



# Autumn

BELLA MATTHEWS

# **ALL IN**

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THE KINGS OF KROYDON HILLS

BELLA MATTHEWS

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Bella Matthews

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**BRADY**

“*D*ude, I think Coach was trying to kill us today.” Walking into Cooper Sinclair’s house, I kick my Nikes off in the mudroom and drop my blue and gold gym bag to the floor. With two weeks to go before senior year starts, our football team has two-a-days, one practice from seven ‘til ten, then a second practice from three ‘til six. I don’t care how much time you spent in the weight room over the summer or how many miles you ran around town in the mornings, these days blow.

Taking a seat at one of the high backed, black bar stools that line the light wood island in the kitchen, I lean back and thank God for whoever invented air conditioning. The cool air against my still damp hair is doing more for the throbbing in my head than any ibuprofen ever could. The heat and humidity of August in Philadelphia are no joke, and I’m pretty sure it’s Coach Maxwell’s goal to make sure everyone pukes at least once a day, every day.

It’s Thursday night, and we only have one more day left of Hell this week. Next week’s schedule is slammed, with four days of practice and a scheduled scrimmage. Then, it’s back to school following the Labor Day weekend.

I am exhausted. My muscles have been pushed to the limit, and my brain feels like it can’t take in any more information, but I don’t say any of that to my teammate, Cooper. I barely manage to catch the ice-cold bottle of water he throws my way.

Coop transferred in from California halfway through last year, right after his dad got the job as Philly’s new professional football coach. This

guy never seems to have a care in the world. “Stop fucking bitching. We’ve got two weeks left until the first game of the season. That’s two more weeks of beer and bitches before we have to get serious for the semester. We are the Kings of Kroydon Hills Prep. Enjoy it.” He doesn’t realize that, as the quarterback, it’s practically my job to be always stressed.

Coop’s still riding the high of Coach announcing today that the starting tight end position will be his to lose this season. He earned it, and now he’s gotta keep it. The announcement pissed off more than one upperclassman who thought it should have been theirs after last season’s starting tight end graduated. “You sound like a fucking freshman, Coop.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, oh wise quarterback?”

“Oh, wise Captain is more like it, shit head. You’ve gotta get serious at some point.”

“And you’ve got to lighten up, QB. Live a little.”

The door slams open as Sebastian and Murphy let themselves into the house. We can hear them dropping their bags and adding their shoes to the growing pile by the mudroom door. Aiden Murphy’s navy-blue Kroydon Prep hat is sitting backward on his ginger head. He’s a few inches shorter than me, Coop and Sebastian... maybe 6’2”. What he lacks in height, he makes up for in bulk. Murph’s freakishly strong. He likes to say he could bench press my little sister’s Fiat. He’s also one of the country’s best linebackers, and he wants everyone to know it. “You know QB doesn’t know how to lighten up.”

He also has a big mouth. “What was taking you assholes so long?”

Sebastian Beneventi is Murph’s opposite in every way. Bash is an intimidating dude. He’s the tallest of the four of us, standing at 6’6”. He’s the quiet one compared to Murphy’s loudmouth. Murphy, Bash, and I have bonded over the years we’ve lived in this town. We all come from very different, very powerful families. Families like ours tend to run at two ends of the parenting spectrum. They are overly involved in their kid’s lives or not involved at all. Because we all fall into the latter category, we formed our own sort of brotherhood. Coop slid right in with us when he moved to town.

Before either of them can answer me, a blonde goddess enters the kitchen. She’s tiny. I’m used to short. When you’re 6’4”, everyone seems short. But this girl looks like Tinker Bell. She has golden blonde hair tied up in one of those messy buns that my sister always wears, skintight black



leggings are barely covering the most perfectly shaped thighs, and I'm betting are doing a lousy job of hiding a tight little ass.

An ass that I notice Murphy is currently checking out.

A green Notre Dame t-shirt is hanging off one tanned shoulder, hinting that those tits, tits that I wish I had a better view of, are bare under there. But her eyes are what are drawing me in; they are the lightest blue I've ever seen. They look like a perfect summer sky and are sparkling with unshed tears while she looks at Coop.

Cooper drops his bottle, practically charging for this girl. Picking her up off of the ground, he spins her around. "Natalie! You told me you weren't flying in until this weekend." When he places her back down on her feet, I swear to God, she blushes the prettiest pink and leans into him like she's going to cry.

"I missed you so much." Sniffling, she pulls back after a minute, her face pink and her eyes watery. "I know you are busy with football camp, and Dad is in the middle of preseason right now, so I figured this was the easiest way. The ballet intensive I took this summer ended last week, and Mom and her new boyfriend were talking about flying to Italy, so I thought, why wait? It wasn't like it was even a long Uber ride from the airport." She hugs him again. "Seriously, Coop. It wasn't a big deal. I just wanted to get here. It's been six months since I've seen you and Dad. I didn't want to wait anymore. I missed you."

Placing his arm around his sister's shoulders, Cooper squeezes her to him. "I missed you too, little sister."

Smirking, she tries to push him away. "Hey. I may be smaller, but I'm three minutes older, asshat. Take the little sister stuff and shove it."

Murphy jumps in then. "So, this is the infamous Natalie? Hate to break it to you, man, but this girl is way better looking than you are. I thought twins were supposed to look the same?"

Bash smacks the back of Murphy's head. "Identical twins look the same. Same sex. Two girls. Two guys. Fraternal twins don't. Try paying attention in biology this year."

Murphy looks pissed. "Yeah, well, we can't all have photographic memories."

Up 'til now, I was a fly on the wall just taking it all in, but when this girl turns, looks up at me, and smiles, every ounce of will power I have starts to snap like strings on a guitar.

I am so screwed.

“Guys, this is my sister Nattie. Stop looking at her like that, Murphy. She is off-limits. Lay a hand on her, and I’ll break every finger.” The grin he gives us all is a little evil and a little serious.

Damn.

“Oh my God, Cooper.” This little pixie spins herself out of her brother’s grip. Placing both hands on her hips, she glares at Cooper. “The fact that you, the biggest man where I know, is saying anyone is off-limits is incredibly hypocritical. Tell me, little brother, how many girls have you hooked up with this summer?” When he doesn’t answer her right away, she crosses her arms over her chest and raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *I’m waiting*.

“Can the big, strong, jock count that high?” She starts laughing, and the sound is throaty and sexy, not at all what I was expecting to hear.

I’ve been half-hard since I laid eyes on Natalie, and I’ve never been so grateful for a counter to hide behind in my life. A water bottle gets moved in front of me. Looking up, I see Sebastian trying to hold back a laugh. Fucker. Guess I was staring.

Clearing his throat, Murphy moves in front of Natalie and bows like he is meeting the Queen of England. “Well, since your brother is against properly introducing us, I’m Aiden Murphy, but everyone calls me Murphy. I’m also known as the best linebacker in the city. This handsome devil to my left is Sebastian Beneventi. If you have any waste management issues, give Bash a call. His Dad’s in the biz.” Murphy winks at her, and I want to punch him in the face.

Sebastian tenses up immediately. The dude hates when we bust his balls about his dad and his connections.

“Fuck you, Murphy.” Bash has Murphy in a headlock and on the floor before he knows what hit him. These two fight like brothers more than most brothers I know.

“Hey assholes, stop rolling around on the floor like it’s some kind of mating ritual.” Cooper’s laughing again.

Natalie looks up at me and tilts her head as if she is assessing the situation. “And who are you? Let me guess. The quiet guys are always the quarterback. Spending too much time in your head, figuring out everyone’s next play. Am I right?”

Of course, she has to be perceptive, too, and she is entirely right. Momentarily hesitating, I answer. “Yeah, I’m the quarterback. Brady Ryan. Nice to finally meet you, Natalie. Coop talks about you all of the time.”

The guys immediately crack up. “Don’t downplay it, man. Brady Ryan is the number one ranked quarterback in the country sis. I swear if Dad could take him right out of high school, he would.”

That shakes me out of my stupor. “Number five, asshole. Don’t jinx me. One bad move and any of us can be out for the season or replaced. Now, let’s figure out what we’re ordering for dinner. I’m starving.”

I swear to god I hear Murphy mumble, *I bet I know what you’re ready to eat.*

Murphy just smiles under my glare before he walks back over to Natalie. “Are you hungry? We were just about to order some food before we figure out our plans for tonight. Plus, we need you to put us out of our misery and tell us all about the hot Sinclair sibling. We’re tired of Cooper and could use some new blood in here.”

Murphy has moved next to Natalie and his arm is around her shoulders, guiding her to a stool. I’ve known this guy since kindergarten, and I have never wanted to make him eat my fist as much as I want to right now.

“Hey, Cooper, since your dad is out of town, are we partying here tonight or keeping it to just us?” Sebastian is always looking for a reason not to go home, always trying to avoid his dad and his uncles. We like to joke about it, but his family is the kind of family you shouldn’t cross if you want to stay in one piece. It’s the worst kept secret in Kroydon Hills.

Natalie’s face falls for a second before I watch a mask go on. “Dad is out of town tonight? I was hoping to see him.”

“I know you hate football, but you seriously have to pay attention to Dad’s schedule. He has a game tonight in Tampa Bay. He’ll be home tomorrow afternoon. He wanted to do dinner when you got here this weekend, but I’m thinking it will be tomorrow after I get home from practice since you’re here now. I’ll shoot him a text and let him know you got here early.”

“Alright. So, what are we ordering for dinner?” I think Bash sensed the tension in the air. It might as well be his superpower.

Of course, tension could hit Murphy over the head, and he still wouldn’t sense it. “Wait. Wait. Wait. Did I just hear Coop, right? Did he just say you

hate football? Come on now. You're breaking my fragile heart here. Say it ain't so."

Clipping Murph on the back of the head, I glare at him. "Knock it off, man. Leave her alone."

"It's okay, Brady, I have two brothers, I'm used to teasing. I don't hate football, Murphy. It's more of a love-hate relationship. I've been around it my entire life. I love the roar of the crowd at games. The smell of the fresh-cut grass. The energy in the air when you're under the lights.

"Our entire family has lived our lives according to where Dad was coaching. I've lost track of how many times we've moved in eighteen years. First, Dad was promoted from assistant coach to head coach in college, then from an offensive coordinator in the pros to head coach of his own team. I hate that Cooper and I spent the last six months living on separate coasts because Dad switched teams again, but I get that this was a huge opportunity for him. Cooper and Declan both bow down to the altar of the football gods. I don't get on my knees for anyone."

"Jesus Christ, Nattie. I don't want to hear about you getting on your knees. Conversation over!" Everyone laughs hysterically at Cooper's reaction to his sister talking about getting her on her knees.

His face is as red as it was from the heat at practice today.

It's funny but not enough to stop me from picturing Nat on her knees in front of me perfectly. Those pretty pink lips, sucking. ... Just then, an empty water bottle hits me in the head.

"What the fuck, man!" I'm looking at Murphy, who's laughing harder than the others now.

"Pick a damn place to order from, QB. I'm ready to get this party started."

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**NATALIE**

It's strange to sit in my new home, surrounded by people who are already comfortable here, when I'm not. The room itself is gorgeous. Wooden beams arch across a vaulted ceiling, warm, creamy marble countertops, and a matching deep farmhouse sink offset the light wood cabinets and open shelving. A huge center island with a butcher block counter is surrounded by five stools in the room's center. An even bigger well-worn table with eight chairs sits off to the right of this massive room. It might have been a barn door in a previous life. I can't help but wonder who decorated because it is gorgeous and certainly not something Dad or Coop is capable of. I love it. It's warm and inviting and so much homier than anything has felt lately.

Last winter, I couldn't believe it when Cooper told me he wanted to move with dad as soon as he could. We'd both been living with Mom at that point. I didn't realize what a big deal playing for Kroydon Hills Prep would be for him.

I hated the idea of moving in the middle of the year. I might have chosen to go with him if I had realized how isolated I'd feel staying in California with Mom. Mom is a retired model and loves to travel. I barely saw her, which was nothing new. Still, with Declan in his junior year at Notre Dame and Coop and Dad on the other side of the country, I started to hate being in California.

All year I had been looking forward to the summer ballet intensive I was accepted into. It was half the damn reason I stayed in Cali. By the time

it was over, I had realized something—I wasn't living my life, I was going through the motions.

I realized that I didn't love ballet anymore, I just loved being good at it.

I didn't love spending all of my time at the studio, I was just comfortable there.

I wanted to spend time with friends.

Friends I have never bothered to make time for before.

Promising myself that would stop, I booked myself on an earlier flight to Philadelphia.

Five hours on a plane gives you plenty of time to think and plan.

My plan was easy.

*Start living life.*

I'm not sure what that looks like exactly, but finding my tribe is at the top of my list. Having fun and enjoying my senior year are both right under that. Breaking the news to my father that I don't want to dance anymore is on there somewhere, but I'm dreading checking off that box.

Getting a boyfriend wasn't on my list, but looking around at the hotties in this room, that may have to change. Murphy is a ginger giant, reminding me of Prince Harry, if he was a tiny bit taller with muscles the size of my head and mossy green eyes. Sebastian is rocking the tall, dark, and handsome thing. He is leaner than Murphy, but he towers over Cooper and Brady.

But of course, it's the quarterback, Brady, who's got my attention. With his warm brown hair, a little too long, whiskey-colored eyes, a mix between brown and gold, and, from what I can see, the body of Captain America, he is the epitome of my type. And, his hands are enormous.

HUGE.

I desperately want to know what those calloused fingers would feel like on my skin. I have never had such an intense, immediate reaction to a guy before.

As a rule, I have always stayed away from Cooper's teammates. It has never been worth the hassle of the hissy fit he will inevitably throw if someone gets near the fragile flower he thinks I am. No one is good enough for me in his mind. I hate it.

When I glance across the kitchen island, a slow smile spreads across Brady's handsome face. Cooper is in the other room calling in our takeout. Murphy and Sebastian both just headed into the family room to turn on the

pregame for Dad's game tonight. The guys move around each other with an ease that shows the comfort level they have with one another.

There is just something about this guy sitting across from me that is drawing me in. Leaning forward, Brady asks, "So do you watch your dad's games? Or does that fall under the 'I hate football' category?"

"Seeing them all in their element is always fun." I tilt my head and smile the way the press manager taught me when dad's team went to the Super Bowl three years ago. The answer is the same, too. I'm from a family of legends, and my job is to look good for the media coverage. "Do you love it, QB, or is it something you do because you're good at it?"

This time when Brady smiles at me, it's crooked and sexy. This is his real smile, not the practiced one for everyone else.

This smile is a danger to my heart.

"Wow. You think you've me figured out already. How about I love it, and I'm good at it. Being on that field, controlling it; it's a high I've never felt anywhere else. The fact that I'm pretty good at it and might be able to turn something I love into a career is definitely a bonus."

"Good. My dad always said the best players play because they love it."

"Sounds like a smart guy. Your turn. What's your story, Natalie?"

I think about that question for a moment. What is my story? "You know, I don't know if anyone's asked me that before. I'm trying to figure out my story. Right now, I am Superbowl winning coach Joe's Sinclair's daughter. Occasionally, I'm Heisman runner up Declan Sinclair's sister. I have always been Cooper Sinclair's twin. And if my mom had her way, I'd be Prima Ballerina Natalie Sinclair."

"Is that who you want to be?"

Shaking my head, no, I answer, "Take a girl to dinner before you interrogate her, QB." I smile up at him through my eyelashes, hoping he'll take the bait, but no such luck. It's as if he shakes himself out of the conversation we were just in, and a wall goes up between us.

"You heard your brother, Nat. You are a no-go area. Come one." He takes my hand, and I swear to God, electricity spikes through my entire arm. "Let's go see what the guys are doing in the other room."

The guys decide on no party tonight. Instead, the pizza is delivered, and we watch Dad's final preseason game, sprawled out all over a giant, dark brown, buttery soft leather sectional. It's shaped like an enormous U with reclining chairs on each end and a matching leather ottoman with a square

tray sitting in the center. This furniture seems to be made for giants, not normal-sized men.

Brady is on one end, and Murphy is on the other. Cooper is in the middle, and Sebastian is on the floor.

These guys are hilarious, and I can see why Cooper gets along so well with them. They give as good as they get. There is a ton of laughter tonight, and I haven't had this much fun in months. I eat pizza and wings, drink a soda, and don't even feel guilty about the number that will be higher on the scale tomorrow, because I won't be putting on my ballet leotard again.

It's been so fun watching the guys tease Cooper. He needs that. As a high school football player who is the son of a famous coach, everyone kisses his ass. These guys do the opposite, and I love it.

Eventually, the game ends, Dad's team winning by two touchdowns. "Little Sinclair." I look up at Murphy, whose eyes are already laughing. Then he throws a football at my head. "Think fast!"

"Son of a bitch" Cooper dives for the ball like it's a bomb, and I laugh, then catch it.

"Come on, Cooper. Chill. I didn't throw it hard." He's belly laughing now. "She's got good reflexes."

Cooper growls. "That's because dudes have been throwing her around on stage for years."

Well. That got everyone's attention. "Spill, little Sinclair. What's he talking about?"

"Seriously? Little Sinclair?" I try for an evil glare, but everyone laughs harder.

From his spot next to me, Brady sighs, "Nat, you're the size of Tinker Bell. Cooper has got to be a foot taller than you. We all are. You are Little Sinclair. You can't blame him."

"You familiar with that particular fairy Brady?" I cock an eyebrow at him.

Brady sits up. "I sure am. My sister went trick or treating dressed as her for three years in a row." He seems to lower his voice at the end of his statement.

Then Murphy starts laughing. "Yeah and QB over here had to go as Peter Pan to make his sister and Mom happy. Picture Brady in green tights." Murphy is laughing so hard he doesn't see the pillow getting thrown at his



face until it smacks him in the nose. “Suck it up, Brady boy. When we were ten years old, I got to be a cool Optimus Prime, and you wore tights.”

Brady mumbles something that sounds like, “I had a bow and arrow.”

“Man, I would have paid to see that.” Cooper hasn’t stopped laughing yet.

Sebastian seems to be the quiet one of the group. I have barely heard him speak tonight. He’s soft-spoken when he does choose to say something, but he has been quick to laugh and seems to have a smile on his face most of the night. I have a feeling he is the silent but deadly type. You never see him coming.

I make a mental note not to piss him off.

Of course, he’s the one to question what my brother just said. “Seriously, Natalie. What’s Cooper talking about? Why do guys throw you around a stage?”

“I’m a ballet dancer.” I leave it because I don’t want to start discussing things I am not ready to get into with my brother just yet.

“You any good?” Murphy has a devious look on his face, and I can’t help but smile.

Before I get to answer, Cooper does. “She’s a ballet dancer, not a stripper, man, stop your gross thoughts before you go there. And she’s great, man.”

God, I missed my brother.

“They call them lifts, Coop. Guys don’t throw me around the stage. I jump. They lift.” I shake my head before standing up.

“I’ll lift you if you need somebody to help you out there, Little Sinclair.” No sooner does Murphy utter those words and wink before he gets two pillows to the face, and I think Brady might have actually growled.

God, that was hot.

Standing up, I look at the guys. “Wow. You are a violent bunch.”

Everyone turns my way and just stares at me like I am crazy.

“Okay, then. My flight was at the crack of dawn this morning, and I am completely exhausted. Jet lag is a real thing. It was great to meet you guys. Thanks for making today suck a little less. I’m going to bed. Will you all be here in the morning?”

“Nope. We have practice at seven tomorrow and then again at three. I’ll be home tomorrow night. I’m guessing Dad is going to try for dinner as

soon as he can since you're here now. Either way, there are a few parties we can crash tomorrow night."

"Sounds good, Coop. Good night, guys." I start to walk away, but I swear I can feel someone staring at me. I peek over my shoulder quickly to see if I'm crazy. I'm not.

Brady is watching me walk away, and judging by the look on his face, he likes what he sees.

Hmm. Is he interested? I can work with this. I may put an extra sway in my step as I walk away.

Game on.

**NATALIE**

A muffled sound wakes me up and takes me a minute to register what it is. I think it was a door shutting. Reaching over, I grab my phone off of my nightstand to check the time. I've only been in bed for a few hours. My body hasn't processed the West Coast/East Coast time difference yet, and I feel like I barely slept at all. I stretch out and look around my room again. There is a faint streetlight filtering in through the curtains.

Judging by the way my father had this room decorated, he must think I am still in my fairy princess phase.

The space is gorgeous and would be a little princess's dream, but I've outgrown my belief in those types of fairy tales. The walls are a light dove grey with elegant, white dupioni silk curtains edged in pale pink stitching stretching from the floor to ceiling on all six windows. The bed is a beautiful, king-sized, white canopy bed with gauzy, white fabric hanging from the canopy's top. An oversized white comforter that reminds me of a cloud and pale pink pillows top it off. Lucky for me, it is the most comfortable bed I've ever slept on.

The dresser is an oversized white dresser with an ornate white mirror. There is a pale pink vanity that is fit for a queen with a small vanity stool topped with grey faux fur. Even the area rug is pale pink, white, and dove grey with hints of baby blue. It's pretty, and I would have loved it when I was ten.

I make a mental note to get room darkening curtains or shades.

Sleep is going to be an issue tonight. After tossing and turning, I decided to head down to the kitchen for something to drink and to hunt for melatonin. Mom always has a bottle near the cold medicine and Ibuprofen in the kitchen, and I'm hoping that's a habit Dad adopted, too. There is a muted light coming from the family room, and it looks like the guys are passed out on the couches. I pad lightly into the kitchen, not wanting to wake anyone up, but then have to muffle a scream.

Sebastian is sitting at the counter, watching me.

"Jesus Christ, Sebastian. You scared me half to death."

"Sorry, Natalie. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm a shit sleeper. I was just getting a drink. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"You know, I think that's the most you've said to me all night." He looks incredibly uncomfortable right now, like I've caught him doing something wrong.

"I learned a long time ago that Murphy would talk enough for all of us."

Sebastian seems like the type of guy that would get more out of watching a conversation and people's reactions to it than being an active participant in it.

"I think I understand that." Sebastian lifts a cup to his mouth, and I'm not surprised. "Is that chocolate milk?" My dad is always talking about what a good recovery drink low-fat chocolate milk is after a workout. He was always trying to get me to drink it. Maybe one day he'll remember that I don't like to drink milk.

Dipping his head to cover what I'm guessing is embarrassment, he answers, "Yeah, it's chocolate milk. There is always some in this fridge. I should probably feel bad because Cooper never drinks it. I think it might just be me. Your dad mentioned a while ago that we should all be drinking low-fat chocolate milk in the summer, especially. Said the sodium in it would help with cramps too. I still feel like a little kid when I'm drinking it."

"That's funny. My dad loves chocolate milk, but it has to be the store-bought kind, not the kind you mix yourself. You guys spend that much time here? That's got to be nice for Cooper. I was worried that senior year would suck being the new kid. It seems like Cooper has found himself a crew."

"Not just Cooper. We've got your back too. You may not know us yet, but we feel like we already know you. Cooper talks about you all the time. It feels like we know you already. He couldn't wait for you to get here.

Kept saying it was wrong having you across the country. Pretty sure it was driving him nuts to have this house to himself.”

“Thanks, Sebastian. I appreciate it.” I hear someone else moving around and turn to see who.

Brady’s walking into the kitchen with low slung blue basketball shorts hanging off his hips and no shirt.

Oh. My. God. His body is incredible. It’s dark in the kitchen, but I swear I just counted eight freaking abs, and he has a light dusting of hair leading down to that elusive V that turns girls like me stupid. I’ve seen men built like this before, but none of them have made my entire body feel like it’s on fire like it does now. I’m hot everywhere, and suddenly, I am very aware that I am sitting here in a cami and booty shorts. My hair is down and probably looking like a rat’s nest after tossing and turning in bed, and I have no makeup on. Not to mention, I don’t even have a bra on. I’m not usually too worried about what I’m wearing, as I’m used to being in very little for dance. My boobs are on the smaller side, but right now, I just know that both these guys can see my nipples poking through this top.

I should have thought it through before I came downstairs.

Shit.

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**BRADY**

*I* was already having a hard time sleeping tonight. Thoughts of a small pixie kept drifting through my head. No doubt Natalie is beautiful, but after spending a few hours with her, it was obvious she was so much more. She had this sarcastic sense of humor that I wasn't expecting. It was fun to watch her come out of her shell. Her answers to our questions got less rehearsed and more real. It made me want to get to know her better. I also caught myself a few times getting annoyed when Murphy would go out of his way to touch her. He wasn't being a creep, but Murph is an overly affectionate, flirty fucker, and it bugged the hell out of me.

I didn't want it to bug me.

I don't date.

I don't do relationships.

Relationships get complicated and complicated screws with my goals.

My goal this year is to win the state championship that slipped through our grips last year. I've already signed my letter of intent for Kroydon University and have a full scholarship and promise of the starting quarterback position waiting for me. Pissing off my new tight end before we've played a single game is not a goal of mine, and I'm pretty sure that Cooper would lose his shit if I told him that I wanted to date his sister.

Even with telling myself this, I can't stop myself from getting up when I hear a distinctly feminine voice floating in from the kitchen. Looking around the room, I see Murphy asleep on the couch, still snoring, and no Bash on the other side of the room. I guess he's in the kitchen with Natalie.

I might be an asshole because I'm trying to convince myself that I can't date Natalie Sinclair, but I sure as hell know that I don't want one of my best friends to take the choice from me.

Walking into the kitchen, I see Natalie and Bash sitting at the island. She's wearing the tiniest little shorts and a white tank top. Her golden blonde locks are messy and falling down around her shoulders, framing that gorgeous make up free face. I momentarily picture waking up next to this girl before quickly forcing myself to shake the image from my head. "Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?"

"Nah, man. I was just grabbing a drink. I'm going to try to crash for a little longer before we have to get up for practice. Night, Nat." Sebastian rinses his glass and heads back to the couches.

Coming to a stop next to the refrigerator, I lean back against the counter and cross my ankles. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shakes her head, no. "Nope. Not even a little. I'm not the greatest sleeper to start with, add in the time change and an overactive mind, and I never had a chance. How are you all sleeping on those couches? You guys are huge. It can't be comfortable."

"It's not too bad. Cooper's up in his room. It's just the three of us down here tonight. Murphy fucking snores, though. Probably why Bash and I can't sleep. We've been crashing at each other's houses all summer, which is kinda funny since we all only live five to ten minutes away." I open the fridge and pull out a bottle of water. "Want one?"

She nods her head again. "Yes, please. I was about to look for Melatonin when I found Sebastian." Natalie walks over to the cabinet to the left of the sink. From this angle, I can see her stretch onto her toes. Her calf muscles are tightening, her tiny little tank is lifting, showing off those sexy dimples above her tight little ass. Even with her arms stretched high, she is never going to be able to reach the shelf with the vitamins on it.

I walk up behind her to see if she needs any help. My hands itch to touch her skin as the citrusy smell of her hair invades my senses. Leaning down, I whisper, "Can you reach that shelf, Little Sinclair?"

Natalie spins around and lets out a squeak. Her hands go to my chest to steady herself, and the warmth of her body puts me on high alert. It would be so easy to lean down and kiss this girl. I have to remind myself why that's a bad idea.

Natalie is trying to get her breathing back under control, but I can see that she is as affected as I am. Sighing, her next words come out breathy and unsure. “Come on, QB. It’s Nat or Natalie. None of this Little Sinclair stuff.”

I reach up over her head, and easily grab the bottle she was reaching for. I hand it to her before backing away. “Height has its privileges.”

Forcing myself to back away is harder than it should be.

Natalie’s cheeks are tinged pink. Her eyes meet mine through those long lashes. “Thanks, Brady.”

My hands itch to touch her again, but I know better than that.

“You should try to get some sleep, Nat. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“Yeah. Cooper said you guys are going to meet us out after dinner with your dad. There is supposed to be a party a few streets over from here. We’ll all be there.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Night, Natalie. Sweet dreams.”

“Night, Brady.”

I’ve never given up on a goal or a plan, and I’m not ready to start now. Staying away from Natalie Sinclair might be my biggest challenge yet.

Shit.



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**BRADY**

When Cooper and I get out of my Baltic Blue Range Rover five minutes before seven this morning, the thermostat is already reading 95. I can feel the humidity in the air clinging to my skin before practice even starts and know it's gonna be another hard day.

As the temperature rises throughout the morning, so do the tensions between the team. They all come crashing down when we practice a running play with Darby Stafford in his new position as left tackle. He is next to Cooper, who is also in his new position as tight end, which happened to be Darby's old position.

I hand the ball off to our running back.

He goes left toward Darby and Coop.

Sebastian, our defensive end, splits the double team of Darby and Coop and tackles the running back for a loss of yards on the play.

So, when he gets in Darby and Coops faces and yells, we all know we're screwed.

Coach Maxwell has been watching us all day. It's as if he knows we were at our boiling points and is just waiting for us to tip over. Maxwell's in his early forties, with slightly graying dark hair and a strong, lean build. He's a few inches shorter than me. For a football coach, he's almost reserved. Until he isn't. When he loses his shit, we all take notice immediately because it doesn't happen often. It does happen today, though.

Coach's entire face is dark red, and the vein in his forehead is bulging. "What the hell happened out there! Do you either of you want to tell me

how Beneventi broke through both of you and caused a loss of yards? If that happens in a game, that could be the difference between celebrating a win or carrying your sorry selves off my football field. Well! What do you have to say for yourselves!”

That’s the exact moment the afternoon goes down in flames. Darby steps forward and answers Coach first. “Just saying Coach, but maybe Sinclair here shouldn’t be in the tight end position. His last name doesn’t seem to be getting it done.”

Cooper spins on Darby, grabbing him by the facemask. “You got something to say to me, asshole, say it to my face.”

Coach grabs both of them by their Jerseys and drags them to the middle of the field. “We are one team, gentlemen. We win as one, and we lose as one. I don’t give a rat’s ass what your last name is. I don’t care that Sinclair’s dad is a football coach, just like I don’t care that Stafford’s grandfather is a huge donor to the school. You earn your positions on my field, and you can lose your positions on my field. Now, I would like everyone to thank Mr. Stafford and Mr. Sinclair today. They are the reason that you will all be doing up-downs until I say you are done.”

The grumbling starts right away. Up downs are right up there with torture at this point in the week. This is the absolute last thing any of us feel like doing at this point, but we don’t have a choice. Coach blows his whistle, and we start the first of what end up being 100 up-downs.

The rest of the day goes better than the morning, but I wouldn’t call it good.

By the time Murphy, Sebastian, Cooper, and I exit the locker room, the tension in the air is still hanging heavy. Everyone’s tired, but Murphy is determined to get us hyped up. Clapping his hands together as we approach our cars, Murph leans back on his black Escalade and smiles. “Alright, men. Today was a shit show, but tonight we party. Tiffany’s house. Be there or be home jerking off by yourself instead of getting your dick sucked by a hot little cheerleader.”

Groaning, I lean on my car across from Murphy’s. “Come on, Murph, man. Aren’t you over that crew? They spew nothing but nasty shit constantly. Most of them don’t even care who they are hooking up with as long as you play football. Have some standards.”

“Shut the fuck up, QB. They can’t spew anything when you keep their mouths busy. I’ll take *easy*, less work for me to do.” Murph climbs into his

car and revs the engine. “Catch you later, assholes.” You can hear his laughter as he pulls out of the parking lot.

Throwing his blue and gold gym bag into the back of his Hummer, Bash stops to look at Coop and me. “One of these days, a chick is going to do him dirty. I hope he doesn’t go down in flames, itching, and scratching.” Bash follows Murphy out.

Coop and I climb in the Range Rover. Adjusting his Notre Dame baseball hat, Coop stares out the window. “You know Darby better than I do. Do you think he’s going to be a problem?”

Taking my eyes off the road momentarily, I look his way. “No. I don’t think he will be. He’ll fall in line. He’s always been a team player. I don’t think that will change. Left tackle is still a good position, even if it’s not what he wanted.”

Coop nods but doesn’t say anything else.

“You going to the party tonight?” What I really want to know is if he’s bringing Natalie.

“Yeah. I promised Tiffany I’d go. I gotta do dinner first. Dad wants to take Nattie out tonight. Welcome her home.”

“Are you and Tiffany a thing now? Be careful, man. She’s a clinger.”

“Nah. We’re just having some fun.”

“You bringing Natalie with you to the party?” I try to sound casual, but I hate how much I want him to say she’ll be there tonight.

“That’s the plan. Is your sister going? It’d be nice to introduce Nat to Chloe. I’m sure she’d like to know another girl before school starts. Especially one I haven’t already hooked up with.”

“I think she’s going. Once she hears your sister’s going to be there, she won’t be able to miss it. She told me before she can’t wait to meet the female version of you. I have to say, I think Little Sinclair is a significant improvement.”

Coop regards me for a moment, before shutting me down. “No.”

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**NATALIE**

*I*t's barely been a full day since I moved into this room, but I've done a pretty good job of making it a little less fit for a princess and a little more me. Pictures of me, Cooper, and Declan line my shelves, along with a few of my friend Luca and me when we danced Sleeping Beauty last year.

Earlier today, I went in search of the boxes that I had shipped from California last week. I found them all in the spare room down the hall. There's a dark wood bed and dresser set in there too. I think that must be Declan's room for when he comes home to visit. I hung my favorite twinkly lights in the gauzy fabric surrounding my bed. My goal is to feel surrounded by stars at night. Not sure if that's gonna work, but it's worth a try. I have a few fashion sketches given to my mom years ago that are now framed and hanging over my bed. Gorgeous gowns sketched out in beautiful jewel tones. She wore the four different dresses in a New York fashion week event. They add a nice pop of color to my white and grey room. I've got Lewis Capaldi singing from my MacBook and my favorite buttercream scented candle burning.

There is still more to do, but it's starting to feel like home.

I'm nervous about talking to my dad about dancing tonight. So, I text Luca to give me the courage I need.

**Nattie:** Hey how's the new company? \*Gif of James Corden learning ballet\*

**Luca:** It's fantastic. A whole new group of uptight bitches and dudes who hit on my boyfriend right in front of me.

**Nattie:** Sounds like heaven. \*Winking eye emoji\*

**Luca:** What's up buttercup? How's Philly treating you? Did ya eat a cheesesteak yet?

**Nattie:** Nope. But I'm telling my dad I want to stop dancing tonight.

**Luca:** That outta make big daddy Sinclair stroke out. Have fun with that. Then send a pic.

**Nattie:** Your weird crush on my dad is NOT helping. I'm nervous already.

**Luca:** Don't judge. He's a total DILF. Pull up your big girl panties and do it. Then find a hottie and do him too. That should make you feel better after breaking your poor dad's heart.

**Nattie:** You're an ASSHOLE!!!

**Luca:** Yup. But you love me. Tell him tonight. Love you. Gotta go.

I hate that's he's right. I just have to rip the band-aid off and tell Dad.



Now, I am sitting at my vanity in a strapless, pale blue sundress, fitted to the waist, then loose to my knees, and my favorite nude espadrilles from J. Crew. I've got a small rose gold chain with a pink stone resting on my collarbones and matching hoop earrings in. My blonde hair is down in loose waves, and mascara, eyeliner, and a little gloss finish off the look. I'm just starting to scroll through my Instagram when there is a knock on my door. Quickly checking myself over in the mirror, I open the door and find my dad.

Luca wasn't wrong. Joe Sinclair is a handsome man. He's forty-five but looks ten years younger. His dirty blonde hair is cut close to his head. Cooper and I both have his pale blue eyes and coloring. Declan takes after our mom, with chocolate brown hair and eyes so blue they are nearly violet. Dad's shoulders are broad, and his strong arms give the best hugs. I hadn't heard him come home and hadn't realized how much I miss him until he is standing in front of me. I'm pulled into his chest and start to cry.

"Oh, honey. I missed you too. Please don't cry." His arms tighten their hold, and I breathe in his unique smell. Irish Spring and Dad. The overwhelming feeling of being safe and loved envelopes me.

“I can’t help it, Daddy. I missed you.” He doesn’t let me go for a long minute, and I manage to pull myself together. I hate being a crier. If I get mad, I cry; sad, I cry; overly happy... more tears.

“I missed you too, Nattie. I’m so glad that you decided to come with me this year. Let’s grab Cooper. We have reservations in thirty minutes, I’m starving, and I want to hear all about your ballet workshop. Tell me everything I missed this summer.”

We take two cars into the city because Dad has to go back to the football complex after dinner to go over a few things with his coaching staff. I ride with Dad in his massive, silver Ford F-350, with Cooper following behind in his red Jeep Rubicon. We drive into the center of the city to the Four Seasons Hotel. It’s beautiful, full of glass and marble. Very chic and modern. Enormous white and purple floral arrangements sit on every surface. The smell of lavender is inescapable.

We are escorted up to the 59<sup>th</sup> floor by a concierge who couldn’t do enough for my father as soon as his name was mentioned. The restaurant, Jean-Georges, is beautiful. White linen tablecloths line the tables. Massive floor to ceiling windows overlook the Philadelphia skyline, showing off the skyscrapers’ white lights and the dome of City Hall. I can just make out the view of the Delaware River in the distance. It’s breathtaking.

The smells of expensive steaks and heavy sauces linger in the air and make my stomach rumble. Servers come in and out of the kitchen dressed in black and white, carrying meals that look like they should be on the cover of a magazine. I know my dad’s assistant must have made this reservation for him. He would be happier at the local diner eating meatloaf and mashed potatoes than in a fancy restaurant like this. This is more Mom’s style.

Dad and Cooper haven’t stopped talking football yet. I nod my head and throw a smile out when they look my way, but this is their conversation. My nerves have been ratcheting up all evening, just waiting for the topic to switch to dance.

When they come to clear away our plates, I’ve decided if I don’t talk to him now, I’m going to lose my nerve. Whether that’s a bad thing is yet to be seen. Checking my phone for the time, I sit up straighter and roll my shoulders back, bracing for the conversation to come.

The idea of telling him that I’m ready to throw away my pointe shoes makes me want to vomit. I mentioned it to my mom once this summer, and

she told me I would be wasting my life, took a Xanax, and went to bed.

That's her usual answer to stress.

Deciding there's no time like the present, I jump in at the first lull in the conversation. "So, Dad, I wanted to talk to you about something." My father turns his head to me, pinning me with his eyes. I forge on. "I'm ready to move on from ballet. I don't want to take class anymore. I've decided to stop dancing." Jesus, I need to shut up before I ramble off a freaking cliff.

"What are you talking about? You love dancing." That's from Dad.

"Are you kidding? You love dancing." That's from Cooper.

A server walks up to our table with a platter full of sample desserts, hears the raised voices of my father and brother, and turns away. It would be comical if it wasn't my life.

"Actually, I love you guys, and Mom, and Declan. I don't love dancing. I realized this summer that I kind of hate it. Maybe not dancing exactly, but everything that goes with it."

Dad crumples his napkin on the table. He scrunches his eyes, the fine lines around them appearing. His lips are turned down, and I know he is disappointed. I hate that, in his world, you don't give up. And that's what he thinks I'm doing. Cooper leans back in his chair as if to avoid being an active participant in the argument that is about to begin.

My father leans both arms on the table and his blue eyes holding mine at attention. "Nattie, I don't understand. Last year you were begging us to go to a ballet school in New York. What's changed?"

"Daddy, I was never actually begging for that. Mom was kind of pushing that on me. I'm not sure what exactly changed. I just know that it doesn't make me happy anymore, not how it used to."

"I am tired of dedicating all of my time to it. I'm tired of watching every calorie that goes into my mouth. I am tired of the nasty girls that hate me because I've gotten the role they want. I just want to enjoy the last year of high school and figure out what I want to do with my life after I graduate."

The server comes back and quietly slips the small, black leather billfold with the check on the table, giving me a momentary reprieve. He looks at me with a slight smile, as if to say good luck, then quickly walks away.

My father's voice is deep and louder than I'd like. "Ballet is no longer what you want to do with your life? To do anything well, it takes dedication

and practice. It's years of hard work. Ten thousand hours to be considered an expert at anything you do."

I've heard this speech so many times throughout my life. I wish I could yawn with the sense of exhaustion it brings.

Dad's not done yet. He pulls his credit card out of his wallet, laying it in the billfold and signaling to the waiter. Speaking to me now without the eye contact he held a minute ago, he tells me, "You have to understand how disappointed I am that you are just going to give up and quit. Not everyone else has the God-given talent you have. I don't want to see you waste it now and regret it later."

Looking at Cooper for help, I'm let down when he refuses to meet my eyes too. My shoulders drop, and all of the bravado I forced on myself at the start of this conversation is gone. "I don't understand, Dad. This is my life. Not yours. I don't want to do this for the next ten years just because I'm good at it."

Cooper puts his hand on mine, and I mistakenly think he's about to back me up. "But you're not just good, Nattie, you're great. Do you want to give that up?"

I clear my throat and can feel the tears starting. Damn it. "Please listen to me. This isn't a decision that I made on a whim. The fact that you both can't imagine your lives without football, isn't a good enough reason for me to live my life in pointe shoes."

My voice is wavering, and I decide I'm not ready to break just yet—deep breath. "Ballet has always been my escape. While you guys have spent your lives on a football field, I've spent mine on a stage, and I am done trying to escape. I want to live my life.

"I want to find something that makes me feel the way ballet used to make me feel. I want to have a life. I want to enjoy my senior year. I want to date and go to parties and prom. You've gotten to do all of that, Cooper, but I haven't.

"Daddy, can't you be happy that I am deciding this now and not after I've missed the opportunity to go to college? Most parents would be thrilled that their child is telling them they want to give up dancing and go to college."

Shit. Wrong thing to say. The red comes back to my father's cheeks. "Natalie Grace Sinclair, I have watched you dance your entire life. It was obvious from the time you were a little girl in a pink tutu that you were



meant to be on a stage. I don't want you to do anything that you are going to regret. I have not raised my children to be quitters, and I do not accept this."

