



Snapped

"Martin is an incredible storyteller."
—New York Times bestselling author
LA LA ANTHONY

Author of *Blitzed*

ALEXA MARTIN

PRAISE FOR ALEXA MARTIN'S PLAYBOOK SERIES

“Martin is an incredible storyteller and has a unique ability to blend fiction with real-life situations in the sports world.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author La La Anthony

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“An emotional journey with an intoxicating romance.”

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—*USA Today*

“Martin scores a touchdown of a debut with *Intercepted*, a witty rom-com set in the world of professional football players and their wives.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

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—*New York Times* bestselling author Kristan Higgins

“Alexa Martin’s books are the ultimate reading escape filled with fabulous characters; witty, dazzling prose; and swoonworthy romances.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Chanel Cleeton

“Alexa Martin is so good at this; I’m so impressed by how nuanced and thoughtful this book is, while still being hilarious and sexy!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jasmine Guillory

Titles by Alexa Martin

INTERCEPTED

FUMBLED

BLITZED

SNAPPED

SNAPPED

Alexa Martin

JOVE
NEW YORK

A JOVE BOOK
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Martin, Alexa, author.

Title: Snapped / Alexa Martin.

Description: First Edition. | New York : Jove, 2020. | Series: The playbook ; vol 4

Identifiers: LCCN 2020007423 (print) | LCCN 2020007424 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593102503 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593102510 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3613.A77776 S63 2020 (print) |

LCC PS3613.A77776 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020007423>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020007424>

First Edition: October 2020

Cover art and design by Colleen Reinhart

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*To Anna and Paul, my grandparents.
I miss you every single day.
I'm forever grateful for every moment I spent with you.
Thank you for loving all of me.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I first started my writing journey, I swore I would never write about football. Having lived the sport for a while, I was having a hard time believing anybody would think this life was glamorous or romantic. However, as I wrote *Intercepted* and began the Playbook series, my opinion changed. I realized I didn't have to tell the story that was expected of me; I was able to use my experiences to create stories that felt authentic to me.

And that's what happened with *Snapped*.

I very clearly remember doing my first-ever podcast and Jenny Nordbak asking me if I was planning on writing a book that touched on players taking a knee on the field. I'm not sure I could've said no any faster. It was not in my plans to write this book. My husband retired before Colin Kaepernick began to take a knee on the field and in the height of the "controversy," I wasn't sure I could properly tell that story.

But when I found out I was able to write a fourth book for the series, it was the only idea I wanted to pursue. I figured enough time had passed that I would be able to tell the story I wanted to tell. I finished writing *Snapped* in October 2019. Little did I know that this book would be more relevant as it released than it was while I was writing it.

This is not Colin Kaepernick's story. I respect him and the bravery he showed by kneeling on the field in 2016. He made a stand that has gotten more powerful over time. He was definitely an inspiration for this book, but I can't tell his story. Only he can. This is a story about Elliot and Quinton. I know I do not speak for all Black experiences, or even all biracial ones. This is my story, coming from my perspective, based on my lived experiences.

Like Elliot, I am biracial. Also like Elliot, my Black parent died when I was very young, and I was raised with my all-white family.

Understanding and accepting my racial identity has been a long journey for me. I grew up in the most amazing home with my mom and grandparents who loved me. Because of that, it was hard for me to see or acknowledge many forms of racism. Partly because I didn't want my family, who loved me, to feel betrayed.

I also constantly felt like I was being pulled in different directions outside of the house. Being told that I wasn't Black enough by some and that I was too Black for others. There was even a time when we went to visit extended family and one of my cousins could not understand how it was possible that I was Black and related to her. We were both in our teens. It was incredibly hurtful, but because it was what I always did, I laughed it off.

It wasn't until I became an adult, got married to a Black man, and had Black children that I finally began to come to grips with my identity and process the way a lifetime of microaggressions had affected me. And it was painful. Painful to come to grips with the way the people I loved and who loved me had left a long-lasting impression. Painful to realize I had quieted and doubted my own feelings for others' comfort.

As for Quinton, I really wanted to narrow his focus on the football league, their treatment of retired players, and racism within the organization. As more people are seeing the realities BIPOC face in this country, these are problems that are impossible to escape. I knew I couldn't do the story justice unless I narrowed it down. As the wife of a former professional player, I've been hearing more and more about the mistreatment of former players, specifically players who retired before 1993. After hearing personal accounts from their spouses, listening to interviews, and then finding FAIR—Fairness for Athletes in Retirement, a nonprofit that lifts the voices of players who retired before 1993—I knew this was the story I was capable of telling in a meaningful and effective way.

This book, which I hoped would be full of laughs and fun, took on a much more personal and serious tone. Though I hope everyone still finishes this book with a smile on their face, my main hope is that you, the reader, will feel the love and heart I tried to insert in these pages. And I hope that if you started this book set in one perspective, you

finish it more open to understanding the journeys of self-discovery and acceptance that so many of us are on.

Prologue

Quinton

Game One

The crowd's cheers echo in the tunnel. Screams of excitement bounce off the concrete floor and vibrate through my cleats and into my veins.

I live for this feeling. The anticipation of running onto the field. Never knowing what is coming or what might happen.

I've always kept my head down. I've listened to the coaches. Made the plays. I've done my job like the good little athlete they've trained me to be.

But today is different.

The piece of black tape feels as if it weighs a thousand pounds hidden in my glove. My knee itches to touch the ground.

I can't keep quiet any longer. I won't keep quiet any longer.

No.

This is the day I will take a stand by taking a knee.

Today is the day I look up.

One

Elliot

I've never had actual work benefits.

I mean, sure, I've got medical and a 401(k), but I'm talking about benefits that mean something. Like my friend Liv's Nordstrom discount or Marie's endless supply of cupcakes.

But now, I'm finally on their level. I have perks. The *best* perks possible: discounted and readily available Denver Mustangs tickets.

Sure, the parking costs a mint, the food is outrageous, and don't even get me started on the drinks . . . but I'm here! My first ever professional football game and I'm part of the Mustangs family.

My dad would've freaking loved this.

"Why'd you make us get here so early?" Marie's freckled arm stretches in front of me to nab one of the cheese-covered nachos in my lap. "I'm going to burn to hell and back."

I made her apply sunscreen in the car, but even so, she's right. She's still going to burn. She burns just thinking about the sun. When we took a trip to Vegas for her twenty-first birthday, she burned so bad at the pool that I thought she needed to go to the emergency room.

"Because, if we didn't get here when we did, the parking would've been impossible, the lines to the concessions would've been a mile long, and you would've been complaining that you were hungry and needed beer when I wanted to watch the game."

"Okay, but now the team's about to come out and I'm almost out of beer and you're not being a good nacho sharer, so I'm going to complain anyways." She grabs the last cheesy nacho in the tray and shoves it into her mouth before I can steal it back. And, because I work for the organization, I can't punch her in the arm like I really want to.

Maybe if I was a trainer or something that sounded a little more aggressive, I could get away with a light swat. But, since I work in public relations—aka the department that extinguishes fires, not ignites them—it's probably not the best idea.

In my next life, I'm so going to be a wrestler.

"Asshole," I mumble beneath my breath, which turns out to be unnecessary because that's the moment the announcer decides to let his presence be known.

"Denver, Colorado! Get on your feet! Let's hear it for your Denver Mustangs!" Jack, the announcer the Mustangs have used for the last five seasons, shouts through the speakers. I met him this week; he was kind of obnoxious, but I guess that's perfect for his job.

The metal floor rattles beneath my shoes with synchronized anticipation as everyone jumps to their feet.

Everyone, that is, except for me.

This is the first professional football game I've ever been to. I've wanted to come to one of these games forever and I promised my dad that he'd be by my side when I did. We were going to celebrate his remission with the best seats and all the beer he could drink.

Grief is such a bitch.

Because even though I woke up with a smile and have been looking forward to this for weeks, grief has decided to take this moment to drop a brick on my chest and wrap itself around my throat. The tears fall before I even have the chance to stop them and the only coherent thought I have is that I hope none of my new coworkers are around to witness this absurd meltdown.

"Hey." Marie squeezes my shoulder and sympathy emanates from her sapphire eyes. "I know he would love this. But I also know he'd have a fit if he thought he was the reason you missed the Mustangs' grand entrance you both obsessed over. So wipe those tears away before he comes back and haunts me for not straightening you out."

That gets a laugh out of me. More like a chuckle—laughter mixed with crying does not make for pretty noises. My fingers linger over his watch, which he had resized for me right after the doctors told him the chemo wasn't working anymore, before I swipe the tears off my face. "You're right." I stand up with the rest of the crowd, who are thankfully too busy watching the offensive starters get called out of the

tunnel to notice the crazy girl hysterically crying in the plastic chair next to them. “I’m done. We’re going to have a fucking blast for the rest of the game.”

“Yeah we are.” She lifts her hand into the air for a high five that is purposefully too high for me to reach. “Plus, you pulled it together before they called that new hot quarterback out.”

I decide to keep my dignity intact and not jump for the high five. Instead I let her hand linger above me and focus on the field in front of me.

Because—even if I’m not sure I can say this anymore, since I work here—Quinton Howard Junior is very hot.

Like smokin’.

He’s a legacy player—his dad was a lineman in the eighties and early nineties—but it was his ability to lead his team to a championship win last year that brought him to Denver . . . and a contract worth a lot (and I mean *a lot*) of money. He was originally a sixth-round draft pick and didn’t have the opportunity to start until the quarterback he played under suffered a season-ending injury during Quinton’s fifth season. This is his seventh year and so far he’s had a killer preseason. Every time I turn on ESPN, there’s another commentator placing their bets on him leading the Mustangs to his second championship ring.

As if conjured by pure willpower—or really good timing—his picture appears on the JumboTron. The screams that held an undertone of bass from grown men transform to the screams you hear at a boy band concert. And Marie, who has made her disinterest of the sport clear to me throughout our entire friendship, is suddenly staring at the JumboTron like she’s preparing to write a paper on the juxtaposition of having a perfect face and getting tackled for a living.

Even though I want to give her shit and pretend like I’m above ogling the hot quarterback—I mean, can you say cliché?—I give in and stare right along with her and just about every other person in the stadium.

Quinton Howard Junior is the physical representation of tall, dark, and handsome. His dark brown skin has not a single imperfection; even amplified and broadcast on a giant HD screen, there isn’t one thing marring his prefect face. While other players are smiling huge,

goofy, yet adorable grins in their pictures, Quinton is the epitome of determination. His almond-shaped eyes are so dark, they're practically black, and are framed by the thickest, darkest lashes I've seen outside of Instagram ads. His thick eyebrows have perfect arches that I doubt have ever been touched by tweezers or wax and I will never get over the unfairness of it all. Granted, maybe if I hadn't gone tweezer crazy in seventh grade, I wouldn't be living the eyebrow struggle now. But what really kills me, more than the eyes and the skin, is his mouth.

Oh sweet heavens. His mouth. Last season, he was clean-shaven. His square jaw on full display. He was adorable. He had a little bit of a baby face and always sported this shy smile that made him look modest and surprised by his own abilities. But not this season. Now he's sporting a full beard around his plump lips. Nothing about him looks modest or young. No, this version of Quinton Howard Junior is a man who knows exactly what he wants and how he's going to get it. Which might be hotter than every single physical attribute he was blessed with.

God help any woman who ever comes in his sights.

"In his first official game in blue and orange, Mustangs fans, give it up for Quinton Howard Juuunnnior!" Jack's voice reverberates through the stadium as fireworks shoot from the sides of the tunnels.

Whereas all the other players ran out of the tunnel with contagious energy and excitement, Quinton takes his time. His steps are slow and his expression is of pure intensity. Everyone around me is eating it up. Their shouts grow louder as if he's putting on some kind of act for them to enjoy.

But it's my job to see a media event before it happens.

And my spidey sense is telling me that whatever this is? It's not going to be local news. No, this is going to be national coverage.

As he walks, he begins to lose the cocky tilt of his head. I don't see the spark of hunger in his eyes that says this is for show.

No.

There's hesitation in his movement. Fear and nerves written all across his face as he gets closer and closer to the cameraman blasting his image for everyone to see.

Then his feet stop moving and he stares straight into the camera. If my nerves weren't eating me alive, I'd probably be enjoying the close-

up of his full lips and dark brown eyes like everyone else. But instead, my eyes are locked on the screen and I watch as he pulls a piece of black tape out of his glove and very carefully places it over the League's emblem embroidered on his jersey.

"Oh my god," I whisper in the midst of similar sentiments floating around me.

"I don't get it." Marie's voice sounds like a shout in the suddenly quiet stadium. She's completely oblivious as she lifts her beer to her lips and takes a final sip. "Is that some kind of quarterback thing?"

The only time Marie has ever watched football was when her ex-boyfriend played on our college team. He wanted her to support him. She broke up with him after the second game because no man was worth that kind of torture—her words, not mine. She came today after letting me know that in no way, shape, or form was I to yell at her when she started playing Candy Crush in the first quarter. I was honestly just so proud that she knew football was comprised of quarters and not periods or innings that I couldn't argue with her. So when she says she's confused, she means it.

Usually I can clear things up, but not this time.

"Not that I know of."

I think she keeps talking, but I can't hear her anymore. All I can do is track Quinton's movement on the field like everyone else. I think of any positive way to spin him blatantly disrespecting the League paying him millions of dollars. I have to be misunderstanding his intentions.

Time ticks by and both teams go to their benches. Most of the fans seem to have let whatever the hell he was doing roll off their backs and I relax a little. I grab my phone out of my purse, wanting to make sure nobody from the Mustangs has sent a panicked email as the first beats of the national anthem start to play.

Then it happens.

I'm waiting for my email to refresh when I hear the cascade of whispers and boos beginning to build.

I hope it's just the poor performer forgetting the words, but when I look up, my eyes are laser focused on Quinton Howard Junior.

On his knee. During the national anthem.

He's making a stand. He's not the first player in the League to take a knee, but he is the first Mustangs player to do it.

I get goosebumps on my arm. As a biracial Black woman, I'm aware of the injustices Black people face daily and respect Quinton's protest. But pride wars with panic over how this will affect my new job.

"Oh shit." Marie doesn't even try to hide her smile. "Looks like your job just got more interesting in the best possible way."

I'm about to spout off some sarcastic response when my phone starts vibrating in my hand, my boss's number on the screen.

I'm not sure the fallout at the Mustangs will be the "best," but Marie wasn't wrong. It did just get a lot more interesting.

Two

The world is on fire.

Okay. Fine. That's mad dramatic.

The world is not on fire, but my job has for sure taken the first crazy train straight to chaos.

I'm the strategic communications manager for the Denver Mustangs. Most people have no idea what that means and look at me like I have two heads. Then I tell them I'm basically Olivia Pope . . . but for football players. This helps most people. Or, at least it helps Shondaland fans. And why would I even talk to someone who doesn't appreciate the greatness that is Shonda Rhimes?

Anyways, it's my job to fix problems when they arise and to place the Mustangs organization in the best light possible. When I found out about the opening for this position—the position I put on my dream board my freshman year of college—I already had a binder full of strategies. Drunk driving? Covered. Injuries? Check. Failed drug test? I have ten different emails ready to send out. I had any and everything that could possibly happen mapped out with at least five ways to spin each one.

I even had a tentative plan for one of the players taking a knee. One I hoped would keep the player, the community, and the organization happy. What I didn't expect? The quarterback blacking out his logo and protesting his employer too. I mean . . . what in the world?

Like I said: Crazy. Train.

"Did you see what Glenn Chandler said?" Paul, my coworker, asks.

Glenn Chandler is the latest person to throw their hat into the upcoming presidential race. It's just that the hat he threw in is covered in outrageous statements trying to get him the most coverage possible. And boy is he eating up this Quinton thing. "That Quinton is an

ungrateful and entitled American, spitting in the faces of our troops?" I repeat the talking points Glenn really harped on. "I did. And people seem to be eating it up."

Thanks to YouTube and social media, everyone has a platform. That can be wonderful. I mean, it brought us Issa Rae and who can ever be mad at that? But for every creative genius using it for good, there's a Glenn Chandler using it to fuel their fire of anger. So when Glenn stood in front of the American flag, with a flag pin attached to his lapel, and started making accusations? It didn't matter that he didn't have anything to back them up with. His conviction was enough to convince his followers that Quinton had one motivation: to attack America and all it stands for.

And now I'm left scrambling to catch up. Normally I'm great at getting ahead of a situation. If Quinton had just told us about his plan, I could've helped. I would've had the press briefed, prepared, and on topic. But now we're two steps behind in a gap that seems to be growing every second.

"Yeah, that's what he said. But we sent your statement to ESPN and for what it's worth, you did a great job defusing the situation for most people." Paul rolls his chair next to mine and tosses his phone on my desk. "Just don't look at the comment section."

"Obviously. That's the first rule of the Internet." Also, I spent all last night reading the thousands of comments on the Yahoo homepage. There's no need for me to dive back into all of that vileness at work. People are terrible.

Even though I won't admit it out loud, I'm not sure how I feel about everything.

After his pregame routine, Quinton was on fire. And as he threw touchdown pass after touchdown pass, the fans seemed to forget about him taking a knee and covering the League's logo. I got hopeful that maybe this would blow over and not be a big deal. It wasn't until I tuned in to watch the postgame press conference that I learned how much work I was in for. Because even though the fans seemed to forget, the reporters did not.

The very first question had nothing to do with plays made or points scored. Nope. The only things they seemed to care about were his actions on the field. Why the tape? Why now?

I held my breath. Waiting to hear what he had to say, to hear him explain. I didn't understand the tape. Plus, he didn't kneel at all last season when players on other teams started to.

"I blacked out the logo because I work for a company that doesn't value our lives. Retired players are struggling and they are being met with silence. The same men we 'honor' with banners, the men who paved the way for us to get here, are wasting away and nothing is being done to help them. This company owns us, they exploit us, and once we're injured and battered, they throw us to the side like garbage. The League is a microcosm of our country and just like in our country, racism and discrimination run rampant. So the tape is for my teammates, but the knee is for the Black lives all across the country." But despite his serious words, his tone was conversational—happy even. He rubbed his hand down his beard, the picture of calm and collected. "I can't ignore the fact that racism and police brutality in this country are killing Black men, women, and children. This crisis must be addressed. I have a platform and I intend to use it." Then, without hesitation or his smile fading at all, he nodded to the press and stood up. "Thanks, guys. I think I can count on talking with you all soon."

I watched the clip approximately a trillion times, until his words were etched inside my skull like an ancient Egyptian text. They even echoed in my dreams during that pitiful hour of sleep I managed to get.

I've never been in a position like this before.

I've never been made to feel off-kilter by a situation I'm supposed to defuse. Obviously, the downside of this job is I don't get to have an opinion. I'm one part of the greater whole. And my job is to make the greater whole look good no matter what my personal feelings are.

What Quinton Howard Junior did—and said after the fact—has forced my insecurities to the forefront of my mind.

I've never known where I fit in the movement for social justice or if I even belonged. And now, that struggle—the ever-constant push and pull—with who I am is happening at work.

"Elliot?" Paul takes his foot and sends my desk chair gliding across the carpet. "You still in there?"

“Yeah, sorry.” I shake my head and force a smile to spread across my face. “Just trying to come up with other ways to spin this since the media is clearly trying to confuse intentions.”

“Welp.” The wrinkles around Paul’s blue eyes deepen and I get the distinct feeling that he’s laughing at me. “I hope you pull something together fast, because Mr. Mahler wants to see you in his office.”

“Just me?” I squeak out, my voice deciding to take a hike.

“Just you, new girl.”

“Now?” I grab the edge of my desk as my eyes go wide and my knuckles turn white.

“Right now.”

Fuck.

Mr. Mahler is the owner of the Denver Mustangs. He sat in on my final interview and literally did not say one word to me. When he had something to say, he would write it down on the clipboard in front of him and pass it to Paul. Then, he would stare at me with an unwavering gaze as I answered. He didn’t even crack a smile. I actually went home and polished off a bottle of wine as I made cookies because I was convinced he hated me and I wouldn’t get the job.

Obviously I got the job, but I’m still not so sure Mr. Mahler doesn’t hate my guts.

I stand on shaky legs and take a deep breath. “It’s been nice working with you, Paul. Remember me when I’m gone.”

Even though I’ve only known Paul for less than a month, I feel like he was meant to be my work husband. The thought of having it annulled so soon breaks my heart a little bit.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He rolls his eyes and grabs his abandoned phone from my desk. “I never remember anyone after they’re given the axe.”

At my gasp, he dissolves into a very unprofessional fit of laughter. Rude.

—

THE NEW HEELS I splurged on after landing my dream job drag across the carpeted floors as I make my way to hear of my untimely demise. Thank goodness I didn’t go ahead and buy the cream coat too. Even

with Liv's discount, it would've been an obscene amount . . . although it did totally look like one Kerry Washington wore once.

Our offices are located inside the Mustangs training facility. A perk I found to be almost as cool as the discounted game tickets.

Almost.

Now, looking at the empty practice fields through the window-lined hallways, I feel like I'm being mocked. But as Mr. Mahler's office comes into view, a sense of peace settles over me and confidence infiltrates my veins.

I'm a woman in a man's world. A biracial woman in a man's world. I've had to work twice as hard as most people to get a foot in the door. I got this job because I was the best choice. Because I'm damn good at my job. I raise my chin and steel my spine. The statement I sent out to the media was great. It was apologetic as well as stern. It made it clear we were taking things seriously while at the same time not jumping to conclusions. It was the best anyone could've made of this hectic situation, and I'm sure Mr. Mahler knows it too.

"Hello," I greet Mr. Mahler's secretary. The older woman has her white hair pulled back into a graceful chignon that highlights her classic features that have not been dimmed by age. "I'm Elliot Reed. Mr. Mahler asked to see me."

"Of course, dear." Her expertly painted red lips split into a genuine smile as she motions toward a seating area filled with navy chairs and orange pillows. "Take a seat and I'll let him know you're here."

"Thank you." I turn to take a seat, but before I make any progress, a door swings open.

"Miss Reed!" Mr. Mahler's gravelly voice takes me by surprise. Considering he didn't speak to me at all during my previous—and only—encounter with him, the smile on his face and apparent eagerness to see me is a pleasant surprise. "Please come in."

When I imagined what Mr. Mahler's office would look like—which happens much more often than I'd care to share—I pictured tons of dark wood with lots of gold accessories. And I'm pleased to say, I hit the nail on the head.

Whereas the rest of the Mustangs facility is filled with modern touches and shades of orange and blue everywhere you look, his office is like stepping back in time. Dark wood panels line the wall. His

oversized desk is very obviously missing a computer of any type. Newspapers and magazines are strewn all across the workspace. Even though Denver is a smoke-free city, a gold ashtray with a lit cigar sending swirls of smoke into the air and a glass filled with some type of amber liquid are sitting on the desk. The only clue his doorway was not a portal back to the 1950s is the wall filled with television screens showing every sports channel available. All of which happen to have Quinton Howard Junior's name and face plastered on them.

I settle into the plush leather chair across from Mr. Mahler. Keeping my shoulders squared, I run through all of the talking points I'd been writing down this morning.

Mr. Mahler takes a seat in his wingback leather chair that is most likely older than I am and lifts his cigar to his mouth. He takes a deep pull and exhales the smoke slowly. It takes all of my self-control to ignore the billowing smoke cloud heading straight into my face.

"I'm sure you're well aware that we are facing a little bit of a media problem." Mr. Mahler keeps the cigar in between his fingers as he grabs one of the newspapers off the table and hands it to me. Finding newspapers nowadays is surprisingly difficult, but I managed to track down a few this morning, so the headline proclaiming that Quinton Howard Junior is an overpaid toddler doesn't catch me off guard.

"Yes sir, I am." I set the newspaper back on his desk, careful not to disturb the rest of the mess cluttering the surface. "We sent out a statement this morning that has gone over pretty well. It was vague, but we were waiting to hear the response from the public before releasing anything else." I pause to see if Mr. Mahler would like to interject, but when he just takes a sip out of the crystal glass, I carry on. "We want to make sure our message doesn't get twisted. The only thing worse than saying nothing is saying everything. We want to make sure we have a direction when we speak so that the public doesn't feel like we are just saying what they want to hear."

"Hmmm." He pulls from his cigar again, his eyes, which match the amber liquid he's sipping, narrowing as he assesses me. I hold his eye contact and refuse to cower under his gaze. "You are so young, I wasn't sure you could handle the job. But you're very articulate. I'm impressed."

Well, that's a backhanded compliment if I've ever heard one. But, it is still a compliment. And considering my last interaction with Mr. Mahler, it does for me what the liquor he's sipping does for him. Warmth flows through my system and the tension I woke up with finally begins to dissipate.

"Now here is the problem as I see it." He sets down the glass and his cigar and steeples his fingers in front of his face. "We can put out as many statements as we want. We can listen to the public and try to take a stance that keeps their anger in check, but nothing is going to change if every time we get them settled down, Quinton steps back on the field covering logos and kneeling during the anthem."

This is the problem that's been haunting me since I saw Quinton walk out of the tunnel yesterday. How do I support his message, but also the organization I'm paid to represent? "We can only say so much if the entire organization isn't on the same page, and that includes Mr. Howard."

"Exactly." He smiles wide. His bright white teeth are on full display and instead of feeling reassured, a spiral of unease blooms in my gut. "That is why I'm assigning you to Quinton."

"I'm sorry, what?" Until that moment I had all of my emotions in check, but there's no masking the panic lacing my words.

"Quinton will be expecting you at HERS this afternoon. The owner, Brynn Sterling, works closely with our organization and will make sure you will both be comfortable for what may be a very uncomfortable conversation." Suddenly, Mr. Mahler's posture changes as he sits up and levels me with the same intense stare that haunted my dreams after my interview. "It's imperative that you get Quinton on our side. The damage his accusations could cause not only our organization, but the League as a whole, is enormous. From this point forward, you are to work only with him and the mess he created. Understood?"

"Yes." The word comes out weak. I close my eyes and take a deep breath and try again. "Yes, I understand."

He nods his head. Satisfaction is written across his time-weathered face, but I speak before he can, because for some reason, I know that he's not finished with me yet. "Just so you know, Mr. Mahler, this job means more to me than just a paycheck. My father passed away earlier this year. We spent his final months together watching the Mustangs

play. My favorite memories of him are wrapped up with your organization. I want what's best for everyone."

His gaze softened as I spoke, but I have a sick feeling in my stomach. It was less because of what I said, and more of what he hadn't. "I'll hold you to that. We can't have an entire season of bad press, and if you don't have a handle on this by playoffs, we will have to find someone who can get it done."

Dammit.

Sometimes I really hate being right.

Three

"Wait," Liv's voice booms through my car speakers. "You're meeting who?"

"You heard me." If the bumper-to-bumper Denver traffic wasn't enough to make a sane person go crazy, listening to Liv's voice rise approximately twenty decibels would be mad entertaining. "Quinton Howard Junior. The stubborn quarterback who just had to do this on his own and possibly put an end to my career before it even started."

I figured a lunch meeting would mean avoiding rush hour. However, I forgot that with the influx of Denver residents over the last few years, every hour is rush hour. It has taken almost an hour to finally reach my exit and I'm most definitely not amused.

"By stubborn, do you mean extremely hot?"

"No, I definitely do not mean hot." I used to think he was hot, but the whole "could cost me my job" thing has changed my mind. "Do you understand how good I am at my job? I'm really fucking good. All he had to do is reach out to me and I would've helped him organize this! Do you know how many people would love to have me at their back? Now the Mustangs—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Liv cuts me off. "I know you love a good rant, but I think you forgot that I don't actually care about the Mustangs. I just wanted to talk about his pretty face and white spandex pants."

"This is why I didn't invite you to the game."

At least Marie will pretend to care about football.

"And this entire 'the Mustangs turn me into a ranting lunatic' is the reason I would've said no even if you did ask."

"Fair point."

I've known Olivia Pearson since freshman year of high school. I don't know if it was because my dad thought nuns could replace the missing female presence in my life, but he sent me to an all-girls

Catholic school when I was in kindergarten and kept me there until high school. It was fine. I definitely didn't hate it. Still to this day, I have a soft spot for plaid pleated skirts and cable-knit tights—it's probably the only reason I joined the field hockey team too. But I wanted to have the full "what you see on TV" high school experience. Mainly, I wanted *Friday Night Lights*. And lucky for me, so did my dad. He played hardball, but I promised straight A's and he gave in. But the luckiest part for me was that Liv was assigned the seat next to me in my first period class and had an affinity for the spoken word. And since I really like to listen, we decided we'd be best friends.

She still likes to talk.

"So, since this is a work lunch, does that mean they are going to pay? HERS has really good cocktails, you should order a few of those bad boys."

I almost don't see the light turning red with how hard I roll my eyes. "I'm not sure if you caught the part where I told you my job is literally hanging by a thread, but I think getting trashed when I'm supposed to be wrangling a grown-ass man is probably a bad idea."

"Well, I get off in a couple hours, want me to meet you there?"

"Doesn't that mean you should be working now? Don't you work on commission?"

Liv has had her job at Nordstrom since we graduated from high school. She's the most stylish person I've ever met. Which is why her fashion blog has taken off the way it has. She doesn't need her day job anymore, but she loves her clients . . . and I love her discount. She's a true freaking friend.

"Eh." I can picture her tossing her perfectly highlighted mane over her shoulder. "I had a huge sale this morning. I'm in the back going through inventory now. But yes to drinks, right?"

"Yes." My phone buzzes in my cupholder, telling me I've arrived at HERS. "I have a feeling drinks will be mandatory after this."

"Yay! Best Monday ever!"

At least for one of us.

IF I HADN'T sat in traffic for half of my life (only a slight exaggeration) to meet the man who holds my dream job in his hands, I'd be stoked to get an afternoon, work-sponsored trip to HERS. I don't like the term "guilty pleasure," because if I've learned anything the past couple of years, it's to not feel guilt over things that bring me joy. But if I had to label one thing as a guilty pleasure, it would be my love of reality television. And *Love the Player* is at the top of my reality TV obsession. Not only does it take place in my city, but it's based on my favorite football team! It's the only reality show my dad actually liked watching with me. I've wanted to go to HERS for the longest time, since so much of the show is filmed there. It's too bad that my first time going might also coincide with the fiery crash of my career.

I luck out and find a parking spot on the street in front of HERS. But as soon as my feet hit the pavement, I don't want to move. So many conflicting thoughts run through my mind. I want to prove to Mr. Mahler that I'm the best person for this job. I worked my ass off for this job and I didn't get it by running from a challenge. But on the other hand, I'm having a hard time sorting out my thoughts about Quinton Howard Junior. I completely respect the stance he's taking. It's brave and admirable. But on a personal—and selfish—level, I hate that I feel like I'm being forced to choose between two parts of myself . . . again. This is my dream job. It's been my rainbow after the darkest, worst year of my life. I refuse to just walk away. There has to be a way I can keep everyone happy and I guess it's my job to figure it out.

With that thought, I pull back my shoulders, plaster a smile onto my face, and open the door to HERS like I own the place.

Even on a Monday, the place is far from empty. Music drifts from the speakers just over the rumbling of conversations taking place and glasses clinking. The wall by the front door is covered in flowers and a pink neon HERS sign that I know for a fact is used as the background for many an Instagram post.

"Welcome to HERS," a woman with the thickest, blackest, most beautiful hair I've ever seen greets me. "Would you like a table or are you going to the bar?"

Bar. God. I wish I was going to the bar.

“I’m actually meeting someone, but thank you.” I feel myself cringe, but if she noticed, she doesn’t let on, which makes me like her even more. Maybe if I get fired, I could try to get a job here and she can be my friend. Plus, I’m really good at drinking . . . maybe that could translate to my skills behind the bar too.

“Great.” She smiles and her teeth gleam against her brown skin that, even inside, sparkles. “Please let me know if I can help you find them.”

Unfortunately for me, Quinton Howard Junior is the only thing more noticeable than the meticulously decorated bar I’m standing in. I was hoping he would be in some spot that made him hard to find, or even better, would be late. But luck just hasn’t been on my side these days.

For the second time today, I thank Liv for convincing me to splurge on my shoes. It’s impossible to have a timid stride when you’re wearing four-inch, five-hundred-dollar shoes . . . and that’s science. Even if on the inside I’m a nervous wreck, at least I look confident in my approach.

Not that it matters much, because even though Quinton looks directly at me as I’m walking toward him, he dismisses me just as quickly.

Rude.

“Hello, Mr. Howard,” I use the voice that Marie mocks me endlessly for. “Nice to meet—”

I don’t finish, not because I don’t want to, but because he doesn’t give me the chance to.

“I’m sorry, I’m waiting for someone.” I assume that he’s talking to me since I’m the only person standing at his table, but I’m not positive because he hasn’t looked up from his phone.

Super fucking rude.

“Actually, I—”

“What do you want me to sign?” He holds out his hand expectantly.

“Nothing, I—”

“Listen,” he cuts me off again and actually takes his eyes off his phone this time to look at me. “I appreciate a forward woman as much as any man, but you’re not my type.”

I know I'm no beauty queen—Liv is definitely the one in my group that would take that title—but this was harsh no matter how I look. I'm sure his type is a six foot tall, size zero model with flowing blonde locks and eyes as blue as the ocean. Basically the complete opposite of my five-foot, three-inch frame that hasn't fit into a size zero since middle school . . . and even that is pushing it. My hair did have gold highlights for a while, but because I blast it with a flatiron at least once a week to tame my wild curls, I stopped dyeing it so it didn't all fall out. And my eyes are more the color of trees—not the leaves, the trunks. They're brown. I'm about as average as they come and I'm usually fine with that because most people have at least a sliver of manners.

In any other situation, I would be completely and utterly horrified. I mean, that's not just rude, it's hurtful! But thankfully for my tear ducts—and my pride—I'm just pissed. Who the hell does he think he is? Just because he was blessed with perfect, smooth dark brown skin and sharp cheekbones that are noticeable even with the thick beard that is infuriatingly even more gorgeous up close, does not mean that every woman who approaches him wants in his pants.

At my sides, my hands form into fists so tight that my neatly trimmed nails start digging into my palms, and I can actually feel the heat rising in my face like my head might explode at any second.

Even through my brown skin and peach blush, Quinton must see the red in my cheeks. He just reads it the wrong way.

I know he gets it wrong because instead of running away screaming, he has the audacity to touch me. His oversized hand wraps around my fist that is now shaking with the almost unbearable urge to punch him.

Much to my dismay, my body isn't on the same page with my mind. Because as soon as his calloused palm rubs against the sensitive skin on the back of my hand, it's like the fireworks that went off as the Mustangs ran onto the field moved into my pants. This only makes me more furious. I mean, I didn't even know touching hands could do this! The freaking audacity! And, by the way, why couldn't my body have reacted like this for any of the guys who actually weren't jerks to me?

"I didn't mean to embarrass you." He squeezes my hand and his voice is so patronizing that if I didn't know the value of the hand

touching me, I'd consider breaking it. "I'm just not interested."

I yank my hand away from him, ignoring the way my skin still tingles from his touch and using every last bit of restraint I have, I pull out the chair across from him and take a seat. He opens up his mouth to speak, but this time, *I* talk over *him*. "As I was trying to say, I'm Elliot Reed. Mr. Mahler sent me."

His mouth falls open and finally—FINALLY!—no words come out.

If I wasn't so out-of-my-mind furious, I might even get some pleasure out of this moment.

But I can say, with one hundred percent certainty, that nothing Quinton Howard Junior does will ever bring me pleasure.

Four

"You . . . you're . . . I mean . . ." Quinton stumbles over his words so hard, it's nearly impossible to think this is the same graceful man out on the field every Sunday. "I thought you were a man."

"Did Mr. Mahler tell you I was a man?" I ask. "Do you think I look like a man?"

The truth is, because of my name, this has happened before. But unlike now, nobody has ever made me feel so small during their confusion. So the joy I'm feeling watching him stumble around is profound.

"No, no!" He holds his hands out in front of him as his eyes damn near bulge out of his head. I swear I can see a blush creep up his dark brown cheeks. "That's not what I meant. I just assumed I was meeting with a man."

"Well, you know what they say about people who *assume* things." And yes, while I know my job depends on me working with this guy, I can't help but to stress "ass" because . . . well, because he's a giant one.

"Yeah, about that," he starts, but I've heard enough and I already want this meeting to be over.

"No need. You made yourself clear and that's fine. I'm here to do my job." The rejection was bad enough, the last thing I need to do is sit here while he lists all the reasons I'm not his type. I like to torment myself enough on my own, I do not need the physically flawless jerk to do it for me. "I'm hoping we can both be professional from this point forward."

Considering I just called him an ass, I definitely need the reminder just as much as he does.

"Yes, of course." He nods his head vigorously. "I really am so—"

“Sorry. You’re so sorry, got it. Moving on.” I’m here for a reason, and every second we sit here with the bullshit apologies is a second I could be doing my job. I just want to hurry this along, and, ultimately, go drown my sorrows at the fully stocked bar less than twenty feet away from me. I grab the fully decked-out iPad that the Mustangs supplied me with from my purse and swipe out of the Twitter app covered with endless tweets about the man in front of me before opening my notes. “So, we both obviously know why we’re here.”

“Because I’m making Mahler and a large portion of the country uncomfortable.” The words come out conversationally, but there’s an undercurrent of anger powering them.

I was not expecting it.

And from the way he shakes his head and then aims a perfectly white, perfectly straight, perfectly fake smile at me, he wasn’t expecting it either.

I’m not sure which part surprises me the most, the fact that he showed me his anger or that he’s so good at hiding it. I never saw it during his interview.

I put the iPad down on the table and level my stare with his. “Is that why you’re doing this? To make people uncomfortable?” My words don’t have any of the malice the reporters had. I’m honestly curious. Unlike Mahler, I don’t disagree with the stance he’s making. I just can’t help unless I understand his motives and goals.

“No.” He slumps down in his chair as he deflates before me. Like the confidence helium he sucked down before meeting me has finally dissolved. “It’s not that at all and I hate that the point I’m trying to make is now being lost in the politics of it. That people are saying that I’m trying to get attention. They have no idea how personal all of this is to me.”

Aha!

I move to write it down, but I’m not a therapist and I don’t want to spook him out of telling me more. So I make sure to tuck that little nugget of information into the depths of my memory.

“Of course it’s personal. If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t do this at all.” I try to relax in my chair, which, though insanely cute, is not the epitome of comfort. “I think I have an idea that could make everyone happy.”

He doesn't say anything, but the expression that crosses his face says everything. He thinks I'm full of shit. Which could be accurate. I want everyone happy, but I really don't want to take a journey down to the unemployment office.

But, last night, as I was reading the comment section filled with the scum of the world, an idea popped into my head. And sitting in front of him, seeing that this is something he actually cares about and not a publicity stunt, I know it's the only angle I have with him.

"You don't have a foundation." I open my email and click on one of the six messages I sent myself for this meeting. "Why not?"

He shrugs his shoulders, but that's all he gives me as far as answers go.

"I think you should start one." I open one of the links in the email, a player's foundation website, and hand him the iPad. He tentatively takes it from me, another win in my column. "With a foundation of your own, you can put actual action in place. You can raise money and help the causes you're so passionate about. I put together a list of about fifteen different player foundations, just go back to the email and you can click through the list."

I don't say anything else as he scrolls and reads. Instead, I watch him. I watch the way his eyebrows furrow together, the slight tilt of his lips, the way his spine seems to lengthen. He's into it. This might actually work!

"I started to set up a foundation last year." His words catch me all the way off guard. Not that he would notice, because he still hasn't looked away from the screen. "I did all of the paperwork and was approved for 501(c)(3) status at the beginning of the summer, but let it fall off after that."

"Wow. Okay, good." The paperwork would've taken us half the season, so this is great for my plan. But even though it makes things easier on me, I can't help but be irritated that normal people can't get approved before they have all of the details. Of course, for the rich and mighty Quinton Howard Junior, he can just make things happen with no real intent to follow through. "Do you have anything else for it?"

"Nope, just the approval." He glances down at the iPad again, like more than a few seconds of eye contact with me is impossible for him.

“I filed the papers and then life happened and I didn’t do anything else.”

Life happened?

By that, does he mean he signed a ginormous contract guaranteeing he’ll make more money in a month than I’ll likely see in a lifetime? When life got in the way for me this past year, it was because I was burying my father next to the plot where we buried my mother thirty years ago.

How sad for him.

The embers of leftover anger and irritation begin to spark and I struggle to smother them.

“Yeah, I get that. Life can get pretty tricky.” Luckily for me, none of the frustration I feel comes out when I speak. Unluckily, however, the quivering that tends to happen every time my dad crosses my mind is completely evident, and apparently is the only thing that can pull Quinton’s attention from the iPad.

Dammit.

“Are you alright?” He pushes the tablet across the table as if nothing else matters besides me. And man, what a total freaking mind fuck that is. Because as much as I’ve been telling myself that I hate his guts, the second he turns his attention to me and those black eyes soften, it’s like all of my resolve slips away.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I force a smile on my face and focus on the task at hand, reminding myself of his harsh words from only moments ago. “The fact that you already have the tax part done is huge. Now, it’s all about the details, and I’m a total details girl, so this is the part I love.”

“What’s next?” I can tell he wanted to know what caused my near meltdown, but thankfully he moves on. Or, more accurately, he doesn’t actually care. Either way, it’s a win for me.

“Well, I know you’re busy now that the season has started, but I’ll need your input and help for a lot of this. It’s your foundation after all.” I close my email and open up the calendar app. “If you could tell me days and times that work for you, I’m more than happy to work my schedule around yours. If you are really serious about getting this done, I think we can have a launch event in a month. And I know you aren’t going to love this part, but we’re going to have to set up a few interviews and press conferences for you. If we want this to work, it’s

up to you to take control of the narrative. After we flesh out what your foundation is really addressing, I'll compile some statements and key talking points for you to focus on. This means that when you aren't doing football, you'll be doing this. It will be a commitment. Are you ready for this?"

And as much as I want this to work, the little voice in the back of my mind shouts that he's worth more to the team than I am, if things go south.

"I know you don't know me. I get that. And I know that people think because I play football and came from a family where my dad also played, that I'm some entitled fuckboy who has been handed everything in life."

Well fuck me! Not literally. Maybe literally? No. Definitely not. Is he a mind reader?

"But the people who know me know that's not true. I work for everything I have . . . and now I'm ready to work for the Black community, whose voices are being ignored." He leans toward me, his voice somehow getting quieter, yet more powerful at the same time. "We got off to a bad start and that's on me, but I need you to know that I'm in this. I'm not doing this for attention or because I didn't get the contract I wanted or whatever other bullshit reason people are coming up with. This matters to me and I work for what's important to me."

Even though he's rude and I hate him, I still respect him. This stance isn't gaining him many fans. And as a person who has a deep desire to be liked, I think it's commendable to do something you believe in, consequences be damned.

Also, as much as I hate myself for thinking about it, I can't help the way every time he looks at me with that dark intensity that my imagination drifts away and I picture him saying those words about me . . . me being what matters to him. To feel like the most important thing to anyone. Something I haven't felt since I last held my dad's hand.

I shake away the memories. "Great. Because I think this can be the perfect solution for you and the Mustangs organization. My job is to make everyone happy here."

"Good luck with that. I'll try this, but I don't care about making everyone happy. I want change and progress, and I won't stop kneeling

or blacking out my logo until I see it.”

Well, crap.

One step forward, two steps back.

Story of my life.

“Well, I would never ask you to stop.” I lean across the table, meeting him in the middle before lowering my voice. “And I do love a good challenge.”

He sucks in a hiss of breath and his eyes widen a fraction. Then, without warning, he leans back and starts to laugh. A laugh so raspy and deep, it’s as if he hasn’t done it in years and I can hear the rust falling away. And fuck me now if it’s not the hottest thing I’ve heard in a long, long time. Maybe ever.

“Looks like I’ve finally met my match.” He takes the tablet back and I watch as his fingers dance across the screen before he pushes it back to me. “Tomorrow at noon. I put the address in for you. I’ll see you then.”

“Tomorrow.” The amount of work I have to do in less than twenty-four hours causes a weird sense of calm and determination to come over me. “Hope you’ll be ready.”

“Haven’t you heard?” The cocky smile I’m so familiar with from watching him play flashes across his face, his midnight eyes gleaming with mischief. “I’m always ready.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Then, in a move I’ve only seen executed in movies and just about every reality show on Bravo, I get up and leave without a goodbye.

Like a boss.

Quinton Howard Junior was right. He has met his match.

Five

It took until I got to my car before I remembered that I was supposed to stay at HERS to meet Liv for drinks.

And nothing ruins a boss-ass exit more than having to walk back in with your tail between your legs.

Which is exactly why I sit in my car until I see Quinton leave.

I mean, the guy shot me down with barely a glance. I wouldn't consider myself a prideful person, but even I don't want to be embarrassed twice in the span of a single afternoon.

Liv texts me while I'm hiding—I mean, waiting—that she's stuck in traffic and running late, but to order her any drink that looks fancy and has gin. I'm more of a whiskey girl, myself. Call it an Irish thing . . . or being raised by an Irish-American single dad thing. But the only time I've had a drink anyone could refer to as fancy, it's been ordered for me, not by me.

I walk back in just as two women are leaving the bar. It's that awkward time after lunch, but before happy hour. I don't think HERS is ever empty, but it's far from crowded now. Which works for me because now I can rant to Liv as soon as she gets here and not worry about tons of strangers hearing.

From watching *Love the Player*, I recognize everyone behind the bar immediately. Especially Brynn Sterling (not Lewis—I swear, her not taking Maxwell Lewis's name was an entire storyline last season). I don't know why, but I assumed in real life, she wouldn't be as pretty as she is on the show. Some of that had to be TV magic. You know, soft light, glam squad, something. But nope. Somehow, behind the bar with what looks like not even a scrap of makeup on her face and a messy bun on top of her head, she's even prettier. And how unfair is that?

All of this to say that even though I want to play it cool, I'm pretty sure I have hearts in my eyes as she walks my way.

"You're back!" Her smile is so white that I swear it brightens the entire room. I look over my shoulder to see who came into the bar, but nobody seems to talk to her. When I turn back around, she's standing in front of me with a menu in hand. "I'm so glad you decided to stay and grab a drink. That conversation looked like one was needed."

"Um . . ." My eyes shift from side to side. I'm still unsure that she's actually talking to me. "Me?"

Her eyes twinkle as her laugh fills the room, and suddenly I realize why HERS is so wildly successful. One second around its owner and I already feel like she's my best friend.

"Yes, you!" She places the menu in front of me and a glass that she starts to fill up with water. "Elliot, right? Gemma, Mr. Mahler's secretary, told me I should be expecting you."

"Yeah, well, people usually call me Elle." I take the menu, grateful to have something to do with my hands.

"Is it okay if I call you Elliot? I've always liked that name, but it's just so kick-ass for a woman."

"An opinion I'm sure you'd reconsider if you had an encounter like the one I just had."

Lovely. I haven't even ordered a drink yet and I already have loose lips.

Oh yeah, Brynn is a freaking master at what she does.

"Really?" She props her elbows on the bar and leans in closer, as if she wants to both protect my privacy and expose all my secrets at once. "It did look really intense, but I figured that was just because of the subject matter at hand."

"Actually, when we were talking about that, things were fine." I hold the menu tighter, the memory of total humiliation making me tense. "It was his initial reaction to seeing me and letting me know that, in no uncertain terms, I'm not his type and he's definitely not interested that wasn't so pleasant."

The smile she'd been rocking falls off her face almost as fast as the color rises in her cheeks.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she damn near shrieks. "What an idiot! First of all, not like you're probably not already aware, but you're

drop-dead gorgeous. And second, even if you weren't, who says that?!"

I know I'm thirty-one and being self-conscious is supposed to end in high school, but loving the way I look has never been something that comes naturally to me. So having a stranger—a beautiful and successful one on top of that—tell me I'm gorgeous actually means a lot to me. Probably too much, if I'm being honest with myself.

"Thank you!" I finally let go of my death grip on the drink specials and throw my hands in the air. "That's what I was thinking! I mean, in what world do you assume that a person is approaching you just to sleep with you?"

Brynn purses her lips and gives a wicked side-eye. "I'm married to a football player." The fact that she acts like I have no idea who she is or that she's married to Maxwell Lewis makes her that much more endearing. "So I'm not the kind of person who likes to paint all athletes with the same brush. So many of them are the shit. They can be the nicest, most generous, smartest guys in the world." The way her eyes gloss over as she talks makes it clear she's describing her husband. It's disgusting . . . but also freaking adorable. "But there are also guys who have heads so big, it's a miracle they can find a helmet to fit them. And their heads stay that big because people feed their egos all day, every day. And have been their entire life."

I can read between the lines.

Quinton thought I was coming to try to sleep with him because people actually approach him to try to sleep with him.

"I guess I can see that happening. I mean, I am a woman on the Internet so I've gotten my share of unsolicited dick pics."

"Are they ever not unsolicited?" Brynn asks.

That is the question of a person well versed in the subject of dick pics.

I also assume it's rhetorical, because really. They're *never* solicited.

"So women approaching him in public is like getting a dick pic in his life?"

"What an odd conversation to come in the middle of." Liv slides into the chair next to me.

"Oh! Hi!" I lean over and give her a hug. "You've never come into a room unnoticed before."

“Well, I was prepared to shout, but then I heard the subject at hand and decided to keep my mouth closed.” She grabs the menu from me, but the gleam in her eyes lets me know she’s not finished. “As one does when dicks are being thrown around.”

“Alright! Topic change!” I can’t hear that word again. Ever. In life. “Brynn, this is Liv. Liv, this is Brynn. We were just discussing my lunch meeting with Quinton and how it started as a disaster.”

Liv’s eyes triple in size and for the first time, concern crosses her face. “He didn’t try to—”

“No, no. Not even close.” I cut her off before she lets herself go there.

Olivia’s shoulders sag in relief, and guilt causes mine to fall along with hers.

My experience at my last job wasn’t a great one. Ever since I can remember, I’ve always wanted to work in sports. And being raised by a man who never questioned or doubted my intelligence or capabilities at working in the sports world, I’d say I was woefully underprepared for what awaited me. The harassment I dealt with, in part because of my gender, part because of my ethnicity, was terrible on a good day. And considering my dad was diagnosed with cancer while I was there, it was soul crushing.

Liv stood by me every step of the way. Even coming over to force me into the shower when things got really bad. Even though I know she’s happy for me for landing my dream job, I know she’s holding her breath, terrified that I’ll fall apart again.

And Brynn, like the bartending goddess that she is, clearly reads the change of tone. “You know what?” She pulls out two martini glasses from beneath the bar. “I think we need cocktails before we continue. What are you ladies drinking? This one’s on me.”

Liv perks up immediately.

Hey. We’re millennials. Home ownership might not ever be in the plans for most of us, so we find pleasure where we can. And a complimentary cocktail is definitely one of them.

“I love everything I’ve ever had from here.” Liv pushes away the menu. “Gin is my booze of choice. Could you surprise me?”

“Oh my goodness!” Brynn practically vibrates with glee. “Yes! None of my friends will drink gin, so I’ve needed a person like you to

experiment with!”

I can see the dreams of unlimited free cocktails floating across Liv’s face and just like that, all fears of me again falling apart have disappeared.

“What about you?” Brynn looks at me over her shoulder as she reaches for a bottle of Bombay Sapphire. “Wanna be a test dummy?”

“As much fun as that sounds”—I do have a secret dream of having a drink named after me—“I think I need to stick with comfort today . . . and with something that I know won’t result in a hangover. Scotch on the rocks, please.”

Her hand freezes above the gin. “Seriously?”

I glance at Liv, who is giving me the “I told you only old white dudes order that and you need a new drink” look, before cringing a bit and looking back to Brynn. “Yeah, I’m a whiskey girl.”

“This is even better than the gin! I’ve been wanting to have a whiskey tasting for so long and nobody will do one with me!” She grabs the gin and spins around to face us. “I’ve been buying all of the stuff to do one. Maxwell is going to be so excited that I found someone else to push this on. He hates the stuff, but humors me.”

“I’m in.” At the mention of Maxwell, I’m reminded that I have my own Mustangs player I need to humor me. “But maybe make mine a single for now. I’m meeting with Quinton again tomorrow and my career literally depends on it.”

“Well.” Brynn puts away one martini glass and pulls out a lowball glass before ignoring my request for a single. She pours a healthy serving of a scotch I haven’t heard of before and drops in a couple of whiskey stones. “Lucky for you, I consider myself something of a Mustangs expert and I do my best work with a drink in hand.”

“I may not know anything about the Mustangs,” Liv chimes in, “but I am an Elliot Reed expert, so I think we have you covered.”

I freaking hope so. Because I have a feeling Quinton is not going to make this easy on me and I’m going to need help from somewhere . . .

And good scotch and friends is always a solid starting point.

Six

When Quinton gave me the address to where he wanted me to meet him, I assumed it was for another restaurant. Guess I'm the ass now.

Because parking on this super residential street in front of a house, not a business of any kind, I realize that Quinton Howard Junior might've given me his address . . . to his house . . . where he lives . . . and sleeps . . . maybe naked.

His house is exactly where I thought it would be. I remember all those years ago when Gavin Pope came to play for the Mustangs. He bought a condo not far from where I grew up. Granted, his condo cost probably triple what my childhood home was worth, but it was still exciting that he lived close.

Quinton, on the other hand, lives in the suburbs of all suburbs. Like, I think they built this subdivision because other suburbs weren't suburb enough. I passed seven Starbucks, two megachurches, and one private school once I got off the highway. On the plus side, I now know of two new spin gyms because the one by my place is always packed and I'm never able to get into any classes. And because it's in the suburbs, it could only be reached by the tollway, so I didn't have to deal with traffic and I get to send the bill to the Mustangs.

I will give it to him, though; even though the location wouldn't be my top choice, his house is pretty amazing. It looks like a super modern cabin that you'd find in Vail or Breckenridge or any of those other places I never go to, but maybe would if I could sit inside a house like this and look at the snow instead of being in it. The exterior is all wood, black steel, and glass. The only stone is the intricate paving of his driveway and the chimney jutting out of the roof.

I don't know if this was a power play on his part, inviting me to his home, surrounding me by his wealth, but I'm trying to keep an open

mind. Plus, I dressed down today, hoping looking casual would make him feel more comfortable around me. Like jeans and Birkenstocks would somehow make him forget that his boss's boss's boss sent me. Plus, I can think much better when I'm comfortable and my feet aren't screaming in stilettos.

I'm climbing up the steps leading to his front door, admiring the simple landscaping that really enhances the entire house, when I hear the door open. I look up, a smile and a compliment on my lips, when instead of seeing Quinton, I see a woman who is so gorgeous and put together that I want to turn and run and not return until I'm fully armored in heels and a pencil skirt.

"I'll give you a call later." She leans in to give him a hug. "Thanks for this morning, it was really helpful." Her blonde hair is cascading down her back in perfect waves and her tan skin glows against the emerald green of her shift dress. She's basically a goddess.

And the polar opposite of everything I am.

