



FIRST
FLIGHT,

FINAL
FALL

*Sometimes...
scoring is the
easy part.*

C.W. FARNSWORTH

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FINAL
FALL**

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To everyone who has supported my writing so far.

You are the reason this book exists.

PROLOGUE

Find beauty in the broken pieces. That's what my mother used to tell me. My father would scoff and say life is about accomplishments, not beauty.

Given the fundamental difference in those two ideologies, it's probably not a massive surprise their marriage crashed spectacularly, but my five-year-old self was not expecting to leave for my first soccer game with two parents and come home to one.

Maybe I should have hated the sport after that; resented it for the loss that took place during the hour I kicked the black and white ball into the goal for the first time, clueless to the fact that my mother was speeding out of the town limits at that very same moment.

I did the opposite.

I shut out everything besides soccer.

After we became a family of three, my older sister Hallie retreated into normal things like friends, boys, and school.

My father retreated into destructive things like alcohol, insane work hours, and a series of flings with women half his age.

I played soccer.

If my teachers had gotten ahold of my father, they probably would have passed on their concerns that my obsession with soccer was unhealthy. That I sketched passing drills on the sides of my worksheets and read biographies about legends in the sport during class.

If my coaches had been able to get ahold of my father, they probably would have informed him I had heaps of natural talent and a work ethic that put the Energizer Bunny to shame.

Instead, I shrugged at my teachers and informed my coaches of all the things I still needed to work on.

Before she left, my mother would say she named me Saylor because it sounded bold.

Fearless.

Brave.

It was the only thing she left me with that I took to heart.

To Hallie's credit, she tried to fill the gaping hole left by our mother's literal departure and our father's metaphorical one. Even so, we were never close, due to both our six-year age gap and our polar opposite personalities.

And it wasn't just Hallie. I didn't let anyone in. Not my many friends, not my soccer teammates, not any of the boys I'd kiss under the bleachers.

I never wanted to.

Until *him*.

CHAPTER ONE

I tend not to think before I speak.

“Yellow is really not your color, Anne,” I inform my redheaded housemate as she enters the kitchen through the opening to my right. “Red and yellow should only be combined on a hot dog.”

Anne rolls her eyes as she grabs a hard seltzer from the fridge.

“Don’t be a bitch, Saylor,” Cressida chastises. She doesn’t look up from the chocolate cake she’s icing as she scolds me. Multitasking at its finest.

“Saylor can’t help it. It’s her default setting,” my best friend and co-captain Emma Watkins contributes as she mixes whatever disgusting cocktail she’s come up with tonight.

I flip Emma off. “I’m just being honest,” I retort from my perch on the kitchen counter as I drum my bare feet against the cabinet below the butcher block. My body is thrumming with excess energy. The last time I missed my daily run was three months ago, thanks to the snowstorm that hit right before the start of winter break.

If only extreme weather were at fault today. Instead, there was my father’s unexpected phone call, followed by a half-hour lecture from my older sister Hallie to detail the many, many ways in which I did not respond appropriately to the news that our father is getting remarried sixteen years after our mother zoomed off solo into the metaphorical sunset.

Actually, lecture is probably the wrong word.

Hallie made it clear my lackluster “okay” wasn’t what our father was hoping for, but most of our conversation was her going on about how wonderful it is that our father is finally settling down with an age-appropriate, stable woman who’s just as boring as he is. I added the last adjective—boring

—in my mind while I painted my nails bubblegum pink and scrolled through social media on my laptop. I wouldn't have even indulged the conversation if not for the fact that Hallie's eight months pregnant. She's a worrier, and I didn't want sending her into an early labor on my conscience.

"Ignore her, Anne. She's having a bad day, and she's drunk," Cressida explains, smoothing things over like always—as she literally spreads chocolate icing.

I shrug because both are true. Doesn't mean I'm wrong about the *bright* yellow top, but I don't care enough to press the point. I've got other things to worry about, like which sports team captain to bring back here tonight. I've narrowed it down to lacrosse or hockey when Anne interrupts my inner debate.

"Bad day? I thought you were celebrating, Saylor?"

I shrug again. My interest in sharing what prompted my quick trip from euphoric morning to vexed afternoon is nonexistent. Given the fact that I'm the only player on Lancaster University's women's soccer team who has never had a family member attend a game, I'm sure my teammates have all surmised my upbringing was not the idyllic white-picket-fence-golden-retriever fantasy many of them took for granted. The best part of coming to Lancaster was finally shedding the sympathetic stares regarding my perennial lack of parenting. I'm in no mood to expound upon my fractured family—even to my best friends. It will either lead to pitiful looks and awkward apologies, or more of the amateur-family-therapist lines Hallie spouts at me.

"It's not that big of a deal. I knew I would get in." I down a third shot of gin. It's the only liquor I'll touch.

My brash words are a stretch. I was confident, sure, but Scholenberg is the most exclusive training camp in the world. I wasn't just competing for admission against the top college-aged players in the United States, but around the world. An invitation is an honor, not a forgone conclusion—something Emma, Cressida, and Anne are all well aware of.

Emma scoffs as she measures out whiskey.

"Didn't they accept two Americans?" Anne asks, moving on. She's never been one to stoke animosity, and she, like everyone else who's ever met me, knows if I don't want to talk about something, I won't. Period.

"Yup," I respond, popping the P. "Ellie Anderson got in, too."

"That's a surprise," Cressida remarks. "I would have expected Cotes or Stevens."

“Ellie’s got connections,” I reply. “Her uncle’s an assistant trainer for Kluvberg.”

“That’ll do it,” Emma states, sticking the carton of pineapple juice back in the fridge. *With whiskey? Gross.* “I can’t believe you’ll be playing on their field.”

“I know,” I admit. The allure of attending Scholenberg isn’t just the exclusivity or the prestige. The camp also provides an opportunity to play on the most famous field in the world: the home of FC Kluvberg.

“I literally have a poster of it on my wall,” Emma continues.

“No, you have a poster of Adler Beck on your wall,” I correct, leaning my head back against the upper cabinet so I can study the cracks in the plaster blemishing our kitchen ceiling.

“But I purposefully chose the photo of him *on* the field, not the shirtless one from the ‘Sexiest Athletes’ cover.”

“Big of you.”

Anne laughs at my comment, and Emma rolls her eyes as she downs her drink.

“Okay, let’s go,” Cressida announces, dropping the now empty bowl and spatula in the sink. “The cake is done.”

“It’s sweet how you think that will make it until tomorrow,” I tell the ceiling.

“Saylor, I swear, if you...”

Emma laughs. “Cress, you need to hide it if you want there to be any left tomorrow.”

“All I need is for Saylor to—”

“Hey!” I’m the one who interrupts this time. “*I’m* not the one eating the stuff, okay?”

“But you are the one telling your overnight guests where my baked goods are,” Cressida points out.

“They’re not overnight guests, they’re her boy toys,” Emma interjects.

I ignore Emma. “I don’t tell them where they are. They’re hungry, and—”

“She uses the sweets to kick them out,” Anne cuts in.

“Here’s a cupcake for the three orgasms,” Emma adds with a wicked smirk.

My gaze stays fixed on the jagged line that runs a couple of feet from the corner of the kitchen. *That probably shouldn’t be there, right?* The four of us snagged this house sophomore year, so eager to escape dorm living we signed

a lease for the first place we looked at, and then we were too lazy to explore other options for junior year.

The Colonial-style cottage serves its purpose: a place to crash between classes, practice, games, and parties. If only any of us had any talents with a hammer or a screwdriver, as there's an endless list of tasks our landlord never seems to get around to. The only nailing and screwing happening around here is of the non-construction variety.

I down one more shot and slide off the kitchen counter, adjusting my light blue dress so it covers some of my thighs. It's a cotton frock more appropriate for a country club in summer than a frat party in Connecticut's version of spring, which feels no different from winter. If Lancaster wasn't ranked as the top soccer program in the country, I definitely would have stayed in the South for my college years. *Dress for the weather you want* has become my wardrobe motto.

"Ready," I announce, tossing my blonde hair over one shoulder.

Emma pours her whiskey and pineapple concoction into one of the travel mugs we use for transporting coffee to morning practice and claps a lid on top. "Me too."

"You better remember to wash that," I inform her, wrinkling my nose in response to the smell emanating from the container as she draws closer to me.

"First thing I'll do when we return from this shindig," Emma replies, sending me a saccharine smile.

I roll my eyes. Emma's notorious for her inability to wash anything without leaving some form of residue behind. It's why she's perpetually assigned to trash duty while the rest of us alternate completing the remaining household chores.

It's a short walk to the frat house hosting tonight. I've never bothered to keep track of the various Greek letters and who belongs to which fraternity or sorority. I go to the parties I feel like going to, and I tend to be followed around by the rest of the soccer team. Being the top female recruit in the country gained me a celebrity following among the niche few who keep up with women's soccer before I even stepped foot on campus.

The past two-and-a-half years of on and off-field antics have only added fodder to my notoriety.

So did winning Lancaster a national championship.

Drunk students have already begun to spill out on the lawn as we approach the frat house; many laughing and stumbling about. It's March—far

too early to be spending time outside voluntarily. No one has ever said drunk people make smart decisions, though. Also, when we step inside the house, I sort of get the inclination to head outside. Every square inch of the floor is covered by feet or littered with empty cups that skitter across the hardwood as people mill about. The scent of sweat and spilled beer hangs heavy in the air. Anne sighs at the scene, but I grin, feeding off the boisterous energy swirling around with sweet-smelling smoke.

I lead the way toward the kitchen, ignoring the shouts and suggestions being hurled my way. I got used to the attention guys pay to me a long time ago—about the same time I figured out how to use it to my advantage. A well-timed hair toss, or suggestive smile is a pretty powerful tool when it comes to the opposite sex.

Jason Williams' eyes light up as soon as the four of us step inside the kitchen already packed with drunk college students. "Hell yes! The party has arrived!"

"And she's in fine form tonight," Emma responds. "You're... what? Four shots deep, Scott?"

"Drink your gross concoction and stop counting my drinks, Watkins," I retort.

Jason sends Emma a questioning look. Emma sighs. "She's in a mood."

"Hello, I'm right here!" I roll my eyes and stalk over to the counter covered with an assortment of cheap liquor. "Do you guys not have gin tonight? I said I wasn't coming back unless there was gin, Williams!" I call out as I survey the limited options.

Jason sighs and picks up one of the labeled glass bottles sitting directly in front of me, which is in fact gin. Probably a sign I shouldn't be imbibing its contents—a warning I don't heed.

"I'm sorry, Saylor," he says. "I know how much you wanted it."

I scoff and splash a generous amount of gin into a plastic cup, adding some ginger ale I find in the fridge in a half-assed attempt at a cocktail. "What are you talking about, Jason?"

"The German camp? You heard back today, right?"

"Yes."

"You know it's the most competitive soccer—or football, whatever—program in the world. You should be honored you were even considered. "

I snort. "What are you talking about? Of course I got in. I'm ranked first nationally." Raising the full plastic cylinder, I shout, "To the fucking

Germans!” I’m far from the only one who started drinking early, so my toast is met with hearty cheers. Satisfied by the enthusiastic response, I take a large sip of my drink.

“Wait, you did? Then why...” Jason’s voice trails off as I wander over to where Anne is standing a few feet away, leaving him with Emma and Cressida. They’re probably speculating about my mood.

“Which one are you eyeing?” I ask Anne, giving her arm a soft nudge as I lean against the counter next to her. She glances over at me, abandoning her feeble attempt to look like she’s texting, not eyeing the baseball players who have set up a makeshift bowling alley on the kitchen table. I smirk as I watch one try to knock over an empty glass beer bottle with a ping pong ball. Yeah, good luck with that, bud.

Anne shoves her phone into the back pocket of her skinny jeans. “I’m not.”

“Convincing.” I take a sip of my drink. “If you just—”

“Hannah Mason.”

“Come on! That’s not—”

“Hannah Mason, Saylor!”

“I can’t believe you’re still bringing that up. It was three years ago!”

“And she *still* hasn’t returned for a single alumni game,” Anne replies.

“That is not my fault. She was interested in Trey, and I made it happen. Anything that happened after is not on me.”

“It’s the ‘made it happen’ part I’m worried about,” Anne remarks.

I roll my eyes. Freshman year, our team captain was obsessed with Trey Johnson, Lancaster’s quarterback. I shared that information with him. Like most college hook-ups, their relationship burned hot, fast, and out. I got none of the credit for instigating their short-lived romance and all of the blame when Trey ended their infatuation by trying to hook up with me instead.

“Saylor!” Natalie, a sophomore on the soccer team, bounces over to me.

“What’s up, Nat?” I ask, keeping an eye on Anne in my peripheral vision to see if I can figure out which guy she was looking at before.

“I heard you got into Scholenberg! That’s amazing! I mean, everyone knew you would, but...”

I laugh a little as I tune out her excited babbling. My badass soccer skills and series of flings with Lancaster’s hottest male specimens have cemented a form of hero worship among my soccer teammates even running together until we puke hasn’t tarnished. Mostly I find it entertaining, but there are

certainly moments when I wouldn't mind fewer starry eyes.

"...Visit at the end."

"Wait, what?" I ask, fully aware that I sound like I wasn't paying attention. Mostly because I wasn't.

"I'm going to Amnerallons!" Based on Anne's snort beside me, it's not the first time I've been told that.

"That's awesome, Natalie. Congrats," I reply, finally giving her my full attention. Amnerallons isn't of the same caliber as Scholenberg, but then again, no other program is. It's still a camp most players would feel honored to attend.

"We're ending the second week by visiting Kluvberg. I checked the dates—you'll be just starting Scholenberg."

"Whoa, very cool," I respond, a bit more emotion in my voice. I'm imagining the atmosphere at Scholenberg will be similar to that of an enemy army camp. A friendly face will most definitely be welcome.

Natalie keeps chatting, continuing our mostly one-sided conversation. She only pauses for breath when some of our other teammates come up to congratulate me on Scholenberg as well.

I mostly lean against the counter and people watch, content to let others come to me. Usually this is the portion of the evening when I'd make the rounds, but I'm drained. Emotionally, at least. My legs are still itching to run. Some of the other partygoers would probably be a bit taken aback if I started doing sprints in the kitchen, though.

Plus, I'm drunk.

I'm not usually much of a drinker. In my experience, people tend to drink for fearlessness or to forget. I've never had the first issue. There is nothing I would do drunk that I haven't already done sober. The second motivation is why the corners of the kitchen look hazy right now. The last time the number of members in my immediate family shifted was not exactly a cause for celebration, and I wouldn't say the last sixteen years have made me less cynical about the general notion of romantic commitment, nor the specific institution that fails as often as it perseveres.

I take the final sip of my drink and drop the empty cup on the kitchen counter behind me. It's already littered with abandoned ones, some half-full, most empty. When I turn back around, it's to a welcome sight. A hot, hunky sight.

"Drew!"

The dark-haired captain of Lancaster's hockey team glances over from the doorway. He's being trailed by two girls who both give me death glares as he bounds over to me.

"Want to get out of here?" I'm not the type to bother with pleasantries or false platitudes, but I usually throw out a "Hello" at least.

Drew doesn't seem to mind the lack of polite greeting. He grins. "Hell yeah."

"Please be done by two," Anne requests from her spot next to me. "I have to be up at nine tomorrow."

I smirk. "Wear headphones."

CHAPTER TWO

Pristine. Green. Empty. Those are the first adjectives that come to mind as I study the emerald carpet spread out before me.

I'm here.

I'm finally, really, truly here.

I take a tentative step out from the shade of the walkway and into the blazing German sun. The cheap nylon shirt I just pulled on chafes against my overheated skin, but the discomfort fades as I trace the steps of players I've admired for years out onto the firm turf. I spin in a slow circle to survey the thousands of empty metal seats.

Awe overtakes me, reminding me of the reason I resolved at age fourteen to one day stand here. I've played in stadiums this size before, but none with the gravitational presence I'm surrounded by now.

Any reverence dissipates, allowing a litany of pitiful emotions to pulse through me as I study the immaculate field I've dreamed of playing on for as long as I can remember. As though I've summoned it with my dour thoughts, a sharp stab of pain—like the jab of a needle—races from my knee upward as a reminder that coming here was probably a terrible decision. Considering some ideas I've had, that's saying a lot.

There are some moments you can make happen through hard work and perseverance. Others take place whether or not you want them to.

This is a combination of the two, with a healthy helping of masochism.

I turn to leave but halt when I hear a rapid stream of German spouted behind me. I look back to see a tall guy who looks to be about my age studying me curiously as he swipes a hand through his shaggy hair. The logo on everything he's wearing identifies him as a member of the football club

whose field I'm currently trespassing on.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Water cooler?" he asks, switching to heavily accented English. My expression must clearly convey I didn't understand a word of whatever he just said.

I glance down at the black polo I snagged that's emblazoned with the stadium's logo and realize immediately what he has surmised.

I flash him my most charming smile. "I don't actually work here," I admit, injecting my voice with a hint of the southern charm that has never failed to get me out of trouble or make males capitulate. "I just wanted to get a look at the stadium, but if I come across anyone who looks like they'd know where the water coolers are stored when I sneak back out, I'll make sure to pass that along."

There's a blank stare of surprise. He clearly was not expecting me to have snuck in, or to admit that I did.

After a long moment, he smiles. I relax slightly, no longer having to feign a casual stance.

"You did not want to just take a tour?" he asks, still smiling.

"Nope," I respond lightly. Now that I'm reasonably certain he's not going to call security, I'm anxious to get the hell out of here. Ellie told me FC Kløvberg was practicing at their training facility today. If there are other players at the stadium instead, I'm not eager to wait and see if they're as trusting of an American stranger. "But don't worry, I'm headed out now." I turn to leave for a second time.

"Wait!" the guy calls, jogging over toward me. I spin back around to see his friendly expression has turned flirtatious and bite back a groan. "I'm Otto," he shares, holding a pale hand out to shake. His fair complexion matches his light blond hair. Either he spends little time outside or is liberal with his sunscreen usage.

Since he's a professional soccer player, I'm assuming the latter. Even after the long, cold Connecticut winter, my skin has already accumulated enough melanin from spring training—what little of it my sprained knee allowed me to participate in—to appear several shades darker than his.

"Nice to meet you," I tell him, gripping his offered hand and then dropping it after a quick shake. A flash of disappointment crosses his boyish face, and I wonder if he was expecting me to act like more of a fangirl. Unfortunately for him, I'm not easily impressed. "I'm Saylor."

Belatedly, I wonder if I should have made up a name in case Otto mentions this to anyone later. No one at Lancaster will ever let me live it down if I get sent home from the most competitive soccer program in the world the day before it officially begins.

For trespassing, the most mundane of all the misdemeanors.

“Saylor,” he repeats, drawing out the final syllable of my name so it’s lengthier than the first. “Would you like me to give you a tour of the stadium?” Otto grins, the insinuation obvious.

“Another time, maybe.” Like never, most likely. My primary goal at Scholenberg is to minimize the time spent with my butt parked on a slab of pine. “I have to head out. I’m meeting some friends.” Temporary teammates who will likely become future opponents, actually, but that doesn’t seem like the type of detail he needs to know to effectively end this encounter.

Otto opens his mouth to respond, but we’re both distracted by the sound of pounding footfalls.

A new figure emerges from the cement tunnel out onto the field, silhouetted by the blazing sunlight. I don’t realize who it is until he stops about twenty feet from where I’m standing, blocking the brunt of the sun.

It’s the poster on Emma’s bedroom wall come to life.

Adler Beck.

Referred to only by his surname by his many, *many* adoring fans. The most famous soccer—fine, football—star in the world. Germany’s chosen Kaiser. Led seasoned veterans to a nail-biting victory in the World Championship his first year of eligibility, making him a household name at sixteen. Now just twenty-two, he’s already one of the most decorated players of all time. The offspring of two highly respected German players, his pedigree and raw talent would have opened any door even if he wasn’t also insanely attractive. He’s blessed in that department as well.

A triple threat.

Even though I’ve watched hours of footage of him playing, it doesn’t prepare me for the sight of Adler Beck’s signature scowl in person. Among other things. His dirty blond hair is ruffled and sweaty, and his skin is as tan as mine as he jogs toward us in his practice gear.

He’s even better-looking in person, which in the age of Photoshop seems both highly improbable and supremely unfair.

There’s a potent magnetism to his presence that makes me forget about the heat, the itchy shirt I’m wearing, and the eager German drooling three

feet from me.

Adler Beck spouts out a rapid stream of German, and for the first time, I regret letting Brett Stephens do all my homework for me in our elementary German class. I even chose German as my foreign language elective in anticipation of this trip. I can't distinguish a single word Beck barks, but the tone is clear. Otto drops his easygoing manner immediately.

Drops me.

"Nice to meet you," he tells me quickly, before pulling a pair of keeper gloves out of his back pocket and heading toward the goal. "I hope we'll meet again."

It's exactly what I was hoping for a moment ago, but I don't feel relief. I feel miffed and irritated as I study Otto's retreating back. The feeling is exacerbated when I watch Adler Beck give me a cursory glance and then walk the couple of remaining feet to where a black and white ball sits, waiting.

As soon as Otto positions himself in the goal, Beck becomes a blur of smooth movements, sending the soccer ball flying at a lethal trajectory. Otto reaches, but it sails past him effortlessly. It's a textbook penalty kick, with one exception. If not for the many hours spent analyzing Adler Beck's technique to complete this very motion, I never would have seen it. Thanks to the annoyance and lingering self-pity I'm still experiencing, I decide to critique the man unanimously considered to be one of the most talented players to ever set foot on a soccer field.

"You dropped your shoulder too early," I state loudly.

Making certain my voice echoes across the pitch.

Ensuring he can't ignore my words.

Piercing blue eyes pin me in place. "You're giving me pointers?" Unlike Otto, Adler Beck doesn't address me in German first. Either I look like a foreigner, or he knows an American accent when he hears one. His incredulous voice is less accented than Otto's but sounds as harsh as it did when he was shouting in German.

"Just stating a fact," I reply, holding my ground against the force of his gaze.

"By all means, show me your technique." Adler Beck steps back from the ball he's trapped neatly and gestures me forward after glancing pointedly at my sneakers. His tone is *almost* teasing, but it carries a hard undercurrent of derision.

I don't need a German dictionary to translate what that means.

I take a tentative step forward, the panic pressing down on me as oppressively as the summer heat. A significant portion of me wants to toss out a "just kidding" and flee, but the competitive spirit I squashed into being dormant for the past couple months flares and refuses to allow me to back down. Somehow, I don't think this is what Lancaster's physical therapist meant when she said to ease my knee back into full motion.

I walk forward, as nonchalantly as I can considering each step brings me closer to the familiar sphere I've barely touched in weeks. There's a chance—a slim one, I hope—my knee is no longer capable of this. So, I don't give myself an opportunity to second-guess anything, sending the ball spinning through the air as soon as I reach it.

Otto lunges, but it arcs past him neatly to drop into the back left corner of the net. I shift my weight back to my good leg and bite my bottom lip to keep the smile from spreading across my face.

Otto glances back and forth between me and the now stationary ball a couple of times, a look of shocked disbelief on his face.

I keep my expression neutral despite the swell of elation I'm experiencing. A quick glance to my left reveals a stone-faced Beck. Famous for his quick temper on the field, the only sign of it now is a slight tic in the sharp jawline that looks like it's carved from granite, or some other equally infallible and impressive material.

Following an invisible command, Otto sends the ball back to Beck, who traps it neatly and then sends it flying effortlessly into the back of the net.

I watch his shoulders carefully and roll my eyes when I notice he makes a point to lower his right one early.

The rational thing to do right now would be to leave, so I take a step farther onto the field. Closer to Adler Beck.

"Best out of five?" I suggest. I'm scalded by blue fire as Beck turns the full heat of his searing gaze on me. Evidently the last glare was just a warm-up.

Unfortunately for him, I'm flame retardant.

He takes a step back from the ball Otto has already returned to him, a silent acquiescence with an edge of challenge that's evident in his slight smirk. I take more time setting up, focusing on ensuring each part of my posture is perfect before I send the ball into the goal. The back of the net bulges against the velocity of the ball's momentum.

I allow myself a small grin as I flex the muscles in my calf. Otto looks both surprised and annoyed as he rolls the ball back to me. Penalty kicks are a challenge for any goalie, more of a test of the player's skill than their own, but if he was considered good enough for Germany's most elite club, then this is undoubtedly a blow to his ego.

FC Kluvberg only takes the best of the best, as evidenced by the athlete to my left.

"Your turn, twenty-three," I say as I pass the ball. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd pretend I have no idea who Beck is. Unfortunately, he's famous enough that I'd end up looking like the fool in that scenario, not him. Still, I refuse to feed his ego by using one of his worshipful nicknames, and since his number is prominently displayed on his practice jersey, I don't have to admit I know exactly who he is outright.

Beck stops the ball without comment and executes another perfect kick that finds the back of the net. When Otto returns it, he sends it in my direction with a quick flick of his ankle.

I score another goal.

Beck remains expressionless, but Otto's expression shifts slightly away from annoyance to reveal glimmers of awe.

I allow the tiny piece of myself, that has spent the last two months terrified my soccer career could be over, a brief moment to absorb the bizarre notion that I'm currently tied in a shootout with the youngest player to be voted "Most Valuable" on a national team as Beck finds the back of the net again.

Forcing myself to focus, I trap the ball he sends my way and send my own kick back to Otto. His fingers come within millimeters of the spinning ball, but it still lands safely behind the goal line.

Otto passes the ball back to Beck. He shoots it back courtesy of a powerful kick, only this time Otto brushes against the side of the ball, sending it skittering to the left and past the post harmlessly. I don't say a word but glance over to see Beck's hands are clenched into tight fists. Otto looks at me nervously as he collects the ball and kicks it back to me. I let out a long exhale, determined not to let my focus waver or allow myself to dwell on the fact that I could potentially beat Adler Beck in a shootout.

"Saylor?"

I turn at the sound of my name echoing across the mostly empty field. Franz Anderson, one of the assistant trainers for the team and the reason I'm

kind of, sort of, possibly allowed to be in here, stands at the end of the same tunnel Beck emerged from earlier.

“What are you doing?” Franz continues, glancing in confusion at Otto and Beck. I told him I was going to take a quick glance at the field. I guess this probably looks a bit different from that.

“Hi, Franz,” I reply. “I was just about to head out.” Unable to resist, I turn back to the round ball resting in front of me and strike, sending it into the white netting with a satisfying smack.

Without another word, I spin and jog over to Franz. “Thank you. Beautiful stadium.”

Franz looks more confused than ever, but he nods. “Have a good night. Say hello to Ellie.”

“I will. Thanks.” I flash him a quick smile and then begin to walk back toward the gate I entered through earlier, resisting the urge to turn around and meet the blue eyes I can feel burning holes in my back.

As soon as I turn the corner, I strip off the itchy polyester polo, grateful for the extra breathability of the sweat-wicking tank top I’m wearing underneath. Not only was it uncomfortable, the polo didn’t exactly have the incognito effect I was hoping it would.

I drop the sweaty top in the laundry hamper that sits next to the stack of clean shirts I borrowed it from. I still feel overheated, like I swallowed a lump of coal that’s radiating relentless heat in every cell and cranny. Wish I could replicate this everlasting ember during Connecticut’s chilly winters.

It’s over ninety degrees today, but that’s not entirely to blame for the inferno inside me. Neither is the thrilling realization that I might not be a retired athlete at the ripe old age of twenty-one. No, it’s the thought of azure eyes and a chiseled jawline that’s got the flames flickering.

No idea why.

Okay, that’s a lie.

But I’ve got bigger life goals than becoming another notch on the post of the king-sized canopy bed Adler Beck likely slumbers in.

No matter how long any residual flush lasts.

CHAPTER THREE

Animosity is an old friend by now. People, particularly girls, have often resented me. For my looks. For the attention boys give me. For my carefree attitude. Sometimes for my unerring ability to ensure the soccer ball ends up in the back of the net.

But girls who knew I'd spent time in bed with their now-boyfriends have given me warmer receptions than the majority of my fellow Scholenberg attendees.

I came in expecting it, to a certain extent. We're some of the best athletes in the world.

All competitive.

All used to being the best.

All perfectionists.

Put a group of people like that together, then add the fact that we'll likely be competing against each other on the world stage wearing our home country's colors in the near future? Hardly a surprise you would need a sharpened steak knife to cut through the thick tension in the small room. Maybe a machete.

My temporary teammates have trickled in over the past few days, but this is the first time we've all gathered in one small space.

I've passed some girls in the hallway before or seen them preparing food in the kitchen. I even went out to dinner with a few last night. Ellie Anderson shoots me a small smile when I walk into the room, but the rest of the expressions are guarded.

There aren't any jokes or quips being tossed around. Sporadic, polite chatter in a smorgasbord of languages is the only sound echoing against

cinderblock. Or it was. Silence descends when I enter, and I realize I wasn't imagining my reception around the shared house being frostier than everyone else's.

I know it's actually a compliment, in an underhanded way. There are a couple of familiar faces I recognize, but most I don't.

They all know who I am already.

We don't have to marinate in awkward silence for very long. I've barely taken a seat next to Ellie, my fellow countrywoman, when the door bangs open to reveal Christina Weber. Seeing her in person prompts that same surreal flash my encounter with Adler Beck did yesterday. I've watched her win championships, studied her playing style, and read articles about her all-around badassery. And now she's standing ten feet from me, talking through today's schedule in crisply accented English. As my coach. She provides an unnecessary introduction and then announces an endurance test is up first, which is hardly a surprise.

Although expected, the announcement still sends an icy chill through me that eradicates most of the thrill of being in Christina Weber's presence. Normally, I'd be champing at the bit to show off my hard-fought-for fitness. At the current moment, I know it means I'll be sitting most of the day's activities out.

Coach Weber ends her brisk instructions with, "Scott. A word." Everyone else takes it as a cue to leave, and in seconds I'm sitting in a sea of twenty-four empty chairs.

"Nice to meet you, Coach Weber," I state, standing and walking to the front of the room. Remaining in the empty row makes me feel like I'm back in high school, getting scolded in after-school detention for not paying attention during class.

"You too, Scott." The words are clipped, but genuine. "Your medical records arrived yesterday," Coach Weber continues. "You've got six more days of recommended rest."

"Yes, ma'am," I confirm. I couldn't definitively tell you what day of the week it is, but I'm completely certain there are six days until I'm cleared to resume normal play.

"We've got a full team scrimmage next week. You'll be starting."

I chew on the inside of my cheek to keep a broad grin from flashing. I sprained my knee nine weeks ago at a spring skills clinic. Needless to say, it scared the shit out of me. Despite my aggressive playing style, I'd never had

a serious soccer injury before; certainly never one that threatened my future in the sport, that jeopardized my career. Soccer has always been a constant in my life. The one thing I take seriously and prioritize. The fear of losing it, coupled with terrifying words like “possible permanent damage” and “surgery,” has kept my normally reckless nature in check these past two months. I’ve followed every instruction to the letter: icing, compression, elevation. Except for my impromptu battle of the sexes with Adler Beck yesterday, I’ve also limited any movement to physical therapist-approved exercise.

“You’ll have to sit out today. I’ve got Kluvberg’s physical therapist waiting for you. She’ll look at your knee and talk you through some additional exercises. Tomorrow’s a film and weights day. We’ll take it from there on what you can participate in.”

“Okay,” I respond. I came in expecting this, and after watching Lancaster’s team practice without me for the past two months, I’m actually glad I won’t have to sit and watch the team run today. There’s nothing worse than sitting on the sidelines.

“Head down the hall. Last door on the left,” Coach Weber instructs.

“Okay.” I head toward the exit.

“Scott?”

“Yes?” I glance back.

“Looking forward to coaching you.”

I allow myself a small smile. “Looking forward to being coached.”

I head out into the hallway. The floor is cement and the walls are painted a cream color. It’s minimalistic, aside from the massive glossy photographs printed on satin paper lining the walls. They’re all action shots of players running, lunging, or mid-kick. It’s impossible to miss that one athlete is featured twice as frequently as anyone else.

I grit my teeth as I pass the tenth photo of Adler Beck.

No wonder his ego is larger than most countries.

The last door on the left reveals a room flashier than I expected. We’re on the lowest level of the Kluvberg stadium. The room we met Coach Weber in was little more than a dim expanse that I’m guessing is ordinarily meant for storage. But despite its disparate location, this room contains a whole host of equipment I know must cost thousands of dollars. A brunette with a friendly smile is tidying a shelf of towels when I walk inside.

“You must be Saylor,” she declares, in what I think is a French accent.

“I’m Alizée.”

“Yes, I am. Nice to meet you,” I reply.

“Take a seat up there, please.” She nods toward the straight-line table, the kind I’ve become far too familiar with over the past two months. I climb up on it and stretch my legs out.

Alizée pokes and prods at the muscles in my right leg in a way I’ve also become too accustomed to, but her next words alleviate some of my frustration. “Your knee looks good. Really good. Six more days until full activity?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding and nod.

Alizée rotates my knee for a little longer, then walks me through a few new exercises I can add to my current routine to ease my knee into full movement. She’s just wrapping up the last one when the door bangs open. I tense involuntarily, not realizing why until I look up into brown eyes, not blue. My body relaxes without me telling it to.

The man who’s just entered jabbars out what sounds like an apology. Alizée replies, and I hear Scholenberg mixed in with a series of unfamiliar words.

“You’re all set, Saylor,” Alizée says. “Keep doing those, and I’ll see you next week. Should be able to give you the all-clear.”

“Okay, thanks.” I hop off the table, passing the man I’m certain must be a Kløvberg player without a glance, even though I can feel his eyes on me.

I head back into the hallway, ducking into the first stairwell I come across. But when I exit the stairs, it’s not into the industrial-looking lobby we entered this morning. Instead, I’m in a hallway covered with a lush carpet and lined with offices. I swear under my breath and turn to head back into the stairwell.

And almost collide with someone.

I glance up into gray eyes. This man is one I recognize. It’s Stefan Hermann, Kløvberg’s current keeper. I’m guessing Otto’s being groomed as his backup and eventual replacement.

Suddenly, I can’t go anywhere without bumping into famous, fit men. It sounds like a wonderful problem to have, but every Kløvberg player I encounter who’s not Adler Beck increases my chances the next one will be. Ellie said FC Kløvberg spends most of the summer at their nearby training facility, giving up the stadium for tours and Scholenberg. Either she has inaccurate information—which, given who her uncle is, seems unlikely—or I

have questionable luck.

“Do you know how to get out of the stadium from here?” I ask, hoping he speaks English.

“Two floors down and through the lobby,” he replies. Of course he does. Everyone I’ve encountered in Germany speaks perfect English, albeit with a range of accents.

“Thank you,” I reply, flashing him a grateful smile and rushing into the stairwell.

His directions are accurate, and a few minutes later I’m emerging from the dim lobby into the brilliant German sunshine. I wave at the security guard as I head out the gate reserved for players, coaches, and others with some form of special access to the stadium. For the duration of Scholenberg, that includes me.

Once outside the fence surrounding the stadium, I pause for a minute. I expected to have downtime during my first week here until my knee was cleared.

I didn’t expect to have free time.

Coach Taylor, Lancaster’s head coach, has a strict policy that requires all players to attend practice, even if injured. I was expecting something similar here.

Instead, I’m standing outside the most famous football stadium in the world with no idea where to go. Every person I know in Germany is inside that stadium, and it’s not even ten in the morning—the middle of the night on the East Coast—so I can’t call anyone back home to kill time.

The four-story structure Scholenberg houses us in is only a few blocks away, but returning to a twin bed and unpacked suitcases doesn’t sound appealing. So, I just start walking.

Kluyberg’s stadium is nestled amidst the oldest section of the city that shares its name. The location is a tribute to both the club’s esteemed relevance and its entwined history. I wander along streets teeming with character and charm.

I would have jumped on a plane to Antarctica if that was where the best women’s soccer camp in the world was located. I didn’t really give any thought to my destination beyond the ways it could advance my soccer skills.

Wandering along cobblestone streets that look straight out of a storybook, I take a moment to appreciate the fact that I’ll be spending the next two months in one of the oldest cities in Europe for the first time.

A canal runs to my right, constrained by mossy banks and filled with stagnant, clear water that reflects the pastel exteriors of the buildings lining its shore. Pointed steeples tower in the distance. Wooden boxes line the street, overflowing with bright blossoms and exuberant greenery stretching mossy fingers toward the stone road.

Up ahead, the narrow path opens to a bustling square. There's a market taking place, consisting of wooden booths displaying a staggering array of products for purchase. Striped umbrellas shade jam, cheese, honey, flowers, and meats, along with every variety of fruits and vegetables imaginable.

A church bell tolls out a booming, commanding sound. I look to the left to see one of the majestic cathedrals Europe is famous for. It's a far cry from the small, white-washed chapel Hallie got married in two summers ago.

The building itself is a work of art; the exterior so detailed and purposefully crafted it seems impossible to even attempt to catalog the complicated texture and dazzling architecture. The cathedral fits perfectly with its timeless surroundings while simultaneously completely overshadowing them.

I stare for a while, trying to reconcile how this building just *exists*. Sitting here the same way it has for hundreds of years. It also serves as an amusing litmus test for distinguishing tourists from the locals. Those manning the booths barely glance up at the magnificent church, while everyone else is gaping upward or snapping pictures.

Eventually I move on, stopping to buy a soft pretzel from one booth and then continuing along the same street I was walking along before. It veers left after a hundred yards, transitioning into an arch bridge that crosses the canal.

The building situated immediately on the opposite side reminds me of the cathedral I just left. It's comprised of the same dark gray stone and has the same emanation of majesty, but everywhere on the cathedral was pointed steeples and sharply carved edges; this building is rounded. Circular windows, ornate arches, and a domed ceiling are the most prominent examples.

There's a steady flow of foot traffic heading in and out of the stone structure, and I fall in line behind a couple speaking what I think is Spanish. I'd ask them where we're headed, but my Spanish is no better than my German. Plus, I receive an answer as soon as we walk into the cavernous lobby.

It's some sort of museum. There's a long counter that spans the center of

the room, covered with pamphlets. Chattering tourists are grouped around signs displaying clock hands in various positions. I can't recall the last time I was inside any sort of museum—probably elementary school, if I had to guess—but that's not why I pause just inside the front doors. It's the stark contrast between the exterior and the interior that has me stalling to a stop.

The outside was a grimy gray, weathered by years of exposure to harsh winters and—as I can attest to personally—sweltering summers. The interior is white.

Blinding, austere, striking white. The total absence of color is jarring. I feel like I was just dropped inside a snow globe.

I walk deeper into the museum, disregarding the tour groups and pamphlets. I assume there's an admission cost, but no one stops me as I pass through the winter wonderland into a cement hallway that matches the aged exterior. Priceless oil paintings hang on walls that look straight out of a medieval castle.

I veer left into the first gap in the wall, which turns out to be a small gallery. There are about ten people in the tiny room, all looking entirely absorbed in the artwork displayed. I don't think anyone who knows me would describe me as an art buff. I took an art history class freshman year and was bored to tears; mostly because the class was filled with pompous overachievers. You know, the type who swishes red wine in the glass and talks about notes of cherry and wood.

Suffice it to say, I'm not one to drop terms like brushwork or composition in casual conversation. But the room is absent of any know-it-all commentary, so I take the time to lean close to each painting and study the intricacies.

There's no sign of the sort of abstract pieces hung in modern art museums where you look at one line of paint on an otherwise blank canvas meant to portray the human experience and think *I could have done this*.

Many of the paintings portray scenes like the ones I just saw outside: cobblestone streets, canals, and cathedrals. Others show countryside scenes with sheep, streams, and distant mountains.

I move into the connected room. This one has more variety. There are a few vineyards, some sailboats, lots of portraits of people I don't recognize, and one painting I spend a long time staring at. It's simple: a field of wildflowers. Shades of green grass and purple flowers. The level of detail is masterful. I feel like I could reach out and touch the blades and petals. The

artistry is exquisite, but it's also got an intangible quality to it, as though the entire painting is a mirror or a mirage. There are smudges and smears you have to look closely to see, and they mar the scene, keeping it from being too perfect. The longer I look, the more I see.

It's a puddle.

Simply a reflection of a perfect scene.

Once I realize that, I move on. I've just entered the next room when my phone rings, earning me dirty looks from everyone else already inside this gallery. I struggle to pull it out of the snug athletic shorts I'm wearing, and the sound grows even more obnoxious when it's free from the spandex. It's Hallie.

I end the call, only for it to ring again immediately.

The middle-aged woman standing closest to me mutters something in German that sounds decidedly unpleasant. Then again, I've yet to hear anything said in German sound pleasant. Any term of endearment might as well be a scolding.

I duck out into the hallway and answer my phone with a whispered "Hello?"

"Why are you talking so quietly?" Hallie shouts. And I mean *shouts*. Her voice is audible enough to catch the attention of the security guard strolling about, making certain none of us attempt a heist. He gives me a stern look and points to the door marked *Ausgang*.

I sigh and follow his silent command, pushing through the door that exits into a sculpture garden.

Immediately, I mourn the loss of air conditioning. "Why are you screaming? You just got me kicked out of the museum. It's sweltering out."

"Museum? You're at a museum?"

"Uh-huh," I reply, taking a seat on one of the cement benches and kicking at the pebbled path. "I can't play." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "Figured I might as well explore Kluvberg."

"That's awesome. Good for you."

I roll my eyes. I should have known. Hallie's always been disturbed by my focus on soccer. Me attending a soccer camp and instead expanding my cultural horizons is practically her dream come true.

"Are you settling in okay?" she asks, raising her voice to a bellow at the end.

I pull the phone away from my ear. "Why are you yelling again?"

“Sorry,” Hallie replies at a normal volume. “We’re at the park. They’re mowing one of the soccer fields and I can barely hear when they pass by.”

I remember those soccer fields, but I don’t voice the memory. Instead, I ask, “Why are you calling me if you’re at the park? Isn’t it still super early there?”

“Yes.” Hallie sighs. “Guess that’s why they’re mowing. Matthew wouldn’t sleep and Matt has an important meeting this morning. I needed to get out of the house.”

“Huh,” I reply. Hallie’s always been selfless, whereas I don’t even remember what Matt does for work. Something in finance?

“So, are you settled?”

“Yes.” If you count the suitcase I unzipped.

“We’re going to Dad’s for dinner tonight,” Hallie says without preamble.

“Have fun.” I trace the patterns carved into the bench’s surface with my free hand.

The half-hearted sentiment earns me another sigh from Hallie. “Last week he said he hadn’t heard from you since March.”

“Phones work both ways, Hallie,” I point out.

“He doesn’t know what to say to you, Saylor. When he called about being engaged, all you said was ‘Okay.’”

“I barely know the woman! What was I supposed to say? ‘Glad she’s closer to your age than mine. Big relief none of my old classmates are going to be my new mommy?’”

A third sigh. “None of them were *that* young,” Hallie says in his defense.

“Jessica was twenty-six.”

“She was?”

“Yup. She asked me if I thought she could pass for twenty-four because that was the age she told her modeling agent.”

Hallie laughs. “You’re making this up.”

“I’m not that creative.” I tuck my phone between my cheek and shoulder so I can pull my hair off my neck. Not that it makes any difference. I can feel a bead of sweat trickling down my spine.

There’s a quiet snort, then Hallie settles back into her serious tone. “He asks about you all the time, Saylor. They’ve still got some stuff to sort out for the wedding. I’m sure he’d love to know your opinion.”

“I can assure you it’s nothing I would have an opinion about. I’ll show up. Doesn’t make a difference to me if there’s cupcakes or donuts at the

reception.”

“They already decided on a traditional cake,” Hallie informs me.

I let out a dry laugh. “Of course they did.”

“Have you booked your ticket?”

“It’s still three months away, Hallie.”

“Plane tickets only get more expensive.”

“That’s a myth,” I counter. “They drop them closer to the date, then raise them again.”

“Is it about the money?” Hallie asks. “Because you know Dad will pay...”

“It’s not about the money. I’ll book one tonight, okay?”

“Okay.” There’s a pause. “Well, get back to the art. Love you, Sis.”

Hallie hangs up before I have a chance to say it back. She’s not expecting me to. Probably because I never do.

CHAPTER FOUR

Natalie shows up in Kluvberg on Saturday with five other girls in tow. They all survey me with a hero worship I should probably be flattered by but mostly find to be annoying.

Except for one.

“Scott!” London Reynolds squeals as I walk into the café we agreed to meet at, giving me a quick hug. In a bid to spend as little time at home as possible, I’ve spent the past decade attending every skills clinic and soccer camp across the country I possibly could. I don’t think London had the same motivation, but we’ve overlapped at more clinics over the years than I could count. Outside of my Lancaster teammates, she’s one of the few people I’ve played with on a regular basis in recent years.

“I didn’t know you were going to Amnerallons, Reynolds,” I reply. It’s not on the same level at Scholenberg, but it’s still a competitive program. Worth bragging about.

“And of course you’re at Scholenberg.” She rolls her eyes. “I should have known you’d be here.”

“I didn’t have anything better to do for the next two months,” I reply with a grin.

Natalie cuts in, introducing the rest of the girls she’s with. Unlike Scholenberg, Amnerallons doesn’t limit how many players it accepts from a country. They’re all American; mostly from schools on the West Coast that Lancaster rarely plays.

“Where are we going first?” someone asks excitedly once we have made introductions. I already forgot her name, but I’m more concerned by how everyone’s suddenly looking at me.

“Guys, I barely know the city,” I admit. “I’ve been here less than a week. I’ve gone to the field and a couple restaurants, and that’s it.”

“You’ve been to Kluvberg’s stadium already?” Natalie asks eagerly. “How was it?”

“Yeah, we had a meeting there a couple days ago,” I divulge, opting not to share my trespassing earlier in the week.

“I still cannot believe you’ll be playing on the same field as Adler Beck has.”

Now would be the perfect opportunity to tell Natalie I met him. To share our electrifying, combative encounter; admit I’m probably on Adler Beck’s shit list.

But something stops me.

I’m not sure what.

Normally, I revel in sharing stories. When Trey Johnson shifted his attention from Hannah Mason to me, he was so confident I’d be interested, he stripped in the girls’ locker room when he knew I came in for extra practice. Athletes tend to be a cocky bunch, but he was significantly less sure of himself when I left with his clothes, forcing him to walk-of-shame through the athletic complex with nothing but a small towel covering his goodies. That anecdote was heard so many times on campus it practically earned triple-platinum status.

Trey Johnson peaked during his years as Lancaster’s quarterback, fading to irrelevance as soon as he crossed the stage.

Adler Beck’s in an entirely different league. Natalie’s new friends—even London—might be looking at me with admiration right now. The revelation that I met Beck would do more than earn me deity status. It would prompt questions—lots of questions I don’t feel like answering.

So, I just shrug in response to Natalie’s statement. “Let’s go to a beer garden,” I suggest. “I’ll text Ellie and see if she has any recommendations.”

“Ellie?” London questions.

“Ellie Anderson. She’s the other American at Scholenberg with me.”

“Oh, right. Her uncle’s a trainer for Kluvberg, right?”

“Right,” I confirm. I’ve uttered the same statement before, but having met Ellie, I feel a bit bad for concluding nepotism was the reason for her spot in the program. Probably has a little something to do with the fact that she’s the only person who hasn’t acted like my presence is an insult. “And she’s visited here a bunch because of it, so she’ll probably know a good spot.”

Ellie recommends a place on the opposite side of the city, prompting my first encounter with public transportation. The tiny town in Georgia where I grew up most certainly didn't have it, and I have a car at Lancaster. From what I've heard about transit systems, I wasn't missing much.

However, there's none of the horrors I've heard described when we find the correct entrance and head underground. No graffiti, no urine scent, no garbage. We buy our tickets from a machine that helpfully has an English selection and then hop on the first train that arrives; one that is hopefully heading to our destination.

The inside of the subway is just as clean as the station was, with spotless plastic chairs we settle in and a map of blinking dots that display where we are. With a quiet *whoosh*, the doors close, and we speed off into darkness.

Two stops later, we emerge from the cool underground back into the warm sunshine. This part of the city looks just like the section we came from, except it's significantly more convoluted. Less residential and more commercial. Restaurants, gift shops, bookstores, coffee shops, and bars line the street, interspersed by tourist traps that boast windows filled with flouncy clothing and t-shirts bedazzled with snappy slogans.

Natalie drags us all into the third gift store we pass. It's small and narrow, but what it lacks in width, it more than makes up for in height. Soaring shelves cover every inch of available wall space, packed with every souvenir imaginable. There are cuckoo clocks, Hummel figurines, leather-bound books of Grimms' fairy tales, outfits with full skirts and suspenders, ornaments, bits of rubble claiming to be pieces of the Berlin Wall, beer steins, fedoras, mustard, and more gummy bears than I've ever seen in my life. All filling the tall shelves in an explosion of culture and color.

We all disperse to peruse the store on our own. I'm flipping through the postcard selection to find ones to send to Emma, Cressida, and Anne when Natalie bounces over to me holding two t-shirts. "Which one for the Theta kegger?"

I glance between the gray option that reads *I'm Just Here for the Beer* and the pink *Life is Brewtiful* one.

"Pink," I decide.

"That's what I thought, too," Natalie replies. "But I think Gamma's colors are pink and white, and I don't want people thinking I'm part of that shitshow. Or is it Kappa that's pink?"

"I associate pink with Alpha Sigma I-don't-give-a-shit," I respond,

grabbing three postcards. “Just get whatever shirt you like better.”

Natalie deliberates for a minute. “Okay, I’ll get both.”

She heads for the cashier, and I move farther into the store. The back wall is entirely dedicated to clothing. I spot both the shirts Natalie found, along with a variety displaying the German flag; faded, as a heart, as a soccer ball. The last iteration is located next to the top displayed front and center.

An Adler Beck jersey.

The sight of it prompts a strange reaction, reminding me of our outré encounter. Thanks to his breakout performance on the world stage as soon as he was eligible to play, he was living the life of a professional athlete back when I was a freshman in high school, despite being just eighteen months older than me.

Ever since then, I’ve admired his athleticism and appearance—along with the rest of the world. Our interaction both exceeded my expectations and fell short. I want to relive it and also pretend it never happened.

“Are you going to get one?” London asks, appearing next to me. I startle. She nods to the Beck jersey I’m staring at. Busted. “You could wear it to practice in Kluvberg’s stadium.”

The mere suggestion makes me cringe. My impression is Scholenberg does everything it can to separate its female attendees from FC Kluvberg players because: hello, distractions. It’s part of the reason Kluvberg supposedly spends the summer months training elsewhere. Although, I have to say, my experience so far has suggested that’s some pretty spectacular false advertising.

FC Kluvberg’s official season doesn’t span the summer months, but professional athletes don’t really have an offseason, as evidenced by Beck’s presence at the field just the other day. The thought of Adler Beck seeing me practicing in his jersey is rebarbative. I’ve always been the type to push back just to show I can. Falling in line as an Adler Beck fangirl feels like capitulating, lessening my small victory against him.

“Nope, just grabbing this,” I reply, taking a baby onesie with a German flag on it off the shelf.

London eyes me speculatively. “Something you need to tell me?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s for my sister. She just had a baby.”

“Look at you being a dotting aunt.”

That adjective seems like a stretch considering I’ve never even met the kid, but I don’t argue. “Are you getting anything?” I ask.

“No, I’ve bought way too much at Amnerallons already. Thank God there’s only a week left, or I’d have to get a new suitcase, too.”

“It’s that short?” I ask, surprised.

“Yeah, just the two weeks.”

“So, what are you going to do for the rest of summer?”

“Lounge on the beach.” London grins. “Hook up with a hot lifeguard. Eat ice cream. Who knows?”

I snort. “Sounds lovely.”

