



THE
JUNIOR

— College Years Series —

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MONICA MURPHY

THE JUNIOR

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PROLOGUE

Late Spring

I WATCH her enter the coffeeshop, her gaze searching the room before it lands on me. Her smile is faint, but it's not fake, thank God. I know we haven't always gotten along.

Wait, scratch that. It's not that we don't get along. It's more that we've always been wary of each other, thanks to him.

Stupid, frustrating Caleb.

She approaches the table I'm sitting at, and I can just tell she's nervous. Unsure. I explained nothing when I said I wanted to meet with her, and she's probably afraid I'm going to drop some outrageous verbal bomb on her.

That's not my plan. It never has been. I'm just trying to clear the air. And I'm trying to figure out what she wants in life. From him.

Maybe even from me.

Clutching my iced coffee in my hand to stop my fingers from shaking, I smile up at her. "Hey. You're early."

"Hi. So are you," she returns, her tone soft.

"I wanted to make sure I got a table for us," I admit, glancing around the crowded café. "Are you going to order anything?"

"Oh, I suppose I should." She glances over at the counter, where a small line has formed. "I'll be right back."

This gives me time to think about what I want and need to say. As if I haven't pondered it enough. Ever since I reached out via text to her a few days ago, this is pretty much all I've thought about, which is so unlike me.

After much consideration, I finally banished *him* from my life over winter break. Mom always said winter break was where relationships go to die, but she was referring to high school. I don't know how many relationships I witnessed end over winter break. More than I can count, and a few that included me.

The idea also applies to college.

I can't deny it's been tough, not seeing him anymore when before I saw him almost every single day. And of course, when you banish someone from your life, you see them everywhere. Or there are reminders of them everywhere you look, which is frustrating.

Can't help but also take it as a sign. I'm a big believer in them.

Signs.

Within minutes, she's returned to the table, an iced coffee in her hand, and she settles into the chair across from me, taking a sip before she sets it on the table in between us. I take her in, admiring her beauty, her pretty hair, her sparkling eyes. Even full of wariness, they still sparkle. I can see why he's attracted to her. How he hasn't been able to quit her.

"Can I admit something?" she asks.

I nod. "Please."

"I was surprised to get your text. We haven't seen each other in—a while. I thought you were mad at me," she admits.

A sigh leaves me. "I have no reason to be mad at you. I never did. You though, definitely have more reason."

She shakes her head. "No, that's not true. Didn't you hear?"

I frown, watching as she takes a big sip from her straw. Like she needs the coffee to continue speaking. "Hear what?"

“We’re done. Through. For good.” Her expression turns sheepish. “I know you cut him out of your life a while ago, and I admired you for being so strong. I finally decided to do the same thing.”

“You did?” I’m surprised. Now it’s my turn to take a drink before I say something awkward or dumb.

She nods. “It was so hard, but after going a solid month without him texting me or seeing him, I realized I felt...free. Now I barely think about him anymore.”

“We’ve been dealing with his B.S. for a long time,” I say softly.

“Years. For the both of us,” she agrees.

We smile. Sip from our drinks. She leans forward, a tiny smile playing upon her lips and I can tell she wants to tell me something.

“I’ve met someone too,” she says, her voice low. Like she’s sharing a secret. “We’ve been seeing each other for a couple of months, and I’ve kind of kept it a secret because I didn’t want people to know.”

I frown. “Why don’t you want people to know?”

“He’s, um, sort of connected to the friend group. Loosely,” she admits, biting her lower lip.

My curiosity grows. “Now you have to tell me who it is. Not like I’m seeing them much anyway.”

A little white lie. But I can keep a secret, and I will. For her, I totally will. It’s the least I can do.

She glances around, as if someone we know is lurking behind a dark corner, before she finally says, “It’s...Carson.”

My mouth drops open. “The dude who was interested in Ellie?”

She nods, her eyes dancing. “He is totally not my type. I’m a snob when it comes to boys, I can admit this.”

I silently agree with her. Not that she’s the only snob—I’m one too.

“But he’s so sweet and nice, and I can’t lie, he’s totally into me, and it feels so good. Like he actually wants to spend time with me, and I know this sounds pathetic, but I’m not used to that from a guy. I’m not some nuisance he has to deal with, which is how a lot of guys treated me in the past. But not Carson.” She sighs, her gaze turning hazy. “I really like him.”

Reaching out, I rest my hand over hers, giving it a quick squeeze. “I think that’s amazing. I’m so glad you met someone who’s totally into you. You deserve that.”

“I definitely do,” she says firmly, and I realize she seems stronger. Bolder. She chased after Caleb for so long, and he just expected her to always be there.

Now she’s gone, and she’s found someone else. She looks truly happy, and I’m thrilled for her.

I’m out of his life too. Sort of. I needed the distance, but guess what?

I miss him.

And it’s stupid, my missing him.

He’s annoying and he says the rudest things ever—like, *ever*. He’s crude. Even filthy sometimes.

My problem? I want to know what it’s like to have that filthy mouth all over me. Is that wrong?

Yes, probably.

Okay fine. It is totally wrong. But that’s the problem with things—and people—that are wrong. Bad.

You’re drawn to them, even when you know you shouldn’t be. That’s part of the allure. Either you want to be corrupted, or you want to tame the bad boy.

I don’t think Caleb needs taming, but he definitely needs to grow the hell up. He can’t be a jock frat boy for the rest of his life. Deep down, he knows this. And that’s why I think he’s so much extra all the time. He’s living it up while he can, before he has to get serious and actually live life as a responsible adult.

“You like him, huh,” she says out of the blue.

I glance up, realizing I was lost in my thoughts for a moment too long. “What do you mean?”

“Caleb. You like him.” She nods, like the Caleb expert that she is. “I get it. He’s...magnetic. Being with him feels like you’re a VIP member and you were invited to his exclusive party. He’s a good time.”

She just described him perfectly.

“He’s ridiculous,” I say, hating how bitter I sound.

She nods. Laughs. “That he is. But his ridiculousness is also attractive. He’s completely over the top, but deep down, he’s a decent guy.”

Like all of them. His friends are decent guys, some more than others. Namely, Tony. That guy is the most decent out of our group of friends.

“I told him I didn’t want to see him anymore,” I say. “And he’s kept his distance, which I appreciate. But I also...miss him.”

Sympathy flits across her face. “He’s easy to miss.”

Yes. He definitely is.

“You should go for it,” she continues. “See what happens between you two.”

“I don’t settle for just one guy,” I say wryly.

“Uh huh, because you haven’t found the right one yet,” she says knowingly. She’s smug and fresh in lust with a guy. Of course, she believes she knows what she’s talking about when it comes to relationships.

“Settling down—scares me,” I confess.

“You two might be perfect for each other then,” she says. “He’s scared to commit too. At least, that’s what he used to tell me.”

We stare at each other, and I note our similar features. He has a type, that’s for sure. I get why he couldn’t quit her. She was madly in love with him and he took advantage of her for years.

She doesn't need him anymore. She's found someone else.

He's completely free.

And while I know he's not the right guy for me—he can't be, there are so many things working against us—I'm still tempted. She's out of the picture forever, and that's part of the reason why I stepped back. I couldn't be in the middle of their fucked-up relationship, even though I never was purposely.

He'd draw me in. I don't think he did it on purpose either. It just...happened. We're drawn to each other.

We always have been.

"Are you really happy with Carson?" I ask her softly.

She nods, her eyes glowing. "So happy. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"That's so great, Baylee," I tell her, and I mean every damn word.

"You'll find your prince charming someday too, Gracie," she says. "And you never know. He could be wrapped up in a douche-y football player package."

We burst out laughing, and in this moment, I'm so glad I asked her to meet with me so we could clear the air.

I could be friends with this girl. I *want* to be friends with her.

"We need to stay in contact," I tell her. "I'll be student teaching in the fall, but I don't want to lose touch with you."

"That sounds good. We should hang out. All of us," she suggests. "I know you and your friends were uncomfortable around me sometimes, and I get why. I was in this awkward position that Caleb put me in."

"Well, forget that guy. Let's all get together soon. Ava is coming home in a few weeks," I say. "You two were friends in high school, right?"

"Sort of. Not really," she admits, her expression vaguely pained. "We were on the cheer team for a while together, but I hung out with the mean girls, and Ava barely tolerated me. I associated with some...terrible people."

I know exactly who she's talking about. I've heard the stories about Cami what's-her-name. "Well, that particular bitch isn't in your life anymore, right?"

Baylee's cheeks turn pink and she nods. "I haven't talked to her since the summer after we graduated high school."

"Perfect. I'm going to plan something. Hayden and I can have a little party," I say.

"Sounds good," she says, her expression grateful. "You're so nice, Gracie. I know I probably acted like a bitch around you sometimes, and I'm sorry for all that. I was just jealous and insecure."

"I hope you don't feel like that around me anymore. We should come together, not let some stupid boy push us apart," I say. "Girl power, am I right?"

"For sure." She nods firmly.

We chat for at least another thirty minutes before we finally part ways, giving each other a hug just outside the café. The moment I hop in my car, I'm on the phone, listening to it ring, anxious for him to pick up as I tap my foot on the floorboard.

"G-dog," Eli Bennett greets me when he answers.

I roll my eyes though he can't see me. The only reason he calls me that is thanks to Caleb, though he normally only calls me G. "I'm in," I tell him in greeting.

He's quiet for a moment. "What exactly are you referring to?"

"I'll move in with you guys. I'll be your roommate," I tell him, hoping he remembers our conversation from last week.

While I couldn't stop thinking about it, at first, I thought Eli was joking when he asked if I was interested in sharing an apartment with him.

And Caleb.

Why would I willingly put myself in a position living with a guy who irritates the hell out of me yet makes me want to jump him, all at once? But the more I thought about it, the

more I wanted to do it. I like Eli. I can tolerate Caleb. And the rent is cheap.

This is why I'm agreeing. Because of the reasonable rent. That's what I tell myself, at least.

"No shit? Really, Gracie? I figured you'd tell us no," he says.

"Well, I'm saying yes. I think it'll be fun," I tell him, wincing the moment the word *fun* leaves my lips. It will be fun living with Eli because that guy is a good time, and he's very firmly attached, thank you very much.

It's the other roommate I've just committed myself to that's got me worried.

Yes, Caleb is fun, but there was so much—*more* brewing between the two of us before I cut him off. Something I wanted to explore, even while knowing I'd get fucked in the process.

Literally and figuratively.

"You'll barely see us," Eli promises. "We're both busy as fuck. Caleb is going back to work at the resort for the summer, and when I'm not at practice, I'll be with Ava the rest of the time. We'll stay out of your hair."

"I'm not worried about you guys. And I need to find a summer job too," I tell him.

"If you don't mind the drive, you should go work at one of the resorts up at the lake. Work in one of the restaurants. The tips are killer," Eli encourages.

"I need killer tips," I admit, thinking about my upcoming lack of finances thanks to student teaching, AKA making no money while I work full-time. "I need to earn as much money as I can this summer."

"You'll find something," Eli says reassuringly.

A sigh escapes me, and I know I sound down and out when I shouldn't. Rent will be cheaper living with two people versus one. Even though the apartment the boys are in is three bedrooms and costs more rent overall, it'll still be cheaper than

what I've been paying while living with my best friend Hayden.

She's moving in with her boyfriend, Tony. Those two are so in love, it's almost sickening. She's going to marry that dude. And she's sticking around, student teaching here for the year, more for him than anything else since he's still in college. I'm sticking around too, because where else would I go? At least we have each other.

And the guys.

This is going to be an interesting summer, that's for sure.

ONE

CALEB

“DAMN WOMAN, you own a lot of shit,” I say as I carry in yet another stack of extra heavy boxes. I drop them on the floor of her new bedroom with a grunt, resting my hands on my hips as I survey the scene. The very chaotic, way too much stuff scene.

“I own the normal amount of stuff,” Gracie says, sounding irritated as she enters the room behind me. I glance over at her. Yep, she looks irritated too. It’s a common emotion when she’s around me. You’d think I’d get used to it. “I think when it comes to me, you like to complain.”

“Right back at you,” I snap, just as Eli enters the bedroom, a giant smile on his face.

“Hey, hey. Roommates fighting already? This is no bueno, my friends,” he says, Mr. Easygoing. The peace keeper, which isn’t normal for him, but here he is, stuck between us. I’m tempted to pop him in the face, but that’s just me taking out my aggression on someone for no good reason.

The one I feel extra aggressive toward at the moment is the other person currently standing in this room, looking all sexy and shit, barely dressed in a pair of extra short shorts and a sports bra.

That’s it. There is way too much skin exposed and I can’t stop looking at her. Every time she catches me, there’s a sneer on her face, as if she’s completely disgusted by me, when she’s the one who’s flaunting what she’s got.

Seriously, I am so fucked this summer—and not the way I want to be, either.

“We’re not fighting,” Gracie says, her voice sickeningly sweet. “More like we’re just having a minor disagreement.”

This is something that’s going to come up time and again between us. Having “minor disagreements,” as she calls them. We clash. We always have. I’m thinking that’s half the reason she cut me out of her life around Christmas last year. She told me she couldn’t tolerate being around me anymore and she needed some distance.

Ouch.

The other half of the reason she cut me out of her life is because she’s totally hot for me and didn’t want to end up getting with me, only for it to fizzle out because that’s what we do. Not just me, and not just her, but *we*.

As in, we can’t make relationships last long. Yeah, I messed around with Baylee off and on for a couple of years, but that’s only because she made it so damn convenient for me. I took advantage of her. I know I did. After seeing Jackson and Ellie go through a similar struggle, only for them to end up together and completely in love with each other, I had to take a good, hard look at myself and my behavior with Baylee.

I didn’t like what I saw. I was a jerk to her—for a long-ass time. She should’ve told me to fuck off a while ago. I was preparing to go to her and explain exactly that to her, too, but the girl beat me to the punch.

Baylee cut me off around the same time that Gracie did. They both walked out of my life, and once they were gone, it was like I threw a party.

A giant, *let’s see how many girls I can get with*, never-ending party. I didn’t even realize what the hell I was doing. Why would it matter that Gracie and Baylee pushed me out of their lives? I didn’t need them. I was surrounded by all kinds of women. What did they matter?

Still haven’t quite figured out the answer to that...

My wild behavior only lasted about a month. Until my friends staged an intervention with me and told me I needed to stop partying and drinking and fucking girls. That I was acting a little out of control and needed to get my shit together before I flunked out of school and couldn't play football anymore.

That straightened me up quick. Sometimes it feels like football is all I've got left. The last bit of glory before I end up being just another mundane motherfucker doing the same ol' thing, different day.

Couldn't risk losing that, so I immediately agreed with my friends, which shocked them. I can still have a good time, but I just need to have a good time in moderation.

Jesus, I sound like my dad. He's been preaching moderation to me since I was fourteen and he caught me stealing a pack of smokes out of the carton he kept in the cabinet over the fridge.

"Caleb. Buddy. Let's go outside," Eli practically yells at me, pulling me out of my head.

I glare at him, realizing he's probably been talking to me for a while, but I was too lost in thought. I send Gracie a look as she crosses her arms, her expression hard to read.

Exhaling roughly, I exit her bedroom, following Eli out of the apartment and into the parking lot.

"Are you two going to be able to get along? Because this is going to be a really shitty year for me, living with you two fighting all the time," Eli says the moment we stop by Gracie's car.

"She always starts it," I immediately say, but Eli shakes his head, cutting me off with a firm look.

"You say shit too. And sometimes all you have to do is look at her and she's pissed," Eli says as he runs his hand along his jaw, his gaze narrowing as he contemplates me. "This was probably a bad idea on my part. You're both pretty awful. But only together. Get one of you alone without the other one around? You're fine."

"And we're living together. How the hell is this going to work?" Frustration ripples through me and I tell myself to

calm down. We can totally make this work. And we need the other roomie.

Well, Eli doesn't. He can afford whatever, because that mofo is rich. His dad the video game designer bleeds money. Me? I'm from a nice, middle-class family who makes just enough to take a couple of vacations to the central coast every year in their old travel trailer, and Dad buys T-bone steaks to barbecue a couple of times over the summer. To him, that's extravagant living.

I want more than that. But how? I was recently forced to declare a major and I chose business, like my friend Tony. That guy is smart as shit. Plus, his dad bleeds even more money than Eli's, and Tony is probably going to take over the family business one day. Why wouldn't I follow in Tony's footsteps?

Though I have no business to take over. No family fortune to inherit. I am on my own and I know it. This is why I work at Mitchell's Landing every summer, and I have them schedule me for as many hours as possible. If the tourists don't tip me in beer—true story—they tip me in cash. And sometimes, if they're hot and female, they tip me with a blow job.

Again, true story.

"You have to make it work," Eli says, reaching out and clapping me on the shoulder in an extra brotherly way. His gaze is intense as it locks on mine. "Just...try to get along with her. Stop always saying things that piss her off."

I send him an incredulous look. "Eli. My friend. *Everything* I say pisses her off. You know this."

Eli laughs. "Can you believe you just called me your friend? We used to hate each other. I still remember that night I caught you flirting with Ava in the parking lot after a game."

"You were on our turf," I defend, remembering that night too, when Eli and the rest of his football team—they were our biggest rivals in high school—came to watch us play on their bye week. My flirting with Ava at that time was completely

harmless. I knew I could never get with her, no matter how hot she was. Her brother is one of my closest friends.

Besides, Jake Callahan would kick my ass if I even so much as touched his baby sister. She's been off-limits since day one.

"Didn't mean to change the subject." He gives me another shake before releasing my shoulder. "But yeah. Keep the peace with Gracie. If everything you say to her makes her angry, then maybe you shouldn't talk to her at all."

Right. Like that's going to happen. Most of the time, it's like I can't resist her—and she can't resist me. Yes, we piss each other off, and we argue all the time, but the arguing feels more like foreplay. Deep down, I think she likes it.

Deep down, I *know* I like it. I enjoy getting a rise out of Gracie. Have I mentioned how beautiful she is? She's fucking gorgeous. Tall and slender with long, long legs. Not much in the tits department, but that's okay. I can work with what she's got. Cute little ass. Slim waist. And then there's her face...

Eyes I can't figure out what color they are because they always feel like they're changing. Light brown. Bright gold. Greenish gold. Flat out green. Long, brown hair she recently highlighted. I know this because she shared photos on her IG story at the salon while getting her hair done. A mirror selfie of her sitting in a chair with her hair wrapped in foil. Somehow, she still looked good.

Truth? I'm dying to bang her. I would bang the shit out of her if given the chance, no hesitation. And it would be good between us. I know this. Every time we accidentally—or not so accidentally—touch, sparks fly. I'm surprised we don't light shit on fire.

But it would end badly. I wouldn't be able to commit. Neither would she. We'd get mad at each other. Or more like, she'd get mad at me, I'd blow her off. And boom.

Friendship—whatever little friendship we might actually have—over.

"I won't be around much this summer anyway," I say. "I'll be working all the time. And then practice will start. Then school.

I'll never be home. And isn't she student teaching? She won't even be on campus when school starts back up."

"Right. Exactly. Perfect," Eli says with a nod, though his expression is uneasy. I almost feel sorry for the guy, but he's the one who asked Gracie to move in with us in the first place, so he literally asked for this.

Gracie chooses that moment to appear and I turn away from her, initiating my, "Let's ignore Gracie" plan at this exact minute.

"I only have a few things left," she says as she heads straight for the trunk of her car, her arm grazing mine as she walks past.

My skin ignites. Just from that simple brush past me. Girl did it on purpose too.

Who's antagonizing who now?

"We'll get everything else," Eli says, rushing toward her. More like kissing her ass. "Grab whatever's lightest and we'll take the rest."

"Thank you so much," she tells him, sounding genuine.

She doesn't thank me at all.

Figures.

We grab the last remaining boxes—they aren't that heavy—that are in the back of her car. She takes a stack of clothes on hangers and once she's closed the trunk, off we go toward the apartment, Gracie leading us as if she's the queen and we're her lowly servants.

Kind of sucks. I don't want to be trailing after Gracie the entire summer and into the school year, doing what she wants, whenever she asks. I'm not her whipping boy.

Taking a deep breath, I pause in the doorway of the apartment, telling myself to reset. Why do I always assume the worst when it comes to Gracie? She's never asked me to do anything like that, ever. She has zero expectations of me.

Wait. Scratch that. Her expectations of me are super low. I've got nowhere to go but up, truthfully.

But I'm also going mostly silent. Eli was right. I need to leave her alone. Pretend she barely exists. She's just a roommate. I need to act like I don't even know her. She'll probably be busy too. She mentioned needing to find a job to Eli, and that fucker suggested she come work where I do.

I hope that doesn't happen. Most of the time, the girls work in the fountain while the guys work in the kitchen or on the dock. We have a couple of dock girls, as we call them, and they work in the office, handling the boat reservations and giving the customers boating instructions, taking all the calls and the money and whatever else. We have a couple of regulars who return every summer, and while they haven't started yet, they will soon.

I'm not too worried about it.

We spend the rest of the afternoon hanging out. Well, Eli and I hang out. Gracie is in her room upstairs, unpacking all her stuff. Setting up her bed—we carried the mattress and box spring in for her while she brought in the frame—doing all the things a person does when they've just moved.

Moving sucks. It's been nice that I'm the one who has remained in this apartment while it has had a revolving door of people. My original roommates were Tony and Diego, with Jackson and Eli living together at another apartment complex not too far from this one. Diego moved out to live with his baby mama, Jocelyn, and become a little family, leaving just Tony and me living here, and Tony covering Diego's share of the rent because he's a rich motherfucker.

Jackson eventually moved out of the apartment he shared with Eli and is now touring the country with his band and took his girl, Ellie, with him. They're dropping out of school and everything which, hey, if that works for them, cool. Tony recently moved in with Hayden. Eli moved in with me. And now so has Gracie.

Wild. If you would've told me a couple of years ago that I'd be living with that hot chick I liked to torment I'd tell you no

fucking way.

Yet here I am, living with her. And Eli too. We used to be mortal enemies. That guy hated me and the feeling was mutual.

Now look at us.

“You going out tonight?” Eli asks me, pushing me out of my thoughts.

“Nah. I gotta open tomorrow,” I say. Meaning I have to be at work by seven, and considering it’s less than an hour away from where we live, I have to leave the house by six in the morning at the latest.

Eli frowns. “That sucks. I was hoping to go to that party at your frat house.”

The frat house I’ve been avoiding lately. I’m not partying anymore. Not really.

“You can go without me,” I tell him.

Eli shakes his head. “Nah. My girl is coming home tomorrow for good. I should go to bed early so tomorrow happens faster.”

“Aw, look at you. All eager to see your girlfriend and shit.” He’s so gone over her. Ava Callahan can do no wrong in his eyes. It’s been tough for them with her going to college in San Diego while he’s here, but they’ve made it through one school year. Hopefully, they’ll keep going.

“Shut up,” he says, but he doesn’t sound pissed. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

“What what’s like?” I frown.

“Loving a girl so much that you can’t stop thinking about her. You haven’t found the right one yet,” he says.

I see the sincerity written all over Eli’s face, and I want to roll my eyes. Call him a lovesick pussy or whatever, but I keep my opinion to myself. I know he means every word he says. All of my friends are just like him. Stuck on one girl, stupidly in love with them. Willing to do anything for them.

That's nice and all, but it's not for me. Not yet. I have enough time before I have to settle down. We're still young. Like, extremely young. Why do I need to tie myself to only one woman? No one tempts me anyway.

Well.

One girl does tempt me, but not in the right way. More like I want to get Gracie out of my system once and for all. Fuck her once and be done with it. But now that I'm living with her, I can't cross that line. Fucking your roommate when you're not interested in her beyond a quick hookup would end up way too messy.

I need to ignore her. I need to remain quiet so she ignores me. We can make this living arrangement work.

I know we can.

TWO

GRACIE

“WE’D LOVE TO HIRE YOU,” the owner of Mitchell’s Landing says right off the bat. Michelle is a pretty woman with bright blue eyes and a wide smile that she’s currently aiming at me. “But, unfortunately, we’re full at the fountain right now.”

My own smile falls. “Oh.”

This has been the story from every restaurant and resort I’ve hit up on the lake since I started earlier this morning. I walked into every establishment on the lakeshore, resume in hand, asking for an application. And every single one of them has told me they’ve hired their staff for the season, and I’m too late. Who knew early June was too late?

Not me.

“I do have one position that recently opened up, but it’s not easy. Not that it’s hard,” she’s quick to correct, probably thanks to my widening eyes. “But most of the young women I hire don’t want to deal with the guys.”

“What do you mean?” I ask carefully.

“We need someone to work the office on the dock. All boat rentals happen up at the store, but once we give them the paperwork, they need to meet with someone at the office on the dock. Then you’ll take care of them by showing them the boating instruction video and sizing everyone for life jackets, while one of the guys who works the dock brings their boat or jet ski around for them.”

I like how she says “you” when describing the position. As if I already have it. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Usually it’s not, but the boys at the dock can be... a lot,” she says, scrutinizing me carefully. More carefully than she was only a moment before. “Not that they do anything inappropriate, but they can be loud and obnoxious. As in, they’ll all show off for you and try to get your attention.”

“I can handle them,” I say firmly, knowing for a fact that Caleb is one of these guys she’s referring to.

And he’s going to kill me if I get this job. He’s been ignoring me for the last few days since I moved in with him and Eli, which is fine because I’ve been ignoring him too. Pretending he doesn’t exist is easier on my mental state, but considering I live with him, I still have to see him whether I want to or not.

Like when, just last night, I found him exiting the steaming hot bathroom with a towel around his waist and nothing else. Water droplets still clinging to his bare skin, rivulets trailing down the perfection that is his back.

Who knew a back could be so sexy? It’s not something I’ve ever really thought about before, but checking out his bare back as he dashed down the hall toward his bedroom, I was immediately thinking dirty, filthy thoughts.

I told myself to calm down. Big deal. So he just got out of the shower, so what? But all of my fantasies went into overdrive, visualizing a naked Caleb under a hot spray of water, soaping himself up. Me soaping him up.

Ugh. Yeah. Not good. He’s got an amazing body. Broad shoulders and chest, washboard stomach, thick thighs. Big ol’ dick.

Hmm. I don’t know if that last part is true, but come on. With the way he acts, and all the women he gets with, it has to be a decent size. At the very least, he knows what to do with it.

I need to stop thinking about Caleb’s dick. Seriously.

“They’ll be the ones who train you. Well, TJ will train you too. He’s the dock manager and he’s a good guy,” Michelle explains as she glances over my application yet again before

returning her gaze to me. “If you’re interested, I would love to hire you. They get tips on the dock, but not as much as they do in the restaurant.” She hesitates only for a moment. “Are you sure you want the job?”

Does this mean she’s giving it to me? And why does she think I don’t want it. I totally do. “Yes,” I say firmly. “I definitely want the job.”

“Then it’s yours. If a fountain position opens up, I’ll keep you in mind for that as well. Maybe you could even pick up a shift once a week,” Michelle says.

“Wow, that’s it? I have the job?” Most places I’ve applied, I’ve had to go through a process. An interview. Sometimes a couple of rounds of them. Then it’s a lot of waiting around, hoping to get a call or an email. Sometimes I never hear back. Sometimes I do.

This was the easiest job I’ve ever gotten.

“You have the job,” she says with a smile. “Come on back. You can grab a couple of T-shirts and I’ll have you fill out all the forms.”

I follow her into the restaurant/store, noting all the girls working behind the counter. There are a lot of them and they all look busy. They also all look younger than me. I know most of them are high school students, or they just graduated.

I’m going to feel like an old lady around here. I already feel enough like one, hanging out with the group that I do. Hayden and I are older than all of them by two years, some of them three, like Ellie and Ava.

As we get older, I know it won’t matter, but right now, sometimes that still feels like a big difference. Especially since I’ve already graduated college and I’m about to embark on my student teaching placement. My life is going to be totally different in a few months.

Guess I may as well have fun at a resort while I can. A summer job on the lake before I start my first job in my chosen career.

Once the paperwork is out of the way, I pick two Mitchell's T-shirts out of a box for me to wear as part of my uniform. I can sense all of the employees nearby watching Michelle and me with curiosity, wondering who the new girl is, I suppose. I smile at them and they smile back, a couple of them even say hi.

"Everyone's friendly here," Michelle says to me as she walks me out of the store. We stop on the front porch, both of us surveying the lake across the road. It's a brilliant blue, dotted with boats and the occasional water skier zipping by. "The summer season is already in full swing, so get ready. You're going to be thrown right into it on your first day."

"I can handle it," I tell her, sounding extra confident, when I really don't know what I'm talking about. This might be kind of scary, but I've got this.

I have to.

I need the money.

"I FOUND A JOB," I announce to my best friend after the server leaves with our dinner orders. We met up at a restaurant not too far from campus, me calling her at the last minute to see if she had the time to get together, eager and excited to tell her about my afternoon.

Hayden breaks out into a giant smile. "That's great news! Where at?"

"Mitchell's Landing," I answer before I take a sip of my iced tea.

Her smile falls, her brows furrowing with confusion. "Wait a minute. Isn't that where Caleb works?"

I nod. Paste on a bright smile. "Yep. He works on the dock."

"And where will you work? At the restaurant?"

"The dock," I answer, going for nonchalant.

Her frown deepens. “Uh, that sounds like trouble.”

“I can handle it.” I shrug. Take another sip. Start to feel itchy because Hayden won’t stop staring at me. I know that look. “What? You don’t think I can?”

“I totally think you can,” she’s quick to say. She always has faith in me, especially when I don’t have it in myself. This is one of the many qualities that makes Hayden such a great friend. “But can Caleb handle it? Working with you?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. That’s not my problem.”

“Whenever Caleb comes into a situation that you’re involved in, he becomes your problem.” Hayden leans across the table, her gaze serious, the frown gone. My friend is beautiful, both inside and out. She has a kind, giving heart. She’s made my college years unforgettable in the best way, and once she got together with Tony and brought him and all of his friends into our circle, it’s been a lot of fun.

Now though, it’s time for me to get serious. I’m in the credential program, I’ll be student teaching and soon I’ll be an actual teacher. And while I’m excited, I’m also scared. I’m scared of a lot of things right now, which is so unlike me.

All my fear of the unknown is making me uncomfortable.

“I know how to deal with him,” I finally say.

“Right. By ignoring him. But you’re not only living with him, you’re also working with him now. And that’s a lot, Gracie. He’s going to be everywhere. You’ll be dealing with him on a *daily basis*,” Hayden says, stressing those last words with extra emphasis. “And you know he’s going to say all sorts of things to get under your skin.”

He knows how to do that. That’s a particular skill of his, for sure.

“Does he know you’re working there?” she asks. I shake my head. “Then you need to tell him you’re going to be working with him. You can’t just spring this on him. Or worse, show up there and be like, surprise! I work here now!”

“Why not?”

“Can you imagine Caleb showing up at your workplace, announcing he’s just started there without warning you first? You’d flip the hell out,” Hayden says.

“Good point,” I admit grudgingly.

“I know. This is why you two need to talk. The animosity is getting you nowhere anyway. Don’t you want to get along with him?” Hayden asks.

“Of course I do. He just makes it impossible. I was doing so well not having him around too,” I say, remembering the past five months with absolute fondness.

Oh, I’m totally lying. I missed him. While he drives me crazy, there’s also something...endearing about him. He’s cute and charming and sexy. Tall and broad and so manly. I’m tempted to run my hands through his dark, thick hair and tell him to shut his awful mouth. I also want to pull him in close and see what those muscular arms feel like wrapped around me. I wouldn’t mind knowing what it would be like to have those plump lips of his land on mine. I bet he kisses like a master. I bet—

“You’re thinking about him right now, oh my God,” Hayden says, interrupting my Caleb-filled thoughts.

“I was not.” I’m defensive because I most definitely was thinking about him.

“You so were. Your cheeks are turning red. Gracie, no guy makes you blush. You’ve been with a lot of guys since I’ve known you—”

“Hey,” I interrupt, not liking the direction she’s going in.

“Don’t be offended. I’m not saying it in a bad way. It’s the truth. You’ve dated a lot of guys since freshman year, and not one of them seems to affect you like Caleb does,” Hayden explains.

“That’s because I don’t like him, remember?” I raise my brows. “He’s annoying. Like a pesky little brother.”

“Ha! You little liar. You don’t have brotherly feelings toward him. I think you not so secretly want to bang him, and that’s

the real reason why you stay away from him,” Hayden says.

She is cutting way too close to the truth. “I don’t want to bang him.” Lies. “I don’t enjoy spending time with him at all.” Also semi-lies. A lot of the time, Caleb is fun. He’s rude and inappropriate and a total douche, but fun. He knows how to laugh at himself. He cracks jokes. He says silly things that are funny. “Working with him will be a test of my patience.” Absolute truth. “But maybe it will bring us—closer together. Only as friends, though.”

Not too sure about that, but it sounds good.

“Uh huh,” Hayden nods, the smirk on her face annoying me. “Maybe the two of you just need to do it and get it out of your system.”

“I don’t think that’s going to help matters,” I tell her, hating how her suggestion lights me up inside.

I would be totally down to do it with Caleb. I’m just afraid of the repercussions afterwards. I’m worried I might end up falling for him completely, and that’s just...

Not good.

I prefer being single. I don’t want to depend on anyone. People—men—let you down. My dad let down my mom on a constant basis, yet they’re still together. She complained about him all the time when I was younger, but never did anything about it. Who wants that kind of relationship?

Not me. No sir.

“I think it could help. You never know. Having sex with him could get rid of that overwhelming sexual tension that’s always brimming between the two of you once and for all,” Hayden says.

“We do not have brimming sexual tension,” I say, feeling defensive. Again.

“You so do,” she says, sending me a pointed look. “And you know it. Don’t deny it. I bet if you had sex with him, the tension would disappear. He’d treat you like a friend again. Or maybe even a non-entity. And isn’t that what you want?”

I recoil at that. I don't want him to treat me like I don't exist.

But isn't that what you did to him for the first half of the year? You pushed him straight out of your life like he never mattered to you.

I hate that I did that to him. Really, I do. But my self-preservation instincts kicked in and I had to keep him at a distance.

Otherwise, I would've done something I regretted. Like have sex with him.

"I think that's a terrible idea," I tell Hayden, wanting her to know where I'm coming from. "What if he falls madly in love with me?"

More like what if I fall madly in love with him?

Nah. That won't happen. My feelings for a guy come and go so fast they barely register. I don't know why either. My parents weren't the best example, so maybe that had something to do with it. My older brother Dave joined the military as soon as he graduated high school to get out of the house. Now he's happily married and living in Texas. He and Jessica already have a couple of kids.

They're living the American dream, while I'm over here trying to get with every cute guy I see, yet they never hold my interest long enough. Or they don't meet my needs—whatever those are.

It's not like they're bad guys. Most of the men I've been with, save for a few, have been pretty awesome. Kind. Handsome. Hard-working. Smart. Funny. Some of them were excellent in bed. A few were meh. Two in particular were flat-out awful.

When I start thinking about all of them, I always end up feeling bad. For making those choices. For having sex with so many of them and then just...moving on, like I didn't even care. Men can be with a bunch of women and they aren't judged. Women get with a bunch of guys, and we're sluts.

I'm not a slut. I'm just—a woman who can't find the right man for her. And I'm a woman who likes to have sex but doesn't want the commitment. Commitment is scary. It's a

trap. I've heard my parents argue a lot over the years, and that's one of the things my dad accused my mother of doing. She trapped him.

That's some scary shit.

Hayden says I'm in love with the *idea* of falling in love. I enjoy the chase. The rush and thrill of finding someone new. Once that's over, I'm done. I've lost interest.

Pretty sure she's right.

I'm also scared of what comes after the chase. I've never stuck around long enough to find out.

"You couldn't be so lucky," Hayden says with a laugh. When she notes my wounded look, her laughter dies. "I wasn't meaning it in a bad way, Gracie. It's just—whenever that big perv finds the woman he falls in love with, he's going to lavish her with so much attention, it's going to be unreal."

"You really believe that?" I can't imagine Caleb in love with anyone.

Just like I can't see it for myself either.

"I do," she says with a nod. "He's the type to fall hard. It's because he's in complete denial of his feelings. He thinks he's incapable of love."

"What? He told you that?" I'm in shock.

"No, I'm just making assumptions, though he's given me little clues. And Tony's told me things. Caleb is scared of his future. He thinks it's going to be boring."

"Caleb is the furthest thing from boring," I say with a little snort.

"Right? I know. But he truly believes he's going to simply settle for everything in life in the future, so why not live it up now?" Hayden shakes her head. "His logic is troublesome."

"I'll say."

The server chooses that moment to ask if we need refills and I let Hayden talk to her, the two of them carrying on a

conversation as if they know each other while I sit with my thoughts.

Caleb thinks he's boring? And that he's going to end up settling for a mediocre life? This doesn't sound like the Caleb I know. Why should he have to settle for anything? He can be whatever he wants—and whoever he wants—if he so chooses. Who convinced him that he can't?

This thought leads to more thoughts, and makes me realize I definitely need to approach him before I just show up at Mitchell's Landing screaming out, "Surprise!" when I see him.

He deserves to know.

THREE

CALEB

I'M KICKING it in my room, exhausted. Freshly showered. Jerked off in the shower too because why not. Work kicked my ass today and I'm ready to crash. I've got my AirPods in my ears and I'm listening to some jams with my eyes closed. My ceiling fan on high because even though it's only early June, it's hot as balls outside and the air conditioning in this apartment is subpar.

At least it works, so I shouldn't complain.

I'm drifting, thinking about absolutely nothing when there's a light knock on my door. I crack my eyes open, staring at the fan in the semi-darkness of my room. The blinds are closed but there's a light outside shining directly into my room. All night long.

Fucking sucks.

There's another knock, followed by a whispery voice.

"Caleb? Are you awake?"

Oh fuck. It's Gracie.

I sit up, shoving my fingers through my damp hair to push it into place before I yank my AirPods out of my ears. "Yeah, come in."

The door slowly creaks open and she's standing in the doorway, the light from her open bedroom door across the hall casting her in a silhouette. And what a silhouette it is. The girl has a bangin' body. I kind of can't get over it. I think it's her legs. They're so damn long. Like, how long would it take me

to kiss every square inch of them, huh? Hours, probably. What would it feel like to have them wrapped around me tight while I fucked her hard?

Pretty damn good, I'd bet.

"Were you sleeping?" she asks as she takes me in.

"Trying to," I admit. May as well keep it honest between us.

"Oh." She leans against the doorjamb, still watching me. Making me feel a little weird having her stare at me while I'm sitting in bed with just my boxers on. At least my comforter is draped over my lap so she can't see anything. Not that I'm ashamed or whatever, but I gotta keep the mystery going, ya know? "Can I talk to you? It can wait if you're too tired."

"No, come in. Sit down." I wave a hand toward my empty desk chair before I lean over and click on the lamp on my bedside table.

She glances around my room when the light switches on, curiosity all over her pretty face. She's taking it all in while I sit up in bed with a yawn, covering my mouth at the last second when I feel her gaze land on me.

"Your room is clean," she says, sounding surprised.

"I'm not a complete slob."

"No, you're not." She settles into the chair, her gaze never straying from mine. It's like she's looking into my eyes on purpose. As if she can't look at anything else for fear of being distracted. Or maybe that's me being hopeful that my bare chest gets her going. "I need to talk to you about something."

I brace myself, prepared for the worst. Girls make statements like that, and it always brings bad news. Something I don't want or need. "What is it?" I ask warily.

"Well, I got a job." She leans forward, her elbows resting on her knees, and my gaze drops—directly to her tits. Not that they're hanging out, but she does have a tank top on, and I can see the smooth skin of her chest, the pale pink lace of her bra, and the swell of her breasts against the lace.

Jerking my gaze from her chest, I stare into her eyes, checking for anger.

She doesn't look angry. Nope, she looks...nervous?

Huh.

"Where at?" I ask, my imagination going wild. Maybe she's going to work at a dispensary and has to warn me she can't give her friends discounts no matter how much I beg—because that would be cool, having a dispensary discount for weed.

Or fuck, maybe it's something worse. Maybe she's going to become a drug runner or some shit. Talk about risky—Gracie wouldn't do that. Oh wait, what if she's about to drop the bomb that she's gonna be a stripper? Girl could totally pull it off. I can only imagine her strutting out on a little stage in fuck me shoes with crystal stars covering her titties—

"Mitchell's Landing," she answers, ruining all the crazy possibilities running through my head.

"What? Get out of here. You're going to work at the fountain, huh?" Looks like she's coming over to my turf, and I don't have a problem with it. My first couple of summers working at Mitchell's, I messed around with a lot of the fountain girls that worked there at the time. Too many of them, really.

After the end of my second summer—and an epic blowup between me and one of the girls, who just so happened to be a year older and taught me everything I needed to know about going down on a girl—I vowed to never mess around with someone I work with ever again. Even though there's quite a bit of distance between the dock and the restaurant, it's not enough when you got a pissed-off girl gunning for you every chance she gets.

Yeah. No more work hookups. They end in disaster.

"No, not the fountain." Gracie slowly shakes her head, her gaze dropping to my chest. "On the dock," she tells my abs.

Oh shit. "You're going to be a dock girl?"

She rolls her eyes. "That is such an antiquated term. Isn't there something better you can call my position?"

See how fired up she gets when I just make a simple statement? She's got it out for me, I swear. Having her work with me is even more of a deterrent to not get with her. I don't need Gracie going into ferocious beast-mode and come gunning for me. "That's what we call all the girls who work on the dock."

"And what do they call you guys? The dock boys?" She lifts a brow and crosses her arms, on the defensive.

"Well...yeah."

She drops her arms to her sides, her face falling. Reminding me of a deflated balloon. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh." I scratch my chest, Gracie's eyes following every movement of my hand. Hmm. "That's cool, though. I can help you out with anything you need to know."

"I appreciate that. Thanks," she says, and I can tell she means it. I mean it too. I may give her endless shit, but I also like her. Gracie's cool. She's a straight up G—that's what we like to call her, and she acts like it annoys her when we say that, but I don't believe it. She has a good attitude and tolerates all of us, and we're not easy. "I just—I wanted to tell you before you found out by me just showing up in a few days without warning."

"That would've been a trip," I say in agreement.

"Right. And I didn't want you to be upset. I'm not trying to like, stalk you or anything. Eli is the one who suggested I look for a job on the lake," she says.

Thanks, Eli. I appreciate the suggestion, bro.

"I don't think you're a stalker, G," I say with a chuckle. She flat-out avoids me most of the time, so yeah. Definitely not stalking me.

Shit, I'd want her to, honestly.

"We're going to be spending a lot of time together," she says. "Living together. Working at the same place."

I nod, but don't say anything.

“And I know I was kind of a jerk for cutting you off a while ago, but I had to do it. To save my sanity,” she continues.

I frown. “I was driving you insane?”

She nods. Licks her upper lip. Sexy. Fuck. This girl...

I let myself check her out fully. Extra short shorts. The tank top with the low neckline that displays plenty of skin. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun and she has no makeup on her face. Just pretty, bare Gracie. No one sees this version much, but here she sits. In my room.

I can't read into it too much, though. I'm sure this interaction means nothing to her.

“Am I really that bad?” I ask when she still hasn't said anything.

“You love to antagonize me,” she says.

“It's all in good fun.”

One brow shoots up again. She's pretty good at that. “Making me angry is fun for you?”

“It's so easy. I only poke at you because you always react.” A dirty joke sits on the tip of my tongue but I swallow it down. “I'm a jerk. I know I am. I'm sorry I've driven you insane all this time.”

She seems taken aback by my apology. “Uh...thank you. I appreciate that. You know, I was hoping to talk to you so we could come to a truce.”

“A truce?”

“Let's try and keep things peaceful between us this summer. What do you think? I'll stay out of your business and you stay out of mine,” Gracie suggests.

“You think I'm too in your business?”

“Not really,” she says with a shrug. “But you know what I mean.”

I sort of don't, but I nod like I get it.

“And I’ll stay out of your way. You can do whatever you want, to whoever you want. I won’t judge.”

Is she talking about my sex life? “Were you judging me before?”

She’s quiet for a moment before she nods. “I have no room to talk though.”

Gracie has been with a few guys, just like I’ve been with my fair share of women. I definitely don’t judge her for it. I’m just like her in male form. “We’re good, G. No worries, okay? You come work at the dock, it’s cool. I’ll help you out with whatever you need. Hey, if we have the same shift, we should ride together and save on gas.”

A faint smile curls her lips. “That would be great. I need to work as much as possible this summer before I start student teaching. I need the money.”

“Me too.” I frown. “And that’s right. I forgot you were student teaching. You won’t be on campus anymore, huh?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Good thing we live together or else I’d miss your smiling face. Or scowling face, since that’s what you usually do when you see me,” I say as a joke.

Of course, she immediately scowls. “Saying that kind of thing is what’s annoying to me, Caleb.”

“I’m just speaking the truth and you know it.” I scratch my chest again, on purpose this time to see if her gaze trails my moving hand. Guess what?

It does.

See, here’s the thing. I know what’s up between us. I’m going to play it cool. We’re going to work together, and that’s nice. You need help, G? I’m here for you. Let’s ride together, so we’re stuck in a car alone for almost an hour one way, forced to make conversation. What a hardship.

I’m a good guy when it comes to Gracie. She just doesn’t realize it yet. I push, but never too hard. I know the moment we end up doing something, anything, I’ll bail on her. Or

she'll bail on me. We fall into a pattern every time we're together, and everyone is aware of it. My friends warned me to stay away from her from the very beginning, and I know for a damn fact that hers tell her to stay away from me, too.

But we're drawn to each other. Sexually attracted. Whatever you want to call it. It's been happening since the first time we met. And while we might be in total denial and act like it's not there, it is.

It's undeniable.

She's been checking me out since the moment she entered my bedroom. Not a lot of women see this bedroom either. It's my sanctuary, and as Eli announced a few months ago, I don't bring many bitches into it—direct quote.

If his girl heard him say that, she'd beat his ass, but that's beside the point.

The point I'm trying to make is Gracie is attracted to me. That hasn't changed. And I am attracted to her.

So what the hell is stopping us from doing something about it?

Our past behaviors. That cliché that old habits die hard fits when it comes to us.

“Whatever,” she says, exhaling loudly, reminding me that she's still in my sanctuary and she's still checking me out.

I'm tempted to flip the covers back and let her see me in my boxers, but she'd probably flip the fuck out and run out of the room screaming. I'm not going to chance it.

“Let's not start anything that's unnecessary,” I tell her, keeping my voice purposely calm. “I'm all for a truce. I know you are too. We can be civil toward each other. I don't need to make every comment I say to you filled with sexual innuendo.”

“You sure about that? I didn't think you were capable of not being a pervert,” she says, snarky as ever.

“Hey, where'd the truce go?” I lift my brows.

She blows out another breath, this time sounding frustrated—with herself. “Fine. You're right. I'll stop giving you shit if

you stop giving me shit. Deal?”

“Deal.” I hold out my hand for her to shake.

She stares at it for a moment before she lifts her gaze to mine.

“You want to shake on it?”

“What, you afraid to touch me?” I’m goading her. I can’t help it.

“No,” she spits out, rising to her feet. She stalks toward me, thrusting her hand out toward mine and I grab hold of it, giving her a firm shake. Keeping my grip on her hand for a few seconds too long.

Sparks ignite and start flying around us. Just from our clasping hands. She feels it too. I see it in the way her eyes widen the slightest bit and gooseflesh dots her chest. I slowly let go of her hand, keeping my fingers straight out so they slide across hers when she starts to pull away and she jerks her hand back as if I just pinched her.

“Uhh...” She clamps her lips shut and looks away.

Huh. Would you look at that. The unstoppable Gracie is at a loss for words.

“Deal,” I tell her, my voice extra soft, disguising the lethal edge.

Yeah. That was a deal all right. I think I just found a new project for the summer.

How long will it take to get Gracie in my bed?

FOUR

GRACIE

TIME IS LITERALLY FLYING. I've been at Mitchell's Landing for three weeks already, working five days a week, full-time hours out in the sun and let me tell you... I'm busting my ass out there every single day.

Dealing with customers. Happy ones, grumpy ones, flat-out angry ones. I've played that boating safety video so many times, I can already recite it word for word—and I've still got months to go. After being on the boat dock for eight hours straight, the world feels like it's in constant motion. As if I'm always walking on a boat that's rocking back and forth. That feeling does eventually go away once I'm off the clock though.

Thank God.

I'd hoped the girls in the fountain would be friendly toward me, and some of them are, don't get me wrong, but a lot of them don't like me because I work with the guys. Makes me wonder if they're jealous. They want to be the ones working with the boys on the dock—funny how they all call them boys, when more than a few of them are full-blown adults in their early twenties.

I've been asked multiple times how I got the job without any of them finding out the position was open in the first place. More than one person has asked me this question, and I don't have the answer. Michelle certainly never told me, and TJ, the dock manager, never mentioned it either.

I also had no idea my starting on the dock would cause so much drama, but oh well. I get why so many of the girls want to work on the dock. It's easy money. As in, they're up in the restaurant busting their ass all day, rushing around serving people, taking their orders, and cleaning up after everyone. While I'm chilling down at the dock, in my very own office—the other “dock girl” who works the shifts opposite of mine shares it with me—and I get to spend every work shift with the guys.

The very attractive, handsome guys who love to pull pranks and push each other in the water and jump off the roof of the dock office while twisting their bodies into somersaults, making me scream at the top of my lungs like a mother scolding her naughty children.

I screamed at Caleb like that, but I couldn't help it. Watching him jump off the roof scared the crap out of me. The lake isn't as deep this summer, thanks to the drought we're currently suffering through in California, and I worried if he landed wrong and oh, I don't know, broke his neck.

My yelling didn't matter though. His head popped out of the water within seconds, a giant grin on his stupidly handsome face, all the other guys cheering him on and encouraging him.

Hanging with Caleb and the boys is a true test of my patience, I swear.

These past three weeks though, we've been getting along for the most part. He's not giving me endless shit like he usually does, which is nice. We've even commuted together a couple of times, which okay yeah, I had to deal with him saying the normal wild and crazy things Caleb usually says, but for the most part, I can handle him. He's not as bad as he used to be, that's for sure. Maybe he's maturing?

So yes, he's being tame, save for the occasional sexy look he sends my way. And by sexy look, I mean the way his gaze scans over me as if he's imagining me naked. Maybe I send him the same look back, because I am constantly trying to figure out what he looks like naked. I've seen a lot of him already. He's always shirtless, like he has something against

wearing shirts. And his legs are a work of muscular art, covered in just enough hair to look manly without reminding me of Bigfoot.

Okay, that last thought is a tad cruel, but I'm trying to put forth a mental picture here.

Maybe that's just the way Caleb looks at all women all the time, but I swear to God, sometimes I catch him watching me, and I can read his expression. He's thinking about—things. Naked things. Between the two of us, and that can't be good.

Yeah, can't be good at all.

Currently, we're close to the end of our shift—it's one of those days when Caleb and I drove here together—and one of the girls who works in the restaurant is hanging out on the dock, trying to get Caleb's attention. She's a newbie like me, having started a couple of weeks before I did, and she's completely boy crazy, like a rabid fangirl over pretty much any guy she sees, specifically all the guys who work at Mitchell's. Considering she's almost twenty, I find her behavior a little over-the-top.

Since I'm twenty-two, I suppose there's a bigger age and maturity level difference between us than I originally thought. Two years can feel like a lot of time. Caleb is two years younger than me as well, but I swear he's acted more mature than usual lately, and it's refreshing.

Currently, I'm standing in front of the open window of my office that I use to first greet customers on the dock, watching in silent amusement as Caleb is trying his best to get away from this girl. Her name is Noelle. She's cute, I'll give her that. Petite and overly tan with light blue eyes that stand out against her sun-browned skin. Those eyes of hers are full of mischief. As if she'd be down for anything.

Pretty sure she'd be down for anything involving Caleb.