Exactly what I pictured when he said I wasn't his type.

She turns to leave and finally notices me standing there . . . in fucking Birkenstocks.

"Oh!" She jumps back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you."

Clearly.

"Oh no, you're fine. I'm sorry I startled you."

"Elliot." Quinton steps out from behind her and I get my first glance at him, barefoot and in gray sweatpants. "You're early."

And I mean, honestly! Gray sweatpants? How fucking dare he? Gray sweatpants are like my kryptonite!

But once I move past the sweatpants, I see his face.

And he looks pissed.

"Oh." I look down at my watch. I am early, but only by ten minutes. "I'm sorry. Do you need me to wait in my car?"

"It's fine. You're here already, just come in." He steps back and waves me inside without even saying goodbye to the blonde beauty.

She gives me a small, encouraging smile before slipping past me and making her getaway, unlocking the doors to the white sedan I parked behind.

I walk inside and all of the hope I had leading up to this meeting drifts away. Instead, I'm left feeling unwelcome, uncomfortable, and

confused.

“Sorry I got here early.” Even though I’m not exactly sure what I’m apologizing for. Professionalism? Punctuality? Both? “I was expecting more traffic and when I got here, I didn’t know how long I could sit in my beat-up Camry with Mustangs stickers before one of your neighbors called the cops thinking I was a stalker fan.”

This is not a lie. Once I saw blinds starting to crack open, I got out of my car immediately.

I stand inside the entryway, unsure of what I should do. Between the stark white walls, the cement floors, and the industrial beams scattered across the room, it’s like the tension is vibrating throughout the space, bouncing from one cold surface to the next, intent on latching onto me.

“I said it’s fine.” Quinton throws over his shoulder as his bare feet pad across the cement floor.

It’s all so awkward that I have to wonder if working with him for the next four months is actually worth it. If I’ve learned anything over the last couple of years, it’s that life is too short to be miserable.

“Are you just going to stand there or come in? I’m guessing since you got here early, it’s because there’s a lot to do.” It’s a good thing he’s a better quarterback than he is host.

He’s standing behind an island in the kitchen that—like the rest of the house—has no personality. He leans forward, cracking his knuckles against the white stone covering the island, the black pendant light dangling above his head only highlights the shadows crossing his face that make him seem even less approachable than he did in HERS yesterday.

But since I can’t quit today—bills can’t be paid with happiness—I pull up my grown-up panties and get to work . . . still wishing I wasn’t wearing Birkenstocks.

“Yes, as I told you yesterday, while this won’t be hard, it will be time-consuming.” I cross the room and place my bag on the counter across from him, pulling out my sleek and shiny laptop. After years of buying secondhand computers that were usually covered with half-peeled-off stickers, seeing it still sends a thrill through my system. “So, first things first. Why do you want a foundation?”

“You’re the one who wants the foundation.”

I not so successfully fight the urge to roll my eyes. But, because he's acting like a petulant teenager, he's not looking at me to see it anyways.

"Well, we both know that's not true since you applied for your 501(c)(3) before I was even a blip on your radar." Which, by the way, I still can't believe he got approved for without having anything else in place. Ahhh, to be rich and famous. Must be so freaking nice. "Did you at least have an idea in place before life got in the way?"

"Let's move this to my office." He lets out a deep breath before pushing off the countertop. "I didn't have much for it, but what I do have is in there."

He doesn't wait for me to respond before he starts to walk away. I slam my computer shut and hurry to follow him. The last thing my nosy ass needs is to be left alone anywhere in this man's house. Even though, from what I can see, he lacks anything that could possibly have any personal or emotional meaning.

And, when he pushes open the door, his office is more of the same.

Not one picture to be seen; his desk—which I'm sure cost as much as my mortgage—has nothing on it besides his computer. It's actually sad. I may be broke compared to him, but at least the things I do have mean something to me.

"Take a seat." He motions to the very attractive, very uncomfortable chair across from his desk as he rounds it and plops into the rolling leather chair opposite me. "You were asking if I had anything ready when I submitted papers to the IRS, right?"

"Yeah, sorry." I cringe at the noise the chair makes as I try to scoot closer to his desk. "There are certain things we have to have in place before we start asking for money, which is part of the goal for the launch event we want to throw."

"That makes sense." He leans back in his chair, some of the irritation finally fleeing from his expression. "Nobody wants to give money if they don't know what it's for."

"Exactly." I flip open my computer again and quickly type in my password before pulling up the checklist I created last night. "Which is why we want the mission statement to be as clear as possible. You've made quite a stir. ESPN has been hounding me and I already scheduled a couple interviews with local channels. Getting publicity

isn't going to be the problem. The hard part is going to be getting your message across in a way that can't be misinterpreted. It will just be guiding the conversation to the place you want it to go. And you can only do that by precise, strategic planning."

"Is that even possible with the Internet? Twitter alone is wild." He quirks a single eyebrow, skepticism thick in his voice. "With everyone spouting off their opinions all the time, how do we overshadow that?"

We. YES!

I knew going into this that the biggest challenge was going to be Quinton not feeling like I'm on his team. I mean, I am being paid by someone who wants him to stop doing something that's very important. So him including me in this, no matter how minor it may seem, is a giant step to this plan succeeding.

"First, don't go on Twitter or any other social media platform from now on. That's my job. I will schedule posts for you if you want to keep a presence online. The last thing you need is to get caught up with online trolls." I've spent enough time on social media trying to gauge people's reactions to him to last a freaking lifetime. I doubt he wants to see all of the "spoiled millionaire complaining over nothing, why don't we send him overseas and see if he can respect the flag then" and the #ShutUpAndPlay tweets. People also seemed to forget that he led a team to the championship. Way too many people were saying he sucks and isn't worth the trouble. "But yes, it is possible. I know it sounds difficult and it can be. But there are things we can do to keep the focus where we want it to be. Big companies do it all the time."

"Big companies? Like the one we both work for."

Oops.

And just like that, we're back to square one.

"Yes, just like the company *we* work for." I don't even try to mask the truth; that will only cause his distrust for me to grow. "But lucky for you, you're the one in charge of this. You control the narrative and can pretty much demand that they support you."

Fuck. Loose lips again. That was probably not the best thing to tell him. But it's true. And maybe if he can realize the power he has here, he can focus on finding another way to express his feelings.

And let me help.

He nods his head—that hopefully isn’t getting even bigger from his newly held power—so I continue. “From there, we’ll want to appoint your board, create bylaws, and then the fun part: setting up funding guidelines and picking the first organizations you’ll fund.”

“That all sounds really good. I did some research last night into foundations and what was needed to get started.” He pushes his chair back and opens the drawer to his desk. Pulling out a spiral notebook, he eyes me as if he’s still deciding whether or not he should trust me. Then I guess he decides he does because he opens the notebook and hands it to me. “I listed out some potential members for the board, some ideas on what I want the mission statement to say, and a few organizations I think would benefit from funding.”

My mouth falls open as I read through his scrappy yet pleasantly neat handwriting.

THE MISSION OF THE QUINTON HOWARD JUNIOR FOUNDATION IS TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY ACROSS THE BOARD. BY SUPPORTING AND FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE DEDICATED TO ENDING RACISM AND HELPING PEOPLE LIVE A LIFE WITH DIGNITY, WE WILL HELP MAKE THIS COUNTRY A BETTER PLACE FOR ALL PEOPLE.

His mission statement isn’t some messy, thrown-together thing. It’s short, to the point, and perfectly describes his objective. He melds together two problems and makes them seem so cohesive that I couldn’t find a place to separate them even if I tried. There are pages and pages of organizations. Some local, some national, all listed with what they do and why he thinks they’d benefit not just from funding, but funding specifically from him. And finally, he has a group of about twenty potential board members.

“This is amazing.” I look at him once I’m finished reading everything. “Why did you act like you didn’t have anything ready when I asked?”

“People tend to act like I’m incapable of doing anything by myself.” He shrugs, but there’s tension in his shoulders that wasn’t there a minute ago and his smile no longer reaches his eyes. “I like to gauge how big of an idiot people think I am. What’s the point of letting someone in who isn’t going to ever take me seriously?”

Ouch.

I know that he showed me in the end, so that means that on some level he senses how much I want this to work. But it also shows that I'm not doing a very good job of hiding some of my personal feelings and he was able to pick up on that.

Just like it wasn't my fault that I got dealt a hand that held a dead mom and a dad who died a slow and painful death, Quinton didn't choose to be the son of a professional athlete. And even though I think he was the lucky one between the two of us, it doesn't discount his feelings and his hurt.

In the end, all people care about is themselves.

I'd do well to remember that.

My sob story doesn't matter here. It won't change anything. If I want this to work, I have to focus on Quinton. That means taking him and all of his childhood problems—no matter what I think of them—seriously.

He has a point to make. I have a job to keep.

And there's only one way to make that happen.

I hand him back his notebook.

"It looks like the Quinton Howard Junior Foundation is well on its way." I crack my knuckles, a habit my dad detested, and reposition my computer in front of me. "You ready to get busy?"

"I thought you'd never ask." No smile crosses his face, but he pushes his shoulders back and any shadows of irritation still lingering on his face are replaced by pure determination.

And I can work with that.

Seven

In the two weeks since our first meeting at Quinton's house, the probability that I will become the newest hostess at HERS has decreased exponentially.

Whereas when I was first assigned this "project," I was one hundred percent certain I'd be heading to the unemployment office at the end of our four months together, now I'm only ninety percent sure.

But hey, progress is progress! Am I right?

I mean, yeah, Quinton is still covering the League's logo on his jersey as soon as his cleats touch the field and is definitely still kneeling. And fans are starting to become restless, so their reactions are growing before every game. Plus Glenn Chandler, who is now in full-on campaign mode, has made Quinton a crucial part of his speeches. Every single night, my phone starts to go crazy with alerts showing me the newest YouTube video of Glenn Chandler standing behind a podium in whatever new city he's traveled to, attacking Quinton. I especially like when he looked directly into the camera and said, "This spoiled child has the audacity to go out on a football field, in stadiums that taxes funded, and disrespect our flag, our troops, and our men and women in blue!"

Those are fun.

And his supporters are eating it up. As soon as he's finished speaking, there's an endless influx of tweets about Quinton's disrespect to our country and how he needs to learn his place. Apparently, if you have a job in sports, it doesn't matter if you're an American citizen or not, you are not allowed to have an opinion. #ShutUpAndPlay has been trending all week long. And while I still don't know where exactly I belong in this movement, I get pissed every time I see the way they twist his motives into something else completely.

On the bright side, we have made a ton of progress on his foundation and the launch party is shaping up to be pretty phenomenal if I may say so myself.

“I’m thinking balloons. Lots and lots of balloons.” I look at Quinton over the top of my computer, the screen filled with balloon displays by a local company.

“Balloons?” Quinton quirks his left eyebrow up, something I’ve noticed he always does when he thinks I’m being absurd. “Like a kid’s birthday party?”

“I mean, kind of, yeah. Balloons are at celebrations because they make people happy. They’re joyous. Which is a good feeling for people to have when you want their money.” I turn my computer toward him when his face still doesn’t change. “See? We can have a big backdrop by the entrance where people can take pictures. Some of the balloons will have your logo on them, so it will be just like a step and repeat, except better. Then, inside”—I walk around the table to stand next to him and point to the arrangement I want—“they can snake up the wall and cover the ceiling. It will be so much more fun than flowers. This isn’t a wedding and we don’t want it to read that way.”

“These are pretty dope. I didn’t know they did shit like that with balloons.”

“Balloons are super dope and shit.” I repeat his words back to him, but the words that sounded so natural coming out of his mouth sound so ridiculous coming from me that we both start laughing.

Besides the very first time we met, this is the only other time that I’ve heard him laugh. I mean, the man barely smiles. I guess he has transformed from quarterback extraordinaire to one of the most controversial figures in sports in the matter of three games, so I can see where the stress would come from. But I have a feeling there may be more to it than that. And even though we’re cordial with one another, I don’t feel comfortable asking. Even so, an annoying sense of happiness floats through me for being the person who finally wiped that serious expression from his face.

Once his laughter has faded away, he looks me straight in the eyes and if I hadn’t witnessed it, I’d think I’d imagined him laughing. Not one trace of humor lingers in the hard edges of his face. “Don’t ever say that again.”

My spine straightens. “What?”

Then it happens.

He winks at me.

WINKS!

“Wait? Are you teasing me?” I’ve been shocked by quite a few things during our time together, like how much he seems to genuinely care about the causes he’s choosing to support, how smart he is when the mask he always seems to be wearing accidentally slips, the Diet Coke I found in his fridge that he let me drink. I mean, I would *never* give up the last Diet Coke. But this, a hidden sense of humor, might be the biggest shock of all.

“You aren’t the only funny one here.”

Well, that’s a stretch. I’m definitely funnier than he is.

I don’t say that, though.

“You’re not funnier than me,” he says.

But apparently my face said it loud and clear. I really need to learn to check my facial expressions.

“Whatever. I guess humor is subjective.” I grab my computer and move back to my seat. I open up the spreadsheet I’ve created for the party and add a column for balloons before confirming. “So yes on the balloons?”

“Yup.” He lifts his chin. “Pop yourself out.”

I groan and rest my head on my computer. “Puns. Dear God. He really thinks he’s punny.”

His throaty chuckle reverberates off the still-empty walls and rugless cement floor.

I sit back up in my chair, closing the party tabs and tucking the piece of hair that has fallen in front of my face behind my ear. I look up to ask Quinton a question. My head jerks back when instead of seeing the top of his head like I expected, we are making direct eye contact. And he’s got some weird expression on his face that I haven’t seen before.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” I narrow my eyes at him before wiping at my cheek. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I wasn’t looking at you.” He drops his eyes and stares at the paper that has no words on it, fidgeting with the pen between his fingers. “I

was looking at the door, trying to think of something when you tried to see into my soul.”

You know that feeling when you wave to the stranger in the grocery store because you think they’re waving at you, but they are really waving to someone standing behind you? That’s how I feel.

“Oh, sorry for interrupting your thinking.” I hope the heat I feel in my cheeks is hidden beneath my brown skin and Fenty blush I slathered on this morning. “But do you have the finalized list for your board members?”

I had him reach out to everyone he had in mind for the board after our first meeting at his house. Some people were immediate—and enthusiastic—yeses. Others had too many commitments already to get involved and the few maybes were supposed to get back to him over the weekend. They didn’t say anything outright, but I think a couple of them were nervous to attach their name to his until they saw which way all of this media attention started to swing. But because I’m good at my job, I drafted an email for him to send over. In it, we showed them the world Quinton was intent on creating. A world where, even if there were some people who were angry—you can’t please everyone—history would show that he was on the right side. This was going to have a lasting impact and they had the opportunity to create a legacy of change.

“Yeah.” He flips through the spiral notebook. The only time I’ve seen him use a computer is when I push mine in front of him. “They said yes.”

“Told you my persuasive emails were a surefire thing.” I resist the urge to shimmy in my seat, the embarrassments of today’s meeting still too fresh in my mind to add another one.

“You did.” He slides the notebook across the table so I can enter in all of the details to my foundation spreadsheet. What? I like a spreadsheet! “Between you and the balloons, we’re sure to raise a ton of money.”

“You’ve never said a more accurate statement in your entire—” I stop talking. Rereading the list of board members, there’s one name that is glaringly missing. “Is this everyone?”

He pulls the notebook back. “Yeah.” His eyebrows furrow as he tries to figure out what has me so confused. “Why? Am I missing

someone?”

“Why isn’t your dad going to be on the board?” When I didn’t see him on the list of potential members, I assumed it was just because he was a shoo-in, not that he wasn’t being considered at all. “The optics of having you both work together, generations of players fighting for equality and the fair treatment of players who have been forgotten, is really important. Not having your dad involved is going to cause problems. Somebody will twist that into him not supporting you.”

I don’t know what part of what I said has pissed him off, but the guy I thought was just starting to warm up to having me around has reverted back to the asshole I first met at HERS.

“Then I guess they’re going to talk because he’s not going to be on the board.” He glares at me and makes no effort to hide his distaste.

But you know what? Fucking same! I’m not here because I need a new friend. I’m here to do my job. And I’m not going to let him sabotage all of the work we’ve done together. And keeping up with his mood swings is giving me whiplash.

As much as I want to say I can’t stand him, spending time with him has softened my resolve. He’s intense in a way that I respect and admire, like he’s the kind of friend who will push you out of your comfort zone because he sees your true potential. I hate to admit it, but that’s something I’m missing in my life. I love my friends, but after all they’ve seen me go through, they ache to see me comfortable. Quinton is forcing me to be better. And I thought I was doing the same for him.

“I’m not even going to pretend to know the ins and outs of the Howard family. But if this is because you want to separate your name from his”—even though they literally share a name, so that seems like a dumb hill to die on—“this is not the time. One mistake can take this from a success to a failure. You’re going to need to put on your big boy panties and go ask your dad to help you out. If you don’t, I will.”

Okay. So after it leaves my mouth, I want to shovel it back in. Telling him to put on his big boy panties is definitely not the way to get what I want. Unless I wanted him to look at me like I was the actual scum of the earth, because that’s what I’m getting right now.

“My dad will *not* be involved in this. Do you understand me?” His voice has dropped to a whisper, but the anger is still coming through

loud and clear. “I don’t want him anywhere near this project. If I find out you tried to go behind my back to change that, I will take a knee on the sideline and not throw a single pass for the rest of the season. We’ll see how Mahler feels about that, but I don’t think he’d be very happy with you. Do you?”

Now, to be fair, I never told him about my meeting with Mr. Mahler and my possible termination if things don’t go well. But it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that I’m not spending all my free time with the rude, moody man in front of me for fun. So his threat hits his intended mark. But that’s not the part that has my sinuses burning and my eyes threatening to flood.

I would give anything . . . ANYTHING! . . . to spend time with my dad. Even when I’m not actively thinking about him, I know he’s only a scent, an image, a word away. And Quinton has the chance to not only spend time with his dad, but to create an actual legacy with him, and he’s spitting on it.

What an asshole!

The inside of my cheeks begin to hurt from how hard I’m biting them. I unclench my jaw and throw my hands in the air at the same time. “Fine.” I shrug my shoulders, shifting my focus back to the computer screen. “This is your foundation. Do whatever you want.”

I expect some kind of response, but thankfully, I’m met with silence.

Unfortunately, though, that silence only lasts a couple of minutes.

“You know,” he says, interrupting my daydreams of him sustaining a minor—but season-ending—injury so I don’t have to deal with him anymore, “I was wondering something.”

When he doesn’t continue, I look up to see him staring at me, waiting for me to say something.

“What, Quinton?” I can’t scrounge up the effort to hide my eye roll or mask the irritation in my tone when I answer. “Please, tell me. What were you wondering?”

“I mean, you seem smart.” He starts in the worst possible way ever. “I’ve just been trying to figure out how you let Mahler trick you into being the token Black girl. Why would you let him use you like this?”

Out of everything that I thought would come out of his mouth, that was worse than anything I could’ve possibly imagined. I’m stunned

speechless.

“Did he convince you that you’re a meaningful part of his organization? Did he say something that convinced you he didn’t put you on me clearly for the optics of hiring a Black woman and supporting diversity?” He tilts his head to the side as if I’m some puzzle for him to solve and not a person he just insulted. “What even is your role in this?”

I try to take some deep cleansing breaths, to remember the coping skills that I had to use almost every day at my old job. The techniques I vowed I would never have to use again because of somebody making me feel small at work.

Yet here I am again.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” I keep my words calm and measured as I slowly close my computer, afraid that all of the anger sizzling through my veins will cause a Hulk-like blowup. “I’m going to leave and try to forget that you ever said that. Tomorrow, you will meet me in my office when you get out of practice and we will only meet there unless we have to go to the venue for the launch. We will only speak when we need to speak or when you decide that you’re ready to apologize for insinuating that not only am I not qualified for my job, but that I only got it because of my skin color.”

“You really don’t think that he’s using you? So that when the press comes sniffing around, he can parade you in front of them and say that I’m misguided in calling out the racism in his organization because look at you. You’re Black *and* a woman.” He leans back in his chair, a sadistic smirk tugging on the corner of his mouth. “You can’t be that naive.”

My dad raised me with the mentality to be color-blind. I try to live my life like that. I don’t know what Quinton has experienced. I see the struggles Black men in this country face and I’m not so “naive” to think racism isn’t a huge problem. But I’m not okay with him projecting his problems onto me. I’ve had enough people question my validity as a biracial woman—and where they think I belong in this world—that I can’t bite my tongue any longer.

“What’s your problem? Seriously, there’s something wrong with you. I’ve been working with you for two weeks. In that time, name one moment where you’ve felt I’m not qualified to be here. You can’t.

Because I'm damn good at my job." I shove my computer in my bag and start walking to the door before I spin back around. "No! I'm not done here. You've made your stance clear. You have a problem with racism and mistreatment in the League. Everyone should! But did you ever consider that by implying I got my job solely because of my skin color, and not because I've worked my entire life for it, you're creating problems too? Yes, I'm Black. And I'm white. I was raised by my white dad. I have white friends. And they've never insinuated anything like what just came out of your mouth. So maybe before you go throwing around insults like that, you should check your own bias first."

And finally feeling satisfied by the look of something other than smugness on Quinton's stupid face, I make my exit with the sinking feeling that my career is ending with the door slamming behind me.

Eight

icy.

If there is one word that could be used to describe the state of my relationships with everyone involved with the Mustangs organization, it's icy.

As much as I wanted to dismiss everything Quinton said as pure bullshit, I'd be lying if some of it didn't worm its way right into my brain and feed all of my insecurities. Like the fact that Mr. Mahler didn't even seem to like me before placing this huge task on my shoulders. Or the fact that since he assigned it, I haven't heard a peep from him. I send him an update every Friday, but he has yet to respond to one email. I'm starting to wonder if he's giving me enough rope to hang myself. I feel like he took the first opportunity he could find to sabotage my time here.

He set the stage so that if Quinton decides to stop taking a knee, he looks great for working things out. Or, on the flip side, say Quinton keeps kneeling and covering his logo, he can place all of the blame for the lack of progress on me.

I asked Paul if this level of disinterest is normal from him and he assured me that it is. That Mahler is known to give big assignments and then leave us to do our work without micromanagement. But now I'm even wondering if I can trust Paul to tell me the truth. I spent all weekend drafting statements for coaches and the general managers to use when they're confronted with questions about Quinton. The messaging is in line with what Quinton has been saying, but takes pressure off the organization. Paul thanked me and told me I did a great job, but when I watched the press conference after the practice, the coaches were singing a completely different tune. It's like Paul took my message and gave them the polar opposite statement. I can feel the

distance growing between me and my coworkers. That feeling of never quite fitting in or belonging grows more pronounced every time I walk in the room.

If Quinton's intentions were to plant a poppy seed of doubt that would bloom into full-blown paranoia, he was wildly successful.

And now, unlucky for me, I get to start my weekend by spending this beautiful Saturday morning waking up way too early and listening to Quinton's annoying voice echoing around the empty room where we'll be hosting his launch event in exactly ten days. And would you like to know how I'm feeling about that? In the infamous words of Dorinda—New York is the best *Housewives* franchise, don't @ me—Medley, “Not well, bitch!”

“What do you think of setting up the bar here?” Brynn points to the corner of the empty event space. “We can bring in our chalkboard, and Paisley, one of the bartenders working that night, is great at hand-lettering so it will look pretty too.”

“Ask Quinton, it's his event. I'm just here to take notes for setup. All the decisions are his to make.” I can't even be bothered to care anymore. I already have plans to spend tonight with a pint of Ben & Jerry's while I update my résumé.

Apparently, Quinton is capable of making friends with some people, and Maxwell Lewis is one of them. Between their relationship and Brynn's longstanding one with the Mustangs organization, she volunteered to donate her services to this event. And because of Quinton's and the venue's schedules, she was nice enough to come out during the only time they could squeeze us in.

If I wasn't too busy hating my life right now, I'd be really excited to be spending time with her.

But instead, all my enthusiasm for anything including Quinton Howard Junior is long gone and I have adopted the mood of an angsty teen instead.

“Um, yeah. Okay, I'll ask him.” Brynn turns to find Quinton, but only takes a few steps before she's walking back to me and grabbing my arm, dragging me out of the room.

“Brynn!” I hiss out. “What are you doing?”

She doesn't answer until we are in the bathroom with the door locked behind us and the faucets all turned on.

“What happened?” She stands in front of me, her hands firmly on her hips and fire behind her eyes.

“Nothing happened. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, don’t even try that shit with me.” She jabs a finger into my shoulder and I’m convinced I’ll have a fingertip-sized bruise later. “If you knew my friends, you’d know that I’ve been witness to Mustang drama for what feels like my entire life. I’ve even gotten Vonnie Lamar to break. You don’t stand a chance against me.”

“Lavonne Lamar? From *Colorado Everyday*?” My attention is that of a squirrel. “I loved when she was on that show! Did you see the episode where she did the fish pedicure? I laughed so hard I almost peed myself. Why’d she quit?”

“Oh my god.” She closes her eyes and lets out a deep breath. “You’re just like them. As soon as you and Quinton admit you’re into each other, you’re going to fit in perfectly.”

“Me and Quinton?” I put my hand on her forehead. “Are you sick? Do you have a fever? Do you need me to call nine-one-one?”

She slaps my hand away, which, like the finger jab, also hurts way more than it probably should.

“I think you’re underestimating my deep knowledge when it comes to Mustangs romances,” she says. “I was a bridesmaid in Gavin and Marlee Pope’s wedding for a reason. TK and Poppy’s rekindling basically took place in HERS. I’ve conducted a deep dive over the courtship between me and Maxwell. And I won’t even get into how many wives and girlfriends I’ve counseled in my office after Wednesday meetings, but hint? It’s a fucking lot.”

“Well, ‘fucking’ is the largest form of measurement, so I can only imagine.”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.”

“But the highest form of intelligence,” I finish for her. “Why does everybody always forget the end of that quote?”

“I think the real question is why do you know the entire quote?”

I have no good comeback for that. “Fine. Whatever. You win this round.” I revert back to my angsty teen routine.

“Ha! Victorious again!” She does a double fist pump before the realization that a double fist pump is way worse than knowing an iconic quote and lowers her arms in defeat. “Call it a tie?”

“I can live with that.”

We shake hands and suddenly, this feels like a very formal bathroom meeting.

“So now are you ready to tell me what’s going on with you?” she asks. “I know you weren’t thrilled about this stint with Quinton, but Liv and Marie both said you were making it work and actually feeling really good about the work you two were doing.”

“Wait.” I replay her words in my head. “What?”

I know Liv and Marie have been going to HERS. They’ve invited me a few times, but because I’m busy trying not to get fired, I haven’t gone. Friday nights spent writing statements that are continually ignored—but still requested—isn’t as much fun as I initially thought. Plus, I have the added benefit of sorting through the hate mail aimed at Quinton, which has been rerouted to me. Speaking of, if people who love the Second Amendment so much had the same enthusiasm for the First Amendment, my job would be so much easier . . . and less scary. What I didn’t know, however, was that I’ve been the subject of their conversations when they went to HERS without me.

“They’ve been coming in and doing gin tastings. They’ve been super helpful. I have three new cocktails ready for winter.” She doesn’t even pretend to be a little bit sorry that she’s boozing up my friends to gain intel.

And I’ll be having a conversation with Liv and Marie soon. I mean really? Betrayed in the name of gin?

How rude.

But also, relatable. I’d totally turn on them for whiskey.

“Okay, so yes, things were getting better.” I start to sit on the ground before remembering we’re still in the bathroom and activate my glutes and hamstrings harder than I ever have in my entire thirty-one years on this earth. Maybe if I get fired, I can start a new workout trend that takes place in public restrooms? I mean, spinning is so last year.

“That was, quite possibly, the greatest squat save I’ve ever witnessed,” Brynn says.

“Thank you!” I shout, even though I know it’s probably heard throughout the entire venue. But nothing gets me more excited than a simple compliment. “My knees didn’t even pop!”

“Even more impressive,” she says. I get the distinct feeling that now she’s mocking me. “Now that I know how you have the world’s nicest ass, would you like to explain to me what the hell is going on with you out there?”

“He’s just a jackass.” My eyes start to twitch just thinking about that day at his house.

“And . . .” Brynn motions me to continue. “More than four words would be helpful.”

“I went over to his house on Tuesday to plan like we’ve been doing and it was going really well. Liv and Marie weren’t lying when they said I was enjoying it. His foundation is setting up to do some real good in the world. He is really looking into fixing problems within the League—I guess there are a lot of problems with the way some of the older retired players are treated. But he doesn’t want to stop there. We’ve been finding projects and charities that address inequality in their communities.”

I’ve been reaching out to a lot of the organizations he’s researched. One of my favorites is an organization that provides professional clothing to men and women. It seems like a small thing, but they provide haircuts and classes to prepare people for interviews. It’s life changing for the people it helps. One thing I’ve noticed about the causes Quinton seems to champion is that, at their core, they provide dignity. Helping underprivileged people out in a way where they can help themselves and not feel like they’re begging for charity. It’s really beautiful.

“I understand why he chose the football field and the national anthem to make a stance. There’s so much passion behind his actions and we were taking it to the next level. It was going surprisingly well, then it wasn’t. He said some really hurtful things and made it clear that he didn’t respect or value the work I was doing.”

I leave out the details. I don’t want to hear the words that have been bouncing around in my head for the last two weeks aloud. Some part of me thinks that even though they’ve already consumed my mind, speaking them will cause them to become a truth.

“It sounds like that means you two need to talk more, not less.” Brynn gives the advice of an adult, which is not what I’d like to hear.

“There’s nothing he can say that can excuse his behavior.” Or that can slow the avalanche of self-doubt he set in motion. “For a person so set on using his voice to create change, I’m not sure he truly understands the power his words have. And how damaging they can be.”

Brynn leans against the door and I know she’s prepared to stay in the bathroom for as long as it takes to get me to agree to take her side. What she doesn’t know is stubborn is my middle name, so we could be in this bathroom all damn day.

“Have you told him that?” she asks.

“No.” Is she crazy? Maybe she had some gin before she came over. “I’m not his mom and he’s a grown-ass man. He should’ve learned basic manners a long time ago.”

“I can understand that. It’s not your job. Except wait!” She perks up. “It literally *is* your job!”

“Oh no. Not even close.” I shake my head. Setting up press conferences, curating emails and Instagram posts, drafting speeches and statements, and planning this event was enough. I know I’m not emotionally stable enough myself to take on a twentysomething rich boy, with what seems like some serious daddy issues. I’m still a disaster, but therapy at least taught me how to set basic boundaries. “I know you mean well, but I’ve been through a lot this year. I really can’t add someone else’s baggage to the mounds of my own issues.”

“That’s fair.” She bites her bottom lip and taps an embroidered tennis shoe-covered foot against the beige tile. And I think my little conundrum might’ve finally broken Brynn. I don’t know if I should be proud or apologetic.

“We can be cordial. I can stand near him and not say something rude.” *Maybe*. “But from now on, I’m just going to show up and try to hoard my paychecks before I get fired in January.”

“That’s it!” Brynn brightens and pushes off the door. Not the reaction I thought she’d have after I informed her of my impending unemployment status. “Have you told him that you have a stake in this too? That you could lose your job?”

I feel all of the wrinkles in my forehead when my eyebrows try to high-five each other. “Of course I haven’t.”

Is she insane? I know I haven't been the most professional dealing with Quinton, but that's a little too low even for me.

"Why not?"

I don't know if she is messing with me or not, but I answer anyways.

"Because my job isn't to trick him into submission." I mean, it honestly might be. Something tells me there aren't many lows Mr. Mahler won't fall to. "It's to give him another option to feel heard. I support the protest he's making. If he wants to stop kneeling, it will have nothing to do with me. I won't hang my burden on him. I won't try to manipulate him with my problems."

Not that he'd even care if I got fired. He basically taunted me with his ability to make that happen at his house.

She walks toward me and takes my hands in hers.

"It's not manipulating him, Elliot." Her voice is softer and so are her eyes. It's a look I know well. One people gave me for weeks after my dad died. Until their lives moved on and I was still stuck in the cyclone of mourning. "I don't know what you're going through and neither does he. But maybe, if you opened up to him, he'd be understanding and you could both get along better."

"I shouldn't have to tell him my sob story for him to not be a jerk. You never know what a person is going through. But he doesn't seem to understand that."

Brynn squeezes my hands and her lips pull into a straight line. "You're right," she says. "And have you thought that maybe you don't know what he's going through?"

With that, she turns the faucets off and leaves me alone in the bathroom with a hell of a lot to think about.

What could Quinton possibly be going through that can compare to the loss I've experienced this year? The problems he's dealing with are only there because he created them.

We don't have anything in common. Of that, I'm positive.

So I don't know why I look so ashamed when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Nine

Wandering back into the now empty event space, I go out of my way to avoid the corner where Brynn has pinned down Quinton. The loafers I threw on this morning are blissfully quiet as I cross the room as quickly as possible to talk with Jen.

Jen Ingram, manager of the Rue, the event space we're using, has been a lifesaver throughout this project. While I fully knew I could create a beautiful and memorable event in a month for Quinton, finding a space large enough to host it that wasn't booked was another story. So when she called to let me know the Rue had opened up, I jumped on it.

The distressed hardwood floors and the exposed brick walls give this historic building instant character. Between the hundreds, maybe even thousands of balloons—I may have gone a little overboard—the acrylic chairs, and the string lighting that will soon be going up, this event will be the perfect mix of old and new. Something that goes hand in hand with the issues at the heart of what the evening is going to be about.

“Hey! Don't forget to give me the caterer's and the balloon lady's numbers. I need to store them in my computer,” Jen says when she sees me approaching. “And I'll email you the new contract with the updated price. Sound good?”

As Jen sat with me and Hannah, the owner of Modern Balloon, her eyes got wider and wider as the designs set in place for the event space were listed out. Hannah had barely left the table before Jen offered to take fifteen percent off the price she'd given us if we let her use the professional pictures from the event in her marketing campaign. I probably should've asked Quinton if he was okay with it before I agreed, but what can I say? Your girl's a sucker for a deal!

“Sounds perfect.” I pull my phone out of my pocket and forward her the phone numbers before I forget. “Done!”

“You’re the best.” She tucks the clipboard with the checklist I emailed to her yesterday under her arm. “I’m just putting it out there: We’ve been thinking about hiring an in-house event planner. I know you have a job, but if you ever consider a career change, the job is yours.”

I file that offer in the back of my mind. “Just wait a couple months and I might take you up on the offer.”

“I’m serious,” she says. “You’re really talented at this, both visually and with the numbers. We’d be lucky to have you.”

I decide to let her think I wasn’t being serious when I told her to wait a couple of months. Nobody needs my heavy baggage laid on them on a Saturday. And despite really not wanting to care about this event anymore, I’m secretly really excited for it.

It has nothing at all to do with Quinton, but I wasn’t lying when I told him I’m a details girl. And big events like this are comprised of nothing but details. From the napkins to the color scheme to the guest list to the budget, no detail is too small.

After my dad passed, I was able to distract from the pain by throwing myself into planning his funeral. And it worked so well that I haven’t really stopped. I guess you could say busywork has become my coping mechanism. Because ignoring the problem completely instead of facing it head on has never backfired on anyone in the history of humanity.

“I appreciate you saying that, really.” Especially since I’m not sure Quinton is actually aware of how much work I’ve put into this event. We spend the majority of our time together focused on the foundation itself. I only ask him questions for the launch when I really need to.

“Appreciate what?” Quinton, the stealthy fucker, says from right behind me.

“Nothing.” I plaster on my professional “the person who just became a potential job lead is watching” smile and turn to face him. “Are you ready for the launch?”

“I am.” He looks around the empty venue and an almost wistful look crosses his face.

“I think this is going to be one of the best events we’ve ever hosted. Elle really did a great job picking all of the vendors,” Jen cuts in. “And I know this is to launch your new foundation, so what exactly is your foundation about?”

Quinton looks to me for permission to answer. I told him in no uncertain terms he was not allowed to discuss his foundation with anyone. I mean, what’s the point of a reveal if everyone already knows what it is? But I’m still kind of shocked he’s listened to anything I’ve told him.

“She signed a nondisclosure agreement,” I tell him. “You can give her all of the details.”

“Aw shit, looks like I found my new therapist,” he says and a surprised snort slips from my mouth.

It’s not that he’s funny, per se; it’s that he’s always so serious and even when he jokes, he does it with a straight face. My dad had the driest sense of humor ever, so even though I will never tell him, I do find him pretty funny when he’s not being a total jerk.

“No, but seriously.” He shakes his head and reveals a smile that is almost fragile. “The Quinton Howard Junior Foundation will support at-risk communities while also bringing attention to the problems within the League. I think it’s really important to point out the problems in these massive corporations because they tend to mirror or set the tone for issues in our communities. Whether it’s racism, greed, corruption, or violence, the League is a microcosm of bigger issues, and too often players are afraid to speak against them—you can’t bite the hand that feeds you. So I’m going to take the lead, stir things up so that the players, past and present, can have their voices heard.”

“I had no idea players felt this way. Is it really that big of a problem?” Jen asks.

“It’s bigger.” Quinton doesn’t hesitate. “You know, with the news about CTE starting to make ripples, some people are acknowledging the real danger in playing football. But we’re only talking about it because so many former players are suffering and dying. CTE is just one aspect. Nobody is talking about the rest and that’s one of the things I want to do. And as a society, we need a hard time talking about racism, but we need to have that dialogue. In a company where seventy percent of its players are Black, but only nine percent of

managers and zero percent of owners are? That's a problem. Racism isn't just saying mean things. It's a system that makes it impossible for minorities to reach certain levels."

"Wow, this is really amazing." Jen breathes out, enthralled with Quinton—lost in the passion behind his words. And I don't blame her.

Even though I know what the foundation is and the passion he possesses for his causes, I've never heard him speak this way. With me, he's guarded. He's precise, but never emotional. Listening to him talk to Jen, however, there are feelings I can't even begin to unpack fueling his words. This isn't just a cause he wants to champion, this is his life's mission. Like every year spent perfecting his craft wasn't for a huge contract or championship ring, but for this moment . . . for the opportunity to speak and have people listen.

I wait for Quinton to say something, to thank her, but instead it's like he has gone somewhere else. Like the mask he's always wearing slipped and he's struggling to put it back in place.

"I told you it was going to be big," I cut into the silence and give Jen a quick hug. "Thank you again for letting us come in today. We'll get out of your hair now, but I'll shoot you an email with the updated spreadsheets later."

"Yes." Quinton's deep voice comes out strong and confident—and very close. Whatever was going on with him a few seconds ago is in the past. "We appreciate your help."

Then he mimics my goodbye and leans in, wrapping his long, strong arms around Jen. And poor Jen, who has been the epitome of professionalism, turns into a blushing, giggling disaster. "It's been my pleasure," she says once she's gotten herself under control, aka when Quinton stops touching her.

Poor Jen.

I mean, I get it! Technically speaking, he is very handsome with his stupidly flawless skin, full lips that look both lusciously plump and firm, his hair that is long and unruly on top—like he's begging you to dig your fingers into it—and the bone structure of a god that is highlighted with a perfectly maintained beard. And on top of all that, he just gave her this impassioned speech about all of the good he wants to do in the world. Who wouldn't giggle? Maybe if she spent

more time around him, she'd become immune to the charms that are few and far between when he's around just me.

"Later!" I wave to Jen, who still looks a little light-headed as we turn to leave.

We push open the door and are met with the chaos of Downtown Denver on a weekend. Fall has just arrived, but it's chilled the air just enough to make for a perfect Colorado day. The glare of the sun off the glass windows surrounding us reminds me that I have somehow managed to forget the sunglasses that I keep in my car *and* the ones I try to keep in my purse.

But even in the midst of crowds of people on their way to lunch and the women chatting on their phones with oversized bags slung over their shoulders, nothing can seem to distract from the awkwardness lingering between us. The noise around us is still not enough to break the uncomfortable silence and tension as we walk to the parking lot Jen told us to park in.

"That was a good speech." Even though his head—and ego—is already inflated, I can't help but say it.

"Oh yeah. That? Thanks." His steps falter a bit.

Huh? Look at that. I guess me being nice to him is the one thing that can knock him off balance. I'll have to remember that.

"Have you been practicing what you're going to say at the launch?"

I wanted to prepare a speech for him, but he won't let me. He's okay with it for press conferences, but he wants what he says at the event to be all him. Which I get.

A thing I've learned about Quinton by observing him these last few weeks is that he's quietly very smart and dedicated, so I wouldn't be surprised if he's been practicing in front of mirrors. He's always writing something down in his notebook or on his phone. He's able to come to meetings in my office hours after the cars have left the player's parking lot because he's studying film. But when reporters talk to him and ask about something other than the stance he's taking, he never really takes credit for what he does. When he throws a great pass? It was all the receiver for running a perfect route. No interceptions? The offensive line blocked for him all night.

It's actually really admirable. But I've already complimented him once and I will NOT do it again.

I refuse.

“No . . . I mean, yeah, I have been practicing, but it wasn’t that. That was just from yes—” He waves a dismissive hand through the air and clears his throat. “Uh, never mind. No, it wasn’t planned.”

“Well, it was good.” I’m curious about what he was going to say, but decide not to push it. “Hopefully she’ll remember it after you scrambled her brain cells before we left.”

I laugh remembering the dazed expression on Jen’s face, but when I glance at Quinton, he’s staring at me with a blank look.

“Scrambled her brain cells? What are you talking about?”

“You know.” I shrug. “When you hugged her all tight and it looked like her head was going to explode all over the place.”

“You hugged her first.” His voice takes on a hard edge. “Why was it wrong when I did it?”

“Whoa there, killer.” I raise my hands up in surrender. Not sure how me trying to be nice to him got us here. “I didn’t say it was wrong. Just that, well, you’re you. A hug coming from you is a lot different than one from me.”

“What does that even mean? I was just being nice.”

Looks like being nice is backfiring for both of us.

“Come on, dude.” I stop walking and turn to face him, ignoring the not-so-nice words the man behind me mutters as he passes by. “You have to know what you look like. On top of that, you’re the starting quarterback for a professional team. So you’re young, famous, rich, handsome, and occasionally not a jerk.” I tick off my fingers one by one. “There’s a lot of people who would love the chance to try and shoot their shot.”

He mumbles something beneath his breath that I don’t quite catch and starts to walk again. His strides are long and measured, but his shoulders are slumped and his spine is bowed. It’s like he’s trying to curl into himself. By itself, that’s concerning body language, but from the ever confident Quinton Howard Junior? It’s downright alarming.

“Hey!” I call after him and try to pick up my pace. But he’s moving really fast and his legs are a lot longer than mine, so this really isn’t fair. “Wait for me!”

He doesn’t answer, but he does slow his steps until I reach him again. And I’ll take what I can get.

“Are you okay? I missed what you said before you walked away,” I ask when I’ve caught up, only slightly out of breath.

“I didn’t say anything.”

He ignores my question about whether or not he’s okay, but after spending the time I have with him, I know he can be short with words. Most of the time, I’d brush this off as him being a dismissive asshole again. But something is wrong. I can see it in the way his throat is working, as if he wants to say something, but the words are stuck . . . threatening to choke him.

And it’s something I recognize. I know all too well what it looks like to pretend everything is fine when in reality, you’re in so much pain you don’t know which way is up or down anymore.

Brynn’s parting words from the bathroom run through my head again. Maybe I don’t know what this man is going through. And it is my job to find out. So instead of ignoring him and hopping in my car that’s finally come into view, I make a new plan.

“Hey.” I rest a hand on his forearm to stop him, ignoring the jolt of electricity that flows through my fingertips at the feeling of his skin. It somehow feels even smoother than it looks. “I’m actually starving right now and there are still a few little things I’d like to discuss with you about the event. I know you have to be at the team’s hotel later, but would you want to grab some lunch and go over everything with me?”

“Um, yeah.” He glances down at his Apple Watch. “I have time for lunch.”

“Oh good!” I try to find some excitement that I don’t really feel. Fake it till you make it, am I right? “Are you in the mood for anything?”

“I’m fine with whatever. I’m still new to the city.” He looks along the building-lined streets of Downtown Denver, probably ready to shout out the name of the first restaurant he sees to get this over with. “I don’t know what’s good here.”

“Well, lucky for you, you’re with a Denver native and I grew up not far from here. I know a place and it’s never crowded.” I reach into my purse and grab my keys and phone. “I’ll text you the address. It’s not far.”

“Sounds good.” He taps on his watch when the text goes through. Technology is so wild. “I’ll see you there soon.”

“See ya.” I open my car door and slide into the seat, then, before I can close the door, he does it for me, like the old-school gentleman he’s most definitely not, then turns and walks away without a backward glance.

What an odd, odd man.

Ten

I didn't think this plan through.

When my dad died, I made the decision to stay far away from the neighborhood that housed too many memories to face on a daily basis. And I've managed to do just that.

Until today.

Driving down the tree-lined roads, memories I've been avoiding like the plague hit me hard and fast. The corner where my dad helped me set up a lemonade stand every summer until I decided I was too cool to do it anymore. The street where he dropped me off for the bus each morning. The park where we would play basketball together. All of those amazing memories that should bring a smile to my face, but are chased away as I drive past the street where our house is.

Was.

Where our house was.

The hospice nurses setting up his bed. Watching the rise and fall of his chest until it stopped. The funeral home coming to take him away. Handing the keys to the house I was raised in to the real estate agent and walking out of the door for the last time. It all slams into me at once.

It's been months. And it somehow hurts even more now.

The air in my car gets thicker, heavier. Inhaling and exhaling becomes a struggle as tears begin to cloud my vision. And I want to give in. I want to pull over and punch my steering wheel until my knuckles bleed, scream until my throat is raw about the unfairness of it all.

But I don't. *I won't*. Because it will do nothing. It won't bring him back or help me grieve. Instead, I'll still be just as alone as I am now,

except the physical pain might distract from the emotional pain of it all.

I relax my grip on the steering wheel, push my foot down a little bit harder on the pedal, and stuff all of those feelings down so deep that I forget they even exist. Or at least pretend they don't exist until the next reminder threatens to finally crack the exterior I've spent so long building.

Stanley's comes into view and I parallel park right in front. Tucked on a quiet side street and owned by a man who thinks Facebook is "hogwash," it's a hidden gem. It's been here for as long as I can remember and if you didn't know before you walked in, the decor inside would tip you off. I'm pretty sure they haven't changed a single thing since they first opened. They even have their "smoking section" sign still up, even though Denver went smoke free when I was in high school.

I open the door and the bell dings over my head. My eyes go immediately to the empty stool sitting outside of the kitchen and I almost fall to the floor in relief. When Mr. Stanley is here, his butt never leaves that stool. And if he was here, he'd ask about my dad and that's the last thing I need to happen in front of Quinton.

A waitress yells from across the room for me to sit wherever I want. Without thinking, my feet automatically cross the checkered linoleum floors until I'm sliding into the booth that my dad and I always used to sit in.

I run my fingers over the tattered vinyl covering the seat and look at the long scratch in the table. The one I put there when my dad let me color with a pen and I got a little out of control.

I order a Diet Coke and look at the menu I memorized years ago while I wait for Quinton.

"Elliot?" A voice says from somewhere behind me. "Elliot Reed? I knew that was you!"

The voice is nearly as familiar—and now, foreign—as my dad's. And while my heart flutters with aching and yearning for the comfort and love it's been missing, my brain sends signals of panic and fear. My palms begin to sweat and I've never wanted to be Barry Allen so badly.

But since I don't have super speed—or the superconvenient power to become invisible—I turn to face my old neighbor. "Mrs. Rafter, how

are you?”

I slide out of the booth and stand to give her a hug. My hands shake as I touch the person I was resigned to never see again after I last saw her . . . at my dad’s funeral. The scent of her signature perfume wraps me as tight as her frail arms. I lean back, but neither one of us lets go of the other. Her blue eyes shine bright against her pale skin, and her yellowing teeth still look perfect against the pink lipstick she always wears. The comfort of the familiarity she brings me causes the first crack in my defense system.

“You would know if you ever came to see an old lady, wouldn’t you?” She scolds me, but even though there’s not any anger in those words, there is hurt.

“I know.” Shame washes over me and the guilt I’ve been pretending I didn’t feel makes a sudden appearance.

Mrs. Rafter has lived in her little bungalow since 1969. Twenty years before I was even born. Her husband passed away and she wasn’t able to have kids. So, when my parents bought the house next door and—from the stories Mrs. Rafter told me—my mom took special care to not just be a friendly neighbor but to bring her in as part of our family, Mrs. Rafter didn’t hesitate. And I became the grandchild she never thought she’d have. We baked cookies together and watched old black-and-white movies together. She gave me money every time I brought home a good report card, and a serious lecture the one time I didn’t. And when we found out my dad was sick, she was there every Monday with a new casserole and a story about the crazy ladies from her knitting group at church.

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t go back.” I focus on the french fry on the floor that needs to be swept up, unable to look her in the eyes.

While the priest was speaking at my dad’s funeral, I made the decision to do everything I could to never feel pain like that again. And that included cutting off just about everybody from my past. The only reason Liv and Marie made the cut is because they are fucking stalkers and wouldn’t let me avoid them. Mrs. Rafter, on the other hand, doesn’t have the social media or Internet detective prowess to find me.

I’ve picked up my phone to call her so many times, but I could never go through with it. After the weeks went by, I regretted my decision, but it felt too late to go back. Part of me was afraid of the

pain hearing her voice would cause. But mainly, it was the fear that she would be mad at me for running away and wouldn't want to talk to me anymore. I couldn't deal with losing another person. At least not knowing kept the possibilities alive.

"Oh, you stop that right now." Her delicate touch lifting up my chin is in total contrast to the fire in her voice. A fire, I should add, that I've never heard from her before. "You don't apologize for protecting yourself. I know how much you loved your dad, how much he loved you. You know I talked to him not long before he passed. And the only thing he was worried about was leaving you. He knew you needed to sell the house, but he was worried you wouldn't. That'd you'd stay and all of the laughter buried in those walls would be washed away by sadness."

The tears I work so hard to keep locked away start to beat against the barriers I have in place and I know I'm not going to be able to fight them much longer.

"I miss him." I give life to the thought that runs through my head on an endless loop, but never dare say out loud. "I miss you. I miss the life from before. I don't know how to be around everything that I want back and still move on."

"Sweet girl." Her hand, covered in wrinkles that only point to the wisdom in the life she's lived, reaches up to wipe the tears I didn't even realize had fallen. "You will miss him for the rest of your life. We never move on, we just learn to not only live with the pain but to welcome it. Because it's all we have left of a love so great."

I hate that for her. I hate knowing how long she's been living with pain. But man am I grateful that it led her to me.

"Would you like to come see my place soon?" I sniffle and try to pull myself together. "I can make dinner and we can watch reruns of *Scandal*."

"Oh yes, you know how much I enjoy that Olivia Pope. Just don't try to make me eat any of that kale crap." She pats my hand and I know we're okay again. "I'm old. I don't need to worry about my figure anymore."

You make someone a kale salad one time! I swear.

"No kale, I promise."

She lifts her hand like she's about to wave when something catches her attention out of the corner of her eye. "Oh my, Elliot." Color rises in her cheeks and she pats the stark white hair curled on her head. "I didn't realize I was interrupting a date! Why didn't you tell me?" Reality punches me in the stomach and I feel like I might literally throw up when I realize that not only has Quinton arrived, but he's witnessed this deeply personal moment.

Anger, hurt, and embarrassment swirl through me as I watch Quinton slip his large form out of the booth like nothing happened. Like he didn't encroach on my privacy by listening to this conversation. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am." He extends a calloused hand to Mrs. Rafter, the epitome of a gentleman . . . and all I want to do is slap it away. "I'm Quinton."

"Oh, I know you!" She ignores his hand and claps hers together, drawing the attention of a couple at the table behind us. "You're that football fella! The one who's been causing all sorts of hubbub! Oh yes, I do love it. Tell those greedy old bastards where to stick it, won't you."

I gasp. "Mrs. Rafter!" I've never heard her call anyone out like that!

Quinton's deep laughter fills the room and causes Mrs. Rafter to blush . . . again.

"Thank you, ma'am," he says. "Actually, Elliot has been helping me set up my foundation. We're having a party next Tuesday and I would love for you to come if you're free. You can see all of the work she's put in. I couldn't have done it without her."

I want to object. I hate that Quinton knows my personal business at all, the last thing I want is him getting even more information . . . having a greater hold over me. But by the way Mrs. Rafter's eyes light up at the invitation, I can't say anything.

"Oh, well spoil an old lady, why don't you? I'd love that!" Mrs. Rafter pats him on the chest and her hand lingers just long enough that I know she's trying to see if he feels as hard beneath that T-shirt as he looks. "Who would've thought a trip to Stanley's would get me my girl back and an invitation to a party? Well, I'm going to head home, I don't want to use all this luck in one spot. Maybe I'll buy a lotto ticket on the way."

She leans in, giving me one more hug, and then shouts out her goodbyes to the rest of the patrons. I watch through the window as she

makes her way to her car, and I try to get ahold of the anger that feels like it's spinning out of control.

"Your Diet." The waitress places my soda on the table before turning her friendly gaze to Quinton. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"A water'd be great, thanks."

"Easy enough!" She smiles, putting her untouched notepad back in her pocket. "I'll be right back with that."

I'm still trying to rein in not only my thoughts, but my emotions as well, when she walks away. I grab my Coke and take a deep sip, wishing Stanley's had vodka.

We sit in the silence. Neither one of us seems to know what to say. I'm hoping this means he'll just pretend he didn't hear or see anything at all.

But I've never been particularly lucky.

"I'm really sorry about your dad. I had no idea." He's so quiet that I almost didn't hear it.

I wish I hadn't heard it.

"Of course you had no idea, why would you?" I keep my voice even, indifferent.

"I know, it's just . . ." He scrubs a hand over his head before leaning back in the booth—leaning back in my dad's spot in the booth. "It sucks, you know? I'm sorry you had to go through that. Life's not fair."

"You got that right." Humorless laughter I can't contain bubbles up from the ugliest part of my soul.

"I'm really sorry." A look I can't decipher crosses his face. It looks like he's having a battle in his head until he squares his jaw and leans forward, coming to a decision on whatever it was. He reaches his arm across the table and gently squeezes my hand.

Oh. Apparently he was deciding whether or not to initiate physical contact with me. Like I'd throw myself all over him at the slightest touch. And that's annoying, but not infuriating. No.

"I know," he says. "Losing a parent—"

That's infuriating. And it's all I let him say. Because is he fucking kidding me?

"You know?" I pull my hand back and let his fall flat against the table. "You know what it's like to watch your father, your only living

parent, slowly waste away until he's so sick, so tired of it all, that he quits treatment?"

"Well, I mean . . ." he stutters and pulls his hand back.

I don't wait for him to finish because I don't really want to hear what he has to say anyways.

"So you know what it's like to spend those months pretending everything is going to be fine, when in reality everything is on fucking fire? But instead, you let him think you're fine, and watch football games with him while you try to memorize each moment with him because you know pretty soon there won't be any more?"

