



*I dare her to give me a shot...*

**I DARE**  
**YOU**

*Wall Street Journal* Bestselling Author

**ILSA MADDEN-MILLS**

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# DEDICATION

This book is for all the cool nerd girls in the world, especially the ones who love hot football guys, cats, *Star Wars*, *The Princess Bride*, *He-Man*, and, of course, it goes without saying...donuts, cookies, and pecan pie.

**From *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Ilsa Madden-Mills comes a brand-new heartfelt, sexy contemporary romance about a smokin' hot football player and the good girl he falls for...**

# I DARE YOU

Badass Athlete: **I dare you to...**  
Delaney Shaw: **Who is this?**

The late-night text is random, but “Badass Athlete” sure seems to know who she is...

Delaney Shaw.  
Good girl.  
Lover of fluffy kitties and Star Wars.  
Curious.

*His dare?* Spend one night in his bed—a night he promises will be unforgettable—and she can solve the mystery of who he is.

She knows she shouldn't, but what else is she going to do with her boring Valentine's Day?

One sexy hook-up later, her mind is blown and the secret's out.

Maverick Monroe.  
Bad boy.  
The most talented college football player in the country.  
*Just ask him.*

Too bad for him Delaney's sworn off dating athletes forever after her last

heartbreak.

But Maverick wants more than one night and refuses to give up on winning Delaney's heart. She isn't one to be fazed by a set of broad shoulders.

Will the bad boy land the good girl or will the secrets they keep from each other separate them forever?



# PROLOGUE

*Freshman year*

***Delaney***

Welcome to Magnolia, Mississippi, where locusts are as big as your hand and iced tea comes with a double helping of sugar.

It's also home to the best damn annual bonfire party at prestigious Waylon University, which is currently happening right now in the middle of a cotton field.

But...

I shouldn't even be at this party.

It's mostly for Greeks and jocks and popular people, yet here I am, a mere freshman, hanging out with my bubbly redheaded roommate, Skye.

"See?" she says as we take in the bonfire. "Isn't this better than watching cat videos on a Saturday night? What do you want to do first?"

I sigh, feeling nervous. Ever since I moved here from North Carolina, I've been pushing myself to try new things. Might as well put a crazy college party on that list. "Let's get a drink."

She claps and excitedly replies, "Done. Alcohol at two o'clock." We weave through the crowd, headed in that direction, and eventually we reach the bar, which is really just a long collapsible table someone set up. On top are various bottles of alcohol, and I grab the Fireball to pour shots. I've just tossed mine back and set down my cup when a prickling sensation washes over me, giving me goose bumps.

My gaze moves across the crowd, stopping on a tall guy with dark blond hair, broad shoulders, and a cocky smile. *Aha*. He's been staring at me, and now that he's caught, he raises his glass as a half-grin crosses his face.

I blush wildly as I adjust my black cat-eye glasses. I'm not used to such blatant male attention.

Skye—who's followed the trajectory of my gaze—spits out part of her

drink. “Oh my God, do you know who that is?”

“Obviously I should,” I say dryly.

Her mouth flops open. “You really need to get out more.”

My eyes drift back to him but keep moving as if I’m not staring. “So who is Mr. Hottie McParty Pants?”

“If you don’t know him, you don’t deserve to know. But, he’s H-O-T—like Chris Hemsworth hot. I dare you to flirt with him.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, knowing full well that for some reason, I can’t resist a dare. Normally rather reserved, a dare gives me permission to be someone I’m not.

So does Fireball. I sling back another shot.

“I’ll bring you a donut every day for a week if you flirt with him,” she adds, watching me.

My ears perk up. “The ones with edible glitter?”

She nods, and I toss a quick glance back to him. Our eyes collide again, and a zing of connection fires between us. He has a strong, handsome face and a stance that has masculine written all over it. A smile tips up his full sensuous lips, and—

Two brunettes—twins, no less—approach him, one on either side, and wrap their arms around his waist. He smiles down at them. *Oh. Well then.*

I turn back to Skye and frown. “Player. Not interested.”

She waves her hands in my face. “He likes you—I saw it on his face.”

I snort. “Probably gas pains. Your dare is not accepted.”

We hear our names being called from the other side of the party and turn to take in the helmet-haired Martha approaching us, which is taking some time due to the fact that she’s wearing stilettos and a slinky halter dress. She carefully picks her way through the crowd, nudging people out of her way—sometimes rudely—as she focuses on us. *Great.*

“Incoming mean girl,” I mutter under my breath.

Like us, Martha Burrows is a freshman and lives on our floor. Rather full of herself, she announced within a week of meeting us that she’d no longer answer to anything but *Muffin*, a nickname she’d given herself.

She eyes us both, a look of superiority on her pretty face. “I didn’t know you two were invited to this little shindig. Obviously, I know all the right people, so I’m always invited.” Her gaze zeroes in on my outfit and she rears back. “What on earth are you wearing, Nerd Girl?”

“Clothes.” I stiffen at her name for me as I tug on my fitted Star Wars

shirt and the pleated red miniskirt I made from a man's shirt. My long pale blonde hair is up in curled pigtails, and I went a bit heavy-handed with the shimmery eye shadow and red lipstick. It's not your typical look for WU—which is anything monogrammed—but I'm learning to ignore the raised eyebrows.

Skye, the peacemaker among us three, clears her throat and nods her head at the guy who's been staring. "Delaney has an admirer, but she doesn't know who he is."

Martha-Muffin follows Skye's gaze, eyeballing the mystery man over my shoulder. She gives me an exasperated look. "That's Maverick Monroe, you idiot. He's the biggest football star in Mississippi and the freshman recruit of the year. Word is, though, girls like you aren't his type—not at all." Her hand flicks a stiff honey-colored curl over her shoulder.

My teeth grind together. "Martha, if you think I care what you think about me and whether or not a quasi-famous football player is interested in me, then you are confused."

Her lips tighten. "It's *Muffin* now, and why do you have to use such big words? What does *quasi* even mean?" is her cutting reply.

Skye's eyes get as big as saucers, and I assume it's because Martha-Muffin and I are about to finally have it out. I can't stand her, and she can't stand me. We just...clash.

But that isn't what has Skye in such a titter.

She points over my shoulder, and I get it.

It's the person standing behind me, the one I can't see. I feel a nervous sneeze coming on and—*thank God*—I somehow push it down.

A husky voice reaches my ears. "*Quasi* means *seemingly* or *supposedly*. What she means is I'm probably not a famous football player but rather one that's been highly touted but is without merit."

*Oh, shit.* The voice is rich and smooth with just enough southern drawl to make a girl swoon. He also sounds halfway intelligent.

I turn around slowly. Mr. Tall, Blond, and Football is right in front of me wearing a cocky smile.

*How in the hell did he get over here so fast?*

You know that moment when everything stops and the next breath you take is the first one of the rest of your life? That's what it feels like as Maverick Monroe stares at me with his piercing blue eyes.

I glance down and take in the sculpted chest and hard biceps.

I look back up and see a chiseled jawline that's defined and lined with a slight scruff. I see the thin pink scar that slices through his left eyebrow, and it does nothing to detract from his appeal.

He's perfection.

He's air.

Which I desperately need right now, because I can't breathe.

He smirks, as if reading my mind, and I scramble to pull myself together. Someone calls his name—it's a girl's voice, probably one of those twins—but he doesn't budge.

His eyes rove over my skirt, glasses, and lips. "The question is...do you even know what makes a good football player?"

"Nice hands?"

His lips twitch. "Hardly."

"A tight end?" I smirk, feeling sassy...which is weird. I don't know who I am right now, but it's like my mouth has a life of its own, saying things I normally wouldn't.

Martha-Muffin chokes on her drink at my remark and Skye watches me with glee, clearly excited that I have the attention of someone who is apparently *very* important at Waylon.

I put my hand on my hip. "The question is...why do I need to know?"

"You don't. All you need to know is I'm the best."

I suck in a little breath at his arrogance.

A guy walks past us and claps him on the shoulder. "Badass game last week, Mav. Rock on."

"Thanks, man." Maverick acknowledges the compliment and lifts his chin, his eyes never straying from mine.

"What position do you play?" I ask. "Quarterback?"

He smirks. "Middle linebacker—defense."

"Sounds fancy."

He laughs.

Skye, who's been eavesdropping unabashedly, sighs with a dreamy expression on her face. "His stats are the best in the country." She clears her throat. "I-I only know that because my brother is a huge fan, I swear."

"Hi, Maverick," Martha-Muffin says as she edges closer to him, nudging me out of the way with her sharp shoulders. "Remember me?"

He focuses on her. “No.”

She glowers. “I was in your dorm room with your roommate last week. You said *hello* to me.”

He shrugs. “A lot of girls come through. I can’t remember them all.”

*Oh. My. God.* He is arrogant, but I like how he just shut her down.

Martha-Muffin’s face reddens and she mutters something under her breath, flips around, and flounces off. Good riddance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Skye is drifting away too, giving me a thumbs-up.

*Whatever. I am not going to flirt with this guy...am I?*

He’s definitely got something about him, something that makes my body buzz. I tilt my chin up, taking in how tall he is. He has to be at least six-four.

His gaze drifts over my face. “You know there’s a legend here at Waylon about our famous bonfire party?”

“Oh?”

He smiles, a flash of white on his handsome face. “Legend says the first person you kiss at the party is the one you’ll never forget. It might be years later, and still their face is the one you dream about.”

“Sounds like hocus-pocus.”

He lifts that mesmerizing left eyebrow. “I like to believe in legends—after all, I am one.”

I smirk. “Probably a game made up by some frat-boy-slash-jock wanting to kiss all the girls.”

He pauses for a moment as if thinking, and then he steps in closer, so close that I can see the varying shades of blue around his pupils. “May I?”

My heart does somersaults.

“May you what?” I ask, my voice low, but I know what he wants. My body is already leaning toward him, wanting it too.

“This.” He kisses me, an almost imperceptible touch as he brushes his full lips against mine. The contact of our mouths is electric, sparks of fire skating along my skin.

As if from a distance, I hear someone calling his name. It’s a female, and she’s pissed.

It’s one of the twins probably.

And I’m jealous.

But, I don’t look. We pull away, and I stare at him as he stares right back.

A stillness settles over the party, although I don't think anything's actually changed. The music is still playing. People are still talking. Beers are being passed around.

Yet...

We're connected.

Two stars in the black velvet sky.

Two ships passing in the night.

*Oh, fuck, stop the nonsense*, I tell myself.

"What was that?" I ask, my voice breathless.

"That's your first kiss of the bonfire. Now you'll never forget me."

And then, before I can think of a reply, he's gone.

I watch him go back to the twins, frustration coiling inside of me as I exhale.

It would be two years before I kissed him again.

# CHAPTER 1

## *Delaney*

It's Valentine's Day evening, and my social life is worse than when I was a brace-faced freshman at William Henry Prep School in Charlotte, North Carolina. At least back then one of the geeks from my math class gave me a tiny heart-shaped box of stale chocolates and a brown teddy bear. All I have this year is a broken heart, a bottle of premium vodka, and an eighties horror movie.

Skye is out having fun, and I'm glad for her. She left the off-campus house we share earlier for a date with her boyfriend, Tyler, and here I sit... languishing in yoga pants and crying into my popcorn.

I send a longing glance at my phone, waiting for it to buzz with a call or text from someone who cares about me...but it remains silent, mocking me as I press myself into the worn brown leather of the sofa. I hate feeling sorry for myself, but sometimes it gets to me that I don't have any family since my Nana—the person who raised me—passed right before I left for college.

*God. I'm lonely.*

My nose takes a whiff of the blanket that's pulled up to my face, and I swear I still smell leftover hints of my ex's spicy cologne. Alex is a special teams kicker for the football team at Waylon, and we'd been together since we met in a literature class freshman year. He was my first, the person I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with, and for the past year, part of me half-expected him to propose. Instead, he cheated.

I take a sip of Grey Goose straight from the bottle, eyeing it balefully. At least he had great taste in vodka.

I lift the bottle in the air, toasting. "Happy Valentine's Day, Alex, wherever you are. I hope Martha-Muffin can give you what I couldn't—ideally, the clap."

Yep, my arch nemesis from freshman year slept with my boyfriend, and the worst part was I'd walked in on them in his dorm room.

Feeling that familiar melancholy of being alone creep in, I turn my attention back to the movie. Eerie, spooky music escalates from the surround sound speakers as a girl runs through a forest, her head twisting as she looks to see if she's being followed. Terror is stamped on her face.

It was on Skye's dare that I chose this particular flick, and part of me knows she really just wants me to be preoccupied on a night when I'm alone.

The popcorn is still warm from the microwave as I pop some in my mouth and chew rather furiously, watching as the heroine on the screen is suddenly accosted by a burly figure with a mask. I scream—even though I knew it was coming—sending fluffy white kernels flying. Han Solo, my cat, stands and hisses at me, his black and white fur sticking straight out. I've upended him from his comfy position on the couch.

"Sorry, little man."

Screw the dare. I'll take her punishment, which would no doubt be inventive. The last time I lost, she made me stand on a table in the cafeteria and call out, "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard."

I scramble for the remote and mute it, wondering if it counts if I watch without the sound on. I *am* watching it, just minus all the bloodcurdling screams and spine-tingling music.

"Give me *Sixteen Candles* or *The Goonies* any freaking day—those are the best of the eighties," I mutter under my breath as I stare down at Han. "You agree?"

His head cocks ever so slightly. He gets me. I know he does.

I exhale and sit back down, tucking my legs underneath me as I lean my head back against the couch.

*Ping!*

My phone goes off with a text and I straighten up to retrieve it from the table.

My brow furrows at the unknown number. Usually those are telemarketers or scammers...but it's a local prefix.

I read the text. **Hey, sexy. I'm glad I have a library card because I was checking you out today. Do you have a Band-Aid? Because I scraped my knee falling for you.**

Two things happen at once: I half-giggle and half-snort, causing a coughing fit I quickly recover from. I *was* in the library this morning before my upper level psychology class to work on a paper, but I didn't notice



anyone staring at me. Must be my bestie pulling a prank on me with someone else's phone.

I quickly type a response. **Skye? What happened to your date with Tyler?**

It's entirely possible she's feeling sorry for me, has skipped out for a minute to check on me, and is using Tyler's phone. Any minute now she's going to ask if I'm still watching Michael Myers.

Another text comes in. **I'm not on a date and I don't know a Skye. Is she as hot as you?**

**Stop messing around,** I send. **I've had a tiny bit of vodka...okay, a lot. I'm a dude. Swear to baby Jesus.**

My brow wrinkles. Is it possible this isn't Skye? But then who is it?

**How did you get this number?** I type out.

**You put up a listing on the Help Wanted board in the student center a while back. I saw you and got the number. I saw you again today at the library so it must be a sign for us to get together. Wanna hook up, babe?**

*Babe?*

*Hook up?*

*What an assuming ass,* I think as mortification shoots through me. No one has answered the listing I put up looking for a male partner to take a salsa class with me. Thankfully, the posting didn't have my name on it (*so embarrassing*), just my phone number, and I've been meaning to take it down, but between working at the library and class, I haven't found the time. I was in a weak place when the idea struck, and now, looking back, it reeks of desperation from a girl who'd recently been cheated on and was lonely.

I glare at the phone as if the jerkwad on the other side can actually see me.

**I'm not your personal Tinder,** I reply, my fingers flying across the screen. **Go find someone else to harass.**

Nothing comes through for the next fifteen minutes as I stare blindly at the television, not really seeing anything, just fuming, my mind racing through possibilities of who saw me posting the ad. Hundreds of students pass through every day, and it could have been anyone. I think back to my morning study session today at the library, trying to recall if anyone was watching me, but I was hyper-focused (as usual) and kept my head down.

I should probably block this number.

A new text pings.

**Hey, look, I'm sorry. This isn't the person with the horrible pick-up lines and offer of sex who first texted you. Those messages were from my asshole friend who took my phone and texted you without my knowledge. I have it back now so we're cool, right? Sorry for the inconvenience and I hope you find a salsa partner. Later.**

Finally, a polite text—except for the goodbye part, because I wasn't done talking. I still want to know who these two people are. Part of me wonders if it's Alex, feeling me out, maybe seeing if I've moved on. He has been texting me, trying to engage me in a dialogue, but I've ignored him. This doesn't seem like his style though.

**Hold your horses, stalker. Who are you?**

Seconds tick by and I can see the dots on the screen indicating he's replying. I'm picturing a loser at a frat house, the first one to fall asleep, and instead of drawing a giant dick on his forehead, they stole his phone and texted random girls.

**My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.**

I laugh under my breath at the iconic movie reference and part of me relaxes. **Good one**, I text.

**You're a fan of *The Princess Bride*?**

**One of my favorites. I even have a t-shirt with Buttercup and Westley on it**, I type, referring to the two main characters.

**I'll remember that.**

**Is that why you're texting me on Valentine's Day? To talk about *The Princess Bride*? Are you lonely?** My fingers move quickly, feeling comforted that I'm not the only one who's a romance dud on the holiday of love.

**I'm texting you because my friend was a jerk. He doesn't mean to be; he just thinks we should hook up.**

Not going to touch that comment.

**So where are you right now? Dorm? Frat party? Off-campus strip club?** My detective cap is on and I'm determined to figure out who this guy is. My mind goes back to a rather geeky, thin guy who hangs out in the romance section at the library. He's given me a few lingering glances when I happen to walk past him.

**I'm in bed**, he says.

**Alone?** I'm being bolder than usual.

**Yes. You?**

I'm hesitant about responding. After all, he could be a serial killer, but I don't get that vibe, and I trust my instincts.

**Just me and my cat, a scary movie, and a bottle of vodka—hell of a way to spend V-Day.**

At least two minutes go by—a damn long time in the world of texting—and I wonder if he's left or grown bored of me. Chewing on my bottom lip, I'm in the middle of chastising myself for revealing as much as I have when a new message comes in.

**Is it crazy and weird that we're talking and you don't know who I am?**

**Do you know who I am?** I ask, adjusting my cat-eye glasses on my nose. If he saw me put up the ad, he probably does. Waylon is small, with an enrollment of around six thousand, so it's likely we've seen each other or even had a class together.

**You're Delaney, a junior from North Carolina.**

My pulse kicks up as I feel my heart beating in my chest, but those are basic facts he could have gotten off my social media.

He sends another text. **Truth: I think you're gorgeous. We also know each other...sorta.**

*He thinks I'm gorgeous?* My bruised ego is flattered, and I shoot a look at Han. "Did it just get a little hot in here or is that the vodka talking?" He rolls his eyes and flounces off to the kitchen. "Are you saying I've had too much?" I call after him, but he pointedly ignores me by not turning around.

I stare down at my phone, wondering what else to say. I should probably end this, but I feel an odd connection with my new texting partner.

I could talk to a random guy.

I want to.

*Do it, Delaney.* I mentally dare myself.

**Are you still there?** he says. **Did I go too far? I tend to do that. I should just apologize in advance for anything I'm about to say or do.**

He hasn't gone too far. My interest is piqued. **So who are you?**

**I'm a badass athlete.**

I roll my eyes. **So you play a sport here at Waylon?**

**Yes.**

*Crap.* My heart does a little sputter and takes a nosedive—it's likely he knows Alex. The athletic dorm is situated on the west side of campus, and most of the players reside there. Football, baseball, and wrestling take up one side of Byrd Hall, while soccer, volleyball, tennis, and the minor sports occupy the other.

I purse my lips. **Which sport? I've sworn off football for the moment.**

**Let's keep that a secret, but if you need a name, you can call me He-Man.**

**And I'll be She-Ra?**

His reply is swift. **Hell no—they were siblings. Pick another name, something that suits you.**

**Does He-Man suit you? I type. Do you live at Castle Grayskull? Are you fighting Skeletor?**

**Damn straight. I kick his ass every day.**

I grin. **You're very serious about this. I'm starting to wonder if you might be crazy.**

**Just pick.**

**Princess Leia.**

**Perfect,** he replies. **I'm picturing you with cinnamon buns on your head.**

I giggle. **I'm picturing you as a muscled blond dude with a brain the size of a walnut.**

**Don't be fooled by the dumb jock stereotypes.**

**And you shouldn't be fooled by my nerdy, quiet girl status. I'm a red-blooded woman with needs.** *God.* I can't believe I just typed that. I take another sip of vodka. **What I MEANT to say is I don't do athletes anymore, specifically football players.** *Okay, that sounded stupid.* Clearly, I need to stop texting.

Nothing comes back from him, and my mind wanders.

*Is he a football player?* That might explain why he's not telling me his name. The guys on the team have a serious bro code when it comes to not messing with the exes of the other players.

I decide to change the subject. **My roommate dared me to watch a scary movie tonight—alone. I was terrified.**

**Do you like dares?** he texts.

**Yes. It forces me to put myself out there.** It feels silly to say, but it's

easy to tell him because I don't *know* him. I'm beginning to see why anonymity is attractive.

I hear Han meowing at the back door. He has a litter box in the laundry room, but he's rather manly and likes to go out for an occasional romp around the yard to mark his territory. I like to go with him since my last cat disappeared on me a year ago, leaving me devastated.

**Hey, I need to go,** I tell my mystery man. **My cat needs me.**

**Wait, you said you take dares, right?**

**Yes.**

**I dare you to dream about me tonight.**

**What? Why?** I ask, my heart rate picking up a beat.

**Because I'll dream about you.**

*Oh.* I bite my lip and chew on it. **Like a sexy dream?**

**Is that what you want?**

*Yes.*

My body comes alive, every sense on alert. It feels like forever since someone kissed me or made my stomach feel fluttery inside.

I type out, **I need more details if I want to picture you in my head, especially since I don't know who you are.**

**You know I'm an athlete, I'm blond, and I like to swing my sword around.**

I giggle. **Where are we in the dream? Give me a setting. I need more.**

A few moments go by before he finally responds. **At a frat party. Everyone else is downstairs and you and I are upstairs in an empty bathroom.**

**Seriously?**

**This is my fantasy, Princess Leia. Just listen.**

**Fine. What are we doing?** The room feels warmer, and my fingers are sweaty as I type the words. I picture myself with a dark shadowy male in a tiny cramped bathroom. His hands cup my face as he stares down at me, his thumb tracing over my lips. He kisses me on the neck, sending lightning bolts of sensation across my skin.

My body heats to the point that I squirm around on the couch, fingers hovering over my phone.

**What do you think we're doing?** he texts.

**Kissing?**

**More.**

*Shit. Second base?*

**More.**

**Home run?** I send after a slight pause, feeling lightheaded. This has escalated and I'll probably regret it tomorrow, but for right now, I don't care.

**We're going at it against the wall, Princess Leia—hard. I like it hard.**

I picture it, the small bathroom hot with our proximity. My body arches toward his and he barely has his jeans shoved down yet he's inside me, sliding in and out as I moan...

*Shit.* This has gotten totally out of control. The feisty girl-power woman in me is rebelling at the suggestion of him taking me hard, but...*holy smokes*, I like it. My heart thunders.

**Are you still there?**

I type, **I have to go.**

**As you wish.**

With a flurry of motion, I turn my phone off and toss it down on the couch. He-Man or Badass Athlete or whatever he calls himself is trouble. I stare at my phone for a few more beats before dashing to the kitchen to drink down a glass of ice-cold water.

# CHAPTER 2

## *Delaney*

I am crazy late for class as I jog out of the student center coffee shop. Wearing my black fitted North Face jacket and carrying my huge backpack, I'm a bit unsteady on my feet. I clutch a large coffee in one hand and a donut in the other; both are essential, sweet sustenance and the best part of my morning, especially since I have to head to the farthest corner of campus for my class.

My head is bent down as I head out the glass doors, my gaze catching on a silver Porsche as it screeches to a halt in a primo parking spot near the entrance.

*Ugh.* It's Alex, and I do not want to see him.

My fists clench as I take a step back under the shadow of the portico, hoping I can skirt over to the right to miss him before he sees me. Even though he's constantly sending texts asking to meet up, I'm not ready. He's even shown up at my door a few times, but I either don't answer or I have Skye tell him I'm not there.

I'm the unluckiest person alive because before I can turn away, his brown eyes find my face. He pauses, his cheeks reddening. Maybe it's from the cold that's still hovering this Monday morning, or perhaps he's embarrassed. He freaking should be. I recall how he gave me a promise ring on our one-year anniversary, saying he couldn't wait to make it a real engagement ring. Obviously, his "promise" meant nothing.

He throws a tentative hand up as if he wants to wave, but then it falls flat and rests against his leg.

*Dammit.* I can't deal with this confrontation right now. Catching him in the act nearly broke me.

I flip around and barge down the path to get away from him.

His voice follows me, echoes of a timbre that used to send shivers down my spine. "Hey, Delaney! Wait up."

No. No matter how much I want to go off on him, I'm not stopping. My Converse eat up the sidewalk as I keep my head down and stare at my shoelaces. *Just keep going, just keep going—*

*Smack.*

I run straight into another body, one that smells faintly of something I can't put my finger on, something...exotic and dark.

All I catch in that brief moment is that he's tall, maybe six-four, with a chest of steel. My coffee sails through the air and lands upside down in the landscaping that lines the walk. I curse. I hadn't even taken a good long sip yet because it was too hot.

Then, just when I think I've managed to keep my donut safe, my feet get tangled and I stumble again into the blond Viking, pressing my donut into his broad chest.

"Dammit," is the gruff word that comes out of him as his hands reach out to my shoulders. His touch is firm and steady without overpowering me, as if he's completely aware of his strength and I'm merely a wisp in his grasp—well, maybe not a wisp. I'm five-ten, and I can hold my own around a big guy.

"Could you watch where you're going, please?" he says, a flare of annoyance in his tone.

"You're the one who plowed into me," I snap back. This is not true, but I'm angry.

I lift my head and meet piercing blue eyes that make me go hot all over. Clear and warm, they have a hint of gray around the iris, giving them a steely look. He blinks as he takes me in, raking his eyes over my messy bun, bulky coat, and leggings. I am not dressed to impress, my face bare of makeup save for quick swipes of lip gloss and mascara, my eyebrows in serious need of waxing. I tuck a strand of pale blonde hair that has fallen out of my bun behind my ear, groaning inwardly. Leave it to me to not only see my ex but run into the unattainable and enigmatic Maverick Monroe immediately after.

My first memory of him is freshman year at the fall bonfire party. He showed up with twins, one on each arm, but somehow he ended up kissing *me*, claiming some legend about the person you kiss at your first bonfire at Waylon being the one person you never forget.

*Yeah right.*

He had forgotten about me—obviously—and I'd moved on and met Alex,



who at the time was sweet and kind, not the cheating asshole he is now.

In the background, I hear Alex's voice from behind me, calling my name, but the warrior in front of me has all my attention. Maverick is the one football player our team couldn't live without. All hard muscle and strength, our defense is legendary in the Southeastern Conference, and it's largely because of him, the hottest jock ever who thinks he's the best thing since hairless cats. Maybe he is. I wouldn't know because I don't really know him. Sure, I know he has washboard abs and shoulders that make you bite your lip, but I don't know a thing about his personal life.

I'm not his type.

Sadly, he *is* my type, right down to his tight jeans, Converse, and tight black shirt that accentuates every indentation in his chest. Why isn't he wearing a coat in February? Probably too tough.

"You okay?" he asks, his gaze drifting over me.

I clear my throat. "Yeah."

"I suppose you're on your way to class." He checks his watch. "Which starts in five minutes. Looks like we're both going to be late. At least you didn't get any coffee on you." He smiles, a flash of white teeth peeking through full, pouty lips.

I tell my eyes to stop looking at him—because football guys can't be trusted, *dammit*—but there are three things my brain can't help but notice: Mexican food, Star Wars, and a tightly muscled athlete...and donuts. So, four.

I nod. "Yeah, you sit with your fan girls in the middle of the auditorium. I sit in the back." I sigh as he plucks the donut off his chest. "Sorry for bumping into you. I was in a hurry to get there, I guess."

"No worries. It gives us a chance to talk."

What? *Why does he want to talk to me?*

"About what?" I ask, but he doesn't answer me.

Instead, he stares down at the pink and purple sprinkles and edible glitter that dot his shirt. "That's a lot of sugar on my shirt. That can't be good for you."

"I...sorry. The sprinkles are a weakness, and I can't resist getting them. I always say I'm not going to because they have to be at least another fifty calories, but in the end, they're just so pretty." I point to the squashed donut. "That particular one is called the Unicorn because it has every kind of

sprinkle in the entire bakery on it.” I make the sign of the cross. “Rest in peace, sweet donut.”

I continue babbling about the different flavors of donuts as I hurriedly wipe at his shirt with my hands, flinging bits of dough to the sidewalk while secretly calculating if I have enough time to dash back in to grab another one.

His chest is—unsurprisingly—hard as iron, his pecs solid as my fingers fuss over him, and suddenly I’m feeling shy and self-conscious because I’ve touched him without permission. Sure, we briefly touched lips two years ago, but that seems like a lifetime ago.

I drop my hands to my sides and our eyes collide again.

A nervous sneeze threatens to erupt, and I push it down, my fingers clenching the straps of my backpack. *Don’t do it, Delaney!*

He clears his throat. “I was wondering if you wanted—”

Alex appears next to me. “Delaney! Are you deaf? I’ve been calling your name and you didn’t even turn around.” His eyes bounce from me to Maverick, taking in the donut, which is still in Maverick’s hand, along with my forlorn coffee cup sitting prettily atop an ornamental bush. “What happened?” he questions, his square face concerned, his eyes taking in my face slowly, lingering on my lips. He’s a handsome guy, lean and wiry, with soft eyes, auburn hair, and an easy smile that used to make me melt.

My entire body tightens. We haven’t spoken in a month, and now here he is, chasing me down across campus and looking at me like I’m a piece of candy.

“Aren’t you even going to talk to me?” Alex hitches up his backpack and takes another step toward me.

Maverick turns his gaze to me and throws up an eyebrow, as if prompting me to respond. *He’s rather desperate*, his expression seems to say.

*I’d rather eat snails than talk to him*, I say back with my face. I’m not sure he gets my body language message, but I could have sworn his lips twitched.

Either way, he says nothing, just slides his gaze from me to Alex.

I’m a bundle of nerves, and most of it has to do with Alex chasing after me, but some of it is because bumping into Maverick has me thinking back to Badass Athlete and what *he’s* doing right now. What if Maverick *is* Badass Athlete? They’re both blond and athletic...but what if Badass Athlete is just a tennis player? Or one of those volleyball dudes? There’s a ton of them.

Alex takes my hand, and because I'm so surprised that he's touching me, I let him. "Look, babe, I don't want to have this conversation in front of everyone"—he sends some side-eye toward Maverick, who hasn't moved an inch—"but do you want to meet me at Pluto's for coffee after your class? I know you love that place."

*Babe? Ugh.*

"You asked what happened—we bumped into each other," Maverick says rather abruptly as his eyes go from me to Alex, talking as if everything is perfectly normal. He's trying to change the topic, and I appreciate it. Maybe he reads the desperation on my face. "Actually, I was on my phone—an emergency with my sister, but everything's okay. I was looking down, and I guess Delaney was too." He shrugs. "Unfortunately, she lost her breakfast in the process, and I lost my phone."

"Did you drop it?" I ask, checking him out and not seeing one in his hands.

He nods, and it's the perfect reason to immediately retract my hand from Alex's and bend down to see if I can find it. Maverick does the same, and our shoulders bump together as we pillage through the azaleas.

"Thank you," I whisper to him as we scan the sidewalk.

"For what?" he whispers back.

"For defusing that...moment."

"Ah—you're still into him."

I scowl. "No, I'm not."

"Then why are you so flustered?"

"I'm not," I huff out under my breath. Scrambling around in the bushes is not the place to explain the dynamics of my relationship with Alex.

"You are. Is it because you bumped into me?" A small grin curls his lips, and I'm reminded of the arrogant football player I met at the bonfire.

I give him a glare. "No. I barely know you."

"We can change that." He cocks an eyebrow.

*Oh.*

*Well then.*

"I'm not one of your groupies. I don't do random hook-ups."

"Maybe I'm just trying to get to know you."

I give him a *get real* look. "Why? We barely talk."

His gaze flicks back to Alex, who's also looking for the phone a few feet

away. “Now that you’re not dating Alex...”

I let out a triumphant shout when I find the phone and hold it up over my head. Alex is glowering at us, and I think he has been since I pulled my hand out of his. I ignore him.

“Found it, and thankfully it didn’t get wet from my coffee.” Maverick and I stand together and do a little handoff where he gives me the crushed donut and I give him his phone. Our fingers graze, giving me a shiver of heat. I stick my hand in my coat pocket.

Alex touches my arm and shoots an annoyed look between Maverick and me. He’s holding my empty coffee cup, retrieved from the shrubbery, and he also grabbed my small desk calendar, which slipped out of my backpack because I left it half-unzipped in my rush to get out of the house this morning.

“Here, don’t you need this?” He waves it at me.

I give him a tight nod and shove it into my bag without looking at him.

“Are you okay? No bumps or bruises?” Alex asks, running his hands over my shoulders.

“No, I’m fine.” I straighten up and give my chin a little hitch to look at him. He’s not as tall as Maverick, about six-one.

A built-up sigh I hadn’t known I’d been holding in comes out, long and full of pent-up emotion. So what if Maverick is here, listening? It’s not like the entire campus doesn’t already know why we broke up. Gossip spreads like wildfire.

“What do you want, Alex? I have a class to get to.”

He stiffens as he glances briefly at Maverick, who is curiously *still* standing here. “I just wanted to see you, and...say hello. Now that football is over, I thought we could get together and talk about everything. I never had the chance to tell you I’m sorry in person for...everything.”

An image of him and Martha-Muffin in his bed flashes in my head. “You mean for cheating on me.” *Get it right, asshole.*

Alex closes his eyes briefly then takes my elbow and gently pulls me aside.

With a sigh, I let him. Maybe if he can say what he needs to, he’ll stop bothering me.

“Don’t be like this, Delaney,” he says in a lowered tone. “Muffin was a one-time thing. I swear I’ve never cheated on you before.”

My heart aches at the memory. I shake my head. “You...you are not the person I thought you were. We’re over, Alex.”

He bites his lip, a pleading look in his eyes. “I just want things to go back to the way they were.”

I take a deep breath, the urge to flee intense. “I have to get to class now.”

I turn back around, and Maverick is still standing over near the hedge, his face concerned as he watches us. He calls my name as I stomp past, but I keep going.

I just need away from both of them. Football guys can suck it.

I imagine both of their eyes on me and barely resist throwing up a one-finger salute, but those cocky athletes aren’t worth the energy it would take.

# CHAPTER 3

## *Delaney*

Being an introvert comes with tells. Sometimes I giggle uncontrollably, but more often than not, I sneeze when I'm nervous. When I'm faced with a situation that tilts my world on its axis, a tingling starts up in my nose, itching and building pressure until finally I sneeze. Senior year of high school, I got caught skipping school, and when the principal called me into his office, I sneezed so many times tears poured down my face. He let me go after stuffing a box of Kleenex into my hands. Sometimes it works in my favor and I can use it as an excuse to make a quick exit, but sometimes it can just be downright annoying.

Like now.

"May I sit here?" a deep voice says from behind me.

My body knows who it is before my brain does, and right away, I suppress the pre-sneeze sensation by inhaling sharply and holding my breath for five seconds.

I slip my glasses down a few notches as I look over to see Maverick staring at me. It's been a couple of days since the donut tragedy, and we've passed each other in the hallway a few times. Once I thought he said something, but I'm too awkward to stop and say, *Hey, did you just say something to me?* so I just ignored him.

We're inside the auditorium for our psych class, and my hands flutter around the desk next to me. "Do whatever you want. Be prepared, though—the lights are rather dim back here. Wouldn't want you to fall asleep."

Somehow he manages to settle his large frame into the cushioned seat and reclines it back, him and his long jean-clad legs taking up all the space next to me—and the air.

"Ah, I could never fall asleep here." He shoots me a grin, and I mentally put up my shields. *Don't get sucked into the hotness.*

I nod, making small talk. "Yeah, it's an interesting class."

“And you’re in it.”

My lashes flutter and I can’t bring myself to look at him. I just can’t. A normal person would ask what he meant by that, but this is me. I just clear my throat and scoot my leg over a little to give him more room.

*Just be cool, Delaney.*

“What are you drawing?” he asks, leaning over my shoulder.

I stop the doodling I’ve been doing in my notebook. The heat from his body is intoxicating, and I swallow. “Han Solo.”

His lips twitch. “Hate to break it to you, Buttercup, but Han Solo isn’t a cat. He’s the captain of the Millennium Falcon.”

“He’s also a scoundrel and a smuggler,” I add. “And who gave you permission to call me Buttercup?”

He waves that off and says, “I know he’s a scoundrel—it’s what makes him endearing. He’s a badass and also has the best friend ever, a seven-foot-tall Wookiee with a gun. He’s my favorite Star Wars character ever, next to Yoda.”

*Maverick likes Star Wars?* I just assumed he sat around and watched recordings of football games while guzzling beer with a girl on either side of him.

I nod and point to my doodle. “Named my cat after him, Han Solo #2.”

“What happened to #1? Killed by a light saber?”

I laugh. “I hope she ran off with a tomcat. She’s probably living in a tree house with her baby kittens right now.” I don’t tell him I cried for a month when she disappeared. I don’t actually know what happened to her, but imagining her with a sweet little family is the vision I like to keep close to my heart.

“Living the dream,” he says, and I flick my eyes at him. He’s hard to look at full-on, but I do, letting our eyes meet, my green and his pale blue. Almost iridescent, like a glittering opal, they contrast vividly with his tanned skin. His chin is firm and square with the hint of a cleft in the middle, and his hair is a mixture of dark blond with streaks of gold, painted by the sun from all those days of practicing football. I can’t see his scar from this angle but I know it’s there, on the other side of his face, that one little imperfection.

A slight smile curves his lips as his eyes warm, and I seize up, realizing I’ve been staring about ten seconds too long. That kind of stare means you either want to kill someone or sleep with them, and I’ve just crossed that line.

“Delaney?”

He says my name softly, and my mouth dries up as a shot of electricity shoots straight to my core.

*Good grief, ignore this weird hormonal reaction you have to Maverick.*

*Right. Now.*

“You okay?” he asks.

He thinks I’m an idiot.

“Fine, totally fine. How’s it going? How’s football? Oh, yeah, it’s over... but you’re still practicing, right? To get ready for next year and all? Can’t believe we’ll be seniors. Also can’t believe you decided to stay another year when you could have been drafted.” I’m rambling and my voice sounds breathy. I gulp in a deep inhalation to steady myself.

He scratches his head, a bemused expression on his face. “You’re funny.”

“I don’t talk much, but when I do, I make the most of it.”

He laughs. “I stayed because I wouldn’t have been picked early enough yet. I need to build my stats if I want the best deal. I have a buddy who went early and his contract sucked. I have another friend who waited it out and got a two million dollar deal.”

“It’s all about the money.”

“Especially if you’ve never had it,” he adds.

*Interesting.* Maybe Maverick didn’t grow up with much. I think back to what I know about him, and I realize it’s basically nothing, except that he’s from Magnolia. I stare down at my doodle. I’m not rich like Alex, but I do okay with the money Nana left me. I own the house Skye and I live in, and I don’t have to work a full-time job. Thankfully, I’m at WU on an art scholarship.

I glance back up at him. “So...why is the big guy on campus sitting in the back of the auditorium with me? Isn’t there a football groupie somewhere crying because you aren’t next to her?”

“Because I can.” He pauses. “And you aren’t dating Alex anymore.”

“What does that mean?” I can’t believe I asked, but something about him has me feeling reckless.

He gets a tight look on his face. “Just an observation. You’ve been with him since freshman year, and everyone thought you guys were the perfect couple.”

“I didn’t think you cared—you know, with the twins and all.”



“You remember the bonfire.” It’s not a question.

“Kinda hard to forget.”

His eyes find mine. “I gave you your first kiss at the bonfire. Legend says you’ll never forget me.”

I tilt my head. “What’s your name again?”

He laughs, but soon a cloud seems to settle on the planes of his chiseled face. “Alex isn’t over you.”

“Why do you say that?”

His shoulders shift, the movement barely perceptible yet giving off a visceral impression of suppressed power.

“He’s my teammate, and I see how he looks at you. He wasn’t happy to see us standing together on Monday, and that was just an accidental run-in. Imagine how he’d react if there really *was* something between us.” His eyes slide over to my face. “He’d probably freak out and get pissed at me, and it would definitely screw up his game, and then *poof*, there goes our chance at a championship next year.” He gives me a teasing look. “Kickers are rather emotional...”

I wrinkle my nose. “Regardless if any of that’s true or not, I do what I want.”

He studies me intently. “So you’re dating again?”

“Why do you care anyway?” I ask.

“Hey, Mav, aren’t you going to come sit with us?” It’s a sleek-looking girl with dark hair and a lot of hot pink lipstick speaking from behind the railing that lines the back of the auditorium. Miss Brunette trails her finger along his shoulder, giving him a soft caress.

She sends a half-smile my way, clearly not worried about me being any kind of competition. I don’t reciprocate.

He flicks his gaze at her, showing even white teeth as he smiles at her, but it doesn’t ring true. They chat about class, and I’m fascinated, watching his reaction to everything she says, taking in the way he nods, the non-interest in his gaze. His eyes find mine as she rambles on and on about some big off-campus mixer between the frat houses, and he smiles ever so slightly.

He isn’t into her, and I know it.

I don’t know how I’m able to read him, but it’s as if we have a connection and I *get* him.

She walks off, hips swaying as she does another little wave over her

shoulder.

“You sleep with her?” I ask casually.

He shrugs. “A few times last year.”

Ah. “You’re just a playboy, aren’t you?”

“I’ve had relationships.”

I narrow my eyes at him, feeling prickly. “Yeah? What’s the longest one?”

He cocks a smile. “Dated a sweet girl back in high school for a year...” His voice trails off. “Then things got messed up and I came to Waylon. Football’s been my muse ever since.”

“Doesn’t that get, I don’t know, lonely?”

He stares at me. “Is this an interview?”

“No. I don’t even care.” Total lie. I’m dying to know the scoop on Maverick.

A gruff laugh comes out of him. “I just know when a girl’s a keeper and when she isn’t. She wasn’t.”

“Ah, a keeper—I see.”

“Yeah, you know, the one girl who makes your heart pound like crazy every time she walks into the room.” He’s looking at me with an intensity that makes me breathless.

*Does he mean me?*

Don’t be ridiculous.

Just then the professor enters and begins his lecture, so I pull out my iPad to bring up the class website and get to work.

I try really hard to ignore how close Maverick is sitting, how his leg occasionally brushes against mine...and I remind myself that getting interested in a cocky-as-hell football player is the last thing I need right now.

# CHAPTER 4

## *Maverick*

It's the same dream again. I try to pull myself out of it, but it's no use.

Maybe the outcome will be different this time.

Rain slaps at the car and Def Leppard blares on the radio as my father drives our old van. My mother yells at him, her mouth moving in slow motion, the sound disembodied, as if my brain doesn't want to hear her words. I look over at my little sister and curl my hand into hers. She's scared, and I have to protect her.

Dread snakes down my spine when a diesel truck's horn blares at us as we fly past it, our headlights reflecting off his grill.

It's coming.

My body tenses...waiting.

Just around this hairpin curve.

I have to stop him.

I yell at Dad to slow down.

I scream at Mom to shut up.

But I never say it in time.

There's a deer in the road, its brown face turning to look straight into our headlights.

There's a horrible metallic sound, like tin foil wrapping around a piece of meat, and then stifling silence, thick with smoke and fumes. Gas...I smell gas and oil, and it makes me frantic. I'm just seventeen, but I've seen movies—I know cars blow up. *Maybe it would be better if it did*, I think to myself in my dream. If we all just died, everything would be okay.

*No*, I tell myself. *Get out. Live.*

I touch my skin, feeling glass. Blood covers my fingers. Dangling from the seat belt, somehow I fight to break free and manage to crawl out of the mangled heap. Mom lies on the pavement, her body twisted like a pretzel.

I hear a whimper and find Raven, a broken doll, her eyes shut as I turn

her over—

*God, make it stop. Fuck!*

I jerk myself awake, my body in a full sweat. Rubbing my hands through my hair, I glance at the clock and exhale heavily. It's five o'clock in the morning, and there's no way in hell I can go back to sleep after that nightmare.

My bedroom door opens, and it's Ryker, one of my roommates and my best friend. We live in an apartment-style suite in Byrd Hall, also known as the athletic dorm. He squints at me with bleary red eyes. "Dude? Heard you thrashing around—you all right?"

I scrub my face one final time and get out of bed, willing my heart rate to slow down. "Same old shit."

"Car wreck?" He leans on the doorjamb and gives me a concerned once-over. He's our quarterback, a big dude with a heart of gold, and he knows the fucked-up childhood I lived through.

I nod quickly. "Every time February rolls around, it brings it all back. It's like I'm in the dream and I keep thinking I can stop it from happening, but I never do."

He nods, studying my face. "It doesn't help that you're worried about Raven. Your dad needs to get his shit straight."

A muscle ticks in my jaw. Just thinking about him makes my blood boil. He's lost his latest job as a mechanic...again.

"How's she doing?" he asks me.

"As best she can."

A sigh comes from him, and I know he's got an opinion. "You're wearing yourself out going to see her every afternoon. Hell, it was midnight before you got in last night. Between practice and her...something's got to give."

My mouth compresses. "I don't have a choice."

Raven suffered a traumatic brain injury, also known as a TBI, in the accident. Now, at nineteen, she drags her right leg and has speech issues, and don't even get me started on the loss of cognitive ability and emotional outbursts. Worry tugs at me as I think about everything she's lost.

Everything I lost.

She's been staying with my dad temporarily for the past few weeks since we removed her from the state-funded group home where she'd lived since the car wreck three years ago.

I never liked the home with its tiny rooms and smell of death, and when she showed up with unexplained bruises on her skin a few weeks ago, I knew right away that I had to get her out of there. I removed her and placed her with my dad, but she needs *somewhere* besides his trailer. She needs stability and a routine and a regular nursing staff to check on her every single day, not just the one her disability helps pay for that only comes out three days a week.

If only I had known about the abuse before I'd signed the paperwork to not go into the draft early. I let out a deep breath. Now it's too late, and I have to wait until next year.

"You should talk to Coach Al—maybe he can help." He's saying what he always does, but Ryker doesn't get it. No one does.

"Help with what?" I can't help but be annoyed with him. "Going out to my dad's trailer and cooking dinner? Helping her get in the shower? Getting her ready for bed? Get real, man. I need *money*, and no one affiliated with football or Waylon can do that because it would be an infraction with the NCAA. I can't accept any compensation or donations, remember? Coach can't even buy me a fucking candy bar. If they think any kind of money or benefits changed hands—for anything—I'll be out of a career in the NFL. Those are the goddamn rules."

"Stupid rules," he mutters. "If you weren't such a damn fine player..."

*Yeah, tell me about it.*

"I'm cool, okay. Things will work out," I say with a lightness I'm not feeling, playing off my worry. I show him my fists, which are rough and red from hitting the punching bag at Carson's Gym, an off-campus facility I've been sparring at for extra cardio. "I work out my frustrations this way."

He shakes his head. "You always get all squirrely on me this time of year. Do me a favor and get laid, or ask that girl out."

"What girl?"

He sends me an *are you kidding me?* look. "Dude, don't even pretend."

I ignore him, grab my socks out of the drawer, and slide them on while he watches me like a mother hen.

"And we need to talk about this fight thing, man. I'm worried." His voice has lowered and he's whispering, and I assume he doesn't want the chick in his bedroom to hear.

I pause. I confessed to him last week that a casino owner, Leslie Brock,

was at the gym where I spar and offered me a flat fee if I would box another college football player at his casino. No one would ever know, and it would be enough money to get Raven set up somewhere.

“If anyone finds out, *that* will ruin your fucking career. Look at Michael Vick—went to jail just for financing a dog fighting ring.”

I groan. We’ve had this conversation. “No one’s getting arrested, and Vick was running a million-dollar operation with illegal gambling, plus he killed the dogs that refused to fight. I’m not gambling or killing animals for sport. I’d just be fighting for money.”

That said, it is risky as hell, and I haven’t decided if I’m going through with it.

His lips flatten. “You really don’t know what this guy is planning. Who the hell knows if it’s even legal? I can see it now: you’ll be wearing an orange jumpsuit *and* taking it up the ass.”

I snort. “Someone else would be my bitch.”

He huffs, letting out a sigh of frustration. “He owns a casino, and that shit will blow up the NCAA rules.”

I stop getting dressed and give him a long look. We’ve been friends since freshman year when we met on the field, so by now I’ve known him long enough to see that he needs reassuring, just like he does when I slap him on the back and tell him his arm is fucking golden and he’s going to take us to a championship next year.

He might be the quarterback, but I’m the glue that holds our defense together, the glue he needs.

I push out a grin even though I don’t feel like it. “Dude, I’m not getting arrested. Next year is going to be our year for a championship, and there’s no fucking way I’d jeopardize that.”

*Except when it comes to my sister.*

He nods, the scowl lifting, revealing his All-American face that is usually lit up with a permanent grin. “I knew you’d make the right decision. You know if you ever need any money, I can maybe see if one of my relatives has some extra cash. It’s a long shot, but—”

My pride jacks its head up. I was the recipient of a lot of handouts growing up, and I never want to revisit that. “No, I’m cool. I’m making it.”

“Ryker, where’d you go?” comes the sleepy voice of the jersey chaser in his bed.

I arch my brow at him, recognizing the nasally whine even with a wall between us. “Is that Muffin? Seriously? Don’t tell her shit. Her mouth is bigger than your ass.” I pause. “I thought she was doing Alex now?”

I’ve never been with her, but half the team has. A bit of a schemer, she’s never gotten over the fact that I turned her down cold freshman year when she snuck into my room one night and tried to crawl in bed with me.

Ryker shakes his head. “Apparently that was a one-time thing. Alex is probably still in love with you know who.” He cocks an eyebrow and I know he’s waiting for me to comment about Delaney, but I don’t—not going there. Yeah, I’m interested in her, always have been, but she *is* my teammate’s ex, and that’s touchy.

“*Rykeeeerrrrr*, I need you, big man,” she coos from the other room, her voice making a weird throaty sound.

I suppress a laugh. “Sounds like you’re being paged, bro, and FYI, she’s looking for a paycheck, so instead of worrying about me fighting, maybe worry about Muffin pulling a fast one on you. Wrap it when you tap it.”

“You’re just trying to change the subject,” he mumbles.

I’ve finished dressing so I grab my shoes and shove them on. Once I’m ready, I put on my orange and blue Waylon Wildcats cap and jog past him into the small living area we share with two other players. A quick glance tells me their doors are still shut and I haven’t woken them up. *Good*.

He follows me and stands there glaring, concern on his face. “Where you going?”

“For a run.” I chug down a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge in the kitchenette.

“At five in the morning? It’s still dark—you might get run over.” He’s got an obstinate look on his face.

“I’ll stick to the sidewalks and areas with streetlights.”

“At least wear pants. It’s cold as shit out there.”

I huff out a laugh. “Dude, are you sure you aren’t a girl?”

He shrugs. “Just worry about you is all.”

“Bye, Mom,” I say sarcastically as I head out the door.

# CHAPTER 5

## *Delaney*

He-Man: **Are you over your ex?**

Me: **Why?**

He-Man: **Just curious. Do you miss him?**

Me: **Sometimes. But every day is better.**

He-Man: **You just have to get your groove back. I dare you to go to the library and shout out that Princess Leia is a badass.**

Me: **What? No!**

He-Man: **I thought you couldn't turn down a dare.**

Me: **How will you know if I go through with it?**

He-Man: **Oh, I'll be there watching. What time should I show up?**

Me: **Dammit. Tomorrow at 8:00 PM. BTW, I hate you. 😊**

I smile, feeling good as I think about today's text convo with He-Man. We've been texting on and off for the past week, just little messages here and there. He now knows I can sing every word to "Baby Got Back", and I know he can tie a cherry stem with his tongue. I admit, I spent a few hours picturing that in my head last night.

He hasn't brought up the whole *I dare you to dream about me* comment, and neither have I.

It's Sunday night as I park my Prius at the local Piggly Wiggly and head across the parking lot. I've come to the second grocery store past campus, mostly because I don't want to run into anyone while wearing yoga pants and a sweatshirt with no makeup on. I'm just about to pat myself on the back for not seeing anyone, but that all goes to hell when I'm almost to the door and see Martha-Muffin with one of her sorority girlfriends at the self-checkout near the entrance.

Part of me considers just turning around and leaving. I can always come



back later, but once Monday arrives, I tend to be overwhelmed with classes and my job at the library.

*Don't let her get the best of you, Delaney.*

With my head down, reading the grocery list on my phone, I fortify myself with a mental pep talk and walk through the sliding glass doors.

*Don't make eye contact,* I tell myself, but before I realize it, I'm glaring right at her. She looks up, catches my eye, and sends me a sly smile, lashes batting.

Our dislike of each other is palpable and always has been. Skye claims she's intimidated and threatened by me because somehow I managed to land a football player as a boyfriend freshman year, and all she got was an STD.

She's wearing her usual, something ridiculous and ill-suited for the cold weather: tall Uggs and a pair of denim shorts lined with lace. Of course, her face is expertly made up, all the way down to the arched eyebrows she probably watched some two-hour YouTube video on how to make.

She finishes checking out and pushes her cart straight over to me, her pert little nose practically twitching with excitement. "Well, well, if it isn't Delaney Shaw." Her gaze sweeps over me, lingering on my baggy Waylon hoodie. "Here to raid the ice cream freezer? Just be careful you don't eat the whole gallon."

I stiffen. As a matter of fact, I do have chocolate ice cream on my list, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I tell her that.

"Don't let me keep you from your Mensa meeting," I say before moving to walk around her.

I've gotten a few feet away when she calls out after me, almost tauntingly. "I can't believe you're being so rude, especially since I haven't seen you in weeks." I cringe, knowing she's referring to the night I caught her with Alex.

I turn back around, knowing I shouldn't, but I just can't stop myself.

She puts a hand on her hip. "Look, you don't have to be so upset about Alex. He's an *athlete*. They screw around—it's what they do."

My stomach churns at the imagery her words bring up, and I feel the blood draining from my face.

Her friend tugs on Martha-Muffin's arm, ushering her out the door, and I stand here for a full five seconds just breathing, trying to get myself under control.

I make my way over to the produce aisle and walk around, not really seeing anything, my heart heavy as I think about Alex and everything we lost.

On an impulse, I pull my phone out of my bag and send a text to my mystery man.

**Paging He-Man. I miss you. Where are you? Not that you care, but I'm staring at cherries at the Piggly Wiggly and thinking of you. It's been a shit day. Shit week. Shit month. Just ran into the girl my ex cheated on me with. Need to vent. Need a cigarette...or I would if I smoked.**

He replies immediately, and I want to shout with glee. **Awkward. Want me to kick her ass?**

**Yes.**

**Done. I'll be there in five.**

A laugh comes out of me, and for some reason, seeing Martha-Muffin doesn't have nearly the punch it did a minute ago.

**No! I'm just kidding. Plus, she's gone already. Hey, can I ask you a personal question?**

**Shoot**, he replies.

**Do YOU sleep with those groupies who hang all over athletes? You know the ones—they've had more loads than a washing machine but they're hot so all the guys want a spin?**

**Uh...how many loads are we talking?**

Of course he sleeps with them. He calls himself "Badass Athlete", and what red-blooded male is going to turn down what's offered?