“What are you doing after Scholenberg? It’s what—six weeks?”

“Eight. I’ll head back to Lancaster to start training for preseason as soon as it ends.”

London shakes her head. “I don’t know how you do it. My teammates think *my* training is crazy.”

I shrug as I plop the onesie on the checkout counter and dig some euros from my pocket. “If you’re doing the same as everyone else, you’re not going to be the best.”

“That’s a better t-shirt slogan than *Life is Brewtiful*,” Natalie comments to my right.

I smirk as I pay for the onesie. “I’ll tell Nike when I sign my endorsement deal.”

We exit the store and continue down the street. The beer garden Ellie recommended is supposedly only a couple blocks farther, and the first hint that we’re drawing near is the sudden change in our surroundings. Dense greenery appears on the right rather than more storefronts. There’s a wrought iron archway halfway down the block and a wooden sign affixed to the center carved with a few German words. The last one says *Biergarten*, which I take as an encouraging sign we’ve navigated the city correctly. Then again, I’m pretty sure Kluvberg has more than just the one beer garden.

I lead the way down a stone pathway that cuts through the foliage. We emerge onto a wooden terrace. Verdure is draped over and twisting through it, sheltering the picnic tables below and dripping down the sides in tendrils of leaves. A wooden hut is situated to the left, with a line of customers waiting to place their orders snaking around the side. Others are already enjoying refreshments at the tables, dipping pretzels in an array of mustards and drinking beer.

It takes me a moment to realize, but the beer garden also overlooks most of Kluvberg. We’re in a newer part of the city, one that’s on higher ground,

evidently. I can see the canal in the distance. The steeples of the cathedral. And the stadium, of course.

“You guys grab a table. I’ll get in line,” I offer.

“I’ll come with you,” Natalie says. “Text me your orders, ladies.”

Our group splits. Natalie and I join the end of the line, and thankfully, it’s moving pretty fast. We’re close enough to see the menu within minutes, and I realize there’s a lot more than just beer and pretzels being offered.

My relationship with German cuisine has been antagonistic so far. The restaurant I went to earlier in the week with Ellie and a few other Scholenberg attendees was offering a wide variety of foods that did not sound appealing at all: rolls soaked in milk, beef with raisins, and potatoes prepared in more ways than I imagined possible. But all the German dishes here have English descriptions written underneath, and bratwurst on a pretzel bun or fried pork doesn’t sound terrible.

We reach the counter, and Natalie relays everyone else’s orders to the young blonde woman behind it as I continue to survey the menu. I’ve always been indecisive when it comes to food. Some might call me a picky eater.

Finally, I settle on just a pretzel to go with my beer.

We move to the side to let the next group order and take up positions along the wrought-iron fence that circles the perimeter of the eating area to wait. I stare out at the city for a couple of minutes and then turn my gaze back to the terrace, just in time to watch a brown-haired guy saunter over to us. The cocky grin he’s sporting tells me all I need to know about why he’s approaching us. Or approaching me, rather. He ignores Natalie, focusing his attention exclusively on me.

“Hello.” He addresses me in English, but there’s a thick accent underlying the greeting. I say nothing, just raise an eyebrow. “I know you speak English—I heard you ordering,” he adds.

“So?” I ask, raising both brows now.

“I was wondering if you’d like to sit with me and my mates.” He jerks his head toward a table filled with a boisterous group I’m not the least bit surprised to learn are his companions.

“We’ve already got a table,” I inform him.

His smile only grows. Men; they love the chase. “That’s not why I was inviting you.”

He’s persistent I’ll give him that. I’d smile if I didn’t think it would encourage him. “We’re good.”

“If you change your mind...” He nods toward the same table, as if I might have forgotten where he is sitting in the past ten seconds.

I nod once to acknowledge I do in fact recall the location he *just* shared with me.

Natalie turns to me as soon as he leaves. “Fuck, he was hot.”

“He was?” I reply, genuinely surprised. He wasn’t unattractive, but I found nothing particularly remarkable about him.

Natalie gives me a weird look. “Yeah, he was.”

I shrug. “Not my type, I guess.”

She makes a small sound of incredulity. “You’re hard to please, then.”

Uninvited, blue eyes and chiseled cheekbones flash before my eyes. A face women everywhere lust after.

Not *that* hard to please.



I definitely don’t improve anyone’s opinion of me when I drag six tipsy strangers into the Scholenberg house. Ellie’s still out with her extended family, so I don’t have so much as a single ally. “Stay here,” I instruct them all when we enter the living room. “I’m just going to change real quick.”

I rush toward the stairs past Sydney, the fittingly named Australian who’s scrolling through her phone on the couch.

Another Scholenberg attendee blocks the first step. “Seriously?” Olivia asks. She’s Norwegian. Maybe Swedish? We’ve yet to step on the field together, but she’s preemptively taken an aggressive stance, glaring at me every chance she gets. This is our first verbal encounter, however.

“We won’t be here long,” I assure her.

“Meaning you’re going out.”

“Yes.”

She sniffs disdainfully. “Interesting training routine you have.”

My temper flares at the absurdity of someone accusing me of not training hard *enough*. “Tomorrow is Sunday, also known as our day off. And we’ll see what you have to say about my *training routine* next week.” I brush past her, heading into my room. I change in record time, swap my cross-body bag for a clutch, and hurry back downstairs.

Natalie lets out a long wolf-whistle when I appear.

“Damnit, we should have made you come in your t-shirt and shorts,” London says from the couch, giggling as she surveys the dress and leather jacket I changed into. “How do you manage to just look like *that*?”

I roll my eyes. “Get up. Let’s go.”

Our next stop is the hotel they’re all staying at. The exterior blends with the local architecture, but as soon as we enter, I feel as though I’ve stepped back into the States. There’s the same generic carpeting and bland art as every hotel I’ve stayed in.

The girls have adjoining rooms with twin beds and cots set up. I don’t ask who’s getting stuck with the cots, but pity whoever the two are when I take a seat on one. They’re just as uncomfortable as one would expect sitting on a canvas-and-wood construction to be. At least they’re free of whatever questionable fluids are preserved in the comforters covering the beds.

You’d think the fact that they’re only staying for one night would mean my companions would have all packed just one outfit, but no. I’m definitely guilty of traveling with twice the amount I actually need, but I lose patience after the fourth outfit Natalie parades around in, especially since it’s the same short-skirt-lacy-tank-top combo as the last three.

Emma calls halfway through the fashion show.

“Hello?” I answer grumpily.

“Lovely to talk to you too, dear,” she replies, laughing. “Did I wake you up or something? I thought it was only—”

“You didn’t wake me up. You interrupted Natalie’s fourth outfit option.”

“Oh, I forgot Natalie was coming this weekend! Are you guys going out?” The sounds of seagulls and surf echo in the background. Emma’s from New York City but spends every summer in the Hamptons.

“That was the plan,” I respond. “We’ll see if we ever leave the hotel.”

Emma giggles. “Not everyone can throw on a dress and look like a runway model, Saylor.” I don’t answer. “So, how is it?” she asks eagerly.

Filling her in on an Adler Beck-less version of Scholenberg so far takes up the rest of the time the girls need to get ready. By the time we’re hanging up, everyone’s ready to go.

We traipse down to the lobby and out onto the street.

“So, where are we going?” London asks.

I prepare for everyone to turn to me. I’ll have to text Ellie again. But Natalie’s the one who answers. “I know the perfect place.”

I don’t have a suggestion and she sounds confident, so I climb in one cab

already waiting outside the hotel with everyone else. It's a sedan, definitely not designed to seat seven, but the driver doesn't seem to mind. He deposits us in a neighborhood I wouldn't expect to contain a trendy club and cheerfully collects his fare.

"How did you hear about this place?" I ask Natalie when we've all tumbled out of the cab, critically studying the bland concrete exterior in front of us.

"*Extensive* research," she replies, grinning. "It was the most consistent hit for a Kluvberg player hangout. According to TravelAdvisor, there's always this long of a line for just that reason." She nods to the line curving around the exterior of the building. To her credit, they're all trendily dressed people about our age.

"You're joking," I say flatly. The last thing I want to do is to spend the night fending off a bunch of Adler Beck-wannabes.

"Nope, totally serious."

"Sounds like a rumor they might have started themselves," I mutter.

"Come on," London declares, striding toward the front of the line. Everyone else follows, me included. "Hi, we'd like to go in," she tells the beefy man clad in all black. Protests sound behind us, but a raised hand from the bouncer quiets them.

"Name?" he asks gruffly.

"Wh-what do you need a name for?" Natalie asks, losing a bit of her bravado. Guess this requirement wasn't included in her homework.

"This is a private club, miss. No entry unless you're on the list," the man responds. None of the other girls speak. Natalie looks crestfallen. I may not want to be at this particular club, but I'm not great about being told I *can't* do something.

I step forward. "My name is on the list." Natalie gapes at me.

"What is it?" the bouncer asks, tapping a pen against the clipboard impatiently.

"Well, here's the funny part," I start, giggling slightly. The guy glances up and falters a bit when he catches a glimpse of my face. I crank up the ditzzy blonde act, twirling a stray strand of hair around my pointer finger. "See, there was this guy I met earlier at a restaurant, Lecker—I don't know if you've heard of it?" I toss out the name of the ritzy eatery Ellie told me she was meeting her family at hoping to add some credence to my story.

First rule of lying: add random details. It seems to work, because the

bouncer nods, his stoic expression softening a bit.

“Anyhoo, he came up to me and was flirting. Then, he asks me to meet him here later. But he’d already asked for my name, and my friend Tiffany here”—I yank Natalie forward—“read some article about how you should never give a strange guy your actual name when you’re traveling because then he could track you down later. I mean, you should hear some of the stories my sorority sisters have told us about the creeps out there. So, I didn’t tell this guy my real name, but then he tells me he’ll put my name on the list here. And I couldn’t come clean then, right?”

The bouncer eyes me apprehensively. I have no idea if he believes me. If this place is really as popular as Natalie claims, I’m guessing he’s heard it all.

“What name did you tell this guy?” he asks. Well, maybe not *all*.

“I forget,” I respond, smiling sheepishly instead of triumphantly. “I panicked and just made one up. Lisa Linderhagen, maybe? Is that on the list?”

There’s a quiet snort behind me, and I hope the bouncer didn’t hear it. If one of these idiots ruins the compelling tale I just fabricated, I will never let them forget it. He studies me for a minute, not even bothering to glance down at his list.

“All right, you ladies can come through,” he finally says, unclipping the ceremonial-looking rope barrier. There are loud protests from those in line, but I don’t wait around to listen to them or give the bouncer a chance to change his mind. I saunter through the doorway into what, I have to admit, is a pretty cool atmosphere. If Kløvberg players do hang out here, they’ve got decent taste. It’s not flashy or extravagant, but minimalistic and sleek.

“That. Was. Brilliant!” Natalie announces, bouncing in beside me.

“Seriously,” London agrees. “I feel like I should be looking around for the poor guy who fell for the ‘I’m Lisa Linderhagen’ line.”

I scoff. “I’m going to grab a drink from the bar.”

“I’ll get a booth,” London announces.

“Let’s hit the dance floor.” Natalie pulls the rest of our group along with her.

The interior of the club is structured in a U shape. The bar sits to the far right, while the dance floor and DJ booth take up the left side. The bottom curve is bifurcated by the doorway, with booths lining the brick walls. I skirt through the crowd, ignoring the glances I’m garnering. I’m not in the mood for it right now, but it’s impossible to tune out the people close to my own

age, all dressed in clothes that hint at designer labels. And they all seem to be locals. Nothing but German punctuates the thumping bass pumping through the speakers.

Finally reaching the bar, I order a gin and tonic, then study the expensive bottles of liquor displayed behind the bar as I wait for my drink. There's a muted light shining behind them that adds to the alluring ambiance.

"You're not supposed to be in here."

Why is it the last person you want to see is always the one you run into? There is *one* person I didn't want to encounter in Germany—actually all of Europe.

A geographic region comprising millions of square miles.

Thousands of clubs.

One Adler Beck.

I turn to face him, which is a mistake. Adler Beck looked gorgeous sweaty and pissed off. He looks even better leaning against the bar in jeans and a gray t-shirt that hugs a torso I've seen splashed on more magazine covers than I care to admit. He still appears pissed off. Either it's his default setting, or I draw it out.

Or both.

"How do you know? Maybe I was personally invited by the owner," I respond, mirroring his pose and leaning back against the bar. It's so unfair hot guys are often the assholes. Hair that blond and eyes that blue should not be genetically possible.

"You weren't," Beck states flatly. He's holding a bottle of beer, and the beverage choice surprises me. He seems more like the type to sip expensive liquor from a crystal tumbler. Then again, I'm just basing that off paparazzi photos of him with models exiting cars that cost more than four years of tuition at Lancaster.

Beck sets the glass cylinder down on the black bar top made of some sort of stone. Maybe marble? Can marble be black? I took geology, aka "rocks for jocks" as my science requirement, but we didn't cover bar top construction. Regardless, the dark, lustrous surface fits with the sultry vibe emanating from each corner. Classy and chancy.

"How do you know?" I ask, before glancing over my shoulder to check on the bartender I ordered from. He's busy flirting with some girls farther down the bar, meaning my drink is not about to appear. Welp, there goes his tip.

“Because I own this place.” The words are matter of fact.

Thank God I didn’t compliment the décor out loud. It would ruin my perfect record of not feeding his ego. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?” He grabs his beer from the maybe-marble surface and takes a sip.

“You don’t really look like the nightclub-owning type. Show me some paperwork.” That sounded a *lot* less lame in my head. I’m speaking like some sort of amateur gangster. I blame it on the fact that I never expected to see him again.

“What exactly does the nightclub-owning type look like?” Beck inquires.

“Not you,” I reply, unable to think of anything wittier. I would love to leave this conversation where I can’t come up with anything clever to say, but it’s fairly obvious I’m standing here waiting for my drink, and there’s no cocktail to be seen.

“Is that a compliment or an insult?” There’s the barest hint of a smirk, which makes me think Beck might be aware of the fact that I’d very much like to leave his beguiling presence.

“No idea,” I tell him honestly. Yup, there’s definitely some amusement in his expression now. “Maybe you should spend less time managing your club and more time practicing penalty kicks.” I went *there*, and Beck’s expression makes it clear he didn’t think I would.

I turn to look at him fully for the first time, enjoying watching him decide how to respond. Defend or ignore?

“Otto’s new.”

I smirk. Or blame the goalie. “He blocked one of yours,” I’m quick to point out.

“You caught him a bit off guard.”

“I can’t think of a single game I’ve played in that progressed the way I expected it to.”

“I was referring more to the fact that you’re American.”

“I actually wasn’t talking all that much,” I respond cheekily, finally finding some footing in the conversation. I’ve never fished for a compliment in my life, but for some reason I really want Adler Beck to acknowledge he means my appearance, not my heritage.

Eyes the exact color of the sky when it’s marred by only a few fluffy clouds flit away from my face, down the navy slip dress I’m wearing, and back up. “Hard to ignore that accent,” he remarks.

Fine. He's a worthy competitor off the field, too. Adler Beck doesn't just have confidence; he oozes charisma. It exudes from every invisible pore, clogging the surrounding air with cockiness.

"The only player in the club over ninety is me." Grudging, barely discernable respect lightly coats his tone.

Adler fucking Beck checked my conversion rate. "You looked me up?"

"Mm-hmm." He takes another sip of beer.

I mastered the art of appearing indifferent a long time ago, but the knowledge that Adler Beck took the time to look up my conversion rate for penalty kicks is surreal—not that I have any intention of telling him that, or telling him I'm impressed he found my conversion rate based on nothing but my first name. My soccer stats aren't exactly splashed across the internet the way his are.

Thirty seconds of silence pass before Beck speaks again. "You here alone?"

"No, with a teammate from home. She's at Amnerallons and came for a visit with new friends. I needed some... I came to grab a drink."

"What did you order?"

"Gin and tonic."

Beck turns and says something in German. I look behind me to see the bartenders are now rushing about. Maybe he really does own this place. Or maybe they're just responding to the presence of the world's most famous footballer. In seconds, a glass filled with bubbly, clear liquid and topped with a lime wedge appears before me.

"Tha—" Beck swipes the glass mid-word. "What are you doing?"

He doesn't reply, just starts walking to the left, clutching what I assume is my drink. Foolishly, I follow him. He takes an abrupt right and heads down a short hallway. Then pushes open a side door. I walk after him into what must be the stock room.

Glass bottles line shelf after shelf after shelf, barely illuminated by the solitary lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. Beck grabs a blue bottle and sends a generous splash of its contents into the glass he's holding. Wordlessly, he holds it out to me. I take the glass and sip some of its contents. Lime, botanicals, and expensive gin hit my tongue.

"It's good," I inform him.

"Good."

Beck doesn't move. Neither do I. But I meet his cool blue gaze

unflinchingly, suddenly very aware—excruciatingly aware, in fact—that the two of us are in a room alone. Together. There shouldn't be any familiarity between us, but I know what he's about to do before it happens.

Beck steps forward.

One step.

Two.

Three.

I hold my ground, only moving back and setting my glass down once our bodies make contact. Once the warmth of his skin sinks through the thin satin I'm wearing.

He presses me against a shelf, prompting loud clangs as the glass bottles shift in protest. And then Adler Beck kisses me. I'm kissing Adler Beck. But it doesn't feel like I'm kissing a soccer superstar. There's no distance—literal or metaphorical—from which to view the body pressed against mine as belonging to a famous footballer. There's just a chiseled frame exuding the temperature of a furnace and forcing a pool of lust to form in my stomach.

I have two options right now, but I don't want to stop kissing him, so that brings me down to one. Beck's domineering. Overwhelming. Clearly used to being the alpha. Just like during our shootout, I don't let him.

We're already careening down a decline, so I yank the brake stick and toss it out the figurative window. He tugs at my hair; I rake my nails across his back. He slips his hands up my dress; I unzip his pants. All the while, our tongues duel for dominance.

Adler Beck may be German, but he's mastered the French kiss.

He's already hard. Really fucking hard. Our brief, clothed interactions have never given me the impression Adler Beck has to compensate for anything, and I receive visual confirmation as I yank down his jeans. He's huge. Hot. I run my fingers along the firm, silken shaft that's prominently protruding between us, and Beck groans. His length jerks in my hold.

Skilled fingers find the evidence of my own desire, but I'm done prolonging what I hope is inevitable. I decided approximately two minutes ago I was going to fuck Adler Beck, and delaying that lost its appeal about ninety seconds ago. My right hand is still stroking the length of his pulsing cock, so I fish through my purse with my left to procure a foil packet. His dick is sheathed in seconds, and then I impale myself on it, shoving his fingers out of the way. I have a feeling he's used to receiving compliments at this point. An "oh, your dick is so massive", or a "will you even fit?" Those

thoughts are absolutely running through my head, but I definitely don't voice them.

My hands-on approach clearly catches Beck off guard, but he recovers quickly. Those same reflexes that blindsided world-renowned defenders and send championship-winning goalies into fits of cursing make it clear anything I throw at Adler Beck will be tossed right back.

He might not have been expecting me to take control, but he's ready once I do. Ready to challenge me. Thrusting. Kneading. Pulsating inside of me. Adler Beck and I are a blur of passionate, practiced movement. We've never done this before, but it feels like we have. Not in a tired, overdone way—in a he-knows-exactly-how-to-make-every-cell-of-my-body-reverberate-with-pleasure kind of way. Probably because he's practiced with half the women in Europe.

Beck brushes that elusive bundle of nerves with every stroke. Sends shockwaves skittering across the surface of my skin. The words muttered in a German accent don't hurt either. His syllables sound thicker when he's aroused, and the hard—pun intended—evidence of that is rapidly sending me toward a very happy ending.

I'd love to prolong this moment, but I can already feel the pressure rising, ebbing over me inch by inch. I want to ask him to slow his strokes and put the eruption off a little longer, but I lost the ability to string a coherent sentence together when I shoved him inside me. Actions are most definitely trumping words right now.

Then it's too late.

Ebbs become flows.

Pleasure floods my body, coating every centimeter and each cell.

I free-fall through a stratosphere of delectation. And land in a small closet filled with expensive liquor next to a gorgeous German who is most certainly smirking at me.

I yank my dress down and stride out of the room, leaving him alone in the dark.

CHAPTER FIVE

“**Y**ou were out late last night,” Ellie comments the following morning, appearing in the doorway of my room and flopping down on my bed.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I respond, not looking up from the course catalog I’m scrolling through on my laptop. I have to choose my fall courses this week. Attending class is one part of life at Lancaster I definitely won’t miss. School has never been my strong suit. I cycled through four majors before landing on public relations, and I already have regrets. “Natalie turned it into a whole thing.”

Ellie snorts. “You are aware I follow you on social media, right? If there was anyone instigating anything, I’d bet it was you.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever.”

“Any German lover boys?” Her playful words dredge up the memories I’ve been trying to repress ever since I woke up. A rough palm sliding up my thigh. Hot tongue in my mouth. Dirty words whispered in an accent. Dragging Natalie, London, and the rest of the girls out of the club as soon as I left that storage closet, claiming a guy at the bar told me about some hip new place around the corner. The club we ended up at was neither hip nor new, but no one seemed to notice.

“Nope.” The word comes out a little too rushed, but Ellie doesn’t know me well enough to notice.

She sighs with disappointment. “Damnit, I was relying on living vicariously through you.”

“What?”

“Again, I follow you, Saylor. You’re a hot-guy magnet.”

“How was your day yesterday?” I ask, eager to change the subject.

“It was fine. Uncle Franz is all excited about some exhibition match the team has coming up.”

“Huh.” Switching topics to FC Kluvberg was not exactly what I had in mind.

I keep scrolling through rows of courses, and then the screen freezes. I sigh, taking it as a sign I should stop. I’m already fed up. Standing, I stretch and then grab my sneakers.

“I’m going for a run. You want to come?”

“You’re joking, right?” Ellie asks. “It’s our day off!”

I let lacing my sneakers up answer for me.

“What about your knee?”

“I’m cleared to jog. Not about to run a marathon.”

“Have fun,” Ellie calls after me as I head down the hallway. I hear springs squeak as she flops back down on my bed.

Several other girls are scattered around the living room when I walk down the stairs, all looking as relaxed as Ellie. They study me as I pass them in my athletic shorts and baggy t-shirt, and I sigh internally. I didn’t expect to leave here with lifelong friendships, but I’ve been here for over a week and there’s no sign of anyone but Ellie liking me at all.

The four-story house that hosts Scholenberg attendees is centrally located, and it’s only a few blocks to the park I know is nearby. The streets are busy, filled with chattering locals and tourists alike. The scenery of the city still shocks me. Aside from a spring break trip to Mexico and a soccer camp in Canada, this is my first time out of the US. I’d seen photos of Europe before coming here, but those didn’t compare to the history permeating every step.

The scarred cobblestones, ancient buildings, and colorful architecture are a far cry from the sleepy southern town I grew up in, or the college town Lancaster is located in. The scent of street food and the chatter of foreign languages fill air still damp from rain the sky expelled earlier. Watery sunshine peeks through light gray clouds here and there, extending misty fingers that trickle down to the damp street.

The crowds extend to the park that’s my destination. I can see them milling about when I’m still a block away, unbothered by the overcast day. Even the park is a work of art. Wrought iron gates mark the entrance surrounded by trimmed topiaries. Carved concrete balustrades and oak trees

line the walkway that opens into a plush spread of grass dotted with lollygaggers reading or napping. Past it, there's a massive marble fountain sending shifting sprays of water upward toward the cloudy sky.

I start jogging along the gravel path as soon as I pass through the open gates. Once I reach the fountain, I realize the park is much larger than I initially thought. It's a green oasis in the center of the city. There's a playground, dog park, snack bar, and some soccer fields. I stop at a bench to retie my left lace, which has become nothing more than a loose loop.

"Of all the parks in all of Germany."

My stomach lurches, torn between sinking with dread and jumping with excitement. I finish tying my sneakers and look up. Adler Beck is standing at the opposite end of the bench, wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, and an inscrutable expression.

"Did you just make a *Casablanca* reference?"

"Ja." One German word I've mastered.

"Ironic. But I get the sex symbol status now," I remark dryly.

"Sure it wasn't when you were humping me last night?" Beck crosses his arms and leans against the closest tree trunk, surveying me superiorly; like I'm a peasant in his kingdom.

I glare at him. Both because I'm genuinely annoyed by that comment, and to cover my surprise. In my experience, one-night stands are like fight club: unremarked upon. If I ever saw Adler Beck again, I fully expected him to ignore me. I fully intended to ignore him—to not mention our time in a tiny storeroom.

"Oh, that was you?" I tighten my ponytail.

Beck grins. Fuck, he's good looking. The kind of gorgeous that hijacks thoughts and hormones. "I'd be happy to take some clothes off so you can confirm."

I snort. "Pass. Plus, it was too dark to see much."

"Yeah, it was. Bit of a shame." Beck surveys my body with blatant lust, leaving trails of goose bumps in the wake of his gaze. My athletic shorts reveal my long, toned legs, but my baggy *Lancaster Soccer* t-shirt leaves a lot to the imagination. Beck's scrutiny makes me feel indecent in the casual apparel, like I should have shown up at the park in a snowsuit.

I study him back. The chiseled cheekbones. The short, messy blond hair peeking out the sides of his hat. The ropes of muscles winding along his golden forearms. Looks that have landed him on the covers of dozens of

magazines—most of which couldn't care less that he earned the mouth-watering physique and sun-kissed complexion by spending hundreds of hours repeating the same motions over and over again on a soccer field.

"What are you doing here?" I finally ask, breaking our staring contest.

"It's a public park."

"I know. You seem like the pretentious type who would only go to a private one that restricts entry the way your club does."

Beck raises one dark blond brow. "Oh, my club restricts entry?"

I shrug. "*Some* people seem to find me charming." He snorts. "You didn't answer my question."

"You seem like the type who might get needing to exercise without your teammates watching every move you make."

I think it's a compliment? It's also accurate, which is unsettling. "That's a bit presumptuous of you."

"You don't like people making assumptions about you? That's a bit hypocritical of *you*."

"Fine, you've made your point," I snap.

"If we *were* making assumptions, I'd say you don't seem like the friendliest person."

I snort. "That's a polite way of putting it. Others have gone for 'cold-hearted bitch' right out of the gate."

Beck's lips quirk. "I've gotten 'heartless bastard' a couple of times."

"There are still women foolish enough to think you're looking for a long time and not a good time?" Every article I've ever read about Adler Beck has made some mention of the fact that he's a player off the field as well as on it. I get wanting to sleep with the guy—especially after last night—but going in expecting a happily-ever-after seems purposefully naïve.

That question earns me a full smile. "Evidently. I've never gotten the impression from my university mates that they feel any different. Must be an American thing?"

I'm temporarily distracted by the reminder that Beck has friends who are in university, that he's technically just a year and a half older than I am. I view Adler Beck differently than I would any other guy close to my age. He's more worldly. Larger than life. Not to mention insanely famous.

He's also waiting for an answer. I shrug. "I think it's more of a challenge thing. Guys aren't interested in a relationship until the girl makes it clear she's not. At least in my experience."

“Hmmm.”

I raise both eyebrows. “I’m misreading the complicated male psyche?”

“No. I just think you’re selling yourself short.”

“I doubt it. I’m plenty confident.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Beck comments. There’s a dry undertone to the words that’s almost humorous. Almost admiring. “I’m going to play for a bit. If you want?” He nods to the stretch of soccer fields lining the far side of the park. There are a few younger kids playing on one, but the other two are empty.

I gape at him. “You want to play soc—football?”

He smirks. “Uh-huh.”

“You didn’t exactly seem thrilled to be playing together last time.”

There’s a shrug. “You caught me off guard.”

“You said I caught Otto off guard,” I correct.

“Did I?” There’s a new, teasing lilt to his voice. It’s the closest to a sense of humor I’ve seen from him, and I decide I like it. Worse, I’m intrigued by it—curious to know what there is to Adler Beck besides fame, wealth, and looks.

“Okay, let’s play.”

Beck walks toward the farthest open field, and I follow, falling into step beside him. Usually, my interactions with the opposite sex are fairly straightforward. I’m used to guys paying attention when I walk by, plying me with suggestive lines. So far, Adler Beck has ignored me, fucked me, and invited me to play soccer with him. The middle action is the only one I might have anticipated, but last night definitely did not go down the way I ever would have imagined it might.

“You’re here with Scholenberg?” Beck asks.

“What’s that?” I quip.

He ignores my sass. “You know they give you access to the field. You didn’t need to sneak in.”

I shrug. “Access sounds boring.”

Beck’s lips stay in a flat line. His sense of humor sure didn’t last long.

We reach the edge of the pitch, and Beck pulls his gym bag over his head and drops it, unzipping it to reveal a smorgasbord of equipment. All he grabs is a soccer ball, tossing it out onto the grass.

Some nerves start to appear. This isn’t just a guy I met at a club last night and slept with in a storage closet. This is the guy who is worshiped for a lot more than his appearance and resulting sex appeal. Adler Beck is good at

soccer. *Really* good. The kind of talent that comes around once in a generation—once a century. His parents were both successful, but Adler Beck is revered on a staggering scale. He's beloved. He was winning international championships when I was attending high school games where half the participants were stoned, and he's far from a washed-up has-been at twenty-two.

I know he's better than me. I'm used to being the best on the pitch.

I stride farther onto the field, expecting him to follow me. He does, dribbling as though it's second nature to him. Which it is, I guess. Aside from our shootout, I can't recall the last time I played against a guy. Middle school, maybe? I think one of the club teams I played on was co-ed.

Beck doesn't ask me if I'm ready to play or stop for a face-off. He just keeps dribbling along, forcing me to back up or else let him pass. He looks light years away from how he did when he first approached me, his movements as carefree and easy as his expression. Either playing has the same freeing effect on him as it does on me, or he was as apprehensive about how to act around me as I was about him.

Beck grins as I do my best to mirror his movements. I've watched enough footage of him playing to know a few of his moves, but he's not exactly pulling out all the stops right now. We're barely jogging. When he finally spins to get around me, I'm ready. I snake my foot between his, knocking the ball into my possession. There's a nod of acknowledgment that lets me know I passed some test. It also tells me he's still underestimating me.

We weave up and down the field, neither of us allowing the other to score, but guarding each other loosely. It's... fun. I can't recall the last time I played soccer so casually. So carefree. Normally, I'm showing off—for coaches or teammates, to preserve the reputation I've carefully constructed; to smash expectations. Based on his comment earlier, I realize Beck feels the same. The spotlight on him is a thousand times brighter.

He blocks me from scoring again, and this time I don't let it go. I press him, broaching the invisible boundary between us. Beck responds with a speed and dexterity I would have been expecting if he hadn't spent the past half hour lulling me into a false sense of complacency. He steals the ball back, literally pulling it out from under me. I barely have enough time to twist so I can protect my knee before I collide with the ground. The impact doesn't hurt, but it's unexpected. Breath whooshes from my lungs like a deflating balloon.

I lie there for a few seconds, readjusting my bearings from vertical to horizontal.

“Fuck, you all right?” Beck bends down beside me.

“I’m fine,” I reply, twisting around and leaning back on my hands. My left palm is stained green, but that’s the worst of it.

“You’re sure?” He scans my body, either looking for visible injuries or taking the opportunity to appraise me up close.

“I’m sure. Nothing for you to kiss better,” I tease.

Beck’s blue eyes snap back to mine. “Nothing?”

Forget any casual comradery. Heat spreads across my skin like a flame. Tension stretches between us like a taut string. I don’t say anything, just study his face as it grows closer and closer to my own. The kiss starts as a whisper. Beck barely brushes his lips against mine. The tease of friction is tantalizing, sending shivers slithering down my body. I scoot closer instinctively, deepening the contact. Soft warmth turns wanton and urgent. Then, nothing.

I bite my bottom lip, studying Beck and trying to figure out why he pulled back so abruptly. He stands and holds out a hand. I grasp it, and he yanks me to my feet. Not harshly, but not gently either. I’m tugged to the right, toward a grove of spruces.

I’m about to protest the rough handling when I see a small building ahead. A line of people protrudes from one side, ordering from a brightly colored menu displaying photographs of soft pretzels and lemonade. Beck pulls me to the opposite side and pushes open a metal door with a familiar symbol on it.

I’m expecting the park’s bathroom to be grimy. Unkempt. Smelly. But, like nearly every other public place I’ve visited here, it’s spotless. It even smells like freshly squeezed citrus.

Not that Beck gives me much time to appreciate it. Or *any* time, really. He kisses me hungrily as soon as the door swings shut, picking up right where we left off on the grass. I respond just as eagerly. Because when a hot, single guy kisses you, it’s the natural response.

Because when he sucks on my bottom lip, it feels like fireworks are going off inside of me.

Because I want to, and it’s just sex.

And that’s how I end up sleeping with Adler Beck for a second time.

CHAPTER SIX

Four days later, I leave the house earlier than usual. I got the all-clear on my knee yesterday, and tomorrow's the first day I'll be practicing in Kluvberg's stadium with the rest of the Scholenberg attendees. Today is our weekly film day. There's a bus that shuttles us the dozen blocks to the stadium, but I prefer walking. I've grown surprisingly attached to the scenery of Kluvberg, and it's a beautiful day.

Halfway into my walk to the stadium, I come across a tiny coffee shop I decide to duck into. Just as I've joined the line, my phone rings. I sigh when I see the name flashing on the screen. I thought being in a different time zone than Hallie would be a respite from the family check-ins. Thanks to my nephew's erratic sleep schedule, they've only become more frequent. There have only been a couple days she hasn't called since I arrived in Germany.

"Hello?" I drone.

"Don't sound too excited, or I might call more often," Hallie replies dryly.

I exhale again. "More often? I'm not sure if that's even possible. I thought you'd stop mothering me now that you have your own child."

"Most people enjoy having others check in on them."

"Or you want to pass on information about more wedding shit you know I don't care about." That's been the main topic of our past few conversations: our father's upcoming wedding.

Hallie doesn't deny it. "There's not much new to report. Sandra doesn't want to make a fuss. All that's left to decide on is the flowers."

"Not make a fuss? But you only get married—oh, wait, this is her third marriage, right?"

“Saylor,” Hallie chastises, a clear note of warning resonating in the tone.

“I’m right. I distinctly remember her mentioning her second husband at your wedding.”

“You ‘forgot’ her name when Dad told us he was getting married, but you remember she was married twice before?”

“She only said her name once. The second husband came up multiple times.”

Hallie lets out a long sigh, but I can hear the amusement hidden deep beneath the irritation. “She’s going to call you tomorrow about the bridesmaid’s dresses, okay?”

“Hold up—I’m supposed to be *in* the wedding? What happened to not making a fuss?”

“He’s our dad, Saylor.”

“Barely,” I mutter. Harsh, but true. I’ve had more meaningful conversations with the man who owns the corner convenience store one block from campus than my father. I haven’t seen him in person since Hallie’s wedding—two years ago. Haven’t talked to him since he called to say he was getting married—four months ago.

“He’s happy. Happier than I’ve seen him since...” She doesn’t utter the words, but she doesn’t need to. “Just don’t... complicate things.”

“Don’t complicate things? That’s your advice? Poor Matthew Jr. These are the pep talks he has to look forward to?”

Hallie ignores my heavy sarcasm. “I’m glad you brought that up. Let me grab him. It’s good for him to hear his family’s voices.”

“Wait, what? Are you kidding? He’s a baby. He’s—Hallie? Hallie!”

The line is silent. I huff an impatient breath as I study the coral color I painted my toes last night. Against the bright blue of my flip-flops, the color seems too gaudy. Clownish. Garish. I should have stuck with the paler shade of pink I was originally planning on.

“Okay, he’s on,” Hallie helpfully informs me, since the line sounds no different than it did before, seeing as the other end of the phone call is still silent, albeit with my three-month-old nephew supposedly being held nearby.

“Hello, Matthew,” I state, feeling ridiculous. I have many talents. Conversing with a baby that’s a mere dozen weeks old is not one of them. “Your mother has lost it.” Hopefully Hallie is listening. “I think your father has more sense, but to be honest, I’ve never really talked with him enough to tell. You’re lucky you can just sleep through everything now. Enjoy that. It

gets worse. Soon you'll have to—"

"Could you wrap this conversation up and order?"

I know that voice. That superior, silken tone with the slightest whisper of a German accent. A timbre that manages to caress one syllable and then send the next one hurtling through the air like a sharpened blade.

I'm very surprised to encounter Adler Beck in this small coffee shop, but I don't let my face betray the slightest hint of it as I slowly turn to face him. Damn him, he looks as alluring as usual. Smarmy and arrogant and sexy.

Arms crossed.

Eyebrows raised.

"Conversation may be too generous of a term, actually. If I'm not mistaken, you're talking to an infant, by the sound of things?" Condescension drips from each syllable.

I haven't given a single thought to whether I might encounter Beck again since I left him in the park's bathroom—where it would be; what I might say. Mostly because I didn't think I would, which I obviously need to stop assuming. But if I had considered seeing him, my first choice of venue would not have been a coffee shop crammed with under-caffeinated patrons staring at him, with my nephew gurgling in my ear.

I don't deign to respond. I spin back around and then continue to prattle on about every meaningless thing I can think of. I'm halfway through the long list of my least favorite German foods when Hallie picks the phone back up.

"You're still on the line?" She sounds surprised. "I figured you would have hung up ages ago."

"That was an option?" Truth is, I would have done exactly that if not for the sarcastic German standing behind me. Which is probably why Hallie replies with a hint of suspicion.

"It's more like your trademark, Saylor."

I prove her right by hanging up. At least I mutter a goodbye first.

"Sure hope I didn't knock you up," Beck comments in a conversational tone as I slip the phone into the pocket of my shorts.

"Excuse me?" I whirl back around, injecting every bit of ire I can into the two words. I misheard him, right? Surely, he's not that much of a....

"You clearly would have no idea what to do with a child."

Nope, he *is* that much of an ass.

"You hardly seem the paternal type yourself," I retort. To my horror,

Beck talking about us procreating has me imagining the accompanying action involved in populating the planet with little soccer stars, and that's got me feeling flushed. Damn him and his massive dick.

"Never said I was," Beck drawls, giving me a lazy smirk. I make certain he sees my eye roll before I spin back around to order my iced coffee. Except they don't sell iced coffee in Europe, according to the barista.

It takes several minutes to haggle a latte and a cup of ice. Those minutes feel more like an hour thanks to the overly amused, self-assured athlete standing right behind me. Mores such as personal space or manners seem to be foreign concepts to Beck. The former faux pas would be a lot easier to enforce if my own body didn't enjoy the proximity quite so much.

I finally step to the side and allow him to order to his own drink, fiddling with the display of granola bars next to the register. There's the same pulsing sensation resonating inside me I experience when I haven't exercised; like a caged animal. Except, I already went for a run this morning.

As I study the list of ingredients on one bar, I eavesdrop on Beck's conversation with the barista—well, on the tone of it since I can't actually understand a word they're saying. She obviously didn't spot him hovering behind me or realize who he is because she's a shocked, fumbling mess now. He has to repeat his order three times, during which she drops five cups. I think she's going to faint when he hands her his credit card and their fingers brush. And yes, I'm the creeper studying their interaction that closely. It takes even longer for Beck to order than it took me to explain the foreign concept of cold coffee when it's eighty degrees outside. I'm guessing there would probably be more disgruntled customers if it wasn't *the* Adler Beck holding up the line.

He finally moves to the side. To my side. He's standing much closer than you'd ordinarily stand next to a fellow patron, even in a coffee shop this size. He's close enough for the distracting scent of his body wash, cologne, or maybe just his laundry detergent to wash over me. Roasting coffee beans and freshly baked pastries are replaced by a fresh, tangy smell that transports me to the woods in a rainstorm. Wow, I really need caffeine. Or to distract my brain from the aggressively arousing aroma.

"Don't you have an assistant who fetches your coffee?" I ask Beck testily.

"I have an assistant, yes. But it seemed silly to call her to the coffee shop I was walking by on my way to the stadium so she could order for me."

I'm about to comment on how some customers in this coffee shop—

especially me—would have appreciated it when I’m hit with a disturbing realization. “You’re on your way to the stadium?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Why do you think? I’m supposed to be there in...” I glance at the clock hanging behind the counter. “Crap. Fifteen minutes.”

“It’s not that far of a walk,” Beck drawls.

“I know, but I hate being late to practice. Plus, *you’re* the reason I’m behind schedule.”

All that accusation earns me is an amused smirk.

“Here’s your ice and latte,” the barista tells me, not taking her eyes off Beck as she sets both in front of me.

“Thank you,” I tell her, hastily pouring the hot liquid over the ice. I don’t really account for basic scientific principles as I do. The ice crackles and hisses as the steaming coffee hits the stack of cubes before they promptly dissolve, sending the now lukewarm coffee over the rim of the plastic cup. “Shit.”

I glance around for some napkins, but Beck’s the one who snags a stack and sticks them underneath the cup. The exasperated sigh he releases takes away from what would otherwise be a thoughtful action, but I still feel obligated to mutter, “Thanks.”

By the time I’ve cleaned up the mess I made and successfully transferred the rest of my coffee atop what little remains of the ice, Beck is having his drink handed to him. I’m tempted to ask the barista for more ice, but she looks frazzled enough already. Tepid will have to do. And of course, I’m now stuck exiting the coffee shop with Beck right behind me. I was hoping I’d be able to put at least a block between us before he departed for our mutual destination. No such luck. My only option to gain any lead would be to sprint. Doing so would place my coffee in peril again, not to mention I’m wearing flip-flops to show off my vivid pedicure.

Side by side it is.

There are a couple double takes as we start down the street, but Beck slips on a pair of sunglasses as we walk along, which make him look a little more like an insanely attractive guy and less like a world-renowned soccer superstar. Meaning there are stares, but no autograph requests or photos. Getting kicked out of Scholenberg for trespassing on Kluvberg’s field would be nothing compared to anyone at Lancaster seeing a photo of me with Adler Beck.

“So, who was the baby?” Beck asks, seemingly oblivious to the attention we’re garnering. The attention *he* is garnering, rather. I look like the poster child for American tourist in my baseball cap and the Statue of Liberty t-shirt Emma bought me.

“He belongs to my older sister.” I take a long gulp of coffee.

“Are you two close?”

“Yes. No. Sort of,” I blurt, caught completely off guard by his question. What does he care if I’m estranged from my sibling or calling her every twenty minutes? I’m not a sharer, and I never encourage sharing. Which makes my next couple words a surprise. To me. “Are you?”

“Close with your sister? No, but I’d love to meet her.”

“She’s married and inherited the morals in the family. I meant yours, *obviously*.”

“We get along fine.” A vague answer to rival my own.

I don’t press, turning my gaze ahead to watch the imposing shadow of Kluvberg’s stadium appear in the distance.

“She’s younger,” he states.

“What?”

“My sister. She’s younger than me.”

“Okay... not sure if that’s her fault.” His tone implies it is.

There’s a ghost of a grin. “*Obviously*. But it means she gets all of the perks and none of the pressure.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s never played football. Never had to deal with the expectations. I mean, do you have any idea what it’s like to walk on the pitch and see your parents sitting there, expecting you not to fuck up their legacy?”

“No, I don’t,” I reply honestly. “My dad’s idea of exercise was walking from the couch to the fridge for a beer. He couldn’t win a gold medal for anything except ‘Absentee Parent of the Year.’” Yeah, didn’t mean to say that. “I hope you’re not spouting this ‘woe-is-me-I’m-a-famous-athlete’ narrative during interviews,” I tease, trying to distract him from my confession and lighten the mood.

“Nope. We covered that during media training when I was ten.”

“Ten?” I gasp. I know the European football system is a far cry from the American one, but media training before middle school seems obscene.

Beck shrugs and shoots me a smirk. “Feel bad for me now?”

“Give me a minute to summon some sympathy.”

He snickers. “Yeah. Guess I’ll just keep making the best of it.” The words are followed by an exaggerated sigh.

“Yeah, I think the entire world is aware of how you ‘make the best of it.’”

“Well, *you* are.” The words drip with innuendo that makes my skin sizzle.

I open my mouth to respond but snap it shut when a security guard steps out of the booth to the right of the gate, interrupting the fence that surrounds Klavberg’s famous stadium. I was so focused on our conversation I didn’t realize we’re practically atop it. The whole reason I walked was to appreciate the scenery, and I missed most of it.

Beck lets out a rapid stream of German and then the man responds, giving him a friendly smile as he waves both of us through the gate. Every other time I’ve entered the stadium this way, the guard made me swipe my temporary badge. *And* go through the metal detector. Yeah, definitely not feeling any sympathy toward the plight of being Adler Beck right about now.

My phone rings right as we enter the stadium. “Fuck,” I grumble, and Beck shoots me a curious glance. “Hi, Dad.” What is *he* doing up at this hour? He doesn’t have an infant to feed.

“Saylor. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Is something wrong?”

“No, everything is fine. I just—”

“I’m running late for practice. I’ll call you later.” I hang up, immediately compiling a list of possible reasons for his call. The last time we talked on the phone was in March when he told me he was getting married. We mostly communicate through Hallie. The wedding can’t be off though, or she would have just told me.

Beck, grabbing my phone from my hand, snaps me out of any speculating. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“The chances of us running into each other a fourth time seem slim, don’t you think?”

“What makes you think I want to run into you again?” I retort.

His only response is a devilish smirk and passing my phone back to me before he turns to the right.

I head in the opposite direction, down the hallway toward the room we meet in for film. A dark-haired girl is approaching the stairwell from the opposite end of the hallway. Annie? Ali? I’m terrible with names, and I can’t recall hers. It’s the second week, but I haven’t been spending as much time with everyone else, thanks to my knee.

“Hi, Saylor,” she says as we draw closer. Her voice is sweet and shy, with a distinctive British accent. And she knows my name, which makes it worse; especially since she’s the first person aside from Ellie to acknowledge me here.

“Hey,” I reply. “Ready for film?”

She lets out a little laugh. “Not looking forward to it, to be honest. I’d rather be out on the pitch. Though I’m guessing you get that more than anybody.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“How’s your knee?”

I slant a side glance her way as we enter the stairwell. It’s an innocent question that could also be construed as fishing for weakness. Injuries are ordinarily kept under wraps for just this reason, but not participating in anything more strenuous than sit-ups was bound to raise some suspicion. Not to mention the knee brace I’ve been wearing around the house. “All clear.”

“Glad to hear it,” the girl replies. Her tone sounds genuine, but I don’t fully drop my guard. “My cousin plays in the States. Said you’re absolutely insane on the pitch.”

I don’t say anything at first, just keep walking down the stairs. False modesty has never been my forte. “You must not be terrible, if you’re here.”

“Saylor!” We emerge from the stairs, and Ellie’s waiting in the hallway. “Hey, Alexis.”

I was right about the A, at least. “Hey,” I reply.

“What happened to you this morning?” Ellie asks.

I shrug. “Went for a walk. Got a coffee.” I hold up the mostly empty cup as evidence.

“All right. We’d better get in there.” Ellie heads toward the door that leads to the same room we met Coach Weber in the first day.

The seat formation is the same, too. So is the silence when I enter with Ellie and Alexis behind me.

Coach Weber is already at the front, setting up the projector next to the whiteboard she’s already drawn out a play on. I feel her steely gaze on me as I make my way to one of the few free folding chairs. Ellie plops down on the one beside me. To my surprise, Alexis takes a seat on my other side.

It feels good to have another ally, especially since I doubt our scrimmage tomorrow will earn me many new friends. None who aren’t on my assigned team, at least.

But I'm not appreciating Alexis's presence as Coach Weber starts the first video or listening to her point out strategy on the field.

I'm thinking about my conversation with Adler Beck.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Klুবberg is going to be at the field today,” Ellie informs me as she sits opposite me at the kitchen table the next morning.

“What?” I look up from my phone, where I’m texting Cressida.

She nods. “Uncle Franz said they have some sort of charity exhibition match coming up. They’re changing up their practice schedule this week. Superstitious about playing on the field before the game or something.”

“Huh.”

Ellie rolls her eyes. “Of course you’d be this nonchalant about it. Adler fucking Beck is going to be on the same field as you, Saylor.”

I don’t tell her it won’t be the first time. Or the second. “He’s not the only player on Klুবberg, Ellie.”

“Uh, he sort of is. I got to meet him at an event with my uncle last year, and he lives up to the hype.”

I shovel another bite of yogurt and granola in my mouth to avoid having to respond.

“Ladies, let’s go!” One of the Scholenberg organizers appears in the doorway, and we all start hustling out of the house to the van idling at the curb. I drop my bowl off at the sink on the way.

An unexpected knot of trepidation tightens in my stomach as the van rolls to a stop in front of the massive stadium. I twist the hem of the sweat-wicking tank I’m wearing, trying to settle the nerves.

Ellie catches the slight movement from her seat beside me. “Your knee will be fine.” She pats my thigh comfortingly.

I smile in acknowledgment of her assurance, although I’m acutely aware my knee is not the reason I’m anxious about being here. I should be excited. I

got a clean bill of health two days ago. This is my first time practicing with the team in the stadium—my chance to show off what I can do.

All I'm focused on is what Beck might do if I see him.

"Saylor?" Ellie says. I look up to see all the rows before us have cleared. I'm blocking her in and holding the rest of the bus up.

"Sorry," I mutter, standing and shuffling out of the cramped seat to head down the aisle. I need to pull it together. Immediately. I've never let a guy distract me on the field. I have no intention of starting now.

We head to the locker room. It's my first time not heading down two floors. Since the stadium isn't currently being used for professional play, we're in the visitor's locker room. I've played at plenty of nice schools, and Lancaster didn't spare any expense with its own facility, but I'm acutely aware that Kluvberg's stadium is on a whole other level when I step inside the locker room. My visits here before—both clandestine and expected—didn't illuminate any of the luxury tucked underneath the cement risers and metal seats. Every surface gleams. The scent of pine lingers in the air.

"Hurry up, ladies." Coach Weber appears at the front of the space, looking like her usual stoic self. It puts an immediate end to any dawdling.

I find an empty locker and quickly pull on my shin guards, socks, and cleats. Once I'm fully suited up, I follow Ellie out through the main tunnel. Each step teases more of the field before me, until finally it's fully revealed, spread out in a pristine sea of green. It's the kind of view that never gets old; one steeped in importance and gravity. One you feel privileged just to take in because you know the caliber of the athletes who have had the opportunity to play on this expanse of turf.

Just as Ellie already told me they would be, the entirety of FC Kluvberg is huddled at the opposite end of the pitch. Like a magnet, a certain blond player lounging toward the back draws my gaze.

I tear my eyes away from Beck when Coach Weber starts talking, splitting us up by our positions for warm-up drills. My insides feel fizzy; electrified. The thrill of being back out on the field is a potent rush, and it washes away the weird effect Adler Beck's presence seems to have on me.

None of the exercises are anything I haven't done before, and I'm relieved to realize my muscle memory is perfect. My feet follow the expected motions automatically, and I lose myself in the satisfaction of executing each drill perfectly.

Finally, Coach Weber blows her whistle. "All right, ladies. Scrimmage

time.”

I’m the recipient of more than a few side glances. Everyone else has already played together. Not me. Rather than buckle under the weight of expectations, I shift from foot to foot, allowing competitive fuel to spread through my warmed muscles as I pull on a yellow pinny.

We don’t have a chance to strategize with our temporary teams, but it doesn’t matter. My teammates know what to do or want to test me. Alexis passes to me as soon as she receives the ball, and I’m more than ready.

I imagine a stream of smoke following me as I sprint down the field. Klavberg has cleared off the pitch, but a few of them are still loitering along the sidelines. Stretching, drinking water, enjoying the view. Who cares? Not me. I’m focused on nothing aside from sending the sphere I’m dribbling down the field into some white netting. I spin around a defender, feint left, and then I see it: an opening that leads directly to my goal—literally. I’m cleared for full activity. No restrictions. I send the soccer ball flying with every ounce of power my leg can muster.

