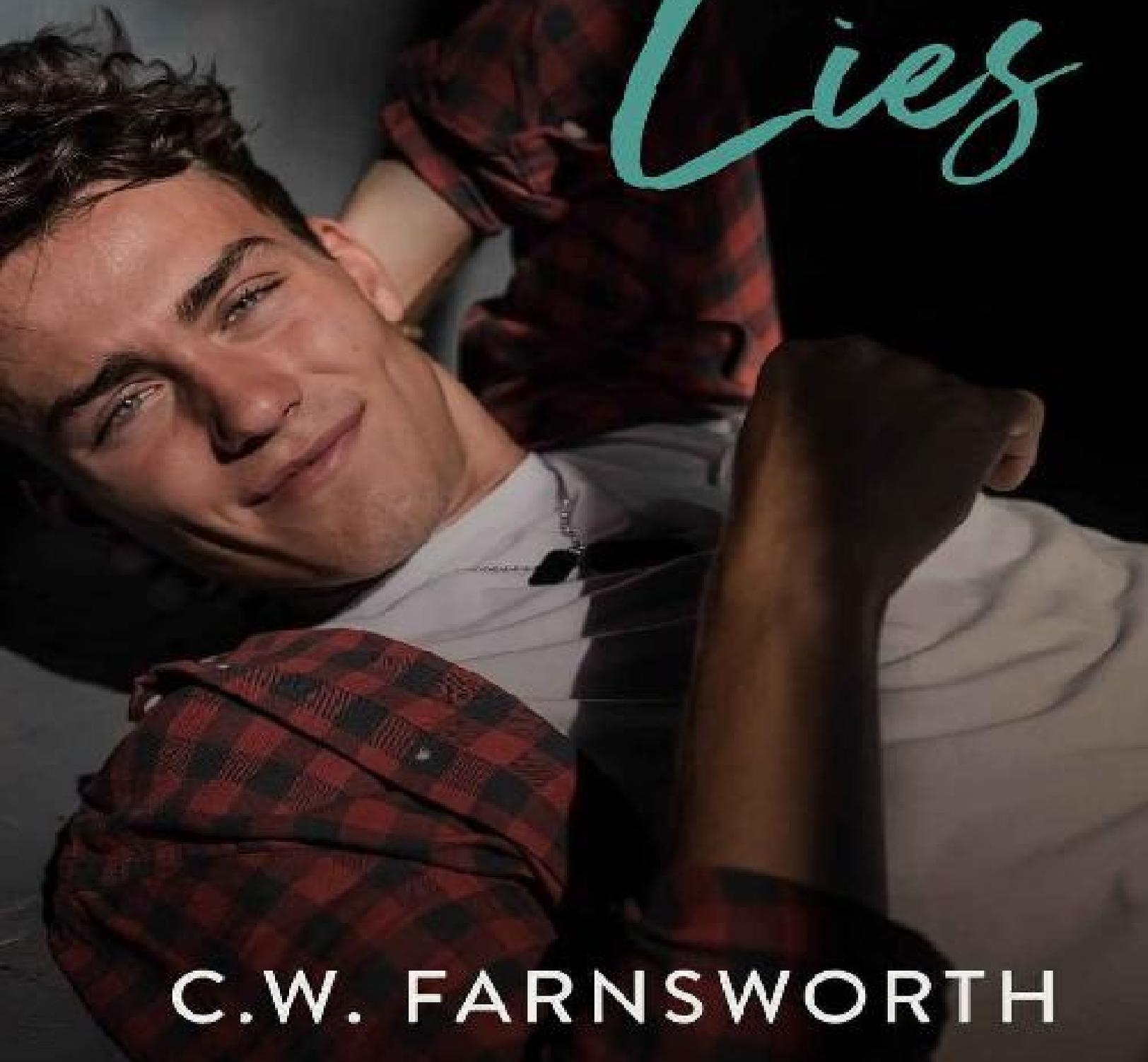


FRIDAY NIGHT

Lies



C.W. FARNSWORTH

FRIDAY
NIGHT
Lies

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FRIDAY NIGHT LIES

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Editing and Proofreading:

Tiffany Persaud, Burden of Proofreading

Alison Maxwell, Red Leaf Proofing

Cover Design:

Kim Wilson, KiWi Cover Design

Cover Photo:

Regina Wamba

ALSO BY C.W. FARNSWORTH

Four Months, Three Words

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Famous Last Words

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Back Where We Began

Like I Never Said

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Fake Empire

Heartbreak for Two

Serve

For Now, Not Forever

For all the hopeful romantics.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

His name starts with a H. So does happiness. Heartbreak. Home. Hoops. All things I associate with him.

Ever since my family moved in across the street when we were both kids, Holden Adams has been *that guy*. My first crush. My former confidante. My best friend's brother. He's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.

I love him.

I hate him.

One of those is a lie.

I'm just...not sure which.

CHAPTER ONE

CASSIA

He smells like cinnamon. Always.

Tonight—or today, technically, since it’s past midnight—the spice is muddled by the strong scent of sweat and beer.

But still, beneath it, cinnamon.

“Cute PJ’s, flower.”

I tighten my fingers around the glass of water I’m holding as they twitch, resisting the urge to tug my plaid sleep shorts down so more of my legs are covered. My shoulders lift and tense as Holden approaches, even though I heard him walking toward the kitchen long before I caught a whiff of distinctive spice. I freeze like prey confronted with a predator, waiting to see what strategy will remove me from the situation emotionally unscathed.

Holden is always unpredictable.

My stiff posture doesn’t scream casual or indifferent, the way I try to act around him. None of my senses can ignore him. And if I’m being honest with myself—which I rarely am on Friday nights—I have never been able to. Over time, I’ve just managed to make more successful attempts at it.

“Rough night?” I ask, ignoring his comment about my plaid pajamas and sipping some water hoping it’ll douse the warmth pooling in my stomach.

He’s just too much. Everything about him.

More than impossible to ignore; it’s overwhelming.

I try to focus on the white cabinets and butcherblock counters instead. On the streak of moonlight beaming in from the window above the farm sink and casting an ethereal glow over the hardwood floor.

But my eyes always end up back on him.

A crooked grin appears, creasing the corner of his cheek. Hinting at the dimple I know is hiding there. “Refs got wasted and took the night off. I don’t look that bad, do I?”

I swallow. “Worse.”

Holden chuckles, a low, raspy sound that twists and snarls my insides. He laughs like he knows it’s a lie. There’s a streak of dried blood on one cheek and his left cheekbone is marred by a reddish streak. But beneath the battering and bruising, he’s still ridiculously good looking. Perfect bone structure and messy brown hair.

I drink more water, just for something to do. Watching as he runs a dish cloth under the tap and rubs the wet cotton across his face. There’s no cut, so the blood wasn’t his, it seems.

I keep staring, long after I should look away. Track the dampened fabric as it trails lower, down the corded column of his neck and across the bunched muscles of his shoulder and farther south.

He’s shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of black mesh basketball shorts and a dirty pair of sneakers.

I swallow—twice. Try not to appreciate the view and fail at every attempt.

“Did you clean in here?” Holden asks, suddenly.

I down more water, trying to focus on the sensation of cold liquid sliding down my esophagus instead of how he’s moved closer in order to toss the towel into the laundry room tucked off one corner of the kitchen. “A little.”

A lot.

The Adamses’ house is usually messier than mine and I’m the oldest of six, so that’s saying something.

Holden pulls his phone out of his pocket and makes a face at the screen. Carelessly, he tosses the device on the counter and strolls toward the fridge, opening it and pulling a bottle of beer out.

I grip the glass that's now empty, feeling the leftover condensation slip against my fingers. "You already smell like a brewery."

He smirks. "Sober as a priest, flower."

"Priests are twice as likely as the average person to develop an alcohol addiction," I inform him.

Holden laughs before popping the top off and taking a long pull of beer. "Good thing I ruled out that career path, then."

"I know. Celibacy isn't your thing."

Holden raises an eyebrow; the only indication my response startled him. Usually, these late-night encounters begin and end with basic pleasantries.

I'm unsure what's loosening my lips tonight. Maybe I'm just sick of the predictability our interactions have become. That's mostly what my life seems to consist of.

Maybe I regret not pushing back at him years ago.

I step forward and take the brown bottle from him. Holden's eyes land and *burn* as he watches me take a drink from the bottle he was just sipping from.

I try not to think about the fact we're sharing spit. Not because I'm a germaphobe—although who knows where his mouth has been—but because it sends a secret thrill through me. The malty taste of hops coat my tongue and fizzes in my stomach.

Something shifts between us as I hold the bottle back out to him.

Something shifts on Holden's face as he takes it from me.

Our fingers brush, a warm contrast to the cold glass. He tilts his head, studying me more closely than he was before. "Asking for forgiveness instead of permission?"

"Neither." I say the word with more confidence than I feel.

His phone buzzes on the counter, and we both glance at it. Notifications cover the screen, most of them from Grace Harper.

I swallow the scoff that wants to release in response. Saying anything will give the impression I care. And even if I *do* care, that's not something I want Holden to know.

We haven't had that sort of friendship in years. The kind where you comment on each other's lives and have any right to do so. The sort where caring about each other's lives is expected, not something to hide.

I move away from him toward the sink. Refill my glass with water from the tap and drain it, trying to wash away the taste of beer since I'm too lazy to brush my teeth again before going back to bed.

I'm not even sure why I stole a sip. I wanted to do something different, I guess, not just say something unexpected.

Rather than spending Friday night in my pajamas, having a sleepover with my best friend, and then cleaning her kitchen, I wanted to be the girl who surprises the most popular guy in school.

I'm not sure it counts, though, considering that guy is Holden Adams. Once upon a time, it felt like he knew me better than I knew myself. I'm not sure if you *can* surprise someone you once knew like that.

Not sure of anything, honestly, when it comes to him. I used to be in love with him. Spent subsequent months hating him. Now remnants of those two extremes are stuck inside of me, swirling around with a mess of other complicated emotions.

Hurt and self-loathing.

Annoyance and appreciation.

Since I started the dishwasher earlier, I handwash the glass and stick it in the drain rack. After drying my hands on a clean dishtowel and looping it over the oven handle, I turn back around. "I'm going to bed."

Holden has blue eyes. Every time I look in them, especially when we're alone, I feel like I'm drowning in their depths. Fathomless and potentially

devastating, just like the sea or the sky.

He picks at the orange label on his bottle of beer as he studies me. “You ever going to tell Sydney you don’t sleep when you’re over here?”

“You ever going to stop getting drunk and playing ball in the middle of the night?”

Holden’s lips quirk. The small movement is not quite a smile or a scowl. Just a response—a reaction. An acknowledgement I spoke, and he listened. From most people, it would be meaningless. From him, it feels *meaningful*. “Good night, flower.”

I brush past him and hurry out of the kitchen as quickly as I can without appearing to run away. Even if that’s exactly what I’m doing.

I hate how, despite never speaking to me most days, he knows my insomnia is worst when I’m sleeping somewhere different than my own bed. It doesn’t seem to matter that it’s a familiar place—Sydney and I have been having sleepovers since our parents decided we were old enough to in third grade. They’ve been a regular occurrence ever since, considering we live just across the street from one another.

The stairs creak as I creep up them, but I’m not worried about waking anyone up. Unlike me, Sydney sleeps soundly no matter what. Holden and Sydney’s father, Joe, is gone for work, like usual. And Holden is downstairs and awake, doing...I have no idea what.

Maybe he’s texting Grace.

Hopefully he’s icing his face.

I’ve never gone to the old high school’s basketball court where Holden and his friends allegedly spend most of their free time, so I have no idea how every pickup game seems to involve some sort of injury. I’ve seen Holden play on the school team in past seasons. He’s fast. Agile.

Those games end unscathed. They also have actual referees, not drunk high schoolers shouting “Foul!” whenever they feel like it.

Sydney is sprawled out on her four-poster bed when I enter her room,

snoring softly. Lily, the Adamses' dog, is curled up on the fluffy rug beneath the window. She raises her head when I enter the room and then lays it back down when she recognizes me. I close Sydney's bedroom door behind me and crawl onto the air mattress, settling on the inflated rectangle with a sigh as I slip under the sheets and pull the blankets up over me.

My ears strain, trying to catch any hint of sound downstairs. All I can hear is the steady thrum of my own heart, whooshing softly as the excitement from our encounter slowly fades.

I hate how much of an effect he has on me.

I hate how I was lingering in the kitchen, hoping he'd come home.

I hate how he only calls me *flower* when we're alone.

And if I'm honest with myself, I know Holden is the main reason I barely sleep in this room. Anticipation of a possible encounter acts as a powerful stimulant, followed by overanalyzing each word we exchange if he does come home. I know those sentences will be the highlight of my week.

But acknowledging that won't do me any good. It makes it harder to act normal around him, to act like it doesn't bother me that things changed between us.

That's why I lie to myself on Friday nights.

CHAPTER TWO

HOLDEN

Finn beelines for my truck as soon as I pull into my usual spot in the lot. He's outside my window before I've even turned the ignition off, knocking on the glass obnoxiously.

It's a beautiful fall day, crisp and clear. I climb out of the cab, listening to leaves as they crunch between my sneakers and the hard asphalt of the high school's parking lot.

"Where were you last night?" he asks as I sling my backpack on one shoulder.

"Sleeping," I tell him. "Did you forget what time Friday's match ended?"

"You slept all weekend?"

"I had some other shit to take care of too."

Finn scoffs, but he doesn't push me to elaborate. He's used to my vague answers, showing up an hour late at parties and forgetting when we made plans. I'm selfish, unmotivated, and I hate restriction.

I like doing what I want, when I feel like doing it. Honestly, it's a minor miracle I play a team sport. Commitment is a constriction that makes my skin itch, which is exactly what my mom used to say. At least I know my selfish tendencies won't result in abandoning two small children, the way hers did.

The only casualty of my choices this weekend is Finn pouting about me missing a fight. "You could've taken this guy down in minutes, Adams!" he

exclaims as we walk across the parking lot.

I roll my eyes and tug the brim of my baseball hat down so it better shades my eyes from the sun. The bruise on my cheek twinges. “It wasn’t supposed to be a regular thing, man. Just some easy cash now and then.”

“Well, Declan needs you there next weekend. He said he’ll sweeten the pot.”

“How much?” I ask, fishing around my backpack for the granola bar I tucked inside before leaving the house this morning.

“Double.”

“For real?”

“Uh-huh.” Finn’s eyes are alight with excitement. “He wants you up against some football player from Ridgemont.”

I make a noncommittal sound as I unwrap the bar and take a large bite of my breakfast. Inside, I’m starting to spiral and second-guess. I knew that the start of the basketball season was going to add complications. Especially since I have no good reason to be involved in Declan’s questionable business enterprises in the first place. It’s pointless and I know it.

But I make a lot of stupid decisions.

“Sup, guys?” Mark appears, munching on an apple.

He and Finn start talking about the football game they watched last night as we all head for the front doors of the high school.

I pull out my phone and scroll through the messages I didn’t have time to read this morning. There are a few new ones from my dad. He’s good about checking in with me and Sydney regularly. Of course, my angel of a sister has already sent him a lengthy response to his texts, telling him all about her wholesome weekend doing homework and hanging out with her best friend.

I type a short response and shove my phone back into the pocket of my fleece as we walk inside Pembroke High School. It always smells the same in here—like cleaning supplies and paint. The high school is new. They finished building it four years ago, right before the start of my freshman year.

Every surface gleams, the tiled floors and the lockers that line the walls. Our school colors are blue and yellow, so the short strip of plaster above the navy lockers is painted a sunny shade.

The hallway is busy. We're only a few minutes away from first bell. Finn and Mark follow me to my locker. I grab the green notebook I use for English.

I slam the door shut and hear a distinctive laugh. Like a magnet, my gaze snaps to Cassia. She's standing across the hall at her locker. Sydney is right next to her. And Cassia...Cassia is talking to Spencer Barnes, who looks likely to shit himself over having her undivided attention. Over having made her laugh.

The pulse of possessiveness is expected.

Familiar.

Annoying.

I look away before anyone in the hall catches me staring. To them, Cassia and Spencer probably look like an obvious pairing. They're both smart and strait-laced and *nice*. They are the ones teachers like and parents adore.

There's more to Cassia, though. Or there used to be. I don't spend enough time around her anymore to tell for sure. I do everything I can to make sure our interactions are limited, which is harder than it should be.

We go to the same school.

Live on the same street.

She's best friends with my little sister.

And then there's this stupid draw to her that I've never been able to fully shake despite my best attempts. Some compulsion to stare. A burning curiosity about whether she's interested in the guy who's beaming at her right now, even though I shouldn't care. Shouldn't have even noticed how he's looking at her.

"See you at lunch, Adams," Mark says, then splits off from me and Finn.

"Yeah. See you."

Finn gives me a weird look as Mark heads to the left. “You good, dude?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

“You’ve barely said anything this morning. Is your dad back yet?”

“No. He’s not supposed to get back ’til Thursday.”

I’m not holding my breath, though. My dad works as a long-haul truck driver. He’s away from Pembroke more than he’s home. I know he feels guilty about being gone as much as he is. I also know me and Sydney were unplanned, and a burden he was saddled with when our mom split years ago. He racks up a lot of miles trying to make up for that. Or maybe trying to drive away from that.

His lengthy absences take a toll on us as a family. On Sydney, especially. She tries to be perfect, churning out good grades and attending play practices instead of parties so he never has anything to worry about. Her future is a lot more certain than mine.

College is a long shot for me. My grades are average at best. My only chance of going is a basketball scholarship. Even if I do get one, I’m not sure leaving is a possibility. It will be the biggest shock to our family dynamic since my mom left twelve years ago.

“Is your dad going to cause problems next weekend?” Finn asks.

I shake my head. “Nah. He spends most of his time home sleeping.”

And if Finn is right about the amount of money Declan is offering, I won’t take no for an answer. I’ll sneak out if I have to.

If I’m not going to college, I need a back-up plan. And I enjoy fighting. I know it’s reckless—that’s part of the allure. More importantly, I’m good at it. Undefeated good.

Finn follows me into Mrs. Berwick’s classroom for first period. Grace is seated in the second row, talking with her best friend McKenzie Howard.

Both girls give me flirty smiles. I’m not surprised by Grace. But last I knew, McKenzie was hooking up with Jordan, one of my teammates.

I couldn’t care less about keeping up with current *who likes who, who*

hates who drama. But basketball is one of the few things that matters to me. I won't pursue anything that might negatively affect that. I pass both girls and head for the back of the classroom without a word.

Grace glances back at me, her arms crossed, and her eyes narrowed. I assume she's irritated I never responded to the million texts she sent me this past weekend asking where I was and what I was doing. Questions I'm as unwilling to answer as she is to stop asking, apparently.

I slouch in a seat in the very back row and tap a pencil against the desk as the principal drones through the morning announcements. Finn kicks my chair from his spot next to mine as Principal Stevens starts reading off the day's birthdays. "What are we doing for yours?" he asks.

"It's during the senior trip," I reply. "We'll be in New York."

"Exactly. You only turn eighteen once, man. We're going all out." Finn waggles his eyebrows. There's a hell of a lot more to do there than in Pembroke.

I shake my head and smile.

Mrs. Berwick begins taking attendance. "No hats inside, Mr. Adams," she tells me when she reaches my name.

I toss my baseball cap on the desk and run a hand through my short hair. Lacie Williams is sitting on my other side. Her brown eyes widen as she spots the bruise on my cheek. I wink at her. She blushes before looking away to focus on the class discussion about some Shakespeare play.

I slide down lower in my chair and yawn, wishing the day was over already.



The final bell rings. It's a loud, annoying chime. But right now, it sounds like the sweetest sound in the world.

I shove the paper we just got back into my textbook and slide it into my

backpack. Stand and sling one strap over a shoulder before heading toward the door.

“Holden. Wait a minute.”

I sigh and stop, playing with the strap of my backpack as I walk over to Mrs. Golden’s desk. An ironic last name if you ask me. Everything about her is dark. The navy dress. The black hair. The stern expression on her face.

She has the decency to wait until the last student files out of the room, at least.

“A D was generous,” she states. “You were three thousand words short of the word count and didn’t cite a single source.”

The strap digs into my palm as my grip tightens. “I was in a rush. I’ll do better on the next one.”

“You know what the student athlete policy is. You’re close to failing this class, Holden.”

I hold in a gush of air before exhaling. This was the first essay of the semester, meaning it’s currently the bulk of my grade. “I know the policy, yeah.”

“I haven’t seen anything to give me the confidence you’re capable of making improvements on your own. If you want to be eligible to play, you’ll need to work with another student and hand in a new copy of this paper.”

My molars grind. “I don’t need a tutor. I’m not stupid.”

“I don’t think you’re *stupid*, Holden. I think you’re unfocused and unmotivated. The student I have in mind is one of the brightest I’ve ever taught. I have full confidence she’ll be able to help you manage a passing grade.”

I don’t miss the pronoun. I sigh, annoyed Mrs. Golden is insisting, but the girls at this school generally are falling all over me. If it will get Mrs. Golden to pass me and allow me to play, I can handle it. “Fine.”

The classroom door creaks open. I glance over automatically, then do a double take. Cassia gives me a small, tentative smile before shifting her gaze

to Mrs. Golden. “Sorry to interrupt. I can wait in the hall.”

“No need,” Mrs. Golden says. “This is perfect. I was just letting Holden know you’ll be helping him out on the essay.”

My head whips back toward Mrs. Golden so quickly my neck cracks. “What?”

Mrs. Golden isn’t paying attention to me any longer. She’s handing Cassia a folder and pointing out lines on a document. The haze of surprise starts to lift. The papers she’s giving Cassia are the syllabus. The prompt for the paper I just got back. “...let you decide where to start,” she’s saying.

And then we’re being dismissed. Another student shows up—some wide-eyed freshman asking for help on a European history quiz.

Blindly, I follow Cassia into the hallway. It’s half-empty by now. The final bell rang about ten minutes ago. If practices had started up yet, I’d be running late.

Cassia turns to the left. Without thinking, I grab her arm, stalling her in place. She spins around, eyes wide and expression stunned.

I avoid touching her.

I have no good reason to touch her.

The last time I did...it didn’t end well.

“I don’t need help,” I tell her.

“You don’t.” She says it like a statement, not a question.

I take it as an agreement. “So...we’re good here?”

“Sure. We’ll meet in the library after school tomorrow.”

The muscles in my jaw pop and tense. “I don’t need your help.”

“Mrs. Golden obviously disagrees.”

“I didn’t want to write the paper. That doesn’t mean I *can’t*.”

“I don’t care.” Her hazel eyes flash with an edge of defiance Cassia rarely shows. The only times I’ve seen glimpses of it have been with me. It fucks with my head. “She asked me to help you. I said I would. I’m not lying to a teacher. And if you don’t let me help me, you’ll probably keep failing.”

“I’m not failing. I just don’t care about what happened a hundred years ago. When am I ever going to discuss the impacts of the Industrial Revolution?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” She taps her chin with one finger. “Maybe when you’re flunking American history?”

I shake my head, but some tiny part of me wants to smile at her sass. “Touché, Little Miss Perfect.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Cassia says it like she means it, but she’s never once told me not to call her flower. That fucks with my head too.

“Yo! Adams!”

I look away from Cassia, at Finn. He’s standing with his hands cupped around his mouth, calling me from the other end of the hall with a bunch of the guys on the team. And a group of girls. “Let’s go!” he adds when I don’t move.

“Write a new outline for the paper tonight,” Cassia says, drawing my attention back to where it wants to be. “I’ll look at it tomorrow.”

“I have plans tonight.” I do. It’s not a lie, but I mostly say it to be a dick. To test her on how seriously she’s planning to take this.

“Your schedule will be wide open when you get benched.”

I narrow my eyes at Cassia, then startle when I feel a hand wrap around my forearm.

The apple scent of Grace’s shampoo hits me first, cloying the air with artificial sweetness. “Come on, Holden. Everyone’s waiting for you.”

I shrug away from her touch. I’ve made it very clear to Grace I have no interest in a relationship. That there are hard limits. Yet she insists on continually testing them. Touching me to mark her territory. Pouting when I won’t kiss her.

When I glance at Cassia, her eyes are on my arm. Focused on the one spot where Grace was just touching me. Her expression is blank, no hint of the

obstinance she just aimed my way.

Because she doesn't care what I think? Because she *does* care? I can't figure her out, can't read her intentions, and it bothers me more than it should.

Grace follows the direction of my attention. "Oh. Hi, Cassia."

"Hi, Grace," Cassia responds, polite as ever.

Her sugary sweet tone makes me want to shatter that poise, which is a good reason to walk away.

I glimpsed more emotion from Cassia in the two-minute conversation Grace just interrupted than in the past few years combined. Instead of ignoring her the way I've done, it makes me want to push her. To peel back more and expose whatever she's hiding.

"Let's go," I say to Grace.

I don't want to continue my conversation with Cassia in front of her. Grace nods. Her expression is bright and eager, happy I'm agreeing to go with her. After flashing Cassia another fake smile, she begins walking down the hall without looking back, obviously expecting me to follow her. I start to, until I encounter an unexpected obstacle.

Cassia grabs my arm, the same way I did to her. The same way Grace did to me a second ago.

Grace's grip was an irritation. Cassia's touch sears my skin like a hot brand, sending a rush of heat flooding through my veins.

I wasn't expecting her to touch me—to stop me. Surprising me further, she rises up on her tiptoes, so she's closer to my six feet two height. So I can read the determination in her hazel eyes.

"I'm not lying for you," she states. "You'd better show up."

"You've lied for me before," I remind her. When we were kids—when we were close—it was a regular occurrence.

Cassia's face hardens into an impenetrable mask. That affected her more than anything else I've said, it seems. "I also learned my lesson."

She drops my arm and walks away, leaving me standing here. I head for my friends, ignoring the curious stares most of them aim my way.

Once I reach the group, we head for the double doors that lead out into the parking lot.

“What?” I ask Finn as he falls into step beside me.

He nods down the hall behind us, in the direction Cassia left, a smirk pulling up one corner of his mouth. “What was that about?”

“Nothing.”

“You finally tapping that?”

“None of your fucking business.”

Finn’s smirk grows as the rest of the group strains to hear what we’re saying. “You’re never possessive over girls.”

This. This is one of many reasons I stay away from Cassia Nolan whenever possible. Because I can’t think straight around her, and it results in predictable consequences, like me getting protective and defensive. Which, like Finn’s made it his business to point out, is not my normal behavior.

I say nothing, hoping he’ll drop it.

He doesn’t.

“She’s single, right? Maybe I’ll—”

I act, then speak. The force of my shove sends Finn shoulder first into the lockers. Everyone else looks at us, but no one asks. They’re used to me and Finn fooling around.

“Don’t,” I snarl.

And Finn, for once in his life, makes a wise decision and shuts up.

CHAPTER THREE

CASSIA

The soft patter of rain is the first sound I register, immediately followed by the sound of Sally's screaming. My youngest sibling at age four, is also the loudest. Thumps sound on the other side of the wall my bed is pushed against, indicating the twins are up. A door slams down the hall.

I glance at the alarm clock. It's set to go off in five minutes anyway.

I toss the covers off. Rub a palm over my face and run a few fingers through my tangled curls before standing and walking over to the window to pull open the curtains.

Droplets of water splash against the panes of glass, blurring my view of the front yard and the gray sky. But I can still make out the sole figure standing in the driveway across the street. He shoots the ball over and over again, making every shot.

The sharp ring of my alarm startles me. I abandon my spot at the window and rush to the bedside table to shut it off. Before heading to the bathroom, I pull on my usual uniform of jeans and a hoodie. I turn the handle, and... locked.

"Maggie!" I shout, banging on the wood. My oldest sister doesn't answer. I call her name again.

"Five minutes, Cassia. Jeesh!"

I continue down the hall into my parents' room. My mom is getting Sally

dressed. My dad is gone, probably already at the office. Most of the time, I wake up well before my alarm and make it to the kitchen before he leaves. Miraculously, I almost made it to my alarm going off this morning.

“Maggie is in the bathroom,” I say by way of explanation as I duck into the en suite. I catch my mom’s sigh just before I shut the door behind me.

I run through my short morning routine and walk back into the bedroom. My mom and Sally are both gone. Likely downstairs, working on breakfast.

Predictably, the bathroom door is still shut when I pass it. “I’ll leave without you, Maggie,” I threaten before heading downstairs.

It’s chaos, like always. Sally is crying again. My mom is making coffee. The twins are fighting over a baseball mitt. Regan is coloring at the kitchen table. On the kitchen table, partially.

“Can you get the twins some cereal, please?” my mom asks, handing Sally a banana that temporarily stops the screaming.

I nod, filling two bowls with Cheerios and milk and setting them on the table. “Charlie! Chris! Come on, breakfast!”

The twins abandon their argument and come eat breakfast. I grab a bowl for Regan as well, confiscating the markers and paper before wiping off the table with a paper towel. My mom gives me a grateful smile as she hands me a toasted bagel and a thermos of coffee. I’m addicted to caffeine, same as her. Most days, I limit myself to one cup in the morning. I have enough trouble sleeping as it is.

“Tell Maggie I’ll be in the car, okay?”

She nods. “Have a good day, sweetheart.”

I grab my lunch off the counter and shove it into my backpack. Shrug on my raincoat and head out into the drizzle.

The soothing scent of rain fills my lungs as I inhale deeply, dodging the puddles that have formed along the front path. I pop the trunk and toss my backpack inside, allowing myself one glance over my shoulder.

Holden is gone. So is his truck.

I climb into the driver's seat, my wet jacket squeaking against the leather. I turn on the car and some music.

My phone buzzes in the cupholder. A few seconds later, the passenger door opens and Sydney climbs in. Her blonde hair is soaked, small droplets flying everywhere as she drops her backpack in the footwell and looks over at me.

"Maggie running late?"

"Of course. I should leave her here."

"You won't."

"I know." I tap at the steering wheel, impatient.

"Graham Warner texted me last night." The sentence bursts out in a rush, betraying the eagerness that's also splashed across her expression.

"Really?" I ask.

"Uh-huh. Asking about a history assignment."

"He's president of the Honors Club."

"Right? It's an excuse, don't you think?"

"Sounds like one to me." I don't have any other boy advice to offer.

Sydney—everyone—thinks I have no interest in a high school relationship. That I'm focused on nothing besides getting into the best college I can and pursuing my dream of becoming a veterinarian.

I *am* focused on that.

But the real truth behind my perceived disinterest? There's only one guy whose actions I'm interested in analyzing, and they haven't indicated any interest in *me* for years.

That's nothing I can admit to Sydney, though, since the guy in question happens to be her older brother.

"He's more realistic than Harrison," Sydney says.

She's had a crush on Harrison Baker—the star of the football team—ever since she started high school. Right along with most of Pembroke High's female population.

“Reality is good.”

The statement rings with sincerity. Fantasy has broken my heart more times than I’d ever admit.

Maggie streaks out from the house, her yellow raincoat a stark contrast to the gray sky and brown grass. She dives into the backseat and tugs her hood down. “You couldn’t have parked in the garage, Cassia?”

“You couldn’t have taken less than twenty minutes in the bathroom?” I counter. “I had to use Mom and Dad’s.”

“I don’t see the issue. We both got ready on time. Problem solved.”

I glance at the clock on the dash before I back out of the driveway and roll my eyes. On time is a stretch. “I figured you’d be eager to get to school. Don’t you have Ceramics first period today?”

“Yes. Which is exactly why I couldn’t show up to school looking like a troll.”

I roll my eyes again. I wasn’t nearly as dramatic as Maggie when I was fourteen. At least I don’t think I was. But we are alike in other ways. I can be just as stubborn as she is. I also make too many boy-centered decisions.

“You’re dressing up for Ceramics?” Sydney asks. “Isn’t that kind of pointless?”

“She’s dressing up for Ben Howard,” I reply, flicking on a blinker before I turn at the end of our street.

“Who’s Ben Howard?”

“Basketball player,” I mumble. Maggie and I also have similar taste in guys, it seems.

Maggie leans forward from the backseat and holds her phone screen out to show something to Sydney. “That’s him. Isn’t he cute?”

“Super cute,” Sydney agrees.

“Maggie! Seatbelt!”

My younger sister lets out a long-suffering sigh. “You’re no fun, Cassia.”
I know I’m not.

I'm bitter and jaded and set in my ways—at seventeen.

Sydney gives me a sympathetic look as I turn off the main road into the high school's parking lot. Rain is falling faster now, in rapid rivers of water that stream down the windshield quicker than the wipers can keep up with. I flick the control to a higher speed before navigating into an open spot toward the middle of the lot.

Maggie is out of the car before I've even turned it off, a cursory goodbye tossed over one shoulder.

Sydney laughs at her hasty departure. "To be young and in love and eager to make pottery."

I laugh too. But inside I'm wondering what that would be like—being bold enough to chase after who you want. To have the person you want to see be excited to see you back.

I search the parking lot as we hurry inside the school, even though I know I shouldn't. Searching out Holden never ends well. He's either surrounded by girls or talking with friends. Never paying any attention to me.

His truck isn't in the lot, which means he went somewhere else before school. I tell myself not to care, but that tactic has never worked before. I focus on Sydney instead, listening to her describe the conversation she had with Graham last night in more detail. Watch her face beam with excitement and anticipation.

Like me, Sydney veers toward what's expected. Our motivations are similar, which is probably part of why we're such good friends. Her mom left when she was young and her dad works for a shipping company, logging hundreds of miles driving every week. Her father's sister used to come and stay with Sydney and Holden when they were younger, but now they mostly stay home alone. Holden took on the role of the reckless sibling and so I think Sydney feels an obligation to be the responsible one.

My parents have five other kids to worry about, so I adopt a similar mentality. Plus, it's been my dream to become a veterinarian for as long as I

can remember. Doing well in school is necessary to pursue that path.

Spencer is next to my locker when I reach it, fiddling with his own combination a couple doors down.

“Morning, Cassia.”

“Hey, Spencer,” I reply.

“Made it through the deluge okay?” He gets his locker open and then pushes his glasses up his nose.

I laugh. “Yep.”

Spencer is a nice guy, plain and simple. A little awkward, a lot nerdy, but nice. Sydney likes to tease me about his crush on me. How we could study together and discuss animal documentaries, which I love to watch, and Sydney finds boring.

But unfortunately, I’ve never felt the slightest attraction toward Spencer. And I’ve experienced firsthand how crushing false hope can be. I refuse to do that to him, so I’ve always kept our interactions completely platonic.

I finish getting everything I need out of my backpack and shut my locker. Say goodbye to Spencer and to Sydney, who’s heading to her own locker. Since she’s a junior, hers is in a different wing.

Holden walks in the front doors as I’m heading toward the science wing for first period. He’s dripping water everywhere. His hair is soaked, rivulets of water dropping down his face. His stupid navy varsity jacket is soaked as well, the fabric so wet it looks black. Holden is surrounded by his group of friends, all of them clamoring for his attention.

I look away before he catches me staring.

He showed up to school. Whether he shows up this afternoon in the library is another story.

I can’t decide whether I want him to or not.

That’s the problem with Holden. I can lie to myself about my feelings all I want.

But they’re still there.

The library is mostly empty when I walk inside. I hurried here from my last class, eager for reasons I'm choosing not to analyze but start with a H and end with a N.

I take a seat at an empty table, pulling a couple of folders out of my backpack as I settle in the wooden chair. I pop in a pair of earbuds and start working through my Calculus homework. If he shows, I want to look busy, not like I'm waiting for him.

Movement across the table startles me.

Harrison Baker smiles. I fumble as I drop my pencil and pull out my headphones.

"Hey."

"Hey," I repeat.

"How's it going, Cassia?"

I'm mildly shocked that Harrison knows my name. Pembroke High isn't huge. But people tend to stick to their own crowd, and I'm most definitely not part of the popular one he is. I know hardly anything about football, but from what I hear, he's one of the better players on our generally abysmal team.

It takes me a second too long to respond to his question. "Uh, good. You?"

"Pretty good. Football practice got canceled because of the rain, so I figured I should get some work done."

"That's, uh, that's smart." I pick up my pencil and fiddle with it, trying to figure out what is going on. I'm not sure if Harrison and I have ever spoken before. Maybe freshman year? We had Algebra together, I think.

"What are you working on?"

"Calculus." I try to think of something else to add to my answer and come up empty. I feel like I'm being rude by doing nothing to carry the

conversation, when really I'm just too shocked to come up with anything substantive.

"Do you have Mr. Danvers?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Uh-huh. Seventh period."

"Did you guys do that derivatives competition last class?"

Harrison laughs. He has a nice laugh. It's deep and husky. Genuine. "Sure did. It was probably—"

"You're in my seat, Baker."

There's surprise on Harrison's face when he glances up at Holden, who's suddenly standing next to the chair opposite me. I'm sure there's some on mine as well. I really wasn't sure if he would show up. And despite everything I said yesterday, I think he knows I *would* lie for him.

"Your seat, huh?" Harrison replies. "You could just find another table, Adams."

"Cassia's helping me with something."

Harrison glances at me, seemingly for confirmation. I give him a small smile but say nothing to endorse or deny Holden's story.

I'm surprised Holden admitted to that much. Linked us together in some way, when he's tried to separate us as far as possible ever since we started high school.

"All right, I'll leave you guys to it. Good luck with those integrals, Cassia." Harrison smiles, surprising me again.

I manage a "Thanks" before he stands and walks away. Immediately, the seat is filled again.

Unlike Harrison, Holden doesn't bother with any small talk. He rifles through his backpack and pulls out a few crumpled papers, placing them on the table between us.

I study his face, trying to catch one emotion in the shifting kaleidoscope. Holden is hard to read. He always has been, and it's made the few times I've

caught a definitive glimpse seem more meaningful.

We stare at each other.

Holden speaks first. “You into him?”

“He was just being nice.”

That response earns me an eye roll. “Don’t be naïve, Cassia.”

“I’m not. Besides, I wouldn’t do that to—” I cut myself off, remember who I’m talking to.

Sydney and Holden aren’t close. Not in a confrontational or resentful way, but a distant one. They’re just two very different people, despite sharing DNA. When we were younger, it often felt like I was the strongest connection pulling them together. That string was severed a long time ago—by the boy sitting across from me.

“I know Sydney has a thing for him.” Holden leans back in his chair and stretches. His shirt rides up a few inches, revealing the dusting of brown hair below his naval and the distinctive V that makes my mouth go dry every time I see it. Ridiculously ripped isn’t even a quality I’d look for in a guy. It’s that they’re *his* abs.

His arms drop, and so does his shirt.

I quickly avert my eyes back to the papers. “You actually wrote the outline?”

“Yup.” He pops the P, leans forward, and shoves the papers closer to me. The spicy tang of cinnamon fills the air between us.

I skim the first couple of pages. Holden was right; he doesn’t need a tutor. Not that I thought he did. His lackadaisical attitude about school has never been because he’s incapable or daunted by the work. He’s just indifferent.

I jot a few comments in the margins, then shove it back toward him. “Did Mrs. Golden give you a deadline for the rewrite?”

“Nope.” He pops the P again, and I grit my molars in response to the irritating sound.

“How long will it take you?”

“An hour, probably.”

I scoff. “Yeah, right.”

“Start a stopwatch,” he tells me. Then pulls his laptop out of his backpack and opens it.

I drop my gaze back to my Calculus homework, trying to refocus on the derivatives I was working on before. But I keep stealing glances at Holden. At the piece of hair that continuously flops onto his forehead. The focused expression on his face. The way his nose wrinkles and his mouth quirks while he types.

We work in silence. The library is mostly cleared out by the time Holden closes his laptop. I look up as he stands and walks over to the printers. He returns with a neatly stapled stack he drops in front of me. The pages are still warm when I pull them closer.

“Here you go.”

I glance at the clock hanging above the circulation desk. Mrs. Henderson, the librarian, is sitting below it, knitting. “It hasn’t been an hour.”

He shrugs. “I know you’ve got somewhere else to be.”

I blink at him, surprised he knows I volunteer on Tuesdays.

“Your room probably needs to be cleaned. Maybe there’s some homework you already did but could redo just to see if there’s—”

Holden shuts up when I grab his essay off the table and shove it in my backpack, rough enough to make it wrinkle. More so when I push my own work on top of it. I stand and sling my backpack over one shoulder. It lands with a heavy thump against my spine, exacerbating my irritation.

“I’ll get it back to you tomorrow,” I say, then start striding toward the double doors that lead out of the library and into the hallway.

My body weight slams into the bar, shoving the door open with enough force it clangs when it swings back into place. I stomp down the hallway, unable to find it in myself to care.

Steps sound behind me, echoing off the linoleum floor, and I *hate* how

my traitorous heart picks up double time in response.

“No rush.”

I don't look over at the figure easily keeping pace beside me. The hallway is empty besides us. There's no one around to stare or speculate. “There is. The sooner I do, the sooner this little arrangement is over. That's what you want, right?”

“I never said that.”

Holden's voice is measured and calm, a stark contrast to the fact I'm basically speed-walking to shorten our interaction.

“Whatever.”

We walk side by side down the empty, locker-lined hallway, and it's too similar to the fantasies I used to entertain. When we were younger, I'd picture something exactly like this. Me and him in high school. Hanging out, even if we weren't dating.

It's a special sort of painful—experiencing something you wanted but has turned distorted. This isn't how I thought it might happen.

Holden and I aren't dating. We're not even friends anymore. A teacher arranged this; he didn't even ask me for help himself.

“What are you getting out of it?”

He speaks right as we reach the doors that lead out to the student parking lot. A gust of cool air replaces the heat of indoors.

“What?”

“This paper. What are you getting out of it? Extra credit? College recommendation? What's in it for *you*, Cassia? Or are you really that selfless?”

I swallow. “Are you calling me selfless? Or heartless? Maybe I just wanted to help another student out.”

“Another student? Or me?”

Damn him for always knowing which questions to ask. Which questions I don't want to answer. Mrs. Golden told me it was him before I agreed, but

I'm not going to admit to that.

"Finally!"

I look away from Holden at Maggie. She's easy to spot in the parking lot that's close to empty, leaning against the side of my car and wearing a scowl that disappears when she sees who's standing next to me.

"Hey, Holden." Maggie flips her hair in a flirty move I'd look ridiculous doing. My younger sister manages to pull it off effortlessly.

"Hey, little Nolan."

My parents stuck with the flower theme for their first two children, then abandoned the idea when the twins were born. But despite the fact magnolias are also flowers, I've never heard Holden call Maggie *flower*.

It's stupid—how much it matters to me. Yet another thing Holden does that shouldn't affect me, but somehow consumes me.

Maggie preens like he paid her a compliment before turning her gaze to me. "What took forever? I've been waiting out here for like twenty minutes."

"I told you I had something after school this morning," I reply. "I thought you were taking the bus."

"It left early."

"Right," I drawl. "And you *never* run late."

"Whatever. Can we go?"

"I'm volunteering today. You'll have to come with me. I don't have time to go home first."

Maggie rolls her eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. Let's go, unless you want to walk."

"I can drive you," Holden offers. "I'm headed straight home."

