



**HARBO**  
*trophy boyfriends*  
**PASSES**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**SARA NEY**



# HARD PASS

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SARA NEY

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Hard Pass

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## PROLOGUE

Miranda

*PLEASE FORGIVE ME, Grandpa, for I am about to sin.*

I'm so sorry.

Reading over my post again, I squeeze my eyes shut, peering at the computer screen through one narrowly cracked lid. I can't do this; it feels so wrong.

*You have no choice, Miranda, not if you want to start your own business.*

It pains me to be selling this baseball card, truly. Hurts my heart, my brain and the memories of my grandfather, I hold so dear. Memories of us at the ballpark, which he'd take me to every spring for Opening Day, so he could cheer on his favorite team. I'd get a hot dog and a soda, he'd get a beer and peanuts, and that's how we'd spend the summer.

Year after year.

Then, when I was a teenager and discovered boys, the ballpark became ground zero for my hormonal fantasizing. Instead of watching the game, I would watch teenage boys. Giggle if the players were close enough to the chain-link fence for me to ogle. I'd get embarrassed when Grandpa insisted we try to get autographed baseballs and eventually stopped bringing my glove to the park.

I was delusional enough to think one of the cute, athletic players would take one look at me and fall head over heels in love.

Foolish girl...

Over the years, Gramps shared with me the baseball card collection he'd been amassing since he was young. Back in the day, when boys hoarded them. Back when owning a rare card made you a child king. Back when players were gods and legends and their cards were worth something.

Do they even make them anymore?

Grandpa had all the greats: Hank Archer. Blaze Bosbee. Aaron Simpson, The Great Baseman.

Six years ago, when I was a junior in high school, he got diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He was hospitalized a year after that, and everything went... devastatingly downhill from there.

Losing him broke me. It's not that I don't have a father of my own who loves and cherishes me, but there's something about a grandfather's love that's entirely different; a precious and unique kind of affection. Every moment spent with Gramps was magic. I wanted to learn it all from him.

Losing him was a curse.

And also a blessing, because I am *broke*.

Okay, okay, maybe not broke in the traditional sense of the word—I do have some money in savings, a chunk of change in my checking account. My kind of broke is the “I want to start my own business and don't have the startup capital” type.

I am at an impasse. I have inherited my grandfather's cherished baseball card collection and it's worth a small fortune.

A fortune I need part of if I'm going to invest in myself.

I hear my mom's words repeating on a loop through my head as I crank out the copy for the advertisement I'm placing online. *“Grandpa left those baseball cards to you for a reason, Randi Jane. He knew they were valuable and he didn't have anything else of value to leave you. You were his only granddaughter and he loved you—he wanted you to be taken care of the way Dad and I can't do. Those cards aren't doing you any good collecting dust in the closet, baby girl. Sell them and follow your dreams. No regrets.”*

No regrets.

Well...

A few regrets.

I am racked with guilt before I've even actually submitted my ad, stomach a knotted fist that won't quit clenching.

I want to puke.

The plan is simple: sell them off one at a time to maximize profits rather than selling them as a lot and allowing someone to lowball me for the bundle. Another reason I don't want to sell them in bulk? The astronomical price. I cannot wrap my brain around the cards' total value, so I cannot wrap my brain around selling them for the six figures they would almost certainly

fetch.

No fucking way.

Selling them may be intimidating, but that's what I have to do if I'm going to follow my dreams, start my own business, and become a boss ass bitch. Well, a boss anyway, no one has ever accused me of being a bitch and I'd like to keep it that way. I need a small studio space, one or two employees, office furniture, and computers. That all takes money, money, and *money* I do not have.

I adjust the computer glasses perched on the bridge of my nose and bite my lip in concentration, furrow my brow. Whoever buys this card will have to have a lot of faith in the company I used to authenticate it. Most of the time, when a collection is this valuable, it gets put up for auction.

But I can't wait around for the next sale at the auction house—three entire months from now is an eternity. I don't want to put my goals on hold for another 9 days. I've waited long enough.

*FOR SALE: Major League Baseball card from 1928. Hank "The Tank" Archer. Most home runs in MLB history, career spanned 22 seasons. Mint condition, independently appraised. \$25,000 FIRM. Text Randi at 555-4439, serious inquiries only. Act fast and don't end up in a bidding war.*

Twenty-five grand. I let out a low whistle, reading and rereading what I've written, eyes continuing to flit back to that dollar amount.

Twenty. Five. Grand.

That is absolutely insane to me. *Who can afford that?*

The card is worth shit tons more than I'm asking, but since I'm not selling it through a reputable auction house, I feel forced to lower the asking price, swallowing my pride and more than a few dollars. A Babe Ruth card went for six figures a few years ago, so I know this card could command serious dough.

Still.

Twenty-five grand is more money than I make at work in three months, and I need cash like, *yesterday*. The money in the bank is a safety net I cannot relinquish—what if the business fails? What if it takes longer than I hope to turn a profit? What if, what if, what if...

I have other baseball cards and the total of what they'll go for is more than enough to get me on my feet.

I rub my hands, finally getting excited, and hit *POST*.

## NOAH

“HOLY SHIT, Buzz—come look at this. Someone is selling a Hank Archer card from 1928 on ListIt.”

My teammate, Buzz Wallace, looks over from his spot on the couch, yelling “It’s fake!” over his shoulder before going back to whatever nonsense he’s watching on my TV as we wait for my other guests to arrive. “What are you doing shopping for shit, anyway? Guys will be here in like 20!”

Yeah, everyone is arriving soon, but that didn’t stop Wallace from getting here way too early to use the sauna to relieve his sore muscles then claiming his spot on the sofa by sprawling out. Right now he’s watching some reality show about couples meeting blindly in pods then getting married. Or not.

“Just come look at it.”

“It’s as fake as Beth’s titties.” He cackles, eyes glued to the television.

Jesus, he’s such an asshole. Wallace is a great teammate, but the kind of dude who likes to gossip and overshare personal shit, like the fact that his ex-girlfriend had a boob job—one he paid for—as well as how they felt, how big they were.

He doesn’t know when to shut up and doesn’t understand that all that shit is *none of my damn business*.

My eyes go back to the computer screen, and I scroll through photos of the Archer card, zooming in to see it better. There are 12 pictures—the max ListIt allows you to upload—and I scrutinize each and every one.

Mint condition.

My dick tingles a little at the sight of it, if I’m being honest. I’ve been salivating over this baseball card since I bought my first one at 11 years old when I spent my entire five-dollar allowance on a pack of trading cards adding an Archer to my dream list. I’ve wanted to own one since I picked up

a bat and began to love the game—except there aren't many of them around, because back in the day? No one knew they'd be worth anything. Moms cleaning out their teenagers' rooms tossed them, given away, or recycled. Not to mention they weren't mass-producing them in the 1920's. Baseball might have been America's pastime, but it wasn't the money machine it is today.

It's my passion.

My career.

Don't tell anyone, but I'm famous.

Shit, that sounded vain, and that wasn't my intention—I'm just stating the facts. I would never brag about something like that; it's not my style. Never has been. No matter how much money I rake in from playing ball or how long I've been in the league, I'll never be an asshole about it. Even though the fact is, as a teenager, I had college baseball scouts parked on the bleachers during my games, watching me. As a sophomore, 15 universities wanted to sign me early. Fifteen. ONE. FIVE.

I wasn't ready to commit, so I waited. Signed to a smaller Division 1 school. Not as many students, but a great program, on the East Coast, not far from home. I had my pick of the best; everyone wanted me.

It was overwhelming.

All I wanted was to play baseball, not be the poster child for douchebag athletes.

So I went where it felt familiar, kept my nose to the glove and the ball in my hand, and when the big leagues came knocking, I answered their call.

Hesitantly, but surely.

Who wouldn't? I live for baseball. Nothing else has been there for me, if you don't count my folks.

Turning a blind eye to everything, but the game, I became famous—and became infamous for being reclusive, too. I'm on the field to do a job with no interest in what comes with it: the fans, the gold digging women, the paparazzi.

Not even the paycheck.

That's just a perk.

One I'm willing to blow a chunk of to own this Archer card.

I stare at the computer, memories from my childhood rising as a lump in my throat, want and need and determination, which I gulp down as I click through the photographs.

Being scouted as a high school student then getting drafted to the pros as

a senior in college has made me hermit-like; everyone wants a piece of me. I just want a piece of history.

“You’re not going to come look at this?” I call to Buzz one more time before clicking the *Contact Seller* button located at the bottom of the page.

“Can’t. Scratching my balls.”

Sounds about right.

I crack my knuckles and stare at the air, conjuring up the words I want to use in my text. Then, without any more hesitation, I click open the text box on my laptop, type in a phone number, and—

**To 555-4439:** *Hey. I’m interested in your Hank Archer baseball card. Is it still available?*

My heart is racing. What if it’s already been sold?

I wait.

Stand up and go to the sink, wash my hands though they’re not dirty. I pace from the pantry to the windows, looking out into my massive backyard. Stare at the pool, its cascading waterfall, the fake boulders and slide made of molded concrete.

It’s a tropical oasis in the middle of the Midwest and it cost me a small fortune. An embarrassingly large house for a man with no wife, no kids, and no family.

My own parents rarely come to visit and I have zero siblings.

I glance away, lump still lodged in my throat, this one from loneliness.

Nothing makes me feel more pathetic than being alone in this stupid house—the one my mother helped me pick out, convinced I would soon be settling down with a nice girl.

Wallace doesn’t count because he’s a cling-on and the worst fucking company, only comes to my house to mooch from the refrigerator, despite his paycheck being almost as fat as mine.

80 million dollars for three years.

Not too shabby for a 24 year old.

Sighing, I glance back at him. Pretty boy “Buzz” Wallace, the shiniest new toy on the Chicago Steam. Women love him, throw themselves at him. New girlfriend every damn month and every one falls madly in love with him the first time he burps at them across the dinner table.

Fucking caveman.

No class.

Me? I’m my mother’s son: polite. Mannered. Affectionate. Hardworking

and driven with a fantastic career, great benefits and retirement plan. Homeowner. Responsible.

The list goes on and fucking on, and the ironic part is nice girls don't want to date a dude with a face like mine.

*“Hard pass.”*

That's what the last girl I slept with said when she got her first sober glimpse of me. She laughed, walked out of my house—and I never saw her again. It doesn't matter that I'm a rich, professional athlete; *what mattered was my face.*

Beauty might only be skin deep for some, but I know better.

“Did the dude message you back yet?” Wallace wants to know after I've ignored him for too long.

“Not yet.” I don't know for sure if it's a dude selling the card. The name is Randy, but spelled with an i, and I'm almost positive that's not the way a man would spell it. Then again, I've never met a female who went by the name Randi, so who knows. Hell, it's probably some old lady selling her dead husband's prized collection, which would explain why the card isn't through-the-roof expensive like it could be—should be.

I can easily afford it at twenty-five grand.

To me, that is a steal. Chump change.

Have I mentioned the fact that I'm loaded?

My phone and the computer ding with a new notification.

I casually saunter toward them where they sit on the counter, forcing myself to slow my pace though my heart beats as wildly as it does when I'm on the field and a batter is about to take his first swing. Uncertainty and anticipation flood through my veins like a tidal wave.

**From 555-4439:** *Hey there, yes the card is still available. I will not ship it—are you local enough for a pick up?*

**Me:** *Cool, relieved it's available—that is great news for me. I guess local depends on where you live?*

**555-4439:** *I'm in DuPage County. What about you?*

**Me:** *That doesn't narrow it down—DuPage is huge. I'm in Chicago, in the suburbs.*

**555-4439:** *Actually in Chicago? Or are you one of those people who SAYS they live in Chicago but really they're an hour north and just like to brag that they live in the city?*

Yup, okay. There is no way this is an old lady—she's way too sassy.

Unless the name Randi in the ad was a typo and the name is actually Randall. Or Ray. Or...

**Me:** *I'm 8 miles from downtown, an hour if the traffic is horrible. I'm in Barrington Heights. You know where that is?*

**555-4439:** *I do. I'm actually not far from there, but no one is coming to my house. I don't need to be assaulted or murdered for a baseball card.*

Yup. Definitely a young woman. Men don't worry about being assaulted and murdered when they're selling shit on the internet. Most of them should, but most of them do not.

**Me:** *Totally get that. I'm willing to meet you somewhere neutral, like the library or a gas station.*

**555-4439:** *A gas station? Um, no. That's shady too. You know the price on this card is firm, right?*

**Me:** *Yes ma'am. I mean sir.*

Randi ignores my attempt to get more info about the person I'm texting with.

**555-4439:** *How do you plan on paying? I could probably do CashPal or QuickPay.*

**Me:** *Would cash work?*

**555-4439:** *I mean...yes. Are you serious? You're going to pay with cash? Is that smart? What if I rob you blind and keep the card?*

I laugh, causing Wallace to look over at me with a scowl. "Oh, sorry, Your HindAss, am I interrupting your show? In my living room...in my house...while you drink my beer?"

"Yeah," the jackass says. "Yeah, you are disturbing me. Pipe it down with the giggles—it's weird."

I was not giggling, but whatever.

**Me:** *You know what they say: Cash is king, baby.*

**555-4439:** *Right, but what if I jump you and leave you lying there?*

**Me:** *That's really dramatic. Besides, I can outrun you.*

**555-4439:** *Pfft, how do you know?*

**Me:** *Trust me. I can outrun you.*

He—or she—has no idea she's talking to a guy who can run all the bases on a field, from home plate and back, in under seventeen seconds flat.

**555-4439:** *You sound pretty confident for someone I've never met. For all you know, I'm an Olympic sprinter.*

**Me:** *Are you?*

**555-4439:** *No.*

**555-4439:** *Why'd you have to go and ask that? You took the wind out of my sails.*

I resist the urge to banter back—it's tempting, so, so tempting—but I need to get back on track, i.e. discussing the card.

**Me:** *Where have you been keeping the card and where'd you get it?*

**555-4439:** *It's in a plexiglass box, always has been. I've never taken it out, not even to clean it.*

Clean it! Hell no. Bad idea.

**Me:** *Yeah don't do that. Don't ever clean a baseball card.*

**555-4439:** *The card was my grandfathers. I have his entire collection in a safe deposit box.*

Safe deposit box? Who even uses those anymore?

No one, that's who.

**Me:** *What are you doing with the other cards? How many are there?*

I'm interested to know which players she has and what she wants for them—before she lists them one by one on the damn internet.

**555-4439:** *Quite a few legends. Maybe a dozen total that are worth anything, the rest aren't players anyone cares about.*

I'll be the judge of that—I care about each and every one of them. I would be willing to give her a price for the collection as a whole, if she's willing to entertain it.

I get why she's selling them one at a time—in this day and age, no one would be willing to give her what the collection is probably worth. Six figures at least.

I have cash to spare and I'm itching to spend it on history. If the rest of the cards are in as excellent condition as the Hank Archer seems to be, I want to see them. In person, close up.

**Me:** *Have you figured out a price for the entire collection?*

**555-4439:** *Don't be ridiculous—you can't afford it.*

I love how cocky and sure she sounds, giving me the set-down. Does she honestly believe a man who can shell out \$25,000 for a scrap of cardboard in a clear box can't afford to pay more?

I can pay more.

I can pay *lots* more.

However, the art of negotiation has taught me not to show my cards (pun intended) and despite haggling for this purchase without my agent, I feel

capable.

**Me:** *I'm definitely interested to know which players you have in the collection as a whole before you sell them off individually.*

**555-4439:** *I'll have to check. I had them appraised—as I mention in the ad—but don't have the list memorized. I feel like...*

The message comes through, sentence unfinished, and I stare, waiting.

**555-4439:** *I don't know, don't quote me on this, but I think there is a Dwight Powers?*

Powers. P-A-U-E-R-S.

Dwight Pauers—she spelled his name wrong.

My heart races.

**555-4439:** *And a Toby Jenkins? Or is it Lenny? I don't remember.*

**Me:** *Leroy Jenkins?*

**555-4439:** *Yes! That's it.*

Holy shit. It's starting to sound like she has the entire World Series winning team from 1928 in her hands.

Sweat beads on my forehead and I wipe it with the back of my hand.

**Me:** *Cool. I'd love to see those. Can I send you a deposit so you'll hold them?*

**555-4439:** *Are you still buying the Hank Archer first?*

**Me:** *Yes.*

**555-4439:** *What day works for you? You want to look it over and all that first, I totally get that. I am free Wednesday through Friday after two. Then Sunday at nine.*

Wednesday? Fuck, that's two days from now.

I'm itching to hold that card.

**Me:** *Wednesday works. I can meet you around four if that's cool. What spot isn't going to weird you out?*

**555-4439:** *LOL How about...*

**555-4439:** *The parking lot of the police station down on 54<sup>th</sup>?*

Great. They're going to think we're doing a drug deal in the parking lot. Or someone will see me and all hell will break loose and the last thing I want is to be photographed by fans in the parking lot of a cop shop. I don't need my ugly mug plastered all over tabloids, television, or social media.

I mind, but my buddy won't.

“Wallace, what are you doing Wednesday after practice?”

“Masturbating. Why?”

“I need you to do me a solid.”

My teammate sighs heavily, burdened by a task he’s not even privy to yet.

“Fine.”

**Me:** *Sounds like you have a deal.*

**555-4439:** *What’s your name, so I know who to look for?*

I glance over at Buzz.

**Me:** *Friends call me Buzz. I’ll be driving an annoyingly clean black Beemer with creepy tinted windows and wearing a Chicago Steam cap.*

**555-4439:** *LOL are you being serious? You’re already skeeving me out. Tinted windows? Beemer, aka pimp car?*

**Me:** *Basically, yeah.*

**555-4439:** *Oh lord, I better let my friends know I’m meeting a random man in a random parking lot.*

**Me:** *It’s the police station—you’ll be fine.*

And you won’t be alone—far from it—not once the cops take one look at the catcher for their hometown professional baseball team.

**555-4439:** *My name is Miranda, by the way. You can call me Randi if you want.*

**Me:** *Randi?*

I think I’ll stick to her actual name and call her Miranda. I create a new contact in my phone so I’m not confused the next time she texts me and to make it easier to find her when we’re negotiating.

*Contact: Miranda Baseball Cards*

Satisfied, I hit save, tapping on her incoming message.

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *Do you want me to bring the other cards along when we meet for this one, or...?*

**Me:** *No, no—we should work out the details first. You can do more research and tell me what you want for them. I don’t want you to feel rushed or taken advantage of. Come up with a number and we’ll talk.*

Not to mention it’s not safe for her to be meeting dudes in parking lots with valuable merchandise. Granted, this is me we’re talking about, but she doesn’t know I’m not a creep. She doesn’t know I would never take advantage of her—or anyone else, for that matter.

I’ve paid my dues. I’m one lucky son of a bitch who prays every day and thanks the good Lord for blessing me.

Shit, listen to me getting sentimental.

What the fuck is my problem?

Wallace has his feet up on my coffee table and is stuffing part of the meat and cheese tray he brought into his mouth. Sure, he's a mooch, but on occasion he remembers to contribute, like today with the snacks.

We don't have practice today because we have a scrimmage tomorrow for spring training, so we're chillin'. The rest of our buddies/teammates aren't scheduled to arrive for a bit.

The plan is to watch another team—the team we play for the season opener—and study their game. Watch the pitcher, the shortstop, how they move and communicate with the coach and catcher.

Shit like that.

Also, we'll drink.

Not shitfaced drunk, but Anderson Stevens is bringing a keg, so no man will leave here thirsty. Anderson's wife also just had their third baby, so we're celebrating too, kind of like a bachelor party but for babies?

A baby shower?

No, that's not right either since she already popped the kid out.

Whatever.

“What the fuck are you still doing over there, Betty Crocker?”

“Ha ha.”

Caterers dropped off a few platters of appetizers, so I have nothing to do, but fuck around idly at the counter.

“I'm messaging the owner of the Archer card.”

Buzz grunts and I can see him shove a hand inside the waistband of his gray sweatpants and rest it there. Jesus, this guy has no class—it's like he forgets he's at someone else's house.

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *You're right, yes. Okay. That's what I'll do, figure out how much I want for the whole lot. In total there are twenty-four cards, twelve of which are heavy hitters.*

**Me:** *That's fine.*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *You sound so sure, LOL. I haven't even told you who the players are.*

She's told me enough.

Hank Archer. Dwight Pauers. Leroy Jenkins.

I'd buy the entire lot for a stab at owning those three cards alone. Six figures don't put a dent in my paycheck; I'll give her whatever price she wants.

Even so, I put my game face on and flex my proverbial haggling muscles.

**Me:** *True. Send me some pictures when you have a chance?*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *Yeah. I need to do it soon—would that be cool with you? The sooner the better, actually. I thought it would take me longer to find a buyer, but if you're interested in them all then I'd love to get this done.*

This piques my interest.

**Me:** *What's the rush?*

A stretch of time passes before Miranda replies and I imagine her debating about how much information to tell me. Me, a perfect stranger.

I check the clock to see where I'm at for time and how much of it I have before the cavalry arrives.

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *I'm using the money I make from the sale of the cards to finance a new business.*

I stand up straighter. A new business? That's a fun development and I lean into the conversation, legitimately intrigued by this person I've never met and probably never will meet.

**Me:** *Oh? Is it your first?*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *Yes, I...*

Another long pause as she decides what to share.

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *Yeah, so, I actually graduated from college last semester and cannot see myself working for anyone, but myself. It's always been my dream to open a design studio—I love designing and decorating spaces.*

She just graduated from college.

That would make her around my age or close enough to it, roughly 22?

I have a few years on her at 24, but I was expecting Miranda to be at least in her forties. No fucking idea why, I just did.

**Me:** *Design, like, interior design? Or are you an architect?*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *A little bit of both, but I don't have my architectural degree. Business with a design emphasis. I want to hire one or two people and I can't do that without capital. That's why I have to sell these cards. I do not want to take out a loan.*

A 22 year old new graduate starting her own business?

I'm fascinated.

Suddenly I'm curious about other details, like what she looks like. Where she went to school. How tall is she? What does her voice sound like? Besides

my buddies and teammates, some of whom are also in their early twenties, I don't know a single recent college graduate with this much ambition or drive. The only women I meet who are that age are gold diggers whose one ambition in life is to become a trophy wife.

This version of girl is foreign to me.

Even Anderson's wife dropped out of school when they were at university together, moved in with him when he got drafted, and started having babies before he even proposed. How's that for a retirement plan?

Anderson never got the memo about girls poking holes in condoms.

I'm not judging Keely; all I'm saying is she picked out her own engagement ring, the car he gave her as an engagement gift, and push presents for all three of her pregnancies. Also, she's barely recognizable after all the surgery she's had on her body and face.

That woman costs him hundreds of thousands of dollars a year—and I'm not in the market for my own Keely Stevens.

**Me:** *That's awesome!*

Seriously, it is, but now I'm stumped on what else to say.

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *The whole thought of taking this giant risk makes me want to throw up, ya know? But if I don't do it, I'll hate myself. I would make THE WORST employee!*

I remember the first time I stepped onto the baseball field at Field Park Stadium, surrounded by all the seats, bleachers, and box suites. The lights. The scoreboard. It was like nothing I'd ever seen and I threw up on home plate in front of my new coach and the team owner.

80 million dollars and he pukes on the plate.

"Good job, kid," Coach said, slapping me on the back and walking away. He left me to my own devices and the custodian arrived to clean up my mess. Asked for an autograph.

I know all about nerves and being scared; I've lived it. I live it every time I step onto that field and the sensation of being on it never gets old, whether I'm playing or practicing.

**Me:** *How so?*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *I would definitely be fired for insubordination and not following the rules by the end of day one. Day three if I'm lucky, ha ha.*

**Me:** *I'll have to take your word for it.*

"Hey dipshit, are you making love to that phone or what? Grimm just

texted me—he and Dexter are on their way over.”

**Me:** *We’ll talk more this week about the cards and plan for Wednesday?*

**Miranda Baseball Cards:** *That sounds great. Thanks again—you’re going to love this card, it really is in GREAT shape. My grandpa never took it out of its case.*

They rarely did.

Which is good news for me.

**Me:** *Sweet.*

I set the phone down, ignoring it when it pings again with a new notification, knowing it’s Miranda. If I don’t stop messaging her, Wallace will ride my ass about it because he isn’t getting enough attention.

That dude is an attention and fame whore.

I think that’s one of the reasons he likes hanging out with me; I let him have the spotlight when we’re out in public, shying away from it for myself when I can. Although, the two of us being out together creates more unwanted attention than not. Christ, can’t a guy just eat dinner without it becoming a big fucking deal?

I can skate by unnoticed if I’m alone: baseball cap down low, sunglasses, baggy sweats, and layers.

When I’m with him?

Jesus, he’s like a walking, talking billboard for douchebaggery that cannot be ignored. By anyone. Paparazzi, fans. Women, men. Teenagers who are fans of the sport or the team. Dude cannot get e-damn-nough.

He’s right though; our friends start to arrive, filling my kitchen and living room, flopping onto furniture. Feet up. Beers poured.

A few of them stand at the kitchen counter with me, shooting the shit, talking about their kids and families, women they’re dating or sleeping with.

Fucking is more like it, but still, it’s more action than I see.

“Wallace was telling us you have a hard on for some baseball card,” Kurt Kleinman is saying, snapping a celery stick in half and dipping it in dill. “Which one is it?”

“Hank Archer,” I say, popping a few veggies into my own mouth. “It’s mint.”

“You ain’t seen it—how the hell you know it’s *mint*?”

Kleinman is from the Deep South and his grammar drives me insane.

“I’ve seen pictures.”

“Are you fucking serious? Boy, haven’t you heard of Photoshop? Shit,

half the women I meet look nothin' like their pictures online. It's all fake."

Fake, fake—that's what Wallace was saying.

I swallow hard, shrugging. "Guess I'll find out on Wednesday."

Well, Wallace will when he meets Miranda and gets the card for me; he just doesn't know it yet. Shouldn't be tough to convince him—he rarely needs much encouragement when there's the chance to meet a chick.

"Who's selling you this card, some old fart who needs a fat paycheck?"

"Nah. It's some young entrepreneur. She inherited them from her grandpa when he died."

Kleinman snorts. "See, that's fucked up—people will do anything for a fast buck. Ain't she heard of family heirlooms? Or legacies?"

The good old boys are far more sentimental than I give them credit for.

"What is a girl going to do with a box full of old baseball cards? They aren't doing her any good in the closet."

"What if her son wants 'em? And she sold them."

I doubt she has a son to pass them down to and if she does in the future, who even says the kid would give a crap.

"Guess I'll keep them for my son then. Or daughter." I shrug, not wanting to get into a pointless argument. "None of my business why she's selling the cards as long as she sells them to *me*."

I expect him to keep arguing, but he surprises me by nodding. "When you meeting her for the drop?"

My eyes roll toward the ceiling; they're making it sound like I'm doing an illicit drug deal on the wrong side of town.

"Wednesday."

"Want me to come with you? Just in case? I've seen *To Catch a Predator*—I know how this shit goes down."

"First of all..." I sigh. "Neither of us are children. Secondly, I doubt she's going to try to jump me."

"You don't even know for sure it's a girl. It could be some old dude pretending to be a girl. Next thing you know—whammo, you're being held at knifepoint in a seedy parking lot by some little dude."

Keep in mind: I'm six foot two, weigh two hundred pounds, and have a glare that would send a junkyard dog running in the opposite direction the way I run from home to first base.

"We're meeting at the police station." Idiot.

"You can get held at knifepoint in the police parking lot."

What is he even talking about? “I’m not worried.” I slide some cheese and sausage in his direction, along with the fruit platter. The more he has in his mouth, the less nagging he can do. “Besides, it’s not me who’s going.”

The guys consider this new information, and Donahue—our first baseman—cocks his head. “You sending Rudy?”

Rudy is my manager-slash-assistant on those rare occasions I need assisting. Mostly he just manages appearances when I have to make them and my time when baseball is in season.

“Nah, I’m sending Wallace. He’s bored and looking for something to do.” He shoots me a glance from where he’s planted on the sofa. Throws me the peace sign to let me know he’s down with whatever.

A few of my friends laugh. “You’re not worried he’s going to steal this girl out from under you?”

Steal her out from under me? “Under me? When was I on top of her?”

They laugh again. “When doesn’t Wallace chase after someone? She could have a bag over her head and he’d find her attractive.”

Brownbagger—someone called me that once, a girl I went out with on a blind date. She got piss ass drunk then slurred the insult at me when I put her in a cab at the end of the evening and sent her home. Alone.

I force a grin, feel it tugging at my cheeks in the most unnatural way.

“Whoa, watch it or your face is gonna crack,” Anderson jests, elbowing me in the ribs and shoving me aside to gain better access to the cheese and crackers. “Let’s get this show on the road, yeah? Keely wants me home in an hour.”

An hour? We won’t get shit done in an hour and the fact that his wife won’t let him stay is beyond fucked up.

“So pussy whipped,” Landon Johnson says, shaking his head. “Okay boys, you heard him—let’s get this show on the road. Wallace? Get the game on son. Let’s see what we’re up against this season.”

## MIRANDA

*WHY AM I SO NERVOUS?*

I shouldn't be—I don't even know this person. For all I know, he's some creepy pervert whose opinion of me I don't care about at all.

Twenty-five thousand dollars, cash.

I've never had that kind of money in my possession before! Will the bank even take it when I try to deposit it? What if they think I robbed a bank? What if they think I'm a drug dealer? *Who carries around that kind of money?*

Cashier's check, maybe?

He didn't say that, though; he specifically said cash. Cold, hard cash.

My palms sweat as I pull my car into the police station, plenty of spots open. I'm right on time, not early and not late. I let my car idle while I wait, looking around for a vehicle that doesn't belong to the police, one that's not a squad car.

A minute ticks by, then another, a knot forming in my stomach, the baseball card tucked safely in my purse. Okay, so maybe not so safe—anyone could rob me blind, could steal my purse along with my money and the baseball card.

A cop in a dark navy uniform steps out of the brick building onto the pavement, strides to an unmarked sedan. The only identifying features are the grill on the front and the antenna on the roof.

He doesn't see me sitting in my car, the same beat-up Tahoe that was passed down from my parents when I turned sixteen. This truck has more miles on it than my college roommate, who racked up notches on her bedpost faster than any frat dude.

I'm woolgathering about school when a sleek, black Beemer rolls into the

lot. It's not the kind you drive off the sales floor—it's the kind you order and have shipped from overseas, with all the custom bells and whistles. The kind of Beemer that costs more than a house.

I know this because my cousin's fiancé is obsessed with sports cars and he drags her to the annual auto show. She drags me along, so I can be miserable, too, and it always takes the entire weekend because God forbid the man is satisfied walking through once.

My eyes track the shiny sports car as it slowly creeps through the parking lot, windows tinted a reflective gunmetal gray. The whole visual is creepy and intimidating at the same time.

*This is a guy who can afford forking over twenty-five grand—unless he's one of those men who are all flash and no cash. All show and no dough...*

Okay, so I don't feel so guilty now. It's not my problem how he chooses to spend his money.

I can't even see through the windshield, but I know the second he spots me. Stops his car directly in front of mine, blocking me in—although logically, I know that's not at all what he's doing. Not technically, though I couldn't pull my car out if I wanted to.

My heartbeat accelerates and I text Claire, my best friend: *If you don't hear from me in 5 minutes, call the police.*

**Claire:** *Are you there meeting the guy for the baseball card?*

**Me:** *Yes.*

**Claire:** *Okay—where are you so I know where to send the police?*

**Me:** *The police station.*

**Claire:** *I can't tell if you're being serious or not.*

**Me:** *[sends a photograph of the guy's car and the police station behind it]*

**Claire:** *Yeah, so if he tries to murder you, try screaming really loud.*

**Me:** *Ha ha, I'm glad you think this is funny. Oh shit—he's getting out of his car!*

The glossy black door opens slowly and one foot steps onto the pavement. Expensive sneaker, black track pants. One hand grasping the top of the door and within seconds, a head of black hair emerges from behind the smoke screen first.

Tan skin. Full lips.

What the actual...

Holy. Shit.

Who is this guy? He looks like a male model, big, buff, and so damn hot. My phone pings again, Claire wanting a status update.

**Claire:** *Are you still alive? Text me when you get this.*

**Me:** *Yeah yeah, hold on, I'm getting out of my car.*

I slide my sunglasses on—not because it's bright outside, but so I can continue gawking at this male specimen from behind their protective lenses. Where I come from (approximately 40 miles north of here), they don't make men like this. I'm from a small town that produces construction workers, IT guys, and dudes who work for their families—not stud muffins who drive \$100,000 sports cars and look as if they just stepped off the cover of *GQ* or *Fitness Magazine*. I wouldn't know what to do with a man like this, but I sure don't mind looking at him.

Since I can't sit here forever, I pull back on the door handle. Lean across the center console and riffle through my purse for the baseball card, which has inconveniently slipped to the bottom.

*Shit, where is it?*

My fingers fumble, tips finally making contact with that smooth box. Grasp it and slip it into the pocket of my jeans as one of my feet hits the ground. Then the other, until I'm standing next to my truck, blushing.

Thank God he can't see my eyes.

He's tall—at least a foot above my five three—and wide, like a Mack truck. Not a bodybuilder, but someone who spends the majority of his time working out. Longer hair. Dark brown eyes. Chiseled jaw and cheekbones, covered in dark stubble.

*No, Miranda. No.*

*Don't you dare flirt. Do not you dare flirt.*

The Goliath clears his throat.

“You Miranda?” The voice matches the stature, deep and masculine and daunting. If I heard it in a dark alley, I'd piss myself.

“Yeah—and y-you're...” HOT. So hot. The kind of hot that makes angels fall from grace.

“Here for the card,” he answers, not confirming his name is Buzz like he said in his text, holding out his mammoth paw.

I glance down at it. Calloused. Rough. A contradiction for such a pretty man. He comes off more as the type who manscapes, spas, and manicures on the regular. His hands tell a different story or maybe it's from all the gym time.

His car idles behind him.

“Let’s see the cash,” I demand, so unlike myself. Suddenly, I feel like I’m in a gangster movie, doing shady shit. I glance around, paranoia setting in. Shit, we’re probably being filmed. What if I’m being set up in a sting operation?