The black and white ball leaves the protective cradle of my feet and flies. Straight and direct and true. Faster than any of the defenders. Faster than the goalie. I know it will make it as soon as it separates from my foot, but it’s no less gratifying to watch it smash into its destination.

I had something to prove today.

I just did.

I turn, only to be mobbed by yellow pinnies. I accept my teammates’ praise with a grin. This isn’t a pickup game at a barbecue. The women I just sprinted around and scored against? Some of the best athletes in the world.

Not only can I still play, but I’m also still *good*.

Ellie’s the last one to melt away, following a final squeeze. She’s beaming, and I’m touched by her support. I know it’s exacerbated because of my strange behavior earlier. She thinks this is a triumph over an injury that could have ended my career, and it is. But it’s also a less noble victory.

I was showing off.

For everyone else who scored a coveted Scholenberg invitation.

For Coach Weber.

For Adler Beck, who’s leaning against the advertisement-splashed divider that surrounds the perimeter of the field. Watching our game with an inscrutable expression and crossed arms.

The scrimmage commences again. Time always seems to pass differently

when I'm playing, rushing by in measures of kicks and sprints, rather than seconds and minutes. It doesn't feel like it's been the appropriate measure of any of those when Coach Weber blows her whistle, signaling the end of the game.

"Nice work, everyone. Get changed, and then we've got a team lunch."

"Team lunch?" I whisper to Ellie as we head back toward the tunnel.

"Forget about lunch. You kicked ass, lady!"

"Well, what did you expect?" I ask her, pulling my pinny over my head as we enter the locker room. "Adler Beck is not the only one who lives up to the hype."

"Um, speaking of which, I saw him staring at you."

"Spectators tend to watch the player with the ball," I reply.

"I'm just saying. You're totally his type."

"What type is that?"

"Gorgeous."

I shrug off her compliment. "Now that I can play again, I'm focused on nothing but soccer. I'm sure Adler Beck has got plenty of women to keep him occupied. I won't be one of them." The words are assured. Based on Ellie's disappointed sigh as we reach our lockers, she believes me.

I wish I was as certain.

My phone buzzes just as I return to my locker from the showers. I scan the messages as I pull on a clean tank top and shorts. One stands out. "I'll be right back," I tell Ellie.

"Where are you going?"

"I've—uh, just going to grab something."

"Okay." She accepts my nonspecific answer despite a less than Oscar-worthy delivery. I sound like a freshman trying to sneak out of the house in high school. Not that my father was ever home to listen to any lies.

I step outside the locker room. The hallway is empty. Right or left? The text from a German number I'm assuming belongs to Beck was as vague as my answer to Ellie. Just a *Come outside*.

I've barely made it more than ten feet down the hallway when he appears, opening a side door that blends in with the walls painted with Klavberg's signature shade of royal blue. Beck beckons me inside, and I comply, surveying the tiny storage closet with a critical eye.

"Seriously? What is it with you and small—"

He cuts me off by shoving his tongue into my mouth and then walking

me backward until cool cinderblock presses into my spine. I forget about any back pain when he tucks his fingers under the hem of my shirt. Swallow my complaints about his choice of venue when he trails his fingertips upward through the droplets of residual water still clinging to my skin from my hasty shower.

Beck breaks our kiss so he can growl in my ear. “Do you know what I was thinking about when I was watching you play?”

“World peace and what you ate for breakfast?”

His rough palm reverses course, sliding back down my stomach and dipping inside the waistband of the athletic shorts I’m wearing. Thank God I just showered, or a very unsexy belt of sweat would have greeted him.

“Doing this,” he whispers in a low, sexy rasp that further ignites the heat already rippling through my body. I lean my head back against the cinderblock, biting down on my bottom lip as he fingers me. Watching him watch me. Imagining him imagining doing this to me. “Come for me, Saylor.”

I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to unhear the sound of Adler Beck murmuring my name, wrapped in layers of lust. I’m not even touching him, merely riding his hand while he does all the work.

And his direction isn’t necessary. Heat is already unfurling inside of me, spreading so quickly and thoroughly I couldn’t douse it even if I wanted to. It’s the natural physical response, but I’m more wrapped up in it mentally than I normally would be. I’m aware of—actively thinking about, actually—who is touching me. I’m not just enjoying the pleasure. I’m luxuriating in it, savoring every second of contact.

Adler Beck has the type of presence you couldn’t forget you’re in if you tried. Being the sole recipient of his full attention is a heady feeling.

I’m drunk on it—intoxicated—like I’ve just rapidly downed a few shots of gin. Maybe that’s why I sink to my knees as soon as the ecstasy begins to wane. I tend to be the selfish, non-reciprocating sort when it comes to oral sex, especially when there’s a cement floor involved—but the allure of having Adler Beck at my mercy is too tantalizing to resist.

“Fuck.” He swears as I yank down his mesh shorts and boxer briefs. There’s a lot packed in those four letters. They slide out of his mouth like they’re coated in dark chocolate and dipped in smooth whiskey. Anticipation tastes delicious.

“Are you sure *this* isn’t what you were thinking about?” I tease as I stroke

his substantial length and wet my lips.

“Not while you were playing,” he replies. “But I’ve definitely thought about it.”

I’m lacking many things. Confidence is not one of them, but the knowledge that Adler Beck has fantasized about me doing this gives my ego a pretty epic boost, even as I appear nonchalant. I lick him like a dick pop and am rewarded when his hips jerk closer. He may have the height advantage right now, but I’m in complete control of this moment. Of him. I can’t copy his command while my mouth is full of his cock, but I don’t need to. He comes quickly, with a gruff groan that makes my toes curl inside my sneakers.

I stand, wincing a bit when the blood rushes back into my calves. My hair is no longer dripping wet, but it’s still damp from my shower, and I pull it up in a messy ponytail to have something to do with my hands, and to hide any evidence of Beck’s effect on the strands.

I don’t know quite what to say to him. I *always* have something to say. It may be brash and blunt, but the words are there. I’m not embarrassed. I’m not awestruck. I’m just... unsure. It’s like something shifted between us, which is ridiculous. We’ve had sex twice already.

This was a continuation.

A regression.

A remnant of lust.

I have a type: hot and athletic. The fact that Adler Beck is hotter and more athletic than most is irrelevant. Any straight, single woman with a pulse would have done what I just did.

Beck tucks himself back into his shorts, and I readjust my own outfit so it’s not obvious I was just groped in a closet.

“I have to go. We’re having some sort of team lunch.”

Beck doesn’t say anything as he follows me out. Why would he? We just had a hot closet hook-up. He got his gratification. Doubt he had any plans to follow it up with scintillating conversation.

I head back into the hallway—the hallway that’s no longer empty. Alexis is standing at the water fountain, filling up a plastic water bottle. She smiles when she sees me. It quickly shifts into a shocked expression that informs me Beck must be right behind me.

I sigh and start walking down the hallway, back toward the locker room. I’m barely halfway there when I hear the slap of cleats against the cement

floor. I knew she'd follow me. What else is she going to do? Stand there and toss accusations at Adler Beck? No, I'm her target, and she homes in on me like a Saylor-seeking missile.

"You were in a closet. With Adler Beck."

I hate it when people state the obvious. "What gave it away? Me leaving a closet with him right behind me?"

She ignores my sarcastic tone. "What were you doing with him?"

"Taking inventory," I droll.

"Saylor."

"Are you fishing for sex tips? Go read an article in *Cosmo*."

I don't know what she possibly thought I was doing with Beck in a *closet*, but she manages to look even more surprised. "I mean—you were..." I guess Brits are known for being repressed when it comes to certain topics.

"Yeah," I tell her briskly. "Can you keep that to yourself?"

"I—uh, I mean yeah, I can, but..."

We've reached the door to the locker room, and I open it and stride inside. A glance over my shoulder reveals Alexis trailing in after me, still looking scandalized. Hopefully no one notices. There's not ordinarily anything all that sordid about a trip to the water fountain.

On the way to the team lunch, Sandra calls, just like Hallie said she would. I only answer because I recognize the area code from my hometown. It's a brief conversation full of awkward pauses. The gist? I need to choose a bridesmaid dress. Black is the only requirement.

We pull up outside the restaurant just after she informs me of the color choice, and I use it as an unashamed opportunity to end the conversation quickly.

The team lunch is exactly what I expect. Scholenberg rented out some swanky restaurant that makes me feel very out of place in my casual athletic attire. Ellie sits next to me, chattering away about how epic the scrimmage was. I nod along and watch Alexis out of the corner of my eye. She still looks a little dazed. Is my hooking up with Adler Beck really *that* much of a shock to her? I didn't think there would be anyone who has met me or read a single article about Beck who would actually be surprised. Excluding the shock value of his fame, I guess.

Maybe I should have assured her it was a onetime thing.

Except it wasn't.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I thought you’d wear something else.” That’s how Beck greets me the following weekend when I reach him. He’s standing at the front entrance of the park whose bathroom we sullied, leaning against one pillar that marks the entrance.

“You look nice, too.” I roll my eyes. Thank God I only changed my outfit twice. Okay, five times. Only because his text last night was insanely vague. I don’t know if he knows Sunday is Scholenberg’s day off, but it seemed like an intentional choice to text me on a Saturday night. All he said was: *Park tomorrow?*

I replied: *To play?*

And he responded: *No. But dress comfortable.* I suppose I should just be grateful he finally sent me more than two words at a time. Prior to last night’s text, our only correspondence was his request for me to meet him outside the locker room at the stadium.

“I told you to wear comfortable clothes,” he reiterates unnecessarily as I pause a couple feet away.

“I know, and that’s all I wear. This *is* comfortable.” I gesture to the green cotton dress and Converse sneakers I’m wearing.

“Okay.” Beck looks dubious but starts walking toward the street. Away from the park.

I follow him over to a shiny black sports car parked along the curb. I snort as I survey the seamless lines. “Of course this is the car you drive.” It practically screams *sexy millionaire*.

“You don’t like it?” Beck asks, feigning disappointment. At least, I think it’s false.

“I would be more impressed if you drove a wood-paneled station wagon,” I inform him.

Beck raises both brows. “That what your family has?”

“Not exactly.” Along with my trust and respect, my mother absconded with the beat-up minivan I spent the first five years of my life being shuttled around in. My dad has driven around in his company’s loaner cars for the last sixteen years, trading in for the newest sedan model every now and again. It was the kids with intact families who were dropped off in old wagons.

My tone doesn’t match his teasing one, and I watch a flash of realization appear that suggests Beck noticed. Thanks to the media, I have a general sense of what Beck’s upbringing was like: elite soccer academies and snazzy parties. Neither of my parents are famous athletes, so he doesn’t have any of the same insight into my background.

Maybe he thinks I’m embarrassed about it.

Maybe he thinks I don’t want to share anything personal with him because he’s Adler Beck and this is nothing but a bizarre blip in both our lives.

Or maybe he’s more astute than I thought, because he asks no further questions; just climbs in the driver’s seat. I slide into the passenger side, inhaling the clean aroma.

Beck’s car smells like him. Manly. Musky. With a rich undertone of expensive leather.

I study the spotless interior. My car is always littered with hair ties, empty water bottles, and spare shin guards. Beck’s looks like it was driven off the dealership lot twenty minutes ago.

“Where are we going?” I ask skeptically. An outing was not what I expected. I didn’t know what to expect, which is mostly why I showed up. I was curious.

“You’ll see.”

I hate not being in control, but I don’t press for more details. Instead, I snap the seatbelt into place. “Isn’t it blasphemous to drive an Italian car when half the country considers you their Kaiser?”

“Wow. You learned one German word.”

I roll my eyes. Admittedly, I’m not doing much to dispel the self-centered American stereotype. Every other Scholenberg attendee is bilingual. At least.

“And it’s a lot more than half.”

“Miraculous your ego fits inside this shoebox,” I mutter.

“To answer your question, it’s common knowledge that Germany produces the best soccer players and Italy builds the best cars.”

“Sure you didn’t just want to buy the most expensive car in the world to show off the pay disparity between male and female athletes?”

“Oh, I didn’t buy this car. They gave it to me for free.”

I glance over at him. “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh,” Beck responds, flicking on the blinker.

I roll my eyes then mostly keep my gaze fixed outside as we whizz along the streets. Beck drives the same way he does everything else: aggressively and assuredly. Not that I’m complaining. We’re outside the city limits in minutes, flying along mostly empty roads as civilization disappears behind us.

When he finally exits off the highway, it provides no indication of our destination. Just another tree-lined road. Oddly, I don’t mind the uncertainty. I figured Beck wanted to meet me in the park bathroom again. Leaving the city is unexpected and exciting.

When he pulls over, it’s in a dirt parking lot. The outrageously expensive car gets turned off, and Beck climbs out, stretching. I scramble out the passenger side to survey our surroundings. It’s just greenery. Trees, shrubs, saplings, sprouts, grass, weeds. Nothing the least bit interesting.

“Is this a pit stop?” I ask.

“This?” Beck asks incredulously, sweeping his left arm in an indication I should take in the scenery.

I’m more focused on the bulge of his bicep, but I humor him. “Okay, it’s a nice view. Let’s keep moving.”

Beck smirks. “This isn’t the view.” He points upward to a peak that seems *really* far away. “That’s blocking the view.”

“You’re planning to go hiking?” I surmise.

Beck nods.

“Why did you let me wear this?” I pinch the skirt of my dress as I tug it to the side to emphasize my attire.

One corner of those luscious lips lifts upward. “I believe we already covered your wardrobe choice.”

I huff out an exasperated breath. “Comfortable and climbing aren’t the same thing, Beck!”

He shrugs. “You’re wearing sneakers. You’ll be fine.”

“I *just* got fully cleared to play again. One wrong step and I could break

an ankle!”

“What do you mean you just got full clearance to play again?” Beck inquires.

“Exactly that. I sprained my knee in the spring. Practice last week was the first time I’ve played in two months.”

Dark blond brows rise, and I’m certain he’s recalling our shootout. Hopefully, he’s thinking it was crazy impressive, not completely stupid. “All right, if you don’t think you can handle it then we can head back.” Beck turns toward the car.

Adler Beck does not know me very well if he thinks I’m going to back down from a paltry challenge like scaling a mountain that looks an awful lot like Everest. Who even knew Germany had mountains that size? Not this American.

“We drove all this way.” I have no idea how far, because Beck drives like he’s taking part in a car chase, but the lack of anything but nature in sight suggests we’re pretty far from Kluvberg. “Lead the way.”

Beck spins back around, and he’s smirking. Forget him not knowing me well.

I totally just got played.

I narrow my eyes at his broad back as he strolls past me and toward the base of the mountain. I would have forged ahead alone, except there’s no obvious entry into the wilderness, no clear path or markers. I grew up in a small southern town where the primary outdoor activity is sipping sweet tea on the front porch. My experience whacking through overgrown greenery is very limited.

As in, nonexistent.

The pavement turns into damp dirt covered with decaying leaves and spotted with fresh sprigs of growth. The scent of moss and sunshine swirls around me. Each step I advance farther into the woods, my apprehension grows. I’m uncertain about following him, but I comfort myself with the thought that this is Adler Beck. He’s beloved. Famous. Rich. Search parties will be sent out. If I stick with him, they’ll have no choice but to rescue me as well.

It’s not terrible, I admit to myself as we walk along. The leafy canopy blocks the brunt of the sun. Birds chirp and chat. The air whooshes in and out of my lungs effortlessly, clean and pure. There’s not the slightest twinge from my knee, even once the flat terrain tilts vertically.

Beck seems completely at ease amidst the trees, pointing out different flora and fauna we pass.

“I didn’t really peg you as a nature lover,” I inform him after he’s identified every plant in sight. Which is a lot, seeing as we’re in the midst of a forest.

“Maybe you should stop ‘pegging’ me as anything,” Beck replies.

“I call them like I see them,” I respond, swatting away a fly.

The light ahead grows brighter and larger as we continue trekking through the forest, and then we’re through the trees, overlooking the view we’ve hiked all this way to survey.

“Whoa,” I murmur breathlessly, taking in the scene spread before me. I used to think there was no nicer view than an expanse of green only interrupted by stark white lines, but there is. It’s this. A sight I’m only used to seeing as the automatic screensaver my computer generates. The kind that makes your breath hitch and your eyes blink to ensure it’s not a mirage.

“Not bad, huh?” Beck comments, clearly enjoying my reaction.

Translucent, viridian water pools in a hidden oasis guarded by craggy peaks. Tall and proud evergreens line the water’s edge, dotting the landscape with darker dashes of green.

“What is this place?”

Beck rattles off a series of German words. He catches my confused expression. There’s a grin. Then, “It’s a national park.”

He navigates down closer to the shore, and I follow closely behind, yanking off my sneakers so I can dip my toes in the water. It’s colder than I expect it to be. If not for the relentless sunshine beaming down on us, the air would feel too cold.

With one hand, Beck yanks his white t-shirt over his head, revealing every ridge and ripple of his torso. I survey the topography unabashedly. It’s a much better view than the surface of the mountain we’ve been climbing all morning.

“Feeling overheated?” I question, smirking.

Shorts come off next. Beck’s still got his boxer briefs on, but they don’t hide much, especially since I already have the dimensions of that particular part of his anatomy memorized.

“Yup.” He shoots me a dangerous grin as he wades into the water; a raunchy, suggestive expression that makes my own body feel like it could benefit from an ice bath, a dunking in water even colder than the pristine pool

bestrewed before me.

I was really hoping I would be accustomed to his appearance by now, but Beck looks like a glistening, tan sculpture of the David come to life, and that's difficult to let fade to white noise.

Heart? Keep beating, please.

I pull cotton that too many washes have softened over my head, leaving behind nothing but matching lace. I may have had some hope for activities aside from hiking on this trip. The chilly water laps higher and higher as I wade in, washing away the perspiration that gathered on the surface of my skin as we navigated uneven terrain.

"Shit," I mutter, submerging up to my collarbones in an attempt to numb myself to the cold. Beck has already dived beneath the surface, and new droplets of water appear in his darkened hair with each step forward, glinting in the sunshine. Just as I'm about to lose contact with the sandy bottom, I draw even with him.

We stare at each other as cold water saturates the ends of my blonde strands. I feel the hair swirl about me.

"You act like you know everything about me," Beck says, his low voice cutting through the quiet lapping of water against the shore.

"Not everything," I correct. "Just the parts extensively reported on by the media."

Beck rolls his eyes. "So, tell me something about you."

He says the words simply. Nonchalantly. "Why?" I ask, stuck between suspicion and confusion.

Beck lets his fingertips trail along the surface of the water, leaving symmetrical ripples behind. "Because all I know about you is that you're American, you're decent on the pitch, and you've broken a lot of hearts."

I splash him. "I'm more than decent, and I've never broken anyone's heart." He raises both eyebrows. "Maybe I've bruised a couple of egos," I acquiesce. Beck laughs at that, a husky, warm sound that brightens the surrounding air. "And you're hardly one to talk."

He doesn't deny it. "I was young and horny. What did you expect me to say? 'No, I wouldn't like a blow job' or 'let's hang out here rather than go off for a quick fuck'?"

I snort. "Was? And I don't care what you said. Just pointing out a fact."

There's a pause. Then, "Well?"

I tilt my head back so cold liquid encircles my skull, wincing at the

accompanying jolt to my nervous system. “I spend twenty minutes before every single game imagining exactly how I want it to go, followed by all the things that could go wrong.” I wait, but there’s no response, so I keep talking. “Whenever I need to think—really think—I like to lie on top of the center line and stare up at the sky. People think I love being the center of attention, but I only enjoy it when I’m on the field. I hate olives. I drink nothing but gin, coffee, and water.” Still nothing. “My mom left when I was five. I eat mint chocolate chip ice cream on the anniversary of the day each year.”

“How come?” Beck asks. His voice is softer than I’ve ever heard it, completely bereft of its usual cocky undertone.

“We went to get ice cream the day before she left. She ordered mint chocolate chip. I was nervous about my first soccer game the following day.” I scoff. “She was probably planning how to pack her suitcase.”

Beck opens his mouth and I’m expecting some sympathetic words; some iteration of the uncomfortable apologies I was subjected to for weeks after she left. Instead, “I’m allergic to tomatoes,” comes out.

Oddly, it’s the perfect answer. “I don’t think we should consider golf a sport.”

I turn my head to catch a ghost of a grin. “I collect paintings.”

“I read mystery books,” I admit.

“My favorite color is blue.”

“I’ve never been on a date.”

Beck breaks our volley. “What do you think this is?”

I raise my head so I can look at him, feeling cold rivulets of water trickle down the sides of my face as my hair emerges from the lake. “Uh, *not* a date. A hike. Hanging out. Foreplay.”

The last suggestion earns me another hearty, husky laugh. “All these trees turning you on?”

“Nope. But you are.” Subtlety has never been my strong suit, and the look Beck gives me in response to that comment makes me glad I’m already submerged in chilly water. I’m pretty sure the heat in his gaze would incinerate clothing. If I were wearing any, that is.

The water parts effortlessly as he advances, ripples radiating outward toward the shore. Toward me.

“Do you want me to do it some more?” Beck whispers in a low voice, like we’re in a crowded movie theater rather than in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere.

And rather than play it cool and composed, I nod so ferociously I look like a bobblehead doll. Beck draws close enough that I can see the skin of his throat vibrate with a chuckle as he registers my response.

“You sure?” he teases.

I step forward so he’s pressed against the drenched lace that’s all I’m wearing. “I’m always sure.” Anticipation crackles and crinkles between us as the mood shifts to one I don’t usually associate with swimming. I trail my fingers through the droplets of water clinging to his chest, dragging the beads of condensation between his pecs and down along the ridges of his lower abdomen. The defined muscles ripple under my touch.

Beck hauls me against his tan torso, and I rub against the washboard texture brazenly, rewarded when I feel the hardened tissue contract against my stomach. I’ve seen a lot of fit, shirtless men. It sounds like a brag—and it’s definitely not a plight I’m unwilling to bear—but none of them had molded their bodies into the perfect specimen glinting in the sunshine before me.

I’ve seen Adler Beck shirtless before. In magazines. On social media.

But not in person.

Not up close.

Not against me.

Beck walks toward the shore as I cling to him like a spider monkey. Now that I’ve been introduced to his bare torso, I’m not super eager to be separated from it. With each step he takes, the water level drops farther, exposing more and more of my wet skin to the breeze soughing through the treetops. Beck sets me on the sandy shore, which is really half dirt and mixed with pine needles and leaf litter. He’s no longer having to hold me up, leaving his hands free to roam, so we could be lying on a heap of wood chips for all I care right now.

Beck rolls so he’s on top of me. The heat is welcome, tempering the wind that makes the water droplets coating me feel colder than when I was fully submerged. He slides down my body slowly, gliding lower effortlessly thanks to the moisture coating both our skin.

Once again, I know what he’s going to do before he does it, but that doesn’t make it any less spectacular. I spend his trip down to the apex of my thighs imagining what it might feel like to have Adler Beck go down on me.

For once, reality outshines fantasy.

His blond head hovering between my thighs is the most erotic sight I’ve

ever seen. I let my legs fall open as I entwine my fingers in the soaked strands of his hair and lose myself to sensation. He feasts on me. Licks and sucks and swirls and teases. It feels decadent. Delicious. Obscene. I've never been shy in the bedroom, but this isn't a bedroom. This is the German wilderness, and this isn't an overeager jock. This is Adler fucking Beck electrifying frissons of ecstasy.

We've had sex before, but this feels different. Even more intimate. This isn't in a club or a bathroom or a closet. It's spontaneous, but in a way that's premeditated. He's pleasuring me because that's what he wants to do, not as part of a one-night stand or a flash of lust.

I'm nothing but nerve endings.

Pleasure lights up my body, as potent and powerful as I've ever experienced.

"I'm too blissed out to give you a blow job right now," I inform Beck breathlessly when he returns to eye level.

He's still pressed against me, so I feel the low chuckle reverberate in his chest. "We don't have to keep score, Saylor," he replies.

His statement chases away the final remnants of ecstasy. Beck may have just carried me out of the lake, but I suddenly feel like I'm in over my head.

Because I hate losing.

Because I like to know where I stand with people.

And because Adler Beck is the furthest thing from a sure bet.

CHAPTER NINE

The next few weeks fly by. I guess that's what happens to time when you're attending an elite soccer camp with an enervating itinerary that believes in only one day off a week. My fellow Scholenberg attendees are tired, too. Even Olivia is too drained to make as many snarky comments. Each day, Coach Weber finds a new way to challenge us. It's exhausting, and none of my fellow attendees are sneaking around with Adler Beck on top of an already draining schedule.

Ellie is definitely suspicious about how I disappear early some mornings and at other random points throughout the day. I had to make up an elaborate story for the day I spent hiking with Beck. I still don't think she bought that I'd spent the day at the renowned art museum I actually visited on the first day of the program. Maybe because the ends of my hair were still damp when I returned to the house.

I'm not sure why I keep lying to her. I like Ellie. I'm certain she'd keep my extracurricular activities to herself if I asked her to, but I also know she'll have questions. Questions I've never minded answering about a guy before. Questions I wouldn't mind answering now if it had just been that time in the club. Or the club and the bathroom. It's easy to answer a few questions about a one or two-time thing that's ended.

Not so much when it's lasted for weeks. And counting.

My phone vibrates on the table that flanks Beck's king-size bed, waking me from a post-orgasmic utopia. Yup, I was right on about the bed. Although, honestly, his penthouse apartment is so massive anything smaller would look ridiculous.

Reluctantly, I drag my arm off the cloudlike mattress to grab my phone.

And think of the devil, it's a text from Ellie asking where I am.

Out for a run, I reply. Hopefully she didn't see me leave the house two hours ago.

Still?? she replies. *It's our day off!!!!*

I chew on my bottom lip, trying to figure out how to respond. Our practice schedule is already insane. I'm dedicated to soccer, but I'm not a crazy person.

"What's wrong?" I glance over at Beck, who's lounging beside me.

"Ellie thinks I'm nuts. I told her I'm out for a run. On our day off." I pause. "I haven't told her about... this." I flick a finger between our naked bodies, unsure how to categorize the reason we're in bed together verbally. We're fuck buddies, I guess?

There are plenty of guys I've slept with more than once, but they were sporadic hook-ups spanning weeks, sometime months, and always corresponding with some big bash on campus. Not almost every day for weeks.

We're also friends?

Ever since our hike, we've kept talking about topics beyond soccer and sex. We still discuss—and act out—those plenty, but it's intermingled with random conversations about books, food, music, movies, and travel.

Beck mutters something in German and slips out of bed. I sit up on my elbows. Most of the time he sticks to English around me, but there are moments when he'll revert to his native tongue. It's mostly when he's close to coming, but that's definitely not what's happening right now. Beck pulls on a pair of athletic shorts and a Kluvberg t-shirt, and I mourn the loss of the view I was enjoying.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

Beck glances over at me, and I don't miss the heat that flares in his gaze. Is it good for my ego that he still seems just as transfixed by my body as I am by his? Try fantastic.

"I forgot it's Sunday," is his explanation.

"Okayy..." I reply, letting a question linger after the word, because that really didn't answer mine. Then, something occurs to me. "Oh my God, are you religious or something? Because I'm not sure He would approve of the past hour."

Beck laughs. "No, I'm not religious. I have a family brunch."

I would have been less surprised if he said he was going to church. "Oh,"

I answer eloquently.

Beck pauses and studies me, as if he's considering something. "Do you want to come?"

"What?" I blurt. Alarm bells start blaring in my head. "To your family brunch?"

Beck nods, since that's literally what he just said.

"Will—uh—will your parents be there?" We've never discussed his parents aside from his brief mention of them during our walk to the stadium together, but I know they're a substantial part of the enigma that is Adler Beck. He had towering expectations placed on him due to the fact that they were both successful players in their own right. Beck's career would have been followed closely based on nothing but his last name and his parentage, even if he'd been nothing more than a mediocre competitor, but he managed to smash those already high hopes at just sixteen when he became eligible to play for Germany's national team. He's not only beloved by his home country but revered around the world for his skill on the pitch.

Normally, the chance to meet two successful professional players is one I would jump at, but they're not just retired footballers. They're Beck's—the guy I've been consistently sleeping with—parents. I've *never* met a guy's parents before. And it's mostly the fact that I want to, that I'm curious about something beyond Beck's skill on the pitch and moves in the bedroom, that's got warning signals singing out in my head.

Beck's oblivious to my spinning thoughts. "At their house? Yes, I think so."

I choose to ignore his sarcasm. "Won't it be weird?"

He shrugs. "Doubt it. I've brought plenty of girls over before."

Other women would probably wilt in response to that sentence, but it prompts a rush of relief for me. Being nothing more than one in a line of many is exactly what I want to be when it comes to Adler Beck. It washes away any reservations I had.

"Yeah, sure," I reply. "I'm guessing attire is casual?" I ask, nodding to his own outfit.

"Wear whatever you want," Beck replies in the indifferent tone most men have when it comes to fashion.

"Well, I only have one outfit, so it shouldn't be too hard of a choice," I respond with a roll of my eyes, hopping off the bed to retrieve the shorts and top Beck dropped in a heap next to his hamper after yanking them off. At

least it's one of my cuter workout outfits, a matching tank top and shorts in a shade of light turquoise that draws out some of the blue in my eyes. Plus, I took a cab here, planning to run later, so it's not even sweaty.

I get dressed and then follow Beck out of his apartment into the hallway, although apartment is a bit of a misnomer. The square footage is probably double that of the house I grew up in. Beck's door is the only one in the hallway. He has the top floor all to himself.

We enter the elevator, and as soon as Beck taps the down button, we drop rapidly. I expect to see the marble lobby I entered earlier, but the door opens to a garage. I follow him over to his car, which is parked in the prime spot just to the left of the elevator doors. Once I settle into the passenger seat, we're soon flying along the roads of Kluvberg. I take the opportunity to reply to Ellie finally, going for a garbled version of the truth.

Nope, I'm meeting a guy for brunch.

She replies immediately. *OMG! Text me after.*

Great. More lies to concoct. Maybe I should just fess up.

I switch my attention to Beck. "So, anything I should know?"

"Hmm?" He keeps his eyes on the road, which I guess is a good thing.

"Family skeletons? Awkward baby photos? Drama? What am I walking into here?"

One corner, or at least the corner I can see, of Beck's mouth lifts. "I wouldn't be expecting any of that. You'll probably be bored."

I eye him dubiously. It's just now occurring to me, since he brought it up, that I've never been bored in Beck's presence. Not once.

"What if they ask about..." I make the same vague gesture between us I did earlier this morning.

I'm not sure if Beck catches the motion I make, but he catches my meaning. "They won't." His voice is confident. "The media keeps them plenty well apprised of my sex life. They won't be asking for details."

I have nothing to say to *that*, so the rest of the drive passes in silence. My sense of travel time is skewed thanks to Beck's lead foot, but we take about forty-five minutes to reach a pair of black wrought-iron gates. I'd guess the trip was probably supposed to take an hour.

I don't say anything as we roll through the open gate and along a cobblestone driveway Beck has the sense to slow down for. I'm too busy gaping at the estate we're driving toward. I shouldn't be this shocked. I just left Beck's penthouse suite that, if I had to guess, I'd estimate cost several

million dollars. Logically, I know he, and his family, have money. Lots of it. But I've never lived anywhere besides the three-bedroom bungalow my parents bought when they got married, a dorm room, and the Colonial-style cottage I share with Cressida, Anne, and Emma that seems to need repairs constantly.

The house before me looks far too dignified to contain leaky faucets or creaky floorboards. The Scholenberg house I'm staying in and the other residences I walk past daily are all designed in what I've come to recognize as traditional German style: brightly colored and half-timbered. But the mansion before me is Baroque in appearance, both symmetrical and stately. There's a courtyard containing topiaries and statues that wouldn't look out of place at a royal residence cradled between the two wings of the house that jut out to the left and right. Beck parks at the very edge of the cobblestones.

"So, is your house behind the palace?" I ask, only half kidding.

He grins. "Come on. We're late."

"Oh, is that why you were driving like we were fleeing a crime scene?"

Beck laughs. "No. I just like driving fast. And I'm not exactly worried about getting a ticket."

Of course he's not. Any cop would probably just ask for his autograph.

I follow him through the courtyard and glass-paneled doors into the marble entryway, feeling *very* out of place in my athletic apparel. One major I tried out before settling on public relations was architecture, and I feel like I've stepped inside one of the chateaus or palazzos we would study slideshows of in the intro class.

There's a flurry of German to the left, and a statuesque blonde girl who looks to be about my age appears, stopping at the bottom of the staircase.

"Hi, Sophia," Beck replies.

The blonde switches to flawless English. "You brought a girl to brunch?" She sounds thoroughly displeased about it.

"I thought you said you weren't coming," Beck replies.

"Ah, that explains it. Plans change. People don't, apparently." She huffs out an annoyed sigh.

I'm worried Beck's managed to double-book his *family brunch* when she holds a hand out to me. "Hi, I'm Sophia Beck."

I see glimpses of the family resemblance. She's got the same pronounced cheekbones and shiny blonde hair as her older brother. "Saylor Scott," I respond, shaking her firm grip.

“You’re American,” she realizes.

“Yes,” I respond, tempted to make a joke but uncertain how it will be received. She still looks annoyed by my mere presence.

“Are you a model?” she asks me.

I laugh. “Ha. No. I play soccer. I mean, football.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Are you any good?”

“Yes,” I respond immediately.

She laughs. “I like you, Saylor Scott.”

“Thank you?” I reply, unsure how to take her quick about-face. But when her attention jumps right back to Beck, I realize bouncing between topics might just be her personality.

“Do you not own any nice clothes?” Sophia asks him, surveying Beck’s clothes disdainfully.

“Do you not own pants?” he retorts, studying Sophia’s admittedly short dress.

“If I wanted your opinion, I would ask for it, Adler,” she retorts, and I have to admit it was worth coming just to see Beck get scolded by his little sister. It’s also the first time I’ve heard anyone address him by his first name, but I guess it makes sense. It would be strange to call someone by your own last name.

Based on the wry twist of his lips, Beck notices my amusement. I’m distracted from his face when a massive tan and black animal appears around the corner and leaps on him. A loud bark alerts me to the fact that it’s a dog. A German Shepard, to be exact. I watch the exuberant canine leap and slobber all over Beck, who doesn’t seem the least bit fazed. He crouches down, allowing the excited dog to circle and rub against him. He murmurs something in German, and the dog’s tail wags even faster, something I hadn’t thought was possible. The whipping fur is generating enough of a breeze to be felt as it wafts across my bare legs.

“My brother likes to act like he’s the shit, but he’s actually a big softie,” Sophia whispers to me. “At least when it comes to dogs.”

“Interesting,” I muse.

Beck raises his gaze to where the two of us are standing, eyes narrowing slightly as he watches us talk conspiratorially.

“You should head out to the terrace,” Sophia instructs, not looking the

least bit bothered by his scrutiny.

“Why aren’t you coming out?” Beck asks, still looking suspicious.

This time Sophia does look a bit guilty, shifting from foot to foot. “I may have invited Karl. He’ll be here any minute.”

“Sophia! I thought you were—”

“You do not get to have an opinion on my love life after what I’ve had to endure in school about...” There’s a quick glance at me, and then Sophia switches to German.

Beck barks something back in his native tongue, and then I’m lost, feeling like I’ve stumbled into the wrong theater and am stuck in a foreign film screening. Without subtitles.

Sophia says something that makes Beck’s fists clench, and that’s when our trio turns into a quartet. A new voice spouts more German, and I turn to see Erika Lange—now Erika Beck—enter the imposing entryway. I straighten automatically. Beck’s mother isn’t in quite the same strata of notoriety as Christina Weber, but she’s close, and she probably would be if an ACL injury hadn’t cut her career short. Despite being in her fifties, she’s still got the lean build of an athlete, and her blonde hair only has a few ribbons of gray working their way through it. She’s stunning, in an ethereal, timeless way. It’s obvious where her children got their looks.

Her voice is quieter than Beck and Sophia’s, but both of them fall silent as soon as she speaks what is clearly some sort of admonishment. Then she notices me and says something else in German. Beck jumps back in, and then Sophia laughs and says a few words.

I wish I could get a transcript of this conversation to plug into Google Translate later, but they’re speaking too fast for me to catch so much as a single word to look up.

“Hello. I’m Erika,” Beck’s mother says, switching to English and giving me a warm, albeit guarded smile.

“I know,” I blurt.

Her smile grows a bit more genuine. “You’re American,” she observes, echoing her daughter. I’m guessing it means the girls Beck referenced earlier have all been German.

“Yes. That’s why I don’t know German. I mean, I didn’t think I’d need to know it. I’m just here for a few more weeks.” *Oh my God, stop talking!* I scold myself. “I think it’s a great language, though,” I add, worried I’ve somehow offended everyone in the room.

Beck snorts at my side, and I elbow him in the stomach. Unfortunately, I think the contact hurts my arm more than his torso.

“Are you here on a university trip? Or vacation?” Erika inquires politely, a small smile playing on her lips that I hope means she found my awkward babble charming and not idiotic.

“I’m here for Scholenberg.” Both Sophia and Erika’s eyebrows rise. “I was just planning to play socc—football. That’s why I didn’t bother to learn any German. I wasn’t expecting to be around so many... Germans.”

There’s a second snort beside me, and I jab Beck a bit harder this time. Still rock solid.

“I’d love to hear more about Scholenberg,” Erika remarks. “I haven’t seen Christina in ages. She’s still the head coach, yes?”

“She’s more of a drill sergeant, but yes,” I reply.

Erika laughs.

“Where’s Papa?” Beck asks, strolling farther into the mansion.

“On the terrace,” Erika replies. “It’s so nice out I thought we’d eat outside.”

We walk through a tastefully decorated living room, leaving Sophia behind in the soaring entryway to wait for the mysterious Karl. I’m guessing they covered that in the German portion of the conversation.

The terrace is covered by a wooden lattice woven with bright greenery that shades the table and chairs beneath it. It overlooks a broad stretch of grass framed by tall, trimmed hedges that block any neighbors.

Seated at the head of the table is a tall, silver-haired man I immediately know is Beck’s father. Hans Beck raises his head from the newspaper when we approach, blue eyes flitting between his wife and son, then to me. He snaps the paper back into its original fold and tucks it under the place setting already set out on the table.

Beck and Sophia favor their mother in appearance. Hans Beck cuts an intimidating figure, with a domineering presence similar to Beck’s, but it’s a rougher one. His face is tough and weathered, and what remains of his original hair color is darker than the rest of his family’s, combed back neatly to emphasize his hewn features.

Beck says something in German to his father that I’m guessing is a greeting. “Hello.” Hans greets me in a gruff tone. Or maybe Beck was instructing him to address me in English.

“Hi, Mr. Beck.” I hold out a hand to shake his. “I’m Saylor Scott.”

“Hans is fine,” he replies, studying me curiously.

I shift nervously under his scrutiny. I don’t know what is wrong with me. I’m not easily starstruck. I’ve met dozens of famous former athletes before and wasn’t the least bit nervous. I managed to beat Beck in a shootout the first time we met, for fuck’s sake. I know their names, but Erika and Hans Beck retired before I was even born. I’ve never seen either of them play. And yet I’m acting like a teenager meeting my date’s parents before prom.

“Your home is beautiful.” I sweep a hand toward the yard like they’re not aware their back lawn looks like it could be featured on the cover of a gardening magazine.

“Thank you,” Erika says graciously. “Saylor is here attending Scholenberg,” she informs Hans.

Something that looks like respect glints in blue eyes the same shade as Beck’s. “Congratulations. That’s a competitive program.”

“Thank you,” I respond. “I’m a competitive person.”

There’s a small twitch of his mouth, and I’m fairly certain it’s as close to smiling as Hans Beck gets. “The best athletes are,” he replies.

I smile.

There’s a chattering of German, and then Sophia appears in the opening between the french doors with a guy with light brown hair close behind. He’s handsome in a preppy, male-model kind of way that’s been artfully prepared. His t-shirt displays the faded logo for a band I’ve seen advertised around Klubberg, and gel glints in his hair, suggesting the messy look he’s sporting is purposeful.

Erika greets him first. “Hello, Karl.”

There’s a pause. “Karl,” Hans grunts.

I watch Sophia level Beck with a sharp glance. “Hi, Karl,” he says.

I look at Karl, only to see he’s already staring at me; in a way that seems a bit more appropriate for a poorly lit bar than a family brunch. “Hey, Karl,” I say casually. “I’m Saylor. Nice to meet you.”

His eyes widen when he registers my American accent, and then his eyes drift downward over my body. I thought Beck was just being protective earlier, but it seems Karl is not the most upstanding of teenagers.

“I’m hungry,” Beck says abruptly. “Is the food ready?”

“Yes, it is.” Erika lurches into motion. “Take your seats, everyone.”

Hans returns to the same chair he was seated in previously, and I round the edge of the table to sit on the side facing the house. There are six chairs,

but only five place settings. Obviously, my attendance wasn't planned upon. I start to take the seat without a plate or silverware, but Beck grasps my elbow and pushes me down a spot to the chair that's already set.

"Take that one," he instructs.

"Wow, so you *can* be a gentleman," I whisper to him as I do as instructed.

Beck smirks as he sits in the chair next to me. "I've gotten the impression you like it when I'm not a gentleman," he mutters back.

"How exactly did I give you that impression?" I ask innocently, still keeping my voice quiet as I brush my arm against his.

"Saylor." There's a note of warning in his voice, but the syllables of my name also sound thicker than usual.

I grin triumphantly. I bet he's hard.

I'm distracted from our flirting when my name is said again, this time in a bubbly, female voice.

"Yes?" I reply, turning to look at Sophia.

"I was wondering if you'd like a tour of the house?" she asks.

"Sure," I reply, standing. I don't miss the way Karl's eyes follow my movements as I walk back around the table to the doors that lead inside. As we enter the living room, I hear Hans ask Beck something in German.

"This is the living room," Sophia announces, smiling widely and spinning in the center of the plush rug. The color scheme is muted, and one I'm pretty certain was crafted by a professional interior decorator. It's almost too perfect; the light grays, pale pinks, and muted blues melding together like an early morning sunrise. There's an oil painting hanging above the fireplace that depicts an old building, some sort of cathedral or church, I think. Below it a series of photographs rest on the mantle.

There are several staged family portraits and a few candid shots. One in particular catches my attention, and I study it closely. A sixteen-year-old Beck stands between his two parents, beaming. I know he's sixteen because of the stadium in the background, the German flag draped across his shoulders. It's a snapshot of the moment following his breakout performance that allowed Germany to win a championship.

"Do your parents play?" Sophia asks me, following my gaze.

"No," I reply, laughing a little at the thought. "I don't think either of them have even seen a game."

"Not even yours?" Sophia asks, sounding surprised.

“Nope,” I respond, keeping my tone light. “Have you ever played?”

Sophia scoffs. “Definitely not. They’re a hard act to follow.” She nods to the photo of her parents and brother.

“Did you want to?” I ask, curious to hear her perspective after what Beck had to say about Sophia enjoying the perks without the pressure.

“Not really. I still remember the first time we played football in school. My parents had retired already, Adler was only at the academy, but everyone still expected me to play, to be good. It was exhausting. I don’t know how Adler does it, to be honest.”

“Do you guys get along?” I ask curiously. “It seemed like I was walking into some pretty thick tension earlier. Not that I understood anything.”

Sophia laughs. “Yeah, we do. For the most part, anyway. It was mostly because of—well, you.”

“Me?” I say, surprised.

“Not you, specifically. Just that he brought home *another* girl.”

“So... he brings a lot of girls home?” I ask. Not that it matters.

Sophia nods. “He promised to cut it out, but then, well...”

“He brought me,” I surmise.

She nods again. “I was just annoyed. But I didn’t mean to make you feel unwelcome.”

“You didn’t,” I assure her, even though she sort of did.

She studies me speculatively. “You’re different,” she admits. “Most girls are too busy making heart eyes at Adler to so much as talk to the rest of us.”

“Sounds awkward,” I note. “But I’m leaving in a few weeks. I already know my heart eyes are numbered.”

She eyes me. “Maybe that’s why you’re different. The rest of them never did.”

Sophia leads me through the entryway to the opposite side of the house, which I learn contains a library, sitting room, two bathrooms, and an honest-to-God conservatory.

“I feel like I’m in a game of Clue,” I confess to Sophia as I glance around the glass-paneled room that juts off the east side of the mansion.

She laughs. “Oh my God, I haven’t played that in forever.”

“It’s my favorite board game,” I admit. “I get sort of competitive. None of my housemates back home will play with me anymore.”

“We’re totally playing after brunch,” Sophia decides, grinning.

“It’s a deal,” I reply, smiling back.

We swing back through the entryway, past a room that must be the kitchen, based on the flash of shiny appliances, and end up back on the terrace. Breakfast has been served, and Beck's eyes jump up from his freshly served plate to meet my gaze as soon as I step out of the house. Erika's taken the seat at the other end of the table, and I make my way around the back of her seat to sink down beside Beck.

"All good?" he asks me in a low voice.

I nod, studying the array of food spread before me. I tend to be a picky eater, and I could characterize my relationship with German cuisine as more misses than hits. There are some familiar dishes—waffles and what looks like a cheese tart with cherries—but the rest are foreign. There's some sort of smoked fish topped with a swirled cream, a green soup sprinkled with crispy brown croutons, a salad scattered with seared meat, and rolls with crispy bacon and sauerkraut peeking out.

"That's mackerel," Beck informs me, nodding to the fish. "And zucchini soup with pumpernickel crusts."

"Yum," I remark, in what I mean to be a genuine tone. Beck chuckles under his breath, suggesting I may not have been completely successful.

"Weren't they both on your list of most-hated German foods?" he asks.

I flush. I forgot about my "conversation" with Matthew Jr. in front of him. "That was before I decided to embrace the local culture," I tell Beck.

He smirks. "Really?"

"Uh-huh," I reply, forking some of the fish onto my plate and trying not to gag at the smell.

"I ran into Headmaster Schneider yesterday," Erika states as she eats some of the green soup that's apparently made from zucchinis. "He's looking forward to the camp, Adler."

"Good. I've got four guys from the club coming," Beck replies.

"Herrmann?" Hans asks.

"Ja. And Ludwig," Beck responds.

Hans nods in approval.

"What camp?" I inquire.

Everyone looks at me, but Beck is the one who answers. "It's for the kids at my old football academy. We do a weekend clinic once a year. This year's is next Sunday."

"They trust you to teach children?" The words are out before I think them through.

Beck just grins, unperturbed. Erika doesn't fully manage to hide her smile behind her water glass.

"We're always looking for more volunteers, if you're interested, Saylor," Erika offers.

"Oh, um, I don't really—I've never coached anyone before," I reply.

Sophia pipes in with "If Adler can manage it, I'm sure you can."

Yup, totally set myself up for that.

I surprise myself by saying yes. Lancaster's soccer teams had to attend a youth clinic last year, but it was more a PR stunt for the university than anything. All we did was pass out water bottles and set up cones.

"Wonderful," Erika replies.

"You play football?" Karl speaks for the first time since I returned from Sophia's tour.

I decide to give his wayward eyes another chance. "Yeah, I do. You?"

"Used to. My band takes up too much time now."

I smile to myself. Of course he's in a band. "Do you play an instrument?" I ask, in an effort to be polite.

Beck sighs beside me. At first, I think it's in annoyance; but when Karl launches into a twenty-minute description of his skills on guitar, his capability in writing songs about squirrels, and his lofty musical goals, I realize it was with dread. This is obviously a soliloquy the Becks have all heard before. Even Sophia looks bored.

After we finish eating, Sophia darts inside and returns with a familiar cardboard box.

"A board game?" Beck asks skeptically.

"No one invited you to play, Adler," Sophia says.

Hans and Erika rise to clear plates, and I start to as well. "We've got them," Erika says, flapping her hands toward me in a clear motion to stay seated. "You kids have fun."

"There's nothing fun about Clue," Beck mutters.

"It's Saylor's favorite game," Sophia states.

He looks to me. "It is?"

I nod, then shrug. "I like mysteries."

"Fine, I'll play." Beck sighs.

I don't miss the way Sophia glances between us, and I know she's misreading Beck's acquiescence. She sets up the board, deals out the cards, and then we play. Despite his initial complaints, Beck is not the least

enthusiastic player at the table. Karl has him beat by a mile. I guess all of his cards by my third turn, mostly because Karl keeps flashing them at me. Either he truly has no idea how the game works, or it's his attempt at flirting with me in front of his girlfriend.

Beck navigates Mrs. White, known as Frau Weiss in the German edition, out of one room, and I let out a long sigh. "You shouldn't have done that."

He glances at me. "I just did."

"But it did happen in the Conservatory."

"No, it didn't."

"How do you know?" I reply.

"Because I have the card, so I know you're just messing with me."

"Hmmm," I say, adding a question mark next to the room listing on my sheet.

"Or am I messing with you?" Beck adds, sending me a smirk as he moves the white figurine forward.

I narrow my eyes at him.

I have to show Sophia one of my cards on her next turn, and I walk all the way around the table just to show her the illustration of a gun to ensure Beck can't peek.

She shakes her head as I head back to my seat beside him. "Anyone ever tell you you're competitive?"

"Multiple times a day," I assure her.

And it's affirmed twice more when I correctly guess the suspect, location, and weapon.

"You don't have to be quite so excited about winning," Beck informs me as we clean up the pieces. Sophia and Karl have already headed inside.

"Well, I didn't exactly have a chance to celebrate last time," I reply, referencing our shootout for the first time in weeks.

"Maybe because you knew it wasn't a clean victory," Beck replies.

"What was dirty about it?" I counter. "I made five, you made four."

"My thoughts, for starters," Beck replies.

I smirk as I meet his gaze. "You didn't seem all that affected."

"I've been training since I was a kid not to be affected on the field."

But I affected him. He's not saying it, but it's spelled out in the subtext. "So, you're saying you want a rematch?" I tease.

"No. There are other things I'd rather do with you than play football." Heat and intensity mix in his gaze, but I don't think he's just talking about

sex.

“Well, Karl left,” Sophia states, bouncing out onto the terrace. “So, you can relax, Adler.”

“Great,” he replies, dropping my gaze.

“I think I’m done with him this time,” she decides.

“Great,” Beck repeats dryly. I’m guessing it’s a line he’s heard before. He grabs the board game box and heads inside.

“I just need to meet some new guys,” Sophia declares. “Clubbing! We should go clubbing next weekend!”

“Uh, sure,” I reply, unsure what the proper etiquette is for going out with a fuck buddy’s family member. Sophia doesn’t seem put off by my lackluster response, bouncing back inside while I follow.

Beck and his parents are already waiting in the marble foyer. We all exchange goodbyes, and Erika tells me how much she’s looking forward to the youth camp next Sunday. Sophia gives me a hug.

I smile, and then we’re back outside. “Sophia likes you,” Beck comments as we climb into the car.

“I know. She told me thirty seconds after we met,” I respond glibly. “Also... she wants to go clubbing next weekend.” I study Beck’s face closely, worried he might be annoyed. But his expression barely flickers as he starts back down the cobblestone driveway.

“Not surprised,” he responds.

We roll through the gate and then hit cement. Beck accelerates accordingly, and soon we’re speeding along at his usual pace.

“Thank you for inviting me today. It was nice,” I say. “Your parents are really nice. It’s nice you’re so close with them.” And nice is the only adjective I’m capable of coming up with, apparently.

“You’re not close with your father.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“No,” I confirm. “My dad, he—he didn’t deal well with my mom leaving. None of us did, really. But Hallie and I were just kids. He was the adult. He was supposed to hold it all together, and instead he fell apart. By the time he started acting like a parent again, I didn’t need one. Or want one, at least.”