I pause and raise my eyebrows to see if he has an answer yet. When I'm met with silence, I keep going.

"Then, it happens and he dies. So even though you feel like you're literally walking through hell and you want to do nothing except stay in bed and cry forever, you get up and work your ass off. And then you get it—the job of your dreams, working for your dad's favorite team. Only to be stuck with someone who insinuates that you don't deserve that job? You know what that's like?"

"No." He shakes his head, hardness set in his jaw. "I don't know what that's like."

"Of course you don't." I lean across the table, disdain dripping from each word. "Because you just think about yourself. You make these grandstanding gestures. You create this foundation. You make these impassioned statements all to say what you want to say and make everyone believe you have all the answers. Forget everything except what mighty, righteous Quinton has to say. You want to fight against racism and problems plaguing the League, but only if it's on your terms, right? God forbid anyone say anything you don't like. You've gotten everything you've wanted your entire life and that's not gonna stop now. Am I right?"

His expression is blank and those black eyes of his look soulless, not one ounce of remorse or regret shining through. "So I'm guessing we're going to skip lunch?" He pulls his keys out of his pocket and doesn't acknowledge anything I've said.

Which for some inexplicable reason pisses me off even more.

"Yeah," I snap. "I think we're finished here."

He doesn't say another word as he unfolds his large body from the small booth and walks out of the restaurant.

"That went fucking great." I say out loud before waving the waitress back over. "Cake. I need cake."

Eleven

The sound of my phone ringing wakes me up the following Sunday and a few things stand out.

I do have friends, and said friends do call me on occasion. However, they never call on a Sunday—they know how I am about Sundays during football season—and never before eight a.m. because that's just rude. The other thing that stands out is the ringtone. The obnoxious ringtone that I set for the obnoxious person on the other end of this call.

"Quinton?" I try my hardest to sound wide-awake, but fail nonetheless. I was up until almost four going over the final details for his event on Tuesday and writing up statements for the coaches and GM to use when they're undoubtedly questioned about Quinton after today's game. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"Because it's not even eight and we've never spoken on the phone, that's why."

"We've talked on the phone." He says the lie with so much confidence that even I doubt myself for a second. "We just talked last night."

I've been avoiding Quinton since our lunch from hell last weekend. It's actually been really easy. I've been so busy finalizing details and meeting with vendors for the launch party that we've only had time to communicate via text and email. At first, I was super thankful for this. I was pissed and wanted nothing to do with his stupid, but still handsome, face. But as the days have passed and my temper has cooled, I know I need to apologize for how I reacted. But because I can be an adult sometimes, I want to do it face-to-face.

“No we didn’t.” I fall back onto my pillow, wishing I was still asleep. I wonder if he can hear my eyes rolling from wherever he is. “We were texting, and texting is not talking on the phone.”

“We’ve communicated on the phone before. Is that better?”

If I weren’t so tired, I might be impressed that we’re managing to fight about this.

“Sure, fine. Tell me what you want or I’m hanging up.”

His deep sigh in my ear is a not-so-gentle reminder of my ability to grate on his nerves. “Dammit, Elliot. I was hoping this early you would at least be too tired to have an attitude.”

“There isn’t an hour of the day I wouldn’t be fully prepared to have one with you. I’m hanging up now.” I pull the phone away from my ear, fully intending on hanging up when his voice comes over the line.

“Fine! I just got off the phone with my agent,” he says like that should mean something to me.

“And you’re telling me this because?”

“You make everything so difficult.” He compliments me without realizing it. “He’s been trying to make it out here for the last couple of weeks and now that he’s here, he wants to talk with you before the launch. I was wondering if you could go to the game with him? He’ll pick you up so you can talk on the way. I share a box with Justin Lamar’s wife, but she’s cool and you guys will be able to have some privacy if you need it.”

Here’s the thing, even though I would like to make Quinton squirm and worry that I won’t get on board, he’s offering me box tickets! I would’ve said yes to driving myself and sitting in the nosebleed section. But no hassle *and* a box? With Lavonne freaking Lamar?! Hell. Fucking. Yes!

I don’t say that to him, though. He can never know that he’s unintentionally fulfilling one of my bucket list items.

“I mean, it’s kind of last minute, but I think that should be fine.” The cobwebs of sleep still in my voice hide the excitement.

Totally the epitome of cool. *Crushed it.*

“Alright, yeah. Okay. This will be fine. Yeah. It will be good.”

Now, I’m fully aware that I’m not an expert when it comes to Quinton Howard Junior, but the nerves and uncertainty as he speaks

are so unlike the smug jerk I'm used to being around, that even I know something is up.

"What's wrong with you?" I scoot up in my bed. There's not a chance in hell I'll be able to go back to sleep. "Why do you sound so weird?"

"Nothing. I don't sound weird." He says it so fast and loud I know I'm right. "It's just that, well, Donny can be a lot. And since I did the whole knee-and-tape thing, he's been even more . . . outspoken. I'd say he'll be on his best behavior, but I'm not sure he has a best behavior."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating." God. If he's giving me this warning about the guy he trusts with his career, I wonder what he's said about me? "He can't be that bad."

"If anything, I'm downplaying it." He mutters something else I don't quite catch. "Just . . . can you try to keep an eye on him? And promise you won't quit."

Wait. Is he anxious and kind of admitting that he needs my help? This might actually be serious.

"Or at least just wait until Wednesday to quit," he adds on.

Annnnnndddd there it is. He's fine.

"Stop acting like I'm not equipped to spend an afternoon with your agent. I'm not a child and like I've told you a million times, it's my job to handle people." Ugh. See? This is why I shouldn't be on the phone before coffee. I can't have people messing with my energy this early. "I'm hanging up for real this time. Bye."

I don't wait for him to say anything before I end the call, but I do hear something that sounds suspiciously like laughter before it disconnects.

I can't stand him.

—

THERE'S A KNOCK on my door three minutes after the time Quinton told me I should expect Donny to arrive.

Normally, I'm not one to be standing by the door and ready to go, but I'm going to sit in a box at the Mustangs game. I was standing at the door twenty minutes ago.

I open the door and am met face-to-face with who I can only assume is Donny. I'm five feet three inches and he's only got a few inches on me. He's wearing a suit that does nothing less than tell anyone who goes near him that he's a very important person. And even though it's a rare cloudy day in Colorado, he's still wearing black sunglasses.

"Hi." I extend my hand. "You must be Donny."

"Yeah." He returns my handshake and goes a tad bit overboard with the firm grip thing. "And you must be the broad that old bastard Mahler stuck on Q." He lets go of my hand and starts to walk away before calling over his shoulder, "Fuckin' move it, lady. I'm parked in a handicap spot and you live in fuckin' Kansas. I have to get in that box early. I don't play well with the general public and if the Lamar boys beat us, they'll eat all the good shit."

Okay . . .

So it looks like I might owe Quinton another apology. He definitely was not exaggerating when it came to Donny.

My condo is on the second floor of my building in Aurora—not Kansas. Thankfully I'm wearing flats, so I'm able to catch up to him faster than if I'd gone with the heels I was contemplating since this technically is a work event. When we reach his rental, he barely waits for me to close the door, let alone put on a seat belt before he's speeding out of the parking lot.

"So let's just get this shit out of the way. I'm not trying to chitchat and drag this bullshit out when I could be watching my boy play." He turns off the sports radio he was listening to, but doesn't so much as glance my way as he talks. "I don't trust that racist fucker Mahler as far as I can throw the bastard. So that means I don't trust you."

"Considering you don't know me, I wouldn't think you'd trust me." I dig my fingernails into my palms, hoping it will distract me from my rising temper. "But open hostility seems a little out of hand too."

"Oh, hostile is one of the nicest fuckin' words used to describe me," he says like I just offered him a heartfelt compliment. "Q told me you've been helping him with his foundation, but I want you to know what I told him. I told him not to stand unless the entire fucking stadium is on fire. And even then, he better stay on a knee until the damn turf is melted to those tight-ass pants and the only thing he can

smell is the charred old boy's club this league has been clinging on to for the last three decades."

Whoa.

That was . . . descriptive . . . and unexpected. Yeah, def owe Quinton an apology. After I yell at him for telling me to get into a confined space with this lunatic, that is.

"My only job is to help Quinton make his point. If, by making these off-the-field accomplishments, he feels like he can stand on the field again? Well, that's up to him. I've never insinuated otherwise and quite frankly, *Donny*, fuck you for implying I would and that I'm just here to do Mr. Mahler's bidding." Alright, so maybe I am just here to do Mr. Mahler's bidding, but I can't tell Donny that. I really do want to help Quinton; I can't have them thinking I'm the bad guy here.

Silence fills the midsize sedan before Donny's—unsurprisingly loud—laugh takes over.

"Well, hell!" He finally takes off his sunglasses and looks at me. "I might like you after all."

"Lucky me." I deadpan before moving my attention to the moving cars outside my window.

"Yeah, lucky you." He focuses back on the road. "I don't know what Q told you about me. It's my job to make sure my clients are covered. And unlike some of the fuckin' hacks out here doing this job, I actually really do care about all of my clients. All the guys I represent are stand-up guys, but Q? I've known him since he was a kid. He's on another fuckin' level and he's got enough shit goin' on in his life. I'm not going to let the fuckin' Mustangs ruin his career."

"So what you're saying is that you think I'm out to ruin his career?" What has Quinton told this man about what we are working on to give him these outlandish ideas about me?

"Never said that, babe."

Babe? Is this guy serious?

"Call me babe one more time and I will jump straight out of this car, Donny. Swear to god, don't test me."

He raises a hand in surrender. "Right, sorry."

"Thank you." I'm honestly shocked he knows how to apologize, so I focus back on the topic at hand before he revokes it. "Why do you seem to think I'm intent on bringing Quinton down? Has he told you he's

unhappy with the direction his foundation is going or the community outreach I've been working on? Or that any of the press I've set up for him has been counterproductive?" There was a local host who was a bit of a jerk, but Quinton handled it perfectly.

I want to be annoyed that I'm asking these questions, but then I think back to my outburst in the restaurant and fight it back. We haven't exactly earned each other's trust yet.

"No," Donny says. "He said you're good at your job and that he's really happy with the direction everything is going behind the scenes. What I think you're missing here is that nobody is accusing you of being a shit fuckin' human. What I *am* saying, though, is you work for one."

"I mean, sure, Mr. Mahler probably doesn't deserve the Nobel Prize"—and he is threatening to fire me over someone else's actions—"but that seems a little extreme."

"You know football?" he asks out of nowhere.

"No, I just chose to work for a professional team for shits and giggles. Do you know football?"

"She's a smart-ass too. What's with Colorado?" he says to himself . . . or the people in his head. Who knows with this guy?

"Anyways. What do you know Quinton for?"

"For stepping up when the quarterback got hurt, clinching the starting position for himself, and then leading Atlanta to their first ever championship." You don't even have to know football to know that.

"Exactly. 'Cause Q is a quarterback. Everything about that man is leadership, quick thinking, and the best fuckin' throwing arm I've ever seen, and Gavin Pope is one of my clients, so that's saying something."

Considering Gavin Pope was my fantasy pick every year until last year when I swapped him for Quinton, I cannot disagree.

"Okay." He's piqued my interest. "What's your point?"

He glances over his shoulder before changing lanes. "My point, dear naive one, is that after the general manager reached out about possibly getting Quinton in orange and blue, we had to table the negotiations because Mahler said he'd only want him if he'd make the switch to wide receiver or running back."

“What?” My head jerks back and bounces off the headrest. “Why would he want to put him at wide receiver? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Mahler said that players like him are better at speed than quick-thinking, high-pressure situations.”

My eyebrows knit together and I couldn’t hide my confusion even if I tried. “Players like him? What does that even mean?”

Donny’s mouth falls open and he takes his eyes off the road for about two seconds too long before he snaps out of it and focuses on driving. “You’re fuckin’ with me, right?”

“No.” I shake my head, genuinely confused. “I really don’t understand why Mr. Mahler would’ve wanted him at wide receiver. Especially after all of his success at quarterback.”

His knuckles go white around the steering wheel. “Because he’s a fucking racist, that’s why.”

“Oookay.” I shake my head and roll my eyes. “I could see how it makes Mahler look incompetent at his job, but racist? I feel like that’s pushing it.”

“Fucking hell. Q told me you were a little wet behind the ears but this is fucking unbelievable.” He takes a hand off the steering wheel and undoes the top button of his shirt. “It’s some old-school, racist bullshit that Black athletes can’t be quarterbacks because they aren’t smart enough. That all they’re good for is hitting people and running fast.”

I purse my lips, trying to come up with another explanation, but I can’t think of anything. “Not everything is racist.”

“Yeah, not everything is racist, but this is.” A vein on Donny’s head I didn’t notice before is all of a sudden very pronounced. “I don’t get it, aren’t you Black?”

“I’m biracial.” I don’t mean to snap, but I hate this conversation.

I’m fully aware that I didn’t inherit my dad’s blue eyes or freckled skin and that I look like my mom instead. Something my dad thanked god for all the time, never missing an opportunity to tell me how beautiful he thought I was. With my full lips, espresso eyes, and wide nostrils, I know I don’t look like what most people see as “mixed.” So when people make the assumption that I’m Black, they aren’t wrong, but they aren’t right either.

I know they don't mean any harm, but what those people don't see is a lifetime of feeling like I was just on the outside of everything. Always wanting to feel accepted, but never feeling like the world ever truly would. Always being made to feel like I had to pick one side over the other, but at the same time, being forced to pick the side that I resembled . . . not the side who actually raised me, the side that for some reason nobody can understand me connecting to.

"You know what?" Donny reaches over and turns back on the sports radio he was listening to. "As a person with some real fucked-up issues, I can recognize them pretty easily in other people. And if I know one thing, your problems aren't with me . . . or even Q."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do," he says. "I just hope that you can put aside whatever issues are fuckin' with your head and start seeing Q for the man he is, not the man you think you're supposed to see."

I don't respond to that. I can't.

And thankfully for the throbbing starting to creep into my brain, Donny drops it.

All I know is this box better be the fanciest fucking box on the planet to make today worth it.

Twelve

The box is everything I expected and so much more.

The walls are covered with TVs showing the pregame shows from not only the Mustangs but all the other games from around the League preparing to start. The front of the box has a glass wall with a glass door seamlessly built in that blocks out the noise from the stadium. But as soon as you open that door and take a seat in one of the many chairs, you are right in the mix with a perfect view of the field. Then on top of all that, there's a buffet table stocked with my favorite foods and a bar with three different kinds of whiskey.

It's literally a dream come true.

"Why the fuck isn't Brynn here?" Donny grumbles as he struggles to pick which alcohol he wants.

I have to admit, out of all the ridiculous First World problems I've ever encountered, having to pour your own free booze in a private (also free) box might be at the top of the list.

"Oh my god." I pull the glass out of his hand and nudge him out of the way after he picks up then puts down the fifth bottle. I scoop some ice into the glass, pour in some Jameson, and top it off with ginger ale. "Take it."

"Jame-O and ginger?" He gives the drink an approving nod before opening the glass door and picking his seat.

I almost scold him for not saying thank you. However, in my short time knowing Donny, I get the distinct feeling he's physically incapable of not arguing back. So instead, I bite back the sarcastic remark on the tip of my tongue and appreciate the quiet now that he's gone.

I breathe in the stillness and pour myself a Jameson and ginger as well. Just like my dad used to make us on game day before he got sick.

He was definitely more of a nosebleeds type guy, but he would've gotten such a kick out of this. I close my eyes and raise my glass into the air, hoping he's somewhere doing the same.

I take a deep sip and open my eyes just in time to see three boys barreling through the door and aiming straight for the food.

I'm guessing these are the Lamar boys and I'm also guessing that Donny wasn't too far off about them eating all the food.

"Jagger, Jett, Jax, you better not act a fool today." A booming voice I instantly recognize as Lavonne Lamar's enters the room before she does. "And before you even think it, I don't care what Donny says, you know I don't listen to one word out of his fool mouth."

And I'm in love.

I love Lavonne Lamar.

"I think you meant foul mouth," Donny yells from his seat outside of the box.

"I said what I said, Donny! I don't have time for any of your nonsense today."

Okay.

So I was wrong.

Now I love her.

If only she rode in the car with us, my day would be going so much smoother.

Lavonne finally strides into the room, making her grand entrance one thigh-high boot in front of the other and—It. Is. Glorious!

Whereas two of her boys are wearing matching Lamar jerseys like probably thousands of other people in the stadium and the tallest—and I'm guessing oldest—boy is in a hoodie and basketball shorts, she is decked out to the nines. The red soles peek out from the inside of her heels as she walks, signaling that she's wearing my mortgage payment on her feet. Like her oldest, she's also wearing a hoodie. But instead of a Nike logo spread across her chest, there is a massive crystal-encrusted crest with a football in one corner, her husband's number in another, the Mustangs logo in one, and a cursive L in the last.

The sparkle from it almost competes with the sparkle coming from the giant diamond on her ring finger. And even the clear plastic purse she's carrying somehow looks designer.

There's a new rule that says you aren't allowed to bring a purse or backpack into the stadium unless it's a clear bag. Not even diaper bags are permitted. I think it's the stupidest f'ing rule ever.

All I know is it's supposed to be for "security" but seems to mainly affect women, even though we aren't the ones typically committing the crimes they're trying to prevent. If they're so worried about safety, maybe they should donate a couple of those millions they throw around to places that help domestic violence victims. I mean, I'm pretty sure one thing most people who commit mass murder have in common is a history of violence against women . . .

But I digress.

That is a good idea, though. I reach into my back pocket to grab my phone so I can make a note to remind myself to bring it up to Quinton later when I hear my name yelled.

"Elliot!" Brynn crosses the box, her model-long legs making quick work of the short distance separating us. "If I had known you were coming, I would've picked you up."

Lavonne clears her throat and gives Brynn the most wicked side-eye that I've ever personally witnessed outside of housewife GIFs.

"Fine. Vonnie would've picked you up." Brynn waves a dismissive hand through the air. "The point still stands, though, we could've come together."

Being that I don't know Lavonne or her children—and still don't—that could've been awkward. Not more awkward than my time with Donny, but awkward nonetheless.

"It's fine." I shrug my shoulders and take a quick sip of my drink. "It was a really last-minute thing and Donny gave me a ride."

Thank goodness they hadn't gotten drinks yet. They both look so shocked that I'm pretty sure if they had, I'd be doused in alcohol right now.

"Donny who?" Lavonne asks.

Because I don't know her, I'm not sure if that's a rhetorical question or not, but I decide to answer just in case it's not. I point toward the seat where Donny is now tapping away on his phone.

"What the hell girl!" She swivels to Brynn. "I thought you said they were into each other?"

“I thought they were!” Brynn takes a step back before narrowing her gaze my way. “I thought you were!”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” I hold my hands up in surrender because I really have no idea what they’re talking about. “You thought I was what?”

“Into Quinton, duh. Keep up.” Brynn rolls her eyes and if they weren’t so pretty, I’d hope they got stuck back there. “You said you two were getting along.”

My head snaps back. “I did not. I said he wasn’t being as big of a jerk.”

I also didn’t tell her that we haven’t really been talking because I was the rude one this time.

“Same thing.” They both say in unison.

I wonder if this box is actually a portal to another dimension or something, because this can’t be real life.

“But if he likes her, there’s no way he would just stick her in a car with Donny’s crazy ass.” Lavonne’s voice is beautiful and bold and loud.

So Donny hears exactly what she says.

“I’m a motherfucking delight, Lamar!” he shouts from the other side of the glass. “The sooner you accept that, the sooner your life changes for the fuckin’ better.”

“Children!” she scolds him and points a manicured finger at her boys. “Remember what I said when we walked in here, I don’t want to hear anything Donny says coming out of your mouths or you’ll be grounded for a month.”

“I’ll give you each two hundred bucks if you tell your mom to shove it.” Still not moving from his seat, Donny waves two hundred-dollar bills over his head.

Now, to the immense credit of Lavonne and her parenting skills, two of her boys shake their heads no and walk away immediately. The other one—the smallest one—however, looks like he is seriously considering it.

“Jax, I wish you would. It’s been too long since I put the fear of god in someone and I’ve been waiting for a reason to do it,” Lavonne warns and even I get scared.

Please don’t do it, Jax. Please don’t do it!

And like he heard my silent prayer, or most likely, the truth in the words his mom spoke, Jax says, “No thanks, Mr. Donny,” before joining his brothers as they attack the gummy bears on the table.

“I know you’re their mom and can’t pick favorites, but Jax is totally mine.” Brynn ignores the death stare Lavonne is trying to shoot through her skull. “That kid’s gonna rule the world.”

“He’ll rule something, alright. Maybe if football wasn’t still taking over their dad’s life, he’d be around to help more. But nope! Gotta love men and their priorities, am I right?” Lavonne exhales as if her life has fully and completely exhausted her. She’s smiling and I think I’m supposed to believe that she’s joking. When I glance at Brynn, there’s a look of concern on her face too.

“Anyway, I’m so rude.” Lavonne reaches out her hand to me, successfully diverting Brynn from calling her out in front of me and diving into her possible marital problems. “Brynn told me about you and all the work you’ve been doing for Q, and I feel like I already know you, but I don’t! I’m Vonnie, so nice to finally meet you, Elliot . . . even if it’s after you saw me nearly have to end one of my children.”

Ohmygod! Lavonne Lamar just told me to call her Vonnie. A nickname! Nicknames mean we’re friends. Vonnie is my new best friend. That’s just how it works, I don’t make the rules.

“It was honestly the highlight of my day so far,” I tell her truthfully. “And you can call me Elle.”

—

LIKE FOR REAL now, I think Vonnie and Brynn might actually be my friends. I don’t know how I will break the news to Marie and Liv that they’ve been replaced, but if they really love me, they’ll understand.

We’re sitting in the seats in front of Donny and I’m picking at the chicken finger I’m too full to eat, but want anyways, when Jack’s voice comes over the speaker and the audience comes alive.

Unlike the peons in the rest of the stadium, I have no need to stand. Instead I lean back into my seat—with cushion, not the plastic junk like everyone else has—like the overlord I am.

Holy shit.

It's in this moment that I know this should be my last game in a box, if I ever even have the opportunity again. Clearly, it has all gone to my head very quickly.

"Denver Colorado! Get on your feet!" The instruction seems redundant, given that everybody—except for me, obvi—is already standing, but go off I guess, Jack. "Make some noise, Denver!"

It's week five of the season and the Mustangs are currently 4–0. And while yes, football is a team sport, a large portion of the credit is due to Quinton. Much to the dismay of his critics, who believe that his actions will distract from his—and his teammates'—performance, he's on track to set a new record for the most touchdown passes thrown by a quarterback in a season.

The commotion is finally enough to pull Vonnie's boys from the food, and they skip the steps until they're at the front of the box.

The cheers explode as fire shoots from the sides of the tunnel and a real mustang runs onto the field being ridden by a woman in a full-on cowgirl outfit waving a huge Mustangs flag. The cheerleaders sprint onto the field, rubbing their pom-poms together as they split into two separate lines, a human extension of the tunnel.

"Here they come!" Jack's voice, mixed with the screams and clapping, causes the floor beneath my feet to rattle. "YOUR DENVER MUSTANGS!"

A stampede of blue and orange bursts from the tunnel as players jump, sprint, or jog onto the field. They all raise their hands in the air, feeding the crowd, fueling up off of our energy.

"Look!" Jett points to the field before he starts waving. "There's Dad!"

"And there's Mr. Maxwell!" Jax shouts out.

The Lamar boys go crazy whooping and clapping up a storm and it's not long until Brynn is standing next to them, blowing outrageous kisses to Maxwell. I look over to Vonnie, expecting her to be doing some version of the same, but instead, she's doing the opposite. She's not even looking at the field. Her focus is on her phone, like she's looking at the most interesting thing ever. But since I tried with no avail to check my emails earlier, I know there's no service here. In the back of my head, I know I should look away. Leave her be. I mean, I don't even know her.

Her shoulders that were held back, in line with her perfect posture, are slumped down and the grip she has on her phone is so tight that her hand is shaking. Her legs are crossed and her Louboutin-booted feet won't stop bouncing. Everything about her says this is the last place she wants to be right now. But it's when I notice the glassy sheen of her perfectly lined eyes, that my heart breaks a little for her.

I look away as fast as I can and pretend I don't notice anything when I see her wipe away a tear out of the corner of her eye.

It's not long until the Lamar boys are calming down and Jack's voice comes over the speaker again. The JumboTrons light up as the starting offense's pictures flash on screen as they are announced one by one.

Unexpected knots fill my stomach as I wait with bated breath for Quinton to come out.

I haven't been to a game since he first made his stand and this part of the game is never televised. Sure, I've found clips on YouTube, but this is the first time I'll witness it in person since the confusion has cleared and fans have started picking their sides.

When his name finally shows up on the screen, it's like my body can't help but react. I stand automatically, taking in the crowd around me. Listening as the boos blend together with the cheers. Knowing what I know now about Quinton's intentions and the mission at the heart of this, I feel an elevated sense of pride watching him now. And while I know that it's controversial for some, I hope that once people learn what he's actually fighting for, the boos will disappear. And maybe then people will worry less about where he's protesting and more about the reason he's doing it in the first place.

That wishful thinking is lost when I'm snapped back to reality by Donny's unmistakable voice shouting from the front of the box as Quinton slowly and precisely covers the League's logo with black tape. "Hell yeah, Q! Don't ever fuckin' stop what you're doing!" Then, I guess somebody from somewhere says something to him, because his attention moves from the field and he yells, "Yeah? How about fuck you too, motherfucker? How about you say something when you've done something with your pitiful fuckin' life, fuckin' scumbag!"

And just like that, I slide back into PR mode.

“Whoa there.” I grab Donny by the sleeve and pull him up the steps. “I think Quinton has the bad press thing down without any help from you.”

While babysitting Donny isn’t exactly my dream job, at least the booze is free and he’s sure to keep me entertained. Today definitely could’ve been worse.

Thirteen

The day of the launch is pure pandemonium.

Between the vendors coming in and out all day, helping with setup, and Brynn forcing me to give my opinion on the signature cocktails she came up with, I've hardly even had time to go to the bathroom. My feet already hurt, I'm jittery from a caffeine overload, and my back is tighter than it's ever been. And I'm loving every freaking second of it all.

Hannah and her crew are still putting up the balloons and someone else is stringing white lights across the ceiling. They aren't even close to being finished.

The caterer is setting up stations all around the room so the crowds will have access to food no matter where they are. Brynn's finishing up arranging her bar while Paisley is creating a chalkboard menu that is basically art.

Everything is coming together beautifully, but there's still one giant dark cloud looming over everything.

Quinton.

I was hoping I'd have a chance to apologize to him face-to-face after Sunday's game. But when the Mustangs were up by over 20 in the fourth quarter and Vonnie offered me a ride home early, I couldn't refuse.

It wasn't at all because I chickened out and was looking for a hasty exit.

Nope, not at all.

Now I just have to hope I can avoid him until after the event and when I do finally see him, he'll be so thankful for how amazing it was that he won't have any other option but to forgive me.

“Can I help you with anything?” I ask Hannah, not because I don’t have a hundred other things to do, but because I’m obsessed with the balloon sculptures she creates and I want to learn from the master.

“Sure! We need to move these toward the entry.” She always sounds as if she’s just finished drinking espresso shots, giddy and energetic. But I guess that’s just what happy people sound like? Weird.

She stands up from behind the balloon structure. It’s so massive that her legs physically cannot just climb over the balloons to get to me, she has to walk around it instead.

She’s walking toward me, pointing a bright pink fingernail near where I’m standing. “See that gold balloon? You should be able to feel some string beneath it—just grab that and lift.”

I lean in, wincing as I go, so afraid that I’m going to pop a balloon and ruin this magnificent creation.

“Don’t worry, I’ve never popped a balloon doing the transfer,” Hannah says. She must have seen the look of terror on my face. “It will be fine.”

I want to believe her, but she must not be aware of my aptitude to fuck shit up.

“I think she’s just worried it will be too heavy for her,” a deep voice says from over my shoulder.

Because why would my hope for Quinton staying away until after the event happen? Oh, that’s right, because that’s how my life always works!

But at least he’s joking? I mean, it is at my expense, but it’s a joke and I feel like that means he doesn’t hate me still?

“Hardy har har.” I look at Hannah, who is suddenly sporting very rosy cheeks, and roll my eyes. “He thinks he’s a comedian, don’t mind him.”

He looks like he’s about to grab some balloons too when Brynn calls him over. “Howard!” she shouts across the room. “Get your ass over here and come have one of these lame-ass vodka drinks you made me make.”

I guess Brynn likes to get extra creative when she does a gig outside of HERS and wanted to explore her creativity during this event. So, when she invited Quinton over to her and Maxwell’s house for dinner and a cocktail tasting (something I was HIGHLY upset not to be

included in) and he told her he thought they'd just have wine and maybe a vodka tonic (his drink of choice apparently), she did not handle it well. I feel like she's already super creative at HERS. But when she was telling me the story, she seemed super annoyed and I didn't want to get yelled at, so I kept my opinion to myself.

This resulted in her forcing me to sample cocktails too, because much to Maxwell's dismay, she decided to ignore Quinton and do what she wanted. Which is why she told me she'd be handing him a cocktail when he came in and breaking the news to him that way. Wasted effort because I'm ninety-nine percent sure he doesn't care one way or another.

"Do you boss Maxwell around like this? Or am I just special?" he yells back before dropping his backpack by my feet and heading her way.

"Oh, trust me, Maxwell loves it when I boss him around," she says loud and proud and for everyone around us to hear.

"Oh my god," Hannah—poor, sweet, innocent Hannah—gasps from beside me, her cheeks no longer rosy and instead fire-engine red as Quinton's deep laughter fades away as he crosses the room.

I'm holding the string like she instructed, but I'm still afraid it's going to pop in my hand. "Sorry about that, not the most professional setting," I apologize in hopes of getting her moving.

"Right!" She claps, no doubt still trying to erase the last five minutes from her memory. "Let's get working."

Carefully, Hannah and I weave through the different vendors walking around and setting up. By the time we make it to the front, my nerves are tattered and dribblets of sweat I've been too afraid to swipe are trickling down the back of my neck, but no balloons have popped. Also, it has diverted me fully from any future career switch to anything revolving around balloons. So, wins all around!

"Thanks for your help." Hannah—who I'm pretty sure is *not* thankful for my help, and is just relieved that my anxiety will no longer be rubbing off on her—waves me off as her assistant takes my place beneath the balloons.

I turn to take everything in and see that the tablecloths are now being laid on the tables. Wanting it to feel more like a cocktail party than a formal event, but still wanting to give guests a place to sit, we

decided on having smaller tables scattered throughout the room with no seating arrangement. It was the best compromise we could come up with and we're hoping that it invites an atmosphere of community and getting to know one another.

I head in the direction of the acrylic chairs that are stacked in the corner to start placing them around the tables when I see Quinton headed my way with his eyes directly on me.

Well crap.

I guess there's no way to avoid this conversation any longer.

"Hey." My awkward wave reveals the killer butterflies attacking my nervous system. "Wanna come talk with me real fast?"

He nods without answering and follows me as I make my way to Jen's office. She told me to take it over if I needed any privacy and while I thought I wouldn't, it's coming in handy now.

I hold the door open for him, turning the lock as soon as he's in the room. The last thing I need is another person hearing all of my business.

"The way I behaved at Stanley's was unacceptable." I opt out of small talk and dive right in. I keep my eyes on him, even though the urge to inspect Jen's ceiling instead is really calling me. "I'm not sure if you've noticed this about me yet, but sometimes I overreact to things. You caught me in a very raw, very private moment. I don't like people seeing me like that, especially someone I work with. I took my hurt out on you and I'm sorry."

His eyes widen just a fraction. I'm sure he never thought I would dole out an apology. But I'm an adult, so I own my mistakes . . . occasionally.

"Um, thank you." He drags his fingers through his thick beard and lets out a deep sigh. Which—inappropriately—makes me want to reach out and touch it as well. As bumpy as our time has been together, I still can't pretend like he doesn't affect me. He's infuriating, but he's passionate and so flipping pretty it hurts my eyes. "I wanted to apologize to you too."

My hair slaps me in the face with how hard my head jerks back. "Apologize to me for what?"

"Donny." He says the name like it should explain everything. And it does.

“Oh.” I wave off his apology. “No need.”

By the end of the day I couldn't help but like Donny. He's nuts and probably needs intense therapy, but honestly? Same.

Plus, he really does seem to care about Quinton and it was almost endearing.

But, instead of looking relieved that we're good, he looks more nervous. He shoves his hands in his pockets and starts to inspect the floors, which are very nice, but not at all interesting. “And I'm sorry for inviting Mrs. Rafter tonight.”

Oh yeah. That.

That was pretty fucked up, but like, in the kindest of ways. And knowing how much he's coughing up per person for this event, it was really nice of him. But it did upset me and I've had a really hard time putting words to my feelings about it.

“It's okay, she's really excited to come tonight.” And she is, which is another reason I felt so shitty about my reaction.

“It's really not okay, though,” he says. “I told you how upset I would be if you went behind my back to talk to my family and then I did the same thing. That wasn't my place. More than anything, I understand wanting to keep your personal life personal. I should've talked to you before I overstepped.”

My mouth falls open, but no words come out.

Because Quinton, of all people, is the only person who seems to understand how I was feeling and put words to it.

And that's something I can't even begin to process right now, but I can accept it.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.” I hold my hand out toward him, feeling like an understanding has finally been reached between us. Hope and excitement bloom at the difference we can make now that we're on the same page. “Now, are you ready to have the best launch party ever?”

His strong grip shakes my hand and the sparks that were there the first time we touched come racing back. The warmth from his touch winds around me and my insides go soft. His eyes crease at the corners as a genuine smile lights up his face and for a split second I hope he's feeling what I am. “I've never been more ready for anything.”

“Good.” I drop his hand, not letting my mind go there, making myself remember his words about me not being his type. I open the door and shove him out of it. “Now go home and get ready, I want the finished product to be a surprise.”

Fourteen

Forget anything I've ever said about balloons. They are a terrible idea and now I see why parents always seem about two seconds from losing their shit when they're around.

As the who's who of Denver start filtering in, filling the Rue with their expertly coiffed hair and thousand-dollar shoes, visions of balloons popping and causing mass hysteria resulting in a stampede flood my mind.

However, for the less paranoid attendees, they seem rather impressed by the decorations and the way the event has turned out.

"You planned this?" Mrs. Rafter looks around in awe, taking in everything with a cocktail in one hand and a plate of appetizers in the other. "I knew you were creative, but I had no idea you could do all of this."

"Well, it's less creative and more able to hire a lot of really creative people." Even though I have a hard time accepting her compliment, that doesn't mean I don't enjoy hearing it. And coming from the woman I've known my entire life, it means even more. I wish my dad could be here.

I give Quinton a thumbs-up, seeing if he needs anything when I spot him across the room. Not that he's easy to miss—and not just because of the constant buzz that has been following him around. Always in the middle of a group, it's like I hired a spotlight to follow him around all night. I swear, he's glowing—pride even evident in his long strides.

When he first walked in for the grand reveal, I thought he was going to cry. Tears are always my goal. I love nothing more than making someone so happy that they can't help but cry. Unfortunately for me, Quinton held it together. Also unlucky for me? The fact that he

has never looked more handsome in his entire life, of this I am sure. And this is coming from a person who doesn't even really like him.

He's wearing a velvet fucking suit, for god's sake! He should look ridiculous. Who gave him permission to be this hot at an event for charity?

All of this is terrible for me in a lot of ways, but especially for two big reasons. One, I don't want to have to acknowledge his hotness. I work really hard not to think about it every time I'm around him. It's super rude for him to thrust it in my face after he's apologized and I don't hate him as much. Two, if he's looking this good, it takes away from all of the work I did around him. He was born good-looking, I worked really hard to make this come together.

Mrs. Rafter follows my gaze, watching as Quinton excuses himself from a guest I recognize as the sports reporter and news anchor from 9 News. "That is one handsome fella you got there." She takes a sip of the manhattan that Paisley made just for her. "Your dad would definitely approve."

I laugh because the thought of Quinton being "my fella" almost makes me need to get a drink of my own. "He's not my boyfriend, he's not even a friend," I correct her. "I'm just working for him. He's basically my boss."

"Is that why he invited me to this fancy thing?" She keeps her eyes focused on him as he shakes hands with guests but never stops heading our way. "Plus"—she finally moves her attention to me—"I saw some bosses look at their employees back in the day, but I think that'd get him sued these days."

I open my mouth to tell her all of the mortifying details of our first meeting, when he put it in no uncertain terms that he was not interested, but he beats me to her.

"Mrs. Rafter!" He pulls her into his arms, wrapping her in a giant hug. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Thank you for inviting me. The ladies in my knitting group were spitting nails, they were so jealous." She looks up at him, not letting him go. "But I told them my granddaughter planned it, so her boyfriend was obligated to invite me!"

My face goes cold. Which is I guess what happens when all the blood drains from it.

The last thing I need is Quinton thinking I'm going around telling people he's my boyfriend. This is like that nightmare when you're naked in front of everyone.

Except worse.

And real.

I'm staring at Mrs. Rafter with eyes so wide that it hurts and shaking my head no, hoping she'll catch what I'm throwing. But instead, she just looks at me and waves me off.

"Oh, stop it, dear," she says to me before patting Quinton's arm. "You're beautiful and talented, he's a smart man. He knows what a catch you are. He's lucky to have you."

"Oh my god," I groan, wishing I could hide behind my hands, but knowing I have on way too much makeup for that. "I'm so sorry," I mouth to Quinton, who looks way too entertained by all of this.

Or you know what? Maybe I'm not sorry. Quinton could at least have enough grace to look like he's not enjoying this so much. But instead his smile grows with every word out of Mrs. Rafter's mouth and his body is shaking with pent-up laughter. The jerk.

"You're lucky to have Elliot? I thought she fuckin' hated you!" Donny moves in between us and stands by Quinton. Supporting my hypothesis that whenever I think things can't get any worse, they actually can.

I close my eyes and throw my head back. "Somebody kill me now."

"Of course he's lucky to have her, just look at her!" Mrs. Rafter gestures at me like I'm a prize on *The Price is Right*, before motioning to the rest of the room. "Look at what she did here. She's a catch, this one—I've known it her whole life."

I decide if there's ever a time to break my no-drinking-during-an-event rule, it's right now. "I'm going to go check on the bar, you know . . . make sure they're fully stocked and whatever."

"Oh good." Mrs. Rafter hands me her empty glass. "Do get me another one, won't you, dear?"

"Of course." I probably have a million things to do right now, but I can't say no to Mrs. Rafter . . . even after she's embarrassed me.

"And I'll take you to your seat," Quinton says.

She frowns, her eyebrows furrowing together. "I thought it was just open seating?"

“It is,” he confirms before leaning closer to her ear, “but I have a special VIP table for a select few, and of course you’re one of them.”

The empty glass nearly slips from my hands as my jaw falls to the floor. He does have a VIP table, just one, and not even Mr. Mahler is sitting there. But now, Mrs. Rafter is.

Shit. I might cry.

He offers her his arm and she slips hers through it without hesitating before he starts guiding her through the crowd. I’m frozen to the spot, watching them as they go, and he waves off some huge potential donors in order to give Mrs. Rafter his full, undivided attention. And the look on her face? Her smile being the sole focus of his? She is gleaming.

Yup.

I’m totally going to cry.

“Still think he’s a fuckboy?” Donny elbows me in the ribs. While he does ruin the moment, at least he saves my makeup.

I aim my sweetest smile his way and pat his shoulder. “Not as big as you.” Then I walk away, pretending I don’t hear his obnoxious laughter as I go.

When I get to the bar, I’m hoping to get in Paisley’s line because, well, she doesn’t ask me questions. But of course, as luck would have it, a group just ordered a round of shots and she’s busy tending to their needs. I cross my fingers they get so drunk that they forget how much money they donate tonight.

“This is amazing! I can’t believe you put all of this together. I’m totally calling you for the next event we have at HERS,” Brynn says as soon as she sees me.

“Thank you.” I look around for the millionth time, taking everything in. “I did do a pretty good job, didn’t I?”

“Fucking killed it!” She hands me a shot that I should not, but do, take.

I cringe as the familiar burn warms my chest. “Tequila?”

“The only shot I’ll make. If you want something fancy, join everyone else.” She points at the long line building in front of Paisley before leaning across the bar and crooking her finger. “Hey! Before I forget to ask, how was Vonnie when she was driving you home?”

Something has been off with her lately. She thinks she's good at covering it up, but she's not and I'm getting worried."

"She seemed okay? Even though . . ." I think about the tears I saw her shed before the game. I don't know if I should tell Brynn or not. It seemed like a deeply personal moment for her and I'm not sure if it's my place to say anything. Even to a well-meaning friend. "She did seem a little upset before the game."

"Yeah." She nods. "I noticed that too. Just do me a favor and keep an eye on her if you're around her again."

I doubt that will happen as yesterday was a one-time thing, but I agree anyways. "Yeah, of course."

"Now that that's out of the way"—she points a finger across the room—"who's that with Q? She must be coming out of pocket a lot for that level of attention."

I follow her line of sight and see that Quinton is now sitting beside Mrs. Rafter, throwing his head back in laughter at something she said. Probably the story about the time I stole her bra and tried to wear it to the playground or some other mortifying childhood tale.

"Oh no," I tell her. "That's just Mrs. Rafter."

Instead of her curiosity diminishing like I assumed it would knowing that Mrs. Rafter isn't some eccentric millionaire with a hoard of cats, she somehow looks more curious.

She plops both elbows on the bar top. "Who's Mrs. Rafter?"

I start to think Brynn might possess some secret, superhero-level ability to sniff out gossip.

"She's my neighbor," I say before realizing that she isn't my neighbor anymore. "Was—she was my neighbor before I moved," I correct myself and still, with every word out of my mouth, Brynn's interest seems to grow and grow some more.

"How random," she says in a way that says she doesn't think it's actually random at all. "How does he know your ex-neighbor?"

"Umm . . ." How the eff am I supposed to navigate this landmine? "We ran into her while we were having a business lunch."

I scoot to the side when someone comes behind me and try not to snort-laugh at the face Brynn makes when they order a vodka tonic.

She squeezes lime wedges into the cocktail and slides it over to them with a grimace on her face that I *think* is supposed to be a smile

before turning her attention back on me.

“Okay, so where were we? Oh! That’s right! We were talking about Q inviting your ex-neighbor to an event that’s costing more per head than some of the nicest weddings I’ve been to.” She rests her chin in her palms, smugness dripping off her like the condensation of the cocktails she’s been serving. “But I thought you hate each other.”

“Listen, you don’t even want to know all of the details behind him asking her, but let’s just say I wasn’t happy and he has since apologized.”

“Oh, you are so wrong about that. I always want details.” She stands up straight and looks over my shoulder. “And if you didn’t have an incoming visitor, I’d want them now. But I can be patient . . . well, patient-ish.”

I brace and turn around, thinking Donny has come back to torture me again, but instead I’m met with the skeptical smile of Mr. Mahler and the swirling smoke of his wife’s cigarette in a long cigarette holder.

And as that sick feeling I had walking to Mr. Mahler’s office five weeks ago returns, I realize that I would much rather talk to Donny.

I guess there really is a first for everything.

Fifteen

"There you are!" Mr. Mahler's cigar-rasped voice calls out over the music.

"Mr. Mahler." I paste on my prettiest smile and extend my hand as he gets closer. "I'm so glad you could make it tonight."

Even under the dim lighting, Mr. Mahler's unnaturally tan skin stands out . . . as does the bright white of his teeth. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

That's nice to know now, after he ignored the email I sent him about the event and the formal invite I hand delivered to Gemma for him.

His wife, unimpressed by our conversation, comes to stand right beside me. "Brynn, darling!" She takes a deep drag from her cigarette holder and blows the smoke out of the corner of her mouth . . . and directly into my face. What a peach. "You remember my drink, don't you?"

"Like I could ever forget." Brynn grabs a martini glass. "The dirtiest martini for the dirtiest woman!"

My eyes widen a fraction and my heart stops until I hear Mrs. Mahler's gravelly laughter.

"That's why you'll always be my favorite," she says.

And now it's no wonder Brynn wasn't disappointed Mrs. Rafter wasn't an eccentric millionaire; she has an eccentric billionaire of her very own.

Now that I know Brynn isn't going to cost me my job by insulting my boss's boss's wife, I focus my attention back on Mr. Mahler, who is busy shaking hands.

"Elliot!" he calls me over. "I'd like you to meet one of my business partners, Charles Carlin. Charles, this is Elliot Reed. She's the one who's planned this event we're putting on."

If the shock of him acting like he's had any part of Quinton's launch shows on my face, neither of the men in front of me acknowledge it.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carlin."

"Yes." His clammy hand takes hold of mine in a very firm handshake. "Nice to meet you as well."

"I've been thinking about that project we've been discussing." Mr. Mahler directs all of his attention to Charles, as if he didn't just call me over. "What do you think about having her plan the event?"

Now, I have a lot—and I mean *a lot*—of pet peeves, but people talking about me like I'm not standing right there is at the top of the list.

"Oh yes." Charles looks around the room, stopping on the balloons cascading across the ceiling before looking back at Mr. Mahler and nodding his head. "Yes, I think she would do very well."

He nods once before the pair turns to face me. "I have been tasked with hosting a very important event. It's a fundraiser, much like tonight, but a little more . . . traditional. Does that sound like something you could handle?"

"Yes, of course." A traditional, formal sit-down would actually be easier for me to put together. "Does this mean that you want me to stop working with Quinton?"

For some reason, the thought of not working with him anymore—not seeing the aftermath of this event—makes me hesitant to accept this offer.

"Oh no." Mr. Mahler and Charles laugh like they're both in on a joke but don't want to fill me in. "This will be separate from the Mustangs and as such, compensation will be separate as well. Or will this be too much to do while you handle Mr. Howard?"

I ignore the way he seems to growl Quinton's name. Been there, done that.

"No!" I almost jump at the opportunity. "I would love that!"

Because my mom died when I was young, my dad made sure he had life insurance to help me out if anything ever happened to him. That, along with the money I got from selling a house in Denver, was enough to pay off hospital bills, give him the funeral he deserved, and put a down payment on my place, but I'm not rolling in money . . . not even close.

“Wonderful, just wonderful!” He clasps his hand on my shoulder. “Stop by my office on Friday and we’ll go over some things.”

“I’ll be there.” My cheeks hurt from smiling. Tonight is going better than I ever could’ve imagined. “Thank you so much for this opportunity.”

“You’re welcome, now just don’t let me down,” he says before someone calls his name and he wanders in their direction.

My conversation with Donny from our drive to the game pops unbidden into my head. And sure, maybe Mr. Mahler has ignored me until he saw that I could do this, but Paul told me this is his leadership style. He’s got that “throw them in the pool and let them swim” old-school kind of thinking. But now he’s offering me a job that he could’ve given to anyone. Me! Would a racist do that? Give me not one but *two* jobs? I don’t think so.

“What was that?” Brynn asks once Mrs. Mahler leaves with what might be her third martini in her hand.

“Mr. Mahler just offered me a job planning a fundraiser for him.”

“Wow!” She holds a hand above the bar, which I high-five with a reckless abandon. “Look at you! Kicking ass and taking names.”

“Thank you.” I hold out my blazer jacket and curtsy. “Thank you very much.”

But before I get the chance to tell her more, my phone vibrates in my pocket with the reminder that it’s time for Quinton to welcome everyone and finally unveil what we’ve been working on.

“I’ll be back,” I tell her. “I’m going to need a celebratory cocktail once everyone leaves tonight.”

“Oh man.” She rubs her hands together, looking more evil genius than bartender. “I’m so getting you drunk tonight.”

“Sounds good to me.” I eye the bar for her whiskey stash. “I know how to Uber.”

—

EVEN THOUGH QUINTON is no longer wooing Mrs. Rafter with his charm, he still isn’t hard to find.

As he is the person everyone in the room is vying to have a moment with, all I have to do is find a large group of people and work my way

into the middle.

“Excuse me, sorry, excuse me,” I say as I weave my way to the front of the crowd. The look of relief when Quinton sees me is a stark contrast to the looks I usually get from him. “Mr. Howard?” I’ve learned that sounding overtly professional is the best way to intimidate drunk people into being quiet. “It’s time for you to give your speech.”

“Thank you, Miss Reed.” He nods, amusement lighting his dark eyes at this weird, very formal thing we have going on before he looks back to the group surrounding him. And I know it shouldn’t, but him calling me Miss Reed kinda turns me on? I’ll explore that later. “Thank you everyone for coming tonight. Now, if you would like to gravitate toward the front of the room, I’ll finally get to tell you all of the details behind the reason you’re here tonight.”

I swear, as he talks, the men and women all begin to swoon.

It must be the velvet suit.

That shit is straight magic.

I lead the way to extract him from the madness, feeling very Secret Service and wishing I had an earpiece on. As we’re moving, my back goes straight when Quinton rests a hand on my shoulder to make sure we don’t get separated. And maybe it’s because I haven’t been touched by a man in many months—fine, years! Leave me alone!—but those sparks I feel every time he touches me seem to explode from his fingertips, causing my entire body to tingle.

And let me tell you, nothing makes you feel more pathetic than getting hot and bothered from the completely platonic touch of a man whose first reaction to you was only slightly below disgust.

When we’re finally out of danger from the crowd sucking him back in, he drops his hand and falls into step beside me.

“Are you ready for this?” I try to use small talk to distract myself from the electrical current still lingering.

“I’ve been waiting years for this.” He’s stretching his neck and cracking his knuckles. This is just another game for him, one he seems to be taking very seriously.

I look at his empty hands. “Did you write your speech down? Do you need me to go find your speech?”

“No speech.” He doesn’t look at me. His eyes are focused on the area we’ve designated as the stage. He points to his head. “It’s all in here.” He drops his hand to point at his velvet-covered chest. “And in here. I wanted it to feel real, not rehearsed.”

Even though he told me from the beginning he didn’t want me writing a speech, I hoped he’d eventually see the light and write one himself. Or you know, just do it to get rid of hearing me nag. I’ve been to enough events to know not having something on paper isn’t a good idea. But I’m keeping my fingers crossed the stubborn man standing in front of me will prove me wrong. And if he doesn’t, at least I get to say “I told you so.”

I give the signal to the DJ to introduce him once the song that’s playing has ended. And it’s like that simple motion causes Quinton’s nerves to skyrocket. His confident stance is now bouncing due to his tapping foot and all of his nervous energy is contagious.

“Relax, you’ve won a championship, this will be cake.” Really though, a couple hundred guests versus millions watching? How hard could this be?

But instead of my words lightening the mood, I think they do the opposite.

Actually, I know they do the opposite because instead of laughing, he shoots his hand out like a rocket and latches on to mine. He stares into my eyes for a second, fear written across every hard edge of his face. “But this actually matters.”

“Hey.” I turn my entire body to face him and grab his other hand, ignoring the way my stomach is doing flips from not only feeling his touch, but getting to be the person he’s confiding in. “You’re going to be amazing. I know we haven’t exactly seen eye to eye during this process, but even so, I’ve never seen someone more dedicated and passionate about something. Everyone here will see that too.” I maintain eye contact with him, watching as he shakes out his shoulders and takes deep, measured breaths.

“You’re right. I got this.” He drops my hand and I mourn the heat almost instantly. “Thank you. And if I haven’t told you before, you’re more than qualified for this job. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Before I get the chance to respond, the DJ is calling Quinton to the stage and I'm left staring at him as he goes, trying to wrap my head around what just happened between us.

"Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for joining me here tonight." Quinton's voice booming through the speakers shakes me out of whatever spell he put on me, and I slip to the back of the stage so I can take in everyone's reactions as he speaks.

"As I'm sure everyone in here is aware, I've caused a little . . . disturbance . . . this season." Quiet laughter rumbles through the audience. It's the perfect start to his speech. "During the first regular season game I decided to use the platform I've worked so hard for to speak out against issues that are plaguing not only our society, but the company I work for. I placed black tape over the League's logo and I've taken a knee during the national anthem."

He pauses for a second, letting the audience get their applause . . . and a few boos . . . out of the way before he continues.

"You see, just like with the small group that's gathered here tonight, everyone has different opinions on what I'm doing. And although I've had more interviews this last month than I've had my entire career, I still need to share my truth. You've heard that I'm upset with the way the company I work for treats its players and the way society treats marginalized groups of all kinds, but you don't know everything. And that's why we're here tonight.

"I've heard from people that even though they might support the causes I'm fighting for, they don't necessarily agree with my methods. I understand that." He finds me on the side of the stage, flashing a quick smile at me before turning to walk across the stage. I don't want that little speck of attention to mean anything to me, but it does. In this room full of people, he sought me out. We shared something that nobody else knows about and it makes those butterflies that only seem to make an appearance around him flutter back to the surface.

"Football is one of America's favorite pastimes, fans are coming to games to escape the reality of their life to watch a game for a few hours, and why should I take that away? Do my job. Hashtag shut up and play, right? Leave the politics to the politicians. I've heard all of you. I have. So now, I'm asking that you hear me.

“As you all know, I’ve grown up with football. My dad, who wishes he could be here tonight, retired from this great game in 1992, ten years after he suited up for his first professional game. When he retired, there were three African American head coaches. The League was almost seventy percent Black, but only three head coaches were. That was a problem, but that was also progress.

“Now, I want to fast-forward to this year. The demographics are still pretty much the same. The League is still made up of nearly seventy percent Black players, which means there has to have been some progress on the coaching front, right? Wrong. Today, there are only two Black head coaches. There are only five Black general managers. And owners? Oh, there are none.” He pauses and lets the statistics he’s just rattled off sink into everyone in the room. “In an industry that could not continue without Black players, we’re still struggling to hold a position of real power inside it. I’ve been told I shouldn’t be a quarterback, I’d be more successful at running back . . . and that was after I got a ring. Black coaches with comparable records to their white counterparts are being fired while white coaches are given another chance. Discipline within the League isn’t evenly distributed, with Black players getting harsher punishments than their white teammates. If this is happening in the League, if systemic and overt racism affect men who are often well known and respected, what do you think is happening to Black people across this country?”

Oh. Shit.

I find Mr. Mahler in the crowd and even from beneath the harsh pink tint of his skin, I can still see the heat rising in his face. He looks pissed.

“And I’m using this platform for the men who, like my dad, retired before 1993 and have been completely left by the wayside. These men who made the League what it is by playing their hearts out without any knowledge of the dangers we know about now. Without access to the insurance we players have now, without the pensions we have, they are suffering in silence. They have been dealing with the neurological issues we’re now taking steps to avoid, but without means to provide for themselves or their families. These men are dying and it is our job as players to fight for them. It’s imperative that I use my platform for a

cause that means something to me. And that is to fight for the people who cannot fight for themselves.”

Whispers begin to roll through the crowd as they start to feed off the energy Quinton is bringing into the room.

