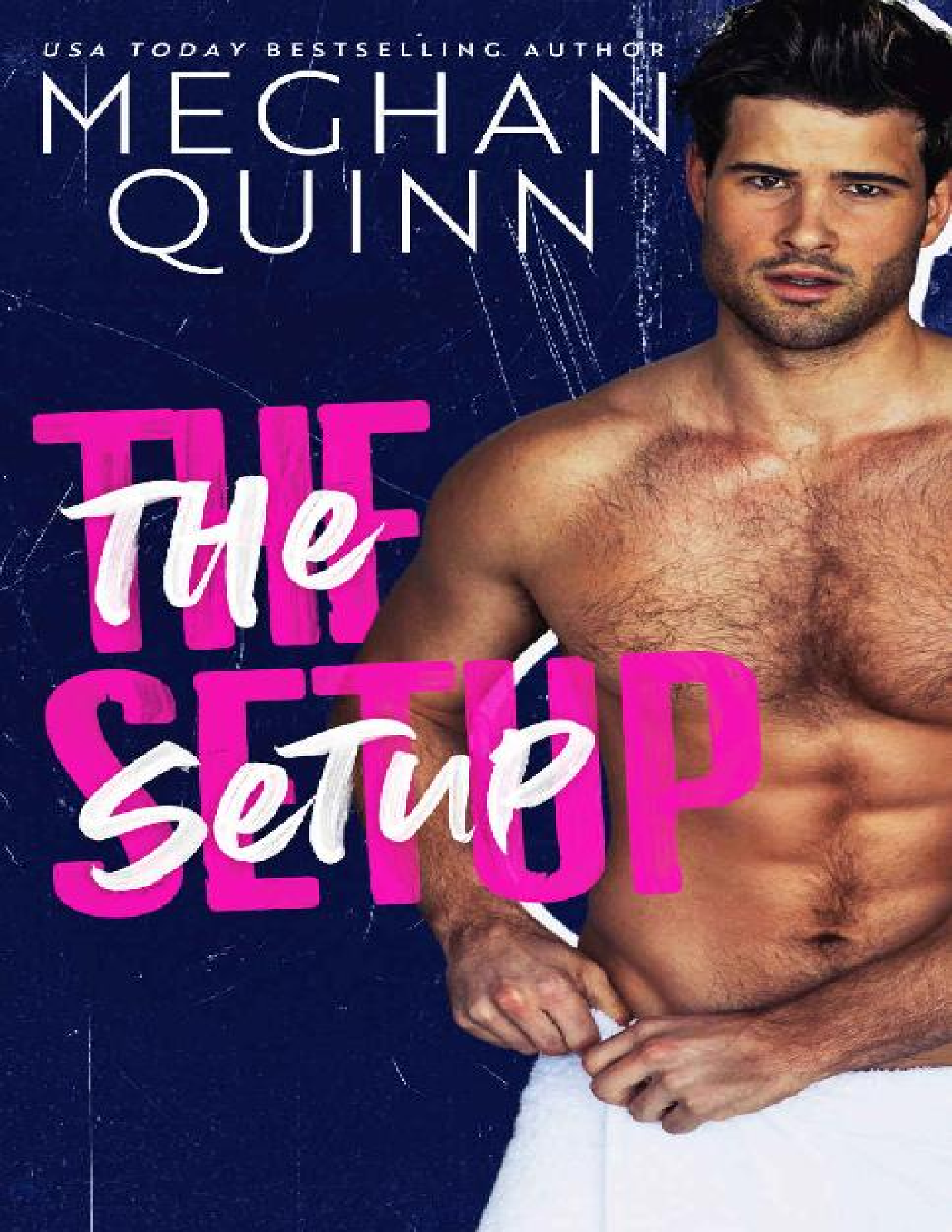


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
QUINN

THE
SETUP



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Prologue

LINCOLN

I've fallen victim to a heinous act.

An act so vile, so downright dirty, that I'm not sure . . .
as a son,
as a member of society,
as a twenty-year-old *man* . . . I will ever recover.

Ever.

I see the concern in your eyes, your hand wandering up your chest to clutch the collar of your sensible cotton shirt, scared to find out the truth.

Brace yourself against something sturdy, because what I'm about to tell you might just knock you back on your ass in horror.

Deep breaths, everyone

I've recently become the pawn of a meddling mom.

Yup, you read that right. A MEDDLING mom.

The bane of a son's existence.

I know what you're wondering . . . what did she do? Make me pick up my socks during summer break?

Eye-rolling

Woe is you

Grow up

You grow up!

Ehhh, that was a little harsh. But before you go and put your judgy face on, you need to know the difference between a nagging mom and a meddling mom.

A nagging mom is one who storms into the living room while you're trying to watch the series finale of *Game of Thrones*, complaining about the dishes in the sink you swore you'd take care of once you found out who took the throne.

Nag, nag, nag—part of the daily routine of the person who birthed you, or in this case, one of two moms who adopted me.

But a meddling mom, oh boy. They're a fresh kind of hell wrapped up in high-waisted leggings and muted tunics. This isn't some everyday mom who texts you GIFs of squirrels playing with a hula hoop. Nope, meddling moms have an agenda.

An agenda that they believe benefits their children. But it really benefits them . . . and only them.

In this case, my mom's agenda: get Lincoln to fall in love.

I understand it's not a crime for a mother to want her child to fall in love, but let me tell you. When she makes it her mission when you're home from college, it should be classified as a misdemeanor.

That's right, all freaking summer, my mom has made it her duty to set me up with girl after girl, all of whom she's met in our hometown Kalamazoo, Michigan. I'd like to say I'm exaggerating that she made a list *and* set me up with every eligible girl—one by one—but I'm not.

I saw the Excel spreadsheet on her computer.

Girls who were highlighted in red were a no-go.

Girls in green still had a fighting chance.

Girls in yellow? Apparently, I had lukewarm interaction with them, but they showed promise.

Why is she so desperate for me to fall head over heels?

Can you believe she's been spending time on the Internet, researching relationship statuses of major league baseball players? Well, she has. *Too much* time. And she said she didn't want me to end up forty, about to retire, with nothing to say for my life other than that I was able to throw a ball off a mound.

She also wants a girl to fawn over.

When my mothers were adopting, Mom hoped for a girl, but Mama hoped for a boy. Don't get me wrong, my mom loves me more than anything—hence the meddling and nagging—but she always wanted to do girly things with me, like have tea parties, get our toenails done, shit like that.

Side note: I've done the pedicure thing with her, and it's not that bad.

But she wants a daughter, and apparently, a daughter-in-law is the next best thing.

Which brings me back to my summer of “not love.” I wanted nothing to do with these girls and after my mom's eighth attempt to set me up—yes, eight—I told her enough was enough. I was done.

And thankfully she listened . . . until the last Saturday before I left for school.

The evil matriarch in the devil's leggings made her final stab at finding a girl for me.

And I hate to admit it, but she saved a doozy for last.

A fucking titan in black skinny jeans.

A boss of nonchalance.

And a girl who will not only turn my life upside down, but do it while juggling a soccer ball, looking effortlessly gorgeous, and is one hundred percent against relationships. *Of any sort.*

Thanks, Mom.

Thumbs up

Your meddling has made me absolutely miserable.

Chapter One

LINCOLN

“The party is going to be epic, dude. You have to come back.”

I slip on my jeans and button them up while the phone is on speaker. “My moms won’t let me go back early. You know that. Why do you even ask, man?”

Hartley Dashed, my best friend, sighs. “Can you tell them there’s some sort of sweetheart dance happening with a speed dating twist and you’re afraid if you don’t go, you’ll miss out on meeting the love of your life?”

It’s a solid attempt, knowing what my moms would like, but they’re not stupid.

Laughing, I say, “If only they’d fall for that. Sorry, man. I have plans with my mom. She wants to take me out one last time before I head to Brentwood on Monday.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“I’ll make it up to you when I return.”

“Are you talking *Frankie Donuts* making it up to me?”

Looking around my room, I see a white shirt draped over an armchair and pick it up. I give it a quick sniff. Clean. *Perfect*. I slip it over my head, find my cologne, and then give my chest a spritz. Got to smell good for my mom.

“Frankie Donuts with a coffee, while walking down the boardwalk hand in hand.”

“You won me over with hand in hand.” He sighs. “I’ll hold down the fort until you get here. Hurry home, sweetie,” Hartley says sarcastically.

“I will, shnookums.”

Laughing, we both hang up, and I slip on my white Adidas and head downstairs.

When I reach the kitchen, Mama is sitting at the table in front of her computer, glasses on, and a concentrated furrow to her brow.

“Everything okay?” I ask, catching a glimpse of the code on her computer. I’ll never understand how she grasps that shit. It’s all just a bunch of letters and numbers to me.

She leans back and presses her fingers to her temple. “The porn site I’m working on won’t search butt plugs, and I have no idea why. It’s frustrating.”

Oh, did I mention she takes on any job when it comes to website design? I mean . . . any job. Oh, and my mom, yeah, she does the graphics for Mama, making them quite the team.

The logo for this website is an erect dick, so helping them scour mockups for said dicks has been horrendous, to say the least.

“Look,” Mama says, switching over to the website where a man’s bouncing in front of a camera, holding his penis.

“Jesus . . . Christ.” I hold up my hand so I don’t have to see a random dick flapping around.

Ignoring me . . . and the penis—I guess an easy job for my lesbian mom—she clicks on the search feature and says, “I type in butt plug and when I press enter, we get butt play but no plugs, and I know there are plugs on this website. I tagged them.”

I run my hand over my forehead. “A real conundrum. But, uh, if you don’t need my assistance, I’m going to the car to wait for Mom.”

“No need to wait, I’m right here.” Mom appears, wearing leggings and a button-up black and red flannel with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Of course, she has the same shoes as me—which is normal at this point—and she’s wearing her signature red lipstick. “Look at our handsome boy. He’s so grown-up.”

Mom places a kiss on my cheek and then turns to Mama, who has her hand on her chin, deep in concentration, while the dick aerobics happen in

front of her. Not batting an eye, Mom bends down and kisses her on the lips. “I know you’ll be able to find the glitch, honey. You’ll soon bring butt plugs to all.”

Huffing and turning back to the code, Mama adjusts her glasses and studies the screen. “Thank you. Have fun, you two, and bring me home some potato skins. I’m going to need them after this.”

“As long as you don’t eat them while watching that man jiggle his penis,” I say.

“Oh honey, when we eat potato skins, we watch cock ring stimulation. Obviously.”

I throw up a little in my mouth, as both my moms laugh and then give each other one more kiss.

Mom takes me by the hand and leads me to the garage where she tosses me the keys. “Care to drive your old lady around?”

“Depends. This is just a date for you and me, right? No hidden agenda?”

We both get in the car and after she buckles up, she tilts her head and says, “This is my last night with you before you go back to Brentwood. Do you really think I’d forfeit it to another woman?”

“Yes.” I start the car and back out of the garage. “I really do, Mom.”

“Then you obviously don’t know me.” She turns away, and I swear I catch a glimpse of a smile on her lips.

This better not be a set up.



“THESE POTATO SKINS ARE POSITIVELY ORGASMIC.” Mom licks her fingers and moans.

I die slowly inside.

“Can you not do that shit, Mom? Jesus.”

“What?” She looks around, confused.

Leaning in and whispering, I say, “Call things orgasmic and then moaning.”

“Is that not appealing to you?” She laughs out loud.

Even though with me she’s massively inappropriate most of the time, I still soak up these moments with her. The sound of her laugh, so familiar that it feels like a warm blanket wrapped around me when I hear it. The

adoration in her eyes when she looks at me, a look so full of love I don't think I could ever do wrong. And that smile. I have so many pictures of that smile staring back at me, and it reminds me what happiness looks like.

"Not appealing."

"Such a shame."

"You know, if you really want to talk about that kind of stuff, I could talk to you about it. Give you a taste of your own medicine."

She rolls her eyes. "I've been working on a porn site with your mama for two months now, so I'm pretty sure anything you have in your arsenal is going to go in one ear and out the other."

"Maybe," I say, biting the corner of my lip, trying to think of anything shocking from my vanilla sex life.

Yeah . . . vanilla.

I didn't lose my virginity until I was a freshman in college. I was too goddamn scared of getting a girl pregnant, thanks to my mama who showed me videos of childbirth and made me walk around with a fake baby on the weekends. She thought it was a good form of birth control.

It was.

Until a girl touched my dick during my first week of college at a baseball loft party.

Yeah, one touch and I was done for. Two weeks later, I lost my virginity, came within a minute, and embarrassed myself completely.

Thanks, parents.

I then did all the research I could about sex. I read about clitoral stimulation, until I actually felt like I had a clit from the number of pictures I looked at.

After that, I was smoother with every encounter until I was known around campus for giving girls amazing orgasms. Yeah, sure, being known as the guy who delivers orgasms is great and all, but when I come, it feels . . . subpar. Like I'm missing something. I don't have that blackout moment, that toe-curling, I-might-die moment.

Concerned for the well-being of my penis, I asked Hartley if he'd ever come so hard, he blacked out. He said once, and then reassured me my dick wasn't broken, but maybe I hadn't found the *right* girl yet.

Which, of course, made things worse, given my mom's meddling, because all I could think about was . . . *does her vagina have the magical blackout powers?*

“Trying to think of something to scare me away?” Mom asks, smirking while finishing off the last potato skin.

“Is it pathetic that I can’t come up with anything?”

She laughs and pats my hand. “Just makes me love you even more. Don’t worry, Linc, you’ll lose your virginity someday.” When I give her a look, she laughs harder.

“I’ve had plenty of sexual encounters, thank you very much.”

Smirking over her drink, she says, “Maybe your problem is that you call them ‘sexual encounters’.”

I lean back in my chair and say, “Being roasted by my lesbian mom about using my penis isn’t boding well for my self-esteem.”

Mom throws her head back and lets out a wallop of a laugh, just as someone says, “Laura, is that you?”

Slowly, Mom focuses on a woman over my shoulder and the corners of her lips turn up. “Beth, how lovely to see you,” my mom says. “I didn’t know you were a Boondoggles kind of girl.”

A woman my mom’s age, wearing high-waisted mom jeans and a frilly blouse, comes up to the table and gives my mom a hug. “We can’t get enough of the potato skins. They’re what wet dreams are made of.”

Smiling even wider, my mom says, “I was just telling Lincoln here that they’re orgasmic.”

Jesus . . . Christ.

“Oh goodness, is this Lincoln?” Beth says, turning toward me. Because of our bar-height table, I come eye to eye with a very done-up lady. Brown hair curled and sprayed down with hairspray, purple metallic lipstick, and bright blue eyeshadow.

Whoa.

“Yes, this is my Lincoln. Lincoln, this is Beth, my hairdresser.”

Because I was raised right, I take her hand in mine and say, “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Oh, what manners . . . and look at these hands, they’re huge.”

Okay, this is uncomfortable.

“And who’s this lovely lady with you?” my mom asks, with a coy smile.

Oh

Sweet

Mother

Of

God

I know that look, that smile, that tone of voice.

I've seen that twinkle in her eye all summer. I've been subjected to that evil grin over eight dates. And that lilt in her voice, like she's about to do something purely *spontaneous*, but it's actually contrived to the very last second.

Yup . . . I'm about to be set up.

"This is my daughter, Indie."

I don't even look to my side. Why bother? Plus, I don't have it in me.

Instead, I press my forehead into my hand and rub it back and forth, feeling the tension move up my neck to the base of my skull where it starts a low thrumming beat, a thrumming I know will grow into exponential annoyance.

"Indie, how lovely to meet you. Your mom has told me so much about you. You play soccer at Brentwood, right?"

What?

I release my head and look to the side to see a slender frame. My eyes travel up her torso. Tight-fitting yellow shirt, medium-sized breasts, smooth, tan skin . . . clenched jaw.

Ha, I know that clench.

When I reach her face, I can practically feel the daggers coming out of her mossy-green eyes as Indie stares down her mom, her long brown ponytail swishing behind her. She's not wearing makeup, but she doesn't need to. She's gorgeous, and those lips . . . fuck, they're enticing. Plump and pouty.

Okay, I'll give it to my mom. Indie's hot.

But that doesn't mean I condone this type of behavior.

"I do play soccer," Indie says, arms folding over her chest, pulling down on the V of her collar, showing the smallest amount of cleavage.

The attitude in her voice is intriguing. Her mom notices it because she laughs nervously and says, "She just loves it at Brentwood. Hey Lincoln, don't you go to Brentwood as well?"

Would you look at that . . . two meddling moms. They should start a club.

"He does," my mom answers for me. "How crazy is that?"

And there it is . . .

The setup. The hook.

And how coincidental that my mom got her hair done the other day. Wonder what they talked about for two hours.

My guess is, *how can we get our two kids together before they go back to school?*

Played again . . . by my mom.

“Yeah, that’s so crazy,” I say through clenched teeth, giving my mom a look that she completely ignores.

“Lincoln, why don’t you go play some games with Indie while I talk to Beth? I meant to ask her something private while I was getting my hair done and completely forgot.”

“Why don’t you grab her number and call her instead of talking about the *private thing* in a public restaurant surrounded by arcade games and potato skins?” I try to give her my best *I will murder you tonight* look, but she’s unfazed.

She tosses the game card at me and says, “This isn’t phone-conversation material. It’s face-to-face stuff.”

“Isn’t it great that we have FaceTime now, so we can have face-to-face conversations without being in the same room?”

“Beth has an Android.” Mom shoos me away with her hand. “Now go on.”

Beth nearly scoots me off my seat and sets her purse and phone down—*her iPhone*—kicking me out, and without blinking an eye, starts gabbing with my mom.

It’s really disturbing how fast my mom had me on my feet. The lies.

So many effing lies.

Awkwardly, Indie and I stand off to the side together, staring at our moms who’ve put up some kind of invisible shield to block them from the world around them.

They laugh.

They use their hands to talk.

They ignore us completely.

On a sigh, I turn to Indie and say, “Do you want to play air hockey?”

She gives me a slow once-over, arms still crossed, and says, “Fine,” on a less than amused sigh.

Great.

“*This is my last night with you before you go back to Brentwood. Do you really think I’d forfeit it to another woman?*” Well played, Mom. Well

played.

This is going to be a fan-fucking-tastic night.

Chapter Two

INDIE

I don't think I've ever felt more hatred for a person than I do for my mom right now.

Harsh, I know, but you must understand where I'm coming from. It's been the summer from hell. I begged my parents to let me stay at Brentwood with my team. We were all going to get jobs, work at night, train during the day. We had it all planned out, but my mom demanded I come back home and spend one more summer with her and Dad.

Guess what this summer has consisted of?

My dad working on his computer wearing noise-cancelling headphones, writing top-secret computer programming he can't talk about, and my mom working at her salon, coming home most days to tell me about this boy I *have* to meet.

He has a 4.0 GPA, so he's super smart.

Okay, he might be shorter than you by two inches, but you don't wear heels very often.

Yes, he might smell like cheese, but look at your dad. He smells like cheese and I still married him.

It's been one guy after the other. Where she keeps finding them, I have no idea, but after she came home the other day saying she had someone

really special to introduce me to, I told her enough was enough.

I yelled at my mom.

And I never yell at her.

But I let loose. I asked her what her incessant need was to get me to meet a guy, and her answer? She said I have a stick up my ass and she wants me to loosen up.

Endearing, right?

You're in college. Have fun.

When was the last time you went on a date?

Have you even been on any dates?

Are you . . . still a virgin?

Newsflash: I don't tell my mom everything, can you tell?

And there's a reason.

We live just outside of Kalamazoo in a small town. Population—tiny enough to know everyone's business. And guess where the gossip mill hub is? The hair salon. Who has the megaphone up to their mouth, feeding all the gossipmongers? My mom.

Carl over at the gas station knew I got my period before my dad knew.

Marleen, who owns the coffee shop, congratulated me on my new bra size when I was a sophomore.

And Madame Baker, my French teacher, pulled me aside after class one day to ask if my dad's scrotum would be okay after he sat on a pen without realizing it.

Nothing has been off the table when it comes to my mom and what she says to her clients.

That's why she has no idea that yes, I've lost my virginity. Yes, I've been on dates. And contrary to what she might think, no, there isn't a stick up my ass.

Luckily, I've been at school for the past two weeks for intense mandatory conditioning, free of my mother, but Coach Wilson always gives us a few days off before school starts and my mom knows it. So she picked me up, and I've spent the last few days listening to her go on about my love life. Trust me, I can't wait to get back to school where Coach will run us into the ground with suicides and ball drills.

Thankfully, tomorrow we pack up and make the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Brentwood. Certain teams report to school early to start training, soccer is one of them . . . and baseball, another.

Did you think I had no idea who this kid is, standing uncomfortably next to me?

Ha, okay. He may not know who I am, but I sure as hell know who he is.

I would have to be living under a rock to not to know who Lincoln Castle is.

Not only is his face plastered all over campus, but he's best friends with Hartley Dasher, quarterback for the football team. They throw epic parties at their house that's split between football and baseball players, and they walk around campus as if they own every inch of it . . . which they practically do.

So it's not surprising that he doesn't know who I am, because honestly, the women's soccer team is a small blip on the Brentwood radar. Our paths don't cross unless I have the crazy notion of going to one of their parties, which has happened once in the two years I've attended Brentwood and ended with me head deep in the toilet from drinking far too much from their famous jungle juice barrel.

Need not repeat.

But of course, my mom somehow does his mom's hair and offered the ridiculous suggestion of getting us together. My mom hates Boondoggles; the arcade games are too loud for her, and she says it's crawling with germs because nothing is ever wiped down. So when she suggested we come here, I had my suspicions.

When we ran into one of her friends, suspicions increased.

And when her friend had a son my age, yeah . . . it was a setup.

"Do you want to play air hockey?" he asks.

Do we even have an option at this point? Our moms have completely cut us off and even if we attempt to interrupt their conversation, I know we'll be put in our place.

Twenty years old and still unable to make my own decisions.

On a sigh, I say, "Fine," and turn toward the arcade.

Lincoln falls in step with me and, being the outgoing, people-person that he is, says, "I'm Lincoln, in case you didn't get that."

I glance in his direction and catch a charming smile, the type of smile that pulls the attention of everyone around us . . . even the men.

"Indie," I say, and leave it at that.

"So, you play soccer at Brentwood?"

“Yup.”

“Cool, I play baseball.”

“Yeah, I know who you are.”

“Uh-oh. Why doesn’t that sound like a flattering ‘I know you,’ but more of an annoyed ‘I know you’?” He pulls on the back of his neck. “Did we . . . you know . . .”

I pause and snort. “Seriously? You don’t remember the girls you’ve slept with?”

“No. I mean . . . there have been occasional drunk nights.”

I snort and shake my head. “Trust me, Lincoln Castle, if we’d fooled around, you’d remember.” I snatch the game card from his hand and walk over to the air hockey table where I swipe the card, turning the machine on.

Air floats up from pinholes in the table, a cheap version of Jock Jams plays through the table speakers, as I grab my paddle and the puck.

Looking shy and not like the confident guy I’ve seen around campus he says, “I feel like a dick that you know me and I don’t know you.”

“I don’t know you personally. I just know *of* you. Kind of hard to go to Brentwood and not know every guy on the baseball team.”

“Yeah.” He looks to the side and says, “We don’t see much of the women’s soccer team.”

I grin at him and place the puck on the table. “It’s because we don’t tend to hang out with douchebags.” I cock back and hit the puck right down the middle, scoring a point before he’s even gripped his paddle correctly.

He blinks at me and then down at the goal. “I wasn’t ready.”

“Not my fault.” I shrug.

He bends down, grabs the puck from his slot, and places it on the table. He pins it to the table as he looks me in the eyes. “We’re not douchebags.” Then he whacks the puck off the side, but I track it perfectly and return the shot, bouncing off a bank and into his goal.

When he looks up at me surprised, I smirk.

“Did my mom bring me here so you could bust my balls?” He grabs the puck and sets it on the table. He whacks it up the middle this time, so I hit it back—barely missing the goal. It bounces off his paddle, right back at me, so I angle it better and score.

“I think she brought you here hoping for a love connection.”

Grumbling, he grabs the puck and says, “That’s going to blow up in her face.”

“Are you telling me you’re not instantly in love?” I roll my eyes, and we volley the puck back and forth until I shoot it down the middle into his goal.

“The only instant thing that’s happening right now is the blow to my pride.”

“Can’t handle losing to a girl?” I raise a brow at him.

He hits the puck and we go back and forth. He almost scores a few times, but then I double bank the puck and make it in. That was a little trickier.

“Can’t handle losing. Doesn’t matter what sexual organ you carry in your pants.”

We go back and forth a few more times, but once I hit seven goals, the table cheers, announces player one as the winner, and then turns off.

Lincoln tosses his paddle on the table and then grips the sides, staring me down. “How are you at basketball?”

“Want to find out?” I smirk.

“You know, I’m kind of scared you’re going to annihilate me at that too, but I’m too tempted to find a weakness at this point.”

I brush past him and head toward the basketball games. “It’s going to be difficult to find one.”

“Are you always this cocky?” he asks, catching up to me.

“Not cocky, Castle. Confident.” I wink and then slide the card through two machines, releasing the basketballs into the bin in front of us. “Want to play random?”

“Sure.” We both push the button for random and the clock counts down from three until it beeps for us to go.

In rapid-fire motion, we both shoot our basketballs. I don’t bother focusing on how he’s doing, even though I can hear his points dinging next to me. I focus on my basket, shooting ball after ball. I’m so in the zone that I lose track of time and when the buzzer sounds, I glance at my score of sixty-three and quickly look at his.

Sixty-three.

A tie.

“Fuck, are you serious?” Lincoln laughs, and lets out a heavy breath. He leans against the machine and sizes me up. “Rematch?”

“Obviously,” I answer, sliding the card through both slots again. “There is no tying in sports.”

“At least we have *that* in common.”



“YOU CROSSED THE LINE.”

“I did not cross the line,” I counter.

“Uh, I saw your toe cross the line.”

“You’re delusional.”

“You’re fucking cheating,” he shoots back.

I cross my arms over my chest and turn toward a sweaty Lincoln. “I do not cheat.”

“Maybe not intentionally, but I was watching your foot, and it crossed the line. The rules we created on this napkin”—he waves our rules napkin in front of my face—“it clearly states if you cross the line you’re immediately disqualified.”

“I know what the napkin says. I wrote it down.” I snatch the napkin from him. “But I didn’t cross the line.”

“Shall we review the footage?” Lincoln asks, holding up his phone now.

“You recorded me?”

“Of course I did. After I saw your foot inching forward during the first round, I knew I had to keep an eye on you.”

Not worried, I nod at his phone and say, “Sure, review the footage. It’s going to be really embarrassing when you’re wrong.”

“We’ll see about that.” He makes a show of typing in his password and pulling up the video. At this point in the night, I honestly wouldn’t expect anything less from him. After nine rounds of basketball, he was the winner. I took him down in Skee-Ball, and now at the football tossing game, he’s held the high score for the last three rounds, putting me behind.

When we reached the football game, Lincoln grew more serious than before, and he demanded we come up with rules to abide by, because according to him, I like to lean forward, bringing me closer to scoring. Can you tell the boy’s reaching? But I gave in to his demands and we wrote up a “contract,” one he apparently has memorized.

Coming up next to me, Lincoln holds his phone, which has a crack right down the middle, and I can’t help but notice how big his hands are. Long fingers, wide palms, hands that can handle a ball . . . and a woman.

“This might be embarrassing for you, so I want you to prepare yourself.”

I clear my throat and lean in closer, ignoring the masculine and earthy scent of his cologne. “Just play the damn thing.”

He chuckles and presses play. The video lights up with arcade sounds, but you don’t see anything but my feet. We both lean in closer, watching carefully, and just as the video starts to come to an end, clear as day, my foot passes over the line.

“Son of a—”

“Ah-ha!” Lincoln shouts. “I fucking told you.” He raises his hand over my head and points down at me, calling out to anyone who wants to listen. “Cheater, we have a cheat—” He stops and looks around. “Hey, where did our moms go?”

I turn and spot the table they had commandeered. It’s vacant. “Uh, they can’t possibly be playing games. My mom hates them.”

Lincoln looks around, his brow creasing in concern. He checks his pockets and says, “Well, my mom couldn’t have gone far, I have the keys to the car.”

“Let me text my mom,” I say, pulling my phone from my pocket.

Indie: *Where are you?*

I press send and almost immediately, my phone starts to ring.

“Hey Mom, where are you?”

Lincoln leans in, as if he’s trying to listen in on the conversation.

“Hey honey. Laura started to get a headache from the loud arcade games, so I took her home. We didn’t want to bother you two since you were having so much fun.”

“You left?” I ask, as Lincoln’s eyes grow wide.

“Well, yes, for Laura. Headaches can be a real cause of pain, Indie.”

“That’s great, Mom, but how do you expect me to get home?”

“Laura told me Lincoln is quite a responsible driver. I have the utmost confidence that he’ll be able to handle my girl. When you two are finished, have him drive you home. Okay, got to go. Love you.”

“You can’t be”—the phone goes dead—“serious,” I finish, lowering my phone and then looking at the ceiling in frustration.

Honestly, I’m not surprised. My mom has gone to great lengths before to get what she wants, but this? Leaving me at a restaurant? Now that’s a new level for her.

“So, your mom left?” Lincoln asks.

I pocket my phone and say, “Both our moms left.”

“Wait, my mom left too?”

I nod, lips pressed together, only to form a pop when I say, “Yup.” I point at him. “Your mom is the reason they left so early. Apparently, she’s been hit with a headache.”

Lincoln rolls his eyes and takes a seat on the football arcade game. He picks up one of the footballs I never got a chance to throw. “Yeah, I’m sure she’s really aching right now.” His head drops as he shakes it and laughs. “Monday can’t come soon enough.”

“Tell me about it. I wanted to stay in Chicago this summer, but my mom wouldn’t have it. She needed ‘one more summer with her girl’ as she put it. More like one more summer meddling in my life.”

“From the way tonight turned out, I’m going to assume you’ve had a similar summer to mine. Constantly being tricked into going out with someone?”

“Yup.” I lean against the arcade game as well, and our shoulders touch. “The worst date of them all was with the kid who works at the ice cream stand. Apparently, my mom thought he was my age. Turns out, he’s seventeen.”

“Oh shit.” Lincoln laughs, still tossing the football. My gaze travels to his forearm and hand. I watch as they flex and retract with every catch and throw. Wow, he really does have great hands. “So, what you’re telling me is that I’m not the worst date you’ve had this summer?”

“I wouldn’t qualify this as a date.”

“No?” He turns to face me. “What would we have to do to make this a date?”

His charming smile releases a wave of butterflies in my stomach, a feeling I don’t think I’ve ever felt when a guy has looked at me.

I’ve spent so much time training to be the best, to earn a full-ride scholarship from Brentwood, the premiere college in the country for sports, that I’ve never put any effort into dating, or men for that matter. They’ve just been a means to an end for me. When I’ve needed the adrenaline release, a moment to escape my busy schedule, I’ve hooked up. Some repeats, some one-night stands, but nothing of any substance, nothing that’s even remotely given me butterflies.

But that one look, that one lift of his lips, has my stomach twisting and turning, sending signals to my heart to stay away—stay so far away from this one. He’s trouble.

“So many things would have to happen for this to be a date,” I answer, standing from the arcade game. I toss the ball I’ve been holding at him and he catches it with ease. “Trust me, you don’t have it in you to make this a date, nor am I interested in it becoming one.”

He sets the balls down and stands. He must be at least six-two, if not taller. I’m not short by any means at five foot eight, but he towers over me, his broad, fit shoulders filling in all the space of his shirt, his bulging arms a product of the Brentwood weight room.

I get it.

I truly get why girls are always talking about Lincoln Castle. His picture is one thing, but his presence is a whole other weapon.

He’s confident in the way he carries his body. Flawless when it comes to his looks and style. Obviously, he’s outgoing and has no problem teasing and joking. Not to mention his body. It’s the work of God Himself, chiseled in all the right places. I can only imagine what he’d look like without a shirt.

But the thing that’s been eating away at me all night is his personality. Strong, bold, but then he whines when necessary, effectively playing the cute card. He’s . . . captivating and annoying at the same time.

“How do you know I can’t handle turning this into a date?”

I give him a smooth once-over, arms folded across my chest. “Have you ever taken a girl out?”

“I mean . . . yeah.”

“When you answer with a pause, then you haven’t. But it doesn’t matter, because I’m not interested in dating . . . anyone.”

“Why not?”

“Why don’t I want to date anyone?” I shift in my spot and hook my thumbs in my back pockets. For a split second, I catch his gaze dropping to my chest, but then it ricochets back to my eyes. Typical. “I don’t have time to date,” I answer. “Training and school are my number-one priorities. If I have time to relax, it usually consists of lying in bed, naked, watching disturbing jail documentaries on Netflix.”

“Naked?” he asks, his brow lifting. “You’re a naked sleeper?”

“Yup. I roll around way too much at night and my clothes get tangled. So, I sleep naked, sometimes in just underwear.”

He slowly nods, his eyes looking hazy.

Ugh, men.

Rolling my eyes, I turn away from him just as he calls out, “Where are you going?”

“Leaving.”

“How are you getting home?” he asks, catching up to me.

“You’re taking me home.”

“Who says I’m ready to leave?”

I look up at him and then grab his arm. “I do. Let’s go, Castle.”

Chapter Three

LINCOLN

I will not give my mom credit.

I WILL NOT give my mom credit.

Yeah, so I might have had a little bit of fun tonight. And I mean a little.

Indie is . . . hell, she's different.

Bossy.

Demanding.

Competitive.

Relentless.

Opinionated.

Annoyingly funny.

Pretty much unlike any girl I've ever met. Not to mention, the girl is hot, especially with her arms raised above her head as she jumped up and down, her tits jiggling in her shirt as she celebrates a win.

Between you and me, I might have let up a few times so I could watch her celebrate. Perverted? Maybe, but it was a damn good show.

I lost track of time playing arcade games with Indie. I didn't even notice our moms had gone, and I know . . . I just fucking know the minute I step into my house, my mom is going to give me the *I told you so* look, the one

that will haunt my dreams for months, because she succeeded. She finally succeeded in keeping my attention with a girl.

And not only did Indie keep my attention all night, she fucking commandeered it. She made it impossible for me to think about anything but our competition . . . *and her jiggling tits.*

I don't want to go home just yet. I don't want to face my mom's gloating. I don't want to see the look on her face, nor do I want to hear her giggle and squeal with excitement when I open the door.

That's why I'm pulling into a Sonic Drive-In.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Indie asks.

"I want a milkshake."

"You're supposed to be taking me home."

I roll down my window. "I realize that, but I want a milkshake. Therefore, I trump you because I'm the one driving." She huffs next to me and I pull out my wallet. "You can huff all you want, but we're not going anywhere until I get a milkshake. So, do you want to join me or not?"

She tilts her head, blinks, then looks out the windshield. "Oreo chocolate, please."

Smiling, I order for both of us and pay.

I open my car door and she quickly asks, "Where are you going?"

"It's one of the last days of summer in Michigan. I think we should take advantage of it." I get out of the SUV and open the tailgate, then pull out two camping chairs, which I take to the front of the SUV, just as our milkshakes arrive. I thank the carhop and nod for Indie to join me.

Unsurprisingly, she doesn't move at first. I've come to realize how stubborn she is, but then she exits the car and flops her body into the chair next to mine.

I hand her the milkshake and say, "You're welcome."

"Thank you," she mutters, and then we both sip and regard the wooded area behind the Sonic that's nestled between our homes.

"So, you went to . . . Carver High?" I ask.

"Yeah. I'm guessing you went to St. James?"

I nod and chuckle. "We grew up twenty minutes from each other and didn't run into one another until tonight."

"We've also gone to the same college for two years and play for the athletic department, yet this is the first time you've noticed me."

I swallow a chunk of Oreo and say, “Wow, bitter much? If you wanted my attention, babe, you should have asked for it.”

“Don’t call me babe, and you know damn well I don’t want your attention.”

“Actually, I don’t know that.” I take another sip. “I have no idea if this was a ruse. If I think about it, how convenient that I ended up meeting you right before we go back to school. Your mom just happened to do my mom’s hair, and then she just happened to leave so I have to take you home. Seems too convenient. How do I know you didn’t plan this? You even admitted to knowing who I am. For all I know, you could be a stalker; watched me all summer, took my mom captive, forced her to bring me to Boondoggles, and then stole me away for your own benefit.” On the inside, I’m cracking up. On the outside: deadpan.

She stares at me.

Blinks.

Stares.

And I wilt slightly under her gaze. The girl has a look, that’s for damn sure.

“If you really think that’s true, you’re more deranged than I thought.”

“Prove me wrong. Tell me it’s not true.”

“It’s not true,” she says without even batting an eye.

“How do I know?”

“Because.” She turns to me and smiles. “If I was truly seeking your attention, I’d have sat in your lap and stroked your ego, like every other girl who’s attempted to get your attention.”

“Ah, so you’ve observed me then.”

“Jesus . . .” she mutters under her breath, turning away. “You know what? It’s true, you got me,” she says in a monotone voice. “I planned out this entire thing. Watch out, my next move will be taking advantage of you in the back of your mom’s sensible Honda CR-V.”

“I knew it,” I say jokingly, as she shakes her head. “Can I suggest though, when you do take advantage of me, please know my nipples are quite sensitive, so go easy.”

She snorts and covers her mouth, then swallows hard. “Are your nipples really that sensitive?”

I puff out my chest. “See for yourself.”

She looks down at my pecs and then back up at me. “You want me to touch your nipple?”

“Don’t be shy. Give it a boop with your finger.” I show her an example of said *boop*. She doesn’t move. “I can lift my shirt so you can see it better.”

“I’m not touching your bare nipple.”

“It’s already excited at the prospect, see? Hard,” I say, flattening my shirt some more so she gets a better visual. “And it’s tingling.”

“I’m not touching it,” she says, going back to her milkshake.

“Don’t be shy. Touch it.”

“No.”

“Touch it.”

“No.”

“Give it the old touchy, touch, touch.”

“Get a life.”

“Touch it.”

“No.”

“Now.”

“No,” she says louder.

“It wants your fingers. Touch it, come on, just touch it. Touch it. Touch it. Touch it.”

“For the love of God,” she says, while flinging her arm to the side and running her fingers over my nipple. The moment her fingers connect with the hard peak, I let out a long, disgustingly sexual moan and tilt my head back. It takes everything in me not to laugh out loud as she retracts her hand quickly, shaking her fingers out.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

I can’t hold back anymore. I let out a rip of a laugh as she just stares at me.

Blankly.

When I settle down, I say, “That was fun.”

“You need help.”



“YOU KNOW, this is shaping up to be more of a date than you realize,” I say, pulling out of Sonic. We threw away our cups, packed up the chairs,

and set the GPS on my phone so I knew where to drop her off.

“This is not a date.”

“I don’t know, feels like it. We went to a restaurant—”

“We didn’t eat together.”

“But we still ate food,” I say, holding up my finger. “And then we played arcade games. I then bought us dessert, courtesy of my mom’s credit card.” She snorts. “And now I’m driving you home. Feels like a date to me. The only thing we have left to do is kiss.” I reach into the center console and pull out the ChapStick I know my mom keeps there, and start lining my lips, making a show of it.

She laughs. Loudly. “Do you honestly think I’m going to kiss you goodnight?”

“I mean . . . I bought you a milkshake . . . so . . .”

“You forced me to get a milkshake. And I was forced to accept a ride from you. This was not a date.”

“Should I ask Siri what the definition of a date is?”

“Why do you even care? You didn’t want to be set up by your mom, unless . . .” I stop at a red light and catch the large grin that stretches over her face. “Oh my God, you’re crushing on me.”

“What?” I say, louder than expected. “I’m not crushing on you.”

“Oh, you are soooooo crushing on me.” She points at my face. “You’re blushing.”

“It’s dark. You can’t even tell.”

“This all makes sense,” she says, starting to run with her absurd idea. “The relentless need to keep challenging me, the disappearance of our moms. You probably sent them a secret text, giving them a thumbs up to leave. And then you just so happened to want a milkshake, and now you’re puckering your lips, looking for a goodnight kiss. Oh yeah . . . you’re crushing.”

“Ha, you wish,” I reply lamely.

“I really don’t. It would be quite a nuisance if you crushed on me, actually. Because then you would follow me around campus, puppy-dog eyes begging me to pay you some attention. Knowing what little I know about you, you’re going to need attention. You seem very needy.”

“I’m not fucking needy.”

“Hmm.” I can feel her studying me and if I wasn’t driving right now, I’d study her right back. Return the same sass she’s shooting my way. “I’d like

to believe you aren't needy, but I did attend one of your parties, and I mean only one. And yes, I might have had too much jungle juice that night, but I distinctively remember you standing on the kitchen counter, shouting to everyone in the house that you were amazing."

I chuckle. "Did I flex my muscles?"

"In fact . . . you did."

I nod. "Sounds like something I'd do."

"And you said you're not a douchebag. Okay," she scoffs.

I rub my jaw while I turn right, down a residential road. "When alcohol is involved, we all have our douchebag moments."

"I'm glad you can admit that." She points to a house on the right. "The house with the red Mazda 3 in the driveway, that's me."

"I'm going to take a wild guess here and assume that's your car."

"Why would you guess that?" she asks, as I pull in next to it.

"Because, it has sass written all over it, just like you."

She removes her seatbelt and opens the car door. "That's Rita, and yes, she's mine." Once out of the car, she turns to face me. "Thanks for the ride."

I pucker up my lips. "Ready for you."

"Get a life." She shuts the door, but I roll down the window and call out to her.

"So, this is how the night's going to end? It's so anticlimactic."

Walking backwards, she says, "If you were expecting more, you clearly didn't learn anything about me tonight. See you around, Castle."

And then she takes off toward her door, leaving me with far too many unanswered questions and thoughts about her.

The scariest thought? I think I like that girl.



"TELL HIM."

"Tell me what?" Hartley asks, pulling me into a quick hug as he meets up with us in the kitchen of our house.

Freshman year, Hartley and I were roommates in the athletic dorm. We shared a suite with four other guys. Four football players, two baseball players. When I got my rooming assignment, I remember thinking Hartley's last name was familiar and then my mama made the connection. Hartley

Dashel is the son of the soon-to-be Football Hall of Famer, Mason Dashel. We, of course, went to our good friend the Internet to confirm, and sure enough, my new roommate was a prince of football royalty.

I had to play it cool, but when Mason Dashel showed up in our dorm room, carrying a minifridge, I nearly had a heart attack. Hartley let me have my fangirl moment, but after that, I was told I had to be cool. And I have been ever since.

We've also been inseparable since freshman year. When we had the chance to move off campus last year, we took it. We found a great six-bedroom house three blocks from Frankie Donuts and the boardwalk. We brought all the guys from our dorm and made it our own.

The four rules are simple:

Don't be a slob.

Don't be a bitch.

Pitch in for groceries.

Knock before entering any bedroom—for obvious reasons.

And we haven't had any problems.

Most of the baseball guys my age moved into the baseball loft, which I frequent, but when given the choice, I stuck with my boy, Hartley.

Mom pokes me in the arm and coos, "Tell him about the girl."

Yeah, you can imagine how the last few days have been. When I got home from the "date," I tried to slip in through the back door, but before I could even lock up, my mom was on my heels, asking me how it was, and if I could smell marriage in the air.

I gave her a pat on the head and walked up the stairs. She trailed after me, asking a million questions, but I didn't answer any of them. Instead, I kissed her cheek, told her I loved her, and then I went to bed, with thoughts of Indie's jiggling tits running around in my head.

The next morning, I received knowing looks. Mama made waffles with blueberries, my favorite, and when I sat down, there was a piece of paper next to my fork with a phone number on it.

Mom just smiled and said, "In case you wanted to call her."

I rolled my eyes and ate my waffles. When I got up, I shoved the stupid piece of paper in my shorts and went to take a shower. That night, I stared at the number for what felt like hours. I considered texting her but remembered how the night went. Yeah, she was teasing and joking a lot of the time, but I also got the sense that she honestly didn't have any interest in

me. It felt like she was forced to stay and hang out with me, and that didn't sit well.

So, I tossed my phone aside, picked up a book, and started reading.

"There's a girl?" Hartley asks, excited. "No way, man. Your mom finally made a match?"

"I did." Mom twiddles her fingers together. "And they're so cute together."

Mama unloads groceries, not paying attention to the conversation, probably still mentally applauding herself for figuring out the butt-plug debacle. Rest assured, people can search for butt plugs on that site now. Thank the high heavens.

"Mrs. Castle, what an accomplishment. I know how hard you've worked this summer." Hartley is such a kiss-ass.

"Countless hours," Mom says, playing up to Hartley's praise.

Interrupting their minor celebration, I say, "She did not find me a girl. She thinks she did, but she didn't."

Hartley's brow creases and he crosses his arms over his chest while leaning against the counter. "Mrs. Castle, were you just lying?" He shakes his head. "Do we need to go over the rules of the house again?"

Oh yeah. No lying. That's another rule, one Hartley strongly holds everyone accountable to.

"I'm not lying; there was a true connection. He had heart eyes."

"I did not have *heart* eyes," I say, picking up an apple from the bowl Mom just filled.

"Back me up, Michelle. He had heart eyes, didn't he?"

Mama's head pops up from the fridge. "I normally stay out of these things, but there might have been an extra bounce in his step."

"Mama," I say in a stern voice.

She gives me an apologetic smile and then returns to loading the fridge.

I turn to Hartley. "I didn't have heart eyes. It was a weird evening, that's all. Different."

"You actually went out on a date with a girl?"

"More like I was bamboozled into a date." I look sternly in Mom's direction.

Hartley holds his hands out and says, "Hold on, I'm getting confused. What the hell happened?"

Before my mom can chime in, I say, “Nothing. My mom tricked me into going to dinner with her, pawned me off to her hairdresser’s daughter, feigned a headache, and left me to take the girl home. Nothing happened. End of story.”

“Oh, that’s cold.” Hartley laughs. “The old switcheroo. I just gained a whole lot more respect for you, Mrs. Castle, if that’s even possible.”

“For the love of God, don’t encourage her.” I bite into my apple, trying to get the image of Indie out of my head. I’ve been doing pretty well, ignoring thoughts of her, but every time my mom brings the date up again, it takes a while to forget that night and how it was . . . unexpected.

By no means was it enchanting.

Or magical, like the cosmic forces brought us together.

It was just different. It’s the best way I can think to describe it.

“You’re not even going to tell Hartley who it is?” Mom asks, her smile practically tickling me from five feet away—that’s how wide it is.

“No, because it doesn’t matter. We have no plans to see each other again.”

“Oh wait, would I know her?” Hartley asks, looking far too excited.

“No, dude.” I shake my head.

“Indie Mayhem, she plays—”

“Soccer,” Hartley finishes for Mom. “Dude, you went out on a date with Mayhem? Damn, man. If I were you, I’d find out how I could see her again.”

Her last name is Mayhem? Sounds about right. That’s what the date felt like at times . . . mayhem.

“You know her?”

“Ah.” Hartley nods and then leans toward Mom. “You see, Mrs. Castle, our boy here is kind of a snob when it comes to knowing other people on campus. Since he’s in the elite circle of the baseball team, he doesn’t need to get to know the rest of the student athletes. Those of us in the trenches, you know, the rest of the athletes, all know each other.”

“I’m not a snob,” I say, even though I feel like that’s a lie. Hartley pins me with a look. “Okay, not a snob on purpose. I’m nice to people. But we train extra hours, and we don’t have a lot of time to hang out with other athletes.” Hartley gives me another look. “Parties don’t count.”

Mama’s head pops up from the fridge, where she’s squaring everything off perfectly so the labels are facing the right way. “At these parties, you’re

drinking . . .”

“Orange juice,” I answer, and Hartley gives me another pointed look about lying.

“What?” I shrug. “There’s orange juice in the jungle juice.”

Backing off, Hartley says, “You know I love you, man, but you’re not particularly in tune with the other teams, and that’s fine. I know you’re not being a dick, but if you were more aware, you’d know Indie Mayhem is untouchable. Many have tried to date her. All have failed.”

“Have you tried?”

Hartley shakes his head. “Nah, rejection would break my already suffering heart,” he says sarcastically, while clutching his chest.

“Would it bother you if he tried dating her?” Mom asks.

“No,” I answer quickly. “I told you, she doesn’t matter to me. You might have thought there was a love connection, but there wasn’t. It wouldn’t matter anyway, because I’m not about to date someone when the draft is coming up in spring. This could be my last year here.”

“Don’t remind me,” Hartley says. “It bruises my heart knowing I only get one more year washing our underwear together.”

“You wash your underwear together?” Mama asks, finally shutting the fridge and moving to the pantry.

“And we take turns folding.”

“Things you don’t have to admit to my moms,” I say with an eye roll.

Mom comes up to me and pats my chest. “You might think there’s no future with you and Indie, but my mom gut tells me differently. I saw the spark between you. I think your story is just beginning.”

She winks and takes off toward the front door, most likely to grab another box of groceries that we picked up at Costco.

Turning toward Mama, I say, “I think she’s starting to lose it.”

She smiles softly at me and says, “That, or you’re in some strong denial. Only time will tell.”

Chapter Four

INDIE

“I can’t feel my legs.” Scarlett hobbles next to me. “Those suicides yesterday broke me. Mentally and physically. I honestly think Coach Wilson is trying to murder us using our own bodies.”

I’m never one to complain about training, because I know with more pain, I’m doing something to gain the upper hand over my competition.

But . . . hell has descended upon the women’s soccer field this past week and oh my . . . Jesus, am I in pain.

“I think I put on pants today, but I honestly can’t tell as my legs are numb,” I say.

Scarlett, my best friend and partner in crime, the girl with the sickest bend in her kick I’ve ever seen, looks at my legs. “You’re good. You’re wearing leggings. Might feel like nothing, but you’re all covered up.”

“Thank God.” We both laugh then stop at the coffee kiosk right outside of our lecture hall.

“I’m so freaking excited you changed your major and we have some of the same classes now,” Scarlett says. “You can do all the studying for both of us.”

“How does that work?”

She shrugs. “You can teach me?”

Scarlett has struggled with school her entire life. She barely made it through her freshman year. She came to me sobbing after finals, admitting to having dyslexia. She thought she could handle the workload of a Brentwood education, but because of her grades, she brought down the team average, which put her scholarship in jeopardy. The next day, we went into Coach Wilson's office together, and I sat next to her while she explained everything to Coach.

Last year, Scarlett was on an individualized learning plan and to her surprise, she earned B's across the board.

I tap her leg with my foot. "You know I got you. Anything you need, I'll help you."

She smiles and shyly says, "That means a lot to me."

We step up to the coffee kiosk, pull out our meal-plan cards, and ask for two caramel macchiatos.

"I'll need to prepare you, there are a lot of athletes in our major."

"Why would I care about that?" I ask.

Scarlett rolls her eyes. "You are so oblivious."

"Oblivious to what?"

"Uh . . . how many guys want to get in your pants."

"Whatever." Our coffees are set off to the side and we each grab one.

"I'm serious. The famous Indie Mayhem is in a lot of guys' wet dreams."

"Ew, gross. Don't say things like that."

She laughs and links her arm through mine. "It's true. Do you know how many guys have asked me for your number?"

"One?" I deadpan.

"Oh sweetie, I wish. Little do you know, I've been cock-blocking for you for the past two years. They hear I'm roommates and best friends with Indie Mayhem and they soon become buddy-buddy with me, hoping for an in." How the hell I became this untouchable *legend* is beyond me. Scarlett's not normally one to exaggerate, but this is crazy. I've slept with guys. I've never seen her bat anyone away.

I shrug.

"Thank you . . . I guess?"

"You're welcome. But now that you're in the classes yourself, you can do all the batting away of penises. I'm retiring."

"Does your retirement come with a pension plan?"

“Not that I know of.” She chuckles.

“Then you were batting away penises for the wrong person.”

“Clearly.” She opens the door to the lecture hall and guides me toward one of the smaller classrooms in the right wing. “Just a heads-up: this is where most of your classes will be.”

“Cool.”

She opens the door to our classroom, and it’s much smaller than most of the lecture hall classes I’ve taken. But it still has a small auditorium feel too it. I’m glad to be back, ready for my new school year to begin.

When we walk in, a few heads turn, and then, “Indie Mayhem, no fucking way.”

Barreling toward me is a two-hundred-twenty-pound linebacker, so I brace for impact. Scarlett grabs my coffee just in time.

“Baby girl, when did you start taking these classes?” Rusty Goodall, my life skills partner from freshman year. It was our first class of our first semester in college, and we were paired up. He made that class so much fun and helped me close the gap between high school and college.

“Rusty.” I let him scoop me up into a bear hug. “It’s so good to see you. I just switched this year.”

“Hot damn. I’m going to need to see your schedule, because Papa is excited.” He sets me down and holds me out at shoulder distance. “Damn, you look good.”

“So do you.” I squeeze his bicep. “Did you lose weight and gain a whole bunch of muscles?”

He gives me a goofy grin and strokes his thick beard. “As a matter of fact, I did.”

“Ah, that’s my boy, getting ready for the draft next year, huh?”

“Got to make some money so I can buy my girl a ring.”

“Are you still with Chrissy?”

He nods and pulls out his phone to show me a picture of her. “Five years and going strong. She started an online weight loss consulting business. Girl is supporting me right now, but when I graduate, Papa will bring home the dough.”

“I have no doubt.” I give him another hug. “I’m so happy to see you. It’s been too long.”

“Far too long, because you probably don’t even know that my twin brother transferred here.”

“Really?”

“Yup.” He bops me on the nose and wiggles his brows. “I’ll have to introduce you two.”

Scarlett snorts next to me. I ignore her.

I’m about to answer when the professor walks into the lecture hall and puts his bag on the desk.

“Ooh, time to be scholarly.” Rusty gives me a wink and returns to his seat up front.

Never a front-row person, I sit in the back, just as Scarlett follows Rusty. Damn it.

I waver between going with her and not drawing attention to myself on the first day, so I take a seat and set my bag down.

“Hey there . . . *Mayhem*,” someone whispers next to me.

I know that voice.

Why do I know that voice?

I turn to my side just in time to catch the heart-melting grin of Lincoln Castle . . . sitting right next to me.

Crap.

“Welcome to Student Teaching. I’m your teacher, Professor Adams, and the people around you will be your student teachers. Please say hello to the person sitting next to you, because they will be your partner through this entire course.”

Double crap.



“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” I ask Lincoln as he gets up from his seat and starts to leave.

He looks around the classroom and then back down at me. “Uh, class is over. I’m leaving.”

“Don’t you think we should exchange numbers?”

“Oh damn, Castle. You’re scoring Mayhem’s number? Mind if I borrow it?” Jorge, a football player, says as he walks up to us, along with Rusty and Scarlett. “I’d love to take her out.”

Lincoln’s brow creases as he slips his backpack on. “Already have it.” He nods at me. “See you around.”

“How do you already have—” I don’t finish the rest of that sentence, knowing exactly where he got it from—the meddling moms.

“Want to hit up the student union with us?” Rusty asks. “I convinced Scarlett to pay for my lunch.”

Scarlett shrugs. “He was very convincing in his debate.”

I glance back at Lincoln, who is still heading out of the classroom and strangely, panic sets in.

I’m a good student. Always have been. It’s important to me, especially because when my soccer career is over, I plan on teaching kids myself. At least, that’s the idea for now. This class isn’t a joke to me and for some reason, I get the impression that it might be for Lincoln.

“Uh, I’ll meet you there. Save me a seat.”

Backpack slung over my shoulder, I quickly get up from my seat and chase after Lincoln. I don’t spot him until I walk outside the lecture hall and see him talking with Hartley Dashel and Asher Peppers, Lincoln’s teammate.

Great.

Just what I need, an audience. And not just an audience, but an audience consisting of the star quarterback of Brentwood and Lincoln’s best friend on his team.

Sucking it up, I go to them and feel the blaze of Asher’s and Hartley’s eyes on me when I step into their small circle. I tap Lincoln’s shoulder and he looks at me, then he smiles and reaches around to pull me into his side.

“Guys, do you know Indie?”

Hartley gives Lincoln a strange, questioning look and says, “Yeah, dude.”

Asher nods at me. “Hey Indie.” The shy one of the group, Asher looks down at his feet and plays with a rock. It’s an anomaly that Asher is friends with two of the most outgoing guys on campus, but I guess it works.

I push out of Lincoln’s hold and turn toward him. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of my besties.”

“Oh Jesus,” Hartley mumbles. “He’s in one of those moods.” Hartley places his hand on Asher’s chest as Lincoln and I stare each other down. “I think we should leave before the sparks flying between these two ignite. Catch you at home, Linc.”

They take off, leaving me alone with Lincoln and his smarmy smile. “Can’t seem to get enough of me today?”

“You’re disgustingly full of yourself,” I counter.

“Hey.” He holds his hands up in defense. “Where’s all this hostility coming from? I didn’t do anything to you.”

He’s right, he didn’t.

I almost wish he had, because being angry with him is a lot easier than being nice.

Looking off to the side, I say, “I’m just . . . irritated.”

“Well, let’s talk about it.” He takes me by the hand and moves me through the passing students to a bench under a giant oak tree. We both take a seat and then he faces me. “Go ahead.” He motions with his hand and I don’t know why, but the gesture irritates me even more.

“How can you be so . . . easygoing? Aren’t you annoyed?”

“What’s there to be annoyed about?” He looks up at the blue, cloudless sky. “It’s a beautiful day, school just started, the air is filled with that familiar freshly cut grass smell. It’s a great day.”

“I’m not annoyed about the day. About our situation.”

“What about it?” He drapes his arm over the back of the bench.

“You didn’t even know who I was, and now we’re partners in class.”

“Seems like kismet, doesn’t it?” He winks and I groan. I try to stand, but he pushes me back down on the seat. “Dude, lighten up. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal to me,” I whisper-yell. “I have no idea how you conduct yourself in the classroom, but I take my education very seriously. I don’t want to be partnered with someone who’s not going to help and will just use me for a free ride.”

His eyes narrow and his easygoing attitude vanishes. He sits up and sternly says, “I take my education very seriously too. I’ve been on the Dean’s List for the past two years, but you don’t hear about that, do you? You only hear about my partying and baseball life.” He looks me up and down. “Maybe don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Oh crap.

I bite my bottom lip and let out a slow breath. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Assumed wrong.”

“I did.” I nod. “I’m sorry. You bolted out of the classroom without talking about the assignments. I freaked out.”

He leans back on the bench again and says, "I told you I had your number."

"Yeah, but that could have meant anything."

"Well, let me put your mind at ease. I have your number, and I plan on texting you tonight to figure out what we should be doing for this week's assignment. Let me get through weightlifting and practice and then we can discuss." He lifts my chin up. "That work for you, Mayhem?"

I nod, feeling incredibly stupid.

He must sense it because he says, "I feel like we got off on the wrong foot somehow. You have a lot of anger toward me and I'm wondering why."

Because you're incredibly hot.

Because you're also really nice, and the combination of both those things is making me think things I shouldn't be thinking about.

But I don't say *that*. "I think I'm projecting my anger at my mom onto you. It was a rough summer. The whole setting me up *one last time* before I came back was incredibly irritating." I take a deep breath and look him in the eyes. "I did have a good time though; in case you hadn't gathered that."

He chuckles and reaches out to tug on my ponytail. "Despite what people might think, I'm not a dumb jock, and I can read people really well. I knew you had fun; you were just playing it cool." He claps his hands together and leans forward. "How about this, we start over. I'm an ass for not knowing who you were, and you were ungrateful for the milkshake." He flashes that smile. "Let's make a wash of it and start over . . . as friends."

I mull it over. "Friends with Lincoln Castle? I don't know. You seem a little high maintenance. The pathetic friend that needs his hand to be held."

"Hey, I'm not going to balk at the idea of you holding my hand."

I roll my eyes and stand. "If we're friends, you can't hit on me. I get enough of that from everyone else."

"Oh yeah?" He stands as well. "Like who? As your friend, I think it's important that I know who the horndogs are."

"I'll be sure to make a list for you."

I stand and start to back away, but he tugs on my hand and brings me into his chest. He wraps his large arms around me and gives me a brief hug before letting me go. "Have a good day, Indie."

I take a step back. "You too, Lincoln."

And then he takes off, giving a few people high fives on his way. I blink several times, trying to figure out what just happened. I am not a *hug it out* girl. In fact, it takes me a while to warm up to people. *But Lincoln Castle just hugged me.* And it was a *good* hug. Both arms. Snug into chest. Momentary happiness. Rare.

And I allowed that. *Sort of.*

Am I friends with Lincoln Castle now? I guess I could have worse friends. At least he's a good one to have at my side.



"I'M GOING to give you a helpful hint," Scarlett says, as I sit down with a steak salad and water. "Don't buy Rusty lunch, he will max out your meal plan."

Rusty laughs and says, "I didn't max it out." He winks at me. "I did make a good dent though." He pops open a bag of chips and offers them to those of us at the table.

"If I wasn't watching what I eat, I'd partake in those chips," Scarlett says, "since I bought them. But we're getting tested on the field soon and I want to be in the best shape possible."

At the start of every season, our endurance and agility are tested. It's a rigorous Saturday that kicks us all in the ass, but it gives Coach Wilson a good idea how we're doing physically, if we took the off-season seriously, and if we've earned the right to be a starter.

My freshman year, I threw up from nerves right before we went out on the field and overexerted myself trying to impress. When we got to the sprints, I was gassed and almost didn't make the time requirement. Last year, I paced myself and held the top spot with Scarlett. I've trained even harder this past summer and I feel prepared, but I'm right there with Scarlett, trying to fuel my body in the best way possible.

"You girls will do great, I know it," Rusty says, chips falling into his beard. "So, what's with you and Castle? Seems like there's something there."

Scarlett rests her chin on her hand and stares at me. "I was going to say the same thing."

I pop open my salad and skip the dressing, using my fork to pierce a chunk of steak and eating it. “We were set up on a date by our moms a few days before I left to come back. He didn’t know who I was, I knew exactly who he was. We played arcade games, our moms left us, he drove me home. Nothing happened. Nothing, so don’t even ask.”

“Wait.” Scarlett holds up her hand. “Your moms set you up?”

I nod. “Apparently, we grew up twenty minutes from each other but went to different schools. My mom does Lincoln’s mom’s hair. They thought it would be fun to secretly set us up.”

“And was it fun?” Scarlett asks.

I shrug. “It was okay. We were both pissed initially, because apparently both our moms have been trying to set us up with people all summer. And then it turned into a competitive thing. We just left it at: thanks for the ride, see you around.”

“And why didn’t you tell me this the minute you came back to school?” Scarlett asks.

Rusty’s eating his chips, looking back and forth between the two of us as if he’s watching his own movie.

“Didn’t think it was worth mentioning. Like I said, nothing happened. Just a random night.”

Rusty shakes his head and says, “I can’t believe he didn’t know who you were.”

“Typical baseball player at Brentwood. Stuck in their own world,” Scarlett says.

“Most of them are pretty good guys,” Rusty says. “I’m surprised about Lincoln, as he’s a really good guy. I would have thought he knew everyone.”

Well, not everyone.

“It’s fine. I really don’t care, because I’m not interested in him in other than as partners in student teaching.”

“You’re not interested in Lincoln Castle?” Rusty asks, his eyes wide. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard that sentence come out of a girl’s mouth. Hell, my good friend Amber on the basketball team, who’s a lesbian, said she would throw away her rainbow flag for a passionate night with the man.”

“Eh,” I say. “Not my type.”

“Oh, okay,” Scarlett scoffs and laughs.

“He’s not. I like . . . bigger guys. Meat on their bones.” I smile. “Like Rusty.”

He pats his muscular stomach with pride. “If you like this physique, I have an identical man I can match you up with. Mind you, he’s a little skinnier, more in shape, doesn’t have the burly beard, and doesn’t have the bear hug quite down yet, but he’s awesome. I think you two would hit it off.”

“Rusty, I’m not dating this year.”

“Who says you have to date?” He leans forward and whispers, “Just let him take you out to dinner and get a free meal out of it.”

I chuckle. “Wouldn’t that be leading him on?”

“The guy needs some more friends and you’re a sweet girl. I know if anything, he’d value your friendship. Give him a shot.”

I sigh and lean into my booth. “What’s his name?”

“Deacon. He just moved in with me and the boys.”

“Yeah, and where’s that?”

Rusty smiles brightly. “Hartley and Lincoln’s house, of course.”

Of course . . .

Chapter Five

LINCOLN

Hartley holds up his soda and says, “To our junior year.”

“To our junior year,” the boys all say together and then clink cans.

Every Wednesday, no matter what we’re doing, we always have a “family dinner.” Hartley got the idea last year when one Wednesday night we were all in the kitchen trying to figure out what to eat and he said, “Let’s make a family meal together.” And we did.

Ever since, we sit at our dining room table, which doubles as a drinking table when we throw a party, and we have a dinner together to decompress.

We lost two seniors from the football team last year, so this year, we have Hartley, me, my boy Asher, Hutton Marshal, a wide receiver on the football team, and Rusty and his brother, Deacon, who just made the football team as a linebacker.

It’s a good group of guys with zero drama, which is what we prefer.

“Dig in, boys,” Hartley says, passing the bowl of homemade sweet potato fries.

Tonight we made burgers on the grill with all the fixings, homemade fries, a salad, and Hutton cut up some watermelon, because he’s a master at it.

We go in a line, handing things off, loading our burgers, and filling our plates until there's barely anything left in the serving dishes.

I'm the first to dig in, going straight to the salad, because I'm the person who needs to eat their greens first to get those out of the way.

"First things first," Hartley announces from the head of the table. "Let's talk about our valleys for the day."

Just like Hartley's family did when he was growing up, he makes us talk about our peaks and valleys of the day, or week for that matter. At first, we grumbled about it, but now I find myself thinking throughout the week what a good peak and valley would be to bring to the table.

"Asher, you're up," Hartley says.

"Valley, uh . . . I asked a girl out and she turned me down."

"What?" I ask, confused. "First of all, you asked someone out?" Asher is painfully shy and to hear he asked someone out is shocking. "Secondly, who was it?"

"Well, technically, I asked her out for Barry on the lacrosse team."

"Why isn't Barry asking his own girls out, and why is he asking the shyest guy in the athletic department to do his dirty work?"

"We were doing a dead lift challenge, he maxed out more than me, and we made a bet. So I had to ask Charlize out for him. Backfired badly." Asher shrugs then picks up his burger and takes a huge bite.