“And now?”

“He’s getting remarried.” I sigh. “He called the day I found out I got into Scholenberg. Not that he would have had any idea of what it even is. I’ve only met Sandra—his fiancée—once.”

“How long have they been together?”

“Three years,” I admit. “I don’t go back home much.”

“Why not?”

“It’s weird. There are all these memories of the past. Before my mom left. After. The last time I was home was for my sister’s wedding. She’s... forgiven him. She went through all the same shit I did, and now she’s just *fine*. Married with a kid, going over to his house for dinner like we were always one big happy family. I’m the resentful one stuck in the past, just getting more bitter as they move on with their lives.”

“Just because you had the same upbringing doesn’t mean you have to respond to things the same way. You’re not the same person as your sister. I mean, look at me and Sophia. She brought a guy to brunch who can spend ten minutes describing his song about feeding squirrels. I was sitting next to the ‘Future of Women’s Soccer.’”

A surprised laugh bursts out of my lips. “Where did you come up with that?”

“I may have researched more than just your conversion rate,” Beck admits.

I smile, but the amusement fades quickly. “Thank you,” I say quietly.

Unexpected warmth encompasses my left hand.

I turn my gaze to the German countryside flashing by, trying to shake the claustrophobia crawling over me. I just told Beck things I’ve never spoken aloud. Never told anyone. That disgusting fish must have had some truth serum in it.

I’ve always kept confessions and coitus separate. Mixing them seems an awful lot like a relationship, and a boyfriend will not get me to the Olympics. To the national team. On a professional team after graduation. Won’t help me accomplish any of the goals I’ve set for myself.

Even if I were open to having a boyfriend, I’m pretty certain Adler Beck is the worst possible candidate for the position. Not just because he’s famous. And lives in a country four thousand miles away from the East Coast of the United States. And goes through women at a dizzying pace. And a poster of him hangs in the room across from my own.

Adler Beck is a terrible idea because I suddenly know with absolute certainty that if I let myself, I could care about him.

Like him.

Maybe even love him.

So, I slide my hand out from underneath his and pretend the pines we’re

passing are the most interesting ones I've ever seen, so I don't have to register his response.

CHAPTER TEN

I'm texting with Emma while eating lunch when Ellie and Alexis take seats at the dining room table across from me. I welcome them with a distracted hello as I reply to Emma about our lease terms. There's a week-long gap between the end of Scholenberg and the start of Lancaster's preseason. Despite the fact that we rent the house year-round, our landlord is being difficult about me moving back in a week earlier than everyone else. His guise is repairs, but I couldn't care less about the house's issues, for once. I'd rather hire a lawyer than have to go home. Emma promises to straighten it out, so I shut off my phone.

"I can't believe it's true," Ellie is saying. "Is it even physically possible?"

"Why not?" Alexis replies. "I doubt he has any shortage of willing participants. There are like forty million women in Germany, right? Plus, the club travels internationally, too." There's a weird note in her voice that catches my attention.

"What are you guys talking about?" I ask, leaning back in my seat and taking a sip of my water.

"Olivia says Adler Beck only sleeps with women once."

Some liquid goes down the wrong pipe, and I let out a small cough to clear my throat. Ah, that's why Alexis is uncomfortable. I take another sip. "That's not true."

"It could be," Ellie argues. "Olivia heard it from another Kluyberg player, *supposedly*. And every time I see a photo of him, it's with a different woman."

Fuck it. We're only here for two more weeks. Plus, I'm running out of excuses for where I disappear to on Sundays, and the youth camp is this

weekend.

“Well, he’s fucked me more than once.” I say it casually in an attempt to temper some of the shock value. A futile attempt, it turns out. Ellie knocks over the soda she was reaching for, and fizzy liquid immediately spreads across the table. “Ellie!” I quickly lift my sandwich to rescue it from the small flood and toss my solitary napkin on the puddle.

Ellie is just staring at me, wide-eyed, so I grab another wad of napkins from the dispenser and finish mopping up the mess myself. “No need to help, guys,” I tell them, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“Is she joking?” Ellie asks Alexis.

“Uh, I—I don’t—I’m not sure,” Alexis stutters.

I roll my eyes. “Sitting right here, Ellie.”

“You’re serious,” Ellie declares. “And you didn’t tell me?” Alexis says nothing.

“You’re going to lead with that, really?” I ask. “After how you just reacted?”

“Saylor, it’s *Adler Beck*! How did you think I would react?”

“I didn’t give any thought to how you might react to *my* sex life, honestly,” I reply before taking another bite. It’s not true if the number of times I’ve lied to her the last few weeks is any indication.

“How many times have you slept with him?” Ellie demands. It’s the question I was hoping she wouldn’t ask, but given the way the topic came up, it’s hardly a surprise.

I still feign disapproval. “Seriously?”

Ellie nods vigorously; Alexis looks even more uncomfortable. “I don’t know. Twenty, maybe? I haven’t been keeping track.” On purpose, and that’s actually a conservative estimate now that I think about it. I’m surprised. I don’t even think Drew and I have had sex that many times, and we’ve been hooking up since freshman year. I’ve known Beck for six weeks.

“Twenty?” Ellie looks stunned.

I shrug. “He’s good in bed.”

“Okay, now we’re getting to the juicy stuff,” Ellie says, grinning as she leans forward eagerly. Alexis blushes scarlet.

I laugh. “Sorry, we’re not getting into the details of my sex life. You’ll have to take your ‘one’ shot with him and find out for yourself.”

“Let’s go, everyone. Bus is here!” One of the assistant coaches enters the house and starts herding us outside to head back to the stadium.

The brief trip to the van is all it takes for a fresh film of sweat to coat my body fully. It's sweltering today, well into the nineties, possibly brushing a hundred. The second half of the day is usually more intense than the first, and there's a fair bit of grumbling throughout the brief trip.

But there's not so much as the barest wisp of a sigh as we file into the dim room in the depths of the stadium where our film sessions take place. Coach Weber is already waiting at the front of the room, drawing out lines on the whiteboard next to the projector screen.

Normally, I dread film sessions. I understand the importance of them strategically, but I'd much rather be making the motions myself. Today is an exception. I sink down on the cool plastic chair with a relieved sigh. The slightly damp, musty scent permeating the lowest level of the stadium has never been my favorite, but the cooler temperature more than makes up for it. I redo my ponytail, scraping up the wayward strands sticking to the back of my neck with the rest of my hair and allowing the colder air to hit my heated skin uninterrupted.

The film session lasts for two hours, and then Coach Weber announces we're heading outside. The announcement is greeted with total silence. I wasn't kidding when I told Beck's mother Coach Weber is a drill sergeant. We fall into line like dutiful, uncomplaining soldiers as we trek through the hallways and out into the oppressive heat. The air hits in a wave of warmth like an oven door that's just been opened.

"Shit, it's hot," Ellie mutters beside me.

"You think?" I murmur back.

We run through our usual warm-up routine of sit-ups, planks, burpees, and push-ups. I'm soaked with sweat by the time we finish the last set.

"Center line," Coach Weber barks. "Usual teams."

The silence holds, but Alexis huffs out a disbelieving breath to my right. Her face is the same shade as strawberry lemonade. We all follow instructions, taking our usual positions on the field. I turn to see one of the assistant coaches wheeling out two giant trash bins. That's new.

"Are those for vomit?" Alexis asks, sounding aghast.

My stomach churns at the thought. I've thrown up during practice before. *Not* an experience I'd love to replicate. But when the bins are close enough for us to get a glimpse inside, I don't see a generic black bag. Instead, it's filled with color. An explosion of it, really.

The bins are filled with a rainbow array of balloons.

“First team fully soaked loses,” Coach Weber announces in the same authoritative tone that normally encourages running at an inhuman pace.

“Wh—what?” Ellie stutters beside me, and I’m equally at a loss. Everyone else is just as taken aback, but we’ve all had listening to our coach drilled into us to the point that it’s permanently impressed. Alexis grabs a yellow balloon; I take a blue one, and soon everyone has one in hand. I roll the sphere in the palm of my hand, feeling the liquid contents squish and contract underneath the latex skin.

My shirt is suddenly sticking to me with more than sweat, and I scowl at Olivia, my Scandinavian nemesis. Never mind the fact that the water actually feels good. I send a balloon back at her, but it hits Sydney instead, who glares at me. I shoot her a satisfied smile, and the game descends into chaos. Vivid globes are flying everywhere, exploding into strips of colored plastic and sprays of clear water. I don’t know which side gets fully drenched first, and I don’t think anyone else does earlier. We don’t stop until the bins are empty.

Ellie flops down on the grass, and I lie down beside her to stare up at the perfectly clear sky.

“This is my favorite memory on this field,” she says, giggling slightly.

I open my mouth to agree, and then close it.

It’s not mine.



I’ve just gotten out of the shared shower on Friday night when there’s a loud knock on my door.

“What?” I call, tightening the towel around my torso. The door opens, and Alexis pokes her head in.

“Get ready, we’re going to dinner and then out,” she instructs.

“I was thinking of staying in tonight...” I hedge. In truth, Sophia texted me, asking about going clubbing. Beck must have given her my number.

“Yeah, right. Cancel whatever other plans you made. Everyone’s going.” Alexis gives me a knowing smirk.

I roll my eyes. “Fine.”

I text Sophia requesting a rain check and then get ready. I go for a smokey eye effect with my makeup and curl my hair, so it looks more tousled than messy. Finally, I slip on the black, strapless dress I picked out for the

soccer formal last spring. It offsets my tan nicely. The dress is too nice to wear anything but heels with, so I reluctantly slip on a black pair and head downstairs. An awkward silence descends when I enter the kitchen, which is already littered with alcohol. I'm honestly a little impressed by my strait-laced teammates.

Ellie breaks the quiet that follows my appearance.

"Okay, that's everyone! Let's go." We all head out of the house, where a line of several taxis already awaits. I climb into the last one with Alexis, Ellie, and a quiet girl named Alice who I've never spoken to before but know has a mean header. Ellie spends the entire drive jabbering nonsensically, making me think she pre-gamed harder than she should have. She's not normally *this* chatty.

The restaurant we stop outside is trendy and upscale. Definitely not a place serving traditional German cuisine, which I'm intrigued by. The exterior is half-timbered but painted entirely black so that the texture differential is barely noticeable.

Based on the monochromatic exterior, I'm expecting a minimalistic interior as well. The variety of decoration inside is a bit of a shock. The floor is covered with woven rugs boasting intricate patterns. The walls are paneled with light wood. Hundreds of lights cover the ceiling, giving the space a warm, homey glow. The furniture takes the longest to absorb. It's an eclectic mix in color, weave, and if I had to guess, century.

There's a communal feel to the large space. Long tables run the full length of the room, surrounded by chairs spanning every possible shape and color you could imagine. It's reminiscent of my high school cafeteria, but none of the food being eaten looks anything like the glop I ate for four years. I study some plates as Olivia talks to the hostess. There's some sort of fish with sectioned citrus, roasted chicken with cucumber salsa, seared beef with jalapeno, and prawns atop a beet salad.

I'm distracted from my perusal when a familiar voice says, "This is a surprise."

I turn to see Coach Weber appraising our group with the barest hint of a smile. It's the first time I've seen her in anything but a polo and soccer shorts. She's dressed in a pink checkered sundress that falls to mid-calf. A few middle-aged women hover behind her, looking at our large group curiously.

I'm the only sober one, so I take the lead. "Hi, Coach."

"Scott. Ladies," Coach Weber responds, swiping her gaze across our

entire group. “Doing some team bonding?”

“There was a group liver workout,” I reply.

Ellie snorts. Alexis hisses my name.

Christina Weber has an epic poker face, but I think I catch a lip twitch. “Don’t set any records. I talked to Erika Beck earlier. You’re in high demand this weekend, Scott.” I nod. “Have a good night, ladies. I’d recommend the chicken.” Coach Weber heads for the door with her girl squad close behind.

“What was she talking about? Erika Beck?” Ellie whispers to me.

“I’ll tell you later,” I reply as we follow the hostess over to the large section of seats waiting for us. Our group of thirty takes up most of the table. I opt to follow Coach Weber’s suggestion and get the chicken. I’m far from a foodie, but it’s good. The cucumber salsa is dressed with salt, lime, and mint, which pairs perfectly with the gin margarita I order.

An hour later, we pile back into a series of taxis to head to our next destination. I’m enjoying myself more than I expected to. It may have taken six weeks, but there’s a bit of the comradery I’m accustomed to amongst players I’ve played with extensively. Maybe it’s leftover goodwill from the water balloon fight. Maybe it’s because we’re so close to the end. Whatever the reason, it was a relief to be plied with questions about playing in the States rather than beamed by glares at dinner.

Taxi assignments remain the same, so Alexis, Ellie, Alice, and I are all crammed together, heading to our next destination.

“Why did Coach bring up Erika Beck?” Ellie asks.

I sigh. Was I hoping she was too drunk and distracted to remember? Abso-fucking-lutely. “I’m helping out at a youth camp on Sunday because she invited me to participate.”

“A youth camp?” Alexis asks. “You?”

I should probably be offended, but I’m not. As Beck kindly informed me weeks ago, I have no idea what to do with children. “I’m hoping mine will end up being an observational role.”

“Wait—how did you even meet Erika Beck?” Ellie questions.

“Well, when I said I was meeting a guy for brunch, I was. It just happened to be Adler Beck. And his parents. The camp came up.”

Ellie opens and closes her mouth a couple of times, but no sound comes out. She looks like a fish seeking oxygen only to discover it’s not in the liquid form it can absorb.

“Wow.” Alexis sounds impressed. “You met Hans Beck, too? He’s

supposed to be super intimidating.”

“Uh, yeah, I did,” I reply.

The cab pulls up outside our destination before either she or Ellie can say anything else. It’s a club called Submarine that sits right along the canal. Unlike my outing with Natalie and London, the bouncer waves us right inside the packed space.

The inspiration for the name is evident as soon as we enter. The entire far wall is made from glass, and the dancing lights of the club reflect off the calm water. It’s more brightly lit inside than I expect, with Edison bulbs hanging overhead that complement the industrial building.

Since I’m in the front of the group, I turn automatically toward the bar. When I push through the crowd of people to get to the long counter, I’m met by familiar blue eyes.

Beck and I stare at each other for a long moment. I recognize several of the guys behind him as his teammates and hear gasps from the other girls in my program as they stop behind me, obviously recognizing the men as well. Despite practicing in their stadium six days a week, as far as I know, I’m the only one who’s encountered a Kluverberg player aside from the one day their practice overlapped with ours a few weeks ago.

“Scott,” Beck states. He’s using his inscrutable voice, so I have no idea if using my last name is an attempt to pretend he doesn’t know me or to tease me.

“Adler,” I reply, just as emotionlessly. A ghost of a smile flitters across his perfect face.

“I thought you were going out with Sophia tonight.” Okay, so it wasn’t the former.

“I had to cancel. We’re... bonding.” I flutter a hand around my companions vaguely.

Beck doesn’t say anything at first. He just studies me, letting his gaze drop to what I’m wearing. The last time he saw me in a dress was the cotton one I wore hiking. That was girl-next-door casual. This is hit-the-dance-floor-with-a-hot-guy gussied. Azure eyes darken to near-navy.

“Have fun,” is all he says before turning and ambling toward a sectioned-off area raised slightly above the rest of the club. His teammates follow.

I turn to the bartender and order a drink, suddenly in desperate need of something to do. I have no idea who chose the venues for tonight, but I’m currently two for two on people I wouldn’t choose to run into on a night out

on the town. Granted, the entire team was at that restaurant, but I've always prided myself on being the player coaches could count on. Coach Weber didn't seem overly enthused about my participation in the camp. Is it because she correctly guessed it means I'm involved with Beck?

But I'm more concerned with the most recent encounter. I had no intention of anyone else besides Alexis and Ellie—and Alice since she was in the cab on our way here—having any idea about my involvement with Beck. With one bar-side run-in, any hope of that is gone.

“You know *Adler Beck*?” Olivia asks incredulously. All the girls in the group are staring at me expectantly.

“Yeah, we've met a couple times,” I reply casually. We play in the stadium plastered with his face. That's believable, right?

“She doesn't just know him—she's sleeping with him,” Ellie contributes, downing a shot. Yup, I definitely prefer her sober.

“Really?” Olivia muses, savoring each syllable as though it's the most interesting thing she's ever uttered.

I shrug.

“Are you dating him?”

I laugh. “No, of course not.”

“So... you won't mind if I go talk to him?” There's a challenge dancing in her brown eyes, but I don't engage. I don't think Beck will take her up on it, but I don't care either way. Or rather, I *shouldn't* care. Same thing.

“Be my guest.”

I turn back to the bar to grab my freshly made drink as the rest of the girls disperse. A dark-haired guy sidles up next to me and begins flirting. The first few sentences are in German, but one clueless expression is all it takes for him to switch to English punctuated by a thick accent. I think he says he's a medical student, but I'm only able to catch every other word he says, so I'm far from confident about that. He's very attractive, and I'm much more focused on that than whether he's a doctor or a dropout.

He asks what I'm doing here, or perhaps something about my hair, and when I tell him I play “football,” his eyes light up.

I should see it coming, but I don't.

The next ten minutes are spent gushing over Adler Beck, and any attraction seeps away like water in a sink with an open drain. I down the entirety of my drink as he continues to praise Beck's performance this past season. It's not like he's asking for my opinion, anyway. He's just the type of

insensitive male I like to shred for sport, but tonight I'm not in the mood.

Once my glass is empty, I simply tell him I need to use the restroom. I'm gone before he acknowledges the excuse. All my Scholenberg companions have drifted away from the bar by now, and I spot Alexis and Ellie crowded in one of the round booths along the edge. I start toward them, only to be pinned unexpectedly against the rough brick wall. Angry blue eyes meet mine.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Beck asks me.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," I snap, struggling against his firm grasp. Most times, I don't have any issue being shoved against his defined obliques. Right now? No thanks.

"You shouldn't be talking to guys like that." Beck drops his hands but doesn't move away.

"Guys like what?" I spit out. "Hot guys? German guys? Guys who learn a girl plays soccer—sorry, *football*—and start going on and on about how incredible Adler Beck is? You're going to need to be more specific."

Some of the anger recedes from Beck's face. "You were talking about me?"

"Jealous fit over?" I riposte.

His face hardens again. "I'm not jealous."

"You just got mad at me for talking to another guy. That is the textbook definition of jealousy."

"You barely know how to get around the city. And you don't even speak German! You'd really go off with some guy you don't know?"

"You didn't seem to mind when that guy was you," I retort. "I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for a long time. And I can talk to whoever I want to, okay?"

"Okay," Beck responds, clenching his jaw as soon as the word is out, as if to restrain more from exiting.

"Okay," I confirm. But it doesn't feel like we've actually agreed about anything.

He doesn't say anything else; he kisses me, and I let him. Because I'm here to play soccer, but a few more orgasms won't hurt. Because he smells amazing and feels even better. Because I know exactly how incredible it will be.

Beck doesn't disappoint, exploring the wet heat of my mouth with both skill and urgency. There's barely any space remaining between our bodies,

but he grabs my hips and fuses our bodies together. I can feel he's already hard. I moan against his tongue as he slips one hand underneath the hem of my short dress.

I pull back, panting. "Beck. We can't do this here." I don't look away from him, but I can feel eyes on us.

He nods once. "Do you want to do it somewhere else?"

This is when I should put some space between us, both figurative and physical. Find some guy in here who doesn't follow football, has never heard of Adler Beck, and leave with him.

Instead, I say yes without hesitating.

He pulls away, and I see that we've captured the attention of the entire side of the club, including all my teammates. Olivia is glaring, but the others look mostly awed. At least I don't have to worry about letting them know I'm leaving, since Beck grabs my hand and pulls me toward the door in front of everyone.

The valet pulls up his car immediately, and we climb inside. Charged silence fills the vehicle as we drive along, tension hanging heavy in the air. It feels like the first time we're doing this, but my body is also desperate, craving the release it's come to expect from him.

"Do you know how many times we've had sex?" I ask Beck as we reach his street.

"What? No. Why, do you?"

"No, I don't," I reply. I feel his questioning gaze on me. "I normally keep track. Guys get clingy sometimes," I elaborate. "I usually get bored, too," I add.

"Are you giving me some sort of notice?" Beck asks. "Because you said in the club—"

"No, I'm not," I interrupt. "I haven't—don't—feel that way. About you." Shit, that was too honest.

Beck doesn't reply, and I feel stupid for bringing it up. I don't even know why I did. I'd blame it on the two drinks I've had, but I've kept secrets after downing twice that amount.

"I usually only sleep with girls once," Beck states as we wait for the door leading to the garage to open. His gaze stays straight ahead as I look over at him.

"We've had sex more than once." I fall prey to my pet peeve and state the obvious.

“I know.” Beck starts driving again, into the garage under his building.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask.

He parks and finally looks over at me. “I wanted to.”

I nod once before I climb out of the car.

Beck follows me to the elevator and then down the hallway to his front door. As soon as he unlocks it, we step inside. The same heat from the club flares between us again, and he hauls me against his body. It’s a relief to shut my brain off and fall into sensation instead.

We stumble deeper inside the entryway, and Beck swears as his foot collides with the table beneath his impressive art collection. The apartment is dark, but he doesn’t turn on a light. We end up on the couch in the living room. It makes it feel more like he really did just pick me up at a club; not that I’ve been coming here for the last few weeks.

I make quick work of pulling off his shirt and yanking down his jeans. He’s not wearing any boxers, and I grasp his long shaft, stroking him quickly. His cock swells even more. He groans in my ear before letting out a rapid stream of German. I absorb the quality of the words spoken in his low, deep voice, enjoying the way my body has become conditioned to release fresh bursts of arousal at the sound.

Beck shifts so he’s sitting down, kicking off his pants and shoes. He pulls me to him as soon as he does, sliding his hands up until he reaches my ass. He pulls my wet thong down immediately, and I slide it off as he sheaths himself with a condom. I straddle him and reach down to guide him inside of me. We both groan loudly as he slides in. I’m still wearing my dress, and Beck sucks and nips along my bare shoulder as I begin to move. I set out planning to torture him, still a bit annoyed by his macho act earlier, but the slow strokes are just as excruciating for me as they are for him. I speed up a bit, and pressure builds like I’m a carbonated can that was just shaken up.

Beck unzips my dress tantalizingly, sliding his hands along the newly revealed skin. He hums with approval when he realizes I’m not wearing a bra, and I gasp when he begins playing with my breasts. He whispers in my ear again, and I’m cracked open. I’m weightless and thoughtless as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me.

I roll over on my side, splayed across the leather surface like a jellyfish. My limbs certainly feel gelatinous.

“Do you have food?” I ask Beck when I can move again.

“Not any you’ll like,” he replies. All I can see is his white teeth gleaming

as he leans forward and licks my nipple. One palm slides down my stomach, and I decide food can wait.

My stomach rumbles loudly, and Beck pauses. He lets out a half-laugh, half-sigh.

“I’ll see what I have.” He sits up and heads into the bedroom, flicking on lights as he goes.

He returns in a pair of athletic shorts and tosses me a t-shirt, which I pull on. I follow him into the kitchen, perching on one of the four stools that line the marble countertop.

“What have you got?”

Beck strolls over to the fridge and opens the door, leaning against the edge. It’s disturbingly domestic and surprisingly sexy. He grabs a few plastic containers and slides them down the counter to me. “Here you go. They’re all labeled.”

I grab one and tilt it upward. Salmon and rice—pass. “Do you have ice cream?”

He studies me.

I grin. “You do.”

Beck reaches out and snags the prepared meals, sticking them back in the fridge and replacing them with a cardboard carton from the freezer.

“I knew it!” I crow.

“It’s plain chocolate. I don’t think Germany sells mint chocolate chip,” Beck informs me as he pulls out spoons.

I have to swallow a few times before I can manage to say, “I knew I liked it here.”

Beck takes a seat beside me, and we eat spoonfuls of ice cream in companionable silence. My phone rings a couple minutes later, shattering the peace. I slide off the stool to grab it out of the clutch I abandoned on the floor alongside my dress.

It’s Hallie. I silence it and return to my seat next to Beck. He doesn’t ask, but I feel obligated to say, “My sister. I’m avoiding her calls.”

“How come?” No judgment.

“I’m supposed to pick out my bridesmaid dress.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“I don’t know.” It’s bullshit, and Beck knows it.

“Do it now,” he suggests.

“Right now?”

He nods.

“I would need another drink for that to happen.”

I’m treated with a smirk that makes me wish we were still on the couch. Beck rises and grabs a clear glass bottle from the freezer, followed by two shot glasses. He sets them both in front of me and fills them to the brim with what smells like vodka.

“I don’t have any gin,” he confirms, grabbing one glass.

“What kind of club owner are you?” I question.

“One who merely put up the seed money for a friend and is now focusing on practicing penalty kicks.”

I laugh. “Touché.”

“Prost.” Beck raises the glass.

I repeat the toast, and he laughs.

“*Prost*,” Beck corrects.

“That’s what I said!” I insist.

He rolls his eyes and downs the shot. I follow suit, sticking my tongue out when the liquor burns a trail down my throat.

“Gah.” Yup, vodka.

“Shop away,” Beck tells me, grabbing a stack of papers piled on the corner of the counter and sitting back down on the stool beside me.

“What are those?” I ask.

“Work. I’ve got a few endorsement offers in the works.”

“Don’t you have people who handle that for you?”

“Ja, but I’m not going to have them sign me on for anything without looking it over myself.”

“What are—”

“Saylor.” He skewers me with a single look. “Shop.”

I huff out a sigh, but Beck’s focused on his papers. Aside from me studying the profile view of his chiseled features, he’s not going to be much of a distraction. I unlock my phone and start scrolling through clothing sites. Eventually I start shifting on the stool, trying to find a more comfortable position. These clearly weren’t designed to spend a protracted amount of time on. I end up wiggling my legs across Beck’s lap so I can stretch out some. He doesn’t even look up from the papers he’s highlighting.

I turn back to my assignment. It sounds so easy: pick out a pretty dress and send it to Hallie so my father can buy it. Not just easy, fun. I spend most of my time in athletic clothes, but I enjoy dressing up for certain occasions.

It's what this occasion represents that has me faltering. It's the outfit I'll be wearing when my father gets remarried. I've never harbored any fantasy that my parents might reunite, but I guess I thought my dad would stay single. I thought he, Hallie, and I would remain in the roles that, while not healthy, have been comfortable. Expected.

A stepmom and an attempt at a whole family is uncomfortable and unexpected.

I planned to look through a couple options and choose the one I hated least, but it's been close to an hour by the time I announce, "this one."

"I like it." Beck's barely paying attention as he glances at the phone screen. But he's still here, on the stool beside me, with my legs draped across his. It's the antithesis of my worries about the wedding. Sitting next to him in a kitchen that looks like it should belong to a Michelin-starred chef, I feel completely content. Like I could stay on this stool forever and it wouldn't be long enough. When the reality is, I'll never perch here again.

And I know that's why I took so long to decide on the stupid dress.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Every single one of my temporary teammates is in the kitchen when I walk in, still rubbing sleep from my eyes. I halt abruptly. “Good morning?” It’s not even eight; way earlier than I want to be up on a Sunday. What are they all... oh. “Seriously?” I ask Ellie, who is closest to me.

She smiles serenely as she sips from a mug. “Good morning.”

I sigh as I open the fridge door to grab some orange juice. If they all want to watch me make breakfast half-asleep, they can feel free to observe.

But I’m only one sip into my juice when I hear Alexis exclaim, “He’s here!”

Shit. I was banking on him running late. I glance at the clock on the stove. I’m not even late; he’s early.

“What is that shit car he’s driving?” Alexis questions. I grab a breakfast bar and then follow her path over to the window to look outside. Beck’s adjusting some bags of soccer balls in the trunk of a wood-sided station wagon. I swallow a laugh. Damn him.

“I’ll see you guys later.” I grab my cleats from their usual position next to the door and head outside. It’s the perfect temperature. There’s a whisper of warmth in the air, but none of the heat and humidity I’m ordinarily greeted by.

“Nice car,” I comment as I approach.

Beck glances up and sends me a devastating smile. “Glad you appreciate it. Wasn’t exactly easy to find one. Not even a soccer mom would be caught dead in this, according to the car shop guy.”

“I didn’t think Germans had a sense of humor,” I comment, studying the admittedly ugly car. But it’s not just a joke. It’s one of the sweetest things

anyone has ever done for me.

“How would you know? You can’t understand a word of what we’re saying,” Beck retorts.

I roll my eyes as I climb in the passenger side.

I didn’t think to ask where the camp is being held, but it becomes pretty evident exactly where we’re headed as Beck races along the road at his usual rapid pace. He makes the trip from the Scholenberg house to Kluvberg’s field in half the time it ordinarily takes the program van to trek the dozen blocks.

I may not have known our destination, but Beck did. Which means he got this car to drive for mere minutes. I try not to dwell on that as he parks in the lot reserved for players conveniently located next to the stadium. There’s a massive coach bus taking up one side of the lot, and the other side houses about a dozen cars.

A group of men lean against one of them, turning their attention to Beck as he climbs out of the driver’s seat. One of them calls out in German and laughs, making me think it was a comment about the car.

I come into sight, and attention shifts from the vehicle to me. There are four of them: Otto, two men I’ve never seen before, and the one I encountered when I got lost in the stadium my first day.

My personal GPS greets me first. “Hello. Stefan Herrmann.”

“Saylor. Nice to meet you,” I respond.

“Have we not already met?” he asks. I feel Beck’s eyes on me.

“I guess we have,” I reply. “Nice to see you again, then.”

He smiles, crinkling the corners of his gray eyes.

One man I’ve definitely never met spits something out in German. It’s a flurry of unfamiliar words. The only one I identify is “Kaiser.” It also sounds like there’s a mention of a banana and mulch, but I seriously doubt that’s correct, mostly based on Beck’s reaction. He barks something back that causes the man to shift his gaze to the ground sullenly.

I learn the one who spoke in German is named Ludwig, and the final member of the group is Fischer. He’s the oldest of the group, probably in his mid-thirties. Everyone grabs equipment from the back of the wagon, and then we start toward the entrance that leads directly onto the field.

“What did he say?” I ask Beck in a low voice.

“Something rude he won’t be repeating,” he replies in a clipped tone, striding ahead through the open gate.

Well, all right then. I let him pull ahead and try again on a more malleable

target.

“Remember me?” I smile at Otto.

He smirks. “You are not easy to forget, Saylor. Do you have permission today?”

“Seems that way. Boring, huh?”

“I don’t think anyone would call you boring.”

That wasn’t what I meant, but I dive into the reason I instigated this conversation. Otto’s admiring tone is probably a better bet than any segue I could have come up with.

“What did Ludwig say?” I ask Otto. He looks incredibly uncomfortable, which confirms it was about me.

“I don’t think he meant offense,” Otto mumbles.

Yeah, right. “I’m just curious.” I flash him my most dazzling smile. “Something about bananas? And mulch?”

Otto’s lips quirk. Then there’s a long pause. “Bananenbieger is doing something stupid or pointless. And lustmolch means sex crazed. He said there’s only a female player here because Kaiser can’t resist pretty women.”

I bristle. The only reason I’m here *is* because I’m sleeping with Adler Beck, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a damn good soccer player, one who’s most definitely capable of teaching some kids to dribble.

The field is the busiest I’ve ever seen it. Energy radiates and resonates across the broad expanse of grass. I can only imagine what it’s like during one of FC Kluvberg’s home matches. There are children everywhere, far more than I was expecting, and about a dozen adults. I see Beck’s parents talking with an older man sporting a bushy shock of graying hair. There’s also a line of photographers with cameras along the side of the field.

I should have been expecting reporters, but I wasn’t. Adler Beck coaching children will probably be front-page news.

I forgot he’s famous.

Completely, totally forgot. It’s no longer how I view him. It’s a strange realization, but not as bizarre as the very obvious reminder that he is.

Beck is clearly the authority figure here, and everyone, both adult and adolescent, falls into line when he starts rattling off a rapid stream of German. Since I can’t understand anything he’s saying, I study the crowd of children that’s gathered around him. I’d guess their ages range from ten to thirteen, but they’ve all got one characteristic in common: the adoring expression aimed at one Adler Beck.

Beck stops speaking, and there's an abrupt flurry of movement as the large gathering splits off into smaller sections. Otto, Hermann, Ludwig, and Fischer all leap into motion, and I'm left trying to figure out what the hell is going on. Beck comes over to me.

"Take that group." He points to the children on the farthest side of the field. "Just run them through some ball-handling drills." Then, he leaves my side, presumably to coach his own group. I'm torn between appreciating his faith in me and wanting to call after him. It's been nearly a decade since I was a middle schooler myself. I barely recall what my practices at that age contained.

But I've never been one to back down from a challenge, so I grab a stack of cones and a bag of soccer balls, pasting on my most excited smile to approach the group Beck gestured to. They study me apprehensively as I approach. Out of the coaching options, I'm most definitely the outlier for several reasons.

"Hello, everyone!" I tell my little huddle, injecting the amount of positivity I imagine a kindergarten teacher might. "I'm Saylor, and I'm going to be coaching you."

"Why are you speaking English?" one kid asks suspiciously.

Before I can answer, another boy asks, "Why does your voice sound funny?"

"I'm from the United States," I reply, choosing not to share that I don't actually know German. That seems like the sort of weakness I *shouldn't* share. "Okay, so we're going to start by dribbling through these cones and—"

"Boring!" a little girl, one of just two in my group, calls out. "We learned dribbling ages ago!"

These kids are brutal. "It's important to know the fundamentals," I reply evenly. "I'll demonstrate first. Line up behind this." I set one cone down like I'm Neil Armstrong planting an American flag on the moon.

There are some groans—and muttered German—but they all listen, lining up behind the orange marker. I set up three more cones in a straight line and then return to the first one.

"All right. I want you to dribble through on the first pass. Get as close as you can without knocking the cone over." I dribble through, brushing the ball against each cone. "Then a roll and reverse." I demonstrate, so I'm facing back the other direction. "Alternate between step-over and scissors on the way back." I step in front, over, and behind the ball. Then, step over it, plant

my foot, and pivot between the next set of cones. I execute another step-over, a second scissors, and then I'm back at the start.

The little girl who told me dribbling was “boring” is first in line. I'm used to people looking at me with envy—of my soccer skills, of the hot guy talking to me—but I've never experienced pure admiration from a child before. The awestruck look on her face makes me feel about ten feet tall.

“What's your name?” I ask her.

“Mila,” she replies.

“All right, Mila, you're up first.” I pass the ball to her, and she traps it neatly, then executes the drill perfectly.

“Nice work,” I congratulate her. “Next.”

All twenty of my charges run through the drill twice. I correct a few of them on the first pass, but they all have it down by the second run-through.

“Okay. Next drill.” I switch up the cone formation so it's in a large circle. “Dribble through at full speed. Knock over a cone or miss one and start over.”

“We did stuff like this ages ago,” one boy complains.

“What's your name?” I inquire.

“Walter,” he replies sullenly.

“You can go first, Walter.” I smile sweetly.

He heaves out a sigh but does as I instruct. He runs through the drill perfectly. I keep my expression neutral but internally start sorting through drills I did in high school. Evidently, they've surpassed the middle school level.

I have them all run through the circle twice and then announce we'll be doing one-on-one. That perks the group up. No surprise the competitive spirit is strong amongst them.

Three duos run through the exercise, and then it's Walter and Mila's turn. I have a bad feeling about the coupling as soon as Mila dribbles toward the two cones I set up as the goal.

Walter jostles her and kicks the ball away. I retrieve it and return it to Mila. “Start again. No contact, Walter.”

He mutters something in German but doesn't touch her as he kicks the ball away for a second time, taking advantage of their size differential.

“Try again,” I encourage.

“I can't do it!” Mila says.

“Yeah, 'cause you're a girl,” Walter taunts.

I ignore him. “Come on, Mila,” I coax. “Try it one more time.”

She does, but the ball slips from her foot at the last minute with no interference from Walter.

“Everyone knows girls can’t play soccer as well,” Walter mocks.

This little— I take a deep breath. “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is,” the insolent kid insists.

Mila’s lower lip wobbles, and that’s what breaks me.

“Come on.” I turn on my heel and start striding toward the other end of the field where Beck is gathered with his group. Either they see me as some sort of authority figure, despite being *female*, or they’re just curious, because they all trail after me.

Beck sees me coming. He keeps talking, demonstrating a maneuver that has all of his charges transfixed.

I let my group meld with his and stride to his side.

“Who knows who this is?” I point to Beck.

They all just stare at me. I turn my gaze to Walter.

“Who is this?” I ask again. “This *male* player?”

“Adler Beck,” Walter replies peevishly.

“And is Adler Beck good at soccer?”

“Yes.” Walter’s lost a little bit of his bravado suddenly. Either it’s because we’re in front of his peers, or because Beck is present. Since he’s had no trouble tossing sass at me in front of the other kids until now, I’m pretty sure it’s the latter. Which only annoys me more.

“And who am I?”

Walter looks at me with confusion. “Saylor,” he mutters.

“Am I a girl?”

“I guess. A grown-up one.” I almost smile at that but force my face to remain serious.

“Do you think I can play football as well as this German grown-up boy?”

Walter manages another bout of petulance. “No.”

I grin, grabbing a ball from the mesh bag set on the sidelines. “Watch this.” I drop the ball and start dribbling. Belatedly, I realize I maybe should have clued Beck into my plan a little bit more, but all of a sudden, he’s there, right beside me. A spin, and he’s blocking my path to the goal. He’s not guarding me as aggressively as I know he’s capable of, but I’m having to work for every inch of ground I gain.

He doesn’t say anything, and neither do I. Maybe he’s annoyed with me

for turning this into a spectacle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that everyone on the field is watching us. Thankfully, the photographers departed after a half hour. I can only imagine the headline that might accompany a picture of this.

Beck steals the ball from me but dribbles rather than steps over, and that's when I know he's playing along. He's not going to hand this to me, but he's going to let me prove my point. Help me, even.

I spin, and he jostles his forearm against my lower back. A textbook stop and go, and he's behind me. I don't hesitate, sending the ball flying. It wallops the white netting with a satisfying smack I imagine being the equivalent of a mic drop. I turn to see every single kid has their gaze laser-focused on me.

Walter looks appropriately abashed, but more importantly, Mila is beaming. I walk back toward the kids, meeting Beck halfway.

"Thank you," I tell him quietly.

He walks alongside me silently for a few seconds. Then, "I was wrong before."

"Doesn't surprise me," I reply. "About what?"

"You would know what to do with a kid."

The annoyance I felt when he told me he hoped he hadn't knocked me up was nothing compared to the swell of emotion those nine words prompt. If I were the sentimental type—which I'm *not*—they might have even made a crack in the plaster my heart is encased in.



My phone won't stop vibrating on Beck's bedside table. After the soccer camp ended, I went with him to drop off the station wagon, and then we ended up in his bed. I finally grab it and answer.

"Hello?" I mumble. If this is Hallie calling me to talk to Matthew Jr. again, I'm going to kill her.

"SAYLOR! OH! MY! GOD!" Emma shouts.

"Emma?" I drape an elbow across my eyes. "What is it?"

"You met Adler fucking Beck and didn't tell me?"

"What?" I ask, shedding some of the orgasmic haze I was enjoying.

"Cress just showed me an article with photos of you at some soccer field

with kids. With Adler Beck.”

Dammit. “Yeah,” I admit. “He was at a soccer camp thing I went to.” And is currently lying three feet away. Naked.

“And?! Did you talk to him?” Emma screeches.

“Barely,” I lie.

“He didn’t fall for the infamous Saylor Scott charm? The one that makes men profess their love outside in the middle of the night with a full choir?”

“That happened once,” I reply.

“Once more than it’s happened to the rest of us,” Emma shoots back.

I roll my eyes, then remember she can’t see me. “I’m taking a nap. I’ll talk to you later, okay?” I hang up before she can answer and start scrolling through some of my other notifications. “I’ve got to go,” I inform Beck.

He’s got one elbow tucked back behind his head, lounging in the streaks of sunset that sneak between the half-drawn shades. Ellie’s latest text contained five question marks inquiring about my whereabouts. Sometimes just one won’t do.

“Everyone wants to go to a beer garden. It’ll be weird if I skip it. Plus, we’re good here, right?”

“I mean, *I* could go for a fourth round.”

I roll my eyes as I pull my sports bra back on, followed by my tank top, thong, and shorts. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Beck rolls upright and pulls his boxer briefs back on to follow me to the door of his apartment.

We’re halfway across the living room when there’s a knock. I shoot Beck a questioning look as he overtakes me and pulls open the front door.

There’s a woman with black wavy hair and perfectly proportioned features standing on the opposite side of the doorway. And I recognize her. She’s a Russian tennis star who’s dabbled in modeling.

“Alesandra.”

“Beck,” she purrs. I can practically see the pheromones flying.

“Looks like you’ll get your wish,” I tell Beck with a scoff, brushing past him to head out into the hallway.

“Saylor,” he calls after me.

“Bye, Beck.” I wave a hand, but don’t look back as I walk down the carpeted hallway. My eyes remain fixed on the gleaming floor of the elevator as soon as the doors ding open.

Anything to avoid facing the fact that Beck having sex with someone else

bothers me.

That's a problem only denial can fix.

CHAPTER TWELVE

This. This right here is what I live for. The smell of freshly cut grass. The feel of warm sun saturating my skin. The sound of labored breaths surrounding me.

I spin, shoving against Olivia as I fight to make some progress up the field. She grunts as my elbow makes contact with her stomach, but keeps pressing. Finally, I pull free—only to be greeted with the sound of Coach Weber’s whistle. Followed by another long pull.

“That’s it,” she announces. I stop with my foot on the ball, pulling in deep breaths of oxygen to replenish my bloodstream.

That’s it, and not just the end of the game or the end of practice for the day. That whistle signaled the end of Scholenberg. Today is our last day. The final of fifty-six days—eight weeks—just drew to a close.

The women surrounding me look just as taken aback. We’ve reached the end of the marathon. A finish line we all knew was coming. Saw coming. Prayed would arrive for weeks.

Crossing it feels different. Instead of relief, I feel perturbation.

“Get cleaned up. I’ll see you all tonight,” Coach Weber announces. Scholenberg is hosting a final group meal before we all go our separate ways tomorrow. I head toward the tunnel with the rest of my teammates but pause when I hear my name.

Coach Weber calls out to me, and it’s a mirror of our first day here.

“Yes, Coach?”

I turn and return to the field, only stopping when I’m a few feet away from her.

“I had my doubts about you, Scott,” Coach Weber declares.

“Oh?” I reply. There are other things I would ordinarily say in response to that but nothing I would dare utter to someone I respect as much as Christina Weber.

“I knew you were talented. I expected you to skate on that, especially after an injury. But... I was wrong.” She gives me a rare smile. “You’re the most dedicated—not just talented—player I’ve ever coached. That will take you far, you understand me? You’ve got confidence on the field, but I also get the feeling not many people have told you this. Some players are talented. Others work hard. But it’s rare—extremely rare—to have both, to never lose the drive to be better. Keep at it, and there won’t be anyone left to surpass, Scott. I’m expecting to one day be known by nothing aside from the fact that I coached you for a summer.”

I gape at her. No one has ever heaped anywhere close to the mountain of compliments she just dropped on me. I just completed the most competitive soccer program in the world, and one of the most famous female footballers in the world is telling me she expects her legacy to encompass nothing but coaching *me*. And she’s completely serious. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Christina Weber these last eight weeks, it’s this: if she has a sense of humor, she guards it closely, and she doesn’t dole out false compliments.

“Uh—I—wow,” I stammer. “Thank you.”

“See you tonight.” She pats my shoulder and then heads toward the tunnel.

I remain on the field, savoring my last moments on this rectangle of grass. It hits me harder than I imagined it would—the fact that these are my last—as I stroll toward the center of the expanse. I drop down on the middle line and stare up at the cloudless sky.

I’m not sure how long I’ve been lying here when a shadow falls across my face. Somehow, I know who it is before I shade my eyes to squint upward.

“What are you doing?” Beck inquires.

I could ask him the same thing. Instead, I reply, “Stargazing,” shifting my eyes back to the sky.

There’s a whoosh of air to my left as he drops down beside me in the center circle.

“It’s the middle of the day,” he observes.

“I like a challenge.”

“Are you upset about Alesandra?”

A logical conclusion, since I've avoided him ever since. I track a puffy mass of condensed water vapor as it drifts across the brilliant blue backdrop. "No."

Beck doesn't say anything for a while. We lay side by side, staring up at the sky.

"What are you thinking about?" he finally asks.

"How I spent two months in Germany and only learned two German words."

There's a huff of air that could be interpreted as amused or exasperated. I don't let my eyes stray from the sky to check.

"I doubt it will matter once you return home," Beck responds. He's right, but the insinuation still smarts. I'll never need to know German again. "You've got other talents," he adds teasingly.

I don't flirt back. "I've got to go. I'll hold the bus up." I jerk upright, then shove away from the turf so I'm standing.

Beck mirrors the first motion, but not the second. I study him sitting there. Sun-kissed skin. Azure eyes. Blond hair. His practice jersey covers the work of art that is his torso, but visible lines of muscle run the length of his forearms, bunching into defined biceps. The perfect portrait is framed by the famous arches of his home stadium.

"Bye, Beck."

I've said those two words before, but they're expelled differently this time. Finality has a bitter aftertaste that lingers in the air around us.

"Bye, Saylor." He mimics my minimalistic farewell.

There's more I could say. Regardless of his notoriety or appearance, I've always admired Adler Beck as a soccer player. This is my last chance to tell him that, but the past couple of months have forever vitiated any chance of me viewing him through a vacuum of just his athletic talents. I could thank him for the sex. For the glimpses into his world not portrayed on shiny covers. For making this trip not only about soccer.

Instead, I turn and head for the tunnel without saying another word.

I've always found it easier to say nothing unguarded at all.



The dinner marking my final evening in Kluvberg isn't held at another fancy

restaurant. It's held at a tiny beer garden tucked in the midst of the city. The more relaxed atmosphere serves as an accurate depiction of the shift that's taken place amongst us attendees over the past two months. Pop music and reminiscing punctuate the air as we scarf bratwurst encased in pretzel buns and gulp beer. There's a communal mood. Tonight, we're not attendees of different universities without matching passport covers.

Tonight, we're teammates.

For the first and final time.

Halfway through her first beer—which is only relevant because I'm pretty sure it means she isn't drunk—Olivia gives me a hug and informs me she hopes the rest of the American team isn't as good as me at the next Olympics. Coming from her, that's the equivalent of pledging lifelong devotion.

Then, I get drawn into a dance-off to Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie" with Ellie; a song that owns a permanent spot on my pre-game playlist, meaning I've got a full arsenal of moves to bust out as I toss my hair and lip-sync the lyrics. There's no official winner crowned by the laughing onlookers, but I'm pretty certain it's me.

Breathless and thirsty, I return to the picnic tables. I gulp some water before switching to my glass of beer.

Alexis is still in her same seat from dinner. "Did I see Olivia hug you?" she asks.

I laugh and take another hoppy sip. "Yeah. See any pigs flying?"

"What?" Alexis looks thoroughly confused, and I can't say I blame her. It's an expression I've never fully understood. If you were going to highlight the impractical nature of a farm animal leaving the ground, wouldn't it make more sense to choose the heaviest one? Like a cow? Or a horse?

"Never mind. How come you're not dancing?"

"I prefer to watch the rest of you act like idiots."

I grin. "Harsh. Come on, it's our last night. You've got something better to do?"

"Nope." Alexis takes a sip of her own beer. "Kind of surprised you're here, though."

She's studying me closely. "I came here *for* Scholenberg. Where else would I be?"

"With Adler Beck?"

I scoff, mostly to cover the fact that the sound of his name hits me like

lemon juice in a paper cut. “Things aren’t like that between us.”

“They aren’t?”

“No.” The word comes out harsher than I mean it to.

“So, you’re done?”

I nod.

“Do you want to be?”

I stopped dancing for a cold drink and somehow stumbled into a therapy session. “No. Yes. I don’t know.” I pause. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

“I don’t—it was just supposed to be sex. I’ve never... cared. I shouldn’t have let it happen.”

“I don’t think we get to choose who we fall in love with,” Alexis says softly.

I rear back like she slapped me. “I didn’t say anything about love.”

“So... your plan is to never see him again?”

“I mean, I assume he’ll be at the next summer Olympics.”

Alexis snorts. “Right.”

“Scott! Get your ass out here for a second round!” Ellie shouts.

“Be right there,” I call back. “It’s best this way,” I tell Alexis, draining the rest of my beer. “Cleaner.”

I stand and return to the makeshift dance floor, losing myself in the music’s beat. But the pulsing bass doesn’t drown out my thoughts for long.

Did I say I’m leaving tomorrow?

Does Beck know today was the last day of Scholenberg?

Did the goodbye I uttered sound as final to him as it did to me?

I’m speeding toward the end of my time in Germany like I’m inside a car Beck is driving, and Alexis was right. I want to be spending the remainder of it with him.

The night ends with a speech from Coach Weber. It’s quite different from her words to me earlier. She sticks to inspirational quotes and ends by telling us we’re one of her favorite groups. It’s a line I’m certain she’s included every year since she became head of the program over a decade ago, but it’s still nice to hear.

The night winds down pretty quickly after that. The beer garden’s staff seem eager to see us go. Not only are we a boisterous group, but Scholenberg rented out the whole place. Our exit means they can shut down for the night.

Ellie’s already concocting a plan to return to Submarine when we emerge

out onto the street.

“I’m going to head back to the house,” I tell her. “I’m exhausted and I’ve got an early flight.”

“Fine,” Ellie agrees with a disappointed sigh. “We can drop you off on the way.”

“It’s fine. I’m just going to walk,” I reply. “One last look at the city, you know?”

Ellie studies me for a minute, and I think she’s going to call me out on it. “Text me when you’re back,” is all she says.

“I will. Have fun,” I encourage as I start down the street—in the opposite direction from the building I’ve lived in for the past two months. I’m already in Kluvberg’s most upscale neighborhood. It’s only two blocks from Beck’s apartment building.

I hover on the sidewalk, staring up at the highest floor. There are a couple of lights on, not enough for me to tell if he’s home or just left them on earlier.

It’s been almost a week since I was last here. Since a brunette bombshell showed up for the second shift. But neither of those things would matter if it was *just sex*.

Heading inside Beck’s building would be about more than that.

It would be about talking to him.

Touching him.

Simply being with him.

For the first time in my life, I’m worried I might let it show that I care. That’s not a risk I can take for a final frolic in the sheets.

I turn and start to walk back to the Scholenberg house, not caring that it’s begun to drizzle. Appreciating it, actually.

It hides the fact that there was already water dripping down my cheeks.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My return to Lancaster University for the start of senior year is anticlimactic. The fourth time doing something is never the time remembered. At least, not the time *I* remember.

Emma harassed our landlord into letting me move in early, so I head straight to our house from the airport when I land.

The drive feels strange. The scenery isn't what I've grown accustomed to seeing. Connecticut looks drab and uninspired after the majestic color of Kluvberg.

The National croons "Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks" in my ears, the melancholy melody matching my mood. I haven't taken my headphones out since I climbed in the waiting car outside the Scholenberg house fourteen hours ago. I needed to drown out the stupid, dangerous thoughts swirling in my brain by listening to others' woes. Lacking the motivation to make my own playlist, I selected one entitled "Feeling Blue." Fittingly, all it's done is make me feel like climbing in bed and pulling the covers over my head.