“Are you almost off, Caleb?” she asks as she follows him along the dock. That's one of her annoying habits. She constantly says his name, as if she enjoys the way the two syllables fall from her lips. It's Caleb this and Caleb that, and I

myself find it particularly irritating. So do the rest of the guys who work on the dock.

But they're also extremely grateful she's not chasing after them, so they tolerate it.

Caleb is struggling to find something to do, I can tell. He glances around at the mostly empty dock—we had a busy morning, pretty much every single boat and jet ski has been rented—and that little crease is forming between his eyebrows that I can't help but find cute.

I shouldn't find anything he does cute, but come on. There's a reason women flock to him. Caleb is gorgeous.

Noelle goes right up on him, practically standing on top of his feet, she's so close. He takes a step back as if he needs the distance, coming perilously close to stepping right off the dock and into the water.

I will burst out laughing if that happens.

"We should take out a boat someday, Caleb," she tells him, her voice ever so hopeful.

The expression on his face clearly states hell no, but he smiles. It's pitifully fake. "Probably not."

"Oh, I know! We could take a jet ski! That would be fun, don't you think, Caleb?" She's bouncing up and down, all excited at the idea of sharing a jet ski with him, her arms wrapped around his middle as she clings to him while he speeds across the water. I'm sure she's envisioning it right now.

I am too, until I tell myself to snap out of it.

"Don't you have to get back to work?" he asks, sounding pained. I love how he doesn't answer her questions. I love watching him visibly squirm. She makes him so uncomfortable.

"I just clocked out," she says. "What time are you off?"

"Ah, I close tonight," he says, like that's going to scare her away. Plus, it's a lie. We're about to clock out ourselves.

“We should get together after you’re off. What do you think? Go for a swim in the lake under the moonlight?” Her brows shoot up, her smile encouraging.

So hopeful.

“Ah, yeah I can’t make it,” he says, stalling.

“Why not, Caleb?”

I love that she won’t back down. Only because it’s bringing me joy, witnessing this.

“Because. I already have a girlfriend.” Caleb’s gaze finds mine and his eyes light up. It’s the craziest thing. Those baby blues of his just magically sparkle and shine, right as he says, “And there she is.”

He points straight at me.

I glance over my shoulder, like there will be another woman standing in the office behind me, but of course there’s not. He actually means *me*.

What the hell?

Noelle turns to look at me, a frown forming on her face. “Who are you again?”

“Gracie,” I answer, unsure of what else I should say. I certainly can’t call Caleb out for lying, and the fucker knows it.

The smirk on his face right now is annoying—and undeniably adorable.

Noelle continues to watch me, tilting her head to the side. “I didn’t know Caleb had a girlfriend.”

“We don’t like to brag about it,” Caleb says as he moseys his way toward me, putting all the swagger he can muster into his walk.

I watch him with narrowed eyes, ready for what he might do next. He strides right into my office and comes to stand next to me, slinging his arm around my shoulders and pulling me into his side. “Don’t we make a great couple, Noelle?”

She frowns, and I can tell she doesn't think we make a great couple at all. "This sucks," she tells Caleb, completely ignoring me. "I thought for sure you were single."

"Why did you think that?" Caleb asks, his arm tightening around my shoulders. Damn, he's strong. I can feel the muscles flexing in his arm, and he's so hot. All that heat is currently seeping into me, and I wish I could shrug him off.

But I don't want to blow his cover either. Why, I'm not sure.

"I asked around about you, Caleb. I heard you were the biggest player at this place," Noelle says, sounding disappointed that he might not be after all.

A smile curls my lips and I rest my hand lightly on the center of Caleb's chest as I say, "I tamed the beast."

He laughs, and I can feel the sound vibrating against my palm. I can also feel his heart rate ratchet up.

Interesting.

One of the other guys walks by and Noelle chases after him, not even bothering to say goodbye. Once she's out of earshot, I duck under Caleb's arm, relieved when I can't feel him surrounding me anymore.

"What the hell, Caleb?"

"I had to tell her something to get away from her," he says, a pleading look on his face. "I'm sorry to put you through all that, but it got her off my back."

"Right, and now she's going to go tell everyone we're together, when we're not," I point out, irritated at having to deal with a bunch of gossipy people talking about us behind our backs.

Because I know that's what's going to happen. People will talk. They'll gossip. It'll spread like wildfire that Caleb and I are dating, and some of them will resent me. They already do, so why not add one more thing to the mix, am I right?

Caleb shrugs. "Who cares? I doubt anyone listens to her anyway."

“I don’t know about that,” I say, hating how unsure I sound, but I can’t help it.

And I’m sure more people listen to her than he thinks.

We spend what’s left of our shift avoiding each other, which isn’t difficult. A few of the other guys who work on the dock cluster together, whispering amongst themselves, and I get the sense that they’re talking about us. Maybe it’s the way they turn and stare at me every few minutes that gives them away.

I’m not sure.

Once the second shift shows up, Caleb and I head up to the restaurant together, where we have to clock out. I can tell he wants to say something the entire walk, but I remain silent, frustration rippling through me. Doesn’t help that when we enter the building, all heads swivel in our direction, curiosity in their gazes.

Looks like Noelle has already started spreading the rumor that Caleb and I are together. We probably shouldn’t have walked in at the same time to clock out, but too late to worry about that now.

Caleb lingers to talk to a few of them while I go back outside, standing on the front porch and staring out at the lake. A bunch of little kids sit on the bench that’s right by the entrance, all of them licking furiously at their melting ice cream cones. Their faces are messy and they smell like sunscreen, which isn’t a bad thing. Their skin gleams pink from the sun and I watch them, smiling faintly.

I like kids a lot. This is why I’m excited to be a teacher. I think they’re funny and smart and I love how honest they are, especially the younger ones. I’ll be student teaching in a third-grade classroom for the upcoming school year, though I really want to teach kindergarten or first graders once I find an actual job. Hayden and I both prefer the younger grades. They’re sweeter. More innocent. They’re also more dependent and not always as focused, but I can deal with that.

“Oh hey, there you are,” Caleb says when he exits the building. “You okay?”

I glance over at him. “They’re all talking about us.”

He frowns. “You think so?”

I nod. “Definitely. And now they all hate me even more than they did when they didn’t think I was your girlfriend.”

“They don’t hate you.”

“They’re not very friendly, Caleb. They feel like I stole the dock girl job from them,” I say.

“They couldn’t all be dock girls,” he points out, which is true but still.

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

We head down the steps at the same time, in sync as we turn toward the back of the building where Caleb parked this morning. I sort of hate how in sync we are. Again, it’s as if we really are a couple. Is this some sort of sign that we should give it a try?

Ugh, no. I can’t give us a try. He’ll fuck with my heart, I know it. This is a guy who views life as one big joke. And getting with girls is an endless party. He will use me—and use me well, I’m sure of it—I’ll fall for him and then he’ll leave me behind. It’ll hurt more with Caleb because I’ll still have to see him. Deal with him. Work with him.

Live with him.

I should’ve never listened to Eli. His idea was so stupid. Move in with us, he said. You’ll save rent and feel safe living with two guys, he said.

Living with Caleb doesn’t make me feel safe at all. He makes me feel unsure and nervous. He makes me want something I shouldn’t. He makes me feel a lot of emotions I don’t understand, and can’t explain.

Men in general are users. This is why I became one myself, I think. Beat them at their own game, so to speak. Watching my mother suffer through my father’s antics over the years—lying and cheating, just to name a few—made me realize I don’t want that kind of life. It’s better to keep them at an arm’s

length than let them get too close. I can flirt and fall for them just like anyone else, but that's it. That's as far as I'll let it go.

Caleb pulls his keys out of his pocket and hits the unlock button. I climb into the car, wincing at the stifling heat, pressing my body against the passenger door once I've closed it, hoping for distance from him.

But it's impossible. He climbs into the car and eats up all the space. He's big and broad and difficult to ignore, especially in the close confines of his vehicle. He should be driving a truck. Or a SUV. Something big with plenty of space so my arm doesn't brush against his every time I move.

"Why are you looking like you're going to hop out of the car at any moment?" he asks me once he's pulled out of the parking lot and we're on the road headed home.

"What do you mean?" I try to ignore the slight pain I'm currently experiencing with my shoulder slammed against the door.

"Afraid I'm going to touch you?" He reaches toward me, wagging his fingers in my direction. I recoil from them and his hand immediately returns to the steering wheel. "Get over it, G. No one's around to see us."

I push away from the door and slump in my seat, crossing my arms and huffing out a breath. Acting like a baby, which kind of sucks, but I can't help it. What is it about this guy that makes me behave so...ridiculously? "Why did you have to tell Noelle we were together?"

"Is it really that big of a deal?" He grips the steering wheel tight. "That chick is persistent. I couldn't shake her. I haven't been able to shake her for like a week, and I was desperate. I saw you watching us like you thought what she was doing to me was funny, and I decided to draw you into it."

"So you did it on purpose."

"Only to save my ass."

"Right, but now, I'm tortured too! That's kind of messed up, Caleb. You don't think about what you do and how it affects other people. You just—do things, and it doesn't matter if it

hurts them or not. Now I'm left dealing with a bunch of girls who don't like me because I'm supposedly dating their dream man," I say, my voice rising.

"I'm really their dream man?" The fucker actually has the nerve to sound pleased by this revelation.

I glare at him. Is he really that oblivious? I don't think so. He just wants the accolades. "That's not the point I'm trying to make. And of course, you're their dream man. You know this."

"No, I didn't know this. Actually, I don't believe it," he says, his lips curled upward. Oh, he looks so pleased.

I kind of want to sock him in his pretty, stupid face.

"We're not having this conversation. I'm not going to tell you how great they think you are just to stroke your ego," I practically spit at him.

"Huh. I can think of a few things you could stroke," he says, his tone vaguely suggestive.

That's it. This time, I do hit him, slugging him in the arm, which is totally ineffective and I end up hurting myself because damn, his biceps are solid as a rock and now my knuckles are smarting.

"Ow, what was that for?" He rubs at his arm, sending me a wounded look, and maybe I did actually hurt him. Huh. I'm stronger than I thought.

"I knew the real Caleb was hiding in there somewhere," I say, discreetly massaging my sore knuckles. "I can't believe it took almost a month for you to reveal yourself. Talk about restraint."

"You're lucky I've been holding back. You've given me way too many opportunities to say something inappropriate. I just bit my damn tongue every time you did," he says, sounding irritated.

"You're gross," I toss at him.

"And you're a prude," he throws back, though he has to know this isn't true.

Judgey asshole.

We sit in angry silence for a solid ten minutes. Me scrolling through my phone, even though reception is for shit through this part of the drive and the only thing that will load are text messages. Not like I have many.

Caleb remains focused on the road, his jaw clenched, his mouth formed into a deep frown. He's mad. Which is fine because guess what?

So am I.

"I didn't mean to pull you into my drama," he finally says to me, his gaze still on the road, his voice tight, edged with irritation. "I saw you watching us, and it seemed like the logical thing to tell her. That you're my girlfriend. I wanted her off my back."

A sigh escapes me. This is probably as close to an apology as I'm going to get. "Well, it worked. She left you alone."

He sends me a quick glance. "They'll talk about us for a few days, but then some new drama will happen and they'll forget all about it, G. I promise."

I see the sincerity in his blue eyes, accompanied by a hint of remorse. He feels bad for telling Noelle I'm his girlfriend? Good. He should. "You owe me."

Caleb raises his brows. "What do I owe you?"

"Dinner," I say without hesitation, my stomach growling.

"You should've grabbed something before we left," he says.

Gross. I'm over the food at Mitchell's already. That's the last thing I want. "I want Mexican food."

"You want me to buy you dinner?" He doesn't sound opposed to the idea, so I take this as a positive sign.

"I do," I say without hesitation, visualizing chips and salsa and a giant margarita. "I definitely want you to buy me dinner, Caleb. And a drink. Maybe two."

"I'm not twenty-one yet," he says.

“You will be soon,” I remind him, knowing for a fact that he turns twenty-one in August.

“Right and your birthday is in February,” he says. “You’ll be twenty-three.”

It should not charm me that he remembers my birthday. It shouldn’t charm me at all.

“I’ve always liked older women,” he continues. “They’ve shown me a thing or two over the years.”

I roll my eyes. Hard. “Gross. You just ruined everything.”

“Did that get me out of buying you dinner?” He sounds hopeful.

“Nope. You’re still on the hook for buying me some tacos and a margarita,” I say.

“Damn,” he mutters, but he doesn’t sound upset. Not at all.

I think he’s pleased.

FIVE

CALEB

YET ANOTHER ARGUMENT with Gracie that felt more like foreplay. Is she really that pissed I told Noelle we were a couple?

Yeah, okay. Probably. But shit, what was I supposed to do? That girl wouldn't get off my dick. She was practically planning our wedding. I had to say something to stop her from chasing after me.

Looks like declaring Gracie as my girlfriend might've done the trick.

We argued, but now Gracie is happy with me paying for her margarita, which she is currently sucking down like a champ. We're at the Mexican restaurant of her choice, a place I've never been to, but I'm digging the chips and salsa so I'm good.

The restaurant is busy, and there are big screen TVs everywhere, broadcasting the same baseball game. The San Francisco Giants, the local favorite. "I used to play baseball," I say to Gracie.

Her gaze fills with interest. "Really? When?"

"Started out playing T-ball. Played league for a while. Even played the first two years of high school, but quit after my sophomore year. Got tired of it. Wanted to focus on football instead," I explain before I grab another chip and dunk it in salsa.

"Were you any good?" she asks.

I grin. "I was fucking great, if you must know. My coach tried to convince me to stay on the team, but I wouldn't."

"You could've continued both and been a double threat," she points out.

"It was a lot of work. Too many practices. I wanted to have fun the last two years in high school. Not practice all the time," I admit.

"Hmm. Well, I guess this is where I admit I played basketball," she tells me, her expression vaguely mortified.

"No shit?" This doesn't surprise me. She's pretty athletic. She runs a lot in the early morning, though I'm not a fan of that. More that I don't want her to get hit by a car or attacked by some creep or whatever.

Gracie nods. "In middle school and most of high school. I was on the track team too. I lettered in track all four years."

"You weren't a cheerleader?"

"No. Sorry to ruin that fantasy," she says with a smile, just before she reaches for that drink again. Her glass is half empty and the margarita was huge in the first place, so girl is gonna get lit here real soon. And Gracie is always a good time when she's got alcohol in her.

"You'd look good in a short skirt," I tell her, not holding back.

"I look even better in short shorts and a tank, running like a beast around the track," she says with a laugh. "I was fast."

"I bet." She's always running away from me, that's for damn sure.

"I'm still fast."

"I don't doubt you. You're also pretty strong." I've seen her out on the dock. Most girls are afraid to move the boats because it means they have to drive them, and some of the pontoon boats are huge. Long.

Like my dick.

Damn, I even make crude jokes in my head.

Gracie hasn't hesitated once out on the dock. We were crazy busy last Saturday with all the boats coming back in, and we needed help because we were falling behind. She jumped right in and steered one of the bigger patio boats we rent out straight into its slip. I was impressed. All the guys were. We paused in the middle of whatever we were doing and burst into applause once she jumped off the boat, and I even whistled at her.

She smiled and bowed, looked awfully pleased with herself.

"Thanks," she says with a smile, her hands curved around her giant glass. "You're pretty strong too. Do you work out?"

She bats her eyelashes at me, and I know she's kidding.

"We start conditioning next month," I tell her and when she frowns, I continue, "the football team."

"Will that cut into your work hours?" she asks.

"I'll just have to rearrange my schedule. It'll get really busy, juggling both, but I don't have a choice," I say. "I need the money."

"I get it. I need the money too," she says with a sigh.

This is what we have in common, Gracie and me. Besides the whole we can't commit thing, we also come from middle-class families. Normal families who make average incomes and do average things. It was easy for me to be jealous of one of my best friends when we were in high school. Jake Callahan comes from money and fame, with his mega rich ex-NFL quarterback dad, and he had everything he could ever want. Constant access to exclusive football training, besides the natural ability he inherited from his father. Plus, Jake always had the best clothes, the best car, the best everything.

I resented him for it for a while, though I never talked about my feelings to anyone. I know our friend Diego resented him too. He comes from even less money than I do. But Jake never acted like a jackass around us. He never bragged either. Hell, he shared his wealth, and his father was cool enough to take the time to actually coach us. I learned a lot from Drew Callahan. He's still coaching our high school football team,

though that's also because baby Callahan is currently on the team.

Talk about lucky, having *the* Drew Callahan coaching us.

That's how I turned my head around. I wasn't jealous anymore. I took advantage where I could. And I realized Jake Callahan was a dope friend who took care of his crew no matter what. He became one of my closest friends. Man do I miss that guy.

We all do. He's currently at USC, killing it as their star quarterback. He'll be drafted by the NFL for sure.

"I bet you were ridiculous in high school," Gracie says, propping her elbow on the table and resting her chin on top of her fist as she contemplates me. "A complete player. Popular. All the girls chased after you."

"Wrong," I say. "I chased after the girls."

"I'm sure it was a mutual thing," she says.

I shrug, but don't say anything. Honestly, I was awful. In the early years of high school, I went through pretty much all the girls in our class, making them mad or frustrated or they'd end up flat-out hating me. With the exception of Baylee, who I messed around with on the side the entirety of our senior year, never once admitting to anyone that we were together.

We really weren't, though. It wasn't a real relationship at all. Just a bunch of sneakin' around and me getting some where I could. Kept that up in college too, though not as frequently.

"I'm sure you were the hot girl at your school," I tell Gracie and she starts laughing hysterically. To the point that I have to wait her out, watching as she laughs and laughs, clutching her sides until she finally dies down.

"No. I was definitely not the hot girl in high school," she tells me, her voice firm. "I kept to myself. I was pretty shy. And I had one serious boyfriend my senior year. That's it."

I immediately hate this guy, and I don't even know who he is. "What was his name?"

“Aaron,” she admits. “We were together for a while. Most of senior year.”

“What happened?”

“He broke up with me right after Valentine’s Day, the prick. He said he wanted to end it then before we left for college, and that he wanted to be free for the rest of senior year,” she says.

“What a dick,” I mutter.

“Right? Especially since he went to prom with Bella Moretti.” She scowls. Clearly, Bella Moretti sucks. I bet she’s a hottie though, with a name like that. “They were basically together the entirety of the summer after we graduated, only for her to dump him when she went to UCLA. His explanation for breaking up with me was clearly an excuse.”

I nod, rubbing my chin, smiling up at the server who drops off a fresh basket of tortilla chips before dashing off. “Was that your only serious relationship? Or have you had more?”

“Only that one,” she admits. “After that, I told myself I didn’t need anything serious. I became a new person in college. Part of that is thanks to Hayden. She really brought me out of my shell.”

“Hayden’s a trip,” I say.

“She’s the best friend I’ve ever had,” Gracie admits with a faint smile.

“You two together are terrifying,” I admit.

Gracie frowns. “What do you mean? Do we scare you?”

“Hell yes,” I say without hesitation. “I wouldn’t mess with the two of you, that’s for sure.”

“Aww, the big bad football player scared of two strong women,” she teases with a glint in her eyes. “We do know how to make your life a living hell, Caleb.”

“I know. That’s why I steer clear of you two,” I say, meaning every word.

“You really don’t though,” she points out. “You bug me constantly. As if you enjoy taunting me on a regular basis.”

Should I admit I enjoy taunting her? “You’re easy to bug, G. You get all riled up.”

“People say we argue all the time because we secretly want each other,” she says, her voice light. Like it’s no big deal what she just said.

But her words render me frozen, my mind going a mile a minute.

Yes, I think she wants me, but she’s never flat-out said something like that before.

Hmm.

The server chooses that moment to return to our table with our food, and Gracie orders another margarita.

“You sure about that?” I ask her.

She sends me a look. “You don’t want to pay for another one?”

“That’s not the point. It’s a big drink, G. You really think you can handle another one?” I ask.

“Hell yes.” She smiles up at the server, who laughs. “Make it a double.”

“Please don’t do that,” I tell the server, who keeps laughing. “Just make her a normal one.”

“Will do,” the server says, her gaze flirtatious when it meets mine. I flash her a quick smile and look away, not interested.

Wait a second. What the fuck? What’s wrong with me?

The moment the server is gone, I’m shoving half my taco into my mouth, mulling over what Gracie said, and how I could bring the subject back up.

Then again, why would I want to do that? Am I ready to talk about this with Gracie? She could shut me down with a few choice words, and I’d have to forget about ever getting a chance with her.

And do I *really* want a chance with her? Or am I just out to fuck her once and be done?

“You’re looking at me as if you want to eat me like that taco,” Gracie says, leaning over to casually slurp on the straw in her mostly empty drink.

I hold back any talk of eating her actual taco and study her, still wondering exactly how I should respond to her.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea,” she continues. “You eating my taco.”

Nice to know she caught her own reference. “Why not?”

“We’d be bad together.”

Fuck no, we would not. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m too old for you. I’m about to embark on my career while you’re still playing around, trying to figure out what you want to do with your life,” she says.

I take immediate offense to that. “You make me sound like a kid.”

She raises a brow, just before she shoves a chip in her mouth.

“I’m all man, baby,” I tell her, sounding like the biggest cheeseball ever, and she bursts out laughing.

“Oh, I’m sure you are, Caleb. But I’m not impressed by the size of your dick or all the moves you could make on my, ahem, taco,” she says, still laughing. “You’re still a kid up here.” She taps her temple.

“You’re judging me because I don’t know what I want to do with my life?” I started college with my major undeclared and my counselor kind of forced my hand. I figured business was just about as general as you could get, so I went for it.

Now I’ve taken all of these bullshit classes about international business and world economics or whatever the fuck, and I have no idea what I’m doing, or if it’s going to apply to what I end up doing with my life. I don’t envision myself as an international businessman. I can see Tony doing that, but not me.

Never me.

“No, I’m judging you for still acting like a kid,” she says, just as she takes a vicious bite out of her taco.

“I’m only twenty,” I remind her.

“And I’m almost twenty-three,” she returns.

“You’re, like, six months from that. Just like I’m only a few months from twenty-one.”

“I’m about to start teaching.”

“Student teaching,” I stress.

“Same diff.” She shrugs. “I’m pretty much done with college. I’m not getting any younger. I suppose I should look for someone...solid.”

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Husband potential,” she says plainly.

That word makes my balls shrivel up. *Husband*. Please. I am not ready for that. Not even close. And honestly? I don’t think she is either. She’s just trying to scare me or whatever.

“Have fun finding your husband then,” I say, taking a sip of my iced tea. “Hope you find him soon, so you two can settle down and eventually lead a very boring life together.”

“My life is not going to be boring,” she says, full of irritation.

“Right. Keep telling yourself that as you teach the same bunch of brats every day, year in and year out. Going home to your nice guy who wears a suit and glasses to work, who’s slightly balding, but not enough to be too obvious, and already has a paunch around the middle thanks to his desk job and a penchant for too many IPAs on the weekends,” I continue, warming up to the idea of Gracie’s future.

Not that I want Gracie to get married to some chubby fuck who bores her. It’s more that I can envision this for myself too. I’ll be the balding, chubby fuck with a penchant for too many IPAs on the weekends. This is my biggest fear.

Mediocracy.

I want something more out of life. Something big. Something meaningful. I just don't know what it is yet.

"You're a dick," she says, her upper lip curled into a sneer. "What's so wrong in finding comfort in the mundane, huh? So what if my husband is balding and has a slight paunch?"

"Gracie." I lean across the table, staring into her eyes. I wish I could figure out what color they are exactly. Right now, they burn a bright golden brown. "You talk about him as if he already exists. I made that guy up."

"I know you did," she says. "But you make it sound so awful, when it's really not, Caleb. Steadiness can be a good thing."

"Or a boring thing. And you're anything but boring, G."

We're quiet as we continue eating, and I can tell she's thinking about something. The server stops by with her fresh margarita and she grabs for it eagerly, taking a healthy sip. She finishes one taco then starts on another one. I polish everything on my plate, not a crumb left behind.

Still, she doesn't speak. Neither do I.

I'm waiting her out. Plus, I'm tired. With food in my belly, I'm ready to go home, take a shower, and crash.

"You really think I'm anything but boring?" she finally asks, her voice soft, her eyes not blazing as brightly as they were only a moment before.

I realize this could be the moment of no return. A shift in our relationship. I could say the right thing, and next thing you know, she's all over me. It would be so easy. We'd go at it, and I'd give her an epic orgasm. She'd probably make me come hard too. It's been a while since I've been with a chick. Longer than usual for me. I've been so busy I haven't had a chance to go find a random to mess around with.

Plus, the idea of that isn't appealing, which is scary and weird, but I don't have time to worry about that right now.

"I definitely think that," I say, keeping it simple. I could've added some flowery words or a crude innuendo. Instead, I treat her like a friend. I give her respect.

Something I can admit, I've lacked when it comes to females.

Her smile is small, yet brilliant. Stunning. She is beautiful. A little crazy, let's be real. Constantly chasing after guys. Chasing after everything she wants. I like that about her. She's bold. Unafraid.

"Every time I think you're completely hopeless, you go and say something sweet or endearing, and you make me change my mind," she murmurs.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"I'm trying to tell you that I think you have potential, Caleb," she says, that smile still on her face. "You can be so much more."

"More than what?"

"More than you give yourself credit for."

SIX

GRACIE

I'M DRUNK.

Not falling down sloppy drunk. And not seeing double, unfocused drunk either. Though, would it be such a bad thing, seeing double of Caleb? No, that wouldn't suck. It wouldn't suck at all. He's so pretty.

But I am buzzing pretty hard. I feel loose. As in loose in my limbs, my muscles. My tongue. I want to say things. I want to tell Caleb I think he's pretty. Would he be offended? Probably. Boys don't want to be called pretty. They're too manly for such a feminine word.

We're still at the restaurant, our plates long gone, a half-full basket of chips in between us, Caleb still dunking the occasional one in salsa and munching on it. Like a bad habit he can't quit.

Hmm, that's an interesting analogy. I should think of Caleb like that. He's a bad habit I can't quit. I don't want to quit him. Arguing with him is stimulating. He gets my juices flowing, and I like it. I like him.

I frown. No, I don't like him. I don't. He's annoying. He's also a complete player who couldn't be serious with a woman even if someone held a gun to his head and told him he had to be. I bet he'd mess it up somehow and bam, he'd be dead.

God, my thoughts are morbid when I've had a little too much to drink. I need to stop. I need to go to bed and wake up sober. Banish these Caleb-filled thoughts of mine.

“I’m tired,” he says as he polishes off his third giant glass of iced tea. “You ready to leave?”

I slurp up the dregs of my margarita, longing for another one. Knowing I can’t have anymore or else I’ll be full-blown drunk. Sloppy. Unfocused.

“Sure,” I say with a small hiccup, blinking him back into focus. No double Calebs in front of me. Such a bummer. He’s so cute. And hot. Look at his shoulders. At his arms. At his broad chest and square jaw and thick hair and blue eyes with the long, thick lashes.

What is wrong with me? I get some tequila in my system and suddenly I’m hot for Caleb?

Oh, let’s be real, shall we. You’ve been hot for Caleb since that first time you met him at Strummers and thought he was a complete dickwad.

I shove that know-it-all little voice inside my head to the far corner of my brain and tell it to shut up.

I slide out of the booth, wobbly on my feet, and Caleb is right behind me, grabbing hold of my arm and keeping me steady. I send him a grateful smile and he basically leads me out of the restaurant, his hold tight the entire time. I notice all the women who swivel their heads with their admiring gazes as he walks by, and I feel stupidly proud to be seen with him.

See? I can snag this pretty boy and you can’t, is what I want to tell them. Which is rude, I know this, but I can’t help it.

And I really didn’t *snag* him. He’s not mine to snag. I need to calm down.

We approach his car and he holds the door open for me, making sure I get inside in one piece. “I told you, you shouldn’t have had that second margarita,” he says, sounding like a scolding parent.

“Sorry, dad,” I say, my head lolling against the seat.

His lips form a thin line and he slams the passenger door shut before he rounds the car and gets into the driver’s seat. I quietly watch him as he starts the engine and backs the car out

of the space. I continue watching as he guns it through the parking lot, driving like a madman, his focus one hundred percent on the road, never straying toward me.

I can't stop watching, my mouth going dry, my imagination going haywire. There are so many things I would do to this man if given the chance.

"You're pretty," I blurt.

He glances over at me, frowning. "What did you just say?"

"I think you're pretty." I pronounce each word slowly, making sure he heard me. "Your face."

He actually grins. "My face?"

I nod enthusiastically. "Everything about you, really."

"Are you complimenting me, Gracie?"

"I am. You're pretty and you know it." A sigh leaves me and I turn to stare out the window as the buildings pass by. "Too bad you ruin it all by opening your mouth."

"How do I ruin it when I open my mouth? Most girls like it when I do that," he says with a naughty smile.

I angle my whole body in his direction, pointing at him. "That right there is how you ruin it. By saying rude, vulgar things."

"It's called innuendo."

"It's called turning everything dirty, even when it's unnecessary."

We come to a stop at a light and he turns to look at me, his gaze narrowed. "What's wrong with turning things dirty? I thought you liked it dirty."

My brows shoot up. "How do you know I like anything dirty?"

He studies me, his gaze so intense, I almost start to squirm in my seat. "I get the feeling you like a lot of dirty things, G. It just makes you uncomfortable to talk about them because you want to *do* those dirty things. With me."

I'm about to deny what he just said but the light turns green and he presses hard on the gas. So hard, my chest jerks against

the seatbelt. My curiosity piqued, I ask, “What sort of dirty things do you like?”

“I asked you first,” he says.

“Nope. You definitely did not,” I say firmly. “Tell me, Caleb. I want to know.”

“Okay. I love it when a girl gives me a blow job on her knees and makes eye contact when my dick is in her mouth,” he says, so casually while I’m over here sputtering.

Envisioning some other bimbo on her knees in front of Caleb with her mouth full of his cock. Yeah, no.

“I love it when a guy goes down on me,” I throw back at him, trying to scrub the image of Caleb with another girl from my brain. “I like it when he sucks my clit and finger fucks me at the same time.”

“Whoa, G!” He actually sounds shocked.

“TMI?” I giggle. And I never giggle.

“Keep going. I like TMI.”

I roll my eyes. “You would.”

“I like it when a girl sits on my face,” he says.

“I like sitting on guys’ faces.”

“I like fucking standing up. Girl pressed against the wall, her legs wrapped tight around my hips. Something about that angle.” He hums, and the sound hits me right between the thighs.

My skin warms at the description. No guy has ever fucked me against a wall. Caleb could support my weight. He’s strong. The muscles in his arms are a work of art. “I just like getting fucked.”

He laughs. “Gracie. You should drink tequila more often. It’s like truth serum.”

“You just want me to blab all my secrets.”

“Definitely,” he says without hesitation. “I do have one major question for you.”

“What is it?” I roll the window down, letting the warm night air flow into the car.

But it’s still too damn hot outside so I immediately roll the window back up.

“How many?”

“How many what?” I glance over at him.

“How many guys have you been with, G?”

“How many girls have you been with, C?” I throw back at him.

“I asked first.”

Damn it, he really did this time.

I sit there and calculate, silently counting them up in my head.

“Actual sex partners?”

I need some clarification here.

“Yeah. Guys you’ve had sex with,” he reaffirms.

“Penetrative or just messing around?”

He chuckles. “Let’s go for the whole enchilada. Penetration only. Does that change the number drastically?”

I say nothing because it does.

“It does for me,” he continues.

“Oh, so you’ve had sex with guys?” I’m teasing him.

“No, I don’t swing that way,” he says. “What about you? You ever mess around with girls?”

“Hayden and I made out once,” I tell him, immediately hating how honest tequila makes me.

His eyes look like they’re ready to bug out of his head. “That would’ve been a sight to see.”

“Picture it. Freshman year. Frat party. Hayden and I get super drunk. Some frat boys are playing truth or dare, and we join them. Hayden took the dare, and they dared us to kiss. With open mouths and tongues. We were drunk enough that we did

exactly that.” I start giggling all over again when I see the wondrous expression on Caleb’s face.

“Does Tony know about this?” Caleb asks, clearing his throat. “Uh...interaction between you two?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Hayden told him. Maybe not.” I shrug.

“How was it?” he asks.

“How was what?”

“Kissing Hayden?”

“Oh. Nice. Soft. Girls are softer.” I laugh because I know I’m torturing him. “You like soft kisses, Caleb?”

“I’m not much of a kisser.” He pulls into our apartment parking lot, and I’m a little disappointed. I was so enjoying this crazy conversation.

“Wait a minute.” I turn to look at him as he steers the car into an empty spot. “You don’t like kissing?”

“I like it, but I said I’m not much of a kisser. Kissing is...” He stops, seemingly at a loss for words.

“Kissing is what?” I prompt.

“So personal.” He puts the vehicle in park and cuts the engine before his gaze finds mine. “Girls read too much into kissing.”

“Caleb.” My voice is soft and he leans in a little, as if he needs to hear what I’m about to say. “Kissing is the absolute best. Why would you avoid it?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, uncomfortable. “Like I said, it’s personal. I make out with a girl, next thing I know she thinks she should start planning our wedding.”

“Your ego is ginormous,” I tell him without hesitation.

“I know. But fuck, G. It’s true. I’m not looking to fall in love. I’m looking to get off. And kissing a girl is—romantic.” He makes a face the moment the word leaves his lips.

“You’re not a romantic?” I already know this about him. I’m just giving him grief.

“Hell to the no.”

“So you don’t like kissing?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it. I just don’t do it much,” he corrects.

I’m suddenly filled with the urge to kiss him. He has a beautiful mouth. Big, pillowy lips. His lower lip is plumper than the upper one, and they kind of form a natural pout that is so adorable.

Adorably kissable.

“That should be outlawed,” I say with absolute conviction.

“What, kissing?”

I shake my head. “Not kissing. People *should* kiss! It’s the best thing. I love kissing a man. Tongues and lips and sighs and moans.” A sigh leaves me as I sink into the seat, trying to come up with the memory of a really good, delicious kiss, but I’m drawing a blank. All I can focus on is Caleb’s lips and what they might taste like. “When you kiss someone for the first time and a thrill ripples through you as you learn each other. Don’t you want to know what a girl tastes like?”

“This conversation is getting stranger and stranger,” he says, avoiding my question.

I lightly smack his arm, my fingers grazing his bare skin. He’s firm and warm and solid as a damn rock. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

He studies me, sliding his tongue along his lower lip slowly, like he’s assessing me as his next meal. It’s sexy. Even with his confession that he doesn’t kiss much, I am tempted to do exactly that. Kiss him. Taste him. Nibble his lower lip. Suck on his tongue. Whatever.

“When it comes to you, I know I’m missing pretty much everything,” he says, his voice low. “Which is a damn shame.”

The air in the car becomes charged with his admission. My entire body pulls taut like a wire stretched too tight. Air lodges in my throat and I wait for him to say something. Do something.

He remains still, as if he's waiting for me to make the next move, and I realize our standoff is the perfect assessment of our entire relationship. This is what we do. We wait for the other person to make a move. And when it doesn't happen?

We let it go. Until the next time we're in this same predicament.

And we will be—in this predicament. It's just what we do.

"This is a bad idea," I whisper, not exactly sure what I'm referring to.

"You say that a lot." He reaches out, his hand hanging between us for a moment. Should he, or shouldn't he?

He goes with should, and that hand grazes my cheek, sliding into my hair on the left side of my head, his long fingers threading through the strands. I brace myself, scared I'll melt into a puddle at his first touch but somehow, I remain upright. Only my breathing accelerates, my heart rate speeding up.

I blink up at him, unable to see anything else but Caleb and his blue eyes and his sensual mouth. That mouth promises all sorts of things. I wouldn't mind feeling it all over my body. Between my legs. Oh yes. He would know just what to do...

He leans in, his mouth hovering above mine, and I mock gasp. "Are you going to actually kiss me?"

"No," he murmurs, his lips brushing mine when he speaks. "I don't kiss girls, remember?"

"This girl is going to kiss you," I say in warning just as I shift forward, forcing our lips to connect.

A bolt rushes through me at first contact. Yep, that luscious mouth feels just as good as it looks. His lips are soft, and he purses them the slightest bit, breaking the kiss almost reluctantly as he slowly pulls away.

"You shouldn't have done that," he whispers, his fingers curling into my hair.

I scowl at him. "Why the hell not?"

He doesn't answer me with words.

Instead, he kisses me again, and he takes it deep. Deeper. I open for him without hesitation, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, making me edge closer, wanting to get near him. I tangle my tongue with his, the kiss turning dirty in an instant, because it's Caleb. And it's me. The two of us together.

I grip his shoulder with one hand, my fingers tugging on the soft fabric of his Mitchell's T-shirt. I can feel the heat of his skin. The hard ridge of muscle beneath. I want to touch more. I want bare skin and mouths and hands everywhere and moans filling the car. I want to climb on top of him and see what he does next.

I have the distinct feeling that no matter what Caleb does to me in a situation like this, it would never, ever disappoint.

He breaks the kiss first. Again. Breathing heavily, his wide chest rising and falling in an accelerated rhythm that my own chest matches. I crack my eyes open to find him already watching me, his lips damp and swollen, his gaze roving over my face as if he's actually seeing me for the first time. He pulls his hand out of my hair and I'm disappointed at the loss, which is silly.

Silly but true.

"What the fuck, Gracie?" he asks, his voice harsh.

I frown. He sounds... mad? "What?"

"We can't kiss."

"Oh, we definitely can," I say with a snort, reaching for him again but he dodges away from me.

"No, we can't. I can't do this with you." He opens the car door and climbs out in a hurry and I watch in disbelief as he walks away, his long legs taking him pretty far in a short amount of time. I remain in his car, unmoving, watching as he heads for our apartment, only for him to stop in the middle of the sidewalk, throwing his head back so he can stare up at the sky.

In the city we can't see the stars. Where I grew up, I never really saw the stars ever. Up at Mitchell's, on the lake, we see them every single night when we work late, and they are

wondrous. The night sky is a mystery, just like this man is a mystery to me, and I wish I could figure him out.

I wonder if he wishes the same thing in regards to me.

Slowly he turns and heads back toward his car, me still sitting inside. He comes to the passenger side and opens the door, ducking his head so he can look into my eyes. “Let’s go, Gracie.”

I get out of the car, still wobbly, and he grabs hold of my arm, his grip gentle. Steadying. He locks the car and steers me toward the sidewalk that leads to our apartment, not saying a word. I walk beside him, my mouth still tingling from the sensation of his lips on mine.

It was a good kiss. A solid kiss. But nothing too outrageous. Truthfully? I’ve had sexier kisses. In fact, I can guarantee Caleb can do a better job than that. There was something about him just now that made me sense he was holding back.

Holding himself in.

Maybe it would always be that way with Caleb. He will never reveal his true self to me. There will always be something he’s hiding. Not like some big creepy secret. I don’t worry about that. More like he keeps certain pieces of himself private. Never to be glimpsed by someone unless they’re important to him.

Huh. Maybe I need to realize I’m just not that important to him. And it’s probably best if I leave well enough alone.

SEVEN

CALEB

TIME HAS JUST FLOWN by since the night of the kiss with Gracie. It's 4th of July weekend and work is a madhouse. Besides renting out boats and jet skis, Mitchell's Landing also has a bunch of cabins they rent out to tourists. Those cabins are booked usually all summer long, and during the 4th of July, they're booked out a year in advance. It's insane. All the locals and the tourists come out to the lake, and the road is packed with cars, the lakeshore crowded with people. Once the sun is fully down, there's the fireworks show. It's usually pretty awesome, but right now I'm distracted as fuck.

I can't stop thinking about Gracie. Gracie who likes it best when a guy sucks her clit and finger fucks her at the same time. Gracie who made out with her best friend on a dare. Gracie who kissed me and tasted like lime and sweetness and sin. Gracie who stared at me while she was drunk and told me I was pretty.

She's the one who's pretty. She's the one who I now envision kneeling before me, her mouth full of dick. *My* dick. And she's loving every second of it as she sucks me off.

That particular fantasy has run through my brain on a constant loop since that night. We never did admit how many sexual partners we've had to each other, and maybe that's for the best. She got too distracted by me saying I didn't like kissing women, which I suppose is a pretty bold statement.

It's not that I don't like it—kissing is fucking awesome, ain't gonna lie. But kissing is also dangerous. You smooch a woman a couple of times, and it's so damn intimate. Next thing you

know, they're coming up with our future kids' names and they're telling me what to do. Who I can be friends with, and who I can't hang out with anymore. They try to run my life and manage my schedule when all I did was fuck them a couple of times.

That's why I avoid kissing at all costs. Even with Baylee at the end, I wouldn't do it. I didn't want to send her mixed signals. I sent her enough already, I didn't need to muddle up what we were doing any more than I already had.

Kissing Gracie was a fucking mistake though, because now I can't get the taste of her out of my mouth or head. I crave it. I crave *her*.

She's pissed at me.

Not like stomping around, fight me pissed like usual. It's a quiet anger, simmering just beneath the surface. We're polite to each other. We still ride up together to work on occasion, like today, which was born out of necessity since it's crowded and why fight for two parking spaces. She's the one who drove this time while I sat in the passenger seat, feeling helpless. Feeling stupid. At a loss. Wishing I could say something, anything to her to make her hear me out and realize where I'm coming from.

The problem? I have no idea where I'm coming from. I don't know what I want. From myself, from her, from the two of us together. I want more from Gracie, what else is new, but now it's forefront in my mind. I've kissed her. Touched her. And as usual, she hates me.

Instead of trying to talk to her, I put my AirPods in and put on some banger music that allows me to work out some of my frustration, but not enough.

I was going to talk to Eli about my issues, but before I got the chance, he planned a spontaneous trip to the beach with Ava and they took off a couple of days ago. Tony's in the Bay Area with Hayden. Diego and Jocelyn are hanging out with Jocelyn's family for the day and they'll be around for the fireworks tonight, though I doubt I'll get a chance to see them, it'll be so crowded. Their daughter, Gigi, can't handle the

fireworks. She screams and cries every time, so she's staying home with her grandparents.

Here I am all alone, trying to figure this shit out with Gracie—while she's still mad at me, barely looking at me, barely even talking to me.

It sucks.

We're busy all afternoon, helping people out with their rentals, assisting them with launching their boats into the lake. We've gone out throughout the day and rescued a couple of boats. One of our patio boats stalled out. A couple of jet skis ran out of gas. Some old guy steered his fishing boat right into the rocks.

Typical busy day.

Gracie spends most of it in the office, helping out customers. They wait in line to talk to her, full of questions and concerns, needing help with this, that and the other. All the while, she keeps her cool and does what she can with a smile on her face, looking patriotic as fuck with her red Mitchell's Landing T-shirt, the white shorts that make her legs look extra-long and her hair pulled back into a high ponytail with a navy blue and white star spangled scrunchie.

I stare at her as she walks by, my gaze glued to her tanned legs. They're golden brown and I bet they'd be smooth to the touch. I remember her tangy sweet lips and when my gaze finds her mouth, it's formed into a firm line. Almost a frown.

As in, she's caught me staring and she's currently giving me icicle vibes.

"I need to get laid," I tell no one in particular once she's out of earshot.

"There are about six girls up in the restaurant right now who would take you up on that offer," my coworker Aidan says. The guy is nineteen, and went to the same high school as I did. He's cool. A complete horn dog, so we have that in common.

"I don't fuck where I eat," I tell him, making him laugh.

“I thought you and Gracie had a thing going. That’s what Noelle said,” Aidan tells me.

“I told her that to get her off my back,” I admit. “Gracie is just a friend.”

“She’s a fucking hottie.” We both swivel our heads at the same time to watch her enter the dock office. “I’d totally hit that.”

I tamp down the jealousy rising in me. He’d never have a chance. Gracie eats douchebags like him for breakfast. “Again, I can’t fuck where I eat. I should find a tourist.”

“There are some babes hanging around here this weekend,” Aidan says with a grin. “Take a break. Go up to the restaurant. I’m sure you’ll find a couple of girls who are interested in whatever you’re putting down.”

This kid talks like an idiot. He reminds me of myself. “You don’t mind if I take my break right now?”

“Nah. Go for it,” Aidan says. “We’ve got this handled.”

It’s fairly quiet at the moment. The calm before the storm. Soon a bunch of boats will be brought back in for the night. And still others will launch out into the water, ready for the fireworks show. At seven there will be a boat parade and people will shout and cheer for the most patriotically decorated boat. It’s a ritual that happens every single year without fail.

“I’ll be back,” I tell Aidan as I walk away from him.

I pass by the dock office, see Gracie standing in the open window chatting with customers about what time the fireworks are starting tonight. Don’t know how many times I’ve heard that conversation today, but I’m sure she’s sick of talking about it. I try to catch her eye, but it’s like she refuses to look at me and so I stalk my way up the sidewalk that leads to the dock, cross the road and head into the restaurant by way of the general store.

All the girls who work inside call my name in greeting when I enter, waving and smiling like they’re actually glad to see me, unlike another girl I know. I bask in their adoration, not caring if they mean it or not. I need their compliments and

enthusiasm because I can't remember the last time I had a girl actually excited to see me.

I make random conversation while one of them scoops up an ice cream for me, coffee flavored in a sugar cone. After I pay, I head outside and sit at one of the picnic tables on the patio, scrolling through my phone, already bored out of my mind.

Lifting my head, my gaze goes to the dock, where Gracie is currently standing and chatting with Aidan. She's laughing at whatever he says, the sun glinting off her hair, making it shine.

Making *her* shine.

My chest aches from watching her and I hate that she looks so happy with someone else while all she can manage to do is scowl at me. How did I fuck this up so badly? Why is she so angry at me? I thought we were doing okay. I thought we were being real with each other.

Guess we can't do that after all. It sends everything to shit.

There are tourists everywhere. Plenty of girls in bikinis or with a towel wrapped around their waist. Or a T-shirt covering their swimsuits, the fabric damp and clingy, their hair hanging around their faces. They're all pretty, with sun-burnished cheeks and big smiles, the scent of suntan oil or sunscreen clinging to their skin. I smile at more than a few of them and they smile in return, though not one of them tries to talk to me.

And I don't talk to them either. I don't feel like it.

This...is alarming. Am I losing my mojo? Maybe I don't have what it takes any longer. I've burned out, which is a shitty feeling. I can't burn out. Not now. I'm only halfway through college. I need to keep up the same level of good-time party guy for the next two years. I need to live it up during this time of my life, because I'm never going to get it back.

Frustration growing, I toss the remainder of my ice cream cone into the trash before I head back to the dock and throw myself back into work.

"Take a rest," TJ tells us when the boat parade is about to start.
"Relax. The hardest part is done."

Aidan and I share a bench that sits directly in front of the office and faces the water, both of us swigging down water, though I secretly wish for a beer. Alcohol might ease the tension between my shoulders.

Actually, I know exactly what would ease the tension between my shoulders and radiating down my back. Sex. I haven't been inside a woman in a while. A few weeks—

Frowning, I calculate exactly how long it's been, and I can't quite remember. At least a month. An entire freakin' month. That's some sort of record for me.

"I *seriously* need to get laid," I say out loud.

"You've already mentioned that," Aidan says with a chuckle. "Didn't see any fine ass babes up in the restaurant earlier?"

"Nah. They all look too—young." I make a face.

"What's wrong with young?" Aidan raises his brows.

"You're only nineteen. It's no big deal."

"And you're only twenty," he reminds me.

"Almost twenty-one," I tack on, needing the reminder.

"Big deal."

"I keep getting older and they all keep getting younger." I tilt my head toward a boat full of babes that's passing by.

Boat full of babes. I sound like a prick even in my own head.

"Look, as long as they're of legal age, what does it matter? This is your time to shine among the younger babes, Caleb. When it doesn't matter as much. When you're forty-five with a beer belly and bald head still trying to hit on eighteen-year-olds? Then you're going to look like a dick, my friend," Aidan explains, as if he's so freaking wise.

But he's making a valid point.

I get bored fast watching the decorated boats pass by. The dock is starting to fill up with people who want to sit on their moored boats to watch the parade and the upcoming fireworks, and Aidan ditches me in an instant when a group of girls he

graduated with approach him, all of them flirtatious as they greet him in sing-songy, high-pitched voices.

Not a one of them even glances over at me.

Irritated, I hop off the bench and stride into the dock office, not even realizing Gracie is in there until I spot her sitting behind the desk, going through paperwork. She glances up the moment I walk in, that familiar frown on her face.

I'm tired of that frown. I'm tired of us barely tolerating each other. I need to make a move, say something, end all this bullshit.

"We need to talk," I tell her, shutting the door behind me.

"So talk," she says slowly, setting the thin stack of papers she was holding onto the desk. Her expression is even, and she seems completely unruffled, while I'm over here feeling like I'm going to erupt into a panic attack at any given moment.

And I don't have panic attacks. Like, ever.

"You're pissed at me." May as well cut right to the chase.

"I thought you were pissed at me," she says.

I rest my hands on my hips, taken aback. "Why would you think that?"

"You're the one who got mad that we kissed, Caleb. You stormed out of your car that night like I was a disease you were trying to outrun, only to come back—reluctantly, I might add—because I guess at the last second, you realized it was the gentlemanly thing to do, helping your drunk roommate get back into your apartment in one piece," she explains. "You haven't spoken to me since."

"I have so," I say, dropping into the empty chair in front of the desk.

"Not really."

I blow out an exasperated breath. "This is stupid."

"What? The way you're behaving?"

“The way we’re both behaving! When was the last time you had sex?”

She rears back a little at my change of subject, leaning away from me in her chair. “How is that any of your business?”

“It’s been over a month for me. I think. I can’t remember the last time I did it. I don’t even remember who with.” I ponder it yet again, but come up with nothing.

“That’s—unusual for you,” she admits. Even she knows my sex habits.

“Right? More like fucking unbelievable. So tell me.” I lean forward, trying to get closer to her, and drop my voice lower. “When was the last time you had sex with someone, G?”

Her brows draw together as she considers my question, her gaze growing distant. As if she’s completely lost in thought. I wait, my right leg bouncing, making the floor rattle, swear to God. Sometimes it feels like one swift wind could sweep through this place and take the tiny office shack out.

“It’s been...a while,” she finally admits.

I curl my hands around the edge of her desk, gripping it tight. “I have a suggestion.”

“No, Caleb. I’m not having sex with you,” she says, not even letting me ask her.

God, this woman exasperates me. “Why the hell not?”

She glances around as if someone’s nearby who might overhear our crazy conversation before she returns her gaze to me. “I’m not about to have sex with a guy who claims he doesn’t like kissing.”

“I never said I don’t like kissing,” I say with an eye roll. “I just—avoid it.”

“Oh. So now you’re telling me you like kissing,” she says, her voice flat.

“Yes, I totally do.” And I’d really like to kiss Gracie—all over her body, if she’ll let me.

“Having sex with you complicates everything,” she not so kindly reminds me. “We live together, Caleb. You know whatever we start won’t last.”

“Are you really looking for something to last, Gracie? Or are you just looking for someone to scratch your itch?” I raise a brow, hoping my approach works.

I’m ready for some fireworks, and not just the ones in the sky, either.

Hey it’s the 4th of July. It’s a given I’m going to make some cheesy fireworks pun.

“Maybe I don’t want you scratching my itch,” she says with a tiny frown.

“Oh come on, G. Of course you do. It would be great between us and you know it,” I tell her, letting all of my arrogance pour right out of me.

“That kiss we shared wasn’t that great, you know,” she says, wounding me with her words. “You weren’t putting your heart into it.”

“What does my heart have to do with any of this?” I ask incredulously.

She rises to her feet, bracing her hands on top of the desk as she glares at me. “Right. Sorry I mentioned the word heart, since you’re such an unfeeling asshole.”

I jump to my feet too, towering over her. And she’s no shrimp either. “What the fuck? Now you’re calling me an asshole? Give me a break. At least I’m not an uptight ice queen.”