Hutton's up next. "Deacon caught me jacking off in the shower." The boys all groan and Deacon buries his head in his hands. "Which reminds me, we need to add to the rules. Knock with bathrooms too."

Deacon goes next. "I saw Hutton's O face. Not sure I'll ever recover."

We all laugh and Rusty puts his hand on his identical twin brother's shoulder. "I caught Lincoln last year. Dude jerks it hard."

"Will you shut the fuck up with that? I told you I was almost at completion, okay? Christ."

Hartley looks around the table. "Am I the only one who knocks in this house?"

Asher raises his finger but says nothing as he bites his burger.

Rusty chimes in and says, "I split my pants yesterday in class when I sat in my seat. I sat through the whole class with a rip in my pants, trying to figure out how I could leave class undetected."

The table roars with laughter.

"What did you do?" Hutton asks, before plopping a fry in his mouth.

“Walked out of there with a split in my pants. There was no other option. I did consider buying the sweater off the girl next to me but realized it would barely cover one of my ass cheeks. It’s all those squats; my thighs are gigantic. Papa needs new pants.”

Once I’m done laughing, I say, “My valley would be . . .” I think about it, unable to come up with anything. I’ve had a pretty good few days. “Uh —”

“Shocking. Lincoln had a good week. Again,” Hutton says in a teasing tone.

“Oh, I know. I asked for skim milk in my coffee and they gave me whole.”

The table goes silent and then Rusty starts to slow clap. “Wow, you brave soul. How are you able to hold your head up right now?”

“Shut the fuck up.” I laugh, while Hartley takes the lead.

“Valley for me would be listening to Lincoln’s valley. I am positively devastated.”

“Whatever,” I say, while the guys all break out in laughter again.

“Peaks. Asher, go.”

“PR’d on the bench this week. Coach Disik was impressed.”

It’s a hard thing to impress our coach, so that’s a major peak. We all offer congratulations.

Hutton didn’t drop one ball at practice.

Deacon is taking some girl out this week.

Rusty found an egg roll at a secret kiosk near the events center that made him weep real man tears with how good it was.

When it comes to me, I say, “I have Thursdays and Fridays off classes, which means I get to sleep in tomorrow.”

Hartley says, “Make room in your bed for snuggles.”

“You know I got you, boo.”

“So, who’s the girl?” Hutton asks Deacon.

“Not sure. Rusty’s setting me up.”

All eyes turn to Rusty, who holds his hands in the air as if to block all incoming questions. “Don’t even ask. I don’t want to scare her away. But if you are wondering, yes, I’m playing matchmaker and I’ve got to say, it gives me life. Not as much life as the egg roll, but it gives me life.”

“Why aren’t you hooking us all up?” Hutton asks. “I feel like taking part in a relationship this year.”

“Are your whoring days over?” Hartley asks.

“Possibly, depends on the girl. Not all of us can be celibate like you, Dasher,” Hutton says to Hartley.

“Not celibate, just picky.”

Out of all the guys that have been in the house, Hartley and Asher are probably tied when it comes to who’s brought the least girls home.

I’m in the middle. Hutton has stuck his dick in more women than he can probably remember.

“What about you?” Deacon asks me. “Plan on bringing any girls home, Linc?” My mind immediately goes to Indie, and I fucking hate that it does.

I texted her the other night like I said I would and we planned out the assignment, but that was it. She was pretty cold, but I won’t hold it against her. I see the determination in her eyes; she doesn’t want to be distracted. She wants to train and do her schoolwork. There doesn’t seem to be very much else on her mind, which is fine with me because it’s not like I’m looking for anything else, either.

This could be my last year at Brentwood, which means I need to double down on my time in the cages working on my spin, in the weight room increasing my strength, and out on the field, building endurance.

“Nah,” I answer, popping a fry in my mouth. “I’m probably going the Hartley and Asher route this year.”

“Damn,” Hutton says. “Look at us being mature assholes.”

“You stuck an uncooked sweet potato fry in your nose in the kitchen,” Hartley points out. “I wouldn’t call yourself mature just yet.”

Hutton nods toward Rusty. “At least I didn’t split my pants in class.”

“Hey,” Rusty says. “It’s not like I let out a giant fart and the impact ripped my pants. My man thighs were too much for the fabric.”

I chuckle to myself and watch my boys go back and forth, ribbing each other, genuinely enjoying family dinner night. I’m going to miss these moments when I move on, so I cherish them now.



“PEPPS, HOLD UP,” I say hobbling up to Asher, using his nickname. I grip his shoulder and steady myself. “Carry me, man.”

“Carry yourself,” he says, shrugging out of my grasp. “I can barely hold up my own body.”

We walk out of the stadium to the parking lot. We drove together, because saving the earth is a pretty cool thing to do, and if we can carpool from the house, we will.

“What was with the weighted box jumps and burpee combo today?” I ask, as we both fall into his car and shut the doors. Asher doesn’t start the engine right away, but just stares back at the stadium.

“I don’t know, but that was brutal.”

“Did you see him smirking after we did twenty box jumps and he yelled fifty burpees?”

“Everyone saw it,” Asher says, starting his car. “Fine, make us do shit we hate, but don’t be a dick and smirk about it.” He pulls out of the parking lot and starts driving toward our house, which is no more than ten minutes from campus, six minutes if we don’t hit lights. “I knew it was going to be hard here, but I thought once I got to my junior year, I’d be used to it.” He shakes his head. “It’s not. I can’t wait to get drafted and move on.”

Asher has never been a fan of the college life. He doesn’t like parties, he doesn’t like all the attention he gets on campus, and he certainly doesn’t like it when Hutton walks drunkenly into Asher’s room with a girl, mistaking the door on the left for the door on the right.

As one of the best centerfielders I’ve ever seen, he’s ready to move to the majors and live his own life.

“You know the attention is only going to be magnified when you’re drafted and make it to the majors?”

“Yeah, but at least I’ll have my own place.”

“It’s not that bad, man.”

He sighs. “It’s not. But being at Brentwood feels like being in a fishbowl, you know? Everyone is always watching everything you’re doing on campus. I’m over it. Plus, fuck, I hate school.” He laughs. “I’m good at it, but I’m over it.”

“I feel you there. I know it’s important to get an education but . . .”

“Yup.”

We pull into our circular driveway and park. I grab my bags and we both head into the house where I set my shit down in the entry, and then walk toward the kitchen where I halt immediately. Asher runs into my back.

“Indie,” I say, surprised to see her at my house. “What are you doing here?”

She’s sitting on the kitchen island wearing a pair of black Adidas leggings and a sweater that’s hanging off her shoulder, showing a hot pink sports bra strap. Her hair is in its classic high ponytail, and she doesn’t have an ounce of makeup on.

She nods toward the fridge where Rusty pops his head up. “Rusty claimed he needed help with understanding elementary school student behaviors.”

“I do.”

“Uh-huh.” Indie rolls her eyes and hops off the counter. Rusty tosses her a water and she catches it with ease. “That’s why you keep talking about your brother, telling me he’s going to be home any second.”

“Can’t a guy talk about his brother and not get chastised about it?” Rusty asks.

“I told you, I’m not interested in dating anyone.”

“And I told you, free dinner.” Rusty gives her a pointed look.

Indie turns back to me, gives me a quick once-over and says, “Why are you standing like that, all bow-legged, like you’re not sure if you should sit or stand?”

Trying to clear my head of the whole Deacon and Indie thing—*was that who Deacon was talking about last night?*—I say, “Rough practice. Burpees and weighted box jumps.”

“Oof.” She squints and, in that moment, I realize something significant: I like that she can empathize with me. I like that she knows the pain I’m talking about. “That sounds like a nightmare. How many rounds?”

“Five,” I answer, while Asher quickly grabs a protein shake from the fridge and retreats to his bedroom.

“Five rounds? Damn, I think I’m having sympathy pains for you.”

I smile. “Look at you being kind to me.”

“You said you wanted to be friends.” She winks. “I’m nice to my friends, right, Rusty?”

“The best.” He rubs his chin and says, “You know, while we wait for Deacon, maybe we should go—” His phone rings, and he checks the screen, smiling like a doof. “It’s Chrissy. Do you mind if I take this?”

“Go ahead,” Indie says.

Once Rusty is upstairs, I work my way around the kitchen and say, “So, a date huh? Thought you were against those.”

“I am, but I’m assuming you know Rusty. He doesn’t take no for an answer. Figured I’d meet Deacon, give him a pat on the shoulder, and tell him I’m not interested in starting anything.”

I go to the sink where I rinse out the Tupperware container from the lunch I took with me to campus. Since I didn’t have classes today, I spent the entire day between practicing and weights studying in the library. When I have long days on campus, I always make sure to take food with me.

“So, when you’re done with your days, you’re sleeping in bed naked, by yourself?”

Don’t ask where the question came from or why I asked it, but there it is, out in the open, collecting all the awkward points that it can.

She makes her way around the island and lifts herself onto the counter next to the sink. “Are you asking if I’m banging anyone, Lincoln?”

Christ, she’s direct. Although, I don’t know why I’m surprised, as she’s been nothing but direct with me since I met her.

Laughing awkwardly, I say, “Honestly, I have no idea where that question came from.”

“I do.” She crosses one long, toned leg over the other. “You tried to deny it, but I know your infatuation. It’s getting stronger, isn’t it?”

My eyes practically roll out of their sockets. “Please. I think we both know why you’re here. It’s all under the guise of meeting Rusty’s brother but truthfully, you want to catch another glimpse of me, in my natural habitat, where I kick my feet up and relax.”

“Ah, yes, you got me,” she says sarcastically. “I had Rusty drive me over here just so I could see you walk around your house in sweaty ankle socks.”

I glance down at my feet and then back up at her. “How do you know they’re sweaty?”

“If they’re not sweaty, then you clearly didn’t do five rounds of burpees and weighted box jumps.”

“Observant.” I point at her and pull out a prepared meal I have delivered to the house. Three meals a week makes dinners easy for me, especially during the season. “But I’m glad you can admit your need to see me; it will behoove you to make such admissions.”

“It will *behoove* me?”

“Yeah, makes life easier when you can admit to your feelings rather than bottling them all up inside.”

“Like you are.”

“I’m not bottling up anything.” I put my meal in the microwave and start it. I turn toward her and brace myself against the counter. I catch her eyes briefly take in the way my shirt pulls across my pecs, before her eyes shoot back up to mine. “Like what you see?”

Not faltering, she plainly says, “Your nipples are hard.”

I glance at them. “It’s because they’re remembering the way you touched them when we shared an evening out with milkshakes.”

“Well, I hope they know that was a one-and-done thing.”

I wink. “Never say never.”

The microwave beeps and I pull my meal out and plop it onto a plate before grabbing a fork. I set my plate on the island, lean down on one forearm, and start moving the food around, allowing the steam to billow up.

“That smells disgusting,” she says.

“Wow, that’s rude.” I laugh.

She shrugs. “It does. What is it?”

“Uh, some uber healthy Brussels sprouts dish with steak.”

She pinches the collar of her shirt and pulls it over her nose. “You can really smell the Brussels sprouts.”

I fork one, bring it to my lips and blow on it, then pop it in my mouth only to spit it back onto my plate and quickly reach for my water. “Oh, fuck that’s hot.”

Indie laughs loud enough that it reverberates against the oak kitchen cabinets. “That was so revolting. If I had even the slightest crush on you—which I don’t—that would have extinguished the flame quickly.”

“Wait.” I look around and lean in toward her. “Are you telling me spitting food back out onto your plate isn’t sexy?”

“Afraid not.”

“Such a shame.” I blow on another Brussels sprout, this time taking a little longer, and then I chew on it. I hold my plate out to her and say, “Want a bite?”

She holds her hand up and cringes. “I’m good, really.”

“Your loss.” I smile and continue to dig in. When silence falls between us, I wrack my brain for anything to say, but all I can think about is how she’s sitting in my kitchen, waiting to meet another guy. And for some

reason, that feels weird. “So, Deacon, huh?” I say, feeling like a moron even mentioning it.

“Am I detecting a hint of jealousy?”

“No, just trying to make conversation.” I wipe my mouth with a napkin and stand tall. “If you’re thinking identical twin to Rusty, getting a burly guy, you’re going to be sorely mistaken. He’s more ripped.”

“Oh no, really?” Indie places her hand on her heart. “What a travesty. I don’t know if I can go through with this. A ripped guy who plays football, what did I get myself into?”

I cut a piece of meat and say, “I can see your sarcasm is on point today.”

“I dusted it off last night in case I ran into you today. Thankfully, I did. I wouldn’t want to go to all that trouble for nothing.”

“You’re such a smartass.”

She smiles brightly. “I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Just at that moment, Rusty walks back into the kitchen and says, “Sorry. Deacon called me while I was on the phone with Chrissy. Coach is making him stay longer at study hall since he’s a transfer. He won’t be back for a while.”

“What a shame. No awkward encounter forced by a brother,” Indie says, making me snort into my food.

Rusty lets out a hearty laugh. “Free dinner, Indie. Keep thinking free dinner.”

She pats the big guy’s belly and says, “Not ruled by food, buddy. You should know that. Anyway, I should get back to my house. We have testing on Saturday. I need to get as much sleep as possible beforehand so I’m refreshed and ready.”

“Okay, give me a few and I’ll take you. I just have to call Chrissy back really quick.”

“I can take her,” I say, wiping my mouth and tossing my napkin in the garbage.

Not pleased with the idea, Indie folds her arms and stares at me.

“Are you sure, man?”

“Yup. Got all my work done earlier during study hall. I’m not doing anything.”

“Okay, yeah. I mean, if that’s okay with you, Indie.”

Even though she doesn’t seem to like the idea, she goes for it.

“That’s fine. Come on, Castle,” she says, walking toward the front door, but not before giving Rusty a quick hug. “Tell your brother I said hi. Maybe I’ll catch him around campus.”

“He wants a rain check. Don’t discount him. I promise, he’s worth the wait.”

Calling over her shoulder, she says, “And yet, I’m not looking to date anyone.” Rusty goes to respond, but she stops him before he can. “I know, I know. Free dinner. Bye, Rusty.”

“See ya, Mayhem.”



MAN, she smells good. Now that we’re in my Jeep, driving to her place, with no Brussels sprouts to drown out her scent, she’s all I can smell. All girly and shit, sweet and fucking good.

I want to bury my head in her skin and soak it up.

“Why do you look like you’re trying to hold in a fart?” she asks.

Okay, maybe not bury my head in her skin.

“You hold nothing back, do you?”

“Call it like I see it. You look pained. Dude, just let it loose if it’s going to cause you that much discomfort.”

“I don’t have to fart, but thanks for that.”

“Huh, could have fooled me.”

The GPS tells me to turn right, but I keep going straight.

“Uh, you missed the turn.”

“I know.”

“Is this another one of those milkshake things? Because I have to tell you, I’m not eating anything bad for me right now.”

“So, Frankie Donuts is a no-go?”

“That’s a giant no, which is painful to say because I would do just about anything to eat one of their strawberry lemonade donuts right now.”

“Strawberry lemonade? Are you insane? Pistachio all the way.”

“What? Only seventy-year-old ladies with cat-themed canes eat the pistachio donuts.”

“Have you even tried one?” I ask, then make a right onto the street that leads straight to the small parking spot overlooking Lake Michigan.

“No.”

“Then how the hell can you say they’re not good?”

“I didn’t say they weren’t good. I just scoffed at a twenty-year old eating one.”

I back into a parking spot and then put my Jeep into park. “Come on,” I say, nodding toward a bench that overlooks the lake.

There’s hesitation in her eyes, as if she’s unsure if she should tell me to take her straight to her house. I hold my breath for a few beats before she sighs and opens her door.

Getting her to come with me is like pulling teeth.

We sit on the wooden bench, and I drape my arm over the back while she pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around her shins.

“Why did you bring me here?”

I tap the back of the bench, staring at the small waves that crash against the water’s edge. “Looked like you needed some fresh air—after the Brussels sprouts and all. I come here when I’m feeling overwhelmed or just need a second from everyone. Living with five guys can make you a little crazy at times.”

“Did I look overwhelmed?”

“You hide it well, but I sensed you were antsy to get out of the house.”

She doesn’t answer, but stares out at the lake instead, resting her chin on her folded arms. After a few seconds of silence, she says, “Rusty was my rock my first semester of college. We both didn’t know what we were doing, but he practically held my hand through all the firsts of college, especially our first party. I drank way too much and if it wasn’t for his intervention, I don’t know what would have happened to me that night. I honestly can’t even think about it. I feel like I owe him so much, and when he asked me to meet his brother, I felt obligated.”

“Even though you don’t want to date.”

“Exactly,” she says.

Surprised that she’s actually opening up given the sarcastic façade she likes to present, I say, “I’m sure if you said that to Rusty he’d be horrified. He does things out of the kindness of his heart. He would never want to push you to do something you really don’t want to do.”

“I know. And I’m sure if I told him I truly wasn’t interested, he’d back off. I just don’t have it in me to say anything.”

“Want me to tell him to back off?”

“No,” she says, horrified. “God, please don’t do that. I think he’d be more insulted if I didn’t talk to him myself.”

“You’re probably right.” Even though I hate to admit it, I say, “Deacon is a good guy. Who knows, you might hit it off.”

“Maybe, but I really don’t need the distraction.”

“I feel you on that. But maybe he won’t be a distraction,” I say, feeling like I’m actually talking about myself.

I would never admit this to my mom, but I enjoy Indie’s company, even when she’s prickly. When I saw her in the kitchen, excitement bloomed in my stomach, and when I found out she was there to hang out with someone else, it didn’t settle well. That’s why I ate my stinky Brussels sprouts in front of her, and why I so quickly offered to take her home.

I want to be around her. To hear her talk. To have her listen.

It’s a different feeling, something I’m experiencing for the first time with a girl.

I kind of like it.

“Maybe you need someone to escape with,” I say.

“Escape, huh?” She smiles at me. “Isn’t that we’re doing right now?”

“I guess so.”

She nudges me with her foot. “So, does that make you my escape buddy?”

“Not sure you could handle me as your escape buddy, especially since you’re not partaking in milkshakes and Frankie Donuts.”

“Just until after testing. And during the season I try to keep it clean too. As best as I can. I have my moments where I find myself standing in line at Frankie Donuts, trying to fill my stomach with the air alone.”

“I gained a cool freshman fifteen because of Frankie Donuts.”

“No, you didn’t.” She laughs, and it’s such a great sound. It has an unexpected rhythm to it, smooth and a little throaty. “How could you possibly gain fifteen pounds on Disik’s program? Aren’t freshmen basically running machines for the first year?”

“Trust me, I ate a lot of donuts. Hartley had to have a conversation with me, because he felt the weight tack on from the donuts I took back to our dorm.”

“You’re going to have to show me pictures, because I don’t believe it. And I can barely remember what I looked like as a freshman, let alone someone else.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. I sift through my Instagram pictures and find one of me, Hartley, and Asher at the baseball loft. I chuckle and hand her my phone.

She sits up as her mouth practically hits the top of her knees. “Oh my God, I can practically see all the pistachio donuts under your shirt.”

“Told you.”

She hands me back my phone and I watch as her eyes travel over my body. “Well, you’ve worked them off, that’s for sure.”

“Are you saying I have a nice body, Mayhem?”

“I’m not going to lie and say you don’t. You’re shredded.” She shrugs, as if it’s an everyday comment.

It’s not.

Not from her.

I gather she’s not one to throw compliments out into the universe like that.

“If you want, I can take my shirt off while we have this conversation, so you can get the full effect of it all.”

“Not necessary.”

“Okay, then do you want to take your shirt off?”

“Oh my God, Lincoln.” She laughs out loud. “You’re better than that.”

I laugh along with her. “I’m really not, but thank you for thinking that I am.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Come on.” I tug on her ponytail, which keeps whispering over the back of my hand. “Even as a friend, I’m allowed to admit that you’re hot, and even though I’m putting myself in the friend zone, I can tease you about taking your shirt off.”

“Pretty sure I stuck you in the friend zone, and you didn’t voluntarily put yourself there.”

“Uh, no. I said *let’s be friends*.”

“No, I don’t recall that.”

“Oh fuck.” I shake my head smiling. “You’re infuriating, you know that?”

“I know,” she says, so cutely that it makes me want to kick her off this bench and right onto the sand. “But if we’re talking about rules for this friendship, then I guess we can say talking of taking shirts off is okay, as

long as you don't ask me to touch your nipple again, because, Linc, that was weird."

"Are you saying you've never touched a man nipple before?"

She shakes her head. "Never said that. I've sucked on a man nipple." Oh shit. That makes my good old loins stir a bit. "But I've never touched a friend's nipple, and not by force."

"It wasn't force. It was more annoyance."

"Either way, it was weird."

"But . . . you liked it."

She chuckles and turns completely toward me now, giving me her full attention. "It was a nice nub."

I fist-pump the air. "Fuck, I knew you liked it." Gesturing to both nipples with two fingers and a whistle, I say, "Don't even need to ask. They're yours for the taking, Mayhem."

"I'll keep that in mind." She looks down at her Apple Watch. "I should really get home."

"Got it." I stand from the bench and think about offering my hand for Lord knows what reason, but she hops off the bench and walks toward my Jeep, so carefree and light in her step.

There's no awkwardness between us.

No uncomfortable feelings.

Just two college kids, fighting through the life of education and athletics, finding our way.

And that I can appreciate.

Chapter Six

INDIE

Lincoln: *Good luck today.*

I smile at my phone as I walk into the women's soccer team locker room. We by no means have the state-of-the-art locker room that the baseball team or even the football team possesses, but it has what we need: showers, lockers, and a whiteboard.

I sit on the metal seat of my locker and type back to Lincoln.

Indie: *Thanks. Feeling good. And no, before you ask, I did not eat the breakfast you suggested the other night.*

Lincoln: *What? That's the magic breakfast. You can never go wrong with eggs and pickles.*

Indie: *Pretty sure there are MANY ways you can go wrong with eggs and pickles.*

Lincoln: *Suit yourself. But I'm telling you, eggs and pickles give you superhuman powers.*

Indie: *Of projectile vomiting at record levels?*

Lincoln: *Maybe . . . maybe. But consider it like a booster rocket.*

Indie: *Do you find this text thread useful?*

Lincoln: *Not particularly unless it got your mind off things. Did it?
*Fingers crossed**

Indie: *Maybe a little.*

Lincoln: *I'm such a good friend, it's borderline disgusting how good I am.*

Indie: *And modest too.*

Lincoln: *Always. Okay, good luck, Mayhem. Sprint as if there's a strawberry lemonade donut at the finish line.*

Indie: *The only true motivator. And thank you.*

I set my phone down and look up to find Scarlett staring at me. We're the only two in the locker room because we like to get here early and prepare.

She motions her finger at me and says, "What was that all about?"

"What was what about?" I ask, tearing my shirt over my head, leaving me in my black sports bra. Thankfully, even though we're lower on the totem pole when it comes to sports, we do still have a lot of perks—like an equipment manager dedicated to our team who washes our uniforms and practice clothes and hangs them up in our lockers for the next day.

"You were totally gone for a second. I said your name twice."

"Oh, shit, really?" I laugh. "Sorry. Just texting Lincoln."

"Lincoln . . . Castle?"

"Yeah," I answer, casually.

"Umm, am I delusional or were you totally hating on him before?"

"I wasn't hating on him, just . . . indifferent. But we're cool now."

"Cool as in—"

"As in friends." I pull down my white workout shirt from the hanger with the Brentwood women's soccer logo on it. I slip it over my head and pull my ponytail out the back.

"Are you sure you're just friends?"

"Positive. Trust me, if I were to start something with someone, and we both know I won't, but if I were, it would not be with Lincoln. There's too much fanfare surrounding him. It would be far too much to handle."

"But he's hot."

"He is," I admit. "But too much, which reminds me. Rusty's coming over tonight with Deacon, bringing pizza to celebrate."

"Deep-dish?" Scarlett asks, as she changes into her shorts.

"No idea."

"If he's a smart guy, he'll bring deep-dish."

The locker room starts to fill with our teammates, and before we know it, we're all walking out to the soccer practice fields, white shirts and green shorts flashing in a single line. Our cleats click against the concrete sidewalk until we reach the turf, where the field is set up for what is known in Brentwood as the most rigorous physical test amongst the teams. Some of the other coaches threaten their players with the women's soccer yearly physical training test as punishment.

Coach splits us into heats, so we're not all going at the same time. We're separated by class, the poor freshmen being the last to go. As a freshman, I'd wanted to go last, but the nerves that eat away at your stomach, doing strange things to your system where you feel like you're going to pass out or vomit—or maybe even both at the same time—are horrendous.

“Hope everyone is well hydrated and got plenty of sleep last night,” Coach Wilson says. She's a badass, with her dark hair flowing out the back of her hat. She played professionally for a few years before she tore her ACL and had to quit. She has five championships under her belt as head coach at Brentwood and is a recruiting genius. When she sees a weakness, she knows exactly how to remedy it, or replace it. “As you all know, we're starting with eight laps around the field, staggered starts. You have twelve minutes to complete eight laps. And that's just your warm-up.”

Her voice booms across the field.

Surrounding us are other practice fields and teams—men's soccer, lacrosse, softball—and they're all practicing, probably thanking the high heavens that they're not us right now.

“After the twelve-minute challenge, we'll go into strength. Forty pushups in a minute, sixty sit-ups. Then five-by-five-by-tens. This will measure how quick you are to change direction. You have five of these, and you must be under ten seconds each time. From there, we'll move to thirty burpee pushups in a minute and then vertical jumps. There's no requirement for vertical jumps, as this is just to see where you're at and if you can improve.” She pauses and looks at the upperclassmen. “Everyone but freshmen better have improved from last year. If not, you're giving us an extra mile after we're done.” That was me last year. I made sure to improve my vertical this go-around. “And finally, we'll end on your favorite, the one-o-five. Fifteen one-hundred-yard sprints. You have twenty-five seconds to make it downfield, thirty-five seconds to make it back to the starting

point. Helpful hint to the freshmen? Stick with an upperclassman. They know the pace.” She claps her board and says, “Let’s get to work, ladies.”



SCARLETT and I share a two-bedroom townhome. It has great living space, a cute kitchen, and is close to campus. Right now, as I lounge on the couch in nothing but a pair of clean underwear and matching Calvin Klein cotton bra, I could not be more grateful that it’s just me and Scarlett, that we’re not sharing with more girls.

“Jesus Christ,” Scarlett says, flopping onto the couch, wearing an oversized T-shirt and no pants. Our wet hair dots the gray couch while we stare at the ceiling. “Why did that feel more brutal than before?”

“I don’t know,” I say, gripping my forehead. “I honestly didn’t think we were going to make it at the end. I had a hard time keeping up with Sandra. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t think I would have beaten the yard sprints.”

“Well, you did run eight laps in ten minutes, so you gassed yourself early.”

I nod. “Yeah, I pulled a rookie move on the eight laps.”

The doorbell rings and I groan. “Ugh, that’s Rusty. What were we thinking telling him it’s okay to come over?”

“We weren’t,” Scarlett says, reaching for her bike shorts and slipping them on.

Too tired for even a shirt, I pull on a pair of black sweatpants, twist my hair up into a wet bun, and go to answer the door. When I open it, I’m greeted by a smiling Lincoln standing on the other side with a box of Frankie Donuts in his hands. His eyes immediately take me in and a sly smirk crosses his lips as he moves his gaze over every inch of my torso. Slowly.

He bites on the corner of his lip and says, “Damn, Mayhem, you have abs.”

I look at my stomach and then back at Lincoln. Maybe I should have taken two more seconds to put a shirt on. Already pink from sunburn, the heat of my cheeks intensifies from his compliment and blatant staring.

A little self-conscious—not sure why, really—I reach out and lift his chin. “My eyes are up here, Castle.”

“Yeah, but your abs are down there, and they’re carved,” he says with awe.

I’m simply too tired to stand in my doorway and go back and forth with Lincoln. “Are those donuts for me?”

“Depends”—he nods toward the inside of our townhome—“can I come in?”

Calling over my shoulder, I say, “It’s Lincoln with donuts. Should I let him in?”

“What kind of donuts?” Scarlett calls back.

“Frankie Donuts.”

“Good God, woman, of course, let him in.”

I chuckle and prop the door open. As he walks in, his eyes roam my body once more, then he takes his shoes off. I shut the door behind him and together we join Scarlett on the couch. Lincoln sits next to me and pops open the box.

The sweet smell of grease and calories permeate the air as I count a dozen donuts—half strawberry lemonade and half pistachio. This man might have just won a special place in my heart.

“Before you can have a strawberry lemonade, you must at least have a bite—”

He doesn’t have time to finish his sentence before I have a pistachio donut hanging out of my mouth.

“Yoink,” Scarlett says, grabbing a pistachio as well. She holds it up to a shocked Lincoln and says, “Cheers, bro.”

We both lean back against the couch and moan. It’s been a long few weeks of training and eating clean, so this donut is hitting all the right spots.

Lincoln clears his throat. “Should I leave the box on the coffee table so you three can have some privacy?”

“We don’t mind voyeurs,” Scarlett says. “Makes things more exciting when someone watches. Am I right?” She winks at Lincoln and from the look on his face, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t exactly know what to do with Scarlett yet.

I nudge the box in his hands and ask, “Are you going to have one?”

“Yeah, I was going to have a strawberry lemonade but now I’m worried if I don’t have a pistachio, they’ll all be gone.”

“I would suggest you grab what you want sooner than later,” Scarlett says around a mouthful of donut. “You can never tell with us.”

“Noted.” Lincoln snags a pistachio donut and takes a huge bite. “Fuck, these are amazing. Frankie cake donuts are good, but their yeast donuts have got to be the best in town. And I like that they don’t try to do all the fun flavors on a cake donut, that they use the yeast base too.”

“It’s why it’s so popular,” I say, right before shoving the rest of the donut in my mouth. Cheeks puffed, I say around the dough, “I love yeast.”

Lincoln snorts as Scarlett reaches past me and grabs a strawberry lemonade. “Come to Mama,” she says, right before taking an impressive bite.

Mouth still full, I stand and ask Lincoln, “Want a drink?”

“Yeah, whatever you have.”

From the kitchen, I hear Scarlett mumbling something about sweet strawberries, and when I come back into the room and hand Lincoln a bottle of Powerade, I catch him staring at Scarlett, confusion laced in his brow.

“She’s in her own world, let her be.”

“Got it.” He uncaps his drink and I shamelessly watch his hand wrap around the bottle and bring it to his lips. The liquid flows down his throat, the muscles contract. It’s surprisingly erotic, and I have to look away because it feels wrong staring at his neck. Half the drink is gone when he sets the bottle on the coffee table. “So . . . from the way you’re both not crying in the corner right now, I’m going to guess your tests went great today?”

I pick up a strawberry donut, break it in half and hand the other piece to him. Naturally he takes it and leans back on the sofa with me, but instead of facing toward the TV, he’s facing us. “I wouldn’t particularly say it went great, but we did pass.”

“Barely,” Scarlett says. “The burpees ate me alive and Indie didn’t pace herself during the twelve-minute test.”

“Gassed out at the end,” I admit, and take a bite of my donut. “I almost didn’t make the one-o-fives.”

“Oh shit, really? I know how hard those are. Coach Disik makes us do them sometimes. They’re brutal. The worst is jogging back to the starting point.”

“Yes,” I say, almost a little too loud. “The actual sprint you—”

“Blackout during, but the jog back is—”

“An impending doom of torture.” Lincoln and I both stare at each other. How odd. We’re finishing each other’s sentences now.

Scarlett perks up from her donut coma and says, “That was weird.” She motions between the two of us. “That *was* weird.”

“I’m not mad about it,” Lincoln says, smirking and raising both eyebrows.

“Frankly, I am.” Scarlett leans over me, her boob pressing against my leg. “Scarlett.” She holds out her hand. “You know, since our friend here is rude and didn’t introduce me.”

Lincoln reaches out and shakes her hand while introducing himself.

“Oh, I know who you are. Indie hasn’t shut up about you.”

“Is that so?” Lincoln asks, with such an annoying grin that I want to push his face away with one of the couch cushions.

“No, it’s not so. I mentioned you for a second.” I push Scarlett off me and ask, “Are you wearing a bra? I felt the definition of your boob on my leg.”

With her hand on the collar of her shirt, she lifts the fabric away from her body and peeks down. “Nope, I’m not.” She smiles and reaches for another donut. I honestly have no idea where she puts it all.

“No bra, no shirt. I feel left out. Should I take my pants off?”

“No,” I say, just as Scarlett whistles obnoxiously.

“Oh yeah, take it off, big boy. Let’s see those undies.”

Turning my head to the side so I’m just speaking to Lincoln, I say, “She soaked up too much sun today, so ignore anything that comes out of her mouth.”

Lincoln stretches his hand over the back of the couch, his fingers brushing against my wet hair. It’s a small touch, but causes a decent reaction from my body, as if he just pulled a string and all my insides shrunk.

“I like what comes out of her mouth. Seems like she’s speaking the truth.”

“And what truth would that be?”

His fingers now press into my scalp, the light massage of his thick fingers making my eyes feel heavy, like I could go to sleep right here on the couch.

“That you talk about me all the time.”

“She does,” Scarlett says, before taking out her phone and starting a game of solitaire.

“Do you?” he asks, his eyebrow lifting.

“No.” But I smile, and it gives me away. “Not all the time.”

“But enough.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you say?” he asks, his fingers reaching the back of my scalp. I lean in toward him, giving him better access.

“How annoying you are.”

He chuckles. “What else?”

“Told her about our moms. By the way, has your mom asked about me? Because any time I talk to my mom on the phone, she’s always asking about you and whether I’ve seen you around campus, if we’ve hung out.”

Lincoln smiles coyly. He’s so freaking cute in this moment: his messy hair, his soulful eyes that capture my full attention, the light scruff on his face making him seem older than his boyish grin suggests. “She has.”

“Oh God, what did you say? Because whatever you said is going to get back to my mom and I’ve lied to her, telling her we don’t even have the same classes.”

Lincoln looks to the side and winces. “Yeah, I told my mom we were partners in class.”

“Oh my God, Lincoln,” I groan. “Now my mom is going to think something’s going on between us.”

“Isn’t there something happening?” Scarlett asks, head still engrossed in her phone but clearly listening in.

“We’re just friends,” Lincoln and I say at the same time.

Turning away from Scarlett and facing Lincoln now, I lean the side of my body against the back of the couch and bring my knees to my chest. Lincoln’s hand, which is still resting on the back of the couch, reaches down and draws small circles on my shoulder. It feels nice, comforting, and it must comfort him too because he relaxes a little more into the couch.

“I didn’t say anything else. Just that we were paired together. When she squealed, I reassured her that nothing was going on, that it was simple coincidence.”

“I’m sure she’s already told my mom and they’re coming up with some crazy ideas together.”

“Most likely.” He sighs. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s fine.” I smile at him and then nudge him with my foot. “Thanks for bringing over donuts.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Yeah, they are,” I answer.

And then we stare at each other, smiling like fools. His fingers trace over my shoulder, and my hands itch to touch him as well. Secretly, I wish Scarlett wasn’t right behind me playing solitaire, making little commentaries to herself about how the computer is not going to get her this time.

“What do you—”

Knock. Knock.

“Pizza is here.” Scarlett jumps off the couch and tosses my shirt at me. “Put this on. No one wants to stare at your tits all night.”

“I mean, I’m not objecting,” Lincoln says, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

I put my shirt on just as I remember who is bringing the pizza. Oh hell . . .

“Congrats on passing,” Rusty’s voice booms from the entryway. “Got some sun on those cheeks too, huh?” I look past Lincoln to see Rusty bend down and give Scarlett a hug. Behind him, I spot a bulkier guy, fit in all the right places with an almost identical face to Rusty’s. Instead of a beard, he has a five o’clock shadow.

His blue eyes connect with mine and . . . okay, yeah, he’s . . . well, he’s hot. But then I knew what he’d look like because they’re identical twins. And perhaps because Rusty’s been with Chrissy for years, therefore unavailable, he’s been in the friend zone. Deacon is like seeing Rusty 2.0.

“I thought that was your Jeep out front,” Rusty says, coming up to Lincoln. “What are you doing here, man?”

Clearing his throat, Lincoln shifts awkwardly away from me and says, “Uh, just brought the girls some donuts. But I’ll, uh, I’ll get going.” He stands but doesn’t glance at me again as he starts toward the door.

“Stay,” I shout, feeling awkward from the way the word sounded coming out of my mouth. “We have plenty of pizza, so you should stay.”

“Yeah, man,” Rusty says. He’s constantly the nicest guy ever.

Lincoln glances back at me, uncertainty in his features. I can see him wavering; confusion and acceptance pass through his eyes before he finally nods. “Okay, yeah, I can stay.”

“Awesome.” Rusty claps and then brings his brother forward, while Scarlett sets the two boxes of pizza on the coffee table, shifting the donuts to the side. She sets a roll of paper towels on top, and that’s the extent of her hostessing. When Deacon steps forward and smiles at me, I feel a small

piece of me melt inside. He's hot, really freaking hot, and checks all my boxes when it comes to the opposite sex. "Indie, this is Deacon. Deacon, meet Indie Mayhem, the swiftest pair of cleats you'll see on the soccer field."

"Hey," Scarlett says, "I scored more goals than her last year."

"By one." I roll my eyes. "And the reason you scored those goals was because of my assists, which I led the league in."

"No one asked for your stats," Scarlett mumbles, while tipping open a box and grabbing a slice of pepperoni.

Deacon holds his hand out and says, "Nice to meet you, Indie." Oh, even his voice is nice. Deep, seductive. He's a whole package of sex wrapped up into six-feet-plus of muscle and athleticism.

I take his hand in mine. It's large like the rest of him, but for some reason, my mind goes immediately to the size of Lincoln's hands.

"Uh, nice to meet you, Deacon."

Smiling, he leans in and whispers, "Sorry that my brother is being incredibly awkward."

We both look to where Rusty is standing, clasping his hands together, looking like a proud papa bear.

"No worries, I'm used to his weirdness." I gesture toward the pizza. "Grab a piece. I'm going to get some drinks for everyone."

"I'll help you," Lincoln says, before Deacon can offer.

"Sure, yeah. Thanks," I say.

When we reach the kitchen, Lincoln moves in close and whispers, "So, Deacon, huh?"

I look over my shoulder as I stand in front of the fridge. "What about him?"

He takes some of the drinks from me as the corner of his lips tilt in a knowing smile. "Please, I saw the way your eyes lit up when he walked into the living room."

"There was no lighting up. If you saw anything, it was probably indigestion."

Lincoln lets out a full-on belly laugh, the sound almost too loud for the small kitchen. "Okay, Indie."

"I'm serious."

"Sure," he draws out sarcastically.

My lips purse as I stare up at Lincoln. "You're annoying me."

“How is that different to any other time we’ve hung out?”

“Not sure.”

I try to move past him, but he stops me, blocking my path. “Are you interested?” he asks, and for a second, I see insecurity wash through his gaze, but it’s fleeting. That teasing glint comes back before I have a chance to digest the other look in his eyes.

“Am I interested in a guy I just met for the first time for five seconds?”

“Yeah,” he says, his chin lifting.

“Uhh . . . no. I told you, I’m not interested in starting anything with anyone.”

“Okay,” he says, and I watch as his chest deflates.

Weird.

He’s being really freaking weird right now.

“Okay . . . so, can I take these drinks to everyone?”

“Sure, yeah.” He steps to the side and as I pass him, my shoulder grazes his and I feel a moment of total weakness, softening my legs, making me want to lean into Lincoln’s body for support. *That is so not like me.* Must be from the tests today. And the sugar high from donuts. No other reason.

He must see me pause because he quickly asks, “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I take a deep breath. “Just tired.”

“Want me to ask everyone to leave?”

I shake my head. “No, I just need to sit down.”

Lincoln takes the other drinks from me and nudges me to sit on the couch. Everyone moves around me, Lincoln hands out the drinks, people grab their pizza, and Lincoln gives me a slice on a paper towel. As he’s about to sit down, Deacon takes the seat next to me and rocks the cushion with his weight.

It’s then I catch the dejected look on Lincoln’s face, which causes my stomach to tie itself into the most impressive nautical knot out there.

“On the way over here, Rusty was telling me about your physical test,” Deacon says. “If our coach made us do that, I don’t think I’d survive. I’m impressed, girls.”

He’s sweet. Really sweet, just like Rusty, and even though he’s really attractive, my eyes keep drifting to Lincoln, who’s sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, looking like he wants to be anywhere but here.

“YOU KNOW, I’m going to head back home with Lincoln,” Rusty says, not being subtle at all. He tosses Deacon the keys to his truck. “Before you come home, pick up some milk. Two gallons.”

“No problem,” Deacon says, snatching the keys in the air with ease.

Lincoln stands at the doorway, his keys in his hands, head bent forward, avoiding all eye contact with us.

Rusty pulls me into a hug and says, “Thanks for letting us crash your house.”

“Thank you for the pizza,” I say, as Scarlett comes up beside me and pulls Rusty into a hug as well.

“Yeah, thanks for the pizza, big guy.” She waves toward Lincoln. “Thanks for the donuts.”

“You’re welcome,” Lincoln says from far away.

Tonight felt awkward. Probably not for everyone else, but for me, it was uncomfortably awkward.

After we all grabbed our pizza, we talked about the different physical tests each team must pass in order to play, and the women’s soccer team has the most challenging one by far, even harder than the men’s soccer team. Deacon was attentive, listened well, and added thoughtful commentary.

He’s incredibly easy to talk to, but that doesn’t surprise me. He’s more reserved than Rusty. Or is that just because I’ve known Rusty for two years and we’re practically brother and sister at this point.

When Lincoln announced he was leaving, I wasn’t surprised, because he’d been quiet for most of dinner. He listened, catching my gaze every once in a while. His demeanor was different, as if the minute Rusty and Deacon walked into our house, someone sucked all the smartass out of him. I’m realizing that oddly, the smartass is what I like the most about Lincoln. He speaks his mind and challenges me.

But he was a different person and it made me . . . sad.

Before I can stop myself, I push past Rusty and walk up to Lincoln. When he sees me approaching, he straightens his shoulders, and when I wrap my arms around his waist, giving him a hug, he encircles me within his arms. *Hesitantly.*

It’s a brief hug, but it’s enough to make me realize that it was probably a mistake, especially when I feel his hand linger on my back as I pull away.

“Thank you . . . for the donuts.”

“You’re welcome,” he says quietly, tipping my chin up with his finger. “See you on Monday, Mayhem.”

“Yeah, see you Monday.”

Rusty gives me a brief wave and takes off with Lincoln.

Once the door is shut, Scarlett stretches her arms above her head. “I’m going to take a bath. That shower did nothing for me. I’ll be upstairs with my vibrator and a good book, so please don’t disturb me.”

Deacon nearly chokes on his own saliva.

“She’s . . . uh, candid.”

“You have no idea,” I say to Deacon, going back to the couch where I curl my legs under me and take a seat. But unlike when Lincoln was on the couch, I keep my distance.

“You don’t care if I stay a little longer, do you?”

“No, you’re good. I would just be watching something on Netflix while Scarlett masturbates in the tub.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard a girl announce that.”

“Well, she’s a different kind of girl. Has zero boundaries. The amount of times we’ve seen each other naked because she’s clueless is far too high to be considered normal.”

“You get that when living with other people. I just moved in with the boys, and I’ve already caught Rusty with his hand down his pants while talking to Chrissy on the phone.”

“Oof.” I cringe. “And you can still see okay?”

“I was temporarily blind, but after some deep-cleansing therapy, I was good as new.”

“Thank God for that.” He turns toward me, just like Lincoln did, but instead of reaching out and pressing his fingers into my scalp, Deacon keeps his hands in his lap, behaving like an utter gentleman. “So, do you like it here so far?” I ask.

“Yeah, love it.”

“Where did you transfer from?”

“A community college in Nebraska where we’re from. I didn’t have the grades in high school to come to Brentwood, whereas Rusty is just naturally smart. And as you know, it takes a lot of athletic talent and intelligence to be recruited by Brentwood. So, I went to a community college and worked my ass off to get my grades up. Rusty helped me train virtually, teaching me

everything they did at practice so I could replicate it. I was a walk-on, had to try out, and then luckily, made the team.” He smiles. “Might have cried a little into my brother’s arms when I saw my name on the roster.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. Congratulations. It must have felt good to see all that hard work pay off.”

He nods. “It did. And I was grateful there was a spare room where I could live with my brother and not have to share a room with him, because that’s what we were planning on doing.”

“Oh, that would have sucked because those conversations with Chrissy would have been increasingly awkward.”

“Tell me about it.” He rubs the side of his jaw. “And when she comes to visit from Nebraska, yeah, that would be even more awkward.”

“Is she going to make some trips again this year?”

Deacon nods. “Yeah, she always does. To be honest, I miss her. We became really good friends while Rusty’s been in Chicago. He asked me to watch over her while he was gone, and now that we’re both here, he worries about her more. Keeps trying to convince her to move to Chicago.”

“Why doesn’t she?”

Deacon sighs and says, “She’s scared. She doesn’t want to move everything and then have something happen to their relationship.”

“But Rusty is crazy about her. They’ve been dating for five years, right?”

Deacon nods. “Yeah, but her parents are divorced so she’s extra cautious. Rusty realizes that and is patient, even though I’m pretty sure if I handed him a ring, he’d propose to her right now.”

I clutch my hand to my heart. “Ugh, that’s so cute.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty awesome together. She’s family at this point.” He smooths his hand over his thigh and asks, “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. Just me and my parents, which makes their involvement in my life difficult at times.”

“Oh damn, really?”

I nod, smiling to myself. “That’s how I met Lincoln, through our meddling moms.” I relay the story, Deacon laughing through the entire thing with a couple “oh damn” outbursts. The whole time I’m telling the story, I realize what a great listener he is, just sitting there, interacting, asking questions. He’s pretty awesome. I can understand why Rusty wanted us to meet. Any girl would be lucky to meet Deacon.

“Could have been worse; you could have been matched up with someone like Barry Winston on the lacrosse team.”

“Oh God, you’re right.” I cringe. “Barry likes to sniff his armpits for fun.”

“Yeah,” Deacon drags out. “I met him for the first time this past week and I’ll tell you right now, he likes to have other people sniff his armpits for fun too.”

“Disgusting.”

“Plus, you’re lucky. Lincoln’s a really great guy . . . even if he didn’t know who you were.”

“He is a good guy, surprisingly.” My mind drifts back to the way his fingers felt in my hair, his sexy smile, the way he smelled like fresh-cleaned man.

“He doesn’t really venture outside of his circle. Not sure if you see it, but the baseball team deals with a lot of pressure, not only from their coach, but from the school and the fans. There’s been drama from players behind the scenes because of the legendary locker room.” I roll my eyes, thinking about the myth of the baseball locker room. According to the legend, if a baseball player takes you to the locker room to have sex, you’re meant to be together forever. I don’t buy it. “And then of course, the rapid rate of Brentwood players going pro. You find out who’s genuine and who’s not. The boys are closed off a lot of times, so the fact that he’s included you and Scarlett in his circle means something.”

Huh . . .

I never thought about it that way.

I just assumed he was being nice. But if I think about it, I’ve never spoken with any baseball player for that matter. They’re a close-knit bunch, probably for the very reasons Deacon stated.

“Hmm, I guess I won him over.”

Deacon chuckles softly. “Pretty sure you didn’t have to put in much effort.” He glances at me and my heart trips. “Would it be cool if I took you out for dinner sometime?”

I look away, unable to meet his eyes. I swore I wouldn’t date. It’s not what I need right now when I’m so hyper-focused on school and soccer, but . . . God, he’s so nice. But I know myself. I don’t want *nice* nor a man who seems like relationship material. *And yet* . . . I could do dinner. He

doesn't seem needy, and he's good company. As long as he knows there will nothing more. *That* is not happening even if the guy is sweet and hot.

On a deep breath, I nod. "Yeah, that could be fun."

"Really?" he asks, surprised, and it's adorable.

"Rusty did say I should get a free dinner out of you."

Deacon shakes his head. "Of course he did."

Chapter Seven

INDIE

I love Sundays. They're our only day off during the week, and Scarlett and I both spend them isolated in our rooms, relaxing and doing absolutely nothing. Well, I have done laundry, read over my notes from Professor Adams's lecture, and done our meal planning for the week. *My* version of nothing.

So, when my phone vibrates with a text message, I consider not answering it as I lie naked in a coma-like state, staring at the ceiling, my muscles on fire from yesterday's physical test.

But when it vibrates again, I pick it up with a huff. Better not be my mom wanting to hassle me about dating.

Lincoln: *Whatever you talked to Deacon about after we left has him walking around with heart eyes over here.*

I roll to my side and type him back.

Indie: *He asked me out to dinner. I said yes.*

Lincoln: *You did?*

I chew on my bottom lip and wish I could hear him ask that question. You can never tell someone's inflection in text messages, and I want to know if that was a sad "you did?" or a sly "you did?"

After Deacon left last night—we parted with a quick hug and a wave—I went to my room, thankful Scarlett was done in the bathroom, and got ready for bed. Lincoln was on my mind the entire time. I couldn't forget the dejected look on his face during dinner. I haven't known him very long, but I do know he wasn't himself once the guys showed up. I almost wished I had taken him up to my room to talk privately, asked him if everything was okay, let him press his fingers into my scalp, massage it some more.

Choosing my words carefully, I type him back.

Indie: *I did. I didn't want to be rude. And he was cool.*

Lincoln: *Deacon is awesome. A great guy.*

Indie: *I got that last night. Just like Rusty.*

Lincoln: *Yeah.*

I stare at my phone, wondering how I respond to that when the dots appear, indicating he's texting again.

Lincoln: *What are you doing right now?*

Indie: *Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to convince my muscles to stop aching.*

Lincoln: *Lying in bed? If I recall correctly, that would make you naked, right?*

Indie: *Of course you remember that.*

Lincoln: *My memory is a steel trap, so don't say something unless you want me to remember it.*

Indie: *Good to know and yes, if you must know, I am naked.*

Lincoln: *So am I, which means we're naked together. This friendship just leveled up.*

Indie: *What's your excuse for being naked?*

Lincoln: **shrugs* playing with my ding-dong.*

A loud laugh bursts out of me, and I quickly cover my mouth.

Indie: *LOL. Why do I envision you just tapping the tip of your dick for the fun of it?*

Lincoln: *Because you're right. After I did some jumping jacks in front of a floor-length mirror to watch the old cock bounce up and down, I took it to the sheets to see if I could get aroused just from flicking my dick.*

Indie: *And the verdict?*

Lincoln: *Turns out any kind of stimulation works.*

Indie: *It's because guys are horndogs.*

Lincoln: *^Facts. So, you're sore?*

Indie: *Very. And before you get any smart ideas, no, you can't come over and massage me.*

Lincoln: *Ew, I would never. Gross. The thought of touching your naked body makes me dry heave. So much puke. All the puke. I would rather scrape a rusty fork over my scrotum than be forced to touch your naked boddness.*

Indie: *How flattering.*

Lincoln: *I just . . . oh fuck, I just threw up in my mouth thinking about it.*

Indie: *You done?*

Lincoln: *Sorry, just ran to the bathroom. False alarm. I'm good now.*

Indie: *Glad to know where you stand.*

Lincoln: *Got to keep it real, Mayhem. But if you're not doing anything and you're sore, I have an idea.*

Indie: *Does it involve me having to put clothes on?*

Lincoln: *I mean . . . you don't have to. That's your right, but I think nudity is frowned upon in public.*

Indie: *Ughhhh, you want to do something in public?*

Lincoln: *It will be worth it, and you know just as well as I do the worst thing you can do for your body right now is lie around doing nothing. You need to stretch out your limbs and get them moving.*

Indie: *I'm not going for a run.*

Lincoln: *Neither am I. Meet me outside your place in ten minutes.*

Indie: *This better be worth it, Castle.*

Lincoln: *It will be, I promise.*



IT TAKES me five minutes to roll out of bed, so when I open my front door to see Lincoln sitting in his Jeep, the canvas cap taken off, I'm not surprised. I'm grateful there are only three steps as I hobble down.

Keeping it casual, I slipped on a pair of leggings and a deep purple tank top. I didn't bother with any makeup, only a little sunscreen for my already burnt cheeks, and I put my hair up in a messy bun rather than a ponytail.

Lincoln leans over the center console and opens the door for me, holding his hand out and helping me in. Normally, I would have scoffed at

the help, but good God, my legs hurt so bad.

“You look like you’re in pain.”

I buckle up and let out a long sigh. “I am.”

He reaches into the cup holder and says, “This is for you. I put in some of my electrolyte tablets that help me the day after a rough workout. It’s strawberry lemonade flavor. Thought that was a safe bet.”

“That’s thoughtful.” *It’s nice too. He’s nice.* But different nice to Deacon.

He winks and starts his Jeep. “What are friends for?”

When he takes off and pulls onto the road, I ask, “So, any hints where we’re going?”

“Nowhere super special, but thought some fresh air and a walk would help you.”

The breeze filters past me, the open-top Jeep increasing the circulation and the excitement racing through my veins. I didn’t realize how much I needed fresh air until now.

We drive in peace, letting the rock music on the radio fill the silence between us as I stare out the windshield, sipping on my drink. I glance down occasionally to Lincoln’s hand gripping the gear shift, taking in how he expertly shifts. It’s mesmerizing to see his masculine hand hold the gear shift tightly, his forearm rippling when he moves. It almost feels erotic, and I avert my eyes before my mind starts getting carried away.

When we pull up to a parking spot along the boardwalk, I have an idea why he’s brought me here, and I couldn’t be happier.

It’s a beautiful day out. Seventy-five, sunny, with just enough breeze off Lake Michigan that it’s not too cold and not too hot. Sublime.

When he shuts off the engine, he turns toward me. “Want to go for a walk?”

“Sounds like a great idea.”

“Perfect.” He unbuckles himself and instead of opening his door, he pulls himself up by the crossbar and goes through the window, then comes to my side and opens my door. When I give him a questioning look, he shrugs. “Was raised by two moms. It’s habit.” *And I don’t mind that at all. Chivalry is not dead.*

We both have a water bottle in hand as we join the boardwalk trail that runs along the lake. For a Sunday, the trail isn’t busy at all. A few bikers,

some jogging moms with their strollers, but other than that, it's pretty clear, providing some privacy.

I notice that Lincoln isn't wearing a single piece of Brentwood baseball clothing, but has on all black with a plain black hat, backwards, and black Ray-Bans covering his eyes. Makes me wonder, does he get recognized often?

If you're in a three-mile radius of Brentwood, you'll see his face on a banner somewhere. What would it be like to have to deal with that, especially since it's just college? It's one thing when you're a pro—comes with the territory—but college? Some of these kids are still trying to figure out their skin-care routine, let alone learning how to talk to the press and diehard fans. He's fairly level-headed. Is that innate or trained?

"Are you incognito?"

"Is it obvious?" he asks with a smile.

"I think to someone else, no, you're just a regular guy on a walk, but to me, it looks like you're trying to hide."

"Just didn't want to run into anyone today. I honestly don't mind talking to patrons and fans outside of campus, but today I just wanted some time alone . . . with you."

I hide the smile itching to cross my face. Not. Easy.

"Did you have to go through media training?"

"Oh yeah." He chuckles. "It's one of the first things you do as a freshman. Disik doesn't fuck around. He doesn't want anyone embarrassing him or the program. And the training is intensive. More than what every other sport has to go through."

"We didn't get any training." I push my sunglasses up on my nose. "In case you didn't realize, we don't get much press or fans in the stands, for that matter. The only reason most of us are on full-ride scholarships is because of Title Nine."

"Come on, you have people watch your games."

"We have our families, but the student body couldn't care less, despite how great we are." He doesn't say anything, and I ask, "Have you ever been to a game?"

When I look in his direction and he winces, I know the answer. "I want to say we have a busy schedule, but that would be an excuse. Hell, I don't even know when you play."

"We have our first game in two weeks."

“Shit, that soon? Right after you had your test?”

I nod. “Yeah, we’re still conditioning, but now we’re focused on working together as a team, reading each other. But the buildup before that is important. We train through the summer, come to school early, as you know, train, and then we have our test. Coach knows who’s serious and who’s going to warm the bench. And starting tomorrow, we dig into the details of the game. The fun stuff.”

“Damn, I had no clue.” He scratches the back of his neck. “I think I need to pay more attention.”

“Why? I mean, I have no idea what you guys do over at your mega stadium.”

He chuckles. “It’s a little obnoxious, isn’t it?”

“Maybe a little.” I smile. “But you guys earned it too. The program has produced some of the best players in baseball.”

“Are you a baseball fan?”

“I’m a fan of sports in general. I could probably sit and watch any athletic competition just because I know what it takes to play at a high level. But if I had to pick a favorite baseball team, uhh . . . probably the Bobbies, but only because they drafted Knox Gentry, and when I was wishing to be recruited by Brentwood, he was all the rage.”

“The dude has major skills. He was just called up to the majors.”

“Really? See, that’s what I’m talking about. Player after player makes it to the majors.” I grow silent for a second and say, “I’m assuming that’s your future too.”

“If all goes right,” he answers, looking out toward the water.

“Aren’t you eligible for the draft this year?”

“In the spring, yeah.”

“And if you’re drafted, will you sign?”

“Depends. If it’s a late-round, there’d be no point. I’d rather stay at Brentwood, finish my major, and build up my strength and spin one more year with Coach Disik.”

“That makes sense. Is that why you chose to go to college instead of being drafted straight from high school?”

“I was debating between the two, but when I came on my recruiting trip to Brentwood, Coach Disik pulled me into his office—which was intimidating as fuck—and he basically told me I had the potential to be great, but only under his wing. He said he had no doubt I’d be drafted out of

high school, but it would be a long, rigorous road for me, and depending on who drafted me, he could see me having a long career in the majors, or no career at all.” Lincoln smiles. “Then he took out this folder and laid it in front of me. It was a timeline of my three years at Brentwood. It pointed out my flaws and weak points and how over the course of three years, he’d break me of my bad habits and get me ready to take on the big leagues.”

“Are you freaking serious?”

Lincoln nods. “It was insulting *and* amazing. I told my moms about the entire conversation and as I was telling them, it felt like a no-brainer. A free education while being trained to be one of the best pitchers in the country? I would have been stupid to say no. Plus, I meshed well with the guys and the facilities are sick.”

“That they are.” I take a sip of my drink and close the bottle. “What I wouldn’t give for a file like that. Coach Wilson is amazing and runs us into the ground, but she doesn’t spend much time with me. I only have one more year after this and if I want to go pro, I’d really like to know what I need to work on.”

“Maybe you don’t have to work on anything.”

“You and I both know that’s never the case. There’s always something to work on.”

“True.” His shoulder brushes against mine and a tingling warmth spreads down my arm to my fingertips. I want him to do that again. “So, you want to go pro?”

“Yeah. I know women soccer players get paid absolute crap, but”—I play with the bottle in my hands—“I’m just not ready to give up the thrill of the game. Yet.”

“I understand that. I honestly think about how some college athletes have their last game ever and that’s it. They never play competitively again. The thought of dropping it all makes me feel sick. Not having one more chance to step out on the field, feel the dirt under my cleats, hear the roar of the crowd, the umpire staring me down, waiting for me to throw my next pitch. It would be really fucking difficult.”

“I think the only people who understand are the ones in our position. My dad has made comments here and there about me getting a real job when I graduate. Working hard on my teaching degree and finding something stable. He’s never been a huge fan of sports, nor has my mom for that matter, so it kills me inside every time he makes a comment like that.

He clearly doesn't understand what it takes to play at the elite level and to just drop it all." I shake my head. "I can't think about it."

"Not to insult your dad, but it seems like he doesn't get you at all. Just from our non-date at the arcade, I knew you were on a whole other level. Competitive, but the type of competitive that knows what it takes to give up everything in your life to make a dream come true."

"And man, did I give up everything."

"Same." He stops and nods toward a stone wall that overlooks the lake. "Want to take a seat for a second? Maybe stretch?"

"Good idea." We walk over and both take a seat on the wide, flat wall. I bring my legs into a butterfly position and groan. "Oh Jesus, please help me through this time of need."

Lincoln laughs next to me. "You know it's bad when you're calling out to Jesus for help."

"Or is it good?" I ask, wiggling my eyebrows.

I see him gulp hard and then look away. "Depends on whether or not you're faking it."

"Oh, good point."

"Have you?" Lincoln asks, keeping his eyes trained on the water. "Have you ever faked it?"

"Uh, yeah. And before you think you're God's gift to sex, I bet you anything there's at least one girl who's faked it with you."

"Never claimed to be God's gift to sex, but I will tell you this, I do eat a lot of pineapple. It's the polite thing to do."

"Ah, look at you. That is very polite." He flashes me one of his sexy grins. "I hate to be admitting this, but I've heard rumors about you around campus."

"Oh, I'm sure you have." Lincoln sighs, staring down at his clasped hands. "You're either practically celibate like Hartley and Asher, or you deal with the talk." He tilts his head to the side as the sun starts to set behind him. I feel my breath catch as I stare at this man who I can only describe as a real-life Ken doll. "What have you heard?"

I switch to stretching my glutes and try to erase the butterfly feeling in my chest from that one look from him. "Uh, you know, the typical stuff. Amazing body . . . big dick."

He smirks and looks away. "Can't argue with that."

"You're also terrible at calling people back when you say you will."

Lifting up his hat, he pushes his hand through his hair. “I never make promises to girls. I always leave it with *maybe I’ll call you sometime*. Easier that way. Trust me, I’m nowhere near man-whore status. I don’t have the time and energy to go looking for women.”

“I don’t think you’d need to look hard. Pretty sure if you said you were looking to bone, half the school would line up.”

He presses his hand to his chest and says sarcastically, “Thank you for the compliment.” When I roll my eyes at him, he says, “What about you? Thinking about having sex with Deacon?”

“So, we’re crossing that line, huh?”

“I mean, we are friends after all.”

I switch legs and groan some more, using my hands to get my leg into position. “Deacon is sweet, he’s hot, and jumping into bed would most likely be awesome.” Lincoln tenses next to me and it makes me chuckle. He asked. “Just not sure I’m ready for any of that. Especially with the season starting soon.” I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ll probably go out to dinner and see where it goes.”

“Cool,” Lincoln answers tersely.

I release my stretch and poke him in the arm. “Don’t be weird.”

“Please just don’t have sex in our house. I don’t want to hear you praying to Jesus.”

“Are you assuming I’m loud when having sex?”

Loosening up a little, he makes a show of sizing me up, looking at my face and trying to peer around both my ears. He’s being ridiculous, and I push his face away only for him to laugh that addictive laugh of his. “Yeah, you’re a screamer all right, but not just for anyone. A guy has to earn a scream from you.”

“That’s disturbingly accurate.” *Very* disturbing. I get chills from thinking about screaming during sex with . . .

“I bet you also make a gargle sound when you orgasm.” Out of nowhere, he throws his head back, rolls his eyes and convulses, arms stretched out like Frankenstein as he makes creepy gargling noises.

I push him to the side but barely put a dent in his position. “That is not me.”

“How do you know? Have you ever recorded yourself?”

“Yes, and that’s not how I look.”

He tilts his sunglasses down. His jaw falls slightly open. “Uh, I’m going to need to review the footage myself.”

“Get out of here.” I push him again and hop off the wall. “Come on, Castle, I’m buying us dinner.”

Chapter Eight

LINCOLN

“This makes me appreciate you so much more,” I say, sitting on the bench across from Indie.

She reaches to the tray of fries we decided to share and pops one in her mouth. “The fact that I treated you to Chicago-style hot dogs, or because I got two?”

“Both.” I laugh. “I never would have picked you as a hot dog-eating girl.”

“I don’t live my life for hot dogs, but ever since moving to Chicago, I stop by Dreaming of Wieners when I’m in this part of town.”

“Was it the name that pulled you in?”

“At first, no.” She chuckles. “I spent the summer before college training and reading. I came across this book called *The Mother Road*. It was in my mom’s stack of romance novels. The watercolor skyline of Chicago on the back caught my eye, and I thought I’d give it a try. The book was hilarious. About a family’s road trip across Route 66 to eat a Chicago dog in Chicago. There was more substance to it, but that’s what made me think of wanting to try a Chicago dog. So, when I moved here, I had to find out what the big deal was. If an author could write so passionately about a damn hot dog, that had to be something worth trying, right? I went on Yelp, found

Dreaming of Wieners—they won me over with the name—and I had my first Chicago dog right at this bench. It’s when my life changed forever.” She smiles. Leaning forward, she whispers, “I think it’s the celery salt that makes them so damn good.”

She’s cute, really fucking cute.

“I’m sorry, I’m still caught up on the fact that you read a romance novel.” She chucks a fry at me, and I catch it and pop it in my mouth with a grin. “Was there sex in it?”

“Of course there was sex,” she scoffs. “Dirty sex. Brother’s-best-friend sex. Oral-on-an-RV-kitchen-counter sex.”

“Oh damn.” I chuckle. “Vivid stuff, huh?”

“Yup.”

My lips curve up. “Learn any pointers?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I would.

I really would.

When I invited Indie out for a walk, I didn’t think it would end up with us sharing a tray of fries and hot dogs, but I’m glad it has, because I really enjoy her company. I feel like she gets me on a whole other level. She knows what I’m going through, and I understand what she’s going through. She’s unpredictable, makes me laugh, and I love being around her.

I considered texting her earlier in the day to see how she was, but it felt desperate, especially after Deacon came home boasting about how amazing Indie is. *Trust me, buddy, I know.* And I can’t even be mad about it because I have no claim over her. Hell, I was the asshole who didn’t know who she was when I first met her. And I kick myself in the ass every day for that.

But as time ticked away, I decided I’d text her around four to see if she wanted to go for a walk. Knowing her intense workout from yesterday, she’d be sore, so getting out would be helpful.

And here we are now, eating dinner together. It’s been a good fucking day.

“Do you have the book still? Maybe you want to lend it to a good friend.”

“It’s my mom’s, sorry. Check the library.”

“Maybe I will.” I lift my hot dog, so does Indie, and we both take a bite. “It’s the fucking celery salt,” I say through a mouthful.

“Right?” Indie replies, mustard hanging off her lip.

On instinct, I reach out and wipe the mustard away and then lick it off my finger.

Her eyes widen, shock and amusement written over her face. “Did you just wipe mustard off my lip and eat it?”