The taxi I flagged down at the airport stops outside the tiny Colonial I've lived in since sophomore year. I hand the driver some dollars that have sat in my wallet for the past eight weeks. I didn't bother exchanging my unused euros for American dollars, and the sight of the foreign currency mixed in with the green bills causes a pang in my stomach I fight to ignore.

I climb out of the back seat. The driver is already hoisting my bags out of the trunk of the sedan, and I thank him before heading up the brick walkway. I yank the heavy bags up the stairs. They thump against every step, and I curse myself for packing so much. Half of it I never even wore.

The house is empty and dark when I walk inside. Preseason doesn't start

for another week, and all my housemates are still scattered across the country in their respective hometowns enjoying the last remnants of summer.

There's nothing I feel like doing more than collapsing in a heap on the floor, so I do the opposite. I drop my bags in the small entryway that runs between the kitchen and living room and head right back outside without venturing farther in the house. I've been wearing athletic clothes all day anyway.

My sneaker-clad feet pound the pavement, expelling some of the emotion simmering with each slap against cement. I veer left, heading onto Lancaster's ivy-covered campus. I run faster than I mean to, the burn of my calves and blur of brick buildings the only indications of my speed. Campus is deserted. There aren't any tours or summer classes being held this late in the day, and those are the only events happening around here this time of year.

It's just me and the scampering squirrels.

I run all the way past the pond to the athletic complex and sports fields, only stopping when I reach the edge of the soccer field I've spent my college career playing on. I vault over the hip-high chain-link fence onto the turf that comprises the rectangular space. It's a familiar walk out to the center of the field, and I flop down once I reach the heart of the pitch.

I ran for longer than I realized, because dusk has begun to fall, shading the sky in streaks of tangerine, magenta, fuchsia, and lilac. I stare upward for so long my eyes lose focus and the sunset twirls together like a swirl of sherbet.

My grumbling stomach forces me vertical. Rather than hop over the fence again, I opt for the gate, walking along the path and around the bleachers to head back through campus.

"Saylor!"

I turn to see Kyle Andrews walking toward me from the sports complex. There's one SUV in the parking lot, which must belong to him.

"Hey, Kyle." I pause in place.

He flashes me a goofball grin. Kyle's known for taking nothing seriously, but he's got enough raw athletic talent to be considered my male equivalent on the men's team. Minus the national championship. "How was Scholenberg?"

"It was amazing," I reply honestly.

"Yeah, I bet. When did you get back?"

“About an hour ago,” I reply. “How about you? Thought you guys start preseason next week, like us?”

“Yeah, a few of us came back early to chill before the torture starts.” He gives me a sly smile. “Including Tim. Who hasn’t shut up about you, by the way.”

“Aren’t you violating the bro code right now?” I reply.

Kyle shrugs. “Who cares.”

Our similarities extend off the field, I guess.

“Why don’t you come over later?” Kyle offers.

“Rain check?” I request. “I’m battling a serious case of jet lag.”

“Yet you’re out running?”

“It’s how you become a national champ, Andrews. Take notes.” He laughs. “What are you even doing here?” I inquire, glancing around the parking lot. “I know it can’t be to work out.”

“I forgot my favorite shorts before leaving for break.” He holds up some gray mesh material in one hand with an impish smirk.

“Of course.” I roll my eyes. “See you around. Tell Tim I’m flattered he has a crush on me.”

“And let him know I broke bro code? Never.” Kyle winks. “See ya, Saylor.”

He heads for the parking lot, and I start running again. My pace isn’t quite as frantic as it was before, but I’m still pushing myself. I’m in the best shape of my life right now thanks to Christina Weber and her militaristic methods.

My knee hasn’t so much as twinged in weeks. When I departed Lancaster two months ago, that was all I hoped for. I’ve made soccer my top priority ever since I started playing, and anything that doesn’t advance those goals doesn’t matter. Can’t matter.

I almost trip over my bags when I open the front door. I didn’t turn on any lights earlier, and the house is dark now. I feel along the wall for the light switch and then head upstairs, leaving the heavier bag by the door. The slanting stairs creak as I drag my smaller luggage to the second floor.

Cressida and Anne’s rooms are to the right, and mine is the first one on the left, with Emma’s located across the hall. I push open the wooden door, half-covered with peeling paint, surveying my room. The air has the stagnant, stale quality of that which has been sitting for a while, so I drop my suitcase and head to the solitary window, throwing the sash up to aerate.

Fresh air circulates, picking up a cross-breeze from the hallway. I'd normally describe my room as "organized chaos," but that's a stretch right now. I packed for Scholenberg in a hurry, and there's evidence of it scattered everywhere, like a tornado passed through recently.

Rather than deal with any of it, I grab a clean towel from my closet and head down the hall to take a shower. I stand under the pulsing spray for longer than usual, letting the concentrated water massage my muscles. Long showers weren't common while sharing a bathroom with six other girls.

I get dressed in a pair of sweats and a tank top, not bothering to do more than yank a brush through my blonde hair. Stray droplets follow me as I pad downstairs to forage through the kitchen.

Food options are limited. Very limited. No one has lived here since I departed for Scholenberg, but I finally find a packet of ramen and a bag of chips. Dinner of champions, right here. I make my meager meal and then raid the liquor cabinet. I drench a few ice cubes with a generous splash of gin and settle on the couch. The alcohol burns a harsh trail down my esophagus and settles in my stomach as I stare at the black screen of the television.

The buzzing of my phone distracts me from the fascinating task of studying a blank screen.

"Hey," I answer, balancing the bowl of ramen on my knee as I tuck the phone between my ear and shoulder.

"You answered! It's a miracle!" Hallie exclaims.

"Do you know what a miracle is? I answer all the time."

"I've talked to you once in the past week."

"Fine. Half the time," I reply.

"You're back at Lancaster?" Hallie asks.

"Mm-hmm," I respond, taking a sip of soup.

"Did you unpack?" She sounds like a mom, and for once it doesn't bother me. She cares, and maybe that's something I should learn to cherish, not make fun of.

But I keep that thought to myself as I snort and answer, "Of course not."

"Headed out to party instead?" she teases.

I glance down at my sad meal and damp tank top. "Hardly anyone is back yet, Hallie." I don't mention the fact that I was, in fact, invited to one.

"You could always come back home for a few days," she suggests. "I haven't seen you in months!"

"I'll be back for the wedding," I answer. "I've got an intense training

schedule right now. It's best I stay here and use Lancaster's facility."

Hallie sighs, and I know what she's thinking. *All Saylor cares about is soccer.* "All right. Well, I'll let you go. I'm sure you must be tired. It's the middle of the night in Germany, right?"

"Right," I confirm.

"Are you all right?" Hallie asks. "You sound weird."

"I'm fine. Just... tired. Like you said."

"Okay. Bye, sis," Hallie says, and the phone clicks.

"Bye," I whisper.

And then I sink deeper into the cushions and resume staring at the living room until I feel myself start to drift toward unconsciousness.



Cressida, Anne, and Emma all return to Lancaster on Saturday. Cressida arrives first, and I haul my butt off the couch to greet her, abandoning the mystery I was reading. That's all I've done for the past six days: work out and lie on the couch.

Well, that and get wasted with the boys' soccer team last night.

"Saylor!" she squeals, wrapping me up in a hug.

"Cress!" I squeeze her back.

She pulls back to study my face. "I swear, you get prettier every year. It's so unfair."

"Says the pageant queen," I reply, rolling my eyes. Cressida is from the South, like me. Unlike me, she participated in some of its more archaic traditions. She claims it was at her mother and grandmother's insistence, but Cressida is both strong-willed and loves the spotlight, so I suspect it wasn't completely involuntary.

Cressida gives me a regal wave that ends with only her middle finger still raised. I laugh and then flop back down on the cushions that have started to mold to the shape of my body.

"I like what you've done with the place," Cressida comments, glancing around the messy living room.

"Yeah, I'll clean it up," I assure her.

"Sad I missed the party," she says, kicking a stray beer can the boys left behind. "Looked like a rager."

“Looked like?”

“I enjoyed ‘Wannabe’ the most,” she replies, smirking.

“Fuck. I’m going to kill Kyle.”

“Was he the lucky guy last night?” She winks.

I make an unintelligible sound, and Emma’s arrival saves me from actually having to answer. I didn’t hook up with any of the more-than-willing soccer guys last night. I drank myself into a haze that apparently resulted in a Spice Girls concert.

Emma arrives next, bouncing into the room and leaping atop the back of the couch. Except she misjudges the distance and ends up half-smothering me.

“Emma!” I protest as her elbow digs into my left thigh.

“Miss me?” She grins, rolling back onto the cushions she was actually aiming for. “I thought you were some badass soccer player who couldn’t feel pain. The way you talked about Scholenberg, I thought you’d come back wrapped in a wall of muscle or something.”

“I’ve always been a badass soccer player,” I respond.

Emma’s attention shifts to the living room. “Damn, I knew I should have come back last night. You had a party without me?”

I shrug. “Just a few of the soccer guys.”

Emma perks back up. “Speaking of which, I told them we’d meet them at Peak’s Point in twenty minutes. Put on something other than... that.” She wrinkles her nose at the sweatpants I’ve barely taken off. “Anne’s meeting us there.”

I haul myself off the couch. “Not wasting any time, huh?”

“It’s senior fucking year, Saylor. I don’t care how hungover you are.”

“I’m not hungover,” I protest, even though I totally am.

“Uh-huh,” Emma replies, giving Cressida a hug and then bouncing upstairs. I trail after her and into my bedroom, yanking off the baggy t-shirt I paired with sweatpants this morning.

I put on a bikini and then pull the same t-shirt back on. I’m too lazy to find something else. I twist my hair up in a messy bun, grab my sunglasses, and meet Emma in the hallway. She’s wearing an emerald sarong and eyes my t-shirt critically.

“Don’t start,” I warn.

“What about that cute cotton dress—”

“It’s dirty,” I reply, which is true. I still haven’t unpacked any of my

suitcases from Germany.

Emma sighs.

I follow her downstairs, where Cressida is already waiting, always the first one ready. She's changed into a tank top that sapphire bikini straps peek out from and a pair of athletic shorts. Emma sighs again when she sees Cressida's outfit, and Cress and I share a grin.

It's a short trip to Peak's Point, which is a small enclave filled with brackish water. Its sandy beach is littered with enough stone to keep snobbish tourists away, which makes it an optimal location for Lancaster students to gather and engage in various forms of debauchery. The road is lined with cars since there's no actual parking lot.

I climb out of the back seat of Emma's car and squint at the water before slipping on my sunglasses. We traipse along the thin trail that cuts through the greenery lining the road and then hit the rocky shore that slowly turns into more sand than pebbles. It's not just the soccer teams here. I spot a few football players and plop down next to Sarah Hawley, who I know is on the field hockey team.

"Hey, Sarah." I lean back on my hands.

"Hey, Saylor," she replies. "Good summer?"

Emma snorts as she settles on my other side. "Great summer. This lucky bitch was at Scholenberg."

"Should I know what that is?" Sarah replies, looking confused.

"It's a soccer camp in Germany. They play at the Kluvberg field," Emma explains.

"Wait, isn't Kluvberg the team Adler Beck plays for?" Sarah asks.

I tense as soon as she says his name. It's an involuntary reaction, one I don't think anyone catches.

"Yup," Emma replies. "Saylor met him."

"What?" Sarah gasps.

"We were both at a kids' soccer camp. Not nearly as exciting as Emma is making it sound," I respond quickly.

"Wow. I'm still jealous. He's gorgeous."

"Right?" Emma replies, warming to the topic. "I have that photo of him on the..."

"I'm going in," I interrupt, standing and pulling my t-shirt over my head. I had no intention of swimming until right now, but suddenly it seems like a fantastic idea.

“Okay,” Emma responds, giving me a weird look.

I stroll toward the water, ignoring the glances my mostly naked body is gathering from the guys. Water laps against my toes. They’re still painted the same shade of obnoxious pink I was studying in the coffee shop when Beck appeared behind me. Barely painted, now. The nail polish has chipped, with only a few remnants of color remaining.

I wade out farther. The water laps at my knees. Then my waist. Just below my breasts. I stare straight ahead. The curves of the cove are invisible from this angle, and all I can see is the ocean stretching ahead until it melds into the distant horizon.

Sarah’s innocent question reverberates around my skull. *Isn’t Kluvberg the team Adler Beck plays for?* I’m going to have to get used to it. He’s not suddenly going to fade into obscurity. I’ll hear his name. Watch him play. See him on magazine covers. If he starts dating someone, I’ll see coverage of it everywhere. If he gets engaged. Married. Has kids one day. His entire life will play out in the media, and I’ll have to witness it.

I just hope I won’t care by then.

“Saylor! Saylor!” I turn in the water. Kyle is standing at the edge, waving his arms. I splash back closer to shore.

“What?” I call.

“I need you on my team for beach volleyball,” he yells back.

“Fine.” I trudge the rest of the way through the water, fighting the current the whole way.

Some of the other soccer players have already set up a line of rocks I surmise is supposed to be the “net.”

“Tempting some sharks?” Kyle asks me when I reach shore.

“Statistically, it’s more likely I’d get struck by lightning,” I utter dryly.

“Saylor Scott: not just beauty, but brains too,” Kyle announces, like he’s a television commentator.

I scoff as I step into the setter’s position.

“Ball,” I bark at the redhead holding the white sphere. I’ve never seen him before and there are only sports teams here, so he must be a freshman. He startles, then tosses it to me.

I spike the ball across the rocks. Since there’s no visible net, I have to guesstimate on the height, but the ball arcs a good six feet before landing in the sand between two football players, who immediately start arguing about who should have been responsible for returning it to this side of the rocks. I

whistle to get their attention, and one returns the ball to me. I send it sailing to the other side again, except this time one of them is quick enough to return it. I lunge forward to spike it back but am distracted when a hand brushes against my left butt cheek.

I whirl around, forgetting about the ball. “Did you just touch my ass?” I snap at the same redhead who passed me the ball a few minutes ago.

He pales. “It was an accident.”

“An accident? Did your hand detach from your brain? Why don’t you grab your own dick while you’re at it?”

“Saylor, come on.” Kyle suddenly appears at my side. “Let’s grab a drink.”

He basically hauls me over to the assortment of coolers spread out by boulders and hands me a can of beer.

“You probably don’t need this, but it’s all we brought. Fuck. You good, Scott?” he asks, studying me curiously. And a little warily.

I crack the can open, making a face at the taste as I gulp down the hoppy beverage. I’ve never liked beer, but apparently my time in Germany turned me into an even larger snob when it comes to brewed alcohol. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I challenge.

“Maybe because you got wasted last night and just terrorized one of my freshmen,” Kyle replies. “You’ve probably traumatized him for life.”

“Good,” I mutter darkly. “Maybe he’ll learn to keep his hands to himself.”

“Didn’t you spank Ryan last night during ‘Spice Up Your Life’?” His tone clearly says *hypocrite*.

“Don’t ask me. I was *wasted*, remember?”

He sighs. “Your knee is fine, right? You’ll kick ass this season.” Kyle, like everyone else, assumes nothing could bother me unless it’s related to soccer.

I let out a dry laugh. “I know I will.”

There’s no mistaking the naked honesty in my voice, and Kyle looks confused. “Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine,” I repeat, emphasizing the last word.

Maybe if I do so enough, I’ll believe it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The start of preseason is a relief, providing the exact distraction I've been craving since returning to Lancaster. I've occupied myself the past week by continuing the insanity of my Scholenberg schedule.

The rest of my teammates spend the first week of preseason complaining. Coach Taylor is strict, but she's not on par with Coach Weber. She eases us into the intensity we'll need once the season officially starts.

So, I spend the first week of preseason adding extra workouts to stay busy.

"You're joking," Anne comments when I come down the stairs on Friday, our fifth day of preseason training, in a fresh workout outfit. She's icing her shin on the couch, and Emma is sprawled out on the rug doing a convincing impression of a dead body.

Emma raises her head when Anne speaks. "Are you fucking kidding me, Saylor?"

I shrug. "Not my fault you slacked all summer."

"That's what summer is for," Emma retorts before lying back down. "Shit, I need a massage."

Cressida walks out of the kitchen holding some sort of green concoction in a glass. She studies me as she sips through a straw. "You know we have the scrimmage against Lincoln tomorrow, right?"

"No, that's tomorrow? I thought it was next year," I reply, lacing up my sneakers.

She rolls her eyes. "You're not a machine. You can't keep this up, Saylor."

I don't answer, just head out the door.

I feel sick.

“Saylor? Are you okay?” Emma’s voice sounds to my right. I don’t bother looking up from my knees, just press my palms a little more firmly against my eye sockets in an attempt to block the world out.

“I’m fine. I just need a minute.”

More whispers to the right, and I recognize Cressida’s muted tone.

“Can we get you anything? Call anyone?” Anne must be nearby as well, because her voice, although low, sounds clear. Her second question is much more tentative than the first. I’m guessing it’s because, aside from the three of them, they would have no idea who to call.

“No, I’m good.” But unfortunately, I realize there is someone I’d like to talk to right now, someone who understands what it’s like to carry a thousand pounds of expectations. But I can’t call *him*. Doing so would have the opposite effect of the clean break that was supposed to be my departure from Germany. Reaching out to Beck for reassurance would look more like a messy, splintered fracture.

I peel my hands away from my face and slide off the wooden bench, ignoring the concerned stares of my three best friends. I’m sure they’re all thinking *I told her so* right now, believing I’ve exhausted myself this past week with extra runs and workouts. If only. Physical fatigue is something I figured out how to fight through a long time ago. Mental angst is my current issue.

Coach Taylor gathers us round for a pep talk I barely listen to a word of. My body knows what’s expected, but my head seriously needs to get in the game. Thankfully, I start to feel some of the brain barriers tumble down as I step out on the field, focusing on the green jerseys of our opponents. I know everyone is going to be looking at me this game.

I went to Scholenberg.

I’m a senior.

The team captain.

This is my year. And considering my past three seasons at Lancaster, that’s saying something.

We lose the coin flip, but it doesn’t matter. As soon as the kickoff takes place, I steal the ball and bolt up the field. Lincoln is taken completely off guard. Green jerseys that were preparing to attack sprint back up the pitch,

but they're too late. Defenders aren't ready. Even if they were, I know spinning around them would be just as effortless.

I flex the muscles of my thigh and propel my foot forward like the strike of a rattlesnake. The checkerboard sphere spins into a blur of black and white, landing in the back of the net. I lost track of how many goals I've scored a long time ago, but that doesn't make it any less satisfying to add another to the tally. The loudspeaker crackles to life, announcing my unassisted goal forty-seven seconds into play.

I smile and nod as my teammates swarm me, but I don't really register anything they're saying to me. My head is in the game now. I'm focused on nothing but decimating my opponent. I'm in the sort of shape where I could run for a lot longer than the length of this game requires, and whatever mental block I was fighting this morning has disappeared, broken down by the rush and exhilaration of being the best on the field.

The rest of the scrimmage passes in a blur. I score once more. Emma sneaks a shot past Lincoln's goalie. And then one of our sophomores manages a half-field kick that drops right behind the goal line.

It's a dominant performance, and Lincoln trudges off the field with shoulders slumped after we shake hands, probably glad this was an away game for them.

A local reporter I recognize from past games calls my name as we head off the field, and I pause. I wasn't ten at the time, but I have received media training, and women's sports need all the coverage they can get.

"Saylor, that was a very impressive performance you had out on the field today."

"Thank you."

"I spoke to your coach before the start of the game, and she credited your dominance on the field to being a direct result of your aggressive playing style. Despite the knee injury you suffered earlier this year, you still seem to manage to find a second gear when everyone else on the field is exhausted. Where does that drive come from?"

"I've never seen the point of leaving anything on the field. If my opponent is tired, that's their problem. It just makes me run faster," I reply.

The guy interviewing me chuckles. "Well, that's certainly a mindset most athletes strive for, but few can actually achieve it. I'm sure you're a role model for lots of future soccer stars out there." Mila's face flashes in my mind. "Are there any athletes who have inspired you?"

“Adler Beck.” I don’t have to think about my answer, but I wish I did.

“Really?” My interviewer doesn’t bother to hide his surprise. I’m not certain if it’s because he thought I would name a female athlete, or if he expected a more original answer than the most famous footballer in the world.

Inferring it’s the latter, I feel obligated to add to my response. “I was fourteen when he scored the game-winning goal for Germany in the final. I’d been playing soccer since I was five, and all I’d heard for the past eight years was that I was too single-minded, that I should try other sports, other hobbies. Be a kid. People said I was too young to be fully dedicated to something. I stayed after practice one day to keep working on a drill I messed up, and when my coach found me there hours later, he made me skip practice for a week. But then there was this German guy, just two years older than me, being cheered on by millions for doing the very same thing. He inspired me.”

It’s by far the longest answer I’ve given during an interview, and I hope that’s the reason for the long pause that follows my response.

“Well, a pleasure speaking to you, Saylor,” the reporter finally says. “Congratulations on the win.”

“Thanks,” I respond, and then I follow my line of teammates into the locker room.

Despite our dominant performance, Coach Taylor still comes up with half an hour’s worth of critiques. Ellie calls me on the drive home from the field to catch up, and by the time I hang up with her and shower, it’s dinnertime.

I enter the kitchen to find Emma sitting on one stool with her feet resting on another, scrolling through her phone.

“Are you making any dinner?” I ask, opening the fridge door and surveying the variety of raw ingredients.

“I don’t know. I’m not really feeling *inspired* to make anything right now,” Emma replies. Even without the way she emphasizes the word, the shit-eating grin she’s sporting when I spin around is proof enough she knows about the interview earlier.

I sigh. “You were eavesdropping?”

“I was across the field, Scott. It’s all over social media.”

Shit. “What? Why?”

“Because you’re hot and semi-famous and Adler Beck is hot and super famous?”

“Semi-famous? Among the hundred people who follow women’s

soccer?”

Emma shrugs. “You’ve been in plenty of articles and magazines.”

“Do you think he’s seen it?” I don’t have to elaborate on who I mean.

“Do I think the world-famous superstar known as Adler Beck has seen the video of you saying he’s the reason you’ve become the badass soccer player you are today that has gone viral on every single social media platform and that he’s been tagged in thousands of times? Hmm... I guess I’d go with yes. A confident yes. Like I’d-bet-my-trust-fund-and-future-endorsement-deals-on-it confident.”

“I get it, Emma,” I say as I set a skillet down on the metal stovetop a bit louder than necessary. “And I did not say he’s the reason I’m anything.”

“It was strongly implied.”

“What’s with the racket in here?” Cressida asks as she enters the kitchen. “Oh good, someone’s cooking—I’m starving.”

“I’m not sure if it will be edible. Saylor just learned she’s gone viral,” Emma explains.

“Ah,” Cressida replies. “Don’t look at me, I’m only responsible for six out of the eight million views.”

“Was it the same video or different versions?” Emma asks.

“I watched the same one five times and then a second one once to make sure it was the same.”

“That only counted as two views, then,” Emma tells her.

“Even better then. Did you hear that, Saylor?”

I don’t respond as I pull a carton of eggs out of the fridge.

“She doesn’t care about you watching it. She’s worried Adler Beck saw it,” Emma supplies.

I grit my teeth as I crack some eggs and they continue talking about me as though I’m not standing here.

“I’m sure he’s flattered,” Cressida says in what I know she means to be a reassuring tone. “I mean, no offense, but he might not even remember you. He probably does tons of those camps.”

I pour the eggs in the hot skillet and start chopping fresh veggies, not trusting myself to say anything.

Eventually, the euphoria of our win earlier trumps gossip about me, and the dinner conversation is mostly centered around the scrimmage today. After we eat and clean up, Cressida announces she’s invited the rest of the team over to celebrate, along with “a few other people.” From experience, I know

that likely means our tiny house will soon resemble Times Square.

I've just finished changing into a skirt and silky top when I hear a fresh chatter of voices echo downstairs. I swipe on a second layer of mascara and head out into the hallway, making certain to close my door behind me.

I head downstairs to see a bunch of the juniors hovering in the entryway. Natalie leaps on me when I hit the final step, giving me a big hug. "All hail the captain!"

I walk into the kitchen, and they all follow me.

"We come bearing gifts!" Natalie gives me a sly grin.

"You look empty-handed to me," Cressida comments.

A shiny cover appears from behind Natalie's back, and a cold cube of consternation drops in my stomach before I even get a good glimpse of the glossy magazine being waved at me.

"Guess who the 'Sexiest Man in Sports' is for the third year straight?"

A lustrous photo of Beck is waved in front of me, and I think I keep my cool. It's my most daunting test of the P.B. era—unrelated to the sandwich condiment—and I don't falter.

"Not much of a guessing game when you wave it in front of my face," I comment.

"Shut the fuck up," Emma commands, grabbing the shiny pages and flipping through them.

I set my phone on the kitchen island since this skirt, while cute, doesn't have any pockets, and I round the corner of the island to where Cressida is whipping up her customary baked goods.

"What are you making?" I ask, trying to ignore the squeals coming from the opposite side of the kitchen.

"Cupcakes," Cressida replies. "And I'll be hiding them."

I roll my eyes. "Can I help?"

Both her eyebrows rise in surprise. "Sure." She hands me a bowl. "Stir this."

My hands whip frosting without any input from my brain, my thoughts spinning as quickly as the sugar and butter. Emma's taken a seat on one of the stools, basically shoving the magazine in my face and forcing me to acknowledge Beck's not alone on the cover. There's a stunning brunette posed against his back. I recognize her. From Beck's doorway as I left it. Maybe it would be easier to look at the cover if I couldn't picture her leaning against his doorframe with a sultry smile. If I didn't know their acquaintance

extends beyond modeling together.

Cressida brings a tray of cooled cupcakes over to me, and we ice them with the freshly whipped frosting. We're halfway through when a phone rings. Emma leans over to one I realize is mine.

"Oh my God, is this Alexis from Scholenberg?" she asks excitedly, grabbing my phone and hitting the green button.

My stomach travels to my toes for the second time tonight.

"Saylor! You answered." Alexis's crisp British accent fills the kitchen. The completely, totally silent kitchen. Because Emma has not only answered my phone, but she's also put it on speakerphone. "I just saw the interview you did. Does that mean you talked to Beck..."

I grab my phone off the counter and turn off the speaker.

"Hi, Alexis," I interrupt breathlessly.

"Saylor? Did you hear me about the video?"

"Yeah, I heard you. I didn't—didn't think he would see it. Anyone would see it. It was a mistake."

"I know you always said it was just about... sex with him, but—"

I eye the magazine set on the counter and interrupt her again. "I said that because that *is* all it was."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Okay."

"How have you been?" I ask, eager to shift topics.

I chat with her for a few more minutes and then hang up. More Lancaster students arrived while I was on the phone, and the kitchen is now considerably more crowded. Emma and Cressida don't care. They both push their way toward me as soon as I hang up the phone.

"What the fuck was that about?" Emma asks.

"Why did she think you'd *talk* to Adler Beck?" Cressida adds.

I clam up like the mollusk itself. "No idea. I need a drink." I push past them both to the cabinet where we keep the liquor. I take more time assembling a drink than I usually would, feeling Cressida and Emma's eyes on my back the whole time. I'm certain they didn't buy my fake uncertainty, but I'm equally sure they won't keep pressing me on it. I'm stubborn. And private. And they both know it. If there's something I don't want to talk about, I won't. I've lived with them both since sophomore year, and neither of them knows anything about my life pre-Lancaster. About my mom leaving. About my dad getting remarried.

I gulp my drink in a shorter amount of time than it took to make it. And

then I concoct another one. I'm well on my way to being drunk. Waking-up-on-a-lawn-with-minimal-clothing-and-no-memory-of-how-I-got-there drunk.

Two shots and a game of beer pong later, I'm dragging Drew upstairs. We stumble into my bedroom, and I slip on a stray sock. I laugh like I'm watching a Rose family catastrophe as I pretend to ice skate the rest of the way to my bed, flopping atop it as though I've just successfully landed a triple axel. Drew watches me with a bemused expression and then follows, draping his muscular frame over mine. He kisses me, and it's pleasant. Familiar. So is the way his hand wanders under my shirt to unfasten my lacy bra. He groans as his calloused palm slips back around to caress my bare breasts.

"Fuck, Saylor. I missed this... you." He grinds his erection against my center as his right hand slides up my leg, dipping beneath the hem of my skirt. My nerves light up with pleasure, but not the blinding, all-encompassing kind I unknowingly became accustomed to. My mind keeps spinning like the inside of a washing machine, the thoughts an endless tangle.

There's no desperation. No urgency. He's not taking every ounce of my attention, not like... Beck. The thought of his name is a bucket of ice-cold water, and any pleasure dissipates.

I pull back just as his fingers find the edge of my thong. "I'm going to throw up."

Yeah, subtlety? Still not my strong suit.

I push Drew aside and run down the hall to the bathroom, banging the door shut behind me. I hover over the toilet, waiting for my churning stomach to expel something, but nothing comes. So, I lie down on the cool tile floor, grateful Anne cleaned it yesterday.

"Saylor? You okay?" Drew's voice comes from the hallway. I guess I should be flattered the prospect of vomit didn't send him running.

"Yeah," I call back.

Silence. "Um, okay then. Feel better." Steps clomp back down the hallway. I sit up to lock the bathroom door and then lie back down on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. I can feel the bass of whatever pop ballad is blasting vibrating below as I study the cracks in the plaster that crisscross in ribbons. I trace the patterns they make until I start to feel dizzy. Then I pull out my phone. The screen is covered with notifications I ignore. Instead, I pull up the web browser and type *Adler Beck* into the search bar. I disregard the articles that pop up, probably about the cover Natalie brought over earlier.

Instead, I tap on *Images* and watch as photo after photo loads. Pictures of him on the field, at press conferences, at practice. I keep scrolling and scrolling... until my eyeballs start to prickle, and I set my phone down on the tile.

I close my eyes, feeling alcohol and confusion course through me.

We won today.

I played the best game of my college career.

Everything I've spent the past fifteen years working for is falling into place. I'm well on my way to accomplishing the lofty goals I set for myself a long time ago.

I should be downstairs celebrating with my teammates or in my bedroom celebrating with Drew.

But all I can think about is him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Nice face art” is how Emma greets me when I stumble into the kitchen the following morning. “That pattern looks a lot like our bathroom floor. Oh, wait...” She taps her chin with her index finger, making an exaggerated expression of confusion.

I pass her to fill a mug with steaming coffee. “Yes, I spent the night sleeping on the bathroom floor, and it was just as uncomfortable as it sounds. Can we please move on?” I reply, holding my face over the mug so the warm molecules waft upward to cling to my face.

“Sure—as soon as you share why you spent the night locked in the bathroom.”

“Well, I don’t know if you know this, but sometimes when you drink a lot of alcohol, it makes you feel like you might throw up. And I thought the best place to do that would be in the bathroom. So that’s what I did, and then it seemed like too much work to get back to my bedroom.”

Emma rolls her eyes at my sass, but then turns serious. “Are you okay, S? You’ve been acting weird.”

“I’m fine,” I say emphatically, taking a large sip of coffee. The bitter, hot liquid trickles down my windpipe in a rapid stream.

“Oh-kay, then.”

I make scrambled eggs as Cressida and Anne both tramp downstairs. We all eat and then pile into Anne’s car to head to practice. Since we had a scrimmage yesterday, all we have is circuit training in the gym. Which is good, because I’m not the only one who is hungover. Most of the team greets me with bleary eyes and tired smiles.

Emma’s doing leg presses beside me when I finally voice the question

that's been percolating in my brain all morning. "When did you hook up again after Connor?" I ask her, referencing the frat boy she dated on and off most of junior year.

"Hello, left field," she replies, glancing over at me.

"Forget it." I shift my gaze back to the muscles of my thighs as they bunch and stretch.

"Oh my God! Did he ask you to find out?" she questions.

"Of course not," I scoff. "Like I would tell him, even if he did. I was just wondering."

"It was a month, I think. Jackson Smith. Oh wait, no, Colby Summers. I remember because he did this thing with his tongue where..."

"I don't need details, Emma."

"You asked." I don't reply. I sort of did. "Why did you ask?"

"Just wondering." I feel Emma's eyes on me, but she doesn't say anything else. We move on to the pull-down bar, then the Ergometer, and then we're done.

The whole team gathers around Coach Taylor. She talks through tomorrow's itinerary and reminds us about the Canadian Football Organization Camp this weekend. Better known as CFOC, it's become an annual tradition during the past three years at Lancaster to separate the end of our preseason and start of the regular season. Each team invited only has eleven slots—the starting squad. I know Cressida, Anne, and Emma will all be on the list alongside me before Coach Taylor finishes rattling off the names.

The prospect of leaving Lancaster for a few days is a welcome one. Maybe it will help me recalibrate.

Then again, leaving the country was how I ended up in this constant state of uncertainty and annoyance in the first place.



"I wonder if we'll see a bear this year," Emma speculates from her seat beside me on the bus as we chug toward CFOC.

"I hope not," I reply, keeping my gaze trained on the Canadian wilderness. Leafy trees flash by, shadowed by craggy peaks.

"Come on, that moose was so cool!"

“The moose was cool,” I admit. “It was also an herbivore.”

“I could save you from a bear. We’d play it totally cool.”

“I wouldn’t trust you to save me from a squirrel,” I retort.

“Well, this is a low point in our friendship,” Emma replies, letting out an exaggerated sigh.

I hide a smile as we pull up outside the wood lodge that houses the participants in CFOC. Lancaster sponsors many clinics throughout the year, but this one has always been my favorite. Tucked away amidst freshwater lakes and towering pines, it’s definitely the most scenic. It draws players from the best programs in North America, meaning it’s a chance to settle old scores and start new rivalries each year before the season officially starts.

“First clinic starts in an hour,” Coach Taylor announces from the front of the coach bus we made the trek from the airport in. “Get changed, get settled, and don’t be late.”

Emma files out into the aisle and I follow, trailed by the rest of our teammates. Cressida yawns widely as we pass through the automatic doors that lead into the lodge. It’s welcoming and homey, with a fire crackling behind the reception desk that makes me feel like it’s winter rather than barely September. There’s a massive chandelier hanging in the center of the lobby, constructed from antlers. I notice Emma eyeing it and grin.

We get checked in and head upstairs. Emma and I are sharing a room, and Cressida and Anne are across the hall. Emma swipes the plastic card against the keypad, and we head inside the room. It’s your average room, except with woolen blankets covering the bedspread and prints of snowy mountains on the walls.

“Bye-bye, summer,” Emma mumbles, flopping down on the buffalo print covering her bed.

I set my duffle bag on the dresser and unzip it to grab my cleats and shin guards. “All good things must come to an end.”

“Did you change your major again? Philosophy this time?”

I stick my tongue out at her and flop down on my bed. “Is it just me, or are these blankets actually really comfortable?”

“It’s just you,” Emma replies. “Mine’s scratchy.”

“I’m taking this back to school.” I pat the tartan pattern I’m lying on.

“Brilliant plan. They’ll never notice,” Emma mutters.

I choose to ignore her sarcasm, closing my eyes and snuggling against the soft wool. What feels like mere minutes later, there’s a knock at our door.

Emma murmurs something unintelligible. I drag myself vertical and stagger over to the door. I blink through sleepy eyes to see Anne and Cressida standing in the hallway.

“Told you they’d be asleep,” Anne informs Cressida.

“Last time I don’t bet against you, Scott,” Cressida tells me. “Let’s go. Clinic time.”

I grab my gear from the heap on the floor, and Emma hobbles out of bed. We all trudge down the hallway, bumping into teammates and competitors alike. CFOC’s headquarters are a mere hundred meters from the entrance to the lodge. It’s essentially a rectangular building constructed of galvanized metal siding meant to withstand the harsh winter. From past trips, I know the layout already. The first floor contains equipment rooms, a small kitchen, and lots of locker rooms, while the second floor is all offices. The paper posted on the front door states they have assigned Lancaster Locker Room five and Field three. I lead my teammates into the square room. It’s minimalistic, with locker-lined walls and a couple of scarred wooden benches.

Emma, Anne, and I are the last ones to leave the locker room. Cressida went ahead with an impatient sigh. Punctual as always. We’re about to exit the back doors that lead out onto the fields when I realize what I’m missing.

“Crap, I forgot my pinny. I’ll catch up to you guys.” I hurry back down the hallway, grabbing the white mesh jersey and pulling it on over the skin-tight polyester sports shirt I’m already wearing. I jog back to the exit leading to the fields, bursting through the doors.

Field three is the second one on the right. I can see everyone has already gathered in the center, so I quicken my pace to a slow run as I near the group. Teammates part as I near, flanked by players from other programs assigned to the same first clinic. Some I recognize, some I don’t.

“Sorry, Coach, I—” I freeze like I was just confronted with the bear Emma was talking about earlier. “What are you doing here?” The words are out before I’ve filtered them.

Before I remember my familiarity with Adler Beck is supposed to extend no further than one brief meeting at a children’s camp.

No one says anything as we stare at each other. Somehow, in the last month, I forgot how heartbreakingly perfect his face is. How one stubborn lock of blond hair flops forward. How his presence makes my blood fizz and my heart pound.

Beck’s the one who breaks the deafening silence. “Nice to see you, too,

Saylor,” he replies. He’s mastered the art of dry humor, so I’m pretty certain I’m the only one who catches the sarcastic undertone. I’m definitely not the only one who catches his acknowledgment that we seem more familiar than two people who met briefly once would be.

“Thanks for joining us, Scott. I was just letting everyone know Adler will be serving as one of the clinic leaders for the next couple days,” Coach Taylor explains. “We have the good fortune of having his input first.”

Good fortune? More like my worst nightmare. I’m already having a hard enough time pretending he doesn’t exist. Forced proximity is not going to help.

“Let’s get warmed up, ladies. Drop off your belongings and then ten laps,” Coach Taylor instructs. Water bottles are tossed. Sweatshirts flung. Laces tightened. Coach heads to the edge of the field to set up a line of cones for what I’m guessing will be sprints.

Everyone moves but Beck and me. I adjust the mesh material I hurriedly yanked over my head, so it hangs correctly and take a step forward. “You knew I would be here,” I accuse. Not my best opener, but what else do you say to the former flame/world famous athlete/sex symbol you weren’t sure you’d ever see again? I’m at a loss.

Beck doesn’t deny it. “Ja.”

“You didn’t have anything better to do than attend a *women’s* soccer camp in Canada?”

Beck scoffs. “We were already here for a practice match. Kluvberg thought it would be good PR.”

“And you didn’t think the fact that I would be here might complicate things just a tad?”

“I didn’t see why it would. We’re good, right?”

Damn him. What the hell am I supposed to say now? *No, we’re not good. Because I can’t stop thinking about you. I’m going to be distracted imagining what’s under your tracksuit for the next two days.* Hard pass.

“Yeah, we’re *good*. It’s still weird you’re here though.”

“Take it up with the organizers,” Beck says breezily. “They’re the ones who reached out to Kluvberg. What was I supposed to say?”

I scoff. “They didn’t make you come.”

“No?” An arrogant brow arches.

“Being here is beneath you, and you know it. It’s also a bad idea.”

“It is?”

“You know it is, Beck. We’ve had a…” I stop speaking as a couple players walk by closely in an obvious attempt to eavesdrop on our conversation. A sharp look sends them scattering like startled chickens. “A different type of relationship,” I continue in a quieter voice. “I can’t go back to seeing you as just a famous football player now.”

“Why not? I made suggestions when we played together in the park.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“We were playing around then, just the two of us. My whole fucking team is here. My coach. Not to mention players from every other reputable program in North America. This is my *future* we’re talking about. My career. My reputation.”

“You think I’m trying to jeopardize any of that?” Yup, there’s some of the anger I’ve been waiting for.

“Not purposefully,” I acquiesce. “But…” Fuck it. “Having you here is a distraction for me, okay?”

He doesn’t pounce on that admission the way I thought he would. Instead, his voice is earnest when he responds. “I can help you, Saylor. I know your style of play better than anyone else here.”

“Coach Taylor has coached me for the past three years. I think she’s equipped to give me feedback. And all of the clinic coaches have seen footage of us playing.”

“So have I.”

I scoff. “You watched hours of footage of every team attending in order to prepare to come here?”

“I never said I watched footage of anyone else.”

“That’s even worse! I don’t want special treatment, Beck.”

“What does me watching you play have to do with special treatment?” he snaps.

“You just said you only watched me play, not anyone else. That’s special treatment.”

“I watched it months ago. Didn’t have anything to do with CFOC asking me to do this clinic.”

That catches me off guard, but I don’t have a chance to respond. “Scott! You done socializing?” Coach Taylor calls.

I turn from Beck to see everyone else has begun running laps. I curse under my breath. I hate being called out at practice, at least for a mistake. I

don't mind the compliments. I could count on a couple of fingers how many times I've been chastised during practice. More than anywhere else, I stay focused on the field. Always. The fact that this lapse is due to Beck makes it all that much worse.

I jog to the edge of the field and then start really running, leaving Beck behind me. I garner more than a few curious glances from the other girls as we run circles around the field.

"Did your volunteer coaching gig with Adler Beck lead to some beef?" Emma questions, falling into step beside me.

The two girls running in front of us both slow their pace as soon as she says his name. *Real* subtle, guys.

"What makes you say that?" I reply, not looking away from the grass rapidly being swallowed beneath my long strides.

"He looks pissed."

"He's German—they always look that way."

"Saylor." Emma breaks out her rarely used, no-nonsense tone.

I sigh. "Fine. I fucked him at Scholenberg and told him he should leave just now. Happy?"

It's a testament to how shocking this revelation is that Emma has some trouble staying upright. She stumbles a couple steps over absolutely nothing before managing to stay vertical and keep pace with me. I've told her some crazy things. We've shared some wild exploits. But based on her sudden balance issues, I'm guessing if I glanced up, she'd look pretty stunned.

"I can't *believe* you fucked Adler Beck and didn't tell me until just now," she finally recovers.

I scoff. "Please. You suspected. He'll sleep with practically anyone who flirts with him."

"Did *you* flirt with him?" Emma questions, sounding dubious.

"I beat him in a shootout," I respond.

Emma laughs. "Only you. Was the consolation prize your—"

"Ladies! If you have spare air to chat, you're not running fast enough!" Coach calls out.

Groans fill the air, but I welcome the challenge, flexing my calves with every stride to give my movements an extra boost. Ten laps fly by at the accelerated pace. Next are push-ups. Then sit-ups. Followed by burpees. One girl throws up before we even hit sprints. Clearly her usual coach doesn't believe in conditioning the way Coach Taylor does.

Every muscle in my body is burning by the time we get a water break.

“I should have pretended to be sick this morning,” Emma grouses. I roll my eyes as I stretch my calf and watch Coach Taylor talk to Beck. “Wonder what Coach is cooking up with your lov-ah?” She croons the last word like she’s Taylor Swift.

I shoot her a glare for that comment.

“Back on the center line, please,” Coach barks. “One line of defenders. One line of strikers.”

We all take our time walking back to the center of the field in a blatant attempt to prolong the short break. I end up at the front of the strikers’ line.

“Scott, Morgan, you’re up.”

I dribble over to the cone that marks the start of the drill. Coach Taylor blows her whistle, and I easily spin and sprint around my assigned defender before sending the ball to the back of the net.

“Morgan! What the hell was that? Make Scott work for it! Scott, again! This time with Adams.” I line back up at the cone, and once again I easily skirt around my teammate and score. Coach Taylor sighs. “Henderson! You’re up with Scott. Stick to her like glue.”

I line up for a third time. Janie Henderson stays with me for about twenty feet, but then I feint right, and dart left, easily outrunning her. I score for a third time and expect that to be the end of it.

“Adler, can you please demonstrate how to properly mark a striker, since my defenders seem to have forgotten?” *Fuckkk*. I keep my gaze on the grass as I jog back to the starting cone.

I can physically feel the excitement thrumming through the assembled players as I hear footfalls approach me that must belong to Beck. Like me, they thought he was here in an observational role. Had I known that wasn’t the case, I would have let Janie keep me from scoring just now.

Finally, I can’t avoid it any longer. Azure eyes are already fixed on me as Beck stops about five feet away. He’s shed the light jacket he was wearing earlier, revealing the cotton jersey underneath that is the same shade of dark gray as the track pants he’s wearing. This is exactly why I wanted him to leave. I never get distracted on the field. But Beck? Less than five feet from me? I’m having trouble focusing.

We stare at each other. He’s looking at me like an opponent, and I’m finally able to do the same. Long after I should have started the drill on my own, Coach blows her whistle. I start to move, darting through the

complicated pattern of footwork that shook off my past three defenders. Beck stays with me, just like I knew he would. Biologically, he's both faster and stronger than I am. But this drill isn't about speed or fitness; it's about strategy. If this was any other top-tier male footballer, I probably still wouldn't stand a chance. But it's not. It's Beck. Not only have I spent years watching him play and studying his technique, this is not the first time I've played with him. Against him.

Most importantly, I know how he thinks, how he moves. Because I've done a lot more than just play soccer with Adler Beck. My body is already attuned to his every shift. I can anticipate his movements before he makes them based on subtle tells most would miss. Thanks to his admission earlier, I know he has all the same advantages when it comes to me. We practically mirror the other's movements. I spin; he turns to block me. I feint left; he goes right. I gain ground; he forces me back.

I'm so caught up in the complicated dance I startle when Coach Taylor blows her whistle. I drop Beck's gaze as soon as we stop moving.

"Well, that was—that was something. Good work, you two. Hart, Thompson, you're up next."

I jog back to the end of the line, avoiding every gaze aimed at me. Especially his.



Exhaustion and my dark mood keep questions at bay for the remainder of the day. Just because no one says anything to my face doesn't mean I can't hear the whispers, though. They grow exponentially more annoying when we head to dinner, mostly because it's the first time all the CFOC attendees are in one place. Gossip contained to individual fields has its first chance to flow freely.

The lodge's dining hall is set up buffet style, with massive trays of food being warmed by kerosene candles. Tables aren't assigned, but I head for one toward the back right, and the rest of Lancaster's team follows me. I set my water bottle on the varnished wood and head for the rapidly forming line. I end up behind Samantha Cole, the captain of one of Lancaster's chief rivals. Despite that, we've always been friendly off the field, as evidenced by the warm grin she gives me.

"Hey, Scott."

“Cole,” I reply, grabbing a plate and a roll of utensils.

“I don’t suppose you’ve suddenly started missing the net?”

“You’ll find out when we scrimmage,” I respond, helping myself to some salad.

She sighs. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Smart choice.”

“Hey, some of us are hitting the pool tonight, if you want to hang,” Samantha says as we shuffle along in line to the poutine.

“Sure, sounds fun,” I reply, studying the gray sludge covering the potatoes apprehensively.

Samantha misreads my interest. “I’ve been dreaming about these since last year. The chef said it’s the ketchup they add to the sauce...”

“Scott!” I groan when I recognize Coach Taylor’s voice calling my name and abandon my spot in line to walk over to where she’s standing a couple dozen feet away, next to the drink dispenser.

“Yes, Coach?”

“Do I need to be worried about you this season?” Coach Taylor fills a plastic cup with ice and then water, all while staring at me expectantly.

“Worried?” I echo.

“You were distracted all day.”

I don’t deny it. “Everyone has off days.”

“They do,” Coach acknowledges. “But I didn’t think the player who showed up to my practice with the flu last winter believed in off days.” I flush, and Coach’s voice softens a bit. “I’ve never had to place pressure on you, Saylor. Because you put it on yourself, and you excel. You’re heads and shoulders above any other player I’ve ever coached. I don’t want—”

“Hi, Elaine!” I look to the left and have to swallow a groan when I see Mackenzie Howard has appeared alongside us.

“Mackenzie.” Coach acknowledges her with a slight dip of her head. I can’t help but notice she doesn’t look thrilled to be addressed by her first name.

Mackenzie Howard is the current star of the women’s professional soccer league. She’s two years older than me, on a professional team, and takes great pains to remind me of both every time we interact. I typically find some way to mention the national championship Lancaster won my sophomore year. Against her alma mater her senior year.

“Saylor, how nice to see you,” Mackenzie says. “Can’t believe you’re a

senior now! Two years on the Wolves have just flown by.” Yup, right on cue.

“I know!” I reply in the same upbeat tone. “Seems like just yesterday we were beating you in the national championship.”

Coach Taylor’s lips twitch.

“Everyone is so excited to see where you end up next year,” Mackenzie states. “You know—” She stops speaking abruptly then waves her left hand. “Beck!”

Shit on a stick. I look down at my plate as I hear steps approach. They must know each other from the last Olympics. Of course, that sends me spiraling into speculation about just how well they know each other. I banish the thought from my brain as quickly as it appeared. I already know I’m part of a pool—a very large pool—of women who have slept with Adler Beck. Who cares who I’m treading water next to? And... clearly I’m *far* too fixated on Samantha’s swimming invite.

Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t look, I chant to myself. So of course, I look. His gaze is fixated on me already; I try and fail to convince myself I’m suddenly feeling flushed because of the heat the side of the ice dispenser is radiating.

“Saylor.” He addresses me and ignores Mackenzie, and I hate how much that matters to me.

“Beck.”

“Oh, you two know each other?” Mackenzie questions, looking back and forth between us. I’m guessing calling Beck over was meant to be a power play on her part.

“Yes,” Beck replies simply.

The weight of his eyes on me is crippling. “Are we good, Coach?” I ask, eager to flee.

“We’re good, Scott,” Coach Taylor confirms. “No shenanigans tonight, all right?”

“Of course not,” I reply hastily.

“That’s what you said last year,” Coach replies, but her smile is amused, not annoyed. “Enjoy your dinner.”

I grasp the opportunity to leave. “You, too.”

The line is gone, with only a few stragglers still getting food. I rejoin where I stopped, plopping a small amount of poutine on my plate before moving farther down the line. I’m transferring some roast chicken when I hear Mackenzie’s voice again. She’s sliding her plate down the buffet,

chattering about some endorsement deal. Beck is following her but doesn't seem to be paying particularly close attention. I don't let myself look for long enough to confirm. I finish serving myself chicken, scoop some rice, and grab a fork. When I turn back around, Beck is spooning some poutine on his plate.

"That's got ketchup in it," I blurt.

Beck looks up at me. Really looks at me, and I forget we're standing in a glorified cafeteria in Canada. "Thanks."

I shrug. "I may not want you here, but anaphylactic shock seemed harsh. I don't exactly think there's a hospital around the corner. Unless they drove like *you*, no one would ever get you there in time."

I'm revealing far too much about the knowledge I've retained concerning Adler Beck, but he doesn't seem to mind. In fact, he appears entertained by it. "Don't go crazy with the compliments."

"That wasn't one."

"Yes, it was." Beck sounds very, very confident about that, and I hate he has a right to be. I'm notoriously forgetful when it comes to things like dates, names, and favorites. But I remembered Beck is allergic to tomatoes. He leans past me to grab a fork, and it's closer than we've been in weeks. "Don't forget I know you, too."

The words are almost a taunt, and they propel me into motion. I stride past Beck toward the rows of tables, dropping my plate down next to my water bottle and sliding into my seat across from Emma. She raises both eyebrows in a silent question, but I don't answer, jumping into the conversation about our scrimmage tomorrow. We're scheduled to play Montclave College, which is one of the better teams here. Assuming I can stay focused, we shouldn't have any problem beating them.

After dinner, there's a speech by one of the organizers filled with words like "dedication," "perseverance," and "discipline." Words I've heard in pep talks and read on posters in locker rooms more times than I could count.

They've never been a reminder I needed.

And the only reason I need them now is nodding along to something William York—Britain's best hope of a world championship—is saying. I do a quick scan of the rest of the table of clinic leaders. They're all athletes I recognize. CFOC really pulled out all the stops this year.

The speech ends with a plea to act professionally amongst our peers, and then we all file out of the banquet hall.

"On that note, Samantha Cole invited us to the pool," I announce to my

teammates.