Maggie's expression instantly transforms from annoyed to elated. Mine creases with an irritation I refuse to name.

He's doing me and Maggie a favor. I won't have to deal with Maggie asking if we can leave yet every few minutes throughout my whole shift. But I'm not relieved by the offer; I'm bothered. "You don't have to do that."

“It’s no big deal,” Holden replies. “You guys literally live across the street.” He glances at Maggie. “Come on, my truck’s this way.”

“Okay!” Maggie straightens and grabs her backpack off the front of my car. “Bye, Cassia.”

“Bye.” My voice sounds flat, even to my own ears.

“You’re welcome.”

I glance at Holden, who’s still standing next to me. “You think I owe you a thank you?”

“You’re usually pretty polite.”

Anger courses through me. He’s right; I’m usually amenable. It’s just simpler to be easy-going.

The ugliness heating my blood is jealousy. I’m jealous of my little sister because he’s offering her more than he’s offered me in years.

“I don’t need you to do me any favors.” I stalk toward my car, tossing my backpack in the passenger seat before starting the engine.

I pull out of the lot without once looking back in the rearview mirror.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOLDEN

Wind rips through the hoodie I'm wearing, chilling my skin as I cross the quiet street. No one else is out running fool's errands.

I hesitate, glance at the bold B- on the top of the paper Mrs. Golden handed back last period, and then continue up the Nolans' front path for the first time in...years.

I ring the doorbell and wait, listening to the commotion inside. Shouting, banging, followed by what sounds like a war cry.

The red door swings open a minute later, revealing Mrs. Nolan. She looks a lot like Cassia. Same curly brown hair. Same friendly smile.

There's a little kid hugging her legs. The last time I was over here, she was hugely pregnant.

It's a pointed reminder of how long it's been since I last stood on this stoop.

I submitted a new paper and aced it, bringing the average of the two up to a B-. My history grade is passing—no longer in jeopardy. There's no real reason for me to be here.

I doubt Cassia actually cares how I did on the re-do, based on how she handed me her suggestions for improvements for the essay without so much as a smile. But here I am anyway—because otherwise there's no guarantee I'll see her anytime soon. I'm not sure she'll be standing in the kitchen when

I get home tonight.

“Hi, Holden. How are you?”

“I’m good, Mrs. Nolan. Thanks.”

“Haven’t seen you around here in a while.” There’s no accusation in Cassia’s mother’s voice, only curiosity.

“I know. I had a question—a school question—for Cassia. If she’s home?”

Mrs. Nolan nods and opens the door wider. “Come on in.”

The inside of the Nolans’ house hasn’t changed since I was last here. It’s comfy and cozy and overstuffed. Filled with toys and games and stick figure drawings and family photos. Everything my home isn’t.

Cassia’s sister Maggie is lying on the sectional couch that takes up a large chunk of the living room. She sits straight up when I follow Mrs. Nolan into the room. “Holden! Hi!”

I smile, mostly in response to her pink cheeks. “Hey, Maggie.”

“Maggie mentioned you gave her a ride home on Tuesday,” Mrs. Nolan says. “I really appreciate it, Holden.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” I reply, which is exactly what I told Maggie when she thanked me profusely during the drive.

The only person who *hasn’t* thanked me is the one I did it for.

I know volunteering at the local animal shelter is important to Cassia. She’s helped out there since her family moved in across the street from mine when we were both in elementary school. I figured she would be happy not to have her younger sister tag along, especially since Maggie clearly didn’t want to go. Instead, she seemed mad at me about it.

I can’t figure her out. I shouldn’t care. Shouldn’t be here. I’m the one who forced distance between us in the first place. That had consequences I’ll have to live with.

“I’ll go let Cassia know you’re here.” Mrs. Nolan departs with a smile, leaving me and Maggie. And the little girl, who’s now busy knocking down

blocks. The twin boys come scrambling downstairs a minute later, hitting each other with foam swords. They rush by and out into the backyard, screeching the whole way.

No wonder Cassia is an insomniac.

I shove my hands in my pockets and nod toward the television. “What are you watching?”

“It’s called *Twenty-Five to One*,” Maggie replies. “They fight over this one guy—or girl—and all go on group dates and stuff.”

“Sounds like high school.”

Maggie leans forward. Her eager expression makes me apprehensive. “You know Ben Howard, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” My answer sounds uncertain, even though I’m not unsure about knowing him. I’m wondering where this is possibly going. Probably nowhere I’ll want to follow. “He’s a freshman on the team.”

“We have Ceramics together.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. “Okay...”

“I like him.”

Maggie’s frankness makes me smile. Mostly because it’s so different from her older sister, who constantly makes me second guess every word she says. “You’re interested in Howard?”

“Yeah. Well, I’d rather date *you*, but Cassia would hate me.”

I chuckle uncomfortably. She’s not wrong.

Cassia doesn’t think much of me. I’m sure she’d be horrified if I expressed any interest in her younger sister. Plus, Maggie is a freshman. Three and a half years younger than me. In some stages of life, that’s nothing. In high school, it’s a lot.

I’ve also found it hard to focus on anything else when Maggie’s older sister is around since we were kids.

So...there’s that.

“Cassia picks up Regan from dance on Thursdays. We always have to

wait around for a little while. Roxbury Diner is right across the street from En'Lair. I'll tell Cassia I'm hungry, we'll walk over, and you guys will be there." Maggie clasps her hands, eyes pleading. "Come on, Holden. *Please*. It'll be perfect!"

I'm taken aback by how much thought Maggie has put into this plan. Do all girls go to these extremes?

I'm also surprised by the realization I'm actually considering it. I was named captain this year, more as a testament to my role as the team's leading scorer than any proclivity toward responsibility on my part. I like winning more than I hate responsibility, I guess.

It would be easy to spin some story for Ben. Tell him it's team bonding or some shit to get to know the new players.

Annoyance replaces surprise, as I realize I'm considering doing exactly what I just judged Maggie for. If I agree to this, it wouldn't be as a nice guy doing her a favor just because I can. Or *actually* getting to know one of the freshman who will likely spend the season riding the bench.

It would be because I want to spend time around Cassia Nolan. And that's a dangerous compulsion I thought I'd successfully squashed. Apparently not.

I think of sitting across from her in the library on Tuesday. Watching her run the tip of her pen across her lower lip and twirl a curl around one finger.

Footsteps sound on the stairs. Maggie stares at me, eyebrows raised and expression imploring. I don't usually think she and Cassia look much alike. But right now, it's all I can see.

Damnit.

"Yeah, fine," I tell Maggie. "Okay."

She beams at me. "3:30."

Mrs. Nolan walks into the living room. "Cassia's in the shower. I'm sure she'll be out soon."

"It's fine." I unzip my backpack and pull out the essay I got back earlier, folding it in half and handing it to Mrs. Nolan. "Can you just give this to

her?”

“I—of course. But are you sure you don’t—”

“No. I need to get going. Thanks, though.”

“All right. Don’t be a stranger, Holden.”

I glance at Mrs. Nolan. There’s something knowing in her expression, some conclusion about why I’m here and why I’ve stayed away. I don’t know if it’s the correct one, and I’m not all that interested in finding out.

I give her a smile and a small nod before turning and leaving the room.



A haze of weed smoke drifts by as I climb out of my truck. The old court usually smells like pot. They leveled the old high school when the new building was finished, but someone decided it wasn’t worth tearing up the rectangle of asphalt and two metal hoops. The tennis courts survived as well.

“He’s here, bitches!” Finn ensures no one misses our arrival, bounding out of the passenger side and toward the group gathered on the periphery of the woods. The *large* group.

What started as a small gathering has grown every week. I see more and more familiar faces as I walk closer, and it fills me with unease.

This was meant to be low-key—a way to blow off some steam and make money in the process. The more people who know, the messier it could get.

Finn reappears at my side, slinging an arm around my shoulder. “Casper is already here.”

“Fine,” I respond, shaking him off.

He reeks of vodka. Just about everyone here appears tipsy.

I’m entirely sober.

I’m stupid enough to fight, but I’m not suicidal.

Casper Wallace is a stereotypical football player. Solid, beefy, and broad. If he pins me down, I’ll be in trouble. And I’m sure those massive fists of his

pack a wallop. But I'm taller and faster than he is. Plus, the way Casper is shifting tells me this is unfamiliar to him. He probably ended up here the same way I did—needling from Declan. An offer of easy money and an ego boost.

Declan swaggers over to me right as I think his name, a broad grin stretching across his freckled face. He's as Irish as his name, down to the red hair. Not to mention the morally gray business ventures. According to him, his grandfather was in the Irish mafia and so it runs in the family. He deals drugs too, which is how I met him in the first place. Finn uses him as his main supplier.

Declan's smile impossibly widens when he sees me, taking over his whole face. He lives for this shit. "Adams! You ready, man?"

I meet his exuberance with monotone. "Yeah. I'm ready."

I am. My body is conditioned to know what takes place here by now. Adrenaline starts to pump through my system as I analyze Casper. Memorizing how he moves and where his weaknesses might be as he stands with a few other guys from Ridgemont.

Restless rage simmers and spreads, heating my blood and combating the chill in the air. I could probably trace the source of it if I really tried. Instead, I embrace the recklessness. It feels like driving down a deserted road with the windows down and the accelerator flat on the floor. Moving too fast to worry about consequences.

I know this is stupid and pointless. I know my dad would be disappointed and Sydney would be worried.

Sometimes making bad decisions feels really good.

Focusing on this cuts through the mess in my head, the worries about the future and the uncertainty about what my life should look like. I'm floating, and it's an anchor to grasp. The only other time I can tune everything out like this is when I'm on a basketball court.

My teachers call me lazy. My friends call me wild. My dad isn't around

to call me anything.

The only thing I want to be called right now is a winner.

I pull the roll of tape out of the pocket of my hoodie and start wrapping my hands. It's a move I learned online watching boxing videos. As an intimidation tactic, more than anything.

I've always had a short temper. But I can control it. Most of the time when I'm pissed, I let it roil inside of me and don't let it out. When I do, it's because I choose to.

There are only a handful of times I've lost control. Most of them were when peers would pick on Sydney when we were younger. The most recent time was when Finn mentioned dating Cassia. I knew he was talking shit the way he often does, and I still lost my cool.

I rip the end of the tape off with my teeth and then shove the roll back in my pocket. Whip my sweatshirt and the t-shirt I was wearing off in one practiced move, smirking at the catcalls from the girls gathered round.

Casper steps up to the makeshift ring, lines drawn in the dirt. He's trying to hide the apprehension on his face, but it's there if you look hard enough.

Declan starts listing off the rules. The only important one is that the first man down loses. So far, it's never been me. That's why Declan is so desperate to keep finding me new opponents. But as I stand here, feeling the cold nip at my bare skin, I know I'm done.

The thrill is gone.

I'm used to this bored feeling. It happens all the time. With girls, with drinking, when I'm at parties. My life feels predictable in the worst way.

Swinging for sport isn't exciting—the way it was the first few times. And if I get seriously injured and can't play this season...I'm not sure I could live with myself, knowing I blew my one shot at a future. My dad makes a decent living, but there's no way he could pay for me and Sydney to go to college without any assistance. Not to mention, I want to play in college. Basketball is the one thing that's always remained fresh—that's never lost its luster no

matter how many years pass or how many times I step onto the court.

Actually, that's a lie. There's one other thing.

I study Casper. He's listening to Declan, his hands swinging at his sides. Large muscles shift in his chest. I should feel apprehensive. I'm feeling nothing.

I've never even met this guy before. A punching bag would summon more emotion. So I do what I always do. I pretend he's someone I can't stand. Sometimes that means I'm swinging at myself. Tonight, I'm picturing Harrison Baker before me. Seeing him smile at Cassia and her smile back. Fury courses through me. My fingers twitch, ready to form fists.

For all of high school, I've never really considered the possibility that she might date someone. I've done my best to tune out Sydney's babble whenever it concerns her best friend, to ignore the gossip, to not know what's happening in Cassia's life.

Maybe there have been lots of guys, and I've just been blissfully oblivious.

Maybe it was just shitty timing I had to watch another guy ogle her during the one encounter I couldn't walk away from.

I was there to meet with her. I couldn't *not* show when she was doing me a favor.

Although, with anyone else, I probably wouldn't have had an issue. I'm cold and selfish.

Sydney is like our dad.

I'm like our mom. I've never pretended otherwise, never bothered to battle the destructive inclinations.

The annoying bell Declan bought goes off. Casper swings. I duck. When I stand again, I picture Harrison leaning across the library table and kissing Cassia. I land an uppercut on Casper's jaw. He rears back, then lands a punch on my ribs that hurts like hell, followed by a smack to my jaw that stings.

I imagine them walking down the hall together. Her wearing his football

jersey.

Casper grunts from the force of the next blow. Blood flows from his mouth freely, mixing with saliva and spilling out. He spits and it lands somewhere in the grass. The crowd around us cheers.

I don't hesitate. Don't bask in the glow of adoration or the thrill of victory. I land another punch before Casper has fully recovered. He goes down, wobbling at first and then his knees hit the grass as he grabs his jaw. Declan blows his whistle. One of Casper's buddies kneels to check on him.

I stand still, registering the cheers but not really hearing them. This moment feels distended, like something I'm watching on a screen but not experiencing firsthand.

Finn jumps on me, screaming in my ear. Mark is right behind him and so are a bunch of the other guys. I spot Grace and a few of her friends standing behind them.

Declan approaches. "Holden! Amazing, man! You're—"

I cut him off. "Send me the money, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Just—"

"And I'm done."

His smile falls. "What?"

"I'm done."

"Holden, we could make a ton of money. Don't—"

I turn around and walk away. Finn is the only one who follows me. "Want some?" He holds out a Gatorade bottle I'm willing to bet doesn't contain any Gatorade anymore.

"No. I'm driving."

"Driving? We're partying, Adams. You knocked him down in a few minutes, dude! Come on, let's—"

"I'm leaving, Finn. Do you want a ride or not?"

He studies me for a minute, then shakes his head. "Nah. I'll catch one with Mark."

“Okay. See you.” I open the door.

“You sure you’re good?”

“I’m good. He barely grazed me.”

It’s not true. My ribs ache. But I’d rather deal with it at home, not here. My dad ended up extending his current trip. Once he’s out on a route, there are always extra deliveries to pick up, and he took advantage once again.

“Okay. You don’t usually dip out so early, though.”

“I’m tired. You get in the ring next time, see how you feel after.”

Finn raises his hands as he starts to walk backwards. “Okay, fine. Text me tomorrow, yeah? I got that new video game.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I climb into the cab of my truck and exhale. Slam my sore hand against the steering wheel.

I’m tired, yeah. But I’m going home, hoping to see her. Wondering if she saw the essay and cared at all.

That makes me feel pathetic, not victorious.

CHAPTER FIVE

CASSIA

The digital numbers on the stove change, displaying the start of a new hour. I glance down at the glass of water that's been my sorry excuse for standing here for the last twenty minutes, annoyed with myself.

I'm not sure why I was so certain he'd be home by now.

Why the fact he isn't feels like a personal affront.

I stick my glass in the dishwasher and head for the stairs. My hand brushes the banister just as I catch a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. I hesitate, my foot hovering in mid-air as I look out the living room window and watch as a tall shadow moves across the asphalt driveway. Warring with myself. Torn between what I want to do and what I should do.

There's a blue hoodie hanging from the row of pegs by the front door. I shrug it on before heading outside. It does little to temper the chill in the air, despite hanging halfway down my thighs. Based on the size, I'm certain it's Holden's.

I wrap the cotton tighter around me as I walk down the front steps and veer to the left, toward the driveway.

I hear the rhythmic smack of rubber against asphalt before I round the corner of the house. The basketball hoop is attached to the front face of the garage, which is tucked between the side of the house and the row of bushes that separates the Adamses' yard from the neighbors.

There's an exterior light affixed above the hoop that casts a dim light over the asphalt. Over the figure who's sitting on the asphalt now, instead of standing and shooting.

I walk over and sink down beside him. The driveway is cold and hard. But I'm more focused on the guy next to me than the fact it feels like I'm sitting on an ice cube.

"B minus, huh?"

The graded rewrite of his essay was waiting on the kitchen counter when I came downstairs after my shower, along with curious looks from my mom and Maggie.

Holden Adams doesn't casually stop by my house—not anymore. I have no idea what him dropping off the rewrite of the essay I helped him ace means. His version of a thank you?

"Yeah." One word, yet it conveys a lot. It tells me Holden is testy and annoyed. That our conversation tonight won't resemble the predictable pattern of past Friday nights.

I glance over, watching as he takes a drink from a glass bottle that was hidden in the shadows. The light is dim, but it's enough to illuminate a purplish bruise blooming just above the sharp line of his jaw. "What happened to your face?"

"Game tonight...devolved."

"Into a brawl?"

Holden scoffs. "You should see the other guy."

"You actually got into a fight?" My voice rises an octave, surprise and concern sharpening the words.

"It was nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing." I glance at the long-sleeved shirt he's wearing, wondering if it's covering other bruises.

"Why do you care?"

"I...care. Getting drunk and fighting? You're more than that—you're

better than that, Holden.”

He snorts before grabbing the whiskey bottle and taking another sip of the amber liquid. “You can spare me the wasted potential pep talk.”

“Fine. I will.” I lean over, intending to snatch the bottle. If he wants to throw a pity party, at least I can save him from getting alcohol poisoning while he attends it.

Holden moves too. To stop me or grab the bottle, or maybe he’s equally uncomfortable sitting on the hard asphalt. He straightens as I reach, and somehow I end up mostly in his lap. Closer than we’ve been since...I know *exactly* how long it’s been since we were this close, actually.

I should move away. Far, *far* away, from the scent of cinnamon and the heat of his body. But I don’t. I remain frozen in place, watching our proximity register on Holden’s face. The haze of liquor leaves his eyes, and the false humor disappears from his face.

Holden tilts his head back, looking up at the sky. I can see more of his face than I could before. Not just the bruised jaw, but the freckle beneath his left eye. The small bump on the bridge of his nose from when he took a basketball to the face in fifth grade gym class. The small crease in the corner of his mouth where a dimple rarely appears.

His throat bobs as he swallows. Once. Twice. “Only you.” He whispers the words, then laughs. “Only you could get me hard right now.”

Unconsciously, I shift. Seeking. Or maybe it’s conscious. Maybe I know *exactly* what I’m looking for. Maybe the past few years have all been leading up to this moment, to some acknowledgment there’s more between us than a forgotten friendship. An abandoned friendship he walked away from.

Holden groans when I brush against the bulge in his joggers. It fuels something rising in me. Some urge, a primal motivation.

The words *Only you could get me hard right now* are echoing in my head.

A secret, sincere confession. And also an acknowledgment of what we’ve avoided. Well, what *he* avoided and I accepted, to protect what little of my

heart he hadn't already broken.

"Fuck," he rasps, as my hips move closer. Faster.

From the outside, this looks entirely innocent. All our clothes are on. We're not touching anywhere except our laps. But nothing feels innocent about the sensations swirling inside me—the excitement and the arousal. They overwhelm me, adding to the thrill I always get around him. The inner giddiness is amplified to a degree that threatens to drown me, that overrides every instinct except one.

His erection thickens and hardens as I grind against it, chasing the bolts of pleasure that keep appearing when I nudge against him just right. His body is responding, but Holden hasn't moved. He's leaning back on one palm, blue eyes fixed on me straddling him.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing. He's drunk and experienced, and I'm neither of those things. The only guy I've kissed, much less humped in a dark driveway, is him.

A warm palm slides beneath the hem of my borrowed sweatshirt. His sweatshirt, technically. If he registers that detail, he doesn't comment on it.

Holden's hand slides higher and higher, over the curve of my ribs until it reaches the swell of my breast. He cups it and squeezes gently, taking advantage of the fact I'm not wearing a bra.

I moan, biting on my bottom lip to try to contain it. I wasn't expecting his touch to feel so good. I imagine his mouth and his tongue replacing the warmth of his hand, and heat creeps across my skin.

His eyes flare at the sound.

I'm disappointed when his palm slides back to my waist. His other hand does the same, so he's gripping my hips and guiding my movements. Immediately, the pleasure intensifies. I drop my head into the curve of his neck, inhaling the scent of laundry detergent and cinnamon.

There's a hint of weed too.

I try not to focus on that, choosing to ignore the reminder he's been out

tonight doing who knows what with who knows who. I focus on him, which is easy to do. *Too* easy to do. Especially now, when we're doing things I've only fantasized about ever happening.

Our movements fall into a deceptive rhythm. Turn into a familiarity I thought was broken between us a long time ago. I can feel him—hard and thick and hot—between my thighs, and it fans the flames lighting between us.

Me.

He's reacting this way to *me*.

I feel the pleasure building inside of me. My hips move faster, chasing the high that's rapidly approaching. It explodes inside of me in a rush of euphoria, a thousand times more powerful than when I touch myself. I feel wetness soak my underwear as I muffle my moans in Holden's sweatshirt. He jerks beneath me, finding his own release.

We're both breathing heavily. Harsh, ragged inhales and exhales are the only sounds filling the still night air. My body feels loose and languid. Relaxed. I don't want to move. I want to sink into this moment, the way you snuggle beneath a blanket on the couch.

Anticipation of what awkwardness could be coming propels me into action.

Holden is still holding my hips, but his grip has loosened. His hands fall as I pull away from him and stand up. He's watching me move away while wearing an unreadable expression. There's no sign of pleasure or satisfaction on his face, even though I felt him come.

And rather than ask if that meant anything, if *I* mean anything to him, I turn around and walk away. Non-confrontational, nice Cassia doesn't demand answers.

Also, I'm embarrassed. *I* initiated things. *I* crawled into his lap and got myself off. Do guys turn girls down in that position? Especially when they're drunk?

I close my eyes to the reality of what just took place, only opening them

when I reach the front door. I fumble with the handle, eager to get inside quickly on the off chance Holden is coming after me and wants to discuss what happened.

It's unlikely, considering he's made a habit of ignoring me most of the time. But I know for sure he won't barge into his sister's bedroom for answers.

There are no footsteps behind me as I yank off the hoodie with shaky fingers and hang it back on the hook. I don't want to wake up wearing a reminder of tonight.

Silently, I creep up the stairs and slip into Sydney's bedroom. She's fast asleep, like always. Hair fanned across her pillow and a peaceful expression on her face.

For a moment, I wish she wasn't Holden's sister. That I could wake her up and tell the closest friend I have what just happened between me and the only boy who's ever given me butterflies. The guy I've had a crush on since before I could identify what one was.

Instead, I crawl onto the air mattress and try to fall asleep.

It meant nothing, I tell myself.

Lie to myself.

CHAPTER SIX

HOLDEN

I should have kissed her.

That's the main thought that keeps circling around in my head, instead of listening to Mr. Watson drone on about different types of seaweed and how to easily identify them. I thought Oceanography would be an easy senior year science elective. It's equally boring, unfortunately.

I tap my pen against the metal rings of my open notebook, my thoughts chaotic and my knee bouncing.

When the girl who's always been *the girl* ends up in your lap, humping your dick, you kiss her. Right?

I don't know what the hell I was thinking. I *wasn't* thinking, really. I was swimming with residual adrenaline, sore as fuck, more than buzzed from the whiskey I picked up on the drive home, and in no way prepared for Cassia to make any sort of move toward me.

I thought any interest on her part had long since fizzled, dispelled by years of barely exchanging trivial conversation, let alone anything meaningful. I thought, at most, there was maybe some physical attraction lingering.

Cassia isn't a random hookup girl. She's the girl you kiss on the front porch after a date, not the one you take upstairs to a spare bedroom at a party. But I didn't think she was the girl who climbed on a guy's dick to get herself

off either, so maybe I misjudged her.

Based on the way she's gone out of her way to ignore me ever since it happened, she regrets that it did. That grates at me, even more irritating than the possibility Cassia is not as inexperienced as I assumed.

She was brazen and bold around me when we were younger. But I hadn't seen that side of her in years, the girl who goes after what she wants without second-guessing. Sure, she's driven, especially when it comes to school. But I think that's more about pleasing her parents than anything else.

And once again, I don't know. I have no idea when or if she still seizes control. It shouldn't bother me as much as it does, considering I'm the one who ensured I wouldn't—that I don't. But it annoys me anyway, itches my skin like an irritation that can't be scratched.

Finn keeps pace with me as we leave class and head toward the cafeteria. He's still talking about my victory on Friday night, describing what he considers my most impressive moments. Completely oblivious to the fact I'm not paying attention to a single word he's saying. More of our friends join us the closer we get to the cafeteria, and that distracts him.

I'm busy scanning the hall.

Mark asks me a question about the start of practice next week, which I focus on until we reach our typical table and sit. Grace and McKenzie appear, joining the group. Grace takes the seat next to me. Her hand finds my thigh under the table, stroking the denim.

"You okay?" she asks. Soft and quiet, not trying to draw attention to the question. Still, everyone else at the table is surreptitiously watching us.

Grace and I are primetime entertainment. Most of the guys have bets going on how long before we hook up again.

They're going to lose.

Maybe before Friday night, those odds had a decent chance. Before then, Grace was a hot blonde distraction who was happy with casual and no strings.

A possibility when Cassia was nothing but a fantasy. But now I know what the reality with Cassia is like. Know what the breathy moans she makes when she comes sound like.

I was in control, up until Cassia instigated things. I've never wanted to resist her, and I'm sick of trying. The problem is, my selfish tendencies have never extended to Cassia.

She's been the exception, always.

I'll hurt her, even if I don't mean to.

Me staying away is in her best interest and so I've tried to do exactly that. Not drag her down into my uncertain future. Into my destructive tendencies and volatile decisions.

The problem is, how I *actually* feel about her has never changed, regardless of how I've acted. It was much easier to keep that façade up when I figured all Cassia Nolan wanted was to become a veterinarian and meet a nice, reliable guy one day.

But then she came on my dick like she was desperate for me, and that assumption shattered like fragile glass.

“Holden?”

“I'm fine,” I answer, then take a long pull of water as I watch the entrance.

Cassia walks into the cafeteria, talking to a girl with a blonde bob who I've never noticed before. They both walk over to the table of girls that includes my sister. Instead of her usual spot facing me, Cassia sits on the opposite side of the table so her back is toward me.

I sip more water, eyes fixed on the back of the gray sweatshirt she's wearing. She sits in the same spot, always. This is purposeful, her making a point.

She won't even look at me.

Fuck it.

I stand, ignoring Grace asking me where I'm going. Cross the linoleum

floor of the cafeteria, pretending not to see the curious glances aimed my way. I stride straight toward Cassia, not bothering with any semblance of *I just happened to be walking by* casual bullshit.

Purposeful strides eat up the distance between us quickly.

I don't hesitate once I reach her, either. "I need to talk to you," I announce.

The table of mostly juniors falls silent. Her friendship with Sydney means most of Cassia's friends are a year younger. I was her strongest connection to our grade, up until I stopped inviting her to hang out.

I ignore the lingering guilt associated with that decision and focus instead on the prime view of Cassia's shoulders rising and tensing before her head turns around. I keep my gaze on her, leaving no question about who I'm talking to.

"Why? What's going on? Is something wrong?" Sydney fires the questions at me rapid fire, glancing between me and her best friend with an expression of concern.

"Everything is fine, Syd. I need help on a Calculus assignment, is all." I keep my eyes on Cassia the whole time, not missing the way hers narrow as I offer that made-up explanation.

It sounds plausible, at least. I've never been an honors student. Always been purposefully lazy when it comes to school. When it comes to a lot of things.

"Ask the teacher."

Everyone else at the table looks surprised by Cassia's curt answer. I'm not. I already figured out she's avoiding me. That she's regretful or embarrassed or both. And I already knew there's some fire hiding beneath her nice girl exterior.

"It's due next period," I lie, banking on her not knowing my class schedule. I already had math this morning.

"He needs to pass to play..." Sydney says.

Sweet, understanding Sydney, who looks confused by the fact Cassia is so reluctant to help me. Seconds tick by, the number of eyes on us multiplying with each one that passes.

Finally, Cassia stands, abandoning her half-eaten sandwich. “Fine.”

She starts toward an empty table across the aisle. I rest a hand on her lower back and guide her toward one of the doors that leads out to the senior courtyard instead. It’s getting too cold to eat out here. There are only a few people sitting in the courtyard, all bundled in coats neither of us are wearing. But I’m not worried about anyone overhearing us, which was a concern in the crowded cafeteria.

“Was that really necessary?” she asks as soon as we’re outside.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans, leaning against one of the empty picnic tables. It’s chilly out here, but it’s peaceful too. Fresh air and open space. “You tell me. How was your *nap* yesterday?”

Cassia scoffs as I mention the excuse her mom fed me when I tried to have this conversation yesterday, looking away at the massive oak planted in the center of the courtyard. The wind picks up, pulling a few pieces of hair out of her ponytail and dragging leaves off the branches.

“You needed help with Calculus then too?” she asks. Her tone is mocking. Annoyed.

It makes me want to smile. I like her like this. Raw and real.

“Nope. Did all my homework yesterday, actually.”

She meets my gaze. “You always were a good liar.”

“You wanted me to tell Sydney what happened Friday night instead?”

Her cheeks flush. Maybe from the wind that’s still blowing, but I’m betting it’s from the mention of what took place between us in my driveway. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“No?” I take a step closer, forcing her head to tilt back in order to hold my gaze. “You climb into a lot of guys’ laps? No big deal?”

I’m hoping the questions are rhetorical. A part of me is really wondering,

though. I don't know her as well as I used to. Maybe I'm a fool for thinking she wouldn't have instigated any sort of intimacy between us unless it meant something to her.

Cassia's front teeth sink into her bottom lip, chasing away the pink until she releases it to speak and color rushes back. "So what if I do?"

"Now who's lying?" I ask, unprepared to deal with the possibility she's not.

Cassia shrugs. Indifferent. Maddening. There's no trace of duplicity on her face, and it pisses me off to a degree I'm not expecting.

She's not yours, I remind myself.

Never has been.

Never will be.

"And you always just walk away after?"

"Mad I stole your move?"

I inhale sharply, surprised she's bringing that Halloween up. Am I proud of it? No. But I thought it was settled history. Part of the past. Irrelevant moving forward. "Cassia...that wasn't—"

"I lost interest in an explanation four years ago, Holden. Don't bother."

Her tone is acerbic. Cutting. The complete opposite of uncaring, and a masochistic part of me wants to grin in response to that small victory.

"Yeah, *clearly* you're over it, since you just brought it up."

She sighs, long and irritated. "I'm cold and hungry and there's no point to this conversation. If you didn't want it to happen, you would have stopped it, since you've never had any issue being honest. It happened, it won't happen again. Now you can go back to ignoring me."

"Cassia..."

"I mean it, Holden."

She turns and walks away from me.

Again.

Leaving me standing here, a whole lot irritated and just as conflicted.

Because, the problem is, I *want* it to happen again.

I can admit that to myself. I'm just not sure it's anything I should tell her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CASSIA

I'm shoving the last of my books into my locker when Sydney appears.

"Hey."

"Hey," I reply, shutting the door and spinning the combination. "You ready?"

"Uh-huh."

Most days, Sydney stays after school in one of her various roles as part of the theater elective she takes every semester. She's never acted in any of the productions, but always takes on some sort of managerial position as a stagehand. I've tried to talk her into performing for years, but I'm not really one to talk. Most of the time, I hang out in my comfort zone right alongside her. The only reliable pull toward the uncharted in my life has been Holden Adams, and I can't exactly pass that along to Sydney as solid advice.

We walk side by side down the hall. The final bell only rang a few minutes ago. Almost every locker is open, and the hallway is packed. I wave at London Jackson as I pass her. We share a lot of the same classes and usually pair up on projects when we can.

"So...that was weird earlier. At lunch?"

I barely register London's returning wave, too startled by Sydney's comment. I manage some vague hum that Sydney takes as me not knowing what she's talking about.

“Holden coming over to our table at lunch?” she prompts. “That was weird, right? He’s never done that before. And he looked annoyed. So did you, actually.”

My eyes stay focused straight ahead as we navigate the busy hall, headed toward the main doors.

Holden isn’t a taboo topic between us. Sydney talks about him a lot. Worries about him a lot, more specifically. Most of the time, he’s the only family she has around. But we don’t discuss *me* and Holden. Not since Sydney noticed the space between us. She asked me, once, if something had happened. I said no—unwilling to dredge up painful details with anyone, including her—and that was that. All the years of the three of us hanging out were easily erased.

“I *was* annoyed,” I answer. “You know how he can be. He asked me for help and then didn’t listen to what I said.”

I’m sticking with Holden’s Calculus help story. No way am I telling anyone—especially Sydney—what we really discussed. Although it’s absolutely a situation where I could use some guidance. Where it would be helpful to have a best friend who isn’t related to the only guy I’ve ever been interested in.

“Holden hates asking for help.”

I don’t respond to the true statement. I figure the less I say about this subject, the better. Holden saying anything to Sydney is unlikely, but I’m not going to wade any deeper into this lie.

“Do you think he’s failing? Maybe he’s really struggling and he’s too stubborn to say anything.”

“I’m sure he’s doing fine.”

Sydney sighs. “I know he’s worried about college. He’s got a lot riding on this season, on getting a scholarship.”

I grit my teeth together and grip the straps of my backpack. Analyzing Holden—sympathizing with Holden—is the absolute last thing I feel like

doing right now.

I'm trying to hold on to my anger toward him. It's easier than exploring the emotions hovering underneath.

He represents my own weakness.

I want him—even though I shouldn't. Despite the many reasons he's given me not to. And now he knows that truth.

"He's doing fine," I assure her. "He figured out the homework pretty quickly."

I didn't tell Sydney about helping Holden with his history paper, and apparently he didn't mention it to her either. All the secrets I've ever kept from my best friend have involved her brother.

"Hey, Cassia."

I automatically slow at the sound of my name. Glance at Harrison, who's leaning against the cinderblock wall, filling his thermos.

"Hey," I reply. Clear my throat and remember how he carried our last conversation. "Heading to practice?"

He smiles before answering, "Yeah." Pleased I asked, I guess.

Harrison's smile is warm and genuine. And I hate—absolutely despise—that all I can picture is the annoyance on Holden's face when he saw Harrison sitting opposite me.

"This is Sydney," I say, once again at a loss for anything else to say to him.

Harrison dips his chin in greeting as he screws the top on his water bottle. "Hey, Sydney."

"Hi, Harrison."

He smirks a little at how she addresses him without an introduction, but he doesn't call her out on it. It makes me like him more.

"I'd better run. Coach is in his sadistic playoffs phase, so practice will be brutal. See you guys."

"See you," I say.

One final smile, and he's gone.

"He likes you," Sydney tells me as soon as he's out of sight.

"He was being nice," I reply as we walk outside.

Sydney gives me a look that's remarkably similar to the one her brother did when I said the same thing. "Cassia."

"What? He's a nice guy. And you think he's hot."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Girl code, Syd."

Sydney laughs. "I've never even talked to him until just now. He's fair game. If you like him, go for it."

Unfortunately, that's the problem. I *don't* like Harrison—not in that way. When I look at his blond hair and brown eyes, I imagine them dark brown and blue.

Crushes can take time to develop, I guess. I don't know anything about Harrison except that he plays football and is good at math. Maybe we have lots of shared interests that would make him more attractive and spark more of a connection.

I think those are the logical, sensible kinds of crushes, though. Where you really get to know someone and understand what they have to offer. Like a pro/con list for the heart. You form a conclusion first and then romantic feelings start to develop.

The problem is, I've experienced the illogical, consuming kind of crush. The *can't sleep, can't eat* sort. The *stay up for hours to talk to him for minutes* madness. Butterflies that keep flying. Giddiness that doesn't fade. Holden hijacks my brain like there's a part of him inside of me I can't ignore.

I'm not sure how to explain that to anyone without sounding crazy.

We reach my car and Sydney gets distracted by putting on a playlist as I pull out of my spot and join the long line of cars waiting to leave the high school's parking lot.

It's a fifteen-minute drive to the local animal shelter from the Pembroke

High campus. I volunteer here as often as I can. Sydney is not as much of an animal lover as I am, but she comes with me whenever she can. The shelter is always understaffed for the amount of work to be done. She usually helps with filing paperwork and cleaning, while I focus more on assisting with the animals.

Susan, a middle-aged woman who also volunteers, is out in the fenced run that juts off from the right side of the shingled building when I park in the small lot. The three puppies that were brought in last week are running around her ankles in circles, yapping playfully. I wave at her as Sydney and I head into the shelter.

There's no one at the front desk when we enter. I walk through the lobby and down the hallway, passing the rooms where potential adopters can play with the animals available for adoption.

The rest of the building is dedicated to housing the cats and dogs living here. I peek into the cat room first. All but one of the twenty cages are filled. The bowls are neatly stacked on the table for feeding later and the play area in the center room looks freshly cleaned.

Sydney follows me across the hall, into the dog room. Eileen, who manages the shelter, is sitting in the center of the room, cross-legged. Patch, the shelter's longest resident, is lying next to her, wagging his bushy tail as he gets brushed.

Eileen looks up and smiles, the corners of her eyes creasing as some gray hair falls out of the perpetually messy ponytail she has it pulled back in.

She's been in charge of everything for as long as I've been coming here. Now a retired veterinarian, she left a practice a few towns over to open up a shelter instead. Rumors around Pembroke suggest she left a messy divorce behind, but I've never pried into her past and she's never offered any details. Her life is the animals, and she's been the largest inspiration for my planned path.

I walk over and crouch down beside Patch, rubbing his head and setting

off a fresh wave of wags. Eileen always says the point of the shelter is to find new homes for the pets, not to have them all end up in her house, but I wouldn't be surprised if Patch ends up a permanent resident.

Eileen gives me a sheepish smile. "I'm behind with the rest of these guys." She gestures to the kennels around us. Most of them are empty right now, the dogs choosing to be outside in the sunshine instead of indoors. "Was just giving this guy a little extra love."

"He deserves it," I say, giving Patch another pet before standing. "I can get started on the rest of the crew."

"I'll get back to the filing," Sydney says, heading toward the door that leads to the office. "Same system, Eileen?"

"Yes! Thank you, Sydney."

Sydney smiles and disappears into the office.

"I'll be lost next year without you."

"Next fall is still a ways away." I force a smile, trying to ignore the twinge of anxiety the mention of college prompts. It sparks apprehension about where I'll end up and how different it might be from what I'm used to.

I've looked forward to leaving for college for years. It's a step forward, a chance to meet new people and have new experiences. Finally embarking on my planned path.

I feel stuck in Pembroke. Everything about my life is expected and confined. Ever since my family moved here back when I was in elementary school, I've been the nice, quiet, smart girl. The girl who gets good grades and doesn't get drunk. I didn't realize how claustrophobic that was until recently, when I experienced the rush of the unexpected. And somehow, it made me more conflicted about leaving Pembroke. Reticent, almost.

Especially since I discovered on Friday night, I don't have to leave to feel a thrill. To me, it feels like the thrill is tied to a person, not a place.

Cleaning out cages and measuring kibble keeps my hands busy, but my mind has nothing to do but wander. I know the mountain of paperwork

Sydney is working on will take the couple of hours we usually spend here. Eileen left to help Susan with the puppies and then to feed the cats. I'm alone in the cavernous space, stuck with my thoughts.

I run through the list of assignments I need to finish tonight. Brainstorm ideas for my college essay. The prompt is *Describe an experience that is essential to who you are*. I can't come up with anything that doesn't sound boring or average. Getting good grades and volunteering here are what were supposed to help me get into college. It didn't allow for many memorable experiences. Humping Holden Adams is the most memorable thing that's happened to me lately.

Memorable, and also an experience I'm actively trying to forget. He's making it harder than I thought it would be. I thought pretending to be asleep when he came over yesterday would be enough of a deterrent. I had been trying to take a nap, I just exaggerated my breathing when I heard my mom open the door. Her knowing gaze at dinner last night was distracting. But the kicker was Holden himself.

Despite my best efforts, I've heard the rumors about him. He's a star player off the court as well as on it. In addition to being the hottest guy who attends Pembroke High, he has *it*. That tangible charisma where you're drawn to someone even when they're doing nothing. He has a pull around him, a confidence that stands out regardless of where he is. Regardless of whatever he's doing.

Maybe it should make me feel better about my perpetual weakness, seeing how girls throw themselves at him based on that appeal alone. I have some measure of history with him, back when we were close friends. There were also ten thrilling minutes during eighth grade when I was certain he felt the same way about me as I felt about him.

I was sure Friday night would lead to the same indifference that rapidly followed our eighth-grade kiss. History is often an accurate predictor of the future.

Instead, Holden sought me out—twice—when he could have very easily pretended it never happened. He seemed...affected. He also acknowledged me at school, which he's never done, aside from the discussions involving the essay that were forced upon him.

It felt like people were giving me side glances all afternoon, and I don't think it was just in my head. It's part of the effect Holden has. There's no way he didn't know pulling me out of the cafeteria would draw attention.

He isn't as egotistical as he could be about the level of interest in him, but he's not oblivious either. I can't figure out why he did it. The only explanation I can come up with is that he's worried I'll say something to Sydney, and that pisses me off.

It would cause strife between them, and that's nothing I'd purposely encourage. I never told her how he ghosted me at the end of middle school. And he was the one who kissed me. I'm the one who initiated things between us this time, and that alone is enough to assure I'd never tell Sydney. Not only is the guy in question her brother, he's also the only boy who's broken my heart. If the roles were reversed, I'd be warning her far away from him.

Holden is synonymous with heartbreak. He's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. I'm still not sure what force compelled me to act on my attraction after years of mirroring his indifference, but it's nothing I need to justify.

Me and Holden are one of those fantasies with flaws. A possibility that you can picture so clearly it seems perfect. But then life gets in the way somehow. Nothing works out exactly the way you imagined it might. Usually it's for the worst, in a way you make do with by saying it wasn't meant to be.

I need to stop allowing for the possibility we are meant to be. To focus on the reality of what we are—what he *made* us. There are certain things I can control. My own future and my own decisions are two of them. Holden is the furthest thing from controlled. He's unpredictable.

College and veterinary school will get me where I want to go. Speculating

—wishing—won't get me anywhere. Focusing on my work here and my planned path will.

I finish rationing all the food and start setting bowls down in cages with fresh resolve. All the dogs run in when they hear the clank of the metal, eagerly gobbling down their portions. I mark off everything on the master chart, make sure all the plastic canisters are closed, and walk across the hallway into the cat room. It's empty, with no sign of Susan or Eileen.

I step back into the hallway. There's a laugh, followed by the murmur of voices. Someone must be here.

Most of my hair came out of its bun while I was working. I yank the elastic out as I follow the sound of commotion, letting my curls fall freely. I run a hand through the tangled mess, turn the corner that leads into the lobby, and freeze.

Susan, Eileen, and Sydney are all gathered by the front desk, staring at... Holden. He's standing just inside the doorway, holding a stuffed monkey.

"All set?"

It takes me a minute to register Eileen is talking to me. An embarrassing long stretch of time, actually. I'm too busy blinking at Holden like he's a hallucination that might disappear. But no matter how many times I do, he's still standing in front of me.

