attention he'd given her...she shuddered at the direction her thoughts turned that night.

ing the Kenzie had never done one night stands, could only imagine the recognized anxiety would wreak in retribution if she did. It scared her that, for him he took been about to make an exception.

If his teammate hadn't run up, broadcasting to the entire bar exact a, and a he was in the form of a ball cap nestled atop his blonde hair, with SPA round an HOCKEY and a jersey number on it...Kenzie didn't want to consider the night would've taken her and Aiden Fuller.

o pulled And then discovering she had a class with him?

o for the Because *of course* she would.

o She should've known that night at the bar. The swagger, the hair o face and the *body*. Aiden was a walking, talking billboard advertisement'd first thing and one thing only: *heartbreaker*.

In truth, Kenzie's steadfast vehemence against dating hockey players at the been inspired less by her own experiences with the type and more ranks to things she'd witnessed her brother say and do. Not to mention, Bre Aiden could be an overprotective asshole, especially with the women in his li o biceps All that to say, Aiden Fuller had trouble written all over him. T s chest, she'd been drawn to him that night at the bar was dangerous, an u must resist at all costs. She'd tried to convince herself it was nothing air and than a fluke, a trick of the alcohol and the heady combination of c lights and being the new girl on campus. After living under the Bre flimsy umbrella of attention and protection for the last couple of years, that dig he had been nice. Typically, once guys realized who she was, they

der the looked the other way, in search of someone who wasn't the younger s
hts had the Warriors' star forward.

She'd had flings, of course. After all, she wasn't a prude, and s
voc her urges like every other twenty-something girl. But they were more of
1, she'd on-a-couple-dates, hook-up-a-few-times-and-move-on variety. She

been in a serious relationship since high school, when her mental brea
ly who precipitated her then-boyfriend to leave her in favor of greener pasture
ARTAN Namely, her best friend.

r where At a party.

Where they were caught making out.

On video.

While she'd been home, attempting to keep her brain from leak
and the through her ears.

ing one How was that for adding insult to injury?

"Hey," a voice said, and Kenzie blinked rapidly, clearing the me
ers had and focusing on the mass of dark green in front of her.

by the She trailed her eyes up, across a flat stomach and an incredible set o
nt Jeansnagging on biceps she vaguely recognized.

fe. When her gaze connected with the man in front of her, she gasped.

he way "Surprise!" Aiden said with cheery little jazz hands, then pulled
rge she chair across from her, dropped her backpack unceremoniously onto th
g more and sat.

lim bar "What..." Kenzie trailed off, unsure how she wanted to fini
nt Jeansentence. What was he doing here? What did he want? What right
change have to look that good, like a snack she wanted to unwrap and take a l
quickly of?

And woah...where had *that* come from?

“I know, you’re surprised to see me, aren’t you?” he asked, the corner of his mouth tipping up so the ghost of one of his dimples appeared. “I wouldn’t be if you’d bothered to answer any one of my texts.”

“Surprised is one word for it,” she said, sitting back in her chair and hadn’t crossing her arms, blatantly ignoring the comment about his text. “What do you want?”

Aiden leaned back and mimicked her body language. “What’s with the animosity?” he asked. “I thought we really hit it off at Rick’s. Then you just went away and have spent the last three weeks ignoring me.”

“I had somewhere to be,” she said. “And I’m too busy for you.”

Aiden smirked. “I don’t believe you.”

She gestured to her laptop and the notes fanned out around her. “I don’t care. It’s the truth.”

Sort of, but he didn’t need to know that. And what was it about the memories that instantly set her on the defensive? Like flipping a switch, her usually even-keeled demeanor became antagonistic in a heartbeat. With two brothers, she’d always been good at standing up for herself, but never this. Never with someone she barely knew.

It was kind of empowering, turning this guy down. Maybe that very day when she’d told Berkley about was already coming back.

A myriad of emotions flicked across Aiden’s face before he said, “How has your first semester at our fine institution been so far?”

Kenzie raised an eyebrow. “That’s what you want to know?”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug.

Kenzie considered how easy it would be to get rid of him quickly, but she decided the answer was *not very*. So she chose to humor him. “It’s going good. I’m still settling in, but I’m enjoying my classes and the city.”

corner of “It can be a lot at first,” Aiden said, and she actually detected a sliver of sympathy in his voice, but it was quickly obliterated by his next comment.

“But those freshman gen eds are a breeze. If you ever need someone to air out your laundry, you should call me.”

“Why would I do that? Don’t athletes have someone who does their homework for them?”

Kenzie knew she was playing with fire. If Aiden was anything like her brother, the comment would strike a nerve.

When he leaned forward and settled his elbows on the table, bringing himself down to eye level with her, she knew she’d hit her mark.

“Listen here, bunny,” he said, lifting an arm to wag a finger at her. “I don’t want to be a team captain, but I, and every other athlete on this campus, work our asses off in mandatory tutoring sessions every week to make sure we get our guy’s homework done and turned in on time, despite our grueling practice schedules—usually—game schedules.”

“Don’t call me ‘bunny,’” Kenzie said, then leaned forward, mimicking his pose like he’d done to her earlier.

And God, had that only been a few minutes ago? Kenzie flicked her wrist up to check the time on her watch right as it vibrated with a text message.

Berkley. She picked up her phone and found a picture of her sister-in-law, “How still-flat stomach, the accompanying message complaining about how her baby was already ruining her figure.

Kenzie barked out a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Aiden asked.

Kenzie clutched her phone to her chest and said, “Nothing,” before typing out a response to Berkley.

Faster than she could fathom, Aiden reached across the table and patted

hint of her phone from her hands.

ment. “Hey!” she protested. “That’s not yours.”

o study Thankfully, she’d learned the hard way to keep pictures of her brother home and lock screens. Instead, her home screen was a picture of Jessica posing at the end of the dock at the family cabin this past summer when the Jean and Daniels families had gathered to celebrate Independence Day. All you could see was Jessica’s damp blonde hair pooling around her shoulders next to Kenzie’s brunette waves, their tanned arms wrapped around each other as they faced away from the camera.

“I want to make sure you have my number saved,” Aiden said. “Mybothering to look up as he presumably navigated to her contacts and deletes offhis information. “So you can’t blow me off anymore.”

get our “What if I don’t want it? And you do realize I could just delete it as you leave, right? Which I’m hoping will be any second. And I can get you off with or without your number.”

herself, Aiden glanced up at her, his criminally-long eyelashes brushing those brows of his, and said, “Is that a promise?”

er wrist “You’re disgusting” Kenzie said as she snatched her phone back, her grin turned wolfish.

n-law’s Although, his suggestive tone sent shivers skittering along her jaw thisSecretly, she wondered what it would be like to get between the sheets with Aiden Fuller.

“No, I’m not disgusting. I’m sexy, and you think so, too.”

And damnit, she did.

quickly “Awfully full of yourself.”

“Bunny, when you look like this, it’s hard not to be,” he said, gesturing to pluckedhis entire being. Kenzie struggled but succeeded in not removing her

from his face to scan that delicious body.

“Well, this has been fun,” she said as she closed her laptop and slithered off back into her bag.

“Go out with me,” Aiden blurted as she stood and gathered her trash can. Kenzie gave him a pitying smile. “Sorry, lover boy. No can do.”

She moved away from him, hoping he’d leave her alone.

Of course, she wasn’t that lucky.

“And why exactly can’t you? I’m not proposing marriage. It’s just a date. Don’t you know who I am?”

Kenzie emptied her tray into the garbage, then stacked it and held up a few dishes on the table next to it before whirling on Aiden. “Oh, I know who you are. Do you know who *I* am?”

Aiden studied her, dragging his gaze from her face to the tips of her breasts and back up. Kenzie had to work hard not to squirm under the attention. “I know your name is Kenzie Jean, and—”

“Technically, my name is *Mackenzie*. Strike one,” she told him, not pausing to consider how he’d figured her last name out. That was a pretty good guess for a different day. But if he knew *that*, he definitely knew who her father was, which made his refusal to back down from her rejection ballsy. Then again, whether by ignorance or sheer lack of fucks to give, his attitude toward her *was* refreshing.

Turned out, she liked *not* being treated like somebody’s little sister.

“I know you’re a freshman, so that probably makes you, like, eighteen.”

“I’m twenty-three,” she said flatly. “Strike two.”

Aiden huffed out an exasperated sigh, blowing the inky strands of his shaggy hair off his forehead. “How are you twenty-three and a freshman?”

"I never said I was a freshman," she said with a shrug, then turned and walked out of the cafeteria, knowing full well he'd follow.

When she reached the lobby, Aiden caught up and curled a palm over her upper arm, spinning her to face him. "Damnit, Kenzie. Why do you keep running away from me?"

"I'm not running from you," she said, pointedly glancing down at her watch. "I have class in twenty in Kedzie, so I need to start walking if I want to be late."

His grip on her arm didn't loosen, and Kenzie glared at him, eyes dark and dirty between his face and his arm in a universal expression of *get your hands off me*.

Still, she couldn't quite ignore the way the heat from his palm seared across her skin in a truly spectacular way. She hoped he didn't notice her reaction. Her breath ticked up a notch, or how goosebumps had risen on her flesh.

"Just agree to go on a date with me and I'll let you go," he said, not even further into her personal space, sliding his other hand up to mirror the one already wrapped around her. "Do you know how many women would throw themselves over themselves to go on a date with a hockey player?"

As hell. The cocky smile he gave her had Kenzie letting out a derisive laugh. She yanked her arms from his grasp. Then she stepped even closer so she

could toe with him, her chest brushing his with each inhale and exhale. Making eye contact with his eyes was surely a bad idea, but unavoidable if she wanted him to hear her.

She understood the weight of her next words. Kenzie proved herself correct a moment later when their gazes collided and held, when she discovered

that the deep brown of his irises were ringed around the pupil by a band of gold. The color of his reminded her of melted chocolate and gooey caramel she wanted to

lick. "I'll be your date?" he asked, sliding his finger into and savor.

ied and Blinking several times to gather her thoughts from where they'd so
wandered, she finally said, "Aiden, you know what my last name is."

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But she wasn't in the habit of dating hockey players, and she c
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Meeting

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Blinking several times to gather her thoughts from where they'd so rudely wandered, she finally said, "Aiden, you know what my last name is."

It wasn't a question, and he didn't treat it as such.

"Yes," he said, full mouth curling into a broad grin that showed off his straight white teeth, and the reappearance of those clefts in his cheeks nearly had Kenzie caving and giving him what he'd asked for.

Nearly.

But she wasn't in the habit of dating hockey players, and she certainly wasn't about to agree to go out with a fuckboy like Aiden Fuller. His *I'm-hot-and-I-know-it* attitude grated on her, and she wanted no part in his particular brand of egotism.

"So you're familiar with my big brother. If you ever put your hands on me like that again, it won't be me you'll be dealing with. It'll be *him*, and he's not nearly as nice."

She paused for a beat, biting off a grin at his stunned expression. She leaned closer still and rose onto her tippy toes so her mouth brushed the shell of his ear, palms resting on those ridiculous pecs. She resisted the urge to dig her fingers into them, to clutch his shirt, shift her head, and slant her mouth over his. What the hell was happening to her?

"As for the fact that you're a hockey player? Strike three."



IN A DAZE, AIDEN shuffled back into the cafeteria and made his way to the table his teammates were seated at, each of them tracking his return with wide, eating grins on their faces.

“She turned you down, didn’t she?” Jack asked.

Aiden ignored him, staring down at his half-eaten lunch while his teammates proceeded to rib him.

“Maybe Fuller isn’t the ladies’ man everything thinks he is,” Lu said with a smirk.

“Fuck you, Hayes,” Aiden said half-heartedly.

Brent Jean was a god around here. Inside Munn Arena, there was a wall dedicated to Spartans in the NHL, and Brent’s larger-than-life photo was situated smack dab in the middle. When he had played here, he’d served as captain for two seasons and had taken his team to two Frozen Fours. After graduating—with two degrees, no less—he’d quickly made a name

himself with the Detroit Warriors, and had finished every season since pro near the top of the league in points.

All that to say, Brent Jean was a hell of a hockey player and a legend in MSU hockey circles. And he was a stand-up guy to boot. He and his former time girlfriend, also an MSU grad, had recently gotten married.

And now Aiden had set his sights on his baby sister.

This was going to end badly.

“Okay, forget about the fact that she’s Brent Jean’s little sister,” Jack said. “Did she agree to go out with you? Or did your little bunny get away again?”

“She blew me off,” Aiden mumbled, and his teammates erupted in laughter loud enough to attract the stares of diners around them.

“Fuller is losing his touch,” Luke said with a smirk.

Aiden flung a piece of broccoli at him.

“I’m not losing my touch, you assholes. But her brother is *Brent Jean*,” Aiden said with a disbelieving laugh. “There’s nothing about me that’s impressive when you’re related to *that*. But never fear, my friends.”

“Oh no,” Jack said, studying Aiden. “He’s got that look in his eyes.”

“What look?” Asher asked dumbly, bringing his head closer to Aiden. Luke squinted.

Aiden pushed him away with a palm to the face and said, “I’m going to ask her to go out with me. I don’t know how yet, but I’m not backing down on this dare.”

Visions of Mackenzie Jean swirled relentlessly in Aiden’s mind, pushing at the edges of conscious thought when he should’ve been paying attention to his homework and mentally preparing for that night’s practice session.

When he got to Munn that evening for practice, half of his teammates were already in the locker room, each in various states of undress. Jack, in particular, was sitting at his stall clad in nothing but black boxers, the rest of his long-tan skin on display, his blond locks falling into his eyes as he laced up his skates.

Aiden walked past him and ruffled the hair on top of his head, making Jack feel like a little kid.

Jack said, "Put some clothes on, DeLuca," Aiden said when he reached his own stall. "Gain?" and whipped his shirt off.

Aiden walked into the stall. "And deprive everyone of all this?" Jack said, waving a hand at his own. "No thanks."

Aiden removed a sock and tossed it at Jack's head. "You're an idiot, but I'm better looking than you."

Jack studied him for a moment, eyes roving over Aiden's body. "All that seriously considering this, then said, "No you're not."

"Aiden's not what?" Asher asked as he walked into the room.

"Better looking than me," Jack replied.

Asher looked between them, as if weighing whether or not he should get himself into this debate, then said, "This is a trap, isn't it? Some of you are going to get dare?"

"No, it's science." Aiden walked toward Jack and pulled him off his feet, then to tow him into the center of the room. "For starters, my biceps are better than yours," he said, flexing the muscles in question. Jack raised his arms to mirror Aiden's pose.

Their display of masculinity quickly gained the attention of the rest of the team, always paying attention. Their display of masculinity quickly gained the attention of the rest of the training teammates, and soon the bulk of the MSU hockey team was gathered around them.

es were semi-circle around Aiden and Jack, voices rising as the forward and back, incompared physicalities.

bulk of “What in the fresh hell are you idiots up to now?” Coach’s voice laced his across the room. The team parted around Jack—still in nothing but his boxers, one hand propped on his hip while the other arm flexed like a traditional body-builder pose—and Aiden and Asher, who stood next to each other, the latter’s hands wrapped around the biceps of the former.

own stall Everyone dispersed quickly to their stalls, and Aiden’s cheeks heated as he turned away from Coach and took two steps in the direction of his own stall. “Fuller!” Coach called.

“Fuck,” Aiden swore under his breath before spinning toward his stall. Plus, and saying, “Yeah?”

“My office,” Coach said with a jerk of his head.

ly as if Aiden avoided the gazes of his teammates as he shuffled his feet toward Coach’s office, still shirtless, the rock in his stomach sinking further with each step.

What could he possibly have done wrong this time?

ed insert When Aiden stepped inside, the last thing he expected to see was Mitch Frambough seated across the room from him.

is stool “Fuller, have a seat,” Coach said, gesturing to the chair next to Mitch. What the fuck was *Mitch Frambough* doing here? And why was Aiden a jigger,” this room right now?

rror the “I’m sure you know this guy,” Coach said, hooking a thumb in Mitch’s direction.

of their “Mitch Frambough,” Mitch said, extending a hand, which Aiden slid into in a daze.

Aiden cleared his throat. “Aiden Fuller,” he said as he sat down. “C

l goaliemeet you. I'm a big fan."

Mitch gave him a tight smile, and Aiden was suddenly reminded
oomed Mitch didn't play anymore.

is black About a year and a half ago, in a move that had rocked the hockey
d in a Mitch had been traded from the Detroit Warriors to the Los Angeles K
to each Aiden and his teammates had sat around for days, discussing at leng

possible reason the Warriors could have had for trading him, which te
d as he gotten the better and worse ends of the deal—LA and Detroit respect
1. and what the Warriors would do without one half of their top defensive

As it turned out, the Warriors had gone on to win a champions
s coach following season, but that was only after Mitch had gone to Califor
had broken his back in a game. That injury, coupled with previous
trauma, had effectively ended his career. After returning to Michi
toward rehab, Mitch rejoined the Warriors as a consultant, and had been fo
er with watch his old team win a championship without him.

That had to have been a tough pill to swallow.

"I was sorry to hear about your injury," Aiden added quickly, an
s Mitch mentally smacked himself for the word vomit. "You were a hell of a pl

"Thanks, kid," Mitch said. "Now let's talk about *you*."

h. "Me?" Aiden said, stabbing himself in the chest with a finger. "Wha
Aiden in me?"

"You were drafted by the Warriors in the..." Mitch pulled a s
Mitch's papers from the bag by his feet and shuffled through. "The 2018 draft,

"Yes..."

hook in "And then you played two years of juniors with the Chicago Ste
graduating from high school. Before that, you were with the NTDP, rig

Great to "Yes..." Aiden said again, mind spinning.

“I played in Ann Arbor in high school too, you know.”

ed that Aiden hadn’t known that, but the United States Team Development Program had a habit of pumping out star players, so he wasn’t surprised.

“What’s this all about?” Aiden asked suddenly, glancing between Mitch and his coach, wishing somebody would get to the fucking point already. Aiden prided himself on being unflappable in high-stress situations—right now, he was moments away from snapping.

“This year, my role with the Warriors is changing a bit,” Mitch said. “I enjoyed my time as a defensive consultant, but thanks to my other business adventures, I’m traveling a lot more—which isn’t conducive to working with the team the way I’d like. So I’m transitioning away from coaching and scouting.”

Scouting? Aiden thought. *And he’s here meeting with me?*

“The Warriors have been keeping an eye on you over the last three years,” Mitch said. “Personally, I’ve watched several hours worth of game film and then you. You were really impressive in that game against Wisconsin in the final round last season.”

Aiden remembered the game well; that was the night he’d scored his first collegiate hat trick, but it had been a bittersweet. Being the visiting team meant the celebration hadn’t been as big as Aiden would’ve liked, but it was still a major accomplishment and a night he looked back on fondly.

“Thank you,” he croaked out.

“Look...I’m just going to cut to the chase here.”

Finally, Aiden thought, but kept his mouth shut.

“We’re interested in giving you a rookie contract in the spring once the season is over,” Mitch said. “But I have to say...the Warriors franch

always taken its reputation for molding young players into upstanding gentlemen and off the ice very seriously. We're aware of your...antics, shall we say, entirely and we have some concerns."

Aiden cut his gaze to Coach, who gave a slight shake of his head, and Mitch told Aiden to keep quiet.

"In reference to the recent incident of Aiden's public nudity, I can assure you that I and the university have already leveled punishment against

He's out for the first five weekends of the season, and it won't happen again. "I've got you, Fuller?"

"Right, Coach," Aiden said, then turned his attention back to Mitch. "Look, I know I messed up. As a team, we've always had this thing where we do dares and—"

"I'm aware," Mitch said, and Aiden looked at him quizzically. "Brent is my best friend."

"Of course he and Brent were close. Which meant he also knew MacGraw. "So you understand why we just...can't say no," Aiden continued. "I

Madison personally know anyone who's ever turned one down and had to suffer punishment, but I've heard horror stories from the guys who came before me. The point is, we got a little carried away with that one. The boys are following strict instructions that I'm exempt from dares for the rest of the season. It was

Well, most dares, but semantics.

Coach sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of his nose, his demeanor broadcasting his thoughts, which were clearly, *my players are idiots.*

"I get it," Mitch said. "We've all been young and dumb. But you have the opportunity here to represent the greatest franchise in the NHL. And you also have the responsibility of representing this university, your teammates, and yourself. So

ng men what I'm asking: keep your head down and yourself out of trouble. When we say, get back on the ice, play the game the way you know how. The V want to sign you because you're a stud on offense and one of the top defensive forwards in the NCAA. Ten games isn't going to change that. Aiden tried not to preen at that confidence in his abilities coming from a proven assurance player of Mitch's caliber.

Coach Fuller. "I appreciate that more than you know," Aiden told him honestly. "I'll be on my best behavior."

Mitch stood and Aiden followed suit. Mitch was only two inches taller than Aiden, but he seemed larger than life in this office, his big body filling up more space than Aiden was used to from his own teammates. Aiden understood why opponents hated playing against him; the man was not Jeanand had been deceptively fast despite his size.

Aiden stuck out his hand and Mitch grabbed it, pumping it a few times. "Nice to meet you, Aiden. We're looking forward to seeing you back in the rink. I don't think you'll be there."

When Mitch had gone, Aiden fixed his gaze on his coach and said, "What just happened?"

Coach smiled indulgently. "I don't quite understand it myself after you pulled a few weeks ago, but the man's not wrong: you are a hell of a player."

"Thanks, Coach," Aiden said with a grin.

Coach nodded his head toward the door. "Now go get changed."

Aiden saluted him and spun on his heel, but only managed two steps before Coach called him back.

"What's up?" Aiden said.

"You haven't RSVP'd to the alumni dinner," Coach said. He f

then you creamy, rectangular piece of cardstock with the Spartan helmet logo
warriors back out of his desk and handed it over.

he best Aiden had an identical one buried at the bottom of his bag.

t.” “Isn’t it mandatory?” he asked with a raised brow.

from a “Just fill out the damn card.”

Resigned, and without really thinking, Aiden checked some boxes
“I’ll be handed it back, then turned to get suited up for practice.

“You’re bringing a plus one?” Coach asked incredulously.

is taller “I...what?” Aiden asked, once again pivoting to face the man.

not taking “You checked the box for a plus one.”

tes. He “Oh...I...uhh...”

a giant, *Fuck. Think, Fuller.*

“I recently started seeing someone,” he blurted. “I wanted to bring her
7 times.me.”

ack out One of Coach’s eyebrows rose, and Aiden steeled himself for the
call him on his bullshit. He surprised Aiden by saying, “Well...I’m excited,

“Did I meet her.”

Aiden gave him a tight smile and finally exited the office, muttering
the shit “Yeah, me too,” under his breath.

ell of a The locker room was empty when he reentered it, his teammates
on the ice warming up.

Aiden suited up quickly and shuffled down the tunnel on his skates
pushed off onto the ice and sprinted to the end where Jack was
on steps scooping up a loose puck and shooting it at him.

“Did you get in trouble again?” Jack asked once he’d stopped
shot.

ished a “The opposite, actually,” Aiden said, showering him as he came to

on the goal line. “When I walked in, Mitch Frambough was there.”

Asher, who was a defenseman and practically idolized Mitch despite the fact that he no longer played, skated closer, eyes wide and mouth comically open. “Mitch Frambough?” he whispered reverently.

“What did he want?” Luke asked, gliding over to join them.

“The Warriors want to offer me a contract in the spring.”

“Holy shit, dude!” Jack yelled, and the three of them clapped Aiden’s shoulders, tossing around words of congratulations.

“I just have to keep my head down and have my best season yet and actually get playing time.”

“Dude, you could be playing with Brent Jean this time next year,” said, eyes wide.

“Maybe then you’ll be dating his sister, too,” Jack said with a wink.

And wouldn’t that be something?

Coach skated onto the ice and blew his whistle, signaling for the players to line up at center ice.

Physically, Aiden was with his teammates, but mentally he was a million miles away. In the excitement of telling them about the meeting with the coach, he had forgotten that he was apparently bringing a date to the already-dinner...which was happening at the end of next week. Where was he supposed to find a girlfriend in ten days? He couldn’t bring just anyone. None of his previous casual hookups would do.

No, Aiden needed someone classy and sweet. Someone who could convince his coach and everyone else that he was trying to get it done. Aiden’s dream was to be a star. Someone beautiful and funny, who would be confident and comfortable surrounded by the who’s who of Michigan State hockey and a stop and donors.

Someone like Mackenzie Jean.

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Someone like Mackenzie Jean.

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“WHAT THE FUCK IS this?” Brent asked Kenzie the second she showed up at his and Berkley’s house on Saturday morning, three days after her last encounter with Aiden.

It had been a few weeks since she’d seen her brother, so she’d decided to show up unannounced this morning to catch up and see how Berkley was feeling in the midst of her second trimester. Every Saturday, her brother and his sister-in-law prepared a massive breakfast buffet and invited Lexie and her over. Of course, both Kenzie and Jessica had standing invites, and they had come over every week when she’d still lived in the city. Now that she had moved away, this was the first time she’d been back. Jessica, as far as Kenzie knew, had never attended.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific, big bro,” she said, making her way into the massive kitchen for a cup of coffee. Kenzie loved coming over because Brent and Berkley had the fanciest coffee maker, meaning she

whip up any type of drink she was in the mood for without paying Starbucks prices.

Brent stalked closer to her, the ocean-blue gaze that usually matched his own turned grey with whatever fit he'd worked himself into.

"This," he said, holding his phone inches from her face. Kenzie stepped away and studied his screen. It took her brain a few moments to process what her eyes were seeing, but when it did, she let out a low groan.

Unbidden, her heart rate kicked up.

This was *not* good.

Half of what Brent ranted about next was lost to the roaring in her ears. She pulled out a barstool and sat, nearly missing completely and falling on the floor. As she wiped her clammy palms on her pants and worked through shallow breathing exercises, her brother continued to yell.

After the A comforting hand settled on her spine, and Kenzie swallowed hard, her heart slowing.

Kenzie decided to "Brent," Berkley said, sliding onto the seat next to Kenzie. "Check it out. Can't you see she had nothing to do with this?"

Kenzie and her brother Finally, her brother shut up, and in the silence, Kenzie's mind spun. Mitch spinning.

Kenzie "Shit, Kenz. I'm sorry," Brent said.

Kenzie at she'd His apology lowered her heart rate further, but she sat with her head down for a few beats longer, letting memories—more like nightmares—wash over her before letting them go.

Kenzie ing her In the wake of Kenzie's mental breakdown nearly six years ago, her then-boyfriend had grown distant. She hadn't really blamed him for his disinterest in being connected to the town freak not all that surprising.

What *had* been surprising was that, instead of breaking up with her,

ambucks gone to a party and had made out with her best friend in front of a crowd of people.

had her Kenzie had found out because someone had captured it on video and posted it to her.

backed Suffice to say, she wasn't a fan of everyone knowing the particulars of her relationships, especially when she wasn't in control of the narrative.

Not that she was in a relationship with Aiden Fuller. But...that's what it looked like.

"It's not what it looks like," Kenzie said finally, lifting her head.

er ears. "It *looks like* you're awfully cozy with some fuckboy," Brent said to her, his teeth gritted, her episode apparently doing nothing to bank his rage.

ugh her The picture in question showed Kenzie and Aiden at Case, his hands curled around her upper arms. She had to admit, they looked...comfortable.

ard, her Once again stable now that the worst of the episode had passed, Berkley glanced at her and said, "I can't believe you're having a child with this guy. That poor kid is going to be so sheltered."

Berkley snorted, and Brent said, "Don't change the subject, Kenzie. What about this guy?"

It shouldn't have surprised Kenzie that someone had submitted the picture to The Green, or that it had made its way into her brother's hands.

l bowed The Green was Michigan State's version of an online tabloid. Michigan State was a place where students could submit juicy gossip for the consumption of their peers, and more often than not, that gossip featured athletes.

ow, her Athletes were, after all, the celebrities of college campuses. She knew from her brother's fact that her brother had been a common fixture on the site during his tenure at MSU.

er, he'd "Why are you even on The Green?" Kenzie asked her brother. "For

“Would fullstalking me?”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you,” he said, brandishing his phone as if it were a weapon. “You haven’t even been on campus a month and you’re pulling this shit?”

“Brent...” Berkley warned. “She’s not doing anything wrong.”

“Berk’s right. Besides, he’s nobody,” Kenzie said.

“Really?” Brent said. “Because he looks an awful lot like Aiden Fuller.”

“What about Aiden Fuller?” Mitch asked as he and Lexie walked into the kitchen.

“Uncle Mitch!” Kenzie yelled, hopping off her stool to run at him.

Form, Mitch scooped her up and swung her around in a bone-crushing embrace. Lexie pecked her on the cheek before making a beeline toward the coffee maker.

Of Brent and Berkley’s friends, Mitch and Lexie were her favorites. Mitch appeared menacing at first glance, and certainly had been on the ice when he was still playing as a defenseman, but inside he was a giant teddy bear. Lexie encapsulated the term *resting bitch face*, but Kenzie had seen over the years how loyal she was to the people she cared about most. Both of them had been instrumental in getting Brent and Berkley back together after their breakup, and had been their maid of honor and best man when they’d recently married in July.

Not to mention, their own love story was the stuff of legends. Neither time nor distance could’ve kept them away from each other, and when they were reunited at Brent and Berkley’s wedding, everything had seemed to fall back into place.

Was it strange to be so heavily invested in someone else’s relationship? Possibly. But Brent’s little found family in Detroit had, by extension,

association, become Kenzie's when she'd moved to Michigan. It made me like happy to see these people happy and in love, especially Lexie and Mitch. They already had each suffered so much heartbreak. They deserved a win.

And maybe...maybe Kenzie hoped some of that good luck would come on her.

Not that she'd ever admit that to anyone. She hadn't been in a relationship in ages, and while some people were lucky enough to run into the loves of their lives in college, Kenzie wasn't delusional enough to think she'd be one of them.

Plus, her anxiety made things difficult. When life became overwhelming, she had a bad habit of retreating into herself, becoming a coffee hermit until the dark clouds that had settled over her passed. In truth, there were stretches of time when she struggled to take care of herself. Missing meals because she was working too hard, or going days without exercising simply because she couldn't be bothered to get out of her room. And seemed unfathomable to add a second personality to the mix, someone who had to take into account when making decisions, someone who wanted to spend time with her and could potentially react negatively if she needed time for herself.

The day Kenzie found a man willing to adapt to her messy little brain, the physical manifestations of her chemical imbalance would surely never freeze over.

"This picture popped up on The Green of Kenzie and Aiden having a click looks like an intimate moment," Brent said, voice dripping with disdain. He passed his phone to Mitch, snapping Kenzie back to the present.

"The Green?" Lexie asked. "I can't believe that stupid site still exists." "That's what I said!" Berkley exclaimed. "I'm surprised the un-

ade herhasn't found some way to shut it down."

ch, who "Ladies," Brent growled. "Not the point."

"Then what *is* the point, big brother?"

rub off "The point, Mackenzie Elizabeth Jean," her brother said, and crawled back onto the barstool next to Berkley, preparing to be seriously embarrassing reprimanded in front of his friends, "is that Aiden Fulleet thebad guy."

k she'd "Actually," Mitch piped up, dropping down onto a stool next to Mackenzie and nudging her with his shoulder, as if to say, *I've got you, kid*, "I just met with him yesterday, and I wouldn't say he's all bad. He's a hell of a promising player, and he seems like he's got a good head on his shoulders. I think he's just got swept up in all the status and attention that comes with being a college athlete—especially a hockey player with a program as storied as Michigan State's."

bed. It "You lived it," Berkley reminded her husband. "What was it you thought whose once? That you couldn't turn down dares even if you wanted to become a woman whose punishment would be worse than the actual dare? If you ask me, Mackenzie's little streak through campus has *dare gone wrong* written all over it."

"Whose side are you on here?" Brent asked Berkley, narrowing his eyes at her.

be the "I'm not on any side," she said. "I'm reminding you that you were once a dumb ass. Cut Kenz some slack, babe. If she says it's not what you're seeing, you owe it to her to take that statement at face value."

in as he Kenzie sat up straighter and grinned broadly at her brother, but his narrowed gaze continued to dart between her, his best friend, and his wife.

s." "I feel like I lost this one," he finally said quietly.

iversity "Get used to it, honey," Berkley said, standing to move around the

toward him. When she reached his side, she stretched onto her tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek, a hand settling on her abdomen. “Me and the girls are about to outnumber you.”

Kenzie “Unless it’s a boy,” Lexie said.

Illy and Berkley cut her best friend with a look. “Even if it *is* a boy, he will still take his mama’s side.”

Brent placed his hand atop Berkley’s and said, “It doesn’t matter who as long as both it and my girl are healthy.”

Kenzie “Gross,” Kenzie said with a gag.

Brent pointed a finger at her. “I don’t care what these guys say,” he smirked, gesturing to Mitch, Lexie, and Berkley. “You will stay away from being a kid. If I see you pop up on The Green again, there will be hell to pay.”

Kenzie “You are insufferable,” Kenzie said to her brother. “Why are you being such an asshole about this? It’s just a picture!”

Brent “Because I know how college hockey players are, Mackenzie. And because of the type of feelings that accompany two people standing that close. I know Aiden’s only wants one thing, and you won’t be the one to give it to him.”

Kenzie opened her mouth to protest, but clamped her jaw shut. Her eyes at Mitch wouldn’t get her anywhere.

“Wait,” she said, circling back to something Mitch had said earlier, “your younger brother had gone for the jugular. She turned to the blond. “Did you ever see it look like you met with him yesterday? Where? Why?”

“I went to campus,” Mitch said. “You know I’m transitioning from my scouting role this season, right?”

Kenzie “Bee mentioned it,” she said, and although she generally tried to keep her brother out, she did vaguely remember a passing comment about the island in Mitch’s job title.

oes and “So I’m in charge of keeping track of our draft prospects,” he said
is babyscouting new talent. Free agents, guys playing internationally—that
thing.”

Kenzie frowned. “So you’re going to be traveling more?”

always “We already travel a lot as it is,” Mitch reminded her, sharing a sma
with his girlfriend. “But that’s not the point, Little Jean. The *point*
at it is, Aiden is a Warriors’ draft prospect, and I met with him yesterday to t
if he keeps his head on straight and stays out of trouble, he’ll have a
contract waiting for him in the spring when his season wraps.”

he told “You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Brent muttered.

om that Kenzie beamed, positively gleeful over this new development.

Aiden stays out of trouble and has a good season, this time next year h
1 beingbe playing with Bee?”

“I mean, there are a lot of contributing factors to whether or not Aid
I knowmakes it to the show,” Mitch said. “But if everything goes right, y
hat kidcould be.”

She turned to her brother, her small smile splitting into a full-blow
Arguing “You better get used to the kid, big bro.”

Brent made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. “Never.”

, before “I don’t know, Jean...” Mitch said, curving his shoulders in a b
you saybracing himself for Brent’s reaction to what he was about to say
watched endless hours of tape on the kid. He’s good. *Really* go
into areminds me of this guy I know. Quick, great read on the ice, he
defensive forward, natural goal-scorer.”

une her “That kid is nothing like me,” Brent said, sounding for all the worl
changepetulant child.

“He’s a little raw yet,” Mitch continued, “but a few years in Grand I

l. “And He could turn into an absolute stud. Brent Jean caliber for sure.”

sort of “Get out of my house,” Brent told his best friend.

Kenzie laughed, and Berkley said, “Brent!”

Mitch held up his hands defensively and said, “You’d be saying the
ll smilethings if you hadn’t caught him in a compromising position with yo
is thatsister.”

ell him “It wasn’t ‘compromising,’” Kenzie protested, but everyone ignor
t rookie “And I’m going on a date with him anyway.”

The conversation around her came to a screeching halt, like tires l
on asphalt.

“So if And...*fuck*. Why had she said that? The problem with her brother v
e couldhe always elicited certain reactions from her, where she reverted fr
adult she was now into the sullen teenager she’d been when Brent v
en everage. She didn’t like being told what to do, and she certainly wasn’t g
eah, hetake relationship advice from her brother, the ruler of Fuckboydom
he’d met Berkley.

m grin. The thing that angered her the most was that her brother couldn’t
take her at her word. At the slightest provocation, the smallest menti
perceived romantic attachment to someone, he blew a gasket. And she
it, as ifto respond in kind.

7. “I’ve The double standard was exhausting. He was allowed to get marr
od. Hestart a family, and Nate was allowed to run around New York, then l
ll of aand now Ann Arbor, fucking anyone he wanted—including Lexie,
way—and no one batted an eye.

d like a But Kenzie was *the baby*, and a *girl*. Of course *she* couldn’t even lo
guy without Brent doing...well, what he was doing right now, whi
Rapids?trying to control her.

“I’m sorry,” Brent said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had over the room. “Did you say you’re going on a date with him?”

Kenzie nodded, swallowing hard around the lump in her throat. She was committed now, refusing to back down. Willing her voice to remain steady, she said, “That’s what was happening in the picture. He was asking me out.”

“You can’t be serious,” Brent said. “You’re kidding me, right?” Kenzie’s phone buzzed on the counter. She lifted it, nearly dropping it in surprise when she saw the name on the screen, which she should have recognized. It had changed the first time he’d texted her. But, for reasons yet unknown, she hadn’t.

Kenzie thought, Besides, it wasn’t exactly a lie. The boy *was* sexy.

Kenzie
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going to
before

Aiden is sexy

hey bunny

don't call me that

K

Kenzie
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on of a
tended

Aiden is sexy

why not? it suits you perfectly

what do you want?

K

Kenzie
ied and
Boston,
by the

Aiden is sexy

for you to agree to go out with me

keep dreaming

K

Kenzie
ook at a
ch was

l settled

Aiden is sexy

keep fighting it, bunny, but I'm very persistent

he was

steady,

out.”

K
and I'm very stubborn

ng it in

Aiden is sexy

I love a good battle of wills ;)

d have

vn, she Kenzie barked out a laugh. “Sorry,” she said, an irrepressible smile up the corners of her mouth. “Aiden just texted me.”

Her brother’s eyes narrowed, but Kenzie turned away from him, forming in her mind.

Because she *did* need a plan. She’d told her brother Aiden was tak on a date, and now she needed to make that happen.

enzie

After all, as far as her brother was concerned, she was already—wh his words? *Awfully cozy with some fuckboy.*

Kenzie hadn’t done anything wrong; she’d been trying to get awc Aiden, not closer. But of course, in her short time on campus, she’d that The Green could take even the most innocent of interactions an nefarious or explicit spin on them. Now, she’d dug herself into a hole the photo as evidence, and was dragging Aiden down with her.

enzie

It wasn’t often she put her foot in it like now, having long since m the ability to filter her thoughts before they left her mouth. As a pro her anxiety, Kenzie carefully considered everything she did and sa didn’t like disrupting the status quo.

enzie

People with anxiety understood the importance of routines. Kenzie like change, which had made the cross-country move from New Y

enzie



Detroit all the more puzzling to her family. It had been a big step, to her life and start over somewhere new at twenty years old. So when she didn't like change, she always trusted her gut, and her gut had told her the right path to take. The opportunity had called, and she'd answered.

The same thing had happened when a little seed had taken root in her mind and sprouted, telling her to go back to school. The longer she'd considered it, and the bigger the idea had grown—eventually blooming into a full-blown plan—the more at peace she had felt.

The same could be said of the pull to leave FLEX behind, which had become harder and became more insistent by the day.

Coming back to school had been the right decision, and she knew FLEX would be too, but she could only accomplish what she wanted by accomplishing her own goals if she took some risks. Broke a few rules. Shook up her life.

Maybe her outburst had been her subconscious telling her Aiden was the one to help her out with that. And, she realized with a jolt, he wanted to be with her, had been begging for exactly that for weeks. This was already done deal. All she had to do now was put the poor guy out of his misery. Her fingers flew across the screen of her phone, typing out a message to Aiden. As she pressed send, a crash echoed in her brain. She couldn't help but think it was the sound of her number one rule—don't date hockey players—hitting the floor and shattering into a thousand pieces.

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didn't

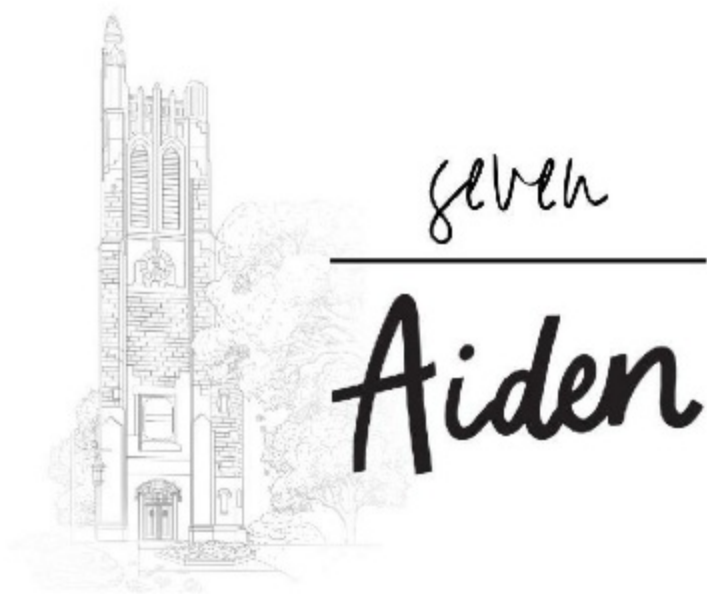
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SUNDAY NIGHT, AIDEN LAY awake well past the time he should've
asleep.

Morning skate would be a bitch.

Rolling onto his side, a glance at his clock alerted him to the fact
was well after three in the morning. Flipping onto his back, he
thoughts swirling.

Aiden had been prepared to do whatever it took to get Mackenzie to
the alumni dinner as his date. Especially since, after the boys dared
ask her out and she blew him off, he'd suddenly started viewing his
challenge. And getting her to go out with him was how he won.

So when she'd texted him to meet her in the Union after class the
morning, she'd taken him by surprise. Maybe she'd decided to stop
hard to get, and he fully intended to take this opportunity to shoot his shot.

He would get down on his knees and beg if that's what she wanted.

Which, admittedly, would be a bit much, but he didn't give a fuck.

wanted this girl.

One big question remained: what could she possibly want from him? The amount of shit she'd given him about being a hockey player, and she'd never go out with him, there had to be something that had prompted her to arrange this meeting.

Eventually, Aiden drifted off into a fitful sleep, his dreams full of her hair and piercing blue eyes.

After what felt like five seconds, his alarm blared, causing him to sit upright in bed. Feeling like a zombie, he shuffled into the kitchen to get a mug of coffee. Asher was already there, elbows bent on the counter, with a banana in his mouth.

The scent of coffee filled the air, drawing Jack and Luke into the kitchen. It had been like a siren luring a ship to a rocky shore.

"Morning," Luke said, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as always. Of the two of them, Luke was the only one who could stomach being awake this early. Aiden supposed that was one of the reasons why he was the captain. It didn't matter how many years he'd been playing hockey at a competitive level, or how long this had been his reality: Aiden would never be a morning person.

His sleeplessness also meant he was a deadweight at practice. Unfortunately, Coach took notice.

"Look, I know you're not going to be playing for a few months yet, but that doesn't mean you can slack off. As an alternate captain, you're one of the leaders of this team, and I expect you to act as such. Got it?"

"Got it," Aiden mumbled, then skated away to join his teammates. He lined up on the goal line to do suicides before practice wrapped

morning.

After Coach stood at center ice, surveying them. “Well...” he finally said and howseen worse.”

Then he blew the whistle.

When Aiden arrived at his eight a.m. after morning skate, his mind was completely consumed by thoughts of Mackenzie Jean. This particular College Sports in the United States—didn’t require a ton of brainpower for him considering his status as a college athlete. Instead, he mentally spun wheels, cooking up all sorts of schemes and scenarios that grew more and more improbable the longer he sat there. The professor finally dismissed them, and Aiden looked at his desk to gather his things, realizing he’d spent the whole class period without even removing his laptop from his bag.

However, that ended up working in his favor, because his advertisement started immediately afterward, and he had to haul ass across campus to get there in time. Thankfully, the university provided him with a motorcycle to speed around campus.

When he reached the lecture hall in the Communication Arts and Sciences building, he spotted Kenzie immediately, as if she were one of those bright red lights atop a skyscraper.

While he wanted to sit next to her and get their meeting started earlier, he didn’t. First, because she sat near the back of the room, and second, because Jack went against his requirements as an athlete, and second, because Jack was up, windmilling his arms to attract Aiden’s attention.

“Why are you out of breath?” Asher asked when Aiden dropped into the seat between him and Jack.

as they
for the

“No parking out front,” Aiden said. “Had to run from the ramp across the street.”

“I would’ve just parked on the sidewalk,” Jack said.

“And get a ticket? Or worse yet, get the moped towed and not be able to use it anymore? No thanks.”

Contrary to popular belief, athletes had to follow the rules like everyone else, and Aiden was already in too much shit with the university for something as silly as a ticket when he could park in a lot or ramp like a normal student.

If Aiden thought his attention span had been nonexistent at practice earlier in his class, he’d been sorely mistaken. Now, being in the same room as Kenzie, it wasn’t only his mind that had checked out; his entire body was now focused on her presence at the back of the room, despite the severe crowd and mass of people between them.

And, honestly, what the fuck was wrong with him? Was he nervous about their meeting, or was it something else? No, that had to be it. Aiden didn’t get nervous around girls; he had no reason to. For starters, they always complimented him, making their intentions so clear that there was no mistaking what they were asking from him.

Everything with Kenzie was different. Whatever she wanted, it was a little bit of physical relationship. It was blatantly obvious that she was interested in him in that kind of way, no matter how badly he wished the opposite were true.

He barely knew the girl, and somehow she’d managed to get into the room. He was definitely going to have to do something about that.

When their professor ended class, Aiden wanted to follow Kenzie’s trail behind her like a lost puppy all the way to the Union. Instead, he

cross the himself to hold back, waiting for the room to completely clear out before he collected his things and made his way up the ramp to where his moped was parked.

able to But he'd be damned if he didn't speed all the way back across campus.

The MSU Union was a stately building on West Circle Drive, located in a neighborhood that was affectionately referred to by students as the Harry Potter Courtyard, but more commonly known as North Neighborhood. Inside, students could find the Spartan Spirit Shop, a Sparty's Mini Market, and three food service stations. It also contained studying spaces, an art gallery, the Union's Student Activities Board office, and meeting areas for student groups.

room as Aiden entered after he'd parked his moped, and was instantly comforted by one of his favorite things on campus: a bench with a bronzed annual statue of Michigan State's mascot, Sparty, smack dab in the center of it.

When Aiden was a boy, his father, who had grown up in the Lansing area, always brought him here to get a picture with the statue anytime they were on campus. It became a fun tradition of sorts, getting a new one each year as he grew, and eventually adding his younger sister to the photos once she came along.

Though his father was gone, Aiden could stand here, staring at the statue and remember those days fondly. He was reminded why he was here and who and what he was working so hard for.

When he heard the "What are you doing?" a voice asked, and Aiden looked up into the bright blue gaze of Mackenzie Jean.

him all "Reminiscing."

She jerked her head in the direction of the stairs that led down into the main lounge space and said, "Come on, I've got a table over here," indicating he should follow her to an alcove that provided some modicum of privacy.

before he “You afraid to be seen with me, bunny?” Aiden asked, a cloud of
perfumed wasperfume enveloping him as he moved down the short flight behind her

She glanced over her shoulder. “Absolutely.”

us. *Okay then.*

ated in “You know, bunny,” Aiden said as he took a seat, “if you wanted to
Campusalone, all you had to do was ask.”

s could “Does that smarmy attitude of yours ever actually work on girls?”

d court “All the time,” he said, grinning. “Most of them aren’t nearly as s
iversityyou.”

“Obviously not,” she said, sitting down across from him and flipp
frontedlong hair over her shoulder.

d green “Why am I here?” he asked. His skin tightened under her unrelentin
t. and anticipation buzzed in his chest.

ig area, He had been obsessing over this meeting for the last twenty-four
were onand though his mind had conjured a hundred different scenarios
ar as henecessity, he hadn’t once considered he might hear the words that ca
e cameof Kenzie’s mouth next.

“I have a favor to ask.”

statue, “So do I,” he blurted.

re, and A delicate crease formed between her brows as they scrunched
confusion. “You do?”

he cold “I need you to be my fake girlfriend for this alumni dinner thing on
night,” he said in a rush, then added, “Please. I accidentally told my
was bringing a date because I was really distracted when I filled
nto theRSVP card, and I’m really trying to look like I have my shit togeth
licatingcan’t say I’m bringing someone then show up alone. That would be s
and make me look so bad.”

of floral “Why can’t you ask one of the other girls who can stand to be
you?”

“None of them are you,” Aiden said without thinking, instantly wishing
could rewind time and suck the words back into his throat. “What I
get methat...your brother is Brent Jean. Surely you’re used to these kinds of t

She remained skeptical, arms crossed in a defensive, unimpressed
one eyebrow arched dubiously.

mart as “What’s it going to take to get you to agree to this?” Aiden asked w
didn’t respond. He hadn’t even thought to ask what the favor she need
ing herHe had a one track mind for not making himself look like a fucking ch
front of his coach and whoever else saw his RSVP card. “Do you wan
g gaze, get on my knees and beg you? I’ll get down on the floor right now.’
slid out of his chair and lowered to a knee.

hours, “Get up,” Kenzie hissed at him, reaching out and gripping his bic
for itsher hand, as if to pull him off the floor. “Don’t make a scene, Fuller.
me outthe last thing we need right now.”

“We?” he asked when he was once again seated. And he’d be dar
his dick hadn’t twitched when she’d called him by his last name.

“That picture of us,” she said flippantly.

l up in “What picture?”

She narrowed her eyes, as if gauging whether or not he was fuckin
Fridayher. When she decided he wasn’t, she said, “You really haven’t seen it
coach I “No!” he said loudly, and she cut him with a glare when a few s
out theturned to look in their direction.

er, so I Kenzie pulled out her phone and tapped around on the screen
o lame, flipping it in his direction.

There was a picture of...them. Outside Case cafeteria, standing to

around for comfort—Aiden remembered the way his body had reacted to her nearness—his hands wrapped around her upper arms as she cut him off with a few more words.

The caption read: AIDEN FULLER'S LATEST CONQUEST?
“Damn, bunny, I’m sorry,” he said. “You know that’s not how I see it.”
“I do?” she asked, an eyebrow rising doubtfully.

“You *should*.” And he didn’t know where his next words came from because he wasn’t entirely sure they were true. But they seemed like something she’d want to hear, so he continued with, “You’re not supposed to jump into me. I’ll admit, you’re hot, and you want absolutely nothing to do with me, which only adds to the allure, but that’s not what this is about. You’re just here to help. Aiden, just be doing me a favor by going to this alumni thing with me. I really owe you nothing, and it’s probably the last thing you want to do, but... please, help me. Really use your help.”

And, okay, *some* of it was true, but mostly he was trying to save his ass, *and* he still hadn’t gotten over the sting of her rejecting him that day before. His teammates had ribbed him endlessly for failing that dare, and suspension was the only thing that had saved him from suffering the consequences.

That and his absolute vehemence that he could still make it happen. He was so fucked if it backfired.

Kenzie studied him for several long moments, lifting her coffee and taking a long pull from the cup before she answered. “I’ll do it.”

Aiden sat frozen, unsure he’d heard her correctly. “You will?”
“Yes.”

Now it was Aiden’s turn to narrow his eyes at her. “What exactly are you getting out of this?”

to her. She hesitated. “I kind of already accidentally told my brother I was on a date with you to piss him off.”

Aiden stilled, completely at a loss for words, but Kenzie obliterated the thought and plowed ahead.

you.” “The way I see it, this is beneficial for both of us. You need to reestablish your image a bit, and as far as anyone else knows, I’m the good-girl younger sister of a professional hockey player. *And* I have a sparkling reputation. You don’t want to look like an ass in front of your coach and these alumni people, and I’ll be damned if I let my brother annoy my brother. It’s a win-win.”

With me, “Are you saying you’re not a good girl?” Aiden asked, voice low and intense. He really leaned forward.

Kenzie mirrored him, resting her elbows on the table so their faces were about a foot apart. “That is for me to know and you to never find out.”

This girl, Aiden thought. The fire in her eyes, the confident way she carried herself through the world, her absolute refusal to want anything to do with him. Even now, when she was asking for his help, her reticence and his stubbornness, the *I-know-this-is-a-bad-idea-but-I’m-going-to-do-it-anyway* expression, clinging to the delicate bones and muscles of her face—*sexy as fuck*.

Aiden’s first instinct was to say no. He needed to, to use her words, “I’ll do anything for your image,” certainly. But badly enough to...what? Pretend to date Jean’s baby sister, even if only for one night? That had *bad idea* written all over it.

Then again, they both needed each other. He needed a date to this dinner, and she’d lied to her brother about going on a date with him. He was supposed to throw her a bone and make an honest woman out of her. He’d simply ignore the fact that he needed this more than she did. He

s going clear winner in this scenario, and what was it they said about looking
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And, damn the consequences, he wanted an excuse to spend time with this girl.

“Okay, bunny,” he finally said. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

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“WHAT ARE YOU DOING Friday night?” Jessica asked Kenzie.

It was Wednesday night, and the pair were at Dublin Square, another Lansing bar only a few blocks away from Kenzie’s apartment. Since Jessica hadn’t seen each other since the weekend after classes had ended when Jessica had dragged Kenzie away from packing, introduced her to her friends, and convinced her to spend the whole night dancing their feet off at this very bar.

Jessica had texted that morning, asking if they could get drinks, because she’d had a hellish week of student-teaching and that she needed a night out from her boyfriend, Silas, who was “one overreaction away from single.”

Yikes.

Kenzie choked on a sip of tequila-heavy margarita. “Why, did she say something?” she asked. Going on a date...could it even be considered a date if they were both getting something out of the arrangement that had not

do with companionship? Probably not, but for lack of a better word, going on a date with Aiden wasn't a big deal—in theory. Kenzie simply didn't like people asking questions she didn't have the answers to.

Honestly, she had no clue what she was actually doing with Aiden. The little agreement they'd come to was a disastrous idea when Kenzie had just told Brent she'd lied, but...it was too late to back out now. It was something about Aiden that brought out a different side of her. Some forgotten piece of her personality clicked into place in his presence. In Aiden's presence, she felt confident and powerful and sexy—things she hadn't experienced in a long time.