**He-Man, you're disappointing me.**

**Truth: I haven't been with a girl in months. I'm turning them down left and right.**

**You're so full of yourself.**

**True**, he says. **But I am the best.**

*Best at what?* Football? Volleyball? Baseball?

**Why are you turning them down?** I ask.

**I've been waiting on you.**

**WHAT?**

Is he kidding? Is it the truth? He never replies, even after I linger around the produce, waiting to see those three little dots that mean he's responding.

They never appear, and once again I'm overcome with embarrassment at

my neediness and lack of male attention. *Screw it.* I stick my phone in my purse and head to the magazine section to pick out a new Cosmo. I move on from there and hit up the meat department. Several minutes later, I'm lifting a large container of ground beef into my cart when I hear a deep male voice behind me.

"Didn't know you liked that much meat, Delaney."

I stop in my tracks.

I turn to see Maverick standing behind me, wearing low-slung jeans, a tight t-shirt, and a grin. We've been sitting together all week in class, and it's been pure torture. We make small talk about the weather and football, but underneath is a current of electricity that I do my best to ignore. Maybe he's ignoring it too.

His gaze brushes over me as if he's undressing me, and a tingling sensation tickles my nose. I can't stop it, sneezing once, twice, three times before I clench my hands together and calm myself.

I'm digging for a tissue in my bag when he says in his southern drawl, "You okay there?"

Sucking in a breath to stop the next one, I hold up a finger for him to give me a minute, and he seems to understand. It would be better if he just moved away.

He takes my packages from me and sets them down in my cart. It's a thoughtful gesture, and I think he does it because he knows he makes me feel out of sorts.

He's just standing there, patiently waiting for me to speak.

"You make me sneeze," I finally say.

"I hope you can find the antidote or we won't be able to hang out together."

"It's worse when I'm surprised by someone, and you're always sneaking up on me." Not exactly true, but I'm making up all kinds of excuses.

"Is it because you think I'm hot, Delaney?"

"Doesn't everyone think you're amazing and wonderful and hot? Been there, done that with a football player, and not doing it again because all it got me was a broken heart."

He rubs at the scruff on his beautifully chiseled jawline. "We're not all cheaters, Delaney."

"I'm not buying it."

He gives me a serious look. “Challenge accepted.”

“What challenge?”

“Proving to you that I’m not like anyone you’ve ever met.”

“And how are you going to do that?” I cock my hip and lean against my cart, trying hard to be nonchalant, but it’s hard as hell with six feet four inches of solid muscle running his gaze over you.

“You can start by hanging out with me.”

“We do...in class.”

“No, more than that.” He thinks on it, his top teeth chewing on his bottom lip a little. “Definitely somewhere with a lot of other people.”

“And why is that?”

He sweeps his gaze over me. “I think we both know what’s going to happen if we’re alone.”

*Oh. My. God.* He is so infuriatingly arrogant that I can’t even...

“I’m not interested in you like that.” Total lie. My body definitely is; it’s my head that’s rebelling.

“Uh-huh.” He grins widely.

My eyes flare. “I’m not.”

“Are you denying what’s going on between us?” His blue eyes are hot as he stares at me, and I might have to step into the ice cream freezer to cool off.

I swallow. “Yes. Flat-out denying.”

He shakes his head and laughs a little, his face so self-assured and freaking confident that I want to scream...or kiss him. *What?* Where did that thought come from?

He shuffles his feet. “Maybe I’ve been waiting two years for you to be free so I could ask you out.”

*What?!*

His eyes go back to the packages of ground beef. He clears his throat. “You never answered my question—what’s with all the meat?”

He’s changing the subject. *Thank God.* “I cook for the upcoming week on Sunday nights. Monday’s taco night, Tuesday’s nacho night, and Wednesday is quesadillas.”

“She’s beautiful *and* she cooks?”

“Stop flirting,” I snip. “I’m not beautiful.”

“You are.”

My body tingles all over at his simple words.

He leans over into my personal space, and I smell him, dark and exotic with a hint of pure male. His finger tilts my chin up until we're staring each other in the face.

I recall the sexy convo with He-Man, about us standing in a cramped bathroom having sex against the wall, only now He-Man has a face and it's Maverick. He's holding me up, cupping my ass as he slides into me, and I'm gasping his name—

I stop, my heart flying as heat rushes to my cheeks. I look down and realize how close we're standing. One more inch and my entire body will be plastered against his, and it's all I can do to stand perfectly still.

Tension crackles in the air as his piercing eyes stare into mine.

"In case you didn't know it already, I like how you look." His eyes slowly drink me in, drifting over my face and lingering on my chest. "All that blonde hair, and your green eyes. I dig how tall you are...and your curves."

*Oh, lord.* I'm nowhere near as bosomy as most, but I do have nice B-cups.

I'm back in that bathroom fantasy and he's kissing me, his hand on my breast—

I can't breathe.

A soft voice brings us both back to the present. "Mav? I...found...you."

I glance over his shoulder to see a delicate creature with long, flowing russet-colored hair and a heart-shaped face. With creamy, porcelain-perfect skin, she reminds me of the beautiful dolls Nana used to collect. She tilts her head and looks at us with interest.

My lips compress as I turn and mutter under my breath. "You're here with a girl and you're hitting on me?"

Ignoring my comment, he takes a step back and simultaneously reaches out a hand to her. "Hey, I lost you at the candy aisle. You find what you wanted?"

She nods, presenting him with the little carry basket she's hooked on her arm. She shows him a handful of Snickers and a six-pack of Dr. Pepper. "Can...I...have...them?" Her words are drawn out.

I glance back at Maverick to see a soft expression on his face. "You can get them, but you know the rule: only one each per day. Too much of that and..."

She nods. "My...teeth...will...fall...out."

I look from one to the other, thoroughly confused. *Who is she?*

He glances back at me. “Delaney, I’d like you to meet Raven—my sister.”

*Oh.* She does a slow blink then comes toward me, and I notice her leg hitches a bit as she moves. She takes my hand in a limp shake, her expression unsure, as if she’s not certain of the etiquette.

“Girlfriend?” she asks, her eyes going from me to him.

Maverick grunts. “Too personal, Raven.”

She shrugs and drops my hand, almost sizing me up. “Need...a... girlfriend...so...you...stop...worrying...so...much.”

*Hmmm.* What does Maverick have to worry about?

“Nice to meet you,” I say. “And, Maverick and I are just friends.”

She squints, looking disappointed. “Oh.”

“We have a class together,” I tell her.

“Where she mostly ignores me,” Maverick adds.

I laugh.

Raven studies me and gives her temple a little tap with her index finger. “Nice...to...meet...you. My...head...is...wonky. I...tell...everyone...so... they...know.” She shrugs indifferently.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, not quite sure how to respond.

“Don’t...be.” She smiles sweetly at nothing in particular, her gaze drifting off. “Mav...olives...please?”

He nods. “Of course, get whatever you want. Meet me back at the front to check out, okay?”

She nods, and without another glance at me, moves down the aisle.

I’m watching this in fascination. Maverick has a sister...a sister with special needs...and he adores her—it’s obvious in the softness of his eyes as they follow her.

He turns back to me. “What?” he asks, and I guess he’s reading my face.

I shake my head. “You’re such a surprise.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “Is she the reason the highest-rated defensive player in the country decided to stay home and play for the local college?” It’s no secret that Maverick received ESPN’s highest ratings and was courted for scholarships from the big schools like University of Alabama and Georgia. I’ve even heard he promised himself to a big SEC team, but at the last moment decided

to stay in Magnolia and play for Waylon—which, admittedly, isn't a horrible team, but it doesn't have the same prestige the Crimson Tide does.

“Yeah. It happened in a car accident my senior year that also took my mom. It...changed a lot of things for me.”

His countenance is full of melancholy, an emotion I recognize because I have the same darkness inside of me. Anyone who's lost a loved one knows it. I nod. “I lost my parents at age ten in a car wreck. I get it.”

He straightens and gives me a surprised look, almost as if he's restructuring how he sees me. “I never would have known it. You seem so... adjusted.”

I huff out a laugh. “Thanks?”

“You know what I mean,” he says with a little smirk. “You're a good person, Delaney. You're always kind and sweet and...” He stops talking and shakes his head. “Never mind. I'm talking too much.”

I clear my throat, easing over the awkwardness. “Anyway, my Nana took me in and raised me. I'd just graduated high school when she passed from a bad heart. Sometimes I think she waited until I was old enough and then just let go.” I don't know what it is about this guy, but suddenly I'm opening up to him.

He nods. “That must have been tough.”

I shrug, playing off my grief, but when I look back up, there's this look on his face like he gets me...like he's been there a million times before and—*God.*

*Stop, Delaney. Just stop. No more football players.*

I recall the words Martha-Muffin just spoke to me: *Athletes screw around—it's what they do.*

I clear my throat and move closer to my cart, wrapping my hands around the handle, anchoring myself, because Maverick makes me feel like I might toss aside everything I think about football players and give him a chance. “Look, you're a great guy, and thank you for the offer of hanging out, but it's best if we keep it simple.”

He studies me. “You'll change your mind.”

My chest rises rapidly, and before I can formulate a snarky reply his sister's voice drifts toward us from down the aisle, calling to him, and he waves back at her.

“Guess I have to run. Later,” he says, and then just like that, he's walking

off—and *damn* if his ass isn't fine.

I let out a sigh and push my cart to the front to check out.



# CHAPTER 6

## *Maverick*

“She’s...pretty,” Raven says as we get in my silver truck, ten-year-old Toyota I bought with my own money when I was sixteen. It’s seen its fair share of dings and scrapes, but it still runs like a well-oiled machine. Someday when I’m playing in the NFL, I’ll buy something sharp, but for now, I can’t think about that. One day at a time is all I can handle.

“Who?” I ask, helping her with her seat belt. Her eyes follow as I clip it into the buckle.

“Have...you...kissed...her?”

Raven’s eyes are turned up to me, and the light from the streetlight illuminates her sweet face. Emotion slams into my chest, reminding me that she’s not the same, not even close.

“No,” I say tersely as I start the truck and drive out of the parking lot.

“You...like...her?”

“Apparently, she’s just a friend.” I roll my eyes. “This isn’t one of your Disney shows where everything has a happily ever after.”

She shrugs and looks out the window. “You...should...ask...her...out.”

I shake my head at her, not telling her that I practically had. “Thanks for the dating advice, sis.”

Delaney...*where do I even begin with her?* Sure, we met at the bonfire, but I cocked that up, and by the time I tried to find her, she was with Alex. Once a football player has a girl, you can’t mess with them. It’s the bro code, not to mention the fact that Alex is the kicker and any small thing can freak them out.

I recall the first time I saw her after the bonfire: at a football party, on Alex’s arm, looking like she just stepped out of the pages of a geek girl magazine with her glasses, tight jeans, and a *Walking Dead* t-shirt she’d turned into some kind of halter top. What I liked about her was how she never looked at me any different because of who I was. She never put me on

a pedestal or kissed my ass. In fact, she always fucking ignored me.

But now she isn't with Alex.

The question is...what am I going to do about it?

I pull up at Dad's doublewide, wishing like hell I had the money to get Raven out of here and in at Pineview Retreat, a state-of-the-art facility near Jackson, Mississippi. I've been eyeing it since she left the home where she was staying.

I put the groceries I bought in the cupboard and wake Dad up. He's fallen asleep watching one of my old high school football games. It brings back memories of when Mom was alive and we were a whole family. Sure, we never had much, not with a dad who couldn't hold down a job and a mom who railed at him constantly, but for me, it had been better than *this*.

He stirs in his recliner and looks up at me with bleary eyes. Smaller than me with thin shoulders and a haggard face, he's in his fifties but looks older.

"You been drinking?" I ask sharply, feeling more like the parent than the child.

He stands and stretches. "No, just tired. I worked at Bill's today changing oil on some cars he had."

I exhale, staring at him. That's good. As long as he works, everything is fine. I nod. "Just keep it that way."

Dad gets up to make us dinner: leftover meatloaf and potatoes from last night. While he finishes up, I wait outside the bathroom while Raven takes a shower so we can talk through the door. I'm paranoid she'll fall even though her balance has improved. I wish we could afford more than three days a week of a nurse who comes in to do these things.

After dinner, Dad loads the dishwasher and I tuck Raven in her bed. As requested, I make up a random story about a princess and her one true love.

She sighs as I stand up to turn off the light, careful to make sure her butterfly nightlight is still on.

"Mav?"

I pause at the door and hold in my exhalation, not wanting her to see how bone tired I am. I've been going since eight this morning when I hit the gym to box.

"Thank...you."

"You don't have to thank me every time I come see you, goofy."

She sighs. "It's...hard...for...you. Do...me...a...favor?" Her voice is

small.

“Anything.”

“Kiss...Delaney.”

That wasn't what I expected. I thought she'd ask for another cookie from the cupboard or another story.

“Why would I do that?”

She shrugs under the covers as she tucks her chin in, her eyes droopy.

“You...just...need...to.”

“I'm not sure Delaney wants me to kiss her.”

“She...does,” she says. “I...have...a...TBI...but...I'm...not...stupid.”

I huff out a laugh. “Okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Guess this means I'm kissing her whether it's a good idea or not. I mean, I'd do anything for my sister.

# CHAPTER 7

## *Delaney*

“What you need is a fresh start with a rebound guy,” Skye says with a toss of her long red hair as we sit inside Buffalo Bills, a rowdy restaurant and bar near campus. We’re in the back in a leather booth, munching on peanuts from a pail as we wait for Tyler and my—*shudder*—blind date to show up. We came a bit earlier than the guys so we could catch up, and so I could get my nerve up with a drink. I haven’t been on a date with anyone but Alex since freshman year, and it feels weird.

I take a deep breath. “Tell me more about this Bobby Gene guy—which is a really weird name, by the way.”

Bubbly and eager, she waves me off and starts in. “Just ignore his name. You’ll love him. He’s on the baseball team but not a horn-dog. He’s nice—like you requested. No athlete floozies chasing him, no fetishes that I know of.”

“Key words being *that I know of.*” I smirk.

“You’re just anti-guy right now. At least he isn’t a football player.”

That is true.

She straightens her red halter top, which matches her hair. “Plus, Bobby Gene’s Tyler’s friend, so this is important.”

“Of course,” I murmur, but I’m feeling ambivalent. I mean, she’s put a lot of effort into arranging this, so I don’t want to be negative, but...Tyler’s a bit of a jerk. I’ve noticed him checking out other girls when they’re together then playing it off when she calls him on it. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe I’m just in a funk because *my* boyfriend cheated on me.

*Whatever.*

I just hope Bobby Gene is nice.

Skye gets a thoughtful look on her face. “You know, I wanted to tell you that I saw Alex on campus today and he looked...I don’t know...sad.” She sees my face and holds her hands up. “I mean, yes, he’s a major douchebag

and I'll hate him until the end of time for you..." Her voice trails off as she grimaces, giving me a *please don't be mad at me* look. "But, I don't know, maybe someday you guys can be friends again?"

I stare down at my drink. That's the rub—we were all three great friends. I also adore Alex's family in Texas, and now I'll never get to see them again. *Ugh*. I don't want to think about him right now.

A noncommittal shrug is my answer.

She sighs. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even mentioned it."

I nod. I know she misses him too since he was over at the house a lot. Before she met Tyler, we spent lots of nights hanging out, cooking, and watching movies together. There were even times I was a little jealous of the camaraderie she and Alex had, but I knew she wasn't interested in him that way and he loved me. *Ha. Right*.

**Paging Princess Leia. Where are you?**

My happiness level goes up a notch as I read the text and quickly tap out a reply. Skye doesn't notice as she orders another round of drinks from our waitress, who's stopped by the table. I don't know why I want to keep He-Man a secret, but I do, as if he's all mine and I need that for some reason.

**On a blind date.**

**Oh. Where?**

**I'll give you two hints: there are beers and peanuts on the table.**

**Ah, Buffalo Bills. Do you want me to rescue you? I can call and pretend I'm your aunt who's terribly sick.**

I giggle. **That's AWFUL! I'm disappointed you'd encourage a lie.**

**Okay. Hey, I saw you at the library last night—nice dare completion. I was digging the buns on your head.**

*Oh my God. He was there.*

My heart thuds, racing back through every single face I encountered.

I recall how at precisely eight, I stood in the middle of the study area and yelled out, "Princess Leia is a badass!" I'd even put my blonde hair up in little fluffy buns on the sides of my head before work. I'd also gone all out with my clothing choices, wearing a fitted white shirt and a pair of white jeans—in February! Deep red lipstick completed the look. If I do a dare, I do it right. The shy girl in me loved letting loose and knowing it was for a dare, which gave me the courage to do it. My eyes scanned the place, but I was so nervous, it was hard to take a good inventory of who was there. It was at least

most of the football team since they do study sessions there on Mondays, and several baseball players saw it along with some guys in fraternity jerseys.

Everyone stared. A few clapped. Some whistled.

**Did it feel good to do the dare?** he asks.

**Yes,** I reply. It was fucking empowering, especially when Alex stared at me with a forlorn look on his face, obviously missing me.

I saw Maverick there too, surrounded by a group of girls at a table. His response to my outburst? A simple smirk and a head nod.

I chew on my lip, wondering once again who He-Man is.

**Hey, you're not the skinny hipster guy who hangs out in the romance section looking for dates are you?**

He sends a whole string of laughing/crying emojis.

**If I stood in the romance section, I'd never make it out alive. I'm already irresistible, but put Twilight in my hands and girls will piss themselves.**

"Why are you giggling?" Skye asks, and I raise my head. Her gaze goes to my phone.

"Just a meme someone sent me," I say as I take a sip of the new beer the waitress apparently set down without me even noticing.

"It must have been a funny one."

"Yeah, it was a cat."

Any mention of my love for cats has her rolling her eyes. She and Han have a love/hate relationship. She gets up and straightens her skirt. "I'm going to head to the ladies' room to freshen up. You'll be okay till I get back?"

I nod. "Sure."

She heads off, and I look back down at my phone as it pings.

**Where did you go? Is your date there? Are you riding a bull? Don't ride the bull because I want to be there when you do.**

**He-Man, I've been thinking...I need to know who you are,** I send.

**Why? Don't you like being anonymous? Don't you think we're opening up to each other more?**

**Yes. Maybe. I don't know.**

I get nothing but silence in return. My hands clench my phone, waiting to see those telltale little dots, but he isn't responding.

Why doesn't he want to tell me? Is it someone I hate? Is it Alex with a

burner phone? Is it Maverick?

I take a deep breath and text, **Are you a football player?**

**Yes.**

My heart flips over. Is He-Man really Maverick? *God*, I want it to be.

**I don't do football players anymore**, I text.

**You'd do me. It's going to happen.**

I squirm in my seat as a bolt of electricity zips through me and my entire body heats up. My skin gets goose bumps, and I know it's because I'm picturing Maverick on the other end of this conversation.

**You're cocky**, I send, my fingers sweaty.

**I know when a woman wants me, and I want you too, Princess Leia. I have for a long time.**

I want to ask more, but I'm scared of...*dammit*, I don't even know. Being hurt? Being lied to?

I spend the next minute staring intently at my phone, trying to think of a response, and I'm still staring when Skye gets back from the restroom. I finally put my phone away when Tyler arrives, along with my blind date.



An hour later, I've met Bobby Gene and we've finished a round of beers and a plate of cheese fries. Handsome with a lopsided grin and cropped brown hair, he's rather engaging. He's made me giggle with his talk of growing up on a pig farm in Iowa, but He-Man is all I can think about.

Each minute I'm here with Bobby Gene feels like an hour, and I'm anxious to get home and text him so we can figure things out.

But is there really anything to figure out?

How can I ever trust a football player again?

My phone rings, surprising me, and I battle down a sneeze when I see He-Man's name on the screen.

"Who's He-Man?" Bobby Gene asks, leaning over and peering down at my phone where I left it sitting on the table.

“Just a friend,” I say.

“Well, you gonna get it?” he asks with a grin. He’s obviously easygoing and doesn’t seem perturbed that I have someone calling me while I’m on a date.

I pick up the phone, excitement curling. “Hello?”

“Hey, I thought you might need a rescue phone call.” I can’t make out the voice because he’s whispering, but it heats every inch of my skin.

*I’m talking to He-Man!* I want to shout it out to everyone, but that would be weird, so I don’t. Instead, I clear my throat, injecting concern into my tone. “Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Oh, no. What happened?” I infuse my voice with drama.

“Truth: I was studying and kept thinking about you on your date. Does it suck? Is he ugly? An asshole?”

I glance over at Bobby Gene, who grins.

“No,” I say, and I get silence from the other end.

“You mean you like him?” There’s an incredulous tone to his voice.

I do like Bobby Gene—as a friend—but I can’t answer something so specific with the detail it needs. Too many people are listening to me.

Skye is shooting me a quizzical look, and Tyler is eyeing me suspiciously.

“Uh, yeah? It’s great,” I answer.

There are several ticks of silence, and I imagine I can feel his unhappiness with my response.

“Are you still there?” I ask, chewing on my bottom lip.

“Yes. I shouldn’t have called you. Obviously I’ve interrupted a good time. Have fun on your date.”

*Click.* He ends the call without even saying goodbye, and I’m surprised.

“I’m so sorry. That’s just terrible!” I say to the silence, clutching the phone tighter as I lean over the table. “Yes, of course, I’ll go home and call her right away and let you know.”

I get off the phone and send a regretful look at Bobby Gene. “Sorry, my aunt is sick—”

“But aren’t you from Charlotte?” Tyler asks, a slight curl to his lips. Skye is giving me a pointed look, and I know she knows I’m trying to get out of



the date.

I blink. *Oh, God.* Lies truly are a sticky web.

“Yeah, but I just need to check in on her, not actually catch a plane to go see her.” I try to sell the lie again. “I should go home and call her.” There, it’s final: I am a terrible person.

Bobby Gene, bless his heart, gives me a shoulder squeeze, and I feel even worse. “I got ’cha. They don’t have to be direct family to be important to you. Maybe we can get coffee and donuts sometime?”

Coffee *and* donuts?

Bobby Gene just went up another notch on my like list.

I agree and we exchange numbers. With a hasty goodbye and a bit of a glare from Skye, I exit Buffalo Bills and head for the house.

It’s not until I’m home and lying on the couch with Han on my chest, purring in my ear like a motorboat that I decide to text him.

**I’m home,** I say.

**Alone?**

**Yeah. You?**

**Always,** he says.

**Were you jealous tonight?**

**Yes.**

I stare at the one-word response, my stomach jittery with excitement even though my head is yelling at me that he’s a football player.

Biting my lip, I change the topic. **This is random, but do you like cats?**

**I’m more of a dog guy.**

**We can never text again,** I quickly type out and send.

**Okay, fine, I like them—just for you, Princess Leia.**

A pang strikes my heart. He’s just...perfect. Everything he says makes me feel fluttery inside, and even though my head is warning me, my heart wants to put a face to the code name of the person I’ve been texting with.

But for now...I wait.

**Good night, He-Man.**

**As you wish.**

# CHAPTER 8

## *Delaney*

**Me: If you had a pair of X-ray glasses, what part of my body would you look at first?**

**He-Man: Collarbone.**

**Me: LIAR.**

**He-Man: Fine, fine, you win. I like big tits and I cannot lie. But I do like collarbones too.**

**Me: Ha. All guys are the same.**

**He-Man: Fine. What would YOU look at?**

**Me: I'd look at He-Man's sword, of course.**

**He-Man: Trust me, it's pretty fucking magnificent.**

**Me: Wanna send me a pic?**

**He-Man: Just to clarify, the quiet and reserved Delaney Shaw is asking me for a dick pic?**

**Me: It sounds bad when you put it like that...**

**He-Man: I'd rather show you in person, Princess Leia.**

**Me: Oh.**

*Can't never could* is what my Nana always said and I'm saying that in my head over and over as I shelve books on the third floor a few days later. I'm beat from a long day of volunteering at the cat shelter and now I'm stuck in The Dead Zone of the library, where few roam unless they're doing serious research. At least I have last night's texting with He-Man to think about, which had gotten very sexy before I'd finally let him go.

The next book to shelve is a huge three-inch atlas that weighs a ton. I drag the stepladder from the wall over to the metal shelves so I can reach to the top where it belongs. Once I climb up and clear the shelf, I have a clear view of most of the floor.

I'm about to turn and come down when two guys come up the stairs and onto the third floor, the echoes of their hushed voices carrying across to me. My heart leaps—*damn heart*—when I see Maverick walking next to Ryker, Waylon's quarterback.

Maverick's eyes look up and capture mine—he must have some kind of secret power that detects female attention—and takes me in, hovering above the shelf like a crazy person. He sends me a wave and I smirk.

Ryker taps him on the shoulder to pull his direction toward one of the study areas to the left, but Maverick nods his head at me and walks in my direction. Ryker follows.

*Shit! They're coming over.*

My hair's in a ponytail and my glasses askew, and I hurriedly pat down the crazy stray strands and straighten my frames. I wish I had time to grab my lipstick, but of course, it's in my purse on the first floor.

"Hey," Maverick says as he turns the corner. He's holding a book and smiling, looking pleased as punch to see me, and it takes my breath a little.

I blink up at him, taking in the finely carved jawline and bitable lips.

Just. *Damn.*

He's gorgeous and it pisses me off that it makes me melt into a puddle of goo.

I stuff that behind me and give him a nonchalant shrug, keeping my expression easy and not at all like I didn't nearly break my neck getting off the ladder. "Hey."

"You working?"

"Obviously."

His lips twitch. "You sound excited."

"I'm not. What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Just roaming the library."

"Why?"

He tilts his head, studying me. "Why not?"

"It's a bit late for mind games, Maverick." I look down at the cart full of books I still have to shelve. "And I have work to do."

"Maybe I was looking for you. I can help if you want?"

My eyes flare. *Damn.* Why does he have to be so sweet sometimes? "That's okay."

He gazes around at the shelving, taking in the empty tables and then

focuses back on me. “This would be a great place to hook-up. Ever consider it?”

I roll my eyes. “Scoping out future make-out places? Please, for the sake of the books, leave the library out of your pound town itinerary.”

He throws up a cocky eyebrow. “I like the dim lighting and all the shelves. Good coverage in case someone comes up.”

My face colors, picturing him with some pretty co-ed.

He grins. “Would you be jealous if I hooked up with someone here?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” I say. *Yes.*

He studies me, eyes at half-mast. “Okay, fine, Delaney. I’ll never hook-up with anyone in the library...unless it’s you.”

My mouth opens and I’m about to say something *really* witty and smart—although I can’t think of a damn thing—when Ryker turns the corner. I guess something must have caught his eye on the way over and that’s why he lagged behind.

Obviously, Maverick has impeccable timing.

The quarterback gives me a nod. “Ah, Delaney. Surprise, surprise.”

*Is he being facetious?*

Because he doesn’t sound surprised. He sounds cryptic and a little pleased with himself if that makes sense. I squint at him, reminding myself to play back this conversation later.

“Hey, Ryker,” I say, giving him a nod. “We rarely get people on the third floor, so...welcome?” I hold my hands out.

Ryker looks around. “Yeah. It’s dead up here. Great place for a hook-up.”

I shake my head. “Oh my God. Is that all guys think about?”

“Yeah,” they say in unison.

“Typical,” I say with a laugh.

Almost as if he knows I’m putting up my internal defenses against him, Maverick takes a step closer and picks at a spot on the shoulder of my black shirt. Butterflies take off inside me as his index finger and thumb press together on the fabric to grab a white hair.

“What’s this?” he asks.

Swallowing, I look down at his hand and clear my throat. “Cat hair. I got in the kitten tent today at the shelter and they crawled all over me. Super adorable. I’d love to bring one home but Han would flip his lid.”

Ryker takes a full two steps back from me, his eyes wide. “You rolled

around with cats?”

“Well, not literally, but yeah. It’s very therapeutic. Are you allergic?”

He nods.

“That’s awful.” I grimace.

He waves me off. “No worries. I’ll just stand over here so I don’t breathe it in. That way you guys can chat.” He finds a spot about ten feet away and pretends to look at a book. I say *pretend* because it’s a reference book about rivers in South America and I can’t imagine why he’d be interested, but who knows.

It’s almost as if they planned on seeing me...

I turn back to Maverick who hasn’t taken his eyes off me. “I’m completely non-allergic to cats,” he tells me.

“Why should I care?” I’m being bratty, but his cockiness brings it out in me.

He isn’t fazed and plucks another hair off me, this time around the neckline of my shirt. His fingers brush my collarbone and I inhale sharply, remembering the texting convo about collarbones with He-Man. “You’re really covered in these.” My chest rises rapidly, and he grins, leaving me convinced the man is the devil.

I’m saved just as I hear Skye talking. We’d made plans to meet after my shift and grab a drink at Buffalo Bills before we head home. She’s probably on her way up here to keep me company until I’m done.

I hear her talking to someone as she calls out my name rather tentatively, which is odd, and I’m wondering who’s with her. It sounds like a guy, but not Tyler...

Alex and Skye appear from around the corner of the shelf and I start, stiffening.

*What the hell is she doing with him?*

With a sheepish expression on her face, she clears her throat and waves at everyone. “Hey, y’all.”

I’m frowning as my gaze goes from her to Alex.

She nods, reading my expression. “Ah, yeah. Alex saw me on the staircase on my way up and wanted to talk...” Her voice drifts off.

Ah, I fill in the rest. She couldn’t tell him to buzz off. She’s too nice and she’d probably done her best to dissuade him.

Alex’s eyes are measuring the space between Maverick and me, which

admittedly is just a few inches.

“What are you doing up here?” he asks Maverick.

Maverick straightens, his back going stiff. “It is the library. People do come here to study. What are *you* doing here?”

Alex taps his hand against his thighs and juts out his jaw. “Studying. Same as you.”

“I don’t see any books, kicker,” Maverick says.

A spot of red appears on Alex’s cheeks. “I left them on the first floor—since you’re so interested.”

“Huh. Maybe you should go get them.”

Alex’s face hardens. “Why? Am I interrupting anything between you and Delaney?”

*Jesus take the wheel.* They are both crazy.

I hold my hands up. “Hang on a minute—”

“Yeah,” Ryker says, interrupting me. He’s put down the reference book and has joined us, his brow pulled low in a scowl as he takes in the back and forth between the two. “We don’t need any trouble here, guys.”

Skye takes Alex by the arm. “Why don’t we head back downstairs?”

Alex pulls his gaze from Maverick and looks down at her, a slight softening in his face. “Sure. Sounds good.” He sends me a resigned expression. “Bye, Delaney.”

They turn to go and Skye gives me an *I’m sorry* look over her shoulder as they walk away.

“Dude. Not cool or subtle,” Ryker says to Maverick as soon as they are out of earshot. “Did you have to be a dick?”

Maverick’s nose flares. “He was a dick first.”

“Yeah, but you’re a leader,” Ryker tells him. “The team needs you to show everyone else how to act.”

Maverick lets out a long exhale, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah.”

*Hang on a minute.* Maverick is jealous of Alex? I’m about to remark on it, but he brushes past me, his tall frame stalking off. Part of me wants to call him back, but pride and all.

I look at Ryker and raise my hands up. “What’s going on?”

“If you can’t see what’s right in front of you...” He shrugs. “Later, babe.”

And then he’s walking off but not before turning around for one more

comment. “Just do me a favor, okay? Don’t hurt him. He’s been through enough already.”

My heart drops at the thought of hurting Maverick. Of course I wouldn’t.

# CHAPTER 9

## *Delaney*

The cafeteria in the student center is loud with the sounds of clanging dishes and students' voices. I'm not here to eat, just to grab a soda before I head upstairs to my first salsa lesson.

I get to the register, pay for my Coke, and then head for the exit. My eyes can't help but wander to the far left corner table near the windows where the football players usually sit in a huddle. I come to a stop when blue eyes meet mine. A flash of awareness washes over me as Maverick rakes his gaze up and down.

A small smile tilts up the side of his mouth, and it infuriates me that he seems to *know* he makes my body do crazy things. He'd acted jealous of Alex in *The Dead Zone* a few days ago but neither of us has mentioned it since. I guess we've decided to let it go.

Miss Brunette—the same one from class—approaches his table and plops down in the seat next to him. Her hands snake around his bicep as she looks up at him adoringly.

I feel the eye roll coming, and instead of stopping myself, I let him see it.

*There you go, folks: further proof that football players are magnets for floozies.*

I tip my soda at him and he smirks, as if saying, *I can't help it if women love me.*

*You're so full of shit,* my face says back.

He gives me a full-blown grin before looking over at her with that distant smile, the one I know isn't authentic. He leans in and says something to her, and she looks crestfallen.

He turns back to me and stands.

He mouths something, and it looks like *Wait for me.*

I glance around to make sure he means me, and the only person near me is a cafeteria worker in a white jumpsuit. Looking back at him, I point to



myself, just to confirm.

He nods and makes his way along the tables, weaving through players and girls and the general maze that is our cafeteria.

My body draws up in anxiety. I'm not ready to deal with Maverick and his intensity, so I do what I do best.

I bolt.

I have somewhere to be anyway.

Flipping around with a flounce of my ponytail, I head for the exit in a full-on speed walk that's debatably a run. I clear the door and dart for the elevator to head up to the third floor.

As soon as I exit, I approach the door to the dance studio. From inside, I hear the low undertones of a conga drum and maracas, so I know I'm at the right place. On the door hangs a sign that says *Welcome to Salsa 101! Can't dance? We can change that!* I hope that isn't a lie. I'm fascinated with Latin music and food, and learning to salsa is on my bucket list...hence the urge to finally show up when I don't even have a partner.

I open the door to the studio, which is actually just a room on the third floor of the student center. In my hand is the flyer that lists the class times and requirements along with the twenty dollars to cover the cost of the lessons.

I'm tempted to text He-Man and tell him what I'm doing, to see if he'd be proud of me for coming alone. I make a mental note to take a selfie and send it to him later.

It's a large square-shaped room with a sound system in the corner and an entire wall covered in mirrors. My eyes scan the space and land on a tall, thin male wearing super tight black pants and a red sequined shirt. He's sitting at a small table in the corner, next to the sound system. Dark gelled hair is brushed straight up from his forehead, and there might be the sparkle of shimmery eye shadow on his lids. I catch a small white nametag pinned to his shirt that reads *Ricardo, Dance Instructor*.

I'm definitely in the right place.

He looks up from his clipboard and brushes his gaze over me. "Here for salsa?" He looks past me. "Alone?" I can hear the surprise in his tone.

"Um, yes," I say, forcing conviction and confidence into my voice. I really do want this. "Is that okay?"

A doubtful look crosses his face. "Typically, it works best if you have a

partner. Everyone else has a partner. I might be able to jump in and dance with you, but I'm usually too busy."

*Nice. Even the teacher doesn't want to dance with me.*

A group of people standing next to a refreshment table a few feet over swivel their heads as his voice carries over to them.

"Right, I saw that in the flyer. Normally my roommate would jump at the chance to do this, but well, she's got this new boyfriend. I mean, who doesn't want to learn to salsa..." My voice peters out and I sigh as I realize I'm rambling.

Ricardo gives me a wry yet kind smile. "Ideally you learn how the rhythm of the body works when you have someone to mirror the moves with you."

I push my glasses up on my nose and shuffle my feet, thinking I should have just stayed at home and watched a movie.

The instructor gets distracted as another couple comes in the door, and I ease off to the side, looking for the nearest exit.

*Could I leave without anyone noticing?*

I pause, clenching my fists.

*Why do I care so much? So what if I'm alone?*

*Where are your balls, Delaney? WHERE ARE THEY?*

I dare myself to go through with it.

I slap my money down on the table and Ricardo turns back toward me, a surprised expression on his face as he takes in my crossed arms. "I'm here to have fun with or without a partner, and who's to say I might not start a new trend: salsa sans partner. You never know, it could be the next big thing in ballroom dancing."

Ricardo's face breaks into a smile as he swishes around the table to hand me a nametag to put on my shirt. "I like your spirit," he says as I scrawl my name on it with a pen and slap it on my *Game of Thrones* shirt. I'm here and I'm ready to rumble.

Bobby Gene appears in front of me. "What! Are you kidding me? Delaney Shaw comes to salsa lessons?" He grins broadly and I automatically give him a hug. With his brown hair and soft eyes, he has an infectious personality that puts me at ease.

"I'm just here for the great Cuban food," he whispers conspiratorially as he nods his head at the long table filled with various dishes and small bottles

of water. “And a girl I work with at the school paper. She roped me into this, and I couldn’t say no.” He points out a perky little redhead with freckles, and she waves at me enthusiastically.

“Where’s your partner?” he asks.

“Don’t have one,” I say.

“Really?” He looks confused. “But how will you—”

“I’m her partner,” says a deep voice behind me, and I know who it is before I even turn around.

A sneeze racks my body—of course.

I battle down the next one and turn to face him.

Maverick stands before me like some kind of Greek god, with his lush lips, magnificent body, and perfect blond hair perfectly swept back. My mouth dries as I take in the fitted black shirt that clings to his sculpted muscles. Does the man ever have a bad hair day or *anything*?

“What on earth are you doing in here?” I whisper-hiss, although I don’t really have to because Bobby Gene has taken one look at Maverick’s glare and wandered back to his partner.

“Honestly, I was following you. Had no clue it was to a dance class...but now that I’m here, I may as well help you out. I heard you don’t have a partner.” He cocks his head, waiting for my reply. “I must warn you though...I can’t dance.”

I shrug, trying to play it cool when on the inside I’m a mess, quivering with excitement that he’s here...with me. “Well, I am alone, and so are you, and apparently the food is great here. Want to check it out before we get started?”

He grins. “You’re asking a football player if he wants to eat? I just had dinner—as you know, since you ran away from me—but lead the way, my lady.”

He gives me his arm and I take it.

We make our way over to the table, which is stocked with dishes that have little placards next to each one, naming the contents. I take in the marinated olives, fancy cheeses, fried plantains, and flan.

“Wow. If I had known all this was here, I might have tried this a lot sooner,” I say.

Maverick picks up a ramekin of flan and hands me one. “Let’s try this.”

He gets his own and we each take a bite at the same time, our eyes

closing in simultaneous ecstasy.

“Damn, that’s good,” he says, his eyes on my face instead of the caramel pastry.

“It is,” I reply as I watch him savor the bite.

I’m relieved when the instructor claps his hands and motions for us to move to the center of the room.

Disposing of our dishes, we follow his directions.

Ricardo’s eyes widen as he takes Maverick in and then he looks at me, a little smile on his face. “I see you found a partner after all, Miss Shaw. Nice choice.”

“Indeed,” I say.

Maverick smirks and shrugs.

Ricardo goes on to explain that the salsa attitude comes from the music, the dance is something you feel with your body, and at the same time, your brain can memorize the mechanics of the eight-count method. He’s enthusiastic as he runs through the steps around the circle we’re standing in. I try to pay attention but it’s difficult with Maverick standing next to me, our arms brushing against one another.

“First, we must start with the embrace,” Ricardo says, pulling on the arm of a tiny woman in a matching red dress who I assume is his partner. He pulls her close with a twirling motion and stares deep into her eyes. “You hold them with intense emotion. You’re going on a journey of love and you must convey this in your every movement, in your eyes, in the sensuality of your muscles as you hold your partner tight.”

I need a fan just from his words. Ricardo is quite the romantic.

He demonstrates by leaning in and putting his left hand on her shoulder. He hugs her tight then wraps his right arm around her lower back, centering it above her ass. His partner then raises her right hand to mirror his movements.

“Keep your head high, your spine straight, your core strong, and your chest lifted. Ooze confidence, my loves!” Ricardo demonstrates with a sliding movement of his feet as he twirls his partner around. “Move forward with your left foot, then forward with your right, forward with the left, then the right. Then, feet together, moving left to meet right. Tada! That’s it, and repeat!” He stops and takes a little bow along with his partner who, of course, mirrored his movements while moving backward. He claps his hands. “Now, let’s partner up and hold each other with deep sensuality.”

*Sensuality?*

I turn to face Maverick, a small laugh escaping me. “Are you as uncomfortable as I am right now?”

“I don’t have a clue what the hell he just did out there.” He grins in a self-deprecating way, a spot of pink on his cheeks.

“Does that embarrass you? That you can’t do everything?”

“No, but I do want to make a good impression on you.”

My heart does a somersault.

“Why?”

He ignores that comment and pulls me into his arms, his left hand on my shoulder and his right going to the base of my spine. Goose bumps rise on my arms as he tugs me in closer. “Put your arms around me.”

I do, my mouth completely dry, my body in tune and ready to catch fire as his chest grazes against me and his leg fits smoothly between mine. Heat engulfs my lower regions and I ignore it by staring at his chin. I can’t bring myself to look into those eyes.

“I’d do anything for some people—you’ll figure that out about me,” Maverick says softly, and suddenly it feels as if we’re all alone and not in a crowded studio surrounded by people.

“So I’m one of those people? We barely know each other.”

A bit of a laugh comes from him as our eyes meet. “You pretend like you don’t know me, Delaney, but there’s something between us.”

I bite my lip and stammer out, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Plus, I don’t like football players.”

“So you keep saying, yet here we are...dancing.”

“You offered, and I didn’t have anyone else.”

He laughs. “You love being in my arms and you know it.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re so freaking infuriating.”

He just shrugs.

“I’m not changing my mind.”

He leans in and whispers in my ear. “Your body already says yes.”

*Oh...God!* He’s so annoying, but dammit if his proximity isn’t creating havoc in my internal organs, and it’s all I can do to not straddle his leg and hump it. Luckily, I’m saved when he begins the forward motion of his feet and I take a step back to mirror his steps.

It’s pure torture the way he guides me across the dance floor, his hold

firm yet loose, his movements fluid and graceful. He's not as horrible a dancer as he said, and I feel like he only said that to make me comfortable.

Later, after the class is done, we're standing near the door talking as the students mill around and Ricardo ushers everyone out the door.

Bobby Gene gives us a wave as he passes us in the hallway. He looks like he might want to say more, but he gives Maverick a wide berth and calls over his shoulder that he'll catch me later.

We decide to take the stairs instead of the elevator since it's packed. Maverick walks next to me, his body solid and hard, and I'm feeling more powerful than I have in days.

"Want me to walk you to your car?" he asks as we reach the bottom floor.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Even though there are plenty of streetlights and security cameras, it is dark.

We walk toward the exit, but then I see Martha-Muffin watching us from a cozy sitting area off to the right. Her eyes are lasered in on Maverick and then they bounce to me, a slight snarl forming on her face. I must slow or stiffen because Maverick pauses and looks down at me. "You okay?"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "It's nothing."

A scowl forms on his brow as he scans the open space of the lobby, his gaze landing on Martha-Muffin, who's put her hand on her hip, openly glaring at us.

"Ah, her..." He stops and looks back at me with a grimace. "If it's any consolation, I can't stand her. She tried to trick her way into my bed once and I kicked her ass out. She's been hating on me ever since."

I can't imagine anyone hating Maverick, and I'm glad he's never been with her. But, seeing her just reminds me of Alex's infidelity and the fact that while Maverick hasn't been with her specifically, he's still a football player with plenty of access.

We exit the building and take off across the parking lot. I'm wondering if he'll ask me out again. What will I say? Am I still on this *just friends* kick?

We reach my silver Prius and he grins. "The kind of car you have says a lot about a person."

"Is this where you say I'm pragmatic and predictable?"

He stares down at me. "Maybe. I like that about you. You're quiet but deep. I am too. I mean, I'm popular but underneath, I'm a quiet guy."

I bite my lip, wanting to know more. “What would you do if you didn’t play football?” I ask.

He sticks his hands in his pockets and stares up at the sky as he thinks. “Medical school, probably a neurologist.”

Ah. “Because of Raven?”

He smiles ruefully, a contemplative look on his face. “Yeah. I read everything I can about her injury, all the latest findings. It’s a complex condition, and very...personal. No two cases are ever the same. Her injuries were rather serious. She had to learn to talk and walk all over again.”

“You’re a good brother.”

He shrugs. “She’s all I have. I mean, there’s my dad, but sometimes I think he’s already given up.”

I inhale a sharp breath at his vulnerability. There’s so much more to him than everyone thinks.

We stare at each other in silence, and it’s not weird or uncomfortable, and...

I’m dying for him to kiss me.

His gaze brushes over me, lingering on my lips. “Want to do the salsa thing again next week?”

“Yeah.”

*God.*

I really want him to kiss me.

Which is crazy. He’s bad news...right?

He leans down and brushes his sensuous lips across mine, and for three seconds, I can’t breathe.

My body hums. My heart flies. We feel connected, as if his lips on mine were always meant to be but we’re just now figuring it out.

“Our second kiss,” he says softly, pulling back to stare down at me.

“Yeah.”

“It won’t be the last,” he says huskily, his voice sending shivers over my skin.

Then he takes my keys from me, opens my door, and helps me inside. He waits as I start the car and drive away.

The entire trip home is a blur because all I can think about is him.

*What am I going to do about Maverick Monroe and how he makes me feel?*

# CHAPTER 10

## *Delaney*

**Me: Did you see tonight's episode of Game of Thrones? OMG.**

**He-Man: Yep. Now I want a pet dragon.**

**Me: Would you settle for a cat?**

**He-Man: Only if you come with it.**

"I can't believe you talked me into this party," I mutter to Skye Friday night as I walk next to her up the sidewalk as we make our way to the baseball frat house near campus. It isn't really a frat at all, just a huge colonial brick house donated by one of the former players from Waylon who went on to play major league baseball.

"Well, you need to get out of the house. Plus, that outfit is amazing and we can't waste it." She eyes the black asymmetrical knit mini-dress I'm wearing. I spent my free time this week piecing together and sewing it. Made of jersey, it's formfitting with a band of thick cream lace on the bottom, giving it a flounce. The neckline has little hearts cut out of the fabric while the back is cut into strips, creating a peekaboo effect.

"You're so talented," she murmurs. "Instead of being a graphic designer, you should consider fashion."

I laugh. "Ha. Me?"

"You'd rock a nerd girl line. Think about it: cute little up-cycled dresses, shirts with books on them...the possibilities are endless."

I shrug. Skye is sweet, but I'm not sure I'm fashion material. I just like being different and wearing something no one else has.

"Oh my God, I'm having so many epiphanies tonight." She grabs my arm and stops walking. "Text your He-Man and see if he wants to meet you there!"

Yes, I ended up telling her about him one night this week when I'd had a few glasses of wine.



I nibble on my lips. “I kinda like not knowing who he is. It’s...freeing.”

She thinks. “True, but wouldn’t it be great to have a guy with you in case Alex is at the party?”

“He probably will be.” The jocks tend to stick together.

My brain mulls it over, part of me scared. He-Man and I have such great conversations. What if it’s not Maverick—the person I really want it to be—but some pimply-faced water boy?

Skye sighs. “You know what, stop thinking about why you shouldn’t. Just do it.”

“Fine.” I pull out my phone and type: **I need you, He-Man.**

Ten seconds go by and I don’t see him replying, so I send another text.

**I’m still single, in case you were wondering.**

Still nothing.

**I’m headed to the baseball party. Do you want to meet me there?**

“What’s he saying?” Skye asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. He’s playing hard to get.”

She takes my phone, reads through the messages, and before I can stop her, she’s typing out another one.

**I’m a little drunk, a lot horny, and all alone. Come with me to the party, and I mean really COME.**

She hands it back to me in triumph.

“I don’t think that message is *quite* slutty enough,” I say with a smirk.

Skye laughs then shouts as the three little dots appear. “Well it worked—he’s replying!”

**Already here, Princess Leia. Remember the first night we texted? The fantasy of us at a frat party?**

My heart flutters.

**Yes,** I text back. It’s never far from my mind.

**Meet me upstairs in the bathroom in an hour and we’ll make it come true. I dare you.**

Excitement steals my breath at the thought of seeing him for real, but are we really going to hook up? I swallow. **How will I know it’s you?**

**I’ll be the only badass athlete waiting for you in the bathroom.**

My hands are trembling as I tuck my phone back in my clutch and look at Skye. “Shit. He’s here and we’re going to meet in the bathroom.”

Skye claps, giddy for me. “You’re going to have sex,” she sings.

“It doesn’t mean that,” I say, trying to shush her as we approach the door to the house, but I have to admit the exhilaration is making my steps light as we make our way inside.

*I get to see He-Man!*

The room is packed with groups of people talking and drinking or making out in corners. Loud music blares from the sound system, and I estimate the drunk factor is already at a five on a scale of one to ten.

Tyler calls out from the hallway where he’s chatting with some other baseball players, his hand waving at us to come over. Skye gives me a questioning look. “Want to come with?”

I shake my head. “You go on. I’ll find the bar.”

She heads off toward Tyler, and I watch as she jumps at him. He catches her in his arms and lays one on her.

Bobby Gene calls out my name, and I look up to see him standing upstairs. He’s looking handsome with a ball cap on and his arm tossed around the redhead from dance class. “Delaney!” He tips his beer at me.

I tilt my head toward his beer. “I need one of those—stat.”

Someone jostles into me from behind, and I turn to see Maverick. He runs his eyes over me, lingering on the cutouts on my chest.

Goose bumps pop up on my skin. I’m hyperaware of every single nerve ending in my body when he’s near.

“So are you always bumping into people or is that just me?” he says.

“You bumped into me,” I retort with a grin. “It’s like you were waiting for me.”

*Was he?*

He shrugs, those broad shoulders shifting with an animalistic grace. He’s wearing a fitted orange and blue Wildcats shirt that hugs his chest, the sleeves tight around his hard biceps.

I get distracted when my eyes go past him and I see Alex with Martha-Muffin trailing along behind him. He looks annoyed, and her eyes are red as if she’s been crying. I study them more intently, taking in the sad expression she wears as she stares longingly at Alex. I don’t really want to know what’s going on between them, but it’s apparent she really likes him.

I inch in closer to Maverick, needing to get away from them. “Why don’t you show me the bar in this place? Isn’t it in the back room?”

As if reading my mind, he tosses a glance over his shoulder and sees

Alex. He looks back and gives me a nod. "Done."

# CHAPTER 11

## *Maverick*

We're sitting on a couch in the back room. People come and go past us, mostly on their way outside where the fire pit is, yet it feels like we're alone. She's all I can see right now, and I've been counting down the days until I can go to a damn salsa lesson with her again. *Fuck me, I want Delaney Shaw.*

I never imagined I'd be this...*intense* about wanting a girl, but here I am. Something about her has me worked up, has me wanting everything I never thought I did.

She smiles at me, her ruby lips curving. "So, let's go back to freshman year—why exactly did you kiss me?"

"Because of the legend. The first person you kiss at your first bonfire at Waylon is the one you'll never forget."

She leans into me. "But you *did* forget about me. You went home with twins."

"Whom I barely remember." I exhale, thinking back to how I was at eighteen. "The truth is, I didn't know what I wanted back then. Plus, the accident had just happened a few months before. My head wasn't in the right place."

"And it is now?"

"I'm not perfect, but I know what I want." My eyes go heavy as I run my gaze over her, taking in the way her breasts push against the fabric of her dress. "You're the one that got away, Delaney, the opportunity I missed."

My hand goes to her back and strums across the bare skin of her shoulder. Her skin feels like silk, soft and velvety.

"And you think you can just sweet-talk me into giving another football player a chance?"

I grin. "Yes."

A little laugh comes from her. "Sometimes I'd like to just slap you."

I smirk. "That means I have an effect on you."

“You drive me crazy,” she murmurs, her eyes going low.

Our faces are closer now, and her scent washes over me, light and fresh, like lemons.

I touch her face, tracing the line of her jaw.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her voice whisper soft.

“I’m going to prove that this heat between us...it’s got to be dealt with,” I say.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t sit by you in class one more day without doing something about it.”

Just before I’m about to press my mouth to hers, someone barks out my name.

# CHAPTER 12

## *Delaney*

He's going to kiss me...until he doesn't, his head turning sharply at the sound of his name.

Anger clouds his face, and I look over to see Alex and Ryker and several other football players striding toward us. Suddenly the room seems full of people swiveling their heads in our direction. Maverick stands, and I do the same. Martha-Muffin is here too, huddled in the corner with some of her sorority sisters, her eyes darting from me to Alex.

I stiffen my shoulders and tilt my chin up as he stops in front of us, his eyes bouncing from me to Maverick. Ryker trails behind him, a worried expression on his face as he looks at Maverick.

"Everything okay here?" Alex says, his chest rising rapidly. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

Maverick towers over Alex, his body coiled like a snake, his face tight. "She's fine. Why are you asking?"

"One of the freshmen said you were getting cozy with Delaney," he snaps. "That isn't cool—not at all."

Maverick scowls and takes several steps away from me, forcing Alex to move backward. In a matter of seconds, the space between us has been filled by other players surrounding them, waiting to see what's going to happen.

"You aren't dating her. What's the problem?" Maverick bites out.

"The problem is I know *you* aren't Delaney's style, and I wanted to check on her. Besides, it's a shitty guy that hits on a teammate's ex."

I've pushed my way through the throng of people and I see Alex crossing his arms. His face is red with anger.

*Shit.* This is escalating fast.

Maverick inhales a deep breath, his fists clenching. "That's up to her. She can make up her own mind."

Ryker steps in between them, his voice low. "Hey, hey, look, this is just a

little misunderstanding. No one is angry here. Everything is cool.”

Some of the other players grumble out an agreement, but neither guy seems to be listening.

Maverick’s eyes have narrowed in on Alex. “There’s no misunderstanding. I was sitting with Delaney. Everything was fine until he showed up.”

Alex puffs up his chest. “She still cares about me, and you’re just getting in the way.”

Maverick bristles and leans his face into Alex’s. His index finger pushes at Alex’s chest, forcing him to take a step back. If a fight is about to happen, it’s clear who would win. “Stay out of *my way*, kicker, or you’ll regret it.”

Alex pales and is fumbling for a response when Maverick spins on his heel and stalks out the back door into the yard. I exhale, watching him go.

I should let him cool off.

But I don’t. I head out the door, chasing him to the back gate that connects to the front drive.

“Maverick! Wait.”

He halts and flips around to face me, his jawline taut with repressed anger. There’s about ten feet between us, but I can read him like a book. He’s coiled like a tiger, ready to spring.

His gaze brushes over me, and I think I see a flash of regret flicker across his face.

“Delaney...go back inside.”

I lift my hands up. “Why? Where are you going?”

He exhales slowly as he sticks his hands in his pockets. “I just need to cool off, okay?” His eyes flick back to the house. “I can’t go back in there. I’m on the verge of kicking Alex’s ass, and I can’t do that.”

*Oh.*

I get it—he wants to flirt with me, but I’m not quite important enough to go against his teammates for.

Fine. Football is king, and nothing else matters.

Disappointment hits me. “So you’re just giving up?”

His lips flatten and he doesn’t meet my gaze. “Later,” he says, and then he’s walking away from me.

I stalk back into the house, my hands clenched, disappointment churning. Part of me is...hurt. Just when I’d been softening to the idea of a football

player, he goes and blows me off.

It's been almost an hour, so I decide to go upstairs and meet He-Man. Careful to avoid Alex, I head upstairs to the hallway to wait outside the bathroom while a myriad of people come and go.

I'm anxious to see He-Man, but when he's fifteen minutes late, I'm starting to look like a bathroom stalker. I pull out my phone.

**I'm here and you're not. Are you standing me up?**

No reply.

**You suck**, I send, typing the words.

**I can't make it**, he replies. **Sorry. Something came up.**

My stomach drops as I suck in a breath. Why is everyone letting me down?

Feeling more devastated than I should about a guy I've just been texting with, I shove my phone back into my clutch.

Alex is a cheating dick, Maverick ditched me, and now He-Man is a no-show.

All men are jerks.