What the *hell* is he doing here? Holden hasn't been by the animal shelter since we started high school. It fell away with all the other things we used to do together, becoming nothing but a bittersweet memory.

"Yeah. Dogs are good." I finally answer Eileen's question.

I glance from her to Susan to Sydney, looking for clues about why Holden is here. I would just ask him, but Sydney's questions earlier are fresh in my mind. The last thing I want is for her to have more for me. That will require lying or telling the truth, both of which have lasting consequences. I'd rather not have to come up with any answers.

"Great. Do you have time to help me with Snowflake's worming before

you head out?”

“Yeah. Of course.” I focus on Eileen as I answer her, but I’m totally distracted. I lean against the edge of the reception desk, trying to focus on the dig of the wood trim against my hip instead of the blue eyes that are too easy to get lost in.

He’s here and he’s looking at me. And I can’t say a word—because I’m too worried about what might come out. My emotions are raw, and my judgment is shot, where he’s concerned.

Holden tosses the monkey up in the air and catches it. The stuffed animal squeaks. “I’ve gotta go. See you later, Syd.”

“Be careful, Holden,” she replies.

He grins, hasty and carefree. “I always am.”

A scoff escapes my mouth before I can stop it. Sydney has never been awake to see him stumble home, drunk and bloody. As opposite from careful as one could be. I cover my disbelief with a cough, but the way Holden’s grin widens suggests he sees right through it.

“Good to see you, Holden. Don’t be a stranger. Bring Lily by sometime.” Eileen is all friendliness and ease with Holden, which is rare. She’s not a people person. She prefers animal company, obvious as she suggests he brings their dog by.

“Yeah, I will. She’ll love this.” Holden holds up the monkey.

The sentences should be aimed at everyone, but he’s looking right at me as he says them. I inhale, sharply. Once again, I’m sure Holden is the only one who catches it. Knowing he is paying attention to me is a heady sensation. It’s giddiness and butterflies, the secret thrill of coveted attention.

I stand still for too long as he says goodbye and walks out the door. Eileen and Susan disappear into the back to set up the worming, leaving me and Sydney in the lobby. She dives back into filing the stack of folders on the desk.

I deliberate for thirty seconds, then ask, “What was Holden doing here?”

“I left some scripts in his car this morning. He thought I might need them and knew I was here.”

“Oh.” That’s all I can come up with to say in response.

I had a dentist appointment this morning, so Holden drove Sydney to school. Not a hardship on his part, considering they were leaving from the same place and headed to the same destination.

But driving all the way here to drop off something Sydney might or might not need? That’s something middle school Holden would have done. The boy who was rough around the edges but fiercely loyal.

That’s part of what hurt the most when our friendship abruptly ended. I didn’t choose to change things. He did. And then once he had, he backtracked so quickly it was like we were always distant acquaintances. Like he’d never shoved other kids on the playground for making fun of my braids phase that lasted through most of elementary school.

“I guess he’s going to Grace’s and won’t be back until late.”

“Oh,” I repeat. Once again, nothing else comes to mind. But this time, I’m preoccupied by the sharp prick of jealousy.

I hate him.

The vitriol behind the thought surprises me. It’s also a welcome relief from the uncertainty that’s plagued me all day. From the small sprig of hope, when he didn’t act like it never happened. When he acted like it might have mattered to him.

I figured he spent every Friday night with a girl in his lap. Part of me was relying on him viewing it as a nonevent, I think. I know better than to expect Holden to wake up and think we’re meant to be.

I’ve been burned before.

“I’m going to go help Eileen with the worming. Then we can head out?”

“Sounds good,” Sydney answers, already refocused on the filing.

I turn and head down the hallway.

Not only have I been burned before, I know that only fools play with fire.

It has nothing but the potential to burn.

To eviscerate.

To devastate.

And Holden has already done enough damage to my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOLDEN

A country song croons on the radio. I don't really even *like* country music, but it beats sitting in silence. And I'm not really listening to what's playing, anyhow. I'm stuck in my own head, thinking about how I'm enduring this to spend time with a girl I'm certain doesn't want to spend time with me.

Cassia has continued to make a point of ignoring me ever since I pulled her out into the courtyard last week to force a conversation.

It's a clear signal—but it's also one I want to ignore. I'm not sure when this switch flipped. When it became such a challenge to continue pretending she doesn't exist.

Maybe it was the first time I came home on a Friday night and found her in my kitchen wearing pajamas that revealed a lot more than they covered.

Maybe it was when I saw a familiar flash in her eyes when she told me she wouldn't lie for me.

Maybe it was when I saw the way Harrison Baker was looking at her.

Whatever the cause, it's fucking annoying. I thought I had moved past this. Sure, I think she's hot. I doubt there's a guy at Pembroke High who doesn't. But I've spent years telling myself that's *all* it is between us—attraction.

Telling myself that the connection we share isn't anything special. That it's something I can easily ignore and that it doesn't mean anything.

If that were true, I think it would have *actually* faded in the past years. It wouldn't be this burrowing under my skin, this voice whispering I fucked up worse than I thought.

"This is a nice truck."

"Thanks," I reply to Ben's fourth version of the same compliment. This outing is awkward so far. There's no other accurate way to describe it. From Ben asking if I'd already met with the three other freshmen who made the team—which I'll now have to do—to him accidentally hitting the parking brake at a stoplight.

I pull into Roxbury Diner's parking lot, park, and turn the ignition off. I'm apprehensive about encountering Cassia. When I agreed to this, things between us weren't volatile.

It's got me tense and agitated, walking into a set-up. It was one thing to ignore Cassia when she acted ambivalent toward me. Another to respond when she initiated contact between us. It's different to pursue—to seek her out when she's actively avoiding me. Something I told myself I'd never do.

I'm turning a favor for a neighbor into something selfish. But we're chaperoning a couple of kids, one of whom is her sister. Cassia won't cause a scene. I won't be able to do anything really stupid—like kiss her.

Resolved, I turn off the truck. "Come on."

Ben jumps out of the cab eagerly. Guy doesn't even know why we're really here.

I probably should have put some feelers out. Asked if there are any chicks he's interested in. If he already has a girl, for God's sake.

I drag a palm down my face and exhale, realizing this plan is unfolding worse by the minute. But it's too late to back out now. I follow Ben over to the entrance and inside the diner.

Warm air saturated with the smell of grease greets me. It's not too busy in here. I spot Cassia and Maggie immediately. Maggie is leaning against the counter, tapping her fingers on the Formica anxiously. Cassia is staring out

the window.

Maggie spots us first.

“Ben! Hi!” Maggie’s voice is high and excited. But there’s no trace of expectation. No hint she knew we were coming or that this was pre-planned.

I’m relieved. Maybe that will save me from a more permanent spot on Cassia’s shit list, which would surely be earned by knowing I showed up here with the knowledge she would be too. To set her sister up on a date, no less.

“Hey, Holden.” Maggie greets me as an afterthought, her focus on the gangly, sandy-haired teenager next to me.

“Hey,” I respond, when it seems evident no one else is going to say anything. Ben is wearing a shy smile, and Cassia...well, I haven’t looked at Cassia yet.

Awkward silence ensues.

I shove my hands in my pockets. “Funny seeing you guys here.”

Okay, so Maggie’s a better actor than I am.

Luckily, neither she nor Ben seem to notice. The kid finally got over his surprise and is now talking animatedly. They’re slowly drifting away down the counter, leaving Cassia and me standing here.

I take a deep breath and finally look at her. She’s standing with her arms crossed, her expression suspicious. “You set this up.”

“Shhh.” I grab her hand and pull her away, toward one of the empty booths.

“Stop manhandling me,” she hisses.

“You didn’t seem to mind it last weekend.”

Pink spreads across her cheeks. “I told you not to bring that up again.”

“Fine. I won’t. Just take a seat. Let me buy you a burger.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then just sit while I eat.”

Cassia scoffs but sits. “I can’t believe Maggie talked you into this.” Her gaze is on the couple now sitting on stools. I follow it, relieved to see that

Ben is grinning, appearing as taken with Maggie as she is with him. One potential crisis averted.

“All I had to do was get the guy here. It was no big deal.” I grab one of the laminated menus, even though I always get the same thing here.

Studying the list of options sounds like a more appealing option than meeting Cassia’s accusing gaze.

“Still. There was nothing in it for you.”

“Sounds like you and my paper.” I glance up in time to see her lips purse.

“A teacher asked me to.”

Resisting a crack about being a teacher’s pet is difficult, but I manage. “Maggie asked me to.”

“And you care that much about her feelings?”

There’s accusation layered in the question, along with something worse—hurt.

“Don’t think much of me anymore, do you?”

“Which should impress me more, Holden? The fact you don’t bother to do your work to the point of almost failing? Or the way you come home in the middle of the night on the weekends, drunk and bruised?”

My jaw flexes and works. Before I can decide how to respond, a waitress appears. She beams at us, failing to sense the tension sparking between us like a live wire in a lightning storm.

“What can I get you guys?” she asks, flipping open her little notebook and looking at us expectantly, pen poised.

I look at Cassia. She glances away, pointedly.

“I’ll take a double bacon cheeseburger with an extra side of fries. And a Coke.”

The waitress nods, scribbling. “And you?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Cassia replies, folding her arms across her chest. All it does is draw my attention to her tits. But the ice between us is so thin I can hear it cracking, so I avert my gaze and don’t say a word.

We sit in silence. For long enough, I lose track of the seconds—the minutes. The only interruption is when my food is delivered. When I sneak a glance at Cassia, she's already looking at me. She flushes, then glances at the row of stools where Ben and Maggie are sitting.

"I should go over there."

I roll my eyes and take a bite of burger. Swallow and sip some soda. "They're fine."

"Wouldn't you worry if Sydney was out with some random guy?"

"That would require Sydney going out, which seems unlikely to happen. She spends her weekends hanging out with you."

Cassia huffs an exhale, her irritation obvious even before she speaks. "Is that supposed to be a dig at me? Should I be out drinking and fighting and doing whatever else you spend your weekends doing instead?"

I suck in a deep lungful of grease-saturated air. "It wasn't a dig, just an observation."

Cassia snorts, glancing over at Ben and Maggie again. Her fingers shred a napkin in quick, efficient strokes.

"What do you think is going to happen, Cassia? They're just talking. We're sitting right here. What are you worried about?"

"I'm worried—" She shoves the pile of white ribbons to the side and starts playing with the straw in her water glass instead. "I'm worried he's going to turn into a player and break her heart."

Her gaze meets mine, hazel slamming into me with an intensity I wasn't expecting.

I know she's not talking about Ben.

She's talking about me.

I swallow. "That's not something you can protect her from."

Cassia scoffs. "Yeah. I know."

I wipe my mouth and ball the napkin up in my fist. I'm squeezing it so tightly I know an imprint of my fingers will be left behind. "Excited for the

senior trip?” I ask. It’s the only thing I can think to ask about and it’s probably the lamest I’ve ever felt. I sound like a teacher or a parent.

Everyone I know is excited for the senior trip. It’s an annual tradition that’s one of the highlights of being at the top of the high school hierarchy. Two nights of limited supervision in New York City. The weekend is legendary.

Cassia makes a face. “Not really.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not friends with any seniors, Holden,” she tells me.

The ball of guilt reappears. We used to be friends, until I fucked it up. “I’ll be there.”

“Don’t say it like it’s an enticement.”

It’s a dig I should probably be offended by. Instead, I’m amused. I like her sass. Like how it feels like we’re kids again. It also provides an opening. “If it’s such a hardship to be around me, Cassia, what was last weekend?”

She looks back outside, but not before I catch her cheeks flush. Again. “I was just...” Her gaze darts back to me. “It was no big deal.”

“Ri-ght,” I drawl the word, adding more syllables than it needs. “You said that before.”

“And I meant it.”

“Did you?” I sound jealous, and I hate that I do.

I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. Of course other guys have been interested in her.

Usually, it’s easy to tune girls out when they mention exes. But I’m suddenly furious with myself for not knowing if Cassia even has any. She’s best friends with my sister, for fuck’s sake. I should have set any misplaced jealousy aside and ensured no one was taking advantage of her.

“You don’t want to know the answer to that.”

Apparently, I’m being transparent with my feelings. My hand tightens around the napkin. “Got it.”

There's a change in her face. It softens with something that looks like uncertainty. "You wouldn't—I mean, it didn't even mean anything to you, right?"

I stare at her, too confused to answer. Does she seriously think I go to these extremes to spend time around a girl on a regular basis? That I do it ever?

I went to her house later that weekend. I concocted a bogus story to have an argument with her in the courtyard. And now I'm sitting here under the pretense of helping out a fourteen-year-old's love life.

"Does it matter?"

We stare at each other, looking for tells and truths. At least, that's what I'm doing.

Most of the time, Cassia is the most even-tempered person you could imagine meeting. She treats everyone the way she looks after the abandoned animals she cares so much about—with respect and kindness. Around me, Cassia seems to run on extremes. She's cold and detached or she's grinding on my lap.

"Uh, Cassia?"

Cassia jolts, almost knocking over her water glass as she glances at Maggie, who's now standing at the end of our booth. "Yeah. Everything okay?"

"It's after four."

Cassia pulls her phone out of her pocket, glances at the screen, and swears. She hustles out of the booth, her movements so hurried and jerky that she almost upends everything on the table.

Just before Cassia slides off the end, she glances back at me. "I've got to pick up Regan."

"I know."

"Right." She glances at Maggie, like she'd temporarily forgotten this entire thing was set up.

“Okay. Bye.”

I want to smile but I don't. I nod, then watch as Maggie and Cassia walk out of the diner.

Ben takes Cassia's seat opposite me. “That was funny.”

I glance at him, sure he's calling me out for setting this up. But he looks serious.

“Yeah. A real coincidence.”

Ben misses my sarcasm. I hope I wasn't as oblivious as a freshman.

“You know Maggie's sister?”

“A little.”

“You like her or something?”

I raise one brow at the ballsy question. I'm a senior, and his captain. Maybe I misjudged Howard as shy and awkward.

Ben hastily backtracks. “Not that—you don't have to tell me. I'm not... You do you, you know.”

I crack a smile. “Yeah, I will. Thanks.”

Ben orders a burger while I polish off the rest of mine. We make small talk as we sit. But the whole time his question echoes in my head.

You like her or something?

I like shooting hoops. Like beer and pizza. What I feel for Cassia has always been stronger. The tug of the tide, not just a passing wave.

Like is unassuming and casual.

Something is vague. It can encapsulate a whole host of emotions. Including ones bigger than like.

Ones big enough to break hearts.

CHAPTER NINE

CASSIA

The credits start to roll. “Did that ending make sense?” I ask. “I’m not sure if—”

I glance over at Sydney. Fast asleep. Rolling my eyes, I crawl over her and off the bed. This Friday night was Sydney’s choice of movie. She still didn’t make it through the whole film.

I stretch, check my phone, then tiptoe into the hallway. It’s almost midnight.

Ever since last weekend, I’ve been resolved about how tonight is going to go. I even considered telling Sydney I wasn’t staying over tonight, which would have broken our tradition of me sleeping over when her dad isn’t home for the first time in years.

But then Holden showed up at Roxbury Diner with my sister’s crush so they could have a pseudo date. Maggie hasn’t stopped talking about it since. Holden has been elevated to deity status in her mind. And honestly, it meant something to me too.

I’m still not sure what his motivation for getting Ben there was, but he showed up. There were a million other ways he could have spent his afternoon yesterday, but he was there.

I don’t know how to act around him. If I’m being too forgiving or not forgiving enough.

That's the problem with Holden—he skews my reactions.

If any other guy had made me come and then sat there silent, I never would have been able to look him in the eye again.

If any other guy had set up a date for my sister with the guy she likes, I'd agree with Maggie about the pedestal.

When it comes to Holden, I can't figure out his motivations about anything.

He very easily could have stopped anything from happening between us—he's done it before. But he didn't.

He very easily could have said no to Maggie. But he didn't do that either.

Lily is curled up in her plush bed when I reach the bottom of the stairs. Her yellow tail taps against the hardwood floor as I approach and crouch down beside her. She's mostly lab but with some other breeds likely mixed in too. The monkey toy Eileen gave Holden is lying on the floor next to her, already bearing evidence of teeth marks.

I stroke her soft fur gently, lingering on the white hairs around her muzzle. She was brought into the shelter right after I started volunteering there in elementary school.

My parents set the volunteering up as an attempt to stop me from begging for a pet of my own. They'd just had the twins and were firm our house was crazy enough as it was. That a dog wouldn't be happy listening to screaming infants all day.

When Lily was brought in as a puppy, I instantly fell in love. I became obsessed with finding her a good home.

She ended up right across the street. Sydney wanted a cat. Holden was the one who begged his dad for the dog until he relented. He's the one who walks and feeds her too. It's one of the reasons I've never been able to see him as the villain he should be in my mind.

Sure, he broke my heart without warning or explanation. But he follows through on other responsibilities—obligations he actually cares about.

Lily whines when I stop petting her. I smile as I relent, moving my hand back to the soft fur and rubbing the top of her head. She lets out a satisfied sigh. “What a good girl,” I croon.

“Lucky dog.”

I startle at the sound of his voice, nearly falling on my ass as I spin around while squatting.

Holden smirks. He’s leaning against the opening that connects the living room to the kitchen. Arms crossed, but his pose is relaxed, not confrontational. Lily stands and pads over to him. He leans down to pat her head, keeping his eyes on me the whole time. I stand, twisting the hem of my t-shirt so I have something to do with my hands.

“You’re home early.” It’s not even midnight yet. I’m used to encountering him later.

He straightens. Lily continues into the kitchen once she’s no longer receiving attention. I hear her lie down with a sigh.

“It’s raining.”

I allow myself to study him a little closer. Note the darker droplets on the red flannel shirt and gray sweatpants he’s wearing.

“Okay,” is my creative response.

Holden saunters over to the sectional couch that takes up most of the living room. Sprawls out on the cushions.

The white t-shirt he’s wearing under the half-buttoned flannel rides up. My eyes are drawn to the strip of skin exposed like a magnet. To the line of hair and glimpse of abs.

Based on the grin that’s spreading across his face, my ogling isn’t all the subtle. Holden tucks one arm behind his head, the damn dimple that rarely appears indenting his left cheek. “Come here.”

I don’t even hesitate. My responses are skewed when it comes to Holden. Always have been. And it’s come into starker contrast these past couple of weeks. I thought I’d gotten over him—thought high school was enough time

to move past a childish crush.

If the thundering heartbeat in my chest is any indication, it wasn't. Heartbeats don't lie the way heads can.

Holden is taking up most of the couch. There's nowhere to sit next to him. So, in a move that surprises the both of us, I crawl right on top of him, only stopping when my chin is resting on his chest. His hands slide up my bare legs to cup my butt, pulling me snug against his body.

I bite my bottom lip, excitement and apprehension warring within me. This is him winning our battle of wills left over from the courtyard. Me admitting that last weekend meant something, that it wasn't a momentary lapse.

"Sydney is asleep?"

"Yeah. She passed out during the movie."

"Were you waiting up for me, flower?"

The nickname sounds different when I'm lying on top of him. When I can feel his dick against my thigh. Not just familiar or teasing. Intimate.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Not what I asked." Holden shuffles us, moving me to the side and then rolling over me. We've swapped positions, him hovering over me while I lie on the soft cushions.

I open my mouth to ask what he's doing. Nerves and giddiness swirl inside of me as his hands slide up from my waist and under my shirt. Words exhale on a gasp as his lips lower, teasing the skin just beneath my jaw. His hot tongue licks a stripe along the skin before he sucks it into his mouth.

"Don't—I can't—my parents—Maggie—Sydney."

Holden understands my mostly intelligible sentence. My shirt moves up, the bare skin of my stomach rubbing against the cotton and flannel he's wearing. "What about here?" His mouth moves lower, following the trail of his hands up my abdomen until cool air covers my whole chest. "Will anyone see if I mark your tits, Cassia?"

All I can manage is a head shake in response. I'm adrift in a sea of sensation, savoring the feel of him touching me. Above me. There's a pulsing throb between my legs.

I shift my hips, searching.

He smiles against my skin, lips light and teasing. "You want to come, Cassia?"

"Yes." The word is a breath.

I'm expecting him to move his leg so I can rub against it. Maybe use his fingers. When he sits up and moves back, I rise up on my elbows. "What are you—"

"Lie back."

I hesitate before listening, rolling my head to the side so I can watch him. He tugs my sleep shorts down, leaving me in my underwear. They're boring and blue, not what I would have chosen to wear if I'd had any idea he'd see them.

Holden smirks as his hand moves from my hip and between my thighs. I realize why when he traces the strip of fabric.

I'm soaked. There's no way to hide how affected I am.

His amusement disappears when I undulate my hips, trying to chase some stimulation from his fingers. They fist around the blue fabric, and then it's jerked away. All of a sudden, I'm basically naked. My pajamas and underwear are on the floor and my shirt is up around my shoulders.

"Holden..." I'm not as embarrassed as I thought I would be, spread out under him like this.

There's a part of me that feels powerful, watching his gaze darken to navy as his eyes linger on all the bare skin beneath him.

But I feel vulnerable too. He's fully dressed and I'm on display.

And I have no idea what he's thinking. How far he wants to take this. Based on his comment earlier, he believed me about being more experienced than I actually am. About last weekend being a regular night for me. If he'd

bothered to pay any attention to my stark lack of a social life, the idea is laughable.

“Fuck, Cassia. Just...fuck.” His mouth lands on my inner thigh, and I figure out what he’s planning to do. Anticipation and excitement streak through me, followed by the fizzle of nerves.

“No one has ever...”

I regret the admission as soon as it leaves my lips. That’s the problem with lying. It’s a web that spirals and expands, drawing you in and then twisting around you. It snags the truth and complicates it.

Holden’s expression softens, his fingers tracing the curve of my hipbone. “Let me make you feel good.”

I nod and wriggle, craving his touch as much as it intimidates me. I’m not sure how people do this with strangers. I’ve never been more aware of the years of shared history between me and him. The fact he raced me on the monkey bars and used to watch movies with me after Sydney fell asleep. He’s also the only guy I’ve ever fantasized about, the face I picture when I touch myself where his mouth is heading now.

When his tongue swipes my clit, it feels like a bolt of electricity. It’s a thousand times more powerful than my own fingers. A hundred times stronger than rubbing against him with two layers of fabric between us. It’s pleasure like I’ve never experienced, so potent and hot it wipes away any uncertainty instantly. I bite the inside of my cheek and dig my fingers into the couch to keep from crying out and possibly waking Sydney upstairs.

My legs fall open as wide as possible, allowing him full access. My hips lift, begging for his tongue. I’ll never, ever forget the way he looks right now. Hungry and focused—on me.

“Take off your shirt.” I barely recognize the rasp of my own voice. It sounds hoarse and needy. Desperate.

Holden sits up, lips glossy. He unbuttons the flannel slowly, teasingly. I hook my knee over the back of the couch and bite my bottom lip, teasing him

right back.

His white t-shirt disappears much more quickly, and then he's back between my legs. This time, I can see the powerful bunch of his shoulders. The bulge of his bicep, as he grips my thigh.

An orgasm hits me suddenly, with the force of a tsunami. I can't contain the moan that escapes as a hot flush works its way across my entire body, accompanying the pleasure rushing through my system. It goes on and on, wringing me out until I slump against the cushions, limbs loose and limp.

I'm not tired, though. And I'm very much aware of Holden on the other end of the couch, running a hand through his hair as he watches me with a satisfied smile. If he had any doubts about the fact I'm insanely attracted to him, I don't think he does any longer.

I sit up slowly, enjoying the lingering buzz humming through my body. Holden looks like a fantasy, leaning back with his legs spread, wearing just a pair of sweatpants. My shirt falls down as I move toward him, the brush of cotton against my sensitized skin impossible not to notice.

Holden's eyes turn hooded as my fingers trace the ridged muscles that cover his abdomen.

He says nothing. Doesn't guide my movements or tell me what to do. He just lets me explore the impressive topography of his chest, running my fingers over the hot skin. The only hair is a small patch just below his belly button. After I've traced the V that points between his legs, my hand ends up there. I swallow, then move lower, dipping beneath the elastic hem of his sweatpants.

"You don't have to."

The gravel in his voice heats my blood. Tells me he *wants* me to. "I know."

I slide my hand into his sweatpants, tugging the gray cotton down. He's not wearing anything underneath. The heavy weight of his erection bobs free. I close my fist around it, exploring the hard length the same way I did to his

chest. Tracing the flared head and the throbbing vein.

His abs clench, and I can tell he's holding himself back. I've never done this before, never even seen a guy's penis in person. It's bigger than I imagined, but I don't have anything to compare it to.

I swallow, then lean over and suck the tip into my mouth. He tastes salty. Groans when I run my tongue around the head. I gain some confidence, taking more of him into my mouth. I want to please him, want to give him pleasure the same way he crazed me.

His fingers thread into my hair. It's a gentle, light touch. A caress, almost.

I pull back for a breath. Stand. There's a flicker of something—disappointment, maybe—on Holden's face. It disappears when I sink to my knees between his legs, tugging his sweatpants down farther.

“Take off your shirt,” he tells me.

“Because I asked you to take off yours?”

“No. Because I want to look at your tits while I fuck your mouth.”

Electricity zings between us. It's not a total surprise to learn Holden has a dirty mouth. He's always had a colorful vocabulary. It's one of the reasons people were surprised we were such good friends when we were younger. Holden would be the kid dropping swears during recess while I was the one insisting everyone follow the rules when we played Capture the Flag. Me and Sydney make more sense. She's as much of a good girl as I am.

But there's something in me that craves the rebellion. That hates how people think they always know what to expect from me, who think I'm always sweet and polite.

Holden sees that in me. Draws it out of me.

So, I put on a show for him. I lean back on my heels and drag my shirt up slowly, revealing my skin to him inch by inch. His eyes grow hooded and heavy as I push my breasts together, his hand falling and stroking his dick.

“Cassia,” Holden whispers.

I lean forward, and he feeds the length of his cock into my mouth. I take

more than I did before, but he's too big for me to suck completely. He doesn't seem to mind, though. His hands fist at his sides, tendons tensing in his forearms.

Holden's jaw hardens and his breathing quickens. He groans. "I'm going to come," he warns. "Cassia. I'm going to..."

I suck harder, and he trails off with another groan. This is stupid. I know what he's telling me. I should take the out. What am I trying to prove? But I keep sucking, resolute in my decision.

He grunts, and my mouth fills with hot, salty liquid. I have to swallow twice before rocking back on my heels, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Holden tracks my movements like an opposing player on the court, focused and intense.

I don't know what to do. Movies and television shows don't show this part. There's a suggestive shot of clothes falling to the floor or a door closing or a light turning off, and then it's the next day. There's no awkward moment when you have to face the guy across the street slash your best friend's brother slash your former crush after rounding third base on his couch.

Do people even still use baseball analogies to equate sexual experiences? Sydney is just as inexperienced as I am—was—and she's the only person I'd consider asking, knowing she wouldn't laugh at me.

Holden doesn't make any move to cover himself. To move. He just sits and stares at me while I hold his gaze. In some ways, it feels more intimate than what just took place between us.

I've heard the stories at school. Seen the girls hanging all over him. Holden Adams is a notorious player. It's a large part of the reason I've avoided high school parties. I don't want to witness it. And that pisses me off, that I've allowed him to dictate so many of my decisions, while telling myself it was so that I could get into a good college and not have to worry about what to wear or what to say around my peers.

Right now, I'm equally annoyed that he's giving me nothing to go on. No

lead to follow. He's supposed to be the certain one.

I reach for my t-shirt and pull it on. Then stand and slide my underwear on, followed by my sleep shorts. My limbs still feel shaky, the lingering memory of pleasure loosening my movements.

Holden pulls his pants up and then leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Um, I'll head to—"

"You tired?" He cuts me off before I can get *bed* out.

I shake my head.

He stands and grabs the remote resting on the coffee table. Tosses it on the couch. "Put something on. I'll be right back."

I stare at him after he enters the kitchen and disappears from sight. He wants to watch something together? We haven't done that since middle school. And I definitely had no idea what size his dick was then. I should be mature enough to move past it...but I'm not sure I am.

If it was some other guy, I probably would be happy he wanted to spend more time together.

With Holden, I'm worried I'll say or do something to embarrass myself. If I haven't already.

I'm not comfortable or relaxed around him. I'm butterflies and heart palpitations.

Despite my apprehension, I take a seat on the couch and turn on the television. Because I'd rather be around Holden than not, and that's always caused conflict where my head and my heart are concerned. I scroll through the movie options until I land on some action thriller.

When Holden walks back into the living room, he's holding a bottle of beer. I twist the hem of my shirt, trying to act oblivious as he settles next to me. The cushions dip with his weight, and my stomach swoops as well.

"I was sober as a non-priest, flower."

I don't react to that statement. For one, I don't want Holden to think it

matters to me that alcohol had no influence during what just happened between us. Or that I care he listened to what I said about priests and drinking, that we have some sort of inside joke about it now.

Holden raises his eyebrows, then takes a sip. The muscles in his throat contract and shift, and I avert my gaze, trying to ignore how there's something masculine and mesmerizing about the motion.

More than not wanting to give Holden a reaction, *I* don't want to react. I don't want telling myself I'm not affected by him to be a lie...but it obviously is.

Something cold touches my arm and I jump. He chuckles, something in the sound rattling around my chest like spare change in a car cupholder. I glance down and watch a bead of condensation roll down the green glass bottle being offered to me.

"No thanks."

"You'll swallow my cum but not swap spit?"

A hot flush starts in my cheeks and spreads. I guess we're not pretending earlier didn't happen.

I clear my throat once. "Maybe I'm not thirsty."

Maybe I like the taste of you.

No way am I saying that out loud. I'm treading on uneven ground. Unexplored terrain. I don't know what is happening or what to say or how to act around him right now.

Holden's eyes scrutinize my expression, his gaze hot and probing. It sears my skin like a physical touch. "Okay," he finally says, turning back to the television that's affixed above the fireplace mantle on the opposite wall.

The movie I clicked on is up on the screen. I hit play and lean back against the cushions, trying to figure out a way to avoid spending more time with him. I need a minute—alone—to internally freak out about what just happened. I can't do that when he's next to me, smelling good and looking relaxed and acting like this is no big deal.

Should I pretend to fall asleep?

Go use the bathroom?

Act like I heard a noise and am worried Sydney woke up?

Finding me sitting on the couch with Holden would be less shocking than seeing us half-naked, but she'd still have questions. Holden and I don't hang out together. Especially alone, in the middle of the night.

"Why did you pick this?"

I startle again when he speaks, lost in my own head. "What?"

He looks over and quirks a brow. "This movie. Why did you pick it?"

"Um..." Honestly, it looked bloody and action-packed and something a guy would like. That he would like.

Somehow admitting that feels difficult.

Holden leans forward without waiting for more of a response, grabbing the remote and clicking back to the main menu. He hasn't put his shirt back on. The muscles in his back roil and tense as he moves, his body more man than boy.

It's unfair, really, how my childhood crush grew up to be the hottest guy in town. Why couldn't he look like most of the boys in our year? Uncertain and lanky and unsure? He looks how he acts—assured—and I love it and loathe it in equal measure.

I wonder how cocky he'd get—if I asked him to put a shirt on. It's as distracting as the smell of cinnamon swirling in the air.

It's not until he settles back against the cushions that I realize he put something else on the television. I glance between him and the screen, too surprised to speak at first.

"Why are we watching this?"

He sips more beer, lifting his legs and resting them on the coffee table. "It's what I thought you'd want to watch."

The words I was too nervous to say when he asked are delivered simply. Easily, like it's no big deal.

Holden looks at me. “Was I wrong?”

“No.”

“Okay then?”

I clear my throat. “Can I have some?”

He nods, then holds the bottle out to me again. I hesitate before sipping, rubbing my finger against the wet label until a few pieces of paper fall in my lap.

“I liked the taste.” I drink, then muster the courage to look him in the eye.

“You’d never swallowed before?”

“No.”

Something pleased and possessive washes over his expression, a response that makes my heart race and my blood warm. I wonder how he’d look at me if he knew my only sexual experiences have been with him.

I’m not brave enough to find out. I hand the bottle back and rest my head against the soft cushions. Focus on the screen, because this documentary about polar bears is one I’ve been wanting to watch.

“Why are you sitting so far away?”

I glance at Holden, then at the foot of space separating us. “Far away is a misnomer.”

“Stop talking like a nerd and move closer.”

“Wow. Such a sweet talker.”

He rolls his eyes. And then he *moves*, which I’m not expecting.

Holden is suddenly everywhere. A hot thigh presses against mine. A warm arm wraps around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him.

I don’t resist. I melt against him, feeling the ice around my heart thaw and crack. I tilt my head back, staring at the side of his jaw. The bruise there is faded now, nearly gone.

He doesn’t need to be sitting here, watching this. And he definitely didn’t need to glue our sides together.

“This is weird,” I whisper.

Holden rolls his head to the side so he's looking at me. "Is it?" he asks before returning his attention to the screen.

And for the first time—ever—I consider that maybe he's imagined this—us—too.

CHAPTER TEN

HOLDEN

Finn laughs, and it pulls me back to the present when I was just zoning out. The hard metal door I'm holding. The guys huddled around me. But then she appears, and I'm distracted again.

It was one thing ignoring Cassia at school before. It's very different now. Knowing how she looks naked. How she tastes. How she looks on her knees. The sounds she makes when she comes.

Fuck.

I stop that line of thought in its tracks, scrubbing a palm across my face and forcing myself to focus on the books I'm looking at instead. I grab the two I think I'll need tonight and shove them into my backpack.

Today is a day I've been looking forward to for months. It's the start of the basketball season, the first practice of what will be many before we win a state championship or lose trying.

I've barely spared a thought about basketball all day. Cassia has more power over me than I realized.

I wasn't planning for things between us to go as far as they did. I was planning to kiss her, since I hadn't the Friday before. Prove to her the past weekend was more than a one-off.

Confirm that there's something still between us, even if she wants to pretend otherwise. Ironic, since I've spent a good chunk of time pretending

too.

I wasn't expecting her to crawl on top of me. To be so responsive. I'd never gone down on a girl before. I'm not a total asshole in bed—I always make sure she gets off—but I've never prioritized someone else's pleasure.

Cassia said I don't want to know what she's done with other guys—but she's wrong. I do. Some masochistic, caveman part of me wants to replace every experience she's had with memories of me instead.

"You good, Adams?" Finn asks as we enter the locker room. "You've been distracted all day."

"Yeah. I just... This season is *it*, you know?"

It's not the only thing I'm thinking about, but it's not a lie. I am stressed about it. What it will mean for my family if I have options—my dad changing careers to come home or my sister left alone. What it will mean for my future if I don't get a college degree.

Finn's expression turns serious for a minute. "Yeah, I know."

But he doesn't, not really. He doesn't have to worry. His family is loaded. I don't think Finn even *wants* to play ball in college. Whatever comes from this season won't have the same consequences for him as they will for me.

The locker room is already full when we arrive. I see all the guys on the team regularly. At parties and in shared classes. Most of them show up to the old court for pickup games on the weekends too. But there's something different about being gathered together during the season, a heightened sense of comradery and anticipation.

I nod to the teammates I pass as I head toward my usual locker. It's right next to Jordan Eaton's. He bumps fists, then turns back to telling a few of the guys about the girl from Ridgemont he hooked up with this past weekend.

Ben Howard is part of his audience, and I hope he isn't listening to any of Jordan's advice too closely, especially if he's got a thing with Cassia's little sister. The protective urges I have toward Maggie are nowhere near as strong as how I feel about Cassia or Sydney, but they're there. In my head, Maggie

is still a little kid.

I finish changing into my practice gear and head straight into the gym. Coach Benson is already standing with Mr. Williams, who is officially a teacher in the arts department and unofficially our assistant coach. He helps out when he can, running a second set of drills for the JV guys and assisting with scheduling our season.

Coach Benson gives me a nod of acknowledgment that I return. Mr. Williams is busy writing something on a clipboard. I head straight for the rack of basketballs, feeling better once I have the familiar weight of the rough rubber in my hands. I dribble down the court to the opposite end, savoring the rhythmic smack of the ball against the hardwood.

There's still a prickle of anxiety in my chest. A reminder that the sphere I'm bouncing is my ticket to something else. Rather than just excitement to be playing, there's apprehension as well. Pressure.

I stop at the foul line and start shooting, sending the ball through the hoop over and over again. I haven't missed one, when Coach Benson calls us all over to the bleachers. He's the type of coach who encourages dedication out of his players, rather than demands it. He takes the sport seriously but doesn't insinuate the sun won't rise the following day if we lose a single game.

I take one half-court Hail Mary shot as I follow the rest of the team over to the blue and yellow bleachers that take up one wall of the gymnasium. I make it, prompting awed looks from some of the younger guys. Mark rolls his eyes as I drop down on the bleachers beside him.

Coach Benson begins by introducing the new members of the team, all of which I met. Then he launches into his expectations for the season. It's a speech I've already heard three times now. I zone out, more focused on playing with a stray thread on the hem of my mesh shorts.

Once Coach starts discussing the start of the season, I perk up. He outlines the schedule I have memorized, including our practices and weight sessions. Team dinners and away games. We'll have a couple of weeks of

straight practice before our schedule picks up, just before winter break.

My dad promised he'd be back for Thanksgiving and the week after, meaning he'll have a chance to see me play for the first time in over a year. He isn't the most athletic, his lifestyle of long hours on the road not really allowing for any sort of regular exercise routine, but he's always been supportive of my pursuits. And despite maintaining college is a possibility regardless of whether or not I get a basketball scholarship, I know it will be a big relief to him if I do.

Coach's talk ends and the guys scramble to stand, all eager to actually get out on the court. Today is sure to be a test, a rigorous workout to let us all know what is expected during the season. The most accurate shot in the world won't matter if the other team maintains possession the whole game because you can't keep pace.

"Adams. One minute."

I sit back down, watching the rest of the guys follow Mr. Williams over to the center of the court and start stretching. It looks like we'll be running first thing. Suicides, if I had to guess.

Coach studies me, rubbing one hand across the gray stubble that always peppers his jawline. "Ready for this, Adams?"

"Yeah, I am, Coach."

He nods. "Grades are good?"

"Yep."

"Laura Golden mentioned you turned in one hell of a paper."

I smile. That was nice of her. Mrs. Golden very easily could have told Coach about my D instead of the subsequent averaged B- that trying to impress Cassia earned me. I resolve to pay closer attention in History tomorrow.

"I've already got a few scouts lined up for the Covington game. If you're still wanting to play in college, I'll make sure to get everyone here I can."

I nod. "I am. Thank you."

“All right. Get out there.” He jerks his head to the left, toward the circle with my teammates gathered in the center of the court.

I stand and walk down the bleachers. They squeak under my weight.

“Oh, and Adams?”

I glance over at Coach, right as I’m about to pass him. “Yeah?”

“I made sure to mention the special attention you’re giving to the freshman when I talked to Dan Rivers and the other scouts. That’s exactly the type of leadership these schools are looking for. Keep up the good work.”

Special attention? What the hell is he...oh. He obviously heard about the outing with Ben. I followed up with hangouts with the rest of the freshman the next few days, so it didn’t look like I was playing favorites. Plus, Ben asked if I was going to, so I didn’t have much of a choice.

I nod and keep walking toward the team. If I get a basketball scholarship, it looks like I might have Maggie Nolan and her scheming to thank.



As soon as I walk inside my house, I beeline for the fridge. Practice was exhausting and I’m starving. I yank out a container of yesterday’s leftovers and spin toward the microwave. Then freeze.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I repeat, watching Cassia fiddle with the sponge she’s holding.

It’s not uncommon for her to hang around my house, but I wasn’t expecting it either. I’m usually home later, closer to dinnertime. And there’s a new dynamic between us—one I’m not sure how to navigate. Cassia says nothing, giving me zero clues about what she’s thinking or expecting out of this interaction. There’s no sign of Sydney.

I glance around the kitchen, which is much cleaner than it was when I left in a hurry this morning. All of the dishes have been washed and put away. The counters have been wiped. “You don’t need to clean when you’re over

here, you know.”

“I know.”

“Okay.” I walk over to the microwave and pop the glass dish inside, not sure what else to say.

“How was practice?”

I raise one brow at the question, mildly surprised she knew today was our first day. It suggests a level of interest in the basketball team I wasn’t expecting her to have. “It was fine.”

She sets the sponge down on the counter. “Ben and Maggie talk a lot. *Maggie* talks a lot about what they talk about,” Cassia explains.

“Guess that means I’m excellent at match-making.”

Cassia rolls her eyes. “You think you’re good at everything.”

“Do *you* think I’m good at...everything?”

I don’t mean it as an innuendo, but it comes out that way. I don’t think I’m imagining the way her pupils dilate. How her breaths quicken.

“Okay, what about this top?” Sydney’s voice announces her entrance a few seconds before she waltzes into the kitchen.

She barely spares me a glance, but I do a double take when I see her. Sydney’s usually straight hair is curled in long spirals. She’s wearing a full face of makeup, jeans, and a sweater that exposes an inch of her midriff. Most of the time when I get home, she’s in sweatpants and a ponytail that’s busy falling apart.

“It’s cute,” Cassia replies, looking Sydney over and nodding.

“Too little boob?”

“Jesus, Sydney,” I say, running a hand through my hair. There are some things you don’t want to hear your sister say, and that was definitely one of them.

“What? I didn’t ask *you*, Holden.”

“I’d definitely go with that sweater,” Cassia states, drawing my sister’s attention back to her.

Sydney nods and heads back upstairs.

“How many options have there been?” I ask.

Cassia laughs. I want to bottle it up, how that genuine amusement sounds. Tuck it away like a secret only I know.

“A lot.”

I smile, then clear my throat. “Look, about Friday night...”

She straightens, all the amusement immediately falling off her face. “We’re good. We don’t need to talk about it.”

Jesus, this girl. Maybe this is karma for how I’ve handled hook-ups in the past. The difference is, I made it clear to those girls I wasn’t looking for anything serious. Cassia is far more complicated. “I know we don’t *need* to talk about it. I *want* to talk about it.”

Sydney bounces back into the kitchen. She looks at Cassia, ignoring me as she pirouettes. “You sure this is what I should wear?”

Cassia nods. “Yeah. You look hot.”

The words are aimed at Sydney, but she looks at me as she says them. I quirk a brow at Cassia, trying to figure out what *that* means. If my sister wasn’t talking a million miles a minute, it would be a lot easier to figure out.

The microwave beeps. I pull out the steaming pasta and dig in, not even waiting for it to cool.

“What is all that”—I wave the fork at Sydney—“about?”

“Graham invited me to a party tonight.”

“On a Monday?”

Sydney glares. “It’s a study party.”

“What the hell is a study party?” I glance at Cassia. She shrugs.

“It’s just a casual thing,” Sydney tells me. “He invited me and I’m going.”

“Who?”

“Graham! Keep up, Holden.”

“Graham who?”

“He’s not on the basketball team, so you wouldn’t know him.”

I smirk at that. This is more snark than I’ve seen Sydney display...ever. She must really like this guy. “What is not-on-the-basketball-team Graham’s last name?”