“Yup,” I answer with no shame. “Got a problem with that?”

“No, just surprised is all.”

“Why? You have a disease I should be worried about?”

“No,” she shoots back.

“Then we’re good.”

“But how do I know when you last washed your thumb? You could have just wiped germs all over my lip.”

“You know,” I say, pretending to give my answer great thought, “I was dipping my thumb into random people’s pants before I came here. Maybe you should be worried.”

“Why are you like this?” She smiles.

“Why am I like this? Why are *you* like this?” I counter lamely.

“You can do better than that, Castle.”

“I’m distracted by the celery salt,” I say, and take another bite of my hot dog just as I hear someone call out Indie’s name from a distance. We both look to the right to see Deacon—*of all people*—jogging toward us.

Just fucking great.

When he spots me, he does a double take and then laughs, as if to say, “*What are the chances?*”

High, the chances are apparently very high.

“Oh shit, I had no idea that was you, Linc.” We do a quick bro shake and then he sits down next to Indie. “What are you guys up to?”

Now if this was any other guy, I’d be fucking pissed, especially if Indie was my girl—which she isn’t—but if she was, Deacon would be perceived as a total cock block.

A giant, two-hundred-pound chastity belt.

Sir Cockus-the-Blockus of Clueless-ville.

A certified jimmy jacker. You get the point.

It’s obvious that Indie and I are enjoying a meal together—hello, we’re sharing goddamn fries—and he came and welcomed himself to our table.

But that’s not how Deacon is. He’s genuinely a happy, outgoing guy who likes to hang out with people. He isn’t malicious, nor does he plan things to grate on people’s nerves.

Nope.

This is him—eating one of our fries without asking—and hanging out.

“Went for a walk on the boardwalk and did some stretches,” Indie answers, and then elbows his arm. “What about you?”

I watch from across the table, the ease they already have with each other, the glances, the way Indie’s body almost leans in toward Deacon. It’s not comforting; it’s really fucking annoying, and I can feel the heat of irritation start to bleed up my neck to the base of my skull.

That’s going to be a tension headache. Yup, I can already feel the thrumming starting . . .

“Rusty, Hartley, and I decided to toss the ball around on the beach. Just grabbed some hoagies and we’re headed back to the house.” Deacon addresses me. “We tried to text you, man, to see if you wanted anything.”

“Oh shit, sorry.” I reach for my phone in my pocket, taking in all the missed texts.

“Nah, it’s cool. I get it. Hartley wants to watch *All-American* on Netflix when we get home. Want us to wait for you?”

“Go ahead. I can catch up.”

“Cool, I’ll leave you guys to it.” Deacon grabs another fry, and then winks at Indie. “I’ll see you later. Have fun, you guys.”

With a quick salute, he takes off toward the parking lot where I spot Hartley’s black SUV. It’s hard not to spot given it’s a TESLA and fucking sick. Hartley’s dad had an electric plug installed in our house for Hartley’s SUV.

As Deacon jogs away, I catch Indie’s lingering gaze before she returns to her hot dog, and just like that, the bubble I was living in bursts. I’m left feeling annoyed because of a really nice guy who just bombed my second non-date with Indie. *I just wish I knew why the fuck it annoyed me so much.*



I PULL up to Indie’s house.

We didn’t talk much the rest of the evening. I couldn’t think of a damn thing to say and it seemed neither could Indie. It was as if Deacon came along with his fucking friendly and jolly Santa-like attitude and threw a bucket of cold water over our impromptu dinner.

Dousing any flames that may have been sparking.

Not that I'm looking for sparks, but our connection is hard to deny, especially our easy witty banter.

Either way, after Deacon left, our night ended abruptly.

Once we finished our dogs, Indie said she should probably get back to her house to get ready for the school week, and I didn't argue with her.

Now that we're in front of her house and she's unbuckling her seatbelt, I feel desperate to say something, anything that would keep her in my company for a few more minutes.

Anything that would make up for my inability to hold a conversation after getting my dick stepped on and flattened by Deacon.

"Thanks for going on a walk with me," I say. "And thanks for dinner. I think those were the best wieners I've ever put in my mouth." Not great, but it's something.

She chuckles. "How long have you been waiting to say that?"

"The whole ride home."

"What impeccable restraint."

She opens the door and before she can get out, I tug on her hand and say, "Hold on a second." I reach behind her seat and pull out a bag with a bath bomb in it. "Here."

Surprised, she examines the bath bomb and then looks back at me. "Is this a bath bomb?"

"It is. My mom sends a bunch to me every month. They're infused with homeopathic oils that help soothe my sore muscles. Fill up your tub when you get inside and try to hang out in the water for at least fifteen minutes. You'll thank me later. Oh, and just so you know, I've never handed them out to other people, so consider yourself lucky."

"You're giving me a bath bomb," she says, still shocked.

"Yeah, is that a problem?"

"No, it's just . . ." Her lips tip up. "It's really sweet. Thanks, Castle."

"You're welcome." I shrug, trying to pass it off as nothing.

Unexpectedly, she leans over the console and wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me into a hug. Only able to maneuver so one hand is free, I squeeze her tight, letting myself revel in the feel of her pressed against my body for a second before she pulls away.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Lincoln."

She hops out and shuts the door. “See you tomorrow, Mayhem.” She gives me a cute wave and then disappears up her stairs and into her house.

Letting out a long sigh, I rest my head against my seat and start my engine. Time to head home.



KNOCK. Knock.

“Come in,” I call out.

“Are your pants up? Hand anywhere near your penis?” I hear Deacon’s voice call through the door.

“No, I’m not jacking off like your brother.”

The door slowly opens, and Deacon peeks his head through, but his eyes are closed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Jesus.” I laugh.

When he opens his eyes, he sighs in relief. “Can’t ever be too sure. When Rusty was saying yes, it was because he was ready to come, not telling me I could come in. Trust me, that’s an image you don’t get out of your head for a while.”

“I believe it.” I nod toward my bed for him to sit. “What’s up?”

Deacon takes a seat and clasps his hands together in front of him. “Can I ask you something? And I don’t want you to get mad at me, but I really need to know the answer to the question.”

“Sure, what’s up?” I ask, feeling like I know what this will be about.

“You and Indie.” Yup, I was right. “Are you guys a thing?” Before I can answer, he holds up his hand and says, “The reason I ask is because I don’t want to step on any toes, man. She’s cool and yeah, I would love to take her out, but if there’s anything going on between you two, I want to steer clear of it.”

I rub the side of my face, scratching my five o’clock shadow. “I appreciate you coming to me,” I say, pausing to think about his question.

Is there anything going on between us?

Nothing more than what’s probably happening with Indie and Deacon. I’ve noticed that Indie likes to flirt, and she’s fucking good at it, but she also keeps everyone an arm’s length away. So even though I would like to believe that maybe there’s something there, I know there really isn’t.

And that should be okay with me because, just like her, I'm not in a position to start anything with someone, especially someone as strong-willed and determined as Indie. I wouldn't want to fuck up any of her finely engineered plans for her future.

It might be great, having a shot at being with her, but I know that past the curiosity of it all, it's not what either of us needs.

I shake my head. "Nah, there's nothing going on. We're just friends."

Deacon doesn't seem to buy it. "Are you sure, man? I saw the way you were looking at her last night, and then today, at the hot dog place. You looked like you wanted to shove your hot dog down my throat to get me the hell out of there."

Shit.

I guess I didn't play it as cool as I thought I did.

"I mean . . . yeah, she's pretty amazing, but I know we're in different places in our lives, headed in opposite directions, so friends works for us."

Deacon nods. "What kind of place is she in her life?"

"Honest truth?"

"Yeah."

I bite on the side of my cheek, wondering how much I should tell him, if I should speak for Indie or not. Hell, she said she'd go out to dinner with him, so maybe she is open to a relationship if it's with the right guy. Who am I to stop that?

Then again, Deacon's my friend too. Indie has told me numerous times she doesn't want anything serious in a relationship. I could see Deacon falling for Indie and falling hard; that would be difficult on him if she didn't share the same feelings.

Deciding to be careful with my words, I say, "Not sure if she's looking for anything really serious right now. I think she's more about having fun."

Deacon pulls on the back of his neck. "Yeah, that was the impression I got as well."

"But who knows," I say, for some reason. "Maybe she'll change her mind."

"Yeah, maybe." He leans back on my bed, his hands behind him as I sit at my desk, wishing for this conversation to be over. "I think I might still take her out, I mean . . . if that's okay with you."

"You don't need to ask my permission, dude."

“I know, but . . .” He bites on his lip and looks to the ceiling. “Jesus, don’t hate me for saying this, but I just get this feeling that you might like her and don’t know it yet.”

Oh, I know I like her. But there’s nothing I’m going to do about it, because when it comes to Indie, giving in to those feelings would be a slippery slope.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m good. Take her out. You’ll probably have a blast.”

“Okay,” he says with reservation. “If you’re cool with it, I’ll text her this week.”

“Do what you want. We’re good, man.”



DESPITE GOING to bed early last night, it feels like I got two hours of solid sleep, max.

I kept tossing and turning, uncomfortable in my own bed, with this heavy weight sitting on my chest from my conversation with Deacon. I meant what I said. He can do whatever he wants. I have no claim on Indie, but hell, I couldn’t stop thinking about what happens if they did go out, if Indie did break her rule and decide to date Deacon. How would that make me feel?

Not great.

But then again, it’s not like I’m making a move on her, or even like I should. We’re both going different directions in our lives and it doesn’t feel right to even consider asking her out.

Deacon is the more suitable choice—as *if I’m the one to make the decision*—as he has another year at Brentwood after this year, and so does Indie. They would be good together.

At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

Leaning back in my seat, I pull my hood over my head and close my eyes as I wait for class to start. Fuck, I’m going to have to take a nap in between classes and training today. Thankfully our locker room has some really nice couches in it.

Students filter in, but thankfully they don’t bother me; they shuffle down into the small classroom, taking their seats and ignoring the guy in

the back trying to keep the world at a distance.

That is, until Indie sits next to me.

“Here,” she says, setting something on my desk. “Looks like you need this more than me.”

Sitting up, I open my eyes to see a large coffee on my desk. I glance at her and she smiles, reaching out and lowering my hood.

“That’s better. Now drink up, sleeping is not allowed in class.”

“Did you already drink out of this?”

“Are you serious right now?”

I laugh and bring the lid to my mouth to take a large gulp. I hand it back to her and she takes a drink as well, and for some reason, her not even caring that my lips were just on the lid does something stupid to my insides—makes them all tingly and shit.

Jesus Christ, man.

“Why so tired?” she asks, getting out her notebook. Something I like about Indie? She takes handwritten notes unlike everyone else with their computers on their desks. And she changes the color of her pen, so she knows when her notes start and stop from each class, alternating between blue and red. It’s cute.

“Couldn’t find my REM cycle. Mind was racing.”

“About what?” She hands me back the cup and I take a sip, faintly tasting her cherry ChapStick.

Now, I *could* tell her the truth. I could say that Deacon came to *get my blessing* last night, and I had to explain that *you weren’t wanting a relationship*. Just to see what she thinks after seeing him yesterday. Because if I’m anything, I’m mostly honest. But when I dig deeper, I don’t think I want Deacon to be a recipient of Indie’s hugs. The feel of her against my body last night was hard—*no pun intended*—to shake off. And if they date . . . well . . . *he’ll get way more than her hugs*.

Yeah, no.

Let’s not go there, Castle.

“Everything. The season,” I say, coming up with an excuse on the fly. “Coach wants me to up my velocity to ninety-five this year, which seems next to impossible. I tap out at ninety-one. Can’t seem to get over that hump.”

“Ninety-five? Hell, I’d be lucky to throw at fifty miles an hour.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, and I’m sure it would take me about fifty tries to score a goal from midfield.”

“Only fifty?”

I nudge her shoulder playfully. “I’m still athletic.”

“Pretty sure I’m more athletic than you.”

“Uh, are you serious with that?” I ask, feeling more alive.

“There’s no competition, Lincoln. I’m easily the more athletic one between the two of us.”

“How do you figure?” I ask boldly, feeding off her spitfire attitude.

“Well, the women’s soccer physical test alone debunks your theory, but I have to be able to juggle a ball with my feet while keeping my eyes on the field. Agility alone, I have you beat, hands down. All you do is stand on a mound and throw a ball hard.”

“All I do—” I suck in a sharp breath. “I have to field too, and bat.”

She rolls her eyes. “We all know batting is a joke when it comes to pitchers.” Cupping her mouth, she whisper-shouts, “Easy out, folks. Easy out.” With a raise of her brow, she chuckles to herself and drinks more coffee.

“Wow, tell me how you really feel.”

“Okay. Yes, you might have a great physique and sure, you can toss a basketball at an arcade game, but when put on the field, there’s not a chance you’d be able to beat me. Hell, I bet you anything if you pitched to me, I’d be able to hit off you.”

“It’s sickening how confident you are.” We both laugh, still waiting for our teacher to show up. “Anyway, Coach Disik says it’s all in the legs. If I build up my leg strength, it will translate to velocity. I’ve been spending more time in the gym, focusing my efforts there, but it seems to be doing nothing.”

“Maybe you’re doing the wrong workouts. In soccer, we’re all about leg strength and agility. I can take you on the field and teach you a few things.”

“Is that so?”

She smiles and removes the cup from my hand. After a large sip, she hands it back. “Yeah. Stick with me, Castle, and you’ll be hitting ninety-five before you know it.”

Just then, our professor walks in and sets his bag on the desk. He sits down and says, “Lesson plans, they’re due in two weeks. I want drafts by the end of the week.”

Indie and I both look at each other, eyes wide.
Whispering, I say, “Uh, want to grab lunch after this?”
She whispers, “I think that would be best.”

Chapter Nine

INDIE

“Where do you want to go?” Lincoln asks, hands gripping the straps of his backpack. Despite looking a little tired, he’s handsome as ever in a black hoodie and jeans that hang low on his hips. It’s casual, but his tapered torso does all the right things for his form and sex appeal. Not to mention his messy hair, or the light tan on his face, which makes his blue eyes seem even bluer this morning.

“Lakeview?”

“I’m down for that.” As if it’s the most natural thing, he loops his arm over my shoulders and we start walking toward the dining hall next to the athletic dorms. It’s not only the dining hall I’m most familiar with, since my entire freshman year was spent eating there, but it’s the prettiest because it looks out over Lake Michigan.

Lincoln’s cologne is making my head feel dizzy . . . and possibly confused. “Uh, aren’t you hot in that sweatshirt?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you take it off?”

“You looking for me to take my clothes off, Indie? At least wait until we’re somewhere private.”

“I see that coffee has kicked in.”

He stops and takes his backpack off, handing it to me. I hold it for him as he reaches behind his head and starts to pull his sweatshirt off. As if in slow motion, the back of his shirt starts to lift, which then lifts with the

front of his shirt, showing off one of the most amazing six-packs and hip divots I've ever seen.

No wonder his jeans hang low on his hips—there's nothing there to hold them up.

The waistband of his black briefs hugs his muscled skin, and rests low, just low enough that it makes my mouth water with curiosity.

But those abs, oh my God, clearly defined and sculpted, stacked one on top of the other, with a thin line of trimmed hair that travels down to the waistband of his briefs. My fingers itch to reach out and touch that hair, to see where it leads, to dip my hand past his waistband and see if the rumors floating around school are true.

“Want me to take my other shirt off too?” Lincoln asks, his deep voice startling my eyes up to his.

“What? No. Sorry . . .” I bite my bottom lip and look away, an awkward laugh bubbling up my throat. “Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. It's just”—I lean forward and say—“you have great abs.”

“Right back at ya, Mayhem.” He winks and ties his sweatshirt loosely around his hips and for some reason, it adds about twenty more hot points to his overall appearance, if that's even possible. His light blue shirt clings tightly to his biceps, making them look like boulders in his arms, and the hem of his shirt is loose, accentuating how fit he is.

I've always been into bulkier guys. Men like Deacon, who fit the description of a lineman, but Lincoln is making me think I've been wrong about my own taste my entire life, because I can't seem to stop staring at him, especially after seeing his abs. That image has been burned into my brain, and I'm pretty sure it's going to be next to impossible to get it out of my mind.

“Come on.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder again and leads me toward Lakeview.

This time, I lean in closer, letting myself marvel in this moment.



“Is it weird that we got the same thing?” Lincoln asks, looking at our steak salads.

“It would be weird if we were sharing one between us.”

He picks his fork up and points it at me. “You’re right about that. Fries is one thing; salad is another.”

“Don’t forget coffee and donuts. We’ve done both.”

“How could I forget? Should we start making a list of acceptable shareable foods between us?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I say. “If we want to keep things fresh between us, we live on the edge. No list.”

Lincoln playfully holds up his hands. “Oh damn, look out.”

He makes me laugh . . . way too much. I crave his company now. He’s so playful and fun to be around. It’s easy to see why everyone likes him. As Deacon said, he’s a genuinely nice guy once he lets you into his circle. And I know now that he’s not intentionally a snob, either. He’s not even picky. He’s just . . . focused. Looking at the end goal. *And I admire that. It seems we’re more alike than I thought.*

“So, about those lesson plans,” he says.

“Yeah. I blame my one-track mind on the physical testing as to why we haven’t done any of it yet.”

He pulls his binder from his backpack and sets it in front of me. “What’s this?” I ask, but he just nods for me to open it. When I do, I see lesson plans typed out with both our names at the top. “Uh, you did all of this without me? You looked just as surprised as me in class that we hadn’t done the draft.”

“I was surprised, because I’d forgotten I’d put this together and hadn’t shown you.” I watch him shovel another impressive mouthful of his salad. The man enjoys his food. Mind you, this steak salad is one of my favorites too. “They’re plans from a previous teammate—”

Slamming the folder shut, I shake my head and hand it back to him. “I don’t copy work.”

“Neither do I,” he says, sounding insulted. “It’s an outline, a starting place, and we fill it all out to what we want to do. Jesus, Mayhem.”

Instant guilt swarms me. “Ugh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

He shrugs. “It’s cool. But contrary to what the basic student population believes about the baseball team, we’re stand-up guys who work our asses off in the classroom and on the field.”

“I know.” I reach across the table and take his hand in mine to give it a squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes soften and he squeezes my hand back. “It’s okay, Indie.”

For a few brief moments, we stay like this, holding hands, staring at each other, an unspoken promise of respect passing between us. It's an odd sensation, as if I've just discovered this undying loyalty deep inside my bones. I'm giving it to this man that I've only known for a few weeks, but a man I feel strongly about, someone who'd offer the same unspoken loyalty to me.

"Hey, you guys. What's going on?" Startled, I quickly look up to see Hartley and Deacon standing at the edge of our table. Deacon's slightly behind Hartley, but I feel the blaze of his eyes on me.

Lincoln leans back and pushes his hand through his hair. "Uh . . . hey there."

"What are you two doing?" Hartley's face is all smiles while Deacon looks concerned. This overwhelming need to explain consumes me, and it bubbles up and out past my lips before I can stop it.

"I insulted Lincoln. I was saying sorry."

Hartley laughs, pulls out a chair, and flips it around so he's sitting in it backward but still facing us. "We all insult Lincoln. Don't let him fool you. The boy has thicker skin than he lets on. He just likes to play the victim card for sympathy."

"Fuck you." Lincoln chuckles as Deacon takes the seat next to me.

"Best way to make it up to him? Rub his nipple."

"What?" My eyes widen, mouth dropping open as I look at Lincoln. He just shrugs and continues eating his salad. "He made me touch his nipple the first night I met him."

"Not surprised." Hartley plucks a piece of steak from Lincoln's salad and plops it in his mouth. "He loves getting his coins caressed. Especially when he's drunk; the dude runs around with his shirt off, thrusting his chest at you."

"I've seen pictures," Deacon chimes in. "And I hate to admit it, but Rusty showed me a video—"

"Okay, okay," Lincoln says, trying to tamp down Deacon with his hand. "No need to get into details."

I prop my chin on my hand and look between all three men. "No, please, let's get into detail."

Deacon looks for permission but not Hartley, he jumps right in, stealing another piece of steak, this time getting a swat on the hand from Lincoln. "Lincoln once ran naked down the street with a red cup covering his junk."

“Dude, come on,” Lincoln says, giving me an apologetic look.

“What? It’s true. It was one of your finer moments while wasted.”

“And how many moments do you have in the drunk archive?” I ask. Lincoln moves his fork around his salad and barely lifts his eyes to smirk at me.

My breath catches, and my heart stills from that one shameless look.

“Enough,” he answers.

“By far the best drunk on the team.”

Deacon groans. “You’re the fun drunk, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Lincoln says, smirking, eyes still on me.

“Figures.” Deacon rests his arm on the back of my chair, and I watch Lincoln’s eyes quickly flick to where his hand falls and then return to his salad. *Connection broken.* “I’m the annoying drunk who borders on one shot too many and spending the rest of the night in the bathroom.”

Hartley takes Lincoln’s drink off his tray and manages a large gulp before Lincoln yanks it away. “That’s vital information to know if you’re living with us. You’re not a hamper puker, are you?”

Deacon shakes his head. “Nah, even though I might be a lightweight, I know porcelain when I see it. I make it to a toilet every time.”

“Wow, isn’t this a great conversation,” I say sarcastically while trying to eat my salad.

“Hey, you wanted the details,” Lincoln points out.

“I tend to forget men are disgusting.”

“Oh bullshit,” Lincoln says. “I’ve heard some of the shit you girls talk about at parties. You’re nasty.”

Chuckling, I ignore him and go back to my salad.

“Are we still on for this weekend?” Hartley asks. “Everyone’s asking.”

“On for what?” Deacon asks, looking between the guys.

Lincoln finishes up his salad and then pushes it to the middle of the table. “Our house usually holds a party before the fall season starts. It’s a big bash. I honestly forgot about it until just now.”

“I think we should talk about it with the rest of the guys tonight, but I’m game. We have to throw something and I’d rather it be now than later in the season since games are just around the corner,” Hartley says.

“Yeah, I get that.” Lincoln pulls on the back of his neck. “I’m game if you guys are.”

“I’m good with it,” Deacon says and then turns toward me. “You coming, Indie?”

“Ah, Indie doesn’t go to parties, isn’t that right?” Lincoln asks me.

“Not usually,” I answer, feeling a challenge in Lincoln’s gaze. “But I’ve been doing things a little differently this year, so maybe I will go.”

“Bring your girls with you,” Hartley says. “We never get the women’s soccer team to do anything.”

I smile and take a sip of my drink. “That’s because, like I told Lincoln when I first met him, we don’t typically hang out with douchebags.”

Lincoln holds his arms out. “And yet, here you are, eating lunch surrounded by them.”

“Speak for yourself,” Deacon says, pulling me into his side. “Stick with me. I don’t carry a douchebag bone in my body.”

“He might be right,” Hartley says. “I haven’t detected any douchiness since he’s moved in.” Gripping Lincoln on the shoulder, he says, “Now this guy, on the other hand . . . shall we revisit his obsession with people touching his nipples?”

“I think we covered it,” Lincoln says, looking slightly irritated. He looks at his phone and then shifts out of his chair. “I have to get to the training room. I’ll see you guys at the house.” He nods toward me. “I’ll email you the outline, Indie. See you around.”

He’s out of his seat before I can even say bye, leaving me with Deacon and a retreating Hartley, who says over his shoulder, “I have class and want to get a good seat. This professor is so softly spoken, I can barely hear her, so I need to sit in front of the class to avoid failing. Catch you guys later.”

And then there were two, which feels . . . odd. *Yet with Lincoln, it was easy.*

Deacon moves to Lincoln’s seat, so he’s sitting across from me. “How’s your day been so far?”

I run my tongue over my teeth, hoping there’s no leftover salad bits stuck in them while I use all the energy in my body not to look at Lincoln’s retreating back. “Pretty good,” I answer. “Nothing too thrilling besides all the nipple talk. You?”

“Good. Hit the weight room earlier this morning and now getting ready to go to the library to study. Where are you headed to next?”

“I have class in an hour and a half. I could probably go to the library with you if you don’t mind company.”

“I’d like that.” Then he smiles, and even though his dimples poke through his cheeks—making him look extra adorable—I don’t feel the stirring of energy I feel with Lincoln. *This* feels like friendship.

Whereas Lincoln? When he smirks, laughs, puts his arm around me or on the back of my chair, it twists my insides, makes my knees feel weak, and causes me to lose my breath at times. *That* feels terrifying.

After we return the salad trays, we head down the stairs toward the library. Deacon bumps my shoulder and says, “You’re quiet.”

“Yeah, just thinking.”

“About Lincoln?” he asks, straightforward and upfront.

There’s no use lying to Deacon, and it wouldn’t be fair to him, so I decide to tell him the truth. “Yeah, a little.”

“Figured. I saw it in the way your eyes saddened when he left.”

“They didn’t sadden.”

Deacon lightly chuckles. “One thing I pride myself in is being observant. On the field, I watch all the guys, look for their tells, and that overlaps into real life. When Lincoln announced that he was taking off, I saw the drop in your eyes, the tiniest turn down of your lips. It’s okay, Indie. I get it.”

I grip the folder Lincoln gave me tightly, pressing it into my chest, wishing I didn’t have these weird feelings flowing through me. I wish I could forget about them, let them go, and move on, but every time I even hear the mention of Lincoln’s name, my mind reacts in a way that sends a signal through my entire body, warming it up from the inside out.

“It’s . . . complicated,” I reply, feeling so guilty that my stomach grows nauseous. “And it just came out of nowhere, Deacon. I don’t want you thinking—”

“Hey.” He stops me and pulls me into a hug, his strong arms so similar to Rusty’s that they instantly comfort me. “It’s okay, I get it. I really do. I saw the way you kept looking at him the other night and I thought maybe there was something there but wasn’t too sure.”

“There’s nothing there,” I say. “I mean, nothing of substance. We’re friends and I mean that.”

He holds me out by my shoulders and studies me. “I see that, and it looks like a pure friendship.”

I twist my lips to the side, wondering how Deacon became such a good guy. Their parents must be amazing people to raise two such empathetic and

kind individuals.

I sigh and say, “Well, it doesn’t matter either way, because we’re just not on the same path, so . . .” I shrug, unsure how to finish that sentence.

“Maybe your paths will cross at some point. Come on.” He takes my hand in his and walks me toward the library. “Let’s get some studying done.” And right then I understand the pull I have with Deacon. *He’s just like Rusty.* With Rusty, I felt immediate friendship, like you would with a long-lost cousin. And it’s here with Deacon too. At least he knows where I stand . . . I think. *But do I know?*



DEACON: *Thanks for the study sesh the other day, I got so much done.*

Indie: *So you said.*

Deacon: *Okay, I’m awkward and weird and don’t know how to talk to girls. But I was wondering if you wanted to go out for pizza or something? Strictly as friends.*

Indie: *Strictly as friends, huh?*

Deacon: *Yeah, figured I could at least get you to hook me up with one of the girls on your team, given you’re not interested.*

Indie: *Who’s to say I’m not interested?*

Deacon: *Both of us.*

Indie: *LOL. Want me to bring Scarlett?*

Deacon: *As a potential love interest?*

Indie: *Problem number one: saying potential love interest. And Scarlett is not for you. I love her like a sister and I’m telling you right now, she’s too much for you to handle.*

Deacon: *I can feel that. As long as she’s not taking off to masturbate in the restaurant bathroom, I’m cool.*

Indie: *Can’t make any promises. Does six work? At Deluca’s?*

Deacon: *Works for me. See you then.*



“ARE YOU USING ME AS A SHIELD?” Scarlett asks, blowing a bubble with the gum in her mouth.

“A shield? What are you talking about?”

“Deacon asks you out to pizza and you bring me along. It’s obvious you don’t want to be alone with him.”

“I was alone with him the other day in the library.”

We walk along the sidewalk, toward Deluca’s, which is a few blocks away from our house, one of the reasons I chose it. If I don’t have to drive somewhere, I try not to.

“Okay, so why am I here? Isn’t this like a date or something?” Scarlett has an ice pack on her head. We came straight from practice where she crashed into a freshman today who wasn’t paying attention. They hit head on head, the crushing sound of their skulls a sickening sound that’s finally starting to fade out of my memory, thank God. When they got up, I could already see the welt forming on a very unhappy Scarlett, so I can understand the current attitude right now.

“It’s not a date. We came to an understanding that we’re just going to be friends.”

“Look at you.” Scarlett pats me on the back. “Friend-zoning every hot guy that comes within a five-foot radius of you. Hope you’re good with celibacy during the season. Lord knows, I’m not. Which reminds me, please tell me we’re going to Hartley’s house this weekend. I could really use a hookup at this point. The vibrator is not getting the job done.”

“We can,” I say, even though I was already planning on it.

“Thank God. I’m going to find myself a beefy football player to get it on with. Maybe Hutton.”

“Scarlett, you’re better than that.”

She taps her chin with her finger. “I’m really not. I have no problem going to the king of orgasms looking for a release. No problem at all.”

When we arrive at Deluca’s I reach for the door and Scarlett pulls me to the side. “Just so I have everything straight. This isn’t a date, you’re not looking to date Deacon, and we’re here to try to find someone else to hook him up with?”

“Pretty much.”

“And you’re paying for my pizza?”

“Yes,” I say on a sigh.

“Okay.” She motions to the door. “Then let’s go, I need to sit down and remove this ice.”

We walk into the restaurant and immediately spot Deacon sitting in a booth in the back. It's hard to miss him. *What on earth did their parents feed those burly boys?*

"Ugh, you're stupid," Scarlett mutters as we walk toward him. "He's so hot."

"Then why don't you go out with him?" I ask through a smile as we approach.

"You know I would eat him up and spit him out. He's too nice."

It's true. They would not mesh well together. Deacon seems to be the sensitive type—in tune with his feelings—so much so that it would *not* work with Scarlett. That's probably why it wouldn't work out with me and him either.

We're not big express-your-feelings-type people, which is why Scarlett and I are best friends. We don't deal with drama, we let it roll off our shoulders, and we aren't easily offended, unlike some of the girls on our team. It's also why we're in a townhome by ourselves so we don't have to deal with the complicated feelings of everyone else.

"Hey ladies," Deacon says, standing from the booth and pulling us both into a hug.

"Oh, you smell nice. Did you catch a whiff of that, Indie?"

Yup, already regretting bringing her to this dinner.

I look up at Deacon and say, "Good job cleaning yourself."

He laughs a good hearty laugh. "Thank you. Scrubbed all the deep parts of my body."

"Cleanliness is key when it comes to landing a girl." Scarlett takes a seat and lowers her ice. "Trust me, the dirty guys are talked about often in the locker rooms."

"Whoa, what happened to your head?"

Scarlett pours herself some water from the pitcher on the table. "Freshman casualty. She was trying to prove herself and ran into me when not paying attention. Classic story of a rookie show-off. But lucky for her, my knee also crashed into her crotch and she was taken off the field telling everyone I broke her privates. I got off easy."

"And here I thought only guys had it rough when it came to the crotch."

I shake my head. "No, trust me, it hurts for a girl too."

"Good to know." He fidgets with his drink and looks toward the kitchen. "I ordered a large cheese pizza, I hope that's okay."

Scarlett takes one of the complimentary breadsticks and crunches down on it. “Love cheese. Thanks.” Chewing, she looks between the two of us and then groans. “If this is going to be awkward, I’m leaving.

“It’s not awkward. You’re making it awkward,” I snap at her.

I never should have brought her.

She points at her chest with her breadstick. “I’m making it awkward? Uh, no. You two can barely look at each other. Let’s just get it out in the open.” Scarlett taps Deacon on the hand with her breadstick and then points to me. “This one right here? Issues. Okay? She doesn’t know what she wants and even though you’re a great guy, you’ll only get hurt in the end.”

“Scarlett—”

“It’s true.”

“Yeah, but we already talked about it . . . sort of.”

Deacon clasps his hands together and like the kind soul that he is, he says, “Even though it would be awesome if Indie was interested in dating, I know that’s not the case. Linc warned me, and I still tried. But at least I gave it a shot.”

“Hold up,” I say, sitting taller. From the corner of my eye, I see Scarlett’s lips stretch into a full-on grin. “Lincoln warned you to stay away?”

“What? No.” Deacon shakes his head. “I didn’t mean it like that.” He’s backtracking, I can hear the fear in his voice. “I was just asking him about you because I saw how he looked at you. Anyway, he just mentioned that you might not be interested in a relationship.”

“He said that?”

“Uhh . . . something like that. He was nice though, told me maybe I might be the one who could change your mind. Not that I have those powers, but you know, maybe you would be open to me, but we know that’s not the case and Jesus Christ, I’m actually sweating.”

“Oh this is so much fun. I’m glad I came,” Scarlett says, chewing loud enough for the table next to us to hear.

“Please don’t be mad at him. He didn’t do anything wrong, and I never should have said anything.” Poor Deacon, an innocent slip of the tongue and his brow is breaking out in a sweat. *See? Too nice for me.*

“It’s fine,” I say, even though it doesn’t feel fine in my chest. I want to leave this restaurant right now and charge toward Lincoln’s house to confront him. I don’t need him speaking on my behalf, especially about my

dating life. But poor Deacon looks like he's about to have a nervous breakdown, which is why I find myself saying, "It's cool. No problem. We're here because we're friends and we're hanging out, trying to figure out who would be perfect for Deacon."

"Uh-huh," Scarlett says, annoyingly. I kick her under the table, and she buckles over.

"Oh sorry, was that your shin?"

"You know damn well it was," she says through clenched teeth.

Just then, the pizza arrives and we clear the center of the table to make room for the giant pie.

Before we dig in, Deacon clears his throat and says, "Maybe we should start this dinner over." Addressing Scarlett he says, "You scare me." She laughs out loud. And then he turns to me. "We're friends."

"Could not have said it any better."

Picking up a piece of pizza, he says, "Now tell me about this freshman who clocked you in the head; is she hot?"

"She's hot for sure," Scarlett says with a teasing voice. "But she's also a lesbian, so I don't think your burly man bod is going to do it for her."

"Okay, next." He chuckles and we start going over the single girls on our team.

We spend the rest of the night pulling up pictures on our phones, getting a feel for Deacon's type, and diving deep into his need to be in a relationship. He really enjoys spoiling his girl, doting on her, and even though I'm not there with him, it does make my heart grow fonder of Deacon. I *want* to find him the perfect person.

Deacon and I split the bill—I made him—then Scarlett goes to the bathroom while Deacon and I head out to the front of the restaurant to wait for her.

"Do you think Kennedy will be at the party this weekend?" Deacon asks about the girl we all agreed upon for him.

"I'll make sure of it."

"Thanks." He pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. "I'm really grateful that we could be friends, Indie."

I look up and prop my chin on the barrel of his chest. "I am too."

"Uh, hey."

Deacon and I both turn to see Lincoln standing in a pair of sweats, wearing a Brentwood Baseball shirt and a hat that makes his eyes almost

impossible to see.

“Hey man,” Deacon says, releasing me.

Lincoln looks between the two of us and clears his throat while pulling on the back of his neck and looking at the ground. “Picking up pizza for the guys. If I knew you were here, I would have made you bring it home.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Silence falls between us, and it has officially become the most awkward moment of my life.

“Haven’t seen you around,” Lincoln says to me.

“Busy,” I answer, feeling this need to yell at him for some reason, a reason that I need to go home to dissect, not act on right now. If he asked me what was wrong, I’d have no idea how to explain it.

“Well, guess I’ll get the pizza.”

“Okay, see you at home,” Deacon says, giving him a wave as Lincoln pushes past us. When Lincoln is out of sight, Deacon releases a pent-up breath and says, “That interaction just made my balls shrivel up.”

“Thank you for the comedic reprieve.” I let out a low laugh and take in a deep breath as well. “That was weird, huh?”

“Really weird.”

He goes to say something else, but I press my hand to his chest and cut him off. “Can you make me a promise, as your friend?”

“Uh-oh, the friend card is being pulled already?” When I nod, he says, “What is it?”

“Don’t talk about me to Lincoln. Things are weird already with him and having a third person in the mix would just make it worse.”

“Could not agree more.” Deacon pretends to wash his hands and then holds them up. “I’m stepping away. Whatever is between you two, is between you two alone.”

“Thank you.” I give him another hug. “And for the record, there is nothing going on.”

He smiles. “Okay, Indie.”

We head in different directions, as I text Scarlett to meet me at home, I keep thinking about how much I do *not* want to see Lincoln walk out with those pizzas. And even though I often want to be around him, right now, I’m too . . . confused. *And does he really make my eyes sadden? Is that actually a thing?*

Later that night, after I'm tucked into bed, ready to set my alarm, my phone vibrates in my hand.

Lincoln: *Did you finish looking over the draft I sent you?*

Weird that he's texting me now. Then again, there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason where this guy is concerned.

Indie: *Was planning on sending it back tomorrow.*

Lincoln: *Okay, don't drop the ball.*

My brow furrows, and I unplug my phone so I can roll to my back and text him.

Indie: *I'm not dropping the ball. I just have a lot on my plate.*

Lincoln: *Okay.*

For some reason, that doesn't seem like an understanding okay.

Indie: *What are you not saying, Lincoln?*

Lincoln: *Nothing. Good night.*

Indie: *Oh no, there is something you're holding back, so just say it.*

Lincoln: *Fine. Seems like you have time to go on a date with Deacon, so there can't be too much on your plate.*

My face flames with anger, and now I'm sitting up on my bed, typing away.

Indie: *You can't be serious with that comment.*

Lincoln: *Yeah, this shouldn't be done via text. Just send it to me tomorrow and I'll give it one more look through. Good night.*

Indie: *You'll get it tomorrow. Jesus. Don't be an asshole, Lincoln.*

When he doesn't reply, I growl in frustration and plug my phone back in to charge. Then I flop back on my bed and stare at the ceiling.

What the hell was that?

Chapter Ten

LINCOLN

“Didn’t expect to see you in here,” Asher says, coming into the ice room where I’m sitting in a metal tub full of ice, stewing in my own coldness.

He grabs a bucket from the ice machine and starts filling it up.

“Been working my legs harder. Needed to ice them down.”

“Cool,” Asher says over the tumbling of ice. “Trying to hit ninety-five?”

“Yeah. Clocked in at ninety-two today.”

“So you must be doing something right.”

“Or wrong,” I mutter, still feeling the boil of anger simmering at the base of my spine.

“What do you mean by that?” Asher asks. He comes over to the ice bath right next to mine and pours his bucket of ice inside. Pushing his shorts down and taking his shirt off, he steps into the water and hisses while he lowers himself all the way down. “Fuck,” he says quietly.

“Mean by what?” I can play dumb.

“You’ve been doing something wrong.” He finally looks over at me. I can’t fucking lie to Asher, no matter how hard I want to, the guy has the most discerning eyes. They pierce right through you.

“Man, I’m . . . fuck, I don’t know what’s going on with me.”

“Does this have to do with Indie?”

Jesus, am I really that transparent?

“I wish it didn’t, but yeah, I think so. I’m just . . . I’m fucked in the head right now and I don’t know how to get my mental game straight. I had so much anger built up inside me today, it was propelling me off the mound. But I don’t work like that. I don’t allow anger to fuel my game.”

“So, what happened then? In the last week, what made you all fucked in the head?”

“I don’t think it’s been the last week. It’s been since before we came back to campus, ever since I met Indie. I feel so fucking uneasy. I don’t want a relationship, but I also can’t stop thinking about her, man.”

“Sounds like you want a relationship.”

“I don’t.” I shake my head. “I really don’t. And then I keep seeing her with Deacon, and that’s messing me up. I saw them hugging outside Deluca’s when I went to get the pizza for dinner. I felt like punching a hole through Deluca’s front door, and then that night I was a total ass through text message.”

“Dude, it’s obvious, you want her.”

“Yeah.” I push my wet hand through my hair. “I know.”

“Okay, then go get her. Doesn’t seem like rocket science.” Everything is so black and white with Asher, but it’s not that simple.

“Won’t work. For one, Deacon is into her.”

“Hmm, yeah, that’s not favorable.”

“Thanks.” I laugh and then dip my body lower into the water. *That’s on me. I told the dude to pursue Indie.* “Fuck, I just need to . . . I don’t know, put my attention into something else.”

“Or somebody else,” Asher says as he winces and takes a deep breath, the cold probably reaching to his bones now. “Is there anyone who you might be able to hook up with that could be a fuck buddy? Get your mind off Indie?”

I think about it and come up short. “Not really. I’ve never had that relationship with anyone. Have only really double-dipped maybe a handful of times.”

“Have you tried using your hand? Works for me.”

“How you’ve been able to hang out with your hand for so long is beyond me, man.”

“Easier that way,” he says. “No complications. That’s why I’m over here with a clear mental game and you’re over there, suffering, hung up on a girl that you think you like but you don’t want to like that maybe likes you but doesn’t want to like you. Hell, man. It’s too much of a mouthful to even say at this point.”

“And here I thought you’d be the helpful one out of all my friends.”

He lifts his hand out of the water and waves it at me. “This was a very helpful suggestion.”

“I already do that,” I say, lifting my hand as well. “And it seems to have increased lately.”

“Nah, you got to pace yourself, man. If you do it too often, then the buildup isn’t as great.”

I study Asher, intentionally study him, and ask, “Dude, you need to get laid if you think buildup with your hand is foreplay.”

He scratches the side of his jaw. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I am. The house party is tomorrow, so why not try to hook up with someone?”

“Nah, you know that’s not my scene. I’ll be in my room with the door locked and my headphones on.”

It’s true. I think there’s only been one time since I’ve known Asher that he’s gone to a party and had a few sips of a beer. After a drunk girl “stumbled” into him and fumbled with his cock, he was done.

“This is our last year, man, so have some fun. After this, you’re going to be working your ass off in the minors, vying for a spot in prime time.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait,” he says with hope in his eyes.

Sighing, I say, “At least just sit out back with me for a bit. Have one beer.”

He looks off to the side and sinks lower into the bath. “I’ll think about it, but only because I want to see you embarrass yourself with Mayhem.”

“Thanks. You’re such a good friend.”

“Anytime.” He smiles to himself. “She’s going to be there, right?”

“Not sure, but if I were to guess, I’d say probably, and I bet she’ll be with Deacon.”

“If that’s the case, maybe I’ll have that beer with you.” I pick up an ice cube and chuck it at him. He laughs and swats it away. “You’re going to have to work harder than that to peg me.”

“Wait until our next scrimmage, I’ll make sure to nick you.”

“Don’t doubt it.



THE BOOM of the bass is thundering beneath my feet.

The raucous sound of the student athlete population fills our house.

I can smell the beer.

And instead of hanging out downstairs, I’m pulling an Asher and waiting in my bedroom.

I’m dressed. Put on a pair of jeans and a simple navy-blue shirt, nothing too crazy. My hair is styled and I spritzed some cologne on while I talked to my moms on the phone. Mama asked how my grades were doing and of course how my pursuit to ninety-five was coming along, and Mom, well, she was fixated on asking me about Indie. I finally told her she was seeing Deacon, one of my roommates. That shut her up really quick and I felt bad, because I heard the disappointment in her voice. I think she was convinced there was a love connection at Boondoggles, when in fact, it was more of an irritation.

Claiming my attendance was needed at a small gathering—which I know they know is a lie—I told them I loved them and then hung up. That was half an hour ago. The party has started, I can hear Hutton downstairs yelling every time he scores in beer pong, and Rusty’s already starting to sing Karaoke, his deep, off-key voice trailing up the stairs. Katy Perry is his jam.

Hartley has texted me a few times, asking where I am, and I keep texting back that I’ll be down there in a second.

But I’m still holding out in my room.

I don’t want to go downstairs and see Deacon with Indie. Are they holding hands? Have they kissed? Have they had sex?

I’ve watched Deacon constantly like a stalker, seeing if he looked happier, because that’s a sure sign of a guy getting fucked—an ever-present smile. But the guy is already so goddamn happy all the time, I can’t tell if he’s just being himself or if he’s actually gotten anywhere with Indie.

“Christ,” I mutter, pushing both hands through my hair and then pulling them back, sticking the strands on all ends.

This shouldn’t matter.

It doesn't matter.

I just need to convince myself that Indie was a temporary speed bump, but I'm moving on.

"Come on, Castle," I say into the mirror that hangs on my door. I straighten my hair out and then take a deep breath. "Mind over matter."

I open my door and follow the noise down the stairs where the living space is already crowded. That was quick.

People call out my name and I toss around high fives while I make my way to the kitchen to grab a beer. That's where I spot Asher and he's not alone . . .

Hold my dick while I gawk, because he's actually talking to a girl.

What the . . .

A hand clasps me on the shoulder and I hear, "Dude, don't stare, it might scare them."

Hartley hands me a beer as I ask, "Who's the girl?"

"No idea. I think she might be a roommate of one of the female athletes here. I haven't seen her around the events center or training room."

She's dressed in a yellow dress that looks like it's made for Sunday school rather than for a party at an athlete's house. "Who does she remind you of?"

"An extremely shy version of Zooey Deschanel," Hartley says without skipping a beat.

I nod. "Yup, thank you, that would have driven me crazy." I take a sip of my beer and glance around the kitchen. "How's the rest of the party?"

"Good. The freshmen are keeping a good . . . what the fuck?" Hartley yells, his voice angry. His eyes immediately go dark and his brow narrows as he stares at something . . . or someone across the room.

"What, man?"

"I told her not to fucking come to this."

"Who?"

"Alice."

"Alice, as in Alice Taylor?"

"Yup," Hartley says. "I have to go take care of this."

I press my hand against Hartley's chest. "Go easy on her, man. Don't embarrass her." But as I stare at Hartley's face, I know my words are going in one ear and out the other.

He pushes past me and goes to Alice who looks a little lost, but also excited to be here.

Hartley has known Alice since they were infants. She's the daughter of Jake Taylor, the greatest quarterback of all time, and she transferred this year. Jake personally asked Hartley to keep an eye on his baby girl.

Apparently, Hartley is taking that request to heart.

Looks like the party is off to a great start. Hartley's most likely about to get in a fight with Alice—she doesn't take well to his bossiness, or so I've been told—Asher is talking to some Zoey lookalike, and I'm just waiting for the moment when I spot—

Holy . . .

Fuck . . .

Indie.

Indie in a pair of jean shorts that barely cover her ass, a form-fitting black shirt. Her straightened hair is dancing across her shoulders.

She's . . . fuck.

She's hot.

Her tits are barely contained in her shirt, her lips are glossy and screaming to be fucked, and her eyes are heavily highlighted with mascara, making them stand out even more than before.

I grip my beer tighter, not realizing how desperately I wanted to see her, and now wishing I never did. Because she looks all kinds of good, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Especially when Deacon walks up to her with a goofy grin on his face, pulling her into a hug and kissing the top of her head. She laughs up at him, cups his freshly shaven face and then holds him around the waist.

Yup, can't do this. No fucking thank you.

Beer clutched to my chest, I turn away from them and make my way to the back of the house and into the backyard where there are fewer people. I spot a vacant chair near the property fence with absolutely no one in sight and claim it as my sulking spot.

I take a seat and then lift my beer to my lips, gulping down about half of it before coming up for air.

This is what my junior year has come to: me, drinking by myself in a rickety lawn chair, scowling at the back of my house.

How the mighty have fallen.

Why does she have to look so damn good tonight? Then again, like it would matter. If she came here in her sweats and a simple shirt, with her hair tied up in a ponytail, I probably would have thought the same thing.

She's so fucking naturally gorgeous.

"What are you doing over here all by yourself?" Hutton asks, his eyes a little hazy, trouble written all over his face.

There is an unsuspecting girl who's going to be wooed by this man tonight and frankly, I feel bad for her. Hutton, although a nice guy, will never commit to anyone.

"Needed some fresh air."

"It's stuffy as fuck in there. It got crowded faster than I expected. I told the freshmen to hold people from entering for now."

"Smart." I take a smaller sip of my beer this time.

"Well, you're boring."

"Thanks, man."

"Sure." He claps me on the back and goes to stand when I spot Scarlett walking up toward us. "Oh shit," Hutton mutters. "Is it just me, or does she have dick on the brain?"

"Nope, not just you."

"Hey boys," Scarlett says, sizing Hutton up who stands and shifts in place.

Out of all the girls Hutton knows, Scarlett's the one who has him tied up in knots. She could get him to do *anything* she wants at the snap of her finger, even though he's never fucked her.

One night, he's told me multiple times. He just needs one night to get her out of his system. Then he can move past this strange . . . obsession.

"Scarlett, what's up?" Hutton says, sticking a hand in his pocket.

"I'm sick of using my vibrator. I came here for you."

Damn.

Looks like he's about to be granted that one night.

A grin spreads across Hutton's face. "Then get the hell upstairs, woman."

If only it were that simple for everyone else.

She holds out her hand, and he takes it. Calling over her shoulder, Scarlett says, "Indie's looking for you by the way. Pretty sure she's been chomping at the bit to chew your head off."

“Great,” I say sarcastically while drinking my beer. “Tell her I’m back here.”

“You got it.” Hutton pulls Scarlett in closer and presses his lips to hers. They both stumble forward and laugh, then disappear into the house.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Hutton is the one who’s going to have to look out.

Indie pops through the back door, brow furrowed, and I realize I was wrong again.

Nope, I’m the one who’s going to have to look out.

I silently beg for the chair to swallow me whole, help me disappear into the grass, anything that will take me away from this moment, but then she spots me.

She charges toward me and even in all her anger, she’s fucking beautiful. Her hair blows in the wind, her tits bounce toward me, and her long legs eat up the grass as she makes it to me in no time.

Hand on her hip, she says, “Why are you being an asshole?”

“That’s quite the greeting.” I down the rest of my beer and set it on the grass next to me, then stand so we’re eye to eye.

“What did you expect? A hug?”

I open my arms wide and say, “Yeah.” She doesn’t move. She’s really pissed. Lowering my arms, I say, “Look, Indie—”

“No, you look, Lincoln.” She steps up to me, her flowery perfume inching up my nose, shooting my brain into a dizzy spell as she pokes me in the chest. “You had no right to be rude to me the other night. I got the project done.”

“I know,” I say, staring down at her lips. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s right you’re sorry. Friends don’t treat each other like that.”

Ah yes, you’re friends. Best be remembering that, Lincoln, as you stare at her tits and back to her eyes.

“You look good.” The compliment slips past my lips before I can stop myself, and I wonder for a brief second if I drank more alcohol without knowing it. Because that’s how I feel right now—drunk.

But it might just be drunk with lust.

“Do you really think a compliment is going to work on me?”

“Maybe?” I try to say cutely.

“It didn’t,” she deadpans.

I shove my hands in my pockets and shrug. “It was worth a shot.”

“Whatever, Lincoln. Clearly you don’t care about me like I thought you did.” She starts to walk away when I quickly grab her hand and pull her back.

“I care, Indie. Don’t say I don’t care, because I do. It’s just . . . hard.”

“What’s hard?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, waiting for a response—a response I’m not sure how to deliver.

What’s hard?

Well, my dick is when she’s around, but that’s not really the answer I want to give her.

I wrack my brain as she stares at me, waiting. Tapping her foot, her eyes racing back and forth over mine, she continues to wait as a trickle of sweat hits the back of my neck.

Fuck.

Say something.

Anything.

She’s waiting and this girl is persistent. She *will* wait forever if she needs to.

“What’s hard, Lincoln?”

I bite the side of my cheek and finally say, “I’ve never had a girl *friend* before.”

“Girlfriend?” she asks. “Uh, didn’t realize we were dating.”

“No, not like that. I mean a friend that’s a girl. A close friend.”

“So are you telling me you get jealous when your guy friends are seen with another girl.”

“What?” I scoff. “I wasn’t jealous.”

She laughs, louder than expected. “Oh my God, Lincoln, you had jealousy written all over you when you saw me and Deacon at Deluca’s.”

“That wasn’t jealousy. I was hungry.”

She rolls her eyes and says, “When you decide to be real with me, then you can come talk to me, but until then, just leave me alone.”

Turning on her heel, she walks back to the house and I stand there like a moron who doesn’t know what the hell to say.

Seems like that’s the new normal at this point.

“Fuck.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and turn away from the house, trying to figure out what to do. I’m so confused. Where is all this coming

from? Her anger, my anger. This friendship that doesn't seem to work, but when it does, I feel like I'm on cloud nine.

And all I can think is if it wasn't for my meddling mom, I wouldn't be in this position, this weird position of being a girl's friend and wanting her so damn bad that I can feel my balls ache when she's around. *And when she's not around . . . I need to jerk—*

"If I were you, I'd go after her," a voice from the side says. When I look over, I spot Brandon, a guy on the men's soccer team. "She's a fucking catch, dude. Everyone in this house knows it and if she's giving you attention like that, it means something. Trust me, she doesn't give anyone that or talk to anyone with passion." He tips his bottle back. "But that's just me."

I don't know Brandon well.

I think I've spoken to him twice in my years at Brentwood, but right now, in this moment, it almost feels like Brandon was placed on my lawn, beer in his hand, to kick some sense into me.

"I think you're right."

"I know I am," he says, leaning back in his chair. "Indie Mayhem is one of a kind. If she was talking to me like that, I'd be one happy motherfucker." He smiles lazily at me and his head lulls to the side. Yeah, he's drunk, but a drunk guardian angel is better than none.

I send him a quick mental thank you and then jog into the house.

The crowd is even worse, and I move people to the side to make my way through the open layout. I scan the heads, looking for long brown hair and when I spot her by the stairs trying to make her way through the throng of people, I quickly squeeze my way through and take her by the arm.

She spins, ready to take out whoever is touching her. "It's me," I say quickly, over the booming music. "Can we talk?"

"Are you going to be real?"

"Yes," I answer, looking her square in the eyes.

"Then let's talk."

"Not here," I say, taking her hand in mine. I thank the guys protecting the stairs, who aren't letting anyone up to the bedrooms who don't live in the house. I walk past Hutton's room, where I already hear moaning, to my room at the far end of the hallway. I take the key from my pocket, unlock my door—because sometimes, people slip by the stair patrol—and I guide her in. I go to my desk and flip the light on, casting a light glow in the

decently sized space. She shuts the door and then we both stare at each other, a few feet apart.

My body itches with an overwhelming need to cut the space between us, push her down on my bed, and explore every inch of her with my tongue. And for a second, I get a bout of courage, as if it could really happen, as if I wouldn't think twice about taking what I want, but when she crosses her arms with impatience again, I snap back to reality.

"I'm sorry," I start. "I'm really fucking sorry, Indie. I didn't mean to be a dick to you, and I was. When I said it's hard, I meant . . ." I take a deep breath and decide to just tell her the truth. "It's hard trying to be cool around you. I, uh . . . I, hell, I think you're a goddamn bombshell, okay?"

Her eyes soften and her lips curve into a smile.

"And yeah, I was jealous. I was jealous that Deacon was holding you and touching you, and I know I have no right to be jealous, since we're friends, but I was, okay? I took my irritation out on you later and it was wrong."

She's still smiling, not saying anything. The silence is killing me.

"Can you respond? Christ."

She chuckles. "I knew you were crushing on me this entire time."

"Jesus," I groan and go to my bed where I lie down. I kick my shoes off and lace my fingers behind my head. "Way to make it easy on a guy."

"When would I ever make it easy on you?"

"Point taken." She sits down on the bed, near my feet. "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to make you mad at me. I do value our friendship."

"Yeah, I do too," she says, and my heart falls as I realize she just agreed with the whole friendship thing. I was hoping that maybe she'd see I was interested in being more than friends, but from the way she's twisting her hands and avoiding eye contact, I have to assume she's trying not to hurt my feelings by letting me down.

Sticking with friendship, okay. Got it.

"Are we cool?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah, we're cool."

"Good." I reach for the remote to my TV and say, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have no interest in being downstairs right now. I'm going to take my pants off and watch some TV."

"Are you kicking me out?" she asks, a lift in her questioning eyebrow.

“You’re more than welcome to stay, but watching season three of *Ozark* is as fun as it’s going to get in here.”

“Ugh, you watch *Ozark*?”

“Uh, you don’t?”

“It’s so dark and the weird blue filtering depresses me.”

I scratch the side of my jaw and flip the TV on. “Yeah, it is quite dark, hard to see sometimes.”

She takes her shoes off and bounds toward the headboard. She cuddles into my side and rests her head on my shoulder. “Let’s watch something else.”

“Uh . . . who said you could use me as a pillow?”

“I did.” She snuggles in even closer and my body thrums with excitement from the combination of her soft scent and supple body curling into mine.

Oh, and the fact that she’s practically twisted around the side of my body.

Firm but soft breasts press into me.

A long leg tangles over mine.

A warm palm falls to my chest.

Okay, yeah, I could get used to this.

Didn’t expect the night to end with her nestled around me, but I’m not going to complain. I would do just about anything to keep her where she is. “If not *Ozark*, then what do you want to watch?”

“Have you watched *To All the Boys I Loved Before*?”

“Oh hell, no. Sorry, Nope. I’m not watching that high school love story.”

She hauls herself up and stares down at me. “How do you know it’s high school?”

“Uh . . . word on the street?” I ask in question. I’m so busted.

“Oh my God, you watched it.”

“No, I haven’t.”

She points to the screen. “Then why is it under the row that says watch again?”

“It’s my moms’ account,” I say with a smirk. Ha, thank you, moms.

“Must I remind you that we’re being real with each other?” Her finger taps my chest and I groan in exasperation.

“Fine. Hartley and I watched it one night. I don’t see what the big deal is about that Noah guy. He’s just a younger version of Mark Ruffalo.”

“And Mark Ruffalo is the Hulk. So technically, Noah Centineo is Hulk’s offspring and if I were you, I’d be kind about Hulk’s offspring.”

I stare at her, silently, and then turn back to the main screen. “There is no validity in that argument.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yup, now if you would like to watch something from a neutral party, then I will consider that.”

“What do you consider a neutral party exactly?” she asks, her hair floating over her shoulders, framing her face, adding to her beauty by tenfold.

I reach out and push her hair behind her ear, my fingers lingering on her cheek longer than they should. She doesn’t seem to mind as she stays still, waiting for me to answer. “Not something super girly, maybe something with Adam Sandler.”

“But you watched *To All the Boys I Loved Before*. That’s girly.”

I smirk and say, “I only watch those types of things with Hartley. It’s a bonding thing we do. Sorry, Mayhem.”

Her smirk damn near kills me.

“Fine, pick an Adam Sandler movie but can I please borrow a pair of shorts, because the ones I’m wearing are clawing up my ass.”

“Can’t have that.” I point to my dresser. “Third drawer, take what you want.”

“Thanks.” Her cute ass hops out of bed and she goes to my dresser while I find an Adam Sandler movie with Jennifer Aniston. That should work.

I start the movie, and then look over at Indie just in time to see her drop her shorts, revealing a black lace thong.

“Whoa, Indie, what are you doing?”

“Changing,” she answers casually. “It’s just underwear.”

That is not *just* underwear.

That was . . .

That was anything but *just* underwear.

That was something I never should have seen, because now it’s imprinted on my brain, and there is no way I’ll be able to focus the rest of the night.

She slips on my shorts and the hem falls down to her shins, the waist loose on her but she lets it just hang on her hips, showing off her midriff.

Hell, her body is fine as fuck. Tight waist, long legs, and the perfect little bubble butt, probably from all the lunges she's done in the past. She has an athletic body, and it's one I want to climb all over and explore. She pulls a hair tie from the pocket of the shorts she just took off and I watch as she flips her head over, gathers all her silky brown hair, and then ties it into a long ponytail on the top of her head.

"There," she says, finding her comfort level. "Now if I could trust you not to be such a horndog, I'd take my bra off too, but I think we both know that is not going to happen."

I swallow hard and say, "I won't be a horndog. Go ahead, take it off."

"Yeah, right." She chuckles and hops into bed next to me. Once again, she snuggles into my side and I move my arm to embrace her. "Aren't you going to take your pants off?"

"Do you want me to take my pants off?"

"You said that's what you were going to do when I left. Don't let me stop you."

Yeah, the only reason I still have my pants still on is because they're containing my half hard-on. If I were in anything else but jeans, it would be way too noticeable.

"I'm good, but your attempt at getting me naked is flattering."

The movie starts and we lie there together, watching, our breathing syncing.

It's nice.

So much better than being downstairs with a bunch of inebriated asses trying to get drunk myself.

No, I'll take cuddling with Indie in my bed—as friends—over being downstairs any day.

Her finger taps my chest and she says, "Deacon and I are just friends."

Umm . . . they better be if she's snuggled into me and watching a movie.

"Cool," I answer lamely. *Deacon and I are just friends*. So . . . I should be relieved by that declaration. But I actually feel confused. *But it's a good thing . . . isn't it?*

She lifts up to look me in the eyes. "We've only ever been friends." Her finger draws slow, lazy circles on my chest. "Just thought you should know."

I grip her chin with my forefinger and thumb and say, “Thank you.”

She nods and then lies back down where she keeps her hand on my chest.

It’s comfortable. Feels right, having her here in my room, in my bed, in my arms. She fits perfectly against my side, and I don’t feel the need to flee or tell her to leave. In fact, it’s the opposite. I’m trying to figure out a way to keep her here all night.

As the movie plays, we stay silent. She chuckles here and there, and it’s a cute sound that travels down my body and ends at my crotch, making it harder and harder to focus on the movie.

Because I can’t seem to control myself—the need to touch her is taking over my brain—I start massaging her scalp with my fingers, loving the way the silky strands feel as they filter past my fingertips. Her body melts deeper into mine and a small moan falls out of her mouth when I move closer to her ear.

Fuck, that sound.

It does nothing to calm my aching cock, and I pray to Jesus Christ Himself that Indie can’t tell how turned on I am. I hope she hasn’t noticed my shorter breaths, or how my fingers dig deeper into her scalp every time she shifts against me, her breasts pressing into my side.

I honestly don’t know what’s going on between us. I don’t know if what I’m doing is okay or if I’m crossing a weird line from friends to semi-relationship. I have no fucking clue.

All I know is that I like her right where she is, and I’ll keep her here for as long as she wants to be.



“I USED some of the toothpaste in the bathroom,” Indie says, walking back into my room. “I hope that’s okay.”

I stretch my arms above my head. The sun’s coming through the window heating up the back of my body. “What’s mine is yours, Mayhem.”

While she was in the bathroom, I changed out of my jeans I wore all night and into a pair of sweats and a fresh shirt. I was the first to go to the bathroom, so I wouldn’t blast her with morning breath.

Last night, toward the end of the movie, I felt her breathing slow and her body completely relax. She fell asleep, and I was perfectly okay with that. I turned off the TV and pulled a blanket over us. We slept like that the whole night, her resting on my chest, my arm around her.

I'm a little stiff this morning from our position, but it was well worth it.

"Thanks." She takes her ponytail out and I watch as the brown strands fall gracefully around her shoulders, only for her to gather it all back up and put it into some crazy bun. "Sorry I fell asleep on you last night."

"It's cool. You were comfortable, and I wasn't about to wake a sleeping beast."

"I'm not a sleeping beast."

"That's what you think." I wink and then walk up to her where I spot a stray hair and push it behind her ear, the entire time our eyes connected. "Want some breakfast?"

"I'm starving, so yes."

"Okay, come on." I'm tempted to take her hand in mine but think better of it. I open the door for her and catch the girl in the yellow dress from last night sneaking out of Asher's room. I stutter-stop, gripping the doorframe of my room, shocked.

Asher had a girl stay over last night?

Uhh . . . that's new.

When she hears the floorboards creak from where we're standing, she looks over her shoulder and her face blushes, before she turns away and practically sprints down the stairs.

"Whose room was that?" Indie asks.

"Pepps."

"Pepps, as in Asher Peppers?"

"Yup." I chuckle. "Fuck, I can't wait to hear how that happened. The dude never has girls stay over."

We make our way downstairs and are greeted by whispered yelling.

I grip Indie by the waist and hold her still, holding a finger to my lips, trying to listen in on who's in the kitchen.

"You treat me like a child."

"No, I don't."

That's Hartley's voice, which means the other voice must be Alice's.

"Yes, you do. I'm allowed to drink and have fun, Hartley."

"Not under my roof."

“Can you not hear yourself? You’re acting like my father.”

“Yeah, well your father asked me to look out for you and that’s what I’m doing.” He lets out a large sigh and continues, “Now stop fucking yelling at me, because I have such a goddamn headache and your voice is making it worse.”

“Wow.” Something slams on the counter and Alice pops out of the kitchen, just in time to spot me and Indie. Her face goes red—that’s two girls blushing so far this morning, wonder if there are anymore—and she gives me a short wave.

“Good morning, Lincoln.”

I wave back. “Hey Alice. Get a good night’s sleep?”

“No.” She glances back at Hartley, who is now watching her from the kitchen entryway, arms crossed, his body propped up by the wall. He looks like a wreck. His hair is disheveled and he has dark circles under his eyes. “Your friend, Hartley, kicks in his sleep.”

“Speak for yourself. Maybe stop rolling every twenty goddamn minutes.”

“Maybe I was rolling because you kept kicking me.”

“I was kicking you to stop rolling,” he shoots back. This could go on for hours.

“I was going to make waffles,” I interject. “Want to stay for some breakfast, Alice?”

Hartley cuts in before she can answer, his eyes dead set on hers. “Alice was just leaving. Weren’t you, Alice?”

She bites her bottom lip and says, “Yes, I was just going to walk home. Thank you though, Lincoln.”

Hartley grumbles in frustration. “You’re not walking home. Grab an Uber.”

Another bite to her lip. “I don’t have my phone.”

“Jesus Christ.” Hartley stomps through the living room to the entryway and grabs the keys to his SUV. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

“I’d rather walk.”

“You’re not fucking walking. Now come on.” Hartley not so gracefully grabs her by the arm and guides her out to his car.

When the front door shuts, Indie turns to me and says, “Oh, they are so going to fuck.”

“Yeah, the boys and I have a bet on when. Trust me, we already know. Those two just don’t know it yet.” I take her hand this time and pull her toward the kitchen. “Come help me make waffles.”

Indie lifts herself up on the island bench, and I feel her eyes on me as I move around the kitchen, setting up the waffle maker and finding the mix in the pantry.

Handing her a bowl and the ingredients, I say, “Make the whole box; the boys are always hungry for waffles.”

“We get first dibs though, right?”

“First waffle is yours, Mayhem.”

She hops back off the counter and starts mixing everything together just as there’s a slight crash on the stairs. We both look up to find Scarlett gripping the banister, muttering swear words. Her shirt is inside out, there seems to be an article of clothing in her hand, which I’m assuming is her pants because she’s wearing a pair of Hutton’s sweatpants that are entirely too large on her, her hair is sticking up on all ends, while dark makeup is smudged under her eyes.