# CHAPTER 13

## *Maverick*

“I’m sorry I had to call you to come get him,” Mick says as I march up to the counter of a local bar, aptly named *Mick’s*. It’s a rather seedy, dusty place that plays old country songs, and it’s my father’s favorite, even though he’s been kicked out of it at least half a dozen times that I know of.

My hands clench. I didn’t see Mick’s voicemails until two hours after he left them because of football practice.

“What happened?” I ask, looking around and assessing, not seeing Dad or Raven. It’s a Monday evening and the place is dotted with a few worn faces.

His head nods to a back booth and my eyes follow, landing on my father. “He’s been here drinking since six. He fell pretty hard and hurt his hand. Nothing too serious, I don’t think, but Jackie played nursemaid back in the office.” I see the large white bandage. “He begged me not to call you, but I knew you’d want to know.”

Anger curls inside me. “Where’s Raven?” I ask, my eyes scanning the room once again.

“In the office with Jackie.” Mick sends me a sympathetic look. “Look, I know things are busy at school, but something needs to be done.”

My entire body tightens. “I’m doing the best I can.”

What I don’t tell him is that I’m driving out to the trailer multiple times a week to take care of her, even though it’s half an hour from campus. In a perfect world, I’d just move back in with Dad and Raven, but Coach Al requires us to live in the dorms.

I deal with my dad first, walking over to his booth and shaking his shoulder. “Dad!”

He reeks of bourbon and stale cigarettes, making bile rise up in my throat. It’s a smell I recall from my early days as a kid, coming home from school to see him passed out on the couch.

“Mav,” he slurs, raising his head up as spittle slides out of his mouth.

“I’m sorry...didn’t mean to...all my fault.” The words are low and barely decipherable through the whiskey.

“I can’t believe you brought Raven here,” I snap, my gaze brushing over the patrons at the bar. “*Anything* could have happened to her.”

“Didn’t have money for a sitter.” His eyes blink up at me, bloodshot and runny with a wetness I don’t want to decipher. *I don’t care*, I tell myself.

“You’re a son of a bitch,” I mutter as I lean down and pull him to the edge of the booth so I can swoop him up in my arms.

His chin falls down to his chest.

I brush past the bar and carry him out the front door. Ryker is waiting for me, his arms crossed against his chest. Same as me, he’s dressed in workout clothes, and he straightens up from leaning against my truck. Normally I wouldn’t have asked him to come down here with me, but he was with me when I listened to the voicemails. I motion for him to open the door so I can prop Dad up in the backseat.

He watches me with a grim face, his gaze brushing over my father. “What the hell? Shit,” he mutters.

With a withering glare at my dad’s lowered head, I head back inside with Ryker following me.

Mick ushers me to the back office and we sweep inside. Raven is sitting in a recliner watching *Family Feud*, her face pale and her cheeks stained with tears. Jackie is sitting at the desk working on a laptop, and she gives me a soft nod and a pat on the shoulder. “She’s okay, love, just feeling out of sorts.”

“Mav!” Raven lights up as she rushes over to me.

She bursts into tears as she jumps toward me, her thin arms wrapping around my shoulders. *God, I need to do better by her.*

“I’m sorry. I never dreamed he’d bring you here.”

Cupping my face, she searches my eyes then gives a little knock to her head. “I...have...headache.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Come on, Rav. I got you. Let’s get you home.”



Later that night as Ryker and I drive back to campus, my head is wrecked, riddled with worry and trying to come up with a solution. Only one thing is certain: I want Raven out of my dad's trailer.

The problem is, I don't have the money to fund it. I can't ask for a loan from Coach or *anyone* at school, and I can't have a job that pays over two thousand dollars; those rules are in place to prevent bribing and payouts. My dad has zero credit, so he's out as well.

Ryker keeps shooting me careful looks and I know he's worried about me, which is funny considering this past weekend he was worried I was causing trouble for the team with Delaney. Obviously, I have bigger issues right now.

Once we get back to the dorms, I give him a brusque good night then go into my bedroom and dig around in my nightstand for the number the casino owner gave me.

I recall his offer to pay me money—a lot of money—to fight another football player.

He answers on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Leslie Brock?"

"Yes? Who's this?"

I clear my throat, picturing the sharp-toothed, plump man who was at Carson's Gym. "This is Maverick Monroe from Waylon. You made me an offer a few months back when we bumped into each other at Carson's Gym?"

"Ah, yes, the famous football player. You have quite the record, young man."

*Whatever.* I know he's just a bull-shitter. "Are you still interested?"

"Hmmm," he says, as if thinking long and hard, and I clench the phone. I mean, he should be fucking *thrilled* I called him. I know the deal he's running, and it's sketchy as hell. I'm a damn fine player and he'd be crazy—

"Can you come to Carson's next week? We can finalize the details there and I can tell you more about the fight."

I exhale. "Sounds good. Text me the day and time and I'll be there."

There's a tone of satisfaction in his tone when he replies. "Excellent. You won't regret this, Maverick."

I tap my screen to end the call.

I'm already regretting it, but I don't see any other options.

# CHAPTER 14

## *Maverick*

The next day Raven and I drive out to Pineview Retreat, a fucking magical place for residents who need extra care.

The fifty-seven acre facility is located outside Jackson, and there are manicured lawns and flowers everywhere you look, even though spring hasn't really sprung yet in Mississippi. It reminds me of somewhere a movie star might go if they needed a spa to recuperate at.

It's a damn far cry from the trailer park we grew up in.

Raven and I get a tour of the place, including the gym, indoor and outdoor pools, sauna, tennis courts, pottery studio, horse barn, and cinema. Hell, the place even has a bubble bar where you can make your own liquid with different colors then package it and give it away as gifts.

I want this to be where Raven will live, but I can't breathe every time I glance down at the dollar amount at the bottom of the paperwork Mrs. Watson, the admissions advisor, has given me.

She sits across from me in her office, the huge bay window behind her showcasing the horses that roam in the sprawling pasture.

Raven's disability compensation would only put a slight dent in the six-thousand-dollar monthly fee, but to even get on the list, I need fifty grand, which acts as a deposit to hold her spot and pays the first few months up front.

I feel like I might be sick.

I'm thankful Raven is sitting out in the waiting room.

"Is everything okay, Maverick?"

I look up into the kind face of Mrs. Watson. An older lady in her mid-fifties, I sense she can read right into my panic.

Once again, I'm regretting not going into the draft early, but it's too late now. Once you send your decision to the board, it's final, and you can't go back.

“Yes. Thank you for the tour and the information.” I paste a smile on my face. There’s no way in hell I can swing this place.

She nods, her hair carefully coiffed and pulled back at the nape of her neck. “In addition to your sister’s fully furnished apartment, she’ll have three nutritious meals served each day in our cafeteria, or she can opt to visit one of our onsite restaurants with friends or visitors. We have daily group activities and excursions to museums and other places of interest. Just last week we took a group to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.” She laughs. “We even do Graceland once a year—talk about an interesting daytrip.” She glances down at Raven’s health history and shuffles through the papers. “I see she sustained a traumatic brain injury in a car accident a few years ago?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, she suffers from memory loss, sporadic seizures—which can be avoided with medication—minor cognitive delays, and frequent headaches, which are easy to manage if she gets plenty of exercise. She was wheelchair bound for a year and still walks a bit off balance.”

Her eyebrow rises. “You’re very knowledgeable about your sister’s health. That’s impressive.”

“I’ve done some research.”

She nods. “We also provide counseling, as well as medical services and checkups. A full-time nurse is on her floor twenty-four hours a day.”

*Damn.* That sounds like heaven. It would mean I could rest easy knowing she was being taken care of.

I sigh, getting to the crux of the matter. “I don’t suppose you offer any financial aid options, do you? The cost is...steeper than I anticipated. I mean, I knew what to expect based on researching your facility online, but I wasn’t sure if you had scholarships or some kind of assistance?”

I’m just hoping maybe I missed something.

She gives me a soft smile. “No, but I understand your reticence. It’s quite the sticker shock.”

“How soon could you get her in if I paid the deposit?”

She looks at her calendar and taps her pen on the desk. “If you pay in the next few weeks, I can pencil her in for the first of May.”

*Shit.* That’s just a few months away.

I’m meeting with Leslie in a few days, and I’m anxious to hear what his offer is and how soon I can fight.

Mrs. Watson pulls me back to the present. “I hate to be a pain, but would

you mind signing an autograph for me?” She blushes. “My son will go nuts over it. Our family has followed your career since you were in high school.”

“Of course.” Feeling at a bit of a loss and still reeling from the idea of figuring this mess out, I sign the piece of paper she’s slid over to me then hand it back to her.

“Great. Someday when you’re in the NFL, this will be priceless—not that I’d ever sell it.”

Right, but as a college student, I have zero money, and no one can give me money. It doesn’t make any fucking sense.

I nod and stand. More than anything, I just want to get out of here, talk to Leslie about the fight, and figure this shit out. I shake her hand and mumble a thank you for the hasty meeting she agreed to then make my way out the door.

Raven walks as fast as she can when she sees me, her face still red from the brisk wind.

“See...the...apartments...again? Please?” She hates Dad’s trailer, and I don’t blame her. I can’t keep running over there, trying to mesh two demanding worlds together into one.

I’m missing class today just to be at this meeting. God knows Dad isn’t the one to come. When I showed up today to pick her up, he was still asleep. I was the one to make us breakfast, help her pick out her clothes, put a load of clothes in the wash, and usher her out the door.

I ruffle her hair, forcing lightness into my voice. She’s sometimes quick to pick up on how I feel, and I like to think it’s flashes of the old Raven, the one who made straight As in school and was a normal sixteen-year-old girl.

“We only get one tour. How about some ice cream at Buster’s? You love their chocolate raspberry.”

Her shoulders shift in a vulnerable way, as if she’s preparing herself. “Pineview...won’t...let...me...in?”

I laugh and hook our arms together as we walk down the hall and head toward the parking lot. “It just takes time to get you signed up, that’s all.”

She sighs. “Wish...I...could...snap...my...fingers...make...everything...how...it...used...to...be.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat.

# CHAPTER 15

## *Delaney*

He-Man: **I'm sorry about the baseball party, Princess Leia. Forgive me?**

Me: **Why should I?**

He-Man: **Because we're friends.**

Me: **Are we?**

He-Man: **I hope so. I left a gift for you at the front desk of the library.**

**Did you get it?**

Me: **Yes.**

He-Man: **Well? Do you like it?**

Me: **What's not to love about a full-size movie poster of *The Princess Bride*? Thank you.**

He-Man: **I may not be texting you as much. I've got some personal things going on, but that doesn't mean I'm not thinking about you.**

Me: **What's going on?**

He-Man: **Just...wait for me.**

"Hey," comes a husky voice, and I flip around, dropping the book I was trying to shelve.

It's Maverick, and my eyes drink him in. His face appears tired, his expression somber as he studies me. It's been almost a week since the party, and things are weird. When he showed up for class on Monday, I'd switched seats on him, opting to sit in the front row. Maybe it was a test to see if he would follow me. He didn't. His eyes searched the room and found me, and though I saw disappointment there—or maybe relief—he took his usual seat in the back. On Wednesday, it was the same. He sat in the back, and I was down in front.

"We haven't talked since the party," Maverick says, bending down to pick up the book and hand it to me.



“Yeah,” I mutter.

He tucks his hands in his pockets and leans against one of the racks, his gaze studying me intently. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t show up for salsa this week. Things are on hold with me right now. My dad is going through some things, and I’m spending a lot of time with my sister.”

I give him a shrug, trying to be as nonchalant as I can when really I was devastated when he didn’t show. I stood outside the door until the very last minute, hoping he’d appear. I didn’t even have his phone number to text him.

“It’s fine. You did miss some great plantains though.” I’ve torn my eyes off him because he’s too handsome, and I stare down at the cart of books I need to get shelved. “I need to get back to this...so if you don’t mind, maybe we can chat later?”

He exhales and takes a step closer to me. “Delaney, I’m sorry...I just need to focus on football...” His voice trails off.

His words hurt, and it makes me angry that I’ve let my guard down and allowed him to get this close. “I’m sure you do have big things going on—football, and probably a different girl every night.” It’s not a fair assumption, but I can’t stop the words from coming out.

He frowns. “It’s not like that at all. I’m taking care of my sister, juggling classes and practice, and working through some other things.”

“What things?”

He stiffens and shutters his face, not giving anything away, but this nerd girl can read him like a book: he’s withdrawing. He doesn’t want to share. He doesn’t want *me*.

I let out a sigh. “Good luck with your life,” I say as I grip the cart and push it down the aisle.

# CHAPTER 16

## *Maverick*

I'm at Carson's Gym, and I grunt out my displeasure when I take a direct hit to the face from my sparring partner. Rio, the guy Leslie has paired me up with, dances away from me, grinning around his big-ass mouthpiece. His hits are sneaky and he's got a mean left hook, but I'm bigger, faster, and light on my feet. Being in tune with my body and how it works is something I've always been good at. Boxing is second nature to me as well, something I took to in high school since my dad used to work here doing part-time janitorial duties.

My skill is the reason Leslie is interested in me—well, that and my name in football. He's standing down on the floor watching us, a cold look on his face, wearing a slick tailored suit. I've already met with him this week, and he's made it clear what he wants from me: a fight with another SEC football player. No rules, just me and another guy in a boxing ring. My gut churns at the prospect of putting everything on the line—my career, my whole fucking life.

A flash of white-blond hair and a pink workout shirt coming out of one of the yoga classrooms gets my attention—right as Rio plants a hit straight to my eye.

“Shit!” I bark and back away into the corner. At this rate, I'll really need to brush up on my skills if some chick in a tight top is all it takes to lose my focus.

I look back to the hallway, and my heart pounds as I realize it's Delaney—I know it from the Princess Leia buns she likes to wear. I haven't spoken to her since the library, and that was a few days ago.

She strides toward the gym foyer, and it looks as if she's been crying.

“Delaney! Wait!”

She pauses and looks over her shoulder at me, and once again I'm floored by how gorgeous she is. Wearing black yoga pants and a pink tank her

breasts strain against, she is damn amazing, even with a tear-streaked face. Her cheeks are red, and she hurriedly wipes at them as I grab a towel and jump down from the boxing platform.

Her eyes widen as she watches me.

I call over my shoulder, telling Rio I'll catch him later, and I give Leslie a quick nod. I've gotten enough sparring in today and I'm done.

"Why are you crying?" I ask as I come to a stop in front of her, still breathing hard from the boxing.

"I'm not." She sniffs and turns her head away, giving me a view of her long neck, the soft lines of her jaw. My eyes greedily eat her up. I've missed her like crazy in class, and I'm a heel for not trying to explain things to her, but with the fight looming over me, I think it's best I keep my distance. Even so, that doesn't mean I haven't thought about her a hundred times.

"Why did you bolt out of the yoga class?" It's an activity I didn't even know she participated in.

She seems to gather herself slowly. "I know it seems silly, but Han Solo's been missing the past two days. I'm sure you don't get it..." Her voice trails off.

"What happened?" I take her arm and lead her over to a group of chairs in the foyer. Grabbing a box of Kleenex from the desk, I press them into her hand as she sits down.

She cleans up her face. "A couple of days ago, I let him out to stomp around like he likes to do, and he just never came back. I called for him and put out tuna fish on the back porch—nothing. It's not like him."

"Maybe he found a girlfriend?"

She shakes her head. "He's been spayed. What if he's in a ditch somewhere and I can't find him?"

"So why are you rushing out?" I glance back at the yoga room. "I didn't even know you took a class here."

"The campus rec center has the worst yoga classes. This one is much better, and I needed to get out of the house and let off some steam."

I nod.

"Anyway, my neighbor, Mrs. Wells, just called me. She thought she saw him on campus today near the fine arts building, and it's the first ray of hope I've had. I'm on my way there to look for him." She stands and holds out the box of tissues. "Thank you for asking." Her voice is shaky yet cool, and I

sigh. I don't blame her for being standoffish with me.

"I'll go with you," I say, and she blinks.

"What? Why?"

I ignore that. I'm in take-charge mode, and when I see the coat she wears to class hanging near the door, I stride over to get it. Slipping it off the hook, I wrap her up in it and button it carefully.

She stands there watching me as I dash back to the boxing area and grab my gym bag.

I jog back to where she waits. "Now, let's go find Han Solo."

A smile briefly appears on her face and she gives me an odd look. "Are you sure? You're..." She clears her throat, her gaze lingering on my pecs. "You're half-naked and it's cold outside."

I grab my North Face off a hook and slip it over my bare chest. "I'm fine, Buttercup."

# CHAPTER 17

## *Delaney*

Maverick ushers me out into the cold and straight to his truck, a Toyota that looks like it's seen better days. He opens the passenger door for me and gives me a hand up into the cab. He gets in on the other side, looks over at me, and squeezes my hand, surprising me. He's being so...sweet and helpful. "You okay?" he asks.

I nod. I'm worried about Han, but I'm also discombobulated by seeing Maverick at the gym, even though Skye casually mentioned this week that she heard a lot of the football players come to Carson's during the off season to take advantage of their programs.

Part of my reason for taking the yoga class here was hoping I'd run into him—so stupid, but I can't help myself.

"Why were you boxing?" I ask.

He shrugs. "My dad used to work there and was able to get me a few lessons when I was growing up. I'm pretty good at it."

"Is there anything you're not good at?"

"Nope." He sends me a grin and I try to reciprocate, but it fails. Things are still strange between us. I sigh and look out the window.

We pull up to the fine arts building, and I'm out the door before he even gets us parked. My gaze scans the horizon, looking past trees and landscaping and buildings, trying to catch a flash of black and white fur. It feels futile, and I don't see anything that looks like him. At least it's the weekend and campus is dead, so there aren't a hundred bodies to look around.

"Han, where are you, little man?" calls Maverick as he takes the north side of the building and I take the south. Ten minutes of fruitless searching goes by as I make one more pass and then two across the quad in front of the surrounding buildings. Nothing is out here except for a few crazy squirrels and blackbirds.

I feel lost. Han #1 left, and now Han #2.

“Over here!” It’s Maverick’s voice, and I flip around to see that he’s holding a squirming Han about fifty yards away. Pure joy fills me as I take off running toward them. Breathing heavily from my jog, I come to a stop, take the fighting Han, and pet him until he calms.

“Maverick! Oh my gosh, where did you find him?”

He shrugs. “Would you believe he was in the dumpster behind the building? He must have crawled in there for food and couldn’t get out. I heard a tiny meow, opened it up, and there he was.”

I rub his head the way he likes, and he nips at my hand then purrs.

Looking back up, I notice Maverick’s jacket is torn and his shorts look askew. My mouth opens. “You got in the dumpster?”

He grins. “Dumpster diver, at your service.”

I throw my arms around him, somehow managing to not squish Han in the process. My lips graze his cheek for a second and he turns his head to meet them, but I pull away before that happens.

I react by looking down at my runaway cat. “What if no one had seen him all weekend? You probably saved one of his lives.”

“Undoubtedly. I hope he’s worth it.”

I sigh. “He’s all I have.”

“Well, you have me now.” He clears his throat. “He looks a bit frazzled. Let’s get you both home.”



We pull up at my house and it’s nearly dark. Skye’s car is gone, and I recall a text from her earlier saying she was staying at Tyler’s place tonight.

I’m still holding Han in my arms and he’s anxious to get down, so I get to the front door in a hurry. Maverick follows me, taking my keys from my bag and unlocking my door.

As soon as he gets it open, I plop the cat down and he takes off. “Now don’t run away again,” I scold him as he flounces toward the kitchen where his food and water are.

I gaze back at Maverick, who's watching me.

"What?"

He shrugs as he leans against the doorjamb and brushes those gorgeous eyes over me. "Just like looking at you. I'm glad we found him."

"Me too," I sigh. "Well, thank you for taking me there and finding him."

Maverick starts, straightening up. "Oh, I just realized we didn't go get your car at the gym."

I shrug. "Don't worry about it. I'm not going anywhere else tonight, and Skye will be back tomorrow."

He chews on his lip. "Don't you have plans?"

"Nope. You?"

"No."

He watches me, studying me, and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "Do you want to stay for dinner? I can cook for us—you know, as a thank you for helping me find Han. I don't think I would have been able to get him out of that dumpster even if I had heard him in there."

"I'd love that." An almost shy expression crosses his face. "I don't think anyone's ever cooked for me...you know, since my mom."

"Oh, that's too bad. Come in." I'm nervous, feeling him walking behind me as we enter the house and he checks out the place. It's nothing fancy, but it's all mine, built in the late eighties and only a block from campus.

Before I get to the kitchen, he grabs my hand, halting me. His expression is conflicted as he stares at me. "Hey, I'm sorry for being an ass lately, Delaney. I swear there's no one else. I'm just—"

"It's fine," I say. "I get it. You're busy."

It seems like he wants to say more, but he lets my hand go, takes off his jacket, and tosses it across the back of the couch. I see his chest...his naked chest...and I swallow thickly.

Feeling breathless, I say, "Take a look in the fridge and decide what you'd like. I have a little bit of everything."

"You did mention nachos once," he says as he pulls out a pack of ground beef and holds it up.

I nod and he grins, making my face heat. "I did. Now move your ass so I can work my magic."

"Can I watch?" he says softly, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans against my fridge, perfectly showcasing his biceps and the ropes of muscle in

his forearms.

I take a deep breath. “Sure. Hand me my apron, will you?” I say, turning on the stovetop and putting the beef in a pan. I tilt my head at the hooks along the back wall, and he strides over to pick up the black apron. He shakes it out and brings it over to me, and I expect him to hand it over, but he doesn’t; instead, he slips the loop over my hair, his hands brushing lightly over my shoulders as he spins me around to tie the back. Blood pounds in my veins at the way he handles me, as if he’s perfectly attuned to every nuance of my skin.

He spins me back around. “*May the Forks Be With You?*” He shakes his head as he reads the white words printed on the apron.

I ease away from him to stir the beef.

“You’re such a nerd, Delaney.”

“And your point is?”

His eyes light up. “I like it. I like a girl with a brain.”

“Good. I like you too.” I say the words lightly.

He’s closer now, leaning against the fridge and watching me as I work. His scent hits me—male with a hint of sweat—and I’m having a hard time keeping my eyes off his chest.

*Just keep him at a distance*, I tell myself, but the truth is I’m weak and tired of fighting this feeling. Maverick freaking Monroe is in my kitchen, without a shirt on, watching me cook like he wants to eat me instead of the food I’m preparing.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his hand drifting down my arm as he pulls away. “You’re quite possibly the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met,” he says softly as his thumb rubs at a spot on my shoulder, and I don’t stop him, don’t pull away. “You’re nervous,” he says, leaning in closer. “Are you trying not to sneeze?”

I clear my throat. “Actually, my sneezing seems to be better lately.” It’s true, and the more I’m around him, the sassier I’m becoming.

“Nice.”

I fiddle with the pan. “Uh, do you want to find us a movie while I cook?” I gesture to the big screen in the den, which is easily visible from the kitchen with the open floor plan of the house.

“Sure. How about *The Princess Bride*?”

I drop the spatula in the pan and turn to look at him. A small grin curls his



mouth.

“Why would you say that?”

His eyes lower. “I saw the poster you have up in the den.”

*Oh, right.* I glance past him to the gift He-Man left for me at work. I already got it framed and up on the wall, and every time I look at it, I think about the mysterious man who gave it to me.

“It’s one of my favorites,” I say.

“Mine too.”

I suck in a breath, my heart flying. I want to ask if he’s He-Man...but I don’t. “Yeah, sure, *The Princess Bride* sounds great. It’s free on Netflix.”

I work in the kitchen and listen to him as he fiddles with the remote, searching for the iconic classic. As I drain the meat and set it to the side, I work precisely and methodically, trying to keep my brain from piecing together what I know is true.

It *has* to be him. Too much has been similar, and I feel close to both of them.

I’m dicing tomatoes at the counter when he strides back into the kitchen, his piercing gaze sweeping over me. “Mind if I take a shower before we eat?”

“In my shower?”

“No, your neighbor’s. Yes, yours.”

“And you’ll use my soap?” I picture him using my loofa too, rubbing it across that magnificent chest.

Another grin. “Is this a problem? Are you uptight about people using your stuff?”

“No.” How do I explain that the image of him in my house with water spraying down on him...I shake myself. “Yes, of course you can shower. I-I just...what will you put on?”

He rakes a hand through his blond hair and scratches his jaw, which I notice has acquired a bit of a shadow. I wonder how it would feel between my...

“I can wear a towel,” he says, a glint of glee in his eyes.

“No.”

“One of your shirts?” His eyes brush over my chest.

“Too small.”

He shrugs. “I can always just walk around naked.” I throw a dishtowel at him and he catches it. “This?”

“No, goofball!” I huff out a laugh. He really is incorrigible. “Wait here, I think I have something.”

I turn to head to my bedroom and hear him call out after me. “It better not be one of Alex’s shirts.”

I chuckle as I grab the garment I have in mind, a roomy shirt featuring a white cat wearing spectacles. I head back to the kitchen, thrust it into his hands, and push him toward the bathroom. He walks backward, letting me guide him, my hands on his forearms.

He’s in the bathroom and I’m just standing here waiting for him to shut the door, but he doesn’t right away. He’s looking at me as if he wants to say something.

So do I.

I swallow, feeling breathless. “I...I have to ask you something.”

“What?”

My chest catches as our eyes meet. I bite my lip. “Are you...He-Man?”

His chin goes up as his eyes lower to half-mast. “Damn, Buttercup, I’ve been waiting weeks for you to ask me that.”



Maverick—or *should I say, He-Man*—is showering while I furiously set the table and finish making lemonade.

He’s in my freaking shower...*naked*.

I check the clock on the wall. It seems like he’s been in there forever, although in reality it’s only been fifteen minutes. Feeling flustered by the images my mind is conjuring up, I march down the hall to knock on the door and let him know everything’s done.

Just as I raise my hand, Han comes up behind me and puts his front paws on the bathroom door, which of course isn’t shut all the way, so it opens. *Darn cat.*

I don’t mean to spy on Maverick. Really it’s just an accident that I peek through the crack in the door and see the mirror, which shows the glass

shower enclosure...and his naked form. I swallow hard at his broad chest, his thick arms as he scrubs his hair, the drops of water as they run down his pecs to that deliciously tempting V, right down to his—

Our eyes meet in the mirror and I take a step back, out of sight.

*Shit.*

The water turns off.

I clear my throat. “Everything’s ready,” I say, projecting my voice.

The shower door opens and shuts. “Do you think dinner can wait?” he says.

I can’t see his face, and it’s killing me, so I step forward a little so we can talk. Before I realize it, my feet have taken me right into the bathroom, and it’s not an accident. My body knows what it wants.

“Wait for what?” I say.

He’s standing there in front of me, and I blink rapidly, my traitorous eyes tracking a wayward droplet of water as it skirts down his corded neck, past his shoulders, and to his legs.

“Buttercup, I think you know what.”

The air is hot and humid, making my face damp as I stand within a few feet of him. My hands itch to touch him, to caress that utter perfection, that body that’s been honed by years of hard work and training.

“Delaney,” he says, and I hear the command in his tone, the sheer confidence that he knows I want him.

“You’re naked,” I say, averting my gaze and looking up at the ceiling.

“And you’re not—why?”

I take a deep breath.

“Delaney.” His tone is silky. “Look at me.”

I do and my body shudders with built-up need, taking him in. *God*, I want to be naked. I want to throw myself all over him and satisfy this craving, but...

“I want you, Delaney, and it’s killing me slowly.”

I suck in a sharp breath as his hand moves to caress his hard cock. He’s unapologetic and proud as he pumps from tip to root, his palms working over the velvety-looking skin of his hard, long member.

“He-Man has a big sword,” I say breathlessly.

“Damn straight.” He rolls his fingers over the mushroom-shaped head as he bites his lip, making *me* bite my lip. His breathing increases as his chest

rises, and I'm filled with the need to be the one to make that noise come from him.

Desire swirls in his gaze. "This is all for you...you."

He releases his grip and I whimper, missing the sight of him pleasuring himself. He takes a step toward me and threads his hands through my hair, tugging at the pins that hold the buns together. With a touch so light it makes me shiver, he trails his fingers down the sides of my neck and onto my shoulders.

"You're wet," I say, watching the water drip down his chest.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

He murmurs his approval softly, and a thousand thoughts fly at me at once, telling me to stop, to not get this close to another athlete, but I'm past caring.

"This is crazy," I murmur.

"Crazy good," is his reply.

"It's probably a mistake," I add.

"Best fucking mistake ever," he says before taking my mouth, his full and sensuous lips sliding over mine, parting them until I sink into him and revel in the sensation of him against me.

Strong hands cup my face as his tongue tangles with mine, and I put my hands on top of his then whimper with need.

"Delaney," he whispers in my ear as his mouth explores the tender curve of my neck and the hollow of my throat. His teeth nip at my skin, and I groan out his name.

With a deftness that doesn't surprise me, he has me out of my pink workout top and sports bra. He backs me up against the wall and kisses me, sighing into my mouth as my hands snake around his shoulders and cling to him. His cock is pinned between us, pressing into me, and I swivel my hips against it.

His hand skates across my breast teasingly and his mouth follows, capturing my nipple and making me moan.

Is it possible to orgasm with just this?

Why am I surprised? It's *him*.

His hand curls around my ass and my leg hooks around his hip, needing friction. With a groan, he pushes my yoga pants down to my feet, puts my leg

back around his hips, and slides his fingers underneath my panties. I'm thankful I put on the pink lace ones this morning, but those thoughts vanish as his fingers brush back and forth, teasing my clit and the entrance to my core. He fingers me slow and then fast, his lips sucking my collarbone as I toss my head back and take in much-needed air. The scent of him fresh from the shower, the wetness of his skin, the sheer beauty of him—it all overwhelms me.

My pelvis moves with him as my spine tingles, the energy building and heating my insides. I'm putty in his hands as he touches me, his forehead pressing against mine.

“You're dripping for me,” he says, and I moan. I can't do anything else but be at his mercy as he plays me. Our breaths mingle together and when our eyes meet, I combust.

Fireworks go off as I come, my body vibrating against his hand, my walls reverberating with bliss. I place both hands on his shoulders to hang on, the aftershocks of the quake keeping my body undulating against him. He watches intently, that piercing gaze of his so open and honest and needy that I reach up and kiss him.

“That was...” I don't know what to say. Amazing seems so cliché; so does awesome.

He seems to know I have no words, looking as bemused as I am by our explosive chemistry. “I didn't plan on this. I was just taking a shower and I saw you...” He swallows, his eyes searching my face. His arms curl around my waist. “Do you want more?”

I feel his cock brushing against my panties, which are now back in place. All it would take is for him to push that fabric aside and slide into me.

“I'll be your scabbard,” I murmur, and he flashes me a grin then swoops me up in his arms.

“You're a nut,” he says as I point him to my bedroom amid giggles.

He's not even winded by carrying me, and I sink into his skin, wanting to bury myself in him.

He laughs as he sets me on my bed and scoots me over until we're under my covers, face-to-face.

“You okay?” he asks.

I pause, my brain spinning. I've had a moment to think between here and the bathroom, and I'm not sure.

It's like he reads my mind. "I'm not him, Delaney. I'm never going to cheat on you."

I swallow. "So this isn't just a spur-of-the-moment hook-up?"

His hand on my waist tugs me closer. "It's going to take a million hook-ups to get you out of my head."

My body curls into his as he pulls me against his chest and kisses me again, harder this time.

He works his way down my body at a leisurely pace, his lips toying with my nipples, plucking at them with his teeth.

I'm moaning as he slides farther down, his mouth finding secret places on my skin, the bend of my knee, the inside of my thigh. When his tongue slides across my clit, my lower body bows up and clenches, on the verge once again.

His hand pushes my chest down, holding me firmly in place as he works me over with the dance of his mouth. He devours me, giving me everything and not holding back. I'm panting when he finally comes up for air, my body trembling, ready to explode.

"Maverick." I taste his name on my lips, and it's so good. My hands tug him up to me, caressing his chest and hips, learning his skin. We kiss deeply, and the heat between us is the hottest I've ever been for another person in my life. His cock begs for me to take it in my hands, and I do, running my fingers over his length, lightly teasing the tip.

"Do you have condoms?" he asks between kisses.

I nod toward the nightstand. He reaches over, opens the drawer, and grabs one. I'm impatient, stroking him with my palms as he tears it with his teeth and slides it on.

He positions himself and enters me slowly, easing his thickness inside my entrance and then darting out, making me moan.

"More," I tell him.

He pumps inside, soft and slow and barely there, making me crazy.

"Please," I beg.

He bends his forehead to mine and kisses me as he adjusts my hips for a better angle, and then he slides all the way in, to the hilt, his girth filling me up tight as he moves inside me. With him on his knees, he takes me, hard and fast, his breath coming in pants as he works above me.

"All mine, Delaney." His words are broken up, and I can tell he's into

this. There's an intensity to him, and he's staring at me like he'll never let me go.

Arching his back, his fingers rub at my pussy, playing me in a synchronized rhythm with his thrusts. I come apart.

He watches me with a heavy-lidded gaze, his eyes eating up every detail of my orgasm. "That's what I was waiting for, Buttercup."

With a shout, he comes after me, his body tightening and straining as his cock hardens inside me, his body pumping out every last bit of sensation.

"Damn," he says after a few moments of lying on top of me. His chest is heaving as he slides out and lies down next to me.

"What?" I ask.

"That was...that was..."

"The best?" I ask.

He grins. "I know it was for you."

I smack him with a pillow and he laughs, pulling me into his arms for an embrace.



Later, we're cuddling and talking in the dark.

"I can't believe you're He-Man," I say, gazing up at him. "I'm still processing."

He grins down at me. "I know. I was going to tell you at the party, but then the other stuff happened with Alex." He plays with a strand of my hair. "Ryker was the one who first texted you that night."

"Did he know who I was?"

"He just knew I'd torn a girl's phone number off of the salsa sign you'd put up. I didn't tell him *who* it was because I knew he'd be worried about the whole Alex thing. You should have seen his face when I told him it was Delaney Shaw. He freaked out."

"Speaking of Alex...what's going to happen now?"

He looks over at me. "Alex has nothing to do with us," he sighs. "Hell,

just you saying his name pisses me off.”

*Oh.* I bite my lip. “I mean, I know you have a lot going on, and I don’t want to mess up your game—or his.”

*But isn’t this feeling worth it?* I don’t say that, but I’m thinking it. My feelings for Maverick have merged with those I’ve developed through the texts with He-Man, and I’m in deep even though I know it’s dangerous to my heart.

“Football doesn’t start until this fall. He’s got time to get used to us.”

*Us?*

I smile and he leans in to kiss me. “Ready for round three?”

I laugh. “You think you’re up for it?”

“I’m up for anything with you.”

My heart swells.

The voice of Taylor Swift singing “Shake it Off” comes from another room. It sounds like a ringtone, but it’s not mine.

He heaves out a sigh and scrubs at his chiseled face. “Dammit.”

“Is that your ringtone?”

“Yeah, my sister’s. I need to go. I forgot I was supposed to check in on her tonight.”

“Oh...okay.”

He stands up, his head seemingly already somewhere else, and I do as well, grabbing a robe from the back of the bedroom door to slip on. He’s already dashed to the bathroom, grabbed his gym shorts, and put them on.

“I wish I didn’t have to rush off, but I’m staying there tonight because my dad’s helping a buddy out at his garage.” He grimaces. “It’s extra cash for them, so...”

I tighten my belt, following him out into the hall. “You do that a lot when he’s gone?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes on the weekends. Raven doesn’t need to be alone.”

*How does he have a life?*

“How do you do that between school and football?”

“Most days I’m barely hanging on.” A gruff laugh comes out of him as he quickly checks his appearance in the hall mirror, arranging his hair. “But really, her living with my dad didn’t start until after football season. If this had happened during the season, I’d have been screwed.” He rubs at the



scruff on his jaw.

“Where was she before your dad’s?”

His teeth clamp together, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. “She was at a state-funded group facility paid for by insurance, but we weren’t happy with it. She had bruises and no one could explain them.”

I inhale. “That’s terrible. What happened when you asked?”

“Nothing. It’s a shitty place and I couldn’t leave her there, so we put her with my dad temporarily—but that comes with its own problems.”

Wow. It’s a lot to take in.

He must read my face. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle it.”

I clear my throat. “Do you want me to come with you? I mean, I don’t mind hanging out with you guys. We can watch TV or play a game or something?”

He rubs his hand across his lips and considers me, a frown twisting his face as he considers what to say.

“Maybe next time.” He kisses me on the lips, cupping my cheek. “I’ll text you, okay?”

I nod.

But...

I know he’s not telling me everything.

There’s a cagey look on his face, a wary expression that pricks at me.

*Stop worrying, Delaney.*

I want to, but now that the fun is over, my head is reminding me to guard my heart.

*If you’re going to do this with him, be careful.*

I head into the kitchen to pack up the food. “Okay, at least take this with you. I’m sure you guys need dinner.” I busy myself getting out containers to put at least half the nachos in, leaving some out for me.

“Delaney...” His voice is soft as he looks around at the preparation I did while he was showering. I chopped tomatoes and lettuce and got cheese and guacamole out of the fridge. I even put out real plates when I normally only use paper. I blush. “I didn’t do anything but make nachos.”

“You’re incredible.” He takes the containers of food I hand him, gives me one last look, and then he’s out of the kitchen and out my door.

I watch him go, hoping like hell I’m not going to get hurt.

# CHAPTER 18

## *Delaney*

I'm ready for class on Monday at least an hour before it starts. Part of it is that I didn't sleep well over the weekend, thinking about Maverick and Raven and how much pressure that must be when he's so young and has such a big future ahead of him.

Since I haven't seen him since Saturday, I take extra care with my hair, blowing it out and straightening it until it's a thick blonde curtain. Last night, I carefully scoured my wardrobe and came up with a tight-fitting lilac sweater and a pair of smoke-gray skinny jeans that curve over my bum. Now, with a careful hand, I apply extra dark red lipstick.

I saunter out to grab a cup of coffee and find Skye sitting at one of the barstools at the island, her head bent as she inhales her early morning brew.

"What's up, girlie," I call out, and she just grunts. She isn't a morning person like I am. "I made some chocolate chip cookies this weekend if you want some," I tell her as I breeze by to grab a mug from the cabinet. "Nana's recipe."

She gives me a little mumble.

I pour my coffee and toss in a healthy amount of French vanilla creamer from the fridge. "They are your favorite, right?"

She nods, her hands gripping her cup as she lifts it up for a long swig.

"Skye? Are you okay?"

She shakes her head. "Not really."

I sigh. I should have known something was up when she came in last night and didn't even pop her head in to say goodnight. Normally she'd check in with me on a Sunday just so we could recap the weekend.

"Did you and Tyler fight?"

She raises her head, and I see dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep. She grimaces. "I know, I look like hell. I slept horribly—I'm surprised I didn't keep you up with my tossing and turning."

I was doing my own tossing around in bed.

“What did Tyler do?” I say.

She grunts out a laugh. “Funny how you knew this was about him,” she sighs. “We were at the baseball house watching a movie with a bunch of people and he just started...being a dick and ordering me around, like he expects me to be his maid or something. He asked me to clean his room and I told him to fuck off. Then I go to the bathroom and when I come back, there’s some stupid girl in his lap.”

My stomach drops. *What a douchebag!*

She bites her lip. “So I get pissed and we have words then he kicks me out of the house and tells me not to come back until I’m *ready to apologize.*” She uses air quotes.

“I’m so sorry.” I always knew he was a jerk, but of course, I don’t say that.

A tear makes its way down her face and immediately I’m next to her with my arms around her shoulders as she leans into me. “Hey, don’t cry.”

Her hands tighten around her coffee mug. “Ugh. I can’t believe I’ve spent the past few months dating him.”

I rub her back. “You know what? Let’s plan our spring break trip tonight. Going to the beach always makes you feel better. We’ll lay out in the sun and forget all about our ex-boyfriends.”

She nods, wiping at her face. “How was your weekend?”

I almost tell her about Maverick, but then decide to wait. “It was great.” I hand her the container of cookies and pop the top, letting the scent of sugar and chocolate waft around us.

She lets out a long sigh. “God, those smell amazing.”

“Five hundred calories each, but who the hell cares?”

She takes one and smiles.



Later, I arrive at class and take my seat in the back of the auditorium. When

our professor arrives and Maverick still hasn't shown up, I'm nervous. The teacher is adamant about attendance, and there's no excuse for missing a test unless you're practically hospitalized. Then again, he is an athlete, and I know from experience they get away with missing class all the time. Still, that isn't really Maverick's style. The man has a brain to go along with all that brawn.

*So, where is he?*

I feel odd as I look through the history of the text conversations with He-Man. I have a different perspective now that I know it was Maverick. It was Maverick who rescued me from my blind date, showed up at the grocery store, and dared me to say I was a badass in the library. I change his name in my phone to Mav-Man and send him a text.

**Where are you? We have a test today.**

**Not coming today. I'll explain later.**

The professor approaches me to give me a stack of papers that are part of the test, and I slide my phone into my bag after switching it to silent.

Whatever he's doing, I hope all is well.

# CHAPTER 19

## *Maverick*

“There must be at least three hundred people packed in this ballroom,” Ryker mutters as he stands next to me on Monday afternoon, surveying the milling crowd. “And they’re all rich assholes.”

I tighten the fingerless leather gloves on my hands and focus on taking deep breaths. Instead of being at Waylon today, we both skipped class to drive to Tunica, Mississippi, for the fight. We’re standing in the corner of a ring underneath a glittering chandelier inside a riverboat casino owned by Leslie.

Standing in my corner as we wait, Ryker grimaces. “This place reeks of cigarette smoke. God, I hate casinos.”

I force a laugh, shaking off my nerves as I do a few air punches and bounce around on my feet. “Isn’t this the first time you’ve been to one?”

He shrugs. “Still don’t like them. This place is trouble.”

Hell yeah it is, yet here we are.

I look around the room, taking in the high-dollar crowd sporting tailored suits and tailored gowns. Just to get in the door, the crowd had to get Leslie’s personal approval as well as put up several grand. The kicker is I have to *win* to get the fifty grand I negotiated.

My stomach feels like it’s filled with lead, and I’m doing my damndest to keep my eyes averted from the stares of the women and men who have their eyes on me as they sip from champagne flutes.

“Don’t look at them,” Ryker says firmly. His mouth is a thin straight line, and his face is harder than I’ve ever seen it. He hates that I’ve made this decision and he doesn’t approve, but he’s the kind of friend who’s not going to leave my side.

“I just want it over with.”

He swivels his head as the competition stalks into the ballroom from a side door. It’s a showoff of an entrance by a monster of a man. He’s around

my age, flanked by two girls in low-cut dresses. He stops in the middle of the aisle, letting the spotlight dance over his broad chest as he puffs up and does a strut up to the ring.

He's massive, at least a couple of inches taller than me, which puts him around six-six. Swirls of brightly colored tattoos cover nearly every inch of his thickly muscled skin. Appearing to be of Polynesian descent with a wide chiseled face and a braid of long hair, he smirks at the crowd, shaking hands with some of the attendees.

I hear a sharp inhalation from Ryker. "Is that Kai Willis, the linebacker from Ole Miss? Goddamn, he's huge."

I exhale, the lead in my stomach getting heavier. "Shit." Ole Miss is our biggest rival in the SEC and "Killer" Kai is their star linebacker, so it makes sense that Leslie would want us to fight.

Ryker shakes his head and whistles as his gaze sweeps over the crowd. "What a bunch of sick bastards."

I nod. "People get off on this. They like seeing blood."

That hard look settles back on his face as he focuses on me. "Yeah, but you're jeopardizing everything."

Maybe.

He grimaces. "And why are there no cell phones? Why did we have to get patted down before we entered the room?"

"Leslie's protecting his fighters. He assured me this won't get out to the press."

He exhales. "The entire state of Mississippi will tear him apart piece by piece if he screws with their hometown Magnolia boy."

A muscle flexes in my jaw. Yeah, I'm a hometown boy with nothing but the clothes on my back.

Kai's face is impassive as he studies me from across the ring. Big, mean, and full of vitriol, he's one of the most formidable offensive players in the country. He stalks over to us, his eyes low as they take in every facet of my physique.

He stops in front of me and just stands there, a curl to his lip. "Never seen you without all the padding," he tells me, a sly tone to his voice. "Not impressed."

I shrug. "Impressive is when I kick your ass back to Oxford."

He tosses his head back and lets loose with a booming laugh before

quickly sobering and leveling me with a cold stare. “You’re going back to Waylon in a body bag. I’ve been doing this a long time, and you’re the perfect little pretty boy for me to toss around today.” He flexes his arms, bending his elbows and flexing his muscles in a strong man-style showoff as he does a little pirouette in front of me. “You can’t beat this, pretty boy. I’m gonna kill you.” There’s a wild glint to his eyes, and part of me believes he wants to.

I force a shrug, playing it cool. He’s trying to rile me up, and I can’t let him. “We beat you on the field this year, Kai, and I’m going to beat you in that ring.” I tap my head. “See, you may have those big steroid muscles going on, but I’m smarter.”

He sneers at me as he gets up in my face. Someone from the crowd gasps as we catch the attention of the betters.

I arch a brow, not flinching. “Scary. Now fuck off and wait for the bell to ring.”

He barks out that bellowing laugh, flips around, and stomps away.

I study him, trying to figure out what his strengths and weaknesses are. He has me on size, but that could be an advantage if I’m faster.

I stretch out and begin my routine of small punches. I flick my eyes over to Ryker, who has a deep scowl on his face. “I got this, Mama Ryker. Just be here when I’m done.”

He lets out a long exhalation as he studies me, his hand sliding over his jaw. “Always, man. I’m not going anywhere until this shit is done.”



Kai is killing me.

I take a punch straight to the jaw and it sends me reeling. I hit the ground on my ass and blink up at the chandelier, the bright lights competing with the birds that are flying around my head.

*Get up*, I hear Ryker say.

I look over at him with one eye because the other is completely shut from

a hit I took in the last round. Blood runs down and clouds my vision as I swipe at it.

Kai is standing over me and delivers a kick straight to my ribcage.

I choke out a gasp and focus. *Fuck*. I'm drifting, my mind wandering because I've been hit one too many times.

I scramble up and dart away from Kai's massive legs to rest against the ropes. He approaches with his gloves up, his mouthpiece filled with saliva mixed with blood. I've gotten in a couple of good hits to his wide face, but it's like banging my hand against concrete.

His fist connects with my hip and I stumble back again.

Ryker is yelling at me from the sidelines, but I can't hear what he's saying. The crowd cheers and shakes their fists, some for me and some for Kai. Loud rock music blares from the speakers, and all the lights are out except for the spotlight that's narrowed in on the ring.

Panting through the mouthpiece, I bounce around on the ropes, moving away from Kai. *God dammit*. I need a fucking minute to get myself together.

*Raven.*

*Pineview.*

*Fifty thousand dollars.*

I shake myself off and roll my neck, barely pausing before I rush at him, my first strike clipping his shoulder, not the chest like I wanted, but the hit has enough force that he stumbles a bit. He barrels back at me, his legs maneuvering a roundhouse kick that plants right into my side.

He bounces away. "Second-degree black belt, asshole. Anything goes in this fight—didn't you know that?"

I narrow my good eye at him, my fists curling. "Mississippi boys learn how to fight for real in their fucking sleep. Karate isn't going to help you."

I wipe sweat out of my eyes, square off again, and eye him, looking for chinks in his armor. He's proficient in MMA, but boxing is where my strengths lie, and that's what I focus on.

Bobbing around him, my fists are up as I dart sideways, moving in and out, teasing him then popping just out of reach. I land a small right uppercut to his jaw, and he comes right back at me with a quick two-handed jab. I block it with my forearms and retaliate with an uppercut to his gut.

*Whoosh*. He grunts and bends over to catch his breath but pops right back up.



He maneuvers behind me, and this time I'm ready before he kicks, managing to block him with a punch to his thigh.

He growls out a curse and backs up, a slight limp to his normal swagger, and my fist aches inside the glove—it was a good solid blow.

He shifts around, eyeing me. He thinks I should be down by now.

I force a grin, knowing I probably look maniacal.

He comes at me again, his swipe a hair too wide, and I duck. He breathes heavily as he chases after me.

“Stop playing and take him down!” one of the men from Kai's corner calls out.

“Go back to Ole Miss!” Ryker yells back.

Kai runs at me head down, in football mode, and I anchor myself, waiting. He gets a second from knocking me on my ass, I sidestep like a good boxer, and he misses completely, lurching into the ropes.

I rush at him, landing a punch to his lower back.

*Score.*

Using my shoulder, I pop him in the chest and send him reeling.

*Stay down, asshole,* my face is telling him.

But he gets back up, his eyes glazed.

“You done?” I pant.

“Pussy,” he calls at me as he slings blood out of his face.

“Your funeral,” I say and raise my fists up.

My words spur him into action and he rushes at me again. He lands a strike to my spleen, and I thrash away to get my breath back. *Fuck.*

“Killer! Killer! Killer!” some of the Ole Miss fans chant.

It's like he brought his own cheering section.

I spare a glance at Ryker, and he screams out that there's a minute left in the round.

I'm not sure I can last sixty more seconds without a breather.

Kai advances again, on the offense, and I skirt around him, my feet skipping on purpose. If I can't take him down, maybe I can distract him. I make my way over to the crowd of people who've congregated in Kai's corner, cross my left arm into my inner right elbow, and pull it up—the universal sign for *fuck you*. The crowd roars its approval while Kai's fans shake their fists at me. I prance off, forcing my body to move like it isn't screaming in pain.

He runs at me, more sluggish than before, and I square off and wait. I suspect he's going to throw more fancy karate moves at me, and he does, his legs kicking at me as his fist aims for my face. I turn my body sideways and he misses, the inertia of his movement making him stumble. Before he recovers, I hit him in the head and he pops back with a dazed expression.

Down he goes like a rock off the side of a cliff.

"Hell yeah!" Ryker screams from the side, and I look around for Leslie, who motions for the ref standing off to the side. He jumps in and checks on Kai, who hasn't even twitched. His chest is rising and falling so at least I know he's breathing—I don't want anything serious to be wrong with him.

"Winner!" the ref yells as he holds up my hand.

I take a walk around the ring, eyeing the people in the audience. Some are cheering—*thank you, fellow Waylon fans*—while some are surly and sneer at me. *Whatever.*

It's fucking over.

# CHAPTER 20

## *Delaney*

Mav-Man: **I miss you.**

Me: **Me too. Will I see you today?**

Mav-Man: **No. I'll see you soon, Buttercup. Just...be patient and wait for me.**

“This donut is the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth,” I murmur in reverence as Skye and I sit inside the pastry shop at the student center. The books for our next class are piled on the table where we’ve been studying. A popular hangout, the place is packed with students milling around before class on this Tuesday morning.

She picks at her donut, a sparkly thing with white icing and purple glitter, as she watches Tyler. Sitting at a table a few feet from us with several baseball players, Bobby Gene included—someone who is obviously too nice for Tyler—he’s been glaring at us since they came in. He also sent Skye a few nasty texts over the past two days. So far, she hasn’t responded, and I approve of her decision to dump him and move on.

“He’s leaving,” I tell her, watching as he picks up his trash and throws it away. “And, dammit, the douche is coming over here.”

“Ugh.” Skye wipes her fingers on a napkin, her body stiffening.

“You got this, girlie. Be polite, but don’t let him talk down to you,” I tell her.

He arrives at our table, tall and looming over us with a glower on his face. He brushes his eyes over me dismissively then turns to Skye, a curl to his lip. “You haven’t replied to my texts. Still pissed at me, I suppose?”

“You told me not to come back until I’m ready to apologize.” Her face reddens as if remembering how he kicked her out of the frat house. “I’m not going to apologize—ever.”

His lips flatten, his face hardening.

“Bye, Tyler,” I say, waving at him. “We’re trying to eat here—alone.”

He spears me with a glare. “You stay out of this.”

“Just leave...please,” Skye tells him, her eyes brighter than normal.

He utters a slur—the dreaded C-word—making her pale, and my hands clench as several heads turn in our direction. His comment was loud and clear, and now we’re the center of attention inside the shop.

Skye is biting her lip and I’m about to stand up and go off on him when suddenly Alex is standing there, a scowl on his face as he looks at Tyler. “What’s going on?”

“He’s calling Skye names and being a dickhead,” I say.

“Dude, back off,” Alex tells him. “They’re girls—what’s wrong with you?”

Tyler huffs as he takes in Alex’s tight face, probably debating whether or not it’s worth it to start something. He hitches his backpack up on his shoulder and sends a heated glance at Skye. “Whatever. This is the end of us, bitch. I hope you’re happy.”

We watch as he stalks off, and I heave out a sigh of relief.

My eyes go back to Alex. I’m still a little ticked at him for the whole baseball episode, but I’m thankful he came over.

“Thanks,” Skye says to him as she chews on her lip. “I-I didn’t know what to say.” She holds up her half-eaten donut. “Want the rest of this as a thank you?”

“Uh, I already have one.” He holds up a to-go bag. “I was just walking past when I heard what he said to you. I couldn’t let him get away with it.” He grimaces and shuffles his feet, looking awkward.

I clear my throat. “He and Skye broke up over the weekend.”

He nods, sending Skye a rueful look. “I see. Been there.” His eyes are regretful as they find mine. “Uh, since I’m here and you’re here...I want you to know I’m sorry about the baseball party. I shouldn’t have jumped in between you and Maverick like that.”

I blink.

He sighs, his face solemn as he rubs the back of his neck. “I’ve been thinking about it—about everything, and I hope you can forgive me someday for cheating on you.”

Oh.

He takes a deep breath. “And I’m not going to bother you anymore—or

Maverick. I won't stand in his way."

This is good...well, except that I haven't even seen Maverick since we were together. Sure, he's texted me, but he has yet to tell me why he missed class.

Alex exhales. "Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

I take in his slouched shoulders, the contrite expression on his face as he watches me anxiously.

"Yes," I tell him sincerely as something clicks in my heart, and it just feels right. I don't want him to be unhappy. We had some great times together, and most of all, we were always friends. I hold my hand out. "Friends," I say with a little smile.

He takes it and we shake.



The next morning before class, I'm standing outside Maverick's dorm room to check on him. I already sent him a text asking if he's going to show up, but he hasn't responded. Part of me is worried, and a bad feeling looms over me, one I won't be able to shake until I see him.

I rap out a quick knock and hear scuffling from inside the apartment-style residence.

"Who is it?" comes a muffled voice.

"Delaney Shaw."

The door flies open and I blink at the image in front of me.

With his wavy brown hair, Ryker has been caught unaware if his leopard print bikini underwear is anything to go by.

I clear my throat. *Good lord.* He's got hair everywhere, his chest a gold mine of curls.

He leans against the doorjamb and rubs the scruff on his face, completely unconcerned that he's only wearing a banana hammock.

"Morning, Ryker."

He throws a look over his shoulder before coming back to face me.

“Mav’s asleep.”

“He isn’t going to class?”

“Uh—” He flounders, clearly not wanting me to come inside.

But I’m determined.

“Do you have any coffee made?” I ask sweetly.

“Why?”

I smile and hold up my paper bag of goodies. “Because coffee would go great with these chocolate muffins I made.”

He sucks in a long breath as I open the bag and show him the contents, the appetizing scent of sugar and butter wafting up out of the bag. Ryker grins at me. “He said you like to cook, and I can’t resist home-cooked food. Come on in.”

I step inside, heading straight to the little kitchenette. Like Alex’s dorm suite, the space has a small kitchen, a den, bedrooms off to the right, and a bathroom to the left.