*Don’t be stupid, Miranda—it’s not illegal to sell baseball paraphernalia.*

Is it?

He leans into the Beemer and produces a large manila envelope; it’s fat and full, bursting at the seams. *Holy shit, that is what being flush with cash looks like.*

“Do you want to count this?” he asks, mouth set in a cocky line. An arrogant line. Smug, almost, as if he knows I’m not going to actually count the cash, in broad daylight, in the parking lot of the cop shop. “It’s in stacks of one thousand.”

Stacks of one thousand...right. He sounds so casual, but now that I’ve gotten a good look at him, I surmise he probably spends this kind of money at the clubs at night. A grand on a bottle of champagne in the VIP section. Bottle service and primo seating I would know nothing about if it wasn’t in the movies.

I swallow the lump in my throat, pretending to be calm. “Okay.”

He holds the envelope steady on his palm, as if presenting me with an hors d’oeuvre tray and expecting me to select an appetizer, balancing it steady. Waiting.

Knowing damn well I’m afraid to touch it.

“It won’t bite,” he says with a wolfish grin. “Although I might.”

I shoot him a look meant to wipe that egotistical look from his face, but it doesn’t work. Only makes the idiot’s grin widen.

So annoying.

So confusing.

Gingerly, my thumb and index finger pluck the envelope from his hand and he watches as I slowly peel back the flap to peer inside.

I’m flush with cash, and I want to shout *I’m rich!* at the top of my lungs. In the parking lot. Of the police station. At four in the afternoon.

*Get a grip, Miranda—this is not yours to spend on a whim. It is going straight to the bank.* I nod emphatically to myself.

“Now let’s see the merchandise,” the guy says.

I pull the card from the recesses of my back pocket, and he takes it. Puts

it in *his* pocket.

“You’re not even going to look at it?” My eyes damn near bug out of my skull—who buys something like this and doesn’t bother to examine it?

Rich, spoiled dudes, that’s who.

“Sure.” He pulls it out and looks at it. Slides it back into his pocket. “There. Happy?”

Uh...not really, but whatever—not my problem if he gets home and finds a flaw. “No returns,” I inform him, crossing my arms.

He crosses his as well, muscles bulging beneath the thin fabric of his black athletic t-shirt.

I tilt my head and study him again. There is a small scar on his square jaw and an indent in his stubble where a dimple creases his cheek. His thick brows look recently waxed—and come to think of it, his arms look waxed, too.

I *cannot* with this guy.

I have a few guy friends who are vain, but none come close to the man standing in front of me.

“Well, nice doing business with you...” My sentence trails off as I wait for him to confirm he’s Buzz. I mean, yes, we already made the exchange and I have my money, but still.

“Baseman.” He says it like BASE-man, different than the usual pronunciation. His large, gruff hand shoots out for a shake—one I do not take.

I cock my head incredulously. “Your *mother* named you Baseman?”

“It’s a nickname, dollface. Calm your ti—” He stops himself from telling me to *Calm my tits*. “Calm yourself.”

Wow. Classy.

“Doing anything tonight? Beer? Wine?” he wants to know. “Blowing me?”

God no, gross—he did not just proposition me to blow him, did he? Did I hear him right? Who the hell does this douche think he is?

“What did you just say to me?” The tone of my voice is scathing, the kind my mom would use when I popped off to her thinking she couldn’t hear me and she wanted me to know she knew I’d told her off.

“I said beer, wine, or me?”

Liar! That is not what he said!

“I’m working tonight, so some other lady will have to do the honors.” I

turn my back and start for the car, this whole transaction making me want to take a scalding shower and cleanse myself.

I cannot wait to text Claire about this.

*Shit—Claire!* It's been way longer than five minutes and she's probably assuming I've been robbed. Or killed.

"Working? At night?" He's speaking to my back now. "What do you do work at Target?"

I squint back at him. He knows I don't have a job; I told him why I need this money when we were texting and that I'm starting my own business—not that he's giving off an 'I'm a great listener' vibe. Quite the contrary now that I've met him in person.

What. A. Dick.

"Peace out." I flip him the universal sign for peace, hopping up into my Tahoe. "Now move your damn car."

"I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND THE WHOLE THING—IT WAS SO WEIRD," I'M telling Claire from my living room floor, sitting cross-legged as I sift through Grandpa's box, stacking the remainder of his cards on my carpet.

My friend is in the process of making dinner at her place and has her phone resting on her countertop as we video call, so putting me at eye level with the frying pan on her stove as she steams vegetables and boils noodles.

Meanwhile, I'm sorting baseball cards so I can sell the rest to Buzz—or Baseman, whichever godawful name he wants to go by—though the last thing I want to do is see him again. Ugh, he was pervy and rude, but I'm going to have to suck it up since I know he's a willing buyer.

And has the money.

"How was it weird? Was he old and creepy?"

"Not old, just creepy. Young and super hot." Okay, so maybe perverted isn't the right way to describe him. I try again. "You know those guys on the football team in college who walked around like they were God's gift to women? That was this guy."

Claire makes a yuck sound. "Ugh, I couldn't stand the student athletes. Remember how they used to stroll through the cafeteria? Like what were they even doing in our cafeteria—don't they have one of their own?"

"Showboating, that's what they were doing, strutting like peacocks, and that's what this guy was doing. I'm surprised he didn't 'baseman' his muscles at me, he was so vain."

Baseman—what an accurate description of him. I'm sure that womanizer gets to first, second, and all the way to home on the first date. *What a horrid nickname.*

Ew.

My phone is propped on my coffee table so I can see it as I work. "I honestly almost expected him to give me his autograph." I glance up to find her watching me through the phone. "He hit on me...I think?"

She pauses, wooden spoon hovering above her silver cooking pot. "How do you not know if he was hitting on you?"

"He asked what I was doing later. Then he goes, 'Beer, wine—or me.'" I feign a gag, fake vomiting theatrically.

"Um, that's gross."

"I know! I can't believe guys still say shit like that, as if there weren't a thousand better ways to ask someone out—not that that's what he was doing. It sounded more like a proposition."

"Yeah, a proposition for you to do all the work. He probably thought you'd suck his dick if he asked."

"I'm sure he'll have no problems finding a replacement set of lips." I laugh.

Claire snorts. "Jesus Miranda!"

My shoulders shrug up and down. "What? It's true!"

Also true: men aren't the only ones who are perverts. I think they'd be surprised to find out that women—especially when surrounded by other women—talk dirty about sex just as often, in just as vulgar of terms as they do.

*It can be our dirty little secret*, I muse to myself, smiling as I put the cards into three little stacks in order of value, most to least.

"What else are you gonna do tonight?" my best friend asks. "Do you want to go out or anything? Monica texted and they're all going for dinner at The Grainery."

I shake my head. "I can't. I have to figure all this out then give that guy a call. I just don't know about selling him the entire collection—he was such a sleaze."

A hot sleaze, but a sleaze nonetheless.

I hope he's not an ass on the phone like he was today. The whole thing was too...contradictory. Honestly, I thought we'd really hit it off and have more in common. I thought our banter when we texted was great. Fun.

I enjoyed it.

*Keep it business, Miranda, and you won't get hurt...*

“You'd really consider not selling him the cards because he was a twatwaffle?”

“Yeah, I really would. These were my grandfather's cards—I want them in good hands.”

“I know, but you need that money.”

True, but... “I have to have some standards, okay? It would be like selling my soul to the devil and I don't think it would be worth it.”

“Don't be hasty girl. Give it some thought.”

“I will. Promise.”

“Okay then, switching gears—what about this weekend?” Claire tries again, determined to get me out of my apartment—the one I could barely afford until today, until that \$25,000 bank deposit. That will help with the rent, and the security deposits for the office space I have my eye on, some furniture...

I shiver, excited. A celebratory night out would be magic and I could use some right about now.

“Yeah, maybe I'll come out this weekend.”

“Yay! It's been forever. And Gretchen's boyfriend has this new place he wants to try out—you need a password to get in.”

“That doesn't sound the *least* bit out of our league.” Or above our paygrade.

“When you're pretty, you don't pay,” she says, grinning confidently, her black hair swept back from her beautiful, flawless face.

My eyes roll to the back of my head. “That's easy for you to say—you're gorgeous.”

Her eyes roll, too. “Give me a break—you're gorgeous too. You just feel dumpy because you've been living in sweatpants like you're quarantined. Slap some makeup on and you'll feel like a queen Mama. I pinky promise.”

Claire is right—I have been living in leisurewear. In my defense, I've been working my ass off to get things off the ground with my business which I still cannot believe I'm doing.

With the help of no one.

I have a few mentors, but not a single soul from my family has ever worked for themselves. I'm the first college graduate and the first to start my own company.

“Alright, I’ll let you drag me out on Saturday.” In my hand is the Jenkins card. I tap it on the coffee table. “Now let me get back to figuring this shit out—Mama’s got bills to pay.”

## NOAH

“HERE.” Buzz Wallace waltzes into my office as if he owns the place setting a clear, plexiglass box on the desk. It’s about four inches long by three inches wide, housing an item I’ve always wanted.

The Hank Archer baseball card.

“How did you get in here?” is the first thing I ask him, without preamble. Reaching for the case, I grasp it gingerly between my middle finger and thumb, turning it this way and that, inspecting the card inside.

“Garage door was open.”

It was? Shit.

Even though I live in a gated community, I usually make sure all the doors are locked and the garage door is always closed if I’m not in the front yard or jogging through the neighborhood. Too many people coming and going—contractors, lawn care providers, pet sitters, nannies.

“Well make yourself at home,” I sarcastically add when he does just that, propping his feet on the corner of my desk. The bastard is lucky he took his shoes off—otherwise I’d kick his ass out.

“Thanks, I will—as usual.”

“So how did it go?”

He gestures toward the card in my hands. “Obviously it went well.”

But that’s not what I mean; I want details on Miranda. What she looked like, how she behaved. Was she as cute as I imagine her to be?

“And?”

He picks at a hangnail, biting on his thumb. “And what?”

“God, are you really this obtuse?” I roll back in my desk chair, setting the card on the built-in bookshelf behind me. I’ll take it out and inspect it later; for now, I want to discuss the woman who sold it to me. Without being

obvious, of course.

“Obtuse? What the hell does that even mean?” He continues chewing on his nail, picking at the cuticle and ignoring me.

Jesus, is he serious? Dude needs a dictionary to translate half the shit I say. I cannot believe he graduated from a Division 1 university with a degree in finance.

“What else? Did you talk to her? Was she normal?” Give me something—anything! I can’t tell him I want information; he’s like a goddamn animal that smells fear and as soon as he knows you want something from him, he takes it away.

As far as friends go, Wallace is bottom of the totem pole. My best friends still live in my hometown, only coming to see me on an occasional weekend here and there throughout the year. Most of them can’t afford to fly to Chicago unless I’m the one paying. Humble, hardworking, family dudes—like me, plus the family part.

Since Wallace is my teammate and seems to like hanging out with me, he’s what I’ve got at the moment, as shitty a friend as he may be.

“Yeah she was normal, about yay high.” He extends his arm, palm turned down to indicate how tall Miranda was.

“Short?”

“About five four.” He spits a fingernail onto the hardwood floor.

“Could you not do that?” I’m trying to talk, for fuck’s sake. None of the other guys on the Steam seem to act like this—why did I get stuck with Wallace following me around like a stray cat?

*Because, dipshit, you haven’t told him to piss off.*

The thing is I can’t. He’d be pissed and it would cause friction and I have to work with the douchebag.

So, I lean forward a little, cocking my head, arching my eyebrows expectantly. “If this were you and I were doing you a favor, I would give you more information.”

He looks up. “What the hell kind of information are you looking for? I picked up the card so you could self-isolate and I dropped it off. What more do you want?”

I want him to tell me more about Miranda.

Buzz Wallace sits back in the chair, crossing his beefy arms. “Wait...do you want information on the girl?”

Finally, he gets it.

“Pfft. No.”

He stares me down, those blue eyes unblinking. Narrow. “She was cute. Small. I didn’t really get a look at her tits. Kind of a bad attitude.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know—she didn’t count the money and she was bossy.”

“What do you mean?” I sound like a parrot, repeating myself. *What do you mean, what do you mean?*

“I don’t know, man. She was just trying to get in and get out, if you know what I mean. She was in a hurry, that’s all I’m saying.”

Translation: She wasn’t into him and didn’t want to stick around and flirt.

Wow. A girl who doesn’t fall for his charms? Miranda just earned another point.

“Well thanks for going—I appreciate it. I would have gone myself, but I had...” I rack my brain for an excuse. “I’m getting a head start on my taxes.”

His brows shoot up. “You do your own taxes?”

No, but I have a hand in them so I know what money is coming in and what’s going out. I don’t want to get bent over and fucked up the ass by my manager, who also has his hands in my finances.

I let the silence linger, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave.

He stands. “You got any of that food leftover from the game this weekend?”

“No, I sent it home with the cleaning ladies.”

“Damn, I’m hungry.” His hands are on his hips and he’s rolling them, stretching—right there in the center of my office, like it’s a yoga studio. “What else you got?”

“Fruit.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, not in the mood. Got any burritos?”

“No, dude. Go order one.”

Wallace glances down at me. “Can’t you do it?”

“What the fuck do I look like, your personal secretary?”

“Nah, she quit weeks ago.” He says it so nonchalantly.

I stare at him for a few seconds. “Yeah, probably because working for you is like working for a toddler.”

A spoiled one who is good-looking and pleasant to look at and therefore always gets his way.

Must be nice.

Wallace continues stretching, bending his leg back and grabbing his ankle.

“Now what are you doing?” Man he aggravates me.

“Think I’ll go for a run around the neighborhood—how far is it if I do the loop?”

“Don’t you have your own subdivision to run in? It has to be mine?” Why won’t he just leave so I can shoot Miranda a note, thanking her for the sale?

He goes about stretching his arms, pulling back on his elbow. “Yeah, but too many people know me and always want to stop me to talk. Ain’t in the mood.”

I sigh. “It’s three miles.”

“Cool, I’ll do it twice.” Bending, he reties his sneakers, the hair on the top of his head a gleaming, glossy mop.

Fucker.

“Where are your water bottles?”

“You run with a water bottle?”

He stares at me like I have two heads. “You don’t?”

“Uh, no.”

Wallace pulls at the elastic waistband of his track pants. “I tuck it into my waistband, der.”

I glare. “Bottom drawer to the right of the sink.”

“You keep your water bottles in a drawer?”

“Would you just go!” He’s making me insane!

“Christ, testy much?” I hear him muttering under his breath as he walks away, toward my kitchen. “Someone needs to get laid and it isn’t me.”

God, I hate to admit it, but he’s right.

I do need to get laid.

Except I can’t do it with a stranger. Not after my last one night stand.

“*Hard pass.*” The words and the laughter ring in my ears, bringing a blush creeping to my face, heating my neck and the space between my pecs.

Dammit. I hate it bothering me that much after all these months; the girl was a complete asshole, straight up laughing in my face. Thinking she was such hot shit, doing me a favor by fucking me.

*Hard. Pass.*

Embarrassed and humiliated by those two words, I never breathed a word about it to anybody, not even my good buddies back home.

Admittedly, they hate this lifestyle for me. The groupies who stand

outside the chain-link fence of the stadium, at the entrance to the parking lot, hoping to catch a player's eye. The groupies at the bars and clubs. The social climbers who want to befriend me for their own gain, tagging me in photographs, pretending we spent the night together, just to impress people.

Hard. Pass.

I shake my head to get the image of that night out of my damn mind, failing when insecurity rears its ugly head.

Ugly. Ha!

I've never been in love.

I thought I was once, in high school, with a beautiful girl named Kimora Westinghouse. Dark skin and brown eyes, she was my teenage dream. Outgoing. Popular. Always with a kind word for everyone, that girl was as sweet as the day was long, and I harbored a secret crush on her for years—but was unconfident and too shy to do anything about it.

That didn't stop me from jerking off to the thought of her though—basically every morning and every night once I realized stroking my dick felt almost as good as hitting a home run.

*Almost.*

Irritated by this stroll down memory lane, I almost forget the baseball card resting on the bookshelf behind me. I gingerly pick it up, cradling it in my hand. It's dwarfed compared to the size of my palm, and I gaze down at it, heart racing.

I cannot wait to show this to the guys—not my teammates, the guys back home. They'll shit themselves when they see this, a national treasure.

And I own it.

Who would have fucking thought.

Gratitude flows through my veins, so I pick up my phone, pounding out a quick text to the woman who sold it to me.

**Me:** *Hey Miranda, I just want to thank you again for this card—it's incredible. I assumed it would be in good shape, but this... Has it even been touched? I'm impressed. So thank you.*

**Miranda:** *You are so welcome. Told you it was mint \*\*wink\*\**

People say lots of things, but we all know a lot of it is smoke and mirrors. Just bullshit. I get jerked around by assholes trying to take advantage of me every single day—my manager included, who's only in it for the paycheck. Oh, he does a great job pretending to be my buddy, but we both know it's horseshit. He'll drop me like a bad habit once I stop making him boatloads of

cash.

If Miranda naively believes a person is as good as their word—should be taken at their word—she needs a wake-up call.

**Me:** *I keep staring at this card and I'm fucking obsessed with it.*

**Me:** *Shit, pardon my French. I'm just so damn excited—it's better than I thought it would be.*

**Miranda:** *Strange, 'cause you didn't seem concerned about it—or its condition—when we met. You didn't even look at the card to check before you bought it! Who does that?*

I didn't?

*I didn't?*

Did I not specifically tell Wallace to fucking check it over? Make sure it wasn't bent, stained or ripped? Is Miranda implying that he just handed over the cash without inspecting the goods first? Goddamn him, making me look like an idiot.

If you want something done right, do it yourself.

My mom's words ring in my ear as I scowl down at the messages on the glowing screen of my phone.

The pisser about this situation is I can't ask Miranda if I inspected the card because she doesn't know the man who showed up at the cop shop WAS NOT ME. As far as she's concerned, I am Buzz Wallace, heartthrob of the Chicago Steam—when in reality, I'm Noah Harding, shortstop and recluse.

The guy known for avoiding the limelight, always taking the back door out of the restaurant, interviewing only when it's contractual. I'm not here for the fame; I'm here for the game.

**Miranda:** *Anyway, I was organizing the other cards earlier and I think I'm ready to negotiate.*

**Me:** *With just me, right?*

I have to make sure she isn't going to sell them out from under me, even though we kind of had a deal.

**Me:** *They're all in mint condition, too?*

**Miranda:** *Well, before you go and get ahead of yourself, I've been giving this some thought after our meeting today...*

The hair stands up on the back of my neck, instincts kicking in.

Is she having second thoughts? Because there is no need to negotiate with me, as I'm tempted to tell her. If my agent knew those thoughts were going through my head, he'd have a fucking stroke. Still, I don't tell her that;

nothing would prevent her from doubling her price, my balls in a sling.

Whatever it is she's not sure about, I have to get her to throw out a number. I try to get her back on track.

**Me:** *How many did you say there are in the collection you have?*

**Miranda:** *At least a dozen. They're not all from the same year, but quite a few of them are from that championship season the Steam had in '28.*

**Me:** *You don't happen to have a signed baseball lying around anywhere, do you? LOL. Kidding.*

**Me:** *But do you?*

**Miranda:** *LOL I don't think so, but if I find one when I'm going through his things, maybe, I'll keep you in mind.*

Maybe she'll keep me in mind?

**Me:** *I would shit myself if you did.*

**Miranda:** *Well that sounds...unappealing.*

**Me:** *Totally joking, obviously—the last time I shit myself I was still wearing diapers.*

Jesus H. Christ, did I really just say that? I put my head down on my desk and groan out loud.

**Me:** *Please forget I just said that.*

**Miranda:** *TOO LATE. LOL OMG—you're so much funnier in text than you are in person!*

At this rate, it's beginning to feel suspiciously like flirting and it's beginning to feel like no degree of negotiation on pricing is going to take place. I need those cards and I have to know what she wants for them—if only I could get her to say they're mine.

**Miranda:** *You don't joke around much, do you? You seem like the serious sort.*

**Me:** *What makes you say that?*

**Miranda:** *I don't know. You really didn't smile at all today. It was more of a...leer? LOL. Forgive me for saying so, but what the hell dude! You are too much.*

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I hesitate, pausing before typing my reply and hitting send.

**Me:** *You make it sound like a bad thing. Don't you think I'm sexy?!*

I hold my breath as those three little dots appear as she types. Then... disappear.

Reappear a few seconds later, and I hold my breath again—unable to

believe I actually fucking asked her if she found Wallace sexy. Sexy? Jesus, I never say that word, let alone use it in a private message.

**Miranda:** *No offense—I'm sure you're a great guy? You're just not my type.*

The bubbles appear again.

**Miranda:** *Like—at. All.*

**Miranda:** *Not that I don't appreciate you hitting on me today. I mean that is what you were doing right? Asking me if I wanted to snack on you?*

Wait. What?

WHAT?

Did she say hitting on me?

I fucking burn holes into that sentence, slack-jawed. Wallace HIT ON HER? And didn't say anything? That prick! I sit there, stunned, staring at the incoming messages, blushing like a fucking idiot, embarrassed all over again.

**Miranda:** *Since we're back on the subject, I should probably tell you that after our meeting today, I'm not quite sure I want to sell you the entire collection.*

My mind is reeling and not about the baseball cards.

What the hell did Buzz do during that exchange? WHAT THE FUCK DID HE DO?

The curiosity is going to kill me if I don't find out the details; he's clearly a lying asshole considering all he told me was she had a bad attitude.

Well no fucking wonder—he thought her attitude sucked because she rejected him.

What a dick.

I need to talk to her, hear her voice and...apologize. Grovel, even, for the sins of my friend. Get back in her good graces, so she'll reconsider selling me those cards.

*Way to fuck this up, Noah. If you'd gone to get the card yourself, this never would have happened.*

**Me:** *I don't know what to say about today except I wasn't myself. Please don't not sell me those cards because of my bad behavior.*

**Miranda:** *That's all fine and good for you to say after the fact, but you put me in an awkward situation today. What made you think I would be okay with you talking to me like that?*

God. I'm going to kill Wallace.

Wring his fucking neck with my bare hands.

**Me:** *Do you mind if we talk over the phone? I think it would be easier.*

More personal = easier to grovel, although she may be able to detect my voice isn't the same at Buzz's. Would that give me away? Would she even notice?

**Miranda:** *What are you going to do? Try to change my mind?*

**Me:** *Are you going to at least let me try?*

**Miranda:** *You really are a piece of work. (LOUD SIGH) Fine. You can call me, but you have to promise me no flirting or funny business—deal?*

Yeah, yeah, I got it. Whatever fun I was having with her died with the words *You're just not my type*. Also that part about me hitting on her, but mostly I'm distracted by the fact that Buzz killed this deal and I have to salvage it.

Me, the worst man for the job since I have no fucking clue how to speak to women.

Confusion muddles my brain and I mull all the facts over. Buzz Wallace, international playboy, isn't her type. If tall, dark, handsome, and rich isn't what she's looking for then—what is? It's hardly appropriate to ask; she's a complete stranger. We're conducting a business transaction, not matching on a dating app, for fuck's sake. Still, I want to know what kind of girl isn't attracted to a guy like Buzz Wallace. A guy who, in my mind, has everything.

*I am not jealous of Buzz Wallace.* She did not want him, not even for one night.

I would be jealous, though, if she were gushing all over him. Or if, God forbid, she'd taken him up on his offer to go out—or, in this case, to go down on him. Fucking Buzz. Where the hell was he raised? In a barn? Didn't his mother teach him any manners?

Wallace is exactly the kind of dude who gives student athletes a bad name. Spoiled. Good-looking. Cocky. We didn't go to the same college—he went to Florida State and I was on the East Coast—but we'd play a few games against each other each year, both entered the draft at the same time, both signed similar contracts.

My contract earns me more than his—10 million bucks more, to be exact—and I smirk, spine a bit straighter.

The weird thing is, Wallace isn't competitive when it comes to his friends. Shocking, I know, but he isn't bothered by the fact that his agent didn't get him more money. Isn't bothered by the fact that I have a bigger house. Doesn't hassle me about my truck.

He just wants to hang out.

It's fucking strange, a guy with his ego not trying to one-up everyone.

One bonus point for him.

My phone pings while I stand here overthinking things.

**Miranda:** *Hey, you still there? Are you calling or no? It's cool if you can't—I have work stuff to go do.*

My palms are sweaty and I wipe them off, almost nervously. Swipe a hand through my shaggy hair as if I'm about to take a video call.

I click through her contact until it begins ringing, chest thumping. *Crap*, I don't remember the last time I called a woman if you don't include my mom—and I don't.

*Don't pick up, don't pick up, don't pick up.*

She picks up.

"Hello?" The salutation is hesitant at best, despite the fact that she knew I was calling. "This is Miranda."

So businessy and professional.

"Hey. It's Noah." Even to my own ears, I sound unsure and insecure, and I groan.

"Noah?" Miranda hesitates again, baffled. "Noah *who*?"

Dammit, that's right—she thinks my name is Buzz, because that's what I told her to call me.

I roll my eyes at the absurdity of this entire situation: the texts, me sending someone else to get the card, him pretending to be me, her thinking he's scum, me apprehensively calling her to confess.

And I will.

Eventually...

"Uh, the guy who just bought your Hank Archer card?" Why do I sound so bloody nervous? I do press conferences in front of entire press corps, for Christ's sake—I can handle a phone call with a cute girl.

*You don't know she's cute, dipshit—you're just assuming she is because Wallace wouldn't hit on her if she wasn't, regardless of whether or not she was his type.* I've seen him in action, and I've seen him make plenty of passes at women who weren't attractive. He's never hit on anyone who wasn't, so Miranda must be pretty.

"Your name is Noah?"

"Yes." I'm smiling stupidly, now standing at my kitchen counter, clicking a solid gold fountain pen cap nervously. It has my initials engraved on it, a

gift from my agent when I signed my contract.

Click.

Click, click.

*Stop it, Noah—you're fidgeting.*

"Noah," she says again. "So much nicer than Buzz, or Baseman, even though it's weird that you have more than one nickname." She laughs, amused and delighted by this new information and I realize Buzz must have used my nickname instead of his. The list of his screwups just keeps getting longer and longer. "Aww, I love your name, Noah. Why do you introduce yourself with a nickname? Buzz and Baseman don't exactly roll off the tongue."

It doesn't, but Noah sure does roll off hers nice and pretty-sounding; I want to hear her say it again.

Why did Wallace have to go and tell her my nickname? Makes me look like a damn idiot. *This is the last time I send him to do my errands, I swear.*

"How did you get the name Baseman? It's odd." Her voice is soft and pleasant, exactly how I would have thought she'd sound. "Wait, don't tell me—it's because you go all the way on a first date?" She giggles before continuing. "You look like the type who has sex after knowing someone three minutes."

Just tell her that wasn't you.

Do it.

*Tell her.*

"I...uh." I clear my throat. "In high school I played baseball." And in college. *Oh, and by the way, I play for the Chicago Steam and am beloved by the entire nation.* "They call me Baseman because I could run the bases even if I hadn't hit a home run, I was that fast."

"Ahh, I see. That makes sense now. And here I thought it was because you were a total douche."

A douche.

Ouch.

She thinks *I'm* a douche because clearly *Wallace* was acting like one, but dang—for her to come right out and say it? I'm not sure how to respond to her sarcasm, to the disdain lacing her statement.

*Take a chill pill, bro. Her disdain isn't for you—it's for Buzz. She has no idea who you are.*

*Because you're lying to her.*

But—I’ve been down this road before. The road where baseball groupies find out who you are, where you live, and pretend to be someone they’re not so you’ll give them the time of day, so you’ll sleep with them. Maybe, if they’re lucky, they get knocked up and pregnant with your kid so you owe them fifteen grand a month or more and they never have to work again.

I connected with Miranda because of baseball cards; it’s not wrong for me to be overly cautious, even throwing my underly cautious buddy to the wolves.

In my mind, though? I have my reasons.

The last thing I need is some groupie meeting up with me, recognizing me, and posting about the encounter on the internet or selling the story to the tabloids: *Ballplayer shells out thousands for a collector’s card!* Or *Bachelor Chicago Steam shortstop will spend dough on ball cards but not on dates!*

The media has speculated on my sexuality since I signed with the Steam. I don’t need them knowing my spending habits too. Ironically, Miranda didn’t recognize Wallace on Wednesday, though he’s one of the most photographed athletes of our time.

Which means she must know absolutely nothing about sports because Wallace is as popular as an international celebrity. Teams want to sign him, men want to be him, women want to sink their claws into him.

“Noah? Are you there?”

“Sorry,” I finally say. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

Miranda laughs. “I called you a douche.” She laughs again, amused with herself, confidence radiating.

“Careful—you might hurt my feelings a little.”

Another laugh, the sound musical and sweet, but not at all playful. “No offense, but I doubt anyone could hurt your feelings. In fact, I have a feeling it would take more than little old me calling you a douche to bruise that giant, inflated ego of yours.”

She’s bashing Wallace again, holding nothing back—apparently not afraid to lose the sale of her baseball cards.

*Cheeky shit.*

“What makes you say I have an inflated ego?”

I dread anything she’s about to tell me.

This time when Miranda laughs, it’s not soft and sweet. This laugh is entirely different, sardonic almost, borderline manic. “Are you being serious right now? Are you trying to pretend you’re not the biggest narcissist in the

Northern Hemisphere?”

I listen as that laugh turns back into a giggle then a snort. It takes a good solid minute before she’s composed enough to say, “Listen, Noah—I’m sure you’re a really nice guy.” *She does not for one second think Buzz is a really nice guy.* “And I won’t lie and say I didn’t enjoy texting you before we met—because I did. I have, but today was just... It actually felt like you were two different people.”

“Two different people?”

“Yes. You’re so *nice* right now, being kind of cute, and you’re fun to chat with, but man—I don’t know what that was today. It just made me rethink the whole card collection. I know beggars can’t be choosers and there’s a chance someone else won’t buy the entirety, but I don’t know if my next buyer should be you.”

“Was I that bad?” I mean, come on.

Miranda inhales and lets out a frustrated breath. “I just thought it was rude how you offered to let me have my way with you, or give you a blowie—whatever you were pretending not to say like boys did in middle school. Come on—does that shit work on a grown woman?” She snorts again. “Because if we hadn’t been in the parking lot of the police station, I would have felt violated.”

“I’m sorry—could you repeat that?” *Did she just say I offered to let her have her way with me? Did she say blowie?* Goddammit, I’m so confused right now.

“You don’t remember?”

“I...”

Yes—I don’t remember! NO—I DIDN’T ACTUALLY EXPERIENCE IT. BECAUSE THAT WAS NOT ME.

“I—uh...” I fumble for a lie. “Forgot to take my meds.”

Andddd I just made it worse. I roll my eyes heavenward, each word leaving my mouth compounding the problem, making it a thousand times worse.

“You asked what I was doing later then asked if I wanted beer, wine—or a blowie. Or not, because then you denied it. Juvenile and immature.”

I’m officially embarrassed on Wallace’s behalf. I might not know shit about women, but I know enough not to say shit like that.

“I said *what?*” I shout it loud enough that the neighbors probably heard. “Jeez, he really actually did hit on you...” I mutter.

“Huh?” She pauses. “You’re not making any sense. Are you high? What medications are you on?”

None. Well, some, mostly for joint swelling, anti-inflammatories—those kinds of meds.

I groan into the phone, raking my fingers through the mop on my head, wishing I had a ball cap on. “Never mind. Let’s just talk about the rest of your cards.”

Miranda is quiet for a second. “You know what? Why don’t I just text you when I know what I want to do, okay? Plus, it’ll all be in writing. Yeah?”

This whole call has become a shitshow, leaving me no choice but to agree. “Sure.”

I don’t want to hear any more about her run-in with my friend. The pit in my stomach can’t get any tighter; the bile in my throat can’t get any more bitter.

“Great. Then I guess for now, just...you know. Wait to hear from me, ’kay?”

No, it’s not okay, but what the hell can I do about it? Nothing. “Sure, that works.”

“Super. Well...” Miranda clears her throat. “Have fun with the Hank Archer card. And again, I really, really appreciate the cash. Really.”

I am really, really going to kill. Buzz. Wallace.

Really.

**NOAH**

I'M WAITING in the kitchen when Wallace returns from his romp around my neighborhood, no doubt collecting phone numbers from all the desperate housewives. Some are married to professional athletes themselves, but they're bored and lonely and looking for uncomplicated sex. And attention.

I would know because during one of the few times I've jogged through the subdivision with Wallace beside me, I watched Carole Dubois—wife of linebacker Karl—cooly commandeer his phone and enter her number. Another time, I watched Suzanne Draper pat his ass and bite her lip—in front of her teenage daughter while they were walking, while I was standing right there.

Unfuckingbelievable.

The audacity.

It's one thing at a bar; it's another in broad daylight on a residential street.

I'm fuming when he walks in, my hands braced on the marble countertop, expression so contorted he stops in his tracks when he sees me, immediately pulling the headphones off his head.

“Dude, what's wrong?”

“You tell me.”

He looks around, at a disadvantage. “Help me out, bro—did something happen?”

“I just talked to Miranda—the girl you met today? For the card? Fuck you very much, Wallace—she doesn't want to sell me another one.” Well, she might, just maybe not the entire collection. Have to wait and see.

“What? Why?”

“Because, dude! You freaked her out! She hates me now.” Sure, I'm being a little overdramatic, but dramatic is how I'm feeling with no desire to

rein it in. My friend might have my back when it counts, but he sure did shit in my cereal bowl today. Took a big dump in it and didn't bother cleaning it up.

"Wait—are you saying she's butthurt because I put the moves on her?" His brows are raised, as if he's genuinely perplexed by the notion that a woman might possibly react in an adverse way.

Stereotypical spoiled jock.

"Put the moves on her?" I move, jerking open the fridge and staring inside. I'm not confrontational, but I want to punch him in his arrogant face, so instead, I stare at the glowing shelves of my Sub-Zero, seething. "Sounded more like you propositioned a hooker at a truck stop."

"Huh?" He has no idea what I'm talking about.

I slam the fridge shut, stalking back over to the counter, a caged tiger with nowhere to go.

"She told me you implied she could suck your cock."