“Fucking steps,” she says just as she looks up and spots me and Indie both staring at her. But instead of a blush, she just gives us a simple, unapologetic wave. “Hey.” Talking directly to Indie, she says, “Multiple orgasms, mission accomplished. See you at the house.”

I chuckle next to Indie as she calls out, “Want to stay for waffles?”

“No. I need a shower. I have Hutton’s tongue all over me.” She motions to the two of us and adds, “I do want to hear about this little sleepover, but only after I feel human again. See you at the house.” And then she takes off, leaving just as quickly as she appeared.

“She’s . . . interesting,” I say.

“Definitely has zero shame about anything.” Indie stirs the mixture and then hands it to me. She hops back up on the counter and says, “So, about last night.”

“What about it?” I ask, feeling nausea make its way up my throat. I don’t want her to say something that’s going to take back how great it felt to hold her, have her next to me.

She smiles and briefly runs her hand through my hair, as if she’s trying to fix it but has no luck. “How did the movie end?”

Hell. I let out a deep breath and chuckle. “Fuck if I know. I passed out just like you.”

Christ, I thought she was wanting a deep conversation, and it's too early for me to navigate through something like that. Especially when I can't categorize my feelings, while she's staring at me with those clear, confident eyes of hers.

"Guess we'll have to try to finish it sometime."

Glancing up with a smirk, I ask, "Breakfast in bed?"

Her face lights up. "What about the rest of the waffles?"

"I'll put the batter in the fridge with a note. The boys can make their own."

"Sounds perfect."

"How are you with a knife? There are some rinsed strawberries in the fridge. I'll man the waffles if you cut some up for us."

"Deal." I set her up with what she needs and just when the waffle maker is ready, Hutton appears in the kitchen, scratching his chest, looking half awake, but also concerned.

"Hey . . . did, uh, Scarlett take off?"

Oh hell.

Indie and I both catch the sound of vulnerability in his voice and we quickly exchange glances, but Indie is the one to answer. "She just left. Said she needed to wash your tongue off her body."

He smiles shyly—which is odd for him—and he grips the back of his neck. "Did she seem . . . happy?"

Oh pathetic, man. So pathetic. But I also feel for him because I seem to be in the same boat. Confused *and* desperate.

"She was very pleased with her multiple orgasms."

That brings a smile to his face. "Okay, cool." He then nods at the waffle maker and says, "Making me some?"

"You can make your own," I say. "We're headed back upstairs in a few."

"Oh yeah?" Hutton wiggles his eyebrows, and I don't even bother correcting his assumption. There's no use.

Instead, we gather everything we need and take it to my room, where I shut the door and prop my pillows up so we can sit against the headboard.

Once we're settled, Indie says, "Quite a party last night."

I turn to face her in an attempt to understand what she means, but she's intent on her food.

Let's see. She didn't slink away like yellow-dress girl, angrily race out the door like Alice, or *understandably* walk out with a happily sated grin

like Scarlett. She willingly came back to my room just now, so she doesn't seem to regret staying. *I think she's glad she stayed as well.*

Go in with humor, Castle.

"That it was. But you know there is one thing we shouldn't do right now." I wiggle my eyebrows, loving the mischievous smile I receive in return. "Don't tell the moms," we both say together, and clink our waffles in a moment of solidarity.

Chapter Eleven

INDIE

“Was that you?” I ask, as my character, Princess Peach, blows up from a bomb hitting her in the back.

“Can’t be sure,” Lincoln says, humor in his voice as I see Yoshi, his character blow by me.

“Lincoln,” I complain, nudging him with my elbow and getting Peach up and driving again. “We had a truce.”

“That was until you were annihilating me. A dude has to save his pride.”

We’ve been playing Mario Kart in Lincoln’s room for the past hour, playing every tournament, and sharing Chinese food that we ordered for a late lunch, early dinner.

After breakfast in bed, we stayed there for a few hours, drifting in and out of sleep, me resting on his shoulder, Lincoln combing his hands through my hair—which has got to be the most erotic and relaxing feeling ever. Just knowing his talented, sexy hands are pressing into my scalp is enough to make me drool and beg for more.

When we woke up, Lincoln didn’t ask if I wanted to leave, but instead asked if I wanted to get some Chinese food and since it’s Sunday, my day off, I figured there was nothing wrong with spending it with Lincoln. We

both took quick showers while we waited for the food. I changed into the shorts from earlier and one of his Brentwood Baseball shirts, minus my bra. He changed into an outfit very similar and then teased me about being twins.

After we finished our food, Lincoln brought out his Nintendo Wii, and we've been playing games ever since. It started with Tetris and has moved on. When I asked him why he had a Wii and not an Xbox like every other college guy out there, he said he was a sucker for Mario. It's why he keeps the console in his room. I thought it was an adorable answer and it made me want to stay with him longer.

"I'm in first. I swear to God, you better not shoot me with anything," he says, his body tense next to mine, concentrated on the TV.

"Uh, okay," I say, just as I drive through a mystery box. When it gives me three green shells, I swear to the high heavens. Green shells are useless when trying to pass people. You risk shooting them off and then running into your own shell when it bounces off the side.

The telltale alert of Lincoln crossing the finish line sounds through the speakers. He pumps the air with his fist, tosses his controller, then flops back on the bed.

"Jesus Christ, I'm sweating."

I finish the race, coming in third, and toss my remote as well. I turn to him and take in the way he's lying next to me so casually, hands linked behind his head, his biceps stretching the fabric of his shirt.

"I can't believe you blew me up."

"Not even sorry about it." I turn toward him, making sure I'm scowling my best scowl. He scoots up the bed so he's against the headboard, ignoring said scowl, so I lean against the wall, then drape my legs over his. "You were getting a free ride and it wasn't fair."

"You were getting the same ride."

"Bullshit." He laughs. "You kept accidentally hitting me with shit." I smile and he points at me. "See, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"It's called playing strategically."

His hand falls to my knee and he gives it a squeeze, sending a lightning bolt of lust straight up my inner thigh. "It's called being a liar."

I try not to concentrate on the feeling of his hand on my leg, or the way his thumb is slowly rubbing my kneecap.

"Call it what you want, but I still beat you."

“You’re also aggressive with your elbows.” He lifts his hand from my knee to rub his other arm. “I think I have some bruises from your combative driving.”

“Poor baby.” I reach out and rub his arm.

“You hit me lower.” I move my hand. “Lower.” He smiles. “Little bit lower. You actually hit me in the crotch, if you would rub that, I’d appreciate it.”

“In your dreams, Castle,” I say, even though I’m pretty sure that situation has been a highlight of my dreams.

Knock. Knock.

We both look toward the door as Lincoln calls out, “Come in.”

The door opens and Asher pokes his head through the crack. “Oh shit, sorry, I didn’t realize you had company. I’ll uh, catch you later.”

“Hey, wait,” Lincoln calls out before Asher can shut the door. “What’s up, man?”

Asher quickly looks at me, and I realize he probably wants to talk about last night and there’s no way he’ll do that in front of me. The guy is way too shy and way too private.

“Uh, you know, I should get back home, get ready for the school week,” I say, sensing Asher’s needs.

“No, you don’t have to do that,” Asher says. “I’ll just talk to Lincoln later.”

“No, it’s good, really. Just let me gather my things and then I’ll call an Uber.”

Lincoln settles his hand on my knee and says to Asher, “Let me drop Indie off and then I’ll be back. Does that work?”

He looks between us, indecisive, but finally he nods. “Yeah, that works. Take your time. No rush.”

He quietly shuts the door and I turn toward Lincoln. “You are so going to get the details about the girl in the yellow dress.”

“I would love to spend more time with you, but sorry, Mayhem, this trumps that right now. I’m practically frothing at the mouth to find out what happened.”

“I would be too.” I hop off the bed and grab my folded-up clothes from last night. “Let me change quickly and then you can take me home.”

“Don’t bother. Just give me back my clothes another time. I probably have enough Brentwood baseball shirts to outfit the entire women’s soccer

team.”

“Okay.”

Lincoln stands from the bed, stretches, and then grabs my hand. “Let’s go, Mayhem.”

Surprisingly, we don’t run into anyone on the way out. I was nervous about seeing Deacon while wearing Lincoln’s clothes, especially the day after a party, but he was MIA, as well as the other guys.

Lincoln opens the passenger side door for me and then rounds the front and hops in. He starts the engine, grabs the gear shift, and takes off.

My house is pretty close, so we don’t have much time in the car together. “Thank you for the day. It was probably one of the most relaxing days I’ve had in a really long time.”

“Me too,” Lincoln says, keeping his eyes focused on the road. “I had a really good time, even if you’re a liar and a cheater.”

“See it how you want, but I’m sticking to what I said. It was strategy.”

“Brutal, Mayhem.” He stops at a stop sign, and then turns right. It might be a weird thing to say, but I love watching him drive. He’s so casual—*relaxed*—one hand slung over the steering wheel, the other gripping the gear shift, his feet moving back and forth over the pedals. It’s sexy, and when he offered to drive me home, I didn’t even put up a fight, because I wanted to see him in his Jeep again. I wanted to spend extra time with him. “Are you getting excited about your first game this coming Saturday? It’s a home game, right?”

“Yeah. I’m excited, ready. I think we still have some kinks to work out, but that’s how it always is at the start of the season.”

“I’m glad we have a fall season where we can work those kinks out before our spring season starts. Gives us a good idea of the level of play the freshmen are coming in at too.”

He turns left down my street and I see my house come into view. A shot of disappointment ricochets through my chest as he pulls into my driveway.

“Think Scarlett has been able to pull herself together?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Most likely she’s still incapacitated.” I turn toward Lincoln and give him a soft smile. “Thanks again for today.”

“Anytime, Mayhem. Just say the word.” He winks, and I unbuckle my seatbelt.

It’s one of those moments where you’re not really sure what to do. We’re friends, so friends don’t kiss goodbye, even though this friend would

like to know what *that* friend's lips taste like. But just leaving feels weird too, so I lean over the console and hold my arm out. He brings me in close, hugs me, and I feel his lips press against my head. It's sweet, not sexual at all—definitely comforting—and when we pull away, Lincoln grips my chin like he has before and says, “See you tomorrow, Indie.”

I gulp, his face so close, his eyes trained on me. “See you tomorrow, Lincoln.”

I don't want to leave. Spending time with Lincoln has been easy.

Well, except when he was stroking my neck and shoulders. God, I wanted to mount him. Have those fingers caressing other parts of my body. Because Lincoln's words have rattled around in my mind since he said them. I was jealous that Deacon was holding you and touching you, and I know I have no right to be jealous.

Why didn't I push for more then? Why didn't I ask what he wants instead? Probably because I'm not entirely sure what *I* want.

Before I can do something stupid, I hop out of his car and make my way inside. I shut the door and then lean against it, my dirty clothes clutched to my chest, my mind reeling with confusion and excitement.

“About time you came home,” Scarlett says, startling the crap out of me.

Lounging on the couch, she's sporting a pair of sunglasses for God knows what reason and wearing nothing but the shirt she borrowed from Hutton . . . and hopefully underwear. I pray she's wearing underwear. At least she's showered, which is a relief since Hutton's tongue traveled all over her body last night and probably early this morning.

“Jesus, you scared me.”

Tipping her sunglasses down, she studies me and says, “Were you just daydreaming about Lincoln?”

“What? No.” Maybe a little. “I wasn't expecting you to be on the couch. I thought you'd be sleeping off your fuck fest with Hutton.”

“I tried, but it was as if his dick energized me.” She waves her hand around the apartment. “I scrubbed every inch of this place and organized both our closets. You have some pretty ugly tops, so we're going to need to filter those out.”

I take in the apartment and notice a fresh lemony smell. There doesn't seem to be anything lying around like shoes or papers. It actually looks really good in here, which can only mean one thing . . .

“Oh my God, you like Hutton.” I walk over to the couch and set my clothes on the coffee table. “You like him, like him. The only time you clean like this is when you need to think, and you just so happened to do it after spending the night with Hutton.” I poke her but she doesn’t move, just stares at the muted TV. “You like him.”

“He’s okay,” she answers nonchalantly. “He is quite talented with his penis though, I’ll give him that. Just what the doctor ordered.”

“Scarlett, I’m being serious. You like him.”

She shrugs and adjusts her glasses. “Tell me about your night.” And that’s all I’m going to get out of her. Some girls are dying to spill their guts to their bestie straight after a significant moment. But not Scarlett. When she shuts down, there’s no way to get anything out of her. And right now? That’s where we’re at. “What’s going on with Lincoln?”

“Nothing, really. We just hung out.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“We slept in the same bed, but we didn’t do anything.”

“Not even a kiss, or a grab of his dick?”

“Nothing.”

She tsks. “Shame. Missed opportunity, boo.” She pats my leg. “Did you hear me and Hutton?”

“No, why, were you loud?”

“Oh yeah.” She smiles. “He had me up against the wall at one point, and I swear I came from feeling my nipples graze the wall. He’s . . . something else.”

“Talk about daydreaming.” I shove her and she just smiles.

“Well, not that it matters. The guy is a whore and we have nothing in common. He’ll be good for a night here and there.” She looks off to the side, her lips twisting together, and I wonder what she’s not telling me. There has to be more if she spent all day cleaning and organizing. Did he say something to her last night? Something that might have scared her?

I want to ask but I also know I won’t get a straight answer, so instead, I say, “Did you see Asher with that girl in the yellow dress last night?”

“Briefly. She was really pretty. Had this whole *Jessica Day* vibe that I was digging.”

“Asher was digging it too, because she stumbled downstairs right before you did.”

“What?” Scarlett clenches her fist. “Damn it. I hate that I missed it. Did she say anything to you?”

I shake my head. “No, not really. She blushed so hard though, it was endearing.”

“I like her already. How cute would it be if Asher fell in love? The silent, shy guy finds a girl in a yellow dress at a party. Ugh, romance.”

I lean back on the couch and take Scarlett’s hand in mine. We both stare at the silent TV. “It was a good party. I’m glad I went.”

“Me too,” Scarlett says wistfully. “It was the perfect party.”



“GOOD MORNING, MAYHEM.” Lincoln’s voice trails up the back of my neck, causing goosebumps to pop up on my arm. From behind me, he reaches his arm around and hands me a coffee. “Here you go.”

I turn around and sigh as I take in his dark jeans and tight white shirt. *Freaking handsome.* His hair is styled and he has the lightest scruff on his jaw, giving him a dark, sultry look this morning. Desire rushes through my veins and before I can stop myself, I bring my arm around him and press my head to his chest, giving him a much-needed hug. When his arm encases me, warmth spreads through me and flows furiously through every one of my limbs, making me feel light on my feet. *Okay, so it was much-needed hug for me.*

Yup. I really needed this.

“Good morning.”

When I look up at him, he smiles and tugs on my ponytail. “That’s a greeting I enjoy.”

When I part from him, I hold up my coffee and say, “Thank you for this.”

“I also got us a cinnamon bun that we can share before class.” He checks his phone. “We have ten minutes, want to sit?”

“Sure.” We take a seat at a bench right outside the lecture hall. A few guys pass us and give Lincoln a bro shake but thankfully leave us in peace.

“Only got one fork, so I hope you don’t mind sharing.”

“I think I can handle it.”

From his backpack, he pulls out a to-go box from the dining hall and pops the top open to reveal a massive cinnamon bun. Holding the fork out to me, he says, “You can have the first bite.”

“Are you buttering me up for a reason, Castle?” I sink the fork in the gooey pastry and then bring the fork to my mouth, letting my lips slide over the tines, taking all the icing with me. “Ugh, this is so good. Did you get it from Lakeview?”

I open my eyes and see Lincoln staring at my mouth. “Uh, yeah.” He clears his throat. “They make the best cinnamon buns on campus.”

I hide my chuckle and hand him the fork. “When I was staying in the dorms my freshman year, I allowed myself one of these a month. *And*, I’m supposed to be eating healthy and you’re making that hard on me.”

He nudges me with his shoulder. “Half a cinnamon bun is not going to kill you.”

We go back and forth, sharing the fork, and the entire time, I keep thinking about how our mouths are touching but not really touching. It’s torture . . . almost.

“So have you hit ninety-five yet?” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee, letting the hot liquid break down the sugar in my mouth.

“Nah. Not yet. I have time, which reminds me. If you’re serious about helping me build up my legs, I’ll take you up on that.”

“Not sure if you can handle my routines.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“If you want it to be, it can be a challenge.”

“I don’t know.” He studies me. “Any time I challenge you at something, it usually comes back to bite me in the ass. But then again, I really want to build my legs. What a conundrum.”

“You’re ridiculous. How about next Monday, before class, we can work on some things?”

“That works for me.” He offers me the last bite of the cinnamon roll, but I turn it down and lean back on the bench, looking up at the cloudy sky.

“I’m glad we’re back to normal.” I loll my head to the side, catching that handsome smile on his face.

“Me too, Mayhem. It was weird there for a second.”

“And we don’t wear weird well.”

He shakes his head. “We don’t.” He stands and offers his hand. I take it, only for him to spin me around and then drape his arm over my shoulders,

holding me close as we make our way into the lecture hall.

Every person that passes us stares at our connection, at how close we are, but I don't give a shit. I'm comfortable. I'm happy. And I think Lincoln is too.

That's all that matters.



"YOU READY?" I ask Scarlett, jumping up and down in the tunnel leading to the soccer field.

"Ready, boo." She hops as well, shaking out her arms.

"Does it seem louder to you?" I ask, trying to peek around the corner.

"It does. I hope it's not fans from the other team, because that would just be humiliating on opening day on our turf."

From a distance, we hear the announcer of our match say, "Now, let's welcome our Brentwood women's soccer team." They play our walkout song, *My Songs Know What You Did in The Dark* by Fall Out Boy, and our coach gives us high fives as we sprint out onto the field. And to my absolute shock and surprise, we run out to a packed stadium and a massively loud crowd. At the epicenter of it all, I see the men's baseball team with signs and pom-poms.

The Baseball Team Loves You

Kick Ass, Girls

Mayhem is Coming Your Way.

The last sign is held up by the gorgeous Ken doll himself, Lincoln Castle. He has my number, three, painted on his face and . . . oh dear Jesus, he's not wearing a shirt. His body is painted in black and green, and I think I just swallowed my tongue.

Beside them is the football team: Hartley, Hutton, Rusty, and Deacon all decked out in paint as well.

And then the men's soccer team, women's softball, and women's basketball.

What on earth?

Lincoln is screaming his ass off, holding the sign above his head, and Hutton starts a cheer by clapping.

It feels like the entire stadium is shaking. I've never experienced anything like it, at least never while I'm on the field. I've seen the way the student population cheers for the baseball team, and this doesn't fall much short of that.

Tears well in my eyes, and I try to hold it together while Scarlett comes up to me and says, "You realize this is all on your boy, right?"

I glance at Hutton again, his eyes on us. "I don't know, could be your boy."

Scarlett doesn't bother looking in the stands. "Doesn't matter, let's give them a show, yeah?" She grips the back of my neck and presses her forehead to mine. "You and me, Indie."

"You and me, Scar."

We jog to our bench while the crowd continues to cheer. I take one more look at Lincoln and we make eye contact. He winks and then yells, "Let's go Brentwood," and I swear, in this moment, Lincoln Castle just secured a piece of my heart.

No one, not even my own parents, has showed this level of comprehension and respect for my love of soccer. I will always remember this moment, where Lincoln showed me what it meant to be admired. *Believed in.* I have no doubt he's responsible for making our opening match special by filling the stands. Of course, he did it for the team, there's no doubt about that. There's also no doubt that I feel love for this man. Not *over-the-top* romantic love. But an appreciation that this guy is special. That no matter where our lives take us, I will always remember this moment. *Him.*



"YOU READY?" Scarlett asks, freshly showered, her backpack slung over her shoulder.

"Yeah." I grab my backpack as well, fix it on my shoulders, and then pick up my phone from the locker. "How's the thigh?"

"Sore as fuck, but it was worth it." Scarlett gives me a sly smile. "Taking out number twelve was a pleasure."

I chuckle and follow her out of the locker room.

We won, three to one. I scored two goals and Scarlett scored one, giving us a head start on our stats for the year. It felt freaking good out there. Once the game started, I completely forgot about the crowd, about Lincoln in the stands, and his six-pack painted in black and green. It was just me, my team, and the field, the field that never looked clearer to me. We had a few moments we could have better capitalized on, but it's a learning game, and we saw the potential strength in the team.

"Number twelve was running her mouth way too much. Glad you took care of it."

"Was she bumping you with her boobs? I swear she used them as a weapon. And was that a turtle shell sports bra she was wearing?"

"Something like that," I answer. "Felt like protective armor. I think I almost cracked a tooth on it one time when she ran into my face, chest first."

"Girl needs to work on her footwork, then she wouldn't have to use her boobs as much."

"Could not agree more."

We push through the doors that lead to the parking lot and are greeted by raucous cheering.

Still holding their signs, Lincoln and Hutton—with wet hair, but sans body paint—cheer for us as we walk up to them.

Lincoln doesn't hesitate by pulling me into a hug, picking me up and spinning me around. "Damn, Mayhem, you were epic out there."

He sets me down and for the first time since I can ever remember, I feel a blush creep up my cheeks. It's one thing to tell me I played a good game, but it's a whole other story when the hottest guy in school—in my opinion—picks you up and tells you you're epic.

Huge difference.

"Thank you."

I look over at Hutton and Scarlett, and they're just staring at each other, as if they're making silent promises about ripping each other's clothes off.

"You were hot out there, Scar," Hutton says. "I especially liked it when you took out that girl like a bad ass."

"Just another day in the office," she says, shrugging off the compliment.

And then I watch Hutton take Scarlett's hand, her eyes flash up to his, her mouth slightly parted. "Want to grab something to eat?"

There's hidden meaning behind his question and she reads all over it. "There's food at our place."

"Perfect."

Still holding hands, they walk down the sidewalk to the parked cars, Scarlett calling over her shoulder, "You might want to go out to dinner or something." Then she winks, and I don't need her write it out for me.

They're going to have sex and they're going to be loud. Noted.

Facing Lincoln, I say, "Uh, want to grab dinner anyplace other than my place?"

He nods at my backpack. "Got a spare set of clothes in there?" I nod. "Then why don't you come to my place? We can pick something up on the way and hang."

"Sounds good to me," I say, nervous and excited butterflies flitting around in my stomach.

Like he did on Monday, he takes my hand in his and walks me to his Jeep, the whole time talking about how amazing the game was. And once again, he blows me away. He watched. He cheered. He understood the game. He gets me. *He was there for me.*



"INDIE," Deacon says when I walk through the door. "Damn, girl, you were amazing out there." He gives me a massive hug, and then I'm picked right back up by Rusty.

"There's my girl. Incredible as always."

"Thank you," I say as he sets me down. "And thank you so much for coming to our game. It meant a lot to all of us."

"It was all the big guy's idea." Rusty nods toward Lincoln, who's in the kitchen getting drinks.

"Yeah, he came barreling into the house yesterday with bags full of arts and crafts and called the house to a meeting. We spent an embarrassing amount of time on the signs," Deacon says and then leaning in close, he adds, "He really cares about you, Indie." When he pulls away, he winks, and then walks into the kitchen where he pats Lincoln on the back.

They exchange a few words and honestly, I'm impressed. Normally you'd see a pissing match from two guys when they butt heads over a girl,

but not Deacon and Lincoln. They're cool with each other and it's admirable.

What's also admirable? Having someone who is not related to me care about me. My parents, for example, have never made signs for any of my games, or cheered as enthusiastically like Lincoln did. It's been a long time since I've felt special to someone. And Lincoln does it effortlessly. Yeah, he might have made some signs and gathered some recruits to come to the game, but even before the game today, he's done things, said things, that made me feel like I matter.

I can truly say that Lincoln is becoming one of my best friends.

"Keep staring at him like that. It's giving me heart palpitations," Rusty whispers to me.

"Stop it." I playfully swat at him. "I'm not looking at him any specific way."

"Oh . . . okay." He chuckles. "You know, I wept in my brother's arms when he told me you guys were going to be *only* friends, and then when he said there might be something between you and Lincoln, I didn't believe it at first." He shakes his head slowly. "Now I do. That dude last night stayed late at the table, making sure his sign was perfect; his tongue was sticking out and everything while he concentrated." Rusty reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He flashes the screen to me and shows me a picture of Lincoln hunched over the table, painting the sign. Sure enough, his tongue is sticking out. He's hunkered so close to the paper that you can tell just from the picture that he took the sign-making seriously.

And Rusty is right: it's adorable.

"He's a good guy. I'm glad both of you allowed the other into your tight circles. I know you, and I know him. This is rare for both of you."

Just then, Lincoln steps up to me, plates, drinks, and food in hand. He motions toward the stairs. "Want to go up to my room?"

"Sure," I say, feeling suddenly shy. I help him with the drinks and climb the stairs, Lincoln trailing behind me. We enter his room, which is spotless, bed freshly made, and . . . is that a mini vase of flowers?

I set the drinks down, as well as my bag, and pick up the vase on his nightstand. "What's this?"

He shuts the door and sets the plates on the bed. "What does it look like?"

"Uh, it looks like a vase of flowers."

He taps the side of his head. “You’re very perceptive, Mayhem.”

“But why do you have it? Did you get these yourself?”

He sets his bag down and kicks off his shoes. “If you must know, my moms send me a box of things every few weeks. That was in there, and my mama asked if I would put it on my nightstand and send a picture for my mom, who specifically picked it out to remind me of home.” He takes the vase from me and sets it back down. “We have a flower bed full of daffodils in our backyard. It’s my mom’s pride and joy, and she used to get me out there to weed with her on the weekends.” He shrugs. “Thought it was nice.”

Dear heavens, I think my ovaries just clutched each other and then passed out.

“That’s really sweet, Lincoln.”

“I have my moments. Now, I split the calzones, so we each—”

I bring my hand to his mouth, stopping him from talking, and step in front of him. I move my hands to his chest. “You have more than just moments, Lincoln. You’re a very compassionate and thoughtful man. I haven’t truly thanked you for today.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Indie. That’s what friends are for.”

“I have friends, Linc, and they’ve never done something like that for me. It was really special, more than you’ll ever know. Thank you.”

He sighs and cups my jaw. It’s an intimate hold, one that usually leads to kissing, and the prospect of that has me licking my lips, preparing for the press of his mouth against mine.

Do I want him to kiss me? Break that friendship code?

Yes.

No, not just yes, but *hell* yes.

He’s been on my mind almost every day. Whether we’re texting, meeting up, or seeing each other in class, I get excited when he’s around, when I get a small piece of that superstar on campus who is Lincoln Castle.

“You’re special, Indie. So you deserve special.”

His eyes search mine and I swear I can see it in his pupils, how they dilate when he spots me wetting my lips again. I can hear it in the way his breath catches when I lean in. I can feel it in the way his hand holds my jaw, tilting my mouth up enough to be the perfect angle.

The room seems to melt away as we stand there, next to his bed, the smell of our calzones wafting into the air, reminding us dinner’s ready. But

there's no urgency to eat. We're here, in each other's hold, the prospect of melding our mouths together hanging heavy in the air.

I won't make the first move though.

He needs to do it.

He needs to be the one who closes the space between us and captures my mouth with his.

I stare at him, my hand inches up his chest, and his corded muscles twitch under my touch. Thick and sturdy, his chest provides balance for me as I navigate these whimsical and euphoric sensations that are pouring through me with every breath he takes.

"So special," he murmurs just before brushing his thumb over my jaw and then moving away, clearing his throat as he does. I nearly fall forward from the loss of him but catch myself. My body thrums with need.

I had no idea I needed this man this much, but here I am, desperate to return to his touch, desperate to be held by him.

"Uh, like I was saying, I split the calzones so we could each try one. Is that okay?" I'm facing away from him, trying to catch my breath and cool down my aroused body.

After *that*, he wants to talk about calzones? What is wrong with this man?

Plastering on a smile, I say, "Yeah, great."

"Awesome." He hands me a plate and then takes a seat on his bed. Sadly, I do the same, while he turns the TV on as if nothing happened. Technically nothing did happen, but there was a possible something, an almost kiss. "Want to watch that other Adam Sandler movie on Netflix? The one with David Spade?"

"Sure," I say in a chipper tone, even though I feel anything but chipper. I'm turned on.

Horny. *Thank you very much, Lincoln.*

And feel like my entire body is on fire from being so close to him.

I can still feel his strong pecs on my palm, his rapid heartbeat, the intake of his breaths. I can practically taste him on my mouth from being so close and yet, now, he feels so incredibly far away.



“DO you want me to take you home?” Lincoln whispers, as I shift against him in his bed.

I have no idea what time it is, nor do I remember falling asleep, but I do know two things: I’m in his clothes again and I’m under his blankets.

I barely open my eyes to see Lincoln sitting up, hovering over me.

“Do you want me to go home?” I ask, feeling disoriented.

“Nah, you’re good here. Just wanted to make sure you were okay with spending the night.”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Do you, uh . . . do you mind if I take my shirt off?”

“Do what you want,” I murmur and turn away from him, curling into one of his pillows.

He shifts around on the bed and I hear his shirt drop to the floor, then he lies back down. He didn’t take his shorts off, which I can understand completely. That might be a little weird . . . or would it be amazing?

Can’t be sure in this hazy state of dreamland I’m in.

“Where are you?” I whisper.

“Right here.” He chuckles.

“Yeah, but I can’t feel you. Aren’t you going to spoon me?” I mumble.

“Do you want me to spoon you?” There’s hesitation in his voice and if I wasn’t so out of it, if I wasn’t so tired, I’d try to understand it. But I am, so I reach behind me and grab his arm, putting it around my waist.

“Don’t be shy. Get in here.”

His chest rumbles against my back as he chuckles and then grips me tighter. “That better?” he asks, his mouth right next to my ear.

“Much better,” I answer, and that’s the last thing I remember before I pass out completely.



THE SOUND of a door clicking shut wakes me up. My eyes pop open as I feel the sun coming through the window. I stretch my arms above my head and look at the ceiling. An unfamiliar ceiling.

I look to the right and that’s when I see Lincoln, standing in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs as he sifts through his dresser. Droplets of water cling

to the short strands of his hair and from here, I can smell the soap from his shower. When he turns to face me, my heart trips at the sight of him.

Carved and built, Lincoln's chest is a work of art, finely crafted by the hard work he puts into his workouts. Sculpted shoulders connect to impressive biceps and thick pecs with perfectly sized nipples. My eyes travel toward his abs, appreciating how they're stacked one on top of the other reaching the waistband of his briefs, where the V of his hips points directly to the bulge between his legs.

Oh sweet Jesus.

"Morning, Mayhem," he says.

I look away and pull the blanket over my head. *God, he caught me staring.* "Good morning."

He yanks on the comforter, pulling it down to my waist while chuckling. "No need to be shy now, you already got a good eyeful. Might as well own it."

"Why do you make things so hard?"

Wiggling his eyebrows, he says, "Pretty sure you're the one who makes things hard." He steps into a pair of jeans and then tosses a Brentwood baseball shirt on.

Leaning up on my elbows, I catch him check out my chest and then look away. Looks like I'm not the only one getting in some staring this sunny morning. "I have community service this morning, so I have to leave soon."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry. Let me grab my things."

He presses his hand on my thigh. "You don't have to rush. You can stay as long as you want."

"No, that's okay. I should get home. I have some reading to get in for my classes. Hopefully Scarlett and Hutton are done with whatever they were doing at our house . . . and cleaned whatever surfaces they used to do it on."

He takes my hand in his, pulling me to my feet on the bed. He circles his arms around my waist, spins me around, and then sets me on the ground. *God, I love that he's so tactile, something I'm not normally.*

"That's one way to dismount the bed."

"Always trying to keep things fresh. If we hurry, I can run by the burrito stand and pick us up breakfast burritos."

"Say no more," I say, rushing to my bag. "I'll be right back."

“THESE ARE DANGEROUSLY GOOD. I can’t believe I’m a junior at Brentwood and hadn’t ever tried one of these burritos.” I take my last bite and then crumple up the foil the burrito came in just as Lincoln pulls into my driveway.

“It’s a little-known secret only the douchebags know about,” he teases.

“Well then, I’m going to hang out with the douchebags more often if they have hidden gems like this.”

“Mayhem, you’re already hanging out with the douchebags more.”

Fact.

“What time do you have to be at the school?” I ask.

“Half hour.”

“So you have some time?” He nods. “Then can I ask you something?”

“Uh-oh.” He turns in his seat. “Why do I feel like this something is serious?”

“It’s moderately serious.”

“Okay, hit me.”

I turn as well and rest my hands in my lap as I lean my head against my seat. “Two people have told me that I’m lucky that you’ve let me into your circle.”

“You are lucky,” he teases with a grin, but when I take his hand in mine and link our fingers together, his smile fades and his expression becomes earnest.

“So you do have a circle?” I ask.

“I mean”—he scratches the side of his jaw—“I don’t really define it as that, but yeah, I don’t invite many people into my life.”

“But you invited me in, why?”

He chuckles and looks out the windshield. “Damn, Mayhem, not making it easy this early in the morning, huh?”

“You don’t have to answer, I just . . . I don’t know, find it interesting is all. I like being your friend, and it comes with some great perks, like secret burrito places and mind-blowing cuddling.”

“Mind-blowing cuddling, huh? First time I’ve ever heard that.” His smile is so infectious. “What makes it mind-blowing?”

He’s deflecting. “If I answer your question, will you answer mine?”

“Seems like a fair trade. Sure.”

I twist his hand so the back of it is resting on my thigh. Playing with the skin of his palm, I run my finger over the distinct lines and up and down his fingers. I notice him staring at my touch, and he bites the corner of his lip before he looks back up at me.

His eyes disarm me, brimmed with tenderness and passion, which makes answering his question that much harder. It feels like he can see right through my indifferent façade and straight to my soul.

“Mind-blowing cuddling doesn’t come around very often, or really ever for me,” I answer honestly. “I’ve been around the block a little when it comes to cuddling, I won’t lie about that. I know when a guy is doing it right and when a guy is doing it wrong.” I point at him. “You do all the right things like bury your head in my hair, hold me tight against every part of you, keep your arm around me at all times, and when I shift, you let me adjust, then secure yourself to me when I’m comfortable again. You make sleeping easy.”

“Hell, I might just cry.” He waves his free hand in front of his face and I poke him in the leg.

“Don’t be a sarcastic ass.”

He chuckles and says, “Sorry, I’ve never been complimented on my cuddling before.”

“Well, glad I’m your first. Now answer my question, how did I qualify for your circle?”

He lets out a heavy breath and this time, he takes control of our connection, twisting our hands together. “You didn’t just qualify, Indie, you’re firmly in place.” Looking over my shoulder, not making eye contact, he says, “There have been girls in and out of my life. Some cool, some in it for all the wrong reasons. But when I met you and your only focus was to beat me at every game we played, I knew you were real. Someone else would have probably let me win, but not you. You genuinely gave me a run for my money. And then from there, it just felt . . . right, like you were meant to be in my life, you know?” He laces our hands together and rubs his thumb over my knuckles. “You make this crazy pressure of being an elite student athlete at one of the premiere colleges in the country feel easy, relaxed and . . . fun. Not many people can do that for me. There’s my boys, my moms, and you.”

Okay, that was a good answer.

A really good answer.

An answer that scares me momentarily with how good it was, how much it meant to me.

Looking him in the eyes, I say, “You do the same for me.”

“Then let’s make sure we keep it that way, okay?”

I nod. “Sounds perfect to me.”

“Get over here and give me a hug.”

I lean over the console and reach for him, he does the same, and he brings me in close, cupping the back of my head. The prolonged anticipation between us, of what this could possibly turn into feels unbearable as he speaks into my ear.

“You’re fucking awesome, Mayhem. Of course you’re in my circle.” He lifts away, but only a few inches, keeping our faces close, our breath mixing as he grips the sides of my face and bring his lips to my forehead. It’s a soft press of his mouth, where he lingers for a second longer than expected and when he releases me, I dream of what it would feel like if his lips pressed against mine. I sit there, desire growing like a smoldering flame, my heart pattering so hard I’m not sure if it’s trying to escape or restart. “We’re still on for tomorrow morning, right?”

I gulp. My throat closing in on me, the pull to be near him intoxicating. “Yeah. Tomorrow morning,” I’m able to choke out.

“Okay. See you then, Mayhem.” He releases me, leaving me feeling like I’m balancing on a plank, on the edge of a mountain, about to fall over.

He starts his car, and that’s my cue to leave, despite not wanting to leave his side. Not after his lips still feel imprinted on my forehead, or how my legs feel wobbly and unsteady, or how I literally want to crawl into his lap and ask him to hold me for the rest of the day.

When I get out of his car and make my way into my house, I realize something terrifying: there’s feelings brewing inside of me, crazy, new feelings, and I’m pretty sure they’re one hundred percent lust. Lust for a man I never expected to show up in my life, and yet, here he is. And every day I have at Brentwood is brighter.

Because he’s in it.

Chapter Twelve

LINCOLN

“You know, I was expecting you to wear something different,” I say to Indie, who’s wearing baggy sweatpants and an even baggier long-sleeved shirt.

Hand on her hip, she asks, “And what exactly did you expect me to wear?”

I lift my baseball cap and push my hand through my hair, studying her outfit. “I don’t know, maybe something that doesn’t look like you pulled it from my dresser drawers. Something a little more form-fitting. Maybe show off some cleavage for encouragement.”

She rolls her eyes, unleashes her hair from her ponytail, only to gather it back and tie it tighter. It’s such a simple *girl* move, but I’m mesmerized every time she does it, unable to look away.

Finished with her hair, she pulls her iPad out of her bag and sets it up in front of the cones she laid out on the turf of our weight room. When I brought her through the player’s entrance of the stadium, I could sense her awe of the space.

Because our team brings in a lot of money to the school, we’re blessed with the best facilities in the country. A stadium with a roof so we can practice year-round, the best turf money can buy, a locker room made for

the professionals, batting cages and pitching mounds wide enough to have multiple players practicing, and a personal weight training room that is better than the one used by all other teams in the events center. And every wall is dedicated to past athletes who helped build the program and the guys who have moved on to the pros. I'm reminded every time I walk through the halls that this establishment demands greatness—one hundred percent commitment—which is why I brought our leg training to this space.

“Okay, warm up first, then we're going to blast your legs with heavy loads of weights. After one round, back to agility, then we repeat weights. We will repeat five times. Your legs will be noodles at the end of this. But it will build endurance.”

“All right. Lead me through it.”

“We'll do ladder work first. Then move to the slide board for a minute. Once warm, we'll do squats, front lunges, power cleans, and dead lifts. Only five reps of each, but at eighty percent of your best weight. The goal is to make sure when you do lift number five, it's next to impossible to make it. Then we'll jump back into agility. One-minute rest in between each set.”

I nod and then hold my hand out for a high five; she smacks it, a direct hit. “Let's do this, Mayhem.”

From her backpack, she pulls out a Bluetooth speaker and sets it on one of the boxes we use for box jumps. “You probably have a stereo system in here.”

“We do.” I chuckle.

“But wasn't sure if you have access to it.”

“We do.” I laugh some more.

“Well, doesn't matter, as I made us a workout playlist last night and I'm going to play it.”

“That's fucking cute.”

She points her finger at me. “Don't try to be charming, I'm not going easy on you.”

“Wouldn't expect you to.”

Once everything is set up, she presses play on her phone and the first song makes me smile. Okay, she means business.

Sandstorm by Darude, blasts through the speaker and she turns to me, removing her long-sleeved tee, leaving her in just her sports bra.

Fuck.

And how is that helpful for concentration? Because now all I'm going to stare at is how her sweats hang low on her hips, her bubble butt barely holding them up, and her carved abs on display, not to mention how her sports bra molds to her lush tits.

"Let's go, Castle. Follow my lead on the ladder."

With ease, Indie creates pattern movements.

In, in, out, out.

Out, in, out, in.

Straight hops.

Diagonal hops corner to corner.

Her feet swiftly move, not touching the ladder once, and I pay close attention to what I'm doing in order to maneuver my large feet through the ladder and not touch it. But my pace is nowhere near hers. Her arms pump, her concentration is so intense, I'm fucking impressed.

And turned on.

"Grab booties for the slide board," she says, moving quickly to the slide board, bringing the timer with us. I slip on the booties so my feet slide easily, and get into position on one side. "Ready, go."

She starts the timer and says, "One minute."

Together, we slide back and forth, our feet hitting the sides at the same time.

"You can go faster, Castle, move it."

I smile to myself, squat a little lower and push off faster, sliding faster than her now.

"Faster," she pushes, picking up her pace and fuck, she's fast. I push harder, avoid looking at the clock and when the timer goes off, I slide to one side and then lift up, feeling out of breath.

Poking me in the chest, she says, "That's why you aren't hitting ninety-five. You're not pushing past your limit. You have more in you, so dig deep to find it. Let's set up the weights."

Christ, she's lethal, in every which way. Not only is she hot as fuck, but her confidence is even sexier. She's in her element. This is what she does best: push and encourage. *I could see her doing this later in life.*

We set up my weights and she stands behind me as a spot while I move through the different lifts, my legs burning, my arms burning, and sweat already dripping down my back. After the last rep of the first round, I set

the barbell down, reach behind my head, and peel my already soaking shirt off.

I toss the garment to the side and catch the subtle once-over Indie gives me. It's not the first time I've seen her check me out, and I'm sure it won't be the last. She seems to appreciate the male form, specifically mine.

"One-minute break," she says while moving to a chair where she takes her sweatpants off, leaving her in the tiniest pair of spandex shorts I've ever seen.

"Ah, come on, Mayhem," I groan as she stands.

"What?"

I motion to her outfit. "You're making things really hard over here."

She chuckles and says, "And I thought this was what you wanted."

I shake my head. "No, sweatpants back on. Stat."

"That's just my warmup gear."

"So this is what you work out in all the time?"

"Of course not. This is just for you." She winks and then claps her hands. "Ladder. Let's go, Castle."

Four more rounds. Why does it feel like they're going to be the longest four rounds of my life?



"YOU'RE JOKING," Indie says, looking up at me. Sweat is dripping straight into her cleavage, her cheeks are tinted a light shade of red, and her eyes are shining with adrenaline from our workout. She's so fucking enticing right now that I have to reel back my need to reach out and touch her.

"What? Do you think you're going to class like that?" I motion up and down her body. "Sorry to say it, Mayhem, but you stink."

"I do not stink." She playfully whacks me, and I laugh.

"Okay, you might not stink, but you will if you don't wash off."

"I'm not going to wash off in the baseball locker room. I see what you're trying to do."

"And what's that exactly?" I ask, leaning against the wall.

She flits her hand toward the locker room door. "I've heard the rumors about what happens in there. Take a girl into the locker room and they're yours forever."

I try to hold back my smile. “Pretty close, Mayhem, but the legend is if a baseball player has sex with a girl in the baseball locker room, then they’re bound together for life and will get married within three years.” I look her up and down. “I don’t know about you, but I just planned on showering.”

“I can run over to my locker and take a shower, smartass.”

“Don’t be stupid. There are stalls in the showers and I won’t look.”

“Oh, okay,” she scoffs. “You were staring at me every chance you got during our workout.”

“Uh, to make sure I had the right form. Jesus, Mayhem.”

False. I was staring at her tits when she was squatting. At her ass during dead lifts. Her stomach during power cleans. Her toned legs during lunges. I was checking her out every chance I got.

“Sure.”

I open the locker room door with my keycard and nod inside. “It’s not a big deal, come on.”

She peeks inside and I see interest flash over her face, so I grab her hand and take her inside.

She stops short just in front of the door, taking in the entire space.

“You know, I had an image of what it might look like in here, but I never expected it to be this nice.”

I go over to the fridge that’s stocked with electrolyte drinks and hand her a bottle. “You don’t have large-screen TVs in your locker room?”

“Uh, no.” She laughs, taking the drink from me. “Nor do we have a fridge with drinks or five couches and a table to sit at.”

I rub my hand over the back of my neck. “Well, this is embarrassing then.”

She steps forward and peruses the space. “Where’s your locker?”

“Far corner.”

She walks over there and I follow her. She spots my nameplate at the top of my locker and runs her finger over it before examining the rest of my space. Her fingers sift through all the practice shirts hung up, and then she goes to my turf shoes and cleats.

“No pictures. I half expected to see a heart frame with a picture of your moms in it.”

I reach above her and pull open the closed-off part of the locker. On the other side of the door is a picture of me with my moms outside my high

school baseball field.

Indie clutches her heart and then looks up at me. “Oh God, look at you being a mama’s boy.”

“Guilty.”

In the center of the locker is a shelf stacked with towels. I grab two for each of us and hand her a set. “There’s shampoo and all that stuff in each stall. You might smell a little masculine, but at least you’ll be clean.”

“Are you really not going to look?”

“I won’t look.” I might sneak a peek though, but she doesn’t need to know that. “This way, Mayhem.”

We pass the rest of the lockers and when we step into the shower room, her eyes narrow at me.

“These aren’t full stalls.”

“And you’re short enough so you’ll be covered. You’re fine. Stop being such a prude.”

“Says the guy who only needs to cover his crotch.”

“I promise I won’t be able to see anything.”

She studies the shower stalls, walks up to one, measures what it covers, and realizes that sure enough, it will cover everything that needs to be covered.

“See?” I give her a playful shove. “Now get clean.” I walk over to the opposite side, step into a stall, and start stripping down and hanging my clothes on the side. I flip the shower on and let the cold water blast me in the chest, cooling off my body. I stand there for a few seconds, letting the cold seep into my skin, waking me up and also freezing the shit out of my junk. You know, just in case.

When I turn around, my eyes immediately go to Indie, who is naked, fully under the water, head tilted up, letting the water run down her face and the front of her body. All I can see is the slight swell of her breasts when her arms lift.

And that’s all it takes.

Despite the freeze-out I attempted, my cock jumps to full mast within seconds.

She steps out of the water, wipes her eyes, and then meets my gaze across the shower wall. “I thought you said you weren’t going to look.”

“I, uh . . .” My cock twitches. “I can’t see anything.”

“Despite how hard you seem to be trying.” She chuckles and puts some shampoo in her hair. I’m fucking stunned, immobile as I watch her fingers sift through her hair, causing the soap to bubble up into suds. I can’t look away. I know I should, but I can’t. I watch in fascination as she washes her hair, the suds falling down her body in slow motion, over her shoulders, to the front of her chest.

I ache to touch my cock, to relieve the building pressure.

But there is no way I can get away with jacking off in front of her. Talk about being a goddamn creep, especially given she told me not to look. I’m over here being a fucking voyeur, unable to peel my eyes away.

“No conditioner?” she asks, looking around. “Ugh, I should have known, boys don’t use conditioner.”

“It’s uh, a shampoo-conditioner combo,” I say, reaching out and grabbing some shampoo so it looks like I’m doing something other than staring.

“It will still probably take me an hour to comb my hair. I’m blaming you, Castle.” She takes some body soap and starts rubbing it all over her body. *Jesus Christ*. “Oh, this smells really good.” She smiles and looks up at me. “Smells like you, Linc.”

And that right there makes me fucking melt into a puddle of horny teenage boy mush. The smile, the shortening of my name, and the cute way she says it.

I’m fucked.

I’m totally and utterly fucked.

Stupidly, I answer, “I take a lot of showers here.”

“That’s obvious.” She makes a turning motion with her fingers. “Now look away, I need to wash my private areas and I don’t need you staring at me while I do that.”

Yeah, I need to wash my private areas too . . .

I spin around and rinse the soap out of my hair. I then wash my face and wipe the water out of my eyes. From behind me, I hear the stall door shut.

“I’m done and going to get changed in one of the bathrooms just in case one of your guys comes in.”

“Okay. Be out in a second.” The minute she leaves the shower, I place one hand against the tile in front of me, quickly soap up my body, and then grip my cock.

I start low at the base and then squeeze hard as I pump up toward the tip.

Knowing how sound echoes in the shower room, I bite my bottom lip to keep my mouth shut.

My mind falls back to the soap cascading down Indie's body, her head tipped back under the water, the swell of her breasts, the way she looked in her workout gear.

Ah, fuck.

My legs start to shake and I pump faster, pressure building at the root of my cock.

Her tits and how they looked like they were about to fall out of her sports bra when squatting.

The groans she made when maxing out her last rep.

That smile . . .

My balls tighten and a surge of euphoria shoots through me as my cock swells in my hand, and I come in the locker room shower for the first time in my life.

I pump for a few extra seconds, a few more pulses of cum falling out of me and down the drain.

"Fuck," I mutter softly and then lift my head into the water, cooling my face down.

I needed that, more than I thought I did.

I finish rinsing the rest of my body off and then turn off the water. When I turn around, I'm relieved to see that Indie didn't catch me. That would have probably been really fucking embarrassing. What would I say?

Probably the truth like I did yesterday.

That she's hot.

That she turns me on.

That I can't stop thinking about her.

That I want her. I want her bad.



"WHERE ARE YOU HEADED?" Hartley asks me, his eyes barely open as he makes his way to the coffee maker.

“Leg day with Indie,” I answer, shoving the rest of my protein bar in my mouth. “I’ve been leaving early every Monday for the last three weeks, man. Way to pay attention.”

He presses one of his palms against his eye and says, “Dude, I’ve been dealing with my own shit, I don’t even know who’s coming or going anymore.”

“Alice?” I ask. He nods. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not even a little.” He sighs and lifts his fresh cup of coffee to his lips. “So what’s going on with you and Indie? Are you guys a thing? Because it sure seems like it.”

“Just friends,” I answer, even though it feels like more than just friends despite never getting physical.

“She spends the night here sometimes, and you’re telling me you’re just friends?”

“Yeah. We’ve never done anything.”

“Seriously?” Hartley blinks a few times. “You’re telling me you’ve had Indie Mayhem in your bed several times and haven’t done one goddamn thing? Not even felt her up?”

I shake my head. “Nah, man. We’re not like that.”

“I’ve seen you hold hands on campus. People notice that shit.”

I plop my baseball hat on my head and then twist it backwards. “Friendly handholding.”

“What about the way you look at her? You get all heart-eyed when you see her.”

I shrug.

“And territorial when other guys are around.”

I shrug again.

“And you can’t tell me you haven’t jacked off to her image at least once.”

Too many times to count at this point.

“Hey, so Alice was here the other day and I heard rumblings in your room. What was that about? Hmm?”

“Point made.” Hartley holds up his hand and then studies me. “I will say this though, you seem happier, man.”

“She’s cool, fun to hang out with, you know?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Hartley looks to the side and scratches his chest. “We have a big game this weekend. I’m going to run over some

plays since I'm up this early."

"Sounds like a good idea."

I start to walk away when he calls after me. "Hey. Asher said he saw you and Mayhem walking out of the baseball locker room together last week."

Fucking Asher.

"We shower in there after working out. Just easier. Trust me, if I had sex with Indie in the locker room, you'd hear about it."

He points at me. "I'm holding you to that."

Hartley goes back upstairs and I think about my comment. *He'd hear about it?* Where did that come from? I'm not some boasting dickhead who talks about his conquests. Hell, if I had sex with Indie in the locker room, I don't think I'd tell anyone. I'd keep that nugget to myself, hold on to it tightly, and savor every last morsel.

Grabbing my bag and water bottle off the counter, I head to the front door just as my phone dings with a text message.

I glance down at the screen.

Indie.

Indie: *Food poisoning got me last night. Not able to make it. I'm sorry.*

Oh shit. I quickly text her back.

Lincoln: *Are you okay? Do you need anything?*

Indie: *Sleep. I need sleep.*

I stare at the phone and before I even have a chance to plan out the logistics, I exit the house. Destination? The nearest drug store.



LUCKILY SCARLETT IS HOME and opens the door for me when I arrive. To my surprise, Hutton is lounging on their couch, shirtless, and eating a bowl of cereal.

As if it's normal, he nods at me and says, "What's up, man."

"Uh, hey." Bag in hand, I ask Scarlett, who's wearing Hutton's shirt, "Where's her room?"

"Upstairs, second door on the right."

"Thanks." I jog up the stairs and approach her door. Slowly, I open it. Her room is completely dark from her curtains, and there's a lump curled up

on the side of her bed. There's a trashcan on the floor and water bottles on the nightstand. "Mayhem, it's me."

My eyes adjust to the darkness just enough for me to see her shift and lift.

"Linc, what are you doing here?" she asks, her voice groggy.

I show her my reusable bag and say, "I got some supplies to help make you feel better."

She lies back down. "I'm exhausted. Can you just come snuggle on me for now until you leave for class?"

"I'm not going to class. Rusty said he'd take good notes for both of us." I take my shoes off and set the bag down near the nightstand. Before I get into bed with her, I squat down and grip the side of her cheek. "Do you still feel like you need to puke?"

"No," she says quietly. "I think everything has left my body at this point. I spent the entire night disposing of it."

"Okay. Can you do me a quick favor, Indie? Can you sit up and take down some of this?" I hold out one of my water bottles with one of my electrolyte tabs. "It's the strawberry lemonade that you like."

She barely sits up and takes a sip. After a few deep breaths, she takes another sip.

"That's my girl." I run my hand over her forehead, pushing her hair out of her face. "One more sip and then we can lie down."

She brings the bottle to her mouth, sips, and then hands it back, gingerly lying back down. I cap the bottle and set it on the nightstand. Instead of jumping into bed right away, I keep my hand on her face and rub her cheek with my thumb. Her skin is clammy, which I can only imagine is from the massive amount of vomiting she must have done throughout the night and funnily enough, it doesn't bother me.

After a few more strokes, I slip into bed with her and move my body up against hers, bringing my hand to her stomach and holding her tightly.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I kiss her head and say, "For what?"

"For missing out on leg day. I know how important it is for you to hit ninety-five."

"We'll do it when you're feeling better. For now, let's get you some rest."

She sighs and melts into my hold. "I care about you, Lincoln."

Not sure where that came from, but I return the sentiment. “I care about you too, Indie.”

“Always?” she asks.

“Always, Mayhem.” I seriously cannot recall what life was like before I met her. Sure, I’ve had dozens of girls want me to hold them—and fuck them—but none have taken the time to understand me beneath the *Brentwood baseball star*. None of them know that I love weeding with my mom. That I include genuine people in my small circle. That I watch chick flicks with my best friend . . . and blame the movie watching on my moms.

She’s silent for a few more seconds before she says, “I’m really glad our moms meddled. I don’t know what this school year would be like without you.”

“Mine would be boring, that’s for damn sure.”

She turns in my arms, and I lie on my back so she can rest on my shoulder. Her hand falls to my chest and she groans in frustration. I’m about to ask her what’s wrong, but when she moves her hand under the hem of my shirt and then slides it back up to rest on my bare chest, she mutters, “Better.”

And then her breathing starts to slow, and I feel her fall asleep in what feels like seconds.

Not me, though.

I stare at the ceiling, Indie in my arms, wondering how the hell I got into this position—a man full of crazy feelings for a girl who’s turned his life upside down.

What *would* life be like if our moms hadn’t meddled?

I don’t even want to know, because there’s one thing I know for sure. I definitely wouldn’t have the same connection with Indie that I have now. A *travesty*.



“SCARLETT, OVER HERE,” Hutton says, looking far too eager as he waves his arm across the dining hall. I’ve never seen him so consumed by a girl, and the funniest thing about it, Scarlett’s so clueless. “Scarlett.” He waves even harder.

“Dude, I think your penis is shrinking by the second,” I say to Hutton, as I lean back in my chair.

He glances at me and says, “Your girl is with her.”

I sit up and look in the direction where Hutton is waving frantically and spot Indie, a giant smile on her face, laughing at something Scarlett just said as they approach.

God, she’s . . . she’s beautiful.

Sweats.

Tight long-sleeved T-shirt.

Worn-out Adidas shoes.

Hair in a ponytail with a pink headband.

No makeup.

Yeah . . . she’s fucking beautiful.

“That’s what I thought,” Hutton mutters just as the girls reach the table.

Without invitation, Scarlett takes a seat on Hutton’s lap and reaches out and grabs one of the strawberries on his plate and plops it in her mouth.

“Big daddy with the fruit hookup.” She holds one out to Indie. “Want one?”

Sitting in the chair next to me, she shakes her head. “I’m good.” She then pokes my arm. “Are you going to just sit there or are you going to say hi?”

I chuckle. “Just waiting for you to sit on my lap too.”

“In your dreams, Castle,” she shoots back with sass, then grabs my Powerade and takes a drink from it.

“Help yourself.”

“I will.” She winks.

“You haven’t kissed me yet,” Hutton says, squeezing Scarlett, who elbows him in the chest.

“Just because I’m sitting on your lap, eating your fruit, doesn’t mean I need to kiss you. This is a free country. We women don’t have to pay up anymore. We have rights and I’ll damn well take advantage of them.”

Oh shit, Hutton really has his hands full. I would not want to be in his shoes.

“You can’t use that ‘I have rights’ shit.”

“Didn’t seem to bother you the other night when I smacked your hand away from your cock and told you I had the right to suck your dick.”

“Oh-kay,” Indie says, jumping in—thank God. “Maybe not a conversation for public, you guys.”

“You don’t want me saying cock in the dining hall?” Scarlett asks with a grin.

“Not really,” Indie says and then nudges my arm nodding at my broccoli. “Done with that?”

Laughing, I nod. “Have at it, Mayhem.” She picks up my fork and helps herself.

I can feel Scarlett’s intense gaze on us, and I have a feeling that because she’s not allowed to talk about Hutton’s cock in the dining hall, she’s about to direct her attention to me and Indie.

“You know what Indie was boasting about last night?” Scarlett says. *Yup, I was right.*

“What’s that?”

“She couldn’t stop talking about how she’s a better athlete than you in all respects.”

“Is that so?” I ask Indie with a lift to my brow.

She finishes up her broccoli and says, “You already know this. Don’t act surprised.”

“I know you think that, but I wasn’t aware of you smack-talking.”

“It wasn’t smack-talking. It was laying out the evidence and being right.”

Chiming in, Hutton says, “You really think you’re more athletic than Castle? The dude is one of the top pitching prospects in the country.”

“Which is awesome, he knows how to throw a ball, but that doesn’t mean he’s more athletic. He’s already admitted to not being able to handle me on the soccer field. I know my feet are faster than his and my endurance is stronger. I’ve proven myself in air hockey and basketball—”

“Hey, I won our basketball competition.”

“Barely,” she scoffs. “And held my own in other challenges. When you weigh it all out, I’m clearly better.”

“And self-aware,” I add, taking my drink from her.

“You know, there’s only way to solve this,” Hutton says, hand on his chin. “You have to pitch to her. If she can hit off you, then that will solidify her theory.”

“Oh, I would love to see her hit off me,” I say on a laugh.

“Then let’s go.” She stands from the table. “Let’s go play some ball.”

“You’re serious?” I ask, challenging her.

She leans down, one hand on the back of my chair, the other on the table, her face inches from mine. “Dead serious.”

Oh.

It . . . is . . . on.



“WARMED UP?” Asher asks, standing from a squatted position and lifting a catcher’s mask off his head.

I nod, rotating my arm a few times.

We ran into Asher in the stadium parking lot and when he asked what we were doing, I gave him a brief rundown, and the cocky grin I saw cross his mouth indicated he had to watch. Thankfully, he’s caught before, so he offered to sit behind the plate for me so Hutton didn’t have to.

“You’re up, Indie,” Asher calls out and then puts his mask back on.

We’re in the pitching cages, because Disik would kill us if we were on his field. I found a helmet and bat that would work for Indie and saddled her up. While I was warming up, she was hitting balls off the tee, and I was pretty impressed with her form.

She very well might be able to make contact.

“Pepps,” I call out and motion for Asher to come to the mound. He jogs up and just like in the games, I place my glove over my mouth as I talk quietly. “I’m going to lob some in there at first, and then pick up the pace, blow them by her.”

“Got it.”

We bump fists and he jogs back as Hutton holds up the netting and helps Indie inside.

She looks adorable in the helmet and seeing her stand in the batter’s box—ready to *try* and best me—it makes me want to run up to her and just fucking hug her. Hug her so damn hard.

“Ready, Mayhem?”

“Oh, I’m ready.” She taps the plate. “Bring it, Castle.”

“Hit him in the nuts,” Scarlett screams from behind the cages.

“Yeah, hit him in the nuts,” Hutton repeats.

“Dude,” I say, arms wide.

He shrugs. “Scar said she’d suck me off if I rooted for Indie. She gives good head.”

“*Good* head?” Scarlett asks, hands on her hips.

“Scratch that, fucking mind-blowing head.”

“Better.” Scarlett claps her hands. “Come on, right in the jewels, right in the jewels, Indie.”

Directing my attention to Indie, I say, “Please don’t hit me in the balls.”

“You nervous, Castle?” she asks, bat on her shoulder, determination in her stance. So irreverent. *So fucking hot.*

“No, just making a simple request, that’s all.”

“Enough with the chitchat,” Scarlett yells. “Let’s get this over with, as I have an orgasm to cash in on.”

That girl is something else.

“Good luck.” I nod at Indie and then get in position.

Like I said to Asher, I take it easy and lob one in. She connects with it, hitting it right back at me. It’s not a hard hit, but it’s a hit that makes Scarlett whoop it up obnoxiously.

“She owns you, Castle. Freaking owns you.”

Rolling my eyes, I toss pitch after pitch, throwing them at about fifty percent, and Indie connects with them. Hutton whoops it up as well and the “crowd” starts to grate on my nerves. *It’s time.* I nod at Asher and he nods back.

I bring it up to about seventy-five percent.

And she hits it.

Okay.

That was lucky.

I throw another and another, and she makes contact with each ball. I pick up another ball and push my hand through my hair.

“Is that all you’ve got?” she asks, a shake to her ass.

“I was going easy on you. Settle down.”

“Oh sure, okay.”

“I was.” I fling my arm out to the side, clearly irritated with the goading from Hutton and Scarlett in the back, egging her on. Blow job or not, Hutton should be on my side, and Asher’s too much of a damn mute to say anything. He observes. So to say my blood pressure has skyrocketed is an understatement.

“Uh-huh.” She taps the plate. “Then give me your best stuff.”

“Fine, I will,” I snap. “Asher, all out.”

“Got it,” he muffles from behind his mask.

“He’s not going to burn anything past you,” Scarlett yells. “He’s weak. You are by far superior.”

Scarlett needs to rein it in.

I set my hands, look down at the mitt, lift my leg, and press off the mound while flinging my arm forward at full speed . . .

Then watch in horror as the ball sails straight for Indie’s ass. She has zero time to move out of the way and she gets plunked, only to send her careening to the ground, the clatter of the bat following closely behind.

“What the hell?” she yells as I stand there, stunned.

“Charge the mound. Charge that mother-effing mound,” Scarlett says, clinging to the net, jumping up and down.

“Oh my God, my ass. You bastard,” Indie says, rolling over and facing me. From the ground, she army crawls toward the mound, one arm moving her forward, the other holding the spot where I hit her, and I watch as she slowly makes her way toward me. “I can’t believe you hit me.” She takes a second, lifts up, and hobbles the rest of the way, then pushes at my chest.

I chuckle and say, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Yes, you did.” She pushes me again and then tries to take me down. I let her. We fall to the ground and Scarlett cheers her on. Straddling me, Indie pushes on my chest and says, “You couldn’t stand that I was hitting off you, so you had to hit me. What kind of shit is that, Castle?” She’s smiling, so I ease up, let her do her thing.

“The ball slipped out.”

“Sure.” She leans down, her face close to mine. “You owe me.”

I grip her hips, not caring who’s watching or how Hutton’s suggesting I roll her over and fuck her on the mound. Scarlett agrees with that idea and joins in on the chants. Asher stands there awkwardly unsure of what to do.

“Tell me what you want and it’s yours.” I smile up at her.

Her eyes darken and for a second, I think she’s going to answer. That the level of intimacy we’re at has sparked something inside of her, but then she pushes off my chest and she says, “I’ll let you know.”

And then she hobbles away.

“You would never be able to hit my ninety-five fastball.”

She looks over her shoulder. “Yeah, because you can’t throw ninety-five.”

“Oooo, burn,” Hutton says like an ass.



INDIE: *I’d like to cash in on what you owe me.*

Lincoln: *That was quick. I thought you’d take a few days to think about it, not a few hours.*

Indie: *I want an ass massage.*

Lincoln: *Done. Let me get the lotion, and I’ll be right over.*

Indie: *Not from you. My body is too revolting for you to touch, remember?*

Lincoln: *I’ll take one for the team.*

Indie: *My glute is so stiff, and if I can’t play on Saturday because your ego got the best of you, I WILL murder you in your sleep, Castle.*

Lincoln: *All the more reason for me to massage it.*

Indie: *No, it will hurt too much. How about some ice cream? Bring some over and I’ll forgive you.*

Lincoln: *That I can do. Can I eat some with you?*

Indie: *Meet me on the front steps.*



“THERE HE IS, Mr. Macho Man himself.”

I roll my eyes and hand her the soft serve order of ice cream she asked for while sitting on her front steps with her. “How’s your ass?”

“I’m sitting on a cushion, you tell me.”

“Let me see it.”

“Oh okay, nice try, Castle.” She shakes her head while scooping up ice cream onto her spoon. “You’re not getting a free peep show.”

“I’m serious,” I say. “Just show me the side. I want to make sure you’re treating it right.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Huffing, she sets her ice cream down, stands in front of me, and pulls down the left side of her sweats, showing me her left glute. I wince when it comes into view.

“Shit.” I reach out and surprisingly, she lets me touch it. “Tender?” I ask as I examine the black and blue spot that’s already spreading on the meat of her ass.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Are you icing and adding compression?”

“How do you expect me to wrap my ass?”

“Huh . . . creatively?” I ask.

She chuckles and lifts her sweats back up. “I’ll be fine. I’ll show our trainer tomorrow and she’ll help a girl out.”

She sits back down with her ice cream and I bump shoulders with her. “I’m sorry, you know.”

“I know,” she sighs, bumping my shoulder back.

“I don’t like that I hurt you.” I barely eat my ice cream, feeling genuine remorse. “I let my emotions take over, which made me lose focus.”

“It’s okay, Linc,” she says, hand on my arm. “It’s all part of the game and I’m tough. I can handle whatever you throw my way, even if it strikes me in the ass.”