“What?” Jessica asked, confused. “No, I'm just curious. Some of the guys, Silas, and I are going to a show at this event space downtown, and we're going to invite you along.”

Kenzie's shoulders relaxed. “Oh, I'd love to, but I have other plans.” She didn't elaborate, but she also knew Jessica wouldn't let it go that easily. “What kind of plans?”

“FLEX stuff,” she said automatically. Though Jessica knew she'd stepped off in step back from the company, Kenzie hoped she wouldn't question it.

Jessica rolled her eyes but let Kenzie's slip go, then lifted her own glass to her mouth, taking a dainty sip. She had never been much of a drinker, but tonight she'd surprised Kenzie by ordering a rum and Coke. Thinking about Silas must've been weighing on her more than she'd let on.

“Sometimes I think you and Berkley should've been sisters,” Jessica said. “You're both workaholics.”

Kenzie snorted. “Have you met my brothers?”

Jessica laughed with her. “Okay, you have a point there. Do you ever feel like a major slacker compared to them?”

ing on “Every day,” Kenzie said without hesitation.

It’s not need This was a frequent discussion of theirs. Both of Jessica’s older siblings, Berkley and their brother Logan—were well-established attorneys. Or Surely that, Berkley was currently in school completing the classes necessary to *could* open her own sports agency. Jessica often thought her decision to be a teacher made her a slacker in the eyes of her family, but anyone who knew the long-Jessica could see how passionate she was about educating, and Kenzie had heard Berkley gush about her little sister enough to know that the family hadn’t family was very proud of her.

As for Kenzie, well...obviously, everyone knew Brent had built a beautiful life for himself in Detroit with his hockey team and with Berkley. And I was in his fourth year of residency in orthopedic medicine at the University of Michigan’s hospital in Ann Arbor.

“It’s hard being the youngest,” Jessica said with a sigh, and Kenzie was in agreement.

Being the youngest had its perks, of course. Growing up, her parents and brothers had rarely denied Kenzie anything, and the four of them were her biggest cheerleaders. She loved her brothers dearly, more than she could drink to say, and was insanely proud of them both. But on the flip side of that coin, and Kenzie often felt like the black sheep, the one who was dragging down the image of the uber successful Jean siblings by not living up to their potential.

“The problem was, both of her brothers had figured out early on what they wanted to do with their lives. Unfortunately for Kenzie, she was still searching for that *thing*. She had yet to find her calling, and it was a constant source of anxiety for her, like a low-level hum in the back

mind, whispering, *Figure it out, Kenzie; when are you going to get your siblings—together?*

For someone who already suffered from depression and high-functioning anxiety, the added pressure to live up to the standards her brothers at school often made matters worse.

Truthfully, she often felt like a prisoner inside her own mind.

Jessica snapped her fingers in front of Kenzie's face, pulling her out of the present. "Dude, where did you go?"

Kenzie shook her head and took a long, fortifying gulp of her beautiful "Thinking about my brothers."

Jessica lifted her glass and clinked it against Kenzie's. "To overcome our older siblings."

nodded



Though she'd tried everything she could to remain calm, after her conversation with Jessica on Wednesday, Kenzie's anxiety was at an all-time high.

Not ideal when she was about to go on her first "date" with Aiden, who embodied the phrase *calm, cool, and collected*.

As she didn't have any classes on Fridays, she spent the bulk of her free time catching up on homework so she wouldn't have to worry about it on the weekend.

Unfortunately, her brain had other ideas, and after an hour of trying to stay focused, she was spiraling over what she had planned that evening, she called Dr. Matheon. "Hello, Mackenzie."

our shit “I’m going on a date tonight,” she blurted.

“Really?” Dr. Mathews responded. “With who?”

ationing “His name is Aiden. He’s a hockey player here at MSU. But it’s not
had setdate. I’m just doing him a favor.”

Concisely, she filled Dr. Mathews in on the last few weeks, surprising
was the first time since school had started that she’d really need
back to therapist’s guidance.

“So let me get this straight,” the woman said, and Kenzie could
drink, picture her in her warm, creamy office behind the mammoth walnut
reclining in her plush leather chair as she considered how to approach
achieving session. “You’re going on a date with a hockey player, the kind
you’ve repeatedly said you’d never date, because you want to piss
brother off? Mackenzie, that’s not—”

Kenzie knew what was coming, and cut off Dr. Mathews’ admonition.
“I know, I know,” she said. “He just makes me so mad!”

ter her “We’ve talked about this.”

all-time “I know!” Kenzie barked, and Dr. Mathews remained silent on the
end of the line. “I’m sorry. I know this is a bad idea.”

Fuller, “Is it really, though? Or do you only think so because Aiden is the
guy you’ve never pictured yourself with?”

the day “I…”

ver the Kenzie trailed off. She’d never considered that before.

Maybe tonight wouldn’t be all bad.

hought- Her chest loosened, heart pumping freely, lungs once again ac-
ews. unrestricted air. She hadn’t realized how worked up she’d been until
Mathews had given her permission to enjoy herself tonight. And how
what was wrong with her? Aiden was ridiculously good looking, fun

physically attracted to her.. Attending a fancy alumni dinner on Friday wouldn't exactly be a hardship.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, her phone beeped, alerting her to another incoming call.

"Sorry, Dr. Mathews," she said. "That's him calling. I have to take this call." "Have fun tonight, Mackenzie," her doctor said before Kenzie connected with Aiden.

"Fuller," she said in greeting.

"Hi, bunny." She could practically hear the grin in his voice.

"What do you want?"

"Just calling to make sure you're ready."

Unable to resist fucking with him, she said, "For what?"

"Bunny, don't play with me. Alumni dinner? You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours? Our deal?"

"I've been studying," she said, as though that explained everything.

Aiden let out a disgusted snort. "Who studies on a Friday?"

"Someone who doesn't like putting it off until the last minute," she said, putting her phone on speaker as she moved through her apartment and into her bedroom.

"Fair enough," he said. "Where do you live again? I'll pick you up."

"Not necessary," she said as she set her phone on her dresser and rummaged through her clothes, looking for something to wear.

"Bunny," Aiden said again, this time sounding exasperated. "If you're accepting of doing this whole pretend-dating thing for tonight, I'm going to pick you up until Dr. your place like a gentleman. I'll open any and all doors for you, and honestly, I'll even give you a goodnight kiss when I drop you off later."

"You are insufferable," she said, pulling a dress out and whipping

his armshirt and shorts off to try it on. “I really don’t need a ride, Aiden. I can get my way there all by myself. I’m a big girl.”

g her to “I think that’s the first time you’ve called me by my first name,” he said. “I don’t like it.”

his.” Kenzie snorted. “I’m sorry, *Fuller*,” she said, then pulled the dress over her head with a frustrated groan.

“Better,” he said. “But I’m picking you up, and that’s the end of the discussion. If I’m going to be your fake boyfriend, I’m going full service. Picking you up and holding your door open for you, giving you a suit jacket when you’re cold, holding your purse when you go to the bathroom. That kind of shit.”

“You’re not my fake boyfriend,” she said. “This is *a* date. A one-time thing. A singular occurrence. And where do you get your ideas from *Brady Bunch*?”

Aiden huffed out a laugh. “Consider it wishful thinking for when you finally stop pretending you hate me and give into this thing between us.” He said, “don’t knock *The Brady Bunch*. Did you ever stop to consider that may be a little old-fashioned?”

Aiden Fuller, old-fashioned? Fat chance.

’ “I can assure you *that* will never happen.”

d rifled “Never say never,” he said. When she didn’t respond, he asked, “What are you doing?”

f we’re “Trying to find something to wear. What are you wearing?”

ou up at “Charcoal suit, white shirt, deep-green bow tie,” he said. “Though it may be a little sticky out, so I’ll probably ditch the jacket at some point.”

Kenzie rolled her eyes, irritated by how easily men dressed themselves. g her t-Not to mention, Aiden probably looked good in everything he owned.

can find “Maybe this one...” she said, pulling on the hem of a black dress immediately dismissing the idea. “No, that won’t work.”

said. “I “Bunny,” Aiden said, tone belying his exasperation, “I do not give what you wear. You’ll be hot in anything. Throw something on, put off with perfume, and let’s go. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Kenzie’s face blanched. “I’m sorry, did you say *fifteen*?”

of this Aiden snorted at her panicked tone. “Yep. Where do you live again? id here, “Above HopCat.”

you my “Tick-tock, bunny,” he said, then hung up.

to the “Fuck,” Kenzie said to her empty apartment.

She finally settled on an emerald-green dress made of a silky material thin as she could’ve easily scrunched it up and stuffed it into a clutch the size of a hand. She paired it with some strappy nude stilettos and delicate jewelry, then quickly sprayed some dry shampoo on her roots and swept her heavy locks to the side with some bobby pins the same dark brown as her hair.

Fourteen and a half minutes later, as she put a final coat of bronzer on her cheeks, Aiden texted that he had arrived.

Kenzie straightened in front of the full-length mirror hanging on her bedroom wall, turning this way and that to survey her appearance. She quickly shoved her ID, key, powder, and lipstick into a clutch and headed downstairs.

Aiden had parked illegally in front of her building, and an East Village public safety officer parked right behind him. The two men stood behind Aiden’s back bumper, apparently shooting the shit. Kenzie was hit with a sudden force of déjà vu, remembering Brent in this exact same position the day she’d moved into the building.

ess and And that was an image she absolutely didn't need right now. Cor
Aiden to her brother wouldn't end well for anyone; the two men were
: a fucksame.

n some Kenzie made her way toward him, waiting for Aiden to look up an
her gaze. When he did, she could've laughed at his expression.

"I'm sorry," he said to the officer, extending a hand and drawing the
" for a bro hug like they were old friends. "I won't park here next time
my girl up."

"No problem, man," the officer said, glancing over his shoulder at
"It's all good."

erial so Aiden winked at him, then stepped toward Kenzie and pulled her
: size of hug, sliding his hands along the exposed skin of her back.

te gold Kenzie stiffened under his unexpected touch, and Aiden said,
rept herbunny. We've gotta make it look good for that guy."

as her Kenzie nodded and leaned closer, slipping her fingers into the wave
base of his skull and pressing a kiss to his cheek. She pulled away as
: on her as she'd come to him and brushed her thumb over the lipstick she'd
his skin.

on her Aiden cleared his throat and said, "You look beautiful, bunny."
atisfied, "Thank you," she replied, a blush creeping into her cheeks. "Can
rushed now?"

"Oh, sure," he said, moving around her to open the passenger door
Lansing Jeep. She climbed in, the hem of her dress clutched tightly in her hand.
od near Once safely ensconced in the car, they began the slow crawl throu
by the Lansing traffic to get to the interstate connection that would take them
ion the to Holt. It was a short trip to the suburb—only about ten miles—but it
Friday night. Football was home the next day, taking on their first con

comparing opponent, and the summer heat still clung to the city, the hot days giving not the comfortable nights, where the college girls could go out in their shorts and crop tops and not freeze to death. As Aiden maneuvered the car and caught the city, Kenzie studied the crush of bodies outside Dublin, then Harper Rick's, as they passed. It was barely five-thirty, and East Lansing wasn't a guy in was in full swing.

"So, bunny," Aiden said as he turned onto Grand River. "Tell me about yourself."

Kenzie. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?"

"New York," she said. "Near Albany."

"I should've known that," Aiden said. "Your brother is basically a sorry, inside the walls of Munn."

Kenzie snorted. "Don't let him hear you say that. The last thing he needs is any more inflation to his ego."

"I'm sensing some animosity here."

Kenzie sighed heavily. "He's my big brother. And there's eight years between us. He has a habit of acting more like my dad than my sibling really gets on my nerves."

Aiden didn't respond, and the silence was uncomfortable enough.

Kenzie kept speaking. "He saw that picture of us on The Green and told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to stay away from you."

"And that's how you ended up telling him you're going on a date with Eastright? You're only doing this to piss him off?"

Something about being in Aiden's presence brought out things in her that she'd sooner keep hidden, had her wanting to spill all her secrets. It was a reference

ng wayso easy to tell him that she was on a mission of self-discovery, a
rt skirtscouldn't accomplish her objectives alone.

out of But as she'd told Aiden earlier, this was a one-time thing, so it didn
er's andsense to dump all her drama on him. For now, he was simply her un
ightlifeaccomplice.

“I’m doing this because you need my help, and I’m a charitab
e aboutPissing my brother off is just an added bonus.”

“Charitable?” Aiden said with a snort. “Not exactly the word I’d use
Ignoring him, she turned her attention inward as she finally
confronted this mess she’d landed in.

Kenzie had dropped out of college when she was twenty. Living
r a godYork, and being so far away from her brother and their business, b
forcing him to run everything while also maintaining an incredibl
g Brentcareer, had stopped making sense. And once she’d gotten that bug in
there was nothing that could’ve stopped her.

At the time, she hadn’t thought there was anything college could tea
t yearsshe couldn’t learn from Brent and real world experience.

, and it The first year was great. But she’d quickly realized there were some
she could still learn in school.

gh that In particular, she needed to learn how to have fun again.

told me New York City wasn’t exactly a college town, and she’d never real
able to do the quintessential college thing there. She’d loved NYU,
with me,because she’d only been a few hours away from her parents. But it
been what she’d pictured when she imagined her college experience.

her that As cheesy as it sounded, Kenzie wanted to go out to the bars with
ould behave all-night study sessions, and binge junk food during movie mar

She wanted to go to football, basketball, and hockey games. And may

and she wanted to go on fall-themed dates, and have someone to hold hands
they strolled through campus, and post cute coupley photos on Instagram
't make The better part of the last two years had been spent being anything
writing young, early-twenties girl.

Aiden glanced at her quickly, then returned his gaze to the road, smile
girl. breaking the heavy silence in the Jeep.

"I'm not a bad guy," he said quietly. "These dares my teammates
do...they're dumb, but we're not hurting anyone. And, usually, we
y, *fully* hurting ourselves. This last one...it was incredibly stupid, and I tried
out of it, but the punishment for saying no is usually far worse than t
in New itself. I wouldn't know because no one in my entire four years here has
basically turned one down, but your brother probably knows someone who did."
y busy Kenzie had heard her brother mention in passing the shit he got up
her ear, his college teammates, but she wasn't aware of specifics. When Brent
college, Kenzie had been young, barely a teenager; she'd had her own
each that to worry about.

"He's mentioned it, but I try not to stick my nose in his business," she
e things "I wish he'd extend me the same courtesy."

"I have a little sister," Aiden said suddenly, and Kenzie turned
surprised. "She's only twelve. So...I can understand where Brent is
ly been from. Being a big brother is an important job, and if my sister grows u
mostly anything like you...like I said, I understand."

hadn't Kenzie fell silent, face heating with Aiden's words. She knew her
loved her, and everything he did where she was concerned was born
friends, love. Sometimes, she simply wished he would let her live her life, m
athons. own mistakes, and suffer the consequences of her actions without br
ybe she'd down her neck, trying to direct her every move.

with as “I know he means well,” she said finally. “But he’s not my dad, and I am. He wouldn’t act like it.”

g but a “I don’t think that’s too much to ask,” Aiden said. “You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself. You’re the co-owner of a successful advertising brand, and you’re going back to school to finish your degree. Most of your position would coast on Brent’s success and money.”

s and I “My brothers are driven and successful. They’ve both worked the hard way. I’m not off for everything they have. I could never take advantage of either of them to get like that. And anyway, I’m leaving FLEX.”

he dare It was the first time she’d said the words aloud to anyone besides her father as ever Mathews, and her shoulders felt lighter.

’ Aiden appeared stunned. “We’ll revisit that,” he said. “Your other brother is with Nate, right?”

: was in Kenzie nodded, looking out the window as the trees lining the field were dramatically lit. “He’s currently in residency at U of M to become an orthopedic surgeon.”

he said. Aiden let out a low whistle. “A professional athlete and a doctor. I wonder you feel like the black sheep.”

to him, Kenzie’s face reddened with embarrassment. “Yeah.”

coming She felt more than saw Aiden glance at her. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “I understand. Tell me why you’re leaving FLEX.”

“My gut is telling me it’s the right move. I feel...stifled, creatively. My brothers are socially. Owning a company is hard work, and I’m just not enjoying it anymore. But I’ve always loved the marketing and advertising side of things. I’m making a lot of money running FLEX, so coming back to school to major in both while I figure out what I want to do with my life made sense.”

“Couldn’t you just stay with FLEX and do only the marketing side?”

l I wishadvertising stuff? Relinquish your ownership rights?”

“I mean, yes, I could. But I don’t want to.”

e doing “Why?”

viewear “It’s like you said earlier. Most girls would coast on their famous s
girls insuccess, but I can’t do that. My brothers are stupid smart and
successful. I don’t think it’s too much to ask that I find *my* thing. My l
ir assesMy medicine.”

of them “So what do you want to do instead?”

“My sister-in-law’s best friend is a successful influencer, an
des Dr.fascinated by it. I keep thinking maybe it’s something I might like
into.”

brother Becoming an influencer was something Kenzie had only recently b
consider. One thing FLEX had taught her was that she loved being h
reewayboss, but she also wasn’t great at managing people. So she’d been t
opedicabout ways she could work for herself.

“That’s amazing, bunny!” Aiden said emphatically, shooting an im
or? Nogrין her way.

The conversation suddenly had Kenzie wanting to turn the attentio
from herself, to peel back some of Aiden’s layers.

7. “Sore “Let’s say hockey wasn’t an option anymore,” Kenzie said su
smiling when Aiden’s thick brows scrunched in confusion. “What
ely andyour dream job be after college?”

ying it “Hockey will always be an option,” Aiden said through gritted tee
side ofKenzie knew from experience that this was a sore spot for most
jure myathletes.

“You met Mitch last week, didn’t you?”

ng and “I did...”

“He thought he’d be playing into his forties,” Kenzie told him. “Inst took one bad hit, broke his back, and now he’s tasked with flying around country scouting cocky assholes like you.”

Aiden’s face blanched, his knuckles going white as he gripped the steering wheel tighter. Kenzie sat still, silent, waiting for him to reply.

“I’d like to be an on-air personality for one of the major networks, call games. Like Doc Emerick.”

Kenzie was surprised. Most of the hockey players she knew, especially at the professional level, like her brother and his teammates, seemed rare to find someone who wanted to be a journalist of sorts, someone who had dedicated so much of their life to it.

“I think you’d be really good at that, Fuller.”

“You think so?” he asked, turning a breathtaking grin on her.

She couldn’t help once again fucking with him. “But maybe stick to what you’ve certainly got the face for it.”

Aiden growled low in his throat, and Kenzie laughed. A moment later he pulled up alongside the curb on a quiet suburban street lined with trees, putting his Jeep in park and turning the key, the tick of the engine as it would fill the otherwise silent car.

“It’s cute how you’re pretending you wouldn’t do unspeakable things, and me if given the chance,” Aiden said finally, breaking the silence, his voice low and dangerous.

Kenzie shivered. “I’d definitely do something to you,” she muttered. “Careful what you wish for, bunny.”

And Kenzie would be damned if the words didn’t feel like a

head, heightening every nerve on the surface of her skin like a live wire.

and the She swallowed hard and looked away, gesturing at the house up the hill where the dinner was taking place. "Shall we?"

steering "We shall," Aiden replied, then jumped out of the car and came around her side to open the door before she could even unbuckle her seatbelt.

or even "So what should I expect from this thing?" she asked. Aiden reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers, beginning a casual stroll down the sidewalk like this was an everyday occurrence for him.

es, had Kenzie, meanwhile, had to surreptitiously take steady breaths and try to keep his skin not to sweat against his.

but she "My teammates will be here," he said. "But it's also an alumni dinner, a way for guys from the past to come back and schmooze with donors. College old fucks with money a reason to donate."

Kenzie choked on a laugh and said, "Don't let them hear you call them 'old fucks.' They pay for your equipment, and travel, and literally even rent a radio of that arena you call home."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said with a cheeky grin as he tugged her hand, leading her path around the side of the house. Rounding a corner, an exit with cars, backyard opened in front of them, where two large white tents were set up, and over a hundred people mingled on the lawn.

Kenzie's gaze swept the crowd, eventually meeting a pair of blue eyes that mirrored her own.

his voice "Oh fuck."

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“OH FUCK,” AIDEN SAID when he laid eyes on Brent Jean, who daggers at him and his baby sister from across the lawn, a pretty blonde woman standing arm-in-arm with him.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Kenzie said, then he massive, world-weary sigh. “*Alumni* dinner, Fuller. Why did neither consider that my brother, one of the most famous alumni this place would be here?”

“I truly don’t know, bunny,” he said. “I know things between you tense right now, but please, just...don’t cause a scene. I can’t afford that now.”

Hurt flashed in Kenzie’s eyes, and Aiden nearly apologized. But he deep enough shit as it was; the last thing he needed was his girlfriend-: night getting into an argument with her brother—her *super famous recognizable* brother—in front of people who potentially controlled his destiny. His only focus right now was getting back on the ice.

“I promise I’ll be on my best behavior,” she snapped, then grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, downed it in one gulp, and returned the tray before the waiter could fully move away.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry, but I have a lot on the line here.”

Kenzie sighed and reached down to thread her fingers through the grass. “Let’s get a drink and you can introduce me to your teammates.”

Aiden grinned and let Kenzie tow him across the grass, over to a table that had been set up along the fence separating this yard from the next. Aiden ordered a beer, while Kenzie ordered a vodka soda.

“Mackenzie,” a voice at their backs said, and Aiden stiffened. He’d heard that voice in interviews more times than he could count.

Aiden glared. “Brent,” Kenzie said when she turned to face her brother.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Brent Jean turned that steely blue gaze on Aiden, which would have been unsettling enough on its own had his eyes not seemed to have matched the exact shape and shade as his sister’s. “You must be a member of us Fullers,” Brent said, extending a hand. “Brent Jean.”

Aiden shook it, refusing to wince when Brent attempted to crush his fingers like they were in a vise grip.

“I know who you are,” Aiden said. “Great to meet you. Kenzie’s told me a lot about you.”

Brent raised a skeptical brow at his sister, voice flat when he said, “It’s not like she was in there now.”

Kenzie reached up and patted him on the cheek. “Only good thing is, very brother.”

Aiden’s “I’m sure,” he said drily.

A moment later, the small blonde woman Aiden had seen Brent

l a flute earlier joined their little powwow.

ied it to *This must be Berkley*, Aiden thought.

Damn, she was stunning—which wasn't surprising considering how
looking her husband was.

his. "I "Babe, have you tried these?" Berkley said, holding up a handful
o your pastries that appeared to be filled with cheese and topped with jam. "I
incredible."

bar that "I haven't," Brent said, then leaned forward with his mouth o
. Aiden Berkley could pop one in. "Oh, damn, those are good."

Berkley smirked. "Told you." Then she turned to Kenzie and pul
d heard into her side. "Hey little sis."

"Hey, Berk," Kenzie said, the tension in her face dissipating as she
down at her sister-in-law. "How's my niece or nephew?"

Aiden, Berkley patted her belly and said, "Good. Sucking the life from r
yes not I'm barely out of my first trimester. I'm not sure how I'm going to l
Aiden with school."

Brent snaked an arm across her shoulders. "We'll figure it out."
ush his Aiden stood, staring down at the tiny blonde who apparently carri
next Jean heir.

told me Kenzie glanced up at him, as if suddenly remembering he was the
gosh, sorry, Fuller. Berkley is, as I'm sure you've guessed, my bi
d, "Has wife. And is currently pregnant with his spawn."

"Don't call him that," Brent growled.

igs, big "You don't even know if it is a *he*," Kenzie said. "You could end up
little girl just like your wife. Or worse, your baby sister."

"Oh, Kenz," Berkley said. "That wouldn't be worse. If we have a li
nt with who's anything like you, I'll consider us very lucky."

“If only my brother felt the same,” Kenzie said, turning away from Brent and grabbing Aiden’s arm. Aiden’s eyes met Brent’s, which were narrowed in displeasure.

“This conversation isn’t over, Mackenzie,” Brent said quietly. Kenzie looked at her brother over her shoulder. “What conversation?” They reeked sweetly, then pulled Aiden away.

“Your brother *really* doesn’t like me,” he said. “I think it has less to do with you and more to do with me ignoring order from King Brent,” she said, voice laced with venom. “He can’t let me live my life. Everything I do, he’s gotta go all overprotective brother on me, like I’m not perfectly capable of making my own choices. It’s exhausting.”

“I told you in the car,” Aiden said, “and I’ll say it again: he loves you, and he only wants you to be safe and happy.”

Kenzie’s shoulders drooped, and she glanced up at him through the fringe of her eyelashes. “I know,” she said with a sigh. “I just wish he’d let me be more is all.”

Aiden trailed his fingers down her arm and laced his fingers with hers, giving her hand a squeeze. “I get it. But look, we’re here at this fancy party with free booze and good food, so what do you say we snag something to eat and go sit with my teammates?”

“Deal,” Kenzie said, giving him a grin that Aiden would kill to see on her face all the time.

Dazed by that blinding smile, Aiden followed her to the buffet table. He filled a plate, mindful of his meal plan. Kenzie, meanwhile, loaded her plate with girlfinger foods and sweets.

“Sweet tooth?” he asked her.

them “I love chocolate,” she said, gesturing to the plate in her left hand tilted toward her. “I’m sorry, I’m a little overloaded with mini eclairs.”

“Duly noted,” Aiden said.

“Well well well,” Jack said when they approached. “If it isn’t you, who’s the runaway puck bunny? I’m surprised he got you to go out with him.”

Kenzie placed her hand on Aiden’s chest, right over his heart, and picked up speed under her touch. “How could I resist this face?” she said directly. “And I’m sure you guys realize by now that I’m not a puck bunny, right?”

“Sure do,” Jack replied.

“Then will you stop calling me that?”

Jack paused a beat, as though considering, before happily saying, “No, I won’t.”

Kenzie groaned. “You know my brother is here, right? One word about him, and I’ll rough you up.”

Jack turned to Aiden, an eyebrow quirked. “Meeting the fam already? Move fast.”

Aiden heaved a world-weary sigh and ignored them. His teammates burst out laughing at his expression, drawing stares from people nearby. Aiden shushed them and sat down, pulling out the chair for Kenzie.

He focused on his plate of food, tuning out his teammates as they directed their attention to Kenzie.

And she ate that shit up.

Aiden knew she would be an asset on a night like tonight. Her brother was living proof that she had spent plenty of time around important people in fancy, professional-type settings. But witnessing her charm was impressive. With him, Kenzie was sassy and stubborn and sarcastic. With other boys, she was sweet and effervescent and almost...soft. It was an

hat was new side of her, and Aiden had to admit, he enjoyed discovering that facet.

He finished eating before she did, and sat back in his chair while Fuller's continued to pick at her own food, chatting with Jack, Asher, Luke, and one of the freshmen who had wandered over.

which Absently, Aiden lifted his hand and toyed with the ends of Kenzie's hair where they brushed her spine. Briefly, she stiffened, but settled into that quickly.

"You okay here?" he asked eventually. His leg bounced, thrumming.

Nope." "Yeah," she said, peeling her eyes away from Asher, who was animatedly telling a story about one of their many dares gone awry. "Where are you going?"

Why? You "I want to mingle. You know, image rehab and all that," he said, smiling and shrugging off his suit jacket and hanging it on the back of Kenzie's chair. He'd had enough of playing the buttoned-up hockey player. The air next to him was trapped on his back and arms by the heavy material of his jacket making it difficult to breathe.

Slowly, he rolled the sleeves of his button-down shirt up to his elbows, revealing the corded muscles of his forearms. First, he revealed the unmarred expanse of skin on his right, then the swirls of ink on his left. Kenzie's gaze was locked, Kenzie licked her lips, and Aiden smirked, knowing where her mind had gone.

Kenzie smiled shyly, clearing her throat. "Do you want me to come with you?" he asked, her voice hoarse.

He bent and dropped a chaste kiss on her cheek, that smooth skin

his new lips sending a jolt through him, the innocence of it so at odds with
next words. “Maybe later.”

while she A sharp inhale followed, and Aiden backed away with a laugh. “Stay
with the boys, bunny. I can fight my own battles.”

“If you’re sure,” she said roughly.

“I’m sure. I’ll find you later.”

Aiden walked across the lawn, beelining for his coach.

“Fuller!” Coach said loudly. Apparently he’d already hit the free all
nerves a little harder than was probably socially acceptable, but Aiden wasn’t going
to be the one to call him on it.

“Hey, Coach,” he said, reaching out to shake his proffered hand.

“You know these guys, right?” Coach said, gesturing to the others
forming their little circle. Coach rattled off the names of a few big
standing people Aiden did in fact recognize. He thanked them all in turn.

“And of course you know Jean,” Coach said finally, pointing the
sweatshirt in Brent’s direction.

Aiden turned slowly and met Brent’s chilly gaze, reminiscent of
Michigan on frigid February days, when white caps dotted its
lakes, not sending cold winds blowing through the Windy City.

“I do,” Aiden said, shaking Brent’s hand for the second time that evening.
“He does,” Brent responded. “In fact, my little sister is his date tonight.”

Aiden checked his urge to wince, instead glancing at Coach
for exactly the same reaction. The man’s eyes comically bugged out of his head. He opened
his mouth to respond, seemed to think better of it, and instead took a giant
sip of his beer before he said, “Cute kid.”

Several of the other men chuckled, and Brent looked murderous.
“I’m definitely against something,” he said through clenched teeth.

with his “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were dating Jean’s little Coach said to Aiden, punching him softly on the shoulder.

ay here Aiden shrugged, eyes locking with Brent’s again. “We’re not *dating*,” he said. “This is actually our first date.”

Looking irate, Brent opened his mouth to say something, but Aiden’s former teammates—a guy named Simmons who had been a when Aiden was a freshman—called his name from across the gracohol aAiden gratefully exited the uncomfortable situation.

going to The next few hours passed in much the same way, with Aiden making way around the party, interacting with old teammates and new, do recognized and ones he didn’t. All the while, he was acutely aware er menpositions of the two Jean siblings, mentally bracing himself for the r donors,when they’d openly clash and this entire facade he and Kenzie had would go up in smoke.

neck of Only...it never happened. Brent and Kenzie avoided each other al though Aiden *did* notice Berkley flitting back and forth between the t of Lakea tiny blonde messenger. Aiden was grateful, at least, that Kenzie had surface,his warning about not making a scene.

Aiden stood in the corner of one of the tents, bullshitting with Jack ening. and Asher. Without a word, Kenzie, who had been standing on the fri ght.” their group tapping away on her phone, backed away, retreated acro for hisyard, and walked inside the house.

ned his Moments later, her brother followed.

unt slug “I’ll be right back,” Aiden told his teammates, then took off after the The second he walked inside, he heard raised voices.

“She’s “What the fuck are you doing here?” Brent hissed.

“I was invited by my boyfriend,” Kenzie responded.

sister,” Brent let out a derisive snort. “That little shit is not your boyfriend.”
“Yes he is.”

really Brent was right; Aiden was *not* Kenzie’s boyfriend, but he couldn’t begrudge her the chance to piss her brother off a bit, not after the way she’d reacted to seeing them together. It was the prerogative of younger siblings to antagonize their older counterparts. Aiden was used to the same treatment, and from his little sister, Eloise.

However, when the time came for her to start dating, or when boys started noticing her, Aiden liked to think he wouldn’t treat Eloise the way Brent treated Kenzie, but he couldn’t be sure. What he *did* know was he didn’t like the way Brent had looked at him, like he’d be better served as something on the bottom of Kenzie’s shoe than someone worthy of being on her arm. Aiden tiptoed forward and peeked around an archway, finding Brent

Kenzie standing in the middle of what appeared to be a well-appointed library. The walls lined with walnut shelves filled with heavy, leather-bound tomes. Kenzie’s arms crossed defensively over her chest, a stance Aiden had seen her take on countless occasions in the short time they’d known each other.

Her brother mirrored her.

“I told you to stay away from him,” Brent said. “What about that, Luke?”
“The part where you thought you could tell me what to do,” she said.

“The part where you thought you could tell me what to do,” she said. Her ocean blue eyes narrowed, her mouth set in a firm line, and Aiden couldn’t help but notice the expression was sexy as hell when it wasn’t turned on him.

“Kenzie...” Brent trailed off, the two syllables of her name dripping with exasperation. “I only want what’s best for you.” He reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder in a placating, fatherly gesture.

Kenzie shrugged him off. “You don’t even know what that is!” she

and Aiden was thankful they'd waited until they were away from prying to hash this out. "I don't even know what that is! I'm only twenty, I wouldn't Brent. Can't you just...let me live my life without trying to micromanage everything? Did you treat Nate like this when he was my age?"

"When Nate was your age, he was fucking his way through his first semester of undergrad and preparing to do the same in med school."

"What if *I* want to do the same?"

"I volunteered as tribute," Aiden thought.

"That's not the kind of girl you are."

"You don't know what kind of girl I actually am, Bee. When you were with me, all you see is the awkward, freckle-faced preteen who followed you everywhere."

"Nate around like a puppy dog. I worshiped you both. My big brother was intelligent and insanely smart, talented, larger-than-life men. And now...I'm not the girl I used to be. You have to let me make my own decisions and mistakes without judgement. Your job as my brother is to support me and love me, not to control me. I've had more and no less. That's all I'm asking."

Brent was silent for several long, tense moments, carding his fingers through his hair—one of Aiden's own nervous ticks.

Finally, he reached out and hauled Kenzie in for a hug, saying in a low voice, "I don't like that Fuller kid."

Kenzie curled her lips between her teeth, clearly biting back a grin. "I don't have to. I doubt he'll last long."

A pang of hurt lanced Aiden's chest. This thing between them was fragile, and Kenzie was right, it *wouldn't* last long. But that didn't make it any easier to hear. In that moment, he felt...disposable.

He didn't like it.

The siblings hugged it out, and Aiden turned away, sprinting

ng eyes before they discovered him eavesdropping.

y-three, As Aiden set foot on the lawn, Berkley met him on the path and manage “Where’s my husband?”

Aiden hooked a thumb over his shoulder as Kenzie and Brent exited the garage. Kenzie’s face lit up when she saw him, and she hurried over, grabbed his hand in hers and towing him away from her brother and sister-in-law.

“You were gone a long time,” Aiden said conversationally, wondering if Kenzie would share any of her conversation with Brent.

“I got lost,” she said simply, and Aiden’s heart sank. He didn’t expect her to always be honest with him given the precarious nature of their relationship, but he didn’t appreciate the outright lie, either.

When they rejoined his teammates, Jack, who was well on his way to a little blackout, pointed a finger at Kenzie and said, “Bunny, we’re having a party tonight, free party tonight and you’re coming.”

me. No “What if I don’t want to?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t care what you want.”

fingers “Jack...” Aiden warned.

Jack raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. How about this...”

Too late, Aiden saw the gleam in Jack’s eyes and realized what he was going to say next.

“Fuller, I dare you to bring your bunny to the party tonight.”

It’s not real, Son of a bitch.

It’s easier Aiden turned to Kenzie, fully expecting her to tell Jack to fuck off and leave.

For reasons still unknown—or perhaps, ones he simply wasn’t ready to admit to—he couldn’t let that happen. He wanted to stretch this night out.

a piece of taffy and savor it.

asked, As he readied to launch his argument for her coming over, surprised him by saying, "I'll do it, but only because you assholes wanted to let me hear the end of it if I don't."

ripping "That's the spirit!" Jack said. "And you're absolutely right. We're sorry you were too cool to hang out with us."

ering if "I am too cool to hang out with you," Kenzie deadpanned. "I'm not slumming it here."

ject her His teammates burst into laughter, but Aiden narrowed his gaze. "Relationship, sure?" he asked her quietly.

"Positive."

ay to a His grin unfurled slowly, excitement over keeping this girl by his side a house little longer blooming in his chest.

Aiden, Asher, Jack, and Luke had been roommates for the last three years since they'd been allowed, by university rules, to seek lodging outside the dorms. They'd found a house on the corner of Charles and Linder, close enough to downtown and campus that they could get there easily, but far enough away that they got some peace and quiet.

he was The fact that there were four sorority houses within two blocks was absolutely *nothing* to do with signing the lease.

"Do you want to stop at home and change first?" Aiden asked Kenzie as they drove back to East Lansing.

off and "What's wrong with this?" she asked, frowning down at her dress.

eady to "Absolutely nothing," Aiden assured her. "I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

out like

“I appreciate the concern,” Kenzie said, flipping down the visor. Kenzie checked her appearance in the mirror, the weak lights casting a warm glow over her skin. “But I’m good.”

Aiden tracked her movements from the corner of his eye as she pulled out a compact from her clutch, along with a small brush, and dabbed powder on her cheeks, chin, and forehead. Once she replaced them, she removed a tube of lipstick, uncapped it, puckered her lips, and dabbed on the liquid.

“Don’t get all made up on account of the boys,” he said. “This is just a party. Are you going to the bar, or the party we just left. It’s chill.”

Kenzie turned to him and blinked slowly. “I know that.”

Aiden exited the freeway and pulled up to a light, glancing at Kenzie. The car was stopped. “Bunny, don’t take this the wrong way, but...have you ever been to a house party?”

“Yes!” she replied, too quickly, then tipped her head down.

“Bunny...”

“Okay, fine. No, I haven’t.”

Aiden laughed. “How is that even possible? Don’t people have homes in New York?”

“Of course they do,” she said. “Just not anyone I was friends with. Most apartments were basically shoeboxes, so we preferred to go out to the clubs.”

Moments later, he pulled into his driveway and killed the engine, looking for Kenzie’s reaction. It wasn’t a top floor condo that overlooked the campus, but...it was home.

The house itself was a two-story Craftsman, painted custard yellow with white trim and a massive front porch. The open-concept main level included the kitchen, dining, and living room, along with a half bath. The

lor and bedroom with its en suite was situated off the kitchen. Upstairs were more bedrooms and another full bath.

They had drawn straws for who got the master, and Aiden had ended up winning. He had come to look at it as both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he had his own bathroom, plus enough room for a desk, his own flat-screen TV, and a small weight setup. A curse, because after they moved in, he kept finding couples hooking up in his bed when parties weren't like rowdy. After one too many times of walking in on half-naked people, he smartened up and put a lock on the door, keeping the key on a chain around his neck.

ie once “This is not what I was expecting,” Kenzie said finally.

ave you “And what exactly were you expecting?”

“I’m not really sure. Certainly not something that looks so...normal.”

Aiden snorted and opened his door. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Come in, bunny, let me show you around.”

He shuffled across the lawn and onto the porch, then shoved the heavy doors indoor open and shouted, “Honeys, I’m home!”

“Back here, shithead!” Asher yelled, and Aiden followed the sound. Our heavy bass thumping from the general direction of the kitchen. When Kenzie stepped through the wide entrance, he found all three waiting roommates gathered around the worn, round dining table, methodically pouring bottles of liquor and Sprite into a plastic tub already half-filled with liquid colored a dubious shade of orange, pieces of fruit bobbing on the surface.

cluded Kenzie leaned closer and wrinkled her nose. “What the hell is that?”

master “Jungle juice!” Jack said, dumping more watermelon chunks into the tub. A moment later, Sofia appeared in the kitchen, and said, “I tried to t

re three out of it, but he wouldn't listen."

"Sofia!" Kenzie said. "I didn't know you'd be here!"

ided up Sofia smiled and pulled Kenzie into a brief but warm hug.

lessing, "I live right up the block," she said. "I'm always here for hockey is large parties unless I have a sorority conflict!"

'd first Jack interrupted by asking, "Will you grab the peach vodka fr got too freezer?"

le, he'd Sofia did as she was asked, and Kenzie turned to Jack, saying, "I v around be drinking that."

Next to her, Aiden laughed and said, "Don't worry, you don't hav you want, you can put your bag in my room. I'm going to change out suit."

." Kenzie nodded and followed him around the corner, then down a sh C'mon, to his bedroom. He stepped inside, shrugging out of his suit jack peeling off his button-up—which clung to his skin courtesy of the high avy oak—and tossing it in the direction of his hamper. Then he toed off his kicked them into his closet, and undid his belt and zipper before drop und of pants to the floor.

he and "You know I'm still here, right?"

of his Aiden whirled on Kenzie, having indeed forgotten for the moment t odically was with him. Clad only in his boxers, he resisted the urge to cover hi ed with Entering his room and immediately undressing after a function or ga on theseo deeply ingrained in him that somehow, not even Kenzie's preser pulled him from the routine.

' He wasn't ashamed or embarrassed of himself. As a college athlete, e mix. in ridiculously good shape. But he never wanted Kenzie t alk him uncomfortable around him; he enjoyed her company too much for tha

spun back to his dresser, grabbed a t-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts, and rushed into the bathroom to get dressed.

“Sorry, bunny!” he yelled once he was behind the closed door. “I’ve been wearing housewearing suits, and I was sweating my ass off tonight.”

“You hate wearing suits?” she asked, tone shocked. “I really do,” he said a moment later when he came out of the bathroom fully clothed. Kenzie stood near his desk, heels dangling from the front of her will notof her right hand, clutch in her left. Aiden reached over her shoulder to the hooks on the wall and snagged one of his Spartan hockey baseball caps. He settled it backwards atop the blue-black waves of his hair.

“That’s...ridiculous.”

“And why is that?”

“I thought all hockey players loved them. Girls everywhere are obsessed with you all in suits.”

“I do look pretty fucking hot in a suit, bunny; you’re right about the shoes, Doesn’t mean I like wearing them.”

“Fuller!” Luke hollered from the kitchen. “Get your ass out here! You’re making me look like you too!”

“I’m never getting rid of that nickname, am I?” Kenzie asked, scowling at that she resigned.

“Nope,” Aiden said, grinning down at her. “You can leave your stuff in the closet. I lock the door during parties, so nobody is going to steal it or anything.”

“Paranoid much?” she asked, one corner of her mouth tipping up into a smirk.

“More like I’ve walked in here at the end of the night to find you fucking in my bed way too many times.”

Kenzie’s face blanched, but she nodded. “Makes sense.”

ts, and Aiden nodded and extended his hand. “Shall we?”

She laced her fingers through his. “We shall.”

“I hate Less than an hour later, the house and backyard were packed wall-with bodies.

Aiden and Kenzie were in the living room, sunk side-by-side into throomcouch while Jack held court, regaling the room with one of his ov 1gertipsstories.

r to the “And that’s how I found myself missing both of my eyebrows tw ll caps,before roster pictures. I had to ask one of the sorority girls to com them on for me.”

The entire room burst out laughing, cheers floating to the ceiling toasted Jack’s fearlessness.

bsessed “Speaking of dares,” Jack said, gaze zeroing in on Kenzie and Ai think it’s time we initiate bunny into the club.”

ut that. “Jack, no,” Aiden said firmly, though his words were swallowed shouts of affirmation from various teammates.

Bunny, Louder, he said, “Girlfriends are supposed to be exempt fro bullshit!”

ounding As previously stated, Kenzie wasn’t his girlfriend. But Aiden was to fudge the truth a little if it meant sparing Kenzie from whatever Ja ff here.cooking up.

,” Jack’s grin turned wicked. “Under normal circumstances,) into aabsolutely right. But you’re a mostly dare-free zone for the season. means your girl has to step up to the plate.”

people Aiden turned to Kenzie, who met his gaze with wide eyes. He tripped in her neck. Without looking away from him, she said t “What’s the dare?”

“I’m glad you asked, bunny.”

“Kenzie, you don’t have to do this—”

to-wall “—we’ll give you an easy one,” Jack was saying.

the low “—we can leave right now and forget this whole thing,” Aiden told
“I want you to kiss your boy in front of everyone.”

vn dare Both of them turned to Jack at the same time, and said in unison, “W

Aiden had not been expecting that. He remembered that innocen
to dayshe’d given her at the bar the night they met, the appetizer to a main co
ie drawdesperately wanted to devour. But as badly as he wanted to kiss the
right off of her, getting physical hadn’t been part of the deal. P
as theywouldn’t subject her to the whims of his sadistic teammates.

Kenzie pushed herself up and scooted to the edge of the cou
iden. “Ishoulders rising and falling as she deeply inhaled and exhaled
standing. Then, much to Aiden’s surprise, she turned to him and reac
l up byhis hand.

Her fingers shook against his as she pulled him to his feet.

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o Jack,

“I’m glad you asked, bunny.”

“Kenzie, you don’t have to do this—”

“—we’ll give you an easy one,” Jack was saying.

“—we can leave right now and forget this whole thing,” Aiden told her.

“I want you to kiss your boy in front of everyone.”

Both of them turned to Jack at the same time, and said in unison, “What?”

Aiden had not been expecting that. He remembered that innocent brush he’d given her at the bar the night they met, the appetizer to a main course he desperately wanted to devour. But as badly as he wanted to kiss the lipstick right off of her, getting physical hadn’t been part of the deal. Plus, he wouldn’t subject her to the whims of his sadistic teammates.

Kenzie pushed herself up and scooted to the edge of the couch, her shoulders rising and falling as she deeply inhaled and exhaled before standing. Then, much to Aiden’s surprise, she turned to him and reached for his hand.

Her fingers shook against his as she pulled him to his feet.



WITH A CONFIDENCE SHE didn't feel, Kenzie held her hand Aiden.

This was what she'd wanted, right? Experiences like this were what she'd come back to college, and why she'd approached Aiden with this crazy plan. If those experiences included being dared to kiss this smokin' hot hockey player in front of a room of people...so be it.

Before the episode that had taken her out of commission her senior year she'd always been a flirt. Some girls grew up sheltered and innocent under the watchful eyes of their older brothers.

Not her.

She'd always been...adventurous. She'd lost her virginity at sixteen while she'd certainly been more reserved in recent years, that flirty, coquette girl still lived somewhere inside her. Being near Aiden had that very slowly herself undoing the locks and chains on the cage in which she'd barricaded herself.

Aiden slipped his hand into hers as she attempted to pull him to a position—though his quads did the bulk of the work. Standing this close, he towered over her, his oversized frame making her average one seem pitiful in comparison.

When they were toe to toe in the center of the room, Aiden pulled her back with a tug on her wrist and settled his hands low on her hips, his long fingers curving around and brushing that spot where her back met her ass.

He leaned down, pressed his mouth against her ear, and said, “We don’t have to do this, bunny. I can walk you home right now. We can even stop to get ice cream on the way.”

Kenzie pulled back to look at him, momentarily losing herself in the intensity of his molten-chocolate eyes. She reached up to brush her fingertips against his sharp jaw, the stubble there scratching her skin. “It’s okay, Fuller,” she said quietly. “I want to.”

“You two have kissed before, haven’t you?” Jack asked, breaking the tension as they’d been wrapped in.

Aiden’s stricken expression surely mirrored her own, and he shook his head once, twice. Obviously, that teasing contact the night they’d met was not for the faint of heart or year, count.

Jack cackled. “Even better!” he said. “What better time than now?”

Kenzie’s eyes darted around the room, noticing for the first time all the cameras pointed in their direction. “Fuck,” she breathed, anxiety evident, “We’re going to end up on The Green again.”

This was surely a terrible idea, and it would take Kenzie days to list a dozen reasons why. Reflexively, she dug her fingertips into Aiden’s palms as she attempted to both anchor herself and quell the shaking in her hands in some measure.

tanding Aiden's head shot up, eyes sweeping the crowd. Then he said, "Lose, hey you know the rules," gesturing to all the phones.

etite in "Ahh, yes, thank you for reminding me." Jack ran into the kitchen and came back with a wicker basket Kenzie had seen holding various items earlier. "Ladies and gentlemen, all phones into the basket, please! Darling, this is a phone-free zone."

A collective groan rose to the ceiling, but the group complied, dumping their devices into the basket as Jack made his way around.

top and "Are you sure about this?" Aiden asked quietly.

Kenzie took a deep breath, the tips of her breasts brushing Aiden's chest. A jolt of heat shot straight between her legs. God, it had been an embarrassment of the first order since she'd been this close to a guy.

he said Finally, she whispered, "Yes."

Aiden nodded, and Kenzie swallowed around the lump in her throat. The spell of anxiety remaining tangled in her chest. It spread down her arms and fingers, which trembled as she slid them to Aiden's shoulders.

ook his When Aiden raised his hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, she didn't notice his fingers also shook. Some of her nerves eased. He gave her a small, wobbly smile, and said, "It'll be over before you know it."

And then, he pressed his mouth to hers.

l of the In a room full of people, Kenzie should've been uncomfortable with the PDA. Only, the moment Aiden's lips met hers, all other thoughts fled from her mind.

t all the His full mouth was soft, softer than she'd imagined—and she'd imagined it. He was tentative at first, but when she reached up to brush his hair with her fingers, accidentally knocking the hat from his head, his restraint seemed to go out the window. One moment the kiss was s

DeLuca, sweet, and the next he was opening up for her, running his tongue along the seam of her mouth, then thrusting it inside when she gasped at the sensation and It had been too damn long since she'd been kissed, and his strong hands on her waist seemed to be the only thing keeping her on her feet. When his hands moved one up to tilt her chin back with his thumb, tangling those long fingers in her hair, he came to her from a new angle, kissing her harder, their clothes shortening.

Kenzie was moments away from ripping his clothes off right there when he pulled away, eyes nearly black with desire. A cheer went up from the crowd. "Not bad for the first time!" one of his teammates yelled, and Kenzie blinks rapidly, clearing the haze Aiden's kiss had painted around her.

"Shut up, Luke," Aiden growled, and the crowd laughed.

Kenzie raised a hand to her mouth, which felt swollen and bruised. "Are you okay?" Aiden asked, curling his hands around her upper arms, so much like he'd done that day outside the cafeteria when she'd been trying to get away from him.

Now...now she desperately wanted to get him alone, to get closer to her, closer until no space remained between them.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice hoarse. "Can we go?"

"Yes," Aiden said without hesitation, trailing a hand down to her hip with the tug of her from the living room, through the kitchen, and to his bedroom. True to his word, he removed a key from a chain around his neck and unlocked the door, then pulled her in and closed the door behind them.

Once it was closed, he leaned back against it, loosing a sigh.

Kenzie moved away from him and sat down hard on his bed, bass filling the room, all music and voices from the partygoers drifting in from the backyard. She took a deep breath and

ong theeyes popped open when the springs squeaked, and he straightened but
sation. where he was.

ands on “I’m so sorry, Kenzie,” he said quietly.

hen he Kenzie huffed out a laugh. “It’s okay, Aiden. Seriously.”

fingers “Are you sure?”

breaths “Positive. Kissing you...wasn’t exactly a hardship.”

A grin spread across his face. “Ditto.”

when he Kenzie stood and walked over to her shoes and bag. “Can you w
crowd. home now?”

Kenzie “Of course,” he said, then gestured to her shoes. “Are you going
those, or do you want to borrow a pair of socks or something?”

Kenzie hadn’t even considered putting her shoes back on, but s
wasn’t keen on walking the few blocks home totally barefoot, so sh
r arms, “Socks would be great.”

ying to Aiden took two long steps toward his dresser, pulled open a draw
tossed her a balled up pair of black socks over his shoulder. She
ser andslipped them on, and they exited the room once again, pausing only so
could lock up.

By Friday night in East Lansing standards, it was still relatively ear
ers andclock had struck twelve only a few minutes before, and even two bl
droom. Grand River, Kenzie didn’t miss the sounds of drunken revelers floa
ck andthe balmy midnight air.

Aiden stuck close by her side as they traversed the darkened sic
along Linden Street before cutting up M.A.C. and joining the
rom theshuffling in and out of bars and restaurants along Albert.

Aiden’s Aiden stayed with her the entire way back to her building. Wh
came to a stop at the tenant entrance, Kenzie laughed, sure they ma

stayed the pair—her in socks that were clearly not her size, him with his hands shoved into his shorts pockets—but unable to find it within herself. Not to mention, her fellow students were too wrapped up in their own fun and enjoyment to pay her and Aiden any attention.

“Well,” Aiden said. “I hope you don’t hate me too much after tonight.”

“I don’t hate you.” *Not at all*, she added to herself. “But we can’t do it again.”

“We can’t?”

“This,” she said, gesturing between them, “isn’t real, remember? This is supposed to be a one time thing.”

Aiden stared at her for several long moments, blinking slowly like a deer caught in the headlights. A few times, he opened his mouth, as though he wanted to argue, but he ultimately snapped it closed again. Then he said, “Okay, I understand.”

He appeared sincere, and Kenzie breathed a sigh of relief. Her explanation was valid, but not the whole picture.

What she didn’t say was that she couldn’t do it again because Aiden enjoyed it too much. Did she want to kiss him again? Absolutely. It was...hot. Hot enough that she’d likely be thinking about it later, when she was alone in bed with a toy.

But that was beside the point.

Aiden’s kiss was intoxicating, the kind of thing she could become addicted to. Kenzie had already broken her number one rule by agreeing to be involved with him. Getting attached to this boy was a bad idea on so many levels she refused to let herself be sucked into his orbit any further.

She refused to be another one of his conquests.

Aiden didn’t seem like that kind of guy—not yet, anyway. But Kenzie learned the hard way that even the best on paper sometimes ended up

the worst in real life. That those blissful early days, when things were so new and perfect, would eventually give way to knock-down, drag-out fights, insecurities, and heartbreak.

“But I’ll see you soon, right?” Aiden asked, breaking through her mental spiral.

“Of course,” she said instantly, though not entirely sure she meant it.

Impulsively, Kenzie stepped forward and rose on her tiptoes to peck him on the cheek. “Good night, Fuller.”

Aiden grinned down at her. “Night, bunny.”

Then he turned on his heel and disappeared into the night.

an owl.

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at kiss

hen she



Berk

whatever you do, do NOT pick up the phone when your brother calls

Ki

how do you know he'll be calling

Seconds later, her phone buzzed in her hand, and her brother appeared on the screen. She pressed the side button to silence it, shooting a quick text to say she was in class—even though she wasn’t, probably knew that—then called Berkley.

“What is going on?” she asked her sister-in-law by way of greeting.

“Have you looked at The Green yet today?”

“No,” Kenzie said, clamping her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she continued typing a paper for her marketing class. “Why, what are you being

“... shiny there?”

“Brag-out” Berkley heaved a world-weary sigh and said, “Just go look at it. It’s damn old for this shit,” before abruptly hanging up.

Kenzie let her phone fall to the couch cushion she was perched on, finishing the paragraph she was working on before pausing to look at the Green.

Suddenly, she wished Berkley had warned her.

That all too familiar wave of dread washed over her.

Before she had the chance to go into a full-blown meltdown, her phone rang again.

“Bunny.”

“Fuller.”

“I take it you saw The Green,” he said.

“I did,” she replied.