“I’m not uptight, you dick!” She flounces away from her desk, headed straight for the door, but I’m quicker than her. I’m on that door before she is, blocking her way. “Move it.”

“No.”

“Caleb...” Her voice is a warning, and I can see the furious glint in her eyes.

Girl means business.

“Hear me out, G,” I plead with her and she takes a step back, crossing her arms. “I went up to the restaurant on my break, trying to find some random girl for a potential hookup, and none of them interested me. All I could think about was... you.”

“Oh gee, that’s so *romantic*, Caleb. I love that you went in search of a random hookup and came up empty so you thought you’d check with me to see if I’m interested instead.” She clutches her hands together in front of her chest as added emphasis.

“Whoever said it had to be romantic between us? I’m trying to be real with you right now. I’m not about romance. I’m not about any of that stuff.” I take a step forward, the scent of sunscreen and flowers hitting me. I inhale subtly, savoring her fragrance. “But I know I can make you feel good.”

She keeps glaring at me, people yelling and cheering just outside on the dock. The only thing separating us from the crowd growing is the door I’m currently standing in front of. She’s still in pure defensive mode with her arms crossed and that glare on her face, but I can see the rapid throb of her pulse at the base of her neck, and I’m thinking she likes what I’m telling her.

“We aren’t looking for a relationship,” I tell her. “You aren’t. Neither am I. So why not mess around? You know you want it. You’ve been wanting it since the first night we met.”

“I want what?” she asks warily.

“Me. Us. Together. Tangled up in the sheets,” I answer.

Her eyes widen the slightest bit but otherwise, I see no other reaction.

I bet she’d be hard to read during a poker game.

“What do you say?” I ask after she still hasn’t said anything.

“I think it’s a terrible idea,” she says, always my blunt, truthful Gracie. “You’ll catch feelings for me.”

“I won’t catch shit,” I say with confidence. “I never do.”

“Not with any girl?”

“Not a one,” I say, shaking my head. Baylee’s as close as I got to having feelings for someone and even that was more of a friendly-type vibe accompanied by the occasional bang.

God, seriously. I’m a complete prick. But at least I’m being honest with Gracie. No bullshit here. She’s going to hear what I’m all about, whether she likes it or not.

And if she doesn’t like it? At least I tried. Hashtag no regrets.

“You say that like you’re proud,” she says.

“I am. I’m not ready for a relationship. We’re young. Why do we need to get all serious like everyone else around us?”

She contemplates me, the frown gone. She even drops her arms by her sides. “You’re right. We are young. And I’m even older than you are.”

“Yeah, and all of our friends are attached. Fuck, Ava wants to marry Eli and she’s barely nineteen,” I say with an eye roll.

“She’s crazy,” Gracie agrees.

“I know, right? Everyone we know is in a serious, committed relationship. Well, fuck that,” I say.

“Yeah,” she agrees, her voice going soft. “Fuck that.”

I grin. “You game then?”

“Game for what?”

“Me.” I reach out and grab her hand. She lets me take it. “And you.” I yank her close, her body colliding with mine. “Getting naked.”

EIGHT

GRACIE

I'VE NEVER BEEN PROPOSITIONED the way Caleb is currently propositioning me. He wants to have sex with me, but with no strings attached. Basically, he's making my dream offer. I don't like strings. We—as in me and the guy I'm with—can get too tangled up in them, and then someone always ends up hurt.

In my case, it's usually the guy. He's the one who wants all the relationship stuff by the time I'm dying to bail out of the entire thing, eager and ready to move on to the next one.

Callous of me, but oh so true.

Messing around with Caleb is all sorts of trouble, but damn it, I like trouble. I'm drawn to it. And the look on his face is trouble personified, mixed with temptation. As in, he's extremely tempting.

Being pressed against his hard, lean body isn't helping me either. He's warm and solid and he smells good. Like sunscreen and the faintest hint of sweat. I'm not usually aroused by a sweaty smelling guy, but here I am.

Turned on. Contemplating rubbing myself against him.

“This won't work,” I remind him. And myself.

“There's nothing to work, Gracie. It's just sex,” he says. “That's it.”

He's so right. It is just sex. But...

With us, it feels like it would turn into more. And by more, I mean an impending disaster.

“Let me think about it,” I say softly as I lift my head so my gaze meets his. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he says, way too agreeably. “While you’re at it, think about this too.”

Without warning he presses his lips to mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth the moment I part my lips on a gasp. He grabs hold of my face, cradling my cheeks as he eats at my mouth like a starving man, and I rest my hands against his chest, clinging to him, a low moan sounding in my throat.

He breaks the kiss way before I’m ready for him to, a smirk curling his lips as he contemplates me. “There. How was that?”

I’m shaky, but I don’t want him to know. I give him a little one shoulder shrug. “It was all right.”

“I’ll do better, I promise.” He leans in, his mouth at my ear, his voice lowering to a rumbling murmur. “I’ll put my mouth on that pussy of yours later tonight and have you screaming my name in minutes. I guarantee it.”

Caleb opens the door before I can say anything in response, and in seconds, he’s gone. Leaving me a trembling, jittery mess.

I go sit down behind my desk once more, my mind spinning as I stare blindly at the stack of papers in front of me. Why did he have to go and kiss me like that? Now I won’t be able to concentrate. And why did he have to say what he did about uh...going down on me, too?

That’s all I can think about, all I can envision now. Caleb’s dark head between my legs. His mouth on me. His tongue on my clit...

A delicious shiver moves through me and I sigh. Fuck paperwork. It’s Independence Day.

I’m going outside.

“Ah, there you are! I was just coming to talk to you,” my boss Michelle says as she approaches me. “I have something for you.”

“What is it?” Oh God, what if they have the dock office bugged and they heard what Caleb and I were talking about.

“Surprise!” she whips out a thin, red plastic headband with light-up red, white and blue stars on top of it. “For you.”

She hands it over and I take it, a fake smile on my face. “Gee, thanks.”

Michelle laughs. “All the girls are wearing them tonight!”

“Where’s yours?” I ask.

“Oh, I didn’t want to ruin my hair.” She pats the side of it. Whatever. “You’ll look cute in it though! Put it on!”

She says it sweetly, but it still sounds like a demand. Maybe that’s because she’s my boss and I automatically want to do what she says. I slip the headband on top of my head, and can feel the stars bobble back and forth since they’re on springs. “How do I look?”

“So cute,” Michelle says warmly as she digs in her front pocket and pulls out some red, white and blue beaded necklaces. “Here, wear these too.”

I slip the necklaces on, feeling ridiculous. I know the guys I work with are going to give me endless shit, but what am I supposed to do? It’s what the boss wants.

And this is what the boss will get.

Personally, I think Michelle is having us wear these stupid things so if people need help, they know we work at Mitchell’s. Which hey, I get. The sun is dropping fast and there’s not a lot of light out here, so they have to identify us somehow.

I go back into the office and stand at my little information window, smiling at people as they walk past, helping those who approach me. One of the dock boys named Aidan catches sight of me with the blinking stars on top of my head, and points at me with a laugh.

Since there are no customers around, I subtly scratch at my cheek with my middle finger, which only makes him laugh harder.

Caleb and the rest of the crew become busy helping a few customers launch their boats to go watch the fireworks, so he doesn't spot my headband for at least an hour. To the point that I don't even remember I'm walking around with it on.

"What the hell happened to you, G?" he asks, coming up behind me.

I whirl around, my expression one of pure innocence. "What are you talking about?"

"I like the stars." He reaches for one, giving it a gentle tug. "The necklaces too." He touches them as well, his fingers brushing against my left tit.

Tell me he didn't mean to do that.

Please.

I bat his hand away and he grins. "You look cute."

He takes off when Aidan calls his name and I stand there marinating in my feelings for a few seconds, savoring the fact that he called me cute.

Okay. I'm being ridiculous. This man-boy doesn't deserve to be thought of like this. He just wants in my panties, and that's it.

When the sky turns to twilight, I can feel the buzz in the air. The murmur of excited conversations all around us. People are everywhere. On the water in their boats, on the lakeshore, on the decks of their lake houses. Sitting on the boats that are docked in front of Mitchell's. People are also sitting at tables on the outdoor dining patio, on the grass, or out in front of their cabins. They're all waiting for the fireworks to begin.

"Why do they have the fireworks here?" I ask Aidan, knowing that he's grown up around here, just like Caleb. "Why not at the high school or whatever?"

"They're a total fire hazard, especially up here since we're in the middle of the forest. But if you launch the fireworks over

the lake, you're way less likely to set something on fire," he explains.

I nod. "Makes sense."

"They put on a pretty good show. You won't be disappointed." Aidan glances around at all the people milling about. "This is a highlight of the year around here. Not much happens in this town."

"The place comes alive in the summer though," I observe, taking in all of the people surrounding us.

"Definitely. The tourists keep us going. When a fire hits nearby, it ruins everything. Last summer a fire threatened the lake, and we had to shut down right before Labor Day. The entire area was evacuated," Aidan says.

"I remember that," I murmur, inhaling the scent of pine from the nearby trees. I can't imagine losing all of this to a fire. That would be awful.

A girl approaches Aidan and he turns to talk to her, putting on the charm. Scarily enough, he reminds me of a mini-Caleb. I wonder if he's actually Caleb's protégé.

Wouldn't doubt it for even a second.

I decide to watch the fireworks from the dock office. There's a giant window that faces out on the water, and I slide it open, both pleased and dismayed that there's no screen on it. Pleased because my view is completely unobstructed, and dismayed because every bug—every single giant, horrific lake bug, is already flying into my office.

My least favorite thing about the lake—all the bugs. Spiders. Giant, hard shelled things that everyone calls June bugs. They're hideous and they have claws. One landed in my hair and I literally screamed, desperate to get it out of my hair, but the little sucker was hard to dislodge.

All the boys laughed their asses off at me when it happened, including Caleb. Even TJ, the dock manager, couldn't stop chuckling.

I grab my Mitchell's hoodie and pull it on, forgetting I'm wearing the star headband and immediately getting it all tangled up in the sweatshirt and my hair. I try to yank it out, pulling on my hair and muttering 'ow' under my breath, when I feel warm hands gently push mine away and take over.

"Let me help you," Caleb murmurs, his deep voice making me go completely still. I drop my hands to my sides and wait, achingly aware of his close proximity as he carefully disentangles the headband from my hair. "There you go."

He takes the headband off and shifts so he's standing directly in front of me. His lips curve up as he slips the headband on his head, the stars blinking, casting his face in red, white and blue. "What do you think?"

I smile. "You look goofy."

"Not cute like you?"

There he goes, calling me cute again. He needs to stop. "Goofily cute," I tell him.

He looks pleased by my compliment. I'm starting to realize it doesn't take much to make this man happy. Kind words, a funny joke. A compliment. Food—always food. Hanging out with his friends. Football. Jumping off the dock office roof into the water—I really hate when he does that but when he first pops out of the water wearing that giant smile, I can't help but smile too.

I suppose I should add sex to that list. Oh, and sleep. Caleb loves his sleep. He likes to lounge around in bed on his days off when he has nothing to do and nowhere to go. I could never call him lazy though, because the dude is almost always on the go. But when he gets a chance for some downtime, he fully embraces it.

"You watching the fireworks in here?" he asks.

"Yes," I tell him, worry immediately filling me. "Is that okay? Or should I be out on the dock?"

"Michelle's out there, schmoozing with everyone. Kevin is too." Kevin is Michelle's husband. They own and run Mitchell's together. "You're fine in here."

“Oh okay. Good,” I say, relief filling me.

“Can I join you?”

“Um, sure,” I say, suddenly feeling...what. *Shy?*

No way. I never feel shy. I go for what I want, balls to the wall. Hayden and I pumped each other up throughout our freshman year at college, telling each other we could do whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted it. It was liberating, being at a school where no one really knew me, and I could start completely over. Be who I always wanted to be. Back at home, where I grew up, I was just...that girl. Gracie. The quiet one. The athletic one. No one gave me much credit for anything beyond being fast on the track.

Yet here I am, all alone with Caleb, feeling unsure. Like old Gracie.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, G? I can see the cogs spinning,” he says, ever observant. Unusually perceptive when it comes to me.

“Nothing.” I shake my head and smile, not about to reveal any insecurities to this guy. “I’m excited for the fireworks to start.”

He sends me a skeptical look and I keep the smile plastered on my face, not about to waver now. He does not get to see me act all vulnerable and shit. Nope.

“Come on, let’s get some chairs,” he tells me and we do exactly that. He grabs the heavier one and carries it over to the window while I find a fold-up chair leaning against the wall that someone probably left behind in one of the boats.

We set up the chairs in front of the window, Caleb pulling them close together when I suddenly hear patriotic music start up.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Oh, they have a recording they play along with the fireworks. It’s all in sync and every resort blasts the music. It’s actually pretty cool.” Caleb settles his big body in the heavier chair. “Sit down. Relax.”

I can't relax with him so close, especially when I know what he wants from me. What I want from him. I'm still thinking about his earlier proposition, but come on.

We both know I'm eventually going to say yes.

I sit on the fold-up chair but it kind of sucks. And it's dusty. I can feel Caleb's eyes on me as I try to get comfortable before he finally says, "Come here."

I whip my head in his direction, startled by the downright sultry tone of his voice. "What do you mean?"

He pats his thigh. "Come sit on my lap."

"Caleb..."

"I won't do anything too inappropriate," he says, holding up his hands.

Notice how he says the word *too*. As in, he'll be semi-inappropriate, but not too terribly so.

I push myself out of the chair and stand in front of him. "Are you sure?"

"You're blocking my view, babe." He grabs hold of me and pulls me into his lap, and I have no choice but to let him rearrange me as I sit there so that he's got one arm wrapped firmly around my waist. "You comfortable?"

A white burst of sparks fills the sky, lighting up our faces. He's watching me very carefully, his lids at half-mast, and he looks sleepy.

Sexy.

Shit. I'm in so much trouble.

NINE

CALEB

THIS IS the closest I've been to Gracie in...a while. I remember the first time I met her, when we went to that concert for her lame ass ex's band Bat's Cave, and she sat on my shoulders. I'd been surrounded by Gracie, her freaking crotch pressed against the back of my head, and I remember thinking then, *this isn't a bad place to be.*

Currently holding Gracie while she sits on my lap, thinking once again, this isn't a bad place to be.

Not a bad place at all.

The fireworks have started. The first one was a dazzler, spreading white sparkles wide across the sky, but the next few have been duds, which is typical for this yearly show. I keep my arm firmly around Gracie's waist, and I notice how stiff she's holding herself. As if she's uncomfortable sitting on my thigh.

She weighs nothing. She's all long limbs and slender curves. Her scent is driving me out of my mind. The sunscreen and flowers thing must be a fucking aphrodisiac. I want to bury my face in her neck and take a big whiff, but she'd probably shove me away and call me a freak.

Which, maybe I am, I don't know.

Instead, I restrain myself, never letting her go, trying to get her to relax.

Slowly but surely, she does. The fireworks continue, perfectly in time with the music, and everyone outside is *ooing* and

aahing as they light up the dark sky. Though Gracie's still holding herself a little too stiffly for my tastes.

Without warning, I spread my legs and pull her down in between them. The chair I'm sitting in is wide enough, so she's a perfect fit. She glances up at me, sending me a questioning look and I just stare back, unsure of what to say. I want her close. As close as I can get her while we still have clothes on.

I'm hoping later tonight will end in more fireworks with no clothes on, but I don't want to get ahead of myself either.

"You still have the stars on your head," she murmurs, though she's not looking at me. Her face is angled upward, watching the show.

"They turning you on?" I ask, sounding extra hopeful.

She laughs, which is the reaction I was hoping for. "Maybe."

"I knew you were into some kinky shit, G." I dip my head, nuzzling the side of her face. "Want me to wear them later tonight when we're naked?"

"No," she says firmly.

"Aw, why not?"

"Because we're not getting naked tonight," she says, again very firmly.

Too firmly.

The disappointment is real, but I banish it. "I thought that was the plan."

"We shouldn't rush things."

Now I'm just frustrated. "Why not?"

"I'm not out for a quick bang," she says. "Is that what you want?"

Hell to the fucking yes. I'm dying for a quick bang. And a long, slow one too. Whatever kind of bang it is, I want to bang Gracie.

“You know what I want,” I say instead, tightening my arms around her, just as three fireworks fill up the sky. Red, white and blue –in that order, too.

“No, Caleb, and that’s my problem. I have no idea what you want,” she says, her voice the slightest bit shaky.

Huh. This is not very Gracie-like behavior at all. She’s always so confident, so sure of herself and what she wants. Am I making her feel unsure?

That’s not cool. That’s the last thing I want this beautiful, bright woman to feel.

I touch her face and she leans to the right, away from my hand before glancing up at me, her gaze meeting mine. I can’t tell what color her eyes are at this moment, but she looks pretty. She always looks pretty.

“I want you,” I tell her with all the sincerity I can muster. Not that it’s difficult. I’m telling the truth. I want her. I want to get closer, as close as I can get. I want to know what she likes, what makes her respond, what makes her come. I want to know all of it.

Every little thing.

“If this is just a line, I’m going to kill you,” she says, her voice full on edge. Like she could kill me with her bare hands if I make the wrong move, say the wrong thing.

I can’t help but chuckle. “I’m full of lines, G. You know this, yet here you are.”

She reaches for me, her fingers wrapping around my nape and tugging my head down, until our mouths are perfectly aligned. “Please stop talking. You’re ruining everything.”

I part my lips, ready to say something stupid, but she kisses me before I can get the words out. Probably the best move. She’s right. I would’ve ruined it all, or we could’ve started arguing.

Instead, I’m kissing her. Soft, teasing kisses, with no tongue. Not yet. I’m trying to warm her up, get her in the mood, savoring her taste. In the privacy of the office, with all sorts of

people surrounding us on the dock, it's easy for me to take my time and learn what makes her whimper.

What makes her moan.

Her fingers tighten in my hair when I take the kiss deeper, my tongue flickering against hers once. Twice. Before I retreat. My neck is starting to ache and my dick is starting to harden, but I ignore everything else to concentrate on this kiss.

We essentially kiss for the rest of the fireworks show. It's like one big make out sesh, which I haven't done since...what? Junior year of high school? So it's been a while, and fuck, I'm enjoying it. The give and take. The strain to get closer, our bodies brushing, hands wandering but never too far. The way our tongues tangle and dance, the sounds she makes in her throat, the feel of her as she shifts against me, like she's trying to get closer. I thread my fingers through her hair, angling her head where I want her, and she doesn't fight me. It's as if we're finally in complete sync, like the fireworks and the music, working together.

The nearby crowd suddenly bursts into applause and we break away from each other quickly, our breaths ragged, the fireworks show coming to an end with an explosion of constant light and sound. The entire sky fills up with endless fireworks, one after the other, launching an epic climax and making everyone outside lose their shit.

Too bad I'm not about to have an epic climax in this moment, but hey. I'll settle for kissing Gracie.

Though not like it's settling. Not even close.

I dive in for another one, but the kiss is short. Gracie presses her hands against my chest, and I break away first, watching her as she slowly opens her eyes. Her lips are parted and swollen, and her hair is a little messy, thanks to me running my fingers through it. Her lips curve into a faint smile as she reaches for the star headband still on my head and she plucks it off, settling it on her own.

"I can't believe we just kissed for like, fifteen minutes, and you kept this on your head the entire time." She nods, making

the stars bobble back and forth.

“I think you’re hot for my new look,” I tease her, touching her chin. Her cheek. “I’m going to keep wearing it if you keep kissing me like that.”

“Says the guy who doesn’t like kissing.”

I blow out an exasperated breath. “I never said I didn’t like kissing, G. I said I wasn’t a big fan of kissing. There’s a difference.”

“Not really.”

“There is to me.”

She pulls herself out of my arms and stands, tugging her T-shirt back into place before running her fingers through the ends of her hair. “Should we help outside?”

“I think we can leave whenever.” I glance out the window to see people are already leaving the dock.

“I forgot to clock out,” she says with a frown.

“I did too, but it’s no big deal.” I shrug and then stand, stretching my arms above my head. “Let’s get out of here.”

I wait as she gathers up her stuff and locks the office. We chat with Kevin and Michelle, which was smart because it allows everyone else to pack everything up in their cars and get on the road, which is currently filled with a steady stream of traffic. By the time we’re climbing into her car, the traffic has died down, and we don’t have to wait long to get the hell out of here.

We don’t speak as Gracie drives, and it reminds me of the ride here earlier, when I kept my AirPods in and she would barely look at me. I hope to God she’s not pissed at me right now. Not after what just happened between us.

I kind of can’t stop thinking about it. I’m reliving it in my head at this very moment.

“We need to establish rules,” she says about ten minutes into the drive, with the windows down and the cool mountain air rushing over us.

“Rules about what?” I glance over at her, the way she’s driving with one hand on the wheel and the other is resting on her thigh. I want to grab that hand and hold it. See what she might do.

I quickly stop myself from thinking along those lines, frowning. Seriously, what the hell is wrong with me?

“Us. What we’re doing,” she stresses.

I grin. “Why put rules on it? Let’s just see what happens.”

“If we just ‘see what happens,’ we might end up hurting each other and ruining our friendship,” she says, ever so logical.

“That won’t happen,” I say with way too much confidence.

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I do. I like you too much. We’re friends. We’ll keep it that way.” Friends who fuck, is what I’d love to say, but she’d probably get pissed.

And I’m jumping way ahead of myself. I need to calm down.

“You like me too much?” She sounds doubtful.

“Yeah. You’re fun. You’re a good time, G. I like arguing with you and talking with you and now I’ve discovered I like kissing you too,” I say.

She’s quiet for a moment, and I wonder if I said too much. Or not enough? I never know with this girl. Sometimes, she makes me uneasy. Just when I think I have her figured out, she surprises me by changing it up.

I like that about her.

“I have to go slow,” she finally says. “To make sure this is what I really want.”

“What do you mean, go slow? You never go slow,” I remind her.

“Right. It’s normally full speed ahead, and I’m bored immediately, ready to get rid of the guy and move on to the next.” She slowly shakes her head, as if she’s disappointed in herself. “I’m tired of that. I—value your friendship too, Caleb.

And while I'm so incredibly tempted to just throw myself at you and have a wild time this summer, I also know we could do some serious damage to our friendship by having sex."

Again, she's so rational. Her explanation makes total sense. But...

Here's where I think like a dog. She's student teaching in the fall. She won't really be on campus anymore. And once she becomes an actual teacher, she's off campus forever and I'll be a senior and we won't ever have to see each other again if we don't want to. Yeah, Tony and Hayden will most likely still be together—they are seriously so disgustingly in love it's sort of pathetic—but that doesn't mean I have to hang out with them when Gracie is around.

She'll be easy to avoid if it all falls apart.

Does this make me a complete dick, that I'm thinking like this?

Yes. Yes, it absolutely does. But I can't help it. This is how I roll. I am who I am. And Gracie knows this. She knows who she's dealing with. I'm not going to change.

Even though I've already conceded to her on the kissing thing. For Gracie, I'll make the exception.

But that's it. That's the only concession I'll make. Everything else we do will be on my terms. If not, then we're done for. Finished.

"We won't ruin our friendship over a couple of quick fucks," I say quietly, making a face as soon as the words leave my mouth. Again, I sound like a jerk. Why do girls bring this out of me?

More like, why do I always say this kind of shit to girls?

My friends would say this is just who I am, and maybe that's true, but sometimes I wonder if I could eventually calm the hell down, find a nice little woman to settle with and not act like such an egotistical, perverted asshole all the time.

I'm sure I could do that eventually, but as for now?

I'm happy with who I am.

“Ha!” she says, the sound sharp. “Whatever you say.”

I watch her for a while, but she won't even look in my direction. “I'm assuming you're not going to get naked with me tonight.”

“Your assumption is correct.”

I bang the back of my head against the passenger seat. “Another night of jerking off in the shower then.”

She laughs. Evilily, I might add. “Sorry to disappoint, but I guess so.”

“You're missing out, you know,” I mutter, closing my eyes.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, for sure. Why let all that be wasted in a shower?”

“I'm not ready for you yet,” she says primly.

“You can handle me.”

“Ugh, you make it sound so dirty.”

I crack open my eyes to watch her. “You know whatever happens between us eventually, it's going to be dirty.”

I render her silent again, and it fills me with so much satisfaction that I close my eyes once more and slowly drift off.

To thoughts of her.

TEN

GRACIE

“I FEEL like I haven’t seen you in forever!” Hayden squeals when she spots me hiding out in the kitchen, shoving tortilla chips into my mouth.

I pause mid-shove, letting her hug me close and smother me with her Hayden best friend love. “Where have you been?” she murmurs close to my ear just before she pulls away.

I hold up a finger, chewing and swallowing the chips before I speak. “Working. A lot.”

She frowns. “Stupid work.”

I feel bad that I haven’t seen her, though part of the reason has nothing to do with work, and everything to do with me and Caleb hanging out—as friends only. I don’t tell anyone what Caleb and I are up to because I don’t want their automatic assumptions that will then turn into judgment, though I think Eli is on to our game. It’s kind of hard for us to hide that we’re hanging out together by choice when we all live together. And while Eli is gone a lot—he’s always with Ava—he did catch the two of us on the couch together one night, looking guilty as hell with messed-up hair and rumpled clothing.

Caleb had been tickling me. That’s it. But it looked like more, and we didn’t bother with explanations. Eli took one look at us, shook his head and sighed, and then went to his room without a word.

What Caleb and I are doing is nothing. We’re just spending time together. No kissing. No real touching. It’s like we got the kiss out of our system and we’re cool just being friends.

At least that's what I tell myself when I wake up in the middle of the night, aching over some dream I had where Caleb and I are naked together.

Tonight is the first time the gang has been together in a while, and Eli and Caleb decided to throw a party, a last celebration before practice kicks into high gear and their schedules turn hectic. It's nearing the end of July, three weeks since we started our friendship pact, as I like to call it.

Caleb calls it the cock-block pact. He's tried to put the moves on me a couple of times, but I always push him off. Kissing him like I did on the 4th of July was too intense. He made me feel too much. Contemplate things I have no business considering.

"It's not so bad. I really like it there." I do. It's fun. An easygoing job on the water, spending time in the sun every day, dealing with happy tourists who, for the most part, are thrilled to be on vacation and away from their everyday lives. Plenty of locals come in too.

Soon enough I'll be leaving and starting my student teaching job, which is daunting. I don't doubt my abilities. I have confidence in myself that I'll be a great teacher, only because I love teaching so much. I enjoy teaching little kids, spending time with them, shaping their young minds.

After my year of student teaching, I'm on my own. I'll need to find a job and I'm willing to go...anywhere. I don't necessarily want to stay in the Fresno area, but I will if I find the right fit at the right school. A change would be nice, though.

But a change means leaving everyone. Hayden is going to stick around until Tony graduates with his degree. She already admitted this to me a while ago, and that's fine. Props to her for knowing what she wants.

I guess that's my biggest problem. I just flat-out don't know what I want. I thought the past four years of college taught me a few things, but right now, I feel more confused than ever. Spending all this time with an assembly line of guys hasn't helped matters either.

“Hey,” Hayden says, her soft voice pulling me out of my thoughts. I blink her back into focus to find she’s watching me with a concerned expression on her face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, pasting on a cheery smile. “Just thinking. Kind of tired. You know how it is.”

She tilts her head to the side, studying me with that examining way she has. Like she can see inside my head and know exactly what I’m thinking. “You know, I keep hearing—rumors about you.”

I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Caleb.” She sends me a pointed look. “If you’ve been keeping something from me, you need to spill. I’m your best friend. I deserve to know.”

A sigh leaves me and I glance over my shoulder onto our tiny back patio, where all the guys are currently standing. Including Caleb, who’s already watching me. A slow smile spreads across his face when we make eye contact and he lifts his beer bottle as if he’s toasting me.

I look away quickly, returning my attention to Hayden. “There’s not much to tell, that’s why I haven’t mentioned it.”

Her expression turns shrewd. “I absolutely do not believe you. Your cheeks are turning pink at this very moment and nothing makes you blush, Gracie! Are you and Caleb actually *together?*”

She squeaks out those last words and I shush her, grabbing her hand and pulling her in closer so no one else can hear me. “No, we’re not.” I pause. “We’re just friends. Really.”

The shocked look on Hayden’s face is vaguely amusing. “Oh my God, you’re lying, I know you are! Tony is going to shit when I tell him.”

“Stop! Calm down,” I tell her through clenched teeth, not wanting others to hear us. “There’s nothing happening between us beyond one night of kissing. That’s it.”

Well, and some other moments when we kissed, but I won’t mention them.

Hayden frowns. “What do you mean, one night of kissing?”

“I mean exactly what I just said. We kissed on the 4th of July. That’s it.” I shrug. Like it’s no big deal.

“Wait a minute. You two just—kissed? Once? You and Caleb?” She sounds dumbfounded.

“Yes. That’s it. We’re not taking it beyond that. I don’t want to,” I say, lying through my teeth.

I’m dying to take it further. If he has sex the way he kisses, then I’m guaranteed a good time. Like seriously, the man can do no wrong when it comes to his mouth. It was a true joy, being wrapped up in his strong arms and kissing him.

“This is so unlike you,” she murmurs, appearing concerned. She’s frowning and everything. “And Caleb. Is this ‘friendship’—serious between you two?”

“Of course not!” I laugh, but it sounds overly fake so I stop. “It’s definitely not serious. Caleb doesn’t have a serious bone in his body. Neither do I.”

“You do too, you just haven’t found the right guy to be serious about yet.” Hayden winces. “Please don’t tell me you think Caleb could be the one.”

“I definitely don’t think that.” I push away from the counter and head for the sliding glass door, opening it and stepping outside so I can talk to the guys. I’d rather hear them chat about football and bro stuff than continue the conversation Hayden and I were having. I’m sure she’s not mad at me for leaving her like that anyway. I’ve done that sort of thing to her before. She’ll just follow me outside and throw herself at Tony, who’s currently taking over manning the barbecue, since Eli burns everything every time he tries.

He gets too distracted, telling stories and laughing it up with his friends. Or he gets too wrapped up with Ava. One time we even had to call for pizza because everything he tried to cook was charred to a blackened crisp.

“Haven’t seen you around much lately,” Tony says when he spots me approaching him. He’s probably the safest guy to talk to out of all of them currently standing around.

“Work is keeping me really busy,” I tell him, watching as he scrapes at the grill with some sort of cleaning tool before setting fresh burger patties onto the cleaned surface with a spatula.

“I hear the lake is packed this summer.” When I frown, he explains, “Caleb mentioned it to me earlier.”

I am dying to ask if Caleb mentioned anything else, but that would be too obvious that I’m digging for information.

“Yeah, it’s been a constant stream of people every day. It’s great though. Making money and working on my tan. Best of both worlds,” I tease.

“You are looking pretty tan,” Tony observes.

“She is, huh? Looking sexy, G,” Caleb says, choosing that exact moment to sidle up next to me and sling his arm around my shoulders, tugging me in close to his side.

What the what? I glare up at him, shrugging his arm off of me. “Stop, Caleb.”

“See you two are getting along as usual,” Tony says, returning his attention to the grill. This is why he doesn’t burn anything. He’s patient and he doesn’t get distracted.

“We’ve been getting along better than ever,” Caleb tells his friend, his smoldering gaze meeting mine in challenge. “Huh, Gracie?”

“Yeah. For sure,” I say through gritted teeth, annoyed as hell that he’s trying to...what? Rile me up?

I leave Tony and Caleb when they’re in the middle of a conversation, going in search of someone else. Anyone else. Eli is chatting with Diego so I join them for a second, but all they’re talking about is football and stats and other teams in their division, so I bail. I find most of the women inside, sitting in the living room and teaching Diego’s two-year-old daughter Gigi how to say Louis Vuitton correctly. This is all Ava’s fault, who is currently letting Gigi carry her Louis Vuitton purse.

“Isn’t she adorable?” Hayden picks Gigi up and gives her a smacking kiss on the cheek.

“Put me down!” Gigi shouts, and Hayden does exactly that. Gigi sashays around my living room like a model striding down a catwalk, the purse chain slung over her shoulder and the bag dragging on the carpet.

“You really shouldn’t let her play with your expensive bag,” says Gigi’s mom, Jocelyn, to Ava.

“It’s no big deal. Besides, look how cute she is,” Ava says, her gaze on Gigi and no one else. “I can’t wait to have a family someday.”

“With Eli?” Jocelyn asks.

Ava nods and smiles, her gaze hazy. A little dreamy. “He’ll be the crazy dad in the neighborhood. All the kids will love him, especially ours.”

“I can’t believe you’re already thinking about having children with Eli,” Hayden tells her. “I have three years on you and I still kind of freak out at the idea of having a baby.”

“Me too,” Jocelyn deadpans, making all of us laugh. “Seriously, it’s still hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that I’m a mom sometimes. That I’m responsible for that little being.”

“You and Diego are doing a pretty good job of it,” Ava says.

“I know everyone thought we couldn’t do it, but look at us.” Jocelyn smiles, seemingly proud. “We’re still together. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier either.”

“You two want more kids?” Ava asks.

“Oh yeah, but not for a while,” Jocelyn says with all the confidence of a woman who knows exactly what she wants and when. “I want us both graduated from college first. Gigi will just be the big sister of the family.”

“I want four kids,” Ava declares, making Hayden gasp out loud. “What? I’m serious. Eli wants six!”

“I can barely stand the idea of one,” Hayden says, trepidation in her eyes.

“I can’t imagine being a mom either,” I confess. “Right now, I’m scared about starting my career and how much responsibility that comes with it. I can’t wrap my head around being a parent.”

“You just kind of—do it,” Jocelyn says with a shrug. “I was only seventeen when I got pregnant, but I knew in my heart I would do what I had to and make sure I raised my baby with as much love as I could give her.”

“You’re strong, though,” I tell her, my voice low. Everyone’s head swivels in my direction, and I kind of feel put on the spot. “Sometimes, I don’t think I’m that strong at all.”

“That’s not true,” Hayden says. “You’re one of the strongest girls I know.”

“Women,” Ava corrects with a nod, making Hayden smile and nod her acknowledgment. “Seriously, Gracie. You’re brave as hell. What are you talking about?”

“I’m nervous about student teaching,” I admit. “Of being done with college. It feels like I’ve been leading up to this moment for so long, and now it’s here and I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“See, that’s the thing. When do we ever know if we’re ready?” Jocelyn asks. “Never, that’s when. It’s hard to determine that. We’re just...living life, you know? And we deal with things as they come at us. That’s the best we can do. You can prepare and plan for the future as much as you want, but life always manages to throw a few surprises at us. You just—do it.”

“That’s how life happens in general,” Hayden adds. “Nothing happens like we plan, you know?”

I think of my situation with Caleb, and how I’m trying to prepare myself for taking the next step with him—and how much I doubt it’ll work.

Is that my problem? Maybe Caleb and I should cut to the chase. Forget the kissing sessions. Just do it like Jocelyn says and get right to the fucking.

Okay, I've been spending way too much time with him. Now I'm starting to sound like him in my thoughts.

"We never really know if we're ready for whatever comes our way. We just have to handle it as it comes," Ava says with all that confidence she has. It comes from growing up in a household where they were always encouraged to dream. They were never told they couldn't do something. My parents did the best they could, but they always set limits on me, and that sucked. Whatever frivolous dream I had when I was younger, my mother always told me was impossible. At one point in my early teens, I mentioned to her that I wanted to be an artist.

You can't make money drawing all day.

Another time, I said I wanted to be a photographer.

Good luck with that—there are so many out there, how can you compete?

My mom isn't a bad person. She's just practical to the point of being a downer sometimes. Any hopes and dreams I might've had, she squashed completely. Dad always agreed with whatever she said, not wanting to cause a fight when it came to me. After a while, I quit talking to her about my future. When I informed my parents that I wanted to be a teacher, Mom praised me for making a solid career choice.

And then insulted me by saying the job would be low paying but with my pretty face, I'd be sure to find a husband to take care of me.

Ouch.

Sometimes I feel like I set limits on myself—still to this day. I blame my parents—specifically Mom—for that.

"Says the girl who's been handed everything she could ever want her entire life," Jocelyn teases, nudging Ava in the ribs.

Ava laughs. "Whatever. I miss Ellie. She'd support my statement."

We all grow sober, every one of us missing Ellie. She's currently on tour with Jackson—still. His career has exploded, and they'll be going on tour in Europe in the fall. Living her

absolute best life, gaining more and more followers on her social media accounts as she chronicles her experiences as the girlfriend of one of the more successful singers currently taking the world by storm.

Who knew that things would blow up so epically for Jackson and Ellie? He treated her like an afterthought for so long, it took her trying to find someone new to wake him up and realize he had the perfect girl for him by his side all along.

“How’s Jake?” Jocelyn asks Ava about her big brother.

Ava smiles. “Doing great. He’s coming to visit next weekend and Hannah is coming with him.”

“And when do you leave to go back to school?” Jocelyn asks her.

The smile disappears from Ava’s face. “Mid-August. Eli isn’t happy about it. Neither am I.”

I want to ask her why she goes to school at SDSU, but I keep my mouth shut. I know she loves it down there. Her parents encouraged her to go somewhere different. Not to get her away from Eli, but to get her to have different experiences. They did the same for their oldest, Autumn, and for Jake too. I’m sure Beck, the youngest Callahan, will end up going to college somewhere out of the area as well. It’s what the Callahan kids do.

Eli chooses that exact moment to walk into the living room, the smile on his face fading when he sees Ava’s somber expression. “Baby girl, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head and rises to her feet, pasting on a phony smile. Eli goes to her without hesitation, wrapping her up in his arms and kissing her in front of all of us. And it’s not a simple kiss either. He takes it a little further, until she’s shoving him away and her cheeks are the faintest pink. “Don’t maul me in front of our friends, Eli.”

“You like it.” He squeezes her butt before letting her go, turning to scan the room, his gaze landing on Hayden. “Your man asked me to come get you. He needs your help.”

Hayden frowns. “Why didn’t he come get me himself?”

“He can’t leave the barbecue,” Eli says.

“Oh, right.” She leaps to her feet then she’s gone. Eli settles onto the couch next to me instead of going to sit with Ava, who’s suddenly involved in a quiet conversation with Jocelyn.

“Caleb was asking me where you were,” he says to me nonchalantly.

“Hmm.”

“That’s all I get? Hmm?”

I glance over at him to find he’s watching me intently. “Yes, Eli. That’s all you get.”

He shakes his head, making a dismissive noise. “You two think you’re sneaky, but you’re not. I may be gone a lot with Ava or whatever, but I know what’s going on.”

Wariness prickles my nape. “And what exactly do you think is going on?”

“You two are fucking on the low,” he says without hesitation.

I burst out laughing. “No, we are not.”

“Then you’re hooking up. Messing around. Whatever. *Something* is happening, G. Don’t deny it.” He points at me, his expression firm. I always thought Eli had such a baby face, but lately I’ve noticed he’s starting to look older. Even handsomer, if that’s possible. He’s filled out more too, becoming broader in the chest and shoulders. Maybe even a little taller? I don’t know.

They’re all looking more and more like grown ass men and not a one of them could be considered hideous. They’re all sickeningly attractive.

“My boy isn’t interested in going out anymore. If he’s not working or at practice, he’s at home. In bed at a decent hour and everything. I can’t remember the last time he was with some random chick,” Eli says.

Caleb better not be with some random chick or I’ll hang him up by his balls. “You should be glad. Sounds like he’s growing up.”

“Oh, I’m definitely glad. We were worried about him for a while there when he was partying too much, but I’m thinking you have something to do with this new version of Caleb.” Eli points at me again. He likes to point. It’s rather rude, but I don’t call him out for it.

“I don’t think I have that much sway on Caleb’s behavior,” I say with a nervous laugh.

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.” Eli leans in close, his gaze serious as he studies me. “I think you have more influence on our boy than you realize.”

ELEVEN

CALEB

I JUST GET HOME from practice, exhausted from being out in the hot ass sun for hours on end, when Gracie is on me the moment I enter the apartment.

“I heard a rumor you’re going shopping with me?” she asks hopefully.

I frown. The idea of going shopping with anyone, even Gracie, sounds like total ass right about now. “Uh...”

“Hayden is out of town. Jocelyn has Gigi and said taking her anywhere at her age is a total nightmare. Ava is with Eli. I have no one, and I need *someone*,” she says, her expression pleading. “Please? I have to pick out new clothes for work.”

My frown deepens. “What are you talking about? Just wear a Mitchell’s T-shirt and some shorts like you always do.”

“Not for my current job.” She wrings her hands, looking stressed. “I need respectable teacher-type outfits.”

Ahhh, right. Gracie is about to leave us to start student teaching. Her time at Mitchell’s is winding down and she starts teaching the week we’re headed back to campus. I’m going to miss her ass at work.

I’m going to miss her ass on the dock. Riding with her to the lake. Seeing her on campus. Hanging out with her and the rest of the gang. Not that she’s going to stop hanging out with us, but we’ve all been too damn busy lately to get together. Feels like we’re all growing up and moving on, and that kind of sucks.

“You want me to help you pick out some virginal teacher outfits? I can do that,” I say with a nod.

She scowls, but there’s no anger in it. That’s what’s changed too. I irritate her still with the dumbass shit I can’t help but say, but it doesn’t make her mad anymore. Most of the time I think she looks forward to hearing what dumb thing I’m about to say next. “Virginal teacher is not the look I’m going for.”

“Hot teacher then. I can work with that too,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “No hot teacher either. More like, sweet, dependable teacher.”

“Boring, old lady teacher. We can do that. Long skirts. Turtlenecks. Gotta cover up all that hotness, G,” I say with a grin.

She laughs. Tries to appear annoyed but fails. She likes it when I call her hot. She likes it when I tease her. She pretty much likes it when I do anything...

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“We’re going to the mall,” she announces and I immediately start shaking my head. “What’s wrong with that?”

“That’s where I draw the line. The mall sucks ass,” I say. “Nope. No can do.”

“Come on, Caleb. Please? I need you to go with me,” she says, reaching for me, her hands settling on my arm as she grips me tightly.

Hmm. Something’s up. I’m not used to seeing needy Gracie. “You’ll owe me.”

“Okay,” she says way too quickly.

“Something big.” I rub my chin, contemplating her. “Like a... blow job.”

Don’t know if she’ll be down if you don’t ask, am I right? The worst she can say is no.

Her expression turns skeptical. “You’re negotiating for a blow job right now?”

“You’re damn right. You’ve left me with blue balls for weeks,” I tell her, which isn’t a lie. Every time I see her prancing around in her sleep shorts and a tank—or worse, the tiny shorts and a sports bra—I get a stiffy.

“So if you go to the mall with me, I have to give you a blow job as payback?” she asks, as if she needs the clarification.

I nod, feeling confident. “Yep. Those are my conditions.”

“Caleb.” She hesitates, and I lift my brows, waiting for her to continue. “I think I’m going to have to go to the mall alone.”

She exits the living room, leaving me high and dry as she goes into her bedroom. I can hear her grab her stuff, and next thing I know, she’s heading toward me once more, her purse slung over her shoulder, a pair of sunglasses covering her eyes. For some reason she looks extra sexy, the white crop top she’s wearing showing off the flat plane of her tanned stomach, and those denim shorts that show every bit of leg the girl has got, which is a lot.

“You’re leaving?” I ask her incredulously.

“I don’t negotiate sexual favors for friendships,” she says, lifting her chin. Looking and sounding haughty. “And that’s what we are, you know.”

“Friends?” My tone is full of disbelief but...

Maybe she’s right. We do hang out. Make conversation with each other. And it’s not small talk either. We have shared friends and experiences. Coworkers we gossip and speculate about on the long drive to and from work. We haven’t kissed since the Fourth, but that’s okay. I do miss the taste of her sweet lips, but then again, we’ve both been busy. And sometimes, it’s good enough to just hang out with her and spend time in her presence.

I frown. What the hell does this all mean?

“Yes, asshole. We’re friends,” she practically spits out.

“Friends don’t call each other assholes, Gracie,” I say, my tone solemn.

“Whatever. I’m out.” She starts to walk by me, but I grab hold of her arm, stopping her. She glances down where I’m touching her but I don’t let go. It’s like I can’t.

“I offended you with the blow job remark,” I state the obvious.

“I thought we were past that sort of thing,” she says.

I will never be past that sort of thing, but I don’t bother saying that. “I was only kidding, G.”

I wasn’t. I would’ve gladly accepted a blow job to go shopping with her, but clearly that was the wrong route to take. I still don’t know what the hell I’m doing when it comes to Gracie, but I’m starting to figure her out. She’s a good lesson for the future.

What to say to get a girl, and what not to say, too.

“The thing is, I don’t believe you really were kidding.” She shifts out of my grip and I let my hand drop. “You say things like that, and I know if I agreed, you’d be down. Am I right?”

She raises her brows and I know she’s on to me. Damn it. “Maybe,” I hedge.

“There’s no maybe about it,” she says firmly. “Caleb, I think it’s best if we keep each other firmly in the friend zone. Taking it any further will just end up being a huge mistake.”

I rub my chin, studying her. Noting the determined jut of her jaw, the way her eyes blaze as she watches me. Gold shot through with green, that’s what her eyes look like right now.

“You’re right,” I say easily, making her mouth drop open. “We don’t need to take things further. We’re good as friends. That’s all we should be.”

She snaps her mouth shut, nodding. “Exactly.”

“The kiss that night was just a one-off,” I continue. “Well, we had a couple of one-offs. The 4th was a really great kissing session, don’t get me wrong, but we can’t do that again. No matter how much I want to.”

Gracie nods, visibly swallowing. “Yes. I totally agree.”

I take a step closer and reach for her, tucking her hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger. I'm doing this on purpose. Drives me crazy how she tries to pretend there's nothing between us, when it feels like everything is between us. All of it. Every single thing. I can't even describe exactly what I'm talking about, but if I mentioned it to her, I bet she'd know.

We just get each other.

"Friends only, G. That's it for me and you." I drop my voice to a low murmur. "Let's go to the mall and find you some sexy sweaters."

She frowns. "Sexy sweaters?"

"My science teacher in the seventh grade was fresh out of college. Young and beautiful. She wore these tight sweaters in the winter that showed off her tits to perfection." I grin. "I fantasized about her coming into my room at night, wearing one of those sweaters and nothing else."

"You know how to ruin a moment every single time," Gracie mutters, stepping away from me as if she needs the distance. "Come on, you giant pervert. Let's go to the mall."

SHE DRAGS my ass to the mall and we wander around, Gracie dashing in and out of stores, always with a look of disappointment on her face when she exits. I'm not sure what she's looking for, but she must have something in mind, and nothing is meeting her needs.

I could come up with a cheesy line right now about meeting certain needs of hers, but I refrain—even mentally.

"I hate everything I'm looking at," Gracie tells me as she walks out of yet another store with a frown on her pretty face. "All of it looks too...young. I want to be taken seriously, not look like one of the students."

"G, you don't look like you're eight." I rake my gaze down the length of her, lingering on all the best parts. "Trust me."

“You know what I mean,” she says with an exasperated sigh.

“I think you’re looking in the wrong stores,” I tell her, spotting another familiar storefront that’s down the way from where we’re standing. “My mom likes shopping there.” I point at the store I’m talking about.

Gracie frowns when I turn to look at her. “You want me to look like your mom?”

I shrug. “Hey, you said you wanted to look older. And my mom looks pretty good for being...older.”

“If she heard you say that right now, she’d probably smack you,” she says, her brows lifting.

“My mom is a little curvier than she used to be, but she still looks good,” I say defensively. I hook my arm through Gracie’s and steer her toward the store I’m talking about. “Let’s go in and check it out.”

I don’t want to go inside the store, but Gracie is reluctant, so I practically drag her in there. It’s definitely got a different atmosphere compared to the other stores she’s been to. No loud, currently popular music blasting from the speakers. No piles of T-shirts and shorts and whatever else stacked on tables. Everything in this place is on hangers on racks, and in one section, it’s nothing but suit jackets and pants.

“That’s...too much,” Gracie says, wrinkling her nose when I grab a hanger with a black blazer and show it to her.

I return the blazer to the rack and keep cruising. “There’s a bunch of dresses in the back.”

She sifts through all the dresses, her nose still wrinkled, her brows drawing together every time she studies a price tag. “They’re a little expensive.”

I spot a sales rack and head for it. “Follow me.”

I’m no expert when it comes to shopping—especially for women—but she’s doing everything I ask, which is surprising. I think she’s defeated. And when you’re feeling defeated, of course you’re not going to be on top of your game. I should

know, since I deal with the feeling of defeat quite frequently during football season.

And sometimes, not so much. Like my freshman season, when we were kicking ass and taking names thanks to Ash Davis leading us to a bowl win—not that I played much that season. Sophomore year was rough only because it was a growing year, as the coach called it, but at least I was on the field. Plus, there was a struggle between the quarterbacks—specifically the first-string guy and Eli, who was second-string. We lost a lot of excellent players since they were all seniors and that hurt. Jackson eventually left us too before the season was barely over, and he had the potential to become something great, though he never believed in himself when it came to the game.

Music though? He had his biggest fan encouraging him to go for it, and look where he's at now. Lucky fucker.

“Ah, these are much better,” Gracie says as she searches through the racks, already grabbing a couple of dresses and slinging them over her arm.

“And they're an additional twenty-five percent off,” says a perky voice from behind us. “Want me to start a dressing room for you?”

I go stiff, hating how familiar that voice sounds. But then again, I've met a lot of women over the last few years. Maybe this chick just sounds like someone I've been with before.

And when I think ‘been with,’ I mean actually *been* with. Intimately. Naked. Sexually.

“Twenty-five percent off? That's awesome, thank you,” Gracie says with a smile. I watch out of the corner of my eye as she hands over the dresses she wants to try on. “And I'd love a dressing room.”

“Great, I'll take care of it for you.” The sales associate takes off, and once she's at a safe distance, I glance over my shoulder, checking her out.

Yep. Totally did that chick at a frat party a few months ago. Can't remember her name though. Kaylie, Kylie? Katie? Shit.

“Oh, I like this skirt too,” Gracie says, her expression determined as she whips through all the clothes on the sales rack. “You know, Caleb, I have to give it to you.”

“Give what to me?” I ask, rubbing the back of my neck. I hate how nervous I feel, but if that chick recognizes me—and she will, I can guarantee it—Gracie is going to be disgusted with me.

I just know it.

“This was a good idea, coming in here,” she explains, flashing me a quick smile. “Maybe I should listen to my friend more often.”

“Are you referring to me?”

“You’re the only friend of mine I’m currently with,” she says, her gaze returning to the rack, though I can see the smile still on her face. She’s probably pleased with putting me in the friend zone, and that sort of pisses me off. She knows what I want from her, but she refuses to give it to me.

So why should I worry what she thinks about me running into the girl I fucked in a frat house bathroom a few months ago? I shouldn’t care at all.

We’re just friends, right?

Shaking my hair out of my face, I start to wander around the store, trying to get this chick’s attention. She’s currently at the register, ringing a customer up, while Gracie is still searching through the sales racks, gathering up a giant pile of clothes to try on. Which sucks, because this means I’m here for the long haul, and I’m going to get bored quick.

Too bad I’m in the friend zone with Gracie. I’d try and mess around with her in the dressing room if we were more than that.

“Okay.” I turn to find Gracie approaching me with that giant smile still on her face. “I think I found more than enough stuff to try on. And it’s all on sale, so that’s a bonus.”

“Great,” I say, my voice flat, causing her smile to fade. “How long is this going to take?”

“You can go wait outside if you want,” she says, sounding defensive. “You knew it would take a while, shopping with me.”

True. I did know this. “It’s cool. I’ll find something to do.”

My gaze goes to the sales associate—Kylie?—and realize she’s headed in our direction, smiling as she sees the giant pile of clothes in Gracie’s arms.

“Let me take some of that for you,” she says, taking a few hangers from Gracie, her gaze sliding over to me briefly, just before she does a double take.