I chuckle and put my arm around her, bringing her into my chest. I press a kiss to the top of her head and hold her there for a second. “So you don’t hate me?”

When I release her, she grips my chin and shakes it. “Never, Castle. I had fun.” She winks and goes back to her ice cream. “Now, tell me, how easy were you really taking it on me?”

I laugh out loud and dip my spoon into the ice cream. “Let’s just say if I really pitched that hard, there’s no way I’d be here at Brentwood.”

“Damn.” She laughs. “Well, I’m going to pretend it was full force, so when you’re famous and in the big leagues one day, I can say I got a hit off Lincoln Castle.”

“And when you’re famous and drilling the soccer ball into the goal, I can say, I saw her ass cheek back in college.”

She laughs and rests her head against my shoulder. “Aren’t you a gentleman?”

“Always.”

Chapter Thirteen

INDIE

I squat down, the smell of grass and sweat reaching my nose. “What a fucking game,” Scarlett says, pounding me on the back and pulling me to my feet. “Girl, conference champions.” She shakes me and I still feel numb, as if this is a dream.

Three years in a row, conference champions.

The crowd around us is still cheering as Coach Wilson walks off with the trophy clutched to her chest.

“You’re not having a heart attack, right? Are you having a heart attack? I’m going to need you to stand and tell me you’re not having a heart attack.”

Laughing, I stand on wobbly legs and pull Scarlett into a hug.

It was a hell of a game. Four to five, we squeaked out a win in the last second. It all still feels like a blur: Scarlett passing to me, finding a hole and kicking the ball to the top right corner of the goal. That was it, we won.

“God, that was amazing.”

“And did you see your boy?” Scarlett asks, pulling away, “I think he nearly jumped the fence to come down here.”

I look over to where Lincoln and the baseball boys are standing, still waving their signs in the air, making a huge deal of our win, which will

never get old. Unfortunately, the football team had an away game, so they couldn't make it. Earlier, Scarlett was disappointed, but she got over it quickly once we were on the field.

"Think I should go say hi?" I smile.

"Uh, yeah. There are no rules now, we won."

I give Scarlett one more hug and then jog over to the short fence that blocks the fans in the stands from climbing over. But it's no match for me.

As I approach, the boys grow louder and Lincoln, in his painted chest and my number painted on his face, comes barreling down to meet me. I hop the fence, and he catches me in his arms, spinning me around, his strong arms acting like a warm blanket as he presses his mouth against my temple.

"Holy shit, Mayhem." He pulls away to look me in the eyes. My legs are wrapped around his waist, and we're definitely drawing attention as he congratulates me. "You fucking killed it out there. Jesus, I don't think I've ever been more proud of someone."

"Yeah?" I ask, feeling my insides turn to goo.

"Babe, you were amazing."

Babe . . .

That's the first time he's used a term of endearment for me. The first time I've heard his deep, sultry voice call me anything other than my first or last name. Calling me something intimate. It makes me feel . . .

Cherished.

Special.

Important.

"Thank you. I still can't believe we won. For a second there, I thought it was all over."

Lincoln shakes his head. "Not me, I knew you were going to take it home for us. You're easily the best out there, but you and Scarlett are an incredible duo. The timing. How you know where the other is. Fuck." He squeezes me again. "We're celebrating tonight, party at the baseball loft, the guys are already planning it."

"Really? That sounds—"

"Any hugs left in you for your mom?"

I still in Lincoln's arms and slowly slide down his chest.

Oh crap.

Slowly . . . very slowly, I turn to find my mom wearing a Brentwood soccer shirt, hair teased to high heaven, and a grin so wide that I'm afraid it's permanent.

I can only imagine what she must be thinking right now.

"Mom." I straighten my jersey, which has some of Lincoln's body paint on it. Even if I wanted to pretend she didn't just catch me in an intimate embrace with him, the evidence is painted all over me. "I thought you and Dad couldn't make it."

"Dad couldn't, but I made the drive." She opens her arms up. "Come here, sweetie. I'm so proud of you." Cautiously, I step into her embrace and give her a hug, my stomach twisting with nerves, preparing myself for whatever she might say.

"Thank you, Mom."

She holds me by the shoulders and says, "I got that last goal on camera for your dad, and he's going to be ecstatic. You were pure brilliance." Her energy for the game is throwing me off. I don't expect my parents at my games. I know they're proud of me, but they've never been super fans, and I've come to terms with that. But this exuberance is confusing . . . until I catch her looking over my shoulder, where her smile grows even wider if possible. "Hey Lincoln. How are you?"

Ah, there's where all her excitement is coming from.

Should have known it had nothing to do with the game and everything to do with the guy cheering for me in the stands.

"Hey . . . Mrs. Mayhem," I hear him say, his voice a little shaky.

We're both thinking the same thing: our moms are never going to let us live this down.

Not that we're a thing per se, we're . . . friends, but still, what my mom just witnessed is probably not the same type of friendship she has with her guy pals.

I don't know if what I have with Lincoln is very common for anyone, to be honest.

"You did a wonderful job with your body paint. Your mom agrees. I sent her a pic when I spotted you."

Yup, this just confirms everything I was thinking. She's happy to see Lincoln. She doesn't care that we just won the conference—which is really shitty—and now I'm in a bad mood. If I didn't know any better, I'd think my mom only made the drive to spy on me. I wouldn't put it past her.

“Oh great. Thanks for sending that.” Lincoln turns to me, and I see annoyance in his eyes already. “I’ll catch you later, Indie.”

I wave awkwardly. “See ya.”

Turning back to my mom, she pulls me in by the shoulder and says, “How about we go out to dinner? Looks like we have a lot to talk about.”



“SO, what’s going on with you and Lincoln?”

“Wow.” I check my phone for the time. “I’m shocked it took you this long to ask,” I say, reaching for my water while Scarlett next to me does the same.

I dragged Scarlett along with me to dinner with my mom for two reasons. One, her parents live in Idaho so they couldn’t make it to the game and two, I was hoping that my mom wouldn’t ask about Lincoln with Scarlett present.

Man, did I underestimate her.

“I waited until we ordered our food, thought that would be respectful enough. By the way, cute place. Why haven’t we been here before?” my mom asks, looking around the Italian restaurant Lincoln brings me to for calzones.

“Lincoln introduced it to us,” Scarlett says unapologetically as she sips her water.

I think we can all agree bringing along the best friend was a bad idea.

“Oh, is that right?” My mom taps her finger on the table. “Do you care to explain what’s happening? Last time I talked to you on the phone about Lincoln, you said you haven’t seen him around campus. Then I hear from Laura, while doing her hair, that you guys are partners in a class. That came as quite the shock, but I let the slip-up on your end—forgetting to tell me—slide, because I figured you’d eventually talk to me. But then I see you guys humping in the stands—”

“We were not humping, Mom. Jesus. He was just congratulating me.”

“Your legs were wrapped around his waist.”

Scarlett picks up a piece of fresh bread from the table and says, “That’s damning evidence.”

“Will you shut up?” I say, “Unless you want me to start talking about Hutton.”

“Hutton and I are way too complicated to unravel over a cozy dinner. That will take weeks,” Scarlett answers, literally giving zero fucks.

Seriously, bringing her was a terrible idea.

“Well . . .” my mom pushes, causing me to lean back in the dark red leather booth, feeling defeated. And to think I’d felt such a high an hour ago.

“Whatever I say you’re not going to believe.”

“Try me,” she says, folding her hands together as if she’s in a boardroom, questioning one of her employees.

“Fine, we’re just friends.”

My mom laughs out loud and shakes her head. “Oh, Indie.”

“See, I told you, you weren’t going to believe me.”

“That was not a *just friends* hug. *Just friends* hug from the side. They don’t leap into each other’s arms and press pelvises together.”

There was no pelvis pressing, at least no intentional pelvis pressing. Believe me, I’ve thought about it.

Chiming in, Scarlett says, “For what it’s worth, Mrs. Mayhem, whenever I ask her what’s going on with Lincoln, the response from both of them is always that they’re friends. I just think they’re close friends.”

Okay, maybe bringing Scarlett wasn’t that bad of an idea.

“I think they’re bordering the line of intimacy though. They totally want to bone, the air screams it whenever they’re around each other,” Scarlett adds.

Scratch that, it was a bad idea.

“We are not intimate. We just . . . lean on each other.”

“Have you had sex?” my mom asks point-blank, shocking the hell out of me.

“God, Mom, that’s none of your business.” She gives me a pointed look and I want to chuck a piece of bread at her head. She’s not letting up, so I say, “If you must know, no, we have not. We haven’t seen each other naked, we haven’t touched private parts and guess what, we haven’t even kissed.” I pick up a piece of bread as well and take a bite out of it. “Out of comfort—*as friends*—he holds my hand occasionally, but that’s it. We hang out, and I’ve been helping him build up his leg endurance.”

I don't mention the showers we've taken together—technically together since we're showering at the same time and in the same room.

“So, there's really nothing going on between you two?”

I shake my head. “Just a really good friendship, one that I cherish, and one I'd appreciate if you didn't go blabbing to Laura about. I don't want to freak him out.”

My mom chews on that for a second and then says, “Let me ask you this. Have you two been dating other people?”

“Indie started seeing a football player named Deacon, Lincoln's housemate actually, but that was a tiny blip and once again, nothing happened,” Scarlett says, mouth full of bread.

“Hey Scarlett, why don't you just focus on eating bread, huh?”

She shrugs and smiles. Remind me to put a personal ad out tomorrow for a new roommate.

“Why didn't things work out with Deacon?” my mom asks, probably categorizing all this information so she can tell it to all the girls at the salon when she returns to work.

“Because, just like I told you at the beginning of summer, I don't want to date anyone. It's too much stress. I like being able to come and go as I please and not have to worry about anyone else while I'm focusing on my schoolwork and soccer.”

“But soccer is over now, so you can start dating.”

“It's not over, Mom. We still have the national championship to fight for. Which means practices are going to become much more intense. Why can't you respect the fact that I don't want to be with anyone right now?”

“You're so caught up in soccer. There's more to life than kicking a ball around. And I'm worried,” she says, moving her finger around on the table.

“Worried about what?” I ask, feeling exhausted and annoyed.

“That you're leading Lincoln on.”

“Mom, please, the guy—”

“Laura's concerned too. She mentioned it when I was doing her hair.”

“What?” I ask, my cheeks starting to burn with embarrassment. “What did she say? What did Lincoln say to her?”

“He didn't say much, but she said he wouldn't stop talking about you, and when she asked him why not ask you out, she said he commented about you not wanting to date anyone. She came to me as a concerned mother,

wanting to make sure that you weren't leading him on only to break his heart."

"I would never," I say, but my mind starts to wander. I'm not leading him on, am I? He's the one who takes my hand, the one who invites me to spend the night. If anyone is leading anyone on, it's him . . . right?

I bite my bottom lip, trying to give this serious thought.

Or is it me?

Wait . . . no, no one is leading anyone on. We're friends.

"We're not leading each other on, Mom. We've talked many times about our friendship and how much we cherish it."

"Uh-huh." She crosses one leg over the other as she shifts in her booth. "So, if he started seeing someone, you'd be okay with that?"

Because I'm bound and determined to prove my mom wrong, I say, "Yes, of course. Hell, I'll even hook him up with someone. Maybe I'll do just that tonight at the party."

"Bad idea," Scarlett mumbles next to me, but I ignore her.

"Yup, that's how much I know we're just friends. I'll find him a girl tonight, prove you both wrong."

"You don't need to prove me wrong, sweetie. I think you're trying to prove yourself wrong."

"No, Mom. Unlike you, I refuse to live a lie." At that, she narrows her eyes at me, shocked, and probably worrying I'll share her secret with Scarlett. But why bother?

It's rare that I think about my mom and dad's marriage. I can mostly ignore it given I live hours away from them. Though with Mom in front of me, reality stares me in the face.

SCARLETT AND MOM know nothing of the pain I carry. They don't know what they're talking about. Yes, I have strong feelings for Lincoln, but they're because I truly cherish him as a person. *My* person. And I want the best for him. So why wouldn't I hook him up with someone? It sounds like the perfect way to let everyone know again that we're just friends.



“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?” Scarlett asks, as I search the party, looking through the throngs of people, seeing if I spot any single girls I can introduce Lincoln to.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. When you get your stubborn mind set on something, you don’t stop until you complete the task. You’re only going to end up hurting Lincoln and yourself.”

“How is finding someone he can hook up with hurting him?” I spot a gaggle of freshmen soccer players and assess them. Hmm, maybe Jasmine? Not quite sold on her yet.

“Hey.” Scarlett pulls on my shoulder so I’m facing her. “You know I’m all about denial. Hell, I’m practically the conductor of the denial train, but if you suggest to Lincoln that he wants to hook up with a different girl, you’re going to hurt him.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“He likes you, Indie,” she says louder, pulling my attention away from searching.

“He doesn’t like me like that. If he did . . .” My voice fades and I look away.

“If he did . . . what, Indie?”

I chew on the side of my cheek, my hands twisting in front of me, angry that we’re having this conversation at the baseball loft where anyone could hear us if the music died down for a second.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“It does so matter if you’re about to hurt the one person who’s been by your side since the beginning of the school year. Do you honestly think you just finished your best regular season of your career only because of all the hard work you put in? Yes, there’s something to say about the extra hours, but credit should also go to Lincoln. He’s kept you calm, relaxed. You’ve actually had fun this season rather than being the stress ball you usually are, and there’s a reason for that. Are you just going to ruin that because you’re too afraid to make a move?”

“He doesn’t like me like that, Scarlett,” I say more angrily. “If he did, then we would have already kissed by now. Trust me, he’s had his opportunities. Okay? He sees me as a friend, and that’s fine. His mom had it wrong, I’m not leading him on.”

“He’s had opportunities to kiss you? When?” she asks, her voice soft, her hand going to mine.

“It doesn’t matter. All that matters is he didn’t take them. And yes, I may be comfortable with him and maybe I lean on him a little too much, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t hook him up with someone he might actually want.”

Scarlett shakes her head. “I don’t know, Indie. I really think this is a big mistake.”

“Well, you have your opinion and I have mine.” With that, I walk away and into the center of the party, still debating if Jasmine would be a good fit. I know she’d love the opportunity to know Lincoln. I heard her proclaim that to the locker room before people knew Lincoln and I were good friends. But would he—

“There you are.” Strong arms wrap around my midsection as a pair of lips kiss the side of my head. “How was dinner with your mom?”

Lincoln turns me around in his arms and my heart leaps out of my chest, right between us, from the mere sight of him. Freshly showered, rid of all his body paint, he’s dressed in a simple navy-blue long-sleeved T-shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His hair is styled in that artful, messy way like he just had epic sex, and he’s wearing a pair of jeans that hug his thighs and hips to perfection.

Easily the most attractive guy in the loft.

“Uh, dinner was fine.”

His brow pinches together. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head.

“It doesn’t look like nothing. What did your mom say to you?”

“Nothing to worry about.” From the corner of my eye, I see Jasmine heading in our direction.

“Uh, when did I start not worrying about what’s going on in your life? You matter to me, so I want to know why you have that look in your eyes like you’re unsure if you want to cry or not.”

“I’m fine, Lincoln,” I say as my chest grows tight and emotions bubble up my throat. Why am I getting emotional? I shouldn’t be getting emotional. There’s nothing to be emotional about.

Get it together, Indie.

Turning just in time to grab Jasmine, I take her by the arm and say, “Come here, I want to introduce you to someone.”

“What?” Jasmine says, caught off guard. Ignoring her surprise, I bring her in front of Lincoln, who immediately frowns at me.

“Jasmine, I want to introduce you to Lincoln. Lincoln, this is Jasmine, a freshman on the soccer team. She has a crush on you, and I think you two would hit it off.”

“Oh my God, Indie, what are you doing?” she asks, horrified.

“Shh,” I whisper into her ear. “Be cool. I’m hooking you up.”

Because he’s a nice guy, Lincoln waves. Albeit, unnaturally, but he still waves. “Hey Jasmine.” Then he peeks around Jasmine, who has two inches on me with her heels, and he says, “Can I have a word with you, Indie?”

“Maybe later.” I push Jasmine closer to Lincoln. “You two get to know each other. I’m going to get a drink. Mingle.” I wiggle my fingers. “Talk to you later.”

I spin on my heel, my pulse skyrocketing, and my face heating to lava levels as I try to locate the drinks.

Kitchen. They’d be in the kitchen.

Beer is not going to do it for me. I need to go for the classic jungle juice that the boys are known for. I take a red cup from the stack and fill it to the top from the giant water cooler on the kitchen island, manned by two freshmen baseball players. If anything, the guys are extra safe about spiking of drinks, especially when they mix it themselves.

Drink in hand, I turn back around looking for someone, anyone to talk to.

Brandon from the basketball team. Perfect. He’ll do. We’ve had a few general education classes together.

“Hey Brandon,” I say, walking up to him.

“Indie, hey, amazing fucking win today. Congrats.”

“Thank you. Were you there?”

“Hell yeah. Got hooked attending your games after opening day. They’re intense. I swear my ass cheeks clench every time the ball gets close to the goal.” I chuckle and he winces. “Too much information?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s good to know we can make your butt cheeks clench.”

“Offense and defense,” he adds with a cheeky grin. “It’s not like basketball where you can turn around and quickly make up for that lost point. Getting the ball remotely close to the goal is a feat on its own, and then a goal. Hell, it makes sense why there’s such a celebration after each

one. But hey, you guys didn't take your shirts off like that Brandy girl in the Olympics."

"Yeah, not all soccer players rip their shirts off to celebrate."

"Shame, was kind of hoping for a show." He chuckles and so do I.

"How's your season going? I haven't been able to catch any games yet," I say.

"Our schedules make it hard to support each other, I get it. But it's going pretty well. We got a transfer this year from Finland and holy shit, the guy is good. Tall, scary as shit, deep voice. He's a monster in center, and he might bring us some of the attention the baseball team gets. Speaking of which . . ." Brandon nods behind me and I turn around just in time to see a very angry-looking Lincoln walking toward me.

Uh-oh.

Doesn't seem like Jasmine sold herself well.

"Indie, a word," he says in a clipped tone.

And because I'm stubborn—like Scarlett pointed out—I say, "Don't be rude, Lincoln. I'm talking with Brandon."

Reading the room—or the friendship—Brandon clears his throat and says, "Uh, I actually should take a piss. I've been holding it for a bit. I'll catch you later, Indie."

"Okay, sure. Bye, Brandon."

Not even before he's out of earshot, Lincoln spins me around to face him and says, "What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing." I've never seen Lincoln this angry before.

"Bullshit, Indie. When did we start lying to each other?"

"I'm not lying, I'm just . . . trying to make sure we have fun."

"I don't know about you, but I came here to have fun with *you*. No one else."

I look to the side, trying to come up with something, anything to get the subject off me. "When was the last time you had sex?"

"What?" he asks, leaning back as if I slapped him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sex, Lincoln. It's when you stick your dick—"

"I know what sex is," he says, taking a step forward, so I take a step back, running up against the wall next to the kitchen. Crap. Nowhere else to go. "Why are you asking me that?"

"It's a simple question, Lincoln. Why won't you answer it?"

“It’s not that I’m avoiding the question, Indie, but I’m just wondering where this is coming from.”

“You know, if you can’t answer it then there is no point—”

“Since before I met you,” he says, his hand falling against the wall, right above my head, his other hand gripping my waist, pinning me in place. “I haven’t had sex since the summer. Is that what you want to hear?”

“I . . . I . . .” His intense brown eyes bore down on me, his eyebrows sharp and menacing. I can taste his irritation on the tip of my tongue with how close he is, and I’m conscious that Scarlett was right. *This was a mistake.*

“When was the last time you had sex?” he asks, his voice coming out hoarse.

“I don’t remember,” I answer honestly.

“Okay, so now that that’s out of the way, where the fuck is this coming from?”

When I look away, he grips my chin and forces me to look at him. Letting out a short breath that seems to keep stopping in my throat, I say, “Jasmine’s a nice girl.”

“Jesus fuck,” he shouts, pushing off the wall and turning away from me. The people around us all stop and watch Lincoln as he pierces both hands through his hair, while I stand there nervously, trying to figure out how to stop these unfamiliar feelings from pumping through my veins, making me want to throw up *and* flee.

The tension in his shoulders is palpable. His anger straining all the way to the tips of his fingers that are digging into his hair.

No matter what, this conversation is not going to end well, so instead of pushing it any further, I decide to end it and walk away.

The only exit is past him, so I take a deep breath and maneuver around him quickly. I make it through but his voice booms through the loft, calling out to me. I don’t stop. I keep going all the way to the stairs that lead to the first floor, taking them two at a time and just as I reach the street, I hear the pounding of Lincoln’s feet behind me.

My place isn’t that far away, a few blocks, so I walk it, thankful that I’m wearing cute blue Keds rather than heels like every other girl in the loft.

“Indie, stop,” he calls out.

I don’t. I keep walking, picking up my pace, but it’s no match for Lincoln’s long stride. Before I know it, he’s standing in front of me, looking

distraught and irritated.

“Fucking stop,” he says, catching his breath.

“Lincoln, please let me by.”

“Not until you talk to me. Jesus, Indie, what the fuck happened in between hugging me in the stands and the party? Does it have to do with going out to dinner with your mom?”

“Nothing happened,” I shout, so sick of being asked twenty questions. “Nothing happened.”

“Then why the fuck are you trying to hook me up with your teammate?”

“Because—”

“Because why?” he shouts.

Anger and fear come together at a crossroads in my brain. Fear of admitting that I want Lincoln—more than just as a friend—and anger that my mom pushed me to this point. Everything was fine between us. Everything was comfortable. Now, because of my stupid head, things are muddled . . . and they don’t feel right.

“Because don’t you want to fuck someone? Don’t you want to stop babysitting me and maybe . . . I don’t know, go back to having sex?”

“What in the actual *fuck*,” he says, gripping his hair. “Why do you care so much about my damn sex life?”

“You were a sexual person before I came along. I don’t want to be cramping your style.”

“You’re serious?” he asks, a crinkle in his brow.

“Yes,” I answer, even though I honestly have no idea what I’m saying.

“Unbelievable,” he says with annoyance and then pushes past me, his shoulder bumping into mine. But he doesn’t make it but three steps before he’s turning around, his voice rising. “Did it ever occur to you that I like the way things are? That I don’t need some random pussy to make me happy? That my life is actually pretty chill exactly as it is?”

Yes?

No?

I want to believe him. And before seeing my mom today, I probably would have. But she’s right. I knew who Lincoln Castle was before I met him. He wasn’t a manwhore, chasing a different girl every night. But *look at him!* Women want him. He’s not oblivious to that. And due to the amount of time he’s spent with me, he hasn’t had much time to hook up. God, he’s even suggested that I make it hard for him, and surely, like any other red-

blooded male, he's needed to deal with that. Wouldn't he resent me for that? *Won't he tire of spending time with me soon anyway? And then what? And then he'll go back to how it was for him.*

"I was just—"

"Just what, Indie? Letting your mom get in your head? What did she tell you? Did she express my mom's concerns, is that what she told you?" I open my mouth to answer him, but what do I say? He nods slowly, his neck straining with anger. "I see. So your mom tells you that my mom was concerned about you leading me on, right?"

"I'm not," I say, wanting to state that for the record.

"Yeah, I'm reading that loud and clear, Indie. You're not leading me on. You're fucking pushing me away." He shakes his head and says, "I'll see you around."

"Wait, Lincoln, let's talk about this," I say out of desperation, realizing how fucked up my head is and how I should have just stayed home rather than prove a stupid point.

"Nah, I'm good. Maybe I'll go look for some pussy like you desperately want me to."

Hands shoved into his pockets, he walks away, and all I can think as I take in his retreating back is how astronomically stupid I am.



THE WORST THING about having your friend in a class with you . . . is facing them when you're fighting.

Normally, my Sunday after a home game has been spent lounging all day in Lincoln's bed, taking naps, eating takeout, watching movies, and playing games. It's become a ritual. And then we wake up early the next morning and train.

Well, there was no Sunday ritual. I spent all Sunday in my own bed, crying on and off and ignoring every text from Scarlett after I didn't let her into my room.

For our Monday training session this morning, I showed up and waited outside the stadium, hoping he'd come, but he didn't.

He was a no-show, and that hurt more than anything because I know how dedicated he is to obtaining his goal. He must really hate me.

Which leads me to class. It's a fifty-fifty chance that he doesn't show up and I'm leaning more toward he's going to be a no-show. So when I see him come through the classroom door, I'm surprised.

I'm even more surprised when he bypasses our usual row and goes up front to sit with Rusty, who gives him a high five.

Ouch.

"Told you not to fucking try to hook him up," Scarlett says, taking a seat next to me. She normally sits with Rusty, because of needing to focus on what the professor is saying, but she must see how pathetic I look and spared me the embarrassment of sitting by myself.

"Can you not, right now?" I ask.

"Listen, I gave you your space yesterday, but we leave for Thanksgiving break soon. Do you really want to go back home, knowing he's only twenty minutes away, but not be able to see him?"

I didn't even think about that.

Fuck.

I bury my head in my hands and Scarlett rubs my back as I hold back the threatening tears. Not in class. Not here. Not where he can see me.

Leaning in close, Scarlett says, "If you're this upset about what happened Saturday night, doesn't that tell you something?"

Sarcastically I say, "Yeah, never open my mouth about anything."

"I'm serious, Indie. You need to figure out your priorities, because there are people who want to be a part of your life, who really care about you. But you push them away. I think it's time to start letting them in."

"I know," I say quietly, my throat growing so tight that it's painful. "I can't talk about it anymore."

"Okay, I understand." She rubs my back and when the professor walks in, I try to focus on anything but Lincoln sitting in front of me.

But it's useless, because I stare at him, noticing how his broad shoulders fill out his hoodie, for the entire class. How his hat sits perfectly backwards on his head, how he shifts from side to side every so often, getting comfortable. I miss the brush of his shoulder against mine. By the time class is over, I'm a complete mess on the verge of a breakdown but, desperate to talk to him, I quickly pack up and book it out of the class to wait for him. When he appears, my breath catches as nerves rip through me, causing my legs to shake.

He starts to walk past me when I call out to him, "Lincoln, wait."

He stops and so does Rusty. Not turning to look at me, Lincoln says, “Go on, I’ll catch you later, man.”

“Okay.” Rusty glances at me, gives me a sad smile, and then walks away, leaving me alone with Lincoln.

When he turns around, he says, “What, Indie? Are you looking to see if I fucked a girl this weekend?”

My lip trembles, and the realization that he could have had sex makes me so physically ill, I can’t spit out my words.

He grips the straps of his backpack and rocks back on his heels. “I didn’t. Thought about it, just to appease you, but I didn’t.”

The smallest amount of tension leaves my shoulders, but not enough to make me feel better.

“That’s”—I swallow hard—“that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.”

He pulls out his phone and looks at the time. “You have about five minutes. I have to meet with my coach.”

God, he’s so mad. There’s normally a sparkle in his eyes when we’re together. A smile tilting his lips, a lightness about him that makes it so easy to joke around with him. But when he’s like this, angry, irritated . . . hurt, I don’t know what to do. I’ve never seen this kind of anger in him. What do I say? How do I fix this? Because, fuck, I need to fix this. *I can’t lose him. I can’t lose my best friend.*

“I’m sorry about Saturday. I wasn’t—”

“You know, on second thought, I really don’t have time for this.” He takes a step back and my heart sinks into a cold darkness as my veins freeze over. Scratching the side of his cheek, he says, “Brandon did ask if you were okay. I gave him your number, you know, in case you want to fuck him. What are friends for, right, Indie?”

“Lincoln.”

He takes another step back. “I thought I knew what you wanted, but I guess I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot of things, but the stunt you pulled on Saturday, instead of coming to talk to me, it was fucked up.”

“I know and that’s why I’m trying to apologize.”

“A little too late, Indie.” Another step away. “I’ll see you around.”

“Lincoln, please,” I call out, but he’s already too far away.

Tears stream down my face, but I quickly wipe them away as I walk in the opposite direction, toward the events center . . . where I plan on running

on the treadmill until my legs can't take anymore. *What have I done? What the fuck have I done?*

Chapter Fourteen

LINCOLN

“So I gave you all of yesterday to sulk, but today is another day and the sulking is done,” Mom says, coming up to me with some of her homemade cookies. She sets the plate in front of me and then sits next to me on the couch.

“It’s nine in the morning. Too early for cookies.”

“It’s never too early for cookies,” she says. “Especially when you’re on break.” She leans over, picks up a cookie, and hands it to me.

On a sigh, I take a bite and lean my head against the couch.

“Are you going to tell me what put you in this mood?”

“I don’t know. Are you going to gossip about it to your hairstylist?”

She winces and instant regret flashes over her face. “Does this have to do with Indie?”

“What do you think, Mom?”

“Laura, where are all the cookies?” Mama calls from the kitchen.

“In here,” Mom says. Then, for some reason, she says to me, “When you’re gone, we eat cookies at all hours of the day.”

“Especially when you have to look at hairy balls slapping against a rather loose vagina,” Mama says, bringing a plate over and putting two cookies on it for herself.

“I thought you were done with the porn site,” I say, thankful for the reprieve.

Mama smiles, as if she won the jackpot. “Scored another one. It was all rather exciting when they contacted us.”

There’s something seriously wrong with my moms.

“Congratulations, I guess.”

Mama pauses and studies me for a few breaths, and then she takes a seat across from us. “He has a crinkle in his brow, Laura.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Why is there a crinkle in our baby boy’s brow? There shouldn’t be a crinkle. It’s Thanksgiving break. I’m making crockpot chicken, like you love, and extra loaves of cranberry nut bread so you can take them back to school with you. There should be joy in the house. Lots and lots of joy. No crinkles.”

“Michelle, he’s upset at Indie.”

“I’m upset at you and Indie,” I correct her, flopping back on the couch.

Mama holds her hand up and stands. “This is on you, Laura. I told you not to meddle. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go stare at large cocks.”

I’m completely unfazed at this point.

When Mama leaves, Mom turns toward me and takes my hand in hers. “What happened?”

Not that I really want to talk about this with my mom, since she’s the one who said too much to Indie’s mom in the first place, but it’s also eating away at me. I feel like I don’t have a choice if I want to enjoy Thanksgiving and not sulk during the few days that I’m here.

Leaning my head to the side, I look my mom in the eyes and say, “I like her.”

She purses her lips, trying not to smile. “Okay.” She’s pained, holding back her glee, but I don’t allow her to let it out. It’s her punishment.

“And things are weird with us. We’ve talked about being friends and we’ve grown this strong relationship, something I’ve never felt before. It almost feels like a stronger friendship than what I have with Hartley and Asher. I go to her for everything and every Sunday, we hang out. Doing stupid shit like playing games and watching movies. It’s our day to relax since we both have Sundays off; at least for now we do.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was. Everything was good.” I press my hand to my forehead, still trying to figure out what was going through Indie’s mind. “Indie had her conference championship and of course, the boys and I went down to cheer the team on. She was incredible out there, Mom. Mesmerizing. Light on her feet, quick with the ball. She scored the winning goal. And after the awards and celebration, she came up into the stands and gave me a hug. It was so natural for her to jump into my arms and have her wrapped around me. And then . . . her mom cut in.”

“Beth was there?”

“Yeah. Indie didn’t think she was going to be there. It got increasingly awkward after that. Indie tensed up and that night, at the baseball loft where we were celebrating the conference win, Indie was a completely different person. I had to find her first and when I did, she tried to hook me up with a freshman on her team.” My mom winces and looks down at her hands. “It was as if going to dinner with her mom flipped a switch. We haven’t been physical with each other. The closest we’ve ever gotten to something is holding hands.” I don’t mention cuddling in bed because that feels weird to confess. “I thought maybe we were just taking things really slow, moving toward that direction of crossing the line into relationship territory.”

“Do you want to cross that line?”

“I did,” I say on an exhausted breath. “I didn’t want a relationship. I didn’t want to start anything serious, but the more I got to know her and hang out with her the more attached I’ve become. I was uh . . .” I scratch my head, feeling slightly embarrassed. “I was going to kiss her the other night, see if it was an okay next step, but then she tried to set me up with someone else and went off to talk to a guy on the basketball team.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. And I don’t want this to sound rude, but what does Indie’s indecision have to do with me?”

“What you told Beth, about leading me on, all that bullshit. Beth told Indie, and I think it freaked her out. I didn’t even recognize her. Then she was asking me about the last time I had sex and telling me I needed to get laid.”

“Oh jeeze.” My mom bites her bottom lip. There’s something she wants to say, but isn’t.

“What, Mom?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not my business to say and if I do talk about it, it would only be adding to the gossip I shouldn’t be spreading.”

“What are you talking about? Is it about Indie?”

She shakes her head. “It’s about Indie’s parents.” She squeezes my hand. “I’d cut her some slack. Try and talk to her.”

“I really don’t want to talk to her right now.”

“Lies.” My mom pokes my side.

“She’s the one who hurt me, Mom.”

“I understand that, but sometimes the person who does the hurting, is actually the one hurting inside. She might be feeling too broken to try and fix things between you two. She might not really know where to start, and as I know you well, you may not be willing to listen.” *Fuck. I didn’t. I wasn’t willing to listen.*

My chest grows tight from the thought of Indie holding something in that could be hurting her.

“If she’s hurting about something, she should have told me.”

“Probably, but she could also be in denial. It’s up to you, Linc, but I’d reach out, especially right now, when she’s back home. She probably needs a friend more than ever.”

Mom pats my leg and stands, leaving me there to stew in my own thoughts.

Is she broken? Am I really that unobservant that I haven’t noticed she’s hiding something painful?

I think back to our interactions and the only thing that stands out to me is how desperate she is to be cuddled at night, how she wants me to hold her close and not let go. Does that have anything to do with what my mom is talking about?

The idea that Indie could be hurting, that maybe I’ve missed something, burns terribly. She’s not very open about her deeper feelings, although I suspect she shares everything she wants shared with Scarlett, but there have been moments I’ve wondered if she’s happy. I haven’t seen the angry girl from our initial interactions for a while. But that doesn’t mean she’s been okay.

And that means I need to push my pain aside and listen to what’s going on for Indie. I also need to be honest with myself.

The truth? I hate that Indie attempted to push me into the arms of another girl . . . when all I want is her.

I know what I have to do. Just hope it won’t backfire stupidly.

NERVES. That's what I feel as I stand outside Indie's home. Which is ridiculous. It took me a few wrong turns in her neighborhood to remember where she lived, but I finally made it. However, all the wrong turns made me increasingly nervous about what I'm going to say to her.

Hell, it took me all day to set aside my anger and to gain enough courage to make the twenty-minute drive. Well, and a push from my mom out the door with a plate of more freshly baked cookies. She apologized for talking about my personal life, something she swore she wouldn't do again, unless it was with Mama. After the apology, she told me to talk to Indie.

Here I am.

At her doorstep, still unsure about everything.

But when the door opens and Indie appears wearing one of *my* Brentwood baseball hoodies with puffy and red eyes, that anger disappears as my heart lurches.

"Lincoln," she says in surprise and then quickly wipes at her eyes. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

Oh shit.

This is not *my* Indie. My strong, iron-willed girl.

This Indie is . . . pained.

Vulnerable.

Miserable.

Fuck. What's going on?

Whatever it is, I *will* shoulder this pain with her.

Because that's what I should have been doing already.

"Put your shoes on. You're coming with me."

"Lincoln, I don't know if that's—"

"I'm not taking no for an answer. Shoes. Now, Indie."

She wavers for a second before reaching behind the door and slipping on a pair of UGGs. She pulls her phone out of the pocket of the hoodie and says, "Let me text my mom real quick."

When she's done, I head down her driveway to my Jeep where I open the door for her. After she gets in, I shut the door and steady my breathing. Soon, with the roar of the engine, I'm taking off down the street to a nearby park that I realize I've been to multiple times.

It feels so weird knowing that Indie grew up only twenty minutes away from me and yet we've never run into each other.

I park my Jeep so we're overlooking a small lake, then step up onto the tailgate.

"Are you coming?"

She's slow moving as she makes her way to the back of my car. Hopping up, our shoulders brush as she sets her hands in her lap, her head turned down.

We sit there, silently, the wind lightly kicking up the water off the lake, sloshing it against the rocky sides. Thankfully it's not too cold tonight given it's fall in Michigan—the perfect night, actually.

Unsure how to start this conversation, I stare at the lake, which reminds me of something growing up.

"I used to play on the field behind the lake. It became a pitcher's embarrassment and a hitter's dream. Since the fence lined up against the lake, you never wanted to give up a homerun because you would see the plop of the ball in the water. I was solidly the only pitcher who didn't get the dreaded plop, until Hector Valdez stepped up to the plate in eighth grade. Dude looked like a college kid. I hung a curveball right over the plate, he cocked his bat back, and the ball sailed far into the lake, making for a huge splash. Hell, it was embarrassing. After the game, I went to the lake and fished out the ball, kept it for a really long time to remind me to never hang another curveball again."

"Have you?" she asks, her voice shaky, weak.

"Of course, but it was a good reminder that I'm never too good, and there is always room for improvement."

"Yeah, I get that."

I turn toward her and with my fingers, I move her chin so she's forced to look at me. Her lip trembles, her eyes water, and then she breaks down.

"Lincoln, I'm sorry," she cries into her hands. "I'm so sorry."

I scoot further into the trunk, thankful for the headspace, and pull her onto my lap so she's straddling me. Her head goes straight to my chest as sobs wrack her body. I rub my hand up and down her back, trying to calm her body. It takes a few minutes, but she finally calms down and only has tears falling from her eyes.

"I don't know what I was thinking. I was just . . . overwhelmed and being stupid. I never should have insulted you the way I did. It was uncalled

for and I was battling my own demons and projected them onto you. I never should have done that. I'm so sorry, Lincoln, please forgive me."

"Shhh," I say softly into her ear as she grips my shirt, holding tightly. *God, it feels good to have her in my arms again.*

"You matter so much to me, Lincoln." She looks me in the eyes, tears filled in hers. "You're my person."

I grip her cheek and wipe away her tears with my thumb. "You're my person, too, Indie."

"Please tell me I didn't fuck this up, that we can still be friends, that we can still hang out and go back to normal where Sundays are our days and Mondays we awkwardly shower together after a hard leg workout. Where you sit next to me in class and share coffee." She grips me tighter. "I need to know everything is going to be okay."

"Of course it's going to be okay."

What doesn't make sense is *why* she's so . . . desperate for that. What she did really wasn't that dire. I was just pissed and probably overreacted. *So why has it affected her so badly?* "Why?" I ask softly. "Why is that so important to you?"

She leans back, her eyes searching mine. "Be-because, I miss you, Lincoln. It's been so painful . . . not having you." I shake my head.

"No, I want the real reason."

"That is the real reason." She stares at me, confused.

I'm frustrated. I want to ask her about her parents, but I also don't want to piss her off even more when it comes to her mom. The only reason I'd know something was wrong would be because of the mom grapevine, and I don't want to succumb to that again.

"Do you not want things to go back to normal?" she asks, her voice shaky, ready to break, the worry in her eyes slicing right through me.

"I do," I answer, then see her shoulders relax. "But I also want to be real with each other. There's something that's bothering you, something that happened after your game and you're not telling me about it. I think that's the real reason I got so mad. I mean, yeah, sure, it felt like a slap to the face that you were trying to hook me up with someone, but it was the change in your personality that caught me off guard, and instead of talking to me and telling me what was going on, you pushed me away." I tip her chin up and ask, "What's going on, Indie?" When she doesn't answer, I lean my head

back and let out a sigh. “Hell, Mayhem, if you can’t fucking talk to me about the important stuff, then what are we really doing here?”

Her head bends forward, and I watch as she plays with the fabric of my shirt. I don’t think she’s going to say anything, but she quietly says, “I haven’t told anyone. Scarlett doesn’t even know.” She looks up at me, more tears fill her eyes, and she finally says, “I found out that both my parents were cheating on each other during the summer.”

Oh fuck.

“Indie . . .” I grip her hip tightly. “I’m so sorry.”

Tears cascade down her cheeks and onto my shirt, I try to swipe them all away, but they’re too fast.

“I caught my dad with another woman first. Saw them together, holding hands, and kissing in a parking lot. I’ve never wanted to throw up so quickly in my life. It took me five days to gain the courage to tell my mom and when I did, she said she knew and that she was seeing someone herself.”

“What the fuck?”

“Yeah. Apparently, they’re together because my mom needs the health insurance from my dad’s plan. She has a thyroid problem and her medicine is vital. They’ve been seeing other people for a while and just put on a show of being a family when I’m home. But it explains why my dad has checked out.” She shakes her head. “It really fucked with my head. I don’t understand why they wouldn’t work on it, but instead just accept it was over and agree to date other people. It’s embarrassing.”

“Hell, Indie, that is so fucked up. I wish you’d told me sooner.”

She shakes her head. “I think I’ve been in denial.” She swipes at more tears angrily. “I want to ask my dad why when he checked out of life with Mom, he checked out of life with me too. Why I’m held at arm’s length, even though I’m his flesh and blood. *I hate that.* And sometimes, I think I hate him too.” *Shit. I’m not surprised.*

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s just . . . hypocritical, you know? My mom trying to hook me up all summer made me more bitter, which is why I was so angry when I met you. As if all I was worth was a setup. I mean, who is she to insert herself into my love life when she’s completely botched her own? How can she endorse a solid relationship when she’s living with a man she’s married to on paper only?”

“Yeah, it’s fucked. I get why you were so angry now. I’d be the same if my moms did something like that.”

“Talking to her the other night, watching her smug smile about how right she was about us, it made me angry. I wanted to prove her wrong.”

And there it is.

“And it was stupid. Because the one person I should be keeping close, I pushed away.” Her hands travel up my chest. “I’m sorry, Lincoln. Please tell me we’re going to be okay.”

Her eyes are pleading, begging, looking for reassurance, and I can’t deny her any longer. I want things back to normal just as much as she does.

Hell, I want more. But I don’t know how to cross that bridge, not yet at least, and definitely not now with how emotional she is.

Smoothing my hands up and down her sides, I say, “Everything is going to be okay, Mayhem.”

She sucks in a shaky breath and asks, “Really?”

I nod. “Really.”

And then she crashes into my arms. Her head to my shoulder, her arms wrapped around me. I grip her even tighter as she sobs into my arms.

“I’m sorry, Lincoln. I really am.”

“You don’t need to apologize, babe.”

“But I—”

“But nothing, Indie. It’s not as big a deal as I made it out to be. I was hurt and lashed out. Everything is going to be okay. I promise.”

We sit like that, in my Jeep, cookies uneaten, her holding on to me, curling into me, using me as a lifeline, while I soak in every second of it. If I know two things, it’s that my mom is a wise woman, and I care so much for this girl, that even if I tried, I wouldn’t be able to stay away for long.

Indie is no doubt in my mind long-term. Someone I’m always going to need in my life, even if it’s only friendship.



INDIE: *I’m going to throw up.*

Lincoln: *Why? Where are you?*

Indie: *In my car, in your driveway, contemplating throwing up in my passenger seat or driving away.*

Lincoln: *How about neither but instead, you come inside the house?*

Indie: *Your moms are going to hate me.*

Lincoln: *Or they will love you. Come knock on the door.*

Indie: *I can't move.*

Lincoln: *You're going to make me come get you, aren't you?*

Indie: *I'm in a fragile state. My parents went to their respective lovers' for "dessert." Struggling here, Castle.*

Lincoln: *Be right there, babe.*

I slip on my moccasins, the same present my moms get me every year. I don't really like them, but I wear them anyway. I don't have the heart to tell my moms that I'm not a slippers kind of guy. Pretty sure it would break their generous hearts with the number of pairs they've bought me. And don't worry, I have a pair for when I'm home and a pair for when I'm at college. They've got me covered.

I open the front door and am blasted by a gust of fall wind, leaves from the ground kicking up and swirling around my feet as I jog toward Indie's red Mazda. I spot her staring at the steering wheel, still looking a little different than I'm used to—more . . . reserved—and that's when I see how hard it is for her to be home. *And she's told no one.*

Her downcast appearance reminds me of when I first met her. Angry. Over life. But once she was back at school, away from the drama of her parents, she thrived. And I got to know the beautiful and cool girl that she is.

I'm hoping I can bring that girl back.

I open her car door and squat down to her eye level. I hold out my hand and smile at her. She takes it and gets out of the car, but before we walk back to the house, I pull her into a hug and she wraps her arms around me, her head falling to my chest. I cup the back of her head and press a kiss to her smooth hair, which is straight and styled over her shoulders.

When I pull away, I take in her outfit and smile to myself. She dressed up.

Black skinny jeans, a maroon sweater that clings to her tits in all the right ways, gold earrings and black ankle boots.

"You look good, Mayhem. And you smell good, too." Jokingly I tip her chin. "You get all fancy for me?"

She rolls her eyes. "You wish. This is for your moms." She leans back into her car, giving me a perfect view of her ass, and she pulls out a pie.

“French silk, made it myself.”

“Dressed up and brings dessert. Damn, Mayhem, you might just kill me.”

“Stop it.” She playfully swats my stomach.

Chuckling, I grab her by the shoulders and walk her to my front door. Before we go in the house, I bend down and whisper, “Thanks for coming over.”

She looks up at me, her appreciative gaze heading straight to my heart. “No, Lincoln. Thank you for inviting me. It means more to me than you know.”

“You’re always invited to our home,” I say and press one more kiss to the top of her head because I need the contact. I need her to know that everything’s okay, that we’re working back toward our normal.

I open the door and instantly we’re greeted by moaning and skin slapping.

“Michelle, not on Thanksgiving.”

“I just thought of something and wanted to see if it works.”

“Indie will be here any minute. Turn off the porn.”

Jesus, fuck. Help me.

Through a clenched jaw, I call out through the house. “Indie’s here.”

“Oh my God, Michelle, turn it off.” The sounds grow louder and Indie buries her head in my chest, laughing.

“That’s not the off button. That’s the volume. Stop touching things, you’re making it worse.” The sounds cease, and I hear a collective sigh from both moms, who appear from the den, awkward smiles on their faces.

I turn to Indie and say, “My moms were hired to update a popular porn website. It’s not that they enjoy watching porn on Thanksgiving. It’s not a family tradition or anything like that.”

“Technically, it’s our second porn site,” Mama says, leaning in with her finger pointed to the sky, adding in her correction.

Mom pulls her back and says, “She doesn’t need to know the details.” Smiling brightly, Mom steps forward and takes Indie into a hug. “It’s great to see you again, Indie. You look lovely.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Castle.”

“Call me Laura, and this is my wife, Michelle.”

Mama holds her hand out for a shake, because she’s not much of a hugger, and Indie takes her hand, giving it a gentle shake. “Michelle, it’s

very nice to meet you. Congrats on your second porn site job. Must be . . . thrilling.”

“Why, thank you. And yes, it keeps us on our toes, that’s for sure. And I’m pretty sure it’s ruined porn for Lincoln, which is great.”

“Can you not?” I ask, already considering this a bad idea. I hand Indie’s pie to Mom and say, “Indie made us a pie.”

“French silk. Michelle, do you remember the last time we had French silk pie. It was in Cancun . . .” She wiggles her brows and I die a slow death inside.

“Hey,” I snap, grabbing their attention. “What did we talk about? Don’t be perverted wretches with company over.”

Indie laughs next to me and when I look at her, she clamps her hand over her mouth, her eyes full of apology.

“Ah yes, I do recall Lincoln requesting that, but I guess I was too busy staring at your mom’s butt to remember,” Mama says, taking the pie from Mom and walking toward the kitchen. Mom follows her closely behind and I lean against the door, my head pressed to the wood.

“Whatever happens tonight, please don’t hold it against me.”

Indie pats my back. “I can’t make any promises.”



“WHO THE HECK IS CAIN WEST?” Mama asks, tossing her cards on the table.

Indie snickers next to me and I gently say, “Mama, it’s Kanye West.”

“What?” She throws her hands up. “This is absurd. How am I supposed to know these people?”

“Maybe stop watching men’s balls flinging around and look into some pop culture,” Mom says, gathering our Cards Against Humanity cards and sticking them back in the box.

“This coming from the lady who didn’t know what a queef was,” Mama says. “You know very well it’s a vagina fart.”

I press my fingers to my brow and say, “Can we tamp it down on the vagina farts, please?”

“It’s a natural thing, and I think society needs to embrace it, not shame it,” Mama says, looking far too dignified while talking about flatulence from a

lady's nether regions. And yes, the only reason I know the words flatus and nether regions is because of the craziness my moms call education.

"Or, we just don't talk about vagina farts with your son and his friend."

Mom winks at me. "Then I wouldn't be able to see that sweet blush on your cheeks."

Standing from the table, I hold my hand out to Indie and say, "We need some fresh air."

On a laugh, she takes my hand and I walk her to the sliding glass door that leads to the back porch. I snatch a blanket off the couch and then guide her outside, shutting the door behind us. Thankfully, we have a partition that grants us some privacy from prying eyes and a porch swing that's perfect to gather some peace from all the vagina fart and *Cain West* ridiculousness.

I sit on the cushioned swing and steady it so Indie can sit as well. Instead of facing toward the trees, she faces me and drapes her legs over mine. I cover us both with the blanket and then rest one arm on the back of the swing, the other on top of her leg.

"Comfortable?" I ask her.

"Extremely." I feel her gaze on me and then she chuckles.

"What?"

She reaches out and runs her thumb over my jaw. "It's really cute seeing you with your moms. I kind of like this embarrassed Lincoln and the best part is, you're never rude or disrespectful to them as you deal with their antics."

"I mean, yeah, they get on my nerves, but they also gave me a life I never would have had without them. My birth mom was a drug addict and my birth father wasn't any better. They gave me up at birth and my moms were called, asking if they wanted a newborn boy with a drug addiction."

She clutches her chest and sits taller. "Oh my God, you were born with an addiction?"

I nod slowly. "Yeah, my birth mom used her entire pregnancy. It's a shock I'm as strong and healthy as I am. But it was hard on my moms. I had a diva moment when I was in middle school and told my moms I wanted to live with my birth parents."

"No, you didn't."

I nod. "Unfortunately, and regrettably, I did. They drove me to my mom's parents' house and told them to take me to my birth parents. I didn't

think they were serious until my grandparents packed me up in the car and started driving to Detroit. That's where I heard the story of my birth, the pain my moms went through to get me healthy. I cried and begged them to take me back to my moms. They said they'd only take me back if I spent the rest of my life appreciating the sacrifices they made to raise me. From then on, I put up with whatever they threw my way, even if it's my mom trying to set me up."

Indie chuckles. "Well, it all worked out."

"It did." I look out toward the trees. "They gave me a great childhood and things might be slightly different than the quote unquote normal family, but we have love and appreciation for each other, and that's all that matters."

Indie's hand goes to my hair, and she plays with the short strands. "The normal isn't all that great. My mom put together the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and we sat at the table, eating, silent, unsure what to say to each other. I would have much rather come over here, had chicken from the crockpot and roasted potatoes while talking about the porn your mama is watching."

"Technically not watching. Working on." I boop her nose and she smiles. "Big difference, Mayhem."

"Either way, it's the love you guys exude for each other that's making this Thanksgiving so much better. So thank you for inviting me over."

"You're always welcome here, Indie."

"I would say you're always invited to my house, but I fear you'd run into one of my parents' lovers."

"Yeah." I move my hand over my jaw. "That's got to be awkward."

"You could say that. But I don't want to talk about them."

"What do you want to talk about, then?"

"Anything. Are you going to come back to training sessions on Mondays?"

"I don't know, are you going to try to hook me up with Jasmine again?"

She chuckles. "No, I learned my lesson."

"And Brandon, are you . . . you know, getting to know him?"

Her eyes pop up to mine. "No. Why, do you want me to get to know him?"

"You can do what you want, Indie," I say growing serious. "But I want you to know I'm content with what we have right now."

“And what is that exactly?”

I move my hand to her hair where I play with the silky strands, biding time to figure out the answer. What is it exactly that we have? Even though we say it’s a friendship, I know it runs deeper than that. There are feelings involved, feelings it seems neither one of us wants to admit to, but we rely heavily on when it comes to one another.

Is this the moment where I cross that line?

All night, watching her with my moms, it felt so real, so right. Joking around, playing games, having a pie-eating contest. I was the winner—*naturally*—of who could eat the most, although Indie gave me a run for my money. She fits in perfectly, but there’s so much ahead of us that I don’t know how to navigate, like what happens when I’m drafted? She wants to go pro, so what happens when we’re both pursuing our dreams and potentially on opposite sides of the country, our schedules not matching up? It could only lead to heartache, but not having her in my life isn’t an option either.

Letting out a long breath, I roll my head to the side and say, “Hell if I know, Indie. But I like you a lot, and I don’t want you out of my life.” It’s a lame answer, but I’m having a hard time expressing myself.

“Why do you care if Brandon’s interested in me?” she asks, and it almost seems like she holds her breath as she says it.

She’s coming in hot with the questions tonight.

I drag my hand over my mouth and try to find the right words, hoping and praying she’s feeling the same way, that I’m not in this alone.

Turning toward her, I decide to go with honesty, because when we’re honest, we’re closest. *Complete*. “Because I don’t want you hanging out with any other guys the way you hang out with me.”

She smiles and plays with the three buttons on my sweater. “You want me all to yourself, Castle?”

“Is that a problem?”

She shakes her head. “I want you all to myself too.”

It’s as if a dam just broke in my body. Relief floods through me—*she wants the same thing as me*. I’m not in this alone when it comes to these crazy, confusing feelings.

“Yeah?” I ask, moving my hand to the back of her neck.

She nods. “Yeah.” She licks her lips and briefly looks at mine.

I've seen this look before. It was once when we were in my Jeep. She wet her lips, leaned in, and I swear she wanted me to kiss her, but I was too much of a chickenshit to close the space between us.

Tonight though? Fuck, tonight, I don't think I can hold back, not after everything we've been through over the last few days, not after seeing her interact with my moms, laughing and joking with them, and not after her claiming me for herself.

It feels right. Like our relationship has been building to this moment, the tension stretching like a rubber band until we're both at snapping point—buzzing—ready for the next step.

I'm ready for the next step.

So fucking ready.

Gently, I pull her closer by the back of her neck and cock my head to the side, going in for the perfect angle. The space between us diminishes and just before I lay my lips on hers, I hear a sharp intake of air before her soft, perfect lips meld against mine.

It's just a light press at first. I don't move quickly, because I want to be able to gauge her reaction in case this isn't what she wanted. But when her hands fall to the side of my head, and she intensifies the kiss, I know. This is *exactly* what she wants.

Thank fuck.

I pull her in closer until she's sitting on my lap. I tilt my head back so she has a good angle, and I let her take over my mouth.

With slow, languid kisses, her lips feel like puffy clouds, soft and plush as they move over mine. When I first met her, her lips grabbed my attention, they intrigued me immediately, and now that she's kissing me, I know I had good reason to stare at them. She's making me lose all thought as they open over my mouth.

We both groan when our tongues clash against each other. I bury my hands into her thick hair, controlling the direction her head goes with my fingers, tilting her to the right, moving her back to the left.

Desperation claws at me, eating away at my veins as I try to claim her. The months we've known each other all spilling out onto the deck swing. The tension, the pent-up frustration, all the times I've wanted to touch her more than *just a friend* would.

Her kisses are slow, drugging, irresistible. Whereas mine feel urgent with a hint of desperation.

I grip her tighter, she moves in closer, her breasts brushing up against my chest and before I know what to do with myself, her hips start rocking over mine.

Ahh . . . fuck.

“Are you two done with the—”

Indie shoots off me so fast she nearly flies off the swing.

“Sorry, didn’t realize you two were making out,” Mama says. Leave it to Mama to point out the obvious. *God. So awkward.* “I don’t think your mom was aware that you’re *make-out* type of friends.” Leaning back inside the screen door, Mama shouts, “Did you know they made out, Laura?”

“What?” I hear the shrill cry of my mom’s voice and the pounding of her feet as she comes to the sliding glass door. I bury my head in my hands. “You caught them making out?”

“Yup, right there, on the swing, scene of the crime.”

“Tongue?” Mom asks.

“Too dark to tell.” Raising her voice, she says, “Linc, was there tongue?”

I glance at a mortified Indie and keep my eyes on her when I answer, “There was a small amount of tongue.”

Her eyes widen and then she buries her head in my shoulder. I put my arm around her and hold her close.

“Oh my God, there was tongue,” Mom says, announcing it loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

“They were tonguing,” Mama says, while clapping her hands to a typical baseball chant. “They were tonguing.”

“And this is why I can’t have people over,” I say to Indie as my moms cheer obnoxiously to the side.



LINCOLN: *Did you make it back to your place?*

Indie: *Yup. Scarlett and I just went shopping. Her parents gave her a two-hundred-dollar gift card for Target, and we just spent it all on food and Nerf guns.*

Lincoln: *Nerf guns, really?*

Indie: Her idea, not mine. We got a target and we're sitting on the couch, seeing who has the better aim.

Lincoln: Kind of jealous.

Indie: If I didn't promise Scarlett some best-friend time, I'd invite you over. But you know, vaginas only.

Lincoln: I think for the first time in my life I wish I had a vagina.

Indie: ^Things I don't want to know.

Lincoln: LOL. Are we still on for tomorrow morning?

Indie: Yeah, get ready, because I'm going to kick your ass for missing our last session.

Lincoln: Wouldn't expect anything else. Have fun with Scarlett. I'll talk to you later. Bye, babe.

Indie: Bye, Castle.

I set my phone down and push both hands through my hair just as Hartley walks into the living room. He flops down on the couch next to me, a light smile on his face.

Uh-oh. I know that smile. It's the same smile I have on my face, the cornball smile only a girl can put on a guy's face.

"How was your Thanksgiving break?" I ask. "Eventful?"

"It was fine."

"You're a fucking liar," I say, causing him to laugh. "Did something happen with Alice?"

"Maybe, but we don't need to talk about that. What I want to know is why you had a goofy grin on your face. Did you make up with Indie?"

Not wanting to push Hartley, because he's always been protective of his relationship with Alice, I say, "Yeah, we're good."

"How good?" He lifts a brow in my direction.

"We kissed."

"Oh shit. Really?" Hartley reaches out and rubs his palm over my nipples. "My dude, getting it done."

"Can you not?"

He frowns. "When have you ever not wanted me to rub your nipples?"

"All the time." I push him away and laugh. "We kissed on the deck swing, my moms caught us—which in turn ended the night—and I haven't seen her since."

"Ouch. Have you spoken with her?"

"Yeah, we're going to meet up tomorrow for leg day again."

“Okay, so how are you going to greet her? Are you going to pucker up?”

I pick up the remote and flip through some channels mindlessly. “I haven’t really thought about it, actually. I don’t want to assume she’s going to want a kiss, but I also don’t want to disappoint her.”

“Ah, the conundrum of a complicated relationship. Fun, isn’t it?” I get the feeling Hartley’s talking about himself as well.

“Yeah. I think I need to have a conversation with her because I don’t know where this is going, and we have such different paths moving forward that I don’t want to hurt her . . . or have her hurt me.”

“You do have a sensitive heart.” He pulls on his shorts, covering his legs more. “Maybe skip out on the kiss, give her a high five, and then say we need to talk.”

“Oh, because that seems like a brilliant idea on how to make her second-guess everything that happened.”

“I never said I gave good advice.” He steals the remote from me and says, “*Cake Wars* is on, dude. What’s wrong with you?”

How could I be so daft?

Chapter Fifteen

INDIE

I put my car in park and hop out. Knowing I'm running a minute late, I jog down to the side entrance of the stadium where Lincoln's leaning against the wall, phone in front of him. When he spots me, a gorgeous smile falls across his lips.

"Hey, Mayhem. You're late."

"A minute. I was wearing spandex that kept falling down and didn't feel like mooning you, so I changed."

"I would have been okay with the mooning."

"Of course you would have," I say pushing at him, only for his arms to capture me against his chest.

I thought about this moment all weekend: the next time I saw him, what he would do. Would he go back to the friendship zone, would he kiss me on the side of the head, or would he kiss me on the lips?

Now that I'm in his arms, staring up at him, my mind flashes to the swing on his back porch, his lips on mine, the way he felt so strong and confident beneath me, as if he's the foundation I'm building a new and exciting life on.

The kiss was sweet at first as flashes of light sparked behind my eyes. I was enamored with how slow he took it, but then, when his fingers dug into

me, the desperation flowing through his fingertips . . . I was more than enamored. I was addicted.

I like his moms a lot—felt jealous that Lincoln has such amazing parents—but when they caught us, essentially pulling Lincoln’s lips away from mine, I wanted to die a slow, tragic death.

And then all weekend, all I could think about was having his lips on me again.

“What?” I ask, resting my chin on his chest.

“Did you miss me this weekend?”

“Not even a little,” I answer, lying through my teeth. “I was glad to have the reprieve actually. You know, since you tried to suck my soul out of me with that kiss.”

His head falls back as he laughs. “You were the one who started to dry-hump me.”

“Pah-lease. I was just trying to get comfortable.”

“Oh, okay, keep saying that to yourself,” he says, tilting my chin up and placing the softest, lightest kiss on my lips. When he pulls away, his smile is just as wide as mine. “Time to work out, Mayhem.”

“Hope you’re ready,” I say, pulling away. He snatches my hand in his and walks me through the stadium to the weight room where we set up. I add a few different drills, turn on the music, strip down to my sports bra and spandex, and clap my hands. “Warm up, Castle.”

His eyes travel down my body and then back up; his tongue wets his lips.

Why do I feel like we broke a seal with that kiss and things just got a lot more interesting?



“WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS STARING?” I ask from across the showers.

“Not staring, just making sure you wash everything. That’s being a good friend.”

“I’m aware of how to wash my body.”

He shakes his head. “No, you’re doing it all wrong. Let me come over there and show you.”

I point at him, soap falling in foamy suds down to the tiles. “You stay right where you are, Castle. Don’t you even think about coming over here.”

“Your loss. Be stinky. Not my problem.”

“You’re fun to be around today,” I say sarcastically as I rinse my hair, preparing for conditioner. I come prepared now. I still use their body soap, but I bring my own shampoo and conditioner so my hair doesn’t take ages to comb out after.

“Thanks, babe.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Too bad.” He chuckles, and the delicious sound vibrates off the tiles. “I took it as one.” His shower flips off and I see him grab for his towel. “Sure you don’t need any help? I have two spare hands now.” He’s drying his body, and it has to be one of the most erotic things I’ve ever seen, especially when his hair is spiked in all different directions after drying it.

“Not happening, Castle. Now go change. You owe me breakfast.”

“Since when?”

“Since I’m getting you to ninety-five.” I rinse the conditioner out now and hear him mumble something under his breath before he walks away.

I finish up in the shower, dry off, and head to one of the bathroom stalls where I change into a clean pair of underwear and matching black bra. I flip my head upside down, put the towel around my hair and clinch it in a turban.

Not caring that Lincoln sees me in my bra and underwear, I gather my things and head into the locker room.

And. Run. Straight. Into. Coach. Disik.

Oh fuck!

“Jesus Christ,” he says, slapping his hands over his face. “Castle!”

My throat immediately closes up, and humiliation washes over me. Oh dear Christ, Lincoln’s coach saw me in my underwear.

In black matching underwear.

A thong! He saw me in a thong.

Lincoln runs over and his face falls flat when he sees me standing in front of his coach holding my clothes to my chest, a horrified expression on my face.

“Oh shit. Uh . . . sorry, Coach.”

“Get her out of here.”

“Yeah, sorry, Coach.” He’s stumbling over his words. “We weren’t doing anything, in case you were wondering. We didn’t have sex or anything.” *Oh God, stop talking, Lincoln.* “We showered together, but in separate stalls. I haven’t seen her naked. We kissed once, and my moms caught us, but that’s it. Nothing you need to worry about. No semen in the locker room. I know how you hate that.”

“Shut the fuck up, Castle, and get her out of here before anyone else sees her.”

Coach Disik steps aside and of course, Lincoln can’t manage to shut up. “She’s been helping me with my leg strength. It’s all business in the weight room. I might stare at her butt when she squats, but it’s all business.”

“Lincoln,” I mumble.

“I don’t care what you stare at. Just don’t let me see her again.”

“Okay, sure, yeah. Just so you know, we’re here every Monday, so try to avoid this time.”

Piping up, because I see a beady vein in Coach Disik’s forehead popping, I say, “I won’t be in here again, Coach. I’m sorry.”

He waves his hand at me and peeks through his fingers for a second. “I thought that was you, Mayhem.” He clenches his teeth and turns away, lowering his hand but with his back to me. “If you can get this kid to ninety-five, I don’t care if you use the bathroom in my office.” He starts to walk away and then says, “Nice goal to win the conference by the way.” Then he takes off, leaving Lincoln and me alone. Once the door shuts, I melt to the floor and cover my mouth as a laugh escapes me.

“Oh my God, I think I might have just died from humiliation. Coach Disik saw me in my bra and underwear.”

“Pretty sure he’s more humiliated.” Lincoln pulls me to my feet and rests his hands on my hips. “Be happy it was Disik and not one of my teammates, because they’d never let us live it down. Disik, on the other hand, he’ll forget all about this and then randomly on a Tuesday ask how my trainings are going with you. Guarantee it.”

“So, he’s okay with you guys having girls in the locker room?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but he’s used to it by now. You know . . . because of the legend.”

“How could I forget the legend?” I roll my eyes and go to my bag where my clothes are. “Does he believe in it?”

“Not sure.” Lincoln comes up next to me and starts getting dressed himself. “But if you want, we could test it out and tell him if it works.”

I pause, one leg in my pants, the other out when I look up at a grinning Lincoln. “You’re so lame.”

“Worth a try.” He chuckles. “Now what do you want for breakfast?”

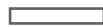
“Egg scramble from Lakeview, half-an-everything bagel with butter, fruit salad, and a coffee.”

“Is that all?” he asks.

“Watch it. I might get a cinnamon bun. Hope your meal card is ready to be lit up.”

“You’re lucky I like you, Mayhem.”

I slip my shirt over my turban head and say, “Pretty sure you’re the lucky one, Castle.”