Wallace doesn't even blink. "I might have made a joke about blowing, but it was just a joke."

"Who the fuck makes jokes about that to a stranger?" Oh, that's right—he does. "Well newsflash, fucker, she doesn't want to sell me the rest of her card collection because you creeped her out. She has morals, apparently, and doesn't want her grandfather's legacy belonging to a total pervert."

"Morals." He considers this, thinking hard. "Oh, you mean her moral compass won't let her sell you the cards based on principle, not because she doesn't still need the money."

What kind of idiot savant am I dealing with here? Christ almighty, this guy. While all other concepts seem foreign to him, he latches onto this one immediately.

"I get it. And I'm sorry—my bad." Funny thing is, he does genuinely look apologetic. "What are you going to do?"

"Uh, excuse me? What am *I* going to do?" My eyes bore holes into his skull. "Don't you mean what are *you* going to do? You got me into this mess—you get me out of it."

"Hey man, I was doing you a favor—you're the one who didn't want to go, which makes no fucking sense. If you want something done right, do it yourself. I'm not your errand boy."

He doesn't get it. He's a fucking god among mere mortals; they all fall at his feet. Everyone else disappears when Buzz Wallace waltzes into the room,

myself included.

“Please. If I can arrange it, will you just help me out one more time? If I can smooth it over and get her to sell me another card?”

I have the card I want, but now it’s a matter of principle—just like he said before—and I won’t let this rest until the entire collection is mine. Even if I have to beg. Even if...

“Fine, but then that’s it. Fight your own battles and stop being a pussy about it.” Buzz cocks his head and considers me. “Why didn’t you want to meet her to get the card, anyway? What’s the big deal?”

I’m not explaining it to him—he wouldn’t get it. I also don’t want to listen to him riding my ass or making fun of me, which he absolutely would do if I told him I didn’t want to meet Miranda because I was developing a weird, anonymous crush on her. I didn’t want to meet her because I didn’t want to feel the crushing blow of rejection.

All this over someone I haven’t met.

And now it’s likely I never will, because Wallace has to go finish the job he screwed up.

“It’s not a big deal, but she’s already met you and then I don’t have to explain.”

“Real mature, Harding. Women love being lied to.” He pauses. “*Not.*”

“Right. They just love being molested in parking lots instead.”

His hands go up defensively. “Hey, I didn’t touch her! It was just words—no harm, no foul.”

“The police station parking lot isn’t a nightclub, dipshit.”

He grabs an apple from the fruit bowl on my counter, bites, and chews. “Speaking of nightclubs, we’re going out on Saturday.”

“No we’re not.”

“Yeah we are. Davis from the Blues invested in that club downtown and he wants us to come see it, so we’re going.” He begins walking to the mudroom, exiting stage left.

Grant Davis is a linebacker for the Chicago Blues football team and a friend of ours. Young, hungry, and a great goddamn guy, he wouldn’t understand why I wasn’t at his club, especially if they’re all there celebrating.

*Baseman couldn’t come—he’s at home, jerking off alone* is what I imagine my other buddies would tell him.

Shit. Looks like I’m going out Saturday.

**Me:** *I KNOW YOU SAID YOU WOULD CONTACT ME, BUT I CANNOT STOP thinking about this situation and feel fucking terrible about it. I'm sorry I crossed a boundary.*

**Miranda:** *Apology accepted, I guess.*

**Miranda:** *Is this you trying to weasel your way back into my good graces so I don't sell the cards out from under you?*

**Me:** *Um. No? I'm not like that.*

**Miranda:** *SURE you're not.*

**Me:** *I'm being sincere. I really feel like a dick about Wednesday, but I can't do it over—all I can do is tell you it won't happen again.*

**Miranda:** *Won't happen again? So what you're saying is, we're going to meet and it will be nothing but business, the way it should have been to begin with?*

**Me:** *If you would reconsider selling me your collection, yes—I would be on my best behavior. You should even bring a friend.*

**Miranda:** *I don't need a bodyguard, but thanks.*

**Me:** *Please consider it. I'll give you whatever you want.*

**Miranda:** *I'm going to be honest here—I really do not want to sell them all to you, but maybe we could start with another one, JUST ONE MORE, and see how that goes. I need the money, but not to the point where I'm willing to sell my soul.*

**Me:** *I understand.*

**Miranda:** *Alright then. We have a deal to negotiate for one more card. Just. One.*

**MIRANDA**

GOOD LORD, the music at this club is pouring out into the street, so I know it's going to be eardrum shattering inside.

Rent.

That's the name of the place and the gold-plated plaque affixed to the building reads: *High rent district, high end liquor, high and mighty clientele. Must be 21 to enter & imbibe.*

Cheeky. Clever.

Everyone wants in.

The line is long, down the block, and I thank God it's not freezing outside—but even if it were, our group is lucky enough to slide inside right away. Gretchen's boyfriend has connections and I'm impressed: a sports marketing intern with the NFL team, he pulled a few strings to get our names on the list.

All six of us.

And just like that, we're in.

I wasn't in the mood for a dress like the ones my girlfriends are wearing and opted for jeans instead; I'm surprised the bouncer didn't raise an eyebrow when I slipped past him. Jeans are a no-no—it says so right on the sign next to the door guy—but I'd forgotten when I slid into mine.

*I can't believe he let me in!*

I mentally high five myself as we make our way through the throng; it can only be described as such, bodies everywhere. Hot, beautiful people. Standing by the bars, dancing under the strobing lights in the center of the huge room, congregating around the seating areas.

I run my fingers through my long hair, following closely behind Claire, who's behind Emily and Gretchen and her boyfriend, Peter. We're an attractive group, but so is everyone in the place. Apparently, we also have a

table reserved near the roped-off area.

No cover charge, no waiting, and a table?

Bonus points for Peter. Wow.

*This must be what it feels like to be famous.* Or to be friends with someone who is. Is this how Gretchen always rolls? I've really only seen her in yoga pants, when we go running in the park on weekends. She's mostly Claire's friend, but I'm trying to make her mine—one can never have too many.

She's a kind, pretty girl and I'm excited to have been invited tonight.

We slide into a black leather booth and I'm the only brunette happily sardined between Emily and Claire.

"What does everyone want?" Peter shouts to the table while my eyes gape at the action in front of me. Sexy servers in black pencil skirts or black slacks and pressed white button-down shirts. Sequins. Diamonds. Luxury handbags that cost more than Noah paid for that Hank Archer baseball card.

I try not to stare, but it's hard—it's as if I've never been let out of the house before and I'm just seeing this shit for the first time, though Lord knows I see it all the time.

Just not in one place. And not in a place like this.

It's sleek and sophisticated—the opposite of me.

I squirm.

"Miranda? Drink?" Emily is nudging me in the ribs. "Peter has a bottle coming, but was there something else you wanted?"

Besides champagne? I'm not going to be the asshole who orders a \$25 drink on someone else's tab. I will drink what is placed in front of me and I'll like it.

Unless it's roofied, ha.

"Gosh, champagne is great! Thank you!"

If I want something else, I'll get it myself, at the bar, so there isn't an argument at the table—which is the kind of shit that always happens when we're in a group.

Gazing around the room, my eyes keep straying to that bar. It's surrounded by some of the largest men I've ever seen, each and every one of them dressed to the nines; I can see glistening cuff links from here. Diamond stud earrings. Gold-encrusted watches. Highball glasses filled with spirits, not cheap booze.

This is not a place that serves beer.

I squirm some more, eyes moving, never stopping.

Tall.

Dark.

Hot.

“Oh god,” I say on a heavy exhalation, dread lacing the two words.

Claire actually hears me over the noise, leaning in to ask, “Oh god, what?”

“There’s that douche from the other day.”

“Where? What douche?” Now Emily is listening, boobs pressed against my upper arm as she tries to hear the conversation.

I give her the background scoop, bringing her up to speed. “So when my grandpa died, he left me this valuable baseball card collection.”

“*Super* valuable.” Claire nods.

I roll my eyes. I love her to death, but she’s an *interrupter*. “He left me his card collection from the late 1920’s and early 1930’s and I’ve been selling them off, one by one.”

Claire interrupts again. “To start her own business.”

“I had this guy interested in one of them and I met him on Wednesday, not realizing he was a megadouche.” I pause, looking up at Noah. “He’s standing by the bar.”

Both girls crane their necks, eyes sparkling as they try to identify the megadouche.

“Which one?”

The gorgeous one in the dark navy shirt, fabric straining around his arms, threatening to bust open Incredible Hulk style. He’s laughing at something someone is saying, the silver watch on his wrist winking in my direction.

“The one—shoot, they all look the same, don’t they?”

Big. Brawny. Masculine.

The entire club suddenly reeks of testosterone.

Why does he have to be here? What if he sees me? Would he even recognize me? I look pretty good tonight as opposed to the athleisurewear I had on Wednesday.

“Let’s go over there.” Emily pokes me. “Please, please.”

Emily is single too, so I don’t blame her in the least; it’s not often men like this fall in our laps along with a legitimate excuse to approach them. Not walking over there, giving her a chance to introduce herself and flirt basically goes against girl code. It would be mean and wrong.

Ugh. Fuck my life!

“But he’s such a dick,” I argue, whining, but just for show, knowing I’m about to drag both our sorry asses over to the bar. Pretend to bump into him, say hello—then introduce Emily.

She makes a pouty face at me and I roll my eyes. “Emily, I’m wearing jeans.”

By the looks of it, I’m the only one.

“*That* guy there is wearing jeans.” She’s pointing to a man standing next to Noah. He’s a giant too, from what I can see in the dim lights. Blond. “Also, who cares? They let you in. You look fantastic—stop stalling.” She reaches over and pulls away a strand of hair stuck to the gloss on my lips. “Okay, now scoot your ass over—we’re going over by those *fine-ass* men.”

We scoot out.

We stand. Both girls fuss with their clothes, pulling at the hems of their short dresses, and I find myself fidgeting too, futzing with the gold loop on my belt. My off-the-shoulder blouse is fussy enough so I don’t stand out like a sore thumb, not too casual, not too dressy—though in here? The latter is not even possible.

My top is hot pink and tucked into a pair of high-waisted jeans, a leopard belt woven through the loops. Black platform wedges no one can see add four inches to my height. Large, gold hoop earrings dangle from my ears, round and shiny and new. They were a graduation gift from my Aunt Caroline. I hook a finger through one—anxious—as the girls shove me toward the bar. It’s not that Noah makes me nervous; it’s the whole sidling up to an entire group of men that does.

They’re busy; I think it’s rude to interrupt, like so many other people seem to be doing. Every few seconds, men and women approach, intruding into their conversations, and I think it’s super impolite.

And yet...here we are.

Noah is ten feet away and hasn’t spotted me; then again, why would he? It’s freaking dark in this place, the only lighting for atmosphere, even the lights on the dance floor are dimmed. Above the bar, navy blue bulbs glow, the ceiling surrounding them covered in mirrors.

Sleek.

Urbane.

One thumb hooked into the waistband of my jeans, I feel my palms getting sweaty, anxious butterflies awakening in the pit of my stomach, wings

spreading and kicking every organ in my body. Ugh. I hate this.

*Take one for the team.*

*This is for the girls, this is for the girls, this is...*

Shit. He's noticed me now, though I can't tell if he actually recognizes me, giving me a once-over then dismissing me.

Shit. It's the jeans—I knew it!

We sidle up in a clump, Emily knocking into the back of me clumsily and I want to spin around and demand more space, but not with this pack of men gazing at us like we're a flock of wild geese about to shit on their front lawns.

*Get it together Miranda—they're staring.*

"Hey Noah. Hi." I give him a tiny wave. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Do I know you?" He looks down at me, a placating smile pasted on his face, teeth bright white under the blue lights above. "Did I fuck you?"

The guys nearby laugh, as if he's just said something hilarious.

"You couldn't even get me to blow you," I counter. "There's no way you could get me to fuck you."

Shock.

Complete and utter shock on the faces of each and every one of them until the stunned silence is broken by one laugh. Then another.

Until they're all choking and slapping him on the back.

"Dang, Wallace, she told you!"

Noah Wallace.

Huh.

"Anyway, I saw you from over there"—I turn and point to the booth where our friends still sit—"and thought I'd pop over to say hello."

"Buzz, aren't you going to introduce us to your little friend?" A giant black dude wearing a pinstripe suit pushes his hand in my direction. "Hi, I'm Leo."

I take it and shake, letting him pump my delicate palm up and down a few times before taking it back. "I'm Miranda, your buddy and I here aren't really friends—more like business acquaintances."

"Guys, this is..." He cocks his head. "What did you say your name was?"

Oh my god, seriously? "Miranda." I roll my eyes, because that's the only appropriate thing to do. "I sold you that baseball card?"

"Buzz, buddy, I don't think she likes you very much."

Not at all and less and less by the second.

Wait—did he just call him Buzz?

Wallace. Baseman. Noah. Buzz. My head is spinning. How many nicknames does this guy have?

Men, I swear...

“The baseball card?” He thinks hard for a second, probably hurting his brain. “The card.” Then, his eyes light up as recognition dawns on him. “Oh, the *cardddd*.” His keen eyes give me another once over, this time more appreciative. “You looked frumpier Wednesday.”

“Gee, thanks.” I feel an elbow jam into my back. “Oh! Guys, these are my friends.” I turn a bit, so Emily and Claire can weasel their way through for introductions. “Emily and Claire, this is the guy I was telling you about.”

My friends, bless their little hearts, stumble over their words as the guys begin flirting, the big guy, Leo, taking an instant liking to Claire—I can see interest in his eyes.

“Hey Miranda, this is my buddy, N—uh, my friend.” Noah has his hand on the back of the tall blond guy I caught sight of when we were still at the booth, giving him a gentle push forward, the way my friends did with me. Nudging unhelpfully.

Our eyes connect and I’m able to get a good, long look at him, in much better light.

He is Noah’s polar opposite in almost every way.

Where Noah is dark, this guy is light.

Where Noah is bulky and buff, this guy is toned but doesn’t look like a bodybuilder. Not as hot, but not many of them are. Comparing them would be like juxtaposing an apple and a cucumber—they’re not even remotely similar.

He’s tall and dirty blond with a nose fit only for a Roman god. Wide shoulders. Shaggy hair that keeps falling in his eyes. Wide, unsmiling mouth.

He avoids my curious gaze, looking over my head, eyes shifting to the dance floor.

My shoulders slouch; another conceited asshole who thinks his shit smells like roses.

Well, I have news for this guy: I am *not* going to fawn all over him like Emily and Claire are doing next to me, giggling and batting their eyelash extensions as if their lives depend on it—so if that’s what he’s expecting, he’s about to be real disappointed.

“Bro.” Noah shoulder bumps him. “Don’t be rude—say hi. To Miranda.”

He looks down at me and those butterflies in my stomach dance.

It's dimly intimate inside Rent, but I swear, I can see the guy's face blanch at the sound of my name, throat constricting as he swallows.

I offer my hand like I'm in a damn business meeting, cool, collected, and unaffected by his stature.

"Good to meet you." I am nothing if not polite, though this whole situation is killing me softly.

Noah's buddy doesn't take my hand; rather, he shoves his inside the pockets of his dark jeans. They're denim, but clearly expensive given the cut and the sheen visible in the lights.

Jeans. Navy dress shirt, top two buttons undone. Belt with the gold logo of an Italian luxury brand.

Well la-di-da, Mister *I'm too good for you* fancy pants.

"Sorry to bother you," I sass, rejected and embarrassed. "We can't all be supermodels here to kiss your ass."

*Oh my god, Miranda, what has come over you? Down girl. Down.*

Chin tilting up, my smile is forced and wane, the lump in my throat making it impossible to say anything more. I knew coming over here was a shitty idea—except for Emily and Claire, who are beaming and flirting and happy.

Crap, I can't drag them back to the table; they'd kill me.

Even so, I am done giving these jerks the time of day.

"Claire." I tap on her shoulder, gesturing. "I'm getting a drink at the bar. Keep an eye on me—don't let me get trafficked. I'll be right there." I shrug my way past Noah, his giant friends and my regular-sized ones, inching up to the bar, leaning in.

I wait.

And wait.

*And wait* for one of the four freaking bartenders to notice me, or give me the time of day, or do their damn job!

Not a one of them comes to ask for my drink order. I grow more agitated by the second, this feeling of being overlooked the entire night wearing on me, assaulting my self-confidence in a way it never has before.

I'm cute, goddammit! What the hell is everyone's problem?

*Goddamn these jeans.*

*Curse you.*

## NOAH

“DUDE, what the fuck is your problem?” Wallace ambushes me the second Miranda strays to the bar, her feelings obviously hurt, his drunken eyes wide.

“I don’t have a problem.”

“Why the hell were you so rude? Why didn’t you fucking say anything or introduce yourself—you looked like a prick.”

“She thinks you’re me, so what’s the point?”

He throws his arm up, pointing to her back as she stands alone, patiently waiting for the service that probably won’t come. She’s simply not important enough to rush for and she’s dressed like a goddamn school teacher in that cute, peasanty shirt and blue jeans.

Jeans. In a nightclub.

I snort.

She’s a sassy one, clearly not giving a crap what anyone thinks. Or she didn’t realize how dressy this place is.

It’s one thing for me not to care—I’m not here to pick anyone up, not here to fuck anyone for the night. I’m also not here because I want to be. I was dragged here and by the looks of it, she was, too.

*You should go back to your booth in the corner, little girl.*

No one is helping her at the bar, but I turn my attention back to Wallace, who will not get out of my face.

Annoying fucker.

“What the hell do you expect me to do, tell her in the middle of the damn nightclub that I lied?” My arms cross defensively. “I don’t think so.”

“At least go talk to her—you were a total ass.”

“You’re always an ass. What’s your point?”

“She’s cute and until you gave her the green weenie, she was flirting with you.”

Flirting with me? “Are you out of your fucking mind? She was being polite. End of story, case closed.”

“You’re as high as I am drunk—she was making eyes at you, idiot.”

“Stop. This isn’t a middle school dance, so kindly climb out of my asshole.”

“You’re so blind.” He shoves me. “Go over there.”

I slap his hand away. “Drop it, would you?”

Now I do feel like we’re in middle school, arguing on the side of the fucking gymnasium about which girls we’re going to ask to slow dance.

He shoves me again, big paws pressed in the center of my chest. “Go over there.”

“Get off me, Wallace.”

“Git.”

“Stop!” I’m whining like a fucking pussy, slapping at his hands while he drunkenly pushes me closer and closer to the bar where Miranda is standing and I groan when my shoulder bumps into hers.

“Shit. I’m so sorry.” The apology rolls off my tongue. “He’s drunk and being an ass.”

Her eyes wander to Buzz, the big oaf hightailing it back to the group of our buddies, laughing like a moron. Her lips part. They’re glossy and plump. Smiling. “Him? Being an ass? Shocking.”

I have no idea what to say.

The music is loud, the song awkwardly romantic, and neither of us speaks for a long moment, Miranda’s hip pressed against the bar top.

I press forward, resting my elbow on the polished wood, shirt sleeve rolled to my elbow. Put out my forefinger to signal that I want some goddamn service.

Immediately, a bartender flies over, setting a napkin down in front of me. I lift two fingers and she sets another napkin beside it.

“What would you like?” I ask the nymph standing next to me.

“I was just going to get a mojito.” Her long, silky hair gets brushed behind her ear. “I’m not really much of a drinker,” is her excuse for the fluffy drink.

“One mojito, and one vodka tonic, heavy ice, three olives.”

“You got it Mr. Harding.”

Mr. Harding.

Miranda doesn't catch my last name and even if she had, she would have no way to associate it with Noah.

Me.

She crosses her arms and scowls. "This is so unfair! I was standing there for at least five minutes and not one of them looked at me."

She has no idea who I am—and I'm not talking about the fact that I am Noah.

She has no idea I am famous.

She has no idea that around here, in this town?

We are gods among men.

Leo, Davis, Buzz, and the others? Heroes.

Tripp Wallace, Buzz's brother, is here, too. Tripp plays for the Chicago Blues, the professional football team, another local—and national—star.

So, of course, the fucking bartenders are going to zoom in my direction to help me—they recognize me, as does everyone here. They want to be seen with the men who are going to take their team to the goddamn national championship.

Her? Not so much.

"This place is full of small dicks, bartending staff included." I can feel the smirk on my face as I insult every person in the club.

"Yourself included?"

"No. I'm only here because I was forced out of the house. This isn't my scene." I take the drink in front of me—the one Tiffany the bartender just set down—and sip while Miranda assesses me.

"What is your usual scene?" She takes a drink of her mojito, watching me over the brim of the glass, her eyes wide and sober.

"Home. The backyard. I jog a lot." Work out a lot, too, because I have to, and practice—obviously.

"What's so great about your backyard? Mine is all public access—there are people everywhere. Does your apartment have a community center?"

Uh, no.

It makes sense that she would assume I live in an apartment since we're in Chicago and most everyone does, especially the people our age. Little does she know I'm outside of town, in a gated community, in a 4 million dollar house. By myself.

At 24 years old.

She would shit herself.

But also...

Maybe she wouldn't give a crap, which I have a feeling would be the case. She knows Wallace is wealthy, knows he's good-looking, and she still wants nothing to do with him.

"You're doing it again," she tells me, nudging me with her elbow, and I look down, into her empty mojito glass. Dang, she must have downed the entire thing while I was daydreaming.

She must be tipsy, feeling the buzz, if she's teasing me.

"Doing what?"

"Spacing out." Her smile is restrained. "I know I'm not that exciting—please do not feel like you have to stand here and keep me company."

Guilt slams me in the stomach, a tight fist to the gut. Is that what she thinks? That she's boring me?

Hardly.

"Sorry, I had a..." I search for an excuse. "It's been a crazy week."

"Right," she deadpans. "Like I said, don't let me keep you." She pauses and looks over the bar top. "But would you do me one favor before you go? Can you order me another drink? They'll leave me standing here all night and I don't want to be empty-handed—it feels weird."

That's hardly a favor.

My hand goes out, finger up.

Tiffany is back in a flash; I hand her Miranda's empty glass. "Mojito?"

I nod.

"Wow. That is unreal." Miranda shakes her head—in disgust? Contempt? Disbelief? It's difficult to tell under these lights, which have turned everyone a slight shade of blue. On her, it's flattering, and I wonder what color her top actually is. "You just snap your pretty little fingers and she comes running over. Must be nice."

It is nice, actually, but let's focus on the word pretty. My *pretty* little fingers? Does she actually mean my hands or is she indirectly referencing my face?

I know I'm not much to look at, but she doesn't have to be a bitch about it.

"I don't understand. Why is it so easy for y'all to get service when I'm just standing here like a shit in someone's punch bowl?" she muses, tapping her hand on the bar.

“Did you just call yourself a shit in a punch bowl?”

Her hand flies to her mouth, embarrassed. “Did I say that? Oh my god, I am so sorry.”

I shake my head. “Don’t be—it’s just not something I’ve heard a woman say before.” I’ve only heard it from men, usually when they have to take an actual shit. “Are you from the south? Y’all just rolls right off your tongue.”

“No, I just love that word and I love the south.” Her mojito arrives and she takes a sip of it before bowing her head. Unsnaps her purse and pulls out a \$20. “Here, this is for the drinks. I appreciate it.”

A few things are wrong with this scenario.

1. \$20 isn’t enough to cover her two drinks, but far be it from me to say so. I don’t want to embarrass her further. \$30 is more like it—even \$40 with the tip.
2. I’ve never had a woman pull money out of her purse to pay me before.
3. She’s expecting me to take it and I anticipate an argument—one I am not ready to have.

I hold my hand out and up in protest, pushing against the money in her hand.

“Keep it.”

“No really.” She flaps it in the air. “I insist.”

As I figured she would, a girl like Miranda is full of principles and ethics. Clearly she is not at this bar to find herself a sugar daddy.

“My treat,” I counter. “Unless you want me to leave it on the bar as a tip.” I have a tab open and all the bartenders know we’ll tip very generously so this is an empty threat, but Miranda doesn’t know that.

“What! Hell no—she didn’t give me the time of day!” The bill gets snatched back, shoved into her little black and gold purse. “I’m sorry, but no.”

I laugh, deep within my chest, and Miranda halts what she’s doing to watch, eyes going wide. Staring like I’ve sprouted a second head, and now I feel like I have, self-conscious and uncomfortable.

Immediately, I stop. “What?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head in the way girls do when ‘Nothing’ means something. Bites down on her lower lip, smiling as she takes another

dainty sip from her mojito, the alcohol probably muddling her brain.

*She must be drunk; it feels like she's flirting.*

She cannot be drunk—she's only had one!

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Really, I want to know. Girls don't give me these looks, not even when they're at my house, or in my bed, or spending my money.

“What look? I'm just looking—it's not a crime.” She tilts her head just then, studying me. “How are you all so tall?”

“Who?”

“You and your friends. It's like a giant convention.” Another shake of the head. “It's so weird.”

I want to laugh. Want to tell her she's adorable, and cute and funny, but instead, I drink from my cocktail to occupy myself. It goes down strong, the bartender having added too much vodka and not enough soda, and despite my size, it hits me in the head.

I lean against the bar, mimicking Miranda's stance, settling in for a conversation, content to have the rest of the group—and the servers—ignoring us for now. I'm going to enjoy the anonymity, my drink, and this pretty girl for as long as it lasts.

“Weren't you going to go back to your friends?” She toys with a mint leaf sticking out of her glass, swirling it around.

“I never said I wanted to go over there—you did.”

She looks bashful, and I can't see it, but I know she's shuffling her feet. “I just assumed.”

“Why?”

Miranda is beautiful and sassy, so riddle me this: why the fuck would I go back to my dipshit buddies when I could stand here in the dark and hide away with her?

“Because?” As if that explains everything.

I wait for more of a reply, casually keeping my lips shut, knowing she'll elaborate if I don't prod her.

I'm right.

“Because look at me! And look at them! I'm in jeans!”

A snort escapes my nose, then a laugh. “So? I'm wearing jeans.”

“Okay, well, look around you: all the women in here are wearing dresses—tight, sexy dresses—and I'm in this thing.” She pulls at the fabric of her blouse, and I catch a glimpse of cleavage that's been hidden until now. Is she

even wearing a bra? She must be, otherwise they wouldn't be sitting so far up on her chest, right? Shit, what do I know about tits? I've only seen a few pair, most of them too round and fake.

Eighties implants I call them.

"Are you staring at my boobs?"

Staring? "No."

Checking them out? Yes. 100%.

"But you did look."

Shit, she really must be getting drunk, her filter slowly slipping.

"Looking is not staring." I feel the need to clarify this point. Feel like I'm in middle school again, wanking it in my bedroom and almost getting caught by my mother because she always refused to knock.

You do not walk into a boy's bedroom when they're a teenager—you're only in for a rude awakening if you do. Mom did not get the memo and I lived in fear every time I jerked it, sometimes in the closet.

When all my buddies were getting laid by girls from our grade, I was masturbating in the walk-in closet at home. Or in the shower. Or in the dark, in bed.

But I digress...

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. I must be getting buzzed from this mojito—I don't usually drink."

"Neither do I." Which is true. I don't. One, I've never liked the taste of it, and two, as an athlete, it's just bad for my body. I spend countless hours eating healthy and exercising. I don't want to counteract all that by drinking my calories. "This is the only one I've had tonight." And then I'll switch to water.

We have a scrimmage this week and I'll be feeling this one drink in my system for days. No doubt tomorrow morning I'll have a headache.

"So..." Her voice trails off, eyes wandering around the room before settling back on me. My chest. Hair.

Nose.

Fuck, my nose.

I resist the urge to cover it with my hand, sniffing instead. Nostrils flare.

She pulls her eyes away, thank God. "You're all friends?"

I nod. "Friends and..." *Let's see, how do I put this?* "Co-workers."

"Dang, what kind of job do you have where everyone is over six feet tall and made of steel? Are you all gym rats?"

“Something like that.”

She emits a *humph*. “Figures.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” I lean in so she has to repeat her snarky comment, stereotyping us as meatheads. Not having a single clue we’re professionals, earning money that would make her pretty head spin. “You’re mumbling.”

“I’m not mumbling. I said what I said.” She’s defiant, getting a bit tipsier, and sounds like a meme on the internet. “Wow, I’m being a brat. Please ignore me—I’m not usually like this.”

Not usually like this?

What a liar. Miranda is a complete sass pants. I can see it in her eyes, along with something else: mischief and sparkle. Interest.

*Interest, Noah? In you? Please get your head out of your ass. This girl is not interested in you.*

But she’s not interested in Wallace or Leo, or anyone else, either. So what is her type if it’s not tall, rich, and handsome?

“You have a terrible habit of gazing off into space. Do you know that?”

“I do?”

“Yes. One second we’re talking and the next you’re off in another world, overthinking things.”

I twist my mouth. “How do you know I’m overthinking things, let alone thinking about anything? We’re in a bar—it’s loud, and crowded. I can’t hear you, can’t hear my own thoughts.”

“Whatever. I can tell by the way your forehead gets all wrinkled, even though it’s covered by all this hair.”

She reaches up then to brush it out of the way, and I grab her wrist to stop her.

*Please don’t touch me.*

It’s been so long my entire body vibrates from the heat of her skin beneath my hand, and I quickly drop it. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Whoa, what was *that*?” Her face changes then, expression softening. Worried, then concerned. “I wasn’t going to hit you.”

“I know what you were going to do. That’s not why I…” I feel like such an idiot, heat rising to my face. “Knee-jerk reaction, that’s all.”

I can’t say, *I have PTSD from all the balls flying toward my face on a regular basis.* ’Cause that wouldn’t sound weird at all.

“Well, I’m still sorry. I shouldn’t get in your personal space. It’s

something I'm working on." She smiles up at me, white teeth shining in the dim light. "I'm overly affectionate."

I clearly am *not*.

Miranda rambles on. "I'm a hugger. I think it's going to be an issue when I run my own business—I don't need anyone reporting me to HR because I grabbed them for a bear hug." She giggles into her glass. "I think it's because my parents weren't really huggers. I don't remember them even touching each other very often. Weird, right?"

Jesus, are we suddenly having a therapy session?

I shift on my heels, uneasy. "Right."

"You could probably use a hug."

Uh. What?

"I'm good, but thanks." Vigorously, I shake my head.

"Aww, the big teddy bear needs a hug." She says it in that way only girls can, almost as if she's cooing to a baby.

Yeah, she's drunk. "Trust me, I don't."

"Come here." Her arms open and I stare down at her tiny, hot little body. The boobs beneath her blouse. The tight, high-waisted jeans. The tips of her toes peeking out from whatever heels she's got on.

No. I do not want her to hug me.

I do not want that body pressed against mine.

I do not—

She grabs me before I can stop her. Tits and pelvis and everything else pressed against me, this virtual stranger, the top of her head tucked under my chin.

Her arms are around me and I feel her hands brushing my spine, then along my latissimus dorsi, as if she's feeling me up, but not brave enough to go all in. 'Cause that would be strange, right?

I'm ramrod straight, fighting so fucking hard not to sniff her hair but failing; it smells like hairspray and shampoo—the fruity kind, not the fussy kind, and as I inhale it, my body relaxes.

"You can put your arms around me, you know," she suggests, settling in.

*She is only hugging you because she is drunk, Noah.*

I have to keep reminding myself, but it's hard. I want to believe this is chemistry, but since I'm not a damn idiot, I know better. Miranda is drunkish and it's making her act loopy, and that's fine.

I guess.

“I don’t want to wrap my arms around you. I don’t even know you.”

“Just do it. Stop being so grouchy.”

Grouchy? No one has ever called me that.

Slowly, I raise my arms. My hands slide around Miranda’s small waist. Brushing the silky fabric of her shirt, I’m not quite sure where to put them. I’ve touched women before, but usually only during sex, and that’s mechanical with no feeling involved.

This? This is making my heart palpitate, and if it was before a game, I’d have my vitals checked by the team physician.

Miranda settles into my body deeper, burrowing almost. I’m not sure she’s aware she’s even doing it, or if she doesn’t care, or if I’m just that cozy as a cuddle buddy.

Her soft voice manages to reach my ears. “You feel good.”

And with that, I pull away, the cold air rushing between our bodies like a bucket of ice water I need to break this spell of stupidity.

“There. Don’t you feel better?”

No, I don’t feel better; this just made everything a helluva lot worse.

“You want anything else to drink?” I ask. “Because I think I’m going to bounce.”

“Leave? We just got here.” A hand touches my forearm and I can’t not look down at it resting there, singeing my skin. “Don’t leave me to the wolves—I’ll never survive.”

*Then stop touching me and stop flirting with me and stop making me feel...*

*...like I’d stand a chance if I gave enough fucks to try.*

*You can’t live like a monk for the rest of your life, dipshit. You want kids and a family—how do you suppose you’re going to do that if you don’t take a chance?*

Easy—by letting the opportunity to flirt pass me by.

“You haven’t even told me your name.”

That’s right. She has no idea who I am. Has no idea that the \$20 bill in her purse and the \$25,000 in her bank account came from *me*.

Me. Not goddamn Buzz Wallace.

“You don’t have to know my name.”

Her mouth opens, shocked. Hurt? Speechless. “Oh.”

*Oh.*

That one little word makes me feel like the world’s biggest...douche. A

bigger douche than I've seen any of my friends be.

Her shoulders sag, the entire mood spoiled. Miranda inhales a breath before squaring herself upright, back straight. Fake smile pasted on her face.

"Wow. Okay." Her lips are still glossy, shining beneath the lights, and if rejection had a look, her face would be on the poster. "Get home safe, I guess."

I nod.

Shoulder my way through the crowd, leaving the way I came.

I'll tell Buzz to settle up my tab for me. I just have to get out of here.