Raising my voice to my father for the first time tonight, I stand from my chair. "You're not hearing me. I am not going to regret this, Daddy. I am not quitting. I have gotten everything out of ballet that I am going to and want to pursue other things. That's not quitting. It's switching directions and deciding what I don't want to do with my life, so that I can find the thing that I do want to do, instead of just knowing what I don't want to do."

"Lower your voice right now, young lady. That is all still to be determined. This conversation is not over; it is on hold. I'm going to have to discuss this with your mother, and we both know having to discuss anything with your mother is not something that I want to do. In the meantime, you may not want to work with Madame Irina the way that we had planned, but I want you to find a local ballet school and take a few classes.

I sit back down and take a sip of my water as my father continues. "Make sure, really sure, that this is what you want. Then we can make a decision."

The waiter picks that moment to give my father his card back and a pile of fancy chocolates wrapped in gold. Cooper grabs a handful and gets a glare from my father. He drops chocolate in front of me, and I glare at him and mumble *traitor*.

"This conversation is to be continued. I have a meeting at the complex that I need to get to." He picks up my hand and squeezes.

"I love you kids and want you to live extraordinary and fulfilling lives. You may not always like what I have to say, but trust me when I tell you I'm on your side."

Giving my father a nod of the head, I sit while he stands up, kisses my cheek, and then turns to Cooper. "Make sure your sister gets home safe. See you tomorrow."

I wait until my father walks away before turning on Cooper, nailing him to his seat with my glare, and the smile on his face vanishes. "You suck!"

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**NATALIE**

**T**hank God we took two cars to the restaurant tonight, because I think that I would rather walk home than spend any more time with my father right now. I'm not thrilled with my brother either, but he is by far the lesser of two evils at the moment.

Slamming the door of the Jeep, I sit with my arms crossed over my chest and my face turned to the window.

Coop gets in but makes no move to start the car. "Nattie."

His voice sounds pained. Good.

Turning my face toward him, the tears I've been holding in for the last thirty minutes finally flow freely down my face. My traitor brother looks at me like I'm a ticking time bomb that he doesn't know how to defuse.

"You were supposed to be on my side. We are always on each other's side, Coop. What the hell was that back there?"

Coop's eyes are the size of small dinner plates as he reaches for me, but I pull my body closer to the door. "Just take me home. Please." I lean my head back and close my eyes.

"You blindsided me in there. I didn't know you were done with dance. If you want me on your side, give me a damn heads-up next time."

I hate it when he's right.

"Dad loves you. He just wants what's best. If you don't think that's dancing anymore, we'll make him understand. I promise. Please don't cry."

Wiping my eyes, I look up at my brother. He used to look like a kid, but now he seems so much older than eighteen. I lean my head on his shoulder and close my eyes again. "I love you, Cooper. I will cheer you on at every

game you ever play in. I will always be your number one fan, but I just don't want to be the one on stage anymore. I'm done, Coop, and I'm not going to change my mind. I'm not just quitting. I've been thinking about this since before the summer intensive. Dance just doesn't make me happy anymore. You guys just haven't been around enough to notice."

Placing his arm around my shoulders, Cooper pulls me into him. "Why didn't you tell me? We've always told each other everything. I might not have been around, but I was only a phone call away. I will always be on your side."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Always." He leans over and wraps me up in a big hug. For the first time all night, I feel like things might just work out okay.

I can't stop the tears now. I think I've danced for as long as I have because I didn't want to let anyone down. We are overachievers in our family, and ballet was my achievement. Now, what am I going to do? I start to get myself under control and realize that I've left tear stains on Coop's shirt, and when he looks down, he sees it too.

We both start to laugh, and the sound echoes around inside the Jeep.

"Okay. If you are done with the pity party, can we head to a real party? I told the guys we'd meet them tonight. Brady's sister, Chloe, might be there. She is going to be a junior. Murphy's sister, Carys, is younger. A sophomore, I think, so I'm not sure if she'll be there. I thought it would be a good chance for you to meet some people."

I look at myself in the passenger mirror and wipe my face. "Hey, this was not a pity party. I'm good. I just needed a minute. I guess a real party doesn't sound bad. Do I need to go home and get changed first?"

"Nope. These girls dress up for everything. Plus, you're my sister, so they have to love you." He winks at me, and I groan.

"Oh, God, Cooper. Have you slept with them all already?" He looks at me and laughs hard.



Okay, so Cooper wasn't kidding when he said these girls dress up. We are in a beautiful backyard a few streets away from our house. There are Edison bulb lights strung from the columns that

surround the patio and swimming pool. The outdoor furniture is pretty teak wood, with oversized, overstuffed cushions that look incredibly comfortable. The backyard is big, bigger than ours, I think, with lush, tall evergreen trees surrounding the fence around the pool. With the number of people here, it should feel crowded, but it doesn't.

Is this the whole school?

I think I may actually be underdressed compared to half the girls here and overdressed compared to the other half. I am pretty sure I am not meeting the high end, name brand requirement that must have been sent out for this party. I've never been much of a label whore, but you can't be the daughter of a retired model and not know high-end fashion.

These girls are in slinky dresses. More than one has got to cost over a thousand dollars. And who wears Louboutin's at a pool party?

The other half of the girls here are in tiny bikinis, which wouldn't be out of place if they weren't wearing heels. It's a combination you don't see often, and it seems like it would be less unexpected at a rock star's blow out than a high school party.

Of course, the guys are all in the standard guy uniform, cargo shorts and t-shirts or short sleeve button-ups. There's a few in board shorts and even fewer in jeans. Guys have it so easy. If it doesn't smell, they wear it. It doesn't matter if it was hanging up, in a drawer, on the floor, or in the laundry basket.

I will always be jealous of how simple it is for them to get ready.

A beautiful girl with white-blonde hair, wearing an electric blue bodycon dress and silver gladiator sandals, makes a beeline for Cooper as soon as she sees him. Her voice is high pitched and a touch whiney. "Cooper! I've been waiting for you all night. The guys said you were coming, but I was starting to think you were blowing me off." That's when she looks at me, and I think if looks could kill, I'd be dying a slow, fiery death. "Who is this?"

Oh yeah, this girl is ready to show her claws and lay her claim. I guess she doesn't know that Cooper doesn't let anyone claim him.

"Tiffany, this is my sister Natalie. She just got into town yesterday." Of course, now her face changes, and I am pretty sure she is quickly trying to assess how she can use me to get closer to my brother. This isn't the first time a girl has tried to befriend me to get closer to Cooper or even Declan.

Her voice changes as much as her approach to me. She seems more relaxed but still a little too excited for my taste. "Natalie. Oh, my God. You and Cooper look exactly alike. I don't know how I missed it. We should hang out. I can give you the low down on everything. I want to hear all about you and your school in California. And you have to tell me all of Cooper's dirty secrets."

Turning my head to Cooper, I lift the corner of my mouth. Really? This is who he's seeing? Thank God Cooper can read my face because I need to get away from this girl, like now. "Tiff, I'm going to take Natalie to get a drink and find the guys. I'll find you later."

"Promise, Coop?" Pushing her bottom lip out, she pouts and rubs her hands up his chest.

"Yup. Be back soon, Babe." Coop gives her a quick kiss on the lips, and I want to gag.

Cooper grabs my arm, and we head toward the back of the property. Shaking my head at my brother, I ask, "Babe? Really, Coop?"

"Shut it, troublemaker."

He maneuvers us through the back yard. A few girls are dancing next to the pool, sounds of Dua Lipa blasting through the outdoor speakers. A few guys stop Coop to talk about the fight today at practice, but he blows them off. As we walk away from the last guy, I give him the side-eye, and he shakes his head. "I'll tell you later. We've already hit our drama quota for the night."

With his hand on the middle of my back, we come up to the pool house. It looks like a smaller replica of the main house, with white shaker shingles with a black roof and matching flower boxes with red, white, and dark purple flowers flowing down.

I can already see Sebastian lifting a beer to his lips. He looks calm and laid back in well-worn jeans and a white Kroydon Prep t-shirt with navy blue lettering. His dark hair looks messy, like he's run his fingers through it a few too many times. He's definitely giving off a "too cool for this kind of party" vibe.

As we get closer, I spot Murphy off to the side with a blonde on one arm and a brunette on the other. His emerald green baseball hat is on backward, making his eyes pop even greener than they did yesterday. A big blonde guy who makes these two look tiny stands off to the side, with an easy-going smile.

"Little Sinclair!" Murphy's voice booms as he moves toward me. Bear hugging me, he picks me up off the ground.

"Dude. Put my sister down."

Murphy's squeezes me tighter. "How about you cool off in the pool, Little Sinclair."

"Murphy! Don't you dare." I pinch his sides, and he laughs as he places me back on my feet more gently than I thought he was capable of. "Seriously, Murphy. Do you ever use an inside voice?" Seeing that I am now the center of attention, I cringe.

I wave my hand toward Sebastian and the blonde giant. "Hi, guys."

"Nope. The louder, the better, in my house. Little Sinclair, meet Holly and Heather." He gestures to the girls on either side of him.

Holly glares at him.

"It's Molly, Aiden." She pouts up at Murphy, and he graces her with a sexy smile. There is an awful lot of pouting going on at this party.

"That's what I said. Molly." He lightly smacks her ass, causing Molly to smile and Heather to look disappointed, "I will catch you guys later." Murphy leans down and kisses Heather, with his hand still planted firmly on Molly's butt. And just like that, he walks away with two girls.

Huh. Okay then. The more, the merrier, I guess.

Cooper comes back over with a beer and a spiked lemonade. "Want one, Nat?"

I chose the lemonade. "Thanks, Coop. So, big brother. Tell me something." I walk over to Sebastian and lean against the pool house next to him. "Have you screwed Tiffany yet, or is she your next conquest?"

Sebastian laughs so hard he spits his beer out, then grabs Coop's shoulder. "Dude. She's got you. That one is a serious clinger, and she is going to get nasty when you drop her. Natalie, stay clear of her and her group of friends. You don't want their brand of drama."

"Shut up, Bash. When was the last time you got your dick sucked?" Cooper looks smug as he asks this.

Rolling my eyes, I turn my head and see Brady heading our way. He has a beautiful girl walking next to him. He's not touching her, but they are both laughing. They look comfortable together, and I hope she is his sister and not a girlfriend. She's not as short as I am, but Brady still towers over her. I'd guess she's at least 5'6. She is wearing boyfriend jeans rolled up at her ankles, with holes in the knees, bright purple converse, and a white, wife-

beater tank top. Her warm brown hair is parted down the middle and braided on either side with purple ribbons tied around the ends. I immediately love her. She's giving off a great vibe. God, she had better be his sister.

Brady's in camo cargo shorts and a soft-looking light blue, V-neck t-shirt stretched tight across his chest and around his biceps, with a pair of leather flip flops on his feet. He looks casual and so freaking good.

"Hey, guys." Brady and the guys do that weird half hug, half handshake thing. Then he walks over to me. "Natalie, this is my sister Chloe." I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"Ahh. So, this is Natalie." She looks up at Brady and smiles, then looks at me, winks, and links her arm through mine. "Come on, Nat. Let's get me a drink and get you out of here. Tiffany is coming our way and eyeing Cooper like he's a lollipop, and she knows exactly how many licks it will take to get to the gooey center." She raises her eyebrows at me, and I burst out laughing.

"Oh my God, I think I love you."

As the two of us start to walk away, Chloe turns around and looks at Cooper. "Have fun, Cooper. Don't forget, babies grow up in 18 years, but herpes lasts forever!"

Yup. I found my first friend in this town.



Chloe and I have been sharing one of the oversized lounge chairs with a big fat, red cushion and an overabundance of pillows. At the same time, we drink spiked lemonades and compare having overprotective, alpha brothers, our hatred of the dreaded Mean Girls, and what to expect at Kroydon Hills Prep in a week.

It sounds like my new school is like every other one I've attended through the years. The girls are mostly catty, the guys are overgrown toddlers, and the football team are gods. Brady, Sebastian, and even Murphy, this time without two girls, check in on us throughout the night. There hasn't been any sign of Cooper for a while, and I'm mildly grossed out even thinking of why because I haven't seen Tiffany either.

A few guys from the football team have stopped by to talk to Chloe and introduce themselves to me. One guy seems nice, Darby, our team's left tackle. He sits down for a few minutes while Chloe is getting us drinks. He seems nice and is a definite hottie.

When Chloe gets back with our lemonades, Darby stands to leave. He grabs my phone from the cushion next to me and holds it out, with a hopeful smile on his lips. "Wanna give me your number? Maybe we could grab a movie or a pizza sometime."

Sitting up straighter, I unlock my phone and hand it back to him. "Sure. Text yourself from my phone, so we have each other's numbers." I'm rewarded with another smile. This one makes the dimples in his cheeks pop. I am a sucker for dimples.

Darby types into my phone, and I hear the ping of the text going through to his. "I'll text you this week. See ya later, Natalie. Night Chloe." He walks off toward a group of guys I haven't met and grabs a beer.

Chloe makes herself comfy on the chair. "Watch out for Darby. He's a bit of a player."

"Huh. He seemed cool."

"Just telling you what I've heard."

"Thanks."

"So, tell me about you, Nat. What do you do for fun?"

"Well, when I'm not dancing, I like to listen to music and sketch."

"Oh, sketch what?"

"All sorts of things. I like to sketch fashion, people, different images. Like the way you're dressed right now would be a perfect pic. The purple ribbons in your hair would pop. I'd put you right on this chair so the red would offset the purple. The colors would jump off the page. I've been accumulating these Copic makers over the last few months, and I love them."

"That sounds cool. You'll have to sketch me something. A Natalie Sinclair original."

"Ha. I wish. I'm not that good. It's just something I do for fun. What about you? Please tell me there is something more to do in this town besides football."

"If Texas is the high school football capital of the country, Pennsylvania is the next biggest. It is huge here, but there are other things to do. We have an old school movie theater in town that only shows black and white



classics. I love to go there and catch Casablanca or Rear Window, something old and amazing. I'm boring. I love to read."

"Me too! What do you read?" I may be a little too excited to hear this.

"Romance."

"So do I! We can have a book club." Really cool, Natalie. A book club. That's gonna win you friends.

"We totally should. We can read the same thing, and then have a girl's night to talk about our new book boyfriends. My bestie Sabrina will definitely want in on this, too."

We talk more about the school, the different cliques I can expect to see. Chloe and Brady have only gone to the Prep, so she is a walking encyclopedia of everything to know and expect. Who to stay away from and who some of the genuinely nice people are.

It's getting late, I've had a few drinks, and I'm starting to get tired. I tell myself that I am just going to close my eyes for a second. At least I thought it was only a second. The next thing I know, I hear Brady and Chloe talking.

"She fell asleep a few minutes ago. Where's Cooper? Nat needs to go home."

I open my eyes and see Brady squatting down at the side of the chair. God, he is a sight. The light is framing his face, making his whiskey-colored eyes brighter than before. His smile makes my insides flutter, and I want to kick myself for even thinking that.

"I'm awake, guys. Jet lag is still kicking my ass. I guess it's going to take a few days."

"How about I get you home, Nat? It's only a few streets over from here. I can walk you home. Chloe, I'll come back and get you after. Okay?"

Chloe gets up. "Don't worry about me. Sebastian said he was leaving soon. I'll have him drop me off. Nat, I'll call you tomorrow. We can go shopping for your school uniforms and figure out what day next week you want to come down to the beach with me, too."

Murphy and Sebastian walk over to us, catching the last part of Chloe's statement.

Murphy's smile grows twice as big. "Party at the beach house? Count us in." Murphy looks to Bash, who nods then continues, "You've got to do it after Thursday's scrimmage is over. Coach is giving us a four-day weekend for Labor Day."

"Why yes, Murphy, let us plan our girl's beach day around your football schedule."

Chloe is throwing down the sarcasm, but Murphy isn't picking it up. I might love her even more.

"Perfect." Murphy kisses Chloe on the top of the head and walks away.

"Do you think the sky is blue in the world that Murphy lives in?" Chloe smirks at her own joke.

"Come on, Chloe. Do you need a ride? I'm heading out." Sebastian reaches down, pulling on one of Chloe's braids. Hmm. I can't help but wonder if there is more to that right there.

Placing his palm out for my hand, Brady asks, "Ready?"

Not even a little bit.

"Sure. Just let me text Cooper to tell him I'm leaving."



It's odd to be walking home from a party. I don't think we've ever lived in a town that was small enough to walk anywhere besides the mailbox and back before now. The houses are spaced far enough apart that there is plenty of privacy, but there is this cozy feel here that I think I could love. I have this overwhelming sensation that this is precisely where I'm supposed to be, and I'm suddenly grateful that Dad got this job.

Brady and I are walking along a dark sidewalk. The dull streetlamps are lighting our way. It feels strangely intimate.

"So, tell me about yourself, Little Sinclair."

"Only if you stop calling me that, QB."

"Done. What's your favorite ice cream?"

"What?"

"Ice cream," Brady speaks slowly like I didn't understand him. "Mine's vanilla with rainbow jimmies."

"Mint chocolate chip. This can't be one-sided, QB. I want a question for every one you get." Brady nods his acceptance. "Favorite thing to do, and you can't say football."

"Hmm. That's a good one. I like to ski. You?"

“I’ve never skied before. We’ve gone to Vale a few times, but my mom and I usually just went to the spa while my dad and brothers did the skiing. It was her version of bonding.”

“We’ll have to all go skiing this winter. We can day trip to the Poconos. I’ll get you out on the slopes. Favorite smell?”

“A warm chocolate chip cookie. Just out of the oven. They smell so good. You?”

Brady groans. “You’re making me hungry, woman.”

“Hey, you didn’t answer. Favorite smell?”

“Oh, that’s easy, the smell of the ocean when we cross the bridge, driving down to the shore. It’s... I don’t know, I love that smell.”

“That’s a good one. Chloe asked me to go to the beach with her next week. Then Murphy and Sebastian decided it’s a party. So maybe I will get to smell that soon. Hey, what’s the story with your sister and Sebastian?”

“No story. Chloe and Bash have known each other since he moved to town

in fifth grade.” He must belatedly understand my question because he laughs a second later. “Nope. That’s not happening. Chloe doesn’t swing that way. She’s more likely to be into you than him.”

“Really? I wonder if I’m her type.” I smile up at him, and the look he is giving me is priceless. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding. Your sister is beautiful. As soon as I saw her walking toward me at the party, I knew instantly we were going to be friends, which is strange because I don’t make friends easily. She’s great. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to come tonight, but I am so glad that I did.”

Coming to a stop, Brady angles his head down at me and grabs my hand. “Why didn’t you want to come tonight?”

“Cooper and I had dinner with our dad. I told him I wanted to take a break from ballet, and he called me a quitter and told me how disappointed he was in me. It was a brutal dinner.”

“Sounds bad. I’m glad you came, though, and that your night got better.” He is still holding my hand as I bring my eyes up to his.

“That’s very sweet of you, QB.”

“Damn, you look beautiful when you smile, Natalie.” Brady’s fingers find mine as he twirls me around in a circle, my dress spinning out around my legs, while we stand under a huge, old oak tree on the edge of this quiet

street. The cicadas are causing a constant, dull thrum in the background, and the fireflies are lighting up the night's sky.

It's beautiful and romantic. I think I'm about to get kissed.

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**BRADY**

As much as I don't want to admit it, I'm drawn to Natalie Sinclair. I can't explain it, but there is a pull I don't think I want to fight. She's sweet and funny, sassy and sarcastic, and fucking beautiful. My fingers reach for hers, and I spin her around like the ballerina she is.

Her pale blue dress is the same shade as her eyes. It's strapless and ties in a knot at her chest with a small open hole under the knot. Cooper would fucking kill me if he knew how much time I spent tonight thinking about how easy it would be to untie that knot. Untie her like she was my favorite birthday present. She may have been showing less skin than most of the girls at the party, but she was sexier than all of them.

Nat spent the night laughing and talking with my sister, and for an unexplainable reason, that made me happy. I can't figure out why she feels right when the idea of a girlfriend feels like a complication I don't need.

She stops spinning in front of me. Her hair is soft and framing her gorgeous face. Flushed cheeks and a beautiful smile are lighting up her eyes...

At that moment, something settles in me, knowing that I put that smile on her face. I want to be the man that earns that smile every day. I run my hands up her arms, feeling the goosebumps I'm leaving in my tracks, and Natalie shivers. Resting my hands under the hair at the back of her head, I'm about to kiss Natalie Sinclair. Until I see fucking headlights coming our way.

"Brady?" Nat's looking up at me now. She's doesn't know it yet but will realize any second that Cooper's Rubicon is approaching us.

Cooper pulls up next to us and lowers the windows. I've already moved my hands, so he hasn't jumped out of the car and started throwing the punches he would have thrown if he caught me kissing his sister. "Hey, Nattie. I'm sorry. Hop in, guys. I'll drop Brady off then drive us home."

"I'm good, man. I'll walk."

I open the door for Natalie, watching her get settled before closing it behind her. Nat leans on the open window. "Thanks for walking me home, Brady."

"Yeah, man, thanks for walking her home. Sorry I was otherwise occupied."

"Eww! Man Whore! I do not even want to KNOW how exactly you were occupied! Just take me home. I'm exhausted."

"I can't help I, the ladies can't get enough. See you later, QB."

I call back, "Don't be a douche, Sinclair." Then hear Nat making fake gagging noises as she rolls the window up.

I watch them drive away and wonder what the fuck I was thinking. I was so close to kissing this girl. She's the good girl you introduce to your mom, not the girl you let suck your dick and then toss aside. She is fucking incredible, but am I going to break my own rule and potentially fuck up my final season playing for the Kroydon Knights and possibly the friendship I've got going with her brother on and off the field?

I don't know if I can throw away what I feel like I have worked my whole life toward for a girl that I've just met. I've signed my letter of intent, but my offer and scholarship can still be rescinded. So why can't I stop thinking about her lips on mine. Natalie Sinclair might be worth the risk.

Walking into my house a few minutes later, I kick my flip flops under the bench in the mudroom and lock the door behind me. There is a lone light on in the kitchen, and I can see my sister sitting on one of the barstools at the counter. Chloe has a cold piece of pizza in front of her mouth and a glass of iced tea next to her.

She's changed into a grey pair of Kroydon Prep sweats and fuzzy socks, like it's the middle of winter. Tilting her head to the side, my sister squints her eyes like she is thinking hard about something. "Well, damn, Brady. I was hoping it would take you longer to get home."

"Why would you want me to take longer? What are you up to?" I lean down and take a bite out of her pizza before she can, then settle myself on the stool next to her.

“Fucker! You might as well take the slice now. Gross.” She grumbles as she hands me the pizza and walks back over to the refrigerator. She gets herself another slice and pushes the pizza box across the counter to me. “I was hoping you’d take longer getting home because I was hoping you and Natalie would take a long way.” She waggles her eyebrows at me exaggeratedly, and I groan.

“Lay off. That’s not happening.”

“Well, why not? She is one of the first cool chicks to come to town in ages. She’s pretty, has a brain, and she seemed like a genuinely sweet girl. Not to mention, she obviously knows football and understands what it takes to play at your level. If I thought I had a chance, I’d go for it, but I’m pretty sure you’re more her type. So, tell me, why can’t it happen?”

“I know you were watching her. You checked on us all night, and I saw the look on your face whenever other guys stopped to talk to us. You looked pissed when Darby sat down with her. Do you know he took her number and asked if she wanted to catch a movie? This one might not actually throw herself at your feet. You might have to put a little effort in here.”

Knowing he has her number and I don’t causes a punch to the gut I wasn’t prepared for.

“I was not watching Natalie all night. I was looking out for my little sister. Gotta keep you safe.”

Chloe rolls her eyes at me. She has a black belt in Judo and started studying Muay Thai last year. My sister could probably kick my ass with her eyes closed. But there is no way that I will tell my sister she’s right, and that I couldn’t keep my eyes off Natalie tonight.

That would be giving her too much ammunition, and I am not in the mood to deal with it now.

“What the fuck ever, Brady. Don’t be a pussy. Go for the girl before someone else does. You’re a good guy. Cooper will get over it. You already signed your letter of intent, so you don’t have to stress out about college, and you’re the best player on the team, so enjoy your last season with your own personal cheerleader in the stands. Stop overanalyzing this the way that I know you are doing right now. Get out of your head for once.”

“Well, when you put it that way, how could I not listen? Why don’t I just let you tell me how to live my life while you’re at it, Chloe?”

“Be careful what you wish for. Your life seems pretty boring right now. Try actually living it a little. Have some fun. That’s what I would tell you to

do if I was in charge of how you live your life. You're eighteen. Enjoy your senior year, stop wearing the weight of the world on your shoulder pads, big brother. That is my wisdom for the night, Brady. Take it how you want. I'm going to bed."

Take it how I want. I'm the God damn quarterback. It is my job to be responsible for an entire team. If we win or lose, it's on my shoulders.

I got called into Coach's office today after our last practice and told to gain control of my team.

Everyone wants to win.

Get them all on the same page, Ryan.

It's your team. Lead it.



**NATALIE**

A week later, Chloe and I are lounging in two beach chairs. Our toes in the cool ocean water, and our faces turned toward the warm sun. The water is a muddy, angry blue, with choppy white peaks. It looks like a storm's coming in, but so far, it's been beautiful. Not as hot as last week, but still a balmy 80 degrees.

We've spent the day laughing, reading, and watching two incredibly hot lifeguards in cliché red shorts, do everything from pull-ups and laps in the ocean, to running the beach. We couldn't have asked for better eye candy.

I also found out my new BFF is just as interested in guys as she is girls, but when I asked her if Brady was wrong, and something actually was going on with her and Bash, she laughed her ass off. Apparently, it's hard to date any of the guys from school because she's known them all since they used to eat dirt.

When I think of Labor Day weekend at the Jersey shore, I think of the old MTV show. I do not think of a tiny little town, full of houses that take up entire blocks. Chloe's parent's beach house is massive. It's also on the part of the island that is only one block wide. From one side of the enormous wrap around porch, you have a beautiful view of the bay, and all of the gleaming boats docked on private docks. You walk down six wooden steps from the opposite side of the house, and your toes hit the soft sand, taking you down a hidden path that gives you direct beach access. The location couldn't possibly be better.

We drove the hour and a half here last night with the top down on Chloe's cherry red Fiat convertible while we sang Taylor Swift at the top of

our lungs. As we crossed the bridge onto the island, I recognized the smell Brady mentioned last week. I don't know that it could be one of my favorite smells, but I could see how it would be something you could grow to love.

We had the house to ourselves last night. We gave each other manis and pedis, ate an entire bucket of popcorn, one bag of Twizzlers, and a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Then, we binged watched The Great British Bake off while FaceTiming with Luca and his boyfriend Dan. It was a perfect night.

I've barely seen Cooper or the guys since last weekend. Our schedules never seemed to mesh up. The coach decided they needed a second week of two a days, so they've been miserable.

Checking my phone, I notice that I have a few missed texts.

**Coop:** Just left the house - on our way to the beach. You girls need anything?

**Darby:** Heard the team talking. Think we are coming to party with you at the beach tonight. You gonna be there?

**Luca:** Hey Bitch. Just checking in. Wanted to make sure you're not in a sugar coma.

I text Coop back first.

**Nattie:** Nope. We're good. Tell the guys Mrs. Ryan had the house stocked with food for us. See you soon.

After Cooper, I text Darby.

**Nattie:** Hey. How was the game? Chloe and I are already here.

**Darby:** Game was good. We won. I had a couple good plays.

**Darby:** I'll try to get down there this weekend then.

I save Luca for last.

**Nattie:** Nope. No sugar coma. Just enjoying the view on the beach.

**Luca:** You better mean the view of the hot guys and not the ocean. Pics, please.

I send him a pic of the lifeguard in the boat.

**Nattie:** Sent.

**Luca:** Yum! Let loose. Have fun, Buttercup. Let a lifeguard bang you against his chair. Better yet, do the quarterback. He sounds like a hottie too. I need a pic of him. Don't make me ask Chloe. She can replace you as my BFF.

**Nattie:** RELAX Drama Queen. Nobody is getting banged this weekend.

**Luca:** Speak for yourself. \*Gif of the Queen of England looking annoyed\*

**Nattie:** Well... Brady is coming down tonight. I think Darby might be too.

**Luca:** A menage?

**Nattie:** Oh, Please. You know me better.

**Luca:** Have fun figuring it out. Gotta Go. Break's over. Talk again soon.

Chloe places her white framed, oversized sunglasses on her head, pushing back her hair and nails me with a glare. "What are you laughing at over there? Who are you texting?"

"Just Luca. He wanted to know if we were in a sugar coma after last night and if I was planning on getting banged by a lifeguard or getting ready for a menage. His overactive imagination is in full force today."

Chloe howls with laughter, like this is the funniest thing she's heard. "Shut it, you. No one is getting banged by a lifeguard this weekend unless you go for it, and I can't manage one guy, let alone two."

"I'm not doing either of the lifeguards. You, on the other hand, could give a girl and a guy a try if two guys are intimidating."

"Let me master one on one before we make it more complicated, please."

"There are other options, you know. My brother will be here, tonight.."

"Yup. It sounds like half the team might be coming too, from the text Darby just sent."

"Oh, really. Will Darby be *coming* for you tonight?"

"Oh, come on."

"What. You are interested in him, aren't you? You've been texting him all week."

"Yeah. We've been texting."

She leans in closer to me. "And...?"

"And, nothing."

"Well, that doesn't sound good for Darby, but it definitely means there's still a chance for the quarterback to score." She sits back in her seat, pleased with herself.

"No one will be scoring this weekend."

Chloe lifts the arms of her chair, moving it into a fully reclined position and lays back. "Well... maybe you won't be."

She rolls onto to her stomach, puts her head down and I'm left alone with that thought. If Darby hooked up with someone else this weekend,

would I be upset? I don't know if I would be. If Brady hooked up with another girl... I get irrationally annoyed just thinking about that. "Shit."

Chloe turns her head to face me. "Didn't like the thought of that, now did ya?"

Nope. Not at all.



## BRADY

We won our scrimmage this morning. The entire team was finally in sync. Coach was happy, the team was psyched, and now we are all home and grabbing our stuff to head to the beach. It's a good day.

Grabbing my phone, I pull up Chloe's Instagram to see what she and Natalie are doing now. They posted a few pictures last night of them painting their toes. Today there are a few pics of them at the beach. In one, Nat is sitting in a beach chair with her glasses pulled down, and her eyes are looking up at Chloe. Her hair looks windblown. Her cheeks are tinged pink from the sun. She's smiling at the camera, and she looks fucking beautiful.

Walking down the stairs, I see my mom sitting at her antique writing desk.

"Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Nothing is up, my darling. Aren't you supposed to be at the beach house with Chloe? You know I hate her there alone." My mother is still under the impression that Chloe can't take care of herself when, in reality, the two of us have been taking care of ourselves most of our lives.

"Yeah, Murphy is picking me up in a few minutes. What are you and Dad doing this weekend?"

My mother stands gracefully, shoulders back, head held high, old money breeding allowing nothing less. Not a hair out of place, she's wearing a red dress with matching heels and pearl earrings that have been passed down in her family for over a century. This is how my mother dresses seven days a week, no matter what she is doing. She may dress up

more than this depending on her function, but I cannot remember her ever dressing down.

“I’m updating my calendar now. Your father and I will be traveling more than usual over the next month, and I want to make sure that I’ve got everything handled. He is in the process of closing a large deal, and I needed to move a few things around.”

“Are you going to be able to go to the season opener next week?”

“I don’t think so, Brady. Your father and I have engagements already scheduled for next weekend. Now, I’ve had the beach house stocked with groceries for you and your friends. Please tell Aiden Murphy to be careful driving today. Shore traffic is bound to be dreadful. Keep your eye out for your sister, no drinking and driving. Do not embarrass me.” Gently placing her hand on my face, she pulls me down to her and kisses my cheek. “I love you, darling.” Then my mother walks away.

I wonder if I am the only 18-year-old man who wishes his parents were more involved. I hear Murphy beeping the horn from the driveway and turn, yelling goodbye into the house.

No one answers.

Last weekend before senior year, here we come.

Murphy was the first to get his license last year and has been the unofficial chauffeur ever since. He only lives three streets away, so I typically get picked up first, meaning I call shotgun, while Bash and Cooper end up in the two captain’s chairs in the back of Murph’s Escalade.

Once we are all together, Cooper starts shooting off questions. “Alright, so who’s going down for the party? Is it tonight or tomorrow?” This is Cooper’s first Labor Day bonfire beach party. It’s easy to forget that he wasn’t here last year because he fits in so well.

Murphy looks at Coop through the rearview before answering. “Tiffany will be there. Her parents own a house in the same town. Most of her minions will be with her too, so there’s plenty of girls that’ll be willing to go down.” Murphy laughs at himself. “Not that Tiffany is going to let anyone else get close to you, Cooper.”

Bash rolls his eyes. “Dude! Forget the girls from school. It’s the locals that will be smoking hot and down for anything. It’s better when they don’t know you and live an hour away. Makes it easier not to get stuck with a clinger. Sorry to say it, Coop, but you’re screwed.”

I have to laugh at that. “You can’t say we didn’t warn you Tiff was a stage five clinger Coop.”

Murphy is quick to agree. “Yeah, man. Way easier to bang and bounce if you don’t have to see them again. Cut that girl out now and get some variety in your life. Girls are like ice cream. You never know what your favorite flavor is going to be until you lick them all. Or until they lick you, is more like it!” We all groan at how bad that line was. “Shut the fuck up, all of you. You know you were all thinking it. I’m just the only one to say it.”

“She’s not that bad, guys. We’re just having fun.” Cooper sounds like he is trying to convince himself. Maybe he’s seeing a different version of Tiffany than what we are used to.

After a few minutes, Murphy punches my shoulder. “What the fuck, QB? You got awful quiet on me there. You need to let loose for the last weekend before the season officially starts. More than anyone, you need to find a local girl that you won’t have to see again and release some of that pent up energy, man. You’re strung so tight. We’re all worried you’re going to snap.” He looks over at me quickly before looking back to the highway.

Something Murphy says rarely resonates with me, but maybe he’s right. Maybe hooking up with a local girl is the answer. Maybe it’ll help get a certain blonde pixie out of my mind.



We are on the other side of the bridge that takes us onto the island, sitting in bumper to bumper traffic. The bridge is open as a boat passes through, and we could be here awhile. The sun is still hot and high in the sky, but Murph knows how much I like the windows open when we come down here, so he’s blasting the air conditioning and has the windows down.

Bash is laughing as we inch along. “Okay, Coop. Your turn. Fuck, Marry, Kill—Black Widow, Pepper Pots, and Gamora. Go.” This is Bash’s favorite pastime for long bus rides too.

“That’s easy. Pepper Pots is the only one that I could kill without getting seriously hurt. I’d marry Black Widow and Fuck Gamora.” Proud of himself, Coop looks like he just cured cancer with that decision.



I've got to ask, even though I don't think I want to know the answer. "Why are you marrying Black Widow? Gamora looks like she's way more fun."

"Because QB, I don't want my kids to be green."

These assholes make me smile.

Finally, the bridge closes, and we are pulling onto the island. Two fucking hours in a car in stop and go traffic has me antsy to get out and stretch my legs. Shore traffic on a holiday weekend is always rough, but I love this part. With the windows down as we cross the bridge, the island's salty, marshy smell hits my nose. There has always been something about that ocean air that just relaxes me. I'm reminded of lazy summer days on the warm sand, surfing with my dad, and not a care in the world. Instantly, I feel the weight lifted from my shoulders, even if only for a few days.

Murphy navigates the streets easily until we pull into my parent's driveway right behind Chloe's little red Fiat convertible. It looks like a wind-up toy next to this giant SUV. We all grab our bags and the cooler, then head into my parent's house. They just bought this one a few years ago when Dad's company won a huge account. He celebrated with the biggest house on the island. It's a three-story stucco home with a porch that wraps around the entire first floor. Balconies sit off the second and third floors, all with million-dollar views of the island. From the porch, we have beach access on one side and a view of the bay on the other.

Dad's always been a believer that you should go big or go home, and he went big with this house.

Heading upstairs, I kick my sneakers off and set my bag down on the chair in the corner of my bedroom before dropping down on my bed. My mom went strong with the beach theme when she decorated. My room is done in dark blues and deep reds, with golden anchor accents on the shelves above the dresser and two oars above the bed.

A little stuffy for my taste, but I don't care.

This beach is my happy place.

Pulling my phone out, I scroll my socials again to see what the girls are doing, but they haven't updated anything since earlier this afternoon. Deciding that I'm being ridiculous, I head back downstairs.

Murphy is already cracking open a beer as he announces, "Alright, men. Are we hitting the beach or getting something to eat? I'm fucking starving,

and the clouds are rolling in, so I vote food first, and then we find ourselves some willing women.”

“Murph, man. There are other things besides fucking and food. I’m not sure that they’re as much fun, though.” Cooper is laughing at Murphy as he says the words, but his eyes haven’t moved from whatever he is looking at from the wall of windows along the back of the house.

I’m betting he’s already checking out a group of girls. What I’m not expecting is what he says next.

“What the fuck, man. Does that lifeguard have his hand on my sister’s ass? Where is the door to get out there?”

Bash and Murphy are laughing at him, but I’m not. The undeniable anger that I have at the idea that someone else is touching Natalie is pissing me off. My mind is screaming, *get the fuck off what’s mine*, and it’s starting to wear me down.

We head out the door and down the steps to the beach.

Chloe and Natalie are walking toward us. The sight of Natalie in a tiny bikini sears itself into my brain. It’s lime green with white stripes. A thick white strap is tied around her neck and a white bow is sitting between her gorgeous tits, which are pushed up and perfectly on display. Tiny cut off jean shorts are pulled on over her bikini bottoms. The shorts are so short that the inside pockets are hanging longer than the bottom edge. A Notre Dame baseball hat is sitting on her head, and a long, messy braid is thrown over one shoulder. The effect she has on me gets stronger every single time I see her.

Chloe has a cooler in her hands.

Natalie has a beach bag on her shoulder.

And the fucking lifeguard is carrying beach chairs. What the hell.

The girls look happy to see us coming, but the lifeguards look annoyed.

My sister smiles like the creepy Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland. “Hey, boys. When did you get here?” I can tell, just from the sound of her voice, she’s up to something. “Meet our new friends Chris and Steve. They were just getting off duty and offered to help us carry our things.”

Cooper is not thrilled. “Looked like you guys were helping yourselves to more than that. Here man. Let me take those chairs from you.” Cooper doesn’t give the guy much choice when he grabs the chairs and pulls them away.

These guys are a decent size, but they are lanky and built like swimmers. It's obvious they've already realized they won't win if they want to throw down with Cooper and me. "Come on, Nattie. Murphy's hungry, and we need to feed him before he goes feral. Let's go."

My sister laughs. It's a pretty good description of Murphy.

Natalie is looking at Cooper, her eyes pinched and annoyed.

The shit lifeguard doesn't know when to give up. "Is Murphy like a dog or something?"

The four of us laugh.

Chloe smiles patronizingly. "We're not sure what Murphy is. But, he's ours, and we love him. Thanks for the help, boys. We'll see you tomorrow." Both lifeguards look disappointed, but they toss out goodbyes as they walk toward the street while our foursome heads back to the steps.

"You didn't have to be such a dick, Cooper. They were just being nice."

"His hand was on your ass, Nat."

"He said there was a bug." We all roll our eyes, and Natalie laughs. "Okay, so it wasn't the smoothest line, but I do hate bugs." Nat scrunches her nose like she smelled something bad, and the girls laugh, walking away, leaving us trailing behind.

"At some point, I'm going to need you to bail me the fuck out of jail for killing one of these assholes who thinks he's good enough for my sister."

"Coop, man, what the hell did you do at your school in Cali? Guys must have noticed her there too. This can't be a new thing."

"She wasn't the new toy there. We moved there in eighth grade. Plus, Nattie was always so busy with dance she never gave anybody the time of day. We didn't exactly hang in the same circles, so I didn't have to deal with it. I just don't want to see her get hurt."

We walk up the stairs to the porch, where Murphy and Sebastian are leaning against the railing with beers, waiting for us. They're laughing their asses off at something, but I ignore them and open my beer.

We all watch as Chloe and Nat rinse the sand off of their feet and chairs before coming up the steps to join the four of us. Murphy is the first to speak up.

"Okay, ladies' choice. Are we grilling dinner or ordering takeout? I'm starving."

Chloe rolls her eyes at Murphy. "Yup. Feral, but ours." Everybody but Murphy starts laughing. "Mom had groceries delivered for us this morning.

The fridge is stocked. I'm pretty sure there are hamburgers and hot dogs and a ton of sides in there for us."

"God, I love Momma Ryan. You know, if she'd leave your dad, I'd be all over that. You could call me Daddy, Chloe." Murphy's smirking now as he licks his lips dramatically toward my sister.

"Fucking gross, Murphy!" She steals his beer out of his hands, finishes what's left of it, and hands the empty back. "Give up the ghost on that one, Murphy. I'm betting that my mother is so high strung and repressed in her life that she is a total freak in bed. A hundred bucks say even you couldn't handle her."

"Jesus Christ, Chloe." I groan as I watch her smile take over her face.

The first boom of thunder rolls through, as the clouds start to roll in.

Chloe rolls her eyes. "Alright, guys. Nat and I need to shower before we make dinner."

"Yes! Can we watch?" Murphy's moving before he even finishes his question. He knows Cooper is going to kill him.

The girls laugh and head upstairs, and Cooper catches Murphy in a headlock.

"Off. Limits. Asshole! If you see my sister naked, I'm going to bury your body where nobody will ever find it!" They're both laughing, but I think Cooper wants us to believe he's serious.