“Better plan than the campfire last year,” Cressida scoffs as we enter the elevator. There might have been a minor incident with some smuggled liquor. “I’m in.”

“Meet back here in a few?” Emma suggests as we reach the hallway containing our rooms. Everyone agrees, and I follow her into ours, feeling a burst of foreboding as the door swings shut and latches.

She whirls around as soon as it does. “Okay, spill.”

“I already did. I slept with him while I was in Germany.”

“Yeah, well aware of how you dropped that bomb during laps, S. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me before.” There’s some hurt mixing with incredulity. Out of all my friends, Emma’s the one I’ve always shared sexual exploits with, both incredible and underwhelming.

I can’t share the truth: that I needed to forget Adler Beck, and telling her would have made that impossible. So, I share a morsel. “I thought it would be weird. You’ve got a poster of him on your wall!”

“Exactly why you should have told me! Having sex with Adler Beck is one of my life goals. I had a whole plan for how to approach him at the next Olympics!”

I head over to my duffle bag and start changing into my bikini. I’ve never felt jealous of Emma before, even though she’s got the perfect family, but I know she’s serious. Emma’s just as bold as I am; it’s part of why we’re such good friends. Given the chance, she would proposition him. The thought forms a knot of anxiety that drops in my stomach like a lead brick.

“Okay, we’ll get back to that,” Emma states decisively when I don’t say anything. “How was—”

“Emma, I *really* don’t want to talk about it, okay?” I interrupt, using a serious tone I rarely employ off the field. “I’d say I’m sorry about not telling you, but I’m really not. If anything, this conversation has made me wish I never did.”

Emma huffs. “You were *never* going to tell me?”

“Honestly, probably not. I had no idea he’d show up here as some sort of guest coach.”

To be honest, I’ve never really understood the role of the clinic leaders here. Especially this year. In the past, they’ve mostly been female players a few years into their professional careers who have suggested new drills to run.

“He didn’t coach shit. Just stared at you.”

I don’t touch that comment, just pull sweatpants and a sweatshirt on over my swimsuit. “Ready?”

Emma sighs. “Yeah.”

We head out into the hallway. Everyone else is already waiting for us as we enter the elevator and then make our way through the maze of beige carpeting to the section of the hotel that houses the pool.

The walled-off area is swirling with steam and excitement when we enter. There are a couple hundred attendees at CFOC this year, and I’d estimate at least a quarter of them are in this space relaxing on loungers, sitting in the hot tub, or standing in the pool that maxes out at five feet.

There’s a game of water basketball already underway, and I quickly shed my clothes to jump in and play. I’m well aware I’m using sport as an escape right now, which is nothing new. It’s definitely healthier than other options.

The game lasts for about a half hour before it dies down. I’m eager to continue playing, but I’ve also swallowed more chlorinated water than I ever wanted to. Everyone else starts to trickle out of the pool and then out of the room.

“517, ladies! We’ve got booze!” one girl calls out, prompting some scattered cheers. I pull myself up on the edge of the concrete but leave my legs dangling in the water.

“We’re headed up.” Cressida appears beside me, already dressed. “Do you want us to wait for you?”

“No, I’m good. Go ahead,” I tell her.

She nods, and pretty soon I’m the only one left at the pool. For the first time since seeing Beck, I’m alone.

I knew I would probably see him again. Eventually. There are a lot of soccer players in the world. Few at his level; the level I hope to reach. That was meant to be some distant encounter.

Not here.

Not now.

Not while I still care.

By the time I stand, my feet are pruned, and my unsubmerged skin is dry. I towel off and then slip back into my sweatshirt and sweatpants. The weight of my phone feels like an anvil. I sink down onto one of the lounge chairs and pull it out of my pocket, biting on my bottom lip as I deliberate.

I text him. *Are you up?* If he’s on a German schedule, it’s the middle of

the night.

His response is immediate. *Ja*.

We never finished playing earlier. Not my best line, but he still replies instantly.

Meet you on field 12.

Heart pounding, I weave my way back down the hotel halls and through the lobby. Technically we have a curfew that went into effect an hour ago, but any authority figures should probably be more concerned about the rager happening in 517 than me taking a walk outside.

The automatic doors glide open, providing me with a soundless exit—into a deluge of water. It's not raining out—it's *pouring*. I'm soaked after a few steps and debate turning back, but I press on. Between the pool and the downpour, it's not like I can get any wetter at this point.

The water coating everything glints under the natural light of the moon and the artificial ones lining the path that leads from the lodge to the fields.

I see Beck long before I reach him. The lamps don't extend past the first field, so I have to rely on the moonlight as I walk toward Field twelve. The rapid raindrops falling blur the entire landscape together, with the exception of Beck and the shape of the soccer goal to his left.

Uneasily, I realize it's a remarkably accurate portrayal of what my life has looked like ever since he jogged out of that tunnel.

"I didn't realize it was supposed to rain," I say when I stop at the edge of the field beside him.

"It wasn't," Beck replies. "Ready?" He tosses the ball tucked under his arm down onto the grass. Rather than bouncing, it rests in place in the middle of one of the many puddles that have formed, and I eye it dubiously.

"Yeah. I've got to take my shoes off, though. They're literally filled with water." Beck watches me pull off my socks and sneakers with an unreadable expression. "What?" I finally ask.

He shakes his head once and yanks off his own. I head after the ball, and he follows me.

We start playing, and I'm fairly certain we must look ridiculous. Both of us were already soaked, and pretty soon we're both splattered with mud as well.

We're less evenly matched than we were earlier, and I know it's because of me. I'm not fully focused. There's no one watching us. Judging me.

I don't think about technique or angles or strategy. I think about keeping

the ball moving through and around the puddles dotting the ground. I watch ribbons of rain run out of Beck's hair, I study the intensity in his blue eyes, and I don't move away when his warm body jostles mine; the contact somehow searing through the waterlogged layers we're both wearing.

Beck's ahead by two goals when I finally collapse on the soggy ground. I'm sweating underneath my swamped clothes, but the rain washes the perspiration away immediately. Beck drops beside me, breathing heavily.

"Did you see the interview I did?" I ask, with no preamble.

"Yeah, I did." Beck's voice gives no indication of his thoughts on the topic.

"It just came out, and then I felt like he was judging me for being another one of your fangirls, and I felt obligated to explain."

"It's fine, Saylor." After a couple minutes of silence, he adds, "It would have been nice if you'd ever told me that yourself."

"Told you what? You know I've watched footage of you playing."

"That's different than knowing you watched that game. That it's part of the reason you pursued football!"

"I watched your first championship game, along with approximately five hundred million other people. It made me feel like less of a nutcase for focusing on nothing but soccer. Happy now?"

Beck mutters what I would guess is a German profanity. It sounds like a word he's said around me before. There's a pregnant pause. "Otto hung a sign that says, 'Saylor Scott's Inspiration' above my locker," Beck states.

A reluctant grin tugs at my lips. "That's kind of funny." It's also nice to know he didn't totally erase me from his life the way I've tried to remove him from mine.

"I thought so, too," Beck admits. "Not that I'll ever tell him that."

We fall into silence, watching more and more water gather on the surface of the field as the soil loses its ability to soak any more liquid up. Thunder rumbles in the distance, suggesting the worst of the storm is far from over. I'm soaked and sweaty. The ground is hard and muddy, and yet I don't move. I don't feel any inclination to, and Beck doesn't seem to, either.

I don't know how long we remain sitting before Beck stands and offers me a hand. It could have been mere minutes, or hours that have passed.

Time has ceased to exist.

I grasp his palm, and his firm grip propels me vertical at the same moment I start to stand on my own. The combined velocity sends me

crashing into Beck's chest.

I pull back slowly.

"Saylor—" Beck starts, but I don't let him finish. I kiss him. Partly because actions always seem to serve me better than words, and mostly because I want to. For once, we're not racing toward something more. This kiss is the meal, not just the appetizer. There's no nearby bed we're about to fall into. Waterlogged clothes aren't easy to grope or caress through.

So, we just kiss. For another indeterminable number of seconds. Until my lips feel chapped and my heart is racing just as fast as when we were playing soccer.

I started it, so I end it, pulling back slowly until Beck lets me break his hold entirely. I stare into his confused blue eyes for a brief moment, and then I turn and walk away, leaving the perfect moment behind me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I wake up the following morning to Emma's suspicious expression. She was already asleep when I snuck back into our room, leaving behind a trail of water that has thankfully dissipated.

"Where were you last night?" she asks as soon as she sees I'm awake.

"I went to the gym." Sadly, I think Emma actually believes me.

"You're acting weird, S," she calls after me as I head into the bathroom.

"I know," I say before I close the door.

She lets the subject drop as we change into our Lancaster jerseys and head down to the banquet hall for breakfast.

Anne asks where I was last night when Emma and I reach the table our team is sitting at.

"She was working out," Emma explains, rolling her eyes.

"Jesus, Scott," Cressida comments. "Thank God I'll never have to play against you." Unlike me and Emma, Cressida has no plans to pursue a professional soccer career following graduation. Anne's still undecided.

I grunt as I grab a bowl and a box of cereal. There's no buffet like last night. Staff have distributed tiny containers of cereal and cartons of milk on each table for us to help ourselves to.

We head toward the fields as a team. This morning is starting with an hour-long scrimmage, followed by rotating between clinics. Unfortunately, I know this means I'll have to interact with Beck at some point. There's no sign of him when we reach our assigned field, though, and I let out a sigh of relief. I don't regret last night, but it definitely didn't clear anything up where he's concerned.

Out of sight, out of mind hasn't helped me much so far, but it ensures I'm

paying close attention to Coach Taylor's pregame talk. This game won't count for anything, but it sets a tone for the type of team we are this season. We'll play most of these teams, including our opponent today, Montclave College, during the regular season. Samantha gives me a brief grin as we meet with the ref, which I return.

"Looking forward to kicking your ass, Scott," she comments.

"In your dreams, Cole," I reply, before calling tails.

I choose correctly, and it sets off a domino effect of luck. Emma slides a kick behind their goalie when she thinks Emma is going to pass to me instead, and then Natalie manages a wicked header. Cressida lets one goal in, but we still emerge victorious.

Then, it's onto the rotation of drills. Beck has arrived at the field and is talking with a few of the coaches. I force myself to focus.

Our first assignment is the station Mackenzie is responsible for, and she gives us all a condescending smile as we gather around. It seems especially patronizing when she spots me. I smirk back at her. If she wants to challenge me, soccer is *not* the way to do it. She hasn't seen me play in two years, and I was the victor of our last match-up then.

The premise of the drill is similar to the one Coach Taylor had us running through yesterday. Except instead of starting from side-by-side cones, we're facing a defender already in the penalty box, and a goalie in position.

"I'll do one round to demonstrate," Mackenzie announces. Her gaze roams across the group. I know she's going to pick me before she says my name. "Saylor. You're a striker, right?"

"Yup." I keep my response short, and I hear Emma muffle a snort beside me.

"Are you willing to help me demonstrate?" Mackenzie asks sweetly.

I tighten my ponytail. "Sure."

She passes me a ball, and I trap it neatly, waiting for her to get into position. As soon as she's in place, I strike, racing forward. I don't head straight toward her, jutting out to the edge of the box so she has to come to me. As soon as she leaves her position, I employ some of the footwork I can thank Christina Weber for. Mackenzie tries to copy me, but she slips.

I send the ball into the netting. It's not the most satisfying goal I've ever scored—not by a long shot—but I still enjoy watching her squirm.

"Was that what you had in mind?" I ask her, my tone saccharine.

"Good work, Scott," she mutters through gritted teeth. "Line up,

everyone.”

The next few clinics pass in a blur until we’re only one away from Beck’s. William York is in charge of our current one, and there’s a fair amount of whispering going on. He’s got a charming British accent and the importance of a member of the royal family. He actually looks a lot like the future monarch who shares his name, albeit a younger version with a lusher head of hair. He instructs us through a combination passing drill. A few players struggle with the fast-paced weaving. I’m not one of them, and William comes over to congratulate me.

“Excellent work out there,” he tells me, flashing a cheeky grin.

“Thanks.” I don’t smile back.

“There are some other passing techniques I could teach you.” Cressida’s to my left, and I see her smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m sure the whole group would love to gain any extra knowledge you have to share,” I reply, and his cocky smile disappears.

He nods once, back to being professional. As he should have been all along.

And then we reach Beck.

He’s wearing all black today. The dark color is a sharp contrast to his golden looks. Those whispers William York garnered? Absent.

Beck’s not sporting a charming smile; his chiseled features are fixed in a glower. He’s not taking a casual stance; he’s planted in place, arms crossed. His presence isn’t charismatic; it’s commanding.

You don’t gossip about Adler Beck when you’re in his presence—you stare at him.

I keep my gaze fixed on the soccer goal behind him. I can feel Emma’s eyes on me and a few glances from my other teammates. They may not have heard my confession to Emma about our carnal acquaintance, but they all saw us talking yesterday.

Beck rattles off instructions for the drill, and I’m not surprised to hear they’re twice as complex as every other clinic we’ve completed so far. Everyone stays silent.

The exercise requires receiving a flighted ball, dribbling on the attack through a series of grids, and then taking a shot on goal.

Based on the befuddled expressions surrounding me, some are uncertain about how to execute it. Beck catches the confusion. He’s still scowling, but I think I catch a glimmer of mirth. “Would a demonstration help?” he asks

authoritatively.

Heads bob around me, and call me a hypocrite, but I'm having the same bout of unprofessionalism that struck William York. Because Beck acting like a coach—my coach? It's hot.

If I wasn't so busy following a rabbit hole of inappropriate thoughts, I might have seen it coming.

"Saylor?" He addresses me directly, and it catches me off guard. I was expecting him to limit our interaction today.

"What?" I ask, in a tone I wouldn't usually use with a coach. Glorified or not.

Does Beck answer? No. He strolls toward the penalty box. I sigh and follow him.

"You clear on it?" Beck asks me quietly when I catch up.

"Insulted you have to ask," I respond. And am completely unprepared for the devastating grin Beck flashes me.

"Good."

We split off. I sprint through the first two grids, Beck plays me a flighted ball, and I send it into the goal. He doesn't congratulate me, just nods.

Like it's exactly what he expected.

Somehow, that's better.

Everyone else works their way through the drill, with varying levels of success. Beck corrects every error. Not harshly, but absent of any sympathy. He doesn't flirt with anyone.

A loud horn sounds across the field, signaling the end of the clinics and the break for lunch.

"Thank God," Cressida announces beside me. "I'm starving. Who thought those little boxes of cereal were breakfast? Give me some waffles and bacon."

"It's a soccer camp, not a vacation," I reply, laughing, although I'm just as hungry.

"Why can't it be both?" Cressida challenges.

I'm following Anne off the field when Beck speaks. "Saylor?"

I pause.

"Can I talk to you?"

"Go ahead," I tell Cressida, who's stopped beside me.

I spin around slowly to watch him approach. He halts closer to me than I expect.

We stare at each other.

“Look, about last night—” Beck starts.

I take offensive action. “This isn’t happening anymore,” I tell Beck, gesturing between us. “Last night was a mistake. We had fun before. Now we’re finished. If you want to get laid, go hit up Mackenzie Howard. Or one of the other couple hundred girls here.”

“I tried to,” Beck tells me. I feel my face blanch in shock in response to his blunt reply, and he lets out a low laugh. “Not here. Back home, once you left. I tried to go back to—”

“Fucking every hot girl who hit on you?” I supplement.

Beck rolls his eyes. “I want you, Saylor. Just you.”

I stare at him, totally shocked. “Be serious, Beck.”

“I am.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means I want to date you. Be in a relationship. Whatever you want to call it. I want *you*, Saylor.”

I’m even more stunned. Beck expecting to hook up after the signals I sent last night? Expected. Telling me he wants a relationship? Un-fucking-expected. To put it mildly.

“I’m just a girl you used to sleep with. One of *many*.”

A frustrated hand rakes through short blond strands. “You’re a lot more than that to me... but I can’t figure out what I am to you. *If* I’m anything to you.”

Once again, I’m wholly unprepared for his response. “I—I don’t know,” I manage.

Beck nods once. “Fine.” He turns and starts walking away.

“Wait. Where are you going?” I call after him.

He spins back around but doesn’t diminish any of the distance he just put between us. “I’m leaving,” he replies matter-of-factly. “I have practice tomorrow. My plane leaves in an hour.”

“You’re... leaving?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t just show up here, tell me you want a relationship, and then take off, Beck!”

“I told you how I feel, and you did the same. Doesn’t seem like there’s anything left to discuss.”

“I told you I *don’t know* how I feel! You just dropped this on me out of

nowhere. I haven't even had time to think about it!"

"You shouldn't need time to think about it, Saylor. Do you need twenty minutes to decide if you're going to go for a goal?"

"The reactions aren't comparable! You waited until an hour before your plane leaves to have this conversation?"

"You asked me to keep things professional," he snaps, before letting out a long string of German. For once, I'm glad I don't know what he's saying. I doubt it's complementary. Sure enough, when he switches back to English, it's to say, "You're absolutely infuriating. First you lecture me for coming and tell me not to talk to you about anything but football, and now that I have, you tell me I should have brought it up sooner?"

"Fine. When you put it that way, I can see why you're annoyed," I acquiesce. "But how was I supposed to know *this* is what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Beck scoffs. "Just forget I said anything."

"I thought—I thought we were just having fun before..."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." The words are inscrutable. Sarcastic? Genuine? Angry? He's giving me nothing.

He turns and strides away, leaving me standing here. Baffled. Irritated. Befuddled. I think I should call out after him, but I don't know what to say. So, I watch him walk away, left with the sneaking suspicion that I just made a cataclysmically stupid mistake.

The nagging feeling stays with me. Every time I make a decision on the field for the rest of the day, I recall Beck's words.

I ask Cassidy Jones, a senior at a school in California who's done the same circuit of camps Lancaster has for the past three years, the question Emma would have a field day with as we're paired off for a passing drill in the afternoon.

"Have you ever been in love?"

She chokes a little on the water she's drinking. "Jesus, Scott. You really don't bother with any small talk, huh?"

I don't answer the rhetorical question. "Have you?"

"Uh—yeah, I guess so."

"You don't sound sure."

"Well, it's not exactly black and white. That's why there are a million songs and books and movies about it. No love story is exactly the same, the way no two people are exactly the same."

I like things to be black and white. That's why I love soccer. "Then how did you know you were in love?" I press.

"I don't know, I just did. It became something I just knew. Like my favorite color or whether a ball is going to get past me when it's flying at my face. He made me happy. Made me a better person. I felt like I could tell him anything. All that sentimental shit people wax poetic about."

"Hmmm," I muse.

Cassidy slants me a side glance. "You asking for any particular reason?"

"Nope. Just wondering," I lie. She lets it drop, another reason she was an excellent choice for the query.

I like things to be black and white. Adler Beck is a whole lot of gray. Overwhelming, confusing gray.

And I don't know what to do about it.

If I should do anything about it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“**Y**ou’ve had a busy few weeks, Adler. You just recently returned from coaching a clinic at CFOC’s junior women’s camp, correct?”

“Yes.”

“That must have been quite the experience.”

“It was. I had a chance to work with some very talented athletes.”

“I’m sure you were a big hit there,” the sportscaster replies.

“Only one player tried to get me fired,” Beck responds. The guy interviewing him laughs, obviously reading it as a joke.

There’s a loud hoot from the direction of the couch, and I give up on pretending I’m not eavesdropping on the interview Emma’s watching on her laptop as she lounges on the couch. “Wonder who that could be?” she calls out.

I scoff as I hit the “delete” button for the thousandth time. Which is approximately how many times I’ve been grilled about Beck since we left CFOC.

“I still *cannot* believe you had sex with Adler Beck and didn’t tell,” Cressida comments from the stool next to me where she’s typing her own essay. “If it had been me, I would have told everyone I know.”

Yup, Emma kept that secret for about twenty-four hours.

I grit my teeth as I watch another sentence disappear. I’m flying home tomorrow for my dad’s wedding, and this essay is due the following day. I know myself better than to think I will get any work done on it once I depart in the morning.

“That might scare off other suitors,” Emma replies, shutting her computer and strolling into the kitchen to refill her glass with water. “No guy wants to

follow Adler Beck.” She takes a sip. “Which makes your question at the gym all the more interesting...”

My plea to not discuss Adler Beck lasted about as long.

“What question at the gym?” Cressida asks.

I close my computer more firmly than I mean to. “I’m going upstairs. I’ve got to get this done tonight.”

Silence descends as I stomp up the stairs.



The kitchen isn’t empty the way I’d hoped it would be when I return downstairs. It’s after midnight, but I’m packed and I have submitted my essay.

“Well, well, well. Look who decided to emerge from her cave,” Emma quips when I appear in the doorway. She’s sitting at the kitchen counter, and Cressida is rolling balls of cookie dough.

“I had a paper to write,” I reply. “Some of us take school seriously.”

“I can’t believe you managed to say that with a straight face,” Emma responds. “Wasn’t it just a couple days ago you were bragging about your C average? You’re trying to avoid—”

“I don’t want to talk about him anymore, okay?” I growl as I grab a glass and fill it with water and ice.

“You haven’t talked about him at all,” Emma replies.

“It was just a weird... blip, okay? Can you drop it?” I implore as I take a seat on the stool next to her.

“Maybe if you’d gotten me an autograph at CFOC,” Emma grumbles.

Cressida laughs, then bites her bottom lip. “What Emma means is we’re worried about you. You’ve been acting strange ever since you got back from Scholenberg, and even weirder since CFOC. We’re just trying to make sure you’re okay. It’s not healthy to keep stuff bottled up.”

“And if you felt inclined to share some details about...” Emma lets her voice trail off as Cressida shoots her a glare. “I’m just saying! Friends don’t sleep with the guy voted ‘Sexiest Athlete Alive’ three years straight and *not* share details.”

Anne walks into the kitchen just then, twisting her hair up in a bun. She stumbles to a stop when she sees us all standing around the kitchen island.

“Wh—what’s going on?”

“Saylor is finally going to spill about Adler Beck,” Emma replies, resting her chin on her hand and looking at me expectantly. “Specifically, the size of his co—”

“Emma,” Cressida hisses.

“Should I go grab a ruler?” That’s the thing about Anne. Most of the time she’s quiet and shy, but every now and then she’ll shock the rest of us by playing along with our crude humor.

“See? Even Anne wants to know about his dick, and she blushed at my cucumber joke yesterday!”

“That *was* one of your more vulgar ones.” Cressida dunks another ball of dough in cinnamon and sugar.

“Thank you,” Emma replies pertly.

I finally intercede. “Okay. I get you guys are curious. I would be too. But...” I pause, glancing down to watch the cubes of ice bob along. “I don’t—I think...” My three best friends all lean forward expectantly, and I can’t do it. I can’t share details. I can’t admit to them I *like* Adler Beck beyond his bedroom skills. More than like him if the amount of real estate he occupies in my brain is any indication. “There’s nothing to say. It was just sex.” I stand and grab my glass of water. “I’m headed to bed. My flight leaves early tomorrow.”

No one says anything as I head for the stairs.

So much for being fearless.

But Adler Beck and I would be a cacophony of calamity and catastrophe.

We’re too alike.

Too different.

He elicits a flight-or-fuck response in me, and now I need to choose flight.

I get ready for bed and have just climbed between the sheets when my phone dings. I grab it from the charging station. It’s a text from Emma. I open it, and there’s just a link to an article. I click on it, and a photo fills the screen.

It’s one of me and Beck.

There was press at CFOC for our scrimmages, but obviously at least one photographer stuck around for the clinics, because the photo is one of Beck and me on the field after everyone else had left. When he dropped the I-want-to-be-with-you bomb on me. We’re looking at each other, but only my

expression is fully visible. It's an unsettling mixture of adoration and anger.

The caption reads: *International icon Adler Beck and Lancaster University superstar Saylor Scott*. The article itself is about the camp more generally. I'm mentioned a couple more times, as is Beck, but we're only linked in the photo.

The picture doesn't fully fit with the article, but I get why they chose it. There's tangible emotion frozen there. Not just in me, but in the set of Beck's jaw. The flex of his forearm.

I stare at until I fall asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The plane aisle finally clears. I hop up, eager to stretch my legs and breathe something other than recycled air for the first time in two hours.

I may not be thrilled about the reason for this trip, but there's a rush of nostalgia when I emerge into the Georgia sunshine. Hallie told me to look for a white SUV, and there's one already loitering along the curb. I stick my suitcase in the trunk and hop in the passenger seat to give her a hug.

"Happy wedding weekend!" she cheers.

"Please don't try to make that a thing," I reply, rolling my eyes at the cheerful expression emphasized by the colorful silk scarf Hallie tied around her ponytail.

"Well, *someone* has to counteract all the negative energy you're exuding," she replies, as I click my seatbelt into place.

"I had to get up at five for my run, and the row behind me contained not one, but two screaming children. Please excuse me if I'm not the picture of joy and excitement."

"Right, because otherwise you would be," Hallie remarks dryly as she pulls away from the curb. I don't deny it.

"Speaking of screaming children, where's yours?"

Hallie manages to give me side-eye while navigating a roundabout. "With Matt and his family. They're staying with us, too."

"What?!"

"You can always stay at Dad's, Saylor."

I huff out an annoyed breath. "I'm guessing that means Jackson is also staying at the house."

"He is my brother-in-law."

“Which makes the fact that he does nothing but hit on me all the weirder.”

“Well, *you’re* not related to him,” Hallie points out.

“Legally, I am.”

“He’s just trying to be friendly.”

I laugh. “Thank God you found Matt in pre-algebra. Jackson asked me out to dinner at your wedding, Hallie. That’s not just being friendly to your sister-in-law’s sister.”

“He’s harmless.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I want to spend the next couple days fending off his advances.”

“Would it be that terrible to be in a relationship?” Hallie asks. “Not with Jackson, but someone else,” she adds hastily, completely misreading my silence.

“I don’t have time for it.”

“You make time for it, Saylor. There’s never been a guy?”

I’m uncharacteristically honest. “Maybe. One. I don’t know. It didn’t end well.”

“Didn’t end well, how?”

“He probably has a dartboard with my face on it.”

Hallie laughs. “How come?”

I look out the window to watch the familiar scenery of my hometown flash by. “Things got confusing between us. Maybe they always were.”

“That clarified nothing, Saylor.”

I sigh. “He said he doesn’t know how I feel about him.”

“And what did you say?”

“That I don’t know,” I admit. “He said I should, and he’s probably right. Right?” I don’t realize how desperate I am for Hallie’s opinion until I voice the words.

“I think it means something that you don’t,” Hallie replies. “It’s a lot easier to know you don’t have feelings for someone than to admit you do. I also think it means something if you’re still thinking about it. And that you told me, seeing as you never share anything.” I scoff, although I know she’s right. The FBI could hire me to guard state secrets.

There’s a pause.

A long one.

I’m not expecting her to say anything else.

Then, “Are you talking about Adler Beck?”

My head whips to the left. “What makes you say that?”

“Matt set up a Google alert so we wouldn’t miss any articles about you. I saw a photo of you two together.”

“You know who Adler Beck is?”

“Duh,” Hallie replies, sounding less like my serious older sister and a lot more like a preteen at a boy-band concert.

“Well, excuse me for being surprised you know about a German soccer player considering you asked me how many touchdowns I scored last season.”

Hallie rolls her eyes. “You know I can’t keep any sports terminology straight. Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate male athletes. I’m married, not blind. Adler Beck is—”

“Yeah, yeah.” I cut her off because, for some reason Hallie talking about Beck’s appearance has the same ew factor as her brother-in-law asking me out on a date.

“So?” Hallie and I may be polar opposites in a lot of ways, but we’re both tenacious.

I sigh and look back out at the scenery. “Yeah,” I admit. “It never would have worked,” I continue, mostly to myself. “I’m not cut out for a relationship.”

“Of course you are,” Hallie responds. “Do you think I planned to end up married with a kid at twenty-seven?”

“Um, honestly? Yes,” I reply. Hallie and her husband had one of those insta-love connections that were all the rage in middle school but rarely lasted past puberty. They spent the entirety of their high school and college years attached at the hip. I would have been more surprised if she’d told me they *weren’t* getting married when she made the announcement three years ago.

Hallie’s eyes are on the road, but I have a feeling she’s rolling them. “Well, I didn’t. I mean, maybe I liked the idea of having the stable family we didn’t, but that was also why I was terrified. Worried Matt and I might end up like Mom and Dad.”

“You were?” I ask, surprised.

“Yeah, I was,” Hallie confirms. “And the point is I realized it. I moved past it. I’m not sure if you have.”

“I don’t need a psychology degree to know I’ve got trust issues because Mom left, Hallie. I didn’t turn him down because I think he’s going to take

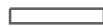
off after I've popped out two kids. I told him I didn't know how I feel because I genuinely don't. Because he's an international soccer icon who's probably fucked half the women in Europe. He doesn't take anything off the pitch seriously. He's unreliable. Annoying—"

"Wow, you really like him." Hallie interrupts my rant, and her words aren't sarcastic. They're serious, which is infinitely worse. I scoff. "Maybe you should tell him he has a reason to change the photo on his dartboard," she suggests. I scoff again. "It would be a shame to mar a photo of the face that broke every heart in the county," she continues teasingly.

I don't reply; I just keep watching houses pass by.

Those boys were fools to think I was after anything more than a fondling under the bleachers.

I refuse to make the same mistake when it comes to Adler Beck.



I'm expecting Hallie to pull up in front of the bungalow she and Matt bought when they got married. Instead, she stops and parks in front of a long, industrial-looking building on the fringes of town.

"Where are we?"

"They opened this farmer's market last year," Hallie tells me as she shuts off the car and opens the driver's side door. "If you came home more frequently, you'd know that."

I ignore the dig as I climb out of the vehicle. "What are we doing here?"

"I need some stuff for dinner. You can browse the booths. They've got crafty stuff too."

"Crafty stuff?"

"Yeah, knitwear, embroidery, artwork. Stuff like that."

"My favorite," I deadpan as we walk inside.

I trail after Hallie, glancing around the booths as we pass them by. Suddenly, I stop. A framed watercolor print is displayed among a series of similar paintings, displaying a puddle amidst a stretch of grass.

An elderly woman appears at my side. "Can I help you find anything, dear?"

"Yes, I'll take this one," I reply impulsively, pointing to the painting. Not only does it remind me of my favorite piece in Kluvberg's art museum, but

it's also eerily similar to the night in Canada I keep thinking about.

"Anything you'd like me to add for you?"

"What?" I reply.

The woman points to a sign hanging to the left of her paintings that reads "Customizations available upon request."

"I always like to give people the option. I paint places that are special to me, but you're the one who'll be looking at it. If there's something I can add, I like to do so. Had a couple in here a few days ago who had me paint their dog on the front porch."

"Can you add a soccer goal to the reflection? Here." I point in the painting. "And can you add a couple numbers as well? Blended in, so you really have to look for them?"

"Sure, sugar. What are the numbers?"

"22 and 23," I respond, handing her my credit card.

She rings me up then tells me it will be ready at noon tomorrow. I thank her and rush out of the booth to catch up with Hallie.

"What happened to you?" she asks.

"Found a painting I liked," I reply truthfully.

"Where is it?" She eyes my empty hands curiously.

"It won't be ready until tomorrow," I inform her.

"Huh. Well, I'm ready to leave."

I follow my sister back out into the parking lot, helping her to load up all the groceries she purchased.

"Hi, Hallie!" a smiling blonde woman stops by our trunk.

"Hi, Stephanie. How have you been?"

"Busy," the woman replies with a smile. "Simon is teething."

"Oh, no," Hallie responds. I feel like saying the same thing, except in relation to this topic of conversation.

"Yup, it's been an experience. Hoping I'll have some wisdom to pass along by the time Matthew hits that stage."

Hallie laughs. "That would be wonderful."

"Who's this?" The woman turns her attention to me.

"Oh, yes. Stephanie, this is my sister, Saylor. Saylor, this is my friend Stephanie," Hallie says.

I transfer the last bag into the trunk and turn around. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh my goodness, I can't believe I'm meeting the famous Saylor!"

"Famous?" I look at Hallie.

“Your sister talks about you all the time at our meetings,” Stephanie informs me.

“Meetings?” I echo.

“Yes, we’re in the same book club.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing. “Really?”

“Hallie’s our newest member, but she contributes a lot.”

“She usually does,” I reply.

“Well, I’ve got to get going, but great to see you, Hallie. Nice to meet you, Saylor,” Stephanie says before she keeps walking down the line of cars.

I head to the passenger side, and Hallie climbs in the driver’s seat.

“You’re in a book club?” I laugh.

Hallie glares at me. “It’s my one night out of the house, okay?”

“I wasn’t judging.” I totally was. “I just find the thought of you in a book club amusing.”

“It’s fun, okay? We have interesting discussions.”

“Oh yeah? What was the last book you read?”

Based on Hallie’s expression, that is the last question she wanted me to ask. “*The Duke Who Defiled Me*,” she mutters.

“I’m sorry, what?” I giggle. “Are you serious?”

“I didn’t choose it.”

I’m laughing too hard to reply.

“We can’t all have thrilling lives in reality, Saylor.”

The serious note in my sister’s voice is the only reason I’m able to regain my composure. “My life isn’t thrilling, Hallie.”

“You’ve always gotten everything you wanted. Do you know how many guys dated me because they were interested in you instead? How many of my sorority sisters would ask if you were considering staying in Georgia for school? Your life is frat parties, magazine interviews, and flings with famous athletes. Sounds pretty thrilling to me.”

“Things always look better from a distance,” I reply, looking out at the local high school. Although Hallie is partially right. Guys, friends, and soccer have always come easily.

“I’m just saying don’t judge my life.”

“I wasn’t, Hallie.”

But I have. I’ve always viewed settling down as the antithesis of everything I ever wanted in life. Until Adler Beck confused things.

She’s dubious. “Sure.”

“Just because I don’t see myself with a husband and kids doesn’t mean I judge you for choosing those things. You’re my sister. I’m happy for you.”

“I know you don’t. I—I’m sorry. I’ve just been stressed making sure everything is all set for the wedding.”

I grasp the peace offering. “I’m here. I want to help. ‘Thrilling’ is exhausting.”

Hallie gives me a smile that seems genuine. “You’re going to regret saying that.”

“I doubt it. I can just bring up your book club and its highbrow literature any time I want to get out of anything.”

Hallie snorts. “It’s how I found out who Adler Beck is.”

“What?”

“We end every meeting by ‘casting’ the book. Adler Beck was the frontrunner for the Duke. Photos were passed around.”

I let out an unattractive snort-laugh. “Are you serious? Did he get the gig?”

Hallie’s reluctant to reply, which tells me the answer before she verbalizes it. “Yes.”

“Wow. I can’t wait to tell him.”

“So, you’re talking to him?”

I turn my gaze back outside. We’re in Hallie’s neighborhood now. “No. I’m not.”

Hallie pulls into the driveway behind two other cars. We load our arms full of the paper bags from the farmer’s market and head inside.

The bungalow is homey. I’ve only ever seen photos, and Hallie’s redecorated since the ones I last saw. The living room is scattered with baby toys, but beneath the infant equipment is a smorgasbord of color. The rug is patterned in bold versions of every color under the sun, and she has covered the walls with vibrant prints. The framed pieces are interspersed with family photos, and I’m surprised to see how many I’m featured in.

“Hallie?” a male voice calls as we head toward the back of the house.

“Yeah. We’re back,” she announces as we walk inside what I immediately realize is the kitchen.

Her husband Matt is sitting at the round kitchen table, bouncing my nephew on his lap. An older couple I recognize as Matt’s parents are seated across from him, along with his brother Jackson.

“Saylor!” Matt greets me enthusiastically as he rises to give me a hug.

“So good to see you.”

“You too, Matt,” I reply, although I could probably count on one hand the number of conversations we’ve had that expand beyond pleasantries. “The house looks great.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a boyish grin. “Want to hold Matthew Jr.?”

“I—well—it’s—” Matt doesn’t really wait for a response. He holds my newborn nephew out, and it’s either grab him or let him drop. The unfamiliar weight of a miniature human settles in my arms. I clutch Matthew closer to my chest, terrified I’m going to drop him. He appears unconcerned about that outcome, blinking up at me innocently as he waves his little hands about. I gaze down at him. I should probably say *Wow, he looks just like you!* but to be honest, I can’t distinguish any familial features in his smooth skin. He yawns, and then brown eyes shutter shut. “Um, he seems tired?” I say.

“Wow, he hardly ever falls asleep while he’s being held,” Hallie comments, coming up beside me. “You must be losing your touch, Saylor.”

“Hilarious,” I respond. “I’ll inform all the other infants I hold.”

Matt takes Matthew and transfers him to a small cradle tucked in a corner of the room. Matt’s parents and brother have risen from the table to greet me, and I try not to yank my hand away when his brother’s handshake lasts twice as long as his parents’ did.

“I’ll get the couch made up for you as soon as I get these groceries put away,” Hallie tells me, unloading the paper sacks.

“Oh, Saylor should take the guest bedroom,” Matt’s mother says.

“No, it’s fine,” I say, because what else can I say? *Actually yes, I’d love to have four walls enclosing my sleeping space that aren’t part of a communal area.* Hallie would kill me. “I’m going to go for a run.”

Hallie eyes me. “I thought you went for one this morning.”

“I did, but I’m missing practice today,” I reply.

“Mind if I join you?” Jackson asks, rising from the table and shooting me a grin. “I need to get in shape for lacrosse.”

“I’m not sure if that’s the best idea,” Hallie says.

“How come?” Jackson asks.

“Don’t you run far?” Hallie asks me.

I shrug. Truthfully, I know what she’s getting at. Jackson has a skinny, lithe frame, but it’s absent of muscle. I’d be shocked if he’s in shape enough to jog more than a couple miles. I can’t recall the last time I ran less than five, but I’ve been inside this house for about ten minutes, and he’s spent eight of

them leering at my legs. Shredding male egos is my favorite hobby. If it keeps him from bothering me the rest of the weekend, that's just a cherry on top.

Hallie sighs. "Have fun."

I'm already wearing my standard athletic apparel and sneakers. "Ready?" I ask Jackson, pulling my hair up in a bun.

"Yeah, sure," he replies with overdone casualness.

We head outside. The air's warmed even further. I suck in deep breaths as I stretch my calves on Hallie's front lawn.

Then I start running.

Jackson attempts to make small talk for the first block but runs out of breath a couple later. We've barely made it to the park—less than a mile from Hallie and Matt's house—when he collapses on the grass. "Holy shit. How far was that?"

"Not far," I respond, standing over him. "Want me to come back for you?"

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead." He waves an arm and then lets it drop. "I'll catch up."

I highly doubt that but don't bother disputing. I continue running through my hometown, opting to stay away from the downtown section and instead weaving through the residential neighborhoods stretching out on the fringes. I'd guess about a half hour has passed by the time I return to the park. Jackson is still there.

"Wasn't sure if you were coming back." He chuckles.

"Just had to get in five," I reply.

"Five? You just ran five miles?" He gapes at me.

"Uh-huh." I start running back toward Hallie's. Jackson trails after me. Calling his pace a jog would be a compliment, but he makes it.

We emerge in the kitchen to find the scene virtually unchanged from when we left. Matt's seated at the kitchen table with his parents, Matthew is asleep in his crib, and Hallie's making sandwiches. With the exception of the baby, they all look at us as we enter.

"You good, little bro?" Matt asks Jackson.

"Great," he wheezes, dropping down in the open chair. Hallie gives me a *look*.

I head to the fridge, grabbing a couple bottles of water. I hand one to Jackson and then drain most of the other one. I'm soaked with sweat, but I

feel better.

“How far did you guys go?” Matt questions.

I wait for Jackson to answer. “I only made it to the park. Saylor ran five miles after.”

Everyone gapes at me. “It’s less than I would have run at practice,” I say with a shrug.

“My goodness.” Matt’s father chuckles. “Guess you won’t be able to complain about lacrosse any longer, Jackson.”

It’s impossible to tell because his face is already so red, but I’m pretty sure Jackson is blushing.

“I’m going to shower,” I announce.

“Towels are in the closet,” Hallie informs me as she spreads mayonnaise on bread.

“Great.” I grab my duffle bag and head upstairs.

This is going to be a long weekend.



“There wasn’t anyone you wanted to invite to the wedding, Saylor?” Sandra asks. She showed up an hour ago to pick up her wedding dress from the closet where Hallie has apparently been storing it for her, took Hallie up on her offer of a glass of wine, and has stayed for three. Glasses, not hours.

“Nope.”

Hallie jumps in. “These cookies are fantastic, Sandra.”

I look at the clock: ten PM. A reasonable time to announce I’m headed to bed, right?

“Thank you, Hallie,” Sandra replies, beaming.

“They are good,” I admit, taking another bite. They’re fudgy and peanut butter-y. Cressida would probably love the recipe, but then I’d have to explain how I got it.

“How are your classes going, Saylor?” Sandra asks, chugging right along on the try-to-get-to-know-you train. We’ve already covered favorite foods, movies, and books.

“Not sure,” I reply. “I’ve only been to one the last couple weeks.”

“One?!” Sandra replies, looking startled. “Were you sick? Marcus didn’t mention...”

“No, I just had soccer,” I respond matter-of-factly.

Sandra looks to Hallie for backup, but Hallie just sighs and shrugs. We’ve had this argument many times before. Hallie doesn’t get it. Her athletic career ended in middle school.

“I’m sure your professors—your advisors—they must know how important your classes are. More important than a *game*.”

My shoulders tense. I couldn’t begin to count the number of times I’ve heard that before. “It’s not just a game, it’s my life,” I reply briskly. “And my professors and advisors would rather I win another national championship than attend *Principles of Marketing*. I’m at Lancaster on a full athletic scholarship. I’m there to play soccer.”

“But surely they don’t expect every student who’s on an athletic team to give up every other aspect of their college experience.”

“Nope. I’m sure the guys on the golf team make it to every class, but I happen to be the captain of Lancaster’s most successful team. You don’t get ranked number one in the country by *not* giving it your all.” I stand. “I’m headed to bed. Good night.”

I’m already wearing my pajamas, so I just duck into the half bath to brush my teeth before climbing under the covers on the couch. I close my eyes and inhale the unfamiliar scent of whatever laundry detergent Hallie uses.

Low voices converse in the kitchen, and then I hear steps head down the hallway. The front door opens and closes.

More footsteps sound. Closer. “Saylor?” Hallie whispers.

I don’t answer.

There’s a sigh. “Good night.”

I lie there for a while before I finally fall asleep.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

This is only the second wedding I've ever been to. The few friends I have who are in relationships are still light-years away from what's meant to be a lifetime commitment.

My mother is an only child, and the few hazy memories I have of her side of the family turned to wisps of smoke around the same time she disappeared. They didn't keep in touch, much less invite us to celebratory events. Or non-celebratory, for that matter.

And rather than relying on his family after becoming a single father, my dad retreated from his. Maybe we do share some DNA after all.

I'm surprised to realize that rift seems to have been restored when I enter the old white church where my father is getting married today.

There are still a couple hours left before the start of the ceremony, but Hallie was resistant to my suggestion we show up a half hour early like normal wedding guests. Since she's my mode of transportation here, I didn't really have a choice.

Now that we're inside the church's lobby, which is bustling with extended family I haven't seen in years, I get that it might have been a bit awkward for us to show up an hour and a half from now. But not as uncomfortable as having to interact with virtual strangers who share my last name.

"Hallie!" A stout, plump woman sweeps my sister up in a hug, crushing the bag containing Hallie's bridesmaid dress between them. I watch Hallie surreptitiously shake it as soon as she's released. "Where's Matthew? Both of them!"

"They're at the park with Matt's family. They'll all be here soon. Saylor

and I wanted to arrive early so we could help out.” Big of her to include me in that offer. And Hallie’s also drawn our grandmother’s attention to me.

“Saylor!” She moves forward slightly, then shifts back, and the uncertain motion is worse than a bone-jarring hug. My own grandmother is apprehensive about showing me affection. Maybe I really am a cold-hearted bitch.

“Hi, Grandma. I like your dress,” I lie. It’s a horrid shade of periwinkle, accented with what I think is meant to be a fascinator but looks more like a bird nested in her hair that left a few feathers behind. Even so, I doubt critiquing her outfit is going to dissipate any of the tension hovering in the air.

“Why, thank you, dear. I got it on sale!” Her thick southern accent emphasizes each syllable.

“Really?” There’s a hint of sarcasm in the word that my grandmother doesn’t catch. Hallie does.

“I hear you’re quite the soccer star, Saylor,” my grandmother says. “If I had your looks, I would just sit around and wait for some handsome fella to sweep me off my feet.”

“How progressive of you,” I reply sweetly.

“We should really go check on... things.” Hallie smiles. “We’ll see you later, Grandma.” She grips my bicep and pulls me away. “Really, Saylor?”

“I’m not going to apologize for being a feminist.” I sniff.

“Grandma went to debutante balls, and maybe our father’s wedding isn’t the best time to lecture on feminism—even if it’s the only time you’re home to talk about anything.”

“Am I supposed to apologize for going to college? For pursuing a professional soccer career?” I snap.

“Plenty of people seem to manage that and also keep in touch with their family.”

“Less than you’d think,” I mutter. It’s true. Giving your all—absolutely everything—requires just that: everything. Not worrying about others’ feelings. Not coming home for holidays. Sequestering every ounce of energy and bit of brainpower. “And I’m not interested in being ‘plenty of people.’ I want to be the best.”

Hallie doesn’t say anything. No matter our shared experiences—growing up motherless, our father’s virtual abandonment, and a small town that loves to gossip—we’ve got a lot less in common than what distinguishes us from

each other. I'm willing to look past it all in my quest for something else.

Soccer is my escape.

Hallie wants to fix it all, make peace with our past. She married the perfect guy to be a father. She's the perfect mother. She showed our hometown a Scott woman can be reliable and genuine. She talks to our father and extended family.

I fled as far and fast as I could.

We enter the aisle of the church, and it's majestic. Ethereal. I didn't grow up devout. I could count on one hand the number of times I've been in a building with any sort of religious connotation, but the varnished wood, stained glass, and symmetrical pews conjure a presence even the most agnostic can't ignore.

The scents of incense and fresh flowers mingle in the air, swirling around our strides toward the altar. Garlands of daisies, peonies, and ranunculus hang along the end of each pew we pass.

"Looks like we missed the decorating," I state. "Bummer."

"I'm sure there's still work to be done," Hallie informs me. "Let's go hang up our dresses."

I heave out a sigh but follow her out of the aisle toward the back of the church. We run into our father on the trip down the hallway.

"Oh, good. I wasn't sure what time you girls were going to arrive." He gives me a nervous glance that seems to be my only greeting.

"I told you we'd be here by one, Dad," Hallie replies.

"Well, something always seems to go wrong at weddings, and nothing has yet." My father frets, glancing around like he's expecting the roof to cave in at any moment.

"That's a good thing," she says soothingly.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," my father admits. "There was a time I swore to myself I never would again."

"It's good that you're doing it," Hallie assures him. "No one wants to be alone forever." I know she doesn't mean them to be, but it feels like the words are a jab at me. "And Sandra is wonderful."

"Plus, she seems like a low flight risk," I add.

Hallie glares at me for that comment, but my father chuckles. Actually makes a sound of amusement. I can't recall the last time that happened. Probably because we barely speak.

"I know I put you girls through hell back then. If I could go back and do

things differently, I would, but I hope this can be a new chapter. A fresh start for our family.” He pauses, and when he speaks again, his voice is thicker. “You two mean the world to me.”

The words are meant more for me, but Hallie is the one who responds. “Oh, Dad.” She hugs him, and I watch them share a moment I’m meant to be included in.

She forgave our father a long time ago. All three of us know that. I’m the one entrenched in the past.

Holding grudges.

Forcing friction.

Because I believe people should be held accountable for their actions. Because actions have consequences. Because I’ve prioritized scoring goals over being daughter or sister or granddaughter or aunt of the year, and this trip has thrown that into glaring clarity.

My father releases Hallie and then takes a hesitant step toward me. Then another. And another. He wraps his arms around me and gives me a small squeeze. I lift my own arms to touch his back, but don’t contract them. Still, it’s the most physical contact we’ve had in years.

It’s barely a hug, but it’s something.

I recall his words. My family doesn’t mean more to me than anything in the world. I love Hallie. I know I love my father, even if it’s wrapped in layers of abandonment and awkwardness any family therapist would have a field day with, but I shifted my world to encompass nothing but soccer a long time ago.

It was something I could completely control.

My mess of a father and missing mother weren’t.

“Marcus! There you are!” A harried-looking woman wearing a pantsuit appears at the end of the hallway. I’m assuming she’s the wedding planner, and it’s confirmed by her next words. “We need to go over some reception logistics.”

“Go handle that, Dad. We’ve got to get ready for photos,” Hallie instructs. Then she starts striding down the hallway.

“See you later, Dad,” I say, and then I literally have to sprint after Hallie since I have no idea where exactly we’re headed.

“Sheesh! Are you training for a speed-walking competition?”

Hallie snorts. “Says the girl who runs five miles a day.”

“I thought we got here ridiculously early to avoid having to rush. What’s

the sudden hurry?”

“Well, we have to make sure Sandra’s not gassing up a getaway car.”

I sigh. “Hallie, it was a *joke*! I’m not allowed to have a sense of humor?”

“We’re in a church, not a comedy club.”

I fake gasp. “Is that why there are crosses every two feet?”

Hallie slants me an I’m-not-amused glance as she stops outside a boring brown door. “I hope you got the sarcasm out of your system. Sandra will take anything you say seriously, and I’m sure she still feels badly about last night.”

“Fine,” I mutter as we head inside a room that finally makes me feel like we’re in the current century. The walls are comprised of the same dark wood paneling as the hallway and pews, but there’s a sectional couch in the corner upholstered with blue cotton. Sunshine streams in through the windows, beaming directly onto the folding table that’s been set up in the center of the space. Only brief glimpses of the scratched plastic surface are visible. Most of it’s covered with bobby pins, hair ties, tissues, water bottles, Band-Aids, and a variety of other miscellaneous items. A couple room dividers are set up, screening off parts of the space from immediate view.

“You’re here!” My attention is drawn from taking in the mess to the figure in a pink robe barreling toward us. Sandra stops just a couple of feet away. “Thank goodness.”

“Didn’t I say one?” Hallie asks, looking a bit bemused.

“Yes, you did,” Sandra confirms. “Everyone’s been asking when Hallie and Saylor would arrive, though!” She lets out a nervous laugh. “I guess we know who the real stars of the show are!”

I’m not surprised Hallie’s absence was missed. I am surprised mine was, but I’m guessing there’s a fair amount of intrigue about my presence. I haven’t been back home since graduating high school, except for Hallie’s wedding.

“This is the famous Saylor?” Another woman appears at Sandra’s side, one who looks enough like her, I’m certain they are related. “My goodness, you’re gorgeous dear.”

“Uh, thank you,” I respond. I’m sporting oversized sweats and a bun so messy it seems an insult to the hairstyle to even call it one. I figured I’d have plenty of time to get ready on Hallie’s early bird timetable.

“I’m Sandra’s sister, Sally,” the woman explains.

“Nice to meet you,” I reply with a polite smile.

“It feels like we’ve already met. I’ve heard so much about you from Marcus.”

That’s a surprise to me, but I keep my face neutral. Luckily, an interruption saves me from having to respond. The door reopens, and a middle-aged woman sticks her head in the room. “Photos in half an hour,” she announces, holding up the camera strapped around her chest.

Sally jumps into action. “Come on, Sandra! I’ve got to finish your hair!” Sally heads back to the corner of the room, where I can see they’ve set up a temporary vanity covered with an array of beauty products. Sandra settles into a director-style folding chair, and Sally continues winding Sandra’s shoulder-length brown hair around the barrel of the curling iron.