**MIRANDA:** *NOAH, ARE YOU UP?*

**Me:** *I am now. What's up?*

**Miranda:** *This is going to sound crazy, but—I was wondering if...*

**Miranda:** *You know what, never mind.*

**Me:** *What?*

**Miranda:** *Nothing. I feel stupid now. Go back to sleep.*

**Me:** *That isn't going to happen until you tell me what's up. Is everything okay?*

**Miranda:** *Yes, I was just...*

**Miranda:** *This is going to sound so dumb, but I was wondering about your friend. The one from tonight?*

**Me:** *Which one?*

**Miranda:** *The tall blond. I was talking to him by the bar.*

**Me:** *What about him?*

**Miranda:** *He left abruptly—was everything okay?*

**Me:** *Uh, yeah? I mean, it's nice that you're asking, but why do you care?*

**Miranda:** *I hugged him and he took off, so now I feel like I violated him.*

**Me:** *LOL*

**Miranda:** *Shut up! It's not funny!*

**Me:** *It kind of is. Who runs away when a beautiful girl hugs them? LOL*

**Miranda:** *Well see, I've been wondering about that.*

**Me:** *And what have you decided?*

**Miranda:** *I think he liked it, but it freaked him out.*

**Me:** *And why would it do that?*

**Miranda:** *Listen, I don't really want to get into it with you. I just wanted to make sure he's okay.*

**Me:** *He's fine and I'll tell him you were asking.*

**Miranda:** *OH MY GOD, PLEASE DO NOT.*

**Me:** *LOL why?*

**Miranda:** *I don't need him to know I...*

**Me:** *...?*

**Miranda:** *Nothing.*

**Me:** *Tell me.*

**Miranda:** *I'll talk to you soon, okay? We'll figure out a time and place to meet for that second card, yeah?*

**Me:** *Sure—ball is in your court.*

**Miranda:** *Good night, Noah.*

**Me:** *Good night, Miranda.*

**NOAH**

*WHY WAS MIRANDA TEXTING 'NOAH' about me?*

I can't get it out of my mind. Not Saturday night—couldn't sleep. Not the next day, or the next.

Not today, at batting practice, and not as I stand here, fielding balls in the infield. An assistant coach slowly hits a grounder in my direction; it rolls straight through my legs. I hear him groan from where he stands on home plate, one hand in a catcher's mitt.

"Harding, what the fuck?" I can hear him spitting tobacco out the side of his mouth; that's how pissed he is. "A toddler could have stopped that ball with his eyes closed."

Coach's arms go up then come down, slapping at his meaty thighs, face getting redder with each grounder I miss.

"Eight. Zero." He points at me, fist shaking. "Start fucking earning it, kid."

*Way to shame me in front of the entire infield, fucker.*

I pull the cap from my head, running a hand over my perspiring forehead and through my hair. My face is beginning to match Coach's burgundy jacket.

*Get your head in the game. The season opener is three weeks away—you do not have time to suck.* Per my contract, if I biff it in practice, they can bench me—and if they bench me, I lose a few million bucks, and my contract could get cut short.

Still, I can't stop Miranda's words from running on a loop through my goddamn head: *I think he liked it, but it freaked him out. Freaked him out, freaked him out.*

Yeah. I did like when she wrapped her lithe body around mine for a hug.

And yes, it freaked me out, too.

But damn, she didn't need to go and psychoanalyze that shit. The timing of her crawling into my headspace and setting up camp there is awful.

Thank God she's not actually texting Wallace; thank God it was me on the receiving end.

"Heads up!" a voice shouts, and instinctively, I raise my glove toward the fly ball. It lands in the center of my mitt with a satisfying pop and immediately gets released again—to the first baseman.

"Nice," Coach praises because I finally did something right this morning.

Somewhere near the dugout, when another member of the coaching staff announces a 15 minute break, gloves around the field start coming off. Bowing my head, I begin the leisurely stroll toward the locker rooms, a water bottle appearing out of nowhere from one of the assistants, placed in my waiting hand.

I squirt a steady stream into my mouth, wiping the dribble hitting my chin with the hem of my blue team t-shirt.

"Earth to Harding." A hand gets waved in my face while I chug, not realizing until now how thirsty I was. Am. "Yo, Baseman."

My eyes snap up; three of my teammates are watching me inquisitively, and it's then I realize I'm not walking toward the locker rooms at all—I'm walking toward the opposing team's dugout.

*Jeez. Get your head on straight, Harding.*

"What's your problem, bro? You've been acting weird all day." Jose Espinoza, a teammate who happened to be at Rent with us Saturday, follows me until we reach the locker room, follows me all the way to my locker. He wants information and he's not alone.

They all fucking followed me like a bunch of teenage girls wanting to gossip! The actual fuck?

I make a show of retying my shoe then yanking a towel from the rack above the open hooks. Drape it over my shoulders and drag it through my perspiring hair, wanting to cover my entire damn head. Then I wouldn't have to stare into their annoying faces.

"I'm just a little distracted—since when is that a crime?"

"Since someone could get hurt, because gee, I don't know—balls are flying toward our faces and dicks at 90 miles an hour?"

"Oh good point, Wallace." Jose raises a dark eyebrow. "Does your bitchy attitude have anything to do with that groupie hanging all over you the other

night?”

I raise my eyes. “What groupie?”

I don’t remember speaking to a single gold digger, cleat chaser, or Steam groupie at the club.

“The one we saw rubbing her tits all over you—how fucking weird was that?”

Rubbing her tits all over me?

Are they talking about *Miranda* hugging me?

“Wait—are you saying you thought a groupie was molesting me and you did nothing to stop her? Fuck you very much, assholes.”

“We’re not babysitters, you prick,” someone shouts.

Espinoza laughs. “We didn’t have to—you peeled her off and fled the scene, as per fucking usual.”

Is that what they thought? I had to peel her off and escape? This just gets worse.

“That was Miranda. We’re acquainted.”

“Acquainted? Is that the term kids are using these days for ‘casually fucking’?”

“No, Jesus. I bought some stuff from her and when she saw me out at the club, she came to say hi. You literally met her—what the fuck? Wallace introduced her.”

“Barely.”

Bam Blackburn removes the towel from my head and scratches his balls, propping a leg up on the locker room bench. So glad he’s not naked. “Wait... I might have been drinking, but I distinctly remember her calling him Noah.” He looks between Buzz Wallace and me, confused. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Buzz is at his locker reapplying deodorant, turning toward the conversation. “Baseman, you gonna explain?”

No.

Except, I’m going to have to, because someone else chimes in with a curious “So what’s the deal with that?”

“There is no deal.”

“Dude, would you just...” Wallace won’t let himself throw me under the bus, but he sure does want me to spill my guts out to the team.

No one moves. They’re all too invested in what I might have to say, particularly given the fact that I usually say nothing at all.

I turn my back to the guys, digging through my duffle bag to kill time.

Stand straight and sigh heavily, knowing I'll have to give in sooner or later—Wallace will never let this go.

“I found a baseball card online and the girl at Rent hugging me was the woman who sold it to me.”

“But she doesn't know it's him,” Buzz snitches, to the delight of the room. A few of them have settled on the edge of the benches, leaning forward like they're watching a live action play or show—all they need is popcorn.

Like fucking girls at a slumber party, these bitches want *details*.

“What do you mean she doesn't know it was you—she was hugging you, man. She had her tits all over you.”

Yeah, no—that's not at all what she was doing. “She said I was grumpy and that I needed a hug.”

That sounds so dumb.

“You are grumpy.” Espinoza states it as a fact. “And you probably *did* need a hug.”

“A hug, a fuck—same thing.” Jerry Johnston laughs, removing the athletic wrap from his wrist and tightening it.

“Except he isn't fucking them either—hugs only.”

I wish they'd all shut up and leave me alone; this is none of their business!

“When's the last time you got laid Harding? On your last birthday?”

Not even close. It's been two years since I had sex, that night turning into my worst nightmare. The girl was a mean, snotty bitch, and it was a lousy lay, one I wish I'd forget, but it's burned into my goddamn memory.

“Okay, so you bought a baseball card from this girl. Suddenly she's rubbing her tits on you and that's it?”

“Yes, that's it.”

“She thinks I'm him,” Wallace kindly informs them, fount of knowledge that he is, the authority on everything and boastfully in the know.

Everyone glances from him to me to him.

Johnston screws up his face. “If she thinks he's you, then who did she think you were?”

Good question. “I don't know. I didn't stay to find out.”

Ricky Thompson blinks. “But then why wasn't she rubbing her tits on him?”

“Dude, I don't know!” *I'm not shouting—you are.*

“Jeez, Baseman—did it occur to you for one second that she might have

liked you?” Jose Espinoza asks after a long stretch of awkward silence.

No.

It didn't occur to me that Miranda might like me.

She has no idea who I am, so how would it be possible?

“Listen to Espinoza, man. He knows women—he has six sisters,” one of the guys reminds me, ripping into a protein bar he's pulled out of his bag.

“Get this.” Wallace reappears to ruin my day a little fucking more. “He's buying another card from her and wants me to meet her. Again.”

“Stop with this. You're the one who fucked it up,” I shoot back.

He disagrees. “I shouldn't have done it in the first place and you should know I hit on anything with a pulse.” Pause. “Wait, that is not what I meant.”

I point at him accusingly, ire rising up, glaring the same way Coach was glaring at me out on the ball field. “I said you need to make it right—this doesn't have to be complicated!”

Wide sets of eyes fly back and forth, back and forth between Wallace and me, the volleying banter better than a tennis match at Wimbledon.

“This is a *you* problem!” Wallace throws down the duffle bag he got his deodorant from with a scowl. “Not a *me* problem, so figure it out yourself.”

“I'm not the one who complicated everything! All you had to do was not be a douche and you couldn't even do that.”

He's right, obviously—this is not and has never been, his problem—and it really isn't a problem, is it? Nope.

It's drama.

Drama I created by being an antisocial, paranoid pussy.

And you know what? I hate drama. If the tables were turned, I would have told him to find someone else to be his errand boy. Would have said I wasn't agreeing to meet anyone for him.

He's just as famous as I am, if not more.

Am I a better ballplayer? Yes.

Do I get paid more? Yes.

Does he have a prettier face? Yes.

None of that stopped him from helping me out, yet I blamed him for the way things worked out.

“Uh oh, guys—I see the wheels turning,” Espinoza cautiously pokes. “What's goin' through that head of yours, Baseman?”

“Guys,” Johnston says, “it looks like his brain is about to explode.”

“Nah,” Wallace says. “That's cum built up inside his body.”

Every last one of them laughs, even a few of the assistant coaches. Even the batboy who likes to linger, who occasionally shows up for practices if he doesn't have class, just to socialize with us.

Jesus, an audience. Just what I need.

“Harding, bro.”

I turn to face Espinoza, who is indeed full of wisdom, young as he is.

“Eh?”

“Go do the deed yourself, man. It's like ripping off a Band-Aid.”

Thing is, more often than not, ripping off a Band-Aid hurts like hell.

**MIRANDA:** *So, I'VE BEEN DOING SOME THINKING ABOUT THAT CARD. I HATE to say this, but I'm ready to sell another one.*

**Me:** *Not the whole shebang?*

**Miranda:** *No, not yet—sorry. Every time we bump into each other, it's a shitshow.*

**Me:** *I'll take what I can get. Beggars can't be choosers.*

**Me:** *So which card?*

**Miranda:** *Does Leroy Jenkins work for you?*

**Me:** *NICE!!!! I want it. How much?*

**Miranda:** *Five less.*

**Me:** *20 large? Done. Same time, same place?*

**Miranda:** *No, I have to be downtown. I'm meeting the property manager of this office I want to rent. I was hoping you and I could meet first, so I could run to the bank, deposit your cash, and then cut him a check for the security deposit.*

**Me:** *That's really fucking exciting, owning your own business.*

**Miranda:** *Scary too! I want to pee my pants.*

**Me:** *Better than shitting them.*

**Miranda:** *Well what a pair we make.*

**Me:** *Are you flirting with me?*

**Miranda:** *GOD NO!!!! \*\*gags\*\**

**Me:** *Tell me how you really feel...*

**Miranda:** *I will. And I'll tell you TO YOUR FACE.*

**Me:** *Dang, you're in a mood today, eh?*

**Miranda:** *I guess so. I'm just so nervous. I've never done this before, CLEARLY. Someone should talk me out of it.*

**Me:** *No one should talk you out of it, and if they do, they're a terrible*

*friend.*

**Miranda:** *Aww, aren't you sweet.*

**Me:** *I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true.*

**Miranda:** *So. Um...*

**Me:** *?*

**Miranda:** *Not to be weird, but how is your friend? Is he feeling better?*

**Me:** *My friend from the other night? The one you were hugging?*

**Miranda:** *The one who ran away?*

**Me:** *Did he though?*

**Miranda:** *Yes and I'm so embarrassed. I feel like such an idiot for making him uncomfortable.*

**Me:** *That's... He's dealing with a lot. It was nothing you did.*

**Miranda:** *That's kind of you to say.*

**Me:** *I'm not a kind person.*

**Miranda:** *Yeah, that seems like it's probably true. You do seem like a giant asshole.*

**Me:** *WTF!*

**Miranda:** *Okay, I have to go. Wednesday at 2?*

**Me:** *That's a bit early for me because I have to work, but I'll make it happen. Where at?*

**Miranda:** *Coffee shop on Dysart and Lisbon?*

**Me:** *Blended Buds?*

**Miranda:** *LOL*

**Me:** *What's so funny?*

**Miranda:** *You saying Blended Buds. It sounds so cheesy now.*

**Me:** *Yeah, well...it is LOL.*

**Miranda:** *See you Wednesday Noah.*

**Me:** *See you Wednesday.*

**MIRANDA**

NOAH IS LATE.

I wonder if he drinks coffee as I stand in line, tapping the toe of my heeled pump. I check my phone again for the time and sigh, grateful there are at least three customers in front of me.

I'm smartly dressed for my first business meeting since incorporating. The black pressed pants are a sophisticated contrast to the jeans I wore to the club and my hot pink blazer announces my love of bold colors. Gold hoops, hair down, hot pink lips.

I'm pursing those lips with displeasure with every second that passes, anxiety chipping away at the confidence I felt striding through the door of the coffee shop—only to find Noah isn't here.

My finger rubs along my top row of teeth, paranoia that there's something smeared there making me fidgety; I'm more nervous about this exchange than I am about my meeting at three.

Except. Noah isn't here.

Two more people in front of me.

One.

The door opens, wind whistling, just like in the freaking movies, a familiar silhouette standing there, gaze roaming the shop behind a pair of dark sunglasses. Backward baseball hat. Torn t-shirt, black mesh track pants, black sneakers.

I would recognize him anywhere. It's not Noah, it's...

*That* guy.

The one who bolted when I touched him.

I don't understand what he's doing here.

The girl ahead of me orders, and I avert my eyes, focusing on the back of

her head. She has a cowlick and not a cute one. More like bedhead, and oh my god, I am so nervous.

I reach the counter, stumbling on my words, his gaze staring holes into my profile. I know it as well as I know what day I was born on. He. Is. Staring.

“I’ll have a, um... Um. Sorry.” I giggle. *Shit*. “A medium—no, a small.” *Get it together, Miranda*. “Plain. No, not plain.” I fiddle with the app on my phone, inhaling a deep, cleansing breath. Start over. “I would love a small, no foam, skinny latte with soy. Please.”

There.

Phew!

I step back a foot and bump into a solid form. There wasn’t anyone behind me when I got in line earlier and now warm heat spreads across my back. The hair at the base of my neck stands on end, a bit static.

The girl behind the counter zaps my app with her scanner and I tuck my cell in my purse. Trying to muster the courage that will allow me to turn around, to face what I know is standing there.

To face *who* I know is standing there.

I mean, I know him, but I don’t know him? If that makes sense.

He never told me his name. I only know what he felt like when I hugged him, hot and stiff and...

Stiff—and not the good kind.

My eyes hit a massive wall of chest before beginning their journey north. That unsmiling mouth. That Roman nose. The half-hooded eyes, shielded by his glasses, no doubt a bit too guarded for someone so young.

He can’t be much older than me, can he? What, maybe 25?

“Hi.”

He wavers before letting out his own “Hi.”

I look around, raising my eyebrows. “What are you doing here?”

Noah must have sent him. Should I trust this guy with this baseball card?

Wait—Noah trusted him with \$20,000.

“I’m here for the card?”

Ahh—so he is doing his friend a favor. Makes sense. Still, a text giving me a heads up would have been nice.

I step aside so he can order, but he doesn’t. Simply jerks his head to the left, toward a table in the corner.

He leads, I follow, staring at his broad back, the fabric sticking along his

spine. His hair looks wet and he smells great, like he's fresh from a shower.

"Were you just at the gym working out?"

He grunts, sitting. "Something like that."

*Okayyy...*

He removes the sunglasses, watchful eyes settling on the necklace at the base of my throat. My lips. The purse I rested on the table.

"Oh! The card!" He understandably wants what he came for. Duh.

The giant shifts in his chair as I retrieve the Jenkins card, his legs so long they barely fit under the small, round table. I can't imagine he'd fit inside a car.

My fingers gingerly set the encased card in the center of the table, but he doesn't reach for it.

He doesn't do *anything*.

So. I do what I do when I'm nervous and unsure: I chatter. "I don't remember you being this socially awkward at Rent on Saturday."

His lip twitches. Mouth slightly frowning. Bottom lip looks soft, but chapped, like he licks it a lot and could stand to use some balm. What do guys know about skincare and exfoliating their mouths? Nothing.

I remove my gaze from his pout and it roams to his eyes.

They're dark, an odd shade. Not amber and not brown exactly. *I have no idea what I'm saying*.

I need him to talk. To say something. And crap, I probably shouldn't have given him the baseball card until I know he has the money.

"Pay up," I tell him jokingly. "You wouldn't want Noah to be pissed you did him wrong, would you?"

More painful silence has me shifting in the chair, the back ramrod straight and ungodly uncomfortable.

"That isn't going to happen."

Oh? "And why is that?"

"I'm Noah."

I'm sorry what now? "Your name is Noah, too?"

Based on my extensive knowledge of body language, I can tell he wants to roll his eyes by his flaring nostrils. He's frustrated with me; that much is clear.

"No. Not 'Noah too'—I'm the only Noah."

"I don't know what that means." Does this guy have two nicknames, too?

"That guy you met at the police station is my friend, Buzz."

My mouth opens and closes like a guppy and I slam it closed, quiet for a beat.

“I don’t understand why you’ve been lying. Are you a criminal?” Shit, what if the cash he used to pay me was stolen? Hot, they call it? Is he on the lam? Could I go to jail? What if they trace the serial numbers on the bills to track me down?!

I notice a group of three high school boys watching us, and Noah—if *that is his real name*—slouches in the seat, sliding his sunnies back into place, spinning the brim of his ball cap over the front of his eyes.

Wow. This guy has issues...

“I’m not a criminal.” His voice is low, even, controlled.

“But definitely a liar.”

His jaw clenches and he turns an unflattering shade of red.

“Did you not hear what I said?” he asks. “I’m the one buying your cards.”

I stare at him, at the eyes I can no longer see. At the wet hair beneath his ball cap. The red cheeks and neck. The twist in his lips.

Any other person wouldn’t care that he didn’t show up himself to retrieve the card. Maybe someone else wouldn’t even care that he didn’t properly introduce himself at the club, didn’t bother correcting me when I called—what was his friend’s name? When I called Buzz Noah in front of everyone.

Buzz didn’t correct me, either, that asshole.

I stare some more, heart racing. Cheeks, I’m sure, as red as Noah’s.

*Noah.*

“I felt like...” We were connecting.

*Connecting*, connecting—like, on a different level than just a transaction between two people. And at the club? I felt something then, too.

A pull. Sparks.

How stupid. What would a guy like this want with a girl like me? No doubt if he’s hanging out with someone like that sleaze Buzz and those other huge, gym-rat-looking guys at the club, I am the furthest thing from his type.

“Felt like what?” He pauses. “Say it.”

My mouth opens—no, gapes. Say it? Hell no I’m not going to say it! He has no right to my thoughts. He has no right to anything and I refuse to give him any real estate inside my head.

“Can I have my money now?” *Pay up, jerk.*

He gazes at me through those dark lenses, mouth set in a straight line.

“That’s all you have to say?”

Is he for real?! “What more is there? You don’t owe me an explanation as to why you felt you had to lie—we’re not friends. This is a business transaction.”

I imagine his eyes are cold and vacant and wish I could see them. “Clearly.”

Clearly?

What does that even mean? The tone in which he says it has me guessing, too. *Clearly* this is just business, but I felt chemistry, too? *Clearly* this is just business, but I had fun talking about things other than this deal? *Clearly* this is just business, but now that I’ve met you, I think you’re cute?

A few moments drift by before he reaches down to the waistband of his pants at a glacial pace and pulls back the elastic, revealing an envelope wedged inside. It’s as thick as the last one was, though it contains less money.

It gets slid across the table.

He takes the Jenkins card, its small plexiglass box dwarfed in the palm of his giant hand. Pinches it between his thumb and forefinger before spinning it a few times, still watching me from behind those dark lenses.

“Well. You have your money.”

Indeed I do, twenty grand of it. “Thank you.”

“No.” He flashes the card in my direction before sliding it into his waistband. “Thank *you*.”

There is so much more I want to say to this man, who seems more like a complete stranger than ever before. A man who gave me butterflies only a few days ago, but really wants nothing from me but my card collection.

Well he can’t have it. I will find a new buyer. Noah whatshisface can stuff it.

“...AND THERE’S THE BUILD OUT ALLOWANCE WE DISCUSSED, BUT ONLY for this main space and the large office, which could be partitioned off into two.”

I nod at the woman who is going to be my new landlord, the property owner of several storefronts in an old school downtown neighborhood. She’s been converting brownstones into business spaces for lots of tech startups, dot-coms, and in some cases, bloggers.

The building is whitewashed with black shutters and a black lacquered door, the vintage house modern and up to date, its interior an ideal

environment for a design center.

Simply perfect.

And within my budget, now that I have actual, liquid capital.

We're on the last lap of my walk-through before I sign my life away, i.e. sign the rental agreement. I'm about to give her more money than I've ever given anyone—not including tuition payments to the university. Those were student loans; this here is *my* money.

“And I can paint?” The walls are gray and I think painting them stark white would make the space that much more impactful.

“You can, once we approve the colors.”

“White?”

She glances over at me as she walks through another doorway, into what would be my office. “White? Yes, absolutely.”

Excellent.

We go over a few more details, the contract laid out on a portable table, one chair pushed in, pen resting on top.

I sit, having read the contract over and over. My father read it too, and my Uncle Mark, who is an attorney—family law, but still able to bullet point a few changes I had to make, specifically regarding the grounds and maintenance.

A cashier's check for the deposit amount sits at the bottom of my document holder, fresh from the bank.

I sign, having been ready for this moment since the day I moved that graduation tassel from one side of my cap to the other.

Francesca Graziano watches over my shoulder as I add one last flourish to my signature. Sign. Date.

Done.

“Well!” She claps her hands. “Congratulations.” There's a laptop briefcase on the floor and she reaches for it, the sleek bag matching her brown leather belt and high-heeled pumps.

Francesca would fit in perfectly at Rent, even dressed for a business meeting.

I pull the deposit out of my clutch and hold it out.

She takes the check with a satisfied nod. “Alright then! Here are the keys. Please let me know if you need anything by contacting the property manager.”

And then...

I'm alone.

Alone with my thoughts and alone with my new space.

Mine, mine, mine.

Okay—not technically mine, but mine for an entire year, as long as I don't default on my rent. Ha ha.

My phone begins buzzing and I fish it out of my bag. Claire's face smiles back at me—she wants to video chat.

“How did it go?”

“Great!” I enthuse, taking the keys from the table where I laid them and jingling them in front of my face for her to see. “Look! The building is all mine. Well, the first floor anyway.” The floor above me is another business space, but will probably remain unoccupied for a few more months.

“How does it feel?” She's chomping on a celery stick and I can see a Bloody Mary on the counter. What the hell is she drinking that for so early? It's barely five o'clock.

“It feels good. I also want to throw up.”

“Aww, you're a bitty baby business owner now.” She hesitates to chew. “Can I have a job?”

I roll my eyes and grab my bag, checking to see that all the lights are off. “You have a history degree.”

“So? I like decorating.”

I fumble with everything in my arms and hands, including my phone, as I make for the front door and push it open. Close it behind me, the key in my hand sliding into the lock.

One turn to the left and it's secure.

“Hold on a second, I'm going to pause you while I get a car.” It takes me two seconds then I'm back. “Done.” I sit on the steps of my new place, thinking if the whole business tanks, I could probably live in my office and save myself a second rent payment. Ha.

Cough.

Just kidding—that's illegal.

“You had your meeting with that Noah guy today, yeah? Have I mentioned how hot he is?”

Only 40 billion times. “Yeah, I sure did.” I gaze down the street, wondering how much to tell her about Noah. The real Noah, not the one pretending to be him. The hot asshole whom I could not stand versus the quiet, melancholy version who wanted me to feel a certain way about the

whole thing.

What did he want me to say?

I thought about it the entire way to my meeting this afternoon and couldn't come up with anything. It's almost as if he was disappointed I wouldn't get confrontational.

So strange and perplexing.

"What's wrong?" Claire is the most insightful one of my friends. We weren't roommates freshman year and when most of the friends I had made that year were moving out of the dorms, my parents wouldn't let me live in off-campus housing.

So, by luck of the draw, I landed with Claire and we've been inseparable since. She came as a package deal, complete with Emily, Gretchen, and two Katys—one with a 'y' and one with an 'ie'. We don't see them as much since both of them moved out of Illinois after graduating, wanting to be closer to where they grew up.

"Nothing's wrong." Ugh, why did I just say that? It's always a dead giveaway that something is wrong.

"What happened?"

It's like she has this sixth sense. It used to drive me insane, her innate ability to find shit out, but now I'm relieved I can just say what's on my mind and stop pretending.

"Noah isn't who he says he is. Yes, he had the money to buy the baseball cards from me, but the guy who picked them up—the guy you met at Rent? That was not Noah."

"WHAT?" Her eyes cannot get any bigger and I stand as the small, gray, compact car that's taking me to my apartment slows in front of the curb. I bound down the stairs, lugging my purse, laptop bag, and documents folder, phone tucked under my chin.

"You Miranda?"

I'm already pulling the back door open. "Yup."

Slide in. Buckle the seatbelt.

He begins driving and I hold the phone in front of my face again so Claire can see me. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine. You were saying?" Now she has a meat stick between her lips.

"Did you eat dinner?"

"Don't change the subject. Noah isn't Noah, he's someone else—go."

"Anyway, the guy I was talking to at the club this past weekend—the guy

by the bar, whom I felt compelled to hug—”

“Whoa whoa whoa you never told me you hugged him. Why did you hug him?”

“Duh.” I roll my eyes and run a hand through my hair, exhausted. “He needed it. He’s pretty grouchy.”

“So you just go around hugging *strangers* now?”

I felt like I was getting to know him!

“People were doing more than just hugging in that club, let’s be honest. That was child’s play compared to what some people were doing.”

I see the driver’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror, his bushy brows raised. Dammit.

“Anyway, you hugged. Was it full frontal?”

I laugh, and the driver laughs, despite himself and the fact that he should be minding his own business.

“Yes? Yeah, I think it was. Maybe that’s what freaked him out.”

“How did he freak out? Did he get hard?”

“No, Claire, he did not get *hard*—he got gone.”

“Eh?” Claire does this Canadian schtick when she’s confused, and she’s doing it now, accent and all. Ridiculous.

“I know. It was weird. I hugged him, he left, end of story. Except...” My voice trails off, like I’m addressing a group gathered ’round a campfire, regaling them with my horror story. “He wasn’t who he seemed to be.”

“Who did he seem to be?”

“Claire! Focus.” Sheesh, it’s impossible storytelling with her around. “Today I met him because I needed...” I look up and lock eyes with the driver again—I’m not about to tell him I went to make a drop and collect twenty grand. He’d either rob me blind or drive straight to the police station. “To give him that thing he needed.”

Claire nods knowingly. “Yes, yes, the thing.”

I’m glad she’s playing along—this dude cabbing me around doesn’t need to know my business, even though he’s hearing literally all of my business.

“The guy who shows up is not the Noah I’ve met before, so I think the guy from the club—who never told me his name—is just there to pick up the *thing* for his buddy.”

“Uh-huh.” Claire is nodding frantically, chewing meat sticks and washing it down with Bloody Mary.

“I say, ‘Oh! What happened to Noah?’ And he’s all, ‘I AM NOAH.’”

Okay, fine—I'm taking a few creative liberties, but that's basically the way it all went down and the point isn't the way I retell it; the point is he lied.

"What?!" Claire is shouting and probably scaring the shit out of her cat in the process. "Get out!"

"Yes. And then I go, 'So you're a LIAR?' And guess what he did, Claire? Guess. Well I'll tell you what he didn't do. He did. Not. Deny it." I'm rambling almost frantically, anxious to get the story out.

"You mean. To tell me. He did not deny lying?" Claire is aghast at the thought! Claire tends to lie about mostly anything that will get her into any kind of trouble. "So then what?"

"Pfft, I took my money, said, 'Deuces bro,' and I left."

That gives Claire pause, and she stares, meat dangling from her lips like a cigar. "You did not say that."

"No, but I wanted to."

"Ugh, I hate when you do that! You give me this buildup and I get so excited and it's just you being dramatic."

"Well what the hell was I going to say? He didn't have to tell me at all. He could have lied about his name today, too, but he told me the truth."

"Well there's something to be said for that, too. Why do you think he told you?"

"I don't know."

And it's true—I don't. Her guess is as good as mine.

"Maybe he wanted you to know the truth because he likes you."

Okay, that was not my guess.

The car I'm in is almost to my apartment complex, so with one hand, I begin gathering my things.

"He doesn't like me. He barely spoke when we were sitting there. It was all brooding and grunting and he let me leave without defending himself."

"Would it have mattered?"

"Yes!" No. Maybe? "I don't know."

"I thought you said you felt a tingle in your lady business on Saturday after you talked to him."

"Claire!" I pointedly shift my eyes toward the back of the driver's head. Though Claire can't see him, she knows I'm in an Uber and knows he can hear everything she's saying. "Could you not?"

"You know I'm right. You had a party in your pants and you wanted to invite him."

She needs to stop.

Instead, the car stops. She goes on as I thank the driver, climb out, and head toward the front door of my building.

“Look, all I’m saying is—since you started this passion project of yours, you have had zero time for yourself. It’s all interviews and hiring and looking at office space. Which I get! I love that you’re doing your own thing. But one day, after you work your ass off, you’re going to look around and realize you didn’t take time for yourself.”

I punch the elevator. “You’re being super dramatic. I take time for myself. I went out on Saturday! And I would have loved to stay and flirt with that guy, but he left, Claire. He left. Not me, him.”

She’s quiet because she knows I’m right; I sucked the wind right out of her preachy sails. She lets out a thoughtful “Hmmm” and looks to the side then back at me. “But why though? What happened before you hugged him?”

I’ve explained this to her before. The only thing I left out was him walking off—and never coming back. I told her he saw someone he knew, they started talking, and that was that.

“We were talking. I think we were flirting? He seemed uncomfortable.”

“What kind of guy is he? Outgoing, arrogant, what?”

None of those things. “Quiet? Shy but not really? Reserved.”

“And he was cool until you touched him?”

“Yes.”

Another hum. A sigh. “Well, it sounds like you either gave him a boner or scared the shit out of him. Either way, I’d say he was into you, especially if he showed up today and spilled his guts.”

“I wouldn’t call it spilling his guts. All he said was, ‘I’m Noah.’”

“So, a confession of sorts.”

“Not telling me his real name is not a crime.” I can’t help protecting him.

“Ahhh, you’re defending him now? *Interesting.*”

Sometimes she drives me absolutely mad, other times she’s absolutely brilliant and right now she’s both.

“Well.” I bite down on my bottom lip, thinking hard as the elevator door opens and I step out into the hall, hang a left, and walk the 40 feet to my door. “What should I do?”

“You do what every modern girl does: you send him a passive aggressive text.”

“Does it have to be passive aggressive? Why can’t I just say what’s on

my mind?”

“What’s on your mind?”

“That I...wish it had been him from the start, because I think he’s great, and if he hadn’t been so immature, I would...”

Claire waits while I think then prods, “You would...?” encouraging me to finish my sentence.

“That’s it. That’s all I have.”

“Sounds like a good start to me. Now go get him, tiger—then call me back.” The last of her Bloody Mary gets chugged and she sets the glass down on her kitchen counter with a thud. “Oh, and Miranda?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be a pussy this time.”

“What? When am I ever a pu—”

—ssy.

The line goes dead.

**ME:** *YOU KNOW WHAT, JERK—I’VE GOT MORE TO SAY TO YOU.*

Delete. Too confrontational out of the gate. He’ll never reply to that.

**Me:** *Hey Noah. I need to talk to you.*

Delete. Guys hate when girls say they ‘need to talk.’

**Me:** *Yo.*

Delete. What am I? One of his guy friends? No.

I try one more time.

**Me:** *Hey Noah. I’ve been thinking about our meeting all afternoon and would like to apologize for reacting the way I did. And for leaving without hearing you out.*

I stare at those words, not sure what I’m actually expecting him to say, if he decides to reply at all. I know he wants those baseball cards, so if he doesn’t respond, I’ll know I’ve ruined it—for him and for me.

I go through my bedtime routine, nerves vibrating through my body, busying myself with washing my face, putting on moisturizer and clean pajamas, the entire time listening for that familiar ping from my text notifications.

Why am I so nervous? He’s buying baseball cards from me, that is all!

I pull my long hair into a ponytail. Take it out again. Topknot. Down again. Ugh!

Tossing the rubber band on the counter, I stalk back to the bedside table

and check my phone, turning it to the side to see if the mute is on.

It's not.

Dammit! It's been 18 minutes—who takes that long to respond to a text message? Monsters, that's who!

I stalk back to the bathroom and pull my hair back.

*Ping!*

Ever so casually, so as not to appear overly anxious, I count to 10. Walk into my closet and stand there, staring up at my shoes. Pull out a pair of jeans and refold them.

Take my ponytail out. Brush my hair.

Go to the toilet, pull down my bottoms, and sit, trying to pee. When that doesn't work, I stand back up and look around the bathroom, deciding any more loitering is pointless.

I mean, I'm home alone—who am I going through this whole song and dance for?

Click off the light and go to stand next to the bed, palming my phone.

Before I open his message—assuming it's him—I quickly give my social media a brief glance before allowing myself to finally tap on the little green messages icon at the bottom of my phone screen.

**Noah:** *Glad to hear from you. Can you talk?*

What does he mean by talk? Talk talk or text talk? I hope he explains more once I respond.