“‘Put your money where your mouth is.’ That’s something else I’ve heard. And I’ve been thinking about that a lot, which is part of why the Quinton Howard Junior Foundation was created. I’m making a stance on the field, but tonight I want to tell you about my actions off the field. I brought all of you here hoping that you would open up your hearts and checkbooks to help me fight this fight. But I realized I have to lead by example, which is why I’m here to tell you that I will be donating my salary for this season to different charities whose causes support the mission of the Quinton Howard Junior Foundation.”

The whispers completely dissipate and I could hear a pin drop with how quiet the room is. Quinton was slated to make twenty-one million dollars this year and I’m not sure anyone thinks they heard him right . . . myself included. Out of all the things we discussed, this was *not* one of them.

“That’s my fuckin’ boy!” Donny—of course it’s Donny—jumps to his feet and breaks the silence.

It’s not even a second before everyone in the crowd has joined him on their feet, the applause and cheers causing the distressed wood beneath my feet to rattle with hope and energy and faith that this man, that Quinton, can not only lead the Mustangs, but everyone around him, to being better humans.

“Thank you.” His voice is barely audible over the cheers still going strong. “But I want to tell you who the first check will be going to. Earlier today, I sent a check to Pro Players for Equal Treatment, an organization run by a former player’s wife that is committed to working with the League to find a solution that allows these retired players and their loved ones to live with dignity. I’m honored to bring attention not only to them, but to the important cause they’re fighting for. Thank you everyone for coming out tonight. This is the beginning of something wonderful and I truly appreciate all of your support.”

And just like that, the room explodes with excitement and applause once again. The reporters who were here for a fun evening all have their cell phones plastered to their faces, no doubt calling their

stations to send a camera crew over, as the rest of the crowd rushes across the room trying to get to Quinton. Thankfully, I already had an interview with ESPN set up after this event. Good thing I'm good at my job. But hopefully some of these reporters are now changing their questions from "Why?" to "How can we help?" I do know that, without a doubt, they're all seeing him through a completely new lens. One that no longer sees him as a spoiled, entitled brat, but as a selfless, caring individual who is going to change the world.

And how the hell am I supposed to keep my guard up around that?

Sixteen

To say the event was a success is a massive understatement.

Quinton was trending before the crowds cleared. The news of his outrageous pledge damn near broke the Internet . . . or at least his website, which crashed approximately fifteen minutes after his announcement.

The other thing trending? Pro Players for Equal Treatment, the first organization receiving a donation from Quinton.

When I told him about all of the traffic to his site, he was annoyingly blasé about it. But when I pulled him to the side thirty minutes later to tell him that? He excused himself and locked himself in Jen's office. When he came out a few minutes later, his smile was the biggest I've ever seen. Before that moment, I actually thought maybe the muscles around his mouth weren't quite working (which did *not* lead my mind down a rabbit hole about Quinton's mouth that I'd rather not recount. *No. Absolutely not.*) and all pictures of him smiling with this many teeth showing were actually photoshopped. But when he stepped back into the hallway with red-tinted eyes, his full lips were pulled wide and framing his perfect smile.

And it was the best moment I've had doing my job . . . ever.

"Never doubted you for a fuckin' second." Donny slaps my shoulder and holds a shot in front of me. "Brynn said it's her specialty."

"You had no faith in me and told me so." I remind him of our car ride that he couldn't have forgotten, given it was only two days ago. "I thought Brynn only does tequila shots?"

The guests left an hour ago. Mrs. Rafter left an hour before that, refusing to let me take her home because she's "old, but not incapable." And a few of us stuck around to help clean up.

And by that, I mean tidying up the bar.

And by *that*, I mean drinking vodka tonics.

After Quinton's declaration, Brynn seemed to lose her distaste for the drink. I guess being the drink choice of a full-fledged activist made it more appealing. And maybe it does? I don't own a bar, so what do I know?

"I do!" Brynn shouts from behind a balloon tower she's dissecting. "Just slam it!"

Tequila shots are not my favorite, but because tonight ended up getting me on Mr. Mahler's good side with another job for him, I do just that.

"Eeeeeek!" My entire face puckers as the bitter burn of tequila hits my throat. "It's so bad! I need a lime."

This is why I stopped taking shots in college. Now I get drunk the classy way. Slowly and generally hating myself during the process.

"Training wheels are for wimps and you're no fuckin' wimp, Reed!" Donny puts another shot in my hand. "You're the fuckin' boss who just put together one of the most memorable nights in sports!"

Wow.

I totally get why these guys hired Donny. If Donny was my alarm, telling me what a boss-ass bitch I was every morning, I feel like my life would improve drastically.

"You're right! I am a fucking boss!" I snatch the small glass from his hand and throw it back.

Bottoms up, bitches!

"Fuck yes!" Donny punches the air before yelling—or just talking? I can never tell with him—to anyone who will listen, "Reed's taking shots! Turn-up time has arrived!"

I regret agreeing to shenanigans with him for a split second before I decide, what the hell? Live a little.

I can't even remember the last time I got drunk for a reason that wasn't sad. Not only do I deserve to celebrate after a job well done, if I know anything, it's that life's too short to wait to celebrate.

Donny is walking back holding glasses. Not shot glasses, water glasses—filled with what I can only assume is tequila. Is he insane?

I take the glass from Donny and pour some of it into the shot glass I just used.

Because while turning up is a party, alcohol poisoning is not.

“It’s starting to not taste as bad,” I tell Donny. I learned my lesson on this my senior year. It tasting better does not mean it’s actually tasting better, it means I’m fully inebriated. “That means I have to tap out soon.”

“But you just fuckin’ turned up!”

“Yeah,” I agree. “But I’m not very good at this. I don’t have a Donny-level tolerance.”

“Funny.” Quinton slides into the empty seat next to me. “And I just don’t have Donny tolerance.”

“Ha-fucking-ha.” Donny rolls his eyes. “I don’t know why you Denver people always want to act like you don’t love me. Everyone loves me!”

Quinton and I both look at each other, but neither of us say anything at all until Donny walks away mumbling how the altitude has ruined us.

“Tequila, huh?” He points at my empty shot glass. “I didn’t peg you as a shot girl.”

I don’t know if it’s the adrenaline rush I get after an event, the vodka tonics, the tequila, or all of the above, but the response I would’ve lassoed in yesterday just falls right out of my mouth.

“Well, considering you didn’t peg me for a girl at all when we first met, this doesn’t surprise me.”

And then—definitely from the tequila—I laugh really hard . . . at my own joke. Lucky for me, it’s not long before Quinton’s thick, raspy laughter is mixing with mine.

“Oh shit!” He leans back in his chair, covering his mouth with a fist. “You got jokes?”

“I got a few.” I bounce my shoulders a few times, and the urge not to brush them off is just obtainable in my drunken haze.

I’ve obviously seen him all throughout this event . . . and after too. But it’s in this moment, with all of the overhead lights on and the top buttons of his shirt undone, that I realize I’ve never seen Quinton look like this before. The shadows and edges usually covering his face are gone and there’s a softness to him. It’s the first time I’ve seen him look happy and relaxed. And it makes him even better looking.

He opens his mouth to say something, but doesn’t get it out.

“Elliot!” Brynn yells from across the room, her arms stuffed with balloons. “Are you sure you don’t need a ride?”

“Yeah, I’m just going to get an Uber. Thanks, though.”

“Okay, if you’re sure! We’re going to fill up our cars with these bad boys and then stuff them in Poppy’s living room.” She uses her head to nod in Paisley’s direction and I see that she’s also holding balloons. “TK hates balloons for some reason, but Posie’s obsessed with them. She’s going to be so excited and TK can’t say no to her. It’s going to be epic. You sure you don’t want to join?”

Not to sound like a total fucking creep, but hell yes I want to go to TK Moore’s house! He was my favorite Mustangs player ever. He did these ridiculous dances and just always seemed like he was having the best time. I get why he retired, but I’m still kinda bummed I don’t get to watch him on the field anymore.

I don’t say any of this because I don’t want to get booted from the cool kids table. But also because I’m ninety percent sure that I’m not just drunk, but I’m druuunnnnk. And as such, I need to take my drunk ass home.

“As much fun as that sounds, and it really is the best invite I’ve had in months, I think I’m going to have to skip this balloon bombardment.”

“Oooh!” Brynn opens her arms and lets the balloons fall to the ground. “Balloon bombardment! That’s a good one, I’m writing that down.”

“For what?” The fear of whatever diabolical plan Brynn is cooking up is clear in Paisley’s voice.

“Not sure, but I do love a themed party.” Brynn starts to gather the loose balloons before she sees Donny sipping another cocktail.

“Donny! Either make yourself useful and help us mess with TK or you’re paying for that bottle.”

He puts down his glass without hesitating. “Where do you want the balloons?”

“Hey.” Quinton pulls my attention from the train wreck in front of me. “I’m about to head out and Donny told me where you live, it’s on my way. Let me give you a ride.”

“Oh. No, that’s not necessary.” “No” is my automatic response to anyone offering to do anything for me ever. “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you’ll be fine,” he says. “Just let me? Please. You did such a great job with this and I know I wasn’t the easiest person to work with. A ride is the least I could do.”

I actually am not a fan of Uber. I mean, I feel like climbing in a car with a total stranger and giving them directions to my house is the first thing I was taught not to do. A ride with Quinton wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Well . . . maybe.

He’s watching me closely and I get the feeling that my thoughts are playing out across my face. “You know what?” I slap the table. “I think I will take you up on that offer.”

Quinton pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth. Maybe trying not to laugh. Definitely drawing unwanted attention to his mouth.

At least there’s a good chance that being trapped in the car with him will rid me of all these pleasant feelings I’m having toward him right now. Because right now I feel like it’s messing with the balance of the universe or something.

“Cool. Then are you ready to go or do you need to check on anything else?”

The fact that he thinks I’m capable of doing anything productive right now is very generous of him.

“Nope, I think I’m good.”

I look around to find Jen and spot her in the corner talking with Donny. He’s got an armful of balloons Brynn forced him to collect, and it looks like he’s hanging onto every word coming out of Jen’s mouth. And Jen isn’t just talking. No, she’s twirling her hair with one hand and touching his arm with the other. The two cornerstones of flirting. “Hey!” I whisper-yell as I elbow Quinton in the arm to see if he sees what I do. Tequila has tricked me into reading signs that weren’t there before. “Are Donny and Jen flirting or am I seeing things?”

“Oh shit.” He leans in, squinting his eyes. “I’ve never seen Donny not wildly gesturing at somebody. So maybe?”

Out of everything that happened tonight, this might be the most surprising. Well, you know, after Quinton donating his entire salary to charity.

“I was going to say bye to her, but I don’t want to ruin their moment.” I think. It is Donny she’s talking to. Maybe I owe it to her to

ruin this. But Donny is loyal to a degree that's almost impossible to find, and even though he makes me nuts, he also keeps me laughing. "No, I'll just shoot her a text later. Let's hit the road."

His hand with his keys in them freezes in midair.

"Hit the road?" he repeats. "Oh god. You're the kind of person who sings in the car, aren't you?"

I am.

I so totally am. And I'm the kind of person who will actively try to outsing the radio. Turning up the volume only makes me sing louder.

"I guess you'll have to wait and see because it's too late to back out now." I waggle my eyebrows before bending down to pick up my shoes that I took off as soon as the last guest left.

"Fuck." He groans, but the smile is still on his face and it feels more like a friend giving me a hard time instead of him hating me. "Is this what I get for doing a good deed?"

"It is, you lucky son of a gun."

I don't know if it's the tequila or the lingering buzz of adrenaline from tonight, but for the first time in a very, very long time, I don't feel sad. My limbs don't feel weighed down by grief, my smile doesn't ache with guilt. I just feel like me, like the Elliot I used to be. Happy.

And to my immense shock and total displeasure, I think that Quinton might be part of the reason why.

Seventeen

“Thank you again for doing this.” I look up at streetlights as they blur together. The dark Colorado sky above them is even darker through the heavy tint on his windows. His BMW whatever series is a lot nicer than my beat-up Camry.

“I told you, you’re on my way home. It’s not a big deal.” The glow from the lights on his dashboard makes everything about him look soft. His eyes, his skin, his lips . . .

“No, not for the ride.” I sit up in the seat. Between the long day, the booze, and the plush, heated seat, I’m in serious danger of dozing off. “I mean, yes, thank you for the ride, but I meant thank you for tonight.”

“Why are you thanking me? You did all of the work and the idea was yours.” He sneaks a quick glance my way before focusing back on the road in front of him.

Now, I love a compliment as much as anyone—more, if I’m honest—but only when they are warranted. And the reason tonight was so successful wasn’t because of the balloons, lighting, and excellent food. Don’t get me wrong, that stuff helped, but the reason it was trending, the reason it worked, was all because of Quinton.

Pledging to give away millions didn’t hurt either.

“I didn’t do all of the work, not the important stuff. You did that.” I shift in my seat, turning to the window, knowing I can’t look at him while I say the next part. The gloating I’m sure he’ll do will ruin the moment. “I mean letting me be part of this. I love my job, but a lot of times it’s cleaning up messes I don’t agree with. Spinning a domestic violence case, defending a DUI. But this? This I can be proud of . . . even if you’re a total pain in my ass.”

His laughter fills the car and even though I don't want to look at him, I can't resist. Seeing his eyes crinkled in genuine amusement is so rare, I can't deny myself the opportunity to take it in.

"Glad you added in that last bit. I almost rerouted us to the hospital," he says. "A compliment from you must mean something is seriously wrong."

"Ha ha. You're hilarious." I roll my eyes but it's half-assed. It's nice being like this with him. Trying to hate him all the time is exhausting.

"I know you're being sarcastic right now, but I think it's imperative to tell you that Mrs. Rafter thinks I really am funny." He risks our lives and looks away from the road to stick his tongue out at me. "So there."

I feel my eyes go wide in my face as I just stare at him, unable to say or do anything. Quinton Howard Junior, arguably the best quarterback in the League, just stuck his tongue out at me. Like a kindergartner . . . a very large kindergartner.

"You did not just do that!" I shove his arm and try to ignore how firm it feels beneath my palm but fail miserably. There was literally no jiggle. I didn't know that was possible!

"I did." He doesn't seem to notice my fascination with his limbs, thank goodness. "It felt like the right thing to do."

"Well, I wouldn't want you ignoring your instincts."

"Exactly." He taps his brakes, slowing as he takes the exit for my place.

"Question. You don't really listen to anything I say to you, right?" I ask. "Like, I could word vomit all over your car and you wouldn't remember any of it by the time you drove away?"

"Right." He rolls to a stop at the red light before directing all of his attention to me. "You can say whatever you want and it will never leave this car."

Even though he's smiling, there's a seriousness behind his words. Like he understands just how much I need to talk to someone. How vital it is that I don't go home to an empty house and still have these words bouncing around inside of my head.

I don't know if it's because in this moment I feel like he might be the only person who understands me or because I have drunk mouth—yes, that's the technical term—but everything I'm feeling just falls out of my mouth.

“I kept picturing my dad sitting with Mrs. Rafter tonight and what he would’ve thought about everything. It’s the first time I’ve been able to do that and not get swallowed by grief. It actually made me happy. And I know my dad wouldn’t want me to be sad forever, but not feeling sad is making me feel guilty. Is that crazy? Because I think I’m going insane.”

“I’m not an expert on this, but I think that being happy when you get a memory of him is something you should embrace.” He keeps his eyes on the road. I’m sure after the way I flipped during our conversation at Stanley’s, he’s choosing his words carefully.

“Oh, trust me, therapy has told me that you are correct.” I drop my hand between the seat and the door until I feel the button to recline the seat. I close my eyes as I let the seat all the way down. “But even though I know you’re right, I feel bad that I participated in this huge thing that he would’ve loved without him. And that when I did think of him, it wasn’t because I was sad he wasn’t there, it was because he just would have been so proud.”

“I don’t like calling people crazy,” he says. “And if I know anything, I know that grief and pain never make sense. So you just feel what you feel and do the best that you can with it. And after seeing everything that you’ve done, I think you’re doing pretty fucking good.”

Considering I’m drunk and lying down in his car while talking about my dead dad, this is probably the nicest lie he could’ve ever told me.

“That’s nice of you.” I should stop talking. I know I should stop talking. But I don’t. “What’s so crazy is that I thought because my mom died, I’d be okay. Right? Like, if you have one dead parent, the other one shouldn’t be as bad. That was bad logic. Like, really fucking bad. My mom died when I was a baby. I didn’t know her. And as fucked up as this sounds, I don’t miss her. I mean, how can you miss a person you never knew? I miss the idea of her. I miss the idea of having a mom. But this? My dad? Fucking hell. And I want to talk about him all the time. Have you seen *Coco*?” I don’t give him a chance to answer and even though I remember that this, the loose lips part of being drunk, is the reason I stopped drinking tequila, I still keep talking. “Don’t see it. Or do. It’s beautiful. Just be prepared. I was not prepared watching that on Netflix one night when I thought a nice

Disney movie could distract me. Anyways, I want to talk about him because I'm afraid he'll fade away if I don't. But I also never want to talk about him because that makes this entire hell experience real and it makes me feel my annoying feelings. If I shove it down, I can be numb. Does that make sense?"

He's totally going to complain to Mahler about me and get me fired after this. But maybe I can start some kind of Uber therapy business because I'm really enjoying this.

"I understand that more than I understand just about anything," he says.

And even though I'm about ten seconds away from falling asleep, my eyes snap open. Even though his car is dark and my vision is slightly blurry, I can still see the ghosts in his expression . . . hear them in his voice.

"You do?"

He nods and takes a deep breath—slow in and even slower out. And just like the first time I saw him walk out onto the Mustangs field, awareness filters into every part of my body. I want to adjust my seat. Sit up and give him the same attentiveness he's given me, but I also don't want to distract him from the words he's obviously struggling to find. So instead, I sit as still as possible, not even breathing.

"Yeah, I do. My—"

"You have now arrived at your final destination." His car—car!—interrupts him.

The British voice seems to startle whatever he was about to say right out of his head. His entire face transforms as he leans forward and looks out of his front window at my building. "Nice place."

Given I've seen his home and I'm still trying to catch my bearings after whatever that just was, I can't tell if he's being serious or not.

"You know, after all this time we've spent together, I still can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not."

"I'm not being sarcastic." He cranks the steering wheel and comes to a stop. "This looks really nice."

"Then thank you." I find the button to move the seat into a sitting position. "I bought it after I sold my dad's house."

I've decorated my condo . . . tried to make it feel like home, but it still doesn't and I'm not sure it ever will. After my dad died, I

contemplated keeping his house. He loved that house. I loved that house. But as soon as he took his last breath, it stopped feeling like my home. Instead it just felt like a place I used to live. And when all of his medical bills started piling in, I knew I didn't have a choice. But now I don't have family. I have a house, but not a home. I just feel like I'm going to wander through the rest of my life. Like I have no place where I really belong.

I guess that will have to be a story for my next drunk taxi ride.

"I'm sure he'd be glad he was able to help you, even though he's not here."

"That's a nice way to look at it." I offer him a tight smile and try to get the focus off of me. Because after the loose lips section of drunk Elliot comes overly emotional Elliot and I cannot go down that road tonight. "What were you going to say before your navigation interrupted you?"

"Oh, it was nothing," he says, but the way his grip tightens around the steering wheel says otherwise.

"Are you sure?" I might be drunk, but that doesn't quiet the fixer in me. "Because I also don't care enough about what you will say to remember it tomorrow."

"Well, when you say it like that," he says, but the cobwebs of whatever was bothering him are gone and his smile manages to be bright in this dark car.

"Whatever, you know what I meant." I try to unbuckle the seat belt but I'm so uncoordinated that Quinton has to turn on the overhead lights to help me out. "Seriously, what is wrong with your car? I swear this is jammed."

This would never happen in a Toyota.

"Here." He wraps my hand in his and leans over to unbuckle my seat belt with the other.

When he touched me and I felt sparks earlier, I tried to convince myself that it was just the nerves because of the event. But the event is over. And with his face inches away and his hand on mine, I swear, the air thickens and crackles from the charged energy between us. Neither of us says anything, but my breathing deepens and my pulse quickens with every second that ticks by.

Until I can't take it anymore.

I close the distance between us and touch my lips to his.

And for a split second, he kisses me back.

Until he doesn't.

He drops my hand and pulls away. "Elliot . . ."

I've fallen in public before. I've replied all with a very personal email. I've embarrassed myself more than the average person. But nothing, NOTHING, compares to the utter mortification of this moment. Fire starts in the pit of my stomach and spreads right to my face. I take in the horrified look on Quinton's face and remember how he clearly stated, from our first meeting, that he was not interested in me. At all.

"Oh shit." I grab my purse off the floor of his car, my cheeks ablaze with humiliation. "I'm so, so sorry. I have no idea what came over me."

"Elliot." Pity is written all over his stupid, beautiful face. "I—"

"No, no. I get it. I'm sorry. I . . . Bye." I open the door, climbing out of his car faster than my drunk mind can keep up with, and run.

And I don't stop until the door to my condo is closed and locked behind me. But even that's not enough. I run to my bed and hide under my covers, hoping the tequila will at least let me forget that any of this ever happened.

When I said I had drunk mouth, this was *not* what I meant.

Eighteen

I don't know what wakes me up first.

Ripping my dry tongue off the roof of my mouth, the constant pounding in my head, or the insistent sound of text messages flooding my phone.

I do know, however, what keeps me up—the constant reminder of the horror on Quinton's face that plays on a loop every time I close my eyes. And the realization that not only did I kiss a guy who is not attracted to me, but I kissed a guy I work with. Like a fucking creep! If I was a man and drunk kissed a female employee I would be fired and publicly shamed . . . and rightfully so!

Ugh.

I've had moments where I wasn't my biggest fan, but I think this might be my baseline for self-loathing.

I'm terrified to check my phone and see missed calls from work or worse . . . Quinton. I'd much rather hide under my comforter for the next one hundred years, but I also need to know if I've been fired and/or have a sexual harassment case being lodged against me.

But even though I don't want to, I tap in my passcode. I'm not even going to attempt facial recognition with smeared makeup and a puffy hangover face. There are no missed calls. I'm taking that as a good sign that Quinton hasn't filed a formal complaint . . . yet.

There are, however, four new text messages. All from Brynn, Liv, Marie, and even Vonnie. If I wasn't mortified and in the midst of hating myself, I'd be flipping out that communication with Vonnie, aka My New Best Friend™, has progressed to text, but I do hate myself, so I only get a tiny bit excited.

The messages almost mirror each other.

Brynn: Don't think the balloons distracted me enough to not see you leave with Q! You bring the details, I'll provide the whiskey.

I almost respond that while I appreciate the offer, she'd have a better chance of catching me with a hangover remedy and greasy burger.

Marie: Heard through the grapevine that you hitched a ride with Quinton. Thought you hated him? What is that about? Meet at HERS. Need deets ASAP!

Liv: Brynn told me that she saw your ass getting mighty comfy in Quinton's car. I knew there was something more going on there! I'll be at HERS at three. Be there or expect me to lead the gossip brigade to your front door.

That, I know, is not a threat but a promise. It makes me wonder what my life would've been like if my dad had just homeschooled me like he threatened that time I got a D in sixth grade. Or at least if I hadn't introduced Liv and Marie to each other.

Vonnie: Biiiitch! I knew if you put up with Donny's ass that you liked Q! I want to hear everything! Be at HERS . . . or else.

I want to laugh at the "or else" part of Vonnie's message, but I saw her in full mom mode at the game. And while I have made some questionable life choices in the last twelve hours, underestimating Vonnie will not be one of them.

I add them all to a group text; my head hurts too much to stare at the bright screen any longer than necessary.

Elliot: What happened to snitches get stitches? I'll be there at three, but not because I'm listening to any of you. I have to go pick up my car, which is close to HERS, and I need bar food.

I don't even get the chance to put my phone down and think of the ramifications that could come from these four women melding their powers together before my phone chimes with a new text message.

Vonnie: Oh shit. The last time we had denial this strong, it was Brynn swearing there was nothing between her and Maxwell. I'm not missing a second of this!

And I think I'm bringing Poppy. I wanna hear more about the balloons TK was bitching about on Instagram.

Yup.

This was a mistake.

My phone chimes again and I almost don't check it. I mean, a girl can only take so much. But this girl is also nosy AF and I do really want to meet Poppy.

But when I look at my phone, it's not the long string of names anymore. It's just one. The one that I don't want to see ever again. Just seeing his name causes my face to burn and my stomach to churn. And because I'm an adult, I do the mature thing. I clear the message without looking at it and pretend that it never happened.

Avoidance. That's my superpower.

—

SINCE I ALREADY planned to work from home today, the hours between me ignoring Quinton until I have to go get my car fly by. I send out press emails about last night, wrap up any lingering invoices, and check with Quinton's website woman to make sure everything is set to handle the amount of visitors he might get as he continues to announce more charities.

Everything is going so well that I forget about what a clusterfuck I've turned my life into. When I'm in the zone, nothing else matters. Football players have helmets to protect them, I have an abundance of emails. Same thing.

Then my alarm goes off and I'm snapped back to reality that means my afternoon is about to take a turn for the wild.

Lucky for me, my Uber driver seems to read my mood when I climb into the back of his car and doesn't say anything to me for the entire fortyish-minute drive downtown. I think about going to the Rue to see if Jen is there but then I remember the thing with her and Donny and decide not to press my—already bad—luck. Seeing Quinton would be bad. Seeing Donny would be worse.

When I get into my car, I contemplate ditching everyone at HERS and instead buying myself a dozen donuts and renting myself a hotel

room until all of this blows over. But that seems extreme . . . even for me. So instead, I ignore the little voice in the back of my head telling me that a bacon and maple donut will solve all of my problems and crank my steering wheel in the direction of the interrogation I'm sure is waiting for me.

When I pull up to HERS just after noon, it's suspiciously empty. I parallel park right in front of the entrance and see the closed sign hanging on the door. I don't let myself get too excited. I might not know Brynn and Vonnie well, but I do know they wouldn't not tell me if they were canceling plans. So even though I want to accept this blessing and go get my donut, I know without a doubt this is terrible news for me.

I lean into the backseat to get my phone out of my purse. I signed Oprah's pledge not to text while I drive and I take that shit serious. I might disappoint myself on a daily basis, but my promise to Oprah is not something I take lightly. One of her tips was to keep your phone out of reach, and now, ten years later, it's just become a habit.

I find my phone at the bottom of my purse and see two missed calls and three text messages from Quinton. I know I deleted the one earlier, but I do work with him and I know I'm going to have to respond at some point. Might as well get it over with before I walk into a bar full of good booze and better people. But in a stroke of luck I've come to never expect, there's a loud bang on my window before I open my messages.

"Hey!" Brynn's innocent smile doesn't fool me for a second. "The Lady Mustangs had their meeting here today and I have to get everything reorganized again before I can open back up to the public."

I drop my phone into my bag, thanking all the stars in the sky for the excuse to avoid Quinton for a little bit longer, and pull my keys out of the ignition.

"Their meeting?" I walk around my car until I join her on the sidewalk. "Aren't you a Lady Mustang too?"

"Maybe technically, but not really." She pulls open the door for me. "I mainly do the bar stuff during meetings. I'm not an active member or anything."

"Is she trying to act like she's not a Lady Mustang?" Vonnie sets her martini on the table and even though I was a firm no when it came to

drinking this morning, now I'm only slightly dedicated to that declaration.

I nod my head. "Yeah, she's basically saying she's just the host."

"And I am!" Brynn laughs and I think she was going for carefree, but sounds slightly hysterical instead.

"Tanya!" Vonnie yells across the room to one of the other servers. "How many drinks did Brynn make today?"

"Is that a trick question?" Tanya grabs a couple of empty glasses behind the bar. "Zero. You know she was talking about balloons for the holiday party the entire time."

"That doesn't prove anything," Brynn snaps before aiming her glare my way. "This is all your fault."

How did I get pulled into this? "My fault?"

"Yes." She puts her hands on her hips and says it in a way that's so matter-of-fact that maybe it is my fault. What do I know anyways? I'm still the dummy creep who kissed my kinda-boss. "If you hadn't made last night so amazing with those damn balloons everywhere, I wouldn't have gotten the bug to throw an event and I wouldn't have participated today. But you did, then I did, so it's your fault."

I don't know what I hate more—her flawed logic or that her flawed logic actually makes so much sense to me?

"So what about last month's meeting? Or all of the meetings last year? Your participation in those meetings is Elle's fault too?"

Phew! I was just about to take responsibility for it too!

"Shut up." Brynn collapses into the chair next to Vonnie. "You know I hate it when you're right and I'm called out."

Vonnie picks up her martini and stares Brynn down over the rim. "I'm always right, you should be used to it by now."

This is the adult version of "The Song That Never Ends." Brynn leans forward, ready to refute, when the front door opens. Liv's long legs walk in first, but Marie's voice leads the way.

As the owner of a cupcake bakery, she's just on a constant sugar high, I'm convinced. When she's not bouncing around, she's a total grump who needs to be fed. She's a toddler trapped in a grown woman's body. Which is probably how she's mastered making her money catering to the mom demographic of Denver. She's wearing her

signature TOMS with cuffed jeans and oversized blouse. It's a stark contrast compared to the woman next to her.

Where Marie thrives on comfort, Liv thinks it's a four-letter word. I think the last time I saw her in flats was when we were in high school. And the pointy-toed stilettos she's wearing today are no exception. Her makeup is applied to contoured perfection and her long blonde hair falls down her back in flawless, glossy waves. And even with all of that, I have no idea if she came here from work, the gym, or a photo shoot. Liv is always on ten. It's why she makes such a killing in retail and with her blog.

"Hey hooker!" Marie drops her purse on the floor by an empty chair and wraps her arms around me. "You look terrible."

Gotta love friends who tell you how it is.

"Awww. Friends. Hugs. Wonderful," Brynn cuts in. "Is it time for details now?"

"Yeah, time to spill." Vonnie crosses her legs and leans back into her chair. "Poppy had a doctor's appointment, so we'll fill her pregnant ass in later."

I'm glad everyone else is so ready to take a deep dive into my personal life, but I so am not.

"Liv and I think it was a Cam Hall thing," Marie says. "Are we right?"

This is why you should end all friendships after high school and start fresh. No need to be in your thirties, already at a personal low, only to have your friends remind you that you've *always* been a disaster.

"Who the fuck is Cam Hall?" Vonnie asks.

"Oh. It's so good." Liv's eyes gloss over like they always do when the chance to gossip presents itself. She turns her chair to face Vonnie.

"Cam went to high school with us and was ob-sessed with Elle. We all called it, but Elle didn't believe us. And when Cam finally told her he was into her, she freaked and ran away and literally avoided him until graduation."

"Okay, first of all? You know that's not what happened. Cam was just trying to weasel his way into our group because he liked Ruby. Second, I did not avoid him! He avoided me once I called him on his

shit. You know I was the DUFF, I can't believe you're still telling that story."

"Oh my god! You were never the fucking DUFF!" Liv shouts as Marie groans.

Jeeez. Glad I came in when this place was shut down after all.

"What the fuck is a DUFF?" Vonnie butts in, not here for high school tales and fucking same, Vonnie! "And why are we talking about Cam when we could be discussing Q's fine self and Elle's cute ass climbing in his car last night?"

"You know, a DUFF." I wave her off.

"Saying the word again does not clear this up," Vonnie says.

Of course super-stunning Vonnie has no idea what it is.

"It's the designated ugly fat friend," I decode, but I'm more focused on the tray of french fries and grilled cheese sandwiches that Tanya is dropping off on our table.

I knew Brynn was going to come through with the hangover food!

I reach across the table to grab some, but all I get is the taste of unexpected defeat. Brynn snatches the tray out of my reach.

"What the hell?" I ask, but when I look up, everyone at the table is wearing matching glares. "Umm . . . did I miss something?"

"Are you out of your ever-loving fucking mind?" Brynn puts the tray of fried goodness at the far end of the table. "Did you just call yourself ugly?"

"She did," Vonnie says to Brynn while staying laser focused on me. "That's exactly what she said."

I hate being the center of attention, it gives me hives. I flip through my PR playbook until I find something that I think will work here.

"You guys, relax. I said *was* and it was a joke!"

I mean, do I still have some body image issues? Of course I do! Who doesn't? But it definitely doesn't need the attention it's getting right now.

Nobody says anything, they all just stare at me, trying to break me with their eyes. But I don't give in.

"I hope so," Brynn says at last, sliding a plate with a grilled cheese in front of me. "Because otherwise I have no problem locking you in here and telling you how wonderful you are until you believe it."

“We’ve done it before, so don’t test us.” Vonnie drains the last bit of her martini and I’m pretty sure I was the reason behind the sudden consumption.

“I fucking love you guys,” Marie says to the table. “Anytime you want cupcakes, come see me. They’re on the house.”

“Okay.” Liv claps her hands to get our attention. “Now that that’s under control, can we get back to the topic at hand?” She turns to look at me and I swear she can see into my soul. “What the fuck happened with you and Quinton last night?”

Now, as bad as the self-help, self-love intervention might’ve been, I know with one hundred percent certainty that it would’ve been more enjoyable than this.

“Are you already blushing?” Marie asks. “Holy shit. This is either really good or fucking terrible. Which one is it?”

I sit on the question for a minute. Not to build excitement or curiosity or anything. But because I have no freaking idea why I came here to subject myself to this nonsense in the first place.

“Terrible,” I finally answer when I realize there’s no way to make it back to my car without getting tackled first. “More than terrible. Mortifying might be better. And I think I might be a predator now.”

“Well, crap!” a new voice says from behind me. “I skip out on one Wednesday meeting and this is what I miss?”

“Take a seat, Patterson.” Vonnie gestures to the beautiful woman behind me cradling her adorable baby bump. “This shit’s about to get good.”

Nineteen

"You kissed *him*?" Liv says for what feels like the tenth time.

"Yes." My resolve not to drink has dropped to about negative three and I'm seriously eyeing the Johnnie Walker right about now.

"And he rejected you?" Vonnie asks . . . again.

I'm starting to feel like I'm stuck in some kind of time loop where only the last fifteen minutes repeat. And unlike all of the movies I watch where this happens, it's missing the zany appeal.

"And then you ran away and now you're ignoring his texts?" Marie not so helpfully points out.

"And calls," Liv, the freaking jerk, not so helpfully fills in. "Don't forget that she's ignoring his calls too."

You know, when I got swindled into meeting everyone here, I thought they would have a little restraint . . . maybe even be reluctant to open up in front of new people. Marie and Liv are my friends. They don't really know Brynn and Vonnie. Hell, *I* don't really know Brynn and Vonnie. How was I supposed to know that meddling in my life would bond them as though they've all known one another for lifetimes?

"Yes, okay?" I hit the table with a little more force than I intended, but none of them are helping and I'm reaching the end of my rope.

"You've known me for half of my life. When have I ever not run from my problems?"

Therapy has helped me identify my issues and coping mechanisms. It has not, however, helped me change them.

"Something just isn't right here." Brynn leans back in her chair and folds her arms in front of her chest.

"I'm with you." Poppy—who is beautiful and lovely and meeting me at a personal low point—takes a sip of whatever nonalcoholic

concoction Brynn made for her. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“How does it not make sense?” My nerves are raw and it’s taking effort that I don’t have to snap at these well-meaning, but not all that helpful, women. “Quinton has now rejected me twice. Once when I wasn’t even trying and again when I threw myself at him. I’m pretty sure the only thing that doesn’t make sense is how surprised we all seem to be here.”

“No. You’re wrong. After the game on Sunday, his face fell when you weren’t with Donny. Then, yesterday, I did not imagine the way he watched you from across the room or the way he trailed behind you just so, keeping his eyes plastered on you, but not in a creepy way.” Brynn tosses her napkin on her now empty plate and pushes out of her chair. “And the way he was with your neighbor? That all said he wants you. He had huge donors begging to spend time with him and he ignored them all to talk to Mrs. Rafter.”

Liv and Marie—my beautiful, loyal, concerned friends—suck in air through their teeth. The hiss of breath cuts through the air and slices my heart.

“Mrs. Rafter was there?” Marie asks.

“Who’s Mrs. Rafter?” Vonnie’s eyes bounce back and forth between me and Marie.

Liv ignores Vonnie’s question. “You called her? Why wouldn’t you tell us?” Liv’s always solid and confident voice trembles.

“I didn’t call her.” I focus on the loose thread on the hem on my sweater. “I ran into her at Stanley’s when I was meeting Quinton about the event. Hence why she was there, he got a front-row seat to our reunion.”

“Oh fucking hell,” Marie says on an exhale.

“I’m sure you handled that well.” Liv picks up the drink she’s been nursing and takes a giant gulp.

“Yup.” My laugh shows just how well I did not handle it and that whiskey looks even better. “I flipped out. It was not my finest moment.”

“Hold on!” Vonnie hits the table, not one to be ignored or left out. “Who is Mrs. Rafter and why do all of you look like you’re about to fucking cry?”

Neither Marie nor Liv open their mouths to answer. Whatever I say is what they will go with. They're not going to push this. And it's on the tip of my tongue to say nobody and start to talk about Quinton again because I know that will distract them. But then I remember the way Vonnie cried in silence at the game when I first met her, and the way she worked so hard to hide it from everyone. I don't expect her to open up to me, I barely know her. But I know how concerned Brynn is and maybe, if I can talk about this, it will help her open up about whatever's been bothering her when the time is right. Lead by example, and all that other stuff I hated when my dad would tell me.

"Mrs. Rafter was my neighbor."

"Oooookay." She nods. "I got that part. So you moved? I don't understand why seeing an old neighbor is such a big deal."

"She was more like a grandma. She lived next door my entire life. She even spent Christmas mornings with us. But when my dad died last February, I sold the house and never went back. I also didn't answer or return her calls. I thought avoiding everything that reminded me of my dad would make coping easier."

Considering I never even told my therapist about Mrs. Rafter or the way I vanished after my dad's funeral, this is a really big deal for me. And from the way Vonnie's eyes go wide and then soft, she knows it too.

"Oh, fucking hell." Poppy grabs a napkin off the table and dabs her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually a crier, but when I'm pregnant, my tear ducts don't go offline."

"I didn't know your dad died," Brynn says. She's sitting in her seat again.

"Yeah, cancer. We knew it was coming." I grab my water, really, really wishing I'd given in and ordered booze. "Three days after the championship. The game was the last thing we did together before he fell asleep and didn't wake up again."

"Shit, girl." Vonnie closes her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"Tis life." I shrug, trying to keep my mask on and stay nonchalant about everything. *People die every day. It's the only guarantee there is in life.*

Also, I do not need to cry in HERS.

“Wait.” Brynn leans forward. “You’re telling me that Quinton heard your reunion with your sweet, old lady neighbor?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

“During this reunion, did he hear any details about your dad?” she asks.

“Well, yeah.” My eyebrows scrunch together. I have no idea where she’s going with this. “I don’t know exactly when he got there, but I’m pretty sure he heard it all.”

“And I’m going to assume you cried?” she presses.

I shrug. I don’t like to cry, but I feel like tears in that circumstance were called for. “Well, yeah. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” She waves me off, which I think is kind of rude, but when I look around the table and everyone is sitting up straighter and nodding along with Detective Sterling over here, I realize I’m the only one not following her. “So you’re telling us that you had a full meltdown in front of Q about your dad with the neighbor who was like your grandma. And, instead of running or pretending he didn’t hear any of it—which he could’ve done because you didn’t realize he was there—he invited her to his exclusive event, blew off donors to make her feel comfortable, and placed her at the VIP table. All because why? He doesn’t like you?” She jumps out of her chair looking like a freaking superhero with one arm raised to the sky before slamming it on the table and pointing an accusing finger at me. “Ha! I knew I was right! He’s so into you!”

“Okay then, super sleuth.” I place both elbows on the table. “If that’s the case, then why has he rejected me not once”—I hold up my index finger—“but twice?” I ask, adding my middle finger.

“Looks like we have a mystery on our hands.” She rubs her palms together. “And do you know what that means?”

I don’t.

I have absolutely no freaking clue where the hell she is going with this. But apparently Vonnie and Poppy do.

“Oh fuck. I knew I was going to live to regret that,” Vonnie groans.

Poppy on the other hand, well, she’s clapping and her belly is bouncing in beat with her hair. “Ace is at his friend’s house doing homework and TK took Posie to her swim class, so the whiteboard is free.”

“The whiteboard?” Liv asks the question for me and Marie.

“Yes, my beautiful friends,” Brynn says. “The whiteboard solves all.”

Poppy grabs her purse off the chair and tosses it on her shoulder before leveling us all with a stare that I’m sure makes her children wither. “Snap snap! What are you waiting for? We have to get to my house and stake our claim before the rest of my motley crew tries to take it over.”

I stand up and start following her, doing whatever it takes to avoid being yelled at and making a pregnant lady angry.

And I do it while silencing the buzzing in my purse by sending a call straight to voicemail . . . again.

Twenty

Once, when I was in college, Liv and I took a trip to New York City. It was amazing. We ate, we drank overpriced cocktails, we wore our skankiest dresses, and one day, while we were taking a stroll through Central Park, a squirrel chased me until I threw it the almonds I was snacking on.

That was a weird day.

But it still doesn't compare to today.

I turn my key in the lock and push open my front door, still trying to figure out what in the actual hell just happened.

When Brynn said whiteboard, I figured it was a euphemism for something. Spoiler alert! It wasn't. It was a literal whiteboard. A giant one that damn near took up an entire wall in Poppy's house, but was still just a dry-erase board nonetheless. I guess when Brynn had problems with Maxwell, the Lady Mustangs staged an intervention and used the whiteboard to help her see the light. And for some reason, she thought the same could be done for me and Quinton.

There was just one major problem.

Quinton and I are not Maxwell and Brynn. The main difference being their relationship grew out of friendship and mutual respect. Quinton and I just started being able to stand in the same room as the other person and I'm pretty sure I assaulted him.

No whiteboard could help with that.

But we did break out into a very intense tic-tac-toe contest. Poppy's son, Ace, won. Which is total crap if you ask me because he's young and probably knows the algorithm. Thankfully for me, though, I didn't drink today so I had enough self-awareness not to say that thought out loud.

Oh.

And I also ignored two more texts from Quinton without reading.

Say it with me everybody: plausible deniability. But now that I'm home and don't have the Lady Mustangs, Liv, and Marie hovering over my shoulder, I'm going to have to be a grown-up and read them.

Sucks.

I hang my purse on the hook by the door and drop my keys in the bowl my dad painted the one time I was able to convince him to go to a pottery painting place with me. It's objectively terrible—an artist he was not—but it is easily one of my favorite pieces in my entire condo.

I toe off my shoes and leave them scattered across the rug protecting the hardwood floors from the door to my kitchen. I'm usually pretty good about putting everything in its place, but I'm lacking the motivation to walk the extra fifteen feet to put them in my closet right now. A feeling I'm sure most people would share after the day—and night—I've had.

The plastic gas station bag holding the plethora of sugar coma-inducing treats bounces off my thigh with every step I take. I might have a Ben & Jerry's-sized bruise tomorrow and I'm honestly okay with that. It will be the most on-brand injury in the history of injuries.

In the kitchen, I empty the bag on the white countertops I had installed right after I moved in. The pint of peanut butter cup ice cream rolls off the counter and hits the ground with a plop. The lid pops off and white droplets of melted ice cream splatter across the hardwood floor that I'm still not sure how to properly take care of. I pick up the ice cream, not bothering to put it in the freezer, and wipe up the splatter art with a paper towel. I'll find a wood cleaner later, right now I'm in a race against room temperature to eat my ice cream.

I leave the rest of the candy sprawled out on the counter. There are a lot of perks to living alone, but the main one is that nobody will steal your snacks.

I grab a spoon out of my drawer and push it closed with my butt as I make my way straight toward my couch. If anything can ease the pain of the last twenty-four hours, it's reality TV and ice cream . . . and I plan on indulging in both.

But before my butt can meet the comfort it's yearning for and I can stuff my feelings down with the calorie-dense, only momentarily effective ice cream, there's a knock at the door.

“Fuck.” I hiss, not wanting to talk about Quinton or Mrs. Rafter or anything actually, with Liv or Marie or whoever else followed me home. These women are relentless and the only reason I even open the door for them is because of the built-up guilt they aren’t letting me repress.

“I’m out of wine and I’m not sharing my ice cream, so don’t even ask.” I swing open the door and then slam it shut when Quinton’s stupid handsome face greets me on the other side.

What the fuck?! Can’t this day just be over already?

“Ummm, Elle?” Quinton knocks on the door again. “If I promise not to ask for some of your ice cream, will you open the door again?”

I wonder how much it would hurt if I jumped out of my bedroom window? I’m only on the second floor. I doubt I’d die or anything. A pair of snapped ankles maybe?

But, as appealing as broken bones sound at the moment, I do the thing Brynn talked about in quadrant four on the whiteboard. I act like an adult and open the door.

“Hi. I’m so sorry. I thought you were someone else. I mean, obviously I didn’t think it was you. Why would I think it was you? And if I did think it was you I wouldn’t have offered you ice cream, I just wouldn’t have opened the door.” My eyes feel like they are going to pop out of my head and I slap my hand across my mouth. “That’s not what I meant! I would’ve opened the door, I just wouldn’t have offered ice cream.”

Stone-cold sober and still suffering from drunk mouth. What did I think was going to happen yesterday? I brought this on myself.

“Are you okay?” He sounds concerned, but even though his beard hides some of his amusement, it’s for sure still there. I’m pretty sure he’s about to laugh at me.

And maybe that’ll be the icebreaker before he tells me I’m:

- A. Fired
- B. Having charges brought against me
- C. Facing a public shaming for my abhorrent behavior
- D. All of the above

It will be like a trifecta of shame.

I ignore his question because I’m very obviously not fucking okay. I’m a literal disaster and I will not humor him. I refuse.

“Umm, so . . .” I look over his shoulder for a stern man in a suit lingering behind him with a restraining order and let out a sigh of relief when I don’t see one. Good sign. “Do you want to come in or something?”

“Yeah, that’d probably be good.”

“Welcome, then.” I scoot over and motion into my modest home.

He walks inside. Even in a Mustangs sweatshirt and matching sweatpants, his long, confident strides seem out of place in my little condo. Even though I really like his Afro fade, the orange beanie he’s wearing looks good on him. All of this makes me even more furious for kissing him.

Before last night, I could mask my appreciation for his physical attributes with a roll of my eyes or a quick question. He never would’ve suspected a thing. But now? Now every time I catch his gaze, he’s probably going to panic that I’m going to launch another attack.

I just started to accept my lust and I can’t even partake in it anymore!

Life is so unfair.

I lock the door behind him, making sure my eyes absolutely do not linger on the way his ass fills out the loose sweatpants, and hurry in front of him.

“Sorry it’s a mess.” I bend down to grab my shoes and then toss them into the spare room that I turned into my office. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

My house is not a mess.

This is a lie I picked up from my dad. No matter how clean our house was, he always apologized for the mess when we had guests. He cleaned every single day. “If you stay on top of it, it will never get out of hand,” he said. Advice, I should add, that also applies to the disaster that has become my entire freaking life.

“This is a mess?” He looks around the room, his eyes scanning my perfectly placed throw pillows and lined up remotes. “Seriously?”

“I haven’t . . .” I look around for something to critique. “Dusted. I haven’t dusted.”

“Yeah, the dust in here is crazy. You should get on that.” His sarcasm is well noted and not appreciated.

“Jerk.” I roll my eyes and shake my head, but my heart’s not really in it.

Awkward silence drifts between us. I know why he’s here. He knows why he’s here, but neither of us seem able to address the giant drunk elephant in the room.

But since I’m the cause of it, I decide to pull up my big-girl undies and face it.

“Listen—” I say at the exact moment that Quinton says, “About last night.”

“No.” I ball my hands into fists, my dull nails still managing to bite into the sweaty skin of my palms. “Let me, this is all my fault. I don’t know what came over me last night.” *Lie number one.* “I was drunk and not thinking clearly.” *Half lie.* “I just haven’t talked about my dad in a long time . . . Well, I’ve never really talked about him.” *That’s actually the truth! Besides in therapy, I never mention him.* “And I think between the emotions and the tequila I just blacked out a little bit. I honestly do not think of you like that at all.” *Massive fucking lie.* “If anything, you drive me a little nuts. I have no idea what happened, but trust me, it will never happen again.”

As soon as he leaves, I need to find the rosary Mrs. Rafter gave me and do some kind of praying because after all of that lying? I’m going to hell for sure.

“Okay, yeah.” His shoulders slump down, the relief he must be feeling that he no longer needs to worry for his safety leaves his body. The small step he takes back, though, lets me know he’s still not positive I’ll be able to keep my hands to myself. “I just wanted to make sure things would be good between us. You weren’t answering your phone and I didn’t want you to quit over a misunderstanding.”

“You called? I didn’t even notice any missed calls.”

I am so going to hell.

And by the look on Quinton’s face, he knows I am too. An actress I am not.

“So we’re alright? I felt like we were just getting to a really good place, I don’t want to ruin that.”

“No, I mean yeah.” I crack my knuckles, a habit I always revert back to when I’m nervous. “We’re good. It will never happen again. And I’d

like it if we got along, because if you thought the work leading up to the launch was intense, you're in for a rude awakening."

Even though I stayed clear of the office today, I've been checking my emails all day. And the amount of interest in Quinton's foundation is wild. The inquiries about what he was talking about, what pension parity even is, were borderline overwhelming.

"I'm ready, I've been ready." He pulls the beanie off his head and toys with it between his hands.

I swear he's testing me. Letting me get a good look at him with and without the beanie. I could conduct a thesis and still not know which way he looks hotter.

"Good." After seeing his speech last night, I have no doubt he's telling the truth. If anything, I'll need to remind him to focus on the field. "So why don't we meet tomorrow after practice and plan on setting up meetings with Pro Players for Equal Treatment? Their cause is one a lot of people still need to be educated on. I was thinking I could set up a joint interview with you and their representative to really get the message out."

"Sounds good." He shoves his hat into his pocket as he heads for the door. I trail behind him, careful not to get too close, reminding myself of personal boundaries the entire ten-foot walk. "Alright then." He lifts two fingers to his dark, full, always stern-looking brows, and salutes. "See you tomorrow . . . friend."

Friend? Awww, the friend zone. It's so cozy in here.

"Okay, yeah. Tomorrow—" I forget what words are and how they work. "We'll get to work then."

He walks out of the door and I watch him until he disappears into the stairwell. I close the door, only locking it by muscle memory, before walking back to my half-melted ice cream.

Friend? Did Quinton Howard Junior just call me his friend?

What in the entire fuck just happened?

I guess whatever it is, it's still better than being unemployed . . . or at least not for another two to three months.

Twenty-one

The ping of my email is almost white noise at this point.

I knew coming back to the office after the launch party would be wild, but I still managed to underestimate just how wild it would be.

I was prepared for press inquiries. I had interviews set up. Press conferences for the next two weeks were scheduled. I was ready with Quinton's mission statement and the press kit we prepared before the launch. What I wasn't prepared for were the calls and emails from other teams' PR managers, telling me that their owners are starting to panic and I need to figure out a way to shut Quinton's protesting down and fast.

I wasn't prepared to hear from the players union about staying in my lane and telling Quinton if he was so worried about this, he should've done more than taking a knee and throwing them underneath the bus. That they had to worry about current players and now cleaning up his mess before they can actually protect the players he's claiming to be so worried about.

Even though I listened to Quinton as we set up the foundation, he always seemed to skate around the details of the individual charities he wanted to focus on. And he did a full-on dance routine when I tried to get him to tell me what, exactly, pension parity is and why it means so much to him.

On the surface, I get it. Equal pensions. Cool. Easy. But there's been a piece of this puzzle that's been missing since day one.

And figuring it out is why I've been ignoring my emails and why I continue to do so until my office phone begins to ring on my desk.

"This is Elliot," I say, half distracted reading about one of my dad's favorite players who is now struggling with ALS.

“Elliot, yes.” The voice on the other end is familiar. “I have been sending you emails for the last twenty minutes. Mr. Mahler would like to see you in his office now,” Gemma—I now recognize—says into the phone before disconnecting without a goodbye.

“Oh shit.” I open my email and see seven new emails from the man upstairs.

“You alright?” Quinton’s deep voice makes me jump in my seat.

“Fuck!” My vocabulary continues to spiral out of control when I check the clock and realize it’s three minutes before I’m scheduled to meet with Quinton and of course he’s not late, like a considerate person. “Shit.” I shake my head, trying to clear out all of the profanity that is occupying my brain right now. “I mean, I’m so sorry. Mr. Mahler needs to meet with me.”

His thick eyebrows arch to his hairline. “About what?”

“Another project I’m working on for him.” I spin back to my computer, hoping to close all of the tabs I have open fast enough that Quinton won’t see what I’ve been obsessing over. I’m sure the last thing he needs to be reminded of is a former player with ALS. “Don’t worry, this one isn’t about you.”

He tries to neutralize his expression, but every time he gets angry, he gets this look like he just sucked on a sour candy. I’m not sure if he even knows he does it, but his chin tucks in and his lips purse out like he can taste whatever’s bothering him so much. “Good for you. Makin’ boss moves, I see.”

I pretend not to notice how irritated he is. Working with him is great, but it’s also consuming all of my time. Having another project to distract me from my very attractive friend with soft lips that I can’t touch again will be good for all of us.

“I’m trying.” I grab my iPad out of my drawer. “Why don’t you head out and I can meet you at your place after this, if it isn’t too late? If that’s okay with you, of course.”

Because “friend” or not, he’s still pretty much my boss and my job still depends on our ability to work together and get things done.

“That’s fine,” he says. “Just give me a call when you’re finished.”

“Will do!” I call over my shoulder as I start to run down the hall. “And start thinking of a statement we can send to the players union! They’re pissed!”

I don't turn around to see his reaction, but even without looking, I know there's a glare on his face. So even though I hate running, I run to Mr. Mahler's office with a smile on my face.

"Hey Gemma! Sorry about the emails," I yell as I blow past Mr. Mahler's secretary and barrel into his office. "Mr. Mahler, I heard you need me."

I'm out of breath when I say this and I can feel the edges of my hair beginning to curl from the sweat. I really need to work out more often.

"Yes." Mr. Mahler leans forward on the table, steeping his hands in front of his face. "I wanted to make sure you were still committed to the fundraiser I need organized. I know the other night was a bit . . ." He pauses as he tries to find the word he's looking for. "Hectic."

Hectic? Out of everything that night was, hectic wouldn't have even registered with me . . . and I fucking kissed Quinton!

"Um, yes." I humor him. "A lot happened"—*understatement of the century*—"but I do remember agreeing to this and I'm looking forward to helping you create a wonderful and successful event."

"I knew I could count on you." He leans back into his leather chair and slaps a wrinkled, unnaturally tanned hand against his bare desk. "Take a seat, let's chat for a moment."

Satisfaction that I'm making myself known—and needed—within this organization causes a wave of pleasure that makes my skin flush.