“Oh. Hey,” she says weakly.

“Hey.” I give her a chin nod, trying to keep it cool. Did I piss her off the last time I saw her? Can’t remember. I’m sure I bailed on her quick. Or convinced her to leave. That’s my usual mode of operation after I finish doing whatever I’ve been doing with a girl. “How are you?”

“Great.” Her smile grows. “How are you? Haven’t seen you around much lately.”

“Not partying as much,” I answer, glancing quickly over at Gracie. Her head goes back and forth as we speak, as if she’s watching a tennis match. “Been busy with work.”

“Still playing football?” the girl asks.

“You know it.” My gaze drops to her tits, looking for a nametag pinned to it, but she’s got nothing.

Damn it.

“My friends and I will have to come watch you play. Like last season,” she says, her tone turning flirtatious.

“Uhhh, excuse me, but could you get that dressing room going for me, please?” Gracie thrusts her armful of clothes toward the sales associate—damn it, I wish I could remember her name—and a couple of hangers fall out of the clothes, landing on the floor.

“Of course,” the store employee says, seemingly flustered as she dips down to gather up the hangers. “Are you still looking

around?”

“Yes, but I’ll be ready to try it all on in a few minutes.” Gracie’s smile and tone is syrupy sweet.

“My name is Skylee. Call me if you need me,” she says, her gaze shooting to mine quickly before she turns and heads for the dressing room section.

The moment she’s gone, Gracie is on me. “Please tell me you’ve never hooked up with that girl.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “I won’t tell you anything then.”

A frustrated sigh leaves her. “Can we not go anywhere without running into someone you’ve been with?”

“I didn’t see anyone I knew in any of those other stores you went into,” I point out. “And I thought her name was Kylie.”

“No, it’s worse than that. It’s *Skylee*.” Gracie rolls her eyes. “That’s awful.”

“Wait until you start teaching. I’m sure you’ll come across some crazy names,” I tell her.

Gracie contemplates me for a long, quiet moment before she starts to slowly shake her head. “You’re something else, you know that?”

Before I can ask her what she means, she’s gone, calling out Skylee’s name, gushing over all the good deals as Skylee lets her into a dressing room. I watch them, my hands in my pockets, worry eating at me over what those two might discuss about me while they’re hanging out or whatever.

The moment Gracie is in the dressing room, Skylee heads straight for me, her expression hopeful.

“What are you up to tonight?” she asks.

“Uh...” What the fuck? That’s a pretty ballsy question. I could be with Gracie—as in she could be my *girlfriend*. Skylee doesn’t know who she is to me. “I’m hanging out with her.”

I wave a hand toward the closed door of Gracie’s dressing room.

“Oh.” Skylee’s expression falls. “Are you two together?”

“Yes. Yes, we are,” I say firmly, nodding my head again and again. I’m filled with the realization that I don’t want to talk to this chick. “In fact, I should go check on my girlfriend. See if she needs help with anything.”

I leave Skylee where she’s standing and head for the dressing room, rapping my knuckles loudly on the sleek door before I try the handle. Unfortunately, it’s locked. “Hey babe, let me in there.”

The door quickly swings open, startling me. “Hey *babe*?” Gracie’s frowning so hard I’m worried she’s giving herself permanent wrinkles. “What the hell are you—”

I crowd her back into the dressing room, slamming the door behind me. “Shhh.” I rest my finger against her lips when she opens them, ready to blast me. “I had to tell her we were together.”

Gracie frowns. “Why?”

“Because she’s trying to ask me out.”

“Oh my God.” She bats my finger away from her lips. “Of course she is.”

I take a step back, checking her out, offering a low whistle. She’s wearing a black dress with little white flowers scattered all over it. “Damn girl, you look fine.”

“You say the worst things.”

“Okay. Let me correct my assessment. You look like a pretty young teacher who’d make my eight-year-old heart flip over itself.” I clutch my chest for extra emphasis.

She’s trying to hide the smile that wants to take over her face. “You can’t stay in here. I’m going to be changing in and out of clothes.”

I drop my hands to my sides. “I can’t go back out there. She’ll keep flirting with me.”

There’s a knock on the door, just before Skylee asks, “Everything okay in there? Do you need any different sizes?”

Gracie's gaze holds mine as she says, "We're just peachy, thanks."

TWELVE

GRACIE

THE PLEADING EXPRESSION on Caleb's face would almost be hilarious if I wasn't so irritated at him for locking himself in my dressing room to get away from some random girl he messed around with in his not-so-distant past.

"You can't stay in here," I whisper hiss at him.

He puts his hands together like he's praying. "Come on, G. Be a homey and help a friend out."

This is not exactly how I envisioned friends helping each other out, and he knows it. "I don't want to strip in front of you."

"Why not?" He raises a brow. "We're just friends, right? Besides, I've seen you in a bikini before. There's not much difference between that and panties and a bra."

He makes it sound like no big deal. Panties and a bra, so what? The problem is the panties I'm currently wearing are really a thong and my entire ass hangs out. Plus, I'm not that thrilled with that particular body part. I have smallish tits, but I sort of revel in that fact. Not having to wear a bra sometimes is liberating.

My butt though? It's kind of flat. When I was younger, my mom always told me I was one long line, and I never took that remark as a compliment. I've also always been more on the lean side, when all I wanted was curves.

We always want what we can't have, am I right? Case in point—curves and Caleb.

"Turn around," I tell him with a sigh.

He automatically turns so his back is facing me. He's currently wearing a red Fresno State T-shirt and navy basketball shorts. Nothing special but, somehow, he's rocking it. Maybe that's because he's so damn attractive, it's hard to look bad when your face and body are both so perfect.

Quickly I shed the dress and pull on a new one, tugging it into place as I tell him, "You can face me now."

Slowly he turns, his gaze scanning me from head to toe, lingering. Making me warm. "You look good in that too."

The dress is the same style as the first one but in a different print. Red with tiny cream-colored flowers. I don't usually wear this color, but I couldn't resist the dainty pattern of the flowers. "Do I look okay in red?"

"We match," he says, pointing at his T-shirt. "And yes. You definitely look good in red."

I shift around him so I can study myself in the mirror with a critical gaze, ignoring the twinge in my side. Maybe my appendix? Nah, feels more like a cramp. I'm sure it's just a period thing. No big deal.

Caleb takes the opportunity to plop his butt onto the single bench in the dressing room, leaning against the wall with a sigh as he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

"May as well be comfortable," he tells me, his gaze never straying from the screen.

"I'm getting this dress," I tell my reflection, liking how confident I feel in it.

"You should. You look beautiful." The compliment is offered so nonchalantly, I almost miss it.

Beautiful? I bask in the word for a moment, and in the knowledge of the one who gave it to me. Usually his compliment of choice is hot. He tells me that a lot and after a while, it doesn't mean anything. He thinks pretty much every girl is hot.

But beautiful? That's something else entirely. I don't think I've ever heard him call a single female beautiful.

Huh.

“I’m getting both dresses,” I decide.

“Good choice.” Again, his gaze never lifts from his phone screen. He’s tapping away at it, a faint smile curling his perfectly kissable lips.

Nope. Can’t think about how kissable his lips are either. That’s a dangerous path to go down, one I don’t need. He is temptation personified. My drug of choice, and I’m an addict looking to get high every damn day on this guy. How I’ve had the strength not to just throw myself at him and beg him to take me, I don’t know.

It’s been nice though, spending time with Caleb and not letting our mutual attraction get in the way. I can definitely consider him a friend now. I feel like I know him better than all of the guys I’ve dated.

Kind of wild, when I think about it.

There are a few more dresses I want to try on and I nibble on my lower lip, contemplating how fast I can whip this dress off and slip on a new one. He might not even notice. He’s concentrating pretty hard on his phone right now, and to tell him not to look will, of course, make him automatically check me out. It’s a given.

Giving in, I gently pull the new dress off the hanger and drape it over the hook, then tug the other dress off my body, fully facing forward so Caleb doesn’t get an eyeful of my entire ass. I slip on the new dress in seconds, already kind of hating how it fits, but not quite ready to give up on it yet.

“See, that wasn’t so bad.” He says this to his phone screen.

I pause mid-tug. “What do you mean?”

“Stripping in front of me.” He taps on his phone again.

I’m dying to know who he’s texting, but I have no business asking. “Did you look?”

He lifts his gaze to mine, a little snort escaping him. “Of course I looked. We may be friends but I’m not dead.”

I should be mad, but I'm not. Not at all. "Like what you see?"

He lifts a single brow. "Do you want me to like what I see, Gracie? Because that's going against friend code, you know."

Deciding it's best to drop the subject, I start tugging the dress into place once again, annoyed with myself for caring. He realizes quickly I'm not going to answer him, so he resumes paying attention to his phone instead of me.

The dress I'm wearing sucks. It's not flattering at all. I immediately take it off, standing in front of Caleb in just my bra and thong as I ponder what to try on next. Am I doing this on purpose? Yes. Yes, I am. Does he notice?

No. No, he does not. The asshole.

I make a big show of taking a new dress off a hanger, letting the hanger clatter to the floor before I bend over and pick it up, clutching the dress close to my front, my butt basically in Caleb's face.

The dude doesn't even notice me in all my half-naked glory. He's too busy texting. Probably some random chick he met once at a party. I'm sure she's pretty and easygoing and doesn't friend zone him ever.

With a huff, I slip the dress on, my arms still up in the air as I let it fall into place. I tug the front down and away from my face to find him blatantly watching me with an amused expression.

"Are you trying to get my attention?" he asks.

I glare at him. "Not like you care."

"I shouldn't," he says.

"Right. Too busy texting...whoever." I wave a hand toward the phone he's currently clutching, gazing at myself in the mirror.

The dress is just okay. Way better than the last one.

"I'm texting my mom," he says.

Surprised, I focus all of my attention on him. "Really, Caleb?"

“Yes, really, Gracie.” He thrusts his phone toward me and I squint as I take in the screen, noting the name Mom at the top of it. “I was telling her I took you to her favorite store and we’re finding you stuff to wear for your new job.”

“Uh huh.” He probably has every hookup he’s ever had under the name “Mom” in his phone. That way he doesn’t look like a complete douche when his phone is blowing up with calls from his various list of females.

“Read it.” He waves the phone at me and I can’t help myself. I snatch it out of his hand and read the texts, slowly realizing that he’s actually telling the truth.

He’s also telling his mom about me, and how we’re shopping together at the mall.

Mom: You actually agreed to go to the mall with this young lady? You must really like her.

Caleb: We’re just friends.

Mom: You’re friends with no girl.

Caleb: I am with this one.

Mom: You must really like her then. You usually don’t even bother being friends with a woman, though I think you should.

Caleb: I’m not friend material when it comes to women. They all want me too much.

Mom: Caleb Richard Burke, you should never talk to your mother like that. I mean it. That’s the last thing I want to hear.

Caleb: Sorry, Ma.

Aww, his mom seems sweet. Look at her chastising her son, and he wasn’t even that bad.

Wait a minute.

“Your middle name is Richard?” I ask him, lifting my head so I can stare into his stupidly beautiful blue eyes.

He nods. “No dick jokes, please. I’ve heard them my entire life.”

“I’m surprised you don’t go by the name Dick. It goes with your theme.”

“What theme?”

“How you continuously think with your dick and nothing else,” I answer sweetly.

He glares at me. “I should tell my mom you said that. She’d get mad at you.”

“Maybe she’d get mad at you, because if you ask me, it sounds like mama knows what kind of guy you are.”

He rolls his eyes, completely unfazed. “At least you believe I’m talking to my mom, right?”

“Oh, it’s definitely your mom.” I hand the phone back over to him, and he seems awfully pleased with my agreement.

“Told you.” His gaze lingers on the newest dress I’m wearing. “I don’t like that dress.”

“Why not?” I glance down at myself.

“It fits you funny.”

I immediately shed the dress. I’m not even bothering to hide the goods. He wants to take a long look at me like this? He better do it while he can. This is his last chance.

He slouches against the wall, his spread legs eating up a lot of space as he crosses his arms in front of his chest, watching me. “You know, I’ve always wanted to hook up with a girl in a dressing room.”

“When you say ‘hook up,’ are you meaning…” I let my words drift.

“Exactly what you’re thinking, yeah. Have sex. Do the nasty. Fuck around. Whatever you want to call it.” His gaze is heavy as he studies me. “Look at you. You’re halfway ready for a hookup. Want to come on over here and give it a shot?”

He slaps his thigh, indicating exactly where he wants me.

“Caleb.” I rest my hands on my hips, not giving a shit that I’m about to lecture him while half-naked. “Are you for real right now?”

“Sure.” He grins. “Why not?”

“I think you need lessons in seduction.” Pretty sure I saw a movie called that once. Maybe on Lifetime?

“I need no lessons. Everything I do always seems to work.” He frowns. “Except with you.”

“Yeah. Because the way you go about this sort of thing is downright awful. At least it is to me.” I don’t hold back. If these are his so-called moves, then he needs serious help because they’re pathetic. And super sleazy. “No girl wants to be propositioned like what you just did to me.”

“I beg to differ.” He sits up straighter, dropping his arms to his sides. “I’ve been hooking up with girls using these very same lines for years. They work like a charm.”

“And how far has that really got you though, huh?” I ask him.

“Far enough,” he says, looking smug.

“Aren’t you tired of the endless hookups?”

“I should ask you the same question,” he throws back at me.

“I haven’t been with a guy in a while,” I admit softly.

“And I haven’t been with a woman in a while,” he admits, just as softly.

We’re quiet, watching each other, me in my undies, his gaze zeroed in on my face, not drifting down once. It must be taking tremendous control for him to keep his eyes off my exposed body.

His phone dings, making us both jolt, and he checks it, smiling as he reads. “My mom said I should bring you around to meet her sometime soon. She thinks you sound like, and I quote, ‘a keeper.’”

“Aww, your mom sounds nice.” I don’t think anyone’s described me as a keeper before. No one really noticed me in high school. And in college, I became the good-time girl. The

one who never stuck around with one guy for too long for fear of missing out on something—or someone—better.

That sort of attitude has gotten me nowhere. Sometimes, I'm lonely, and here's the weird thing: Caleb is filling the void.

Yes, the biggest horn dog on campus is practically like a boyfriend to me, yet we keep it strictly platonic.

We make no sense.

"My mom is pretty damn sweet," Caleb agrees, finally letting his gaze scan downward, lingering on my chest. "But I'm not thinking about my mom right now, thank fuck. You need to cover up, G. It's suddenly getting pretty hot in here."

"Hmm. You can look, but you can't touch." I turn away from him, unclipping a denim skirt from its hanger when I feel fingers drift across my left ass cheek. I whirl on him just as he snatches his hand away, a guilty look on his face. "You touched."

"Sorry 'bout it." He doesn't sound sorry at all.

"Caleb..."

"What do you expect? You can't stand here with your ass in my face and not expect me to do something, am I right?" He shrugs, as if he has no other explanation, and I clutch the skirt tighter, holding it in front of me like some sort of shield.

"I should slap your face," I say, my voice shaky. My butt cheek still tingles where he touched me, which is crazy.

Unexpected.

Wait. Not really.

"Why? Do you think I took advantage of you?" He rises to his feet, all six-feet plus of him looming over me. I take a step backward as he steps forward, until I'm the one with my back against the wall and he's standing directly in front of me, the denim skirt I'm still holding the only thing between us. "Or were you trying to tempt me on purpose?"

I was totally trying to tempt him and maybe I shouldn't have. I'm playing with fire with this guy, and it's like I'm dying to

get burned.

“Because I got the sense you were—toying with me.” He braces his hand on the wall above my head, leaning toward me. “One kiss wasn’t enough, you know.”

Oh God. He would bring up the fact that we’ve kissed. “It was more than one kiss,” I correct him.

“Yeah. Definitely more than one. With lots of tongue too.” He shifts even closer, his body heat radiating, seeping into me. “I’d be down to do it again, you know.”

“Do what?” I ask warily.

“Kiss you. See where that takes us next.” He reaches out, his fingers drifting across my cheek.

I suck in an inaudible breath, dropping my gaze, scared to look at him. Everything about him is potent. Alluring. I want to lean into him and let him kiss me.

Guess he doesn’t need lessons in seduction after all.

“I don’t know...”

He silences me with a finger pressed against my lips, just like he did earlier, when he first shoved his way into my dressing room. He slips his fingers beneath my chin and tilts my face up, our gazes meeting. The intense, sexy look on his face leaves me breathless. I part my lips as he leans in, anticipation racing through my veins as I feel him draw closer, his breath wafting across my face. My eyes drift closed. His mouth hovers above mine—

“How are you doing in there? Do you need any other sizes?” Skylee asks from the other side of the door.

Caleb presses his forehead against mine and I open my eyes to find his still closed, his expression pained.

“I’m good,” I say, my voice shaky. I clear my throat. “Thank you.”

“Cock-blocked yet again,” he murmurs once she’s gone, right before he pulls away from me. “This is turning into a habit,

you know. I'm starting to think it's never going to happen between us."

I watch him, hating how everything inside of me feels pulled tight. Like I might explode. All because of an almost kiss, while I'm standing in just my underwear, with one of Caleb's one-night stands on the other side of the door. "You really believe that?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. So nonchalant. While I've got nothing but chaos happening inside of me. "Maybe we are better as just friends."

THIRTEEN

CALEB

I'M tired of this near miss shit. Seriously. This woman has been driving me crazy since day one. Day. One. I met her, I was instantly attracted, while she instantly hated me. We haven't been able to get on the same page since we first crossed paths. When I'm thinking maybe, she's thinking definitely not. And when she's considering me, I'm not interested.

Okay, that last part is a lie. I'm always interested. I just try and play it cool with this girl because...I don't know why. I care about what she thinks of me.

Frustrated, I leave the dressing room, ignoring Skylee when she calls my name. She doesn't bother asking me again what I'm doing tonight, which is a good thing.

I might've taken her up on whatever offer she made.

God, I'm a dick. A sexually frustrated, annoyed, out of my mind dick.

Fleeing the store, I pace around in front of it, thrusting my hands in my hair, my gaze snagging on Gracie as she goes to the counter and makes her purchase. She's chatting up Skylee as if they're old friends, which irritates me. Everything about Gracie aggravates me right now.

But intrigues me, too. I can't lie. She's a mystery. She keeps herself locked up tight, only revealing bits of information here and there. Little clues that leave me hanging, wanting to know more.

Me? I'm an open book. What you see is what you get. I'd even go so far as to call myself a simple man.

She's not simple at all. Gracie is complex. Prickly—only when it comes to me, though. Warm and friendly with everyone else. But she keeps it all on the surface, never going too deep. The only people she's real with are Hayden and the rest of the girls, though I don't hang around them long enough to know what she's really like with them.

Here's the weirdest part of all: I fell into a friendship with her and didn't even mean to. My mom wasn't lying when she said I don't make friends with women.

I don't.

Yeah, I'm friendly with my friends' girlfriends, but it's not like I hang out with Ava and Ellie. The only one who seems to accept me for what I am is Jocelyn. But she's too busy chasing after her cute daughter to give me much time anymore, and I understand. Being a mom is serious business.

I'm not serious about...anything. Not yet anyway. Dad encouraged me when I was younger to sow my wild oats, whatever the fuck that meant. It was the analogy he kept giving me every time we had a talk about relationships and sex, and when I was fifteen, I finally had to Google that shit to understand exactly what he was talking about.

I could only laugh when I read the definition. My dad got me. And when I went to him about it, he said he did much of the same thing when he was in high school. Sowing all those wild oats.

"I met your mom right out of high school," he admitted to me. "She was working on the lake, just like me. A year older. So much wiser than me, I thought, and turns out, I was right. Your mom is a smart woman. I don't know what she saw in a guy like me, but there we were, madly in love and married by twenty-one, your mom was twenty-two."

My dad telling that to sixteen-year-old me made it sound like an impending death sentence. No way did I want to get serious about anyone. I didn't need or want that.

“I don’t regret marrying your mom so young, but if I could give you one bit of advice, I’d tell you to take your time. Enjoy your youth and the opportunities it gives you. You don’t need to settle down with anyone. Go out and live your life. Enjoy it. You’ll be a responsible adult for a lot longer than you’ll be a student. Take advantage of those years.”

I took his words to heart. I’ve been living it up ever since.

Until recently. No fucking around for me. I just follow after Gracie like a whipped puppy dog, eager for her attention. Desperate for any little scrap she shares with me.

“Hey.” I turn to find Gracie standing there, a giant shopping bag hanging from her arm. “Ready to go?”

I nod and take the bag from her, because I’m a gentleman, damn it. And I’m going to help a lady instead of making her carry it herself.

She hands it over without protest and off we go, back in the direction we came.

“I got a lot for what I spent, but I’m done. I need to save as much as I can,” she says.

“You ready to go then?” I ask.

She nods. “Yeah.” Then pauses before she keeps going. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And thank you for the store suggestion. It turned out to be the perfect place for me to shop.” A smile barely touches the corners of her lips. “You surprise me, Caleb.”

“How?”

“I didn’t expect you to know where to shop for women’s clothes,” she says as we enter the department store we parked by.

“I’m an expert at taking them off so…” I shrug.

She comes to a stop in the middle of the aisle. “Why do you always have to take it somewhere sexual when we’re talking?”

“That’s where my thoughts always go, I guess,” I say, feeling defensive.

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true.” She starts walking and I follow. “My middle name is Richard, remember? Guess I can’t stop thinking with my dick.”

She whirls on me right in front of the doors leading to the parking lot. “You’re more than that. I don’t believe you just think with your penis and that’s how you live life. Roaming the land, looking for your next conquest. You’ve got depth, Caleb. You’re smart and thoughtful and sweet.”

I flash her an exaggerated smirk, going for smug. “I’ve got you fooled, woman. There is no depth here. And I’m definitely not sweet.”

Gracie just smiles and I swear I see a flash of pity in her gaze. “Okay. Whatever you need to do to convince yourself that’s all you are.”

I frown as she approaches me, getting so close I can smell her scent, feel her warmth. Carefully, she stretches, her mouth landing on my cheek, lingering there for a second too long before she pulls away. “What was that for?” I ask, tempted to rub at the spot where her lips just were on my skin.

But I keep myself in check.

“A thank you for being my friend. For indulging me on this little shopping trip I know you didn’t want to go on,” she explains. Her expression is open.

She looks happy. With me.

“You’re welcome.” I grin, surprised by how good it makes me feel, that I made her happy with something as simple as this. “But now you owe me dinner.”

She rolls her eyes and goes to the door, pushing it open and letting a blast of hot air into the cool interior of the store. “Come on. I’ll feed you.”

“Really?” I ask hopeful, my stomach growling as I follow her out into the parking lot.

“Yes, really. Caleb, you aren’t led by your dick. More like your stomach and its endless need to be filled,” she says with a laugh.

I savor the sound of her laughter, watching as she opens the trunk of her car and I drop the giant bag full of clothes inside. This all feels very...domesticated. Like we really are friends. Or maybe even a couple.

The idea of that sends an icy cold shiver of dread straight down my spine, landing in my balls.

That is the last thing I want to be.

Right?

THE MOMENT we enter the apartment, Eli is there, practically in our faces.

“We’re going out tonight,” he announces, a giant grin on his face.

“Count me out,” Gracie says as she walks past him and heads for her bedroom with the shopping bag in her hand. “I’m exhausted.”

“You’ll go with me, right?” Eli asks hopefully, his brows shooting up.

“Why are you so anxious to party? And where are we going?” I ask warily, quietly agreeing with Gracie.

I’m tired too.

“Up to the lake. Jake is home for a few days, and Hannah is with him. They rented a cabin and asked a bunch of us to join them,” Eli explains.

I slowly shake my head, hating that this asshole finds out about Jake having a get-together before I do. Jake was my friend first. “Did he invite you to go and forgot to mention it to me?”

“Ava called and told me about it. She said her brother wants all of us there. Tony and Hayden are going too. So are Jocelyn and Diego,” Eli explains.

“I didn’t even know Jake was in town.”

“It’s a brief trip. They were both missing home so they decided to come visit. He’ll be here for two nights. I’m surprised he didn’t text you.”

“Me too,” I mutter, exhaling loudly. “I have to work tomorrow. I open. So does Gracie.”

Eli slowly shakes his head. “That job eats up all of your time.”

“I need the cash,” I tell him, like I always do. “Especially since we’re practicing more starting next week. That’ll cut into my hours.”

“Well, come with us tonight. Have a few drinks and relax. You need it. You’ve been strung tight lately.” Eli claps me on the back before he heads for the kitchen. “I’m leaving in an hour. Be ready by then.”

I watch him go, contemplating my decision. I don’t mind the idea of staying home and missing out on this. I’m tired, and I’ll have to get up early to get to work tomorrow.

But then again, I haven’t seen Jake in a while, and it would be nice to hang out with him and hear what he’s been up to. I’ll even tolerate his sweet girlfriend hanging around. Those two are connected at the hip, I swear. You rarely see Jake without Hannah.

My decision made, I head down the hall, pausing in front of Gracie’s door before I knock lightly.

“Come in.”

I push open the door to see she’s pulled all of her new clothes out of the shopping bag and they’re strewn on top of her unmade bed. Since living with her, I’ve realized Gracie is kind of messy. She has issues with laundry. As in, she hates doing it. Folding it. Putting it away.

“Are you going tonight?” I ask her.

She slowly shakes her head as she contemplates her new clothes. “I don’t think so. I’m not in the mood to hang out and drink. I’m really tired. Plus, we work early tomorrow.”

“I know. I was thinking the same thing.” I lean against the doorjamb, watching her. She’s moving kind of slow, favoring one side. Almost as if she’s in...pain? “But if we went, we’d be that much closer to the lake. And work.”

Gracie pauses, glancing over at me. “Where are Jake and Hannah staying?”

“I don’t know. Hey Eli!” I scream, making Gracie wince. “Where’s the cabin at that Jake’s in?”

“At The Pines,” he yells in answer.

“That’s on the other side of the lake,” she points out to me.

“We’d still be closer than we are if we stayed here,” I remind her. “We’ll stay the night. I’m sure Jake won’t mind.”

She slumps her shoulders, a weary sigh escaping her. “Please don’t make me go.”

“Why not? You’re always down to party,” I say to entice her.

“Not tonight.”

“What about Hayden? Your homegirl will be there,” I say to entice her.

That brightens her up a little bit. “She will?”

I nod. “That’s what Eli said.”

Another sigh leaves her. “It’s almost eight.”

“Okay grandma, and so?”

“When would we leave?” She rests her hands on her hips, looking sassy. Looking more like her usual self.

“Eli said in an hour,” I answer.

“We wouldn’t be at the lake until ten,” she points out.

“Just in time for the party to really be hopping.” I rub my hands together in anticipation, smiling big.

She slowly shakes her head. “It’s a bad idea.”

“A little get-together is never a bad idea. Come on, G. Just go. I’ll drive and you can ride to work with me in the morning,” I suggest.

“What about Eli?”

“He’ll end up staying with Ava. She’ll get him home. Don’t worry about him,” I say because it’s true.

“You should consider being a lawyer. You’re very persuasive, Caleb,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Fine. I’ll go.”

“Good. Get ready for a good time,” I tell her with a wink before I leave her bedroom and head for mine.

I don’t know what’s going to happen tonight. But I have a good feeling about this.

A very good feeling.

FOURTEEN

GRACIE

BY THE TIME we arrive at the cabin Jake and Hannah rented for the night, the party is in full swing, just as Caleb predicted. I was so tired from shopping that when we first got home, I wasn't feeling it. Plus, that nagging pain while we shopped turned into full-blown cramps. I just had my period too so I don't know what's up, but the idea of going to a party did not appeal.

But now I'm practically bouncing with energy as we approach the well-lit cabin. There are people standing outside on the massive front porch with beer bottles clutched in their hands, engaged in small talk. None of them are familiar faces, but Caleb says hi to all of them, nodding and smiling as we walk by them.

He grew up here, and it shows.

We enter the cabin together, Caleb and me. We lost Eli the second Caleb parked the car. He shot out of the vehicle like a bullet, off in search of his girlfriend, and clearly he found her because I see him and Ava already snuggled together on a couch in the living room, lost in each other as only two lovebirds can be.

Those two are couple goals, if you're into that sort of thing.

"There you are!"

I turn to find Hayden making her way toward me, a giant smile on her face. She looks a little buzzed already and when she wraps me up in her arms in a generous hug, I realize she is very much buzzed. I can literally smell the alcohol on her.

“My best friend,” Hayden croons in my ear before she delivers a sloppy kiss on my cheek. “I’m so glad you made it.”

“I almost didn’t come,” I tell her as I pull out of her arms, studying her face. “You’re drunk.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “I am. I can admit it.”

“You all right?” I ask with a slight frown. It’s not like Hayden to get smashed, not anymore.

“I’m great. Not drowning my emotions in liquor, if that’s what you’re worried about.” She giggles. Hiccups. Giggles again. “I just felt like letting loose tonight. Before responsibility kicks in, you know?”

“I do know,” I say with a nod.

“Plus, there’s something about being surrounded by all of these handsome guys that sends me over the edge,” she says with a dreamy sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“Take a look around, my friend. We are surrounded by gods,” she says, utterly serious.

I do as she asks, scanning the room. I see Jake standing amongst a small group, his beautiful girlfriend Hannah next to him, watching him with adoring eyes. And I can see why, because the older he gets, the handsomer he becomes. He reminds me of his father.

And former NFL quarterback Drew Callahan back in the day—hell, even right now—was gorgeous. Total DILF material, though I’ve never admitted that to anyone, save the drunk girl standing beside me.

My gaze snags on Eli again, who is whispering something in Ava’s ear while she grins. He pulls away from her with a laugh and yep, he’s attractive. Diego and Jocelyn are cuddled next to each other on an oversized chair that’s next to the couch, lost in a world of their own making. Their heads are bent close and their gazes are fixed on each other. They are one hundred percent connected.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” I ask Hayden.

“Right there.” She points.

Looks like Tony just joined Jake’s group, stopping right next to his friend. They perform a complicated handshake as they both laugh.

“See what I’m talking about?” Hayden asks. “We’re surrounded by men with gorgeous faces and full of testosterone. I can barely take it.”

“At least you’re getting some on the regular,” I mutter, watching as Diego approaches Jake and Tony. More complicated handshakes and laughter follow and when Caleb joins them? It’s on. Those are the original four. The core of the friend group.

I love that they are all still close. That they have each other’s backs, even with Jake far away at USC. Even though he plays for another school, they support him. How could they not? They’ve come so far, mostly together.

“Wait, are you not getting any on the regular?” Hayden frowns, confused. “Like...sex? Is that what you’re talking about?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re not...having it?”

I slowly shake my head. “Nope.”

“I thought you and Caleb were...” She gestures with her fingers, forming a circle with her index finger and thumb and inserting her other index finger into the circle.

I roll my eyes and gently slap her hands apart. “Nope. Definitely not with Caleb.”

“We all think you’re doing it,” she admits, her expression solemn. “Some are even taking bets on when it’s going to implode between the two of you.”

My mouth drops open. Well, that’s kind of rude. “They’re taking *bets*?”

Her expression changes. As if she just realized maybe she shouldn’t have said that. Yeah, Hayden. You probably

shouldn't have. "Just as a joke."

"Who's in on this joke?" If she says Caleb, I'm going to scream.

"Eli. Tony. Diego." She winces. "I might've placed a bet too."

"Hayden," I chastise and I see the remorse on her face. "And what do you mean, implode?"

"He drives you crazy. We're all aware of this. But we also all thought you two were secretly doing it, so we started making bets on how long this could last before everything blows up between you two," she explains.

"Like break up?"

"Yeah. But I guess we were wrong." She frowns. "You're not having sex with Caleb. Which is like...so wild to me."

"You sound disappointed."

"I kind of am. I didn't mind the idea of the two of you... together. I've barely seen you lately. Figured you were spending all of your time with Caleb," she says.

"I've been working," I say weakly, though she is right. I do spend a lot of time with Caleb.

My gaze returns to him standing mere feet away from me, still chatting with his friends, smiling. Laughing. Looking happy. Sexy. He lifts his head, as if he can sense I'm watching him, and next thing I know his gaze meets mine and he aims that smile right at me, slow and easy.

I look away quickly, my heart racing. *Shit.*

Shit.

"Working and spending time with Caleb," Hayden says, as if she's got me all figured out. "It's weird, how you guys are friends. Tony says Caleb isn't going out as much anymore."

"He doesn't have the time."

"He's not getting with other women much either," Hayden adds. "Not like he used to. And he always used to."

I have nothing to say to that.

“How about you?” Hayden asks me when I still haven’t said anything. “Met anybody new out on the lake?”

I slowly shake my head. “Nope.”

“Not even a cute tourist to hook up with?”

I don’t answer her, my gaze finding Caleb again, like I can’t help myself. He’s already watching me, and he doesn’t look away. He lets himself get caught. He even toasts me with the beer in his hand and I realize I don’t have a drink. I’m stone-cold sober.

“He’s looking at you right now,” Hayden says, a little too loudly. “If you two aren’t doing it yet, you will be soon.”

“Shh,” I say, not bothered by her comment whatsoever.

Tony approaches us and I leave them alone to wander through the cabin, finding myself a White Claw to sip on. I talk to Hannah, Jake’s girlfriend, and she tells me all about the art school she’s at and how much she loves it. Jake joins us at one point, slinging his arm around her shoulders and tugging her in close, pressing his lips to her forehead in the sweetest gesture. I quietly swoon, watching the two of them, and I suddenly feel...

Lonely.

I want that, I think to myself after I walk away from them. I think I’m finally ready. I want to be with one guy and no one else. Could that be Caleb?

The thought is scary...yet not. I can imagine myself with Caleb. We already spend a lot of time together. We’re definitely compatible. Would it be so awful to take the next step? Or would it be a giant mistake, trusting this man with my heart when he’ll most likely throw it aside once he’s done with me?

I take a big chug from my drink, the alcohol coursing down my throat and racing through my veins. I can literally feel it, and in that moment, I decide to drain the can. Screw nursing the drink for the night. I want another one.

I need another one.

In search of more to drink, I go to the kitchen to find Eli and Caleb arguing about something involving football. I grab another White Claw out of the fridge and shut the door, turning to find Caleb standing directly in front of me, Eli long gone.

“What are you up to?” he asks, his voice extra deep and extra sexy.

Swallowing hard, I lift my head to meet his gaze. He’s watching me so carefully, it makes me feel uneasy, but not in a bad way.

No, more like in a *I think this guy wants me* way.

“Just getting another drink,” I tell him, keeping my voice light and airy. As if I don’t have a care in the world. “What are you up to?”

“Pissing Eli off.” He grins. “It’s one of my favorite things to do.”

“I heard the two of you arguing.” I pop the tab on the White Claw can before taking a giant sip.

“It was all in good fun. I just like getting a rise out of him.” Caleb shrugs one shoulder, his gaze locked on the spot where I drink from the can. “What flavor is that?”

I check the can. “Watermelon.”

“Can I try?”

I hand the can to him. “Sure.”

His fingers graze mine as he takes it from me, sending a shiver down my spine. I know he did that on purpose. The air between us immediately becomes charged with electricity. I watch as he drinks from the can, noting the movement of his throat when he swallows.

Makes me think of that dude I hung out with for a little while last year, with the giant Adam’s apple. Franz. Nice guy. From Germany. Very proper and polite. Nothing like the guy standing in front of me.

“Delicious,” he says, licking his lips as he hands the can back over to me. “Thanks for sharing.”

I shake the can, realizing he drank quite a bit. “You should just keep it. You already drank most of it.” I thrust it back in his direction.

“You don’t want to share?” He raises a brow.

“Oh, is that what we’re doing now? Sharing?”

“We’ve shared a lot of things this summer,” he says. He makes it sound so simple. “We’ve spent a lot of time together too.”

“We have,” I agree.

“I’m starting to think you haven’t put me in the friend zone at all,” he says easily, as if we’re just having a regular conversation, though it’s anything but. “More like you’ve been treating me like a boyfriend.”

My mouth pops open and to fill it, I bring the can back to my lips, draining the rest of my drink in a few swallows.

“Don’t got anything to say about that?” he asks after I still haven’t responded.

His voice is deceptively soft, but his gaze is sharp. This is totally unlike Caleb. He’s normally easygoing and casual. Laughing and joking and always saying something inappropriate.

This version of Caleb? Is making me nervous.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“We’ve been hanging out a lot,” he says, taking the now empty can from me and setting it on the counter behind him. “All summer. We’re friends, right, Gracie?”

I nod, unable to look away from him. Wondering what sort of spell he’s trying to place on me. He’s acting different. All traces of good-time Caleb are long gone.

“I consider you a friend,” he continues. “And I don’t make friends with women. Just ask my mom. She’ll confirm that little fact.”

I can't help but laugh. "Right, like she said earlier."

He nods. "That I even mention my mom to you makes this—you—different. I don't do this sort of thing, you know."

I frown. "Do what?"

"Hang out with girls on a regular basis. Tell my mom about them. You're the first." He reaches out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

I shiver from his touch, mentally telling myself to calm down. "Isn't it kind of nice, having a woman as a friend?"

"It's more than nice, G. And I can't help but think I want more than just friendship from you." He takes a deep breath, a faint smile curling his perfect lips as he leans against the kitchen counter behind him. "But I always think that when it comes to you."

I'm quiet, my voice leaving me. How do I answer him? What do I say?

"I call this the cock-block summer," he continues, chuckling softly. "You've been throwing up blocks left and right. All summer long. I normally give up by now. Hell, I would've given up at the first block."

I'm dying to ask him why he hasn't given up on me, but I keep my mouth shut.

"But there's something about you that I can't give up on, G. No matter how hard I try." He grabs my hand and pulls me into him, so I'm standing in between his spread feet. "I can't quit you."

"That sounds like a line from a cheesy country song," I say, hating how shaky my voice sounds.

"Here's the thing—I mean everything I'm saying. I don't go shopping at the mall with chicks. I don't commute with them to work. I don't buy tampons for them at the store either," he says with a faint grimace.

Oh right. He was at Walmart last week and I asked him to pick me up some tampons. It didn't even faze him.

“That’s what friends do.”

He settles his hands on my waist, as if he’s testing me. Testing how they fit on my skin. As if he’s testing how we fit together. “So tired of the friend shit, G. You know it’s bullshit.”

“What do you want from me, Caleb?” I ask, my voice so soft, I almost can’t hear myself.

“You really want to know?” He raises a single brow, tipping his head forward, a lock of dark hair falling across his forehead.

Ugh. He’s so, so cute. Attractive. Sexy. I’ve been drawn to him since the first time I met him. Even when he was a complete dickhead screaming about the Bee Gees while hanging out of Tony’s car in front of Strummers. He still made me laugh.

And I’m a sucker for a guy who can make me laugh. It’s a total weakness of mine. There are way too many serious men out there. Shouldn’t life be fun?

I get the feeling that life would always be fun with Caleb.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Tell me.”

“This,” he whispers.

Just before he dips his head, his mouth landing on mine.

FIFTEEN

CALEB

THE MOMENT my mouth finds Gracie's, I lose all sense of time and place. Which sounds stupid as hell, but it's true. I feel like we've been racing toward this moment since the last time we kissed. That was weeks ago. A month ago. We've been spending time together almost daily since.

A lot of the time since we've been hanging out, I don't think about how I'm going to get her naked. I just bask in her presence and actually enjoy it.

Call me crazy, but I like her. A lot.

I like kissing her too.

The moment she pulls away from me, I can hear Eli laughing. I glance toward the kitchen entrance to find him standing there watching us, Ava next to him wearing a shocked expression while her stupid-ass boyfriend appears greatly amused.

"Finally, I actually catch you guys doing something," he says as he strides into the kitchen with Ava by his side.

Gracie pulls away from me quickly, her cheeks turning pink. As if she's embarrassed to be caught with me. "It was nothing."

I'm immediately insulted. That kiss, while brief, was definitely something.

"Looked like something to me." Eli's gaze meets mine. I scowl at him, irritated. With myself for being such a baby and with Gracie for being so dismissive of what just happened between us.

As usual.

“Really,” I say to Gracie, my voice flat.

She sends me a defiant look, her lips thinning into a flat line. She says nothing.

Neither do I.

Fuck.

With a glare, I turn away from her and exit the kitchen, determined to find someone else to talk to. Preferably a girl. Someone I don't know who I can flirt with for a while, though I have no plans on doing anything with a random chick tonight beyond talking to her.

I move through the small crowd, chatting with all sorts of people, most of them I know or at least remember their faces from high school. None of the women in this place interest me. They're pretty and they're giving me flirtatious vibes, but I'm not responding. I smile and bow out, every single time.

I'm about an hour in of constantly moving like a shark underwater when Eli calls me over to where he's at, sitting with Ava. He leaves her with a brief kiss and a murmured, “I'll be right back,” before he comes to stand by me.

“Let's grab a beer and chat,” he says.

I follow him into the kitchen, where we grab beers and head outside. I don't know what kind of speech he has planned, but I steel myself as I follow him out on the back porch. The air is cool, the scent of pine lingering in the breeze. It's a scent that always makes me think of home, and while I don't necessarily want to return to my hometown to live any time soon, I know I will miss it when I'm well and truly gone.

“What did you want to talk about?” I ask Eli after about a minute of silence.

He watches me carefully. “You're falling for her.”

“Who?” I frown, immediately knowing who he's talking about. “Oh, you mean Gracie? Nah. I'm just trying to get in her panties, but she keeps those things on lock.”

I think of her earlier in the dressing room. How she hid from me at first, but then eventually gave up. I looked my fill, eager to touch her. That one caress on her ass was about as far as I dared to take it, and her skin was like silk. Smooth and soft.

What I really wanted to do was take a handful of her ass and squeeze. Pull her into me and let her feel what she does to me just by looking at her.

But I used restraint. I was respectful.

“I don’t believe you,” Eli says. “Trust me, I know what it’s like to want a girl. To fall for one, and feel all confused and shit. It fucks with your head and your dick.”

“My head isn’t involved in this. I’m not interested in her,” I say firmly before I take a swig of beer. “Not like that.”

“You kissed her in the kitchen. In front of everyone. Then you looked hurt when she called it nothing.” He points at me. Eli’s always pointing, the fucker. “I call that feeling something.”

I glare at him. “Why are you trying to make this happen?”

“I’m not trying to make anything happen. I’m trying to have a man to man with you and reassure you that it’s okay to admit your feelings. It’s okay to want a relationship, my friend. Your life isn’t going to end if you have to fuck the same pussy every night,” Eli explains.

“If Ava heard you say that...” I arch a brow.

“She won’t. That’s the beauty of this conversation. It’s just between us. And besides, I’m trying to get on your level, so you understand what I’m saying.” Eli grins.

I don’t think this conversation is a laughing matter. “Being with one woman goes against everything I’ve been taught.”

Not that anyone actually taught me this. I just assumed it was the right path to take until I was expected to settle down. Live it up, play around, have a good time. That’s been my plan since I first discovered girls.

“And who exactly taught you this again? Because if you ask me, it’s nothing but a bunch of horseshit.” Eli smiles, and I can tell he’s trying to put on his Mr. Convincing act. “Come on,

what's the big deal? You and Gracie like each other. You seem compatible.”

“She hates me,” I mutter, though I know it's not true. “She's not interested in me like that.” I also know that's not true either.

“She doesn't hate you. That's all sexual tension,” Eli says, like it's no big deal. “Ava and I were the same way, you know. She didn't like me. I was obsessed with her. All I could think about was getting a taste of that. A piece of that. It was never really about getting back at her brother, no matter what all you assholes thought.”

“Really?” I never believed that. I always figured Eli went after Ava because he wanted to piss off Jake—and fell in love with her in the process. “I thought you were just fucking with her because she's a Callahan.”

“Her being a Callahan was the worst part. Felt like our chance was cursed from the beginning. But we made it work. We're still making it work, even though sometimes it's a struggle.” Eli's expression darkens and he takes another drink from his beer.

“What do you mean?” I ask with a frown. “I thought you two were all cozy since she's home for the summer.”

“We are. But she's going back. I was hoping I could convince her to stay. Why can't she just go to Fresno State? But she doesn't want to leave her friends she's made there. She likes it in San Diego.” Eli's mouth twists, as if he just said a dirty word. “She was always dead set on leaving. Even after we got together, she warned me she would go to school somewhere else.”

“Why didn't you follow her?”

“Because the Bulldog coaching staff persuaded me to come to Fresno State. And I've done great here—no complaints. I played under Ash Davis, and look at him now, kicking ass in the NFL. He taught me a lot during that one season. And I didn't have the advantage of going to your high school and getting coached by Drew Callahan,” Eli says.

“He’s practically your father-in-law now.” I don’t want to hear a bunch of mopey, *woe is me, you had a better shot than I did* bullshit from Eli. The dude’s got it made.

“Yeah. He’s a good guy.” Eli smiles. “You know who else is a good guy? You are.” He points at me again. His mama must have never taught him that was rude. “Stop trying to act like a giant manwhore and go with your gut.”

“My gut is telling me to continue acting like a manwhore,” I tell him, my tone serious.

I mean, it sort of does. I don’t know what to do anymore. Be a manwhore and fuck everything in a skirt? Or calm down some and get a little more selective? That’s the route I thought I was taking. I’m not out to fuck every chick I meet anymore, but damn.

I’m starting to get real tired of just using my hand. I need some action from someone else, and I really want that someone else to be Gracie.

If she’s not interested though, I’ll move on.

I have to.

“Is it really though, Caleb? Because I see the way you watch Gracie,” Eli says.

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t take your eyes off of her. And don’t tell me when she said your kiss was nothing that it didn’t hurt. I saw the look on your face. Like you just got kicked in the balls,” Eli says.

Damn it, it did feel like she kicked me in the balls when she said that. Girl is ruthless when she wants to be, and it feels like she’s constantly giving me a taste of my own medicine, which fucking sucks, let’s be real.

“I get the feeling that once we finally do it—” and hopefully we’re going to, “—I’ll be over this...whatever it is I’m feeling for her.”

“If you say so.” The doubt in his voice is one hundred percent maddening.

“I’m not interested in a relationship with her,” I say.

“Okay. Whatever.” Eli shrugs, polishing off his beer. “I need to go find my girl. Good talk.”

“Oh yeah. Great talk,” I tell him as he walks away, flipping me the bird the entire way until he disappears back into the cabin.

I slump against the porch railing, sipping on my beer, thinking. Something, admittedly I’ve never been real big on.

I don’t think. I just do. I’m impulsive and rash and reckless. Fearless. All words that have described me since I was a little kid. I speak out of turn and can’t shut up. I’m always too daring. I broke my right arm twice and my left wrist. I never say no to a dare, no matter how scary it is and most of the time, I’m not even scared.

Some people might think I’m stupid, but I’m not. I just flat-out don’t give a shit. I never really have. I’m all about living life in the moment, doing whatever I want. Being scared is for pussies. I’m young and free—free to be me. Damn, that sounds corny as fuck, but it’s true.

So why the fuck does Gracie scare the absolute shit out of me?

Eli makes getting into a relationship sound so easy when I know it’s not. My dad always told me not to fall too young, too hard. Get out there and make something of yourself first. Live your life and have fun doing it. Don’t let anyone, including yourself, hold you back.

I’ve made it my mission to do exactly that. No fear. No qualms. Just—do it. I should be the face of Nike, swear to God.

But did my father ever guide me on what exactly I should do with my life? What sort of career I might consider? What I should major in, in college? Nope. He left that all on me, telling me often that I don’t want to end up like him. He’s a tire salesman for the love of God. He manages the only chain tire store in my hometown, working that retail grind. That is the last thing I want to do, and he knows it. He encouraged me to go to college, to get an education.

A realization hits me and I squint at the window in front of me, spotting Gracie. Maybe she isn't one hundred percent invested in me because I have no drive. I'm aimless. Unsure. She's two years older and about to embark on her new career. I know she's nervous about it, and that's half the reason I agreed to go shopping with her earlier.

Maybe in Gracie's eyes, I'm still just a kid. A boy who's fucking around and can't be serious.

I see her inside, chatting with Hannah, her gaze going to the window every few seconds, as if she knows I'm out on the back porch. I stare at her, feeling sulky. Less than. Even...

Unworthy.

But then I really look at her. The expression on her pretty face. The wince. The way her forehead creases as she pauses in her talking, and how she bends over a little.

Almost as if she's hurting.

Forgetting my beer, I dash back into the house, shoving past people to get into the living room, until I come to a skidding stop right in front of her and Hannah. I reach for Gracie, my hands on her elbows as I pull her close to me.

"What's wrong?"

She's frowning. It's immediately replaced by another wince. "What are you talking about?"

"You look like you're in pain."

Her frown deepens. "I'm fine. I just—oh God."

Gracie doubles over, a cry falling from her lips. A wave of panic washes over me, but I fight it.

"Where does it hurt?" I ask, my tone sharp.

Hannah watches us with wide eyes. "What's going on?"

"Gracie," I say firmly when she doesn't answer me. "Where. Does. It. Hurt?"

She lifts her head, her expression full of agony. "Right here." She clutches her side. "It's just—cramps."

We've lived together for almost two months and I've never heard her complain about cramps. But Gracie doesn't complain about much of anything, so whatever is bothering her, it has to be pretty bad.

Without hesitation I gather her in my arms—she's really freaking light—and carry her over to the nearby couch. There are people currently sitting on it, but they all scramble off when they see me glowering at them.

I lay her on the couch and then kneel beside her, touching her forehead. It's cool yet damp with sweat. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"Have you been in pain? When did this start?" God, she's so frustrating. But I need to be patient and get this out of her.

"Earlier this afternoon," she admits, biting her lower lip. "Before we left for the mall."

"Gracie," I say gently, hating that she's hurting.

"Caleb," she returns with a faint smile, then winces in pain once again. "Oh man, these are the worst cramps I've *ever* had."

"Didn't you just have your period?"

She seems shocked by my question. "Since when do you pay attention?"

"I brought you home tampons, remember?"

She sighs. "Right. Yeah no, I'm not on my period."

"You on the pill?"

"Yeah. Are we having the sex talk right now?"

I chuckle. "No, G. That is the last thing I want to be having with you right now."

"So insulting. *Aah.*" She closes her eyes and presses her hand against her lower belly, pain etched in her features. "God, this really hurts."

"I'm taking you to the emergency room," I say, panic flaring inside me, sending me straight over the edge. I rise to my feet

and hurriedly look around, spotting Jake first. “I’m out of here.”

He comes rushing toward me, concern in his gaze. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s not feeling well.” I gesture to Gracie, who’s sitting up with her eyes closed, concentrating on her breathing. “Maybe her appendix?”

“Oh shit.” Jake’s frown deepens. “You okay to drive?”

“I barely had one beer and some of her White Claw.” I wave a hand at Gracie. “I should be fine.”

I feel fuckin’ sober as hell right now, knowing Gracie is in pain and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“What’s going on?” Hayden appears, crouching down beside the couch and grabbing hold of Gracie’s hand. “Are you okay, babe? What’s up?”

“I don’t know. It hurts.” Gracie rests her hand on her front. “Right here.”

Hayden glances up, her gaze meeting mine. “Has she been complaining about pain?”

I slowly shake my head. “Not until just now.”

“Are you sober?”

“Hell yes.”

“Thank God,” Hayden says. “Is there an urgent care open up here at this time of night?”

“No,” Eli says with a shake of his head. “He’s going to have to take her to Fresno.”

“Not a problem.” Growing up around here, I know all the shortcuts. I can get her to Fresno quick.

“I don’t need to go to the emergency room,” Gracie protests, her voice weak. “Seriously, I can go to the campus medical center tomorrow morning. I’ll be fine.”

“No,” I say firmly. “You shouldn’t wait. You look pale, G. You need to see a doctor. Make sure you’re all right.”

Her face turns even paler, thanks to what I just said. I don't mean to scare her, but shit. I don't want to risk it. She needs medical attention, and I don't think she should wait.

I grab her hand, giving it a squeeze. "You're gonna be okay. I've got you."