Hallie moves into motion as well.

“Wait, are we supposed to be in the photos?” I whisper to Hallie as she hangs her dress bag up on a curtain rod and unzips it.

“Yes.” She shoots me a *Duh* look.

“Why didn’t you say that earlier when I was complaining about leaving so soon?”

“I did,” Hallie replies as she pulls her black bridesmaid dress out of the bag. It’s a sensible A-line style that’s knee-length. “Good to know you weren’t listening.”

I scoff as I copy her. Once we’ve both changed, I head over to the full-length mirror to apply some mascara and lip gloss. I brush my hair and survey my appearance. I still love the dress I chose from Beck’s kitchen counter. I opted for a one-shoulder design with a tight bodice. It’s floor-length, but the flowy chiffon is asymmetrical, showing off flashes of my tan legs every time I move.

“Don’t you look lovely!” Sandra says, coming up behind me. She’s changed into her wedding dress, which is a simple white slip with a lace overlay.

“Thank you,” I respond. “You do, too.”

She beams. “Thank you. And, Saylor, about last night...”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt. I hate apologies. Receiving and giving them. “Don’t worry about it.”

Maybe Sandra feels the same because she looks massively relieved when I cut her off.

“Everyone ready?” Sally calls from the vanity. She’s changed as well, into a cap-sleeved dress that falls to mid-calf.

“Ready!” Hallie replies.

We file out of the room and back into the hallway. There’s only one door farther down the hallway on the opposite side, and Sally heads through it first, revealing that it leads out into the gardens behind the church. There’s a stone courtyard in the center, surrounded by an explosion of lush greenery with scattered dots of color provided by the few remaining blooms. My father is already standing in the courtyard, along with my Uncle Jerry and two older men I vaguely recognize as his work partners.

“Isn’t it bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding?” I whisper to Hallie.

She gives me a dubious glance. “You’re superstitious?”

“I’m an athlete.” Still a blank stare. I sigh. “Never mind.”

The photographer’s instructions stop any further conversation. I’m handed a bouquet of roses and instructed to smile. We take individual photos, group photos, candid shots, posed shots. I lose track. I just keep smiling, and no one seems to notice the expected expression pasted on my face is mostly fake.

I think I’m exaggerating how long the photos are taking, but when the wedding planner instructs us to head inside and take our places for the ceremony, I realize it’s actually the opposite. The hallowed building echoes with audible chatter as we walk down the hallway toward the front of the church. My father and his groomsmen split off to enter the front of the altar.

There’s a man who looks close to eighty waiting in the church vestibule. The front doors to the chapel have been closed, and the oak ones marking the entrance of the nave are shut as well.

Strains of organ music penetrate the ancient wood, halting the chatter that was previously echoing. The older man introduces himself to me and Hallie as Sandra’s father, and the two of them take their place at the back of the line. The music swells and transitions to a melody even I, who have only been to a grand total of two weddings, recognize.

The doors in front of me open, and Hallie starts walking. I count to ten and then follow her down the aisle. I saw the church earlier, but it’s animated now. Lively.

A hush fell as soon as Wagner began to play, but there’s a low hum of voices filled with excited energy as we walk forward. I reach the end of the aisle and take my place beside Hallie at the foot of the altar. Sally takes the next spot, and then I watch the whole congregation rise as the music reaches

its crescendo, perfectly coordinated with Sandra's arrival.

She's beaming as she floats down the aisle on her father's arm. She doesn't look like someone who's done this twice before. Her smile is giddy when she reaches my dad's side.

I zone out for most of the ceremony. Sandra must have had some sort of religious upbringing, because I can't imagine my father selecting the numerous lengthy readings the priest declaims. He seems content to listen to them, though, nodding along and smiling. He looks happy, and it makes standing in heels that are slowly cutting off all circulation in my feet worth it. Regardless of our relationship, I want him to be content. And he seems to be.

The vows come last. Is it impossible to attend a wedding and not imagine saying those words yourself? Hallie's crying, but I don't feel emotional.

I feel detached.

Incredulous.

My father's words from earlier reverberate around in my skull. *There was a time I swore to myself I never would again.*

So why is he?



The country club where the reception is being held is only one block away, but Hallie insists on driving. I don't protest; mostly because my shoes are killing me. I stare out the window as Matt and Hallie chat about how smoothly the ceremony went.

The church lawns meld into the sidewalk that traverses the length of the small downtown area. We pass the library, post office, general store, and high school before arriving at the country club. It's not nearly as posh as it sounds. It's simply an oversized building set behind an ornate gate and before the golf course.

The front lobby is minimalistic, filled with clean lines and muted colors. The ballroom is just past a double set of doors. It overlooks a stone patio surrounded by the lush grass comprising the golf course, and the entire room is decorated in creams and golds that make me feel like I'm inside a giant wedding cake. Round tables dot the hardwood floor, already decorated with dishes and floral arrangements I recognize from the ends of the pews. Guests are milling about, claiming seats with wraps and clutches. I head toward the

first empty one I see.

“Where are you going?” Hallie asks.

“To get a table,” I reply.

“We’re sitting up there.” She nods to a long rectangular table set up just past the dance floor.

I sigh but follow her over to it. My grandparents and Sandra’s parents are already seated, and I take the chair at the farthest end, next to the highchair that’s been set up for Matthew Jr.

“When is dinner?” I ask Hallie.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s drinks and appetizers first. Then the first dance. Then dinner. Then cake...”

“Okay, okay,” I reply. “No dinner yet. Got it.”

There’s a round of applause, and I turn to see my dad and Sandra are entering the room. They’re quickly swallowed into the crowd. On cue, I watch black-clad servers start to infiltrate the room. Twinkly lights turn on out on the patio just as dusk begins to fall.

“I’m headed to get sustenance,” I inform Hallie.

“Liquid or solid?”

“Both.” I stand but only get a dozen feet before I run into Great Aunt Eloise.

“Saylor! So wonderful to see you, sugar. How is school?”

I learned my lesson on this question last night. “It’s great.”

“And you’re still playing soccer?”

“Yes.”

Despite my brief answers, Eloise draws out our conversation for a good ten minutes. As soon as I extricate myself, I run into another distant relative. Then another. And another. By the time I make it out onto the patio, half the hors d’oeuvres are gone.

I snag a few mini bruschetta and strike up a conversation with Ashley Martin. Her father works with mine, and we were friendly in high school. We’ve barely started chatting when Hallie appears.

“Here you are! Come on, we need you at the table.”

I groan. “Nice to see you, Ashley. Bridesmaid duty calls.”

I follow Hallie as she weaves through the tables back to ours. My dad and Sandra are just rising from their seats and making their way out onto the dance floor. I plop down on my chair to watch them waltz, realizing I never even grabbed a drink.

I remember my father having no sense of rhythm, but apparently it's something he rediscovered along with some paternal instincts. They sway in time to some song that sounds familiar but I can't name.

The music ends, and Sandra walks over to her father. He rises, and they head back out onto the dance floor. I expect my father to walk over to his mother's chair, but instead he strides in the opposite direction.

Toward my end of the table.

Toward *me*.

"Dance with your old man, Saylor?"

My gaze leaps to Hallie, but she doesn't look the least bit surprised. She knew. She knew he was going to do this.

"Sure," I manage, standing. What else can I say? We're in front of a couple hundred people. On his wedding day. No wonder Hallie dragged me off the patio earlier.

We head out onto the dance floor, and my father's lost his Fred Astaire impression. We sway awkwardly.

"I'm happy for you, Dad," I finally say, when the silence is so thick it's choking me.

"That means a lot," he replies, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

Silence falls between us again.

"Maybe we'll be doing this again one day. At your wedding."

I tense. "I doubt it."

"There's no... special guy?" my father asks, and if I wasn't immensely uncomfortable, I would laugh. My father checked out back when I thought boys had cooties. We've *never* had a conversation about a guy. I doubt his newfound parenting skills would be thrilled to know about the ways I took advantage of his absence during my high school years.

"Nope." I almost leave it at that, but then I add "Not a big fan of relying on people."

"You don't have to do everything alone, Saylor."

"Well, I didn't really have a choice."

He sighs. "I know. But I hoped you'd learn from my mistakes."

"I *have*."

"Relying on people is not a mistake. Relying entirely on someone who doesn't rely on you is. That's what happened with your mother and me. I relied on her for everything, and she didn't rely on me at all. You're strong, Saylor. So, so strong. You don't need someone to hold you up, but it's nice to

have someone to lean on.” He looks over at Sandra, who’s laughing at something her father is saying. “It’s really nice.”

I don’t say anything.

Wisely, my father opts to change the subject. “I was thinking maybe Sandra and I could come up to Lancaster for a weekend this fall. Maybe catch a soccer game?”

“You want to come to one of my games?” I don’t bother to hide the shock in my voice. He nods once. “Why?” I can’t help but ask.

“Well, I’ve never seen you play, and—”

“Exactly! You’ve *never* seen me play. Why now?”

My father manages to shift uncomfortably while dancing. “I’m trying to do better. If you don’t want us to come, just say that.”

“No, it’s fine. You can come.” We keep dancing. “Just let me know what game you want the tickets for.”

“We can buy our own tickets. I want to support your team.”

I snort. “The entire season is sold out. You won’t be able to get into the game unless I request them.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize...”

“That other people care about seeing me play?” I let a little bitterness seep into my voice.

“No,” he insists, although I’m certain I’m right. “I just—you always said women’s sports don’t get enough attention.”

“They don’t. I’m trying to change that.”

My dad looks at me, and it’s not with the uncertainty or discomfort I’m used to seeing. There’s pride etched in the lines of his face, and it feels good.

Despite our difficult relationship—if you could even call it that—it feels really good for him to look at me like that.

The song ends before either of us can say anything else. We return to our seats to see dinner has already been served. Hallie stares at me from across the table, and I can tell she’s burning to ask what we were talking about, but she restrains herself. I’m guessing the glare I give her has something to do with it, and the fact that she looks sheepish tells me she played a part in the dancefloor ambush.

After dinner, I make a beeline for the bar. I’ve just ordered a gin and tonic when I hear a familiar voice.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Saylor Scott.”

I turn to see Andy Jacobson has appeared to my left. “Have we met

before?” I ask.

The lopsided grin high school girls fangirled over appears. “Good to see you haven’t changed. Still breaking hearts, Scott?”

“Are you volunteering yours, Jacobson?”

His dimples deepen. “Nah. I learned my lesson in high school.”

“That why you’re stalking me at my dad’s wedding?”

Andy clutches his chest in mock outrage. “Stalking? That’s harsh. I’m here to catch up with old friends.”

“Oh yeah? Who would that be?”

“Who wouldn’t it be? The whole town is here.”

“Yeah.” I let out a long exhale as the bartender hands me my drink. “I noticed.”

“Rare to have a celebrity in our midst.” I scoff. “I’m serious,” Andy insists. “You’re huge. My buddy’s cousin goes to Lancaster and said it’s nuts. You’re ranked first in the country!”

“Yeah, I know,” I say as I take a long sip of my drink. His words aren’t terrible for my ego, though, especially after the past day of conversations with my family.

“Hooking up with you in high school earned me some major cool points, by the way.”

“Still a gentleman, I see.”

Andy grins. “So, what’s it like—”

“Saylor! Finally! We need you for the cake.” Hallie appears.

I let out another long breath, trying to summon some patience. “Why? Do I have to cut it up?”

Andy snorts. Hallie glares.

I down the rest of my cocktail like a shot. “See you, Jacobson.”

“I’ll save you a dance, Scott,” he calls out as Hallie hauls me off.

“Maybe there could be one part of the wedding I don’t have to be front and center for?” I suggest.

“It’s not particularly fun having to track you down for every event.”

“Then don’t,” I reply, a bit sharper than I mean to. “And don’t think I don’t know you had something to do with the dance.”

“If I don’t, then Dad will be upset. Now Sandra too. And if I’d told you about the dance, you probably would have hid in the bathroom or something.”

“Yeah. Obviously.”

We reach the dance floor, which has been cleared for the cake. It's a massive concoction that matches the room décor perfectly, all white with flowers that have been dyed gold. Or are made of gold-colored frosting. Cressida could probably tell.

Champagne is passed around, and Sandra's father makes a toast. Rather than the customary sip, I drain the entire glass as my father and Sandra make an impractical dual attempt at slicing through the three-tier cake.

I snag another glass of champagne as everyone oohs and aahs over the slow process.

"How many of those have you had?" Hallie looks over and eyes the glass flute in my hand.

"Not enough." I take a sip of fizzy liquid.

"Don't be stupid, Saylor."

It's amazing how, after twenty-one years, Hallie still doesn't know people pushing me only makes me push back. Harder.

I grab another glass from the display, double-fisting champagne. Classy and contrarian, that's me.

"Me? Act stupid? Never." I take a sip and send her a shit-eating grin.

Hallie backs down and looks away, just like I knew she would. I also know it's not because she doesn't care. She just can't force herself to engage in confrontation any more than I can walk away from one.

Plates of cake finally start to disseminate amongst the crowd. I grab one and, with my full glass of champagne, disappear outside. The patio is empty now, no longer crammed with wedding guests. I'm guessing it's the lack of appetizers combined with the slight chill in the air. Coming from Connecticut, the brisker air still feels tropical to me. I settle on one of the concrete benches and stare out at the golf course. It's pristine. Perfectly manicured.

The flawless grass reminds me of a soccer field.

Reminds me of Kluvberg's field.

Reminds me of lying on it with Beck.

I blame the recollection for what happens next. I gulp down the rest of the bubbly alcohol and spin so my feet rest on the opposite end of the concrete bench. My stilettos fall to the stone floor as I stretch my toes, luxuriating in the freedom the lack of a pointed prison allows for.

I pull my phone out of the clutch, and it turns out there *is* something I would do drunk I wouldn't sober. And that's call the number I swore to

myself I never would again.

Even if I were stranded in the desert and no one else was answering. Well, maybe then.

It rings once, and I take a bite of cake. A choice I regret when he picks up on the second ring.

“Saylor?” His voice is sleepy. *Shit*. Yeah, it’s... I actually have no idea what time it is here, much less in Germany. But I obviously woke Beck up. I don’t say anything.

Partly because I don’t know what to say.

Partly because I’m listening to hear if he leaves his bed, or if there’s a female voice in the background.

Partly because there’s a lump of flour and sugar blocking my windpipe.

Mostly because I’m contemplating hanging up and pretending it was a butt dial.

“Saylor?” he says again, tone more alert and softer. “Is everything okay?”

I swallow several times. “Yeah, everything is fine.” I pause. “I’m at my dad’s wedding.”

“How is it?” Beck asks. His voice is still quiet, no more than an accented murmur. No background noise.

“Weird. Good. Okay. I don’t know.” I let out a small laugh. “I danced with my dad, fought with my sister, and overindulged in champagne.”

“They didn’t have any gin?”

I hate how my chest warms with the realization that he remembered that tiny detail about me. “No, they did. I had some. And then I decided to try something new, I guess.”

“New can be good.”

I don’t respond. There’s no sound besides the whisper of his exhales being transported across the ocean by technology.

Eventually, “You called me.”

For once, the obvious deserves a response. “Yeah, I did,” I confirm. “I—I don’t know. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“You could have watched an interview.” I thought his words in person were inscrutable. Those six might have as well have been read by a robot.

I huff out a laugh anyway, too buzzed to dwell on nuances. “Yeah, I guess I could have.” If I’d wanted to hear the soccer star Beck instead of the guy who knows I ordinarily drink nothing besides gin.

I’m surprised to realize I can detect a difference. The softer tone. The

emotion underneath.

I'm not sure what I might have said next, what he might have, because Hallie chooses this exact moment to burst out onto the patio. "We need you for another round of photos."

If I wasn't suddenly desperate for an exit ramp, I would cover the speaker and point out how we've already taken what seemed like hundreds of photos.

Instead, I veer off the road of regret I'm rapidly speeding along. "I have to go. Sorry for waking you up." I tap the end button before Beck can say anything, shoving my feet back into the stilettos and wincing as my feet protest the uncomfortable footwear.

"Who were you talking to?" Hallie asks as I approach her.

"No one."

Despite the literal impossibility of my answer, Hallie doesn't press. Instead, she apologizes. "I'm sorry about before. I know today is tough for you."

"It's fine," I mutter as we head back inside the country club. I probably owe her an apology too, but right now my emotions are all over the place.

It's strange, being in my hometown surrounded by family mere seconds after talking to Adler Beck on the phone.

It's a collision of two worlds: the Saylor Scott who grew up in a tiny town with a broken family and the one who took control of her identity and turned down the man who melts panties with a single smirk.

The girl who grew up convinced love was a legend and the woman worried she might have found and flung it.

We take more photos, there's another round of dancing, and then my dad and Sandra disappear in a shower of grains of rice and a deluge of well wishes.

The drive back to Hallie's from the reception is silent. Either she's still annoyed with me or simply too tired to talk. I'd guess it's a combination of the two.

The porch light is on when we arrive back at the bungalow, and I know it's because Matt left it on when he brought Matthew Jr. home. For some reason it makes me wonder if Beck would do the same. Especially when my phone keeps buzzing with incoming calls I can't bring myself to answer. Every time it vibrates, it sounds a little louder.

"Night," Hallie tells me when we walk through the front door. She heads straight upstairs.

I was exhausted earlier, but suddenly I'm not. I head to the couch and grab sweatpants and a sweatshirt from the suitcase resting against it. I quickly change and then walk into the kitchen, swinging the fridge door open and hauling myself up on the edge of the marble countertop to survey the contents.

Wasteful? Yes.

Convenient? Also yes.

I'm not hungry. I'm scavenging for liquid contents. I've had enough alcohol to know more is a bad idea, but also enough where I'm not exactly thinking logically. I compromise by grabbing a bottle of beer and a can of seltzer. I stroll out the door off the kitchen, onto the deck, and down into the grass.

The lawn feels like home. I've spent more hours on turf than I could ever count, but mostly with the barrier of cleats. Crushing blades of grass is much more satisfying when it's with your bare skin.

There's a hammock strung up between two broad beech trees, and I flop down atop it, beverages in hand. I can't see anything through the canopy of leaves, and I prefer it that way. Stars have a way of suggesting too much. The vastness of the universe makes me feel too small, too inconsequential. Like maybe the decisions I have to make aren't quite as massive as I've made them out to be.

In the grand scheme of the world, they're definitely not.

In the context of my life, they're trajectory. They'll send me careening down one path with no chance of ever returning to another. There will be other choices farther down the trail, but no chance to return to where I am right now. That's what has me paralyzed in place. Because I decided a long time ago that I wouldn't let anything detract from my soccer goals.

Adler Beck has already made his mark in the sport.

I've barely scratched the surface.

I toss the drinks on the ground, belatedly realizing they'll probably explode whenever they're opened. Too tired to care, I push off from the ground so the fabric I'm lying on starts rocking back and forth.

I'm asleep before it stills.



“If only I had a camera on me.”

I squint upward and find Hallie’s smirking face. “Why have a hammock if you’re not going to use it?”

“We use it plenty. We just don’t sleep in it.”

I stretch, relieved to discover a bird didn’t decide to crap on me overnight. My muscles are stiff, but I’ve definitely woken up feeling worse. “You should. Switch things up a bit.”

Hallie rolls her eyes, and I know she’s taken my words as a personal affront, an assertion that she plays it safe while I dance with danger.

Might as well rip off the Band-Aid. “Look, Hallie. I’m sor—” I don’t even get the full apology out.

“It’s fine, Saylor. We’re good.” Hallie loves to sweep anything uncomfortable under the rug. It’s why she’s on a joking basis with our father whereas I can barely exchange a dance’s worth of words with him. Ignorance versus grudges. I’m not sure either approach is healthy, but I know Hallie’s means me pressing things won’t end well. “Do you want breakfast?”

“No, I’ll get something at the airport.”

“Okay. Your flight’s at eleven, right?”

“Yeah.”

Hallie heads back inside, and I flop back down on the hammock to review the past couple of days. So far, my trip home has consisted of: tense conversation with my father, pushing Hallie further away, and a drunken phone call with the guy I’m supposed to be forgetting exists. Throw in too much champagne and excessive flirting, and I’ve got a promising sitcom plot.

Too bad it’s my actual life.

I pick up the beer and seltzer I never opened and walk up the steps and inside. The kitchen is chaos. Matthew Jr. is screaming. Hallie and Matt are rushing around, trying to placate him. Matt’s family is eating breakfast. No one but Jackson acknowledges my arrival on the scene, and I definitely don’t acknowledge his. I stick the drinks back in the fridge and help myself to a banana. I contemplate changing my outfit as I peel the fruit and then decide against it.

“You ready, Saylor?” Hallie asks, handing Matt a bowl of the cereal that seems to have halted the shrieking.

“Yeah,” I respond, heading to the couch to zip up my suitcase. I haul the bag vertical and offer Matt and his family a small wave. “Nice to see you all.”

They each reply with the same pleasantries, and then Hallie and I are off, zipping out of the cul-de-sac her house sits on.

“Shit,” I realize. “Can you stop at the farmer’s market thing?”

“What? Why?” Hallie inquires.

“I never picked up my painting,” I reply. After last night’s drunken dial, it’s probably an idiotic idea, but the thought of never retrieving it bothers me.

Hallie doesn’t reply, but she pulls over at the warehouse when we reach it. The parking lot is empty this time, but every booth I pass by has an occupant. Finally, I reach the one that caught my attention last time.

The same old woman is there, perched on a rickety stool as she sketches something on a notepad. She looks up when I enter the small stall and smiles. A hand spotted with age reaches behind the desk and procures the painting with the additions I requested.

It’s eerie how much it resembles the scene seared into my brain. It’s perfect. Mesmerizing.

“Thank you,” I tell the woman.

“You’re welcome, dear. Have a good day.” She passes me a paper sleeve I slide the painting into.

“You, too.”

I retrace my steps through the warehouse and back outside, climbing back into the passenger seat. Hallie studies the package in my hands with unveiled interest but says nothing as she pulls out of the parking lot.

“Can we stop at the post office?” I request.

“Sure,” Hallie replies casually, but I don’t miss the extra glance she gives the paper-covered painting on my lap.

The tiny post office is just as quiet and empty as one would expect. I don’t realize until I’m outside the doors it’s because it’s closed.

It’s Sunday.

I’m not shipping life-saving medication. There’s no real urgency. But I am worried I won’t send it if I don’t do it now, before I’ve really thought it through.

There’s a jangling sound to my left, and I glance over to see a man unlocking the side door tucked around the corner. I’d guess he’s in his late twenties, and he does a double take when he glances up and sees my face.

“Hi! Could you do me a massive favor?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer right away, looking a bit stunned. I don’t recognize him, so I don’t think he recognizes me. I put absolutely no effort into my

appearance this morning, so I suppose it should flatter me he's at a loss for words. But I just feel impatient.

"Well?"

"Uh—um, I'm not supposed to—I mean—sure."

Euphoria overtakes any annoyance with his stuttering. I follow him inside through the door he was unlocking.

I still have Beck's apartment address memorized, and I pay the exorbitant fee required to ship the package to Germany after relaying it to the postal worker.

"Thank you," I tell him, flashing him a genuine smile after he's completed the shipping slip.

I leave the post office with a skip in my step. For the first time since Beck strode away from me in Canada, I feel a little lighter. The painting is not a response to his admission, and it's not an apology.

It's an acknowledgment that the moments we spent together meant something to me.

That *he* means something to me.

If my departure from Germany damaged us, we're in tatters post-Canada. But the dysfunction doesn't diminish what we shared.

Maybe that's what my mother meant about broken beauty.

Or maybe she was referring to herself.

If she hadn't left, I'd probably ask her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The next two weeks follow the same pattern every fall has for as long as I can remember. The official season starts, and everything but soccer fades. I barely attend class, I stop attending parties, and I definitely don't answer any phone calls from a German number.

But I do answer calls from my father. Ever since the wedding, he's rung once a week. We muddle through few mundane topics: the weather (different in Connecticut than Georgia, shockingly), hometown news (nothing's changed), and how I am (busy). Despite the less than scintillating conversation, he keeps calling. And I keep answering.

Which, repetitive as it might be, is more than I can say has ever happened before. Our most recent conversation, however, ended a bit differently. I tried not to think about my dad's mention of attending one of my games, mostly because I didn't want to get my hopes up. But he ended our last phone call with a tentative mention that he and Sandra were planning to come to our next home game this coming weekend. I didn't miss that it meant he actually took the time to look up my soccer schedule.

They made the puzzling decision to make the fifteen-hour drive rather than fly and were supposed to arrive an hour ago. I sit in the locker room, listening to the chatter of my teammates around me. Anne is not-so-subtly looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

"You really need to work on your surreptitious looks," I inform her, spinning around on the bench to face my locker and lace up my cleats.

"I wasn't looking!"

"Anne."

"I was just making sure you're okay. Normally you're more hyper before

games.”

“My dad is here,” I admit.

Anne fumbles for words. “Your—your dad? I didn’t, I mean... you’ve never...”

“Yeah, I know. We’re not close.”

“Wow. If you need to talk...”

“Nope, I’m good. I need to play.” I stand, stretch, and yank my jersey on over my sports bra.

Most of the team has already huddled around Coach Taylor. There’s no pep talk. We had a three-hour strategy session yesterday afternoon, and everyone knows what is expected of them. This is just another game. Old hat by now. It’s not a championship, or even a playoff game.

No one wants to risk our perfect record, but even playing at the highest level of collegiate athletics feels mundane after a certain point. I couldn’t have even told you what day we were playing Northampton back when our season’s schedule was announced. Now, I’m focused on nothing but dominating them.

Coach Taylor finishes explaining our warm-up drills, and players file out onto the field one by one.

After attending my first football game at Lancaster, I convinced the guy who announces the football players as they run out of the tunnel to do the same for us. And not just the starters—the entire team.

It was a genius move, if I do say so myself. Not only because it excites the crowd, but because it’s fantastic for team morale. I mean, who doesn’t want to run out on the field as their name is announced on a loudspeaker?

No athlete I’ve met.

Coach tugs at my sleeve as I pass her. “You good, Scott? You look a bit like you’re headed into a cage match.”

“To win it, right?”

Coach gives me a rare smile. “Give ’em hell.”

“That’s the plan.” I head down the tunnel after Emma.

“Did you get laid last night? You’re in a weirdly good mood,” she asks as I stop beside her.

“I’m always in a good mood.”

Emma snorts loudly. “Uh-huh, sure.”

“Number twelve, Emmmmaaa Waattkkkiinnnssss!”

“That’s my cue.” She grins and jogs out of the tunnel.

“And last, but certainly not least, we have our captain. Lancaster’s leading scorer. Number twenty-two, Saayyllllooorrr Sccccc000otttttt!”

I sprint out into a wall of noise. The stands are full, and I don’t bother to scan them. It’s a perfect fall day, warm with a crisp edge. The game is supposed to start at three, and the sun is bright but not blinding.

The sound of voices and the smell of concession stand snacks mingle, but I don’t stop to take in the atmosphere. I’m laser-focused: on lunges, toe touches, and scoring sprees. Warm-ups end, and I call heads. We win the coin toss, opting to take the kickoff.

I’m addicted to this moment. Some players love the euphoria of scoring a goal or the thrill of being ahead when extra minutes end.

For me, it’s the start of the game, when anticipation’s built to a breaking point.

I love scoring and I love winning. But in those moments, I already know what I’ve accomplished.

I know the ending.

Right now, I have a chance to determine it.

I’m in motion as soon as the ball leaves Emma’s foot, sprinting upward with the other forwards. I challenge the Northampton player who has possession, a sharp jab of her elbow letting me know she doesn’t appreciate the crowding. The motion also provides me an opening. I spin, taking the ball with me, and start running in the opposite direction from where she was headed, back toward Northampton’s goal.

Cassidy Jones is waiting for me. She may have been a confidant at CFOC, but she’s nothing but a barrier now. I pass to Natalie, and she passes to Emma. After years of playing together, we’re in perfect sync. Emma sends the ball back to me before I enter the penalty arc just before I send it flying, taking advantage of the split second of confusion Emma’s pass bought me. It also buys me the first goal and a whole lot of appreciation from the crowd.

Northampton doubles down after that, barely letting us past the center line. The only upside is they’re so focused on keeping us from scoring they’re unable to press themselves.

The scoreboard is still displaying 0-1 when we leave the field for halftime. I take a seat on the bench and take slow sips of water. Coach Taylor’s got her whiteboard out, going through suggestions of plays. I watch her marker slash, circle, and squiggle across the snowy surface until it’s time to resume play.

We obviously weren't the only team discussing strategy, because Northampton opts for a very different approach in the second half. They're more aggressive, pushing toward the end of the field they were formerly protecting.

Anne and our other three defenders have their first real tests of the game as I try to slow Northampton's offense along with the rest of the midfielders. The girl I'm marking passes to a teammate, and Emma is too far away to stop the ball. The Northampton player sends it flying toward the net, but Cressida is ready. She snags the ball midair, and I let out a long sigh of relief.

I turn to head back to the center line. It takes a while for everyone else to follow, and I frown as Emma falls into position beside me for the kickoff. We've still got a half hour of play left, but the close call seems to have sent fresh vigor through my teammates.

Suddenly, it feels like we *are* playing in a championship. That extra gear I find as I near the end of a game, like a shark moving in for the kill? I'm not the only one shifting, and Northampton is entirely unprepared for us to all start sprinting faster and pressing harder. It's an onslaught that earns us two more goals: a header from Natalie and a half-field kick from Anne.

When the final whistle blows, I'm expecting the team to flock around Cressida, who managed a shutout, or Anne, who scored the most recent goal. But they don't. They throng around me.

Once we finally disentangle for handshakes, Natalie falls into step beside me. "Three zip against Northampton? They might as well inscribe the championship cup already."

I laugh. "If everyone keeps playing as well as they did today? Definitely."

"Not much we wouldn't do for you, Captain."

"What do you mean?"

"Anne said today was a big deal to you after their failed goal. That your dad is here?"

An unexpected lump appears in my throat as Natalie looks at me curiously. There's no worship in her eyes right now, just friendship. "Yeah, he is," I finally manage as we fall into line.

Cassidy is the last one in Northampton's line. "Better luck next time," I say with a smile.

"All's fair on the field, Scott," she replies, pulling me into a quick hug. "You know where else?" She mouths the answer with a wink before heading for the guest team's tunnel. "Looking forward to a rematch," she calls over

her shoulder.

I head back to Lancaster's bench to grab my gear and then make my way over to Anne, who's grabbing her own stuff. She looks a little nervous as I approach, so I pair the "Thank you" I was already planning on with a hug.

"Anything for you, Scott," she replies with a smile. I pretend to wipe tears away from my eyes, and she shoves my shoulder. "I take it back."

I'm grinning as I head into the tunnel. The locker room is exultant. Northampton is normally one of our toughest opponents. We just destroyed them. It bodes pretty fucking well for our championship chances.

I shower and change into jeans and a t-shirt. My instructions to my father this morning included where to meet me after the game, and he's right by the oak tree I described, just to the left of the field's exit.

Cressida, Anne, and Emma all trail behind me. I definitely didn't buy Cressida retying her sneakers twice in an effort to delay leaving until I did, but I can't blame them for being curious. I've met all their families. I even spent a week with Emma's two summers ago when my own family thought I was still at the U20 team training camp.

Most of the crowd has cleared by now, but there are still a few streams of students leaving. We're stopped several times, which only increases my anxiety. I'd rather get this over with.

We finally reach the shade of the oak. "Hi, Dad. Hey, Sandra."

"Saylor!" Sandra speaks first. "What a fantastic game!"

"Thank you," I reply, but my gaze bounces back to my father. He doesn't say anything. "Uh, these are my teammates and housemates: Emma, Cressida, and Anne."

"It's so nice to meet you, Mr. Scott... uh, Mrs. Scott," Emma says. The last two words are a bit of a question, and yeah... I probably should have provided a bit of context. They know nothing about my mom leaving, about the family trip three weeks ago actually being my father's wedding.

"Nice to meet you two." Cressida jumps in, smoothing over the awkward moment, and Anne echoes the sentiment.

"Lovely to meet you all. And my goodness, you're all so gorgeous!" Sandra comments.

"So kind of you to say that," Emma replies. "It's really hard on our egos, being friends with *the* Saylor Scott."

I roll my eyes. "The trip here was okay?" I finally address my dad directly.

“Yup. Quick and easy,” he replies. I don’t know how you could categorize a fifteen-hour drive as “quick,” but I don’t challenge him on it.

“That’s good.” Silence falls over our little group.

“Are you free for dinner?” my dad finally asks. “Your friends are all welcome to come, of course.”

It’s just past five, which is awfully early for dinner, but I’m starving, so I nod. “You guys want to come?” I ask them. They all stare at me, obviously trying to suss out whether or not I mean the offer. I nod again.

“Yeah, we’d love to!” Emma answers for all three of them. “Tony’s?” she suggests, referring to the local pizzeria just on the edge of campus.

“Are you good with pizza?” I ask Dad and Sandra.

“Sure,” Sandra replies, looking overly thrilled at the prospect. Her enthusiasm carries us through the walk to the restaurant. It’s mostly filled with her eager questions about Lancaster. I only answer the ones posed at me directly, letting my friends pick up the slack in the conversation.

Tony’s is bustling with activity. The jovial atmosphere is welcoming, but I didn’t think through how many students would be here, fresh from the game. Normally, I’d bask in the attention, but in front of my dad and Sandra, it’s embarrassing.

Jason Williams leaps up from a table filled with his fraternity brothers to give me a bear hug. “Scott! Way to kick some ass! You better come to Kappa tonight to celebrate. I even got gin and—”

“Jason, this is my dad,” I interrupt, raising my eyebrows meaningfully as I nod at my father.

“Oh. Hi, Mr. Scott. Nice to meet you.” Jason switches from party boy to polite with a charming grin.

“And this my stepmother, Sandra,” I add. It’s the first time I’ve called her that, and it feels weird.

“Are you two... dating?” Sandra asks, eyes on the arm Jason has slung over my shoulder.

Jason snorts. “Plead my case, Mrs. Scott. I’ve been trying since freshman year, along with every other male on campus.”

I twist out of his grip. “Go eat your pizza, Williams.”

I keep my tone light but am incredibly uncomfortable. Jason may have been speaking teasingly, but I know he’s actually serious. He *has* been asking me out since freshman year. It’s why he’s one of the few hot, popular guys at Lancaster I’ve never hooked up with. Because he’s made it clear it would

mean something to him, and it wouldn't to me.

Because it never means anything.

Or, it never used to.

Sandra continues to ask most of the questions as we eat the steaming pizza. People stop by our table periodically, and each time someone does, I experience a flash of annoyance and appreciation.

Annoyance because it's one more person who's made a mention of my performance today aside from my father, who supposedly drove over a thousand miles to see it. Appreciation because the surprised expression on his face every time someone does makes it pretty clear he had no semblance of an idea *this* is what my life here is like.

I know part of it is my appearance and my identity outside of athletics, but I'm also a damn good soccer player. It feels good to have student after student say that to me in front of my father.

We finish our early dinner and then start walking back to the soccer field's parking lot. We've just reached the edge of campus when my father finally addresses me directly.

"Saylor, could I talk to you for a moment?"

Proficient in social cues, all three of my friends keep walking toward the parking lot.

"Sure." I halt, noticing Sandra has hung back to read the plaque on the side of the English building.

"I..." He clears his throat, and I drag my gaze up from the leaves beginning to coat the brick pathway to his face. "I just wanted to tell you how fantastic you were today. Truly. I can't believe—I can't believe I'd never seen you play before. I've never been so proud in my entire life."

There was a time—a very recent time—when I would have lashed out in response to that admission, because there wasn't anything keeping him from attending one of the hundreds of games I've played in the past fifteen years.

He hasn't recently returned from an overseas deployment.

He wasn't working three jobs to support Hallie and me.

I'm bitter about it. Maybe I always will be.

But looking at his hopeful, tentative expression, I can't say any of that.

"Thanks, Dad." I scuff the toe of my sneaker against some dead leaves, causing them to crinkle. "And, uh, thanks for coming."

"Of course," he replies.

There's no 'of course' about it, but I don't say that.

Sandra comes up and smiles at the two of us. “It’s such a beautiful campus. You must love it here, Saylor.”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” I respond. “I should...” I jerk my thumb in the direction of the parking lot, where my friends are waiting for me. “Are you guys staying for long?”

All my conversations with my father were about arrival logistics. I never asked when they were leaving. “No,” Sandra answers. “I’ve got school on Monday.” She’s a teacher, I recently learned. “We’ll drive back tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, okay,” I respond. The roundtrip drive will last longer than the time they’ve spent here.

“We can stop by in the morning before we leave?” my father suggests. “Hallie gave me your address.”

Of course she did. “Yeah, that’s fine,” I reply. “I’ll be up early for practice anyway.”

“Okay,” my father says. “We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Okay,” I repeat. “Night.”

I turn and stride the rest of way to the parking lot. No one says anything as I climb into the car. Emma starts driving around the sports complex then turns onto one of the side roads that leads back to our house.

“Your dad seems nice,” Anne says as we hit our street.

“Yeah,” I say flatly.

We return to silence. My feelings about my father are all over the place right now, and I let them churn inside me until we reach our house. I head upstairs as soon as I walk through the front door, changing into my comfiest set of pajamas. I debate flopping down on my bed with the new murder mystery book I downloaded last night but decide to head back downstairs instead.

Emma’s standing at the counter, mixing one of her infamous cocktails. She studies the peach-patterned cotton I’m wearing. Hallie bought them for me as a joke, but they’re so soft I wear them more than I planned to. “Guess you’re staying in tonight?”

“Uh-huh,” I say, getting a glass of water and then climbing up on the kitchen counter to lean my head back against the upper cabinet.

“Jason will be disappointed.”

“He’ll get over it,” I tell the ceiling.

Cressida enters the kitchen in sweats and a face mask.

“Wait—you’re not going out either?” Emma exclaims.

I straighten my head to see Cressida shrug. “Not in the mood.” She comes over to the cabinet next to me to grab the flour. I know what’s coming next, so I slide off the counter so she can grab the sugar from behind me, relocating to one of the stools.

Emma huffs as she measures out tequila. Then squeezes two lemons. Then adds some orange juice.

I turn my attention to Cressida as Emma returns the ingredients to the fridge. “What are you making?”

She eyes me apprehensively. “Sandra’s brownie recipe.”

“Oh.”

“Did someone drink the tomato juice?” Emma inquires with her head inside the fridge.

“Please tell me you’re not putting tomato juice in *that*,” I reply, nodding to the cocktail shaker.

“What? It’s fruit,” Emma says as she closes the fridge door, heaving out a disappointed sigh that suggests she didn’t find the tomato juice. I’m almost certain it’s on the top shelf, but I keep that to myself.

“Emma, no.” Cressida backs me up. “That’s disgusting.”

“Fine.” She sighs again, grabbing some ice from the freezer and shaking the mixer. She snags a glass and pours some out.

I drain the rest of my water. “I’ll try some.” I hold my cup out.

“It’s tequila, not gin,” Emma cautions.

“I know, I saw you pour it.”

“Since when do you drink tequila?” Cressida questions as she measures flour.

“I’m trying new things,” I say as I take a long sip. It’s better than I expect, although it’s probably because I know it could have been so much worse.

“Like sharing?” Emma asks slyly.

I sigh. “Is this about Adler Beck again?”

Anne enters the kitchen. “Aha! She does acknowledge it happened!”

“I’m not denying it happened. It was a fling. It’s over now. And no, I’m not giving you dick details.”

“Ugh, fine.” Emma takes a sip of her concoction.

“I did call him drunk a few weeks ago,” I admit, and my left arm is sprayed with tequila. “Emma!” I grab a napkin.

“Back the fuck up. You drunk-dialed Adler Beck? You have his *number*?” Emma shouts.

Anne and Cressida look equally stunned.

“Yup,” I confirm.

“He gave it to you?”

“Well, he stole mine and then texted me, technically.”

“What? Why?”

“To hook up, mostly.” I take another sip of my cocktail. “Didn’t think I’d need to explain that part.”

“Well, maybe it has something to do with the fact that you haven’t provided any details *at all*, but I was kind of assuming you met him at a club and had a quickie.”

“Yeah. The first time.”

“The first time? How many times did you have sex?” Cressida asks.

What is it with people asking me that? Do I have an expression that reads *Ask me how many times I slept with Adler Beck*? “I didn’t keep a tally.”

“Ballpark, then,” Emma presses.

“I don’t know. More than fifty?”

Silence. Stunned silence greets that admission. I probably should have lied, but I’m sick of lying. Sick of pretending Beck was just sex when I admitted to myself he wasn’t a long time ago.

“Holy fuck. You dated Adler Beck,” Cressida murmurs breathlessly.

“No, I did *not*. It was a fling,” I reiterate.

“Fifty times is not a fling, Saylor,” Emma informs me.

“A fling is whatever I think it is,” I retort.

“Were you guys exclusive?” Anne asks.

“I don’t know. We never talked about it.”

“Were you sleeping with other guys?” Emma questions.

“No,” I admit.

“I overheard Mackenzie Howard telling one of the other clinic leaders he would barely talk to her,” Anne contributes.

I shrug off the satisfaction. “It doesn’t matter. We’re done. I only called him at my dad’s wedding because I was drunk.”

“Your dad’s wedding?” Cressida questions.

I drain my glass. “Yeah. He and Sandra only got married a few weeks ago.”

“That’s why you went home,” Emma realizes, refilling my glass in what

I'm sure is a ploy to loosen my lips more.

"Yeah," I confirm.

"What about your mom?" Anne inquires quietly.

"She's not around," I say briskly.

"I'm sorry," she says softly.

"Thanks," I mumble, taking another long sip of my drink.

"Brownies are in the oven," Cressida announces, breaking the heavy moment and gaining my eternal devotion as a result. "I'm going to watch a rom com."

"Ooooh! Can we watch *Sweet Home Alabama*?" Anne asks eagerly.

"You said you were going to Kappa, Anne!" Emma protests.

"We haven't had a girl's night in forever," Anne replies. "I'm going to change." She dashes up the stairs.

Emma measures out more tequila then hands me the mixer. "Shake this."

"Where are you going?" I ask as she exits the kitchen.

"To put on pajamas!" she calls back. Cressida smirks at me.

Ten minutes later, we're all sprawled across the living room, brownies in one hand and tequila in the other, watching *Sweet Home Alabama*.

I laugh so hard my sides hurt. Emma squeezes my hand when Melanie makes jam with her mother. Anne ruins all the best lines by saying them a few seconds too early.

And it's probably my favorite night in college.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I wake up on the living room floor. At least it's an upgrade from the bathroom tile. I sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Emma is sprawled out on the couch. Anne's in the recliner. And Cressida is on the opposite corner of the rug.

Emma snores loudly, and I grin, pulling out my phone so I can record her. "Shit!" I shout when I look at the screen.

"What?" Anne startles awake, glancing around the living room wildly. Her red hair is just as untamed.

"It's almost eight," I reply.

"Oh, shit!" Anne echoes.

"Cressida! Emma! Wake up!" I holler, running into the kitchen to start brewing coffee.

Emma sits up, yawning widely. "What?"

"We've got practice in twenty minutes!" I call back. "And I have the worst headache. I'm not drinking tequila ever again!"

Cressida strolls into the kitchen, stretching. "We weren't exactly pouring it down your throat. And apparently, it's some sort of truth serum. I found out more about your life last night than I have since we met."

I dump the grounds into the coffee maker and dart toward the stairs. I whirl around my room like a hurricane, swapping out the pajamas I'm wearing for leggings and my practice jersey. My hair goes up in a messy ponytail, and then I sprint across the hall to brush my teeth and wash my face.

Slams and bangs suggest my housemates are all getting ready just as quickly.

I sprint down the stairs, cleats in one hand and sneakers in the other.

“EMMA! ANNE!” I holler. “We’ve got to go!”

“I’m coming!” Emma shouts back.

“Why is no one else *ever* ready on time?” Cressida asks from the front hall, exactly where I knew she’d be. Her usual routine is to lean against the cubbies and watch us all dart around desperately. “Practice is always at the same time. It doesn’t magically move up just to catch y’all off guard.”

“You could have a little more sympathy this morning,” I retort.

“Even less. We all woke up at the same time. *I’m* ready to go.”

“Start driving yourself, then!”

“No way. Watching you all race around is too much fun,” she replies as the sound of running footsteps continues to echo upstairs as Anne and Emma hurry about. “Especially hungover.”

“Can you at least check if Jenny is here to pick us up?” I ask.

“She wasn’t a minute ago—holy shit.”

“What?” I reply, quickly lacing up my left sneaker. “Is Jenny not here? I still have a headache, but I can just—” I glance up as I grab my right shoe and freeze in place.

Because the sight of Adler Beck walking into my living room is not one I ever expected to see.

He’s wearing a tracksuit, all black with Kluvberg’s logo embroidered in white. A jacket is tossed across the top of the leather weekend bag he’s carrying. He must have taken a red-eye to be here this early, but his are perfectly blue, without any dark circles.

“What are you doing here?” I choke out.

“I got your gift,” Beck states.

I stare at him. Thanks to the copious amount of tequila I consumed last night, it takes me a minute to realize he’s talking about the painting I sent. “A thank you note would have sufficed. You didn’t need to fly across the Atlantic,” I reply.

“If you’d answered any of my calls, I wouldn’t have had to,” Beck retorts.

Shit.

“I didn’t—I’ve been busy,” I reply lamely.

He scoffs. “So have I. But I answered yours.”

“I know.” The call with Beck at my father’s wedding is burned into my memory. “I wasn’t—wasn’t sure why.”

“Why what?”

“Why you were calling.”

“Answering would have been one way to find out,” he snaps. “I wanted—want—to talk to you, Saylor,” he replies, in a tone that suggests it should be obvious. If he were anyone else, it would be.

“But *why*? You were so mad when you left Canada.”

“You’ve had weeks to think about it and you can’t figure out why?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I retort. “I’ve had other things to think about these past few weeks, okay?”

“What is going on down—” Emma comes to a screeching stop when she enters the living room with Anne right behind her. “Holy shit,” she says breathlessly. “Am I hallucinating?”

“If you are, I am too,” Anne replies.

“Me three,” Cressida calls from the entryway.

Beck turns and starts walking away, and this time I don’t let him.

“Beck!” I call as I scramble after him, quickly shoving my foot in my right sneaker and following him with the laces still untied. He’s already reached the front steps by the time I catch up with him. I can see Jenny’s silver SUV loitering along the curb with more of my teammates inside. The chances of anyone on the team not hearing about this just disappeared. “Beck, don’t walk away from me again. You can’t keep showing up unexpectedly and dropping bombs like saying you want a relationship and never give me any fucking time to react!”

Beck spins around to study me, and I have to force my body to keep from shivering. It feels more like winter than fall.

“Are you going to say anything?” I finally ask.

“I was waiting for you to.”

I throw my hands up in exasperation. “I can’t have this conversation right now! I have practice in...” I check my phone. “Three minutes. Fuck. I’m making all the seniors late. But it’s only two hours, and then we can talk, okay?”

“Okay,” Beck responds, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“Okay. There’s food in the fridge if you’re hungry, and—”

“Saylor?” I look away from Beck to see my dad and Sandra walking toward the house. *Crap*. I totally forgot they were coming over. “Just stopping to say goodbye,” my father says unnecessarily, looking at Beck curiously.

I think longingly of the days when my life at Lancaster were

uncomplicated. I sigh and walk down the rest of the steps, wrapping my arms around myself.

Wordlessly, Beck hands me the jacket he has draped over his bag, and I slip it on. “Thanks,” I mutter. He doesn’t respond. “Um, thanks for coming,” I say louder to my dad, who’s stopped a few feet away. I’m not sure what else he’s expecting. I’m in no way emotionally equipped to handle a heart-to-heart right now.

Beck takes over, stepping forward and holding a hand out to my father. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Scott. I’m Adler Beck.” There’s no flash of recognition on my dad’s face, and for once I’m glad he’s never taken any interest in soccer. This moment is awkward enough already.

“Marcus, please,” my dad responds, shaking Beck’s offered hand.

“And you must be Sandra?” Beck asks, shifting his gaze to her. She nods.

My dad’s eyes flash to mine, and I flush. It’s now pretty obvious this isn’t just some booty call I was shoving out the door.

Beck makes it worse when he adds, “Congratulations. From what I’ve heard, it was quite a wedding.” I wince at his thinly veiled reference to my phone call.

“Thank you,” my father replies. “Married life is pretty great so far.” It’s a sweet sentiment, and it also makes me want to vomit.

“Did Saylor give you a full recap?” Sandra asks, curiosity burning bright in her voice as she glances between us, obviously trying to discern our relationship. I wish her luck because I’m unclear on it myself. He could have taken off, and yet he stayed to make small talk with my dad.

“Nope. I just heard a lot about the bridesmaid dress,” Beck responds.

I’m torn between wanting to strangle him and smile. He’s making things with Sandra and my dad a hundred times worse. My dad’s looking a bit curious now as well, but it’s almost worth it to see the lighthearted, joking side of Beck that has been glaringly absent from our last few interactions.

I intercede. “It was really nice of you guys to stop by, but I actually have practice, so…” The words remind me that half my team is watching this conversation take place.

“Yes, of course. We should get going.” My dad hovers for a moment, and then steps forward and gives me a hug. “I’ll call you, okay?”

“Okay,” I reply.

Sandra gives me a quick hug as well. They both say goodbye to Beck then head toward the car parked across the street.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell Beck.

“You met my parents,” he replies.

I nod. “I have to get to practice. I’ll be back in a coup—”

Beck cuts me off. “Can I come?”

“You want to come to my college soccer practice?”

Beck nods. “Um, I guess so.” We’ve had random spectators at practice before: parents, friends, siblings. Never any world-famous soccer phenoms. “Let me grab my gear and keys. That’s my car there.” I nod toward the black sedan parked in the driveway. Beck heads toward it as I hurry inside.

Anne, Cressida, and Emma are all standing just past the front door when I walk back in.

“Care to share anything?” Emma asks as I dart into the living room to grab my abandoned cleats and soccer bag. I quickly bend down to tie my right shoe’s laces and grab my car keys from the hook by the door.

“He just showed up.”

“Yes, that much I actually figured out for myself, Saylor,” Emma rolls her eyes. “I meant—”

“We’re going to be super late,” I interrupt. “I’ll see you guys there.”

“Wait, you’re driving yourself now?” Anne questions.

“Yeah, he wants to come.”

“Adler Beck is coming to our soccer practice?” Cressida shouts.

“Apparently.” I rush back outside before any of them have a chance to say anything else.

Beck is leaning against my car. “It’s unlocked,” I tell him as I toss my bag in the back.

He climbs in the passenger seat without comment. I twist the key in the ignition, and the engine flares to life. Loud pop music blares through the speakers, suggestive lyrics pounding our eardrums. I think I catch a ghost of a smirk as I turn the volume down and reverse out of the driveway. Jenny’s car is still loitering along the curb waiting for my housemates to depart the house, and I zoom past the SUV.

It’s a short trip to Lancaster’s sports complex. The few minutes feel like hours in Beck’s presence, though. I can’t believe he came all this way. At least at CFOC I knew why he was there.

There is no reason why Adler Beck should be headed to a Lancaster women’s soccer practice.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer any of your calls,” I finally say. It’s the truth,

and not only because it's landed me in the predicament of showing up at practice with Adler Beck in tow.

"Are you?"

"I mean, at the very least, I could have saved you some money on airfare."

"I think my male athlete salary will manage to cover it."

"Or some more magazine covers." The words are out before I've thought them through. I feel his eyes on me, and I'm glad I have the excuse of looking at the road.