I sit in the chair across from him—the same place I was sitting when he told me my job was on the line—ready to prove just how valuable I am. I swipe open the iPad screen and go straight to my notes app.

"Now, what exactly is this event for? Once I know that, we can come up with a theme and let ideas begin to form from there."

I love the details and even the technical aspects of an event, but the beginning stage, where I can let my imagination run wild, is my favorite part.

"Actually, my dear," he says, and I hope I hide the way I cringe from a person in power calling me by a term of endearment. Gross. "I can't tell you anything about this event until you sign an NDA. We want to make sure everything about this stays under lock and key until it happens."

I'm sure a nondisclosure agreement would throw most people, but I'm not most people. And as someone who has been on the other side of these situations, I understand the need to keep the details of a high-profile event under wraps.

To be honest, I always thought the people who signed them—no questions asked—were a little nutty. But now that I'm on the other side, I get it. It's kind of thrilling to be in the know on something so secretive and important. And after the way Quinton just stepped up to the plate, I can't wait to see what Mr. Mahler does next.

"Not a problem, Mr. Mahler. I understand your discretion and I have no problem signing an NDA." I sit up as straight as possible and hope my posture helps me come across as assertive. "But while we wait, basic details—like if it will be a formal sit-down dinner or more a cocktail hour with passed hors d'oeuvres, and what the anticipated guest count will be—will at least give me some kind of starting point. The date would be the most helpful. I can't even begin looking for a venue if I don't know when I'll need it."

"Oh, well, I guess I don't see the harm in that. The event won't take place until the first week of January. We want it to be a Friday so we won't have to worry about it interfering with the playoffs. It will be small, I'd say somewhere between thirty to forty guests. We want to keep it intimate." He folds his hands on the top of his desk. "I know you people love a big loud party, but sometimes it's better to keep it small."

My fingers stumble across the screen. *You people?* What the fuck? I'm hoping he means millennials. He has to mean that. Right? I tap the information into my notes, keeping my thoughts to myself, sure I'm turning his words into something they're not.

"Got it," I say when I'm finished. "When the nondisclosure is ready for me to sign, please let me know and I'll take care of that so we can get started planning immediately."

"Oh yes, very good." Mr. Mahler stands behind his oak desk, the corners of his mouth tilting up in a way that's anything but comforting. He's always reminded me a bit of a Disney villain, but even more so now as he reaches his hand across the table to shake my hand. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

I want to remind him that we already work together. Literally. He's my boss. But I don't.

"So am I." I stand from my seat and return his firm handshake. "Thank you for this opportunity."

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine." The smile on his face tenses a little bit as his fingers tighten around my hand. "I assure you."

I offer him my kindest smile before spinning on my heel and leaving his plush office.

"Bye, Gemma." I wave to the receptionist, who seems to have forgiven me from earlier. "Have a good evening."

"You too," she says, her normally warm smile back on her face.

I push open the heavy glass door and head into the window-lined hallway leading away from his office. When I'm at work, I tend to rush through everything. I don't tend to be seen as someone who can't keep up with the pace, so I move so quickly that I forget to slow down and breathe. But now that the halls are quiet and the parking lot is almost empty, I take this moment to stop and take in the view sprawling out in front of me. With everything that has happened in this last year, sometimes it's easy for me to ignore things like this. It's easy for me to forget that as bad as life has been, I still got my dream job. I did that. Even with the shit storm that has swirled around me.

There are things in life that we can't control. No matter how many positive affirmations we say or books we read or podcasts we listen to. Nothing I could've done would've stopped my dad from dying. It's a fact of life. Death comes for us all. And even though I feel like I've been stuck under the weight of the rubble that collapsed on me, I still managed to keep going and fought for the things I could have power over. Yeah, it hasn't gone exactly as planned, but I'm still doing it. And I need to appreciate that.

I need to appreciate myself.

With fall settling in, the sun is starting to set a little earlier each night. The sun fades behind the mountains, and the pink and orange clouds wisp across the sky above the perfectly maintained fields. In this moment of calm, a sense of peace I haven't felt in ages settles over me and I know that one day, I'll be okay again.

Gentle footsteps pull my attention from the view in front of me.

“Hey,” Quinton says when I catch sight of him. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, just taking in the view.” I keep my gaze on the changing sky as the clouds dance across the horizon.

“It is pretty amazing.” He closes the distance between us and stands beside me, taking in the view with me. “We had good ones in Dallas, but the mountains take them to another level.”

“I forgot you’re from Dallas. My mom’s family lived there, I visited when I was a kid. It seemed nice from what I can remember.”

I—admittedly—don’t remember much besides missing my dad and not feeling like I fit in. I remember going for Thanksgiving break one year and just feeling lost the entire time. After my mom died, my dad had a really hard time being around her family. I still don’t know if it’s because it made him miss her more or if he felt guilty that he couldn’t protect her. But when they invited us for Thanksgiving that year, he mysteriously had to go on a work trip and sent me by myself. I hated it. None of the food I normally ate at Thanksgiving was there, they didn’t listen to any of the music I listened to, I got in trouble for using the hand towels in the bathroom. I was with family, but I felt like a stranger.

I didn’t go back and they never came to Colorado to see me.

Such is life.

“Yeah, it’s nice. I’m not sure it prepared me for these Colorado winters everyone keeps warning me about, though. Atlanta’s winters were pretty mild too.”

“Pshhh. The winters are nothing.” I wave him off. “It’s the spring that really bites you in the ass. Just when you think you escaped without a snowstorm? Bam! Blizzard. It’s super fun. And, it’s scientifically proven that they only come when I’m out of milk and bread.”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see his smile grow as his deep chuckle washes over me. I don’t know what it is, but it’s so soothing. He could start a Pandora station just of his laughter, and masseuses would play it while people got massages, it’s that good.

“So if I keep you stocked, we’ll be safe?”

“Yup, you can’t argue with science.” I stop and amend my statement. “Well, you shouldn’t argue with science.”

“Truth,” he says.

We continue to stare out of the window until the blue starts to deepen and the pinks fade. Which reminds me that even though I’m only thirty-one, I already hate to drive in the dark. And also, that I told Quinton not to wait up.

“Why are you here anyway?” Once I hear the words out loud, I realize how rude they sound and cringe. He’s going to think I’m incapable of being anything other than a bitch. “Nope, let me rewind. I thought you were going to head out. What made you stay?”

There. That was better . . . marginally.

“I went to talk to Jason about some extra stretches, my shoulder’s been bothering me a little.” He must see the panic that crosses my face. He might drive me nuts, but he can’t be hurt, the Mustangs need him. “I’m fine, really. I just want to get ahead of it.”

That seems like something a reasonable person who doesn’t procrastinate would do. Not that I can relate to that in any way, shape, or form. What can I say? I make plans and life laughs—or punches me—in my face. And I’ve learned the punches hurt more when you’re expecting a different outcome.

Expectations, kids. Don’t have any.

“Okay, that’s good.” I take one last look out of the window before turning and starting to walk down the long hallway. “My fantasy team would not be happy if you weren’t out there.”

“I’m on your fantasy team?” he asks, a cocky, shit-eating grin pulling across his face.

“Don’t let it go to your head. You were the only quarterback left. Definitely not my first choice.” I lift my hand to pat his arm before remembering that I kissed him the other night, and all touching, no matter how innocent, should probably be off limits.

“Woooow.” His laugh returns and my steps falter. “Okay, I see how it is.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes, hoping he doesn’t notice how much he affects me. I never thought I’d say this, but it was so much easier being around him when I hated him. “Well, since you’re still here, do you want to try and get some work done?”

“I’m actually starving.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and glances at the time. “It’s not too late. Wanna go grab a bite somewhere

first?”

We're just friends. He does not like you like that. This is not a date. It's a professional courtesy because despite what you initially thought of him, he's actually a decent guy. So calm the fuck down, Elliot.

Logically, I know what this is, but my stupid hormones don't seem to get the memo. My palms start to sweat and the place where my stomach used to be is replaced with butterflies.

“Um, yeah, sure.” I keep my eyes trained in front of me. I'm convinced if I look at him, he'll be able to see that I'm still thinking about kissing him and run for the hills. “Dinner would be good.”

“Cool.” His voice is calm and steady, just like always. Which, of course it is. Just another reminder that I'm not his type and he doesn't see me in that light at all. “Since you picked the place last time and I didn't even get food, I'm picking this go-round. Wanna follow me there?”

I hate choosing restaurants, so this works for me. “Sounds good. Let me just go shut down everything and grab my purse.”

“Great.” He gives me that manly chin nod that all dudes seem to learn during puberty when they're too cool for words. “I'll pull my car around the front and wait there.”

“Perfect, I'll be there in a sec.”

He walks away and I only watch him for a second before I remember what I'm supposed to do. I head to my desk in a bit of a haze, only shutting down my computer from pure muscle memory as I try to get my mind right to have dinner with Quinton.

Hopefully I'll manage to not make a total fool out of myself . . . again.

Twenty-two

I follow Quinton to a restaurant not far from his house.

I do this thinking he's much better at leading than I was when we went to Stanley's. He even passes up the parking spot right in front of the door and goes for the one that's a little further but has an open one right beside it. It's frustrating that when I really need to be focusing on reasons why I don't want to kiss him again, he seems to be going out of his way to be chivalrous.

"What is this place?" I ask as I push open my door.

Quinton is standing behind my car with his hands in his pocket and a smirk on his face. "You're a terrible driver."

Oh. Okay. Yeah. This is the ammunition I need.

"First of all, rude. Second of all, how dare you?" I climb out of my car and lock the doors before tossing my keys in my purse. "I'm a fantastic fucking driver. You, on the other hand, drive like a grandpa."

Whatever. Sure I just said he was nice to follow. I lied. Or am lying. Same difference.

He falls into step beside me as we cross the parking lot. "I had to be a grandpa because you rode so close to my bumper that if I went faster and had to stop, you would've killed us both."

"Whoa now, big fella. Playing it a little fast and loose with the exaggerations, don't you think?"

"Big fella?" His shoulders bounce with laughter as he pulls open the door. "We'll just have to agree to disagree."

"As long as we're agreeing that we disagree with what you said, that's fine with me." I approach the hostess, who is on her phone, before Quinton can retort. "Hi! Two please."

I don't mean to startle her, but by the way she fumbles her phone before it finally falls to the floor, that's what I do.

“Crap. I mean, sorry!” She grabs her phone and shoves it beneath the hostess stand before grabbing two menus. “Follow me.”

I wasn’t really paying attention when we were pulling in, so following her to the seat is the first time I really take in my surroundings. The restaurant isn’t anything to write home about. There’s a glassed-off area above the bar seating where you can see the chef rolling sushi. Japanese-inspired lanterns hang overhead, lighting the room. The tables are a light wood and there are lots of red and black decorations hung around the room. It’s cute, someplace I could totally picture stopping on the way home from work when I don’t feel like cooking (which is pretty much every day).

“Here you go.” The hostess stops at a booth near the rear of the restaurant.

“Thank you.” Quinton turns his attention to the hostess and directs his full, wonderful smile her way. She freezes midmotion, the menus hovering over the middle of the table as color fills her face. It isn’t until he pulls them from her hands that her brain seems to kick back into gear and she damn near runs away from us.

Poor girl. Not that I can blame her. Out of everyone, I fully understand how being on the receiving end of Quinton’s attention can scramble your brain.

I want to make a joke about what he does to people, but since I have been people in this situation, I keep my lips zipped . . . and to myself. Off to a great start!

“I probably should’ve asked if you liked sushi before, but—uh . . . do you like sushi? Or we can go grab Mexican . . . if you like Mexican food.”

And fucking fuck me. How is he even more endearing like this? He just always has this air of confidence following him around like cologne. Even on the field while people are booing or in the conference room when reporters are grilling him, he never seems off balance. So seeing him stumble over his words, it makes me feel like I might be getting a glance at the real Quinton, not the practiced facade he puts on so well.

“First of all, I love sushi, this is perfect. Second, what kind of person doesn’t like Mexican food?” The thought of people not liking the culinary gift of the gods honestly offends me. “You’re in Colorado now,

Howard. This is the home of Qdoba and Chipotle, where we have strived to get as much burrito in our mouths in the shortest amount of time. It's an institution!"

I don't mean for my voice to rise, but if there is one thing I'm undeniably passionate about, it's tacos.

"Damn, killer! I'm on your side, no need to attack." He drops the menu on the tiled tabletop and holds his hands in front of him, surrendering to my salsa-infused indignation.

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop the smile that's trying to overtake my face, but it's useless. I'm defenseless when it comes to playful Quinton. Lucky for me, though, before I can giggle or do something equally as mortifying, the waiter approaches the table.

"Mr. Howard, you're back!" the middle-aged man with a fantastic handlebar mustache says. "Do you want your usual?"

"Bobby, my man." Quinton shakes his hand. "I do, but I'm not sure what my friend wants."

There's that word again. "Friend." Blah.

Bobby turns his attention to me. His eyes are wide, but his smile is wider. "Oh yes, you brought a friend today! Can I get you something to drink?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to order something with sake. But I'm still scarred from the other night and will not be indulging in alcohol of any kind around Quinton.

"Can I have a Diet Coke?" I scan the menu, making sure they have my go-to order. "And I'll have a rainbow roll, please."

Bobby nods without writing down the order and takes our menus. Now, this would normally make me pretty nervous, but something about his mustache reassures me. I don't think you can be anything but dependable with a handlebar mustache that thick. He walks away, calling out his hellos to an older couple sitting in the opposite corner of the restaurant.

"And you thought you were special." I point to the couple who are now on the receiving end of Bobby's attention. "You're not his only favorite."

"I know I'm not." He rests his elbows on the table. "I don't think he has any clue who I am, it's why I always come. Well, that and their sushi is the shit."

“Sushi and anonymity, that’s your kink?” As soon as I say the word, I want to fall under the table and roll myself out of the restaurant. I’m pretty sure if I touch my face, it will burn my hand. I could just die. There’s no way he’s not going to report me for harassment. Not a fucking chance. “Oh my god. No.”

I hide my face behind my hands—not even caring a little bit about how smeared my makeup is getting—and keep them there until Quinton’s unmistakable laughter fills the restaurant.

“I’ve never heard it that way before, but yeah, that’s my kink,” he says once I’ve peeled my hands off my face.

I fan my cheeks for a second before massaging my fingertips into my temples. I don’t know what’s worse. Saying shit like this sober or making a drunken fool out of myself. I’m thinking they’re equal.

I should’ve ordered the damn sake.

Bobby returns to the table with a tray carrying our drinks and edamame. I aim a grateful smile at him not only for the food, but the interruption as well.

“Moving on . . .” I take a deep gulp of my Diet Coke and my body rejoices. “So how have things been for you since the launch?”

Work is the only topic I think I might be safe discussing with him. It is, after all, the only reason we are speaking in the first place.

“Pretty good.” He avoids eye contact when he talks. “A lot of questions.”

I keep my response measured because even though he’s trying to play it cool, I can tell something is bothering him. I’ve learned a lot about him over the last month or so, and one of the big things is that he shuts down when he gets uncomfortable.

“Oh yeah? What kind of questions?” I grab an edamame and shoot a few beans into my mouth.

“Mainly, they’re trying to understand my issues with the League. Lots of personal questions. But I still have to clear up why I’m kneeling, remind them of systemic racism and police brutality.” He shrugs before grabbing the soy sauce and spinning it around on the table. “It doesn’t help that Glenn Chandler is still using me as one of his talking points. I don’t understand why he’s so intent on twisting what I’m doing.”

“I don’t know either. What I do know is that you can’t make everyone happy. We expected this. There are still people who don’t like Oprah. Oprah, Quinton! If the world can’t agree on Oprah being the best, then there is no hope for any of us.”

This is the pep talk I tell myself on almost a daily basis, but it doesn’t seem to give him the same reassurance it gives me.

He sits up straight and meets my gaze again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, it’s literally my job.” I drop the empty bean pod in the empty bowl next to the edamame. Shoving food in my mouth is one thing, talking with it in my mouth is another. I’m not a monster.

“I’d be blind not to see that a lot of people are pissed with my kneeling and that’s fine. Like you said, I can’t make everyone happy. But you made it pretty clear in the beginning that you weren’t my biggest supporter and I’m not sure I ever really understood why. Does it still make you mad?”

His mouth is saying one thing—that he’s curious and wants my opinion—but his eyes are saying something else. They are begging me to agree with him, pleading for me to tell him that I understand.

But I can’t.

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.” He fidgets with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “I won’t get mad, promise.”

I hope not.

“It never made me mad.” He opens his mouth to cut me off, probably thinking I’m blowing smoke up his ass right now. I hold a hand up and keep going. “It made me uncomfortable. I was just starting this new job . . . my dream job. I get why you’re doing it. I understand your cause and what you want to accomplish and I support that. I even respect it. But for me, personally and selfishly, it put me in a really tough position. Siding with my boss and keeping my job, or siding with you and the important cause you’re supporting. My job was kind of my bubble protecting me from the real world and you popped it.”

“But that’s the point. People are hiding in their bubbles and ignoring problems, letting things get worse. They go watch football games and pretend that the men they cheer for aren’t killing

themselves to entertain them. They think the League cares about players, when in reality they don't do shit." He no longer looks relaxed in the booth. Instead, every vein on his neck is bulging. His shoulders and arms are both stiff; no doubt he is trying to keep his words measured when he wants to yell. Serious conversations in public for the win! "And the racism! Every day when I turn on the news or look at Twitter, there's a new hashtag. Another Black life lost, and for what? For trying to live? And then I go work for rich white men who bank off our backs. Buying us, trading us, throwing us away when we're broken. Just to go back into a world that's moving backward instead of forward. I'm supposed to be quiet and thankful that they threw some money my way? Take it and shut up?"

Whoa.

I feel like I'm doing cartwheels in a minefield, but not just because of Quinton. My own mind is running wild and I don't like it.

"I don't know. What you're doing is messing with my head, okay? I think racism is the worst. But I've never known where I fit in this fight. I never felt like I belonged or was even welcome." If I could get away with pouring the soy sauce on his head, I would. I just wanted to eat and he has me talking about this. He's a jerk. A very hot jerk. "You're making me think about things I've avoided thinking about my entire life. I try to ignore race, and what you're doing is forcing me to examine things in a way I never have. I'm fucked up enough with everything else in my life without digging into the crazy parts of my brain."

So, remember how Quinton kept his voice down and only let his anger show through the tense lines of his muscle-covered body? Well, I do not have that skill. And by the end of my rant, not only is the old couple Bobby said hi to staring, but Quinton looks like he's about to laugh.

"So you're saying it really has nothing to do with me taking a knee and everything to do with you?"

And even though the soy sauce dumping might be unacceptable, I make the executive decision that throwing an edamame bean at him is fine. So I do. And it makes me feel better . . . until he catches it and pops it in his mouth like I did him a favor. "I hate you."

“Maybe, but that might have more to do with you than me too.” He looks like he wants to say something else when his phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket, looking at the screen for a split second before his shoulders tense up and he swipes his finger across the screen, putting it to his ear. “Angela.” His deep voice caresses each syllable of her name. “Is everything okay?”

Ugh. Angela. I’ve bumped into her a few times since our first run-in outside of Quinton’s house and every time she manages to seem even more beautiful and put together than before. Her long, naturally straight, perfectly highlighted blonde hair taunts me. Her cute little upturned nose is almost identical to the one I dreamed of when I begged my dad for a nose job. She’s tall, skinny, and has curves that fit perfectly in her probably size-zero skirts.

And the thought of her makes the embarrassment from the other night rise up once more. I mean really, what was I thinking?

“Okay,” he says and I tune back into his conversation. “I’m at dinner with a friend, but I’ll check in as soon as I get home. Alright . . . bye.”

I ignore the way him calling me a friend stings even more knowing Miss Perfect was on the other end of the phone. “Everything alright?”

“That? Oh yeah.” He fidgets with the wrapped silverware and chopsticks on the table. “It’s all good.”

“Glad to hear that.” I tread carefully with this subject; it’s not one I love talking about considering our recent history. “How long have you two been together?”

“What?” His fingers freeze on the torn edges of the napkin he’s fussed with. “No, we aren’t together.”

I want to roll my eyes and argue, but it’s not my place . . . at all. Also, Bobby approaches our table with a tray full of food.

“Rainbow roll for the lady.” He sets the long plate covered with the colorful roll in front of me.

“Yum.” I fight to keep my eyes from rolling to the back of my head. “Thank you.”

He puts Quinton’s plate down in front of him. “Spider roll and salmon roll, neither with avocado for you.”

“My man,” Quinton says as he rubs his hands together like a super villain ready to take over the world.

And if I just heard him correctly, a villain he is. “No avocado?” I eye his plate with keen interest. “Why not?”

“I hate it,” he says like he hasn’t just lost all of his credibility for being a good judge of anything in life.

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask, giving him the chance to change his answer to the right one.

“Hate it,” he repeats.

“Oh my god.” My chopsticks fall out of my hand and I turn to see if Bobby is nearby.

It’s one thing to force me to examine my own internal biases and to downplay his girlfriend situation, but it’s another thing completely to disrespect avocados. Everything else we can discuss later, but this? I will not stand for it.

“Just so you know, as soon as we leave here, we’re going to a Mexican restaurant and I’m forcing you to eat guacamole.” I pull out my phone to google the closest restaurant, even though my stomach is growling and I’m starving. “I can’t work with a person who doesn’t like avocados or guacamole. Unacceptable.”

Priorities.

Twenty-three

"I brought food!" I yell as soon as I walk into Quinton's house.

I kick off my shoes and push them against the wall—the jolt of the freezing-cold cement floors never fails to shock me—before I head into his kitchen with the plastic bag filled with more tacos than he could possibly eat.

Or at least, I hope. He's like a bottomless pit.

But since he told me he didn't like avocados and I force-fed him guacamole, I just keep bringing them—and ignoring the fact that my pants are legitimately starting to get too tight from constantly eating them with him.

However, can I just say that I find it incredibly unfair that he's an actual endless pit and still looks as though he has no body fat. Yeah, sure, he works out like seven days a week. Whatever. The point still stands. It's bullshit.

"Did you get guacamole?" He shouts this ridiculous question from somewhere in this massive, cold, echoey house of his and misses the theatrical rolling of my eyes.

"Come on, Howard. I thought we talked about this."

When we stopped by the Mexican restaurant after sushi, I ordered chips and guac. When the waiter brought it to the table, it was like dealing with a fucking toddler. But when he finally tried it, his eyes lit up and he devoured the entire bowl. Apparently his mom used to always make face masks out of avocado when he was growing up and his aversion came from that.

And that's how I successfully converted him to the Church of Avocado. It is my proudest accomplishment to date.

I pull the tacos out of the bag and line them up on his pristine white countertops that are only pristine because he never cooks. And

considering my life goal is to never have to worry about taking the meat out of the freezer and only cook when I want to—which is basically never—he’s living my fucking dream.

I’m only a little bitter.

I look at everything lined up on the counter and there is one very noticeable thing missing.

“Crap!” I meant to stop at 7-Eleven on the way over here, but started to listen to my favorite podcast and totally forgot.

“What’s wrong?” Quinton comes around the corner and even though we’ve been hanging around each other a lot recently, it’s still always a jolt to my system to see his hotness up close and personal.

Plus, even though his beard was never short, he’s stopped trimming it down and it just does things to me. *Things*. He’s younger than me by more than a couple of years, but the beard just makes him look like a grown-ass man. A zaddy, if you will. And I am here for it.

“Nothing really.” I walk to the cabinet that houses his dishes. “I just forgot to grab my Diet Coke on the way. I guess I can have water. My skin would probably appreciate that.”

“Water is the better choice.” He pulls two glasses down for us. “But I’m pretty sure I saw a Coke in my fridge earlier.”

“No.” I shake my head. I took the only one he had in there a few days ago. “I drank the one you had.”

“Check again.” He lifts his chin in the direction of his fridge.

“Angela was over here yesterday, she might’ve left one.”

Angela.

Blah.

So I know that Quinton and I are never going to happen. I get it. But it’s one thing to know that and it’s another to know that the reason why is because his “type” is the complete opposite of me. And while Quinton says they aren’t together, I get the feeling that’s just a technicality. Even though I’m an adult who lives in the time of Rihanna and body positivity and self-love, she still reminds me of all the times I was ignored while my skinny, blue-eyed, blonde friends were the envy of all. When all I wanted was to be one of those mixed girls who looked like both parents. The loose wavy hair or pixie nose or green eyes or something. Anything so that I could see myself in the people around me.

I swear, when Quinton asked why I didn't fully support him at first, he inadvertently opened a fucking floodgate in my mind. I've been remembering all of these things I thought I'd forgotten. I'm feeling things I'd learned to suppress. I hate feelings.

I pause in front of the fridge, squeezing my eyes shut to try to get myself under control and push everything to the back of my mind, where it belongs.

I open the door and sure enough, he's right. How Angela is consistently forgetting these blows my mind. I can't keep them stocked in my place. I almost feel bad for taking it.

But not that bad.

"You're right." I pull it out, not even waiting to get to the counter to crack it open. "Thanks."

"Hey," he says when I pull out the stool next to him. "You alright? You look . . . weird."

Another one for my ego!

"Wow, you sweet-talk all the girls like that?" I take a sip out of the can, looking at him over the aluminum rim.

He gets off his stool, shaking his head. "You know what I mean." He walks across the kitchen and pulls off a couple of paper towels before coming back. "You look like you were thinking about something and whatever it was, wasn't good."

"Oh no." I take a bite of my taco. There is no better stalling method than a mouthful of food. "I was just thinking about everything on my to-do list."

Even though that's a lie, I do have a shit ton of work to do.

"You still working on that thing for Mahler? What is it anyway?" he asks. His jaw clenches beneath his beard the way it always does when Mahler or any of the League's higher-ups are mentioned.

"Yup, still working on it." I take one of the napkins he brought over. "And I honestly don't know yet, but even if I did, couldn't tell you. I had to sign a nondisclosure agreement last week. So everything stays under wraps until the event itself."

"You know how I feel about him, so I won't say much. But I will say watch out, you can't trust him."

I don't tell him I think he's right, but I also don't tell him he's wrong. At this point, it's not really about trust, it's about building my

résumé and not burning bridges. But Quinton wouldn't know this because I never told him that my job is out here just dangling by a thread. It doesn't matter that Quinton might actually be a friend (that word still haunts my dreams) of mine . . . or at least someone I'm friendly with, I'm not sure he would stop taking a knee for me. And more so, I wouldn't ask him to. It'd feel more manipulative telling him now that we're getting along than it would've when I hated him.

"It'll be fine." Considering my past experiences with Mr. Mahler and my luck in general, this might be a bit of an exaggeration. But no need to tell Quinton this—therefore increasing the size of his head—right now. "The entire thing is only for thirty to forty people. How much damage could it do?"

"Pretty sure that's the question the girl asks at the beginning of every horror movie." He takes a giant bite of his taco and gives me a chance to let his words sink in.

"You know what? I really don't like you." I throw my wadded-up napkin at his head and for once, I actually hit my target. But instead of the immense joy I thought would follow, it's more like a dull jolt of triumph for accuracy followed by disappointment from the lack of reaction from Quinton and the way it falls so gently to the floor.

"Do you feel better now?" He follows my gaze to the stupid, useless ball of paper on the floor.

"Not even a little bit." I hope he can hear the warning in my voice. "As an avid Bravo watcher, I've seen my fair share of items tossed in people's faces and I'm not afraid to step my game up."

"Is that where that one chick flipped the table and was yelling about prostitutes?"

Well fuck me.

Seriously.

I want him to do it.

He watches *Real Housewives*? He plays professional football, donates his salary to worthy causes, and watches Bravo. I've literally never been so attracted to a man in my entire freaking-ass life.

"You watch Bravo?" I ask, but I know it's too good to be true. That's probably one of the many things he does with Angela when she's over here forgetting about her Diet Cokes.

“I’ve watched.” He shrugs before picking up another taco like he didn’t just discover my love language. “My mom likes it, so I’ll watch it with her.”

The visual I get of him watching *Real Housewives* with his mom and not Angela does things to my insides that I’m not proud of. It’s so sweet to picture him sitting with his mom, not caring what they watch, just wanting to spend time with her.

“I bet you can’t wait to go back home to watch it with her. I’m sure watching the Dallas franchise is even more fun when you’re there.”

“Probably.” He doesn’t meet my eyes and shoves another bite into his mouth. I wonder if he dated one of the housewives? I’m pretty sure one of them was a cheerleader. His shoulders tense up and his jaw does that clenching thing before he tries to hide it with the phoniest smile that I have ever seen. Glad he can throw a football, because acting is def not an option for him. “Can’t wait to go home to see.”

He sounds like he’s stepping on a nail and is doing everything he can not to show me just how much he never wants to go home. Between his dad not coming to the launch or being on the board and his reaction to me mentioning Dallas, something has to be going on. And as a person who understands the desire to keep all family matters under wraps, I drop it.

“Anyways, speaking of things I like to watch”—I really am the segue queen—“Vonnie invited me to go to the next Mustangs game with her. I wanted to run it by you since it’s your box too. I didn’t want it to be weird.”

“Not weird at all. I can just give you one of my tickets if you want, that way you can ride on your own.” All of the tension he was sporting is gone just as fast as it arrived. So much so that I wonder if I imagined it all. “I think that’s the game right before Halloween. I’m not a kid expert, but I feel like Halloween makes kids nuts and you might want your own exit plan.”

“Oh, uh—no. You don’t need to do that.” I try my best to sound convincing, but fail miserably. Probably because the giant lump that just materialized out of nowhere makes it hard for me to speak.

Because ugh. Halloween.

He places the taco in his hand back on his plate before pushing it to the side. “Hey.” His voice is almost as soft as his eyes as he leans in

closer to me. "Are you okay?"

I wave my hand in front of him. "Yeah, of course I am." I try to laugh it off as no big deal, but instead, my laugh mingles with the sob stuck in the back of my throat.

Oh my god.

I'm going to cry in front of him.

Again.

"Fuck." I slap my hands over my eyes when tears flood my vision and I realize there is no possible way to force them back down. "I'm so sorry." The words are smothered in my hands as my breathing hitches with each mortifying sob that takes over my body.

And before I know what's happening, heat envelopes me as long arms wrap around my shoulders and Quinton pulls me into his chest.

Any other time, I'm sure I would take note of his cologne and how his arms fit so perfectly around me. But instead, all I can think about is how crazy I must look and that there's a ninety percent likelihood of me ruining his shirt with either my mascara or snot.

Please, God, let it just be the mascara.

His hands start to rub circles along my back and he whispers words I can't comprehend in my ear.

The only thing I know, is that for the first time in a long time, I don't feel alone and it's that feeling . . . that realization . . . that slows my tears. Quinton's arms loosen as my body starts to relax, but he doesn't pull them away. His hands rest on my shoulders, and the heat and strength from his reassuring touch seeps into my body.

"I'm so sorry." I start to extract myself from his arms, but I don't make it far before his grip tightens.

"Don't you dare fucking apologize for that." He bends down so he's looking me straight in my eyes. "Are you okay?"

I start to say I'm fine. This is not what he signed up for . . . this isn't what *I* signed up for. But then I wonder when else I'll be able to share my feelings. When will I have this support and attention from someone offering to be a shoulder to lean on? My friends have been amazing throughout all of this, but I'm sure they can only take so much of my crying until they get sick of me. It might be nice to vent to a person I probably won't ever talk to again once I'm finished with this job.

But the real reason is that I'm so fucking tired of saying I'm fine when I'm not. I'm over being strong. I'm exhausted from the effort it takes to bury everything and walk around like nothing is bothering me. The smile I've been wearing is so heavy. I don't want to do it anymore.

"I've been pretending the holidays weren't going to come this year. I know it's only Halloween and it doesn't even count as a real holiday for most people. But once I got too old to trick-or-treat, I would pass out candy with my dad and as soon as we'd turn off the porch light, we'd watch a movie that gave me nightmares until the following Halloween. Even in college. I'd do the parties one night, but I always came home and did this with him." I look down at his stupid, bare cement floor that really needs a rug and wipe away the stray tears I don't try to stop from falling. "He's not here, the house is gone, and I can't even watch the movies because unless it airs on Disney—and not even always then—I get too freaked. And yes, I know how ridiculous this sounds."

"None of that sounds ridiculous." His fingers bite into my skin for a split second before his hands fall to his sides. "You miss your dad. The time of year when everyone is preaching about family is coming up. It'd sound ridiculous if you weren't feeling like this."

"Really?" I try to wipe away the remnants of melted mascara that's probably staining my cheeks and take a deep breath before meeting his gaze again.

And when I do?

Holy shit.

I might be drunk off feelings or the constant welling of tears has distorted my vision, but the way he's looking at me knocks what little air I do have right out of my system. I can't even pinpoint what I see. But it's not the look of pity or disinterest. He doesn't look irritated or annoyed that I broke down in his kitchen and he was forced to comfort me. It's none of those things. Understanding maybe? I'll never know.

"So . . ." He wiggles his eyebrows and looks cuter than anyone wiggling their eyebrows has a right to look. "Do you want that ticket and parking pass or nah?"

"Ugh." I groan and take a step away from him. My brain is struggling to function from all of the nearness and physical contact of

a human male. “I mean, if you insist. It would be rude to turn you down.”

“Thank you, I’m not sure my delicate ego could’ve taken the rejection.” He grins and his white teeth just sparkle against his beautiful dark skin.

I nearly fall into a trance looking at him, so for the sake of self-preservation, I turn on a heel and book it out of there. Only slowing down to yell over my shoulder once I’m sure his smile magic can’t take hold of me. “Hurry up, Howard. If you’re done being so unprofessional, it’s time to work.”

I don’t even make it around the corner before a wadded-up paper towel—just like the one I hit him with earlier—whizzes by my head, just missing its mark.

Note to self—don’t get into a throwing war with a professional fucking quarterback.

And not falling for him would be good too.

Twenty-four

Even though Quinton gave me a parking pass along with tickets—yes, plural, like I have friends who want to watch football with me—to the game, Vonnie insisted that we ride together. I gave in easily because there's free booze and having a designated driver works in my favor more than anyone else's.

What I didn't realize is the insanity that comes from riding in a car with three boys who have been strapped down in their seats for forty minutes after they have no doubt been sneaking Halloween candy for the last week.

And let me tell you, if I wasn't already planning on drinking, I sure as hell would be now.

"Mmmh. You see?" Vonnie says from inside the suite door as she watches me head straight for the bar. Her boys, who sprinted away from us as soon as we parked, are already sitting in their seats, plates piled high with goodies sitting on their laps. "You see why I made sure to make the woman who owns a bar my best friend?"

"I honestly don't know how you do it." I "accidentally" pour too much Jameson into my glass before topping it with a minuscule amount of ginger ale. "The fact that you can ignore and break up their fights and still manage to drive while not getting into a million accidents is a straight-up miracle."

After seeing the way Vonnie had to manage a million things at once, I'm not sure having kids is in the cards for me.

When Quinton said I wasn't a good driver, he wasn't exactly wrong. I mean, I'm not a *bad* driver, but I definitely cannot multitask when I drive. Putting on lipstick in traffic? Nope. Eating? Hell no. Even singing to the radio has its risks, it's why I got satellite radio. Talk radio saves lives, people.

“Thank you!” She throws her hands in the air. “Everybody acts like I have it so easy and this shit is hard. I love my boys, but fuck, can a girl get some support around here?”

Vonnie laughs as she navigates her way around the high-top table where she drops her clear purse before making her way to the bar. But even though her laugh is convincing and her smile is beautiful, I don’t believe her. Normally, I would take this at face value and let it slide. Let’s be honest, as evidenced by my own life, feelings aren’t particularly my strong point. But this isn’t the first time she’s made a joke like this. I have a feeling that if Vonnie doesn’t say something soon, she’s going to explode.

I might not be much help when it comes to sorting things out, but I am the perfect person to commiserate with.

“Hey.” I hand her a glass as she reaches for the vodka. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah girl.” She takes the glass from my hand without looking at me. “Of course everything is fine! Just a little mom venting, nothing a little cocktail and a lot of football can’t handle.”

As a person who has mastered the art of hiding my hurt behind a little self-deprecating humor, I know what she’s doing maybe even more than she does.

“If you’re sure.” I keep my voice quiet—measured—but I don’t move to give her space. “Because I’m not sure if you’ve been paying attention these last few weeks, but I’m a total disaster and if there is one person you can talk to who will not judge you, it’s me.”

I don’t mention that I’m pretty sure Brynn would move heaven and earth for her. I get how hard it is to talk to the people closest to you. To feel like you’re laying your burdens on them.

“You’re sweet for offering, but I really am fine.” She turns to face me, taking a sip of a drink that has about a shot too much of vodka for it to do anything but burn her esophagus. Her full lips are painted the most gorgeous shade of red, her eyes are flawlessly lined, and her highlighter makes her look like a glittering angel. She is perfection.

But the highlighter also shows off the hollowness in her cheeks that wasn’t there a few weeks ago and the eyeliner points out the sadness in her eyes. Her lipstick shows a smile that was painted on for show.

Even her crystal-covered sweater falls off her shoulder in a way that is not for fashion but because of weight I don't think she was intending to lose. But all I can do is offer to be there, I don't want to push her if she's not ready.

"Okay, if you're sure." I grab my glass off the table and turn to go join her boys out in their seats.

"It's just that . . ." she starts and stops just as fast.

I change direction. Instead of opening the glass door to join the masses as we wait to see our favorite team take the field, I move to the long leather couch inside the box.

I fall onto the surprisingly plush couch not saying a word. I take a small sip of my drink and keep my eyes locked with Vonnie's.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath as she lifts her glass to her lips. Her feet look like they're coated in cement with how slow and hesitant her steps are. But her eyes contradict her movements. They might be red and glossed over from the tears she's been trying so hard to fight back, but the determined glint in them outshines everything else.

"My life has gone up in flames," she says as she takes a seat beside me on the couch. "I don't know how it happened or when it even began to change, but now things are so bad and I'm so overwhelmed with it all, that I don't even know if I can fix it."

My heart breaks for her as I see the carefully constructed facade she built crumble right in front of me.

I place my drink on the table next to the couch and grab her hand. "What's going on? What's so bad?"

"My mar-marriage." She chokes on the word and I know this is the first time she's given a voice to what she's been feeling. "I don't think we're going to make it. I don't even know who Justin is anymore and I'm pretty sure he hates me."

I'd like to say that loyalty is one of my best qualities. And even though I've only known Vonnie for a short period of time, we're on a nickname basis and she's my new bestie. But even if she wasn't, I still couldn't ignore the fact that she's a total badass who cares hard and deep for everyone around her, is funny, smart, and an amazing mom to three wild—but polite and wonderful—boys. How anyone could hate

her, let alone her own freaking husband, makes my blood boil. But my anger won't help her.

"I'm sure that's not true." I squeeze her hand a little tighter. "I'm not sure if you know this or not, but you are pretty freaking phenomenal. I don't think anyone who knows you could hate you."

"Then maybe I hate myself?" She pulls her hand out of mine and runs it through her long, bone-straight hair. "I let myself become this woman I said I'd never become. Justin and I got married in college. It was a small wedding, we had fake flowers because they were all we could afford. He was still playing football and working on his undergrad. I was in law school. His major was childhood education. He wanted to be a teacher if he didn't make it to the League. I knew I would carry the financial burden and I was fine with that . . . he was fine with that."

I lean back on the couch, listening as she surrenders to everything she's been battling.

"Obviously he wanted to play in the League, but we're both smart. Justin was good, but he wasn't a standout in college and we both knew how quickly an injury could change everything. So when he was invited to the combine, we were pleasantly surprised. When he was drafted, we were ecstatic. He'd be able to live out his dream of being a football player and I'd live out mine as a lawyer. We figured he'd play for three, maybe five years, you know? The average career. What I didn't realize was the career I worked so hard for would become irrelevant."

The laugh that comes out of her mouth is the saddest sound I've ever heard. It's as if she put all of her hurt and regret into that one sound. I want to pull her into my arms and hug her, but she stands up before I get the chance. She paces in front of me, her high-heeled boots clicking against the wood-looking tile floors.

"I always wanted kids. Always. I know a lot of women feel pressured into having them, but not me. I couldn't wait. So when I got pregnant with Jagger, and Justin got his first big contract, it made sense that I would stay home. Then Jax and Jett came and I couldn't rationalize putting them all in daycare when they could be home with me. The thing is, as much as I'd always wanted to be a mom, I hate being a stay-at-home mom. But I can't say that. What kind of

ungrateful, terrible mom can have as much money as we do and still complain about the fucking privilege to be home with my kids and watch them grow? How could I? And when I mentioned wanting to maybe get back into work to Justin, he basically reiterated what I was already afraid people would think. That I should be happy not having to work and he didn't want his boys gone when they could be with family."

"That doesn't make you a bad mom, Vonnie." I'd been trying to stay quiet, but when I see the pain and self-loathing in her grimace, I can't keep my mouth shut any longer. "You aren't just a mom, having kids doesn't mean you have to give up every single piece of yourself. Wanting to have the career you worked so hard for isn't something you should feel guilty about."

I don't know if I want to have kids. It's never been a goal of mine. I thought maybe I was broken and didn't have any maternal instincts because my mom died when I was so young. But as I got older, I realized part of it was because the way society acts like child-rearing is the only purpose of women pissed me right off. And, growing up being raised by a single dad, I need a partner willing—and wanting—to do just as much work as the mom, which is hard to find.

"Thank you!" She spins on her heels to face me. Her tearstained cheeks are filled with color, but somehow, her eyeliner and mascara are still perfectly in place. "Just because I took his last name when we got married doesn't mean I'm not still the same person I was before we met. Being married and a mom doesn't take that away. But after so long at home, my résumé didn't look as impressive and my independence had turned to dependence. I did the blogger thing for a while, but the Internet is scary and I wasn't comfortable with it anymore. So I knew I had to wait. Once the kids were all in school, it would be my time, right? Motherhood is a series of seasons, and for this season, I could suck it up and be the best stay-at-home mom possible."

I glance out the window at the Lamar boys, who are completely oblivious to the meltdown their poor mom is having. I may not be an expert on kids by any means, but I'm pretty sure they all look old as fuck. "But aren't your kids all in school?"

She waves her hands wide and looks at me with hard, angry eyes. “Exactly,” she says—scratch that—she yells. “Herein lies the problem. The kids are in school and Justin is going into his hundredth year playing this stupid fucking sport and I’m still waiting. When I told Justin I was going to look into going back to work when Jax started kindergarten, I was still somehow convinced to stay home. Why would I want to miss all the field trips? Who would go to the teacher conferences? Wouldn’t I feel terrible sending them to daycare after they already spent their day at school? Why would I want to miss any of this? I think it’s why I jumped at the opportunity to be the president for the Lady Mustangs. It was the first opportunity I had to talk with adults and make things happen. And even though Justin will never admit it, he loved it because it was still focused around him. Because once I started getting outside opportunities based on it, he suddenly had a problem again.

“I don’t know when the man I married became so keen on keeping me dependent on him. You know he called me selfish when I was working on the morning show?” she asks. I open my mouth to say something—something about what a dick Justin is being—but snap it shut when I realize she wasn’t looking for an actual response. “I think it’s a security thing for him, like I won’t leave if I don’t have a job. But what he doesn’t realize is I probably am going to leave and he keeps pushing me to it.”

She stops talking and her mouth hangs open, like her admission shocked her.

“Oh fuck.” She falls back onto the couch and stares at me with wide eyes. But instead of seeing sadness and anger in her eyes, I see fear. “Can I leave him?”

“I’m not going to answer that for you.” I twist my body so I can look her in her eyes. “I am going to say that life is too short to be unhappy. One day everything is fine, then the next day you’re diagnosed with cancer. And then you’re gone. If that happens. If, god forbid, you’re taken from this earth tomorrow, would you be happy with the life you lived? Would your boys at least have the comfort of saying, *At least she lived her life the way she wanted to*? No matter what your happiness looks like, you can not only do it, you deserve it. It’s your duty to show yourself and your boys how to live life to the fullest. And that happy

life might be leaving Justin or it could be fighting for your marriage. But whatever it is, you're going to do it. Because you're still Lavonne fucking Lamar and you're alive and a badass."

"I'm a badass and I'm alive," she repeats after me, and a fire seems to have lit from within her. "Damn girl." She reaches for the drink she put down sometime during her rant. "You should be a therapist."

"Well"—I mimic her and take a sip of my drink too—"with as many as I've gone to, I was bound to pick up something."

Her eyes crinkle at the corners and for the first time today, a real smile crosses her face, but it falls away just as fast as it came. "I don't get it."

My eyebrows pull together. "Don't get what?"

She seemed to just have the breakthrough. Is she already trying to talk herself out of it?

"You seem to love dedicating your time and energy to other people. Me, Quinton, from what Liv and Marie said, them. You just talked me through shit I've been avoiding for months in a span of—what? Thirty minutes?" She puts a hand on my arm and I'm not sure if it's to offer support or keep me on the couch when she knows I want to run. "You said I deserve to be happy. That it's my duty to be happy. But where's that same energy when it comes to you helping yourself?"

Wait. Hold up.

How did she manage to flip this on me?

"I'm happy." I gesture to the suite that we're in. How can I not be happy and grateful for this? "My dad died. Of course that fucking sucks and I get sad. But death is part of life. I couldn't do anything about that. So you know what I did? I changed what I could. I got out of a toxic work environment and found my dream job. I love my job and I have great friends. I'm happy."

"You love your job? Really? The same job where some old man is threatening to fire you if you don't get a grown-ass man to stop fighting for causes he believes in?" She purses her lips and the red painted on them no longer looks like the perfect shade she found at a MAC counter. It looks like the blood of the people who tried to tell her half-truths.

Damn you, Vonnie Lamar, and your soul penetrating side-eye!

“Okay, well obviously that’s not great. And some parts of my job suck.” Knowing that Mr. Mahler doesn’t really support Quinton is hard, but this is still a company and if it’s hurting his bottom line, that’s understandable. Money is still king. “But I’m working for the Mustangs! My dad can’t be here for this, but he would’ve loved this and that makes me happy. Even if Quinton drove me crazy sometimes, planning his launch party was the most fun I’ve had in a long time. And now I get to do another event for Mr. Mahler. I love all of that.”

“Okay, so what I’m hearing is that you’re trying to connect with your dad through work while not dealing with the emotional ramifications of losing him and that you like event planning.” She lets go of my arm and leans back against the couch. “I fail to see where I’m wrong.”

“You know, I’m not sure I like you anymore.” I almost roll my eyes at her, but like a small child, I wither under her warning glare.

“Mhmm.” She lifts her drink to her lips, looking at me with bloodshot eyes over the rim of her glass. “Just like you don’t like Quinton? It’s hard to like the person shoving a mirror in your face.”

I want to respond with something good. A snappy comeback that will make Vonnie question if she was right or missed the mark completely.

But instead, her lawyerly instincts have left me on the witness stand broken and battered.

See. This is why I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Help one person and they try and help you back.

Rude.

Twenty-five

After Vonnie went into the bathroom and fixed her face—her words, not mine—she came back out and we pledged not to discuss any more heavy shit for the rest of the day. Preferably, the rest of our lives.

What I didn't know was that soon, Brynn was going to bless my soul with the most wondrous, enchanting woman I've ever had the pleasure of meeting.

Ever.

In life.

"Greer, do you want a cocktail?" I offer, even though Brynn is here and obviously makes way better drinks than I do. But it's the thought, you know?

"Oh, thank you for offering, but I only drink if it's organic," she says. I can't tell if she's being serious or not, because I've literally never heard such a thing, but by the exaggerated roll of Vonnie's eyes, I realize that she is indeed serious.

I'm not sure why this surprises me.

Greer Francis—wife to Darren, the second-string safety—is basically a living, breathing, motivational Instagram account. When she walked into the suite, she deemed that our energy was off and rolled us with whatever essential oil blend she carries in her purse before reciting her quote of the day. Her long, ash-brown hair falls down her back with loose curls. It's the kind of hair that convinces me she's worn a flower crown more than once in her life. Wearing ripped-at-the-knee jeans with a checkered button-up beneath a chunky sweater and distressed loafers that she for sure bought that way, I can guarantee she's ordered at least five pumpkin spice lattes this fall.

And that's not me being a hater. Because I'm a fan of ALL of it.

Being the most basic person ever is on my vision board . . . if I had a vision board. But that's just one more thing I'm sure Greer has that I'm here for.

"Really? Are there a lot of organic alcohol brands out there?" I ask because now I am truly curious.

The trip when I was chased by a squirrel through Central Park, I also went to the Church of Scientology. It was during the height of Tom Cruise and his crusade for his one true religion . . . it also had air-conditioning on a hot and humid day. When I sat down to stay for the movie they offered about the church, the eyes of the woman who worked there—maybe worked? Maybe volunteered? Who knows?—lit up like she finally caught a fresh one. And now, Greer has that same gleam in her eyes.

"There are!" She bounces in her probably vegan leather loafers. "I eliminated all GMO foods from my diet years ago. I did a ton of research and realized that even though my food was clean, my drinks weren't. People think all of the bad stuff is burned off when alcohol is distilled, but that's not the case. I just try to be very mindful of everything I put in my body and how it affects not only my health, but the environment as well."

"That's great." I nod, trying to remember the last time I was purposefully mindful of anything. "I had a Diet Coke and donut for breakfast."

This could be why Greer has skin that glows like the sun while mine is a confused mash-up of random breakouts and wrinkles.

"Diet Coke was the hardest thing for me to give up, but you can do it. If you want, I can send you the list of affirmations I told myself while I was quitting." She pulls out her phone and starts scrolling before I answer, but honestly, I'm not sure I could say no to this offer no matter what. Now that I know such a list exists, I need to know what anti-diet soda affirmations consist of.

Brynn shakes her head vigorously behind Greer, mouthing, "Don't encourage her."

This only makes me more interested in what she's selling.

"Thanks, I can't wait to see it," I tell her with complete sincerity. Brynn's consequent glare is merely the icing on the sugarless, organic cake.

Jack's—he's the announcer—voice has slightly less impact behind the glass wall of the suite as his voice drawls out through the stadium. They're introducing defense this week, so while the Lamar boys are chomping at the bit to see their dad, and Brynn is drooling to get a close-up of Maxwell, I stay inside to load up my plate with chips and guac and top off my drink.

Marie would be pissed if she saw me now, taking my time on snacks and ignoring the entrance I rushed her through the concessions to watch.

I do make sure to hurry out in time for the national anthem. Purely for work reasons.

Obviously.

Since his launch, Quinton has donated to a total of eight charities. He has given millions of dollars to these charities, but beyond that, he has introduced them to the public in a way that wouldn't have happened without him. He has opened up possibilities that they could've only dreamt of before. It's been amazing to witness. The foundation is doing what he and I wanted it to, but he's still taking a knee on the field and covering up the logo on his jersey.

I have set up hundreds of interviews and press conferences—that is only a slight exaggeration; I'm on a first-name basis with all the local news stations—for him to discuss his stance. He has spoken out many times about why he's doing what he's doing and he's putting a (not so) small fortune behind his actions, but that hasn't stopped people from trying to change the narrative.

Or, more accurately, it hasn't stopped people from going out of their way to deliberately misconstrue his mission. And the biggest culprit of this is still Glenn Chandler.

His popularity has been skyrocketing and his base has increased to a problematic level. During his last rally, he spent a record twenty minutes spewing his lies about Quinton, convincing his followers that Quinton is protesting the military and disrespecting our troops . . . despite Quinton stating multiple times why he's protesting—fairness and equality for all. *“If he cared about any of these causes, he'd quit throwing a football and sign up to serve his country. But the only person he's concerned about serving is himself. We aren't fooled!”* The

crowd went crazy over that and the more conservative news stations have been playing it on what feels like a loop.

It's absurd. From what I've seen online, a lot of people are ready to grab their torches and burn things down. I'm really concerned about how that will translate to real life.

I slide open the glass door with my hip since my hands are occupied by an overabundance of snacks and a filled-to-the-rim glass. Nobody seems to notice my entrance, so I take a seat in the back row. It will be easier for me to pay attention without someone pointing out how cute Quinton is (Brynn and Vonnice) or telling me about all the chemicals in my tortilla chips (Greer).

"Please stand and remove your hats as Carol Langford performs our national anthem," Jack says as a woman in a bright-red dress settles into her position behind a microphone in front of the Mustangs sideline.

A group of four military members in their uniforms stand behind her; the two in the middle are holding flags while the other two hold what look like guns. Children and adults burst out running from the center of the field in different directions, all holding onto a giant flag they're now spreading across the field. But even with all of this, my attention is focused on one person and one person only, Quinton Howard Junior.

I can't see the front of his jersey to see if he's used the tape or not, but I know it's there. Then the music starts, and for a moment, he stays standing. My lungs stop working and even though it doesn't make sense, dread that he might stay standing courses through my body. I close my eyes, not able to watch. But when the wave of boos fill the stadium, my eyes snap open and I see him on one knee. Relief blooms from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head even as Vonnice and Brynn both turn around, concern for my livelihood evident on their beautiful faces. They offer me what I'm sure are their best attempts at reassuring smiles, but what in actuality look more like grimaces.

"It's fine." I get out of my seat and I walk down the few steps to their row. "I'm really not worried, I promise."

Nobody says anything. I'm guessing that's their way of not lying to me. I appreciate it all the same.

Carol finishes belting out the final note of the anthem and Quinton stands up, clapping with the rest of the team as they rush the sideline.

All of the tense, angry energy floating around the stadium seems to dissipate with a crescendo of cheers that builds as the special teams players—the players who come out during kicks and punts—take their positions on the field.

Cleveland's kicker runs forward, swinging his entire body as he makes contact with the football and sends it deep into our end zone. Davis, the Mustangs kick returner who clenched the position after his fourth return for a touchdown during preseason, positions himself beneath the ball and catches it with ease. But instead of dropping to his knee, he explodes into a full sprint.

Before I can check myself, I'm out of my seat with the rest of the stadium, screaming until my throat is sore, cheering as he breaks one tackle, spins past another one, and finds the hole his teammates have created with amazing blocking. He runs as fast as he can until a Cleveland player ends up bringing him down on our twenty-five yard line.

Everyone is on their feet, even Vonnie, who told me at the last game she saves her energy by sitting while everyone else stands. But this is why I love football so much. In the last hour, Vonnie was crying, I was put firmly in my place, and the crowd booed their quarterback, but thirty seconds in and everyone has forgotten it all. It's like their cleats have magical powers. Each step they take, every brutal hit they make, we're pulled out of reality and nothing else matters. For three glorious hours, all of our problems fade away.

Special teams clears the field as the Mustangs offense jogs out. Quinton is the portrait of confidence and grace. His body looks like it was made for this. Tall and lean, he fills out his uniform in a way that not a single other player on the field does. And even though I know I can't go there ever again, I can't help but notice how well he wears the uniform, blacked-out logo and all.

He just shouldn't look that way. Cropped spandex pants have no right looking that delicious on anybody.

He takes his position behind the center, squatting down before checking to his left, then his right. He stomps his legs and his head bounces around as he no doubt yells out instructions to the rest of the

offense. This is his field. This is his team. And there's no mistaking that he has it under control.