We might be a dysfunctional group, but these are the best people I know.

Sebastian and I head into the house to get the food started when he decides it's time to call me on my shit. "Listen, QB, Cooper talks a good game, but you're not a bad guy. He hasn't watched you fuck your way through the summer the way he's done. Tell him you've got a thing for his sister. Get it over with before the season starts and before something happens behind his back."

"Who says I have a thing for Natalie?"

"Pretty sure anyone that pays attention does." The fucker drops that on me and then walks away. I hate that I can let myself get this stuck in my own head. Maybe Bash is right.

I hear thunder in the distance and hope that it's not a bad sign for the night to come.



## NATALIE

I've just gotten out of the shower and finished putting aloe on my face to cool the slight sunburn I've got going on, when I walk back into the bedroom wrapped in a towel. The curtains are blowing in from the wind and rain that has started to whip around outside. The smell of the salt air is invading my nose, and there is a chill in the air now that wasn't there before. Jumping back, I'm startled to see Chloe is sitting on my bed going through my suitcase.

She's wearing navy blue sweatpants with the gold Kroydon Hills Prep emblem embroidered at the hip and a white tank with a navy-blue bra under it showing through. Her hair is in a messy bun, and her feet are bare, her bright white toenails sparkling against her tanned skin. She looks relaxed and cool, a vibe I have come to associate with Chloe that I can't help but be a little jealous of.

"Are you going to get dressed or what, Nat? It's already raining outside, so I don't think we are going anywhere tonight. At least, not unless it stops soon. The bonfire will be tomorrow night anyway." She starts tossing stuff on the bed.

"Nope." She throws the green maxi dress down on the bed.

"Nope." She tosses my favorite black leggings next.

"Yup!" She picks up a pair of my old, cotton grey, super short dance shorts, her eyes light up. "Wear these and that long sleeve white t-shirt. I'm betting we sit outside and watch the storm. It's going to be a little chilly, and this will look cool and casual but will still show off your legs."

“Number one, you won’t even be able to tell I have shorts on under this shirt. These shorts are so short, they were just supposed to be for the beach. Two, who exactly am I showing off my legs for? Murphy?” I’m trying to play like I don’t know what she’s going for, but she’s not buying it.

“Don’t pull the blonde card with me, Nat. I didn’t bring it up last night, but now that he’s here, we have to come up with a plan.”

“He, who, Chloe?” I play dumb, over enunciating both syllables of her name, but she gets me back immediately.

“My brother, Nattie. The chemistry between you two could catch the whole damn house on fire. Don’t act like you don’t feel it. It’s pretty obvious to anyone that has eyes. The two of you won’t stop eye-fucking each other. I don’t think he’s ever going to make a move, though. He doesn’t do girlfriends, so if you want to move on to actually fucking, we will have to remind him why he should break his own rules. He’s a guy, Nat. You may need to hit him over the head with it a little.”

Pulling my towel tighter, I lean back against my door. “Oh my God, Chloe. There are so many things wrong with what you just said, but we’ll start with the obvious. One, I have not eye-fucked your brother or any man, and two, I don’t beg. Not even Brady. And, I’ve been texting with Darby all week, while Brady hasn’t even asked for my number.”

What I fail to mention to my new bestie is that I might not be eye fucking Brady, but I sure am thinking about all the ways he could be fucking me.

“I can work with that because you didn’t deny that you’re into him. By the way, that was three. Anyway, listen up. If you were really into Darby after a week of texting, you wouldn’t even be thinking of my brother. Honestly, he’s a douche for not asking you out yet. Ditch the douche.

“I’m not telling you to beg. Trust me. I would never tell you that you needed to beg any man or woman. Girl, you are a catch, and you need to own that. I’m just reminding you that guys are a little slow to pick up the breadcrumbs we put out there for them to follow. They are visual creatures, and you are the total package. You need to flaunt what your momma gave you.”

“Fine.” Snatching the clothes off the bed, I go back into the bathroom and get changed into exactly what she picked out.

I’ve texted back and forth with Darby all week and never got so much as a flutter, but as soon as I feel Brady near me, my skin is on high alert. I

have absolutely no control over my reaction to him.

Do I want to make the first move?

No.

But, I may be willing to give him the encouragement he needs.

I towel dry my hair, leave it down, add a little mascara, gloss, and my favorite teal, sea turtle anklet. Not too shabby.

When I come back into my room, Chloe gives me a look of approval. She is holding my sketch from this morning. “Damn, girl. You really are talented. This is awesome. Can I keep it?”

“Umm. I guess so.” It comes out more a question than an answer. I don’t really share them with anyone, it’s always just been something I do to pass the time or when inspiration struck. This one is of two girls, one blonde, one brunette, sitting on beach chairs. The sand is a golden tan, the ocean is a gorgeous blue, and they are in red and green bikinis, with big, floppy straw hats hiding their faces. I like sketching hair more than faces, so most of my sketches are side views or back views. Some have big hats over their heads or something like a book or cup of coffee hiding their faces. I love drawing hair though. Long or short. Curly or straight. It’s my favorite part of the pictures I draw.

Chloe walks to her bedroom door across the hall and places the picture inside. “Were they us?”

Nodding my head, I add, “Inspiration struck.”

She links her arm through mine. “I love it. I’m going to frame it when we get home.”

We head downstairs as the thunder strikes so loudly, it nearly shakes the house. The rain is playing a metallic tune on the copper roof of the porch. All of the glass doors are open to the outside, and the salty air is causing the sheer white curtains to billow into the rooms.

The sound of the guys’ laughter is echoing in from the covered porch, and the smell of burgers and hot dogs being grilled is making my mouth water.

Chloe and I go to work in the kitchen, setting out the potato salad and a few bags of chips, along with the condiments and plates. She hits play on her favorite beach playlist, and the two of us dance around the room with no one watching.

I am having more fun and feeling freer in this moment than I have in years.



Just when Harry Styles' "Watermelon Sugar" comes through the speakers, the guys come in with the food.

Sebastian comes over and joins our little dance party. Before I know it, I'm the center of a Bash and Chloe sandwich. Bash smells good, like Abercrombie and Fitch's Fierce. He's in black cargo shorts and his soft, grey t-shirt is hugging his chest. He's so damn tall, my head is barely coming up to his chin.

He leans in close to my ear and whispers, "Play along, Little Sinclair."

Bash isn't half bad. He's way better than I would have thought a guy as big as he is would be. With his knees bent and his hands on my hips, I throw my arms around his shoulders and follow his lead.

Murphy's whistling echoes throughout the house.

Cooper puts the platter of food down a little harder than necessary and then grumbles, "Dinner's ready," before stalking off back to the porch.

I chance a quick glimpse of Brady. I don't know him well enough to be sure, but the look on his face can only be described as pissed. Is he jealous?

With that in mind, I start to swing my hips and grind my ass a little more than I should, but Chloe's right. This boy needs to make up his mind. If I'm willing to bend my own rule and consider dating one of Coop's friends, he can bend one of his. It's the first time I've been this interested in a guy in forever. I will not beg, but there is nothing in the rule books saying I can't tease or try to force his hand.

When the song ends, Bash kisses us both on the top of the head and then whispers in my ear. "Point one to you, Little Sinclair. You've got his attention."

Huh. Guess Bash is on my side too. Am I that obvious? Wait... do I have a side?

Looking over Bash's shoulder, I have a direct view of Brady, whose lips are in a tight line, like this whole exchange is painful for him to watch. He's wearing worn blue jeans and a threadbare, dark blue t-shirt. His feet are bare, and there is just something about the way he looks that makes my mouth water.

Cooper walks back into the kitchen with a bottle of beer in his hand and is the first to grab a plate off the counter. We all follow him and load up, and then head out to the table on the porch. The outdoor fireplace is tucked into the corner and is already on, giving off extra heat. The table is situated

in a way that sections the kitchen area off from the rest of the outdoor space.

The ceiling is high, with a copper fan and fairy lights lining the space. A big, light tan sofa, oversized chairs, and a smaller fire pit table create a different area next to the beach's steps. The rain is coming down hard now, making us seem hidden, cut off from the rest of the world.

Chloe sits down at the far end of the table before throwing a chip at her brother sitting next to me. "So, what's the plan tonight, guys? Sabrina texted that she wouldn't be down until tomorrow. Do you guys have anybody else coming?"

I pull my phone from my pocket to see if Darby texted again, but he hasn't.

Brady picks up the thrown chip and pops it in his mouth. "I think a few of the guys from the team are coming. Not sure if they are stopping by tonight or not."

Leaning his forearms on the table, he smiles devilishly at his sister. "Want to play cards?"

Before Chloe gets a chance to answer, Murphy does. He throws both hands out in front of him, gesturing wildly. "You guys fucking suck when you play cards. No, nope, no freaking way. I don't want to be stuck in the middle of another Ryan family fight over who cheated."

It's hard not to laugh at Murphy's description.

A few different options are tossed out before Bash offers up beer pong, and we all agree.

Murph gets a beer, and Chloe tries to grab it from him. He holds it above her head, so she can't reach it. "I think Momma Ryan would have a stroke if she saw what we are about to do on her table. What do you think?"

Chloe throws her napkin on her now empty paper plate and glares at Murphy. "Well, how about we try not telling my mother that we used her ridiculously expensive table for beer pong. Then, there is no need for her to stroke out. Now, what are the teams? And, don't you dare try saying guys against girls. I love you, Nat, but your aim sucks. She may need your help, Brady. Teach her how to throw."

I can't even say anything because she's right. My aim does suck. We were trying to throw popcorn in our mouths last night, and I got more on the couch and floor than in my mouth. This is why I leave the sports to my brothers.

I don't mention that I've never played beer pong before or that I really don't like beer.

Brady places his arm on the back of my chair and pulls it closer to his. He leans into me, giving the illusion we are plotting. "What do you say? You and me against these guys?" I look up, meeting his whiskey eyes. They look gold in the warm light of the porch. Would *Oh God, yes, please*, be a good answer?

I somehow doubt it.

Chloe has claimed Bash as her partner, and Murphy and Cooper are clearing the table, so that leaves us.

Tilting my head slightly, I act like I have to think about my answer. "Sure, QB. You might want to show me what I'm doing, though. I've never played this before."

There is no mistaking the nearly pained look on Brady's face right then. "Oh, Nat. There are so many things I want to show you."

What the fuck?

Did he just say that?

"Well, I'll have to judge your skills first. A girl needs to decide if you're a worthy teacher."

Two can play at this game. I might seem naïve, but I'm not. I might not be the most experienced girl, but I did grow up with two brothers and have spent my life in and out of locker rooms.

Naive left the building a long time ago.



## BRADY

*G*ive up. I don't think I can fight it anymore. Natalie is beautiful and funny. She laughs at everyone's jokes, has a dry, sarcastic sense of humor, gets along with all of the guys, and my sister, and knows more about football than any girl I have ever met.

She looks hotter in a pair of shorts and a long sleeve t-shirt than most girls do with a full face of makeup.

We are about to finish our latest turn at beer pong. Natalie is standing in front of me, ball in hand. My hands are on her hips as I help her get in position. There is no fucking way she doesn't know what she is doing when that delicious ass grazes my cock for the millionth time tonight.

She turns her head slightly, looking up at me from underneath those long lashes, and smiles. There is no way that she isn't doing that shit on purpose.

We've been playing beer pong for the last hour or so. The beer is flowing freely, and everyone is having a good time.

I've found out that Nat is not a fan of beer, so, being the gentleman that I am, I've spent most of our turns drinking both of our beers, so I know she's still sober. I've noticed Cooper hasn't looked very happy when I touch his sister, and his sister is tough not to want to touch.

Bash is right, I need to talk to Cooper.

I give up.

I give in.

Fuck I want this girl, and not just for a quick lay. I want her to be mine, and I can't go behind my friend and teammate's back and not expect it to

fuck things up. That's not how I want this to start.

Natalie finally manages to get the ball in the last cup, winning us the game. Spinning around, she jumps up and throws her arms around my neck, celebrating our win. I quickly squeeze her, then look over her shoulder at a less than thrilled Cooper and place her back on her feet. We walk over to the couch and sit down while the other two teams take their turn.

Murphy's bombed, and I'm pretty sure Chloe is too.

Bash and Cooper still seem sober.

Nat has been nursing the same beer for a while now. I don't think she likes it, but she hasn't said anything. Getting comfortable, she tucks her knees up inside her shirt in front of her, and I can't see her legs or shorts. I'm leaning against the corner of the couch, and she's turned, facing me, when she pushes her bare her toes tucked under my legs.

The rain has stopped, but the storm brought the temperature down, and it's still a little windy out. "Are you cold? I can grab a blanket."

She tucks her feet further under my thigh. "Nope. I'm good just where I am."

She beams up at me like she just struck gold when in reality, I'm pretty sure I am the one who just figured out my shit. I put my hand on her calves and start to rub. Her skin is so soft and smooth. The sweetest little moan leaves her lips as I dig into her calf muscles.

"So, no boyfriend back in California?"

Leaning back into the cushion further, Nat worries her bottom lip with her teeth. "Nope. I never really had time before. Dance, plus, I never really found anyone that seemed worth it. Bringing someone around my brothers and my father can be intimidating. Usually, guys are either scared of my family or are trying to use me to get close to them. Not great options. What about you? Do you have a girl that can't wait to see you again when school starts?"

Pushing in closer to her, I rub further up her legs. "Never really did the whole serious thing. Football is the only relationship that I've made time for."

"I get it. My brother Declan has always said the wrong girls were nothing but a distraction. At least that was what he said in high school. He has changed his tune since he's been in college. Had a serious girl for his freshman and sophomore year, but since they've broken up, I've never seen him with the same girl twice."

“I heard a rumor this week that you and Branson are talking.”

“Darby?”

“Yeah. Are you guys together?”

My question is rewarded by her deep, throaty laugh. “Umm, together? No. Have we been texting? A little.”

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I unlock it and hand it to her. “Wanna call yourself from my phone? I realized this week, I don’t have your number.”

“You were thinking about me this week?”

“Probably more than I should have been.”

I hear her phone beep as she hands me mine back.

Her hair blows in the wind, giving me another whiff of that orangey scent. I want to lick every tanned inch of her skin. I tell myself again that I have to talk to Cooper first, just as I hear the cars come down the street and the obnoxious beeping of the horns.

Fucking shit timing.

The team just showed up.

It kills me to do it, but I remove my hands from her body, lean down and whisper in her ear, “I’ll be right back.”

Natalie fucking sighs like she is disappointed.

I don’t want to walk away right now, but I do.

Walking around the porch, I see the street that was empty earlier is now full of cars. We’ve been in our own little world for the last few hours. I hadn’t realized how much time had passed. The center from our team, Landon, is at the bottom of the stairs. “We coming up, QB?” He’s a fucking giant of a man. He’s got half the team with him and a keg on one shoulder.

“Well, fuck, get up here before you asswipes get the cops called on us.”

The guys start to climb the stairs. A few of the girls are with them, too, and I see Tiffany and a few cheerleaders climbing out of her little Porsche convertible at the end of the street. She’s smoking hot, but there is a train wreck hidden underneath. There’s a ton of backslapping and bro-shakes over the next few minutes.

The keg gets tapped, the music gets turned up, and before I know it, I’ve lost Nat in the crowd.





## NATALIE

The party isn't waiting for Friday night. It looks like half the school is here now, and it's not even ten. I didn't realize when Brady walked away earlier that I was losing him for the night. He's been making the rounds for the last hour. Talking to everyone and moving from group to group with ease.

When I see Brady, Murphy, Bash, and Cooper together, everyone seems like they are on equal footing. The rest of the guys and most of the girls at this party treat Brady and my guys like football gods among mere mortals. Especially Brady. They are hanging on his every word.

I'm standing by the fireplace, surrounded by a group of girls I met tonight. Chloe told them that I dance, so they're all trying to talk me into trying out for the squad.

"Sorry, guys. I'm just not sure if I want to do that or not. I promised my dad I would take a few classes at a local studio and want to see how that goes first."

Kristy, a pretty brunette, nods her head enthusiastically. "Totally understand. You gotta let us know if you change your mind, though. We lost a few good seniors last year and only filled half the slots for the football season. We should still have slots open for basketball season."

"I will," I answer as my eyes drift back to Brady. The possessiveness I feel annoys me when a beautiful girl with hot pink hair, legs twice as long as mine, and boobs I'd die for catches my eyes. A few minutes ago, she came up the stairs, gave Brady a huge hug, and is now his beer pong partner.

It looks like pink-haired Barbie is hanging on his every word and his every muscle.

My phone pings, and I pull it out to check.

**Darby:** Just pulled up to Ryan's house. You here?

**Nattie:** Yeah. Just heading inside.

**Darby:** Good. See you in a min.

Chloe gives me a questioning look.

I give her a quick nod back, telling her I'm fine and then heading for the kitchen.

Deciding to make a pit stop, I run upstairs into my bathroom to touch up my hair and makeup before heading down to the kitchen. As I am coming back down the stairs, I collide with Darby.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asks as he catches me by my upper arms, making sure I don't topple over.

"Thanks for the save."

"Happy to help. You and Chloe have fun today?" The guy has a great smile. He's not quite as big as Brady or as broad as Murphy. He's built more like a shorter version of Bash. Maybe 6' tall and lean with chiseled features. His dark brown eyes are so dark I can barely see his irises.

"We did have fun. It was a perfect beach day before the storm hit."

"You ever sit on the beach after a storm? The waves are something else right after the rain stops. Grab a towel. Let's go check it out."

"Sure. Why not."

There's a gleam in Darby's eye. It's a little sexy and a little unsettling.

We walk onto the porch where the party is in full gear and grab my towel from earlier today to sit on. Everything is still wet from the rain, and I don't want a wet ass. "Just let me find Chloe real quick to let her know where I'm going."

"Chloe." She looks around until she finds me in the crowd. "I'm going to go for a walk on the beach."

"With Brady?" She looks triumphantly at me.

"No. With Darby." I see her shoulders fall.

"You've got your phone on you?"

"Yes, Mom. I've got my phone, and we won't go far. I'll be back before curfew."

She shrugs her shoulders. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Her laughter follows me down the steps where Darby is already waiting for me. He's thrown on a red sweatshirt. He looks good, but I am incredibly aware that he is not Brady.

The fact that I immediately compare the two should be the first sign that this is not the guy I want to be sitting with on the beach. But there is nothing wrong with seeing where this goes.

Darby guides me down to the tall, white lifeguard tower with red lettering across the back. He gives me a boost as I climb up. Placing the towel down, I try to get comfy. I love the air after a storm. It's as if the slate has been wiped clean, everything looks and smells fresh. You can taste the salt in the air, and the waves are lapping loudly at the beach, crashing like an angry song.

Darby climbs up and, places his arms across the back of the stand, and begins to play with my hair. As he settles himself, I tuck myself in and pull my legs up. "So, are you excited to be starting a new school next week?"

"I guess I am. I was a little nervous before I moved, but Chloe and the guys have been great and made me feel like I'm home. It's nice to know I'll have a few friends when I walk into school on Tuesday. How about you?"

"I am excited. I'm ready for the school year to start so that the season can start."

"The football season?"

"Yeah. A week from today, it's our last first game of the season on that field. It's crazy to think of it that way when I've been going to this school my entire life. I'm going to miss it next year. Gotta see what scouts show up at the beginning of the season. I haven't signed a letter of intent yet. Has Cooper signed a letter? Does he know where he wants to go?"

"Nope. Coop isn't sure what he wants to do yet. I've heard him talking to my dad about Annapolis. But he hasn't signed anything."

"Huh. I would have figured he'd have his football career all planned out already. The pressure to perform well has to be hard coming from your family."

I don't like where this conversation is going. "Yeah. I guess."

When I don't elaborate, Darby changes topics. "How long are you down here for?"

"We're leaving early Sunday morning so that we can make it back for my Dad's first home game. He's driving me nuts lately, but I want to be there to support him and show him how proud we all are."

“That’s so cool. You can’t grow up in our town and not be a Philly Kings fan. It’s pretty cool to know that I’m sitting here with the coach’s daughter.”

I hate being referred to as the coach’s daughter. Leaning away from him slightly, I cringe. That’s strike one. “I’ll have to take your word for that. Anyway, we leave Sunday.”

Not picking up on my annoyance, he continues, “Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night? Before the bonfire? We’ll be back for the party?” Darby moves his arm to my shoulder and pulls me closer.

“I don’t know. I came down with Chloe. I don’t want to blow her off.”

“Two hours tops. You know you want to.” Angling himself, he moves so we are closer than I want, and I move my legs to put some space between us.

I know I don’t like being told what to do or what I want. “Let me check with Chloe. I came down with her and really don’t want to ditch her.”

Pulling his sweatshirt off, Darby places it over my head. Did I give him the impression I was cold? I push my arms through as he is pulling my hair out of the hood. That was odd. Grabbing me by the front of the hoodie, he pulls me to him and slams his mouth to mine.

Immediately, his tongue is seeking entrance, but I refuse to open my mouth. I shove him back, then his hands go to my cheeks. More gently this time, he licks at my lips.

I can smell the beer on his breath.

His hands move from my face to under my shirt, and I grab his wrists, holding them in place, but not breaking the kiss.

It’s not the worst kiss I’ve had, but red flags are going up.

His hands start to push up further until he is grazing the underside of my bra.

I pull back, cutting off our kiss. “No, Darby. Don’t.”

I say it quietly. I almost feel bad, like I don’t want to be a tease.

He hears me because he is looking right at me when I say it. But he doesn’t answer. Instead, he crowds me, kissing more gently this time.

This is better until his hand goes for the waistband of the shorts I’m wearing.

What the hell?

“Darby. No.” I’m more forceful this time.

“Come on. Let me make you feel good.”

“Darby. Stop,” He’s not listening.

I don’t even realize I am crying when his hand goes inside my panties. Before I know what I’m doing, I’m trying to shove him back, but he isn’t moving. His hand is trying to get between my legs, but I have them clamped shut. With his other hand, he starts to unclasp the belt on his shorts, and I freak.

I try to push him off again, but he grabs me by the back of my hair and yanks my head hard. Hard enough that when I pull away, I hit it on the lifeguard stand.

Internally I think, *this is it. I’m about to get raped.*

Raped.

That word echoes in my head for a minute before I move. I close my eyes and listen to my older brother Declan giving me self-defense lessons years ago.

Always kick them in the balls if you can, if not punch them.

Tuck your fingers in.

Make a fist.

Keep your thumb on the outside.

Pull back with your whole arm, then aim for his nose with all the power you’ve got.

Holy Shit! I did it. I hit his face and heard a crunch. Blood immediately burst from his nose, and I jump down from the lifeguard stand and take off toward the house. As I run back up the sand, I hear him calling after me.

“What the fuck, you crazy bitch!”



## BRADY

This night hasn't gone the way I thought it would.  
I thought the rain would keep the team away until tomorrow.

I thought I'd get a chance to talk to Coop about Nat.

I thought I'd be with Nat right now instead of wondering where she went.

The storm stopped earlier, but the clouds are still hanging heavy in the dark night's sky. There are no stars out tonight, they've all been covered by the clouds. An ominous feeling is weighing me down, but I don't know why.

Bash and I are leaning against the couch, talking with my cousin Kenzie when Bash turns to me. "Hey, man. Do you hear that?"

It takes a second for the noise to register, but someone is screaming.

A guy.

It sounds like it's coming from the beach.

Bash and I hop over the porch railing and take two steps forward when I see Natalie running up to us through the sand. She launches herself into my arms and starts sobbing uncontrollably.

Running my hands over her hair, I lift her face to see her eyes. "Natalie. You're safe. I've got you. Are you okay? What happened?"

She buries her face in my shirt, and I lift my head, looking at Bash. His eyes are wide and murderous, mirroring my own emotions.

What the hell happened?

I turn my head when I hear footsteps running up the sandy path. It's Darby. He has blood pouring out of his nose and down his face. His grey shirt is soaked with it.

*I'm gonna kill him.*

The thought takes control of my body as I let go of Nat.

Feeling my grip loosen, Nat grabs the front of my shirt, and leans her body against mine, as if her legs were about to fall out from under her.

A crowd is starting to form around us. The party goers are hearing the commotion and curious to know what's happening.

Bash keeps his cool. He walks over and grabs Darby with both hands by the front of his blood-soaked shirt.

"You better start talking now, man. This doesn't look good. What the fuck happened?"

Darby takes a step toward me but is stopped by Bash's hold.

Pointing at the girl shaking in my arms, he yells, "That fucking, crazy bitch broke my nose. That's what fucking happened. You fucking Sinclairs are all fucking entitled, crazy mother fuckers."

Wrong answer.

Bash lets go with his right hand, still holding him in place with his left.

He rears back and unleashes a fist straight to Darby's chin.

His body goes completely rigid, a split second before he falls to the ground.

Sand kicks up against the weight of his impact.

A guttural scream rips from Natalie's throat.

Bash walks over to where I'm shielding Nat, asking the questions I didn't get answers to yet.

"Nattie. What happened?"

"Are you okay?"

"You can talk to us."

He has his hands on her on her back, rubbing softly as she continues to grip my shirt and sob.

Turning, I see Landon and tell him to go find Cooper.

"Is he dead?" Her terrified voice comes out one step above a whisper.

Bash removes his hands. "No, Nattie. He'll live. The mother fucker is just out cold."

She raises her head, meeting my eyes. Tears cling to her lashes and leave tracks down her beautiful face. "Please get me out of here. I don't



want everyone to see this.”

There’s a loud crash that rivals the thunder from earlier in the night, followed by the pounding footsteps of Cooper, Murphy, and Chloe running down the stairs.

Cooper looks at Darby bloody and laid out on the ground, then looks at his sister, shaking uncontrollably in my arms, and I watch an animalistic rage transform his face.

Charging forward, he growls. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

Murphy grabs him as Cooper lunges for a still unconscious Darby. “Fucking let me go, man.”

“Bro, hold tight. We gotta find out what the hell is going on first.” Murphy tightens his grip on Cooper.

A soft voice begs, “Brady. Please. Please get everyone out of here.”

“Nattie. Do we need to call the police? An ambulance?”

“NO! No. Please just tell someone to take him home. Get him out of here. Please, Brady. Please.”

Pulling back slightly so I can see her entire face, I force her to loosen the grip she has on my shirt and take her delicate hands in mine.

“Okay, Sweetheart. Whatever you need. But then you’ve got to tell us what’s going on.”

Nodding my head at Bash, I hear his baritone voice boom, “Party’s over, guys. Everyone out. Now. And get this piece of shit out of here too.”

“No. He’s mine.” Cooper is seething right now, looking down at Darby, who is starting to come to.

Tiffany has made her way through the crowd to Cooper. She is trying to get his arm, but he pulls away from her. “Someone better start fucking talking and tell me what the fuck is going on here and what the fuck happened to my sister.”

Bash grabs Cooper by the shoulders, looking directly into his eyes, and recounts what little he knows of what happened.

This time the boom heard overhead is thunder.

Doesn’t seem like this storm is done with us.

Cooper lunges.

Bash throws his arms around him from the front.

Murphy wraps an arm around his chest from behind.

Two other players from the team pull Darby to his feet.

I start to move toward Darby, but Nat pulls me back. “No. Don’t Brady. Please don’t let go yet.” The complete devastation in her voice is a knife to my heart.

Running my fingers over her hair, I try to soothe her.

“I’ve got you. I’m not going anywhere, and no one will hurt you. I won’t let anyone hurt you. I’ve got you.”

The rain starts to fall again.

Thunder booms.

Lightning crashes overhead.

As Darby starts to walk by, I move Natalie behind me and further away from him.

“You’re a crazy, fucking, bitch. You know you wanted it.”

He spits blood at her face.

My vision blurs with rage.

I see red and I punch.

His head snaps to the side.

In slow motion, he stumbles back, as I lunge forward.

A delicate hand grabs my wrist, grounding me.

Bash shoves my chest, forcing me back.

Grabbing Nat’s hand, I look at my teammates holding Darby back.

“Get him out of my house.”

Bash’s voice is slow and steady when he speaks. “If that fucker even thinks about calling the cops, remind him who my dad is and what happens to rats. Got it?”

Darby rounds the corner and is finally out of sight.

I turn to look at Natalie and watch the exhaustion overtake her beautiful face as her legs go out from beneath her and I scoop her up.

I know with absolute certainty I am never going to be able to let her go.



## NATALIE

**B**rady scoops me up and carries me into the house, then sits on the couch with me on his lap.

I sit there for a minute with my head buried in his shoulder, then wipe my face on the sweatshirt I'm wearing. Remembering its Darby's hoodie, I pull it up and over my head, throwing it on the floor. Then I lay my head against Brady's solid chest. "Burn that, please."

Brady tries to laugh, but it comes out painful and strained. He runs his hand over my hair, and I wince as he touches the bump on the back of my head.

Then laying my head back on his chest, I close my eyes. I'm awake, just sitting here, trying to get my bearings.

I listen to everyone moving around and talking in hushed voices in the background.

Cooper especially.

Tiffany is trying to calm him down.

I'm surprised when I hear her say, "Cooper, stay out here with Murphy and Bash. Try to get it together before you step foot inside that house and bring your anger anywhere near your sister."

"Chloe, snap the heck out of it and come inside with me. Let's see if she needs girls to talk to right now. We don't have any idea what happened or how traumatized Natalie is."

I may have underestimated this girl. Maybe my first impression of her was wrong. Then I think about what she said.

Am I traumatized?

I don't think so.

I was scared, and my adrenaline was running insanely high. I've never hit someone before, and I don't believe that I've ever been terrified of anyone physically hurting me before tonight, either.

Hopefully, it's not something I ever feel again. Maybe being sheltered by my family isn't so bad after all.

Chloe squats down in front of me, and Tiffany stands by her side. They both look me over.

Chloe is the first to speak. "Do you want to tell us what happened, Nat? Do we need to call the police?"

"No. We don't need to call the cops. I don't want to talk about it right now, though." I take a deep breath in and slowly blow it out. "I'm okay. I think I was more scared than anything." I feel Brady's arms tighten slightly around me.

It feels like safety. "I don't know what I was thinking earlier. Going to the beach with him was stupid."

Tiffany jumps all over that statement. "You should be able to walk on a beach with a guy without having to worry about whether or not he's going to hurt you. You didn't do anything wrong, and screw anybody that tells you differently."

Tiffany's anger surprises me. I watch her gaze drop down my body, assessing.

She gasps loudly. "Oh, my God. Natalie. Your hand. Your knuckles. Let me get you ice. Chloe, do you have an ice pack?"

Looking down, I see my swollen, red knuckles and realize they do hurt. I hadn't noticed that before.

Brady speaks up. "Chloe. See if we have any frozen peas. That works better than an ice pack."

Chloe nods and walks away.

Tiffany is still standing there. "Natalie."

She waits for me to look up. "Natalie. Can I tell Cooper it's okay to come in now? I'll tell him to stay outside if you want, but I know he wants to see for himself that you're okay."

"Why are you being so nice to me? You don't even know me, and I was rude to you the night we met."

Tiffany gives me a sad smile. "Yeah, well, I can be a lot to take in all at once, but I think we have more in common than you know. And, nobody

deserves to be treated the way I'm guessing you were treated tonight."

Her words take me by surprise, and I momentarily wonder if I am the first girl Darby has assaulted.

"Thank you. If you don't mind, can you let the guys know they can come in?"

Tiffany gives me a small smile and walks away as Chloe comes back in. She gently places a small baggie of frozen peas on my knuckles then squats back down in front of me. "Nat, do you want to come with me to get cleaned up in the bathroom?" She's running her fingers through my hair, moving it away from my face.

"Yeah. I think that's a good idea." I go to stand up, and Brady tightens his hold on me just enough for me to feel it.

I lean into him. "Thank you...for everything."

He touches his forehead to mine. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. I'll be okay." I gingerly get up and start toward the stairs.

I can hear Chloe stopping behind me. "She'll be right back. Take a deep breath and then calm Cooper down before we get back. I've got Nat."

Brady lowers his voice. "Try to get her to talk to you. We don't have any idea what happened. I'm worried."

"We're all worried."

I hear Chloe coming up the stairs as I sit down on the edge of the bathtub. Was it only a few hours ago that I was showering the sand off from our relaxing day at the beach?

It feels like a year has passed since then.

Chloe walks into the bathroom carrying a washcloth and a bottle of water. She hands me the water and rummages around in the medicine cabinets until she finds what she is looking for. Then gives me a bottle of ibuprofen before turning on the hot water and wetting the washcloth.

I stand up to look in the mirror for the first time, and I don't recognize the person looking back at me. My hair is a hot mess, my eyes are swollen and red from crying, and there is a little blood spatter on my chin and cheek.

Was that from his broken nose or when he spit at me?

Chloe comes over and starts to gently wipe at my face with the warm, wet cloth.

We hear a knock at the door, followed by a gentle voice.

"It's Tiffany. Can I come in?"

Chloe leans in, whispering, “I swear she’s usually awful. I think an alien has invaded her brain or something.” She winks at me, attempting to lighten the weight of the massive cloud hanging over us right now, but it doesn’t work.

I shrug. “She’s been nice tonight.”

Then we both gasp as we hear Tiffany. “*She* can hear you both. Let me in.” Luckily, she’s laughing.

Chloe unlocks the door, and Tiffany joins us.

Her white-blond hair is flowing around her shoulders.

A pink shirt is now untucked, probably thanks to my brother.

Tiny white shorts are shedding sand, and cute tan wedges make her legs look a mile long. She looks completely put together and the exact opposite of how I just saw myself in the mirror.

“How are you feeling, Natalie? I know we keep asking you this, but right now, it’s just us girls. Your insane brother and the guys downstairs don’t have to be told anything you say. Nobody is going to get beaten to death. It stays here if you want it to.”

Tiffany pauses for a beat.

She leans her body against the sink and glances at her feet before asking the question I know everyone has been thinking. “Do we need to call a doctor? Do you need to go to the hospital and get checked out? They can do things there, but we have to go tonight, and you shouldn’t shower or change if that’s what you decide you want to do.

“My mom is the Chairman of the Board for the hospital back home. If you want, I can call her. I’m sure we can drive there tonight. I know she could pull some strings so that everything can be kept quiet and out of the news.”

Oh. My. God.

I hadn’t even thought about the press getting wind of any of this. I know what Tiffany is trying to ask without coming straight out and saying it.

“Thanks. I think I’m alright. I stopped him before he got what he wanted. It scared me, but I think I did more physical damage to Darby than he did to me. My knuckles hurt worse than anything else. And maybe my pride. I guess I was lucky. Tonight could have been so much worse.” I’m trying to hold back the tears now, but a few slips down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Nat. I should have told you not to go to the beach by yourself with Darby. I heard he was a player, but I would never have

thought he was anything more than that.” Chloe is crying now too. She pulls me into a big hug.

Tiffany raises her voice, sounding annoyed. “Chloe Ryan, do not take any of the blame here. This is not your fault, and it is not Natalie’s fault. This happened because Darby Stafford is an overgrown toddler in a grown man’s body who does not know what the word no means. No one should be taking any ownership of what happened tonight besides him.” She sounds like a pissed off schoolteacher, and I feel bad for judging her when we first met. I hold my arm out for Tiffany to join our girl hug, and the three of us just stand there for a few minutes.

Unsurprisingly, Chloe has to try to break the silence with laughter. “Ladies. As much as I love a good girl hug, I think if we are going to touch each other at all, we should at least do it in front of Murphy. It would be the highlight of his night.” Her words hang dead in the air for a minute. “Too soon?”

Tiffany looks from Chloe to me. Her eyebrows wrinkle, and I think she is trying not to smile. “Well, maybe?” It comes out like a question instead of a statement, and I can’t hold it back anymore.

I start to laugh.

We all do.

We laugh hard and long.

I let the laughter outweigh the tears. It’s cathartic. We stay in the bathroom for a while before deciding it’s time to face my brother and the guys.

Tonight could have been so much worse than it was.

I refuse to let this moment define me.

I will not give him that kind of power.

This is my year of growth.

My year to find myself and the person I want to be.

I am stronger than I knew I was a day ago, and I refuse to let Darby Stafford ruin me.





## BRADY

I'm watching Nat walk up the stairs with Chloe following behind, and it is physically hurting me not to follow her just to make sure she's safe. I can hear Cooper roaring outside at Tiffany. She is trying to calm him down, but it doesn't sound like it's working. Looking up, I see Murphy and Sebastian come in. The two of them are leaning against the half-wall, separating the kitchen from this room.

No one makes any move to talk. We all stay quiet, stuck deep in our thoughts.

After a few minutes Tiffany walks in and stands in the middle of the room. She looks around at the three of us, before settling her eyes on Bash. "Cooper isn't ready to come in yet. I want to go upstairs and check on Natalie and Chloe. Can one of you guys please talk to him? He's not listening to me. He's too angry right now, and he'll feel awful later if he upsets her even more. He has to get it under control before she walks back down those stairs. I'll make sure she stays up there for a few more minutes."

With the orders given, she nods her head and walks away.

Sitting on the couch, I'm leaning forward with both elbows resting on my knees and my head in my hands when I hear Murphy. "You know something isn't right with the world when that girl is the voice of reason."

Bash and I just look at him.

Then we all hear Tiffany's voice floating almost musically, back down the stairs.

“I heard that, Murphy.” No one laughs, but it lightens the air a bit.

Standing up, I move to talk to Cooper, but Bash pushes off the counter first.

“I’ve got him, QB. Go change your shirt before your girl gets back downstairs. It’s got blood on it, and she doesn’t need to see that shit anymore tonight.”

Murphy’s looking at Bash like he sprouted another head. “His girl?”

Bash is walking out of the door but turns his head back. “Yeah. His girl. Pay attention, Murph.” Then he walks out.

“What the hell is he talking about, man?” Murph’s question is directed at me, but I’m already halfway up the stairs and don’t bother answering him.

Bash is right. That girl is mine, and I’m a fucking idiot for not realizing it sooner.

The door to the girl’s bathroom is shut as I walk past. I can hear a burst of subdued laughter inside and hope to God that’s a good sign.

I head into my bedroom, ripping off my shirt as I go. Walking into the bathroom, I throw it on the floor. Reaching into my bag, I sort through the clothes I packed until I find my favorite white Kroydon Prep shirt. It’s soft and old and might possibly be the most comfortable thing I own.

After I change and wash my face, I flex and stretch out my right hand a few times to make sure I didn’t fuck up my throwing hand by hitting Darby. I wouldn’t regret it if I did, but it would complicate my season and possibly my scholarship and position next year. I hadn’t thought about that as I was about to beat the life out of that fucking piece of shit.

I wasn’t going to stop.

I think I was ready to kill him.

If it hadn’t been for Nat’s hand wrapping around my wrist, I might have killed him. It was like her touch grounded me from the electricity coursing through my body, reminding me it was more important to take care of her than it was to kill him.

I’m usually better at seeing the big picture than I was tonight.

I’m the guy that thinks everything through.

I always have.

I don’t act on impulse or emotion, and I’m never reactionary.

I didn’t even see Nat walk down to the beach with him.

Darby's had a shit attitude all summer. After he got bumped from tight end and moved to left tackle, he started gunning for Coop, but it his attitude started before that. He's had issues with Coop since he joined the team. Thought it was unfair that the new kid was going to steal someone else's playing time.

Is that what this was? Did he retaliate against Cooper by hurting his sister? We've never been tight, but I wouldn't have expected this from him. This mother fucker is supposed to be protecting my blindside this season, and there is no way I can ever trust him now.

If he can even show his face at practice next week.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I've got to pull the insane amount of shit I'm feeling together, but my brain is running in a million directions.

Could I have stopped whatever happened from happening?

Is Nat okay?

Did my entire season just get fucked up the ass?

Will this affect my future?

Is Natalie my future?

How will the team survive this?

The only thing I know right now is that I can't get answers to any of these questions by standing in my room.

Stepping into the hall, I see Chloe shutting the bathroom door behind her. Tiffany is walking down the stairs, and there is no sign of Natalie. I walk over to Chloe just as she notices me. Leaning forward, she rests her forehead on my chest. "Nattie is still in the bathroom. She asked us to give her a minute. Said she'd be right behind us."

"How is she?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Chloe looks back at the bathroom door. "I think she's going to be okay. But I don't know if the shock of it all has worn off yet. Should we have called her dad?"

"Why don't you head downstairs. See if Sebastian needs help with Cooper. I'll wait here for Nat. Only Nat can decide if she wants to call her dad. That's not up to us."

"Yeah. I guess. Are you alright, Brady?"

"Nobody hurt me, Chloe."

"I don't believe that for one second. This hurt all of us. Maybe not the same as Nat, but that was some crazy stuff happening downstairs."

"Go ahead downstairs and help with Cooper. I'll be down in a minute."

“Brady.” She lowers her voice. “Be careful with her. She’s really upset.”

“Yeah. I got it. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Okay. Let me see what Tiffany is doing with the guys. Did you ever think she would be the one to keep it together in a crisis? Because it shocked me. I always figured she would cause the crisis or be stuck somewhere in the middle of it. She impressed me tonight.”

“Maybe we all underestimated her.”

“Guess so.” She looks so unsure of herself right now. So unlike my sister. “See you downstairs. Love you, big brother.” She gives me a tight hug, then leaves me alone with my thoughts.

I stand there, leaning against the wall, staring at the bathroom door. I’m starting to think I should just go downstairs when it cracks open. Natalie is there, in the doorway. She hasn’t looked up yet, and I watch as she takes a deep breath before lifting her head. When she sees me, those baby blue eyes are big and surprised. They are rimmed red from crying, and my beautiful girl looks pale.

“Sorry. I thought I was alone up here.”

“You were alone in there. Chloe said you needed a minute, but I wanted to make sure you were alright when you were ready. You want to go downstairs?”