Gracie's gaze locks with mine. "You promise?"

I nod, not knowing if I can keep my promise, but I'm going to do my damndest to stand by it. "Promise."

SIXTEEN

GRACIE

I THOUGHT I was going to die.

Not from the pain—though it's intense, but it comes in waves.

No, I thought I was going to die thanks to the way Caleb drove.

He was scared. I could see it in his eyes, on his face. He looked petrified. And he drove like a maniac, taking corners way too fast, driving down the mountain like a man possessed. He passed every slow car he came up behind and it didn't matter if he crossed a double yellow line to do it. After a while, it became easier to just close my eyes and pretend it wasn't happening. That way I wouldn't see my impending death upon impact.

Somehow, we made it to the hospital in one piece. And now I'm in a hospital gown laid up on a hospital bed somewhere in the depths of the emergency room, unable to sleep while Caleb dozes in the chair next to the bed, his big body slumped over in the most uncomfortable position I think I've ever seen.

He's still cute though. And sweet. Look at him running to my rescue when I needed him. Hayden and I accused Jackson Rivers of having a major hero complex when it came to his now girlfriend, Ellie. He was always trying to save her, and after a while, she hated it.

But no one has really ever tried to save me before. This is a first. And despite my need to be a strong, independent woman, I have to admit it was really nice to have him swoop in and completely take over.

When you're in pain, you don't want to deal. If I'd been at home, I'd have popped a couple of Ibuprofen and gone to bed early. By morning, I would've felt better. How do I know this?

Because I've been in this exact scenario before. A couple of times, in fact, over the last oh, six months or so. I just never bothered to tell anyone because the pain always stopped by the next day and I sort of forgot about it.

It wasn't letting me forget last night though. Nope, the pain was shouting at me, making me miserable. Reminding me that I was in a mega bad way and I needed to do something about it, stat. It was like the most excruciating cramps I've ever dealt with.

The emergency room nurse told me it could be a number of things, but she wasn't very specific. Caleb tried his best to drill her with questions, but she would just smile and nod politely, never giving him much information. I'm sure they're not allowed to speculate, which I totally get, but it was still super frustrating.

"Hello." A sing-song voice sounds from behind the curtain, just before a woman in scrubs pulls it back, a pleasant smile on her face. "I hear you're having some pain?" she asks me.

I nod, trying to smile. "Feels like cramps."

"But you're not on your period?" She has a clipboard in her hand and she's scanning my information. "You don't think you're pregnant, do you?"

"Ha!" I bark out, rousing Caleb from his slumber. "No."

"Hmm." She flips a page up, reading it before she glances over at me. "I'd like to perform an ultrasound on you."

"What for?" I ask warily. "I don't think I'm pregnant."

"We do ultrasounds for all sorts of things." She smiles reassuringly. "Let me check and make sure the room is open, and then I'll wheel you on over there."

She disappears before I can say anything else, and I glance over at Caleb to find he's already watching me.

"Why do they think you're pregnant?"

“Probably because they think I’m having a miscarriage. But I’m not.” I can’t remember the last time I had sex with someone.

“I’m glad you’re not,” he says before he yawns, stretching his arms above his head. “I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, you did. You even snored.”

He whips his head in my direction. “I did?”

“No. I’m teasing.” I smile, feeling sleepy. I give in and close my eyes.

“You still in pain, G?” He’s suddenly right next to me, his fingers in my hair, brushing it away from my forehead, and it feels so nice, so sweet, that I can forgive him for nearly killing me on the highway.

“It’s not so bad,” I murmur, enjoying the sensation of his fingers gently raking through my hair. “That feels good.”

“Yeah? I’ll keep doing it.” He says nothing for a while and I revel in the sensation of being taken care of. Knowing this big guy is watching out for me and will protect me no matter what. It’s a nice feeling. One I’m not really used to.

Guys rarely stick around long enough to even want to take care of me, not that I need a man. I prefer to be on my own, doing my thing. I can handle whatever comes my way.

But it’s kind of nice, how attentive Caleb is being. How much he seems to genuinely care about my well-being.

“You scared me,” he murmurs after a few minutes, pulling me out of my sleepy state. “I could tell you were in pain.”

“No one else noticed.” Not even Hayden, and we were hanging out together the entire time.

“Maybe I’m always paying real close attention to you. Closer than anyone else,” he says, his fingers still stroking my hair.

I crack one eye open. “You sound like a stalker.”

“I think you like it.” He chuckles. Even grumpy and tired, he’s sexy. I wish I could pull him into this bed with me, feel that big, hard body cuddled up next to mine but that wouldn’t

work. There's hardly any room on this bed, and I don't want to seem too clingy.

"I like you," I admit, tightly squeezing my eyes closed. I'm tired and in pain and feeling vulnerable right now. "Thank you for bringing me to the emergency room."

Caleb shifts, coming closer to me, and I feel his mouth move against my forehead. "I would do anything for you."

I take those six words to heart and savor them. Does he really mean that? I want to believe he does.

I want to believe it so badly.

I'M in a darkened room on an examination table, my legs spread wide and my feet in stirrups while I stare at a screen. I'm having a transvaginal ultrasound, which means I currently have a wand up my vagina and we're looking at my internal reproductive organs.

Not the way I envisioned the night ending, that's for sure. And I made sure Caleb wasn't allowed in here. He tried to come in with me, insisting to the nurse that he was my boyfriend, the little sneak, but I refused to let him enter the room.

"Your boyfriend was persistent," the doctor says to me as she taps at the keys on the computer keyboard.

I don't bother correcting her. "He's very determined when he wants to be." Which is pretty much all the time.

"I'll say." She studies the screen, before reaching forward and pointing at a dark spot with her pen. "Looks like you have a fibroid."

I frown. "Really?"

"Yes," she says firmly, tapping at the dark spot. "That's it, right there. You'd be surprised how many women get them, but we never realize it. Sometimes they can grow rather large and cause some discomfort. Even pain. We can even have a lot of them. Looks like I can only see the one, so that's good."

“What should I do about it?”

“Remind me again about a few things. Are your periods heavy?”

“They have been lately,” I admit.

“Strong cramps?”

“Sometimes.”

“Anyone in your family who’s had fibroids?”

“If they have, no one’s told me about it,” I say.

“Are you on birth control?”

“Yes, I am. I have been since I was seventeen.” I frown.

“Could being on the pill cause this?”

“No, that’s usually not the case.” She studies the screen, her eyes narrowing as she concentrates. “This fibroid isn’t too large. I’m just surprised it’s causing you pain. You do have a few options in regards to treatment, which I will be glad to go over with you.”

I listen as she discusses a few options. I could have an ablation, which I’ve heard of, but then I probably couldn’t get pregnant afterwards.

Like...ever.

Possibly surgery, which sounds scary, but that’s only in extreme situations. She describes a focused ultrasound where they send waves into my uterus that helps break up the fibroids, which sounds like the safest procedure for me.

“I recommend you make an appointment with your gynecologist and have another ultrasound. I’m sure you and your doctor can come up with a proper treatment plan.” She smiles and pulls the freaking wand out of my vagina.

We chat a little more about my options, and what I should do to help ease the pain. Ibuprofen and rest is her recommendation. I should take tomorrow—well, actually today—off of work. Maybe the next day too.

By the time we're finished and I've been released, I'm a sleepy, confused mess. I stagger into Caleb's arms, who makes me wait on a bench in front of the emergency room entrance so he can go get his car and pull right up to the curb. I let him steer me into the car. I even let him put my seatbelt on me so I don't have to lift a finger. He's so attentive, all I can do is watch him fuss over me, murmuring a thank you before he shuts the car door.

"The doctor said I shouldn't go to work. She even wrote me a note." I hold it up to show him.

He sends a quick stern look in my direction. "You shouldn't go to work then."

"I need the money though. My time is winding down. I've saved up a lot of my earnings this summer, but I don't know if it'll be enough. I was thinking of asking Michelle if I could work weekends at the fountain until the season ends," I say, nibbling on my lower lip. It'll be exhausting, working two jobs, seven days a week, but do I really have a choice?

I don't think so.

"You won't be able to come to my games," he says, sounding dejected.

"Do you really want me there? Would you even notice? Don't you have enough fangirls supporting you in Bulldog stadium?" I rest my head against the seat and close my eyes, grateful that he's driving a lot slower than before.

"Damn, you know how to wound a man with just a few choice words."

I pop my eyes open to watch him rubbing at his chest, as if I actually hurt his heart.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long night," I murmur. "I'm tired. Grumpy."

I don't want to hurt him when he's been so thoughtful and caring. Showing me a completely different side of him. He was so quick to come to my aid, stepping in as if he knew I needed him, which I did.

He proved to me I can depend on him. I can trust he'll be there when I need him.

No one's ever really done that for me before.

"Are you still in pain?" he asks.

"Not really."

"I'll run you a hot bath when we get home," he suggests.

I turn to look at him. "You'd do that for me?"

"My mom always liked soaking in her tub after a long, tiring day. It'll relax you." He shrugs, seemingly uncomfortable.

Maybe he's not used to tender gestures toward the opposite sex. I know I'm surprised by it. "I'd like that."

"Then I'll do it for you," he says, shifting in his seat.

"That's very—sweet of you." I pause. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We're quiet for only a moment before I say, "We're not very good at this, are we?"

"What?"

"Being nice to each other."

"Actually, I think we're pretty good at it. Until we start... dissecting what we're doing." He sends me a quick glance. "Maybe we should just stop questioning everything. We're so busy fighting it when we could go with the flow and let it happen naturally."

"I think you're right." I close my eyes. Practically melt into the seat when I feel Caleb's hand touch my bare knee and give it a gentle squeeze. "You're a good friend, Caleb."

"I try." He gives my knee another squeeze. "You scared the shit out of me earlier, G. I don't like seeing you in pain, especially when there's nothing I can do about it."

Now it's my heart's turn to melt. "I appreciated you forcing me to go to the emergency room. Thank God I'm still on my parents' health insurance."

“Soon you’ll be on your own. You’ll be a teacher with your own insurance. And your own class,” he says. “You excited?”

“Scared,” I admit. “Nervous. I’d hoped to live it up this summer, but instead I got too caught up working and worrying over my savings account.”

“You’re going to be fine. I have faith in you. And you can still have a fun summer. It’s not over yet.” He removes his hand from my knee and I immediately feel the loss. I like it when Caleb touches me. Makes me feel connected to him. “If you’re up to it.”

“If you’re talking sexual escapades, I’m going to have to pass,” I say wryly. “Feels a little broken down there at the moment.”

More silence. I’m sure he’s not one to sit around and talk about vaginas and periods and all the problems that come with them. He likes talking about the fun stuff when it comes to vaginas. Like how many he’s explored.

Ew. I just grossed myself out.

“We can just hang out,” he finally says. “Hey, maybe we should take a day and drive over to the ocean.”

I send him a look. “That’s kind of far for a day trip.”

“Fine. Let’s make it an overnight trip.” He shrugs.

“Don’t you have practice?”

“I start back full force on Tuesday afternoon. I have Monday off. I don’t work either,” he says.

“I have Monday off too,” I admit. “I have to be at the school for all-day meetings on Wednesday.”

“Let’s get out of here then. Get away from reality and the heat and go to the beach,” he says, sounding excited.

“You want to stay the night and...what? Get a hotel room?” I wrinkle my nose, wondering what he’ll want from me if we share a hotel room. That sounds expensive. “I can’t really afford it.”

“My treat,” he says. “We can find somewhere cheap. Or hey, we can borrow Tony’s SUV and take it out on the dunes. We can camp on the sand.”

I burst out laughing at the thought of Tony letting Caleb borrow his car. “Tony is not going to let you drive his pretty Range Rover onto the beach and camp out there overnight.”

“You never know. Tony’s one of my best friends. He trusts me. Even with his expensive ass car.”

“I’ve never camped before,” I admit. “Not in a tent or an RV or a trailer. I’ve never done it.”

“Seriously? Growing up, that’s all we did. My parents have taken us out camping on the dunes or at one of the RV parks since I was a little kid.” He sits up straighter, and I can tell he’s getting excited. “We’re camping. It’ll be fun. I can borrow a tent from my dad. We’ll stay out on the dunes and barbecue hamburgers or hot dogs. Roast marshmallows.”

Sit by a warm fire and get those warm feelings. Snuggle up close together in the tent since I bet it’s cold out there at night. Maybe even share a sleeping bag.

This is dangerous. Incessant alarms should be clanging in my head, warning me off.

“Let’s do it,” I say, not paying attention to those warning bells whatsoever.

SEVENTEEN

CALEB

“WHAT ARE you doing again with the tent?” Mom asks me as she follows me out into the garage where Dad is already searching for it.

“Uh, going camping.” What else does she think I’m doing with it?

“Right, but where? And with who?”

“We’re going to Pismo. Staying at Oceano Dunes,” I explain. “And it’s just me and Gracie.”

The look on my mother’s face is nothing short of ecstatic. She’s always known about my preference for casual relationships. It was hard to hide while growing up since she worked for the school district. She’d hear things. Living in a small town, how could she not?

“Is it getting serious with this young woman?” she asks, her brows up, a hopeful expression on her face.

I slowly shake my head. “We’re just friends.”

I can say that truthfully now. I’m not about to push myself on Gracie anyway, especially now. She just went through some trauma, and she took today off from work, which gave me the perfect excuse to swing by my parents’ house after my shift ended to pick up some camping gear.

“Uh huh. You’re not friends with any girls, Caleb,” Mom points out. So helpful.

“I am with this one.” I turn toward her and drop a kiss on her cheek. “Stop trying to make this into something it’s not.”

“If you say so.” Her tone is full of doubt.

I get why she feels this way. This sort of behavior isn't normal for me. But hey, guess what? Maybe I'm growing up for once in my life.

It's possible. Stranger things have happened.

“Here's the tent,” Dad calls from the depths of the garage.

I go to where he's at, rummaging through all the stuff on one of the many racks he has all of his stuff stashed. I grew up in this house. My parents have never moved, and over the years, they've accumulated a ton of shit.

“I appreciate you letting me borrow this,” I say as I pick up the bag the tent is in. It's a little dusty but not too bad. “When was the last time you went tent camping?”

“Aw, a few years ago with my friends. We went hiking in Yosemite and stayed overnight,” Dad says.

“I don't tent camp anymore,” Mom says before she bends down and pets one of her cats that just wandered into the garage. “The trailer is it for me. And I can't remember the last time we went out on the dunes. We probably took you with us so it's been a while.”

“We always stay at the RV park now,” Dad says, nodding toward the travel trailer sitting out in front of the garage. “Thinking about keeping the trailer there so your mother and I can just drive over for the weekend when we want.”

“Won't that be expensive?” I ask, glancing at the shelf where he pulled the tent out from. I'd take any other camping equipment he has if he'll let me.

“Nah, I've checked into it. Not as bad as you'd think.” He rifles through a few other items on the shelf before pulling out a couple of sleeping bags. “You need these?”

“Please.”

“Did you make a reservation, Caleb?” Mom asks me. “You know how busy it gets during the summer, even on the weekdays.”

“I did,” I call to her. “Got the email and everything.”

“Don’t forget to print it out before you leave!”

I roll my eyes at Dad. “I can just show the email to them on my phone when I get there.”

“Oh. You’re right.” She laughs at herself. We chuckle too.

Dad drops the sleeping bags on the ground next to the tent before resting his hands on his hips. “What car are you taking?”

“Mine.”

“Out on the beach?” Dad turns to face me. He’s a little shorter than I am, but we resemble each other. Same blue eyes, same mouth. He’s still got a full head of hair, but it’s mostly gray now. He likes to say I gave it to him with all of my antics growing up. “You can’t take that on the beach.”

“Why not?” I run a hand through my hair, fighting annoyance. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve always hated it when my dad tells me I can’t do something.

“You need four-wheel drive. You don’t want to get stuck out there,” he explains.

“I won’t go too far.” The sand near the entrance to the park isn’t as soft and deep.

“Take my truck.” He waves a hand toward it. “Leave your car here.”

Wait a second. His truck is downright precious to him. “You’re voluntarily loaning me your truck?”

“I don’t want you to get stuck out there. Plus, this way you can keep all the equipment in the back,” he says, as if it’s completely logical that he’s letting me use it.

But it’s sort of not logical at all, because he’s never liked me driving his vehicles. He described me as reckless and careless on the road—direct quote.

Not going to turn down his offer though.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, still a little in shock.

I help my father dig out a few more camping supplies. A couple of fold-up chairs. A battery-operated lantern. Long, metal sticks with wooden handles made to roast hot dogs or marshmallows. A shovel so we can dig ourselves out if we get stuck, or dig a fire pit at night. I've camped out on the dunes enough times with the family that I can figure it all out on my own. I'm not too worried.

Though I do want to make this good for Gracie. She's been stressed this summer. Not her usual, fight me self. I know she's worried about money and taking on the student teacher thing. And the health scare didn't help matters either. I just want her to have a good time when we go on this quick trip, so she can forget all of her troubles, even if it's only for twenty-four hours.

"Going camping with friends?" Dad asks me once we've found everything I want to use and we're loading it into the back of his truck. Mom has gone back into the house and it's just the two of us.

"A friend," I say, being purposely vague. Mom dug for info because she's a pro at it. Dad doesn't pry as much.

"Girlfriend?" He lifts his brows.

Well damn. He just proved me wrong.

"A female friend," I amend.

He tosses the chairs into the truck bed. "You serious about her?"

"We're not even dating," I admit. "We live together. She's one of my roommates."

"Oh, that Gracie girl?" I'm surprised he remembers her name. He doesn't seem to keep up with much of what I'm doing since I moved out. "The feisty one?"

How the hell does he know this?

"Your mom keeps me up-to-date," he explains. I'm sure my surprised expression gave me away. "You might think I'm not paying attention to what you're doing, but I am."

“Oh.” I nod, glance around, suddenly uncomfortable. “Yeah. I’m going with Gracie. She’s not feeling so feisty lately. We’ve been getting along.”

“That’s good.” His gaze narrows as he contemplates me. “You like her?”

“As a friend?” I frown. “Yeah. I do.”

“You attracted to her?”

I could lie, but what’s the point in that? “Yes. I am.”

He chuckles. “You’re in trouble, son.”

I’m immediately defensive. “Why do you say that?”

“You trying to impress this girl? Take her camping, share with her a part of your life you enjoyed growing up? That’s a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“That you have feelings for her.” I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand, stopping me. “Don’t bother denying it. I can tell.”

I clamp my lips shut, annoyed. With my father. With myself.

“And it’s okay. You’re getting a little older. You’ve gone a long time without having a serious relationship,” he says.

“I had Baylee,” I start, but he shakes his head.

“You treated that poor girl like garbage and you know it.”

Leave it to my dad to keep it real.

“Saw her last week at Big Five. She was with some guy and she looked real happy. I talked to them for a bit. He goes to Fresno State too. She said they were going up to Yosemite for the day,” he says.

Wait a minute. “Baylee came here? And she was with a guy?”

“I ran into them when I went to buy a new knife.” He nods. “Nice kid. Said his name’s Carson.”

The only Carson I know is the one who Ellie hung out with for a little while. “Get the hell out of here. I might know that dude.”

Though I'm sure there are plenty of guys out there who go to Fresno State named Carson.

"Well, that dude seemed totally into her. Something you never really were." Again, more honesty from dear old dad. "She even gave me a hug. She's a good girl."

She was. "I ruined that."

"Hard to ruin something you were never really into, am I right?" He doesn't wait for me to reply. "Don't worry about her. She seems very happy with her new guy."

That should hurt, right? Knowing Baylee has completely moved on from me. But it doesn't. I'm happy for her. I'm glad she moved on. I want her to forget about me and what I did to her. How I used her for way too long.

Knowing I did that, how much I took advantage of her and for how long, makes me feel like shit.

"I'm glad she's happy," I finally say, meeting my dad's gaze.

"You deserve happiness too. And most of the time, that doesn't involve chasing after endless tail." I don't even bother trying to argue this time around. "Yes, I know what you've been up to these last four years or so. Maybe longer. And that's okay. It's just like I told you: you're young. You should live it up while you can. No need to settle down any time soon. But it's okay to find someone you actually care about too, you know."

"You've been giving me contradictory advice my entire life, you know that, right?" I can't help but laugh, and he joins me.

"I guess I'm a contradiction then," he says with a shrug.

I study him. The way he holds himself. The things he says and his self-deprecating ways. He reminds me of myself. Which makes me think I could end up like him. Living in the same average house and having the same average life. But does he seem so down and out over it?

"Dad, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course you can," he says without hesitation.

“Are you satisfied with your life?”

He considers it for a moment, his expression turning somber. It's as if I can see him running through his memory bank, assessing his past. “You know what, son? I'm damn satisfied. There is nothing better than to live in the small town you grew up in, and manage a place that serves the community. I've been married to your mother for a long time. We've raised two wonderful kids, and I think we gave you both a pretty great childhood. Now it's just the two of us, and we're enjoying ourselves. Your mother is a good woman, though she gave me a run for my money when I first met her.”

I frown. This is a new part to their relationship I've never heard before. “What are you talking about?”

“She played hard to get. Acted like she hated me at first. Maybe she did. I was pretty obnoxious when I was younger. Kind of like you.”

Ouch. Damn.

“She put on this act like she couldn't stand me, but after a while, I broke down her walls. And now look at us.” He smiles proudly. “We've had our ups and downs, but we're better than we've ever been.”

“That's great,” I say, a little weakly, shocked by how similar their story is to mine and Gracie's.

I feel like I've broken down her walls bit by bit, all while she acted like she hated me at first. I never hated her. I was entranced by her from the very beginning.

Some might say...a little obsessed even. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Every time I saw her, I bugged the shit out of her just to get a rise out of her. And it always worked. It's like when you're in kindergarten and you chase after a girl to let her know you like her. I chased lots of them back then, and they never wanted to get caught by me.

Then I start catching them, and I immediately threw them aside like a heartless idiot.

Now I want one. I want her bad. But I don't think she sees me like that. Sometimes I wonder if she can barely tolerate me.

“Have fun on your camping trip.” He grips my shoulder and gives it a little shake. “Show her what you’ve got, son.”

“Thanks,” I tell him.

Yeah. No pressure.

No pressure at all.

EIGHTEEN

GRACIE

“YOU FEELING good enough to go camping with him?” Hayden asks me, concern in her gaze.

It’s Sunday evening and I’m at her new apartment. Caleb and I came here after work to hang out with her and Tony for a little bit before we head home to finish packing for our beach trip in the morning. The guys are currently outside barbecuing chicken. Well, Tony is barbecuing it while Caleb watches him.

“I don’t have any more pain, if that’s what you’re asking,” I tell her. “I was fine at work today.”

“You probably shouldn’t have gone,” she says with a frown.

“I was okay. My job isn’t very strenuous. I sat around most of the time.” Caleb didn’t want me to go either, but I insisted. The pain is mostly gone. Only the occasional twinge happens. And I need to work because I need the money.

“Still. The emergency room doc said you should stay home for a few days,” Hayden reminds me.

I should’ve never told her what the doctor said. Now here she is hovering over me. “I’ll be fine. Really. I’ll make an appointment with my gyno tomorrow on the drive.”

“Don’t forget.” She wags her finger at me like a mom. “Try to get in as soon as you can, too.”

“Yes, Mother.” I roll my eyes and her expression becomes stern. “Come on, Hay. Lighten up.”

“Honestly, I think you’re treating what happened to you too lightly.” She lowers her voice. “Something could be seriously

wrong. You need to make sure you're okay."

"I doubt it's anything serious," I say, but deep down, that's what scares me. What if I'm all messed up down there and I can't have kids? That would be...awful. Because I want them. Eventually. And I don't want the choice taken away from me.

"Doesn't hurt to check," she reminds me, just as Caleb opens the sliding glass door and enters the living room.

"Doesn't hurt to check what?" he asks.

I study him, hating how attractive he looks right now in this moment. His dark hair just keeps growing, getting longer and longer, and he pushes it away from his face as if it's an annoyance. Doesn't help that his biceps bulge every time he does it, all those muscles flexing. Reminding me of how strong he is.

He's got those muscles on display too, wearing a black Nike tank top and black shorts, and the gold chain around his neck has become this weird temptation for me. I'm oddly fixated on it. Like I want to trace it with my fingertips. My lips.

My tongue.

Whoops, yep. Nope. Scratch that. No tongue involved. Not with me and Caleb.

"Her health," Hayden says, answering Caleb's question and not holding back whatsoever. "It's important she makes that appointment with her gynecologist tomorrow morning when you guys are traveling, okay?"

"I'll make sure she calls." He stands taller, his shoulders back as he salutes her. Seeing him act goofy makes me smile, and he catches it, his gaze snagging on me. The warm smile he returns in my direction has me feeling all fuzzy inside.

A good kind of fuzz too. The sweet, adorable little kitten kind of fuzzy.

Hayden watches us, not saying a word until Caleb has disappeared into the kitchen. No doubt grabbing something for Tony.

“What the hell is going on between you two?” she whispers at me.

How do I explain this when I can’t explain it to myself? I don’t know the answer to that question. I honestly have no idea what Caleb and I are doing, but I’m enjoying it, strangely enough.

“I don’t know,” I say, deciding to be honest. I press my lips together to keep from saying anything else when he walks back into the living room with a clean plate in one hand and a jar of barbecue sauce in the other.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Caleb announces as he pulls the slider open.

“Great! Tell Tony everything’s ready on my end,” Hayden calls to him just before he shuts the door, then she turns to me. “You act like you’re a couple.”

“We’re a couple of friends. That could turn into something more...maybe?”

There’s a gleam in Hayden’s eye. She likes what I’m saying, just like I knew she would.

“Still no sex?” She raises her brows.

“I’ve been a little under the weather in the vagina department, Hayden,” I remind her drolly. “It’s only been two days since I went to the emergency room.”

“Right. Of course. Does it hurt still?” Her eyes flash with concern.

“No. Not at all.” I sigh and grab a throw pillow, plucking at it absently. “There’s nothing to really report between Caleb and me. He’s been very supportive these last couple of days.”

“So supportive he’s even taking you camping,” she points out.

“Exactly. It should be fun. Even though I’ve never camped before in my life.” Trepidation streaks through me, but I push it aside. Caleb swore I would enjoy it, and I believe him. He also promised he’d do all the hard work and I’d reap the benefits. He just wants me to relax, he said. That’s the most important thing.

And that's so sweet. It's all I want too.

Caleb and Tony choose that moment to enter the apartment from outside, bringing with them the delicious smell of barbecued chicken along with corn on the cob. We all go into the kitchen and Hayden brings out a huge salad from the refrigerator, along with a variety of salad dressings, setting everything on the counter. We all grab a plate and serve ourselves before we settle in at the small table in the dining area off the kitchen.

"I feel very grown up right now," I announce to the table before I start to dig into my meal.

"Same," Hayden says with a laugh, her gaze only for Tony. He reaches toward her, grasping her hand in his. "Ever since we moved in, I feel like we're playing house, living in this apartment together."

"You guys playing house during the day and doctor at night?" Caleb asks, lifting his brows.

We all start complaining about how tacky and gross he is and he holds up his hands in front of him with a laugh.

"What would I be if I didn't say something like that? I have to keep it consistent," Caleb says jokingly.

I laugh along with Tony and Hayden, but I'm starting to see through this public persona Caleb maintains. Or maybe it's more that he reveals his true self to me, versus the always joking, mostly crude front he gives everyone else.

Spending all this time with him lately is helping me see there's more than meets the eye when it comes to Caleb. He actually has depth. He's kind and thoughtful. He may tease me about what he wants from me, but it's becoming rarer and rarer. What's happening between us isn't just about sex.

It's becoming something—more.

We eat and chat, Tony and Caleb telling funny stories about when they were younger. How close they all were in high school, and how much they hated Eli Bennett.

“God, he was the worst. Remember those videos he’d post on his story every day?” Tony asks Caleb.

“Hell yeah, I do. That asshole would talk constant shit about me,” Caleb says irritably, shaking his head.

“What would he say?” I ask, curious.

“A bunch of bullshit.” Caleb scowls, making Tony laugh.

“Eli called him out on his playboy ways, which is hilarious considering Eli was pretty much the same way at his high school. Until he met Ava,” Tony explains. “And that caused a whole bunch of drama, considering Eli and Jake were mortal enemies.”

“And now you’re all friends,” I marvel.

“Well, we’re pretty close with Eli. And I guess Jake is close with him too, though I think he tolerates him more than anything else because Eli’s with his little sister,” Tony says. “Eli used to be—a lot.”

“And he’s not a lot now?” I ask pointedly, making Hayden nod in agreement.

“Oh, he’s still a lot, but being with Ava has calmed him down considerably. I could barely tolerate him back in the day,” Tony says.

“Now he’s your quarterback,” I say with a faint smile.

Both guys get a serious expression on their face. “Yeah, and we respect him for it. I think he’s going to take the team far,” Caleb says.

“Maybe not as far as Davis, but close,” Tony adds.

“You still have one more year after this too,” I remind them.

We talk more about football and how well Jake is doing at USC. All four of us help clean up around the kitchen and when we’ve moved the conversation into the living room, I can feel myself getting sleepier and sleepier, until I flat-out pass out from exhaustion.

Don’t think I’ve caught up on my sleep after the emergency room incident and being up half the night. Working all day on

the dock in the sun zapped all my remaining energy.

“Hey sleepyhead.” I’m nudged awake by the sound of Caleb’s voice. He’s tapping me on the shoulder incessantly and I swat his hand away, making him chuckle.

“What do you want from me?” I don’t open my eyes so I don’t have to look at him.

“It’s late, Grandma. Almost ten. We should head out.”

The grandma cracks need to stop but I don’t complain. He could be saying worse things. “You’re ready to go?”

“Yeah.” He starts tapping me once more, not too hard but enough to irritate. “I think they want to start playing doctor and we’re ruining the mood.”

“God, you’re so gross,” Hayden calls from wherever she’s sitting.

I crack open an eye to find Caleb sitting on the couch right next to me, his blue gaze meeting mine. “There you are.”

Groaning, I shut my eyes once more. “Can’t I just stay the night here?”

I feel really cozy. Someone threw a thin blanket over me and I could lie on this comfortable couch for the rest of the night, no problem.

“We have to go home and pack for tomorrow.” I feel him shift and I can tell he’s standing. “Come on. Let’s go.”

With a groan, I open my eyes once again and sit up, pushing my hair out of my face. “Fine, let’s go.”

We say our goodbyes to Tony and Hayden, who do seem awfully eager to get rid of us, and by the time we’re getting into my car—we left the truck at home because Caleb didn’t want to drive it, so I let him drive my car just now because I’m so tired—we’re both laughing at how quick our friends were to get us out of their apartment.

“I told you they wanted to play doctor,” Caleb says as he backs out of the parking space.

“I thought you were just joking,” I say, giggling as I remember the look on Hayden’s face when we walked out. “She practically slammed the door in our faces.”

“Maybe Tony’s barbecue chicken makes her horny.”

“Maybe they’re just always horny for each other.”

“They’ve been together what...two years now almost?” When I nod, Caleb keeps talking. “Aren’t they sick of each other yet?”

“I don’t think so. They still act like they’re pretty into each other.” All of our friends who are in committed relationships do. It’s as if they’re all hot for each other twenty-four-seven.

“I thought that sort of thing faded,” Caleb says, suddenly sounding serious. “It’s half the reason I didn’t want to be in a relationship.”

“Same with me,” I admit.

“Though my dad just told me yesterday that he’s satisfied with his life,” Caleb says.

“You thought he wouldn’t be?”

“I didn’t know what to think. They’ve been married a long time and their life seems so...mundane. Boring, you know?”

“I do know,” I say with a nod. This is a common complaint for Caleb. He doesn’t want to be complacent.

“That’s what I was always running from before. I didn’t want to do the same old thing they did. It sounded...awful. But now I’m starting to realize I don’t think it’s so bad. He’s genuinely happy. Mom is happy too. They have a decent life,” he says as he readjusts his grip on the steering wheel. “They seem...content.”

He sounds surprised, but why wouldn’t they be content? Everyone has different expectations. Different wants and needs. His parents have been together for a long time and from what I’ve gleaned from Caleb’s remarks on his childhood years, he lived in a solid household. No drama, no fighting, no abuse.

“Here’s the thing, Caleb. You were so busy running from your supposed mundane life, but I never heard you come up with any ideas on how to change it, you know? Like, what were you going to do to make it different? Better?” I ask, curiously.

“I don’t know,” he says with a shrug. “Honestly I figured I’d end up exactly like my parents. Me working...wherever. I’d probably end up marrying a teacher. *Oh.*” He shoots me a stricken look while I gaze back at him mutely, feeling as if I just swallowed my tongue. “I only said that because my mom works for the school district. I didn’t mean anything by it. What I’m really trying to say is that I feel like I’m on the same path as my dad was, and before that always scared me. But now I’m starting to realize maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“Right. Of course. I know what you meant.” I nod, looking away from him, staring unseeingly out the passenger side window. His admission just now was...jarring. But not in a bad way.

More like in a, *why are we wasting so much time dancing around each other when it’s pretty freaking clear that we’re totally into each other* way? What exactly are we doing? Why aren’t we just going for it? We have never been afraid when it came to getting with someone before.

Like, ever.

Long term relationships? That’s different. But would it really be so bad, being with Caleb? I already spend an enormous amount of time with him, and it’s not a chore. Not even close. I like hanging out with him, talking with him, joking with him. The biggest thing I’m realizing?

I trust him. I trust him with my life. He takes care of me because he wants to. He just flat out cares about me. And I care about him, too. A lot.

Everyone’s right—we act like a couple. Yet we’ve only kissed a few times, and that’s it.

Why are we depriving ourselves? What the hell is wrong with us?

“Caleb,” I say after a few minutes of silence.

“Gracie,” he returns in the same tone.

“I like you.”

“I like you too,” he says warmly, and without any hesitation either, I mentally note.

“I think I...*like you*, like you.” I press my lips together, almost wishing I could take the words back.

But too late. They’re out there, floating between us, and for the quickest, most terrifying few seconds of my life, I’m scared he’s going to say he doesn’t feel the same way.

“You do?” he asks, sounding surprised.

He’s going to make me say more, isn’t he? Well, I’m the one who changed the direction of this conversation, so I guess I need to go further out on a limb.

“I do. We hang out all the time. We work together, live together, and we just—fit, you know? I feel connected to you on a deeper level.” I roll my eyes and laugh nervously. “That sounded like some corny shit.”

“Nah,” he says, glancing over at me. “I have to agree. I uh... *like you*, like you too.”

His voice is deeper than normal. Lower. Extra sexy.

Oh. Shit.

“You feel connected to me?” My voice squeaks and I clear my throat, mentally telling myself to get a grip.

“G, I’ve felt connected to you since the first night I met you. I saw you and it was like my brain said, ‘you want that one,’” he admits. “And I feel like I’ve been chasing after you ever since.”

“You could’ve had me,” I murmur. “Many times over, if you would’ve said the right thing or made the right move, you could’ve totally had me.”

“Really?” He sounds doubtful. “I always got the sense you would’ve beat my ass if I tried anything.”

I laugh, my entire body relaxing at the realization that we're on the same page. "We've kissed a couple of times."

"Reluctantly."

"Never reluctantly," I correct. "I always wanted it."

"Really?"

He sounds genuinely shocked. I think I make the playboy feel insecure, which was never my intention. I decide to be even more honest with him.

"After the Fourth of July I thought, 'If this boy has sex the way he kisses, then it's going to be good.'"

He's quiet for a while. So am I. So quiet, I start to second-guess admitting that. Admitting anything to Caleb feels like a risk, and I start to get nauseous the longer he doesn't say anything.

It's absolute torture.

"I'm trying to come up with something to say that doesn't offend you," he finally admits. "Because all kinds of inappropriate things are rolling through my head right now."

"Like what?" My curiosity rises, of course. "I won't get offended."

"Promise?"

"I promise," I say swiftly, anticipation curling through me. I'm dying to hear what he has to say. I want to know.

Desperately.

NINETEEN

CALEB

SHE'S BLOWING my mind with her confessions—especially because I feel the same exact way. And I'm terrified I'll say something stupid and fuck it all up somehow. That's how much she means to me, how much this entire moment means to me.

Normally I could give a shit. I'd just say what's on my mind, consequences be damned. My big mouth has gotten me into plenty of trouble, yet it's also snagged me some hot babes for a quick fuck.

But Gracie matters to me. She's not some hot babe I want a quick fuck with. Though she is most definitely hot and just looking at her for a second too long gets my dick hard.

Yeah, that's the crude side of me, and she appeals to it. As I've gotten to know her, I realize I value her as a friend too. I enjoy spending time with her. She makes me laugh. She makes me think. I want to help her. Taking her to the emergency room a couple of nights ago scared the shit out of me. I don't want anything bad to happen to this girl.

I want to protect her at all costs.

“Don't hold back,” she says. “Give me your worst. Lay it on me.”

I hesitate, annoyed with myself. I never hold back, but here I am. Afraid she'll want to smack me or worse?

She'll say never mind, and that's the end of that.

“I think about having sex with you,” I admit, my voice so low I can barely hear myself. “A lot.”

“This doesn’t surprise me,” she says wryly and I feel like I have to defend myself.

“Not like how I did before, when we first met. And over the last couple of years. That was always about getting with you because you’re so hot, and I knew whatever happened between us would be explosive,” I say. “But now...”

More silence. I don’t quite know how to express myself. My feelings. And I’m not used to that.

“But now what?” she asks after I haven’t said anything.

“Now I want to know what you like. I want to take my time with you. I don’t want to rush into it because I want to savor every minute, every second.” I wince the moment the last sentence leaves me, because it sounds like a crock of shit.

But I’m being real right now. Probably the realest I’ve ever been.

“Caleb...” she starts, but I interrupt her.

“I know it sounds like a bunch of bullshit, but I’m being sincere. I fucking *like* you, Gracie. Probably too much. And it scares the hell out of me because I don’t want to mess this up, whatever it is that’s happening between us. You mean more to me than just about any other person in my life right now.” I’m digging into some deep shit, and I’m uncomfortable revealing it too, but fuck it. I need to get my feelings out. “I think about you all the time—you’re never out of my thoughts. I just want to see you happy when you’re sad, and I want to make you feel better when you’re not well. Driving to the emergency room was one of the scariest moments I’ve ever experienced in my life, because I didn’t know what was wrong with you, and I felt so out of control. I just wanted to fix it. Fix *you*.”

We’re getting closer to our apartment complex, thank God. I don’t think I can say much more without having to touch her. I could reach right out and put my hand on her leg, or her knee, but when I barely lift my hand away from the steering wheel, I see that it’s shaking.

Fuck me, this is...a lot.

Worse? She's quiet, and I'm sure she's just absorbing what I said, but damn. Now I'm nervous as hell and afraid I ruined everything by saying too much, though when do I not do that? Saying too much is normal for me.

"Your silence is killing me, G," I whisper as I turn into our complex parking lot. "Say something."

"Caleb..."

"Just don't say anything bad. Don't break my heart. I don't think I could take it," I rush out.

"If I say something bad, I could possibly break your heart?" She sounds surprised, as if she has no idea the power she wields with a few choice words.

Pulling into her regular spot, I put Gracie's car in park before I cut the engine. "Yes. You could. You're holding everything right now."

I swallow hard, the silence surrounding us, growing thicker by the second. It's quiet outside, and still so damn warm. No one is around. Feels like just the two of us in our own little world, having an extremely important conversation on an otherwise normal night.

I chance a glance over at her to find she's already watching me. Her eyes soft and warm, golden and glowing in the dim light coming from outside. Her lips curl up in the faintest smile and the tension bleeds out of my body, slowly but surely.

"Wow. I didn't realize you had it in you," she says.

I frown. "I had what in me?"

"That you could be so sweet." She reaches over and grabs my hand, interlocking our fingers together. "And thoughtful. And so...open with your feelings."

"It's not my usual style," I admit, squeezing her hand. Wishing I was squeezing other things.

"Oh, I know," she says with a huff of laughter. I can't help but smile. "I like this new version of Caleb."

“You do?” I lean in over the console, suddenly overwhelmed with the need to kiss her. To feel her lips move beneath mine.

“Definitely,” she murmurs as she leans in too, her gaze dropping to my mouth.

I take full advantage and swoop in, kissing her, keeping it light. Soft. Easy. Not pushing at all, which goes completely against my usual moves. Normally I push and push, going for what I want without hesitation, but this woman is...

Special. And right now, she’s still hurting. I can’t do what I really want—fuck her long into the night—but I’ll settle for this. A little honesty.

A lot of kissing.

Gracie opens to me immediately and my tongue finds hers, swirling around it, taking the kiss deeper. The temperature rises in the car, making me feel as if I’m burning up and when she rests her free hand on my bicep, I want her to take it further. Slip her hand under my shirt. Touch my stomach. My pecs. Maybe even rest her hand over my dick so I can show her what she does to me.

But I keep it chaste—for me. Mouths and tongues only, our hands still linked, her other hand on my arm slowly stroking up and down.

Driving me out of my fucking mind.

I break the kiss first and reach for the door handle. “Let’s get out of here.”

She doesn’t hesitate, exiting the car as fast as I do, both of us hurrying toward our apartment. Apprehension ripples through me as I wait behind her while she unlocks the door, worried Eli and Ava will be chilling in the living room and want to chat. We’ll have to pretend nothing’s out of the ordinary, and that will be difficult as fuck.

But when the door swings open and reveals the living room blessedly empty, my sigh of relief is extra loud.

Sending me a quick, questioning look, Gracie shuts and locks the door before turning to me. “Should we pack?”

I shrug one shoulder, hoping she's not trying to get out of whatever we might end up doing. "It's only for one night."

"We can pack in the morning," she suggests.

"Yeah, we can," I agree.

She takes my hand and leads me to her room, closing the door when we both walk inside. I part my lips, ready to say something when she unexpectedly pushes at my chest, sending me toppling onto the mattress. I land with a grunt, another one escaping me when she crawls on top of me, her long, sleek body sliding over mine until her pretty face is hovering above me, our gazes meeting.

Molten gold tonight, I think as I stare into her eyes. I reach out, sliding my fingers into her hair, cupping the side of her head. So fucking beautiful.

"You're looking at me like you've never seen me before," she whispers.

"You haunt my thoughts all damn day," I admit. "I'm looking at you like this because I can't believe I finally got you where I want you. On top of me."

She smiles, pressing her hips into mine. "We can't do much tonight. I'm—scared."

I stroke her hair and she leans into my palm, her eyes sliding closed. "After what happened to you? Are you still in pain?"

"Not really. I just—I don't know. What if we do it and it hurts after? I don't know what's going to happen." Her voice drops to the smallest whisper. "I haven't had sex in a while."

"Me either," I confess.

Gracie cracks her eyes open. "Really?"

She almost sounds like she doesn't believe me.

"When would I have time? If I'm not with you, I'm at practice. Or here. Or at work. Pretty much always with you," I remind her. "I don't want anyone else. I haven't for a while."

She grins, and she looks so damn pleased with my admission—and herself—that I smile in response. "I never thought I'd

hear you say something like that.”

“Like what?”

“That you don’t want anyone else.” She dips her head, her mouth on mine, though she doesn’t really kiss me. “That you only want me.”

“I do. It’s true.” I grip the back of her head, pulling her in for a kiss. Our lips meet. Break apart. Meet again. “No one else.” I run my other hand down her back, across her ass, tugging her closer to me so she can feel my erection. “Just you.”

It’s on after that. Lots of kissing with tongues and heat. So much kissing. More than I’ve ever really experienced before.

Why the hell was I avoiding this again?

I push all other thoughts out of my head and concentrate on the girl in my arms, savoring her taste. The warm weight of her body on top of mine. Our hips are almost perfectly aligned and there’s no way she doesn’t notice my hard cock. It’s currently resting against her stomach and I lift my hips, trying to nudge her. Let her know what I want.

Damn I hope she wants the same thing I do.

She pulls away from me slightly, the sound of our heavy breaths filling the room. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“I’m not pushing for shit,” I say, my fingers kneading one of her ass cheeks, keeping it on top of her clothes, though I’m dying to touch bare skin.

Fuck it, I am touching bare skin. I slip my fingers beneath the hem of her short shorts, touching the silky-smooth curve of her ass and she moans low in her throat, her lids fluttering as she closes her eyes.

“Take your shirt off,” she demands, and I move so fast, I practically dump her off the bed as she rolls off me.

The tank is gone in seconds and I send her what I hope is a smoldering glance. “Your turn.”

She tugs her T-shirt off, letting it fall to the floor. She's just wearing a simple cotton bra, the color a pale blue that contrasts beautifully with her tanned skin. "We're not having sex," she tells me and I nod.

"I know," I say, my gaze feasting on her chest. I reach for her, cupping both of her breasts, streaking my thumbs over the front of the cotton bra. "Take this off too?"

Gracie reaches behind her and undoes the snap, the bra springing loose from her body. Within seconds, she's free of it, tossing it on the floor before she turns to look at me, topless. Her breasts are small, topped with tiny dark rose nipples and I cup them in my hands once more, testing their weight.

"Beautiful," I whisper before I dip my head and pull a nipple into my mouth, sucking deep, savoring the taste of her skin. She immediately wraps her hands around the back of my head, holding me to her as I lick and suck and bite. She yelps when I tug on her nipple with my teeth, then soothe the sting with my tongue. I give her other nipple the same treatment, lingering on her chest until she's shifting beneath me restlessly, her hands shifting from my head to my neck, sliding down to my shoulders.

I move down her body, raining kisses on her stomach, noting the way she trembles beneath my lips. I feel the same way too. Shaky and consumed with need. I want to explore every bit of her flesh. I want to find out what she likes and what she loves. I want to learn what she tastes like everywhere. I want to lick her pussy until she screams and can't see straight.

I want. I want. I want.

It's a chant in my head, a throb in my body as I reach for the snap on the front of her shorts and undo it. Then slide the zipper down. She doesn't protest. She's as into it as I am, and I shift upwards, sliding my mouth over hers as I slide my hand into the front of her shorts at the same time, cupping her panty covered pussy.

She thrusts her hips forward, against my hand, her kiss eager. I twist my tongue around hers as I slowly start to stroke, gliding

my fingers up and down the front of her panties, not wanting to press too hard.

Not yet.

More kissing. More petting. This isn't my style. Normally I'd already have fingers beneath her panties, touching bare, hot flesh. Within seconds, I'd be balls deep, pounding inside of her.

My cock twitches at the mere thought.

"Caleb," she whispers as I break the kiss to slide my mouth along the delicate line of her jaw, down the elegant length of her neck. "We should stop."

I pull away from her, watching her from beneath my heavy eyelids. "Okay," I croak, my cock screaming *noooooo*.

But I gotta do what the lady wants.

"I don't want to, though." She touches my chest, her gaze dropping as she maps my skin with her fingers, making me shiver. "I really, really want to continue."

"I'm not pushing it." I kiss her, my lips lingering before I pull away. My hand is still beneath her shorts, over her panties. "You want me to stop, I will."

I'm about to pull my hand out of her shorts when she wraps her fingers around my wrist, making me pause. "Don't stop."

Slowly, I begin to stroke, keeping my gaze on her, watching her face. The look of pleasure on her pretty face. The way her swollen lips part as she breathes out slowly when I touch a particular spot. "Feels so good," she whispers.

I lean in close to her, my lips at her ear as I murmur, "I can make you feel even better."

She doesn't tell me no when I carefully slip my fingers beneath her panties, encountering nothing but bare skin. Of course, my dream woman would have my dream pussy. Bare, no hair at all. Nothing but softness.

I delve deeper, my fingers parting her folds. She's drenched, coating my fingers immediately and I'm dying to put my

mouth on her. She moves with me, her hips lifting, her mouth seeking mine. I kiss her, drown in her, my fingers busy as I stroke and rub. Her clit is a hard little nub beneath my fingertips, and I rub tiny circles over it, pressing harder. She sucks in a breath, a whimper leaving her, and I swallow the sound, increasing my speed.

“Oh God,” she chokes out.

“I want to taste you,” I whisper. “Let me.”

She nods hurriedly and I remove my hand from between her thighs, lifting away from her so I can slip her shorts and panties down her legs. She kicks them off impatiently and I openly study her naked body, drinking her in.

Fucking stunning.

I touch her everywhere I can, my hands mapping her skin, fingers stroking, torn between watching her face and staring at the perfection that is her body. I dip my head, kissing her tits, sucking on her nipples. Licking them. Licking across her quivering belly. Dropping a kiss on one hip bone, then the other. Streaking my mouth across the spot just above her pussy, heat radiating toward me, calling me.

I slide down farther, until I’m face to pussy, and push her thighs open wider, kissing her on the left leg. Then the right. She lifts her hips, practically shoving her pussy in my face and when I finally rest my lips there, I feel a shudder move through her entire body.

Slowly I nuzzle her, breathing in her heady, intoxicating scent. Her hand lands softly on top of my head, her fingers threading through my hair as if she’s trying to keep me there.

Not like I’m going anywhere else. She’s got me completely ensnared.

I sneak out my tongue for a quick lick and she moans so loud I’m afraid she’ll wake up Eli, if he’s even here.

Not going to let that bother me, though. I lick her again, a little more thoroughly this time and she cries out.

Girl is vocal—this doesn't surprise me. But damn, she won't be quiet. Doesn't help matters that I attack her pussy like a starving man who hasn't had a full meal in weeks. I search her pussy thoroughly, my tongue everywhere. I suck her clit. I tongue fuck her. I tease the skin between her pussy and her ass, making her jump.

Making her groan.

I slip a finger into her tight pussy, then add another one. I finger fuck her and suck her clit at the same time, focusing on the way her breathing increases. How she practically smashes her pussy against my face. I lift my gaze to watch her, noting the beautiful flush taking over her skin and making her glow. Her cheeks are red, her eyes dazed and when they meet mine, I intensify my sucking and licking.

Until she's a shivering, uncontrollable mess, coming against my mouth, my name falling from her lips.

Satisfaction rolls through me. Yeah. My name. Why that fills me with such a surge of pleasure, I'm not sure, but by the time I'm finished and I'm wiping the back of my hand against my mouth, my cock is like steel beneath my shorts, ready for its turn.

Gracie reaches for me and there's no hesitation. She pulls me to her, our lips connecting, my tongue thrusting, giving her a taste of herself. She moans into my mouth, her hands everywhere, slipping between us, her fingers curling around the front of my shorts, squeezing my dick. And suddenly it's my turn to moan into her mouth, which makes her smile. All while diving her hand beneath the front of my shorts, skimming the length of me with her fingers.

“You keep this up, I'm gonna come all over your hand,” I tell her, the urgency deep inside me growing with her every firm touch.

She laughs and continues teasing me, not saying a word. I hold my breath when she slips those magical fingers beneath my boxer briefs, her fingertips lightly brushing the head of my cock. I suck in a sharp breath and close my eyes tight, praying that I don't blow too early.

This is something I don't normally have to worry about. Over the years, I've gained complete control over my body, and I rarely come too fast. Hell, I haven't done that since...God knows how long.

But I can feel my cock dripping with precum, and Gracie is using it as lubrication, slicking it up and down my shaft. She's straight up jacking my dick like we're a couple of kids sneaking off for a quick hand job before curfew hits, and I feel like an overexcited virgin who can't believe there's a girl willingly touching my dick and actually enjoying it.

"Jesus, stop." I place my hand over hers, halting her torture. She lifts her gaze to mine, a little frown on her pretty face. "Just—hold on a second." I try to catch my breath, pressing my forehead to hers as I close my eyes.

She's not listening to me though. Shoving at my chest, she sends me onto my back and next thing I know, she's on top of me, her mouth at my throat, her tongue licking where my gold chain rests against my neck. She explores my body with her mouth, giving the same exact treatment I gave her, gliding her mouth down the length of my chest, paying close attention to my abs. My stomach. She's torturing me with her hot tongue and her wet mouth, her legs wrapped around one of my thighs and her damp pussy pressed into my skin as she grinds herself against my leg.