“Warner.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Shocking,” Sydney drawls.

“So, you’re going to some random guy’s house?”

“You do it all the time, Holden.”

“Yeah...but it’s different.”

“Why? Because I’m a girl?”

Sydney’s tone makes it clear *yes* is the wrong answer here. Unfortunately, there are things that happen to girls at parties—even study parties, whatever the hell that really means—that guys just don’t have to worry about. I don’t feel like getting into an argument about that reality. “Because I’m older,” I say instead.

She huffs and flounces out of the kitchen.

I glance at Cassia. “What’s wrong with Sydney? She’s acting weird.”

“She’s *nervous*, Holden. She really likes this guy. I’ll keep a close eye on her tonight. We’ll be fine.”

“You’re going?”

“Yes...”

Cassia is looking at me strangely, which makes absolutely no sense. I’m not the one acting differently. Sydney has never gone out to a party because a guy invited her.

Most of the time, it feels like she’s the older sibling. But I’m suddenly very aware of the fact our dad is hundreds of miles away. If anything happens to Sydney, I’m the one who is responsible.

And I’m equally unenthused by the revelation Cassia is going. But I have no right to be. She can spend her night however she wants. One look at her

was all it took for me to forget everything I told myself this weekend about her being a dangerous distraction. I tore up the mental list of reasons to pretend nothing happened on my couch as soon as I caught a glimpse of her brown curls in the hallway this morning. Some space is probably a good idea.

“Do you know this Graham guy?” I ask before polishing off the rest of the pasta.

“Yeah, sort of. We’ve had a few classes together.”

“Sort of?” I shake my head and set the empty container in the sink. Then, realizing Cassia just cleaned, I rinse it and stick it in the dishwasher. “I’m going.”

“You’re *what*? Why?”

When I turn around, Cassia is looking at me with a bewildered expression. “Because *sort of* isn’t good enough. What if he’s a total creep?”

“He’s not a creep, Holden.” She rolls her eyes. “He’s president of the Honor’s Club, for God’s sake.”

“Sociopaths are always super smart.”

Another eye roll.

“Whatever. I’m going. What time are you guys leaving?”

“Eight.”

I snort. It’s an eight on a Monday party? Maybe there really is nothing to worry about.

“You don’t have to come, Holden.”

“I know,” I say, then walk out of the kitchen. I need to shower and attempt some homework before leaving. And text Finn, letting him know I won’t be coming over to play video games tonight.

I run into Sydney in the upstairs hallway on my way to the bathroom. “I’m coming with you guys.”

She halts in place, aiming a confused expression at me. “What? *Why*?”

“Because you’ve never gone to a party and you’re my sister. I don’t want anyone messing with you.”

“No one is going to mess with me. Cassia is already coming with me.”

“Even more reason.”

Sydney stares at me and I realize I just said more than I meant to.

“Cassia doesn’t go to many parties either.”

“What makes you think that?” There’s an edge to my sister’s voice. I’m not sure if it’s sticking up for her friend or something else. “Because they weren’t parties *you* were at?”

My jaw flexes. “I’m going to shower.”

“Holden. Seriously, you don’t have to come. It’s...sweet, I guess, but I’ll be fine.”

“Dad is in Minnesota. I’m responsible for you when he’s not here. If you want me to sit outside in the car, I will.”

Sydney scoffs and heads for the stairs. I hope that means I won’t be stuck sitting in the car.



Cassia and Sydney are standing by the door when I walk down the stairs just before eight. Despite obvious surprise about my choice to come, they’re clearly waiting for me.

“Okay, let’s go,” I say once I reach the front door. I grab a fleece out of the closet and look at the girls expectantly.

“What about your homework?”

I raise a brow at Cassia. “I did most of it.”

“I mean, you’re supposed to bring it.”

“Bring it?” I glance between her and Sydney, noticing they’re both wearing their backpacks. “Seriously?”

“It’s a *study* party, Holden,” Sydney says.

“I have no idea what that means. It’s a group homework session. What about that says party?”

Sydney looks annoyed. Cassia hides a smile.

I sigh and trudge back upstairs. I didn't make much progress on my assignments earlier; I showered and then watched basketball highlights for a while as I scrolled through social media. But sitting around doing homework with a bunch of strangers does not sound like my idea of a good time. Maybe I can feel the "study party" out and then head to Finn's until the girls are ready to get picked up. I could even ask Cassia to come with me.

It's a bad idea, I know. Not only is it a direct violation of everything I promised myself I wouldn't do, where she's concerned, but I'm positive at least one of the guys will hit on her. I'm not sure I'm capable of handling that well.

Sydney and Cassia are waiting out on the front porch when I descend the stairs for a second time. It's dark and chilly out, signaling fall's creep toward winter.

Sydney is quiet as we walk toward my truck, all of her babbling earlier, noticeably absent. The lamps lining the street cast a white glow over her anxious expression.

"He invited you to his study thing, Syd. He must like you."

"It's a group thing," she replies. "He invited Meredith Lowe too."

And...I'm out of my element. I have no idea who Meredith Lowe is. I can't even picture this Graham guy. My level of experience with relationships is the same as Sydney's: zero.

I'd be better at this if I had a younger brother. I'd know how to teach him to unsnap a girl's bra or roll on a condom. Sydney's interests have never merged with mine.

We're more like roommates on good terms than siblings. I'd kill anyone who hurt her, but as far as casual chitchat goes? I've got nothing.

The only advice I have to offer pertains to casual sex, and that's not something I want to encourage Sydney to partake in. If she's this nervous about going to the guy's house, I'm assuming—hoping—that step is a long

ways away.

“It’s a group thing, Syd. Of course he invited other people. He probably didn’t want to single you out or make you feel uncomfortable.”

Sydney nods, appreciating Cassia’s response far more than mine. I’m grateful for it too, until I start to wonder whether she’s speaking from personal experience. Her smiling at Harrison Baker is suddenly all I can think about. Cassia suggested she wasn’t interested in him, but that was in context to Sydney’s crush.

It seems safe to say Sydney is over that, based on her reaction to Graham’s invite. Will that change Cassia’s mind about Harrison?

The possibility bothers me a lot more than it should. Harrison is a good guy, as far as I know. His friend group overlaps with mine some, and I’ve never heard about him getting into trouble. I’m certain he’s never fought someone for money. He gets good grades. Has two present parents and a picket fence in front of his house.

“You sit up front, Cas,” Sydney says.

My sister doesn’t appear to notice the way Cassia glances at me as I unlock my truck, but I do. This is the first time she’s ever ridden in it. I bought it last summer with money I obtained legally, stocking groceries at the local supermarket, plus years of birthday money from distant relatives on my dad’s side.

It’s too easy to pretend it’s just the two of us sitting in here. After giving me Graham’s address, Sydney is totally quiet in the back.

“Your truck is nice.” Cassia isn’t as willing to sit in silence.

“Yeah?” I glance over at her before taking a left-hand turn, surprised by the choice of comment. Her car is at least a decade newer than mine. There’s a lingering tobacco smell in the cab and the brakes squeak. I’m not sure *I* would call it nice. More like functioning.

“Yeah. It seemed like it took a lot to get it running.”

It did. I spent weeks fiddling with the engine in the driveway. Mark

helped some and so did his dad, who's a mechanic. But I did the bulk of the work myself, watching videos online and reading manuals to make sure it runs reliably.

"It seemed that way, huh?"

Cassia's house is directly across the street from mine. I'm not sure if she meant to insinuate she watched me work on this truck last fall, but that's what I got out of what she said just now.

The dim light and fact I'm driving make it difficult to tell for sure, but I think she's blushing. At the very least, I watch her shifting in the seat, fiddling with the strap of the seatbelt and looking out the window instead of me.

It only takes another five minutes to reach Graham's house. It's a two-level Colonial, well-maintained and modest. I eye the basketball hoop visible to the left of the driveway. Maybe I'll just hang out here instead of heading to Finn's. My muscles are sore, but it doesn't take much effort to just stand and shoot.

There's no one stumbling down the front steps. No flashing lights or music.

"Looks like a rager," I say, as we walk up the brick front path.

"I told you, you didn't need to come," Sydney says.

The door opens before we reach it. A tall, skinny guy with a mop of curly blond hair is standing in the doorway. Graham, I'm assuming.

"Hi, Sydney!" He beams at my sister, making no attempt to hide his excitement about seeing her. It's cute, watching them exchange shy smiles. He greets Cassia next. His tone is just as friendly, but it lacks the same eagerness, making my opinion of him rise a little more. Treating Sydney well while having no romantic interest in Cassia are the two best ways to endear himself to me.

"Graham, this is my brother, Holden," Sydney says. "He wanted to come."

Wanted is a stretch. But I did choose to. I wasn't dragged along, so I don't dispute it as I hold out a hand to Graham. "Nice to meet you, man."

"You too," Graham says, as he shakes it. His grip is firm, but not tight. "Although we've, um, we've met. We had Physics together freshman year. Mrs. Liberman, third period. Remember?"

No. I barely remember taking Physics, let alone anyone in the class. But Sydney and Cassia are watching me closely. If bonding with Graham over sitting in the same classroom for an hour three years ago will make this "party" easier, I'm fine with lying. "Right. Yeah."

"Come on in," Graham says, stepping to the side so we can enter the house. The open floor plan is similar to the layout of my house, with the living room to the left and the kitchen back behind it. About a dozen people are sitting in the living room, most of them spread out on the fluffy rug covering the floor. Everyone has textbooks or notebooks spread around them.

A few faces look familiar. Probably people I've shared classes with over the years slightly more memorable than Graham.

Everyone stares as we enter.

"Grab a spot wherever," Graham says. "And help yourself to anything." He gestures toward the coffee table covered with snacks. "I'm just going to grab some more chips from the kitchen."

Graham heads deeper into the house, leaving us standing here. Cassia and Sydney start talking with some of the "party-goers." I'm not sure who came up with the term study party, but I think study *session* would be the more accurate descriptor.

I smile at the two girls who make eye contact with me but don't engage anyone in conversation. I head toward one open corner of the living room and take a seat on the rug, leaning back against the bookshelf covering the wall.

My muscles protest the movement and the sitting on the ground. I'm going to be sore as fuck tomorrow. Practice was rough and lounging on the hard floor isn't helping.

I unzip my backpack and pull out my laptop. While I'm stuck here, I might as well be productive. Whenever I've done work at a friend's place, there's always been a lot going on in the background. Finn is usually playing video games or smoking weed. Mark likes to tinker around with his dad's old cars when we're at his home.

Graham's house is silent and clean. There's not even music on. It feels like working in a library during study hall.

I glance up from the essay I'm typing when Graham walks back into the room. He takes a seat on the edge of the couch, right near where Sydney has settled. They smile at each other and then both start on homework. I want to laugh but don't.

Cassia is standing near the opposite end of the couch. She's whispering with the same blonde girl she walked into the cafeteria with on the day I approached her table.

I refocus on my essay before she catches me staring. I very much feel like the outsider in this studious group. Cassia and Sydney were right—there was no reason for me to come. If Sydney hadn't been acting so strangely and the word party hadn't come up, I wouldn't have.

Movement catches my attention out of the corner of my eye, right as I hit submit on the essay. Cassia is sitting down next to me, instead of staying near the couch like I expected her to. It feels like a show of solidarity of sorts, and it's also distracting.

I haven't checked on Sydney and Graham once, mostly because there's nothing they could be getting up to, sitting right here with everyone, but Cassia just a few feet away? Yeah, I won't be getting any more work done.

I pretend for a little while, pulling out my history textbook and skimming the assignment chapters, then stand and stretch. "Where's your bathroom, Graham?"

"Um, down the hall to the left. I can show you..."

"Nah, it's fine. Thanks."

I follow his directions, walking through the kitchen and easily finding the half bath located next to the pantry. Rather than head back to the living room, I walk out the back door and down the deck, ending up beneath the basketball hoop I spotted when we arrived. I shove my hands in my pockets and scuff a sneaker against the asphalt.

“There’s a ball in the garage.” I turn to watch, as Graham ducks into the garage and reemerges holding a familiar orange sphere. He hesitates like he’s considering tossing it, then walks over and hands it to me instead.

“Thanks.” I tuck the basketball under my arm, studying Graham as some hair flops in his face and he brushes it away. As far as high school guys go, Sydney could do far worse. But I still feel obligated to say, “You seem like a nice guy, Graham. But if you break my sister’s heart, I’ll break your face. Got it?”

Graham nods like a bobblehead. Based on the sallow pallor of his skin, he took my threat seriously. As he should. I’m pretty sure rumors about the fights by the old courts never made it past the popular crowd because I’m certain Sydney would have said something to me if she had any idea.

“I’m not much of an athlete,” he tells me, nodding to the hoop. “So I’m going to head inside.”

I chuckle. “Okay.”

Graham walks toward the house. I spin and start to dribble.

“That was...sweet?”

I pause to glance over one shoulder, squinting at the shadows until Cassia appears, zipping up the jacket she’s wearing. I palm the basketball as she approaches, rough rubber rolling against my thigh as I move the ball back and forth. “Just making sure he knows where we stand.”

“I’m pretty sure you scared the shit out of him.”

I shoot, smiling at the satisfying *swoosh* as the ball sinks through the basket. I jog forward to retrieve the basketball, then tell her, “Good.”

She rolls her eyes at me—again—and it makes me want to kiss her. So I

suggest the only thing that might distract me right now.

I nod toward the hoop. “Want to play?”

“With *you*?”

Her voice is comically shocked. I make a show of looking around the empty driveway, just to be a dick. “Good guess.”

“It’s just—I—we haven’t, in a while.”

“I know.” *My fault*, I think, and she’s probably thinking the same. “Want to?”

Cassia glances around like she’s looking for the right answer. Or maybe she’s just stalling for time.

“Nevermind.”

“No.” She unzips the jacket she just zipped and pulls it off. The shirt she’s wearing underneath clings to her stomach and breasts, and I realize this probably was a terrible idea.

Desire pools in my stomach. Getting turned on is not normally something I need to worry about while playing.

“Let’s do it.”

I know exactly what she’s referring to, but my mind still goes straight to the gutter. I need to focus before my body starts thinking for me. “You start.”

She catches the pass I bounce to her. “You think I’m rusty?”

“Are you?”

The last time I saw Cassia play basketball was in middle school. She didn’t try out for the high school team, even though she easily could have made it. Not asking her why she hadn’t was the biggest test of my resolve back then.

In answer, she sends the ball flying. I track the movement as it arcs and falls directly through the basket.

It hits the asphalt driveway with a loud *smack*. When I glance at Cassia with a brow raised, she smiles.

“Thank God. It would have been really embarrassing if I’d missed.”

Laughter spills out without permission as I retrieve the ball and pass it to her again. “Why did you stop playing?”

I regret the question instantly. Cassia’s expression turns somber as she rubs her fingers against the rough rubber, pressing hard enough tiny circles are probably indenting into her skin. “Just outgrew it, I guess.”

I scoff. She might as well have told me it’s none of my business. “Sure.”

Her eyes narrow. “It’s true. Sports take up a lot of time. I knew I needed great grades in high school to get into a good college.”

“Colleges also like admitting student athletes,” I point out. Digging the hole I’m in deeper, based on her annoyed expression.

“Why do *you* think I stopped playing?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“*Years* later. You must have drawn conclusions at the time.”

I exhale, looking away and running a hand through my hair. “You want me to say I thought it had something to do with me, Cassia? Fine, I thought it might have had something to do with me.”

“You think I make my decisions based on *you*? I’m not that pathetic, Holden.” She spits the words, and I realize I’ve colossally fucked up by bringing this subject up. There’s no satisfaction that I’ve cracked her sweet exterior. She’s mad and hurt, and it’s my fault. The realization sits in my stomach like a lump of lead.

“I don’t think you’re pathetic.”

“Gee, *thanks*.”

I inhale and exhale deeply, trying to release some frustration. Trying to come up with some way to salvage the conversation. But Cassia isn’t done.

“You think the fact I gave you a blowjob means I *want* you? Means I’ve *forgiven* you? God, you’ve got a lot of nerve, Holden. But you always did, didn’t you? You’ve always done whatever the hell you want. Fuck the consequences. Fuck other people’s feelings.” She shakes her head and drops the ball. It bounces a couple of times and then rolls away toward the bushes.

“Just don’t talk to me. We’re not even friends, *remember?*”

Cassia storms past me and inside. I listen to her and say nothing. I’m not sure what I would’ve anyway. Do I try to explain? Tell her the distance between us was my fucked-up way of trying to look out for her? Or do I focus on basketball, on my future, and go back to doing my best to ignore her?

I grab the basketball and slam it against the backboard so hard the whole hoop rattles.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CASSIA

I'm scrolling through my music library, looking for a playlist to listen to, when someone takes the seat next to me. I gape at Holden, watching as he adjusts the seat and pulls a water bottle out of his bag.

"What are you doing?" I hiss, glancing around at the surrounding empty seats.

"Sitting."

"Why are you sitting *here*?"

"It was open."

"So is half the bus," I tell him.

The PTA chartered ten coach buses for the senior trip to New York City. There are tons of other seats available. Most people are taking advantage of having a row to themselves to stretch their legs out or set their bags on the seat instead of the floor. Yet Holden—six foot two Holden—is folded into the cramped seat next to me, so close I can smell cinnamon and feel his body heat.

He swallows a sip of water and then turns toward me. "I'm sorry."

"For invading my personal space?"

His lips quirk. "Two seats are meant for *two people*, you know."

Whatever expression I make in response coaxes a full-blown smile out of him.

“That’s not what I’m apologizing for, though. I’m sorry about Monday night at Graham’s. I shouldn’t have asked about why you stopped playing. It’s none of my business. It wasn’t then, and it isn’t now.”

I *hate* that he’s apologizing. Not only because it’s uncharacteristic, but because he looks like he actually means it. Earnest and sincere. But what I *really* hate is that it forces me to acknowledge that I overreacted, and the only reason I did is because Holden has a much stronger hold on me than I would like.

The truth is, he *is* the main reason that I stopped playing. I associate the sport with him. But that’s not something I planned to ever acknowledge, and I hated that he was asking me to.

“It’s fine.” I look out the window at the high school’s parking lot.

We haven’t even left yet. There’s a four-hour drive ahead before we’re in the city. Four hours is a long time to sit next to someone you were hoping to ignore.

This trip is mandatory, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. It’s a final attempt to impart wisdom on the graduating class; to give us a glimpse of freedom before we’re set loose on the world next spring. That’s the school line, at least. Every student knows it’s an opportunity to let loose under limited supervision. Rumor is a girl got pregnant on the trip a few years ago.

A warm hand grasps my chin and turns it away from the window. I suck in a sharp breath at the contact, and I know Holden doesn’t miss the inhale. His thumb runs an inch across the edge of my jaw before dropping. Awareness trickles through my bloodstream from the one spot he was just touching.

“I mean it; I’m sorry. It’s just something I’ve wondered about for a while. That seemed like a good moment to ask. It wasn’t—obviously.”

My stupid heart latches onto *something I’ve wondered about for a while*. To the indication that Holden has given some thought to me since he all but ended our friendship.

“I overreacted.” I don’t elaborate on why and he doesn’t ask.

“I’ll move, if you want.”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay.” He leans back in the seat and then picks up my phone and starts scrolling through the music app I have open.

I’m flustered and frazzled. He’s too close. Too much.

“What are you doing?”

Holden doesn’t answer at first, continuing to scroll down the screen. Finally, he looks up. “You have good taste in music,” he tells me. “Guys, not so much.”

I take that comment to mean he saw Harrison talking to me before we boarded the buses. “What does that say about you?”

He blinks, like he can’t believe I said it. I can’t believe I did either.

“Maybe I’m talking about me.”

We remain locked in a stare-off until the bus’s loudspeaker crackles to life. “Last call, everyone! We’ll be departing in the next few minutes. Please make sure you have everything and that all bags are stowed properly. Mr. Harris will be distributing folders closer to our arrival to the city. Those will contain an updated itinerary for the weekend, along with your room assignments. Those are final. No room-swapping.”

There’s no grumbling. Switching rooms is a notorious part of this weekend. Nothing much the chaperones can do to prevent it, really, once keys are handed out. I’m apprehensive about sleeping in a strange place I’m sharing with a stranger, but, with the exception of Holden, virtually everyone in the senior class feels like a stranger.

There’s some saying about doing something every day that scares you. It sounds like a stressful way to live, but there’s probably some truth to it as well. Leaving your comfort zone is healthy, and this trip is definitely far beyond mine.

“Wake me up when we get there, okay?”

I glance over at Holden, who's dropped my phone and is now reclining his seat as far back as it'll go. His long legs get stretched under the row in front of us and he tugs the brim of his ball cap down, so it covers most of his eyes.

"Okay."

I study his relaxed profile for a few seconds, then turn to look out the window again. The bus pulls away from the high school, the familiar brick façade fading from sight as we turn onto the main road headed toward the highway.

I want to ask Holden what he's doing next to me. I want to ask him what this means. I want to ask him why he kissed me in eighth grade and hasn't acknowledged it in the four years since.

Back then, I did nothing to drive him away. I never told him I had a crush on him. But Monday night, I was very clear about asking him not to talk to me again. I overreacted, as I just admitted, and I regretted the harsh words, but I didn't give any indication of that to him. We haven't spoken since. But he's still here, next to me.

My phone buzzes in my lap. It's a text from Sydney asking how it's going. With not one but four question marks. I laugh under my breath before responding, letting her know we left the high school's parking lot about thirty seconds ago.

This will be the first Friday night we haven't spent together in a long time. But I associate the day of the week with Holden more than her.

I see Sydney almost every day. Aside from occasional glimpses at school, the nights Holden makes it home before I've fallen asleep used to be my one guarantee of time with him. My weekly hit and also my chance to show him I was just fine without his friendship.

And I am. I have Sydney, and there are plenty of girls at school I'm friendly with. That friendliness just rarely translates outside of school hours. Maybe it would if I did things that scared me more frequently.

But I miss him.

I was reminded of just how much on Monday night, when we were going to play basketball together. And when we watched the documentary.

Sydney hates sports and prefers watching comedies over anything educational. I've missed playing basketball and staying up late watching television shows with him. Things that I haven't done with anyone else since middle school. The reminder was a large part of why his question about basketball upset me so much. It dredged up all the resentment from the past years of nothing but some small talk.

I'm not sure I'm brave enough to ask him what happened. I was a confused thirteen-year-old harboring a crush and couldn't figure out if it was reciprocated or not. He kissed me and I thought it was. But then any confirmation was swiftly shut down when weeks, months, *years* of mostly silence followed.

Confusion turned into hurt. Hurt morphed into anger. And my pride kicked in. If he didn't want to be friends, then I wasn't going to *beg* him to be. We were navigating puberty and all that comes along with early adolescence. I thought we'd drift apart and then back together.

I gave up on that happening a long time ago. Or I thought I had, at least.

I can't figure out how we got here. Sitting side by side as two people who have barely spoken in years but know a lot about each other. Who have seen each other naked.

Holden appears to be fast asleep when I glance over at him. He's obviously not affected by my proximity the way I can't seem to ignore his.

The bus turns onto the highway. Fall foliage is out in full force, the trees lining the interstate boasting a broad array of red, orange, and yellow. They pass by like a watercolor as the bus picks up speed. I press play on a playlist and lean my head against the cool glass of the window. Close my eyes and try to fall asleep.

“Cassia. Cassia. *Cassia!*”

I blink. My eyelashes flutter, torn between sleep and waking up. The surface I’m leaning against isn’t hard and cold. Nope, it’s warm and smells like cinnamon.

Shit. Even before I open my eyes, I know what I’ll see.

Not only did I manage to fall asleep, I also traveled from leaning against the bus window to resting on Holden’s shoulder. I sit up straight, focusing on fixing my ponytail as an excuse for not looking at him.

“You kinda suck as an alarm clock,” he comments.

“Set one next time, then.”

I don’t look over, but I can feel his eyes on me. Weighing my irritation. Trying to figure out its cause.

A glance out the window reveals we’re already in the city. Miles of asphalt and multi-colored leaves have turned into skyscrapers and yellow cabs.

I play with the hem of my sweater, twisting the knitted wool.

“What’s wrong?” he asks softly, like it’s a secret between me and him.

I drop my hands. “Nothing.”

“It’s not *nothing*. If you don’t want to tell me, just say so.”

“It’s just...overwhelming, I guess.”

“What do you mean?”

“The city. It’s big and busy and...I don’t know. I prefer not to have people on top of me when I walk around.”

I also have some apprehension about spending the next couple of days with the senior class. But Holden knows who I hang out with. Mentioning that will only make me look like more of a loser.

He half-smiles. It disappears quickly, like he’s worried about offending me. “Does that mean Columbia is out?”

“I’m not expecting to have a lot of options.”

“What do you mean? Of course you’ll have a lot of options.”

“My parents have five more kids to put through college. I can’t afford to be picky.”

“You’re exactly what Admissions Offices look for, Cassia.”

“Well, I’m not a student athlete, so there’s that.”

Holden shifts beside me. Clears his throat. “I didn’t mean—”

I cut him off with a laugh. “It’s fine, H.”

He stares at me, clearly shocked. I haven’t called him that since we were kids. Since we were friends.

Now, I’m the one flustered. Thankfully, we stop in front of the hotel a few seconds later. We’re instructed to disembark quickly so the other buses can pull up and unload as well. Activity erupts around us, everyone eager to get off the bus, eat dinner, and get our room assignments. Holden and I are both silent as we follow the other students off the bus.

There are a few side glances and double takes. Our class is around five hundred students. Out of them, I doubt a single one doesn’t know who Holden Adams is. Who he’s friends with. And since at least half of them went to a different middle school, before the new high school was built and districts merged, they’ve never known Holden and I to have any familiarity.

Or maybe I have dried drool on my face. I swipe both cheeks once we’re on the sidewalk, just in case.

Mr. Malone, one of the teachers chaperoning this trip, is waiting, passing out folders with schedules and envelopes with room keys. According to the planned itinerary that was sent out to parents a few weeks ago, we’re supposed to have dinner delivered to our rooms tonight in preparation for an early morning tomorrow.

I see Mark and Finn disembarking from the next bus, along with the rest of the crowd Holden usually hangs around with. They all rode together, and he rode with me.

Because he knew I wouldn't have anyone to sit with?

Because he feels guilty about how our last conversation ended?

I have no idea, and I can't ask him without looking pathetic.

"Night," I say, then follow the stream of students being directed toward the elevators. Once I'm caught up with the group, I risk a glance back.

Holden's friends have all caught up to him, huddled around as they talk intently. Probably planning how and where to sneak off to tonight.

It's an important reminder. There might be some familiarity between us, but there's also a separation. Most of what Holden and I share is history, and it's supposed to stay in the past.

I don't look back again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CASSIA

The light above the handle flashes green, and I push the door open. I glance around, pausing when I realize it's not empty like I expected. "Hey."

"Hey." McKenzie Howard, my roommate for this trip, is studying me closely. I try to think of the last time I talked to her before this trip and come up blank. Most people think going to a smaller school means you know everyone.

Truthfully, I think it segregates people more. Once you're associated with a certain group, that's your group. You can't "meet" new friends, they're technically peers you've known for years. Blurring boundaries becomes awkward.

Last night, it was late enough for conversation between us to be limited. *You use the bathroom first and Okay if I turn out the light?* was straightforward.

Now, it's more awkward. There's another layer of uncertainty between us that's fueled by the fact that there's nothing to do. Today was exhausting, endless stops around the city scheduled closely together.

I hung out in the lobby with London and a few other girls I'm friendly with for a couple of hours after dinner, expecting to come back and find McKenzie gone. This is our second and final night in the city, so I'm sure some—most—seniors are planning to sneak out.

I assumed McKenzie would be one of them. I was banking on it, actually. It's awkward, being in here with her.

After changing into my pajamas, I take a seat cross-legged on the bed. McKenzie is still settled on the couch, busy on her phone.

I pick up the remote and start flipping through the channels. It's mostly news and sports. I stop on an action thriller with an actor who looks familiar, but it's halfway through and the plot is hard to follow. At least the gunfire and explosions keep the room from total silence.

I'm barely paying attention to the movie when there's a knock on the door. McKenzie stands and walks over to open it.

Grace is standing in the doorway. She's wearing a low-cut top and tight jeans, her blonde hair curled and her makeup flawlessly applied. "You ready?"

"Yeah, I, um, I thought we were meeting at the elevators?"

Grace spots me. Her expression flares with surprise. Obviously, her best friend didn't mention she was rooming with me. "I got bored," she tells McKenzie. "London fell asleep."

I already knew London was staying with Grace. She mentioned it when we were hanging out earlier.

There's nothing malicious about Grace's words themselves, but there's a superiority seeped into her tone. Some judgment of London that seems like it's really a slight at me.

It's lingered in her voice every time she's ever spoken to me, and I've never understood it. Her fake niceness is like an artificial sweetener. She's insistent on acting nice toward me but wants me to know it's not genuine. I suspect Holden has something to do with it. Grace *did* go to middle school with us. She knows we were once friends.

I raise a hand in a small wave. "Hi, Grace."

"Hi, Cassia," she replies, looking me and my pajamas over. "You look... cozy."

I smile, the expression tight.

Grace glances at McKenzie. “You have the tequila?”

“Yeah.” McKenzie walks over to her suitcase and pulls a glass bottle out.

I avert my gaze back to the television.

A male voice draws my attention to the doorway again. “Come on. You ladies ready to...” Finn’s voice trails when he sees me. “Cassia. Hey.”

I raise a brow. “Hey, Finn.”

Finn and Mark, Holden’s two closest friends, used to be guys I considered friends as well. Up until Holden stopped inviting me to hang out—with them, at all.

I wonder if Holden gave them a reason for distancing from me. I’m guessing not. He’s not the type to explain himself. And he was the common thread—the reason I was friendly with either of them in the first place. I’ve barely spoken to Finn since we started high school.

Finn takes a few steps into the room, acting like that’s not the case at all. “Whatcha watching?”

I shrug, since I’m not really sure. Finn seems to recognize the movie, though, because his eyes light up with excitement as he studies the motorcycle chase taking place on the screen. “Oh! I love this part.”

Well, that makes one of us.

“Finn!” Grace snaps. “Let’s go.”

She and McKenzie are waiting in the doorway. Impatience radiates from Grace. I’m surprised she’s not tapping her foot.

He jerks his attention away from the television, aiming it at me instead. “Wanna come, Cas?”

I’m shocked, both by the casual use of the nickname and the invitation itself. Questions fly to the tip of my tongue.

Why is he inviting me?

What are they doing?

Will Holden be there?

I swallow them all, forcibly. It's after curfew. Whatever they're doing, it's not school-sanctioned. If I decline, I know exactly how this night will end. And for once, that bothers me. I'm a couple hundred miles from Pembroke. If I stay out late, I won't have to worry about my parents noticing.

So I nod and stand. "Sure."

None of them expected me to agree, that much is obvious. Finn is the first to shed his shocked expression. "Cool. You ready?"

I nod again, turning off the television and pulling a sweatshirt on to hide the fact I'm not even wearing a bra. I feel silly asking them to wait for me to change, and I'm not sure what I would put on instead. The warm clothes I brought—sweaters and fleeces—are nothing like the cute tops Grace and McKenzie are wearing. None of them are wearing jackets.

All I do is slide on a pair of sneakers, leaving my sleep shorts on. At least I'll be comfortable.

Finn doesn't comment on my attire as I slide my phone and room key in the pouch of my sweatshirt and walk out into the hallway. He doesn't say anything at all, and neither does Grace nor McKenzie.

Apprehension swells, asking me what the hell I'm doing. I could be snuggled under the covers right now. As far as I know, Grace and McKenzie don't get in trouble, but Finn is a wild card.

Debauchery on this trip might be expected, but it's certainly not condoned. If we're caught, we could be suspended. My whole future could be gone in a flash. Nerves wriggle in my stomach, tightening into a ball of dread.

Finn stays silent as we walk down the carpeted hall, which must be a record for him. Usually, he won't shut up. In addition to not distracting me from my anxiety, it makes me worry what he's concerned about. Does he regret inviting me along?

There's audible commotion behind several of the doors we pass, and it

relaxes me some. Obviously, Holden's friends aren't the only ones flouting the rules. If the chaperones decide to check on anything, that lowers the odds we'll be caught.

Finn finally speaks as we're nearing the elevator bank. Unfortunately, his choice of topic makes me wish he had stayed quiet. "So you and Holden... what happened there?"

I tense, I can't help it. I knew coming was a bad idea. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Cassia. You and Holden used to be tight. Then one morning he's telling me and Mark not to talk to you."

I barely suppress the flinch that wants to surface. I could tell him the truth—that I'm just as much in the dark as he is. That Holden chose to end our friendship without consulting me, and I was too confused and heartbroken to consider confronting him until it felt too late and like too much time had passed. To the point that it felt pathetic to still be affected by it, to want to know answers.

The truth makes me look sad and discarded, like a used toy cast aside in pursuit of shinier objects. I'd rather Finn—not to mention Grace and McKenzie, who are eavesdropping—think that I played a more active role in the separation.

It's none of their business anyway. If I have to wonder, so should they.

"Ask Holden," I suggest, pressing the down button for the elevator and feeling all three of them looking at me.

Finn scoffs. "Yeah, I tried that. He didn't tell me shit."

"There's your answer then," I say as I step inside the elevator.

The descent to the ground floor is silent. So quiet I can hear the elevator's gears shifting, which is disconcerting.

I trail behind Finn, McKenzie, and Grace once we exit. They veer to the left of the lobby and down another carpeted hallway. They all seem confident in wherever they're going. I resist the urge to ask. I'm not sure it matters; I'm

along for the ride at this point. *Expect the unexpected* needs to be my motto for this trip.

Finally, we stop. Finn knocks three times on the door, and I roll my eyes at the exaggerated cloak and dagger routine. No wonder he liked the spy movie I was watching so much.

Mark opens the door. His eyes skate over the group, land on me, and widen before he aims a questioning look at Finn. Finn is already walking past him, with Grace and McKenzie close behind. Mark's stare moves to me instead.

While Finn is easy to read, Mark is not. He's not as impenetrable as Holden. But he's serious and expressionless most of the time, like he is right now.

"Hey, Mark."

"Hi, Cassia."

"Uh, cool if I come in?"

"Wha—oh yeah. Of course." He holds the door open wider and I slip past him, into what I realize is the hotel pool. Hot, humid air swirls the scent of chlorine around. There's a group of people clustered around the far end where the lounge chairs are set up. Otherwise, the pool deck is empty.

Finn, Grace, and McKenzie have already melded into the group. I feel very much the outsider as I approach the loose gathering. McKenzie sets the glass bottle she brought down on the tile with a clang. I'd like to think that sound is what causes the pause in conversation, but I'm pretty sure it's my approach.

I scan faces I know by name but wouldn't consider friends. These are the popular kids, the people who never had to wonder about where to sit at lunch or whether they would have a date to a school dance.

I ate in the library more than a few times freshman year before Sydney joined me at Pembroke High. I've gone to Homecoming with a group of girls each year. To say I don't fit in here is no understatement.

But I attempt to act otherwise, walking forward with a confidence I don't feel.

Holden isn't here. It incites a strange mix of relief and disappointment. I'm relieved he won't witness how out of place I am, my inability to fit in with his friends.

But he would have been a lifeline of familiarity. I probably shouldn't trust him to look out for me, but I do. And if he's not here, I can't help but wonder where he is instead. I seriously doubt he's asleep, obeying curfew.

Conversation starts up again right before I reach the group.

I settle on a chair, tucking my legs up underneath me. It feels like the temperature has risen, sticky warmth coating my skin and curling my hair. It makes me glad I kept my shorts on. The other girls here are dressed similarly to Grace and McKenzie. I'm guessing they're all sweating in the tight clothing.

I rub a finger against the hard plastic edge of my room key, safely tucked away in the pocket of my sweatshirt. It feels like an escape route. I'll stay here for a little while and then head back upstairs.

My phone buzzes. I pull it out to see a message from Sydney. It's a photo of Lily, sitting outside of Holden's bedroom door with the stuffed monkey that's become her favorite toy. *She misses you guys*, she adds in a second text.

I stare at the photo. Zero in on *you guys*. It chafes. I know Sydney—of all people—doesn't mean it to sound like a coupling, but it's so easy—*too easy*—to imagine a me and Holden.

I like both messages right as a door slams. Everyone looks toward the pool entrance. A jolt of adrenaline runs through me, wondering if it's a school chaperone or hotel employee here to bust us.

Holden walks into the room instead, with Jordan Eaton right behind him. A different sort of anxiety floods my system.

"You're late," Mark calls out.

“And you’re supposed to knock three times,” Finn adds.

Holden rolls his eyes as he walks over. He scans the group, looking for somewhere to sit. But then his eyes land on me.

I drop his gaze like it burned me, then immediately chastise myself. Not only does it make it seem like I’m unsure or embarrassed about being here, I can’t read his reaction to the fact that I am.

These are his friends. I blame my inability to maintain eye contact on the way I’m in his element.

I obviously didn’t look up the pool hours and policy, but I’m confident they’re flouting both. I’m amongst people I don’t know well in a situation that could blow up in my face.

There’s no avoiding Holden, though, when he takes a seat at the end of the lounge I’m perched on. I know it’s him before I look up, based on the glimpse of flannel I catch out of the corner of my eye and the hum under my skin.

When I glance over, he’s already looking at me.

“Hey.”

I clear my throat. “Hey.”

The talking around us sounds muted, almost like I jumped in the pool and am listening to it from underwater. I hope it’s in my head, not that they’ve actually quieted to listen to our conversation.

I wait for him to ask what I’m doing here.

He doesn’t. He glances down at my phone, which is displaying the photo Sydney just sent.

One corner of his mouth lifts. “She’s up late.”

I check the time. Just after midnight.

Something else occurs to me. “Happy Birthday.”

Holden glances up, and our gazes lock again. It’s not light enough in here for me to read the emotion swimming in his eyes. Only the emergency lights are on, emphasizing the fact we’re not supposed to be in here. The planes of

his face are shadowed, all harsh angles and sharp lines. “Thanks.”

“I’m rooming with McKenzie,” I say. “Finn and Grace came to get her. Finn invited me.” I shift so I’m sitting cross-legged after offering the explanation he didn’t ask for. My knee hits Holden’s thigh, but he doesn’t move away. Neither do I.

He says nothing in response. His placidity emboldens me.

“Finn asked me what happened between us. Why we stopped being friends.”

A noncommittal hum is the only response I get.

“I told him to ask you, and he said he has. That you wouldn’t tell him.”

This time, Holden raises a challenging brow. “So?”

“Would you tell *me*, if I asked?”

“I’d ask why it took you four years to.”

Outrage courses through me, heavy and hot. *He* breaks my heart and then has the gall to ask why I didn’t confront him about it sooner?

Not that he knows about the heartbreak—I hope. But regardless, he had to know distancing himself would hurt me. Would lead to insecurity and second-guessing.

“I can take a hint, Holden. If you didn’t want to be friends, that was fine by me.”

“*Want* has never been part of the problem, Cassia.” He sounds irritated with *me*, which I don’t understand. Almost offended that I’m questioning him, that the subject that used to be taboo between us has come up.

It makes no sense to me, but most of me and Holden since high school started has been a puzzle. I should give up on collecting pieces. But it’s hard to do when he’s sitting next to me, when I’m enjoying his proximity. When I keep replaying what happened between us that Friday night. If I had pushed for more, would he have had sex with me?

“Holden! You playing?”

I look away from Holden—probably for the first time since he sat down

—to see that everyone else has gathered into a tighter circle. The bottle McKenzie carried down has been set in the very center, suggesting they're recruiting for some sort of drinking game.

“Yep.” He stands, and I assume he's walking over there. Instead, he jerks the lounge I'm sitting on closer, so it's part of the periphery of the circle.

I fall back against the cushions, not expecting the sudden movement and unprepared to stay upright. “You *dick*.” I speak without thinking, embarrassment coursing through me as everyone looks at me with shock.

Holden grins as I sit up. Amused by my outburst, not contrite.

“Truth or Dare, Holden?”

I scoff, both with annoyance that Grace is choosing Holden to start with and because of the irony we're playing a game that involves the word truth when there are so many lies stacked up between us.

Predictably, Holden chooses dare.

Grace jerks her chin toward the pool. “Take a dip.”

There's murmuring amongst the group. Guys grumbling the choice of dare is lame. Girls excited about the prospect of Holden stripping to swim. Maybe I would be too, if I hadn't already had a private show.

But I doubt it. There's always been an innate possessiveness when it comes to Holden. Some claim that I can't make or resist. Watching other girls ogle over his abs is not my idea of a good time.

I focus my attention on anything but Holden as he stands. Jordan Eaton is sitting directly across the circle from me. When he catches my eye, he smiles. I smile back, hesitantly.

Jordan is on the basketball team with Holden. He moved to Pembroke sophomore year, though, so I don't even have the distant history that I do with some of the other people here.

I startle when a ball of fabric lands in my lap. *ADAMS* is spelled out on the back of the gray sweatshirt, but the fact the guy next to me is now shirtless is really the only clue I needed to know the sweatshirt is Holden's.

I don't think his aim was off. Holden is the star of the basketball team, for Christ's sake. He's making a point. I make one too, shrugging the sweatshirt off my lap.

"Actually, I don't feel like swimming," Holden says.

He walks to the center of the circle, unscrews the top of the tequila, and takes a long pull from the bottle. I watch the shift in topography on his stupidly muscular back before he turns around and returns to my side.

When he sits, he doesn't pull his sweatshirt back on. His presence next to me is impossible to ignore. His knees are spread, and he's leaning back on his palms. It's like he's trying to encroach on as much space surrounding me without actually touching me anywhere.

I swallow. Glance at Jordan again. He's not looking at me this time, and it feels purposeful. Grace is having the opposite issue. Her gaze is direct and annoyed—and aimed straight at me. She's clearly irritated I'm here, and I'm assuming Holden's choice of seating arrangement has only amplified it.

"Eaton. Truth or Dare?"

I look at Holden, surprised by the edge to the question. He's friends with Jordan...right? I see them at school together. They showed up here together. But there's a challenge and maybe a warning laced in the words that don't sound very friendly.

Based on the nervous way Jordan clears his throat, he notices it too. "Uh..."

Jordan glances at Mark, who's sitting next to him. Mark shrugs.

"Truth, I guess," Jordan decides.

"Did you cheat on Lacie with McKenzie?"

There's a rumble of whispers around the group. Obviously, this is a well-known rumor or a poorly kept secret.

Jordan rolls his eyes. I think it might be a bit of false bravado, based on the flush to his face. But it could also be attributed to the temperature in here. If I were wearing a bra, I would have taken off my sweatshirt a while ago. It

feels like the humidity has saturated everything I'm wearing, and I can only imagine what my hair looks like.

"Lacie and I were already over. And you're one to talk, Adams."

I don't need to look at Holden. I feel him stiffen beside me. "What the fuck does that mean, Eaton?"

"Just, I mean...you know." Jordan smirks, then glances around the group. Interestingly, no one else seems interested in engaging in the conversation.