The play clock is ticking down when he finally claps both hands together and the ball shoots between the center's legs and right into Quinton's strong grip. One lineman misses his block and a Cleveland defender slips through the line protecting Quinton. My breath catches in my throat and my stomach clenches as I brace for him to get hit. But at the last second, he fakes to the right before dodging to the left and sprinting out of the defender's grip. He runs toward the sideline, keeping his gaze down the field before spotting an open receiver in the end zone and snapping his arm back, firing the ball over the helmets heading straight for him.

It's not the longest pass, so we aren't kept in suspense as the ball whizzes to Beck, who doesn't even have to jump to catch it. Quinton, who never doubted that it would be caught, is already running toward Beck, jumping up and meeting him midair as they slam their shoulders into one another. If anyone in the crowd has a problem with Quinton's protest, they've put it to the side for now as they jump and scream, shaking the stadium floors.

The offense clears off the field as the special teams runs back on and Butler, the kicker, lines up behind the ball before kicking it directly between the goal posts.

The crowd cheers a little more—the poor kicker has all of the pressure but none of the glory—before finally settling into their seats. Their expectations for the game are set.

“Oh! Guacamole!” Greer pulls my attention off the game as she leans over and nabs one of my chips. She loads it with dip and shoves it in her mouth before I can say that I don't think any of it is organic.

“Just don't,” Brynn says before I can warn Greer. “Trust me.”

“I told you guys,” Greer says after she's finished chewing on a most def not GMO-free chip. “Didn't I tell you?”

“Tell us what?” Vonnie is using the same tone she used with her kids when they were asking her what felt like twenty questions in the car.

“I gave Darren a list of positive affirmations to pass out to the guys last night so they could start reading them before bed and up until the

game.” She looks super fucking proud of herself as she grabs one more chip. “They’re totally going to win today.”

Vonnie just looks at her for a second before shaking her head and turning her attention to the game.

“This is why you are one of my favorite Lady Mustangs,” Brynn says with no sarcasm in her voice. “You upped my vodka game at HERS and you do wild shit like that. We need more Greers in the world.”

“Cosigned.” I lift up my plate, giving her the option to dip, which she takes me up on.

And even though I’ve kind of resigned myself to the idea that I will not be working with the Mustangs come the end of the season, I really need to figure out a way to make sure these women are forced to stay friends with me.

I might be a bigger fan of the Lady Mustangs than I am of the actual Mustangs.

Twenty-six

I don't know if it was the positive affirmations like Greer assured us or the Mustangs were just that much better than Cleveland, but it was a blowout. So much so that Jax fell asleep during the third quarter and I hitched a ride home with Vonnie in the middle of the fourth.

But despite the fact that we left early and I didn't drink nearly as much as I wanted to, thanks to Greer's judgy side-eye—even though she ate almost all of Jett's gummy bears and half of my chips—I still had a terrible case of the Mondays all week long. And now, of course, this is the bye week, so there is no game and I have two back-to-back meetings on a Saturday. I'm supposed to meet with Paul after them, but I fake being sick and cancel instead.

It has nothing to do with today still being Halloween, no matter how many times I tried to get it to not come this year.

Who am I kidding?

It has everything to do with it being Halloween. I've been teetering on the cusp of tears all week long. I had no idea the depths of grief until I experienced it myself. I wish I didn't know how the smallest things could set me off. Or how logic has failed me all day and I keep hoping my phone will ring and my dad will be on the other end. I wish I didn't resent all of my carefree coworkers and hate them when they wandered through the office with a painted face or ridiculous hat. I can't even talk about how much I wanted to punch Paul when he offered me a piece of candy from his pumpkin-shaped bowl yesterday. What he thought was nice felt like he was mocking my hurt.

I really need to call my therapist again because I am not properly equipped to handle this. Not even close.

I get home midday and kids are running all over the complex, probably counting down the minutes until they can trick or treat. I

keep my sunglasses on as I make my way up the stairs, trying to decide whether or not I want to be a curmudgeon and keep my outside light off and eat the candy instead of handing it out.

I want the candy.

I unlock my door and I drop my keys into the bowl. I walk straight to my room, where I promptly kick off my shoes, unbutton my pants, and take off my bra before heading into my bathroom. I turn on the hot water, staring at the stream until I see the steam starting to billow up from the porcelain sink.

Even though I wear makeup every day, I don't love wearing it. Washing my face after work is one of my favorite parts of the day. I run the wet washcloth over my face, savoring the way the hot water stings before lathering my face wash between my palms.

After rinsing my face, I look into the mirror at my blotchy red skin that matches the red in my eyes. I just look so tired. The dark circles underneath my eyes that I've had since my dad's diagnosis have gotten darker and the worry lines on my forehead seem to have only gotten deeper. It's like all of the heavy shit in my life has made a permanent residence on my face.

It almost makes me want to put my makeup back on.

I guess if I do decide to pass out candy tonight, my makeup-free face could pass for a scary mask?

I'm putting away my face lotion when I hear a knock on my door.

I know they're starting trick-or-treating hours earlier these days, but this just seems excessive. Maybe they have special toddler hours.

"One second!" I call out as I run to my kitchen and grab the bag of candy I'm planning on finishing tonight. "Happy Ha—" I cut myself off when instead of a young trick-or-treater standing at my door, it's a not-so-young quarterback.

I really have to start using my fucking peephole!

"Quinton, um—hey." I cross my arms over my braless chest, trying to scrub the image of my makeup-less face from my memory. "What are you doing here?"

"Let's go, Reed." He claps his large hands together before barreling into my condo. "Get your shoes, we have shit to do."

"No we don't." I feel those frown lines I was just inspecting getting even deeper as my eyebrows scrunch together. "I didn't see anything

on the calendar.”

I might’ve been off my game today, but I’m positive we didn’t have a meeting. Since the launch party, we had managed to go down to meetings twice a week and then quick get-togethers before an interview to go over talking points. But other than the meeting where we saw the Rue, we don’t do Saturday meetings.

I watch him as he walks into my living room and falls onto my couch. “That’s because it wasn’t on the calendar.” He spreads his arms across the top of my couch and his wingspan almost covers the entire length of it. “You said you have Halloween traditions and I have none, so I figured you could show me yours.”

Holy.

Freaking.

Hell.

I might cry.

I forgot I even told him I was dreading Halloween. He not only remembered, but he’s making sure I’m not going to be alone?

Oh yeah.

I’m for sure going to cry.

“You didn’t need to do this.” I forget about my appearance, lost in his kindness.

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. Really. I’ve never really done the Halloween thing because my mom said it was the devil’s holiday, so I’m excited to see what all the hype is about.” He pushes off of my couch and comes to stand in front of me. “So are you going to get ready or am I going to have to figure it out on my own?”

“Oh man.” A smile I didn’t think would be possible today tugs on the corner of my mouth. “I hope you know what you’re in for.”

“With you, I’m not sure I ever know.” He grabs me by the shoulders and turns me so I’m facing the hallway to my bedroom. “Hurry, we’re losing sunlight.”

—

THE FIRST THING I see when I walk into his house are two giant pumpkins decorating his normally empty kitchen island.

“You got pumpkins?”

“Yeah,” he says as he walks in behind me. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do for Halloween? I got pumpkins, those carving books, and this drill the woman at Target said was a must-have.”

Okay.

I know that I’ve covered the gamut when it comes to my feelings toward Quinton. I’ve hated him and wanted to kiss him—and was, admittedly, pretty bummed when he rejected me on that. But after this, if all I ever get to do is call Quinton a friend, I will take that and feel damn lucky to do so. Because this might be the nicest thing a person has ever done for me.

“You have no idea how much this means to me.” I don’t try to hide how my voice wavers. I’m a freaking emotional live wire right now, and I don’t have it in me to pretend I’m not. “I was having a really hard day and this just made it so much better.”

“Then it’s all worth it.” He squeezes my shoulder, letting his fingers linger before he lifts his chin and nods toward the kitchen. “Now, show me how to carve a pumpkin so I can beat you on my first-ever try.”

“Oh, you wish. I might be grateful, but that doesn’t mean I won’t still kick your ass in pumpkin carving.”

Just because he’s the only professional athlete here doesn’t mean he’s the only competitive one. Once, Mrs. Rafter took me with her to her church group to decorate Christmas cookies. I turned it into a competition that I’m pretty sure nobody else participated in. My cookies kicked their asses. My sprinkle work was just—*chef’s kiss*—so good. If I didn’t take it easy on a bunch of old Catholic ladies, there’s not a chance I’m easing up on this able-bodied male specimen.

And I don’t.

“This is bullshit.” He pouts as he looks at his pumpkin that is basically just a giant hole in the front because he wouldn’t listen to me when I was telling him where to cut. “This is your fault, you sabotaged me. Look at yours next to mine.”

I try not to laugh, I really do. But when I look at my beautiful pumpkin with a perfect witch carved into the front next to his . . . circle . . . I can’t help it.

“If you would’ve listened to me, it would’ve been fine,” I say once I’ve finished laughing. “Now grab it, we have to put it on your porch and turn on your light so trick-or-treaters know they’re welcome here.”

Wait.” I stop and turn to look at him. I forgot my candy at my place and Quinton better not be the jerk who gives out apples or protein bars. “Do you have candy?”

“Psssh. Do I have candy?” He walks past me with his sad pumpkin in his arms and a cocky smile on his face.

I follow him outside, putting my pumpkin on the other side of the steps so they frame his door and snap a quick picture before going back inside after him.

“Is this candy good enough for you?” He’s standing next to his pantry door and when I make it next to him, I get my first look at what might be the entire candy section of Costco.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, taking it all in. “You’re like the fucking king of Halloween! Your house is so going to be the winner. A Mustangs player and an assortment of every full-size candy they could ask for!”

Dad and I were always generous with our handfuls, but there’s just something extra special about getting a giant candy bar in your trick-or-treat bag.

“Did you just call me a king?” Mischief lights his dark brown eyes and I regret my words almost immediately.

“The king of Halloween. Not the king of like . . . life or anything.” It’s not my best comeback, but his thoughtfulness mixed with an overabundance of sugar has knocked me off my game.

“Say whatever you want, but a king is a king and I’ll wear my crown with pride.”

Oh god.

The pleased smugness in his eyes confuses me. I don’t know if it makes him look hotter or makes me want to slap him.

Both.

Definitely both.

“I’m not doing this with you tonight.” I grab the box of Milky Ways to be helpful, but also to snatch one when he isn’t looking. “Do you have a big bowl we can dump these in?”

“No,” he says behind me. “But I do have this.”

I turn to see what he’s talking about and he’s pulling a fucking cauldron out of a giant dark red Target bag.

“You did not.” I feel like my jaw is about to hit the floor. Every time I think he can’t go any further with this Halloween surprise, he pulls

something else out and shocks me again. “Why would you buy that? Don’t you have a mixing bowl or something?”

“I don’t cook much and I’ve never baked in my life, so I’m not sure.” He walks toward me with the cauldron that covers his entire midsection. “Plus, the king of Halloween had to be prepared.”

I brought this on myself. I had to open my big mouth.

“It’s pretty dope, though,” he says as he drops it in his entryway. “I think I’m gonna bring it to the locker room. Fill it with protein bars or something.”

“That’s weird, but also nice.” I tear open the box of Milky Ways and dump them into the cauldron. “I’m sure everyone will appreciate that.”

He shrugs off my compliment. Something he does often. Even with his foundation, he always deflects praise and directs it toward the charities he’s giving to. As a human, it’s endearing. As a publicist, it’s infuriating.

His doorbell goes off before I can point it out, though.

Quinton’s eyes widen and an almost childlike smile lights his face. “They’re here!” he whisper-shouts to me before swinging open the door and presenting the cauldron that still needs to be filled. “Happy Halloween!” he says, greeting the trick-or-treater.

The sun is still out and it’s pretty early for trick-or-treaters, which is probably why the mom clasp the hand of her toddler outside Quinton’s door is here. If I ever have kids, I’ll want to hit the houses before the mad rush of sugar-hungry children starts busting down doors too.

“What do you say?” she asks her toddler, who is painfully cute dressed up as a dinosaur. The headpiece is falling over his face and he yanks his hand out of his mom’s grasp to lift it out of his eyes.

“Twick-o-tweat!” he yells, raising his pumpkin candy basket in the air.

“Here you go, little man.” Quinton reaches into the cauldron and when he pulls out the giant candy bar, the little boy’s eyes get so round, I’m worried they might pop out of his little head.

Quinton drops it into his basket and it barely makes it in before the dinosaur is sprinting down to the sidewalk, where the man I’m assuming is his dad and not a random creep is recording it all with his phone.

“My gotta a BIG one!” he yells, ignoring his mom chasing after him shouting, “Don’t forget to say thank you!” When it’s clear there’s no way her son is going to do anything except try to eat the candy bar on the sidewalk, the mom turns and waves. “Thank you!”

Quinton waves back before he closes the door and turns to me. “Fuck,” he says, his smile even bigger than it was when he opened the door. “I get it now. This is great!”

I wish I was the kind of person who could refrain from saying “I told you so,” but I am not.

“Told you so.” I head back to his pantry to grab more candy while he looks out of the window next to the door, waiting for the next trick-or-treater.

I know he did this all for me—the thought still makes my stomach flip—but seeing how into it he is almost makes this feel like an equal partnership.

And even though Halloween will never be the same, Quinton has made it so the ache in my chest and the urge to cry are long gone. Just like the little dinosaur’s candy bar.

Twenty-seven

"I can't believe how many trick-or-treaters you had." I peel open a Reese's cup and lean back on his stupid comfy couch.

I don't know why, but because his neighborhood is so fancy, I thought he wouldn't get many coming through. But I forgot that people drive to the fancy neighborhoods in hopes to find a house like Quinton's and get good candy. He almost ran out!

This could also be because once the kids realized who Quinton was, they came back like three or four times, until they worked up the nerve to ask for his autograph. And because Quinton was as into Halloween as they were, he gave them candy every single time.

I'm pretty sure that even the kids were calling him the king of Halloween by the end of the night too.

"I know." He grabs the remote before settling next to me on the couch. "I thought I was going overboard with the candy, but I'm glad I did."

He still has candy left over, but it was getting close. Thankfully, lights-off time came before he was cleaned out . . . and I still had my choice of candy.

"What movie do you want to watch?" I ask as he starts scrolling on his fancy smart TV.

He tosses me the remote. "Doesn't matter to me, you can pick."

Now, I can plan an entire event without help. What colors? No problem. Plan a menu? I got it handled. But when it comes to choosing what to watch? That's a different story.

There are just too many options and I always fall back to the same handful of shows.

"Ummm . . ." I hand him back the remote. "It's probably for the best if you pick. We'll be here all night if it's up to me."

“That’d be fine with me,” he says before he starts clicking his way through movie options.

And lucky for me, he does this with his eyes trained on the TV because my jaw is just dangling helplessly while I openly stare at him.

That’d be fine with me? What the fuck does that even mean?!

I’m sure he just means that he’d be happy not to have to drive me back home or something meaningless like that. But another part of me, the part of me staring at his perfect profile with his parted, full lips and the way his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat as he chews his candy, is hoping it means he wants me to spend the night because he wants to be with me.

“What about *Get Out*?” He startles me out of my thoughts and I snap my head around, hoping I wasn’t caught staring at him.

“Um, yeah,” I clear my throat and stare at the screen without really seeing. “That sounds good.”

Now, if I was in my right state of mind, one where I wasn’t just caught being a total freaking creep—again!—I would’ve remembered that I haven’t seen *Get Out* because I’m a total scaredy-cat and I’m going to have to figure out a way to live my life, alone, in my condo again once this night is over.

Instead, I was too busy staring at his throat to have any cohesive thoughts float through my brain. Self-preservation is something I really need to get.

“Um, Elle?” Quinton asks not long after the movie starts. “Are you alright?”

I don’t know just how long the movie has been playing, but I know we’re getting to the part where shit’s about to break loose. And being the person that I am, I’m not only covering my eyes . . . but plugging my ears as well.

“Yup! Totally fine.” I give him a quick thumbs-up before putting my hand back over my face.

“You know we can watch something else.” He wraps his long fingers around mine and pulls my hand from my face. And even though I’m sure someone is about to jump out from somewhere on the screen, all of my fear seems to fade away as all of my attention goes to the way he lets his hand linger on mine. “I just thought you said you watched scary movies.”

We've touched before, but this feels different. Intimate even. After the night we had, I think it's almost impossible for me not to imagine him in a different light. One where he wasn't just a good friend trying to cheer me up, but an attentive boyfriend who has made it his job to be there for me.

Obviously, I know that's not the case and no matter how much I want it to be true, I won't make the mistake of crossing the line between us again.

"'Watch' might not have been the best word." I pull my hand out of his, even though it's the last thing I want to do. "More like I hide under the covers and scream every time the music gets scary or there's a creepy noise."

He shakes his head and even in the darkness of his living room, I can see him fighting back a smile. And I really do appreciate the effort.

"Then how about we start a new tradition where we pick something you can actually enjoy." He exits out of *Get Out* and searches until *Hocus Pocus* comes on the screen. "I've never watched it, but everyone is always talking about it on Facebook, so I figure it's a safe choice."

"I love this movie!" I almost clap, but have just enough restraint not to. I don't, however, have the restraint not to yell, "Sissstaaasss! 'Tis Time!"

His head jerks back and he looks at me like I've grown another head. "What the fuck was that?"

"That was my Sanderson sisters impression." I shimmy my shoulders. "It was a perfect fucking impression and you're going to be mad impressed when you see. But hold on!" Now that I'm not in danger of peeing my pants because I'm scared and can actually enjoy the movie, I need refreshments. I stand up, enjoying looking down at him for once. "I'm getting snacks. What do you want?"

I start to climb over his long, outstretched legs, but because I'm still a little drunk off fear and my legs fell asleep a little bit thanks to how tense I was, I trip over his feet like a total klutz.

"Shit!" My screech is higher and louder than I would ever like to hear again as I reach out for the couch. I've already embarrassed myself in front of Quinton enough to last a lifetime, I refuse to fall onto the ground.

Refuse.

But before I even get the chance to right myself, Quinton's hands latch onto my hips and pull me down onto his lap.

"Are you alright?" His gaze drifts down my body trying to see if I'm hurt. His hand reaches for my ankle that got caught up in between his legs.

"Ye—" I start, but the word gets stuck in my throat when his strong hands pull my legs onto the couch and start kneading into my ankle.

My mind goes blank and my eyes are glued to his fingers as they latch onto the hem of my leggings and slowly push them above my calf. He keeps his hands on my legs as he drags them back down to start his massage again.

Every muscle in my body—muscles I forgot I even had—are clenched. The silence in the room is only punctuated by the sound of my heavy breathing, which I can't seem to get under control. Goose bumps trail his every touch and my body is betraying me. No matter how hard I've tried to convince myself that I don't have feelings for him, one touch is all it took for me to forget it all.

The circles his fingers make across my skin are hypnotic. I couldn't look away even if I wanted to. Seeing his dark skin against mine is going to be what I dream about from now on. We look like the Reese's I just ate, chocolate and peanut butter . . . my favorite combination.

"You're so fucking beautiful," his hoarse voice whispers into my ear.

I'm pretty sure I have fallen into a sugar coma and this is all my imagination. I keep my eyes on his hands, afraid that if I look away, I'll shatter this wonderful fantasy I fell into.

But when his hand leaves my ankles and drifts to my chin, turning my face to meet his, I know this is real life. Because not in my deepest fantasy could I dream up the way he's looking at me right now. There's a fire behind his eyes that I've never seen before. He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth as his hand falls down my back, and we just stare at each other for what feels like an eternity.

Our breathing getting heavier with every second that passes by until he finally breaks the silence. "I'm going to kiss you." He leans in and his breath dancing across my lips causes shivers to run down my spine. "So if you don't want that, say it now."

I move my gaze from his full lips, wanting them to touch mine more than I've wanted just about anything in the entire world, and look him

straight in his eyes. "I want it."

The words are still on my lips when his mouth touches mine.

I might've been drunk that last time we did this, but I was not wrong when I remembered how lush his mouth was.

The kiss starts out gentle. As though we are both waiting for the other person to say what a terrible idea this is and put a stop to it. Thank god, neither of us does.

His full, soft lips drop feather-light kisses onto my mouth. They are so sweet, I feel a pang in my chest. I twist in his lap, bringing my legs around so that I'm straddling him. I don't know if this will ever happen again, so while I have it, I'm taking it. All of it.

I link my hands behind his head, holding onto this ride for dear life and he seems to take that as a hint that I want more.

And how right he is.

His giant hands take up almost my entire back and pull me into him, pushing my chest into his and his mouth onto mine. Long gone are the gentle kisses. His tongue darts out, licking the crease of my lips and then takes advantage when my mouth instinctively falls open.

His firm tongue takes over. Dancing with mine as we explore this thing I've been wanting for so long. I let him take over as my hips grind against his. I'm at the mercy of his mouth. When he takes my lip between his teeth, letting it go ever so slowly as he tugs my ponytail, I think I might explode.

"Holy shit." I'm panting as though I've just finished sprinting. "I was not expecting that."

It was actually the last thing I ever expected to happen tonight. Which is why I'm sitting on his lap in leggings, a sweatshirt, and not a drop of makeup.

"It's all I've thought about since you kissed me in my car." There's a huskiness in his voice that would tell me just how affected he was by our kiss . . . if the bulge in his pants hadn't already clued me in.

"Probably longer if I'm honest."

"What? You're such a liar." I lean back. I want to stay in this lust-filled bubble we're in, but I also know that's total bullshit and I can't not call him on his shit . . . no matter how good of a kisser he is. "The first time we met, you told me I wasn't your type. And you're the one who stopped the kiss last time!"

“I’m not a liar. At least, I’m not lying now.” His fingertips sneak beneath the hem of my sweatshirt and start to draw lines across my back. “I was definitely lying when I told you you weren’t my type. I was having a shit day and I was dreading meeting with the suit Mahler was sticking me with. The last thing I needed was him to walk in while I was flirting with a beautiful woman when I was supposed to be focused on damage control. And I only stopped the kiss because you seemed pretty drunk and I didn’t want you to regret anything the next day.”

The little bit of breath I have left leaves with a whoosh as I try to reevaluate our entire relationship.

“But you hated me.” There is no way he wanted to kiss me this entire time. He didn’t want to be in the same room as me, let alone stick his tongue in my mouth.

“You hated me. You made it clear from the beginning you thought I was an entitled asshole,” he corrects me. “I’d be lying if I said I liked you all the time at the beginning, but things have changed over this last month. I consider you to be one of my friends.”

“Friends?” I laugh as I rock my hips against the bulge that hasn’t gone down at all. “You treat all your friends like this?”

“No,” he says, but he’s not laughing. “I don’t.”

“Good.” I lean in and touch my lips to his, unable to bite back my smile that Quinton Howard Junior *likes me* likes me. “I don’t either.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” He pulls his hands out of my sweatshirt before grabbing onto my butt and standing up, keeping me attached to him. “Now let’s go get snacks so I can see what this movie is about and sneak some more kisses.”

And just like that, this is no longer the first Halloween without my dad, but the first Halloween I have with Quinton.

And there’s kissing.

Lots and lots of kissing.

He may have filled the ache in my heart, but he also created a new one between my legs. But I’m okay with that.

Twenty-eight

I was *this* close to blowing off being an adult and spending the night at Quinton's house last night when I remembered I had to meet with Mr. Mahler to look at venues and hopefully get the details needed so I can plan this event.

However, being an adult doesn't mean I didn't stay late and that Quinton didn't wake up with a few hickeys on his neck this morning. I would normally never do that, but he's Quinton and even though I'm not totally sure what's going on between us, I'd be crazy not to try and find one way to tell the world that he was mine.

I pull my car into the historic Denver neighborhood where I'm meeting Mr. Mahler and feel out of place almost immediately. Where Quinton's neighborhood is ridiculous and filled with mansions, I still don't have a complex driving my Camry there. But here? It's old money. It's filled to the brim with people looking for reasons to look down their noses at me. Which is the exact reason I know Mr. Mahler is going to love it.

I don't need my navigation to direct me to Fitz's Mansion. Nestled deep in the heart of Denver, Fitz's Mansion was built in the early 1900s, something that is apparent as soon as I pull up. Thankfully, I don't think anyone will ever part ways with this architectural beauty to let someone else get their greedy modern hands on it. Without stepping foot on the property, you're aware of how special it is just from looking out of your car window. The beautiful stone covering the exterior isn't something you see anymore and neither is the ornate molding lining the tall windows and giant door. It isn't huge by any means, but that only makes it better. Only the most exclusive clients can have events here. And although I have other venues lined up, my fingers are crossed that Mr. Mahler will want Fitz's Mansion the second his old eyes land on it.

I'm walking up the stone-paved walkway when a Rolls-Royce turns onto the street. And even though I'm sure just about everyone in this neighborhood can afford one, Mr. Mahler is the only person who would be seen riding in one. The car comes to a stop and the driver steps out and opens the back door. Mr. Mahler climbs out, followed by the man I met at Quinton's event. I panic for a moment as I struggle to remember his name, but thankfully it comes to me just before I run out of time.

"Mr. Mahler, Mr. Carlin," I greet them.

An arrogant smile appears on Mr. Carlin's face, framing his yellowing teeth. He looks more like a super villain than I'd care to admit, but at least I know I got his name right.

"Elliot, how are you, darling?" Mr. Mahler leans in and kisses my cheek.

Gross.

This man really needs a lesson in personal space and talking to employees.

"I'm well, thank you." I suppress my shudder and start walking in step with him. His leathery skin somehow manages to seem even harsher beneath the bright Colorado sun. "Have you been to Fitz's Mansion before?"

"Once," he says as we step onto the patio that wraps around the building. "It was wonderful."

"Yes, the Ramsey event, wasn't it?" Mr. Carlin, clearly not one to be left out, adds. "That was a great event."

I take their mutual fawning as a good sign.

I open the door, holding it open for both men as we walk into the classic opulence of old money.

The entryway alone is enough to take my breath away. The owners take pride in the preservation of this estate; they boast that all features are still the originals. From the dark cherry staircase to the wide crown molding to the tiles on the floor, it's like stepping back in time—just with electricity and air-conditioning.

A door to the left opens and an older woman that I assume is Elizabeth Holding, the woman I've been speaking with for the past week, steps out to greet us. In a gray skirt suit with pearls resting at the base of her neck, Elizabeth is just how I imagined her. Her black

hair is pulled up in a twist and her face is made-up in perfectly neutral tones. Even her closed-toed heels promise competence.

“Elliot? So nice to meet you.” She reaches out her hand to shake mine. I want to point out the appropriate greeting to Mr. Mahler, but don’t. He is in charge of my career, after all.

“It’s nice to meet you as well. Thank you so much for taking the time to show us around.” I shake her hand in return before stepping to the side to introduce the rest of my party. “This is Mr. Mahler and Mr. Carlin, they are the ones hosting the event. I want them to be able to see the space before making the final decision.”

“Hello, gentlemen,” Elizabeth aims a polite smile in their direction but makes no move to get closer. She must’ve seen the kiss out of the window and is keeping her distance. *Smart woman*. “I hope Fitz’s Mansion is exactly what you’re looking for for your event. Of course, if there is anything we can do to help, we would love to do just that. Fitz’s Mansion has hosted some of our country’s biggest names and most extraordinary leaders. We strive to make all events as perfect as possible.”

Mr. Mahler and Mr. Carlin both nod, but keep their mouths shut. Something that brings me way too much joy.

“Could you give us a tour?” I really do want a tour, but Elizabeth’s presence has also seemed to calm both of the men with me, and keeping her close is in my best interest.

When we talked on the phone, we discussed that Mr. Mahler and I would be able to walk around on our own and then go back to her with any questions once we finished looking around. I’m worried that she’ll say no, but when her eyes soften and a sympathetic smile crosses her face, relief courses through me.

“I’d be happy to,” she says. “Let me just grab a notebook so I can write some things down as we go.”

She walks back into her office and when I turn around, Mr. Mahler and Mr. Carlin are huddled together, speaking in hushed tones.

Quinton’s warning about not trusting Mr. Mahler pops into my mind unbidden.

The more I’m around Mr. Mahler, the less I like him. Neither one of these men gives me good vibes. I mean, I don’t even want to walk around the venue alone with them, for goodness sake.

I don't know if it's because I can still taste Quinton's lips on mine or if I'm starting to recognize things I've been ignoring for the last couple of months, but I'm beginning to regret agreeing to plan this event for Mr. Mahler.

—

"SO," ELIZABETH COOS once we've made our way back to the entryway or, as Elizabeth calls it, the foyer. "What did you think? Will Fitz's Mansion be the site of your fundraising event?"

I hold my breath and cross my fingers behind my back. With every gold accent Elizabeth pointed out and historical anecdote she told, the doubts I had about working with Mr. Mahler faded. What could possibly be wrong with me getting to plan an event in this beautiful venue? Visions of centerpieces overflowing with every white flower I can get my hands on and white twinkly lights fill my mind. I can envision every piece of this event, all I need is Mr. Mahler's approval.

He leans over and whispers something in Mr. Carlin's ear and not surprisingly, Mr. Carlin nods yes to whatever he's hearing. During the tour, it became more apparent that even though Mr. Mahler introduced Mr. Carlin as a business partner at Quinton's launch, he doesn't hold any weight when it comes to this event. He basically just agreed with everything that Mr. Mahler said. Not saying I blame Mr. Mahler for bringing him. If I had a hype man, I too would bring them with me everywhere.

Mr. Mahler claps his hands together before revealing his freakishly white teeth. "Let's do it," he says. "This will be the perfect location for the fundraiser."

"I'm so glad! I knew you would just love this place." I can't hide my excitement. "If you want to wait here, I'll go confirm the date with Elizabeth and get her settled with the nondisclosure and then I'll meet you back in the dining room to tell you my vision."

"Perfect. We'll see you in a moment, dear." He turns to walk away but I'm so excited that he gave me the go-ahead to book the Fitz that I don't even care about him calling me "dear."

After I settle everything with Elizabeth, I take a little detour as I make my way back to Mr. Mahler. I walk down the empty hallways,

listening as my stilettos echo against the mosaic marble floors. In school, history was always my favorite subject. There's just something about hearing stories about the way people used to live and how every decision had such massive repercussions on the world around them. Now, walking down this hallway, I can't help but imagine the world as it was when the Fitz family moved into this house and walked down this very hall every day.

I push open the heavy wooden door to the dining room, ready to get down to business. Like the ghosts of the Fitz women are helping me be the boss they weren't allowed to be, my spine straightens as I approach Mr. Mahler.

"So?" I gesture to the room around us. "What do you think of this being the location for the dinner?"

"Dining room" doesn't seem to really describe the room we're standing in. If we use long tables, we can easily fit forty people in here. The massive crystal chandelier falling from the center of the room catches the sun's rays from the window and covers the room in tiny rainbows.

"I think it's perfect. Just the kind of high-class event I knew we could pull together."

Just like at Quinton's event, his inclusion of himself where he did nothing irritates the shit out of me. Also like at Quinton's event, I bite my tongue and smile.

"I agree." It's so hard to say and I can feel my eye starting to twitch as the words leave my mouth. "Now, you still haven't given me many details, but from what I do know, I was thinking we could have the plated dinner in here and then move to the parlor after for entertainment and we can pass out different desserts. How does that sound?"

"That sounds marvelous." A phone ringing stops him from saying more. He looks at his phone and whatever he sees causes him to smile in a way that makes the sick feeling I had before the tour return with a vengeance. "One moment, I need to take this."

He puts the phone to his ear and walks out of the room with Mr. Carlin on his heels.

I'm sitting alone in the room, trying to focus on the beauty surrounding me and not letting my mind drift off to the place where

worst-case scenarios live. I mean, it's a fundraiser . . . at the Fitz! How bad could it be?

The door opens and Mr. Mahler strides into the room. The look on his face makes my stomach twist and my palms sweat as my nerves go into overdrive. He's watching me closely, measuring my every move. The sadistic smile pulling on his lips makes me wish Elizabeth never left my side.

"I know you've been wondering when you'd get all of the details for this fundraiser and I've been a little . . . well, stingy with the details." This is an understatement. He hasn't told me anything other than the details I forced out of him. "Truth be told, I had to watch how you've handled the Howard boy before I could decide if I could trust you. But I saw the way he hesitated at the game this weekend and I appreciate how you've taken the narrative off my organization and onto him."

Something about the way he calls Quinton a boy rubs me the wrong way, and for once I can see why Donny didn't trust me. Also, if he saw the way I handled Quinton last night, I'm not sure Mahler would trust me at all.

"I'm glad you can see how hard I'm working to maintain both the organization and its players' integrity." I don't mention that I haven't ever discussed telling Quinton not to kneel and don't plan to.

Voices drift into the room from the hallway behind Mr. Mahler. The door opens and Mr. Carlin walks in, his unmistakable chuckle filling the room like my least favorite song. He's looking behind him at a man who looks so familiar. Someone I've been watching a lot of YouTube videos of lately.

Glenn Chandler.

The trash politician who has been dragging Quinton and just about every ethnic group through the mud.

And I'm planning a fundraiser for him.

"You must be the proud American working to get me elected." He extends his hand to shake mine.

Mr. Mahler is still watching me and I'm beginning to think this wasn't a job opportunity but a test of my loyalty. Everything in me wants to turn and run, but this is my job. It's what I've worked years to master. My personal feelings don't count. I just can't believe Mr.

Mahler would support the man who has taken every chance he's gotten to disparage his starting quarterback.

I shake his hand and disgust makes it hard for me not to recoil at his touch. How am I going to do this? And what is Quinton going to think when he finds out?

Fuck.

I'm going to be sick.

Twenty-nine

After my meeting with Mr. Mahler, all I wanted to do was hide from the world. And also go back in time and say no to doing this event for him.

But as luck would have it, I couldn't do either.

Surprise, surprise.

Quinton and I already had plans to meet with Patricia and Bill Masterson from Pro Players for Equal Treatment to discuss what they're doing to fight for pension parity for retired players, and since the kissing happened, I can't even avoid him.

If it weren't for this stupid Glenn Chandler cloud hanging over my head, I would be really excited. Even though I've seen how passionate Quinton is about equality in the League for current and retired players, I'm still not exactly sure what all it entails. I've been looking forward to this meeting for a while. Working with Quinton has opened my eyes to issues I didn't know existed, and I've loved learning about them.

Because of the uptick in negative attention thanks to Chandler—who by the way, is just as greasy in person as he seems on TV—we moved the meeting from a restaurant to Quinton's house. He was worried we'd be interrupted and Patricia and Bill wouldn't feel comfortable enough to talk openly about the issues they're facing.

My hands are filled with groceries and I just manage to grab the doorknob without having to put down a bag. Yes, sure I parked in his driveway and could've just taken two easy trips, but I'd rather lose all feeling in my hands from bags on my wrists and arms than take multiple trips.

"You know, you really need to start locking your door!" I yell as I walk in.

“But then you wouldn’t be able to just come and go when you want.” His voice bounces off his empty walls, but he’s nowhere to be found.

I start unloading all of the bags that I brought. I wasn’t exactly sure what to bring, but I make killer charcuterie boards and they always look fancy as fuck. I figured it was a safe bet that there’d be at least one thing for everyone and the Mastersons would see that we put effort into the meeting.

“Damn, that’s a lot of stuff.”

Quinton comes up behind me and rests his hands on my hips before dropping a quick kiss on my cheek. His touch feels so right, but now, underneath it is this thread of guilt because of the fundraiser. All I want is to fully enjoy something . . . *someone* without feeling like impending doom isn’t unavoidable. Is that too much to ask?

Ugh. My hate for Mahler and Chandler skyrockets by the minute.

“It looks like it, but it’s just for a charcuterie board. I wanted to have a lot of options since I don’t know what Patricia and Bill like.” I point to the bag with sparkling waters still on the counter. “Can you put those in the fridge? Warm sparkling water is gross.”

“I hate to break it to you, but sparkling water tastes like feet no matter the temperature,” he whispers in my ear before backing away and forcing me to lose the comfort of having his heat against my back. “And I have no idea what the fuck charcuterie is.”

I turn around with a log of salami in my hand, prepared to use it as a weapon against him for slandered sparkling water and being as old as he is and not knowing what a charcuterie board is. I mean, it’s the age of Instagram! Doesn’t everyone post pictures of their boards? There’s no excuse.

However, all of my wrath fades to black with my first look at him.

Now listen, I’ve seen this man shoeless and in gray sweatpants more times than I can count. I’m pretty sure it’s his outfit of choice, one that I fully stand behind and support. But right now, he’s not in his standard home uniform. He’s dressed in actual adult man clothes and holy fuck if it doesn’t make my thighs clench together.

I feel like an athlete’s build helps determine their position. Linemen are bigger, tight ends are taller, but still bulky in muscle. But quarterbacks. My, my, my. Quarterbacks. Quinton is tall and lean, but

not bulky at all. I'm sure he's been told he's built like a basketball player many times in his life. And it's a build that wears dress pants and a tucked-in, button-up shirt so well that it actually robs me of my ability to speak. His dark gray pants were clearly altered to fit him just right. Snug around his thighs and slim cut all the way down to his ankles. I really want to make him turn around because I know his butt looks amazing.

But the pinnacle of this casual yet authoritative look, the part that just makes me want to scream "Yassss zaddy!" is the way he's taken the time to roll his sleeves up to his elbows. If you ask me, the most underrated part of the male body is the forearm. I don't know what it is, but seeing Quinton's forearms out, covered in just the right amount of hair and a fantastic watch, is the fantasy I never knew I had.

"Damn." I stare with my mouth hanging so wide open, I could catch flies, pointing a salami at him. "You look so hot."

The best thing about him kissing me last night is that I can finally say things like that aloud and stare at him until my heart is content.

"Thank you." He quirks the corner of his mouth before letting his gaze trail down my body, pausing at the salami. "What's going on with the meat stick?"

"Meat stick? Really?" It's good to know that no matter how hot he looks, he'll say things like that to bring me back to the reality that he's human. A very hot, but still dorky, human. "It's salami. I need a knife to slice it. You can open the rest of the packages so we can start building the board."

He pulls a knife out of the drawer and puts it on the counter next to the cutting board I brought because I wasn't sure he has one. "Would it be inappropriate to tell you how hot I think you are when you're bossing me around?"

I roll up on my tiptoes and drop a chaste kiss on his lips. Because I can do that now too! Kissing is the best. "Considering I just referred to you as a zaddy in my head, I'm going to say no."

"Zaddy?" he repeats after me before biting his lip and doing a terrible job at hiding his laughter.

"Anyways." I glare at him. "Would there happen to be a spare Diet Coke in your fridge? You know I can't work without one."

"Maybe," he says. "Let me check."

He turns to walk away and as he does, Angela's long legs and blonde hair flash in my mind. I know he's said in the past that nothing is going on between them. But maybe he meant nothing like the nothing I'm reading into between us.

"Um, hey?" The confidence I felt only moments ago is gone and nerves have taken its place. I'm not saying I want to marry him or anything, but I would like to know if I've become an unintentional side chick. "I know you said nothing is going on between you and Angela, but the amount of sodas she forgets here says otherwise. Are you sure there's nothing going on between you?"

"Angela? What? I work with Angela, she's . . . well, I can't really say what she is. But nothing has ever happened between me and her. I know me and you got off to a bad start, but I wouldn't ever do what I did last night if I was seeing someone else." He closes the fridge and walks back over to me to grab my hand. "Let me show you something."

We hold hands as I follow him down the hallway and into his laundry room before he opens the door to his garage. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting more confused with every door he opens.

"Angela wasn't leaving the soda. I honestly don't even know if she drinks them." He pulls me over until he stops in front of another, not nearly as nice fridge. "You always had a Diet Coke with you, so I started buying them when I'd go to the store. I keep them in here and then move one into the kitchen before you come over."

I open my mouth to say something, but for the second time since I arrived, he has rendered me speechless. While I thought he was a jerk who hated me, he was going out of his way to do something nice for me. And he did it without taking any credit. The rules of the universe say that makes the act even kinder.

"It's not a big deal." He pulls a Diet Coke out of the fridge and hands it to me. "Like you said, it was pretty evident you worked better with one. I figured it'd be best to just have them on hand, you were mean that day you forgot it. It was self-preservation, re—"

I don't let him finish.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his face to mine. I don't even try to make it a gentle kiss. I slam my mouth onto his and meet his tongue as we continue our explorations from last night.

“You know . . .” I’m out of breath when we finally separate. “If you aren’t careful, I might start telling people what a thoughtful person you are.”

“You’re the only one who didn’t know.” He winks before holding open the door for me. “The rest of the world loves me . . . well, most of them, at least.”

I know he’s thinking of Glenn Chandler and all of his followers, who are so intent on making their hate for him known. The guilt of the secret I’m hiding from him feels like I swallowed a brick. I have no idea how I’m going to keep this from him.

—

WE’VE JUST SET the charcuterie board on his coffee table when there’s a knock at the door.

Quinton glances at his watch and I try not to stare at his exposed forearm . . . again. “Five on the dot, they’re punctual.”

He walks to the door and I run to the kitchen, pulling out four glasses, quickly filling them up with sparkling water.

“Patricia, Bill, this is Elliot Reed,” Quinton introduces me to the stunning redhead and dapper man next to him. “She’s the one who helped me organize my foundation so I could act on the commotion I caused.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Masterson, it’s so nice to meet you.” I round the island and extend my hand to shake theirs, but I’m immediately wrapped up in Patricia Masterson’s arms.

“Please, call me Patty,” she says.

“And call me Bill,” her husband says. “I might be old, but nothing makes me feel it like being called by my dad’s name.”

“Patty and Bill then.” I nod, before gesturing to the glasses. “We have snacks, but would you like sparkling water before we sit?”

“That’d be wonderful, thank you,” Patty says.

Everyone grabs a glass, even Quinton, who said he doesn’t like it, before walking over to the living room. Peer pressure for the win!

Patty and Bill both sit on the couch, and Quinton and I sit in the chairs we set up across from the couch.

“Thank you for coming to talk with us.” Quinton places his glass on one of the coasters I put down beforehand. “I really appreciate you coming all this way so we can work together to hopefully bring more awareness to this problem.”

“It really is our pleasure,” Patty says. “It’s rare that we have current players come to us. Of course, your father played, so I’m sure you’re much more aware of these issues than the average player.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Quinton tense the way he does whenever his father is mentioned. I don’t think Patty or Bill notice, but I wade in just in case.

“If you don’t mind me asking, could you explain a little bit more about what pension parity is? I’ve heard Quinton say it a thousand times, but I’m still a little confused.” At this table, I’m very much the odd one out. Sure I watch football, but I’ve never lived it the way the other three people around me have. If I can understand it, maybe I can help explain the importance of it to other people like me.

“Yes, of course.” Patty looks to Bill and he motions his hand for her to take the lead. “In 1993, the players union and the League reworked the agreement between players so that once players retired, they’d be granted more benefits. These are benefits like severance packages, 401(k) retirement plans, access to healthcare plans. Things that are needed. On top of all of that, the League started to take notice of all of the dangers in the game, changing the rules and trying to make it a safer game for players to participate in.” As Patty speaks, the air of the carefree woman drifts away. She’s all business and her passion for what she’s speaking about reverberates through her every word. “Now, don’t get me wrong, all of that is wonderful and so needed. The problem with this is they’ve completely forgotten about the players who retired before 1993.”

“Okay.” I try to take in the enormity of what she is saying. “So the men who retired before then aren’t getting help from the League?”

This is hard for me to wrap my head around for so many reasons, but the main one is how often the League throws around the term “legends” and “honors” at past players. I just assumed that meant they were taking care of these men as well.

“Well, not exactly.” She picks up her glass and takes a small sip and I feel like she’s just giving me a few extra seconds to prepare. “You

have to remember the pre-'93 players were also playing before they had full free agency, so the men also weren't making nearly as much as Quinton and his teammates are today. So while the men who qualified for a pension—about four thousand still living today—get one, it's not enough."

"You see on the news these stories about CTE being discovered. You might see a little blurb here or there about a former player passing away, but what you aren't seeing is the actual suffering that's going on." Bill leans forward. The smile he walked in with is gone, his jaw is set, and his mouth is a straight line. Talking about this clearly brings him no joy. "You don't hear about the dementia or the Alzheimer's or the ALS. You're not seeing the surgeries or the proud men who have been brought down to their knees and can't afford to even pay their bills. We fought for the guys to get what they're getting today and they deserve that. We just want to be able to take care of ourselves as well, to not be forgotten."

I look over at Quinton and I swear I can see the rigidity through every line in his body. His hands are balled in fists so tight, it'd be a miracle if he doesn't draw blood.

"The pension pre-'93 players are receiving is about one-third of what today's players are receiving. To put it this way, a basketball player who played for ten years and retired after 1965 receives around two hundred and fifteen thousand dollars a year at age sixty-two. A football player who played for ten years and retired before 1993 will receive a little over forty-three thousand dollars, pretax, at age fifty-five." Patty scoots to the edge of her chair; her kind eyes look tired. I know she has to be tired of feeling ignored. "Like Bill said, these are men who are suffering. They played the game when it was at its most vicious. The little money they are getting is going right back out of the door for medical bills and medicine, and some of them can't even afford to get the proper care. All we want is a pension for these men that's equal to those players are receiving today. Nothing else."

"More and more of us are dying every year," Bill says. "We want pension parity before we all disappear."

"Okay." I set my glass on the table, finally understanding why Quinton feels so strongly about this. "What can we do to help?"

Bill lifts his beardless chin Quinton's way. "Well, Quinton's doing a lot of it. People don't know this is a problem and because of that, the League doesn't feel any pressure to make changes."

Quinton is still as stoic as ever. With a stiff upper lip, he looks unbreakable, but something seems off. I know how unprofessional it is and I'll kick myself in the ass for it later, but I reach across the distance between us, and wrap one of his fists in my hand. I can't stand to see him fighting whatever demons he's fighting without knowing I have his back.

Patty's eyes follow my movement and a warm smile lights her face as she directs her attention to both of us. "With a new agreement getting ready to be worked out, all we want is a seat at the table during this negotiation."

"But in order to get that," Bill says, "we need Quinton to get more current players on board. I'm not sure they understand the power they wield."

I think back to all of those angry emails I've received from the players union and teams around the League and I finally understand why. Right now this is a Mustangs problem, but once people realize the way these retired players are being treated, this is going to be an issue all teams are going to start facing.

"I got you," Quinton says. "We owe this to you and I will do everything I can to get my peers on your side."

Underneath my hand, I finally feel some of the tension fall out of Quinton's body. It's like as soon as he has a call to action, purpose and determination take hold and nothing can stop him.

"Wonderful!" Patty claps her hands together. "Now can I dig into this board? I've never seen such a beautiful spread before."

As if I didn't like her enough already. Boards for the win!

Thirty

I feel like I'm living a double life.

And I'm really fucking terrible at it.

At the end of every day, I take a scalding-hot shower to try to wash the grime off me. I just don't know what to do.

Even though I want to, legally I can't tell Quinton what I'm doing for Mahler. And I might despise the man I'm planning this event for, but I can't help but try my hardest as I put in the work. This is still my job. And working in PR, I know there are times where I have to spin something I don't want to. And yes, this might hurt someone I really enjoy kissing, but I can't flush my career down the toilet over it.

But after two weeks of living like this, I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I don't handle stress well at all. It manifests very physically and I almost drove myself to the emergency room last night when I was convinced I was having a heart attack. I have to tell someone.

"Vonnie!" I look into the camera on her doorbell. "Let me in!"

"Damn, girl." Vonnie pulls open her front door, looking glam as always, even at noon on a Thursday. "Is everything alright? Your texts were a little manic and you aren't looking much better in person."

She steps to the side as I bulldoze my way in. I'm so stressed that I can't even focus enough to drink in the grandiose decorating I know she has put into this house.

"You're a lawyer, right?" I ask instead of answering her question.

"Technically, I guess." She narrows her eyes before pointing a blood-red nail at me. "Why? Are you in trouble? Do you need legal advice?"

"I am in so much trouble that I don't even know what to do with myself." I tell her the god's honest truth.

“Oh shit. Come on, girl.” She walks past me and I follow her as she makes her way to the kitchen. “Sit.” She points at the stools lined up on her kitchen island and walks to the wine fridge a few feet away.

“Champagne okay with you?”

“I’ll take any and all things alcohol. I officially have no standards.”
In life and in drink preference.

She pops the cork with experienced precision and pours us each a glass before sitting on the stool next to me.

“Cheers.” She taps her glass against mine. “I know we usually do this at HERS, but this will have to do in a pinch.”

“I mean . . .” I take a look around at her beautiful kitchen, the pendant lights hanging above us, the two-toned cabinets with gold hardware, and the gorgeous tile backsplash beneath them is all immaculate. “This is hardly sloppy seconds.”

“Thank you.” She takes a small sip of her bubbly. “They’ve just been filming so much for *Love the Player* at HERS and I have too much shit going on in my life to even think about putting a damn mic on. Now that Aviana’s husband got traded, those producers are working double-time to create drama and I know better than to fall into that trap.”

I shudder at the thought of cameras catching anything that I’m about to admit to.

“That’s a good call, what I’m about to tell you isn’t something I’d want going around either.”

“I’m intrigued, go on.”

The stabbing chest pain that has been bothering me for the last week starts up again.

“I need you to agree to be my lawyer.” I ignore the shocked look on Vonnie’s face as I pull out my checkbook that Liv still mocks me for having. “How much should I give you?”

“Fuck. If you’re enacting client-lawyer confidentiality on me, this is good enough to go pro bono.” She leans over and snaps shut my checkbook. “I agree to take you on as a client, now spill.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, not even knowing where I should start this clusterfuck of a story. “Do you want the good or bad stuff first?”

“I would normally say bad, but by the way your lips look a little swollen and bruised, I’m going to assume the good has to do with Q.

So I pick good.”

I haven’t told anyone about Quinton and me yet. We didn’t make the decision not to say anything, but seeing as I’m a female in a male-dominated industry, it seems smarter for me to keep it on the down-low . . . even though I want to shout it from the rooftops.

“Quinton ca—” I don’t even get the first sentence out before Vonnie’s jumping off her seat and her scream is puncturing my eardrums.

“I knew it! I knew the good shit had to do with Q! What happened? How was it? How does that beard feel up close and personal? It has taken him from fine to finer and I’m loving it.” I’m not sure she’s taken a breath, let alone given me the chance to answer her rapid-fire questions.

“I was trying to get there when you went full rap verse on me. Like I was saying . . .” I take a deep gulp of my champagne, needing the liquid courage to get through all of this. “Quinton came over on Halloween. I’d mentioned to him before that I was dreading this holiday season and this was going to be my first Halloween not passing out candy with my dad and watching movies.” The butterflies return to my stomach just thinking about how thoughtful he was that day. “So he took me to his house and he bought pumpkins for us to carve, candy to pass out to the kids, just everything. Then at the end of the night, we kissed.”

“I knew it! I knew those lips looked fuller than usual!”

“Yeah, there’s been a lot of kissing.” I graze my fingers across my lips without realizing what I’m doing. “And it’s been great. We cleared up a bunch of misunderstandings we both had and things are going really well.”

Too well, one could say.

One being me.

We meet up at one of our places almost every night and eat dinner together. Then we either do some work for his foundation or talk when we say we’re going to watch a movie. I’m starting to feel like we’re in a real relationship and he’s one of my best friends.

And then I remember I’m lying to him.

“Now for the bad news,” I say.

“Oh lord. Hold on.” Vonnie holds up her index finger as she drains the rest of her glass before filling it right back up again. “Poppy and Brynn were a pain in the ass, but I have a feeling you’re about to blow them straight out of the water.”

“You know how I agreed to plan the event for Mr. Mahler?”

“Yeah . . .” She drags out the word. “He’s a creep, but you need him on your side if you’re going to keep this job, and maybe even more if you don’t make it past this season.”

“Thank you!” I slap a hand on her granite countertops. “That’s why I took this job with him. He had me sign an NDA, which is standard for these big events, so I didn’t think much of it.”

“Fuck the foreshadowing already, spill!”

“Okay, okay. Geez!” I really wish I would have asked for something stronger. “The day after we kissed for the first time, I met Mr. Mahler at the venue for the event and he finally shared all the details with me. The main one being it’s a fundraiser for Glenn Chandler.”

There.

I said it.

Mr. Mahler didn’t appear out of thin air to sue me, and the world didn’t explode.

“That disgusting son of a bitch who has been dragging Q every chance he gets? That fucking Glenn Chandler?” Vonnie shouts and the pendants I was just admiring rattle overhead.

So the world didn’t explode, but I’m pretty sure Vonnie did.

“One and the same,” I say. “I don’t know what to do. Legally, I can’t tell Quinton, but each time I’m with him and I don’t tell him, I feel like I’m lying. And on top of that, I think this guy is a total prick! He’s terrible and the last thing I want to do is plan an event that could help him. But I’m already skating on thin ice with Mahler, I can’t not do it.”

“Fucking hell.” Vonnie sits back on her stool and just looks at me for a moment, not saying anything.

“Don’t just stare at me! Tell me what to do!”

“I don’t think I can tell you what to do on this one.” She leans forward and rests her sweater-covered elbows on the granite. “I’m pretty sure this is a textbook definition of a lose-lose situation. The only question is which one are you okay losing? Q or your job?”

Is she crazy?

“Are you crazy? You think I should choose a guy I’ve literally only kissed over a job that I’ve worked my ass off for?”

I can’t even wrap my mind around it. My dad would be so disappointed in me if I did that. He raised me to be strong and independent, not to give up everything for a guy who there’s probably not even a future with.

“No, what I said was you need to choose what’s important to you, because I don’t see any way you can come out of this with your relationship *and* your job. What I didn’t say is that you should choose Q over your job.” Vonnie purses her lips the way she does before she yells at her kids, and I know I’m in for it. “Listen, we only met a couple of months ago, I’m not going to pretend like I know everything about you. But, from what I do know, this isn’t about a job. If it was, I have a feeling you would’ve already started looking for a new one. First Mahler threatens your job and now he has very knowingly put you in a terrible position with Q.”

“You were the first person I told about me and Quinton, Mahler has no idea what’s going on.” And I’d like to keep it that way, thank you very much. Just the thought of having to go to human resources and tell them makes me cringe.

“It doesn’t matter that you two are doing whatever you’re doing behind closed doors. Mahler gave you the job to get close to Q, which you have done. And even if he doesn’t know the full extent of your relationship, just seeing the way Q has started to approach his protest in relation to his foundation is all the proof Mahler needs to know you’ve succeeded in gaining his trust. Mahler is doing this to fuck with him.”

“Hey! I—” I try to defend myself, but Vonnie cuts me off before I can begin to state my case.

“I know you’re good at your job. Damn good, according to the pictures I’ve seen and everything Brynn told me about the event I wasn’t invited to.” She cuts me with a fierce side-eye and I zip my lips closed. “What I’m saying is that Mahler could’ve found another person to put together this event, one who would not be put in a terrible position. Him making you do this—yes, making you—says a lot about him,” she says when I open my mouth. “He is the owner of the

organization you work for. He may have asked, but you know damn well you couldn't have said no."