Ryker sinks his teeth into a muffin as I dig around in the pantry to find what I need to make coffee.

“Goddamn, you’re amazing,” he murmurs as he reaches for a second muffin. “If Maverick isn’t into you, how about we spend a little time alone?” He waggles his brows at me, clearly joking, making me shake my head.

“Maverick *is* into her,” comes a gruff voice from behind me as two strong arms wrap around me and a nose finds my neck and inhales. “Damn, I’ve missed you.”

My body melts into his. *God...yes.* This is what I need.

Ryker rolls his eyes at us. “Okay, you two, keep it PG.”

Feeling glad that he’s here and okay, I turn around only to have my heart fall.

He stands there in bare feet, navy flannel pajama pants, and a white t-shirt with one eye swollen shut and his left cheek colored yellow and purple from a bruise. His arms are painted with bruises too, most of them on his biceps.

For a moment, I can’t breathe. I feel sick. Swallowing down my panic, I say, “What happened to your face? Are you okay?” My hands flutter around him.

He shakes his head. “Nothing you need to worry about. It’s all over now.”

*What? Nothing to worry about? Is he crazy?*

“Who did this to you?” I’m assuming it was a fight.

His face tightens, his gaze not meeting mine. “I got in a fight with someone at the bar when I went to pick up my dad this weekend.”

My brow furrows, trying to imagine it. “That’s horrible.”

Ryker seems displeased with Maverick’s response and lets out a sigh. Maverick scowls back at him, his jaw clenching.

I look from one to the other. “What on earth is going on? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Maverick doesn’t respond, just strides over to the coffee. I watch as he lifts his arm to get a cup from the cabinet, the movement slow and careful.

My frustration with the lack of details grows. “This is why you weren’t in class?”

Ryker snatches another chocolate muffin from the container and makes his way around us. “Looks like you two need to talk, and I need to put some clothes on.” He walks by, giving me an apologetic look. “Good luck,” and then he’s out of the room and shutting his bedroom door.

“What the hell is going on here?” I ask Maverick as he stirs in creamer and settles back against the counter to sip his coffee.

“Just got in a tussle. It’s not anything I want you to worry about.”

“I am worried.”

“Why?” Those intense blue eyes study me.

“Because you look terrible and I’m afraid you’re hurt.”

“Why?” He takes a long drag from his mug.

I lift my hands in exasperation. “Because I like you and I don’t want bad things to happen to you.”

He exhales loudly as he sets down his coffee, the movement making him wince. Because he’s an alpha male, he’s probably holding back some of his discomfort, so I know he’s in a lot of pain. My eyes roam over him, taking in the way he gingerly moves forward to retrieve one of the muffins and sinks his teeth into it.

My lips compress. “Were the police involved? Because you need to file charges against the person who did this to you.”

“No.” Silence fills the room, and I stand here, not feeling entirely welcome. I’m disappointed and angry he isn’t being more forthcoming.

*Fine.* I inhale sharply and snap up my backpack, which I set on the floor next to the table when I came in.

I’m at the door when I hear his voice.

“Delaney, please...don’t go.”

I freeze, my chest rising at his plea. His tone is soft, with an undercurrent of vulnerability that gives me pause.

I hear scuffling and turn around to watch him walk toward me. His steps are slow, his jaw clenched, his chest barely moving as if he’s restraining even his own breaths.

“Dammit, you’re really hurt,” I say, biting my lip as I drop my backpack and walk over to him.

“I don’t want you to go.” He swallows and stares down at his feet.

“Let me see everything,” I say, pulling up his loose shirt and gasping as I see the bruises on his ribs. A long one stretches down his right side, ending just above his hip. I clench my jaw and gaze up at him as tears prick at my eyes. This wasn’t just a regular good-ol’-boys tussle.

“Maverick? This is...this is...”

“I’m okay,” he says soothingly, cupping my cheek. “Get that worried expression off your face. I’ve been checked out by a friend, got some X-rays, and nothing’s broken or fractured. I’ll be fine, and I’ll be back at practice in a week. Coach Al and my professors think I had a fender bender.”

I lace my fingers with his and squeeze. “You’re scaring me. Are you going to tell me what happened?”

His forehead presses against mine. “Just trust me, okay? Are you in a hurry to get to class?”

I shake my head as his eyes hold mine.

He kisses me lightly on the lips. “Good. Come back to bed with me.”

My body gets hot at the words.

“You can’t have sex like this...can you?”

He huffs out a laugh, and a smile—the first one I’ve seen today—flashes across his face. “I can have sex even if I’m half-dead, but right now, I just want to hold you.”

There’s a neediness in his gaze, and it makes me protective of him.

He tugs me toward a door and I follow him as we enter his bedroom. The bed is a full with a plaid duvet, and there’s a dresser against the wall. His laptop and books are scattered across the foot of the bed, and he grunts as he moves them to a chair next to the door. I’m itching to offer to help, but I can sense he doesn’t want me to.

I have a design class at noon, but I know I’m not going to make it,



especially when he slowly pulls his shirt off by tugging at it from the neck. I get an unobstructed view of his magnificent chest as it slips over his hair then gets tossed to the floor. Next are his flannel pants. He kicks them off and stands there proudly, bruises and all, and I probably look like I need a fan in my face to cool me down.

“Want me to open a window, Buttercup?”

I smirk.

He hits me with those piercing eyes. “Take your clothes off. I want your skin against mine.” There’s that need in his tone again.

I take my coat off and toss it on the chair. My shirt and jeans are next, until I’m standing in my black lace demi-bra and matching panties.

A long sigh slips through his lips as his eyes caress me. “Damn.”

Moving tentatively, he gets in the bed, lies back on the pillows, and pats the spot next to him, a searching expression on his face. “It’s like I wished you were here, Delaney, and you appeared. Thank you for checking on me.”

I swallow. Part of me wants to get to the bottom of what happened, but for now, it doesn’t feel right. I crawl in beside him and lie down, our bodies touching lightly; I don’t want to hurt him. His arms curl around me, and everything else fades away.

Whatever’s going on with him, I’ll figure it out later.

# CHAPTER 21

## *Maverick*

Delaney taps her chin, thinking. “My biggest TV-slash-movie pet peeve is that Han Solo and Princess Leia never got enough on-screen kissing time.” She looks over at me. “What’s yours?”

I grin at her. It’s been over a week since the fight, and most of the bruises on my face have faded to a light blue. I’ve been wearing sunglasses and a ball cap everywhere, and my story of a minor car accident seems to be accepted. I hate lying to everyone, but it’s necessary.

We’re sitting inside Buffalo Bills after salsa lessons, and Delaney’s on a quest to figure out the real Maverick. I get the feeling once she becomes interested in something, she’s devoted to it with a one-track mind. I can relate because I’m the same with football.

She’s wearing a flowing red skirt and a pale blue sweater with a deep V-neck that clings to every curve. I’m trying not to stare at her full breasts, but I’m a Neanderthal and can’t help it.

She waves a hand in front of my face. “Hello, is anyone listening?”

“Right. Back to your twenty questions,” I say teasingly.

She stabs one of the fries on her plate. “If you didn’t want to play, you should have just said so. I just thought it would be a good way to get to know each other.”

I grin. “I can think of a few other ways.”

She blushes furiously.

We’ve shared a lot since she came to my dorm room that morning, but I still haven’t told her the particulars of the fight or the fact that I’m training for the next one at Carson’s Gym every night after football practice.

I cock my head, thinking. “Okay, my pet peeve is when you’re watching a horror movie and that *one* person breaks off from the group to go search. Right then you know that’s the next one who’s going to end up dead. Why are people so stupid?”

She laughs. “Right! Why don’t they just get in their car and go to Starbucks? At least then they wouldn’t die.” She takes a sip of soda, her red lips curving around the straw. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Your sweater color...whatever that is.” My gaze lingers on her tits.

She glances down. “Yeah, you can’t seem to take your eyes off of it. It’s pale blue, by the way.”

“In my defense, it’s pretty tight,” I point out. My voice lowers. “And you look fucking hot in it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, if your life is a movie, what’s the soundtrack?”

“*Star Wars* theme song.”

She frowns. “But there’s no words in it. Are you just saying that to get on my good side?”

I arch my brows. “I’ve already seen your good side, and it’s amazing.”

She just shakes her head and bites her lip. I’ve been flirting with her constantly for the past half hour, and I really do only have one thing on my mind: getting her alone. Between class, football, boxing, and Raven, I’ve barely seen her.

I laugh. “Fine. My theme song would be...” I drum my hands on the table for dramatic effect. “*We are the Champions* by Queen. It’s old school but spot-on.”

“Why that one?”

I shrug. “I’m a small-town boy, but I’m going places, and I’ve never stopped fighting to get ahead. Nothing’s going to hold me back, and I’ll do whatever it takes to get where I want to go. I want to win a football championship next year, and then I want to have a stellar career in the NFL.”

She takes that in, absorbing my words. “Football’s everything to you.”

I nod. “What’s your song?” I ask.

“Definitely *Beautiful Day* by U2. It’s about life giving you lemons but you still find the good. I try to do that, especially after Nana passed. I came to Magnolia and try to live a life she’d be proud of.”

I look at her, feeling emotion shifting inside my chest. Like me, she’s experienced death, but being with her and talking with her, I’ve never been happier.

I jump into the question game. “What’s your favorite...position?”

She pushes her glasses up while her top teeth nibble on her bottom lip. “What do you mean?”

I lean forward. “Don’t be coy. You know.” I set my napkin down on the table. “Mine is any position with you. I want you so bad right now that I can’t even focus on anything else.”

A telltale blush steals up her neck to her lovely face.

*God.* She’s everything I want, and I spend most of my time thinking about her.

But, dread tugs at me. I’m worried she’ll discover what I’m doing and be disappointed.

I tried a while back, rather feebly, to push her away at the baseball party, but once I saw her crying at the gym because Han was gone, all that went out the window.

She toys with the straw in her drink. “Oh, I know exactly what you meant. I just wanted the question to be clear before I answered it.”

“Well?” I picture her back in my bed with my head between her legs while she moans my name out.

“My favorite position is linebacker, of course.” She giggles.

I lean forward again, my voice low and husky. “I’ve just spent the last hour with you pressed up against me trying my damndest to do some Latin dance because I like you, and now you’re just teasing me.”

She lets out a shaky breath. “You’re bossy.”

“You like it.”

“I love it,” she whispers, her chest heaving. Her tongue darts out and licks her bottom lip. “Does that even make sense?”

Heat fires through my body. “It does when it’s the right person.”

Her eyes hold mine. “How’s this for a little tease? I have a skirt on so you have easy access. What are you going to do about it?”

Clearly, she is past being nervous with me.

My cock hardens even more and I stifle down a groan. I look around the restaurant, my head spinning. We’re sitting in a booth toward the back, but it’s definitely not private, and with what I want, I need privacy. I exhale slowly...and have an idea.

I catch her hand. “I dare you to go to the last stall in the ladies’ room and wait for me.”

“Now?” She blinks. “Why?”

“You know why.” I cup her face. “And have your underwear off or there’ll be hell to pay, Buttercup.”

Her chest rises rapidly, the color in her cheeks flaming. She thinks for a moment then stands rather shakily, gives me a final lingering look, and heads down the darkened hallway that leads to the restrooms.

I give her five minutes before I pull out a couple twenties that more than cover the bill. Rising up, I'm barely able to walk in my tightened jeans, but I manage to make it over there without anyone glaring at the obvious tent in my pants. At this rate, I'm going to bust a button off my britches.

*Damn.* I'm halfway in love with this girl.

# CHAPTER 22

## *Delaney*

*Why am I standing in a bathroom stall, you ask?*

Because I want Maverick more than I want air.

My head spins with heat and pure need. He is a rollercoaster, dangerous and exhilarating; my brain is telling me to jump off and save myself, but my heart yearns to ride it to the end to see if I live or die.

I hear the door open and the lock slide into place. My heart pounds. The stall I'm in is hot, my skin is hot, and I just might pass out before he—

The door swings open and it's him.

A quivering breath slips out of me.

I breathe in his masculine scent as he stalks forward and laces his fingers through my hair. His shoulders are broad and taut, as if he's coiled like a tiger and ready to pounce. I know that feeling well. I've been on a tight wire all week, wanting him, worrying about him. For now I lock that away, promising myself I'll come back to it later.

He doesn't speak, just runs his eyes over my face before drifting down to my chest then lingering on my legs. I hold up my purple lace underwear, and he takes them from me with a smoldering look then tucks them in the front pocket of his jeans.

"Good girl."

His eyes come back and capture mine, and I feel weak at the desire I see there. We haven't even kissed and I feel like I'm going to come apart.

My breath comes in shallow pants as he places his hands on my shoulders and strokes them down my arms then back up. His fingers drift to the curve of my waist and back up to cup my face. He's so gentle, and the emotion in his eyes—I gasp at what I see. Is it love burning in his gaze, or is it just passion? I don't know, but right now I'll take whatever he gives.

He kisses me, devouring my mouth with his, nipping at my lips and sighing. One of my hands curls around his neck to pull him closer while the

other one plants itself on the hard bulge in his pants. My mouth doesn't want to let him go, and it feels like it's the same for him.

He traces his tongue down my neck to my collarbone, slips his hand under my sweater, and massages my breasts, his fingers tweaking the lace of my demi-bra. I toss my head back and hiss at the pleasure that zips up my spine. He maneuvers my arms out of my sweater and pushes it up around my neck without taking it off. I'm hot with it like that, but I don't care. All I want is *him...this*. My nipples strain toward him and I bite my lip when he finally frees them with a snap of the back clasp. He groans as he cups my bare breasts, his expression raw with passion, visceral and primitive. His mouth sucks at a nipple, making me gasp.

"You're too beautiful for me," he says.

With need and lust rippling through my veins, I try to be careful as I help him take off his t-shirt and sling it over the top of the stall door. Though faint, there are still bruises on his body, and I lean down to kiss each one. A hiss escapes his lips as I trace my fingers over his pink nipples, playing with his skin. My mouth finds them, exploring, tasting him.

I work my way lower to unbutton his pants and shove them down around his hips. I push at his tight athletic briefs, my fingers stroking over the head of his cock. My mouth follows, tasting him the way I've been thinking about all week, and he groans my name.

While my mouth works him, he reaches his fingers underneath my skirt. He finds me wet and grunts as his finger slides back and forth against my core, teasing me and making me squirm with need. I'm panting around him, feeling like I'm going to come any moment.

"Do you have protection?" I gasp out. *Hurry, hurry* is all I can think because it seems like a million years ago that we were together in my bed.

He gives me a quick nod and tugs a package out of the back pocket of his jeans.

I watch him slide it over the bulbous head and onto his hard shaft, the veins there long and thick. His eyes look up at me.

He tugs my neck forward and kisses me, his chest against my breasts. In between kisses he whispers, "You're everything I've ever wanted."

In a rush, he has me picked up as if I weigh nothing. My legs wrap around him, my center resting on his abs. I'm soaked and I don't care that I'm out of control for him.

His length nudges at my entrance, easing inside until finally he grunts and sheaths himself fully. Neither of us move a muscle for ten seconds, our faces next to each other, my hands hanging on to his shoulders.

“Fuck.” He closes his eyes and groans as I begin to move on him, grinding my hips and swiveling.

He turns so I’m pressed against the wall then withdraws and slides back in, the fullness intense, a sensation I quickly adjust to as he begins again. Hard and fast is the pace, and I can’t get enough. Each time he strokes inside me, it’s like it’s happening all over again for the first time.

“Mav,” I say as he watches me, detailing every nuance of my reaction. I’ll never have enough of this, of him. He’s ruining me.

I turn my face to him, gasping for air. His lips kiss my shoulder, sucking hard as my body clenches his cock.

Sensation gathers, growing warm and then hot at the base of my spine. Arching my back, I take all of him as his hands hold my hips, pushing me harder and harder until I break, shattering into a million pieces.

I breathe out his name and hang on as his cock swells inside me. He crests over the edge and calls my name.

His mouth finds mine and kisses me, his hands still holding me up as he pushes into me and shudders.

I feel supple and loose, like a cat that’s just been fed a big bowl of cream and now only wants to bask in the sun.

Then I’m reminded of where I am: in the restroom of the local Buffalo Bills.

He slowly lowers me. “I can’t believe we just did that,” I say as I disentangle myself, my feet finding solid ground.

I’m wobbly as I straighten my clothes, watching out of the corner of my eye as he disposes of the condom then zips his pants up. I hand him his shirt and he finishes getting dressed, watching me with a considering look on his face.

“What?” I say, turning to him. I know I must look crazy with my hair everywhere.

“Nothing, just...happy.”

Emotion clogs my throat. We’re moving so fast, but I can’t stop it. *I can’t*. I want him. Maybe I love him. My hands shake as I ease past him to open the stall and step out into the sink area where I turn on the faucet and



run cold water over my wrists. I don't know why I do it, just that my Nana used to do it when she got flustered. It seems fitting.

He grabs my hands and laces our fingers together. "So are we going back to your place or mine?"

"I thought you said you had to go work out?"

"I do, but I want to hold you tonight. I want to wake up and you be there."

I smile. "Mine."

# CHAPTER 23

## *Delaney*

Mav-Man: **Did you get the gift I left on your porch?**

Me: **You mean the stuffed animal wearing a Jedi outfit? Didn't know it was from you.**

Mav-Man: **Minx. Who else buys you stuffed cats? I'll make you pay for that remark later.**

Me: **Can't wait. XOXO**

I sip from a glass of red wine as I sit across from Maverick inside Giardina's Italian Grill, an eatery a few blocks from campus. With dark lighting, a ceiling strung with ivy, and a collection of art depicting scenes from Venice on the amber-colored walls, it's quaint and a popular date night place—which is what we're doing tonight. Saturdays are busy, and I'm glad Maverick called ahead to reserve a table for four. I cross my legs under the table and uncross them, nervous to be meeting his dad and seeing Raven again.

He taps his fingers on the table, on edge, perhaps because his dad and sister are officially ten minutes late. He keeps staring at his phone, checking the time and seeing if she's texted him.

I study him, taking in the chiseled jawline, the straight angles of his nose and forehead. It's late March and his hair has grown out; he wears it swept back off his face, the ends curling around his ears. A pale blue button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up is paired with a pair of jeans that sculpt the taut muscles of his thighs. He smells intoxicating, all earthy and spicy from his shower at my place. Even though he looks great semi-dressed up, my favorite look on him is gym shorts, a tank, and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes.

"You look gorgeous," he tells me, taking in my demure Peter Pan-collared black dress. The lapels are a stark white with tiny seed pearls I

sewed on myself. His hand reaches out and strokes a long finger down my neck, ending at my collar where he tugs me toward him and kisses me lightly on the lips. “I’m with Skye—you should look into fashion when you graduate.”

I grin. I love how beautiful and talented he thinks I am. “Maybe. I’m not sure what I’ll do after this, maybe grad school.”

“Where at?” There’s a worry line on his forehead, and I wonder if it’s because he doesn’t want me to go to far from wherever he ends up in the NFL.

I study the white linen of the tablecloth. “I’m not sure, maybe somewhere back in North Carolina.”

What I don’t say is I really don’t know because I want to know where he’ll be going next year. I sigh at the prick of fear that rises up at the direction of my thoughts. Maverick is...he’s all I think about. What I felt for Alex doesn’t even compare.

Just then his phone pings with a text, and he pulls away to glance down at it.

His face tightens.

“What’s wrong?” Just a few days ago, a local strip club called about his dad, and Maverick drove to pick him up then took him back to their house, where he spent the rest of the night. He wasn’t able to leave until the nurse showed up for Raven.

He exhales, his eyes still reading the text. “It’s Raven. Dad hasn’t come home from work yet and isn’t answering his phone. The nurse is ready to go but doesn’t want to leave her alone. She’s gone next door to see if the neighbor is home.” He looks up at me. “He should have been home an hour ago.” He checks his watch.

“Can you call the garage?”

He grimaces. “They’re already closed. He’s probably at a bar.” Uncertainty crosses his face and he looks around the room as if searching for answers. He’s told me a lot about growing up with an alcoholic father who rarely had a steady job.

He looks through his phone and calls a few different numbers to ask if his dad is there, keeping his voice quiet.

I take his hand. “We can just go to her. That way you won’t be worried and she won’t be upset, and you can figure out what’s going on with your dad

later.”

He looks up. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. She’s your sister.” I pause, seeing from his intensity that this is important to him. “I’ve always wanted a sister, so any sister of yours is a friend of mine,” I assure him.

“The trip will take an hour if we go get her then come back—and she *will* want to come back because this is her favorite place. You said earlier you were starving...” He searches my face for a chink in my optimism.

There isn’t one.

I smile. “You’ll figure out that I’m pretty easy and laid back. I may be a bit of a nerd, but that doesn’t mean I’m a control freak and have to have everything a certain way.” I gather my purse and jacket off the back of the chair and notice he hasn’t moved yet, a hesitant look on his face. “Is there something else?”

He stands and takes my arm in a brisk motion, as if he doesn’t want to respond to my question. He lays down more than enough money to cover my glass of wine and gives a nod to the server who brought us our drinks. He explains to her that we have to go but will come back later. A young teen girl who’s obviously a Maverick fan, she tells us they’ll make sure we have a table once we come back.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as we head to the foyer of the restaurant.

He exhales. “The thing is...you’ve never seen where I grew up. It’s not much.”

“You don’t have to apologize for how you grew up. Your humble circumstances made you who you are”—I squeeze his hand—“and you’re one of the most honest, hardworking people I know.”

“I’m not honest.”

*What?* I look at him. “Yes, you are.”

He doesn’t meet my gaze and I imagine I read remorse on his face, but over what, I can’t imagine.

“You *have* stalked me since freshman year...so there’s that.” I give him a soft slap on the shoulder, trying to change his mood.

He nods and shoots me a brief smile, seeming to come around. “Yeah, and you always dreamed about me even when we weren’t together. You watched me on the field at every home game and wondered what it would be like between us. You may not admit it—because you were seeing Alex—but

I know you did.”

“How on earth do you contain that giant ego of yours? Oh, that’s right—you don’t.”

He tugs at my hair. “Admit it—you’ve wanted me since the moment I kissed you at the bonfire.”

“Nope.”

“You have.”

“Okay, fine. I can’t deny a few fantasies,” I murmur. “There’s this one in particular where you’re in a Han Solo outfit in my front yard holding an eighties-style boom box, trying to woo me.”

“Do I have a light saber?”

I grin, waggling my eyebrows. “Oh, yeah, a big one.”

He laughs, and I lean my head on his shoulder as we walk out the door, aware that several pairs of eyes are watching us. A few die-hard fans even have their phones out and are snapping pics. A young boy, around eight years old, has been sitting in the waiting areas with his family and comes running up, yelling Maverick’s name. He hands him a napkin to scrawl an autograph on and he graciously does so before folding it back into the kid’s shirt pocket.

Just as we’re almost to his truck, Maverick’s phone rings and he looks down at it, sees who’s calling, and stops.

“Is it your dad?”

He shakes his head, his face hardening “No, but I need to take this.” He hands me the keys. “Go ahead and get in. I’ll be there in a second.”

I glance at the ringing phone in his hand and the scowl on his face.

“Ryker?” I press.

“No. Just wait for me please.” His words are curt, and my body stiffens. I want to ask him what the hell is going on, but he’s barely noticing because the phone has all his attention. I watch as he stalks away from me to take the call, going several feet before he answers, his voice hushed.

*What is he hiding from me?*

I get in the truck, but I turn around to watch him as he paces back and forth, his body language tense as he listens intently to whoever is speaking.

Why is he being evasive? Maybe it’s Raven. Maybe it has something to do with the bruises he had or the fact that he’s always busy. I chew on my lip as worry settles in my gut. Am I putting my trust in someone who’s only going to let me down? What if these sweet moments with him are just stolen

bits of paradise that will crumble at any moment?  
What if...he breaks my heart?

# CHAPTER 24

## *Maverick*

On Monday, I wake up tired and worn out in my dorm room. After working out in the ring at Carson's for two hours last night, I ended up going out to the trailer to make Raven dinner and then hung around while she took a bath and went to bed.

Dad was there, and I'm still angry with him for being a no-show at the dinner where I'd planned for him to meet Delaney. I don't know why I thought it was a good idea for us all to have dinner. I guess there's just a small part of me that's still optimistic that he will be a regular dad. Turned out, he went to a bar after work for a few drinks and lost track of time. *Figures*. Delaney and I ended up picking Raven up then having dinner with her at Giardina's, and by the time we brought her home, Dad was already in bed passed out—further proof that Pineview is a great idea.

After showering, I come out of the bathroom and Muffin is sitting on the couch in her underwear and one of Ryker's shirts. A cursory glance around the room tells me his door's shut, and I figure he's still sleeping.

She darts her eyes at me rather furtively as she puts something behind her back, and I study her more intently. Maybe it was her phone. *Whatever*. There's not much to steal here, so I ignore it, and I don't want to ask her too many questions because she might get the idea that I'm interested in her.

I mutter out a greeting as I walk past, keeping my eyes averted from her legs, which she's propped up on the coffee table. She's a sly girl with an agenda, and I'm disappointed Ryker is still into her. To me, it's clear she still wants Alex if the way she chased him at the baseball party is anything to go by.

I make my way to the kitchenette to make a protein drink before class.

"So, you're with Delaney now?" she asks, her nasally voice echoing in the room.

I give her a short nod. "We're dating."

Her lips turn down, her distaste obvious. “I don’t know what everyone sees in her. First Alex, and now you—she must be amazing in bed.”

My nose flares. Everything she says rubs me the wrong way, and I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual. “I don’t talk about my private life.”

A laugh comes out of her. “Oh, you’d be surprised what I know about your private life.”

I freeze, my eyes on her face, trying to read the smarmy expression there. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

She shrugs, her eyes hard as they stare right back at me.

“I don’t like riddles, Muffin.” *And I don’t like you.*

“No riddles here, just the fact that everyone loves you and you’re the best player ever...right?” With that she stands, marches back to Ryker’s room, and shuts the door.



“Where are you off to? I thought you already had football practice,” Delaney asks as I load the dishwasher at her house. Ryker and I came over after class and she and Skye made lasagna for us. As a thank you, Ryker and I cleaned up the kitchen.

She’s standing next to me, her gaze zeroed in.

I shrug. “We’re going to hit the field house for some weight training.” Every word is a lie and feels like a bullet to my gut, but I can’t tell her the truth: I’m going to meet with Leslie at Carson’s tonight to work out the details of the next fight. He was the one who called me as we left Giardina’s.

I want to confide in her, but if I get caught fighting, the less she knows, the better, and damn it’s hard to admit I’m a cheater who’s breaking rules.

“I made cookies,” she tells me rather tartly. “Too bad you’re going to miss those.”

Han is weaving in and out of her legs, and I reach down to give him a pet so I don’t have to look her in the eyes. I’m such an asshole. “Just save me some and I’ll get them tomorrow.”



“Are you coming over later?”

“No, I have a test tomorrow.” I stand and brush my lips across hers. “Thank you for the meal. It was amazing as always.”

Feeling the weight of her eyes on me as I move to grab my gym bag, more guilt settles over me. Besides Raven, she’s the most important person in my life, and I’m not giving her what she deserves.

After thanking the girls for dinner, Ryker follows me as I make my way out the front door.

He starts in on me as soon as we get in the truck. Earlier I told him about Leslie calling me, and he’s been fuming all afternoon.

“You can’t do another fight. I won’t let you,” he mutters as I start the truck.

I exhale. “Just one more and I’m set to pay for Pineview for an entire year. If I get one more fight in now—before football starts this fall—then I won’t have to do it again.” I flick a quick glance over to him as he stares out the window, clearly annoyed with me. “Look, think about Raven—this is for her. My dad is shit, man. He can’t take care of her, and I’m barely managing everything I have with school and football. Plus, I’ve already paid the facility the deposit. Raven moves in May 1<sup>st</sup>.”

Knowing she will be happy and safe...that makes it all worthwhile.

“Unless you get caught,” he mumbles, raking a hand through his hair. “Then you’ll never play pro ball.”

“Nothing’s been said about the last fight, and no one will find out about this one.”

“Secrets never stay secrets, Mav. Someday it’s going to come back on you.”

“Have you told anyone?” My head recalls Martha-Muffin in our dorm room and how oddly she acted.

“No, of course not.” His words are clipped.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. “If you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

He exhales loudly. “Have you told Delaney what you’re doing for cash? Because she isn’t going to be cool with it.”

“Stay out of me and Delaney.”

“See, you know I’m right. You haven’t been honest with her—with

anyone, not even Raven.”

My teeth clench. “What’s your point?”

He waves his hands around. “Raven has a traumatic brain injury, and you’re out there getting beat up. Last time you nearly fractured a rib.”

I shrug. “It’s the same as being on the field.”

“On the field, you have a helmet and pads.”

I shake my head. “I could break my neck on the football field and never walk again. I could die in a car wreck like my mom. I could be walking across the street and get hit by a car. I can’t live my life by what-ifs. All I know is what I have to do right now, and that’s take care of my little sister. No one else is going to do it—not my dad, not the state, *me*.”

We’re both quiet for a moment.

“You don’t know what it was like growing up like I did,” I add. “I got a job when I was thirteen, mowing the football field at school. When I was sixteen, outside of football, I helped my dad clean Carson’s Gym. I’ve worked my entire life and now I have the chance to really provide for Raven.”

He looks out the window.

“Dude, let it go,” I say. “Be my friend.”

He shrugs. “I just...have a bad feeling.”

“Maybe it’s because you’ve been hanging out with Muffin.”

He juts out his jaw. “So?”

I sigh. “All I’m saying is be careful. Just a few weeks ago, she was hot and heavy after Alex.”

He scratches at his scruff. “We’re keeping it casual.”

“Good.”



We enter the gym and take in the surroundings. It’s seven at night but the place is busy. Off to the left are the locker rooms, and I head there to wrap my hands, change into shorts, and put on some flat, high-topped boxing

shoes, ones Leslie provided for me after the last fight. I figure I may as well get some sparring in while I'm here.

Ryker goes over to the weights to do some lifting.

I come out of the locker room and see Leslie has entered the building and is in the main office talking to Carson, the owner. Dressed in a suit that looks out of place in the smelly gym, he gives me a wave through the glass walls.

I nod and head that way, and as soon as I enter the room, Leslie motions for Carson to leave us, which I can appreciate. I'm sure Carson knows what's going on, and I don't doubt he's got his fingers all up in this, but I'd rather speak with Leslie alone.

Leslie motions for me to take a seat, but I decline. I don't like him. He's a slimy guy who's taking advantage of the fact that I need money. It makes me wonder about the other players and their reasons for fighting for him. No football player with a good record would do this *just* for the money; it's too dangerous.

"I'll stand, thanks." I cross my arms. I want him to know he doesn't own me. "You said you had some news about the fight," I say.

He studies me with a smile that's overcrowded with small teeth in an otherwise large mouth. "Yes. Same terms as before. Your opponent has knocked out everyone before the second round. You up for it?" His beady eyes rake over me, an arch to his brow as he takes in the additional muscle I've managed to build up in the past couple of weeks. I've also healed up completely and feel like I'm at the top of my game.

"Who is it?" A whole list of names runs through my head, mostly SEC powerhouses since those are the ones I know the best.

"He's an Alabama boy, and the fans are chomping at the bit to get to you. It's all everyone is talking about."

Everyone being his little circle of rabid rich fans.

My lips flatten. Alabama is the best in the country—this year. They defeated us in a tight Rose Bowl game last year, knocking us out of the national championship.

A muscle flexes in my jaw, and I give him a sharp nod. "Done. Just tell me when."

"I'll make the final arrangements and call you." He puts out his hand for me to shake. There's an ostentatious ring on nearly every finger, but I grit my teeth and take it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of movement outside the office, and I turn to see Muffin watching us, a petulant look on her face.

I narrow my eyes at her and she flips around then hurries toward the door, but not before I see that she had her phone out.

Did Ryker tell her we were coming here? That doesn't make sense, not when I'm meeting Leslie here.

Brushing past him, I exit the office, my eyes scanning the gym for Ryker, who I find in the back on a butterfly machine.

Everything seems okay, but I know something isn't right. I follow Muffin as she heads to the foyer, her bag slung over her shoulder.

I call her name, but she tears out the front door, a purposeful stride in her walk.

Following behind her, I exit the building and see her half-running to her little Mercedes convertible.

Jogging, I catch her before she gets it unlocked.

"Hey, I didn't know you worked out here." It's not unusual for students to come, especially since the Waylon facility doesn't offer the same variety of classes, but I've never seen her here. "What's up?" I say.

"Yeah, well, I signed up for a CrossFit class here. The only time available is super late." She's fumbling around in her purse for her keys. "I thought it would be great since Ryker is here a lot."

My stomach falls. He must have mentioned that he comes here. *Dammit.* I don't need Muffin sniffing around and seeing me spar in the ring. I mean, it doesn't look bad to box, but still...I want to cover my tracks.

"Oh, did you see him? He was on the butterfly machine."

She blinks. "Uh, no...but I saw you in Carson's office."

My eyes narrow. "Is that right? Huh."

"Yeah, that's right," she says curtly, giving me a sneer.

"You seem a little off, Muffin. You okay?"

With an aggravated sigh, she glares up at me. "Why so many questions, Maverick?"

I sneak a look at the phone she still has clutched to her side and nod my head at it. "Did you take a picture of me?"

She blinks. "What if I did? Is that a problem? Do you have something to hide?"

A scowl pulls my brow down. "No."

She laughs. “I did actually, of you and the fat guy in the suit. Those glass walls are amazing—I could see everything.”

I stiffen. “Don’t meddle in my life, Muffin. Stick to Ryker.” My voice is hard and flat.

She bristles and opens her car door, giving me a cunning look as she slides inside. “Are you threatening me?”

I take a step back, holding my hands up. “No. I’m just asking why you took a picture of me with a man you don’t know.”

She arches her brow. “There are ways to find out who he is. Ever hear of reverse image search on Google? Besides, I asked Carson and he told me his name was Leslie Brock. Guess who I’m going to look up when I get home?”

I’m baffled by why she would even care.

Anxiety eats at me, imagining her blabbing around campus about who Leslie is. I know exactly what she’ll find out if she tries hard enough: he owns casinos.

“Don’t start something you don’t know anything about,” I say tightly.

An insinuating expression flits over her face. “Just a heads up, Ryker leaves his phone out constantly. I just happened to take pictures of some messages you’ve sent him that came across his lock screen—texts about fighting in Tunica and a man named Leslie, and then lo and behold, I ask Carson who you’re with and he says *Leslie*. Not smart to meet your bookie so close to home.”

*Fuck*. I can’t breathe.

I bark out a laugh. “He isn’t my bookie.”

She’s off base, but dangerously close...

“Yeah, right. You’ve been gambling.”

“It’s not what you think it is,” I say. “I’ve never gambled.” There’s so much more I want to say to her—I want to fucking go off on her—but I’m terrified.

“Whatever. You’ll say anything to protect yourself.” She’s managed to get in her car now. “I’ll see you,” she says as she slams her door and cranks her engine.

I stand back as she jerks out of her parking spot and squeals off.

Everything feels wrong.

I scrub my face and head back into the gym. I have to find Ryker and figure out what the hell is going on.

# CHAPTER 25

## *Delaney*

It's the Thursday night before spring break and the library is a dead zone, except for the diehards who aren't leaving early for a quick trip to somewhere.

It's seven o'clock, so I have two more hours before I can hightail it out of here and head to my house, where I'm supposed to meet Maverick.

Voices drift in from the front, and I look up from the circulation desk I'm manning, expecting to see my co-worker who's been working on the main floor downstairs, but it's Martha-Muffin and one of her sorority friends.

She sees me and changes her trajectory, making her way over to the desk. She practically flounces in a pair of white cutoffs and a lace top that barely covers her boobs.

I exhale. "Mensa meeting for two tonight? Please don't let me interrupt. Choose a table, any table." *As long as it's far, far away from me.*

"You think you're so smart." She shakes her head. "It all might just fall down around you."

I arch my brows. "*Okaaaay*. Am I supposed to be scared?"

"You would be if you knew what I knew," she says, twisting her lips.

I sigh, not in the mood for her antics. I just want to get out of here and see Maverick. "Unless you're here to check out a book—which I highly doubt is the case—or need help finding a book—which I also highly doubt—then I'll leave you to your ridiculously vague comments and go do something productive with my time."

I skirt around the edge of the counter, my goal to get as far from the toxicity as I can, then I hear her voice calling behind me in a singsong tone. "I know something you don't."

I push my glasses up and turn around. "I already know you slept with my ex. Over and done. I've moved on."

She laughs, but it isn't a pleasant sound, and by now the group of guys

back in the corner openly stare at us.

“This is about Maverick.”

*She’s toying with me*, I tell myself, but part of me—the insecure side of me—wants to know exactly what she means. My old anxieties tug at me, reminding me that Alex cheated and saying maybe Maverick has too.

“Fuck off, *Martha*.”

She rears back in surprise. “Well, you do have claws. I was beginning to wonder.”

I flip back around and head down an aisle.

Her parting shot follows me. “Just ask him why he’s been training at Carson’s Gym so much. Ask him who Leslie is.”

*Leslie?* Is she someone he’s seeing at the gym? He’s been telling me he goes to the field house to work out...

But I did see him at Carson’s all those weeks ago when Han was lost.

I take the stairs two at a time, her comments niggling at me, digging under my skin. I try to pack them away and store them in a back corner of my mind, but when my phone pings with a text from Maverick and I read it, the uncertainty yanks at me even more.

**Rain check on tonight? We’ve got a big scrimmage coming up and I need the rest.**

**Fine**, I say.

**You okay?**

I type **Yes**, but then delete it.

I’m not okay, not at all, and I need time to think. I don’t respond, instead just tuck the phone back in my pocket.

# CHAPTER 26

## *Delaney*

The next day, Ryker opens the door, this time with some clothes on. It makes sense since it's the afternoon and after classes, but in a dorm with athletes, you never know. I'm here to pump him for information, and I'm not above using food to get what I want.

"Mav isn't here. Already left for the gym."

I let out a sigh. "Is he at Carson's with *Leslie*?"

Ryker pales—just a hair—and I know I'm on the right track. "He might be at Carson's, but I don't know a Leslie."

My heart drops at his obvious lie, but I shrug, playing it cool. "I know he's not here. He texted me this morning and said he had things to do today." He's been too busy for me for the past several days, and my nerves are stretched thin. It feels like whatever we had is slowly slipping away and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

He nods. "So why are you here?"

I pull a full pecan pie out of my handy little Tupperware carrier. "I made pie, and I do recall you mentioning once that pecan is your favorite. Just thought I'd drop it off."

"Man, you're the best." He opens the door wider and I step inside, heading to the kitchenette. "It's been a shit day and I really need this."

"Oh? What's wrong?" Normally he always wears a smile, but now that I'm noticing, there are dark circles under his eyes and his hair is everywhere, as if he's been rubbing it.

His lips tighten. "Just girl problems." Muffin problems, no doubt, but I hold on to that thought and wait.

"Let me cut you a piece," I say as I pull open a drawer to find a pie cutter. Alas, these guys are primitive, so I settle for a butter knife. I slice into the flakey golden crust, tossing a look at him over my shoulder.

"Sure." His eyes are focused on the dish, and I smile at his interest.



“By the way, this was my Nana’s recipe, and it’s been handed down in my family for generations. It won a blue ribbon at a fair in North Carolina.”

He walks in closer. “Awesome, but why are you bringing *me* pie? Shouldn’t it be for Mav?”

“Just thought we could chat. Want me to make us some coffee to go with this? Or some iced tea?”

“I think my mom left some Lipton packets here the last time she dropped off groceries, and there’s sugar in the pantry. I don’t have an iced tea maker though. We can use a pan?”

“Sure.” I nod and he helps make the tea, immediately turning on the stovetop. There’s a bit of pep in his step, probably excitement about the pie. He fills the pan with water and I drop in the bags as he digs out a pitcher. I mean, I don’t really want tea, but I’m nervous and need something to keep my hands busy because I feel guilty about pumping Maverick’s friend for information. I exhale. I’m desperate, and I just want Ryker to reassure me that everything’s okay.

“Let’s talk while the tea brews, yes?”

“Sure.” He shrugs.

I set the pie in the center of the table and cut it into six large slices, the sterling silver of the knife slicing into the crystallized pecans and down farther into the dark gooey confection.

“So the recipe is a big secret?”

“Nana thought it was. Sometimes I think it’s a shame not to tell people about it because I’m the only person in the world that knows it, and I don’t have any family to pass it on to.”

“You’re not missing much. Family can be a real pain in the ass. Maybe you’ll have a house full of kids someday.”

I hope so. “Or a bunch of cats.”

Silence settles between us as we wait for the tea to brew, and I notice the pensive look on Ryker’s face.

I’m trying to figure out how to lead into asking him details about Maverick when he speaks first. “You didn’t *really* come here just to bring me this pie, did you?”

I feel myself blush. “Correct.”

A gruff laugh comes out of him. “You came to ask me about Maverick and why he’s so...weird lately, right?” His eyes flash down to the gooey

goodness that's spreading out on his plate. "The pie is a bribe."

He's funny, and I smile a little even though I'm worried. "Pretty much."

He sighs, but I don't think he's annoyed with me.

My stomach churns and I go all in. "The truth is...Muffin came to see me at the library last night, throwing threats around about Maverick and someone named Leslie. Is he cheating on me?"

He shakes his head. "No. God, no—Maverick wouldn't do that. Leslie is a guy, a real piece of work."

I sit back, my head spinning with relief. I'd been so focused on him cheating...

He rakes a hand through his hair, his lips twisting as if he's deep in thought.

"But you're not telling me everything," I say. "What does Muffin claim to know about Maverick?"

He rubs a hand down his face. "This whole Muffin thing...shit, it's my fault. Apparently one night she got my phone while I was sleeping and read a bunch of texts from Maverick. It was on the lock screen but she was still able to take pictures of messages about a casino and this Leslie person. She's crazy. She even went up to him at Carson's and took a picture of him with the guy."

He says a few other things, mostly about how he's pissed at Muffin and how he's tried to call her but she's not answering, but all I can focus on is the casino bit.

My heart drops. "He's been gambling?"

He studies me and frowns, giving me a rueful look. "No, and I've already said too much. I only did because I know you care about him and if anyone can talk to him, it's you. You'll have to ask him for the rest of the story."

I chew on my bottom lip, my head trying to piece it all together. Ryker's right—if I want to know the truth, I'll have to confront Maverick.

He lets out a sigh as his eyes drift back to the plate in front of him. "Are you still going to let me eat this?" The fork is already in his hand and there's a huge clump of crust and pecan filling on the tines.

"Eat the damn pie."

"Thank God." He shoves the huge bite in his mouth and groans so loudly, I blush. Once he gets the first bite down, he reaches across the table and gives my hand a squeeze. "Don't give up on him. Just talk to him."

# CHAPTER 27

## *Maverick*

I'm leaning against the wall in the gym's showers, letting the hot water run down my body. I've been pushing myself to the limit this week, preparing for the fight along with our first scrimmage game tomorrow. NFL scouts will be in attendance, and just thinking about everything I have on the line kicks up my adrenaline.

I think back to Muffin and what she might do with those text messages she took pictures of. Everything she has is just conjecture, but she's batshit crazy, and batshit crazy can cause a lot of havoc.

I get out and am drying off when I hear the clank of a door somewhere in the building. *Dammit*. I thought Carson locked up before he left, but obviously he was leaving that to me since I'm here so late.

Still damp, I toss on my gym shorts then ease out the door and into the darkened gym. The lights are off and the only light is the glow from Carson's office, which he leaves on all the time.

"Maverick?"

My shoulders sigh in relief—it's Delaney.

My eyes scan over her, eating her up. She's wearing a pair of gray yoga pants and a shirt that says *I'm Sorry For What I Said When I Was Hungry*. Her hair is up in a side knot thing, and strands of blonde hair that have escaped fall down her cheek.

I exhale. Damn, she's beautiful, but she shouldn't be here.

"What are you doing here? It's past eleven."

She looks around the deserted gym, her gaze ending on the boxing ring. She pushes her glasses up on her nose. "Muffin came to see me at the library last night, and I went to see Ryker today. He didn't tell me everything, so I'm left piecing things together. I'm not sure what to think, and I'm here to find out what the hell is going on with you."

"Okay." I swallow as my entire body tenses. My chest feels like a chunk

of ice.

“Who’s Leslie and what does he have to do with a casino?”

*Fuck.* My pulse kicks up, dread filling my gut as I realize the one person I didn’t want to know what I’m doing is about to find out what a liar I am. I suck in a sharp breath, gathering myself.

“Let me get dressed first,” I say before turning back around to head into the locker room, trying to keep it together. She follows me as I march away and dig through my gym bag, my eyes avoiding hers.

“Is that how you want to play this? By not saying anything?” I look up and her hands are on her hips, her breasts straining against the fabric of her shirt.

I slip a Waylon football shirt over my head and shove my feet into Adidas slip-ons. “I just didn’t want to involve you. The less I say, the better.” My voice is soft.

Her hands fall to her sides and she clenches them. “You’ve been lying to me for weeks. I thought we...had something real.” She swallows, her eyes searching my face for answers. “Don’t we?”

“I don’t know. This isn’t the time to ask me, Delaney.” It hurts to say the words, but I’m reacting on instinct. I need to push her away and just focus on the game tomorrow.

She stiffens. “Who are you?”

I scrub my face. “Look, my life...it’s crazy right now, and I don’t want you caught up in my shit.”

“With this Leslie person?” Her voice trembles, and I know her well enough to know she’s close to tears.

“Yes.”

“What? Is he like a mobster or something? Do you owe him money?”

I push my hair off my face, tugging on the ends. *Fuck it—just tell her.* “No, I’m fighting in Tunica for him. He owns a couple of casinos. Muffin thinks he’s my bookie, but he’s not.”

Her chest rises rapidly and she looks faint. She sits down on one of the benches.

“I’m just fighting. I get in the ring, go a few rounds, and get paid a flat fee if I win. That’s it.”

She sucks in a shuddering breath as the dots are connected in her head. “That’s why you were all beat up before?”

I nod.

She shakes her head. “But you can’t take money from anyone, not if you want to play football.”

An eerie calmness settles over me. “I know.”

“Why?” She stands and walks over to me, her hands fluttering as if she’s a caged bird who needs to escape but doesn’t know the way out.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I did the fight for Raven, to pay for Pineview.”

She blinks, taking that in. “I didn’t realize you were paying the bill. I thought the state or insurance was.”

“No.” My shoulders slump as I feel the weight of all my decisions. “I’m sorry for lying to you. I’ve been coming here to spar as much as I can. I just wanted to keep you out of it in case the press finds out.”

She stares at me, taking it all in.

I pick up my gym bag. “I need to go. The scrimmage is tomorrow and I have to be rested. It’s late. I’ll see you later?”

Hurt flashes over her face, and her eyes shimmer. “Seriously?”

I nod. “The NFL scouts are coming. I need some space, okay?”

She nods, pain in her eyes as they dart around the room. “Fine. I see what’s most important to you.” She brushes past me and out the door.

Part of me wants to call her back, for her to just...help me through this craziness, but the other part knows I need distance. I need to focus on tomorrow and everything else that may come with it.

# CHAPTER 28

## *Maverick*

The next day, I'm on the way to the field to dress out for the scrimmage.

I was up late thinking about Delaney, and I'm beat. At least Eminem is blaring on the radio, and I crank it up. The lyrics to "One Shot" blast out as I tap the beat on the steering wheel. The song feels prophetic. The NFL scouts will be sitting in the stands getting a tight view of me as I manage the defense, and whatever happens will definitely set the tone for next year.

I pull into the parking lot and make my way to the dressing room. Most of the guys aren't here yet, and more than likely won't be for another hour. I like to come in extra early, get dressed, and get myself mentally prepared for the game. Every hardcore player has a few game-day quirks, and mine is running my hands along the turf or grass before any other player steps on it. Ryker likes to tell everyone I actually eat the grass, but that's a lie. Still, I go along with it, let them think I'm crazy. As for Ryker...his is getting bitch-slapped by one of the coaching assistants while I hold his hands behind his back. Says it gets his adrenaline going.

Coach Alvarez comes out of his office and meets me in the hallway. A few inches shorter than me with a bald head and bright blue eyes that don't miss a thing, he's in his forties and stocky. A former WU player, he lives and breathes the game. His face is grim most of the time, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders, but today there's an extra bit of downturn at the corners of his mouth. Known for his profanity and booming voice, he scares the shit out of most people, and no one wants to get on his bad side. He can rake you over the coals faster than a quarterback sneak.

I nod. "Coach. On my way to the locker room."

"My office first, Monroe." He juts his chin in the direction of his door.

My first thought is *Shit, he knows*, and a wave of dread washes over me. He's been nothing but kind to me, a good coach who saw right away that I had no father figure at all, and freshman year, he made sure to check in with

me from time to time.

My second thought is that this is a pep talk. He knows how much I'm hanging on to the fact that the scouts are interested in me, especially since I didn't go out early. They want to see if I'll live up to the hype.

I follow his broad frame into his office. Boxes of equipment, helmets, and padding are stacked against the walls, and a white board and a projector sit in the back surrounded by several desks and chairs. This is the coaching headquarters where the assistants meet to decide how we're going to be playing the game. He leans against his desk.

"Shut the door."

I close it as quietly as I can, suddenly a ball of nerves.

"Take a seat."

His voice is hard as nails—the usual.

His eyes bore into mine, that deep frown on his face, making his chin triple as it digs into his chest. A long stretch of ten seconds goes by as a myriad of emotions cross his face, ones I can't read...don't want to read.

My hands shake as I clasp them in front of me. "Sir? Is everything okay?"

"No, Monroe, everything is not fucking okay." His voice is deadly quiet.

That's when I know it's bad. He's not yelling, and this is even worse than if he were.

"I want to know why the motherfucking hell I got a call from the athletic director this morning about an anonymous tip that you're somehow involved in gambling."

It's not just my face that pales—it's my entire body. I feel my skin grow cold. I lick my lips.

"I don't know anything about that, sir."

"Don't fucking play with me, son. Have you been gambling?"

I feel faint.

I tell the truth. "Sir, I have not been gambling. I would never gamble on a game or throw a game. Winning—this team—means everything to me."

He squints at me, a scrunched up look on his face as if he's tasted something sour. "Then where the hell is the AD getting this from?"

"A girl, Coach. She thinks she knows shit and she doesn't." I grip the edge of my chair. Part of me wants to tell him everything...

*Tell him, my inner voice screams as nausea washes over me. Let out the guilt you've been carrying.*

But...I'd never play for him again.

“Son, are you sure you're telling me everything? The AD says I'm supposed to question you, but if you got nothing, I'll let you play today. It is a big fucking day.”

I feel the weight of his stare and it makes my heart jerk.

What I've done is so goddamn wrong.

I should just quit football and get a job and support me and Raven. I can live at the trailer with her and take care of her. I can get a job.

I exhale. I don't want to hang on to this any longer. “The truth is—”

“Al!” It's the quarterback coach at the door, and his eyes go from me to my coach. “Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting anything?”

Coach Al moves off his desk, sticks out his hand, and hauls me up to my feet. “We done here?”

“Uh...”

He gives me a nod and a shove toward the door. “Get the hell out of here, get dressed, and hit the field. I want you out there shining today for the scouts—no matter what. You've told me everything I need to know right now. You got me?”

His gaze brushes over me, dismissing me as he turns to talk to the quarterback coach, but there's a question in his gaze. I realize he likely knows there may be some truth to what was reported to the AD, but he doesn't *want* to know. If he knows, he's culpable. If he doesn't know, I can play today—and I have to play today.

Maybe I'm reading too much into it.

Maybe I'm just paranoid.

Maybe I'm just fucked up.

I picture what things would look like if I didn't have football, and I want to run as far away from Coach as I can.

I can't tell him.

I give him a brief nod and slide out the door.



# CHAPTER 29

## *Delaney*

Skye, Raven, and I weave our way through the crowd of people to get to the section of seats reserved for players' family members. I told Maverick weeks ago I'd make sure Raven saw the game, and that's what I'm doing.

I think back to Maverick and swallow down the lump in my throat as I recall our conversation last night. I still feel like I can't breathe. I'm worried about him, but I'm also angry.

I force a smile, trying to put on a brave face.

With a quick survey of the nearby seats, I find a collection of six men, all dressed in various forms of suits that look a bit too posh for rural Mississippi. They're sitting on the front row at the fifty-yard line, and several of the coaches from Waylon are shaking their hands—must be the scouts. I send up a prayer that Maverick does well.

Waylon's team has been divided up into two separate teams, red and blue, and the winner gets bragging rights for a year plus a party tonight in their honor.

Maverick and Ryker are both on the red team, and when Maverick's name and stats are called, Raven jumps to her feet and claps furiously. I stand up with her and we root for the hometown boy.

Even though my heart aches, my eyes can't get enough of him as he takes the field.

Skye rolls her eyes but stands anyway. "I really don't see what all the fuss is about." Her eyes drift over the players as they line up on the field, seeming to linger a little on Alex. "Guess I like a more trim look."

"Football...is...king," says Raven, and I grin behind my popcorn.

Skye laughs. "Well, aren't you just the little spitfire?"

Raven turns her head to Skye. "Spitting...is...gross."

"It means you're sassy and smart," I add.

Raven grins, her big eyes finding mine.

I nod.

Raven leans over on her knees, propping her chin up, laser focused on the team as they line up. Maverick barks out encouragement and when the blue team snaps the ball, his team flows into motion and tackles the quarterback.

Two more downs, and each time the red team stops the running game before blue can get the ten yards needed for a first down.

“He’s...good,” Raven murmurs as she crams a handful of candy into her mouth.

“The best,” I say, running my eyes over those sure, confident shoulders. He’s the focal point of every eye in the stands.

“He...deserves...best,” she adds slowly, and I look at her with interest, noting the quiet tone of her voice.

“Of course he does. You do too.”

She squints up at the sun that’s beating down on us. April in Mississippi can either be humid or freezing, depending on God’s sense of humor, and today he must be happy because it’s a beautiful seventy degrees.

“I...know...what...he’s...doing...is...wrong.” Her hands twist at the box of Skittles.

I stop chewing my popcorn. *Does Raven know something?*

“What’s he doing that’s wrong?”

A pensive look crosses her face. “Heard...phone...call...at...my...house.”

“About what?”

“Fighting...football...players...in...casino.”

Skye’s eyes have widened and she puts her phone down, a confused expression on her face. “No, a casino is where people go to gamble—”

I clear my throat, cutting her off. I haven’t said a word to her about what I know. “There’s no casino here, and no fighting, I promise.” Skye nods then turns back to the game, and I grab Raven’s hand. “Don’t worry about Maverick, okay?”

She nods, and I turn to watch him run off the field.

I keep my eyes on the game, but my brain flies. I’m sure Raven will keep this to herself, but Martha-Muffin is going to be a problem. How much longer before she tells someone? How much longer before it all hits the fan?



The game is over and I wait near the team entrance to the locker room, just outside the tunnel at the end zone. Maverick comes running out, wearing a pair of slacks and a blue button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up, obviously dressed up to see the scouts at the meet and greet, and then he'll be off to the party at the AD's house.

He's stopped at a couple of young boys wanting autographs who've been standing here with me for the past half hour. Skye and Raven have gone on ahead, and I don't plan on being here long. I've made up my mind to say what needs to be said, and once it's out, I'm done.

"Congratulations on the win and a great game," I say as he nears me, stopping within a few yards.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I played well."

I huff out a laugh at his honest assessment. There's no pretense to Maverick when it comes to his abilities. He looks around for Raven.