I glance around, literally in the middle of Pembroke High's inner circle. It appears less leaks out than I thought, since I never heard any rumors about Jordan and Lacie. Or involving my current roommate.

"Know *what*?" Holden challenges.

Jordan is silent, seemingly trying to figure out how to backtrack under Holden's glare.

"I think he's referring to how you *play* off the court." It takes me a second, and Holden turning to stare at me, to realize that I'm the one who said that. There are a few muffled chuckles around us, but Holden looks serious. Surprised.

His intensity is focused on me now. I don't shirk away from it the way Jordan did.

"I'm not a cheater."

"I know. That requires commitment."

Someone whistles, long and low. A muscle jumps in Holden's jaw, but he says nothing in response. Jordan is the one who speaks next, choosing someone to keep the game going. I miss who he selects and whether they pick truth or dare, too fixed on holding Holden's stare. It seems important, somehow, that I don't drop eye contact.

He looks away first, without giving me much of a glimpse of what he's thinking. I play with the ends of my hair, trying to figure out how I can extricate myself and head back upstairs.

I don't regret coming. Based on the curious glances I'm getting, I might

have successfully disabused some ideas about me being the senior class's goody two shoes. There's a thrill to that.

"Cassia."

My head snaps up at the sound of my name. I focus on McKenzie.

"Truth or dare?"

I deliberate for a few seconds, then decide. "Truth." I think—hope—there's less that can go wrong there.

"Who was the last guy you kissed?"

At first, I'm relieved she didn't ask anything more invasive. Then I realize it's probably because she doesn't think I've done anything more than kissing.

And *then* I realize I was very wrong about truth being the less damaging choice. The honest answer to that question is not one I want to share. I don't want Holden to know he's the last guy I kissed.

We haven't kissed during either of our recent...lapses.

Which means the last guy I kissed was him—nearly four years ago. Admitting that will give Holden the impression I've never gotten over him.

While I know there's some truth to that—more than I'd willingly admit—it's nothing I want *him* to know. He'll read into what happened in his driveway and on the couch—think it meant something to me instead of being hormone-driven. That it wasn't about what we were doing, but rather that it was him I was doing it with.

If I answer truthfully, everyone else here might not know *when* we kissed, but they'll know we have at some point.

Holden has spent the past few years acting like I don't exist, especially while we're at school. I'm certain he doesn't want everyone knowing we've kissed, even if it was before high school started.

The longer I'm silent, the more oppressive the humidity around me feels. Everyone is waiting for my response...and I can't make myself speak the two syllables of his name.

I untuck my legs from under me and stand, feeling the blood rush down and heat my skin further. Eyes follow me as I walk over to the glass bottle. The only other person who has chosen to drink as a penalty was Holden.

The cap of the tequila comes off easily, and I take a healthy swallow. Smoky alcohol burns my throat and pools in my stomach. I want to gag or make a face, but I do neither. I enjoy the surprised expressions around me. Me drinking is almost as shocking as me sharing the truthful answer to that question would have been.

Mark is grinning, which feels like an accomplishment in comparison to his usual stoicism. He was always my favorite of Holden's friends. Less self-centered than the rest of the popular crowd.

I set the bottle back down. For a second, I entertain the idea of sitting somewhere else. I don't *want* to sit next to Holden. I'm trying to get him out of my head, which is especially hard to do when he's inches away.

Everything he does confuses me. He sat beside me on the bus yesterday. Didn't talk to me at all today. Then sits next to me now. It feels like a game of tug of war.

And I want to walk away. To not care what he does and why.

But feelings aren't a switch you can turn on and off. Love doesn't have to be requited in order for it to feel real. If it were easy to get over someone, there wouldn't be millions of songs about heartbreak. If it were simple to not care about someone by sheer force of will, moving on wouldn't be a monumental task.

So I know, even as I glance around, I'll end up right where I was. Literally and emotionally.

I zone out as the game continues. The whispering over seeing me drink is annoying, but it also distracts from the fact I neglect to choose who goes next. Truth or Dare skips on without me, full of side chatter and inside jokes.

I mostly stare at the smooth surface of the pool, inhaling chlorinated steam and feeling warmth slowly trickle into my bloodstream thanks to the

sip of tequila.

Finn comes up with a dance routine for his dare. I take the opportunity to stand and head into the attached locker room. The air is cooler and drier in here. I inhale deeply as I use the bathroom and then wipe my face with a damp paper towel. I linger for a little while, trying to decide what to do next. Should I leave right away or wait a little longer?

When I walk back into the pool area, I'm expecting for nothing to have changed. It has. Instead of a crowded space, there's only one person left by the pool.

Holden is sprawled out on the lounge we were sharing earlier, hands tucked behind his head as he stares up at the ceiling. I glance up, wondering if there's something to see besides white plaster. There isn't.

I walk over toward him slowly, scanning the space like everyone else might be hiding and about to leap out. "Uh, where did everyone go?"

"Game got old. They went out to a club." He keeps his eyes on the ceiling as he answers.

"A club?"

"Yep. New York has a lot of them, I hear."

I'm expecting a mocking, sarcastic edge, but instead he just sounds matter of fact. "And...you didn't want to go?" Nothing about his answer explained why he's still here.

"No."

I consider that. Stick my hands in the pocket of my sweatshirt and rock back on my heels. "Okay. Well, I'm gonna..." My voice trails when Holden suddenly stands, still shirtless, and now he's tugging down his sweatpants. "What are you doing?"

He straightens, tossing his sweatpants on top of the hoodie he shucked earlier. I force my eyes to stay north. "Relax, flower. Nothing you haven't seen before, right?" And then he walks over to the edge of the pool and jumps in.

Whatever expression I'm wearing when he surfaces makes him smile.

"Water is warm," he comments, spreading his arms.

My front teeth dig into the soft flesh of my lower lip. I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't, and yet I'm embarrassingly tempted. There's no one else around to wonder or speculate. I don't have to worry about what anyone is thinking about me—what judgments they're making about me—except for him.

Maybe that's who I should be most concerned with. I'm giving him more and more ammunition against me. Providing more and more evidence that he still has power over me—lots of it. When—and I'm sure it'll be a when, not an if—he breaks my heart again, I'll only have myself to blame.

But I know I'll agree anyway. "They're not coming back?"

"They're not coming back."

I exhale. Step out of my shorts and toss them on top of his clothes. It's an unexpectedly intimate sight, seeing our clothing mixed together in a discarded heap.

I grab the hem of my sweatshirt next, maintaining eye contact the whole time. He's seen me naked before, same as I've seen him. But twice feels more momentous than once. Smart people don't make mistakes twice, and I like to think I'm a smart person. Not an intelligence that's measured by your grades, but simple sensibility.

When my hoodie and tank top drop onto the lounge, I drop eye contact. I run toward the edge of the pool and leap, taking a deep breath before oxygen disappears. Warm water saturates my hair and surrounds my skin, sliding over me in a sensuous glide.

I remain underwater until my lungs begin to burn, breaking the surface and facing him.

For seconds—minutes, maybe—we stare at each other. Water drips out of his hair in small streams, traveling over the bridge of his nose and the angle of his cheekbones. Our strokes are lazy, just the bare minimum necessary to stay afloat. The pool isn't very deep; I brushed the bottom easily when I

jumped in. But the motion of treading water is something to focus on, rather than him.

“Why didn’t you answer?” That’s all he asks, but I don’t need to ask him to clarify what he’s wondering about.

I drag my fingers through the silky water, focusing on the smooth glide instead of his intense gaze. “Doesn’t seem like any of their business—who I’ve kissed.”

“Is it mine?” One corner of his mouth tugs upward. “You know, as someone you’ve kissed.”

It’s the first time he’s ever acknowledged it happened. He’s made comments or references to the past here or there, but he’s never outright stated what immediately predated the end of our friendship. I’ve always assumed he was worried I got the wrong idea. That he kissed me on a whim—as a dare, maybe—and regretted it right away. That he panicked and put as much distance between us as he could—an impressive amount, honestly, considering my friendship with Sydney and how we live across the street from each other, not just in the same town.

I stare at the wall of windows, wishing they displayed something besides foggy darkness. “You.”

“Huh?”

“That’s the answer. *You*. I didn’t answer because I didn’t think you’d want everyone to know.”

There’s a *long* pause following that confession. I’m not brave enough to look over and try to read his reaction.

“So…”

“I haven’t kissed a guy in four years. Yeah.” I tilt my head back. Partially because the sensation of warm water soaking my scalp feels really good. Mostly because I don’t want to meet his gaze when I admit that.

“Why?”

“Herpes, mostly.”

His laugh echoes across the surface of the water. But then it fades, and we're left in oppressive silence again. "You said it was a regular occurrence. Made it seem like there were other guys." His voice is quiet, not accusing. But there's no mistaking the undercurrent of irritation.

"Yeah, I lied. You might have heard of it?"

He scoffs, almost a laugh, but not quite. "Yeah. I'm familiar with the fucking concept, Cassia. I'm just not sure when *you* started lying to *me*."

"Probably around when you started ignoring me."

Holden swims closer. Everything inside me sings at the proximity. He reaches out, fingering one of my wet curls and tugging on it gently. "So *everything* we've done...was your first time?"

If I wasn't blushing before, I definitely am now. "Disappointed?"

He laughs, but it's humorless. "No. I'm definitely not disappointed." His hand moves to my jaw, tilting my head so I'm forced to look at him.

I can't read anything but sincerity on his face, and it soothes something inside of me that was convinced guys like him desire girls who are experienced and bold and know exactly how to pleasure them.

He kisses me, deep and hot and desperate. I sink into the kiss, everything inside me craving his touch. Holden is tall enough to stand. Water rushes by as he moves us closer to the edge of the pool. Rough cement rubs my bare back as I'm crushed between him and the tile.

His hands run up my thighs until they reach my butt and slide over my hips. I wrap my legs around his waist, heat sparking in my stomach when I feel him reacting.

He chose to stay behind instead of going out with his friends.

He followed through on the dare after they'd left.

He kissed me first.

I'm responding to those decisions just as much as his touch. For the first time in a long time, it feels like he's choosing me.

Prioritizing me.

It shouldn't undo the past few years when he's chosen differently, and it doesn't. But it means *something* to me. Makes me feel sexy and desired and all the ways I want to feel around him. Makes me feel more than I wish it would. But I've never had any control over how I feel around him—about him—and that's always been most of the problem.

I'm sure Holden is aware of the way his erection is pressed against me, but he doesn't attempt to do anything more than kiss me. His hands remain on my hips, holding me in place as he plunders my mouth.

I love kissing him. I missed it more than I thought you could miss something you'd only experienced once.

Kissing him chases away all the chatter in my head.

Happy thrills patter in my chest. If I were braver, I'd ask Holden if kissing always feels like this.

Sydney's first kiss was last fall, with a guy from her English class at Homecoming. The adjectives she used to describe it were wet and awkward. Kissing Holden has never felt that way, not even back when we were far younger and even more inexperienced.

I'm disappointed when Holden pulls back, but I work to hide it.

"We should get out of here," he says. "Someone might look in at some point."

I blink rapidly, recalibrating with reality. For however long we were kissing, I completely forgot we're in a hotel pool after curfew, naked. "Right. Yeah." I'm flustered. Turned on and confused. How does he keep doing this? Keep surprising me? Keep consuming me?

I swim toward the stairs. Holden hauls himself right out from the edge. Water sluices off his body and his muscles ripple, which does nothing to alleviate the ache between my legs. I watch as he adjusts himself and then pulls on his sweatshirt and sweatpants.

I hurry to put on my clothes too without bothering to dry off, not wanting to be the one of us left naked.

Water drips from my hair, soaking the hood of my sweatshirt immediately. I can feel droplets sliding down my skin beneath the fabric as I pull on my sneakers and confirm the room key is still in my pocket, along with my phone.

Holden holds the door for me, surprising me again.

“Thanks,” I murmur as I pass him and start down the hall toward the elevators. The lobby is empty and there’s no one at the front desk. I jab the up button twice, gnawing on my bottom lip as Holden catches up and stops next to me.

The doors slide open a few seconds later. I step inside and hit the button for floor 8. Holden shoves his hands in his pockets and leans back against the wall, making no move to hit another button.

When a seven flashes on the screen above the buttons, I glance over my shoulder at him. He’s already looking at me, and my heart flips right as the doors open with a ding.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I phrase it like a question, even though I know I will. We’re visiting the September 11 Memorial and Museum tomorrow morning and then leaving the city in the early afternoon.

“It is tomorrow, flower.” He straightens and walks past me into the carpeted hall. I hurry after him before the doors can close.

“You don’t have to walk me to my room. McKenzie might be back.”

“I’m walking to *my* room.” Holden pulls out a key identical to the one tucked in my pocket.

“Oh.” For some reason it didn’t occur to me he might be staying on the same floor of the hotel.

He sleeps across the hall from me every Friday night. But this feels different. Maybe it’s the lack of Sydney’s presence.

“Who are you rooming with?” I ask, trying to distract myself—and him—from my wrong assumption.

“Jordan. But he’s sleeping in Claire’s room tonight.”

Once again, “Oh” is the best response I can come up with.

Claire Scott is friends with McKenzie and Grace. She was at the pool tonight. I’m curious how *that* dynamic works, especially if what Holden said about Jordan and McKenzie is true.

My conversation with London and the other senior girls I’m friendly with centered around classes and college visits and the latest Taylor Swift album. Not backstabbing or cheating or sex.

But what I’m really absorbing is that Holden just told me he has a hotel room to himself tonight. Would he have mentioned it if I hadn’t asked about his roommate? Is he expecting Grace or one of the other girls always hanging on him to show up after she gets back from the club?

Holden kissed me in the pool, but he was also the one who suggested we climb out. He was still hard when we got out, so I don’t think I did anything to turn him off.

I don’t *know*, though. Do other people just know what to do in situations like this? Was there some guide I missed? A tutorial I could have taken? My only reference is how my peers act at school.

My parents don’t police my social life because they’ve never had to. I go to school and I volunteer at the animal shelter and I spend time with Sydney.

There’s no way they would allow me to go to any of the parties Holden frequents. My dad works for a local law firm that’s handled plenty of drug and DUI cases involving teenagers. He’s always made it clear to me and my siblings what standard of behavior he’ll accept.

Most of the time, it’s one I have no problem adhering to. I’d rather watch movies and make chocolate chip cookies with Sydney on Friday nights than get drunk at a crowded party where I’m sure I’d feel just as out of place as I did earlier.

Holden stops walking. I glance between him and the closed door, deciding what to say.

He solves the dilemma for me. “Want to come in?”

My response is quick. Maybe too rapid. “Yeah.”

Holden swipes his room key and opens the door. I walk in first, feeling his presence right behind.

The door closes, and we’re alone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HOLDEN

The water in the bathroom shuts off. I flip the remote in my hand, then start spinning it in circles.

I'm nervous. I haven't been nervous around a girl since...well, since Ginny Davis's Halloween party in eighth grade.

I can trace exactly how I got here, easily. The simplest place to rest the blame is on Finn. He was the one who invited Cassia to the pool, according to her.

It's Jordan's fault as well. He's a good friend and a decent basketball player, but when it comes to girls, he's the worst guy I know.

I saw the way he was looking at Cassia earlier. Somehow, he keeps drawing in girls who know he's fucked over their friends, and there was no chance I was going to sit back and watch him do that to Cassia. Watching Harrison talk to her before we left Pembroke on Friday was bad enough.

But none of that required me to invite her into my hotel room.

We're in this situation squarely because of me. And I'm caught in a strange state of excitement and uncertainty. This is *exactly* what I've gone out of my way to avoid ever happening.

I don't trust myself around Cassia.

This isn't a drunken fumbling at a party. And even if it were, I'm pretty sure I'd be feeling this same way.

The bathroom door opens and Cassia appears. She asked to use the bathroom as soon as we walked into my room. Part of me thought it was her way of taking some time to figure out how to backtrack out of this situation. Then the shower started running. I figured she wanted to wash off the chlorine. I was planning to turn on the television so I could suggest we watch a movie or something.

I didn't consider this possibility.

Cassia walks out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a fluffy white towel. She didn't bother to put on any clothes. She didn't even dry her hair. Dozens of tiny rivers run down her arms, dripping onto the generic, patterned carpet.

I swallow. Watch her walk toward me. Her face is neutral. Her hands are gripping the towel so tightly I can see the whites of her knuckles.

Cassia doesn't stop the way I'm expecting. She comes closer and closer, until her legs are bumping against my knees. "You're sure Jordan isn't coming back?" she asks.

"I'm sure." My voice is the consistency of gravel.

She asked me something similar at the pool. It twists my insides, knowing that Cassia doesn't want anyone else but me to see her this way. It fuels the possessiveness she's in full command of.

A drop of water falls from her hair and lands on my thigh, darkening a spot of the gray cotton. I should have turned on the television. The only sound in the room is the gentle whoosh of the heating system as it exhales warm air. If anyone in the rooms on either side of mine is still awake, they're impossible to hear. It sounds like—feels like—the world has narrowed down to just me and her.

I'm startled by how much I like it. How right it feels.

Cassia stares at me. Girls don't usually look right at me like this. They want my attention, sure. But once they have it, they turn shy. Sly. Quick glances, then looking away. Slight brushes, then pulling away. Part of it is

probably an act. Maybe they think I want uncertainty or are playing hard to get.

Ask most of Pembroke High, and Cassia Nolan wouldn't be considered bold or brazen. But right now, she's both. One knee lands on the bed, then the other. She takes a seat in my lap, directly on top of my hardening dick.

It's the sexiest sight I've ever seen. Maybe—probably—because it's *her*. Cassia's hair hasn't dried in its usual curls yet. It's dark and wild, falling over her pale shoulders in messy waves. The white towel hugs the very top of her breasts, teasing at the cleavage beneath. Her legs are on full display, parted and pulling the towel up to the top of her thighs.

"What are you doing, flower?" I don't mean for the endearment to come out, but it falls out of my mouth anyway.

Somehow, it adds to the anticipation. It's an acknowledgment. I can't treat Cassia with any of the separation I should. I can't pretend she's just another girl in a bedroom.

Rather than answer the question, she shifts. The towel pools around her waist, and her tits are right in my face. I'm sure she can feel how hard I am. How much I want this and how desperate I am to be inside of her. To be the *only* guy that's been inside of her.

I've never slept with a virgin before. In the past, it's been an unpalatable option. Extra work with added potential for a messy separation, which I know makes me sound like a dick. I know it's a big deal to some girls, and it's never been something I've felt equipped to handle.

Sex is a physical release for me the same way fighting is. I don't attach any emotion to the act itself, I just enjoy the resulting adrenaline and endorphins.

But the thought of being the first guy that Cassia will be with? There's something primal about it. Incendiary. It heats my blood and makes my cock so hard it's painful. Destroys the indifference that's usually unshakeable.

I grip the towel that's the only barrier blocking her body, warring with

myself. She shouldn't be offering this. Because I'm selfish enough to take it.

Years. I've spent *years* trying to resist this pull between us. We landed here anyway.

"Are you sure?"

This time, she answers. "Yes."

I scan her face. Features I know better than my own. I turned on the overhead light when we came in here. I wasn't trying to set any sort of romantic atmosphere. Its bright glare reveals everything. I can see everything, from the green swirl in her hazel eyes to the freckle just below her jawline. The small scar just below the dip of her chin from falling off the monkey bars in sixth grade. The generous swell of the breasts I've jerked off to way too many times.

"Are *you*?" she asks. Her confident façade falters, insecurity saturating the two words. She's not sure if I want this—want her. It's a misconception I'm suddenly desperate to correct.

And that's all it takes. The battle inside me ends. There's a chance this was always inevitable between us. In some ways, capitulating feels like another failure on my part. But the sense of victory—of relief—is much stronger.

I don't believe in destiny or fate. I'm not even sure if I believe in love. The romantic sort, at least. The kind where you *choose* to love someone without the link of any obligation.

But there's something that feels right, feels settled, about Cassia being naked in my lap. I fall into the pull, yanking the towel away and looking my fill. She lets me stare, holding my gaze every time it flickers back to her face.

I pull my sweatshirt off and shift so she's more on the bed than my lap. Kick off my sweatpants and boxers, leaving me as naked as she is. I consider turning off the lights but don't.

I like this—like seeing her. It's such a contrast from every other time I've had sex, there's no comparison.

Cassia bites her bottom lip as I lie down beside her. There aren't words that explain how this feels. Some combination of confusion and euphoria. Her hair is a dark tangle spread out on the sheets. She rolls on her side, facing me.

"I've never done this before."

"I know."

She's looking to me to take the lead, but it feels like I've never done this before either. It's never felt like this before with anyone else.

Her body moves closer to mine, until our bare skin is brushing. "I want to, Holden. I want you to fuck me."

Some of my confidence makes a sudden return. I don't know what it is about Cassia that disarms me so thoroughly. But I know those aren't words she could have uttered easily. She's putting herself out there—for me. Trying to entice me, as if I need any encouragement.

I reach out and brush some hair away from her face. "I'm going to, baby."

Her body stiffens. I still, just as surprised. I've never—not once—called anyone by that pet name. Based on the uncertainty that flashes across her face, Cassia doesn't think that's the case.

I roll above her, searching for any hint of reservation. There's none. I lean over, fumbling for the condom Jordan left on the bedside table.

He brought a box and passed them out when a bunch of the guys were hanging out in here last night. I left the one I rejected yesterday by the hotel phone.

I don't ask her again, but I give Cassia a minute to watch me. A chance to change her mind, if she wants to.

She doesn't look uncertain, but she does scoff as I toss the wrapper in the trashcan. "Prepared, huh?"

"Jordan brought them. I wasn't planning on doing anything this weekend."

Another scoff, this time louder. I crawl back over her body, easily shifting

her into the position I want her in. The irritation disappears as I hover over her, apprehension appearing instead.

“I *wasn't*.”

I never justify my actions to anyone. Don't ever explain myself. Not to my friends, not to girls. But it feels immensely important for Cassia to know this wasn't my plan—for us to end up in a situation like this. Or even worse, for her to assume I figured I'd get my dick wet regardless, and she's just a stand-in for someone else.

“It doesn't matter. I don't care. I know you're not a virgin, Holden.”

Cassia is saying exactly what would normally prompt a sigh of relief. Coming from her, all it does is piss me the hell off.

I grab both of her hands and hold them above her head with one hand, using my other palm to spread her legs. She's so wet I can see her arousal. Smell it. It eases some of my annoyance, but not all of it.

The tip of my dick brushes her clit and her hips jerk, instinctively seeking more contact. I slide my hand up her thigh. Slow. Teasing.

She writhes beneath me, a red flush working its way across her body. Her breathing quickens into desperate puffs.

I hide it, but I'm just as affected. There's nothing I want to do more than push inside her.

“You don't care, Cassia? This could be any dick you're so desperate to get inside you? If I'd had a different girl right where you are last night, that wouldn't bother you?”

Anger overtakes her expression. I'm playing with fire, just begging to be burned. I'm also walking a line so thin I can't even see it.

This thing between me and Cassia, it won't last. It's lust. She and I are about to head in two very different directions, and we both know it. We're satiating curiosity that's been there since puberty before the opportunity is lost for good. I can't lose sight of that.

But at the same time, I know it means something. To her, and to me. I

can't *not* acknowledge that.

I lower my hips, letting her feel all of me. Cassia gasps, her back arching. Her breasts are right in my face and I finally give into the temptation, swirling my tongue around one nipple and then gently sucking.

She swears loudly, her whole body jerking against me.

“Do you care, Cassia?”

“Do *you*?” she spits, turning my own question around on me again.

“If I didn't care, I wouldn't ask.”

There's a pause. Then, “I care.”

The words are annoyed and rushed. But they're all I was looking for. I push into the wet clench of her pussy, watching her react to the intrusion.

I let go of her hands so I can grip her hips with both hands, holding her in place so I can control the speed and the angle.

Cassia's head falls back as her eyelashes flutter. Her teeth sink into her lower lip. I brush her clit with my thumb, worried she's in pain. Her inner muscles tighten around me as I slide deeper.

For the first time, I'm worried how long I'll last. I can't distract myself from what's happening between us, can't focus on anything but her looking like every fantasy I've ever had. It's too easy to get lost in the moment, to become fully consumed by her.

Cassia watches where we're connected. It's every intimacy I thought I'd shirk away from. I feel laid bare, every flaw and fear exposed, just from how she's looking at me sliding inside her. I'm barely inside. She's so *tight*, and I'm nervous to exert much more pressure.

“Can you kiss me?” she whispers.

In answer, I do exactly that. It's messy and heated. Nips and sucks without any finesse or pattern, like a dance we're making up as we go.

Cassia wraps her legs around my waist. I slide deeper, taking advantage of the way her body naturally opens. She stretches around me, her lips parting against mine.

“You okay?” I whisper.

“Uh-huh. It’s just...weird. It feels weird. Huge.”

Usually, girls commenting on the size of my dick is a nice ego boost. It’s what every guy wants to hear. But right now, I’m more concerned with the grimace in her expression. “Bad weird?”

She shifts under me. “I’m probably not going to come. Most girls don’t their first time. Just...move. You can, you know?”

It’s so Cassia, turning her pleasure into some sort of statistic.

“*Of course* you’re going to come.”

Does she think I’m so callous I don’t care if she enjoys this? The thought pisses me off. Irritation helps me regain some of the control the novelty of being inside her shook.

I pull out, almost completely, and then push back inside. This time, there’s less resistance. I still go slow, fighting the urge to thrust hard and deep.

This is what Cassia will forever remember as her first time. I’m determined to make it memorable for her. Good memorable, not painful or awkward. Fuck how it feels for me. I kiss a line down her neck as I rub circles right above where I’m entering her.

Cassia moans when I rock into her for the third time and a different sort of satisfaction rushes through me. I didn’t think I could be more turned on or more affected than I am right now. But hearing her pleasure—knowing I’m the one inciting it—is the most powerful aphrodisiac I’ve ever experienced.

I rock in deeper on the next thrust, gripping her hips and guiding her to meet my body when I fall into her.

It’s...indiscernible. Intense and consuming. Every time I shove my cock a little deeper, inching closer and closer to release. I hang on with everything I can, determined to make her come first despite being right on the edge and barely in control.

Her moans come faster and louder, interspersed by the sound of my name

spoken like her favorite swear.

I move faster, continuing to play with her clit and breasts. “You take me so good, baby. You feel that? Come for me, Cassia. Come on my cock.”

Her pussy flutters around me, responding to the dirty talk. A familiar feeling begins to build. It starts in the base of my spine and spreads throughout my body, electric and consuming. I keep talking, part of me wanting to shock her, part of me hoping it will make this more memorable in her mind, and all of me praying she’ll come so I can finally let go.

When she does, it surprises both of us. I feel it around me. Hear it echo in her moans. See it explode in her expression.

My dick swells as I empty inside her, coming longer and harder than I ever have before.

We’re both breathing heavily as I roll off her and yank off the condom. I toss it and lie back down, my heart racing and my skin sticky with a mixture of sweat and chlorine.

I search for something to say and come up totally empty. I’m grateful; it felt like a gift, but telling her thank you sounds lame. Asking if she’s okay is redundant.

Cassia climbs off the bed and walks into the bathroom without saying a word. I sit up and pull on my boxers, a strange mixture of relief and regret filling my chest.

There’s no party downstairs to disappear into, which is what usually follows sex. Should I offer for her to sleep here? I wait for the trickle of dread to appear, but it doesn’t. Sleeping next to her sounds...nice.

She reappears, dressed in the same sleep shorts and sweatshirt from the pool. “I won’t mention you to McKenzie if she’s back yet,” Cassia says.

Apparently, she doesn’t want anyone to know we slept together. Or maybe that’s what she thinks I want?

“Because it’s none of her business, or because you think that’s what I want?”

Her eyes widen, like she expected me to just nod along. “Both.”

I scoff. “You’re wrong.”

She hesitates before speaking again, and I hate it. I want her to be honest with me, not be weighing words.

“I knew what this was, Holden. You’re not—we’re not—it was just sex, right?”

I can’t figure out what part of that chafes. Why it feels like I should be shaking my head in response instead of nodding. Once again, she’s saying exactly what I should want to hear.

She nods too. “Okay. Good night.”

Without consciously deciding to, I’m standing and walking over to her. I’m still not sure what to say, so I act instead. I tilt her chin up and kiss her. Deep and heady. Thorough and consuming.

Her eyes scan my face once our lips separate.

“Good night.”

Whatever she’s wondering, she doesn’t voice it. Cassia smiles and walks away, out of the room and into the hallway. The door shuts behind her and I sink back down onto the bed, resting my face in my palms and then scrubbing them over my face.

Trying to reconcile how that felt right and wrong.

Like everything and nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CASSIA

The familiar shape of Pembroke High School appears. I rub at the condensation that's formed on the inside of the window. The trees that separate the main brick building from the football field are nearly bare, just brown branches waving in the wind with only a few orange leaves stubbornly clinging to the bark.

The bus comes to a stop along the curb. Immediately, the rustle of activity picks up around me as my peers stand and stretch. Grab belongings and say goodbyes.

I stand and pull my backpack on before following the flow of traffic down the few steps and onto the sidewalk. The leaves that left the branches crunch beneath my boots as I scan the bags being unloaded from the luggage compartment beneath the bus. I finally spot my duffel bag and pick it up, slinging it over one shoulder.

"I got it." Suddenly, there's no weight on my shoulder.

I spin around, then take a step back.

Holden is close, closer than I expected him to be. He grips the handle of my bag since his own is slung over his shoulder.

I clear my throat. "You don't have to."

"I know." There's something warm and soft in his expression, an intimacy that makes my insides feel like toasted marshmallow.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, not sure what else to say to him. We haven't spoken since I left his hotel room last night.

The night itself was perfect, everything I imagined and more. But it wasn't reality. I thought Holden and I were fated before. That fantasy crashed and burned. My expectations are rock bottom this time. I wanted Holden to be my first, and he was. Maybe—hopefully—that was the closure I needed.

The butterflies in my stomach say otherwise.

“You saw my text?”

“Yeah. I did.”

His message saying he was riding with the guys because they had to go over something for the team was unexpected. It felt like something you'd send to your girlfriend, not the girl you had a one-night stand with.

“Sorry I, uh, forgot to respond. I fell asleep.” I didn't know what to say in response either, but that feels harder to admit.

“Did you not sleep well last night?” Holden asks innocently. For anyone eavesdropping on our conversation—which I hope is no one—it's innocuous.

But I catch the teasing glimmer in his eyes. The upward curve of his mouth.

I want to be the girl who's suave and unaffected. Who has a flirty, clever response ready for any teasing. Instead, I'm the girl with warm cheeks and a tied tongue. Who's spent all day replaying parts of last night, worrying about what I might have done wrong.

I smile, then look at the ground. I'm so far out of my depth here, it's not even funny.

My familiarity with him is a double-edged sword. There's the scrawny six-year-old I moved in across the street from and used to play H-O-R-S-E with. Then there's the eighteen-year-old version who avoids commitment and who was inside me last night.

I know him and I don't.

Sometimes I hate him and I also might be in love with him.

Complicated doesn't begin to cover it.

A warm hand lands on my chin and tilts it upward. Blue eyes search my face. "Are we good, Cassia?"

"We're good."

Holden doesn't look away or drop his hand. "Are you sure?"

"I knew exactly what it was, Holden. Or rather, what it wasn't."

He studies me, and I have absolutely no idea what he's thinking right now. His expression is a blank page with absolutely no words on it. It's strange—how you can feel so close and familiar to someone in one way, yet so distant in others.

Eventually he nods, then looks away. "Your ride is here."

I follow his gaze to the blue minivan parked in one of the first rows.

My family is here. My *entire* family. The twins are both in soccer jerseys, so they must have all come from their afternoon game. My dad waves when he sees me, and Regan is holding a sign that reads *Welcome Home Cassia*. I smile at the sight. My family is crazy and loud, and I can't imagine my life without them.

I sneak a peek at Holden. No one is here for him. His mom walked away, and his dad is gone most of the time. Sydney put off her permit test since she had me and Holden to drive her around, so she won't get her license until this summer. With both of us out of town, she's stranded at their house.

"It'll be noisy and you'll probably have to sit on some Goldfish crumbs, but if you want a ride..."

He glances at me, smiles, and it hits me square in the center of my chest. It looks like a special smile. A secret smile. A *you get me* smile. The sort that wreaks havoc on my heart and has me replaying parts of last night in my head without the filter of uncertainty. "I told Finn I'd come over for a bit," he says.

I nod. "Okay. See you later."

I reach out to grab my bag back from him, but Holden just chuckles and keeps walking toward my family.

They all watch us approach curiously. Me and Holden—together—aren't an expected sight, at least not anymore. The twins are arguing over a soccer ball and Sally is drinking from a juice box. Otherwise, everyone's attention is solely on us. My mom and Maggie's gazes feel especially probing.

"Hi, sweetheart." My mom is the first to speak, stepping forward and giving me a hug as soon as I reach them.

"Hey, Mom." I hug her back but drop my arms quickly.

It's stupid, considering he's known me since my family moved in across the street in first grade, but I don't want Holden to see me treated as a kid anymore. Especially after last night.

I glance at Holden and discover he's talking with my dad. About basketball, by the sound of it. My dad has always been an avid fan, and I was the only one of his kids to stick with the sport for longer than one winter.

"Did you guys lose this?" a familiar voice asks. Harrison is approaching, a soccer ball in his hands.

My mom glances between it and the twins. "Boys! What did I tell you about playing in parking lots?"

"Sorry, Mom," they both mumble.

"Thank you," my mom tells Harrison, taking the soccer ball from him and tossing it into the minivan. "It was very nice of you to bring this over."

"No problem. I've got younger siblings too." Harrison smiles at my mom, then shifts his gaze to me. "Hi, Cassia."

"Hey, Harrison."

I can feel eyes bouncing back and forth between me and Harrison, but I resist the urge to look over and see who is paying close attention to us.

"Have fun on the trip?" he asks, in that easygoing way of his.

"Yeah, I did. The Met was cool."

"The Met was a highlight for me too." His tone is light. Flirty. We were part of the same group for the museum tour.

I smile, not sure what else to say. Harrison smiles back, but it drops off

his face quickly.

“Baker.” Holden’s voice is close. Right behind me.

“Hey, Adams.” Harrison mirrors Holden’s polite, detached tone.

I play with the zipper of my jacket as he glances between the two of us.

“I’ll see you guys later.” He gives me another smile, one that looks more forced, before he walks off.

“Your bag is in the car.”

I glance over one shoulder, meeting Holden’s gaze. “Thanks.”

A small nod and then he leaves as well. I can see Finn waiting on the opposite side of the lot, along with Mark and Jordan and a bunch of his other friends.

My parents start piling all the younger kids into the van. Maggie walks over and nudges me in the side. “So really, how was it?”

It’s rare my little sister is interested in what I have to say. Most of the time, it feels like our roles are reversed. Like she’s the wiser one between the two of us when it comes to life experience.

“It was fun.”

“Did you—y’know—do anything?”

“There were tons of trips. We went to the Empire State Building and the Met and—”

Maggie snorts a laugh. “Yeah, okay.”

Belatedly, I realize what she was actually asking. The senior trip debauchery is legendary, and she was asking if I partook.

For a split second, I indulge the idea of telling her I drank tequila, went skinny-dipping, and then had sex with Holden Adams.

Would she even believe me? She’d probably consider it a joke. Even if she did believe me, Maggie is notoriously terrible at keeping secrets. She spoils group gifts for our parents every year.

“I think he likes you.”

My head snaps to the side. “What?”

“Harrison Baker. I think he likes you.”

“He was just being nice.” I fall back on my standard answer, smothering the disappointment Maggie wasn’t talking about a different *he*.

“He came over here, Cassia.”

“So did Holden.”

“Yeah, but he’s *Holden*.”

I have no idea what that means, but I think it’s a slight at me. As in, Holden would never be interested in me, but Harrison might be.

“Let’s go, girls!” I turn around to see my parents, Sally, Regan, and the twins, have all piled into the minivan. I climb into the way back and move a few toys off the seat before buckling in. My dad pulls out of the lot, and I keep my gaze firmly fixed on the road ahead, not the group gathered in the corner of the parking lot.

It was fleeting between us. Temporary. I knew that all along. But I admit to myself, just for a moment, that I wanted it to be more. Want it to happen again.



“This tastes funny.” Sydney holds a spoon out to me.

I take a bite of the chocolate chip cookie dough she’s offering and chew. Swallow. “Did you add salt?”

“I think so?”

“Syd,” I groan.

Sydney is usually as fastidious as I am. But when it comes to certain things—namely baking—she’s totally scatterbrained.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

I’m less confident, but I continue rolling balls of dough anyway. The trays of cookies get slid into the oven and then we end up at the kitchen counter, sipping on the hot chocolate Sydney made when I first arrived. I

lasted about an hour amidst the chaos at my house, unpacking and finishing one assignment that's due tomorrow, before crossing the street.

"So...was it wild?" she asks.

I've been preoccupied with rescuing her baking project since I crossed the street to her house an hour ago. We haven't discussed the senior trip beyond the few texts we exchanged while I was gone.

"It was different," I answer. "It felt grown up, you know?"

Sydney bobs her head. This feels very different than talking about the senior trip with Maggie. Sydney is more similar to me. She's not expecting any crazy stories and she would be shocked to hear I have any.

"I roomed with McKenzie Howard, so that was interesting."

"Was she nice?"

"Yeah. I think so. She wasn't trying to become best friends, but she didn't ignore me or anything."

"So you guys talked?"

"*Do you want to use the bathroom first?* Was most of it."

Sydney laughs. "How was the city?"

"It was a little overwhelming. But energetic. It was like you stand there and can just soak it all in." I fill her in on all the sights we saw and all the places we went to, then admit, "I played Truth or Dare."

"Really?" Sydney's tone is a mixture of shocked and excited.

"Yeah. Finn invited me when he came by the room to get McKenzie."

"Finn? Was Holden there?"

"Uh, yeah. He was."

"He wasn't rude to you, was he? I know you guys are..."

Sydney's voice trails. This is the closest she's gotten to addressing the rift between me and Holden in years, and it's incredibly ironic it's happening now.

"No. He wasn't rude."

That's all I say, and I watch Sydney forcibly shove down her curiosity. I

show her some photos I took around the city and brainstorm a plan regarding another hang out with Graham until the cookies are done. By the time they're cooled, it's dinner time.

"I should head home. Dad wants to look over my college essay tonight." I finally managed to finish a draft right before leaving on the senior trip.

Sadness crosses Sydney's face like a cloud passing in front of the sun, the same expression she wears every time that the topic of college comes up. I nudge her shoulder. "It's still a year away."

"Eight months," she grumbles.

I haven't asked—and she hasn't said—but I know Sydney's apprehension when it comes to the topic of college isn't just because of me.

Holden leaving will mean she's all alone. Their dad's schedule has gotten busier and busier in recent years. I've barely seen Mr. Adams in months. I have no idea if he plans to be home with Sydney once Holden leaves, and I'm not sure she knows either. It's not my place to ask.

Our goodbye hug is tighter than usual before I grab the plate of cookies and head for the front door. I slip on my jacket and step out onto the front porch, pulling the door shut behind me.

I turn and freeze. "Oh. Hi."

"Hey." As per usual, Holden meets my awkwardness with ease. He leans against the railing that runs the length of the stairs, totally relaxed.

"I was just, um, cookies." I swallow. Blush. "Sydney and I made cookies."

Holden smiles. "You're acting weird."

"No, I'm not." I can't keep eye contact through the three words.

He takes another step up the stairs, which doesn't help. Holden is closer now. Even more consuming. "Yeah, you are." He sounds amused about it, and I have no idea what to make of it.

"I...I just came to see Sydney. I don't want you to think *I think* things have changed between us. I know they haven't."

“You were right, when you said I avoid commitment.”

“I know,” I blurt.

He laughs. Slowly, the amusement slips away. “Probably have my mom to blame.”

I still. Sydney has never, not once, mentioned her mom to me. My mother was the one who told me their mom left when Holden was five and Sydney was four. She also warned me it was a sensitive topic, so I’ve never asked. Never brought it up.

Holden takes another step. Now he’s less than a foot away.

“Eighth grade? Ginny’s Halloween party? I didn’t mean to kiss you. I’d never kissed a girl before.” He clears his throat, and it’s the closest I’ve seen Holden to being embarrassed.

I don’t think he meant to say that—to admit that to me.

“Anyway, I just, I knew I wasn’t the right guy for you. I knew letting you think we possibly had that sort of future would just hurt you more in the end. So I thought avoiding you for a while would help draw boundaries. I didn’t think—I didn’t mean for it to totally end our friendship. But we started high school and had different friends. And then Sydney was a freshman, and you two were always together. You seemed happy. It didn’t seem like you were stuck in the past. I had no idea it still bothered you until last night.”

“I was closer with you than Sydney back then. You kissed me and then acted like I was invisible. *Of course* it bothered me, Holden.”

“I’m sorry, Cassia. Truly.” His blue eyes are sincere. I know he means the words, but they’re not enough to completely wash away years of resentment.

“Thanks for...explaining,” I say awkwardly.

Holden inhales. “Do you—do you regret last night?”

I’m thrown by the fact he’s bringing it up. I thought what happened in his hotel room would stay in New York, never to be discussed again. I was banking on it, actually. Holden bringing it up is unexpected.

It makes me wonder if *he* regrets it. Is he worried I’ll tell someone? That

Sydney will find out?

“No.” I answer honestly. “I don’t regret it.”

He exhales. “Okay. Good.”

“Do, um, do you?”

“Nope.” He grins, unexpectedly. “I enjoyed it.”

Heat floods my cheeks, a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure fueling the blush. I was worried he was too busy treating me with kid gloves. “Me too.”

“I know. I felt you come on my cock.” He says the sentence casually, but I’m certain my face must be flaming red. It was one thing to hear him talk dirty in a hotel room when it was the middle of the night. His front porch in broad daylight is very different.

Holden smirks, confirming my suspicion my complexion resembles a tomato. He takes the last step, putting us at the same level, then tugs at a loose piece of my hair. His smile transforms from mocking to sweet as he tucks it behind one ear. “You look beautiful when you blush,” he tells me, then keeps walking.

I hear the front door open and close, and know I’m standing on his porch alone now. My blood is buzzing, and my stomach is giddy.

Getting under Holden to get over him? Undoubtedly the worst idea I’ve ever had. Any closure between us feels non-existent.

I’m totally screwed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HOLDEN

My arms burn but I keep forcing them to move. Up. Down. Up. Down. It feels like it takes hours to reach fifty.

Finally, I drop the bar with a *clang* and sit up. I drink some water and wipe my face with a towel, rubbing away the sweat until my breathing evens. Around me, guys are starting to stand and head for the locker room.

Thursdays are our easiest day. We have a team meeting to go over specific strategies for tomorrow's opponent and then a weight session. Tomorrow's game is against Covington, one of our main rivals. The meeting lasted later than usual, then we still had weights.

I stand and head for the hallway. Finn meets me in the middle of the weight room and punches my bicep. "Fellini's?" he asks.