***INDIE:** I have a confession that I really don't want to confess.*

***Lincoln:** You have me intrigued. Lay it on me.*

***Indie:** Promise you won't make fun of me?*

***Lincoln:** No.*

***Indie:** Aren't you charming?*

***Lincoln:** I try to be.*

***Indie:** You know what, I think I'm good on the confession.*

***Lincoln:** Oh no, you don't. You have to tell me now.*

***Indie:** I don't have to do anything.*

***Lincoln:** You're so goddamn stubborn. It's infuriating.*

***Indie:** And yet you still hang out with me.*

***Lincoln:** I'm addicted to the challenges you present. What can I say?*

***Indie:** Are you talking about how I beat you at Mario Kart again this past weekend?*

***Lincoln:** And other things.*

***Indie:** Still nursing your wounds?*

***Lincoln:** A little, I let Hartley lick them the other day. His tongue has magical healing powers.*

***Indie:** Strangely enough, I can picture it, and I can't tell if I'm more disturbed by the image it provokes, or if I'm disturbed that I have a vivid*

enough imagination to see it clearly in my head.

Lincoln: *I think both are disturbing.*

Indie: *And here I was going to confess something to you. Never mind.*

Lincoln: *Stop stalling and just tell me.*

Indie: *Fine. Are you ready?*

Lincoln: *All ears.*

Indie: **Deep breath* I'm sore from our workout yesterday.*

Lincoln: *You're what?*

Lincoln: **Wiggles finger in ear**

Lincoln: *Did you just say you're sore?*

Indie: *Yup, should have never said anything.*

Lincoln: **Shouts from megaphone* Everyone, Indie Mayhem, the cockiest workout partner I've ever known has admitted to being sore. Split the heavens, because I think I might have just died a happy death.*

Indie: *You could not be more annoying.*

Lincoln: *I don't know what you expected. You know I love to gloat about the almighty's weaknesses.*

Indie: *Maybe I was looking for understanding, some fellowship from our workout. Maybe you were sore too and I was trying to help you feel better.*

Lincoln: *I'm good, babe, but your concern is sweet.*

Indie: *Once again, I'm annoyed.*



"ARE YOU ANNOYED NOW?" Lincoln asks, standing in front of my bedroom door, holding a bag from Frankie Donuts and another bag from the local pharmacy.

"Do you really think donuts are the way to my heart?"

"Yes," he says on a laugh, walking into my room and shutting the door behind him.

"It's a Tuesday, you know."

"Well aware of the days of the week." He sets his things down and hands me the bag.

"We don't normally see each other on Tuesdays."

“Well, I don’t think we’ll melt if we stray from routine. I think we’re okay.”

I pick out a strawberry lemonade donut. “You’re sassy today.”

Ignoring me, he motions to my body. “What’s sore?”

“Why?” I ask, suspiciously.

He digs into his bag and pulls out some massage oil. From the mere sight of the pink and white bottle, my body grows blissfully happy with excitement.

I swallow hard, the donut feeling like a brick as it travels down to my stomach. “Uh, hamstrings.”

“Okay, lie down. I’ll get to work.”

“Get to work . . . as in massage me?”

“Yup, thought that was a given. Go on.”

“Are you serious?”

“No, I’m joking.” He gives me a *get real* look. “Of course, I’m serious. Now lie down on your stomach before I change my mind.”

“Okay,” I say cautiously. “Should I take off my pants?”

“That would make things easier.”

“Such a smartass,” I mutter, pushing my pants down, revealing a green pair of boy shorts that barely cover my butt. “Don’t get frisky.”

“Pfft, I have better things to do than get frisky. I have muscles to massage with these large man hands of mine.”

I’m about to finish my donut and lie down when I pause, my hand halfway to my mouth. “Why did you say that?”

“Say what?”

My eyes narrow. “Large man hands. That specific term.”

He smirks and I already know before he answers. “Scarlett and I had a great conversation earlier today when I ran into her at the events center.”

“I’m going to murder her.” I pop the rest of my donut in my mouth and charge toward my door, but Lincoln stops me.

“No need to earn yourself jail time. She didn’t say much, other than you really like my hands and think they’re sexy.”

I finish chewing, swallow, and say, “Well, lucky for her, information can travel both ways. Just wait until I see Hutton next.”

“Ruthless.” He chuckles. “Now lie on your stomach.”

Muttering under my breath about Scarlett, I lie down and rest my hands under my head. “We should invite Hutton over for dinner, really shock the

shit out of Scarlett.”

“Or you and I can order in and hang out on our own.”

“Or that,” I say just as I feel oil drip onto my legs. My body stiffens from the cold, but then quickly relaxes when I feel Lincoln’s hands flatten against my aching muscles and smoothly glide up and down. “Oh God, that feels good,” I moan, unable to help myself.

His hands pause and he shifts on the bed. “Uh, if you could *not* moan, that would be appreciated.”

Chuckling, I say, “Sorry. But it feels so good after my hammies have been so tight.”

“Well, I didn’t think this through very well, because I’m staring at your ass, massaging your legs, listening to you moan.”

I glance over my shoulder and see how bright Lincoln’s cheeks already are. “Getting turned on, Castle?”

“No,” he chokes out.

I just smile and lay my head back down. “I would say you don’t have to do this, but now I’m thinking this is better payment than breakfast after training.”

His hands slip up my legs, just below my butt and then go back down. He starts with what I believe to be closed fists, moving them up and down, and then switches to rotating his thumbs over my sensitive muscles, starting on the outer part of my legs, and moving inward and up.

His thumbs travel slowly, methodically, and soon I’m lost in the feel of his sexy hands caressing me, kneading me.

They reach the crease of my ass where my legs connect and he digs a little deeper.

“Oh,” I say on a long moan, my ass moving against his fingers.

He doesn’t say anything, just coughs, and then moves back down my legs.

My skin heats up, the back of my neck growing sweaty as he digs his fingers up my inner thighs. And when he travels along the base of my ass to just below my hip, my entire body breaks out in a sweat. A wave of arousal pulses between my legs.

God, I’m turned on, so turned on that I’m hot in my sweatshirt.

“Hold on,” I say, feeling breathless. I remove my sweatshirt, leaving me in my sports bra and boy shorts, the cold air tingling against my scorching skin.

“Do you want me to do your back too?”

I want you to do me.

“Legs are fine. I was just getting hot.”

“Okay.”

Reaching for my phone, I say, “Mind if I play music?”

“That’s cool,” he answers. So I press my favorite playlist and the first song to come on is “Fallin’” by Jessica Mauboy. It’s the perfect tempo, the perfect mood for what’s happening.

There’s only one light on in my room, my desk lamp, so it’s not very bright, and my mattress and comforter combination has me losing myself in comfort as well as the feel of his hands, creating a relaxing mood.

“Have I ever told you what a great ass you have?” Lincoln says, his voice sultry, gliding over me like a cool fan, chilling my heated skin.

“No,” I say, feeling sleepy.

“Well, it’s a great ass.”

His fingers travel to right below my cheeks, cutting into the sensitive spot—kneading, and pressing—and my arousal kicks up another notch. My clit starts to throb. And just when I don’t think I can take it anymore, his hands travel back down again.

I groan and grip the comforter below me tightly. His fingers travel to the backs of my knees, kneading softly and then my inner thigh where he smooths his thumbs over them at a snail’s pace. Unconsciously, my butt lifts off the mattress as the pressure between my legs builds to a heavy pulse. I spread my legs wider, and his fingers go higher this time, so high that I swear they almost touch my underwear.

“Oh God,” I groan, moving my head to the side and taking a deep breath. My nipples harden as he travels back down. I’m seconds away from begging him to touch me, to move his hands up higher, to relieve the pressure.

“Jesus, Mayhem,” he whispers, moving his hands back up again until they’re at the highest point of my inner thighs. I move my ass so his hands connect with my covered pussy and I moan, doing it again. “Indie,” he says breathlessly.

“Touch me. Please. Touch me.”

“Babe, this wasn’t my intention.”

“I don’t care,” I say, moving my ass again.

“Hell . . .” His hands pause, and I wait on bated breath, hoping and praying he crosses this next line with me. It almost feels like he’s not going to.

And then I feel the lightest touch along my ass. He moves down, lower, and lower.

“Motherfucker, Indie,” he says as his fingers connect with my pussy. “You’re soaked.”

“Please stroke me.” I reach down to the waistband of my underwear and lower them over my ass. “Remove these.”

“Are you . . . sure?” he asks, hesitant.

“More than sure.”

Slowly, he removes my underwear, and that’s when I spread even wider and I lift my ass ever so slightly, giving him a better angle.

“Fuck, Indie, this is so hot.” His thumb passes over my crease and then rubs against my aching and throbbing clit. When he connects with it, my head buries into the mattress and I let out a long moan. It’s been so long since I’ve had someone touch me here—since I’ve been this turned on—and I can feel myself unraveling quickly.

His thumb continues to apply pressure to my clit as his fingers splay out over my backside, and I ride his thumb, using my hips to apply pressure where I need it.

“In me. I want your fingers in me”

He drags some of my arousal back and then slips his fingers inside me.

“Oh fuck, that’s perfect. Oh Christ, Lincoln. I love your hands. I fucking love them.” I move my hips, making him pulse in and out of me, his thumb staying on my clit. I breathe heavily into the comforter as my veins tingle. The passion I have for this man starts to mount—*climbing and climbing*—sensations pulling me in every which way.

Pleasure burns through me. My stomach bottoms out. My clit shudders. And as I pulse one more time against him, my orgasm tips over the edge. Liquid fire rips through me, causing me to scream into the comforter as I come.

“Ride it out, babe,” he says, continuing to move his thumb over my clit, sending aftershocks of pleasure through me, until I can’t take it anymore and still.

Breathing heavily, I keep my head plastered to the bed as I fall from my orgasmic high. “Oh . . . my . . . God, Lincoln.” He chuckles and smooths his

hand over my ass and up to my lower back and then back down.

“Feel good, Mayhem?”

“Amazing. I can’t remember the last time I came that hard.” Gradually, I sit up, the massage oil slippery against my legs. A shower is in order.

I stand from the bed and move right in front of him. I watch as his hungry eyes travel the length of my body. Why not give him an even better show? I reach to my sports bra and peel it off, tossing it to the ground. Lincoln’s eyes widen and then turn into molten lava when I climb onto his lap. His hands immediately go to my waist where he holds me in place, just in the right spot where I can feel how incredibly hard he is.

My hands fall to his chest, and then I move them to the hem of his shirt and peel it up and over his head.

Perfection. He’s absolute perfection.

I roam my hands over his sculpted shoulders and down to his pecs. “I seriously love your body so much, Lincoln. It’s such a turn-on, and I know I’m never going to get enough of it.”

“Same, Mayhem,” he says, his hands floating to my breasts. “Jesus, you’re so hot.” His thumbs drag over my nipples, and I suck in a sharp breath right before he brings one of my breasts to his mouth and sucks on it.

“Yes,” I sigh, tilting my head back, urging him to take charge. My hands slip into his hair and I tug as his mouth, teeth, and tongue work together over my breasts.

I’ve wanted this for so long, to move past friendship with Lincoln and become more intimate. I’ve wanted it so bad that when he’s at his own place and I’m dying with need, I masturbate to his image in the shower—wet and sculpted . . . so perfect.

His lips travel up my chest to my collarbone and then neck. I feel him suck and bite for a few seconds, and I don’t even care if he leaves a mark. I hope he does, so when I walk around tomorrow, people will know: I don’t just hold Lincoln’s hand around campus, but he’s actually mine.

I rub my bottom against his erection and after the first pass, his mouth pauses on my skin and he stills my hips.

“I can’t handle you dry-humping me, babe.” He peels away to look me in the eyes, and I see desperation, desire, and need for so much more.

Smiling, I get off him and take his hand in mine, pulling him up from the bed. Thankfully Scarlett and I each have ensuite bathrooms in our

townhome, so I walk Lincoln to my connecting bathroom and switch on the shower.

While the water heats up, I turn my attention back to Lincoln and glance at his sweatpants covered in oil with a rather large bulge pressing against the fabric.

“I have sweatpants of yours I’ve borrowed that you can wear.”

“Babe, that is the last thing on my mind right now.”

Chuckling, I take a step forward and play with the waistband of his sweats and briefs.

“What’s on your mind?”

“You . . . all of you.”

Chapter Sixteen

LINCOLN

Sweatpants?

Clothing?

What?

Is she insane? All the blood has rushed to my dick. I can only think of two things:

The way her pussy clenched around my fingers, contracting and convulsing.

And her naked body.

How I got so lucky, I'll never know, but I'm not going to waste this opportunity talking about dirtied sweatpants.

Her hands explore, and the feel of her palms over my skin is an erotic sensation adding to the heat building at the base of my spine. They link behind my neck and she stands on her toes to reach me, so I pick her up and set her on the counter, where I spread her legs and squat in front of her.

"Lincoln," she gasps right before I press my tongue against her clit. Her right leg snaps up to the counter for stability.

"You taste fucking amazing."

I swipe at her, loving the sultry sounds falling past her lips, the way her hand seems to always tangle in my hair, and the tension in her legs while

her pelvis moves toward my mouth. I love that. I love that she takes what she wants. She doesn't wait for me to do the work, but she works with me to bring her to completion.

"The water," she says on a heavy breath. "Don't want to waste it."

I hate that she's right. I give her a few more swipes, building her almost to orgasm, but then I pull away. *Reluctantly*. She gasps out loud and her eyes fly open—just in time to catch me stripping down to nothing.

Her mouth falls open when I grip my erect cock and stroke it. Her eyes attach to my hands, watching me tug and pull. Pre-cum falls past the tip and I use that for lubrication, dragging my hand over it and then back down.

Her eyes gleam with lust. She steps down from the counter and goes to the shower where she opens the glass door. It's a larger shower than I expected, but I'm grateful for the space as I step in and she pulls me under the spray of the water.

Without a word, she picks up the soap and runs it over my chest.

"Fuck," I mutter, loving the feel of her hands roaming my body, across my abs, and then back up to my pecs where she pinches my nipple, pulling a deep groan from me.

"God, Lincoln," she says quietly, putting the soap down and using the residual suds on her hands to spread down to my cock. My stomach hollows out in anticipation, and the first touch of her hand to my dick has me nearly shooting out of my own skin. "So big," she says. "I love how big you are."

Feels weird to say thank you, so I don't say anything. I try to steady my legs as she plays with my cock. At first, she's gentle, almost like she's giving it a massage. Using her fingers to twist around the tip and then gently fall down the underside of the shaft, to my balls where she lightly rolls them in her hand. It's torture, her featherlike touch—*not what I need*—and I'm about to say something when she moves so the water rinses the soap off me. Her hand goes to my chest, pushing me against the cold tile, and then she drops to her knees and grabs my cock, pulling it into her mouth.

"Fucking hell," I say, my voice vibrating off the tiled walls. "Oh shit, Indie, that feels so good."

She presses her hands against my thighs, opens her mouth even wider and before I know it, she's taking me deep, swallowing every time I'm at the hilt.

Stars burst in the backs of my eyes as she continues to suck me in and out of her mouth, her head bobbing, her wet hair clinging to her, her eyes steady on mine.

It's sexy as fuck, taking the experience to a whole other level. A level I've never been to before.

I feel useless as I lean against the tiles, my palms against the hard surface, unable to do anything but let this beautiful and amazing woman deep-throat me in her shower.

She dips down and then pulls all the way off. I want to cry from the loss of her warm mouth, but then she takes in the tip, sucking hard as her hand pumps me.

"Oh shit, babe," I say, feeling my legs giving out as a tingling sensation climbs up them, traveling to my knees, pulling in every which way, merging to my groin where all the blood in my body pools.

She sucks hard and then flicks her tongue; sucks and flicks.

Sucks . . .

And . . .

Flicks . . .

"Babe, Indie, I'm going to come," I croak, my voice strained as I hold back, as my orgasm is seconds away.

And that's when she grips me again and takes me all the way to the back of her throat.

Pleasure—*white-hot euphoria*—explodes through me, ripping me apart. My cock convulses and twitches in her mouth. *Holy. Fucking. Shit.*

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, attempting to catch my breath. That was the first time I felt like I was going to black out during a blow job or even during sex.

She places kiss after kiss up my body and when she's fully standing, she kisses my jaw and quietly says, "Wash my hair for me?"

I pull her into a hug, loving her soft body against mine. Her breasts against my chest, her hard nipples indicating she's turned on. *From sucking me off. Fuck. Me.*

"Wash . . . hair," I gasp, because what she just did was extraordinary. "Of course. Just give me a second."

She chuckles against my chest and snuggles in closer as I try to float back down from what I can only describe as heaven.



“WE SHOULD GET FOOD,” Indie says, cuddled into me on her bed.

“We should,” I say, my hand on her backside, lifting my shirt, which she seems to love wearing, and toying with her soft skin.

After I caught my breath, I finished the job I started on the counter, lifting one of her legs onto my shoulder and eating her out until she was screaming.

Fucking phenomenal.

Once I’d washed her hair, we finished up, coming out to a text message on Indie’s phone.

Scarlett: *So . . . you guys just had sex?*

Indie and I chuckled, and she text back.

Indie: *Just oral.*

Scarlett: *If that was just oral, please make sure I’m out of the house when you two actually do it, because damn, girl.*

Scarlett’s response made me laugh and yearn for what’s to come.

We then got dressed—I wore pair of my sweats Indie had borrowed in the past—and Indie threw on my Brentwood baseball shirt and a pair of boy shorts. We crashed on her bed and that’s where we’ve been ever since.

“Want me to order something to be delivered?” I ask her.

She sighs. “I really don’t want to move. I’m so comfortable.”

“I can get it.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want you to move either. You’re what makes this comfortable.”

Chuckling, I reach for her phone and pull up the text message from Scarlett.

Indie: *If we order food and get you something too, will you bring it into our room?*

She texts back right away.

Scarlett: *Post-coital paralysis. I get it. Order me a small cheese pizza and we’re cool.*

I show Indie the screen and she smiles against my chest. I then pick up my phone and order pizza through a delivery app, soon returning my hands to Indie’s skin, reveling in how it feels under my palms.

“You are such a smart man.”

“I have my moments.” I stick my hand under the waistband of her underwear and keep it there, loving that I *can* hold her without worrying if I’m crossing a line.

“This is going to sound incredibly cheesy,” she says, her voice sleepy. Content. “But I’ve never come when a guy has had his fingers inside me, but I knew, just from how you were massaging my legs that you could do it.” She kisses my chest. “It felt so good, Linc, like earth-shattering good. I swear I can still feel your fingers inside me.”

“Are you trying to turn me on? If so, you’re doing a good job,” I say, feeling my dick start to stir.

“Just being honest. It was different for me and startling, but amazing too.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I like it when you’re honest.” I stroke her hair and say, “To tell you the truth, I’ve never had an orgasm that’s taken over my entire body. It’s always been a release but having you deep-throat me like that . . . Damn, Indie, I fucking saw stars.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

I shake my head even though her head is rested against my chest. “No, I wouldn’t lie to you. What you did in the shower was fucking unbelievable.”

Her fingers caress my chest. “So I guess that would make us compatible.”

I laugh and squeeze her to me. “I would say more than compatible.”

She’s silent for a second, and I can practically hear her mind spinning with questions. “So . . . not to get super clingy on you, but what does this mean?” She sits up and turns so she’s facing me, and then lies across my chest. I move my hand up her thigh, wanting to keep the connection.

“Are you asking if we’re exclusive?”

“Uh, we better be,” she says on a nervous laugh.

Reassuring her, I squeeze her thigh and say, “We are, babe.”

“That’s not what I was asking, though.” Her finger draws lazy circles on my chest. “I know this is crazy and it’s like okay, we just gave each other oral, so *slow down*, Indie. But we’re going in different directions, you know?”

“Ah, you’re freaking out about the future.”

“Aren’t you?” she asks, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“Babe, I’m still trying to remember my name after what you just did to me.”

“I’m being serious, Lincoln.”

“So am I.” I chuckle and then let out a long breath and push my hand through my hair. “Okay, so we like each other, that’s obvious from the way you can’t seem to stop staring at me.”

“I should have known you were going to make this difficult,” she says with a roll of her eyes.

“Always, especially when it comes to teasing you.” I give her leg a shake. “You’re going pro after you graduate and if all goes well, I’m drafted after the end of my season this year, which yes, makes things difficult.”

“Very difficult,” she says, looking at my chest and then peeking up.

“But I don’t think I can stop touching and wanting you at this point.”

“Same.” She purses her lips to the side and says, “I have an idea, but I don’t want you to get mad about it.”

“I won’t get mad. We’re having a mature conversation. We’re being open and honest right now. It would be stupid for me to get mad.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath and then says, “I like you a lot, Linc, more than I think I should, given my goals for the year, but I can’t seem to stay away.”

“Me neither, babe.”

“But I know the likelihood of us staying together after you leave is very slim, especially once I hopefully go pro.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, gripping the short strands of my hair. That realization sucks. *Hurts.*

“So, I guess I’m suggesting we stay friends—”

“Uh.” I lean up on my elbows. “Friends after what just happened?”

She presses her hand against my chest, soothing me. “Friends with benefits.” Before I can say anything, she quickly adds, “You’re my best friend, besides Scarlett, and I can’t imagine not hanging out with you for the rest of the year, or touching you and kissing you. I don’t want to get my heart involved, though. Keep things casual and fun. No expectations.”

“And what do you propose happens when I get drafted?” I ask, feeling wary about her idea.

“We’ll figure that out when we get there. But I think we should just, you know, hang and—”

“Fuck?” I ask with a lift of my brow and a chuckle.

“I mean . . . yeah.”

She looks at me nervously, as if she's unsure what I'm going to say. "So that means no dates?"

She shakes her head. "No dates, just continue to hang and do what we do best with the added benefit of touching private parts."

"I do like that added benefit." The idea works for me, as it gives me the opportunity to still be around her but also touch her in ways I've wanted to for so long. I'd like to take her on dates, because that's what she deserves, but I can understand her hesitation. Who knows what spring will bring? Why add on the stress of a relationship?

Friends with benefits could really work.

"So, what do you say?" she asks, her nerves making her that much more irresistible. "Fuck buddies?"

"Exclusive fuck buddies," I add, and her smile grows as she cups my face and brings her lips to mine. I fall back on her bed, helping her lie on top of me as we kiss.

Yeah, I could really get used to this.



"YOU BOYS READY?" I ask, bounding down the stairs of my house, feeling lighter on my feet than normal.

Why?

Indie Mayhem.

After our declaration of choosing to be fuck buddies, we ate pizza, and then she gave me one hell of a hand job—that I can still feel four days later—pulling at all the muscles in my groin. She then proceeded to stick my hand down her underwear and I most definitely obliged.

I'll tell you right now, watching Indie come has got to be the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Her mouth falls open, her nipples pucker, and her legs part as her pelvis shifts up and down, searching out every last moment of pleasure.

And she's so fucking open about her body. She's not shy, she doesn't care that I watch her walk around naked, and she has no problem pulling my pants down to take what she wants. *Giving* what she wants.

It's fucking hot. She's hot.

And I'm one happy man.

Hartley's sitting on the couch, tossing a football in the air. When I hit the bottom step, he tosses the ball at me and I catch it with one hand, then run toward Rusty, who nearly tackles me to the floor.

"Nothing gets through this brick house," Rusty says, as I attempt to catch my balance but fall to my ass instead.

Hutton laughs his ass off and says, "I wish I caught that on video. The great Lincoln Castle taken down would have gotten me at least two thousand more followers on TikTok."

"Dude, are you really on TikTok?" Asher asks, coming into the room while holding a bowl of cereal. I haven't seen him around in a while, nor has he been very vocal lately. It's concerning, but I'm not going to press him because when Asher is ready to talk, he will talk.

"Hell yeah, I'm on TikTok. Scar and I did a dance together yesterday."

The room falls silence as we all stare at Hutton.

Scar?

Dancing?

Something has happened to our manwhore friend.

"What?" Hutton looks around. "Am I not allowed to have fun?"

"You just referred to Scarlett as *Scar* and you're doing dances with her on TikTok. Sorry if we're a little shocked."

He just shrugs. "It is what it is."

"And what is it exactly?" Hartley asks.

"My life, so keep the hell out of it."

Deacon comes down the stairs and starts clapping his hands. "Today's the day, boys. We win this, we go to the bowl."

"In the bag," Hutton says casually. "Nebraska has no idea what kind of freight train is coming for them."

"Don't be too cocky," Hartley says. "We show the work on the field."

"Dude, we got this," Hutton says, standing and going to the kitchen where I hear him root around in the pantry.

Rusty walks up to Hartley and pats him on the shoulder. "We do, man. Stop worrying. We got this."

"Worrying?" I ask, plopping down on the couch. I toss the ball back to Hartley and ask, "When have you ever been worried?"

He looks back at the kitchen and then leans in toward me. "Not worried, just . . . nervous. My dad and Jake Taylor are coming to the game today. They have field passes."

“Ah, and you want to impress.”

“Who doesn’t want to impress their parents?”

“True, it feels like additional adrenaline rushes through me when my moms are in the stands.”

“Exactly, but it isn’t just my dad . . .” He tosses the ball in the air and I make the connection.

“Alice’s dad will be there. Does he know about you guys?”

He shakes his head. “He doesn’t, and I’m not sure he’d be cool with it, either.” Hartley rubs his hand over his face. “They want to go out to dinner after. I’m *not* going to be cool about it, especially if we lose.”

“Hey.” I take the ball from him and then lightly toss it back. He catches it and finds the seams. “Focus on the game, the rest will come to you. But the most important thing is blocking out your personal life and pushing the ball down the field.”

“Yeah, I know you’re right.” He sighs and then says, “So, Scarlett told Hutton about your orgasm fest the other day with Indie.” Hartley grins, and I’m instantly annoyed. Of course, Hutton wouldn’t keep his mouth shut. “What’s going on there? You dating?”

“No,” I answer. “Just having fun.”

“Just having fun.” He nods and tosses the ball, catching it himself. “Okay, because that seems like a good idea.”

“It is,” I answer. “We’re both in a spot where we can’t get into anything serious, so we’re just going to have fun, hang out, and if she happens to sit on my dick, then so be it.”

Hartley chuckles to himself and then says, “Sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“How so?”

He gives me a very good side-eye. “Come on, you really think you’re not going to grow feelings for the girl? I’ve already noticed a change in you. Convince yourself all you want, but when the time comes to part, it’s going to be a lot more painful than you think.”

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine today?” I stand from the couch and Hartley blocks my path.

“Sorry, man. Just stressed.”

“I know.” I give him a fist pump. “You’re going to be awesome. You’re not an All-American for no reason. Focus on seeing the field and then concentrate on everything else after that.”

He nods, so I take off toward the kitchen where the rest of the guys have congregated. There's an air in the house: playoff air. The boys are buzzing, testosterone is flowing, and I can feel great things are in the works.



"I SERIOUSLY FEEL like I'm going to throw up," Indie says next to me. "I'm never this nervous during my own games, so why am I a lunatic now?"

I lift my ball cap and push my hand through my hair, feeling as uneasy as the rest of the crowd around us.

Fifteen seconds left to play, Brentwood is down by four points. We need a touchdown.

Hartley has been magic on the field all day, but he threw one interception while being tackled that has put them behind.

"Yeah, I'm nervous too," I say, hopping up and down. My boys are all around us, Scarlett is next to Indie, and the buzz of the game has us all shaken up.

The boys take the field and Hartley gets into position, pointing out defensive moves to look for. His deep grunt is heard around the stadium. The ball is snapped, he falls into the pocket, the lineman giving him time to find Hutton, who's cutting down the right side of the field.

Everyone in the crowd holds their breath as Hartley falls back and throws the ball. It sails in the air. Indie grabs my arm and Hutton's arms reach to catch the ball. He pulls it into his chest and makes a run for the end zone.

The crowd erupts.

Nebraska's hot on his heels, but the man is a machine. He kicks up the speed, escaping a tackle and diving into the end zone before being taken down.

The refs hold up their arms for a touchdown and the stadium bursts into cheers.

Indie and Scarlett jump up and down together as both my hands go to my head. *Fuck. That was phenomenal.*

The boys celebrate on the field while the stands shake with excitement. They're going to the Governor's Bowl. Third year in a row.

“Oh my God, I’m going to bang him so hard tonight,” Scarlett announces to us as she claps.

There’s no doubt in my mind that’s going to happen.

“This calls for a party,” I say. “We need to celebrate.”



HARTLEY’S nowhere to be found, but we can’t hold off any longer. I lift my red cup to the air and say, “To the boys who represented today.”

They lift their cups as well.

“Kick some ass at the Governor’s.”

They all cheer and most of them drain their cups, then head to the keg for a refill.

We kept the party “small.” It’s just the football team, baseball team, and people’s significant others slash fuck buddies. Just enough to celebrate, but not too many where you can’t move in the house.

I hop off the counter and go straight to Indie, where I grip her around the waist and spin her around. She laughs and grips my shirt to keep herself steady. I lean down and press a kiss to her lips that she quickly returns while holding on to my cheeks. If people didn’t know we were together before, they know now.

I hear a few people call out my name in celebration, and I just wave at them while I keep my lips on Indie’s, who opens her mouth, inviting me in. I groan against her mouth and slip my tongue inside. I find a wall and back her up against it. Her hands fall to the loops of my jeans and she tugs on them while I press my hands against the wall behind her, keeping my mouth fused with hers.

Sweet and titillating, she tastes so fucking good, like strawberries and beer.

We didn’t drink at the game like everyone else, and we’ve only had one beer at the party. I think it’s because we’re both aware of what’s going to happen tonight and we want to be alert when it does.

I haven’t seen her all week other than in class, as our schedules have clashed, so when I picked her and Scarlett up for the game, I was more than ready to take her back to my bedroom. Now, it’s all I want to do.

I pull away and lean closer to her ear where I whisper, “Want to go upstairs?”

“Can you?” she asks, looking up at me with those stunning eyes of hers.

“I can do whatever the hell I want.”

She smiles and then nods. Taking my hand in hers, we walk through the living room to the stairs and straight back to my bedroom.

I close the door behind me with my foot and then lean against it, taking her in. She wore a Brentwood U shirt and a pair of skinny jeans. Her hair is straight, and well, fuck, she’s stunning.

Nodding at her, I say, “Strip for me, babe.”

“Just like that, you think I’m going to listen to your demands?” she asks, sticking her hands in her back pockets, pushing her breasts out even more.

“Yeah, I do.”

She chuckles and kicks off her shoes. I do the same. “I don’t know, I think I need to be convinced how much you want me.”

I glance at my crotch and say, “Come feel me, and you’ll figure it out quickly.”

“No, tell me something. Every admission will grant you a piece of clothing.”

She wants to play a game? I’m down, especially if it means she’s stripping.

“Okay. The first time I ever met you at Boondoggles, I couldn’t stop staring at the way your tits bounced when you celebrated a victory.”

A sly smile spreads across her face. “I saw you checking me out.” She strips her shirt off, leaving her in a pink lacy bra.

I drag my hand over my mouth. “Wear that just for me?”

“Maybe. Now tell me something else.”

“The first night you slept over, I desperately wanted to slip my hand under your shirt, anything to feel your skin. I was fucking burning for you like I am right now.”

Satisfied with that answer, she pushes her pants down, revealing a matching thong. Clothes pushed away, she saunters over to me, and drags her hand up my shirt, taking it off. I stand there, enjoying her hands roaming the contours of my chest right before they fall to my jeans. She undoes them and pushes them all the way to the floor where I step out of them, leaving me in just my boxer briefs.

She moves her hand to my groin and cups me in her palm. A sweet moan bubbles up and out of her throat as she falls to her knees and peels my briefs down.

Leaning against the door, I suck in a sharp breath when she cups my balls and brings her lips to them where she presses a light kiss, her mouth just a whisper on me. My dick twitches above her with every touch of her mouth, begging to be taken in.

Her tongue peeks out and draws a long line up the underside of my cock, and then she stands and brings me to the bed where she makes me sit. I lean back on my elbows, staring at her gorgeous body. My dick wants inside her. *Urgently.*

Turning around, she shows me her sweet ass, the globes so perfect that I want to bite into each of them. She spreads my legs, grips my knees, and starts working her ass over my cock.

“Ah, fuck, babe. Are you trying to kill me?”

“No, just waiting for more evidence.”

“Is my cock not evidence enough?”

“I want to hear it from your lips.”

My length falls between her two warm globes, and I suck in a sharp breath to keep myself from losing it.

Fuuuck.

“Our first training,” I groan out, my voice pained. “When you were squatting in your bike shorts, I couldn’t stop staring at your ass and the way your tits were practically spilling out of your sports bra.”

She reaches behind her and unhooks her bra, dropping it to the floor. I sit up and look over her shoulder at her fantastic tits. I grip them, letting the weight of them float in my hands. Her head falls back on my shoulder as I massage her breasts, bringing my fingers to the points and rolling her nipples.

“Yes,” she whispers, moving her hips over mine relentlessly. “One more, Lincoln. Tell me one more thing.”

“Sit on top of me and I’ll tell you.”

She gets up, so I lie on the bed where she straddles my lap and continues to move over me, her hand on my abdomen as she rocks.

Like a goddamn goddess, she floats over me, reminding me with every pass of her hips how lucky I am to have her in my life, to be the guy she chose.

Christ, the way she rubs against me, it feels so good, so fucking good, but there's only one way to make it that much better.

Reaching up, I take her breast in my hand, roll it around in my palm and say, "Remember the first time we showered in the locker room? After you left to get dressed in the bathroom stall, I jacked off in the shower."

She pauses, her eyes falling to mine. "Seriously?"

I nod, biting my bottom lip. "Yeah, babe. It was too much for me. The entire workout, and then you naked only ten feet away, seeing the water cascade down your body. I was so goddamn hard there was no way I would have been able to walk out of there without doing something about it."

She gets off my lap, shimmies out of her thong and then climbs back on, but stays on all fours, taunting me.

"I've masturbated to thoughts of you in the shower often. You're not the only one who was turned on during that time."

"That's fucking hot. Fingers or vibrator?"

"Fingers. Scarlett is the one with the toys, not me."

"Babe." I flip her onto her back. "I want to see you do that sometime."

"Get myself off?"

I nod, bringing my mouth to her neck. "Yeah, I think it would be such a turn-on. But not tonight. Tonight, I need you for myself." My mouth reaches her jaw. "All of you."

"I need that too." Her hands fall to my back, down to my ass. She presses me down on her so my dick glides over her spread legs.

"Hell, Indie," I breathe against her skin. "I have a feeling I'm going to embarrass myself."

"Don't worry, I'm right there with you." She takes one of my hands and brings it between her legs and against her slick center. "I'm throbbing. Needing release. I need you to ease the pressure." I go to move down her body with my mouth but she stops me. "No, I need you inside me. Please tell me you have condoms."

"I do," I say, reaching into my nightstand and pulling one out. Once I'm sheathed, I lie back down on top, and she spreads her legs even wider. "Are you sure about this?" I ask, knowing this is the final line to cross when it comes to our relationship becoming full-fledged fuck buddies.

"Positive," she says, reaching down and positioning my cock at her entrance.

There's no turning back now. I slowly ease into her, her feral moan spurring me to keep going until I'm fully inserted. I still, catching my breath as I try to focus on what I'm doing, but that feels next to impossible. She feels so tight and warm around me. I swear, if there wasn't a condom between us, I'd have come just from penetrating her, from the look of absolute satisfaction on her face when I sank into her.

"So perfect," she says. "You feel so perfect in me." Her legs wrap around my waist, and she connects her hands with mine, bringing them above her head.

Instead of moving my hips right away, I bring my lips to her heated skin and play with her nipples, lapping at them, pulling on them just enough with my teeth to extract a hiss from her, and sucking on them so her chest lifts off the bed.

"Yes, Lincoln. God, you're so good at this."

Trailing kisses back to her neck, I glide my tongue over her collarbone and then run my nose along the column of her neck. Her hips start to move as she groans into my ear when I kiss her jaw.

I don't give in to her eagerness. I trail my lips all the way to her mouth and then lift up a few inches. Her eyes open, those mossy-green beauties full of lust, and then I crash my mouth into hers as I pulse my hips.

I capture her moan in my mouth and run my tongue along her lips, parting them so our tongues can meet. Her lips are warm and sweet, contradicting the desperation of her tongue. Her legs dig into my back, trying to help control the pace of my thrusts, but I hold strong as her hands grip mine tighter.

Her head pulls away and she lets out a long breath. "Oh my God, Lincoln, please. I need more. You have me on the edge."

"Good," I say, bringing my mouth back to hers, drinking in her sweetness and living out the moment, prolonging it as much as— "Oh fucking hell," I say, my head falling to her shoulder.

"Do you like that?" she asks, contracting her pussy around my aching cock.

"Indie, don't."

"Don't what? Do that?" she asks as I pulse into her.

"Jesus . . . fuck," I hiss. My balls tighten, my mind starts to fade as everything around us begins to blacken. "Indie, I won't last."

"Good. Make me come."

She releases my hands and reaches between us where she presses on her clit. I feel her pussy contract around me, and I can't help it, my hips spike forward, faster, harder. I move her hand and replace it with mine, making circles over her clit.

Her torso stiffens, her cries get louder, and her hands go to the back of my neck as an anchor while I pump into her, over and over again until I can't feel anything else but the sensations pulling into my groin.

"Babe, I'm—"

"Oh God," she yells as she spasms beneath me, her pussy contracting so tight that I feel like I can't move.

It's my undoing.

My body stiffens and unbridled heats rips through me as my cock swells inside Indie. Once again, euphoria hits me so hard, I black out as my cock spills inside of her.

Fuck . . . ahh, fuck.

Aftershocks hit both of us, spasms keeping us under the spell of our pleasure. I collapse on top of her and roll us both to the side so we can catch our breaths.

Our foreheads connect and when we finally open our eyes, our gazes meeting, we laugh at the same time, then I capture her lips. I find her breast and squeeze it while I make out with her, feeling so fucking happy.

So fucking grateful.

After a brief make-out session, I pull away and whisper, "Christ, Indie, that was . . . that was the best I've ever had." I don't mind making the admission, because it's true. This girl just rocked my world upside down. I'm in a post-sex daze—*numbers running into letters, not knowing where I am, who I am, what I'm doing* kind of daze.

"I don't think I've ever come that hard," she says softly, caressing my cheek. "I think you ruined me for the rest of my life."

"At least we had fun doing it," I say, wrapping my arms around her and encouraging her to rest on my chest.

We lie there for I don't know how long, but after what feels like hours, Indie climbs back on top of me and takes what she wants. We have sex three more times and each time, I keep wondering how it can keep getting better. I've had sex with a lot of girls. *Single guy. Adrenaline. Willing participants.* But nothing compares to sex with Indie. Nothing. The sexual compatibility. The welcome intensity. God, even the laughter. She's sexy,

confident, and brilliant. Absolutely mind-fucking-blowing. *And she's all mine.*



“WOO, LOOKING GOOD IN THERE, CASTLE,” Knight, our shortstop says, peering into the bullpen.

“He’s popping the shit out of my glove,” Louis, my catcher adds, standing from his squatted position. “I think you could hit it today, man.”

I shake my head. “Nah, I don’t think I’m ready.”

“I think you are,” Disik says, coming up next to me with a radar gun in hand. He stands behind me and nods toward Louis. “Let’s see if those *workouts* have been working,” Disik says with a slight frown. Not sure if the guy knows how to smile. But I can’t really focus on that at the moment. The man who has trained me for the last two years, who believed in me when I was eighteen, that man believes I can throw ninety-five. Fuck.

Retrieving the ball from Louis, I rub it between my palms, my glove tucked under my arm, and then get settled into my position on the mound. I can only hope I don’t let Disik down.

Believe in yourself, Castle. You’ve worked fucking hard for this. Get it done.

I hold my glove up, look down at the catcher, lift my leg, and bound off the mound, my chest leading first and then my arm following through. The ball sails down the shoot and straight into Louis’s glove with a snap.

I turn to Disik with hope. He doesn’t look at me, doesn’t even flinch. “Again.”

Hope disappears.

I wasn’t ready.

I get the ball back and repeat the pitch.

Disik makes me repeat it eight more times. After the tenth pitch, he lowers the radar gun, hands it to our equipment manager, and then just stands there, arms crossed, staring at me.

I try not to shift under his strong gaze, waiting for him to talk.

“You’ve been training?”

“Yes, sir. Upping my weights in the weight room and then working with Indie Mayhem on leg endurance and strength.”

He grips his jaw and nods. “It’s been working. You just threw nine out of ten pitches hitting ninety-five.”

“What?” I ask, surprise taking over. “Are you serious?”

He nods. “Yes. Keep it up, Castle.”

And then he takes off.

Holy Fuck.

The sound of Louis’s gear bounding toward me has me bracing for impact as he congratulates me.

Shit . . . I did it.

I hit fucking ninety-five, which means one thing: I’m that much closer to the major leagues.

And there’s only one person to thank.

Because she believed in me too.



I CONTEMPLATE whether going to celebrate with Indie is okay, given the women’s soccer team was eliminated from the championships this past weekend, but hell. I need to see her, so I go barreling up her steps and knock on the door.

It takes her a few minutes, but when she opens the door, I scoop her up into my arms, spin her around, and push her against the door as I close it. My lips land on hers and my hand—the one that’s not holding a bag of Frankie Donuts—grips the back of her head. I dive into her mouth with my tongue and press my pelvis into her—just as I hear a throat clear behind us.

I still, wince, and turn around to find her mom sitting on the couch.

Oh fuck.

When I release Indie, her face doesn’t read angry, just . . . content.

“Uh, sorry about that, Mrs. Mayhem,” I say, straightening my shirt and awkwardly handing Indie the bag of donuts. “Just making a donut delivery.”

“Well, I’ve never seen a donut delivery like that, nor have I ever seen friends greet each other in such a friendly way.”

Indie sighs next to me and says, “I was just about to tell my mom that we’re seeing each other, but you beat me to it.”

“Nothing like making an entrance,” I say, feeling incredibly awkward. I scratch the back of my neck and say, “You know, I can come back another

time.”

“No, stay. We can chat,” Mrs. Mayhem says, but Indie grips my hand, holding me in place.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m sure Lincoln has a bunch of finals to study for.”

“Oh yeah, sure. I do,” I answer, even though I don’t have finals in any of my classes, just final papers. But I’m pretty good at picking up the tone of the room. “Just wanted to drop those donuts off.”

“Such a shame. Maybe we can catch up another time?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” I wave at Mrs. Mayhem and then reach for the door.

Thankfully Indie says, “I’m just going to walk him out.”

“Take your time.”

Hand in hand, Indie walks me to my Jeep where we both stop at the driver’s door. “I’m sorry,” she says, looking up at me. “My mom surprised me and said she needs to talk to me. I have no idea what she’s going to say, but I’m sure it can’t be great if she drove here on a weeknight.”

“No need to apologize, babe.” I tilt her chin up and press a chaste kiss across her lips. “I’ll just talk to you later.” I reach for my car door when she stops me.

“Wait, why did you come over?”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ll tell you later.”

She stops me again. “Lincoln, you brought donuts, Frankie Donuts, which means it *is* a big deal. Tell me. I’ll probably need whatever news you have to help me get through this conversation with my mom.”

I feel bad about my timing, but I know she won’t let me get away without spilling the beans, so I grip both of her hands and say, “I hit ninety-five today, babe. Nine times.”

“Oh my God,” she shrieks as she hops up into my arms, her legs going around my waist. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “Yeah, Disik clocked me. I was feeling pretty good today. Louis said he could tell I’d added some steam to my pitches, so Disik came up to me with a radar gun. At first I didn’t think I hit it, because he kept making me repeat the pitch, but when he finally handed the radar gun away and told me I did it . . . hell, I had to tell you. You were the first person I wanted to tell, Mayhem,” I say, bringing my forehead to hers.

She grips both of my cheeks. “I’m so proud of you, Lincoln. That’s amazing.”

“Do you know what this means?”

“What?” she asks, a huge smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“Because I hit ninety-five, that means we get to have sex in the locker room now.”

“Wait . . . what?” she asks, a little crinkle to her nose. “When did we ever agree to that?”

“I agreed to it in my head.”

“And you think that counts?”

“It does in my book.” I wiggle my eyebrows, and she smooths her hand over my face, laughing.

“Keep dreaming, Castle.” She lowers her mouth and lightly presses a kiss to my lips. “I’m really proud of you. This made my night, so thank you for telling me, and thank you for the donuts.”

“Just a small thank you for helping me. Seriously, babe, I’m so grateful for your help.”

“Don’t forget it when you’re an All-Star pitcher in the big leagues.”

“Never,” I answer while kissing her again.

After a few passes of our mouths, she asks, “Depending on when my mom leaves, do you think I could come over?”

“Yeah, you never have to ask, babe. Come over whenever you want.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She presses another kiss to my lips and then hops off my waist. “I’ll call you.”

I give her one more kiss and then head back home, content to wait for her call.

A call she *never* makes.

Chapter Seventeen

INDIE

When I shut the door, my mom doesn't take very long to question me about Lincoln. Honestly, I had no intention of talking about him, but when he showed up, I didn't want my mom to make a big deal of things with Lincoln there. *So I told her.*

And thankfully she didn't.

But now we're alone, and I know her curiosity will need to be answered.

"And you told me you were just friends." Her voice is teasing, and I know she's trying to joke with me, but it's coming off as more annoying than anything.

"Things progressed."

I take a seat on the couch, leaving the donuts on the coffee table.

"Is Lincoln your boyfriend?"

"No." I shake my head quickly. "Just having fun."

Her brow crinkles. "As in just sex?"

"You know, I think you hardly have any room to judge given the fact that you're married and apparently have a boyfriend."

She leans back, hands clasped in front of her. "I guess I deserved that." A wave of guilt washes through me, and I'm about to apologize when she

says, “And that’s a good segue into why I came to talk to you.”

“Okay,” I say, pulling a throw pillow into my chest, nerves itching up the back of my spine.

“As you know, your dad and I are seeing different people. Well, things have progressed for your father, and he’s fallen in love.”

“With another woman?” I ask, feeling so sick to my stomach about the whole thing that it’s hard to listen to my mom talk about it.

“Yes, with his mistress. He respects me and cares for me enough that he’s waiting to file for divorce until I can figure out health insurance.”

“Divorce?” I swallow hard.

“Yes, honey. Divorce. Your father is quite happy with Rochelle.”

“And what about you?”

“Well, Joe and I seem to be getting along just fine.”

Joe. He has a name. They both have a name.

It still feels so unreal that my parents have not only been sneaking around with other people, but they’re so accepting of it that they’re going to divorce. When did it start? Who cheated first? When did they *both* feel it would be okay to ignore every vow they ever took, to keep their daughter in the dark—and who the hell else knows that I’ll have to face next time I’m back home? What ever happened to true love? Does it not exist? They used to be so happy. Weren’t they? What happened to “until death do us part?”

And where the hell is my father? Where has he been in this? No calls. No texts. No conversation when I was home. Is he so *happy* with his darling Rachel, or whatever the hell her name is, that he can’t bother to be here? To reach out? To reassure me that no matter what happens with him and Mom, that he’ll always be there for me?

But why would he do that when he never has been?

How long has it been since he hugged me and told me he loves me?

“Okay.” I swallow hard. I will not cry in front of my mother, a woman who doesn’t have any remorse in her eyes. A woman who looks . . . deliriously happy. Maybe a little like I’ve felt with Lincoln. Before now. “Is that why you’re here? Because you’re telling me about your fling?”

“It isn’t just a fling, sweetie. Joe and I are getting serious, another reason why I’m here.” She sets her hands on her lap and says, “Joe’s moving in.”

“What?” I ask, blinking a few times. “Moving into our house?”

She nods.

“With Dad?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Oh no, honey, he already moved out. Found a very nice apartment that he and Rochelle are sharing. I helped him pick it out.” *What?*

I press my hand to my forehead, all this information starting to swirl around in confusion. And then I think back on my house when I was there. In a word, it was sparse.

“When, Mom? When did he move out?”

And for a moment, she looks sheepish. “It doesn’t matter when.” She laughs. *Laughs. Fuck.* “But your father and I are happy and—”

“No, Mom. It does matter. Were you and Dad just playing happy families, who scuttled off to their booty calls on Thanksgiving when their daughter came to see them? For what purpose? Why not tell me the truth then?” It feels like my blood is boiling. I don’t think I’ve ever been this . . . enraged.

“Indie, you’re blowing this out of proportion. It doesn’t—”

“When? When did you help Dad—your *husband*—pick out a new apartment to share with his girlfriend? When did you decide your boyfriend should move into our home?”

“Not just my boyfriend, but my boyfriend and his daughter.”

My heart stops.

Literally stops.

“Daughter?”

“Yes, she’s the sweetest little thing. Priscilla is her name, and she’s ten. Loves Barbies, something you never enjoyed, and she loves playing beauty salon with me.”

“Where . . . where is she going to stay?” I ask, my heart sinking with every confession.

“Well, that’s the thing. Since the house is only a two-bedroom, it makes things quite difficult. Since you’re here in college and wanting to stay over breaks, I was hoping that Priscilla could have your room.”

My jaw hits the floor.

She has got to be kidding me.

“You want Priscilla to sleep in my room?”

“Well, not just sleep there, honey, but live there. I was going to pack up all your trophies and medals and paint the walls pink, because Priscilla just

loves pink. We picked out a comforter at Target the other day; it's so adorable. But before we move forward, I wanted to make sure it's going to be okay with you." *Okay with me. That I'll never see my own room again. I won't have a home anymore.*

"It seems like you've already moved me out, Mom," I say, a bitter bite to my voice.

She goes to take my hand but I move away. "Indie, I'm not moving you out, I'm just utilizing a room that's not being used. The only way I can afford the mortgage is if Joe moves in, as he's going to pay half. But Joe can't move in unless Priscilla comes with him."

"I see." I look away, my eyes burning. *There is no place for tears, and I won't let her see any either.*

It's bad enough that my parents are seeing other people and apparently have already spoken about divorce, but to take away my childhood room from me and replace me with a girl by the name of Priscilla, a girl who loves Barbies and is everything I was *not* growing up . . . it's too much.

"Honey, you didn't want to come home this past summer. I had to force you. You're growing up, do you expect me to keep your room as a shrine forever?"

"No," I say, steadying my voice, even though it's wavering. "It's fine, Mom." I take a deep breath, put on a good face and then stand from the couch. "Do what you want with the room. It's not like I'm returning anyway."

"Well, we still want you to come home for Christmas, sweetie. You can split time between the house and your dad's new place. It has an indoor pool. Fancy, right?"

It takes everything in me not to rear back and kick my mom in the shin.

An indoor pool?

That's what she thinks will make everything better? A goddamn indoor pool?

Unbelievable.

"Yeah, fancy." I move away and say, "I'm sorry to just bolt but I do have finals to study for."

"Of course, of course." She stands as well. "I'm sorry I crashed in on you, but I thought it would be better to tell you this in person." She comes up to me and clasps my hands. "Thank you for being so terrific. Priscilla is going to just love your room."

Great.

She places a kiss on my cheek and then cups it. “You’re a good daughter. Oh, and sorry about your loss. But hey, now you can focus on supporting Lincoln and his journey to the big leagues.”

And there it is, the final kick to the crotch. The underlying tension between me and my mom. She’s never supported my pursuit of soccer, wishing I was more like her, happy to settle with a man—even though it doesn’t last a lifetime apparently. Oh, and, it’s good to know that at least I’m replaceable. This time around, Mom has the girly-girl daughter she’s always wanted.

“Yes, well, we’ll see what happens this spring.”

“So glad I introduced you two.” She presses another kiss to my cheek as steam flies out my ears. “Love you, sweetie. I’ll send you pictures when we’re done making the transformation of your room. Can’t wait.” She claps her hands, gives me a hug, and then takes off, leaving me alone in my living room with a broken heart. With tears falling down my face.

Today, I found out I was replaceable.

And forgettable.



LINCOLN: Hey babe, are you headed over? Wasn’t sure if I should get dinner for us.

Lincoln: Just checking in. Everything okay?

Lincoln: Indie, growing concerned. Scarlett’s here, and we’re ordering pizza. Are you coming over?

Lincoln: Indie, babe. Can I have a heads-up that you’re okay, please . . .

Scarlett: Girl, your dude is freaking out. Can you text him back?

Scarlett: Okay, so you’re ignoring both of us. I’ll be over in a few.

Indie: Don’t. I just want to be alone. Have fun with Hutton. Tell Linc I’ll talk to him later.



MY FEET POUND against the tread of the treadmill, sweat drips down my chest and off my face, and my mind is focused on the speed number in front of me. Nothing else.

Double digits. I have to get to double digits.

I move the dial up another notch.

Nine point five.

I stay there. My legs are flying, and my lungs are exhausting themselves as I cross the forty-minute mark.

One more minute. Hit ten.

I ramp up the treadmill to speed ten and feel the tension in my legs as they fly so fast that it doesn't feel like I'm touching the tread. Just flying in place. My eyes focus on the countdown—thirty more seconds.

My pulse skyrockets.

My lungs search for air.

My legs feel like noodles.

Ten more seconds.

Five, four, three, two, one . . .

I slow the treadmill to a jog and then a walk, putting my hands on top of my head as I attempt to catch my breath.

The burn's a satisfying sensation.

Until I look up to find Lincoln standing at the edge of the treadmill, a not-so happy look on his face.

"Jesus," I mutter, startled. I grip the handles of the treadmill. I slow it down to barely a walk and try to speak over my racing heart. "What are you doing?"

"It's been four days, Indie."

I move my hands back to over my head and look away. "Haven't been counting."

He walks around to the buttons and stops the treadmill. "Brian said you're running two-a-days in here, beating your body up. What the hell is going on?"

"Training. You should know what that is, Lincoln."

He shakes his head and says, "No, you're not pulling this bullshit on me." He takes me by my arm and hustles me out of the training room and into a private corridor near the locker rooms. "Talk, now."

"For being fuck buddies, you're being awfully possessive," I say, knowing it's not the right thing to say but also not appreciating his

abrasiveness.

“I’m being a concerned friend, Indie. Did you forget that part?”

Ugh, I hate that he’s right.

I lean against the wall and say, “Can we not do this here?”

“This is the only way to get you.”

“I mean, can I take a shower and then you come over?”

“Are you . . . will you let me in?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.” He lets out an exhausted breath. “I’ll bring food. That work?”

“Yeah.” I push off the wall to walk by him but not before saying, “We have a lot to talk about.”

“I hope all good.”

I shrug. “We’ll see.”

“Indie,” he calls after me as I walk away. “I don’t like the sound of that.”



THE DOOR to my bedroom clicks shut and Lincoln stands in front of it, a small pizza in one hand, drinks in the other. I’ve been dreading this conversation ever since he pulled me off the treadmill. I’ve been dreading it because it still hurts to talk about what my mom told me.

Stings actually.

Burns.

Like I’m being ripped apart.

And I still haven’t heard from my dad.

Without saying a word, Lincoln sets everything down on my desk and then sits in front of me on my bed. He tilts my chin up and says, “Listen right now. I’m here because I care about you. Because you’re my best friend. Because when I sense that you’re not in a good headspace, I want to make sure you’re going to be okay. Do you understand that?” I nod, tears already starting to well in my eyes. “I’m not here to be lied to, to be tossed around as if what we have doesn’t matter, and I’m sure as hell not here to be

ignored. So, you're going to tell me what happened between you and your mom and then we're going to eat some pizza. Got it?"

I nod and take a deep breath as the first wave of tears hits me. I wipe them away and then pull my knees into my chest.

"I'm sorry about distancing myself. It's been a tough pill to swallow, and I haven't wanted to talk about it." Even with Scarlett, despite her pushing.

"I can understand that. But I'm here now and bottling it up isn't going to help, so tell me what's going on."

"Can I ask you something first?"

"Anything," he says, scooting farther on my bed and leaning against the wall while his long legs stretch out in front of me.

"You and me, this is just fun, right? I want to make sure this isn't going anywhere for you, that we're just playing it cool."

His brow pinches together. "That's what we talked about."

"Okay, because this can't go anywhere for me. It has to stay the way it is. Friends. I'm not emotionally available for anything else." *And I never will be.*

"Where's this coming from?"

"Just promise me, Linc," I say, a tear spilling over my cheek. "Promise it will stay where it is. Relationships are fucked up. Marriage is a joke, something I don't ever see myself participating in."

"Did something happen with your parents?"

"Linc, promise me," I say, needing to hear the words from his lips.

He looks down at his hands and I see him swallow hard before he looks back up at me, an intensity in his eyes I've never seen. "Promise," he chokes out.

"Thank you." Relief washes through me, and the tightening in my lungs starts to ease. I scoot back so my shoulder is touching his and we're sitting side by side.

His hand falls to my knee. "What happened, Indie?"

"My parents are getting a divorce. And I know you probably saw that coming, but I don't know, I thought their situation was a phase. But my dad got an apartment that my mom helped him pick out. He's living with his girlfriend, and uh . . . my mom's boyfriend is moving in."

"Shit, Indie. I'm—"

"With his daughter."

Lincoln pauses and then says, “Oh.”

“My mom came down here to tell me her *happy* news. That Dad and she were happy. Oh, and to ask me if Priscilla, that’s her name, could have my room. After they’d picked out her new comforter and the new color for the walls.”

“Have, as in . . .”

“As in, take it over. Mom’s packing up all my shit, painting the room pink, and gaining the perfect princess daughter she’s always wanted. Don’t worry though, I have *you* to support like the good little woman I am, so my mom thinks I’m taken care of.”

“Wait, what?”

I sigh in frustration. “It’s been a thing with me and my mom. She always thought soccer was something fun for me to do, has never taken it seriously, even when I signed my letter of intent, receiving a full-ride. She never got it. Always told me there’s more than soccer. She can’t see that I’m also getting a degree at Brentwood that will bring employment once I graduate . . . if I don’t go pro. She ignores that. As if I’ll never be able to be whole on my own or support myself. And I’m guessing that’s why she spent the whole summer trying to hook me up. Hook *me* up, when she’s the one who can’t even stay faithful in a committed relationship. A marriage. She’s such a . . . hypocrite.”

“Indie, it takes two people for a marriage not to work.”

“Are you defending her?” I snap, facing him.

“No,” he recovers quickly. “No, I’m not. I don’t know why I said that.”

“Because I’m just as mad at my dad. He’s the one who checked out. He hasn’t even tried to have a solid relationship with me. At least my mom attempts to connect, even if it’s for a shitty reason.” A billowing heat rises in my chest as anger starts to crest. “What do they expect me to do? Come home for winter break and act like everything’s okay? My mom said I could split time between the two places, but where the fuck am I supposed to sleep? On the couch? When some girl I don’t even know takes my bed?” Another tear slips down my face. “They’re both starting new lives . . . without me.”

“Indie,” he says on a sigh and tries to pull me onto his lap.

“No. Okay, Lincoln? I don’t want to be comforted, I want . . .” My lip trembles and my mind freezes on me. *I want an escape*. I want out of my head. I don’t want to think anymore. I need to check out.

I sit up on my knees and pull my shirt over my head, revealing my bare chest. Lincoln's eyes go wide and when I reach for him to lie down, he puts his hand out, holding me in place.

"Indie, I'm not going to have sex with you right now. Not when you're so upset."

"I don't need you to baby me, Lincoln. I need you to fuck me."

"And I'm not going to fuck you when you're not in a good headspace. We don't use each other like that."

Covering my breasts, I say, "Then just leave." I point to the door, emotions bubbling up so fast that I can't control the torrent of tears taking over.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, pulling me down on the bed with him, curling me into his chest. I resist it at first, but when he rubs my back soothingly, I melt into his side and cry.

I cry hard.

I finally let months of resentment pour out of me.

And Lincoln holds me the entire time.

Never moving.

Only pulling me in tighter as sobs wrack my body.

He kisses the top of my head when I finally calm down. "You matter. You realize that, Indie? You matter to a lot of people and the empty feelings you have right now, feeling like you're being replaced, like you don't matter . . . aren't true. Do you hear me?" When I don't say anything, he squeezes me tighter, his voice growing rough. "You fucking matter, Indie."

I nod, unable to stop the onslaught of tears.

"You fucking matter," he repeats.

I don't know how long we lie there until we both drift off to sleep, forgetting about the pizza and anything else that's happening in the world. It's just me and Lincoln.

My rock.

Chapter Eighteen

LINCOLN

JANUARY

BUZZING and fucking horny as hell, I sprint up Indie's staircase and throw her door open only to find her completely naked and spread out on her bed.

"Jesus," I mutter, tearing my shirt off and tossing it to the floor.

She giggles and says, "Shut the door."

I kick it closed and then quickly strip down to nothing. I reach into the back pocket of my jeans and pull out an accordion of condoms that nearly touch the floor. She laughs even harder.

"Miss me?" she asks.

"Like you can't even believe," I say, flinging myself on her bed and tackling her. My lips find hers, and I'm reminded why I've been so goddamn thirsty for this girl ever since Christmas Eve.

Her mouth is magic.

Her body is fire.

And her touch is an addiction to me, something I crave every goddamn second of the day.

After Indie told me what was going on with her shitty parents, things were awkward between us for a few days. I felt her pulling away, but I didn't let that happen. I couldn't, not when she was feeling so broken, not after she made me make that promise. Because that promise felt like the finale to what we were doing, and I didn't like that at all. It didn't feel good. Didn't settle well. So, I kept pushing, making sure she didn't hide in a hole and eventually, the gray clouds looming over her cleared, and I started to see my girl again. Well, a slightly more cynical Indie.

She spent most of her winter break at school. Scarlett stayed with her until a few days before Christmas, and then she flew out to see her parents. I had to go home right after finals were over because it was my last Christmas before the draft, and my moms wanted time with me, something Indie understood completely. I was missing her like crazy during the break so when she showed up at my doorstep on Christmas Eve with her present, I was more than ecstatic.

And her present . . . a mind-blowing blow job in my Jeep. I got home in a daze, pretty sure my moms knew exactly what had gone down.

Indie spent Christmas with her mom, slept on the couch like she thought she would, then went to her dad's—didn't use the indoor pool—and then drove back to school. I hated knowing that she was there alone, but she said she was good. She trained and worked on her footwork.

When I got back to campus today, I was nervous to see where her head was at but when she told me to get my ass over to her apartment, I went.

And finding her on her bed, a smile on her face, the happy Indie I've grown to know shining back at me? I've never felt more relieved in my life.

"God, you taste good," I say, moving my lips down her neck to her collarbone.

"Condom now," she mutters.

I tear one off the sleeve and then quickly sheath myself. Then she's up on all fours, sticking her ass in the air.

"Christ," I mutter, gripping her hips and moving behind her. "Are you ready, babe?"

I move my fingers over her arousal and feel how slick she is. Oh fuck, she's ready.

"Yes, Lincoln. Please," she begs.

I position my cock at her entrance and push forward, slamming into her. We both let out a loud groan as I fill her up.

“Is Scarlett here?” I ask, pained.

“No. Scream all you want.”

I chuckle and start moving in and out of her, using her hips as a guide.

“God, I missed this,” I say. “The way your pussy clenches around my cock so perfectly. So good, Indie.”

I thrust harder and am already feeling the tickle of my orgasm up the backs of my legs.

Indie moves her hand between her legs, and even though I like to do the work for her, if this is what she needs—she’s *that* ready—fuck, she can get do whatever she wants. *I love that about her.*

“How does that feel?” I ask her.

“Amazing. Oh my God, so good.” Her hands fall to the bed where she braces herself. “Oh Jesus, Linc, I’m almost there. Right there.”

“Me too,” I say, my heavy breath making it hard to talk. Shit, this was fast. Faster than expected.

I lean over her back and grab one of her tits as I continue to slam into her. With skillful fingers, I roll her nipple and pinch it, extracting a sharp hiss from her and causing her pussy to contract around my cock.

“Fuck, yes,” I grunt, doing it again and again until she’s panting and crying out my name, her orgasm ripping through her as mine tightens and sends me into another world.

I’m still behind her, my cock twitching inside her.

“Too good,” I mumble. “Way too fucking good.”

She chuckles and then collapses to the bed. I take care of my condom and then climb back on her bed where I bring her on top of my chest so I can look at her. Face red, eyes sated, she looks freshly fucked, and it’s the prettiest sight I’ve ever seen.

I push a few stray hairs behind her ear and say, “Glad to have your boy toy back?”

She laughs out loud, and then brings her hand to my crotch where she gives it a squeeze. I shudder under her, not prepared, and also fucking sensitive.

“I would say so.” She places both of her hands on my chest and stares down at me. “Did your moms cry saying goodbye?”

“They always do,” I answer, feeling weird talking about my parents when I know things are rocky for Indie. But she seems unfazed and honestly, I don’t know if I should be relieved or worried.

Sadness can be a tricky thing. You can think someone is completely okay on the outside, but on the inside, they're lonelier than ever. I'm nervous that Indie might be headed in that direction.

But from the fresh look in her eyes right now, I can probably think otherwise.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her, rubbing her back.

"Good." She smiles. "I've been volunteering at the public library in the children's section all break."

"Really? How come you didn't tell me?"

She shrugs. "I'm telling you now."

"Okay," I say, hesitantly. "What did you do?"

"Everything from putting away books, checking out, setting up different displays, and my favorite was story and craft time. It felt like I was preparing my own classroom. Great experience and I really enjoyed working with the kids, even if some of them had snot hanging out of their nose."

"Ew, really?" I ask.

"Oh Lincoln, so much snot. And you could tell the parents with one kid against the parents with multiple kids."

"What do you mean?"

Brimming with joy—something I haven't seen from her in a while—she says, "One-kid parents have all these devices with them. Like special tissues called Boogie Wipes, specific for kids' runny noses. They take one out, wipe the nose, and then everyone is sanitized."

"And what about the other parents?"

Her smile grows wider. "Multiple-kid parents are the ones who see the snot dripping, call the kid over—while holding another kid in their arms like a sack of dog food—and then wipe the snotty kid's nose with their own clothing. They shove them back into play so they can deal with the sack of potatoes."

A laugh bubbles out of me. "Seriously?"

I nod. "Also, one-kid parents have their hair done, look presentable and like dignified members of society." She shakes her head, growing serious. "Multiple-kid parents, they're . . ." She clutches her heart. "They're sprung from the depths of hell, raggedy monsters, stomping around the earth, repeating the same thing over and over again—*don't touch that, don't touch*

that, don't touch that—while Cheerios cling to their hair and a toddler's finger is shoved up their nose.”

I laugh even louder. “So what I’m hearing from you is that you’re never going to be a multiple-kid parent.”

“Or a parent at all.” She shakes her head. “I like kids, but after this break I realized one thing: it’s nice to give them back to their rightful owners. Plus, kids mean marriage, and I think we both know I’m never getting married.”

Ah, so she’s not fully better.