“I am so, so sorry. We took everyone’s phones; you saw that. Someone must have snuck in after and shot that video. I don’t even know who it was other than I’m so sorry.”

Kenzie
me?

Kenzie bit off the grin that threatened to break free at his rant. Ending up on The Green wasn’t the end of the world for her—although her face and anxiety disagreed—but for him...

The video showed them at Aiden’s house the previous Friday, a crowd gathered around as they stood in the middle of the living room, lips and mouths locked together in an intimate embrace. The headline read: FEEL HIM FULLER [VIDEO], and the caption below said, *Aiden Fuller and his girlfriend, who teammates referred to as “bunny,” share a steamy moment at a hockey house party on Friday night.*

Kenzie had lived it, but watching a replay of it brought all of those feelings

she'd experienced rushing back to the surface of her consciousness. The heat of his skin had burned in all the places he'd touched her. How a low growl vibrated through his chest—and hers—when he'd slipped his tongue into her mouth the first time. The silken strands of his hair, the initial soft pressure at her lips, then the harder, more insistent way he'd kissed her.

It was, quite honestly, the most incredible kiss she'd ever had. Having a video in front of her now was better than any porn she could find.

"Aiden, seriously, it's okay. I'm more worried about you than me." She said into her phone. And that was the truth. They'd reached their little agreement as a way to help his image, and here she was, making things worse.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if your coach sees this video? Or Mitch, or someone else in the organization? I don't want you getting in trouble."

Aiden was quiet on the other end of the line for so long that Kenzie almost checked to make sure he hadn't hung up. Eons later, he said, "This is a little bit to say compared to streaking across campus, but I appreciate the concern."

Kenzie watched the video again. In the moment, the kiss had felt like it lasted for hours. According to the time stamp, it had really only been a few minutes.

A few minutes with their mouths fused together, and Kenzie was already having crowd her feelings over this guy.

God save her.

"Do you or the guys have any idea who took it?"

"It honestly could've been anyone," he said, resigned. "We took it out from everyone who had been in the room, obviously, but there were plenty of people outside. Any asshole could've walked in and decimated her feelings."

he way record and send that video to The Green. I'm just sorry you ended
can had collateral damage."

into her "Collateral damage? Hardly," Kenzie said. "Being seen making o
s of his you is going to do wonders for my image."

Aiden snorted. "Okay, smartass."

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"Of course," he said. "But hey, I just walked into the rink for a t
session. I'll talk to you later?"

way to "Sure," she said. "I'm apparently your girlfriend after all."

Another laugh, and then, "Bye, bunny."

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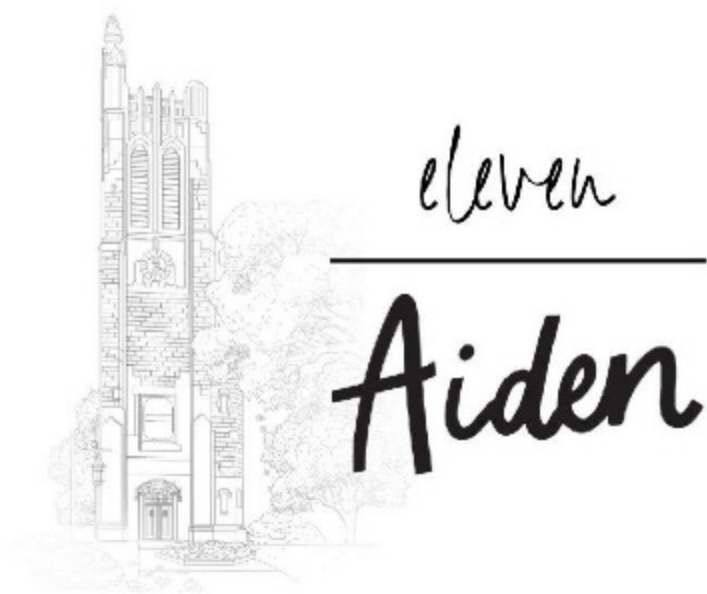
"So we're good then?"

"Of course," he said. "But hey, I just walked into the rink for a training session. I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure," she said. "I'm apparently your girlfriend after all."

Another laugh, and then, "Bye, bunny."

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“CAN I COME OVER?”

The week after the kiss, Aiden was holed up in his room, the sound of his roommates rearranging the living room, dining, and kitchen furniture filtering in beneath his door.

“Why?”

“Jack and Asher decided to host a beer pong tournament.”

“On a Wednesday night?” Kenzie asked, tone incredulous, and smirked. On the assumption that she would say yes, Aiden put her on his feet and walked to his desk, unzipping his backpack to shove his laptop and textbooks into it.

“My thoughts exactly,” he told her as he slung the bag over his shoulder and grabbed his keys. “So what do you say? I really need a quiet place to study.”

The line was silent for a long moment until Kenzie said, “Sure, come over. But all we’re doing is studying.”

“Scout’s honor.”

“Yeah, you’re a real Boy Scout alright,” she said quietly before she went dead.

Aiden barked out a laugh. *This girl.*

After the kiss the week before, he’d struggled to clear her from his mind and focus on things that mattered, like hockey and his classes, even though the former was in a bit of a tailspin at the moment. Unfortunately, that had been easier said than done.

And that wasn’t to say Kenzie didn’t matter. He enjoyed spending time with her, and he cared about her...as a friend.

Okay, and he definitely wanted to get in her pants, but he respected her boundaries.

Even if their kiss *had* been incredible. Aiden wasn’t a romantic, but he had a stretch of the imagination, and that was the kind of kiss that could make a man weak in the knees. The kind that could easily send his mind spiraling with a thousand thoughts of the future, and how he could make sure she was included in it.

The kind that nearly made him want to drop to the floor and worship at Aiden’s feet.

Yeah, he had to get his shit together. Kenzie had made it perfectly clear that nothing would ever happen again; they’d simply had a mutually beneficial arrangement, and now he had to keep his head on straight. He had a contract waiting for him in the spring, *had* to be his main focus for now. He couldn’t afford to get all turned around by a pretty girl and lose sight of what was most important.

Ten minutes later, Kenzie buzzed him into her building, greeting him at the door in a pair of grey sleep shorts that made her ass look *obscene*,

oversized Warriors t-shirt with her brother's last name and number on the lineback.

Which, he supposed, was also *her* last name.

That was going to take some getting used to.

is mind “Hi, bunny,” he said as he stepped inside, taking in the space. To his mind it was as if there was a large living room with a sectional and coffee table—both littered with books and papers—positioned in front of a big wall-mounted TV. To the left was the kitchen, with bright white cabinets, stainless steel appliances, and a large time-impressive island lined with four bar stools. Straight ahead was a hallway with a glass door, the windows affording a view out across campus two blocks away. A hallway branched off from the kitchen, which Aiden assumed led to her bedroom.

by any “Sorry about the mess,” she said, gesturing to her work spread out on the floor in the living room.

pinning She walked away from him, her long ponytail swishing across his back, but Aiden remained rooted to the spot.

Now that he was here, he was unsure what to do. He was rarely ever in a room with a girl in a purely platonic situation. This was territory he didn't know how to navigate.

ly clear “Aiden?” Kenzie asked. “Are you okay?”

mutually “Yes?” he said, the word more question than answer.

ockey, “Then why are you standing there like a statue?”

us right “Sorry,” he said, stepping forward and dropping his bag on the floor on the hardwood floors next to the arm of her couch, where a small end table held a box of tissues and a small framed photo of three children. He picked up the photo, taking in the subjects. In the middle was clearly Kenzie, her hair a wild mess around her shoulders, and below her and a body of water behind her.

on the either side of her, towering over her and bracketing her like bookends. Two good-looking boys with chocolate-brown hair and ocean-blue eyes that matched hers.

“You were a cute kid,” he said, waving the frame at her.

“Yeah,” Kenzie said, stepping up next to him to look at the picture. “That’s our cabin up in New York.” She pointed at one boy, then the other. “That’s Nate.”

Even without her help, Aiden could’ve picked out Brent. In the photo, Brent was probably in his late-teens, already tall, but lanky, not yet having grown into the man Aiden knew today. Nate, in comparison, was a few inches shorter and more delicately built. Whereas Brent was all angles and sharpness, the shadows of defined muscles visible under his skin, Nate was softer, as though someone had taken Brent and blurred him slightly out of focus.

With their arms hooked under her thighs, Kenzie beamed crookedly at whoever was behind the camera, showcasing a missing front tooth. Brent grinned widely as well, Nate preening for the shot while Brent was turned on his little sister.

“What an ugly family,” Aiden said with mock disgust, setting the photo down.

Kenzie gave him a shove but laughed. “I know, right? You’ve seen this before. It’s a wonder Berkley never kicked him out of bed. And don’t even get me started on Nate.”

“He can’t be any worse than Brent,” Aiden said, continuing the joke. “Hey, that’s my brother you’re talking about. He may be a jackass sometimes, but he’s *my* jackass.”

Aiden raised his hands placatingly. “Okay, okay.”

s, were “Nate isn’t worse than Brent, exactly,” Kenzie said. “Both are v
yes that handsome for their own good, and they know it. They’re both inc
driven, not to mention smart, charming, and protective of me—
different ways.”

“That’s “How so?”

“Brent, “Brent is the oldest, so he’s always been the leader, the father figur
though we have a perfectly amazing one of those already. Nate was
oto, he high school, smoking pot, doing drugs, staying out drinking and part
g filled night, while Brent was busy working his ass off to make a career
inch hockey. And me...” She shoveled a stack of cloth samples onto the fl
es and sat on the couch, patting the seat next to her, which Aiden took. “
ate was baby. Brent was eight when I was born, and legend says he rarely let
out of his sight or let anyone else near me in those early months. I love ho
we are, and how much he loves me, but sometimes it’s...”

edly at “Suffocating?” Aiden supplied, giving her a small smile when she r
ent and “I have a little sister, too, remember? She’s twelve, so the age gap betw
’s gaze is actually bigger than the one between you and Brent. I understand
protective.”

e frame Aiden never expected to find he had anything in common with Bre
The man was a legend, both on and off the ice, and Aiden was a
Brent. talented kid from Chicago who apparently had a proclivity for fuckin
get meepic, public ways.

But when it came to his little sister? Eloise had been the light of
since the day she was born. Aiden was nearly twice her age, having
g about twelve four months after she was born, and he had made the co
decision, even as a pre-teen, to always look out for her and do what
could to save her from unnecessary pain.

way too Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to protect her from everything. credibly Kenzie hadn't spoken, as though sensing Aiden was about to just insomething difficult with her. And for some reason, he *wanted* to t He'd never been compelled to share with anyone before, save teammates. As a rule, Aiden didn't do emotional relationships. e, evenwatching his teammates and his family and friends go through it, h wild inthey only bred drama and heartbreak. Why did he now feel urged t ying allsuch a raw, vital piece of his heart?

out of Aiden swallowed around the lump in his throat and said, "My d oor andwhen I was fifteen."

I'm the Kenzie gasped and settled a hand on his forearm. "I'm so sorry, Full me out Aiden sniffed, somehow not embarrassed to be emotional in front w closegirl. "I don't think I've told you this, but I'm from Chicago. I grew Naperville, which is about thirty miles outside of the city. My dad ioded executive in the Redhawks organization, and my mom is a loan spec veen usone of the big downtown banks. In the summers, when it was nice c feelingdad would ride his motorcycle to work. Chicago winters can be harsh liked to enjoy the good weather whenever he could. The day he died nt Jean.the off season, and he was at the rink for some contract negot a semi-Afterward, he and some of his colleagues went to dinner, and by tl g up inDad headed home, it was dark."

Kenzie's grip tightened on his arm, and Aiden covered her hand v his lifeown, grateful for the support. "My dad didn't drink. Like...ever. In m ; turnedlife, I saw him drink maybe two beers. On the way home that night, nsciousplowed into at a four-way-stop intersection. A big Bronco mowed hir ever heright there in the middle of the road. My dad died at the scene."

Kenzie shocked Aiden by climbing into his lap and throwing her

around his neck. He squeezed her tight, surprised to find they were
sharecrying. "I'm so sorry, Aiden," she whispered against his neck.

ell her. "The guy who hit him *was* drunk," he said. "But he tried to blame
for his accident on my dad. Said my dad ran a stop sign when he didn't have
. From right-of-way."

e knew "Well fuck that guy," Kenzie said, tone nasally from her tears.

o share Aiden choked out a laugh and said, "He's in prison, so he probably
fucked daily."

ad died Kenzie pulled away and smiled down at him, moisture glittering
long eyelashes. And then, as if realizing how close they were, how precious
er." their position, she pushed off him and scrambled to her own side
of this couch, instantly putting three feet of space between them and taking
up in warmth that had settled on Aiden's chest with her.

was an And honestly, what the fuck was happening to him?

ialist at "Really, Fuller, I'm sorry about your dad. But I can see why you're
out, my protective of your sister."

1, so he "Damn, that's really what started this whole conversation, is
, it was Overprotective big brothers," he said with a laugh as he swiped at his
emotions. Kenzie nodded solemnly. "And in light of this conversation, I'll try
to give my brother some slack."

Aiden nodded back, then tugged his backpack toward him and worked
with his laptop.

y entire "Can I ask you a question?"

he was "You just did, Fuller."

n down "So, little confession: I eavesdropped on you and Brent at the
dinner, and I have to know...is that really how you see me? That I
am some fuckboy with no redeeming qualities?"

re both Kenzie sat motionless, eyes blinking in slowly. “Of course not,” she said. “I mean, at first...yeah, I definitely thought you were a fuckboy. But I’m here only because you let me believe you were. Now that I’m getting to know you a little better, you’re the furthest thing from that. I told my brother that stuff because it was easier to act like you don’t matter and save face with him than to tell the truth.”

ly gets “Which is?” Aiden prompted.

“That I like being around you way more than I care to admit.”

on her An irrepressible smile stretched across Aiden’s face. “Except you just don’t know it, and I’m never going to let you forget it.”

of the Kenzie groaned and tossed her head back, dramatically covering her face with her hands. Aiden chuckled.

“My turn to ask you a question,” she said through her fingers.

“Shoot.”

re extra “Do you play hockey because you actually love it, or because you just love the idea of it?”

sn’t it? Aiden stared at her in shocked silence. How was it possible that they could so easily cut right to the heart of him, despite the fact that they had only just met? Aiden himself had considered the same question countless times over the course of the last eight years. Did he keep playing because he loved it? Or did he keep playing because his father loved the game so much that he wanted to please him, and it was something they had shared when he’d still been alive?

“My dad was actually born in Michigan,” Aiden said finally. “He grew up not far from here, in Mason, and went to the University of Illinois for college. That’s where he and my mom met, and she was a Chicago girl. He was a hockey player, and I’m just followed her anywhere, and when she told him she wanted to start a family in her home city, my dad didn’t argue. My first real memory was

he said. is us driving up to Detroit so he could take me to a Warriors game. But that's he was working within the Chicago Steel organization, so he had a lot of free time on his hands. I must have been six or seven, but I was hooked because of the speed of the game, the hits, the finesse, the crowds, the theatrics of it. When we went home the next day, I asked to be enrolled in whatever ice hockey program he could find, and the rest is history.

“So to answer your question, it's a bit of both. I started playing because it was common ground for my dad and me. He loved the game so much that he made a career out of it. He got hired by the Redhawks when I was ten. At the time Eloise was born, I'd turned into quite the player, and by the time I was 18, I was already garnering a lot of attention from scouts in the junior colleges. I signed with the National Team Development Program in Detroit not long after he died, actually. Moving away so soon after he died was insane, but it saved me. Then I entered the draft in 2018, and the San Jose Sharks picked me in the fourth round. It felt like a sign...not just a sign that I could keep playing if I continued to develop my game, but a sign from my dad that he was proud of me and he was right there with me.”

And that was the truth of it. Aiden played hockey for two people: himself and his dad. When the day came that his career was over, he'd partied hard and he'd game happily—if a bit melancholic—but not before he exhausted every avenue available in order to stay as long as possible.

There was nothing as intoxicating to him, no drug or drink that could give him the same high, as stepping onto the ice. The chilly bite to the air, the moment he skated a few laps and set his heart pumping hard against the roar of the thousands of fans, whether he was on home or away ice, sent their adrenaline straight into his veins. The crush of his teammates after a goal with him

ck then win. The bus rides and plane rides, endless hours of practice and weight more media obligations.

ed. The All of it. Every last second was worth it to play the game he loved. f it all. game his dad had loved.

skating Kenzie, apparently processing everything he'd dumped on her, remained silent. Aiden, who didn't handle fraught pauses in conversation well, pulled up the paper he'd been working on that was due the next day.

By the Sometime later, Kenzie finally said, "The Warriors is a new Dad organization."

ors and Aiden stared at her for a beat, then burst out laughing.

in Ann "I pour my entire heart out to you," he said through a chuckle, his loss different kinds of tears from his eyes, "and that's the best you can do and the with?"

ign that Kenzie smiled sheepishly and, on a giggle, said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. I appreciate you trusting me with all of that, though."

Aiden shrugged. "You're easy to talk to."

himself, "You say that like it's a surprise," Kenzie said with a little smirk. From the he wanted to kiss away. A moment later, her expression turned solemn. Every last remind me a lot of Brent. Before Berkley, he was a workaholic. His family were his entire life. And they still are. But when that world gave expanded to include Berkley, his priorities shifted. *She* became his first, driven one priority. And now that they've got a baby on the way..."

ler. The "Bunny..." Aiden said, reaching for her. She swatted his hands away.

hooting "It's okay. I know he's my brother and he'll always love me. This goal or a just changing, and I don't do great with change. But I have to face it on."

lights and Aiden quirked an eyebrow at her. “You moved clear across the country on a whim.”

and. The “It wasn’t on a whim,” she said, standing from the couch and moving him into the kitchen, where she rummaged around in the fridge until she had extracted a bottle of water. “Want one?”

opened “Sure.”

due the She grabbed another and walked back, dropping one in his lap, and narrowly avoided clipping his dick.

is great “I didn’t move on a whim,” she said. “I moved to be closer to my family and our business. They are not the same.”

“That’s still a big change, from New York to Michigan.”

wiping Kenzie shrugged. “I like changes I can control. My brother getting married and starting a family and treating me like some rebellious teenager instead of the adult I am? That’s completely out of my hands.”

‘t know Aiden sensed there was more to it than that, a reason why she was so concerned about her brother’s happiness and bringing a new life into the world—a life that would be her niece or nephew. He wanted to press her open and spill all her secrets onto the floor where he could sweep them up. “You go through them and find out exactly what made this woman tick.”

key and And with *that* ridiculous thought, Aiden returned his attention to his family laptop.

number “I’m sure your dad is really, really proud of you,” she said into the phone sometime later.

y. “Thanks, bunny,” Aiden said. “I appreciate it.”

ngs are “No problem,” she replied, gaze downcast, and the air thickened around them.

How would she react if he reached for her right now, settled his hands on her hips?

entry on her hips and dragged her back onto his lap? If he buried his nose in that spot where her shoulder sloped up to meet her neck, where the prettily blended of her perfume lingered? If he ground her onto his lap, showing her exactly what those little shorts and her kindness had done to him?

He opened his mouth to say something, to cross that barrier and break the fucking rules...and his phone rang.

Where it was anyone else and Aiden would've ignored it, but the readout showed his little sister's name, and he never passed up the chance to talk to her.

brother "Hey, kiddo!" he said when he answered.

"Hi, Den," she said in her soft, sweet voice, and Aiden smiled at her nickname. As a toddler, she'd struggled to pronounce his full name, so he'd married-shortening it to "Den," and had called him such ever since.

instead of "What are you doing?"

"I just got home from dance," she said. "Now Mom and Dan are making me do my homework, but I told them I would only do it if I got to talk to you first."

her, to Aiden chuckled and pulled his phone from his ear, tapping the speakerphone button. "What kind of homework?"

"Math," she said. "And I have a book report to write."

to his "On which book?"

"Well, I get to pick," she said, her voice muffled as though she had her hand over the speaker. "It's a summer reading book report. Which is kind of so silly, considering we're already several weeks into the school year."

"Ahh, I see." It amazed him sometimes, how smart Eloise was, and how quickly she was growing. "What book are you going to choose?"

"Harry Potter," she replied matter-of-factly.

ends on "That was my favorite growing up," Kenzie said absently, then lifted

hat softhead and clapped a hand over her mouth.

y floral “Who was that?” Eloise shrieked.

ing her “Calm down, El,” he said. “That was just my friend, Kenzie. studying together.”

reak all “Excuse you, Aiden,” another voice said, and Aiden cringed as hi entered the chat. “Since when do you *study* with girls?”

ved his Aiden winced and shot Kenzie an apologetic look. The proble suffering through adolescence without a father was that he’d had to his mother during the awkward stages of maturing. When his bo l at the started changing, when he’d started having...urges, when he began r name, girls in more than a friendly kind of way, he’d gone to his mother for and guidance. She hadn’t married his stepfather until a few years ago then, the deeply personal bond between mother and son had solidified.

making All that to say, his mother was well aware of his antics. He’d nev k to you secrets from her, not after the loss they’d suffered together.

“She’s just a friend, Mom, seriously.”

ng the “I don’t believe you,” his mother said. “But I’ll let it slide. El, hang phone and get started on that report.”

His sister *hmped* and Aiden could practically see her pout. “I have she said. “Bye, Den. Love you.”

had her “Bye, kiddo. Love you, too.”

think is Aiden glanced up at Kenzie to apologize for his mom, finding in ’ stricken look on her face, eyes brimming with tears.

nd how “What’s the matter?” he asked in alarm.

“Nothing,” she said, attempting a smile that wobbled at the edges two just remind me a lot of how me and Bee used to be.”

ited her “Oh, bunny,” Aiden said, scooting next to her and throwing an arm

her shoulders, curling her into his side. Surprisingly, she came willingly. Aiden settled them against the cushions. “You should talk to him. You can’t resist. I’m sure he’ll want to know that you’re hurting.”

Kenzie was quiet for a long moment, then abruptly pushed away from him and swiped at her cheeks. “No, it’s fine,” she said. “I’m just emotional.”

She leaned over the coffee table and gathered up a stack of magazines, shuffling them into order and reclining into the corner of the couch. “Now, I’d hate to make a liar out of you. You told me you’re here studying, so let’s study.”

Dumbstruck, Aiden stared as she busied herself with whatever she was doing, by those sheets in her hands. Eventually, when he finally accepted that she was serious, he turned off the TV, picked up his laptop, pulled up his online class materials, and got to work.

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her shoulders, curling her into his side. Surprisingly, she came willingly, and Aiden settled them against the cushions. “You should talk to him. You’re his sister. I’m sure he’ll want to know that you’re hurting.”

Kenzie was quiet for a long moment, then abruptly pushed away from him and swiped at her cheeks. “No, it’s fine,” she said. “I’m just being emotional.”

She leaned over the coffee table and gathered up a stack of papers, shuffling them into order and reclining into the corner of the couch, away from Aiden. “Now, I’d hate to make a liar out of you. You told your mom you’re here studying, so let’s study.”

Dumbstruck, Aiden stared as she busied herself with whatever was on those sheets in her hands. Eventually, when he finally accepted that was the end of whatever sharing circle they’d found themselves in, he turned to his computer, pulled up his online class materials, and got to work.



KENZIE WASN'T PROUD OF herself, but for the week after she and Aiden had spilled their guts to each other, she avoided him like the plague.

There were simply too many things about his relationship with her that struck chords with Kenzie, and she'd found it difficult to look Aiden in the eye after he'd unintentionally broken down some of her walls. Told, she didn't like the way he made her feel—not only about Brent but the way she would fit into his life going forward, but in general.

Aiden Fuller was sex on a stick, and those moments she'd spent curled up in his lap while he poured his heart out to her? That wasn't what she'd been looking for. Physical intimacy for the sake of keeping up appearances was one thing. But emotional intimacy? That was more than Kenzie had been looking for, and she needed to distance herself from him and all the long-slurping emotions he'd stirred.

Like she said, she wasn't proud of herself.

For an entire week, she purposely avoided anywhere he might be.

either showed up to their class late, well after he'd already arrived, or enough back that university requirements wouldn't allow him to sit anyway. And as soon as their professor called time on the session, she power walking away from the building, taking a different route every he couldn't track her down on his stupid little moped. She didn't eat at the campus cafeterias, especially not Case, choosing instead to DoorDash meals, or go down to HopCat when she was craving crack fries and a beer. Avoiding him allowed her to clear her head a bit.

On Wednesday afternoon, Kenzie and Sofia exited the Comm Arts and Sciences building together, intent on getting lunch somewhere on campus.

"So are you going to the football game on Saturday?" Sofia asked. Kenzie nodded and continued to walk down the sidewalk, heading toward the center of campus.

The concrete pathways were dusted with fallen leaves, too fresh to be crushed under her feet but pretty in their kaleidoscope of autumn shades. Halting Sofia by throwing out an arm, she withdrew her phone and snapped a picture of their feet—Kenzie's thick-soled vinyl boots and the beige canvas platform sandals—to post on Instagram.

"I hadn't planned on it," Kenzie said when they resumed walking. "I've got a lot of work to get done."

Sofia signed "What, like...homework?"

Kenzie laughed. "Well, yes," she said sheepishly.

Sofia regained "Girl, no."

Kenzie answered "Why not? I hate leaving things until the last minute."

"You're way too hot to spend a Saturday alone *doing homework*," Sofia spoke the last two words as though they were some kind of disease.

Sofia said "I don't even have a ticket," Kenzie said.

sat far Sofia waved her hand, dismissing the protest. “Those are easy with her C’mon, Kenzie. You can take a day off to enjoy yourself. Come to the bolted, with me and my sisters. The student section is insane, and I think you day soit.”

Kenzie hesitated, quickly realizing she had no legitimate reason to wash her out. Hadn’t her reasons for coming back to college included doing beer. college things like attending football games? And making friends? The only person she’d really managed to befriend, other than Jessica, was Aiden. And here on study session the week before was any indication, Aiden Fuller was the kind of person she could befriend. Not with the way her body reacted as they like a magnet being pulled toward an iron surface whenever he was near. No, she needed to put some much needed distance between them, and the crunch was the perfect opportunity.

“Are there like assigned seats, or is it a first come, first served one and thing?”

Sofia laughed again. “It’s more like the Hunger Games. Some people to the gates hella early so they can be closer to the field. Some tailgate “I have kickoff and roll in around the start of the second quarter.”

“Which one are you?” Kenzie asked as Sofia steered them down the in front of Shaw, heading in the direction of the sports campus, Spartan Stadium loomed like a mountain in the distance.

Sofia smirked. “I’m the kind of girl to get there hella early,” she said. Kenzie wasn’t surprised by the admission. “I need to get as close to the” Sofia as possible. It increases my chances of getting on TV during the game.

After they’d met during the first month of classes, Kenzie had Instagram stalked Sofia and had found one of the most beautifully

to get feeds she'd ever seen. It featured fashion, beauty, college, and soror
e game with enough of her family mixed in to balance it all out. Kenzie was su
i'd love—but also not—to find Sofia had well over one hundred thousand follo

Her nine thousand seemed paltry in comparison.

to bow Kenzie wanted to pick Sofia's brain, ask how she got into influenc
typical what kind of compensation she received.

hus far, Kenzie always had the option to ask Lexie these questions, but she
a—whowant to seem like that younger hanger-on sibling trying to be like
if their kids. Sofia was the perfect person to ask, their budding friendship giv
not themore than enough reason to be curious.

to him, Tugging Sofia along, Kenzie said, "Come on. We can go get lunch a
ar. can tell me all about football game etiquette, and give me some poir
and thisgrowing my Instagram following."

They continued along the path and crossed the street, bypassing the
type ofnear the International Center and coming out in front of the football p
field.

ople get "First rule is always go for cute over comfort," Sofia said. "You
ite until know who you're going to run into, or whether or not you'll be feat
the broadcast."

he path "Even if it's freezing outside?" Kenzie asked as they passed the Dai
whereFootball Building. Unwittingly, Sofia had led them right to the doors o
cafeteria, and Kenzie's blood ran cold.

uid, and What were the chances Aiden would be in there right now w
ie frontteammates? And what were the chances he'd even see her if he was
" she figured, but then again, the chances that the guy she'd met at
y haveduring Welcome Weekend would end up in one of her classes, and the
curated

ity life, her down a short while later in the same building they were about to enter. Surprised also been slim, and yet...

owers. “Even if it’s freezing outside,” Sofia confirmed, still caught up in conversation at hand, oblivious to Kenzie’s inner turmoil.

ing and “I’m going to be honest, Sofia,” she told her as they swiped in the cafeteria, “I have very little Michigan State gear.”

She didn’t Sofia spun on her heels, hair flying around her head like a steel the big curtain. “But your brother went to school here.”

ing her Kenzie laughed at Sofia’s confusion. “I’m aware.”

“So you should have tons of stuff,” Sofia said, like it made all the sense in the world.

ters on “When Brent was in school, I was barely a teenager,” Kenzie reminded her. “My tastes, and my chest, have changed a lot since then.”

She traffic Sofia laughed as they sidled up to a counter for rice bowls. “Okay, practice enough. But that’s perfect, because now I can take you thrifting!”

“You think we’ll be able to find gear at thrift stores?”

She never Sofia gave her a look that said, *girl please*, and responded with, “I’m supposed to be a fellow thrifter, Mackenzie Jean! You should already know the answer to that. Of *course* we’ll be able to find some gear.”

ugherty The girls got their food and settled at a two-person table in the middle of the dining space. Kenzie immediately clocked the number of eyes on them.

Before she could ask Sofia if the attention ever bothered her—she got the answer was *no*, anyway—Sofia yelled across the cafeteria.

? Slim, “Jack!” Sofia said, standing from her seat and waving her hand in the air like a marshaller directing a taxiing plane out to the runway.

on track With a wide smile, Jack, who had just walked in with Asher, Luke, and, of course, Aiden in tow, headed straight for their table.

ter had “Bunny!” Jack shouted when he spotted her. “We’ve missed you the house this week.”

in the At that moment, Kenzie wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Aiden sidled up and dragged Kenzie from her chair, wrapping h into the possessively around her waist and planting a smacking kiss on her che

“Kenzie is my girlfriend,” Aiden said proudly.

k black Kenzie wanted to punch him in the throat.

Sofia’s confusion turned to outright surprise in an instant, her ey raising impossibly higher, forehead scrunching like an accordion.

sense in “You’re dating Aiden Fuller,” Sofia said, awestruck. “I thought tl was just a dare? I didn’t think there was anything actually going on?”

minded Kenzie stifled a groan and turned to Sofia, a broad, fake smile pa her face. “We went on *one* date,” Kenzie said. “It’s nothing serious. ay, fair just hanging out.”

Kenzie felt more than saw Aiden’s gaze turn to the top of her head, whispered, “And you shouldn’t avoid the person you’re hanging out v ‘You’re an entire week.”

y know Shit, he was mad.

“It doesn’t look like *hanging out*,” Sofia said, lips turning up at the ddle of as she waved a hand at Kenzie and Aiden’s embrace. “You wo hem. Mackenzie Jean.”

guessed Kenzie smiled tightly, uncomfortable under such scrutiny. The absolutely nothing happening between her and Aiden, but he’d wa the air here and made it seem as though the opposite were true. Someho thought didn’t bother her nearly as much as it should have.

and, of “Mind if we join you?” Jack asked, grabbing two more tables and p them together before either girl could respond.

around “Sure!” Sofia said brightly, then turned her gaze to Kenzie. “Jack and I were just *hanging out*, too,” she added with a wink.

“Walk with me?” Aiden asked, not giving Kenzie the chance to respond before tugging her away from the group.

He stepped into line for the same meal Kenzie had on her own tray at the table and spun on her while the cooks prepared it.

“Why have you been ignoring me?”

Kenzie sighed, knowing there was no way she was getting out without providing a semi-believable response. But this was Aiden, the boy who had opened up to her in a way she was sure he’d never done before with a girl. The least she owed him was honesty.

“We got too close last week,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means this thing—” she gestured between them “—was never meant to be more than a surface level, mutually beneficial arrangement for one another. There weren’t supposed to be cozy, soul-baring hang out sessions in the living room.”

As she spoke, Aiden’s expression morphed from confusion to glee. “Like me, don’t you?”

Kenzie scoffed. Yes. “No.”

Aiden leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear in an echo of the way she’d pulled on him the last time they’d found themselves building together. “It’s okay to admit it, bunny. I like you, too.”

A shiver raced down Kenzie’s spine, and she pushed him away, turning her head in the direction of Sofia and the boys.

The boys appeared to have dispersed to get food of their own, and Sofia remained at the table. When their gazes connected, Sofia gave

and I gave a wide grin and thumbs up.

“I don’t like you, Aiden. Not like that, anyway,” Kenzie said, surprised by the firmness of her tone. “I just don’t want either of us to get confused. Turn this into something it’s not.”

Aiden smirked, unfazed. “Whatever you say.”

“I’ve just been busy,” she added, compelled to explain herself.

“Suuuuuure,” Aiden said with a look that told her he didn’t believe her. “Look...” he continued, lowering his voice to a whisper. “We might actually be dating, but I thought we really were becoming friends. You were with open up to anyone, let alone girls, and then you disappeared for a week after? That hurt, bunny. I’m man enough to admit it.”

Kenzie was taken aback by his admission. In her desire to spare him from pain, she’d wound up hurting him in the process.

“I didn’t mean to,” she said quietly, giving his arm a squeeze.

“Then why?”

She knew what he was asking, and she didn’t have a good explanation. “You had been the entire point of going radio silent—to avoid having to share things with him, things she wasn’t meant to be sharing with someone who wouldn’t be a part of her life long term.”

Although, it was getting harder and harder to imagine her life without Aiden in it.

What if...what if she could keep him?

No, she told herself firmly. That kind of thinking wouldn’t do either of them any good.

Aiden stared at her expectantly, his bowl of food clasped between his hands, those long fingers making the china look even more delicate.

“I don’t know,” she said finally.

Aiden blinked once, twice, and something Kenzie could’ve sworn and irritation flitted across his features, there and gone in a flash.

“Okay,” he said finally, and shifted his bowl to one hand, grabbing with the other.

“So are you guys going to the football game on Saturday?” Sofia asked her. Once Kenzie and Aiden rejoined the table.

“Duh,” said Jack, who had scooted closer to her and slung an arm over her seat back.

“You should sit with us!” Sofia said. “I convinced Kenzie to go with us.”

“Aww, bunny,” Aiden said, sliding his arm around her shoulder, twirling a lock of her hair around his fingers. “I thought you were going to tailgate with me and the boys beforehand?”

“I was?” Kenzie asked.

“Yes,” he said. “You promised me last week.”

She had done no such thing, and she really wanted to hang out with them. But when she opened her mouth to say so, her friend cut her off.

“We would love to join the hockey tailgate,” Sofia practically whistled, turning a sultry glance at each of the players gathered around them, looking at Jack.

In response, Jack leaned close and whispered in her ear. Sofia giggled, a high, musical sound.

When he pulled away, Jack said, “We’ll pick you up, bunny.”

Sofia tilted her head to the side, reminding Kenzie of a puppy when it wanted a treat. “Why do you keep calling her that?”

“Bunny?” Aiden asked, turning to smirk at Kenzie. He didn’t break contact with her as he said, “She ran away from me the first two times.”

her out. The guys started calling her my runaway puck bunny, and it st
rn was “That’s so sweet!” Sofia gushed.

If only she knew.

ng hers “It’s definitely something,” Kenzie said under her breath, and
pinched her thigh under the table.

a asked “What did you say to get her to finally agree?” Sofia asked.

Aiden’s grin widened, that ever-present twinkle in his chocola
n alongturning mischievous. “I made her an offer she couldn’t refuse.”

“You two are adorable,” Sofia said.

1 me.” “That reminds me, bunny,” Aiden said. “What are you doing Sunday
ers and Aiden’s palm burned a brand onto her skin, short circuiting her bra
joing tohe expected her to know what she was doing four days from now?

“Oh!” Sofia cut in before Kenzie could conjure up a response. “I v
talking to Jack here about an outing I’m going on with my sorority si
Uncle John’s. I asked him to be my date, and he said he’d only go if
1 Sofia.did. Why don’t we make it a double date?”

Sofia looked at them expectantly, a smile spread across he
purred, showcasing her perfectly straight white teeth.

ngering Kenzie couldn’t outright say no, and Aiden was apparently all
because he said, “That sounds perfect. That’s actually where I wanted
gled, aKenzie, but this sounds way more fun.”

Cutting her gaze to Jack, Kenzie noted that he looked pained, a
guessed he’d been hoping Aiden would say no so he could get out of it
n asked And the only reason Jack had probably agreed in the first place wa
could get laid.

ak eye Aiden had no such motivation, so what exactly was he getting out of
I asked Jack, Sofia, and Aiden all stared at her expectantly, so she quick

uck.” “Yeah, sure, that sounds amazing! Can’t wait.”

Everybody ignored her forced cheer.

This was going to be bad.

Aiden

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“Yeah, sure, that sounds amazing! Can’t wait.”

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THE SUBSEQUENT THREE DAYS between asking Kenzie on a date, meeting her outside Munn for the hockey tailgate on Saturday, a rush of classes, rink sessions, and far too many butterflies in his stomach, a guy who wanted to perform in front of thousands of people for a living.

Saturday morning, Aiden woke early when the vibrating of his phone on the nightstand dragged him from sleep.

“Hi, Mom,” he said around a yawn.

“Did I wake you?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it’s fine.”

“Maybe you should stop staying out so late drinking and get more sleep.”

“I stayed in last night.”

“You still had a party, didn’t you?”

Aiden laughed. “Okay, yes, we had a party. It’s fine, Mom. We’re in college and we’re not in season. We’re allowed to have friends over for drinks.”

He could practically hear the eye-roll in her silence before she said,

what's new, kid? I feel like I've hardly talked to you since school start

"You mean other than the fact that I'm suspended for ten games?"

"Yes, other than that."

"Well...we're tailgating today, and I'm excited for the game. An going on a date tomorrow."

"You're *what*?"

Aiden winced at the shrill tone his mother had adopted. "It's no deal," he said.

"Aiden, you've never brought a girlfriend home, and in high school only dates you had were to dances. This is a *very* big deal. Who is she girl you were *studying* with last week?"

"That's the one," he said, sitting up in bed and reclining against the headboard. "Her name is Kenzie and she's...The night I met her, she ran away from me, and the first time I asked her out, she handed me my ass each for" His mom laughed, wanting to know more.

ing. Succinctly, he told her about the alumni dinner and their study session. How exactly did he accurately describe Mackenzie Jean? How exactly capture the precise color of her eyes? The way his entire body tight with anticipation whenever she touched him, even if by accident? How he to be around her all the time?

It was insanity.

leep." "I told her about dad," he said. "And you know what? I liked sharing with someone."

"Sharing his loss doesn't make it hurt any less, but it does ease the pain a little bit," she reminded him, repeating her favorite mantra from the time she'd spent with her widow/widower support group.

id, "So "I really like her, Mom, and it freaks me out."

ed.” “Why?”

“Because I can’t afford any distractions from hockey right now, especially not when I can’t even play until next month. And this girl...”

d...I’m Aiden swallowed hard, cutting off that thought before it escaped.

He’d been about to say that this girl could become his entire world if she chose her, and he refused to admit that. Not yet, maybe not ever, and definitely not a big to his mom, who needled him endlessly about settling down with a nice girl and giving her grandbabies. Which was ridiculous considering he was only twenty-three and still in college.

e? That “You can have both,” was all his mom said.

“I don’t know how.” His voice was quiet, resigned.

inst his “Well, if you’re serious about this girl, you’ll figure it out.”

she ran A few minutes later, he and his mom disconnected, and Aiden dropped his head back against the solid wooden frame of his bed, scrubbing a hand over his face.

ion, but Where Mackenzie Jean was concerned, Aiden found himself doing things that had never crossed his mind before. He’d become surprised in attached to the girl over the course of the last month, but he couldn’t want ahead of himself. Their date could go a number of different ways, so he needed to keep his expectations low.

ing that Tailgating for football games was serious business. Everyone had a favorite spot on campus where they’d set up tents and grills, bars and games. Aiden spent hours leading up to the game drinking, playing, and socializing with his friends. The hockey team’s spot was, of course, the ice arena, which was only a block or so away from the stadium.

After the boys roused themselves, showered, and got ready, Aiden especially Jack made a Meijer run, stocking up on burgers and brats, chips and cheese, crackers, meats, and an obscene amount of beer, seltzers, and iced tea.

Even at ten in the morning, with kickoff still six hours away, campus was already clogged with game day traffic, and the boys crawled along, getting ever closer to their destination. Finally, they turned onto campus and immediately left into the Breslin Center parking lot, using their athletic pass to gain entrance. Aiden steered his Jeep to the far eastern side of the lot, which would allow them to hop over Birch Road and right onto the street to Munn.

“We’re going to have to take a few trips,” Aiden said when he opened the hatch and surveyed the damage they’d done at Meijer. Jack shook his head. “Already texted the boys,” he said, and moved over behind Aiden at the mass of Spartan hockey players making their way to the arena.

The group made quick work of setting up on the patio outside the arena, in addition to the arena, which faced Breslin.

The addition had been added to finally expand and upgrade the arena and hockey locker facilities. Thanks to the generous contributions of donors, all of their equipment was now state-of-the-art. For the players, it made a huge difference in their training, and for pro fans, completely modernizing *everything* was a huge draw.

Aiden manned the grill, methodically flipping burgers and rotating hot dogs. He was humming along to the Kenny Chesney song playing from someone’s speaker, when his phone buzzed.

“Hey, bunny!” he practically shouted when he pulled it out and answered. “Where are you?”

len and “I was just about to ask you the same thing!”

nd dip, “We’re at Munn,” he said, walking inside and taking a seat in one of the meeting rooms where it was quiet.

ous was “Okay,” she said. “We’re walking by the Spartan statue now, so we’re heading there in a few minutes!”

took an “Sounds good,” he said. “Walk to the Munn Field entrance and I’ll pass you over there.”

the lot, Aiden poked his head back outside. “Pascoe!” he yelled, and a few steps off a sophomore whipped his head around. “You’re on grill duty until I get back!”

“Sure thing,” Pascoe said, and Aiden headed back inside, weaving through the popped-around people milling in the hallways as they checked out the new

Finally, he stepped out into the atrium at the south entrance, now named after the long-tenured basketball coach who had contributed so much to Munn Field toward State athletics over his nearly four decades with the university.

Aiden turned in a circle, taking in the names of players who had played here before him, a small smile tipping up the corners of his lips when he scanned over *Brent Jean* on the wall above his head, and then again at the Spartan video screen below, where the Spartans who had made it to the NHCAA Finals were showcased on an endlessly looping slideshow.

current And when he spun toward the doors, looking out over the expected prospects, Munn Field and the tailgates set up there, Kenzie stepped into his line of vision.

ing brats He was struck, then, why she’d looked so familiar that night at the tailgate, lasting when he’d first met her; from a distance, she and Brent looked eerily similar.

It was only upon closer inspection that their differences took shape. Kenzie answered. Before he went to her, he took the opportunity to study her. Mother had yet to box up summer and put her away until next year, and

temperature outside was unseasonably warm for early October. Kenzie wore a pair of high-waisted, black denim shorts and a tight, white, ribbed t-shirt underneath a deep-green button-down that hung to mid-thigh. Her chestnut brown hair was twisted into space buns atop her head and adorned with black and white ribbons. A blonde girl joined her, and Kenzie glanced at her as she moved around her as though looking for someone.

Looking for *him*.

And he couldn't keep her waiting any longer.

"Bunny!" he said brightly as he pushed out of the arena.

The smile she turned on him could've lit the entire city, and Aiden responded in response. "Hey you," she said.

"Where's Sofia?"

"One of her sister's had a last minute crisis, so she headed right to the stadium. She said she'd try to meet up later." Kenzie shrugged, then

when she looked at her friend. "This is Jessica, though. Berkley's sister."

Aiden stuck his hand out. "Aiden," he said.

"I know." Jessica smirked. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All good things, I hope."

Kenzie's eyes sparkled mischievously as they turned on him. "Nice to meet you."

He boomed out a laugh. "I'd expect nothing less."

"So these are the new digs?" Kenzie asked, craning her neck to look up at the soaring wall of glass and the metal MUNN ICE ARENA affixed right above the doors.

"Well, not completely new," Aiden said. "It's just an addition. I thought you'd want to see?"

"Can we do that?" Kenzie asked, surprised.

ie wore “Of course,” he said, reaching for her hand. She threaded their
ank to together without hesitation, and Aiden bit back a contented grin. “I pla
r dark-remember? Plus, your brother is a god around here. Nobody is going to
h greeneye at you being inside when they hear your last name.”

phone, Without waiting for a response, Aiden tugged her through the
Jessica following behind, and pulled them to a stop right inside the en
where they could take in the full scope of the vaulted ceilings, the
board straight ahead featuring him and his teammates, and the
adorning every inch of the walls.

’s grew Aiden released her hand and stood back as she spun in a circle, ex
he had while he’d been waiting for her. The names of every Spartan fi
1950s onward ringed the space, which was now known as the Ron
t to the Hall of History—after the great coach who had sat at the helm of M
n lit up State hockey for over twenty years, and remained one of the win
r.” coaches in the history of the NCAA.

“Are you a hockey fan?” Aiden asked Jessica as Kenzie consid
surroundings.

“Not really,” she admitted. “That’s always been more of Berk’s
ot even expertise. I love football, and haven’t missed a home game in my enti
here, but this is only the third time in four years I’ve set foot insi
building.”

k at the Aiden’s eyes widened, probably damn near bulging out of hi
t above “We’re going to have to change that. Are you a senior?” Jessica r

“Yeah, we’re definitely changing that. I expect bunny at every home
Do you so you can come cheer us on with her. Our first game is next weekend.

“I’ll consider it,” Jessica said.

“Bee,” Kenzie said quietly, pulling Aiden and Jessica from

fingers conversation. Head tipped back, Aiden deduced she must have found
y here, name on the wall.

o bat an He stepped to her, placing a hand on the small of her back and turn
to the video screen on the opposite wall. “Watch,” he said.

doors, In groups of four or five, all of the Spartan hockey players who ha
ntrance, on to have NHL careers were featured in photos, first from their
e video MSU, and then with their pro team. Aiden studied Kenzie, know
history instant Brent’s face appeared without looking for himself. Her hand
her mouth with a little gasp, and her cheeks spread in a giant grin.

actly as “Your family must be really proud,” Aiden said.

rom the She turned to him then, eyes shining with emotion. “We are. Even v
Mason pisses me off, I couldn’t be *more* proud.”

ichigan Aiden smiled at that, hoping his little sister felt the same about hi
ningest hoping that Eloise would get the chance to see him skate on NHL
day.

red her After leading the girls through the locker, meeting, and video roo
well as the training stations and everything else downstairs, Aiden
area of brought them back out to the patio.

ire time As soon as they stepped outside and Jack laid eyes on them, all th
ide this drained from the blond’s face.

“Jessica?” he asked, tone incredulous.

s head. Aiden and Kenzie stopped dead in their tracks, turning on each oth
noded. identical astonished expressions on their faces.

e game, “Jack?” Jessica responded, voice small and unsure.

.” “Holy shit,” Jack said. “It is you.”

Jack and Jessica stood ten feet apart, gazes locked, the moment stret
n their Finally, Jessica shook her head and spun on her heel, disappearing i

Brent's "I'll be right back," Kenzie said quickly, then followed her.

Aiden turned to Jack and opened his mouth to ask what the fu
ing her happened, but Jack cut him off with a raised hand. "I'm not talking ab
here."

id gone Okay then.

time at "Look," Aiden said later as they walked over to the stadium. "It's g
ing the be impossible to find Sofia in this mess, and even if you did, people
shot to going to take too kindly to you shoving your way into a seat near h
suggest you just stay with us."

when he Jack shuffled up and hooked an arm around Kenzie's shoulders. B
matching swatches of pink on their cheeks, flushed from a part
im, and competitive game of beer pong that had pitted them against Aid
ice one Jessica.

After the awkward and weird initial reunion between Jack and .
oms, as both had settled into each other's presence ...mainly by avoidi
finally another.

At one point, Aiden had followed Jack to the bathroom in an atte
e blood pump him for information.

"It's...I can't do this right now, Fuller," Jack had said. "Maybe n
Just let it go."

er with "Okay," Aiden had said, and dropped it.

He had his own girl problems to deal with.

In the present, Jack said to Kenzie, "Yeah, sit with us, bunny! I f
we're a good time."

ching. On the walk over, Jessica had disappeared to meet some other frie
nside. Kenzie was kind of stuck with them anyway.

Kenzie reached out her hand, wiggling her fingers back and forth just as Aiden grasped it in his. Looking up at him, eyes glassy from alcohol, she gave him a small smile. “I *am* having fun with you guys,” she said, so surprised.

“We’re having fun with you, too,” Aiden said, and Jack made a disconcerting sound next to them as he withdrew his arm from Kenzie’s shoulder. “Get a room, you two,” he said, picking up his pace to catch up with Aiden and Luke.

“Maybe we will,” Kenzie said quietly, casting her gaze down.

Aiden figured it was the gallon of High Noon seltzers she’d consumed that was doing the talking and not actually her, that she didn’t really mean it. His dick twitched anyway, his hand tightening around hers in response.

“You’re playing with fire, bunny,” he said quietly.

“Maybe I want to get burned.”

Jessica, And, okay. Aiden wasn’t touching *that* right now, but his dick had some ideas, and he surreptitiously adjusted himself as they walked. He pretended not to notice when Kenzie chuckled next to him.

“Hurry up, love birds!” Jack shouted back as they approached the crush of bodies bottlenecking through the security entrances three times over, to separate them all.

Their group withdrew their phones so the admittance staffers could scan their digital tickets and wave them through.

“I’ve never been here before,” Kenzie admitted.

Aiden wasn’t surprised; she’d only been on campus for a little over a month, and anytime she’d been to East Lansing before, surely it had been inside Munn, its immediate vicinity, and wherever Brent had lived.

“It’s going to be hot as shit up there,” Aiden said, thankful he’d

th, and pair of dark-green athletic shorts and a black tee with “Michigan
101, she Hockey” emblazoned in white block letters stretching across his pecs
ounding we’re likely to win this game, so shit is going to get crazy. Stick close
and follow my lead for the chants and cheers and stuff.”

sgusted “Did you learn the fight song?” Jack asked, dropping unwelcom
olders. their conversation.

1 Asher Kenzie’s brow furrowed in irritation, but she said, “Yes.”

“Good,” Jack told her. “Then you’ll do fine.”

And Kenzie did fine. In fact, she did better than fine. She caught c
ied that cheers and chants quickly, and when she didn’t know what was going
1 it, but watched Aiden.

He had to admit, he loved having her eyes on him. Her gaze sweepi
his body, those ocean eyes missing nothing, had his skin tightening
most delicious of ways. More than ever, he was thankful his short
d other loose enough to hide the rock hard cock he’d been sporting all evening
etended While the Spartans should have won the game handedly, as th
seconds of regulation ticked off the clock, the score sat tied at twenty-
e gates, The refs conducted another coin toss to enter overtime, which the
atening team won, and they elected to receive the ball. The Spartans elected to
the end zone near the student section.

ld scan In college football, overtime rules were simple: each team
possession, which started at the twenty-five yard line. Teams kept t
until they scored, failed to score, failed to reach a first down, or tur
over a ball over.

ad only The volume of the student section rose from excited chatter to a de
d. roar as the visiting team lined up and snapped the ball. The first play
worn a

n Statepass, caught near the ten yard line, giving the Spartans' opponent a first down. "And another goal to go.

As to me, Aiden gripped Kenzie's hand in his, holding on for dear life as the visiting quarterback caught the snap and dropped back once again to pass...and he was sacked.

The student section lost their minds, but the opponent chose to run the ball on the next play, for a gain of about six yards, which put them at third down and nine yards to go.

Into the The student section's shouts and yells reached a crescendo, and once again, as the visiting quarterback dropped back to pass, this time floating one yard on top of the defense into the far corner of the end zone, where not a single member of his teammates was in sight. Instead, the ball was intercepted by one of the Spartans' cornerbacks, and the stadium collectively lost its mind.

It was over. All they needed to do was score, and they'd win.

On the sideline across from them, Michigan State's head coach bled out around, waving his arms in the air in the universal gesture for GET IT DONE. And so they did. When the offensive line stacked themselves for the visiting scrimmage, the quarterback's cadence was lost in the din of the student section cheering on the home team.

The play developed in slow motion, or maybe that's how it seemed to Aiden. The center snapped the ball, and the QB caught it, dropping the ball three steps, eyes shifting right to left, watching, waiting.

When the pocket collapsed around him, Aiden was sure he'd been sacked until the quarterback rushed forward, narrowly avoiding the outstretched hands of a particularly meaty-looking linebacker.

The quarterback got to the edge, legs pumping for all they were worth, with teammates blocking ahead for him.

st down Twenty.

Fifteen.

ne rival Ten.

l ended Five.

“TOUCHDOWN MSU!” the stadium announcer shouted as th
t on thestruck up the opening chords of the fight song, and everyone in the
wn andscreamed themselves hoarse.

Aiden, however, found himself in a kind of trance. Without hes
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“TOUCHDOWN MSU!” the stadium announcer shouted as the band struck up the opening chords of the fight song, and everyone in the vicinity screamed themselves hoarse.

Aiden, however, found himself in a kind of trance. Without hesitating, without sparing the potential consequences a single second of consideration, he pulled Kenzie to his chest, cupped a hand around the back of her neck, and sealed his mouth over hers.

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THE REST OF THE world dropped away the second Aiden pressed to hers. For all Kenzie knew or cared, they were completely alone making out in front of the packed house of Spartan Stadium.

And they *were* making out. What had started as a tentative slide of her mouth against hers increased in pressure and intensity until Kenzie was moments away from jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist.

As it was, a piece of paper wouldn't fit between them. Aiden's fingers dug so hard into her hips, pulling her flush against him and the hardness of his cock, that she'd surely have bruises tomorrow. For her part, Kenzie tunneled her hands in his hair, and her calves strained from raising her tiptoes to meet every exquisite thrust of his tongue into her mouth and the scrape of his teeth against her lips.

Kenzie could've lived in that moment forever, and taken it much more had Jack not wrapped them in a bear hug and yelled, "GO GREEN!"

top of his lungs, forcing them apart.

To his credit, Jack didn't make a comment on the position he'd found in, only smirked and turned to join the football team and the rest of the stadium in a raucous, celebratory version of the fight song.