The local pizza parlor is a popular hangout after practice. I nod, my stomach grumbling.

I shower and change, remembering to text Sydney, letting her know I won't be home for dinner before I leave the gym. We eat separately most nights, especially now that basketball has started and taken over most of my schedule.

Most of the team is already gathered just inside the door when I arrive at Fellini's. It's seat yourself, so they're waiting for me. I stop next to Finn and glance around, looking for a couple of empty tables. And *freeze*.

I'm totally immobile and it's involuntary—completely outside my control. I just...can't move. Blinking, but can't process what my eyes are seeing.

Betrayal slashes my chest, hot and harsh.

“Adams?” Finn asks. “What are you—oh.” He laughs. “Dude, she's a junior. She was going to start dating eventually. And that's the honor club guy. I doubt he's going to get her into hard drugs or knock her up.”

I manage a grunt in response. Finn thinks I'm focused on Sydney, who's sitting in a booth next to Graham chatting away. I'm not. I'm looking at the girl with a brown ponytail and a *Pembroke Animal Shelter* sweatshirt sitting across from my sister. Sitting *next to* Harrison Baker.

Cassia is on a double date with another guy—and my sister.

I can't figure out the flare in my chest, can't rationalize why I want to walk over and kiss her. Mark my territory and make it clear she's off-limits.

I've slept with several girls. Not as many as the school gossip mill speculates about, but she wasn't my first—the way I was hers.

That's the only reason I can think of to justify the way blood is whooshing in my ears. I want to look away, but I physically can't. It's like driving by a car crash. There's some morbid fascination, except the only person I'm hurting is myself. Everyone around me is oblivious to the hot spike of anger in my chest.

“Wanna go over there and mess with him?” Finn asks.

I clench my jaw and finally jerk my gaze away. “No.”

I'm not worried about Graham. Between the talk I had with him at his so-called study party and the fact he seems to be every bit the nice guy he acts like, he's not a threat. I want Sydney to have fun. To branch out.

I just don't want Cassia to have any part of that growth if it involves other guys.

We end up sitting across the restaurant from the booth where Sydney, Graham, Cassia, and Harrison are sitting. I'd have to crane my neck to the

side to catch a glimpse, and it's a good deterrent.

Mark ends up sitting next to me. "You okay?" he asks me quietly.

I glance at him. "Of course."

"It's not just Baker. I've heard other guys talk about her."

My look turns into more of a glare. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm thinking about the scouts coming tomorrow."

He nods, but it's more of an *I'll drop it* than an *I believe you* gesture. As far as I know, Finn has always been oblivious to my feelings for Cassia, but Mark doesn't miss much. I saw him glancing between us at the pool last weekend.

Conversation about tomorrow's game dominates the rest of dinner. As soon as the last slice is finished, I announce I'm leaving, making up an assignment as an excuse.

I'm eager to get out of here. To clear my head. Maybe I should text Grace, but I doubt I actually will. As much as I want to wash away the memory of me and Cassia right now, I know it will haunt me for a long time.

I shouldn't have slept with her. I don't regret it, but it was a mistake. It's made the possessiveness I've always felt toward her a million times worse.

"You're not actually worried about Covington, are you?" Finn asks. "You didn't say much at dinner."

"No," I reply as we walk toward the door. "I'm not worried."

I *wish* basketball was the source of my anxiety right now. Covington is one of the biggest threats to our undefeated season and playoff rankings. To my chances of getting a scholarship. A bunch of scouts will be at the game tomorrow night.

But right now, my head is too full of Cassia to care if we lose tomorrow. And that freaks me the fuck out. When did she start to affect me more than basketball?

"Holden!"

I swear under my breath before pausing. If it was anyone else besides

Sydney, I would keep walking and pretend I hadn't heard her. But I know it's not easy for Sydney, being my sister. I know girls have tried to befriend her in an attempt to get closer to me.

Whenever I'm with friends and see her—which isn't very often, since Sydney mostly hangs out at home or in the school's theater department—I always make a point to acknowledge her.

I don't want anyone thinking I'd tolerate any disrespect toward my sister, especially if I go anywhere next year and I'm not around.

Sydney is walking straight toward me. Graham is right behind her, with Cassia and Harrison a few feet behind. My hands form fists, then relax. I keep my gaze on Sydney as they approach. She has her coat on, so they must have just finished eating.

If I'd allowed myself to look over there once during dinner, I could have timed this better. Left sooner or later. Instead, it couldn't be worse. I'm stuck acknowledging them. Interacting with them.

“Hey, Syd.”

My sister is smiling, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright. Despite my resentment of this outing, I feel myself smile in response to hers. Sydney looks happier than I've seen her in a long time.

Reluctantly, I glance at Graham. My mood improves further when I notice he's looking at me with obvious apprehension.

Finn chuckles under his breath beside me, probably noticing the same thing. “Hi, Graham.”

“Hi.” His response comes out as a squeaky syllable.

Mark muffles a laugh with a cough. “Haven't seen you all week, Cassia,” he says. “One time hanging out with us was enough?”

Everyone looks at her, and I reluctantly do the same. Cassia glances away as soon as our eyes meet, a pink flush spreading across her cheeks.

She was already looking at me, and it eases a little of the tightness in my chest. At least she's not making googly eyes at Baker.

“I’ve just been busy,” she says, twirling the end of her ponytail. “College applications and stuff, you know.”

Another necessary reminder of why I’ve stayed away from Cassia—why I need to keep staying away. We’re on very different paths. She’ll have lots of options for college. I’ll be lucky to have one next year.

“I’m headed out,” I announce, more forcefully than I meant to.

“Dude, what the hell has gotten into you tonight?” Finn asks, chuffing my shoulder. “I’ve never seen you this eager to do homework before.”

“You must be a good tutor,” Harrison tells Cassia, laughing.

I hear him. Unfortunately, Sydney does too. She looks at Cassia, then glances at me. “Tutor?”

I tense. The last thing I need is for Sydney to start getting suspicious about me having feelings for her best friend. Or to start worrying I’m flunking out of high school again. As far as Sydney knows, Cassia and I haven’t spent any time together alone in years.

“I just helped him with that one thing,” Cassia says. “We should head out, right?”

Apparently, I’m not the only one more than ready to get out of here. Thankfully, Sydney drops the tutoring topic as we walk outside.

There’s a sharp chill to the air, the closest to winter’s bite we’ve gotten this fall. Every inhale burns my lungs and I can see my breath when I exhale.

“You good to get home, Sydney?” I ask.

Sydney glances at Graham.

“I can drive you,” he offers.

It’s obviously what she was hoping for, based on her broad smile, so I keep my mouth shut. I’m not expecting for Sydney to look to Cassia next.

“Can you give Cassia a ride?” she asks me.

I stiffen. It’s obvious Sydney wants to be alone with Graham. But I assumed Cassia had driven here herself or came with Harrison.

“I drove,” Harrison states. “I don’t mind dropping you off.”

Cassia smiles at him. My jaw clenches. Tightly enough, it's painful despite how numb my face is, thanks to the outside temperature.

"Thanks for offering, but Holden is right across the street. I don't want you to have to go out of your way."

It's obvious to everyone Harrison wouldn't consider it to be any sort of inconvenience, but Cassia turns and walks toward me before he can say a word. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

She chose me over him.

I'm not expecting for that to matter to me the way it does. There are plenty of girls who have ignored other guys in favor of getting my attention, as arrogant as that sounds. In the past, I've found it amusing or irritating, depending on my mood. It's never incited this warm feeling in my chest before.

I say goodbye to the guys and give Graham a glare that conveys Sydney better make it home safely. It's a ten-minute drive to our house from Fellini's, so I'll know if he makes any detours.

Cassia follows me down the street toward my truck. The farther we get from our friends, the tenser the silence between us becomes. The easier it is to imagine we were just the ones having dinner together.

I make it one block before glancing at her. Cassia's arms are wrapped around her midsection. She's wearing a sweatshirt but no jacket over it.

Impulsively, I shrug mine off. It's my letterman jacket, which I hardly ever wear. We're supposed to have them on for game days, though, so I grabbed it from my locker after I showered. It's not that warm, but better than nothing.

Without saying a word, I drape it over her shoulders. She looks over at me, then sinks her teeth into her bottom lip. It's the worst possible thing she could do because I can't think about anything except seeing her do that same thing when I was buried inside her.

“Thanks.”

I nod as we continue walking.

“You’re acting weird.”

An involuntary smile tugs at my lips as she parrots the words I told her last week on my front porch. “I’m just...we’re playing a rival tomorrow.”

“I know. Covington, right?”

I glance at her, surprised. “How did you know?”

She shrugs, tugging my jacket closer around her. It looks good on her. Really good. I look down at the sidewalk, trying to think about something else.

“My dad follows the team pretty closely,” Cassia says after a beat of silence. “It’s sort of our thing, if I’m up before he leaves for work. Sometimes I feel guilty for not playing in high school. I guess it’s my way of making up for it.”

I hesitate before speaking. For one, I’m processing the fact that Cassia and her father follow my team. That it’s their *thing*. Also, the last time the topic of her not playing high school ball came up, it wasn’t exactly a relaxed conversation. I’m treading carefully.

“I’m sure your dad wouldn’t want you to feel guilty,” I finally say. “If you didn’t want to play, you didn’t want to play.”

“I started playing because of you,” she states. “So...in high school...there didn’t seem like much of a point anymore.”

I steal a glance at her. Cassia is staring straight ahead, obviously not interested in discussing the topic any further.

“You’re not in a big rush to get back, right?” she asks.

“Uh...” I’m not sure how to answer. I was in a hurry to leave Fellini’s. Now that it’s just the two of us, I have no sense of urgency, honestly.

“I kind of want a waffle.”

“You and Baker didn’t split a dessert?” I huff a breath as soon as the question is out, thoroughly annoyed with myself for bringing him up.

“I voted no on dessert. I was sick of third-wheeling.”

“It looked more like a double date.”

Her eyebrows pull together as she stares at me. “I went to Fellini’s with Sydney and Graham right after school. There weren’t any open tables. Harrison was already there with some of his teammates and invited us to sit with them. They left before us and he stayed.”

I swallow. *Fuck*. I’m relieved. I’m worried by *how* relieved I am.

“And even if I was out on a date with him, you have no right to—”

I kiss her, cutting off the rest of her indignation. Cassia freezes. Familiar electricity arcs between us, snapping and crackling with its potency and power.

When Cassia starts kissing me back, I groan. Wrap my arms around her and haul her closer to my body, right here on the sidewalk.

I tighten my grip on her jacket—my jacket—and that knowledge mixes with the desire circulating through my body. I’ve never kissed a girl wearing my clothes before. She was wearing my sweatshirt the first time we got off together in my driveway. It added an extra layer of intimacy then, and it does the same now. There’s never been another girl I *wanted* to wear my clothes before. Just her.

She’s so responsive, so eager. I just know, somehow, that it wouldn’t feel like this with anyone else. I knew it when I kissed her in eighth grade, and I feel the same way now.

Her expression is dazed when we separate. It makes me want to start kissing her all over again, to keep that expression on her face and know that I was the one who put it there. I wait for the questions. The *What did that mean?* and *Why did you do that?*

Instead, she simply smiles. “Is that a yes on the waffle?”

I grab her hand and pull her toward the waffle place. It’s warm inside and smells incredible. I haven’t been here since last winter. There’s a young family sitting by the windows, but the shop is otherwise empty.

Cassia walks right up to the counter and rattles off her order.

I raise my eyebrows when she looks to me. “You come here a lot?”

“It’s on all my siblings’ chore charts as a reward. So...yes.”

I shake my head at that, marveling over just how different our families are before ordering one of their premade options.

Cassia argues when I go to pay, but I elbow her out of the way. Thanks to the illicit Friday night fights I spent the last couple of months participating in, I’ve got a decent amount of money set aside. And it occurs to me, as I hand my card over, that there’s nothing I’d rather spend it on than her.

“I’m super excited for the game tomorrow night.” It’s not until the girl working the register says that while handing back my card that I aim any focus at her. She’s on the younger side, probably a freshman or a sophomore. “I traded shifts just so I could go.”

“It should be a good game,” I say.

“You’re playing so well this season. It’s amazing to watch.”

I’m no stranger to flirting. There’s always been a reliable thrill to saying something suggestive or teasing to a girl. It’s a dance, a tease, a push and pull. But all I’m feeling now is uncomfortable. There’s nothing wrong with what she’s saying, but the tone is unmistakable. And it feels wrong that she’s talking that way to me in front of Cassia.

“Thanks,” I reply, tucking my card back into my wallet.

I know this isn’t a date and I know Cassia knows it isn’t a date, but that’s exactly what I assume it would look like to anyone else.

Our waffles are prepared and handed to us, along with a few napkins. Cassia heads for one of the tables, and I follow her over.

She dives into the dessert immediately. I can’t help but smile, my bad mood totally forgotten, as I watch her annihilate the mound of waffle and ice cream. Some whipped cream gets left in the corner of her mouth. I want to lean over and wipe it away, but I pass her a napkin instead.

The second napkin in the stack has a number scrawled on it.

Cassia glances at the series of neatly written digits. Scoffs. “I guess she assumed I was your sister.”

I clench my jaw, tempted to walk back over to the counter and ask for a new stack of napkins. I’m irritated by her presumptuousness.

But I don’t hate the way Cassia is close to snapping her plastic spoon. Another girl giving me her number bothers Cassia, and I like the glimpse of possessiveness far more than I should.

“You didn’t tell Sydney about me tutoring you.”

I smirk. “I wrote the paper while you did your math homework. You call that tutoring?”

Cassia rolls her eyes. “I made suggestions.”

“You didn’t tell her either.”

“I know.” She plays with her spoon, dragging it through the small pool of chocolate that’s all that remains of her dessert. I take the final bite of mine. “I was worried she’d think it meant something.”

“Me almost failing history?”

“Yep.” She smiles.

“I never thanked you properly.”

“For what?”

“Helping me with that paper.”

Her eyebrows rise. “You said you wrote it yourself.”

“I did. But you...I wasn’t going to waste your time.”

Cassia studies me for a minute, then nods.

“There are some scouts coming to tomorrow’s game.” I share the information unprompted, which is unheard of for me. For some reason, there’s an urge to share with her. To explain what I’m thinking and feeling.

“For schools you’d consider?”

“Yeah. One of them is my top choice.”

“Top choice, huh?”

“I mean, they have a good program. I have a shot of getting in, Coach

thinks.”

“Which school?”

“Richmond.”

She looks away. “In Vermont?”

“Right.”

“That’s on my list.”

I stare at her. The possibility of us ending up at the same university has never occurred to me. “They have a good pre-vet program?”

“It’s decent. I can take the classes I need pretty much anywhere.”

The bell above the door rings. A large family walks into the store. Cassia consolidates her trash but leaves the napkins untouched. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah,” I reply, doing the same with my bowl and spoon.

We stand and head for the door. I make sure Cassia sees me throw away all the napkins along with the rest of my trash.

My truck is parked another block down the street. I think of the trip to Graham’s study party as we climb in the cab, the first and only other time Cassia has ridden next to me. It felt like we were alone then.

We *actually* are now. Rather than awkward, the silence sounds like possibilities. She hasn’t brought up me kissing her on the sidewalk since it happened.

I war with myself as I pull out of the spot and start driving in the direction of our shared street. Should I mention it? Pretend it never happened? I had no plan for this encounter. I wasn’t expecting to see her at Fellini’s, and I definitely wasn’t expecting to drive her home, just the two of us.

In contrast to my indecision, Cassia seems relaxed. She reclines against the seat and tucks one leg under the other.

Still wearing my varsity jacket, she’s difficult to look away from. I like her like this. Wearing my clothes in my truck. Innocent and sexy. Familiar and new.

I stop at a red light. Fiddle with the heat and some music, so we’re warm

and not sitting in silence.

I tend to get lost in my own head while I'm driving. It's an easy way to think things through without overanalyzing them. But now, with her, I can't consider anything else.

"Can we do it again?" Cassia asks suddenly, right after I turn onto our street.

I glance over. "What?"

"Um, sex." The faint glow of the streetlights is enough to illuminate her blushing. "Can we have sex again sometime?"

I pull into my driveway and park, mind spinning.

"Nevermind." The momentary pause is all it takes for her to rethink things. "Forget it."

I turn off the ignition at the same second her seatbelt clicks. I look over to see her reaching for the door handle.

"Cassia." She keeps reaching, so I lean over and grab her hand. Then her chin, forcing her to look at me. "Yes."

"You don't have to say that," she whispers. "I just...last time was...I was so nervous." Cassia tries to look away, but I don't let her. "It felt really good, but I want to know what it's like when I know what to expect and you're not worried about hurting me..."

I brush her bottom lip with my thumb. "You don't have to convince me, flower. I'm fully on board, trust me." I'm getting hard at just the suggestion, but I don't go into that level of detail.

"I'm not expecting anything to change between us, Holden. If you're worried about that. We're not friends anymore. I know you don't want a relationship. I just...there's no other guy I trust to..."

"Make you come?"

She scoffs but doesn't dispute it. Trust feels especially important now that I know the truth behind her experience. I'm not just the guy she trusts. I'm the *only* guy who's touched her intimately.

Silence stretches between us. Silence with an *agreement*.

“So were you thinking a code word or a schedule or...”

Cassia rolls her eyes. “I was thinking I sleep over at your house every Friday night.”

Today is Thursday, which means she’s talking about tomorrow.

I’ve never scheduled sex. Never expected sex. It’s always just happened. Planning it out is an idea I thought I’d hate, like a relationship. Like a box you’re stuck inside. But instead...I’m excited. Anticipation is thrumming inside me, knowing that sex will happen between us again.

“Okay?”

“Yeah?” She looks excited, and it twists my insides further.

Does she care it’s me, or is she just looking for a way to get off? I should hope it’s the latter. That’s always what I’ve been looking for when it comes to sex.

But instead, I’ll be disappointed if it’s not the former.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Night.”

She lingers for a minute, and I consider kissing her again. But my thoughts are already a snarled mess. I thought once would be it for us. Not because I wanted it to be, but because that seemed like the reality of our past and our futures.

Cassia climbs out of the cab, giving me a small smile before shutting the door. I watch in the rearview mirror as she crosses the street and enters her house, still warring with myself.

I always viewed staying away from Cassia as non-negotiable. Also in her best interest.

But something leaped in my chest when she asked about us having sex again. Something more than just arousal or anticipation.

And I consider, for the first time, that maybe Cassia isn’t the only one who will get hurt if things between us end badly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CASSIA

The quiet murmur of voices comes from the kitchen when I walk inside the Adamses' house on Friday night. It's unexpected. Usually when I come over, Sydney is the only one home.

"Hello?" I call out. Maybe Sydney is talking to her dad? Or Graham? He's not supposed to come over until later.

As much as I like Graham, I'm dreading it. If not for the late-night plans I made, I would have come up with an excuse not to come over.

I know Sydney is trying to include me. She's not the kind of friend who would ever abandon you for a guy, especially not as part of a tradition we've had for years. I think she's also nervous about being alone with her crush.

"Kitchen, Cas!" Sydney calls.

I walk past the stairs and through the living room into the kitchen. Holden is leaning against the sink, arms crossed and smirking.

I focus on him first, my gaze sweeping over the sweatpants and t-shirt he's wearing. His hair is damp from the shower he must have taken after the game against Covington earlier.

Sydney is sitting on one of the stools at the kitchen counter, also dressed casually. I watch as she tugs at a hole in the knee of the yoga pants she's wearing.

"Uh, what's going on?" I ask, glancing between the two of them.

Sydney looks at me, a serious expression on her face. “Is Holden failing?”

Out of the periphery of my eye, I watch Holden roll his eyes and tuck his hands behind his head as he leans back against the edge of the counter. His shirt rides up, providing a very distracting view.

She takes my silent appreciation the wrong way. “Oh my God, he is.”

“No. *No*. I mean, I don’t think so.” I glance at Holden. “Are you?”

“No!” His tone is exasperated as his arms fall back to his sides. “I’m tired from the game earlier, so I’m not going to Grace’s party tonight. Sydney seems to think that means I’m either sick or flunking high school. She’s settled on the latter, thanks to Baker’s big mouth.”

“Oh,” I say. He’s not going to Grace’s party tonight?

I’ve spent all day replaying our conversation in his car last night. Preparing for the possibility he could change his mind while surrounded by hot girls and alcohol. Second-guessing ever asking him in the first place.

“You’re hardly ever home,” Sydney says. “And *never* on Friday nights.”

Holden shrugs and takes a sip from the open Gatorade on the counter.

“Is this about Graham coming over? Because—”

He coughs a laugh. “Syd, I just want a quiet night. Stop reading into it.”

Sydney glances at me. I avoid her gaze, hoping she’ll drop it. I want Holden to stay, not only because of what I’m hoping will take place tonight, but because it will feel less like I’m third-wheeling.

Harrison joining us at Fellini’s yesterday afternoon helped with that, but made it awkward in other ways. Namely, I wasn’t quite sure what to say to him. I’m not worried about that with Holden. I mean, I am, but it’s more in the context of being worried about saying too much. I’m not at a loss of what common ground to find in the first place.

“Cassia will be here. I don’t need you to look out for me.”

“Uh-huh. I’m sure Cassia is a very capable chaperone,” Holden replies.

I roll my eyes at that, and he smirks in response.

“But for the millionth time, me staying home has nothing to do with you or with Graham.”

He doesn't include me on the list, I notice. Probably because Sydney has no reason to think anything Holden does or doesn't do would involve me. But I read into it anyway.

Holden pulls his phone out of his pocket and glances at the screen. “See you guys later,” he says, grabbing his Gatorade and leaving the kitchen.



I'm sitting on the couch, alone, almost as far away as possible from Sydney and Graham's whispering, when Holden walks back downstairs. It's been total silence upstairs since he left the kitchen a couple of hours ago. Part of me was wondering if he went out after all, without saying anything.

Based on how disheveled his hair is, I think he was sleeping. He runs his hand through it again as he approaches the couch, smoothing some of the disarray.

Holden grins when he sees how I'm huddled at one end of the couch, then plops down right beside me, so close our arms brush. My cheeks flare pink, and I hope it's dark enough in here he can't tell.

All I can think about is the last time the two of us were on this couch together.

“What are you guys watching?” he whispers to me.

“I forget,” I reply. “One of the goblin movies?”

He glances at me, one corner of his mouth curling up in a smile. “Lord of the Rings?”

“I guess? I didn't pick it. Graham would know.” I glance toward the kitchen. “He and Sydney paused the movie a couple of minutes ago to make popcorn.”

“Ah.” He leans back, getting comfortable. I resist the urge to lean closer.

We agreed to sex, not snuggling.

When I glance over, he's looking at me. It's a searching gaze. He's looking at me like it's the first time he's seeing me.

"Hi," I whisper.

He smiles. "Hi."

"Congrats. I saw you won."

"Yeah. Thanks." His fingers weave through the ends of my hair, combing through the strands falling across his shoulder. I tilt my head, allowing him more access.

I want to ask him why he's here. What made him decide to stay home instead of going to a party tonight like usual. But I'm worried it might fracture this moment, might not be an answer I'm hoping for, so I stay silent.

"You ever been to a game?"

I scan his expression, trying to read the subtext of his question in the curves and angles of his face. "Last season, I went to a couple."

All I get in response is a vague hum. Was that his way of asking me to come? I know Sydney goes to the ones she can, but I've always avoided them, aside from the few times she begged me to join.

The two I went to last season were uncomfortable for me. I already admitted I associate him with the sport. Connecting the lines between that and me not going seems simple, but he still asked.

"Are you cold?" Before I can answer, Holden is pulling an afghan off the back of the couch and draping it over my legs.

I wasn't cold, but the weight of the soft blanket feels nice.

"Um, thanks."

"Uh-huh." There's a twinkle in his blue eyes, a glint that makes my heart race.

Sydney walks out of the kitchen holding a big bowl of popcorn, with Graham right behind her.

Surprisingly, neither of them comment on Holden's appearance or seem

to notice how close we're sitting together. Graham greets Holden with a nervous smile. I guess the threat I overheard is still fresh in his mind.

Sydney and Graham settle back on the couch, and the movie starts to play again. I relax back against the cushions, shifting a little closer to Holden and hoping Sydney doesn't notice. She seems totally wrapped up in Graham, giggling at something he's showing her on his phone. I'm happy for her. Slightly resentful they picked a fantasy film and aren't even watching it. There's an African cats documentary I've been dying to watch.

A warm hand settles on my thigh, and thoughts of television selections are suddenly irrelevant.

I tense, then glance at Holden. He appears focused on the screen, but one corner of his mouth is lifted.

His hand moves upward, slowly, and I realize why he draped the blanket over me. Sydney giggles next to me, right as he reaches the waistband of my pajamas.

I inhale sharply, glancing back and forth between him and the screen. He looks totally focused on the movie, but one finger plays with the drawstring. Every nerve ending in my body seems to focus on that one spot.

Breathing becomes difficult. I have to remind myself to take each breath and then let it loose in a gush, a simple reflex becoming a chore. I feel like I'm a kid playing Hide and Seek, trying to stay quiet and not be found. The quieter and more inconspicuous I'm trying to be, the louder each exhale seems to sound.

Graham and Sydney are still whispering to each other, but Holden is totally silent. His fingers dip lower, tracing the inseam of my pants. They brush my clit, sending a bolt of electricity through my whole system.

I bite my bottom lip—hard—worried I'll accidentally make a sound otherwise.

I've spent all day anticipating tonight. There's already a frenzy built inside of me. Each teasing stroke of his fingers sends me closer to the edge.

My heart races and keeping my breathing even is a struggle. I slip one of my hands under the blanket and grab his, stilling his movements.

Holden finally looks away from the screen, at me. *I'm close*, I mouth. Heat flares in his eyes, turning them almost navy.

I'm expecting for him to pull his hand away, but he doesn't. We keep holding hands under the blanket. His thumb starts drawing circles on the back of my hand. That's all I focus on.

Not the movie playing.

Not Sydney giggling.

Just those circles.



When my eyes open, I'm on the air mattress. I sit up straight and glance around, startled. The last thing I remember is sitting on the couch.

Sydney is in her bed, sprawled out like usual. I scramble for my phone, finding it set next to the air mattress. It's just after one in the morning. Last I recall in the living room, it was ten something. I fell asleep, something I struggle to do under the best of circumstances. Passing out early and not in a bed is unheard of for me.

I glance at Sydney again before crawling out of bed.

I'm annoyed with myself. Disappointed. I spent all day anticipating tonight.

Once I'm in the hallway, I hesitate outside his door. Maybe he decided to go out after all. Maybe he's asleep. I have no sense of when the movie ended or when Graham left.

My hand closes around the knob and turns. Holden's room is dark; the only illumination is the moonlight streaming in through the gap in the curtains. I scan the room and my focus lands on the bed. There's a large lump in the middle.

I close the door and tiptoe closer.

“Holden?” I whisper.

He sits up. “Cassia?”

“Sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“No.” A pause, where I hover and he stares. “Come here.”

I walk across the cold hardwood until I reach the edge of his bed. He holds up the edge of the covers and I slip inside, sighing when the heat envelops me. His sheets smell like laundry detergent and cinnamon. I inhale deeply and snuggle against the soft cotton.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“I don’t blame you. The movie was terrible.”

“Pretty sure you were the only one watching.”

His chuckle is low. I feel it as much as I hear it. “Yeah.”

“I’m glad you stayed home tonight.” I second-guess the words as soon as they’re out. I don’t want him to think it’s what I expect. Or that it matters to me he chose to. It’s just another Friday night, but it feels entirely different.

Holden doesn’t answer. He pulls me on top of him and kisses me. I sink into it, into him. This feels different from the hotel. More purposeful, more permanent.

We kiss and kiss. I get lost in the sensation, swimming through the depths of what it feels like to kiss Holden. I try to memorize it, to imprint every touch.

Our hands begin to wander. Mine slide lower and lower, tracing every dip and valley. All he’s wearing is a pair of boxers. It’s easy to slip inside of them and grip his erection. My boldness surprises me, and I think it catches him off guard too.

Holden hisses when I grip his cock. “*Fuck, Cassia.*”

His breathing grows harsh and fast. Ragged, just like mine. I keep stroking, watching the pleasure play out on his face.

“We don’t have to do this.”

“Do you not want to?” I ask, worried he’s changed his mind.

He laughs, low and unamused. “Of course I want to.”

Holden rolls so he’s above me and kisses me again. He doesn’t seem in any hurry to skip to the sex. He kisses me like it’s the destination instead of the journey. Like it’s a privilege instead of an obligation.

It makes me think of his confession—that I was his first kiss.

He has all of my firsts.

At least I have one of his.

I close my eyes and kiss him back between ragged breaths. I let myself pretend this means something to him. That *I* mean something to him.

Most of the time, I’m careful to keep a close grip on reality. It’s easier to avoid disappointment if you stick to what you know for sure. But I let myself drift, just for now. I pretend. I let my mind warp the situation into exactly what I want it to mean.

The longer we kiss, the more I experiment. I tug his bottom lip between my teeth. Suck on his tongue. Holden grinds his hips into mine.

“These fucking shorts.” His hand fists the fabric as his mouth moves to my neck. “Drive me fucking crazy.”

“Take them off.”

“So impatient.” His mouth travels lower, kissing a line across my collarbone. I arch against him, pressing our bodies as close together as possible. My body throbs, craving his attention.

There’s a hum in my blood, a thrill skipping across my skin. Anticipation floods my system like an addictive drug. We’re both breathing heavily, our mouths so close together the same air is being exchanged.

“Please,” I whisper. My heartbeat is an impatient thrum, eager to have him inside of me. To be connected, not just touching.

His hand runs up my thigh and between my legs, slipping beneath the strip of wet lace I’m wearing beneath my sleep shorts. I left my clothes in his bathroom the last time we hooked up, mostly because they were damp and

smelled like chlorine, but also because I was wearing comfortable cotton briefs that didn't add much to the moment.

I planned ahead tonight, knowing what was going to happen, wearing a pink thong that I bought at the mall last summer on a whim. This is the first time I've worn the lacy underwear with the intention of anyone else seeing them. Usually they're pulled out on days I need an extra confidence boost or a lack of panty lines.

One of his fingers sinks inside me. I moan and he groans.

"You're so wet."

"Your fault," I whisper.

His laugh is quiet. I feel it more than I hear it before he moves away and opens the drawer next to his bed. It's filled with a random assortment of stuff: a composition notebook, a packet of tissues, some gum, and a box of condoms.

He sits up to tug down his boxers and rip open one of the foil packets. I bite my bottom lip as I watch him roll on the condom, warring with my riotous emotions.

Of course he has condoms in his bedroom. This moment that feels so special to me is ordinary for him.

The more I get lost in this, the more it will hurt when it ends.

I'm chasing pleasure that I know will turn to pain.

I shouldn't have suggested this.

He shouldn't have agreed.

But I want it. So badly I can barely think straight. Call it lust or hormones or misplaced hope. But it feels like I'm in pain *now*, and he's what will bring relief.

Holden lies back down, holding his weight on his arms so he's hovering over me. I'm caged in by his body, and I've never felt safer.

"You good?"

"Yep." I run a hand down the side of his abdomen, exploring all the hot,

hard skin above me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I lift my hips, trying to guide him inside me.

“Flower.”

For some reason, the nickname draws tears to my eyes. I blink rapidly to chase the emotion away. “I’m fine. Just fuck me.”

Holden laughs, but it’s humorless. “Just *fuck you*? Maybe you should just buy a damn sex toy, Cassia. Is that all you’re looking for? A way to get off?”

He moves, his arms lifting as he starts to shift away. I panic, wrapping my legs around his waist. His dick rubs right against my center, and the pleasure is overwhelming. Based on his expression, Holden is affected too.

“I want *you*, Holden,” I tell him. “But I’m...nervous. I’ve thought about this all day and it’s finally happening, and I just need it to *happen* so I can stop overthinking. You don’t need to ease me into it.” I swallow. “Just...just treat me like you would anyone else.”

“I *can’t*, Cassia. You’re not anyone else. You think I fuck other girls in my bed?”

I say nothing. Because yeah, that’s exactly what I thought.

Two firsts. Twice as many as I ever expected.

Holden sighs and drops his head so it rests in the crook of my neck. He’s still supporting his weight, and I run my hands up his arms, marveling at the tendons and the muscles which are all sharply defined.

And then I feel him. He eases into me slowly but purposefully. I gasp at the intrusion. It still feels foreign, but there’s no twinge of pain this time. I’m being stretched in a way that’s satisfying instead of overwhelming.

He lifts his head. “Better?”

I roll my eyes. “You dick.”

“Seems like you like my dick, flower.”

Holden pulls out and then thrusts back inside. I can’t contain the moan that slips out. Triumph flashes on his face. I tighten my inner muscles around

his cock, and it quickly transforms into an expression of pleasure.

He grabs my knee and hooks it around his hip. I moan again as he slips deeper inside me, hitting a spot that sends sparks skittering across my skin.

It's easier to find a rhythm this time, to meet each thrust and feel like I'm participating instead of just receiving. I clench around him every time he slides in fully, making him groan with each glide.

My world narrows down to Holden and the spot where we're connected. It's too much and not enough. I'm struggling to adjust and craving more.

Our mouths meet again. It's filthy and desperate. I spread my legs wider, savoring each slow drag and strong thrust. Any anxiety is slipping away, the hot wash of pleasure consuming everything else. He fucks me harder and deeper. The build inside me explodes, my inner muscles contracting around the hard length filling me.

"*Fuck.*" Holden's cock thickens and throbs, his eyebrows drawing together in an intense expression that borders on pain.

I relax against the soft mattress, watching him come. There's no guard on his face now, some combination of tenderness and satisfaction obviously displayed on his handsome features.

I run my hands over his back and into his hair, taking advantage of the final opportunity to touch him. Holden doesn't move away. I wait for the embarrassment or the shyness, but it doesn't appear.

He kisses me before rolling away and pulling off the condom. I don't move. My body feels boneless. Sated and sleepy.

But I force my eyes to stay open. Holden and I are already straddling a strange boundary thanks to our past friendship and how close I am to Sydney.

So I sit up and glance around, trying to locate my underwear and pajamas.

Holden lies down next to me, totally naked. My eyes skate over every inch of him, soaking him in greedily, as if this is the last time I'll see him like this.

Maybe—probably, it is. His dark hair is messy—from my hands. The

rows of abs that were just hovering above me are clenched and defined. My gaze moves lower, to the half-hard dick that was inside of me a couple of minutes ago.

He's ridiculously hot. The fuel for fantasies. And tonight, he was mine.

"What are you doing?" Holden tucks one arm behind his head. His bicep bulges and my throat goes dry. It feels like I'm becoming more attuned to him instead of less, which is not what was supposed to happen.

"Going to bed. I just need..." I spot my pink thong at the end of the bed and lean forward to grab it.

His free arm closes around my waist, pulling me back against him. I relax automatically, the smell of cinnamon reassuring and the heat of his skin relaxing.

"Stay," he whispers.

Smart is undoubtedly the adjective most people associate with me. It could be much worse. Of all the things you can be known for, being smart is better than most.

I might be book smart, but I think I'm lacking other forms of intelligence. Because I close my eyes and melt against the boy most likely to break my heart instead of inserting some distance.

This was only supposed to be about the physical. Giving Holden my body is much less risky than handing him my heart.

Can you choose who you fall for?

Or is it called falling because it's outside your control?

"Holden?"

"Yeah."

"Did you ever think about this—us—before last weekend?"

"Of course I did."

"What did you think?"

"I think that you're better off without me."

"Don't you think that's my choice to make?"

He's silent in response. Neither an agreement nor a dispute.

"When you thought about it, what was it like?"

"What do you mean?"

"People say fantasy doesn't live up to reality. So...I'm just wondering."

I'm glad I can't see his face and he can't see mine. It's much easier to make confessions or ask difficult questions under the cover of darkness.

"Wondering if you as a reality lived up to the fantasy?"

I can't see his expression, but it sounds like he's smiling.

"Yeah, I guess."

His lips brush my hair. "It was better."

I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HOLDEN

My dad yawns as he approaches. His shirt is on inside out and he's clutching the mug of steaming coffee like it's something precious.

When he's gone on a route, his sleep schedule is discombobulated. Returning home can involve a time change as well. Still, he does his best to be up when me and Sydney are, even if it means less sleep for him.

This is extreme, though. For both of us. I tossed and turned for an hour before getting out of bed and coming out to the driveway right as the sun rose.

"What's your read on this Graham guy?" he asks, then covers a yawn.

I grin as I dribble. "Sydney told you about him, huh?"

Last night, I went to Finn's place for an early celebration of Mark's eighteenth. I was wondering if Sydney might say anything when I was gone.

I'm not surprised, really. She's always been an open book with our dad. I'm the kid who keeps secrets.

My dad nods, then grimaces. "Sydney invited him over tonight."

"Graham is a good guy. A little nerdy, but nice."

He muffles his guffaw, but I don't miss it. It feels good, laughing with my dad out in the driveway. He's home for a little over a week. While I appreciate the freedom of having no parental supervision sometimes, I wish he was home for longer.

“What about you? Any girls catch your eye?”

My eyes flick across the street. It’s involuntary. Startling. I don’t think my dad notices, but internally, I’m reeling.

I’ve had sex with Cassia twice.

I’ve known her for over a decade.

Neither entirely explains how she’s become a pivotal part of my world. Why she’s the person I want to share good news with. Who makes bad moments feel better.

“I’m focused on basketball,” I say instead.

It’s true. I’ve made basketball a priority because it makes me happy. But it’s gained a new importance this year, a fresh elevation.

“I spoke to Larry last week,” my dad says. “Starting in May, I’ll be cutting back. Shorter routes and longer breaks.”

“You don’t have to do that, Dad. Chances are, I won’t get a scholarship. And even if I do, I don’t have to take it.”

“It wasn’t a question, Holden. You’re going to college, scholarship or not. We’ll figure it out. That’s part of being a parent—ensuring your kids have more opportunities than you did. It’s an experience I want you to have.”

I don’t answer right away. We’re dancing close to a topic we don’t discuss—my mom.

She got pregnant with me in high school, then had Sydney just eleven months after I was born. I wasn’t planned, and I’m pretty sure Sydney wasn’t either. Our existence changed their lives. For the worse, even though I’m sure my dad would say for the better. He’s done his best to compensate for our mom walking away, making do with the limited opportunities a lack of a college degree allows and working himself to the bone for the shipping company he still delivers for.

It’s a large part of why Sydney and I have always gone out of our way to assure him we’re fine with his long absences. And I know it’s why my dad is so insistent on me going to college, even though it would make things easier

for him and Sydney if I didn't.

"I talked to a scout after the Covington game," I state. "He said they might make an offer."

My dad looks elated. "Which school?"

"Richmond."

"That's amazing, Holden. Of course, if it doesn't work out, it'll just be their loss."

Something warm and soft swells in my chest. I'm not used to having these sorts of conversations with my dad. Usually, our discussions are a predictable back and forth. Him asking about my grades and groceries. Reminding me when Aunt Catherine is stopping by to spend a night with us. It's rare to delve deeper.

"Were you in love with Lana?" I haven't called her Mom since the day she left.

Sometimes my dad is hard to read. Right now, all I can see is shock. Shocked I brought her up. Shocked I asked about love. Just shock.

But then he answers without having to think about it much. "No."

"You weren't?" I'm surprised by his response and how certain it is, and I know it's reflected in my tone.

"Maybe I could have loved her. But no, I never did. She was an adventure. Excitement. You and Sydney came along. We could have grown into it. Instead, we grew apart." He sighs. "I wish it had worked, for you and Sydney. But for me? I think I always knew there was something missing. Probably more than you wanted to know."

He's wrong. It's exactly what I needed to know. I always assumed he and Lana were an epic love story with a sad ending. That they'd tried to make it work and failed spectacularly. Knowing it never was headed that way...it helps, actually.

"Thanks for telling me, Dad."

"I'll tell you anything, kiddo. Might not be what you want to hear, but..."

there's nothing I'll hide from you.”

I smile. Shoot, and watch the ball sink with a swoosh.

“You hungry? I was going to make pancakes.”

Suddenly, I'm starving. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

He nods and smiles. We head toward the front porch, side by side. “So... who's the girl?”

“There's no girl.”

My dad laughs. “Okay.”

Sydney is already in the kitchen when we walk back inside the house. It turns into a lazy morning, typical for most families but unusual for us. We eat together. Clean up together. I help my dad with some repairs around the house while Sydney works on costumes for the spring play in the living room.

Around three, we start work on our version of Thanksgiving. Roast chicken instead of turkey. Baked potatoes instead of mashed ones. Barbeque sauce instead of cranberry sauce.

The doorbell rings while I'm cutting the ends off the green beans. Sydney goes to answer the door. When she returns, Cassia is right behind her.

I freeze for a second, soaking in her appearance. I saw her at school on Tuesday, but that was only a glimpse.

We haven't spoken since last Friday night. I woke up to an empty bed on Saturday morning, disappointed but not surprised.

Cassia has never given me the impression she's interested in anyone else knowing about us. I'm assuming that applies to my sister in particular.

I refocus on the green beans while Cassia exchanges pleasantries with my dad. She's carrying a pumpkin pie that her mom must have asked her to bring over.

Her conversation with my dad and Sydney seems to drag on forever. My dad is asking about her family, catching up on everything her siblings and parents have been up to during his latest trip. Sydney tells her about

Graham's visit later and the costumes she finished.

I'm silent during the whole interaction. It's some form of torture, listening to Cassia talk and not reacting. Pretending like her presence has no effect on me.

I focus on each individual bean, trying to drown out the conversation.

"Holden?"

I glance up. "Yeah?"

Cassia is looking at me. So are Dad and Sydney.

"I was talking about that English assignment. Do you have the textbook?"

I stare at her for a second. We don't have English together. Don't have an English textbook.

Sydney laughs. "Come on, Cas. It's Thanksgiving. You'll be over here again before anything is due on Monday. And you know any teacher would give you an extension."

"Yeah, you're right."

"I have it," I blurt. "The textbook."

Cassia is looking for an excuse to talk to me alone, something I'm fully on board with. My dad will be home this weekend, the first weekend in many weekends. She won't be sleeping over, and there will be no opportunity to take advantage of her being across the hall.

I toss the rest of the green beans in the pan without bothering to trim the ends, then head for the stairs.

Steps follow me. Cassia's steps.

Once we're in my room, I turn. "We don't have English together. Or an English textbook, even."

"I know."

I wait for more of an explanation, but it doesn't come. And I don't need one. I've given up on fighting the pull toward her. It might last or fizzle. Be love or lust. I'm worried I could accurately predict each choice.

"Happy Thanksgiving."

She smiles. “Happy Thanksgiving.” Cassia is wearing a dress with a sash. I use the ribbon to pull her closer to me, so her lips are mere breaths away. “I wanted you to be in my bed when I woke up.”

“I was worried Sydney might wake up.”

“And you don’t want her knowing about this.”

Cassia’s eyebrows rise. “I don’t even know what *this* is.”

I don’t either.