**Me:** *Yes?*

**Noah:** *I meant is it okay for me to call?*

Shit. He wants to call me? On the phone? Who even does that anymore?! This is an outrage! I won't even pick up when my grandmother calls unless she calls twice in a row!

If you need to get ahold of me, text.

If it's an emergency—still text.

Video chatting is fine, and *easy*. I can move the phone around while I continue about my business, but for some reason, it seems more involved having to listen to someone on the other line rather than watch them on a video call.

My pits begin to sweat. I won't lie—this whole thing makes me twitchy and I lose steam. Earlier while I was on the phone with Claire, she got me all worked up and I knew what I wanted to say, how I wanted to say it—I was ready! Then he goes and throws this wrench in my plan by wanting to speak

to me!

There is nothing I can say to him except: *Sure*.

I busy myself, fluffing my pillow on the bed, trying to be cool, so my discomfort doesn't come through in my voice when I answer the phone.

"Hey," I say, practicing, going so far as to lean against my nightstand, one hand propped there as if I'm at a bar using a pick-up line. "What's up?"

Lord, I sound like Joey from *Friends*. How you doin'?

I clear my throat. "Miranda speaking." Way too formal considering it's bedtime; well, it is for me anyway. Maybe he's a night owl.

I try again. "Hi." Blah, why is this so hard!

I'm chastising myself when the phone rings, his name popping up on my screen since I programmed his number in—because right now, he's the only one forking over five figures for vintage sports memorabilia. Everyone else who's contacted me has either tried to lowball or hasn't followed through and I don't have time to deal with anyone who isn't serious.

Noah is serious.

I take a deep breath and accept the call. "Hello?"

Oh, well done, me! I sound so natural and casual, as if this could be anyone calling.

"It's Noah." Deep and gruff, those two words.

"Hi." Okay, that was lame.

He clears his throat, just as I did moments ago, and says, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I deadpan, feigning indifference.

"For lying."

"It's weird for me thinking of you as Noah right now. I've had—what's your friend's name? Buzz? In my mind since I met him." I pause, choosing my words carefully. "Why didn't you tell me when we were at Rent?" It would have been the perfect opportunity; he could have blamed alcohol. He could have blamed any number of things if he had spilled his guts and confessed right there.

Though I don't remember his buddy coming clean either. Two liars turning me into a joke. Well ha ha, no one is laughing.

Noah is quiet and I practically hear the wheels churning in his mind as he racks his brain for an answer that won't upset me. "I don't know."

Well. That's not what I was expecting him to say. Thought he'd at least say something like *I thought you'd be mad* or *I didn't think it would matter since we're not friends*. Or even the standard *I didn't think I'd ever see you*

*again.*

Except he knew he was going to see me because I'm selling him my stash. *Was* going to sell him the stash—was. Past tense.

Instead he goes with another truth: I do not know.

Hmph. What the heck do I say now?

I say nothing.

“Are you mad?” His low voice sounds a bit tired.

“Why would you care?”

I mean, seriously—I don't even know him.

“I'm not an asshole.”

“I didn't say you were.”

“No, I mean...I don't want you to think this is the kind of thing I do—I don't get off on embarrassing other people.”

“You didn't embarrass me.” He did, but just a little, not that I'd admit it.

“Okay.” He pauses. “Good.”

I hear the tenants in the apartment above mine flushing their toilet, one of the downsides of living in a place this old. Shiny, new high-rise apartments are nice, but not when you're scrimping and saving every dime to start your own business.

*Maybe I should move into my office and sleep under my desk...* Jeez, just the thought gives me chills and not in a good way.

“If you're calling because you thought you embarrassed me, you're good—we are good. No worries.”

Tick, tock. The seconds go by quietly as we both decide what to say next.

“Was there anything else?” I wonder out loud, trying to urge this quiet guy into opening up. “Anything at all?”

*Literally anything. Please just say something.*

“What...” He stops. Groans. And I get the sense he's struggling with his words. Maybe even at home right now, in whatever apartment he lives in—or condo, with all that money he has to burn—running a frustrated hand through his hair. Bet it's sticking straight up, too, all wild and frantic.

I hate having to pry information out of people. If he has something to say, he shouldn't be a pussy about it.

“Fuck. Tell me how you really feel.”

A hand flies to my mouth. “Shit. Did I say that out loud?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry.” Then. “Not sorry.”

We both laugh and the temperature warms a little, and I'm not talking about the temperature in my bedroom. The whole mood of the phone call shifts.

"I don't picture you as the type of woman who curses."

"Did you just call me a woman?" I smile.

"You're not a girl, so what am I supposed to call you? Young lady?"

That sounds weird. "I don't know. You probably could have just left that part out completely."

We laugh again and I bite down on my bottom lip as I climb into bed and pull the comforter up over my lower half. Settling in, hoping for a long phone call. I'm bored, and lonely, and attracted to Noah.

Not the Buzz Noah—*Noah* Noah.

"You're a sassy little thing—you weren't this sarcastic this past weekend."

"I was nervous this past weekend."

"Nervous about what?"

I fiddle with the square corner of my white sheets, rubbing the fabric between my fingers. "Why do you think I was nervous?"

I mentally face-palm myself. *Don't be that girl Miranda! Guys hate guessing games and here you are sending him on a merry chase that's going to end up going nowhere.*

*Well done.*

"I...uh, have no idea. Too many people at the club?"

"It's Chicago—every club has too many people." Curious, I wonder, "Do you go out downtown very often? I remember you mentioning that you don't live there."

"I don't. And no, I don't usually. Sometimes? I don't know, it depends. I have to be dragged out."

"Did they have to drag you out on Saturday or did you go willingly?"

"Did you?" Noah bounces the question back into my court.

"No. I don't think you met my friends Claire and Emily, but they live for the weekends."

"And you don't." He seems to have a habit of making questions sound like statements. Matter-of-fact. Punctuated.

I like it.

"No. I'm a Monday kind of girl. I feel really unproductive on the weekends. How about you?" I'd twirl the cord of this phone if it had one like

the phones did when I was younger before my parents let me have a cell phone. I would have to use the one in the kitchen so they could hear what I was talking about, and those times I talked to boys, I would wind that phone cord around and around until my mother couldn't stand it anymore and gave me the universal sign for *Cut it out!*

Twirling cords. Flirty laughing. Nervous giggling.

"I had to be dragged out, too. I'm not a fan of crowds. My place has it all, so what reason do I have to leave?"

"So you live in one of those complexes with a pool and gym?" Must be nice.

Noah is silent. Then, "You could say that."

That's a weird way of putting it, but I'm quickly learning he is a man of few words.

Man. Woman.

That is how he sees us, not as a boy and a girl.

*Maybe he wanted you to know the truth because he likes you.* Claire's half-drunken words of wisdom echo in my head.

How the hell do I find out if he likes me or not? I can't come out and ask the poor guy—he'd probably hang up on me the same way he bolted at the stupid club! And he is impossible to read!

If only he'd taken off his sunglasses during our conversation today. Then maybe it would have been easier to tell.

Or not.

He had one hell of a poker face.

"You're not very talkative are you?" I finally ask him, the art of conversation and being polite more fleeting with every passing, awkward second.

"Not really."

"So then...why did you call to clear the air if you don't have anything to say?"

I want to bang my head against the table—he is giving me banter blue balls! First rule of thumb when trying to get into a girl's pants: excel at witty repartee. Second rule: don't leave a girl hanging by not asking a follow-up question.

*Maybe he wanted you to know the truth because he likes you.*

There you go again, Miranda, letting Claire get inside your head.

"I'm going to ask you something and I want you to be completely honest.

I'm not going to fault you for it, in fact, it could work in your favor."

"Okay."

"Are you only calling me because you want me to sell you the rest of my card collection and you're afraid if you don't kiss my ass, I'll sell it to someone else?"

The line is just as quiet as it was before as he considers his answer. "That would seem like the most likely scenario, wouldn't it?" he comments. "But no, that's not the main reason."

"What is the main reason?"

He walked right into that one, except—he doesn't give me the answer I'm looking for. He doesn't give me an answer at all.

"Noah?"

"Yeah?"

"Aren't you going to say something?"

This is like pulling teeth.

"You're right—I shouldn't have called."

*Maybe he wanted you to know the truth because he likes you.*

"It's not a bad thing that you called, it's just confusing. But whatever, it's okay. I..." I clear my throat and brace myself. "I just want you to know that I wish..."

His "Yeah?" isn't more than a whisper, and I shiver.

"I wish..." I can't say it. The words get lodged in my throat, too chickenshit to come all the way out.

"You wish what?" More whispers.

Why can't I say it? It would be so easy to throw it all out there and never have to see him again!

"I wish Buzz had been you. I wish it had been the real you who came and bought the card that first day." I stare up at the ceiling with its water-stained corners and crack at the center near the light. "I wish it had been you."

"Why?" His voice cracks.

"It hardly matters now, right?"

## NOAH

I WISH it had been you.

I wish.

It had.

Been *you*.

No one has ever *wished* me into any kind of daydream before, and to be honest, I'm not fucking sure what Miranda meant by it, because she wouldn't explain.

After a few more awkward seconds on the phone, she abruptly ended the call the same way I abruptly ended our hug at the club, disconnecting without even saying goodbye.

"I have to go. I'm sorry."

*Click.*

I stared at my phone for a good long minute, debating about calling her back, not wanting to feel the rejection if she refused to pick up. Wanting to text, but not knowing what the hell to say.

I shift my stance and adjust the batting helmet stuck on my skull, eyeballing the pitching machine on the mound in the center of the red dirt field. Our coach stands next to it and I know he's gauging my readiness for the pitch.

He waits and watches until finally, I give a curt nod.

Whoosh.

Snap.

The ball and bat connect at the sweet spot, five inches into the wood, the combination causing a ripple of momentary stinging in my forearms before sending that leather orb into space.

I raise the brim of my red helmet to watch it soar.

“Nice.” Coach’s nod is one of approval, and as the ball is fielded, I ready my stance again, flexing and tightening my arms to ease out the vibrations. “Ready?”

Another nod from me, another ball torpedoing my way, another base hit from my bat.

I am on fire today, thank fucking God. Our first game is days away and my second season has to be a good one. I have no intention of leading this team down the tubes instead of to the pennant.

I bat. Then give up my spot at home to someone else, in favor of the cages.

Wallace is there, throwing with the assistant fielding coach. He looks over at me, pulling his arm back before letting the ball fly, “Thought you were going to biff it out there.”

I pound shape into my leather glove. “Shouldn’t you be worried about yourself?”

“Nah bro, we’re a team. Your success is my success, your house is my house.” He catches the ball thrown at him with little trouble.

It’s times like this where I actually feel guilty getting pissed at him. Buzz might be a womanizing ball sac most days, but when push comes to shove, he would have my back in a heartbeat.

“My house is not your house.”

“Eh,” he disagrees.

“It’s not.”

“Whatever you say.” With a shrug, he releases another ball to the coach fifty feet away. “By the way, you’re almost out of almond milk.” *Thwak* goes the ball. “And toilet paper in the powder room off the kitchen.”

“Stay out of my fridge asshole.” I laugh, eyes trained on the staffer who’s about to catch with me, making sure there’s room between Wallace and me. “Or go shopping yourself.”

“Shopping is your job.”

What the hell? “Stay home,” I argue, lobbing a ball toward the staffer. His head gives a shake every time Wallace says something outrageous. “Not my home, your home.”

“But you have a more comfortable couch.”

“It’s not my fault you bought a man couch.” Meaning: a black leather sofa, shaped like a square and completely uncomfortable.

We go on and on like this for a solid hour, neither of the assisting coaches

joining in on the banter, but amused by it just the same. My catches are on point, my throwing game strong, perspiration dripping from my hair to my forehead.

I remove my hat and wipe with the back of my hand then reach for the hand towel hanging from my belt loop. It's not summer, but working out has me sweating as if it were sweltering outside or maybe it's just nerves.

Nothing prepares you for being out in front of crowds and it's something I don't think I'll ever get used to, no matter how long I'm a professional.

*I wish it had been you.*

Miranda's words repeat when I'm under the shower spray in the locker room, head tipped back, hot water sluicing over my entire body, dirt and grime disappearing down the drain at my feet. My eyes open to stare at the tiled ceiling of the shower room then close and I turn my back to wash the shampoo from my hair.

Women. I will never understand what they want from me especially when they don't seem to want my money. Buying a card from Miranda is one thing; I get it—she has something I want. Being used because I'm famous is entirely different.

I shut the water off and reach for the towel on a nearby hook, wipe it down my legs, arms, and torso then wrap it around my waist. Stroll to my locker and root through my duffel for a clean t-shirt.

Sniff it.

It might be clean, but it smells like gym bag, so it looks like I'll be going straight home and not to the grocery store; I cannot go out in public reeking of moist, dirty socks.

Down on the bench in front of my locker, my cell screen lights up, catching my eye, and I glance down at it while I pull on a pair of mesh shorts.

Miranda. And the text preview reads: *Yes. I think that would...*

Huh?

Yes she thinks that would what?

I snatch the phone and tap in the password to unlock it, quickly tapping the messages open.

**Miranda:** *Yes. I think that would be fun.*

My eyes wander, tracking farther up into the conversation, then damn near bug out of my sockets.

Apparently, five minutes ago, I texted her and asked her on an actual date.

And she said yes, in an exchange that went like this:

**Me:** *This is gonna sound super rando, but I was wondering if I could take you out?*

**Miranda:** *Take me out?*

**Me:** *Yeah like on a date or something.*

**Miranda:** *Or something? Ha ha.*

**Me:** *I'll be cool, no worries.*

**Miranda:** *Well if you're going to be cool, how could I say no?*

**Me:** *So you're saying what exactly?*

**Miranda:** *Yes. I think that would be fun.*

Horrifying words and grammar stick out at me: Super rando? I'll be cool? Or something?

*What.*

*The.*

*Fuck.*

Who talks like that!

God I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole. Please God, just do it—I cannot talk to her again or look her in the eyes knowing she thinks I would say stupid shit like this.

Fucking embarrassing.

I hold up my phone and thrust it out toward the rest of the locker room, daring someone to take ownership of the texting conversation with Miranda. “Who the fuck went into my phone and...” I swallow, unable to finish the sentence.

Wallace raises his hand. “Yeah, that was me. I did it while you were in the shower.” His tone is bored.

“What the actual fuck!”

“It was just sitting here.” He’s tying his shoes, one leg up on the bench, casually ignoring the anger in my voice.

“This is password protected!”

“Yeah, well, find a new password—your old one sucks donkey balls.” He raises his arm and gives Espinoza a high five. “I guessed it on the first try. Boom goes the dynamite!”

He makes his fist explode.

Remember all those nice things I said earlier about him having my back? I retract all of it because this feels as if he’s just stuck a knife in and twisted it.

“How the hell did you know my password?”

“Are you being serious?” He sighs, exhausted by me. “You’re not supposed to use house numbers as a password, dipshit. Everyone knows that.”

You’re not?

They do?

Shit. “That’s not the point dude. You can’t just break into a person’s phone and...and...” I can’t even talk I’m so pissed.

“And what? Do you a favor?”

Yes!

“You asked out a girl for me—one I had no intention of asking out!”

“You’re welcome!” He glances over now, standing, brows raised.

“That was not me thanking you!”

The entire team looks amused, watching and smirking dressing while Wallace and I bicker like an old married couple.

“What did she say, Baseman?” someone asks from the other side of the room, but I can’t tell who because they immediately scurry away like a rat.

My lips clamp shut—I refuse to give them the satisfaction of knowing Buzz Wallace hit a home run with this one.

“What did she say, bro? Do *not* make us tackle you to the ground for that phone because God as my witness, we’ll fucking do it.”

Around the room, they mutter their agreement.

“This is for your own good, amigo,” Espinoza says, nodding. “What did the chica say?”

I need them both to stop talking so I can figure out what to fucking do.

I cannot tell her I was not the one who asked her on a date, not after I lied about Wallace being me and sending him to get that card and *fuck what am I going to do?*

“I hate you right now.”

He is unperturbed. “You say that at least once a week.”

“This time I mean it.”

“She said yes, didn’t she—don’t lie to us.”

I hate him even more now that the entire team is on his side.

“You have to start dating, bro. You need a good woman in your life.” This from our third baseman, because suddenly everyone is a goddamn expert on what I need.

“Thanks, but if I wanted to date someone, it wouldn’t be difficult to find

someone.”

A few shakes of their heads. “If you’re talking about groupies, get your head out of your ass. He means someone you’d bring home to your mama.” Darren Dafke isn’t wrong, but I’m not admitting *that*, either.

“You can’t ignore her.” Wallace begins his walk past me. “You’re gonna have to text her back sooner or later.”

“I’m telling the guard gate you’re not allowed in anymore” is my only response.

“But not until after tomorrow morning—I’m coming for breakfast.”

“No you’re not!” I tell his back.

He laughs. “Get almond milk!”

## MIRANDA

HE HASN'T TEXTED me back since I said yes.

*Yes. I think that would be fun.*

It's been hours.

I check my phone millions of times (definitely not exaggerating the number) and message Claire and Emily a few hundred times each. Both of them tell me to chill out and relax: he asked me out—why would he change his mind?

Because. This is Noah we're talking about. He is big and adorable, but painfully shy, as I'm slowly discovering. A man of few words and many thoughts who hides behind the cover of his phone, who was so afraid to meet me he sent his friend instead.

He hasn't admitted that to me officially, but I suspect that's the case.

I wear a path across the carpet from my spot on the couch to the place in the kitchen where I set my phone, determined to leave it alone, but failing on a colossal scale. Why am I bothering to even try?

One hour turned into two.

Two hours turned into five.

Why hasn't he messaged me back yet?

Has he changed his mind?

I preoccupy myself by bingeing a series about daters who can't see each other's faces—they're hidden behind walls and it reminds me of Noah hiding behind his phone. And his friend. Which only makes me think of him again and has me getting off my ass to grab my cell.

*You are an independent, grown-ass woman, Miranda Pressinger. Call him.*

Why am I so nervous?

*Because you're afraid of being rejected.*

But he's the one who asked me on a date!

*Right, but he could have decided that was a terrible idea and now his plan is to ghost you.*

"Why are you talking to yourself? Get a grip!"

I inhale, heart racing a mile a minute as I suck it up and search for his number. It's one of the last ones I dialed and we all know how that conversation ended.

The call connects. The phone rings.

Then...

"Hello?" I shiver at his greeting, his voice so deep it has me like *woah*.

"Hey Noah."

He pauses before saying, "Hey Miranda. I was...going to...I was just about to text you back."

This has me chuckling softly, the liar. "No fibbing."

"Okay. I wasn't *just* about to text you, but I *was* going to text you back, I swear."

"Alright." I let the silence sit, not wanting to fill it with idle chatter or babble. I want him to say what he has to say, even if I have to wait all night.

*Admit you changed your mind.*

It would suck, but at least I'll know.

"I wanted to figure out a few nights for me that would work to go out before throwing anything out there. My schedule is pretty hectic right now, so I had to look at my calendar first."

At least he didn't say he was busy.

Of all the excuses in the world, "I've been busy" is the laziest alibi, one that never fails to rub me the wrong way on both ends.

"And did you find a few days that work?"

"Are you okay going out during the week? I work most weekends."

Inquisitiveness demands that I ask what he does for a living, but then we wouldn't have that to discuss on this date we're going on.

"I could do a weekday, sure."

"How about...Thursday? Or Tuesday of next week?"

I am literally free every day of the week, but pretend to consider it. "How about Tuesday? I have some things to get done in the office space I just rented." Plus, I need time to plan my outfit. "What time are you picking me up?"

There's a long pause. "You want me to pick you up?"

Uh. Yes? "You said you weren't a criminal and I assume that means you're not a murderer. Call me old-fashioned, but...I'd love for you to pick me up." So it's official.

"Then it sounds like I'm picking you up."

"Six thirty? Any later and I will die of hunger."

"How about six? It will take us time to get downtown."

"Ohhh downtown. Oo la la!"

"Or not? We can stay local."

Hell no! If I get to wear a dress and go somewhere in the city, I am not passing up the opportunity. "Surprise me, okay? I'll be ready at six. I'll text you the address next week."

"Sounds good."

"Hey Noah?"

"Yeah?"

"It's a date."

## NOAH

I FEEL SICK.

Literally ill as I slowly crawl my way down the street, the navigation system in my car directing me to the address I punched in before leaving my house.

Miranda's place is twenty minutes from mine, not in the suburbs, but not in the city. A little offshoot near the mall tourists flock to, a cute apartment complex situated in an older part of town that probably used to be hip and trendy.

It's not anymore, but still has some charm.

"*Destination is on your left,*" the guide instructs and I slow further, neck craning, eyes scanning the narrow street for a parking spot. Pull my car to the curb behind a hybrid.

I cut the engine of my truck and glance in the rearview mirror at my reflection. Fresh haircut, no ball cap. No bruises on my face, for once. Glance around the interior of my vehicle, making sure the leather is clean, the garbage is gone, and it doesn't smell like a locker room from the bags I normally keep in the back seat.

Those are gone.

Tonight is date night.

Fuck that sounds weird to say and I keep thinking it all the way to Miranda's front door.

We won our game this past weekend, our first scrimmage of what hopes to be a successful season, so I plan to celebrate tonight with alcohol. Liquid courage, celebration—same thing. I'm going to need it if I want to make it through the night without making a horse's ass out of myself.

The door opens and I'm taken aback at how pretty she looks.

I remember what she looked like that night at Rent, but barely. The image of her from then versus the image standing in front of me now does not compute.

No wonder Wallace was hitting on her. Miranda is—

I don't want to say adorable. She's pretty in a wholesome way, not a bombshell way, and that's probably a horrible way of describing it too and I'd never say that shit out loud because she'd probably be insulted.

Girls are funny like that.

Pretty. Gorgeous.

Pretty gorgeous.

"Hi." Her hand holds the door open, her eyes running up and down the length of me, checking out my appearance—the same way I'm doing to her.

It's a strange moment. A bit uncomfortable having her scrutinize me this way and I remember that this is customary dating behavior and not a critique. She has only met me twice, it's normal for her to give me a once over.

*She's taking a mental picture of you in her mind, not adding up everything about you she doesn't like.*

Or maybe she is?

The soft look in her eyes tells me if that is my guess, I'm wrong.

"Is it cold out?" she asks, pulling the door open a bit farther. so I can walk across the threshold. I glance around, noticing all the little things. The stark white walls, white woodwork, white doors and trim. Couch? White.

Everything that's nailed, screwed, or buckled down is white. Everything else is pops of color, like the pillows on the sofa and the weathered wood. The hutch in the kitchen area? Grayed wood, a glaring contrast to its sterile backdrop.

I see what she's got going on here and as far as apartments go, it's very simple, but stylish. I like it.

My hands get stuffed into the pockets of my pressed slacks and I shrug my shoulders, willing them not to slouch. "It's not that bad, but maybe bring a jacket anyway. For later."

She nods. I watch her walk away—presumably toward her bedroom—legs looking smooth, tan and freshly shaved, if I were a betting man.

Her hair hangs down her back, stick straight, and I've always been a sucker for brunettes, though I've never actually dated one.

The dress she's wearing is short, but so is she, showing off her stems and ass nicely. It's one of those wrap things that crisscrosses in front, giving me a

decent shot of tits without being tacky or vulgar.

Conservative yet sexy.

Classy but young.

Miranda is gone for a hot minute, returning from the back room with a denim jacket thrown over her arm, wedge shoes a nude color I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't looked all the way down.

Hot pink toenails.

Man is she good-lookin'.

"Ready?" She's chipper and seems excited, her smiling lips a glossy shade of light pink, flipping the light switches off as I stand by the door, gaping like a fool.

I step into the hall while she closes the door, listening for the lock to click into place, the door armed with one of those high-tech locks that doesn't need a key.

I let her lead, all the way down to the street, the quick elevator ride silent, as I'm dreading the car ride will be, too.

Miranda looks left. Looks right.

"I'm the black truck over here."

She follows and I open the passenger door, doing my best not to stare as she slides her way in, already buckling the seatbelt when I shut her in.

I climb in and start the engine.

"This is nice," she says politely. "I feel so much safer in bigger vehicles."

"Yeah, me too." I clear my throat. Rack my brain. "Um."

*Um?*

*Good one Einstein.*

I'm going to kill Wallace. Literally wrap my fingers around his beefy neck and—

"I've been looking forward to this all week."

Okay fine. Maybe not wring his neck exactly.

I'm not sure if I'm lying or not when I say, "I have too," but I can't bloody say I've been nervous as hell. What guy wants to admit that shit? Insecurity has been the driving force all week. Thank God I had that game Saturday to take my mind off of it, the nerves from that nowhere near as bad as the nerves pooling in the pit of my stomach now.

*And she's such a tiny little thing.*

"Where are we going?" she asks, watching the landscape as we enter the freeway and I can see her image in the window, recently washed and highly

reflective.

“Mason’s.”

Miranda turns to face me, eyes wide. “Mason’s?” She has a great poker face; the restaurant is notoriously impossible to get a reservation at. All it took was my assistant calling and we had a table for two in under five. “I’ve never been there.”

No shit. Not many people have.

I, however, go there often enough that a few of the servers and hostesses know me by name. Then again, I’m the shiny new member of the Steam—it’s their job to know high profile clients who might walk through the door with only a moment’s notice.

“I hope you like steak.”

“I do. And seafood, and salad, and bread, and dessert.”

“So, food?”

“Yes! Food. There isn’t anything I won’t eat, except...” Her voice trails off. “Onions and garlic. Yikes.” Her mouth twists. “You do not want me eating either of those things. Ever.”

“Why?”

“Uh...” Her head turns to glance out the window. “Let’s just say I don’t smell cute when I eat onions or garlic.”

“Don’t smell cute? What does that mean?”

She gives me a ‘Do I have to spell it out for you?’ look and I zip my mouth shut.

Oh. So what she’s saying is she smells like stank ass when she eats garlic or onions and I shouldn’t keep asking dumb questions about it.

Point taken.

I might be clueless when it comes to women, but it feels like some confidence is kicking in for me.

We chat the rest of the way downtown, only stopping so I can concentrate on not plowing down any pedestrians. They’re everywhere in this tourist destination, jaywalking and crowding the sidewalks, hordes at the stoplights waiting to get across the main drag.

Mason’s is easy to find yet impossible to park at and I’m lucky to pull up, so Miranda can hop out without being in the street. The valets are ready to take the car and my keys. One less thing to worry about.

A young dude comes to my window and I roll it down, keys dangling in the air. As I drop them in his palm, I say, “Can you let them know I’m here

please?”

Code for: *Get me inside and seated quick so I don't draw attention to myself.* He runs off, frantically whispering to his co-worker, who dashes inside.

Good boy.

I pop on my sunglasses.

Lower my head before opening the driver's side door and climbing out, meeting Miranda at the curb, hand hovering over her lower back, but not touching her. I want to, I fucking do—I just don't have the balls.

We're greeted in the vestibule by a smiling host, most likely the manager, who begins kissing my ass almost immediately, damn near tripping over himself as he holds the door open for Miranda and asks if she'd like her coat checked.

“No thank you,” she replies and I'm glad—no waiting around after our meal if I want to get the fuck out of here. Then again, all I have to do is tell someone we want it and it'll be delivered like *that*. Same goes for my car.

If my date is wondering about all the excellent service, she hasn't said anything. If she's wondering why everyone is beginning to take notice of us—of me—she hasn't commented.

*Why would she notice asshole? She doesn't know who you are. She only knows your first name and that you can afford to drop forty-five grand on a couple baseball cards.*

“Mr. Harding, we have you in our side dining room. It's a bit more discreet.”

Miranda's brows go up. “What are you planning to do to me Noah? Murder me and drag my dead body through the kitchen?”

The manager looks shocked, quickly hiding it behind an eager smile. “Beverly will be taking care of you with the help of Jacob. If there is anything more you need, my name is Carson, and I'll be happy to get it for you. Just let one of your servers know.”

He pulls a chair out for Miranda then places the white linen napkin on her lap and the menu over her silver charger plate.

“Can I start you off with a bottle of wine?”

I glance at my date, questioning. “Wine?”

“Um.” She hesitates. “If I could just do iced tea that would be great. With a lemon if you have it?”

God, she is so sweet. And polite.

“Absolutely. And for you?”

“I’ll do the same. With sweetener.”

“Outstanding. Your server will be along shortly to take your order.” He’s gone in a flash and I turn my attention to the pretty girl across from me. Do my best to give her a grin, the tight expression strained, I’m sure.

“You poor thing. Are you nervous?” She laughs. “You look...”

“Angry?”

“I was going to say constipated, but angry works, too. You don’t smile a whole lot, do you?”

Why did she come out with me then if she thinks I’m a crab ass? Then, I frown deeper, realizing I am in fact acting like a crab ass.

In my defense, I’m edgy and paranoid. Not at all ready for this dating thing I was thrust into against my will—which is unfair to Miranda, and I realize that, too. It’s not that I don’t like her or think she’s amazing; I just don’t know how to act around a girl who wants nothing from me. I’m used to women with ulterior motives.

This is going to take some getting used to—I mean the girl ordered a four-dollar glass of tea at a high-end restaurant, for God’s sake.

The drinks arrive and we both doctor them up. Miranda sits back in her cushy, velvet padded seat and watches me add sweetener to mine then lay the tiny packet of trash on the saucer.

“Can I confess something to you?” Her tone is slightly hesitant, but she seems determined to tell me something.

“Yes, of course.” *Get it over with now; tell me you’re only here to discuss the baseball cards. Out with it.*

I brace myself.

“I’m really surprised you asked me out.”

My brows go up at that, but then I feel several sets of eyes on us and the hair on the back of my neck rises, too. Instinctively, I turn my head a little to see who’s watching us.

A couple at a nearby table gets caught red-handed, but at least they have the decency to look away quickly when I make eye contact, the woman with a cell phone in her hand pointed in our direction.

Nice. *Thanks for the privacy, lady* I want to shout across the fancy dining room.

“Why were you surprised I asked you out?” I swear my voice cracks when I ask, tension blasting my body, the couple at the other table continuing

to catch my eye and distract me.

I try to focus on what Miranda is saying.

“I wouldn’t have known you were interested, especially after Rent. Remember how you ran out?”

“I didn’t run out.” A smile begins a slow creep across my mouth and I stir the sugar in my tea with the skinny straw inside the glass. “I was having a moment.”

“A moment?” she teases. “Is that what they’re calling it now?”

“Listen, I’m not good at this sort of thing, if you haven’t figured that out yet.”

She leans forward in her seat, cleavage plumping a bit, wolfish grin on her face—the flirt. “Oh, I’ve figured it out. I just can’t figure out why.”

Why?

“You’re tall, you’re cute, you seem to be—” Miranda stops talking and cocks her head. “What do you keep staring at?” Her neck turns and it’s then she sees the young couple watching us. “Are they staring at us?”

Yes, 100% they are, but I don’t tell her that. “I think so.”

She looks back at me. “Um...*why?*”

We’re interrupted by a server, who sets bread on the table in front of us, notepad propped on her forearm, pen poised between the fingers on her other hand.

She glances expectantly between the two of us, waiting on Miranda.

“I’ll have the short rib risotto.” She closes the menu she’s holding and hands it back to Beverly, ordering soup instead of salad. “I always order risotto if it’s on a menu,” she confides in me as I’m about to tell good ol’ Bev here I’ll take the filet, medium, with mushrooms and broccoli on the side. Wedge salad, dressing on the side.

“So what were we talking about?” She’s squeezing the lemon into her drink. Stirs it with a spoon then rests it on the tea cup saucer. “Oh, that’s right—we were discussing the reason you ran out of Rent. Was it something I did? Because if I offended you in any way, I am so sorry.”

“Offended me? You?”

“Well what other reason could there be? I know I’m a bit much sometimes, but I didn’t think I was that bad. You can tell me—am I too bold? Be honest.”

“You’re not too bold. You were being...” I scan the word bank in my head, settling on “Kind.”

“Kind?” Her little laugh is adorable, but sardonic. “That is not what I would call giving you a full frontal last Saturday.”

“Full frontal?” I almost choke on the bread in my mouth as I attempt to swallow it whole. Bad idea. I cough, covering the action with the napkin from my lap.

“Sure, I’d had just enough alcohol to put the moves on you.”

“Put the moves on me?” I can’t stop myself from repeating her words.

“Duh. What did you think I was doing?”

“Hugging me because you felt bad.”

“Well, sure, you looked miserable, but I also wanted to know what you felt like.” She leans back, satisfied. “And I found out.”

What I felt like? What did I feel like? Now I’m dying to know.

A flash lights up the dining room and I clench my jaw to stop it from ticking.

“Did someone just take a picture?”

“Yeah.”

“Aww, date night!” Miranda nods, dismissing this as normal. “I bet they took pictures of their food, too, and posted it on Insta.”

I don’t bother correcting her, letting her live inside her little bubble before I have to burst it. And I will have to. The young couple who just snapped our picture isn’t the only couple who’s noticed me at the edge of the room—they’re just the first people to do something about it.

Comes with the job, but it’s not always my favorite part of it. Especially not when I’m already treading on thin ice with Miranda for the truths I’ve kept from her.

This is yet another one and it’s going to catch up to me.

Soon.

*Tonight.*

“Should we ask the waiter to take our picture too?”

Um, no? “Sure, if you want.”

This seems to make her happy because she grins. “Maybe not now—when we leave? How does that sound?”

“Sure.” I relax a bit into my chair. “Tell me more about this full frontal business.”

She rolls her eyes, dark black lashes fluttering. “It was a total ruse. You weren’t going to get handsy, so I was going to get handsy. Only—it freaked you out.” Her laugh is loud enough to draw more attention, but I grin, despite

myself.

“I’m not good at flirting.” I am a master of the obvious.

“What *are* you good at then?”

I can’t decide if this is an innuendo—an invitation to begin a sex conversation—or an innocent question about my secret skills.

I go with the latter. “I’m good at math. And I’m good at...” My throat clears. “Sports.” No time like the present to start dropping hints.

“Which sports?” She only breaks eye contact when Jacob—the other server—sets down our soup and salad.