“Not really.” She laughs. It’s tight and forced. Then wraps her arms around herself. “I kinda just want to go to bed and sleep until I wake up and realize this was all a bad dream. But that’s not going to happen. So, I might as well get this over with.”

She takes another deep breath, then continues, “I feel so stupid.”

“Nat, you have nothing to feel stupid about. None of this was your fault. We’re all on your side. Just tell us what you need from us.” Pushing off the wall, I offer her my hand.

She takes it without hesitation.

It feels so small and delicate, and I wish more than anything I could wrap my arms around her right now and tell her everything was going to be okay, but none of us can know that.

Not without knowing what happened.

I shudder thinking about how easily Nat could have been hurt tonight. “Come on. Your brother is ready to run through us all to get to you.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t forced his way up here.”

“Bash was with him when I came up. I don’t know how much longer he’s going to wait.”

She leans into my side, like she needs my support.

I wonder if she senses how much her touch is calming me?

Feeling her here, next to me. Reminding me that she’s okay.

We head downstairs, and to our surprise, there is no one in the kitchen or living room. The glass doors and windows are open, causing the curtains to blow all around. The rain is back and drowning out the voices outside.

As I guide us to the doors, Natalie pulls back on my arm. “The storm sounds angry. I don’t know that I want to go outside.”

“Maybe it’s not angry. Maybe, it’s washing away the day. Giving us all a clean slate for tomorrow.”

“I guess I need to go face everyone now, don’t I?”

“Yeah, Sweetheart, you do. But I’m with you. If you need me, I’m here.”

Leaning against me, she wraps her arms around my waist. “Thanks, Brady. I wish I could go back to sitting on that couch with you. You know, before everyone came over. I wish I could have a do-over. I would have never left with him.”

“Why did you, Nattie? Why did you go out there with him? I thought... I was looking for you but couldn’t find you.”

“You might have been looking at some point. But first, you were playing beer pong with someone else. Darby texted, and I figured why not. God, that sounds so stupid now. I’ve got about a million reasons why not.”

“Beer pong?”

“Yeah. You were playing with a pretty girl. Tall. Looked like a pink-haired barbie.”

“Kenzie?”

Natalie shrugs her shoulders. Of course, she doesn’t know who Kenzie is.

“Kenzie goes to the all-girls school in Kroydon Hills. She’s related to my Uncle somehow. We’ve just always said she’s a cousin.”

Nat’s arms are crossed protectively as she listens.

“She is tall, and she’s pretty, but I have a newfound need for someone short and gorgeous. Someone who looks like a pixie. Someone whose brother I was planning on talking to tonight before all hell broke loose. I need to talk to him so that he doesn’t kill me when I kiss his sister.”

Running both hands up and down her arms, I go on.

“I know you don’t need to hear this shit tonight, Nattie. But, when you’re ready to hear it, you let me know. I promise I’ll be waiting.”

Those big baby blues are so big and bright right now, and those pretty pink lips have formed the sweetest O.

Heavy footsteps fall across the porch, warning me that we are about to have company.

Cooper pushes ahead of everyone else, and Natalie walks right into his arms.

He’s whispering in her ear. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but I can see she’s crying again.

Jesus, I can’t take this.

Quietly, I extricate myself from the room and walk outside.

From here, I can see the angry waves crashing in the distance. Their white peaks are slamming against the shore. The salty air is clinging to everything like a second skin. The fat raindrops seem almost cartoonish, they are so big and defined

I can’t help but feel like I let this happen. It was under my roof, and I don’t know how to reconcile that. I’ve always been *that guy*.

The one to take care of everything.

To take charge and fix the problems, organize the solution.

Keep everyone safe.

“Brady, man, don’t take this on by yourself. You couldn’t have known what was going to happen.” Sebastian walks up beside me and leans against the rail.

“Bash. You creepy mother fucker. How do you know what I’m thinking all the damn time, man? And seriously, you’re six-foot fucking six. You’ve got to weigh two hundred and fifty pounds.”

Bash laughs. He knows what I’m about to say because we all say it all the time.

“How the fuck do you manage to sneak up on all of us? Seriously man. You need to walk louder or wear a God damn bell around your neck or something.”

“Walk louder? How do I walk louder?”

“I don’t know, but you’ve got to figure it out. It’s fucking creepy.” Turning back to look out at the ocean, I lean down with my arms resting on the wet railing. “How are things in there?”

Sighing deeply, Bash folds his arms across his chest. “Cooper hasn’t let her go yet. I think he is trying to convince himself that she’s alright. There’s a whole lot of whispering going on between them. Maybe it’s a twin thing. They seem like they’re in their own world. Made me feel like I was watching something private.”

“Do you think he’s going to call the cops?”

“Who? Cooper?”

“Don’t be fucking dense, man. Darby. Do you think Darby is going to call the cops? I think this could get a whole lot worse for him and everyone involved, you and I included.”

“No. He’s not stupid. He knows who my family is. He’s not calling the cops. I sent my brother a text just in case he did, though. He told me not to worry about it. It’s taken care of.”

“Like... how taken care of?”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole. Not like that. My brother Sammy’s just gonna make a few calls. Make sure he can handle the situation if the cops get a call. You know he has connections everywhere.”

“You two love birds about done out here?” Murphy walks over to us and kicks Bash’s foot, always the jokester.

“Shut the fuck up, Murph. I was trying to give Cooper and Nat some space.” I glare at him.

His face sobers. “Yeah, me too. They are still talking, and Chloe and Tiffany have decided it’s their job to clean the mess up. They’re on Solo cup patrol. Tiffany asked Chloe for a trash bag and just started at it. I swear, man, it’s like an invasion of the body snatchers. We’ve known this girl for years. Have you ever seen her like this? She’s almost normal.”

I think about that for a second. “She wasn’t bad when we were in middle school. She didn’t get crazy until high school. But she’s been good to have here tonight. She seems to genuinely want to help Natalie. So, I’ve got her back.”

Both guys agree.

Turning around, I look at these guys, who have been my best friends and teammates my entire life. We’ve been through so much together and have so much coming still. Bash, and I already signed our letters of intent for the same Division 1 college last spring. Murphy has had interest from them but hasn’t signed anything yet. It’s always been the three of us, and in a matter of one year, we’ve added Cooper and now Natalie. Chloe has



started to hang around more, and who knows whether Tiffany will stick or not? It feels like everything changed tonight somehow.

Time to face it.

Steeling my back, I blow out a breath.

“Alright, guys, let’s go find out what she wants to do.”



## NATALIE

Cooper's strong arms are banded around me so tightly, I think he is trying to physically hold me together. Still, I've decided I am strong enough to hold myself together. If I am going to shatter the glass box that my family likes to keep me in, it needs to start here and now.

I pull back to try to gauge the emotions rolling across Coop's eyes.

My eyes.

We are not identical twins, but looking into his round, pale blue eyes, I feel like I am looking into a mirror, our eyes are exact matches.

They look stormier now than I have ever seen before.

Breaking free, I take Cooper's hand and take a seat on the couch. He drops to his knees in front of me. "Cooper. I promise. I am not hurt. I was scared more than anything, but I'm okay. I swear to God, I would tell you if I weren't."

Everyone has left us alone in the room for the time being. Grabbing both of my hands in his, his eyes well up with unshed tears. "Are you sure you don't want to call the cops, Nattie? Or Dad? Are you sure we don't need to go to the hospital to get you checked out?"

"Tell me how to fix this, Nattie, please. I need to fix this for you." Coop's pleading with me now.

Taking a deep breath and turning my head, I look for Chloe. She is following Tiffany around with a big black trash bag as they deal with the aftermath of the abruptly stopped party. They're in the kitchen, cleaning up the mess in there.

“Chloe... Can you please ask Brady, Bash, and Murphy to come inside? I have a few things I would like to say, and I don’t know if I can say them more than once.”

Nodding her head Chloe goes through the open doors to the porch and has the guys following her back inside within seconds. No one is saying anything. The tension in the room is a living, breathing thing.

It’s strangling me.

Deep breath in—slow breath out.

I do that a few more times before I make eye contact with Brady.

He gives me a small, sad smile, and for a reason, I am not ready to unpack right now, that smile gives me the extra strength I need.

Okay. I can do this.

“I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to get it out there. Darby didn’t rape me. I didn’t give him a chance. Do I think he was going to try?”

I think about that for a moment. “Yes. I do. He wasn’t listening to no, even though I said it more than once. He was forcing his hand where I didn’t want it, and he was starting to unbuckle his pants right before I hit him.”

Making the mistake of looking at Cooper, I immediately see the pain in my twin brother’s eyes shining back at me. He’s pulling on the strands of his blonde hair. It looks like I just hit him harder than any punch could have.

“Cooper. Sit down. Please listen to me.” I take his hand and pull him down next to me. “Do you remember a few years ago when you and Declan went on that self-defense kick? You were trying to teach me everything you could think of.

“When that young girl in Newport had been raped and killed, and you guys insisted on teaching me how to flip someone but ended up having to settle for teaching me where to knee or kick them and how to throw a punch instead?”

Coop is looking right below my eyes. Refusing to make eye contact. Trying to protect me from seeing the pain in his glassy, red eyes, but it’s not working.

No tears are falling, but my big strong brother, my protector, looks so hurt right now.

“Cooper...” Pleadingly, I place my hands on his shoulders. “Coop. Look at me. I remembered everything you guys told me. I kept my thumb on the outside, I pulled back, and I aimed for his nose. I hit him as hard as I could. Then I ran away. I need you to see that you and Declan saved me.

“Even if you weren’t standing right next to me, you were with me, and you saved me.” I feel tears welling up in my eyes but refuse to let them fall. I will not give that asshole another tear.

Another deep breath and I glance at everyone else. “I hit him and then ran as fast as I could. He started to chase me, screaming, and that’s when I saw Brady and Bash. You guys know everything else. I don’t need to see a doctor because he didn’t get to do what he wanted to do.

“I don’t want to call the cops because school starts in a few days, and he’s going to be there every day. This will be complicated enough already, and if I call the cops, the media will get involved. I do not want that. I just want to forget this night ever happened and try to enjoy this school year. After the way you guys took care of him tonight, I doubt Darby will come anywhere near me now.

“I also don’t want Sebastian and Brady to get in any trouble with the cops for them hurting Darby, either.”

“Little Sinclair,” Bash says, “you don’t have to worry about the cops. Nobody here is getting in trouble. My family is taking care of it.” He walks over to me, pulling me to my feet, and gives me a big, bear hug. Pulling back, he looks me in the eyes. “You being alright is the only thing any of us care about right now.”

The damn tears are threatening me again. “I’m so sorry that I caused all of this. I know you guys don’t know me well yet, but I swear I am not a drama queen. I hate drama. I like to think that I avoid it at all costs, but I guess I missed the mark with that one tonight.”

Murphy makes his way to me next. He takes his green hat off and runs his finger through his hair before putting it back on and adjusting the position. He wraps one arm around my shoulders. “Nat, as long as you’re okay, we can handle everything else. Darby’s been a fucking dick all summer, and the fact that a five-foot-nothing pixie broke his nose is fucking awesome. You didn’t cause any of this, and we will make sure that this isn’t the talk of the school next week. I guarantee you no one will say a word.”

I actually manage a small laugh. “You are insane Murph. You know that, right?”

He squeezes my shoulders tighter. “Just remind me not to piss you off. That’s a hell of a right hook you’ve got there, Killer.”

Eyes roll, and laughs are heard. It’s what the room needed.

I look around at the people I haven’t known that long.

They feel like family, like home.

Like exactly what I was hoping to find.

I think I finally found my people.

Chloe laughs loudest. “That’s like naming a teacup Chihuahua Killer. Ironic and ridiculous.”

“Okay, people. Lovefest is over.” Tiffany claps her hands. “Chop. Chop. This house is not going to clean itself. Brady, get another trash bag, and you guys can clean up outside. I’ve got Chloe and Natalie, and we’ll finish up in here, then check downstairs and make sure there isn’t anything down there.”

“Man, Tiff. We could have used you after all of our parties.” Murphy’s smiling at Tiffany, then looks at my brother. “Admit it, Coop. It’s kinda hot when she gets all bossy.”

Cooper stands up and shoves Murphy’s shoulder. “Shut the fuck up, Murph.”

“Stop talking shit on me all the time, Murphy, and maybe I’d be around more. Probably not nicer, but around more. Now come on. I want to get this cleaned up, and I’ve got to get back to my parent’s house soon. Some of us have parents that aren’t cool with us spending the entire night out or at a party with no parents there.”

Cooper walks over and puts his arm around Tiffany. “Come on. I’ll help you girls inside.” He kisses her temple then grabs the black trash bag from Chloe.

Coop smirks, “You know, I could have fit the fucker’s body in this bag.”

Chloe hits him in the head with an empty red Solo cup.

Tiffany turns around, laughing. “Not helping, Cooper.”

“It’s true,” Cooper mutters contritely.

Then follows behind Tiffany with the bag held open.

I love my brother.



## NATALIE

Not long after we finished cleaning up last night, I went to bed. I wish I could say that I went to sleep, but I didn't. My mind kept racing with what if's.

What if I hadn't gotten away?

What if Sebastian had killed Darby with that one punch?

What if the party had never started and I had gotten to stay tucked in next to Brady?

I hate what if's because they're questions that have no real answers. I'm exhausted when I roll over in the morning and force myself to get out of bed. Cooper asked me last night if I wanted to go home today or stay down until Sunday morning, like we had initially planned. I would have opted to go home today, but I rode down with Chloe, and Coop rode down with Murphy.

With neither of us having our own car here, I didn't want anyone else to have to cut their weekend off early, so I just told him I wanted to stay. I know Chloe would have brought me home, no questions asked, but that didn't seem fair to her.

As I sit up now and contemplate a day on the beach with the potential to see at least half the people that were witness to what went down last night, I cringe.

Unless I am on a stage, I hate being the center of attention. I'm trying to convince myself to get out of bed when there is a knock at my door, immediately followed by Chloe's head popping in. I can only see her from the neck up—the rest of her body is hidden behind the door.



“Are you decent?”

I can't help but laugh at my friend. “Chloe, you know that you are supposed to knock and wait for a response before you come in, right?”

“I didn't come in. It's just my head.” Her smile is wild, genuine, and contagious. I can't help but smile back.

“Please tell me I smell coffee going downstairs?” Standing up, I try to avoid wincing. My muscles are sore in ways I'm not used to. My hand still hurts. My head is throbbing from lack of sleep. It's too early to be this whiny.

“Oh, ye of little faith. The coffee is brewed, and Murphy is already cooking breakfast. Can't you smell that bacon?” She pushes the door completely open, and I swear to God, my crazy ass friend is wearing one-piece, footie, unicorn pajamas.

“I have so many questions right now, but I'm gonna go with just one. Aren't you hot?”

“Nope. Now let's go downstairs. I'm starving, and Murphy's an excellent cook. I don't want the guys to eat everything before we get to grab something.” She pulls on my arm. “Come on.”

“Give me five minutes, and I'll meet you down there.”

“No can do. It was my job to get you so we can eat. Come on.” She tries to pull me with her, but I just laugh.

“Chloe. Let me use the bathroom, brush my teeth and my hair. I promise I'll be right down. Five minutes.”

“Don't make me come back up here, Nat. I get hangry.” She chuckles and heads down the steps.

Going into the bathroom and seeing my own reflection, I debate on taking another shower. I took one last night before bed to wash the grime of the night off of me. Now, I look like I've been in the eye of a tornado and spit back out. Sleeping with wet hair did nothing for me. Neither did tossing and turning all night.

Knowing if I am not downstairs in five minutes, Chloe will come up here and physically remove me from the shower, I settle for washing my face, brushing my teeth, and throwing my hair in a fishtail braid. Grabbing my grey Notre Dame sweats out of my bag, I throw them on with a white t-shirt and a spray of my favorite orange blossoms body spray. This will have to do.

Five minutes later, I'm walking down the stairs and can see everyone pulling plates from the island in the kitchen and taking them over to the table in the dining room. Chloe was right. The smell of bacon is strong, and there is something spicy in the air too. I can't place it, though, until I step into the kitchen and start to see what's actually on the plates. Bacon, eggs, sausage, sour cream, salsa, burrito wraps, onions, peppers, and bagels are all out on assorted plates and bowls. I momentarily forget my awe at what I'm guessing is going to be a surprisingly good breakfast, though, when a shirtless Brady walks into the kitchen.

Holy Hell. I was right that first night.

Brady's body is carved perfection from all of his hours spent working out on the field and in the weight room. I mentally tell myself not to drool, as I wonder if beautiful is an appropriate term for a man. Because beautiful is the only word I can think of right now.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Wants some coffee?" He is already holding what I'm guessing is a now empty mug of coffee and grabs another cup from the shelf. "Sugar and cream are on the counter over there."

"Thanks."

Brady fills both mugs and hands one to me. He leans back on the counter for a minute and might as well shine a spotlight on the perfectly sculptured V that his shorts are hanging off of. I internally groan while I imagine licking every ridge of his chest.

If I lick it, is it mine?

Standing up, Brady hands me a plate. "Come on. Everyone's waiting for you, and Murphy gets pissy when his food gets cold." The laugh that comes after that strange statement is deep and rumbly, and makes me melt.

I follow Brady into the other room and see everyone is around a massive, cherry wood dining table with six high back, upholstered chairs. The chairs match the gorgeous golden drapes that are embroidered with the prettiest jewel tones. The way the morning light is filtering through is bathing the entire room in a magical golden glow. "Wow. The food smells amazing, guys. Sorry I slept so late."

Brady pulls my chair out for me. "No worries, Nattie. You needed it."

Sitting down, I look at my brother, who is seated to my right. He already has one breakfast burrito in his hand and manages to eat half of it with one bite. "Murphy made plenty."

Elbowing him in the side, I yell at him. “Gross, Coop. Trying swallowing before you speak.”

Murphy chokes out a laugh. “That’s what she said.”

The joke falls flat, and Murph shrugs his shoulder. “Sounded better in my head.”

Murphy is shirtless, wearing a pair of black gym shorts and a *Kiss the Cook* apron that looks so out of place in this room I have to hold in my laugh. “Huh. Murphy, I didn’t know that you liked to cook.”

Murphy is busy putting together a giant burrito on his plate. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Little Sinclair.” He winks. “It’s my fallback plan if the pros don’t come knocking. Or maybe after I retire. I want to be the next Gordon Ramsey and get to yell at everyone in my kitchen all of the time.”

“I stand by what I said last night, Murphy. You are crazy. But, you’re my kind of crazy. Thanks for the breakfast. So, what’s the plan for today?”

Everyone answers all at once.

“The beach.”

Okay then.



The day ends up much better than I was initially expecting. We are moving slowly in the morning but manage to get on the beach before noon. Chloe and I brought a gigantic, blue plaid blanket today instead of chairs. As soon as we get everything set up, I am lying face down on the super-soft blanket, happily avoiding everyone else.

The warm sun feels good on my skin. You’d never know by the gorgeous day today that there was a nasty storm last night. The only thing giving it away is the riptide warning the lifeguards have posted, and the nasty waves still crashing against the sand. T

he sun is out, and the seagulls are everywhere.

I am not in the mood to be around people.

I am tired from not sleeping last night, and it just seems easier to lay down, close my eyes, and try to drift off than it does to deal right now.

Laying my heads in my hands, I sneak a quick glimpse of the guys in the ocean and then close my eyes.

I am woken up by cold, damp drops of water touching my skin, and something is suddenly blocking the sun. Cracking open my eyes and twisting my head to the side, I have to wait a few seconds for Brady to come into focus.

He looks like a golden god sitting next to me. Tanned and toned, his face is a little red from the sun and exertion. He has water droplets dripping down those perfectly carved abs and cut arms. Royal blue board shorts with white piping running down the sides are covering muscular thighs. His warm brown hair is still dripping wet, with fat droplets sticking to his face and lashes. He looks like sex on a stick and his presence puts me strangely at ease.

“You’re blocking the sun, Quarterback.”

“Your back is getting red, Sweetheart. You may wanna flip over.” He runs his cold, wet fingers down my spine, sending a tingle straight through me.

Instead of flipping over, I reach to my left and into my beach bag. After a minute, I pull out my can of sunscreen spray and hand it to him. “Could you please put more sunscreen on me?”

“Gotta say, Nat, in my fantasy, this sunscreen is a lotion I get to rub all over your body, not just a spray touching your skin.” He shakes the can and sprays. Internally I’m cheering, and I’m brought back to what he said last night about talking to Cooper and being ready to hear what he wants to say.

I flip over and sit up next to Brady. Taking the sunscreen can back, I spray the front of my body myself, then situate my straps. Looking around, I can see the guys throwing a football out in the ocean. Chloe is standing waist-deep in the water next to a pretty girl with light blondish brown hair and a turquoise print bikini that is so well filled out I can’t help but be envious.

“Who’s with Chloe?”

“That’s Sabrina. I think you’ll like her if you get a chance to know her. She may be the busiest person I know. Her schedule puts mine to shame.” He leans back on his elbows and tips half his mouth up in a devious smile.

Good lord, am I drooling again?

“See something you like, Nat?”

Oh, my God. Did he just ask me that?

“Seriously? Did you throw that cheesy ass line out there?” I stand up and slowly adjust my bikini top, then run my fingers under my bottoms,

making sure everything is in place. I may do it a little slower and more exaggerated than necessary, but two can play at this game. “I may have seen something I liked. But, if I recall correctly, you feel like you need permission from my brother before you are willing to do anything about that. Just in case you weren’t aware, Brady, I am not an object that someone needs to ask permission to use. I decide if, and how, I get played with.”

“Nattie, your brother is my teammate and has become one of my best friends. I’m not asking for permission, but I don’t want to feel like I am doing anything behind his back, either. Because, I don’t plan on hiding how I feel about you for anyone’s sake. Not once you realize you’re already mine. And, make no mistake, Sweetheart. You are mine.

“Last night should never have happened, and I won’t let it ever happen again. I will keep you safe.” He stands up next to me. “Now, I think it’s time for you to cool off.”

His words are a balm to my soul.

I want to be his.

I feel bad for the mini tantrum I just threw, for about five seconds. Then I’m six feet off the ground, with my ass in the air as Brady throws me over his shoulder and runs into the ocean with me screaming the whole way.



## BRADY

It has been one of those days that I know I will look back on years from now and remember. We played beach volleyball for half the day. Threw the football around then surfed until the sun started to dip behind the warm, orange-hued horizon.

It's just Cooper and me out here now. The two of us sitting on our boards in the ocean as we watch the hazy sun start to go down past the end of the sea. He keeps teasing me that these waves suck compared to California, but we make do with what we've got.

Bash was with us earlier, but he and Murphy went back to the house with the girls a while ago.

We're going to head in soon.

They'll be starting the bonfires a few hours after the sun sets.

This has always been my favorite time of the day on my board. My dad taught Chloe and me to surf as little kids. Before he got too busy to have fun and was still willing to spend his time with us enjoying life instead of always focusing on furthering the Ryan empire.

I think it's time for me to start enjoying life too.

I'm lost in my thoughts, staring off into the distance, when I hear Cooper.

"You ready to head in, man?"

Now or never. "I wanted to talk to you about something first."

Cooper looks momentarily worried. "About last night? Cause I gotta tell you, man. Natalie asked me earlier to let it go. She wants to move on. I

don't know how I'm gonna look at the piece of shit for the rest of the year, but I'm not good at telling my sister no."

"I hear ya. I wanted to talk about something else, though."

"Hit me. What's up?"

"I was hoping to talk to you about this last night before everything went down. I want to take Natalie out. On a date. I think there's something there between us, and I want to see where it goes. I know she's your sister, and you don't want her to get hurt, man, but I'm not going to hurt her. I'm gonna fucking worship her."

"Shut the fuck up, bro. If you promise never to tell me you are going to worship my sister again, I won't beat the piss out of you for even thinking about all the ways you want to worship her. And try not to touch her in front of me."

I sit there waiting for more, but that's it.

He seems like he's done.

"Seriously? That's it? I thought you were going to rip that lifeguard's arm off and beat him to death with it when he tried to touch her ass yesterday."

"What you didn't see when that happened was the look on your face. You also didn't see it last night when you took care of her before you even considered yourself. You could have ended your season with that hit last night, QB. You know that, right? Of course, you fucking know that. The consequences could have been fucking epic if you broke your hand while breaking his face, and you didn't hesitate to protect my sister. There aren't a whole lot of people I trust.

"People are usually trying to use me to get to my dad. You, Bash, and Murph aren't like that. Don't fucking hurt her. Don't fuck her over. And don't ever fucking talk about her in the locker room, and we are good man."

"I won't. Pretty sure I'd do anything to make her smile and would get you to help me bury the body of anybody that tried to hurt her."

"Good. Keep it that way. Let's head in. I'm starving, and Murphy said he was grilling steaks tonight."





fter dinner, while Bash and Murphy are getting ready for the bonfires, I plan my next move.

*A* few of us are sitting at the outdoor table when Chloe asks Nat if she wants to head down too. Chloe is supposed to be meeting Sabrina then heading to the beach.

“If it’s okay with you, Chloe, I think I’m going to pass on the bonfire tonight. I really would rather just stay in.”

“Oh, Nattie. I’m sorry. I didn’t even think. I’ll text Sabrina and tell her to meet us here, and we can have a girl’s night in.”

“No. Please don’t do that. Go. Have fun. I’m going to sit on the front deck. I just want to watch the bay and read. I swear. I’m good. That’s all I feel like doing.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Tell Sabrina we have to get together soon, though.”

Leaning back in my chair on the porch, I’ve been quietly watching everyone have their conversations. Taking everything in and not committing to anything one way or the other.

I knew I wanted to be wherever Nat was tonight. I had a feeling that would be here. She got uncomfortable today when some of the guys from the team played volleyball with us on the beach. I didn’t think that she would want to be around half the school at this bonfire.

After Chloe left, Natalie went back inside to get her book.

I see Cooper when he’s ready to leave for Tiffany’s house. He stops and crosses his arms over his chest. “You were quiet at dinner earlier. You coming to the bonfire?”

Shaking my head, I stand and lean on the arm of the couch. “Nope. I’m staying in tonight.”

“Remember what I said, Brady.”

Reaching out, I grab his shoulder. “I won’t forget, man.”

With that exchange out of the way, Cooper heads down the steps to go pick up Tiffany.

I head into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water and see Murphy. “We are heading out, QB. You sure you don’t want to come with? There will be local girls, man.”

Bash comes into the room and slaps Murphy on the back. “He’s good, man. Let’s go.”

“Thanks, brother. You know where the key is if you crawl back in tomorrow morning, right? Don’t forget we have to leave early to make it back before the football game.”

“We’re good, QB. Stop worrying about us. Have fun tonight.”

Finally, I thought they’d never all leave.

I walk down the hall to the other end of the house. This is the only way to access the deck that overlooks the bay. I can see Nat through the glass French doors. She is wearing worn jeans with holes in the knees and a tiny light pink t-shirt with black writing. I can’t quite make out what it says until I open the door. Startling her, Nat turns quickly.

I can see it now. Her shirt says, *It takes an athlete to dance, but an artist to be a dancer!*

“Are you an artist, Nat?”

“Jesus, Brady! You scared me!” She has her hand on her chest, and I’d feel bad for scaring her if it wasn’t for how stunned I am right now. She is fucking gorgeous. Her hair is framing her face, and she has the prettiest pink on her cheeks, matching the pink of her shirt. Diamond studs sparkle from her ears, and her face is free of makeup. She is the epitome of natural beauty.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Nat sits back down on the white Adirondack chair with her feet tucked up underneath her.

I sit next to her feet on the footstool. “Ready for your first Philadelphia Kings game tomorrow? Fair warning, the fans can be brutal. I hope your dad has some tough skin.”

Cocking her head to the side, she surveys me. “Why are you here, Brady? I told Cooper that I didn’t need a babysitter. I’m fine. Go. Have fun. I swear, I’m okay.”

“What if I’m here because I’d rather be here with you than at the bonfire with them?”

“I’d say you’re crazy. I’m boring. I really would be happy sitting out here, with this view and a book.”

“Oh, yeah. What kind of book are you reading, Sweetheart?”

Her face flushes before she answers me. “It’s a romance.”

“What kind of romance?”

“It’s about these three brothers and the girl that comes into their lives.”

“Like... comes into all their lives? How? With all of them?”

“Eww. Don’t be gross!”

“Come on. You didn’t think I was going to go there?”

“Shut up.”

“Do something with me tonight.”

“Like what? I don’t want to go to the bonfire.”

“Wanna go get ice cream?”

“Come on, Brady. Go to the bonfire. Have some drinks with your team. And your friends. I don’t want you to feel like you have to stay here. You don’t. I’m fine.”

Standing up, I extend my hand. “Natalie, I know you’re fine. You say you are, so I believe you. But I want to spend my time with you. Please come with me to get ice cream. They have really good mint chocolate chip. Don’t make me look like a creeper going all by myself. Come on. We can walk to the pier out by the bay afterward. It puts this view to shame.”

“I highly doubt anything puts this view to shame.”

She’s wrong. The view I have of her right here and now puts every other view to shame.

“Come on.” This time Nat takes my hand and lets me pull her up.

It doesn’t take long to get to the mom-and-pop ice cream shop that has been here for seventy-five years, according to the plaque on the wall.

Chloe and I have been coming here every summer since we were little kids. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Meader, are the kindest people. They have to be in their mid-seventies by now but still work every summer. Mostly walking around interacting with the customers. Their grandkids usually work the counter these days.

We have to wait in line for a few minutes before we get to enter. Outside, we’re behind a family of four. The dad is holding a little boy who looks like he’s maybe two. Nat starts playing peek-a-boo with him, and he won’t stop smiling at her.

Yeah. She’s got that effect on me too, kid.

When we finally make our way inside, white metal tables and chairs with heart-shaped metal backs and bright red cushions are scattered throughout the room. The floors are black and white checkers, and there is a long counter where you can sit to get a sundae, milkshake, or old-fashioned root beer float. Nat is looking over the menu written on the chalkboard above the counter. It boasts only homemade ice cream or old-fashioned Italian water ice.

When they call us up to the front, Mrs. Meader is standing behind the register. “Brady Ryan! It’s so good to see you, honey. And who is this beautiful creature you have with you? Did you finally find yourself a girl?” She winks at Nat, who smiles back at her like they are sharing some great inside joke.

“You know, Brady here has come here every summer for most of his life. He used to ask to sample all of the different flavors we had until one summer when he was maybe ten years old, he tried a vanilla cone with sprinkles. Do you know that is all he’s ever gotten since? I asked him once if he wanted to try a different flavor.”

Mrs. Meader turns to me, asking, “Do you remember what you said?”

Glancing from Nat to Mrs. Meader, I answer, “Didn’t want to try anything else because I already had the perfect ice cream.”

Mrs. Meader and Nat laugh. “See, he’s loyal to a fault when he finds something he likes. Which also means I know his order already. What can I get for you, dear?”

While they get Nat her mint chocolate chip in a pretzel cone and my three scoops of vanilla in a sugar cone with rainbow sprinkles, she turns to me, still laughing. “You think she could have laid it on any thicker?”

“Nope. And, I didn’t even pay her. The moral of the story—stick with me, and I promise not to lick anyone else.”

“You’re terrible.”

“Yeah, that was pretty bad.”

We take the ice cream to go and walk down to the bay to sit and watch the boats go by. The sunset a while ago and the stars are beginning to dot an inky sky. We don’t talk much, just sit and eat our ice cream.

I’m staring at the bay and the stars, anything that will keep me from watching Nat lick her ice cream cone. It’s actually torturing me because I might be a good guy, but I’m a filthy man, and I can’t help but think about everything else she can do with that delicious tongue.

Once she’s done, I take our trash and throw it out before we walk back to the house.

“Thanks for this tonight, Brady. If you tell Cooper, I will deny it, but I appreciate you hanging out with me. I don’t think I really wanted to be alone.”

“My lips are sealed, Nat.” I link my fingers through hers and walk back to my house with a silly smile on my face.

“Come upstairs with me.”

Her eyes look shocked, and I realize what that sounded like. “My parents' room has a private deck. It has a great view of the beach. It's the perfect place to watch the fireworks. The porch downstairs has a ceiling, so it messes with the view. This deck is at the top of the house, and you can see everything.”

“Okay, then. Show me the way, QB.”

“Always, Sweetheart.”

We pass the bedrooms on the second floor and take a private flight of stairs to my parent's master suite on the third floor. My mother has a two-person lounge chair on this balcony. We sit down next to each other, leaning back, waiting for the show to start.

I will not touch this girl is a mantra playing over and over in my head. It would work too if she didn't situate herself right next to me. I lift my arm, and she snuggles in like she was always meant to be there, and that's the thing, I think she was.

Nat lets out a light sigh, and her whole body relaxes against me.

We watch the fireworks exactly like that.

My fingers are playing with her long, blonde hair but not straying further.

The smell of orange blossoms is invading my senses in the sweetest possible way.

We stay like this long after the fireworks end.

Eventually, her arms get tucked up, in-between us, and I can tell she's falling asleep. I want to go inside and grab a blanket so we can just stay here, but I don't want to wake her up, and I don't need Cooper to find us like this, hours after I talked to him.

I lean down and kiss the crown of her head. “Sweetheart, you've got to wake up. I don't know if anyone will be looking for us when they get home, and we have to get out of here early tomorrow. I think we better go back inside.”

Her eyes are soft and sleepy as she reaches up with her hand and runs her fingers through my hair. “I had a perfect night tonight, Brady. Thank you. For everything.” She stretches up and lightly kisses my cheek.

It takes the will power of a saint for me not to kiss her. Attempting to be the good guy, I stand up and extend my hand. She slides her palm into

mine, and I pull her to her feet and walk her down to her bedroom door.  
“Good night, Natalie.”

“Night, Brady.” Nat closes the door behind her with a click, and I lean against the wall, trying to get my dick under control.

It was a damn near perfect night.



## NATALIE

The next morning comes too quickly. I slept better than I had in a long time, but I still don't want to get out of bed. There is no time for chit chat as we all pack everything back up and get into the cars to caravan back to the city. It's my dad's season opener, and he gave us tickets for the owner's box.

We spent the day with the same group of friends we had been with all weekend, not tired of each other yet. Everyone laughing and talking as if we hadn't just shared a house for two days.

Until the last few minutes of the fourth quarter, we all thought that the Kings were winning this game. Our starting quarterback got sacked with two minutes left to go and had to be wheeled off the field. According to the guys, it's never good when someone isn't allowed to walk off. We lost the game two minutes later. The final score was 15-14.

My dad texted to let us know that he would see us at home later that night, so Cooper and I headed home.

Labor Day weekend.

Last official day of the summer.



Spend the next morning doing laundry and organizing my room. I'm a planner, so my tan, Burberry messenger bag is packed with notebooks, black pens, pencils, and an array of multicolored highlighters. My MacBook is charging and ready for Tuesday.



Pulling the plastic dry cleaning bags off my brand-new uniforms, I hang one set on the back of the walk-in closet and the others with the rest of my clothes. Tomorrow, I'm opting for a starched white, button-down blouse, navy blue jacket, and navy blue and gold pleated skirt with white knee socks. We can choose between this and the white shirt with a navy blue V-neck sweater over it, instead of the jacket. My brand-new clunky brown, lace-up uniform shoes are sitting on the floor, waiting to be worn. I don't mind our uniforms over all, but these shoes are hideous.

Tropical storm Peter is hitting the coast hard and leaves us with heavy rains and wind all day. No thunder and lightning like we had at the beach, but hard rain, that leaves it cold and dreary outside. The kind of day where you have to have all the lights in the house on in the middle of the afternoon because it gets so dark.

Dad spends most of Monday in his office. Cooper and I lay on the couches all afternoon watching an Avengers marathon and ordering Uber Eats. I'm relaxing in my comfiest leggings and fluffiest socks, and Coop is in a pair of old Notre Dame sweats and a matching blue t-shirt. This is our version of bumming it.

It is exactly the day I needed. I feel organized and ready for the first day of school, and my mind is focused on the real Captain America, not the hot football player that reminds me of Captain America.

My very own version makes sure to check-in, though.

**QB:** Hey, what are you doing?

**Nattie:** Admiring Captain America.

**QB:** Yeah? I think I could take him.

**Nattie:** Ohh. I think I'd like to watch that. You know, for educational purposes.

**QB:** Hilarious, smart ass. You need a ride to school tomorrow?

**Nattie:** Nope. I'm catching a ride with Coop.

**QB:** You're breaking my heart.

**Nattie:** I doubt that. See you tomorrow, QB. I'll be the new girl.

Our lazy day also leaves me with a little time to worry about any of the ramifications of Friday night that I could possibly be walking into tomorrow. No one has seen or heard from Darby since the party.

Chloe tells me to stop worrying about it. She says he is a little bitch who got put down by a girl and two guys all in one night. Hopefully, she is right, and he will leave me alone, but it still makes me nervous.

Cooper and I decide that we are going to drive together to school in the morning, and I'll take the car home in the afternoon. He says one of the guys will bring him home after practice.

As always, I start to cry at the scene between Spiderman and Iron Man at the end of the battle in Avengers Endgame.

Cooper laughs at me. "How many times have you seen this movie? Seriously. You know what's going to happen, and you're still crying." He rolled his eyes at me. "I love you, sis. Your heart is too big."

"Shut up. At least I have a heart, Dickhead." I throw a pillow at his head.

Of course, that's when my dad walks in. He clears his throat to get our attention, and we both look at our father's massive presence. "Are you two ready for tomorrow? Need money? Anything?"

"Nope. We're good. Chloe said you use your ID Card to buy lunch, and I checked, you already preloaded our accounts."

Cooper looks at me, confused. "Really? Mine too?"

"Yes, Coop. I checked yours too. We're both good. I printed out your schedule for you too. You are welcome," I say exaggeratedly.

Cooper throws his arms dramatically around me. "Thank you, Nattie." Then he starts to tickle me until I can't breathe.

"Cooper, leave your sister alone."

I stick my tongue out at him. "Yeah, Cooper, leave your sister alone."

"Are the two of you eight or eighteen? Young lady, do you have your dance schedule for the week? Do you need anything?"

"No, thanks, Daddy. I think I'm good. I'm going over tomorrow after school for Annabelle to give me everything I need for the class that I will be teaching on Wednesdays. She's the owner, and I'm going to be working with her individually for myself too."

"Alright, you two. Make sure you call it a night soon. Love you, kids." And then he's gone.

That's probably the most I've heard him speak all day. He has been hidden in the home office, doing whatever he does the day after game day. He always gives his players morning meetings that day and then afternoons off to rest and recoup, and he is always moody after a loss. Cooper and I are used to it. Today was a little worse because it looks like his quarterback is out for the season.

“For once, I agree with Dad, Coop. I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.” Standing up, I stretch my arms out above my head.

“It’s gonna be a good year, Nattie. I can feel it. Senior year, baby.” He pounds his chest like King Kong.

“Oh my God, Cooper. I think Murphy is starting to rub off on you.”

“Shut it, Nattie. It’s gonna be the best year yet. I know it.”

I keep walking and answer him without turning back. “I hope so.”



The next morning, I wake up at six to get in a run before I have to get ready for school. Since leaving California, I’ve been slacking on my eating habits, and I need to start to incorporate some of my old habits into my new life if I want my clothes to keep fitting. By seven, I’ve run three miles, showered, blow-dried my hair, and gotten dressed.

Not bad for under an hour.

The warning alarm I have set on my phone goes off, telling me I have five minutes left before we have to leave for school. I take stock of my appearance in my mirror. My hair is bouncy and wavy, my makeup is minimal, and my uniform isn’t the worst thing in the world. The shoes are not cute, but the rest isn’t too bad. I’m trying my brown shoes when Cooper knocks on the door.

“We need to get moving, Nattie. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there.” I put the strap of my Burberry messenger bag over my shoulder and across my chest and nearly skipped down the stairs with excitement. I can’t remember the last time I looked forward to a school year this much.

Cooper is pouring coffee into two to-go mugs and hands me the sparkly purple one. “Ready to go?”

“Ready to go.”



## BRADY

*I* pull into the wet parking lot and take a deep breath.  
First day of senior year.

The rain stopped late last night, bringing the temp down to a comfortable 80', but the air still feels heavy and damp. Four days from today, we play our first game of the season, and I start my final year as starting quarterback for Kroydon Prep. Next year I'll only be going to school twenty minutes from here, but the world will be different. I'm only alone with my thoughts for a minute before the rest of our crew shows up.

I watch Natalie and Cooper get out of his Jeep. Her hair is a bouncy golden halo around her face. Her jacket is unbuttoned and framing her gorgeous body. I get out of my Range Rover and grab my navy jacket and brown leather bag before making my way over to the crowd of our friends that is starting to gather in the parking lot.

Murphy pulls up with his sister Carys. She's a sophomore this year and looks like a smaller, prettier female version of Murphy. I hear him tell her to stay away from guys and laugh.

Walking over to where Natalie is fixing her lipstick in the mirror, I don't even care that I'm staring. I've been looking at these uniforms for years, but I've never seen a girl make one look sexier than she does without even knowing it. The whole naughty schoolgirl thing is a cliché when all the girls around you dress like this, but man, I've already got a fantasy going on involving her dressed in that uniform, bent over a desk.

I hear the warning bell sound just as Murphy declares, "Alrighty ladies and gentlemen, let's make this year our bitch!"

Everyone laughs as we all head into the old brick building together. We are the kings of this school. When people see us, they move. Not gonna lie, it's a good feeling. Nat and Chloe are walking past me when I grab Nattie's hand. "Did you print out your schedule, pretty girl?" She spins around, her skirt swishing around her shapely thigh, and starts walking backward, so she faces me.

"I sure did, QB. Why? Are you gonna walk me to my classes? Ask me to go steady?"

She bounces on her toes and claps her hands.

"Do I get to wear your letterman jacket, QB?" She's laughing at me because she has no idea how right those words are.