"Don't worry, they're waiting for me. We're going to get pizza."

He nods. "Thank you for today. She really wanted to come, and my dad...well, you know how that goes."

"Yeah. I'll make sure she gets home okay."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

I nod, my emotions tugging at me, clogging up my throat. I swallow. "I also wanted to tell you that I...I don't think we should see each other for a while. You're not being truthful with me, and you haven't been for weeks. Also, I'm not even sure how you feel about me, and if you can't talk to me or tell me what's going on with you, something isn't right." I take a big breath. "We need a break." There, I've said the hard words, and I turn to leave before the tears that are brimming in my eyes fall.

"Delaney, wait!" he calls out as I walk hurriedly across the field. He catches my hand and turns me around. "I'm sorry," he says softly. "For putting you through this, for Muffin hounding you, for lying about the bruises..."

I bite my lip, not able to stop the admission. "For making me fall in love

with you?”

“Delaney?” His voice is torn and he swallows. “Is that true?”

*God, yes.* I do love him. Maybe I have since the moment he admitted he was He-Man. Maverick is in my blood, my skin, my bones. He’s the light, the sun I want to orbit.

But, I make mistakes when it comes to love—every damn time.

This time, it hurts way more than it did when Alex cheated on me.

If Maverick cared about me, he’d have told me he loves me back by now instead of just standing there with an uncertain look on his face.

“I always fall for the impossible guy.” I clench my hands, trying to keep it together.

He scrubs his face. “Delaney, I’m sorry.”

*He’s sorry?*

I close my eyes at the words he’s not saying, at the way he isn’t committing to us.

“I hear everything you’re *not* saying, Maverick—everything.”

“Just let me take care of this thing with Raven, and then I’ll be back for you.”

I sigh. I want to believe him, but still, it isn’t enough. “Whatever you’re doing—this fighting—you need to stop. It’s wrong.” I shake my head. “When people care about each other, life has a way of working out. We can figure out Raven’s situation together.”

A male voice calls Maverick’s name from the tunnel, and I shift my gaze to see one of the scouts waving for him to come over.

“Look, I have to head out. Can I come by your place later?”

I shuffle my feet, and his eyes watch me with a desperate look, but I’m not sure he actually feels that way. I just don’t know if I’m *worth* it to him... not like he is to me.

“I’m driving down to Panama City tonight with Skye for spring break.”

“That didn’t take long,” he says, a muscle flexing in his jaw. “You’re just going to leave me here.”

“You wanted space, and now you have it,” is my reply, recalling words he said last night.

“Delaney...”

But I don’t want to hear anything else. I flip around and stalk off, feeling his eyes on me the entire way.

Before I get far, he calls out, “We aren’t over, Delaney, not by a long shot. I’m going to make you proud of me.”

I clench my hands into fists and keep walking, because if I don’t, I’m going to turn right back around and run straight into his arms and tell him I’ll stick by his side. I want to tell him that no matter how many times he pushes me away, I’ll always be there.

But I don’t.

# CHAPTER 30

## *Maverick*

Watching her walk away from me nearly makes my knees buckle. It feels like she isn't coming back.

*She loves me.*

She loves *me*, even though I lied to her.

I've wanted her to say it so many times, yet I'm the one who can't admit what's going on inside me.

"Maverick? You coming?" It's one of the scouts, and I give him a nod and head that way.

Something's got to give. I hate this feeling, like I'm torn apart and in shambles.

I pull out my phone and type a quick text to Delaney.

**Don't go to the beach. Please, don't leave me. Just wait.**

But, I delete it before I hit send. *Shit.*

*What am I going to do?*

I think about Raven and how much she loves Pineview, the expression on her face when I told her I got her in.

There are only two options: admit I've been taking money for fighting and lose everything, or just keep my head down, keep on trucking, and pray to God Muffin shuts up.

My head tells me to keep trucking, to maintain the status quo.

But...

I rub at my chest, a nagging, aching feeling tugging at me, telling me I'm going to lose everything.

# CHAPTER 31

## *Delaney*

Even though I told Maverick I was leaving that night, I still half-expected him to show up to catch me before I left. He didn't. I checked and re-checked my phone, hoping to get a text from him, but nothing.

Skye and I made the drive to the beach in five hours. There were other people from Waylon on their way, all of them taking flights or driving, several of them staying in the same area of hotels on the beach.

Two days in and I'm lying out on the sand, wearing a yellow bikini, still a little burned from yesterday's time in the sun, but I really don't care. I'm nursing a bit of a hangover from the shots of Fireball Skye made me take last night. Okay, she didn't make me, but she did strongly encourage me, and I didn't need too much urging after still not hearing anything from Maverick.

A shadow drops down next to me, and I glance up from the book I'm reading, expecting to see Skye, who ran in to grab me a water and get a margarita for herself.

My eyes widen as I take Alex in. I'm not too shocked to see him here since it's the same place we come every year, but I haven't thought of him in so long that, well, I'm taken back.

Wearing a pair of salmon-colored Ralph Lauren swim trunks, he's tan with a hint of a slight sunburn on his shoulders. He's sitting on the beach lounge next to me, the ones only hotel guests are allowed to sit in, looking quite comfortable as he looks at me.

"Alex? What are you doing here?"

He smiles. "Hey. I texted Skye and she told me where you guys were staying."

*Interesting.* He and Skye had lunch together a few times last week.

I sit up and ease my sunglasses off, propping them on my head where my hair is tied up in a messy bun. I'm without makeup and my eyes are puffy from crying into my pillow last night.

He tilts his head down toward the north end of the beach. “A couple of guys from the team are staying in a house a few resorts up.”

“Cool.” I really don’t have much to say; I’m too depressed and just *blah*.

“Skye says you and Maverick are having problems?” He squints at me.

“Maybe.”

His eyebrows go sky high. “Well, you are at the beach without him.”

I nod, feeling the pressure of the headache I’ve been nursing since I woke up this morning. I slip my sunglasses back down. “He broke my heart. Happy?”

He frowns. “Of course not, but it does explain his bad mood after the scrimmage.”

I stiffen, worried. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah. He and the AD exchanged words, and then Maverick left the party.”

“He left? *Why?*” My heart is in my throat. *Did he tell them about the fighting?*

Alex looks up at me. “I don’t know, but there are rumors going around the team. Nothing concrete, but I’ve heard gambling tossed around.”

I stand up. “He has never gambled! It’s your friend *Muffin* who’s stirring this pot.” I’m glaring at him. “You really know how to pick ’em, Alex. She’s a liar and a lunatic.”

He holds his hands out in a placating manner. “Look, Muffin is nothing to me, and I’m just telling you the rumor, that’s all.” He stares at me. “I only want the best for you, and if Maverick is what you want, then I want you to be together—I really do.”

I sigh and sit back down. “She hates Maverick...and me, and...” I let my voice drift off. It’s not my story to share, and the less that’s said about the fighting, the better. “You can’t trust her.”

“I know.”

Skye appears with a sardonic expression as she juggles a cooler and a margarita. Her red hair is a riot of curls around her face, and a sheen of sweat covers her forehead.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Silver Spoon.”

Alex grunts. “If it isn’t Miss I Only Date Baseball Players.” He goes to help her with the cooler.

Skye watches him critically as he situates it between the two loungers,



underneath the two umbrellas so it doesn't get hot.

"Nice job, Cheater."

"You're welcome, Home Run."

Skye snorts. "You're such a douchebag. You wish you could get a home run."

Alex brushes at a patch of nonexistent sand on his chest. "You wish I'd try."

*Oh. My. God.*

I forget my own melancholy as I watch their bantering like I'm at a tennis match.

*Skye and Alex?* I blink. *Wow.* My best friend and my ex might actually have some chemistry.

I look at Alex. "So you wanna hang with us girls today or do you have a hot babe to get back to at your beach house?"

"I'm free."

Skye smiles and bumps him out of the way with her hips as she grabs me a water out of the cooler. "Here, sweetie, for your headache."

Impulsively, I grab her and give her a big hug. She's been waiting on me hand and foot and giving me pep talks for the past few days.

Alex is watching us as I set her down. "Nothing like seeing two chicks rubbing up on each other at the beach."

Skye darts over and tackles him, and I laugh.

Maverick's face comes to mind, and I bite my lip, hoping wherever he is, everything is okay.

# CHAPTER 32

## *Delaney*

“Let’s watch a movie!” Skye calls out as we walk in the door of our hotel room.

“It’s two in the morning!” is my reply.

She shrugs and bats her lashes at me. She looks at Alex, who’s clearly had too much to drink judging by the way he’s weaving.

I blow out a breath. *Ugh*. I’m not even buzzing, yet somehow she and Alex are like the Energizer Bunny, still ready to party.

They’ve worn me out dancing, and all I want to do is crash. It’s the only way I can turn my head off and stop thinking about Maverick.

They follow me into the room and I head to the mini fridge to grab water.

“Get me a glass of wine, will ya?” Skye requests as she points herself in the direction of the bathroom. Her face is flushed and lined with sweat from dancing. Knowing her and her penchant for cleanliness, she’s headed in there to spritz on more deodorant and powder her nose.

“Red or white?” I ask, looking at the two boxes of wine we bought at the liquor store.

“White.”

I give her a nod as she stumbles into the restroom, already fluffing her red hair as she walks in.

“Alex? You want anything?” I ask.

He turns his gaze from watching Skye to me, and I bite back a smirk. Maybe a normal person would be jealous about their ex sending lingering looks their best friend’s way, but I’m not. He made a mistake with Muffin, but maybe he learned from it.

“Um, I’ll take a wine too,” he says. He flops down on the bed spread-eagled, his hand over his face. I’m beginning to wonder how he’s going to make it back to his house.

After chugging half the bottle of water, I get to work on making their

drinks. Once I have them ready, Skye still isn't out of the bathroom, and I make a mental note to check on her.

I walk over to Alex and nudge him with my hand after setting his drink on the nightstand. "Dude, wake up."

I get nothing but a soft snore.

*Dammit.*

I decide he's Skye's problem and once she comes out of the bathroom, she can decide what to do with him. He's on her bed, so she should be the one to deal with him.

There's an abrupt knock at the door, and I figure it's the pizza guy from the place across the street. Skye called in an order right as we left the club, and even though it's late, my stomach grumbles.

I fling open the door with cash in my hand and freeze.

Maverick is standing there in the hallway, his head bent as he stares at the floor. There's a slump to his shoulders that breaks my heart.

His head flies up and his eyes are haunted.

"Delaney." My name on his lips is like a benediction to my ears. I've missed him so much, and it's only been a few days. I want to run to him, cup his cheeks, and take that anguish off his face.

A heavy exhalation comes from his mouth as he straightens. "God, thank fuck. I had to bribe the desk clerk and sign three autographs to get your room number, and I still wasn't sure he told me the truth."

"Are you okay? Is anything wrong?"

His eyes cloud over. "Everything's wrong. I came here to—"

His voice abruptly cuts off as he looks over my shoulder into the room where he has a clear view of a set of feet on Skye's bed.

He walks in, brushing past me. "Who the fuck is in your room?" He halts mid-stride, his face paling as he sees Alex. I send up a prayer that he's still out and doesn't have a clue that a hulking man is glaring at him like he wants to yank him up by his ankles and toss him over the balcony.

Maverick's chest heaves, his face oddly still as he moves his gaze around the room, taking in the clothes strewn about on the floor, the shoes I kicked off as soon as I came in, and the boxes of wine. He swallows, his throat bobbing as his eyes finally land on me. His fists are clenched at his sides, a barely contained force about to blow.

"Alex? Seriously? Goddammit, Delaney. You really had me fooled."

I die at his words. The world stops.

I want to rewind everything and make sure Skye doesn't beg Alex to walk us to our room. I wish I'd never even spoken to Alex at the beach today.

He brushes past me and I grab his arm, making him come up short. Anger works his face, and another girl might worry that he'd lash out, but it's Maverick and I know underneath all that muscle is a heart that would never hurt a girl, not even Muffin.

"It's not what you think. Skye and I went clubbing with him then he came up here and promptly passed out. That's it."

His teeth snap together, his shoulders stiff and defensive as he glares at me. I see pain there, hurt. "You tell me you love me one minute and the next you're at the beach with your ex—what am I supposed to think?"

How on earth do I explain to him that Alex doesn't even register on my radar anymore? Not after falling for Maverick.

"You're supposed to believe me because nothing compares to you," I say, letting his arm go. "Because my heart is yours and always will be."

He's made it to the door but turns back toward me. Maybe it's my words that stopped him. He scrubs his face and pulls the hair off his forehead, holding on to it as he stares at me. "You're killing me, Delaney. I can't think straight without you."

We hear Skye then, flushing the toilet then singing "Let It Go" from the *Frozen* soundtrack over the rush of the sink as she washes her hands.

I walk over to him, eliminating the distance between us. "You came all this way, Maverick. Stay and talk to me. Alex...he and Skye...I think there's something there between them—that's why I agreed to go out with them tonight. He's not a rebound guy. I think they like each other. You...you're all I want."

He stares at me for a long time, even after Skye pops out of the bathroom and weaves over to me. She throws her arms around me and once she sees Maverick, she takes a step back, nearly falling. "Whoa. Is there a hot guy that looks like Maverick in our room?" She squints. "Is he a stripper? Please tell me it's a stripper."

"No," I tell her firmly. "It's Maverick."

She blinks. "How did he get here? Is he magic?"

"I drove," he says tightly.

He must be exhausted.

“Well, howdy do, Maverick. I’m glad you’re here because this girl has been crying her eyes out.” She shakes her finger at me and giggles.

I exhale. “That’s enough. You need to go to bed.”

“Fine.” She burps and pulls her dress over her head like she’s getting ready for bed. I try to stop her but she’s already got it around her neck, and at this point, I just help her get it off. Tomorrow she’ll be mortified that she took her dress off in front of Maverick.

She looks around the room and finds Alex. Her eyes light up then she gets on the bed and lies next to him, her body curling around his. At least she’s got a camisole and undies on.

She gives us a little wave. “Peace out, y’all. I got what I need.”

Skye says exactly what she thinks when she’s been drinking.

“See,” I say, looking at Maverick.

There’s a tightness around his eyes. “Come here,” he says, motioning for me to come closer.

I do, and he curls his arm around me, staring deep into my eyes. “I believe you.” He pushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his hand warm as I lean into it. “But if you think for one minute I’m letting you stay in this room with them, you’re crazy.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Get your shit. You’re coming with me.”

“Lead the way,” I say after grabbing my purse. I don’t need anything else, only him.

We make it to the elevator and I don’t even ask where we’re going. I don’t care. As long as I’m with him, everything else will work itself out.

We exit and he leads me to another hotel room, where he slides the key card in the slot and ushers me inside.

Neither one of us speak as we face each other. I’m scared. He looks so serious, the chiseled lines of his face etched with an unnamed emotion.

“Talk to me.”

He closes his eyes then opens them again. “I love you, Delaney. I love you so damn much, and watching you walk away from me and not being able to do the right thing for you...I never want to go through that again.”

I bite my lip, holding in the swell of feeling that washes over me. “Never again,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you how I feel after the game. I’m sorry for

dragging you into this mess. My life is probably ruined, but right now, I don't even care because all I can think about is you. I can't lose *you*."

I run to him, he catches me, and we kiss. His lips are everything, hot and needy, tasting of a passion that only comes once in a lifetime. Our tongues tangle, greedy for the other, anxious to get our fill.

In a blink, his hands have expertly unzipped my dress and I've removed his shirt. In between long breathy kisses, we hold each other, rushing and touching and taking everything.

It feels like it's been months since I've seen him and I want to relearn his skin, but right now all I focus on is how much I want him inside me.

"Fast now. Slow later," he says as he tugs down my underwear to my heels. He looks up at me from where he's kneeling on the floor and I bite my lip. He's perfect. He's gorgeous with those steel eyes looking right at me.

His lips and tongue kiss my calf, my kneecap, and the inside of my thigh while his hands cup my ass, pulling me closer.

I huff out a laugh. "I thought you said fast."

"I lied," he says breathlessly as his thumbs slide to the front to part me, his tongue lapping. He inhales my scent, his fingers dancing across my body, strumming me and making me undulate against him.

I tug him up. "Maverick...please."

He stands and removes his jeans and shoes, his gaze never wavering from mine. "I didn't bring a condom. I wasn't thinking. I just needed to get to you. I'm clean."

"I'm protected," I tell him, and before I even finish, he's kissing me.

It's perfect.

It reminds me of the night we met at the bonfire when he brushed his lips across mine and became the one I'd never forget. Two stars in the sky, two souls destined to be together.

He picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. He likes me like this, and it makes me smile to know the power I have over him.

Holding me around the waist, making it seem almost effortless with his strength, he slides into me slowly, giving me what I need. I gasp each time he takes me, my head leaning against the wall. Our breathing is loud, the sex louder, and I come fast, my legs locking on his hips as I clench around him. We kiss and he breaks with me, our love the perfect storm, a tsunami that washes over us.

Later, we're in bed under the covers, our bodies sated. His fingers trace loops and intricate swirls on my back as he hugs me from behind.

"I told Coach and the AD the night of the meet and greet."

The enormity of his words hit me. "What? Why? Does this mean you aren't going to fight?"

He nods. "Yeah."

I cup his cheek. "What's going to happen to Raven?"

A hint of sadness crosses his face before he recovers. "I don't know."

I kiss him softly on the neck. "I'm sorry I didn't ask sooner."

A brief smile flashes. "We had other things going on."

"Are you okay? I mean, what's going to happen with football?"

He plays with a piece of my hair and doesn't answer.

"Maverick? You seem rather calm about all this. This is your career on the line."

He nods. "I know."

"So?"

He arches a brow. "Will you still love me if I don't play in the NFL?"

"Hell yes," I say.

"That's the answer I was looking for." He gives me a lingering kiss, making me grab his shoulders and pull him down until he's on top of me.

He clasps my hand tight, intertwining our fingers as he looks down at me. "I actually have a plan," he says.

I wrap my hands around his nape and pull his lips to mine. "Whatever it is, I'm in."

We kiss more, our hands exploring. I'm so happy to have him back, but I know we need to talk. No matter what, as long as we're together, we can weather any storm.

# CHAPTER 33

## *Maverick*

We're at a television station and Coach Al and I sit behind a table, the cameras locked and loaded, ready to film. On my right is Delaney, and on the other side of her, slightly off camera, is Raven. A rep from the NCAA is on the other side of Coach, and we're about to go live on ESPN for an interview about the fighting scandal that's rocked the college sports world since I came forward and admitted to my involvement.

Fred Moran is the interviewer, and he's eyeballing me critically. A former linebacker from Ole Miss, he was one of my heroes when I was a kid, and now he's looking at me like I've disappointed him.

I get that, but I'm ready—ready to be true to everyone I care about.

The interview starts with the control room replaying a statement I made at Waylon that was recorded at a press conference put on by the school then released to the media.

“I fully admit to accepting money for fighting a rival football player. I knew this went against NCAA rules of accepting money for gain. I also take full responsibility for deceiving my university, my teammates, and the people I care about, and for this, I'm deeply sorry.”

I didn't reveal Kai's name, leaving it up to him and anyone else who'd been involved to come forward. Sure enough, five additional players also made statements after mine.

Even so, I was the big one, the famous player with so much promise, the one who was going to break out of the small town.

I was a disappointment to everyone—everyone except Delaney, Raven, and Ryker, who've stood by me the entire time.

The cameraman starts a countdown, signaling that we're about to go live.

I tense, and Delaney squeezes my hand.

I look down at her, and she gives me a soft smile. “Me and you, He-Man. We got this.”



Fred Moran focuses in on me. He gives me a nod then speaks to the millions of viewers. “As many of you know, Maverick Monroe came forward with a scandal that was hard to believe: a star college football player fighting in a casino for money. That’s right, tonight in the hot seat, we have none other than Maverick himself.”

The camera swings to me, and I nod and straighten my shoulders. I have nothing else to lose.

“Good evening, Fred.” I smile, digging deep for that Maverick charm I used to have. “Before we begin, I’d just like to say I’m a huge fan of you and your career, and I follow this show religiously.” I huff out a laugh. “Especially lately since I seem to be the topic of many of your conversations.”

He smirks. “People aren’t saying very nice things about you.”

I nod. “And I accept that.”

His eyes scrutinize me, noting my hand clasped with Delaney’s. His gaze brushes over Raven, who smiles at him.

He clears his throat. “I was wondering if perhaps you’d like to shed some light on why you risked your career.”

“I didn’t do it for the money. I mean, I did, but it wasn’t for me. It was for my sister.”

He nods, encouraging me to go on.

“In a car accident that took my mom, she suffered a traumatic brain injury, and I’ve been unable to get proper care for her, the kind she needs. My father is an alcoholic and at times is...unable to care for her, and I was often either in class or at practice.”

“He...cooks,” Raven calls out, and the camera swings to her.

Fred smiles. “You’re Raven?”

She nods and plays with her hair, her voice slow but careful as she speaks. “He...takes...care...of...me.”

I give her a soft smile and continue. “As you know, I’m not allowed to work or accept any kind of loan or money from anyone in case it’s construed as bribes for football. I was hoping I could get by until the draft next spring. Unfortunately, I’d already opted out of the draft this year when we realized she needed extra care.”

Fred exhales. “I see. Do you gamble, Mr. Monroe?”

Ah, the crux of the matter.

“I have never gambled, and Leslie Brock has already told the NCAA that.” I go on to tell them the details of the organization, how Leslie’s casino is a legit business and I merely worked as an employee.

“I never placed a bet on myself or a fight or a football team. What I did was fight, that’s it.”

“How much money did you get for the fight?” is Fred’s next question.

“Fifty thousand, and every penny went to the facility to take care of Raven.”

Raven is crying softly, and Delaney hands her a tissue then pats her on the shoulder. They’ve grown close these past few weeks.

Fred nods, a softening to his face. “Is it true that you requested the money you’d already paid to the facility be returned?”

I smile. “Yes. We donated the money to fund an animal shelter in Magnolia. It was Raven’s idea. She’s going to be volunteering there some.”

Raven glows at my words.

Really, that was all Delaney. She sat down with Raven and they talked about what kinds of volunteer work she’d like to do. It was something I’d never thought of, mostly because I’d have to get her there and back.

“And what about your sister? We’ve heard from a close personal source that you don’t have anyone to take care of her.”

“I’m taking care of her,” Delaney says proudly. “She’s my family.”

Love slams into me. What I ever did to deserve her, I don’t know.

What she doesn’t say is that Raven and I have moved in with her, and she’s quit her library job to take care of Raven on the days the nurse can’t come by. Skye said she’d chip in a day a week too.

Fred looks at the viewers. “Well, the question on everyone’s mind is if you’ll be playing for Waylon this year.”

I swallow. “I don’t know. I haven’t been informed yet.”

He nods. “What do you think the ruling will be when it comes to being drafted?”

“I have no idea.” I look at Delaney and Raven. “We’re still waiting to hear.”

I do know that whatever happens, I’ll be okay.



Delaney comes out of the kitchen, wearing a big grin and her *May the Fork Be With You* apron. She and Raven are making dinner and pecan pie for Ryder since he helped us move into her place a few weeks back.

It's the end of the year, and we're celebrating.

I think back to how everything played out after the interview. After much discussion and interviews, it was determined that the only technical rule I broke was accepting money. There was no indication of foul play, and most importantly, no gambling. Because the scandal involved several star players in the SEC who'd been preyed upon by offerings of big money, the NCAA decided not to kick us out of college football completely. Myself, along with the other players, would be sitting out the first five games of the year.

It was enough.

It was hope.

As far as Muffin went, none of the players on the team would even talk to her anymore. Rumor has it she's transferring schools for her senior year.

This fall is going to be the year—*my year*. I look at Delaney and watch as she shows Raven how to make her Nana's pie. She catches my eye and smiles as Han weaves between their legs, meowing for a table scrap.

"I love you," I mouth at her as she straightens up. She's everything, mine, and maybe she has been since the night of the bonfire. We just had to figure it out.

She smiles, a slow blush working up her cheeks. "I know," she mouths back.

I burst out laughing.

Forget this being my year. I look at her and Raven.

*This is our year.*

# EPILOGUE

*Few years later*

***Delaney***

I wake up, and Maverick's not in bed. *That's weird.* It's not quite eight in the morning and it's the off-season, which means he gets to sleep in before training starts. Spotting the blue dress shirt he wore last night when we went out to dinner, I pick it up off the floor where I tossed it before we made love. I pull it on, pad over to the window, and look out over the Nashville skyline from our penthouse.

I sigh contentedly. After winning the national championship with the Waylon Wildcats, Maverick went on to be drafted in the first round by the Tennessee Titans. He's already broken two records, and they went to the Super Bowl this year. They were defeated, but like he says, it gives him something to work for.

I look at the picture of him and me and Raven on the nightstand and smile. Somehow we managed to juggle her and classes and football our senior year, and because Maverick was so open about the reason he fought, people came out of the woodwork to help us. Mrs. Watson from Pineview herself volunteered to donate services to Raven, including riding lessons and art classes at Pineview.

She lived with us until Maverick was drafted, and then made it clear that while she loved us, she did not want to be attached to us at the hip. So, we did some research and found her a facility nearly identical to Pineview in Nashville.

As for me, I'm designing a line of clothing for my new Geek Girl fashion label and volunteer weekly at a local animal shelter. Maverick loves coming with me too, although I don't think he'd ever admit it. Rescuing animals has become his charitable calling card, whether he meant it to or not.

I hear clanging from the living room and make my way there.

"Mav?" I call. "Where are you?"

I make my way down the hall and into the den then come to a halt at the vision I see. Standing smack dab in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows is Maverick dressed as a...Jedi?

I give him a careful once-over, taking in the white leggings with brown boots, the beige tunic with a utility belt, and the light saber holder. A brown overcoat is draped over the getup, and I rub my eyes. The detail is amazing and he looks professional, like something straight out of the movies.

“Morning, gorgeous.” He strikes a pose, waving around a blue light saber that makes a *whooshing* sound with each movement.

“Morning, babe. Where did you get this outfit?” I’m impressed and starting to wonder if I can get a Princess Leia one. “Are we going to a comic con somewhere?”

“I had it made. And no, we’re staying in today. Just you and me.”

Cool. We’ve been busy these past few weeks, and it would be great to just relax at home. Maverick swings the sword and Han darts from behind a chair, paws swatting at the light saber as he runs past.

I giggle. “Nice moves. You’ve got Han riled up now.”

I expect him to laugh with me, and he does flash me a brief smile, but there’s something about his expression that’s different. It’s intense, as if he’s about to head out to the most important football game of his life.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” I say, moving in closer.

“More than okay. It’s the best day of my life,” he says as he sets the light saber on a chair and kneels down in front of me. From the coffee table, he picks up a black velvet box that I hadn’t noticed yet and pops it open. Inside is a ring with the biggest square cut solitaire diamond I’ve ever seen.

I blink. My body flutters and I can’t breathe.

He gazes up at me with those steel blue eyes, the ones I hold close to my heart every night when I go to sleep.

“It feels like I’ve waited forever to do this. Delaney Renee Shaw, will you marry me and make me the happiest Jedi in the universe? I promise to always love you—and your cats—and give you everything you could ever want, body and soul.”

Tears flood my eyes as I take him in: his pure heart, the way he fights for those he loves, the way he loves *me*.

“Yes. Always. You are everything.”

“*You’re* everything, Buttercup, and I couldn’t have made it without you

by my side.” He stands up, cups my face, and kisses me, and I know that no matter what, he and I can do anything together.

**THE END**

## Dirty English Excerpt

If you love swoony stories about hot alphas, keep reading for an extended excerpt of my #1 Amazon Bestselling book *Dirty English!* With over 1300 reviews on Amazon, it was also #8 on the Wall Street Journal.

### *Dirty English*

There are three things you need to know about Elizabeth Bennett: she's smart as a whip, always in control, and lives by a set of carefully crafted rules. She's learned the hard way that people you love the most always hurt you in the end. But then she meets Declan Blay, the new neighbor at her apartment complex.

A tattooed British street fighter, he's the campus bad boy she's **supposed** to avoid, but when he saves her from a frat party gone bad, all her rules about sex and love fly out the window. She gives him one night of unbridled passion, but he longs for more.

With only a cardboard-thin wall separating their bedrooms, he dreams of possessing the vulnerable girl next door forever.

One night. Two damaged hearts. The passion of a lifetime.

***\*A modern love story inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*\****

Warning: 18 and over please. Book contains language, sexual situations, and triggers.

# Prologue

## *Elizabeth*

A stabbing pain in my temple.

Fat and swollen lips.

A throbbing tenderness between my thighs.

Why did I feel like I was dying?

Muddled images flashed in my head, but nothing connected or made sense, just a big black hole of nothingness. Thanks, vodka.

The ache seemed to spread across my face. I groaned. *Had something hit me?*

Nausea curled as I got my bearings in the dark. Bit by bit, I figured out I was sprawled cross-wise on a bed that wasn't mine.

A small hotel room came into focus.

Careful to move my head slowly, I gazed around, taking in the battered nightstand and a rickety desk that had seen better days. In the corner of the room lay the beaded clutch purse I'd borrowed from my best friend Shelley for prom. Okay. *But where was she?*

My last memory was dancing in the gym. Maybe on top of a table?

My eyes went around the room.

Threadbare navy curtains.

A bed that reeked of stale cigarettes and body odor.

A bottle of Grey Goose.

My stomach lurched at the memory of that bitter taste sliding down my throat, and I swallowed to keep the bile down.

*Was this a hangover?*

I didn't know. I had nothing to compare it to.

Snippets of the night came in vivid clips.

Dinner with my boyfriend, Colby, and my friends Shelley and Blake at an Italian restaurant in downtown Petal, North Carolina. Lots of giggling. Colby sneaking in his flask so we could spike our drinks. Dancing under twinkling lights at the prom in the Oakmont Prep gymnasium. Getting in Colby's



Porsche to head to the lake for an after-hours party.

No memories of the lake came to me.

Colby, though, I remembered him urging me to drink, pushing the bottle at my mouth on the way to prom and then later as we drove to the lake. *Don't be a pussy, Elizabeth. Drink it. Let's rule the world, babe.*

*Rule the world* was his thing. He was invincible, and I guess since his father was a Senator of North Carolina, he believed it. Being part of his inner circle, especially being his new girlfriend, made me feel like I was freaking royalty.

My tummy still fluttered from winning prom queen to his king. On stage when they'd set the sparkling crowns on our heads, he'd turned to me and told me he loved me. Crazy and giddy happiness had filled my heart. He loved *me*. The girl from the wrong side of town. The girl without a real family. The girl who was nobody.

I'd waited for someone to love me like that my whole life.

More flashes from the car came and I groaned.

I remembered the second sip. Third. Fourth.

Things got hazy.

*God, I couldn't remember.*

Colby giving me a little white pill.

*Did I take it?*

It was all so fuzzy.

Pink, sparkly sequins dotted my hands and I gazed down at them on the bed. My dress—the one I'd scrimped and saved to get by waiting tables at the local diner—lay in scattered pieces around me. My body was on display with my breasts hanging out.

I whimpered and tried to cover them, but my arms were too sluggish. Panic ate at me—and then an awful realization hit. The material had been ripped from bust to hem, the delicate spaghetti straps torn off. My underwear lay twisted around my ankles and spots of blood dotted the coverlet below me.

For a millisecond my brain refused to accept what was plain as day, but when reality finally settled in, horror pooled in my gut.

My hands attempted to move but only fluttered around my body.

Red marks. Bruises. Scratches. Teeth marks.

*No. No. No. This was all wrong. This wasn't supposed to happen tonight.*

Whispers came from a corner of the room. Colby.

My eyes found him standing shirtless in the bathroom, his back to me as he talked on the phone.

Pieces of his conversation came to me.

“She’s out of it, man ... like an animal in the sack ... popped that cherry ...”

His words hit me like a tsunami, and my breath snagged in my throat. I struggled to regain my equilibrium—to focus—lying to myself that this whole episode was a figment of my imagination.

Colby grunted. “I don’t think she’ll be able to walk for a week.” A pause, and then he burst out laughing at something the other person must have said.

Something fragile inside me cracked and split wide open.

A sound tore from my throat, low and primitive, and his eyes swiveled to me.

I flinched, every muscle in my body jerking in revulsion.

“Gotta go.” He hung up and stalked toward me, stopping at the edge of the bed to stare down at me with ice-blue eyes. A flash of annoyance crossed his face as his gaze skated across my body. “You made a mess.”

Being from the trailer park, I’d had more than my share of scuffles with boys who wanted my attention and girls who wanted to boss me around, so I knew how to kick ass. Right then every nerve ending in my body wanted to jump up and claw his heart out piece by piece with my nails. He’d done this to me.

Rage burned inside, but I couldn’t move.

My voice came out thin. Reedy. “You hurt me.”

I struggled to sit up but collapsed backward.

He watched me dispassionately as I flailed around on the bed, letting the moments tick by, escalating my fear.

My tongue dipped out to lick dry lips.

He scooped up his white dress shirt from the floor, careful and steady hands buttoning it up, and that gesture, it said everything. He pulled on his pants and checked his sandy hair in the mirror. He wasn’t drunk at all.

“What did you give me?” I pushed out. “Why?”

“Don’t play games, sweetheart, you begged for it. *This* was consensual.” He twirled his fingers around the bed, a look of derision on his face. “Whatever I gave you, you took it without asking.”

“No, that’s not true.” *Had I?*

“Oh yeah, and you were the best lay I’ve had in months. Well worth the time I spent on you.” He bent down until his eyes were level with mine. “Don’t be telling lies about what happened here. No one would believe you anyway as drunk as you were. Still are. I’m sure there’re photos and videos from the prom to prove it.” He laughed as if hit by a sudden memory. “Damn girl, you were crazy in the gym, dancing on the tables and yelling at people. Chaperones tossed us out, babe. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were a bad influence on me.” He cocked his head. “That’s what I’ll tell everyone at least.” He brushed at some lint on his trousers.

I shook my head. *No*. I was the good girl who’d scored the highest in her class on the SAT. I was the girl who volunteered at the local animal shelter—and not just for service hours. I didn’t get thrown out of parties. I barely got invited to them.

He pushed hair out of my face, his fingers trailing down my cheek.

I flinched and jerked away as far as I could. “Don’t touch me.”

“Ah, and here I was hoping you’d be ready for another round.” He chuckled, his hands fiddling with the ring I’d made for him a few weeks ago, a sterling silver band with our initials etched on the inside with a heart between them. I’d spent hours on it, engraving the letters and then fashioning the metal until it was perfect. I’d even used some of my college savings to buy the butane torch and tools necessary to make it good enough for him.

“You said you loved me.” I hated the weakness in my voice.

His lips quirked up. “I tell all the girls I love them, Elizabeth. You just took a little longer to give me what I wanted.”

A strangled noise came out of my mouth.

He sighed and zipped his pants. “Don’t be upset. We both wanted this.”

*No, no, no.*

He twisted his ring off and twirled it between his fingers. “I guess you’ll be wanting this back now.” He tossed it on the nightstand and it made a tinkling sound as it hit the wood, spun off, and fell onto the floor.

He checked his appearance in the mirror one last time to straighten his jacket. “Well, I have to go, but I’ll see you at graduation in a few days. Later, babe.”

And then he walked out the door, shutting it softly behind him.

*Thank God.*

I sucked in a shuddering breath, my lungs grasping for more air.

To make sense of what had happened.

An hour went by. Another one.

Memories flashed like a horror movie you didn't want to watch but couldn't stop. Colby carrying me in the hotel and placing me on the bed. Ripping my dress. Groping at my legs. Hitting. Shoving. *Pain.*

I'd tried to say no, but the words hadn't come.

I'd tried to move, but I couldn't.

My body had been a frozen statue, and he'd moved me where he wanted. Twisted me. Ruined me.

I held myself together and watched the minutes tick by on the digital clock as my alcohol-soaked brain struggled to make my body move again. In tiny increments, I slid my legs down until they touched the floor, my toes clenching into the cheap, fuzzy carpet. Groaning, I forced myself to sit up and then immediately fell. I crawled until I got to my purse in the corner of the room and found my phone.

Panic drove me.

Any minute he could come back in here and do it again.

My hand shook as I pushed 911 but froze when the nasally voice of the operator came on.

“You've reached 911. Do you have an emergency?”

Shame. Guilt. Remorse. *Truth.*

Had I asked for it?

Was this my fault?

I panted, the throbbing between my legs reminding me of my sin.

“Hello? Do you have an emergency? Do you need assistance?” The voice was more insistent.

“No,” I croaked and ended the call.

I gazed down at my ruined dress. Who'd believe a girl whose father was in prison—if he even was my father—versus the wealthy son of a senator? I was white trash, a small town girl lucky enough to get a scholarship at the prep school down the road.

Nausea rose again, more violently this time, until the contents of my stomach spewed out everywhere.

The smell of alcohol made me sicker.

Mocking me. Telling me the cold hard truth. I'd had a part to play in this

scenario.

I clutched my chest, my heart hurting. Broken.

My muscles screamed.

My head banged.

I was done. Dead. Cold. Even my skin wanted to crawl away.

The sun crept up in the sky, the rays curling in through the dirty curtains. Dawn, a new day, but I'd never look at the sunrise the same.

Clarity happens to all of us when our heart jumps ship, and mine was no different.

Something dark slithered around inside me, crawling into the crevices of my soul and suffocating it. Everything I'd believed about myself ... about who I was ... about *love* ... unraveled, turning into something dark. Dirty.

Love is a knife that cuts out your heart piece by piece, feeding it to the boy you love.

Broken in more ways than one, I vowed to never fall again.

My body caved in on itself as I wept.

# Chapter 1

## *Elizabeth*

*Two years later*

Sweat dripped down my neck as I tucked blond hair behind my ears and groaned in the hot sun. It was Friday afternoon in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the only day I had to move into my new apartment before junior year started on Monday. “Welcome back to Whitman University,” I muttered as I pulled yet another box out of the trunk of my beat up Camry.

For only being twenty years old, I’d accumulated a lot of stuff.

Most of it consisted of jewelry making supplies and books except for my furnishings, which I’d inherited from Granny Bennett when she’d passed this summer. A beige and green plaid couch, a kitchen table with ducks painted on the top, an old bedroom suite, and a collection of crocheted doilies in various colors was my inheritance from her. Not exactly Ethan Allen, but it had a certain style.

“Your apartment looks like an eighty-year-old cat lady lives here,” Shelley called down to me as she popped her head out of my apartment to peer down over the railing at me. My bestie since prep school, she was a privileged rich girl, a sharp contrast to my own wrong-side-of-the-tracks upbringing, but she’d been there for me through everything. Even Colby. Her red hair had gotten fuzzy in the humidity, but it didn’t detract from her prettiness. She pinched her nose and made a scrunchy face. “And it kinda stinks.”

“Stop your complaining and get your butt down here to help. I’m melting in this heat,” I said.

She snorted and made her way down the metal stairway. “You and your fair skin. If you’d get out of the house now and then, you might get some color. But no ... all you do is study and work at the bookstore. You probably have more colors of highlighters than you have dating prospects. Not to mention, you go to the library so much people think you work there.”

I grinned. “I’m not that bad. I see people in class. I even talk to them sometimes.”

She lowered her head at me. “Get real. If it wasn’t for me forcing you to go out with me—like tonight—you’d hole up here and eat ramen noodles for the rest of your college career.”

“Meh, sometimes I eat pizza.”

She sent me a smirk and grabbed one of the boxes at my feet. We waddled back up the staircase and came to a stop at apartment 2B on the second floor. A two-bedroom with a balcony and a bathroom, it felt like a mansion compared to the dorm room I’d lived in all last year. I was on the corner and facing the setting sun, and I only had one neighbor on my left, 2A.

As if on cue, the thump of loud rap music blasted from next door.

I listened. Was that Eminem?

“That’s loud and obnoxious,” Shelley said. “Maybe it won’t be as quiet here as you think.”

I tried to be optimistic. “So? It’s two in the afternoon, not two in the morning.”

“They’re just moving in, too,” she noted, nudging her head at the pile of boxes sitting outside the neighbor’s door, which I noticed was slightly cracked. She indicated the pile of books in one. “Looks like a nerd. Yuck. And here I was hoping you’d win the jackpot with a hot neighbor.”

Making sure the new neighbor was nowhere in sight, I leaned over and hurriedly rifled through some of the titles: *The Great Gatsby*, *Wuthering Heights*. “Hmm, someone likes the classics. English major, maybe?”

She rolled her eyes. “Boring. What you need is a sexy neighbor who likes to have great monkey sex.”

I shook my head at her. “See, you say ‘monkey sex’ and all I can think of are hairy animals in bed. Gross.”

She huffed in a teasing kind of way. “Whatever. It’s like every time you see a hot guy, you have FUCK OFF tattooed on your head.”

Colby had been a hot guy and look what that had gotten me.

I shrugged, swallowing down those memories. “So? I don’t want to fall for anyone. Ever. Love hurts. Remember?”

“Yeah.” She nibbled on her lips, a hard look growing on her normally smiling face. She was remembering the hotel and the devastation that had followed. She’d been the one to pick me up that morning and take me home.

The kind of girl who fell in love at least once a month, she was under the impression that if I could just meet the right one, then all would be well and I'd have my happily ever after. Crock of shit.

"Don't worry about me, Shelley. I'm good, okay? I don't need a guy in my life to make me happy. All I need is you and Blake—and the occasional hookup." Blake was my other best friend from Oakmont Prep who'd come to Whitman as well.

She smirked. "Your sex rules again?"

I nodded.

Here's the thing. I'd had sex since Colby. Plenty of times. The events of that night didn't ruin my sexuality, only my trust in men. So a year after Colby, I halfheartedly propositioned a guy from my science class and asked him to come back to my room. Connor had been his name, and I'd seen him checking me out more than once when we had a lab together. That day, he'd looked at me like I'd suddenly grown two heads—me having a reputation as a bit of a bitch when it came to guys flirting with me—but he'd been eager. We'd walked back to my dorm room, and while the sex had been horrible, a furtive and awkward encounter, it proved that Colby had not won.

He was *not* the last person to touch me.

My body was my own.

So was my heart, and I planned to keep it that way.

After that, sex got easy—as long as I was in control. Over the past year, I'd made it into a game with strict rules. Pick an average guy who wasn't popular or rich or too good-looking. Make sure he wasn't taken. Make sure he didn't drink or do drugs. Make sure he wasn't an escapee from the local insane asylum. Have sex. Never speak to him again. End of story.

It was about control. My choice. My rules.

I had to initiate the first move, and I had to be on top. Most importantly, I had to be in my own bed and around my own things. Sex with me was tame by most standards, I suppose, based on some of the crazy stories Shelley had told me about her adventures. But I didn't care. If they wanted me, then they'd follow my lead.

"Maybe I'll join a nunnery."

She grinned. "You don't look good in black."

"True."

"And you aren't even Catholic, goofball."



“Again, true.” I smiled back widely. I didn’t mind her teasing me. It was better than pity.

I moved past her and we went back into my apartment to unpack. I pulled out a picture of me with Granny on her front porch the day I left for Whitman freshman year. Most days, it hurt to look at that photo, to see the skinny girl in the picture with the saggy jeans and wrapped wrists. But it was the last picture I had of Granny and me together, and that was worth something to me no matter how hard it was to be reminded of my foolish mistake with Colby. I set it on the coffee table.

We finished putting the dishes in the kitchen cabinets and then moved to the bedroom where she helped me arrange my closets. Later, we ventured into the extra bedroom, which was more like a tiny storage room. This was university housing and the apartments were notoriously small, but I managed to fit my jewelry supplies and a twin bed in there.

But I hadn’t made any jewelry in two years. The metals I’d once loved to shape and mold had become a metaphor for my own stupidity in love.

Shelley fiddled with one of my drawing pads, a pensive look on her face. She darted her eyes at me and then back at the boxes against the wall.

I steeled myself for her questions.

“When are you going to get serious about your jewelry? What are you going to do when you graduate in two years?” She opened the book and flipped through the pages. “Besides, I really need a new necklace. Something with a butterfly. Or a heart.” Her face softened as she looked up at me. “Remember the little friendship medallions you made us when we were fifteen—”

“Shelley, I’m not talking about this. I can’t make jack right now.”

She cocked her head. “Are you just going to give up on your dreams because you made a ring for Colby? It’s been two years, yet he’s still dictating your future. It’s fucked up. At one time *this* was all you wanted to do—design and create. Do you honestly think you’d be happy in some job where you can’t make something beautiful?” She sighed, a resigned look on her face. “I mean, you use sex with guys to say you’re past him, but you’re not. Not really. You’re still punishing yourself for something that’s not even your fault.”

*It was my fault. I’d been drunk. I’d taken his drugs. Willingly.*

The familiar shame settled in my gut. I blinked rapidly. “You weren’t in

that hotel room. You know nothing.”

She bit her lip. Nodded. “You’re right, I wasn’t, but I saw you afterward. I took you home and took care of you until your mom got back from Vegas. I know how wrecked you were. I—I just love you, that’s all.”

I exhaled and paced around the room, setting things out, arranging them. We’d gotten too serious. “Besides, butterflies and hearts are worse than tramp stamps. *If* I made you a piece, it would stand for something big.”

She grinned. “Like what?”

“Maybe your phone number on something since you give it out so much to guys.”

She pretended to be pissed but then giggled. “God, that is so true. I’m a slut.”

We laughed. “Come on, let’s go get the rest of my stuff.” We made our way back outside my apartment and stood in the breezeway. I sighed as I looked out over the parking lot. I still had several more boxes to bring up before I could even think about relaxing.

She poked me in the arm. “Hey, I have an idea. Let’s go meet your neighbor.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s move-in day, and I’m sure they’re just as busy as we are.”

She ignored me and tiptoed over to the door. Instead of knocking, she pushed the cracked door open and peeked inside the darkened apartment. “I don’t see anyone. Maybe they’re in the back on the balcony.” A grin crossed her face. “Which gives us plenty of time to be nosy.” She bent down and riffled through the boxes outside, pulling out a cap with a Union Jack flag on it, a pair of men’s athletic underwear, a pair of men’s black Chucks. She went a bit crazy, pulling out fingerless boxing gloves—*that was interesting*—and a collection of postcards from London.

“Oh, your neighbor is definitely a guy. And hung.” She held up a box of condoms. Super-sized and ribbed. Triumph gleamed in her eyes. “Magnums, baby. Score,” she sang out.

My eyes scanned the door to make sure no one saw us. “Put that stuff back before they come out here. Are you insane?”

“Yes.”

I groaned at her obvious disinterest in being caught, but I couldn’t help venturing closer. I did want to know more about my neighbor who read the

classics and listened to rap music.

She tapped her chin, eyes coasting over the contents. “Even with the musty books, he’s not a terrible combo. I’d do him.”

“You’d do Manson.”

She laughed.

I snapped the postcards out of her hand and tossed them back where she’d gotten them. “Step away from the box, or I won’t go to the Tau party with you tonight or wear that silly dress you spent an hour hemming last night.” Shelley was a fashion major and took all sewing projects serious. I was her number one model.

She sent the box a forlorn look and pouted. “Fine, you win. Party pooper.”

“Huh. You need me to keep you in line. You never would have survived freshman English if I hadn’t been yelling in your ear every morning to get up.”

She agreed—a little too easily—and we moved back inside and went to sit on the balcony.

“What’s that you have?” I asked later, noticing a brown book she kept pressed against her side.

She glanced down with a feigned look of surprise. “Oh this old thing? I got so wrapped up in your new place, I must have forgotten to put it back in the box.”

Right. I narrowed my eyes. “Really?”

She got a giddy expression on her face, ignoring my sarcasm. “Okay, you got me. It’s Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. I snitched it from your neighbor. I mean, it’s your favorite book because your name is in it.” She let out a dramatic sigh and pressed the book to her heart. “Don’t you see? It’s fate. You and the boring neighbor dude are meant to be.”

I shook my head. Sometimes she was too much. “That’s it. No more silly romantic movies for you. I don’t even know why we’re friends. I’m revoking our friendship as of now.” I snatched the book out of her hands. An old hardback with gold lettering, it was an older printing, perhaps even valuable.

What kind of guy hangs on to a book like this?

*The kind that believes in love,* my heart whispered.

I cracked the book open and turned the pages until I found the chapter where Mr. Darcy describes how he fell in love with Elizabeth Bennet: *I*

*cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun.*

Sappy drivel. I snapped it shut. “I love lots of books. It’s called reading, you know. You should try it.”

“No need. I have my looks.” She preened and flicked a strand of hair over her shoulder. “Where are you going?” she called as I marched through the living room and toward the front door.

I held the book up in my hands. “Hello! To return what you stole.”

She threw her arms up. “It accidentally got stuck to my hand, I swear! There’s a difference!”

“Uh-huh.” I walked over to the neighbor’s, but the door was shut, and the boxes were gone. I put my ear to the door, but all was silent.

The sudden blast of music from a car in the parking lot made me jump.

I leaned over the breezeway railing that overlooked the parking lot and searched below until I found a rugged-looking black Jeep with the top off. The Beastie Boys song “Fight for Your Right” reached my ears. I blinked. Damn, it was loud.

The driver was a bulky guy with a black Union Jack hat pulled low over his brow, blocking his face from me, leaving only the ends of his brown hair showing as it curled around the sides. A pair of aviators rested on his nose. Even from here, I saw broad shoulders and taut, muscular forearms as he shifted gears on the manual transmission. I even caught the flash of tattoos on his arms but couldn’t make them out.

*Mystery neighbor?* It was the same hat from the box.

I found myself leaning over further, arching my neck to see more of him.

Something about a big dude that read *Pride and Prejudice* made me breathless.

In my head earlier, as we’d gone through the boxes, I’d pictured my neighbor as more the Harry Potter type, a geek with black-rimmed glasses and a shy smile. *Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

Before he pulled out into the traffic, he turned and glanced back at the apartment building, his shielded eyes seeming to zero in on me. His car idled as he looked at me, and even though there were quite a few yards between us, I felt the physical weight of his stare.

I inhaled sharply, goosebumps making the hair on my arms rise up.

Had he seen Shelley going through his things? Shit.

*The book!* I looked down to see it was still clutched in my other hand.

*Dammit.*

Feeling ridiculous, I tore my eyes off him and backed up slowly until he was out of my vision. I propped the book up against his door and bolted for my apartment.

“Who was that?” Shelley asked as I flew in the door.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t Harry Potter, that’s for sure.”

## Chapter 2

### *Declan*

Note to self: arriving at the first frat party of the year at the Tau house with a black eye and without your usual girlfriend—now ex—raises a lot of questions and a shit-ton of stares.

The black eye was from a fight the night before. Right when it had looked like I was toast, I'd got in a heavy hook straight to the guy's jaw and a high kick to the gut. He'd gone down like a sack of bricks. It was my third win since uni had ended in May.

I rubbed my sore fists against my jeans.

The pain was worth every cent I'd taken home.

"Where's Nadia?" one of the honorary frat little sisters asked with a big smile when I came in the door.

I grunted. "Not with me. I'd check with the men's tennis team."

Her eyebrows went up as I marched on by. She obviously hadn't heard that Whitman's *It* couple had broken up over the summer. I'd ended it when I'd walk in on Nadia bouncing on top of some other guy's cock. I clenched my fists, remembering her deception. She'd known exactly when I'd be walking through that door, and she'd timed it perfectly, all part of her plan to force me to freak out and do what she wanted. Buy her a ring, go to law school, be like my wanker father. Never going to happen.

Her manipulations had failed, and I'd dumped her.

To borrow a saying from my dead mum, she was all fur coat and no knickers.

Most days I felt like my heart had recovered, but my faith in women was shit.

As far as I knew, Nadia was still with her new guy, some fancy tennis player from Brazil. Donatello or Michelangelo or something. Ninja Turtle? Yeah.

I pushed thoughts of her away and entered the large den which on a normal day would have a row of couches, end tables, and beer bottles, but

now had a mass of bodies gyrating on a makeshift dance floor. Music blared, a strobe light ricocheted around the room, and red Solo cups littered the floor.

I wasn't a member of this frat—I didn't have time to get rat-arsed every night—but my twin brother, Dax, was the Tau President, so it was understood I was always invited.

Questions kept coming from partygoers as I crossed the room.

“Hey, Nadia isn't with you?” one of the girls asked. *That's right. She's a bloody slag and I'm done with her.*

“Dude, what happened to your eye?” a guy called as I passed. I sent him a dark look. *Seriously? You don't know about the underground fighting? You must be new at Whitman.*

I grabbed a bottle of water from the bar and twisted off the top to take a big drink.

“Dirty English is in the house! About fucking time,” Dax called out as he jumped down the staircase and landed on the bottom floor, a distance of about seven feet.

“Bugger me, you're going to kill yourself doing that.”

He tossed his head back and let out a deep laugh. “Me? Dangerous? Look in the mirror, asshole.”

I sighed, half annoyed, half glad to see him. Polar opposites, he was the happy-go-lucky one who partied while I was the serious one who dreamed of teaching mixed martial arts at my own gym and maybe getting a run at the UFC.

I peered into a face nearly identical to mine, except for the scruffy beard he had going on. His grin was lopsided.

“You're snookered, brother,” I said.

He shrugged, ignoring me. “Where have you been? This party is off the chain, and I need my wingman.”

I grinned. “Whoa. You're *my* wingman.”

His lips twitched. “Let's try it out then. Pick a hottie and let's see who she wants more? I'm up on you by three already.”

“You're keeping score?”

When you have a twin, everything's a competition.

Freshmen year, we'd pretended to be the other one for a week, even going so far as to wear long sleeves so no one saw my tattoos or Dax's lack of. We'd switched up girls for the weekend too. Damn crazy. They'd dumped us

when they discovered the truth. I didn't blame them. But lately those days seemed like a distant memory. At twenty-one, I was close to graduation and about to be out on my own while he'd still be here trying to finish his degree.

Dax ruffled his hair back and checked his breath by holding his hand up and blowing. He rolled his neck. "Alright, the next pretty bird that walks through that door is up for grabs. The first one to get a kiss wins."

"Stakes?" I asked.

"The usual."

I smirked. "It's your dollar."

His eyes gleamed. "It's not about the money, brother."

I laughed. Dax had a way about him that always made you grin even when your ship was sinking fast.

Just then, I heard the front door open and saw Blake, one of the frat brothers, shooting out of his seat like he'd been shot in the arse by an arrow. Lorna, who'd been sitting in his lap, fell to the floor in a heap. I leaned down to help her up. Blake was a bit of a mystery to me, but Lorna was a popular girl and most guys knew her, me included.

"Ouch, love. You good?"

She dusted herself off, annoyance on her face as she took in the girls who'd entered the house. "Thanks. God, Blake is such a freak when it comes to her. I thought he was going to be with me tonight, but then he tells me *she's* coming. I just don't get it. She's not even that pretty. She's weird and slutty." She crossed her arms and glared. "He sees her across the quad and practically runs to her."

A bit more than I wanted to know, but I smiled to soften the blow of her being rejected.

I turned to see why the room had gone quiet.

Or maybe it just seemed that way to me.

*She* sauntered straight in the room like she belonged there, yet the bravado was fake—I could tell by the fluttering eyelashes and the way she clutched her purse like a lifeline.

I recognized her right away although I don't think she'd ever looked at me twice in our years at Whitman. Which was surprising. This was a fairly small, albeit prestigious, uni, and I'm used to girls flirting with me in the hallways and classrooms. After all, it's hard to miss the guy with the English accent who was voted Whitman's Sexiest Man on Campus by the sororities.



But this girl, she lived in a bubble, and seeing her out at a frat party was like spotting a unicorn.