I wait for him to leave. “I used to play football, but then in high school, I focused on baseball.” I force the words out painfully, reciting them like a requiem.

“Baseball? That’s nice.” She pauses just long enough to take a tiny sip of soup, testing out how hot it is. Hums. “This is good. I love bisque—no places I go ever have it.”

I peacock a bit, glad to make her happy with a simple tureen of soup.

“So you’re good at math, sports, and what else?” She busies herself with the bisque, adding a tad bit of pepper. “I want to hear more about you—what do you love doing when you have the weekend off?”

I have entire seasons off—whole months, I want to point out—but I keep that information to myself. Although, now is just as good a time as any to tell her I’m a professional athlete.

“It depends on the time of year,” I admit honestly. “But usually in my free time I work out to stay in shape, and—obviously you know I like collecting things. Baseball cards is only one of my collections. I also love vintage pennants and signed baseballs.”

“Wow. You really do love baseball.”

“Yeah.” I flush, digging into my salad, sliding a mushroom onto my fork for the perfect bite. “What about you?”

“What am I good at? Um—I used to be a runner, but I haven’t gone in ages. Winter had me all kinds of unmotivated, but when I jog, I feel so much better. Uh, let’s see...I paint? And I love decorating. I think I’m good at it?”

“What do you collect?”

“I love antique malls. Architectural remnants. My parents have a place about forty minutes north of here with a shed and they let me store things there. Someday, I’m going to build a house and use the things I’ve collected.”

If she likes old things, she would probably hate my house with its

polished stone, echoing hallways, and cold tile floors.

I hate it too, if I'm being real.

"What are you thinking about? You look so serious all of a sudden."

"I hate my house," I blurt out.

First, Miranda looks shocked. Then, she bursts out laughing. Snorts. "Oh my god, that is so random. What made you say that?"

"You. It sounds like you know what you want. You have it all figured out."

"Nah, I just like old shit. Stuff—old *stuff*, sorry."

"You can swear, I don't—"

"Mr. Harding?" A man is standing next to the table, and I glance up. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering—"

"Can it wait? Catch me after I'm done here?" I give Miranda a tight-lipped smile, her eyes having gone wide. "Thanks."

The man says something I can't understand, presumably apologizing, before fading away.

"Uh." My date's soup spoon hovers about the bowl, mid-sip. "What the hell was that?"

Beverly chooses that moment to swing by and ask how our meal is, but instead of giving her a thumbs up, I catch her to say, "Hi Bev, can you kindly ask them to not take pictures?"

"Of course Mr. Harding. We are so sorry."

I nod, irritated. Can barely meet Miranda's eyes.

"What is going on?" Now she sets her spoon down and leans back to look at me anew. "Who are you?"

I open my mouth to respond, but she beats me to it.

"Wait, this is Chicago—are you in the mob?" She lowers her voice to a frantic whisper. "Like, I know all about that stuff. If you are, blink twice."

I do not blink twice.

"Dammit, that seems like the obvious choice!" She sighs. "Well? Are you going to tell me or do I have to go ask that dude who obviously wanted your autograph?"

He chose a shitty time to come ask for it, making me feel and look like kind of a selfish asshole. What are the chances he's ever going to bump into me again?

For real though—if I sign something for him, a line will form and I'll be stuck here signing my name on shit instead of enjoying dinner, which would

get cold and have to be put in a takeout container. I've been down this road before and have no interest in going there tonight.

*No need to feel guilty.*

*You deserve privacy.*

I have to repeat this over and over and will surely do so again tonight, when I'm alone again and lying in my giant bed, staring up at the ceiling in my dumb giant bedroom inside my stupid giant McMansion.

"Noah?" She's quiet now.

"Mm?"

"So before when those people were taking pictures, they weren't taking them of themselves?" She shifts in her chair, and I can see that she's uncomfortable. "I'm pretty sure they were taking them of you. Am I right?"

I swallow the piece of bread I've just set on my tongue, an answer to her question not finding its way out right away.

"Yes."

She hesitates. "Why?"

*Because I'm famous, except you're the only one who hasn't realized it, which means you're here because you actually like me for who I am, and these fuckers have the potential to ruin the entire evening for us by being nosy.*

Nope. Too harsh, can't say it. Even though the onlookers with their prying eyes are making me nervous, and edgy, and I'm losing my patience—I still cannot say it.

"Maybe they were taking pictures of you?" I counter back, grinning.

"Why would they do that!" She laughs, amused, swirling the straw around her iced tea to occupy her hands.

"Because you're so cute?" Oh my god, those words did not just come out of my mouth. I want to snatch them back, they feel so foreign, though the compliment did roll off my tongue pretty nicely.

Miranda stops swirling her tea around, a stunned expression filling her gorgeous face. "Did you just call me cute?"

"Yes."

"Are you flirting with me while I'm trying to get to the bottom of this?"

It's a mystery I can easily solve with an explanation, but now I'm having too much fun. "All I'm trying to do is get to the bottom of this glass, so I can have another one."

"It's iced tea," she points out wryly, scanning the room again with her

perceptive eyes. “That man over there is staring so hard I swear he wants you to notice him. He’s barely paying attention to his wife or whoever that lady is he’s with.”

Probably his wife.

I chuckle.

“Do you think this is funny?”

Wallace may have had a point when he told me, *“Dude, if you stay home like a hermit and don’t go out in public, when you finally do, the media and fans will be so hungry for a picture of you it won’t be pleasant, and you’re going to hate yourself.”*

He was right.

This is annoying and it sucks.

“No, I don’t think this is funny. But it happens all the time, which is why I sent my friend Wallace to get the baseball card from you.”

There, I finally fucking said it.

Sort of.

Miranda is silent, as if she’s picking apart the sentence, deciding which part to respond to. She chooses the first.

“What do you mean it happens all the time? You still haven’t told me what you do—is this because of your job? Are you on TV?” She groans. “Please do not tell me you’re the star of a reality TV show.” She feigns a gag.

“I’m not on a reality show.”

That she thinks I’m the type of guy who would do that? Laughable.

Like a police interrogator, I can see she’s determined to let the quiet stretch between us until it’s uncomfortable, or until I crack and start spilling my guts, whichever comes first.

We sit staring at one another until she raises an eyebrow.

Cocks her head. Sips at her tea.

Picks at the bread.

Dear god how long is she going to sit there not talking?

I clear my throat.

Adjust myself in my chair, rearrange the napkin on my lap.

Miranda sighs. “You’re really going to make me come out and ask?”

“Ask what?”

My date rolls her eyes. “What you do for a living that has everyone staring?”

“Not everyone is staring.” I can’t help myself. “That guy and that guy and

that guy couldn't care less." They're either blind and can't see me sitting here or aren't baseball fans.

"I'm not going to play guessing games with you, but you're obviously on TV."

True.

"I am on TV." I'm proud of my career and everything I've built, so why is telling her so hard? It's not like I'm bragging. It's not like I'm trying to impress her. It's just...facts. "I play baseball. For a living."

The servers come and take our appetizer plates, replacing them with our entrees.

"For a living?" I see the wheels turning, a bit resistantly, it seems. "Like—professionally?"

I hold back a laugh, not wanting to piss her off. "Yes, professionally."

"Like—*how* professional?" She's got that pretty little head of hers cocked sideways at me again.

"As professional as it can get."

Miranda blinks as if she's not quite sure what that means. "What team?"

"Chicago Steam."

Her lips twist in thought, making it hard to read her face. "What position?"

"Shortstop."

"Shortstop." She inhales. Exhales. "That's a good position, isn't it?"

I bust out laughing. "Yes, that's good."

Miranda is quiet after that, clearly mulling this news over, piecing together the bits of what she now knows about Noah Harding, and I let her ponder, uninterrupted.

After a few tastes of her dinner, a tender piece of ribs on a bed of rice that looks insanely delicious, she rests her fork on the edge of the plate. Swallows. Leans back to study me, arms crossed.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner that you're a ballplayer? I kind of feel like an idiot."

I fidget, as if she's the teacher and I'm the student, who's just been busted doing something naughty.

"I wasn't sure how to tell you and honestly? I didn't think I would have to."

"Because you weren't planning on seeing me again?"

Bingo! "Sort of."

“Hmm.” She hums low in her throat, but it makes its way across the table.

“The baseball thing—it’s just a job.”

Just a job? Wow. No bigger load of bullshit has ever left my mouth and I want to take the words back immediately. She and I both know it was a ridiculous thing to say.

“It’s not just a job—don’t lie. It’s a big freaking deal.” She glances around at the people watching us like we’re their entertainment for the evening. “Look around you...everyone is watching us.”

That actually makes me blush. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just...” She huffs. “I don’t know what to say right now.” She sets her napkin next to her plate and pushes up out of the chair, rising. “I’m going to go to the bathroom, okay?”

“Promise you won’t crawl out the back window?”

At least she laughs. “Please, this is Chicago—I’d fall into a dumpster occupied by a homeless person and a dozen rats.” Her finger taps the table twice. “Be right back.”

I’ll be waiting.

## MIRANDA

“I’M SORRY, can you repeat that?” The reception on my call to Claire is terrible. The sound was breaking up when I stood near the sink in the women’s bathroom, so I’m in a stall with my hand cupping the receiver and pressing my body against the cold, tile wall.

Four bars when I hover.

Two bars when I stand up straight.

Shit.

“Did you say Noah *Harding*?”

“Yes. I thought I already told you his last name—why do you keep repeating it?” She’s being a weirdo.

“Eh, I don’t remember—but like, Noah *Harding*?”

“Yes, Claire—focus! This is DEFCON-1 level shit! What do I do?” Only my best friend can help me get out of this mess. Or help me fix it.

“What do you do? Girl, you’re at dinner with a freaking major league ballplayer—why are you in the bathroom whining about it?”

“Because he never told me! He lied!”

“Lies by omission? Big deal! Are you listening to yourself? If I were there I would slap some sense into you.” I hear her rip open a bag of something—chips, probably. “Everyone knows who Noah *Harding* is, Miranda. Even my six-year-old brother.”

“Well I didn’t,” I declare snippily. “He should have told me.”

“Uh, what could he have said that wouldn’t have made him sound like a total douchebag?”

Okay, true. “I don’t know. Anything.”

“Oh hey, by the way, I play baseball for the Steam and just signed an 80 million dollar contract for three—”

“What!”

“What are you shouting about now? Read the google, for crying out loud. He’s worth a friggin’ fortune.”

80 million dollars.

Well no wonder he could afford those baseball cards—forty-five grand is less than he pays in income tax!

“I’ve never dated anyone with a decent job, let alone a professional one.”

“Yes, well—welcome to adulting.”

“Could you dial down the haughty attitude? It’s not helping.”

Claire snorts. “What do you want me to tell you? To go in there and throw water in his face because he’s AWESOME? No. You’re the one who needs a bucket of water tossed on you. Get a grip.”

I sputter. “Claire!”

“No. Put on more lip gloss and get your bony ass back out there. Do all us single girls a favor and give the guy a chance. I’m hanging up—goodbye.”

I stare at a blank screen, the line dead.

A few seconds later:

**Claire:** *Don’t forget to call me later, whore.*

I do what she says. Dig into my purse for the lip gloss I tossed in before leaving home and put some on before leaving the restroom stall. And, on second thought, I should probably try to pee while I’m in here, since I’m in here.

Finish up, wash my hands, stare at my reflection in the mirror.

“You never would have known if he hadn’t told you,” I say to myself. “He is a nice, sweet guy.” Shy and a bit aloof, but I can see he has a good heart. “Give him a chance. Don’t judge him because you’re intimidated—he doesn’t deserve it.”

I acknowledge that last thought again: I am intimidated. Who wouldn’t be? Fans. Women. Reporters. Lack of privacy. Nice things, but at what expense? Not even being able to have dinner without being interrupted by strangers? Having your photo taken without your permission while you stuff your face?

Tabloids writing about you, getting in your business.

Is that the kind of life I would have if I dated him?

It’s not like he chose it, either. But in a way, he did!

I stand there debating with myself until a woman walks in and glances at me, doing a double take. Smiles a little too wide as she drifts to the sink to

wash her hands—without using the toilet first.

Weird, but whatever.

“Hello,” she says pleasantly.

I smile back, pulling a terrycloth towel from a small stack in a basket on the counter, and hand it to her.

“Thank you.” She grins, opening her mouth to say something—but I cut her off.

“Have a good night.”

She knows I’m here with Noah; I can see it in her eyes.

Suddenly, I’m furious for him, marching back to the table with purpose.

“Do you want to take this food and get out of here? We can eat it at my place.” We need to talk and it won’t be happening here, in a room full of gawkers.

He looks up at me. Nods. “Yes.”

Good. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure?” His expression is a mix of relief and uncertainty, but he’s already taking the napkin from his lap and setting it on the table before flagging down our server to box up our food.

“Yes, Noah, I’m sure. C’mon.”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a stack of cash, peeling off a few hundred-dollar bills and laying them on the table before standing.

Holy shit—that must be a thousand bucks! What the hell is he doing walking around with that kind of cash?

“And you were trying to convince me you aren’t in the mob,” I tease, grabbing my jacket from the back of my chair and letting him help me slip it on.

Such a gentleman.

He chuckles, close to my ear as I shrug into the jean jacket. “You’re really something else—do you know that?”

I shiver. “All I’m saying is, be careful or you’re going to get mugged with all that loot.”

“I haven’t been near a dark alley in a long time and I’m pretty sure at some point I mentioned my ability to run really fast.”

“Oh that’s rightttt,” I joke. “Baseman. It all makes sense now—you’re a super-fast baseball guy everyone is making a fuss over.”

“Did you google me while you were in the bathroom?”

“No.” Pfft. “Claire did.”

“It’s kind of pathetic when my date knows nothing about the sport I play or who I am as a player.”

“Don’t lie—you kind of like it. Otherwise you would have told me sooner.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

I roll my eyes. “Do not even say that. You don’t have an egotistical bone in your body. You’re too nice.”

“Too nice?” He pretends to be stabbed in the heart. “Okay, now I’m butthurt. No guys wants to be the nice guy—you might as well slap a label on my forehead that says friend-zoned.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a nice guy! Why do guys hate that so much?”

“Because, Miranda, nice guys usually only finish first in the movies. They are not the trophy boyfriends every girl wants.”

“That’s not true! I can’t stand guys who are assholes—it doesn’t matter how good-looking they are.” I stop myself before I use his buddy Buzz as an example; the pair of them are like night and day and if it’s a touchy subject with Noah, I don’t want to piss him off.

We’re having a good time, and the last thing I want to do is spoil the mood that’s already been affected by superfans who can’t be bothered to use manners.

Beverly comes with our leftovers and tells us the car is already out front, idling when we push through the doors to outside.

The ride back to the burbs, back to my place, is pleasant as we both search for things to say. It’s not awkward silence, but silence just the same—a newness to the whole thing that fills me with excitement and anticipation.

I invite him inside when we park and he grabs the takeout from the back seat where we stowed it. Judging by the size of the bags, Beverly threw in a few other things.

I can’t wait to dig through it.

Noah is big. Fills my kitchen after we’re settled in, our shoes by the front door, his navy stocking feet a contrast to the rest of him. So tall and imposing.

I shiver a little, turning away from him to retrieve some plates, then, “Should we just warm up the containers? Like, do we even need plates?”

“Good call—let’s just eat out of the boxes.”

So we do.

Seated on the floor in my minuscule living room, Noah and I tear through our meals like savages, an entire hour after they first arrived at our table. We were too distracted to eat then.

“Is it always like that?” I want to know, cutting through the pork riblet resting on a bed of risotto.

He raises one shoulder into a half shrug, chewing his steak. Swallows. “Eh, sometimes. It depends on where I go? I’m less conspicuous at, say, the mall, or like at the coffee shop the other day. Glasses and a hat help.”

“Sure, I can see that.” I pause, thinking. “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“You know.” I wave a hand airily around. “Having everyone know who you are, but you don’t know them,” I clarify.

“I won’t lie, it’s weird. Real hard to get used to.” He uses a knife to spear through a hunk of meat; it hovers halfway to his mouth. “People come up and know all this shit about me, like my birthday or my parents’ names and where I was raised. And I don’t know who they are at all. Kind of creepy, but...no close calls. Yet.”

“What do you mean by close calls?”

“Stalkers.”

I feel my eyes widen. “Stalkers? Like—that come to your house?”

“Yeah, it happens. Superfans or people get pissed off and go crazy blaming you for a loss. It doesn’t get any realer than that.”

“So no one has ever stood on your lawn and shouted at your windows?”

“No.” He laughs. “But I live in a gated community, and there’s a fence around my house, too, so...”

Ah. I see.

Not an apartment, not a condo. Not a shithole he rents. “Do you have roommates?”

“God no.”

The tone in which he says it makes me laugh and I bite down on my bottom lip to hold in a huge grin. “Guess you don’t need to split the rent, eh?”

I can’t believe I actually have the lady balls to allude to the fact that he has money. I’m so tacky sometimes.

His smile is rueful. “You’ve met some of my friends—can you imagine living with Buzz Wallace?” He feigns a tremor rippling through his body. “I’d kill him within a week.”

“Is he that bad?”

“That bad? That—” He gives me a stunned expression, a playful one. “He’s the fucking worst, pardon my French.” Stops. “I don’t speak French.”

“Is he one of your best friends?”

Noah tips his head to the side as he considers the answer to this. “Uh...I don’t know. He does some pretty fucked up shit.”

“What kind of fucked up shit?” I don’t mind cursing since he’s done it twice in the span of thirty seconds.

“Acting like an asshole when he was pretending to be me. He comes over, eats all my food and never feeds me. Lets himself in—once I found him in my backyard with three random women. You have a house, dude—don’t use mine as your sex dungeon.”

“Sex dungeon!”

“Okay, maybe that’s me being dramatic, but he doesn’t need to bring anyone over without telling me. It’s rude. My home isn’t a fraternity house.”

“Were you in a fraternity in college?”

“God no—when would I have had the time? I entered the draft as a senior, and you have to prepare for that months in advance to be eligible, so I had no life.”

“You didn’t date?” Yes, I’m fishing for information on his love life.

“Uh—no.”

“Because you didn’t have time?”

The vegetables on his fork hang there, halfway to his mouth. “Sure, we’ll go with that.”

“What kind of answer is that! I didn’t date in college either, mostly because I’m not the kind of girl guys hit on.”

There. I said it.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t dress sexy or go out and get drunk. If I was being hit on, I wouldn’t have known it. Guys don’t like the girl next door. They want the girl who wants to bang.”

“Those guys were idiots. You’re gorgeous—who wouldn’t want to date you?”

He’s not looking at me, he’s staring into the takeout container as if it’s the most fascinating thing in the room, but the insides of me melt at his words just the same. There is nothing placating or pandering about them and he’s bashfully hiding his face as he says it, so endearing and sweet.

Noah Harding is a big softie.

“Plenty of people haven’t wanted to date me.”

“You don’t sound upset about it.”

I shake my head slowly. “I’m not. I’ve always thought the right guy would come along when he came along.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I just mean that...” I pause to think about it before putting it into words. “I’m young—we are young. Everyone—and by everyone, I mean my girlfriends—puts pressure on themselves to find someone, to be in a relationship, and they’re willing to settle for the first asshole who pays them any attention. Then it’s nonstop drama and arguing.” I feed myself and chew. “Sometimes they break up then get back together, then break up, and everyone around them develops whiplash from the back and forth.”

I mimic my head whipping side to side.

Digging a fork into my dinner, I say, “My mom always told me, ‘When you know, you know.’”

And when it comes to Noah—I know. I just do. He’s a great, caring guy, and no matter what he wants to believe, he gives me flutters and butterflies—a few key ingredients in the early stages of puppy love.

I’ve never been in it before.

“You feel no pressure to meet someone?” he asks me after a moment of silence.

“Not really. Do you?” I glance up and over at him, cross-legged on my living room floor and smile.

The shake of his head is terse, definitive. “No.”

“When was your last relationship?” It’s a fair question, although to be honest, I once read an article saying it was against the rules to ask this on a first date, dismissing it as completely irrelevant.

But I disagree. His relationship history has everything to do with me. It can tell a lot about a person—if they’re a stayer or a goer.

“I’ve never had one.”

“Never had a relationship?”

“No.” He lets the answer linger before asking me the same question. “What about you?”

I lift a shoulder. “Eh. Briefly, in college. Not anyone I brought home to meet my parents. Just a guy who was fun to hang around with.” My friends

hated him, so there was that. Newsflash: when Claire or Emily or any of my other friends didn't like a guy, didn't approve of him, or thought he was a douche? It became impossible to date him, like him, or bang him.

Bye-bye Brad.

Hello single life.

Claire introduced me to my first vibrator our junior year of college and I haven't worried about dicks since. I *miss* dicks, but I didn't sleep my way through my graduating class to satisfy my lust for one.

Noah clears his throat as if he can see my inner thoughts, including the dicks now on my brain, even though I spent the last few seconds convincing myself I couldn't care less about them.

He knows.

And now I know he knows and both our faces are bright red, leaving me no choice but to reach over and trace my hand over his strong jawline—the one dominated by dirty blond stubble—letting my thumb brush beneath his bottom lip.

His body goes still. Rigid almost. And for a second my heart stops beating, afraid I've done something wrong—like that night at Rent when he bolted and didn't come back to me.

*Don't leave, Noah.* “I'm sorry, I...”

He repositions himself, sitting up again, fingers reaching out to circle my wrist, gently.

Pulls me closer.

When our lips meet, I'm not surprised—we have chemistry and have been wanting to kiss since the minute he picked me up for our date tonight.

My body sags with relief and a bit of shock, honestly.

He *actually* did it. He made the first move!

Hallelujah! I was worried he had no interest in jumping my bones, which is something my grandmother used to say, and now I feel old.

Ugh.

I have just enough time to put my own dinner container on the carpet as he hauls me into his lap with seemingly little effort. I'm not tiny by any means, but I feel dainty as he hefts me over.

For a kiss.

Swoon! I have died and gone to heaven...

I'm in his lap when our mouths meet again, everything I just ate forgotten, inhibitions gone. His lips are warm, but not tentative. Full.

He's holding me—cradling me, almost—bowing his head to seal the deal, and I let my arms rise so I can curl my hands behind his head, fingers grazing his hair at the nape of his neck.

He could probably use a haircut, but he smells fantastic, the pheromones working their magic on my lady parts.

His broad chest feels good. Warm. His hands on my back, supporting me? Better. The mouth fused against mine? Delicious.

I cannot get enough of Noah Harding the sweet, sweet man child.

I cradle his face as I sit in his lap, legs hanging over his crossed ones, our tongues finally getting acquainted.

There is nothing timid about the way he's kissing me, no hesitations like there are when he speaks. No shyness. No embarrassment.

I feel my panties dampen.

He moves me then, just out of the way of the bags and containers scattered on the floor, laying me down and rolling to hover over me, large hand cupping my cheek the way I cupped his. Staring down at me, memorizing the contours of my face with his eyes and hands.

I don't dare move. Or talk.

Or breathe.

I do not want it to end.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs, more to himself than to me. "Smart." The tip of his finger runs along the Cupid's bow of my upper lip. "Funny." It trails up the bridge of my nose. Along my eyebrow. "Sexy." *Me, sexy? Do go on.* "Cute." *No, not that!* "Brave."

"How am I brave?" I whisper, not wanting to break the spell, but curious.

"Because," he whispers back, "you're 22 and you're starting your own business. That takes guts."

Oh, *that*.

Yes. Yes it does.

Noah's brown eyes get darker the longer he looks down at me, pupils dilating, nostrils flaring a little.

I recognize that look: he is turned on.

My breath hastens more when his hand takes a leisurely trip down the column of my neck, brushing the hair back, thumb playing with the underside of my earlobe.

Down over the curve between my neck and shoulder, palm flattening, fingers skimming lightly over my collarbone—one of my favorite erogenous

zones.

I barely resist a moan.

Noah falters, his attention drawn to the open part of my dress, where my breasts are pushed up by a black, lacy bra. To urge him on, I reach up and rake an entire hand of fingers through his hair, nails grazing his scalp.

He gets the message loud and clear, the rough palm of his hand slowly dragging across the exposed part of my skin, sending a ripple through my body and causing goose bumps to arise. My nipples pucker and he notices, giving them the attention they want, tip of his index finger tracing round and round over the fabric of my dress.

Then.

He draws that fabric back, hand caressing the lace bra. Thumb stroking the plumped-up mound I hadn't realized was so sensitive to the touch.

This time, that moan escapes on a sigh. Relief. Pleasure.

God, I love having my boobs played with and it's been too long—way too long. I love it. I. love. it.

“So pretty,” he's murmuring again, leaning in, pushing back the bra, mouth latching onto my nipple and my hands now fully buried in this thick hair, wanting him to stay this way forever and give me all the 'gasms.

Sue me for being lazy and wanting to just lie here, but c'mon!

Noah sucks, his tongue pure magic. So magical I swear, if he sucks my nipple long enough, I may end up coming. No lie. It feels that amazing or I'm that easy—does it even matter?

No.

All that matters is this boy.

He does not miss a beat, suckling at the same time his hands go to the little knotted belt at my waist, tugging hard enough to release the loop. Big, warm, calloused hand roaming over my stomach, down to the waistband of the granny panties I wore so I wouldn't have sex with him on the first date.

So much for that dumb idea.

“Cute.” I feel him smile, lips and hands all over my body.

My knees spread at the welcome intrusion, already weakened. I am wanton.

He makes me feel sexy, the way he's gazing up at me, as if I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever laid eyes on, and isn't that the way it's supposed to be when you find someone you think might...

I stop my mind from wandering, so I can stay in the moment. So I can

feel his hands and mouth and tongue.

Lips kiss my pelvis.

Lips kiss along the waistband of my Hanes.

Oh *yeah*.

Praise be! *Yes!* Don't stop.

He moves over me, in between my legs, positioned to pleasure, wide shoulders inching my thighs apart. I moan with anticipation, then moan again when his warm breath hits the valley I desperately want him exploring. Hot. Warm. Breath.

Hot. Wet. Pussy.

My head thrashes on the floor, fingers clenching the carpet, pulling, then reaching for his hair. Gently tugging.

Noah buries his face. Licks my panties, so they're good and wet. Tugs on them. Pulls. Creates a friction so delicious I groan out loud and pant his name, throw a little Jesus into the mix along with it.

"Oh lord, Noah." Oh *god*.

I'm not sure what to do with myself, not having done this in who knows how long—porn does not count. Watching a man go down on a woman is not like having a man's head between one's legs, the feel of his body keeping your legs spread apart. The soft hair on his head as you grip it, muttering and praying to the heavens above.

"Thank you, Lord," I mouth to the ceiling, convinced once and for all that the stars are aligning and good luck is on my side.

First the city approving my business plan. Then the landlord accepting my application to rent the office space. Noah buying my cards, so I have the money to pay my rent, to hire an architect and a social media/bookkeeper/office manager person.

Why am I thinking about work when his tongue is—

"Oh! Yes..." Keep doing that. *That*, right there.

Noah goes at me hard, mouth working my clit through the thin fabric of my panties, something I've only fantasized about. It feels so frigging good—so sexy.

I leverage my body up a bit, resting on my elbows so I can get a view of his blond head, face buried, eyes closed.

My head tips back but I stay elevated, wanting to enjoy the show. It turns me on more to see him going down on me, even with these half-hooded eyes of mine.

Noah pulls his head back, fingers easing their way beneath the panties. Hooking either side of the waistband, hauling them down. Down. Towing them all the way off and discarding them at my feet, his mouth glistening.

“You taste so fucking good” are the last words he says before diving back in, lips and tongue and teeth clashing over my clit, licking and sucking until I’m moaning out loud—loud enough, it seems, to wake the dead.

Loud enough that I would be embarrassed if I cared enough to be embarrassed.

I don’t.

The noise doesn’t faze him, only seems to spur him on, arms hooking under my knees, pulling me deeper into his mouth. Spreads my legs wider. Kisses harder.

Everything quivers. Shakes. Vibrates.

I squirm.

He holds me down.

I gnash my teeth.

Noah braces my hips.

He is not letting me weasel my way out. He is going to refuse to—“Fuck me. Oh my god, I want to feel you inside of me so bad.”

He ignores me, sucking harder.

I tip my head back, hair landing on the carpet beneath me, mouth open, eyes squeezed shut.

“Come for me, baby,” he urges, still lapping me up like it’s his day job and he’s gunning for a bonus.

“I want to come so bad,” I moan like a porn star, beginning a slow roll of my hips, mimicking the motion I’d make if he were actually inside, screwing me. Grip his head, yanking on his hair as gently as I can—which isn’t all that gentle given how lost in the moment I am.

How lost we are.

He’s enjoying it too—I can tell by the noises he’s making in his throat. How he’s looking at my pussy when he runs his fingers over my clit. How he watches me as his fingers go inside.

Jesus he’s good at this.

I wonder how many women he’s had to sleep with to achieve this skill level...

*Stop it, Miranda. He isn’t that kind of guy.*

Noah is sweet and shy and sexy—hardly the womanizing playboy his

friend Buzz is. Or maybe he doesn't have to work at it at all; maybe the women flock to him without him even trying. *Oh my god, there must be groupies everywhere.*

I tense up.

Noah notices. "What's wrong?"

I push his head back down like a strumpet. "Nothing. Keep going."

He does. He does and he doesn't stop until the pulses in my stomach are the pulses in my vagina, reverberating in my thighs, and my body is racked with exploding nerve endings.

Yes, yes, hell yes!

I want to die.

And laugh.

And cry.

Cry? Let me rephrase: weep tears of joy from the climax I just experienced, a true gift from the Almighty.

*Dramatic* much?

But seriously, I could kiss his mouth right now out of gratitude; this orgasm feels amazing. Incredible. I shall forever be indebted to the first orgasm of the year I didn't give to myself.

Mostly naked, on the floor, it dawns on me for the first time that Noah is completely dressed...and probably stiff as a board, hard as a rock—whatever analogy you want to use for massively erect. Guilt washes over me as my gaze scans over the front of his dress pants when he repositions his body next to mine.

Yup.

He's totally hard.

I reach between our bodies, flattened palm working its way down to his belt, none too expertly fumbling with the gold-plated clasp. Pull it through the loops as he sucks in a breath, our mouths fusing while I diligently free the smooth leather.

He tastes like me and I like it.

My fingers find the button on his slacks. More fumbling. The zipper comes down with a satisfying whir, the bulge of his hard on covered by the dark fabric of gray underwear, and it has my clit pulsing all over again, my mouth watering, excited.

Jesus. I've never been this desperate to see a dick before. Normally they're not my thing—I mean, who thinks dicks are cute? Literally no one

except the owner of any given penis and most men haven't gotten the memo that no one wants to see that shit, especially unsolicited.

Noah's dick, though? I want to see it.

It's thick, and warm, and when I touch it, it moves.

My eyes dart to his face: eyes closed, mouth slightly open, arms braced behind his head. He peels said eyes open to look at me and our gazes meet at the same time I run the tip of my finger along the waistband of his boxer briefs.

Hard stomach.

Hard thighs.

Hard cock.

I stretch back the cotton just enough to play peekaboo with the tip. The head. *The best part of the entire thing.*

Noah hisses through his teeth, a powerful aphrodisiac that goes to my head; I am drunk with the idea of making his knees weak.

But I do not plan to suck it.

I do not plan to blow him.

What am I going to do?

I'm kicking this old school with a good old-fashioned hand job, the way we did it in high school before we were brave enough to put one in our mouths and suck it.

I tug at his pants, pulling them down his hips and leaving them down around his calves. Then, I run a finger along his shaft, wanting to see it jump again.

It does not disappoint, eager for my touch, wanting attention.

It's not so big I'm afraid to pull his underwear down, and I sigh with relief; I've never seen a monster dick in person, but Claire and Emily have told me horror stories, and I'm suddenly grateful that Noah—for his tall size and stature—possesses a proportionately average, Noah-sized package.

I wouldn't know how to handle a giant one, so I'm giving thanks for the one in my hand. The man on my living room floor gasps when skin-on-skin contact is made, his underwear having joined his trousers.

There is a bottle of lotion nearby—another thing we used back in the day when we were too chicken to buy lube at the pharmacy, the only store in town that sold condoms and contraception—and I reach for it.

Unscented. Left there from when I moisturized after shaving before our date.

Noah is unfazed when I squirt lotion into my palms then rub them both together, warming up the cool cream. He's barely coherent, breathing heavy—waiting.

Is it too soon to blow him?

Gretchen once said if you blow a guy on the first date, he'll never take you home to meet his mother, but Noah's dick is right here, in my hand, and he's so sexy lying on my floor...

Ugh. It's been so long and I just want it.

IS THAT SO WRONG?

## NOAH

“HARDING, Phil wants to see you in his office after practice.” One of the assistant coaches has been waiting for an opportunity to shout the message at me, the bat in my hand dangling after I hit a fly ball over second base, watching it soar into the air.

Shit. It’s never a good thing when the team’s publicist, Phil Scilara, wants to have a meeting after practice. Usually it’s tactical, to strategize about a public fuck up someone on the team was involved in, and usually those have nothing to do with me. Wallace, yes. Espinoza, yes.

Me, no.

Besides, unless there’s a situation—drunken photos emerging, or misconduct all over the news, or a woman claiming paternity—Phil is rarely in his office.

“Do you know what he wants?” I toss the bat in my hand to a different assistant and wipe my forehead with the towel in my back pocket.

“No clue.” He shrugs. “Sorry man.”

“I know what it’s about.” Wallace—the sneaky fuck—is behind me, and I turn, batting gloves coming off one at a time, as I watch him walking toward me.

Why is he always around when there’s drama?

“Are you going to tell me?” I can’t stand when someone beats around the bush. If he knows why I’m being called into the principal’s office, I want him to spit it out.

“You’re all over the news.” He spits on the ground. “You and your friend.”

Friend? “You mean Miranda?”

“Yeah.” For once in his life, Buzz Wallace comes at me looking bashful

instead of cocky. Hesitant instead of aggressive.

That...cannot be good.

“And?”

His feet shuffle in the red dirt, the toe of his cleats soiled. “Fuck, man. I don’t know what to tell you.”

What does that mean?