"We should..." Aiden trailed off, directing his gaze away from Kenzie though embarrassed.

"Yeah," she said, swallowing around the lump that had formed in her throat.

Slowly, they followed the throng as fans trickled out of the stadium, eventually being spit out into the parking lot on the Shaw Avenue side.

"I'm going out," Asher said when they found some room to breathe. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Aiden's lips. Kenzie glanced at Aiden questioningly.

"We agreed we weren't having a party tonight," he said by way of explanation. "We're all exhausted. Asher was the only one against the idea of hisso he's off to get rowdy elsewhere."

Kenzie was Kenzie nodded, and she and Aiden turned in the direction of Munn. What were things between them suddenly so strained and awkward? When it

before, arousal had coursed through her, urging her to throw all caution to the wind? And he had been feeling it, too, hadn't he? Judging by the thick ridge of his hand pressed against her stomach, she could confidently say he had.

In silence, they moved away from the stadium and the crowds, walking into her front of Munn and then past it. Kenzie didn't know where they were going, every she was simply following Aiden's lead. But when they reached Birch Street, she decided it was time for them to part ways.

She cleared her throat and said, "Well, I'm gonna head home." She pointed down the road, indicating she planned to walk in that direction. "I'll see

tomorrow for our date.”

and them *Date*. The word sounded foreign in her mouth, and suddenly tasted of the acid after how he’d been acting these last ten minutes.

“Wait,” he said, wrapping his large hand around her significantly, as delicate wrist. “Let me give you a ride.”

Sit in a car with him when the air around them currently vibrated in her negative energy? No thanks.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I don’t mind walking, and it’s not that far.”
tadium, “Kenzie, please,” he said, voice anxious, bordering on pleading.

She studied him for several long moments as cars, lined bumper-to-bumper on the road in front of them, inched forward, their passengers wondering what the hell they were doing standing here, staring at each other.

“Fine,” she said finally, if only because being alone with him for a moment longer gave her the opportunity to ask him what in the fresh hell he had the idea, thinking, kissing her like that.

Their short trek to his Jeep was tense, Kenzie growing more and more annoyed. Why angry by the second.

minutes Had she liked kissing Aiden? Yes. Loved it, in fact. It had been true since she’d had the kind of instant physical chemistry with someone else—had with Aiden. And more than that, he was so damn easy to talk to. It

fair that he should be appealing on so many levels. At this point, she was feeling unsure why she’d even bothered to turn him down in the first place. Ending the conversation here had been inevitable.

1 Road, But she had told him repeatedly that there would be no physical relationship between them. Aiden may have checked several—okay, most—of the boxes on her list of things she liked in a guy. Unfortunately, he also exhibited quite a few of her red flags. Namely,

a hockey player, and to her that spelled trouble. She wasn't naive enough to think that Aiden could be the exception to the rule.

By the time they'd safely ensconced themselves in his car, Kenzie was more aflame, tingling with simmering rage. Blood pounded in her veins, and her armpits prickled uncomfortably with an excess of adrenaline.

Aiden didn't bother turning the engine over, as though sensing Kenzie was about to blow, like a can of soda that had been shaken too hard and needed to relieve the pressure.

"Kenzie—" Aiden started, but she cut him off.

"What the hell, Fuller?" she yelled, her voice reverberating through the small space.

"I know," he said, hanging his head. "I'm sorry. You specifically told me not to do that dare that it wasn't going to happen again, and I totally ignored you. I just...I was so excited about the win. For some reason, kissing seemed like the best way to celebrate."

"That's sweet and all," she said, blood pressure lowering a bit, "but you can't just go around kissing people like that. You can't just go around kissing people for as long as you feel like it."

"And why the hell not?" he asked, turning his full attention on her. "I want to kiss you. It's all I think about."

The admission took Kenzie by surprise, but she plowed ahead.

"I've told you this. I don't want either of us getting the wrong idea."

We had an agreement. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, remember? We're just friends, Aiden. You don't get to go breaking the rules just because you feel like it!"

"And what if we weren't?" he asked, and Kenzie gasped, feeling as though all the air had been sucked from the car. "What if we weren't just friends?"

ough to “No,” she said firmly.

“But we could be, bunny,” he said, reaching out. He hesitated before pulling her skinher hand from her lap and grasping it in both of his.

and her “No,” she repeated, trying to withdraw from his grasp, but he held her.

What exactly was he playing at here? Was he messing with her? Trying to mess with her head? Because if that was his plan, it was working.

He decided to “I don’t see why not,” he said. “Look, we have a good time together, right?”

“Yes...” she said hesitantly.

“And you’ve already agreed to go on a date with me tomorrow.”

“Technically not a date,” she reminded him, “since Sofia invited us. It’s not a date, Aiden. What are you talking about?”

He said that “I’m saying I know we both had reasons for starting this whole thing, but neither of us planned on it becoming anything real or serious.

I want that now. I want to try. With you. If that’s something you’re interested in, we’vein, we can quit pretending right now and take a real shot at this. I don’t want to waste time with anyone else like you in my life, bunny. Someone I have this much fun with and can talk to so easily about anything. And I think you feel the same way.

He moved toward her, angling his body over the console between them, reaching up to anchor his hand in the hair at the base of her neck. He hesitated.

“Giving her the chance to pull away.”

“Before you answer, there’s something you need to know. I didn’t tell you because you out at Case that one day because I think you’re hot. The boys dared me to.”

“Wait, what?”

“They dared me to get you to go out with me. And admittedly, why should I care?”

“They dared me to get you to go out with me. And admittedly, why should I care?”

kept blowing me off, you became a bit of a challenge for me. But I s
e lifting you, Kenzie, the dare hasn't mattered to me for a long time. Even with
would have pursued you. That night we met, I knew there was sor
ld fast here. Something about you pulled me in, and I've been entranced ever
ying to "But if you don't feel the same, and you don't want to give a relat
with me a chance, then say so. I'll take you home right now and we w
gether, about this again. We'll go out with Jack and Sofia and her sorority
tomorrow, business as usual."

Kenzie's mind spun. He actually wanted this? He actually wanted h
was unsure how to respond. Every single brain cell told her—no, sc
So spit—at her to run. To get out of this car, take off down the block, and n
back until she was safe in her apartment.

ng, and But every nerve along her skin begged to lean into his touch, to f
But...mouth to his again and see what happened now that they were alc
terested couldn't be interrupted.

it have Ultimately, she did neither.

un with "Take me home, Fuller," she said, and her stomach sank as hurt s
." the surface of his eyes and remained.

n them, He pulled away, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard and n
k, then Aiden joined the queue snaking from the parking lot, and Kenzie w
her phone from her pocket, fingers trembling as she frantically texted J

K

just ask

ired me

ien you

HELP SOS 911

Jess
yes?

wear to
out it, I
nothing
since.

Sofia

who is this other person in the chat?

ionship
on't talk
sisters

Jess

Jessica. who are you?

er? She
reamed
not look

Sofia

Sofia. nice to meet you, Jessica

use her
one and

Jess

yeah you too!

wam to
odded.

Jess

right sorry

ithdrew
lessica.

Sofia

what's up?

enzie



Jess

I'm failing to see why that's a problem

K

LADIES! NOW IS NOT THE TIME

K

Aiden asked me out. he also told me the only reason he asked me out the first time is because the boys dare

Sofia

what Jessica said. a hot guy asked you out and you're freaking because...?

K

he's a hockey player. a total fuckb
be an idiot to fall for his charm

Jess

I've seen you two together, Kenz, and I can assure you that boy is smitten

Sofia

yeah I've only be around you guys a few times but he's definitely obsessed

K

no he probably just wants to get pants

enzie

Sofia

I mean duh. you're hot

Jess

I'm sure that's a contributing factor, but have you considered that maybe the way he is with you is the real Aiden, and he's just been waiting for someone like you to come along and show him it's safe to be that version of himself?

enzie

d me
it the
d him

Sofia

couldn't have said it better myself

Kenzie's eyes strained as she read and reread Jessica's text.
Could it really be that simple?

There was only one way to find out.

What felt like hours later, Aiden pulled up in front of Kenzie's building. She reached for the door handle, needing to escape this car, to breathe Aiden-free air into her lungs, and get her head back on straight.

Kenzie
boy. I'd

"Do you..." Aiden trailed off, and Kenzie's gaze snapped to him.

She remained silent, waiting for him to ask whatever he had started.

"Do you still want to go to the cider mill with me tomorrow?"

Kenzie grinned widely at him, and he blinked at her, clearly confused by the shift in her expression.

"Consider tomorrow our first date," she said. "I...I want all the things you do. And I'm not mad about the dare. But I *am* afraid, and we should take it slow. Somehow, we've become friends and enemies overnight, and I don't want to throw that away just because we're both hormonal after a pretty hot makeout session."

Kenzie
in my

"You thought it was hot?" Aiden asked, perking up, and Kenzie laughed.

"You know it was," she said. Then she leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. "Good night, Fuller. I'll see you tomorrow."

Without giving him the chance to respond, she exited the car and ran into her building.



Uncle John's Cider Mill was located on US-127 about thirty miles north of East Lansing, in a town called St. John's. The owners offered a variety of activities, everything from wagon rides and a pumpkin patch, to geocaching and a trail that looped the entire farm.

As much as Jack begged and pleaded with them to ride the bus the building had rented for the occasion up with him, Kenzie and Aiden had both decided there was no way that was happening.

After they'd arrived and parked, Aiden took her hand as they made their way to the group gathered in the parking lot.

"We're heeeeeere!" Sofia yelled, spreading her arms wide and spinning in a circle, her unbuttoned, oversized flannel ballooning out around her. Her high-heeled booties digging holes in the gravel.

Jack stood nearby, also in a flannel, the limits of which were tested by his same bulging biceps as he crossed his arms over his chest.

The girls sent a cheer to the heavens, then started across the lawn. Kenzie walked up and linked her arm through Kenzie's.

"We're going to walk through the farm first," she said. "We've done this a hundred times before, so we're old pros. Just follow me."

Off they went on the two-mile trail, tailing the sorority sisters. Lucinda and Jack, Sofia stuck close to Kenzie, so he and Aiden could shoot the photos.

Kenzie felt bad that Jack was basically ignoring Sofia, but she didn't mind. She was strode mind, too intent on posing for Instagram-worthy photos.

During one of those photo shoots, Kenzie stood off to the side, waiting for her to wrap up so they could continue, when Aiden walked up. He immediately reached for Kenzie's hand. She fought the urge to wiggle her fingers, reminding herself she'd agreed to give him a real chance.

And if the boy wanted to hold her hand? She'd let him.

Sofia turned from where she was miming taking a bite of an apple, looking back over her shoulder. A stone kicked up behind her. Her gaze brightened when it landed on Kenzie and Aiden.

"You guys are so freaking cute," she said. "You should let me take a photo of you two together."

sorority pictures of you.”

agreed Aiden tipped his chin down to look at Kenzie, and she blushed under his attention. No amount of looking into this boy’s eyes would ever condition her to their molten depths, would never not make her knees weak.

“What do you think, bunny?” he asked. “In the interest of going forward with this thing.”

And this was what she’d signed up for when she agreed to go on with him last night, hadn’t she? It wasn’t like she could back out now, especially not with Sofia’s eagle eyes focused solely on them.

So she handed her phone to Sofia and tugged Aiden forward until Sofia stood exactly where Sofia had, and Aiden tucked her close to his side, snaking an arm behind her back to rest on her opposite hip. She placed her hands around his waist, planting the other in the center of the solid expanse of his chest.

“Smile pretty!” Sofia called as she snapped photos, the camera shutter audible between them.

Sofia directed them through a few different poses, then released them. Kenzie walked to her side, and Sofia relinquished her phone. Scrolling through the shots, Aiden studied them over her shoulder.

She had to admit, she and Aiden looked good together. Like...really good. Kenzie had always known she was pretty. Objectively speaking, though, her siblings had hit the genetic lottery. And she was more than aware that Aiden was practically a Greek god with his dark, wavy hair, perfectly sculpted jawline, and olive skin.

But together?

“Damn,” Sofia said, echoing Kenzie’s thoughts. “It’s disgusting how good you two are.”

Kenzie blushed, mumbling a quiet thank you, then looking up at Aiden to gauge his reaction. She was surprised to find his cheeks were as red as her felt, but something told her it wasn't due to embarrassment.

"You should post them on Insta!" Sofia said, taking Kenzie's phone and flipping quickly through her camera roll, tapping the heart button on a select bunch to favorites. "That one, this one, this one, aaaaaaaah, a date one." She handed the phone back to Kenzie, adding, "Don't forget to post them now!"

Then Sofia bounded off to join her sisters, towing Jack along behind her. Aiden who shot them a *help me* look over his shoulder.

On his side, "What do you think?" she asked Aiden, studying the photos. Sofia had suggested she post. "Should we post them?"

In response, "That's up to you, bunny," Aiden said, then placed a finger under her chin and tipped her head back until she met his eyes. "Do you want to let the whole world know you're dating me?"

"Is that what we're doing? Dating?"

Aiden nodded. "I think so. I *hope* so."

Kenzie smiled. "Me, too."

This had never been part of the plan, coming back to college and immediately falling into a relationship. But she couldn't deny that Jean's presence in her life was a welcome one.

"What are you going to caption it?" he asked.

Kenzie considered that, feeling the moment warranted something a little cheesy.

"*I picked a good one,*" she said as she typed, then tapped the share button, sending the photo onto the feeds of her nine thousand followers.

Immediately, she closed the app and locked her phone, shoving it deep

aiden to her pocket.

as hers “No going back now,” Aiden said, grinning down at her, his teeth g
brightly in the midday sun, eyes sparkling like amber.

ne back She shot him an easy smile and slid her hand into his.

to add “What’s your favorite apple?” Kenzie asked as they walked up an
nd this the rows of the orchard. The fruit had already been harvested, and the
to filter were beginning to turn with the changing of the seasons, some
littering the ground at the roots of the trees.

nd her, “I don’t think I have a favorite apple,” Aiden said.

“Sure you do,” she told him. “Everyone does. Mine is Golden Delic
fia had “Why?” Aiden asked. She paused in front of a tree that flamed gold
handed Aiden her phone. Without question, he lifted it, she posed,
er chin snapped the picture. Then he stepped up next to her and wrapped
let the around her, angling the camera for a selfie.

Now that they had sent coupley photos out into the ether, it amazed
how easily Aiden touched her, and how quickly she softened into tha
It was surprising how comfortable she already felt around him, as
they’d known each other forever—when it had really only been ab
ge and weeks.

Aiden’s “Golden Delicious apples are really soft,” she said when they mo
“Kind of like a pear, but not. And they’re not overly tart. They’re
perfect.”

g super Aiden looked thoughtful for a moment, once again lacing his
through hers and towing her along the path between the trees. Sofia
button, sisters had disappeared, leaving her and Aiden all alone out here, wrap
entirely in the sights and sounds of nature.

æp into Already, this was the best date of Kenzie’s life.

“I think I just like the big red ones,” Aiden said finally, and
glowingsnorted.

“Okay, fair enough.”

They reached the end of the row and turned right, where the
d downsprawled across the property came into view at the end of the lane.

leaves “What do you want to do next?” he asked. “Pumpkin patch? Wagc
alreadyCheck out what’s going on in the barns?”

“Shouldn’t we wait for the group?”

Aiden shook his head. “Hell no. I was only doing Jack a favor by a
ious.” to come with them. The only person I want to be here with is *you*.”

en, and Kenzie blushed, unable to formulate a response around the butterfl
and hehad taken up residence in her stomach. Finally, she answered his

an armquestion. “Definitely the barns,” she said. “I want to check out the ta
and get some cider. Then we can get pumpkins before we head back?”

Kenzie Aiden grinned at her. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

t touch. Despite the fact that it was barely one in the afternoon, they ente
thoughtaproom, bellied up to the bar, and ordered a flight of ciders. Gro

out sixSofia’s sisters gathered around tables, sipping on glasses of cider and
photos, filling the barn with the sounds of laughter and raised voices.

ved on. While they waited for their drinks, Kenzie took the opportunity t
just...Aiden, who stared out the window at the rolling green fields beyond th

and surrounding yard spaces.

fingers The boy was a study in Greek architecture, with a long, straight
and hereyebrows thick, dark slashes over his chocolate eyes, high cheekbones

oped upsquare jaw sharp enough to cut glass. He had a tiny little cleft in the c
his chin, and a wide, full mouth she knew was as soft as it looked.

When he turned to her and caught her staring, he grinned, faint laug

Kenzie appearing at the corners of his eyes, those lips stretching and parting to his perfectly straight smile.

“Like what you see?”

Kenzie considered her answer, then said, “I wouldn’t kick you out of the barn.”
“That’s funny, because I distinctly remember you telling me the other night?the night we met.”

Kenzie’s face burned as she remembered their flirty banter and suggestive comments that night. Something about this man had turned her into a brazen version of herself, someone who’d considered throwing caution to the wind, saying *fuck all the rules*, and letting him show her pleasures that somehow inherently knew only he could.

The bartender appearing with their drinks spared her from a formal response.

The flight consisted of six samples—one for each of Uncle Aiden’s homemade cider flavors. Included were apple, apple blueberry, apple cranberry, apple pear, and apricot apple.

Kenzie had already guessed that Aiden wasn’t a sweet and fruit-loving kind of guy, but the fact that he’d agreed to do this for her sake earned him major brownie points.

They each took a side of the board to start with and decided to meet in the middle. Kenzie sampled the apricot, pear, and cranberry first before moving to the other three.

“Okay, I know this isn’t really your thing,” she said to Aiden after she’d tried them all, gesturing at the drinks, “but which was your favorite?”

Aiden wrinkled his nose before he answered. “Honestly? I hate them.”

Kenzie barked out a laugh, and Aiden shot her a sheepish grin. “I’m

o reveal trying here. For you. But I just cannot do the fruity shit. I can f
stomach lining burning away under all the sugar.”

Kenzie laughed harder. “I didn’t know I was out with someone so pi
f bed.” “I’m not picky,” Aiden said, leaning back in his chair. “You don
opposite body like mine by consuming things that are bad for you. I have a ve
meal plan I follow year round to be in the best shape I can to play.”

uggestive “To be fair, they’re way too sweet for me, too,” she said with a laug
a more sobered at the stern set of Aiden’s jaw. Unwittingly, she’d struck a ner
n to the Settling a hand over his on the bartop, she said, “I was just kiddi
ire she know.”

Aiden smiled. “I know. Honestly, I wouldn’t like these even if I
lating asuch a control freak about what goes into my body.”

“Well,” she said. “I appreciate you humoring me.”

John’s Aiden squeezed back and said, “Finish these and I’ll take you on a
cherry, ride.”

Kenzie downed the remainder of each sample like a shot, then sto
y drink reached for Aiden.

ied him He raised a quizzical brow at her.

“I really love wagon rides,” she said by way of explanation.

it in the They walked back out into the yard and made their way tow
shifting pumpkin patch, where people milled about, waiting for the tractor pu
red tent-covered wagon to arrive. When it did, Kenzie and Aiden loa
they’d choosing a seat on the outer edge near the front of the wagon. As th
were the most natural thing in the world, Aiden scooted close, the le
l all of his hard-as-a-rock quad pressed against hers, his arm coming to settle
her shoulders.

n really With the familiarity of a long-term boyfriend and not a couple on th

feel mydate, Aiden hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her closer, planting a soft kiss on the hair at her temple. She was still getting used to this, “icky!” that he already understood physical touch was her love language. Her first reaction was to stiffen and shrink away, but this was Aiden who *strictly wanted* his hands on her body. Soon, she relaxed into his embrace.

“This is nice,” she said quietly, tilting her chin to look up at him. “You’re going to have to be more specific, bunny.”

Kenzie glowered at him, and he smirked. “Being here,” she said.

“With me? Or just in general?”

“You are insufferable,” she told him. Still, she smiled and added, “I wasn’t you.”

“I thought so,” he said, a blissful smile stretching his mouth as he pulled away from her and out over the fields as they rolled past.

Conversation buzzed around them as the tractor carved its path around the farm, the sorority girls and their dates louder than most, but Kenzie and Aiden remained quiet, soaking in the gorgeous fall day and each other’s company.

When the tractor pulled to a stop in front of the pumpkin patch, Aiden grabbed her hand and dragged her off.

He led her through the winding field, careful not to trample any glistening orange globes as they searched for ones to take home.

They finally settled on two near-perfect pumpkins, plus some good enough to dress up the hockey house’s front porch, before loading back onto the tractor to continue the tour.

Kenzie was surprised by how easy it was to be with Aiden. She expected to be nervous, or at the very least awkward, given how long it had been since their first she’d been on a proper date. Even in the best of social situations, K

ting anxiety hummed right below the surface of her skin, waiting to take over the fact reasons unknown to her, that didn't happen with Aiden.

body's With him, she was calm. At peace. Content.

n. She When she spoke, he focused all of his attention on her, letting her know he was listening to every word. His gaze never wavered, and some part of her body—arm, leg, shoulder, head—was usually always in contact with his.

Aiden was...surprising. How sweet he was under his cocky, football player exterior, how protective he was of his little sister, how he knew exactly what to say in any situation to put Kenzie at ease.

, "With The way his thumb lightly traced circles on the back of her hand and rested on his thigh. How, without even trying, he turned Kenzie on simply by looking like himself.

She could write a book about all the things this man made her feel.

and the "What're you thinking about?" he asked quietly when they settled Kenzie and Jeep to head home. Guilt that she hadn't said goodbye to Sofia and her mother's Kenzie in the chest, but she'd been too focused on Aiden to even care as they'd departed.

, Aiden "You," she answered honestly.

"What about me, bunny?" He leaned that big body of his over the back of the console, his face close enough now that she could easily tip her head back and kiss him.

urds to Angling her body, she faced him, his hand sweeping up her thigh and coming to rest on her hip. "You continue to surprise me," she said, looking

into his eyes, the exact color of rich hot chocolate made with a splash of cream. "How?"

n since She bit her lip, weighing how much to reveal. But if they were doing this, Kenzie's if he was serious about giving a real relationship a try, she owed both of

er. For complete candor.

“I never expected to feel like this. Before I met you, I had a rule: never date a hockey player. I’ve been around the game too long, so now he much. I love my brother, but he wasn’t always the family man he is now. When I met you at Rick’s and realized who you were, *what* you were, because I was scared. I had way too much fun talking to you, and even though you made me feel things and act in a way completely at odds with how he usually am. I panicked. But the more I get to know you, the more I realize you’re nothing like I expected.”

where it “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Aiden asked, mouth turning into a small frown.

“A good thing,” she assured him, reaching up to cup his face in her hand. “The *best* thing.”

The frown instantly flipped into a devastating grin, and he leaned in to kiss her. When his lips met hers in that exquisite soft and slow slide, it had been replaying on a loop since last night, her fingers anchored themselves in his hair. And when the kiss turned more insistent, her toes curled under her stomach flipping as he deepened the pressure and licked his way into her center mouth, Kenzie realized something.

She was falling for him, hard and fast, with no idea when she’d reach the bottom.

I am in deep shit.

looking

of milk.

OceanofPDF.com

ng this,

of them

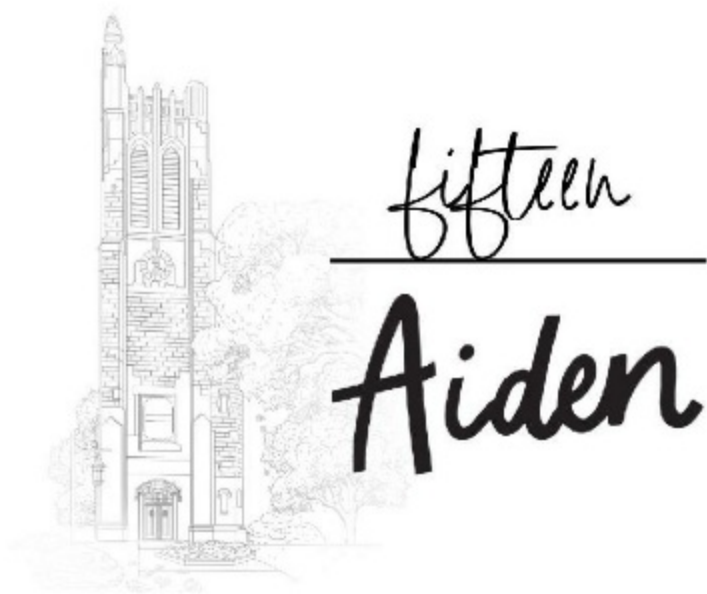
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AIDEN WAS IN DEEP shit.

Mackenzie Jean had him hopelessly wrapped around her little finger and he wasn't sure he could untangle himself.

In fact, he wasn't sure he *wanted* to.

But he also didn't have the time or mental capacity to devote to head over heels for this girl, because it was opening weekend of the season and while he wasn't playing for over a month yet, as alternate captain his job was to psych the team up and prepare them for a win against a very good Princeton team.

"Is your friend coming to your game?" Eloise asked on the phone Friday morning.

Aiden didn't have classes that day, so he'd woken up and decided to make breakfast for his roommates, pulling out the recipe book their nutritionist provided and selecting something at random.

When his sister called, he was shirtless at the stove, watching the

the pan bubble and firm up.

“What friend?” Aiden asked absently, trying and failing to split his attention between cooking and conversing.

“The one you were *studying* with,” she said, and he could practically hear the air quotes she used around *studying*.

“Oh, Kenzie,” Aiden said, glad his sister couldn’t see him. Eloise was that age where she would mercilessly tease him for the splotches of cooking oil that appeared on his cheeks. “I think she’ll be there.”

“I want to meet her, so she better be!”

Aiden chuckled, already lifting his phone off the counter to text her. “I’ll see what I can do, bug, but she might be busy.”

Eloise *hmpfhed* and said, “Fine,” then unceremoniously hung up.

“Can’t wait to see you, too!” Aiden said to nobody.

ger, and

are you coming to my game tonight?

falling
season,

Bunny
do you want me to?

, it was
ry solid

yes please

ne that

Bunny
then I'm there

o make
nist had

great :) I'll leave a ticket at will call
can sit with my family

eggs in

s focus

Bunny

ABSOLUTELY NOT AIDEN I WILL SIT IN THE STUDENT SECTION

ally see Aiden laughed at her vehemence. He could picture her, sitting couch, thumbs angrily tapping at her screen as she meted out her respo

was at
lor that

okay okay fine. you'll at least wear a sweater, right?

Kenzie.

Bunny

you don't think that's weird since you're not even playing?

ouch bunny, you wound me

Aiden
ght?

but no, I don't think it's weird

A second later, his phone buzzed with an incoming call.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Kenzie said as soon as he answered her call.

Aiden

“Why not?”

“Females are vicious and I don’t want to cause a bunch of drama by sitting in the student section wearing your sweater.”

“You could always sit with my family,” he reminded her.

“Ugh,” she said. “No, that’s even worse.”

Aiden
l. you

“Didn’t you ever do that in high school?”

“Do what?”

“Wear your boyfriend’s jersey to his games?” He didn’t really know the answer, not too keen on picturing her with another guy,

desperately wanted her to support him in this way.

“Well, yeah,” she said. “But I didn’t realize it was a thing that grew up in high school with you. It seems kinda...silly.”

on her Aiden sighed and set his phone down, stirring the eggs one last time before removing them from the heat and dividing them equally onto four plates. Overhead, the floorboards creaked as his roommates stirred.

Aiden
ar my

“Trust me, bunny,” he said as he moved the plates from the counter to the table. “There’s nothing hotter to a guy than seeing his last name on his back.”

“You know I’m not like...your property, right?” she asked.

Aiden

“Of course I know that,” Aiden scoffed. “But tell me something: do your sister-in-law wear Brent’s jersey to his games?”

Aiden

“Well yeah,” Kenzie said. “But technically, Jean is her last name too.”

“I mean before they got married, and you know it,” Aiden said with a roll of his eyes.

answered Truth be told, Aiden was a little afraid of what seeing her in his room would do to him. He’d never had a serious girlfriend before. She’d told him she wasn’t his property, but what if he went all neanderthal at the sight of her sitting of FULLER on her back? He couldn’t be held responsible for his primal instincts.

Kenzie was silent for several long moments. By the time she responded, Jack, Asher, and Luke had shuffled into the kitchen and sank down at the table, unceremoniously digging into the meal Aiden had prepared.

“Fine, Fuller,” she said, her voice surprising the boys as it echoed through the room. Aiden had forgotten to take her off speaker. “I will wear your jersey tonight.”

Aiden grinned. "The boys and I just sat down to eat, but I'll bring
aduated after."

"K bye," she said, and hung up.

before Aiden tucked into his food, aware of the gazes his friends settled
plates. but choosing to ignore them.

He might not be able to play tonight, but he felt like he'd already
r to the something more valuable than a hockey game.

is girl's

It had been an incredibly long time since Aiden had last attended
where he wasn't suited up to play.

es your He didn't like it. In fact, he downright hated it.

As a scratch, he wasn't even allowed on the bench with his team
ie now, he was relegated to finding an empty seat in the stands or watching from
press box.

an eye He'd opted for the press box, deciding he'd get fewer dirty looks and
in better in his suit and tie than he would surrounded by fans.

jersey The second he stepped through the door, someone yelled his name.

warned Aiden whipped his head around to find Jeff Flash, who had been the
ie sight of Spartan hockey since before Aiden was even born.

s baser "Jeff," Aiden said, stepping forward to shake the man's hand. "How
been, man?"

ounded, "Good, good," Jeff said, patting Aiden roughly on the back. The man
1 at the up to Aiden's shoulders, his face dominated by a massive white beard
eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiled behind a Coke bottle.

through "Shame about what happened, though. We all wish you were out there

ar your "Me, too," Aiden said. "But I'll be back before you know it."

it over Jeff nodded, then squinted up at him. “Hey, you wanna join up
period? We can get another headset up here, and there’s plenty of
Could be fun!”

on him Aiden considered the offer. He was two semesters away from getting
journalism degree, and had embarrassingly little experience in the
ly won thanks to his grueling training, game, and class schedules. Coach probably
wouldn’t like it, but he wouldn’t know until it was too late.

Plus, the man could hardly fault Aiden for doing a little job shadowing
a game right?

“You know what, I think I will,” Aiden said. “Just tell me where you
me.”

ates, so Jeff clapped excitedly, like a little kid who had been gifted exactly
from the they’d asked for, and Aiden smiled.

“We’ll put you in between me and Rico,” Jeff said, gesturing to the
d blend row of the press box, where Jeff’s broadcast partner was already seated.

Aiden descended the steps and Rico stood, extending a hand. “
Good to see you, man.”

e voice Rico Playfair was a legend at Michigan State, much like Brent Johnson
had been an enforcer for four years in the eighties, when the Spartans
ow you gone to eight Final Fours—and had won a National Championship in
when Rico was a senior. He’d gone soft around the middle with age, but
in came stood tall enough to look Aiden square in the eye when he spoke, and
rd, blue knew he still played hockey every week on a local beer league team
glasses. would bet good money he still knocked guys around with enough force
.”
bruise or break bones.

“Good to see you, too, Rico,” Aiden said. “Mind if I join you guys?”

Rico raised an eyebrow at Jeff, who stood behind Aiden. “Sure this

s for aLet's teach Jeff a little something about the game of hockey, eh?"

f room. Aiden laughed, and Jeff scowled at them both.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" he said.

ting his They quickly set up, and a half hour before puck drop, they went liv

ie field "Welcome, Spartan hockey fans, to today's broadcast, as your hor
robablyteam takes on the number ten Princeton team in the season opener! I

Flash, here with my broadcast partner, Rico Playfair. And we've als
lowing,very special guest with us today, senior Spartan forward, Aiden Fuller!

"Hey everyone," Aiden said. "Thanks for having me, guys."

ou want "Well, I think our listeners agree when I say we'd much rather have
the ice instead of up here with us, but we're gonna have fun. Before

ly whatinto the game preview, I think everyone is dying to know what
happened that cost you the first five weekends of your senior season."

ie front Aiden hesitated. "Well...I can't go into too much detail. Suffice it
l. made a really stupid decision, and now I'm paying for it."

'Fuller! "I'm going to assume it was a dare gone wrong," Rico said knowing
Aiden winced.

ean. He "Those were a thing when you were here, too?" Aiden asked him.

ans had "Kid, we *started* the dares."

n 1987 Aiden's eyes widened, his mind churning with a thousand qu
but still"We'll be having a conversation about this later," he said, and Rico lau

l Aiden "You got it. But I can tell Jeff feels left out, so let's get back to the
. Aidenhand."

orce to Jeff, who was pouting over his exclusion from the boy's club Aic

Rico were part of, perked up and said, "Right, the show. Normally I
" with an interview with Coach, but it's not every day we get an actual

ng, kid.up here for an entire broadcast. So I want to hear from you, Fuller. Ho

vibe in the locker room this season? Who are you expecting to breakout year?”

“I’m a firm believer that the foundation of a good hockey team is built on the back of a good goaltender,” Aiden said. “And I don’t think you’re netownto find one in the NCAA right now who’s better than DeLuca. He’s got a Jeffbrick wall for us for years, but I think last season he really settled in and got agame. He led the league in shutouts, had a ridiculously high save percentage, and kept us in a lot of games when the guys in front of him made mistakes, myself included.”

Rico and Jeff laughed indulgently, and Aiden continued, speaking about the camaraderie in the locker room, how he and his teammates had spent countless hours in the offseason training, and the number of team building activities they’d participated in over the summer.

“We’ve got a tight group,” he said. “We all get along really well, and all understand what’s at stake here, which I think is going to make a big difference as the season progresses.”

“That’s all great to hear,” Jeff said. “Was it like that with your brother Rico?”

“Yeah definitely. You have to trust each other out there. And you all understand that when one of you wins on the ice, you all win. And when one of you loses...”

“You all lose,” Aiden finished for him. “I’m not going to pretend that I’m carrying this team on my back. But I am aware that I generate a significant amount of offensive production, and am one of the best defensive forwards in the country. Losing me is a loss for the team, but I’m confident they’ll find a way to win games without me.”

“Spoken like a true leader,” Jeff said.

have a With that statement, the noise level in the arena rose as the Spartans
out of the tunnel. The band, a quarter the size of that present at
built on games, began the fight song, and Aiden reclined in his seat while J
e going Rico ran through their pregame talking points.

been a Badly, he wished he were on the ice instead of up here, but he
into his definitely think of worse ways to watch his team take on a non-con
centage, opponent.

stupid When Jeff pressed play on the pregame interview he'd done with
and Rico sat back and withdrew his phone from his pocket, Aiden sto
g about stretched, looking over the ledge and across the ice to the student secti
d spent There in the middle of the crowd, the only one wearing green in a
uilding white student section jerseys, stood Kenzie, Jessica's blonde head b
next to her as she clapped and sang along to "Victory for MSU."

and we
all the

you look hot in that jersey. where
get it?

teams,

Bunny
where are you?

have to
then one

press box

I carry He watched as her head whipped up in his direction, and he waved
ount of to get her attention.

s in the
id ways

Bunny
what are you doing up there? this isn't
another one of your dumbass dares is it?

Aiden laughed as he typed his response.

skated
football
eff and

no, I came up here to watch the
and Jeff asked if I wanted to jo
and Rico for the broadcast.

could
ference

Bunny

only you

Coach,
od and
on.
sea of
obbing

to be fair, it could be considere
shadowing

Bunny

Coach is going to be pissed

I don't care

Aiden
d you

Bunny

you never do

Aiden

And what the hell was that supposed to mean? Aiden didn't have
consider Kenzie's comment further, or formulate a response, becau
was tugging on his suit jacket, so he quickly sat and slipped his heads
on.

a hand "Welcome back, Spartan fans! Jeff Flash here with Rico Playf
Aiden Fuller. Puck drop is moments away."

Aiden had never given much thought to what exactly he'd do
journalism degree after graduation if hockey didn't pan out. At least, n
Kenzie had asked what he'd do if playing was no longer an
Broadcasting had crossed his mind as a possibility, but at some dista

Aiden
the game
in him

after a long, successful career. Over the years, he'd seen a lot of
transition from players to analysts, without any formal training other than
the fact that they played the game at the highest level possible, and succeeded.
To him, that seemed like a solid way to spend retirement.

Aiden
and job

His mother disagreed, and had wanted him to go into something practical
like business or accounting, but Aiden's cocky ass couldn't imagine
stuck in some office for the rest of his days, only interacting with a handful
of people. With journalism, he figured he'd at least be able to put his
charms to good use.

Aiden

Radio was so much more difficult than television. Aiden imagined
like explaining a movie, in detail, to a blind person. But as it turned out,
Aiden was a natural broadcaster. Not only because he knew the game
hockey inside and out, but because he was comfortable with a microphone
front of him. Jeff had the hard job of giving play-by-play, and Aiden
was awed by his ability to easily track the puck from all the way up the
ice. Aiden loved when Jeff and Rico deferred to him when big plays happened.
He loved describing exactly how the play had unfolded, his intimate
time to knowledge of his teammates adding color to his analysis.

Although he missed being on the ice with his teammates—wouldn't
it be rather back rather be skating and checking and shooting—he was having fun.

At the first intermission, the Spartans led the Tigers one to nothing
air and knew he was expected in the locker room, so he hastily bid Jeff
goodbye, promised he'd be back for the second period, and headed
with a downstairs.

When he arrived, his teammates were sprawled around the oval-
option locker room. Jack, the superstitious little shit, still had all of his gear on
not until date,

of guys his helmet, though he had to be sweating his ass off. The rest of the teammates had shed their buckets and mitts, and reclined at their stalls comfortably. “Where have you been?” Coach asked when Aiden sprinted into the locker room, no doubt noting he would have arrived sooner had he been seated in the tactical stands and not up in the booth.

“I watched from the box,” he said. It wasn’t entirely a lie, and Coach would have to know he’d been on the radio.

“Perfect,” Coach said. “Tell the boys what you saw.”

All movement in the room ceased, and Aiden stilled, staring dumbfounded at his coach. “I’m sorry?”

“You had a bird’s eye view of the ice. If you’re not playing, the least you can do is break down the first period.”

Aiden didn’t move, and his coach stared at him expectantly.

“Well, okay then.”

Confidently, Aiden strolled to the doorway at the far end of the room and opened the door. “Video room, now.”

Without hesitation, his teammates rose and followed him to the video room, where Aiden raised the projector screen and picked up a dry-erase marker.

When everyone was seated, he began.

“Okay, so here’s what I saw...”

For the next ten minutes, Aiden spoke quickly, drawing diagrams on the whiteboard and looking to his coaches for input or confirmation that they agreed with his suggestions. His teammates sat in rapt attention, nodding in agreement, asking questions, and taking his ideas and expanding on them. They were ahead by a goal, but that lead could disappear in a moment.

With Aiden’s help, they had a solid game plan heading into the second period.

of his As everyone shuffled out, Coach blocked Aiden's exit.

“You going back up to the box?”

the room, “Yes.”

l in the “Good,” Coach said, clapping him on the shoulder. “See you
intermission.”

1 didn't Dazed, Aiden hurried back upstairs, joining Jeff and Rico right as the
dropped.

“Oh!” Jeff said. “We weren't sure, but Aiden has indeed joined us
oundedsecond period. What's the energy like in the locker room right now?”

“They're hungry,” Aiden said. “They know a single goal isn't going
ast you decide this one, so we tweaked a few plays and they're hoping they
those to generate some more solid scoring chances.”

And they did. Aiden watched the second period unfold, sandwiched
and Rico, as his teammates went on to score three more goals.

om and In direct contrast to Princeton's goaltender, Jack had been perfect
Through the first forty minutes, he had faced twenty-six shots and
mediaevery single one. When Aiden went down to the locker room at inter
y-eraseagain, spirits soared.

“You guys do realize you still have twenty minutes left to play,
Aiden asked after he watched two freshman high five like they'd just won
conference championship.

on the “So we can't celebrate?” one of them asked.

at they “You can celebrate in twenty minutes when the game is over and
ding in more goals than Princeton,” Aiden said.

1 them. The freshman's brow furrowed and his mouth dropped open. Aiden
it. With himself to give the kid an undressing for whatever retort he was a
d. make, but Coach interrupted.

“Fuller is right. We celebrate when this thing is over.”

Chastised, the freshman dropped onto the bench in front of his locker.

Coach turned his attention to Aiden. “Got any notes?”

“Neutral zone play looks like shit,” Aiden said with a shrug.

Coach barked out a laugh, and turned to his players. “He’s right. Pick up those passes, and stop chipping it into the corners when we’re on the attack. Change.”

“And stop going offsidies,” Aiden added. “You guys know better.”

Coach nodded his agreement. “That too.”

“It’s our first game of the season,” Asher said under his breath, and Aiden and Asher both whipped their attention in his direction.

“If you don’t clean up the mental mistakes now, we’ll never have a chance to win by Jeffa natty,” Aiden said.

To his surprise, the remainder of his teammates mumbled their agreement. Aiden smiled, trying not to puff his chest out in pride.

Coach stepped into the center of the room to address the team, and Aiden stood off to the side, thinking things could definitely be worse. He might not be playing, which wasn’t ideal, but surprisingly, he was having fun tonight. “And it could only get better from here.”

The Spartans did indeed win by a score of four to zero, earning three points in the standings and giving Jack the first shutout of his final college season. After Aiden had joined his teammates for a victory fight song in the locker room, he headed up to the concourse in search of his mom, sister, and stepdad.

When he found them, he was surprised to see Kenzie standing in the group.

“Den!” Eloise yelled, rushing at him. In a well-practiced move,

caught her mid-stride and lifted her off her feet, swinging her around. He crushed her to his chest in a hug. Her hair still smelled of that strawberry conditioner she'd been obsessed with for as long as he could remember, and the scent clinging to his nostrils fortified him. She had tightened so much since he'd last seen her a few months ago, but he was glad she hadn't grown out of that.

When he set her back on her feet, he studied her. Her wavy hair, the same shade of his own, was pulled back from her face by an eclectic mix of black and white barrettes, and the jersey he'd gifted her four years ago still clung to her past her knobby knees.

"Who are you and what have you done with my little sister?" he asked, his voice serious.

"It's me, Den! I promise!"

His mom stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist, squeezing her tight, comforted by her warmth and the cloud of vanilla perfume that always hovered around her.

"Did you grow again?" she asked when she stepped away and looked at him.

"I wish," he said. "But I'm still six-three."

"I think you're shrinking, honey," his stepfather said, extending a hand to shake Aiden's. "Hell of a game."

"If only I got to play," he said with a weak smile.

"Soon, sweetheart," his mother said. "Although I'm still incredibly proud that you thought streaking in broad daylight through the busiest part of campus was a good idea."

Aiden's cheeks burned, sufficiently chastised in a way only his mother could accomplish.

d as he Then a flash of green had him glancing up from his family in time t
: cheapKenzie turning away from them. But he wasn't going to let her go that
e could "Bunny!" he yelled, and ran the short distance after her. He cau
l grownwrist in his hand and spun her to face him, pulling her close. "Where
lad shethink you're going?"

"You were busy with your family," she said quietly. "I didn't v
ie exactintrude. Jess and I were going to say hi and go get dinner."

of green "Trust me, you were not intruding. I was hoping you'd come to dinr
ll hungus, actually."

Her eyes widened, that ocean blue practically glowing in the dim ov
ked herlights.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked, sharing an indiscernit
with Jessica.

aist. He Aiden squinted at her, confused. "I thought we agreed we were giv
scentedthing a real shot," he said, voice lowered.

"Yeah like last week! I didn't expect to meet your family so soon!"

ed up at "I've met your brother and sister-in-law already," Aiden pointed out

Kenzie huffed. "That hardly counts," she said with an eye rol
brother is famous."

and for "Kenzie, please," he said, his tone an octave away from begging.

"What if they hate me?" she asked quietly, turning her head awa
him.

r pissed He captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently
part offer to look him in the eye. "They're going to love you," he said, and l
his mouth to hers.

mother The kiss was slow, sweet, the most gentle press of his lips against h
over way too soon. To Aiden, it felt like it had been ages since he'c

to catcher, and he wanted more.

easily. Distantly, Aiden heard Jessica say, “And this is where I take my leave.”
“Fine,” Kenzie said when they parted, her breath fanning over his lips. He nearly drew her back in to get completely lost in her, but he couldn’t with his family fifteen feet away and an arena of hockey fans empty around them.

“Fine, what?”

“I’ll go to dinner,” she said, stepping from his embrace. “But don’t get in front of them again.”

Aiden sighed, but said, “I won’t.”

“Promise?” she asked, extending her pinky.

He hooked his finger around hers. “Promise.”

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“Fine,” Kenzie said when they parted, her breath fanning over his lips. He nearly drew her back in to get completely lost in her, but he couldn’t. Not with his family fifteen feet away and an arena of hockey fans emptying out around them.

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MUCH TO KENZIE'S CHAGRIN, Aiden was right.

His family *did* love her, and she adored them right back.

Kenzie half expected there to be some sort of tension between Aiden and his stepfather, between the boy and the man who had taken his father's place. But she quickly came to realize Dan and Aiden had a wonderful relationship.

"He's never tried to take my dad's place," Aiden had said to her on the drive from the rink to the restaurant in Okemos, where they were having dinner. "He and my mom actually met in a support group for people who unexpectedly lost their spouses, and they were really good friends for a long time until it bloomed into...more. But he's never tried to step into that father figure. He's been more like a friend than anything."

From the way Aiden spoke about Dan, she could tell he deeply respected and appreciated what he'd done for his mother and their family in the wake of their tragedy.

And Eloise was the most perfect ray of sunshine.

“So you like Harry Potter?” she asked Kenzie at dinner, mouth half full of mashed potatoes and gravy.

“El,” her mother scolded. “What have I told you about talking with your mouth?”

Eloise dropped her gaze to her plate and audibly swallowed, then looked up at her mom and said, “You told me it’s tacky and rude.”

The table burst into laughter at the pronouncement, Aiden’s mom shaking her head with an exasperated grin. Kenzie had seen that same expression on her own mom’s face in regards to her brothers plenty of times to recognize for what it was: pride.

Turning her attention from her daughter, Aiden’s mother leveled her steady-eyed gaze on Kenzie. “So,” she said conversationally, pausing to sip her water while Kenzie waited for what was sure to be an interrogation. “How long have you and Aiden been sleeping together?”

Aiden and Kenzie exchanged a look. “Mom!” Aiden shouted, nearly tipping over his water glass as he thrust up his hand in protest.

Kenzie gasped, choking on her own spit in the process, coughing up a storm as her eyes watered.

“What?” Aiden’s mom asked. “It’s only a question.”

“Well, we haven’t slept together,” Aiden told her, and Kenzie didn’t miss the note of pride in his tone. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Aiden went through puberty without his father around,” his mother said, looking at Kenzie.

Kenzie. “So I had to be Mom *and* Dad. We’re very close because of it.”

Kenzie was unsure how to respond, unsure if the comment even warranted a response. Aiden made an impatient, warning noise in his throat.

“Mom, please don’t bother her about this. We’ve literally been on long-term dates.”

of full of “That’s more than you usually take girls on before you get them into bed,” she reminded him.

“Oh. My. God,” Aiden whined, dropping his head into his hands.

Kenzie couldn’t help it; she burst out laughing.

Eloise, who had been laser-focused on her food, looked up at Kenzie and, without knowing why, joined in. Soon the entire table was shaking, mirthful tears running down their cheeks.

“Honey, stop tormenting the poor kids,” Aiden’s stepdad said once everyone had calmed down.

“Thank you, Dan,” Aiden said. Then he leaned closer to Kenzie, his hazel eyes fanning across her cheek as he whispered, “Although I would like to see you more than to get you naked, bunny.”

Kenzie shivered from head to toe, and quickly picked up her wine glass and gulped down several large swallows. Aiden chuckled next to her.

As the rest of the evening unfolded, Kenzie sat back and watched her family interact, coming to the realization that Aiden Fuller was an enigma. On campus, he was a hotshot hockey player, emphasis on *hot*, with an *all-that* attitude that had females tripping all over themselves trying to get his attention. And yet, he wanted the one girl who’d openly disdained him. It wasn’t until that moment she realized who he was.

With his family, he was sweet, attentive, and jovial. Happier than she had ever seen him. With each minute she spent in his family’s company, she could help the comparisons she drew between Brent and Aiden. It was clear that Brent loved his mother, and the two were extremely close. As her mother had been born, Brent had always been closer with their mom than she or Nate. Jean loved each of her children equally—or so she said—but she and Nate had always had a special connection. Kenzie and Nate would

to bed,” understand. On top of that, Aiden was extremely attentive to his little
and a pang echoed through Kenzie’s chest as she remembered when s
younger and Brent had doted on her, exactly how Aiden did with Elois

When they were alone together, Aiden became a combination of t
Kenzie’s personas. He was incredibly sweet to Kenzie, holding open car and b
le was doors, holding her hand, and telling her she looked pretty. But then he
that charm on her, and Kenzie’s toes would curl in anticipation of v
they’d might say next. She was always on guard around him, bracing for t
subtly sexual comment, or a touch that would have her stomach
s breathbackflips.

nothing Nobody had ever turned her on the way Aiden did, and all they’d do
kiss. She couldn’t imagine the way she’d react if he bothered to put hi
ine and on her body with any sort of intention. Half the time she wanted to get
knees and beg him to do just that, but she held herself back.

ned the She had to maintain some semblance of composure in his presence,
gma. she was desperate for him.

an *I’m-* Once dinner was over, Kenzie let his mom wrap her in a hug.

get his “Take it easy on him,” she whispered in Kenzie’s ear. “He’s so
him the happier than I’ve seen him in ages, but he’s more fragile than he lets o

Kenzie pulled away and gave his mom a soft smile. “I will.”

ie’d yet Kenzie had always thought she was the fragile one in this relations
ouldn’t maybe...maybe she and Aiden were more alike than it appeared.

r Aiden “Bunny!” Jack yelled when they walked in the door of the house,
r’s first up and scooping her off her feet. When he set her back down, he gav
Sandrapeck on the cheek. “Did you hear your boy made his broadcasting
d Brenttonight?”

l never Kenzie turned to Aiden, eyebrows drawn together. Aiden’s exp

the sister, rested comically between irritation at the way Jack had manhandled her and the fact that she was bashful.

"I did," she said.

"Speaking of," Aiden said, turning to her. "What was your *you know* building text about?"

Kenzie sighed. "You're already on thin ice," she said, ignoring the chuckle at the unintended pun. "I just wish you wouldn't make the next spectacle of yourself."

"Bunny has a point," Luke chimed in.

Aiden glared at each of them in turn before releasing a heavy sigh. "Fine, I won't do it again."

Kenzie rose and pecked him on the cheek. "Thank you."

Their gazes locked, tension thickening around them. Aiden beamed at her.

Kenzie moved to meet him halfway. Right as their lips were about to meet, a pillow smacked the side of Aiden's head.

"Get a room!" Asher yelled.

Aiden groaned, but closed his hand around Kenzie's and towed her to the bedroom. When the door was closed behind them, Kenzie moved to sit on the bed, and Aiden turned the lock and immediately began shedding his clothes.

The first time she'd witnessed this particular ritual, it had been awkward and uncomfortable. She'd watched him but tried not to, and wondered how she should remind him she was in the room.

This time, she openly studied him as he stripped.

Aiden was built like a statue, and Kenzie looked her fill. He loosened his belt, unbuttoned the top button of his dress shirt, and removed it, then flicked open the top button of his dress shirt.

Aiden tracked his fingers as they brushed the strong column of his throat, then moved down his chest and stomach as he made quick work of the remaining buttons.

her and shrugged out of it, then tugged off the white tee beneath in that smooth handed way only men could.

Each muscle of his body was perfectly defined. Kenzie traced her fingers over the slopes of his shoulders, the bulges of his biceps, and the corded lengths of his forearms—the left covered in swirls of tattoos. Asher wanted to sink her teeth into his traps and pecs, and wondered how such skin would be if she ran her fingers over the ridges of his abdomen. She followed them with her mouth.

As he unbuckled his belt and pulled it free from the loops, his gaze met hers and held. Completely enraptured by this man, Kenzie didn't dare break his stare as he unzipped and dropped his pants to the floor, leaving nothing but a pair of blue and white checked boxers.

"Like what you see?" Aiden asked, his lips twisting into a cocky grin. Kenzie noted with no small amount of satisfaction that his chest heaved in time with his rapid breaths, mimicking her own.

Kenzie could only nod, trapping her bottom lip between her teeth to keep herself from saying something she couldn't take back. It should freak her out on how much had changed between them since the first time she'd come home. Instead, she was simply excited for all the possibilities of what came next. But she was in uncharted territory here, and she didn't know what to do if she were going forward. They had agreed to give this thing between them a chance, and she'd met his family. For all intents and purposes, they were dating. Right? So what was stopping her from saying and doing exactly what she wanted at this moment?

Kenzie "You're beautiful," she told him honestly.

Aiden's cheeks colored, and he prowled toward her. "So are you," he murmured. He reached her and perched on his bed, wedging himself between her

th, one-and placing his hands near her hips, bracketing her in.

“What are we doing?”

er eyes Aiden blinked, as though confused by her question, but lazily

thick, “Whatever you want, bunny.”

os. She And what did she want?

soft his She wanted to taste him. She wanted to press her mouth to his, to k

als andsmirk off his face, to make him sigh against her when she brushed h

against his and tunneled her fingers into his silky-smooth hair.

caught But she also wanted more dates, more adventures with his hand

e breakmore wearing his jersey to games, more *everything*.

him in “I want you,” she said finally, a little breathless.

“You already have me.”

rin, but In the span of a heartbeat, she was on her back on the bed, Aiden h

aved inover her, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that set her mind and th

spinning, blurring everything out of focus until only she and Aiden an

to stopthe places they were connected—mouths, hands in hair and brushing

her out,skin, chest to chest and hip to hip—remained.

ie here. Aiden’s kiss was ravenous, like he’d been lost in the desert and K

ext. lips were the first taste of water he’d had in days. And she met hi

ie rulesequal vigor, wanting to erase every single millimeter of space betwee

n a realuntil she couldn’t tell where he ended and she began.

y were Lazily, he ran his fingers across her collarbone and ghosted them o

ly whatchest, trailing them lower until he found a strip of exposed skin wh

jersey—*his* jersey—had bunched up. Without warning, he slipped l

under the material and brought his hand up to cup her breast.

he told “God,” he mumbled against her mouth. “You are so soft.”

ier legs In answer, she brushed her fingertips along the ridge of his spine.

you.”