"Oh, so I'm getting Sassy Nattie this morning, huh? And what if I do want to walk you to your class and have you be my girl? Would that be so bad?"

"Nope. I don't think that would be so bad." She's beaming at me in a way that makes me want to be the man responsible for making her smile every fucking day.

Cooper shoves me. "Fucking gross, man. I'm adding a new rule. No being a moron with cheesy lines when you're hitting on my sister. Keep that shit away from me, asshole."

Natalie's cheeks go crimson red, but she doesn't stop smiling. Instead, she pulls the schedule from the outside pocket of her messenger bag and hands it to me.

Scanning it, I can see we are grouped for homeroom. That goes alphabetically, Ryan and Sinclair. Then we have the first two classes of the day together, after that, she has an AP Calculus and is back with me for lunch.

I can work with this.

"Come on, Sinclairs. I'll show the two of you, homeroom." Everyone else goes their separate ways.

Cooper walks in first, then I let Nat go through the doorway ahead of me, with my hand on her back. I know how these fuckers are with new students. We don't get them that often in this school, and they are never as gorgeous as Nat is. I'm not taking any chances with someone else getting ideas.

We take seats together toward the back of the homeroom and let the teacher go through her welcome back to school speech. Locker assignments

are passed out, and morning announcements read before we are dismissed a few minutes early to give us a chance to test out our locker combos.

“Come on, Nat, I’ll help you with your locker.” Reaching up, I wrap a lock of her hair around my finger. Every guy in this school will know to stay the fuck away from her by the end of this day. I might not be able to tattoo MINE on Natalie’s forehead, but there are other ways to get the point across.

Cooper and Nat’s lockers are next to each other, so we all compare schedules. Cooper is in a study hall in the cafeteria for his first class, so if he wants it, he will be allowed to have a late arrival and not start his day until the second class of the day. Lucky bastard.

Walking down the hall, fist bumps, and greetings from guys I haven’t see much of this summer are coming my way. A few girls eye me with the new girl and don’t look happy about it all.

I don’t give a shit what they think.

I guide Nat into the Chemistry Lab and sit us down at a table across from Bash. This room has multiple lab tables with two stools on each side and a small stainless-steel sink at either end. While we wait for the teacher to come in, a junior girl with dark brown hair sits down next to Bash. She looks way too happy for this early in the morning and starts talking the second she sits down.

“Oh, my God! Sebastian!” His head whips up. “I can’t believe that you don’t already have someone sitting here. You know Professor Carpenter always makes your lab partner the person sitting next to you on the first day of class! Guess it’s fate!”

Sebastian looks like a deer in headlights. He raises his eyebrows so high they are touching his hairline. Bash has never been much of a talker in school, or anywhere else for that matter. This chick just hit his threshold for interaction for the day in the first thirty seconds. He looks at Nat and me as if there is something we can do to help him. Lucky for him, real help just walked in the door.

“Junior.”

The poor girl looks up at Tiffany with a who me? look to her face.

“Yes, honey you. Candace, right? I need you to move for me. Bash was saving my seat but didn’t want to be rude. Everyone already knows that I’m rude, so sorry, not sorry. Buh Bye!”

Candace is sitting there for a second stunned, until Tiffany clears her throat and pantomimes this poor girl getting up and moving on with her hands. She quickly gathers her stuff and practically runs to the back of the room, looking like she wants to cry. As soon as she vacates the seat, Tiffany sits down and looks at us as if she did not just ruin this poor junior's first day of school.

"Oh, come on. Sebastian didn't want some crazy fangirl sitting here. All the girls in the school are already scared of me, so I decided to use my powers for good instead of evil. Relax, Bash. She was right—Carpenter always makes you pair up for the semester with the person you sit with on day one, and you should be thanking me. I'm kinda a chemistry genius." I guess Tiff doesn't realize that Bash is a secret science nerd himself.

Bash is sitting there, just staring at Tiffany as Natalie giggles. "Tiff, seriously, you made her cry."

"Yeah, well, it's better to be the one in control than the one everyone is trying to torture. You've known me for years, guys. I'm a control freak, I own that. I say what everyone is thinking but too afraid to say, and I'm proud of that. But I'm not a mean girl. I just make sure that they fear me. Fear is a form of control, and if they fear me, they won't hurt the people close to me.

"Besides, you guys might have put the word out to the guys in school that the events of the party last Friday night is a no-go topic, but the girls don't care what you say and won't back off just because you said so. Let them see Natalie sitting with me, and no girl will even whisper her name. Trust me." Tiffany reaches out and grabs Natalie's hand. "I've got your back, Natalie."

"Thanks, Tiffany. You know you're a little scary, right?"

Tiffany laughs. "I better be more than a little scary."

It turns out the junior was right. Natalie and I get partnered up. So do Bash and Tiff. Our foursome will also be working together throughout the semester.

Our next class is European History. Right before the late bell rings, Darby slides into class and into the only available seat, which happens to be directly behind Natalie. His left eye is swollen, black, purple, and turning yellow along the bruise's outer edges. The other eye is not as bruised but is still slightly purple, but much less pronounced. There is a split in his cheek



that has started to heal, sitting on top of the remnants of swelling and a fading purple mark.

His nose looks slightly swollen but straight. He must have had it snapped back into place. It may be four days later, but he is looking worse now than he did Friday night. He leans back in his chair and is just staring into the back of Natalie's head.

Leaning over to Nat, I whisper, "Do you wanna switch seats?"

Before she has a chance to answer me, Ms. Scarpa, one of my favorite teachers in this school, shuts me up. "Mr. Ryan, do you have something you need to share with the class?"

Giving her my best kiss ass smile, I answer her. "I was just asking Natalie if she would like to switch seats with me, Ms. Scarpa."

"While it is very nice of you to be concerned about her seating assignment, the late bell already rang. Translation, these are your seats for the rest of the semester. Now class, please open your laptops and pull up the syllabus to discuss. The sign-in sheet is already going around the room. Make sure that you are signing in next to your name so that your absence does not get reported to the principal's office."

I spend most of the class paying more attention to Darby than I do to anything Ms. Scarpa says. When he leans forward and taps Nat on the shoulder to hand her the sign-in sheet, he whispers something in her ear, and if it wasn't for her looking directly at me and shaking her head no, I might have killed him then and there.

When the bell announcing the end of class rings, we all get up. Darby ducks out right away.

Grasping Nat's wrist, I pull her back for a minute. "What did that asshole say to you?"

"He just said he was glad to see I was okay. I'm sure he didn't mean it. The whole thing was strange."

We walk over to her locker, and she stacks her books. When she turns around looking slightly frustrated, I pull her in and kiss her forehead. "Don't let him bother you. If he says anything, you tell me right away. Okay?"

She leans her head against my chest.

I hold my hands on her hips and inhale her scent, staying like that until the warning bell rings.

Looking up at me, Nat straightens her spine. “Okay. I refuse to let him ruin the first day of school. I’ll see you at lunch.” She walks away. Her skirt swishing behind her.

I’m still leaning against the locker when Murphy stops in front of me. “What’cha looking at, QB?” He turns his head and sees Natalie walking away. “Oh, man. I do hate to see her leave, but I sure do like to watch her go.” The fucker laughs at himself.

“Bro. You should see your face, QB. I’m just kidding. Fucking relax. Come on. We’ve got gym next, and we need to get moving if we are getting to the other side of campus on time. You know coach gets pissed if we are late for his class.”



## NATALIE

Today flew by. I am already at my locker, gathering my things when Brady and Cooper walk up together. “And, how was your first day of school, Coop? Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Shut up.” He’s laughing as he says it. Putting his hands over his heart, Cooper acts like he is swooning. “It was everything I wished for and so much more, little sister.” That makes all three of us laugh as I shove him away.

“Little sister, my ass. I am three minutes older, drama queen.” I have to refrain from actually stomping my foot right now. “Have fun at practice, boys. I’ve got to go get changed and head to dance.” I put my bag back across my chest.

“Okay. See you later, Nat.” He sprints down the hall to Tiffany’s locker.

Shutting my locker, I stand there for a second, waiting for Brady make a move.

Walk away.

Say anything.

Do something.

Leaning his shoulder against the locker, he quietly asks, “How was your day, pretty girl? Was it everything you wished for?”

I lean back against my locker and raise my eyes to his, looking up at him through my lashes. Moments like these, I thank my mother for the long lashes I was blessed with and bat them at Brady, hoping I look flirty and not like I have something stuck in my eye.

“You know, I think it was. I had this super-hot football player walk me to my classes. My new best friend was in lunch and French with me. My locker opens. And I don’t completely hate my uniform. All in all, I’d have to say it was a good day.”

“You look fucking incredible in this uniform Nat.”

I can feel the heat of my blush start at my chest and move up my face.

“So, tell me more about this super-hot football player.”

“I would, QB, but I wouldn’t want you to get jealous.”

Brady reaches up and pulls me forward with the lapels of my uniform jacket. For a second, I think he’s going to kiss me, but he just tugs me toward him so that I’m standing in-between his legs and looks at me like he wants to say something.

After a minute of waiting, I give up. “I’ve got to go.” It comes out one step above a whisper. “I have to go to dance this afternoon. I’ll be with the owner of the ballet studio I am going to be working at, and I have to run home and change first.”

“Tell me, do you wear a little pink tutu when you teach?”

“Why do you want to know what I wear to teach in?”

“Because I like to have as much detail in my fantasies as possible.”

Fuck, that was hot. Oh, so quietly, I answer this incredibly sexy man. “I will be wearing a light pink leotard with a flowy little black wrap skirt and pale pink tights today.”

Brady runs his fingers down the side of my neck. “Hair up or down?”

I suck in my breath. “Up.”

“In my fantasy, your hair is down, beautiful. It should always be down and wild. I fucking love your hair.” He has one hand under all of my hair now, gripping the back of my neck, and it’s giving me chills everywhere.

“Do you like my hair too, Brady?” Murphy runs his fingers through his hair as he and Bash walk down the hall.

“Get the fuck out of here, Murphy.”

“Time to go, QB. Bye, Little Sinclair.” Murphy’s smile is huge as he waves his fingers at me.

Bash is just shaking his head as he keeps walking.

“Have fun at dance. See you later.” The look Brady is giving me makes me wonder if he will be seeing me in person or in his fantasy, and damn, I like the idea of him getting off thinking about me.



Later that afternoon, I find myself nervous for the second time today. Parking the Jeep I am now sharing with Cooper, I take a minute to calm my nerves. I have studied at plenty of impressive studios throughout my life. I've taken classes from some of the most incredible instructors in this country at different points in time. But right now, I am scared to death.

I don't want to be here.

I have no idea what I want to get out of this experience, and I don't want Annabelle, the owner, to see right through me.

Walking in, I see Annabelle finishing up with a toddler tap class. It's impossible to see these tiny little girls in their tiny black leotards and shiny, black patent leather tap shoes with their contagious smiles and not smile. She is stretching them out as she cools them down.

Annabelle nods at me, so I take a seat in the corner of the waiting area and drop my bag next to me. Ten minutes later, the class has ended, and the tiny dancers have run to their parents, excitedly telling them all about their first dance class.

Annabelle approaches me after everyone leaves.

"Their excitement, it's contagious, isn't it? It's hard to remember what it was like to dance for nothing but fun and cool shoes." Annabelle's is smiling wistfully.

"Don't forget the leotards. I had one in every color when I was that age."

"Me too. Thanks for coming in today, Natalie. I wanted to take some time to show you everything and get you familiar with the place before tomorrow. I'll be here during your classes, but your teaching them will give me more time to work on administrative things that I hate to do. If I sit in my office and force myself to work through it while you are teaching, I'm hoping to stay on top of it this year. I know that we've discussed you are teaching the toddler intro to ballet class, but I wondered if you would help me out with the class after that as well? I had so many sign up in that age group that I split them into two groups. I understand if it's too much, but you would be helping me out. Even if it's just for a few weeks."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I appreciate you being so flexible and working with me. I'm really looking forward to teaching the little ones and

getting the chance to work with you one on one.”

“Oh, me too. It’s been ages since I’ve had the opportunity to work with someone with your talent. I think we are going to have some fun together.”



**A**fter I’ve gotten the tour of the studio, Annabelle turns on the music in the studio, and Kesha’s Praying is piped in through the speaks. She hits pause and looks at me through the reflection in the mirror. “This has been one of my favorite songs to dance it out to this last year. Dance with me, Natalie. Follow my lead and feel the music.

I haven’t heard this song in ages. Annabelle plays it through once, giving me time to take in the words and the beats before hitting pause. “You ready?”

I followed Annabelle’s lead the first time through. Loosening up and feeling the music and her moves.

Then she told me she wanted to see what I had.

I stuck with what she had us doing for the first part of the song but then went into a string of pirouettes, alternating between attitude turns and leg hold turns. Throwing myself into grande jetes and tour jetes. Annabelle oohed when I threw in an ariel into a split leap. Finishing the last thirty-two counts with alternating turns and feeling a little bit like I may have found my own soul again.

Annabelle clapped her hands together. “Alright. Let’s do that again.”



**T**he next school day passes much the same as yesterday. My Wednesday schedule is slightly different from Tuesday, and I am excited to be in a study hall with Chloe. Sitting together in the library, Chloe and I speak quietly, trying not to draw any attention to ourselves. “So, are you ready to tell me what exactly is going on between you and my brother? Every time I’m around the two of you, he can’t keep his hands to himself. Care to explain?”

I feel that damn blush creeping up my face. God, I hate that. “He’s a touchy, feely kind of guy?”

Chloe leans forward. “Are you asking or telling me? Because I am most definitely telling you that I have never seen him act this way before. I’d say our little mission over the weekend worked.”

“Last weekend seems like years ago.”

“Shit, Nat. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. That night sucked, but the rest of the weekend wasn’t awful. And, maybe something is going on with Brady, well, not going on yet. I guess. He let me know he wants something to be going on with us, between us. I don’t know. He wants an us. He told me he would wait until I was ready, and I think I am. I mean, why wait? Your brother is a great guy, and he is so freaking hot. Like seriously, when he touches me—”

“La la la!” Sticking her fingers in her ears, Chloe starts to sing. “TMI. I’m all for encouraging this thing between the two of you, but no details, please, unless you want me to puke up my lunch. Gross. No talking about what happens when he touches you.”

“You and Cooper are both ridiculous. Do you know how many times I’ve caught him screwing around with someone? More times than I can remember, but as soon as I’m into a guy, he has a hissy fit.”

The librarian looks at us and hisses. “Miss Ryan and Miss Sinclair, you are in a library. Please keep your voices down.”

Chloe salutes the librarian. “Yes, sir, Miss Abrams.”

Miss Abrams crosses her arms and stands up. She doesn’t look amused.

“Anyway...” Lowering my voice, I repeat myself. “Anyway. I think I’m ready for more. I just have to let him know. But I don’t want to have the conversation at school, and I don’t want to text it.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you need to do.” Chloe claps her hands and gets us yelled at again. Then she tells me her plan.

Oh yeah. My best friend is the best.





## BRADY

Our team has just finished our second practice this week.

We have a walkthrough and interviews with the local sports channel scheduled for tomorrow.

There is a pep rally in school on Friday.

Our first game of the season is that night, and our team has never played shittier football. Tensions are so high from the fight last weekend that I don't know how to pull us together. We talked to Natalie about telling Coach Maxwell what happened, but she doesn't want to do that. I told Cooper I thought that we should, but he said it was her decision. I don't let anyone make decisions for this team, but if it's what she wants, I can't go against it.

It really isn't helping matters that I want to rip that mother fucker's balls off and shove them down his throat every time I see him in the huddle.

I'm the quarterback, the captain of the team. Part of my job is to get everyone on the same page, and I don't think I can do it now.

Darby has tried to keep under the radar, but he is getting his ass handed to him by half the damn team. The other half are his friends, and they've got his back, pitting one half of the team against the other.

Coach Maxwell ripped us to shreds. He screamed himself hoarse this afternoon.

At the end of practice, I was instructed to shower and have my ass sitting in his office in ten minutes. So here I am sitting in the hard metal chair on the opposite side of Coach's desk with him staring me down. I'm

waiting for him to speak first, but I am starting to doubt his ability to do so. Once he opens his mouth, I regret ever questioning him.

“Brady Ryan, you have played for me for four years. You’ve been my starting quarterback for three of those years, and this is your second year as my captain. Care to explain to me what in the actual fuck is going on out there on my football field? And don’t even think about saying nothing, because that shit show out there today was not nothing.”

He stares at me for a long minute. “The floor is yours, son. Explain. Now.”

“Uh, Coach. There was a bit of an issue over the weekend, but I know we can pull it together for Friday night.”

“You are in the top five quarterbacks in this country, Brady. You better be able to pull it together. Leaders lead. They don’t make excuses. Show me the leader that I know you can be. Reporters will be here tomorrow to do interviews before the opener this weekend. I will not have any of you boys make a mockery of this school. Pull your head out of your ass and pull your team together. I’m counting on you.”

“Will do, Coach.”

“Now get out of my office.”

“Yes, sir, coach.”



Driving down our town’s main street later that night, I pull to a stop at the red light and glance to the right. Sandwiched there between the local pharmacy and the dry cleaners is Hart & Soul Dance Academy. The windows in the front are one way, so I can’t see if Natalie is still there or not. Before I have a chance to second guess myself, I’m pulling into an open parking space in front of the studio.

There are little girls in pink tutus holding their parents’ hands, skipping happily out of the studio as I shut my car off.

My hair is still damp from my shower earlier, and my head is still heavy from my conversation with Coach, but I don’t care. There is a magnetic force pulling me to my girl.

Bells jingle as I walk through the front door. There is no one sitting at the front desk, and the lobby is deserted. Looking to my right, I see Natalie.

She is on the other side of the glass dressed just as she described in a pale pink bodysuit and a floaty little pink skirt wrapped around her hips. She has a fuzzy sweater covering her arms and tied in a knot at her chest. All of her gorgeous, golden blonde hair is pulled up in a tight bun with a pink ribbon around it, hanging down the back of her head. She floats around the room, her feet barely touching the ground. Jeff Buckley's Hallelujah is playing through the speakers and I can't look away as she leaps through the air.

She is incredible.

A throat clearing pulls me from the picture in front of me. "Can I help you with something, Mr..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. No, I don't need any help. I just wanted to stop in and see Natalie. I wanted to ask if she needed a ride home."

"Well, I can let Natalie know you're here if you give me your name." This woman has a lightness to her voice now like she knows why I'm here, and it's amusing to her.

"I'm sorry. I'm Brady Ryan. Nice to meet you."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Mr. Ryan. I'm Annabelle Hart, the owner of Hart & Soul Dance. I'll just go grab Natalie for you."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have interrupted."

"Don't worry about it, Brady. Natalie's last class is done for the day. She's dancing for herself now." Annabelle winks then walks into the studio that Natalie is still dancing in and waits for the music to end before interrupting Nat.

Looking surprised, she turns around and sees me through the glass. Men would go to war for the smile that graces her face.

Knowing I put it there has me standing taller.

Walking back through the door, Annabelle turns to Natalie, "I'll be in the office if you need anything." She smiles at Nat and heads down a long hall.

Nat opens the door wider for me to walk through. I spin around, taking in this room of mirrors and bars, with light pink walls and light wood flooring.

"Brady, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I guess I wanted to see for myself if the fantasy lived up to reality."

Natalie looks around, checking to see if we are alone. Then she grabs my hand and leads me into the room she was dancing in. Turning around to face me, she asks, “Well, does it?”

“Does the fantasy match the reality?”

Biting on that pouty bottom lip, she nods her head.

I grab her face and pull her to me. “The fantasy doesn’t hold a candle to the reality, Sweetheart.” Leaning down, I brush my lips over hers. Once, twice. Licking at the seam of her lips until she opens for me.

Nat surprises me and pushes her tongue into my mouth and tightens her arms around my neck.

I spin us around, leaning her against the wall so that she is pinned between me and the mirror. Her feet are off the ground, and her entire body is lined up with mine. I pull my head back momentarily, to look at this gorgeous girl, and can’t hold in my groan. Her lips are the prettiest shade of pink, cheeks flushed, and I can see her nipples harden under her sweater.

God, I want her more than my next breath.

She’s breathing heavily and looking at me with those dark lashes.

“Let me take you out this weekend, Nat. Saturday night? Let me do this the right way.”

She nods her head again.

“I need to hear the words, Sweetheart.”

“Saturday night sounds good, Brady.” She pulls away but has nowhere to go. She pushes me back a bit, and I let her body slide down mine until her feet are back on solid ground. “I don’t want to push you away, Brady, but I can’t do this here. I just met Annabelle. If she walked in…”

“I’ve got you, Sweetheart. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble. I did want to see if you needed a ride home tonight?”

“No. I have the Jeep tonight. I’m parked behind the studio, in the back lot. I’m going to be here for a little while anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow at school, though. Thanks for stopping by, Brady.” There’s that damn smile again.

“You just gave me a whole new level of fantasy, Natalie. Trust me. The pleasure was all mine.” I lean down and kiss her lips quickly.

“See you tomorrow, Nat.”



## BRADY

Friday at school is our first pep rally of the season. It's supposed to be for all fall sports, but football rules this school. If you play a fall sport, you are allowed to wear your uniform today. The football team is wearing their jerseys and jeans. The rest of the student body can pay \$5.00 to dress down. When you dress down, you can wear whatever you want so long as you keep it appropriate.

It's always a good day when we don't have to wear our standard school uniform.

Tiffany bounces over to our group in the parking lot before school. We've made it a habit of not going in until the warning bell rings, so you can usually find us out here until then. Her cheerleading skirt swishes as she moves, and her high ponytail is bouncing in time with her steps. She has a capital C on her upper left chest that matches the C on my jersey.

She walks right up to Cooper and immediately puts her arms around his waist.

I don't know exactly when it happened, but after years of Tiff annoying the shit out of us, she has become part of our crew.

"God, I love the first game of the season. It's so exciting! Everybody is pumped and ready. My girls are in top form this year. Are you boys ready?"

Murphy laughs. "Jesus, Tiff, do you ever stop to breathe? I'll bet that comes in handy, huh, Cooper?"

Cooper punches Murphy in the shoulder. "Shut the fuck up, Murph. Don't make me kick your ass."

“Aww, Cooper. You can try, but I’d hate to see you get embarrassed in front of your girl.”

Tiffany laughs. “Murphy, has a girl ever been able to stand you long enough to come back for seconds?”

Chloe interrupts. “Children, can we please all remember we are on the same team today?”

The warning bell rings.

“Alright. Saved by the bell. I hate being the youngest one here. You all suck.” Chloe sprints off to the farthest part of the school, where her homeroom is. The rest of us head in together.

As we walk into the school, we can see that the cheerleaders were hard at work last night. There are blue and gold streamers strewn all around the halls.

Every player’s locker is decorated. There are hand-painted banners hung on anything that stood still long enough to be assaulted. Each player is supposed to have a secret cheerleader that decorates their locker before the games each week. The cheerleaders always want us to know who they are. They usually add their touches.

Sometimes they give us candy or something that goes with the theme of that week’s game. I look at Tiffany, still attached to Cooper, and take a not-so-wild guess that she’s his.

He has a big card hanging from his locker with hearts all over it, and it looks like sweet tarts candies pouring out of the envelope.

“Man, QB. This is school spirit taken to a whole new level.” Natalie is laughing at me, looking gorgeous in a tight white sweater, skinny jeans, and brown booties that add a few inches to her legs. The smile on her face is contagious, until a girl with jet black hair and a cheerleading uniform comes up to me. Her name is Aria, and she was my secret cheerleader last year.

I also made the unfortunate mistake of hooking up with her after one of our first home games of the season and had a clinger for the rest of the year. I never took her out and never meant to fuck her again but woke up next to her at one of Landon’s parties drunk after we lost the state championships. She kept trying to make a go for the third time, but it never happened, and she never stopped trying. She summered in France with her family over the break, and I was hoping that she wouldn’t be trying again this year.

“Brady Ryan. Do you like your locker?”



She studies Natalie like she's a bug under her shoe that needs to be squashed. Then presses up against me in an attempt to be sexy.

"I tried to make sure it was just the way you liked it." Turning her nose up at Nat, she whines, "Cute shoes."

Stepping back, I try to put some distance between us. "Thanks, Aria. It looks great."

Nat looks pissed.

"Come on, Nat. We don't want to be late. Bye, Aria." Nat and I turn and walk away.

"She seemed nice." Nat isn't looking at me as we sit down in time, not get marked late.

"I wouldn't exactly call Aria nice. I guess she's my secret cheerleader again this year."

"Your secret what?"

"Secret cheerleader. She'll decorate my locker and shit like that this season."

"Oh, goodie," Nat mutters sarcastically.

I don't hate seeing this sweet girl jealous, even if she has no reason to be. I'm hoping that means she feels as possessive of me as I do of her. I can't wait to take her out tomorrow night and show her that she's it.

I've been so busy trying to keep our team from imploding this week that I haven't planned anything for tomorrow night yet.

Guess that will be something to figure out tomorrow morning.



*H*ours later, the entire team is in the locker room, getting ready for the game.

We all have our routines.

Murphy psyches himself up in a mirror.

Bash tapes up his wrists and hands like a boxer.

Cooper is with the trainer getting stretched out.

Landon blasts his Meek Mill playlist loud enough to be heard in the parking lot.

I'm sitting with my back to the locker, noise-canceling headphones on, and my eyes closed. This helps me decompress and get into the zone. If I

can tune everything out, it's easier for me to focus, visualize the game.

I feel someone sit beside me before cracking my neck and opening my eyes to see who's fucking with my zone.

Darby is next to me, looking uncomfortable.

Taking my headphones off, I wait for him to speak.

"Brady, I wanted to talk to you for a minute before the game."

I just look at him. This fucker seems to be utterly oblivious to how much I want to fucking kill him. He's lucky that my position on this team means that I can't hurt him... yet.

"Listen, man, I know what happened at the beach was fucked up. I had too much to drink and wasn't thinking clearly. I wanted to let you know that I've got your back out there today. Just thought it was important that my quarterback knows that." Darby waits for an answer, an acceptance that doesn't come.

He nods his head at me, gets up, and walks away.

Darby doesn't offer his hand for a shake.

He just steps away.

He has always been a sneaky mother fucker, and I still don't trust him.

Darby may be talking about a united team, but if he means it, it's only for his benefit, not mine or the team's.

Coach Maxwell comes into the locker room, and it's time for the pregame speech.



## NATALIE

Chloe took me home after school today and made sure that I had everything I needed to get ready for the game tonight.

I may be going to the game with my Dad, but my BFF has my back. Of course, it was a whole lot easier to be sure of this move earlier when Chloe was here than it is now.

I'm dressed in the tightest, dark blue skinny jeans that I own. My hair is up in a high ponytail, with the curls hanging down and a navy blue ribbon tied around it. I refused to wear the booties that Chloe was pushing for, so instead, I have on my light pink converse. My brother Declan likes to laugh at my converse addiction. I have a pair in almost every color, but what can I say. My mom loves her Jimmy Choos, and I love my Chucks.

The vital part of my look tonight is the jersey that I'm wearing. It doesn't say Sinclair on the back. Nope. The navy-blue Kroydon Hill's jersey I'm wearing was given to me this afternoon by Chloe and has a number 6 on the back.

RYAN is written in big gold letters stretching from shoulder to shoulder.

Chloe said it was Brady's jersey from last year. I am a little nervous about this.

I feel like I am doing something wrong.

We haven't even gone on a date yet.

Do I have the right to wear his jersey?

Is Brady going to be annoyed that I did this without checking with him?

He didn't give it to me.

Just as I'm spiraling down this path, my Dad yells up the stairs. "Come on, Nattie. We've got to get moving. I want to make sure we're there before kickoff."

"Coming, Dad." One last look in the mirror, then I grab my phone and hurry down the steps. My dad is waiting by the door in the kitchen.

"Let's go, Nattie."

Heading out the door, I mumble, "I'm coming. I'm coming."

Just as I get outside, I hear my dad mutter, "What the hell."

Oops. I didn't think about what my dad would say when he saw someone else's name on a jersey I was wearing.

"What the hell are you doing wearing Ryan's jersey Natalie? Why aren't you wearing your brother's jersey?"

"Uhm. I figured the cheerleader that Cooper has been seeing would be wearing his jersey tonight. Thought I'd leave that for her, and I'd wear Brady's." I try to end the conversation by opening the door and climbing into Dad's ridiculously big Ford F-350. Thinking I just got myself out of this, I close the door and click my seatbelt into place.

Dad hops into his seat and closes his door. Looking at me before he starts the car, "Did you think the conversation was over? Is that the only reason you're wearing this young man's jersey, Natalie?"

"For now."

Dad chews on that for a moment then returns his eyes to mine. "I expect to be kept informed if that changes. I trust you and your brother with more freedom than most kids ever get a taste of before college. Please do not make me regret it."

"Okay."

"I need to make sure you understand me. I am not ready to be a grandfather yet."

Oh, God. Cringing, I can't even look at my father right now. "Please, stop. I promise you that we do not need to be having this conversation. I'm just wearing a jersey."

"A boy's jersey that does not belong to either of your brothers. I've spent my life around football players, Natalie. Don't act like I don't have a right to have this discussion with you. I had this conversation with both of your brothers long before their senior year and trusted your mother to have them with you, but she's not here, and I am. You are a beautiful young

woman. Just be smart because the decisions that you make now affect the rest of your life.”

“Mom has had me on the shot since I was fourteen.”

“Dear God, Natalie Grace. Some things a father doesn’t want to know.”

“Then, don’t ask.” If I could throw myself out of this truck without dying right now, I would. This is the most awkward conversation that my father and I have ever had. Pretty sure neither of us will be able to look at each other when it’s over.

“Natalie, I need you to know that you can come to me with anything. Part of that is treating you respectfully, like the young adult you are. You may be eighteen years old, but you are still my baby girl. I trust you. Just don’t ruin that.”

“I won’t, Dad.”

“I mean it. I know that I leave the two of you alone in the house all of the time. I’m not going to tell you both not to have people over. I try to be a realistic parent. Just promise me that you will be smart about it.”

“I promise, Dad.”

As we pull up to the school’s football field, I can say with absolute certainty that I have never been so grateful to be able to get the hell out of the car before.

Dad and I walk in through the gates together. I hear people murmuring all around us. Everyone knew that the new Kings coach had a son in this school. It’s been announced on the news and discussed on ESPN.

We hear a few, *Hey, Coach Good luck this weekend*, and even more, *We gonna beat Boston this weekend, right Coach?* When you win, they love you, when you lose the first game of the season, not so much.

Dad goes to the same spot I have seen him stand, no matter what field we were at, during every single one of both of my brother’s games throughout the years. He likes to be behind the end zone, by the goal post, right up at the fence. He always has.

I stand with him for now. “Dad, do you ever wonder what life would be like without football?”

He looks out at the still empty field.

The teams haven’t been announced yet.

The cheerleaders aren’t on the track.

The marching band is exiting it as we watch.

The lights are on, the sky is dark, and the air is starting to get crisp.

There is excitement surrounding us.

My question just slipped out without any forethought.

“You know what, Nattie. I don’t ever wonder what life would be like without football. I feel like it’s in my blood. It’s what I’ve always done. It was my first love, long before I was the college hot shot that met your mom or first laid eyes on you kids. There is something about being on that field, it’s when I feel most alive. Controlling that field, whether it was as a player or now as a coach, it makes me feel like a Spartan warrior going into battle, and I love it.

“It’s everything—the lights on your face, the smell in the air, the roar of the crowd. If you’re lucky, you get to feel that for four years of high school. If you’re unrelenting, you get to feel it on a college field.

“Only the chosen few warriors will feel it professionally.

“I’ve been lucky enough to feel all of that as a player and now a coach. I will never regret a minute of it. I hope your brothers feel the same way.” Never taking his eye off the field, my dad puts his arm around my shoulders, and I feel like I just got to see into his soul. “I always hoped that you felt some version of that on the stage.”

I leave that statement hanging with no answer.

Luckily the announcers are ready to announce the two teams. Soon the cheerleaders come out in the navy blue and gold uniforms, tumbling and kicking into their positions. Tiffany is at the center of it all, sitting on top of someone’s shoulders, holding the banner that our team is going to run through as they are announced.

I get actual butterflies in my stomach for our guys.

Just then, Chloe and Sabrina walk up. “Hi, Mr. Sinclair. Hey, Nat.” Chloe quickly appraises me and smiles. She introduces my dad to Sabrina and stands with us at the fence for a few minutes before going to stake out seats in the bleachers.

“I’ll meet you guys up there. I’m going to stay here for a little longer.”

“Gotcha, Nat.” Leaning into my ear, she whispers, “You look like a total babe.” Then, as I shake my head, the two of them head up to the bleachers.

“You can go with the girls if you want. You don’t have to keep me company.”

“I’m good right here. I’ll go up in a little bit.”

“Love you, kiddo.”

“Love you too, Daddy.”





## BRADY

There is nothing like running on to this field. My senses are on high alert right now, trying to take it all in. AC/DC's "Hell's Bells" is pumping through the speakers and into the crowd.

We ran on to the field to this song for the first time during my freshman year. We won the state championship that game and used this as our song every single time we have played since.

The excitement in the crowd is palpable, and it's thrumming through my veins. It's hard to explain how at peace I feel at this moment, with my teammates hollering to pump us up and bouncing on their toes—the crowd cheering on their favorite team, nothing but a sea of blue and gold. Murphy's sister Carys is walking out on the fifty-yard line to sing the National Anthem.

This is my field.

My church.

And I will worship every last second that I get to spend on it.

We all quiet down and turn toward the flag at the back corner of the field for the Star-Spangled Banner. I don't ever bother to look for anyone in the crowds during games, they aren't on my team or on my field, which means for sixty minutes of football, they don't exist to me.

But the sight that catches my eye has my heart beating harder than it was seconds ago.

Natalie Sinclair is standing on the sidelines, about 25 yards in front of the flag, next to her father.

Her back is turned toward me.

RYAN is printed across her small back in block letters. Where it is stretched shoulder to shoulder on me, it's practically hanging off of her body, but it's my jersey.

That's when it clicks. At that moment, with my name on her back, I decide she is going to be the girl that wears my jersey for the rest of her life.

As the song ends and she turns back to the field, I catch her eye and don't know that I have ever been so sure of anything.



We knew coming into this game it was going to be a battle. Our conference is full of powerhouse teams, and this game has been a bloodbath. There are ten seconds left on the clock. If we don't score, we are going into sudden-death overtime.

The crowd is going crazy.

The marching band is playing our fight song.

Coach calls a time out. "Ryan! Get over here."

Running over to him, I ask, "What's the plan, coach? Are we throwing or kicking?"

"How's the arm? Do you have that throw in you?"

"Yes, sir. I can throw that. Let me get it to Cooper. We can win this now, Coach."

"You've got this, Ryan. Go win this game."

Running back to the huddle, I relay the play. "You good, Coop?"

"I'll be there, QB."

The clock is running. I am on the 30-yard line.

Calling the play, I step back as Cooper sprints down the field. I shut everything else off.

The linebacker coming at me.

The fans screaming.

I find Cooper and throw the spiral right before I get tackled. He knocks the wind out of me for a second, but I still see Cooper catching the ball and crossing the end zone.

The clock runs out, and we win the game.

It isn't until that moment that I register the roar of the crowd, and my eyes immediately search the sidelines for Nattie. She is jumping up and

down, screaming next to her dad.

I watch Cooper run over to his dad and hug him.

One win down. Twelve more to go to get us to State.



## NATALIE

I have never enjoyed a football game this much in my entire life. Which is saying something since Cooper and I were two weeks old the first time my mom took us to one of my dad's games. I never even went to sit with Chloe and Sabrina because I didn't want to be that far away from the field. I understand now why my dad stands at the fence.

We were so close to all of the action. I could see every play.

Every hit, every catch and every perfect spiral as it traveled down the field.

I can't stop cheering.

Dad and I are still standing there when Chloe and Sabrina run over to us.

"Oh, My God! That was AMAZING!" Chloe is so loud that Dad takes a step back.

I excitedly hug her. "It was. That was so much fun to watch. I love it when they win!"

"Where are you ladies going to be waiting for your brothers? I'll walk you. I have a plane to catch and have to get going."

"Thanks, Mr. Sinclair. I parked by the guy's cars, so we were just going to wait there." We are following behind my dad when Chloe leans into me. "Your dad is so freaking hot, Nat."

"Oh, my God. Stop." I laugh.

She snaps a quick picture. "I'm texting this to Luca."

We all walk over to Chloe's car. Then leaning in, my dad hugs me. Whispering in my ear, "If your brother throws a party tonight, do not let anyone destroy our house, please. Absolutely no drinking and driving. I'm trusting you both. Remember, good decisions." Then he straightens. "Goodnight, ladies." Kissing my cheek, he walks away as if he did not just blow my mind.

Dad knows we're throwing a party?

And, he's okay with it?

What the hell?

I wait for him to be out of earshot. "Holy shit, my dad knows that we are throwing a party and just said not to destroy his house. He didn't say no parties. He didn't sound pissed. Just don't destroy the house." I'm shocked.

"Awesome! Don't worry too much about the house. I can help you clean up tomorrow."

"Me too." Sabrina chimes in. "My soccer game is at nine in the morning, so I can come over after it's done in the afternoon. We should be back by twelve."

"Thanks, girls!"

Tiffany practically skips over to us. Her cheer bag with pom poms sticking out of it is on one arm, and another cheerleader is on her other arm. Brady's secret freaking cheerleader, Aria, is behind them with two other girls I don't know. They've all changed out of their uniform into tight little dresses. "Did I hear right, girls? Cooper said earlier today there is a party at your house tonight, Natalie."

"That's what he told me today. I didn't make any plans, so I don't even know what we have at the house."

Aria answers. "Don't worry about that. Everyone will bring something. They always do. You just have to order pizza and some food for the team. The rest of us save our carbs for the beer." They all laugh at that like it was the funniest thing anyone has ever said.

I just look at Chloe and Sabrina, who are both unamused. Chloe and Sabrina are dressed more like me in jeans and cute shirts. Sabrina's hair is in a loose braid and Chloe has hers parted down the middle, with a tight bun on either side.

Hoots and hollering are coming toward us now from the direction of the locker room.

By the time I finally see the guys heading in our direction, my nerves are shot. I expected to see Brady smiling and laughing like Murphy, Bash, and Cooper are. I wasn't expecting serious Brady, but the look on his face is almost scary. He walks toward us like a man on a mission.

Dropping his bag, he picks me up in a fluid motion and keeps walking.

Out of instinct, I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. He moves until we are behind his car, and he has me leaning against the back of the Range Rover. Completely out of sight of everyone else.

The catcalls have already started, and the guys are loud.

"Tell me, Natalie. Tell me now."

"Tell you what?"

"Why are you wearing my jersey?"

Shocked and more than a little turned on, I stare up at him. "Should I not have worn it?"

"No, Sweetheart. I fucking love seeing my name on you. But I need to know why. I need to know what it means."

"You told me I had to let you know when I was ready for more, Brady. This is me telling you, I'm ready for everything."

He's on me instantly.

This isn't a sweet kiss.

This is claiming.

His hands are on my ass, and his tongue is in my mouth.

My legs are still wrapped around him, and I can feel him hardening against me. He pulls his mouth away and licks a trail down my neck before nipping at my pulse point.

"Oh, God."

The next thing I hear is my brother banging on the front of the SUV. "Do not fucking make out with my sister in the parking lot, man."

Brady leans his forehead against mine.

I laugh. "He's such a baby."

"Yeah, but he's not wrong. What I want to do to you right now is not for anyone else's eyes."

"Well, then, it's a good thing that my bedroom door has a lock, isn't it, QB?"





## NATALIE

Everyone has piled into cars and is heading to our house. I'm riding with Brady, who looks utterly relaxed and hasn't stopped smiling yet. "That was such a great game tonight, QB." Surprisingly, that's all it takes to wipe away his smile.

"We only won by one touch down."

"You threw for 300 yards. Cooper caught 2 TD's, and you ran in another one yourself. I'd call that a pretty good game."

"It was way too close."

"Learn to take a compliment. You won."

"I wish it was that simple."

"It can be for tonight. Celebrate the win. Let the rest come tomorrow."

We drive down the street toward my house. There are already cars filling the driveway, and the road is lined. Parking just past the house, we start to walk in.

Landon Gage is carrying a keg on his shoulder like it weighs nothing. How does he even get a keg? None of us is twenty-one yet.

"Oh, my God. Landon. Isn't that heavy?"

"Don't you go worrying about it, Little Sinclair. These arms are plenty strong. They can carry kegs and won't let anything happen to your boyfriend." Landon laughs and walks away.

Meanwhile, I am stuck in my spot, pouting.

Brady tugs me, but I don't move. "What's wrong, Nat?"

"Little Sinclair? It's going to stick, isn't it?"

"Yeah, babe. I think it is."

I stomp my foot. “What the hell! I am three minutes older than him!”

Murphy and Bash walk up laughing. “Aww. Who pissed in Tinker Bell’s fairy dust?”

I turn around and try to give Murphy the nastiest look I have. “I hate you right now, Aiden Murphy.”

Murphy puts his arm around my shoulders. “You love me, and you know it.”

“Is the whole team going to call me Little Sinclair?”

Murphy looks to Brady, having no idea what I’m talking about.

Brady meets my eyes and smiles. “Pretty much. But that just means you’re one of ours now. Come on. Let’s get inside.”

I turn my glare to Murphy. “You started this stupid nickname, and I will get you back for it when you least expect it. Be afraid, Murphy. Be very afraid.”

“I’m shaking in my tights, Tink.”



A few hours later, people are spilling out of every room on the first floor of my house and yard. I can’t believe that the cops haven’t been called, but apparently, Landon’s dad is the chief of police, and this is normal in Kroydon Hills. We locked all of the bedrooms so no one could get in any of them. Hopefully, that works.