Her name was Elizabeth Bennett, and the only reason I knew that much was because we'd had a class together last year and the professor had called roll.

It *was* a memorable name.

I remembered turning to check out the girl with a heroine's name, but she'd bent her head over a textbook already. She'd sat in the back of the class all semester and never once spoken to me—or to anyone. Most people said she was stuck-up. Some guys even claimed she'd shagged them in her room and then had never spoken to them again.

I didn't get it. Or her. But I'd admit to a certain fascination.

She was beautiful in a chilly don't-touch-me kind of way with white-blond hair pulled up in a high ponytail. Dark eyebrows rose up dramatically and accentuated almond-shaped eyes, making the pale blue pop from clear across the room. Her lips were painted a deep red, and a sprinkling of freckles dotted her nose—decidedly, the only sweet thing about her.

From beside me, Dax whistled under his breath. “Bloody hell, who is that? I pick *her* for a good seeing to.”

I edged in front of him. “I saw her first,” I said.

## Chapter 3

### *Elizabeth*

I stood in front of the Tau fraternity front door and gave myself a mental pep talk.

So what if this was my first college party? *I had this.*

It may have taken me two years, but walking into the biggest party on campus would prove that Colby had not won.

I could still be around alcohol and partying and not freak out.

Hadn't I watched *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* this week to prepare myself for the onslaught of college-age shenanigans?

Feeling fidgety, I adjusted the sterling silver bangles I wore each day. Two inches wide and embellished with my own infinity design, I'd made them in a metal working class before Colby happened. Now, I used them to hide the bundle of scars on my wrists where I'd tried to kill myself two days after the hotel.

I rubbed the cool metal, reminding myself I had two goals tonight.

The first was to walk into this frat party; the second was to find a guy, take him home, and christen my new place.

Any sober guy would do.

*Like there would be any sober guys here.*

Still ...

Something was off tonight, as if a heavy presence lingered in the air. Fate warning me that life was about to get rocky? Was I making a huge mistake by coming here?

"I can't believe you're actually going to walk in that door. On a normal Friday night, you'd be eating delivery pizza and avoiding my calls."

I took a breath and nodded.

Just be normal. Okay, don't be normal 'cause normal for you is being alone and grumpy and watching *Downton Abby* episodes curled on Granny's cat couch.

*Just ... be cool,* I told myself. Plus, if I didn't go in this party, Shelley and

Blake were going to have me committed to some psyche ward for antisocial behavior.

We walked in and Blake rushed to meet us. He wore his fraternity jersey, looking boyishly handsome with his auburn hair and big grin. A big guy, he'd played football in high school and now played linebacker for the Whitman Wildcats. We'd dated in high school for about a second, but Colby had come along and all other guys had faded into the background.

His eyes gleamed with what I took as pride. "Hot damn, you made it! How are my two favorite girls?"

I smiled up at him. "The question is how's the party? Anyone OD yet? Human sacrifices going on in the back?" I pretended to be casual, but I stood on my tiptoes and peeked around his shoulders as I spoke, checking out the scene. I didn't let my gaze linger too long on anyone. My nerves were taut and ready to pop, and I hadn't even seen the entire place.

He shook his head, giving me a pointed look like he saw through my jokes. "Nah, we keep a tight watch on those things." He wrapped us both up in a big brawny hug, his rosy cheeks making him look almost cherubic. "I'm damned glad you're here. And I promise to take care of you." He tweaked me on the nose. "You especially. Now stop waffling and come on in."

The room blared with music and people stood everywhere. It was hot and noisy and my chest tightened. I skated my eyes through the crowd when all I wanted to do was run like hell. Thank goodness we swept on through to get out of the throng, and he led us out the patio doors to the backyard. Air. I inhaled and then choked on a cloud of perfume as one of the fraternity sisters stopped in front of us. Lorna something. I'd seen her around Blake before, and judging from the evil eye she sent me, I wasn't her favorite person. Whatever. I didn't care. Blake and I were just friends, but because we spent a lot of time together, some people might assume we were more.

She slid her hands over Blake's chest. "Hey baby, don't you want to come back inside where the real party is? No one fun is out here."

Shelley giggled and I kept my face a mask. Cool. Calm. I'd been around girls like her all through prep school. Pretty rich girls. The best way to deal with them was to never let them see you get flustered. Be a bitch right back. I smiled at her tightly as Blake leaned over to whisper something in her ear. She flounced off to go back inside, a little extra swing in her hips.

He crooked our arms together and showed me around, pride evident in his

voice as he stopped periodically to introduce me to several of his brothers. Shelley knew most everyone already.

I took a look around the area, taking in the lit tiki torches, a makeshift dance floor with a DJ and strobe lights, and a huge pool. People roamed everywhere, most of them popular and Greek and not part of my crowd. A girl in a tiny red bikini did a cannonball into the deep end and came up holding her top. Almost immediately, guys whooped loudly and jumped in after her.

“This party is on steroids,” I murmured.

“You good?” Shelley asked.

I nodded.

A tall guy—about six three—with dark hair and a jawline that could rival any movie star stopped in front of Blake. He did a bow thing and came up with a cocky grin and checked us out blatantly.

Shelley pushed her well-endowed boobs out. A notorious guy-chaser, she loved guys and was quite, er, free with her love. Didn’t matter who they were. Tall, short, rich, poor, black, white, amphibian ...

“Who’re your hot friends, mate?” the guy asked in an English accent, his words sleek in their delivery. Lofty.

My eyebrows went straight up, my interest piqued. Yes! I loved the way he talked.

Blake immediately stiffened. “They’re with me, Dax, so hands off.”

*Dax?* Nice name.

I shot Blake a quick look, but he avoided my eyes. He was a bit possessive when it came to protecting me, and a few times over the past few years I’d had to tell him to back down. I started to lean in and tell him it was fine, but the guy spoke first.

“What? Can’t I even say hi?” He turned dark gray eyes at me. “You. Do you eat sugar all the time? ’Cause you are the sweetest thing I’ve seen all night.”

A surprised snort came from me. “That’s the worst pickup line ever.”

He looked crestfallen. “Ah, angel, don’t laugh—or snort—at me. You’re killing my fragile ego.”

“Truth hurts.”

He grinned, not deterred. “Okay, this isn’t a line, but have we met before? You seem really familiar.”

I stuck my hand out. The more forthright I was, the easier it made things. “I’m Elizabeth Bennett, and we’ve never met because I’d definitely have remembered your accent. Unless it was in class and we never spoke ...” I arched my brow. “What’s your major? I’m in the art department mostly.”

He grimaced. “Psychology, but I don’t go to class much. Maybe it was the Sigma party last year?”

“The one with the goats on the roof? Ah, no.”

“The Delta toga party? The one where the cops came?” He chuckled. “Don’t recall much of that one, although I do remember waking up in a pair of women’s underwear.”

Oh. “Sadly, no, but I did see the students who were arrested on the news.”

He tossed back his head to laugh, calling attention to the strong lines of his throat. I let my eyes take more of him in, checking out the skinny jeans and the Vital Rejects band shirt that fit snugly to his muscled chest. He was gorgeous.

He knew I was checking him out, because he smirked, a knowing glint in his eye. He nudged his head at the crowded dance floor. “Wanna go dance?”

“Ever heard of taking it slow, Dax?” Blake snapped. “She just got here. Give her some space.”

Shelley ignored Blake and looked at me expectantly, obviously wanting me to say yes, but I shook my head at Dax. “Sorry. I’m not your type.” Best to rip the Band-Aid off fast.

“I’m every girl’s type.” His eyes skated over my white strapless sundress. “Especially beautiful angels who just fell from heaven.”

“Don’t angels have wings?” I asked. “Kinda hard to fall when technically you can fly.”

He wagged his eyebrows and held up the Solo cup he carried in his hand. “No one’s splitting hairs here, besides my lines get better the more I drink.”

*Ah.*

I stiffened but nodded. Trying to be polite. “Hmm, well, I usually spend my Friday nights doing homework while I wear granny panties. I also binge watch Masterpiece Theatre, crochet knit hats, and do calculus when I get bored. I don’t usually come to parties. I don’t even talk to guys who drink, so I’m *really* not your type.”

He rolled his eyes. “Just one dance, love. We don’t have to get married.”

“Good thing I’m stone-cold sober. Looks like I’m the winner here,

brother. You can pay me later,” said another accented voice behind me, and I whipped around to see a replica of Dax. Only with bigger muscles.

*Another Brit?*

Only this one’s voice was huskier. Sexier.

“Twins?” I squeaked.

They smirked and nodded simultaneously. In the same exact manner.

I blinked. Oh. They were double trouble, sex on two sticks.

The sober one pushed dark brown hair off his forehead and stared at me. His face was classically handsome, the jawline angular and defined, but that’s where the carbon copy stopped. Every inch of this guy’s arms not covered by his black shirt were covered in colorful tattoos, and I got lost trying to trace the designs, from ivy branches to skulls. My eyes paused on the blue dragonfly tattoo on his neck. Odd seeing something so light-hearted on such a bulky dude.

He wore tight designer jeans, black motorcycle boots, and a shirt that clung to a chest that had obviously seen its fair share of the inside of a gym. *Intense* was the word that came to mind when his silver-gray eyes met mine, sweeping over my face, lingering on my bare shoulders. Warmth spread and I got hot as if I’d just stuck my finger in a socket.

What *was* that?

One thing for sure, he was pure hot male and if you could put it in a bottle, you’d make millions.

*Get away from the hotness and tell your ovaries to settle down*, my brain yelled, but I stupidly ignored it.

Something about him had me riveted. Maybe it was the black eye.

I immediately pictured him in a bar, turning over chairs and tables and kicking other big dudes’ asses.

I took a tiny step back. *Remember the rules*. No hot guys. No popular guys. No rich guys. I was fairly certain he’d check all those boxes.

The sober twin flashed even, white teeth. “In case you’re wondering, I’m the oldest by two minutes. I also get better grades, as you might have guessed.” He tossed an arm around his brother and rubbed his head good-naturedly.

“Yeah, but I’m the babe magnet,” Dax said. “You’re just coasting on my bloody coattails, trying to pluck the birds I found first.”

The bigger one laughed. “Keep dreaming, baby bro. I don’t need to coast.

I *am* the sexiest guy on campus.”

“Whatever. I’m Dax, in case you missed it,” he said to me with a grin.

I looked at the other twin. “And you are?”

“Declan,” he murmured in his low voice, his accented words like silk, the vowels soft and rounded.

I shivered.

*Declan.*

One simple word that I felt all the way to the roots of my scalp.

Butterflies danced in my tummy. I yelled at them to settle down, but they didn’t listen.

His full, sensuous lips kicked up in a grin as I repeated it. “That’s a beautiful name,” I said, “the way it rolls off my tongue.”

“It’s Gaelic and means *full of goodness*. Ironic since most call me trouble.” He smiled. “Elizabeth, right?”

I nodded and he put his hand out for me to take. I rested mine in his much larger warm one, not surprised by the tingles that zipped down my spine. Reluctantly he released my hand, his fingertips sliding against my palm in a sensuous sweep. I let out an uneven breath I must have been holding since the moment he stepped into my vision.

Was his reaction the same as mine?

His facial expression hadn’t changed at our first touch, yet he’d moved closer to me, the expensive scent of his woody cologne permeating my senses.

The conversation picked back up with the others, but Declan and I just stood there silently. I glanced at him. He glanced at me. He smiled. I smiled. And right there it felt like we were having an intimate moment, just the two of us as we stared at each other while the world carried on. His gaze kept coming back to me, almost inquisitive as if he wanted to ask me something but didn’t know how. There was a connection between us, and I’m not stupid, I know it wasn’t love at first sight—maybe lust—but he was definitely the hottest guy I’d been this close to in two years.

He was exactly what I needed tonight, the complete opposite of Colby’s blond and preppy Ralph Lauren looks. Perhaps it was time to take my rules a step further, to prove to myself I could be with whomever I wanted and keep control of the situation.

As long as the fortress of my heart remained under lock and key, I was

good.

He turned away from me when a pretty girl walked up to him, and just like that I changed my mind. *Player?*

He looked back to me a minute or two later, a sheepish smile on his face. “Sorry about that. I taught her some self-defense moves last year, and she was telling me how she’d used them on her older brother this summer.”

Oh. I took in his broad chest and biceps. “You’re a trainer?”

He nodded, an earnest expression on his face. “Yeah. I’ve taught in some of the local gyms, but I’m opening my own soon.”

“Is that how you got your black eye?”

He considered me carefully. “No.”

I studied him harder, my gaze boring into the masculine planes of his face. Instinctively, I reached up and delicately touched a red place near his hairline. A cut? He winced and I immediately dropped my hand. “So sorry, I—I don’t know why I did that.”

*Stop touching the hot guy!* I yelled in my head.

He shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“You use your fists a lot?”

“Yes,” he said softly.

I sucked in a sharp breath. Dangerous. Sexy. Trouble.

*Why was I still talking to him?*

Blake sidestepped between Declan and me in such a way that it felt forced. “You want a drink, Elizabeth? There’s beer and some punch, although it’s probably spiked. I can scrounge around and find you something though.”

“A water would be great.”

“Yes,” Shelley said emphatically. “She may not drink, but I do. Bring it to mama. Anything will do.”

Declan surprised me by saying he’d get them for us, and I watched him move away, his lithe frame moving with the easy grace of someone used to holding back power like a sexy jungle cat who prowled around and took what he wanted ...

I’d like to pet that jungle cat, rub his silky fur and make him purr ...

I slapped myself mentally.

*Jungle cat? Make him purr?* What was wrong with me tonight?

“Don’t mess with him,” Blake whispered in my ear as if he’d read my



train of thought.

I shot a look over at Dax and Shelley to make sure they hadn't heard his comment, but they were involved in a discussion about music.

"Why? What's wrong with him?"

He narrowed his eyes, a flash of annoyance on his face. "Are you interested?"

"Get real. I study. I work. I sleep." Occasionally I have sex.

He nodded, his expression growing serious. "Maybe it's time to move on and trust someone."

I arched a brow. "But *not* Declan?"

He opened his mouth. Shut it. He held his hands up as if to placate me. "Don't get me wrong. He's cool. But you're exactly his type, physically any way, and I saw the way he looked at you. He's on the rebound, and I just don't want you to get hurt. He's a senior and popular—and well, no one knows *you*."

"Wow. That hurt. Thanks for the vote of confidence." I crossed my arms.

He groaned. "It's just ... I've seen him go through girls like frat boys and their beer. He's a user and once he's done with you, he'll toss you out. You need a nice guy."

My mouth tightened. "I thought Colby was a nice guy and look how that turned out." I sighed. "Are you actually jealous?"

He flushed. "I just know how guys think. Declan's a jerk and you need to avoid him and not do anything stupid."

"And if by stupid you mean let a guy get me drunk so he can do whatever he wants—I think I learned my lesson." Blake and I had been arguing a lot lately, and it was always about stupid stuff. Something was off between us. "Whatever. I'm going to find a restroom."

Shelley's eyes were big as I turned to walk away, but Blake grabbed my hand and pulled me back. He grimaced, hazel eyes apologetic. "I'm an asshole. I'm sorry. It's just—I remember what you looked like, all messed up and crying, and then you tried—"

"Just stop," I snapped. "Please. I don't need reminders of my mistakes."

He reddened, his shoulders dipping down. "I can't do anything right by you tonight. Forgive me, Elizabeth?"

God, what was wrong with me? He'd always been there for me.

"Of course. I'm sorry for snapping," I said as his big body leaned in to

give me a hug. We embraced tightly, his strong arms encircling my waist as I tilted my head up and met his eyes. They were glistening with some kind of emotion I took as remorse.

“It’s okay,” I murmured and kissed his cheek.

We pulled apart but not before I saw Declan look over his shoulder at us from his place in line at the bar. A strange expression crossed his face, but then it was just as quickly gone.

I couldn’t help but notice that my gaze wasn’t the only one following him around the patio. Almost all the girls. And a few of the guys. He laughed at something someone said on the way back to us, his long legs eating up the ground in big strides. People everywhere clapped him on the back as if congratulating him. He’d nod and smile. Those who didn’t know him seemed to scurry to move, nodding their heads at him, giving him passage.

He had *presence*, as Mom would say.

My mom had dated a string of men with presence—drug problems, felonies, heavy fists.

I groaned. I was spending way too much time analyzing this guy.

But my mouth had other ideas. “So what exactly is Declan’s type,” I asked Blake, turning my eyes to him.

“Blond hair, long legs, smart. Mostly sorority girls with attitudes and rich daddies. In fact, his ex, Nadia, is here somewhere.” He gazed around at the crowd as if to find her.

I snorted. “Rich girls? I’m here on an academic scholarship. I think I’m safe.”

“Safe from what?” Declan asked me as he approached us. I startled. He’d moved a lot faster than I’d thought. He handed me a chilled bottle of water, his warm hands again connecting with mine, his fingers lingering.

Sparks went off on my skin.

Did he carry some kind of electrical current machine around in his pocket?

He handed a Solo cup of beer to Shelley.

I tried to focus my eyes away from him, but the darn things kept returning to him, searching his face and taking in the details. He had a three-inch white scar above his right eyebrow and I found myself wanting to touch it, to trace it with my fingers and ask him what had happened. He was preoccupied with me too, giving me long glances but then looking away and rolling his neck as

if what he saw in me made his shoulders tight.

Ha. I bet he had a line of girls waiting to work those kinks out.

But still that didn't stop me from following him to the back of the yard when he suggested it, saying we could talk without everyone in our face.

Blake went off to dance with one of the fraternity little sisters. Shelley checked with me to make sure I was okay and when I told her I was fine, she and Dax headed out to dance.

We stood with our backs against the fence and watched the party, laughing every now and then at something crazy someone would do in the pool or on the dance floor.

“Do you think we're the only sober people here?” I asked. I'd noticed he'd been drinking water too.

He shrugged. “My father drinks a lot, and I don't want to be anything like him.”

I heard the tension in his voice, and because I wanted to ease him, I opened up. “Hmm, no family is perfect. My dad's in prison—or at least the man my mom tells me is my dad. I've never met him, but he's there for murder.”

His mouth parted, a look of surprise on his face. That I was the spawn of a killer? “Bugger, that must have been tough.”

“He beat a guy to death in an alley outside a bar while he was on probation for selling drugs. He got life.” My gut tightened as I took in his black eye. “My mom says he was a hothead. Maybe it's a good thing I never knew him. People who use their fists scare me.”

His body tensed at that, but it didn't stop me from babbling on and on. Maybe it was because he was a stranger, and I figured I'd never see him again. “My mom, on the other hand, wanted to be a Vegas showgirl but then she got pregnant with me. I guess you could say I ruined her life.” I shrugged, pushing those memories away. “So, how did you end up here? Are you an athlete?” My eyes lingered on his broad chest. Again.

He grinned. “No.”

Oh.

“I'm originally from London. My mum was English and my dad's American—he was the ambassador to England years ago.” He seemed to gather himself, adjusting his stance, his eyes suddenly everywhere except on me. “They divorced when I was a toddler, and when I was ten, Mum died

from cancer. Dax and I moved here to Raleigh to live with my dad. I guess you can say we've been Americanized in the past few years. At least I got a dual citizenship out of the union." Hardness grew in his eyes. "He ripped everything away from us and then forgot we existed when he got remarried. I don't see him often. He doesn't care."

I held my water bottle up. "A toast to shitty parents."

A large blue dragonfly landed on my arm, its stick-like body vibrating. I'm not the kind of girl who screams bloody murder when an insect shows up. The artist in me preferred to study everything in great detail.

"Oh. Look how pretty it is," I said, but he'd already seen it and had leaned in closer, the smell of him male and potent.

"It tickles," I giggled after a while, and he shooed the creature away, his gentleness surprising me.

He watched it fly away and then sent me a considering glance. "It's funny—every time I see a dragonfly, I think it's my mum's spirit. She loved them. Crazy-like. She even had this charm bracelet someone had given her, and you'd think she'd have different things on it, but all she bought were dragonfly charms. She had magnets, knickknacks, even paintings." He rubbed his jawline. "On the day of her funeral, we were at the burial and one landed on Dax and then flew over to me. It hovered around us the entire time and wouldn't leave. It was strange yet comforting—" He swallowed and then continued. "The day my father showed up at our house to move us here, one followed our car for miles. Weird, right? I—I just always think it's her looking out for me."

"That's beautiful. Is that why you have the tattoo on your neck?"

"Yeah. To always have her with me."

*Him, him, him, my body said. Pick him tonight.*

I fidgeted, switching my water from one hand to the other.

"Hey, you okay? Did my story bother you?" His eyes watched me, landing on my lips.

I licked them. "Uh, no, it's just we seem to have this *thing*, like a connection, and I was wondering if maybe, you know, if you weren't busy later, and you know, if you aren't with anyone else, and if you think it's cool, and if you're attracted to me and like sex, then perhaps you could come back to my place?"

I closed my eyes in horror. Kill me now. Shit, shit, shit. That came out so

wrong.

I popped my eyes open to see Blake jogging over to us. Thank God. Someone to rescue me from my stupidity.

I chanced a look at Declan for a reaction to my offer, but his face was a cool mask as he watched Blake approach us.

Had he even heard me? What was up with him?

Blake stopped in front of me, not looking at Declan. "Come on, you love this song. Let's go dance," he insisted, grabbing my hand and tugging.

I cleared my throat and got my nerve back up. "Why don't we all go out and dance? Declan?"

Declan sent me a conflicted look, his eyes going to my hand enclosed in Blake's and then back to my face. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "No, thanks," he said coolly.

*What was that?*

"Go on. I'll be out there in a minute," I told Blake, who immediately sent me a sulky look but stalked back to the dance floor.

I turned to Declan. "Why don't you want to dance? No rhythm?" I grinned to lighten the suddenly dark mood he seemed to be in.

"Are you Blake's girl?" His words were clipped.

"No. I don't date anyone. I have fun, that's it. And in case you missed it, I just propositioned you. Horribly."

His face softened as he touched my hair briefly and then dropped his hand. "You shocked the hell out of me, you know. It was surprisingly ... earnest and cute."

*Cute?* The worse adjective ever for a girl. A death knell sounded.

"I shouldn't have done that. I got caught up in the night and you ..."

Obviously, he wasn't interested.

"Don't think I'm not into you," he said rather huskily.

"But?"

"It's not a good idea."

"Whatever. I should be running like hell from a guy like you anyway."

His eyes zeroed back in on mine. "Why?"

"Long story."

He shifted closer to me, his hand brushing mine. "Maybe you can tell me that story someday."

And then out of the blue, tears pricked at my eyes at his tenderness, and I

hurriedly blinked them away before he noticed.

He exhaled, seeming to be uncertain about how to proceed. “Look, I’ve seen you around on campus. You keep to yourself and underneath you seem, well, fragile—and honestly, I like my girls and sex hard. I’d be all over you, and somehow I’m sensing you aren’t down with that.” His intense eyes searched mine. “Putting everything out there, I just broke up with someone a few months back, and I wouldn’t want to use you.”

I got hung up on *I like it hard*, and repeating it in my head made sweat pop out.

“Maybe I want to use you, and I’m not fragile. No one hurts me anymore,” I said, but before he could reply to that, Shelley yelled from the dance floor.

“Elizabeth, get your ass out here and dance with me.” Her arms waved at me to come on, her lithe body gyrating around several partners.

When I turned back to Declan, a pretty girl with blond hair cut in a sharp bob had come up and crooked her arm through his. Thin with big boobs, she wore stilettos and a soft periwinkle dress that probably cost more than my rent.

She took a look at me, dismissed me with a sniff, and turned to Declan.

“Hey, babe, I need to talk to you.” She ran her fingers down his arm.

His entire body stiffened, a cold look on his face as he peered down at her. “What do you want?”

“You,” she whined. “Just give me a chance to explain ...”

*Oh.* The ex?

He flicked his eyes to me and nodded. “It was great to meet you, Elizabeth. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

*Tomorrow?* Since when?

He sent me one final look, turned, and walked away with the other girl.

Just like that, my night with Declan was over.

Was I disappointed? *Yes.*

Was I going to let it ruin my first college party? *No.*

## Chapter 4

### *Declan*

Elizabeth Bennett was the most awkward person to ever come to a frat party.

Not only had she come through the door like she was going to an execution, but she'd asked me to shag her in the most unsophisticated manner I'd ever seen in my days at Whitman. I could live for the next hundred years and my ears would never hear a come-on *that* bad.

Weird or not, no one could deny she was hot as hell. The entire time we'd talked, I hadn't been able to stop staring at her blue eyes or the way her dress plunged down to the deep V between her breasts—which was frustrating.

I wasn't here to meet some girl and start something. I didn't need the distraction.

And the Blake dude?

What in the bloody hell?

He was crazy in love with her, and she had no clue. Or did she?

I followed Nadia as she led me back into the house. I should have shoved her off me as soon as she'd sidled up next to me with that forlorn expression on her face, but truthfully, I'd needed to distance myself from Elizabeth and Nadia had been a good excuse. Surprisingly, seeing her hadn't crushed me like I thought it might. Now that we'd been apart for a while I'd had time to think and I could see how incredibly wrong she'd been for me. Most of our relationship had been based on sex. A shallow girl who only looked out for herself, she'd been the wrong choice all along, but I'd been swayed by her body and the way she'd fawned over me.

We headed into the library toward the back of the house. A secluded room, it was where the frat held most of their meetings and formal gatherings. I figured there'd be less of a chance of anyone walking in on us if things got heated. Not that I'd lose my temper with her. That wasn't my style. I'd never gone off on a female—thanks to the good influence of my mum.

I took my frustrations out on the punching bag at the gym, not on girls.

I knew Nadia's game. She'd come to the party and seen me with

Elizabeth. She wanted what she couldn't have. Typical.

We made our way into the center of the room and before I could even ask her what she wanted that was so important, she had her tongue down my throat.

It felt good for half a second, and then I reached behind me to untangle her hands and remove her lips from mine.

"Don't do that," I snapped.

"Declan, I know you hate me," she whispered, staring up at me, "but I've missed you so much. Please don't push me away. It's been an absolutely horrible summer without you."

"Mine was pretty good," I bit out. "I got rid of a cheating girlfriend and worked my arse off getting the gym ready. Ditching you was the best thing I did."

She closed her eyes, a flash of pain on her face, and when she opened them, tears swam, making them shimmer. "I know we ended terribly, and it's all my fault, and you shouldn't even give me the time of day, but it's been so long since I've seen you—"

"Where's Donatello?" I said curtly and crossed my arms. "Go find him."

She bit her lip and let out a choke. "Oh, God, Declan, my mom has cancer. She was diagnosed last month, and I've been a basket case ever since, and all I could think of was talking to you, and I *can't* because you won't return my calls." She swallowed, her hands twisting in the fabric of her dress. "With what you went through with your mom, you're the only one who gets how scared I am. I—I just needed to see you tonight and tell you."

*Her mum?*

I scrubbed my jaw, remembering Mrs. Brown as a sweet lady who resembled Nadia, only softer and always asking if I needed anything when we'd been at her parents' house a few times for dinner. I exhaled and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I'm sorry for your mum. Cancer sucks more than anything I know."

She sniffed and snuggled into my chest, so I ended up wrapping my arms around her.

"God, you smell so good," she murmured against my chest.

I stared down at her. "Nadia—"

She cupped my face. "Don't talk. Just kiss me, Declan."



## Chapter 5

### *Elizabeth*

The song ended and I took off to go back inside. I told myself it was just to find a restroom, but I also really wanted to see where Declan went. Stalker? Maybe.

I wandered around until I passed one of the smaller rooms and out of my peripheral gaze caught a couple embracing.

I stopped and backed up to get a better view.

I really shouldn't spy, but it was Declan and Nadia who stood in front of a chair, giving me a view of their torsos as they held each other. She pulled his head down and kissed him hungrily as her hands ran through his hair. He let it go on for a while but then disentangled her hands as he said something I couldn't hear.

Holding my breath, I leaned forward to try and catch their conversation.

I don't know why I cared so much. He'd turned me down and let me know I wasn't his type, which was damn ironic considering I'd rejected his brother—not that it had fazed Dax in the least.

Yells and whoops reached my ears as a sudden influx of partiers came into the house. Declan and Nadia turned toward the door, and afraid of getting caught snooping, I ducked down to my knees.

*Had they seen me?* I closed my eyes.

How had I gotten myself in this mess?

*Because you had to pee,* I responded to myself. And because you came to this stupid party.

Praying the chair hid me, I moved in a slow duck crawl toward the hallway and hopefully a toilet.

Black Converse shoes stopped in front of me, and I looked up into the amused eyes of Dax. He peered down at me with a quizzical look. “Enjoying yourself?”

*Think fast, Elizabeth.*

“Just looking for my contact,” I said, patting the hardwood floor. “It

popped out while I was looking for the restroom.”

“Ah. You need some help then? It’s rather dark in here.”

“No, I’m fine.” Pat, pat.

A few ticks went by.

I kept crawling around. Playing cool. Hoping he’d walk away. *Praying.*

I chanced a look up to see him watching me in amusement.

“Are you sure you don’t need help? That floor is terribly dirty.”

“I don’t mind a little dirt. Improves your immune system. I ate it daily as a toddler.”

He laughed. “Why don’t you just confess you were staring at my brother and Nadia? Besides, I can see straight down your dress when you’re on your hands and knees. I don’t mind the view of your tits but figured you’d want to know.”

*Dammit!*

“Fine.” I stood up, brushing my dress down. “For your information, I don’t wear contacts. I just happened to be walking by and saw them, and you have to admit, they’re intense. It’s like a soap opera. Obviously I lack social skills and I’m nosey.”

“Indeed.”

His lofty English accent only made my mortification worse.

I buried my face in my hands. “I should never have come to this party in the first place. I’m way out of my comfort zone, and your brother ... well, I tried to flirt—pick him up, to be honest—and it blew up in my face.”

“You fancy my brother?” His tone was surprised.

I peeked through my fingers. “And by fancy you mean like?”

He smirked. “As you Americans like to say, *duh.*”

I bit my lip. “I barely know him.”

Dax looked over my shoulder, eyes narrowed. “He’s coming out now. Let’s pretend to be madly in love.”

“What?” *He was crazier than I was.*

He sent me a long look. “Let’s give him something to think about ... make him jealous. Kiss me.”

I held my hands up to ward him off. “I don’t kiss guys with liquor on their breath—and probably a venereal disease.”

He clutched his chest like I’d broken his heart. “Oh, you’re funny, but trust me on this. Declan likes *you*. I saw how he was talking to you. Kiss me,

love, just do it.” His voice was insistent.

Alarm bells went off. I clenched my fists.

“No.”

But he wasn’t listening.

He gathered me in his arms, his strong arms cupping my shoulders and pulling me closer. He pressed his lips to mine, his hips maneuvering me against the wall behind me.

The smell of alcohol on his breath slammed into me.

My stomach lurched. Memories hit.

The sharp sting of vodka.

My dress torn around my body.

The slice of razor on my wrists.

I shuddered, bile crawling in my gut.

Dax lifted his lips from mine and stared down at me. Confusion dawned on his face. “Elizabeth? You’ve gone white as a sheet.”

His voice came from a distance, and I shook my head, shoving him to get away from me. Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth. *Just breathe*. I dug down deep, reaching for that part of myself I knew was strong. A survivor.

I’d had years of counseling. I knew how to handle a freak-out.

He touched my arm, and I flinched, my palm flashing out to strike him hard across the cheek, the sound reverberating in the quietness of the hallway.

He cupped his cheek and stared at me with a stunned expression. “That is not how I saw this ending. Bugger, I had no clue you weren’t into me.” He put his hands on my shoulders with a light touch. “You okay?”

“Get away from me,” I hissed and shoved at his broad shoulders. He released me, and I leaned against the wall, my hands digging into the paneling to stay standing up.

Suddenly strong hands were pushing Dax even further away.

Declan stood between us, his face dark and angry. His silvery eyes swept over me then focused back on Dax, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “What’s going on here? What’s wrong with Elizabeth?”

“It’s fine,” I whispered. It wasn’t.

Declan swiveled his eyes back to Dax, who held his hands up. “I went in for a kiss, and she wasn’t excited. That’s it.”

His eyes flared as he shoved Dax away from him. “Don’t be such a prick, Dax.”

Dax flushed a deep red as he glared back at Declan. He exhaled and fixed his gaze to me, a contrite look on his handsome face. “Look, I’m truly, truly sorry. I didn’t know kissing me would make you want to barf. I just wanted to be able to tell Declan I’d kissed you first. We have this thing where we take bets on who can get a girl ... Sorry, you probably don’t want to hear that right now.”

I wasn’t even listening to him, focusing instead on breathing.

Declan touched my hand. “You okay?”

*Okay?*

Hundreds of miles and years away from Colby and that hotel room, yet it haunted me. Shame beat me with her whips. I hadn’t had a reaction like this in months, mostly because I kept my environment in strict control.

But, I’d wanted to be a normal college kid for a night. I’d just wanted to be like everyone else.

I straightened up from the wall, my gaze encompassing them and then bouncing away. I felt embarrassed. “I’ll be fine.”

Declan didn’t agree, his stormy eyes still flashing at his brother.

Nadia came out to the hallway, adjusting her dress, making me wonder what I’d missed.

“What’s going on?”

No one answered.

Dax just shrugged and fidgeted while Declan kept his gaze on my face, his eyes seeming to devour every inch.

Even in the midst of having a near panic attack, something about *him* had dug into my skin.

*Leave. Go. This party is not for you.*

“I need to go,” I said, crossing my arms and rubbing them. “It’s late.”

“Don’t go,” Dax said. “I swear to keep my hands to myself if you’ll just stay.”

“Don’t pressure her,” Declan said. “Can’t you tell you scared her?”

Nadia’s eyes bounced from me to Dax to Declan as she tried to figure it out, but I didn’t want her to.

My mortification grew.

I needed away from this party, away from the guy who’d kissed me, and

away from the guy I couldn't have and certainly didn't need.

"Let me give you a lift home," Declan stated more than asked, his voice soft.

*No!* I couldn't take being close to either of them anymore. "I can take care of myself."

Nadia chimed in. "I can take her home. I'm leaving anyway."

"No thanks," I snapped at her. I would not be maneuvered by a jealous ex simply because she was afraid I'd take her man.

She held her hands up. "No need to be bitchy."

"That's enough, Nadia," Declan said.

She huffed. "I'm just trying to help."

No she wasn't. I didn't know her personally, but I knew girls like her. They were the ones who'd talked about me after prom, the ones who'd gossiped and posted on twitter and Facebook about all the horrible things Colby had told everyone about me in the hours following the hotel. Suddenly girls who'd I'd thought were my friends had labeled me as a slut and a troublemaker.

Before Declan could protest any more, I turned on my heel and walked away. I found Shelley back outside on the dance floor where apparently she'd never left. I pulled her aside and said I was ready to go.

"Is everything okay?" she asked me, her face flushed from dancing.

I didn't want to see the disappointed look in her eyes, so I lied and told her I was just tired. She offered to drive me back to the apartment, but she'd been drinking and was having a great time, and I didn't want to always be the friend who required extra attention because she had mental breakdowns over stupid stuff.

After some cajoling and assurances that I could find a way home, she went back to her dancing, and I got my phone out to call a cab. Next time I'd know to drive myself.

No, wait, there wouldn't be a next time.

This was my last party.

Blake appeared at my side as I hung up my phone. "Where in the hell have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you." He took in the way I clutched my purse. "Leaving already?"

"Sorry, I have a lot to do at the apartment. Can you take care of Shelley if she's too trashed to drive? Make sure she gets back to the dorm?"

“Of course.” He sent me an anxious look. “Just don’t disappear on me like that. I searched all the bedrooms for you. Who knows what could have happened when you were with Declan Blay.”

Declan? He’d been the nicest of the entire lot of them.

I didn’t have time to argue with him. I just wanted to go. “I’m fine. I’ll see you soon.”

He grabbed my arm to stop me as I turned, uncertainty written on his face. “Elizabeth, wait. There’s something I need to tell you that I should have said a long time ago ...”

*No.*

I put my hands to his lips. I suspected what he wanted to say, and I wasn’t ready to hear it—or respond to it. “Don’t. Not now. I can’t handle any more tonight.”

## Chapter 6

### *Declan*

From the side of the Tau house, I watched her long legs walk across the yard and ease into a cab that had pulled up to the curb. Her shoulders were hunched as if weighted down with burden. Her huddled posture sent alarm bells all through me. Her reaction had been extreme. I got angry at Dax all over again. He was impulsive and rushed headlong into everything without thinking, so it wasn't a surprise to see him making a pass at a pretty girl, but it was *her*, and for some reason it bugged me.

Acting on impulse, I jumped in my Jeep and pulled out to follow her home. Some unnamed emotion made me anxious to make sure she got home okay.

It wasn't like I didn't know where she lived.

I followed the cab until it reached the apartments, and I pulled in at Minnie's Diner across the road to let my Jeep idle as I watched her get out, pay the driver, and then make the trek across the carpark. She made a solitary figure as she trudged across the pavement, her white-blond hair blowing in the wind that had kicked up from an incoming storm. One of the streetlights was out, and I noticed she seemed keenly aware of the fact, her pale face peering over her shoulder as she made her way up the stairs. She walked briskly down the hall, the mere swing of her arms telling me she was on alert for anything. She was aware of the dangers of walking alone at night.

Had Dax been the one to cause all that reaction?

I suspected not. She fit the mold for the kind of girls I'd seen in my self-defense classes. Scared. Vulnerable. Hiding behind her pain.

Elizabeth Bennett had been hurt in the past by someone, and whoever he was, I wanted to bury my fist in his face.

She stopped at her door and dropped her keys. I got jacked up at the way she bent over in her dress, her heart-shaped arse straining against the material. My eyes lingered on her shoulders and how they contrasted with the white of her dress. She was hot, and it had been hard as hell to tell her no

tonight. She slipped inside the door, giving me a brief glimpse of the soft curve of her face, and I immediately regretted my sexual urges.

Right then all I wanted was to take that bruised look off her face.

She went inside, so I pulled out and parked in our own lot, planning on heading inside myself. There was no need in going back to the party, even though Nadia had insisted we talk tonight. And with thoughts of her, I reminded myself why it was a shitty idea to even be attracted to any girl right now, especially one as gorgeous as Elizabeth.

I got inside just as my phone pinged. Father.

I read his text: **Dinner at my house tomorrow. Dax has already confirmed. We need to discuss your after graduation plans and inheritance.**

I barked out a laugh and tossed my phone on the couch.

And that proved how well he kept up with me.

He had no idea I'd used my half of Mum's money I'd got last year to buy a gym.

I needed to punch something. I stripped off my shirt, yanked on some gym shorts, and picked up my gloves. I couldn't hit the bag without music, so I cranked up Nelly on my speakers and went for it.



## Chapter 7

### *Elizabeth*

A thunderstorm lit the night sky.

I sat on my bed and watched the lightning, its lines jagged and sharp in the distance. Before long, the wind picked up, the gusts bending over the small trees in the landscaping below my balcony.

I picked at Granny's quilt on my bed.

I was alone, but like the storm outside, winds of change were blowing in my life. I just didn't know where they'd take me.

Shelley sent me a text, responding to one I'd sent her earlier to check on her.

**Blake got me home. Why did you leave so soon? What happened with you and Whitman University's Sexiest Man on Campus? Did you guys have monkey sex?**

**No monkeys. Please! What's wrong with human sex? And Whitman's Sexiest Man? Wow. Cheesy,** I tapped out.

**He's hot and rich and sexy as hell,** she texted. **Rumor is he only had eyes for you tonight. According to Blake.**

I ignored that and tapped out, **Nite. Let's do lunch soon. I owe you for helping me move today.**

I set my phone down and snuggled back down in the bed.

While the storm raged, my neighbor moved around his apartment, making a racket as he cranked up some music, the beat of the bass loud through the thin walls.

Okay, I could handle some late night music next door. Easy. I quickly reminded myself this was the weekend and these *were* university-owned apartments.

But isn't he being inconsiderate? Whatever. I flip-flopped over just as a rhythmic thumping sound reached my ears. *Thump, thump, whack, whack.*

Great. Was he having a freaking party over there?

I groaned and buried my head under my pillow. That didn't help. I tossed

in my bed, antsy. Angry even. I replayed the night, remembering my rejection from Declan. I rose up to beat on my pillow to make it softer.

Bloody Brit. He knew *nothing* about me.

I'd seen the darkness on the other side that night in the hotel, and I'd faced it down, dealing with it the only way I knew how. I was *not* fragile.

*But you've changed*, a small voice inside me said. *You're bitter. A shell.*

I blew out a puff of air and flipped over on the mattress to find a more comfy spot, but it was pointless. Ugh. After fifteen more minutes of music and thumping noises, I jerked up and slipped a white cotton robe over my nightgown. I burrowed through a pile of shoes still in a box in my closet, bumping my head in the process, which only made me more pissed. Finally I found my pink rain boots and shoved my feet in.

I was putting my foot down with my new neighbor. If I didn't, then he'd likely party every single night, and I couldn't have that. I stepped outside my door, and since there was no overhang along the doorway, I got drenched in about five seconds. Cursing, I ran the short distance to my neighbor's apartment and banged on the door with a heavy fist.

The thumping stopped, then the music.

I put my hands on my hips and schooled my features into an irritated glare. Kinda hard to look tough when you're being pelted with rain, but I did my best.

The door opened wide and I squinted at the brightness.

"Excuse me, but your music is way too loud and you seem to be knocking out the walls—" I came to an abrupt stop. Blinked, resisting the urge to rub my eyes. "*Declan?*"

Dressed in black gym shorts and nothing else, he leaned against the doorjamb, his body glittering from the sweat that dripped down his well-muscled chest and straight down to the V of his hips. Oh. My. I inhaled.

He should come with a freaking warning label.

Just perfect. I must look like a drowned rat.

He pulled me inside the door and slammed it shut after a bolt of lightning lit up the sky. "What the bloody hell are you doing out in this?" His molten eyes swept over me, and I swallowed at the lump that formed in my throat.

Once again I felt a tug between us, that mysterious carnal push that had me imagining us in an erotic kiss while he pressed me against the wall and pounded ...

Whoa. I stopped that train of thought.

“What are *you* doing here?” A ridiculous question, but my brain was fried.

He set down the red boxing gloves that had been dangling from his hands when he opened the door. “This is my new flat. I moved in today, same as you.”

He was the guy in the Jeep with the Union Jack hat.

“You saw me on the balcony today and recognized me at the party and didn’t say anything?” My voice had gone up an octave. “Don’t you think that’s weird?”

He raked a hand through his dark hair. Sighed. “I felt it best to not mention it after seeing how Blake reacted to me. He won’t be happy to know we’re neighbors.” He cocked his head. “He’s a territorial dude. You sure you aren’t with him?”

“I’m not with anyone. Ever.”

He took that in, his eyes raking over me. “So, did you come over here with the intention to seduce me? Because if you are, you’re doing a rather kick-ass job.”

*What?* I looked down.

My robe had come apart, revealing my now practically see-through white gown thanks to the downpour outside. Short, filmy, and made of silk, it had been a gift from Shelley.

I stiffened. “I’m here because someone keeps beating on the wall and playing their music so loud that I can’t sleep. Oh, it’s you.” I smirked.

He grimaced apologetically. “I was working out pretty hard with the punching bag. Sorry. It’s been a crap day. My new gym is stressing me out, plus my father sent me a text ...” His eyes ghosted over my skin. “You’re soaked.” He turned and left the room, giving me a glimpse of scars on his back before he disappeared. My mouth parted. *What had happened to him?*

He came back with a towel, which he draped over my shoulders and pulled the ends closed. He smiled softly. “I’m sorry for bothering you. I like my music rather loud.”

*And his women and sex hard.* Oh yeah. I shivered.

“Okay.” My voice was husky, my heart hammering at his nearness.

But it wasn’t fear; it was pure lust. Declan was a man who hit all my buttons.

He seemed to realize how close we were standing, and he shifted, taking a few steps back from me. “Was there anything else?”

I laughed. Someone was ready for me to go, and for once, I wasn’t the one being overly cautious around the opposite sex; it was the guy. “No, that’s all. Sorry to bother you. I’ll go. Just try to keep it down.”

“Wait,” he said, as I put my hand on the doorknob.

I turned back. “Yeah?”

“About earlier with Dax. I’m sorry for it. I’ll hold him if you want to punch him in the nuts.”

I smiled at that visual. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It’s just—he’s a good guy.” He shrugged. “I’ve been taking care of him my whole life even though we’re the same age. He can be careless but doesn’t mean to hurt anyone intentionally.”

I nodded. “No, of course. I’m glad you were there. Thank you.”

He smiled. “My mum always said I was the stronger one. She told me to watch over him.”

“Oh.”

He smiled and sucked his bottom lip in with his top teeth. The entire thing—his sweet words, his sexy face, his luscious lips—I wanted to kiss him.

My chest rose.

My palms got sweaty.

An entire colony of butterflies fluttered around in my tummy.

“If you really want to make me feel better, maybe you’d like to erase Dax’s kiss from my memory with one of your own?”

He froze, his alert gaze lingering on my lips as he licked his own. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “Most definitely.”

“Now?” His husky voice assaulted my senses.

“Why not?”

The apartment swelled with silence as his eyes ate me up, as if he were trying to figure me out. God. What was wrong with me? Was I this desperate? I prepared myself for another rejection.

“Come here, Elizabeth,” he said in a soft yet commanding voice.

The towel around my shoulders dropped to the floor, and my feet crossed the space between us, eager for him. For this.

He cupped my cheek, his fingers trailing down my jawline to my neckline

where he toyed with the buttons on my gown. “I can’t tell you no again, Elizabeth. Are you sure?”

A whisper of something sang through the air. Electric.

I nodded and put my hands on his shoulders and stood on my tiptoes, my mouth settling on his, my tongue dipping out to taste his secrets. He smelled masculine, like sweat, and the warmth of his chest pressed against my wet one. He didn’t move, until suddenly he did, his arms sliding around my shoulders, brushing the base of my spine as he gathered me close.

I sank into him, sighing at the way one of his hands moved to tangle in my hair.

Deeper. Decadent.

He became the instigator. His mouth roved over mine, his breathing heavier as he sucked at my lips playfully and then attacked again, his tongue tangling with mine. Owing me. Tendrils of desire curled inside me.

His hands moved down and tightened around my waist, digging into my hips. Sharp with need. He said my name against my mouth.

He felt so good, hard against my soft, and I wanted to revel in my success, in the way he wanted me, in the way I wanted him.

I moaned. This was good. Hot. Erotic. This was progress.

Until it wasn’t.

He tore his lips away and rested his forehead against mine. “You make it hard to stay away when you come in here with pink boots and wet knickers—which clearly aren’t granny panties.” His voice was like liquid amber, gold and warm, wrapped in sex.

“Why would you want to?” I breathed. “Come to my apartment and spend the night with me.” I touched his face, my fingers stroking the softness of his sensuous lips. “Just one night and we can make this shitty world disappear.”

He exhaled. “A one-night stand?”

“Yeah.”

He cupped my chin. “Someone hurt you, didn’t they?”

My lips tightened. No one at Whitman knew about Colby except for Shelley and Blake, and I sure as hell wasn’t telling him. He’d judge me like everyone else had in Petal, North Carolina. “That’s none of your business.”

“I see.” His eyes searched mine until I felt like a bug under a microscope. “What if I wanted more than just one night?”

“Then your hands can let go of my hips now.”

He removed his hands slowly, the tips of his fingers grazing mine. “This may surprise you, but I don’t sleep with every girl I kiss.”

I’d been rejected. *Again.* “Blake said you got around, that you used—”

“And you believed him?” His voice was incredulous. “Dude is in love with you and he saw exactly how we looked at each other tonight—”

“*Looked at each other?* What are you talking about? You refused to dance with me and then you ran off with your girlfriend. Not to mention I just kissed you and you didn’t even care.” I threw my hands up.

“I wanted to fuck you the minute you walked in that party,” he snapped.

“Then why don’t you,” I bit back, tossing back my shoulders.

“You think you want me?” he said tightly. “You can’t handle me, Elizabeth. I can see it in your eyes. You’re scared of something, maybe not me, but something.”

My eyes went to his black eye.

He let out a harsh laugh. “Ah, that’s what you’re afraid of. You want the real truth? You told me tonight you didn’t like violence, but I’m an asshole who uses his fists. That’s who I am.”

I didn’t believe that. I sensed a good guy in him. “What do you mean?”

His gaze was intense, dark and low, his face struggling as he fought to find the right words. “I’m in a fight club for money. I show up at warehouses and fight other blokes. Sometimes I beat them so bad they need medical attention. A few times, *I’ve* been beat to unconsciousness. I’m everything you need to stay away from.”

I inhaled, anger and lust and excitement all riding me. Anger that he was pushing me away, lust for the alpha male in him, and God help me, the fighting thing repelled me and excited me at the same time. “I don’t want to stay away from you. I want you to fuck me and stop making excuses for why you can’t.”

My words seemed to snap his taut restraint.

He pulled me back in his arms, his lips fusing with mine unerringly. His tongue plundered me in a sensual way my body had craved for years. I wrapped my arms around his neck, my anger morphing into all-out desire as he turned us and pressed me against the wall.

*Yes, yes, this is what I craved.*

A passion to remind me that I was *real*, not just some sad excuse of a girl who chose to exist on scraps of love.

Before I knew it, he'd shoved my robe off, his hands sculpting my shoulders, massaging them as he ravaged my mouth. I reveled in the warmth of his hand on my neck as his mouth skated down, kissing the hollows of my throat, sucking on my collarbone.

"Like this?" he asked, his voice dark and gravelly. "You want me to take you up against this wall?"

"Yes," I moaned. Gone. Past caring as long as he kept his hands on me.

*Out of control*, my brain whispered, but I beat back the dark warnings as his warm hand found my breast and squeezed, his fingers rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

I gasped in pleasure and arched my back to get closer to his body, ignoring the fear that pricked at the surface.

The rules girl in my head stamped her foot and yelled at me. I ignored her.

But even if I wanted to stop right now, I couldn't. My tongue tangled wildly with his, my hands pulled at his hair, spurring him on, his hand palming my breast and then tugging. Sharp sensations of need went straight to my core.

"Is this what you want? Something quick where we just take what we want and forget each other the next day?"

No. Not that. Not like the way he said it, like it was something dirty.

"Yes, like that," I whispered against his shoulder, my mouth on his skin, tasting him as my teeth bit down. I pressed against him and rocked. Friction. *More.*

He grunted and hoisted me up until my legs looped around his hips, his shorts and the hard length inside pulsating against my skin. He moved sinuously, his long legs supporting my weight as I squirmed to get his body closer to the place I wanted.

I clung to him, a fire building under my skin, in my blood. I rocked wildly and reached around to grab his ass and shove him against me.

Take me.

*Make me forget. Make me feel good.*

"Elizabeth, you're so hot," he said hoarsely. "I can't stop, love."

We'd passed the point of no return. He was hungry for me, just as much as I wanted him.

His mouth skated down with his hands as he took my nipple between his

lips and sucked.

I groaned, the sound primitive and loud in the quiet apartment.

Hot fingers slipped under the waist of my panties, finding my wet core and massaging the wetness.

“Yes,” I whispered, gripping his arm and moving him faster, showing him what I wanted. More, more.

“Slow down, love,” he whispered and played me effortlessly with his fingers, dipping in and then out, finding the sensitive nub and flicking it and then teasing me by darting away.

But I didn’t want to go slow. I wanted fast and hard and rough before I changed my mind.

“Declan.” I bit his neck, making him grunt. “Make me come.”

He kissed me harder, his tongue fucking my mouth like I wanted his cock to. “I want you so bad I can’t think straight,” he whispered between kisses.

“Me too.”

I’d gone over the edge when it came to him.

I’d lost all sense of where I was ... who he was ... *my past*.

Yet ...

Darkness inched in bit by bit. This wasn’t some guy from my calculus class I could control. This wasn’t some nerdy guy who’d thought he’d won the lottery when I propositioned him.

This was Whitman University’s Sexiest Man on Campus.

He was part of the beautiful people—just like Colby.

He was everything I shouldn’t want but did.

Suddenly there was space between us, and I realized I’d been the one to shove him off me. He obliged readily, I acknowledged thankfully as he panted from a few feet away, his face red, fists clenched tight at his sides.

My own chest heaved and I looked down at my nightgown, its straps pushed down, exposing my bare breasts still rosy from his ministrations.

God. *Things had gone too far*.

I gazed back at him, but he was already in the kitchen pouring a glass of water and chugging it with his back to me. I studied the taut lines of his shoulders and the tightness in his stance, recognizing he’d let go when I asked.

No matter *who* he was, he wasn’t Colby.

Yet how could I have been so stupid? He was a dangerous fighter with



enough sex appeal to blow up a building. *He was entirely wrong for me.*

Tension escalated as he still didn't turn around, but his voice came out rough, like it had been dragged over gravel. "Get out of here, Elizabeth."

I sucked in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry—"

"Go!" His body heaved.

I turned, bolted out the door, and slammed it behind me.

## Chapter 8

### *Declan*

“Where’s Nadia? She’s usually here with you,” my father said as I stepped into the study where he and Dax already sat in leather club chairs. My stepmum Clara and my stepsister Blythe played on the floor with a puzzle.

I shrugged noncommittally at my father, knowing it drove him bonkers.

We’d just finished a five-course dinner with rather stilted conversation in the dining room, where my father had talked about his business projects and the various vacations he and my stepmother, Clara, planned to take in the coming year. My four-year-old stepsister, Blythe, had been fed by the nanny in the kitchen while the adults chatted.

My family lived a prestigious life, which I guess wasn’t surprising considering he came from a long line of privileged military men and she was the daughter of a real estate mogul.

My mum, on the other hand, had been a secretary and merely a casual fling that had resulted in a pregnancy. He’d married her when she’d refused to have an abortion and then he’d promptly given her a small house, a lump of money, and divorced her. Most of that had been to save his career and reputation.

Mum should have been the one living in this huge colonial mansion with a pool, tennis courts, and a stable full of Arabian horses, not the younger version Father had replaced her with.

The sharp ache of a distant memory touched me, one of Mum lying on her bed. Weak. I’d been upset—even angry—with her, too naïve to see her illness. All I’d focused on was that the giggly woman who’d made the best shepherd’s pie, the woman who’d come to my martial arts classes and cheered me on, was missing.

God, that cut deep, and I closed my eyes, wishing I could jump back to that one point in time and tell her I was *sorry*, that I didn’t mean any of the stupid shit I said.

She hadn’t told us until the very end.

*I'm dying and your father is coming to take you away.*

She died a week later.

A man I hadn't seen in nine years had shown up at our house the next day, his face a mask of iron, his eyes dismissive as he took in our small house filled with the belongings of two messy boys. He'd heaved a great sigh and told the packers to forget bringing anything with us. We'd left behind our cozy home in London for a mansion in Raleigh, North Carolina.

It had been the beginning of my hell.

"Declan, I asked you about Nadia."

Still I didn't answer, my eyes touching on the huge plate glass window behind my father's desk, and I recalled how angry he'd got with Dax one summer in high school over his failing grades. He'd shouted loud enough at Dax that I'd heard them and came in to see my father waving his fists at him. A big barrel-chested man, he'd got in our faces plenty of times, but had never used his fists. I don't know if he would have that day, but I didn't give him a chance.

Rage had driven me to use my own fists. We'd wrestled on the floor of the study, his hands connecting with my face more times than I care to remember. Sweat and blood had flown, and when he tossed me off him and I'd stumbled, the force of it sent me straight into that window and right out onto the concrete drive.