"I guess you're right." I hang my head, hating just how right she is. But, if I ever decide to have kids, I'm so coming to her for lecture lessons.

"Of course I am." She raises an eyebrow like she can't believe I had the audacity to ever doubt her. "Now, the question is, what are you going to pick? It's not just your relationship with Q, it's your relationships period. Are you going to put a job that is slowly sucking away your soul over the relationships in your life? It's up to you, but you need to make this decision soon. The longer it goes on, the more damage it will cause."

It sounds like such an easy decision when she puts it like that, but she's missing one giant piece to this puzzle. My dad. This job feels like my last tangible link to my dad. Every time I walk through the doors of the Mustangs building, I feel like he's right next to me, taking it all in with me. And if I quit, I lose that. And I'm not sure I'm ready to throw it away.

Fuck.

Being an adult sucks.

Thirty-one

After talking with Vonnie, I decided that she was right . . . but also wrong.

Yes, I do need to make a decision, but what's the rush? It's nearing the end of November, but the event isn't until January. That gives me at least another month to weigh things out and choose what's actually right for me and not just base it on emotions.

And since Quinton asked me out on a date—like a real one, not at his house—I'll be even more well-informed before I pick.

"No," Liv says. "I refuse to let you wear leggings on your first date with Quinton fucking Howard."

Okay. So it'd be a safe assumption to say that I haven't been out with a guy in a long, long . . . long time. It wasn't a conscious decision I made or anything, but life got in the way. Plus, dating sucks these days. I was on the apps for a month before I deleted them all. I'd rather be a spinster than have to deal with that many dick pics. But that doesn't mean I need Liv to babysit me while I'm getting dressed.

This is what I get for opening my big mouth. I should've kept this a secret.

"He said to dress comfortable, and nothing is more comfortable than leggings." I know I'm not a style guru like Liv, but I think I look cute. It's November in Colorado. Boots, sweaters, and leggings are my go-to.

"Fine," she grumbles before going into my closet. "But at least wear these boots and not your UGGs. There's comfort and then there's pajamas. Leggings with UGGs is pajamas."

"I will agree to the boots, but not to your point. UGGs are the best and you're just a snob." I take the knee-high boots from her hands and set them next to my bed.

“How are you going to wear your hair? I think you should leave your curls, they’re gorgeous and you never wear it like that.”

I don’t know how old I was when my dad realized he had no idea how to manage my tight curls and started taking me to get relaxers. If you don’t know what relaxers are, bless you, child, and thank the heavens that your scalp never suffered. Relaxers are perms that chemically straighten your hair. Your stylist puts on gloves (probably the first sign that you don’t want that junk on your head) and slathers the white cream directly to your roots. You then sit with it on your head as it starts to burn your scalp. Once the burn gets too intense—like it might start melting your brain at any second—you tell your stylist and they wash it out of your hair. The end result is perfectly straight, perfectly damaged hair.

I remember when I was in elementary school and another mixed girl came to my class. She had these beautiful ringlet curls and I wanted them so bad. And I’ll never forget what happened when I asked my dad and the hairstylist if I could have curls like that. “Girl no,” she said. “You don’t got those good curls. Your hair’s too nappy for that and your daddy can’t handle all of that.” They both laughed as she slipped on the gloves and started parting my hair.

I stopped getting relaxers in high school when I realized how much damage they were doing to my hair, but I never stopped straightening it. I love the way natural hair is being accepted and I think curly hair is beautiful, but I hate it on me and I always will.

I appreciate the compliment from Liv, though.

“Thanks, but I’m going to straighten it. You know I don’t even know how to begin to style my curly hair.”

“Fine.” She sticks out her bottom lip, the same way she does every time I don’t abide by her exact styling requests. “One day I’m going to convince you to go curly and you’re going to regret not listening to me sooner.”

She’s been saying that since college. Still hasn’t happened, but I do admire her tenacity.

“If that happens, feel free to throw it in my face.”

“Like I need permission,” she scoffs. “Okay, I have a photo shoot to get to. I need you to promise me you will not wear your UGGs.”

“I promise.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll even send you a picture before I leave.”

“Yes, I want one.” She opens my bedroom door and walks through my condo. “Now, I know most people say don’t go too far on the first date, but I’m going to say the opposite. You need to let loose and live a little. If the opportunity arises, go for it. You only live once and it’s time for you to have some fun with yours.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s terrible advice.” I unlock the front door and hold it open for her. “But I will keep it under consideration.”

“That’s all I ask,” she says before spinning around. “Well, that and a bold lip. I left you three choices from MAC in your bathroom. I will find you on your date and apply it myself if I see any hint of clear lip gloss in the picture you send me.”

“Leather boots and bold lip, promise.” I push her out of my door; she’s totally going to be late. “Now go, I think you’re forgetting how bad traffic is . . . even on a Saturday.”

“Fucking transplants,” she groans as she stomps away.

I close the door on her, laughing at what an old lady she sounds like before checking the clock. T-minus two hours before my first real date with Quinton.

—

A KNOCK COMES on my door at four o’clock exactly. I would be impressed if I wasn’t a nervous wreck. I even used the essential oils Greer gave me, but now I smell like a lavender plant and I hope I don’t give Quinton a headache.

“Here I come!” I take one last look in the mirror, resisting the urge to wipe off the dark red lipstick and put on my clear gloss instead, before turning off the light and grabbing my purse. “Hey!” I pull open the door and get my first look at Quinton and man, it’s like he gets better looking every single day.

I think I do a pretty good job not staring at how handsome he looks in his plaid button-up and puffy vest, a combination I didn’t even know worked for me until this very moment. His beard is still on his face, but I can tell he’s been to the barber recently because it’s lined up

so well that I swear it just creates a bull's-eye around his full lips. It's all very lumberjack in a way that makes my insides quiver.

"You look gorgeous." He leans in and drops a quick kiss on my red painted lips, his facial hair tickling against my face and making my mind drift to places it shouldn't . . . like what that beard would feel like against the inside of my thighs.

"Thank you," I say, hoping he'll think the blush in my cheeks is from the cold wind blowing around us. "You look very handsome as well. Very outdoorsy."

"I figured it was fitting for what I have planned today." He pulls a hand out of his pocket and wraps it around mine. It's such an innocent, sweet gesture that it makes my heart feel like it's going to explode.

"Outdoors?" I look at the deceptively cloudless sky and the bright Colorado sun. Sure it looks beautiful, but it's freezing outside. And I might not do heat, but I definitely do not do the cold. Plus, I brought my cute jacket, not my warm one. I'm not prepared for outdoors. "Isn't it a little cold for that?"

"Ouch, Elliot!" He brings his free hand to his chest and holds it over his heart. "You already don't trust me?"

"You're such a dork." I lean into him, shoving him with my shoulder. "Fine, I'll give."

"Good, because I think you're going to love it."

I look up at his wide smile and shining dark brown eyes and can't help but agree. "I'm sure I will."

He unlocks the doors to his fancy-ass BMW as soon as we approach. The dark blue paint glitters beneath the sun and I'm pretty sure he just got it washed, a mistake only a person new to Colorado would make. A native understands that you just give up hope of having a clean car until at least May. Especially when the forecast is calling for snow soon.

"So," he says as he pulls out of my complex. "I've been thinking about you a lot with the holidays coming up. I know Halloween had you nervous. How are you feeling about Thanksgiving?"

Usually this is the kind of topic I try to avoid, but after how amazing he was on Halloween, I'm glad he brought it up. It's like he somehow

understands what I'm going through. I don't feel like a buzzkill when I talk to him about it like I do when Liv and Marie check in.

"Not great, but not terrible." I tell him the truth. "Brynn invited me over to her dad's house for dinner. I guess he goes big for the holidays. And Maxwell's mom is helping him cook. She said it would be a 'dinner for all tastes,' whatever that means. Plus, she told me I could bring Mrs. Rafter and whoever else I wanted to bring, which I'm pretty sure means you." I laugh thinking about how she didn't even try to play it cool. "So, if you want to come, I think it might be fun. Unless you already have plans or something."

"That sounds like fun." He reaches across the console and squeezes my thigh. "There was one thing I have planned earlier in the day, but I was going to ask you if you'd want to come with me. We could do that in the morning and then go pick up Mrs. Rafter and ride to Brynn's dad's together?" His fingers tense on my leg and even though he's staring at the road in front of him, I can still tell he looks anxious for some reason.

"I'd love that." I put my hand on top of his, enjoying that we're in a place where we welcome the other person's touch. I hope mine can comfort him as much as his seems to comfort me. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"I'm pretty much always thinking about you these days," he says. "Even when I'm trying not to."

I couldn't hide my smile even if I wanted to; his words make me happier than I can remember being in a long time. That undercurrent of guilt I've been feeling ever since my meeting with Mahler gets a little bit stronger before I shove it back down. I'm not doing anything wrong. What would be wrong is me making a permanent decision based on temporary emotions. If anyone would understand that, it's Quinton.

The cold must be keeping people inside today, because the drive downtown goes by in a flash. There wasn't even any traffic between Broadway and Sixth, which never happens anymore. When we arrive in the heart of downtown, Quinton opens his phone and clicks on a few things before deciding to park in a partially empty parking lot on Twentieth.

“Where are we going?” I ask as Quinton guides us through the people on the sidewalks. I figure since we are downtown, the chances of us staying outside are slim to none, thank goodness, but now I’m even more curious about how his outdoorsy look was a clue.

“We’re almost there.” We round the corner and he points to a door. “What do you think?”

It takes a second for the words on the door to register. “Axe throwing?” I shout, startling the poor woman walking her dog as she passes us. “What if I kill you?”

I know I can be dramatic quite often, but seriously. What if I kill him? This seems like a terrible idea.

“You won’t kill me.” He opens the door and walks me inside. “I’m pretty sure they’ve taken the necessary steps to avoid that. It’s going to be fun.”

“I’m not convinced,” I say as we walk up the stairs. “But I’ll give it a go.”

As soon as we reach the top of the stairs, I change my mind. The huge open space is a mix between industrial, artsy, and rustic. The brick walls and exposed air ducts on the ceilings somehow meld perfectly with the long wood tables going down the center of the room and framed art throughout the space. Six cages compiled of wood and metal wire house the bull’s-eyes where people are throwing axes. The outside of each cage has a different mural painted on the wood base, and there is a huge bar boasting local beers at the end of the room.

Other than HERS, it’s one of the coolest places I’ve ever been to.

“Hey, can I help you two?” A man approaches us and his eyes widen just a fraction when he recognizes Quinton, but to his immense credit, he doesn’t say anything.

“Yeah,” Quinton says. “I have a reservation under Quinton for two hours.”

Now it’s my eyes going wide. Throwing axes for two hours? But also, spending time with Quinton for two hours? Yeah, I’m alright with that.

The man, also sporting a plaid flannel shirt and a beard, opens up an iPad and swipes around for a moment. “Quinton for two,” he says. “Right this way.”

He walks across the room to an empty cage in the back, but closer to the bar. “Alright, before we get going, we just need you to sign some waivers and then we have some rules and tips to go over. As I’m sure you can guess, we want to make sure everyone has a fun time and you can’t do that if you get injured.”

“Yes.” I pull the iPad he’s extended from his hands. “Please tell us how. Do you remember when Gavin Pope fell ice-skating? I cannot be responsible for something like that. Got it, Howard?”

“Got it,” he says, but his laughter does not make me feel like he’s taking me seriously.

“I’m serious.” I look away from Quinton and aim my attention at our new bearded friend. “Tell him I’m serious. This cannot end with him losing a finger.”

“We haven’t lost any fingers yet, and I’ll make sure it stays that way,” he says, but also looking like he’s going to laugh.

We’re throwing freaking axes, for goodness’ sakes! I can’t be the only person who sees this going very, very badly!

I narrow my eyes at both of them before focusing on the man who works here. “I didn’t get your name yet.”

“Sorry about that,” he says. “I’m Brett.”

“Alright then, Brett.” I move my finger between the two of them. “It is literally my job to spin stories in my favor. If this goes wrong, you and this guy”—I point to Quinton—“are going to be the only names mentioned. I was never even here.”

“I promise that nothing will happen.” Brett holds up three fingers in the air. “Scout’s honor.”

“Oh great.” I roll my eyes as I start filling out the waiver form. “Like I haven’t heard that before.”

Thirty-two

"That was bullshit and you know it." I glare at Quinton from the passenger seat as he drives under the streetlight-lined highway.

"How so?" He laughs like he's been laughing since we got our total scores from axe throwing. "You're the one who made the bet, not me."

"Then you should've let me win and then lied about letting me win." I don't even know what I'm saying at this point. Losing brings out the worst in me.

"I don't think I'm wired to do that." He drops a hand from the steering wheel and rubs my leg. "Even for someone who looks as distracting in leggings as you did."

"I appreciate your attempt to distract me by implying that my butt looks good in leggings. I'll let it go . . . for now." Between the compliment and the way his hand is steadily moving north up my leg, he has discovered the only way to lick my wounds. "Just know that the next time we have a competition I get to pick the event and there will be no throwing involved."

"Fine by me," he says. "Just remember that I also lettered in track and swimming."

"Swimming?" I feel like I know a lot about him, but this is a total shock. "I would've assumed you played basketball."

"Nope, I was good at basketball, but I loved swimming." He squeezes my leg before putting his hands back on the wheel. "My mom signed me up for swim team when I was a kid. She said she wanted me to be a good swimmer because she didn't learn until she was an adult, but I'm pretty sure she just wanted to wake me up early and wear me out during the summers. I was actually really good at it. Got offered a scholarship and everything before deciding to go with football."

"Seriously?"

The world is so unfair. I had to write what felt like a billion essays to apply for scholarships and he just had them handed to him. And not only did he get all the football talent, but he got it in swimming too? Plus he's hot? What kinda bullshit is that?

"Yeah." He shrugs as he takes the exit to his place. "I wanted to find a place with a pool here, but it's almost impossible in Colorado."

"Yes, the harsh winters," I say. "That's the reason I'm not a great swimmer."

"Shit." He looks out the window as if only just realizing where we are. "I didn't even ask you. Do you want to come over or did you want me to take you home?"

"I'd love to come over if that's okay with you." I was secretly hoping we'd keep the date going, but I wasn't sure because his next game is away. "Don't you have to travel tomorrow?"

"Yeah, but we don't have to get to the facility until noon, so I'll be fine."

"If you're sure then." I pick at my nails, suddenly nervous even though I've been over to his house many times before.

"I'm sure." He links his hand in mine and his touch makes all of the nerves disappear.

We pull into his garage and he grabs me a Diet Coke before walking into his house. The fact that he's been buying them this entire time still blows my mind.

"Wanna order some food?" he asks as he kicks his shoes off in the laundry room that doubles as a mudroom.

"Sure." I'm never going to turn down food. Ever. "I'm not really in the mood for anything specific, so you can pick."

"There's a good Chinese place that I order from. Is that okay?"

"Yup." I follow him into his house. "I pretty much love all food, so that sounds good."

"A woman who eats, you must be after my heart," he says as he walks into his kitchen and pulls out a menu from one of his many drawers. And even though he hasn't decorated . . . like at all . . . it's nice to know he's still human enough to have a junk drawer filled with takeout menus.

"Oh yeah, you know me. Taking down men one order of fried rice at a time."

I have to admit, it's nice that we started out as friends—or not friends at all—and I was able to skip that whole awkward “should I order a salad or not” phase of a relationship.

“You want to pick something or do you want me to surprise you?” He waves the menu in front of my face.

“Surprise me,” I say. “You’ve done a pretty good job of it so far.”

“And there are so many surprises I’ve been hiding.” He winks at me and I’m pretty sure my legs go numb. “Why don’t you go ahead and pick something to watch?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll do that.” I trip over my words, my brain is still stuck on what I think was sexual innuendo. I mean, I’ve been out of the game a long time, but that was an obvious hint at sex. Right?

I fucking hope so.

I think back to what Liv said before she left, and even though I waved her off, I have had a very, very long dry spell. Who better to break it than Quinton? We both like each other. He’s hot as fuck. And we’re grown. We can do what we want.

But on the other hand, he is Quinton Howard and he’s hot as fuck. I’m . . . well I’m me. Maybe I should work my way up to Quinton. Work on my flexibility or something before we go at it.

“Food will be here in forty.” Quinton sits down on the couch next to me, interrupting my sex thoughts. *I hope he can’t read my mind!* “Did you find something to watch?”

“Um, yeah.” I turn on Netflix and find my trusty *Scandal*. Shonda never does me wrong . . . except when she kills all my favorites. “Have you watched it before?”

He looks at the screen and his eyebrows scrunch together. “Not really. I’ve watched an episode or two.”

“Oh good!” I pick season one, episode one. “Then we can start from the beginning.”

I might not love scary movies, but even though there is way more murder than should ever be condoned on *Scandal*, I can’t say no to a forbidden romance.

“Olivia is a fuckin’ boss,” Quinton says a little over halfway through the show.

“Right? She might be fictional, but she’s totally my idol.” It’s hard for me not to tell him all the twists and turns that are coming, but I

manage. "Shonda is a genius."

"Shonda?" Quinton stands up and pauses the TV when the doorbell rings. "Are you guys friends?"

"How dare you? Of course she's my friend." I follow him to the door. "She just isn't aware of it yet."

He opens the door and hands the deliveryman a tip that makes his eyes go wide before a smile splits his face. Just add that to the growing list in my head of reasons why I should pick this relationship over Mahler.

"I know you have your Diet Coke, but do you want anything else?" he asks as he unpacks too many boxes for just the two of us to eat. "I think I have wine in the top of my pantry."

I would normally be okay with just the Diet, but my shoulders are already starting to ache from that damn axe throwing, and a glass of wine sounds like a good idea.

"Wine actually sounds great, I'll go check your pantry."

I walk into his pantry and see the bottle shoved behind a cereal box on the top shelf.

"Where's your bottle opener?" I ask him as I walk back into the kitchen just in time to see him piling food onto two plates. "You know I'm never going to be able to eat all of that, right?"

He looks up at me with mischief in his eyes. "Wanna bet?"

"No!" An unexpected giggle falls from the back of my throat. "I'm not doing any more bets with you today. Now wine opener, stat."

—

ONE EMPTY BOTTLE of wine and what feels like twenty dumplings later, we're back on the couch watching Olivia as she fixes everything with her gladiators.

"I think Huck's my favorite," Quinton says.

"Yeah, he's pretty great." I roll my neck to try and loosen it. The ache in my shoulders from axe throwing has extended to my neck and back.

This is why I stay away from physical activities.

"You alright?" Quinton puts his hand on my neck and lightly massages it.

I don't know if it's the wine, the food, or that his hands just work that well, but my body goes slack underneath his touch.

"Thank you." I close my eyes and enjoy the way his strong fingers seem to find my pressure points without even trying. "I think two hours of axe throwing upset the muscles in my body that I've never used before."

"Come here then." He stands me up for a second before sitting me down between his legs. "Try to relax."

I've never loved being touched. I'd rather spend my money on just about anything other than a stranger rubbing my body for an hour. I got a massage one time with Liv and was so tense during it that my back wasn't right for a week afterwards. I actually broke up with a guy in college because he wanted to cuddle all the time and I couldn't take it.

But for some reason, I don't feel like that with Quinton. I already knew his hands were magic from when he helped my ankle, but this feels decadent.

My arms seem to go dead weight as they rest across the tops of my thighs. His hands make easy work of getting rid of the many knots I have in my back.

"Damn, girl," he says as he pushes his palms down my spine. "How stressed have you been lately?"

"You have no idea." I try to sound normal, but I accidentally moan out the last word when Quinton pushes his fingers into the spot just beneath my shoulder blade. "Why are you so good at this? Did your mom make you take massage lessons as a kid too?"

"Very funny." His voice sounds off. He clears his throat and repositions himself behind me before he answers. "No, I guess my big hands are good for something besides throwing a football."

"Thank you for that." I unroll my back and stretch my arms into the air. But as I do it, I scoot back against him and feel the reason his voice sounded the way it did. But instead of scooting forward and giving him space, something comes over me and I rock back against him instead.

"Fuck, Elle." His thick voice sounds strangled in his throat. His fingers clasp on to my hips, digging into the softness I've been so self-conscious about for so long. "You have no idea what you're doing to me, do you?"

Sitting on his couch, my makeup worn off, barefoot, and in leggings, I've never felt sexier.

"I hope I do." I stand up and turn around before straddling my legs over his lap. "Because you do the same thing to me."

He doesn't say anything.

His gaze drops to my mouth and he stares at my lips for a minute. "Then what are you waiting for?"

His hands reach into my hair, pulling out the ponytail I threw it into while we were axe throwing, and digging his fingers into my scalp, pulling my face to his before pushing his mouth onto mine.

We've done a lot of kissing since our first kiss on this very couch, but something feels different about this one. This feels like more. Every time his tongue circles mine, it feels like a promise of what's to come.

His hips thrust up beneath mine. The bulge in his pants aligns the zipper of his jeans perfectly against the seam on my leggings. He twists my hair around his hand and pulls my head back. My mouth falls open and my breathing speeds up as he moves his hips, hitting that spot with every thrust.

Like the rest of my body, my eyelids feel heavy and opening them is a struggle. But Quinton's breath is heavy against my throat as our moans begin to mix together. I know that if I don't see him beneath me as I fall apart, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

I open my eyes and when I do, I'm met with the most beautiful sight in the entire world. Only inches away, Quinton is staring at me like I'm the only person in the entire world. His cocoa eyes are black as he watches me fall apart on top of him. And that's all I need to let go.

The friction between our bodies is too much to hold back anymore, and it's like all the heat from our bodies finds its way between my legs and explodes. A scream falls out of my mouth before Quinton's mouth is back on mine, drinking every sound that I make as my body shakes around him.

"So fucking beautiful," he rasps out once my breathing has evened out.

I think I should thank him or something, but instead, there's only one word that comes to my mind. "Bed," I say. "Let's go to your bed."

I don't have to repeat myself.

Quinton is off the couch, holding me against him as I lock my legs around his waist and he runs down the hallway, kicking open his bedroom door.

He slows down once we're in his room. His steps are measured and careful as he crosses the space and lowers me onto his bed.

"You're sure about this?" he asks. "We don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

It's sweet of him and I appreciate him asking, but I've never been so sure of anything in my entire life.

I roll onto my elbows, taking in his giant height as he looms over me.

Oh yeah. I want this.

Bad.

"Take off your pants." I reach for the top button of his jeans, eager to see this fine specimen of a man naked. Needing to see it. Maybe needing it more than I need my next breath.

He steps out of my reach, taking over for my hands as he pulls down his zipper and slides the denim down his long, toned legs. I don't know what I expected, but the reality is still so much better than anything I could've imagined. He kicks them to the side and stands in front of me, not moving, like he understands how badly I needed this moment. Like he understands my need to carve every moment of this into my brain.

He starts unbuttoning his shirt. One button at a time, revealing his smooth dark skin, inch by maddening inch, until the shirt is on the floor next to his jeans and he's standing in front of me in nothing but his black boxer briefs. His body looks like something out of Greek mythology. His muscles aren't exaggerated, but they are all there. The ridges of his abs, the thick curve of his thighs, and the broad expanse of his shoulders that lead his strong arms, it's all flawless.

He's flawless.

He takes a step toward the bed before bending down and reaching for the hem of my shirt. "Your turn," he whispers before dragging his teeth against my earlobe.

Goose bumps cover my body at the same time my nerves kick in.

Me? Get naked? In front of that? Seriously?!

He must sense my hesitation because instead of waiting for me to do it, he stands back up . . . pulling me with him.

“Don’t make me beg,” he says into the dark room. “I’ll do it, but don’t make me.”

He would beg to see me naked? Not that I’m complaining or anything, but something seems wrong with this scenario.

“I kind of want to see you beg now.” I mean for it to come out as a joke, but I still haven’t quite caught my breath from watching him take off his clothes and from the orgasm on the couch, so it comes out more as a whisper. A request.

And instead of him laughing, he drops to his knees. I try to tell him to get up, but I’ve forgotten how to speak. My brain has gone awry and all of the muscles that just stopped quivering tighten again. He doesn’t even need to touch me. The sight of him, almost naked and on his knees, is enough.

But then he speaks.

“If you had any idea the amount of times I’ve walked into this room and pictured you right in this very spot, you’d think I was crazy.” He curls his fingers into the waistband of my leggings. The scrape of his fingernails against my skin makes me shiver. “I’ve never met anyone like you. You are funny and infuriating and brilliant. You’ve brought me to my knees, literally. Please, let me see you.”

My mouth has gone dry and I don’t trust myself to say anything, so instead, I bite the inside of my lip to try and hide my nerves as I nod my head.

“Thank you,” he says as he starts pulling down my leggings. He hasn’t gone far before he lets out a hiss of air. “You aren’t wearing underwear.”

“They’re legg—” I start to explain, but the explanation dies on my lips as soon as his mouth lands on me. “Oh my god.”

My eyes slam shut and my mouth falls open as his tongue finds the target on his first try. I dig my hands into his coarse hair. I don’t know if I’m doing it to pull him closer, push him away, or just to hold on.

“No!” I groan when he pulls his mouth away, but I’m only missing it for a second before he lifts me up and places me on the center of his bed. He climbs in after me, grabbing my ankles with his rough,

calloused hands before putting them on his shoulders and covering my mound with his mouth. His talented, amazing mouth.

He sucks and licks and even nibbles until my back is arched so far off the bed I think I might be levitating. He digs his fingernails into my thighs so deep that there are going to be marks there tomorrow. And that's what does it. The thought of being marked by Quinton causes a wave of pleasure to wash over me that's so deep I might drown.

"Fuuuuck!" I moan as I shatter under his mouth.

But Quinton doesn't stop. His tongue swirls around on my core and only when my breathing has evened does he start to drop kisses down my thighs before sitting up on his knees.

"Holy shit. That was . . . That was . . ." Fuck. I don't even have a word for what that was. "What was that?"

"That was us just getting started." A mischievous smile that makes my insides tighten again crosses his face. "Now what do you say to us getting rid of the rest of these clothes?"

"Yes." I nod my head, all reservations and insecurities I had disappeared with the rest of my mind during that orgasm. "Let's do that. Now."

I pull my sweater over my head in record time, not wanting to miss a second of him pulling off his briefs.

And what a solid fucking decision it was.

Because when he pulls them off and reveals *all* of himself, I damn near faint. I knew he wasn't going to be small when I felt it beneath me on the couch, but this. Wow.

He reaches into the nightstand next to his bed, pulling out a condom, ripping it open, and then rolling it onto his perfect fucking penis.

"How are you real?" I breathe, not moving my eyes from his manhood as it stands at full attention in front of me, sheathed and ready to go.

"I was going to ask you the same thing." He climbs back onto the bed, positioning himself on top of me. "You have no idea how bad I wanted to get my hands on these. You're always wearing those silky tank tops and the curve of these"—he drops his head, running his tongue along the curve of my breasts before sucking my nipple into his mouth and releasing it with a pop—"they taunt me."

“Please.” I wrap my ankles around his back, trying to pull him into me. “I need you inside me, now.”

Droplets of sweat fall from his forehead as he rubs his manhood against my entrance and I can feel his muscles trembling beneath my fingers. “I’m not sure I can go slow.”

I pull his face to mine, pressing my lips to his before biting his full, luscious bottom lip and tugging it between my teeth.

“Then don’t.” I lift my hips off the bed and kiss the soft skin on his neck. “I don’t want gentle, Quinton. I want to feel every inch of you and I still want to feel it tomorrow when you’re on that plane.”

That does it.

He slams into me. His size and power catches me off guard. “Oh yes!” I moan as he pulls out and pushes back inside.

Every thrust feels different . . . amazing. Like he’s waking up a part of me that’s been asleep for so long. If I knew sex could be like this, I probably wouldn’t have been able to have a dry spell for as long as I did.

He leans back on his knees, grabbing my legs from around him and slipping his hands down my calves until they reach my ankles. He wraps his long fingers around each ankle, forcing my legs apart as he thrusts inside of me, watching his every stroke as he enters me. With my legs spread wide, he gives me the perfect view of his abs as they contract with every movement he makes, but even that has nothing on the look on his face.

My fingers grab onto the sheets next to me as another orgasm begins to build. “Harder,” I moan out even though I’m not sure my body can handle any harder.

Until he goes harder.

“Give it to me, Elle.” His voice is hoarse with restraint and I know he’s waiting for me.

He keeps driving into me at a maddening pace, never slowing, never easing up. Until I can’t hold it back anymore.

Every muscle in my body goes taut, even my toes. My back arches as my head pushes back into his pillows and my knuckles go white clenching his sheets. My mouth falls open as I let out a strangled moan as every single nerve in my body explodes. The world goes black right

before Quinton moans out and slams into me a final time before dropping my ankles and falling on top of me.

Even though my body feels as though my blood has turned into cement, I lift my legs and arms and wrap them around Quinton, holding him tight as our breathing returns to normal and we float back down to earth.

“Damn,” he whispers, dropping a kiss onto my shoulder. “That was . . . That was . . .”

“Yeah, it was,” I finish for him, because there are no words to describe what just happened between us.

I should’ve known he would be magic in bed.

As if my decision wasn’t impossible enough already, I had to go and have the best sex of my entire life with him. I’m not one to think sex means love. Not at all. But maybe in this case, it does? Nobody has ever known what my body needs the way he did. And not just my body, but he’s always one step ahead of me emotionally too.

How did I let this happen and what the hell am I going to do now?

Thirty-three

If someone would've told me that after my dad passed away, I wouldn't be completely dreading my first Thanksgiving without him, I would've laughed in their face and asked them to share whatever they'd been smoking. Yet here I am.

Of course, there is still a gray cloud hanging over my day. A looming sadness that I don't even try to shake. A reminder that the most important person in my life will never share this day with me again. But instead of crumbling like I thought I would, I'm standing in front of my building, soaking in the sun on this surprisingly warm November day, watching as Quinton's sparkling blue BMW that he still insists on taking to the carwash glides into the empty parking spot in front of me.

"Happy Thanksgiving." I climb in and he meets me in the middle for a quick kiss.

"Happy Thanksgiving to you," he returns and glances at the clock. "I hope you weren't waiting long, I would've come sooner."

"I know you would've." I buckle my seat belt and settle in as he reverses out of the spot. "My place just felt too quiet and it's beautiful out. I figured I'd enjoy it before the weather switches up on us again."

He forces out a laugh. "This Colorado weather is giving me whiplash. It is a nice day outside, though."

Weather small talk? I thought we were beyond this. But as I look at the rigid lines in his shoulder and his white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, it's obvious something is off. I wrack my brain, trying to think of anything that could've happened to make today so awkward, but I can't think of anything. He dropped me off at my place on Sunday morning before driving to the facility to meet the team and

didn't get back into town until early Tuesday morning. We had dinner on Tuesday, but missed each other yesterday.

"Everything okay?" Maybe he's regretting giving his entire day over to me? We did just start seeing each other. This does feel like something a more serious couple would do. I wonder if he's afraid he's giving me the wrong idea?

"Yeah, great." He looks away from the road in front of him and offers me what I think is supposed to be a reassuring smile, but does the opposite. His mouth is so strained, it hurts me.

"I know we kinda just fell into this whole thing." I rest my hands on my legs as an attempt to stop my knee from bouncing. "If you're worried that I'm reading into this and going to become some crazy stalker, know that I won't."

Alright, so the no-stalking thing is a lie. We live in the time of the Internet and social media. I will for sure cyberstalk him. Torturing myself with thoughts of what could be and endless scrolling between the hours of twelve to three a.m. is my favorite pastime. But I won't like "show up at his house" stalk him or anything.

"No." He manages to pry one of his hands off the steering wheel and grab mine. "That's not it at all. If you couldn't tell, I'm really fucking into you. I want to see where this goes. I want you to read into this, I know I am."

My knee stops bouncing as my heart explodes into tiny little hearts in my chest. I'm not sure anyone has used the word "fucking" in such a sweet way, but it might be my love language. Well, that and Diet Coke, both of which Quinton has mastered.

"I'd like that too." Mr. Mahler crosses my mind, but I quickly shut it down. If I'm going to make a decision, I can't not be present when I'm with Quinton or at work. There's no way I can make up my mind if I'm checked out when I'm around them.

"Good." His fingers wind around mine and his jaw flexes beneath his thick beard. "Where we're going, I've never taken anyone. Ever. And I need you to know bringing you here isn't something I take lightly."

"Oookay," I drag out the word as I look at the nondescript neighborhood he's driving us through. The houses are nice, but cookie-cutter, typical for the suburbs. "Where are we going?"

He didn't tell me and I never asked. His surprises haven't let me down yet, so I didn't feel the need to ask until now.

"I've been pretty vague about my family life, but I'm a lot closer to them than you think." He flicks on his blinker, making the right-hand turn like it's second nature. Like these are streets he frequents. "I just like to keep my family private. It's not something I've ever wanted to advertise. And a few years ago, something happened and I grew even more private at my family's request."

"So I'm meeting your family?" The pieces of my heart slowly meld back together as it pounds against my chest and my palms begin to sweat. The way he is presenting this doesn't bode well for me. I feel like meeting the family should not contain this much dread.

"Yeah." He pulls to a stop in front of a ranch house with a white sedan parked in the driveway. The small tree in the grass is bare, its leaves long gone. It's every average house. "I . . . It's just . . . I need you to promise me that you will not share any of this with anyone."

Oh fuck.

He has a kid, doesn't he? He's taking me to meet his secret love child.

"I promise." I will a smile onto my face, hoping it looks more convincing than it feels.

It must work, because he takes a deep breath and I watch as the muscles in his body finally relax. "Alright then." He leans over and when he kisses me this time, it's more than the peck we had when I first got in the car. This one is deep and slow. It's him saying something that he couldn't quite put into words. I'm just still not sure what it is. When he pulls away, relief shines bright in his eyes. "Let's go."

I meet him on the sidewalk and he grabs my hand as we walk side by side to the front door. Quinton lifts his hand to knock on the blue-painted door, but it swings open before he can. And at the sight of the person on the other side, my stomach falls to my feet and my vision blurs.

"Hey!" Angela says. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

Unlike the first time we met, and the times since, her hair isn't down in perfect waves and her slim hips aren't wrapped in a pencil skirt. Instead, her long blonde hair is up in a bun that I think is

supposed to look messy but instead looks high fashion, and her legs are encased in jeans that make them look even longer than they already are. Like a person would dress at home.

“Elliot, right?” she asks before leaning in and giving me a quick hug that I’m too shocked to reciprocate. “Nice to see you again.”

“Um, yeah, you too,” I say to the woman I’m beginning to suspect is the mother of his child. I look at Quinton with wide eyes that hopefully say “What in the entire fuck is going on here?” when she steps to the side and gestures us inside.

Quinton doesn’t say anything, but his fingers tighten around my hand as I try to pull it away. I freaking asked him if anything was going on between them and he said no!

“Q!” A beautiful Black woman who could pass for Angela Bassett’s twin comes running into the room and wraps him in her arms. “You’re early. I don’t even have the appetizers ready yet.”

“You know I’m always early, Mom,” he says. “You and Dad drilled it into me.”

“I know that’s right.” Her warm laughter fills the room so much that it unthaws my feet that have been frozen to the carpet beneath them. She turns her head and when she sees me, her mouth falls open for a second and then Quinton’s smile appears on her wrinkle-free face. “You must be Elliot!” She forgets about Quinton and wraps me up in a hug much like the one she gave him. She pulls away, leaving her hands on my shoulders as she looks me over. It’s hard not to shrink under her intense gaze. I swear she is looking into my soul right now. “I’m so glad he brought you. I’ve heard so much about you. It’s nice to put a face to the woman who has made such a change in my son.”

“Hi.” I struggle to find my voice after the shock of seeing Angela and then meeting his mom wears off. “It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. Howard.”

She glares at Quinton, and I’m so glad I’m not him, before looking back to me with that gorgeous smile of hers. “Please, call me Monica.”

“And you can call me Elle.” I feel my smile widen since I’m pretty sure I’m not meeting his secret love child. I’m still not sure why Angela is here, but as long as she didn’t birth his offspring, I think I can handle anything.

“Alright, Mom.” Quinton puts his arm around my waist and his fingers squeeze into my hips. I flush with the reminder of our night together. “Give her some space.”

“Please.” She brushes him off in a way only a mother can before pulling me out of his grip. “You knew this was going to happen. You’ve never brought anyone to meet me before. It’s about time I had someone on my team when it comes to you and your father.”

At the mention of his dad, his eyes soften and he looks at Angela. “How’s he doing today?”

The smile falls from Angela’s normally sunny face. “Not great.”

Monica clears her throat and changes the subject. “Anyway, where are my manners? Can I get you something to drink? Q told me to grab Diet Coke, so we have some of that if you want.”

I glance at Quinton and I swear, under that thick beard and beautiful skin, he’s blushing.

Oh yeah, Diet Coke is definitely my love language.

“I’d love one, thank you.” I look back at Monica and when I do, her eyes are glossed over and it looks like she might be on the verge of crying.

“Coming right up.” She clasps her hands together and looks at Angela. “Come on, Angela, help me get this food together.”

Angela follows her through the living room and as soon as they are out of our sight, I cut right to the chase. “Your mom is wonderful, but what in the world is going on here? Why is Angela here? Why are you asking her about your dad?”

“Angela runs a program that provides in-home care to dementia patients.” He doesn’t hesitate before answering. “She has gone above and beyond to make my family feel safe with their care for my dad, and she’s become a close friend to my mom, hence her spending Thanksgiving here.”

All of my breath leaves my body in one fell swoop.

“Dementia?” I ask as all of the pieces that I’ve been trying to place since the day he first covered his logo fall into place.

“After we got the diagnosis, he made us promise not to tell anyone, and I haven’t, until you. It started off with little things. Falling down a lot, forgetting why he went to the store, not remembering phone numbers.” He’s looking at me, but he’s not. It’s almost like he’s being

pulled back in time. “Then he started getting mean. My parents didn’t have me until after he retired. My dad wanted to be all in, not traveling or moving us around with trades. They wanted to be settled. He was at every single one of my football games, every school program. He was the best. But as he got older, his temper started getting shorter. My mom and I brushed it off in the beginning, but then news stories started coming out about other players committing suicide and getting diagnosed with all sorts of things.”

I step in closer, grabbing onto his hands, trying to give him any kind of comfort that I can. My dad died. Yeah. And it fucking sucked. But my dad was the same person until the day he died. I can’t even begin to imagine the horrors that come with watching the person you love disappear right in front of your eyes. And to suffer through all of this in silence? Hiding your pain from the entire world? It breaks my heart.

“My mom started reaching out to some of her friends from when my dad played and they were exchanging stories that resembled each other. One of them told her about the League sending her husband to see doctors. Neuromapping or whatever they call it.” He rolls his eyes and I watch as his anger rises. “You know, the League pays these doctors and we’re supposed to believe them? When they can’t even get around to reimbursing you for seeing them? And we were the lucky ones. My dad kept jobs. He had made enough of a name for himself to earn money talking about sports, working short hours that he could manage. But once he couldn’t work anymore, once things started going south, the money went fast and that measly pension the League gives him does nothing. And once he dies? My mom gets half of it. So I’m stuck working for this soulless corporation to provide for the family they should be paying. These men built this fucking league and now what? Now my dad can’t even go to the bathroom by himself. He can’t take walks without a nurse and my mom is stuck loving a man who disappeared a long time ago.”

Guilt slams into me with the force of a tsunami. All of the times I judged him, resented him for not including his dad in his efforts. The times where I thought he was selfish and an asshole and I threw my dad in his face and he said nothing. Nothing about how the sport that I loved so much with my dad is the sport that stole his away. And the

company that I work for is the same one who abandoned them when they needed support the most.

“I’m so sorry you have to go through this.” I grab his face in my hands, hoping that he feels not only the sincerity of my words, but how grateful I am that he opened up to me. “I wish I could do something to make this better.”

“You already have.” He puts his hands on top of mine and places a kiss on my forehead. “You’ve been there for me in a way nobody else has and you’ve helped me find my voice in all of this.”

“I didn’t do anything, it’s all been you.” My stomach twists into knots and not for the first time, I feel dirty. Working for Mahler has me feeling gross.

But I can’t lay that on Quinton. Not now. Not when I see the weight he already has on his shoulders. And I can’t just up and quit with no plan either. I’ll figure it out. I still have a month. I can make this work. Somehow.

Thirty-four

"Is that handsome quarterback you keep insisting isn't your fella going to be here tonight?" Mrs. Rafter asks from the passenger seat of my car.

After the wonderful early dinner with Quinton's mom and Angela—his dad was asleep the entire time, something Quinton reassured me was growing more and more normal for him—he dropped me off at home so he could get a quick workout in before eating again at Brynn's dad's. If I ever questioned if I had the dedication to be a professional athlete before, I now know the answer is a resounding no. Hell no.

Instead of working out, I just changed into my stretchy pants because priorities.

He offered to bring a change of clothes with him to the facility and pick me up right after, but I wanted to spend some time alone with Mrs. Rafter. Spending this morning with his family, seeing the strained smiles as their loved one was in the other room, slowly fading away, reminded me how important it is for me to cherish the people I love while I can. Plus, we still agreed on him coming back to my place after, so I'll still end the night with the only kind of workout I want to participate in.

"Yes." I put my old Camry in park behind the long line of luxury cars lining the street. "And I'm not insisting he isn't anymore. He definitely is."

"Oh good," she says. There's comfort in her voice that warms me from the inside. "Next time maybe you'll listen to an old lady instead of thinking you know better."

"I'll never doubt you again."

"That's all I ask." She opens her door and points to the ceramic pie dish that she has brought to every Thanksgiving we've spent together. "Do me a favor and grab the pie for me."

“Only if it’s your bourbon pecan pie.” It’s the best pie on the planet . . . or at least the Denver metro area. She even has a couple of ribbons to prove it.

“Like I would spend this day with you and not make my girl her favorite pie.” She clucks her tongue and wags a short, painted nail at me. “It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Of course I know you.” I hurry around the car with the pie in my hands as we trek up the walkway to the front door. “And I know this will forever be the best pie in the world.”

The beautiful weather from earlier is long gone. The forecast is calling for snow tonight and the chill in the air that’s nipping at my ears believes it.

“Miss Elle!” a little voice yells just before the Lamar boys come piling out of the house.

“Another pie?” Jax says with wonder in his voice.

“This Thanksgiving is going to be so much better than when we went to Granny’s house.” Jett slams a hand over his mouth and looks around him, no doubt making sure his mom didn’t hear that.

“I’ll help you with that, Miss Elle,” Jagger, such a little gentleman, says.

“Thank you.” I hand over the pie, leaning in to whisper in his ear. “But be careful, because this isn’t just a pie, it’s the *best* pie, and since you helped, I’ll make sure to sneak you a piece.”

“You’re the best!” I’m pretty sure the only reason he is saying that is because the last time I saw him, I snuck him a few handfuls of gummy bears after Greer ate all of his. He leans in and gives me a shoulder hug, keeping both hands secure on the pie dish as he walks carefully into the beautiful house filled with loud voices and laughter.

“Hey!” Brynn calls out as soon as we walk into the house and runs to greet us. “You must be Mrs. Rafter! I’m so glad you could make it, thank you for coming.”

“It smells like the pleasure is all mine,” Mrs. Rafter says, and she is not wrong.

I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to eat much after Quinton’s mom practically force-fed me, but just smelling everything is making my stomach rumble.

“My dad and mother-in-law went wild.” She puts her arm through the crook of Mrs. Rafter’s. “Let’s go get you something to drink and a few snacks to hold you over. They keep saying dinner’s almost ready, but who knows anymore.”

Brynn walks her into the kitchen, but just before they disappear, Brynn turns and points a very aggressive finger toward the stairs. And because I’m going to need her to make me the caramel apple cocktail she keeps telling me about, I follow directions.

When I reach the top of the stairs, there’s a single door open with light and hushed voices spilling into the hallway. All heads turn to me when I walk in, but I focus on one face.

“Fuck.” I rush over to Vonnie, who, for the first time since meeting her, doesn’t have a drop of makeup on her face. “What happened?”

“I told him I couldn’t do it anymore.” She doesn’t even try to wipe away the tears as they fall down her face. “I can’t pretend to be happy with things the way they are anymore. I don’t want to remodel the house again or do any of the other busywork I’ve been doing. I told him I’m tired of feeling like everything I care about is second to what he deems is most important.”

I pile onto the twin-size bed with Greer and Poppy. “Good for you. What’d he say to that?”

She might not be happy with the way her marriage is going, but she still loves the man she married. Even though she’s crying on what I can only assume is Brynn’s childhood bed on Thanksgiving, a part of me is still hoping there’s a chance this won’t end in total heartbreak.

“He told me I was being ridiculous and that if I didn’t like it, I could leave. Then he grabbed his car keys and drove to his mom’s house without even saying bye to the boys.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? What an asshole!” I know it’s not what I’m supposed to say, but my filter has up and left me. My heart is broken for her and my anger is off the charts. How could he not realize that he had the best of the best?

“I can’t believe he did that.” Poppy leans back on her elbows, her sweet baby bump sticking out for all to see. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“I don’t even know if it is him anymore.” Vonnie swipes at the tears on her face, leaving angry red marks in her wake. “He’s so different

now. I don't know if this is just the man he's grown into or if it's some brain thing. But what? Do I stick around and wait? If it is CTE, he's sick, right? So I should stay, like I promised in my marriage vows. But there's nothing to do to treat it, and you've seen what the women who have lived through CTE have said. Do I take that abuse and let my kids see it? Or do I protect myself and my boys? I don't think there's any way I can win in this situation."

"Alright." Brynn walks in and slams the door behind her. "The Lamar boys are in the basement with Ace playing that dance game on the Xbox, which is hilarious by the way; TK has Posie; and Mrs. Rafter is being entertained by Maxwell. Should we FaceTime Charli and Aviana? I feel like we should. I hate this whole trading, different teams thing. None of my friends should be allowed to move. Can I make that a rule?"

"Oh my god!" Vonnie shouts, effectively cutting off Brynn's rambling. We all turn to look at her and when we do, she's not only no longer crying, but she is staring at me in a way that, frankly, terrifies me. "Q gave you that D!"

I feel the blush rise from my neck as my mouth sputters like a dying fish, but nothing comes out. How could she know?

"What?" I finally manage to spit out, but it's not the denial I was going for.

"She has a gift." Brynn pats me on the shoulder. "Don't fight it. She did it to me too."

I turn to Brynn, horrified by the idea of all this.

"I-I mean . . ." I start, not knowing where the hell I'm going with this, when the cutest boy with long golden curls barges into the room.

"Grandpa Sterling says it's time to eat!" He turns to Poppy. "Dad said he'll make your plate when you come down."

Ace sprints back out of the room without waiting for Poppy's answer.

"Ooooh, TK. Makin' plates and everything now." Vonnie stands up, pulling Poppy up after her. "You better be glad you found him before I left Justin because I'm telling you, all these years later and that man is still fine."

"Vonnie!" Greer sounds scandalized. "You can't say that about her husband."

“You want me to say it about yours?” Vonnie snaps back as she files out of the room. Brynn and I trail her, doing a terrible job disguising our laughter as coughs. “Hey Q,” Vonnie says, and I’m not sure if she’s serious or getting back at me for laughing until I turn the corner and see Q’s long body leaning against the hallway wall.

“There you are.” His eyes go soft when he sees me. He pushes off the wall and walks over to me. “You look beautiful . . . again.” He drops his chin and touches his mouth to mine.

“You guys can go in my room, but no sexing on my childhood bed.” Brynn motions two fingers from her eyes toward us. “Got it?”

“No sex in your room or the champagne room, got it.”

We go into her room and close the door as she heads downstairs, warning people not to step on her PUMAs.

“I missed you.” Quinton covers my mouth with his, but even though Brynn’s bed is bumping into the back of my legs, he makes sure we stay on our feet.

“I missed you too,” I admit, feeling silly saying it. I’ve never been the sappy type, but I guess that’s changing like everything else in my life.

“I’m not sure I let you know just how much this morning meant to me,” he whispers, the bristles of his beard tickling the shell of my ear. “You know how you said you were dreading the holidays?”

“Yeah.” God. The amount of whining and complaining I did. I can’t believe he doesn’t just find me completely insufferable.

“That’s how it’s been for me. For years.” He keeps his arms wrapped tight around me, like looking me in my eyes during this would be too much. A feeling I understand all too well. “I had to go put on a happy face and pretend I was fine, that everything was fine. Then I’d leave and bury it all because I couldn’t put it on my mom. But today, for the first time, I wasn’t alone. I don’t have to carry that weight anymore. And that’s because of you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I say. “You make it so easy for everyone in your life to depend on you. It’s about time you start leaning on someone else. Nobody deserves that more.”

“Donny had to convince me to come to Denver. I was dreading it.” His gruff voice washes over me and he nuzzles his face into my hair.

“Thank fuck I did, because I can’t even imagine my life without you anymore.”

Those words almost break me and the need to tell him about Glenn Chandler is overwhelming. But a lump forms at the base of my throat and when I go to confess, I feel like acid is dripping down the back of my throat. The fear of losing him and my job chokes me.

I’ll figure out a way to tell him, to make him understand why I had to do it.

I have to.

“Lovebirds!” Brynn pushes open the door to her room with her foot, covering her eyes with both hands. “Mrs. Rafter is wondering where you are and Mrs. Lewis won’t let anyone eat until we’ve all said grace. So hurry your hot asses.”

“Let’s go eat. We can continue this conversation later . . . with a king bed behind you instead.” He waggles his eyebrows. He looks so young and carefree it’s hard to remember the man I met at HERS a few months ago.

He intertwines his fingers with mine as we walk down the stairs and into the packed room. Because Brynn is Brynn, she couldn’t just buy a few plastic foldout chairs from Walmart and call it a day. No, instead she went all out, ordering tables extending the entire expanse of her dad’s living room. The table is beautifully set with a burnt-orange tablecloth and gold dinnerware that matches the gold seats we’re assigned to. Food fills the table. Everything from the Thanksgivings I had with my dad, from mashed potatoes and green bean casserole to macaroni and cheese and collard greens. It’s like the best of both worlds. I almost get teary-eyed taking it all in. I wish I had this growing up. Seeing people of all shades in one room, celebrating together, feeling as though I could exist in both worlds.

After Mrs. Lewis says grace, we all not so gracefully dig into the food in front of us. Ace and the Lamar trio pack their plates, and Mr. Sterling—Brynn’s dad and America’s favorite grandpa—encourages them to eat downstairs in front of the Xbox, despite the objections of both mothers. Mrs. Rafter is on the other end of the table, chatting it up with an older Black woman I haven’t met yet.

“Did I sound convincing enough?” Vonnie whispers in my ear after the basement door shuts behind Jett. “Not having to fuss over them

while I eat is a Thanksgiving miracle.”

“You honestly deserve an award, I thought you were pissed.”

“Misguided anger for the win.” She takes a bite of the sweet potatoes with the candied pecan crust and moans. “Oh yes, try those next. And also one of these.” She points to the nearly empty cocktail behind her plate. “I’m normally a vodka girl, but whatever Brynn put in this is a winner.”

“I will, but maybe you should slow down a little bit? You don’t usually drink this much.”

Obviously, I know Vonnie drinks. We’ve done it together multiple times. But I’ve never seen her come close to being drunk. Even at the games with unlimited free booze, kids running around, and the Mustangs making a fourth quarter comeback, she’s never had more than two drinks. Seeing her not only emotionally not herself, but under the influence on top of it, has me on edge AF. And call me selfish, but she’s the only person who knows about what’s going on with Glenn Chandler. Part of the reason she’s the one I confided in is because she never gets like this.

“I know I don’t.” She picks up her drink like she’s accepting the challenge I most definitely didn’t give. “But I’m also not usually alone on Thanksgiving and in the midst of marital ruin. Plus”—she points to TK and Poppy—“those two offered to host a sleepover tonight, so the boys will be with them while I crash in Brynn’s bed.”

“Ace is so excited, he has deemed this the ‘best Thanksgiving ever.’ And we love having the Lamar boys over.” Poppy has a bright smile on her face, but I can hear the worry in her voice. I’m not the only one who thinks this is way out of character for Vonnie.

Brynn clears her throat and waves her fork between Quinton and I. “So, I don’t mean to make a scene,” she says, no doubt about to cause a scene. “But does the hand-holding you two were doing as you walked down the stairs mean you’ve decided to admit you’re into each other? And by that, I mean do I get to gloat because I was right and totally called this relationship from the beginning?”

I know that Brynn is just trying to get the focus off Vonnie, but as a person who thrives behind the scenes, having everyone staring at me in the middle of Thanksgiving dinner is something ripped from my

nightmares. Luckily for me, though, the guy I'm falling head over heels for does his best work in front of a crowd and takes over for us.

"It does." He settles back into his seat and rests one arm across the back of my chair. He looks so comfortable sitting at a table with his coworkers and friends, talking about us. Confirming that there is an us. "But I don't know about you getting to gloat, though."

I don't know whether to be embarrassed that all eyes have turned to me—even Poppy's, which have only been on Vonnie or the plate that TK made her before we even said grace—or just give in to the giddy goodness that's filling me up more than the food in front of me ever could.

"That's fair," Brynn says. "You don't really know me too well, but I gloat. Like . . . a lot. And I did an entire whiteboard presentation trying to get her to acknowledge that you were into her, so I'm gonna go ahead and gloat."

Maxwell just stares at Brynn with a soft smile on his face as she talks, like every word that comes out of her mouth is the most interesting thing in the entire world. His love for her is written all over his face. It's disgustingly cute.

Quinton's hand freezes, his fork full of mac and cheese suspended midbite. "A whiteboard presentation?"

"Oh! You're Elliot?" TK asks. "I was wondering why your name was all over my board. Have you figured out the job thing yet? Or is Mahler still going to let you go?"

Because I have always been a huge Mustangs fan, TK was one of my favorite players. Not only was he a fantastic player, but he was so much fun to watch. He was one of those guys who actually looked like they loved what they did when they were on the field. Also, he's so hot it hurts my eyes to look at him and his Thor-adjacent face. In order not to make a total fool out of myself, I avoided meeting him when the chances arose.

Something I'm deeply regretting at the moment.

"Ummm . . . you know, not really, but—you know." I trip over my words. It's like I can feel Quinton's gaze burning a hole through my skin.

"No." Quinton sets his fork on his plate. "I don't know. Mahler is going to let you go?"

“It’s not a big deal. Just when he assigned me to working with you, he said if you didn’t stop protesting by playoffs, he’d have to let me go.” I force a smile on my face and try to ignore everyone around us who are now also trying to look anywhere but at us and our awkward exchange. TK is cringing so hard that I’m almost positive Poppy is pinching him underneath the table. “He hasn’t really mentioned it since, so I’m not even sure if he was serious or not.”