Chloe, Sabrina, and I sit outside with our jeans rolled up and our feet in the pool. It’s still relatively warm for early September.

Brady might not have been next to me this whole time, but I could feel his eyes on me wherever I went, and it’s amped me up all night. I can’t wait until everyone leaves. I wanted to ask him earlier if he wanted to go somewhere else and skip the party but didn’t want him to miss out on celebrating his victory with his team.

Sabrina pulls me from my thoughts. “I’ve got to get going, Natalie. If I’m not home by midnight, my mom will freak.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize it was that late. Thanks for coming, Sabrina.”

Chloe looks to Sabrina. “You can sleep at my house if you want, Brina. You know my parents don’t pay any attention to what time Brady and I

come home. I don't even know if they were supposed to be coming home tonight. Dad had some benefit event in the city."

"Thanks, but I've got to get going. I have an early game tomorrow, and you know my parents don't let me get away with half the stuff you guys get away with. Text me if you need help cleaning up tomorrow, and I'll come by after my game." She stands up, and just as Chloe and I go to stand up, I get knocked from behind and end up in the pool.

What the hell?

As I break through to the surface of the water, I see Aria laughing with a few other girls.

These girls think that they just ruined my night, but they are seriously mistaken if they think they are the first mean girls I've encountered. I learned how to deal with this shit a long time ago. My father's a famous coach, my mother is a former supermodel. Being in the spotlight is part of the package, and when you're in the spotlight, the mean girls and trolls come out in droves.

As I pull myself out of the pool, I hear Chloe ripping into Aria.

"Are you serious right now? What the hell is your problem?"

"I don't have a problem, Chloe. Maybe Natalie should pay closer attention to what she's doing."

One of her minions behind her covers a fake cough and says, "Or *who* she's doing."

Chloe shoves the girl. "What did you just say?"

I grab Chloe's hand. Turning to Chloe and Aria, I smile my best stage smile.

Aria looks at me with just as fake a smile. "Oh, my, Natalie. I really should be more careful. I didn't see you."

"Oh, don't you worry about it, Aria. It's really isn't a big deal at all." I smile sugary sweet at this little twit. Then I look at Brady, who has come over to see what the hell is happening, and my smile turns genuine. "What do you say, QB? Do you want to come with me? I need to go to my room and get out of these wet clothes. I'm getting kinda tired, too. Wanna help?"

Brady's face morphs from annoyance to elation. "Night, Chloe. See you later, guys." Brady grabs my hand and starts to pull me away from the group.

But I stop him and turn. "Bye, Sabrina. Good night Chloe. See you tomorrow."

I can feel Aria's eyes following me into my house. The pinched look on her face makes walking away, dripping wet, worth every second.



## BRADY

I'm not sure what just happened, but it got my girl away from everyone else, so I am not complaining. She is leading me up the stairs and does remind me of a pissed off pixie right now. I'm going to keep that thought to myself for the time being, though, because I plan on her enjoying the rest of her night, not getting myself kicked out of her room. At some point, I will tell her that she is fucking adorable when she gets pissed off.

She pulls us into her room and locks the door behind her. I'm not sure exactly what happened outside, but Nat doesn't seem upset. She is soaking wet from head to toe and dripping on her rug. The look on her face tells me she's lost some of her bravado from a minute earlier.

"Just give me a minute. I need to dry off and change my clothes." Leaning up on her toes, she kisses me quickly. "I will be right back out." She's closing the door to what I am guessing is her en suite bathroom before I've said anything at all.

I walk around the room, taking it all in. There is a whole lot of white in this room. I do see some signs of my girl, though. Her black dance bag with her monogram embroidered on it in pink is thrown in the corner. There are a few pictures on a shelf over her desk. One is of her and another guy. It looks like she just finished a performance, and happiness is pouring out of her. A rose gold Mac Book is sitting on the desk right next to a photo of her Cooper and Declan after a Notre Dame game. Nattie is wearing the gold jersey, with a Notre Dame hat and cutoff jeans.

A few fancy sketches are sitting on her desk. With some fancy kind of marker, I've never seen before, sitting next to them.

I tentatively sit on her bed, situating myself back by her headboard. Why the hell do girls have so many pillows? Her blanket is white, the thin curtains hanging around her bed are white. She has twinkly lights mixed in that look cool. Her bed is big and soft as hell.

Everything about this room screams pure as the driven snow, and I want to do filthy things to my girl in here.

"You look ridiculous on that princess bed." She leans against the doorframe, smiling, and that's all I care about right now.

"I feel like I need to take my shoes off in your room. I don't want to get anything dirty."

Climbing up on the other side of the bed, Nat leans back against her wall of pillows. "Then take your shoes off. Get comfy. Or we can head back outside. I just had to change." I take in what she changed into. She's in dark green boxer shorts and a threadbare Notre Dame t-shirt.

"Were you planning on going back out to the party dressed like that, Nattie?"

She scoots back a little and sits with her legs crossed. "I don't feel like going back out to the party, Brady."

"Then, let's not." I kick my shoes off and sit back on the bed, mirroring Nat.

"For a girl that supposedly doesn't like football, you have a lot of football t-shirts."

"I may not love the sport, but I love the teams that make Dec and Coop happy. I love supporting them. Stealing their shirts is just a bonus."

"Tell me something."

She tilts her head to the side. "Hmmm. Like what?"

"Something nobody else knows."

Natalie doesn't hesitate. She turns her head so that she is looking right into my eyes. "I've never wanted somebody to kiss me as much as I want you to right now."

"Then come here, Sweetheart." I place my hands on her hips and pick her up, helping her move so she is straddling my legs. Moving my hands to either side of her face, I look at her. "Do you have any idea how much I want you, Nat? I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the first night you came to town. I saw you standing in the kitchen and knew you

were different. I had no idea you were going to change my entire world. But I think I knew that night that you would change it.” I lean in and brush my lips over hers.

Deepening the kiss, she opens for me, and my tongue tangles with hers.

Moving one of my hands down her back, resting it just above her ass, I pull her, so she sits flush against me. Nat raises on her knees slightly, then finds the position she was looking for and settles more in my lap. I know she can feel my dick trying to push its way through my jeans.

I pull back slightly and lick my way down her neck. When I suck on the sweet spot between her neck and shoulder, and Nat lets out the sweetest sound.

My hands have moved to rest at her waist, just under her shirt, but I’m not sure how far she will be comfortable with, so I leave them there. Natalie’s skin is smooth and sweet and tastes like oranges.

God, I’ll never be able to eat an orange again without thinking of this girl.

She raises her ass up again and then grinds down on my cock.

“Jesus Nat. You’re gonna make me come in my jeans like a twelve-year-old. “

She laughs and pulls back to look at my face. Her hands go into my hair and angle my face to hers. “Brady Ryan, what kind of slutty twelve-year-old girls were you around?”

She laughs again, then grinds down. “I can’t help it. It just feels good.”

She leans in this time and takes what she wants—kissing my lips then my neck.

Nat’s pushing my shirt up with her hands and pulling it over my head.

“I love your body, Brady.” She pushes me back just enough that she can kiss my chest while she runs her fingers along my abs, grinding that tight little ass the whole time.

Grabbing her waist, I quickly flip us around and have her back flat on the bed in one swift move. Pink pillows fall to the floor, and Nat’s golden hair is spread out around her head. Sitting back on my heels, I move my hands back to her waist and graze her skin.

Pushing her shirt up slightly, I stop. “Is this okay, Nat?”

This beautiful girl blushes, and I want to see how far down that pretty pink color goes. “I’ve got to tell you something, Brady.”



Moving my hands back to her hips on the outside of her boxers, I try to get my ragingly hard dick under control. “Tell me anything.”

“I haven’t exactly done this before.”

Okay. Now I’m paying attention.

“Haven’t done what, exactly, Sweetheart?”

Nat blushes again, and I wonder if her nipples are the same color pink as that blush. “Any of this. I’ve never exactly had a serious boyfriend before, not that you’re my boyfriend. Oh, God. You know what I mean. I am screwing this all up.”

“Take a breath. You better believe that I’m your boyfriend, and I am completely serious. You were mine before you wore that jersey tonight. I just needed you to be on board with that. We can take it as slow as you want, but I need to know what you mean, Sweetheart. Are you trying to tell me that you’re a virgin?”

My hands are grazing her skin again. I just can’t help myself. I can’t be this close to her and not be touching her.

“I am a virgin. I’m also inexperienced. I guess.”

“Inexperienced?”

“Oh, God. I’ve never had sex. Rounded the bases. How detailed do you need me to be here? How about if I say I want you to be my first with all of the fun things, Brady Ryan. And I want all of the fun things.”

She hides her face behind her hands, so I gently grab her wrists and move them to see her beautiful ocean colored eyes. “Natalie, I want to be your first everything. I’m pretty fucking sure I want to be your only everything.”

Her baby blues go big and round, and she gets the softest, sweetest smile on her face.

“We take everything at your speed.”

Nat nods her head.

“I need your words, Sweetheart.”

“Yeah, Brady. Now can you please kiss me?”

Kissing her again, I let my hands roam under her shirt. I’m expecting to feel satin or lace, but my girl is bare under her shirt. Gently cupping her breasts, which are the perfect handful, I let my thumb flick over her hard nipple before pinching it. She moans. The sound goes right to my dick, and any control I had forced on myself earlier is lost. I am hard as steel in that second.

“Brady...”

“Yeah, Sweetheart.”

“Take my shirt off. Please. I want to feel your skin against me.”

God, yes.

I want to worship this girl.

Protect her.

Possess her.

I want to give her everything.



## NATALIE

**B**rady whips my shirt over my head faster than I knew possible. Much more gently, he grips the waist of my boxer shorts and looks at me.

I nod my head, and he peels them down my legs, much more slowly than my shirt. I'm lying before him in nothing but teal blue lace, cheeky-cut panties. The look in his eyes is worth everything.

"Natalie. My God. You are a goddess."

His hands go back to my breasts, followed by his mouth. He licks and nips and sucks on my nipples. Swirls his tongue around one, then the other. I swear to God, I think I could come just from this. Then his hand moves down my body and over my panties.

His fingers run over the outside of my panties. Up and back. God, it feels good, but I want more, and I don't know if he will take it.

Grabbing his wrist, I go to move his hand.

Brady stops immediately, but that's not what I want. I push his hand inside my panties, wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his shoulders, then kiss him. Hard. It only takes a second before Brady has established a rhythm. Up, down, circle around my clit.

"Oh, my God. Brady." I'm riding his hand now, absolutely soaked.

Our tongues are stroking with the same rhythm. I feel like I am completely out of control. I can hear moaning and am pretty sure it's coming from me.

"Brady. Oh, God. I'm gonna. Oh, God." I explode without any control, my body clenching around him as I ride out the waves.

That was like what I would imagine an out of body experience would be like.

Brady is kissing my neck again while I lay there like a limp noodle. He kisses my breasts, then down my stomach. Gripping the edge of my panties, he's kissing under the waistband. "Brady?"

He looks up at me.

"What are you doing?"

He kisses my hip bone. Then looks up again. "Lie back and relax, Sweetheart. I need to taste you. And, this time, I want my name on those lips when you come, Nattie." He kisses my other hip bone. Then the inside flesh of my thigh. Then...

Oh, wow then.

Oh, my God.

Wow.

He licks a line up to my clit then circles it with his tongue.

Then this man feasts on me. It's like nothing I've ever experienced. My mother gave me my first vibrator when I turned fifteen. Something about wanting to make sure I knew that I didn't need a man for anything. But dear lord, nothing has ever felt as good as Brady's mouth on my pussy.

He adds a finger. Then two. And holy shit. I can barely form a coherent thought.

I had no idea that I could come more than once, or that it could happen that quickly.

"Oh, my God. Brady. Brady, I'm gonna come." This time his name leaves my lips like a prayer.

With the smuggest, most handsome, utterly satisfied smile I have ever seen, Brady kisses his way back up my body and curls me against him until I am the little spoon. He kisses my hair and wraps his arms around me.

"But what about you?" My eyes are already growing heavy.

"Tonight, wasn't about me, Natalie." He kisses me again, and I can taste myself on his lip, tart and tangy and utterly sexy. "Relax, Sweetheart. I've got you."

Those are the last words I hear.

I have no idea what time it is when I wake up to pee in the middle of the night. Brady is still in bed with me. At some point in the night, he lost his jeans and is tucked in next to me in just black boxer briefs. I take a minute to soak in the sight of this boy who is entirely man. Padding as quietly as I

can, I sneak into the bathroom and clean myself up, taking a minute to brush the rats nest out of my hair that's a byproduct of falling asleep while it was still soaking wet.

Here's hoping it helps, and when we both wake up in a few hours, I don't look awful. When I changed out of my wet clothes earlier, I hung Brady's jersey on the back of the bathroom door. It's dry now, so I slip it over my head and go back to the bed.

Brady hasn't moved a muscle, so I try to slip back under his arms. He wakes up just the slightest bit. Muttering, "Come here, baby," he lifts his arms, and I slide back into him.

This time I lay with my head on his chest, wrapped in his arms. I kiss his chest once, and he groans and holds me tighter.

It takes me longer to get back to sleep because I keep replaying the moments of the night over in my mind.

The kiss in the parking lot.

Landon calling me Brady's girlfriend.

Everything that happened in my room tonight.

Holy hotness, everything that happened in my room tonight. Thoughts play out in my head like an old home movie, and I fall back to sleep, smiling at my images.



Waking up the next morning, I realize two things: I am still tucked in Brady's arms, and I smell coffee. I slowly open up my eyes, and Brady is awake, smiling down at me. "Morning, Sweetheart." His tan skin glows against my white blankets.

"Mmm. Good morning, handsome. How long have you been awake?"

"A little bit. I heard people moving around downstairs. Then smelled the coffee, and, I think, bacon. Guessing Murphy spent the night and is making breakfast."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. My phone is in my jeans, on the floor. I didn't want to move you so that I could reach it."

"You could have moved me. I wouldn't have minded."

I stretch out and move to stand up, but Brady tightens his hold. “Just lie here for another minute. You were honest with me last night, and I need to be honest with you now.”

“Well, that sounds ominous.”

“No, not at all. I just want to make sure that we are on the same page. I’m a hundred percent in this, Nat. I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours—no one else. I’ve never done the whole relationship thing before and have no idea what I’m doing. Be patient with me. I promise not to lie to you, and I’ll never do anything to hurt you. But if something is happening and you don’t like it, please come talk to me. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“This is new for me too. But I like the way that sounds. I’m already yours. I think I have been since the night we met.” Leaning back into him, I rest my head on his strong shoulder and look up at his eyes. They look golden in the hazy morning light. “Out of curiosity, does that give me permission to shove Aria’s pom-poms down her throat?”

“Ignore her. She’s nothing. She will never be you, and it’s killing her.” He kisses my lips, and I pull away, not wanting him to smell my morning breath.

“Let me go brush my teeth, and then we can go downstairs.” I swing my legs over the edge of the bed but hear the rustle of the sheets a moment before a muscular arm goes around my waist.

Then his lips go to the back of my neck. “Did I tell you what seeing you in this jersey did to me last night?” He moves my hair over one shoulder and kisses me again.

“I think you got the point across to everyone in the parking lot.”

“Just in case you weren’t sure, I fucking love it.”

I pull away and stand up, turning to face him. “Mission accomplished then. I’ll be right out. Why don’t you head down first, so we ease my brother into this?”

I hear his laughter behind me as I shut the door.





## BRADY

Grabbing my jeans off the floor, and my shirt off the foot of the bed, I throw them on and head downstairs. I've spent plenty of nights in this house since I met Cooper Sinclair, but this is the first time I've slept in a bed with his sister.

Permission or not, I'm thinking he isn't going to be thrilled with me this morning.

Walking into the kitchen, I see my friends sitting at the island, nursing coffees and hangovers while Murphy flips pancakes and pulls a pan of bacon out of the oven. Before Murphy says anything at all, I know that I am not going to like what is about to come out of his mouth. It's the shit-eating grin on his face that gives it away.

"Look who's decided to join the rest of us. Too busy getting busy last night to get much sleep, QB?"

"Boundaries. Get some man." Walking over to the coffee pot, I grab two mugs and start to pour.

"Aww. Come on, QB. Since when do you not share?"

An apple goes flying across the kitchen and hits Murphy in the back of the head. "Since the room he slept in last night was my sister's, shit head."

Of course, this is when Natalie walks into the kitchen.

I can't help that I am a little disappointed she changed out of my jersey.

"Don't be a grouch, Cooper. It's not nice to hit your friends with fruit." She sits down on the stool next to Bash.

Murphy smiles like he just got away with something, and Cooper starts grumbling.

I walk over, handing her a cup of coffee, and sit down next to her.

Bash looks at me. “What’s everyone doing today?”

Nat answers first. “I told Annabelle that I’d stop by the studio this afternoon for a little bit.”

Cooper raises his head. “To dance or teach?”

“Maybe a little of both. I had only planned on helping with the one class this fall, but Annabelle and I get along, and she could use more help. It’s only her at the studio, and she takes care of her younger brother too, so any help I can give her seems like a good thing.”

“Oh, yeah. A brother, huh? Should I be jealous?” I want her to think I’m teasing, but I’m not sure if I am.

“Your ego can safely stay intact, QB. Tommy is nine years old and has autism. Annabelle’s parents died last year. She has no other family and didn’t want to move Tommy out of his school, so she left the ballet company she was dancing with in New York and came home to take care of him. She opened Hart & Soul in the spring and has been doing it all on her own since.

“I like helping her. It lets me still have my toes in dance but on my terms. Bonus points for getting Dad off my back, too.”

“Breakfast is ready, guys.” Murphy pushes the plates stacked high with pancakes and bacon toward us all.

Cooper grabs a pancake and folds it in half, before putting the whole thing in his mouth. “Nat, are you going to be home for Declan’s game today? It’s on at four.”

“Jesus, Coop. Try chewing with your mouth closed.” Walking over to the pantry, she grabs syrup then sits back down. “I doubt I’ll be home for the game today, but I’ll make sure I’m here for tomorrow’s game. One, right?”

Cooper makes a point of swallowing and takes a drink of orange juice before answering. “Yeah. One tomorrow. You guys coming over for the game?”

Murphy agrees right away, but Bash is quiet. “I can’t tomorrow. My cousin’s kid is being Christened. It’ll be an all-day thing.”

“Are there going to be any single ladies there? Cooper and I could go as your wingmen.” As usual, Murphy is laughing at his joke.

Cooper shakes his head. “Speak for yourself, Murph. I’ll be watching the game. You’re on your own, Bash.”

Nattie is laughing at Murphy. “Murphy, didn’t I see you hooking up with a blonde cheerleader last night? How bad is your ADD?”

“I can’t help that the ladies love me. Who am I to deprive them of all of this?”

We all groan, and another apple flies across the room.



**W**e’re all cleaning up from the party when grab Nat’s arm and pull her into the laundry room, shutting the door behind us. She is giggling uncontrollably.

“Shh... I don’t want your brother walking in here.”

Grabbing her face with both hands, I kiss her.

Nat melts against me.

I box her in against the wall and just enjoy kissing her. Tongues tangling. Sweet sighs are coming from my girl. Before I know it, I am hard as steel and need to pull back before we take this further than I want to, surrounded by dirty clothes.

“Do you know what time you’ll be back from the studio? What time can I pick you up for our date tonight?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I should be back around five, I guess. Where are we going? What should I wear?”

“That’s up to you. Do you want to do a fancy dinner, movies, something low key, maybe outside?”

“Low key and outside sounds perfect.” She leans up on her toes, put her arms around my neck, and kisses me again.

One kiss quickly turns back into her ass in my hands and legs wrapped around my waist.

That is until Cooper walks in looking for extra trash bags.

Nat grabs the box off the shelf above her head and hands them to her brother, who has his eyes shut tight.

He takes them and walks away, mumbling something that sounds like, “Get a fucking room.”

The two of us just laugh.

“Tonight Nat. I’ll pick you up at seven. Sound good, Sweetheart?”

She nods her head, kicks the door shut, and kisses me again.



## NATALIE

I walk into the studio's empty waiting room that afternoon and see a young man behind the front desk with dinosaur headphones on, watching something on an iPad that is making him laugh. Loudly. He's a cute kid, with the same dirty blonde hair as Annabelle and the same striking green eyes. He's a few inches shorter than me and has chubby cheeks with two dimples that pop when he smiles, which, judging by the few moments I've been standing here, is often.

I can hear Sam Smith's "Stay With Me" playing throughout the studio. Looking around, I see Annabelle dancing in the studio to my right. She is amazing.

I'm good.

Some said that I could have been great, but I don't know that I ever looked as natural as she does when she dances. It gives me chills. I get lost in time watching her as she gracefully glides across the floor lost in the music, only to get pulled back to reality when I get tapped on my shoulder.

"Who are you?" The boy that I am assuming is Annabelle's brother, Tommy, has his headphones hanging around his neck and his blue iPad tucked under his arm. There is a giant dinosaur on his shirt. His smile is crooked and devilish, and he's looking past me instead of at me.

"Well, hello. I'm Natalie. What's your name?"

"I'm Tommy David Hart. Why are you here?"

"I'm supposed to help your sister Annabelle, but I don't want to interrupt her until her dance is over."

"Annabelle tells me I can interrupt her whenever I need to."

“I’m sure you can, but I don’t need to, not yet. We can let her finish her dance first. What were you watching on your iPad, Tommy?”

“The Kings. They were interviewing the new coach and the backup quarterback that’s going to start for the game tomorrow. His name is Jeff Jones. He only played in one game last year and threw for one touchdown and two interceptions while he was in. I don’t like him. I don’t think he is going to win the game tomorrow.”

Football seems to follow me everywhere I go lately. Tommy must have no idea how I’m related to this team. “Oh, yeah? Do you like the Kings?”

Tommy reminds me of when we were little, and my grandfather would say we had ants in our pants. He can’t stand still as he is standing here talking to me. “I love the Kings. They are my favorite team. My dad and I watched their games every single Sunday, unless it was Monday night. Then we would watch it on Monday. We never missed a game. Annabelle hates football. She’ll sit in the room while I watch the game, but she paints her nails instead of paying attention. It smells. Do you know that our starting quarterback is out for the season? Matthew Bennett tore his ACL last week, and the reporters are saying he is out for the season. Our new coach is in trouble. Jones isn’t as good as Bennett.”

“Yeah, he’s been stressing out about that all week.” I don’t even think about it before I answer him.

“Coach Sinclair says the team is still solid, but he never said he was stressed. Not on any of the interviews he’s done. I’ve watched them all.”

“Can I tell you a secret, Tommy?”

“Yup. I’m a good secret keeper.”

“Coach Sinclair is my dad. That’s how I know he’s been stressed.”

“Oh, wow. Coach Sinclair is your dad. I bet you don’t paint your nails during football games.”

“Nope. Never. I usually watch them with at least one of my brothers.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“I have two brothers.”

“I don’t have any brothers, only Annabelle. She’s the best, but I wish I had a brother that would watch football with me.”

“Well, maybe I can share my brother with you.”

I turn around to see Annabelle coming toward me. “I see you’ve met Tommy.” Then making eye contact with Tommy, she says, “Tommy, did you say hello to Natalie?”

Tommy plays with his headphones for a minute. “I didn’t say hello, but I did tell her my name. She likes football more than you. I’m going to her house to watch the Kings game with Natalie’s brothers tomorrow so you can paint your nails.”

“Tommy, you can’t invite yourself to someone else’s house. It’s not nice.” Face turning red, Annabelle looks mortified. “I’m sorry, Natalie. I hope he wasn’t bothering you about football. He loves it. Always has. He might know everyone’s stats better than your dad even does.” She smiles, but she looks exhausted.

“You know, Annabelle, my brother and I are having a few friends over tomorrow to watch the game. You could bring Tommy.”

“That’s so nice of you to offer, but we couldn’t.”

“Yes, we could.” Tommy’s smile is enormous. “The game starts at one, so we have to be there by twelve to make sure we don’t miss any of the pregame. Do you know how to make pizza? Cause my mom always made homemade pizzas for the games. She would let me put the pepperoni on. Annabelle tries, but it’s not the same.”

I think my heart is breaking for this kid whose entire world changed. “You know, I am not a very good cook, but I have a friend that loves to cook. He is a football player with my brother, and he’s a great cook.” I interrupt Annabelle before she can protest again. “Come over at noon. Please, it will be fun. Really. You’re not that much older than us. My brother and his friends will be there and will be able to talk football with Tommy the entire game.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

“I’m positive. It’ll be fun.”



A few hours later, I’m surprised to find Cooper sitting on the couch by himself, watching the Notre Dame game with a big bowl of popcorn. “How is Declan doing?”

Cooper glances over his shoulder at me before bringing his eyes back to the game. “Hey. He’s kicking ass like Sinclairs do.” Leaning on the couch behind Coop, I hang around and watch a few minutes of the game. He holds the bowl of buttery goodness up for me, and I grab a handful of popcorn.

“What are your plans for the night, Coop?”

“I told Tiff that I would go with her to some party. What are you doing?”

“Brady’s picking me soon. I have to go get ready.”

“Yeah. Is he going to be having breakfast with us again tomorrow morning, Nattie?”

“I don’t know, smart ass. I don’t even know what I’m wearing tonight. Why? Is it a problem if he does?”

“Nah. He’s a good guy. I trust him. Just be careful, okay?” He glances at me quickly. “It would suck if I had to kick my quarterback’s ass.”

“Gotcha. Listen, I invited Annabelle and her brother Tommy over to watch the game with us tomorrow. Tommy told me how much he loves the Kings, he used to watch all of the games with his dad. My heart broke for him. Annabelle really could care less about football, so I thought maybe you guys could be nice to him. Give him some guys to watch the game with. Do you care?”

“No. Not at all. That was a nice thing to do. How old are Tommy and Annabelle?”

“Tommy is nine. I think Annabelle is twenty-one. I appreciate it, Cooper.”

“Damn. Twenty-one and she lost her parents and is now parenting her special-needs brother? That’s rough.”

Leaning down, I kiss the top of his head, then turn to head upstairs. “Be good tonight, Coop.”

“I’m always good, Nat. Just ask Tiff.”





## BRADY

*I* grab my keys, wallet, and phone off of my dresser. Look in the mirror to make sure I look okay and close my bedroom door behind me. I can hear music coming from Chloe's room, so I knock. "Chloe, you still home?"

"Come in, dumb ass."

Scowling, I open the door. "Dumb ass?"

She's sitting crossed legged non her bed, with her red Beats around her neck and her lap top sitting on her legs. "Do you think there would be music playing in my room if I wasn't home? Don't ask stupid questions if you don't want to be called a dumb ass."

"Well, you seem to be in a great mood. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just trying to finish my trig homework before I go over Sabrina's house. We're having a movie night. I'm crashing there, so don't wait up."

"Are Mom and Dad home tonight?"

"Nope. I saw Mom this morning, and she said they were going to the shore house this afternoon. There is some golf tournament, Dad's company is sponsoring it, and I think he is playing tomorrow. Pretty sure tonight was the dinner for attendees. She told me they should be home Sunday night and that we would be on our own for dinners this weekend. Like that's something new." Pushing the laptop aside, Chloe walks over to the door.

Getting comfortable, I lean a shoulder against the door frame, and put my hands in my pockets. "You gonna watch the Kings game at Cooper and Nat's tomorrow?"

"Sure. Is everybody going?"

“I think so; everyone but Bash.”

“Alright. Have fun tonight. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. See you tomorrow.” Chloe shuts the door behind me.

“See ya.” Pulling my keys out of my car, I’m ready to go get my girl.

Pulling my Range Rover into Natalie’s driveway, I park and shut off the SUV. I knock on the door just as Cooper is opening it to leave.

“Hey, man. She’s still upstairs.” Coop stops walking and grabs my shoulder. “Remember what I said. Treat her right, man. Catch you later.” He skips down the steps to his jeep.

“Later.” Shutting the door behind me, I wander over to the bottom of the stairs. Not wanting to scare her if she thinks she’s alone. “Nat, can I come up?”

“Brady?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Sure. Come on up.”

Taking the steps two at a time, I knock once on her door before she opens it.

“Hey, handsome.” She leans up to kiss me like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Pulling back, Nat graces me with a shy smile. “What shoes should I wear? Ballet flats or wedges?”

Stepping into her room, the scent of oranges mixed with cake invades my nose. Her room is clean and organized. She has a candle burning on her vanity. There isn’t a piece of clothing on the floor, or a pillow out of place. Her closet door is open, and two pairs of shoes are sitting side by side, next to it. “What’s a wedge?”

She holds up a sandal-ly looking thing.

“Go with the flats. There is a food truck festival in Manayunk tonight. They’ve got food trucks and live music out on the streets. I thought it sounded like fun.”

“That sounds perfect.” Nat throws her sandals back in her closet and slips on her shoes. She has on a white sundress with skinny little straps and grabs a pale blue sweater off a hanger. Slipping her arms through, she wraps the sweater around her and ties it right under her breasts, leaving a bit of the white showing underneath.

“You look incredible.”

She spins in a circle.

“I’m glad you think so.” She blows out the candle and turns off the lights. Lacing our fingers, my girl guides us out of her room.

Nat grabs a small purse off the kitchen counter, makes sure her phone and keys are in there, loops it over her wrist, and is ready to go. “So how far away is the festival?”

We lock up and head for my SUV.

“About twenty minutes.” I hold the door open for her while she gets in. Rounding the SUV, I see her lean across and try to open my door from the inside. As I slide in, she laughs.

“You know they make the whole unlock the car door for your date look a lot easier in the movies. I’m so short I can barely reach your door.”

I love this girl’s laugh and the way it echoes throughout my car. Sliding my hands into her hair, I bring her face to mine and kiss her lips. It would be so easy to ditch the rest of the night and head right back inside, but Natalie deserves more than that.

She deserves to be different.

To be more.

So, I pull back and start the car.

The Weekend is blasting through my speakers, but I turn it off. With the radio off, we talk the entire drive to the festival. That’s how we spend the entire night—walking through the streets, navigating between different food trucks, trying to decide what to try. Laughing. Getting to know everything we can about each other.

Finally, finding an open picnic table, we sit while I eat a pizza cone.

“Okay, QB. Favorite movie?”

“That’s easy, Rocky.”

Nat wrinkles her nose like she smells something bad. “The boxer movie?”

“You’re killing me, Nattie. Yes, the boxer movie. You cannot live in Philadelphia and not love Rocky. They’ll kick you out. His statue is at the top of the Art Museum steps.” Crumpling my napkin in a ball, I shoot it into the trash can across from us. “It’s one of those movies that I remember watching with my dad as a kid. We spent a snowy weekend marathoning them all. I still stop and leave it on, if I find it when I’m scrolling the channels. Rocky’s a classic. Please tell me you’ve seen it?”

“Nope. Can’t say I have.”

“As soon as football season is over, we have a date. You, me, and all eight Rocky movies.”

“All eight?” She gulps. “Seriously? There’s eight of them?”

“Including the two Creed movies, yup there are eight. Our first weekend without football. Don’t make plans.”

“So, you’re saying December? After you win State?”

Leaning in, I grab her face and kiss her lips. “God, I love the way you think.”

“Aww. Isn’t this so sweet? The frigid bitch and the man whose quarterback. Aren’t you two just so cute together.” Fucking fantastic.

Aria has walked up, with Darby not far behind. “Has he told you half the senior girls have sucked his dick? How about that once you spread your legs for him, you might as well be damaged goods? Has he told you, Natalie? Brady doesn’t do repeats. His precious football team is the only thing he commits to, and it will always come first. Don’t get attached. Get everything you want out of him tonight, because tomorrow you’ll be thrown out like the trash you are.” Aria pushes forward, but I move to stand in front of Natalie.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Aria? Get your shit together and get the fuck away from us.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, Brady. I’ve got my shit together” She smiles over at Darby like he’s a prize. “I know where I stand and where you stand. One of us refuses to let anybody close, because he doesn’t have the first clue how to be in a relationship or how to love someone back.

“Poor little rich boy with mommy and daddy issues. It’s old now, Brady. Time to grow up. Let me tell you; one of us should be watching our back, and it’s not me. Have fun riding his dick tonight, princess. Just remember you are one of many. Bye-ee.” She shakes her fingers in a mocking wave, then Aria walks away, pulling Darby behind.

Meanwhile, I am so angry that I want to hit something, but I have no one to be pissed at but myself, for hooking up with that train wreck in the first place. Turning around, I look at Nat, not sure what I’m expecting. “Jesus. Natalie. I don’t even know what to say.”

She reaches for my hand and intertwines our fingers. “It’s not your fault that Aria is a nasty person. Let’s get out of here before she comes back.” She’s not looking at me, and I don’t blame her. Walking back to the car in

silence, I hate that a stupid decision I made last year just ruined this night, almost as much as I hate the idea that that bitch Aria may be right.

I don't have issues, I just don't have any clue if my parents love each other for more than what they can do for each other.

I always told myself I wouldn't settle for that kind of relationship.

When I finally let myself have one, it was going to be with someone special.

Someone worth it.

The problem is, Natalie's worth everything, and she deserves so much more than me.



## NATALIE

Nothing like a jilted ex to ruin an evening.

Well, try to ruin an evening, and maybe an ex?

I don't even know what the hell happened back there. Tonight was perfect. Everything about it was perfect, until it just wasn't. The inside of the SUV is quiet. The radio is off, but in stark contrast to the ride up to the festival, where we couldn't stop talking, neither of us has spoken a word since we started driving home.

I have a feeling that if I don't come up with a way to salvage this night in the next few minutes, our first date is going to be our only date, and I refuse to accept that.

When we pull up to the stop sign at the end of my street, I decide enough is enough.

Turning in my seat, I study Brady's clenched jaw.

He looks like he is carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's tense, and gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles are white. It's more than evident that my night is about to be over if I don't do something now.

"Brady, are you taking me home?" I'm hoping that he can hear the disappointment in my voice, but he doesn't acknowledge it if he does.

"That was my plan."

"You know you don't have to, right? What happened back there wasn't your fault."

"It kinda was. Aria thinks I screwed her over last year, and this was her way of screwing with me. I don't want that touching you. That's not fair."



“What’s not fair, QB, is you deciding what’s best for me. I get enough of that from everyone else in my life. I was hoping you wouldn’t be another person that puts me in that box. I don’t want to go home yet, Brady. I’m not ready for the night to end yet.”

He doesn’t answer me but drives past my house, taking the first right then left. “Oh, my God. Is this street named Kroydon Hill Lane? Like Kroydon Hills Prep and the town of Kroydon Hills?”

“Yeah, it is. My mom is a Kroydon. Her family founded the town. Our house is at the top of the hill. It’s the original Kroydon Manor house.”

“Wait. So, am I like dating a local celebrity?”

He finally cracks a smile at that. “Says the daughter of a Super Bowl-winning, pro football coach.”

“At least it lightened you up a little, QB.” I try smiling at him, but he doesn’t look at me. We make our way up a winding, tree-lined driveway to a gorgeous nineteenth-century farmhouse. It appears to have been impeccably restored. It’s done in old flagstone in greys and creams. You can tell that additions have been added over the years, but they blend into the original house beautifully.

It has to be 6,000 square feet. The floor to ceiling windows all have black shutters. Both the four-car detached garage as well as the driveway are done in similar stone. “Wow. Brady. Your home is amazing. It looks like it should be in Architectural Digest or something.”

“It’s my mom’s pride and joy.” He parks the car and gets out, starting to walk to the front door, but I refuse to get out of the vehicle. Once Brady realizes I am not following him, he comes back and opens my door, then turns and starts to walk away.

“What happened to the guy that held my hand and my doors all night, QB?”

Brady stops but doesn’t turn around. “He was reminded tonight of all of the reasons that this probably wasn’t a good idea. All of the reasons that you deserve more than me. Aria wasn’t completely wrong tonight. My parents are dysfunctional assholes most of the time. My team means everything to me, and I will probably hurt you.” He stomps off ahead of me into the house.

Following him in, I see Brady go directly to the kitchen and grab a Gatorade. “Do you want anything to drink?”

Shaking my head no, I walk past him toward the French doors leading to the backyard. There are three sets of double glass panel French doors, all opening to a paver patio. The Ryans' backyard is laid out similarly to mine but on a larger scale.

The covered patio has a high ceiling, set off by tall black columns covered in green ivy. The surrounding terrace is done in warm teak wood, with chaise lounges lining the pavers next to the pool and a lounge area with an expansive outdoor sectional sofa that is easily as big as the furniture for giants that my dad has in our family room.

The pool is surrounded by tall, narrow evergreens. In the distance, the property appears to be surrounded by fatter, wider, more towering evergreens, with what looks like maple trees behind them. It is a secluded paradise.

"Your yard is huge." Brady flicks a switch, and twinkle lights light up the trees and patio. "Wow. It's so pretty."

He walks through the door and out to the patio without ever sparing a glance in my direction. That's when I know I've hit my limit. "Brady Ryan, twelve hours ago, you were making me promise if something was bothering me that I would come to you. Well, you are bothering me right now. So, a nasty piece of trash said some shitty things."

Brady sits down on the outdoor sofa and hangs his head in his hands.

Sitting across from him on the teak coffee table, I grab his wrists. "Please look at me."

Lifting his head, his eyes lock on mine and look tortured. "Natalie, I don't want you to ever see me the way Aria described me tonight, but I can see why she said it. Not that she was right. That's not how I view women, but I never wanted more than a night before you. Where she was wrong was that I always made sure we were on the same page. I never lied to anyone and acted like it was more than it was. I guess I did use them, though."

He looks away momentarily, as if to gather his thoughts. Then, Brady pushes forward to the edge of the couch, so our knees are touching. "But I never wanted more. Until you. One night, Nat. You showed up, and in one night, you changed everything."

He switches the grip I have on his wrists and pulls me until I am straddling his lap. "It may have taken me a minute to accept that I wanted more with you, but once I did, you were all I could see. All I could think

about since the night you walked into your kitchen and told Cooper you were home.

“I wanted you the minute I saw you. I think I fell for you when you couldn’t sleep that night. I never knew how strong I was until I had to force myself away from you in that kitchen. It only took me one week to realize I didn’t just like you, didn’t just want you. You’re it for me, Natalie.”

I place my palms on both sides of his face. “Brady, I need you to look at me. I know what Aria said was all bullshit. I didn’t doubt it at all while she was spewing her nasty venom, and I don’t doubt it now. I know you. I don’t know why I feel so sure about you, about us, after only a few weeks, but I do. I don’t doubt you. This is where I am supposed to be.

“I have no idea how this happened, but I’m completely positive that you won’t treat me like that, because I have to believe that you feel the same way that I do. I know it’s too early to be in love, Brady, and just uttering that word probably scares you, but I feel like my soul knows yours. It recognizes you. I could feel you watching me the night we met. I know that you’ve walked into a room before I ever set my eyes on you.”

“Nat, when I saw you at the game last night, saw my jersey on you, I pictured you wearing my jersey years from now. It didn’t scare me. I never thought I would feel like this now. Maybe ten years from now, but not senior year. It doesn’t matter, though, because you’re here. I found you, but as much as I don’t want to let you go, I also don’t want to hurt you.”

I lean in and kiss his lips. With my hands on his face, he wraps his strong arms around my back, so every inch of me is flush against him. He makes me feel safe and delicate and sexy, all wrapped up. “Please don’t break my heart, Brady. I’m pretty sure I’m falling in love with you.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m already there, Sweetheart.” His hands go to my sweater. Untying it and pushing it off my shoulders, he licks his lips. “Nattie, I feel like I am unwrapping the best present ever.”

“Oh, yeah? How unwrapped should this present get outside?”

“Our house sits on five acres, Nat. It’s pretty safe to say we can unwrap outside if we want to.”

Leaning in, I kiss him again. “I want it all, Brady. I want everything.”

“I want to give you everything, Nat. Today, tomorrow, next year. I want to give you the world, Sweetheart.”



## NATALIE

“God, Brady. I want you.” Without overthinking it, I move off of his lap and drop to my knees. My sweater is off, and the straps of my dress are falling down my shoulders. My hands go to work on his belt before he even realizes what’s happening.

“Natalie, what are you doing?” His voice sounds strained.

Lifting my eyes to his, I answer, “Exactly what I want to. Now lift up so I can get your shorts off. “

As he helps me slide his boxer briefs down, his dick stands at full attention. Brady reaches one hand behind him and pulls his army green polo over his head. So sexy. My eyes are feasting on this beautiful display of sinewy muscles. Looking at his cock, I can’t help wondering how the hell I am going to fit that in my mouth.

Without giving myself a chance to second guess, I grab the base of his cock and lick up the length of him, swirling my tongue like he is the most decadent ice cream cone that I’ve ever had.

“Jesus, Natalie.”

I do that again and add my other hand, lightly scratching my nails along the bottom of his balls. He shudders, and I make a mental note, that must have been a good thing too.

“Brady.”

He moves those deep, golden flecked eyes to lock with mine.

“Tell me what you like.” I lick him one more time and then slip the head of his cock into my mouth, running my tongue around his head before adding suction.

Brady gathers the hair from around my face and fists it in his hand. “Nattie, my dick is in your mouth. Just avoid your teeth, and this will be the hottest fucking experience of my life because it’s you.”

His words spur me on, and I take him deeper. Keeping my hand on his balls, I pump him with my other hand to the same rhythm I’m sucking him off. Lifting my eyes, my gaze holds his, and Brady groans.

He is jerking his hips now with the rhythm of my mouth, and the tight lines on his face are telling me he’s still holding back. It’s so fucking hot, knowing that I’m doing this to him. I finally work up the nerve to take him to the back of my throat and am incredibly relieved when I don’t choke—Yay for my lack of a gag reflex!