I think about her constantly. I haven’t been with another girl since she crawled into my lap in my driveway, weeks ago.

But all the reasons I decided to stay away in the first place still exist. I’m still selfish. She’s still leaving for a brighter and bigger future.

I don’t think love is supposed to hurt. To limit someone.

I don’t *want* to love her if it will hurt her in the end.

So I step away, instead of closer. All of my school books are stacked on the desk. “You should take one of these. Dad and Sydney might notice.”

Cassia nods, then reaches for the composition notebook next to the stack. “What about this? I can—”

I grab it before she can make contact. “This is for basketball.”

“What? You record every box score?”

I don’t answer. Don’t lie.

The notebook I’m holding has everything to do with her and nothing to do with basketball. But that’s the last thing I can tell her, when things are so uncertain between us.

“Here.” I grab a random textbook and hand it to her. “Use this.”

“Thanks.” Sarcasm saturates the word, then she turns and walks out of my bedroom. I hear her steps echo down the stairs. Her goodbyes to my dad and Sydney.

When I return to the kitchen, my dad is the only one there. He’s spinning the roast pan around and checking the temperature of the meat. “Sydney went over to the Nolans’ for a bit.”

I grunt an acknowledgment and head for the sink. There's a tall stack of dishes that's piled up from our cooking. I grab the sponge out from under the sink and start washing.

"It's Cassia Nolan, right?"

I still, my hands submerged in soapy water. "What?"

"She left with an Oceanography textbook, Holden. I'm thirty-six, not blind."

"It's just...it's not going anywhere."

Footsteps sound behind me as my dad walks over. He adds the meat thermometer to the pile of dirty dishes. "That's a damn shame. Because what you'd call nowhere? I'd say it looks like a place worth exploring."

Then he walks off, leaving me alone to question everything all over again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CASSIA

I've never seen the main hallway as empty as it is right now. Staying after school on a Friday isn't a popular choice, unsurprisingly.

I shut my locker with a slam that echoes and head for the main doors, all of Mrs. Golden's advice whirling around in my head. I asked her to be my faculty advisor for my college applications. Her suggestions were useful. They're also stressing me out. They sound like more pressure. Everyone seems to expect perfection from me. Seems to assume I'll have no problem rising to the occasion and doing exactly what needs to be done.

Another figure appears up ahead, heading out toward the parking lot, same as me. I swallow a groan when I realize who it is.

Grace glances at me, her expression equally displeased. She waits until I reach her. We're an awkward amount of distance apart, where she has no choice but to stop and I have to hurry to close the space between us.

"Hi, Cassia."

"Hi, Grace."

I thought New York might have been the end of the forced pleasantries between us, but apparently not.

"Staying after?" She smirks a little, like it's a perceived weakness. I'm not sure what her point is. She's here too.

"Yeah. I had a meeting about college applications."

“Of course you did.”

I say nothing. Non engagement has always been my preferred choice of tactic when it comes to Grace. If she wants to take subtle jabs at me, she can feel free.

“How are you? I haven’t talked to you since the senior trip.” There’s a mix of annoyance and curiosity in Grace’s voice. She obviously noticed Holden stayed behind with me.

I’m tempted to laugh. She’s making it sound like us talking isn’t the rare occurrence it is.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

Grace stops just before we reach the double doors. “Look, Cassia. I know you’re a nice person. So I just feel obligated to tell you...Holden will lose interest. You’re his little sister’s best friend. All innocent and sweet. You’re a novelty, something a little different. But he’ll get sick of you. A little friendly advice? Don’t get too attached.”

She follows the fake speech up with a sweet smile. Like she really only wants the best for me, and I might have no clue that Holden Adams is considered the school heartbreaker.

“I appreciate it,” I say.

Grace smiles again, like she thinks that’s all I’ll say in response.

I smile back. Decide to abandon my non-engagement strategy. “A little friendly advice for *you*? Don’t worry about my sex life. It makes you sound...attached.”

Predictably, Grace’s smile disappears, creasing into a scowl instead. Maybe she didn’t think I’d ever call her out on her passive aggressive friendliness. Maybe she didn’t actually think anything has ever happened between me and Holden. Either way, any forced niceties are officially over.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she tells me before striding out into the parking lot.

I loiter in the lobby for a couple of minutes, hoping she’ll be gone by the

time I walk outside. Thankfully, she is. But there's a familiar truck parked near the entrance to the gymnasium. I veer course in that direction, walking along the concrete path and inside the set of double doors.

The rhythmic staccato of a bouncing basketball echoes as I walk into the gymnasium. It's a massive, empty space. Like a temple to five guys on a court.

Holden stands at the top of the key. Basketballs litter the honey-hued hardwood as he shoots over and over again. Shots bounce and roll, colliding like bowling pins knocking into each other.

I walk toward him slowly, studying the tense line of his shoulders and feeling the irritation radiating off him.

“Bad practice?”

He stills and spins, watching me walk toward him. “Bad day.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Holden studies me. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” I hold out the Oceanography book I borrowed from him on Thanksgiving. “Here you go.”

We haven't spoken all week. His dad is still in town, so I haven't been spending as much time over at the Adamses'. I want Sydney—and Holden—to have as much time with their dad as possible. And I'm perpetually confused about where Holden and I stand. Are we just sex? Does he want more? Do I want more? Should we try to salvage our friendship?

I miss him. Ever since that night in the kitchen where I stole a sip of beer from him, it feels like something permanently shifted between us. Like he finally noticed me again. It makes me feel weak and pathetic; the girl sitting around waiting instead of pursuing life.

But *Holden* doesn't make me feel weak or pathetic. I walked in here stressed and uncertain. And now, just from looking at him, there's a lightness in my chest that wasn't there before. A bubbly giddiness. Happiness.

Should you chase happiness if it's attached to a guy who broke your heart

once before?

Holden takes the textbook from me and walks over to the bleachers, tossing it into a pile of his stuff.

I should go. Instead, I drop my own backpack and grab one of the abandoned basketballs, dribbling it a few times before shooting. It bounces off the rim and to the side.

“Lower your elbow.”

I send Holden a glare. “I didn’t ask for pointers.”

He flashes me a smile. The smirk that makes me feel like I’m floating and flying and falling. The expression I’d do anything for.

Then he walks over, not stopping until he’s standing right behind me. He smells good. Not like cinnamon today, but something masculine and musky. The heat of his body radiates, warming my back and flushing my cheeks.

His hands land on my hips, shifting me slightly so I’m facing the hoop head on. I pull in a deep breath, unable to think about anything but the last time he held my hips—while he was moving inside of me.

Goosebumps spread across my skin as his hands move upward, skating across my sides until he reaches and adjusts my elbows. My breathing is erratic now, frantic huffs and puffs as I try to focus on the basket I’m supposed to be making.

I sway back against him as Holden releases my arms and tugs at the bottom of my ponytail. He chuckles as our bodies brush, his own breathing deep and even. Unaffected.

But I don’t think he is.

There have been enough moments between us where there’s something more, when he’s let his guard down a little. He’d do it when we were kids, but the secrets he’d share were breaking the garage window while playing basketball. Admitting to missing his dad. Staying up later than he was supposed to, watching television. Nothing like his hopes and fears now.

“You’re supposed to shoot.”

Instead of replying or taking the shot, I turn around and drop the ball. It bounces and rolls away, but neither of us look down or make any attempt to retrieve it. Holden stares at me, and I stare at him.

His blue eyes are stormy yet clear, taking me in with an intensity I wasn't expecting. He looks like he wants to consume me, and I want to let him.

I step forward, all but erasing the distance between us. I raise one hand, brushing the stubborn piece of hair that's usually flopped on his forehead away. Outside of our most intimate moments, I've never really touched him. Not like this, at least. Not when we're all alone, so purposeful and direct.

I'm proud of how I hold eye contact as I trail my fingers down and across his jaw, not shirking from his searching expression or worried what he'll find. I've gained confidence from our physical interactions. It's much easier for me to read how he responds to those than how he's feeling or what he's thinking. I don't think he'll reject me this way, and it emboldens me.

"What are you doing, Cassia?"

I slide my hand lower, fisting the fabric of his shirt. "I miss your cock."

His eyes flare, surprise and lust mixing in ocean-colored depths.

There. I did my scary thing for the day.

I could have easily said I miss him, and it wouldn't be any form of a lie. But I'm not sure I've ever experienced what *having* Holden is truly like. He was my first crush. Long before our friendship blew up, I hoped we'd become more. Instead, I got less.

I've never felt like he's given me much. Nothing to my everything. The moments when we've had sex are some of the few times it felt like we were equals, when it felt like he wanted me just as much as I crave him.

There's also a part of me that chases the boldness he pulls out of me. I do and say things around him I just know I'd never do or say around anyone else.

Like what I just did.

"Careful what you ask for. I could fuck you right here."

I think he's trying to shock me right back. Regain the upper hand. Holden is assuming the thought of having sex at school is unappealing to me.

And yeah, part of me is mortified by the prospect of a teacher or janitor catching us. But another part of me—a *larger* part of me—finds the prospect of having sex here incredibly arousing. It's the exact opposite of what anyone would expect from me.

"The locker room is empty, right?"

Holden raises a brow at me. I raise one right back.

He's looking at me exactly the way he used to when we were younger. When he'd suggest staying up later to watch one more movie and I'd put on the second one. When I'd make a crazy shot from the street, and he'd miss. Half approval and half incredulity.

I used to think there was something else there too. Not love, but love-adjacent. Something more powerful than like or friendship.

I see it now, flickering across his face as he grips my waist and pulls me flush against his body.

"We could get caught," he teases, slipping his thumb under the hem of my sweater and rubbing it back and forth just above the edge of my skirt. "Suspended. People would talk. They'd know you aren't the good girl everyone thinks."

I lean into him, letting Holden support most of my body weight. "Make it worth my while, then. I'm not risking all that for subpar sex."

Holden's hand stills on my back. He laughs. "Baby, it's never going to be subpar between us."

There's affection and familiarity in his tone as he grabs my hand and tows me toward the locker room. My heart takes off at a gallop, excitement and anticipation coursing through me. I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe *I* suggested this.

I've never been in the boys' locker room, obviously. The layout is the same as the girls'. I look around like there's something to see, fiddling with

the hem of my sweater.

Holden glances at me as the door swings shut. “We don’t have to—”

“I want to.” I’m nervous, but it has nothing to do with second-guessing. For once I want to regret what I’ve done, not what I haven’t.

I’m not sure I could ever regret anything involving him, though.

I reach down and pull off the boots I’m wearing. The tile is cold and hard but looks clean. I peel off my tights next, followed by my underwear, leaving my skirt on. Based on the way Holden is looking at me, he likes that I did.

He takes a seat on the scarred wooden bench that runs the length of the room, knees parted and expression serious. I walk closer and closer, not stopping until my legs hit the edge of the bench and I’m standing between his.

This isn’t the frantic hook-up I was picturing. I thought we’d come in here and it would happen immediately. That drawing things out would have lost the appeal to him. That the novelty has worn off, like Grace said.

I startle when his hands land on my thighs and slide up, under my skirt. Staying upright becomes a challenge as he cups my ass and then slides a hand between my legs. My breathing becomes loud. Ragged. In the quiet room, it’s all I can hear.

“Always so wet for me,” he whispers.

I moan, everything else but him melting away. One of his hands moves to the waistband of the mesh shorts he’s wearing, pulling out the long, pulsing length of his dick. I ogle his erection as it bobs between us.

I wasn’t lying when I said I missed it. I lean forward and suck him into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the flared tip of his cock. Holden’s hips jerk, his hand sliding into my hair as I pull him deeper into my mouth. His grip tightens as my lips slide along his length.

Abruptly, he pulls away. “You’re too good at that.”

I lean down and kiss him, and he pulls me into his lap. Our mouths set a rhythm that our bodies match. He’s everywhere. A hot tongue in my mouth.

A warm palm sliding under my sweater and into my bra. A hard penis rubbing between my legs.

I freeze when I feel the head probe my entrance. Holden stops kissing me, pulling back and studying me with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You just—I’m not—I’m not on anything. Sydney said the pills made her feel weird.” I fumble for words. He’s always worn a condom. His parents had him when they were teenagers, and that story didn’t have a happy ending.

Holden makes a face. “I really didn’t need to know my sister is on birth control, Cassia.”

“Graham hasn’t even kissed her yet.”

Holden glances down at our laps, then back up at me. “We don’t have to...we can slow down.”

I shake my head. “I want to. Just put on a condom.”

“I was going to. I’ve never...not.”

Part of me regrets bringing this up and ruining the moment now. But I’m also curious. “Never?”

He shakes his head. Probably wary of discussing other girls with me, which I appreciate.

“So if I did go on birth control, I’d be your first?”

Holden swallows. Nods. “Yeah.”

I’m putting myself out there a little, even if it is just in the context of sex. He’s not shutting the idea down or looking uncomfortable about me assuming we’ll sleep together again.

“You have all of mine,” I whisper.

“You have more of mine than you think,” he tells me before turning and opening one of the lockers.

When he turns back around, he’s holding a familiar foil packet.

I scooch back to watch him roll the condom on, biting my lower lip. “I know this is super convenient, so I’m glad you do. But seriously? You guys

keep condoms in here?”

Holden smirks as he grabs my hips and pulls me back toward him. “I’ve never used one before. Never had sex in here.” His lips move just below my jawline, kissing the sensitive skin there. “Another first, flower.”

I shiver at the sweetness, the intimacy of the moment. “I like when you call me that,” I admit for the first time. I’ve never commented on the nickname before. It was all that remained of our friendship for a while, the sole reminder of what we were. I was worried addressing it might make it disappear along with everything else we used to be.

“Yeah?” He murmurs the word against my neck.

“Why do you call me that?”

“Cassias are flowers.”

“I know. I just...”

He didn’t answer my question, but I’m not sure how else to ask.

Holden sighs. “I wanted to have a name no one else called you.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I kiss him instead. Holden’s hand slides under my skirt. There’s no uncertainty. No hesitation, on my part or his. His hand returns to the spot between my legs, rubbing my clit for a minute before he guides his dick inside. The stretch as I slide down is nothing but pleasure.

He feels bigger from this angle. Pushes deeper. We fall into an effortless rhythm.

Moans fall out of my mouth as the pleasure sparks and spreads.

“Quiet, flower,” he says. “Or else the whole school will hear how much you love taking me like this.”

The taunt of the forbidden, delivered in Holden’s husky voice, is all it takes. I come quickly, Holden groaning when I contract around him. He comes right after, our bodies totally in sync.

I don’t move off him right away, wanting to live in this moment a little longer.

Our breathing slows and evens. Holden's hands are on my waist, covering the strip of skin between my skirt and sweater.

"Subpar, right?" he whispers.

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling too. I move off him, grabbing my underwear and tights to get redressed. Holden tosses the condom and fixes his shorts. Tugging them down was as undressed as he got.

As far from subpar as the sex was, I wish I'd been able to explore his body more.

We're both silent as we walk back into the gym, but it's a comfortable one. The kind when you're around someone who already knows everything important. I'm not sure that's entirely accurate when it comes to me and Holden, but that's how it feels.

"Give me a sec," he says as I pick up my abandoned backpack. "I'll walk out with you."

I nod, watching as he retrieves the balls on the court and returns them to the rack. He grabs his backpack and gym bag off the bleachers and then returns to my side.

"Sydney asked me to come over tonight," I tell him. "There's a movie she wants to watch, and your dad is going out with some friends before he..."

"Before he leaves again." The words are flat.

"Yeah."

Holden sighs. "I hate how he still skips out. I know it's his job—know he's providing for us the only way he knows how. But it feels like abandonment too, you know? Like not sticking around the one place you're needed."

I don't respond right away. I'm floored, not only by what he's saying, but that he's saying it at all. Opening up to me, without me even asking.

"Have you ever said anything to him?"

"No. We're basically adults—I am one, legally. It doesn't matter anymore."

“It can still matter, Holden.”

“I told him not to change anything next year. Chances are good I’ll be here regardless.”

“Why are they good?”

He glances over. “My grades are shit. Basketball is a wild card. I could get injured next game and never play again.”

“You beat Covington last week by twenty points. Chances are *good* you’ll have options.”

He glances over, his serious expression turning into a smirk. “Twenty points, huh?”

I shrug. “I checked the school site.”

“You do that often?”

“After every one of your games for the past three years.” It’s terrifying and relieving to admit. To give him a glimpse into the ways I’ve held onto him. How far from over him I really am.

His expression softens as we approach my car. It’s one of the few left in the lot, aside from his truck.

“I won’t be home tonight. I promised Finn I’d come over. He’s having a party.”

“Oh.”

“It’ll probably run past Syd’s bedtime if you want to come.”

“You’re inviting me to Finn’s party?”

He nods, sucking his bottom lip in between his teeth. “If you want to come.”

“What would I tell Sydney?”

Holden shoves his hands into his pockets. “You could tell her the truth.”

That suggestion is just as shocking as the invitation itself. She’s my best friend and his sister. It involves permanence. Seriousness.

He smiles, probably in response to my shocked expression. “You can think about it. Totally up to you.”

I nod, still numb with shock. He kisses me, deep and somehow sweet.
Then turns and heads for his truck.

I stand in place, frozen and upright.

But it feels like I'm falling, too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CASSIA

Sydney lifts one hand from under the blankets to point at one of the characters on the screen. “Do you think he’s lying?”

“Hmm?” I refocus on the movie playing on the television screen.

Sydney huffs. “You aren’t even watching.”

“I am. I’m just...” *Distracted*. “Tired.”

“And yet you always stay up way later than me.”

I say nothing, contemplating the segue. If I replied with “I was waiting up for Holden,” what would she say? Would she be angry? Excited?

I’m not sure how to bring him up. *If* I should bring it up. I could mention the party and leave it at that. She’d have questions, but not nearly as many as if I admitted to why I’m wanting to go.

The house phone rings. Sydney pauses the movie and stands. “It’s probably spam, but I’ll check it and make some popcorn. Want any?”

“Sure. I’ll help.”

I toss the blanket off and stand, leaving Lily sleeping on the couch. I’m antsy, trying to decide what to say to her. Doing something is better than sitting and stewing. Thinking and overthinking.

I head into the pantry and grab the box of microwave popcorn. Sydney picks up the phone as I pop it inside and start the timer.

When I turn around, Sydney is still on the phone. “...my phone died,”

she's saying. "I didn't know you'd want to talk."

Her cheeks flush a pretty shade of pink as she glances at me, mouthing *Graham*. I nod and smile, right as there's a knock on the front door.

I'll get it, I mouth back, walking out of the kitchen and through the living room—couch still a jumble of blankets—toward the front door.

I glance through the peephole, and it feels like a heavy stone was just dropped in my stomach. I don't know *who* I considered as options for people standing on the front porch, but two uniformed police officers were not on the list. Two *grim* uniformed police officers. I've never seen an upbeat cop, though. Not even when members of Pembroke's police force have come to school for demonstrations or talks. They're always serious and stoic. Maybe you have to be whenever you're on duty in that sort of career field. Where you have to witness horrible things. Share horrible news.

My hands are shaking as I work to undo the deadbolt and turn the knob. The police don't show up—without you calling—to deliver good news. It's a universally dreaded sight.

I manage to get the door open, letting in whoosh of cold air that helps me stay in this moment instead of my mind racing with terrifying possibilities.

"Miss Adams?"

I clear my throat, worried no sound will come out otherwise. "Um, no. I'm a neighbor. A friend."

One of the officers nods. "Is there anyone home related to a Joseph Adams?"

For an awful stretch of seconds, I thought they were here because of Holden. The rush of relief is dizzying, closely followed by the worry something is still wrong.

"Yes. I'll...I'll get her."

I go to close the door, then think better of it. I leave it half-open as I spin and sprint toward the kitchen.

Sydney is leaning against the counter, still talking on the phone.

“Sydney,” I hiss. “Sydney.”

Her eyes meet mine, the happy shine slowly fading as she registers my expression. “I have to go, Graham,” she says, then hangs up. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“There are police officers at the door. They—” That’s all I manage before Sydney is hurrying toward the front of the house, following the chill spreading through downstairs as the draft expands.

The officers are still waiting on the porch. Part of me was hoping they’d disappear. That they would realize they had the wrong house, the wrong person. That this was all a terrible misunderstanding that would simply disappear.

But it’s not.

“Miss Adams.”

“Yes, that’s me.”

I linger in the background a few feet behind her, my pulse and mind racing. I’m an observer in this moment. It feels like I’m seeing this unfold as part of the movie we were just watching, not as someone experiencing it firsthand.

This isn’t my house. This isn’t my father police officers are discussing using phrases such as *head-on collision* and *killed instantly* and *identify the body*. That’s all Mr. Adams has become. A body, not a person.

But this will have consequences for two of the people I care most about in this world. I barely register that thought, the realization that at some point I re-elevated Holden to the same level of status as my best friend. That I forgave his silence or moved past it, or accepted people make mistakes.

I step forward and squeeze Sydney’s hand as the officers leave after a final round of condolences.

Sydney’s eyes are wide and unseeing, the color mostly drained from her face. I shut the door, figuring the cold won’t help.

“My dad is dead.” Every word is coated in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry, Sydney.” That’s all I can think to say. I’ve been lucky enough to avoid tragedy in my life. All of my grandparents are still alive, even. I have two present, healthy parents.

Sydney has none now.

I don’t think anything I say will ever make that okay.

Sydney steps back until her back hits the plaster wall of the entryway. There’s a photo of Holden and Sydney with their dad hanging next to the bottom of the stairs. I’m glad her back is to it. Glad she doesn’t have to look at those smiling faces right now.

She sinks to the floor slowly, studying the hardwood with a blank expression, like she’s never seen it before.

I pick up the landline and dial one of the two numbers I know by heart. My dad answers after three rings. “Nolan residence.”

“Dad?”

“Cassia?” Instantly, his tone changes into apprehension. I rarely call the home phone, and he knows I’m supposed to be sleeping across the street.

“Dad, I need you or Mom to come over. The police were just here.” I glance at Sydney, who’s still staring at nothing. “They... Mr. Adams was in an accident. He, uh, he didn’t make it.”

There’s a sharp inhale on the other end of the line, followed by some commotion. I can hear Sally screaming. My mom asking a question and Maggie replying. I can’t imagine getting the call Sydney just got. Can’t imagine losing a member of my family.

“I’ll be right over, sweetheart.”

“Okay,” I whisper, then hang up the phone. I stare at the number pad.

I have Holden’s cell memorized. Should I call him?

“My dad is on his way,” I say.

Sydney nods.

“Can I get you anything? Do anything?”

This time, there’s a head shake.

We sit in silence on the floor until the front door opens. Both of my parents walk inside.

My mom rushes to Sydney's side, giving her shoulders a squeeze. "Maggie's watching everyone," she tells me.

My dad crouches down as well. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Sydney."

"Thanks," she whispers.

"I've got some contacts at the police station. I'll give them a call, see what needs to be handled."

Sydney nods. "Thanks," she repeats.

"Did your dad have anywhere he'd keep papers or documents?"

"I'm not sure. His room, maybe?"

My dad nods and stands. "I'll go take a look."

"Let's get you off the floor, sweetie," my mom says, helping Sydney stand and guiding her over to the couch. Lily stands from her spot curled up, walking over and sniffing at my mom's jeans. One of my siblings probably spilled something on her.

I trail behind them, then force the words out of my mouth. "I'll go tell Holden."

Sydney nods. She's in no shape to. She doesn't even question how I know where he is. My parents are handling everything that needs to be done here.

It feels like years, not hours, since our time at the gym. When Holden invited me to Finn's tonight, this is not at all how I imagined showing up.

"Are you sure, sweetie? Dad or I can go."

"I'm sure."

I don't want to do this at all, and especially not alone. But I need to.

"Be careful, Cassia."

I nod.

My feet drag as I walk outside, fingering the car keys in my pocket and relieved I left them there. I don't feel like going inside my house and facing my siblings' questions. I'm closest with Sydney and Holden because of our

ages, but my brothers and sisters all grew up across the street from them too. There's a whole section of our fridge dedicated to postcards Mr. Adams would bring back from his trips around the country.

The drive to Finn's house passes too quickly, even sticking exactly to the speed limit. I need more time to think through what to say. How to tell him.

The roads are empty and quiet, no sign of any death or destruction. If the officers shared where exactly the accident took place, I missed it in my haze of disbelief.

Cars are parked haphazardly on both sides of the street. It takes me a little while to find a space to squeeze into. I lock the car and walk toward the house, shoving my hands in my pockets.

I'm dressed in leggings and a fleece. My hair is a mess and I'm not wearing any makeup. It's stupid to be focused on my appearance right now, but I still regret changing out of my outfit from school earlier as I step inside and register the number of skimpy tops and short dresses.

It's hot and sticky in here, the air filled with the scent of pot smoke and hormones. People bump and grind up against one another, laughing and spilling drinks. I push through the crowd, ignoring anyone who does a double take.

This plan was not thought through. I should have texted him first. What if I can't find him? What if he's high or drunk or with a girl?

I soldier on despite my misgivings. I make it to the kitchen and spot Holden immediately. He's standing by the fridge, talking with Mark. He appears sober and there's not a girl in sight. Relief and dread war within me as he glances up and spots me. Abandons Mark and walks right over.

"Hey! You're here!"

He looks thrilled to see me. My heart swells in size as I live the beginning of a fantasy I've had since freshman year.

Then I remember why I'm here. The reminder twists in my chest like a jagged knife. I wish I could enjoy this moment. Wish I could smile back and

wish I could not know his whole world is about to be upended.

“I need to talk to you. Can we go outside?”

Holden’s forehead creases with confusion. “Uh, yeah. Sure.” His eyes skate across my face, looking for clues or hints.

I head for a back door that looks like it leads outside, hearing his footsteps follow and ignoring everyone looking at us. I keep walking until I reach the railing of the back deck. I take a deep breath and spin around. Cold air shocks my lungs.

He’s right behind me, expression unsure as he shoves his hands into his pockets. Each exhale of air lingers in the air for a second before fading away.

I don’t want to be the one who has to tell him this. Selfishly, I don’t want him to associate this moment with me.

“You’re acting weird,” he states.

This time, I don’t crack a smile.

“There was an accident, Holden.” I pause, letting those words hang in the air between us with our breaths for a minute. “Your dad...he didn’t make it. He’s gone.”

Holden stares at me, his gaze flat and unblinking.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

Still, he says nothing. He doesn’t react. Doesn’t ask questions. Definitely doesn’t lean into me or seek comfort.

“Sydney’s at your house with my parents. If you want, I can drive you.” I hold up my keys, like he needs proof I’m capable of operating a vehicle.

I’m not sure what else to do or say.

Nothing.

Once again, he’s giving me nothing. If our roles were reversed, I’d lean on him. I’d want him here. There’s nothing on Holden’s face to suggest the same.

“I have my truck.”

I wait, but that’s all he says.

“Okay. I’ll, uh, I’ll go.”

I wait for him to say something else. All I get is more silence.

He’s in shock. I’m not sure I should leave him, even if that’s what he wants. But I’m not sure what else to do or say.

A few hours ago, it felt like we were on the brink of becoming something. All of a sudden, those possibilities look like ash. I’m not his girlfriend. I’m not even sure he considers me a friend.

So I turn and walk down the stairs. The whole time I wait—hope—he’ll call me back.

But all I can hear is silence.

Once again, he’s shut me out. Without warning and about something I have no control over. I see the parallels slide into place.

He kissed me. He forgot about me.

He slept with me. He’s over me.

I glance back, once, as I reach the grass. Holden is no longer on the porch. I can see in the through the window, the lights in the kitchen a beam through the darkness.

He’s standing right where he was when I walked into the kitchen. Back near the fridge, talking with Mark. McKenzie Howard walks over to them, and I watch him greet her with a smile. More than he mustered for me.

I feel thirteen again, watching out my bedroom window as the boy across the street leaves on bikes with a group of friends without glancing at my house once. Forgotten. An inconvenience.

I thought he’d changed. I thought I’d changed. I thought we’d changed.

Maybe I’m leaping to too many conclusions. Maybe this is the aftermath of shock, where he acts out of character. But the problem is, this *is* in character. This is exactly the way he’s treated me for years. It’s only recently that’s started to shift and change. That I fell for his touches and smiles all over again.

Instead of smart, I feel like the stupidest person alive. Who lets the same

person break their heart the same way twice?

My face is numb. I turn and walk toward the spot where I parked my car. I'm upset enough it takes a while. After five minutes of aimless wandering, I spot the sedan and slip inside. I slam the door shut and exhale, leaning my head back against the seat and letting one tear escape my closed eyes.

I love him.

I hate him.

One of those is a lie. You can't feel two such strong emotions for one person at the same time. Or at least, I didn't think you could.

If one's a lie...I'm not sure which.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HOLDEN

When I leave the gym, it's long after everyone else, which has become routine. Coach tried to talk me into not playing for a few weeks. Told me scouts would understand and so would my teammates, given the circumstances. But I *want* to play. It's the one escape I have.

I haven't even used my dad's death to get out of school assignments. All of my teachers have been understanding and accommodating. But I've turned everything in on time, despite knowing I'll pass regardless.

Tragedy is a funny thing. It can rock your world to its core and leave everything else untouched. My dad is gone, just like that. Forever, I'll no longer have a dad.

But my life looks the same. My routine is unchanged.

He was gone more than he was home. It's very easy to pretend my dad is still alive. That he's just driving an eighteen-wheeler through Kentucky and will be home for Christmas.

Sydney is having a hard time adjusting. But she *is* adjusting. She talks to her friends and still helps out with school plays and is now officially dating Graham.

I'm not in denial. I know he's gone. But I'm stalled in place. Stuck in a reality I don't want to actually face.

There's a female figure standing by my truck as I leave the sidewalk and

cross the parking lot.

My sure steps stutter. For a second, I'm worried it's Cassia. I haven't spoken to her since she came to Finn's to tell me about my dad.

There was no funeral, just a cremation and a will reading. My dad kept his wishes simple and straightforward, just like him. He left me and Sydney everything. Since I'm eighteen and she isn't, I'm also technically my sister's guardian. A shitty one, so far. I'm too consumed by my own grief.

I've always felt like a mess in comparison to Cassia's poise. But that's especially true now. I'm scared to face her. I've always known she deserves better than me, but it's never seemed clearer than it does right now.

It's not Cassia next to my truck, though.

It's my mom.

She showed up about a week after a drunk driver swerved across the center line and took my dad's life. Fucking ironic. He logged thousands of miles on the road. Late nights and long hours all across the country. And then he died fifteen minutes from our house.

I stop a few feet away from her and cross my arms.

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you I'm living in Ridgemont."

Right. The first time she showed up, she dropped that bomb. She walked away from us, a whole two towns over. Didn't even leave the county.

"*Here*, as in the high school. You want Sydney to see you?"

I haven't told Sydney our mom showed up. I'm worried how it might affect her. I don't trust any of my mom's intentions as honorable.

"I'm not giving you money."

I was shocked when I heard how much my dad had tucked away at the will reading. Enough I can afford college without a basketball scholarship.

It should be a relief. Instead, it's another thing I'm stressing about. I don't see how I can leave now. Abandon Sydney. She shouldn't have to stay home alone. Extended family offered to take her in—take both of us in—but that

will require switching schools. No one lives close enough to Pembroke High to make it a reasonable commute. I'm not asking her to do that, though I'm sure she'll offer. It's a conversation I'm dreading. A large part of me does want to leave, to get away from this town, and I'm sure Sydney recognizes that.

"You don't think much of me," my mom comments.

"Is that a surprise?" I ask, tone cutting.

"Not really."

I inherited my bluntness from my mom, I guess. I'm worried about what else I might have inherited from her too.

"It's easy to judge, Holden. It's hard to be home with two toddlers. Your dad was always gone."

"That's not an excuse for abandoning your kids. There *is* no excuse for that."

She shrugs. "I knew you were better off without me."

That sentence hits me hard, with more force than anything else she could have said. Because that's always what I've told myself when it comes to Cassia. It feels like I'm having a conversation with my own insecurities.

"I wasn't meant to be a mother," she continues. "I never wanted to be a mother. I was a kid, younger than you, when I had you."

"What's your point?"

"I don't have one. I'm sorry—sorry you got me as a mother. Your dad promised me he'd be there. Instead, he was out. Working. Doing God knows what with God knows who."

"Providing for us, you mean?"

"Your father wasn't perfect, Holden. I know I'm a low bar. But me leaving forced him out of some bad habits. If I hadn't, you would have ended up with two crappy parents, not just one."

Part of me wants to ask what she means. But most of me doesn't want to know. Delving into my parents' train wreck of a relationship won't bring my

dad back or change who my mother is.

“You should go.”

“Okay.”

My mom doesn't offer any resistance, and that stings, even though it shouldn't. *She* abandoned *me*, and still there's some part of me that doesn't hate her. How can she feel nothing toward me?

She walks away, toward a black hatchback parked across the lot. I climb into the cab of my truck, not wanting her to see me standing here, watching her walk away from me again. Part of me wants to fling more questions at her, demand answers and apologies.

But I know none of them will be satisfying. She made a decision that can't be undone. Even if she did regret it, it wouldn't change anything. I don't think I'm capable of forgiving that choice.

For a minute, I stew. I don't want to go home. Can't deal with watching Sydney go through my dad's things or forcing smiles around me.

My emotions are swirling close to the surface. I need an outlet or some sort of release. If Declan hadn't paused fights for the winter, I'd be texting him right now.

I turn on my truck and head for the old high school. The only stop I make is at the seedy liquor store on the fringe of town.

The guy behind the register recognizes me. Knows I'm in high school and underage. But he just eyes me with pity as I check out, not even asking to see my fake ID.

I'm so sick of the pity. Sick of a lot of things.

There's no one else at the old courts when I pull up along the asphalt. It's a sad sight. Faded lines and frayed hoop strings. A few tufts of grass have managed to survive in cracks in the court, tiny spots of life in the midst of an unforgiving surface.

I grab the whiskey bottle and the basketball I keep in the back of my truck and walk out onto the court. The lights flicker on, contending with the rapidly

dropping sun. One of them is permanently out thanks to a stray shot Finn took. As far as the town is concerned, this place is out of commission. No one has come around to fix it.

I start dribbling, ignoring the chill in the air as I weave across the court, pretending to dodge and block invisible opponents.

Then, I start shooting. Every shot I miss, I take a sip of whiskey. The more I drink, the more I miss. The more I miss, the more I drink.

Eventually, I stop. I'm breathing heavily. Lazy heat is swimming in my bloodstream thanks to the alcohol.

My body is already exhausted from practice earlier. I'm emotionally drained too, from the encounter with my mom.

I sink down in the center of the court, not caring the ground is cold and hard. There's no way I can drive. No way I could do that to Sydney or live with myself if I took a stranger's life the way someone took my dad's. I'm going to have to call someone to come pick me up.

I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here, when another car pulls up. I roll my head to one side so I can look and see, too lazy to actually turn my whole body around.

Finn climbs out, followed by Mark. Jordan. Grace. McKenzie. A second car arrives, spilling out more of my friends. Finn approaches me first. "Figured you'd be here."

I grunt, trying to decide how I feel about them all being here. I wanted to be alone. But I'm sick of it too.

"Started the party without us?" he asks, spotting the bottle.

I wouldn't call this much of a party. Graham's study thing was livelier. "I guess."

More of the group filters over. Jordan sets up a speaker and pop music starts blaring. It's better than sitting alone in silence, but I'm not really in the mood to party, either. Most of my friends respect that, smiling at me but not approaching.

Most of the guys start playing a pickup game. Grace comes and sits beside me. A few of the other girls follow her over.

“Hey,” Grace says.

“Hey.” I run a finger along the edge of the whiskey bottle.

“I’m worried about you, Holden.”

“Don’t be. I’m fine.”

“You’re drunk on a Monday night.”

“I had a shitty day.”

“Right.” She sighs. Things between us were never good, but they’ve been bad as of late. No matter how drunk I get, I can’t seem to stomach touching a girl who isn’t Cassia, so I haven’t had sex in weeks. I know Grace wants to think we were ever more than that, but we really weren’t. She’s stopped pushing anything physical and tried to be here for me as a friend. The problem is, we never were.

So I’m perpetually disappointing Grace.

Perpetually disappointing a lot of people.

Grace doesn’t make any more attempts to talk to me. She chats with the other girls instead, while I lean back on my palms and stare off into space.

I’m buzzed enough zoning out is peaceful, not boring. I tip my head back and stare up at the stars, trying to trace patterns in the constellations twinkling overhead.

It got completely dark out when I wasn’t paying attention. That’s how all the days have felt lately—like they’re over minutes after I’ve woken up. A constant cycle with no clear start or end.

At first, I think the stars are falling. But then I force my eyes to focus. A snowflake lands on the back of my hand, melting as soon as it touches my skin.

Usually I hate snow. It’s a pain to clean the truck and shovel the steps. Means I can’t play out in the driveway and turns into a mess.

But there’s something peaceful and mesmerizing about watching it fall.

The ground isn't frozen, so it disappears as soon as it touches the earth, dissipating as if it was never there in the first place. Like magic.

A third car arrives at the court, headlights cutting through the darkness and illuminating the lazy drift of a few snowflakes before they shut out. I squint at the car, then glance at the court. No one is missing. Maybe they're kids from Ridgemont?

Two figures reach the edge of the court. Familiar figures.

This time, I sit up. My body is sluggish, my movements slow.

Fuck.

I don't want her to see me like this. Don't want either of them to see me like this. Sydney walks over first, with Cassia right behind her.

She crouches down beside me. "Hey," Sydney says softly.

"Hi."

Sydney glances between me and the half-empty bottle, her expression tight. Disappointed. "I got worried. You weren't answering your phone, so I asked Cassia to drive me here."

I glance at Cassia. She's standing a few feet away, hands in her pockets, watching the guys play. Studiously not looking at me.

"I left my phone in the car," I tell Sydney. "Just needed a...minute."

I've been out here for hours, though, and I hate that I worried her. The last thing Sydney needs is to be stressing about me.

"I'm sorry. I should have texted."

"It's okay," she replies.

"I'll be home soon, okay?"

Sydney glances at the whiskey again.

"One of the guys will drive my truck," I add.

"Okay." She stands and walks away, passing Cassia.

I'm expecting Cassia to follow Sydney. To leave.

She doesn't. She walks right up to me and leans down. I have a clear shot down the front of her shirt. Despite all the whiskey I've drunk, I feel my dick

twitch.

It's déjà vu to the night we sat in my driveway. I wonder if she realizes the same, especially when she grabs the bottle.

Last time, I stopped her, and she ended up in my lap.

This time, I don't move.

"What the fuck are you doing, Holden?" she asks.

For a second, looking at her, I forget how to breathe. The night air around me seems to stiffen and constrict, crowding in around me.

"Coping."

Her hazel eyes glance between Grace beside me and the bottle she's holding. She scoffs. "Yeah. I see that."

I stand so suddenly she has to take a step back. Grab her wrist and pull her away, off into the grass.

"Don't act like I owe you anything," I say. Because it feels like I do owe her something, and I'm not sure why. She's better off without me. I have nothing to offer her.

Cassia's eyes flash with brown-green fire. "Owe me? How is me *caring* inconveniencing you, Holden?"

I grind my molars. "You shouldn't have brought Sydney here."

"Well, I did. If you don't want people checking up on you, maybe you shouldn't disappear and get drunk."

"Whatever." I turn to leave. I shouldn't be having a conversation with her right now. I'm too drunk, too volatile.

I freeze when I hear the crack of glass. I glance between Cassia and the broken bottle, some disbelief breaking through the haze of whiskey as I stare at the two broken halves on the edge of the court.

"You're going to walk away from me? *Again?*" She shakes her head, anger twisting her expression. "Sydney wasn't the only one worried, you know. She isn't the reason I'm here. You made me think..." Her voice cracks, and it breaks something in my chest too. "It's been *weeks*, Holden.

Not a fucking word from you.”

I scoff, attempting to act unaffected. “Life doesn’t work out exactly how you want it to, Cassia. I’ve had some shit going on.”

“I know that, Holden. You think I don’t know that?”

“I don’t know. What has ever gone wrong in your life? You have the happy family. You know exactly what you want to do with your life.”

“What’s ever gone wrong in my life? Well, falling in love with you has been fucking inconvenient.” She spits the words out. They sound more like a declaration of war than of love.

I freeze. I’ve wondered how she felt about me. We’ve been stuck in a cycle of lust and confusion. But for some reason, I never thought she’d say it. At all, and certainly not like this. “It was a waste of time too.”

I say what I’m thinking, and she stills like I slapped her. I meant it as an apology, more than anything. I feel unlovable right now. She should have been falling in love with a guy who can handle hardship without falling apart. Who has a certain future and something to offer her.

“Don’t talk to me again, Holden. We’re *done*, you hear me? This thing between us, it’s finished.”

It’s exactly what I wanted. Needed. For her to let go, so I can stop feeling guilty or like I’m letting her down. But I’m stunned by how much it hurts. How much I want to take everything back.

Instead, I force myself to keep going. Clean breaks are easiest to move on from, right? “Fine by me. We fucked a few times. You’re not my girlfriend. I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

That’s what I thought I wanted. The truth is, I haven’t touched any girl since the night she climbed into my lap and made me come fully dressed.

That’s nothing Cassia knows. Nothing I intend to tell her.

“You think I’m so dick-whipped I won’t do the same, Holden?” she snaps. “I *will*.”

I let the alcohol in my blood temper the way those words feel like a blow.

“Fine.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Yeah, I know,” I agree. “Told you you have shitty taste.”

Cassia shakes her head. “Wow. I thought you’d changed. I thought you actually cared.” She spins and starts to head toward her car.

Everyone on the court is staring at us. I should let her walk away, but something in me can’t leave things like this between us.

“Goddammit,” I mutter. “Cassia!”

She spins around. “*What?*”

I take a step closer. “It’s better this way, okay? There’s not—I’m not—” I exhale. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry everything changed. But I’m not—I have no idea what the hell I’m going to do. I’m not going to drag you down into that with me.”

I’m not expecting a smile and apology accepted. But I’m not prepared for the vitriol in her expression either.

Cassia looks like she wants to shove me. Maybe slap me. “Right. Don’t ask me what I want. Don’t talk to me about how you’re feeling. Just decide—the same way you’ve decided everything else.”

I inhale, bracing myself for what I need to say. Stare at the grass and scoff my sneaker against it. I can’t keep waffling. Giving her false hope. “You should move on. Give Baker a chance. He’s a good guy, Cassia.”

She says nothing. When I finally man up and look at her, I realize there’s a wet sheen covering her hazel eyes. My stomach drops.

“Cassia...”

“Bye, Holden.” Those are two words she’s said to me before. But there’s a permanence now. A finality.

She turns and walks away. Just like I did to her four years ago, at Ginny Davis’ eighth grade Halloween party, right after I kissed her.

I thought that hurt—walking away.

But it hurts just as much—maybe more—to be the one walked away

from.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CASSIA

I prefer animals to people. No cat has ever made me feel excluded. No dog has ever broken my heart.