The thick veins in Quinton’s neck strain and I know he’s trying not to make a scene. His distaste for Mahler is something I try to avoid whenever possible. Well, I try to avoid all conflict, to be honest. Hence my terrible decision-making skills.

He lets out a deep breath and moves his arm from the back of my chair to the top of my leg. “Alright,” he says. “We can talk about it later if you want.”

I nod in agreement.

Next to me, Vonnie finishes off her drink. “See, that’s how a relationship works.” She sounds a little unhinged and I have a terrible feeling that she is going to explode before the night is over. She’s been holding it in for too long, it’s bound to come out. “You guys talk to each other and value the other person’s opinion. That’s how things are supposed to be.”

I hate the broken look in her eyes and the way her voice cracks at the end of her sentence. I’m about to tell Brynn to find childcare so we can whisk Vonnie away to some private island with no cell service when Quinton reaches behind me and grabs Vonnie’s shoulder.

“You know if you need anything, I got you, right?”

She looks over, her throat working, but no words come out as her almost unrecognizable eyes—lacking both her long lashes and confident gaze—gloss over.

“Well, I’m glad you guys figured things out,” Brynn cuts in, sounding much less gloaty than she did moments ago. I know I’m not a member of the Lady Mustangs and I’ve only been around them for a short time, but the one thing that has been clear from the beginning is how much they care about one another. When one of them is hurting, they’re all hurting. And right now, the women surrounding Vonnie are breaking for her. And even though I hate being the center of attention,

I will gladly take that for her. “I’ve seen a lot of bumpy roads, but you two may have beat everyone else out.”

It’s impossible not to laugh at that. “Bumpy” seems like such an understatement when I think back on just how much the man next to me drove me crazy. “You could say that,” I say through my laughter.

“You don’t even know.” Quinton slips his hand on my thigh beneath the table. “But I think that now we’ve gotten everything out in the open between us, things are going to be good from here on out.”

Well, almost everything.

I feel his eyes on me, but I can’t meet them. Guilt over the secret I know I can’t carry anymore makes it impossible.

“Oh thank god,” Vonnie says and my vision blurs. She’s moved on from her cocktail and is pouring herself a glass of wine from one of the many bottles sitting on the table, so she misses the way my eyes go wide, begging her to look my way. And I know it’s only my fault. “I still can’t believe Mahler had you planning a Glenn Chandler fundraiser.”

Quinton jerks his hand from the top of my legs like the mere touch of me burned him. And maybe it did? The sting of what he must think is betrayal hurts. My stomach falls to my feet, and dread fills me to the point that I think everything I’ve eaten might make its way back up. I try to think of something to say, a way to explain to him what really happened. Anything to make him understand. But when I look at him and see the disgust written all over his face—disgust about *me*—my mind goes blank.

“How could he think you’d have no problem planning that trash fire? What an asshole.” Vonnie takes a sip of her wine that she very clearly doesn’t need, oblivious to the tension and anger radiating off Quinton.

“Quinton.” My normally strong and assertive voice wavers over every syllable of his name. And even though I’m an expert at fighting back tears, the burning in my eyes is getting worse. “Just let—”

The legs of his chair scrape across the hardwood floors beneath them as Quinton shoots out of his seat, slamming his napkin on the table. “Thank you for inviting me, Brynn.” He looks down the table, finding Brynn’s dad and mother-in-law. “Mr. Sterling, Mrs. Lewis, this was wonderful.”

Every line in his body is taut, stretching the soft fabric encasing the arms that I want to touch, the body that I want to hold on to. I reach out to grab him with shaking hands, but he cuts back away from me and steps out of my reach. My hand falls to my side. The weight of his rejection makes my arms feel like they weigh a hundred pounds. But it's the look in his eyes that hurts the most. Only moments ago, they looked at me with so much trust and affection, but now they're full of so much hurt and anger that his gaze is like a fucking knife to the heart.

"Fuck," Vonnie whispers as Quinton strides away from the table like he can't put distance between us fast enough. "I'm so sorry."

This isn't her fault. I knew how much she was going through and I still laid my burdens on her. This is exactly why I've learned to keep things to myself, figure my problems out on my own. I want to reassure her that I'm not mad at her, but I can't. I don't have time.

Because Quinton is storming out of the door and I have to go after him.

Thirty-five

Unlike Quinton, I don't excuse myself from the table.

I run through the living room, catching the door just before it slams in my face. "Let me explain!" I yell after his retreating form.

He doesn't slow his steps; in fact, he might start moving faster.

I run after him, not even caring if the neighborhood is staring out of their windows, trying to catch a glimpse at a holiday disaster playing out somewhere besides their tables for once.

The lights to his car blink and he opens his door without missing a beat, without even looking back at me as I barrel full speed toward him.

"Stop, please! It's not what you think." I grab onto his arm, stopping him from getting into his car.

He jerks his arm out of my hand, spinning around and staring down at me. Nothing but disgust is written across his face. And I get that he's mad. He deserves to be. But that doesn't make it hurt any less.

"It's not?" His lip curls as he spits the words in my face. "I introduced you to my fucking dad, Elliot! I told you things I've never told anyone and you've been hiding this? How is it not what I think? Have you been fucking playing me this entire time?" His voice cracks, the anger fading and his hurt taking over for just long enough to effectively break my heart and make me feel like the scum of the earth.

"No, I haven't! I'm so, so sorry." The cold harsh winds bite against my cheeks and it feels like needles are poking my eyes. I can't fight back the tears anymore. They fall down my face like razor blades against my cheeks. "But it's not what you think, you just have to please let me explain. Listen to me for five minutes."

He looks at me for a minute before closing his car door and crossing his arms.

Relief overwhelms my system and it's like my lungs finally fill with air again. If he'll just listen, he'll understand. He has to.

"Thank you." I take a step toward him, but he holds out his arm, stopping me from coming any closer.

"No," he says. "Just talk so I can leave."

That glimpse of relief, hope that we'd work everything out, crumbles to dust, floating down the street with the stubborn leaves that are still falling.

"I didn't know it was Glenn Chandler's event. When Mr. Mahler asked me to plan it, he didn't tell me who it was for." Desperation filters my words, making what was supposed to sound like my defense a plea. "I didn't even find out who it was for until the day after Halloween."

"The day after Halloween?" Quinton looks as if I punched him as he repeats my words back to me. "You've known since Halloween? You've been coming to my house, forging into this relationship, all while going behind my back to plan an event for the guy who has done nothing but slam me in the press? You're supposed to try and help me! And you've been fighting for the guy who's done more damage to me than anyone else!"

Even when Quinton has been angry before, he's kept it contained. He'd shut down and get quiet. Having him standing in front of me, yelling in my face isn't just unexpected, it's scary. I know he'd never lay a hand on me. But the fact that he doesn't even care to restrain his anger? It tells me he doesn't think I'm worth the effort that the restraint would take. And that's fucking terrifying.

"I signed a nondisclosure, you know I couldn't tell you." Between the tears openly falling down my face and the snow starting to fall, my face is wet and freezing as I beg him to understand.

"I told you not to trust Mahler! From the very beginning, you didn't like what I had to say, but I told you. And you just refused to believe me!" he bellows, his words bouncing off the car-lined street. "And now you're working with Glenn fucking Chandler on top of everything? Two old, racist bastards that are determined to bring me down. And I'm supposed to trust you?"

“It’s my job!” I snap back. I want to apologize for lying, but he, out of everyone in this world, should understand working for a person you don’t like. He knows! It’s fine for him, but I’m expected to give up everything and hold some moral high ground that I literally can’t afford? He just wants to be mad at me. “What did you want me to do? Throw away my entire fucking career because you carved a fucking pumpkin with me?”

I hate myself the moment the words leave my mouth.

“Wow.” Quinton rubs his hands through his hair and a humorless laugh falls out his mouth. “That’s how you want to spin this? That’s what the PR genius inside your head is doing now? Alright.”

“Quinton, no, you know that’s not what I meant, I just—”

He cuts me off.

“No, I get it.” The smile on his face is colder than the snow falling on us and causes every muscle in my body to tense. The Quinton I’ve gotten to know isn’t in front of me anymore. And I’m the one who pushed him away. “You know, when you told me how my taking a knee made you uncomfortable because it made you reevaluate the way you saw the world, I dropped it. It was already clear to me you had some childhood issues I had no business touching, but I hoped it meant you’d start looking at yourself and how you view things.”

At this point, I know he’s not going to forgive me, and explaining myself is probably useless, but he has me confused with someone else if he thinks I’ll just let him hit below the belt. “Seriously? I get you’re mad, you have every right to be. But that’s not okay. I don’t have childhood issues.”

“You don’t?” He steps in closer, not needing space anymore now that it works for him. “Is that why you practically shove your fingers in your ears and close your eyes anytime anyone points out racism to you? I told you what Mahler was. I told you how racist and disgusting he was, and you refused to believe me. And still, here you are, lying to me, planning a fucking fundraiser for a guy who does nothing but spew racist shit every single day?”

“Just because I don’t like to label everyone as a racist doesn’t mean I have issues.” The trembling in my hands has morphed from trembling to full-out shaking, but I don’t know if it’s because I’m so

angry or cold. “How is me not wanting to throw that terrible label on everyone a bad thing?”

“It’s not a bad thing,” he says. As if the angry man in front of me was conjured by my imagination, every line in Quinton’s body falls. Even his eyes that looked at me with so much hate only moments ago go soft. He reaches out for my hands and rubs them between his, causing feeling to come back into my fingertips before pulling me into a tight hug and tucking my head into his chest. “I think you’ve spent your entire life wanting so badly to fit in with the part of you people can’t see, that you’ve conditioned yourself to excuse the hurtful things they say. You want them to accept you so bad, you’ve become blind to certain things. Even if I was the only Black person in my class, I still got to go home and fit in there. And I can’t hold it against you for finding a way to protect yourself in a world I know nothing about.”

He drops his face, his nose nuzzling into my hair, the kiss on my head speaking volumes. The tears that slowed pick up again, but before I can tighten my arms around him, he pulls away. Dropping his arms, he takes a step away from me and opens his car door.

“I can understand it, but it’s not something that I can bring into my life,” he says. Even after my dad died, nobody looked at me with the amount of pity that Quinton is looking at me with now. “I know this job is important to you and I’ll make sure you can keep it. I hope you can find whatever validation you’ve been searching for, Elliot, but I know that I can’t give it to you.”

He folds his large body into his seat and starts his car, pulling away without even glancing my way. Not that it matters. I’m rooted to the spot he last touched me, wanting to rewind time and tell him everything before it came to this. Questions without any answers run through my mind. I can’t move. I can’t speak. I can’t do anything. All I do is stare after him, watching as his taillights get further and further away, until I can’t see him anymore . . . until he’s gone.

“Come on, sweetie.” Mrs. Rafter puts the strap of my purse over my shoulder and pulls my eyes away from the empty street in front of me. “Let’s get you home.”

I follow Mrs. Rafter out of the middle of the street and down the sidewalk until we reach my car.

Every step jostles me back to reality.

The reality where I had Quinton and lost him just as fast. The one where he took the liberty to try and tell me how and what I feel.

By the time we've reached my car, I'm so fucking pissed I can barely keep it in.

I mean, how fucking dare he? He has no idea how or what I think. And for him to tell me that I excuse racism is full-on bullshit. He has his opinions about people and just because I don't automatically agree with him means I'm not only wrong, but that I have some deep-seated issues I need fixed? Screw that.

I can understand that he was angry because I kept the fundraiser from him. I really can, but the things he said were not only untrue, but unfair. But he was right about one thing—I can't be enough for anyone. I can't fit in anywhere. No matter what I do, I seem to be inherently letting half of myself down.

At least now I know trying is pointless.

Thirty-six

If there's one thing I'm better at than most people, it's hiding.

Whether it's hiding my emotions from my coworkers or dodging Liv, Marie, and a gaggle of Lady Mustangs, I've been successful for the last two weeks.

I just wish I could avoid Quinton too.

Even though Paul is still clueless to the depths our relationship reached, there's no way he couldn't notice the difference in the way Quinton and I have been communicating since our Thanksgiving drama. Instead of weekly meetings, we've switched to emails. And by emails, I mean I send Quinton one with important information on Wednesdays and he never responds. I send him detailed itineraries of press conferences I set up for him during the week with statements and talking points that he never uses. I didn't realize how much he trusted me before to use the materials I sent him. Now it's like he thinks I'm trying to sabotage him.

But even though things are different between us, I still know I don't have to worry about him dropping the ball when it comes to his foundation. It may have been my idea in the beginning, but it is fully his now. I know how personally invested he is, I don't have any doubt that no matter how we turned out, we created something really special that will still be doing good years from now.

I wish the same could be said about my relationship with Mahler. Having to plan this event for Glenn Chandler is slowly ruining me.

It's like when Quinton threw all of that garbage in my face, he triggered a part of my brain to become hyperaware of all the things happening around me. Everywhere I look, I swear I see Glenn Chandler. I look on social media? Somebody is sharing the latest offensive thing he said. I turn on the news? It's a clip of one of his

hate-filled rallies. I knew he wasn't good before, but I didn't realize he was this terrible. He must've gotten more confidence in the last couple of weeks and is getting more reckless. I want to believe Mr. Mahler has no idea what's happening, so I asked for a meeting today to talk about Chandler's recent antics.

"Elliot! Come sit," Mr. Mahler calls me into his office when he sees me approaching. "How've you been, dear? How's the big fundraiser coming?"

My heels tap against the plush rug as I enter the room, but the rush of nerves I used to feel coming in here is nowhere to be found. Maybe it's because the wooden walls and folded newspapers on his enormous desk have become so familiar that the room has lost its ability to overwhelm and intimidate me. More likely, however, I'm just too tired to care. I'm tired of him calling me "dear." I'm tired of acting like it doesn't bother me. I'm tired of letting him take credit for all of my ideas. I'm just tired.

"The vendors have all been fantastic. I talked with the florist, and the arrangements we have planned will be beautiful." I sit in the seat across from him, the same one I have been using for months now, and take out my iPad with all of my notes and plans on it.

"Very good." He taps his cigar in the ashtray on his desk. "But I know you asked for this meeting for a reason. Is there a problem?"

The only downside of being alone for two weeks is that I've been inside my own head for the majority of it. I've been overanalyzing everything that I say, do, or think. Conversations from the last few months, like Vonnie saying she thought I hated my job, repeat in my head like a bad song. And the only way I can think of to get them out is to confront what's been bothering me and prove to myself that I was right to give my loyalty to the organization that my dad and I both loved.

"There is, actually." I pull open the document I have filled with Glenn Chandler quotes and links to the videos or articles where he's being quoted and slide the iPad across the table. "I'm aware that this isn't an event under the Mustangs organization; however, as you're the owner, it will be touted as one no matter what. I understand that you're friendly with Mr. Chandler, but I'm not sure you're aware of some of the deeply problematic things he has said recently."

Mr. Mahler slips on his glasses as he takes the iPad from my hand. He starts reading the list, clicking on a few links as he does.

“I’m sure you understand that I’m just trying to protect your organization from the potential fallout that could come from you hosting a fundraiser while he’s spouting some things that are, quite frankly, racist.”

Take that, Quinton! I see racism and I call it out when I do!

Mr. Mahler takes off his glasses, tossing them on the table as he hands me back the iPad. “Racist? Come on. People are just too politically correct these days.” The smug smile does a terrible job at masking the irritation in his voice. “That’s what I love about Glenn. He says what people are too afraid to say, he shakes things up.”

“I’m sorry”—*not fucking sorry*—“but alluding that minorities are criminals and attacking immigrants is not just being politically incorrect. I can tell you, as a person of color, it is offensive.”

“Oh lord.” He huffs, leaning back in his chair. “Don’t tell me you’re pulling the race card.”

“Excuse me?” I must’ve heard him wrong. There’s no way he said what I thought he said. Right?

“You know what I mean, I thought you were different. Don’t go getting all offended and pulling the race card on me now.”

Wrong.

Heat blooms from deep within, my blood starting to boil with the rage that has been lingering beneath the surface for the last couple of weeks, as the final thread holding me together snaps.

First, I get Quinton accusing me of excusing racism. Then, when I do point out something that is glaringly racist, I get accused of using the race card. Whatever the fuck that is.

But more than the anger and shock of having him say those words to me, there’s pain. Excruciating pain that comes with the realization that no matter what I do, no matter who I am, no matter how old I am, there are people who will never see deeper than the color of my skin.

Hurt causes my voice to shake. “If anything, I give more passes than most people and you should listen to me because that is not a term I throw around lightly.”

“Sure it is,” he scoffs. “Only when things aren’t going your way, right?”

I have made an effort to not put labels on anybody for any reason. When something happens, I never factor race into it. And maybe that's naive of me. I never missed the way store clerks would follow me in stores, but never my friends. I witnessed the way officers handled pulling over my dad versus the Black men I dated. But I never attributed it to race . . . even when I knew deep down it was the reason.

Standing in this room, still reeling with the heartache of Quinton walking away, staring at a man who will never respect me, I feel like my entire life has been summed up in two moments. I just can't win. When I was a kid, my dad would say things about how we should all be color-blind. I can't help but resent those words now. It's how I've tried to live my life and it's impossible for me. I can't ignore color, I *am* color. Trying to do so has caused so much damage. What I should've been doing is acknowledging and accepting all of the pieces that make me who I am instead of trying to force myself into a box I'll never fit into.

Maybe Quinton was more right than I wanted to admit. Because when I think about it, I was so afraid that if I pointed out racism, I was inadvertently calling my family racist. I thought that I could protect myself from racism if I shielded myself in whiteness. But it doesn't matter how much I straighten my hair, how many stories I tell about my white dad, or if I never address racism ever in my life, some people won't see anything beyond my Blackness.

"You know what?" I stand up, ready to walk away from Mahler and Glenn Chandler. Vonnie was right, I hate this job. "I quit."

"You what?" He chokes on the cigar smoke he just inhaled. "You can't quit!"

"I can and I did." I grab my purse, not wanting to waste another second in the same room as this man who makes my skin crawl, and walk out of the room feeling ten feet tall.

I pull out my phone, first sending a text to Jen from the Rue to see if she's still looking for an in-house event planner, and then one to Marie and Liv, hoping they'll forgive me for ghosting them and show up when I need them . . . again.

THE GENTLE SNOWFLAKES falling make the cemetery look ethereal. It's so much different than the last time I was here, watching his coffin as it was lowered into the ground.

The empty space on the headstone that once only had my mom's name and dates is filled. My dad's name is etched into the granite stone and it just all seems so inconsequential. Their dates of birth and death, when it's really all of the living they did between those dates that matters the most. I close my eyes, thinking about my life. About the living that I'm doing, wondering if in the end, any of it will matter. Will anyone care if I spend the rest of my life pushing away everyone around me because I've been at odds with myself?

Even though it's freezing and there's no chance the flowers I brought will survive, I still empty the water bottle into the vase built into the headstone before I put the grocery store bouquet inside. I sit down in front of the large granite stone, and the cold from the grass seeps through the black trousers I wore to work today.

I trace my fingers over the carving of his name. "I think I'm mad at you."

I've come here many times before, but this is the first time I've ever spoken out loud. I never talked to my mom. It's just another thing on a long list of things I'm ashamed of. I was so young when she died and because of that, I never knew her. And how do you miss a person you never knew? And even though my dad always told me stories about her, she felt more like an idea than an actual person. "I'm mad that you guys figured out how to make life work for you, but you both left before I figured it out for myself. And now I'm a grown-ass woman who has tried to live life in this bubble that's done nothing except prevent anyone from getting close to me."

The sound of footsteps crunching against the frozen ground pulls my attention away from the stone in front of me. I glance over my shoulder and I'm so glad I'm already sitting, because the sight of Marie and Liv walking toward me makes my muscles go weak.

I push up off the hard ground and scrub away the tears with the back of my hands.

I wrap my arms around them, hoping they can feel how grateful I am for them. "Thank you guys for coming."

“Of course.” Marie hands me a thermos mug. “Thank you for calling us.”

I roll my eyes and take a sip of the hot chocolate she brought me. “Yes, because I’m sure a trip to the cemetery is the way you want to spend your Friday.”

“Yes.” Liv grabs my hand and bores into my eyes. “Supporting our friend who we’ve been worried about is exactly how we want to spend our Friday.”

I’m not sure I’ve stopped crying since I drove through the gates of the cemetery, but the tears fall a little harder now.

Liv spreads out the blanket she always has in her trunk because we live in Colorado and she has a fear of being stuck in her car during a blizzard. Flanked by my closest friends, they take my hands as we sit on the blanket, staring at the headstone. They don’t pressure me to say anything and I soak in the comfort they give me until I’m ready to talk.

I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly before breaking the silence. “Quinton broke up with me.”

“We were able to piece together that much of the story,” Marie says. “Vonnie feels terrible because she told him about some event you’re planning and that’s why he got angry.”

Great. On top all of the hurt and confusion bouncing around my head, now I feel guilty too. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own feelings, I haven’t even thought that Vonnie would blame herself. As if she’s not already going through enough, I let her stew all this time, not telling her it had nothing to do with her.

“It wasn’t Vonnie’s fault that the event I was planning for Mahler was for Glenn Chandler.” I cringe a little bit at the gasp that comes from both sides of me. “I know, I should’ve quit the moment I knew it was him and I should’ve stopped making excuses for Mahler then. I just wanted so badly to not believe the worst. But I quit today.”

“You what?” Liv almost shouts. “I thought you loved that job!”

“I think I just loved the idea of the job. I loved thinking about what a kick out of it my dad would’ve gotten. But Mahler accused me of pulling the race card when I told him that I was offended by the racist shit Chandler has been quoted saying.” I look at them and know that the red in their cheeks isn’t just from the cold. “And one of the reasons Quinton said we couldn’t work things out was because he thinks I

excuse racism. I just feel like I can't win." I stare ahead of me, but when neither of them says anything, I look between the two of them exchanging worried glances. "Do you think I excuse it?"

"It's not that we think that you excuse it," Liv says like I'm some skittish cat she's approaching. "It's just that you don't seem to notice things."

"Like what? How long have you thought this and not said anything?"

"What were we supposed to say?" Marie asks. "We don't have any right to tell you how you're supposed to feel, so we stopped saying things. Even in high school, when people would call you an Oreo or how Ruby was always telling you she was Blacker than you for whatever stupid reason she came up with, even though she's white? You never seemed fazed, you always laughed it off."

"Just like when you were saying you were the DUFF," Liv says. "You always thought that and you would say little things about your nose being too wide or hating your hair and your hips. Why do you think I'm always trying to get you to wear your hair curly? I don't know what it must be like to be the only person in a room who looks different than everyone else, but I have seen the way it affected you. Maybe even more than you because I was on the outside looking in."

"We all go through a phase where we're insecure about our looks." I try to defend myself, even though she's right on.

"Of course we do, and we all build our defenses accordingly." Liv squeezes my hand. "And you did that by laughing off things that hurt you. You don't excuse racism, but you have learned to deflect and make excuses for people when they do things that are offensive."

"You know how much we loved your dad, right?" Marie says, and my lungs forget how to function as I brace for whatever she's about to say. "But remember when you were thinking about going to a historically Black university and your dad talked you out of it because he was disappointed you would go to a school that excluded people? And so you ended up miserable with us at the whitest college ever, where you had to build up your defenses even more every time someone asked you what sport you played or what you thought of affirmative action."

I haven't thought about that in such a long time that I almost forgot it happened. But now that Marie mentions it, I feel like it happened yesterday. I was so tired of sticking out all the time. Of the teachers looking to me for the "Black perspective" in history class and being overlooked by all the boys who loved my skinny, blue-eyed friends. I thought maybe, if I went somewhere I didn't stand out as soon as I walked through the door, maybe things would be different. The horrified look on my dad's face when I asked him broke me. I remember not feeling sad as much as I felt shame and guilt. *I thought I'd raised you to be different than that, I thought you'd want to go someplace that welcomed everyone*, he'd said. And that was the last we talked about it. I don't think he meant harm by what he said, but that doesn't mean it wasn't harmful. And I think I understand how he felt. Maybe he was afraid that I was ashamed of him, that I wanted to distance myself from him. But what he didn't understand, what I've never acknowledged, is that he made me feel the same way. It taught me to measure my thoughts, my feelings, and to place them beneath the feelings of everyone around me.

And that has gotten me here.

"I thought we had fun together in college." My deflections get weaker as their words continue to penetrate and break down my defenses.

"Sure, we had a blast together and you only remember that because you ignored the other shit you dealt with. And that wasn't wrong . . . but I also think maybe Quinton was more right than you want to admit."

Well, at least we can agree on that.

"Well crap, you guys." I fall back against the fleece blanket. "What am I going to do now?"

"Probably call your therapist because you have some shit to work through." Liv yanks me off the ground.

"But until then." Marie picks up my thermos and stands up. "How about we meet back at your house? I'll bring cupcakes and Liv will bring wine."

"That sounds like a plan I can get behind." I stand up and help Liv fold the blanket.

We walk back to our cars, navigating the headstones as we go. Liv and Marie bicker over what movie we should watch, a crying one or a laughing one, and when I look over my shoulder at my parents' grave, the flowers already wilting in the vase, I feel a sense of peace starting to settle over me. It's a foreign feeling, but I'm ready to fight for it.

Thirty-seven

A knock on my door forces me off the couch.

“Pizza’s here!” I yell to Marie and Liv, who are spread out across my living room, practically comatose from the amount of wine and junk we’ve consumed over the course of our sleepover.

I would also like to note that sleepovers are way better as an adult. You can eat what you want, watch what you want, and drink all you want. Way better than when I was a kid and my dad made us go to bed early . . . even though we’re adults now and still wanted to go to bed early.

I swing the door open, holding out money for the tip, and freeze when the money is snatched out of my hand, but not by the delivery person.

“Thank you.” Brynn shoves the money in her jeans pocket before pushing past me. “Even though I think we are owed much more than five dollars for how long you’ve ignored us.”

For fuck’s sake, Elliot! Use the goddamn peephole!

Poppy, Vonnie, and Greer all file in after Brynn as I stand dumbfounded by my open door.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“Well . . .” Brynn grabs a cupcake off of my coffee table and licks the frosting off like a toddler. “Since you weren’t responding to our text messages, we decided we had to force our way into your house. It’s a good thing you answered because I bought a lock-picking kit and was prepared to get in no matter what.”

“I did not agree with that plan, so thank you for opening the door,” Poppy says as she falls onto my spot on the couch. But considering she’s like, a million months pregnant, I don’t say anything.

Vonnie, who usually has at least something to say, looks like she's trying to blend in with the wall behind her. She's staring down at my runner and even though I think it's a great rug, it's not *that* interesting. Then I remember Liv and Marie telling me that she thinks I'm mad at her.

Ignoring everyone else in the room, even though I know their nosy asses aren't ignoring us, I walk over to Vonnie and put my hands on her shoulders. "Hey," I say when she won't meet my eyes. "I am not mad at you, not at all."

"I just feel so terrible." She closes her eyes and pushes her lips together. "I promised you I wouldn't tell and then I did it in front of a room full of people. You must have been so pissed at me."

"Please! If anything, you should be pissed at me." I hope she doesn't take me up on that, but I say it anyways because it's true, and a sad Vonnie is the most heartbreaking sight in the entire world. She's too full of life to ever be muted. "I should've never put that on your shoulders, it wasn't your secret to keep and I should've told him when you told me to."

"I thought you hated me," she says.

"Are you kidding me?" My incredulous laughter cannot be prevented no matter how hard I try. If anything, I was just waiting until they realized I was a visitor in their world and there was no reason for them to want to hang out with me when Quinton was out of the picture. "You are literally one of the best people I know. I thought you guys would've washed your hands of me already."

"Why the hell would we do that?" Brynn asks.

Poppy looks at me with big, sympathetic doe eyes, her curly hair bouncing as she shakes her head no.

"You know . . . I mean, we've only known each other for a short amount of time." I look to Marie and Liv to back me up, but the traitors say nothing. "I just assumed that because we only hung out because of Quinton, you wouldn't want to anymore."

"Oh yeah, that makes so much sense." Brynn's words drip with sarcasm. "You didn't even like Q when you guys met! Also, we're all grown women capable of creating and maintaining friendships that have nothing to do with our husbands or boyfriends."

“Preach.” Vonnie snaps her fingers two times, the quiet woman who walked into my condo fading away.

“I get what you’re saying.” Poppy tries to take my side, ignoring Brynn’s and Vonnie’s glares while Greer just picks through the cupcakes, oblivious to it all. “When TK and I broke up, I felt the same way. But these women are like glitter, they never go away.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” Brynn says.

“Same,” Vonnie agrees. “Plus, Justin and I might not make it much longer, so then what? I’m not going to have any friends anymore? I think not.”

Even though Vonnie is talking about her marriage ending, the sadness in her voice from minutes ago is gone and I’m so grateful to have her back. Even if it means her giving me a hard time.

Like Queen Lizzo says, truth hurts.

“Alright.” Greer peels the wrapper off of the cupcake she finally decided on. “Are we going to tell her our intel from Maxwell now? Also, I brought sage to burn when we’re finished. You know, good vibes only.”

While someone offering to sage my house would usually be the thing that catches my attention, it isn’t in this case.

“What intel?” I ask the Lady Mustangs taking over my living room. Even Liv and Marie are sitting up straight.

“I might’ve had Maxwell invite Q over to our place for dinner.” Brynn has the decency to look a little embarrassed. “Hey, don’t look at me like that! You weren’t answering my phone calls, so I had to do what I had to do.”

“That’s fair,” I say to Brynn before aiming a glare at Liv and Marie when I hear them laughing.

“I asked him about things between you two and he was super vague.” She walks to my kitchen and sits on my stool as she pulls a bottle of whiskey out of her purse. And I’m not sure there’s a more effective way to distract me from whatever bombshell she’s about to drop. “But he said that he was worried about you losing your job, that he didn’t want to be responsible.”

I already know this since he said something along those lines before he drove away from me.

“Is that all?” I ask. “I quit yesterday, so it doesn’t matter. Not that I think anything he says to Mahler would’ve changed his mind about letting me go.”

“You what?” Vonnie grabs my arm and spins me around.

“Um, yeah. I finally realized you guys were right. Mahler is an asshole and I think I like event planning a lot more, so I quit.” I thought out of everyone, Vonnie would be the happiest to hear that I made the decision to quit, so I’m taken aback by her reaction. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“It would be if Quinton didn’t tell the world’s slowest storyteller over there”—she glares at Brynn, who is glaring right back—“that he’s planning on not taking a knee or wearing the tape for these final games so Mahler won’t fire you,” Vonnie says.

“Why would he do that?” The room starts to spin a little and I stumble backward. “I never once told him to stand. After all of this, he’s just going to stand? That doesn’t even make sense!”

Greer takes a bite of her cupcake, oblivious to the mood in the room. “I think it’s romantic.”

“It’s not romantic! It’s stupid! Why would he risk his integrity for this? And why does he think I need him to save me?” By the looks on everyone’s faces, I’m pretty sure I’m yelling. But seriously! “Why are men like this?”

“Age-old question, girl.” Vonnie is the only one brave enough to answer.

“So,” Marie says. “What are we going to do?”

“Seriously, you can’t let him do this, especially when it won’t even help you.” Liv tells me something I already know.

I march over to the front door and grab my keys out of the bowl. “I’m going to go over to his house and yell at him! That’s what I’m going to do.”

“One problem with that plan.” Brynn is in my kitchen, opening all of my cabinets until she finally finds my wine glasses. “They’re at the hotel and it’s like Fort Knox in that bitch, no way you’re getting to him.”

Tears spring to my eyes as I think about his parents, about Patricia and Bill, and about all of the people who are feeling so inspired by

him. My heart aches as I imagine how let down he will be in himself for giving in.

I can't let that happen.

"I have to stop him." I will never forgive myself if he does this.

But even more than that, I won't forgive myself if I don't fight for him.

At first, I was so wrapped up in my righteous anger that he would use the things I confided in him about against me. I was so mad that it was easy to ignore that he wasn't trying to hurt me, he was trying to help me. He knew what I was struggling with, even when I didn't. And just like I've been doing for my entire life, I ran from those feelings instead of confronting them.

I'm done running.

I know he won't answer my calls. He might read my texts, but he deserves so much more than that. And I need to prove not only to him, but to myself, that I can fight for something, no matter how hard it might be. I have to see him.

"Oh goodness." Marie straightens from her slumped-over position on my couch. "That's your determined face. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but I know I'm going to need all of your help." I've always been the person to help, not the person who asks for it. But I know if I'm going to be able to do this the right way, I have to get over myself.

"So she does know how to ask for help!" Brynn walks back into my living room. "Miracles do happen!"

That seems a little dramatic.

"Oooh!" Greer puts down her cupcake and claps. "I have the perfect list of power affirmations for this!"

"Do we need TK to bring the whiteboard?" Poppy rubs her ever-expanding belly with one hand and reaches for her phone with the other. "This feels like a whiteboard mission."

I hate to admit how much I love the idea of the whiteboard, but it's the mention of TK that really gets my mind working.

"I think we can manage without the whiteboard, but I might need you to call TK." I cross the room and grab my computer. "Does he still talk to some of the other players?"

“Umm . . . yeah.” Poppy’s eyes shift around the room as she struggles to sit up straight.

“Are you going to fill us in on what’s going on in that mind of yours or are we supposed to guess?” Brynn, forever the smart-ass, asks. “The suspense is killing me.”

“I need to show Quinton how much I believe in him and what he’s fighting for.” I sit down on an empty spot on my couch, trying to work this idea out in my head. “But I think I need to show him that it’s not just me who believes in him. He’s been fighting for everybody but himself and refuses to let anyone else help him.”

“Something else you both have in common,” Marie chimes in and gets nods of agreement from everyone in the room except for me.

“Rude.” I try to glare at them, but I don’t have it in me. “Fair. But still rude.”

“Glad you’re finally seeing the light.” Vonnie leaves her post at the wall and sits on the arm of my couch. “Now what’s the plan and how can we help?”

“I need you to help me get in touch with all the Mustangs. It’s time Quinton has backup in this fight.”

Vonnice stands back up, striding across the room until she reaches her purse and pulls out her phone. “Calling Justin now.”

Obviously I know Vonnie isn’t on the best of terms with Justin, so the fact that she would do this without hesitation makes my heart burst.

“We don’t have Mustangs contacts.” Liv grabs Marie’s hand. “But we’re in for whatever crazy plan you’re dreaming up right now.”

“Always and forever,” Marie says.

God.

I thought I was alone—that I never fit in—while all along I was surrounded by the best friends a person could ask for. Even if Quinton and I never speak again, I will always be so grateful to him for waking me up to how lucky I really am. Not only did he hold my hand through one of the hardest times in my life, he introduced me to the most amazing women.

But before I go thanking him, I’m going to save him first.

“Okay.” I put my communications hat back on as my fingers hit the keys on my computer. “I’m going to draft a script of sorts for you all. If

you're on the phone, it's just a general list of talking points to help get the players on board. I'll also write an email that we can send out. I think an email will be the fastest, but obviously a phone call is more personal."

"Yeah, obviously." Greer is nodding along, but it's clear by the deer-in-headlights look she's sporting that she has no idea what's happening. And considering I'm making all of this up as I go, that's understandable. "So what exactly are we calling to ask for?"

"Help. That's how change is going to happen."

"I just got goose bumps." Vonnie shows me her arms, which are, in fact, covered in goose bumps. "That's amazing."

"It is," Brynn chimes in, and for once her tone is all business. I'm not sure I've ever heard her talk like this. "But we can do more. Why stop at the Mustangs? We all have friends on other teams. The guys all have friends playing on other teams. Hurry up and write the email. I'm going to call Maxwell, he'll get email addresses from all the guys, and then have them spread the message around the league."

"Wow." I breathe the word out, in awe of how these women not only support me, but make me better. Even if Quinton doesn't ever talk to me again, at least I'll be able to give him this. So I start typing and I don't stop until it's perfect, hoping the entire time I do, that this will work. And Quinton can finally see how much he means to everyone.

How much he means to me.

Thirty-eight

If I got more than an hour of sleep last night, it was only by a few minutes.

Vonnie took Poppy home right before midnight. Brynn and Greer stayed until the wee hours of the morning. Liv and Marie, proving once again just how much they love me, camped out with me as we worked through the night.

The whole night, all I could think of was Quinton and how betrayed he must've felt not only that I was working with Glenn Chandler, but that I was always so quick to dismiss his feelings about Mahler. I don't know if he'll ever be able to forgive me for that—for how small I must've made him feel—but I hope that today will at least prove that I heard him and that I think his voice matters.

“Miss Elle.” Jax tugs my sleeve and pulls my attention from the crowds starting to surround us as we make our way to the family and players' parking lot. I'm never sure if I feel like an old lady, a kindergarten teacher, or both when he calls me that, but he's cute enough that I don't think about it for too long. “Are you okay? You look kinda sleepy.”

Nobody, and I mean NOBODY, in the entire world will tell you that you look like shit quicker than a child. I wish I could appreciate their honesty, but I'd much rather hang out with adults who know how to lie.

“She does, doesn't she?” Liv says from the front seat, the laughter in her eyes evident even through the rearview mirror. “That's what happens when you don't let your friends help you and then you're forced to stay up all night fixing things that could've been taken care of with a simple phone call.”

I'd like to amend my previous statement. I'd much rather have friends who not only know how to lie, but do so often.

“Yup.” Vonnie cosigns for Liv. “Listen to Miss Liv, this is good advice.”

The car really isn't moving that fast. I'm sure I wouldn't get too hurt if I just jumped out.

“Hardy har har.” I roll my eyes, not setting the best example for the impressionable eyes next to me. “You guys are so funny.”

“Sarcasm is also a terrible defense mechanism,” Marie, who I wasn't even annoyed with, pipes up from the row behind me.

But before I can say something snarky to her, Vonnie turns down the radio and starts to go over the plan for today again. “Alright boys, when we get to the stadium, you'll take Miss Liv and Miss Marie to the box. If I find out from either of them that you gave them a hard time, you won't have electronics for a month, and that includes Christmas, got me?”

“Yes, Mom,” all three boys say in perfect synchronization. Even they know Santa's got no pull on Vonnie. Smart kids.

“Are you sure they'll let us in the tunnel?” I ask Vonnie. The confidence I had last night has withered away and melted into a rock in the pit of my stomach.

“I already told you yes. They love me here.” She slows down, waving at the police officers guarding the players' lot. “Plus, I give them really good Christmas presents every year, they won't want to put those in jeopardy.”

“Okay. Good. Yes.” I've forgotten how to form sentences and I'm not even in the stadium yet. I hope this doesn't turn into a disaster. I really need this to work.

I spent so much time trying to hate Quinton that even when he managed to slide past my defenses, I still couldn't admit just how much he meant to me. It took him walking away and me really thinking about just how much he has been there for me to realize that the butterflies I felt every time he walked in the room, and the pressure in my chest every time he left, was love. I was just so convinced he would leave like everyone else seemed to, that I pushed him away. *A self-fulfilling prophecy*, as Greer not so helpfully informed me.

“Ready?” Vonnie asks as she pulls her gigantic SUV into the narrow parking spot surrounded by luxury cars.

But as nervous as I am, this feels different from everything else I've done. Because for once, I know I have an entire support system standing behind me. And if I fall, I know they'll pick me up again.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."
"Then let's go get your man back."

"WE HAVE THE stuff!" Brynn's voice echoes around us as she runs into the tunnel, waving a plastic bag above her head.

"Oh thank goodness." I take the bag from her, the weight of it surprisingly heavy . . . but that might just be the pressure of this grand plan I made.

I glance at my phone and check the time. I've never wanted a game delay more in my entire life. But of course, the one time I need Colorado's weather to go crazy, it's sunny and beautiful outside. Cold . . . but still beautiful.

"Here." I reach into the bag, pulling out the rolls of tape and handing them to Vonnie, Brynn, and Greer. "You know what to do."

Greer grabs me by the shoulders and stares so deep into my eyes that I'm convinced she can actually see my soul. "Remember, 'You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.' This is you changing the ending and you can do this."

Whoa.

I never thought there was really any merit to motivational quotes and life coaches and whatever else everyone is always talking about on Instagram, but Greer just hyped me all the way up. And it's exactly what I needed to hear before the click-clack of cleats echo against the cement floor as the team makes their way to the front of the tunnel.

"Rewrite the ending. Rewrite the ending," I chant and a very satisfied, bordering on smug smile pulls across Greer's beautiful face.

"You got this." Brynn wraps her fingers around my sweaty hand. "Maxwell texted me while we were in the car, everyone he talked to loves your plan. It's going to be amazing."

I'm sure we're a sight to be seen, the four of us huddled together at the entrance of the tunnel when Patrick Dawson, one of the linemen,

rounds the corner and sees us all.

“Elliot? I think you might have something for me.” His soft smile is a stark contrast to the helmet he’s holding and the pads encasing his body.

“I do.” My voice wavers, but I’m not sure if it’s from nerves or the overwhelming flood of emotions coursing through my system right now. “Thank you so much.” I rip off a piece of tape and tears well in my eyes as he slaps it across the League’s emblem at the top of his jersey.

“No, thank you,” he returns. “I didn’t realize how bad it was for the guys who paved the path for us. I’m proud to stand by Q’s side.”

After my plan started coming together last night, I reached out to Patricia from Pro Players for Equal Treatment. She sent over player testimonies of retired men all facing challenges like Quinton’s dad. I included them in an email to every player whose address I could get my hands on. And then I proposed a call to action: take a stand alongside Quinton. By joining his fight, they will take him out of the equation and put the pressure on the people trying to twist his motives. There’s power in numbers. It’s up to them to make sure they’re all taken care of, and that includes Quinton.

Even though Brynn and Vonnie have been trying to tell me everyone was on board, I still wasn’t sure how this was going to go. But, with the first one down, my nerves fade and determination I’ve never felt before sets in. I bet this is how Wonder Woman feels.

The rest of the Mustangs players and coaches all make their way into the tunnel, stopping to get their piece of tape from one of us as they prepare to run out onto the field.

My cheeks hurt from smiling and I’m afraid I might run out of tape when strong fingers wrap around my wrist and navigate me through the crowded space until we’re in a semisecluded corner.

“What are you doing here?”

I haven’t seen Quinton since Thanksgiving. Whereas the time apart caused me to gain five pounds, break out like a thirteen-year-old, and get bags so dark beneath my eyes that I needed to order a special concealer, Quinton looks better than ever. His beard is longer than I’ve ever seen it and it’s really unfair that he looks this good in a football

uniform. Seeing him in it on TV or from up in the box really does it no justice. He's a work of art.

My stomach cramps as the nerves come rushing back. Even though I've missed him, maybe he's been better off without me. And even though I've been telling myself this isn't just about getting him back, but showing him how much he means to everyone around him, this is the first time it's really set in that this might not work. There's a good chance he won't forgive me.

I don't want to lose him.

I take a deep breath before the words fall out of my mouth. "Brynn told me you weren't going to take a knee. You have to take one."

His fingers tighten around the face mask of his helmet before he puts it on the ground. He moves his hands to his hips, and even though I know it's imperative for me to focus, I can't help the way I stare a little bit before moving my eyes back to his. And those dark eyes framed by his even darker lashes look anything but happy. "I told you I'd make sure you could keep your job and that's what I'm going to do."

"Okay, but—" I try to tell him that I quit, that this is pointless, but he talks over me.

"I hope you're doing well and I appreciate you coming here, but I know what I'm doing." He cracks his glove-covered knuckles and looks over my head as Jack starts announcing the players before him. "I was prepared for the fallout, but I'm not going to let that affect your job. You made it clear it's the only thing that matters to you. I won't be the reason you lose that too."

He can't keep the bitterness out of his words or his face when he talks about my job. And my heart aches that I made him feel like he wasn't as important as a stupid job. But even though I feel terrible, I can't help but be annoyed that he thinks I need to be rescued. So I latch on to that thread of irritation and hold on to it for dear life.

"Stop talking." I cover his mouth with my hand. "I quit. Mahler's a jackass and you were right about everything. I'm not here just to tell you not to stand, I'm here to prove that you don't have to do this alone."

"You're always so concerned about taking care of everyone else that you never let anyone take care of you. And I understand if you never want to see me again. I get it. But I'm not going away until I prove to

you just how important you are to me. To everyone.” I hold up my nearly empty roll of tape. “All I had to do was show your teammates the things you’ve shown me. Every single one of them was proud to have your back. They’re all going out there to kneel with you, to cover their emblems until the League is forced to make a change and all men”—I drop my voice so only he can hear me—“men like your father, get what’s owed to them.”

I take my hand off his mouth, but I still don’t give him the opportunity to speak.

“I just need to tell you how much you mean to me. No matter what happens in the future, you’ve changed me. You made me face things I’ve spent forever hiding from, and I will always love you for that. I’m just so sorry that in that process I ignored your doubts and feelings just because I was scared to face my issues—”

“You love me?” His eyes go soft and I hope it’s not from pity.

“I know it was fast and I get it if you don’t—”

Before I can explain or even say yes, Quinton’s mouth is on top of mine. The urgent, demanding kiss, forcing my mouth open as our tongues circle each other.

“I’ve been waiting to hear you say that,” he whispers, his breath dancing across my lips. “Because even though you make me crazy, I love you too.”

“Howard!” a security guard at the opening of the field yells. “You’re next!”

Quinton grabs his helmet off the floor and intertwines his fingers in mine, running with me and only letting go of my hand when his feet hit the turf. He jogs backward onto the field, bringing his hand to his mouth and blowing me a kiss before lifting his helmet into the air and running into the middle of the circle of his teammates, all with their black tape on their jerseys, as they cheer for him along with the rest of the stadium.

I only wish I could see the look on Mahler’s face right now.

“Sooo . . .” Brynn bumps her shoulder into mine. “How’d it go?”

Even though I’m sure the smile that has taken over my face gives her the answer, it feels so good to say the words. “I love him.”

“Girl, tell us something we don’t already know!” Vonnie stands besides us, the sun catching on the crystals of her shirt I know she

doesn't want to be wearing.

I look out at the field, watching Quinton as all of his teammates, with their logos blacked out, walk over to him and pat him on the back before they line up on the sideline. "He loves me too."

"Fucking finally!" Greer—GREER!—shouts. "It took you two long enough."

We all break out laughing and for the first time in a long time, I feel free. There's no sadness lingering beneath my laugh, no weight on my shoulders that I can't shake. I just feel happy. And, as I look back to the field as the first notes of the anthem begin to play and see everyone on the Mustangs' sideline, players and coaches—and even some of Baltimore's players—drop to their knees, a pride I didn't know was possible flows through my veins.

Knowing how pissed Mahler must be in his box is just the icing on the cake.

There's always been some booing when Quinton would take a knee. But today, it seems like the crowd has been shocked into silence. And even though it's not my job to figure out what they're thinking anymore, part of me can't help but to step out of the tunnel to look out into the sea of orange filling the stadium. And when I do, I'm shocked at what I see.

It's a moment I'll never forget. Chills run down my spine and goose bumps cover my arms. So many people are slowly lowering themselves back into their seats, as if making the stand with the players. Some people are even taking off their jerseys and turning them inside out. As the final chords of the anthem blast from the speakers, cheers start to build from the stands. They start quietly, hesitantly even, but grow louder and louder until everyone is back on their feet shouting their support for the men on the field.

Who knows if this is something they've always wanted to do in support of Quinton. Maybe it's something they were inspired to do today after seeing all of the men they look up to also take a stand. But either way, it just goes to prove how much power comes with sticking together. Quinton has empowered all of these people to put action behind their thoughts. By doing something so small, but with more courage than most people could ever imagine, he's changing the League and the world.

But more than any of that, we've changed each other.

I always thought that I'd end up alone, but not anymore. Not only do I have this wild group of women, I also have Quinton by my side. And I've never been more excited to tackle life, because for the first time ever, I'm finally living it.

Epilogue

If it wasn't so infuriating, it would almost be comical at how quickly the media changed their tune once it wasn't just Quinton they had to go against. Apparently, it's a lot harder to twist the words of hundreds of people than it is just one person. In the two weeks since players from all across the League started kneeling with Quinton, it's like everything he was fighting for magically clicked.

Who would've thought?

Other than me, of course.

"Have you checked the news yet?" I flip all the switches and hit the buttons to make a coffee on Quinton's spaceship coffee machine.

He slides onto a stool at the counter. "You know I didn't."

Whereas the first thing I do when I wake up every morning is check my email and various social media sites, Quinton refuses to look at it before noon. I'm not saying he's an alien or anything, but he def has a healthier relationship with devices than I do.

"Well . . ." I slide my phone in front of him with my favorite article on the screen, "By Covering Up Their Logos, These Men Uncovered Mistreatment in the League." I try not to get too salty over the fact that they're acting like this has been a group effort all along and take the win.

In the article they discuss the mistreatment of the pre-'93 retired players, pointing out the way the League goes out of their way to honor them without putting in the work to actually care for them. They ask whether or not they are doing this on purpose and manipulating the public with halftime honors. But it doesn't stop there. They also delve into the racial stats of the League, questioning the fairness of the coaching standards by comparing the rate in which Black coaches are fired when white coaches with similar records are given more chances.

It's everything Quinton has been discussing, but what everyone raked him over the coals for talking about.

"Wow." His eyebrows reach his hairline as he scrolls through the article. "They finally get it."

"Took them long enough." I grab the creamer out of the refrigerator so he can't see the way my eyes roll to the back of my head. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad my idea worked out and people are finally seeing his point, but I'm a bit of a Bitter Betty that it took them so long. And that they are glossing over Quinton starting the movement.

"Just because I can't see your face doesn't mean I don't know the face you're making right now." There's laughter in his voice and I do not appreciate it.

"I don't know why you're so amused by this." Forgetting the creamer, I turn and aim a glare at him with hands planted firmly on my hips. Something I'm sure would be more effective if I wasn't barefoot in his pajama pants that I rolled up approximately ten times. "It would've been so much easier if they just listened to you from the beginning."

"Maybe." He stands up and walks around the island. And even though we spent all of last night—and part of this morning—continuing to celebrate our official relationship status, seeing him without his shirt on and his eyes still hooded from sleep makes me want to jump back into bed with him. "But if they listened, I wouldn't have met you and this wouldn't feel nearly as sweet." He lowers his voice just as he drops a gentle kiss on my lips.

And I swear I swoon.

Maybe one day I'll get used to this, but I really hope not.

—

"YOU BOUGHT RUGS!" I yell as soon as I open Quinton's front door and cozy goodness is covering his cement floors.

Quinton closes the refrigerator and walks over to me with a Diet Coke in his hand. "You like it?"

"Do I like it?" I take the soda from his hand and roll on to my toes to drop a kiss on his mouth. "I freaking love it! Don't you?"

“I actually do, and look.” He points to the living room floor that is also covered by a massive rug.

My eyes go wide and I shove my hand into his shoulder. “Is that the one I told you I loved when we were at the mall? You bought it?”

As a Mustangs fan, I was bummed when they got knocked out of the playoffs. As a girlfriend, I was thrilled. Because as much as I loved spending time with Quinton during the football season, having him to myself every day is so much better. If anything, now I’m the busy one.

Working at the Rue with Jen has been amazing. I can’t believe I went so long thinking that hating so many parts of my job was normal. Now I get to go to work and love what I do. Even when we get a difficult client, I still come home with a smile on my face.

“Yeah.” He sits on the couch and almost looks embarrassed. “I snuck back in and ordered it while you were in line for ice cream.”

“Sneaky, but I like it.” I put my soda on a coaster and sit on the couch next to him. “It looks perfect in here.”

He turns to me, his face suddenly serious as different scenarios race through my mind.

“You look perfect in here.” He twists his body so that he’s facing me and pulls me into his arms. “I used to hate coming home to this place. It was so empty, so cold. But the second you stepped through that door, things began to change. I know you’ve said your condo never felt right to you, so what do you say? Do you want to move in with me? We can turn this place into a home together.”

I’m still in therapy. I have a lot of issues I still need to work my way through, but there is one thing that I know for sure—when I’m with Quinton, I feel safe. I fit and I belong. Whether it was the times we’ve spent laughing, crying, or even the time we were apart, he’s always accepted me for me.

“Yes.” I nod my head, watching as his face lights up just before our mouths touch, confirming what I already knew.

There’s no place in the world I would rather be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Playbook Series was originally only supposed to be three books. So, first and foremost, thank you to Berkley for giving me the opportunity to continue this series and tell this story.

Kristine Swartz, my badass editor, thank you for just being you. You make this entire process so wonderful and give me the courage to tell my stories, even if they might ruffle a few feathers. I'm so grateful that I get the opportunity to continue working with you. You are everything. Jessica Mangicaro, thank you for all of the amazing work you do and for making social media not seem scary and for basically holding my hand through all of it. And to the rest of the Berkley team, thank you, thank you, thank you. You are all so brilliant and talented, I still can't believe you took a chance on me.

My agent, Jessica Watterson. You are my biggest advocate and I will always be so thankful to be a part of Team Watterson. I could not ask for a better agent or a better friend.

Thank you to everyone at FAIR—Fairness for Athletes in Retirement—for the work you have done fighting for retired players and telling their stories. You have amplified their voices and finally let them be heard.

Lin and Lindsay. I could not have finished this book without your encouragement and hand-holding. Thank you for reading every chapter I sent you and telling me it wasn't a total dumpster fire. I love you both.

Andie J. Christopher. I wouldn't have had the courage to write this story without you. Thank you for being not only an amazing friend and someone I can always confide in, but also an inspiration.

Maxym. I'm not sure I've ever met someone and clicked with them so instantly. You are a superwoman and I'm so proud to call you a friend.

Abby, Taylor, and Natalie. I hope you know how much I love you. I talk a lot about strong female friendships in these books and that wouldn't be possible if I didn't have you all in my life, showing me just how important it is.

I'm writing these acknowledgments on day seven of social distancing for COVID-19. Hopefully by the time this book is out in the world, things will be back to normal and I will be home voluntarily. But right now, I think it's imperative that I thank all of you. This time is so wild and freaking scary, and the only thing that has brought me any comfort is seeing the way we've all come together on social media to comfort one another. Whether you've posted a funny meme or sent an encouraging message or voiced your fear so that someone else can feel like they aren't alone, thank you. The romance community is always the best, but I'm more aware of it than ever right now.

Now my kids, even though you have interrupted me approximately nine times while I'm writing this to ask for snacks, ask for water, or tell on your sibling, I couldn't love you more. You are sunshine and sparkle and everything good in this world. You are my everything. Even though being stuck inside is kind of a bummer, I'm so grateful for this time with you. I've loved slowing down and just enjoying you all without anything to interrupt us.

Derrick, thank you for being my partner through all of this. I love you.



Photo by Kristie Chadwick

Alexa Martin is a writer and stay-at-home mom. She lives with her husband—a former NFL player—their four children, and a German shepherd. When she's not telling her kids to put their shoes on . . . again, you can find her catching up with her latest book boyfriend or on Pinterest pinning meals she'll probably never make. Her books are inspired by the eight years she spent as an NFL wife and the reality shows that have her heart.

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