The next thing I know, Brady’s moving us. He lifts me from under my shoulders and lies me down with my back flat on the couch.

Pouting, I lean up on my elbows. “Hey, I wasn’t done.”

“Sweetheart, I want to come inside of your tight little pussy tonight, and if you kept your mouth on me for one more minute, I was going to be done before I get to be inside of you. Lift your arms up.”

I do as he says, and my dress is pulled over my head.

Sucking in his breath, Brady runs his hand over his face, before his eyes set every inch of my body on fire. “You are my every fantasy come to life, Natalie.”

I internally thank my mother for her expensive tastes and all of the shopping we did before moving to the East Coast. I’m wearing a sheer lace, ice blue, strapless La Perla bra, and matching ice blue lace, Brazilian cut panties.

Pulling the cups of my bra down, Brady runs one deliciously calloused palm around my breast while the other goes between my legs.

“Please, Brady.”

“What, Sweetheart. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you. I want us. Now. Do you have a condom?”

While he leans over the couch and grabs a foil square out of his wallet, I remove my bra. Brady rips the condom open with his teeth and pulls it down the length of his cock.

“These need to go, Natalie.” He pulls my panties down my legs then kisses up them. He licks his way up to my clit then sucks. Sending an electric current through my body.

I grab his hair as he licks and sucks, driving me wild. “God, Brady. I want more.”

Leaning back on his heels, Brady takes his cock in hand and strokes it before running it up the line of my pussy, right where his mouth just was. My whole body shudders.

Positioning himself at my entrance Brady moves his hands to my hips, then starts to push in.

Slowly.

So slowly.

I feel like I will lose my mind if he doesn't begin to move.

“God, Natalie. You feel so fucking good. I'm trying to go slow. I don't want to hurt you.”

“Please, God, Brady. Don't go slow.” I try to wiggle a little to get him to move.

“Fuck, Nat.” In one hard movement, he forcefully pulls my hips toward his and bottoms out in me. He doesn't move. Leaning down, he takes my mouth in a devastating kiss, leaving us both moaning from the exquisite torture.

“Move, Brady. Please. I need to feel you move. You're not hurting me. I'm not glass. I won't break.”

“You don't know what you're asking for, Nattie.”

Attempting to grind against him, I answer, “But I do, Brady. Fuck me. Now.”

I've unleashed something animalistic in him.

He builds his rhythm and fucks me like nothing I've ever imagined. He pulls me up to sit in his lap with my legs wrapped around his waist.

My chest is rubbing against him with every rise of my body. The sensation of his hard muscles rubbing against my nipples is driving me insane. He's still in control, but now I'm riding him to his rhythm. My hands are in his hair, and his eyes are on mine. He's licking and sucking my neck, my tits, my mouth.

It's so hot.

With one hand wrapped tightly around my back, the other is holding my face to his. My hair is tickling our naked skin. Our tongues are fucking to the rhythm of our bodies, and I'm not going to last long like this.

“Brady. I'm there.”

“Come, Sweetheart. Come on my cock. Come fucking now, Natalie.”  
It’s as if my body has no choice but to follow his command. Brady’s cock surges up as he pulls me down, and I explode with his name on my lips.





## BRADY

Neither of us makes any attempt to move for a few moments.

The sky is dark, with only the trees' small lights giving off a pale white glow. The cool air is hitting my hot skin and reenergizing me already. I'll never be able to get enough of my girl.

I fucking love having Natalie in my arms.

Her skin on mine.

Her head on my shoulder, and her golden hair hanging all around us.

It's like the universe is quiet right now, and we are the only two people who matter in this world. "Nattie, I've got to take care of the condom." I don't want to stop touching her, but I have to. Moving her to the corner of the couch, I tie the condom off, then throw my boxers back on.

Nat grabs her dress and slips it back over her head, making me want to rip it off again.

"I need to clean up." Nattie is blushing like she is embarrassed as she quickly picks up the sexiest panties and bra that I've ever seen and tries to sneak away. Grabbing her by the waist from behind, I lift her off the ground and squeeze until she starts laughing.

"Where are you trying to go, pretty girl? I'm not done with you yet."

"Brady!" Nat manages to say between giggles. "Put me down!"

I can't believe I almost let that bitch from earlier screw this up for me. For us. Putting Nat down and spinning her around makes my world complete.

Nat is trying to scowl at me, but it's not working.

“You know you’re not helping the Tinker Bell comparison right now. When you get pissy, it really is fucking cute. I feel like you should have fairy dust all around you.”

“Do you want to know what I’ve got, QB? I’ve got come dripping down my legs because you just gave me the best orgasm of my life. Can I please go clean that up?”

I fucking love hearing that.

Love that I did that.

Mine.

Dropping down, I grab her leg and place it over my shoulder. “Oh, I can clean that up for you, Sweetheart.” Licking up her leg, I don’t stop until my head is under her dress. I’m about to lick that pretty pink pussy again when I hear a gasp that didn’t come from Natalie.

Fuck me.

“Ohmygod. Oh, Fuck. I. Um. I didn’t see anything, I swear. Fuck. I’m going upstairs. Shit.” I hear my sister trip over a chair as the hardwood scratches over the pavers.

Nat whips her leg off my shoulder so quickly that her ballet training must be the only reason she didn’t just fall over. “Oh, my God. Chloe. I am so sorry.” Her voice is shaky and embarrassed, and I am going to kill my sister for putting that quiver there.

“What the fuck, Chloe? I thought you were sleeping at Sabrina’s tonight.”

“Sabrina’s little sister started puking halfway through the movie. I don’t do puke and didn’t want to be around her if she got the flu. Her mom thought it was probably best if I came home. I didn’t know I would be walking in on a scene out of Youporn.”

Nat hides her face in my shirt, but I think she’s laughing.

Chloe starts cracking up, which spurs Nat on more. Both girls are hysterical after a minute, and I give up.

“Come on, Nat. Let’s go inside.”

My asshole sister isn’t done with us yet. “Oh, don’t stop on my account. If outdoor nookie does it for you, I can put my headphones on and watch something on Netflix. There are plenty of surfaces out here that I’m sure could work.”

Nat grabs my hand. “As much fun as that sounds, I think I need to go home, Brady.”

“Are you sure? Do you want to stay here tonight?” I’m not ready to let go yet after our roller coaster of a night.

Leaning into me, my girl whispers, “I would love to sleep in your bed, but I think I should go home tonight. You’re coming over tomorrow, though, right?”

“I’ll be there, Sweetheart.” Wrapping my arms around her, I kiss her lips.

“And I’m out. See you tomorrow, Nat. Lock up when you leave, Brady. I’m going to bed.” Chloe heads into the house.

“I am so sorry about that. She told me she was gone for the night.”

“QB, I’m good if you don’t apologize for the hottest night of my life. Now take me home, walk me to my door and kiss me goodnight. I want to go to sleep tonight thinking about your lips on mine.”

Leaning down, I press my lips to hers and wonder what I did to get this lucky.



## NATALIE

The next morning, I wake up early to get to the supermarket and back before anyone starts knocking on the door. Everywhere I look is a sea of black and gold Kings jerseys, t-shirts, and hats.

Once I get home, I change to match everyone else. By the time I get the food together, I look like a real Philly Kings fan. I'm wearing black leggings, a gold Kings t-shirt with black lettering tied in a knot at my side, and my hair is in two braids.

When the doorbell rings at 11:55 a.m., I could kick myself for not getting up even earlier.

Cooper comes flying down the stairs and surprises me by beating me to the front door. As I'm walking over, I can hear Annabelle introducing the two of them. I'm scrambling to get an assortment of munchies onto the kitchen table and into the family room when they all walk into the kitchen.

One of the things I have always taken very seriously is the food we eat when we're stuck watching one of Dad's games on TV instead of in person. We've got chips with sour cream and onion dip, cheese and crackers, spinach dip and pumpernickel bread, pepperoni bread, BBQ wings, and a bowl of cheese puffs because Annabelle may have mentioned that they are Tommy's favorite.

I'm ready to feed a small army or a few big football players.

Cooper guides Annabelle and Tommy into the kitchen. Clearing her throat, Annabelle looks at Tommy. "What do you want to say to Natalie, Tommy."

Tommy looks adorable. He has on his own gold Kings jersey, a black and gold Kings hat, and is holding a stuffed dinosaur with a mini Kings jersey of its own.

“Thank you for letting us watch the game at your house, Natalie.” Tommy is looking everywhere but at me. Once he sees the big screen tv mounted over the family room's fireplace, he looks over at Cooper. “We need to put on the pregame show now if we don’t want to miss anything.”

Yup. He’s got my vote for the number one fan.

I wonder if my dad could get the whole team to sign a jersey for Tommy.

“Yup. You’re right, Tommy. We don’t want to miss anything. Wanna come with me?” Cooper holds out his hand.

Tommy nods his head but doesn’t take his hand. He squeezes his dinosaur tightly to his chest and walks in front of Cooper into the family room, plunks himself down on the center of the couch, and places his dinosaur in his lap.

Annabelle follows me over to the island, where I still have a ton of food spread out. “Thank you so much for doing this. Tommy hasn’t stopped talking about you since yesterday. I don’t know what he is more excited about, watching the game with people who like football or with the pretty girl that invited him.”

She looks different than what I am used to. Today she is in a short, pale pink corduroy skirt, showing off her long legs, a black Kings t-shirt with the logo swapped out for glittery pink instead of iridescent gold, and black Doc Marten boots. Her dirty blonde hair is down and curlier than I’ve seen it before, hiding part of large tote bag that hangs on her shoulder.

“Annabelle, that is too sweet. Don’t thank me yet. You haven’t met the rest of our crazy crew. You might want to let Tommy know that he shouldn’t repeat anything he hears today when he’s in school.”

She starts pulling snacks out of her bag, followed by Tommy’s iPad and headphones. When she gets to the bottom of the bag, she grabs her cell phone and places it in her pocket before she starts to put everything but the food back in there.

When she looks up, she sees the look of astonishment on my face. “You have no idea how much I have to travel with just in case Tommy needs it or has a meltdown. Most women carry cute handbags, I bring my Mary Poppins bag. I’ve got it all in this sucker.”

Laughing, the two of us finish up in the kitchen as the side door opens, and Murphy walks in. I see him kick his sneakers off in the mudroom like he's done it a thousand times. He's wearing his always present green ball cap backward on his ginger head, and a black Kings hoodie with a pair of cargo shorts.

"Well, hello there. And who do we have here?" Oh no. Murphy is looking at Annabelle like she's a juicy steak that he just grilled to perfection, and now he wants to savor her.

"Murphy, this is Annabelle, my dance teacher. Her little brother, Tommy, is in the other room with Cooper. They're watching the pregame. Annabelle, this is our friend Aiden Murphy."

"Nice to meet you, Annabelle. Need me to carry anything in for you, Nat?"

"Nope. I'm good, Murph. Thanks."

Murphy winks at us and heads to the other room.

Annabelle fidgets nervously. "Natalie, do your friends know about Tommy?"

"I hope it's okay, but I did let them know that I have a very special friend coming over today and that he has autism."

"It's better than okay." She surprises me by reaching out and hugging me. When Annabelle pulls away, she has unshed tears in her eyes. "That's perfect. I think it helps people accept Tommy's quirks a little bit if they know what to expect. He knows when people are uncomfortable around him. I can tell by the way he acts. I'm sorry to get so emotional. It's just hard sometimes."

"We've all got our quirks. Trust me. Murphy is the king of quirks. I give him ten minutes before he's hitting on you. But, trust me when I tell you that my friends are going to love Tommy. They're a great group of guys. I hope he has a good time today."

The side door opens again, and I can hear Chloe's laughter echoing down the hall.

Brady walks, and my body warms. God, this guy looks good in a pair of old jeans. His white t-shirt is stretched tightly across his chest and arms. He's my living breathing, Captain America fantasy come to life. He wraps his arm around my back, kisses my head, and whispers, "Hi." Then he turns to Annabelle, saying, "Hi Annabelle. It's good to see you again."



“You too, Brady. And this must be the infamous Chloe. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Chloe shoots me an evil glare. “All good, I hope.”

“Only good. I don’t think that I’ve heard Natalie say anything bad about anyone yet.”

“That will probably change today. One of these guys will get on my nerves.”

Chloe laughs. “My bet’s on Murphy.”

“I heard that, Chloe,” Murphy bellows from the couch.

Shaking my head, I motion toward the couches. “Why don’t you guys head in. I’m just going to clean up in here first. Annabelle, when does Tommy want the pizzas? Half time? I bought pizza dough balls and all the fixings at the grocery store this morning.”

Murphy turns to face us from his spot next to Tommy on the couch. “Me and Tommy are going to take care of the pizzas at half time. Can’t have you burning them, Little Sinclair.” The fucker laughs.

I shoot him what I want to be a nasty look, but he just laughs harder.

And I rest my case.

The entire afternoon goes by in a blur of laughter, sarcasm, touchdowns, and food. I’m cleaning up the counters after the pizzas when I feel Brady walking into the kitchen. I’ve got my back to him when I feel his hands go to my hips. My neck automatically bends to the side, granting his mouth access to that sweet spot.

“I’ve been trying to behave all day but being next to you and trying not to touch you is fucking killing me,” he whispers in my ear. “Your brother is going to have to get used to this because I’m not going anywhere.” Spinning me around, he lifts me so that I’m sitting on the counter.

My head is at his height, and I lean in for the kiss I’ve been dying for all afternoon. Wrapping my hands around the back of his neck, I drag him closer. “A girl could get used to this, QB.”

“Yeah, well, her brother can’t.” Cooper walks into the kitchen and grabs another bag of chips. “Get your tongue off my sister, dude. Keep that shit to yourselves.”

Brady’s hands go back to my hips as he helps me off the counter. We are both laughing soundlessly as screams of “Touchdown” are heard coming from the family room.

Rejoining the party, Brady sits back down, pulls me onto his lap, and we enjoy the rest of the game.

After the Kings pull off a surprising victory, winning the game by two points, the guys take Tommy into the back yard to throw a football around, leaving Chloe, Annabelle, and I to finish cleaning up and start grilling me.

Chloe winds a kitchen towel up before snapping it against my ass to get my attention. “So, Nat, what exactly are your intentions toward my brother?”

I throw the washcloth in my hand at her head. “Oh, come on. You were the one who told me to go for it.”

“I don’t know, Nat, it’s looking pretty serious pretty quickly. Especially after what I walked in on last night.”

Annabelle has walked into the room, carrying dirty paper plates. She dumps them in the trash can, then leans on the counter. “Ohh. What did you walk in on? Throw a girl a bone. I haven’t been out on a single date since I moved home, and your man is hot. A little young, but hot.” She quickly covers her mouth with a stricken look on her face. “Oh, God. Please tell me he is eighteen...”

“He’s eighteen. No need to get grossed out. What these two did last night was legal. Possibly in the category of exhibitionists but legal.”

“Shut it, Chloe.” I hip check her as I close the fridge door. “She may have walked in on us having some fun.”

“Uhm, yeah, it looked like you’d already had fun once and were about to have more fun. His head was under your dress, and I’m pretty sure you had underwear in your hands. Did I mention that this was all outside?”

“That’s not the only place his head was,” I singsong at my best friend, and enjoy grossing her out way more than I should.

She fake gags as she walks away.

I notice that Annabelle has turned away from us and is quietly staring out into the back yard. Then I see a tear fall down her cheek.

Moving to stand next to her, I ask, “Hey, are you okay?”

Wiping at her face, she clears her throat. “Yeah. I just haven’t seen Tommy smile like that in a long time. You’ve got a great group of friends out there. Look at how good they are with him. A kid they barely know. I just... I appreciate this, Natalie.”

“You know what, Annabelle... so do I.”

Chloe comes back into the room with a now cold piece of pizza, and we watch these guys of ours. Not officially men, but so much more than boys. Everyone is smiling. Brady is tossing Tommy the ball, and Cooper is trying to block Murphy, who's only acting like he's going to rush Tommy. Everyone cheers when Tommy carries the ball into the makeshift endzone.

I wish I could bottle up today and keep it with me forever. Days this perfect never last.



## NATALIE

The next few weeks fly by, and I feel like I am cocooned in my happy little bubble. Other than the nasty looks and random comments Aria likes to throw my way, she and Darby have left us alone, and Brady and I have had the chance we wanted to just enjoy the newness of us.

We've all settled into a routine, and I now understand what I've been missing.

My own tribe.

I've been accepted and embraced in this new version of a family that was formed long before I came to Kroydon Hills, and it's an incredible feeling. I rarely walk in from dance to an empty house, the guys are always there. Sometimes eating, sometimes studying, sometimes watching tape. I gained a boyfriend this year but also two more brothers.

Chloe and I are closer than ever, and I've gotten the chance to get to know Sabrina, too. Her schedule is harder to work around, but she pops in when she can during the week. Girls' nights are now a common thing. Sometimes with two of us, sometimes with three.

We're all gathered at our lockers before class Monday morning, discussing the week, when the warning bell rings. Everyone disperses, and Brady leans down and kisses me.

When he pulls back, I look up and see Aria in the corner of the hall looking more pissed off than usual. I hate knowing that my inner bitch enjoys seeing someone else annoyed, but I'm not hiding from her. I'm okay with her being miserable.

Of course, Brady is entirely oblivious to any of this, so I just smile and hold his hand as I watch her face go red, and imagine steam coming out of her ears before her whole head explodes like a cartoon character.

Serves her right.

Sebastian is texting someone when we sit down at the table. “Hey, man. What’s going on? Missed you yesterday. How was family dinner?”

Bash looks up, smiling at me before he answers Brady. “It was complicated. But isn’t everything when it comes to my family?” Sebastian has a love-hate relationship with his family. I wish my family was closer, I think Bash wishes he could put more distance between his.

Tiffany dramatically drops down at our table.

“Good morning, all.” Tiff seems full of energy, like it isn’t too early on Monday morning.

“Hey, Tiff. How was your weekend? I thought we would have seen you at our house yesterday.” Brady and Bash aren’t paying any attention to the two of us now.

“Cooper and I got in an argument. We’re taking a break.”

Completely shocked by this declaration, I choke on the water I’m sipping. “I’m sorry, what?”

“We got in a fight Saturday night. Talk to your brother. It’s his story. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you. Has something else happened with you and Aria? She bitched about you this weekend. More than usual. She made it obvious that you are public enemy number one.”

My mind is still reeling from the news that Cooper and Tiffany broke up, and he never said anything. But Tiffany has more surprises this morning. “Yeah, she doesn’t like me very much.”

“No, kidding. She freaking hates you. She had her sights set on Brady all last year. When she got back from her summer abroad, she thought that she would finally be the one to get Brady Ryan into a relationship. I’m pretty sure she’s told the whole school you stole that from her. Not that anyone believes it. I just wanted to get your side of it.”

“There really is no side. I haven’t spoken to her in weeks. I just ignore her, and she hates me.”

“That’s what happens when you snag one of the Kings of Kroydon Hills. You’re new, pretty, the daughter of a pro football coach, and you have the most popular boys in the school at your house all of the time. Girls get jealous. I can’t seriously be telling you anything new.”

“No, nothing new there. I’m just way too busy to play therapist to an overly entitled brat. Things are falling into place for me here. I’m finally starting to love my life the way that I want to.” Glancing at Brady, I smile and lean into Tiff. “Brady is amazing, and Aria’s right, he’s worth the fight, but so many things are finally starting to click. Brady is a piece of that, but so is dance and this new art class I’m taking. I’ve just started applying to colleges. I refuse to give her the attention she wants because she’s throwing a temper tantrum.”

Tiff leans away from me as if she’s surprised by the strength in my voice. “Well, damn. Who are you, and what have you done with Natalie Sinclair? I kinda feel like I’m seeing my baby grow up.”

Shaking my head, I throw my highlighter at her. “You are such a smart ass!”



That class is the first class in a very long week. There are papers assigned, projects given, and a few pop quizzes spread throughout the week. By the end of the day, Wednesday, Brady, Bash, and I are standing at my locker, discussing an assigned chemistry project. We are planning on working together tonight at my house. Tiff didn’t want to join us. Murphy and Cooper walk up to get the guys moving for practice. Cooper is handing me the keys to the Jeep, and none of us are paying attention when Aria walks by.

“Awe isn’t that cute. Are you spreading your legs for all of them, Natalie?” The venom drips from her lips.

Cooper spins on her as she continues to walk away. “What the fuck is your problem, you stupid whore?”

Brady is almost eerily quiet when he answers her, staring daggers into her back as she raises her hand and gives him the finger. “Just because you will spread your legs for anything with a dick, doesn’t mean everyone does, Aria. Do yourself a favor and crawl back into your fucking hole.” He grabs my hand and starts pulling me toward the doors in the opposite direction of where Aria has stopped at her locker.

We are half a hallway away when I hear, “Aww. Make sure to protect the poor little bitch while you can, Brady.”

Slamming his locker shut, I hear Cooper roar, “Threaten my sister again, and you won’t like what happens.”

When we get outside, I yank my hand free of his. “What the hell, QB! You didn’t even give me a chance to defend myself.” I’m trying not to cause a scene in the parking lot, but I am pissed.

“Nat, I’m sorry.”

Cooper comes storming through the doors, with Bash and Murphy hot on his heels.

“Listen, guys, that was a nasty girl dealing with jealousy issues mixed with anger issues, and I’m sure some other shit going on. You all freaking out on her in school is exactly what girls like that feed off of. Attention. Don’t feed into it.”

Coop moves toward me, not backing down. “Sorry, Nattie, but I’m not going to let anyone speak to you that way.”

“Jesus, could you all listen to me for a moment. I might suck at dealing with shitty guys. I own that. But, dealing with jealous girls is a whole other thing. Come on, Coop. We’ve been in the public eye our whole life. Do you really think I can’t handle Aria Marino? Give me some credit. I’ve got what she wants. I’ve got Brady, and I’ve got all of you in my corner willing to defend me. That has to be killing her. *Ignore. Her.* It will hurt her worse than anything you could possibly say.”

Brady still looks furious.

Grabbing his hand, I lean up and quickly kiss his lips. “Go to practice, QB. Go hit someone. Work out this aggression and take Larry, Moe, and Curly with you.”

Brady grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard and deep. “Nattie...”

Of course, Cooper is having none of it. “Get off my fucking sister, or it will be me expressing my aggression against you at practice, asshole. Love you, man. But I don’t need to fucking see it every day.”

Murphy and Bash snicker in the background, but Brady just adjusts us so that his back is to my brother and continues to kiss me as I hear Bash telling Cooper to leave us alone.

I break the kiss. “Torturing my brother is almost as much fun as kissing you, QB. Now get your cute butt to football practice before I climb you like a tree in the parking lot.”



“God, I like the sound of that, Nat.” He squeezes my ass before quickly kissing me one more time. “I’ll see you tonight. Are you walking to dance?”

I nod. I like walking to dance. It only takes me fifteen minutes, and it’s a beautiful walk. I like living in a small town. I may never go back to city living again.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind. Want me to pick you up after you’re done with the mini-ballerinas?”

“Sure.” Leaning up, I kiss him one more time, then start to back away. “I’ll see you tonight, handsome. Be nice to my brother at practice.”

Starting to back away, I remember one more thing. “Hey, QB.”

“Yeah, Sweetheart?”

“Have your phone with you in the locker room.” My smile is so big right now it hurts.

Brady is looking at me so confused. “What are you talking about, Nat?”

“There may be something funny that you want to get a pic of. Maybe even a video. Just trust me. You better hurry up.” God, I wish I could be there to see this firsthand.

Brady has stopped walking away now and is now coming toward me. “What did you do, Nattie?”

I quickly kiss his cheek one more time. “Bye, QB. See you tonight.”



## BRADY

After another shitty fucking practice, I'm pulling behind the building that houses Hart and Soul Dance. I've had enough today and just want to see my girl. The only highlight of this shitty day was when Murphy went to grab his tape out of his gym bag, and a fluorescent green glitter bomb exploded.

Glitter, the same color as Tinker Bell herself, coated everything in a three-foot vicinity.

Everything inside of Murph's bag.

Everything inside of his locker that was unfortunately open when the glitter went airborne. It went inside his helmet and all over his pads. I've never seen so much glitter in my life, and Chloe was obsessed with that shit a few years ago. That's how I know he is never getting rid of it all.

You could hear Murphy cursing from a mile away. He's going to be wiping glitter out of his locker for the rest of the season.

Everything after the glitter pretty much went downhill. Practice sucked. Coach was pissed because we were all at each other's throats. Not sure if it's a fucking full moon or something, but I felt more like a peacekeeper than a quarterback today.

Cooper was still pissed about the shit Aria said and was a fucking beast on the field.

If it could go wrong, it did go wrong.

Now, getting out of the Rover, I see Annabelle hurrying out of the back door next to the Dumpster, carrying two boxes, and two bags.

"Hey, Annabelle. Is everything okay? You need a hand?"

“Thank you so much, Brady.” She hands me the boxes and hits the button on her key fob that unlocks her doors and opens her trunk. “I just got a call from Tommy’s principle. He got into an argument at school and is having a bit of a meltdown. He’s usually there for another hour on Wednesdays for a Minecraft club, but I have to pick him up.

“Anyway, Nat’s inside. She only has ten more minutes of this class, and then she’s done. Thanks again for taking Tommy to the Kings game with you guys last weekend. You guys are the greatest, and it meant so much to him. He hasn’t stopped talking about it. I can’t believe that Nat’s dad showed him the locker room. I’m pretty sure his mind exploded.”

“That’s awesome, Annabelle. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

She nods and gets into her car. Annabelle’s little brother is awesome, and the two feel like part of our ragtag family. Tommy has become a little brother to all of us and has a way of getting exactly what he wants from us, too.

Smiling, I walk around the corner to the front door and hear the chimes as I enter. Tonight, the waiting area is packed with moms and a few dads, watching their little dancers through the glass.

And there’s my girl.

Her beautiful blonde hair is piled high in a tight bun, she has on pale pink tights, and that pink sheer wrap skirt around her waist over her pink leotard. This time she has a white fuzzy sweater covering her arms, that ties underneath her chest. She is showing the little girls what they are supposed to be doing and has the most contagious smile on her face.

Leaning against the wall, I only have eyes for my girl when an older guy stands next to me.

“One of them yours?” he asks.

A slow smile spreads across my face. “Yeah. The teacher. She’s mine.” And God damn, I like the sound of that.

The dad chuckles. “Oh. My daughter loves her.”

“Yeah, she’s kinda hard not to love.”

A few minutes later, the door opens, and twelve little dancers all make their way out at once. Excited voices greet their parents and small hands grab their parents’ hands.

Natalie is standing at the door, thanking everyone for coming and reminding the little girls to practice over the weekend. When the last parent

walks out of the door, Nat turns the lock, flips the open sign to closed, and then leans her back against the door.

“Hi, QB. How was practice?”

“Fucking awful. How were the minis?”

“Minis?”

“Yeah, minis. They all look like little mini versions of you and Annabelle. It’s cute.”

“Huh. I like that. The Minis were sweet but hyperactive. I had no idea how hard teaching them would be. Trying to get them to pay attention is impossible. I may not know what I want to study in college, but I can cross teaching off my list.” She smiles, and every last ounce of stress from the day melts away.

All of a sudden, an image pops into my mind. I can see it clear as day. It’s Natalie, a little older, dressed exactly like she is now. She’s holding the hand of an actual mini version of herself. A tiny little ballerina, with blonde hair and baby blue eyes that own my heart, and they are both smiling at me.

Shaking the image out of my head, I wonder what the fuck is wrong with me.

I’m supposed to be thinking about next weekend, not ten years from now. But damn, that pretty picture made my heart speed up and grab on.

Natalie starts moving around the studio, shutting down the music and shutting off the lights, with me following her like a lost puppy.

When she makes it back to the front desk, she hops up to sit on top of it. Then grabs my hands and pulls until I’m standing between her legs. “So, QB. Did anything interesting happen in the locker room today?” If Nat is trying to be sly, she is doing a terrible job of it.

My hands move to rest on her hips. “You can cross the CIA and FBI off your list, too. Are you trying to be sneaky, Natalie? Let me think. What on Earth could have happened in the locker room today?”

She moves her hands to my shoulders then lets out a huff. “Oh, come on. Just tell me. Was it funny? Did it work?”

“It was fucking hilarious. Murph’s going to be scrubbing away green glitter for weeks. It went everywhere. Guarantee he’s going to still have green glitter on him for the game Saturday.”

“Crap. I didn’t think about that.”

“Oh, you better be prepared for the blowback, Sweetheart. Murphy likes to win, and you just scored the first point.” She blows her hair out of her

face and crosses her arms. “Swear to God, Nat, you make it so easy to compare you to a pixie.”

Stepping in closer, I grab her face with both hands and claim her mouth. My tongue explores before I nip my way down her neck.

Laughing at me, Nat bats my hands away. “Brady,” she murmurs, “it may not seem like it, but I have on three layers of clothing, and I am so not getting out of them in here. Let me set the alarm, and we can go home.”

Once everything is locked, and the alarm is armed, we exit the same door that Annabelle did. It’s gotten darker over the last thirty minutes, and there are no lights back here. “Do you walk to your car alone at night?”

“No, it’s usually Annabelle and me together. Why?”

“I just don’t like how dark and closed off it is back here.”

“I guess I never really noticed it before. I can see if Annabelle can ask the landlord to add a light back here. Would that put your mind at ease, QB?” She kisses me and hops in the SUV when I open the door.

Throwing her dance bag in the back with my football bag, I tell her, “It’s my job to keep you safe.”



## BRADY

When we enter the Sinclairs' house, Bash, Murphy, and Cooper are already at the kitchen table. There are books scattered everywhere and a smell wafting through the room that reminds me I haven't eaten since before practice, and I'm hungry.

"Hey, guys. What's in the oven? It smells delicious." Apparently, neither has Nattie.

"I don't know. I think Dad said it's eggplant parm. The meal service stocked us up earlier."

"Is Dad home yet?"

Just as Nat asks, her dad walks into the room, his eyes zoning right in on the fact that I am carrying his daughter's dance bag and holding her hand. I've been around Joe Sinclair many times since I met Coop and Nat, but never blatantly as his daughter's boyfriend. We have tried to keep the PDA away from him. I can't decide if he looks annoyed or curious.

Nat drops my hand and walks over to her dad to kiss his cheek. "Hi, Daddy. Are you going to eat with us?"

"No, Nattie. I've got more work to do. I'll be in my office if you kids need anything." Mr. Sinclair starts to walk away but stops and turns to study Murphy. "Aiden?"

Murphy looks up nervously. "Yes, sir?"

"Why the hell do you look like rolled around with a sweaty stripper?" Mr. Sinclair asks Murphy this with absolute sincerity, that is not shared with the group. Everyone else in the room explodes with laughter.



Natalie manages to keep a straight face. “Well, Dad, Murphy made the mistake of comparing me to Tinker Bell. Then, he got the entire football team to call me Little Sinclair. The. Whole. Team.” She pouts at her dad, who is laughing now too.

Coop starts to speak, but Nat cuts him off.

“Nat, you are—”

“Zip it, Cooper Sinclair. I. Am. Older. Then. You.” It takes every ounce of strength I have not to laugh at my feisty little pixie.

Nat’s dad looks over Murphy again. “I see—poor kid. I guess nobody told you that Natalie might be tiny, but she is ruthless. Lesson learned, Aiden. Don’t mess with my daughter.”

Looking over, Joe Sinclair’s eyes meet mine next. “Brady, can I speak with you for a moment?”

Not waiting for an answer, Mr. Sinclair heads away from us and toward his office.

Cooper is failing at hiding the grin that has overtaken his face. “Ohhhhh. Somebody pissed off his girlfriend’s dad already.”

“Shut the fuck up, Cooper.” I flick his ear as I pass by.

Then hear Murphy mutter, “What the fuck, Nat. Brady’s the one that compared you to Tinker Bell. I just called you Little Sinclair. You are little. I’m going to be shitting glitter for a fucking week.”

“Sucks to be you, Murphy.” Turning away, Nat looks at me. “I’m going to get changed. Have fun talking to my dad.” I get a quick kiss on the cheek and feel like I’m about to walk the plank.

Heading down the long, narrow hallway Coach Sinclair just walked, I stop and knock on the closed double doors. The office is large, and nine months after he moved in, it is still littered with boxes in every corner. His desk is a substantial old mahogany piece with a laptop on the little space that papers and binders don’t cover. The desk is facing out, with built-in white shelving behind it. Pictures of Nat and her brothers take up most of that space.

Pictures of them as babies and little kids at his football games.

Nat with her hair in little, blonde pigtails, sitting on her father’s shoulders, both wearing matching Sinclair jerseys.

Pictures of the Sinclair siblings wearing three sets of matching red plaid pajamas on Christmas morning, in front of a Christmas tree that looks ten feet tall.

Pictures of Natalie dancing on stage. My girl looking gorgeous in a loose, flowing white costume. Her hair up in a tight bun. She is suspended midair in a perfect split.

Pictures of them at Declan's high school graduation.

Across from the desk is a whiteboard with names listed. Some with lines through them, a few circled. Next to that is a flat-screen TV that is tuned in to ESPN but muted for now.

There are no trophies on these shelves. There are no framed articles about him winning Super Bowls or the Rose Bowl. No pictures of his own time playing in the pros. But his family is everywhere in this room.

There is a single, framed jersey leaning against the wall, still on the floor. It appears to be his only memorabilia from his days playing on the field, and this man is so unassuming that he hasn't even bothered to hang it on his wall.

"Come in, son, and ignore Cooper. He and his brother have always loved to torture Natalie. He did manage to answer my first question, though, but I'd like to hear it from you. Are you dating my daughter, Brady?"

"Yes, Mr. Sinclair. We are dating."

"Brady, I am giving you the benefit of the doubt here, son. You are a successful high school quarterback in your own right, and you've already signed your letter of intent for an Division 1 school. I also saw your friendship with Cooper long before Natalie moved here. But I need to say this, and I need you to listen, son. If I find out that you are using my daughter in any way. If you think that you being with my daughter can help your potential football career. If you hurt her, son, I will destroy you, and I have fixers at my disposal who would be happy to help me cover it up."

Well, shit. How am I supposed to respond to that? "All due respect, sir, I know that we are young and that this is new, but I plan to be with your daughter for as long as she'll let me. I'm hoping that is a long time, sir. I respect you, and I respect Cooper, but my relationship with Natalie has nothing to do with what either of you can do for me. You being her father has absolutely nothing to do with why I am with her. You have my word that I will protect her and take care of her. I have no intention of hurting your daughter, sir."

"Okay, good answer Brady. One other thing. If you get her pregnant, I will rip your balls off with my bare hands and make you watch while I pop them like balloons. Understand?"

I think my balls crawled back up into my body at that vivid fucking description, but he got his point across. “Understood, sir.”

“Good. I’m glad we had this little chat. Now get some dinner and study hard. If you’re ever going to have a chance at keeping my daughter happy, you’d better not be dumb, son. A pretty face only goes so far.”

He’s smiling at me and laughing at himself. “And, stay the hell away from Murphy. That glitter won’t be gone by the game this weekend, and you don’t want to be on the weekend sports roundup looking like you just hugged a stripper.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Turning to leave, I take a deep breath and open the door. I’m not expecting Natalie to have her hand raised, ready to knock on the other side.

“Why do you look pale?”

“Nattie, honey.” Nat’s dad is calling over me now. “I think Brady just pictured something incredibly painful. Why don’t you get him some water? He’ll be fine.” He sounds like he’s enjoying my utter discomfort thoroughly.

Meanwhile, I am still imaging my balls popping. I shut the door behind me, and those big beautiful baby blue eyes look up at me.

“You okay, QB?”

Looking her over, I draw in a deep breath.

She has on a pair of navy blue school sweatpants and a tiny white t-shirt. Her hair is down around her shoulders, and her little diamond studs are twinkling in her ears.

“I’ve got you, right?”

She nods that gorgeous head of hers.

“Then, I’ve got everything I need, Nat.” Brushing her hair away from her face, I kiss the crown of her head. “Let’s get something to eat.”

For the next two hours, we work on chemistry and talk a little football. Eventually, Coach Sinclair joins us, and we all grill him about the upcoming game.

He hates that he’s missing our game this weekend, but it’s a Saturday afternoon game for us, and the Kings fly to Seattle Friday. I can’t help but be a little in awe of a father who cares about his kids so much that he tries to catch later flights than his team when he can, just so that he can watch his son play in a game.

I may not like what Joe Sinclair said to me tonight, but I respect the hell out of it. He's already been to more of our games this season than my parents, who are as uninvolved as parents can get. I doubt my father even knows that Chloe dates girls more than guys. He certainly has no idea that I am dating Natalie.

When it's time to go, Nat makes a big deal of walking me to my car. She goes as far as opening the door for me, so I lean against the seat and pull her to stand in between my legs. It's one of those crisp, early fall nights. The stars are bright and lighting up the inky night sky. There's a coolness in the air now. At some point in the night, my girl threw my Kroydon Prep hoodie on over her t-shirt, and my name is stretched across her back. I don't think seeing my name on her will ever get old.

Smiling at that thought, I pull her closer. "What's on your mind, Natalie?"

Tilting her head back, she bites down on her lower lip before answering. "What did my dad want earlier? I didn't want to ask in front of the guys."

"He wanted to make sure that I was planning on treating you right." I lean in and kiss her. "He wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to try to take advantage of you or hurt you."

"Oh, yeah?" She looks up at me under those long eyelashes of hers, having no idea the power she has over me. "And what did you tell him?"

"I promised him that I would look out for you. That I'd take care of you. And that I wouldn't get you pregnant." I laugh.

She doesn't. "Are you freaking serious right now? What the hell. He already had that discussion with me weeks ago."

"It's his job to protect you, Nattie. You can't ask him to give that up yet."

She grips the front of my t-shirt. "Did he scare you away, QB?"

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her closer and rest my chin on her head. "Nope. It takes a lot more than that to scare me away. You're worth it, Nat." Leaning down to kiss her again, I try to remind myself that we are in front of her house, and her father is home. "Want to go out Friday night? We could catch a movie?"

"Nope. Dad's flying out that afternoon. How about we order pizza and find something to watch on Netflix?"

"Netflix and Chill? I like the way you think, naughty girl."

“You’re an idiot. I meant to watch the movie. We can chill afterward.” Stretching up to her tiptoes, she leans in, kisses me quickly, and turns to walk away. Her hair whips around her face as she turns her head back to me.

“You better be nice to me, Brady Ryan. You’ve seen what I can do with a glitter bomb.”



## NATALIE

When Brady walked in my door late this Friday afternoon, I wasn't expecting Cooper to be walking in with him. Obviously, it's his house too, but our date night has officially turned into the three of us. By seven, we are all laid out on the couch, waiting for the Chinese food to be delivered, fighting over what movie to watch. Just as we decide on the new John Wick, the delivery driver shows up, and we all sit down to eat in the kitchen.

Coop is hovering over his plastic container of sweet and sour chicken. "Jesus Coop, do you want to slow down and chew?" My disgusting brother opens his mouth that is full of half-chewed chicken so that I can see it. "Gross! Don't be a pig."

"Whatever. I feel like I've barely seen you this week, little sister. What's going on with you?"

"Nothing new to report here. Actually, I've been meaning to ask you something all week. Monday morning in Chemistry, Tiffany mentioned that you two broke up."

Brady passes me the egg rolls. "Actually, she said you were taking a break. Very Ross Gellar of you, Coop."

Stunned, I look at Brady. "I'm not sure why, but I'm impressed by the Friends reference, QB." He smirks at me, and I blow him a kiss before turning back to my brother. "Back to you, Coop. Tiff blew me off when I asked what happened. She told me it was your story to tell. Care to elaborate?"

Cooper swallows his food before going back in for seconds with his chopsticks. “It is what it is. We went to that party at her friend’s house Saturday night, and Tiff’s older brother was there. She got pissed off. We both moved on. It was never anything serious anyway. We can’t all be the over the top, sappy, fucking couple you two are.”

I throw a wrapped fortune cookie at his head. “Asshole.”

Brady leans forward. “Man, I haven’t seen Dave in forever. How long is he home for?”

“He said he has two weeks’ leave.” Coop looks upset.

Annoyed that I have no idea who Dave is, I interrupt. “Hello... You guys know that I don’t have a clue who you’re talking about, right?”

Turning to me, Brady explains, “Dave is Tiff’s older brother. He graduated four years ago. He’s always been a cool dude. Captain of the team when he was at Kroydon. Incredibly smart. He skipped college and went into the Navy. He’s a Navy SEAL now.”

Cooper takes another bite of chicken, then adds, “I ended up talking to him all night, and it pissed Tiff off.”

My stomach drops. I hate that I know the answer to my question before I ask it. “Why?”

“She didn’t like it when I told her that I was going into the Navy after high school.”

Brady puts down his chopsticks, stunned. He looks from Cooper to me like he’s missing something.

“Haven’t changed your mind about it then? Does Dad know?”

Cooper moves his rice around with his chopsticks, never looking up. “Dad wants me to go to Annapolis and play there for four years first. That way, I’ll come out as an officer.”

Already shaking my head no, I fill in the rest of the sentence. “But you don’t want to go to college, right?”

“No.”

Cooper has always said he didn’t think college was for him.

He’s never wanted to play football past college.

Coop doesn’t want our dad’s life.

He doesn’t want Declan’s life.

He’s wanted to be a SEAL for as long as I remember, and my mom and dad have been against it for just as long.



“Anyway, Tiffany said that she was not wasting time on someone who was going into the military. Said it was too hard already with her brother, and she wouldn’t do it again. Somehow, we decided that maybe we needed a break, and I gotta tell you, I’m okay with that. I wasn’t looking for a serious thing right now anyway. Tiff’s great, but I’m not looking to wife anyone at eighteen.”