He moved away from her mouth, and she made a noise of protest. He replied, pressed kisses along her cheek and jaw, nudging his nose along that spot behind her ear and nibbling at the lobe.

“Oh,” she gasped.

Aiden smiled against her neck as he bent his head lower, sucked at her chestskin where her shoulder sloped up, and pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Aiden...” she groaned.

“Yes, bunny?” he asked innocently, picking his head up to stare at her. In her lust-filled haze, he appeared fuzzy around the edges, haloed by the desk lamp behind him.

“Do that again,” she begged him.

He obliged, moving from one breast to the other, this time licking from her shoulder to her jaw, and she nipped at his collarbone in response. She shifted her hips up to meet him, groaning again when she was met by the hard line of his cock pressing against her through his boxers.

Abruptly, Aiden sat back on his heels and studied her. Kenzie’s face was instantly gripped by panic, wondering what she’d done wrong. She felt the urge to turn away from him, and was rewarded a second later when he spoke.

“I cannot tell you what seeing you in that jersey does to me, bunny,” he said, tone low and dangerous, broadcasting to her exactly how much his arm was coming undone. “But I’d really like you to take it off now. Can you do that for me?”

As always, Aiden gave her a choice, ultimately letting her decide. “So are they went tonight. Would it always be like this? Him providing her...”

escape hatch in every situation?

until he Kenzie wasn't a virgin, but she'd only been with a handful of guys. Each of them had been that particular brand of narcissistic in bed that was common in males in their early to mid-twenties. Kenzie had been a means to an end; a quick way to an orgasm. Not a single one of them had cared for her the way she'd wanted or needed.

But everything was different with this man in front of her. Aiden was patient, unselfish, unhurried, and unwilling to make her do anything she didn't want to do.

"I..." she trailed off, unsure how to articulate this in a way that wouldn't have him kicking her out seconds after the words left her mouth. "I think I'm obvious how badly I want you."

Aiden grinned and nodded. "I want you, too, bunny. Why do I have to wait for a path 'but' coming?"

She sighed and sat up, rising onto her knees so she was face to face with him. "We've only just agreed to give this thing a shot," she said. "I've never really been in a serious relationship, at least not since high school, and I know you're hardly counts. I'm willing to bet you haven't, either. I don't want to resist physical boundaries too far too fast."

That was the truth...but it wasn't. This man in front of her, in a few months, had blasted through her emotional barriers. She was breaking down her walls, and for him, falling headlong into disaster. While she knew she could, she wanted to keep that last wall intact, because she knew once he took her, once she let him have her body, those last vestiges of her independence she'd managed to hang onto would be in his hands. If—when that happened, she'd never be able to get rid of him.

To her surprise, Aiden didn't try to fight her, or even seem part

upset by her desire to halt whatever had been about to happen.
ys, and “I understand,” he said, then pressed a bruising, toe-curling kiss
seemed mouth before fully backing away. “Do you want to crash here tonight
jeans to you want me to bring you home?”

d about Dazed, Kenzie glanced at his bedside alarm clock, and was shocked
it was already well past midnight. As if her body realized it, too, she y
en was largely, and Aiden chuckled.

’t want “I think I’ll stay here.”

Aiden nodded. “Let me get you a shirt and some shorts. I’ve got a
ouldn’t toothbrush, too, and you’re welcome to help yourself to any of my skin
think it’s Kenzie laughed. “Skincare?”

“Don’t give me that look, bunny. You think my face looks like this
sense ato genetics? Of course not. I take care of my skin.”

She shook her head. Aiden continued to surprise her.
ce with He gathered some clothes and stalked into the bathroom, rifling t
e never drawers before emerging with a toothbrush still in the packaging.

nd that She took her time washing her face and brushing her teeth, trying to
ush our a little of her composure before she went out there and had to share

with this boy who drove her crazy in the most delicious of ways, rig
w short telling him she didn’t want to sleep with him.

g all her Then she stripped out of her socks, shoes, and jeans, and lifted t
he still jersey over her head.

she let But she felt cold without it, and the shorts he’d given her were co
er heart oversized. So without thinking twice, she whipped off her t-shirt and
n—that donned the jersey again, folding her clothes in a neat stack on the floor
vanity.

icularly “Bunny,” Aiden said when she opened the door and walked back i

room.

to her “Yes?”

t, or do “Tell me you at least have underwear on still.”

Kenzie laughed. “Of course I do.”

to find “What happened to the t-shirt and shorts?”

yawned She shrugged. “They’re still in there. But I wanted to wear this..
you’d rather I didn’t.”

Aiden rose from the bed and walked toward her, snaking his hands
in extraher waist and pulling her close. “I wouldn’t dream of making you ta
ncare.” off. Unless you want to. As far as I’m concerned, you can wear it ev
for the rest of your life.”

thanks She smiled at him, and he responded by kissing her, a sweet little pe
had her wanting more but knowing she couldn’t ask.

“Do you have a side preference?” he asked when they pulle
throughgesturing to his bed.

“I usually sleep in the middle of my bed, so no. I’m good with what
o regain Aiden gestured for her to take the side farthest from the door, and
e a bedcrawled in, laying on her back and tracking him as he double checked
ht afterdoor was locked and then turned off the lamp. Surely by memory,
moved back across the room and slid between the sheets next to her.

Aiden’s For several long moments, neither of them moved. Then Aiden sai
we at least cuddle?”

mically “Duh,” she said, and turned onto her side so Aiden could scoot up
bra andher and wrap his arms around her, one thrown casually across her mid
r by theother snaking under the pillow beneath her head.

“Good night, bunny,” he said quietly, his breath shifting her hair t
into theher neck.

She shivered and burrowed deeper into his embrace. “Good night, F

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Kenzie
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She shivered and burrowed deeper into his embrace. “Good night, Fuller.”

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“FULLER!”

His shouted last name and incessant pounding on his bedroom door woke Aiden awake, causing him to bolt upright. Kenzie grumbled in her sleep, curled into a ball next to him.

Aiden smiled, and leaned down to press a kiss to her temple.

“FULLER!” Luke yelled again. “Morning skate! Get up and let’s go!”

“Go away!”

Aiden stilled, then busted out laughing at Kenzie’s outburst.

“Morning, bunny,” Luke said through the door, quieter this time.

“Morning,” she mumbled.

Aiden leaned down and brushed his lips over the blade of Kenzie’s cheekbone. “I’m sorry for the incredibly rude wake up call,” he said in her ear, “but I have to get to the rink.”

Kenzie rolled onto her back and stared up at him, slowly blinking and studying her and how the bright, ocean depths of her eyes had turned

with sleep. How her hair floated around her head, fanning out across pillows. How the side of her tanned face was creased from lying on her back all night.

“You are stunning in the morning,” he blurted.

A slow, sleepy smile spread across her face. “You’re not so bad you know.”
“I’m going to kiss you now,” he said, leaning down and capturing her mouth before she could protest.

He shifted between her legs, and she raised her knees to bracket him with her thighs.

Now was absolutely not the time, but Aiden couldn’t help releasing a damper on his lust for this girl, at least a little bit. He couldn’t resist pressing the full length of him, from chest to hips, against her, grinning into the back of her throat at her gasp when she encountered his hard length. Thrusting his tongue into her jarred her mouth, Aiden lost himself in the kiss, in how soft and warm she was, how deep and languid he felt from sleep, and how every noise, every sweep of her hair, and the slow slide of her lips against his had him wanting to ignore her wishes and take her right now.

.”
“FULLER!” Jack yelled this time. “I know your girlfriend is super hot, but you really cannot afford to be late to the rink!”

Aiden pulled away and rested his forehead against Kenzie’s, both chests heaving. “Fuck,” he whispered.

She raised her hands to shove him away, though Aiden only moved to press against Kenzie’s to tilt his head and press a kiss to the tip of her nose.

l in her “Go,” she said. “I can’t have you getting in trouble on my account.”

Reluctantly, Aiden rose and shuffled around the room, throwing on his clothes. Aiden shorts and a t-shirt before hustling into the bathroom to brush his teeth. When he emerged, Kenzie was upright on the bed, the sheets

... his arms around her waist, his jersey draping across her delicate shoulders. ...
... in it all mouth went dry, and it took all of his willpower to remain rooted to the spot
... instead of rushing to her for one last kiss before he left.

“Stay as long as you want,” he said. “And don’t worry about locking the door
... rself.” when you leave.”

... ing her He was going to get absolutely nothing done today thinking about the
... half naked in his bed.

... his hips For the first time since his suspension, he was almost glad he could
... play.

... ing the

... pressing

... eir kiss



... ue into The Spartans won again that night, sweeping their first series of the
... as, how To celebrate, the boys threw a party.

... tongue Shocker, right?

... s to go Aiden found it difficult to muster any major enthusiasm for the trophy
... course he was happy they’d won, but he would’ve been a lot happier if he

... hot and contributed in any meaningful way. Coach had sent him to the press conference
... again with strict instructions to *stay off the air*. Aiden did as he was told

... of their instead had sat with a few other hockey personnel, tasked to act as a
... scout, where he’d report back on areas where they could improve

... enough intermission. It was nice to be involved, but his entire body ached to play

“I can’t wait to actually see you on the ice,” Kenzie said to him that night
... as though she’d read his mind. She was tucked into his side as they watched

... on gym game of beer pong unfold in front of them. In comparison to his

... melancholy mood, Kenzie basked in the revelry.

... pooled

Aiden's He looked down at her, where her pretty round cheeks were flushed. He spotted the drink in her hand, her hair in a messy bun piled atop her head, his hands once again hanging on her lithe frame.

king up Leaning closer, he whispered, "I can't wait for that, either. You won't be able to resist me once you see my skills."

his girl Kenzie shivered, and Aiden grinned, loving how easy it was to rile her up. They hadn't discussed sexual partners or experience, and honestly, it didn't matter to Aiden now. When he got her naked and willing, he was going to ruin her for everyone else, make her forget about all the boys who had put their hands on her before him.

And with *that* image in mind, Aiden needed a distraction.

"Bunny and I call next!" he shouted into the room, and his four teammates—Jack and Asher teamed up against two freshmen—turned to stare at him.

Jack shrugged. "Okay," he said, turning his attention back to the table. He immediately sinking a ball in a cup. Water splashed out—they'd spilled it before. Filling the cups with beer ages ago after one too many spills on the hardwood floors—and one of the freshmen took a large drink from the table. "Be prepared to lose."

"Aiden!" Kenzie protested, tugging on his arm so he'd look at her.

"What? Are you any good?"

"I've never even played before!" she hissed, and Aiden's eyes widened.

Stupidly, he said, "You've never played beer pong before?"

Kenzie rolled her eyes and settled them on him in a glare. "I just said I've never played before."

"What...how? You were in college before, right?"

"We didn't really do house parties in NYC, remember? Going to college was easier. This," she said, sweeping her arm out at the mass of bodies gathered inside the hockey house, "is all new to me."

ed from Aiden's brain seemed to misfire, and he had difficulty unders
s jersey exactly how this twenty-three-year-old girl hadn't yet experienced sor
as simple as playing a game of beer pong.

on't be "Well, bunny," he said. "You're in luck. Tonight, we're going to
all that."

her up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

none of "It means tonight, I'm introducing you to all the college party thir
he washaven't done yet. Have you played flip cup? Done a beer bong? Shot
ys who beer?"

"No, no, and no," she said, splashes of deep pink staining her cheeks.
Aiden tipped her head back with a finger under her chin and bent c
mmates give her a quick kiss. Against her mouth, he said. "Do not feel embai
him. It's nothing to be ashamed of. But it's time we fix it. Do you trust me?
ble and She nodded, emphatically and without hesitation.

stopped "Good. Let's do this."

ancient In the interest of giving Kenzie the best night he could, he slow
e cup in drinking, sipping on his beer and letting her take the lead during beer p

Despite having never played before, she was a natural, sinking ne
many shots as he did. After Jack and Asher had won the game agai
freshmen, Aiden and Kenzie made quick work of his roommates.

ned. When they won—on her shot, no less—she cheered and yelled i
room for the next challengers to step up and try their luck.

d that." Aiden had different ideas.

"Actually," he said loudly. "We're done playing! Someone else c
out was these losers."

athered "One and done, Fuller?" Jack said with a head shake. "Embarrassing
"Just trying to give my girl a good night," he said. "She's already

landingsheets to the wind, and we have to pace ourselves.”

nothing Kenzie had moved into the center of the adjoining living room, raised in the air as she swayed her hips back and forth to the beat change Notorious B.I.G. song pulsing from the speakers. Hypnotized, Aiden and watched.

Kenzie had a natural rhythm about her, was in full control of her body. Aiden couldn't help the smile that spread across his face watching his gunned loose. He knew it wasn't something she did often, and it warmed him that she felt comfortable enough in his house—and safe enough with him to dance alone in the middle of the party, uninhibited.

Unfortunately, Aiden wasn't the only one who appreciated her grace. Guys around the room watched her hungrily, and Aiden's jaw tighter. Warmth in his chest replaced by ice cold jealousy.

“Okay, that's enough,” he said, stalking toward her and grabbing the wrist, pulling her from the makeshift dance floor and toward the living room.

“I was dancing!” she protested, pulling her arm free.

And shit, she was even more drunk than he'd initially thought. Maybe he should've taken more of those drinks during beer pong, but it was too late to go back now. If he tried to tell her to slow down, she'd only rebuff him and most likely accuse him of being exactly like her brother, and run away.

If he'd learned anything about Kenzie in their time together, it was that telling her not to do something almost certainly ensured she would.

Exactly as he'd expected, a smaller group of people gathered around a long, white folding table set up in the center of his postage-stamp backyard. A rousing game of flip cup taking place.

Aiden and Kenzie sidled up to the table, and Aiden said to the group

guys.”

, hands “Sup Fuller.”

: of the “Hi Aiden.”

n stood “You gonna play?”

Aiden nodded. “My girl has never played, though,” he said, in-
dy, and Kenzie, who was staring wide-eyed at the overturned cups and uprig
girl lets spread across the table.

is heart “Well let’s show her how it’s done then,” one of the guys said, and
him—to lining both sides of the table shuffled to make room for them. Aiden s
one side and directed Kenzie to the other.

moves. “So here’s how it goes,” he said to her, splashing some beer into
ied, the cup and explaining the rules of the game.

Exactly as she had with beer pong, Kenzie took to the game natural
her by game required far less hand-eye coordination and much more patience
back of was something she had in spades. Though they were on opposite

Aiden couldn’t help rooting for her, cheering happily and pulling her
kiss when she beat him.

aybe he At that point, she was so unsteady on her feet, Aiden decided it was
late to get her to bed.

efforts, “Do you want to crash here or do you want to go home?” he asked c

. They stood in the darkened hallway that led to his bedroom, K
as that weight supported almost entirely by his left arm wrapped around her

Thanks to his large size and high tolerance, Aiden only had a small l
ound as he asked him to, he would gladly walk her home right now. The party
yard, abe going on for several hours yet, despite the fact that it was after mi
and he wanted her to get some rest.

p, “Hey “I want you,” Kenzie slurred, then threw her body sideways so s

backed against the wall, taking Aiden entirely by surprise as she pulled with her.

In seconds, he found himself with every inch of his body, from his knee, pressed against her. Kenzie reached up and buried her fingers, plucking hair at his nape, scratching at his scalp in the way that made his eyes roll back in his head.

She rose on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his, losing her temper along the way and dragging her lips across his cheek. Undeterred, she followed a path across the sharp line of his jaw and down his neck. The sound her tongue made as it scraped along his stubble was obscene, a solo jolt to his groin that had his cock almost instantly hard.

Aiden wanted her—wanted this—badly, but not at the expense of his dignity. This regretting it in the morning. She had stopped him once before when she was, which completely sober, and as much as she seemed to want this now, she couldn't take it from her. Not when he knew better.

So when she moved her hands under his shirt and scraped her fingers across his abs, the muscles jumping in time with her touch, Aiden gripped her wrists and pulled them free, holding her arms by her sides.

“Bunny,” he said, voice low and rough. He leaned down to rest his forehead against hers. “Not like this.”

Aiden blinked his eyes open and pulled away to stare at her. In the light of the hallway, he saw her eyes widen in confusion, then narrow into a sharp, brilliant line. If he would blink rapidly, shining more brightly than before.

And, *fuck*, he'd hurt her feelings.

“If you don't want me, Aiden,” she said, voice steady with conviction. He knew was embarrassment, “all you have to do is say so.”

“I do want you,” he said, cupping her face in his palms. “Badly. But

led him so drunk; I don't want to take advantage of you."

"I'm not drunk," she said, pushing away from him and moving down the hall—away from his bedroom.

She was in the *Guess she's not staying here tonight.*

For someone so inebriated, she was particularly nimble, bobbing and weaving through the crowded living room until she reached the front door and stepped out onto the porch. She power-walked onto the sidewalk, and she headed in the direction of her apartment.

Jack. The Barefoot.

Aiden sighed and hurried after her.

"Is she okay?" Sofia called from behind him.

He turned as he continued to move toward Kenzie, shooting her a thumbs up. "She's just drunk," he assured her. "I'm going to take her home."

Aiden "Okay," Sofia said. "She's lucky she has you." Then she went back to work, walking right into Jack's waiting arms.

"Bunny," he said to Kenzie when he finally caught up with her, grasping her wrist and pulling her to a stop.

She jerked free from his grasp and continued walking. "Leave me alone, Aiden."

"No," he said, this time grabbing her and pulling her to his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

"Please," she said quietly. "I want to go home."

"Then I'll take you home. But at least let me carry you. You're not wearing shoes."

Glancing down at her feet, she let out a small sound, a cross between a hiccup and a giggle, when she realized they were bare.

Which then turned into full-blown hysterical laughter.

He had to get her off the street before East Lansing public safety could show up and ding her for public intoxication.

That was the last thing either of them needed.

Finally, she said, "Okay."

Aiden turned and let her scramble onto his back, then quickly walked six blocks from his place to hers.

About halfway, she passed out, becoming a deadweight on his back, so he was grateful he remembered the code from the time he'd come over to see her so he could get them upstairs without waking her.

When he reached her door, he was doubly grateful she'd hidden the key under her doormat. Thankful for years and years of training, Aiden squatted with Kenzie still on his back, removed the key, and let them in. Flipping on lights as he went, he made his way through her living room, kitchen, then down the hall to her room, where he gently laid her on the bed. The bottoms of her once-pristine white socks were now nearly black from the dirt they'd picked up over the course of the evening. Her jeans pulled down to her legs in an obscene way that had him wanting to peel them off her. Alone, his jersey covered her top half.

Sleeping in jeans was about the most uncomfortable thing ever, so Aiden rapping badly as he wished he were undressing her for different reasons, unzipped her pants and pulled them off, tossing them into the corner of the room.

Then he moved into her attached bath and rifled through her medicine cabinet, finally finding a bottle of Advil. He shook two pills loose and took them into the kitchen, where he filled a glass of water and grabbed a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge.

When he reached her bedside again, he jostled her shoulder, waki

ame by “Bunny,” he said quietly.

Bleary eyed, she blinked up at him exactly as she had that morning, now the milky white of her sclera was marred by red veins. She m something incoherent, and he smiled.

ked the “Bunny, I need you to take some medicine.”

“I don’t want to.”

, and he Aiden sighed, reminded of how much he hated taking care of o studypeople. But he also understood that Kenzie didn’t let go like this c ever, and he would feel even worse if he left her to her own devices a sparewoke in the morning with a jackhammer pounding her skull.

n easily “I know you don’t want to, but I promise you’ll feel better if you do. nside. Gingerly, he helped her sit up, figuring if she were going to throw g roomwould be the time. When she was upright on the edge of her be : on the dangling, the color in her face remaining steady, he said, “Open up.”

y black Kenzie did as she was told, and Aiden popped the pills into her is clungthen wrapped her fingers around the glass of water and lifted it to her ier, andShe took a small sip to wash down the pills, aware even in her drunk that too much too soon could upset the delicate balance of her stomach

and as Without ceremony, she flopped onto her back, nestled into her pillow. Aiden promptly passed back out.

r of the Aiden couldn’t help but chuckle, then set the glass of water and b Gatorade on her nightstand.

edicine Though they’d shared a bed the night before, Aiden didn’t feel com: carriedcrawling in next to her. He had a feeling that when she woke up otle of morning and realized what she’d done—throwing herself at him—ai

he’d reacted—by turning her down—she’d be more embarrass ng her.

anything. He didn't want to exacerbate the situation by forcing
though immediately confront him.

umbled They needed to have a conversation about what came next, and as b
he wanted to scoop her into his arms and cradle her against his body al
he had to practice restraint. Maintain some boundaries until they co
out the events of the evening.

drunk So he turned away from her and flipped off the light, whispering,
often, if night, bunny," as he closed the door behind him.

and she

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anything. He didn't want to exacerbate the situation by forcing her to immediately confront him.

They needed to have a conversation about what came next, and as badly as he wanted to scoop her into his arms and cradle her against his body all night, he had to practice restraint. Maintain some boundaries until they could sort out the events of the evening.

So he turned away from her and flipped off the light, whispering, "Good night, bunny," as he closed the door behind him.

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WHEN KENZIE WOKE THE next morning, her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth

With a groan, she rolled onto her side and waited for the throbbing in her temples to withdraw. It ebbed a little, but she still felt as though someone was hammering her skull.

Blindly, she reached for her nightstand, groping along the surface until her hand connected with the bottle of Gatorade she vaguely remembered leaving there the night before.

She groaned again. *Aiden.*

It was truly the first time she'd gotten to see Aiden in his element as a man on campus. Though she had been undeniably drunk, she'd been fully aware of where he was and what he was doing at all times. She'd been watching him work the room, chirp his teammates, and effortlessly teach the rules of beer pong and flip cup.

It had her feeling all sorts of things.

Memories returned in snatches. Him guiding her wrist as she tossed across a table. Him showing her the proper technique to use in order to get the cup perfectly onto its rim on the first try. How he'd mopped her up when she spilled half a drink down her front.

How she'd kissed him in the hallway.

What the hell had she been thinking, drunkenly throwing herself like that? Her cheeks burned as she remembered.

Then her mind snagged on something else: his reaction.

Not like this.

Her cheeks burned impossibly hotter.

Flipping onto her back, she threw a forearm dramatically across her forehead, like a Victorian woman dropping onto a fainting couch.

Giving this relationship a real shot had been Aiden's idea, so she knew she hadn't exactly been happy on Friday night when she'd put a stop to things at her before they could go all the way. Still, she hadn't expected him to come and reject her when she told him she wanted him last night. What was he doing anyway? Some sort of retribution for bruising his ego?

Embarrassment turned to fury in her veins, and she reached for her phone. Aiden—plugged in, on the nightstand, presumably courtesy of Aiden.

And speak of the devil...

Aiden is sexy

do you hate me?

as a big
acutely

Kenzie considered his question. Did she hate him? No. But she was definitely pissed.

d a ball
o flip a
hen she

K

I don't hate you, but I don't like you
much right now

Aiden is sexy

get out here and say it to my face

at him Get out here?

Kenzie leapt from her bed and stumbled as she got her sober legs under her, ignoring the way her stomach lurched and head pounded with the blood as she ran down the hall and slid into the kitchen.

Aiden stood at the stove, shirtless, feet bare, a pair of grey joggers crossed her low on his hips, directing the eye south, showcasing that perfect vein in his muscles.

new he “What are you doing here? How did you even get in?”

air tryst “Good morning to you, too, bunny. Did you forget I brought you home outright night?” he said, scooping fluffy scrambled eggs out of a pan and onto as that, He whirled and set the plate on the bar-height counter attached to her where it joined similar plates loaded with sausage, sliced fresh fruit r phone roasted sweet potatoes.

“Did you...do all of this for me?” she asked, indicating the spread.

She didn't only mean breakfast, and he knew it.

Aiden nodded. “I figured you'd be mad at me and feeling like she thought I'd kill two birds with one stone.”

he was Kenzie was indeed mad, but mostly at herself. She was also starving she climbed onto a barstool and spooned food onto her plate. A moment later Aiden silently set a steaming mug of coffee and a glass of orange juice in front of her, and she gave him a tight but thankful smile.



The whole thing felt incredibly domestic, and it did funny to Kenzie's resolve to be angry about Aiden's rejection.

After loading her dishwasher and wiping down her counters, Aiden sat next to her and made himself a plate. They ate in stilted silence, painfully aware of his every movement next to her.

"You finished?" he asked after they'd both inhaled their meals. He stood and cleared their plates, rinsing them before putting them in the dishwasher. Kenzie's brows drew together at the way he moved around her kitchen, the way he lived here. He'd only been here a few times, but he'd somehow managed to make himself feel at home.

She wondered if that was because it was her place, and he felt comfortable around her, or because he was Aiden, and he felt comfortable anywhere.

When he circled back around her side of the counter, he jerked his head in the direction of the living room. "Come sit with me."

Reluctantly, Kenzie rose from the barstool and trailed after him, sitting as far away from him on her sectional as she could manage.

"Why are you still here?" she asked, annoyed by her attitude but unable to reel it in.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay, and..." Aiden pushed through his hair and scrubbed it down his face in exasperation.

"Well?"

"I'm assuming you remember kissing me last night."

"You mean do I remember kissing you and you pushing me away from me later, do?"

Aiden grimaced, but Kenzie's embarrassment had morphed into anger as she pressed on.

"I don't like being made a fool of, Aiden. Did I misread all the signs?"

ings touches and quiet moments we've had over the last couple months' misunderstand when you asked me to give this thing with you a real shot. I didn't, tell me now."

Kenzie Aiden groaned and stood, moving over so he was sitting right next to her. As if to prove she hadn't misread anything, he placed his hand on her hip and brushed his thumb along the arch of her heel.

"I pushed you away because I didn't want you doing something you'd regret," he said.

"And you think I'd regret that? Letting you take me to bed?"

"Well, wouldn't you? How would you have felt this morning if you woke up naked in bed next to me, bunny? Would you have been happy with yourself, or would you have run screaming?"

Honestly, she would've run screaming, and the look he leveled at her said he knew it, too.

She met his gaze, and his normally milk-chocolate eyes darkened.

"So you're telling me the only reason we didn't have sex last night was because you're a gentleman and didn't want to take advantage of me?"

Aiden snorted a laugh but nodded. "Exactly."

Emboldened, Kenzie climbed onto his lap, straddling him. "Well, what, Fuller?"

Aiden remained still as a statue beneath her. "Hmm?" he asked, his cock already swelling against her.

"I'm stone-cold sober now," she whispered. "And I still want you."

Aiden sighed deeply and pulled her mouth down to his.

His lips were warm, his mouth tasting of bitter coffee and sweet cream, and Kenzie could've gotten drunk all over again on the feel of his tongue slipping into her mouth.

? Did I Aiden dove his fingers into her hair, heedless of the knots she
not? If I provided, and pulled, tilting her head back to expose her neck.

He nipped and sucked at her jaw, trailing his lips down to her collar
to her, then running his nose along her skin, inhaling deeply.

her ankle “How is it that you consumed all the alcohol in East Lansing last night
still smell amazing?” he asked, his lips tickling her skin. “If I drank a
; you’d as you did, I’d smell like the bathroom at Rick’s.”

Kenzie laughed, and he dipped his attention to the valley between
breasts, still covered by his jersey from the night before.

she woke “You have no idea how hot you are in this thing,” he said, bunching
up with them in his fists. “But I’d really like to take it off now.”

“Be my guest,” she said, raising her arms so he could lift it over her
head and toss it across the room.

He ran a finger along the slope of her left breast, then unclasped
and latched his mouth around her nipple in one smooth motion, sucking
right in and swirling his tongue around.

Goosebumps broke out across her skin, a low moan escaping her.

Anchoring her fingers in his hair, she gasped and pulled him
I guess “Fuller.”

She felt more than saw his grin against her skin, and before she could
his cock ask, he moved over to the other side.

Her gasp became soft mewling, and Aiden growled in response.

Settling his hands on her hips, he gripped her tightly and pulled her
harder onto his lap, the hard length of his dick pressing against her center
cream, She groaned, and Aiden said, “Do you see what you do to me? How
; que as if you ever think I don’t want you?”

Kenzie was almost unable to form words, except for, “Touch me

ep hadPlease.”

Aiden needed no further encouragement and dove his hand down the arbone, of her panties, easily parting her and dragging his fingers through her s

“Fuck, bunny,” he said, head dropping back onto the couch as he ght and pointer through her wetness. “This all for me?”

s much She wriggled on his lap, urging him to put those fingers to better use

Aiden chuckled and pressed a finger into her, but only as far as t aen her knuckle. “Answer me,” he said. “Answer and you’ll get the rest. Tell

only get this wet for me.”

ing the “I only get this wet for you,” she said, voice shaking. “No one e even come close.”

er head “That’s what I thought,” he said, and pushed his finger all the way

added another, his thumb deftly tracing circles around her clit w her brafucked her with his hand.

ng it in “If you keep doing that,” she started, voice a strained whisper, a

immediately lost her train of thought when he pressed his thumb into

and rubbed. Her back arched, and he clasped her nipple between his te

closer.sensation only adding to what he was doing with his hand.

“If I keep doing this, what?” he asked when he let go of her nipple ld even sounding as wrecked as hers.

“Don’t stop,” she said. “Just...don’t stop.”

“Never,” he whispered reverently.

r down And was it possible he enjoyed giving her pleasure as much as she e ter. receiving it?

v could Kenzie wanted to be selfish in this moment, to bask in the sexual at this man was giving her, but she simply couldn’t. It wasn’t in her natur

!. Now. “Let me make you feel good, too,” she said as she reached

waistband of his pants.

the front His right hand, the one working its beautiful magic on her, never
sex. but his left hand moved at lightning speed to stop her.

slid his “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” she told him, kissing him long and slow as she slipped
joggers and took the hard length of him in her hand.

the first “Bunny...”

me you Aiden was big. Like...ridiculously so. Even by touch, she could tell
the biggest cock she’d ever interacted with. The thought scared her
else hashrilled her in equal measure.

Experimentally, she smoothed her hand up his length once, twice
in, thentimes, swiping her thumb over his head each time she did.

while he Aiden moaned and reflexively pumped into her hand.

“You were saying?”

and then “Just...keep doing that,” he said through gritted teeth, then awkwardly
her clitshoved his pants down his hips with one hand, bearing himself fully
eth, thegiving her unrestricted access.

She continued to stroke him, loving the velvet texture of him, so smooth
a, voicesmooth against her palm. But her movements were jerky, halted by
skin.

Desperately, she wanted to take him in her mouth, but she didn’t
give up the perfect angle of his fingers.

enjoyed When she withdrew her hand, Aiden made a sound of protest in the
his throat, his hand stilling against her sex.

attention “Shh,” she told him, then spit on her hand and gripped him again, her
e. sliding along much easier now.

for the Those selfish boys she’d been with before had taught her a few things

Aiden remained still, and Kenzie squirmed, begging him to move. slowed, “That was so fucking hot,” he said, then renewed his attention to her off. She gave him a hearty squeeze and he gasped, his fingers tw inside her.

After that, it was all pumping arms and whispered wo encouragement, Kenzie shifting slightly on his lap when she wanted change the angle, him directing her *harder* or *softer* when he wanted he had increase or decrease pressure.

When she was close, Kenzie lifted herself off Aiden, balancing he on either side of him on the couch cushion, giving him free rein to f e, three with his hand as hard and fast as he could, and she mirrored his mov with her own hand.

They came in unison, him with a heavy groan as he tossed his head and spilled all over her fingers and his stomach. At the same time, tension that had slowly built where his hand moved inside and again to her, released and spread, sending shockwaves along her spine and tingle her thighs. Kenzie fell forward onto him as she shook and shivered, h oft and still moving jerkily up and down his cock.

When the pulsing stopped, Kenzie lifted her head from Aiden’s chest and pressed her forehead to his. Wrapping his free hand around the back of her neck, he rubbed gentle circles at the base of her skull, heaving a co sigh.

Several long moments later, after basking as long as she felt comfort the post-orgasm glow, she climbed off Aiden’s lap, righted her underhand and walked topless into the kitchen to wash her hands. Then she grabbed a length of paper towel and, on her way back to the couch, scooped Aiden up.

shirt off the floor and dropped it over her head. When she reached Aiden, she was getting mopped the cum from his stomach.

Once he was clean, and he had pulled his pants up, Kenzie had the intention of settling on the couch next to him, but he tugged her down into his lap again.

“Do you believe me now?” he asked, once again settling his hands on her hips.

“About what?”

“Look at me,” he said, and she pulled away, studying him.

Heavily lidded eyes. A sexy, satisfied smile. Sweat beading his forehead and glistening along the sharp points of his collarbones.

What was the saying? Rode hard and put away wet?

But he looked happy about it—happier than Kenzie had ever seen him. “You look...sated,” she said.

“I am,” he told her, leaning forward to capture her lips in a searing kiss. When he broke away, they were both breathing hard, heart rates once again kicked up. “This is what you do to me. Rile me up and calm me down for me on and get me off. I have *never* experienced this with anyone else but you, bunny.”

Kenzie was unsure how to respond, swallowing hard around the lump in her throat.

Hadn't she been thinking this same thing? That nothing about her past relationships and entanglements had prepared her for Aiden and how to be with him.

How her anxiety had never reared its ugly head in his presence, that Aiden's never woken. How this post-hookup moment normally would've been strained and awkward, but with him, she could simply enjoy the afterglow.

len, shea mind-blowing orgasm and not worry about either of them rushing door in that ridiculously uncomfortable post-hookup dance.

l every Aiden had shared some heavy things with her, and it was time she r vn ontothe favor.

“I have really bad anxiety,” she blurted.

on her Aiden’s eyebrows drew together. “Okay...”

“I had a bit of a mental breakdown when I was a senior in high s she said. “I just...freaked out. I had taken on too much at once, snapped.”

hairline The words flowed from her, and Aiden remained silent, listening. “ life, I’ve tried to live up to my brothers’ work ethics. I looked up to the how talented and successful they both were. They made our parents sc im. and I only wanted to do the same.”

Aiden studied her as she spoke, his fingers laced through hers, gro ng kiss.her.

e again “Junior year is the time you start preparing for college, you know. n. Turninterest of making myself stand out on college applications, I kept e. Onlymore and more to my plate. On top of dance, cheerleading, and gymn was on the yearbook staff, debate team, and in Model UN. I wrote suddenand photographed for the school paper, was a National Honor member, and volunteered at Big Brothers Big Sisters.”

revious “Bunny, that’s...a lot.”

t felt to Kenzie choked on a laugh. “I know. I did okay at first, but by tl December of senior year rolled around, I was drowning. It got to th ie beastwhere I hardly slept, drank coffee by the gallon, and just generally ran e beenragged.”

nath of Kenzie paused, remembering the day she lost her mind.

out the “I was covering a girls basketball game for the paper one night in January, and two opposing players were going after a loose ball that came out of bounds near me. One of them knocked me over and I just...lost it screaming nonsense, threatening to kill her, pushing and shoving, swinging at anyone who tried to come near me to calm me down. It wasn’t until I don’t think my parents knew how bad it had gotten until that moment at school,” “Of course, I became a social media sensation for all of a week until the next big scandal came along.”

She didn’t tell Aiden the scandal had been her boyfriend cheating on her. That wasn’t the point of the story.

“I spent the last semester of my senior year at home, submitting homework online or having my parents drop it off at school so I could graduate on time, which I did in absentia. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone. Brent and Nate had been moved out for ages at that point, but they came home for my graduation party,” she said, throwing air quotes around the word. “We had a family dinner at home, just the five of us, to celebrate me graduating high school with honors.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked quietly. “Not that articles appreciate the vulnerability.”

“Since those days, I’ve found it really hard to be comfortable around people. I was a social pariah in my hometown for ages, and it got to the point where everyone I knew either made fun of me for having a breakdown, or they only wanted to get close to me because, by that point Brent was an NHL standout. They all wanted something from me, whether it was notoriety by proxy, or the opportunity to make themselves feel better by putting me down. My therapist has always told me that I’d find p

ght that could trust eventually. My family, of course. Berkley, absolutely
ame out friends Lexie and Mitch. Jessica. I've kept my circle small...until now
t. I was "I can't really explain how, or why, but I've never once felt anx
ng and your presence. I always just feel...calm. Protected. It's been nice, lik
as ugly. finally just be myself and turn off the part of my mind that alway
t. inadequate.

until the "You make me feel safe, Fuller."

Aiden wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly to his ch
on her. "I promise you, bunny," he said against her neck. "I will always be
place for you."

ing my And the scary thing was? She believed him.

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could trust eventually. My family, of course. Berkley, absolutely. Their friends Lexie and Mitch. Jessica. I've kept my circle small...until now.

"I can't really explain how, or why, but I've never once felt anxious in your presence. I always just feel...calm. Protected. It's been nice, like I can finally just be myself and turn off the part of my mind that always feels inadequate.

"You make me feel safe, Fuller."

Aiden wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly to his chest.

"I promise you, bunny," he said against her neck. "I will always be a safe place for you."

And the scary thing was? She believed him.

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THE CLOCK ON AIDEN'S suspension ticked closer and closer to zero with each passing day, the itch to play grew stronger and stronger. At that point, he would gladly peel himself out of his skin if it meant getting back on the ice.

Practices weren't the same, didn't even come close to match the adrenaline rush of game play.

And on top of keeping his head on straight for two more weekends, he had another thing driving him mad: Kenzie.

Or rather, the incessantly looping thoughts of what they'd done on the couch last weekend, and the things she'd shared with him afterward.

It had been a long time since Aiden had let a girl give him a handjob, and that had definitely never occurred without him burying his dick inside her afterward. He was once again reminded that nothing about his relationship with Kenzie was normal.

The thought was equal parts terrifying and exhilarating, an adrenaline

inducing phenomenon all its own. Every second he wasn't with
wanted to be. Every other thought was of her: what she was doing, wh
was, who she was with, if she was thinking about him, too. Somehow
become a possessive boyfriend, something he swore he'd never be.

To make matters worse, the Spartans were on the road the last week
October and the first of November, meaning he and Kenzie would bar
each other for two long weeks.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with my weekends while
gone?" Kenzie asked.

They were on the couch in her apartment, lying side by side, decid
paying attention to whatever the hell Kenzie had put on the TV a
before. Instead, they were alternating making out and talking.

ro, and "You have friends, don't you? Call Sofia or Jessica. Or both!"

At that "I don't want to," Kenzie whined, pressing her lips to the pulse poi
jack on neck and sucking.

Aiden groaned. "Trust me, bunny, I would much rather be here w
ing the than sharing a hotel room with Jack. I love the dude, but he snores
buzzsaw."

he now Kenzie giggled, and Aiden nuzzled her neck, feeling the vibration
laugh against his skin.

on her He skated his hands along her sides, sliding them below the waist
her pants and cupping her ass.

, and it "Aiden," she said, pushing him away as he tipped his head down
ide her her nipple into his mouth through the thin cotton of her shirt—*his shirt*
ionship Ever since the weekend before, she'd taken to stealing his clothes,
she loved the way they smelled like him.

naline- It did wonders for his ego, seeing her walking around in his

her, he broadcasting to the world that she was his

here she Reluctantly, he withdrew. “What’s wrong?”

w, he’d “I can’t...”

“Can’t what?”

kind of “Do...that,” she said, gesturing between them, where his erection
rely see against her thigh and he was seconds away from slipping his fingers t
her sex.

you’re “Why not?”

Kenzie heaved a sigh and said, “What is it Alicia Silverstone
edly not *Clueless*? I’m riding the crimson wave.”

in hour “Oh!” Aiden said, understanding dawning. “That’s okay, bunny. I
cuddle and watch a movie.”

“You sure?” she asked, concern lining her features.

it in his “Of course,” he assured her. “I just want to be with you.”

She gave him a smile, one that started small and grew until she flas
ith you bright, white teeth at him. “In that case, I’ll make us some popcorn.”

s like a Ten minutes later, she returned with a near-overflowing bowl of p
and two drinks—a bottle of beer for him, a seltzer for her. Togethe
t of her curled up on the couch, Kenzie’s back to Aiden’s front. After
discussion, they turned on *Miracle*.

band of “Lake Placid is beautiful,” Kenzie said wistfully. “It’s the best
winter, and the arena is...I get chills every time I step inside, and I’ve
to suck played a minute of hockey in my life.”

“I’d love to visit one day,” Aiden said. “That game changed ho
saying America forever. Those guys are such role models, and I loved wear
red, white, and blue when I played in Ann Arbor.”

shirts, Aiden had considered it the greatest honor to have been recruited

given the opportunity to play for the National Team Development Program in Ann Arbor during high school. The offer to sign with them had come on the heels of the death of his dad, and though moving away from his family had nearly broken his heart, joining the team had been the best thing that could have happened for him in the wake of such a tragedy. His teammates had become like family to him, and it had made those dark days a little brighter.

He told Kenzie all of this as she trailed her fingers over the tattoos on his left arm, the touch comforting as he once again bared his soul to this girl. “This single-minded focus I have for hockey and making it the top priority in my life isn’t just because I love the game so much, or because I’m a We Can Do It, or because it makes me feel closer to my dad. Hockey saved me, and it’s the game *everything*.”

“I’m assuming that’s why you got this tattoo,” she said, brushing her fingers across the American flag rippling on a phantom breeze on his bicep. “Exactly.”

“How did you end up with a full sleeve anyway? And what do the corn cobs mean?”

Aiden laughed at the memory of his first tattoo.

“My second week on campus,” he began, “we’d just finished a training session, and all I wanted to do was go back to my dorm, shower, and eat some food. Unfortunately, the upperclassmen had other ideas.”

“Oh no,” Kenzie said, realizing where this story was going.

“Yeah,” Aiden said. “They dared all of us freshmen to get the hockey helmet tattooed on us somewhere.”

“What possessed you to get it so big?” Kenzie asked, spinning in her chair to point at the tattoo that dominated almost his entire deltoid.

Aiden chuckled. “I figured, go big or go home,” he said with a shrug.

gram in that's not the point. The point is, after that...it turned out I really
: on the getting tattoos. It's peaceful, you know?"

ily had "I'm not sure everyone would agree with you, but I get it," she said,
ould've swiped his thumb over the tiny word on the inside of her right wrist.
become *Breathe*.

"It's a reminder," she said. "A cheesy little attempt to marshal my th
: on his when my anxiety is spinning them out of control. If I just breathe thro
irl. everything will be okay."

priority He pressed a kiss to it. "I love it," he said against her skin.

good at "I love yours," she said. "I want to know the stories behind all of the
d I owe And so he told her.

"This one," he said, twisting his arm to indicate the squiggly little
a touch his elbow, "is a drawing Eloise did when she was nine. That was the
one I got."

His sister's name also ran along one point of the star, as well as t
hey all his mother and father.

He continued to catalog them all, him and Kenzie laughing at th
stories behind them, and how four years ago the arm that had been b
raining now entirely engulfed in ink. From where his neck met his shoulder to
l go get the lines and shapes abruptly cut off at his wrist, his skin was
decorated with permanent momentos of the things, places, and pe
loved most.

Spartan The underside of his arm, from his elbow up to his armpit, feature
on a motorcycle, endlessly riding along a road, trees and cliffs rising
is armshim.

"I modeled this after the Black Hills in South Dakota," he said. "I
g. "But had always wanted to visit the Sturgis bike rally but never had the ch

lovedgo. Now he's forever riding through those hills."

"Aiden..." Kenzie said, eyes shining with unshed tears. "That's so s
and he He gave her a watery smile in return and moved on.

"I got this one as a reminder that life is short, and to make each
count," he said, pointing at the massive clock that stretched across the
oughtshis shoulder, brushing against the edges of both the Spartan helmet
ough it,deltoid and the flag on his bicep.

"You really miss your dad, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he said. "It never gets easier, and every day
em." around with a hole in my heart. But...you get used to it."

That was a lie. He would never get used to not having his father
star onand he frequently experienced anger and despair in equal measure
secondthought that he would never see him again. But some days were bett
others, and Aiden forced himself to keep pushing forward.

hose of It's what his dad would've wanted.

On the soft underside of his forearm was the Chicago skyline.

e crazy "To remind me where I came from," he said to Kenzie.

are was Above it, stretching around to the top of the skyline was a gai
) whereplanets and stars.

forever "Eloise is big into astronomy," he said to Kenzie as she traced the
ople heof a constellation. "The older she got, even though she doesn't remem
dad, she got this idea in her head that he's up there among the stars,
l a manfor us to join him."

around "That is...beautiful," Kenzie said, leaning down to brush her lips c
path her fingers had taken.

My dad "She's a smart kid."

ance to The remaining space was filled by flowers—his mother's favori

hockey player shooting a puck, FULLER emblazoned on the back
weet.” jersey, a compass pointing due north, trees, gears and rope, and a sparrow
the inside of his wrist.

second “Jack dared me to get that,” Aiden said when Kenzie touched it and
ball of fat him quizzically. “He said I needed something girly and delicate.”

on his Aiden snorted at the memory, but Kenzie remained quiet, smooth
fingers over the outline of the tiny bird.

“I don’t think sparrows are girly or delicate,” she said, then turn
I walk back to him and lifted the hem of her shirt, exposing the tattoo in the
of her back between her shoulder blades.

around, A sparrow.

at the “What?” Aiden said, which made no sense in context, but was th
ter than thing his mind conjured.

“Sparrows symbolize a number of things,” she said, dropping her sl
once again facing him. “Joy, community, teamwork, protection, sim
hard work, self-worth. I struggle with a few of those myself, and th
can’t see it, I can feel it with me always. My little wings, carrying me
laxy of can’t carry myself. Jack didn’t understand the meaning behind the lit
when he gave you that dare, but community, teamwork, protection, a
outline work? All of those things are you, Aiden.”

ber our She placed her hand over his heart. “They’re all the good things abc
waiting along with so many more. Neither of you may have realized what it
but I can’t imagine a bird more fitting for you than a sparrow.”

over the Aiden covered her hand with his and brought it to his mouth, pre
kiss to the center of her palm. “How is it possible we have the same t
he asked against her skin.

rites—a “I guess we were destined to find each other.”

of his
row on



Two days later, Aiden found himself on a bus heading north.

This weekend, they were playing another non-conference series
Northern Michigan University, which was located in Marquette
Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

“Okay,” Coach yelled from the front of the bus, standing to address
“How many of you have never been to the UP?”

Aiden, Jack, two of the freshmen, and all six international players
their hands.

“Well then, you're in for a treat.”

Coach moved back to his seat, and the bus rounded a corner, the M
Bridge stretching out in front of them.

“We have to cross *that*?” Jack asked, eyes widening at the sight
massive suspension bridge that spanned the five miles over the St
Mackinac, where Lake Huron met Lake Michigan.

Aiden liked to think he wasn't afraid of anything, but the further
drove onto the bridge, the more his anxiety spiked. For starters, the
were incredibly narrow, one of which was made entirely of metal
through which one could see the churning waters of two Great Lakes
It was truly a feat of modern engineering that they could hold the thousands
of pounds this bus weighed without bending or breaking.

Aiden couldn't let himself ruminate on it too long. It was like flying
gave it too much consideration, he'd never be able to make it to the other
without an accompanying panic attack.

As they reached the peak of the structure, a lot of his teammates started snapping photos out of the bus windows.

Aiden texted Kenzie.

against

ette in

s them.

s raised

ackinac

: of the

raits of

er they

e lanes

grates

below.

ousands

g; if he

her side

Bunny

once, why?

Bunny

I hate that thing. I don't know how people stand to cross it everyday. the engineering just doesn't make sense

Bunny

okay, diva, it's not THAT bad

Bunny

maybe there's an anxious little boy lurking beneath all those muscles

have you ever been to the UP?

this bridge is scary

my thoughts exactly. I'm wondering why we didn't just fly

speaking for yourself. I thought you were the one with anxiety here?

ood and

you love these muscles

Aiden

Bunny

keep telling yourself that

Once they were across the bridge and back on solid ground, the three to Marquette passed smoothly. Aiden had his laptop open in front of him, typing up an article for his blog.

Aiden

As part of one of his journalism classes, Aiden had been tasked with keeping a blog all semester long, detailing his classes, homework, and extracurriculars he participated in that pertained to his degree.

Lucky for him, he was a student-athlete who spent his days around football players. There was no shortage of fodder.

Aiden

entering

Today's post was about the trip to the UP, and how crossing the Mackinac Bridge was like crossing into a different world.

For starters, there was already snow on the ground, and the bulk of the landscape consisted of trees, trees, and...more trees. Everything about the trip felt more peaceful, slower-paced and quieter, as though these people weren't in any rush to get things done. Like they had all the time in the world.

Aiden

were

Aiden's favorite part of the trip was the stretch between the cities of Marquette and Munising, which took them along the edge of Lake Superior. It was a blustery day, with snow and sand kicked up by the wind and waves across the road. The waves on the lake were towering, white-capped waves that hit the rocky shoreline and sent sprays high into the air.

Lake Superior was cold and unforgiving, and it amazed Aiden that he lived here year-round. Chicago was a lakefront city, too, but the scene

Aiden

Lake Shore Drive were worlds away from this.

Marquette was a college town, with a feel at complete odds with what they'd left behind in East Lansing. For starters, it wasn't only a college town. Yes, Northern Michigan University resided there, but Marquette was a town of families and young professionals in addition to the student population. It was a bustling city that stretched far beyond the reaches of campus.

Not to mention, where East Lansing was all lights and color, here it was all brick buildings, and guys in skinny jeans and button-up shirts with suspenders.

Marquette was old, beautiful architecture, people with dreadlocks and flannels, guys wearing oversized parkas and Timberlands, and girls in sweaters and comfortable yet warm-looking boots.

Finally, they arrived at their hotel, the bus dropping them at the dock and the hockey team driving away to deliver their gear to the arena.

Not that Aiden had any.

As Jack keyed open the door to their room, Aiden's phone rang. He answered without checking the readout, hands full of his backpack and a bag of the UP.

"Did you survive your trip across the big, scary bridge?" Kenzie asked when he picked up.

"Ha ha, bunny. Very funny."

"Is that Kenzie?" Jack asked, moving to stand inches away from the superior. "Tell her I said hi!"

"She can hear you, dumbass," Aiden said, shoving his roommate away.

Kenzie laughed and said, "Hi Jack!"

"Bunny, as badly as I want to talk to you right now, we just got to the people and I have some homework to finish up before practice tonight."

"That's okay," she said. "I just wanted to say hi and make sure you

alive.”

the one “We did,” he said, smiling. “Thanks for checking.”

e town. “Bye, Fuller.”

also full “Bye, bunny.”

ation. It “You guys are so cute it’s disgusting,” Jack said when Aiden hung
tossed himself on the bed.

igh-rise “Thank you,” Aiden said, though he was sure Jack hadn’t exactly r
loafers,as a compliment.

ks and “You really like her, don’t you?”

girls in “Yes, and it scares the shit out of me.”

“Why?” Jack asked as he reclined on his own bed.

ors then “I don’t know how to give my full attention to anything but hockey.

“From where I’m standing,” Jack said, “you’ve been doing a prett
job of it already.”

ng. He “Yeah, but I’m not even playing.”

l duffel “Why does that have to change anything?” Jack asked. “You’
training with the team and traveling to games exactly like you woul
e askedyou were playing.”

Aiden considered that for a moment, quickly realizing he had no r
Jack was right.

Aiden. Jack continued. “All I’m saying is your relationship doesn’t have to
once you start playing again if you don’t want it to. You’re in control l
ray.

Aiden remained silent while he considered that. Could it really
simple?

ie room “We’ve gotten a lot closer the last few weeks,” he said finally. “It’s
nice. Different, but nice. I don’t want to lose that.”

made it “There’s nothing that says you have to,” Jack said. “Although, it’s v

see you like this with someone. But I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, man," Aiden said. "I never thought I was the relationship until Kenzie."

"Personally, I think you've always been a relationship type," Jack took up and as he scrolled on his phone. "You were just waiting for the right girl."

And wasn't that statement in the same vein as what Kenzie had meant it day before? That they'd been destined to find each other?

With a smile on his face, Aiden decided to take a quick nap practice, and instantly fell asleep.

The next night, he sat with the rest of his scratched teammates in the uppermost row of seats, directly above the visiting bench inside the Events Center.

Aiden was surprised to find how...open the arena felt. Unlike where you walked off street level and right onto the concourse, there here was a set of stairs leading up the concourse, and the rows could be if descended until they flattened at the ice. The players entered at ground and walked right into the bowels of the building.

Not only that, but the ice was Olympic-sized, meaning the rink was fifteen feet wider than a standard rink. It provided more room along wings, making breakaways all the more likely.

Aiden wanted to be down there with his teammates, but he was none be that mesmerized.

NMU had been a perennial top finisher in their own conference for five years, since their current head coach had taken over. Plus, they were home, where they were used to the oversized ice and had their own backing them. Yoopers, as those born and raised in the Upper Peninsula veird to

called, took their hockey seriously, and Wildcat fans were a rowdy dedicated bunch.

Jack appeared to be having an off night, letting in two quick goals in the first period on ugly bounces he normally would've stopped. Everything appeared to be running smoothly as far as their offense and defense went, but something was up with Jack.

At intermission, Aiden hurried down to the locker room, leaving the rest of his teammates in the dust.

"What's wrong?" Aiden asked Jack the second he laid eyes on him.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm sweating, but I'm freezing. I just...don't feel right."

Aiden stepped closer and took a good look into Jack's face. His skin was flushed, a sheen of sweat coating his cheeks and forehead. Aiden rested the back of his palm against Jack's forehead, noting the elevated temperature, reminding himself it could be the result of exertion.

"Marta!" Aiden yelled, and a brunette popped her head out of the doorway of the training room, eyebrows furrowed. "Can you come take Jack's temp?"

"Sure thing," she said, withdrawing and reappearing a moment later, bobbing and weaving her way through the massive hockey locker room with a thermometer in hand.

When she reached Jack and Aiden, she pressed a button and held the device to his head, sweeping it from temple to temple.

"One-oh-one," she said a moment later.

"Fuck," Jack said.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I have to tell Coach. You're out for the rest of the night."

She made her way back across the locker room, and Aiden watched her go.

dy and horror as she sidled up to Coach, told him about Jack, and sternly relayed the message that their starting goaltender was not allowed back on the ice in the night.

ing else “Fuller! DeLuca!” Coach yelled, crooking a finger in their direction, but disappearing into the office behind him.

The two exchanged a look before obeying.

rest of “Who the fuck got you sick?” Coach asked Jack the second they stepped in front of him.

“Do I really need to be here for this?” Aiden asked.

“Yes,” Coach said. “DeLuca is going back to the hotel, and you’re not coming with him.”