She pats my chest. “I’m starving. Let’s get some food.”

And just like that, she hops off me and goes to her dresser where she grabs some clothes and heads to the bathroom. I stare at the ceiling, placing both my hands behind my head, trying to figure out how much I push her?

Technically, she’s happy right now.

She’s fine.

So why bother trying to peel back a scab that she’s trying to heal?



MARCH

“INDIE, it’s so great to see you,” Mom says, pulling Indie into a hug.

“It’s great to see you, too.”

Mama puts out her hand for a shake and says, “I really appreciated your chanting. It was colorful.”

Indie snorts next to me. “I may have gotten carried away.”

“You were good up until the point where you told Indiana to eat shit after I struck out the side,” I say.

“Personally, I thought it was deserving,” Mama says, as we all walk into the restaurant.

I pitched one hell of a game today. Coach said I was consistently hitting ninety-five, and it showed. The batters were having a hard-ass time keeping up with me. Ended up with a shutout and another win under my belt. After the game, Disik pulled me to the side and said if I stay consistent with my

spin rate and speed, there's no doubt I'll be in the top of the draft class and on my way to Double-A in the summer.

Hell, it's crazy to think that in a few short months, I could be training with an actual professional team. I know it's going to be tough, the pay is going to be shit in the minors, but it's all going to be worth it in the long run, because I'll be living a dream.

We're seated by the host, who gives me a fist bump before handing me a menu. "Heard you pitched one hell of a game," the guy says. "Can't wait to see where you're drafted to by the end of the season."

"Thanks, man," I say. And yeah, I'm puffing my chest out as I answer him because of the gaggle of important women surrounding me. "I really appreciate that."

He walks away, and both my moms look at me with a knowing smile.

"What?" I say, setting my menu down.

Indie pokes my side and says, "Ooo, someone's famous."

"Shut up." I laugh, but it doesn't stop them.

"We should get your fanboy back, have you sign a few things for him," Mom says.

"Can you stop? He was being nice."

"You know he's going to tell all his buddies about seeing you in here, eating a giant burger, taking that meat down like a man," Mama teases.

I look between the three ladies as they all laugh. "Are you guys done? Care to be mature about this?"

"Not really," Indie says. "This is more fun."

"She's right," Mom adds. "Plus, we bought you, so we can tease you however you want."

"What did I say about saying you bought me?" I say with a smile.

"We did," Mama says, jabbing her finger to the table. "The lawyers didn't pay for themselves."

Indie laughs next to me. The sound's so goddamn throaty and perfect. "Oh that's great."

"Did all three of you decide to gang up on me during the game?"

"Oh no," Indie says, petting my head. "Are your sensitive man feelings getting hurt?"

"Yes," I say, a huff to my voice. "Yes, they are, and I'd appreciate it if you all would stroke my ego and make me feel important."

"Ah, we'll leave the stroking to Indie," Mom says on a smirk.

“Jesus.” I cup my forehead with my hand. “I can tell this was a bad idea.”

Indie picks up her menu and says, “No, I think this was a great idea. Dinner with the moms; doesn’t get much better than this. By the way, how’s the porn site, Michelle? You were having a hard time with getting the moaning sound to work when there was a purchase over winter break. Finally crack the code?”

Lighting up, Mama says, “Oh yes. And we added an extra-long moan for purchases over one hundred dollars. The incentive of longer moans was very well received by the owner.”

“We’re in public,” I say through clenched teeth. “A public where people know me.”

“Oh, look at him,” Mom says, pointing at my face. “He’s getting red.”

All three pairs of eyes land on me so I lift my menu, blocking their view. Indie pulls it down and studies me.

“And his cheeks are getting blotchy.”

“That means extra angry,” Mom says. “Blotchy could lead to an outburst. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“I’d be down for an outburst. We haven’t been put in our place by Lincoln in a while. We’re due.” Mama smiles delightfully.

“Overdue,” Mom adds.

“I’ve never seen an outburst,” Indie joins in. “How could we push him to that moment?”

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” I say, staring at the menu. “I’ll get there really fast.”

Everyone chuckles and under the table, Indie’s hand clamps down on my thigh where she gives it a reassuring squeeze. I look at her and she gives me a soft smile, one that confirms she’s just teasing me.

It’s a tender smile that smooths down my anxiety and makes me feel like everything’s going to be okay.

“Oh jeez, look at those two?” Mom says, clutching her heart. “You are too cute together. I still can’t believe you’re happily having all the bedtime relations because of my meddling.”

“How much do you tell your moms?” Indie asks.

“Apparently too much.” Eyes wide, trying to express my feelings through my facial expressions, I say, “How about we don’t talk about

what's going on between me and Indie and maybe focus on something else ___”

“I came up with a party tab for the porn site,” Mama says, breaking the moment. “It, uh, gives you the opportunity to join an online orgy. The idea earned us a giant bonus.” She nods, then returns to looking at her menu. “Pretty neat if you ask me.”

Indie chuckles again next to me as I mutter under my breath.

Why . . . why do my lesbian moms have to be porn website developers?

And why is there absolutely no filter even when we're in public?

Just . . . why?



MAY

SIX TEAL CUPS are held high in the air as Hartley says, “To another fucking amazing year. To the heartache, the bruises, the sweat, and the relationships we found along the way.”

All the boys clink their cups and then we take back the shot of whatever Hutton concocted.

Burning liquid slides down my throat and we all start coughing at the same time, besides Hutton, who's smiling like a jackass.

Rusty wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and asks, “What the hell was in that?”

“Vodka and hot sauce. Got to get those loins moving, boys. Big things are ahead of us.”

“We don't need any loins, moving,” I say, looking at the clock on the oven. “We don't need to be vying for the bathroom while we throw our last party of the year.”

“Nah, you'll be good.” He waves his hand at us just as the door opens and Indie pops through it with a bottle of Sprite for the jungle juice. Asher forgot to pick some up at the store for us. He's had a lot on his mind lately.

“Hey boys,” Indie says while handing the Sprite to Hutton. Rusty picks her up and spins her around, only to toss her over to Deacon who does the

same. “Why don’t you greet me like this?” Indie asks me as Deacon sets her down on the ground.

“Because I fail at life.”

She chuckles and taps my crotch. “Not all aspects.”

“Oh damn, look at that, giving our boy some confidence in his bedroom skills. Well done,” Rusty says.

“He has to know there’s more to life than just baseball if that doesn’t work out.” She winks. “He could be a gigolo.”

“I’d hire him for a lap dance,” Hutton says walking back into the living room. “Always wanted to know what it would be like to have that ass grind on me.”

“You’re fucked up,” I say, taking Indie in by the shoulders. I press a kiss to the side of her head and whisper, “Want to go out back?”

She nods.

People will be arriving soon and even though I know it’s our end-of-the-year party and probably the last time I’ll see everyone—besides my guys—I want time with Indie.

The last few months have been . . . simple.

My routine has stayed the same: Sunday nights, we hang and bang like crazy when the team isn’t on an away trip; Mondays, I spend the morning training with Indie; with some intermittent hang outs throughout the week. I practice, train, attend a few classes, and then on the weekends, we play games. The team is undefeated going into playoffs, and the draft is only a few weeks away. Feels like everything is perfect.

Because we’ve learned lessons from previous teams, we don’t have a firepit in our backyard. Fire and drunks don’t really make a great combination. But we do have lawn chairs formed into a circle with a cooler in the middle full of beers and some of those hard seltzers that the girls who come to the parties seem to like.

My girl in particular.

I lead her to the circle, open the cooler, and hand her a blackberry-flavored hard seltzer and grab a beer for me. I take a seat in a wide lawn chair and pull Indie onto my lap. At this point, she knows better than to try to sit anywhere else.

“Did you get these drinks just for me?” she asks, popping open her can.

“You know I got you covered,” I say, rubbing my hand over her thigh.

She takes a sip and then laughs. “Oh Lincoln, you have sex eyes.”

“What? No, I don’t.”

“Uh, yeah, you do. Big-time sex eyes.” She motions to my eyes.

Shrugging, I say, “Is it a shame I want my girl?”

“Your girl, huh?” she asks, taking another sip of her drink, and this time it’s a longer pull.

“You know what I mean.” I pop open my beer and take a drink as well.

Even though things have been incredibly easy these past few months, I keep wondering in the back of my head about what’s going to happen after I’m called down to train by whatever team picks me up. Do I shake hands with Indie and thank her for a great year? Do I ask to see her whenever I’m in town? Do I just end all communication?

Ending all communication seems like a terrible idea, but I honestly have no idea where her head is at, and I’m too damn scared to ask.

I’m so out of my element. I’m confused. It feels like she’s my girlfriend, but we’ve never put labels out there other than fuck buddies. And we don’t see each other every day like other boyfriends and girlfriends do, nor do I take her on dates. When I do see her, we’re usually naked within minutes. Afterwards, we hang out, play games, just have fun, but we never dive into anything too deep. The last deep conversation we had was before Christmas break, when she broke down in her bed and I held her all night. Ever since, it’s like she’s put up an emotional wall around herself and hasn’t even given me a chance to peek in.

And I’ve been fine with that. But for some reason, since hanging out with the boys earlier, sharing shit about our years together—and this being our last party together—I want to peek over that wall, feel her out.

Thankfully, she leads into the conversation perfectly. “Are you excited about the draft coming up? I saw an article online talking about how you’re a top-twenty prospect. Top-twenty, Linc. That’s incredible.”

“Thanks, babe,” I say, squeezing her thigh. “Yeah, it’s pretty crazy. Hitting ninety-five this season boosted me to the next level. Coach Disik said it’s opened a lot more doors, and I really have you to thank for it.”

“You would have hit it on your own,” she says, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “Just would have taken you longer.”

“Well, it means a lot to me, you working with me on everything.”

“What are friends for?” She winks and my stomach drops.

Friends.

Okay, I don't know why I was expecting more. Maybe because it feels like so much more than just friends.

Plastering on a smile, I say, "Yeah, you've been one hell of a friend."

"I don't know if we should thank our moms or our professor who teamed us up."

Chuckling, I say, "I still can't believe we got a B in that class."

"Don't even talk to me about it. I'm still bitter. He had an agenda and it was to make us feel less than perfect."

"The nerve."

She tangles her fingers through the short strands on the back of my head, leaning against me. "I'm sad we didn't have another class together. We didn't plan that well."

"For the best. I was too distracting for you."

"Please." She rolls her eyes as her fingers work magic on my scalp.

"I saw the doodles in your notebook, the many attempts to draw me naked. Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

"Aww, you thought those were naked pictures of you? That's cute. They were of Rusty."

I nearly choke on my beer laughing.

She pats my back. "Did you picture it in your head?"

"I did, and I did not like it." I take another sip of beer and say, "Did he tell you that he's proposing to Chrissy? This summer?"

"He did." She sips her drink. "Good for them."

"Wow, hold back your excitement," I tease.

"You know how I feel about marriage, Linc."

Yeah . . . I do. She could write a skeptic's guide to marriage now. Especially given her parents' divorce was done three months after they filed for divorce. Three months. That's good old Michigan for you. After twenty-two years of marriage? *Three months*. Property and debt division finalized amicably. A neat, fucking package. And Indie's fucking mom had the audacity to send her a text with a smiley emoji announcing just that. Needless to say, Indie got wasted that night. I heard her tears in the shower the next morning, but she didn't let me see those. Nope. Those tears are well and truly hidden behind her wall, never to be comforted. *Much like her heart*.

"Anyway, are you sure you want me to come to the draft-watching party? I don't want to step on a family gathering."

“Hey, you’re family,” I say. “Of course we want you there.”

“Okay.” A small sigh escapes, and I want to break down that sigh and figure out the meaning behind it. “I still can’t believe they’re having the championships at Brentwood this year.”

They’re usually held in Omaha, Nebraska, but a terrible storm hit the city this year, leaving the field unusable. Brentwood was nominated to hold the tournament, the college stadium hosting most of the games with some being optioned out to fields in the area. It isn’t ideal, but it will get the job done, which means we can have a gathering at Indie’s during the tournament.

“It’s crazy, but also kind of cool, being able to play in our stadium again.”

“I can feel that. I’m dreading the fall when I have to say farewell to my field.”

“Yeah, I wish I could be there for that,” I say, already knowing my life will be so different this coming fall.

“But you’ll be on to bigger and better things.” It sounds like a throwaway comment, and that makes me worry. Worry about *our* future and what’s to come.

“So when you’re a big-time soccer player, think you’ll still talk to me?” I ask, feeling her out.

“Not going pro,” she says, downing a big gulp of her drink.

“Wait, what?” I ask, pulling her drink down. “What do you mean you’re not going pro? When did you decide that?”

“A few months ago,” she says casually.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t think I needed to tell you everything, Lincoln. Anyway, it’s no big deal, just focusing on other things.”

“Indie, soccer is your life. This has been your dream forever. Why are you giving up on it—” I pause, remembering something. “Is this about your mom?”

“No,” she says looking away. I don’t believe her. “It’s just not smart. The pay is shit and what happens when my career is over? It’s not like I’ll have millions to fall back on like you.”

“Hey, when has it ever been about the money? It’s always about the game for you.”

“There’s no use talking about it, Lincoln. I’ve made my decision.”

“Well . . . I think it’s a shitty decision,” I say, unable to hold my tongue.

“Wow, tell me what you really think.” She laughs sarcastically and tries to get off my lap, but I hold her in place.

“You want to know what I really think? I think you’re hiding behind someone you’re not. You’re hurting because of your parents’ choices and instead of facing that hurt, you’re turning into someone nowhere near the Indie I know.”

“I don’t think this is the time to have this conversation, Lincoln. It’s your last party. Let’s not fight.” She leans in and presses a kiss to my lips. It’s sweet, and it stirs feelings inside me, feelings I shouldn’t be having. Gripping my cheek, she looks me in the eye. “Can you drop it, please? Let’s enjoy these last few weeks, okay?”

Remember when my heart sank? Well, it just flopped onto the floor, and I’m pretty sure Indie carelessly kicked it across the lawn with that last statement. I want to ask her what she means but I can sense the tension building between us, and the last thing I want is to ruin tonight. So, I drop it and nod.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you.” She tilts my head back and swipes her tongue over my lips. “Open,” she demands, and because I’m desperate for anything from this girl, I open my mouth and get lost in her for the rest of the night, reveling in her sweetness the only way I know how.

Fuck, I’m going to miss her.



JUNE

“INDIE.” I motion for her to come sit with me. Mom and Mama are holding hands on my right and when Indie comes over, I pull her down to sit at my left.

Rusty and Deacon are pacing in front of me, hands in their hair, looking more stressed than I am. Hutton is sitting in a chair by the living room window, holding a beer between both of his hands, and Hartley? Well, he’s sitting on the stairs, one leg bouncing up and down. Me? I’ve surrounded

myself by those I trust—my people, my tribe. I’ve done the work. Followed the rulebook to success. A draft spot should be mine, so I don’t doubt that. What I’m not sure about is what that will look like without these people by my side. But I can’t think about that. Not now. *Onwards and upwards. Working toward the goal.* That’s what my parents have taught me. I take a deep breath. *You can do this, Castle. You’ve got this.*

The phone rings and a collective silence falls over the room. I glance at my phone, a Chicago number lighting it up.

Mama squeezes my shoulder and Indie grips my thigh in encouragement.

I pick up the phone, as all the boys gather around the coffee table. Clearing my throat, I answer, “This is Lincoln Castle.”

“Lincoln, this is Harold with the Chicago Rebels. Congratulations, son, you’re going to play for the black and red.”

Tears well in my eyes, my skin prickles with excitement, relief, and nerves, which makes me want to puke and cheer. Simultaneously. *Shit.*

“Wow, thank you so much. This . . . this means the world to me.”

“Well, we’re very excited to have you as part of our organization. Congratulations. We’ll be in touch.”

I hang up and everyone waits in anticipation. “The Rebels. I’m going to be a Rebel.”

The room erupts in cheers. My moms pull me into a hug, both crying into my shoulders while the boys all fist-bump and chant my name. It’s ridiculous and obnoxious, but it also feels good.

Really fucking good.

I did it.

All that hard work, the extra time, the special events I missed because of training. It all came down to this moment—where it paid off.

A Rebel. I never expected to be picked up by a Chicago organization, but I couldn’t be happier.

My moms release me from their loving embrace and then hug each other. I turn to Indie, who has tears in her eyes. She clasps me by the cheeks and brings her lips softly to mine where she presses a gentle kiss, only to pull away and caress her thumbs over my cheeks. “I’m so proud of you, Castle,” she whispers. “So freaking proud.”

Tears spill over my eyes.

“Thank you,” I say, choked up.

Champagne pops in the distance and I hear Rusty gathering glasses for everyone, but I ignore it all and stare at Indie, excitement pouring through me . . . as well as dread.

Because this means it's coming to an end.

And from the tears falling onto her face and the tremble in her lips, I *think* she's seeing the same thing. Yet . . . she's kept herself hidden emotionally. And sometimes, I wonder if she ever became as invested as I have. Was I wrong? Was this year's success possibly due to *being in* a relationship with Indie, and not despite it?

And if that's true, what happens next?

Chapter Nineteen

INDIE

JUNE

KNOCK. Knock.

“Who is it?” I ask, mumbling into my pillow.

“Who do you think it is?” Scarlett says, opening my door.

“Not in the mood,” I say, not bothering to look back at her.

She shuts the door behind her. “If you lifted your head right now, would your face be covered in mascara?”

“Maybe,” I answer.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Too bad.” She flops on my bed and drapes her legs over the back of mine. “So, Lincoln is with the Rebels. That’s pretty badass.”

“It is. He’s really excited to have a chance to play in Chicago still.”

“Must be exciting for you too. Means he’ll be here still.”

I shake my head. “Scarlett, you’re smarter than that. You know their Triple-A and Double-A teams aren’t located here. Double-A, I think, is in Massachusetts for God knows what reason, and Triple-A is in Kansas. I

think Lincoln is amazing, but it will be a few years before he's actually playing in Chicago, and that's if they even keep him in the organization. Minor league players are used as bargaining chips for trades constantly."

"So what you're saying is that his future is full of uncertainty."

"Yup."

"And that makes you sad because . . ."

"I'm not sad," I mutter.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that. Can you lift your face off your pillow and repeat that?"

"No."

"Indie, lift your head or I'm going to do it myself."

Sighing, I roll to face her and give her a top-notch view of my drenched eyes and black-stained cheeks.

"Jesus Mother," she says, moving back, hand to her heart. "Your face is what nightmares are made of."

A snot bubble pops out of my nose as I snort. "It's not that bad."

"Have you looked in a mirror?"

"No—"

"Then your opinion has no legs to stand on. Bury your face back in that pillow. You're going to terrify the children."

"Scarlett, stop making me laugh."

"Oh that's right. Sorry. We're pretending that you're not sad when in fact you really are sad."

"Yeah. Keep it straight," I say, staring at the ceiling.

"Okay, so even though we're pretending you're not sad, when you really are sad, let's talk about why you're sad even though you're not sad."

"I barely followed that."

"I'm surprised it made sense at all," she says, her smile easing my tattered soul.

I don't answer right away, but try to catch my breath as I think about the goodbye. The one I've been dreading ever since he came barging into my room before Christmas break demanding I tell him what was going on. In that moment, I knew . . . I knew deep in my bones that he's the best thing that's ever happened to me and life without him is going to be impossible.

It's going to be painful.

It's going to be tangible pain I won't be able to get over for a long time, and that thought sent me into a deep depression.

A debilitating depression.

One that I'm still fighting.

I spent the entire winter break seeing a therapist—learning to identify my true fears and pain—and using the library as my place of healing, desperately trying to gain control of the downward spiral that was my life. It was so bad, I almost called up Coach Wilson and told her I was quitting. I couldn't even conceive of playing soccer, not when nothing felt right.

The only thing that felt right, Lincoln, would leave me at the end of the school year.

And now that we're here, I can feel the darkness creeping in on me again.

Finally, on a deep breath, I say, "I'm going to miss him, Scar. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do when he's gone. I've relied on him so much this year that I can't imagine going through another year at school and not seeing him bright and early Monday morning, showering together in the locker room, spending Sundays together lounging, or catching him around campus for a spontaneous coffee date. I don't know how to be here without him. I don't know how to play without him in the stands, screaming like a fool. It's all too painful." Nothing has ever torn me apart like this. *Not my father's absence. Nor my mother's negligence.* Lincoln has provided the much-needed salve for the damage my parents' decisions and actions caused in my heart.

And soon he'll be gone. Forever.

And just like I did to my mom last December, I'll pretend I'm dauntless and unbreakable . . . even though the truth is, I'm cowardly and weak.

Scarlett presses her hand to my leg. "Is he why you're not going pro? Because I still don't get that."

I shake my head. "No, he's not the entire reason. I mean, he's not a reason, because it's a combo of everything."

"Did your mom say something to you over winter break about it?" I look away and Scarlett nudges my leg. "I freaking knew it. What did she say?"

"Doesn't matter. I know she didn't mean it to crush my dreams, but to gain perspective."

"Perspective? What's that bullshit? Listen, your mom is a nice lady and all, but she wouldn't know what a goal was if it slapped her big old boob around. She's never understood you, and I'm not sure she ever will. So

yeah, she might say things in a nice tone, and it might seem like she cares about your future, but she doesn't see your future the way we do. Soccer is life. Soccer is everything and so much more. You and I live and breathe the sport. So why are you going to give it up because of someone else?"

"I don't know." I drape my arm over my eyes. "I don't know anything anymore. I feel lost."

She quiets, and although that's rare for Scarlett, this is one of the things I've valued most in our friendship. Even in silence, I know she's present. I don't even want to think about the end of next year when we possibly go our separate ways. *More denial.*

"When does he leave?"

And there it is. The question I hate. "Five days," I say, nearly choking on my own words.

"What are you going to do during those five days?"

"Avoid breaking down when he's around."

"Or, you can tell him you love him," she says with such confidence that it makes me feel even sicker.

"I don't love him."

"Uh, I beg to differ," Scarlett says with a hint of cockiness.

"I don't even know what love is, Scarlett. I thought I did. I thought I had a general idea, but then my parents blew up that concept this past year. It's a clusterfuck and to be honest, even if I told Lincoln I want to keep in touch, or try to make this fuck buddies thing last, I honestly don't think I'm mentally there. I would be more of a burden than anything."

"You wouldn't be a burden to him and you know that. He'd never consider you a burden."

"And that right there is the problem. He would be blind to it and the last thing he needs is for me to drag him down." I shake my head. "We said it was friends with benefits, and that's how we're going to keep it. We'll stay in touch, but that's as far as it goes. Nothing more. He'll move on. I know he will."

"But what does that mean for you?"

"It means I'll have a lot of lonely nights to think about what the hell I want to do with my life."

"You'll have me." Scarlett pats my leg. "I'm not going anywhere. I can play Mario Kart with you and share calzones."

I chuckle. "Yeah, and how are you when it comes to oral?"

She winces. “Vaginas aren’t my thing. But, I’ll get you a play toy, how does that sound? I can even make it the size and girth of Lincoln.”

“Wow, then all my worries would be gone.”

“See?” Scarlett chuckles. “Told you I’d be here for you.”



DEEP BREATHS.

You’ve got this.

Smiles and fun. That’s all this is going to be. Smiles and fun.

Lincoln comes bounding up the stairs and throws the door open to his packed-up room. He’s here for two more nights. His moms are picking up his car and belongings, and he’ll be headed to Massachusetts where he’s going to be thrown right into the minor league season. I can tell he’s excited. He’s been bouncing off the walls ever since he got the call. We spent a few more days working on his strength and conditioning. I even watched him practice with one of the catchers he knows that lives locally, and all I kept thinking about was how I was going to miss everything about him. Watching his strong form perform physically daunting workouts. How I’m going to miss his heartwarming smile, and the way he winks at me when he’s teasing.

I’m going to miss his voice, how it gets sultry and deep when he’s turned on and means naughty business.

I’m going to miss his cuddles, the way he stays wrapped against my back, solid, so I never feel alone.

I’m going to miss his heart, how he can read me so well, *and* how he doesn’t let me get away with shutting down on him.

I’m going to miss his friendship, the freedom to rely on him for pretty much anything at any time of the day.

I’m going to miss my rock.

“Calzones, babe,” he says, holding up a box of our signature calzones—that we split in half—two drinks, and a cannoli, a post-season treat we’ve partaken in lately.

“I should have known,” I say, not feeling very hungry.

He sets the box on the bed and asks, “Should we watch a movie while we eat or do you want to talk deep and dark secrets?”

God, no talking. Talking will make me lose it.

“I’m too scared to dive deep and dark into your unknown. Might get scary. Let’s stick to a movie.”

A flash of disappointment crosses his face before he says, “Sure thing. How about we watch an animated movie?”

Neutral—probably won’t make me cry—so it’s definitely a good idea.

“Sounds good to me.”

He flips on Disney Plus, because his moms—although they work on porn websites—love themselves a good Pixar movie, at least that’s what they told me.

“Oh, Let’s watch *Coco*. Mama said it was really good.”

“Okay, yeah. Haven’t seen that one yet.”

“Perfect.” He turns on the movie and then sits back against the headboard with me. He hands me my plate and then leans over and presses a kiss to my lips. “Glad you’re here, babe.”

“Me too,” I say as a lump forms in my throat. With a shaky hand, I cut into my calzone and try to act as normal as possible, but as the movie plays, my emotions get the best of me and I start crying.

When I see Lincoln wipe at his eyes, he says, “I forgot they said it was sad. Damn you, Disney. Why do they always have to pull at our heartstrings? Give us movies like *The Emperor’s New Groove*. Funny, clever, no heartbreak. It’s like they’re trying to break all adults around the world.”

Our plates were set aside long ago, and that’s when Lincoln pulled me up against his chest. When he hears me sniffle, he asks, “It’s the grandma that gets you, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, thankful for the horrendous “children’s” movie that was formed to rip you apart in the movie theater so you can embarrass yourself in front of strangers.

He doesn’t say anything, just keeps his arm around me and kisses the side of my cheek. More tears spill over and I try to contain my pain, not wanting to turn into full-on sobs because yes, the movie hits you in the feels, but not *sobbing* feels.

By the time the movie is over, I’ve pulled it together enough to not seem like I’m completely losing it. Just in time for Lincoln to peel off my clothes slowly, to lay me on his bed, and touch every part of my body with his tongue. It’s languid, intimate, and he’s slowly arousing me to a point

where all I can think about is the pleasure pumping through me rather than the misery clogging my throat.

But once we're both tucked in bed, naked, holding each other, Lincoln fast asleep, I allow myself to feel again, to suffer the heartbreak bubbling up inside. Because after tonight, I only have one more night with him, and one more night is definitely not enough.

Because only forever would be.

And I know love . . . forever . . . doesn't exist.



INDIE: *Scar, I can't do this. I can't go there.*

Scarlett: *Where are you?"*

Indie: *A street away from his house.*

Scarlett: *Indie, I know it's going to be painful, but you have to go. You don't have a choice.*

Indie: *I can't say goodbye. I just . . . can't.*

Scarlett: *Then don't let it be a goodbye. Let it be a see you later.*

Indie: *I think we both know it's not going to be a see you later. This is it.*

Scarlett: *Well if you're not going to allow yourself to continue whatever this is with Lincoln, then you at least owe it to him to say goodbye. After everything you two have been through. If you don't say bye, I don't think he'll ever forgive you.*

Indie: *Maybe that's for the best. Leaving angry is better than leaving sad.*

Scarlett: *Where the hell did you hear that from? That's not true. Indie, listen to me, you have to say goodbye. He's counting on it.*

Scarlett: *Indie . . .*

Scarlett: *Indie, I swear to God, do not run on him. Not today, not now.*

Scarlett: *Indie!*

Chapter Twenty

LINCOLN

***Lincoln:** Hey babe, just wondering where you are. I need to head out soon.*

I stare at my phone, my stomach twisting in knots, wondering where the hell Indie is. She's ten minutes late. My moms have already gone, after saying a tear-filled goodbye. I gave them each a hug, promised to call at least once a week, and then thanked them for everything they've done for me. It was hard to say goodbye to them, especially since they've been a little over two hours away whenever I've needed them, but I know this is the next step in my life.

Now saying goodbye to Indie? This is what I've been dreading, what I've been trying to prepare myself for all week. And even though I've mentally prepped, the fact that she's late and not responding has me thinking she's going to skip out on the goodbye, which would be fucking shitty.

Last night, when I was deep inside her, pulsing in and out, I swear I heard her gasp in sorrow, and when I looked into her eyes, in the moonlight, I think I saw a tear. Before I could decipher it, she turned her head away and pulled on my backside to move quicker.

I wanted to ask her about it but by the time I came back from the bathroom, she was curled into the pillow, eyes closed. And when I woke up

this morning, there was a note on the nightstand from her claiming she had some things to do and she'd catch me later.

Catch me later, as if we're not going to say goodbye to each other today.

As if my entire thought process is being thrown into a mixer and being scrambled.

Besides despite the *maybe* tear I saw last night, she seems unaffected, and that's more concerning than anything, because all I can wonder is . . . will she miss me?

Growing impatient, I open my contacts and call Scarlett. She answers on the second ring.

"Hey Lincoln." That doesn't sound like a very good greeting.

"Is she coming?"

"Linc, man . . ." My heart falls, and I sit down on the front steps of my house.

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

After everything we've been through. All the ups and downs. She's not going to fucking show up?

She's not going to say bye to me?

I push my hand through my hair, my anger spiking, just as I see a bright red Mazda come around the corner.

Christ.

"Never mind. She just pulled up," I say, keeping my eyes on her the entire time.

"Thank God," Scarlett mutters, and I hang up, not bothering to dive into her response. I stay seated on the steps and watch as Indie puts the car in park and then sits there for a few moments, staring out the windshield.

Eventually, her car door opens and she steps out. I watch her wipe at her eyes and when she turns to face me, I see it—the same agony I'm feeling.

The air seems to still as time passes by us—our eyes connected, our collective sorrow coming together . . . finally.

I stand, meet her by the passenger side, and pull her into a hug. A sob escapes her as she clutches my shirt. I bury my head in her hair, trying to commit the subtle scent to memory.

Her body shudders against mine, as her tears seep through my shirt. I suck in a deep breath. Tears of my own form.

Hartley was right. Or more to the point, I was wrong. *Very wrong.*

This isn't just *painful*, like he suggested all those months ago. I had no idea that hugging Indie this last time would feel as though I'm ripping my heart out of my chest. I said goodbye to my parents, knowing it was simply a natural part of life. But this? It doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel natural at all.

"Shh," I say on a shaky breath.

"I . . . don't know how to say bye to you, Lincoln. I don't know how to let you go." She pulls away and looks up at me. "I don't know if I can."

"Then don't," I say out of desperation. "Don't say it. We can work this out, Indie. We can figure it out."

She shakes her head. "I think we both know that's a lie, Lincoln."

And even though I don't want to believe it, I'm pretty sure she's right.

I haven't known of many guys who've been able to work things out with their girls after college. When I was a freshman, I heard about the brutal breakups that Knox Gentry and Carson Stone went through. Do I want to do that with Indie? Go through something so devastating that there's no possible chance we could make things right?

Or do I want to savor this moment, end things on a good note, where the door might always be open?

Looking down at her, I realize—*I think*—that's the only option. Even though I don't want to admit it, I don't think Indie is ready for anything long-distance. I could see it falling apart quickly, and that's not a risk I'm willing to take, not where she's concerned. Which means I have to say goodbye with a hope in the back of my head, that our paths will connect again.

"Fuck," I breathe out heavily, as her hands climb up my chest and then grip my cheeks.

When I meet her gaze, my heart shatters right there in the gravel of the driveway.

"You're going to do great things, Mayhem," I say, feeling the finality of this moment. "You're bound to do amazing things. I can feel it on my bones." Her lip trembles. "And I know, one day, despite what you say, I'm going to turn on SportsCenter, and you're going to be on the screen, looking hot as shit in a white shirt and white shorts, playing for Team USA. I can feel it, babe."

More tears spill down her cheeks but she doesn't say anything. I'm not sure if it's because she can't, or if because she won't. But I need to hear her

voice, I need to know she's going to be okay.

"Say something, Indie."

She opens her mouth, and her voice catches in her throat. Looking away, she wipes at her tear-stained cheeks and then takes a deep breath. Meeting my eyes again, she says, "Thank you for everything, Lincoln. You made this last year at school feel easy. You made it fun. You showed me what true friendship is, and I'll never forget it."

"Indie," I say, choking back my emotions, which hit me harder after her last sentence. "This isn't goodbye forever."

She softly smiles and then takes a step back.

"Indie." I grab her hand. "This isn't a forever goodbye."

"Then what is it, Lincoln? A promise to see each other later? When? You and I both know this is not a *catch you later*. This is where our road splits—where you go one way and I go the other."

"Are you saying you're never going to call me? Answer my texts? Come to one of my games when I make the big leagues? Are you saying you're never going to see me again? Because that's bullshit." Anger bubbles out of me before I can stop it. "And you were ten minutes late. Is that because you weren't going to show up at all?"

She shakes her head. "Don't do this, Lincoln. Don't fight with me, not right now."

"Well fuck, Indie." I pull on my hair. "What the hell do you expect me to do? You're my goddamn best friend and you're just going to cut all ties as if I don't matter?"

"But you do matter." She pokes me in the chest. "You matter too much. I don't know how to do this, to give you up without cutting all ties with you."

"You don't give me up. That's what you're not getting. You don't give up on us. You make promises to meet up in the future. You make promises to call me. To text me back. You don't just cut me off. That's not what friends do."

She bites her bottom lip. "I'm not sure I'd be strong enough to say goodbye to you again, Lincoln. To see you, talk to you, know that you're so far away, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Well, this isn't just about you, Indie," I yell. "This isn't just about your feelings. Ever consider that I might need *you*? That I'll need to hear your voice, to watch movies with you through FaceTime, to text you when I need

a second to take a breath? I'm about to embark on one of the hardest journeys of my life, and I'll never make it if you cut me off. If you take away my best friend." I choke on a sob and bury my hand in my hair. "Please don't fucking do that to me . . . please."

Her chest rises and falls, her eyes search mine, and even though they're full of vulnerability, they're also laced with understanding.

Taking a step forward, she smooths her hands up my chest and says, "I'm sorry." Waves of nausea hit me. *This is it.* What I say doesn't matter. *She's still going to cut me off.*

But then, she stands on her toes and places a soft kiss to my lips. "I'm so sorry, Lincoln. I was thinking about myself, not you." Her hand grips the back of my neck and she connects our foreheads. "I won't let you go."

A harsh exhale comes out of me. "Promise me, Indie. Promise me you won't let me go."

Her teary eyes look into mine. "I promise you, Lincoln. As long as you want me as a friend, I'm yours."



"THANKS FOR LETTING ME STAY HERE," I say, setting my bags down in a small living room.

"Had the extra room," my new roommate says, as he lounges on the tiniest couch I've ever seen with a sketchbook on his lap, his hand scribbling across the paper.

"Is this place close to the field?"

"Pretty close, yeah." Maddox pauses his drawing and looks up at me. "Coach thinks we're going to be friends because we're both pitchers. He's a dumbass. We're both vying for a spot in the big leagues and only a few pitching spots open up on a team, if any."

"You're telling me this will be a very uncomfortable living situation and that I should watch my back and not attempt to talk to you, because you've been here longer and have better things to do than play Mario Kart with your competition?"

He sits up on the couch, sets his book down, and clasps his hands together. The guy screams Rebel with his tattooed sleeves, intense gaze, and messy hair that dips over his forehead. When I heard I could stay with

Maddox Paige, I was relieved I'd have a roommate. Now I'm second-guessing that.

"You're telling me you have a Nintendo Wii in your bags? Not an Xbox or PlayStation?"

I shrug. "Guilty. I have two moms and they were obsessed with Mario, which transferred over to me."

He stands and walks over to me, inches away from my face, his intimidating persona making me wilt. He looks me up and down and then in a low voice, he says, "Set it up. You're going down, Castle." With a smirk, he continues, "Want some Cheetos?"

I take a deep breath. *Jesus Christ.*

When I look over at him, he's smiling, leaning against the counter. "Dude, relax, I was only kidding. It's cool you're here. I'll show you the ropes. Now, Cheetos?"

I chuckle. "Uh, yeah. Cheetos."

"Cool."

Relieved and still slightly frightened, I start setting up the Wii. I hand Maddox a remote with a wheel and then sit next to him. Our shoulders bump from the lack of size of the couch and Maddox says, "No accidentally bumping someone's shoulder while driving. I play fair."

"Surprising, given the way you greeted me."

"Did you want a hug and kiss?"

"Wouldn't have hurt. That's how my moms greet me. You would have made it feel like home."

"Two moms, huh? Would that make you adopted?"

"Yup," I say as the Wii warms up.

"Badass, man. Your moms cool?"

"Well." I push my hand through my hair. "They've become famous for their website design for two porn sites and just started on their third. Revolutionizing the industry."

"No shit." Maddox laughs. "Does that make it hard to look at porn, knowing your moms had a hand—no pun intended—in creating it?"

"Up until yesterday, I didn't have to worry about seeking porn . . ."

"Ah, you leave a girl behind?"

"Something like that," I say, working my way through the menu of Mario Kart. When Maddox picks Princess Peach as his driver, I look at him, questions written all over my face.

“What? I like to pretend her tits jiggle when driving.”

I let out a roar of a laugh and nod. “Okay, fair.” I don’t mention that Peach is who Indie drives. It sends a jolt of sadness through me.

“So, were you dating?”

And here I thought this guy wasn’t much of a talker. I guess I should never judge a book by its cover.

“Best friends . . . with benefits.”

“I see.” I feel his eyes on me, but I don’t turn to look at him. I select the Mushroom Cup and lean back on the couch, my attention entirely on the TV.

Later that night, when Maddox and I separate to our rooms, I lie down on my twin-sized bed and pick up my phone. I debate not calling her—giving her time after I left—but before I know it, the phone’s pressed to my ear.

She answers on the third ring and I relax into my bed.

“Hey you,” she says, her voice sleepy but also aware.

“Hey Mayhem,” I sigh into the phone. “Met my roommate.”

“Yeah? I did some Internet stalking on Maddox Paige. Seems funny that the real-life Ken doll is rooming with a true Rebel. You two could not look any more different.”

I chuckle. “I thought the same thing when I walked into the apartment. And frankly, he was intimidating at first, but he’s actually a really nice guy. But I have a confession to make.”

“Oh? So early on? You just got there.” Her voice is laced with humor and it puts me at ease.

“I move fast.”

“Apparently. Lay it on me, Castle.”

I make a dramatic sigh and then quickly say, “We played Mario Kart together and he was Princess Peach, and every time Peach squeaked, my cock tightened thinking of you.” I wince, waiting . . .

And then Indie bursts into laughter. The sound is so perfect and just what I needed. “Oh my God, what is wrong with you?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you.” I chuckle.

“So you had a halfie while playing Mario Kart with your new roommate?”

“I mean . . . it was half a halfie.”

“Don’t try to make it sound better, you were turned on. Did you take care of it in the shower, your half a halfie?” Her teasing makes me smile.

“Why do I tell you things?”

“Because you can’t seem to help it.” I hear her shift around. “If you’re looking for forgiveness, I’m afraid I can’t give that to you. Sorry.”

“Are you saying . . . I cheated on you?”

She chuckles. “Yup, and that hurts, Lincoln. You couldn’t even keep the Wii remote off for one day before your relationship ran cold.”

“The dude made me nervous. I panicked and gave in to his intense stare.”

“You’re weak, Castle. That is *not* the boy I raised with the suckling of my breasts and the milking of my vagina.”

“Oh my God.” I laugh too loud, hopefully not disturbing Maddox. “Now look who’s the demented one.”

“Are you telling me that my vagina and breasts didn’t assist in helping you reach ninety-five on the gun?”

“I mean . . .” I scratch the side of my face. “Kind of believed it was all those squats, but if you want to say it was your tits and pussy, sure.”

“It was.” I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Then you have some magical tits and pussy, babe.”

“Don’t I know it. Maybe I should put them on Craigslist as a service.”

I know she’s joking, but a bolt of jealousy still hits me hard.

“Try it. See what happens,” I answer.

“Too lazy to take naked pictures of myself.”

I perk up. “I can do it. FaceTime me, and I’ll take some screenshots.”

“In your dreams, Castle.” She laughs. “Nice try.”

“Guess I’ll just have to live with my memories.”

“So you didn’t take any secret naked pictures of me while I was sleeping? I have at least twelve of you; five of them are close-ups of your penis.”

“Do you pretend to stick your phone in your mouth, acting as if you’re sucking me off?”

“And it just got weird.”

“And your comment about creepy naked pics while I’m sleeping didn’t take it too far?” I laugh.

“Nope.”

I chuckle. “Unbelievable, Mayhem.”

“Even from far away, I can still rock your world.”
Pretty sure she’s going to rock my world for a very long time.



INDIE: *How did you do?*

Lincoln: *You already know if you’re texting me rather than calling.*

Indie: **Winces* I saw the scores online. I’m sorry, Linc.*

Lincoln: *First game as a professional baseball player, and I’m taken out in the fourth inning after allowing five earned runs. Not how I envisioned things.*

Indie: *I know you expected more, but you’re still adjusting.*

Lincoln: *Everything felt wrong. I wasn’t comfortable on the mound. I kept forgetting the signs. I was lobbing shit in there. I was a goddamn mess, and I’m pretty sure the organization is regretting putting so much faith in me.*

Indie: *Or . . . they realize it was your first game and there’s a learning curve. You’re just getting settled. I know you, Lincoln. From now until your next game, you’re going to make sure you find your equilibrium.*

Lincoln: *You’re right.*

Indie: *Now is not the time to sulk. Now is the time to address what went wrong and make those adjustments. People who sulk are the people who continue to fail, and you didn’t work this hard to fail.*

Lincoln: *Damn, Mayhem. You’re pumping me up.*

Indie: *Good, now get to work.*



I’VE JUST PLACED my precooked meal in the microwave to heat up as my phone rings, and Indie’s face comes through on FaceTime.

God, she’s beautiful.

“There he is, ladies and gentleman, Mr. Seven Inning Shutout.” She cups her hands around her mouth and speaks loudly.

Laughing, I say, “Hey babe.”

“Hey to you. How pumped are you right now? Is your dick hard?”

“Whoa, she gets right to the point,” Maddox says, coming up behind me.

“Is that the intimidating roommate?” Indie asks, getting closer to the phone.

Maddox puts himself in view and says, “He said I’m intimidating? Good to know.”

“Can you not blow me up?” I ask Indie, who’s laughing at my expense.

She waves and says, “Hey Maddox, I’m Indie.”

Maddox looks at me and shakes his head. “She’s too hot for you, man.” Then he turns back to the phone and says, “What’s up, Indie? This guy talks about you all the time.”

“He better.” She moves a little closer and says, “I have a bone to pick with you, Paige. Are you driving my girl, Peach?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?”

“Uh, she’s mine.”

He shrugs. “You’re not here to claim her, therefore, she’s mine.”

Maddox winks and then takes off while Indie shouts to him, “Stay away. Peach is my bitch.” But Maddox’s door shuts behind him, closing off the conversation. “He went to his room, didn’t he?”

“Afraid so.” The microwave beeps and I pull out my food.

“Are you having a microwave meal after the amazing game you pitched?”

I move my fork around the chicken and almond pasta dish that’s packed with protein. “Yeah. We don’t make a ton of money, so going out to eat isn’t an option like it was at Brentwood. To be honest, it’s fucking weird going from Brentwood athletics with state-of-the art facilities to Double-A where they use soup cans as hand weights.”

“Do they really?” Indie asks, shocked.

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Nah, but pretty close to it.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re slumming it while I’m in athletic glory?”

“Yup.” I blow on my pasta. “It was a quick fall from stardom.”

“A peon once again,” she jokes. “Hopefully it’s a quick rise.”

“Hopefully.”

Chapter Twenty-One

LINCOLN

AUGUST

"I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN you were going to call today," Indie says, answering the phone.

"Mayhem!" I yell. "Let's go, babe! Kill it today."

She laughs. "I think you just broke my eardrum."

"Wait until you see the video I recorded for you last night. Maddox was less than pleased to help me."

"Aw, he wouldn't join you?"

"I think it was a *hell no* from him." She chuckles and I say, "Last first game at Brentwood. How do you feel?"

"Excited. Ready. Worked my ass off all summer, as I didn't have the distraction of my mom setting me up, nor did I have a Ken doll trying to distract me either."

"Hey, I wouldn't have distracted you. I would have kicked balls at you. Helped."

"I would have loved to have seen that. You might be a powerhouse on the mound, but I don't think you have a foot to stand on when it comes to

the soccer field.”

“You could not be more right about that.”

“How’s Kansas?”

“Pretty good. The accommodations are better, that’s for damn sure. I’m not sharing a tiny couch with Maddox, but have a three-seater and it’s leather. Old leather, but leather.”

“Look at you moving up in the world. And you graduated from soup cans?”

“Barely.”

“At least that’s something. Making it to Triple-A in the same year you were drafted is pretty awesome, Lincoln.”

“Yeah, glad Maddox came along with me. He’s been working really hard, keeps up with my workouts, says I’m pushing him. When I first met him, he seemed like he was in a funk, but now we’re hitting the gym together every day and sharing spin techniques. He feels like a brother more than a teammate.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.”

We’re silent for a second, and it feels awkward. *I hate that.* We’ve both been so busy that I think the last time we talked on the phone was two weeks ago. It pains me to think that maybe she’s pulling away. I hope that’s not the case. We’ve still been texting, and that’s been the usual crazy sparring. But I need to hear her voice.

“Well, I just wanted to wish you good luck today. Tear them apart, Mayhem.”

“Planned on it. And hey, thanks for calling, Castle. It means a lot to me.”

“Anything for you, babe. Text me after. I want to know how it goes.”

“I will. Bye, Lincoln.”

“Bye, Indie.”



OCTOBER

"I LEAVE for a few months and you guys all turn flabby on me?" I say, walking up to my football boys.

They spin around and yell, picking me up and practically tossing me around.

"Dude, you made it," Rusty shouts. "Hell, I might cry. Does Indie know?"

I shake my head. "Didn't tell her."

"Oh fuck, this is going to be the best surprise ever." Rusty gives me another hug, and I push him away.

"You're going to ruin our body paint."

"Shit, sorry. I'm just so excited."

Deacon and Hutton both give me a hug too while Hartley pats me on the back. He's the only one who knew I was coming, and the one who helped paint me up for Indie's last game of the season. Unfortunately, they haven't had the best season. The team has been riddled with injuries, so they weren't able to pull it together in time to make it to the playoffs, so this is Indie's last game in green and black.

Hopefully not her last game ever. Still waiting to hear about that.

Together, we walk into the stands, our bodies painted, Indie and Scarlett's numbers written on our faces. We don't bother taking a seat, but instead, hold up signs, declaring our undying love for the women's soccer team, chanting as the girls come out of the tunnel.

I spot her immediately.

Her long brown ponytail swaying back and forth, the snug fit of her jersey around her top half, her sexy-as-hell legs. Fuck, I've missed her so damn much.

"Let's go, Mayhem," I shout, cupping my hands around my mouth. Her head snaps up to the crowd. She stops, and her hand lifts to her chest while we stare at one another. "Tear them apart, babe," I yell. Her chest rises and falls faster, and the look of shock and joy on her face will last me a long time. This is a moment I've been thinking about for a while, but nothing prepared me for seeing her again. God. So gorgeous.



WE CRASH THROUGH HER DOOR, lips desperate, hands clawing at our clothes. While Indie was taking a shower, the boys got me into the locker room, and I took the quickest shower of my life, and then met Indie by her car. She ran up to me, leapt into my arms, and it's been pretty hard to take our lips off each other since.

"I can't get close enough to you," she says, lifting my shirt up and over my head. I do the same to hers and remove her bra as well. I lift her up to my waist where she clings to me, as I use the door to help keep her in place. "You're stronger," she says as I move my mouth down her neck. "Bigger." She gasps when I take her breast into my mouth. "Broader."

I grind my cock against her, and she digs her fingers into my back as she moans against me.

"I want to see you, all of you," she says. I pull away and look her in the eyes, pressing a desperate kiss against her lips as I move her back to the bed and lay her down. I grab the waist of her leggings and peel them off her body followed by her thong, leaving her in nothing. I've been starved of this sexy sight for nearly five months. *I won't last long.*

"Touch yourself," I command. "Touch yourself, and I'll take the rest of my clothes off."

Her hand falls between her legs, which she props up on the mattress. Her mouth parts as her fingers play with her clit.

I stiffen to full mast in my jeans as I watch her work herself expertly.

"How often do you do that?" I ask, reaching to my jeans and unbuckling them.

"Enough," she says on a gasp.

"Do you think of me?"

She bites her bottom lip and nods. "I do."

Damn.

I push my pants and briefs down and step out of them, and her eyes fall to my cock. Her fingers speed up and I take my cock in hand, pumping up and down, feeling my arousal already start to spike. The last time I had sex was with her, the night before I left, and seeing her here, right now, beautiful and naked for me, has my dick growing exponentially.

"You're so fucking hot, Indie."

"You're massive," she says. Her eyes seem unable to fall from my torso and cock. "God, Linc, I need you."

Still gripping my cock, I grab condoms out of my jeans pocket, ripping one open and toss the others on the nightstand while I sheath myself. Ready, I climb on top of the bed, where I position myself at her entrance.

Her eyes well with tears and her hands loop around my neck. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, babe,” I say, pushing inside her. “I missed this. Us.”

“God, you feel amazing, don’t stop,” she says, gasping when I push in harder. “Please tell me you’re here for a while. Please tell me I don’t have to say goodbye right away.”

“Here until spring training, babe.”

“Really?” she asks on a moan, her head falling back.

My jaw clenches as I feel the early signs of her orgasm closing around my cock. “Yes. Working with the guys during the off-season. I’m all yours, babe.”

“Oh God, Lincoln,” she cries out, her grip tightening. “I’m going to come.”

“Me . . . too.” Everything around me turns to black, and all I do is feel.

Feel her.

Feel us.



NEW YEAR'S EVE

“WOULD YOU LIKE ANY MORE WIENERS?” Mom asks Indie, holding out a platter of pigs in a blanket to her.

Indie holds up her hand with a smile. “Good on the wieners. Thank you though. I might have another one of these penis cookies.” Indie picks up a colorful cookie that Mom spent a lot of time decorating this morning.

“Aren’t they delicious?”

“Really good.” Indie takes a bite and then says, “I wish our New Year’s Eve was a celebration of penises growing up.”

“Not everyone can be like my moms,” I say on a sigh.

Yup, you heard that right: a celebration of penises. Growing up, every New Year’s Eve has been dedicated to the male phallus. My moms felt bad

that it was a two-to-one ratio when it came to vaginas and penises in the house, so to make me feel included—I really didn't need this—they dedicated New Year's Eve to the penis and said even though they didn't prefer them, they still think they're a great addition to society that we should celebrate. Hence the ten-year-old penis garlands strung around the house and the phallic-shaped food my moms prepared for tonight.

"So have you made a decision about what you're doing after college?" Mama asks, sucking on a cock-pop. Truly, nothing fazes me anymore.

Indie looks at me and smiles. I've spent the past few months with the boys at Brentwood. Deacon's room has been free, since he's been staying with his girl, so that's worked out perfectly. I didn't want to fall into a deep hole with Indie, knowing I was leaving again and so was she, and staying at her place would have done that. I've driven back and forth to my moms' home, spending time with them as well, but at least once a week, I've spent a few hours between Indie's legs, listening to the sweet sounds of her pleasure. It's been perfect.

Just what both of us needed. A refresher, especially after it felt like she was pulling away. But we haven't talked about anything of substance. I haven't mentioned her parents or what she's doing after college, and she hasn't asked me how I'm doing with my pursuit of the majors. It's as if we've both put up an emotional wall to avoid another tearful goodbye and have just been working out and fucking.

That's it.

I don't even stay the night at her place.

It's too much. And we both realize that, because even though it would be easy to fall back into old habits, our situation is still the same: we're going down different paths.

"I actually, uh, signed with the Texas Comets the other day," she answers.

"What?" I ask, pulling away to look her in the eyes. "As in, you're going pro?" She nods. "Indie . . . why the fuck didn't you tell me? That's amazing."

She shrugs. "It's not a big moment like you had. It's just—"

"Don't ever compare your accomplishments to someone else's. What you achieve truly matters and this is huge, Indie. Massive."

"Don't make a big deal out of it," she says, looking down at her cookie.

“Oh, fuck that. Mom, let’s open the champagne early. We have things to celebrate.”

“Lincoln . . .”

I grip her chin and force her to look at me. “Indie, this is a huge accomplishment. Let’s celebrate.”

Sighing, she leans back and then smiles at me. “Fine, you can celebrate.”

I clap my hands and then pull her into a hug. With my lips against her ear, I say, “And tomorrow, when we’re back at Brentwood, I’m going to eat that sweet pussy of yours as a congratulations, too.”

She pokes my side when I pull away, but I see the desire in her eyes. That’s a future promise.



FEBRUARY

“OH MY GOD, oh . . . my . . . God. Lincoln!” Indie stiffens and then screams my name while her hands fall into my hair. Her hips ride against my tongue and she spasms beneath me.

Her hand falls over her eyes, spent, and I spend the next couple seconds pressing my tongue against her clit, extracting every ounce of pleasure until she’s completely done.

Lifting up, I smile at her, loving how flushed and exhausted her body is. I leave for spring training tomorrow, and we decided to have a fuck fest before I left. She’s on orgasm number five for the night.

“I don’t think I can go any longer,” she breathes out. “That last one nearly killed me.”

“You’re still breathing. Not dead yet, babe.” I move up her body and press a kiss to her jaw and then lie next to her, naked, my dick half hard, still recuperating from taking her about five minutes ago from behind.

“This was a great idea,” she says, looking over at me. She rolls to her side and places her hand on my chest. “We should have done this the last time you had to leave. Just kept fucking.”

“We fucked last time,” I say.

“Not like this. Last time felt sad. This feels more like a celebration,” she says, sounding completely normal.

Even though I feel sick to my stomach, knowing I have to say goodbye again.

Yeah, I wish she'd have opened up more with me, but I also get it. I've only seen Indie truly cry twice: when she told me about her parents' divorce and when she said goodbye to me. She's not one to be emotional and she keeps her feelings at bay, so knowing I was in and out of Brentwood, she kept me at a distance. I wasn't super happy about it, but I can't be mad because she's simply making sure she doesn't get too attached.

Hell, I should have done the same thing. But here I am, the night before I leave again, and I'm trying to soak up as much of her as I can. I don't feel unaffected by this time together. The connection we had before is even stronger, as if the time apart made it clearer that we're a good fit. *Not that Indie seems to think so.*

“So, your first spring training. Are you nervous?”

“Nah, I'm cool. It'll be pretty fucking awesome to play with the big-league guys. I don't think I have a shot at being called up yet, but the experience will be great. Maddox though, hell. He might be ready.”

“He fits the description of a Rebel, that's for sure.”

“Are you crushing on him, Indie?”

“And if I was?” she says with a sly smile.

“Uh, we'd have a big issue,” I say, climbing on top of her and moving my lips over hers. She sighs into my kiss and strokes my hair.

“Can I ask you something?”

“I don't know. Is it going to piss me off?”

“Maybe,” she says. “But I really want to know.”

“Okay. Hit me.”

Her fingers play with the back of my neck when she asks, “Did you have sex with anyone while we were apart?”

“No,” I answer quickly. “Didn't even think about it honestly. Why . . . did you?”

She shakes her head. “No, didn't think about it either.” Fuck, that's a relief.

I go to kiss her but she stops me. “But I don't want that to be the expectation moving forward, Lincoln.”

“Uh . . . what?” I ask as my dick presses against the warmth between her legs.

“I mean, if you want to have sex with someone, feel free. I’m not going to be mad about it. We’re going in different directions, and I don’t want you to think you need to be loyal to me.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying not to get pissed because honestly, there’s no reason to be pissed. We never made a promise to each other after we said goodbye. We never said we’d be exclusive after we parted. But still, as she says that, after everything we did tonight, it rubs me the wrong way.

I push off the bed and sit up, feeling anger boiling in the pit of my stomach.

“Lincoln, don’t be mad.”

“I’m not. I mean, Jesus, Indie, you surprised me.”

“I know, I’m sorry, but I didn’t want you holding out. These last few months have been amazing, but we’re not going to have the same access during the coming year. We’re going to be in different states, starting new lives. Who knows when we’ll see each other again? I don’t want you thinking you owe me anything, because you don’t.”

“We’re going to see each other, Indie.”

She looks away and then says, “I mean, don’t you think maybe we should just . . . cut things off?”

“What?” I push my hand through my hair, trying to comprehend this conversation. “We talked about this, Indie. You’re my best friend. I still need you to talk to me.”

“I know. But I don’t want there to be expectations. You know? You don’t owe it to me to be celibate. Have fun, Lincoln.”

“I’m not celibate on purpose,” I say. “I just didn’t want to fuck anyone just to fuck.”

“Okay,” she says, looking down.

“Christ, Indie, you’re making this too complicated.”

“No, I’m not,” she shoots back. “I’m trying to uncomplicate things. I’m trying to make sure you know that if you fuck someone else, that’s cool.”

“Great. Thanks for letting me know, Indie.” I push off the bed and grab my pants from the floor.

“Lincoln, don’t be mad.”

“How can I not be mad? You’re ruining our last fucking night together.”

“I’m not trying to, Lincoln. I’m trying to be honest here. I really don’t know when we’ll see each other again. We said from the beginning, this was friends with benefits because we’re going opposite directions. I don’t see how you can be mad about me saying you can fuck whoever you want.” *Clearly, she’s not invested in us like I am. Clearly, she wants other guys.* Fuck.

“Timing, Indie. Maybe wait until my dick is dry from your pussy before you start talking about fucking other guys.”

“Lincoln. I don’t want to fuck other guys, I’m just . . . saying it’s okay to do what you want to do.”

“Do you really think I’m that desperate to get my dick wet?”

I put my pants on, quickly shrug my shirt over my head, then pick up my shoes. Indie wraps herself in a blanket and says, “Don’t do this. Don’t leave like this, please.”

I finish tying my shoes and grab my phone off her desk. *Don’t leave like this.* What? Pissed off? Like I cannot be here another minute while I still have her taste and scent on my lips? *And she wants to free me up to fuck other girls.* Just great.

“I’ve got to go. Early flight.”

“Lincoln,” she calls out on a sob, and when I turn to see tears streaming down her face, I block it off and grip her doorknob. “I’ll talk to you later, Indie.”

“Please,” she cries out. “Please don’t leave, Lincoln.”

I trot down her stairs and walk out the front door, the sound of her desperate voice playing on replay in my head, but I’m too angry to pause.

The entire drive back to the boys’ house, I try to dissect why I’m so angry, why I shot off like a rocket from her suggestion.

She wasn’t wrong.

Everything she said was completely accurate, and yet, it stung like a motherfucker and put me in a mental headspace I don’t want to be in. One that is not settling easily.

One that I know I’ll regret later on down the road.

Chapter Twenty-Two

LINCOLN

ONE YEAR AFTER INDIE'S SENIOR YEAR

"THINK THIS IS YOUR YEAR?" one of the rookies on the Triple-A team asks as he swings his arms back and forth.

"Not sure," I say, stretching my right leg with a band.

"I think I have a good chance."

Pfft. Okay, buddy.

The average time a player spends in the minors is three years. I'm starting year three right now, so if anyone has a chance at getting the call, it will be me.

But the way I pitched last year, I'll be lucky to even get looked at. Honestly, at this point, I know my time with the Rebels is going to be short. Guaranteed, by the trade deadline this year, I'll be used as a pawn to make a move. I can feel it in my bones.

I spent my entire off-season working out at home and training with my pitching coach from high school. I went back to the basics, focused on my mental fitness, and made sure to block out all distractions, which meant when the holidays rolled around, I didn't contact Indie to see her.

Even though she sent me a few texts.

I spent the entire last season trying to get my head on straight. After I left her place, I texted her the next morning, apologizing, asking her to forgive me for walking out like that. She met me at the airport, gave me a kiss goodbye, and then we went our own ways. Things haven't been the same since. I maybe talk to her once a month. I checked up on her when her season started, wanting to make sure she had a good first game, but other than that, I follow her more on social media than actually talking to her.

And the whole fuck-someone-else debacle? Yeah, I've taken a few girls home, and it's felt wrong every goddamn time.

It's never truly satisfied me and there was always something missing, so I haven't had sex since September.

I'm fucking blue balls-ing it so hard. I'm tense. And I just want to fucking see her. *Although, I do not want to know if she's fucked other guys.*

It's been a goddamn year, and I haven't seen her. No FaceTime, no visits. Just phone calls and texts.

And it's driven me to a breaking point.

"All right, boys, that's it for the day," our coach says. "Get some sleep and don't get yourself into any trouble."

I finish stretching and then hand off the band to one of the trainers. I take a quick shower, give the guys a few fist bumps, and then head to my hotel room that I thankfully have to myself this year.

With a to-go box on my lap, I pull up my phone and look at her name in my contact list. I debate turning on the TV to avoid falling into a pit of *should I or shouldn't I?*, but when I click on the button for FaceTime, I realize my heart needs something else right now. *Apparently.*

I hold my breath as I stare at myself in the screen, waiting for her to pick up. It rings far too long, and I'm just about to cancel the call when she answers. "Lincoln, hey."

I nearly choke on my words when I see her. Her hair is swept to the side and has a wave to it. Her makeup is done, and from what I can see, she's wearing a low-cut shirt, showing off a good portion of her cleavage—cleavage I've buried my mouth in on multiple occasions.

Jealousy pricks at the back of my neck, and I instantly regret calling her but it's not like I can hang up now.

"Hey, Indie."

There's some cheering in the background but it quickly fades as Indie shuts a door behind her. She turns on a light.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." I grip the back of my neck. "Sorry, I can go if you're busy."

"No, we're just getting ready to go out, waiting on a few girls to meet up at the house."

"Yeah, okay." I look to the side and then back at her. "I, uh, I like your hair."

"Oh, thanks," she replies, biting the corner of her lip and looking so uncomfortable that it's painful.

"Sorry about not meeting up over the holidays. Things were hectic."

"It's fine." She shrugs. "Not a big deal."

"Did you have a good holiday?"

"It was okay. Mom and Joe got married. Taught Priscilla a few soccer tricks, my mom's worst nightmare."

I chuckle. "And your dad?"

"Broke up with Rochelle. But he started seeing someone he knew back in high school. Of course, my mom felt spiteful about it because it's a girl my mom never got along with. She seems to be over it, especially since Joe gave her a vacation to Hawaii for the new year. Joe in a Speedo, not the type of pictures you want from your mom."

"Yeah, I guess not." I rub the side of my cheek. "Hairy?"

"So much hair." She laughs, and I let out a sigh of relief. "Is Mama still working on her porn sites?"

"Nah, she's graduated," I say. "They're now working with a company that makes compost bins."

"Well, that's a change. Porn to compost."

"Mama seems to enjoy it, and she's now fascinated by the worms. I think she just likes long, wiggly things."

Indie tilts her head back and laughs out loud. "Only your moms."

"Yeah, they're something special."

She stares at me for a few seconds, a smile on her face. "I've missed you, Linc."

"I've missed you too, Mayhem."

"Maybe we don't go so long next time, not seeing each other?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, that's on me."

“It’s okay.” I hear someone in the background, and she says, “Be right there.” Turning back to me, she gives me a sad smile. “I have to go. Call me some other time? I want to catch up.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Bye, Lincoln.” She cutely waves.

“Bye, Indie.”



TWO YEARS AFTER INDIE’S SENIOR YEAR

“I’M SO PROUD OF YOU,” Mom says, grabbing me by the cheeks and planting a kiss right on my lips. “My big boy is a star.”

“Settle down.” I chuckle. “It was one game. We have an entire season to go.”

“It wasn’t just one game; it was your major league debut,” Mama says. “And you won. It’s your first win. One of many.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be here without you two,” I say, as I put my arms around both my moms and walk them out to my car in the players’ parking lot.

Just as I predicted last year, I was traded during the All-Star break to Pittsburgh and then was called up after spring training this year and added to the starting rotation. In the five-slot, but hell, better than riding the bench, or being back in the minors. My contract isn’t huge, but it’s enough to be comfortable. I have free agency after this year, which means I could go anywhere if I’m not happy in Pittsburgh. When I felt depressed about being traded from the Rebels, I talked to my moms, and they told me to use it as experience, to work hard, and when my free agency comes up, maybe I’ll have some pull in where I go.

And that’s what I’ve been doing.

After a debut like that, I think I’m on the right track.

“Thanks for flying out here by the way; it means a lot to me.”

“Are you kidding? No compost bin would hold me back from seeing our boy play today,” Mama says. “Did your mom tell you we started a

veggie garden in the backyard? Not just flowers anymore. We're composting and loving it, all because of the website."

"Well, I'm glad you were inspired by this website, and not the porn ones. I can only imagine you two wanting to shoot your own porn flick."

"Who's to say we haven't?" Mom says, wiggling her eyebrows just as my phone rings in my pocket.

I pull it out to silence it but when I see Indie's name come across the screen, I answer, excusing myself for a second.

"Hey Indie."

"Ahhh, is this the star pitcher for the Pittsburgh Steel?"

"Not you too." I chuckle.

"First things first, your moms being interviewed on TV while you pitched has got to be the best thing I've ever seen. Mama standing in the stands, pelvic thrusting when you struck someone out literally made my year."

"Oh Jesus, she didn't," I say, looking over at my moms who are holding hands and talking quietly.

"She did, and I took a boomerang of it. I'll text it. Also, wearing your socks high is a good look on you."

"Yeah, the team requires it. Felt weird, but I think it might be good luck, you know? Superstitions and all."

"Naturally. And thirdly, you killed it, Lincoln. Oh my God, at one point I was crying I was so happy for you."

"You watched the whole game?"

"Of course I did. I'm just sad I wasn't there in person." She sighs. "You did it, Castle. You made it. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Indie, that means a lot." I toe the ground and ask, "Uh, how are you? I saw that you led your team in goals last season. That's pretty badass."

"Have we not talked since then?"

"Yeah." I pull on the back of my neck. "Things keep seeming to get crazy between us."

"As long as you still pick up the phone when I call, that's all that matters."

"Always." I glance over at my moms as they wait. "Hey, my moms are here, waiting on me."