It's fucking painful, how good this all feels, and she's enjoying herself, I can tell. She's loving every minute of it and I swear to God, there's a secret, evil streak that runs through her. She gets off on tormenting me.

And I'm about to get off too soon, I just know it.

"You're so hot," she murmurs against my stomach, her mouth right above the waistband of my shorts. I want my clothes off. They feel too restrictive, like they're fucking strangling me, but she's right on top of them and I can't do anything about it.

"I'm fucking burning up for you," I tell her, not holding back. "Take them off."

I gesture toward my shorts.

Gracie shifts away from me slightly, smiling as she reaches for the elastic waistband of the shorts I wore to work, grabbing hold of my boxer briefs too. She pulls them both down my hips, my thighs, and I kick them off, my cock springing up, eager to meet her properly.

Jesus, so eager.

“Um...” Her head lifts, her gaze meeting mine. “Wow.”

“What do you mean, wow?” Frowning, I reach for my erection, giving it a firm squeeze. A pearl of precum beads in the slit, and I’d give anything right now to watch Gracie lick it up.

Her gaze widens as she watches me, as if she’s completely fascinated with my cock. “You’re huge,” she breathes.

“Oh, come on.” If she’s trying to amp up my ego, it’s fucking working. But I know she’s been with her fair share of guys. Not that I’m thinking less of her for that, I’m just facing facts.

I’ve been with a lot of women. We’re on an equal playing field here.

“Seriously. Big.” She strokes it. “Thick.” Up and down she goes, her fingers tight as she squeezes. I close my eyes and pray for strength. “I need to look at you.”

She removes her hand from my dick—swear to God, a whimper leaves me—and she scrambles off the mattress, coming to stand beside the bed, studying me carefully.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I ask, knowing I sound grumpy, but I kind of don’t give a shit.

Gracie laughs. “I want to really look at you.”

I throw my arms out, spreading them wide. “Here I am. Look your fill. Then get your pretty ass back on this bed and let’s resume what we were doing.”

The smile on her face is nothing short of absolutely gorgeous. Seriously, this woman...she is standing there naked like no big deal, not hiding herself whatsoever, which I appreciate. Her skin is still flushed from her earlier orgasm, her hair is a wreck, and she looks freshly fucked.

Not quite there yet, but if we keep going, that's how she's going to end up.

"You are perfection," she tells me, her smile growing as she openly checks me out. "I mean, look at you."

I glance down the length of my body, gripping the base of my dick and giving it a firm squeeze. Shit, if a stiff breeze stirred up right now, it would probably send me straight over the edge. "I am nothing special."

"Ha! You've got to be kidding me." She climbs on top of me, basically sitting on my stomach and I let go of my dick, resting my hands on her slim waist, stroking her there. Her skin is so damn soft. "You've got a body like a Greek god."

She kisses me after making that particular statement and when she breaks away, I chase after her, leaning in close, wishing she'd kiss me again, but she denies me. "I work out."

"Hmm, it's more than that. You're perfectly proportioned." Gracie runs her hands across my shoulders. "Wide here and here." She touches my pecs. "Slim through here." She grazes her fingers along my ribs and stomach, tickling me. I giggle like a fucking child, which I can tell amuses her. "Long legs and big ol' thighs. And a big, thick cock." I raise my brows when she says the word. Damn, that was kind of hot. I really like this girl. "I think I hit the jackpot."

She breathes this last statement against my lips, just before she delivers a devouring kiss. I grip the back of her head with my hand, holding her to me, thrusting my tongue against hers until she finally comes up for air, her gaze meeting mine once more.

"I thought you said no sex," I tell her.

"I'm going to give you a blow job," she announces, which hey, I'm not going to protest, but still.

"And then I'm going to fuck your brains out," I tell her, my tone serious.

She slowly shakes her head. "I don't know if I want to take that chance."

“You’re, uh, still nervous about it?” She nods. “Did I hurt you earlier?” I lower my voice, concern making me wary. Leave it to me to let my horniness take over when I should be watching out for her.

“No.” She shakes her head.

“How about when I made you come? Did that hurt?” I raise a brow.

Her smile is devilish. “Nooo.”

“I won’t push you for anything you don’t want.”

“I know,” she murmurs.

I lean in, my mouth practically on hers. “Did you like it, when I made you come?”

“Yes,” she whispers, kissing me once. Twice. “I liked it a lot.”

“I liked fucking you with my mouth,” I whisper, licking at the corner of her lips. “I like how loud you are, too.”

“I’m usually not that loud,” she admits, her eyes falling closed when I lick the side of her neck.

“When I actually fuck you, I’m going to make you scream. It’s going to feel so good,” I murmur against her warm, smooth skin. “I can’t wait to sink deep inside you.”

“Are you a dirty talker, Caleb?” she asks.

“Not always,” I admit, giving her lower lip a gentle nip. “But when it comes to you, I can’t help but think of all the filthy fucking things I want to do to you.”

TWENTY

GRACIE

MY IMAGINATION GOES into overdrive at his words. What sort of filthy things does he want to do to me? How he went down on me was pretty filthy. He licked me everywhere, and without hesitation. For him being so open the first time we're together sexually, it's impressive.

But then again, we've known each other for a while now. I'm comfortable with him, and I get the sense he's comfortable with me too. Maybe that's just it. When you get to know someone gradually, you're open to whatever. You just want to please your partner.

Caleb is all about feeling good, though he's not selfish about it. He wants to make me feel good too.

"Will you give me a hint?" I ask, slinging my arms around his neck and burying my fingers in his thick hair. I love his hair. It's so soft. The softest part of him, besides his lips.

"A hint of what I want to do to you?" His brows shoot up and a wicked smile slowly appears. "You want to hear me say dirty things, don't you?"

"I do," I say with an eager nod, making him smile. "Say something. Tell me what you want to do to me. Something extra filthy."

He breathes deep, contemplating me, his eyes darkening as they sweep down my body, settling on my breasts. "I'd titty fuck you if you'd let me."

I burst out laughing and he scowls. “That wasn’t very filthy,” I chastise teasingly.

His scowl deepens. “I said the first thing that came to me.” He cups my breasts and brings them together. I’m aware they’re not very big and no guy has ever said that to me before, but leave it to Caleb to make the suggestion. “I’d make you hold them together as I slide my cock back and forth between them. Until I’m coming all over them. That’s what I want to see. My come all over your tits.”

Okay. That was hot. I squirm a little bit at his words. “I was going to give you a blow job.”

“Oh, I’ll take that too. I’ll take that over a titty fuck any day. But that’s something I want to do to you. Eventually.” He kisses me, his mouth lingering on mine. “There are a lot of things I want to do to you. With you.”

Tingles sweep over me at the promise in his voice. This evening turned out completely different than I thought it would. I certainly didn’t expect to end up naked with Caleb in my bed, after he gave me an epic orgasm.

I decide it’s my turn to return the favor.

Sliding down his body, I kiss him everywhere, just like I did earlier, before I became overwhelmed with the need to really look at him. He is masculine beauty, personified, and he actually seemed a little embarrassed when I blatantly checked him out.

Adorable—though really? He’s not adorable. He’s gorgeous. Sexy. Mouth wateringly delicious.

His hard cock is insistent, rising between us, reminding me that he definitely wants to be touched and licked and sucked. I scoot farther down the bed and Caleb spreads his legs, accommodating me. I circle my fingers around the base of his thick erection, staring at it for a moment. He’s got a beautiful penis—is that weird to think? But it’s true. It’s really beautiful. And it’s currently flexing in my hand, as if trying to urge me to get on with it already.

I dip my head, my gaze finding his right before I trace the vein on his cock with my tongue. He watches me with heated eyes, his lips parted, his entire body still. I continue licking, never looking away from him as I try my best to cover every inch of his erection with my tongue.

“Jesus,” he breathes out, making me smile just before I tease beneath the flared head of his cock. “Don’t stop.”

As if I would. I actually like giving head. I know some women don’t. They view it as a chore. An obligation. Some are even grossed out by it.

But I like it. I like sex. I like men. I like dicks and I enjoy having one in my mouth.

So there.

I draw the head of his cock between my lips, sucking lightly.

“Tease,” he whispers, just before I slide him deeper into my mouth.

Oh, look at that. He’s not complaining anymore.

I work my hardest to give him the most epic blow job of his life. I remember what he said, how he likes a girl on her knees in front of him with his dick in her mouth, and while I’m not on my knees, I do have my mouth full of his cock and we’re currently making eye contact. Something I haven’t done much with other guys.

It’s usually very quick and hurried. Not much lingering. I’m always eager to get to the next thing, to get to the good stuff. Coming is the end game, and I’ve been disappointed before. This is why I usually have to take the initiative and make it happen for myself.

Not this time. In fact, I wonder if Caleb also remembered our conversation from earlier, when I said I liked it when a guy sucked my clit and finger fucked me at the same time. I’d said that for shock value, but it wasn’t a lie.

And that’s exactly what Caleb did. He concentrated his oral efforts on my clit while he slid those thick fingers in and out of me. Of course, I came fast. That’s one of my favorite things.

This guy pays attention. He listens. He remembered. And that's...

Huge.

Bigger than his dick size, really.

Throwing my whole heart into it, I suck and tease. Squeeze him tightly with my fingers. Most guys handle their equipment a lot rougher than we do, and they like it when we work them hard. Caleb is no different. His breathing increases with my every head bob, I swear to God. I take him so deep, his cock nudges the back of my throat and I almost gag.

Guys love that shit on porn and I don't get it. I'm not one to deep throat a man, but looks like I just did.

"Holy shit," Caleb says on a gasp. I glance up to find him watching me with utter fascination. "I'm—close."

His warning doesn't slow me down whatsoever.

"I'm going to come in your mouth," he continues.

I'm still not slowing down. I suck him harder, my tongue swirling, silently urging him to go ahead and do just that.

"Aw fuck." He chokes the last word out, his eyes falling closed as he tilts his head back, exposing his throat. His entire body grows tense. "Jesus. I'm gonna come..."

The first spurt of semen fills my mouth and I pull his cock from between my lips, putting on a show, licking up the come that is still spilling from him. Boys like it messy. They are such visual creatures, but I can also admit my clit is throbbing and my body feels hollow.

I want him inside me. Despite my earlier fear and worry over the potential fibroid I might have, I'm suddenly not worried about it anymore. I'm dying for him to fuck me.

I want Caleb to fuck me hard. It's been too long since I've been with someone, and I feel like I've been saving it up for him for months.

"Fuck me, G. That was fucking amazing," he says once he's caught his breath and is able to speak again.

I rise up to press my mouth to his and he kisses me deep and dirty, his tongue searching my mouth like he wants to lap up the taste of himself on his lips. Ooh, this man.

“Caleb,” I whisper when we break away from each other, my face still in his.

“Gracie,” he whispers back, a satisfied smile curling his lips.

“Did you remember what I told you a while ago? What I like?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “The sucking your clit and finger fucking you at the same time comment?”

“Yes,” I say, already knowing his answer.

“I sure as fuck did.” He kisses me again, and it’s sweeter. Slower. Downright romantic. “You remembered what I liked too.”

“I wasn’t on my knees though,” I point out.

“Still was pretty damn good.” He flat-out grins. “Next time I’ll have you on your knees, begging for it.”

“You are so bad,” I murmur against his mouth as I run my hands down his bare chest. I love touching him. His skin is hot and smooth. I brush my fingers against his small nipples and he nips at my bottom lip.

“You like it,” he says. “And you’re bad too.”

Our mouths meet in a kiss that turns instantly dirty. Plenty of tongues and heat and teeth.

“You like it,” I repeat back to him, sliding my body down, until I can feel his cock nudge at my butt. “And you’re hard again.”

“You rubbing your hot body against mine isn’t helping things,” he says, as if he doesn’t like what I’m doing.

“Please.” I roll my eyes and he laughs, the sound soft and light. “We need condoms.”

“I don’t have any with me,” he admits sheepishly.

“I have some in the bathroom.”

He pulls away slightly so we can look into each other's eyes.
"Aren't you on the pill though?"

"I am," I say solemnly. "But I don't like taking risks."

"Having sex with me is taking a risk?" He raises a brow.

Oh, he doesn't know the half of it. Having sex with Caleb is risky to my emotions. My heart.

I'm scared once we actually have sex, I won't want to stop. I'll become too attached. Before I always told him I was afraid he'd fall in love with me, but I'm starting to think it's the opposite now.

I'm afraid I'll fall in love with him. And the idea of that is...

Frightening.

"I'm not about to get an STD," I tell him, and he actually looks hurt. "Not that I think you have one."

"I get tested regularly," he says defensively. "Being on the football team, they make us get tested for all kinds of stuff."

"I'm not implying you have an STD," I stress, resting my hand on his cheek and forcing him to look at me. "We both have had sex with other people. Recently."

"Not lately," he says. "The only person I've wanted to have sex with for the last couple of months is you."

Ah, he's slaying me dead with those big blue eyes and sweet confessions. Who is this boy? I didn't think Caleb had it in him. "I haven't had sex with anyone else either. In a long time."

"Right." His expression turns arrogant. "Because you wanted me so damn bad."

"We're not having this conversation again," I tell him, dropping a kiss on his lips. "The reason I want you to use a condom is because I don't want to get pregnant either."

A full body shudder moves through him. "Hell to the no."

"Right. That's why I double up with protection. No babies for me. I have a life I want to lead first. Kids come later," I say

firmly.

“Much later.” His mouth finds mine and he kisses me with everything he’s got. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To your bathroom to get the condoms. Where are they?”

“Middle drawer on the right,” I tell him.

He literally shoves me aside, but gently, so I have no choice but to fall onto the bed before he stands, stretching his arms above his head, his erect cock bobbing toward me. Then he’s gone, heading into the connecting bathroom and pulling the drawer open. I can tell he’s rifling through my stuff and I get off the bed, tugging the covers back so I can dive beneath them, the cool sheets soothing my heated skin.

Caleb walks back into the bedroom, a box of condoms clutched in his hand. “You have a bunch of shit in there, G.”

I shrug, tugging the covers up practically to my chin. “It takes a lot, being me.”

He pulls a wrapped condom out before dropping the box onto the bedside table, then pulls the comforter back and dives beneath it to join me. He scoots in close, our legs tangling, bodies colliding, and he wraps his arms around my waist, holding me to him.

“Why you covering up?”

“I don’t know. For mystery?” I’m teasing, but maybe it’s true. Or more like I’m keeping up that last wall, though I don’t know why.

I’m so into him, it’s almost pitiful.

“You don’t need to act mysterious,” he says right before he presses his mouth to the side of my neck. “You’ve got me. For as long as you’ll have me.”

His words linger in my head as he lingers over my body. There’s no more talking as he trails his mouth everywhere, exploring. Learning. I can’t stop thinking of what he said, how I’ve got him, as long as I’ll have him.

That sounds...almost too good to be true.

I banish all worrisome thoughts from my head as he rises above me, tearing the wrapper open and rolling the condom on his erection. I open my eyes and watch, fascinated with the way he handles himself, breathless with anticipation. He brushes his cock against my folds, teasing. Testing. I spread my legs without hesitation, wanting him inside me.

“Be gentle,” I whisper, a trickle of fear running through me. He hesitates, his gaze meeting mine. “I’m still a little—nervous.”

About my health issue. About being with this man who makes me feel too much, too soon.

“I won’t go too fast,” he promises. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long...”

His voice drifts and I close my eyes, overcome with foreign emotion. I’ve been waiting for it too. So long. And I didn’t know I wanted it so badly—wanted *him* so badly—until this very second.

“Please,” I whisper, urging him on, hating how desperate I sound. How sore and achy my throat feels. My entire body feels raw. Vulnerable. I want him to put me out of my misery and just do it already.

Caleb slips inside, just the tip. I’m surprised he’s not making a joke about it right now. I don’t say anything either.

I don’t want to ruin the moment.

He pushes farther, slowly filling me, an agonizing groan falling from his lips. I crack my eyes open to watch him sink even farther, until he’s deep inside me. Until he can’t go any farther.

Reaching up, I brush the hair from his face and he opens his eyes, blue brilliance staring back at me. “I’m in,” he says with the faintest smile.

A giggle escapes me. I can’t help it. “You’re in.”

“I never believed I’d actually be here. Like this. With you.” He leans into my palm when I cup his cheek. “Just thought I’d say

that.”

I shift beneath him, sending him deeper, making us both moan. He starts to move, slowly, but with no hesitation, dragging his cock in and out of me, driving me out of my mind with pleasure. I wrap my legs around his hips, linking myself to him and he bends down, his mouth finding mine as he increases his speed. I move with him, little cries falling from my lips with his every thrust and he swallows each one. The room grows hot, our bodies damp with sweat, our skin slapping against each other. Faster. Faster, my orgasm building. Growing.

He slips his hand between us, his fingers finding my clit and that’s all it takes. I shoot off like a rocket, my orgasm washing over me, making me tremble and cry out his name. His movements become sloppy, his thrusts short and deep as he groans with each one. Until he’s coming too, my inner walls gently milking him, a groan falling from his lips.

I lie there beneath him, my heart racing, my thoughts chaotic. I close my eyes, trying to slow my breathing as he remains on top of me, his weight almost like a comfort.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, nuzzling the side of my face. “What are you doing to me?”

“What do you mean?” I run my hands down his smooth back, enjoying how his muscles shift when he moves.

“That was...” He goes silent. Swallows hard. “Unbelievable.”

“Oh, come on. It was just sex.” I’m trying to keep the moment light, even though secretly, I feel the same way.

What just happened between us felt...momentous. Like something I’ve never experienced before.

And that is some scary stuff.

TWENTY-ONE

CALEB

WE'RE DRIVING, headed for the beach, the oppressive heatwave currently happening in the central valley slowly becoming a distant memory the farther we go. Dad's truck drives like a fucking dream since it's newer than my car, and I'm speeding like a son of a bitch, eager to get to our destination.

I've got a pretty girl sitting in the passenger seat, sunglasses covering her eyes, a sweet smile on her face. She's wearing shorts that her ass cheeks are practically hanging out of and a cropped, mint colored tank top. No bra underneath, which means her nipples are poking against the fabric.

Those nipples? They're a fucking distraction.

"Since when did you become so anti-bra?" I ask her out of nowhere.

She glances over at me, her elbow propped near the window of the passenger side door, her fingers in her hair as she studies me. "Since when did you notice?"

"All morning, I've noticed." When we left our apartment, I stared. When we went through the drive-thru at Starbucks before leaving Fresno, I kept staring too. I'm trying to stare now, but I don't want to wreck.

I'd like to make it to the beach in one piece. Besides, my dad would kill me if I totaled his truck. I'm surprised he let me take it in the first place.

“I’ve been going braless all summer,” she says and I shake my head.

“No way. I would’ve noticed.”

“I have smallish tits.” She sits up straighter, glancing down at her chest before she cups both of them and pushes them together. “I don’t really need a bra with this top. It’s tight enough and holds them in place.”

“I can see your nipples,” I point out helpfully. Nipples I sucked until they were bright red and wet from my mouth. Nipples I licked and bit just this morning, before we reluctantly climbed out of bed.

Nipples I want to taste right now.

She drops her hands from her chest, her head bent as she studies them. “You sure can.” She touches one, circles it once. Twice. Lifts her head with a glare when she catches me staring. “Eyes on the road, buddy.”

“Oh fuck off, G. That’s some bullshit.” I spot a gas station up ahead, the only one for miles before we reach the 101 highway and without warning, I turn off, pulling the truck through the parking lot and looping around until we’re parked out back.

No one else is around. Not another car in sight. I put the truck in park, undo my seatbelt and reach for the button on the side of the seat, pushing it back all the way before I pat my thigh with the palm of my hand. “Come over here.”

She watches me with wary eyes, though a smile plays upon the corner of her lips. “Why?”

“I want to suck on those nipples you’re flaunting.” I decide to be one hundred percent truthful. Well, as close to the truth as I want to get. If I reveal much else, she might run screaming from the truck, because I feel like a man obsessed.

I want the taste of her on my tongue. I want to lick her pussy and her asshole and whatever else she’ll let me explore. I want to own every piece of her. I want to fuck her right here in this parking lot while I suck on her titties and feel her shudder all around me. I want to strip her completely naked and turn off

the a/c in this truck and fuck her hard, until she's hot and sweaty and gasping.

Weird, right? I feel fucking possessed by her.

It's not normal.

Laughing, she unbuckles her seatbelt and shifts over the center console, landing right on top of me, straddling my hips, her tits bouncing in my face. I nuzzle her with my nose, breathing in deep, her scent sending a wave of arousal through my system. She thrusts her fingers into my hair, holding me to her chest and I run my mouth across the front of her tank, until I find a hard nipple.

I draw it between my lips and gently tug.

"We shouldn't do this here," she whispers as she practically smashes my face into her chest. Her fingers are so tight in my hair it fuckin' hurts. "Someone might catch us."

I think someone wants to get caught. Or at least gets off on the possibility.

"No one's around," I reassure her, just as I tug on the neckline of her tank top, exposing her bare breasts to my gaze. Her nipples are so fucking hard. And so fucking tempting. I nibble on one, then the other. Back and forth, I keep doing it while she's grinding her ass on my dick, driving me out of my mind.

"Caleb." She says my name with such urgency I break away, gazing up at her in question. "You should stop. Someone could park back here any second."

"Uh uh," I say, leaning in and tonguing her nipple. "I don't care if they see."

She tugs hard on my hair, but I don't pull away from her chest, lavishing all of my attention on her. I feel hard enough to bust through my shorts and I feel desperate. Consumed. Overwhelmed.

All because of this woman in my lap. She drives me out of my mind.

"I care."

I lift my head away from her chest to stare into her eyes. Her pupils are dilated and she's breathing fast. "I'd fuck you right here if you'd let me."

"Okay," she says without hesitation, dropping her hand between us and curving her fingers around my dick.

Within seconds, her shorts are off and her panties are pushed to the side. My shorts and boxers are tugged down around my knees and I've got a condom on. Then she guides me inside her warm, snug pussy. She fucks me deep, bouncing on my cock, our movements becoming frenzied, completely out of control. It takes no time to push me to the brink, and I come first, like a fucking amateur. She reaches for her clit and rubs herself, my mouth hanging open as I watch her bring herself to orgasm with my dick still throbbing inside her.

Fuck me, that was hot.

"Oh my God." She climbs off of me, landing back in the passenger seat with a plop, her panties stretched aside, revealing her wet pussy. Her tits are still out too. She glances over at me, her eyes wide with what looks like shock. "What the hell was that?"

"Fucking great, wasn't it?" I find a napkin in the center console and take the condom off, wrapping it up with the napkin and dropping it into the cup holder before I pull my shorts and boxers up in one fell swoop.

Gracie acts like she can't move, every intimate bit of her exposed, and my cock again rises to the occasion like I have no self-control. As if it wants another chance inside her.

She's still not moving, her expression dazed and I can't help but think I rocked my girl's world.

Wait a minute. *My girl?* I don't think so. I'm jumping way ahead of myself.

"Want a snack?" I ask as I put the truck in reverse and back out of the parking space.

She watches me carefully, tugging her tank top back into place before she readjusts her panties. "Is that a normal thing for you?"

“What exactly are you referring to?”

“Pulling over at a gas station and fucking a girl’s brains out in oh, say five minutes?” She bends down, reaching for her shorts that are on the floorboard.

I pull into a spot directly in front of the mini mart. “Not usually, no.”

“So I’m a special case.”

“I can’t resist you, G. Your cute little titties drive me out of my mind,” I tell her with a grin.

She rolls her eyes. “I don’t know if I can take that as a compliment. Cute little titties? You sound like a middle schooler.”

“Okay, how about I tell you that I can’t stop thinking about your hot pussy milking my cock. Does that sound like the words of a middle schooler?”

I don’t wait for her reply. Instead, I turn off the truck’s engine and hop out, suddenly famished. We should’ve stopped earlier, got some In-N-Out or Taco Bell or whatever when we passed through that last town, but I was hell-bent on getting to our destination at the time and wasn’t in the mood to stop.

Now I’m stuck with gas station food. And I’m starving.

I’m rounding the front of the truck, tossing the used condom in a nearby trash can before I walk into the mini mart when Gracie hops out of the truck as well, looking completely put together, not a hair out of place. I hit the keyless remote to lock the truck and we enter the store walking beside each other, that ever-present sexual tension buzzing between us, reminding me that I want her again.

When do I not want her? Fuck, it’s even worse, now that I’ve had her.

Twenty times worse.

I bet no one would guess I just had my dick buried deep inside her not even five minutes ago. Though I swear to God, I can still smell her, lingering on my skin. Like her scent is rubbed all over me.

Not gonna complain though.

We pick out bags of chips and I grab a couple of deep fried burritos that look like they've been sitting under the heat lamp for a while. Gracie passes on the fried food, opting for a single serve salad she finds in the refrigerated section. We both grab sodas from the fountain and when we get to the register, I insist on paying. She lets me, thanking me as we walk outside and within seconds, we're back in the truck, feasting on our finds.

"This is so weird," she says before she shoves a forkful of lettuce into her mouth.

"What is?" I ask after I polish off the first burrito. All this fucking is leaving me hungry.

"What we're doing." She waves a hand between us. "Having sex like we just did."

"I thought it was hot."

"It was," she says without hesitation. "I just..."

Her voice drifts and she shoves another forkful of salad into her mouth, preventing her from speaking any further.

"You just what?" I prompt.

"I've never done that before. Had sex with a dude in the middle of the day parked behind a gas station. Like we can't control ourselves." She sends me a questioning look. "Have you?"

"Nope." I tear open a bag of Doritos and shove a bunch in my mouth. My coaches would kill me if they saw me right now. I'm not treating my body like a temple, but I get the feeling I'm going to burn so many calories in the next twenty-four hours, my temple can handle some junk food.

"Really?" She sounds shocked.

"Yeah. Really." I hold the chip bag out toward her, shaking it. "Want some?"

"No, thank you," she says primly.

“That’s kind of hot, how uptight you sound right now,” I tell her truthfully. “I’d love to try and give you a taste of my cock and have you say, *no, thank you*, just like you did a second ago, and try to push me away. We could role play. Have you ever role played?”

She stares at me as if I’ve lost my damn mind. “Are you for real?”

I nod. Unwrap my second burrito and start eating it. “Gas station food isn’t so bad, you know?”

“Who are you?” Her voice is full of alarm. I lift my head, slowly chewing while she gapes at me. “Have *you* ever role played before?”

“No. Never.” I slowly shake my head. “Sounds like fun though.”

“I’ve never role played either.” Her hand finds my thigh and she strokes me there, right where the hem of my shorts meets my thigh. “I need to confess something.”

I pause in my eating, worry flooding me. “What is it?”

“That moment just now—behind the gas station.” Her expression is damn serious. “Hottest of my life.”

My smile is slow and I rest my hand over where hers rests on my thigh. “Yeah? For real?”

She nods. “It was...so unexpected. And felt kind of...wrong, but in the absolute best way.”

Her cheeks go pink and I squeeze her hand. I know exactly what she means. “Same for me, babe.”

“We’re going to keep doing this, huh?” When I don’t say anything, she prompts me. “You’re going to find a way to fuck me all over Pismo Beach, aren’t you?”

“If you’re down, I’m down,” I tell her without hesitation, leaning in to brush her mouth with mine. Just like that my entire body reacts, ready to get down yet again. “I’d fuck you right now if I could.”

“I really hope you brought a giant box of condoms,” she says with a sigh.

I laugh. “I did. But thank Christ there’s a Walmart. We could buy an economy pack. I think we’re gonna need it.”

TWENTY-TWO

GRACIE

I AM HAVING the best day.

No seriously. It's the best day I've had in a long time. Hanging out with Caleb is helping me forget all my worries and stress. We're just having fun and being silly and also being...

Extra, extra horny.

That moment behind the gas station? Hot. Every time Caleb looks at me? Hot. His gaze is smoldering and I feel like he's undressing me with his eyes every time I catch him staring.

Which is a lot.

Escaping to the ocean was a good idea. The weather is cooler, the sun not as intense. Pismo Beach is a serious vacation destination for people from the Fresno area. They come in droves every summer. Coming here on a weekday means there aren't as many people.

Since starting at Fresno State, I've visited the area a few times, but not in well over a year. The air just feels fresher over here. Cleaner—which I'm sure is true. And everything is so pretty, like this cute little barn area we found where people can buy fresh produce and baked goods. They have a super cute gift shop that includes a bunch of succulents and I want every single one.

"Forget the plants," Caleb says as he approaches me from behind, slipping his arm around me so he can rest his hand against my stomach. "Let's go get ice cream."

“I don’t want to leave yet,” I tell him with a little pout. “I want to buy a plant.”

“You can buy a plant and then we’ll walk over to the ice cream place. It’s right over there.” He points toward a faded red building with the doors thrown open.

“Thanks.” I turn to face him, looping my arms around his neck. “You’re so generous.”

He kisses me right there in front of the succulents, and I pull away quickly before I lose my head. He has that effect on me.

I finally choose a plant and pay for it, then walk over to the red building where they serve ice cream and other yummy treats. I’m not that hungry but Caleb says he’ll share, and I laugh when he gets three scoops of ice cream, each a different flavor.

“I thought you were in training,” I remind him as he purchases his ice cream.

“I’m sharing with you,” he says as he hands over his cash to the store employee. “Besides, I can have a cheat day.”

I don’t mention the gas station food. “I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to burn those calories off.”

“Yep, and every way I’ve thought of involves you,” he says with a smirk.

I laugh as we exit the store, opening my mouth as he serves me a bite of peach ice cream. It’s cool and bursting with flavor and I make a humming noise as I swallow it down.

He stares at me with wide, unblinking eyes. “Keep making that noise and I can’t be held accountable for what I might do next.”

“Stop,” I say with a giggle.

He settles into a giant rocking chair that sits in front of the store and he grabs my hand, pulling me down onto his lap. We sit there and eat ice cream together, Caleb feeding me bites, me making that same humming noise every time. His arm tightens around my waist, his fingers digging into my side when I do it, and I can’t help but laugh.

I am having way too much fun with this man.

I didn't think it could be like this, especially with Caleb.

He offers me another bite of the peach ice cream—my favorite—and I open my mouth like a baby bird, eyeing the spoon hovering in front of my mouth with anticipation. At the last second, he swoops in and kisses me instead, his lips tasting of peach. Same with his tongue.

It's one of the most delicious kisses I've ever had.

Caleb pulls away with a faint smile curling his lips. "Couldn't resist."

"I still want my bite." I grab his wrist and guide the spoon to my mouth, where the milky sweetest melts on my tongue. "This was a bad idea."

He frowns. "Why do you say that?"

"I can feel my ass spreading with every bite."

"I like this ass." He smooths his hand over it. "I like it a lot."

Caleb leans down like he's going to kiss me again when we hear a voice screech his name.

"Caleb?"

A familiar female voice.

"Gracie???"

Oh shit, a very familiar voice.

We both glance up at the same time to find of all people Baylee standing in front of us, hand in hand with that Carson guy. She's still with him.

Good for her.

"Baylee. What's up?" Caleb sounds cool and calm. Like it's no big deal that we're running into the one girl he wasn't able to quit for years.

I immediately feel self-conscious. Especially because I told her I was quitting him only two months ago and now here I am, sitting on his lap and letting him feed me ice cream and feel me up.

“Hi,” Baylee says, her questioning gaze sliding over to me. “Didn’t expect to find the two of you together.”

Caleb’s arm tightens around me when I fully expected him to drop it. “We came over for the day.”

“How nice. So did we.” Baylee glances over at Carson, her gaze softening. “You both know Carson, right?”

“Not really,” Caleb says.

“Sort of,” I add.

“Well, this is my boyfriend, Carson.” She smiles at him and he grins in return. “Carson, this is Gracie and...Caleb.”

Oh, I am one hundred percent sure Carson has heard all about Caleb and what he did to Baylee throughout the years. And I’m also sure he thinks Caleb is a total prick.

But he’s polite and says hello. I scramble off Caleb’s lap and he rises to his feet to go shake Carson’s hand, which I can tell shocks Baylee. I’m sure her expectations of Caleb are very low when it comes to manners, and I’m quietly proud of him for acting like such a gentleman.

“I heard you two were living together,” Baylee says. I can tell from the expression on her face that she’s dying to ask questions, but she won’t say anything since we kept our coffeeshop meeting to ourselves.

“With Eli as well,” I remind her. “We’re roommates.”

“Interesting,” she says, drawing the word out.

Caleb chooses that moment to sling his arm around my shoulders. I get the sense he’s staking a claim on me, and normally that kind of thing annoys the crap out of me, but for some reason, I’m okay with it. Okay with his claiming.

In fact, I tilt my head back, meet his gaze and smile at him like a lovesick idiot.

“How long are you here for, Bay?” Caleb asks and I try my best not to let the nickname bother me. It means nothing. He’s known her a long time. Way longer than me. And he’s known her intimately too.

Ugh. I sort of hate that, and I totally hate how I feel right now.

“We got here yesterday. We’ll head home tomorrow,” she answers, leaning her head against Carson’s shoulder briefly. He takes his opportunity and drops a quick kiss on her temple. “We’re staying at one of the hotels on the bluffs.”

“Nice,” Caleb says with a nod. “We just got here. Can only stay one night because of practice and work.”

“Where are you staying?” Carson asks.

“We’re camping in the dunes tonight. My dad let us borrow his truck,” Caleb answers.

“Your dad let you take his truck? I’m shocked,” Baylee says with a laugh.

I see green. I’m a jealous whore and I hate it.

“Yeah, same,” Caleb says with a chuckle, his fingers streaking up and down my arm.

“We just wandered over here to try the ice cream,” Carson says, his gaze going to the mostly empty cup in Caleb’s hand. “How was it?”

“Amazing,” I tell them. “The peach is my favorite.”

“We’ll definitely have to get some then,” Carson says as he starts toward the front door. “Nice officially meeting you both.”

“You too,” Caleb says and I smile.

“You guys have fun,” Baylee says, her gaze knowing as she follows Carson into the shop, her hand still clutched in his.

The moment they’re gone, Caleb tosses the cup into the nearby trash can. “You ready to go?”

I pull away from his hold and grab my bag with my succulent inside from the ground. “Let’s do it.”

We walk back to the truck, both of us quiet. Me muddling over Baylee and her intimate knowledge of Caleb. I am not what I would consider a jealous person. We all have history, pasts

with other people, and that's okay. I'm cool with it. I always have been before.

And I don't have any issues with Baylee. She's nice. When she was in deep with Caleb, I felt sorry for her. He took advantage of her and treated her like garbage a lot of the time, and I firmly believed she deserved someone better. It looks like she found her someone better in Carson. I'm happy for her, really, I am.

But I am also a jealous shrew who's suddenly full of insecurities and worry over how Caleb is going to eventually treat me.

Is he going to give me the same treatment that he did Baylee? Hang out with me and fuck me constantly only to then pretend I don't exist? I will be so pissed if he does that.

Worse?

I will be so freaking...

Hurt.

"You're quiet," he says as he hits the remote to unlock the truck. He follows me to the passenger side, opening the door for me like a gentleman. "Did it bother you just now, seeing Baylee?"

I climb into the truck, not saying a word, still thinking. I don't want to say the wrong thing. I don't want to be that woman who makes demands like, "I never want you to talk to your ex ever again!"

I would love to make that demand right now, in my irrational state, but deep down, I know that's wrong. Unnecessary. I trust that Caleb isn't interested in Baylee anymore. He's totally into me.

But for how long? That's the issue that's niggling at me.

Caleb climbs into the truck and starts the engine, but doesn't go anywhere. He turns to look at me, and I can feel his heavy gaze as I keep my head bent. The longer I go without saying anything, the more awkward this moment is going to be.

Looks like I'm headed straight into mega awkward land. It can't be helped.

"G, look at me," he demands softly.

I lift my head, my gaze finding his. He doesn't look upset or irritated, which is a point for me. No, he's looking at me with those same horny eyes, though there's another emotion sparking in them. One I don't really recognize.

"I talk to Baylee and I feel nothing. Looking at her, seeing her with her new dude...I'm happy for her. She deserves a good guy, and I wasn't good for her. I know that." He reaches for me, his hand finding mine and interlocking our fingers. "Say something, babe. You're killing me right now."

I like it that he calls me babe. I've never been one for cheesy nicknames but the way he says it, the glint in his eyes...I love it. Way too much. "You scare me," I admit.

He frowns, his fingers tightening around mine. "How so?"

A deep sigh escapes me and I hang my head. "You bailed on every woman you met relatively fast. But not Baylee. You held onto her for a long time, and took complete advantage of her too. I...I don't want to end up like that. Like her."

There. I said it. The words are out, hovering between us and ready to detonate. He could become defensive. Or freak out. I wouldn't doubt a reaction like that coming from him. I'd even expect it.

"You won't," he says vehemently. I lift my head, noticing the gleam in his gaze. The firm set of his jaw. He almost appears angry, but not at me. "I respect you too damn much to do that to you. I swear."

My resolve melts, as does my heart. "Really?"

He nods, leaning in so his face is in mine. "I'm consumed with you. How could I ignore you or forget you? You're in the forefront of my mind, day and fucking night. I want to kiss you. I want to fuck you. I want to feel your mouth on my cock and I want to hear your laugh. I want to make you come. I want to talk to you. Spend time with you. I just—I want. You."

Oh shit. My heart has now completely disintegrated at his passionate declaration. Like, it's completely gone.

I smile, on the verge of tears. "Caleb."

That's all I can say. Just his name.

He smiles, and the look on his face is so tender, so sweet, tears do spring in the corner of my eyes. "Gracie," he whispers.

Right before he kisses me.

TWENTY-THREE

CALEB

I AM A HAPPY MAN.

We're sitting on the beach in front of the fire I just made, roasting hot dogs on one of those spear things my dad loaned us. Gracie is sitting right next to me, clad in sweatpants and a thick hoodie, the hood over her head because the wind whips her hair around in her eyes, driving her nuts.

It's windy. Cold as fuck. Our hot dogs will probably be seasoned with ash and sand, but I don't care.

I'm fucking thrilled to be out here, enjoying the sunset with my lady.

Oh fuck, I sound like a complete cornball, but it's true.

She looks happy too. Despite the lack of protection from the elements beyond the tent we just put up, despite the wind and the chilly temperature and the dog that keeps trotting over from the family camped out not too far from us, Gracie is smiling. She's having a great time, I can tell. She keeps laughing every time the dog nuzzles her legs.

"He wants our hot dogs," I tell her.

"I don't blame him. But you can't eat your own kind," she croons to the dog as she rubs under his chin. He watches her with adoring eyes.

I feel you, bro, is what I want to tell the dog, but I keep my mouth shut.

"You do know that hot dogs aren't actual...dog," I tell her. She has to know this. She's going to be teaching the youth of our

future for the love of God.

“Of course I do. But why would a dog want to eat a hot dog?” She pets him as she stares into his eyes. “It should freak you out, puppy. Yes, it should.”

I turn the dogs over, glad to see they’re not too black. Dad would call burnt hot dogs Cajun style and Mom always thought that was so funny.

“Hot dogs are disgusting,” I tell Gracie.

“Yeah, they are,” she agrees.

“I don’t think about it too much though, when I eat them.”

“You can’t, or you won’t eat them ever again.” She grimaces.

“True that.” I pull them away from the fire and Gracie, at the ready, thrusts a paper plate toward me. I pluck the hot dogs from the spears and drop them on her paper plate, blowing on my fingers because those dogs are mega hot. “They’re done.”

“Yay.” We’re sitting on low beach chairs that make it easy for us to grab everything on the ground. She picks up the bag of hot dog buns and opens them. “You’re really going to eat three?”

“Nah, I thought I’d make you an extra one just in case. If we don’t eat it, I’ll give it to our new friend.” I wave at the dog, who is currently trotting back over to his family’s campsite. He’ll be back though, once he sees us actually eating.

“Someday I want a dog,” she says, her gaze wistful as she watches him. “My mom is allergic so we could never have them growing up. She’d always sneeze.”

“Dogs are cool,” I say, trying to ignore the pang in my chest that’s making me feel sad for her. I loved growing up with pets. Dogs are the best, though cats are okay too. I don’t love them as much as Tony, who currently owns one, but I can appreciate them.

“They are.” Gracie’s made a makeshift kitchen area for us at our campsite, and she grabs a plastic fork and sticks it in one of the hot dogs, dropping it into a bun. She does the same for

the second one before handing me the plate. “Ketchup and mustard are right here for you, sir.”

Smiling, I take the plate, liking how light and easy she’s keeping everything right now. The entire day has been pretty great, minus seeing Baylee.

Not that it was a bad experience, but it filled Gracie with insecurities, and she’s not what I would consider an insecure person at all. For me, seeing Baylee for the first time in a while made me realize I don’t feel anything for her beyond fondness. With a little bit of a friendship connection. I treated her badly, and I’m grateful she doesn’t hate me for it.

We’ve known each other a long time, Baylee and me. But what we shared is done and firmly in the past. I’m over her.

Completely.

Who I’m not currently over is the gorgeous woman sitting right next to me who’s squirting a thick layer of mustard on her hot dog with intense concentration. Her eyes are practically crossed and her tongue is sticking out between her lips.

She’s adorable.

“You like mustard?” I ask, just before I shove a third of my hot dog into my mouth.

“Love it,” she says, setting the mustard down before she takes a dainty bite. “It’s delicious.”

She says this with her mouth full. Again, adorable.

Shit, I’ve got it so bad for this girl. Worse than I ever have. Like, ever.

We eat and talk. The dog wanders back over—his name is Buddy—and I feed him half of the spare hot dog. He eats it in one gulp, making Gracie laugh, and it sounds so good. Her joyous laughter carrying on the wind, making everything inside of me rise up. Lighten.

This feels so damn easy between us. Maybe before it was always so difficult because we were fighting whatever it was growing between us. Now we’re not fighting it anymore. We

truly got to know each other and it's not just about sex between us.

We're having fun.

We polish off our dinner and we clean up, putting everything in a small trash bag I brought, stashing the rest of the food in my ice chest. Once that's finished, I grab Gracie by the waist and pull her into me. I'm already settled in my chair, her back nestled to my front and she yelps, struggling a little like she wants to escape, but she's full of shit.

I know she wants to sit with me.

"You want to watch the sunset?" I ask her, my mouth right at her ear. Though it feels more like I'm talking into her hoodie.

She nods, a little smile curling her lips. "Are you getting romantic on me, Caleb?"

"I've always been a romantic, G." I kiss her cheek and she rubs her butt against me, making my dick perk up.

"Uh huh." She leans her weight into my chest and I let her, wrapping my arms around her tight, the two of us staring at the ocean as the sun slowly sinks into it. The occasional car passes by, disrupting our view, but it's no biggie. I'm not even really paying attention to nature's show anymore.

I'm too busy concentrating on how good this woman feels in my arms.

This sort of one night getaway thing isn't my usual style. I don't do this. I've never done this. Not even with Baylee. Definitely not with any other female. If I travel anywhere, it's with my friends. Used to be with my family.

Being out here, camping on the beach like this, reminds me of growing up. Of hanging out with my parents and my older sister and our dogs. Of running around on the beach, trying to fly a kite with my dad and building sand castles with my mom. Watching the dogs chase after the receding water, biting at the lingering foam. Of finding sand dollars and broken shells—one time I found a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses washed up on the shore. I was twelve and rocked those things for years, thinking I looked cool as hell.

Until I lost them one summer at the beach. Sure hope another kid found them and is wearing them.

Bringing Gracie here feels like I'm sharing a piece of myself with her. A glimpse of my past. I've made a lot of memories on this very beach—in this area. Good times were had here.

I plan on having a very good time tonight with Gracie still, especially once we cozy up together in the sleeping bag.

"It's so peaceful out here," Gracie murmurs, her voice almost carried away by the breeze. "I love the sound of the ocean."

"It's nice, huh." I rest my chin on her shoulder, breathing in her delectable scent. She feels good in my arms. Like she belongs.

"Thank you for bringing me here. It was just the getaway I needed before all the real shit starts," she says with a sigh.

"I needed the getaway too. Even for twenty-four hours, we all need to escape sometimes," I say.

She angles her face so she can look at me, her eyes gold and green in the waning sunlight. "You are full of surprises, you know that?"

"It keeps you guessing." I dip my head and kiss her. She parts her lips, her tongue seeking mine and we kiss like this for long minutes.

Until I hear a dog bark and feel a long, warm tongue lick on the back of my calf.

"Buddy," I groan against Gracie's lips, making her laugh. "You're blowing my chances here, bro."

Gracie pulls away from me, reaching for the dog so she can pet him. "You're not ruining anything," she tells the dog. "Caleb should know by now I'm a sure thing."

Her gaze is sly, as is her smile. Seeing her look like that fills me with longing.

Anticipation.

We're getting naked on the beach tonight.

That'll be a first.

We sit by the fire long after the sun sets. I turn on the battery-operated lantern so I can see what I'm doing as I slip a couple of marshmallows on the stick and roast them over the fire. I feed one to Gracie, getting her lips sticky sweet before I kiss her. She laughs and does the same thing to me, and fuck me standing, this is some major foreplay shit. I can't stop thinking about getting her into that tent and having my way with her.

But this is fun too. Sitting outside, enjoying the cold weather and the fire. The entire beach is dotted with people doing the same thing, some of them camping in trailers or motor homes. If we had more time, I'd suggest renting an ATV tomorrow and take her for a ride in the dunes.

I used to drive like a bat out of hell in those dunes though, so I'd probably scare the shit out of her.

We eventually pack up the rest of our stuff and I put the fire out as best as I can. We walk over to a nearby bathroom to take care of our nightly rituals and then we're back at the tent, ready for bedtime.

"What time is it?" she asks me.

I've barely looked at my phone today. I've noticed she hasn't either. "Almost nine-thirty," I say after I check the screen.

Her mouth drops open. "That's early."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting we go to sleep yet," I tell her, raising my brows. "But we can definitely go to bed."

"It's going to be cold." She shivers extra hard for emphasis.

"I'll keep you warm."

"We're going to snuggle in the sleeping bag?" she asks hopefully.

"Hell yeah, babe. Get your ass in there." I give said ass a light slap, making her squeal as she darts into the tent. I follow in after her, setting the lantern on the ground before I turn to zip the flaps closed.

The tent is actually pretty nice. A newer one I don't remember using before, so Dad must've bought it after I moved out. We can both stand in it—well, I hunch my shoulders a little bit but not as much as usual. It's big enough for us to move around in, and it's pretty damn secure, even with that ocean wind howling outside. I brought a couple of pillows and sleeping bags and some extra blankets to layer on the ground since it's going to be pretty hard.

If Gracie wants to sleep on top of me, I'm good with that.

“Let's make the bed,” she suggests and I help her, following her lead. Girls always know how to make things cozy, and this one is no exception. By the time we're finished, there's a layer of blankets beneath the sleeping bags along with the pillows and it appears pretty damn comfy.

“What are you wearing to sleep in?” she asks me.

I whip off my hoodie, taking the T-shirt with it. “This. Well, I'll kick off the shorts too.”

“You won't be cold?”

I grab her hand and rest it on my stomach. “I'm hot.”

“Yes, you are,” she murmurs with a laugh as she pulls her hand away. “Fine.”

She kicks off her flip flops and I watch as she gets rid of the hoodie. And the sweatpants too. Until she's standing there in a pair of black panties and a tank top, her nipples poking against the fabric like they've been doing all damn day.

Fucking distraction, those nipples.

“Keep me warm,” she says before she ducks down, flipping the sleeping bag open and slipping beneath it.

I join her, pulling her into me, our legs colliding, my dick brushing against her belly. I roll her over so she's on her back and I'm on top of her, letting her feel every inch of me that's been dying to get inside of her since the moment in the parking lot earlier.

I'd tried a couple more times to get in her panties throughout the day, but she'd always push me away, telling me to wait, or

that it was in too public of a place. Which she was right. There's no denying that, but I never got mad.

No, the waiting has just made this moment even more memorable. I feel like I've been dying for this pussy all damn day. Lying in wait. Being patient.

Now I can finally make a move.

"You uncomfortable?" I ask, just before I run my mouth along her jaw.

A sigh leaves her as her hands slide into the hair at the back of my head. "No."

"Are you warm?" My lips blaze a path down her neck and I feel her shiver.

"Yes," she whispers.

"I'm gonna make you hotter," I warn her, scooting down so I can rain kisses across her chest, just above her tank top. "You'll be burning up in a few minutes."

"Is that a promise?" She sounds so hopeful.

"That's a fucking guarantee." I shove her tank top up over her breasts, diving in so I can feast on them. Her nipples drive me out of my mind with lust. I suck and lick and bite. I pinch and nibble and flick my tongue over them. I kiss the valley between her breasts, then slide down her body, kissing her stomach. Her cute little belly button. The sensitive skin just beneath it.

With hurried fingers, I tug her panties down and she helps me, getting rid of them in seconds. I run my hands along the inside of her thighs, spreading them wide, kissing her everywhere but on her glistening pussy.

She rests her hands on top of my head, trying to guide me, but I resist. She groans in frustration and I lap at her clit. One quick flick of my tongue before I move away, kissing the soft skin on the inside of her thighs.

"You're mean," she whispers.

"It'll be worth it," I murmur against her skin.

“You better deliver,” she says, her voice stronger. As if she’s trying to threaten me.

Ha. She’s funny.

“Just you wait. I’m about to make you come so hard you’ll see stars,” I promise, shifting down to kiss the inside of her knees.

“Ooh, promise?” She rakes her fingers through my hair and I glance up, meeting her gaze. She’s watching me with an unfamiliar emotion in her eyes and a foreign feeling rises up in me, making me pause.

What the hell is happening to me right now?

TWENTY-FOUR

GRACIE

HE IS DRIVING me crazy in the absolute best way.

Teasing licks and touches. His mouth so very, very close to where I want him. He pauses for a moment, his head lifting, gaze meeting mine. He stares at me for a beat, sliding his hand up at the same time, and it finds mine. He entwines our fingers, as if he needs the connection, just before he dips his head and runs his tongue through my folds.

I arch my back, seeking that magical tongue, needing more of it. He licks and sucks, his free hand moving between my legs to spread me open. I watch him the entire time, entranced with what he's doing, how he seems to actually enjoy it, relishing my taste and response.

This man is just...a complete surprise. All the joking and sexual innuendos almost feel like a façade. A wall to the real Caleb, hiding behind the dirty comments and silly smirks. This guy has fucking depth.

Who knew?

Maybe I just didn't give him enough credit.

Wait, I definitely didn't give him enough credit.

He lets go of my hand to slip a finger deep inside me. I'm wet and open and I can hear his finger move as he pushes it in and out. I close my eyes, lost in the sensations of his fingers and mouth. It feels so good. I'm already on the verge of an orgasm, and usually it takes me a while.

But it's like I get with Caleb and he turns me into this needy, horny addict. It's so wild. Don't get me wrong, I've always had a healthy sexual appetite, but now that Caleb and I have broken past the barriers and given in to our attraction?

It's like all I want is for him to touch me. Fuck me. Whatever. Whenever.

His tongue increases its pace and he adds another finger. My hand lands on the top of his head and I give his hair a tug, nudging him to the exact spot I want him.

"Right here?" he asks, his voice muffled.

"Yesss..." Oh God, he hits me right where I want him and I'm glad I'm not shy. You must show them where you want them and thankfully Caleb is a quick learner. He puts all of his effort on my clit while slightly curling his fingers inside me, nudging a spot that has me...yep.

Seeing stars.

Just as he promised.

He keeps doing it. Finger fucking me, sucking my clit. Lapping at it. Then he shifts away from it, licking me everywhere, even around his fingers, making a humming noise against my flesh that sends a jolt rushing through me.

Oh, God. That's it. This is when I die. At night, in a tent on a beach, with Caleb's mouth on my goods.