I stroke the soft fur of one of the unnamed puppies absentmindedly, barely registering the warm lick of her tongue. My thoughts are stuck on harsh words and broken glass. That's why I'm here on a Friday afternoon instead of sticking to my normal schedule. I'm desperate for some distraction.

"You okay, Cassia?" Eileen asks.

I give the puppy one final pat and stand, turning back to measuring the kibble. "Yeah."

"College troubles?"

"Uh, no." My applications are all submitted for early decision. It's a waiting game at this point. Nothing else I can do.

"How is Sydney doing?" Eileen's voice is soft. Pembroke is a small town, and Joe Adams' accident was the subject of discussion for weeks after it happened. So was the man from Ridgemont who was drunk and also died in the accident. A tragedy all around.

My broken heart was another casualty. But that will heal. Repair itself. I'll move on, even if it hurts like hell right now.

It takes me too long to respond.

"Cassia?"

I clear my throat. “She’s doing okay, I think.”

“What about Holden?”

An innocent question with a lot hiding underneath. One most people haven’t even thought to ask me. They associate me with one Adams sibling, and it’s not Holden. But Eileen knew us before. She saw him volunteer with me here. Was there for the beginning and middle of us, and now she’s asking about the end.

My elbow knocks one of the bowls, prompting a clang. “I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I glance at her, something in Eileen’s expression suggesting everything I’ve been too scared to say is obvious in the way I answered the question. “Am I that transparent?”

I try to pair the question with a wry smile, but I’m sure it falls flat.

“I have some experience with complicated love,” Eileen replies, suggesting some truth to the rumors I’ve heard. “And...I saw the way you two were looking at each other when he was here last month.”

“Pretty sure you misread things on his end.” Despite my best attempts, plenty of bitterness saturates my voice.

Eileen hums. “It’s harder to see love up close.”

“There’s definitely no love to see.” If the radio silence of the last couple of weeks wasn’t enough to tell me so, pushing me toward another guy sure was.

Eileen picks up a couple of the bowls that have already been filled. Gives me an understanding smile. “I hope you’re wrong.”

She takes the bowls toward the far kennel, starting to distribute dinner among the dogs.

The sad thing is, even after everything, I hope so too.



I'm close to home, running through a mental checklist of the work I need to finish tonight, when I realize I forgot my Calculus textbook in my locker.

I rushed out of school as soon as the final bell rang, eager to get to the animal shelter. Actively avoiding Holden. Not that he was trying to talk to me.

I turn around in a random driveway and speed back toward the high school.

The lot is almost empty. I forcibly shove back the memories of the last time I was here with so few cars as I park right in front of the school. Quiet hallways greet me as I enter the building and hurry toward my locker. There's no one else around. I grab the textbook I need and retrace my steps back outside.

I'm halfway to my car when movement catches my attention out of the corner of my eye.

My heartbeat stops and stutters before I realize the tall frame doesn't belong to the boy I'm avoiding.

Harrison smiles as he approaches, as friendly as ever. "Hi, Cassia."

"Hi, Harrison," I reply.

We haven't spoken since he brought over Chris's soccer ball in the parking lot after the senior trip. Honestly, that's the last time I thought about him—until Holden brought him up at the basketball court.

"How've you been?" he asks.

"Um, okay."

Harrison nods, understanding. He knows I'm best friends with Sydney. Which is useful, honestly. I'd be just as affected by Mr. Adams's death if Holden had been his only child because it affected Holden. It's easier to hide how much I care about Holden under the guise of how recent events have affected my best friend, which makes me feel spectacularly shitty.

"You doing anything tonight?"

"No," I answer, honestly. Sydney is going over to Graham's. I was

planning to watch a documentary and go to bed early, like a geriatric spinster.

“Jack Randall is having a party. If you want to hang out...I’ll be there.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him.

“Okay,” he replies, smiling before he walks away.

I told myself to move on. Holden told me to move on.

But still...I’m conflicted.



Three hours later, I park in front of Jack Randall’s house. After a twenty-minute speech on what I should be aware of at a high school party, my parents told me it was okay for me to go.

I was shocked. Part of me told them so I wouldn’t be able to come. So it wouldn’t be a possibility.

Instead, they endorsed it. Said they were happy I was going out. I guess I haven’t hidden my heartbreak over Holden as well as I thought. It’s a new low—when your parents think you’re pathetic.

Maggie fussed over my hair and outfit. I’m wearing skinny jeans and a top I never would have picked out for myself, my hair straight and my eyes smoky.

I feel good. I’m also scanning the other vehicles parked as I walk toward the front door, looking for a familiar truck. There’s still no sign of it when I reach the front door.

It’s unlocked. I step inside, the scent of beer and sweat immediately reminding me of the only other high school party I’ve been to. I push away the memories forcibly.

Holden wants me to move on.

Told me to move on.

Living in the past won’t do me any good.

I spot Harrison as soon as I enter the living room. He walks over to me

right away.

“Hey!”

“Hi,” I reply, tugging the hem of my borrowed shirt anxiously. I’m awkward and uncomfortable. Proud of myself for coming and also ready to leave.

“You want a drink?”

“I’m driving.”

“There’s soda, Cassia.”

“Oh. Okay, sure.”

Harrison smiles at me and then guides me into the kitchen. He grabs me a ginger ale, which I sip on as he introduces me around. *You know Cassia, right?* is a constant refrain.

It’s sweet of him to include me. I try to relax and enjoy myself, nodding along like I get jokes and agree with what everyone is saying as I down the ginger-flavored soda.

I finish it about fifteen minutes after I arrive and immediately have to go to the bathroom.

As soon as the lacrosse player he was talking to heads into the kitchen, I ask Harrison where it is.

“I’ll show you,” he offers.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But it can get a little crazy upstairs, and the lineup there will be shorter.”

I smile and nod, following him toward the staircase. I try to ignore the fact people are looking at me. It’s a novelty I’m here, I guess. I also try to ignore how neither Holden nor any of his friends appear to be here. I didn’t think Pembroke was large enough to host multiple major parties in one night.

Maybe he’s drunk at the old court again.

Not my problem, I remind myself. He made that clear.

Harrison leads me to a bathroom upstairs. There's only one girl in front of me, so it's a short wait. I use the restroom. Study my appearance as I wash my hands.

I hardly recognize myself in the mirror.

I look older. Adult. More like a woman than a girl. From the outside, you'd hardly know anything is wrong. On the inside, I'm a mess. I want to be here. Want to move on and be over him. Why can't *wanting* that be enough?

Harrison is waiting dutifully when I walk out of the bathroom. Leaning against the opposite wall, wearing a small smile.

I study him as I approach. His jeans and his Pembroke Football sweatshirt.

And I will myself to feel something. Anything.

Nothing.

When I reach Harrison, I do something that shocks us both.

I kiss him.

It takes him a few seconds to start kissing me back. But once he does, it's hesitant. Tentative. At first, I think it's surprise. But we kiss and kiss and it's a long ways from consuming. Water lapping at my toes as opposed to being pulled under by a rip current.

When Holden kisses me, I have to remind my heart to beat. My lungs to breathe.

I pull back slowly, dreading having to explain my actions to Harrison. We stare at each other for a few seconds.

"Sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Don't be. I enjoyed it."

I'm blushing. I can feel the heat in my cheeks. "Oh. Um, good. You ready to go back downstairs?"

Harrison doesn't move. "Why'd you do it?"

I shift my weight from foot to foot. My fingernails dig into my palms.

"Why did you kiss me, Cassia?" he asks again.

His tone is kind, but it beckons an answer. One I don't want to give him. I kissed him because I wanted to break what is already battered. I wanted to destroy me and Holden beyond repair. Wipe away the past and prove I'm capable of moving on.

And that isn't me. I'm not the girl who uses one guy to make another jealous. And the worst part is, I'm not sure if Holden would even care if he knew I just kissed someone else. We fooled around, same as he's done with lots of other girls.

"I just...wanted to."

He nods like that was the answer he was expecting. Then he looks away, down the hallway. "It's obvious you're in love with him."

Harrison doesn't even specify who he's talking about. He says it like it's obvious—to him, to everyone.

"I...I don't want to be." I whisper the words, worried about what truth they hold.

Another nod. "I know. Adams is an even bigger idiot than I thought."

I flinch when he says Holden's name.

Something wry and knowing twists Harrison's expression. "I wish I could be your rebound guy, Cassia. But I like you too much. You're my first choice, and I'll always be your second."

"Holden and I are finished. There's too much...too much has happened. There's more hate than love there now."

"Hate and love are the two most powerful emotions. If you feel both for the same person..."

"You're saying I'm screwed."

He quirks a smile. "I'm saying, give Adams hell."

"He doesn't..." I look away, because it's embarrassing to admit. "Things weren't like that between us. We were just casual."

"He told you that?"

I nod.

Harrison swears under his breath. “Come on, let’s go downstairs.”

A moan sounds from one of the closed doors we pass. I glance at Harrison and he smirks.

“I’ll set anyone straight who thinks that’s what we were doing up here.”

“You don’t have to.” I doubt Harrison is a crappy kisser. Which means my reaction earlier means my body is not ready to move past Holden. That doesn’t mean he can’t think that I have.

He smirks. “The basketball team is tight. You’re putting a target on my back.”

“Why would the basketball team care?”

“Because *Holden* will care, Cassia.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sure that’s what *he* told *you*. But he lied. Adams has always been a wild card. The fighting, the—”

“What fighting?”

Harrison exhales. “He used to fight for money, down at the old high school.”

I think of all the Friday nights he came home with bruises or bloody. How I assumed it was an errant elbow or a trip or a game that got “heated.”

I feel foolish. Oblivious. Inexperienced.

Did I ever really know him at all?

Right at the top of the stairs, I pause. Lean back against the wall and exhale. I feel the hot tears coming and let them loose. Here, where no one else but Harrison can see.

Harrison looks horrified. And uncomfortable. “Cassia, I—”

I wave his concern away, then swipe at my cheeks. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I’m just…” I take a deep breath. Wipe away a few more tears. “He never told me. I gave him everything, you know? He gave me nothing.” I sigh. “Sorry. Let’s go.”

“Don’t apologize. Do you need another minute?”

“No. I’m good. I promise.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t move. Neither do I.

“People went to these fights?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Yeah. They placed bets. That’s how it made money. Holden always won, so he drew a crowd.”

“You went?”

“Yeah. Once. He fought a guy from Ridgemont’s football team. Most of my teammates were going, so I did too. Adams kicked his ass.”

I nod. I can’t picture it. Can’t fully register it.

We walk downstairs and head into the kitchen. It’s more crowded than it was earlier, but I have no issue picking one face out of the dozens gathered.

Holden’s expression doesn’t change when he sees me.

But I catalogue the tiny changes in his posture. The way his fingers tighten around the plastic cup he’s holding. The flex as he tightens his jaw. How his eyes bounce between me and Harrison.

There’s no way Harrison hasn’t noticed Holden is here. But he acts oblivious, guiding me over to the fridge and pulling out a chilled bottle of water, which he hands to me.

I shoot him a grateful smile as I take it, twisting off the cap and taking a long swallow. The cold water soothes my throat and settles in my stomach. I focus on the sensation, trying to tune everything else out.

“What the fuck did you do, Baker?”

Suddenly, Holden is near, close enough I can smell cinnamon.

“Ask yourself that same question, Adams,” Harrison retorts.

The kitchen falls silent, all other sounds leaching away like water through a sieve.

Holden looks at me. “What happened?”

“None of your business. We’re *done*, remember?”

Something flashes across Holden’s face before he looks at Harrison. Something other than indifference, which is what I was expecting to see. He

doesn't look peeved, like a little kid annoyed someone else is playing with his toys. He looks *hurt*, and the sad organ in my chest thumps pathetically.

Holden glares at Harrison. Harrison looks at me, wearing a *told you so* expression.

But I don't think Holden is jealous. I think he's mad he was wrong about me moving on. That what is pissing him off is seeing me at a party with another guy and not heartbroken at home.

There's no regret on his face. No resentment. Just rage—pure and strong.

Holden looks away from Harrison, at me. "What happened upstairs?" he asks again.

"Are you asking if I hooked up with him? Because that's not really any of your business."

His jaw tenses to the point it looks like it could snap in two. "You've been crying."

"So? Go do *whatever the fuck you want*, Holden."

His blue eyes blaze as I throw his words back at him. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. You did mean it. That's the problem."

I brush past him, heading for the kitchen island that's covered with a wide array of bottles. I grab a plastic cup from the stack and one bottle at random, pouring a generous splash. I tip it back and swallow, enjoying the burn as it slides down my throat. But it leaves behind the bitter aftertaste of regret. I promised my parents I wouldn't drink tonight.

"Leave it, man," I hear Harrison say.

"Don't talk to me, Baker," Holden responds.

I drink more after listening to that exchange. Heat trickles lazily into my veins as I sense him approaching me. I spin and stare him down, my gaze defiant as I drain the rest of the cup.

Awareness simmers and crackles between us.

"There you are, Holden. Why did you—oh."

Everything in me tenses as Grace appears, slipping her arms around

Holden's waist. He doesn't lean into her touch, but he sure as hell doesn't push her away.

My eyes prick, exhaustion and emotion overwhelming me. I'm not going to cry again, though. Not here, not in front of him.

I set my empty cup on the counter. Take a step forward and rise on my tippy-toes. Holden inhales sharply as the space between us shrinks down to inches.

"His dick is bigger than yours," I whisper in his ear.

Then I walk away, out of the kitchen, not turning around once. Not even when I hear something crash behind me.

I need to get the hell out of here before I do anything else I'll regret.

I don't make it far, though. I weave through the living room and end up on the front porch.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and call my home number.

My mom answers. "Cassia?"

"Hi, Mom. Can you come pick me up?"

I wait for the disappointment, but all I hear in her voice is understanding.

"Of course. Text me the address, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

I hang up and send her my location. Take a seat on the railing and stare up at the sky. It's a clear night. All the stars seem visible, sprinkled through the heavens as pinpricks of light. Beautiful and massive.

The front door opens a few minutes later. Harrison steps out.

I give him a sheepish smile. "I'm really sorry about all that."

"Don't apologize, Cassia."

"Bet you regret inviting me."

"No, I don't," he tells me, earnest. "Do you regret coming?"

"I haven't decided yet, honestly. I was hoping for some closure."

"I don't think closure is something to hope for. Either you want it, or you don't."

“Are you saying I don’t want it?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

I glance up at the stars again. “I want to want it. Does that count?”

When I look at him again, Harrison is smiling. “No. It doesn’t.”

My phone buzzes in my lap. I look down to see a message from my mom. Our blue minivan is visible between two of the cars parked directly in front of the house. “My mom is here. I texted her after I started drinking.”

Earlier, I would have been embarrassed to admit that. Now, I don’t really care. I’m emotionally tapped, incapable of caring.

Harrison nods.

Impulsively, I step forward and give him a hug. He smells like laundry detergent and spicy cologne. Nice, but not cinnamon.

“Thank you—for tonight.”

He smiles as we separate. “You know, the first time I noticed you was during the Homecoming assembly freshman year. We were seated alphabetically. Adams was in the row right in front of me. The whole time—when the principal was talking, when the cheerleaders were performing, when the team captain was giving a speech—he kept glancing over to the right. It took me a little while to figure out what he was looking at.”

I wait. Raise an eyebrow.

“*You*, Cassia.”

“If he cared—at all—I wouldn’t be out here with you, Harrison,” I tell him. “No offense.”

Harrison grins. “None taken. But I’ve been at a lot of the same parties as Adams. He cares—a lot.”

I sigh, too exhausted to keep arguing and not wanting to keep my mom waiting any longer. “Night, Harrison.”

“Night, Cassia.”

I walk down the front steps to the waiting car. My mom glances over as I settle in the passenger seat and snap my seatbelt. She starts driving right

away, which I'm grateful for. All I want right now is to go home and go to bed. And hopefully wake up as someone better equipped to handle heartbreak. I'm not proud of the way I acted tonight, no matter how forgiving Harrison was. I shouldn't have said what I did to Holden, shouldn't have had a drink. My actions blurred the line into mistakes. I'm not sure how to move on without making them.

"Did you have fun?" my mom asks as she flicks on the blinker and makes a left turn.

"No."

She laughs at my candor, but it's brief. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

I stare out the window. I can't see anything besides blackness. "It was my own fault."

"Did something happen?"

"I fell in love."

"Tonight?" I hear the attempt at levity in her tone. But there's also understanding. Acknowledgment.

"Ten years ago, when we moved in across the street."

There's a long stretch of silence, none of it sounding like surprise. She knew. "Love can take time, honey. Face obstacles. It doesn't mean it's not real. That it doesn't matter."

I look over at my mom's profile, surprised. I figured she was going to tell me to forget he ever existed. Girl power. Independence. Value your own worth. "He doesn't love me."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He said I was better off without him."

"Do you think you are?"

I don't hesitate before answering. "No."

"Maybe you should tell him that."

The rest of the drive home is silent.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HOLDEN

Grace gapes at me, shocked. My hand throbs like a motherfucker, but it's nothing compared to the anguish splintering in my chest. I storm past a shocked Finn and out onto the back deck. No one else is out here—it's freezing.

The cold feels good. Numbing.

I take a seat on the picnic table, trying to focus on the physical pain and nothing else. I don't realize I'm bleeding until some blood drips onto the wood beneath me. I yank down the t-shirt I'm wearing beneath my sweatshirt and wrap my split knuckle in the white fabric. It's immediately stained red.

My breaths come in ragged gasps, pain and fury roiling my insides. My eyes screw tightly shut, trying to force away the images my brain conjures easily. Harrison kissing her. Touching her. *Fucking* her. I'm tempted to punch another cabinet.

As angry as I am with Cassia, I'm even more furious with myself. I did this.

I pushed her away when she was only trying to help.

I made her hate me, when it was a miracle she cared in the first place.

And I knew there would be consequences. I didn't think they'd be her coming downstairs with some guy, hair tousled and lips swollen. Didn't know that sight would feel like a hot knife to my chest. I've fooled around

with plenty of girls. I've seen most of them with other guys, and it never bothered me at all.

I should have known she'd be different. I *did* know, which is part of why I did it.

Masochism and self-sabotage are two of the things I'm best at. I knew she'd move on eventually; knew we were headed on two very different paths. If it wasn't Harrison, it would have been someone else.

I thought a clean break sooner rather than later would be better. Would hurt less.

Except, I can't imagine anything hurting more than this.

The screen door squeaks open. Mark steps out.

I look away, not wanting to see anyone. Definitely not wanting to talk. "Here." He holds a bag of ice in front of me.

"I'm cold enough, thanks."

He drops it in my lap. "For your hand, dipshit. We've still got a championship to win, remember?"

I can't summon anything in me to care about basketball right now. But I grunt a "thanks" as I drop the cold bag on my split knuckles.

"You love her, huh?"

I clench my jaw so tightly I hear a crack.

Mark sighs. "Baker said he didn't screw her."

"He's worried I'll come after him."

"Why would you do that, if you don't care?"

I scoff. I care, and he knows I care. He's trying to force me to admit it. Maybe I should. Pretending she doesn't matter to me hasn't accomplished a whole heck of a lot. It's landed me bitter and freezing out here.

Mark sighs when I say nothing else. "He doesn't look like a guy who just got laid. He looks like a guy who doesn't have a shot in hell with the girl he wants. *You* do." Mark claps my shoulder, then heads inside.

I sit for a while longer, letting the cold numb me. I'm sober, which I

haven't been in weeks.

Eventually, I fish my keys out of my pocket and walk toward my truck. I'm not sure why I came tonight. Part of me wishes I hadn't. Now I have the sight of Cassia coming downstairs seared into my brain.

It was an attempt to return to normalcy, I guess. An acknowledgment the path I'm on is a destructive one. My dad would want better. Would be disappointed by the way I've acted since his death. That realization sings in a way little else has managed to affect me in weeks.

All the lights are off across the street when I park in the driveway. Cassia's car isn't there. The knowledge niggles against my skin like a rash, persistent and irritating. Maybe she went home with Baker. Maybe she's still at the party, dancing and drinking.

She's not mine. I have no claim over what she does or who she chooses to do it with. But yeah, it fucking stings.

Sydney is sitting on the couch, arms crossed, when I walk into the living room. I sigh, then drop my keys in the dish on the coffee table.

Of course this would be the night she stays up past eleven p.m. It's bad enough I feel like I'm disappointing my dad's ghost. I'm letting her down too.

"What happened to your hand?" she asks.

The bleeding has stopped, but my knuckles are still red and swollen. I debate lying, but she'll hear the truth at school on Monday. "I punched a cabinet."

Sydney's eyes widen. "What? Why?"

"Felt like it. I'm going to bed." I turn, heading toward the stairs.

"Was Cassia there?"

I still but don't turn around. "Yeah."

It didn't occur to me she would have told Sydney she was going to Jack's party. It should have.

"Did you apologize?"

I wince, recalling what I said to her. “She doesn’t want to hear it. She hates me.”

“*Goddammit*, Holden.”

I flinch. Sydney never swears.

“She’s my best friend. She’s been there for me through everything. And I can’t be there for her because you’re my brother. She doesn’t even want to come over here anymore. Won’t talk to me about it, because I’m your sister and she doesn’t want anything between her and you to affect our relationship. I have no idea what happened between you guys. Back in eighth grade, now, she won’t tell me anything. Neither will you.”

I close my eyes. “I’ll go,” I offer. “I’ll spend a couple of nights at Finn’s, and you guys can—”

“I don’t want you to go, Holden. I want you to stay. To show up. To stop running away.”

My jaw works. “I’m here right now. I’m here for you, Sydney. You’re not alone.”

“I’m not talking about *me*, Holden. Did you know Cassia has a cinnamon air freshener in her car? Those Lions tickets that her dad won last winter? I found a receipt for them in her room over the summer. The only day she drinks coffee in the afternoon is Friday, so she never falls asleep before me when she sleeps over. Those granola bars you eat every morning? She brings a new box over every week, for you.”

The fist around my heart tightens.

“*Apologize*, Holden. Fucking grovel for her forgiveness. She might hate you right now but she’s also in love with you. Has been since we were all kids. Anyone could see that, especially someone who knows you both as well as I do.”

“She deserves better than me.”

“You’re right. She does.”

I scoff at Sydney’s hasty agreement.

“Better than this version of you, at least. But she wants *you*, Holden.”

I tilt my head back to stare at the ceiling. “She hooked up with Harrison Baker at the party tonight.”

“She told you that?”

“They came downstairs together.”

Sydney stands and walks over toward me. “If you’re not sure, let her go. If you are, *do something*.”

“Sure of what?”

“You know what.”

Then she walks up the stairs, leaving me standing here staring at the couch, where I first saw Cassia naked, with a mess in my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CASSIA

Everyone stares at me on Monday morning. It's the first indication that Friday night wasn't just a bad dream.

I hid out all weekend. I didn't answer any texts. Didn't go on social media. Didn't so much as glance at the house across the street.

Maggie and Sydney are silent as we walk inside the high school. It's a chilly, gray day that matches my mood perfectly. Maggie peels off to head toward the freshman wing. Sydney stays by my side as we walk down the busy hall.

It's not until we reach my locker that she speaks. "Did something happen between you and Harrison on Friday night?"

My muscles tense as I put my lunch away. "I thought you were over him. Especially now that you're with Graham."

"I am. That's not why I'm asking."

"Does it matter?"

"To Holden? Yeah, it does. I'd never seen him more upset than when he got home on Friday night."

My fingers turn white as I grip a textbook so tightly no blood can circulate. "Sydney..." This isn't a topic I want to discuss with her. Not under these circumstances.

I considered telling her how I felt about Holden when we were in a good

place. I never considered it might come up now, when we're a broken disaster.

"You're the two people I love most in the world, Cassia. And you're both miserable."

I tense, wondering what the hell Holden told her in order for her to land at that conclusion. "That's not my fault."

"I know. I'm not taking sides, I swear. Holden said he messed up. But if there's a chance you can forgive him—"

"He hasn't *asked* me to forgive him."

Sydney sighs. "I know. He's an idiot. He's hurt, though. And angry."

My fingers start to feel numb. He must have shared a lot. Why? "He has no right to be."

"Would it have bothered you if you saw him coming downstairs with someone else?"

Yes. "Whoever told you about me and Harrison obviously left out that Grace was all over Holden."

"*Holden* is the one who told me about you and Harrison, Cas."

"He did?" I'm surprised, and it saturates my voice. Holden doesn't talk about what bothers him, usually. He holds it in until he lets it out with flying fists or harsh words. Illicit fights at the old basketball courts. Smashed bottles and secrets. "What, uh, what else did he say?"

Sydney shakes her head. "He's my brother, Cassia. Don't put me in the middle."

The problem is, I can't ask Holden. I *won't* ask him. I've folded when it comes to him too many times. My pride won't allow me to ask him for answers when he's given me no indication he regrets how he handled things between us.

"I can't believe he said anything to you."

"Why?"

"He's just...it's not...I mean, we're not..." I fumble for words. "Does it

bother you?”

“That you never told me how you felt about him? Not really. I figured it out a while ago.”

I look away. “I would have told you if it became anything serious.”

Sydney laughs. “Cassia. Holden punched a cabinet over whatever he thinks you did with Harrison Baker. It’s serious for him.”

“He *told* me to date Harrison at the court that night.” I feel obligated to defend myself. I’m also admitting to a lie. When Sydney asked me what we were arguing about, I said I was lecturing him about drinking. A partial truth, not the full one.

Sydney nods right as the first bell rings as the two-minute warning. “He cares too much, Cassia. It’s not because he doesn’t care *enough*.”

She says *that*, then darts off. I want to call after her and demand more of an explanation. I trust Sydney. Rely on her. Harrison telling me Holden has feelings for me didn’t have the same effect.

The second warning bell rings, and it prompts me into action. The rule-following part of myself won’t allow me to be late.

I duck into first period right as the loudspeaker crackles to life for the morning announcements. I take my usual seat in the third row and flip through the pages of my planner, crossing off the assignments I’ve already finished.

“Are you going to the basketball game tonight?” London asks, leaning over. The low hum of chatter echoes around us.

“Um, no. Probably not.” My voice is sharper than I mean it to be. Mostly because of *who* the captain of the basketball team is. My life is filled with reminders of him, and it makes me wish my acceptance or rejection letters had already arrived so I had a solid means of escape from them.

London’s cheeks flush. “Oh. Okay.”

I grip my pen tighter, trying to get my emotions under control. “Sorry. I’m super tired. Are you going?” I struggle to keep my voice light and

unaffected.

“Yeah, probably. I mean—”

“Hey, Bobcats.”

I freeze at the sound of the familiar voice. London stops talking. So does everyone else. The room I’m in is suddenly silent.

“This is Holden Adams. Tonight, we’re playing the Edgewood Ravens, so make sure that you come out and show your support. As most of you know, my dad passed away a few weeks ago. A portion of the tickets sold tonight will be donated to an organization that works to prevent drunk driving. It’s a worthy cause to support, even if you’re not a basketball fan.”

There’s a long pause, and I think he’s done talking. So does everyone else. The gossip starts up immediately, people muttering about Mr. Adams. About their plans to attend the game tonight.

“I also wanted to say...”

Silence falls again, everyone trying to hear what Holden is going to say, as if he’s whispering instead of speaking on the loudspeaker so his voice is echoing around the room.

“I’m sorry, Cassia.”

My heart takes off at a gallop. The whoosh of blood makes it hard to hear. My fingernails dig into the skin of my palm, hard enough they’re probably leaving marks. I can’t believe he’s doing this.

Here.

Now.

At all.

Years of meaning nothing to him in the four walls of this high school. And now, this. An acknowledgment that confuses every instinct.

There’s some noise in the background. The screech of feedback.

“Game tonight starts at seven. Be there or be lame.”

The loudspeaker shuts off. And everyone turns to stare at me.



My locker looks foreign. I stare at the neat row of books like I've never even seen it before.

My mind is preoccupied. By the stares and whispers that have followed me around all day. By the words he said and the wondering about whether he meant them.

"Hi."

I bite on the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste blood before I turn to him.

Holden looks cool, calm, and collected as he leans against the locker next to mine. Relaxed, as he holds the strap of his backpack and stares at me.

I swallow. "Hi."

"Are you coming tonight?"

"I haven't decided."

It's a lie. I know I'll be there. But it doesn't mean I forgive him, and I don't want him to think that it does.

Holden nods. "Okay."

"That wasn't much of a sales pitch." I speak without thinking, falling into the instinct to speak first and think second that's always been way too easy around him.

He grins, but it disappears quickly. "I'm not here to talk you into anything. I meant it when I said you're better off without me."

Everything in me tenses at the reminder of that conversation.

"I'm selfish, Cassia. I've always tried to protect you from that. But it doesn't mean I don't care about you. I gave you my heart a long time ago. You don't have to believe me. I won't blame you if you don't forgive me. You can punish me. Ignore me. Hate me. But no matter what, it will always be yours."

Weeks ago, this speech would have made me melt. Now, I challenge

everything he's saying. "Was it mine when you were ignoring me for years, Holden? When you were with other girls? When you forgot about our friendship?"

Holden winces, looking away and running a hand through his hair before he holds my gaze.

"I would change things if I could, Cassia." He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a composition notebook. I recognize it. It's the same one he told me was full of stats when I reached for it in his bedroom.

I doubt that's what he's handing me. "What's this?"

"Things I never told you."

I start to open it. He stops me, holding a palm to the cover. "Don't read it here. Just...you don't have to read it at all, actually. But every time during the last few years, when I thought of something I wanted to tell you, I'd write it down. That's what's in here. So, yeah. Hate me, I deserve it. Mistakes, I've made plenty. But don't ever think I forgot about you. That I didn't care. That you've ever meant nothing to me. I know you won't believe me if I just tell you that. So here's the proof, if you want it."

Before I can say a word in response, he's turning and walking away.

I'm not the only one who tracks his movements down the hallway. But I'm the only one holding a notebook of his thoughts.



I end up in the library, which has been my sanctuary throughout all of high school. A peaceful, sacred space. I walk to my favorite table, spread my homework out, and then pull the notebook out of the laptop compartment of my backpack where I stored it.

Stare at it.

I glance around, like someone might be reading over my shoulder. There are a few other people around, but no one nearby. I open to the first page,

smiling at the messy scribble covering the neat lines.

Made the shot from just past the marigolds Mrs. Lowe planted. You would have missed. That's the first entry.

My dad was only home for six days this time. Trips are getting longer. Sydney probably told you that, is the second.

They go on and on. Pages of increasingly neat lettering detailing comments about basketball. About his friends. About his dad. About Sydney.

There's never anything about other girls, but there's a lot about me.

You should wear your hair down more often.

Finn made a comment about dating you and I shoved him into the lockers. Probably wouldn't actually have told you that, is a recent entry.

It takes me a couple of hours to read through and reach the last page that has writing on it. It's close to the end of the notebook that contains years' worth of thoughts. None of the entries are dated. But there are small clues scattered throughout that hint at timing. Entries that mention prom and Homecoming. Holidays and certain classes.

The final entry is separated from the one before it by three lines, instead of one. The letters are large, like he knew there would be nothing after it.

I love you too.

I stare at them. Trace them. The pen strokes are harsh, cutting into the paper and leaving sharp indents behind.

I remain in the library until it's nearing seven, the start of the game. I try to do homework, but I mostly stare at the notebook.

Sydney texts me at quarter of seven, telling me she and Graham are going to the game and asking if I want a ride. I reply, telling her I'll meet her there before I pack up my books and leave the library.

There's a steady stream of people headed into the gym as I approach it. All the players are already out on the court, warming up.

I find Sydney and Graham easily. They're sitting front and center. Both of them eye me curiously but say nothing about this morning's

announcements or anything Holden-related. I'm grateful, especially once I spot him on the court.

We're close enough to the sideline that he looks larger than life. He walks across the court like he's commanding its presence, the snug fit of his uniform impossible to ignore as he gestures and talks with his teammates.

My eyes trail him instead of focusing on anything else, absorbing every little detail.

Every now and then, Holden looks away from the court. It seems like he's looking for something, but he doesn't glance my way. Not until the very start of the game. He sees Sydney first and gives her a wave. Then spots me and freezes.

We stare at each other for what feels like far too long.

He gives me a nod of acknowledgment, and then the game begins. I barely pay attention to any of the plays taking place, too lost in the confusion of my own head. I came because I couldn't not come, and I'm not sure that's the right reasoning.

There's some part of me that is used to capitulating to him, to taking what little he offers, and I don't think that's a healthy instinct. He's too adept at pulling me in and then shutting his feelings down.

It's devastating for my head. For my heart.

The final whistle is startling. I was watching the whole game and missed every moment. I know they won, but still have to glance at the scoreboard to confirm.

Sydney stretches and glances at me as other spectators start to file out of the gym. It was a sold-out game, the gym fuller than I've ever seen it. "Are you staying?"

I know my answer before I say it. "Yeah."

Her smile eases any fears I had about her not accepting me and Holden, on the off chance that we became something *to* accept. "Okay."

She wants to say more, I can tell, but she doesn't, just giving me a hug

before she and Graham depart.

I stay seated, watching everyone else filter out of the gymnasium. Through the lobby and outside into the parking lot.

Holden is the first player to walk out of the locker room, with wet hair and a serious expression. It seems like he rushed, and I suddenly can't think of anything else besides the four words he scrawled on that last page. I don't need to ask to know when he wrote them.

"Hey." He stops at the edge of the bleachers, his grip tight on his gym bag.

"Good game," I say.

"Yeah. Thanks." He kicks the edge of the bleachers. Exhales. "You read it?"

"Yeah." That's all I say. I'm not sure what else to. I can't keep up with how I feel about Holden.

I know there's love—a lot of it. That's why everything else is so amplified. Why, when he hurts me, it feels like my heart is being squeezed too tight. Why, when he kisses or touches me, it feels like the sweetest euphoria. He's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Only a masochist would willingly accept that exquisite torture.

But maybe I am one.

Maybe he made me one.

I stare at him, memorizing every detail. The letterman jacket he's wearing with his jeans. The way his brown hair is mussed, like he's been running a hand through it. The bob of his Adam's apple.

"You hungry?" He sounds nervous and uncertain—two adjectives I'd never associate with Holden Adams normally.

"Starving," I admit.

"We could go to Fellini's?"

Fellini's is where *everyone* will be headed, and he knows it. The two of us showing up there—together—would be a statement. One I'm shocked he's

willing to make.

I fiddle with the strap of my backpack and then force myself to say exactly what I'm thinking. "I've always been here, Holden. Waiting. For years. You ignored me for *years*. Why should I believe you've cared all along? About any of it? What happens the next time you're angry or upset? The next time you tell me I'm just a fuck who means nothing to you?"

He winces. "I was drunk and pissed. It's not an excuse. It's just how I felt. My dad...it was a lot."

"I know." I manage to say, through a thick throat.

"You were trying to help. And I lashed out—because I was sad and angry, and I didn't know how else to deal with it. I didn't say it because I meant it. I said it because I'm in love with you, and I was trying to hurt *me*, more than you. Trying to take away the one thing that made me happy, so that I could just be miserable. It's not an excuse, just the truth. And you deserve to know it. Deserve better than me. I'm the cautionary tale parents tell their kids—the guy who could've been something but self-destructed instead. There are so many things I'd go back and fix if I could. But you and me? The good parts? Cassia, there's nothing I'd change."

I swallow. "Did you sleep with her? Grace?"

"I haven't been with anyone since you dry-humped me in my driveway."

Despite my confusion, my anger, I feel myself blush. I look away, studying the empty rows of bleachers. "I have no idea what the size of Harrison's dick is."

I hear him exhale. It sounds like relief.

Part of me is scared to trust this place where we're headed. The rest of me knows it's inevitable.

Knows I'll regret not falling into this far more than I'd ever regret not walking away.

I stand and walk down the bleachers. Don't stop until I'm standing right in front of him, under the blinding lights of the gymnasium that is entirely

empty. “I gave my heart to you a long time ago, Holden. Stop breaking it, okay?”

Holden’s smile is unexpected. Breath-taking. My heart thumps in my chest. Alive. Active. *Whole*.

“Those Friday nights when you’d come home, bloody and beaten up. Were you playing basketball?”

He holds my gaze as his head shakes. “Baker has a big mouth, huh?” There’s no venom in his voice. Mostly resignation. Maybe some regret. “The fighting was stupid, flower. I needed—I *wanted*—an outlet. It felt good in the moment. I’m focusing on what makes me feel better all the time. What makes me want to *be* better. Basketball...and you.”

I scan his face, absorbing his earnestness. “Stop doing things I’ll have to forgive, okay?”

“Okay.”

“No more fights and no more shutting down. Or I’m done, Holden. I mean it.”

He nods. “I promise.”

We stare at each other. Tentative feelings bloom in my chest. Hope and anticipation and lust and love.

“So...dinner?” he asks.

I nod and turn toward the door. I’m embarrassingly eager to go out with him. To take what he’s offering and hope and pray this time will end differently between us. Holden grabs my arm before I can take a step. Stalls me in place and says, “You were wrong.”

“What?”

“You said I’m good at everything, remember? I’m not, Cassia. I’m terrible at a lot of things, and I’m especially bad at this.” He gestures between us, then tucks a stray piece of hair that’s fallen out of my ponytail behind one ear. “You’re easy to love. I’m just...really bad at loving.”

“But...do you? Love me?”

It was one thing to read it. Another to look at him while he says it. “Yeah. I love you, Cassia.”

The water in my eyes starts to overflow, dribbling down my face in thin streams. He brushes one tear away with his thumb. “Can I kiss you?”

“You’ve never asked for permission before,” I say.

And then I kiss him. It’s punishing and bruising. Desperate and deep.

But then something shifts. His mouth opens, his tongue tangles with mine. Holden is kissing me like I’m oxygen and water combined—like I’m something he can’t live without. Like he’s desperate for it and miserable without it.

Like he used to.

When he pulls away, he grabs my hand. And then we walk off the court. Together.

EPILOGUE

HOLDEN

“S top smiling.” Mark says.

My grin stretches my cheeks.

Finn rolls his eyes. “It wasn’t that good of a shot.”

It was, though. I celebrate by raising my cold can of beer in a cheers motion before taking a sip.

Jordan takes his turn. We’re playing a version of H-O-R-S-E with more letters. S-E-N-I-O-R-S. It seemed fitting, considering we graduated high school today. As of midnight, we’ll be kicked back to freshman status.

I glance across the yard, scanning the faces gathered round. Finally, I find her.

Cassia stares straight at me. Her hair is down and loose, brown curls falling over the green t-shirt she’s wearing. She smiles. Mouths *good shot* before Sydney says something and steals her attention away.

I resist the urge to walk over to her. The guys would give me shit for it, but I don’t care about that. I want her to have time with Sydney. Come fall, she and I will be leaving for Richmond together. I got a full ride offer and so did she.

There were other schools she got into too. More prestigious schools. But she chose Richmond, and I’m not sure how to convey to her how much that matters to me.

My dad's younger sister, Catherine, requested a remote work option. She's moving to Pembroke in September and will be staying with Sydney through her senior year, so she's not all alone and is able to finish high school in the same town.

Sometimes it seems silly, how much time I spent worrying about the future and all that could go wrong.

Other times I feel guilty for feeling so happy when my dad is gone and my mom doesn't care. I never told Sydney about her brief reappearance. I want to shield her from whatever I can. Maybe one day I will. Slowly, I'm learning that opening up leads to more good than bad. But I'm not sure anything good could come from mentioning our mom. She hasn't shown up since the school parking lot. Whatever obligation she felt to check in after our dad's death was short-lived at best.

Mostly, I'm grateful that my mistakes aren't permanent. That Cassia didn't kick me to the curb the way I probably deserved.

"Your turn, Adams." Finn bounces the ball to me.

I back up a few more feet, then take the shot. It swishes, and all the guys around me groan.

I'm the only one without a letter. Most of them miss from the spot, racking up another themselves.

Mark is the first to earn a second S. Rather than keep playing for other places, we abandon the game, spreading back through the party.

I beeline for Cassia, walking up behind her and closing my arms around her.

She leans back against me and glances up. "Did you win?"

I pull her closer to me and drop a blistering kiss on her lips. I pour everything into it—love and lust and vulnerability.

Cassia is an addiction—a healthy one. She soothes the darkness. Makes me want to be less destructive. Care more. Focus more. Matter more.

We don't separate until my lungs are burning for air. "Basically."

“I could have beat you.”

I scoff. “Sure.”

She rolls her eyes, but smiles.

I savor it—the feel of her in my arms and the soft expression on her face. “Finn wants to play Truth or Dare for old time’s sake. He’s been talking about it all morning.”

“I’d rather play with just you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I wrap one of her curls around one finger and tug. “Well, the truth is...I really want to fuck you right now.”

Cassia’s hazel eyes widen with surprise, then another emotion I recognize. Lust. “You asking me to go upstairs with you, Holden Adams?”

“Not asking. Just stating a fact.”

Going upstairs at a party together comes with a label. Even though we’ve been officially dating for months, people will notice. Care. Talk. It doesn’t bother me, but I don’t want Cassia to be uncomfortable.

She grabs my hand and pulls me toward the stairs, in full sight of everyone. The kitchen is crowded and so is the living room. But people make way for us, most of them watching with wide eyes. I guess we’re still some sort of novelty.

Once we’re upstairs, I pull her into the first bedroom.

Everything I thought I’d hate about commitment is absent when I’m with her.

I love how familiar I am with her body. Love how there’s no hesitation when she tugs down my shorts and grips me, familiar and eager.

We’ve done this many times before. But somehow, it never loses its novelty.

I’m especially impatient tonight. Aunt Catherine was visiting this week for graduation, meaning it’s been days since I’ve been inside of Cassia.

“Lie down,” I whisper.

She falls back on the bed, watching as I tug her jeans down and parting

her thighs to accommodate me between them. I pull her thong down and thrust inside of her.

Cassia moans, wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me closer. I lean over, resting my weight on my forearms.

I kiss her, slow and searching. Her nails dig into my back, and I start moving faster. We both come quickly, within minutes. I don't move away, though. I soak in this moment, and it feels like she's doing the same.

"We'll be able to do this for four years at Richmond," she whispers, running a hand across my shoulder. "No parents or siblings."

As busy as my house has been lately, it's nothing in comparison to hers. I've never even managed to kiss her without one of her siblings bursting into the room or one of her parents calling from downstairs.

I kiss her again. "Forget college, Cassia. I fully intend to do this for the rest of my life."

Something sparks in her eyes. Hope, I think it looks like. I know I've given her a lot of reasons to distrust my intentions. But I can't imagine my life without her in it anymore. All my intentions of ever walking away from her left me a while ago. I'll do whatever I can to make up for it.

"Do you promise?" She whispers.

"Yeah, flower. I promise."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.W. Farnsworth is the author of numerous adult and young adult romance novels featuring sports, strong female leads, and happy endings.

Charlotte lives in Rhode Island and when she isn't writing spends her free time reading, at the beach, or snuggling with her Australian Shepard.

Find her on Facebook (@cwfarnsworth), Twitter (@cw_farnsworth), Instagram (@authorcwfarnsworth) and check out her website www.authorcwfarnsworth.com for news about upcoming releases!