“In what, exactly?”

“Go find the bus driver and tell him to bring you back,” Coach said, shooing the boys away with a flick of his wrist. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to figure out how to win this damn hockey game without my backup goalie.”

The game clock in the locker room ticked closer to the end of intermission, then Coach went out ahead of them, shouting at the backup goalie that was in net, then yelling orders at the defensemen to tighten up their game.

Shortly after, they cleared out, leaving Aiden, fully dressed in his street clothes, and Jack, halfway through undoing his pads, his jersey shed and tossed into the dirty laundry bin across the room.

Aiden left briefly to find the bus driver, alerting him to the small changes in the game plan, then going back to get Jack. By then, Jack had made quick work of removing his gear and changing his clothes. He was shoving his arms into a suit jacket as Aiden re-entered the locker room.

“Let’s go,” Jack said, shoving an MSU hockey beanie over his blond

yed the “I feel like shit. I can’t wait to go to sleep.”

the ice “Yeah you look like shit, too,” Aiden told him, earning a small smi

Jack. “How’d you get sick, anyway?”

m, then “There’s something going around the sorority house, so Sofia mu
passed it on to me.”

They went back to the hotel, and once Jack had stripped and crawl
pped inbed, promptly passing out, Aiden walked to the gas station across the s
get him some Gatorade and cold and flu medicine for when he woke.

Then he settled on his own bed, connecting his AirPods to his pho
: takingturning on the radio broadcast of the game.

The Spartans pulled off a comeback that evening, ultimately winn
game by a score of three to two. After Jack went down, their backup g
h said, a sophomore who hadn’t seen many game minutes—really stepped
se me, lthe rest of the team did their jobs. They won the next night, too, and r
startingto East Lansing in good spirits on Sunday.

With that series over, only two games stood between Aiden and
nission, back on the ice, and it couldn’t come soon enough. He hadn’t mindec
he wascare of Jack, but he would’ve preferred to help the team out by scorin
and playing solid defense.

suit and His chance to do that was coming, and he hoped to be ready for it
l tosseddid.

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“ISN’T CELEBRATING BEFORE YOU even get back on the ice a weird?”

Kenzie didn’t only think it was weird; she thought it was downright weird but she’d never tell Aiden that. The look on his face reminded her of Christmas time: his cheeks rosy, eyes glistening with joy, smile stretching across his face.

“It’s not weird, bunny,” he said, slinging his arm across her shoulder and second they stepped out of her building and onto the street.

The first stop of the night was Harper’s, which was the perfect spot to get a buzz and dance before it got too busy and they left for elsewhere, most likely Dublin, or even Rick’s.

“It’s a little weird,” Jack said from behind them, startling Kenzie, who momentarily forgotten he was there.

Aiden turned and shot Jack what Kenzie guessed was a glare over her head. She chuckled, and he pulled her tighter into his side.

“We’ve never been out together like this,” he said to her. “You sure ready?”

She shrugged. “It had to happen sometime, right? Aren’t you worried your adoring fans will react?”

She accompanied her words with a poke to his side, and he fake laughed. “I doubt anyone will even notice or care.”

Up ahead, the queue for Harper’s nearly reached the bottom of the staircase, and Kenzie hurried to join it, narrowly beating a group of people walking down the sidewalk from the opposite direction.

Aiden and Jack reached her as the girls did, and one of them showed her a dirty look while another yelled, “Aiden!” and draped her body across him, what Kenzie guessed was supposed to be a hug.

little... She tried to quash the jealousy that flared in the pit of her stomach, but it was no avail. The girl was tall, thin, and blonde, her short leather skirt showing off her long, tan legs, shoulders and back bared by the halter top she wore. Kenzie glanced down at her faux-leather leggings and cropped sweater, and frowned. For starters, it was frigid out, winter finally creeping over the city in the form of frosty morning grass and temperatures hovering around forty. Second, the girl was stunning, and Kenzie couldn’t help comparing her cozy and comfortable outfit with the girl’s jaw-dropping to get ahead-turning one.

It likely And she didn’t particularly like the way Aiden’s big hand splayed across the girl’s bare back, either.

Who had “Fuller,” Jack called, shooting Kenzie a wink. “Let’s go.”

Aiden turned back to them and followed Kenzie up the stairs. He slipped his arm through hers, and when the line paused again, spun her to face him. “You’re mad, aren’t you?”

you're "No," she lied.

"Bunny..."

ed how "She's definitely mad, you idiot," Jack said. "You let that girl hang you with your girlfriend standing right there. If I was bunny, I'd punch the face and leave you to find someone hotter." Jack turned to Kenzie with a cheeky grin and added, "I fully volunteer for the job, by the way."

f a tall Kenzie laughed and stretched onto her tiptoes to kiss Jack on the cheek. "Thank you."

"Bunny," Aiden said quietly, though still loud enough for Jack to hear only because he pressed his head into the space between them, hanging in their every word. "If I wanted that girl, I would've had her a long time ago."

But I'm a nice guy, and I'm not going to shove her off when she's just being herself at me. That's just mean."

howing "You didn't have to look like you enjoyed it so much," Kenzie said, blowing her breath, though she knew he was right.

wearer, Jack snorted, but Aiden captured Kenzie's chin in his hand, fingers resting against its way across her cheek.

overing "I don't want anyone but you." He stared deeply into her eyes, not helping chocolate depths of his melting her. "Do you believe me?"

opping, Before Kenzie could respond, Jack cut in. "If it makes you feel better, bunny, in the entire four years I've known him, I've never seen him do anything across anyone the way he is with you."

Kenzie's wide eyes darted back to Aiden. "Is that true?"

"Yep," he said proudly. "Now do you believe me?"

looped "Yes."

him. "Good, now let's celebrate."

And celebrate they did.

Despite the relatively early hour, Harper's was packed, and Kenzie was thankful for both Aiden and Jack's big bodies as the former led her through the crowd. Aiden trailed her to the bar, protecting her from the worst of the crowd of you in bodies.

They ordered drinks, the female bartender passing them out free of charge. She winked at Aiden.

Jack raised his glass into the middle of their small circle. "To the best of girlfriends," he said, winking at Kenzie again. To Aiden he added, "I hear, if you wait to have you back out there tomorrow."

Aiden laughed, clinked his bottle with Jack's glass and Kenzie's can. "Thank you," then took a long drink.

After two more drinks, Harper's became unbearably populated.

Kenzie's anxiety over the sheer number of people reached its peak. She had never been able to pinpoint what exactly would trigger an anxiety attack.

Tonight, apparently, it was a combination of things. The too-loud music, the drunk girls screaming at each other over the volume of said music. The

guys putting their hands on her body without invitation. The loud music, the inebriation from everyone around her. The buzz along her limbs.

Her heart was in her throat, making it difficult to breathe, pulse pounding. She felt like she was running a marathon, a thousand miles a minute.

Finally, she turned to Aiden and said, "Get me out of here, please."

Aiden didn't ask questions, didn't argue or beg to stay longer. He set his drink on the nearest flat surface, grabbed her hand, jerked his head back, and led her out of the bar. When they reached the sidewalk, Kenzie sat on a low retaining wall, dropped her head into her hands, and took several deep breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth.

"Is she okay?" she heard Jack ask quietly.

Kenzie was Aiden must've nodded because he didn't verbally respond, only sat and the Kenzie and placed a reassuring hand between her shoulder blades, right over her sparrow tattoo, anchoring her when lightheadedness threatened to
go away.

with a "You're alright, bunny," he said. "If you want to go home right now I can."

Bunny's Though he couldn't see, she gave him a grateful smile, her head 'I can't'lowering by the fact that he was here, always keeping her safe like promised.

Kenzie said, The moment lengthened, and Jack eventually crouched at her other side, clasping her hand between his.

Kenzie said, and To passersby, it probably appeared as though the boys were comforting a drunk girl. Kenzie couldn't muster the energy to be embarrassed by the picture they presented.

Kenzie said. The Finally, she lifted her head and gave Jack and Aiden each a wobbly smile, then focused her attention on Jack.

Kenzie said of "I have pretty bad anxiety," she told him. "I never know what's going to trigger it, and the crowd in there tonight...it was too much."

Kenzie said, Jack nodded and reached out to squeeze her shoulder. "Do you want to go home?" he asked, echoing Aiden's earlier sentiment.

Kenzie shook her head. Now that her heart had slowed below cardiac simply levels, her mind cleared and her chest loosened. "No, let's stay out."

Kenzie said, head at "Are you sure?" Aiden asked.

Kenzie said, lewalk, "Very," she said. She stood and dusted her ass off with her palms, and took boys rose with her. "Where to next? Dublin or Rick's?"

Jack flicked his wrist and checked the time on his watch. "It's midnight," he said. "I think it's time for Rick's, don't you guys?"

next to Kenzie nodded, and Aiden laced his fingers through hers. They
ght overhand in hand, following Jack across the street and up the block to Rick
fly her Once safely inside the basement bar, Kenzie breathed a sigh of
Rick's wasn't the nicest bar in the city. In fact, most people would
ow, wewas the dirtiest and dingiest. But she loved it because it was unassum
unpretentious. It didn't try to be anything but what it was: a dive.

art rate "Drinks?" Jack asked.

ke he'd "Yes please," Kenzie said. "Vodka soda for me."

"I've got them, bunny," Aiden said. "Hang back here with Jack."

er side, There was a mass of bodies four people deep between them and t
and Kenzie melted. Aiden was worried about her, and her heart warme

orting a "You're good for him," Jack said when Aiden disappeared into the t

by the "He's good for me, too," she said.

"I'm really happy for you both," he told her, and Kenzie smiled.

/ smile, "And what about you?" she asked. "Any special ladies Jack DeL
his eye on?"

oing to Jack fought it, but a small, self-satisfied smile appeared on his face
the kind of smile that said, *I've got a secret*, and Kenzie was dying t
nt to gomore.

"You do!" she accused, grinning and pointing a finger at him. "C
ic eventshe? Anyone I know? Tell me *everything*."

"You do know her, yes. But I'm not saying anything more on the :
It's new, and I don't want to jinx it."

and the Kenzie desperately wanted to press him for more, but decided to
have his secrets...for now.

nearly Still, she couldn't help the way her mind swirled with the possibil
had to be Sofia, right? They'd gone on that date to the cider mill a little

walked month before, and Sofia had told her in class the next week that they'd
's. amazing time and she hoped to see him again. Not to mention the pain
of relief, physical relationship before that date.

agree it But as Kenzie considered it further, she realized Sofia hadn't been
ing and much lately. In fact, she hadn't seen her and Jack together since the
she'd gotten too drunk and Aiden had to carry her home.

Kenzie's memory tripped over that hockey tailgate, when they'd
onto the patio at Munn, and Jack and Jessica had shared that *look*
clearly knew each other, and Kenzie had a feeling it was in a deeper way
the bar, two people who may have crossed paths on campus. Unfortunately, she
d. been unable to get anything out of Jessica about it, and Jack had
wrong. similarly tight-lipped with Aiden.

But she and Jessica were close—practically sisters—and Jack was
best friend. If Jack was interested in Jessica, it didn't make sense
because she wouldn't just say so.

Kenzie opened her mouth to ask, but Aiden returned with their drink
. It was that moment, and all thoughts of anyone's relationship but her own
dropped to knowher.

She'd been staring at him all night, and had seen him in various situations
Who is undress over the last few months, but nothing ever prepared her for the
of Aiden. Tall, broad-shouldered, each muscle on his body perfectly
subject, and proportioned. Those big hands and long fingers that held her, wrapped
around her, and dug into her flesh in the best ways. The wavy blue-black
hair curling around his ears and the edge of his ball cap. The tight black
with a hooded jean jacket thrown overtop. The dark-wash denim with
knees clinging to his quads.

He was a study in perfection, the ultimate prize for straight women,

l had anwas all hers.

ir had a The thought made her lightheaded, as though she'd become
Victorian Era heiress ready to swoon and faint at his feet.

around "I have to pee," she blurted, then thrust her drink back into Aiden
at partyand hurried away from them.

Blessedly, there was no line to the women's restroom, so she slippe
steppedstall, relieving herself quickly.

κ. They While she washed her hands, she looked herself dead in the eye
ay thanmirror above the sink and said, "Get your shit together, Jean. You
she hadhim. He could have anyone he wants, and he wants you."

d been After a quick reapplication of her lipstick and an adjustment
ponytail, she was ready to face him again.

Aiden's When Kenzie came back from the restroom, Jack was nowhere
that hefound, but Aiden stood at the edge of the dance floor, unsurpr
surrounded by a gaggle of females, all vying for his attention.

rinks at Right as one spun her back to him, clearly intending to plant her as
lesertedcrotch and dance on him, Kenzie reached his side, and he pulled her

The girl bounced off Kenzie's back and whipped around to glare at her
tates ofstomping away, two other girls hot on her heels.

ne sight Aiden turned her and pulled her back to his chest, settling his hands
definedher hips, gripping her tightly, his fingertips like a brand on her soft fles

rapped The song changed, a throwback Fetty Wap jam replaced by a
ack hairTiesto song, and without thinking, Kenzie and Aiden began to sway
κ t-shirtside to the beat.

h holes Kenzie tried to melt into the moment, to lose herself in the feel of
hands on her body, the way his heartbeat thumped against her shoul
and hetime with the bass of "The Motto." But she couldn't quite enjoy

couldn't ignore the way eyes tracked every move they made, the bulk of some females staring at her with open disgust.

"I don't think you understand the effect you have on women," she said, handing over the music, tilting her head back to look at him over her shoulder.

Aiden ducked so his mouth was level with her ear. "The only woman I've ever had into about is you, bunny," he said, voice low and husky, sending shivers skittering across her skin. He pulled her impossibly closer, until not even a millimeter of space remained between them, the thick length of his cock pressing against her ass. "Because *this* is how *you* affect *me*. Every single second I'm with you, I'm hard. It's embarrassing, like I'm a teenager again with uncontrollable urges. I want you every second of every day."

Kenzie spun in his arms and rose onto her tiptoes, throwing her head back to bear down his neck and crashing her mouth to his.

The kiss was almost punishing, a way to prove to him that she felt the things he did. That she felt connected to him in a way she never had with anyone else. A promise that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her to him. Aiden broke the kiss and grabbed her hand, pulling her off the dance floor before heading out of the bar, then down the block until he found an alley.

He led her down it and backed her against a brick wall, then lowered his head to press his mouth to hers.

His kiss was all-consuming, and if Kenzie hadn't already had a couple of popular seltzers in her, she'd be drunk on the way his mouth moved against her neck. The way their tongues tangled. How he tasted of beer but smelled like a man who always did—clean with a note of something that could only be described as Aiden's masculine. Aiden was a pure, undiluted *male*.

"As your boyfriend," he whispered against her ear, hands skating down her sides, "I think I should know the sounds you make when you come."

of them “You’re not my boyfriend,” she croaked, the heat of his palms on her skin so at odds with the chill seeping through her top from the building below that she yelled back. They hadn’t actually defined their relationship yet, though she could deny they’d both been seriously committed to each other in all but name since the night I care the last month. Still, she couldn’t help needling him a little bit, despite the shivering wanting to see how he responded.

millimeter Aiden leaned in and pressed a kiss to that sweet spot right below her ear. Kenzie shivered, and felt his lips curve into a smile against her skin. “You know about you, bunny,” he said, his already deep voice growing deeper with what Kenzie could only describe as desire, “but I’ve convinced myself yours since the moment you handed me my ass outside Casey’s. I want you to be my girlfriend. And I want to be your boyfriend. Is that something you want?”

at all the His words sent a rush of pleasure through her, amplifying the reaction she’d already elicited with his hands and mouth and sheer nearness.

“Fuller, this isn’t really the time—”

ce floor “I think this is the perfect time. Do you want to be my girlfriend?”

“Aiden...”

ered his “Answer me,” he growled, and she’d be damned if she did anything to make him less than impossibly wetter at his commanding tone. “Answer me or we’re going to have sex several times inside right now.”

ers, and She didn’t like being put on the spot like this, and didn’t like that her pleasure was contingent on providing an answer to what, really, should have been a simple question.

And it *was* simple, wasn’t it? If Kenzie were honest with herself, she’d known she’d been falling for him since the moment she’d laid eyes on him. Since the moment he’d dared her to get a free drink, then asked her to come home with him.

er body she'd seen how he was with his family. Since he'd taken care of her
; at her ass, then made her come undone with only his fingers and his words.

ouldn't In every moment, he'd handled her with care.

ame for All along, slowly, day by day, she'd been falling.

erately She wanted him. Badly. In every possible way. And the hard line
cock against her stomach said he felt the same.

her ear. So she turned her head slightly and brushed her mouth over his,
'I don't' "Yes. I want to be your girlfriend. Now make me cum."

possibly Swiftly, he scooped her off her feet, and she instinctively wrapped
sidered around his waist like a koala clinging to a tree as he crashed his m
I want hers.

nothing Aiden shifted his stance so his legs were set wider, his massive
supporting the bulk of her weight so he could dive his hand down the
on he'd her leggings.

Deftly, he made contact with her clit, and Kenzie dropped her head
the slight sting when the brick bit into her skull nothing compared
waves of pleasure already radiating from Aiden's touch.

She ground harder against him, urging him on, breathy moan
n't get should've been working harder to silence escaping her. Aiden chuckled
ing back "You like that, don't you?" he asked. "Is it just that it feels good?

because anyone could walk by and catch us at any moment? Who knows
hat her little bunny was such a dirty girl?"

uld be a Spurred on by his words, Kenzie's release rolled through her, with
exquisite pleasure blooming from Aiden's fingers and then cresting
she had crashing. She trembled in his arms as he applied steady pressure wh
ce he'd rode out the orgasm.

1. Since "Aiden..." she said, mind swirling, thoughts completely incoherent

r drunkcame down from the high. “I want you.”

Even in the faint light reaching from the street to their hidden spot darkened alley, she saw his eyebrows shoot toward his forehead in surp

“Now?”

e of his “Now,” she confirmed, then reached between them and made hast of the button and zipper of his jeans, pushing them and his boxers ou saying, way enough to take him in her hand.

At her first touch, he hissed through his teeth. As she wrapped her ner legsaround him, she suddenly doubted her ability to take him into her body outh to “Aiden,” she said, her tone tinged with amazement and a little fea been like...a really long time.”

thighs Aiden, whose attention had been focused on his cock and its expc front ofher touch, raised his head to look at her. The depths of his eyes twink stars winking in and out of the night sky, and a slow, sexy smile—the d back,only flashed when he knew he was about to do something epic— l to theacross his face.

“Don’t worry, bunny,” he said, rolling her leggings down her h ins shereaching down to insert a finger inside of her, and then another, and d. third, preparing her for a much larger appendage. “I’ll be gentle.”

Or is it Warmth spread along her limbs, like an egg cracked atop her he new myslowly leaked down and down and down. Kenzie had never pegged he a girl who was into dirty talk, nor had she ever been with a guy whi aves ofback up his big talk in the streets with any sort of sexual prowess betw ng andsheets.

ile she But she was completely turned on by everything this man did, and more safe and cared for in his arms than anywhere else.

t as she Kenzie wanted to be a different girl with Aiden, one who wasn’t a :

the whims of her own negative thoughts and unpredictable anxiety. O
: in this wasn't afraid to take chances, who went after exactly what she wan
prise. didn't apologize for it.

And right now, what she wanted was *him*. She'd already given hir
y workpieces of herself than anyone before, so what was one more?
t of the Clutching Aiden's shoulders, she pulled him impossibly closer.

"Now," she said, and as always, he understood exactly what s
fingers asking.

7. "My wallet," he said through gritted teeth.

ar. "It's Without asking why, she reached into his back pocket and flip
wallet open, easily finding the condom. She wasn't entirely surprised
sure to the kind of guy to always have one.

led like She replaced his wallet and ripped the foil open with her teeth, then
one he rolled the rubber down his length and gave him a squeeze at the base t
-spread him bucking into her hand.

The head of his cock pushing inside her stung a bit, but he paused,
lips and her time to adjust, before giving her more and more until he bottomed
l then a "You feel *amazing*," he said with a groan, fingers digging deliciou
her ass.

ad that Kenzie echoed the sentiment with a moan, unsure if she could form
rself as right now.

o could They fit together perfectly, like two adjacent pieces of a puzzle, li
een they were made for each other.

Two halves of a whole.

she felt Kenzie knew she was ruined. The exquisite way he nestled perfectly
her, the way she'd relaxed and stretched after that initial discomfort, h
slave to gripped him, tight like a glove, from base to tip.

ne who She'd never find this again, and she didn't want to.

ted and Aiden's head dropped to her shoulder. He hadn't moved yet, and wiggled a little on top of him, trying to elicit a reaction.

n more "Bunny," he growled, tone laced with warning.

"Fuller." She said his name like a command, but tacked one on for measure. "Move."

he was He obeyed instantly, pulling all the way out and pushing back in, the torturously slow.

"Fuck," she said. He'd managed to hit a spot impossibly deep and deep thebefore, and she shivered.

he was "Aiden," she said, cupping his cheeks in her hands so he would look

"As much as I would love to wring this out for as long as we possibly slowly you do realize we're only about fifty feet from half of East La hat had population, right?"

"So you're saying you want it fast and rough?" he asked, one corner of his mouth ticking up into a smirk.

out. Slowly, he withdrew until he was poised at her entrance. Kenzie only nod.

Aiden turned his head and kissed her hard, biting at her lower lip. "1 wordson, bunny."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her fingers deep in the thick waves of his hair as he began to move.

Having gotten off only minutes before, she didn't expect to do so content to be joined with him and let him use her in any way he needed inside. She was surprised when an orgasm once again built in that spot low on her belly.

Compared to the first one, it was a slow burn, the warmth slowly c

up her torso and along her limbs. Judging by his erratic movements, Kenzie guessed Aiden was close, too.

Confirming her suspicions, he said, "Fuck bunny, I'm almost there."

She dug her heels into his ass, and his hands tightened on her thighs for good. He adjusted his stance, changing the angle so he, somehow, hit an spot inside her, and Kenzie fucking loved it.

"Oh my gaahhhhh," she moaned. "Right there."

"Kenzie." Her name was a gasped plea. "How did we go so long?" Somehow, she understood he didn't mean sex.

He meant a lifetime spent without *this*, without each other.

"I don't know," she gasped. A particularly aggressive thrust had her body slam into the brick wall, and before she could even open her mouth in protest, Aiden once again shifted his weight and wrapped an arm around her waist, the other a bar under her ass, providing a barrier between her and his further pain, but still fully supporting her weight.

He continued his frantic fucking, mumbling words of encouragement and compliments all the while, until Kenzie could feel his whole body tremble with the effort of holding himself back.

"Hold on." And she was *right there*, but she knew she needed him to let go before she could allow herself to do the same.

"I can't wait to fuck you in a bed," he growled.

"Fuller," Kenzie said, his name choked off as a moan escaped her lips. "Yeah bunny?"

She grabbed fistfuls of his hair and tugged, tilting his head back and forth in her hand in the eye. Sweat beaded along his hairline, the only clear manifestation of exactly how much work he was putting in here. Never rawling would Kenzie complain about how much time he spent at the rink.

Kenzie “Stop talking and let go,” she said.

As though she'd flipped a switch, Aiden did what she asked, undone with several long pulses inside her, his entire body going rigid as he rode out the orgasm.

Like a chain reaction, Kenzie followed him over the edge. She arched back and dug her fingers into Aiden's shoulders, knowing full well she would've drawn blood without the barrier of fabric between them.

Once they stilled and their breathing slowed, Kenzie unwound herself from his waist and he loosened his grip on her, letting her slide all the way to the ground until she could put her feet on the ground.

While she righted her leggings, Aiden removed the condom, tied the knot, and tucked it into his pocket once he pulled up his jeans.

Without warning, he backed her against the wall and kissed her.

And when she said he kissed her, she meant he fucking *kissed* her. Though he wanted to consume her. Their joining had only recently ended and Aiden kissed her like he couldn't wait to do it again.

His tongue plunged into her mouth, rubbing against her own, and she nipped and sucked in response, their teeth clashing in a way that she thought seemed awkward and inexperienced, but for Kenzie only added to her infatuation with Aiden Fuller. Neither of them cared that the kiss was messy and uncoordinated; they simply needed to be connected.

Finally, they broke apart, both sensing the longer they spent back here, the more likely they were to get caught. And after his near-arrest for public nudity, Kenzie couldn't risk something similar happening again. Not outwardly, at least. She was about to get back on the ice.

“Let's go home,” she said, reaching down to thread her fingers through his and tow him back onto the well-lit city street.

“Your place or mine?”

coming “Mine,” she said, then tossed him a saucy little grin over her shoulder while wanting more, and I don’t want any pesky roommates lingering outside the door like the creeps they are.”

He said to her “They mean well,” he said sheepishly.

Well, she said “I’m sure they do,” she said. They were only two blocks from her place now, and she tipped her head back, looking up at her darkened window. “Besides,” she added. “At my place, we can be as loud as we want.”

Along his side, Aiden pulled her to his side and tossed his arm around her shoulder, pressing his mouth against her ear. “And I’m going to make you scream it in a *Fuck. Yes.*”

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“Mine,” she said, then tossed him a saucy little grin over her shoulder. “I want more, and I don’t want any pesky roommates lingering outside your door like the creeps they are.”

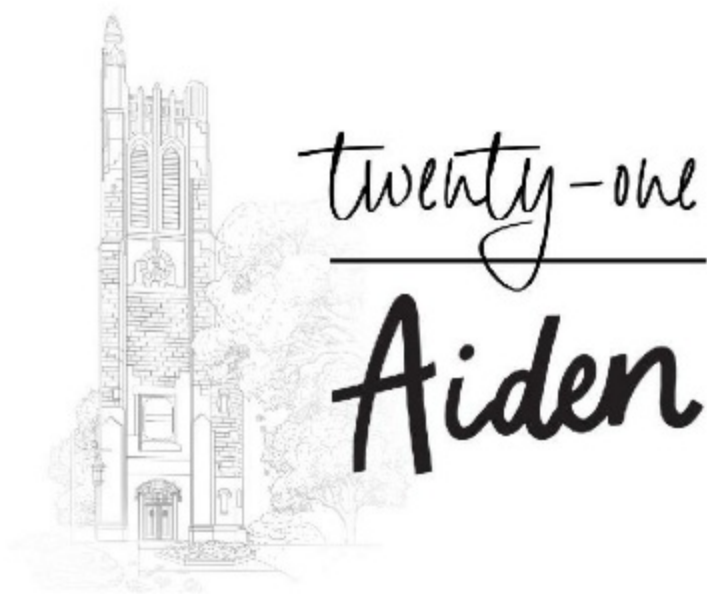
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Aiden pulled her to his side and tossed his arm around her shoulders, pressing his mouth against her ear. “And I’m going to make you scream.”

Fuck. Yes.

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“WHERE DID YOU AND bunny disappear to last night?” Jack asked. Aiden walked into their house the next morning.

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” he said.

Jack smirked knowingly. “How was it?”

Aiden considered that for a moment, unsure if there was a word in the entirety of the English language that would adequately express last night’s experience. So he settled on, “Mind-blowing.”

Jack’s answering grin was of the shit-eating variety. “Well you know something,” he said, and withdrew Aiden’s debit card from his wallet and squared up.”

“Oh fuck,” Aiden said, reaching for the piece of plastic. “Thanks.”

“Sounds like you did,” Jack said with a wink, then turned to go upstairs.

Aiden smiled, remembering flashes of golden brown skin, dark brown vibrant blue eyes, pink lips, soft warmth against hard heat, tongues, tee

endless sighs and moans of pleasure.

Leaving Kenzie's bed this morning had been a feat of Herculean strength but Aiden had bigger fish to fry at the moment.

He got to play today.

The smile grew into a full-blown grin.

Finally.

It had been a full seven months since Aiden had suited up for a game. He donned his gear by muscle memory, laser focused on the task at hand, his mind completely blocking out the chatter of his teammates around him in the locker room.

A sophomore by the name of Pascoe, who happened to have played the same line with Aiden and Asher last season, sat down at his stall next to Aiden and asked, "You nervous?"

Aiden shook his head. "Nah. Just ready to get back out there."

"We're happy to have you back," Pascoe said, and Aiden gave him a lipped smile. The team had done well in his absence, going undefeated in the conference play and splitting with conference opponents Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Tonight they took on Notre Dame, a five hundred team that hit hard and skated fast. Aiden didn't think their record reflected the whole story, and he was more than ready to get out there and bury them.

Coach entered the room and stepped to the white board in the back, picking up a dark green dry-erase marker and scribbling out numbers. The conversation in the room ceased, the only sound the squeaking of the marker as it flew across the surface of the board.

“Lines for tonight,” Coach said unnecessarily; they’d all been through enough times.

Aiden scanned the lines, searching for his number twenty-seven.

Eventually, he found it on the fourth line, on the wing of two freshmen.

Surely, the rest of his teammates had noticed, too, and several of them gave him disbelieving looks. Aiden quickly strapped on the rest of his gear and hurried across the carpeted floor to where Coach stood with one of the trainers.

“Fourth line?” Aiden said without preamble once he reached his locker.
“Really?”

Coach gripped Aiden’s upper arm and pulled him out of the locker room and into the deserted hallway. When on flat feet, Aiden looked directly in the eye, but somehow, even with his skates giving him three extra inches, the man still managed to make Aiden feel small.

“First of all, don’t air your shit in front of your teammates. I guarantee you just made those freshmen you’re playing with feel like shit for being on the bottom line. Second, you haven’t played a game in seven months. Full stop. I know you’ve worked your ass off during your suspension to stay in shape and keep your game sharp, but neither of us knows how tonight is going to go. So you’re taking short shifts and playing with those freshmen until I see what I need to see to move you back to your usual line. I don’t want another word on the subject. Understood?”

Aiden nodded, sufficiently chastised. “Understood.”

As it turned out, Coach had been right to give Aiden time to readjust. After the showing he put on, he wouldn’t be back on a line with Asi Pascoe anytime soon.

He skated out for his first shift since April about four minutes into the

igh this period. As he'd expected, Notre Dame's players threw their bodies cutting off lanes up the wings by tossing Spartans carelessly into the. Offense was choppy, passes that should've gone tape to tape getting cut. the last second, the puck turned over repeatedly in the neutral zone. am shot Aiden knew what he needed to do. He'd played in hundreds of games and probably thousands, actually—in his lifetime.

of the Unfortunately, whatever synapses that sent those directions from his brain to his limbs were experiencing some sort of disconnect. Instead of feeling smooth and fluid, skating and taking shots and checking opponents like it was second nature, he was slow and sloppy, his passes inaccurate, shots embarrassing roomwide of the net.

his coach Then there was the fact that he almost gave Notre Dame a goal because of a dumb mistake.

He'd been behind the net on a change, Jack shifting restlessly in the penalty box as he tended to do, keeping himself amped up in case things went sideways on the ice quickly.

er. And And they did.

in shape Asher came over the boards and streaked into the neutral zone, then going to the blue line, and Aiden passed to him. In the same moment, a Notre Dame player came flying onto the scene, intercepted the pass, and nearly sent the puck to Jack off guard on his glove side.

Aiden came off the ice shortly after, and his line didn't take a shift for several minutes.

1st, and Honestly, he'd never been more thankful to see the end of a period when the buzzer sounded at the end of the first.

“What is going on with you?” Jack asked from behind him as they filed the first single file down the tunnel at first intermission.

around, Aiden shrugged. "I'm rusty."

boards. Jack grabbed Aiden's shoulder and spun him until his back was against the wall, their teammates streaming by, unbothered by whatever was going on between the two.

— "That's not *rust*," Jack said, using air quotes around the word. "You're better than anyone there's no *rust* on your body. This is all in your head, it's in your brain." Aiden hated how well Jack knew him, and was embarrassed to admit how fast he was.

muscle Coach appeared then. "Problem here?"

Jack shook his head. "Just helping Fuller get his shit together."

Coach gave him a nod and continued on to the media room, where he'd go to watch the review tape and make adjustments for the second period. For all the bone-headed game play, the score was luckily tied at zero.

crease "Tell me what's really going on," Jack said. "Now."

deways Aiden hesitated despite the fire in Jack's eyes and the stern expression. Jack said he'd beat it out of Aiden if needed.

And truthfully, what was his problem?

He'd been prepared to have a couple growing pains after not playing for Dame over half a year, but this was more than that. He knew it, Coach knew it, and Jack knew it, too.

"Bunny," he said with a sigh.

Jack nodded indulgently. "I figured. Go on."

"I don't want to let her down," he said. "She's never seen me play, but you know me. I talk big game. Not to mention my stats from previous seasons speak for themselves. I just want her to be proud of me."

padding "Well she's not with you because you're a hockey player," Jack reminded him. "In fact, you being a hockey player is what sent her running in the other direction."

place. She's with you because she cares about you. But if you want to
inst theer proud, you're not doing a very good job of it right now."

ing on "I know," Aiden said, raising his gloved hands to his hair and awkwardly
pulling at the strands. "And I feel like I'm being pulled in two directions.
I know there. My mind is half focused on my game and half focused on what
d." thinking, watching every move I make. She's not just some random girl
nit how know? Her brother is ridiculously talented, so she's used to watching
athletes. What if I don't measure up? I don't know what to do."

"Play your game," Jack said simply, as though it were that easy. "It
it's easier said than done, but you've been playing hockey for a long time.
they'd Fuller. Long before bunny came into the picture. Stop acting like this
Aiden's first game ever. It's just another night, exactly like the thousands
played in before. Forget about Kenzie. Forget about everything happening
outside of those boards. Focus on this. Stop letting your heart do the
ion that and use that brain of yours. Let it go for the next forty minutes. You
will come back."

Aiden studied Jack for a long moment, until Luke poked his head
ring for the media room and hollered for them to get their asses inside.

7 it, and "When did you become so philosophical?" Aiden asked.

"I'm a goalie," Jack reminded him, "so if anyone knows anything about
mental fortitude and shaking off a bad period or game, it's me."

Jack entered the media room ahead of him, and Aiden paused for a
before, longer, inhaling deeply.

revious *Let it go let it go let it go*, he chanted to himself as he held his breath
three...two...one...

minded He exhaled and stepped inside to join his teammates, turning his
the first wholly to the task at hand: winning this game.

o make

The rest of the game went about as well as the first period, which is
wardly Aiden continued to play like shit. He tried to compartmentalize, but
ons out time he skated past the student section, he thought of Kenzie, and wonder
at she's what she thought of him.

irl, you It caused him to blunder a lot of plays, and the pitying looks his team
; stellar shot his way certainly didn't help matters. The freshmen on his line who
started the game excited to play with him now avoided him in the
realize room.

g time, He'd become a pariah, an angel fallen from grace.

is your Everything he'd worked so hard for was firmly back within reach now
you've his suspension was up, and he was fucking it all up because of a girl.

opening Kenzie wasn't just any girl, obviously. He cared deeply about her
talking was difficult to imagine his life without her in it, despite the fact that
ir game only known each other for a few months. They'd shared things with
other that they'd never been able to with anyone else, and their connection
l out of was something special.

Once in a lifetime kind of special.

g about "What's going on with you?" Kenzie asked when they'd crawled in
that night.

second "What do you mean?" he asked, reclining back on his pillows, arms
behind his head, studiously avoiding her gaze in favor of watching the
fan whir above him.

h in for "You looked like shit, and somehow I don't think that's how you
play."

s focus "So I had an off night," he said irritably. "I haven't played in
months, bunny. Cut me some slack."

“I think there’s more to it than that.”

s to say Aiden absolutely did not want to have this conversation right now
t every wouldn’t do either of them any good to hold it in.

ordered “I…” he began, then cut off. How did he word this in a way that w
upset her? “I’m struggling to compartmentalize.”

mmates “Compartmentalize what, exactly?”

who had “You and my game,” he said, rolling onto his side to face her. “I’ve
locker been in this situation before, bunny. I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what? Be with me and play hockey at the same time?”

“Yes,” he admitted, voice barely above a whisper.

ow that Kenzie was silent for long, tense moments, and Aiden’s pulse p
loudly in his ears while he waited.

, and it “Do you want me to stop coming to your games? I can do that f
they’d Fuller, if that’s what you need. Do you want me to leave right now?
th each want to…table this? Us? Until you figure your shit out?”

nection She didn’t sound angry, or hurt; simply resigned, which was so
even worse.

“I want to not be such a fuckup,” he said finally.

nto bed “Unfortunately, that’s not a solution to the problem at hand.”

ns bent He wished he could see her face. Outwardly, she appeared calm, b
ceiling weren’t touching, and the darkness prevented him from studyi
expression. Somehow, he knew her heart was thrumming in her ch
throat and chest probably tight with anxiety, but her voice was even.

usually “I think…” he said, hesitating.

“Just say it, Fuller.”

1 seven “I think it would be best if you didn’t come to my games anymc
said. “At least until I’m back in a rhythm. It sounds so dumb, but I’ve

really had anyone to play for. My mom, sister, and Dan have been w
7, but itme play for ages. You're...new. And you're very important to me. T
all I could think about was not making a fool of myself in front of yo
ouldn'tended up doing the exact opposite. I need to give my team one h
percent, and I'm not sure I can do that if I know you're somewhere
building, watching every move I make."

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hesitation. She reached out to him, settling a hand in the center of hi
"I never want to be a distraction for you, Aiden. I *want* you to succeed
you need your games to be a bunny-free zone, then they will be."

ounded The weight that had settled on Aiden's shoulders lifted, and he
deeply, the remnants of the perfume Kenzie had put on that morning
or you,his nose. He caught her hand in his and lifted it to his mouth, pressin
Do you to the center of her palm. "I don't know what I did to deserve you,"
quietly, more comfortable being vulnerable in the pitch black than he'
mehowthe light. "But I want this to work. I want *us* to work. I promise i
always be like this."

"I know," she said, equally as quiet. "I'm not going anywhere."

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really had anyone to play for. My mom, sister, and Dan have been watching me play for ages. You're...new. And you're very important to me. Tonight, all I could think about was not making a fool of myself in front of you, and I ended up doing the exact opposite. I need to give my team one hundred percent, and I'm not sure I can do that if I know you're somewhere in the building, watching every move I make."

"If that's what you need, then that's what I'll give you," she said with zero hesitation. She reached out to him, settling a hand in the center of his chest. "I never want to be a distraction for you, Aiden. I *want* you to succeed, and if you need your games to be a bunny-free zone, then they will be."

The weight that had settled on Aiden's shoulders lifted, and he inhaled deeply, the remnants of the perfume Kenzie had put on that morning filling his nose. He caught her hand in his and lifted it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to the center of her palm. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," he said quietly, more comfortable being vulnerable in the pitch black than he'd be in the light. "But I want this to work. I want *us* to work. I promise it won't always be like this."

"I know," she said, equally as quiet. "I'm not going anywhere."



THREE WEEKS PASSED IN a blink, and suddenly Kenzie was down the barrel of her first end-of-semester exams at Michigan State.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in early December, and Kenzie and sat at IHOP, where they'd decided to get a late lunch. It had been since they'd spent any time together, Kenzie too wrapped up in Aic Jessica busy with student teaching and her own relationship.

"How are things with Silas anyway?" Kenzie asked when mentioned he was planning a fancy date night for their annivers upcoming weekend.

"Things were rough for a bit there," she admitted. "But...I think we' on track. This weekend should help."

Unfortunately for Jessica, the words leaving her lips didn't ma expression on her face. It seemed as though she was trying to co herself as well as Kenzie, and Kenzie's eyes narrowed. Jessica stu

ignored her, focusing her attention on her hands curled around a coffee.

There was a reason Jessica had lied to her, and it definitely had something to do with a certain Spartan goaltender. But Kenzie knew pressing that wouldn't yield the results she wanted, so she dropped it.

With feigned enthusiasm, she said, "That's great to hear, Jess."

The compliment sounded dull, even to her own ears.

"And how about you and Aiden?" Jessica asked, clearly trying to turn attention away from herself.

Kenzie sighed, unsure where to begin. "He's finally playing again. And he looked like absolute shit in his first game back. I figured it was a fluke, or something was bothering him, so I confronted him about staring night. Turns out the thing bothering him was me."

Jessica gasped, and Kenzie held up a hand to halt the tirade she was about to embark on. "I guess he's struggling to compartmentalize, and I don't entirely understand because he's been playing hockey for a half a dozen years, but whatever," she said, waving a hand flippantly.

"This is not a *but whatever* kind of conversation, Kenzie. What the hell happened?"

Kenzie said, "He asked me to stop coming to his games."

"That little shit," Jessica said. "I'll kill him."

Kenzie laughed despite her frustration. "I told him I'd do whatever he wanted, and that was the compromise. The thing is...it seems to have worked for the most part."

"What do you mean?" Jessica asked after the waitress appeared with a platter of food.

"Despite his shitty play that Friday night, they still won, and Saturday

had a much better game. The last two weekends they've been out and he scored four times and notched six assists, so he's in good nothingpoints-wise. They've got Michigan this weekend, so I'm happy his issue coming back. But he's still been distant, despite the fact that I gave exactly what he asked for. I've hardly seen him. Before when they traveled he'd call me and FaceTime me all the time. Now it's like he can't get on the phone with me fast enough.

"When they got back on Sunday, I expected him to come over and see me...you know..." she trailed off.

, right? "I get it. You wanted to fuck his brains out after not seeing him for a while."

"Precisely," Kenzie said with a chuckle. "Eventually he invited me to his house, but nothing happened because he claimed he was exhausted and sure he passed out while we were watching a movie. I feel like he's pulling the wool over my eyes, which I can't figure out why. What happened over the last three weeks? How did we end up here?"

"I hate to state the obvious here, Kenz, but you need to have a conversation with him. Have you tried to talk to him about it?"

"No..."

Jessica exhaled roughly, clearly exasperated. "You need to."

Then she promptly dug into her food, leaving Kenzie swirling in the air above her thoughts.

As Kenzie walked through her apartment door an hour later, she called.

"Hey Berk," she said, dropping her purse on the sideboard. "I'm going to have lunch with Jessica."

"How is my little sister?" Berkley asked. "She never calls me anymore."

f town, Kenzie laughed at Berkley's pouting tone. "She's good. Busy preparing her end-of-semester evaluation. She's nervous."

game is "She's a great teacher," Berkley said. "She'll do wonderful."

ve him "How about you text her and tell her that?"

aveled, "I think I will."

off the "I'm assuming there was a reason you called me?"

"Oh!" her sister-in-law gasped and giggled. "I totally forgot I called you. Pregnancy brain is such a bitch. Anyway, I wanted to see if you were coming tonight?"

n for a "Coming where?" Kenzie asked dumbly.

"Your brother's game?" Berkley said. "Your parents are in town?"

over to "Shit!" Kenzie said. "I completely forgot. But yes, I'll be there."

ed, and "What's going on?" Berkley asked.

g away, "How do you know something is going on?"

s? How "You do realize how strange it is that I just had to remind you that your own parents are in town, right?"

ersation Kenzie snorted. "Okay, fair. It's just a little Aiden drama."

"Lay it on me," Berkley said. "I've got time."

With a resigned sigh, Kenzie repeated everything she'd told her brother. She was thankful her brother's marriage had given her the sisters she'd been denied. It was a whirlwind vortex for her entire life.

She loved her brothers, but they weren't exactly the ideal sounding board for Berkley's girl talk.

"Have you talked to him about it?"

ust left "Your sister asked me the same question, and the answer is still no."

"You need to," Berkley said, yet again echoing Jessica's words. "You need to talk to someone who knows: not communicating your feelings and worries."

ring forbe the death of your relationship.”

“I’ll talk to him later. Tomorrow. Next week after exams.” *Sometim future*, she thought. *Maybe never. Who knows.*

“Do it tonight,” Berkley said sternly. “As a matter of fact, you should bring him tonight. You can clear the air on the drive over and he can meet my parents finally. Your mom has been pumping me for information about you. you know.”

Kenzie groaned. “I’ll think about it.”

“Sounds good. See you later,” Berkley said, then disconnected. *You should bring him tonight.*

Berkley’s words stuck in her brain like a popcorn kernel stuck in her ear. Should she? Her parents would be there, and of course Berkley would probably bring Lexie and Mitch if they were in town. Nate would definitely be there if he wasn’t on shift or on call. It could be a lot to throw at Aiden at once with their relationship on such rocky ground, but it could also be what they needed to get back on track.

After a moment’s hesitation, she called him, fully planning to talk about whatever was going on with him.

Jessica, “Hi bunny,” he said when he picked up.

“Hey you,” she said. All her plans for a serious conversation went out the window when she heard his voice, that deep and low rumble that carries through a phone line, and instead she blurted, “Do you want to go to a Warriors game with me tonight?”

“Bunny, it’s a school night.”

“Yeah but it’s a free hockey game. In Brent’s suite. Please? I really want you to be there. I want you to meet my parents.”

Aiden was silent for so long, Kenzie was certain he was trying to c

with the best way to turn her down. Instead, he surprised her by
e in the “What time are we leaving?”

“Six,” she said. “I’ll pick you up.”

ld bring “Not a chance,” he said. “I’ll be outside your building at 5:45.”

et your Kenzie rolled her eyes but didn’t argue, knowing it was a fig
ut him, wouldn’t win. If Kenzie had learned anything about Aiden these 1
months, it was that he took being a gentleman and the conventional
dating seriously. It was one of the many things she liked about him.
I’ll see you later.”

“Bye bunny,” he said and hung up.

r teeth. She’d talk to him tonight on the drive to Detroit, and hope it didn’t
ay, andentire night.

tely be Exactly as he’d said he would, Aiden was waiting for her fifteen
iden atbefore six. When she hopped into the car, she leaned across the cor
exactlygive him a kiss, which he enthusiastically returned.

He shot her that panty-dropping smile and said, “You look hot.”

to him Kenzie glanced down at her distressed jeans, the denim so dark
nearly black, and cropped Warriors hoodie with “JEAN 22” on the bac

“Thank you,” she said. “You always look hot.”

out the Aiden laughed and reached for her hand, pressing a kiss to the back
sed herdepositing it in her lap, attention turning to the road where snow fell sc

at to go Had she imagined the disconnect between them over the last few we

She’d had several expectations for tonight, but not a single one c
had included getting the old Aiden back. The reemergence of this fur

ly wantsupremely sexy version of Aiden in his black jeans, tight black sh
hooded jean jacket had Kenzie ready to make him pull over so she cou

ome uphim up to her apartment and undress him.

saying, But now was not the time.

Kenzie's mind spun. Was it even worth voicing her concerns now seemed to have turned back into his normal self?

Berkley's words once again echoed in her head.

ght she *Not communicating your feelings and worries will be the death*
ast few *relationship*.

rules of Resolved, she opened her mouth as they passed through Howell.

. "Fine. Never once had she been anxious in his presence, but now...her
trembled in her lap, skin suddenly chilled and clammy all at once.

"Are we okay?"

ruin the Aiden shot her a quick sideways glance, the headlights whizzing b
the opposite direction setting his eyes glinting in the darkness.

minutes "Of course," he said. "Why wouldn't we be?"

isole to "Something is going on with you," she said. "You've been really
these last few weeks. Basically since your suspension ended."

"I haven't been distant," he argued, and she noticed a tinge of ann
it was in his tone. "I've been busy. Now that I'm playing again, I have to lea
k. to juggle everything."

"So now I'm something you have to juggle?" she asked, unable
before herself, hurt lacing every word. It was an overreaction. She kne
oftly. Mentally, she screamed at herself to chill out. It was a shame her
eks? didn't want to listen. "I thought we already moved past this. You pr
of themme things would get better. I stopped going to your games, Aiden. E
t, flirty, you asked me to. Because you seemed to think that would be some
irt, and cure-all for whatever mental block you experienced."

uld drag "That's not what I'm saying. But look...I've never had a relationsl
this. I've never really had a relationship at all that lasted more than

nights. Before it was hockey, hockey, hockey all the time. And now that hethere's you, too. I'm struggling to balance the two. I'm struggling both you and my team the time and attention you deserve."

Kenzie understood he was trying to make her feel better by confi of yourher, by giving her this vulnerable piece of himself. She knew Aid fallible; he was human, after all. But to her, based on this conversati the way he'd treated her and their relationship the last few weeks, she i r handshe was more of a hindrance to his life than a benefit.

"If that's how you feel, why did you come with me tonight?"

Aiden didn't have a temper, at least not in any explosive way Ken ry fromwitnessed in their time together. He'd always been quiet and thou carefully considering each thought he had before speaking it into ex never raising his voice to her or flying off the handle when thing distantsideways.

The same could not be said for her, who stewed in his passenger se oyancea vat of soup ready to bubble over.

urn how "I don't understand what you're asking," Aiden said finally.

"You just told me you don't know how to navigate this, us, and ho to helpthe same time," she said, steam releasing from that pot inside her. "t w that.did you come with me tonight? It seems like you should be home focu mouthyour series with Michigan this weekend."

omised "Where is this coming from?" Aiden asked, deftly avoiding the qu becausewhich only infuriated Kenzie more.

magical "You've told me from the beginning that hockey is and always your number one priority, Aiden. I get that. My brother was the same hip likeguy before he met Berkley. I have no delusions here that I'm the I 1 a few

...now Daniels to your Brent Jean. So I'm asking you now: how do I fit into you to give going forward? Do you even want me to?"

Suddenly, Aiden smashed the brake pedal and swerved to the side, sliding into a stop on the edge of the median that separated the eastbound traffic from the west. He angrily stabbed at the button for his flashers, unbuckled his seatbelt, and turned to her.

felt like "That's really how you feel?"

Aiden's face was illuminated by the lights of passing cars, every line of his face—full lips, chiseled cheekbones, sharp jaw, and long, straight nose etched into his skin—was set in a grimace of anger.

thoughtful, He was *angry*? He was angry?

existence, *Well, welcome to the fucking club, Fuller.*

she went "I don't know how to feel," she answered, trying to keep her voice steady despite her rising temper. "All I know is that things the last few weeks, since you came back, like playing again, have been weird. We hardly see each other, and I get it.

it was going to be an adjustment. But you told me it wouldn't affect us. You know it is."

she said at The scariest part about this whole conversation was realizing how far she had truly fallen for him, and how cutting him out of her life now was like removing something vital from the very fiber of her being. But she'd known from the beginning how important hockey was to him, and she couldn't let herself get in the way of that.

"I'm not asking you to choose here, Aiden," she said. "But to me, it's obvious you already have and you're just too afraid to say it out loud."

kind of Aiden scrubbed a hand over his head, the inky strands of his hair sticking to his forehead every which way. "I never planned on you," he said quietly. "I had a set of rules. Things that would get me where I wanted to go. And you came

our life and threw a wrench into the whole damn thing. We're floating in space like a rabbit in a hot bunny. You have to give me time. Can you do that for me? Trust me, I'm coming to wait here with me while I figure it out?"

Could she?

Yet again, he hadn't answered her question, avoiding the actual issue in his hand. But Kenzie pushed down her reservations and locked them in place, burying them in some deep, dark, infrequently traveled corner of her mind, leaving her free to deal with his problem on a different day.

Right now, Aiden wasn't explicitly saying one way or the other, but she thought their relationship was going. All he was asking for was time to build trust.

She could give him that.

"Yes."

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and threw a wrench into the whole damn thing. We're floating in space here, bunny. You have to give me time. Can you do that for me? Trust me enough to wait here with me while I figure it out?"

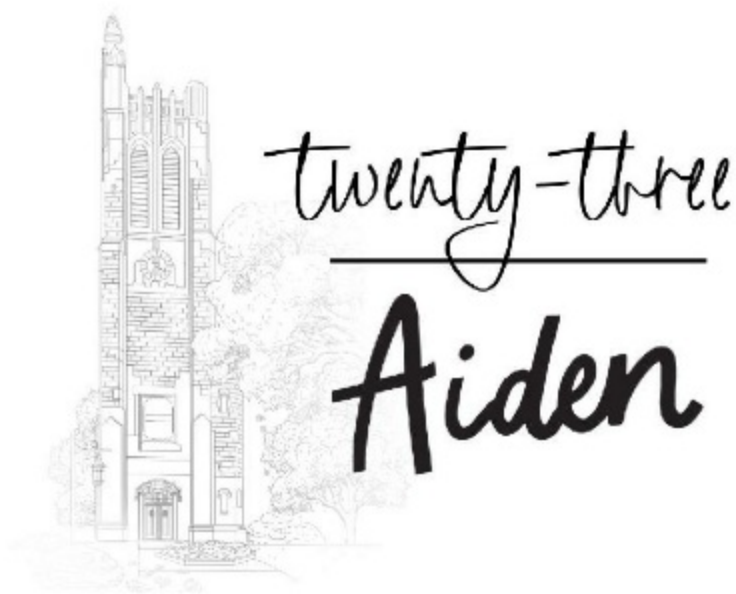
Could she?

Yet again, he hadn't answered her question, avoiding the actual topic at hand. But Kenzie pushed down her reservations and locked them in a box, burying them in some deep, dark, infrequently traveled corner of her mind. A problem to deal with on a different day.

Right now, Aiden wasn't explicitly saying one way or the other where he thought their relationship was going. All he was asking for was time and trust.

She could give him that.

"Yes."



AIDEN SIGHED IN RELIEF when Kenzie said, “yes,” and leaned in her hard, deeply inhaling her scent, branding it on his memory.

Playfully, she pushed him away when he moved his hands to the her shirt, his fingers tickling the exposed skin of her abdomen.

“Aiden,” she said. “We’re parked on the side of 96 and we have a game to get to.”

“Highway and hockey game, got it,” he said, reluctantly moving and buckling himself back in, pulling back onto the highway when it was do so.

“So what exactly should I expect here?” Aiden asked as they Detroit.

The skyline shimmered in the distance, buildings scraping the starry wasn’t Chicago, but it was beautiful, and he knew he’d come to love got the opportunity to play for the Warriors one day.

“My dad will probably try to break your hand,” she told him. “I

mother will fawn all over you. So prepare for that emotional whiplash, sure how Nate will react. Could go either way.”

Aiden laughed, and Kenzie directed him down the freeway, telling him to take an exit once they neared the river.

“Well Brent already tried to break my hand at that alumni dinner, used to that from the Jean family,” he told her.

Kenzie gasped. “He did not!”

Aiden nodded solemnly. “Sure did. Crushed my poor little finger grip. It’s a good thing I had five weeks of suspension to recover.”

Kenzie giggled. “Nothing about your fingers is poor or little,” she said in a tone indicating she remembered all the things those fingers had done to

And now, his dick was hard.

kissing “Kenzie...” he warned, and she laughed harder.