I'd ended up in the hospital with a concussion and over a hundred stitches across my back.

To say things had been rocky between us since was an understatement.

I turned to face his hard stare. "We broke up this summer."

Wearing a frown, he set down his tumbler on a coaster. "Why? She's the perfect girl, plus I like the thought of you going to law school settled in a steady relationship."

*Perfect?*

I'd rather have *imperfect*.

It dawned on me that perhaps I'd been drawn to Nadia because dating her had been a small attempt on my part to do *one* thing to please my old man.

My father sighed. "What stupid thing did you do to lose her?"

"Caught her screwing a Ninja Turtle."

Clara gasped, her eyes flashing angrily as she looked pointedly at Blythe. "Really, Declan. Have you lost all sense of decorum?"

I grimaced down at Blythe, who looked up at me with big green eyes, her curly brown hair in angelic ringlets around her face. My dad might be a wanker, but she was innocent and completely unaware that her parents were arseholes. “Sorry, poppet. I forgot you were there. Forgive me?” I grinned and pulled out a pack of gum I’d picked up on the way over. “Look, I brought you a treat. It’s orange sherbet, your favorite.”

She took the gum in her small hand. “Which Ninja Turtle was it?”

I laughed. “Donatello.”

She pursed her lips. “How do you screw a Ninja Turtle? Do you twist his neck?”

Dax barked out a laugh from across the room.

I smiled. She was as cute as a button. “Yep, that’s exactly how you do it. Want to sit with me?”

Truth was I needed a buffer between my father and me.

She nodded and climbed into my lap as I sat down in one of the chairs.

He got right to business. “Dax has informed me he isn’t going to graduate on time—I’m not surprised considering his dismal grades—but I hope you will be walking the line this spring, yes?”

I nodded.

He sent me a pleased look. “At least someone is studying around here.”

“Dax’s got other skills,” I reminded him. “He’s the president of Tau and head over so many bloody clubs I can’t keep track of him.”

“Yes, we’re all aware of Dax’s penchant for social activities.”

“Right here,” Dax muttered. “I can hear you loud and clear.”

Our father stiffened and swiveled his cold eyes toward him. I saw the moment Dax drew up, radiating nervousness.

I patted Blythe’s hair, trying to keep my fists from clenching.

Dax had always been the weaker one, and Father picked on him the most.

“I bought a gym,” I announced.

Dax’s eyes flared wide and he shook his head rapidly back and forth. His eyes said, *No dude, no dude, don’t fucking do it! He’s going to flip.*

*Too late now,* mine said.

I ignored the flush that started taking up most of my father’s burly neck, easing up to his face.

I sighed. “I got my half of the inheritance from the barrister that handled Mum’s estate. Law school isn’t going to happen. I know it’s what you had

planned, but fighting—training people—it’s what *I* want to do. Someday I might want my own shot at a UFC championship.”

Tension ramped up the room.

Clara fluttered around him. “Now, Winston, don’t get upset. Here, let me get you another Scotch.”

His gray eyes bored into me. “You wasted your inheritance on a sweaty gym for white trash karate wannabes?”

I stiffened. “We have all kinds who come in to take classes. Blacks, Hispanics, a few Muslims—”

He slapped his palm down on his armchair. “Don’t get smart with me, Declan. You will apply for law school at Harvard like you should.”

I set my cup down. “It’s done. You can’t get money back that I’ve already spent.”

“No son of mine is going to toss away a first class education and a high IQ to be a common laborer.”

I let out a resigned sigh and poked Blythe in the side, making her giggle. “You better go see your mum. It’s time for me to go.”

As usual, I’d made him angry. I just couldn’t be what he wanted.

I was never good enough just the way I was.

\* \* \*

An hour later I was at my gym.

Built in the late seventies, it had been constructed in the historic part of town that was being revitalized. Several of the neighboring homes had been re-modeled and upgraded with young and hip families moving in.

No matter what my father said, the gym *was* a good investment.

Anybody can pop up a gym and say its MMA qualified, and it didn’t mean shit, but Front Street Gym would have real credentials. Max was one of my trainers, and although he’d got his start in traditional martial arts, he’d transitioned over to Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Muay Thai, and Krav Maga in his later years.

As for me, my mum had put me in classes starting at four. I held a black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and a blue belt in Judo.

Max had taught me everything else I knew.

I unlocked the double metal doors and stepped inside, my eyes taking in the updates the contractor had been working on for the past week, installing new plumbing in the restrooms and lockers, revamping the front office. The final step would be putting in a flat for me to live in. I was bleeding money to get this place opened—literally. I imagined Front Street with every punch and strike I took, knowing that in a few months this place would be open and running and I'd finally be free of my father.

I bent down and rubbed my hands across the new red sparring mats that had been delivered last week. Some of the new workout machinery had been installed as well, and I checked out everything carefully. I made the rounds of the building, checking the windows, outside doors, and smoke detectors. Paranoia ran high when I was this close to tasting happiness. And I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was as if something was waiting out there in the darkness, panting its nasty breath, waiting for the right opportunity to yank away my slice of good.

## Chapter 9

### *Elizabeth*

Two days after the party, I drove a few miles down the road to meet my mom at a truck stop off the interstate.

I hadn't seen her in nearly four months, and we only lived three hours apart.

The diner smelled like old grease and deep-fried onion rings, reminding me of my childhood when my mom would bring home takeout from the restaurant where she waited tables.

She waved at me from a red booth at the back.

I walked her way, feeling anxious.

Some people think God puts difficult people in our lives for a reason, to make us better people as we sharpen ourselves on the knife of their shortcomings. That was my mom. She'd destroyed my trust a million times as a child, and eventually I'd learned to stop counting on her. My kindergarten graduation, my first middle school dance, the day I got my acceptance letter to Oakmont Prep, the night with Colby ... she'd been gone, off on an adventure with whomever she was seeing. Like a stray dog that whines for scraps, I'd been begging my mom to love me my whole life.

Yet out of my shitty childhood, a strong drive had been forged in my heart.

To be *more*.

More than the trailer I'd grown up in; more than my alcoholic mother and absent father.

Today she'd put extra effort in, hot-rolling her natural blond hair in big waves and pulling it back with a bejeweled butterfly clip. She wore a pink gingham sundress and her lips were painted a glossy pink. At thirty-nine, she still managed to look farm fresh.

She jumped up to greet me, a bright smile on her face.

"You're too skinny," I commented as she gathered me up in a hug, my hands feeling the bones of her spine poking through.

We pulled back, and I studied her face more closely, taking in the hollowed neckline. A tingle of foreboding went over me. It had been a year since her last rehab for alcohol and drugs, and I'd held out hope she'd last longer this time. "You clean?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Elizabeth, I'm fine. Right as rain." She laughed at my frown. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

We sat down together.

Her eyes gleamed with a happiness I hadn't seen in a long time. "I can't wait for you to meet my new boyfriend, Elizabeth. He's in the restroom right now, but he's got real class and is the sexiest man I've ever dated." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know I've said that before, but I mean it this time." She squirmed in the booth, excitement written on her face. "He's even going to take me on a one of those cruises to Mexico soon."

"Fun." I smiled through my disappointment. I'd thought it would just be us today. "Is he employed?"

She nodded. "And he has dental. What else could I ask for?"

"A washing machine maybe, or I don't know, a home to live in?"

She'd sold her trailer a year ago and had been bouncing back and forth between boyfriends' and friends' houses.

An older man sauntered out of the restroom area in a flowery print Tommy Bahama-type shirt unbuttoned a quarter of the way down, wiry chest hairs poking out like crazy. He was so abundantly hairy I wouldn't have been surprised if a small monkey lived inside his shirt and was reaching up to say hi.

Balding but hiding it with a greasy comb-over, he walked toward us, his eyes raking over me, lingering. Long muttonchops came down each side of his face.

My whole body went on high creep alert.

He stopped at our table and his eyes bounced back to my mother. "Yo, baby, you didn't say she was a looker like her mama. Guess I hit the jackpot today. Now, who do I sit next to?" He let out a belly laugh.

I stiffened.

*But this is your mother*, I told myself. Be respectful. Give her a chance.

She laughed and blushed. "Stop flirting and sit down and meet my daughter."

He slid in next to her, and my eyes went back and forth between them.



I'd seen a myriad of men come in and out of our trailer growing up. A few had been decent to me, but she'd never wanted those. Nope. Most had been grade-A assholes, and she'd loved them the most. In my teens—and after a particularly bad episode where I'd found a hidden video camera in my bedroom—I'd managed to avoid a lot of them by staying at Shelley's most nights.

“Didn't know you were bringing your boyfriend,” I said, not able to hold back.

“Now don't be that way, Elizabeth. This is *Karl*.” She preened at me expectantly. “He owns a used car dealership in Rockport and even gave me a new Impala for my birthday.” She pointed out to the parking lot. “Look, there it is. It's even got leather interior.”

“Hmm.” I was still reserving judgment.

“Hell yeah, I did, 'cause this hot piece sure does know how to treat a man right.” *Sure was shore and right was riiaght*, the county twang heavily pronounced, his words elongated.

He leaned in and they kissed each other with visible tongue.

“Nice,” I muttered.

The waitress showed up to take my order, and they separated, Mom straightening her blouse and Karl wiping his mouth and leering at me.

He placed hairy arms on the table. “So you one of those smart girls? I heard you got yourself a scholarship to Whitman with a free ride?”

I nodded. Warily. “Yes, but I get financial aid to pay for living expenses. I work too,” I added.

“Good for you, but these are bad economic times we're living in. Gotta make a buck where you can.” He took a sip of coffee, eyes skating over me. “Maybe you need to get yourself a sugar daddy like your mama here.”

“I'm fine just the way I am, thank you.” My fists clenched under the table.

It was decided. Karl fell in the asshole category.

They had ordered before I came, and I watched him chew his eggs nosily, wiping his mouth on a napkin as he finished. “Well, if you ever need anything—like a new car or a loan, I can take care of ya. Any girl as pretty as you who's related to the love of my life, well, I wanna do good by. Maybe adopt you after I marry your mama.” He nodded emphatically as if I had no other option but to agree.

My eyes flared. “You’re getting married?”

She shrugged, her thin shoulders making me wince.

I looked only at her. “You think that’s a good idea?”

Karl stiffened. “Of course it is. That’s what you do when you fall in love.”

The waitress finally set down a coffee for me, and I busied myself drinking it.

*How long did I have to stay here?*

I powered on. “So how did you guys meet?”

Mom leaned in over the table, eyes glowing. “It was fate, Elizabeth. I was at Club Raven, you know the one out on Highway 89 where all the locals go?”

I nodded. It was her favorite honky-tonk.

“So in walks this big hunk of a man here and from out of nowhere, someone played Journey’s ‘Faithfully’ on the jukebox and *bam!* His eyes met mine and when he came over to ask me to dance, I nearly fell off the barstool. He bought me a slew of drinks and we laughed and played pool all night.” She sighed, hooking her arm through his as she gazed into his eyes. “It was love at first sight.”

“What an epic romance. Sounds like a movie ... maybe even a country song.”

I didn’t say a good movie, but I really did try to keep the sarcasm out of my tone.

Karl took a sip of coffee. “So, your mama and I have been talking about how to get some real cash, you know, to start our marriage off right, maybe buy us a big house and later expand my car dealership.”

“Yeah?” I didn’t see how this related to me.

He cleared his throat. “So we thought you might help us.”

“Me?” I was dirt poor.

“Yeah, she told me about you and Senator Scott’s son back in high school. How he took advantage of your good nature and all. And well, one thing led to another and we came up with a plan.”

The entire room spun and I wanted to vomit. I heaved in deep breaths and clutched the table, fighting the panic. *Why had she told him?*

She shushed him by flapping her hands at his shoulders. “I told you to let me bring that up. She’s sensitive.”

I wanted to crawl under the table. “What gives you the right to discuss my personal life?” My voice was sharp, my wrists itching.

She pouted. “Baby, it’s water under the bridge now, right? In the past. You’re over him. Why look at you. You’re a big time college girl now. You’ve left all that behind.”

Left it behind?

He’d ripped my heart out and sent it through a wood chipper.

I’d never be over that night.

“You can’t let him get away with it,” Mom insisted. “Something should be done about what happened to you.”

*What?*

I shook my head. Emphatically. My nails dug into the seat, trying to hold it together in a public place when what I really wanted to do was run away screaming. I didn’t want to think, talk, look at, or dwell on Colby Scott ever again.

“What does this all have to do with me?”

Mom lowered her voice. “In case you didn’t know, it’s an election year for Senator Scott.”

Karl leaned in. “So, if we play this right, we can *all* come out ahead.” A glint grew in his eyes. “We just tell your story to dear old dad and claim we have evidence against his son. He’ll give us money to shut up about it, and we’ll all be richer.”

They wanted to blackmail the Scotts.

They wanted to dredge up the past and air it all out for everyone to see.

They wanted everyone to be reminded of what a slut I was.

*Never.*

“You deserve retribution. Don’t you want to make him pay?” Mom said.

*Make him pay?* A strangled laugh came out.

Revenge is hard when the person I blamed the most was myself.

Revenge is even harder when the person you despise is at the top of the food chain and you’re a bottom feeder.

“No, I don’t,” I snapped louder than I’d intended, causing a nearby table to glance our way.

I didn’t care.

I slapped my hand on the table. “The Scott family has run Petal and this state for generations. They control the police, judges, everyone. You can’t do

this. It's the most stupid thing I've ever heard, and I refuse to help you."

A few beats of silence went by.

Karl held his hands up. "It was just an idea. That's all. If you say no, then I guess we don't have a leg to stand on. We can't exactly say we know what happened when you aren't willing to tell your side of the story."

"Never in a million years. Don't ever bring it up to me again. Got it?" I felt the muscles in my jaw clenching.

Mom let out a brittle laugh. "Let's have some pie. Okay? That will make it better."

Karl just stared at me. I stared back.

I jerked up from the table and looked at Mom. "I'm done. I came here hoping, I don't know, that we could be a real mother and daughter for once—but I guess not." I opened my purse, pulled out a ten, and dropped it on the table. "This is for mine. I trust you can get your own?"

Her lips compressed. "Elizabeth Nicole Bennett, you will not walk away from me. I gave birth to you and I deserve some respect. So does Karl. He drove me here to see you."

I shook my head, feeling the last vestiges of my control slipping away as my voice grew louder. "You don't get it, Mom. You weren't even there the day I came home from the hotel. You were in Vegas. You didn't see how *broken* I was."

She paled. "I got there as soon as I could, baby girl. I was trying to get a dancer's job, to get ahead and make a better life for us both. You know I could have been great if I hadn't gotten pregnant and then your dad ..." Her voice broke.

I turned to go, but she grabbed my wrist. "Wait, don't be mad at me, Elizabeth, for trying to make us a better life. Just think about what we said ... okay?"

*No!*

I pulled away from her and pivoted, my nose crashing into a warm chest.

Strong hands clasped my shoulders, and I tilted my head up, up ... straight into a pair of stormy gray eyes.

## Chapter 10

### *Declan*

Cookie's Kitchen was a dump but homey. It was mostly a stopping place for truckers off the interstate, but it was where Max liked to meet and talk shop, mostly about the underground fighting.

We strolled in the double glass doors.

Arlene sashayed over to us in a pink waitress outfit with a white apron. "My Brits are back," she said with a smile. "Been missin' you boys." She nudged her head toward the back. "Max's next to the window. He's waitin' for ya."

"Thanks, love," Dax said as he swooped down and picked her up in a bear hug and kissed her on the cheek. She blushed and popped him with a dishrag.

He watched the sashay of her hips back into the kitchen. "There's not a woman alive who doesn't want me. I think I'm going to change my name to Sex Lord."

I snorted. "Yeah, that's a real turn on."

"Jealous?" he asked.

"Extremely."

He grinned. "Don't be. Not everyone can be as wonderful as me. You got your fists, I got my sexing abilities—which in my opinion is a hell of a lot better. Make love not war, bro."

"That so?" I chuckled.

Max caught my eye and waved us over. He was in his late forties with thinning hair and a trim physique, and I'd met him at one of the local gyms where we'd both taught classes. Over the past three years, we'd grown close, and hiring him to work at my own place had been the next natural step.

We ordered and talked about the gym and the updates. If all went well with the renovations, then Front Street would be ready for business by January. We'd have a soft opening at first and then a grand opening party in February. The flat at the back would be finished a bit later, perhaps in June,

since my first priority was to get the doors open for business.

“What’s new with Nick? You got anything?” I asked a bit later. Nick was the guy who ran the underground fights in North Carolina.

“Yeah. I’ve got some small fights lined up in the next few weeks for you, but Nick wants to schedule a big one for Halloween. He’s got a warehouse lined up as the venue with heavy spenders coming, not just college kids.” He slapped down a portfolio and then slid it over to me with two fingers. “Don’t be afraid to say no.”

Dax shifted in closer, peering down to take in the photos of a blond behemoth posing next to a makeshift octagon. “Bugger.”

Max rubbed his whiskers. “They call him Yeti. He played linebacker for UNC Charlotte but got kicked off for hazing freshmen players. Third strike.”

“Nice lad,” Dax murmured.

I studied him analytically. “It takes more than bulk to beat me. He needs skill. What’s his record?”

“Three knockouts and one tapped out.” Max sent me a rueful look. “Don’t be fooled by the football. He’s been working with a mixed martial arts trainer, hoping to hitch a ride to the UFC. He’s not like these pansy boys you’ve been grappling with on the weekend. He’s serious.”

“Style?” I asked.

Max grimaced. “Signature move is a guillotine choke until you black out. If you don’t, he pounds your face till you do.”

Nice.

“What’s the purse?”

“Two thousand if you lose,” he said.

“I won’t lose.” I couldn’t.

He grinned at my confident manner. “If you win, you get twenty-five percent of the purse, not to exceed fifteen grand. And bragging rights, of course.”

Fuck. That was the most I’d ever fought for.

“Take a look at this.” He pulled out his phone and handed over a YouTube video of Yeti and another man. “The guy he’s fighting is Lorenzo, a Cuban from Miami. Tried to go pro in boxing but opted out to make some fast cash first. Yeti nearly killed him a month ago.”

We watched the blond monster tear the Cuban apart in less than five minutes using his Thor-sized fists to pound him into the pavement.

Dax shook his head. “No way. He’s bigger than you and you’re a giant. Let me give you any extra money you need. I have my half of Mum’s inheritance.”

I shook my head. We’d already had this conversation. “That’s yours, and if Father found out, he’d disown you. You don’t want to piss him off anymore.”

It’s funny, but Dax had cleaved to the new family while I hadn’t. He adored Clara and Blythe, and losing family after Mum would kill Dax.

I rubbed my hands across a coffee stain on the table and stared down at the video.

Raised voices came from a booth in the back of the restaurant and we turned to stare.

A blond girl stood up from the booth, her shoulders stiff, hands clenched at her side.

Elizabeth.

*What the hell?* I squinted, taking in her companions.

Dax’s eyes followed mine and then came back to me as I rose up from the table.

“You’re going over there?” he asked. “Why?”

“Because she looks like she needs help—and I happen to like her.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You just met her.”

I ignored that.

He shrugged. “Fine, I’m not missing this.” He made as if to stand, but I pushed him back down.

“You stay here. If we both show up, it looks pushy. Give her some space. Plus, she’s probably still angry with you.”

He held his hands up. “Alright, I can take a hint when I’m not wanted. I’ll chill and watch from across the room.”

“Who is she?” Max asked.

“A girl we met at one of the frat parties,” Dax answered, his eyes scrutinizing me oddly, as if he were trying to suss me out. “Declan seems to have a crush on her.”

“Fuck you.”

He chuckled. “I don’t blame you. I do too.”

Max grunted. “Huh. Well, anyone’s better than Nadia. I never liked that girl. All she wanted was to ride your coattails.”

Dax's eyes shifted over to Elizabeth. "You better hurry if you want to talk to her. She's about to bolt."

I ate up the distance between our tables. She turned, her face planting itself in my chest, her body flush against mine.

Heat ran through me, my groin tightening at the contact. Since the night in my flat, she'd weighed on my mind. Mostly with visions of me pounding into her. Against my wall. On the kitchen table. On the floor.

"Whoa," I said, taking her shoulders to steady her. "You okay?"

She peered up at me, and my fingers itched to smooth out the worry lines I saw on her face. "Declan? What are you doing here?"

"Just having breakfast. Small world, huh?" I smiled down, resisting the urge to question her about the shadows in her blue eyes. She nodded, still visibly upset, as I stared over her shoulder at the table she'd left behind. A woman who resembled Elizabeth gaped at us while the man's eyes narrowed in on me.

I glanced back down at her and spoke softly. "Do I need to kick anyone's arse?"

"No," she said, a look of desperation flickering across her face. "Just get me out of here before I say something I'll regret."

I didn't even pause. Whatever she needed right at that moment, I wanted to give it to her. I took her hand and led her through the maze of the restaurant, sending a wave to Dax and Max as we passed their table.

Elizabeth didn't even see them there.

We went out the doors, and she came to a halt in the carpark as she looked around in a daze. Her shoulders hunched in on themselves and she let out a frustrated sound, her hands digging through her purse. "God, I'm so frazzled I don't even remember where I parked."

I wanted to march back into that diner and find out exactly what had happened.

"What's going on? Who were those people?" The lady had to be her mum, but I wasn't so sure about the man.

She inhaled at my question and turned away from me, as if she didn't want to face me. "I appreciate you coming over to help, but I—I don't want to talk about it."

"You're hurting, Elizabeth. Sometimes, it helps to talk." Shit, I didn't know what else to say. I felt like a blundering wanker. But I wanted to make



her feel better.

“You want me to talk? I’ll talk. I’ll tell you that my whole life is ruined and some days it’s all I can do to remember the girl I used to be. I’ve never had much, but two years ago I lost everything. My innocence, my creativity, then my Granny, everything.” Her voice trembled, rippling with pain. “And you’d think she’d understand, but no, I’m always the one reaching out and begging her—my mother—to just see *me*. She wanted to abort me. She doesn’t think I know that, but I overheard her telling Granny once.” She covered her face. “God, I shouldn’t be telling you this stuff. It doesn’t even make sense to you.”

I picked up her hand and took the keys she’d clasped in her fist. “Come on. I’ll drive you home. You shouldn’t be alone.”

She sniffed, and I braced myself for tears that never came, and frankly, I wasn’t surprised. She might be vulnerable, but I sensed the steel underneath.

She sighed and gave me a curious look. “What about your car?”

“I came with Dax. He can drive by himself.” I would send him a text before we left.

I waited anxiously while she decided.

She sighed and sent me a wry half-smile. “Thank you. I’m glad you were here today. You always seem to be right where I need you.”

I nodded and scanned the carpark until I found her white Camry. We walked over to it, and I opened the passenger door for her. Her blue eyes roved over my face as I buckled her in, our arms brushing. Sparks.

This girl. *Her*. What was it about her that had me twisted up in knots?

Since the moment she’d walked in that party, I hadn’t been able to get her off my mind.

Shit. But she was all wrong for me. I mean, she was skittish as a colt. How in the hell would she ever fit in my world?

*She won’t*, the cynic in me said.

“Why are you so nice to me?” she said suddenly as I set her purse at her feet. Her eyes searched mine. She continued. “I mean, I made a fool of myself at your party, then I came in your apartment and hit on you and then pushed you away right when things got heavy ...” She swallowed and gazed out the window. “I’m sorry. I’m a real bitch.”

I exhaled and bent down on my knees next to her seat. We stared at each other.

Breathlessness mixed with exhilaration hit me, as if I were about to take a dive off a cliff straight into an ocean below. I pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I’m nice to you because you’re worth it, Elizabeth.”

## Chapter 11

### *Elizabeth*

That afternoon I took a nap feeling as worn and thin as old paper, as if I'd been folded and refolded a million times.

Visits with Mom tended to do that, but today had been the worst ever.

I made a mental note to call her tomorrow after the dust had settled to make sure she and Karl had given up on their plan.

I groaned and rolled out of bed from my nap and got dressed, pulling on a pair of black eyelet shorts and a halter top. I brushed my hair in a ponytail and applied makeup with a heavier hand than usual. My body was jumpy and twitchy. I needed out of the apartment, but I couldn't think of a single place to go. Blake and Shelley had gone to lunch together earlier, and I hadn't heard back from either of them.

After pacing around the apartment, I peeked out the balcony window to check out Declan's place. He'd mentioned going to work out on the way home and then seeing Dax, so I assumed he hadn't returned.

The minutes ticked by. I paced past my extra bedroom a few times but nothing eased me. Something insistent clawed at my brain, itching to get out. Finally, I stepped inside the extra bedroom and turned the light on. My artist pad sat out on a small desk with a myriad of colored pencils next to it—just waiting for me to draw.

Not thinking about it too much, I walked over to the pad and opened it, thumbing through some of the old designs I'd created. After a few minutes of mulling, I grabbed one of the pencils and twirled it between my fingers.

I licked my suddenly dry lips, feeling the tendrils of inspiration for the first time in ages.

And the thing is, my hand seemed to know exactly what I needed to create. Something vibrant. Beautiful.

I closed my eyes and pictured the tattoo on Declan's neck.

I recalled the reverence in his voice when he'd talked about his mother.

*What must it be like to be on the receiving end of that kind of emotion—*

*from Declan?*

With furious fingers, I drew half a dozen different dragonflies and then used colored pencils to decorate them. Some were big, some were small, but all had that ethereal quality I imagined a dragonfly had.

I pictured engraving a dragonfly on a bracelet. Or a plaque on a necklace.  
No, no.

But the more I thought of it, the more I realized I was thinking way too much about Declan and not just the dragonfly. Frustrated, I set the pad aside.

I didn't need to think about him.

He was exactly what I didn't need.

I stood and paced, shaking my hands out.

God, I needed a release.

I needed someone inside me.

And that person could never be Declan. I wanted him too much.

Because today in the car when he'd said I was worth it, all I'd wanted to do was wrap my arms around his strong shoulders and sink into him. I'd wanted to unbuckle my seat belt and crawl in the back with him. I'd wanted to trace my tongue over every inch of him, my hands following, learning the map of his body, committing it to memory.

*But I can't!*

Which is why an hour later I found myself sitting in the bookstore café, sipping on a soda as people came and went.

It wasn't my night to work, but then that wasn't why I was here.

I found an easy mark, a cute-in-a-geeky-way kind of guy. I studied him, recognizing him from an astronomy class last fall.

Medium height and lean, he strolled among the stacks with an intense expression. In one hand he had a notebook and periodically he'd pause at one of the chairs at the end of each row and sit down to jot notes.

Studious. Not over-the-top hot. Perfect.

I left money on the table for my drink, gathered my purse, and made my way over to him.

A dark corner of my mind whispered *yes, he was the one tonight*, but my heart was silently judging me. I ignored my stupid heart and stopped in front of my mark.

I leaned against the shelving. "If I had to guess, I'd say you are a TA prepping for our first week of classes. Your professor must love you." I

smiled broadly.

He glanced up from his seat, swept his eyes over me appreciatively, and stood. He grinned in a self-deprecating kind of way I found endearing. “Uh, yeah, but the professor I work for barely knows I’m alive. I do all this work with no recognition.”

“That sucks.” I stuck my hand out. “Elizabeth Bennett, by the way. Sorry to interrupt, but I had to come over and say hi. We had a class together last year? You sat in the middle and I sat in the front.” I laughed. “Truthfully, I always wanted to talk to you, but when you left class you always had a girl waiting for you in the hallway.” This part was true. He was always on my list of possibilities, but I never fooled around with guys with girlfriends.

He leaned in and took my hand briefly, giving me a clear view of his soft brown eyes. “Harry Carter, astronomy major. I remember you, of course. You wore lots of jewelry to class. Yeah, that was my ex. We broke up this summer.” He made a little shrug, his shoulders dipping. “Her loss, I guess.”

And check. No attachments.

“My gain.” I grinned.

He laughed, a gleam in his eyes as his gaze lingered on my legs and then moved up to the red halter top. I was tall and slim, but my breasts were a good C cup.

“What are you doing here?” He leaned against the stacks, calling attention to the nice set of arms he had. Hmm, closer up, he was definitely hotter.

“Hanging out. Looking for a guy like you.” I peeked at him from underneath black lashes and laughed. This part was always so easy, mostly because I wasn’t being myself. I pretended to be someone else.

Someone who didn’t carry pain around.

I bit my lip. “Sorry, I tend to talk before my brain can tell me to shut up. That was way too forward and you probably think I’m a flirt—but I’m not. It’s just—I go with the truth. I’m upfront and some people kinda freak out about that.”

“No, I like it.” He cleared his throat and waved his hand outside to the street. “I was actually about to go have dinner across the street. You want to join me?”

“Sure.” Success.

\* \* \*

We left the bookstore and along the way I explained to Harry how I didn't drink and never spent time with guys who did. He seemed on board with it, and we found a quiet booth in the back of the restaurant and ordered hamburgers and fries. Before long, a local band set up and started playing, and the lights went low. Harry scooted his chair close to me, his leg pressed firmly against mine. I reciprocated, brushing my arm against his when I could, letting my fingers touch him as often as possible. Before dinner was over, his hand was tucked into my upper thigh, his thumb caressing my skin softly.

The way he made me feel and the way he gazed at me was nice, but something was off. There was no fire, no burning need. I forced myself to carry on though.

He asked me to dance when a slow song came on, but I said no. I immediately regretted it. He was the one for tonight. Right? Why was I being so wishy-washy?

"Kiss me," I whispered in Harry's ear a few minutes later as we still sat at the table.

Feeling like I had something to prove.

He leaned down and captured my lips, his tongue slipping into my mouth with just the right amount of pressure. Light, nothing hard or hot.

Flashes of Declan kept popping up in my head, and I remembered how just the tiniest brush of my hand in his had been electric.

Where was he tonight?

*Why did I care?*

He'd made it plain he wasn't into one-night stands.

And that's what *this* was all about. It didn't have to be spectacular like I imagined sex would be with Declan.

Mmm, Declan ... his big body covering mine, his sensuous lips caressing my mouth, his hands framing my face as we kissed ...

"... next Friday night at the bonfire. Want to come?"

I startled as he toyed with my fingers, his head bent low as he gazed into my eyes.

I tried to piece together what conversation I'd missed. "Oh, sorry. I

can't."

Disappointment flashed on his face. "You're distracted. Am I that horrible of a kisser?"

Suddenly everything felt wrong. Him. Dinner. The touching. The kiss.

He kissed me again when I didn't answer, his lips more insistent this time, his tongue massaging mine. He groaned and I put some effort into the act, parting my lips and rubbing his leg with my hands, skating close to the growing length in his crotch. Our hands were hidden, and I pushed on him, making him moan. He put his hand on top of mine, grinding it on top of him.

"I want you, Elizabeth," he whispered. "Right now. Let's get out of here. Mmm?" He nipped at my lips playfully while his eyes begged me to say yes.

But ...

Something was niggling in the corners of my brain.

*Don't do it.*

"Actually, I need to go." I pulled away from him and put some distance between us in the booth. He wasn't the guy on my mind, and it wouldn't be fair. I needed some time to think. Maybe I'd rushed into this a little too fast. "Look, it's great touching base with you, but I—I didn't realize it's already kinda late. Classes start tomorrow."

His face fell. "Seriously? After all that?"

I picked up my purse. "College calls, and I'm serious about my studies. Maybe we can run into each other again." I looked at my watch. "Plus you have a professor to impress tomorrow."

He let out a heavy sigh and rose up from the booth, looking at me intently. "That's too bad. I kinda felt like we were just getting good here." He blushed. "You're a gorgeous girl, Elizabeth—and nice, of course. I'd really love to see you again."

"Sorry, I can't." My voice had sharpened. "I need to get to my car and get home."

He shrugged it off and we each paid our checks and walked outside together. It was dark, and I dreaded the walk back to my car at the bookstore. We walked in a strained silence. His car was a few rows over from mine and after telling him goodnight, I turned back to mine.

He grabbed my hand and tugged me back.

"What are you doing?"

"Come on, babe, don't you want to hang out some more? I don't want

this night to end.”

*Babe? Didn't want this night to end?* Hmm, Harry was more of a player than I realized.

“I have to go.” I eased my hand free. Clingy guys made me itchy.

“Wait. Can I get your phone number at least? I mean, it kinda feels like fate, us meeting at the bookstore ...”

Fate? Ha.

Fine.

“You can give me yours.”

I'd never call it.

He wrote out his digits on a piece of paper, and I tucked it absently in my shorts' pocket.

I said goodbye *again*, got in my car, and left. Tonight had been a mistake.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into my complex and parked. My eyes went straight to Declan's Jeep. He was home, and part of me wanted to knock on his door and just ... I don't know ... talk.

I made my way up the staircase to the breezeway that led to my door. I fished around in my purse and found my keys just as a loud male voice came from behind me on the breezeway a few feet away.

“Elizabeth, wait a minute!”

I turned, half expecting to see Harry. I was ready to tell him off for following me home like a creeper, but the truth dawned on me as I watched the handsome guy jog over to me.

I froze for a second and then snapped myself out of it. I tried to shove my key in the lock but fumbled and dropped them to the ground.

There he stood, Colby Scott, tall and handsome, wearing black pants and a black shirt, his hair swept low over his forehead, ice-blue eyes glittering at me. He looked the same but thinner and harder, a tightness around his face as his chin jutted out.

Of course, I'd seen him in passing in Petal after the hotel. Once at a gas station when I was filling up my car to head back to Raleigh and another time at the local Wal-Mart. He'd leered at me but had never spoken, and hearing his voice now was a shock.

“Don't come any closer to me or I will scream this place down and someone will call the cops.” I bit the words out, but inside I quaked.

He held his hands up. “Hang on. I'm not going to hurt you. I just wanted



to pop by and say hi. In case you haven't heard the good news, I'll be a Whitman student come Monday. Got kicked out of NYU, I'm afraid—too much partying apparently. As you can imagine, Dad wasn't too thrilled about that." He sent me a wry grin, as if expecting me to smile along with him. "Anyway, I just got settled into an apartment nearby. I couldn't be this close and not look *you* up, Elizabeth. We dated once. We had some good times. Aren't you glad to see me?" His low southern drawl washed over me in waves. Making me ill.

Was he crazy? Didn't he know what he'd done to me?

My gut churned as the entire world tilted on its axis, and the only way I was able to stay upright was by leaning against my door.

Panic beat at me.

God. Don't pass out.

"Get away from me. Now." I panted, the air growing thin. My heart thundered.

*Had he been waiting for me in the parking lot?*

Even if I wanted to scream, I couldn't seem to muster up the air to do it. Somehow I managed to bend down and snatch my keys.

He smiled, raking his eyes over my body. He came closer. "You're still as pretty as ever, Elizabeth. I hope we can catch up real soon."

My hand clutched my keys as the fear escalated higher. I made a fist with my keys and showed him. "Don't come one inch closer."

He laughed and placed his hand up on the wall behind my head. "You're not going to do a damn thing. You're too scared. Besides I'm not here to bother you, only to get a welcome to Whitman from you. Does everyone here know what a sexy little thing you are? How you like it? Hmm?"

I snapped away from him, using my hands to push off his chest.

If I could just get to Declan's door.

## Chapter 12

### *Declan*

A female's raised voice penetrated my brain and in my half-asleep state, I pictured Elizabeth in my bed, lying back against my sheets ...

Her voice came again.

*Shit.*

This was no dream.

I sat up from the couch where I'd fallen asleep after the gym and glanced at the clock on the telly. I groaned as I clicked on the lamp. Barely eleven. I scrubbed my face, my muscles screaming. I'd been at the gym most of the afternoon working on sets and sparring with Max. Dax had come by to watch, and later on we'd ended up catching dinner together.

A male's voice came next, and I perked up

*Who was that?*

The greasy guy from the truck stop came to mind.

I jerked up, not bothering to put a shirt on.

As soon as I stepped out the front door and into the breezeway, I caught a clue. A guy I didn't recognize had Elizabeth cornered with his body, a hard look on his face.

"Get away from me," Elizabeth yelled at him, her face ashen.

I saw red. Bloody hell, I saw every fucking color imaginable.

Without pausing, I rushed and ripped into him with a palm strike straight to his face. Hard. His neck snapped back and blood splattered in the air.

His body got airborne as he lost his balance and landed on the concrete of the breezeway, nearly toppling over into the carpark below.

Elizabeth gasped, but I didn't look at her.

With tightly clenched fists, I loomed over him, doing a mental checklist: five eleven, blond hair, newly broken nose, a Rolex on his wrist. I fished around in his pockets, but his wallet wasn't there.

"Don't hurt me, man," he said, opening his eyes with a wild look on his face as he took me in. He swallowed, wiping at the blood that dripped from

his nose to his mouth. “I was just saying hi to an old friend. Nothing’s going on.”

I didn’t like the look of him, from the expensive cut of his clothes to the petulant droop of his mouth. And then his eyes slid over to Elizabeth as if drawn there. Incensed, I kicked him in the ribs with my bare foot. “Don’t look at her. Get out of here before I rip your throat out.”

He scrambled up to his knees and crawled away a few feet until he jumped up and took off running. I watched him dart across the carpark and then cross the street to Minnie’s Diner where he’d parked in a darkened area.

He squealed out onto the street and drove away in a black Porsche with tinted windows.

I turned back to Elizabeth.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” I rushed over to her and tilted her chin up.

She took a deep breath, her lashes fluttering as she tried to gather herself. She gasped in air then slowly let it out.

“Panic attack?” I asked softly, careful to keep my distance from her as she inhaled and exhaled.

She nodded and spoke around her breaths. “Yeah. Only happens when I feel out of control.”

I gave her a few minutes to gather herself and watched as she took deep breaths, her color slowly coming back to her face.

“Who was that guy? Did you know him?”

Her eyes flared wide and then she looked hurriedly away. “Just—just someone I met tonight at the bookstore. He—he followed me home, I guess.”

She was lying. But why? Was she protecting him?

“He said he knew you.” I clenched my fists. Was he one of her one-night stands gone wrong?

She blushed a bright red and clamped her lips shut.

Why wouldn’t she confide in me? God, I didn’t want to upset her when she was already freaked out.

I sighed and looked around the breezeway. Okay. Changing gears. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Her tongue darted out to lick her lips. She nodded. “One minute I was thinking about getting into my apartment, and the next he was just there. He didn’t touch me, but if you hadn’t come out ...” She shuddered. “Thank you.”

Again.”

“You get a name?”

She stiffened. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I have a friend with campus police. Wouldn’t hurt checking in to see if any complaints have been filed about him.”

She let out a deep breath as if steeling herself. “Colby Scott.”

“Okay.” I smiled gently, filing that name away as I took the keys from her hand and pushed her door open for her. I’d be doing my own investigating as well.

She blinked at the door, not moving.

I cupped her shoulders, consciously keeping my hands soft. “Hey, it’s over, okay? I showed up in time, and I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.” She rested her head on my shoulder, and shit, I got angry all over again. I should have hit him harder. “I think we should call the police and file a report. He followed you here, and that’s not cool.”

She tilted her head up and looked at me. Her lips trembled. “He didn’t actually do anything.”

“But you felt threatened, right? That’s enough to report him. Maybe I should just go pay him a visit myself.”

Her eyes widened. “No,” she bit out. “It’s over, and after what just happened, he won’t be back.” She swallowed. “And don’t you do anything on your own either, Declan. I don’t want you getting into trouble because of my stupid mistakes. Besides, he could stab you or shoot you or hit you with a two by four ... just don’t.”

I grinned at her. “A two by four? Is that what people fight with in Petal, North Carolina?”

She smiled—just a little—and damn it made my heart glad.

She wavered for a moment at her door, her glance falling on my hand. “You were so fast, and I didn’t even know you were there—until you were. I wish I could do that.”

I gazed down at her, assessing. “If you want, I can show you how to hit, but I’d need to touch you. Are you good?”

Emotions flitted across her face and her mouth opened but then shut.

“Elizabeth?”

She covered my hand with hers and looked up at me with those soul-wrenching blue eyes I could drown in. “When it comes to you, Declan, I’m

never afraid. Why don't you come inside and show me?"

Heat poured into me.

"Okay." I followed her into her flat. A lot like mine, it had a big living room with a small kitchen to the right and the bedrooms in the back. "Your place is cleaner than mine."

A few minutes later, after she'd got us some water to drink, we stood in the living room and squared off across from each other. I showed her a few basic self-defense stances, and then got to work on her hands. I took her right one and curled it around until she had a nice tight fist.

"First rule is to make sure your thumb is on the outside. Never tuck it inside your hand when you hit because you'll break it. Keep it tight, but not so tight you cut off the circulation."

She nodded and came in closer. I held her hand, adjusting it, my fingers pressing into her skin as I shaped her fist. The fresh citrus scent she wore made my cock twitch.

*Down, boy.*

She watched me intently, the electric current between us seeming to ramp higher.

Did I notice that her eyes had darkened? That her breathing was heavier? Yes.

I sucked in a ragged breath. *Keep control, man.* She might be gorgeous and sweet, but she wasn't the one for me. I needed someone who wanted the same things I did.

"When you hit, use a linear motion, not a wide swing. Your opponent is less likely to see a straight punch. Tilt your fist down slightly and protect the fingers. Your goal is to hit with the first two knuckles."

"Okay." She made a fist and held it out.

I bit back a groan, picturing her holding my cock, sliding those soft hands over my hard length.

I cleared my throat. "Good. Now, use a quick jab when you hit, keeping one fist up to protect your body." I took a step back and demonstrated a jab while she watched, her eyes big as saucers.

"You're beautiful," she said, her voice full of awe. "And, I love how you move. I could watch you forever. Of course, you are half naked." She blushed and bit her lip. "Sorry. It's just ... you have to know how great looking you are, and then you're so fit and muscled up, and well, the sex appeal factor is

just off the charts. But all that aside, you're a nice guy too, and ...” She trailed off, her tongue dipping out to caress her lower lip. “Sorry. I’m talking awkwardly. Again. I seem to do that a lot when you’re around. I’ll shut up now.”

My heartbeat had kicked up, and part of me wanted to kiss her, but what kind of guy would I be if I made a move on her after what had just happened?

I rubbed my mouth. Her chest rose more rapidly and her eyes glittered with a heat that had been banked for far too long.

She wanted me.

A few beats of silence passed.

A car horn blared in the distance but neither of us moved.

All I wanted in that instance was *her*.

I gazed down at her mouth. Licked my own. “You need to stop looking at me like that if you don’t want me to kiss you, Elizabeth.”

“God, please, kiss me.” Her eyelashes fluttered down and that was all I needed to close the small distance between us and press my lips to hers, my tongue diving in to take control of her mouth.

She tasted like mint. Like perfection.

My hands snaked around her waist and I tugged her against my chest, my mouth plundering the softness of hers. We kissed for a long time, our mouths learning each other, neither of us in a hurry to rush, yet the intensity was well off the charts.

Sweet yet hot.

I wanted to prolong the kiss, drag it out.

But you can’t kiss forever.

We pulled apart after a while and stared at each other. I rested my forehead against hers.

I wanted her.

*But what did she want?*

The soft echo of rain falling and splashing on her balcony hit our ears.

She closed her eyes, a soft smile on her face. “It’s funny that we’re kissing and now it’s raining. Two of my favorite things.”

“Yeah?” She was slowing us down. I went with it. I didn’t want to rush her. Not yet anyway.

She nodded. “I love the sound rain makes, how it taps against the roof, rhythmic and steady like a heartbeat. The best place to hear it is on a metal

roof, lulling you to sleep. My trailer had a roof like that. Rain made me happy as a kid, just to get caught in a downpour so hard it's like a white noise all around you. The best is when it catches you without an umbrella or rain boots and you go splash in a puddle." A small smile flashed across her face. "I miss that feeling of being free and young, like I'm a superhero and nothing can touch me. We're all so innocent as kids, and then life happens and we grow up and make stupid mistakes. We get hurt."

She let out a small surprised laugh. "It's funny—I haven't talked like this with someone in forever. And today, I actually drew some pictures—that's a freaking miracle because I've been stuck in some kind of artist limbo. I know I'm not making any sense, and I'm rambling, but it's just—just there's something about you like you *get* me, and I—can't put my finger on it, but I like it." She bit her lip.

I took her hand. I didn't ask questions. She didn't need them right now. "Come on then." I tugged her through the flat.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

She followed along behind me as I led her into her bedroom and stopped at the balcony door. Rain pelted down the glass door, the drops splashing on the concrete outside.

"Let's get soaked then. No rain boots, no umbrellas, just skin and rain."

"Naked?"

I grinned. I couldn't help it. She was so damn cute. I kissed her nose. "No, silly, we'll keep our clothes on this time. If I was naked with you, we'd be fucking, not doing this." I slid open the door and pulled her outside.

She followed me and stood on the balcony as the rain came down.

I got lost a little. Watching *her*. Taking in her face as she tipped it up to feel the wetness.

She glanced over at me. "You're staring."

I grinned. "Because you look like a drowned rat." Because she looked beautiful.

She laughed. "Come on, don't make me feel like the idiot out here. This was your idea. Dance with me."

"Why are you always trying to get me to dance? What if I don't have any rhythm? I am a big bloke, you know."

But she ignored me and tugged me around the balcony in some awkward

square dancing moves she insisted on.

I laughed. She laughed.

I showed her how to box waltz just like my mum had shown me.

After that, she did some baton routine she'd done at prep school.

And we just got sillier and sillier, our laughter filling up the night. We did some moves from *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*. I looked bloody ridiculous, but I didn't care.

In that moment, life—we—were perfect.

I'd never been like that with a girl before. Spontaneous and fun. Real.

Later, we ran inside to get dry. She grabbed a towel for herself from the bathroom and then handed me another. I stepped inside, shut the bathroom door, and dried off the best I could while I heard her tearing apart her bedroom, slamming drawers.

I came out rubbing my hair and watched her scurry around the bedroom.

My eyes darted to her bed, my thoughts dirty. Picturing us there. Fucking. Her mattress wasn't nearly big enough for the ways I wanted to take her.

She looked jittery as she took in my still damp gym shorts, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. She was wondering the same thing I was ... *where did we go from here?*

She'd changed into a nightie with a large white unicorn head on the front.

"Nice," I said. "You've always been a unicorn girl in my head, and now this proves it."

She grinned. "Oh? How's that?"

"You know, because you're a rare sight on campus?" I grinned.

She smirked. "Thanks. Now if I could only grow a real horn, I could stab people. Like you!" She turned and grabbed a pillow off the bed and tossed it at me. I ducked just as it sailed over my head and crashed into one of her photo frames.

She giggled.

"Oh no, you didn't." I rushed her, swooped her up and twirled her around while she screamed.

"I'm going to barf on you!"

"Liar."

She giggled and I set her down on her feet where she swayed and then grabbed my arm, her eyes laughing up at me.

Something changed in the air, that tug between us sharpening.



She caressed my arm, an unsure yet needy look on her face. “Stay with me tonight.”

Somehow I sensed she didn’t mean sex. Not after the guy at her door.

“Like a sleepover?”

She nodded, a tentative smile on her face. “We can watch a movie if you want. I’ll even let you pick.”

I didn’t want a movie. I wanted her under me.

I scrubbed my face, thinking this was insane and a horrible idea, but she pulled back the quilt on her bed and crawled inside, her body sliding against the sheets. She was so bloody beautiful.

I rationalized. This *was* purely platonic. No strings. Just me and a girl in the same bed. Sleeping.

But...

I was a heartbeat away from getting in too deep.

She must have sensed my reserve. “I don’t want to be alone tonight, Declan. I—I need some kindness, and you seem to have it in spades. I can’t put words to it, but I feel safe with you and like nothing bad will ever happen to me again. Stay?”

“My shorts are still damp.”

“Then take them off,” she said, patting the bed.

I grinned and took a step closer to her, my body already tightening up at the thought of lying next to her. “Fine with me, but I don’t wear underwear.”

“That’s a problem.”

“Yeah, a big one.”

She blushed, her eyes drifting down to the obvious tent growing by the second in my shorts. Her gaze bounced back to my face as she cleared her throat. “Oh. I—I don’t mind if you’re...wet.”

“Okay,” I chuckled and slid in, biting back a groan as my legs brushed the soft warmth of hers.

“You feel so good,” she murmured as she turned to face me and wrapped slender arms around my chest, flowing into me like honey, warm and sweet. Our legs tangled together, seeming to know the perfect position to touch each other the most, and fuck, it felt right.

She didn’t mention the movie, and I didn’t bring it up.

Her body was a drug, and I wanted to consume her. I wanted to press her deep into those sheets and claim her as mine.

But I didn't.

I didn't want to be just one night with Elizabeth. *I wanted more.*

I kissed her hair lightly, and somehow, I slept.

## Chapter 13

### *Elizabeth*

At six on the dot my alarm clanged me awake. Monday, the first day of class.

I rolled over, expecting to see Declan's chiseled face resting against my extra pillow, but he was gone.

Relief hit. No morning chitchat or awkward kisses goodbye.

Yet ...

I was disappointed too. For the first time, I *wanted* the guy to still be there. I wanted to caress my fingers across his tattooed arm and wish him good morning. Sadly, the only thing remaining of him was the scent of his spicy cologne on my pillow. I picked it up and inhaled for exactly ten seconds longer than I should have.

I wasn't creepy at all. Nope.

I showered, put on makeup, and dressed in a pair of bright red shorts and a vintage peasant shirt with cream embroidery, another one of Shelley's purchases for me. We'd gotten the shirt at a consignment shop downtown, and although it had been too big, she'd taken in the sleeves and bust to fit me. She had an eye for fashion, and I tended to listen to her, especially considering I'd grown up wearing hand-me-downs from wherever my mom could get them. We'd never had much, and what's funny is I hadn't even realized it until I'd gotten in at Oakmont Prep and seen how the other half lived—fancy cars, designer clothes, Louis Vuitton backpacks.

Money and power everywhere.

I'd wanted to be part of it—desperately.

I'd figured out quick that the only way to fit in was to pretend to be like them, and I had with the help of Shelley. I'd been young and impressionable and eager to make friends—who turned out to not be real friends.

Everyone but Shelley and Blake had rejected me after Colby told his lies.

After parking my car and trekking across campus, I settled in a seat in my first class, an elective English Literature class taught by Dr. Feldman, one of the toughest professors on campus.

I craned my head to scan the auditorium, searching for Colby's sandy hair. What if I ended up in a class with him? Now that I didn't have Declan to distract me, the dread piled up. *What was I going to do when I saw him on campus?*

Blake came in and took the seat next to me. We'd filled out our schedules at registration together last spring so we could get in some of the same classes.

He tapped me on the arm. "Hey, how's it going? I wish you could have gone to lunch with us yesterday."

"Sorry, it was a hectic day." Understatement.

He exhaled heavily.

"What?" I asked.

He rubbed his face briskly and then looked at me for a few ticks. He seemed to come to some kind of decision. "I—it's just—I really need to tell you something, and there never seems to be a good time."

I cleared my throat, feeling nervous. I didn't want to have *that* conversation.

He checked his watch. "We still have five minutes. Let's go outside and talk. Right now. We'll get this all out on the table, and you'll know exactly what's been wrong with me lately."

"Class is about to start and Dr. Feldman is a stickler for being on time. Why don't we meet later—?"

He groaned his frustration, his mouth tightening as he glared at me.

"Don't be that way. You're acting like a baby."

He closed his eyes and then popped them open. "Fine. You want to know what's eating me? I'm in love with you, Elizabeth, and I have been since Oakmont. You know it. I know it. Hell, all of Whitman knows it. I'm sick of sitting back and watching you screw guys and never pick me. It's a new year for both of us, and I want you to think about maybe ... me and you ... together."

No. This wasn't happening. I couldn't take this. Not with the specter of Colby hanging over me. "Blake, we did this before—"

He held a hand up, interrupting me. "That was two years ago, and you gave me up for Colby."

I stared at him, remembering all the times he'd picked me up for school when I didn't have a ride, the times he'd sat in the diner where I waited tables

just to keep me company.

I *did* love him in way, but it wasn't a gut-wrenching, I-might-die-if-I-don't-see-you kind of love. It was easy and soft, like a warm blanket on a winter's night in front of the fire.

*Could there be more with him?*

He fiddled with his notebook, his eyes jumping to my face and then glancing back down. "The thing is, we are perfect for each other, you just don't see it. I already know everything about you. Your favorite color, the kinds of books you like to read, the songs you love. I know you want to get a tattoo, but you can't afford it. Hell, I even know you snore when you sleep —"

"Blake, stop, please. I can't do this right now. We're in the middle of class."

Pressure, pressure.

"Why not? Because you're afraid I'm right? You and I were meant to be from the very beginning, and you just got sidetracked by Colby." Intensity laced his voice, making me squirm.

My rules had no room for a serious relationship—even with Blake. "Please—just let it go."

He slumped down in his seat and shook his head angrily.

Thank goodness a sleepy-eyed Dax strolled into the auditorium right then, getting my attention. He was wearing skinny jeans, high-tops, a WU shirt, and an infectious grin that looked like trouble with a capital T. He gave Blake a fist bump and plopped down in the seat on the other side of me. Completely oblivious to the tension. Aren't most guys?

He gave me a wide grin, and I had to smile back. His face brightened even more. "Hiya. I take it you've forgiven me for being sloshed on Friday night?"

I nodded. "Declan's more than made up for your shortcomings."

He grinned and shrugged, the movement reminding me of Declan. "Indeed, he's the good one."

More students piled in, including Declan, who stalked in wearing frayed jeans and a shirt that showcased his muscled chest to perfection. My eyes feasted on his forearms, tracing the lines of his skulls and roses. Last night, he'd held me tight as if he were afraid I'd slip away—yet he was the one who left without saying goodbye.

This morning I'd been partly relieved and disappointed he was gone, but that feeling had morphed into being pissed. And me being mad over him—made me madder.

I didn't want to *care* that he'd left.

That didn't stop the heat from settling in me when his gray eyes met mine.

He walked over to us, his gaze locked with mine the entire way.

"Hey." I cleared my throat to get rid of the nervousness. "We're being geeks and sitting up front. You wanna join us?"

He flicked his eyes from Dax to Blake on either side of me, almost as if he'd ask one of them to get up, but that was completely insane.

He shrugged broad shoulders. "I'll just sit behind you guys."

It was stadium style seating, so he had to take the stairs and then turn down the row behind us. He selected the seat behind me.

And even though we weren't touching, I could feel him there, the warmth from his skin radiating across to mine.

Dax ran his eyes over the syllabus that had been left on the top of each desk. "I'm not quite sure how I ended up here. I must have had a hangover when I selected courses." He checked out the female students who were coming in. "Although I have to admit, there are some hotties in here."

"And you?" I turned around to look at Declan. "Do you like literature?"

"I'm an English major with a minor in business," Declan said.

"No way."

His lips quirked. "Yes, way. And why not?"

"I'm just surprised. I just assumed ..."

"He's a Neanderthal?" Dax said. "Most people do, but bro here is a sucker for poems and sonnets, boring tosh that makes me want to shoot myself. He's overcompensating by opening his own gym soon."

"You two are completely opposite," I mused.

Dax snorted. "So, I'm the Neanderthal?"

I laughed. "No. Okay, maybe."

A flurry of activity came from the door, and we turned to see a petite brunette in a tube top and short-shorts make a beeline for us. Lorna from the frat house. Fabulous.

She came to a halt in front of Blake, and when she took in that there wasn't an empty seat next to him, she sent me an evil look and then moved

her gaze to Declan.

“Is the seat next to you free?” she asked with a pout.

My eyes narrowed.

Had Declan slept with her?

Ugh.

*Why did I care?*

“Yeah,” Declan nodded, his eyes off me and on her.