“Shit.” Wallace pauses, hands stuffed in the pockets of his team issued athletic pants, company logo of our sponsor emblazoned on the side. He takes them out and claps them, as if trying to psych himself up. “Okay, I’m just going to say it—like tearing off a Band-Aid.”

I wait for him to fill in the blanks.

“You’re in the news—you and Miranda. And the headlines are...” He dips his head, staring down at his shoes. “They’re embarrassing.”

“We were at dinner.” How could that be considered embarrassing?

Buzz begins a slow pace to home plate, to where the catcher usually squats, then back to me. His arms rise and his giant, sweaty palms clamp down on my shoulders, squeezing firmly. “Look dude, you’re my best friend...”

Oh shit.

“...but this is going to fuck you up.”

I scoff with a loud, “Pfft. We had *dinner*—nothing indecent happened. A few people took pictures, but that was it. We weren’t at a strip club, I didn’t get a lap dance, no one was drunk, we went to a nice place.”

Side by side, we begin our walk toward the dugout, and I can feel Wallace thinking beside me; he’s that deep in thought, brows furrowed into angry slashes.

“Hey pretty boy,” one of the guys says as we get closer.

“Shut your fucking mouth, Gomez,” Wallace snaps and it’s then that I take his words seriously.

“Wallace, what the fuck is going on?”

We don’t make it to the dugout before he takes my arm and pulls back, leading me toward the tunnel for the locker rooms. Stops, shifting me to face him. “Bro. You know I think you’re fucking awesome. You know how the paps can be dicks and reporters are fucking worse—”

I yank his hands off me, pissed. Frustrated. “Dude, spit it out!”

“Shit.” Is Wallace hanging his head? “There’s no easy way to tell you this. Promise you won’t get mad.”

Too late. “I’m already mad.”

He inhales a deep breath and lets it all go with a stream of words. “Your picture with Miranda is out there and the press is calling you both ugly ... there I said it.”

Exhale.

He physically sags against the cement wall behind him, the dark hall leading to the offices and locker rooms hollow and cold.

Colder now that I’ve been dealt this blow, except I’m still not sure what it means.

“What picture?”

“The two of you eating.”

*Fuck that fucking guy who took our goddamn picture.*

“But it’s not the pictures, Baseman—it’s the headlines.”

I lean against the wall next to him, running a hand through my hair after removing my ball cap. My hair is sweaty and wet and I slick it back away from my eyes.

“What headlines?” What could they possibly say that has Buzz Wallace—the least sympathetic guy I’ve ever met—suddenly so goddamn sympathetic?

My buddy tips his neck back, gazing up toward the ceiling, squinting. “The ones that say, *‘He might be a brownbagger, but I’d fuck anyone with even half his net worth.’*”

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I can’t stop the obscenities from pouring out of my mouth. Can’t stop myself from kicking the ground beneath my feet, from wanting to punch the hard wall behind me.

“Are you going to go see Phil?” Wallace wants to know.

“What the hell is Phil going to do about it? Tell me to stay home?” Fuck Phil. Fuck the paparazzi. Fuck phones with cameras.

“You have to call Miranda—she’s probably flipping her shit.”

No doubt.

After we had such a great night. For once I had gotten out of my own head at her apartment and it was amazing. She was amazing. Now how will I face her. I know me-I won’t.

“Harding. You have to call her.”

I give a barely perceptible shake of my head. *I can’t.*

“Dude, you cannot ignore her. I bet she’s called you a million times.”

And I wouldn't blame her, but I can't talk to her right now. I need to think.

I don't want to be near Wallace.

I don't want to be near anyone.

Pushing away from the wall, I head into the tunnel and away from Wallace, the sorry bastard who had to deliver the bad news. Into the dark, where the temperature matches my mood.

“Harding! Bro, I'm sorry!”

Not as sorry as I am for going on that date to begin with.

*I should have known better.*

## MIRANDA

NOAH DIDN'T SNEAK out of my place this morning, but he left wicked early—long before the sun came up, like a vampire might—kissing me on the forehead and covering me with the blankets I keep at the foot of my bed.

Eventually, I manage to drag myself up, throw on a cute outfit, and get out the door at a reasonable hour with plenty of day left to accomplish some tasks.

Ten o'clock.

Not the best, but not the worst.

I push through the door to my new offices letting the bright light cheer me up. The walls aren't the shade I want them to be, but in time, they will be.

My leopard print tennis shoes pad across the hardwood floors and I pull my wireless speaker from my tote, set it on the folding card table doubling as my makeshift desk until I can get my actual desk delivered.

First comes paint.

Then comes furniture.

Humming, I swipe through my phone, pairing the device to my speaker, and set that down too, happy and tapping my feet to the first song that comes on, a playlist I call "Throwback" amping me up to be productive.

Jeans. Cute t-shirt. Printed sneaks. Hair in a pony.

Two orgasms last night.

*I am feeling good.*

Nothing can bring me down.

I twirl, walking to the window and staring down at the street, marveling at the location I managed to score for my business. Midtown. Up and coming. Tons of foot traffic. Lots of clients living nearby with oodles of connections for more work.

Busy, busy, busy is what I hope to be.

Cars pass by. A woman walking a terrier, face buried in her phone—I admire her chic little polka dot rain boots and red coat with a smile. Cute.

So cute.

*Blech, Miranda. Orgasms have addled your brain!*

“Time to get to work—quit dillydallying,” I say out loud to no one. No interviews are set up for this week. I do have three candidates scheduled to come in soon, but not until I have something other than a card table and a folding chair.

I’m a startup, but no one wants to take a chance in an office that looks like it’s been robbed!

Laptop comes out.

Sketchbook too.

Pencil.

Through the wireless speaker, still playing my favorite songs, my phone pings once.

Again.

Again.

Three notifications back-to-back can only be one person, and I leave it be for now, because I don’t have time to sit and chat with Claire—not until I’ve gotten something done for work.

“No,” I say. “I don’t have time for this right now.”

I do, however, scoop up my phone, and the tiny red icon in the corner of a social media app has my brows rising.

One hundred two.

Weird.

“Huh.” I poke it open and my jaw drops.

Last night when I went to sleep, my social media profile—the one I recently created for my design business—had 893 followers. This morning? 15,724.

Wait—15,725.

“What the hell?” This makes no sense.

There must be a glitch—that can be the only explanation since I am a nobody with no ad budget and barely a business page.

I click over to my personal page.

4,082 follow requests.

“Eh?” I literally say that out loud: Eh. “What is going on?”

Of course, no one responds, because I am alone.

Ding.

Ding.

Claire texts me again, twice—at least I think it's Claire? but when I actually look at the messenger notifications on my phone, I notice 44 unread texts.

“What the...”

It rings: a girl I went to college with, one I haven't spoken to in over a year and with whom I have no desire to speak now.

I decline the call and tap open my inbox.

Claire: 12 texts. A group chat lighting up. Some guy named Will I dated briefly my freshman year. Emily. My cousin Gwen, who can be a real bitch sometimes—she wanted me to give her a job, but has no work ethic.

My dad.

And several other people I haven't spoken to in ages.

Honestly. What is happening?

Is it the apocalypse? Is the world coming to an end and suddenly everyone is texting to say they love me?

My phone rings again and this time it is Claire, so I accept.

“What the heck is going on,” I say by way of greeting, walking toward the bathroom in my cute office space.

“Um hello, have you been online this morning?”

“No, why would I?” I don't sit and look at gossip columns or read the news like she does—that's what I have her for, to give me the daily tea. No need to go snooping myself. Besides, who has time for that? I might have been late as shit this morning, but that's not normal for me. I do not spend the beginning of my day being idle, orgasm hangover notwithstanding.

“Good, good,” she replies and I can picture her nodding. “That's good.”

She's being weird, but speaking of which... “Claire, my Insta is blowing up. It's the strangest thing. Like, overnight it went crazy—I don't know what's going on.” I tuck the phone under my chin and start washing my hands. This new almond and shea foaming soap is just the yummiest and my fave. Wash. Rinse. Grab at the black hand towel on the counter. “Is the whole site down? What's going on? Did you see anything about a glitch?”

“It's not a glitch.”

“Well if it's not a glitch then some freaky shit is going on, because I literally gained 15,000 followers overnight, and my phone was blowing up

this morning.”

“Yeah, well—I have two words for you.” She pauses dramatically and I roll my eyes, waiting for her to continue.

“What two words?”

“Noah. Harding.”

“Oh my god, Noah—I forgot to tell you about our date last night, but Claire, he spent the night, and before you ask, no we did not have se—”

“Would you stop talking! This is serious!” Claire demands. “Randi, listen to me: do not go on the internet.”

“Uh...” I look at myself in the mirror, irritated skin on my neck and collarbone visible at the neckline of my t-shirt. I blush at my reflection. “Why?”

“Trust me. Just don’t do it.”

Since when has that ever worked to keep me from doing something? In fact, it has the opposite effect.

“Okay, but now I want to.”

“For once in your life, would you listen?”

I laugh and leave the bathroom, flicking the light switch down. “I don’t know what I’m even listening to—what is your problem?”

I go to the table-desk and plop down in the metal chair, cringing at how hard it is on my ass. Power up my laptop and let it come to life.

It’s as if my bestie knows what I’m about to do.

“I said don’t do it!” she shouts—yes, shouts—and I laugh again.

“Relax! I’m just going to check my emails!”

Not.

I fully intend to investigate, despite not knowing what the Sam Hill she’s squawking about.

“You don’t think it’s weird that I have a billion new followers?”

And what does Noah have to do with any of this? We went on one date.

“Yes I think it’s weird, but Miranda, it’s not good.”

I stop what I’m doing, which is pulling up a browser. “What do you mean ‘It’s not good’? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Besides, how can all these new followers on my business page be a bad thing?

I should scroll through some of them to see if any are local and potentially in the market for a decorator!

My heart races with optimism.

“There’s a picture.”

A picture? “Of what?”

“You and Noah. Him.”

“Okay...” Finally, I lean back slowly in my ungodly uncomfortable chair, crossing my arms, ready to listen. “Explain.”

“In the tabloids.”

“What tabloids?”

“All of them.”

Huh? “That makes no sense whatsoever. No one saw us out.”

Well...that’s not entirely true. I think about the men and women who were at Mason’s last night, slyly taking photos of us. The man who approached our table for an autograph, the one Noah politely snubbed. The young woman in the bathroom with me who clearly wanted to ask me questions, but was too afraid to actually do so.

Leaving early. Sneaking out with our leftovers. Ducking into the car as a few cameramen stood across the street waiting for a rare shot of Noah Harding on a date.

He explained that to me after we got into the car—how someone inside must have called the press, or paps, and probably got paid for the tip, which happens too often. More so if he’s caught out with a woman, which almost never happens.

*“I haven’t been on a date.”*

*“Since when?” I asked.*

*“Since ever.”*

*“You’ve never been on a date? Ever?”*

*“No.” His eyes were glued to the road, listening for the navigation system’s directions, fingers clenching the wheel.*

*“But you’ve been out with women before.”*

*“Sure. When I go out, there are almost always women.”*

*I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but I assumed he meant groupies, though neither of us spoke the words.*

*He glanced over at me then. “They just show up. I don’t date them.”*

*“You just...” Sleep with them? I didn’t have the courage to ask—but then I didn’t have to, because he nodded.*

*“Yes, but I’m not... I don’t like it.”*

*“You don’t like sex?”*

*He shook his head. “I like sex, I just don’t like how women act.” His grip on the wheel got tighter.*

*“How do women act?”*

*His wide shoulders shrugged. “Like...I don’t know. They don’t want relationships. They just want what they can get from me. Or not.”*

*He sounded sad and jaded and lost.*

*It made me think he’s only been used because of his career, and my heart broke a bit listening to what he wasn’t saying, my arm reaching across the space so my hand could slide across the smooth plane of his deltoids and brush the hairline at the nape of his neck.*

*“So do you want a relationship?”* Is that what he’d been saying? *I wondered.*

*“I...”* He tightened his lips, pressing them together, the small scar on his jawline turning rather white against his tan skin. *“I...”*

*He couldn’t finish his sentence.*

*“You don’t have to talk about it.”*

*I didn’t want to press him—it was only our first date and it was none of my business.*

*“Someone must have seen you out, because there’s a not-so-nice write-up on some trashy blog, with a picture—you look gorg, by the way, love that dress—”*

*“Aww, thank you!”*

*“Focus, Miranda—this is not about the dress.”*

*“Sorry.”* Jeez.

*“And it’s not the picture that’s terrible because it’s you and him, but it’s the caption and I don’t want you to see it yet. So please just don’t go searching hashtags or looking for it.”*

*“But—”*

*“I’m serious.”*

*“Okay, but wouldn’t you want to see it if it were you?”*

My best friend pauses. *“Look, I’m trying to do you a favor and maybe now is a good time to hire me as your publicist.”*

*Publicist?*

The thing is, she sounds dead serious. *“Are you high?”* What the hell do I need a publicist for?

*“Of course I’m not high! I want to make this go away for you!”*

*“Make what go away?! You won’t let me look at the internet!”*

*“Because it will make you sick!”* She practically yells it into the phone. *“God I want to crush somebody’s balls for this—that’s what I want to do!”*

Drama queen.

“Oh come on, how bad could it be? So they published a picture of us—so what?” I do my best to come off as blasé, though that excited flutter that was growing in my stomach earlier is starting a slow spiral of dread.

Claire is incensed. “Did you not hear what I said? I said the picture is fine—you both look adorable, all cutesy-giggling at each other.” She makes a gagging sound in her throat. “It’s the captions and the story that go along with it that I don’t want you to see.”

This gives me pause. “Do you think Noah has seen it?”

“I *guarantee* you he has.” She scoffs. “Please, that dude has people working for him whose job it is to keep up with this shit.”

“Then...” I glance out the window to my right, out at the red brick building across the street, the one with the bright blue door. “Why hasn’t he called me? Because I haven’t heard from him since this morning when he left.”

“Maybe he’s waiting.”

“For *what*?”

Claire is quiet. “I don’t know.”

“How bad is it, dramatics and hysterics aside?” I need to know because I’m going to look and nothing she can say will stop me, but I do want to be prepared.

“Bad.”

“On a scale of one to I want to curl up in a ball and die.”

“Nine.”

“What!” I shout back. “What on earth could possibly have been published?” I rise from my chair so fast it almost topples over. “We had dinner, for Christ’s sake—we didn’t bang at the dinner table!”

“Calm down! In fact—where are you? I’m coming over.”

“No—don’t, I’m fine. It’ll be fine.” Whatever it is because I haven’t seen it yet.

“What’s the address of your new place Miss Independent?”

“Ugh.” I have to get out the envelope for my electric bill and read it out loud to her, not having memorized it yet. “But honestly, I will be okay. You don’t have to race over here.”

“Okay. Just...don’t look, okay? Please.”

“I won’t,” I say, fingers crossed behind my back.

IT'S BAD.

Worse than Claire said and I want to curl up and die, just like she said.

Why did I *look*?

Why didn't I listen?

It took less than one minute to find the first post about Noah and me, right there in the center of the search engine, my face—along with his—sitting at Mason's, smiling across the table at each other, completely oblivious to the fact that someone was taking our photo. Without my consent.

Without his.

*This happens all the time*, he said.

Well no wonder he doesn't go out in public. No wonder he didn't want to show up to buy those baseball cards and risk ending up on the front page of the daily news.

The first source wasn't horrible, accompanied by a boring article with little information—thank God it didn't include my name. I was dubbed “female companion.”

Female companion? Makes me sound like an escort, but—whatever. Fine. Still anonymous.

Second and third source? Not much better, but still reasonably inaccurate.

It was the fourth article that had me breaking down, a well-known, widely read, televised gossip column that included my name, age, occupation—and a vomit-inducing headline.

### **BEST RBI, UGLIEST MUGSHOT**

*“With a face like that, Noah Harding is lucky he's worth 80 million dollars...”*

*“I'd fuck him too for that kind of money.”*

*“Is that girl blind or just desperate?”*

My jaw hits the ground as tears well in my eyes.

*“Match made in heaven—she's ugly, too.”*

I stare at those words in the comment section knowing they're not true, but feeling their sting just the same, the tingling in my eyes stronger, threatening to break through the dam holding back the tears flooding my eyes.

They think I'm ugly too?

First of all, that sentence implies Noah is ugly, which couldn't be further from the truth. Second of all, I'm ugly too? Fuck you, Walter from Philadelphia! Mind your own goddamn business, asshole.

I hiccup, swiping at the tears on my cheeks, indignant.

Tilt my chin up defiantly.

How dare they call me ugly! How dare they even comment on our looks—they have nothing to do with the article! Except...they do, because the headline screams *Ugliest Mugshot*.

*Don't look at the comments, Randi—close the search window and get it out of your head.*

But I don't, because I can't, because I cannot unsee it.

The floodgate is open.

The damage has been done.

So now what?

I've been searching and reading, cell phone still in my left palm, and I remember it then, needing to hear Noah's sweet voice. I need him to tell me what I should do.

What we are going to do.

*This happens all the time*, he said. He'll know what to do, so I text him.

**Me:** *Noah, call me please.*

Ten minutes go by with no reply, no response, and I check the time—nearing eleven o'clock. I wonder if he's working or at home. Maybe he's in the shower?

What do professional baseball players do all day? Does he have a game today? Is Claire wrong—is it possible he hasn't seen our faces splashed all over the news?

When I try calling him, it goes straight to voicemail, and the knot lodged in my throat turns into a sob so intense I can't find my voice to leave a message.

**Me:** *Why aren't you picking up? Please, Noah, I just want to talk to you.*

I'm pacing now, back and forth across the empty shell of my office.

**Me:** *I'm not mad, but I need to talk through this, please call me.*

**Me:** *Noah this ISN'T FUNNY. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.*

Defeated, I put my head on my desk and let myself cry.

## MIRANDA

I WAKE up to a pitch black room, the only light shining in from the streetlamp outside the window.

Not my bedroom window.

My office.

How on earth did I end up falling asleep and staying asleep this long?

I lift my head, groggy, stomach growling from hunger, and frown at the scroll of notifications on my lock screen. There are dozens.

Dozens.

My head pounds and the salt stains on my cheeks pull my skin tight, the tears having long dried up, but present nonetheless. My hair sticks to the side of my mouth and I spit, sputtering, to dislodge it.

*So hot, I know.*

Drool. Tears.

Blinking against the bright ray of blue light from my cell, I crack an eyelid to peer at the messages, one at the very top from an unknown number catching my eye. Not only have they texted me a few times, they've also called, one in a long list of many concerned—I'm assuming—friends.

Not a word from Noah.

I blink back more tears, sniffing, inhaling a cleansing breath like my friend Jennifer would tell me to do. She's the friend who's always trying to get me to meditate, so I'll relax a bit and chill out.

It comes in handy now as I go through and skim messages, keep some, delete and block others.

**Unknown:** *Miranda, it's Buzz. Give me a buzz when you get the chance.*

Oh, he's a funny guy alright with the play on words, even knowing I'm probably a ball of nerves at the moment. But this is Noah's best friend, so

maybe he'll know where Noah is? Or why he hasn't called? Or if something has happened to him?

Should I call him or text him back?

Call or text, call or—

The phone starts ringing, and speak of the devil, it's Buzz Wallace lighting up my phone with his fourth call in a single day. How he got my number is a mystery, but I have others I want to solve, so I hit accept.

"Hey." That's the best I can muster up as a greeting considering how shitty I feel, how hard my head is pounding, how heavy my heart feels.

"Miranda, it's Trace Wallace."

"Who?"

"Buzz—Noah's friend that you hate."

Trace? His name is *Trace*? That's a new one—a first name I've never heard before, especially for a man. Not that I think it's feminine, but it's not common.

I like it.

"Hi." I'm not in the mood for small talk. "What's going on, Buzz? Where is Noah?"

"Listen, I'm not going to lie to you—he's not in a good place."

What does that mean?

"Noah is..." He clears his throat and I sense his discomfort. "He's sensitive."

"Sensitive?"

"Yeah, like—some people are built for the limelight and he isn't one of them. When shit like this happens to someone like me, I let it roll off my back, 'cause fuck everyone, right? Excuse the language."

If I wasn't in such a mood, I might laugh at him for apologizing.

"But he's not me and he can't just shrug it off. That's not how he's wired. Harding is in it for the game, not the fame—being in the paper is the last thing he wants and this bullshit? He's going to run from it, not toward it."

"But why is he running from *me*? I didn't do anything!" I can't keep the panic out of my voice, the sound a bit desperate. "I just want to talk to him. I'm freaking out, Buzz. Trace." Whatever his damn name is.

"He's running because he likes you and he's running before you run from him. Does that make sense?"

Not really. "Why would I run from him?"

"He might be a professional athlete, but his self-esteem is shit."

I have about a million follow-up questions, but Trace isn't the one I should be asking—I should be talking to Noah, only he refuses to take my calls.

“My hands are tied here, Buzz.” It feels so strange calling him that. Reminds me of Buzz Lightyear to the rescue and now I'm thinking of animated movies and going to infinity and beyond.

“They're not. Relax, we'll figure it out—though you'll have to ease into it with this one. Like I said, he's sensitive.”

Of all the people who might comfort me and give me relationship advice, I never in a zillion years would have thought it would be this guy. Unreal.

“What the heck do I do? He won't answer my calls or talk to me. I can't even get him to reply to a text. He probably blocked me.”

“Yeah, he's being a bitch about this.” Buzz makes a *hmm* noise on the other end of the line. “I think you're going to have to ambush him. He needs to see you, but he's never going to call you.”

Ambush? Since when do guys like an ambush? Um, since NEVER.

“I'm not doing that!” But also, “What do you mean? Explain.”

I walk to the window, feeling emptier inside than the office I'm standing in, looking down at the road, not a single car coming or going at this hour of the night.

My stomach growls.

“Hear me out before you shoot it down.”

I sigh. “Okay.”

“We have practice tomorrow—you know where the stadium is?”

“Uh, doesn't everyone?”

“There's a side entrance we go in and I think you should be waiting there when we're done so you can talk to him.”

No.

No, no, hell to the no. “I am not doing that! It's creepy!” I am not a fangirl, lot-lizard groupie who stalks around the stadium!

“Listen, I know, but it's the only way you're going to get to talk to him, unless you plan on waiting for him to come to his senses, which will be never.”

I mull this over, biting down on my bottom lip and chewing.

Now or never.

From what little I know about Noah that does sound accurate.

Ugh, shoot me now!

“What would I have to do?”

“Show up at the side gate, show security the pass I’m going to text you, then wait in the parking lot.”

“Then what?”

“Uh—then you *talk*.” I swear, the asshole is probably rolling his eyes like I’m the moron here, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’d be a perfect match for Claire—not that I’d wish this guy on anyone. He’s too full of himself, too attractive for his own good, and cocky, although he *is* proving to be a decent friend.

Color me surprised.

“I won’t have any problems getting in? I didn’t think they let people in when there isn’t a game.”

“Well, you’re not getting into the stadium—you’d be waiting in the parking lot. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“And you don’t think Noah will think I’m a stalker?”

There’s an uncertain pause. “I doubt it. That’s not how his brain works.”

“So you’re saying there’s a chance he’ll think I’m a stalker.”

Buzz’s laugh is low. “A slight chance, but not likely.”

“How reassuring.”

“Hey, the guy is miserable—don’t you think it’s worth the risk?”

“Miserable? Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“I don’t want to throw my buddy under the bus by telling the girl he likes he’s behaving like a teenage girl.”

If I wasn’t so upset myself, I would giggle at that. “How is he acting?”

“Like a pussy. Not talking to anyone. Bitchy. You know, lashing out at people. He’s not happy and listen—not to make it too personal since he barely knows you, but he’s been shit on by women a lot and I don’t think he needs to get shit on by *you*. So, you’re going to have to take one for the fucking team, alright? If you have any feelings for Noah, you’ll show up at the stadium tomorrow after practice and let him know he’s not alone.”

My heart constricts in my chest. Clenches.

“Miranda, you got this. Balls to the wall.”

My mouth curves up into a smile. “Are you pep talking me?”

“Do I *need* to pep talk you?”

“No.”

“Then no, I’m not trying to light a fire under your ass.” He hesitates. “So will you do it?”

I sigh, a resounding exhalation that's loud enough to make him laugh again. "Yes, I'll do it."

"Cool. I'll act surprised when I see you in the parking lot."

This time, I do giggle at him. "I hope you're a good actor."

"The best. I've faked so many orgasms."

"I have *no* idea how to respond to that."

"I think you just did."

What an idiot. "Hey Buzz?"

"What?"

"I don't hate you."

"Hey Miranda?"

"What?"

"I know you don't."

Ugh, that bastard.

## NOAH

IT'S BEEN a day and a half since I've seen or heard from Miranda.

Okay, fine—I've heard from her; I just haven't replied. I mean...I was just humiliated in front of the entire nation—why would I want to confront the one person whose opinion I care about with my tail between my legs?

She definitely hates me. I made sure of that by being too chickenshit to reply.

How could she not? I ghosted her out of fear and embarrassment, ruled by that boy inside me who doesn't want to be laughed at by the girl he asked to the homecoming dance, the girl who only said yes because her friends dared her to.

Fear of rejection is a powerful deterrent and it courses through my veins like an undammed river, quicker now that my face is splashed all over the morning news, pimped out by strangers for the few hundred bucks they got for the lead. I hate admitting to my weaknesses, but there they are.

No one says anything to me in the locker room; each of my teammates has been in the headlines at some point for one reason or another, usually a huge signing bonus announcement or their contract being renewed. Obviously we get the occasional paternity claim. Cheating scandals. Public fights with spouses or the paparazzi. A few of my buddies date celebrities—actresses and other athletes and shit—and that's in the news, too.

I can't recall a single time any of them have been raked through the mud because of their face.

And yeah, I read the comments, too, cringing when I got to the one about Miranda being ugly. *Match made in heaven*, the trolls declared, and my blood boiled. Who the fuck do they think they are calling her ugly? Miranda is gorgeous—I'm the lucky bastard she went out with and then this shit happens

to her?

Worst part is other people agreed with the asshole who made the original comment.

The whole situation kills me and I know she's hurting because I could read it in her words, could see it as she pleaded with me to call her back.

*You're a pussy, Harding. You don't deserve a girl like Miranda—smart, beautiful, and full of spunk.* I pulled a dick move that wasn't justified and now there's no going back.

"Did you just call me a pussy?" Wallace asks beside me as we shove through the giant swinging doors separating the tunnel from the parking lot.

"No, I was calling myself a pussy."

A solid hand gets clamped on my shoulder and I glance down at it, alarmed. Great, he's comforting me now? Ugh.

"Don't get so down on yourself, bro—you know how the paps are giant wankers. They want a reaction out of you and they're not going to get it."

They're not. Any reaction or statement of my own will trigger a feeding frenzy of articles and then they'd really be all over my ass in search of a bigger story.

No. Best keep my lips shut, despite Phil wanting to issue a statement about how Miranda is an old friend and we were just having dinner to catch up.

Spread more lies? I don't think so.

"I couldn't care less about them printing shit about me—I'm used to it," I lie. "It's the whole shit about Miranda. What fucking right do they have to call her ugly?"

Wallace shakes his head from side to side, looking morose. "Don't know, man. That's fucked up. We both know she's a little hottie." He pauses, and I feel his sidelong glance. "I tried to bang her, but she wasn't interested."

"Gee, thanks for bringing that up."

"What! I'm trying to make a point here—she wasn't interested in me and I'm clearly a fine specimen." Buzz Wallace thinks he's the real life version of Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* and I've never been one to argue with him. "No one can resist me, except her. I haven't been shot down like that in years."

"Alright, I get it."

"No—you don't get it." Our bags are slung over our shoulders and he hefts his. "She went out with you. Not me—you."

Yeah...why is that?

He reads minds now too, apparently. "Because beauty is only skin deep and when she looks at you, she sees what she likes. Blah blah blah, attracted to your personality." Wallace stops in front of the gate that leads to the parking lot, bracing both hands on my shoulders and looking me in the eye. "Dude, listen to me. She likes you—attraction doesn't last long if there isn't chemistry to back it up. Did you feel chemistry with her?"

I give a stiff nod. "Yes."

"Were you worried about what everyone might think when you were out with her or were you just there in the moment with her?"

"Jesus, did you go to shrink school over the weekend and get your psychology degree? What is this, a therapy session?"

*Yes, I realize how dumb that question sounds coming out of my mouth.*

Wallace does, too, and he rolls his eyes. "Just answer the question, asshole—did you feel a connection?"

I shrug his hands off my shoulders, irritated. "Yes, obviously—*god*, Dad." I sound like a teenage girl annoyed with her mother. Or Napoleon Dynamite feeding his llama Tina.

"So why are you acting like this?"

He will not climb down out of my ass about this. "Why do you care?" I move past him, toward the exit gate, shooting a terse smile toward the security guard, Stan.

"Because I'm your best friend."

There he goes again with that best friend business! I'm telling you, all he ever does is raid my fridge and show up unexpectedly and—

Shit. Those sound like things a best friend would do. Plus, he seems to have my back considering he will not quit riding me about my relationships—or lack thereof.

"What do you want from me?" I shoot the barb over my shoulder at Wallace as Stan releases the lock from the metal gate, parking lot in the forefront.

"I want you to be happy, bro."

Happy.

I thought I was happy—back when life was fucking simple and everyone didn't want something from me. I was happy when I played baseball because I loved it, not because it paid the bills for the big, dumb, empty mansion I felt pressured to buy. I was happy when I could see my parents more often. I was

happy when my friends from home could afford to come sit in the stands and watch me play in our hometown, when they didn't have to hop on a damn jet to see me.

I was happy after our date when I thought Miranda liked me.

Liked.

*Why the past tense, Harding?* I can almost hear Buzz asking me the question, though he's now a few feet behind me, severely lagging.

I'm about to pivot around to chew his ass out when a flash of pink catches my eye.

Miranda?

In the parking lot?

I squint, focusing on that pink dot ahead of me, the face and the hair and she's leaning against a white car, wringing her hands nervously.

Suddenly, Wallace is beside me. "What...? Is that..." He shields his eyes with his free palm, though he's wearing a ball cap and can probably see her just fine. "Oh my goodness, look. Is that...could it be? Is it she?" Lines from that goddamn kid's movie. "Why, is it Miranda? What on earth is she doing here?"

Son of a bitch.

I give Wallace a sidelong glance. "Please don't tell me you had anything to do with this."

"I do not know what you are talking about." He tosses his invisible long hair, words stilted; he is by *far* the worst fucking liar I've ever seen. It's a good thing he vies for an ESPY every year and not an Oscar.

Good god. "You are the worst actor I've ever fucking met. Don't quit your day job."

He grins stupidly, making a beeline for the black, souped-up pickup truck he often drives to practice. "Oh look, there's Tripp to pick me up—it's..." He racks his brain for another lie. "Our mom's birthday, so I'm out. Can't talk right now, gotta run!" Practically races away, duffle bag flapping behind him, knocking into his calves it hangs so low, and Tripp Wallace is not in the fucking parking lot waiting for him, that liar.

He doesn't look back, but throws Miranda a hasty wave.

Asshole! With friends like this, who needs enemies?

Slowly, I approach Miranda. Wary. Uncertain. The usual behavior for a guy who's inexperienced enough with women to be a bit ashamed of his behavior while standing in front of a girl he has a crush on. A girl who could

crush his heart if he gave in to her. Got to know her. Let her in.

Which is why I've been avoiding her. Because I don't know what I'm doing.

Well, there's no avoiding her now, is there? She's standing in the parking lot of the stadium, my teammates and support coaching staff curiously looking over at this newcomer who clearly isn't one of the WAGS, definitely not a groupie—not in the casual outfit she's got on. Thankfully they're all smart enough to keep their mouths shut, knowing she must be the girl they've read about in the tabloids.

And they have read about it—when something goes down with a guy on the team, we all hear about it. We're worse than women, the biggest gossips you've ever met.

“Hi.” She looks bashful too and I can tell by her body language that she's uncomfortable—probably as much as I am. “Um...Trace said I could find you here.”

“Trace?”

“Your friend, uh, Buzz? He said that was his name.”

Oh shit, that's right—his name is Trace and his brother's name is Tripp, how stupid could two names possibly be?

“I'm sorry to show up like this without giving you a warning, but I have been trying to get ahold of you...although if you wanted to talk to me, you would have called me back, right?” Her head drops as if she's only just considered that. “Shit. This was a horrible idea.”

I take another step forward. “No, it's fine. He was right—we can't avoid it forever.”

“It or each other?”

“It. The press.”

Her nod is slow. “Right. But...can I be honest?”

“I thought we already were being honest.” I scratch at my head under the brim of my cap.

Miranda rolls her eyes at my literal translation of her statement, powering on. “I couldn't care less about what's in the papers, or online, or on social media or wherever that horrible story is posted—I just wanted to talk to you and see how you were feeling about it.”

She's worried about *me*?

I was worried about *her*.

“I wanted to make sure you were alright, even if you never want to see

me again, which *appears* to be the case.”

That last part is mumbled under her breath, her lips twisted into a sardonic, somewhat sad downturn. That makes me frown. It was mumbled, but I caught it—and now I’m confused.

“Why would I never want to see you again?”

She looks up at me. “Noah—I’ve texted you at least a dozen times and called a few and you’re avoiding me. The only reason I’m here is because of Buzz. He said…”

I brace myself for whatever she says next. I can’t imagine what Wallace told her and glance across the parking lot as his car drives away. It’s too far to tell, but I swear I catch his eyes staring back through the rearview mirror and I have no idea what to think.

Is he a shady bastard for setting this up or a really good friend?

“What did Buzz say?”

Pretty mouth. Beautiful eyes. It isn’t just those things I like; it’s her. She is beautiful. Kind and caring. And brave—if she wasn’t, she wouldn’t be here, standing in front of me to see how I’m doing.

“Miranda, what did Buzz say?” I shift on my heels, moving my bag from one shoulder to the other.

“All he said was…all he said was you’re sensitive.”

Not what I was expecting her to say.

Pussy, yes. A chicken, yes.

Sensitive? What the fuck does that even mean?

“I’m *what*?”

“It’s okay, Noah—I like the fact that you’re not an insensitive asshole. I like that you get sad. I like that—”

“What!” *I’m not shouting—you’re shouting.* “He did not say I was sad.” If he did, I will kill him. Strangle him with my bare hands.