“Just saying, Fuller. Your hands are magical. Perfect. My favorite thing about you.”

“Really? My *hands*? What about my dick?”

hockey “I like that, too,” she said. “But your hands...I like the way mine feel on them perfectly. And when you dig your fingers into my hair and scratch my scalp. And when you run them over my body and put those fingers on my safe to me...”

Not a moment too soon, they pulled up in front of the arena, and Aiden neared barked, “Tell me where to go!”

Kenzie’s laughter turned into a full-on maniacal cackle. Aiden wanted to pay her back later for her dirty little mouth putting ideas in his head, but he had to keep it from hardening his flesh to uncomfortable levels minutes before he met her.

“Around back,” she said, pointing up the street. “We can park in the But my player’s lot.”

sh. Not Aiden followed her directions, eventually pulling up to a guard station at the entrance to a gated lot.

him to “Sorry sir,” the guard said when he stepped up to Aiden’s window. He was an older man with a bushy grey mustache, eyebrows to match, and a Vancouver Island so I’m ball cap settled atop his salt-and-pepper hair. A deep-blue parka with the Warriors logo at the breast wrapped around his body, his large hands were on his hips. “This is for players and player’s guests only.”

s in his “Hey Frank!” Kenzie said from the passenger seat.

“Who is that?” Frank asked, bending down and shining his flashlight into the interior of the car, illuminating Kenzie’s face. “Mackenzie Jean, is that you?”

“Sure is! How’re you, Frank? How are Martha and the kids?”

“Oh, everyone is great!” he said. “Joshua and his wife just had a baby, and Millie and her family are living with us while construction on their new home finishes up! It’s great having everyone here for the holidays. I’ll see your parents in about ten minutes ago!”

fit into “That’s great to hear,” Kenzie said, a huge smile on her face. “I’ll try to catch my better get in there. You know how my mom gets if I’m late.”

s inside Frank huffed out an indulgent laugh. “That I do. Enjoy the game, kids!”

“Thanks, Frank. Merry Christmas to you and yours!”

l Aiden “You as well!” Frank said, then turned and signaled his partner to open the gates.

s going Aiden drove through and pulled into the first spot he found, put the car in park, turned it off, and turned to Kenzie, gobsmacked.

family. “What the fuck did I just witness?”

in the “What? That back there?” she said, waving a dismissive hand in the direction of the guard station. “Frank has worked security for the Warriors for years.”

ation atlike thirty years, and my brother has been playing here nearly ten. You know people.”

He was Kenzie got out of the car and Aiden followed, rushing up behind her. A warrior scooped her off her feet, pressing a smacking kiss to the side of her face. She squealed and squirmed until he finally put her down and captured her gloved hand in his.

“You continue to surprise me, Mackenzie Jean.”

She looked up at him, giving him a small, secretive smile. “You might not have seen anything yet.”

It is that Aiden had been to the arena the Warriors called home several times in his years at Michigan State, but always as a player or a regular old holding fan.

by girl, Never as a VIP.

Her new When they reached the side door that served as the player entrance, she just letgreeted the security guard with a passing wave and, “Hey, Greg, good to see you!” He handed her some sort of badge, and Kenzie breezed through.

But we Aiden fought the urge to punch him when he stared at her ass a little longer as she marched through the security checkpoint.

“Hello!” They moved down the hallway situated beneath the seats of the arena. When they came to a tiny, inconspicuous elevator. Kenzie held the badge up to the scanner, and the doors opened. They entered and she pressed the button for the suite level, once again scanning the badge.

He got in the car in The elevator jerked into motion, and Aiden grabbed her and kissed her. When he pulled away, she was breathing hard, and he gave her a wide grin.

in the “What was that for?” she asked.

Warriors for “Wanted to before I have to be on my best behavior around your partner.”

u get to And then all the blood drained from Aiden's face as he remembered what he was about to meet her parents.

her and "You just remembered what we're about to do, didn't you?" Kenzie smirked at him with a laugh.

red her "Is this how you felt when you met my family?" he asked her.

"Yes. Although...no offense, Fuller, but I think this might be a little bit of a challenge for you. I am the baby, after all. Brent's overprotective bullshit doesn't even have a candle to how my dad can get if he thinks his little girl is threatened."

during Aiden froze, blood chilling. "What exactly about me is threatened?" he asked. "Ticket-you?"

Kenzie gave him one of those *get real* looks and gestured to his chest. "Have you seen yourself? You're sex on a stick. And you're a hockey player. Are you forgetting my parents raised one?"

l to see "Oh god," Aiden said. "I should've stayed home."

Kenzie stepped up next to him and looped her arms around his waist. "Don't worry, little toopromise it'll be fine, Fuller. One look at how happy I am and they'll see there's nothing to be worried about."

na until He studied her closely: the smooth skin of her forehead and between her eyebrows, her full lips pulled back in a smile, eyes twinkling in delight.

ttion for She was happy, and that was because of him, wasn't it?

Panic rose in his chest.

ner. What he'd told her in the car was true; he needed time to figure out how to handle a cockyout. He felt confident he would, but it wasn't as simple as an overnight

He simply hoped she'd stick around while he settled into this new normal.

The elevator arrived at the suite level, and Kenzie towed him out of the elevator. "Parents." and down a deep-red carpeted hallway until they reached a door

ered he plaque next to it that read BJ 22.

“You ready?” she asked, settling her hand on the doorknob.

he asked “As I’ll ever be,” he said, and she rose up to give him a quick kiss.

Then she pushed the door open.

“You’re late!” a woman called the second they pushed inside, and she harder pulled her hand free from his as a petite woman with brunette hair embraced him. She pulled him into a hug, a cloud of Chanel No. 5 washing over him.

she said “Sorry, Mom,” she said. “Aiden drives like a grandma.”

“I do not,” he said indignantly, and she smirked.

Sandra Jean turned her gaze on him, blue eyes a shade or two darker than her daughters. Aiden felt like he was being assessed by a head-to-toe X-ray. He was thankful his dick had returned to its usual state.

“So you’re the infamous Aiden Fuller,” Sandra said.

“Mom!”

“It’s fine, bunny,” Aiden said. “I’m sure my reputation precedes me.”

“Brent has told us about you,” Sandra said.

“I’ve also told you about him!” Kenzie protested.

Sandra cut her gaze to her daughter. “Your brother is the one who showed us Aiden’s little streaking video, though.”

Aiden’s face flamed, and he secretly prayed for a black hole to open and suck him into oblivion.

“Then I guess you’re glad he’s fully clothed now, aren’t you?”

she asked her mom. “Although...the video really doesn’t do him justice.”

“Mackenzie Elizabeth Jean!” Sandra shrieked, then spun and threw the car hands in the air. “Ronald, come get your daughter.”

“I’m your daughter, too,” Kenzie reminded her. Then a man walked

himself from a seat on the balcony and came inside to see what the fuss was about. Kenzie squealed, “Daddy!” and ran right into his arms.

Kenzie’s dad set her back on her feet and held her at arm’s length. “You’ve been too long, bug,” he said. “How are you?”

Kenzie “Good,” she said. “This is my boyfriend, Aiden.”

Aiden thrust his hand out. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jean.”

Staring at Kenzie’s dad was disconcerting for a number of reasons, the least of which being Brent could’ve been his father’s twin if not for the nearly thirty years that separated them.

“You can call me Ron,” he said, and shook Aiden’s hand. Aiden felt the scanner himself for the grinding of his bones against each other, but it never aroused Ron’s handshake was firm but not crushing. Aiden took that as a good

“Thanks for getting my little girl here safe tonight.”

Aiden nodded. “Of course. Bunny is very important to me.”

Ron raised an eyebrow, and Aiden realized too late he’d called her “Bunny.” nickname...a truncated version of the term “puck bunny,” which he was surely familiar with.

Before Ron could bite his head off, Berkley came to the rescue.

“Did he just call you ‘bunny’?” she asked, pulling Kenzie in for a side hug.

Her stomach had grown since Aiden had last seen her three months ago. Now, it formed an adorable bump that on someone taller would’ve been normal, but seemed obscenely large on Berkley’s petite frame.

Kenzie “Yep,” Kenzie said proudly. “I totally hated it at first, but now I think it’s cute. His teammates even call me that.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet,” Berkley said, smiling up at Aiden. “Good to see you again, Aiden.”

“You too,” he said, replying with a shy smile of his own.

uss was Another dark-haired man joined their group, and Aiden recognized him from Kenzie's pictures as her other brother, Nate.

h. "It's Kenzie launched herself at him, beaming, and Aiden sensed that something about their relationship was different than hers with Brent. The two appeared more like friends than big brother and little sister. Kenzie seemed more at ease around her middle brother than her eldest. It seemed as though Brent, though, actually treated Kenzie like the twenty-three-year-old woman she was for the purpose of viewing her as the little girl Brent did.

Aiden liked him instantly, and after a quick handshake and introduction, Nate felt the same. "I didn't know she was bringing her boyfriend!" Aiden heard Nate say to their dad as they walked toward the bar on the far side of the room for drinks. "Good looking kid."

Kenzie laughed and pointed a finger at Aiden. "Don't let it go by your head," she said. "Although you are pretty hot."

Aiden raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Wasn't going to," he said. Nate leaned in and ghosted his lips over her cheek, whispering in her ear, "You're pretty hot too, bunny."

When she shivered, he chuckled, then backed away when her father ambled toward them—though he left his hand possessively on the shoulder and looked her back.

Ron held a beer out to him, and Nate handed Kenzie a seltzer. They all took a drink, and then the men waited for her and Aiden to open their cans, then held their own out. "Cheers," Ron said. "To hockey bringing us all together."

Everyone echoed the sentiment and sipped from their drinks, Aiden choking on his when a hulking blond man appeared behind Ron.

Ron Jean was not a small man. Like his sons, he was tall, and had

ed him his broad-shouldered frame on to Brent.

Mitch Frambough made him look about three feet tall.

nothing “Uncle Mitch!” Kenzie squealed, throwing herself at yet another man who appeared tonight.

more at If two-thirds of them hadn’t been related to her, the final one being her father, Nate every committed relationship *and* her brother’s best friend, Aiden would have instead certainly developed a complex.

When Mitch released her from their hug, she turned to Aiden and said, “You remember my boyfriend?”

One of Mitch’s dark-blond eyebrows rose. “Boyfriend?”

Kenzie rolled her eyes. “Don’t make it a big deal.”

“Yeah, baby, don’t make it a big deal,” a tall brunette woman said, stepping into her way into the circle.

“I just think it’s interesting,” Mitch said.

The brunette scanned Aiden head to toe, arms crossed over her chest. Her language screamed *unimpressed*.

Aiden resisted the urge to squirm under that hazel gaze, her eyes golden than green, like pools of honey. Her legs seemed to go on forever. Aiden guessed she had to be close to six feet tall, with a curtain of small dark hair that fell all the way down her back. She was a smokeshow, and he knew it.

He’d never once been intimidated by a woman, but Aiden so understood that this one would eat him alive in a heartbeat if the need arose.

“Stop scaring the poor kid, Alexandra,” Berkley admonished, cutting in nearly their little powwow belly first.

“I’m not scaring him. I’m simply checking out the goods.” She turned and passed Kenzie. “You did good, kid.”

Kenzie grinned broadly, and Mitch groaned. “Lexie...”

Lexie turned and looked up at her boyfriend, giving him a smaller man before turning a wolfish grin on Aiden. “His tone means I’m going to be punished later,” she said, then added in a stage whisper. “And I’ll play along in a minute.”

“LEXIE!” Berkley and Mitch yelled.

Lexie laughed and hooked her arm through Kenzie’s, towing her away from the group. Aiden heard her say, “Tell me *everything*,” as they walked toward the balcony, and he bit back a grin.

“I’m sorry about her,” Mitch said. “She’s...”

“Lexie,” Berkley supplied with a sigh, and Mitch nodded, as though explaining everything.

“It’s fine,” Aiden said.

“She means well,” Berkley said. “She’s just really protective. She doesn’t have any siblings of her own, so Kenzie is kind of like the community sister, even though I have one of my own.”

“Jessica, right?” Aiden asked.

Berkley smiled brightly. “Yep, that’s her. You’ve met her?”

Aiden nodded. “She and Kenzie came to a football tailgate the weekend my team hosted back in October. Turns out she knows one of my teammates too?”

“Jack,” Berkley said, surprising Aiden. Had Jessica talked about her sister? Was there something there? Jack had been cagey lately, slipping about his relationship with Sofia and steadfast in his refusal to talk about how he and Jessica knew each other.

Something fishy was going on.

Aiden didn’t have time to consider it further, or press Berkley for

because a horn sounded from outside the suite, alerting them
I smile impending game-starting puck drop.

g to be Never once had Aiden watched a hockey game from this high. The v
robably point was incredible, not affecting his ability to track the puck one bit
wasn't the same as sitting in the stands, didn't hit the same as
completely immersed in the game with all five senses.

r away It was easy to see why the Jean family sat up here, though. When
walked scored midway through the first period, the entire arena lost its s
deafening roar surely rocking the building on its very foundation. He c
imagine being the relatives of the man these Warriors fans looked a
gh that god, and the melee that would ensue if they were exposed to
celebration.

When the first period ended, and Kenzie asked Aiden if he wa
doesn't watch a period from the club seats in the lower bowl, he swiftly agreed
ty little She told her parents they'd be back for the third and pulled him fr
suite. Halfway down the hall to the elevator, Kenzie abruptly stopp
pushed open a door, pulling him in behind her and flipping the lock.

“What are you do—” Aiden started, his question cut off by Kenzie's
hockey on his.

mates, “I miss you,” she said against his lips, already working his zippe
and shoving her hand into his boxers.

Jack to “I'm right here,” he said back, nipping at her lips before trailin
, tight-across her cheek and down her neck, moving his hands below her s
to talk filling his hands with her breasts, squeezing in that way he knew wo
her up, grinning against her skin when she rewarded him with a
contented sigh.

details, “I want you,” she said. “Right now.”

to the His pants pooled around his ankles in seconds, and Kenzie fell to her knees in front of him a moment later. She worked his boxers down and he vaulted free, right into her waiting palm.

t. But it “Bunny,” Aiden said, voice strained as her hand caressed him. “Are you being sure this is a good idea? I mean your parents are—”

“Don’t bring my parents into this, Fuller,” she said, stroking him in Brentand faster.

hit, the “I’m just saying, anyone could walk by and...oh my god,” he said. His train of thought once again derailed when she put her mouth on him, sliding like a hot tongue up and down the length of his shaft once before closing her lips such a around him.

She might not care about the fact that her parents were right down the street but she seemed to possess at least some sense of urgency, because she had no time by teasing or toying with him. Instead, Kenzie dove right in, biting him on the head with a gusto that surprised him, quickly bobbing up and down. The heat and warmth and wetness of her mouth was a delicious combination that

Aiden closer and closer to his release faster than he thought possible. His mouth Then again, there wasn’t a single thing he could think of about Kenzie that didn’t turn him on, and when she was around, he was in a perpetual state of arousal, mere moments from blowing apart if she so much as looked at him in some type of way.

g them “Bunny,” Aiden groaned, chest heaving, every muscle pulling taut with the effort of holding back.

uld rile He drove his fingers into her hair, intent on pulling her off, not wanting to come in her mouth when they’d never discussed if that was something she was into. Kenzie hummed around him, showing no signs of stopping. The vibrations along his dick causing him to jerk his hips, sending his head

er kneesback of her throat. All of Aiden's good intentions went out the window as he found himself instead pulling her closer, pushing deeper into the warmth of her mouth. When she gagged, the stab of guilt in his chest was overwritten immediately by her hand clamping around the base of his penis and squeezing.

harder Aiden let go, his release barreling down his spine and across his thighs, legs shaking with the force of it. He came in great spurts, dropping his head, his back onto the metal door behind him with a *thunk*. Kenzie continued sliding him through it, swallowing down everything he gave her until he felt her lips stilled.

With a small *pop*, Kenzie pulled away and rose to her feet, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and stretching onto her tiptoes to kiss his forehead. The taste of him lingered on her lips and tongue when she brushed her teeth, giving against his, and he couldn't imagine anything hotter in that moment than this. The fruity seltzer mingling with his cum to create a heady mixture that he'd edged would forever crave.

When she backed away, he bent to pull up his boxers and pants. Kenzie that wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close, planting one more deep kiss to her mouth.

to him in "Fuck, bunny," he said finally, clearing his throat when his voice cracked. "That was..."

with the Her bright teeth flashed in the darkness when she smiled. She reached for his hand and he wove their fingers together, squeezing tight.

menting to "I know," she said. "Now come on before we get caught."

ing she Still dazed from his orgasm, Aiden followed her out, barely paying attention as they got in the elevator and took it to the concourse level. The train led them to the block of seats reserved for players' friends and family.

ow, and and pulled him onto the chair next to her, releasing his hand so she
he wetbrush her fingers through her hair, setting to rights the strands Aiden
est was rearranged.

is cock The second period had started in the midst of their tryst, but Aiden
from paying attention.

ghs, his Instead, he studied the girl beside him. To him, there was nothing
is headworld sexier than Mackenzie Jean. It amazed him how much had cha
to sucksuch a short amount of time, how he'd started this semester with a sus
finallyand was ending it with a girlfriend.

Cloud nine was firmly under his feet.

ing her But it had holes.

him. The night had started off on a bad note and had unfolded towa
shed itenjoying the game he loved with the girl he loved.

han her And...fuck.

t Aiden There was no point in denying it to himself anymore: he loved Ma
Jean. But loving people meant the possibility of losing them, and if he
ts, then to keep Kenzie, he had to find a balance between her and hockey. Th
ressingdeserved his full, undivided attention, and he had absolutely no idea
was going to make it work.

caught. Then he remembered something Jack had said to him months ago.

You're in control here.

hed for Up to this point, Aiden hadn't handled anything about this situatic
Now that he was playing again, his hockey routine had changed. He
going out or drinking as much, spent more time in the weight room an
payingrink, and had to devote more time to tutor sessions to keep u
Kenziehomework.

She sat When he'd thought nothing would change once his suspension ende

e could be sorely mistaken. The mental fortitude he needed while playing
len had been required during those ten games, and he'd gotten comfortable
routine, the one that featured Kenzie front and center.

was far In the last three weeks, time with Kenzie had taken a backseat,
didn't know how to fix it.

g in the His work-life balance was all sorts of fucked up, and Aiden desper
ned in needed to find a happy medium that worked for everyone.

pension Because he refused to give up the thing that had been such an integ
of his life for so long, but he also couldn't let go of the girl who'd st
heart.

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been sorely mistaken. The mental fortitude he needed while playing hadn't been required during those ten games, and he'd gotten comfortable in *that* routine, the one that featured Kenzie front and center.

In the last three weeks, time with Kenzie had taken a backseat, and he didn't know how to fix it.

His work-life balance was all sorts of fucked up, and Aiden desperately needed to find a happy medium that worked for everyone.

Because he refused to give up the thing that had been such an integral part of his life for so long, but he also couldn't let go of the girl who'd stolen his heart.

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FOR A FEW BRIEF moments after Kenzie had given him head supply closet upstairs, it seemed as if that closeness she'd been missing Aiden in recent weeks had returned. She'd thought they were back on

By bringing him down to the lower bowl, she'd hoped the new point would loosen him up further after her skillful oral had started the

Aiden's attention was on the ice, but he didn't appear to be processing of what he saw. When he'd first sat, a smile had played at the corner lips, and his eyes glinted with bone-deep contentedness, the kind that came after a really good sexual release. Now, those lips had flattened into a straight line, eyes grown weary, shoulders curving forward, as though he was holding himself for something.

Something had shaken him, and the distance in his eyes told her he was in some far away corner of his mind. At least now she knew where he was at, knew he was having difficulty balancing her and hockey. But her anxiety threatened to rise to the surface in that moment, when he

attempted to turn to the worst case scenario, Kenzie quashed it, shut down, threw up a wall to hold it at bay.

Aiden had asked her to give him time, and she intended to do so. There was no reason to panic.

Yet.

As promised, she and Aiden returned to the suite in time for the start of the third period, and watched with her family as Brent scored his third goal of the night, the game delayed as hats rained from the stands. Even from all the way down below, the in-arena cameras managed to seek out the Jean-Baptiste family broadcasting their celebration on the Jumbotron: their parents embracing, smiles stretching their cheeks high and wide, Mitch yelling at someone in the stands below to toss his hat on the ice for him, and Lexie, Berkley, and Kenzie embracing, tears streaming down Berkley's cheeks.

Kenzie wailed, swiping at her eyes, smearing mascara everywhere. "I'm just so fucking hormonal!" "And the last time he scored a hat trick was three years ago. Last night we talked for the first time. It's crazy how much has happened in the last three years."

Kenzie nodded in agreement and glanced over her shoulder at Aiden as he clapped her father on the back in congratulations.

"Hell," she said to Berkley and Lexie. "It's crazy how much has happened in three months."

Lexie laughed. "You know, when we told you to get out there and find yourself again, we didn't mean hop into a relationship with the first guy you meet at school."

Kenzie scoffed. "You're one to talk," she said with a nod to Mitch.

"Not the same and you know it," Lexie reminded her.

This was true. Lexie and Mitch had fought tooth and nail to be together.

oved it Their love had spanned years and thousands of miles and mistakes and misunderstandings, but here they were. Against all odds, they'd made it work.

Kenzie once again looked to Aiden, and found him already staring at her. She gave him a weak smile, and he returned it, then returned to the conversation with her dad.

She knew he cared about her. And he cared about hockey. Surely, in the way that Mitch and she, two people who had so much shit between them attempting to bring their family back together, could find their way back into each other's arms, she and Aiden could make this work.

If they wanted.

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it?

Did they want?

Did *he* want?

Once the game ended in a 4-1 victory for the Warriors, the group moved into the suite, cracked open more drinks, and waited for Brent to join them.

Aiden appeared at her side. "Should we go before your brother comes in, where?"

Kenzie's brow furrowed. "Why would we do that?"

"It's not exactly a secret that he doesn't like me," Aiden said with a shrug.

"I don't want to cause problems."

Kenzie grabbed his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "He won't find out. He's not going to dare with my parents here."

"If you're sure."

She rose on her toes and planted a kiss on the underside of his jaw.

"It'll be fine. Promise."

Brent arrived with more fanfare than usual thanks to his three-goal performance.

es andThe first to reach him was his wife, who turned sideways in deference
made it bump and twisted her head so her brother could plant a kiss on her
mouth, then settle a hand on her belly and grin widely at his family.
at her. Kenzie found herself thinking maybe Aiden had been onto somet
to his wanting to leave early.

Brent's reaction confirmed it.

f Lexie "What is he doing here?" Brent asked, glaring daggers at Aiden.

g to pull "He's my boyfriend, Bee, and my guest."

l Aiden "Like hell he is," her brother growled, and their mom raised a hand.

"Now is not the time," she warned them.

Brent's face, which had moments before been cloaked in anger,
quickly to blankness, like a storm cloud passing by the sun, there an
The only outward signs of his rage were the pinched skin arou
narrowed eyes and the flat line of his mouth.

moved "Now that you're all here, we have some news," her mom said, step
hem. her father's side and sliding a hand into his.

mes up Kenzie's anxiety reared its head. "You're not sick, are you?"

"What? No!" her mom assured them. She shared a look with her da
with a beaming grin, said, "We're moving to Michigan!"

a shrug. The suite became a vacuum, all sound and air instantly sucked fr
room.

ouldn't Brent was the first to recover. "You're *what*?"

"To be honest, we've been thinking about it for a while," Mom sai
three of you are here, and with the grandbaby on the way, it doesn'
"I am.sense for us to be all the way across the country anymore. We war
closer to our babies."

l night. Kenzie's eyes filled with the happiest of tears, and she reached her

to her in two long strides, throwing her arms around their necks. “That’s the best news ever.”

Her mother held her at arm’s length, tears lining her own lashes. “I’m happy you think so, bug.”

Nate joined the hug next, and then Brent, squishing Kenzie in the middle of her four favorite people.

Eventually, they disbanded, and Brent asked, “When’s the big move?” Sheepishly, her dad grinned and said, “The first of the year.”

“That’s...soon,” Nate said, mouth tipping into a frown.

“Soon?” Brent said with a laugh. “That’s in three weeks!”

“We closed on the new house last week, and signed the paperwork and moved into the new house in New York before we flew out yesterday. I know it’s happening and it’s not the most ideal time to move with the holidays coming, but we couldn’t miss out on the new house, and we couldn’t refuse the all-cash offer we received on the New York house.” Her dad shared a look, soft smiles so full of love that Kenzie’s heart clenched. “It’s been such a huge help.”

Brent whirled on his best friend, whose face blanched under the scrutiny. “You knew about this?”

“Guilty,” Mitch said with a strained smile. “They asked me not to say anything until it was official.”

“I think everyone is forgetting to ask one very important question,” Berkley said, joining their group. “Where exactly are you moving to?” Kenzie’s mom grinned. “We found a beautiful house in this little town you might have heard of. It’s called Bloomfield Hills.”

Berkley gasped, and a groan escaped Brent before he could check it. “Bloomfield Hills was the Detroit suburb where they lived.”

he best Kenzie laughed, and Brent turned to Mitch. "I'm going to kill you."

Mitch held up his hands and said, "Hey, if it makes you feel better, we're here. The house is on the opposite side of the city."

Brent considered this, then said, "Actually, it does."

middle "It's going to be wonderful having you so close," Berkley said, tears flowing freely down her face as she settled a hand on her bulging abdomen. "Baby boy is so lucky to have grandparents who love him so much."

"It's a boy?" Kenzie's mom asked, tears welling in her eyes. She nodded, smiling widely, and she hauled her daughter-in-law in for a hug. When she pulled away, her gaze darted to her own sons. "Being a boy is the best."

ng fast, *Remember me, your daughter? I'm standing right here,* Kenzie wanted to say.

ouldn't It was too much. Too much changing at once. Too much of Kenzie's life forgotten and left behind.

"Mitch A hand slid into hers. Startled, she looked up at Aiden, having forgotten all the chaos that he was here. Without doing anything more than suddenly holding her hand, he grounded her before her mind could spin out of control. She'd never understand how he managed to do that, but she wanted to say thank you for it more than ever.

"How do you feel?" he asked quietly.

here," As their gazes held, Kenzie took stock of her emotions. "I've been here for a while," she said. "The next few weeks are going to be a lot, and I just...don't know how far."

Aiden lifted his hand and settled it along her cheek. Kenzie leaned into his touch. "I'm here with you through all of it," he reminded her, and sealed his promise with a kiss to her forehead.

Kenzie's heart swelled, and in that moment, she knew they and even their children would be okay.

Later, as the arena staff hustled them out, Berkley asked, "You're staying over this weekend to help with baby shower invites, right? We really need to get those out since we're less than two months away."

Kenzie nodded. "Yep," she said. "I don't have class on Friday, so I'll be home that afternoon."

Berkley gave her a hug. Berkley nodded. "Thanks, Kenz. Me and this kid love you."

Kenzie's mom is "Love you, too, Berk," she said.

Kenzie turned to follow Aiden, who already stood sentinel at the entrance waiting for her, when Lexie caught her arm and pulled her in for a hug.

"Call if you need me," Lexie whispered in her ear. Kenzie backed up and nodded, feeling better.

She didn't know how Lexie knew something was going on; she was often in a grateful that she had her to lean on.

The ride back to East Lansing was quiet, both of them lost in their thoughts.

"Do you want to come over?" Aiden asked.

"I think I should go home. Tonight was...a lot. I need some time to process."

Aiden nodded in understanding. "I meant what I said earlier," he told her better,

"I know things have been shaky lately, but I'm here for you for all of it." He reached across the console and captured her hand. "Don't hide from me, go too."

Kenzie nodded, knowing he couldn't see her in the dark, swallowed the lump of emotion lodged in her throat.

rything The silence in the wake of those words was oppressive, sucking
from the car. When Aiden pulled up to her building, she couldn't get
enough, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before rushing o
coming should've asked him to stay. In some deep, hopeless-romantic corner
need to heart, she wished he'd come after her anyway, follow her upstairs an
her.

ll come But she didn't, and neither did he.

Instead, Aiden drove away, and Kenzie went up to her condo alone.

Friday evening, after she'd spent most of the day catching up on
e door, assignments of the semester and studying for finals, Kenzie hea
. Detroit.

d away On the drive there, she called Dr. Mathews.

"I think it's time," Kenzie told her therapist without preamble.

as only "Okay, I'll bite," Dr. Mathews said with a laugh.

"I'm ready to tell Brent and Berkley about leaving FLEX."

eir own "Really," Dr. Mathews said, sounding surprised. "What prompted th

"I'm on my way to their house now to help Berkley with baby
invites and it just seems like the right time. This baby is going to
time to before we know it, and I don't want to spring this on them after he's he

When Kenzie had first learned of Baby Jean's impending arrival, s
old her. admittedly been nervous about the shift the baby would create in the
it." Hedynamic. But over the last few months, thanks to long chats w
e." Mathews, she'd come to realize that nothing about her relationship w
ing the brother had to change simply because he was becoming a father. She
always be his baby sister; a baby wasn't going to change that.

"I think that's incredibly practical. How are you feeling about it?"

the air “Good,” Kenzie answered honestly. “I’m going to tell Berkley first out faster reaction, and then together we can tell Brent.”

ff. She “Seems like you’ve got it all figured out,” Dr. Mathews said. “I know of heris going to be difficult for you, no matter how you’re feeling right now and holdjust remember that it’s not the end of the world. Your brother and sister-in-law will still love you once all the cards are on the table, and you’ll feel more free without this thing hanging over your head.”

It was nearly five p.m. by the time she arrived at Brent and Berkley’s house. She was grateful her brother’s truck was missing. She knew there would be a discussion about Aiden, and she wasn’t quite ready to face the firing squad. When she walked into the kitchen, she found Berkley at the island with her laptop open in front of her, envelopes and stacks of invites spread across the counter, a glass of non-alcoholic wine dangling from her right hand.

“Rough day?” Kenzie asked, nodding at the wine.

Berkley sighed dramatically. “I wish it was the real stuff,” she said. “This kid is sucking the life out of me. He better come out ten pounds with a head of hair like his father for all the work I’m doing growing him.”

“No offense, sis, but I don’t think your body is equipped to eject a ten-pound baby.”

Berkley looked down at her stomach, which already bulged dramatically despite the fact that she still had about three months until her due date.

“This kid is going to kill me,” she said finally. “So I suppose we should celebrate him first.”

Kenzie laughed and slid onto a barstool next to her. Berkley shifted her laptop so Kenzie could see the screen.

“Here’s a spreadsheet of all the invitees and their addresses,” Berkley said. “I’ve divided them into two columns, half for you and half for me. As

...; gaugewe'll just mark them off so we don't have any duplicates and so we don't forget anyone. Sound good?"

Now this "Yep. Let's do this."

Now, but Each envelope received three things: the actual invitation, a ticket for the diaper raffle entry, and a card asking attendees to bring a book signed with their name instead of a card so Brent and Berkley could begin building Jean's library.

Kenzie's, and "Do you guys have a name picked out yet?" Kenzie asked as she added an envelope.

quad. "We do," Berkley said slowly. "But I don't want to share it yet and, her announce it once he's born, so for now he's just Baby Jean."

across the "And speaking of," Kenzie said, figuring now was as good a time as any to discuss the thing that had been weighing on her for months. "I have something I want to talk to you about."

l. "This Berkley's eyebrows rose, her hand stilling over the envelope she was holding. "What's up?"

"I want to step down from FLEX."

at a ten Berkley's mouth popped open in surprise. "Really?"

Kenzie nodded, swallowing hard. "I've been thinking about it for a while. I've actually always planned to do it. I just wasn't sure how to broach the subject with my brother, so I told him I wanted to take a leave of absence for a better while I was at school to give myself time to figure it out. But with the new year coming...things are changing for both of you. I want to give us ample time to come up with a solution."

The door leading from the garage opened and her brother breezed in. "Kenzie said. Berkley said, "When are you going to tell him this?"

we go, Before Kenzie could respond, her brother said, "Tell me what?"

e don't Time slowed to a crawl as Berkley shot Kenzie an apologetic lo
said, "Kenzie is leaving FLEX," to Brent.

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Time slowed to a crawl as Berkley shot Kenzie an apologetic look and said, “Kenzie is leaving FLEX,” to Brent.

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IT WAS A TRAIN wreck, the reaction from her brother instantaneous. Kenzie glared at Berkley.

“Traitor,” she muttered, then turned to face Brent, who had dropped his hockey bag on the floor and crossed the room in two giant strides toward her over Kenzie at the island.

“What do you mean you’re *leaving*? You’re already *on leave*.”

“I mean I’m not coming back. Not when I finish school, not ever.”

Despite the fact that shit was about to hit the proverbial fan, a weight fell off Kenzie’s chest, like the moment when an anxiety attack loosened the band around her lungs cut free, and she inhaled deeply.

“I don’t understand,” her brother said.

“I’m just not happy,” she told him. “I’ve loved working with FLEX, but I think I’ve outgrown my role in the company, and it’s time to move onto something else.”

“Like what?” Brent asked. “You’re already finishing your degree

the company.”

“Actually, I’m not. I’m finishing my degree because I want to. Full :

“I don’t even need you to have a degree,” Brent said. “I need you the day-to-day.”

“You can hire anyone for that. Someone who actually wants to b That’s just not me anymore, Bee. I’m sorry.”

Her brother stared at her...and stared and stared, for so long Ken: worried she’d broken him. The longer the silence stretched, the m relaxed, thinking he was processing and would surely let this go wi fight. He’d say they could sit down right now and hash out logistics, supported her in whatever she wanted to do.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

us, and “No,” Brent said.

“What do you mean, *no*? You can’t stop me.”

ped his “As your big brother and partner, I can, and I will. You’re about to o loomhuge mistake, and I can’t in good conscience let you go through with i

“Brent, this isn’t up for debate,” she said calmly, though anger chu her gut.

“Kenzie, this is our business. *My* business, my livelihood.”

nt lifted Kenzie snorted. “Oh, please. You don’t need FLEX money to live c ied, themake more playing one game of hockey than probably seventy-five

of this country makes in a year. That’s not even including what t makes,” she added, hooking a thumb at Berkley.

you on “The point is,” her brother ground out, “you can’t just up and wal time tobecause you’re no longer enjoying it. It’s work, Kenzie. It’s not supp be fun.”

to help “Tell that to your hockey career.”

“You know, your head was on a lot straighter before you moved to stop.” started partying and fucking around with that Fuller kid.”

Kenzie reared back as though she'd been slapped. She had *everything* for this company, had dropped out of college and moved there the country for it. How *dare* he suggest she didn't take it as serious? How dare he speak to her like that?

Kenzie exploded.

“Don't you dare bring Aiden into this. He has nothing to do with it. I thought about this decision before I even met him, and I've been trying to figure out that he tell you ever since! But I was terrified, and this reaction is exactly what I needed. I heaved a deep breath, attempting to marshal her hysteria. “I haven't been happy, truly happy, in a long time, Brent. I owe it to myself to figure out what *happy* looks like. I'm only twenty-three years old and in college. You asshole. What the fuck do you expect from me?”

Brent remained unfazed by her outburst, hip leaned against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. In her periphery, Kenzie clocked Brent turned in watching, eyes darting between them, mouth agape. “You know what I was doing when I was twenty-three? Playing professional hockey. Being a professional athlete doesn't give you the right to be immature, or to fuck with our business. You percent for the last time, me leaving is *not fucking with our business!*”

With jerky movements, she gathered her things. What should've been a quiet weekend with her brother and Berkley, helping Berkley plan the wedding, a shower and getting some much needed Aiden-free time, had turned into this.

She was disgusted.

With herself, with her brother, with all of it.

EL and As she stuffed her arms into her coat and feet into boots, she furrowed her brows and blinked, using every ounce of resolve she possessed to hold her tears at bay. “Where do you think you’re going?” Brent asked. “We’re not done yet.” “Yes we are,” she said, stalking down the ridiculously long hallway as he led to the front door. Her brother’s heavy footfalls trailed behind her, and he whirled on him as she reached for the handle. “I don’t want to hear from you for a while. Just...leave me the fuck alone.”

I made “We have to help Mom and Dad move next week, you brat!” he yelled, his voice a howl of anger. “You’re going to have to talk to me sometime!” “Yeah well sometime is not tonight,” she thought.

It hadn’t been long since Kenzie keyed her car open and threw herself behind the wheel, steering the car out and backed out of the drive, Lizzo’s *Truth Hurts* serving as the soundtrack to her getaway.

Once she navigated out of Brent’s neighborhood and sped through the sleepy town, she got on the freeway at her first opportunity. It was on the Berkley side that she set her cruise that she glanced at the clock, noting it was half past eight. The sun had long since disappeared below the horizon, the headlights of her and her fellow travelers’ vehicles illuminating the highway lanes.

It was Friday night, which meant she had a few options at her fingertips. Andways to fill her suddenly wide open social calendar.

She could call Jessica, and they could hit the bars, stumbling back to her apartment sometime in the wee hours of the morning after their usual routine to get drunk fast food.

She could go home, crack a bottle of wine, and wallow in self-pity over the fact that she and her brother were in a fight the likes of which the Jean had never seen before.

On a normal Friday night, she’d be with Aiden, but he had a game to

iriously Wait...*Aiden*.

t bay. A few taps on her phone screen confirmed the start time and the op here.” and a few more had her GPS fired up and ready to go.

ay that They’d been in agreement that she wouldn’t attend any of his gam and shewhat he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

om you Twenty minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot of Yost Ice home of the Michigan Wolverines hockey team, and hustled insic elled atbought a ticket at the door, not giving a fuck where it was because sl intended to stand the entire game, and made her way inside.

Yost was formerly a field house that had opened its doors in 1923 a arted it,been converted into an ice arena in 1973. For a building that ha ndtrackstanding for a hundred years, Kenzie expected it to be dingy and showing the signs of its age. Much to her chagrin, the arena was be igh thewith bench seating, exposed brick, and soaring windows at one end t ly onceearned the building the moniker The Cathedral of College Hockey.

ast six. Kenzie reached the edge of the concourse and set her sights on s of herglancing at the Jumbotron hanging from the center of the ceiling to fin only missed five minutes of the first period.

tips for Kenzie had been to enough hockey games in her lifetime to underst nuances of the game better than most men ever would, so she stood to herrailing, attention captured entirely by the vicious dance unfolding on l detourbelow.

As it stood entering that night’s game, the Spartans were behind th over theplace Wolverines in the conference standings by two points.

family A win tonight would catapult them into the top spot over their rivals.

onight. The game was fast and physical, full of hard hits and spectacular

chances that had fans rising from their seats only to drop back down, groans.

Both goalies guarded their respective nets like brick walls. Kenzie never paid particular attention to Jack DeLuca, too concerned with where the puck was to focus on anything else during games, but she was impressed. Arena, reflexes were quick, his ability to move from post to post fluid. He scored. She shoots that lesser men would've let in, and Kenzie found herself cheering fully loudly for him, much to the annoyance of the Michigan fans in her vicinity.

Aiden and his teammates scored a goal early in the third, but ultimately lost to Michigan by a score of four to three. Kenzie knew he would be in a bad mood and want a distraction. Whatever was going on with them, no matter how worn, the strain their relationship had experienced recently, she wanted, needed to see him tonight. Wanted his arms wrapped around her, needed to take that into her body and lose herself in bliss.

As she made her way out to her car, she texted him.

the ice,
and she'd

K
let's get drunk tonight

While she waited for the car to heat up and for Aiden to text back, she mindlessly scrolled her social media.

l at the
the ice

Finally, her phone buzzed.

Aiden is sexy

I thought you were in Detroit?

the first-

in-state

K
change of plans. my brother
asshole

scoring

vn with

Aiden is sexy

I'll drink to that

zie had

ere the

ed. His

stopped

heering

inity.

Aiden is sexy

see you soon bunny

I'll be at your house when you get

tely fell

n a bad

matter

ded, to

ke him

She took her time traveling back to East Lansing, knowing it would be a bad while before Aiden and his roommates arrived. Before getting back on the freeway, she took a detour to the Briarwood mall, where she wandered around for an hour, picking up a few wintry outfits from H&M, new jeans and panties from American Eagle, a new mascara and a new lipstick from Sephora.

enzie

The fight with her brother seemed years away now, her anger dissipated by some retail therapy and thoughts of Aiden.

ck, she

When she reached the outer edges of Lansing proper, she swung into Meijer to stock up on seltzers, knowing full well she wouldn't want to drink anything the boys had in the house. Then she headed to Aiden's, dropping her alcohol and duffel bag off before heading home quickly to leave her car in the parking garage. The walk back was brisk, but it fully cleared her head.

enzie

is an

When the boys rolled in some indeterminate amount of time later, their team following closely behind, and a hoard of people showing up in pairs not long after, Kenzie had already drunk enough to generate a nice buzz. Her cheeks warmed, lips tingled, limbs loosened comfortably.



Desperately, she wanted to have a good time, but it was obvious Aiden was miserable, so after witnessing one of his teammates sock him on the side of the head and tell him to get a grip one too many times, she intervened.

“C’mon,” she said. Breaking through the wall of hockey players gathered around his perch on the couch, she reached for his hand.

Without any shift in facial expression, Aiden let her pull him to his feet and tow him to his bedroom, where she removed the key from around his neck and let them in, locking the door again behind her.

She pushed Aiden across the room until his knees buckled at the door and he fell on the bed.

“What happened with your brother?” he asked quietly.

Kenzie heaved a sigh and walked around to the other side of the bed, what she’d come to consider *her* side—and crawled on top, curling into a ball against the mountain of pillows Aiden had stacked there.

As if sensing she needed him close, he moved next to her and scooped her up so she curled against him, her legs slung across his lap, her head tucked against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around her.

“I finally told him I’m leaving FLEX,” she said.

“I’m assuming that didn’t go well.”

Kenzie let out a derisive laugh. “No, it didn’t. He said my head isn’t straight, and he accused me of wasting all my time partying and fucking around with you,” she said quietly, embarrassed. “And the worst part is he’s not wrong.”

Kenzie *had* been partying, and she *had* been fucking around with guys. Both of those things were true. But, as she’d told her brother, she was twenty-three and in college; she was *allowed* to do those things. Aiden didn’t control her life, as much as he wanted to. Without a shadow of a

len was she knew leaving FLEX was the best thing for her in the long run. She should have hoped her brother would come to see her side of things.

“Kenzie,” Aiden said, sifting his fingers slowly through her hair. “I gathered bullshit and you know it.”

“He just can’t see past the success of the company to realize how ungrateful his feet I’ve been the last year. I was fully prepared to sit down with him around his and figure everything out tonight. But then he started screaming at me and told him I didn’t want to hear from him for a while and stormed out the edge of course, he reminded me we’re helping Mom and Dad move next door. Asshole.”

“Well, I’m happy you’re here,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head—head.

“Your turn,” she said, tilting her head to look up at him. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m struggling to get my game back after being off for so long,” she said. “I’m on his side. And I’m worried that my off-ice antics are going to cost the boys a playoff championship run and me a rookie contract.”

Kenzie’s heart seized. Aiden never spoke so candidly about hockey or the ways he felt solely responsible for the team’s success or failure. When she wasn’t on the ice, she felt compelled to remind him of a few things.

“Aiden, the success of this team does not weigh on your shoulders. It’s on his, he’s know that, right?”

“Logically, yes,” he said. “But I’ve worked my ass off to become the best players in the country, and when I’m not performing my job as only everything is off. We lost tonight because I wasn’t at one hundred percent.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” she said, echoing his earlier words. “No doubt, He rolled his eyes. “Hockey is my entire life, bunny.”

he only “Ouch,” she said jokingly, but still, the comment stung more than she wanted to admit.

“That’s” He wrapped his arms tighter around her. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah yeah,” she said, rolling her eyes and trying to turn away from him. “Hockey is your number one priority—I get it.”

He was quiet for so long that Kenzie was worried he’d fallen asleep and the rumble along her back when he spoke again startled her.

“Hockey is the only connection I have to my dad,” he reminded her. “A week ago, I was out. Of course, I’m still here, and every time I step onto that ice, I feel connected to him in a way that I don’t feel anywhere else. I want him to be proud of me wherever he is. My mom tells me he is, but when I’m skating...that’s the only time I actually believe it. Like he’s right there with me, sitting on my shoulder and whispering words of encouragement in my ear. And on nights like tonight, when everything was going wrong, I could practically feel his disappointment.”

“Oh, Fuller,” Kenzie said, shifting so she was straddling his lap and holding his face in her hands. “He is proud of you, all the time, when you’re with him and all. You’re his son, and you’re one of the best people I know. How could he not be? I can’t imagine what it must be like for you to not have him there’s one thing I’m certain of, it’s that he is so proud of you. Thank you for being so proud.”

Aiden wrapped his arms around her, clutching her tightly to his chest as though she were a life raft saving him from drowning. She could’ve stayed in that hug forever. She’d never been held like this, as though she were a child in need of someone. And even though Aiden was drunk and vulnerable, she couldn’t bring herself to wriggle out from under him, though they both were—she couldn’t bring herself to wriggle out

can she embrace and establish some physical distance between them in the wake of all the emotional intimacy.

But then Aiden said, "I'm sorry I keep hurting you. I've been struggling to balance you and hockey. I know that. And I know it's not fair to you.

I never want you to think you don't matter, that you don't mean the world to me. The fucking world to me, Mackenzie Jean. You've been so fucking patient

with me, but I'm terrified one day that patience will run out and you'll leave. "He's I can't...that can't happen, bunny." He tilted his head so their gazes connected. "I love you, bunny, and I'm not sure I'd survive if you left me."

And I love you, Kenzie gripped the sides of his face tightly, holding his stare. "I love you too, and I'm not going anywhere."

And Aiden clung to her, his face buried in the crook of her neck. When she eventually pulled back, she rested her forehead against his, content to feel his heartbeat in this moment with him.

Then she tilted her head, lips a breath away from his, and said, "I want to kiss you now."

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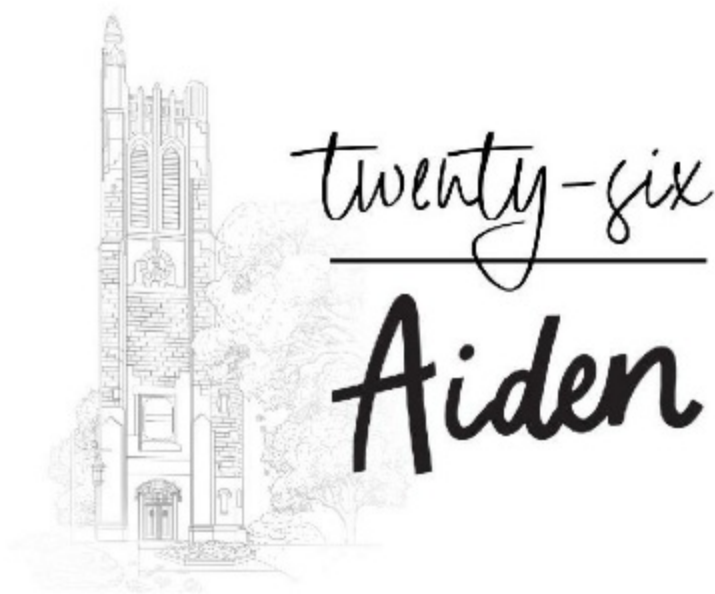
embrace and establish some physical distance between them in the wake of all the emotional intimacy.

But then Aiden said, “I’m sorry I keep hurting you. I’ve been struggling to balance you and hockey. I know that. And I know it’s not fair to you. I don’t ever want you to think you don’t matter, that you don’t mean the entire fucking world to me, Mackenzie Jean. You’ve been so fucking patient with me, but I’m terrified one day that patience will run out and you’ll leave. And I can’t...that can’t happen, bunny.” He tilted his head so their gazes collided. “I love you, bunny, and I’m not sure I’d survive if you left me.”

Kenzie gripped the sides of his face tightly, holding his stare. “I love you, too, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Aiden clung to her, his face buried in the crook of her neck. When he eventually pulled back, she rested her forehead against his, content to simply be in this moment with him.

Then she tilted her head, lips a breath away from his, and said, “I’m going to kiss you now.”



THE KISS WAS A slow slide of Kenzie’s full lips against his, then gone, tentative as though she were gauging his reaction. She pulled away and whispered, “This okay?”

Aiden fisted a hand in her hair and brought her mouth back to his. When he kissed her lips, he said, “God, bunny, of course. You don’t ever have to worry about that.”

To prove his point, he kissed her harder, delving his tongue into her mouth in exploratory strokes. He wrapped his hands around her rib cage, digging his fingers into her back and pulling her closer, holding her tight. In response, she ground down onto his lap, and they both groaned.

“Bunny,” Aiden said as he tore his mouth from hers, chest heaving from the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He slid his lips and tongue over her jaw and down her neck. “I want you so bad.”

He pulled away and stared into those eyes, thinking how he could drink from their depths. In response, Kenzie reached between them, bunched the

her shirt in her hands, and whipped it over her head, tossing it some distance across the room. He reached behind her and set his fingers on the clasps of her bra, ready to remove it with her go ahead. Both of them were fragile now, emotions rubbed raw, and all Aiden wanted to do was lose himself in her...but only if she wanted it, too.

“Then have me,” she said, and Aiden pinched the material between his thumb and pointer and slid the hooks free. Softly, he trailed his fingers down her shoulder blades and up the column of her neck, then down the slope of her shoulders, pushing the straps off so her bra fell between them.

Kenzie’s breasts were...perfect. Slightly more pale than the rest of her skin, with dark-pink nipples the size of quarters. Aiden lifted them gently in his hands, marveling at how he could fit the whole of them in his palms.

Leaning forward, he captured one of her nipples in his mouth, gently rubbing it against her skin when Kenzie gasped above him. Lazily, he skimmed his tongue into the valley of her chest and back up, giving the other nipple the same attention.

He was so hard, one touch from Kenzie would set him off like a bomb. He wanted, *needed* to wring at least one orgasm out of her before he could embarrass himself.

In one smooth motion, he sat up and flipped them, dropping Kenzie onto the bed. Then he pulled his own shirt off, wanting to be skin-on-skin with her. He leaned down to kiss her again.

And...*fuck*. Every smooth inch of her chest and torso pressed against him along the hard lines of his body had Aiden’s eyes rolling back in his head.

Kenzie whimpered against him, and Aiden said, “Me too, bunny.” He shifted his weight back and knelt between her legs, hooking his fingers in the waistband of her leggings and peeling them and her underwear down.

ewheredown her legs, then throwing them over his shoulder. A small crash fo
p of herbut in that moment, Aiden didn't have a single fuck to give.

le right Moving so he was flat on his stomach, eye level with Kenzie's sex
nself insaid, "I'm going to kiss you now."

Kenzie let out a breathless laugh at his echo of her earlier words,
een hisquickly turned to a moan the moment he trailed the tip of his tongue in
ers overpath around her clit.

opes of "Fuck," she said on an exhale.

He'd never get tired of this, the way she melted into the bed the n
of herworked her toward that precipice, his tongue swirling around and
i in hisaccompanied by gentle sucking and, eventually, the insertion of two

into her warmth, pumping them in and out in time to the movement:
rinningmouth. Her little gasps and moans and incoherent mumb
his lipsencouragement. Her taste.

e same *Her.*

Aiden knew she was close when she tightened around his finger
nb, andthighs quaking with the effort of holding back.

fore he "Let go," he growled, then sealed his lips over her clit and sucke
curling his fingers inside her at the same time.

faceup Kenzie detonated, a cry tearing free from her throat. Her thighs c
n whenaround his head as she arched off the bed while he continued to w
through it, loving how she pulsed around his fingers, feeling like a g
inst allthe knowledge that he could do this to her.

When she stilled, Aiden rose and shed his pants and boxers, then
his hands behind her knees and shifted them back and wider.

fingers He gripped his cock at its base and dragged it through her warn
slowlywetness from her orgasm coating him was nearly his undoing.

llowed, “Can I...” he trailed off, hoping what he was asking was obvious.

“After that?” she said, eyes heavily lidded, voice already wrecked
, Aiden can have whatever you want.”

Aiden grinned. “I want all of you, bunny.”

, which He lined himself up with her entrance and began to push inside. O
i a slow tip breached before she said, “Wait!”

Aiden pulled back quickly, then leaned forward until they were
face. “What? What’s wrong?”

nore he Kenzie smiled, raising her head so she could give him a gent
around, “Nothing,” she said. “I just...condom, please.”

fingers Aiden relaxed, then nodded.

s of his He reached for his nightstand, pulling open the drawer, removing a
les of condoms, and tearing one free from the rest. He watched Kenzie as
into the foil and rolled the rubber down his length.

“Now where were we...” Aiden said, once again lining himself u
ers, her prepared to push into her in one rough thrust, unsure he could hold ba
a millisecond longer.

d hard, But again, Kenzie stilled him with a hand on his forearm. “Aiden...”

She gnawed on her bottom lip, then in a rush said, “I love you you know
lamped Aiden grinned. “I’m sorry, repeat that?” he asked, knowing full we
ork hershe’d said but wanting to hear it again.

od with And again and again forever.

Kenzie heaved a sigh and dramatically threw her forearm across h
hooked “I love you, you know.”

Aiden leaned down and captured her mouth with his, pressing his
nth; the hers three times in quick succession. “I love you, too, Mackenzie Je
said against her skin. “And I’m going to make this so fucking good for

Reaching down, he gripped the base of his cock and positioned himself. “You entrance, sliding home in a single, quick thrust. Kenzie moaned and tightened around him.

“I’ll never get sick of this,” he told her, pausing for a moment to enjoy only the feel of her wrapped all the way around him, squeezing him from base to tip.

“Sex?” Kenzie asked with a breathless laugh.

“You, bunny,” he said, then began to move.

Kenzie didn’t respond, simply clung to his shoulders as he drove into her, kissing her, pressing her into the bed, hands braced beside her hips.

Sex in love was an infinitely more euphoric experience than sex without.

Before, sex had always been about his release, but also about making sure the girl had a good time.

With Kenzie, it wasn’t about having a good time, or chasing his own pleasure.

With her, it was about making her happy, giving her everything, and being present, fully close to her as humanly possible, feeling like they were connected on every level, even physical, emotional, and dare he say, spiritual levels.

Mackenzie Jean was an altar Aiden wanted to worship at every day.

“This girl...she was it for him.

As if she’d sensed where his thoughts had turned, she dug her fingernails into his back, returning his focus to the task at hand.