"You're a slow driver," he comments.

"Law-abiding," I correct.

"Slow," Beck insists.

"Well, not everyone can get themselves out of a ticket the way you can. I'm not famous."

"Yet." The words are matter of fact.

His confidence in me, his belief that I'll one day be well-known enough that a random traffic cop knows who I am despite the dim, flickering spotlight on women's sports means more than I can put into words. So, I just agree. "Yet."

I veer left into the athletic facility's parking lot a minute later. Jenny's SUV is nowhere in sight.

Not wanting to lose any of the ground I gained, I grab my soccer bag, throw my door open, and step outside into the chilly morning. Beck follows my lead, unfolding his long, lean frame from the passenger side and following me toward the main doors.

A swipe of my student ID lets us inside the building, and as soon as we pass through the lobby, I point toward the stairs. "You can watch from up there."

I keep walking toward the entrance of the field before Beck has a chance to respond. My nerves are stretched taut, tensed to the point of breaking. This day is not progressing at all how I expected it to.

It was supposed to start with an early morning practice and end with finishing the marketing project I've been putting off all week, but I'm not wed to a schedule. Unexpected events are ordinarily easy for me to navigate.

Adler Beck's startling appearance feels more like I was dropped in the midst of a maze.

I breeze onto the field, noting most of the team is already gathered in the

center of the field. I drop my bag and head toward the huddle, resisting the urge to glance up at the window that overlooks the field as I do. The window that looks out from the observation room I sent Beck to.

“Scott! Care to tell me why half my starters are ten minutes late?” Coach Taylor barks.

“Sorry, Coach. They should be here soon. It’s my fault. I had an unexpected delay.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yes.”

I hear whispers behind me, and Coach notices too.

“Ladies! Anything you’d like to contribute?”

“Sorry, Coach, it’s just, uh, *Adler Beck* is here,” one of the freshmen says. The words are wrapped in awe.

Every girl on the team looks up to the observation room where I sent Beck. Reluctantly, I follow their collective gaze. He’s leaning against the wooden divider between the windows, typing something on his phone. He’s taken off his track jacket to reveal a white t-shirt, and he looks every inch the international football star he is. I feel Coach’s eyes on me.

“Your delay, Scott?” she asks.

“Yes,” I admit.

“Hmm,” is the only response. Coach Taylor has a knack for saying a lot without actually saying anything at all. It’s a talent I’d love to mimic, but I know I’ll never be able to. I tend to opt for more blatant approaches when it comes to registering my opinion.

Cressida, Emma, and Anne show up a few minutes later with the rest of our usual carpool, jumping into the warm-up routine we’ve already begun. I’m not sure if it’s an intentional response to the tardiness and pulsing excitement, but Coach Taylor barks out instructions that push the limits of my own fitness.

Considering I’m one of the few players on the team I know adds to our already rigorous routines, that’s saying something.

Or maybe it’s the tequila talking.

Either way, I’m grateful for the distraction. Not only for myself, but also for the gazes I can feel bouncing between me and the upstairs window.

We’re all part of one of the most competitive soccer programs in the country. Meeting legends in the sport is nothing new. However, they don’t usually look like the male specimen that is Adler Beck. And—I know this is

the crux of the interest—they don't normally have a connection to any of us.

Lancaster didn't arrange for him to come do a clinic with us.

He's here because of *me*.

Practice ends, and I take a seat on the turf to stretch my tired muscles. The downside of the taxing practice is I had no time to plan out what to say to Beck. I hate the paralyzing feeling that accompanies uncertainty. I can feel it creeping over me right now, making my skin itch and my insides crawl.

Especially when the source of the anxiety appears in the doorway.

"You need to work on your left touch still," Beck informs me as he walks over to where I'm stretching, loudly enough for most of my teammates to hear.

"I only take advice from footballers who have won a gold medal," I retort. I know Germany getting silver two years ago is a sore spot.

Beck grins, and it's an easy, carefree one that adds a dash of nostalgia to the complicated feelings swirling inside of me. It's been a while—a lot longer than just since I departed Germany—since there was any easy banter between us, since everything wasn't seeped in secret feelings and hidden meanings.

"Nice to see you, Adler." Coach Taylor approaches to shake Beck's hand. I drop my gaze back to my calves to finish stretching.

"You too, Elaine," he responds.

"Wasn't expecting it to happen quite so soon," Coach says.

"Me neither," Beck states.

Coach nods, and then shifts her attention to me. "Good work today, Scott."

"Thanks, Coach."

Coach heads off the field, followed by the last of my teammates finally trickling off as well. I'm unenthused by the prospect of facing them in the locker room, but I'll have to deal with their questions eventually.

"So, I should probably..."

"Want to work on that left touch?" Beck asks, tossing my ball in the air with a practiced flick of his toe and bouncing it on his knee.

"You want to play?"

"Something else you had in mind?"

A flirty comment referring to some of the other activities I think about involving him is on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back. "I don't want to play games with you, Beck."

The ball bounces three more times then falls to the ground. I'm mentally

patting myself on the back for acting the part of an adult, not a sex jokester, so it takes a moment for his next words to sink in. Or more specifically, their tone.

“Seems like all you do is play games, Saylor.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “That’s not fair.”

“You sail along doing whatever you want, whenever you want to do it, and don’t bother to think about how it might make anyone else feel.”

I jerk back like he just slapped me. “Excuse me? Let’s not pretend you’re doing all of humanity some sort of personal favor by chastising me. You’re mad at me and—”

“I didn’t come all this way to fucking chastise you, Saylor. I knew you’d never face it, any of it, and—”

“Are you calling me a coward?” I snap.

“I wasn’t the one to leave Germany without saying a proper goodbye,” Beck shoots back.

“What did you want me to say?” My voice is no longer just angry; it’s also loud, echoing through the enclosed expanse of field we’re standing on.

“Something!”

“I figured you’d be too busy posing for magazines to notice I’d even left,” I retort. “Oh, wait, that’s exactly what happened!”

“I think I made it pretty clear I’d noticed at CFOC,” Beck replies.

“Saying ‘I don’t know’ wasn’t an easy answer for me,” I tell Beck. “I know you think it was, but it wasn’t.” He doesn’t say anything, so I forge ahead. “Whenever any other guy has asked me how I felt about him, I’ve always known. Sometimes I’d hedge around it, tell him I was too busy with soccer or wasn’t looking for anything serious. Most of the time I wouldn’t. But the point is, *I knew*. I don’t know anything when it comes to you, Beck, except you’re the best sex I’ve ever had. But you’re more than that. You always have been. And I didn’t know how to express that to you. I don’t have anything to compare it to.”

“You’re supposed to know,” Beck replies quietly. “You think I’ve ever told anyone else I want a relationship? You think it was easy for me to say that, knowing you’d probably run in the opposite direction?”

I bite my bottom lip, studying him. Then, I grab his left hand and start hauling him toward the exit door. I only manage to pull him a few feet before he halts.

“What are you doing?”

“Just trust me,” I implore. “I want to show you something.”

He doesn't say anything but lets me lead him through the door that leads out to the soccer stadium. His strides pick up a bit once it comes into sight, realizing our destination. I hop the fence, and he mirrors me, trailing me out to the center line. I flop down on the turf, and he studies me for a minute before lowering himself down beside me.

“This is why I came,” he says quietly, so softly I almost don't hear the words.

“To stare at the sky?” I ask, as I do just that.

“No, I can do that in Germany,” Beck responds, smirking as he sits back up.

I scoff as I sit up too, brushing bits of tire off the backs of my legs. The skin feels textured now, with dozens of tiny indentations marring the ordinarily smooth skin.

The shift in position is accompanied by a change in expression. Beck looks serious now. Earnest. Maybe even a little uncertain. Almost vulnerable. Or, as vulnerable as someone who radiates confidence simply by breathing *can* look.

“I came because I feel this way around you even when we're just staring at the sky,” Beck continues. The words are a leisurely confession. Languid and slow. But there's also an honesty that resonates in every syllable.

“Feel what way?” I ask, because this doesn't seem like the right moment to rely on body language and subjective meanings. You only need to watch one romantic comedy to know that's usually the catalyst for some amusing misunderstanding. Except I'm not laughing. Beck isn't either.

“Like we could be doing anything in the world and it would still be as thrilling as skydiving.”

I snort. “I will never go skydiving. Do you know how many people break their legs? I wouldn't be able to play for months!”

“I don't want to go skydiving with you, Saylor. I want to be the person you rely on when you're acting like you can do everything on your own.” His words remind me of my dad's, and I push back the same way I did at the wedding.

“I *can* do everything on my own,” I insist.

“There's a difference between wanting to and having to,” Beck replies sagely.

“Jesus. Did you read a self-help book on the flight here or something?”

Beck doesn't respond to that quip, and that's how I know he means the words. Means them now, at least. "Relationships hardly ever last."

"Which you know from the many you've been in?"

"I didn't need to get nailed in the face with a soccer ball to know it was going to hurt," I retort.

That earns me a wry smile. "You're equating me swallowing my pride and flying almost four thousand miles to being on the receiving end of a wayward kick?"

"You're Adler Beck." My words are matter of fact.

"I know." He looks bemused by my statement.

"Practically every woman in the world is in love with you. That's what? Over a billion people? Probably some men, too? My teammates, my sister—who very recently thought soccer was measured by touchdowns, by the way. Any relationship is tough. Us? It would be a mess, a disaster everyone would know about and feel entitled to talk about. I'm not interested in being known for nothing but my involvement with you."

"We don't get to pick and choose how others see us, Saylor," Beck snaps. "You're judging me for shit I have no control over."

"Well, you certainly haven't spent the last few years avoiding the spotlight."

"I'm not going to apologize for my past."

"I'm not asking you to! I'm just telling you it means I'd be a fucking fool if I..."

Beck stands and starts walking away.

For the second time today, I chase after him. "It would be really nice if you could cut it out with the taking off," I snap when I catch up. "I thought you came all this way to talk—you can't even make it through a full conversation."

"Well, I got a little sick of being criticized. Figured I'd wait at your car while you got changed."

"I'm not changing. I'll deal with the team inquisition later."

"Is that my fault, too?"

I sigh as we reach the fence encompassing the field. "I'm not trying to blame you for anything, Beck." No response. "How long are you staying for?"

"No idea. I didn't think this trip through, clearly."

Shit, shit, shit. He came all this way, and I can't seem to stop fucking it

up. “I could give you a tour of campus?” I ask tentatively. At this point, I’m expecting Beck to want nothing from me but a ride to the airport.

“Hey, Scott!” I turn to see Kyle Andrews jogging over. I list off a long and impressive array of profanities in my head. “Reliving your game yesterday? Heard it was fucking epic—holy shit. You’re Adler Beck.” He glances between me and Beck twice. “This is Adler Beck.”

If I were in a better mood, I would laugh.

“Holy shit,” Kyle repeats. “You’re—I mean, man. I’m a huge fan! We always watch the Kluvberg games. I can’t believe—I wish...” Kyle glances around like he’s waiting for someone to appear with a camera to commemorate the moment.

I take pity on him. “Beck, this is Kyle. He’s on the men’s soccer team.”

“I’m the captain, *actually*.” Kyle gives me a side glance.

“Wasn’t sure if you wanted to take credit for going one and three,” I say sweetly.

Kyle glares at me, but it morphs into a worshipful expression when Beck holds out a calloused palm and says, “Nice to meet you.”

Kyle looks a bit dazed as he shakes Beck’s hand and I chuckle. “As entertaining as watching you completely lose your cool is, we’ve got to get going.” I start walking, and Beck follows. “If you want that tour of campus, we should probably do it now, before Kyle tells the whole school you’re here,” I tell him.

“He a friend of yours?” Beck asks.

“I guess.”

“Good friend?” He’s fishing, and we both know it.

What I don’t know is why I answer the way I do. “No, I haven’t been very friendly lately.” *Distance, Saylor*, I chide. I’ve never slept with Kyle, and I think Beck knows that. I also think he knows I just admitted to the fact that I haven’t been with anyone else since him. *Not* something I planned for him to have any inkling of.

His response is an anticlimactic nod as we walk along Lancaster’s central path. It’s a Sunday, so campus is pretty quiet. Just a few overachievers hustling to the library, too concentrated to give us more than a second glance. Still, I’m not willing to take any chances.

I duck into the student center, which houses study rooms, along with the post office, a smattering of offices, and the campus store, my current destination. Beck follows me, looking around the open space containing

every item you could imagine Lancaster's logo being embroidered on.

I don't think I've been in here since I visited campus for my recruitment trip. Being on a national-championship-winning team, I've been plied with more free Lancaster apparel than any one person could wear. I find the hat section easily, grabbing a navy one and heading up to the register.

"Good morning," the middle-aged woman says pleasantly.

"Morning," I respond. "Just this, please." I set the hat on the countertop.

The phone next to the register rings. "One moment," the woman says, lifting the receiver. After listening to whatever is being said, she covers the speaker. "Stephan! Can you cover the register?"

A baby-faced boy with brown hair appears from around a t-shirt display. His eyes widen when he sees me. "Wow. You're Saylor Scott, right?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply. There's a sound of amusement to my left, but I don't look over at Beck.

"Uh, you don't need to pay for this," he tells me.

"It's fine," I reply.

"No, I mean it. If my supervisor knew you'd come in and I made you pay... seriously, take it."

"Fine," I say. Arguing doesn't seem worthwhile. "Thanks."

He nods eagerly.

Beck laughs as we leave the store. I shove the hat at him. "Shut up," I grumble.

He pulls the tag off and puts the ball cap on. The sight of Beck in a Lancaster University hat sends a pang of yearning through me. What would it be like if Adler Beck had just been a guy in one of my classes? If he was just a hot guy who'd sat next to me? Not a world-famous one revered, beloved, and fantasized about?

"I kind of wanted to go to university," Beck informs me as we leave the student center and start walking along the brick path that cuts through the center of campus.

"It's not all that great," I tell him. "Classes, essays, exams? I'd rather just play soccer."

"Really? I've never gotten that impression from you."

In one of my more mature moves, I stick out my tongue at him. He grins, a carefree expression that transports me to the German wilderness and a penthouse apartment simultaneously.

We head inside the building that houses the public relations department. It has the same brick, ivy-covered exterior as every other academic building here.

We pass the stretch of hallway that houses professors' offices and advance farther into the building. I pop open the door for one of the lecture halls.

"Here's what the not-fun part of college looks like," I inform Beck.

He moves forward to look inside, but instead of moving around me, he moves into me. Suddenly every muscular inch of the front of his body is pressed against mine, and I pull in a quick breath. Lust hits me with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"You better cut that out, or this is going to be a short tour," I warn.

"If you've seen one classroom, you've seen them all, right?" Beck asks, giving me a sexy smirk that makes the heat already pooling in my belly simmer. He yanks me around the corner inside the hall and forget any seething. I'm at a boil.

"We can't do this here," I pant, as the door slams shut and his hand creeps under my shirt.

"You sure about that?" The words are a whisper against my skin. A dare.

No, I'm not. The chances of anyone walking in on us are slim. There's no class scheduled in here today, and most people don't just wander into empty classrooms. But there's *a* chance. If I'd paid attention during statistics sophomore year, I might know what percentage, but Beck's hand wandering across my ribcage makes any mathematical calculations impossible. Even if I knew an equation.

"Beck," I whisper as he reaches my breast. I arch against him, barely managing to stop a moan from crossing my lips. Yeah, I won't be the one stopping this.

Based on the bulge in Beck's pants, he's not feeling particularly inclined to pump the brakes either. It's been weeks—I know *exactly* how many—since we were this close to each other. Since he was inside of me. No matter what my brain says, my body wants this. Badly. I'm soaked by the time Beck's fingers make the journey south to feel between my legs.

Just like our first time together, I don't let him linger. We've crossed the boundary into where this feels inevitable, but just because I've accepted that doesn't mean I'll stop to dawdle. I've got his cock out and aimed before I realize what's missing.

“Do you have a condom?” I tear my lips away from Beck’s.

“Oddly enough, I didn’t imagine fucking you in an empty classroom when I boarded the plane,” Beck replies.

Oh, good. He’s lucid enough to employ sarcasm, while I’m a panting mess risking suspension or expulsion by fucking an internationally renowned athlete in what is, and I hope will remain, an empty classroom.

I fight through the Adler Beck haze. “Right. Because we *never* have sex. You tend to ask permission before giving me a goodnight kiss and use phrases like ‘Gosh darn, dear,’ too.”

Beck wrestles with a grin. His lips win. “‘Gosh darn, dear’?”

“I grew up in the South,” I snap. Heat is still racing through my veins with no other outlet. I yank my shirt down, and Beck makes himself presentable as well.

But we remain against that wall, just staring at each other. I re-memorize the way his face looks this close and in person.

The freckles scattered on his cheeks.

The faint scar slashing the edge of his left eyebrow.

The way the blue of his eyes grows lighter closer to the pupil.

It’s only when I recall the fact that I slept on the living room floor last night and got ready this morning in approximately five minutes that I jerk away from the wall to end his perusal of my appearance. It’s stupid. He knows what I look like, but I care what Adler Beck thinks of me, whether he finds me attractive.

I care a lot.

“We should keep going,” I tell him.

“Ja,” Beck agrees.

But he doesn’t move.

Neither do I.

“Okay,” I finally manage. “Let’s go.”

We head through the building, ending up back outside. This morning’s wind has dissipated, allowing for a little more warmth to permeate the air. I guide Beck through the rest of campus, and then we end up at the parking lot where I left my car.

Neither of us says anything on the drive. The tour served as some sort of unspoken truce between us. Now, I’m not sure how to bring up any of the heavier subjects hovering in the air.

The driveway is empty when I park in it, suggesting no one else is home.

Beck trails me up the path and inside.

“Wow,” he remarks when we step inside the kitchen. The remnants of last night’s drunken slumber party combined with this morning’s hurried departure have made it a sight to behold. He picks up the half-empty tequila bottle. “Wild night?”

“Not by your standards.” I grab a few dirty glasses and set them in the sink to clear some counter space.

“You might be surprised,” Beck replies, taking a seat at the kitchen counter. “I haven’t been going out much.”

“Mmmm,” I hum as I transfer some plates to the dishwasher, although I *think* that comment was his way of responding to my “friendly” remark earlier. “Is the season going well?” Soccer and sex have always been the two safe topics between us, and we already covered the latter with abysmal results.

“We’re playing decent.”

“So, you’re undefeated?”

Beck flashes me an arresting grin. “One draw.” I scoff as I throw away the desiccated lemons from Emma’s cocktail. “You had a good game yesterday?”

“Yeah. Three zip against one of our main rivals. Northampton. They were at CFOC.” I pause. “My dad came.”

“I figured that was why he was here,” Beck replies. “How was it?”

I lean against the now-clean counter. “I don’t know. It’s nice he made an effort. But it was weird, you know? Sharing this part of my life with him. Having him here. Him seeing me play. Meeting my friends.”

“You can’t expect to go from no relationship to a perfect one in a single visit,” Beck replies. “And it doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Let him in as much or as little as you want.”

“I don’t know what I want,” I whisper, and I’m no longer talking about my dad.

“Yeah, I know,” Beck replies. His tone is dry, and I know he isn’t anymore, either.

“Hello! Anyone home?” Emma’s voice echoes from the entryway, and then she appears in the doorway to the kitchen, with Cressida right behind her. They both stop and stare.

I straighten and sigh. I have no idea how long Beck is going to stay, and at this rate it will take us a week to get through a full conversation about

anything meaningful. “Hey, guys. Um, this is Beck. Beck, this is Cressida and Emma.”

Beck smiles. “Nice to officially meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you both.”

Neither Emma nor Cressida say anything; they just gape at him.

“Don’t make it weird, guys,” I say.

Beck’s phone vibrates against the countertop. “Sorry, I have to take this,” he tells me. He grabs the phone and starts a rapid stream of German.

“Hey, Emma? Can we come in?” a voice calls from the direction of the front door.

My head whips to the left. “Who is that?”

“One minute!” Emma calls out. “If you’d answered any of my texts, you’d know.”

“My phone died,” I respond. “I normally charge it overnight, and there wasn’t exactly a cord on the living room floor.”

“Well, if you *had* charged it then you would know I agreed to host study group because this may or may not be the first time I’m attending it and I’m hoping they’ll give me the old notes,” Emma informs me. “You disappeared after practice and weren’t answering!”

“Why are they all outside?” I ask.

Emma sighs. “I said we had a party last night and hadn’t tidied up.” She surveys the room. “Thanks for cleaning.”

“Like you were going to do the dishes,” I reply.

“I would do the dishes! You won’t let me do the dishes!” Emma responds.

“Because you always leave—”

“Could you guys argue about this later?” Cressida interrupts.

“Fine. I’ll go hide upstairs in my own house,” I say, heading into the living room. Cressida and Emma trail behind me. Beck’s leaning against the back of the couch, still jabbering away in German. When I hold a hand out, he wrinkles his brow in confusion, but he lets me pull him upright, then lead him up the stairs, down the hall, and into my bedroom. He looks around curiously before taking a seat in my desk chair. I make a series of hand gestures I hope convey my plan to shower and head across the hallway to do just that.

I stand under the pulsing spray and try to figure out what the hell I’m going to do about Beck. I can’t give him a garbled *I don’t know* this time. I

owe him a yes or no. But what should be a straightforward affirmation or dissent is anything but simple.

I know I have feelings for Beck.

I stopped viewing him as a mere hook-up a long time ago. I just don't know what these feelings are. I was hoping they'd just disappear, and they haven't. But Beck was right earlier. I never would have done anything about it.

Never would have flown halfway around the world and shown up at his apartment.

Never would have pressed him on his feelings for *me*.

I have no idea if I'm ready for a relationship, or how to know if I am. Does me not knowing mean I'm not? I had friends with "boyfriends" in middle school, but I've never called a guy my boyfriend. Not even close. I've had no interest. I either friend-zone a guy, or I sleep with him. Beck was supposed to remain in the second category, but the lines got blurred.

I let them blur.

There's no easing into anything when it comes to me and Beck. Not only because of who we are as individuals, but because he's *Adler Beck*. There may be some interest in me at Lancaster or among the niche few who follow women's soccer, but even if I hadn't spent two months in Germany, I'd be well aware that the mania surrounding the European football league is a different beast entirely.

Surrounding Kluvberg.

Surrounding Beck, its most notorious player.

The one measly article with a photo of us at CFOC is nothing compared to the media circus that would erupt if it came out that we were in an actual relationship.

I step out of the shower. Steam swirls around as I squeeze excess water out of my hair and then wrap my towel around my torso. I'm gathering my dirty clothes to dump in the hamper when the bathroom door bangs open.

"Hello! Occupied," I say as Cressida barges inside, followed by Anne. "What is going on?"

Anne shuts the door a lot more quietly than Cressida opened it.

"Answers, Saylor. Start talking!" Cressida demands.

"Answers to what?"

"Adler Beck was in our kitchen when we got home!"

"Yes, I'm aware," I drawl.

“Is he staying here?”

“I think so... we haven't really covered logistics yet.”

“You've been off together all day!” Cressida exclaims.

I shrug. “It didn't come up.”

“Kluyberg's in season,” Anne points out. “Isn't he missing stuff to be here?”

“I don't know. I haven't asked,” I admit. The first sentence is a cop-out. I know he must be. *I* have commitments seven days a week during the season. He's a professional athlete. Playing soccer is his job. There's no way Beck's not missing something by flying across the Atlantic. “Could we discuss this after I've gotten dressed?” I request, gesturing down at the small puddle that's forming at my feet.

The door opens, and Emma joins the party. I groan, leaning my head back against the shower door.

“What's she said?” Emma asks eagerly.

“Absolutely nothing,” Anne supplies.

“Because there's nothing to tell!”

Cressida scoffs. “Yeah, right. I never bought the ‘It was just sex’ line because you acted so weird about it, but there's definitely something else going on.”

“I don't know what's going on! We haven't talked about it yet, and even when we do I'm not going to give you a fucking transcript. I can ask him to get a hotel if you don't—”

Emma gapes at me like I just suggested we streak across campus naked. Except we did that sophomore year and she didn't look nearly as horrified. “Don't you dare. I'm having ‘I slept in the same house as Adler Beck’ engraved on my tombstone.”

“Morbid. And creepy,” I add as I push through them to the bathroom door. “I'm going to get dressed. Let's *not* do this again.”

Beck is still on the phone when I re-enter my room, so I don't say anything. I don't even make eye contact, just get dressed and flop down on my bed. I open my laptop and glance over at him. He's staring out the window, listening to whatever the person on the other end of the line is saying. I turn my attention back to the marketing project I was planning to spend the afternoon on.

My phone vibrates on my bedside table a few minutes later. I yank the charging cord out and roll onto my back to read the latest message. It's from

Emma. *All clear down here.*

“Wir sehen uns dann,” Beck says, which I’m surprised to realize I recognize as a farewell. I didn’t think I’d retained any of my meager German. I hear him stand and walk over to my bed. The mattress dips as he sits.

“Long phone call,” I comment.

“Ja,” Beck responds. “My coach was... checking in.”

“Did you tell him you were coming here?”

He pauses. “We talked before I left.”

I drop it. “Emma had a study group over earlier, but they’re gone now. Do you want to shower? Or food?”

“Yeah, both would be good.”

“Okay. I’ll make something.” I close my laptop and roll off the bed. “Towels are in the closet.” I head out into the hall before he can say anything. I don’t know what Beck’s coach told him, but he seems more withdrawn now. Reticent. I’ve been so focused on my own emotions, I haven’t considered how it might feel if Beck is the one who walks away.

If he decides this isn’t worth it.

That *I’m* not worth it.

Anne is the only one in the kitchen when I enter it. “Hey.” She looks behind me at the stairs. “Whe—uh, where’s Beck?” I can tell she’s trying to sound nonchalant, but she falls spectacularly short.

“In the shower.”

Anne nods jerkily. “Speaking of, sorry about the bathroom ambush.”

I snort. “It’s fine. Where are Cressida and Emma?”

“Trying to fix the television before *Twenty-Five to One* is on.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you watching last week,” Anne replies.

“It was impossible to ignore. I didn’t think it was physically possible for someone to cry that much.” I open the fridge door to survey the contents.

“Are you making dinner?”

“Yeah,” I reply, pulling a package of chicken out of the fridge.

“What about Spaghetti Sunday?”

“Beck’s allergic to tomatoes.” Anne makes an annoying humming sound. “Don’t start, please.” I sigh.

“Just saying, you gave Natalie a peanut butter granola bar during play-offs.”

“She just doesn’t *like* peanut butter for some absurd reason. That wasn’t

life-threatening.”

Anne hums again. “Still. You forgot.” She pauses. “You guys would make a cute—well, actually more like insanely gorgeous couple.”

I don’t say anything as I dump chicken in a baking dish and turn on the oven. Anne takes the hint and starts talking about our game on Tuesday instead. Cressida and Emma return to the kitchen, still bickering about whatever is wrong with the television.

It feels like an ordinary Sunday night.

Until the sound of footfalls comes from the stairwell. I keep my gaze fixed on the potatoes I’m peeling, only glancing up when I hear him enter the kitchen.

When I see him, I’m hit with a wave of lust and longing powerful enough to knock me over. Beck strolling into my kitchen wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt with wet hair is something I want to happen more than just this once.

Emma and Cressida keep arguing in an overdone attempt to act casual, and Beck saunters over to my side. “You’re cooking?”

“Mm-hmm.” I set aside the last peeled potato and make eye contact with him. He holds my gaze as I probe, trying to get a read on his current mood.

Nothing.

I can’t discern a damn thing.

We just stare at each other. Unfortunately, Beck has one of those faces that looks better the longer you stare at it. I get lost in those azure depths, so adrift I startle when Anne says my name.

“Saylor?” she repeats.

“Yeah?” I tear my gaze away from his.

“The timer just went off for the chicken.”

I grab the potholders off the counter and pull the pan out of the oven. Juice bubbles and crackles in the bottom of the dish, and the surface of the meat is crispy, cooked to a perfect shade of light brown. I grab the meat thermometer from the drawer to check, but I already know it’s done. Once I confirm it is, I transfer the chicken onto a plate, fill the pan with potatoes, and stick it back in the oven. Then, I start on the salad.

“Can I help?” Beck asks quietly.

Without looking at him, I slide a cucumber his way. “Chop this.”

He does, and the rest of dinner is ready shortly thereafter. We all sit down, and my three housemates sure don’t have any shortage of things to say. They chatter about such a range of topics I can barely keep track.

One minute I'll tune in and it'll be about bunnies as pets, the next high-waisted bikini bottoms. I'm at a loss for the connection between those two. Dinner is good—if I do say so myself—but I'm barely cognizant of what I'm tasting. I'm hyperaware of Beck sitting a foot to my left. He mostly seems amused by the endless commentary.

We finish eating, and Cressida offers to do the dishes.

"It's fine, Cress. I know you want to watch the show. I'll clean up."

"What show?" Beck asks, speaking for the first time since we sat down at the table.

"*Twenty-Five to One!*" Emma exclaims. "Have you seen it?"

I snort and Beck glances at me. "What is it about?" he asks.

"It's a reality television show about finding love," Cressida replies.

"Filled with unnecessary drama and toxic personalities, and fueled by too much alcohol," I add.

"Do you watch it?" Beck questions.

"I mean, sometimes. If it's on..." I hedge.

"She watches it," Emma confirms, and I glare at her.

"Okay, let's watch it," Beck states.

I glance at him. "Seriously?"

"Why not? I'm definitely not playing Clue with you again."

I fight the smile, I really do. But I don't win. "Okay, let's watch it."

We all migrate into the living room. Cressida plops down on the recliner. Emma takes a seat on one side of the couch. Beck settles on the opposite end. I take a seat closer to Beck, but toward the middle. Then Anne comes out. I'm surprised. She's never watched before. Then again, Adler Beck's never been in our living room watching it before. Her presence means I have to scootch farther down the couch.

Closer to Beck.

Our thighs press, then our sides, then our shoulders. Acute, self-conscious awareness pulses through me, and it's ridiculous. Absurd. I've been a *lot* closer to Beck than this, but somehow being pressed against him in front of my friends feels more intimate.

The show starts with an elaborate montage replaying last week's most scandalous events.

"That's the guy they're all fighting over?" Beck whispers to me incredulously as the new episode starts.

"Yup," I reply. "Not your type?"

Beck chuckles, and I lean a little closer to feel his chest vibrate. “Nope. Yours?”

“I prefer blonds.”

“Karl will be disappointed.”

I laugh softly. “Are he and Sophia still dating?”

“No idea. I made my opinion about him pretty clear. He’s not exactly a popular topic of conversation.”

“It’s sweet that you’re protective,” I say quietly.

“Is it? Because I made my opinion clear after he spent brunch staring at you. Because he spent brunch staring at you.”

I look up at him. He’s staring at the television screen. “Yeah, it’s sweet,” I murmur. I look away, back at the screen, which is currently depicting a hot-air balloon ride over a field of wildflowers. “This is even more ridiculous than the helicopter last episode,” I say at a normal volume.

“I thought you weren’t watching last episode,” Emma replies from the opposite end of the couch.

“I just wanted to see if Madison ended up getting on it,” I respond. “I mean, who plans a helicopter ride for a woman afraid of heights?”

“He didn’t know she was afraid of heights,” Cressida defends.

“Well, maybe he should know that about the person he’s supposedly falling in love with,” I retort.

“Like her allergies?” Anne comments beside me. I don’t think anyone else hears, but I scowl at her anyway.

The hot-air balloon lands in the field, and the couple disembarks to discover a picnic that’s already been prepared. “Seriously? How unrealistic,” I grumble.

“Saylor! I can’t hear what they’re saying,” Emma complains.

I sigh as I settle back into the soft cushions. I watch as the lead and his current date make contrived conversation, biting back more sarcastic comments. And then Beck’s left hand settles on my knee, and I lose all sense of what’s happening on the television. I glance over at him, but his attention seems to be on the show. His thumb traces small circles on my skin, and zings of arousal shoot up my thigh.

I bite my bottom lip and shift closer to him. His right arm slides down my back, dipping underneath the hem of the crewneck sweatshirt I put on after my shower. I’m not wearing anything underneath besides a bra, and he discovers that.

Rough callouses scrape against my lower back as his palm drags across the skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake. I arch against him involuntarily, and Anne's pretty much got the center of the couch to herself. I'm partly on the cushion, mostly on Beck's lap. He keeps rubbing his hand against my skin but doesn't venture any farther north.

It's an innocent touch, but there's nothing virtuous about the wetness pooling between my thighs. Beck's eyes don't waver from the television, which makes it even hotter. Either he's completely oblivious to the effect his touch has on me, or he's actually paying attention to the show.

After a few more minutes, Beck's hand stills. It remains on the small of my back, searing into my spine and radiating heat through my whole torso. Once I get my libido under control, I snuggle closer so my head is resting on his chest.

I stopped paying attention to the show a long time ago.

Now, I'm focused on nothing but Beck. I slip my hand underneath his shirt, and he inhales sharply. I revel in the knowledge that I've still got some power over him, too, as I close my eyes. I block out the sound of the annoying commentary on the television and focus on the sensation of being held by Adler Beck.

The next thing I'm aware of is whispers.

"... leave her down here?" Cressida's voice.

"She spent last night on the floor. This is an upgrade." Emma this time.

I open my eyes and glance to the right. Beck's already looking at me. "Hey, sleepy. You missed some drama."

"He sent Madison home!" Emma exclaims.

I sit up and stretch. "I don't even know who that is."

"The hot-air balloon girl," Cressida supplies.

"Guess there are worse things to be known by if you're on a dating reality television show," I comment, standing.

"I'm going to bed," Anne says, yawning. "Practice earlier kicked my ass."

"Imagine how terrible it would have been if we lost yesterday," Cressida comments, heading toward the stairs after her.

Emma follows.

It's just me and Beck in the living room.

"Ready for bed?" I ask.

"You obviously are," he replies.

Except I'm not. I'm tired, sure, but the hunger I repressed earlier is suddenly raring back to the surface. I don't act on it now, though.

I head toward the stairs, and Beck follows. The upstairs hallway is empty, and I enter my room, shutting the door behind us.

I yank my pink sweatshirt over my head and swap out my sweatpants for a pair of sleep shorts, feeling Beck's eyes on me the whole time. He strikes just as I'm pulling a tank top out of my dresser.

"Do you know what I've spent the past hour thinking about, knowing this was all you had on underneath?" he asks, pressing up behind me.

I push my hips back against his. "Maybe you should tell me."

Soft kisses trail along my shoulder, and I moan when he reaches my neck. Loudly. Desire floods me, so potent and all-consuming I can't think straight.

Warm hands slide up my stomach, and I buck back against him as they reach my breasts. "I was thinking about doing this," Beck murmurs against my neck, before sucking on some of the sensitive flesh.

I'm so close to coming from that alone it's embarrassing. I struggle, trying to turn around so I can touch him more. His arms pin me in place. "Beck," I whimper, rubbing against him. I roll my neck so I can see him better, and he responds with a blistering kiss.

I was overwhelmed before; I'm drowning now. Sinking through ecstasy and euphoria. His tongue is urgent, seeking immediate entrance and plundering once it's granted.

Beck kisses me urgently, fervently, fiercely. I squirm, still desperate to touch him. He still doesn't let me. "What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Skydiving," he responds, and I get it. This sweeping, exhaustive feeling feels a lot like I imagine jumping out of a plane might. The inability to think about anything else. The overwhelming sensation. But just because I can conceptualize it doesn't mean I'm ready to leap. It's not an athletic undertaking I can train for.

"I'd rather do this," I suggest, gyrating against his very obvious hard-on.

Strong arms drop, and I'm finally able to twist around and look at him. All the emotion has drained from Beck's face, leaving behind nothing but that same stoic expression that blocked the June sun on Klavberg's field. "That's not the best idea."

He walks to the right side of the bed, sliding under the covers before I have the chance to blink more than twice.

Excuse me, what? Call me vain or a sex goddess, but that's never

happened before.

Never.

The fact that it happened with Beck makes it that much worse.

I swallow the painful lump in my throat and turn off the light before slipping under the covers myself, making a point to scooch as far away from the other side of the bed as possible.

The thin cotton sheets and down comforter prove to be an ineffective barrier against ravaging thoughts, however. I don't know how long I lie on the mattress for, but it's not long enough for endless pondering to wear my brain out.

I finally slip out of bed and head downstairs. Anne has an extensive tea collection, so I might as well try a cup.

At this point, I'm pretty sure the only thing that will knock me out is a few shots. But I've got morning practice, and I made a vow that Adler Beck would never interfere with my performance on the soccer field.

An oath that was far easier to keep back when I'd done nothing but beat him in a shootout.

I'm filling the kettle with water when a familiar timbre sounds behind me. "What are you doing?"

"Making tea," I respond, turning the tap off with a little more force than is strictly necessary. The hardware wobbles its way back into place. Another thing for our landlord to never get around to fixing.

"You're a light sleeper?"

"Not normally," I respond, flicking the burner on and setting the full kettle atop the flame. I grab a mug and pull out the drawer to scan through the packets of tea. Anything to keep from making eye contact with Beck.

He catches my meaning. "I can sleep on the couch. My flight's in a few hours, anyway."

"It is?" My eyes dart to his azure ones, and I'm snared in his gaze, dammit.

"Yeah, it is," Beck confirms.

"Guess I should be grateful you're giving me more than an hour's notice this time." I shut the drawer. Hard. The whole kitchen is going to be in shambles by the time I brew myself a mug of glorified plant water.

"Fuck, Saylor." Anger stirs in the blue depths I can't look away from. "You can't act pissed when I show up *and* when I say I'm leaving."

"I wasn't 'pissed' you showed up, I was surprised," I retort. "Now I am

pissed.”

“Because I wouldn’t fuck you?” Beck snaps.

“Because you say one thing and act the opposite!”

“At least I say things. You give me nothing at all!”

“That’s not true!”

“You left Germany without saying goodbye. You hardly said anything when I told you I wanted a relationship. You called me drunk and then didn’t answer a single one of my calls.” Beck ticks off my mistakes, and I can’t deny a single one of them.

“Don’t you get it? You weren’t supposed to mean anything, Beck!”

“Yeah, I got it,” he sallies.

“But you do.” I finally lay my cards down. “You mean a lot. So much it scares me.” Some of the anger finally retreats from his face. “I don’t want you to leave tomorrow.”

There’s a glimmer of affability. “That’s nice to hear. But…”

“You have to leave anyway,” I finish.

“Yeah. I do.”

“I want to believe you,” I inform him. “That you want this. That this can work.” Suddenly, it seems important he knows that.

“So believe me,” Beck says simply.

“I—It’s not that—” I start, but Beck doesn’t let me finish.

“You don’t walk on the field knowing you’re going to win, Saylor. You earn it. Fight for it. That’s all I’m asking. For you to try.” I open my mouth to speak, but he keeps talking, so I close it. “I know it’s a lot. I know people care where I go, who I sleep with. And I get that it would complicate your life, and I wish it wouldn’t. But…” He pauses, and I watch him teeter on the precipice. “I care what *you* think. I think about you the way other people think about me.”

It’s such a ridiculous metaphor I’m tempted to laugh, but I can’t. The words are too raw.

Too echt.

Too real.

Worming their way inside of me and gnawing away at my doubts and insecurities.

“Then why wouldn’t you…” My voice trails off when Beck rounds the edge of the island, caging me against the butcher-block countertop right next to the boiling kettle I should probably turn off.

“It seemed like sex might mean something different to me,” he tells me. “Might mean more.”

Emboldened by his honesty, I offer up a little of my own. “It wouldn’t,” I admit.

Beck’s face stays blank, but there’s a tic in his jaw that suggests it might take some effort to appear that way. “Earlier, what you said about being friendl—”

I know where he’s going with this. “I kept thinking about you,” I whisper.

He kisses me, shoving me against the counter and then lifting me atop it. I yank his shirt off, anxious to feast on the abs I was stroking earlier. We’re racing along faster than any speed limit would allow.

I rake my fingers through his soft hair.

Trail my fingers down his neck.

Dig my nails into his shoulders.

Bite on his bottom lip, spurring his own perusal along...

“Holy shit!”

Beck pulls away just enough so I can see Cressida standing in the doorway to the kitchen, wide-eyed and blushing. Wearing a matching pajama set patterned with penguins.

“Uh, hey,” I say. “What are you doing down here?”

“Just getting some water. Wasn’t expecting to walk in on a porno,” she comments, strolling over to the fridge and opening the stainless steel door. I jump down from the counter and turn off the burner, pouring the scalding water over the packet of herbs.

There’s a pounding sound on the stairs—Emma’s trademark.

“Put your shirt back on,” I hiss at Beck. He grins, completely unrepentant.

“I thought I heard—oh my God!” Emma appears in the kitchen and focuses on—no surprise—Beck’s admittedly impressive torso.

“Good night!” I call out, grabbing my mug in my left hand and one of Beck’s in my right. He glances back at the kitchen as I tug him toward the stairs. “If you hook up with any of my housemates, we’re never having sex again,” I inform him.

“That’s what you got out of our conversation? That I’m looking to hook up with someone else?” Any affability leaves Beck’s face.

“No. I just—I don’t know,” I admit, trying to pull together my scattered thoughts as we reenter my room. “I think...”

I didn't have any impressive lines cued up, but Beck doesn't wait to find out. In seconds, he's pulled off my tank top and yanked down my shorts, walking me backward until I have no choice but to lie down on the comforter. I'm expecting him to plunge right into me, but he doesn't.

It's a continuation of the torture from earlier.

He kisses me. His tongue and lips assault my breasts, my neck, my chest. All while rubbing his massive erection against my inner thigh. Teasing me.

"Beck, please." I let him hear the desperation in my voice. It's not like he can't tell I'm a wanton, writhing mess beneath him.

"Do you want me, Scott?" He's never called me by my last name in bed, and the sound of it falling off his lips is surprisingly erotic.

"What the fuck does it seem like?"

There's a flash of humor in those perfect blue eyes, but it's extinguished like a doused flame. One hand slides between my thighs, and my hips jerk upward from the additional stimulation. If this were anyone else, I wouldn't capitulate.

"I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone," I tell him, laying myself bare in more ways than one.

Beck unrolls a condom and then thrusts inside of me. I barely have the presence of mind not to cry out, muffling my moans against his shoulder.

Thoughts flee like dandelion pappuses in the wind. All that remains is sensation.

I'm aware of everything and nothing.

Thoughtless and overstimulated.

There's the heat of his skin. The ripple of his abdominal muscles against my own stomach. The thick hair my hands are raking through.

I'm close, feeling trickles of ecstasy, when he slows, pumping into me at a leisurely pace. Languidly. I clench my inner muscles and feel the muscles in his back ripple as he responds.

He slides out of me, teasing me with the bulbous tip of his cock, and I let out a throaty gasp. Then he plunges back inside, and I'm over the cliff. Liquid hot pleasure courses through me as I light up like a supernova.

I watch Beck's face tighten and then relax as he finds his own release.

He drops onto the comforter beside me.

"I want to try," I whisper when I regain the ability to form a coherent sentence.

"What haven't we tried?"

I smile, flipping over so we're chest to chest again. I rest my chin in the groove between his pectoral muscles. "Plenty, but I'm not talking about sex."

I feel his chest rumble with laughter. "What are you talking about?"

The words are playful, but there's an undercurrent of curiosity that tells me what I need to say.

"I want to be in a relationship with you." Beck doesn't say anything, just studies my face, peering so closely I'm sure he can see every pore. But that's not why I'm shifting uncomfortably. *That's* happening because I know there's more I have to say. "I mean it. I'm not going to run. I'll answer your calls. This is me jumping out of the plane, okay?"

Beck studies me for a little while longer. Finally, his expression changes. It's not triumphant or indifferent. He looks hopeful, and I decide that's perfect as I twist so I'm half-splayed atop him.

"Okay," Beck says softly.

Hope never hurt anyone.

As long as you remember: hope isn't always reality.

"Okay then. We're in a relationship." The words sound foreign, but not strange.

"Okay then," Beck repeats.

I can't see his face, but it feels like the emotion radiating from it is happiness.

Or maybe that's just me.

EPILOGUE

The street is teeming with Adler Beck jerseys, and they're not just topping torsos. They're flapping from windows. Spread across tables that line the street leading to Kluvberg's stadium. BECK is spray-painted repeatedly across the pavement we're walking along.

"This is insane," Hallie comments. Matt and our father nod their agreement. They've both met Beck before, but I guess meeting someone and seeing their name plastered on every visible surface are two different things.

Despite my many protests—mostly about how I'd enjoy myself more if they weren't present—Beck insisted on flying my family to Germany for his final match of the season. Sandra remained behind at the hotel with Matthew Jr., but my father, Hallie, and Matt are all making the trip with me to Kluvberg's stadium for the game.

I guess Beck might understand more than my stubbornness after eight months of officially dating, because I'm less irritated and more cheery as I watch my three companions take in the chaos the anticipation is effervescing. *It is spectacular.*

We reach the stadium, and I guide my companions to the side entrance. One flash of our badges is all it takes to bypass security and head through the tunnel toward the seats reserved for us. I don't know if Beck requested these particular seats or they were just given to him, but we're right on top of the field.

It's insanity. Pandemonium. I'm watched plenty of clips of European football games, but this is the first one I'm witnessing in person. Television screens don't convey the energy and excitement of a sold-out crowd.

I try to take it all in, but it becomes a blur. Anthems, announcements,

applause. Once number twenty-three appears on the pitch, nothing else can hold my attention.

My father and Matt are content to just take the atmosphere in, but Hallie keeps pestering me with questions. *Are they allowed to cross that line? What does the whistle mean? Is he going to score?* I simply grunt in response to most of them, too focused to formulate an answer.

The first half is scoreless and mostly even. I dig my nails into my palm for the start of the second.

“This is much more exciting than I expected it to be,” Hallie announces as the noise level in the stadium rises again.

I roll my eyes. Sometimes, I’m not sure how we’re related.

Ten minutes into the second period, I watch Beck steal the ball from Portugal’s star striker just past the center line. “Go, go, go,” I whisper.

He does, dodging defenders with a beauty and grace even an impartial viewer would appreciate. I’m the furthest thing from one. Not only am I invested in the sport, I’m invested in *him*.

Not because he’s the most famous footballer in the world.

Because he calls me every night before I go to bed, despite the fact that it’s the middle of the night for him.

Because he sent me a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream on the anniversary of my mother’s departure, so I didn’t have to go buy it myself.

Because I’m completely, devastatingly in love with him, even if I haven’t told him so.

One powerful kick, and Kluvberg is winning. Beck’s surrounded by his teammates. Noise I didn’t think could get any louder rises exponentially, filling the stadium with cheers I imagine overflowing the stadium and flooding all of Kluvberg.

“Oh my God!” Hallie screams. “He scored! He actually scored!”

I’m too busy cheering to laugh at her out loud, but I definitely do inside.

The rest of the game is a nail-biter. Both teams have chances to score. One kick by Portugal almost finds the back of the net, but Herrmann snags it from midair.

Two minutes are added for extra time. My stress level shoots through the roof. Metaphorically, since the stadium is open air.

But those one hundred and twenty seconds pass, and Kluvberg is still ahead when they officially expire.

I sit in shocked silence as the jubilation resonating around the stadium

slowly registers, rising and rising and rising like an ocean tide that can't be contained.

"They won," I say to myself.

"Get out there!" Hallie urges.

"How?" I break through my daze and look around at the euphoric fans surrounding us. I've seen photos of players on the field with loved ones after a major victory, but I've never seen how that actually takes place, logistically speaking.

"Um, the field is right there." Hallie gestures forward.

"I'm definitely not supposed to climb over the barricade, Hallie."

She smiles. "Since when has that ever stopped you?"

Fair. And Hallie doesn't even know about my illicit first trip here.

So I do just that, leaping over the plastic fencing. Portugal is standing in shocked disbelief. Kluvberg is celebrating. They're a huddled mass around the one person I want to see. Eventually, they clear. Thankfully, it's before security hauls me off the field.

Beck spots me and grins, and that smile is the release I've been waiting for. I sprint, not caring who's watching us. We could be on the fucking jumbotron for all I care right now.

He catches me, barely moving, despite my momentum.

"Holy shit! You won!" I shout the words so he can hear them over the pandemonium.

Pure euphoria is painted over Beck's perfect features. Some amusement blends in as he takes a few steps back, taking us to the fringes of the celebration where it's a few decibels quieter. "You know you could have just shown your badge to get on the field, right?"

"Obviously not."

"I told you last night," Beck informs me.

"You were naked. I was distracted."

He chuckles. "Or you like trespassing."

"I'm not trespassing. You just said I have permission." I grin triumphantly. "It was a grand gesture, okay?"

"I'm blown away."

"Yeah, you look it," I comment. But he doesn't. He looks sweaty and happy and gorgeous. And the knowledge that he's also mine swells and swells inside me until it pushes out the words I've been afraid to utter until right now. "Ich liebe dich."

Those three words just sit, encasing us in a bubble of silence amongst the celebration that surrounds us.

“What?” Beck asks. Now he *does* look stunned. Ten minutes ago, he was sprinting across the field like a god, and now he looks so startled a light breeze could knock him over. I don’t even think he’s trying to draw this out or get me to say it again. I think I genuinely took him completely off guard.

“Did I pronounce it wrong?” I roll my eyes, even though it’s totally possible. “I love you, Beck.” I say the unfamiliar words with a little more conviction this time, because I actually *know* what I’m saying, and I’m rewarded with a crooked grin that grows and grows until it transforms the handsome features I now know better than my own.

“Ich liebe dich auch. I love you, too,” Beck replies, and I realize why he looked so completely gobsmacked seconds ago. Because it’s one thing to hear others exchange those words, or to say them in different combinations.

It’s another matter entirely to have someone say them to you.

To hear them ring with sincerity.

“Uh, okay then.” I flash him a giddy smile that betrays any indifference my casual words convey.

“Okay then,” he echoes, still grinning. “This is alleviating a lot of worries about the surprise proposal I planned for tonight.”

That gets my attention. “You didn’t.” I study his face, trying to draw the truth out of those chiseled features.

“I don’t know. Did I?” Blue eyes dance.

“I’ll turn you down.”

A broad grin splits stone, transforming from teasing to delight. “Yeah, right,” Beck scoffs.

He’s got reason to be confident. Ever since I agreed to give us a try, his record on convincing me to say yes is pretty spotless. Even disallowing his dirtier tricks.

“Guess you’ll just have to ask me and find out then,” I challenge.

Beck accepts it with a smirk. “Okay, I will.”

“Okay,” I volley back.

Beck takes a step closer to me, compressing our little bubble further. “What did you think of the game?”

“Let’s go find a storage closet, and I’ll show you.”

Beck chuckles as he uses my waist to tug my body flush with his. “I love you, Saylor Scott.”

There are a dozen witty quips waiting on my tongue, but for once I opt for sincerity. "I love you, Adler Beck."

He kisses me. In the very spot where we first met.

And this time, I don't critique.

I don't deflect.

I don't flee.

For the first and final time, I let myself fully fall.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *First Flight, Final Fall*. I hope you enjoyed Saylor and Beck's story!

Please take a moment to rate or review this book. It's an irreplaceable way to help me reach new readers, but more importantly, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

All the best,
C.W. Farnsworth

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.W. Farnsworth is the author of five novels. She has always been a voracious reader, and grew up devouring books by flashlight under the covers long after she was supposed to be asleep. She primarily writes young adult and new adult romance, her favorite genres to read, often involving sports.

Charlotte is a native New Englander, but attended college in New York, and now resides in Washington, D.C. Find her on any of the sites below, and check out her website www.authorcwfarnsworth.com for upcoming book news!



OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

Four Months, Three Words

Two Decisions, One Duty

Kiss Now, Lie Later

The Hard Way Home