“Awesome,” she said with a bright smile and made her way over to his aisle.

“She’s pretty hot, huh?” Dax whispered to me as she and Declan took up a close conversation after she got settled. “She’s limber too. All the brothers at the house love it. She can do this thing where she puts her legs behind her head and—”

“Stop.”

He grinned sheepishly. “I’m teasing. It’s her tube tops that keeps us riveted. Blokes keep waiting for one to fall off.”

I snapped my fingers. “Shucks. If only I had the guts to wear one I could be just like Limber Lorna—my dream.” I batted my eyelashes.

He laughed loudly, causing Declan to send us a sharp glare. *What was his problem?*

“If you do, pick a blue one to match your eyes. They’re gorgeous,” Dax said.

I blushed. “That’s sweet—and oddly the most sincere thing you may have ever said to me. Thank you, Dax. I think you’ve more than made up for almost kissing me.”

“*Almost?* Trust me, love, there was some lip-on-lip action. Don’t you remember?” He leaned in and gave me a quick peck on the cheek, his full lips brushing against my skin, sending little tingles over me.

A chuckle erupted from me. With no alcohol on his breath and no crazy party going on in the background, his kiss didn’t bother me at all.

“What’s so funny? That was grade-A kissing right there from the Sex Lord,” he said, pretending to be affronted by my laughter.

I rubbed my lips. “You gave me goosebumps, goof.”

“Goosebumps today, orgasm later?”

I barked out a laugh. “Do you ever stop with the flirting?”

“I can’t. It’s like I’m hardwired to get as many girls as I can. It’s probably

a coping mechanism because my mum died when I was young.” He sent me a rueful look.

He’d said it all as a joke, but underneath I sensed the truth. “Sorry. Declan mentioned some of what you went through when you came here. It must have been hard leaving everything behind for the United States.”

“Yeah, people talk funny here, and you have weird names for things. For us a lift is an elevator, a chip is a French fry, a biscuit is a cookie, a shag is a fuck, and don’t even get me started on football.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Declan cleared his throat, and I tossed a glance back to see him glaring at both of us. His hands sat on top of his desk, one clutching his pen tightly.

I arched a brow at him. Don’t even go there with me, buddy. You have no right to be jealous. *You left me this morning*, I wanted to yell out.

Blake leaned over until our shoulders touched. He’d been quiet since the twins sat down. “Want to grab lunch later?”

I thought about it. With Colby walking around, I didn’t want to be alone. “You mind if we ask these guys to come too?” I nodded toward the twins. “And maybe Shelley?” I wasn’t ready for the *talk* he’d mentioned, and I needed a buffer between us.

“Something wrong with just me?”

“No, of course not. I just want to branch out and get to know more people.”

Like a normal college girl.

Dr. Feldman came into the auditorium, saving me from Blake’s reply. She was a tall, sparse lady with long brown hair she kept in a thick braid down her back, and her face was like stone, making you wonder if she ever smiled.

Wire-framed spectacles sat on the end of her nose as she swept beady eyes across the auditorium. “I trust you’ve all read the reading list I provided when you registered?”

Silence.

“I see. Another stellar class.” Disdain dripped from her words. She shuffled some papers. “Well, for the first few weeks, we’re going to be studying Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. I do expect classroom participation, so be aware that when I call on you you’re required to stand and present your discussion.”

Dax’s hand shot up, and she waved at him to stand.



He did. “Do you grade on our discussion?”

She arched a derisive eyebrow. “Of course.”

He shot her a cocky grin. “Brilliant, because I’m a great talker.” He plopped back down.

“Any more questions before I call roll?” she asked, looking around the room.

No one moved.

“Fine.” She ran her finger down what I assumed was the class roster and chuckled. “Is there seriously an Elizabeth Bennett in this class?”

I raised my hand tentatively. “That would be me.”

“Please stand when you speak, Miss Bennett, so the entire class can see and hear you.” She raked her eyes over me as I stood. “I confess, I’m extremely curious ... did your parents name you after the book?”

I straightened my shoulders. “My parents never married, so Bennett’s my mother’s name. Elizabeth is just a name my mother picked. I doubt my parents had ever heard of Jane Austen.” I shrugged. “I didn’t discover *Pride and Prejudice* until high school.”

She tapped her pencil against her leg. “Are you looking for your Mr. Darcy here at Whitman, Miss Bennett?”

My face flushed and I blinked. “I—I’m not looking for love, Dr. Feldman, just an education.”

“Hmm, I see. But as humans aren’t we naturally inclined to seek out love? Elizabeth found her soulmate. Don’t you want to find yours?”

“No.”

She gave me a surprised look. “Ah, I see. That might be a discussion for another day then. You may sit.”

I sat down, relieved.

“Bugger, you could have warned me how scary she is,” Dax leaned over and whispered.

I shrugged. “Wait until she asks hard questions. I heard at least half of all her students drop after the first day.”

Feldman’s voice interrupted us. “Mr. Declan Blay, please stand if you are present today.”

Rustling motions came from behind me as Declan stood. “Present.” His husky, clipped voice sent shivers over me.

She nodded, her eyes gliding over the muscles in his arms then coming

back to rest on his face. “Mr. Blay, I trust you’ve read the required first ten chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* before today’s class?”

“Not precisely.”

She bristled. “I don’t tolerate students who don’t follow directions or complete homework assignments.”

Declan cocked his head. “No, let me explain—”

She cut him off. “Please sit down so I can call on someone who’s read the material.”

“I’ll take my chances if you don’t mind, Dr. Feldman.” He crossed his arms and sent her an expectant look.

She waved her hand. “Fine. Tell us about our heroine. What do you think of our Elizabeth Bennett?”

He rubbed the slight shadow on his face. “She’s witty and spirited and the one least expected to marry a rich man, although she does by the end of the book.” His gray eyes lazily brushed over me. “She’s also a beautiful girl who likes the rain.”

My heart thundered. God, it sounded like he was talking about me.

“Would you say she’s the perfect woman, Mr. Blay?”

He blinked. “I don’t believe in the perfect woman, just the right woman. Elizabeth knows she isn’t perfect, but neither is Darcy. They’re both flawed people who are at times too proud to admit their own true feelings—hence the title.”

I admit it. His understanding of the theme of the book made me hot. Right then and there, I wanted to toss him down on the floor, crawl on top of him, and ride him like the Jane Austen reader I was.

“What are Elizabeth’s flaws, then?” Dr. Feldman asked him.

“She’s defensive—because of her family—and it affects her relationship with Darcy. She assumes he’s a rich arsehole when he’s actually in love with *her*.”

“You seem to have a grasp on the entire novel, yet you didn’t read the assignment.” Her high heels clacked over to the front row so she could peer more closely at him. “Explain yourself.”

“I’ve read it several times, Dr. Feldman, just not recently, and I was in the process of explaining when you interrupted me.” He paused. “*Pride and Prejudice* is one of my favorite books. My mum read it to me when I was a kid. She was a huge romantic ... and perhaps I am as well.”

Girls swooned. Literally. I could hear them, melting in their seats as his softly rounded vowels washed over them.

I wasn't too far behind them. Heck, I'd already pictured us lying in a pile of old books, stark naked and smoking a satisfying cigarette after boinking each other's brains out.

Lorna clapped daintily, her eyes enraptured by Declan's question-answering skills. I rolled my eyes.

"So *awesome*," she whispered to him. "I'll have to read it for sure now."

Feldman studied him, and I thought I detected a little bit of swoon in her expression too. "I look forward to calling on you again. Please be seated."

After class finished, I turned to a glum Blake, whose hair was standing up everywhere from raking his hands through it. "Shit, this class is killer. There's no way I can do it."

"You're dropping my dream class?" I patted his hair down, some of the earlier weirdness fading.

He sighed and stood. "Yep. I'm heading over to the registrar's to take care of it. See you at lunch?" He fidgeted, waiting for me to reply.

"Sure." I couldn't say no.

We made plans to meet later, and he headed down the stairs and out the door.

I gathered my notebook and pens with a grin. Even though Feldman was tough as nails, I was excited about digging into this class.

Plus Declan was here. *But he's trouble, remember?* a voice in my head reminded me.

"You're a weird chick. You act like this class was fun," Dax said as he watched me gather my things.

"True," I said.

He laughed, and with Declan and Lorna trailing behind us, we headed for the exit.

We all came to a rather odd standstill outside the auditorium. No one seemed to know what to say next except for Lorna, who apparently knew both brothers well and kept the conversation going.

She looped her arm with Declan's. "You wanna go back to your place and study later?"

She may have liked Blake at one point, but I got the distinct impression she'd switched over to Declan.

“*Study* is apparently code for *let’s have sex*,” I whispered to Dax, who smirked.

“You look awesome today, by the way,” Lorna said, continuing her flattery of Declan as she reached up to brush imaginary lint off his shirt.

Ugh. Enough.

I didn’t want to watch this, and I came to a rapid decision.

I turned to Dax. “I’m going to grab some lunch at the Student Center at noon with Blake. You want to come?”

His eyes lit up. “Sure.” He looked over his shoulder. “Hey, you guys want to join us on our date?”

“Date?” Declan came to attention, and his eyes bounced from me to Dax.

He nodded. “It appears Miss Bennett has forgiven me for trying to kiss her and has invited me to lunch. Want to join us or do you have *awesome* plans with Lorna?”

Declan cracked his neck and stared at us both, his gaze intense as if measuring the situation. “That’s okay. Maybe next time,” he said curtly and stalked off with Lorna half running beside him like a little puppy.

*Pfft.*

Dax watched her ass swing from side to side. “Guess he had plans.”

“Uh-huh.”

He snorted. “You have to admit. She’s bloody *awesome*.”

He looped an arm around me and walked me to my next class.

## Chapter 14

### *Declan*

On Friday night, I fought a uni boy from Duke called Snake. Matches with Duke boys were packed events since we both had local fans. When I'd come in the warehouse, I'd also noticed a few more suits in the crowd this time, and I figured they were scouting me out for the Yeti fight in a few weeks.

I took a punch to the gut from him and gasped. People leaned back to get away from me as I stumbled around the warehouse. Some girl yelled in my face for me to get my act together.

I shook it off and rolled my neck.

Time to end this fight and start thinking about the next one.

I rushed at him, my palm strike clipping his shoulder, not the chest like I'd aimed for, yet the hit had enough force that he fell to the ground. He jumped up and barreled back at me, his legs maneuvering a jumping reverse roundhouse kick that I recognized as a Shotokan technique.

*Bam!* It was a hell of a move that got me right in the side. I staggered back.

He grinned as he bounced away from me. "Third degree black belt, asshole."

"I'm better, *arsehole*."

Sure, he'd landed a few good hits—the blood that had spurted out of my nose a few punches ago could attest to that. But I had motivation and drive to win, my dream of the gym keeping me swinging.

I wiped sweat out of my eyes and squared off again. His body was lean and tall with fast reflexes, a testament to his fighting name, and I eyed him carefully, looking for chinks in his armor.

Earlier, he'd arrived in a Mercedes and had stepped out with a smirk on his face as he'd taken in the surrounding seedy area. A pretty girl had been on each arm as he'd stalked around the street like he owned the place. Cocky bastard.

I darted in and hit him with a strike to the upper thighs. He grunted and

snapped back with a quick two-handed jab. I blocked them with my forearms and retreated, but he followed, still on the offensive, his elbow snapping up to catch my clavicle. I grunted and retaliated with a sideways hammer-fist strike to his gut.

*Whoosh.* He bent over gasping.

He got his breath and came at me again, but I blocked him. He'd grown sluggish, telegraphing his moves big time. He needed more training, and I watched the frustration grow on his face as I played with him, moving in for a quick jab and then bouncing back out of the way.

He punched at me and I ducked. He swung again, his breath winded.

*That's right, pretty boy, wear yourself out.*

I bounced around him and smirked.

"Kick his Dirty English ass, Snake!" one of his friends called out. "I got big money riding on this!"

"Go back to Duke, you utter twats," Dax yelled back at them, not to be outdone. Dax's frat brothers agreed.

I kicked Snake in the other leg and sent him reeling. He fell against one of the steel columns that supported the warehouse.

His eyes blinked. Once, twice.

Shit.

"You ready to call this?" I panted.

He grunted, his face set in a grimace as he staggered around me.

"We can end this right now."

"Fuck you," he said, slinging sweat-soaked hair out of his face.

"Your funeral," I said and raised my fists up.

But Snake was distracted by something in the crowd. I followed his eyes across the warehouse to see him watching one of the girls he'd arrived with. She'd apparently slipped over to a new guy, and they'd moved to an area against a back wall to kiss. Tongue action ensued. Hands rushed and roamed under shirts and down pants. They'd be shagging soon.

I looked back at my opponent, watching his face redden.

The bloody wanker was distracted by a girl who obviously didn't give a shit about him.

I grunted. *Another reason I needed to avoid Elizabeth,* I reminded myself.

"Focus. Let's do this," I snapped at Snake with a slap on the upper arm, and he turned back to face me, eyes wild.

My words spurred him into action.

He came at me again, both hands up and ready. With moves faster than I'd anticipated, he landed a strike to my spleen. I stumbled away from him to get my breath back. *Fuck*. No more trash-talking.

"Snake! Snake! Snake!" his friends chanted.

"Dir-ty Eng-lish! Dir-ty Eng-lish!" my side of the room called.

He inhaled a deep breath and flew at me, but I read his move and turned my body sideways and kicked out in a thrusting, snapping motion, the outside of my right foot aiming for his chest. He went down like a slow-moving boulder, arms splayed out and legs spread as he hit the ground.

He'd never had a chance with the girl distracting him, although I would have defeated him either way. She just made it quicker.

He moaned, and I knew he wasn't getting up anytime soon.

I walked over to him. Checked his eyes, his breathing.

"You done?" I asked.

Glazed eyes looked up at me. "Yeah."

I waved for Nick to come and call it. A slick guy who wore a three-piece suit each time I saw him, he'd been setting up street fights in North Carolina for the past two years.

I looked back at Snake. "Keep a watch on your head, and if you have any headaches, see a doctor." It went unsaid that he'd have to lie about how he was injured. "And a word of advice, leave the girl at home next time."

He groaned and turned away as one of his mates came over and helped him to his feet. They stumbled away from me and out the metal doors.

Trouble. That's what girls were, right?

No way in hell would I ever let a girl distract me.

I took the cash Nick and Max counted out. This was all that mattered.

## Chapter 15

### *Elizabeth*

By the end of the first week of school I was back in the routine of going to class, working at the bookstore, and studying like crazy. I was off to a good start except I couldn't stop thinking about Colby being at Whitman. I looked for him everywhere now. In the grocery. In the parking lot. Outside my door?

And then there was Karl and my mom. I'd tried to call and text her several times, but she was ignoring me, and I got it. She was angry because I'd gotten upset with her and Karl at the diner. She wanted to use my story to get rich, and no way was I down with that.

By Sunday night, chocolate ice cream and relaxing were the only two things on my mind when I got home from work.

And ...

I readily admitted to myself I was jonesing for some English accents, so I kicked my shoes to the floor and snuggled into Granny's couch for season two of *Downton Abbey*.

After eating a giant bowl of Ben & Jerry's and indulging in two hours of television, I stepped out my balcony door and stood there taking in the soft rain that had begun to fall. I was getting wet, but I didn't care.

Dressed in nothing but gym shorts, Declan stepped out onto his balcony. It seemed neither of us minded the weather. Like me, was he thinking of the last time it rained?

He flexed his hands, loosening the tape around them, his eyes out in the distance as if his thoughts were far away. He hadn't noticed me, and I eased further back into the shadows, letting my gaze roam over his bare chest, hard biceps, and trim waist.

*Why did one guy have to look so damn good?*

*Did he ever wear a shirt?*

I sucked in a sharp breath as I noticed the bruises on his body, one on his shoulder, another on his ribs.

"I know you're there," he said.



Dammit, there was no escaping him.

He bent over against the railing, the muscles in his back rippling, eyes still on the horizon.

And I said nothing, anger pricking at me and I didn't even know why.

But I did ... we'd spent the night together—albeit platonically—and he'd had a week to knock on my door, and he *hadn't*. He'd sat behind me in class all week but had mostly ignored me, sending eye-daggers my way when I joked around with Dax.

I didn't understand him.

And yet I did.

Both of us were afraid of getting too close.

He sighed and ran a hand through his wet hair. "I don't blame you for being quiet. I guess you're a wise girl to keep your distance." He grunted. "Which is ironic because you're the dangerous one, Elizabeth."

*Me?* He was the one with the potential to break me into a million pieces.

He turned to face me, his eyes zeroing in on mine, and I realized I'd walked to the edge of my balcony to be closer to him. He took in my damp nightshirt and bare feet.

My nipples pressed against the material as if they too wanted to be near him.

"Dangerous? Please. You're the one sporting new bruises," I said.

He shot me a grin. "I like it when you get feisty."

"I know." My words were quiet, remembering the night in his apartment.

His gaze brushed over my breasts like a physical touch, desire plainly written on his face.

I swallowed, feeling the invisible wires that pulled me toward him. I threw caution to the wind.

"We slept together without having sex. Do you do that often?"

His eyes smoldered like molten steel. "Never."

God, I wanted him. Desperately.

I clenched my fists. "Goodnight, Declan."

"Goodnight, Elizabeth."

\* \* \*

“The results are in, and I’m pleased to announce the prom king and queen are Colby Scott and Elizabeth Bennett,” Mr. Brown, Oakmont’s headmaster, announced from the gymnasium stage.

Elation washed over me in waves.

At first I couldn’t believe we’d won, but when Colby took my hand to tug me toward the stage, reality set in. *This was it.*

Everything I’d ever wanted was right in front of me.

“Come on. They’re waiting to crown us, babe.” Colby’s white teeth flashed.

I let him guide me toward the stage, my pink dress sparkling under the mirrored lights as we made our way across the basketball court, passed balloon sculptures and a backdrop featuring a cityscape of Paris. We glided up the steps and toward the center of the stage. Hands from the audience reached out to congratulate us.

Something was off ...

A crawling sensation scratched at my brain, pricking at me.

I yanked my hand out of his, but he snatched it back and jerked me flush against his gray suit. “Too late, Elizabeth. This is what you wanted. Don’t deny it.” He kissed me roughly, his hands splayed out across my breasts.

I fumbled and pushed.

Slow motion. I couldn’t move.

Wait. Had I taken something? Was I drunk? What was wrong with me?

A spotlight hit us. I saw Blake and Shelley. I saw my mother and Karl and Senator Scott, their lips curled in disgust.

Then we were in the hotel.

I was on the bed with him between my legs. Jamming into me.

No, no, no ...

The terror wouldn’t end.

I fought.

Stop, stop, stop.

“Elizabeth, wake up!” Firm hands shook my shoulders.

*No!*

I came awake screaming.

I scrambled up to the headboard. My eyes bounced around the room.

My bed. My dresser. My apartment. *Declan.* Thank God.

I sucked in a shuddering breath. My hands wiped my eyes, feeling

wetness.

“What happened?” I croaked as I scrubbed my face, trying to clear it.

He sat on the edge of my bed, and even in the dim light I could see his normally tanned face was white. “I heard you screaming from my room and came in through the balcony after I couldn’t tear down your front door. Thank God your balcony door was open. You were all twisted up in the sheets ...” He stopped talking, a muscle working in his jaw.

I moved closer to his warmth and leaned my head against his shoulder. Inhaled. “You must think I’m a lunatic.”

He lifted a hand to cup my head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I bit my lip at his kindness and snuggled into his arms more fully. “No. It—it’s nothing you want to know about. I just need some water.”

“Okay, I’ll get you some.” He left and went into the kitchen, where I heard him milling around and opening cabinets until he found a glass and filled it. He came back into the bedroom and handed it to me.

Feeling nervous and just plain old shy, I scrambled to find conversation. “Did you—uh—actually jump to my balcony from yours? Wasn’t that kind of dangerous?”

“Yes,” he said softly. “But your front door was locked. Maybe you should give me a key.”

Key? I laughed to hide my surprise. “You’re just a regular Superman, aren’t you?”

He shrugged, his expression giving me nothing.

I nodded.

Okay. Things were strained between us.

Obviously he was ready to go. I mean, I’d woken him up and he had classes tomorrow.

Silence ticked between us.

I kept it simple. “Thank you for coming over.”

He rubbed his jaw. “If you’re good then I should probably go—I guess?”

“I guess.”

Neither of us moved. “You don’t need anything else?” he asked.

I needed *him*. My body craved him. I was sick of seeing him for brief moments each day. I wanted more.

“No.”

“Mind if I use the front door?”

I smiled. “Sure.” We walked to the front door together, and he surprised me by reaching out and grabbing my hand on the way. His warm fingers stroked the tangled scars on my wrists.

He studied them. Looked back at me. “What happened?”

I swallowed. “I fell in love with the wrong guy.”

I waited for him to question me or get angry at my stupidity, but I shouldn’t have been surprised when he didn’t. This was Declan, and he wasn’t like anyone I’d ever met.

“I noticed them the night I showed you how to punch, but I didn’t say anything. I’m sorry for your pain,” he said, gazing down at the pink skin. “Your scars are beautiful. It means you survived. It means you’re here with me.” He kissed my wrist, light as a feather—and changed everything about us. “It’s my favorite part of you,” he said.

Big moments happen with the smallest of actions, and sometimes it’s not until later we connect the dots, but in that instant, I knew that somehow, somehow Declan was going to own my heart. It terrified me and excited me all at the same time.

He brushed a finger down my cheek. “Elizabeth? Do you really want me to go? Because—because I don’t want to. It’s been a shit week and I’ve barely talked to you and—”

“I want you to stay,” I said softly.

Still holding hands, we went back to my darkened bedroom.

We got into bed together. Being careful of his bruises, I snuggled into his chest letting the warmth from his body seep into mine, banishing my nightmare. Wrapped up in a gorgeous body and tattoos, he was a heady sleeping aid. I wanted to yank my gown over my head, climb on top of him, and take him inside me. I wanted to ride him until all the bad memories were gone—but I didn’t. I settled for keeping my clothes on and pressing myself against his hot skin, pleasure flooding me at the way his hands roamed my back, brushing against the bottom of my shirt, his fingers massaging me.

His touch was sexual.

Yet it wasn’t. It was simply *more*, and I was terrified to put a name to it.

So I didn’t think about it at all.

I just went with it.

## Chapter 16

### *Declan*

The next morning I woke up around five thirty, left Elizabeth in bed, and headed to the gym before class. I'd been going early so I could catch the contractors who were working on the updates.

After the gym, I left for class and met Dax at our usual spot outside the humanities building. We hadn't seen each other much in the past few days, mostly because I was caught up in the gym and my classes while he was partying at the frat house. At least we had one class together, although it was hard to watch him sit next to Elizabeth each day and flirt with her.

"What do you think of Elizabeth?" he asked as we walked up the stairs to the third floor and came out onto the hallway.

He'd brought her up when I'd been thinking about her? "My Elizabeth?"

He paused mid-stride and flicked his eyes at me. "Yours? You shagged her?"

"No."

"I'm sensing a *but* here."

"Don't be a knobhead." I resisted the urge to shove him up against the wall.

*Jealous of my own brother. Sad.*

He stiffened. "What's your deal? I'm just making conversation about a girl in class." His eyes searched mine. "And let's just say for argument's sake that I wanted to shag her—would you be okay with it?"

I shrugged. "You're your own person. Do whatever the bloody hell you want."

He rubbed his jaw, studying me with narrowed eyes. "You seem a bit off. You okay?"

Just then Nadia and Donatello came down the hall toward us, effectively ending our convo. I didn't miss that Nadia's eyes lingered on me, a pleading look in them. I ignored her for the most part, but judging from her tight face and Donatello's sullen expression, there was trouble in paradise.

They stopped in front of us, mostly because the line of bodies moving had come to a standstill. It was unavoidable we'd bump into each other. This was a small uni. I hadn't talked to her since the frat party, and although she hadn't been on my mind, her family had.

"How's your mum?" I asked, as Ninja Turtle wandered off to talk to some of the tennis lads who were standing near a classroom door.

She got misty-eyed. "She started chemo, and it goes for twelve weeks. I—I'm headed home this weekend to see her."

I nodded. "I'm sorry. Mum never took chemo. There wasn't time or any reason to."

She cleared her throat and changed gears. "On the other hand, my sorority is having our annual back to school mixer next week. You're invited."

"We're over, Nadia. I won't be coming."

Dax raised his eyebrows and bounced his eyes between us, and then over to Donatello.

"I know." Her hand caressed my arm and then dropped. "But I still care about you, Declan. Just think about it."

She waved bye and wandered back to her boyfriend.

Dax snorted. "You're way too easy on her. Everyone here is wondering why you haven't kicked Donatello's arse, too."

I shrugged. "Some things are worth it and some aren't."

We walked into the auditorium for Lit class. Wearing a skimpy top and a miniskirt, Lorna waved at me, pointing at the same seat where I'd been sitting next to her since class started a week ago.

Dax chuckled. "Looks like someone wants to be the next girl Dirty English chooses."

But my eyes went to Elizabeth. She sat in front of Lorna, her head bent low as she flipped through the pages of her textbook. She hadn't even noticed I was here.

Dax left me to sit next to Elizabeth. He plopped down next to her, and they immediately began talking. Of course, Dax did most of the talking while she listened.

Envy ate at me. I wanted to be in his seat.

Dr. Feldman took to the podium, and I tried to focus on the lesson.

Usually, I was riveted, but today I barely listened.

My eyes were never off Dax and Elizabeth.

## Chapter 17

### *Elizabeth*

“I wish you were rich like me. It’s not fair you have to work all the time. And if you’re not working, you’re studying. It’s a shame you’re missing out on the true college experience,” Shelley complained as I unpacked new textbooks that had come in for the bookstore. She smiled. “But don’t you love me for coming to keep you company?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Whitman isn’t cheap, and we can’t all have daddies that pay our Amex card every month.”

She made a moue with her lips. “We could probably figure out a way for him to pay your bills too. He’d never know probably.”

I shook my head. “I pay my own way. Always have. I’m here for a top notch education ...”

“So you never have to depend on a loser like your poor mom does ... I know, I know. You say it all the dang time. Trust me, you are never going to end up with some car salesman from Petal who wears Hawaiian shirts. But if you want to meet a nice, *rich* guy, then you need to get out more.”

“Working makes me feel good about myself. You should try it.”

She sent me a disbelieving glare. “I just buy shoes to feel good—or jewelry. Speaking of, have you seen the new line of James Avery necklaces? God, totally gorgeous with these little silver charms everywhere. And you could totally do it, Elizabeth. Your drawings are much better than half the stuff I see.”

“I—I did draw something recently. A dragonfly.”

Her eyes flared. “Holy hell, that’s huge. Why didn’t you tell me? What are you going to do with it? Put it on a bracelet? Necklace? Make me one ... please?”

She didn’t understand why I’d stopped making jewelry, not really, but her encouragement meant something to me. No one else had ever pushed me but Granny, and she was gone. “Thank you for saying that.”

She grinned, refocusing. “So, let’s talk about your sexy new neighbor.

You had a nightmare and the English dreamboat came over and saved you from the bogeyman?”

I groaned. I never should have told her. “You can drop the baby-girl voice.”

“But it’s so fun. I can’t believe you didn’t do the deed with him. Don’t you want to see if he’s like Hugh Grant in *Notting Hill*? Oh, or Jude Law? Wait, how about Charlie Hunnam? Oh yeah, I’d have his babies. Well, all their babies.” She waggled her eyebrows.

“My life is not a movie, Shelley.”

She munched on a bag of chips she’d snagged from the café. “I beg to differ. You have to admit your life is fairly dramatic. Heck, you could probably sell the rights to it and make millions. *Chi-ching!*”

Her words sobered me, reminding me of my mom and Karl and their scheme. I pushed the worry away.

“Does everything he says sound hot? Like if he called you a bitch, you’d be like *oh, baby, say it again?*”

I cracked a grin. “Maybe.”

“Oh my God, what if the twins are related to the Queen?” She pointed a finger at me, her face animated. “You could be English royalty. Heck, your name is already Elizabeth—wasn’t she a queen or something? Think about it ... you in a Lady Di-type wedding dress. You already love all that Shakespeare stuff, and this would just be the icing on the cake.” She started quoting famous Shakespearean lines but ended up mixing them together, tossing *Romeo and Juliet* in with *Macbeth*.

A bit later, after she’d finished, I took a deep breath. “Listen, I don’t want you to freak out, but you may see Colby on campus this semester. Apparently, he’s a student here now.”

She dropped her bag of chips, eyes big as saucers. “What the hell? Are you okay? How do you know? Why are you not freaking out? Why—”

“I’m fine.” I totally wasn’t.

“He—he came to see me, but he left when Declan ran him off. So, if I act odd or whatever, it’s because I’m paranoid I’m going to see him or he’s going to tell people about what happened.” My voice trembled.

She exhaled loudly but her voice came out hushed. “You have nothing to be ashamed of, Elizabeth, absolutely nothing. But you need to call the cops if he shows up again. Please say you will.”



I nodded. But would I?

“Since your parents know his family, will you ask them if they’d heard anything about why he’s transferred here? See if you can figure out what’s going on with him.”

She nodded, a look of worry on her face.

I pushed out a grin. “Come on, don’t get glum on me. Make me laugh.”

“You doing okay unpacking those boxes?” a male voice called from around the corner. Rick ambled into view. Tall with sandy blond hair and a skinny build, he’d recently graduated from Whitman and was the store manager here while he worked on his graduate degree.

He stood next to me and pilfered through some of the titles in the box. “Some of these boxes are heavy and need to go upstairs to the non-fiction section. Let me know if you need some help getting them up the stairs.” He smiled and adjusted his glasses.

I smiled back. “Okay.”

We had an elevator, but I didn’t say anything. He always offered to help me, and I thought it sweet.

I could feel Shelley’s eyes on us, watching. Plotting.

“She needs help a lot, *Rick*. She needs a big old—oh, never mind.” She grinned maniacally.

I shot her a look. This was not what I meant by *make me laugh*.

Her eyes said what she’d said to me many times, *That is some good man-meat right there. What are you waiting on, chica? Scaredy-cat. Here, pussyyyyyyyy.*

I huffed just as the café door opened and Blake walked through to the bookstore.

“What’s going on?” he asked us.

“Nothing,” snorted Shelley. “This bookstore needs to magically turn into a night club or a frat house.”

“Geez, no one’s keeping you here with me,” I replied. “I’m not bored at all. I’m working to pay *my* bills.”

She shrugged and sipped on her soda. “This year is just so blasé so far.”

“Don’t you have homework?” How did the girl not get kicked out of school?

“All done.” She tapped her head. “I might look like a dumb co-ed, but this brain is smarter than you think.”

“Let’s all do something,” Blake said. “Movie maybe? I hear the new Marvel movie is showing at the Malco.” He sent me a sheepish grin. “I know Elizabeth loves Thor, right?”

“Wow, Elizabeth? Is that so?” Shelley asked in a snarky voice.

I shrugged. “Sure, what’s not to like? There are big muscles and blond hair and tattoos and a hammer ...”

“Yeah, she likes big hammers,” Shelley deadpanned.

“That’s enough,” I said.

“I was kidding.” She sent me a sly look.

Blake and Rick chuckled, and even though I was the butt of the joke, it made me glad to see Blake smile. I didn’t want things to be weird between us. I’d been processing his declaration of love, but I still didn’t know what I wanted to do about it.

The chime on the overhead door went off as Dax and Declan both walked in the café entrance.

Shelley came to attention. “The British are coming, the British are coming.”

“Stop it,” I hissed.

Blake’s face had grown still at our conversation, his body tense. “I don’t know what all the girls see in those two—”

“—who are hotter than my hair straightener,” Shelley finished.

A girl in the café waylaid Dax, but Declan strode our way wearing low-slung jeans, a Whitman shirt, and a pair of leather flip-flops.

I sighed, taking in the dark hair that curled around his ears and nape, the glossy sheen catching the lights. His steely-gray eyes seemed to zero in right on me from clear across the store, and I felt myself prepping my body for the current that would inevitably shoot through me.

He came closer and it seemed as if every eye in the place followed him.

*Why couldn’t I just write him off like I had all the others?*

“Yep, hotter than a Times Square Rolex,” I murmured to myself.

He came to a stop in front of the counter. “Hey. You good today?”

I squirmed at the attention. He meant the nightmare. It had been several days since our sleepover and he’d been checking in with me each morning in Lit class, keeping it casual but always asking if I was okay.

“Yeah. And you?”

He nodded.

Dax came crashing into us, the girl he'd been talking to tagging along behind him. "What's going on? Anybody want to come to the house and hang out?" He came over and tossed an arm around me. "Hey, love, when do you get off work?"

Blake answered. "We're going to the movies later. Sorry."

I didn't recall agreeing to a movie. Seems my friends had decided what my plans were for the evening when really I needed to get home and study.

"Sounds kinda boring, but I'm in," Dax said with a clap of his hands. He left me to toss an arm around the random girl. "You too?"

She blushed.

"Actually, Elizabeth and I already have plans tonight. I was just coming by to confirm," Declan inserted smoothly.

All eyes turned to me and then bounced back to Declan.

"Plans?" Shelley squeaked. "You didn't tell *moi*?"

"But, the movie ..." Blake's voice trailed off.

Dax's eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't see that coming."

Rick moved to the cash register to check someone out but not before looking at me with questioning eyebrows.

Seemed like everyone had a damn opinion on the matter.

"You still coming?" Declan said, a slight edge to his voice as he turned to look at me.

A hush had settled over the group.

I set down the book I'd been holding. Swallowed.

*Was this a real date-date?* One without sex at the end or one with sex at the end? God, I didn't know because I hadn't had a real date since Colby.

Or had he figured out I didn't want to go anywhere at all and was just trying to rescue me from my well-meaning friends?

"Yes, of course," I said. "Where are we going?"

He grinned, a soft boyishness settling on his face. "It's a surprise."

Shelley giggled, abruptly clamping up when I glared at her.

Blake snapped up and took off for the café. *Dammit*. I watched him go with a heavy sigh and then turned back to Declan.

"I don't get off for another hour."

He looked at the books scattered around me. "I can help you. What needs to be done?"

"Oh, thank you, but only employees can shelve. Rick's rule. I appreciate

it though. Are you sure you don't mind waiting?"

"Good things are worth waiting on."

I smiled. Breathless.

He sent me a grin. "Nice shirt, by the way." He raked his eyes over me, lingering on the T-shirt he'd given me a few nights ago. Made of thin white cotton, it featured the Front Street Gym logo, which was a black circle with two fists meeting and the gym name written around the circle. On the back of the shirt in Old English font was written *Property of Dirty English*. I'd been surprised as hell when he'd knocked on my door and handed it to me, saying he'd designed it and wanted my opinion before ordering in bulk for his gym's grand opening. It fit tight across my chest. He lifted his eyes up to mine.

"Thanks. Some cocky guy gave it to me."

He lifted an eyebrow. "He must be a nice bloke to give you a free T-shirt."

"Very. Although I think he gave me a size too small. On purpose."

His eyes landed on my breasts and he smiled before focusing back on my face. "Perhaps he never thought you'd wear it in public. Is he handsome?"

"He thinks so." My face felt like it might split in half I was grinning so big. What was it about him that had me feeling so giddy?

Shelley linked an arm through Dax's. "Well, I still want you to come along with us to the movies."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Indeed. You're far too hot to say no to. Tell me, do you dig threesomes?"

She giggled and tapped his arm. "Behave."

They got out their phones to finalize movie times, and I started in with the duties I did at the end of my shift. Half an hour later, I'd gotten the new books shelved and had broken down boxes and carried them to the back storage room. I piled them up in a corner next to the trash and then went to the broom closet. I opened it and pulled out the wide, heavy-duty dust mop.

When I turned around Blake was standing there.

"Oh! You scared me!" I laughed, clutching my chest. "What are you doing back here?" I looked past his shoulder. I didn't think Rick would mind that he was in a restricted area, but you could never tell.

He scrubbed a hand through his auburn hair roughly, making the ends stand up. "I can't believe you have a date with him after what I told you."

"Blake—"

“Since when does he get to march in here and act like he owns you?” He paced around, his movements swift and sharp, as if he were holding in banked anger.

I stiffened. “*You’re* the one acting possessive. He’s a good guy. In fact, you outright lied about him at the party. Care to explain that?”

His eyes widened. “I was desperate. I don’t want you with him, okay? It’s just—I told you how I feel, and you haven’t said a word about it. You just keep going about your day, not wanting to accept that our relationship is changing. I can’t just be your friend anymore and see you screw around with other guys.”

I shook my head. “You’re my friend. I need you.” I only had two in the whole world.

He exhaled. “Just give *us* a chance. We’ll take it slow, I promise. No crazy stuff.” His hand reached out to touch my cheek, soft and easy as if I were a skittish animal he wanted to tame. “I won’t ever pressure you or push you to do anything you don’t want to do, I promise.”

And the thing was, there was a tiny bit of something in my heart for him. A spark of whatever we’d had in prep school still lingering. But being with Blake meant commitment.

I—I just couldn’t do it.

“Everything okay back here?” Rick’s voice cut through the tension. “You need some help, Elizabeth?”

I cleared my throat and stepped back around Blake. “No, it’s good. Coming out to mop soon.”

Blake reached out to clasp my hand. “Wait, Elizabeth. I’m not the only one with feelings here. Talk to me.”

I sighed, changing gears. Anything to get away from this topic. “Look, I have a lot on my mind right now. There’s something I haven’t told you. Colby—he came to see me the night before the semester started. He—he’s enrolled here now. I haven’t seen him since, but I’m going to. I just know it. He’s not going away.” I heard the fear in my voice and cringed.

He gathered me in his arms. “Fuck. I’m so sorry. What can I do to help?”

I leaned my head on his shoulder. “There’s nothing to be done. It’s something I’m going to have to deal with, and I really need you here beside me. I can’t do it without you.”

He let out a long breath and kissed my forehead. “Whatever you need,

I'm here."

## Chapter 18

### *Elizabeth*

Later we left the bookstore and headed out to the parking lot, where Declan took the top and sides off his Jeep. We'd decided to leave my car there and have him bring me back later from wherever we were going.

I got in on the passenger side and buckled up. "Want to tell me what that was all about in there? We never made plans."

He smirked. "What? You've wanted me to ask you out since the moment you saw me at the frat house."

"You mean when you wouldn't even dance with me?" I snapped.

He tossed his head back and laughed. "You're a little spitfire. And I did dance with you on your balcony, remember?"

Fine.

He put on his Ray-Bans and grinned. "Don't like surprises, I take it?"

"No. Just tell me," I groaned.

He nodded. "Okay. We're headed to an intervention."

That didn't sound fun at all. "For what?"

His gray eyes caressed my face when we stopped at a light. "I promise, you'll like it."

Oh shit. Lightning strikes went straight to my core.

We hit the open road and the wind made my hair crazy. It was exhilarating, but I yelled as I tried to wrestle my hair and hold it back. I needed a ponytail holder.

He reached over and opened the glove box and pointed at a pile of hair bands.

It scared me that he read my mind, but I shot him a sour look as I selected a black one. "Nadia's?"

He shrugged in that effortless way of his I'd come to recognize. Noncommittal. Mysterious as hell.

I glared at him.

But my anger only made him grin. "Jealous?" he asked.

“Yes,” came out before I could stop it.

He shot me a surprised look and then turned quickly back to the road, but he kept sending me little glances as he drove, his eyes roaming my face.

“You’re beautiful,” he said softly. Simple words. Heavy weight. “There’s no reason for you to be jealous of her. You’re everything she isn’t, and I like it. A lot.”

When I watch romantic movies or read a book, there comes a point in the story where the two love interests are perfectly synced. He looks at her and his eyes soften. She looks at him and realizes he’s the best thing since sliced bread. Kinda like when Elizabeth looks past Darcy’s awful marriage proposal and sees the real man underneath the rich veneer. Or when Romeo first sees Juliet at the party and knows life will never be the same.

It happened for me just as the wind caught his dark hair and ruffled it, and in that tiny millisecond, the carefree way he smiled, the way he held the steering wheel with strong hands, the way he sent me a little searching glance as if gauging my reaction—it was enough to make me second guess everything.

But then I told myself to get my head back on straight.

He was a fighter for goodness’ sake.

*He was wrong for me.*

Anyone was, really.

Because my heart was locked up tight, the key buried deep in my soul. And no one, not even Declan Blay, could pick that lock.



## Chapter 19

### *Declan*

We barreled down the highway and she gave me the oddest look when I told her she was beautiful.

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head as if to clear it. “You know this isn’t a *date-date*, right?”

I shrugged. “I just got out of a shitty relationship myself.”

“I don’t mean friends with benefits either,” she said.

“Did I ask you for sex, Elizabeth? Have I made a move on you?” My voice had tightened.

A soft “No” reached my ears.

“Right. I have plenty of girls willing to shag me. I don’t need to go begging.”

She licked pink lips, and I found my eyes lingering there, imagining my cock sliding in ...

“Will you stop staring at me and watch where you’re driving?” she said sharply.

I couldn’t stop the grin on my face. She made me happy, and I didn’t even know why. Maybe it was the way she’d looked when I’d walked up to her at the bookstore—blushing like a schoolgirl, yet with a wicked gleam in her eyes that went straight to my dick. Maybe it was the way she filled out that T-shirt.

But, maybe it was more. Deeper. I sensed a kindred spirit in her, a loner who ached to find someone to love for real. Like me.

Just one glance from her and I wanted to kiss her and make her mine. People laugh when you talk about one look at someone and you’re in love, and I’m not saying that’s what this was, but damn, something weird was at work here and it had me scratching my head. Was it because she was so wrong for me that I wanted her even more? Yeah. Fuck. Elizabeth Bennett had her pretty little claws in me, and God help me, I wanted her to dig them

in deeper.

I pulled the Jeep into the carpark of the Front Street Gym, although she wouldn't know that since the signage hadn't been hung yet. The work crew had left for the day, so it was quiet as I hopped out and looped around to help her climb down.

She stepped down on the pavement and looked around, wary eyes taking in the two story building. "What's this place?"

I grinned. "It's my new gym."

"How can you afford all this?"

I shrugged. "I used the inheritance from my mum to buy the place, and my fighting money helps with the remodeling."

Her eyes widened. "Oh."

"Did you think I fought for fun?"

She licked her lips. "I—I don't like fighting."

I sighed. Whatever.

We stepped inside the dark foyer, the smell of sweat and rubber mats piercing my senses like a balm of cool wind on a hot day. We were both quiet as I flicked on the lights and watched her take in the wide space, imagining how she'd see it through her eyes. It was old and musty and most of the workout equipment hadn't been updated, but the boxing rings were new.

She stared at the posters in the hallway. I pointed at one of Max with his gloves in the air as the ref put on his championship belt during a mixed martial arts championship. "That's Max. He's my personal trainer, and he'll be one of my trainers here when I open this place in a few months. We've been friends for a while."

Her eyes searched mine. "You really love this place."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for this gym—for training—I'd be, I don't know, crazy? Pissed off all the time, for sure. It gives me focus."

She chewed on her lip, unease on her face.

I ignored it. "Ready for your surprise?"

She sent me a nervous look. "Yeah."

"Come on, then. Let me show you something." I took her hand and led her over to one of the red sparring mats. "I can't help but notice how wary you are with certain people, and I think you might be more confident if you really knew how to defend yourself. You need to know more than just how to make a fist. You need to know how to use it."

She looked down at the thick mat. “We’re going to wrestle?”

I grinned at that image. “We’re going to do Krav Maga. Ever heard of it?”

She shook her head.

“Translated it means *contact combat*, and I’ve been teaching it at various gyms in the area for a couple of years. Basically it’s a form of self-defense developed by the Israeli military, fast, aggressive, and very effective with just a few moves.”

“Does this mean you’ll be touching me?”

I blinked. “Yeah. A lot.”

She debated for a few seconds, a small smile curving her mouth. Full and plump, those lips on mine had been my fantasy way too many nights. “Okay, but only if you let me take you down a few times. Like flip you over my shoulder, toss you to the ground kind of take down. Maybe sit on you.”

I exhaled, picturing that little scenario, and I couldn’t stop the little grin on my face. “You can sit on me whenever you want.”

She smirked. “Funny, Englishman. You better be nice if you don’t want me to hurt you.”

I laughed. This was the girl I wanted to see. Sure of herself. Sassy. Not the scared girl at the frat party.

She walked around on the mat and hopped a little on her heels. “Okay. This is going to be fun. What’s first?”

“I need you to take your clothes off.”

## Chapter 20

### *Elizabeth*

Of course he was teasing me.

He chuckled. “You can close your mouth. I meant that you don’t want to ruin—or rip—your jeans.” He pointed to the back of the gym where the lockers and restrooms were. “Come on. I’ve got some extra pants for you to change into.”

Ten minutes later I came out of the ladies locker room barefooted in a pair of extra-small white karate pants.

I walked back to the mat and did a little pirouette, liking the way it made his eyes gleam with laughter.

He waited for me dressed in the same pants. His feet were bare and spread apart in a cocky stance, and even though I’d never been one of those people who got a thrill from odd body parts, his feet were sexy.

But it was his naked chest that made my heart do a loop-de-loop. My tongue wanted to lick it, but I settled for deep breathing. I recalled how wonderful it had felt to press myself against his skin the nights we’d slept together. But that was then and this was now, and it seemed as if we were slowly progressing toward more.

*Keep your tongue in your mouth, Elizabeth,* I told myself.

To distract myself, my eyes traced the dragonfly tattoo on his neck, my fingers itching to draw it. The tattoo seemed so incongruous with the tough guy he was, yet it fit him. He had a softness to him, and I think I’d sensed it from the first moment we’d met.

“Come here,” he said. Silkily.

I went without hesitation. “What?” I asked.

He reached out and gathered the bottom material of my shirt and tied it in a knot that rested on my tummy. Tingles went over me at the brush of his fingers against my skin. “Now, you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, looking down at the peek of my tummy that showed through. I suddenly felt alive. Wired.

He nodded as he bent down to readjust the sparring mat, and I saw the scars on his back again.

“What happened to your back?”

He stood back up and faced me, his face like stone.

I saw the distance growing in him, as if he didn’t want to talk about it.

“If—if you ever wanted to tell me about it, I’d listen ...” My voice petered out.

“I don’t.”

Sadness filled me. There was so much more to him than just being the hot guy with the sexy accent. “I won’t judge you, Declan. I have my own scars.”

He exhaled, studying me. “I got into a scuffle with my father and went through a plate glass window when I was fourteen. My back took the worst of it.”

“That sounds awful.”

“I spent that whole summer sleeping on my stomach, waiting for the stitches to heal.” He looked at my wrist. “What happened?”

Images of the hotel zipped through my head, and I opened my mouth to tell him, I mean really tell him what had happened to me, but I didn’t. Old habits die hard.

I looked away. Swallowed. “I can count the number of people on one hand who know why I slit my wrists. I—I’m not ready to tell you.”

“Blake knows?”

I heard the jealousy in his voice.

“Yes.”

He tightened his lips. “Right then. Let’s get to work.”

I nodded, relieved he was letting it go.

“When we get down to direct man-on-man sparring, I’ll ask you to wear protective gear and wrap your hands, but for today, we’re just going to talk about stance and some basic moves to get you comfortable. Okay?”

I nodded, and that seemed to be all he needed to go into full-on teaching mode. He had a beautiful voice for it, clear and low, yet commanding. I could see the appeal in taking a class from him. I bet the women hung on his every word.

“You don’t want to give your opponent any leeway. Be cognizant of your environment and if you can get help. If you can’t, then be prepared to put up a hell of a fight. Most importantly, be aggressive and do whatever it takes to

defend yourself. Punches, kicks, elbow strikes, knees, and even biting and scratching. Just don't freeze up like you did the night Colby showed up."

I smirked. "Sounds like a cat fight I saw once on the quad freshman year."

He smiled as he adjusted my shoulders and stance. "This kind of fighting is much more premeditated. Just keep your strong leg in front of you. Put your hands up in front of your face just below eye level. Your hips, eyes, and lead shoulder should always face your opponent."

I followed his instruction, my heart thundering at our closeness.

He had me shifting my weight around on my legs to get comfortable.

Back and forth. Again. And then again.

He demonstrated an uppercut elbow punch for me, positioning his body next to mine as he rotated his hips and shuffled forward at an imaginary attacker. He moved like lightning strikes in the sky. Fast. Brilliant. Too hot to hold. I repeated his kicks and punches again and again until I began to feel a tight burning in my thighs and arms and buttocks.

"You'll need to exercise to get stronger muscles," he told me later as I failed miserably at a good front kick. "The thing to remember about a kick is you go for his twigs and berries. If you can't, aim for a knee or his neck or nose. Just get the kick in and get out."

I grunted and wiped sweat from my face.

"Tired?" He paused in demonstrating the kick once again.

I shook my head. Liar, liar. But watching him move his powerful body around was invigorating.

Who needed Gatorade when I had a hot dude showing me his moves?

A few minutes later, we faced off on the mat. "Come at me with some heat. See if you can sneak in my circle and land a tap on my arm."

"What about the protective gear?"

He waved me off as he positioned himself in a defensive stance. "We're fine for today. You won't get in."

*Won't get in?*

I puffed up my chest and shuffled toward him like he'd shown me, hands up and ready to strike. I bounced around back and forth, angling for a spot on his body.

"Come on, Elizabeth. You're taking too long."

I moved around him, looking for a way inside, but each time I rotated

around him, he'd pivot his body toward mine.

"Move slower," I snapped.

"It doesn't have to be perfect, Unicorn Girl. Just get a tap in."

"Don't call me that."

I shifted and he followed.

"I can't!" I yelled at him. "You're too big and fast."

He sighed and rolled his neck. "Pretend we're at some party and we just met and I'm going to throw you down and take whatever I want ..."

I don't even remember lunging for him. I don't remember telling my fist to slam his face, but it did. His head jerked back, mostly to avoid my punch, but some of it still connected.

I gasped. "Declan! Why didn't you defend yourself?"

He blinked a few times. "Damn. I didn't say break my nose; I said *tap*."

I fluttered around him, feeling terrible. My hands cupped his face, our chests touching. "God, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" I ran my fingers across his jawline, fingering the stubble there. "Want me to get some ice? Maybe a bottle of water? Do you need to sit down? God, I'm talking too much, aren't I?"

He wore a bemused expression. "I'm fine. You caught me by surprise is all."

"I could have hurt you," I wailed. "And then I'd feel horrible. You've been nothing but good and wonderful and sweet to me and I ..." I sputtered out of words, scared at what was on the tip of my tongue. God. *What was wrong with me?*

"Maybe I do need water." His voice was weird, his eyes as well, the gray taking up most of his irises.

"Declan, your eyes are dilated. Are you sure you're okay? Do you have a concussion?"

He groaned and shut his eyes.

"Declan?"

He stepped back. "It's not the hit, Elizabeth. It's *you*."

I hissed, something in my heart shifting as he opened his eyes and stared at me. With longing. With heat.

I imagined fireworks went off somewhere in the distance.

Change happens to all of us. Sometimes you want a new haircut, sometimes you want to try blue cheese instead of ranch, and sometimes you

just want to ignore your head and go with what you desire the most. Mostly it's a gradual process, but not with Declan. I wanted sex on a mat in an un-air-conditioned gym with a hot as hell British guy pounding into me, no matter the consequences. Fuck my silly sex rules. I wanted him.

He studied me. "If you knew what I was thinking, you'd run like hell."

"Are you thinking about tossing me on the mat for real?"

He lowered his chin, his eyes at half-mast. "Yes."

I felt drunk at his words. Dizzy with need.

I shivered at the heat that raced up my spine as he stood there looking at me with those molten eyes.

*Wanting me.*

God, I was sick of being a walking, talking dead person when it came to real emotional need. I just wanted him, hard and fast.

"Kiss me, Declan. *Please.*"

Want to read the rest of *Dirty English*? You can read it for FREE in Kindle Unlimited!

[\*Dirty English\*](#)



# I DARE YOU RECIPES

## Nana's Super Secret Pecan Pie

### INGREDIENTS:

1 cup of sugar  
1 ½ cups of corn syrup (half dark and half light)  
4 eggs  
¼ cup butter  
1 ½ teaspoon vanilla  
1 ½ cups pecans, broken  
1 unbaked deep-dish pie shell

### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In saucepan, boil sugar and corn syrup together for 2 to 3 minutes and then set aside to cool.
2. In large bowl beat eggs lightly and slowly pour the syrup mixture into the eggs, stirring constantly.
3. Strain the mixture to make sure it's smooth and lump free. Stir in butter, vanilla, and pecans and pour into crust.
4. Bake in a 350°F oven for about 45 to 60 minutes or until set.

5. Serve with a smile and a story about a secret recipe.

# Chocolate Chip Cookies

## INGREDIENTS:

8 tablespoons of salted butter  
1/2 cup white sugar  
1/4 cup packed light brown sugar  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
1 egg  
1 ½ cups all purpose flour  
1/2 teaspoon baking soda  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
3/4 cup chocolate chips

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Microwave the butter for about 40 seconds to barely melt it. It shouldn't be hot, but it should be almost in liquid form.
2. Using a stand mixer or electric beaters, beat the butter with the sugars until creamy. Add the vanilla and the egg; beat on low speed until just mixed.
3. Add the flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix until crumbles form. Use your hands to press the crumbles together into a dough. It should form one large ball that is easy to handle. Add the chocolate chips and incorporate with your hands.
4. Roll the dough into 12 large balls and place on a cookie sheet. Bake for 9-11 minutes until the cookies look puffy and dry and barely golden.
5. DO NOT OVERBAKE and let them cool on the pan for 30 minutes.

# Double Chocolate Muffins

## INGREDIENTS:

2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 cup white sugar  
3/4 cup chocolate chips  
1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 egg  
1 cup plain yogurt  
1/2 cup milk  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
1/2 cup vegetable oil  
1/4 cup chocolate chips

## DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F (200 degrees C). Grease 12 muffin cups or line with paper muffin liners.
2. Combine flour, sugar, 3/4 cup chocolate chips, cocoa powder, and baking soda in a large bowl. Whisk egg, yogurt, milk, vanilla, and vegetable oil in another bowl until smooth; pour into chocolate mixture and stir until batter is just blended. Fill prepared muffin cups 3/4 full and sprinkle with remaining 1/4 cup chocolate chips.
3. Bake in preheated oven until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean, about 20 minutes. Cool in the pans for 10 minutes before removing to cool completely on a wire rack.

# BOOKS AND STALKING

Welcome to a detailed list of all my books PLUS the various places to stalk me, which I highly encourage.

My series books are standalones about brand new couples.

Briarwood Academy Series: Angsty, heartfelt new adult standalone romances

[\*Very Bad Things\*](#)  
[\*Very Wicked Beginnings\*](#)  
[\*Very Wicked Things\*](#)  
[\*Very Twisted Things\*](#)

British Bad Boys Series: Steamy and emotional new adult/contemporary romance with British heroes

[\*Dirty English\*](#)  
[\*Filthy English\*](#)

Standalones:

[\*Fake Fiancée\*](#)  
[\*The Last Guy\*](#)  
(w/Tia Louise)

[\*Spider\*](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *USA Today* best-selling author Ilsa Madden-Mills writes about strong heroines and sexy alpha males that sometimes you just want to slap. She's best known for her angsty, heartfelt new adult college romances.

A former high school English teacher, she adores all things *Pride and Prejudice*; Mr. Darcy is her ultimate hero.

She's addicted to frothy coffee beverages, Vampire Dairies, and any kind of book featuring unicorns and sword-wielding females.

[Join her Unicorn Girls FB group](#) for special excerpts, prizes, and snarky fun!