"Caleb..." His name falls from my lips with a keening cry, just before I buck my hips against his face. He holds me down, intensifying his efforts on one singular spot that has me coming in an instant. Wave after wave of pleasure washes over me, obliterating every thought in my head. All I can focus on is the ministrations of his mouth and fingers. How he clamps my hips down with his arm.

How strong he is, and how thorough. His soft, skilled mouth. His fingers.

Oh man, his fingers.

He's kissing the inside of my thighs, rubbing his face against one, just before he lifts his head. I crack my eyes open just in

time to see the grin on his face. How his lips and chin shine from my juices.

“Well?” he asks.

“Well, what?” I am way more breathless than I thought I would be. I clear my throat. Try to take a deep breath to calm my racing heart, but it doesn’t really work.

“Did you see stars?” He climbs over my body, his boxer briefs not doing much to restrain his erection. I can feel it rest against my belly, hard and insistent.

“Yes,” I breathe just as he kisses me. And it’s a dirty kiss. Full of fire and tongue and plenty of groaning on his part. As if he relishes my taste and wants to share it with me.

I kiss him just as eagerly in return, touching his face, my fingers drifting down to trace the stubble lining his jaw. It’s sharp and rough. Sexy.

Ugh, I can’t take this man. He’s too much. I’ll probably go up in flames before we’re through.

Before we’re through.

A sobering thought. One I don’t even want to contemplate right now.

“Told ya,” he says arrogantly as he swipes his tongue across my lower lip.

His cockiness is a turn-on. Caleb knows what he’s doing and it shows. “Are you bragging?”

“Yeah. I am.” He kisses me deep, ending it before we can get too carried away. “You like it though. You reap all the benefits.”

I pull him back in for another kiss, and soon we’re lost. In each other’s mouths and bodies. Hands everywhere. Condoms pulled out of the front pocket of his backpack, a string of them lying beside us. I help Caleb remove his boxer briefs, a selfish move on my part because all I want to do is put my hands on him. I stroke his cock, watching his face the entire time, his expression agonized as I push him to the brink, only to stop.

Grabbing a condom, I tear the wrapper off and roll it on him, dropping a wet, sloppy kiss on the head before I do so. And then I climb on top of him, slowly guiding him into my body until he's buried deep inside.

I rise up, my hands pressed on his pecs, his cock slipping deeper. Just about as deep as he can get. Watching him, I start to move, lifting almost all the way up his length before sliding back down. The friction is unbelievably good. I'm taking my time, really enjoying the sensation of his thick erection filling me over and over. I close my eyes. Cup my breasts. Rub my nipples.

"Oh fuck." I crack my eyes open to find Caleb watching me, his eyes glazed over. "You're really putting on a show."

I push my breasts together just for his benefit. "You like?"

"I fucking love."

"Want more of a show?" I ask.

"Hell yes."

I drop my hands from my chest and reach between us, where our bodies are connected. I touch his cock, circling around the side until I find his balls. They're loose and warm, and I cup them. Squeeze them.

His eyelids flutter. "I like having my balls sucked."

"Of course, you do." I wouldn't expect anything less.

I stroke his balls as best I can, but it's awkward, so I give up and do what I really planned on originally.

And begin to stroke my clit. While I slide up and down on his cock.

"Damn woman." He wraps those big hands around my hips, taking over the pace. Making me bounce faster. "Look at you."

I toss my head back, letting him take command of my body while I rub tiny circles around my clit. That combined with his cock pushing inside of me is edging me closer to the brink.

A gasp leaves me when he bats my hand away and then he's the one who's rubbing my clit. His touch is rougher. Firmer.

He rubs and rubs and I glance down at him, my lips parting as our gazes connect.

He has complete control of me and it's...amazing.

My breaths whoosh out of my lungs in shuddery exhales. I'm whimpering. The orgasm is close. So close. I can almost touch it. Taste it. I lick my dry lips, my pussy clenching around his shaft, his fingers working my clit into a frenzy when it hits me.

My body shakes as I moan. My inner walls spasm, milking around his cock and his fingers fall away from my body as he starts thrusting inside of me with all of his might. In the near distance I can hear the crash of the waves on the shore at the same time that he comes with a shout, his entire body growing still beneath mine for only a moment before he's consumed with the effects of his orgasm.

I collapse on top of him when it's over, resting my cheek on his chest, the rapid thump of his heartbeat against my ear. He wraps me up in his arms, his hands skimming up and down the length of my back and lower. Those big hands spreading across my ass, squeezing my cheeks. His fingers tease the crack of my ass, there and gone in a flash, and I lift my head to look at him.

"Ass play gets me going," he admits.

I raise a brow. "I've not done much ass play."

"Me either. Most girls freak out," he says.

My smile is slow. "I'd let you play with my ass."

His expression is so earnestly hopeful, I can't help but think he looks adorable. Which is funny, considering what we're talking about. "Yeah?"

I nod. "But not right now. I don't want sand in my crack."

He laughs, squeezing me close, his hands far away from my butt. "Gracie, you're the coolest chick I've ever been with."

This sounds like a true badge of honor, considering he's been with a lot of women. "Gee, Caleb. I'm thrilled."

Cupping my chin, he tugs, until I'm crawling toward his mouth and kissing him, his cock slipping out of my body. "I'm gonna fuck you again. A couple more times before the sun comes up."

I yawn. "I don't know. I'm kind of tired."

"I'll wake you back up."

He rolls me over so he's the one who's on top.

And then proceeds to make good on his promise.

WE'RE DRIVING HOME the next afternoon, both of us exhausted but content. Quiet. My phone is plugged in and we're listening to one of my playlists I made earlier this summer. The song is called "Trust" by Brent Faiyaz, and while I'm not that familiar with his music, I'm totally jamming to the mellow tune, nodding my head to the beat, absorbing the lyrics.

YOU TOLD me I could trust you, don't lie.

"IS THAT TRUE?" he asks me out of nowhere. "Those lyrics. Can I trust you?"

I glance over at him with a frown. That's usually my line. I'm the one who hitches myself to the most untrustworthy motherfucker on the planet. Well, not always, but especially early on, I dealt with a few, shall we say, shady characters. "Yes, you definitely can—but what exactly are you referring to?"

"Can I trust that when we return home, you won't diss me? Pretend I don't exist?" He concentrates on driving, but he's gripping that steering wheel with all he's got. Practically white knuckling it. He seems...

Stressed.

About me?

“This trip was so much fun,” I tell him, reaching out so I can rub his thigh. It’s as hard as a rock.

A shiver steals through me. His muscles are such a total turn-on.

“Yeah. I thought so too.” He grabs my hand before I can shift it away, bringing it to his mouth and dropping a kiss on the back of it before he releases his hold on me. “But I don’t want to act like it never happened once we get back home.”

I absorb what he’s saying, trying to decipher it. “You want our friends to know about us?”

“They already know, Gracie. You’re the one who’s been in denial the last few months. I’ve been denying it too.”

“Denying what?”

“That we’re together—and that we’re good together, too.”

He’s right. We are good together. It’s been fun.

Wait. It’s more than that. It’s not just fun with Caleb, it feels...

Right.

So right.

“What are you saying, Caleb? Are you wanting a commitment from me?”

“Only if you’re willing to give it.” His jaw is tight and I can tell he’s nervous. Afraid I’m going to take a pass. Or run away. Find someone else to fixate on for a while, which is what I usually do.

But my mind is one hundred percent focused on him. He’s what I want. No one else.

Just Caleb.

“I have a question for you,” I say and he gives me a quick, startled glance.

“What is it?” he asks warily.

“Um, Caleb Richard Burke?” Oh God. I sound vaguely terrified. “Will you be my boyfriend?” My voice, my expression, my everything is sincere though.

Now I’m the one shaking. Scared. Nervous.

He sends me another look, one I can’t figure out, and the next thing I know, he’s pulling over to the side of the road, kicking up a cloud of swirling dust with the truck tires before he puts the vehicle in park and turns to fully face me.

“Fuck yes,” he says, just before he reaches for me.

I go to him willingly, quickly undoing the seatbelt so I can climb into his lap, the steering wheel digging into my back, but I don’t care. I kiss and kiss him, all over his face, his nose, his chin before returning to his seeking lips. He kisses me back with equal abandon.

“Yes,” he keeps murmuring. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Yes.

TWENTY-FIVE

September

“I HATE YOU,” Eli says to me out on the field, right in the middle of practice.

Resting my hands on my hips, I glare at him. “What the fuck did I do to you?”

“You’re getting some on the goddamn regular, and I’m jealous,” Eli practically spits at me, just before he does actually spit, right on the grass.

I can’t help but start laughing, which only infuriates him further. “Go ahead, Burke. Laugh all you want,” he says. “I’m tempted to kick your ass out here in front of everyone!”

Diego appears out of nowhere, jogging over to where we’re standing, stopping right between us. “Hey. What’s your guys’ problem?”

“He hates me.” I wave a hand at Eli, still chuckling.

Eli doesn’t appear amused at all. It’s already late September. Ava is long gone, away at San Diego State and from what I hear, she’s thriving. Loving every minute of it.

While our boy Eli looks like he wants to murder me because I’m...what? Having sex with Gracie regularly, while his girl is three hundred miles to the south of us?

Diego glances over at Eli. “Bro, why you hatin’ on Caleb?”

“I hate his smug face.” Eli points right at me. “Look at him.”

Diego does exactly that, looking at me before returning his gaze to Eli. “What about him?”

“He’s a dick.”

“Eli, Jesus. What is your problem?” I ask, throwing my arms up in the air. “I know you miss your girl, but damn. Give me a break.”

We always get along, Eli and me. We have similar personalities, so you’d think we’d clash, and back in the day, when we viewed each other as the enemy, we did.

But once we got to know each other, we became fast friends. So this, I hate you tirade, is...kind of unexpected.

A whistle blows in the distance and I glance over to see the defensive coach waving us all over to where he’s standing. “I gotta go,” I tell Diego and Eli before I leave them to jog over with the rest of the defensive line to hear whatever coach wants to tell us.

Okay, I’m acting like I don’t know what’s up Eli’s ass, but I think I do. He’s just pissed because he’s living with two people who are having nonstop sex while he’s getting none. He’s missing his girlfriend and I get the sense it’s killing him that he’s not seeing her. Worse, he keeps trying to call her and a lot of the time, she doesn’t pick up. Once she went to San Diego, she hit the ground running and girl got busy. She joined a sorority last year and is even more involved this year. We’ve been back in school for six weeks, and time has flown by for everyone, I think, but Eli.

I feel sorry for him. I do. Before Gracie, I would’ve given him shit and told him to break up with Ava because I was that much of a callous idiot. Hell, when she first went to San Diego, all of us talked about how long they might last, not giving them much of a future because come the fuck on.

A long-distance relationship is hard work. Yeah, Ava’s sister Autumn and Ash Davis made it work. And look at them now. They’re engaged to be married. Autumn is living with him while he’s playing in the NFL.

That is the shit of dreams, and not for me—the NFL part—but that’s okay.

I’m happy where I’m at. Where I’m going.

Content.

I don’t let Eli get in my head and end up having a solid practice. Being on the team the last two years means I get lots more field time and I can’t help but think of Jackson, who gave up on this shit because he never played and besides, music was calling his name.

He’s making a solid living at it so I can’t blame him. He’s also on my mind because he’s here right now. The first leg of his tour has come to an end and he and Ellie are visiting for the next few weeks before they go to Europe for the fall while he tours. They’re currently staying at Ellie’s parents’ house for the next couple of days and they’re coming over for dinner tonight at Tony and Hayden’s. Tony’s barbecuing.

Of course.

Hayden is eagerly playing hostess, I’m sure. She’s good at that. Even after teaching all day.

My girl lives for that shit too. And she teaches all day as well. She’s killing it. Those third graders love her. And I love that they call her Miss Hughes. I mean, they have to. She is their teacher after all. But it’s kind of hot, I can’t lie. Miss Hughes this, and Miss Hughes that. I might’ve called her that a few times when I was trying to get her naked. She always laughs, but deep down, I think she likes it.

That is what’s so great about being with Gracie. She just gets me. And I get her. We’re on the same wavelength, and I’ve never felt that way with a woman before. More like I’ve never had a deep enough relationship with any woman to ever think we could be in sync together, but I’ve changed that. I’ve changed in general.

All thanks to Gracie.

It helps that our sexual appetites match. I love nothing more than being balls deep in her every single night. She hasn’t had any issues with fibroids or whatever since that one night I took

her to the emergency room. No pain, no cramps. She went in for a more extensive ultrasound, but they could only spot a small blip and her doctor reassured her she should be fine.

I've told Gracie I'm the one who healed her and she just laughs, but I believe it. Girl has been going strong since we've been together. Teaching is going well for her. Life in general is going well for the both of us.

I have zero complaints, beyond Eli wanting to rearrange my face. And he's not pissed at me. He's just mad at life in general. The guy's emotions have always run close to the surface. It doesn't take much to send him straight over the edge.

And he's been a lot edgier lately.

Once practice is over and we're all sweaty and exhausted—still fucking hot as balls outside, thank you very much—I'm headed back to the locker room when I hear someone run up behind me.

Eli.

“Sorry, man,” he says, still sounding irritable. “I think the heat is getting to me.”

“Uh huh.” It's not the heat, but I don't bother saying that. “It's all good, bro. I'm not mad.”

“Even if I admit I still kind of want to punch you in the face?” He raises his brows.

I just shake my head. “Come on. Relax. Your best friend is home. We get to chill with Jackson and Ellie tonight.”

“Seeing them just makes me miss my girl even more,” he says morosely.

We enter the locker room, Eli following me since our lockers are near each other. “When do you get a chance to see Ava next?”

“I don't know, October? If she's not too busy for me,” he says bitterly.

Shaking my head, I open my locker, my brain scrambling to come up with a new topic to discuss. This guy is not happy, and it shows. He threw like shit today. He's thrown total bombers all week. Everyone's frustrated with him, and he's frustrated with everyone.

He needs a serious reset.

I start talking about this weekend's game, which helps get Eli's mind off of his loneliness. I take a quick shower and so does Eli, and after we get dressed, Tony and Diego join us, all of us walking out to the parking lot together.

I have a total moment of gratefulness as I take us all in, walking in a line, heading for our cars. We've all been friends now for three years, and while I miss Jackson something fierce, I'm so damn glad to have these guys in my life. Especially Diego and Tony, who I've known for what feels like forever. We go way back, and I didn't ever give it much consideration before, but I'm realizing now that having tried and true friends who stick with you is valuable. These fools slap me into shape when I'm acting like an asshole or when I'm fucking up.

And right now, someone needs to be slapped into shape. For once, it's not me either.

Eli shoots off toward his car first. "I'll be over around eight," he tells Tony. "Maybe a little later. I'm hoping to talk to Ava first."

The moment he's gone, I turn to Diego and Tony. "We need to help him."

Diego frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Guy is suffering hardcore. I think he's on his way to become a founding member of the lonely hearts club." I think of The Beatles and their Sgt. Pepper album. My mom loves them because my grandma loves them too.

Tony nods. He knows where I'm coming from. "Being apart from Ava so far has been worse than it was last year."

"I think it's because she's become busier and it seems like she doesn't have as much time for him," I say.

We all stop in front of Tony's fancy schmancy Range Rover. Rich fucker. "Remember how you guys talked to me about all the partying and my grades suffering? And how much that could affect my chances to stay on the team?"

They both nod.

"I think we need to have that same conversation with Eli. He's throwing for shit."

"Intercepted twice today at practice," Diego confirms with a nod.

"Right. He's in a bad headspace. We need to help him out," I say.

"Look at you, ready to help when he was dying to plow his fist in your face today," Diego marvels.

I make a dismissive noise. "That's just because he's tired of watching Gracie and I hang all over each other in front of him."

"Maybe you should hang all over each other in the privacy of your bedroom," Tony suggests.

"We've tried being more discreet, but it's like we can't help ourselves," I admit. I don't mention how thin the walls are. I'm sure he can hear us going at it. Maybe that's why he always has his AirPods lodged in his ears.

I just want to touch her. She just wants to touch me. It's as if we can't resist.

"Never thought I'd see the day." Diego shakes his head, grinning.

"What?" I ask, faintly annoyed.

"You're in *loooove*." He draws out the last word in a high-pitched voice, sounding like a complete idiot. "The biggest player of all time is now completely pussy whipped."

"Hey, that pussy is worth being one hundred percent whipped for," I crack, making Diego laugh.

I immediately feel like a jackass, talking about Gracie in that way, but I rarely say stuff like that anymore, and I think they

all wonder if something's wrong with me. I'm just keeping up the 'Caleb is a dirty bastard' façade.

Why I need to, I don't know. I think they'd accept me as I am, no matter what.

"I have a secret," Tony announces, causing Diego's laughter to die. "But you two assholes have to swear not to mention it to anyone."

Damn. He sounds deadly serious.

"What is it?" Diego asks.

"You promise to keep your mouths shut?" Tony looks from Diego to me, his expression solemn.

I nod. "I swear."

"Yep," Diego agrees.

"Ava is here. She flew home for the next few days to see Ellie and spend time with Eli. He has no idea." Tony grins. "We wanted to keep it a surprise. So don't breathe a word of this, got it?"

"We won't," I say. "He's going to shit."

"He's definitely going to be happy," Diego adds.

"Ellie went and picked up Ava at the airport. She landed around five. She has to fly back in two days," Tony says.

"She can't stick around for the game?" I ask with a frown.

Tony slowly shakes his head. "She has some charity event she has to participate in for her sorority. She can't miss it."

Damn. That sucks.

"He'll be glad to get any amount of time he can with her," Diego says, and I nod my agreement.

"Keep it quiet." Another one of those measured long looks from Tony. "Especially you," he says to me, since I live with Eli. "See you two boneheads later."

I drive home, my head full of thoughts. About relationships. Friendships. Long distance bullshit. I don't know if I'm cut out for that kind of thing. Having Gracie around all the time

makes me happy. Yes, we're both busy during the day, but we spend time together every night, unless I'm gone for an away game.

Have I mentioned how supportive she is at games? She gets all decked out in Bulldog red and screams my name from the stands. One time I legit heard her voice, the scream was so distinctly Gracie.

And there are a lot of people filling up Bulldog Stadium, let me tell you.

Everything I do, she supports. Most everything I say, she argues with—most of the time it's all in good fun, but there are those occasions where she thinks I'm flat-out wrong and she calls me out for it. Which is fine. I love that she doesn't just readily agree with me or say yes to every suggestion I make. She's an independent thinker. She's got her own brain, and it's a big one.

One I admire.

What I've come to realize is Gracie is everything I never knew I wanted. I'd been avoiding having a relationship for so long, I didn't even know what it took to be in one. And now that I've let this girl into my life, and she's let me into hers, it turns out we're a perfect fit.

Should've known. We reacted to each other so strongly from the first moment we met. It makes total sense.

By the time I'm entering the apartment, Gracie leaps from the couch where she's sitting and comes for me, grabbing hold of my waist and rising up to smother my face with kisses. I slam the door behind me and scoop her up, pressing her against the door so I can kiss her like I mean it.

She breaks the kiss first, breathless. "Well hello to you too."

"You started it." I drop a kiss on her nose. "Have a good day?"

"Feeling extra glad you're finally home." She grins. "I missed you."

I like this honest stuff too. We're real with each other. Open. No bullshit. I don't hold back and neither does she. Frankly,

it's surprising. I didn't believe I had it in me. I didn't think I could act this way with a woman.

But I can with Gracie.

"I missed you too." I press my cheek to hers, my mouth at her ear. "Eli hates us because we're too happy."

She pulls away slightly, frowning. "Really? That sucks. He did seem a little grumpy when he got home a few minutes ago."

"I don't think he means it. He just...he's frustrated he can't see his girl regularly," I explain.

"That would be hard," she says with a sigh. "Props to them for making it work."

I consider telling Gracie about Ava being at Tony's get-together tonight, but I restrain myself. Eli could be anywhere in the apartment right now. Lurking in the hall. Standing in the kitchen. What if he heard me?

Nope. Keeping this little secret to myself. They'll all find out soon enough.

"It would be hard." I kiss her cheek. I can't resist. My lips always seek her out. "You know what else is hard?"

I grab her hand and settle it over my semi-erect dick.

She laughs, giving me a teasing squeeze before she yanks her hand away. "You're insatiable."

"You love it."

"I don't know about that." She's teasing me. Something she's really good at doing. There is nothing I enjoy more than a good Gracie tease.

The girl is naughty. She says things that can sometimes shock me. And she lets me do things to her that no other woman has allowed, which is fucking great.

She's full of surprises.

"Let's go to my room," I tell her, taking her hand and leading her down the hall.

She doesn't protest. She doesn't say anything at all. The moment we're in my room and the door shuts, she falls into my arms, her hands sliding beneath my clothes.

Until we're both lost in each other completely.

TWENTY-SIX

GRACIE

WE ARRIVE at Tony's house a little later than usual, only because we had sex and then fell asleep in each other's arms. Meaning we overslept and when Caleb woke up first, he shook me awake and said we had to go.

I feel a little dazed still, but not in a bad way. More like in a, *wow I can't believe he just made me come like that way*. He teases my ass every time he goes down on me now, and it feels...good. No denying it. But that last orgasm he gave me knocked me for a loop and left me exhausted.

No wonder I fell asleep.

We enter Tony's house to find the gang is already there. Jocelyn and Diego are sitting on the couch. Hayden is in the kitchen making margaritas, her new specialty—I can hear the whirl of the blender. I spot Jackson first and I go to him, letting him wrap me up in a big hug.

"My second biggest fan," he says, teasing me.

I squeeze him tightly before I pull away slightly to stare into his handsome face. Somehow, he's become even better looking. His hair is longer and blonder, and his smile is open. He seems...content. "You look good," I tell him.

"I feel good," he admits. "You look great, Gracie."

"Why thank you." I shimmy out of his arms, glancing around looking for Caleb, who's chatting with Diego and Jocelyn. "Where's your girl?"

“In the kitchen. There’s a surprise in there too.” Jackson grins as he lets me go.

I dash into the kitchen to find Hayden pouring large amounts of frothy margaritas into glasses. “Hey, you made it!”

“Sorry,” I apologize. “We took a nap.”

“Uh huh.” The knowing look on my friend’s face says it all, but I ignore her.

My gaze snags on Ellie sitting at the tiny kitchen table. I do a double take when I spot a blonde head. Wait a minute.

Ava is here?

Yep, she’s currently sitting on Eli’s lap and he’s got his arms around her waist like he’s never going to let her go, while she chats animatedly with her very best friend. I go to them, lightly touching Ellie’s shoulder and when she glances up, a giant smile spreads across her face as she leaps to her feet and pulls me in for a hug.

“Gracie!” she practically shouts, squeezing me tight. “Oh my God, I’ve missed you.”

I hug her back, briefly closing my eyes. “Missed you too, babe. Let me look at you.”

We pull away from each other, my hands still on her shoulders as I take her in. She’s freaking glowing with vitality. Her dark eyes sparkle and the smile on her face is contagious. Her hair is long and flowing with gentle waves and she’s got on a flowered sundress that skims her body perfectly.

“Even more gorgeous than usual,” I tell her.

She laughs. “I could say the same about you.”

“And I’m not even in my teacher wardrobe,” I tease.

Hayden makes her way over to the table, a glass in each hand. “One for you,” she offers it to me and I take it with a thank you, greedily sipping from the straw. Ooh, that’s strong.

“And one for me,” Hayden says as she collapses in a chair across from where Eli and Ava are sitting. “Making margaritas is exhausting work.”

Ava comes to me and we hug. “I didn’t know you were coming,” I tell her.

“It was a surprise.” She glances over her shoulder at Eli, who’s watching us. Oh, that guy is so stuck on her, and I don’t even find it pathetic. His love for Ava is just there, obvious and hers for the taking.

I immediately think of Caleb, and how well we’re getting along. As if we’ve always been together. There have been no words of love, of course. It’s way too early for that kind of talk, but lately I’ve been realizing I could see something... more with this man.

Then I banish the thought because it’s too damn scary.

I chat with the girls as we down our margaritas. Eli eventually leaves us to go outside with Tony. We listen to Ellie tell all kinds of funny stories about touring with Jackson. All the places they see and the people they meet. The groupies who lose their minds over Jackson, even if he so much as walks onstage. He’s getting so much attention. A clothing designer wants to feature him in her next campaign. He has over ten million followers on Instagram and close to twenty-five million on TikTok.

He’s a huge sensation. Big. The girls love him. Guys love him too.

And he’s our friend. It’s so crazy to think about how big he’s blown up over the last year.

Tony eventually comes inside with a platter full of barbecued chicken. We all make plates and eat outside at the makeshift table Tony and Hayden put together. The night air is cool and I’m sitting next to Caleb, our sides pressed into each other since it’s so cramped out here. I don’t mind though. It’s nice having him by my side. Swiping food from my plate because he’s so damn hungry all the time. He burns lots of energy on the field and with me.

Ha.

Eli and Ava are the first to leave, and we don’t give them any grief for bailing early. We know what they’re up to.

A few minutes after they leave, Diego and Jocelyn have to go. They have a sitter with Gigi and need to get home. Once they're gone, the guys go inside to play video games for old times' sake—no joke—leaving me, Hayden and Ellie outside, still sipping on melted margaritas and giggling because we're buzzing a little bit.

“Should I make more?” Hayden asks, holding up her mostly empty glass.

“Uh uh.” I shake my head. “We have to go to work tomorrow morning.”

“How's that going anyway?” Ellie asks.

“I love my class,” I say, feeling all warm and fuzzy inside when I think of that rambunctious group of mostly seven-year-olds I teach every day. “They're a handful, but for the most part, they're so sweet. And really smart too.”

They're also exhausting, but I'm starting to get used to it. Being with Caleb is exhausting too, but in a good way. As in, he's keeping me satisfied every night.

The sex hasn't slowed down. If anything, it's completely ramped up, which still surprises me.

Who knew it could be like this?

“I don't know,” Hayden says, surprising both of us. We turn to look at her.

“What do you mean, you don't know?” I ask.

“I thought I wanted to teach kindergarten, but I'm not sure if I'm cut out for it.” She shrugs, her expression turning miserable. “They're so damn needy.”

I burst out laughing. I blame the alcohol. “Of course they are. They're little! Practically babies still.”

“Yeah, I thought they would be sweet and lovable and want hugs all of the time, which some of them do, don't get me wrong. But they can get whiny. They're so easily distracted. They're smart little boogers, but they'd rather go outside and play,” Hayden explains.

“I don’t blame them,” I tell her.

“What are you going to do?” Ellie asks, concern lacing her voice.

“I’ll finish out the school year, of course. I’m no quitter. But I might reconsider teaching kindergarten or first grade. I’m envious of Gracie’s third grade class,” she says, glancing over at me.

“Young enough to be adorable, old enough to be fairly independent,” I add.

“That makes sense,” Ellie says, glancing from Hayden to me. “And what’s going on with you and Caleb, hmm?”

Oh. I can actually feel my cheeks turn warm, and that’s kind of embarrassing. Why does it make me blush when anyone asks me about him? It’s silly. “Nothing much,” I croak, clearing my throat the moment I get the words out.

Hayden and Ellie laugh at me while I glare at them.

So rude.

“They’re together,” Hayden tells Ellie. “Though I’m sure you figured that out, with the way he stares at her as if she’s the best thing he’s ever seen.”

“That’s not true,” I immediately protest.

Hayden shakes her head. “It’s so true. He looks at you like you’re a big, juicy steak and he can’t wait to take a bite.”

“It’s true,” Ellie confirms. “I noticed it at dinner earlier. Every time you spoke, he watched you with hearts in his eyes.”

“It’s really cute,” Hayden adds.

I cover my face with my hands, mortified, though I shouldn’t be, considering they’re my friends and I appreciate their honesty. But it’s so weird to think Caleb is completely enamored of me. I mean, I know he is. We are totally into each other; it’s a mutual thing. But most of the time we feel lost in our own little world, not worrying about what anyone else thinks. We’re all so busy that we don’t see our friends too often. This is the first time we’ve had a get-together in a while.

“You thinking about bailing yet?” Ellie asks.

She’s got my number because we would have long, deep talks last year about relationships, before she and Jackson got together. She would share her woes over that oblivious jackass, while I would share my woes over the various jackasses I was dating. She used to tell me I just hadn’t found the right guy for me yet, and she was probably right.

But is Caleb that guy?

He feels like he could be. The possibility is there.

“Not yet,” I say, and she smiles.

“He’s your lobster,” Ellie says, making me frown. “It’s a *Friends*’ reference. I watched it a lot while we were on tour.”

“What are you even talking about?” I watch *Friends* sometimes, but not consistently enough to get the reference.

“Lobsters mate for life. When they find their ‘one,’ they stick together forever. Maybe that’s you and Caleb,” Ellie explains.

“Does that mean Tony is my lobster?” Hayden asks, sounding hopeful. When Ellie nods, she smiles. “That’s so cute.”

A flare of panic lights up my chest and crawls up my throat. I smile through it, blinking over and over again, the words ‘mate for life’ running through my head on repeat.

Is that what I want? Caleb and me, always and forever?

I never gave it any real serious thought. I was always living in the moment, enjoying him. And us. Together.

Being in a committed relationship is a big step for me—and him. We don’t do that sort of thing, and everyone knows that. That we chose each other and continue to see each other is a huge deal.

What if it doesn’t work out? I live with him, and the lease isn’t up until June. That’s a long way out. Everything could fall apart and I’d be stuck having to share an apartment with the guy. The very guy who’s had his mouth on every part of me. Who held my hand when I went to the emergency room. The

man who took me camping on the beach and shared a part of himself that not too many people ever get to see.

I think of that version of Caleb that I see all the time now, and my panic dissipates. I sink into the chair, taking deep breaths, hoping no one notices me.

But wouldn't you know, my friends totally notice me coming down after a minor anxiety attack.

"Are you okay?" Ellie asks, leaning across the table toward me.

I wave a hand, trying to smile. "I'm fine."

I don't sound fine. My voice squeaks and I'm breaking out in a sweat, despite the cool breeze currently blowing outside.

"Are you freaking out right now?" Hayden asks, her voice loud.

I shush her, making Ellie giggle. "The lobster comment got me," I admit.

Ellie frowns. "You didn't like it?"

"More like it scared me. Caleb and I..." How do I put this without sounding awful? Would it actually sound awful? I don't mean anything behind it. I'm just going to state facts. "We're just living in the moment, you know? Yes, we're together. Yes, we really like each other. Are we in love?"

"Probably," Ellie says.

"Yes," Hayden replies at the same time.

I slowly shake my head. "I don't know about that. I've never been in love before, and it's kind of scary, if I'm being honest. Can I imagine being with him forever? When I try, I see nothing. Plus, there are a few things going against him."

Ellie frowns. "Like what?"

"His player reputation, for one." Girls throw themselves at him after games. I've witnessed it. He claims they don't tempt him, but how long will that last? Eventually he will get bored of me. I'll probably get bored with him too. It's just the nature of the beast.

And we're the same beast. I think this is why we're so drawn to each other. We're a lot alike.

"You have a bit of a player reputation as well," Hayden reminds me. "Yet you seem perfectly content with him."

"For now," I tack on, frowning. "I worry about his age. He's two years younger than me."

"So? Tony and I make it work," Hayden says.

"Tony knows what he wants. What's expected of him. Caleb is kind of lost in the future career department," I say.

"He's still young," Ellie says. "He'll figure it out."

"Eventually. While I'm over here, already throwing myself into my career." I was always told in school that girls mature faster than boys, and overall, it's true. Nothing against dudes, but they can be really immature. Caleb is extremely immature a lot of the time. All that boyish charm is part of his appeal. And while he knows when to step up and take care of me when I need it, he also knows how to hold back and let me lead.

Which is nice. Refreshing. I've been with a lot of macho assholes. Caleb has macho asshole tendencies, but he's also a sweetheart.

"Our timelines don't match," is what I finally realize. "Next year, he's a senior and still living it up. His last year of glory as a football player, of being a student. While I'll be working my first, real job, not knowing where I'll be. I could end up leaving the area."

"Are you planning on finding a job somewhere else?" Ellie asks.

"I don't know." I shrug. "I planned on applying everywhere I could think of and see what happens."

My friends are quiet, ruminating over my words, and I ruminate too. That was always part of the plan. Student teach here, then eventually end up somewhere else. I could go back home to the Bay Area, but it's so freakin' expensive over there. I'd probably barely make rent, let alone be able to afford

anything else. And I don't like the idea of having a bunch of roommates after this year.

I want to live on my own. Be my own person. Do my own thing. Feel like an actual, capable adult. In a year, that's exactly what I'll be doing, while Caleb is still in college. How can we make that work?

I don't know if it's possible. Maybe I'm looking for every excuse to end this before shit gets hard, I'm not sure...

"Have you told Caleb that?" Hayden asks.

I slowly shake my head. "Will we even be together by the time I'm trying to find a job?"

Ellie's eyes go wide. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying anything's possible. I could end up with him for a little while longer, but who knows? We're eventually going to get bored with each other. I know us. And that's okay. It'll be fun while it lasts." Ellie and Hayden's faces turned panicked, their eyes going wide, their mouths popping open. I stare at them, wondering what kind of secret message they're trying to tell me when I realize...

Caleb is standing directly behind me. I can smell the faint scent of his cologne, feel the warmth of his body radiating toward me. He must've slipped outside when I was talking, and I didn't hear him.

He settles his hand on my shoulder, giving it the briefest squeeze before he asks, "Ready to go?"

I close my eyes for the briefest moment, my heart sinking. How much did he hear? How bad is the damage?

My eyes open to find my friends watching me with openly sympathetic expressions. I don't need to glance up at Caleb to know he's either mad, hurt or both.

I chance a glance upwards to find it's all of the above. He looks crushed.

Furious.

Crap.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CALEB

THE ENTIRE DRIVE back to our apartment, her words keep ringing in my head, over and over. The tone of her voice, how nonchalant she sounded. Just another night gossiping with her friends about our so-called relationship. She made it—us—sound downright unimportant.

Meaningless.

We're eventually going to get bored with each other. I know us. And that's okay. It'll be fun while it lasts.

If I could, I'd punch the steering wheel right now, but I restrain myself. I don't want to give away exactly how much I heard her say. I tell myself it was nothing. Just Gracie talking to her friends, saying something I'm sure I wasn't meant to hear.

The problem? I heard it. I heard enough to know that her attitude is, *ha, ha, let's just see how far this goes before we're finished*, and that just...

Fuck that hurts.

She dozes in the passenger seat, which is infuriating. She's not even worried over what I could've possibly heard, which means she's actually okay with me knowing that she doesn't see a future for us. That hurts even worse.

Hey, I'm not one who's big on thinking long term. I never have been. But Gracie has completely changed my life. Not like I can admit that I'm totally in love with her, because I'm not. But I'm definitely falling.

At least, I think I am. Considering I have no previous experience in the love department, I'm floundering over here.

Fuck.

And I was having such a good night too. All of my friends reunited, back together, just like the old days. Ava and Eli all over each other, the look of pure joy on that dude's face at having his girl by his side, I could *feel* that. Hanging out with Jackson, playing video games like we used to, yelling and cussing each other out. Listening to his stories about being on the road, and how much he loves it, even when it's intimidating. How glad he is that he has Ellie with him, and how much she grounds him.

I felt that last statement down to my soul. It's what Gracie does to me. She grounds me. She reminds me of who I am, and I thought she saw the possibilities of who I could be. She makes me feel like I have potential. I figured with Gracie by my side I could do anything. Conquer any challenge. Find happiness. Feel content.

Nope. I was wrong. Sounds like she's planning on finding a job elsewhere. She'll move on and I'll still be here. She'll have a career and a new life, living in a new place with new friends and probably new men because, come on, look at her.

While I'll be stuck here, wrapping up my last year in college, playing football for one last season before I turn in my jersey and become a dried-up has been.

Fuck my life. Seriously.

I whip my car into the complex lot and pull into my usual parking spot, shutting off the engine at the same time I say way too loudly, "Hey."

She startles, sitting up straight, her head swiveling in my direction, her sleepy gaze finding mine. "Hey."

"We're home," I practically bite out, sounding like a bitter asshole.

"Okay." She climbs out of the car without another word and I follow her along the sidewalk. Then wait for her as she unlocks the front door. There's no one in the living room,

which isn't a surprise. Eli and Ava are probably going at it like rabbits right now, having all that reunited sex they need to fit in before she hops on a flight and takes her ass back down to San Diego.

Women. Always trying to move on from us.

I don't get it.

Once we're inside, I follow Gracie to her room. Shove the door closed behind her before I sweep her into my arms and kiss her. It's brutal. Possessive, and she responds to it completely, her tongue battling with mine, a low moan sounding in her throat.

Ridiculous, but wouldn't you know it, my dick gets hard at the first taste of her sweet lips, and that sexy way she rubs against me.

My hands are everywhere, trying to take off her shirt, her shorts. She helps, shedding the shirt, revealing she wasn't wearing a bra and I immediately rest my hands over her tits, squeezing and kneading her flesh. She whimpers against my lips and I thrust my tongue deep to shut her up.

I'm mad, but I'm desperate to fuck her. Maybe she'll realize that what we have isn't so bad, and she'll want to stick around. That I'm not just some dumb fuck who doesn't know what he wants to do with his life.

There's more to me than meets the eye, and I thought she knew this, but maybe not.

She pushes me so I land on the edge of the bed, my legs spread, my breathing accelerated. I watch as she falls on her knees in front of me, reaching for the waistband of my athletic shorts and tugging. I left my hips and she pulls them off along with my boxers, my dick popping up, always ready and eager to play.

Especially with her.

A smile curls her lips, her gaze finding mine as she reaches for me, drawing my cock into her mouth. She sucks on just the head, her eyes falling closed as she throws herself into the act like she always does. As if she enjoys it. Like she craves the

taste of my dick, which I sort of think she does. I know I'm always wanting to lap at that pretty pussy of hers, so I get it. We're addicted.

One of us more than the other.

I try to stay impassive, as if I'm observing her from afar. Try to see if she's just pretending to enjoy sucking my dick, when all along I believed she was totally into me, but it proves difficult. Soon lost to the suction of her mouth. Her fluttering tongue and her hands cradling my balls.

Leaning back, I rest my hands on the mattress behind me, lifting my hips in a restrained rhythm as I fuck her mouth. She lets me, taking it. She always takes it. Always acts like she enjoys it too and I groan when she releases me from her mouth to slide her tongue down my shaft, just before she licks my balls.

I have a real thing for women using their mouth on my balls and she knows it. She plays it up. Just like I also have a real thing for ass play and she lets me play with her ass whenever I want. We give each other so much, and not just sexually either.

So why can't she see? Why is she so blind?

I banish the worrisome thoughts from my head and concentrate on how good her mouth feels on my cock. She wraps her lips around the head once more, sucking so tight her cheeks hollow out and I groan, that familiar tingling starting at the base of my spine.

"I'm gonna come," I warn her and she releases my cock from her mouth, her tongue out, her fingers around me as she puts on a show for me and smacks my dick against her tongue again and again.

So fucking hot. The woman just knows what to do to twist me up.

"Do it," she whispers, racing her lips up and down my shaft. "Come for me, Caleb."

She squeezes the base of my cock extra tight, her lips back on the tip before she dips her head down, taking me all the way in. I give in to my urges and move my hips, fucking her face in

earnest now, and she breaks away at the last second so I can see that first spurt of semen hit her right at the corner of her mouth so that it drips down her face.

I'm a sucker for a visual. The groan that leaves me is loud enough for our neighbors to hear.

Fuck it.

I come for what feels like an eternity and she laps most of it up while I shudder beneath her. I'm barely recovering when she leaps to her feet, stripping the remnants of her clothes while I get rid of my T-shirt and kick off my shorts and boxers.

Then she's on me, her mouth finding mine, her hands gripping my shoulders while she rubs her body all over me. I get the feeling she's trying to make up for something. Probably that shitty remark. She feels guilty and she thinks she can buy my happiness with an extra messy blow job and a quick, hot fuck.

Turns out I'm easily bought, because this shit is working.

We don't say anything, when normally, we do. I flip her over so she's on her back. I race my mouth all over her chest. Suck her nipples. Kissing the underside of her tits. Slip my fingers between her legs to find her drenched, her clit swollen, a little whimper coming from her when I pinch it.

She even likes a little pain sometimes. This girl is up for anything. It's why I believed she was so perfect for me.

I shift so I'm over her once more, my face in hers, my hand braced above her head on the mattress while I guide my cock close to her pussy with the other. I'm already hard again. Aching. I drag the head back and forth through her wet folds, and she arches against me, her eyes closed, her lips parted as she moans. I lick her throat, nip at her jaw. Her chin. All the while slipping inside of her. Just the head at first.

Then deeper.

Until I'm fully inside her snug heat, my cock throbbing. The first orgasm out of the way means I'll go slower. Be more patient. Not so eager to get to that tipping point. Taking a deep breath, I do my best to gain control of myself and I start to move, a slow drag out of that hot pussy, before I push back

inside. She loves it when I do this. The slow in and out makes her wild and I can see it's already working. There's a rosy flush to her chest, her tits. Her neck and face. She cracks her eyes open to find I'm already watching her and her voice is throaty as she says, "Feels so good."

Too fucking good, is what I want to say in response, but I don't. I don't say anything at all.

Instead, I fuck the shit out of her with grim determination. Methodical thrusts in and out of her body. I touch her clit. Tease it. Stroke it. She spreads her legs wider, curling one around my hip, her heel digging into my ass as she urges me deeper. I start to pump harder, careful not to lose control, but not holding back with my thrusts either. There is nothing gentle about this moment. I'm fucking her like a beast, like an animal using his mate, not concerned with tender feelings.

I'm just taking. Fucking. And she's taking, fucking me right back.

Her nails claw at my back as she clings to me, incoherent sounds falling from her lips, as if she doesn't know how to speak English. I rut into her, grunting with every push, my second orgasm looming just on the horizon. It's too soon, I think, wanting to prolong this, but she presses her face into my neck, sinking her teeth into my throat and making me yell.

Then it's on. I'm moving so fast, my balls slap against her ass, our skin sticky with sweat. I fuck and fuck, can feel her growing closer, can sense it. I know her tells, the way those shuddery moans emanate from her. How she reaches for me, reaches in between us, her fingers finding her clit to stroke. I bat her hand away and take over, flicking her clit right as I take her mouth in a brutal kiss.

She comes with a gasp, her pussy clenching around my shaft over and over again, milking the orgasm right out of me. I fill her up with cum, realizing a moment too late that I don't have a condom on and we just fucked raw.

No wonder it felt so damn good.

I collapse on top of her, winded. My heart racing. She curves her arms around my neck, her fingers in my hair, her mouth on my cheek as she delivers tender kisses. Like she might care for me or some such bullshit.

“My God, that was...” She doesn’t finish the sentence, and I don’t bother supplying any words for her either. We remain quiet, the only sound our rapid breathing, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, roaring in my head.

“That was amazing,” she whispers, tugging on the ends of my hair so I have no choice but to pull away some so I can stare down at her. Her gaze is searching and I try my hardest to keep my expression neutral. But I know without a doubt she realizes I’m upset. “What got into you just now?”

Can’t tell her the truth. That I’m trying to prove to her it’s good between us no matter what. Even when I’m mad at her. Even when she’s already considering the end for us. That we’re connected, though she tries to fight it. I don’t want to fight it.

I’m all in.

I wish she could see that.

TWENTY-EIGHT

GRACIE

SOMETHING CHANGED the night Caleb overheard me giving our relationship an end date. And I'm not just referring to the frenzied sex we had that night either, though I cannot lie, it had been totally hot. He fucked me like he meant it, and in the heat of it all, we forgot to use a condom.

Thank God I'm on the pill. He probably could've impregnated me that night, he was so intent on proving something to me.

No, there's been a shift in the relationship. In his entire personality. He's a little colder. Not as sweet and open. He wants to hang out. He talks to me, asks how my day was, but it always seems to be a lead up to sex. As if that's all he wants from me.

And then he eventually falls asleep, exhausted because the man is just going, going, going all day long and of course he's going to lapse into a coma after an intense orgasm.

Here's the worst part of it all: since that night, we haven't talked about it. Never. Not once. I don't bring up him overhearing my conversation with the girls, and he doesn't bring it up either. Which totally sucks, because what a pair of little babies we are, running from our feelings.

But if he's a baby, then I am too because I'm not about to be the one who brings it up first.

My meaningless words fucked up what we have. I self-sabotage. I always have. How many guys have I been with in the past? A lot. Many of them were trash. Or just not the guy for me.

Some of them were nice. Solid. Kind and thoughtful and totally into me. They lavished me with attention and I drank it up like the not-so-secret attention whore that I am. Eventually, I'd get bored. How many times can a guy tell me I'm beautiful? I'd find a way to prove to him that I wasn't so great after all. I'd shatter the illusion, and then move on.

I was so, so good at that.

Now I'm terrified Caleb is going to move on from me first. And that's another fault of mine. I was always the one who'd run first. Who'd break hearts first. It's better to break than to be broken, am I right?

God, I'm fucked. I'm well and truly fucked.

It's only been a week since that night. The football team has an away game this weekend, and they left earlier today to head to Las Vegas, where they're playing UNLV. My apartment is empty. Lonely. I could sit at home alone and pout over Caleb, but where's the fun in that?

There's a knock at my door and I rush toward it, throwing it open to find Ellie and Hayden standing there. Ellie is carrying a bag full of takeout and Hayden has a tote bag that I know for a fact includes her blender and all the things she needs to make her margaritas.

"I've never been happier to see someone in my life." My gaze goes from Ellie to Hayden. "Two someones."

They smile and hold up their bags. "Let us in!"

I hold the door open and Hayden goes immediately to work on her drinks while Ellie pulls all the containers out of the bag and I grab plates and silverware. She brought Chinese takeout from one of our favorite places, and the fragrant smell fills the kitchen, making me hungry.

And I haven't been that hungry this week. Too upset over what Caleb might've heard. Worried about our impending doom. For the first time, I regret setting those wheels into motion. I'm not ready to end this.

Not even close.

“Gracie! Are you—are you crying?” Ellie yells at me over the whirring of the blender, sounding confused.

I blink, my vision blurry. Something slides down my face and I swipe at it.

A tear.

Shit.

I *am* crying.

The blender shuts off. Ellie abandons the takeout containers and I’m being surrounded by my friends, their arms coming around my waist from either side as they rest their heads on my shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” Hayden asks. She sounds scared.

“I-I don’t know.” A sob escapes me and I slap my hand over my mouth, trying to contain it.

But it’s no use. I am full-fledged crying, with tears pouring down my face and sobs wracking my body. I bend over, my hands braced on the kitchen counter and I stare at the floor, my vision swimming with unshed tears. My friends release their hold on me, though they remain at my side, Hayden running her hand up and down my back slowly.

“You’re scaring me,” Ellie finally says, her voice small.

“Tell us what’s wrong,” Hayden urges.

I swallow hard, my throat impossibly dry, though I guess all the moisture in my body is currently falling from my eyes so that makes sense. I tilt my head back and swipe at my eyes, gratefully taking the tissue Ellie offers me. I wipe my face and sniff, trying to find composure, but it’s so damn difficult.

“You never cry,” Ellie says, sounding distressed. “Like, ever, Gracie.”

“It’s true,” Hayden adds. “I’ve known you a long time. You’re not big on tears, my friend.”

I look at my friends, my head swiveling from Ellie to Hayden. “I think I broke Caleb’s heart.”

Ellie frowns. “What do you mean?”

But Hayden...understanding lights up her eyes. “That night at my place? When he overheard you say it won’t last much longer between you two?”

Nodding, I close my eyes for the briefest moment, my face crumpling like I can’t control myself. “He’s been so distant since that night. Like he threw up a wall I can’t climb over no matter how hard I try.”

“Have you talked to him about it?” Ellie asks gently.

I open my eyes and scoff. “No. We’re both not saying anything at all like the classic avoiders we truly are.”

A sigh escapes Hayden and she pats my back. “A simple conversation would fix this.”

“A simple conversation would ruin everything,” I insist. “We’ve been...playing at having a relationship. Playing house. Playing friends, playing lovers. We don’t have the guts to stick it out and make it actually work.”

“You really think Caleb couldn’t stick it out with you for the long term?”

I think of how great he’s been since that camping trip at the beach. Even before that, he treated me with respect. Reverence. Like a friend, but so much more. We were having so much fun, until I had to go and say something so flippant, as if he doesn’t matter to me.

Caleb matters. More than I want to admit.

“I’m the one who can’t stick,” I practically wail. “I fuck it up every time. I messed this up. He’s mad because he heard what I said, and I hurt him. Though he’s never admitted it to me.”

He doesn’t have to. I can see the hurt on his face. The distance that’s growing between us like a chasm, wider and wider, until we won’t be able to cross it anymore. It feels like we crested the mountain of this relationship we’ve entered and now we’re barreling downhill, heading straight for the bottom AKA the end.

Oh my God I'm thinking in analogies or metaphors or whatever. I'm ridiculous.

They console me with kind words and more tissues, eventually leaving me alone so they can finish their tasks. Ellie serves plates heaping with steaming hot Chinese food—chow mein and sweet and sour chicken and pork fried rice. My stomach growls despite my growing sadness and I settle in a chair, letting my friends serve me. Grateful that they came in my unknown time of need.

Hayden brings us salt-rimmed glasses full of frothy margaritas accompanied by neon pink straws. I immediately start sucking down the alcohol, wincing at the overwhelming taste of tequila flooding my mouth.

“You need it,” Hayden says as she watches me. “We’re going to have a hard conversation here in a minute.”

My stomach bottoms out and to fill it, I start shoving forkfuls of food into my mouth. It tastes amazing. Funny how I’ve always been one who could stress and stress, but never lose my appetite. I suppose it’s a gift, or a curse.

We eat and talk, me bracing myself for the verbal blow my friends are about to rain upon me. My thoughts are dramatic and over the top and I start to slow in my eating, the buzz of all that tequila a steady hum in my blood stream. Hayden and Ellie chat about nonsense and I interject here and there, but otherwise I’m not feeling it.

All I can think about is him.

Finally, Hayden sets her fork on her empty plate, sending a meaningful look in Ellie’s direction before she turns to look at me.

“I have an observation,” she states.

I frown. “What is it?”

“You mentioned earlier that you think you broke Caleb’s heart, but that’s not the case. I believe you are the one who’s heartbroken,” she says, her voice gentle.

I stare at her, blinking slowly. “No. That’s not possible.”

Hayden frowns. “Why not?”

“He’s the one who was always going to fall in love with me, not the other way around.” I don’t fall in love. Not really. I’m in love with the idea of love—chasing after it. That first rush. The first touch, glimpse, slow smile. The long stare, the laughter, the kiss. Touching. Teasing. Even sex, though that didn’t happen with every guy. I thrived on that high, and when it started to dissipate, I was out.

I never stuck around long enough to actually fall in love. I don’t even know what that’s supposed to feel like.

“Um, Gracie.” I turn to look at Ellie, who’s watching me with her dark, kind eyes, her lips curled up faintly in amusement. At me I guess, because I’m in full-blown denial? “I think Hayden’s right. You’re in love with Caleb.”

I sit there, pondering their words, my thoughts coated in tequila. No way am I in love. Am I?

I think of Caleb’s face and I smile.

I think of the silly, sometimes crude things he says to me and I want to laugh.

The way he touches me...sigh.

The way he looks at me.

Double sigh.

The easy conversations between us, and the consuming way he kisses me. How his eyes lit up when I painted his jersey number on my cheek at that one game. How possessive he’s been in bed lately, as if he’s trying to prove a point.

You belong to me. Those are the four words I think he is trying to convey every time he fucks me into oblivion, especially lately.

A shiver steals over me, remembering the last time we were together. The intensity in his gaze. The purpose behind his touch. He’ll never come right out and say it though. I’m sure he’s afraid I’ll reject him completely.

Realization dawns and I look up, staring at my friends in horror. “Oh God.”

Ellie reaches for me, resting her hand over mine. “What is it?”