“No, he didn’t say that, but he did say you were hurting.”

Hurting? Nice choice of words. Makes me sound like an even bigger pussy.

“...and he said you miss me, but that you probably wouldn’t contact me.” Miranda inhales a deep breath. “So here I am. I came to you.”

*I came to you.*

Just like that, she came to me. Instead of waiting or giving up, she sucked it up and came to me.

Admittedly, she would have been waiting a really long time.

I must have a look on my face that she can't interpret because the silence between us stretches; no words are coming out of my fucking windpipe, the uncertainty lining her worried brow intensifying.

But I can't talk, because I'm getting choked up, and we're still in the damn parking lot, my idiot teammates looking on as if they haven't seen enough drama for one day.

Typically, I am not at the center of it.

My face flushes from the attention and I clear my throat. "Not to sound cliché, but do you want to get out of here and go somewhere we can talk?"

Her expression of self-doubt turns to one of relief, and she nods. "Yes. Could we?"

"Are you cool coming to my place? It's not far from here, maybe 20 minutes tops."

Miranda nods. "We can do your place."

I glance at her car. "Follow me? I'd hate for your car to be here on its own and look abandoned. I don't know if they'll ticket you without a parking pass."

"Sure—I can follow you. Lead the way."

I stand awkwardly, glancing down at her. Tempted to kiss the top of her head or her lips. Or something.

*Just do it. Stop holding back. Get out of your own head. She came to you.*

Leaning down, I press my lips to the crown of her head and when she tips her chin up to look at me, I press another kiss to her surprised mouth.

"Follow me." I point to my car—not the truck she was in on our date. "Black Tesla." Not just any Tesla, the luxury sports car that goes for a cool six figures.

Miranda blinks toward the stupidly expensive vehicle, then nods slowly. "Okay."

We're young, so the fact that she's having a difficult time reconciling the sports car makes sense to me. By now she also knows what I'm worth, but I don't let that bother me. She liked me before she knew I had money; she liked me before she knew I was famous.

She likes me. That's all I know and that's all I care about.

I walk to my car, flipping the bird to the parking lot stragglers who are still loitering. Hear a few laughs from my buddies and one or two wolf whistles. Immature assholes.

Still.

I'm grinning when I slide inside my car, the warm leather heated from the sun, push the START button. The engine purrs, low and melodic, and I adjust my mirrors, so I can see Miranda. Make sure she's settled, buckled, and ready before shifting the car into drive.

I take the time to glance at her every so often; she's singing as she drives, that much is evident. Checking her blind spots when we switch lanes, sunglasses perched on the bridge of her nose.

She's in a good mood, all things considered, and in no time at all we're pulling past the security gate—and guard—of my community, winding down the roads at a leisurely 15 miles an hour. A few more turns and I'm home, the automatic gate gliding to the side so we can pass through.

Miranda sneaks through before it closes behind her, and I pull into the garage as she parks in the turnaround.

If I'm expecting her to comment on the McMansion before her, I'm about to be disappointed, because she doesn't. Doesn't say anything as she patiently waits for me to punch in the code for the house and step into the mudroom.

Silently, I lead us to the back deck. Walk to the fridge beneath the outdoor BBQ and grab us a few bottles of water before gesturing toward the lounge chairs. Pull one into the shade, under the giant umbrella, then do the same with one more.

"Thank you." She sits.

I sit.

"You didn't have to hide from me," she starts. "I'm your...friend."

Oh god—her friend? *The fuck...* Is she already friend zoning me? "Are you friend zoning me?" I ask, the hairs on the back of my neck standing at full attention.

"No! I mean, unless that's what you want. I didn't mean it like that. I meant—you can tell me anything. Just don't run." She pauses, twisting off the cap of the water. "Why did you do it? The past 24 hours have been horrible, Noah. Just horrible—you might be used to it, but I'm certainly not." Now that she's opened the floodgates, the words keep flowing. "I'm getting messages from people I haven't spoken to in years. Guys I dated in eighth grade suddenly want to talk to me. My Instagram for work is blowing up—it went from a few thousand followers to ten thousand, to fourteen thousand to twenty. It's insane. And you ditched me in the middle of it."

I think she's done, but she's just pausing for a breath.

"I don't have a team of people to handle this shit for me, Noah—no

publicists or PR person. I'm 22 and I'm selling baseball cards to pay the rent on my office space which I'll probably be sleeping in next week. So honestly? It was really shitty for you to ignore me."

"Neither do I," I argue, knowing it's a half-truth. The team has someone, but I do not, because why the fuck would I?

Miranda skewers me with a dagger like gaze. "Don't you go there."

"Sorry." My bad.

"The point I'm trying to make is that you ignored me and I want to know why. Trace said you missed me, but if you missed me, why would you avoid me?"

I busy myself with a sip of water, swallowing hard. Wipe my mouth with the back of my hand to buy a few more seconds to think. Then, "I don't know. You're right, it was a shitty thing to do." I uncurl myself from the deck chair and rise, cross the foot or two between us, and kneel next to her lounge. "I don't know, but I'm sorry. It was stupid—I panicked. The whole thing freaked me out, especially since you were involved." I take her face in my hands—her beautiful, shocked face. "It's one thing for them to trash me in the news, but it was another thing to see you trashed. I didn't know how to handle it and I let you down."

Her eyes are huge, brows raised into her hairline.

Mouth an O of wonder.

"I'm sorry."

I brush her cheeks with the pads of my thumbs before releasing her face, head dipping to her lap, forehead pressed against her smooth legs.

Miranda's fingers rake through my hair, brushing gently. She doesn't tell me it's okay. She doesn't say, *That's alright*. She doesn't say it because we both know it *wasn't* okay, and it wasn't alright, and whoever raised her raised her right.

Miranda knows her worth and she's not going to placate or make me feel better when we both know I screwed up.

"Don't do it again" are the words that come drifting toward me, even as her hands stroke my neck. It's not a threat, but it's enough to let me know she means business.

My fingers drift along the smooth skin of her legs, the calloused pads on the bottoms making her shiver. I kiss her thigh, shifting so I can kiss the skin of her knee. Her calf. Higher again, inching back up the way I came, drinking in the smell of her skin.

I leave one of my giant hands spread on the inside of her thigh, below the hem of her denim shorts, her intake of breath a good indication that if she was mad before, she isn't any longer.

"You smell good."

"You've mentioned that before." Her tone is teasing and I look up, into her face. "But do go on—what else do you like?"

Cheeky little shit. "You have the softest skin." I could touch it for days. "And I like this spot right here." My thumb strokes along the sensitive area inside her thigh, the skin a little lighter there where the sun doesn't reach.

Trail the thumb farther, inside her shorts.

Suddenly wish she was naked. "Do you want to go swimming?"

Miranda laughs. "I don't have a suit."

"So?"

We stare at each other then, she to gauge my sincerity, me to gauge if she wants to get naked.

Her eyes scan the hedgerow of tall cypress trees planted at the back of the property, running along the perimeter, as if determining how private the place actually is. I am separated from the house behind mine by their hedgerow, their fence, and their pool house.

"I've had my mouth on your pussy," I blurt out. "It's not like you have to be modest."

Miranda stares at me, wide-eyed, as if she can't believe the words that just came out of said mouth. If we're being honest, I can't believe it either. I've never said shit like that to a woman before and immediately regret it.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

She moves to get off the chair and I go back on my haunches, still kneeling next to her as she says, "No. You're absolutely right and it is really hot out."

Without another word, she reaches for the hem of her tucked-in shirt, pulling it free from the shorts, and yanks it up over her head, tossing it to the deck chair.

Looks down at me. "Well? Let's go. Get naked."

I scramble to stand, like an amateur, the dick inside my pants twitching. *Down, boy, down. Relax.*

Except—it's been a long time since anyone stripped naked in front of me (strip clubs do not count) and watching Miranda peel one layer after another from her body has me gawking like a teenage boy.

She's facing the water, so I can't see her boobs, but her hands are obviously working the front snap of her jean shorts, those same hands pushing them down around her waist. Hips, legs, until they're pooled on the ground.

Stepping out of them, she's in only a thong and a bra. Hands reach around, deftly working the clasp quicker than I ever could. Tosses it to the side. Tugs at her lavender panties, bending slightly at the waist, and I...

Frantically begin stripping like a bad scene in a movie where the kid cannot get naked fast enough, desperate to catch up.

Miranda takes one, two, ten steps and leaps into the pool, the giant splash behind her flying through the air and wetting my feet.

I'm a few seconds behind, managing to make it in the water before she surfaces—I don't need to be caught with my pants down around my ankles and my dick in my hand, relieved when I'm sinking into the lukewarm water beside her.

When my head pops up, I get splashed in the face, wiping a hand up and over my forehead, flipping my hair back.

Miranda splashes me again, flirtatiously, the sun catching the beads of glistening water on her shoulders and hair.

"You're so dead," I threaten, walking toward her, making my way through the chest deep shallow end.

"I'm not afraid of you," she taunts just before disappearing below the surface. I watch as she strokes to the other side, hits the wall, and swims back toward me with a single breath. Pops up in front of me, dark nipples skimming the top. "The water feels so good."

She's close and moves closer, arms wrapping around my neck, legs wrapping around my waist—I'm surprised by her unabashed affection, but not put off by it and I weave my arms around her bottom, cupping her ass. Hoist her up.

Kiss her mouth.

"Aren't you worried about shrinkage?"

I pull back and look at her. "Shrinkage?" I drop her, letting her sink under, and she rises, sputtering.

"You brat!" Splash. "You dropped me!"

"My dick does not shrink in cold water!" The temperature of the pool is a blissful eighty-five degrees: not too warm, not too cool, definitely not cold enough to shrink my cock.

“Are you sure?” One of her eyebrows is raised arrogantly.

“See for yourself,” I tease, not thinking she’s actually going to dunk beneath the water and tread in front of my dick, eyes wide open, bubbles hitting the surface and popping.

I watch, spellbound as her hand reaches forward, wraps around my somewhat flaccid cock and tugs gently.

Miranda reemerges. “Big deal. You’re a shower AND a grower.”

That’s a good thing—everyone knows that.

She wraps around me again and this time, I don’t dump her back into the water, instead walking us toward the edge of the pool where a bench is built into the side. It’s not nearly as deep, but we can bob here, kissing without me nearly drowning us both.

“It’s so nice that you’re tall,” she tells me, kissing the underside of my chin. Neck. Collarbone. Wet lips, wet skin. “I like being carried around—you should do it more often.”

“Carry you? I can do that.” She’s light and naked, entire body smushed up against me. Her boobs feel amazing.

I nibble at the side of her neck and she tilts it, giving me more access.

“Mmm,” she moans, fingers running through my drenched hair, nails massaging my scalp.

I heft her so her back is to the wall, ass perched at the edge of the narrow tile bench, pressing my pelvis and dick into the V of her thighs. Inviting. Warm. Even in the water, I can feel the heat of her pussy.

My cock twitches. Hardens.

“Does he want to play?” Miranda reaches below the water and grips it as I gasp, our movement causing a small ripple around us.

Holy shit her hand feels good.

I bite down on my bottom lip when she squeezes.

“Apparently.” We kiss again, my hand sliding up her skin to cup her bare breast, the nipple hard. Pert. Perfect.

“I hear having sex in water is like going down a dry water slide,” she muses, the tip of my dick now pressing against her clit, growing stiffer by the second.

I could make a habit out of touching her.

I kiss Miranda’s wet mouth; it’s warm and soft, tongue sweet. Her boobs? Blissfully flattened against my chest. My hand? Inching down her rib cage, fingers brushing along her side boob, down to grasp her hip.

She adjusts her position on the bench, moving closer toward me. Spreading her legs. Head tipping back.

I suck on her neck, mouth roaming, sun warming our skin as we make out and dry-fuck in the pool.

So hot. So sexy.

The sight of her wet hair and her glistening body has my cock so hard it's painful, a porno of my own making—a wet dream turned reality.

"I want you inside me," she whispers as the sprinklers on the lawn kick on, water spraying, casting small rainbows over the grass beyond.

Miranda's hands travel from my penis up my abdomen, over my chest. She smooths her palms over my pecs, fingers circling my hard nipples, breathing heavy.

Scoots closer still. Pressing into me as if begging for it.

I inch forward, pelvis pushing.

She spreads her legs, tipping her head to the side, hair hanging and hitting the surface of the water, drenched at its ends. She lets her hands drop, one braced on the bench, the other reaching around to grip my ass, drawing me in.

Eases between our bodies and guides the head of my cock to the valley between her thighs, positioning it so it's in the perfect spot, so if I were to push, I'd ease inside.

I push.

Little by little, I push, and fuck if it isn't the most fantastic fucking feeling I've ever felt.

"Shit," I moan as I'm welcomed, halfway in and stiff as a board. Burying my face in her neck, I push again. Again.

"Ugh," Miranda moans. "Keep going."

"Does it hurt?" I ask, eyes rolling clear to the back of my head from how tight she is.

"I mean, I could stand to use lube, but it's not the worst." Her breath hitches when I thrust in all the way. "God that feels good—maybe I'll even come."

It would suck if she didn't; no dude wants to bang someone and have them not have their own happy ending. "Do you want to get out and go to the bedroom? I have lube..."

Whatever she wants.

"No—don't you dare stop." Her head tips back, neck exposed to the delicious sunlight. "Feels so fucking good."

Okay then.

I thrust, and thrust, and fuck her good, thighs pumping into her, water thrashing around us, her gorgeous tits jiggling—the sight of them is so goddamn sexy I want to reach out and touch them, but I can't since I'm holding her steady.

“So good,” she groans, moaning. “Yeah, fuck me.”

Shit, Miranda is a dirty talker, something I never would have guessed.

“You like that baby?” I taunt, banging into her harder.

“Yes, your big dick feels incredible.”

*Your big dick feels incredible*—a sentence I'm likely going to replay over and over in my mind when I'm alone in bed later.

Or maybe I won't be? For once, I'm not dreading the *after*.

The telltale sign of an orgasm tingles inside my balls and I can't help but ask, “Are you close?”

*Do not be the guy who comes before her, do not be the guy who comes before her, do not...*

“Yes, but fuck me harder.”

Shit—how am I going to fuck her harder and not come until after she does?

I'm screwed—literally.

Somehow, I manage it. Fight through the intense vibration of her pussy clenching around me, fight through her loud, whiney “Oh god, oh GOD!” before bearing down and driving myself into her once, twice—then coming myself with a shudder far more dramatic than I'd prefer.

Like a damn amateur.

Miranda wraps her arms around my neck, kissing my shoulder, fingers at the nape of my neck playing with my hair.

## MIRANDA

NOAH IS FEEDING me at the kitchen counter a half hour later, both of us dry, dressed, and tired—yet hungry enough for a late lunch. I watch as Noah fusses behind the door of a giant, stainless steel refrigerator, hauling out a bowl of cut-up fruit, turkey meat, and mayo for us.

For me.

“What are we doing with that?” I point to the mayonnaise, not seeing any bread hanging around.

“I just dip the meat in it.”

“Like—with a knife?”

“No.” He laughs. “Like a savage. You cool with that?”

His house, his rules, and I like both, so I lick my lips. “You’re the boss.”

He eyes me as he twists the jar lid off, muscles straining, drawing my attention.

I just had sex with this big, beautiful man.

Me.

Miranda Jane Pressinger.

It’s not like I haven’t had sex before, but somehow this feels different. Special? As if Noah and I have reached a new phase in our new relationship—an unspoken bond, an agreement after the drama happening the past few days.

I feel close to him.

Protective.

Glancing around, I do my darnedest not to gawk at his house, but it’s difficult. He is only a few years older than me and lives in a house he owns. Compared to my dinky apartment, this is a palace. Compared to *any* apartment, this is a palace.

Shiny stone countertops. Expensive stainless steel appliances. Expansive windows. Custom furniture. Miles and miles of hardwood floors.

“I also have some leftover pizza. Should I warm that up?”

Leftover pizza? “Um, that’s my favorite.”

He sets about tossing the slices on a plate, setting it in the microwave, zapping the cheesy goodness a few minutes, my stomach grumbling in the process. I content myself with watching him fuss, getting me a water with ice. Adding a lemon.

Adorable.

Melts my heart and I ask one more time, “Are you sure you don’t need me to help you?” My mother didn’t teach me to sit idly by while someone waits on me hand and foot, unless it’s at a restaurant, and even then, occasionally, I feel guilty.

“I owe you one,” he says simply.

“You owe me nothing.”

“After those articles came out—”

“Noah, that was not your fault. Those things they wrote about us were not your fault—or mine. You have to let it go.”

I have. Why can’t he?

“What is the point of staying upset about it?” I pop a piece of strawberry in my mouth and chew. “It will drive you nuts.”

He rests both hands on the counter, leaning forward. “Dwelling on things seems to be my thing.” He shrugs, standing up straight once the microwave dings. “I have a history of not...letting things slide. They...” He pauses again. “Weigh on me.”

I study him: his face, the determined set of his mouth, the frustrated slashes of his brows.

I want to tell him that worrying and letting things weigh you down does no good. Those two things do not change the outcome of any situation—they only stress you out. Instead, I pick up the pizza on the plate he’s set in front of me and bite down into the thick slice, chewing thoughtfully. Wipe my mouth with a napkin and chase it down with water.

Noah is only wearing boxers, a pair he threw on after strutting back inside the house naked and I can’t help my eyes from straying up and down his toned chest. Arms.

My mouth salivates and not from the salty pizza sauce, as I sit here in just the t-shirt I arrived in, and panties, of course, the chair cushion under my ass

coarse against my smooth skin.

I shift in my seat, still eyeballing the prime young man in front of me who seems oblivious to my ogling.

I've noticed that about him—Noah is modest and seemingly unaffected by the fame and notoriety, and not just for show. He truly only seems to want to play baseball and doesn't care about anything that goes along with it.

Like this massive house.

“Can I be weird for a minute?” I ask, setting down the remainder of my pizza. “Would you show me around the house?”

I love looking at houses online and on Instagram—decorating is my passion—and it appears someone very well paid came and designed Noah's interior. It doesn't fit his personality, but that is none of my business.

Still, when he agrees to show me around and I hop off the stool, I can't help, but commenting, “This really does not fit you at all.”

Cold metals. Cold stone. Cold appliances.

“What does fit me?” He walks me to an office near the front of the house, carpet on the floors and framed posters on the walls, trophies and baseball paraphernalia. I spot my grandpa's cards on a shelf, still in their plexiglass boxes.

“Definitely something cozier. I feel like...your mom should have had a hand in helping you out and not a professional.” I lift a heavy, silver paperweight from the desktop that had to have cost over five hundred dollars. “I love this office, Noah. Bet you spend most of your time here.”

“Yeah and in the loft. That's upstairs.”

So, not the big room with stiff couches across the hall from here?

Figures.

I hate rooms like that—spaces that get no use because they're fancy and for company. Why would a designer buy him ridiculously expensive sofas he is never going to use and are just for show?

Money.

Another user.

No wonder he is so jaded sometimes.

He walks me out of his office and we go up the winding staircase; a loft is at the top, with an overstuffed sofa and a beanbag chair. It looks like it's meant for kids, but the imprint in the couch tells me this is where he spends his time.

I peer into a guest bathroom. A guest room. Another guest room. Another

guest room. Another guest bathroom. There is a den with an air hockey table and I blurt out, “I just don’t understand all these random rooms? None of this makes sense.”

Noah shrugs and I clamp my mouth shut, not wanting to criticize.

“And this is my bedroom.”

I take a step inside.

Large windows at the back of the room. A sitting area, two chairs and an ottoman flanking a fireplace. Your usual bedside tables. Lamps.

Giant bed. “I would need a ladder to climb up on that thing,” I tease, walking over and pressing my ass against the mattress to demonstrate. It hits high on my waist.

Noah walks over, two hands grasping my hips as he hauls me up, setting me on the edge. “See? You can get up just fine.”

He kisses me.

I kiss him back.

He presses into my spread legs; I wrap those legs around him, tugging him in closer, loving the heat from his body, wanting it on top of me.

My hands roam; his slide over my bare thighs.

Our tongues mingle.

His dick hardens and I moan softly, scooting back on the mattress, making room for him to climb up and on top of me, and he does so without ceremony. Hands roaming from my thighs up to the hem of my t-shirt, over my stomach.

I help him pull my shirt off.

He helps me remove his boxers.

Sleek, toned body. Warm skin. Hard muscles, hard dick.

*All for me.*

Impatient, I’m already wet and want it now. So when he begins kissing his way down my body, intention clear, I tug at his shoulders. “I want you inside me.” Don’t want to wait.

Greedy. Selfish.

Listen—when you’re like me and haven’t banged in forever, you want all the sex and you want it now.

He eases back up my body, kisses me on the lips.

“Noah...we didn’t use a condom in the pool. Should we put one on now?” Is it pointless to use one now? What if his swimmers are super sperm and penetrated the birth control I’m on? He didn’t even ask me about it

before; it's a good thing I'm on something and don't have to worry too much. For all he knows, I'm a cleat-chasing gold digger looking for an easy ride—bad move, Noah.

Bad move, indeed.

"I have one here, somewhere—I think?" Naked, he moves toward the side table, ass in the air as he pulls open the drawer and begins rummaging through it. Victorious, he holds a gold foil packet in the air. "Found one!"

Indeed.

"How old is that?" I ask teasingly, lying flat on the bed, watching as he tears the package open.

"No idea—I don't have women here, so I'm not actually sure why there are even condoms in the drawer. Wishful thinking, probably."

He rolls it on and I watch, transfixed, never one to find that sort of thing sexy, though I get a bit turned on watching him now. He does it slowly, deliberately. Brows furrowed with concentration, as if he is also enjoying every second of the act.

"Come here," I tell him when he finishes, my hand going around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. A warm, full kiss that melts my insides, his hand brushing along my skin.

"Are you sore?" he mumbles. "You know, from before?"

Hardly.

Okay, maybe a little. But, "Not enough to stop me from doing it again."

I wiggle my hips and reach over to pull him on top, loving the weight of him. His heat. So different than how he felt in the pool with water lapping around us, weightless. I could feel him inside me, but the sensation wasn't the same—the experience wasn't the same, although it was just as intimate.

Noah leans in and runs his lips over the slope between my neck and shoulder, and I tilt my head a bit, so he lingers there with his mouth. *Heaven.*

When he lines up our bodies and pushes forward—for the second time today—I am more than wet enough for him to ease in without a problem. Unlike in the pool, where more persistence was necessary.

I cradle the back of his head when he buries himself inside, hands then dragging down his back, nails lightly scraping his spine, that dip above his ass I find so incredibly sexy.

He thrusts and I wish I could watch those thick, athletic thighs pumping into me. *Mmmm...*

"Fuck you feel good," he groans.

*Better than before, so much better...*

“Do you want to get on top?” He pulls back and looks at me, eyes glazed over, lips parted.

*Why yes, I would. Thank you for asking. “Yes please.”*

We roll until I’m on top, adjusting so he’s back inside, and move back and forth, back and forth, leaning forward, so I can push against the headboard. He’s deeper.

So good.

I clench my Kegel’s hard, knowing full well that with the condom on, he can’t feel me as well as he would without one. It has the desired effect; everything inside me knows “I’m close. I’m...”

Going to come. Again. For the second time in one day, without having to do it myself.

*Hallelujah, there is a god!*

“Come for me, baby.” Cliché, but sexy.

I come, clenching every muscle in my body, so he can feel it and maybe he will come soon too. Back and forth, back and forth...

“Shit, yes. Don’t stop doing that.” Noah grips my hips, pulling me across him, pulling me deeper, nostrils flaring. Red-faced, his orgasm face is intense and almost has me laughing—thank God I don’t. He looks so serious and determined.

Strong.

*God he turns me on.*

After he cleans up, we’re back on the bed, under the gray down comforter, all snuggled in for a nap, Noah traces a finger along my shoulder. Kisses it before settling his head on the pillow next to mine, facing me.

I close the distance to kiss the tip of his nose.

Vomit inducing, I know.

“I won’t lie,” he says after a time. “Having that condom on was like having sex while wearing a moist gym sock,” he pouts.

“Don’t say moist.”

He pauses. “Moist.”

We laugh, disappearing under the covers and don’t come back up until we’re both satisfied again.

## NOAH

“YOU KNOW WHAT?” Miranda is laughing softly, naked under my blankets, drowsy from our nap. “When—I mean if, sorry—we’re in a committed relationship, we can have sex without a condom.”

Oh? This perks me up. “How long do people have to date before they consider themselves committed?”

She stares up at the ceiling. “I don’t know—I don’t think there are rules.”

I roll toward her and brace myself up on an elbow. “I don’t plan on dating anyone else—do you?”

Her eyes move to my face. “No.”

“Does that mean we’re committed?”

“No, but I think it means we’re monogamous?”

I pause, confused. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Yes? But no? Heck, I don’t know. I think committed means we’re in it for the long haul—we want to be together long-term. Monogamous just means...we’re only sleeping with each other until we figure out if we want to be committed.”

“So...” I think that through. “We can go bareback when we’re committed?”

Miranda opens her pretty mouth to reply, but the words about to leave her tongue die when my bedroom door crashes open, followed by Buzz Wallace, followed by, “Yo, dipshit, you guys in here?”

With a horrified gasp, Miranda disappears below the covers with a loud groan. “Oh my god, tell me that is not who I think it is.”

“It’s Wallace.”

“Why? Why is he like this?”

Because he cannot help himself. He’s the fucking worst.

“What the hell man—have you ever heard of knocking?”

His wide shoulders shrug. “The door was unlocked.”

Why I ever gave that dude the passcode to the gate is beyond me. I hate myself now.

“Wallace, you cannot just barge in. Did you not see Miranda’s car outside?” Not only did he definitely see the car outside, he is the one who sent her to the stadium to fetch me!

Now look at the bastard, picking at a fingernail and ignoring my scorn. “Yeah, so? I thought the three of us could hang.”

Hang? Not a fucking chance. “Don’t you have anything better to do than follow me around? I thought you were with your brother or going to your mom’s, or some bullshit.”

“Oh. Right. I did say that.” He walks to the overstuffed chair in the corner of my room and plunks himself down, propping his feet up on the ottoman in front of him. I didn’t choose the furniture—the decorator did—and now I wish there wasn’t a suite of seating options for him to get comfortable on while Miranda and I are held captive on the bed.

“Do not make yourself comfortable, asshole! Get out!”

Beneath the covers, I hear a giggle—the traitor in my bed thinks this is amusing? I’ll deal with that later.

“This is what you’re doing? Taking a nap?” He yawns. “I was hoping you’d be having sex.”

Too late, did that already—three times.

“What do you want?”

“I told you: I was bored so I came here.”

“You are not picking up on my sarcasm—at all.”

The fingernail he’s been picking at gets popped into his mouth, and he peels it off, spiting it on my carpet. The fuck!

“No, I’m picking up what you’re throwing down. You just never know what’s good for you—I do.”

“How is you barging into my room while we’re naked good for me?”

This seems to perk him up. “You’re naked? Can I climb in?”

Finally, Miranda reacts, sitting up on the bed, hair and eyes wild. “Don’t you dare! No.” She holds the covers over her boobs. “Stop staring, you creep!”

“Can we go for dinner?” Buzz throws his head back on the cushion behind him. “I’m starving.”

Beside me, quietly, Miranda makes an *eh* sound. “I could eat, actually.”

Jesus Christ, these two are going to be the death of me. “The last thing I want to do is spend more time with you.” I cannot escape this dude. “Work, meetings—now you’re busting into my house.”

“I know, isn’t it great?”

It’s not great. I wonder for a second if I’ll ever get used to having a best friend who’s so...goddamn needy. None of my friends from home act like this. How the hell did I get stuck with the biggest playboy on the team? We’re polar opposites!

Buzz turns his attention to Miranda. “You look pretty cozy—you’re not going to move in here, are you?”

“NO!” Miranda practically shouts. “I mean...no. We just started seeing each other, my gosh.”

Buzz isn’t deterred. “Because if you did, you’d bring the rest of that baseball card collection, wouldn’t you?”

Goddamn him!

Miranda’s mouth drops open. Dips her head a bit lower, shielding herself. “We haven’t...we...”

Wallace repositions his feet on my ottoman, the bottoms of his white socks dirty. “Well since I’m here, maybe I can broker the deal between the two of you for those remaining cards, yeah? It’s the least I can do.”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“Jesus, Wallace—now is not the time!”

A finger pokes me in the thigh from under the covers. “He’s right though—we do need to talk about the rest of those cards.”

She is not helping.

Even though they’re both right—I still want those cards and she still has to sell them—we’re not fucking discussing it right here, naked, in front of Dipshit over there.

“Get out, so we can get dressed.”

“I want tacos,” he announces, standing.

After he’s gone, Miranda and I speak at the same time.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“He’s five.”

With a laugh, we climb out of bed and get dressed.

## EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

Noah

“I CAN’T BELIEVE there are two of them.” Miranda hands me a bowl of pasta salad and I carry it to the table she has set up at the front of her office space. “They could be twins.”

I follow her gaze. Buzz and his brother Tripp are arguing over near the makeshift bar, set up for the official opening of Miranda’s design business.

“If Wallace were a twin, I’d punch myself in the nuts.”

My girlfriend rolls her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic—he’s not so terrible. And his brother seems nice.”

*Nice?* Not a word I’d use to describe either of them, especially not Tripp Wallace, but Miranda is delusional and, much to my irritation, has grown to love Buzz like a brother. As such, she’s using words like nice, and cute, and adorable to describe them both.

*Vomit.*

A professional football player for Chicago, Tripp is as big an asshole as his brother, if not worse. Taller. Bulkier. Cruder. The day they were handing out god complexes, Tripp was first in line to receive one.

*Prick.*

At the moment, he’s trying to steal a wine bottle out of my friend’s hands and I watch as he gets elbowed in the gut. Jeez, they fight like kids.

Someone needs to take him down a peg or two.

And someone needs to stop those idiots from arguing before they knock the entire bar over. It took me two hours to hammer that fucking thing together and longer to paint it.

Miranda hands me a plate of sushi and kisses my cheek. “Thanks for all your help arranging this, baby.”

Baby.

She loves using endearments when she's talking to me, hardly ever calls me by my name anymore. It's always babe this, honey that, oh hey sweetie.

I fucking love it.

I love *her*.

All our friends have come out to support her. Claire, Emily, Gretchen and her boyfriend, whatshisface whose name I can't be bothered to remember. A few people she's met networking. Friends of mine, mostly all teammates and their wives or girlfriends. It was an act of God getting them all here because our season just started and everyone is tired and strapped for free time, but I managed it. Also packed into the room? The two new hires she found as support staff: Tanner, a woman in her late twenties whose job will be new building design, and a dude named Kyle who does residential, but will act as her intern, too.

It's a full house, seemingly packed with giants, especially considering her office space is pretty tiny.

I stand back and watch as Sophie Blackmore approaches Miranda and leans in for a hug, the glamorous WAG the wife of another Steam player.

"Oh my gosh, it's so nice to finally meet you," Sophie gushes. "I started following you on Instagram a couple months ago and I love your stuff."

We all know what happened a couple months ago and I shift uncomfortably, waiting for Sophie to keep talking.

"Bam and I just bought a new little lake cottage and I would love for you to come take a look at it—he said if it will keep me quiet, I can redo the entire thing." She giggles, sipping from the champagne flute in her hand, a submerged raspberry kicking up bubbles.

"I would love that!" Miranda enthuses. "I'm actually really busy the next couple days, but I can make time for you next week?"

Damn right she's busy—after the whole mess online with the tabloids, her business page blew up. Some people called her out of sheer curiosity, others just trolls to hassle her, but quite a few were legitimate clients who wanted to hire her for design work. She was off and running, never slowing down since. It won't be long before her two employees turn into four, or six—maybe more?

My girlfriend is the fucking shit.

"Here is my number." Sophie hands Miranda a business card. I can't imagine what the hell is on it, because as far as I know, Bam Blackmore's

wife does not work outside the home.

“I’ll shoot you an email Monday morning,” Miranda promises, tucking the card away as Sophie saunters off to join her husband. She turns to me. “Oh my god, Noah, it’s happening. People want to hire me—I’m freaking out!” She squeals a little. Kisses me again on the cheek, eyes bright. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“Yes you could have.”

But I know what she means: the remaining \$50,000, I paid to buy out her entire baseball collection, that money enabled her to hire Kyle and Tanner. To pay her utilities and buy an actual desk—the one she really wanted, not the cheap one she had in her Amazon cart.

Stars shine in her eyes when she looks at me now, but I know it’s not from the money. “I love you.”

It’s because of that. Her arms wrap around my waist and she kisses the tip of my chin.

My lips part. “I…” A lump catches in my throat. I’ve never said the word love to anyone other than my parents. This will be the first time and I mean every fucking word of it. “I love you too.”

Miranda bites down on her bottom lip to stop it from quivering. “Let’s not get sappy in the middle of the room. We’ll embarrass ourselves and I’m trying to be professional.”

She pulls herself away. Straightens her long skirt. Tucks a few errant strands of hair behind her ear.

She’s perfection. Sassy, chaotic perfection. “I’m so proud of you.”

An air kiss and she disappears into the small crowd.

Then.

Claire stalks over, weaving her way through, steam practically rising from her ears. “Those buffoons pretending to bartend are making a *mess*! That big one just told Kyle he was cut off from *life*! They’re asinine—could you *please* go do something?”

“Tripp? That big one? Or Trace, the other big one?”

That gives her pause. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Yes.”

Miranda’s best friend scrunches up her nose. “Those are *not* their names.”

“One hand on the Bible.” I laugh.

“Well that explains a lot.”

“Aww, come on,” I tease, knowing she’s still single. “You don’t think

either one of them are cute?”

Another eye roll and she crosses her arms. “Hard. *Pass.*”

***The End***

Mark your calendars for Buzz’s story next in Hard Fall releasing  
August 18t!

Pre-Order at your favorite book retailer!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Ney is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the How to Date a Douchebag series and is best know for her sexy, laugh-out-loud New Adult romances. Among her favorite vices, she includes: iced latte's , historical architecture and well-placed sarcasm. She lives colorfully, collects vintage books, art, loves flea markets, and fancies herself British.

For more information about Sara Ney and her books, visit:



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