Cooper gets up and throws away his trash. He walks back over to the table and rests his hand on my chair. “And, no, I have no idea what I’m doing next year. I haven’t talked to a recruiter. Not yet, at least, and until I do, I would appreciate it if you don’t mention this to Dad, Mom, or even Declan.”

“I love you, Cooper. I’ll support whatever you decide you want to do. I can’t act like it doesn’t scare me, though.”

“Yeah, love you too. Now enough of the serious talk for the night. Can we put the movie on?”

Brady grabs his carton of food and my hand and pulls me behind Cooper to the family room. The two of them dissect every fight scene and force me to watch a YouTube clip of Keanu Reeves preparing for this role. Not exactly the date that I had hoped for tonight.

On the bright side, I spend the night snuggled up next to my hot as hell boyfriend, with my feet thrown over his legs. Brady has been rubbing my ugly dancer’s feet for the last half hour, and it’s driving my brother nuts. I’ve come to realize it is always a bonus when I can drive Coop nuts.

It’s strangely fun, watching his eye start to twitch when Brady and I get too close.

As the movie ends, Cooper stands and looks at Brady, asking, “You spending the night, man?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t talk about it yet. My parents are in London for some acquisition until the middle of next week.”

“He’s spending the night, Cooper.” Throwing a pillow at us, he gives us a *keep it down* before he goes upstairs. Waiting until I hear Cooper’s bedroom door click shut, I pull on Brady’s t-shirt. “So, do you want to spend the night?”

“Do I get to sleep in your bed again, Sweetheart? Because I’ve got to tell you, your mattress was the most comfortable mattress I have ever slept on.”

“Oh, Yeah? Just using me for my mattress QB? What do I get in return?”

“Orgasms. Lots of orgasms.”

“Big talk. Let’s see if you can back that up.”

His hands go to my face the way I have started to crave. Then, leaning me back, he lays me on the couch. Brady’s strong hands travel down my body and grip my hips before slipping inside my yoga pants and dipping inside me. Whispering in my ear, he asks, “Nat, wanna go upstairs before Cooper comes back down for something?”

“Hmmm. God, I don’t want you to stop, though.”

Brady brings his fingers up to his mouth and sucks me off of him, and I’m done.

“I’ll race you upstairs!”

I take off running with Brady hot on my heels. Running into my room, I jump on the bed, laughing.

Like an animal stalking his prey, he moves behind me, quietly pulls the door closed, and puts his fingers up to his lips, telling me to be quiet.

Nodding my head, I strip off my slouchy crop top and am left in a hot pink bralette.

Brady pulls his dark Kroydon Prep t-shirt over his head and stands in front of me barefoot, in worn-in blue jeans and his belt. I love this.

Licking my lips with anticipation, I go up on my knees and reach for him.

Meeting me in the middle, he places one knee on the bed and one arm around my waist before he picks me up and sets my feet on the floor, facing away from him.

“Brady,” I protest. “What are you doing?”

Dropping to his knees, he pulls my pants down my legs and then groans when he sees the bright pink thong I’m wearing. I’m not prepared for his next move when he smacks my ass. I’m even less prepared when I wiggle back toward him because I liked it.

“You like that, pretty girl?” He’s gently rubbing where he just smacked, with the palm of his hand. “Bend over, Nat.” He pulls my thong down my legs and licks his way back up. “I will never get enough of you, Natalie.”

One finger enters me. Then two. He dips them in and out, curling toward the most incredible spot.

I moan when he pulls them out, but tense up in the next moment when he rubs that thick finger covered in my juices against a puckered hole I had always thought of as forbidden.

“Brady,” I pant, “what are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, Sweetheart. I’m not going to do anything you don’t want. But one day, Nattie. One day, when you’re ready, this perfect ass is going to be mine.” He licks up my pussy again, pushes a little harder with his finger, and I don’t know if it’s his words or his actions, but I come.

I drop my head to the bed. “Jesus, Brady.”

“Not Jesus, Nattie. That was all me.” Running his palm over my stomach and under my bra, he pushes it up and over my head. The feel of his calloused hands against my sensitive flesh is a match setting fire to my body.

“Brady, you have too many clothes on.”

No sooner have the words left my mouth before I hear his belt hitting the floor and the tearing of the condom packet. “Turn your head, Nattie. Look in the mirror. Watch what I’m going to do to you.” Jesus. From the angle I am leaning against the bed, I can see us in the big white mirror over my dresser. I can see my pussy totally bare to him. Brady is stroking his cock before he rubs it against the moisture gathering at my center. This is by far the most erotic thing I have ever watched.

Brady enters me in one thrust, and we both moan from the exquisite feeling of my body stretching to accommodate him. Gripping my hips, he sets his rhythm and fucks me hard. One of the hands-on my hips moves to my clit, and I know that I am not going last long.

“Mine, Nattie. God, you are all fucking mine.”

Thrust. “Mine to fuck.”

Thrust. “Mine to protect.”

Thrust. “Mine to love.”

With him holding me down on the bed, my eyes never leave the image of us in my mirror. Thrusting into me one last time, I feel his body go rigid. As if he commanded it so, my body has no choice but to obey him, I come around his cock. Aftershocks shaking me to my core. Brady looks like a god right now. With the low light coming in through the curtains, his tanned skin is almost glowing against my white comforter. I can just barely make out all of his ridges and muscles, but I know they’re there. He’s kissing my back and running his hands up my sides. I swear I want to purr like a cat.

When Brady moves to my bathroom to get rid of the condom, I grab his t-shirt off the floor and slip it on. Pulling the covers back, I crawl into bed with a smile on my face. I don't even know if he realized what he just said, but I heard it. The question is, did he mean it, or was that just a slip during sex?

The night may not have started the way I originally intended, but I certainly can't complain about the way it ended.



## BRADY

I know I have a game tomorrow.  
I know I am supposed to be at the school at ten.  
I know I need to be sleeping.

But, right now, I just don't care. Right now, I am lying in this bed, with my girl curled up in my arms, and I can't seem to force myself to stop watching her sleep.

I have no doubts that the guys would tell me that I am a total pussy, but I just don't care. This girl is it for me. She's everything. She's the end game. I'm all in.

I kiss her neck, then the shoulder that my shirt has fallen off, I just can't help myself. She is snuggled into me with her back to my front. Her tight little ass is entirely bare and has been tucked against my dick for the last two hours. The only thing separating us is a pair of boxer briefs, and I want back inside of her so badly that my cock is ready to rip through the fabric to get there. But that is not my goal in waking up my girl right now.

Instead, moving her hair away from her face, I kiss her again.

Nattie's sleepy eyes start to open, looking completely confused. "Brady, is everything alright?" Slowly, she rolls over to face me. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I can't sleep. So, I was watching you instead."

Closing her eyes, she snuggles in closer. "Because that doesn't sound creepy?"

Leaning down to kiss her, I whisper in her ear. "I couldn't sleep because I needed you to know something, Nat. I realized something tonight, and I

need you to know it now.” I kiss her again quickly, then pull back to look at the soft, sleepy smile she has on her face.

“I love you, Natalie Sinclair. I know I said it earlier, and I want to make sure you know I meant it. You are the first person that I have ever said that to. I love you, and I need you to know that.”

“Brady.” She reaches up and runs her fingers through my hair. “I love you too. I was worried that I would scare you if I told you that. But it’s true. I am completely, madly in love with you, and I don’t think that is ever going to change.”

Nattie pulls my face down to hers, and we kiss. Slowly and gently at first, but it quickly turns frenzied.

I can feel her heat through my boxers, and those perfectly pink nipples are hard against my chest. I run my fingers from her hips down her toned stomach and into her slick heat. “You are so wet, sweetheart.”

She is grinding against me. “Brady. Please.” Nat pushes down my boxers with her hands and gets my legs free of them with her feet. Gripping my cock, she lines it up with her entrance.

“Nattie, I don’t have a condom on.”

“I don’t care if you don’t. I’m on the pill. We’re covered, and I trust you.”

Kissing her again, I leave the decision up to her.

Looking into my eyes, she pushes the head of my cock into her pussy.

I think I’ve just died and gone to heaven. Nothing has ever felt this good.

“Nat, God, you feel so good.” I inch in as slowly as possible, wanting this to last, but knowing my self-control is slipping. “Baby, I’m not going to last like this. I’ve never gone bare before. You feel better than anything ever has.”

She throws her head back, jutting her chest out, and I take one of her nipples into my mouth. My hands are on her hips, holding her down.

This beautiful girl is every wet dream I’ve ever had come true.

“I’m close, Brady.”

Changing the angle, I move her leg over my shoulder and go deeper than before, while rubbing her clit with my thumb. I feel her muscles tighten around me as she comes on my bare cock. Milking me. Her orgasm urges me on, and any thoughts I may have had about pulling out leave my brain as I come inside the tightest heat I’ve ever felt.

Leaning my head against her chest, we both lay like that for a few breaths. “That wasn’t why I told you I love you, Natalie.”

“I know Brady. Now go to sleep. You have a big game tomorrow, and I need to be able to walk in the morning. I love you, QB.”





## NATALIE

**B**rady kisses me goodbye early Saturday morning. He and Cooper have to be at the field by ten, and Brady still needs to go home, shower, and grab his game gear. Alone now, after drinking some coffee in an attempt to fuel up for the day, I shower and then text Chloe.

**Nattie:** Hey. You still driving us to the game today?

**Chloe:** \*GIF of Michelle Tanner from Full House saying ‘You got it dude’\*

**Nat:** \*kissy-face emoji\*

**Chloe:** We gotta up your text game, amateur. Emojis were last year. Get with the GIF game, girl. Be there in a bit.

I put on Brady’s jersey, telling myself that it’s good luck, but knowing that it’s just because I know how much he loves me wearing it. I love wearing it too.

What girl doesn’t want to claim her man by wearing his name? This week I pair it with cute boyfriend jeans, rolled at my ankles, and my new navy-blue converse that I added gold laces to. I have my hair down and bouncy with a blue ribbon tied like a headband. I’m just about to go downstairs to wait for Chloe when I get an incoming text. Thinking it’s Chloe, I start to read the text as I walk down the stairs, but I stop walking and stop breathing when I see what it says.

**Unknown:** I bet you thought your life was perfect. You fucked with mine. Now I’m fucking with yours

There are pictures loading, and while the little downloading circle continues to spin, so does my stomach. Then, I see what the two images are.

They are pictures from my first date with Brady. When we were in his back yard.

Naked.

You can see everything. My body was covering most of Brady's, but there is no question what we were doing. I drop my phone and run back to my bathroom to throw up.

This can't be happening. I waited until I was eighteen years old to lose my virginity, and some creep was watching us. Someone has pictures of us. My stomach hurls again, and I stay in the bathroom with my head in the toilet for the next ten minutes.

I can hear Chloe beeping the horn.

What the fuck am I supposed to do? I can't even talk to Brady about this until the game is over. There are thirty minutes until kick-off. I know his phone is turned off now.

Was this Aria? Oh, God. Was this Darby?

Is this revenge?

Is there someone else out there that has been watching us?

What's going to happen to the pictures? Will the entire school see them?

Will they get uploaded to the internet? Can they get uploaded to a porn site?

Oh, my God. Will the paparazzi get them?

Chloe beeps the horn again. Shit. I've got to pull myself together until I can talk to Brady. We'll figure this out. But, God, I don't want to have to tell my Dad this. Will he have to see the pictures?

Will my brothers?

I'm not surprised when I hear the side door close, then Chloe yelling, "Come on, Nat. I don't want to miss kick-off. Hurry your cute little ass up."

"I'll be right down." Splashing water on my face and gargling mouth wash is the best I'm gonna be able to do right now. I can't fucking believe this is happening.

I head down the steps, grabbing my phone from where I dropped it. "Hey. You okay, Nat? You look a little off."

"Yeah. I'm good. Just tired. I didn't get a ton of sleep last night." I hate lying to Chloe, but I've got to talk to Brady first. These pictures are just as bad for him as they are for me. Shit. Will these affect his scholarship?

"Gross. I don't need to hear what you and Brady did last night instead of sleeping. If we lose today because our quarterback is dead on his feet, it's

going to be all your fault.” She’s laughing, but I’m not.

We barely get to the game before kick-off and decide to stand where Dad and I have been standing whenever he’s been with me.

I’ve been watching Aria. Looking to see if she is acting different.

Did she send me those pictures?

Did Darby?

I keep looking around, expecting some big bad villain to jump out of the crowd, but no one does. My head is swimming with the weight of my phone, but I have no idea what I’m supposed to do.

I know it’s a tight game because I can see the scoreboard. I hear the announcers speaking but couldn’t tell you a word they are saying. I keep cycling through the same questions over and over in my head.

What the hell am I going to do?

What is my dad going to say?

What is Brady going to think?

Chloe calls me out on my mood halfway through the second quarter. “Are you even paying attention to the game, Nat? You seem like you are a million miles away. Wanna tell me what’s wrong?”

Staring out onto the field, I debate how to answer her. “I wish I could tell you, Chloe. I will when I can, but I can’t just yet.” I wipe away the tears that start to escape. Damn it. I hate being a crier.

“Cryptic much?”

Looking back out to the field, I notice the sky is a perfect blue with white fluffy clouds, and the sun tucked brightly above us. I hear the band playing in the distance and the crowd cheering for the prep. My world just took a turn on the crazy train, but everyone else is having a perfect day. It’s the strangest sensation. I’m standing still as everyone else moves around me.

Then the next ten seconds of my life happen in slow motion.

I watch the guys leave the huddle, and Brady calls out the play.

Landon snaps the ball to Brady, who drops back into the pocket for a pass.

The team scatters, everyone going to their positions on the field—everyone except Darby. If I didn’t know football the way I do, I might not have noticed, but Darby just stepped aside. He moved out of the way.

He’s left Brady’s blindside completely open, and Brady doesn’t see it.

He doesn't see it coming—his focus is on Cooper at the other end of the field.

He doesn't see the giant of a defensive end coming his way as he throws a beautiful spiral down the field.

“Brady!” His name is ripped from my lungs.

The defensive end barrels down on him.

Brady's head snaps back from the momentum of the hit as he crumbles to the ground under the weight of the giant.

“Brady!” Chloe and I are both screaming.

Cooper catches the ball and runs it in for a touchdown, not having seen what just happened.

The defensive end has stood up, but Brady hasn't moved.

There is an official standing by his prone body.

The whistle is blowing, and coaches are running onto the field.

My view of him is quickly blocked when the rest of the players realize something is happening with their quarterback.

Their captain.

They all run down the field, forming a circle around Brady.

Looking over to where Darby is standing, it appears he is looking directly at me. He takes his helmet off and I swear he is smiling.

After a few excruciatingly long minutes, the ambulance pulls up to the fence. The medics place a stabilizing brace around his neck and strap Brady to a wooden backboard before they place him on the gurney.

Chloe and I are standing there in shock just as someone grabs my shoulder. I whirl on them with a scream on my lips when I see Annabelle and Tommy. Tommy looks as shaken as I feel. I had completely forgotten they were even coming to today's game.

“Come on,” Annabelle says. “Do you know which hospital they are taking him to?”

Shaking my head no, I sprint toward the ambulance. They are already closing the doors, but Coach Maxwell sees me coming. “Sinclair, take a breath. They are taking him to Kroydon Hills hospital. There is no reason to think this is anything more than a concussion, but they've got to check him out. I will be there as soon as the game ends. My assistant, McNamara, is going to follow the ambulance there. You let him know if Chloe needs anything. Are their parents in town this weekend?”

“No, coach. They're in London.”

“Okay. Make sure you calm down before you drive, young lady. Brady Ryan is made of strong stuff. He’s going to be fine. I’ll see you in a few hours.” Turning around, he runs back to the team.

Chloe, Annabelle, and Tommy catch up to me, and I fill them in. Annabelle offers to drive us to the hospital since neither of us is okay to drive.

Once we get into the cold, sterile waiting room, I am even more grateful for Annabelle and Coach McNamara. They take control, talking to a nurse and relaying what little information they can get to Chloe and me.

I can’t sit still. The hard, plastic chairs make getting comfortable impossible. The yellowing ceiling tiles are chipping, and the wallpaper is dated. I think I’ve counted the lightbulbs dotting the ceiling ten times already, just trying to calm myself down.

The voices around me are a dull reminder that there are other people in this room, but I can’t bring myself to care right now. Chloe calls her parents and leaves them message after message. She’s called the hotel they are staying at, her father’s assistant, anyone she can think of. She checking her phone constantly, hoping to hear back from them.

I’m alternating between pacing and sitting here, completely useless as Tommy relays all of the football statistics he knows about quarterbacks getting hurt.

According to him and his stats, Brady is going to be okay.

Now, if only those stats could tell my heart that.

“Natalie?” Tommy’s small voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Yeah, bud?”

Tommy doesn’t answer me. Instead, he places his small hand in mine and squeezes, making me want to cry for the millionth time today. Tommy has never initiated any kind of physical touch with me in the months that I’ve known him. He lets us all touch him, but he never reaches out to us. Squeezing his hand, I lean my head down against his and breathe.

When a nurse comes over to tell Chloe that they are taking Brady for an MRI, I text Cooper and let him know what’s happening. I want him to have an update as soon as they get off of the field.

An hour later, when I check my phone to see if Coop responded, I get my final text of the day.



## NATALIE

**U**nknown: I've shown you that I can hurt the people you love. Imagine what I can do to you. Have fun trying to figure out what's next.

Before I'm even able to process that text, the waiting room doors slide open, and the quiet stillness that Chloe and I have been sitting in for the last two hours disappears. Coach Maxwell has just walked in, followed by what looks like the entire football team. Cooper, Bash, and Murphy immediately surround the two of us, making it impossible for me to see who else is in the waiting room. A million questions fly our way, but we have no answers. Coach walks over, asking if we've heard anything, then goes to the desk to get us information.

I feel like I am going to be sick.

I cannot be around my brother right now.

I cannot handle this text right now.

Does the text mean it's Darby who has the pictures? Did he hurt Brady because I didn't answer him earlier today?

"Can you guys excuse me for a minute?"

As I walk away, I hear Chloe telling Cooper to back off and give me a little space. Walking out the same doors everyone else just entered through, I navigate around to the side of the building.

Sliding my ass down the wall, I rest my head on my knees and have the freak out that has been coming since I got the first text today. My hysteria has taken over, and I don't hear the footsteps approaching until a body is squatting down in front of me.



“Nat.” Cooper reaches out gently and touches my shoulder until I look up at him. He scooches over and sits down next to me, pulling me to him. “He’s going to be okay. This happens. He probably has a concussion. It’s not his first and probably won’t be his last.”

Lifting my head, I see Murphy and Bash have joined us too. Oh, God.

“Cooper.” I take a deep breath. “I don’t think what happened was an accident.”

Much to my surprise, he doesn’t look shocked.

Bash clears his throat. “I saw it happen from the sidelines, Nat. I think you’re right.”

“Guys, there is so much more going on here than Brady getting sacked. I swear Darby did this. He did it on purpose. I watched him. I watched it happen.”

Cooper tightens his hold on me. “We’ve already told Coach what Bash saw. Nat, I’m so sorry, but we had to tell him what happened this summer, too. Darby has been gunning for us, and we needed to give him the full picture.”

“Cooper.” I can’t stop the sobbing that happens now. “It’s worse than that.”

“What do you mean?”

Looking around at the guys, I make the gut wrenching decision to tell them everything. “I got a text before the game today. You guys were already in the locker room with your phones off. It was a threat, and there were pictures attached of Brady and me... naked. They were from a few weeks ago at his house. Someone must have been watching us, and they took pictures.”

Cooper stands up and starts to walk away. Then turns around and roars, “What the fuck, Natalie? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Murphy steps in front of him, blocking his path, as I scream back, “Because it happened today! Right before the game. What was I supposed to do? Walk into the locker room and announce it to the team?”

Coop pushes Murphy away and lowers his voice. “I’m sorry. What happened next?”

Standing up, I pull the phone out of my pocket and open the text. I read it to them.

“I’m gonna kill him.”

Cooper starts to storm off, but Murphy grabs him as Bash comes over to me and pulls me into his side. One step above a whisper, Bash makes his offer. “How do you want to handle this, Natalie? I can call my dad for help.”

Cooper marches back over. “No. Sorry man, but no. Natalie, you didn’t want to call Dad this summer when shit went down, and I went along with it, but you have to call him now.” He grabs my hands and bends slightly, so he’s at my eye level. “Let Dad handle this. He has fixers on his payroll who can squash this mother fucker like the bug he is. Bash, man, I love you, but I don’t want to owe your dad anything.”

Coop wipes the tears from my cheeks and pulls out his phone. “I’m calling Dad.”

I rip it out of his hands and scream, “Cooper Sinclair, you do not get to make this decision for me!”

“What do you want to do then, Nat? Make a deal with the devil to handle this? Ask Bash. Ask him what his dad will do to this guy when he finds him. Better yet, ask him what you’ll owe his dad if he takes care of this for you.”

Coop steps closer to me. Rage filling his eyes. He looks from me to Bash. Then yells, “ASK HIM!”

I put Coop’s phone in my pocket, then storm off. I need to get as far away from him as I can. I feel like I can’t breathe right now, and Coop bulldozing me into what he thinks is right is not helping.

I walk back into the hospital waiting room and am momentarily shocked by what I see. We’ve taken over the space. There are football players scattered throughout the room, everyone sitting stoically waiting for word on their captain. Tommy is laying down with his head in Annabelle’s lap. Chloe is walking toward me, with her phone up to her ear. She mouths to me that it’s her mom on the phone, and I take what feels like the first deep breath I’ve taken in hours.

Coach Maxwell is leaning against the wall. His arms crossed over his chest. He’s surveying the room as I walk over to him. “Coach, have they said anything yet?”

“They sure did, young lady. Brady has a concussion like we expected. They are thinking a few cracked ribs, but that hasn’t been confirmed yet. He woke up for a few minutes, but once the pain killers kicked in, he passed back out.”

Tears fill my eyes. “I missed him waking up?”

Coach awkwardly places his arm around my shoulder. “We aren’t allowed to see him yet, Natalie. You didn’t miss anything. He’s going to be fine.”

I wipe my face with the back of my hand and step back. “Thanks, Coach.”

As I turn around, I see my brother and the guys walking back in, so I turn down the hall instead of sitting in the chairs. I wonder for a few minutes until I find an empty chapel. Slipping inside the doors, I take a seat in the back corner and pull out Cooper’s phone. I flip it over in my hand a few times as I mentally replay my conversation with my brother.

I know he’s right. I can’t handle this on my own. I have to call my dad. But did he have to scream at me? I didn’t do anything wrong, but he made me feel like this was my fault.

And what was that stuff about Bash’s dad? I’ve heard the gossip around school. I know Bash has issues with his family. But I thought that was just gossip.

*A deal with the devil?*

“Nattie.”

I jump out of my skin. “Holy shit, Bash. I didn’t hear you come in. You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Coop’s looking for you.”

“Yea, well, Coop needs to chill the fuck out and not make things worse.”

“He’s trying to protect you, Nat, and he’s not wrong.”

Turning to look at Bash, I wonder how he does it. How is he this kind, smart man if he was raised in a family of criminals?

“I know he’s right. I just needed to get away from him for a few minutes. He can be a bit much when he goes into over-protection mode.”

“We all think of you and Chloe as our little sisters. Of course we want to protect you. It’s what big brothers do. My big brother still thinks he needs to protect me.” Bash’s hand grabs mine. “Coop’s right this time though. You’ve got to call your dad.”

“I know.” I hear a noise beyond the doors and turn to look. I don’t see anyone, but I know they’re there. “Are Coop and Murphy in the hall?”

Bash nods his head.

“Alright.” I take a deep breath, then stand. “I guess I need to call my Dad.”



## NATALIE

Walking out into the hall, I hand my brother his phone. “I don’t want to do this in here. Let’s go back outside. I really do not need the entire football team as an audience.”

I feel the three guys presence behind me as I slip out the side door next to the chapel. I see Cooper’s Jeep in the parking lot and don’t stop walking until I’m standing in front of the curb next to it. I hear the guys talking, but the world feels like it is starting to spin, so I sit on the curb

in the dirty parking lot, taking in where we are for the first time. The sun is setting in the orange, fall sky. I see two paramedics wheeling someone in through the double doors on the other end of the parking lot and a mother carrying a crying toddler on her hip behind them, the noise from the waiting room breaking through the silence as they enter. The smells of oil and exhaust fumes invade my nose.

Then I hear my brother. “She’s right here.” He hands me the phone. “Dad needs to talk to you.”

I grab Cooper’s hand with my free hand as I hold the phone up to my ear. “Daddy?” The sobs start immediately. “I’m so sorry, Daddy.”

I fill my father in on everything that happened, horrified that I have to tell him any of this, but Coop’s right. My dad can get this handled, and I can’t.

Once I’ve gotten it all out, I wait for my father to holler, or utter a curse. For him to lecture me about safety and responsibility, but it never comes. When he finally speaks, his voice is calm and even. His only worry is for me. “Natalie. I need you to take a deep breath for me. Breathe, Honey. I’ve

got this. We can take care of this. I have an entire staff that does nothing but fix issues for my players. I just never thought I'd have to use them for my family. I need you to listen to me. I want you to let Cooper take you home. I want you to lock the door and not let anyone in or answer your phone unless it's me. I need to get my guy on the phone to get this handled, so I have to hang up with you now, but I will call you back."

"I love you Dad, but I'm not leaving the hospital until Brady is awake."

My father's worried tone changes. "Put your brother on the phone."

I hand the phone to Cooper, who looks confused. Looking around, I realize for the first time that Murphy and Bash are with us, but they've backed away. It's enough to give us privacy, but still close enough to be here if we need them. I'm pulled back to my brother's conversation when he puts the phone on speaker.

My father's voice crackles over the line. "Am I on speaker?"

Coop answers him. "Yeah, Dad. You're on speaker. Nat's next to me."

"Natalie Grace, if you insist on staying at that hospital, your brother is to never leave your side. If either of you sees this kid, you walk away. You do not, under any circumstances, engage him in any conversation.

"Cooper. Do not leave your sister's side. Understand me, son? I do not want either of you alone for even a minute. If you take this on, Cooper, it's your future on the line. Let me handle this. I am going to own this little son of a bitch when this is done. I have to go now and talk to the fixer. Do not talk about this to anyone. Understand me?"

I nod, and Coop answers, "We understand you, Dad."

"Get back inside now and see how Brady is doing. Keep your phones on you, and I will call back when I know something. I love you." The phone goes dead, and I raise my eyes to Coop, shaking my head.

"He's got fixers?"

Cooper pulls me into his chest. "Dad will fix it."

I jump when I hear footsteps pounding against the pavement, and spin around. Chloe is running over. "He's awake. He's totally out of it, but he's asking for you."





## BRADY

*A*s I start to wake up, I notice a few things. My head feels like it's been hit by a sledgehammer. Every noise inside my room is making it worse. What the fuck is that beeping? My arm is asleep, but Nattie's hair is tickling my face.

This doesn't feel like my mattress, and it fucking hurts to breathe.

Slowly forcing my eyes open, it takes a minute for everything to come into focus. The room is dark, except for the lights of the machines I appear to be hooked up to. I think I am in the hospital, and vaguely remember talking to a doctor earlier today. I try to turn my head, but the motion makes my stomach flip.

Groaning, I try to take stock of the room without moving my head, but I'm having difficulty getting everything into focus. There is movement in the corner chair by the door. I think it may be a person. Attempting to sit up, I see the blob from the corner of the room stand up and come toward me.

"Brady, man, don't move too fast. You've got a concussion and two cracked ribs."

"Cooper?" My voice comes out scratchy and cracked but not as quiet as I'd hoped.

Nat shoots up to a sitting position.

Moving herself so that she's barely touching me, she whispers, "Brady, you're awake."

I look from Nattie to Coop. "Guys, how long have I been here? Did we win?"

Cooper leans on the foot of the bed. “We won, man. It’s about midnight right now.”

Nat fusses with my blanket. “I did tell you all of that earlier, but your memory is still foggy. The doctor said it might be like that for a day or two.”

She reaches for something on my bedside table. It’s Tommy’s stuffed dinosaur. “Tommy left this for you. He said it helps him sleep.”

“Annabelle and Tommy left around dinner time. The nurses wouldn’t let all of us stay, so I begged Chloe to let me stay. She went home with Bash and Murphy a few hours ago. She wasn’t thrilled, but when I told her it would be easier for me to sleep in bed with you than her, she agreed.”

I look over at Cooper. “How’d you pull the lucky card to get to stick around, man?”

Nat tenses up again and looks to Cooper, eyes filled with worry. There is a long pause, and no one is speaking.

“Does somebody want to fill me in on what’s going on? I feel like you two are having a conversation without any words. Is this a twin thing? Was I out for days or something? What aren’t you guys telling me?”

Nattie grabs my hand. “Brady, why don’t we just leave it until tomorrow when you’re feeling better?”

Now I’m concerned. “Natalie, you need to tell me what’s going on.”

Coop moves next to Nat. “Listen, man, nothing is going on now. Shit’s been handled, but your hit today wasn’t an accident. Darby didn’t block for you. He stepped out of the way.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I wish I were, brother.” He looks at his sister. “You want to tell him the rest?”

I feel Natalie get off of the bed.

“Nattie, what’s going on?”

“I got a text before the game. I wasn’t sure it was Darby texting me. It was bad, and I figured it had to be either him or Aria.” She won’t meet my eyes. Keeps fiddling with the blanket, plucking at it.

“They were working together,” Coop said.

Nat sits down in the reclining chair next to the bed and pulls her knees up. “That’s what I figured. Is it over?” She’s asking Cooper this, not me.

“It is. Dad texted me an hour ago.”

“Guys, my brain already feels like fucking Swiss cheese. I’m going to need you to slow down and quietly tell me what the fuck you’re talking about? Why did your dad text? What does he have to do with this?”

A look passes between Natalie and Cooper before Coop walks over and squeezes Nat’s shoulder.

She nods.

Coop gives me the look he saves for really bad news. “Nat got a text right before the game. It was a threat, and there were pictures attached. Pictures of you two in your back yard. Graphic pics, man. Then you were hit at the game, and the unknown texter messaged again when she got to the hospital.”

I look over to my girl, and tears are cascading down her face, but I don’t get to say anything before Cooper continues.

“By then, Bash had already told us he suspected Darby had let you get hit on purpose, and we had already talked to Coach Maxwell. When Nat filled in the rest of the details, we called our dad. He got the team’s fixers and his lawyers on it. An emergency gag order has already been signed, and an arrest warrant was issued for Darby and he’s already been picked up.

“Dad’s game tomorrow is at one. He said he’d hop a flight home after and come right to your parent’s house to go over everything with them.” Coop looks over at Nat. “He told me to let you sleep and to tell you to call him in the morning.”

Trying to take it all in, I’m sitting here stunned. “Holy shit. I don’t know what to say. Nattie, come here, baby.” She moves over to me and sits back down on the hospital bed. “I am so sorry that you had to deal with this alone. I am so sorry that I wasn’t there to help you. I can’t fucking believe that piece of shit.”

Nat curls up next to me and puts her head on my shoulder.

“Listen, I’m going home. They’ve got Darby in custody; you guys are safe. Chloe texted that your parents should be home tomorrow afternoon. They had trouble getting a flight out.”

“Coop, man. I owe you.”

Coop walks over to the door before turning back to us. “We’ll talk about it later, once you’re out of here. The hot little nurse said they should be releasing you later this morning. Try to get some sleep. I’ll check on you in a few hours.” He shoves his hands in his jean pockets then looks at Natalie. “You did the right thing, Nat.”

Wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, Nat forces a smile, “I love you, Coop. Thank you for everything tonight.”

“We’re family. Family fights for each other. Call me if you need me.” Coop quietly shuts the door behind him as I lie there, replaying everything he just said.



## BRADY

Natalie promised me that she would answer any questions I had later, after getting out of the hospital. She's curled up against me, sleeping now, but I haven't been able to close my eyes since I first found Cooper in the room. I'm not sure whose bat shit crazy life I've been living lately, but it certainly doesn't feel like my own.

There have been such incredible highs, but they have been countered by crazy fucking drama like I have never experienced before. If I can finish my senior year without anymore more excitement, I'll praise whatever God I have to.

A nurse comes in just before 5:00 a.m. to check my vitals. She glares at Natalie in bed with me. "Mr. Ryan, we may have allowed your girlfriend to spend the night, but you need your space. She should not be in that bed with you."

Trying to flash her my most charming smile, I read her name tag and answer, "Nurse Macy, my girlfriend is the size of a large child. Having her next to me is helping me more than it's hurting, I promise. Do you know what time I'm getting discharged?"

"Probably around eleven, Mr. Ryan. And she may be the size of a large child, but she has the determination of a four-star general. She didn't care what anyone said. She was not leaving your side yesterday. You've got yourself a keeper there. How's your pain level?" Nurse Macy points at a picture on the wall beside me, demonstrating smiley faces that show pain on a 1-10 scale.

"I'm at a six. I could use something for this headache."

“Okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Try to get her out of your bed, please. I should be in again after breakfast to go over your discharge papers.”

I mumble thanks as she closes the door.

Closing my eyes, I try to catch a little more sleep, but hear Nat speak. “She’s not kidding. I had to play hardball to get Nurse Ratchet out there to let me stay. I did bribe them with Kings tickets in the end. There was not a snowball’s chance in hell that they were getting rid of me.” She leans up and kisses my cheek. We hear what sounds like the nurse walking back down the hall, and Nat lays her head back down and pretends to sleep.

Nurse Macy gives me two pills and helps me sip some ginger ale through a straw. “Get some sleep, Mr. Ryan.” Luckily for me, she shuts the door behind her.

“Who knew my girl is a sneaky little thing.” Kissing Nat on the top of her head, I whisper, “Thank you for fighting to stay with me, sweetheart. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I love you, Brady. When you were hurt yesterday, I lost my mind. I only just found you. You aren’t allowed to go anywhere. Not without me. Got it, QB?”

“I’ve got you, Sweetheart. I wish you didn’t have to go through all of the craziness yesterday, but if you did, I wish I was there to shoulder some of it. I’m glad that Cooper was able to help, but it should have been me. I love you, Natalie Sinclair.”

She kisses me again. “I love you too, Brady Ryan. I’m pretty sure the best thing that ever happened to me was moving to Kroydon Hills, because it led me to you.”

One day, I’m going to marry this girl and give her my name.



A few hours later, Chloe and the guys shove their way through my door to take me and Natalie home. My parents had to charter a private jet to get home from London. They should be back sometime this afternoon, so until then, I’m surrounded by the family I’ve made for myself.

When we get to my house, Natalie brings me upstairs and forces me to get back into bed while everyone else turns on the Kings game. I'm under strict instructions for no electronic devices, including the TV or iPad, for forty-eight hours.

"Come on, Brady. You are supposed to be relaxing and staying stress-free for the next two days." She pulls down my blanket and glares at me when I don't move. "Come one. Do you want me to get pajama pants for you?"

Stripping out of the sweats and t-shirt the guys brought for me to wear home, I climb into bed in my boxer briefs and pat the spot next to me. "You've got to be exhausted too, Nat. Come over here and lie with me."

"Brady Ryan, the first time I meet your mother, it will not be while I am in bed with her concussed, broken-ribbed son."

"If I put on pajama pants, will you lie down with me?"

"Put on pajama pants and a shirt, and I will lie on top of the blanket with you underneath it." Flashing me that smile that I love, she hands me a pair of flannel pajama pants and my t-shirt, then sits on the bed. "I love you, Brady. I need your parents not to hate me, in case one day they are my in-laws. Now stop screwing around and get in bed."

Pulling my girl into my arms, we hear a muffled TOUCHDOWN being yelled from two floors below. Kissing her head, I whisper, "Love you, Nattie."

The End



## **EPILOGUE**

BRADY

*A*s we sit in the sweltering June heat, in navy blue caps and gowns with golden tassels, retaining every ounce of humidity in the air, you can feel the nervous energy surrounding us all. At this point in the ceremony, the energy is a living, breathing thing. Natalie is holding my hand, running her thumb back and forth over it.

Tiffany is commanding the podium, giving her final speech as class president. I am sure that the families in the stands are listening to what she is saying, but most of us are lost in our thoughts right now.

What comes next?

This is really the last time that I will ever be on this field.

This year has been both the best year and craziest year of my life.

A myriad of thoughts are going through my head. My life doesn't change today. For most of my friends and I, life is changing in two weeks. July first, we are moving into a four-bedroom house just off of the campus of Kroydon University. A house my parents bought as an investment opportunity. According to my father, he would rather spend his money on an appreciating asset than throw it out the window on room and board. Works for me. I won't have to deal with the dorms, and my friends were quick to grab up the other bedrooms.

It had to be four bedrooms because Natalie's father refused to have it any other way. It didn't matter that she will be in my room or I will be in hers every night—he insisted that she have her own room. If that was what it took for us all to live together, the guys and I didn't care. We have more than enough space.

One of the best things about going to Kroydon Hills Prep is that it is a feeder school for Kroydon University, a Division One University. Bash and I signed our letters of intent junior year. Murphy got his offer halfway through this past football season, and Nat had been initially waitlisted.

Lucky for us, she got accepted in the spring, and we will be going together. Cooper enlisted in the Navy and ships out for boot camp in Illinois in September. He's going to spend his summer training with a retired SEAL to get his test scores where they need to be.

Nat, Declan, and their dad were pretty fucking upset about that when he told them last fall. College recruiters from all over the country were scouting Coop, including Annapolis, but he said his heart just wasn't in it. Cooper wants to be a Navy SEAL. He's told us he doesn't want to live his life in the public eye. He doesn't want to be his father. This is what he wants. Because he chose to go the SEAL route, he had to sign up for an eight-year commitment. The Navy will own his ass until he is at least twenty-six.

Natalie is excited for him and always supportive, but when it's just us, she cries. She's scared of Cooper getting hurt, scared of being so far apart for such long periods. She was really hoping he'd change his mind, but once Coop decided, there was no turning back.

Cooper and Nat's brother Declan went as the number four draft pick last spring to none other than our own Philadelphia Kings. Nat told me that he has some reservations about playing for his dad, but Philly needed a quarterback, and his dad needs this team to have a winning season.

There is a ton of speculation in the sports world on whether he should have been drafted so high or if this is nepotism at its best. He has a lot to prove.

Natalie is excited to have him around. He seems pretty cool. He graduated Notre Dame last month and is staying with their dad until he finds a place. We keep telling him that there is a finished basement in our house, and it's all his if he wants it, but really, his signing bonus was big enough for him to buy the entire street if he wanted to. He's going to look at condos this weekend.

During graduation practice yesterday, we were all given strict instructions that we had to sit in alphabetical order, but not a single person in our graduating class of over one hundred seniors bothered to listen. My friends are all sitting in a line: Cooper, Nattie, me, Bash, and Murphy.

Nattie is whispering something to Cooper that I can't hear. Murphy is hitting on the cheerleader to his right, and Bash is taking it all in.

Not everyone that started the year with us is sitting here today. Darby and Aria were arrested. A gag order was placed and it was never discussed, but everyone knows their families made deals. Neither of them did jail time, but neither returned to Kroydon Prep either. It was as if they had never existed.

Nat squeezes my hand, and I realize everyone else has stood up. We join the rest of the class, turn our gold tassels from one side of our caps to the other and throw them in the air. Nat turns around and throws her arms around my neck. Lifting her off of the ground, I squeeze her as tight as I can and kiss her on this field for one last time. "You ready for the rest of our lives, Sweetheart?"

"I'm ready for anything with you, QB."

A graduation cap hits me in the head. "Stop kissing my sister!" is heard one last time.

We all laugh and leave this field and this school behind, on our way to bigger and better things. Together.

**WHAT'S NEXT?**

**Murphy's book, *More Than A Game*, will be releasing in early 2021.**

Want to see what our favorite linebacker is up to?



“Murphy, are you listening to me? I’m pregnant.”

Not a phrase I thought I’d be hearing tonight.

*Yeah, Murphy, harder, or Just like that, Murphy.*

Those are things I expect to hear when I am alone in my bedroom with a hot girl. I don’t get too picky about who the words are coming from. Big tits, nice ass, and I’m sold. Short, tall, blonde, brunette, it all works for me. I’m an equal opportunity kind of guy, and I’m all about ensuring everyone involved has a good time. But, I’m also a no strings attached type of guy.

I’ve got my friends.

I’ve got football.

If I play the next few years right, I’ve got the possibility of a career in the pros after graduation if that’s what I decide I want.

What I don’t have is a girlfriend or a wife, or the ability to take care of myself, let alone a baby. I’m a good cook, but I hate food shopping. I go commando more days than not because I don’t have clean underwear. My roommates are always up my ass about leaving dishes in the sink. I like to live in the here and now and not worry about next week, next month, or next year.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of the alphas in my life, big and small. Without your unconditional love and support, *The Kings of Kroydon Hill* would just be a group of stories in my head. I hope this reminds you that it's never too late to go after what you want.

Kelly, I don't know how many ledges you talked me down from or how many times you listened to me brainstorm a plot twist. You are my person. I'm so grateful for our friendship. I promise Murphy's coming soon.

My Betas, Kelly, Jenn, Terra, Jenn ~ You ladies rock! Thank you for reading *Brady* and *Nattie*. Thank you for never judging my random questions, laughing at my crazy browsing history and for all of your feedback. I don't know that I would have had the courage to publish this book without you.

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And finally, the biggest thank you to all of the readers who took a chance on an unknown author. I hope you enjoyed reading Brady and Natalie's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Matthews is a Jersey girl at heart. She is married to her very own Alpha Male and raising three little ones. You can typically find her running from one sporting event to another. When she is home, she is usually hiding in her home office with the only other female in her house, her rescue dog Tinker Bell by her side. She likes to write swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, smart heroines with a healthy dose of laughter thrown in.

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