“You’re right. You’re so right.” The tears threaten all over again and I clap my hands over my face, as if that will contain them. “I’m in love with Caleb.”

My heart hurts with the knowledge as I cry all over again. As if I never did in the first place. Hayden and Ellie make sympathetic noises but otherwise let me cry it out. This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever experienced in my life. And worse?

It hurts. It hurts so badly. I thought love was supposed to lift you up and fill you with light.

Right now, I’m plunged into darkness and worried I’ll never be happy again. How can that be love? It’s so damn painful, it’s excruciating.

“You need to tell him,” Ellie urges. “And soon.”

“He’s gone,” I mumble into my palms, slowly shaking my head.

“Let’s go see them,” Hayden suggests brightly.

I drop my hands and stare at her in disbelief. “They’re in Las Vegas. We have to work tomorrow.”

“We could drive over there. Once we get off work,” Hayden says.

I slowly shake my head, my tears drying up, as if they’re intrigued by the idea. “That will take forever.”

“We don’t have to drive,” Ellie says. “We could fly.”

“That will cost way too much money,” I say, thinking of the cost of a last-minute ticket to Vegas.

Ouch.

“No, it won’t,” Ellie says, whipping out her phone. “Let me see what I can do.”

She starts texting someone while we watch in silence. She's tapping away at the screen, the notifications coming in one after the other, the whooshing noise of a text coming through, sounding again and again. She wiggles in her seat, the phone in her hands suddenly ringing and she gets up to answer the call, walking away from the table.

"What is she up to?" I ask Hayden.

She shrugs. "I don't know, but listen to me, Gracie. I've known you a long time. I've seen you with other guys, and none of them meant as much to you as I can tell Caleb means right now. You guys have a real connection. It's always been there, from the very start."

"Well, we've done it," I say, sounding grouchy. "And now I think I've blown it."

"The problem is, you two are great at communicating with banter and arguing. I'm sure the sex between you two is explosive," she says, and I wonder where she's going with this.

I say nothing though. Sex between us *is* beyond explosive. It's freaking life-changing.

Ugh, listen to my thoughts. I'm so over the top.

"But when it comes to the hard stuff, like admitting your feelings? Being real and vulnerable in front of each other? I don't know how easy that is for you two," she says.

We've done it before, specifically when he took me to Pismo. We were on such a high after that trip, it felt like it could never end.

Real life sucks.

"You need to tell him," Hayden stresses. "Admit to him how you feel. Let him know that you didn't mean what you said when you were talking to us the other night. I'm guessing he's hurting right now, but he doesn't know how to express himself. Take that man out of his misery and tell him how much you love him."

“But...” I swallow hard, my throat raspy. “What if he doesn’t love me?”

“Oh please.” She actually laughs, which makes me glare at her. “He’s *totally* in love with you. Can’t you see it? And how he’s acting right now? All hurt and distant, yet still unable to keep his hands off of you? The boy is completely enamored of you. He doesn’t talk about other women, you know. Not anymore. Tony says he doesn’t even look at them. After games, there are all sorts of girls hanging around, eager to flirt and see what they can get. Or more like who they can get, yet none of them interest him.”

I’m quiet, thinking of how he acts now versus how he used to be. Horn dog Caleb. Chasing after every girl Caleb. King of the players Caleb.

It’s true. She’s right.

Oh God.

Maybe he does love me.

“Okay!” Ellie reenters the room, grinning. “I’ve put something together, and you two are going to love it.”

“What did you do?” I ask warily.

Ellie settles into her chair and takes a sip of her melted margarita. “Start packing—I arranged for us an all-expenses paid trip to Las Vegas! The plane leaves tomorrow at five. I found rooms for us at the Bellagio, and I also got us box seats at the game.”

My mouth falls open. “Um, how in the world did she do that in such a short amount of time?”

“What the hell, Ellie? How cool is this!” Hayden starts shimmying in her chair. “Oh my God, we get to party in Vegas!”

“Well, you guys can party. I’m still underage,” she reminds us.

Hayden stops her seat dancing. “What are you going to do then? We can’t party without you.”

“I’ll be with Jackson. That’s how I managed all this.” Her smile is back, bigger than ever. “The record label has a plane they use for artists. Jackson was able to get it for us. And the hotel has been dying to comp me some rooms as long as I post some photos and videos while I’m there on my social media.”

Holy wow. “Did you really just do all of that for me?” I ask, my voice squeaking.

“Yes,” Ellie says with a firm nod. “For you. You were always so good to me when I was having my problems with Jackson. You listened to me whine and cry, and you gave me good advice. Both of you did. You completely empowered me and reinforced my self-worth. It’s the least I can do for you.”

It’s like the faucet turns on after that. We’re all crying and laughing at the same time, overwhelmed with emotion. I have the best friends in the world.

The absolute best.

TWENTY-NINE

GRACIE

WE'RE FLYING to Las Vegas in a private jet.

A private. Jet.

Talk about extravagant...

Hayden and I met up after work with our overnight bags already packed and headed to the airport in her car. Ellie met us at the private hangar and we boarded the plane feeling like superstars to find Jackson already inside with a full spread of fruit and crackers and cheese and a variety of meats spread on a table before him. A bottle of champagne on ice waits for us too, along with four long-stemmed glasses.

The moment he spots us, he comes forward with his arms spread wide in greeting. "Ladies. Welcome to my lair."

"Oh my God, stop it," Ellie tells him with a grin, going straight to him. He wraps her up in his arms and lifts her off her feet, kissing her soundly. "Don't be such a show-off."

"We're all friends here. They won't judge me, right?" He releases his hold on Ellie and turns to Hayden and me, rubbing his hands together. "This ought to be a fun weekend. Have you told the guys you're coming?"

I furiously shake my head. "I don't want Caleb to know."

"I didn't say a word to Tony either," Hayden confirms.

"Perfect. It'll be a great surprise." Jackson glances over at me. "I hear you and Caleb are the real deal."

I nod, owning it. "We are."

At least, I hope so.

He smiles. “You two make a good couple. I’ve been predicting this for years.”

“You all have,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“It was all the arguing. You two seemed to get off on it,” he teases.

I’m not going to protest, because I’m pretty sure Jackson is right. They all are.

The flight to Las Vegas from Fresno takes just about an hour. We spend that hour talking and laughing, listening to Jackson chatter away, telling funny stories about their high school rivalry and what Eli used to do to work our boys into a frenzy. Everyone snacks and drinks plenty of champagne, with the exception of me.

I’m too nervous to eat—or drink. Worried over Caleb’s reaction at seeing me at his game. What if my being there makes him angry?

And will he even see me? UNLV’s home stadium is the same one that the Raiders use—meaning it’s huge. Massive. There will be so many people there tomorrow. The Bulldog fans love to travel for games, and Vegas is an easy flight over from Fresno, or a longer drive that many of them willingly make. I don’t want to meet up with him tonight either. I’m not ready for that conversation yet. Plus, I don’t want to get into his head the night before a game. He needs to stay focused.

Centered.

By the time we’re dropping our bags off in our rooms, I’m exhausted. But Jackson is having none of it. He whisks us off to a very expensive restaurant that’s in the hotel, where he proceeds to order practically every appetizer on the menu. He’s having the time of his life, surrounded by three women while wining and dining us. I can only laugh, swept up by his easy, charming attitude, my heart expanding every time I watch him and Ellie interact.

He is so in love with her. You can see it in his eyes, in his body language. He leans into her, always smiling, his blue eyes

trained on her. He can't keep his hands off of her either, and he presses his lips to her forehead. Her temple. Her cheek. Her lips.

He can't stop kissing her. It's as if he wants to consume her. But not in a bad, stalkerish way either. His gestures are sweet. Tender.

I think of Caleb. How sweet he'd been with me recently. Like a little boy looking to always please me. I loved that. It made me want to please him in return. Though he didn't act like a little boy behind closed doors. He was all man. Commanding and forceful and precise.

So precise.

As in, the man knows just what to do to make me come.

We're waiting for dessert—really, it's only Jackson waiting for dessert, the rest of us are absolutely stuffed—when my phone buzzes with a text notification.

From Caleb.

Caleb: **Hey.**

I stare at that one word, my heart in my throat. What does he want? Is it bad? Or is this a casual reach out, like no big deal?

I'm probably making something out of nothing.

Me: **Hey.**

The little gray dotted bubble pops up, indicating he's typing, and I wait in breathless anticipation for his reply. He takes forever, which makes my heart thump harder, scared over his response.

Caleb: **I miss you.**

Oh. My chest expands, and it feels as if a million butterflies were just released, spreading their colorful wings in the air. I breathe easier, and fighting a smile, I tap at the screen.

Me: **I miss you too.**

His response is immediate.

Caleb: **But I'm mad at you.**

My heart drops again and I blink back the sudden tears. Ugh, the crying really needs to stop. It's so annoying when I have to focus.

Focus on saving my relationship.

Me: **Why?**

Caleb: **What I heard you say to your friends. You have zero faith in me.**

Me: **More like I have zero faith in myself.**

He takes a while to respond to that, which leaves me anxious. The server has brought over the dessert—some chocolate cake, vanilla ice cream monstrosity that made Jackson burst out laughing when he saw it. He's currently spoon-feeding Ellie tiny bites and Hayden is working a spoon into the ice cream as well, doing a double take when she glances over at me.

“You okay?” she asks softly.

“Texting with Caleb,” I admit.

“Did you tell him where you're at?”

I slowly shake my head. She smiles slyly.

“He's going to flip.”

Yeah. And it might not be with happiness either. He might be angry that I showed up when he's ready to tell me to get lost because I shit all over him and our relationship. I can't blame him either. I didn't handle this right.

But how was I supposed to know how to handle it in the first place? I have no experience with a real relationship, with a man I love.

The words ring in my head. *I love.*

I love him.

I love Caleb.

A tiny smile plays upon my lips. At least the knowledge of my love for him doesn't send me running away screaming.

That's reassuring.

My phone buzzes and I check the new text from Caleb.

Caleb: Do you have zero faith in us?

I don't even pause in my response.

Me: I'm sorry that I hurt you.

Caleb: You didn't answer my question.

I ponder it for a moment, scared to reveal the truth.

Me: I want to.

Caleb: That's not good enough.

Oh God. If he breaks up with me right now, while I'm sitting in the middle of a busy restaurant in Las Vegas and about to make a grand gesture tomorrow...

I'll crawl back into my hotel room, shrivel up and die.

Me: I have faith in you.

The waiting is a killer. It's as if he's doing it on purpose, and maybe he is. I don't know. He's not one to play games. Caleb is one of the most straightforward people I know.

It's one of my favorite things about him.

That and his smile. The way he takes care of me. How loyal he is to his friends. How loyal he's become to me. How he may act like a dog with females, but he's always been respectful to his friends' girlfriends. He's a nice guy. He's a fun guy.

People don't give him enough credit. I used to not give him enough credit either, but that's all changed now.

Caleb: And I have faith in you. Isn't that enough to say we have faith in US?

I decide to be completely truthful.

Me: I wish I could see you right now.

Caleb: Me too. I wish you were in my bed.

My heart soars at seeing his words.

Me: Lonely?

Caleb: Always when you're not around.

“Are we almost ready to go?” Ellie calls, catching my attention. I glance up from my phone to find everyone at the table focused on me.

I put my phone back into my bag, smiling. “I’m ready.”

“You didn’t eat any dessert,” Jackson chastises.

I shrug. “Not hungry. Still full from dinner.”

Didn’t eat much of that either, but no one calls me out on it.

“Who were you texting?” Ellie asks, getting right to the point.

“Caleb,” I admit.

Ellie frowns. “Everything okay between you two?”

I slowly nod. “Actually, yes. He seems...content.”

She smiles and claps. “Yay!”

We take a private car back to the hotel and by the time I’m walking into my room, my phone starts buzzing with a FaceTime call.

From Caleb.

Shit.

I turn off all the lights and throw myself on the bed, grateful I shut the curtains on the windows before I left for dinner. The room is shrouded in darkness so he can’t see anything and by the time I answer the call, I’ve arranged myself on the bed so he can’t tell where I’m at.

Hopefully.

“Hi,” I say when I see his pretty face filling my screen.

“Hi.” He yawns, immediately covering his mouth, and I can tell he’s in bed. In some random hotel room in this very same city, which is frustrating. We’re so close, yet so far apart still.

“What are you up to?”

“Oh, nothing much,” I say, lying through my teeth, which makes me feel guilty.

“About to go to bed?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I admit, my voice soft. He’s bare chested and I drink him in with my greedy gaze, wishing I was with him. Touching him. “I’m tired.”

“Me too. We practiced hard today. I think they’re worried we’re going to lose.”

“Who’s worried?” I ask.

“Our coaches.” He scratches at his chest, his lips curled into a lazy smile. “You look pretty.”

My heart warms. “Caleb, do you hate me?”

He chuckles. “I could never hate you, G. My dick wants you too damn much all the time to ever hate you.”

I laugh too, though his words hurt a little. But I know what he’s doing. He’s cracking a joke and making it about sex between us. Too afraid to admit his real feelings, I guess.

I’m the one who’s going to have to go out on a limb and admit everything first.

Which is fine. I can totally do it.

Maybe?

Ugh, uncertainty is real and it is currently swamping me.

I decide to change the subject.

“Are you worried about the game tomorrow?”

“Nah, I feel really good about it, actually,” he answers.

“Really? That’s great.” Sometimes he can get worked up. Same with Eli. All that pissed-off testosterone in our little apartment can be a bit overwhelming at times, but I’m getting used to it.

“Yeah.” His voice softens, as does his expression. “I wish you were here.”

Oh, if he only knew. “I wish I was too.”

“When I get home Sunday, we need to talk.” He hesitates for only a moment. “About us.”

“I totally agree,” I say.

We just stare at each other on our phones, giddiness rising inside of me, telling me it's all going to be okay. I've got this.
I've got him.

THIRTY

CALEB

THE ROAR of the crowd is fucking unbelievable in this stadium. The first time we played UNLV, it was just after Allegiant Stadium opened, and I was just a freshman. I spent the entirety of that game on the bench, in awe of the giant crowd screaming for the Rebels—and for us.

Last year we played them on our home turf—and we barely kicked their asses.

Now, here we are back in their stadium, and I swear to God, the crowd is bigger. Louder. The space is buzzing with barely restrained anticipation, making me feel jumpy. Anxious.

“You can’t stop moving,” Tony chastises at one point, when I’m hopping up and down in one spot as we wait to run out onto the field.

“I can’t help it,” I complain. “Something about this game is making me antsy.” I jump up and down in place for emphasis, like I really can’t stop moving. Which is sort of the truth.

“Bro, you’re being ridiculous.” Diego shoves his way toward us, a scowl on his face. “Get serious. We’re about to play the game of our lives.”

“Isn’t that a bit much?” Tony asks, sounding amused.

“This game is pivotal for the season and you can’t deny it,” Diego points out.

“Oh yeah.” Tony instantly soberes up. “You’re right.”

We’ve been inconsistent this season. We show moments of glory, only to fall completely apart. The defensive line is

getting stronger, and the offensive line does a solid job of protecting our quarterback.

But our quarterback is also a little inconsistent. His emotions grab hold of him and send him into a downward spiral. He's contributed to a few losses, thanks to throwing too many interceptions, and those were games we should've won. Which means we must win this one in order to remain in the playoffs.

We have to.

And those fucking Rebels? Their team this season? They're good.

I'd even go so far as to say they're fucking excellent.

The assholes.

They're not really assholes, that's just my jealous streak talking. I want to go out with a bang. I want our team to be on top this season, and even fucking better next year. Our senior year. I want to be the best.

I know my friends feel the same way.

As we run onto the field, I take in the crowd. Thousands upon thousands of people are here, and not just hometown fans either. I see plenty of Bulldogs gear and the cheers for us are pretty damn loud.

My stomach cramps and I try to force the feeling away. For some reason I've got a raging case of nerves, and I don't get it. What's so different about this game versus any other I've played for the last twelve years of my life? Okay yeah, the youth football league is not nearly as stressful but still. I've done this a long ass time.

I need to chill and get myself together.

Once we're on the sidelines, my mind fills with images of Gracie. She instills calm in me, though the last few days I've been stressed the fuck out over our relationship. Talking to her last night helped. I got my feelings out—somewhat. And she was receptive. Seeing her face helped too.

I miss her. A lot. I wish she could've come to this game. It would feel good, knowing she was sitting up there, watching

me. Sending out all of those positive vibes just for me to catch and absorb. Sounds like a bunch of nonsense, but it's true. Knowing someone has faith in you makes you feel like you can conquer anything.

I try to channel that. Faith in myself. I focus on what our coaches are telling us. I watch Eli, who's grim, determined expression tells me his head is in the game. He's not acting stressed out or yelling at everyone, which is a positive sign.

Maybe it helped, having Ava around, even for a short period of time. He needs that girl more than anything else. It's like she recharges him.

We win the coin toss before the game starts and choose to kick. Meaning, we kick off and will be on defense. This also means I go out first, along with the rest of the defensive line.

Shi-it.

I run out onto the field and get into position, ready to block some weenie-ass Rebels. Once the ball is in the air, I'm running like a motherfucker, alternating between two dudes trying to block them. They curse at me as I turn, the ball spiraling straight toward us.

Holy shit, straight toward me.

The QB threw it too short, and the ball somehow lands in my hands. For a split second I don't move. It's as if I'm frozen, unsure of what to do next.

Until I hear one of my teammates scream, "RUN!"

I launch into gear, sprinting across the field, the ball tucked against my body. I'm running, my feet pounding on the ground, the announcers sounding excited as they call my number. My name. People are cheering me on. They're actually chanting my last name.

"Go Burke, go! Go Burke, go!"

I pick up my stride, chancing a glance over my shoulder. Two Rebels are charging after me and I face forward once more, gaining yardage, the end zone drawing closer and closer.

Until I'm crossing it. The nearby referee throws up his arms in the universal sign.

"Touchdown Bulldogs!"

Everyone comes running toward me, Eli leading the pack. He slaps the back of my helmet and pulls me in for a quick hug, screaming, "Fucking showoff!"

I grin. Laugh. I can't help it. I've never done something like that before. Made such a great play.

It feels fucking amazing.

And thank Christ for that first play interception because the Rebels give us a run for it the entire first half. For every touchdown we make, they do the same. Until they're actually leading us by one touchdown at the end of the second quarter.

Damn it.

"I can't even believe I'm saying this, but none of you—not a single one of you—are playing like shit," Coach announces in the locker room at halftime. "You're all bringing your best out onto that goddamn field. It's just that those damn Rebels are on their home turf and they're our equals. And right now, they're better than us."

We all sit quietly, dejected. Even after the most amazing play of my life—damn I hope my dad saw that—I feel down and out.

"So gather up some steam boys, and play your fucking hearts out during the second half. Show those Rebels what you've got. They play hard? You play harder. They run fast? You run faster. They hit you? You demolish them. And Bennett, throw that fucking ball as if your life depends on it. As if your girlfriend says she's going to quit sucking your dick forever if you don't win this fuckin' game," Coach says, his voice rising.

"You got it, Coach!" Eli yells amid a few chuckles.

"Burke!" Coach points at me and I sit up straighter. "That was a miracle run during that first play, kid. Nicely done. I'd ask you to do it again, but magic like that doesn't happen twice in a single game."

“Thanks,” I tell him, pleased as fuck. I never get called out for doing something good in the locker room. Or at practice. Hell, anytime. I’m just another grunt on the defensive line who blocks. I haven’t caught an interception since my junior year in high school.

Here I am four years later, doing it again my junior year in college.

“What the hell, man? That was awesome,” Diego says when he approaches me after Coach’s speech. “Sorry I gave you shit before the game started. You put all that nervous energy to good use.”

“Thanks, man.” We perform our usual elaborate handshake. Diego doesn’t hand out compliments easily. They have to be earned in his eyes, so it feels good, hearing his praise. And his apology. “I don’t even know how that happened.”

“Right place, right time,” Tony says as he comes up to us. “Lucky fucker.”

He says that last bit with a grin, making us laugh.

“More like fast fucker,” Eli adds when he joins us. “You set the tone for the game, bro.”

I get real serious, real quick. “I want to win this game.”

“Me too,” Diego says, his tone grim.

“We will,” Tony says with all that quiet confidence of his.

“Then let’s fucking do it!” Eli shouts.

We head back out onto the football field, the entire team quiet. Solemn. I sit out the first part of the third quarter, the defensive coach replacing me with someone else. A fast, big kid who’s a sophomore and not afraid to take a hit. They’re saving me up and letting me rest for a little bit longer. Coach is worried I burned myself out on that first play, but I am still a bundle of energy, my knee bouncing as I sit on the bench, making the entire thing rattle and earning glares from all my teammates sitting on the bench with me.

I leap to my feet and start pacing behind the bench, unable to stay still. I want back out on the field, but I’m also pleased we

kept them from scoring that go around. I offer up high fives to the defense as they all jog off the field, my heart in my throat as Eli and the rest of the offense run out and get into position.

Thank Christ, they score.

And we keep on scoring. Until we're in the lead by only one touchdown.

The back and forth is killing me—killing everyone in the stands too. Frustration ripples throughout the stadium, and I know everyone in this place just wants to win.

Including myself, of course.

When they finally let me back out onto the field, I'm ready. My blood is pumping hot, and I settle into position opposite the Rebels' offensive line, glaring at them from behind my helmet. They glare back, one of them sneering. Another one cursing at me under his breath.

I just grin. Bring on the hatred, boys. It'll just blind you to my fast moves.

I lunge for them, knocking heads, but I shake it off. We get back into position once again and this time, I run, trying my damndest to block so they don't catch the ball. I turn, my gaze on the sky, searching for the ball when I spot it.

Miracle of all miracles, it's heading straight for me.

The announcer sounds like he's having a coronary as he gives his play by play. I can hear the crowd screaming. One half wants me to catch it. The other half wants me to miss. I pick up the pace, the blood roaring in my ears as I put my hands out, ready to catch.

I'm going so damn fast, I trip over my own damn foot, my entire body leaning to the side. I right myself, turning so I can run backwards.

That's why I don't see it. I hear the warning of the crowd right before it happens.

Right before I plow into a Rebel who's coming for me headfirst.

And I'm plunged into darkness.

THIRTY-ONE

GRACIE

ALLEGIANT STADIUM IS HUGE. Gorgeous. Since the stadium is brand-new, everything is sleek and gleaming and beautiful. Black and white and silver everywhere, since this is also the Las Vegas Raiders' stadium and UNLV gets to play here.

I'm in awe as we walk through the stadium, past the shops and the restaurants and the one bar that looks like a freaking nightclub on the strip. I've been to Levi Stadium—my family is Niner fans, which means we are definitely not Raider fans—and I can't help but be impressed by how beautiful this place is.

The suite we're watching the game in is, of course, beautiful. I don't know how Jackson and Ellie managed to get us in here exactly, but I'm not asking any questions. Instead, I'm enjoying the food and drinks, talking with new people and staking out my seat to watch the game.

We're up high, above everyone else, and there are big screen TVs everywhere, but I want my eyes on that field. For some reason, I'm nervous about the game, and I never am. More like I get all amped up and enjoy cheering on Caleb and the rest of the team. They haven't had the best season, but they've held their own and Caleb has played a lot.

It's been fun to watch. Even more fun to know it's my man out there playing.

My skin grows warm and my heart expands. Look at me. My man. I'm obnoxious. But just in my thoughts so that's not so

bad.

“Best seats in the house,” Hayden proclaims as she settles into the chair right next to mine, both of us in the front row of seats, right in front of the suite’s wall to ceiling window.

“They’ve got better seats down there on the fifty-yard line,” Jackson says as he settles in next to me, a grin on his handsome face.

“I beg to differ,” Hayden says, her tone faintly snotty, not that she means anything by it. “I’m content sitting up here in the air-conditioned comforts of this lovely suite.”

“It’s pretty damn fancy, huh?” Jackson looks around before returning his gaze to us. “Your boys have a lot on the line today. They need this win.”

“Do you miss playing?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “A little. Sometimes. Mostly no. I play to different crowds now.”

“And you do it magnificently too,” Ellie says as she hands him a plate full of food. She settles into the empty seat next to his. “At least he can’t get hurt on stage.”

“Oh, I could get hurt,” he says, earning a dirty look from Ellie. “I could get electrocuted. I could trip and fall. Knock myself out.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. It’s riskier on the football field. So many injuries.”

Her dire tone instills a fear in me I’ve never felt before. She’s right. Football is a dangerous sport, and considering Caleb plays defense, he puts himself more at risk than a lot of other players.

I don’t like that.

At all.

I forget all about potential injuries when the game starts and Caleb intercepts the Rebels’ ball, running it in for a touchdown. I leap to my feet the moment he’s barreling down the field, that ball tucked against his side as he speeds across

the turf. Two Rebels trail after him but he's so fast, no way they can catch him.

"Go, baby, go!" I'm screaming, hopping up and down, Hayden right next to me. We hug when he gets the touchdown, and I swear to God, it feels like I just did that myself. "Did you see him?"

"He's amazing," Hayden readily agrees.

I'm on a fluffy cloud for the first half of the game. Despite the fact that the teams are so evenly matched and they keep up with each other's score, I'm not worried. I firmly believe our boys have got this.

I'm feeling even more confident midway through the third quarter. We're finally leading, and Caleb has yet to hit the field, which I'm okay with. They're either saving him for later, or they've determined he can't play any more for the rest of the game.

These are the moments that frustrate me. When I can't communicate with him and I don't know what's going on. I want to know why he isn't playing. Is he all right? Is he injured? Or is this no big deal and I'm making something out of nothing?

I lean in close to Jackson and ask, "Why aren't they playing Caleb?"

"They might be letting him rest. They're keeping up, and now we're in the lead, so whatever they're doing, it's working," Jackson explains.

"I just hope he's all right," I say, worry coursing through me.

"He's fine," Hayden reassures. "You know him. He's tough."

"Fearless," Jackson adds.

"That's what I'm afraid of," I mutter.

When I see number 78 run out onto the field, my heart seizes up and I lean forward in my seat. He's back in play. I bring my hand to my mouth and start chewing on my nails—a bad habit I quit years ago but only reappears when I'm super nervous.

Why am I nervous? This is no different than any other game I've watched this season, and I've never felt this way before. Is it because I know Caleb and I need to talk? Am I worried how he might react when he finds out I'm here?

Maybe...

He starts running, trying to block the other team, and I rise to my feet, my gaze trained on him and no one else. He turns, running backward, and all the air gathers in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I see the other guy just before it happens. Caleb leans right, his long body looking as if he's in mid-air.

Just before he collides with the other guy and they both crumple to the ground.

"Oh God!" I step forward, pressing my shaky fingers against the glass as I watch Caleb lying motionless on the field.

Hayden is immediately by my side, her hand on my shoulder as we both silently watch. The announcer says something, but it's garbled in my ears and the next thing I know, a coach is running out to check on Caleb, who is still lying there.

Not moving.

The other player sits up, and the crowd roars their approval.

"Looks like he's going to be all right," the announcer says.

I press my lips together, praying for my baby to be okay. He's so big. Larger than life with the personality to match. He always acts as if he's untouchable, doing reckless, crazy shit that's made my heart stop more than once.

Right now, it doesn't even feel as if my heart is beating. I'm completely still, my fingers pressed to the glass, my lungs frozen as I wait for some sign of life from Caleb.

Their coach is crouched on the ground next to him. Someone else from the coaching staff runs out onto the field to join him, and the announcer is talking about Caleb. Identifying who he is.

"Number seventy-eight also made that fantastic interception at the beginning of the first quarter. Caleb Burke has been with the Bulldogs for three seasons..."

I tune him out, watching as the coaches work over Caleb. Was he knocked unconscious? Is he awake? They're not moving him, which tells me they're afraid to in case of a head or spinal cord injury...

My heart lurches as if there's a chokehold on it and I part my lips, trying to speak, but no words are coming.

Oh God.

"He's going to be okay," Jackson says as he walks over to the window to stand beside me.

I turn to him blindly and he pulls me into his arms, offering me brief comfort. It's not the right man holding me, but Jackson will do for now. "Can you text or call someone?" I ask when I pull away from him. "Any of the coaching staff?"

"They don't usually pay attention to their phones during a game, but I can try. I have a couple of numbers still stored in my phone," he says.

All of a sudden, the crowd roars and I turn back to the window to see Caleb sitting up, his helmet off, his hair a disaster, sticking up everywhere. I rest my hand against my throat, struggling to breathe, tears springing to the corners of my eyes as I stare at him.

He's okay.

He's *okay*.

It all happens very quickly after Caleb sits up. A couple of referees join the small crowd gathered around him, and you can tell they're all talking to him. A doctor rushes out, carrying a bag with him and he pushes past them so he can solely concentrate on Caleb.

I wish I was out there with him. I wish I could give him comfort and say all the right things, but I'm stuck up here in a gorgeous suite with all the food and booze I could ever want, utterly helpless.

They fuss around him for a little bit but I can tell he's waving them off. Slowly, he stands, then lifts his arm in a wave, turning completely around so everyone can see him. There's a

smile on his face, I can tell even from this distance, and the announcer sounds excited as he says, “Looks like Burke is going to be all right!”

Everyone cheers.

He walks off the field unassisted and I sag into my seat, practically falling into it, closing my eyes against the emotion that threatens to overwhelm me.

“I knew something bad was going to happen,” I murmur to no one in particular. “I could feel it.”

“He’s fine,” Hayden says reassuringly. “He’s going to be fine.”

“If he’s walking and talking, he’s definitely going to be okay,” Jackson says firmly.

“At least you weren’t paying attention to the TV screens,” Ellie says with a mock shudder. “They kept showing the replay of when Caleb and that guy collided. It was kind of awful.”

Oh yes. Thank God I wasn’t watching. That probably would’ve sent me straight over the edge.

ONCE THE GAME IS OVER—AND holy shit they lost, talk about devastating—we all make our way down to the field. Or at least, we try to. Security refuses to let us on, despite my yelling at him that I’m Caleb Burke’s girlfriend.

“Oh, now you call yourself that,” Ellie teases when I turn away in frustration from the security guards.

“Shut up,” I tell her mildly, making her giggle.

It’s Jackson who gets us out there, with his usual charm and a casual mention of his name—which they all recognize. Oh, and that he used to play for the Bulldogs too. He slaps the security guards’ hands as they let us out onto the field, and I’m off like a shot, my gaze searching for him, hoping I can find him.

But the field is so big, and there are so many people. I spot Eli, looking dejected as he speaks with a reporter. I'm tempted to go comfort him. He's become a good friend. Living with him the past few months has brought us all closer, and I kind of love that guy.

He's not the one I'm looking for though. That's the guy I'm totally in love with.

Caleb.

I finally find him after long, agonizing minutes of searching. He's talking with a reporter as well. A cute blonde who's standing terribly close to him, her mic shoved in his face. He's got a faint smile on his face and weariness shows around his eyes. She's telling him he'll get the play of the week for her network, and he laughs, looking pleased.

I kind of want to rip her hair out, jealous shrew that I suddenly am.

She wraps up the interview but keeps talking to him, and I can see the way the light in his eyes dims. He's not interested, though she's clearly flirting with him. Straightening my shoulders, I head toward them, almost laughing when I see the double take Caleb gives me.

"Gracie?" he booms.

Deciding I can't hold back any longer, I run up to him and he grabs me in his arms, holding me close. Despite all the gear he's got on, I can feel him. Warm and solid and whole. I press my face against his chest, breathing in deep as I close my eyes. I forget where we are, forget the woman interviewing him and the crowd and the stadium and the game.

I'm just glad he's okay. Here in my arms.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, his mouth right at my temple.

"I wanted to surprise you." I pull away slightly so I can look into his eyes. There's so much joy there in the blue depths. He's genuinely happy to see me, which eases some of my tension. "But you surprised me instead. First with that interception, and then when you got hurt."

“That play was pretty fuckin’ epic, was it not?” He looks very, very pleased with himself.

“It was amazing,” I breathe, staring at him in wonder, so grateful that he’s whole, and not hurt.

He doesn’t say a word, but he stares, his gaze eating me up.

Just before he dips his head and kisses me in front of everybody.

“I didn’t like that hit you took,” I whisper against his seeking lips. “You scared me so bad.”

“Aw, G. Don’t worry.” He pulls away completely and spreads his arms out wide, grinning. “I’m fine.”

“You didn’t look fine earlier when you weren’t moving,” I remind him.

“I got knocked out cold for a second. Kind of a trip. Next thing I know, my eyes pop open and I can hear people chanting. They were chanting, right?” He frowns, as if he’s trying to remember.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t concentrate on anything else but you lying there. Not moving.” A shudder moves through me at the memory. “I hated that.”

“I’m fine.” He pulls me in for another reassuring kiss. “Promise.”

Jackson, Ellie and Hayden find us soon after, and Tony is with them. We all chat, everyone going on about the exciting game Caleb had today. The touchdown and the near injury. They didn’t let him play for the rest of the half for fear of a concussion, but he says he feels all right, he’s just tired.

I can tell. I see it written all over him.

“We’re flying home today,” he tells me at one point. “Our flight leaves in a couple of hours.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t win,” I murmur, meaning every word.

“Hey, I had the game of my fucking life today. I intercepted the ball and made a touchdown. Got my ass knocked out on

live TV, and I've got my girl." He slips his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. "I have no complaints."

I can't help but grin. "Neither do I."

Neither do I.

THIRTY-TWO

CALEB

IT'S HOURS LATER, long into the night, and I'm in my bed with Gracie, the both of us naked and tangled up in each other. We had sex, but I took it slow because my body is aching, and so is my head. The team doc says I have a mild concussion and I can't play for the next few days, which is fine by me. I still have to show up to practice though.

I'll just stand on the sidelines and encourage my boys.

Despite the epic game for me, I hate that we lost. Eli feels like shit. The Rebels were tough, we all told him this, but he's taking it personally. Just like he takes everything. The guy throws his entire being into something, and when he fails, it breaks his heart. Sometimes I think it's kind of hard, being him.

I'm glad I'm just me.

Other teams in our division lost as well this weekend, which means our chances for a playoff spot just got a bit easier, so this is a good thing. The only other bright spot in a kind of shitty day for the Bulldogs' football team.

Me? I've got bright spots all over the place. Life is good.

No, that's not a strong enough word. Life is fucking *excellent*. I may ache like a motherfucker, but I don't mind, thanks to the woman who is currently snuggled up close, her leg thrown over both of mine like she's trying to claim me.

She can claim me all she wants. I'm hers.

“I’m so glad you’re finally home,” she whispers, her lips moving against my chest tickling me. “And in one piece.”

“You just want to use me for sex,” I drawl, teasing her.

“Not true.” She lifts her head, and her gaze is serious, the color of her eyes a deep, dark green. “I was so scared when you got hurt, Caleb. And it was weird, but I felt like something bad was going to happen right before it, too. Like I was having a... premonition.”

Reaching out, I brush her hair away from her face, the silky strands sifting through my fingers. “I felt the same thing.”

Her mouth pops open. “Really?”

Nodding, I cup the back of her head and pull her in for a gentle kiss. “I’m okay though.”

I don’t want to dwell on it. What’s done is done. I’m all right. We can move on.

I’d rather focus on her. And us.

“I know you are.” She runs her hands up and down my chest, her fingers bringing my skin—and dick—to life. As usual. “Football is dangerous.”

“It’s safer than it used to be.”

“Sometimes you’re reckless.”

“You only live once.”

“Right. That’s why I need to tell you something.” She pulls away slightly, her gaze meeting mine once more. “I’m uh....”

My lips curl up in a closed-mouth smile. “You’re uhhh... what?”

Those gorgeous eyes of hers well up with tears. “I’m in love with you.”

“Aw babe.” I pull her back to me, my mouth on hers in a quick, devouring kiss. My heart is soaring at her admission, which makes me feel like a sentimental ass. “Why are you crying?”

“I thought I was going to, I don’t know, lose you earlier. This last week you were so distant because you heard what I said —”

“Why did you say that?” I interrupt, needing to know. “To the girls. It’s like you already expected us to be over. As if you weren’t ever really giving us a chance.”

“I’m not good at this relationship shit, you know this,” she says, vaguely defensive. “The moment I said it, I felt like an asshole.”

I don’t say anything. It was an asshole move, but she doesn’t need the reminder. Plus, she’s apologized for it once already.

I’m usually the asshole in these situations, so it feels kind of good, not being one for once. And I’d love another apology, in person this time.

“I’m sorry you had to hear me say those things,” she says, and from the shaky sound of her voice, she’s on the verge of tears. “And I’m sorry for ever uttering those words out loud. I love you, Caleb. I can’t even believe it, but I’m totally in love with you and I don’t know what I’d do without you. Witnessing you get hurt out on that field today was devastating. I...”

Her voice drifts and she is full-fledged crying. I gather her in my arms and offer her comfort by kissing her face and squeezing her tight. She cries for a moment, and I let her get the emotion out. It was an emotional day. It’s been an emotional week.

Thank Christ everything worked out in our favor.

Once she’s calmed down some, I decide it’s my turn to bare my soul to her.

“I’m in love with you too, G,” I admit softly as I drift my fingers up and down her back. “I know I’m kind of a fuck-up and I have no idea what I’m doing with my life, but as long as I’ve got you by my side, I’m pretty sure I can do anything I set my mind to. I need you. More than you will ever know.”

There are more tears, but I can tell they’re happy ones this time around. They still break my heart though and I do my best to kiss them away, my mouth always finding hers. We

kiss and kiss, overwhelmed with emotion, exhaustion, happiness. My hands start to wander as they do, and so do hers. She touches my cock, and of course, it's hard. Eager.

Ready to get back inside her.

"You should rest," she chastises, as she continues stroking me.

My eyes feel like they might cross because she keeps squeezing me. "Can't rest when you're touching me like that."

She sighs, her gaze sparkling. "Fine. Lie back, and I'll do all the work."

I do as she asks, my hands folded beneath my head as she races her mouth all over my chest, my stomach. The inside of my thighs. She licks at my balls and cradles them in the palm of her hand, holding me as if I'm something she cherishes.

I know I cherish her. She's the best fucking person I know.

When she wraps those tempting lips around the head of my dick, I hiss out a breath, losing myself for a few minutes to the sensation of her mouth and tongue working me into a frenzy. Within minutes, I'm ready to explode and she slows down. Releases me completely.

Only to climb on top of me, grab hold of the base of my erection and slowly sink herself onto me, until I fill her completely.

I arch into her, my hands settling on her hips as I guide her, help her maintain the rhythm. I'm not one to use corny expressions like making love. I am all about straight fucking.

But this moment right here is about as close as we can get to love. I'm so damn grateful for this woman.

Gracie rides me steadily, her hands braced on my chest as she works her hips. She's careful, keeping up the rhythm and always pushing me off when I try to exert power over her. She's watching out for me, probably still worried about me too, and I let her. I enjoy the shift of her body, and how she takes me deep. I savor the view of her tits bouncing, the look of pure pleasure crossing her pretty face. I'm a lucky man.

And I know it.

Within minutes her pussy clenches tight around my shaft and I close my eyes, a groan sounding low in my throat. I'm close again. It doesn't take much for us to come. And it always seems to get better between us too.

Will it always be like this? Probably not. There will be ups and downs and arguments and maybe even some resentment sometimes, but damn it, there's no other woman I want to do all of this with. I want to fight and love and laugh and just be with this girl.

For as long as she'll let me. If that's forever, then...

That's more than okay with me.

EPILOGUE

Gracie

Late Spring

“MISS HUGHES, MISS HUGHES!”

I laugh as my students rush toward me, surrounding me with their eager smiling faces. “What, what?” I ask them.

They’re all hyped because the end of school is drawing closer and closer, and they can feel it. The air becomes warmer and the days become longer. We start doing more school activities outside, and they love it. So do I. Being outside helps them burn off all the pent-up energy that keeps them restless throughout the day.

If I could bottle up little kid energy and sell it? I’d be a gazillionaire.

“We want to go outside!” one of the boys announces.

It’s near the end of the school day, and sometimes I let them sit in the grass and we take turns reading a story. Anything to feel the warm sun on their faces and the cool breeze stir their hair.

“Let’s go read then,” I tell them.

We pick out a couple of books and head outside, my class sitting in a circle in the grass. I stare at all of their faces as I read to them, my heart swelling with emotion. I swear to God I

always thought I was such a heartless bitch, but once I opened up this cold heart of mine to my man and my class?

Forget it, now I'm an emotional, weeping mess.

I'm starting to read another book when a couple of my students start getting antsy. They keep giggling and looking at the spot above my head. I pause in my reading, sending them a look.

"What's gotten into you guys?" I ask them, frowning.

They shake their heads, still giggling.

Big, warm hands suddenly cover my eyes, and I can smell him.

My boyfriend is here.

"Guess who?" he asks, his deep voice full of amusement.

"I have no idea," I say drolly.

"It's your boyfriend!" squeals one of the girls at the top of her lungs, making me wince.

Caleb drops his hands and presses a kiss to my cheek before he plops onto the grass next to me, sitting cross-legged like the kids. He's visited me a couple of times on campus lately, always stopping by the main office as is protocol, getting a visitor's pass and essentially charming the ladies that work there. They adore him.

So does my class.

A couple of the boys scoot closer to him and ask questions about football. I stop reading from the book and let the kids talk, knowing we only have a few minutes before the bell rings. I smile as I watch Caleb with the children, content. I am going to miss this class, and this school when I'm finished. I've been hunting for a permanent job and I found one that I haven't said yes to yet, but I really want to.

I need to talk to Caleb about it first.

Within a few minutes, I've got the kids rounded up and headed back to the classroom so they can gather their things, Caleb taking up the back of the line and steering them. The bell rings

and I lead them back out, delivering the kids to the bus and car pickup line while the rest of them go with another teacher to get picked up in person.

When I'm done with my after-school duties, I head back to the classroom to find Caleb sitting behind my desk, his hands resting on top of it.

"It's kind of hot that you're a teacher," he says, leaning back in my chair.

I let the door shut as I roll my eyes. "You say that a lot."

"I would've had mad fantasies about you if you were my teacher," he says with a faint smirk.

I laugh. "Please. Not at eight years old."

"I might've kissed the pillow at night pretending it was your lips," he teases.

Walking straight up to my desk, I lean in and drop a kiss on his smiling mouth. "You're weird."

"Just trying to keep it real." He glances around the classroom. "You going to miss this place?"

I nod, settling my butt on the edge of the desk. "Yes. I've really liked it here."

"Found a job yet?"

I'm surprised he's asking. It's been a bit of a sore subject between us. He's scared I'm going to leave the area, and I can't deny that I've applied to a few school districts that aren't close.

Hey, I had to keep my options open, though he'd rather I stay here.

I get it. I don't want to leave him either.

"I think I have," I say, keeping my voice light. Casual. "I wanted to discuss it with you first, though."

He frowns, those thick brows of his drawing together. "What did you want to talk about?"

“Well, I got a job offer as a second grade teacher.” I pause for only a moment. “In your old school district.”

His frown deepens. “Wait a minute...in my *hometown*?”

I nod, excitement bubbling up inside of me. “They’ve lost a lot of teachers lately, due to them retiring, and they were desperately in need. I applied and I got the job.”

“Which school?”

“Rivergold Elementary,” I tell him.

His frown completely disappears. “Where all the rich kids went?”

I burst out laughing. “Okay sure. Whatever.”

“Wait a minute.” He gets out of my chair and approaches me slowly, his steps careful, as is his gaze. “What are you saying right now?”

“I’m sticking around, Burke.” I’m smiling so hard my face hurts. “You’re stuck with my ass.”

“You’ll be teaching in the same area where I grew up, Gracie. Are you going to...what? Live up there? It’s an hour away from here,” he points out.

“Not at first. I thought maybe...I could live with you still. If you don’t mind,” I say with a shrug. “But eventually I’ll have to move up there.”

With you, is what I want to say, but I’m too scared.

Which is dumb because I love this man and he loves me, so why should I be scared? But I’m really going out on a limb here, taking a job in the same area he grew up. Looking like some sort of stalker, even though I doubt he actually thinks that.

Here’s the thing. As we’ve gotten closer, he takes me to his parents’ house. A lot. Especially once the football season ended. I really like his mom and dad, and the relationship that they have. They genuinely love each other, and they’re having a good time right now. Life is all right for the Burkes. They have no complaints.

And that...appeals to me. I don't need anything flashy. I just want to be happy.

Content.

"Gracie, what the fuck? Are you saying you want to have a mundane life and live in the sticks in some small house? Teach a bunch of brats while married to that one guy with the slight beer gut thanks to all those IPAs he drinks?" Caleb asks. He sounds serious, but I see the sparkle in his eyes.

He's giving me shit. And repeating back to me something he said a long time ago.

"Minus the beer gut, yes," I say simply, breaking out into a huge grin when he starts laughing.

"Okay then," he says, yanking me into his arms, his mouth finding mine just before he murmurs, "Deal."

Caleb

THE MOMENT GRACIE and I walk into our apartment, hand in hand and laughing, we come to an abrupt halt. Eli is pacing back and forth in the living room with a grim look on his face, his phone pressed against his ear as he yells into it.

"You're *really* going to do that? That's what you want? What about me and what I want?"

Gracie and I exchange looks, her eyes wide.

Shit.

This doesn't sound good.

Eli is quiet as he continues pacing, listening to whoever it is talking to him. His expression is grim, his lips thin and his eyes are blazing with emotion.

Mostly anger.

“Really,” he says mockingly. “An opportunity you can’t pass up? Fuck that, Ava. You promised me you would come home for the summer.”

Damn. He’s having a fight with Ava.

Gracie snags my hand and we squeeze past Eli to head for the short hallway. We dart into her bedroom and she’s about to close the door, but I quietly shake my head.

I feel like an asshole, but I want to listen to this argument, even if we only get one side. Why are they fighting? Yes, they argue, but I’ve never heard Eli sound so angry with Ava like this before.

We settle on the bed, Gracie sitting near the pillows while I sit at the end of the mattress, our bodies leaning toward the slightly open door. Swear to God, Gracie and I are so quiet, we can actually hear Ava yelling at Eli through the phone. I can’t make out exactly what she’s saying, but I can definitely hear her, and she sounds just as pissed as Eli.

“You have to make a choice,” he says, interrupting her. “You either come home for the summer, or you don’t. And if you don’t—”

He goes silent.

“What the hell is he doing?” Gracie whisper hisses at me.

I shrug. “I don’t know,” I whisper back.

“If you don’t come home this summer,” Eli continues, his voice eerily calm. “Then we’re done. Through.”

Oh fucking hell. We used to talk about this amongst the friend group back in the earlier days. About the two of them not lasting. Someone has to break up, am I right? We can’t all end up together forever. That’s just not how life works.

I just didn’t think Eli would be the one to try and end things in this situation.

“Yeah, I mean it,” he says, sounding downright hostile. “You’ve been pulling away from me for months and you know it. Prove to me you still love me, Ava. Come home after finals. If you don’t, I know where we stand.”

That's it. That's all he says. He must've ended the call. Now there's nothing but weighted silence out in the living room, and even in Gracie's room. We're still watching each other, both of us almost afraid to move until finally, I rise to my feet first.

"Uh hey, bro," I call, my voice tentative. "You okay out there?"

Eli comes stomping down the hall, pausing in the open doorway. "Did you hear that just now? She's going to leave me all summer."

Gracie sends him a sympathetic look. "Come on, Eli. You can't make ultimatums—"

"The fuck I can't," he says firmly, nodding over and over like he's a fucking bobblehead. "I just did. She always promised me her summers and breaks. That was part of the deal when she went away to college, and now she doesn't want to come home. She'd rather go to Europe instead for some sort of school shit. What the fuck?"

Eli starts pacing in Gracie's bedroom, which isn't that big and since she's still kind of a slob, he's kicking clothes aside while he does it, sending her a look of disgust. "You're a mess," he tells her, pointing.

"Hey, ease up." My voice is firm. Deep. He can be as pissed as he wants, but he's taking his anger out on my girl.

"Sorry." Eli glances over at me, running both of his hands through his hair and gripping the back of his neck. "I'm just... this is fucked up, what she's doing to me."

Always taking everything so damn personal. Typical Eli.

"Why does she want to go to Europe?" I ask him.

"She got accepted to some study abroad program, I don't know. If she goes, she'll be in Spain for eight weeks," Eli says bitterly.

"Eli. Come on," Gracie starts, her voice soft. Like she's speaking to a wild animal, trying to calm it. "This is probably an opportunity she couldn't pass up. You shouldn't—"

“Fuck that!” he roars, causing Gracie to press her back against the wall. I go to her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and pulling her into me. “She *promised*, damn it. She said she would always be there for me, just like I said I’d always be there for her, and now she’s bailing on me!”

“Sometimes things just...happen that are out of our control,” I say, keeping my voice even. Not that I think anything’s going to work on calming him down at the moment. He’s so torqued up he looks like he could breathe fire. “There are opportunities we can’t pass up. And maybe that’s what’s happening here.”

“What the fuck ever you want to call it, it’s not right,” Eli says, hanging his head. Damn, he looks sad now. And I’d rather see a pissed off Eli than a sad one. He glances up, his eyes blazing with fury. “Let’s see what she does. Let’s see where she goes. If she comes home to me, then that proves she still loves me. That I’m number one in her life. And if she goes to Spain...”

His voice drifts. I squeeze Gracie closer, thinking of our good news we were going to share, and how there’s no way I’m telling him now.

We’ll save it for later.

Eli clears his throat. “If she goes to Spain for the summer, then I’ll know.”

“You’ll know what?” Gracie whispers.

“That me and Ava are over. Finished.” He glances at me, then Gracie. “Done.”

YES! This means Eli Bennett is [The Senior](#)! What’s going to happen between Eli and Ava? Find out by preordering [The Senior](#), coming November 4th to Kindle Unlimited!

PLAYLIST

“Mr Rager” - Kid Cudi

“No Type” - Rae Sremmurd

“Strawberry Skies” - Kid Travis

“Dick” - StarBoi3, Doja Cat

“Traveling Alone” - Tom the Mail Man

“Cupid’s Chokehold” - Gym Class Heroes

“Knockin’ Boots” - Candyman

“Always Forever” - Cults

“Here If You Want (Pale Blue)” - MOSSS

Find the rest of The Junior playlist here: <https://spoti.fi/37ircmS>

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lets just get the hard part out of the way - I hope you weren't disappointed in Caleb's choice AKA my choice for Caleb. To me, they make complete sense. To have him with Baylee would've read too much like *The Sophomore* and I wanted to do something different. I wanted Caleb to work for it in a sense. To figure out what he wanted in a relationship - to realize he even wanted one in the first place. And Gracie needed to figure out some stuff too. Plus, they needed to be friends first. To respect each other before they could bang each other - ha HA.

Anyway...I love how this book turned out. Caleb is my favorite. Such a perv! Says and thinks whatever he wants! Reminds me of someone else I created who is...[The Senior](#). I'm sure y'all are mad at me for ending the book like that but DON'T WORRY. It's all going to be okay. Eventually.

Thank you to everyone at Valentine PR who make my life easier, especially Nina who holds my hand and tells me everything's going to be all right. Big thank you to Hang Le for designing these gorgeous covers. Thank you to Kevin Roldan for being a delight to work with and getting Wyatt to pose for a few photos for my book cover. Big, huge thank you to Rebecca and Sarah for slapping my book into shape, as well as Brittany and Serena for the excellent beta reads and notes. You are all the absolute BEST!

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I also need to give my daughter props because she's always sharing stories about her friends and their romantic entanglements and they are so good, y'all. Pure inspiration for current and future books!

p.s. - If you enjoyed this book, I would greatly appreciate it if you left a review on the retailer site you bought it from, or on Goodreads. Thank you so much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monica Murphy is a New York Times, USA Today and international bestselling author. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and has sold over two million copies worldwide. Both a traditionally published and independently published author, she writes young adult and new adult romance, as well as contemporary romance and women's fiction. She's also known as USA Today bestselling author Karen Erickson.



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