“Sure, yeah. I’ll let you go. Just wanted to congratulate you. I’m really proud of you, Lincoln. All that hard work is paying off.”

“Yours too, Mayhem. Keep hustling, babe.”

“Always. I’ll talk to you later. Bye, Lincoln.”

“Bye.” I hang up and stare at the phone for a few seconds, my mind starting to wander down memory lane. Her face flashes through my mind, her smile, her throaty laugh. Hell, I miss her. It would have been fucking amazing if she was here today. I considered calling her, seeing if she could fly in quickly and fly back out. I would have paid for everything, but I knew that would be asking too much, so I didn’t, especially since I haven’t spoken to her in months.

Different lives.

Separate lives. That’s what we’re living.

I pocket my phone and walk back to my moms, who welcome me with open arms and we head out to a celebratory dinner.



THREE AND A HALF YEARS AFTER INDIE’S SENIOR YEAR

BZZZ. Bzz. Bzz.

My eyes flit open and I look at the clock on my nightstand.

Two in the morning.

What the hell?

I glance at my phone that’s buzzing and see Indie’s face cross the screen. Rubbing my eye with my palm, I sit up and answer, my voice sounding groggy.

“Hello?”

“Linc?” Indie’s voice sounds meek . . . scared.

“Indie? Is everything okay?”

“Linc . . . I need you.”

“What’s up? What’s going on?”

“Can you come back home?”



“IS THERE anything I can do for you?” I ask Indie, as I place the last of the dishes in the sink of her dad’s house.

She shakes her head as she sits on the counter, dressed in all black, staring at the ground. “No.”

I walk up to her, grateful my manager gave me the day off so I could fly to Michigan to be with Indie. When she told me that her dad had died suddenly of a heart attack—alone—I knew I had to be here. Her sobs . . .

I haven’t seen her in a few years, so when I walked into her dad’s house this morning, seeing her sunken eyes, full of despair, my heart broke.

I walk up to her and place one hand on her thigh, push her hair back from her face with the other, and then cup her cheek. “Come on. It’s been a long day, let’s get you into bed.”

She doesn’t say anything, so I pull her off the counter and walk her back to the guest room where she let me change when I arrived straight from the airport. I fly out early tomorrow morning to make my game. I wish I could stay longer but unfortunately, it’s the life of a professional athlete.

When we reach the room, I set her on the bed and say, “What are you going to sleep in? An old tee?”

She shakes her head and then connects her eyes with me. “Please, would you just hold me, Lincoln? Hold me like you used to back in college?”

Unable to deny her anything, I lie down on the bed and pull her into my chest. She rests her head and grips the fabric of my shirt. She sniffs, and my shirt grows wet from her tears. I grip her tighter, letting her know I’m here for her.

“I’m so sorry,” I say quietly. “I know you had a rough relationship with him, but—”

Indie tilts her head up and kisses my jaw.

I still.

She kisses me again and then sits up and moves her mouth to mine, pressing a kiss against my lips.

“Indie, I’m not sure—”

“I need to get lost. I need to forget. Please help me do that.”

Her hand travels down my stomach to the waistband of my dress pants. She unbuckles my belt and pants, as I try to determine what the right decision in this situation is.

“Please,” she says again as her hand slips inside my pants and cups me.

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

Even if I tried, I don't think I could deny this girl, not when she's happy, and especially when she's sad. If she wants me, I want her. It's as simple as that.

This might be stupid, and she might be using me, but I do still crave her. After all this time, no sexual experience has come close to the ecstasy of sex with Indie. The way she knows my body. The way I know hers. *Her heart. Her soul.* Even seeing her lost in grief, the minute I walked through the door, that burning need for her erupted.

"Please," she repeats, pressing another light kiss across my lips.

I groan and move her to her back. I unbutton my shirt and toss it to the floor. Her eyes widen, taking me in, and then she smiles very lightly.

"Jesus, Lincoln." Her eyes roam my body, running over each contour, taking in every difference from the last time she saw me. The intensity of my workouts has changed drastically since I last saw her and from her heated—*dizzying*—perusal, she's impressed by the difference.

I lift her cotton dress up and over her head and peel off her bra, while she kicks off her underwear. I stare down at her naked body, a million flashbacks racing through my head followed by an onslaught of emotions.

Happiness.

Weariness.

Guilt . . .

"Are you sure?" I ask her, feeling like a tool who's taking advantage of her.

"I need this, please, Lincoln."

Her hands travel up my chest to the back of my neck where she brings my mouth down to hers. She places a light kiss across my lips and then another. They're little pecks that make me grow harder each time. Just having a taste of her mouth again twists my stomach in knots and before I can stop myself, those knots turn into heated yearning, and my mouth crashes down on hers.

She groans against me, her back arches, and she pushes me to my back, climbing on top of me, taking charge. And I let her.

Because even though I want this—want her . . . *probably always will*—she needs this more than me.

INDIE: Thank you for last night. I'm really thankful you came.

Lincoln: You don't need to thank me, Indie. I'm glad I was there for you.

Indie: In more ways than one. Thank you.

Lincoln: If you need anything, don't be hesitant to call.

Indie: I won't. Have a safe trip.

FOUR YEARS AFTER INDIE'S SENIOR YEAR

"DUDE, ARE THERE TWO OF YOU?" I ask Maddox, patting his face.

"Just one, man." He laughs while unlocking the door to my apartment. My apartment that doesn't have any furniture in it but a bed. "Nice place, man."

"Thanks," I say, stumbling behind him. I sit on the floor and then lie across it where I make snow angels against the freshly waxed floors. "Join me. Just like old times."

"We never did that," Maddox says and then picks up my feet and drags me across the floor to my bedroom.

"Wee," I call out, letting my arms float above my head. "Again, Daddy. Again."

"Dude, there are so many things wrong with what's happening right now, you calling me Daddy being one of them. I know you're excited to be a Rebel again in one hell of an epic trade, but this is your third night celebrating. We need to calm it down."

"Aren't you excited?" I ask as he saddles me up next to my bed.

"I am, but we also have games to play, so get it together."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I sit up and take a deep breath. "I can handle it from here."

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm not blackout drunk, I know what that feels like. I'm just silly drunk, and if you're not going to be silly with me, then what's the point?"

You're dismissed."

"Okay," he says hesitantly. I kick at his feet and he laughs, scooting away. "I'm coming by in the morning with breakfast."

"Panny-pan-pancakes please."

"Yeah, silly drunk, all right," Maddox mumbles as he walks away.

I hear the door to my apartment shut and I strip down right there at the base of my bed. When my phone falls out of my jeans, I pick it up and stare at the screen.

Who wants to be called?

I sit on my bed completely naked and consider calling my moms just to give them a heart attack, but it's not New Year's so they probably don't want to celebrate penises I think, looking at my dick.

Who likes my dick?

Who likes . . .

I smile to myself, scroll through my contacts, and press the FaceTime button.

It rings a few times and then she answers.

"Hello?"

"Naked party," I say out loud, shaking the phone. I stand up, point the phone at my crotch and then dance. "Naked party."

"Oh my God, Lincoln. Is that your dick?"

I move the phone to my face and say, "Who else's dick would it be? And you should know, you've had your mouth on it enough." I give her a big grin and her sleepy eyes roll.

"You're drunk."

"Not just drunk—"

"Silly drunk," she says, sitting up in her bed. Her covers are cut right above her breasts exposing her bare shoulders.

"Indie, are you naked?"

"What do you think, Lincoln?" She presses her palm to her forehead.

"I think you need to drop the comforter and join the party."

"I haven't talked to you in months. Do you really think I'm going to join your naked party?"

"I don't think you are, I know you are. Come on, drop the blankets. Let's see if those boobs are sagging yet."

"Oh my God, what is wrong with you?"

“Tequila. Tequila’s what’s wrong with me.” I set the phone on the bed, propping it against the headboard, and then step away so she can get the full view. “Look, I got my balls waxed.”

She laughs louder and then shakes her head, mumbling, “I’m not getting naked for you. But congratulations on getting your balls waxed. Are they smooth?”

“Very. I bet you would like rubbing your cheeks against them if you were here.”

“Why are you like this?”

“Probably because my moms designed porn sites for a living. A boy doesn’t recover from that.”

“Fair.” She laughs and then yawns. “As much fun as this is, I need to get to bed, and I think you should too.”

“But I miss you,” I say. The filter’s gone.

“I miss you too, Lincoln. You’re back in Chicago, right? Maybe we can meet up when I get back.”

I step closer to the phone so it’s just my torso and up. “Promise? You’ll really meet up with me?”

“Promise. Okay?”

“Okay.” I flop on the bed, taking the phone with me. “I miss you so much, Indie. I can’t wait to see you.”

She smiles softly. “Can’t wait to see you either.”



“DUDE, YOU BROUGHT PANCAKES . . .” I say, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and letting Maddox into my place.

“Don’t get too excited. They’re protein-packed pancakes, no syrup, just peanut butter for topping.”

“Still, you love me.”

“Are you still drunk?”

I bring my hand to my mouth and huff on it before taking a sniff. Mint and tequila. “I think so.”

“Figured.”

Maddox brings the takeout boxes to the dining area and looks around. “I forgot you don’t have furniture.”

“Floors are clean,” I say, flopping onto the ground.

Maddox rolls his eyes and joins me, but leans against a wall. “Did you make any drunk phone calls?”

“Aw, you remembered that I do that.”

“Hard to forget when I used to be the recipient.”

Maddox hands me a box and I pop open the top. The smell of pancakes and protein powder wafts toward me. I’ll take it. “Yeah, I called Indie. Pretty sure I shook my dick in front of her.”

“Indie?” Maddox’s brow raises. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I shrug.

“Care to elaborate on that decision?”

I pierce the pancakes with my fork and take a large bite. “Miss her, that’s all. Plus, I know she likes my penis, and I had to show my waxed balls to someone.”

“Obviously. Can’t let that go unnoticed.” Maddox chuckles. “So how was it?”

“Good. She laughed.” I shrug. “Kind of made me nostalgic.”

“I could see that. You going to follow up?”

I take another bite. “Yeah, I think I am. We’re both in different places now. She’s coming back to Chicago after her season. It would be cool to meet up with her. Maybe see where her head’s at.”

“Oh shit, like . . . start things up again?”

I shrug. “So, when are we training?”

“Today. Which means, eat up, you’re going to need it to keep up with me.”

I laugh. “Please, you’re going to be the one struggling to keep up with me. Fine-oiled machine over here, man.”

He smirks. “We’ll see about that.”



LINCOLN: Remember the time Rusty walked in on us?

Indie: OMG, why did you bring that up?

Lincoln: He just texted me, and that’s what he opened with. Figured it was a good opening text and wanted to try it out on you.

Indie: I’m still mortified.

Lincoln: *Because you were deep-throating my cock?*

Indie: *Uh . . . yeah.*

Lincoln: *I mean, I wasn't mad about it.*

Indie: *Because you've always been a pervert.*

Lincoln: *Rusty's high-pitched scream is branded in my head.*

Indie: *I wish it was my ringtone.*



LINCOLN: *Hat trick today? Damn, Mayhem.*

Indie: *You looking me up, Castle?*

Lincoln: *Just need to make sure you're not making an embarrassment of our friendship.*

Indie: *Speaking of embarrassment, heard you had a 50 Cent pitch off the mound the other day.*

Lincoln: *Wow, I congratulate you and you bring that up? For your information, my ankle twisted. And I'm fine, thanks for asking.*

Indie: *I watched it on replay for at least ten minutes, crying laughing.*



LINCOLN: *I'm craving banana bread.*

Indie: *Is this going to lead you to saying how I fucked up the banana bread I tried to make for you?*

Lincoln: *Isn't it fun to reminisce?*

Indie: *Sure is. Remember the time a pea snorted out of your nose because you laughed too hard . . . and then you ate it off the counter?*

Lincoln: *I did not fucking eat it and you know that.*

Indie: *It just happened to disappear so quickly?*

Lincoln: *In the trashcan!*

Indie: *Sure . . .*



LINCOLN: *Thoughts on a cronut?*

Indie: Are you speaking of a croissant-donut combination?

Lincoln: Precisely.

Indie: I had one at this small place in Austin, and it was as if angels were floating around in my mouth.

Lincoln: It's the special at Frankie Donuts right now.

Indie: STOP IT. Are you serious? Have you had one?

Lincoln: Yep.

Indie: And . . .

Lincoln: I wept like a goddamn baby after I finished.

Indie: I could not be more jealous right now.



LINCOLN: So . . . uh, that picture you posted on your Instagram . . .

Indie: What about it, Castle?

Lincoln: It was *clears throat* nice. That bikini suits you.

Indie: Might have posted it with you in mind.

Lincoln: REALLY?

Indie: No, but glad you liked it. *winks*

Lincoln: Cruel woman.



LINCOLN: Did you happen to catch my new Under Armour ad campaign?

Indie: Boasting? Really, Castle?

Lincoln: NO. Just checking in. I was shirtless in them.

Indie: I know.

Lincoln: Thoughts?

Indie: You're hot.

Lincoln: Damn, you're just going to come out and say it?

Indie: Facts are facts. You're hot, Castle.

Lincoln: You're making me blush.

Indie: Don't let it get to your head.

Lincoln: Yeah, that's not going to happen. Sexiest girl I've ever known says I'm hot? Yeah, that's going straight to my head . . . both of them.

Indie: You're impossible.

Lincoln: **Shrugs** Now, tell me you're coming back to Chicago soon. I want to see you.

Indie: *Two weeks.*

Lincoln: *Meet up with me?*

Indie: *Do I have a choice in the matter?*

Lincoln: *Always, Mayhem.*

Indie: *You know I want to see you.*

Lincoln: *Good.*

□

LINCOLN: *Still on for tonight?*

Indie: *Yup. Can't wait.*

Lincoln: *So excited to see you.*

Indie: *Same, Castle. Same.*

□

I TAP the top of the table, my nerves taking over as I wait for Indie to show up. Now that I'm back in Chicago and she's home for the holidays, it will make meeting up easy. I've texted her now and again since my naked party, feeling like our connection, which had faded away, has started to resurrect itself.

And that made the end of the year that much better, especially since we won the World Series this year. Hell, I can still feel the euphoria from that win, and sprinting from the bullpen to celebrate. It felt like fucking magic. The crowd erupting, the lights, the cold October air shocking our warm, excited breath as we cheered. Puts a guy on cloud nine. It's also made me start wondering if I could have more with Indie. She's still playing soccer in Texas, but she doesn't travel as much as I do. And . . . maybe, now that we're older, we could make it work. I'm not the twenty-year-old college kid, fixated on making it to the majors, with no option for a distraction. And I sense that Indie's softened since her mom married Joe and has been so happy. *Maybe. Maybe not.*

What I do know is that I can't wait to taste her again. Pleasure her. Make her scream. Be inside her. For hours.

The door to the restaurant opens, and I spot her.

Hell.

A wave of longing hits me.

She's wearing a pair of dark wash skinny jeans, brown ankle boots, and a green sweater that makes her tits look amazing. We're meeting in Grand Rapids. There are more restaurant choices, *and* because I secured a hotel room for the next couple of nights, wanting some privacy from my moms for obvious reasons.

She looks around and when I stand, she sees me, and a large smile crosses her face. She comes up to me, and I capture her into a hug. Her sweet perfume infuses my nose as I commit the feel of her in my arms to memory.

Perfect. This is absolutely perfect.

She pulls away and touches my cheek. "Oh my God, I'm so glad to see you."

"You too," I say, giving her one more hug before pulling out her chair. "How are you, Mayhem?" I ask once situated in my seat.

"I'm great. Congrats again on the big World Series win." She smiles, shaking her head. "I would like to say I can't believe it but that would be a bold-faced lie. I knew you were bound for greatness."

"Thank you. My proudest moment, besides hitting ninety-five of course."

"Of course." She chuckles. "Never forget the pursuit for ninety-five."

"Never." I sip my water and set the glass down. "I'm at ninety-eight now."

"Cocky." She chuckles, and I swear my heart nearly beats out of my chest. Being here with her, seeing her again—seeing her familiar facial expressions, experiencing her teasing—takes me back to one of the best years of my life, which was spent with her by my side.

"Have you seen your mom yet?" I ask.

"We haven't made it there yet. You were our first stop."

"We?" I ask, laughing, just as I notice a dark figure come up behind Indie. I glance up to see a man with tan skin, slicked-back, peppered hair, and a charming smile.

In horror, I watch as he leans forward and presses a kiss to Indie's cheek. With an Italian accent, he says, "Car is parked." He then looks at me

and holds out his hand. “This must be the famous Lincoln Castle. Such a pleasure.”

I take the man’s hand as Indie says, “Yes. Anthony, this is Lincoln.” I release his hand. “Lincoln, this is Anthony . . . my fiancé.”



“DUDE, are you going to talk, or just sit on my couch and drink?”

“*This is Anthony . . . my fiancé.*”

Sighing, I set my beer down and say, “She’s engaged.”

“Who? Indie?”

“Yeah.”

“Seriously?”

I nod and drape my hands over my eyes, still reliving the painful dinner from two nights ago, the dinner that I paid for, the dinner where I pretended everything was totally cool and I was so excited to meet Indie’s fiancé . . . even though I felt like I was slowly dying the most horrendous and torturous death inside.

“Engaged. I still can’t believe it. She doesn’t even believe in fucking marriage. She told me that, many fucking times, so what’s she doing engaged to some Italian loafer, sweater vest?”

“Did he wear a sweater vest?” Maddox asks, confused.

“No, he was fucking sharp-looking in a button-up shirt and dress pants. Intimidating as fuck. I felt like a boy next to him, which I probably was because the dude had gray in his hair.”

“Some men gray early,” Maddox says. I give him a look and he holds his hands up. “Sorry, so she’s engaged to an old fart of a sweater vest.”

“Yeah.” I grip my hair. “Fuck, man. I had this whole weekend planned for us. Romantic-type bullshit. I hoped that after all the communication we’ve swapped lately, that maybe—”

“She wanted to be fuck buddies again?”

I shrug. “Wishful thinking?”

“Uh yeah, you moron. You really think the girl is going to hold out for fuck buddies?”

“She doesn’t believe in marriage,” I shout. “She’s never believed in relationships, either. Christ, trying to get her to commit to being friends was

a task in itself, but she can commit to a guy I've never even heard about? And what the hell is that? We're talking, and she doesn't think to mention that she's in a relationship? A little heads-up would have been nice rather than shocking the shit out of me."

"Maybe she was nervous to tell you?"

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"It's my apartment, you asshole."

I roll my eyes. "Semantics." I lean forward and press my forearms into my thighs and clasp my hands together. "Dude, I don't know what to do."

"What is there to do? I mean, you've only said you were fuck buddies, unless, you know . . . you love her."

I shake my head, not quite sure if I believe it or not. "Nah, nothing like that. But, it doesn't feel right."

"Well, I guess you're going to have to get used to it, because unless you love her, you really don't have any other options other than to try to find a new fuck buddy."

"God, you're useless."

"Really feels good when you say things like that." He chuckles and then hands me back my beer. "Drink up, man. I'll allow you to get wasted and sleep here tonight."

"Now that's the kind of friend I need."

Chapter Twenty-Three

INDIE

FIVE YEARS AFTER INDIE'S SENIOR YEAR

"THANKS FOR HELPING ME MOVE," I say to my mom, who sets a box down on the secondhand table I just bought.

"Of course, we're just so glad you're close to us again." She comes up to me and gives me a hug, as Joe and Priscilla bring in the last of the boxes.

"This is a nice place," Joe says, hands on his hips, his dad bod looking nice these days. It took a while for me to get used to having Joe around, and Priscilla for that matter, but they took it slowly with me. Joe is a pretty understanding and perceptive guy who knew I wasn't happy when he first moved into my mom's house, so he didn't push himself on me. Nor did he force me to have a relationship with Priscilla. That developed over time. The way Joe handled things when my dad passed away gained him a lot of respect in my book. Especially when my mom was grieving over the loss of her first husband. Joe was there for her and nurtured her through mourning her loss.

He was there for me too, and even though I don't want to admit it—because I was against it at first—Priscilla is pretty cool and we get along. It

doesn't hurt that she's started playing soccer . . . and is pretty good at it.

What especially helped, though, was when my mom realized how much she'd hurt me. How I'd felt so replaceable. *Abandoned*. I took a chance and spoke honestly with her after Dad died. She simply hadn't seen how Dad's and her relationship issues affected me so miserably. I didn't get the chance to reconcile with Dad, and I was determined not to repeat that mistake with Mom. She's a different woman with Joe—brighter. She apologized. It was heartfelt, there were tears, and then there was alcohol. *And a shocking hangover for both of us the next day.*

And now? Now I'm back in my old stomping ground, ready to make new choices. Better choices.

"Thanks, Joe. It will do for now until I can save up a little more. I would like to move closer to Brentwood at some point to cut down on the commute, but unless you're in student housing and splitting the rent, it's pretty expensive."

"You'll get there," my mom says. "But look at all the natural light in here, and there's a park across the street, which is nice. You're not staring at a bunch of buildings."

"Yeah, it's one of the reasons why I moved here."

Joe takes a kitchen box and says, "Should I start unpacking, or do you have a certain way you want to put things away?"

"There's like two drawers in the kitchen." I laugh. "I think I'll be able to find whatever you put away, plus I don't have a lot."

"Which reminds me," my mom says, holding up a package I saw her bring in from her car. "We got you a housewarming gift. We know you've been sharing apartments with girls on your team, and then you know . . . Anthony."

"We don't need to mention him," I say, pressing my hand to my stomach. My heart's still cracked because of him.

"Well, anyway, here's something from us."

"You didn't have to do this," I say, sitting next to the box and opening it up.

"We wanted to. You've been through a lot this past year and this is a fresh, new start. We're excited for you. And assistant coach for the men's soccer team at Brentwood—the first female coach of a men's team at Brentwood. We are so proud."

I smile softly. "Thanks, Mom."

When I got a call from Coach Wilson about a coaching position opening up at Brentwood, I thought she was referring to the women's team, but when she said men's, I was completely shocked. We'd been shooting emails back and forth, keeping in touch as I made my way through a professional career that had its highlights and definite downfalls. When I told her I was taking a year off, she told me she'd look out for a coaching job for me, keep her ears open. A year later, I never expected to be offered a coaching job at Brentwood, especially with the men's team. But she highly recommended me, I interviewed well, and I was called the next day, letting me know I had the job.

For a few years, Brentwood had been my home, so being here again feels like a better fit. I loved being in Texas, but this place is . . . healthy for me. *Restorative.*

I open the box and it's full of little apartment things like hand towels, soap containers, oven mitts, toilet paper (which makes me laugh), a can opener, and some frames. I pull out the first frame, which is a picture of me and my dad when I was in middle school. It was right after a game, and he has his arm around me, standing proudly.

Tears well in my eyes as I smooth my hand over the picture. "He loved you so much, sweetie, even if he had a hard time connecting with you sometimes."

I give her a shaky smile. "Thanks, Mom."

The next picture is of me, my mom, Joe, and Priscilla in Chicago during Christmas last year. We're in front of a large tree, bundled up and smiling together.

"I love this picture."

"Me too. I have it up on the mantel," Mom says.

I reach for the last picture and my heart stops in my chest when it comes into view.

"I found the picture on your Instagram," my mom says. "I love this picture of you two, and he's been such an important person in your life. It feels right that he would be here."

Lincoln's gorgeous smile is beaming at the camera. I'm snuggled into his neck, happy as I can be. I can't quite place when we took the picture or where since it's just our faces, but what I do know is that it was during a time when I was happiest. It was during a time where I felt safe and protected, when I could have called Lincoln at any time of the day and he

would have been there for me. *And I would have been there for him.* Because that's what he asked of me on that painful day when he left Brentwood the first time. It's what I promised.

"I'm about to embark on one of the hardest journeys of my life, and I'll never make it if you cut me off. If you take away my best friend. Promise me, Indie. Promise me you won't let me go."

God, the expression in his eyes had gutted me. And looking back now, I feel guilty I didn't keep my promise to him. *"As long as you want me as a friend, I'm yours."* Words of an emotional twenty-one-year-old? Fanciful?

"Why don't you give him a call, sweetie?" my mom suggests, placing her hand on my arm. "You're both in Chicago again, so it makes sense."

I hold up the picture and say, "Thank you." I set it down and start moving boxes around, not really sure to where, but I need to busy myself.

"Indie"—my mom comes up to me, pressing her hand to my back—"when was the last time you talked to him?"

"A year ago," I say, still remembering the most awkward dinner of my life. I didn't want to bring Anthony. I wanted to have a private conversation with Lincoln where I told him everything, but Anthony wouldn't have it. He was a jealous man and hated my relationship with Lincoln, so as he said it, there was no way in hell he was "letting" me go to dinner with Lincoln alone. After the dinner was done, Anthony demanded I not talk to Linc anymore and I foolishly listened, trying to appease him, to make things easier.

Well, it only made things worse.

And now, I don't have a relationship with Lincoln.

"Indie, that's far too long. You should reach out to him."

I shake my head. "He wouldn't want to hear from me. Not after the last time I saw him, trust me."

"Is that when he met Anthony?"

I nod. "You should have seen the look in his eyes when I said *fiancé*. It was as if I'd betrayed him. The rest of the evening was awful. Anthony talked the entire time, filling in the silence, and then we awkwardly shook hands when we left because Anthony wouldn't let me go long enough to give Lincoln a hug."

"You shook hands?"

I cringe, remembering the confused and hurt look on Lincoln's face. "Yeah, it was awful. Trust me, calling him would not be the best idea. I

think we just need to go our separate ways.”

“But—”

“Mom, please, not right now, okay? Let’s just enjoy the rest of the day together.”

I can see that it’s painful for her to not push me, but thankfully she nods and then reaches into the box, pulling out the oven mitts. “These silicone ones are the absolute best and they make great puppets when you’re waiting for your food to cook.” She moves one in front of me and opens it and closes it. “I love you, Indie.”

Rolling my eyes, I take the oven mitts from her. “Love you, too, Mom.”



“AND HERE’S YOUR OFFICE,” Tyler Morrison, the head coach of the men’s soccer team says. I know him as Coach Morrison, so calling him Tyler feels strange, but he thinks it’s weird if I call him Coach Morrison. Guess who won?

I sigh, looking out the window, still in disbelief that this is where I ended up. “The field looks amazing,” I say. We’re midway through the season, but the old assistant coach had to move because his wife was transferred to North Carolina. It worked out great for me.

“Attendance has increased over the last few years, and sponsors have picked up, so we’ve been able to add to the stadium. We’re very proud of it.”

“I can imagine.” Sighing, I say, “Do the guys know?”

“You mean do they know that Indie Mayhem, one of the top soccer players in the country is going to be their assistant coach? Yeah, they know. And they’re terrified.”

“Why’s that?” I ask on a chuckle.

“Because they’re nervous you’re going to make them do the physical tests that the women’s soccer team has to do.”

A sly smile crosses his face. “Then they should be terrified.”

He laughs and says, “I knew you were the perfect hire.”

One of the sole reasons Tyler hired me is because he wanted my knowledge in building strength and endurance that’s geared to our sport. During my interview, I discussed the many different training techniques I’d

bring to their program, with my strength and conditioning knowledge, and how I had no problem showing the guys what it took to perform each workout. *In other words, I was going to make them hurt.*

Tyler liked that a lot.

We spent an hour going over strategic workouts on the whiteboard in his office and when I was done, I could see it in his eyes, he was impressed.

I always knew I wanted to teach, but I just didn't realize it was going to be soccer . . . to college-aged men.

"Let's get you to the admin office. I think there were a few more papers you had to sign and then we'll head to the equipment room so we can get you fitted with some gear. We'll be ordering clothes for you since all we have is men's fit, and I have a feeling that's not going to work for you."

"I mean, I'll take what I can get but if you want to order the women's cut, that would be appreciated."

He winks at me and pats me on the shoulder. "Trust me, we want our coaches looking professional, and you drowning in a man's shirt is not going to do the job."

He leads me through the coaches' hall and up one floor to the admin building where I meet up with Sariah, a lovely lady who remembers me from when I used to play at Brentwood. We reminisced for a few moments, she had me sign papers, and before I knew it, I was being escorted to the equipment room.

"I think the best thing to do is circle whatever you want out of this catalogue and then we'll have everything screen-printed," Nolan, in the equipment room says.

"That works," Tyler says, taking the catalogue. "I have about a one-thousand-dollar budget you can use, including screen-printing, so time to go shopping."

He hands me the catalogue and I smile. "You don't have to ask me twice."

He looks at his watch and says, "Shoot, I have a meeting with the athletic director I have to get to. Head to your office and start picking things out and I'll meet you there."

"Sure," I say as he takes off.

I thank Nolan and then take the long way to the offices, walking past the weight room where I used to work out almost every day. Fresh faces are lined up with the equipment, trainers are walking around spotting athletes,

and the dull beat of techno music is playing through the speakers. Nostalgia washes over me. The smell of the weights, the feel of a completed workout with your team, the fighting over what music we're going to play . . . all of it. I've missed all of it.

"Indie?"

Oh God.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand straight and apprehension crawls down my spine as I turn to see Lincoln standing in the hallway, hands in his pockets, a baseball hat sitting low on his brow.

What the hell is he doing here?

He's probably thinking the same thing about me.

"Lincoln, hey." I wave awkwardly.

His brows pull together in confusion. "What, uh . . . what are you doing here?"

An athlete moves by us, completely oblivious that he just pushed past Lincoln Castle. Noticing that we're standing smack dab in the middle of the hallway, I pull off into a corridor with him but the minute I do, I realize it's the same corridor he once confronted me in.

That moment hits me hard, the emotion of it all. Six years later, here we are again. It's too much, especially since I wasn't ever expecting to see Lincoln here. If he's in Brentwood, he'd be at the stadium, right?

I know he's waiting for a response, and lying won't get me anywhere, so I say, "I was just hired . . . as a coach."

His brows shoot up to the brim of his hat. "Seriously? You're coaching with Coach Wilson?"

I shake my head. "No, Coach Morrison hired me."

"For the men's team? Hell, that's pretty awesome." He shifts and I take that second to observe him, soak him all in. He's not much bigger than when I last saw him. Maybe his biceps are a little thicker, but that could be me imagining things too. Same handsome face though, scruff lining his jaw, and killer eyes that to this day still make me dream of comfort. "Congrats." He looks off to the side and asks, "Were you going to tell me you were back in Chicago?"

I glance at the catalog I'm clutching to my chest and shake my head. "Wasn't planning on it."

"I see." I feel his eyes on me as he says, "How are things with Anthony?"

Not wanting to have this conversation here, I say, “You know, I should really get to my office. It was good seeing you.” I try to move past him, but he grabs me by my upper arm and holds me in place.

“You owe me explanations, Indie.”

I glance up at him, and his face is as hard as stone. “For what?”

“You really weren’t going to let me know you were back here?”

“We haven’t talked in a year, Lincoln. What’s the point?”

“The point is I thought we were friends. Even when we had periods of not talking, we still met up. How is this any different?”

“Things have changed.”

“Because of Anthony?” he asks, an irritated look on his face.

“I really should go.”

I start to walk away when he calls out. “Where’s your engagement ring, Indie?”

I pause and squeeze my eyes shut. Nothing gets past him . . . ever.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, coming up next to my ear. “You have some explaining to do. Text me your address, I’m coming over tonight.”

“Lincoln, that’s not—”

“It’s not a question. It’s a request,” he says in such a stern tone that for a second I don’t recognize him at all. “Text me, Indie.”

And then he walks off, and I watch as he takes large strides, eating up the hallway and pushing through the doors that lead to the parking lot.

Text him.

Yeah, there will be no texting him.

I’m not ready to answer his questions, especially when I’m still filing through the hurt, the . . . desolation Anthony left me with.



FRESH OUT OF THE SHOWER, I dry off and wrap a towel around my torso. That’s exactly what I needed, a nice hot shower to wash the day away.

After Lincoln left, I went back to my new office and tried not to hyperventilate. By the time Tyler got back from his meeting, I was levelheaded and had a few articles of clothing circled. When he asked why I didn’t pick more, I just said I felt bad, when in reality, I wasn’t mentally

checked in to think about clothing. He told me to take the catalog home and figure out the rest of my selections so we could order tomorrow.

So I did just that. I enjoyed a nice Mediterranean salad, circled the rest of the clothes I wanted, and then took a much-needed hot shower. Once I lotion up, I plan on crawling into bed naked and then spending the rest of the evening watching mindless TV to clear my head of the day.

I brush my teeth and floss, then I hang up my towel, lotion my entire body with this amazing lavender bedtime lotion my mom got me for my birthday, and just as I finish brushing my hair, there's a knock at my door.

I set the brush down, and peer around my bathroom door. Did I hear that right or was it a neighbor? I stand there, holding my breasts for some reason as I listen closely and then a pound to my door. "Indie, open up."

Lincoln?

How on earth does he—

My mom.

Damn that woman and her meddling.

I pull my dark purple silk robe from the back of my door, slip it on, tie a tight knot, and then go to the entryway where I peek through the peephole. A very irritated Lincoln stands on the other side.

There goes my peaceful night.

I unlock the door and open it. He doesn't even bother to say anything, he just charges in.

"Come on in," I joke, shutting the door behind me.

He's wearing sweatpants, his hand is pushing through his hair, and his shirt is rising high, giving me a brief glimpse of the waistband of his boxer briefs from his raised arm.

"What the fuck, Indie? I told you to text me."

"Looks like I didn't need to," I say, leaning against my door.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, he glances around my tiny apartment and scans every corner. "Are you here alone?"

"Does it look like I could share this closet with another human being?"

Not answering, he walks over to my two-person couch and takes a seat, draping his arm over the back like he always does. It's how he's the most comfortable, and it's how he's gotten away with playing with my hair so many times.

"Sit, Indie."

"Do you really think I'm going to fall in line to your barking at me?"

“I can force you to sit if that’s better?”

Insufferable.

I walk over to the living room, and I watch his eyes carefully as they roam my body, starting at my legs and then traveling up to my breasts where they stay until I sit in the chair next to the couch. No way am I sitting next to him, not when he’d be that close on my tiny couch.

I cross one leg over the other and my robe exposes more thigh than appropriate, so I quickly try to cover it. “I’ve buried my head in your pussy on multiple occasions, so there’s nothing to be modest about.”

I run my tongue over my teeth and know he’s right, so I let the robe do its thing but make sure it’s secure up top.

“What do you want, Lincoln?”

“A lot of things.” He looks me dead in the eyes. “But how about we start with why the hell you didn’t text me?”

“Because . . .” I wish I could leave, even though this is my apartment, anything to get me out of this incredibly painful conversation.

“Because why? If that’s how you’re going to be answering questions, you might as well show me the bedroom, because I’ll be here all night.”

I don’t doubt him.

“I didn’t text you because frankly, I was too nervous to have this conversation.”

“And that’s why you didn’t call me either, to tell me that you moved here?”

“Yeah, part of it.”

“What’s the other part?”

I sigh and say, “We haven’t talked or seen each other in a year, Lincoln. It didn’t seem appropriate. Last time we spoke, it wasn’t the greatest get together and since I didn’t hear from you, I thought . . . well . . . that was it.”

“The phone goes both ways, Indie.”

“I know, but it wasn’t easy back then.”

“Because of Anthony?”

I look at my lap. “Yeah, because of Anthony. He, uh, wasn’t very keen on our friendship.”

“So you let some fuckhead control you? I’ve been your best friend for years, Indie. Best fucking friend and because some guy I never heard about

decides to pop into your life and tell you not to talk to me, you listened to him? Where's the goddamn loyalty, Indie? I would never do that—"

"I was pregnant with his baby." *Fuck. I really didn't want to say that.* I can't look at Lincoln, but I know what he'd look like. Stunned. Perhaps angry. *Confused.*

"Pregnant?" he whispers, now looking around the apartment for baby items I assume. "Where, uh . . . is the baby with him?"

I shake my head, tears welling in my eyes. I look to the ceiling and take a deep breath. "Shortly after our dinner, Anthony and I got into a fight. He hated the relationship I had with you. He was incredibly jealous. He deleted you out of my phone and when I tried to grab the phone away, he pushed me." A tear falls down my cheek and I quickly wipe it away. "I was off balance and crashed into the coffee table. It was a bad fall, I was bruised up and down my back and then a few days later, I had a miscarriage."

"Jesus," he says, leaning forward now.

"The doctor wasn't sure if it was from the fall or not, but I had to have surgery to remove the fetus." I suck in a harsh breath, and Lincoln quickly moves to the coffee table where he takes a seat in front of me and grabs my hand. His thumbs rub over my knuckles and he grips me tightly.

"You're breaking my goddamn heart, Indie. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because . . . I was embarrassed. I was dealing with a lot of shame. Anthony proposed to me when I told him I was pregnant. It was his quick fix to everything. I said yes because it felt like the right thing to do. I quickly realized it wasn't. He was controlling and for some reason, I let him control me. I was missing you, trying to forget you, and once I found out I was pregnant, I put in my resignation for the team. I lost everything at once and was clinging to the one thing that I was familiar with." I wipe another tear. "Once Anthony and I broke up, I stayed in Texas for a while until I got the job with Brentwood."

"You could have told me," he says.

I shake my head. "No, I saw your face at that dinner . . . the disappointment."

"It wasn't disappointment, Indie."

"Then what was it?" I ask. "Because you sure as hell shut down the minute Anthony stepped into the picture. You shut down quickly. I thought maybe, just maybe, you'd reach out again, but you never did and I knew. You'd finally moved on."

“Because I thought *you* were moving on. Hell, you did. You were engaged. What was I supposed to do? Try to fuck you while your fiancé watched?” he asks, his voice full of irritation.

Removing my hand from his, I say, “No, you could have been a friend. Our relationship didn’t start with fucking. It was a friendship.” *One I treasured. A lifeline at times.*

“I always wanted to fuck you, Indie,” he says and for a second, I don’t recognize the guy sitting in front of me. Anger billows off him in waves, his brow is pulled together, and when his hand pushes through his hair, his forearms fire off with tension.

I can’t be near him, not like this. I stand and walk away as he calls out, “Indie, stop.”

I go to my door and I hold it open. “I think you should leave.”

Without a word, he stands, walks over to me, and shuts the door. He then leans against it arms crossed and says, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Lincoln, that’s not your choice to make. This is my apartment, and I don’t want you here.”

“Well that’s too damn bad. I’m not leaving, not when we’re like this.” He motions between us.

“Like what?”

“Angry at each other. Yelling. Clearly not in a good place.”

“Saying that our relationship was all about fucking puts us in a horrible place,” I say pulling my robe closed tighter.

“I didn’t mean that.” He pulls the back of his neck and pushes off the door. “I’m just irritated. Frustrated. Jesus Christ, Indie, you’re here in Chicago. We should be celebrating. We should be hanging out. We should be—”

“Fucking?” I ask with a shake of my head.

“No,” he says, walking toward me. He cups my chin with his fingers, forcing me to look at him. “We should be there for each other. And you’re not letting me be.”

“Because you dropped out of my life, Lincoln.”

“When has distance ever been a hinderance to what we have?”

I step away and walk to my bedroom, tired and over this conversation. “When I needed you the most and you weren’t there.”

I go to shut the door, but he’s too quick and slips into my bedroom. “How the fuck was I supposed to know you were going through a

miscarriage? Last time I saw you, you were happy with your fiancé.”

“Was I happy, Lincoln? Did I look happy to you? Think about it, did you truly think I was the same Indie that night or were you blinded by your disappointment or whatever it was to notice?”

“You can’t be fucking serious. You’re mad at me because I couldn’t read you that night? Are you hearing yourself?”

I sigh. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d be able to read me. Not after *all* the years of you knowing exactly when something was wrong with one glance.”

“You’re not being fair. You have no idea what I was dealing with that night.”

“What you were dealing with?” I ask, brows flying up. “Are you—”

“I had plans,” he shouts. “I was so fucking excited to see you, Indie. To pick up where we left off. I had an entire weekend planned for us. And leading up to that dinner, our conversations, our playful texts. Jesus Christ, my hopes were so high that the minute I saw Anthony, it was like you’d picked up the knife from the table and stabbed me in the chest. Yeah, I shut down, but not because I was disappointed.” He pounds his chest with his fist. “I was fucking hurt. My girl was engaged. My girl, who didn’t believe in marriage. My girl, who I thought—” He blows out a frustrated breath and pulls on the back of his neck again while looking at the ground. “Well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. All that matters is that I was there for us, and you showed up with someone else. A heads-up would have been appreciated so I didn’t have to walk away with my tail tucked between my legs.”

“So your pride was broken?” I say, trying to make sense of this. Of what he’s trying to tell me. After he FaceTimed me, naked, I started feeling differently toward him. Desperate for him, for more. Our conversations after that made me wonder what life could be like if there was more between us, if we broke the seal of fuck buddies and grew our relationship into something with so much more substance. The floodgate opened, and the jumbled feelings I’d suppressed for years crashed over me again. He came to me when my dad died. He drunk called me and told me he missed me with so much sincerity, I’d wondered.

Could there have been more?

There was never a scenario in my head where I actually thought Lincoln could want more prior to that night.

But then, I said yes to dating Anthony, got pregnant, and had gotten lost in that shock as I continued to grieve the loss of my dad. *Lincoln hadn't known that his texts had held me together.* I hadn't told him that in my confused state, I'd said yes to marrying a man I barely knew. One who . . . *treated me woefully. Hurt me.*

And that night in the restaurant, when I saw the unmistakable joy on Lincoln's handsome face when he saw me, it had momentarily stripped the confusion from my mind. *I was making a mistake marrying Anthony, but I was trapped.*

And Lincoln's pride had been dented. "You gave up because of your pride," I whispered

"No, Indie. It wasn't my pride that was broken. It was my fucking heart—" He stops and takes a deep breath. "You're right. I should go."

He starts to walk away when I stop him, pulling on his arm. "Don't leave."

His arm tenses and he says, "Indie, I'm holding on by a thread here."

Chapter Twenty-Four

LINCOLN

The minute her small, soft hand touches me, it's like a match to a flame: my entire body ignites with heat and a war rages inside me. Emotions I've never allowed myself to feel take over. "Indie, I'm holding on by a thread here."

But instead of backing away, Indie grips me tighter and that's all I need. I spin around and face her, both our breaths are heavy, our eyes flitting back and forth at each other, as the air grows thick around us.

I count to five, slowly, waiting, but when she doesn't move, when she doesn't back down, I say, "I'm going to give you three seconds to let me walk away. I'm not here to fuck you, Indie. But I want you. I want this. I want you."

Keeping her eyes on me, she brings her hand to the knot of her robe, and I watch as she pulls on it. Her robe parts, revealing the middle of her body, and that's my undoing.

In a flash, my hand cups the back of her head and I crash my mouth down on hers, reclaiming her lips, lips that have always been mine—lips that I've never stopped craving.

For a second, I release her and tear my shirt over my head, leaving my torso bare. Her hands immediately find my skin, and then she kisses me

with hunger, her fingers driving into my hair, her heated body pressed against mine.

I loop my arm around her waist and with our mouths still connected, I lay her on her bed. Her robe falls completely open and I hover above her, remembering every curve, every place I used to spend time kissing and licking. Every place I want to explore tonight, but right now, I need to be inside her.

“Lose the robe,” I say while I pull my wallet from my back pocket and take out a condom. Clutched between my teeth, I hold the packet while I strip down the rest of the way. She removes the robe and while she watches me, I sheath myself, my cock already hard as stone, ready to bury itself so far deep into Indie. It’s anticipating her sweet warmth.

She scoots back on the bed and slips under the bedding, and I join her as she parts her legs. I run the tip of my cock up her slit, sliding with ease. She bites her bottom lip and arches her back from the feel of my cock against her. Even though I want to be inside her, I spend a few moments rubbing, gliding, watching how she reacts. In the haze of the light I can see her cheeks redden, her chest rising and falling quicker, and then I hear the moans falling past her lips. It’s all there, everything I love when it comes to being with this woman, everything that makes her the best I’ve ever had.

The only woman I’ll ever want.

And that realization is what fuels me to bring my lips to hers, to part them with my tongue, and show her how much she means to me, how much I want her in my life despite everything we’ve been through.

My tongue tangles with hers, her hands press into my shoulders, her pelvis seeks me out, and I can’t hold back any longer. I reach down, position my cock at her entrance, and I push inside. Immediately, I feel my eyes roll to the back of my head as her warmth squeezes around me.

God, I’ve missed this feeling, being so connected with her.

Nothing has ever felt this amazing.

Nothing.

“Fucking . . . perfect,” I mutter as I push into her and pull out. “So good, Indie. So fucking good.”

She moans into my ear. Her warm breath sends chills down my legs as her hands move down my back to my ass where she grips my cheeks tightly and pulls when I thrust in, causing me to bottom out every time.

“Shit,” I groan, feeling my orgasm already building, swirling, and circling, adding pressure to my lower torso.

“Faster,” she says breathlessly. “I need more.”

She sounds desperate, on edge.

I pick up my pace, while my mouth pulls away from hers and falls to her breasts.

“God, yes,” she cries out when I pluck one of her nipples with my teeth. “Again.”

I repeat the sensation for her, over and over again, until her fingers dig so deep into my skin that I feel like she’s going to draw blood soon. *It feels amazing, so goddamn amazing.*

I roll my hips against her, and my mouth goes everywhere. Her breasts, her collarbone, up her neck, across her jaw, over her mouth, tangling and dancing with her tongue.

Her breaths grow deeper, her moans become louder, so my pace picks up.

She bites down on my lip.

I claw onto her.

She matches my thrusts with her own.

I roll her nipples between my fingers.

She cries out my name.

I mutter hers as my orgasm builds to a crescendo, pulling and tugging on my balls, getting ready, sitting there, just waiting for that final push.

“Fuck, babe,” I mutter, so close that I can taste it.

“Oh God,” she says, tensing around me, and then convulsing in my arms as she falls over into her orgasm. I fall right with her, my hips stilling, and my cock swelling inside her with a final blow.

“Fuck,” I yell into her shoulder as everything in my groin tightens, dragging out her orgasm. “Jesus,” I say as we both slow our breathing and fall from a euphoric high.

“Lincoln,” she says on a sigh, and then lets go of me, her body sated.

I roll off her, take care of the condom, and then pull her into my chest. She comes easily, taking up the spot she’s so familiar with, tucked into my shoulder and nestled right where she belongs.

I draw my fingers over her back, and it’s not long before she passes out. For the first time in years, I feel like I can breathe again. Indie Mayhem is in my arms. *Finally.* It’s finally our time.

THE CLANGING of mugs wakes me up, followed by a muttered curse word. I sit up in Indie's bed and look around, rubbing my left eye with my finger.

Bed's empty.

Noise is coming from the kitchen.

I reach to the floor where my discarded pants are, slip them on, and don't even bother buttoning them up. Scratching my chest, I walk out into the living room and kitchen area, spotting Indie by the coffee maker, soaking up water with a towel.

"Morning," I say.

She startles and then takes a deep breath. Looking up, she smiles and shyly says, "Good morning."

Unsure where her head is at, I cautiously walk over to the door of the kitchen and lean against the wall, hands stuffed in the front of my jeans pockets.

"How are you?" I ask, feeling like it's a stupid question but unsure what to say at this point.

"Fine." She finishes with the cleanup and then turns to face me. "Listen, about last night . . ."

Fuck.

FUCK!

Regret. I see it, written all over her beautiful face. *How the fuck is that possible? How can she not see that we've finally found our right time?*

"I didn't mean to pressure you into doing anything with me. I got lost in the moment. I'm sorry," she says, and I can feel my heart cracking, right in front of her.

"You don't need to apologize, Indie. Last night was—"

"A mistake, I know." She sighs and presses her hand to her forehead. "God, I just. I can't seem to get my head on straight." Her coffee machine beeps and she caps the travel mug with a lid. "I have to go. I need to get a workout in before I head into the office." She walks up to me and places her hand on my chest. On her toes, she lifts up and kisses the side of my jaw. "Sorry about everything, Linc. Truly, I am." She walks toward the front door and lifts a bag over her shoulder.

"Indie—"

She gives me a sad smile. “Could you lock the door on your way out?”
Say something . . .

ANYTHING.

But I can’t form words over the deafening sound of my hammering heart.

I want to tell her to stop—*let’s talk about this*. Figure it out, but the only thing playing in my head over and over again is the word “mistake.”

How could she think what happened last night was a mistake?

It was anything *but* a mistake.

Hell, to me, it felt like the start of something new. As if, every moment in my life led to last night, where Indie finally became my girl. “*I didn’t mean to pressure you into doing anything with me. I got lost in the moment. I’m sorry.*”

What the fuck do I do now?



“CARE TO TALK?” Cory, my teammate and first baseman asks. He’s the resident dad in the clubhouse, the guy everyone seems to go to when they need the proverbial pat on the back.

I lean back on the leather couch in the locker room and say, “Not really, but I don’t think you’re going to let me get away with that answer, are you?”

He opens a bag of shelled seeds and says, “I’m feeling particularly annoying today, so probably not.”

“Figured.” I sigh and tangle my hands together on my lap. “Remember my friend Indie I told you about?”

“Yeah, the soccer player, right? You guys met in college?”

“That’s her. Well, I just found out yesterday that she’s back in Chicago. Got a coaching job at Brentwood.”

“Oh shit. Weren’t you guys an item?”

“No, not really,” I say, hating the words that are about to come out of my mouth, because it feels like it cheapens what we have. “We were best friends . . . *and* exclusive fuck buddies.”

“Romantic,” Cory says with a teasing tone.

“Yeah, not really. We’ve always been off and on, almost like we were stringing each other along until last year, when she showed up to a dinner with a fiancé.”

“Oh fuck, really?” Cory asks, leaning in. “So, is she married?”

I shake my head. “No. She wasn’t even in love with the guy. They were engaged because she was pregnant.” I grip the arm of the chair, remembering what she said last night. “She had a miscarriage. The fuckhead pushed her and she flew into a coffee table, lost the baby a few days later.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Cory asks, his anger spiking just like mine.

“Honestly, I can’t talk about that part, because I’ll black out in rage.” I take deep breath, taking a second to center myself. “They broke up, her career was over, and she got a job at Brentwood coaching the men’s soccer team.”

“Damn, good for her. Let me guess, you saw her?”

“Last night.” I nod. “I was pissed she didn’t tell me she was in Chicago and even more pissed when she didn’t text me her address after I told her we needed to talk. I messaged her mom and got her address. Let’s just say the evening didn’t start off great, but then it ended in . . .” I shake my head, “Hell, it ended in the best way possible.”

“Ah, you got some.”

I chuckle. “We reconnected.”

“And judging by the sour look on your face, she freaked out this morning?”

“Yup,” I say with a pop. “Big time. Left before we could even talk. I barely had my eyes open. She apologized, said it was a mistake, and took off.”

“A mistake? Damn, that’s rough, man.”

“Yep.” *I’m a man of many words today.*

“And that’s where you left things?”

“Yeah.” I prop my legs up on the coffee table in front of me, slinking into my seat. “Now I have this empty ache in the middle of my chest, and I’m hell, I’m feeling depressed, man. Even though Maddox knows more about our relationship, I don’t want to tell him. You and I both know he’s going through his own shit with Kinsley . . . and is currently unstable. I don’t know what to fucking do.”

“You said you have this ache in the middle of your chest.” He looks to the side and then finds my eyes again, “Dude, are you in love with her?”

I look at my hands, noticing the calluses on my left hand from the seams of the ball I’ve rubbed against for years. Am I in love?

I blow out a long breath. “I think I’ve been in love with her for a very long time, but couldn’t admit it to myself.” My eyes find Cory’s as I say, “She’s all I fucking want, all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Tell her how you feel.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“How? You only have everything to gain by telling her you love her. Trust me, I know. I blew up on Natalie, broke up with her for no reason, and I fucking groveled my way back into her life by telling her how I felt.”

“But Natalie was never afraid of commitment. Indie is terrified of it.”

“Is she?” Cory raises an eyebrow. “Because from where I’m sitting, she’s committed to having a lifelong relationship with you and she committed to marrying someone on the premise of having a baby together. I don’t think she fears commitment. I think she might fear the magnitude of the love she harbors for you.”

“Man, you don’t know that.”

“I don’t.” He picks up his water bottle and takes a drink. “But from what you told me about her, I would wager that she has some pretty strong feelings for you and has no idea how to face them head-on.” He smiles at me. “Time to not take no for an answer, Linc. Fight for what you want. If you don’t, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. I wouldn’t take long to think about it. She’s a female coach for a men’s team. She’s going to get a lot of press and there will be people knocking on her door. Don’t miss your opportunity to finally make your move.”

I drag both of my hands down my face. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Then that means you’re about to do the right thing. Isn’t love fun?” He tosses more seeds into his mouth and smiles.



HOPPING on my feet a few times, I rub my hands over my knuckles and then wrap them on the wood door in front of me.

Christ, am I really going to do this?

The door unlocks, and I don't bolt.

I guess I'm doing this.

The door opens and I'm greeted by red, bloodshot, and teary eyes. There's no denying what she was doing right before answering the door.

"Lincoln, it's late."

"I couldn't wait," I say, knowing damn well it's late. I couldn't come visit her until after our game. "Can we talk?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

I press my hand against the wood of the door. "Do not shut this door on me. After everything we've been through, do not shut this door on me."

Her lip trembles and she nods, opening the door for me to step in. I shut it behind me and she makes her way over to the living room where she curls up on the couch and brings her knees in close to her chest. A tear falls down her cheek and she quickly wipes it away, her oversized sweater acting as a tissue.

"Why are you crying, Indie?"

She leans her head against the couch and looks past my shoulder, her lip trembling again. I can see she's trying to compose herself, so I give her time. I have all the goddamn time in the world to make this right. I'm in no rush now that I'm here.

Finally, she says, "I've made some mistakes in my life, mistakes that have shaped me to be the person I am today, but I think my biggest mistake, one I can never take back . . . is you."

Talk about a motherfucking gut punch.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

A really bad fucking idea by the way nausea rises up my throat.

I press my forearms to my thighs and clasp my hands together in front of me. "I don't really—"

"I'm not finished," she says, her eyes cast down.

Okay.

I watch as her breath evens out and finally, her gaze meets mine. "I should have known being *just* friends with you would never work out." She shakes her head. "I thought keeping you in my life as my friend would be enough, because I'd always have you. No matter what . . . I'd always have you. But then I didn't." More tears fall down her cheeks. "And if this last year has taught me anything, or last night for that matter, it's that I can't be friends with you, Lincoln."

Christ.

I suck in a sharp breath. Taking blow after blow. Cory was so fucking wrong.

“It feels impossible to be friends with you, when I’m . . . when I’m in love with you,” she says and my eyes shoot to hers. Did I just hear her correctly? Love? *She’s in love with me?* “And I know that’s not what we said this relationship was about. We put rules and limits on what we’re supposed to be, but I can’t have you coming over here, visiting with me, fucking me, and then leaving.” She catches a tear on her finger. “It’s too hard to walk away when all I want is to have you all to myself.” She sucks in a sob and steadies her breath. “I’m sorry, but I thought I should be honest with you.”

When she’s done, I move over to the couch and slide her legs over mine so I’m sitting right next to her, my arm draped over the back of the couch.

“Indie.” She doesn’t look at me but buries her head in her hands. I reach out and lift her chin. Tears stream down her face and I lean in closer, keeping her eyes on mine so she hears me loud and clear. “I am so in love with you, it’s painful. So fucking in love with you.”

She shakes her head, almost as if she can’t quite comprehend what I’m telling her.

“You don’t have to say that, Lincoln.”

“Hey, I listened to you, now it’s your turn to listen to me.” And now I know why I’m here. I know exactly what words need to be said. “If we’re talking about mistakes, I have a few. First, never pushing for more when I first met you. Then when I left after the draft, never asking if you would do long-distance with me. And every time we met up after that, never finding it within me to assess how I honestly felt about you. And when we met up for dinner, a year ago, never calling you and begging you to reconsider, to give me your heart instead. And then this morning, allowing you to walk out that door without telling you how much I love you. How much I don’t want to go through another goddamn day as *only* your friend. I want to be your man, your person, your goddamn everything.”

“You already are,” she says on a sniff. “You’re everything to me, Lincoln, and I’m so mad it took me this long to figure it out, to admit it.”

I grip her cheek, brush a tear away with my thumb. “Babe, it took me just as long.” I can feel my uneven breathing as I hold her close, our

foreheads touching. “I’m so fucking in love with you, Mayhem. Will you please, after all these years, go on a date with me?”

A bubble of a laugh falls past her lips as she lightly nods. “I don’t think I could ever say no to that.”

Gently, slowly, I lower my mouth to hers and capture her mouth with mine. Sweet and innocent, we move our mouths, finally closing our friendship chapter and turning us into so much more.

What started out as two meddling moms attempting to find love for their children, turned into the longest, but most brilliant love affair. And even though I hate to admit it, my mom picked right.

She picked so fucking right.

Indie is it for me. My one and only. My *forever* setup.

Epilogue

LINCOLN

“Three orders of potato skins?” Mom asks. “Are you insane?”

I lean back in my booth, looking at my two moms, who I met at Boondoggles for dinner. “Mom, I can afford it.”

She rolls her eyes. “I know you can afford it, but you know they don’t reheat well, despite what your mama might think.”

Mama stuffs her napkin in her Rebels shirt and says, “I am more than happy to take these down with my son. I haven’t had these potato skins in a really long time and didn’t eat lunch. I’m ready.”

“Self-respect, Michelle,” Mom says while fluffing her napkin on her lap. “So, to what do we owe—”

“Hey, I didn’t know you were going to be here,” I call out to a very unsurprised but rather smirking Indie, whose mom is trailing behind her, hands over her ears. Beth hates Boondoggles, so it was a feat for Indie to get her to come.

“Lincoln, is that you?” she asks, pointing her finger at me. “Wow, look at you.” Indie and her mom come up to our high-rise table. We give each other a quick side hug and then she pulls away.

“Beth, you remember my mom, Laura, right? And this is my mama, Michelle.”

Confused and possibly a little scared, the meddling moms all exchange timid hellos.

“Crazy running into you here,” I say.

“Yeah, I was just telling my mom, who started her own salon, that she needs a website.”

“No way. Well, my moms just finished up a job. Maybe”—I point to the three of them—“maybe you guys should, you know, talk or something.”

“Oh honey, that’s not necessary,” Indie’s mom says, looking startled and very unsure. It takes everything in me not to bust out in laughter.

“Don’t be silly. My moms wouldn’t mind helping. Here, take my seat, we just ordered potato skins, so you can talk over spuds.”

My mom smiles. “Lincoln, honey, I thought you were just here for the night.”

“But, Mom, it’s not every day you see an old friend.” I move out of my seat and Indie forces her mom to sit down.

All three pairs of eyes look at us confused, and that’s when I wrap my arm around Indie’s shoulders and say, “I think I’m going to take my girlfriend to the arcade and play some games. What do you say, babe?”

She looks up at me with a sweet smile. “Kicking my boyfriend’s ass at air hockey seems like a perfect night.” I bend down and kiss her, totally not sick of her calling me her boyfriend.

We turn to walk away when all three moms call out, “Hold on a second.”

Indie and I laugh as we turn around.

Mom has her hand clutched to her chest as she asks, “You two are dating?”

I nod. “For a few months now.” I kiss the side of Indie’s head. “Head over cleats in love with this girl.”

“Oh, dear Jesus,” Beth says, fanning herself with a drink menu. “Seriously?”

Indie nods at her mom. “Yeah, really, truly in love with this guy.” She squeezes me tightly and our moms all stare up at us, tears in their eyes—even Mama.

“Looks like for the first time, your meddling actually paid off.” I wink and say, “Call us when the potato skins get here. We’ll celebrate after I beat this girl in air hockey.”

Beth claps her hands together.

Mama holds up her drink to me and then takes a sip.

And Mom . . . well, she just gives me a tearful smile and watches us walk away.

Who knew a setup by two nosey moms would end in a happily ever after? I didn't . . . but I'm so fucking glad it did.

THE END

DO you want to find out what the future holds for Lincoln and Indie? Click [HERE](#)

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Excerpt - The Locker Room

EMORY

Rule number one in college: don't lose your friends at a house party . . . especially when you're drunk.

Technically this is a loft party though, so . . . am I really breaking the rule?

My head falls back against the wall, my empty red cup rests in my hand and is clutched to my chest as I scan the giant loft space on the third floor of a renovated warehouse. I climbed up a fire escape in heels to get here, risked the safety of my ankles to be a part of something special, because apparently this is the place to be on the weekends.

The Baseball Loft.

As I've been told by my best friends, this is where you earn a golden ticket invitation to the exclusive but highly sought-after locker room—where dreams come true.

Supposedly.

Don't take my word for it.

But rumor on the street is: the best orgasms take place in the Brentwood Baseball locker room. Legends say one girl had a five-minute orgasm on the tile floors of the shower.

Five-minute orgasm in exchange for a week's worth of ringworm. Not sure I'm interested.

But alas, I'm here, drunk off my ass, boobs practically spilling out of my shirt, and my mascara slowly melting off my eyelashes and onto my

face, morphing me from new-in-town college girl, to trash panda from the raccoon clan.

“Dottie, Lindsay,” I say weakly, moving my head from side to side. “Where art thou?”

“You need help?” a deep voice slurs next to me.

I look to my right through very blurry vision and make out what I’m going to assume is an incredibly attractive man. But then again, I’m drunk—the whole *mascara melting off my eyes* in full swing—and I’ve been fooled once before.

But hey, I think those are blue eyes. Can’t go wrong with that . . . reasoning that will be thought better of in the morning.

“Have you seen Dottie or Lindsay?”

“Can’t say that I have,” he answers, resting against the wall with me.

“Damn it. I think they’re making out with some baseball players. Have you seen any of those around?”

“Baseball players?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod, shutting my eyes for a second but then shooting them back open when I feel myself wobble to the side. The guy catches me by the hand before I topple over, but thanks to his alcohol intake, he’s not steady enough to hold us up and . . . *timber* . . . we fall to the couch next to me.

“Whoa, great placement of furniture,” I say, as the guy topples on top of me.

“Damn near saved our lives.”

I rub my face against the scratchy and worn-out fabric. “How many people do you think have had sex on this thing?”

“Probably less than what you’re thinking.”

The couch is deep, giving me enough room to lie on my side with the guy in front of me, so we’re both facing each other. He smells nice, like vodka and cupcakes.

“So, have you seen any baseball players around? I’m looking for my friends.”

“Nah, but if you see any, let me know. I can’t find my room.”

“You live here?” I ask, eyes wide.

“Yup,” he answers, enunciating the P. “For two years now.”

“And you don’t remember where your room is?”

“It has a yellow door. If the damn room would stop spinning I’d be able to find it.”

“Well . . . maybe if we find your room, we’ll find my friends,” I say, my drunk mind making complete sense.

“That’s a great idea.” He rolls off the couch and then stands to his feet, wobbling from side to side as he holds out his hand to me.

Without even blinking, I take it in mine and let him help me to my feet. “Yellow door, let’s go,” I say, raising my crumpled cup to the air.

“We’re on the move.” He keeps my hand clasped in his and we stumble together past beer pong, people making out against walls, the kitchen, to an open space full of doors. “Yellow door, do you see one?”

I blink a few times and then see a flash of sunshine. “There.” I point with force. “Yellow, right there.”

His head snaps to where I’m pointing. A beam of light illuminates the color of the door, making it seem like we’re about to walk right into the sun. I’m a little chilly, so I welcome the heat.

“Fuck, there it is. You’re good.” Together, we make our way to the door, pushing past a few laughing people and into the quiet den of his room.

Black walls, white trim, one window looking out over the water; the guy has a nice place. I scan the space, looking for any sign of my friends but come up short, only finding a large bed with a black comforter, a metal-looking desk, and a large white dresser with a giant TV mounted on top.

Not a friend in sight but what a cozy spot to take a little rest.

“I don’t see my friends.”

He looks around. “I don’t either, but fuck, my bed.” He throws his arms out to the side and bellyflops on the mattress, bouncing a few times before settling his head on his pillow.

I stare at him a few moments. Tight jeans shaping his ass and thighs, white shirt that shows off every muscle in his back, handsome face. Not a bad view. But that’s not what’s enticing me to move forward. It’s the warm and fluffy-looking pillow right next to the guy.

Like a cloud calling my name . . . *Emory, come here, Emory, rest your head on me.* I make one of the best decisions of my life.

Don’t mind if I do.

I propel my body forward like a dolphin slicing through the water and flop down on the mattress, resting my head right on top of pure heaven.

Oh, that’s nice.

Real nice.

Smells like fresh soap and feels like my head is being hugged by cotton.
See, best decision I ever made.

The mattress shifts next to me, and I peep my eyes open to see the guy with the nice ass hovering over me. He glances down with heavy lids and then back up at me.

I smile lazily up at him, a little nervous that I'm puckering my lips, but honestly, I can't be in control of anything my body is doing right now.

He's about to tell me I'm the most luscious and beautifully smelling girl he's ever met—like a field of flowers on an epic spring day—

“Uh, your boob popped out of your shirt.” He points at my chest. *What now?* Spring flower—

That's no spring flower compliment.

I must be completely and utterly exhausted, because instead of reaching up to stuff the wayward boob back in my shirt, I cry out, “Oh, no,” but make no attempt to fix the problem.

“Does it usually do that?” he asks, looking very concerned for me. “Try to run away?”

I shake my head, the softness of the pillow making my eyes heavy. “No, this is the first time the little lady tried to escape.” Barely able to lift my hand, I tap his forearm and say, “Be a dear and lecture the poor thing and stuff it back into place.”

“I've never lectured a boob before.”

“You got this. You're a strong, confident man with a commanding voice. Give that breast a berating.” When he just continues to stare at me, I shift my head to the side and rub my cheek against the smooth fabric of the pillowcase. “Don't be shy,” I encourage him. “Just lift it up and shove it back in.”

He rests his head next to mine, the mattress shifting and bouncing with his movements. Still staring at my boob, he reaches up and cups it in his hand. “Heavy,” he says quietly.

How sweet.

And utterly romantic.

I've never been told I have a heavy boob, but by God, it makes me smile. Good job growing, Emory.

His abnormal but delightful compliment is the last thing I remember before I drift off and fall into a deep slumber.

It's the last thing I remember before I wake up in the middle of the night in a stranger's room, passed out with my boob in said stranger's hand. *So much for tucking her back in.*

Welcome to Brentwood U.

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