“Aiden,” Kenzie moaned, and he knew she was close to going over the edge.

“I know, bunny,” he said, dropping his head to the crook of her neck. “I know. I’ve got you.”

Pressure built at the base of his spine, like a storm surge gathering strength, a wave reaching higher toward the sky as it rushed toward the shore.

He slid one of his arms under her back and lifted her off the bed, carrying her to the bathroom.

t at herback on his heels at the same time, still buried inside her.

ghtened Aiden hadn't even moved again and Kenzie whimpered, clenching around him he knew it was only a matter of seconds before she would enjoy the few quick pumps and it'd be game over. For both of them.

o tip. To get a better angle, he shifted a bit, settling himself more comfortable under her, and then used an arm under her ass to lift her off him and d back down. Kenzie repeated the movement herself, bouncing away onto her, him, and Aiden gripped her hips in his hands, holding tightly, buckin meet every one of her downward thrusts.

in lust. "Right there," she gasped, throwing her head back. "Don't stop." Aiden didn't intend to, picking up the pace until the whole bed under them. The party raging beyond the door became a distant memory release. Then he leaned forward and scraped his teeth against her shoulder being asway he knew she liked and bit down hard, chasing the pain away with a wet onswipe of his tongue. She'd have a bruise there in the morning, he couldn't wait to see the mark on her skin in the light of day, like a brand he could give her.

In response, Kenzie dragged her nails down his back, digging her fingernails into the muscles, surely drawing blood, and finally let go, moaning and gasping and shaking, muscles going rigid before she melted, wrapping herself fully around him as the shockwaves continued to pulse through her body.

In two more thrusts, Aiden followed, throwing himself off that cliff into the deep water after her. He was drowning, torn asunder by the force of his own release. Kenzie's weight on top of him kept him from stretching to his full strength, and letting the climax flow through him. Instead, it was kept contained so it seemed more powerful and longer-lasting than any he had experienced before, sitting before.

When the waves eventually ceased, Aiden pulled himself free of so hard and collapsed backward onto his pillows, dragging her down next to him. “Well done, Fuller,” Kenzie said, tone sleepy and content. “That incredible.”

“Different, though, right?” he asked, shifting their bodies so he could drop her the covers down and pull them back up over their naked skin. “In a top of eyes, but...different.”

“In the best way,” Kenzie said. “I think sex with someone you different. Better.”

Aiden nodded, chin brushing the top of her head. “I was thinking that rocked thing.”

“I know we still have some things to figure out,” she said quietly, in that half asleep. “But I want to figure them out with you. I want to do this with you if you are.”

Mentally, he'd been a mess the last few weeks. But knowing she and only him, and finally telling her he felt the same...he couldn't figure out what been worried.

“I'm not saying it's going to be easy, bunny, and I'm not saying I'm not going to fuck up, but of course I'm all in.”

Kenzie's only response was a mumbled, “good,” before she drifted into unconsciousness.

Aiden tightened his hold on her and buried his nose in her hair, afraid she'd slip through his fingers.

ing out

closely

e'd had



Kenzie “You two look awfully cozy,” Jack said at the breakfast table this morning.

It was... The boys were enjoying a meal together before heading to the morning skate. They’d face off against Michigan tonight, in East Lansing. It was old kicktime, and all four were eager to get on the ice and work through the redemptive mistakes they’d made the night before.

Aiden had woken Kenzie this morning with his face between her legs. His scalp still stung where she’d pulled his hair as he’d made her come. Now she sat on his lap in one of his sweatshirts, which she’d thrown carelessly over her head as they’d left his room in favor of the kitchen.

Kenzie shrugged and stuffed a piece of melon in her mouth. Aiden already wrapped an arm tighter around her waist and said, “We had a good night. I’m all yours.” His teammates smiled, and Kenzie tilted her head to kiss him on the cheek.

“I’m glad to see you guys managed to figure things out,” Asher said. “We’ve been worried the battle between bunny and hockey would not end in your favor by his favor of your relationship.”

Kenzie stiffened, and Aiden glared daggers at Asher. “Really, Ash? I won’t let you go. I’m just saying...it was touch and go there for a while. You’ve been so dedicated to hockey. I couldn’t see how you were going to end up fully room in your life for Kenzie.”

“Ash...” Luke said. “Shut the fuck up.” Asher raised his hands in surrender, digging back into his meal, completely unaware of how Kenzie had reacted to his comments.

“Seriously, we’re happy for you guys,” Jack said, and Luke nodded in agreement.

Aiden gave them a strained smile, and Kenzie mumbled, “Thanks,” before rising from Aiden’s lap and padding back into his room.

ie next Aiden rose to follow Kenzie, and as he left, Jack smacked Asher up
head, saying, “Good going, dumbass.”

ink for When Aiden entered his room, he found Kenzie in the process of
ing thisdressed. She’d managed to don her leggings and bra, and was stuff
mentalarms in the sleeves of her sweater when she looked up at him.

“I’m sorry about Ash,” Aiden said. “He’s an idiot.”

gs, and “He’s not, though.”

. “He is. I have been struggling, and I told you that. But I know
thrownmake this work. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing, one way or the
can give my everything to hockey *and* give my everything to you.”

Aiden While he spoke, Kenzie’s chest rose and fell faster and faster, he
ht.” hands toying with the frayed hem of her top. She sat down hard on l
cheek. and Aiden took a step toward her.

er said. “Don’t,” she said, forcing the word out, the single syllable strangled
ot go in Aiden realized what he was seeing: a panic attack.

Respecting her wishes, he didn’t move toward her. All he sai
’ “Breathe.”

always “I’m trying,” she whispered. “I’ve been trying. But maybe *tryin*
o makeenough. Hockey is your whole fucking life, Aiden. I don’t want to be
responsible for fucking up this one thing you want more than a
because I love you and want to be with you.”

pletely “That’s not what’s happening here, and you know it,” he said, t
small step forward.

ded his “Logically, sure. Unfortunately, my brain doesn’t always listen to lo

She unsteadily shot to her feet, and Aiden reached out to catch l
guys,”hands encircling her biceps. “Just breathe and sit with me for a second
you, bunny, and that’s not going to change. Your brother did it, did

side the Found a way to balance hockey and his life with Berkley? Why can't
the same?"

getting Kenzie shoved away from him. "We are *not* Brent and Berkley."
ing her Well...that stung. Not because she wasn't right. Obviously, they
her brother and his wife. But there wasn't anything to say they couldn't
a relationship as happy and fulfilling as theirs one day. So why was
trying to backtrack, after everything she'd said the night before? After
we can both agreed to be all in?

other. I She stalked to his desk, where her keys lay on the surface next to his
and her bag rested on the floor nearby.

r shaky "Don't run away from me right now, bunny," he said. "Please. I'm lying
his bed, you."

She turned to face him, her usually golden skin bleached white under
excess of adrenaline and whatever mental gymnastics she was
performing.

id was, "I'm not running away," she said. "I just...I can't breathe right now
to go home. I—I love you. And I know we'll figure this out. You just
ing isn't give me some time. The last few days have been a lot, and...I'm not
the one great. I need my meds and my bed and some alone time. Okay?"

nothing Tears lined her lower lashes, and Aiden wanted so badly to go to her
her in his arms, and never let her go. But he understood anxiety played
making tricks on her, and unlike that night outside Harper's when she'd let him
Jack talk her through a minor attack, she had routines in place to help
logic." survive this bigger one. Routines that didn't include him.

her, his Aiden settled for cupping her face in his hands and pressing a kiss
l. I love forehead.

in't he? "Call me when you feel better, please."

t we do Kenzie nodded. "I will."
And then she was gone.

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Kenzie nodded. "I will."
And then she was gone.

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FACE BURNING WITH SHAME and embarrassment, Kenzie ran through the kitchen of Aiden’s house in the direction of the front door. When she made it outside, she sucked in large, grateful breaths of sharp, fresh air. The chill pierced her lungs, soothing some of the tightness in her chest.

Kenzie ate up the distance between Aiden’s house and her building, and the time she let herself into her apartment, she was so lightheaded she collapsed in a heap in front of her door, head bent over her lap, and breathing shallowly.

She deployed every trick in her arsenal to calm down, but after several minutes when the blackness at the edges of her vision refused to recede, Kenzie knew she needed to call in reinforcements.

With shaky fingers, and after dropping the phone several times, she accidentally pressed the wrong contact and awkwardly stabbed at her screen until she finally connected to Dr. Mathews.

“Hello, Mackenzie,” she said, cool as a cucumber. The even tone

therapist's voice was a balm to Kenzie's frayed nerves, and her head dropped a tick.

"Help," she managed, the word strangled.

"What's going on?" Dr. Mathews asked.

"I—" Kenzie tried, but failed to speak anything beyond that.

"I'm here," Dr. Mathews said. "You're safe. Just breathe, Mackenzie. You're okay."

Her phone clattered to the floor as her grip on it slackened, and she pressed the speakerphone button, allowing Dr. Mathews' soothing words to fill her apartment and slowly soak into her mind, talking her off the ledge that the attack threatened to toss her over.

Some time later, Dr. Mathews said, "Did you take your meds?"

"No," Kenzie croaked. "I..." She swallowed hard and tried again. "When I collapsed at the door when I got back from Aiden's. Haven't made it to fresh air yet."

"Take your meds, Mackenzie," Dr. Mathews prodded. "And then get up and byed. Once you feel safe, you can tell me what happened."

Kenzie did as her therapist asked, rising on legs that felt like jelly and shuffled toward her room. Her first stop was the bathroom, where she took a few out a pill and washed it down with a hefty gulp of water. Then she slipped down to a t-shirt—Aiden's, she realized—and her underwear, and curled up beneath her heavy down comforter.

"Feeling better?" Dr. Mathews asked.

"Somewhat," Kenzie said, voice stronger than it had been minutes before. "What was your trigger?"

"I don't really know," she answered honestly. "I think it's a combination of herof things. My parents are selling my childhood home and moving

art rate Michigan, which I'm so excited about, but it's very bittersweet. We have the cabin in New York, but it's not the same. Then Brent and I had a huge fight last night because I told him I'm not coming back to FLE. Aiden's roommates this morning were talking about how they're sure our relationship is solid and surviving and I just...freaked out. It was just one thing. Just a lot at once."

She took a few minutes to go into detail on each of these things, and she pressed that talking it out helped ease some of the weight on her chest.

fill her "Understandably so," Dr. Mathews said diplomatically. "You're in a panic, undergoing a lot of change, change you can't exactly control. You can't control your parents selling their home, and losing a piece of your childhood would be stressful to even the most emotionally well-adjusted. Again, you definitely can't control your brother's reaction to the news that you're that far from the company. The only thing you can control there is how you respond since this is something you've been holding in for a long time, it makes you get into that you would defend yourself. As for Aiden, you've spent a significant amount of time in recent weeks worried that you would lose him. He couldn't figure out the balance between you and hockey. His roommates were certainly aware of the issue, and they couldn't have known what that conversation would do to you. And while you may be relieved that you and Aiden are going to be okay, that release of stress, like waiting for someone to receive news of something, whether good or bad, and finally getting that news, caused an excess of adrenaline that sent you into a tailspin."

Before. Having Dr. Mathews explain that her reaction to all her life changes was warranted and understandable further loosened the tension in Kenzie's mind. All at once, she was so very tired. Her eyelids became leaden, bringing her to a blessedly slowing to a resting rate.

She'll still "I think I'm going to take a nap now," she told Dr. Mathews, not bothering to acknowledge anything her therapist had said, not having the energy to unpack it all right now.

Surprised "Call me tomorrow," Dr. Mathews said. "You're okay, Kenzie. Even if you're not, you'll be okay."

Kenzie drifted off to sleep with those words swirling in her mind, wrapping around her like a warm blanket on a cold winter day.

life is
you can't
childhood
and you
leaving
and, and
no sense
significant
even if he
remembers
that that
you and
long to
be good
because
was
limbs.
leaving



Aiden is sexy

how did your exams go?

K

good, I think. I don't really know, I wasn't all there

Aiden is sexy

understandable. how are you feeling?

K

I'm okay, tired and not looking forward to going to New York

Aiden is sexy

I'm sorry, bunny. I wish there was something I could do to help

K

me too

gathering
energy to



everything

Aiden is sexy

how's New York?

brain,

Kenzie

I actually just landed so I haven't
Brent yet. I'll keep you posted

Aiden is sexy

call me later?

Kenzie

yes but I'm not sure when

Kenzie
wow. I

Aiden is sexy

that's okay just call when you can.
I love you

Kenzie

love you too

Kenzie
forward



Kenzie

“Have you lost weight?” her mother asked when she picked Kenzie up
at the airport.

“No,” she said. “I just...had a bad weekend.”

“Too much booze?”

“No,” Kenzie said. “Bad couple of mental health days.”

Her mom’s mouth flipped to a frown. “Want to talk about it?”

Kenzie sighed, knowing her mother wasn’t going to let her get away saying nothing.

“My relationship has been a little rocky lately, and then you dropped this bomb on us. I’m excited you’re moving, and I think Aide are going to be okay, but...it’s a lot at once.”

Kenzie
seen

Her mother dropped a reassuring hand onto her shoulder and squinted. “I’m sorry, bug. Your father and I never intended for this move to be a source of anxiety for you.”

“It’s not your fault, Mom. It’s my brain that’s the problem.”

Kenzie

As she drove, her mother steered the conversation away from Kenzie’s struggles and toward the plan for packing up over thirty years of memories. Kenzie was grateful for the distraction, although her parents selling their childhood home was a bittersweet milestone.

“I heard you and Bee had a fight,” her mom said suddenly as she turned onto the tree-lined street that led home.

Kenzie

“Ugh, don’t remind me, please. That’s another thing that’s been weighing on me.”

“Well...I can’t have my children on the outs with each other,” her mom said. “You two are having a discussion when we reach the house and then you’ll have this all out. I won’t have this hanging over our heads the next couple of weeks, especially not with Christmas next weekend.”

Kenzie

Kenzie groaned, but she and her brother did need to have a conversation. She supposed there was no time like the present.

The second she and her mom stepped inside the house, Brent approached her, hands in his pockets, and jerked his head in the direction of the

where she followed him like a prisoner being led to the gallows.

When they entered the game room at the back of the house, Brent lay with the door behind them and turned his weary gaze on Kenzie.

“I’m sorry,” they blurted at the same time, then burst out laughing and dad pulled her into an embrace. She pinched his side but hugged him in and inhaling deeply, the familiarity of the cologne he’d worn since high school was somewhat soothing her frayed nerves.

He squeezed. He led them to the couch and pulled her down next to him. As she remembered the source when she was younger and had injured herself in some manner or another, coming to him with scuffed knees and bruised elbows, he let her curl up on his side, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

Kenzie’s With a jolt, she realized how much she’d missed this. Things between them had been so tense for so long; she couldn’t even pinpoint the moment when they’d stopped being brother and sister and had instead morphed into adversarial business partners.

And maybe therein laid the root of all her displeasure with her brother at FLEX.

It had started to affect her relationship with her brother.

All along, her subconscious had been trying to tell her; it was only a few months ago that she finally heard it.

“I’m sorry for everything I said to you last week,” Brent said as he ran his fingers through her hair. “I’m under a lot of pressure here, and it’s not an excuse to treat you the way I did.”

Kenzie shrugged. “You’re always an ass.”

“Mackenzie...” Brent warned.

With a resigned sigh, she sat up and looked him in the eye. “I’m sorry, I should’ve told you I was unhappy at FLEX sooner. I just didn’t know

We used to be so good at communicating, and somehow, by becoming closed partners, we forgot how.”

“I didn’t understand it before,” Brent said, “why you wanted to leave. Brent get it now. And I’ll support whatever it is you decide to do next. I’ve been back, too stubborn to admit that you didn’t need me anymore. That you’re old enough to live your life how you choose without my constant input. It’s time to turn being a big brother off.”

“You don’t have to turn it off,” Kenzie said. “Just reel it in. Or turn it off. You’re the mother, being the best father you can be for my nephew.”

Brent grinned. “Fucking wild that I’m going to be a dad, right?”

Kenzie beamed back. “The wildest, but you’re also going to be the best between it.”

He ruffled her hair. “Thanks, bug. I’m also sorry for how I’ve acted around Aiden. I know you really care about him, and it’s unfair for me to judge based on rumors.”

“I forgive you,” she said easily.

“How are things with him anyway?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” she told him honestly, and then launched into a whole tale of what had happened in the wake of their fight last week.

“I’m drowning a little,” she told her brother. “I know he understands and is giving me space, but I can’t ask him to do that indefinitely, you know?”

“If he loves you, he’ll wait as long as it takes.”

In theory, Kenzie knew her brother was right. Aiden *did* love her. Aiden also loved him, and it was for that reason she knew she couldn’t keep waiting forever.

After she and Brent made up, the rest of the week was spent

coming emotional flurry of cardboard boxes, bubble wrap, packaging tape unearthing memories like an archeologist on a dig. Her parents had e. But the house back in early 1993, right after they found out they were pregnant with Nate. For nearly thirty-one years, Ron and Sandra Jean had made their old house a home, bringing first Nate, then Mackenzie here. The Jean's had taken first steps, spoken first words, broken bones and had hearts that laughed and cried, and celebrated and mourned within these walls.

Kenzie looked forward to the next chapter of all their lives, but letting go of this place created an ache in her chest that wouldn't be going away anytime soon.

By the time Christmas morning arrived, Kenzie was mentally exhausted. Aiden had called her bright and early, and Kenzie had to admit, his voice was like a warm blanket on a cold December night.

"Hey you," she said when she answered.

"Hi bunny," he replied. "God, it's good to hear your voice."

She smiled. "I was just thinking the same thing. I miss you."

"I miss you, too. When are you coming back to EL?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "We got a lot done last week, but there's a lot more to do since my mom wouldn't let us take down any of the Christmas decorations. And I think I'm going to drive back with them instead of leaving. Classes don't start until the eighth, so it'll be nice to spend some more time with them."

"If you want, I can help move them into the new place when you get back."

"You'd do that?"

"I would do anything for you."

Kenzie's heart swelled.

oe, and A soft tapping came at the door to her childhood bedroom, now bought everything but the bed on which she laid, the yellow walls patchy regnant around where the posters and photos she had tacked up as a teen. The memories were now somewhere in the trash. A moment later, Berkley siblings her head in, so Kenzie said, "I love you, but I have to go. I promise broken, you soon."

"I love you, too, bunny. Merry Christmas."

ting go "Merry Christmas," she said and disconnected.

g away "Are you going to have breakfast with us today?" Berkley asked.

"Maybe," Kenzie said, her voice rough from disuse.

sted. "Your mom is worried about you," Berkley said, snaking her arm c s voice grab Kenzie's hand in hers. "We all are."

"There's nothing to be worried about," Kenzie said, the sta accompanied by exactly zero emotion.

A moment later, Berkley's glare landed on the side of her face like a and Kenzie struggled not to squirm. It was a good thing for any p opposing counsel in the state of Michigan that Berkley wasn't a trial s still a because they would lose every single time. Kenzie had found herself rismas down by that blue gaze before, and was intimately acquainted with Be f flying particular brand of persuasion.

re time "We understand you're going through something, Kenz," Berkl softly. "And that's okay. But you can't lie in this bed and wallow i you get every day. Eventually you're going to have to emerge and face life aga

"I'm fine," Kenzie mumbled, though the words tasted funny, and I saw them for the lie they were.

"C'mon," she said, tugging on Kenzie's wrist until she had dragged the edge of the bed, surprising Kenzie by the strength in that tiny h

bare others.

; faded Saying nothing of the fact that she was eight months pregnant.

Those Kenzie stood, towering over her sister-in-law, and studied her popped abdomen. The reminder that her nephew was growing inside the petti I'll see of this fierce woman doused Kenzie like a bucket of cold water on head. If Berkley could carry her brother's giant spawn and not cc about it, Kenzie could get out of bed and stop moping about saying g to her childhood home.

"Well, well, well," Nate said when she emerged from her cave. I seated at the island in the center of the kitchen, hair mussed from low n to black-framed glasses perched on his nose, laptop open in front of him. who decided to grace us with her presence."

atement She flipped him the bird and said, "Shut up," making a beeline coffee pot, where Brent stood with his arm outstretched, a cup of a brand, balanced in his hand.

otential "Thanks, Bee," she said quietly before taking a long, fortifying sip.

lawyer, Arms wrapped around her from behind, and a cloud of Chanel pinned enveloped her. "Merry Christmas, my darling girl," her mom said.

arkley's Kenzie spun and gave her mom a one-armed hug. "Merry Chi Mama."

ey said "Come on," her mom said, hooking her arm through Kenzie's. "Let' all day, Reluctantly—because she hadn't exactly eaten a real meal in a in." weeks, choosing instead to survive on peanut butter M&Ms and Cool Berkley Doritos, or takeout when they paused the packing long enough to refu followed her mother to the dining room, where the long table was lad d her toevery breakfast food imaginable.

ody of Before she dropped onto her seat, she took a moment to study her

They all knew about her mental struggles, and she couldn't stand looking at her with pity right now. Thankfully, no one seemed inclined to handle her with kid gloves.

"I know you're all aware I've been struggling," she said finally. "I've never been going to be okay. It's just going to take some time. And this," she complained, tapping her temple, "has nothing to do with Aiden, so I don't want to say a single bad word about him."

She leveled each of her brothers and her dad with a glare in turn, and they all of them nodded.

The funny thing about anxiety attacks was they were like being stuck in a loop. "Look and she'd do anything she could to spare herself that pain again. Could she easily fly back to Detroit and avoid spending two or three days on the road with her parents? Of course. And did she miss Aiden? Desperately. Yes, coffee. But she needed more time.

It had nothing to do with Aiden. It was simply her own mind playing tricks on her, and unfortunately, she now associated their relationship with panic. No. Tightening in her chest, shaking in her extremities, and intrusive thoughts.

She'd spoken to her therapist a few times over the last three weeks, and the guidance had been the same every time: Kenzie had to let it go. Aiden was not the cause of this particular episode. The trigger had been a combination of a lot of changes happening in her life at once, but Aiden wasn't to blame and she couldn't keep doing this to him.

Now that the attack had passed and she'd had some distance from it—she was more embarrassed than anything. Aiden loved her, sure. But distance spared him from the worst of her more recent episode. How would he react when he had to watch it unfold in real time and could do nothing to help the family.

anyone These were the things that kept her up at night, and compounded by th
ined to and the fight with her brother, Kenzie was barely hanging on.

After breakfast, they opened gifts, and then spent the rest of the day
But I'm living room, marathoning their favorite Christmas movies.

added, "You know, honey," her mom said during a short intermission betw
to hear a first two Home Alone movies, when everyone dispersed to stretch,
restroom, or refill on snacks and beverages, "I've been thinking about
and each lot, and I had an idea."

Inwardly, Kenzie groaned.

burned, "What's that, Mom?"

ould she "I was thinking you should go up to the cabin for a week or so. It
he road nice opportunity for you to relax, clear your mind, and refocus your p
before the new semester starts."

Kenzie was...surprised. That hadn't been in the same universe of
g tricks she'd expected her mom to say, but now that the idea was out there, it
ith that lodged in Kenzie's brain, taking root and spreading until she couldn't
its. reason why she *shouldn't* head to the cabin for a week.

but the "You know what, Mom," Kenzie said. "That's an excellent idea."
len was Brent, ever the fun-sucker, chose that moment to insert himself i
ination conversation. "Are you sure it's a good idea for her to be up th
blame, herself?"

Their mom shrugged. "Why not? It's safe and secluded. The cabin
it, she excellent security system—you would know, you paid for it," she re
nce had him. "There's Wi-Fi and full cell reception. If something happens
re reach house, your fancy little app will alert you right away."

elp her? "Plus," Kenzie cut in, reminding them that she was standing righ
"I'm twenty-three and perfectly capable of spending a week alone. I

...e move be a half hour from Lake Placid, and like Mom said, you guys will or
phone call away.”

y in the “Not exactly,” Brent said. “Albany is still two and a half hours away

“Brent!” their mother yelled in a rare moment of exasperation. “I
been the parent here, and if I say Kenzie can go to the cabin, she can go to the
use the End of story.”

it you a At the outburst, everyone else in the room fell silent, the only sound
quiet whirring of the projector mounted to the ceiling.

Brent, who had always been the golden child and thus rarely had
parents raise their voices at him, sank down onto the nearest plush
...’d be a chair, twin splotches of red appearing on his cheeks.

riorities “Sorry, Mom,” he mumbled.

Their mom ignored him, turning her attention fully to Kenzie. She
...f things her daughter’s hands in her own and said, “You deserve this break, kid
quickly Throat clogged with emotion, Kenzie could do nothing but wrap
see any mother in a hug.



nto the

ere by Leaving her family home and the chaos of packing for the quiet Upsta

York cabin was like stepping through a door into a magical world
...has an Kenzie’s mental clarity sharpened, her surroundings more crisp and clear
minded air cleaner, the snow whiter, the noises of civilization nonexistent.

to the Kenzie parked her dad’s truck, which she’d driven up from Albany
driveway, snow crunching under the tires in the most satisfying way
t there.

’d only

ily be acould make one of those ASMR videos of that sound alone, a guaranteed it would go viral on TikTok.

7.” She stepped down from the cab and closed the truck door, taking a r I’m theto pause and study the front facade of their once-humble-turned-ma cabin!lake house.

It was less *house* and more *mansion*.

und the To be fair, when her parents had inherited the property fro grandparents, the cabin could barely fit the two of them, let alone th id theirthree kids, two of whom were oversized men. And then Brent leatherBerkley, who had a big family of her own, and Kenzie had become for all that extra space.

The dark-stained logs, which usually gleamed in the sun, were frost claspedwith snow, the roof covered in a blanket of powder. Upstate New Yo ldo.” received several feet of snow already, and thankfully one of their ne rap her—who lived here year-round—had come over and plowed the drivewa a phone call from Brent.

Speaking of her brother, if he were here, he’d be spending his days c fishing, clearing the ice and skating lazy laps around, showing off neighbors, maybe taking the snowmobile out on the nearby trails.

ite New Kenzie would be doing none of that, save *maybe* venturing outside niverse.a walk around their little neighborhood when she felt inclined to ge ear, thefresh air and cardio.

No, Kenzie would be spending her days catching up on all of th r, in theKindle Unlimited romances she hadn’t had time for during the school ay. She The little hamlet that served as the town for their cabin was Hawkeye, which seemed appropriate to Kenzie given the fact that it population was certainly higher than its human one. They didn’t g

nd she here, but in case of an accident, they needed an address where they
direct emergency response teams.

moment When she arrived, it was midday, and all Kenzie wanted was to curl
up on the couch with a book.

First, she turned the heat up. They kept it on during the winter
only high enough to prevent the pipes from freezing and causing a burst
pipe. No one was here to notice. Then she donned her thickest pair of fuzzy
socks and an oversized hoodie that had once belonged to her brother Nate, and
turned the gas fireplace in the living room on full blast.

grateful Now that she was alone, Aiden consumed every one of her thoughts

Although he'd never been to the cabin—actually, he didn't even know
if the place existed—she could easily picture him here. In the easy chair across
from the bedroom, those favorite dark-grey sweatpants of his clinging to the
sweaty muscles of his quads and calves. Except he'd never sit that far away from
her. Aiden always had to be touching her, and it was one of the many things
she loved about him.

outside: From the very first moment they'd met, Aiden had an innate ability
for seeing right through all the walls she'd built up around herself. Unlike anyone
else, he had truly seen her. Better than even her family ever had.

to take And she'd seen him right back.

at some Kenzie wished he were here. And she knew if he didn't have game
on the middle of the week, he would come if she called.

he filthy For a moment, she considered inviting him anyway, but ultimately
no. She didn't want that possibility hanging over his head when he had
to win a tournament to win.

s hawk Besides, she needed this time to reset, and she couldn't do that if he
got here, stealing her heart and all of her attention.

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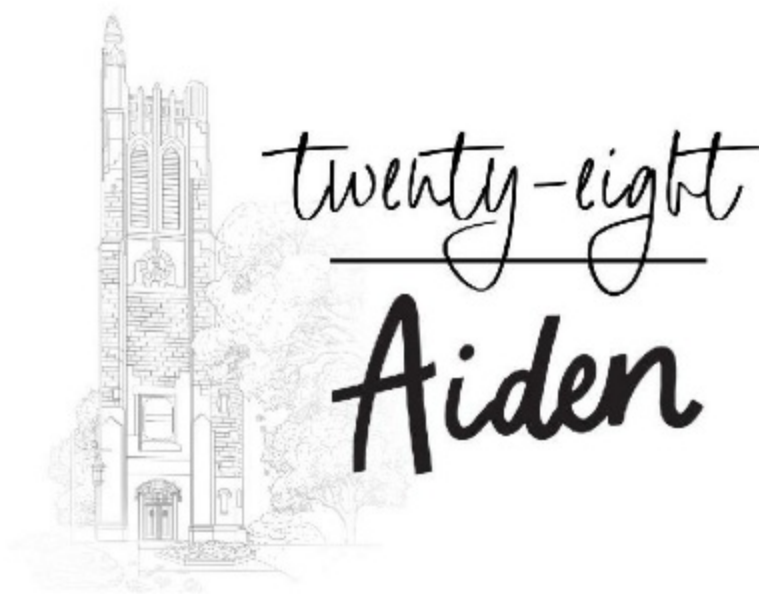
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THE SPARTANS WERE GREAT Lakes Invitational champs for the first time in fifteen years, and Aiden should have been celebrating.

Instead, he sat at a table in the hotel bar of the Renaissance Center, the trophy dangling from his fingertips, watching as his teammates got caught up in revelry around them. Spartan fans poured in from the streets and their balconies upstairs to celebrate with the hockey team.

“Fuller,” Jack said, walking over to him and thrusting a shot of sorghum golden into his hand. A sniff told Aiden it was something strong, but almost told Jack to piss off, but *strong* was exactly what he needed right now.

Without waiting for Jack to salute or make some ridiculous toast, Aiden downed the liquor, relishing the burn that lit the lining of his stomach. A moment later.

“Dude, snap out of it!” Jack said, fist socking Aiden’s shoulder to punctuate his demand. “Kenzie ran away from you. And we get it. Aiden, your and mental health struggles are nothing to thumb your nose at. But

miserable, and I'm sure she is, too. Why are you sitting here with u
you should be with her?"

"Go away," Aiden said sullenly.

"Fuck that," Jack said, ignoring Aiden's request and pulling a chair
to him. "What do you want, Fuller? It's your birthday tomorrow, and
won the GLI for the first time since Obama was president. Both o
things warrant a celebration, and your bad mood is making the rest
boys feel like shit."

"I don't care," Aiden said, rising to his feet. "I'll go upstairs then."

Jack reached out and placed his palm flat on Aiden's chest, shovi
back down into the chair.

"Asher, Luke!" he called over his shoulder, and at once their room
he first joined the little powwow.

"You guys," Aiden said, leaning forward to drop his head in his
, a beer "Now is not the time for this."

p in the "Now is *exactly* the time for this," Asher argued. "We're your frien
: rooms we want to help you."

Aiden whipped his head up and leveled Asher with a glare. "Do
nothing think you've helped enough? You're the reason she had a panic attack
and he first place!"

ht now. Asher opened his mouth to protest, but Jack cut him off.

, Aiden "He has a point, Ash," Jack said, and Asher sulked. "That doesn't
mach why you're still here, though, Fuller. You and bunny are good, right?"

"Yes. I think. I don't know."

lder to Luke huffed out a laugh. "Well it's pretty fucking obvious you miss
Anxiety I think you need to go see her. Make sure you're good. Tell her you lo
you're All that lovey-dovey bullshit."

s when “You fuckers are the reason I’m in this mess,” Aiden said under his
He leveled Asher with a cold, hard stare. “Especially you.”

Asher opened his mouth to protest again, but Jack shoved him out
up nextcircle.

we just “So you agree it’s a mess,” Jack said, nodding sagely like a therapist
of thosewith a patient having a breakthrough. “That’s the first step.”

: of the “Fuck you, DeLuca,” Aiden said, the words lacking any real malice.

“Look, we get it,” Asher said. “You’re pissed at us for the dare. But
fair...you’re the one who turned a single date into a full-blown relation
ng him Aiden opened his mouth to respond, then clapped it shut.

Asher was right: he was as much, if not more, to blame for
mmatespredicament.

Asking Kenzie out on a dare—*agreeing* to the dare in the first place
hands.been the catalyst that had set every single moment of the last three months
motion.

ids, and Well, besides his suspension; *that* had been all him.

And partially Jack. But mainly him.

n’t you And while he’d given Kenzie the time and space she needed to
k in thehead back on straight, he had to admit he was fucking miserable without

Enough was enough, right? Why weren’t they together right now?
even was she? Had she come back to Michigan and not told him? Why
explainstill in New York?

It seemed insane that he didn’t know where his own girlfriend was.

Over the course of the last three months, he’d gotten used to her constant
her, sosteady presence. The way she quietly hummed to whatever music played
ove her.her AirPods while they studied side by side on her couch. How she

breath.knew exactly what to say to him in high-stress situations to bring him
Earth.

of their How she tasted. How she smelled. How smooth her skin felt beneath
fingertips. How perfectly they fit together.

it might “I can practically see those wheels spinning, Fuller,” Jack said, narrowing
his gaze at Aiden. “What’re you thinking?”

“I miss her.”

ut to be “No shit,” Luke said. “So go get her!”

relationship.” “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“You could start by calling her,” Asher suggested.

for this Aiden hopped up from his seat, startling Asher so badly he fell out of
chair. Ignoring Jack and Luke, who devolved into fits of laughter, he

re—had to a quieter corner of the lobby and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

months in He pressed the call button on Kenzie’s contact info and waited. No
rang.

And waited.

And waited.

get her “Hi, you’ve reached Kenzie. Leave a message.”

ut her. “Fuck,” he breathed, then turned to his friends. “No answer.”

Where “Let me try,” Jack said, withdrawing his phone from his own pocket
Was she dialing Kenzie’s number, then tapping the speakerphone button and holding it
in the center of their group.

Aiden wasn’t surprised when it went to voicemail.

constant, Without comment, Aiden stalked across the lobby and down the hallway
eyed onward toward the elevator bank, his teammates’ footsteps landing heavily on
always him as they raced to catch up.

“Where are you going?” Jack asked as he skidded to a stop beside Aiden.

back to “Upstairs to pack.”

“Why? The bus doesn’t leave until tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the bus,” Aiden said as the elevator reached the floor, dinging as the doors slid open. “I’m leaving tonight. I’m going to find Kenzie.”

“YES!” his teammates cheered, then piled into the elevator with him.

Ever the practical one, Luke said, “But she’s not answering her phone. How are you going to find her?”

“I’ll call her brother, or Berkley, or Mitch, or literally anyone who knows where she is.”

“I can call Jessica,” Jack offered.

Aiden locked eyes with his goalie. “Yes, do that. Please.”

Jack dialed Jessica’s number as the elevator spit them out on the hallway. The four of them rushed to Jack and Aiden’s room, where Aiden keyed in.

“Hey, Jess,” Jack said as they stepped into the room, then pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker.

“What do you want, Jack?”

“Aiden needs to know where Kenzie is.”

“Please, Jess,” Aiden begged. “I need to see her. Is she in Detroit? Is she in EL? Where is she?”

The line was silent for several long, tense moments. Finally, Jessica answered and said, “She’s still in New York.”

“Like...the city? Albany? Where exactly? It’s a big state.”

“Her family cabin,” Jessica said. “But I’ve only been there once and have no idea where exactly it is. Somewhere in the middle of Upstate.”

“Okay, Upstate New York. That’s a start. Thanks Jess.”

Aiden was already turning away from the phone, but he didn't n
way Jack said, "I'll call you later."

ed their Nor did he miss Jessica's, "You better," before she hung up.

g to see Aiden raised an eyebrow at Jack, who opened his mouth to give so
of explanation. Unfortunately, Aiden didn't have the time, and bro
1. hand up to stop him. "We're not even going to talk about whatever t
phone.you've got going on with Jessica Daniels right now. One relat
problem at a time."

o might Bag packed, Aiden tossed it over his shoulder and moved to th
turning to survey his teammates as he reached for the handle.

"If I forgot anything, bring it home, please," he told them.

"What are you going to do?"

r floor. "I don't really know," Aiden said. "Get on a plane and figure it out
ed themI guess."

"Godspeed, my friend," Luke said solemnly.

e phone "May the odds be ever in your favor," Asher quipped.

"Good luck," Jack told him.

He gave the three of them a grateful smile and exited the room,
downstairs as fast as the elevator could carry him. When it landed
Back inmain floor, he once again hustled across the lobby and to another e
bank that would take him down to street level. That elevator reach
sighedground floor and Aiden stepped out, slamming into a body so hard
have been carved out of stone.

"I'm so sorry—" he started, but cut off as he looked into the face
l I havehe'd collided with. "Fuck."

"Fuller," Brent Jean said, voice laced with venom. "Where are you
in such a hurry? Shouldn't you be upstairs celebrating with your teamr

miss the “I’ve got something more important to take care of.”

Brent raised an eyebrow, as though he’d guessed what that thing was unwilling to help Aiden in any way when it came to his sister.

me sort Finally, Aiden broke the stalemate. “Where’s the cabin?”

ought a “Why should I tell you?”

he fuck “Because I need to see her!” he yelled. And fuck it all, he threw cautionshipthe wind, unloading on this guy who didn’t even like him. “I know you me, and you don’t think I’m good enough for her, but I think she’s the e door,my life. And I am all in on her and our relationship. I’d like the chance to prove that to her. I haven’t seen her in three weeks, and I’m going Please, Brent. If you love your sister and want her to be happy, please me.”

as I go, Brent considered him, that steely-blue gaze that matched his perfectly sweeping over his body like an X-ray machine. Aiden struggled remain still, to not squirm under that intense scrutiny.

Instead of responding, Brent withdrew his phone from his suit jacket, tapped the screen a few times, then lifted it to his ear.

rushing “Hey kid,” Brent said, and Aiden knew it was Kenzie on the line.

on the “Look, I know I haven’t exactly been the kid’s biggest supporterlevatorpast, but I’m staring at your boyfriend right now and he looks like shehed thehe wants to see you. I’m calling to make sure it’s okay to give him it maycabin’s address.”

A tinny sort of squawking floated to Aiden from the phone, but he couldn’t make out any of what Kenzie was saying.

“I’m just saying, Kenz...you’ve been pretty unbearable, too.”

u off to “I HAVE NOT!”

nates?” Aiden definitely heard that, and bit back a smile.

“Do whatever you want, I guess,” Brent told her. “I’m just saying, but might regret it someday if you don’t fight for this one. If I hadn’t found Berkley, you wouldn’t be becoming an aunt in a few months.”

So now Brent was comparing Aiden and Kenzie to him and Brent. Hadn’t Kenzie explicitly told him she was *not* the Berkley Daniels situation to Brent Jean? Maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe they both had been. An asshole brother was using his own relationship as a model for theirs, Aiden was about to complain. Brent could say whatever the fuck he wanted if it got Kenzie back in his arms.

“Okay, fine,” Brent said, then hung up.

“How’d you reach her?” Aiden asked. “She’s not answering my call.”

“Called the landline at the cabin,” Brent said, then stared at Kenzie expectantly, waiting for something.

A moment later, Aiden’s phone dinged, and he dropped his bag on the floor to fish it from his coat, shoulders sagging in relief when he found the message from Kenzie.

The message itself had no words, no explanation at all.

There was only a location pin.

“That’s where she is.”

“Thank you,” Aiden said, reaching out his hand. Brent shook it, and the second they broke contact, Aiden rushed outside, ran three blocks away from the Detroit River to where city traffic was thicker, and hailed a cab.

In that moment, Aiden could’ve sworn something had shifted between him and Kenzie’s brother, but he’d figure out what it was later.

Right now, he had to get to his girl.

“Airport, please,” he told the driver.

ng you
ight for



erkley? Seven hours later, after a long and torturous two-hour layover in
; to his Aiden landed in Lake Placid, New York. According to his Google r
d if her on the cab ride to the Detroit airport, it was as close as he could get b
wasn't to the cabin. Having checked no luggage, Aiden beelined throu
t ended terminal, right to the rental car line.

“I’m sorry, son,” the middle-aged man working told him. “You’re
enough to rent a car.”

s.” Fuck. Aiden had forgotten about the stupid age limit on car rentals.
at him “Look, Otis,” Aiden said with a quick glance at the man’s nar

“about three weeks ago, my roommates said some things that kind of
on the out the girl of my dreams and sent her into a panic attack. She left my
d a text and I let her go, and I haven’t seen her since. I’ve been fucking mi
without her. I came all the way from Michigan, and now I have to c
some place in the middle of nowhere just to get my girl back.”

Aiden heaved a deep breath, refilling his lungs after his ramble w
rental guy stared at him open-mouthed.

and the “And did I mention it’s my birthday?” Aiden gave him a sheepish g

ay from “That is without a doubt the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard
said. Then he pulled a clipboard from a drawer under his desk and pu
en him in front of Aiden. “Today is your *twenty-fifth* birthday, correct?”

The guy winked at Aiden, knowing full well from the driver’s licen
flashed minutes ago that Aiden was only twenty-four.

“Yes, it is,” Aiden said, quickly filling out the rental form, easily filling in his birth year before the guy could change his mind.

“Good luck,” the man said. “And drive safe. Looks like we’re getting Boston snow.”

“Thank you,” Aiden said. “I appreciate your help.”

Aiden scoffed as he stepped outside, noting the itty-bitty snow falling like dandelion fluff on the wind. He clicked the lock button on the rental key fob, surprised to find the man had upgraded him to an SUV, not an old charge. Either he’d been really moved by Aiden’s story, or he was concerned about the weather.

It was only about a half hour from the airport to Aiden’s final destination. As he came within five miles of the cabin, snow began slanting across the road, nearly blotting out his vision, and he regretted being so cavalier about the weather earlier.

“In three hundred feet, turn left,” his GPS droned in that creepy, disembodied voice.

“I would if I could fucking see anything!” Aiden yelled uselessly.

“Turn left. Turn left. Turn left.”

Aiden couldn’t see more than twenty feet in front of him, his headlights useless thanks to the necessity of his flashers. He crawled to a stop, sending up a silent prayer that nobody was coming to T-bone him, and turned left. In that moment, the snow lifted, a street sign appearing in the dim, early-night light.

Bingo.

“Continue on Richards Road for half a mile. Your destination will be on your left.”

Aiden slowly crept down the road, the wall of white in front of him

fudging it impossible to orient himself. At this point, he navigated purely based on the satellite image his phone showed. Up ahead, the road appeared to be going some into a U shape, and in another hundred feet, he came upon a drive marked with a tall wooden placard.

w/ flakes JEAN FAMILY CABIN

on the Well, well, well. Aiden navigated up the drive, ultimately coming to a free of in front of a stunning log cabin. Through the snow, which seemed s really lightening, smoke curled into the air from a stone chimney. Beyond, a lake stretched out, begging to be shoveled and skated on.

ination. *One thing at a time, Fuller.*

ross the A single light illuminated the front porch, and Aiden made his way t r about the snow, his shoes and the hems of his pants instantly soaked. Bri debated whether or not he should knock, but ultimately decided to bar y robot in. He was fucking freezing and, despite having come all this way, he entirely trust Kenzie not to leave him out in the cold.

With a shaking hand, he turned the knob and stepped inside.

“Bunny?” he called, kicking off his shoes, then his soaked socks.

blinker He padded further into the house, barely registering his surrounding ent up a hunted for the one and only thing he wanted to see.

t. For a Finally he found her, fast asleep, curled up under a mountain of b morning on a large sectional, a fire diminished to faint flickers in the hearth from her.

l be on Aiden knelt at her side and brushed an errant lock of hair from her At his touch, she stirred, slowly blinking her eyes fully open.

making “Fuller,” she said finally, her voice rough with sleep. “You’re here.”

l on the “I’m here, bunny,” he said. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

id itself With a deep sigh, Kenzie lifted herself into a seated position and parked by couch next to her.

“I’m all wet,” he told her, gesturing to his pants.

“So take them off.”

Aiden had a feeling she wouldn’t be telling him to strip if she weren’t lucid, but he wasn’t about to argue. He made quick work of removing his joggers, then crawled onto the couch next to her.

Without preamble, Aiden pulled her onto his lap and pressed his mouth to hers.

He couldn’t wait any longer to breathe her in, to taste her; he’d gone through long without a hit of pure, undiluted *Kenzie*. For a moment, she stiffened, but he melted into him seconds later, kissing him back with a vigor that matched his own.

“I love you,” he whispered between kisses. “I’m so sorry for everything I didn’t do. But I love you, bunny, and I’ll spend forever proving it to you.”

Too soon, she pulled away and rested her forehead against his.

“Aiden,” she whispered.

He pulled away and looked at her, her blue eyes glowing like sapphires in the low, flickering light of the fire. “What? Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

“I love you, too.” A grin split his face and he leaned forward to capture her mouth again, but she pressed a finger to his lips, stalling him. “I...the last few weeks have been awful. And you have nothing to be sorry for. I’m the one who should be sorry. I hurt us both by letting this drag on so long. I know how embarrassed after that day, I couldn’t bear to find out what you thought of me. Being out of town was a convenient excuse to avoid you.”

“This was never supposed to happen. I’ve always told myself I’d

date a hockey player, and I would certainly never fall in love with one. Having one for a big brother is bad enough, and I never planned on getting close enough to make me want to break that rule. But I never planned on you.

“You, Fuller, make every rule worth breaking.”

When more Aiden loosed a breath, the band wrapped around his chest snatched the wet freeing his lungs, his heart. He leaned in so his forehead rested against

“I’m sorry I didn’t come for you sooner. Whatever you’ve got going on your mouth to here,” he said, tapping her temple, “I love every bit of it. I love all of it, and I can’t have you hiding from me when things get bad. Talk to me. Let me hold you. Let me do whatever I can to help you through it. That’s what I’m here for, but couples do, right?”

He brushed his hair back. Kenzie nodded. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.”

Kenzie pulled away and hopped to her feet, hands raised to her head. “Thank you for everything. My god, Fuller.”

“What?” he said, standing and taking her hands in his. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I just can’t believe you spent the first eight hours of your birthday traveling!”

Aiden shrugged. “I wanted to see you. I wanted to be with you. I can’t capture her of nowhere else I’d rather spend today than right here.”

She stepped into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck, the one tilting her head back to look up at him. He snaked his own arms around her waist, just... hips and slid his palms down to cup her ass, the ends of her hair tickling his forearms.

“Happy birthday, Fuller,” she said.

He never He kissed the tip of her nose, then her forehead, then moved to her

th one pausing a breath away. “Thank you, bunny.”

anyone They soon lost themselves in each other, their discarded clothing scattered around the sitting area at warp speed. Kenzie pulled her blankets from the couch and spread them on the floor in front of the fire, where they had spent hours making love—sometimes long and slow, sometimes frenzied, but always perfect. It was the most perfect birthday present Aiden had ever been given to her. This love was a true gift, something he’d never allowed himself to take for granted, and he’d spend every day from now on treasuring it.

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FOUR MONTHS LATER

“AREN’T WAGS SUPPOSED TO sit in suites or something?” Jessica as Kenzie led them down to the stairs.

“It’s his first professional game,” Kenzie said. “I want to be close that he can see me when he scores.”

“*If* he scores,” Jack said from behind Jessica, and Kenzie shot him over her shoulder.

“Don’t be jealous, DeLuca,” Luke said.

Jack scoffed. “Why would I be jealous? It’s not like I’d be scoring : playing right now. I’d be preventing that.”

Kenzie laughed when Luke opened his mouth to protest, then clai shut when he realized Jack was right.

She led the group, the rear of which was brought up by Asher, to the about ten rows up from the glass and slightly left of center ice.

They filed in, the five of them a mass of red and white, the shirts made using Jessica's Circuit because the team obviously didn't have merch with Aiden's name and number on it yet.

Right as they sat, the PA guy's voice blasted through the arena. 'ready for some Assassins' hockey?!'

Cheers rose, the volume deafening, the stands beneath Kenzie vibrating with the force.

"And now for tonight's starting lineups."

Kenzie took in the scene as the announcer listed the starters, for a time realizing exactly how surreal it was for her to be seated here.

Aiden had put up impressive numbers the second half of the finishing third in the entire NCAA in points and leading his team to a asked Four appearance. The Spartans had made it to the championship game ultimately lost to the University of North Dakota.

enough Immediately after the conclusion of that game, practically before they on their bodies had even dried, Mitch called Aiden with an offer.

a glare Aiden had signed without hesitation.

He'd spent the better part of the last two months in Toledo with Warriors' ECHL team, but last weekend, he got called up.

if I was So here they were, in Grand Rapids, where Aiden was making his professional start for the Warriors' American Hockey League team. mped itAssassins.

After their reunion on Aiden's birthday, he and Kenzie had inseparable, only spending nights apart when Aiden was out of town. a thing was possible, their relationship had only gotten better and better.

air seats the last few months, and Kenzie looked forward to what this new chapter in hockey, and their summer and life beyond that, would look like for the next year. When she'd returned to Michigan before the start of the new semester, Brent and Berkley had sat down and discussed at length plans for FLEX's exit from the company. Eventually, they'd decided to hire Brent as CEO and the figurehead of the company, maintaining controlling interest. Kenzie would have final say in any and everything FLEX did going forward—but he would no longer be as hands on as he'd been up to that point. Kenzie retained stock, she sold half of her shares to Nate. Berkley had passed the handling of the first company's legal matters to a colleague in preparation of leaving the firm, and the birth of her son.

Brooks Austen Jean was born on March 24th and was quite possibly the most perfect baby boy Kenzie had ever laid eyes on. He'd arrived in the world, but not without screaming, with a full head of that dark Jean hair and his mama's eyes. He had his parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and pretty much everyone who met him wrapped around his tiny little fingers.

Kenzie still had another year of school to finish before her degree would be complete, but she'd been spending a lot of time picking Lexie and talking with the brains about influencing, and thanks to her smoking hot boyfriend's connection to a major activewear company, professional athlete brother-in-law, and his first fun, thrifty style, she'd grown her social media presence exponentially in the last few months.

A degree wasn't necessary to be an influencer, but this time Kenzie had been finishing what she'd started. Eventually, she'd like to branch out. If such working directly with companies not only as a brand ambassador, but to take over

apter of marketing exec, helping them choose the best campaigns and placements to achieve their goals.

er, she, But all that would come with time. For now, she wanted to sit back and watch her man play his first professional game.

a new “There he is!” Jessica squealed, pointing and smacking Kenzie on the main as Kenzie grinned widely, and lifted her phone to snap pictures of Aiden and the ice. He played beautifully, blocking shots, making crisp passes and no seeming to transition smoothly into playing with new teammates, on the back, but in a new offensive system.

of the He even had the secondary assist on the game-winning goal. Kenzie had never been more proud, and Jessica and the boys screamed themselves hoarse alongside her.

bly the After the game, they remained in their seats, waiting for Aiden to finish his kicking media obligations and shower before they headed out for a night on the town. They had a lot to celebrate.

y much When he appeared from the tunnel and saw them all waiting for him, his face split into a grin and he rushed up to meet them. His former teammates were and roommates attempted to stop him for hugs and claps on the back. Sofia’s Aiden made a beeline for Kenzie.

y friend, He scooped her off her feet and spun her around, finally stopping her, and could kiss her, harder and longer than was probably appropriate for a boy in the public.

Kenzie didn’t care.

zie was “You were amazing,” she said against his lips, and his answering kiss was so wide that their teeth clacked together when he kissed her again. It was a makeout devolving into a fit of laughter.

He put her back on her feet and turned to his friends, who stared at him.

product with varied expressions on their faces. Jessica, moony-eyed. Jack, eating grin. Luke, an indulgent smile. And Asher, borderline disgust and with something that looked dangerously like jealousy.

Kenzie's phone vibrated in her pocket, and she withdrew it to find the arm. from Jessica.

Aiden on "What is this?" she asked, unlocking her phone and opening the messages, and "You two are disgustingly photogenic," Jessica said by way of explanation, as Kenzie thumbed through the photos she'd taken.

Aiden whistled low. "We are pretty hot."

Kenzie studied the photos, finally selecting one, applying her first filter, then opening Instagram.

Jessica had caught them in their embrace, Kenzie's face hovering over Aiden's, both grinning stupidly, eyes shining with what could only be described as nothing other than pure, undiluted love.

It might be Kenzie's favorite picture ever.

Kenzie typed, his *First of many, she captioned it. And I can't wait to see what happens.*

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Kenzie's phone vibrated in her pocket, and she withdrew it to find a text from Jessica.

"What is this?" she asked, unlocking her phone and opening the message.

"You two are disgustingly photogenic," Jessica said by way of explanation as Kenzie thumbed through the photos she'd taken.

Aiden whistled low. "We are pretty hot."

Kenzie studied the photos, finally selecting one, applying her favorite filter, then opening Instagram.

Jessica had caught them in their embrace, Kenzie's face hovering over Aiden's, both grinning stupidly, eyes shining with what could only be described as nothing other than pure, undiluted love.

It might be Kenzie's favorite picture ever.

First of many, she captioned it. And I can't wait to see what happens next.

AS ALWAYS, I COULD not do this without the love and support mom, dad, and sister.

To Granny J and Grandpa Vic: thank you for always cheering especially Granny. I know you don't like the language I use, but I love more than I could ever say for reading my books.

To Grammy and Grumpy: I miss you. Thanks for keeping an eye from up there.

To Mer: where do I even begin? I could write an entire book on what friendship means to me, but it would really just be full of inside jokes, thirst traps, and endless streams of unanswered texts. Truthfully, THANK YOU. Thank you for talking through ideas with me before I put them on paper—or after I do and realize they suck. Thank you for introducing dark romance books before me so I know if I'll like them or not. Thank you for being my favorite buddy read, for making sure I never post a stupid or TikTok, and for literally everything forever.

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the feedback that made Kenzie and Aiden's story so amazing. I appreciate you all so very much.

To the Pancakes: thank you for always talking me off a ledge, encouraging me, for loving me, and for understanding me and my life better than most people ever will. I couldn't do this without y'all.

To Samantha: I say this every time we do this, but thank you times over for giving me the cover of my dreams. You are truly a miracle worker. I'm not sure what I did to deserve you, but I could not be more thankful for your talent, or your friendship.

And lastly, to my readers, especially Cort and Ashley: THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT. I couldn't keep writing books without y'all, and your constant posts, stories, reels, and general screaming into the void about my stories makes this all worthwhile.

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