

A romantic couple embracing. The man is shirtless and muscular, with his arms around the woman's waist. The woman is seen from the back, her hair long and dark. They are standing outdoors, possibly on a balcony or near a window, with a soft, warm light in the background.

How many
times can a
heart break?

*the
charlotte
chronicles*

THE JACKSON BOYS

Jen Frederick

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE CHARLOTTE CHRONICLES

A NOVEL

JEN FREDERICK



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SUMMARY

Charlotte and Nathan were supposed to be forever. They grew up together. Their families were intertwined. Charlotte was Nathan's first love. Nathan was Charlotte's first everything.

Until they weren't.

How do you hold on to the person you know in your heart you are supposed to be with when everything and everyone in the universe is telling you it's over?

How many times does a heart break?

When is enough.....enough?

How long is forever?

This book is for the fans. After writing the epilogue to Unspoken, a romance between the son of the couple from Undeclared and the daughter of the couple from Unspoken arose from the pages. I wrote one scene for fun and then another, and it became a free serial novel in my newsletter to give readers a glimpse into the future of two popular couples from my Woodlands series. Reader enthusiasm inspired me to expand the story, and Charlotte and Nate's love took on a dramatic life of its own.

PART ONE

Today is a no good, very bad, wholly rotten day. In the history of bad days, this has to be on the top. My best friend Nick is sitting by the window and won't look at me. His brother Nathan's in the corner, glowering as if somehow this is my fault. Mom is trying not to cry, and Dad is pacing like a lunatic.

And my head hurts bad. The doctor says that tonight's surgery will help alleviate the pressure from the tumor that's taken up residence in the back of my skull. No one knows what will happen next, other than to not operate would be a death sentence.

My choices are dying or getting my head cut open and possibly dying.

Being only fifteen, I don't get to make the decision. That's up to my parents, who said yes to surgery before the doctor even was done introducing the idea. Did either of them even hear the litany of absolutely terrible things that could happen during surgery?

They could administer the wrong amount of anesthesia, and I wouldn't wake up. Or they could accidentally cut into some vital portion of my brain, rendering me conscious but incapable of speech or movement. Or the tumor could be so large that surgery was a worthless endeavor in the first place.

Everyone wants me to have the surgery. As for me, I'd like a moment, just one, to think about it. But there's no time. It's now, tonight, immediately or not at all.

None of the adults are going to give it to me straight. Even the doctors talk in quiet tones to my parents in the corner. I want to yell that *I'm the patient*, but I can't yell because even speaking is too painful right now. But I'm glaring. My eyes are shouting at them. Unfortunately no one but Nathan is even looking at me right now. Nathan who must think I've done something to create this tumor in my head and ruin his day, because he can't stop glowering at me. His face looks thunderous like he'd like to squeeze my head until the tumor pops out like a zit. I'd like that too. But at least he's looking at me, unlike everyone else.

Worst. Fucking. Day. Ever.

The metal of Charlotte's bed rattles as she is wheeled out of her room toward the operating room. Her blue eyes look afraid, like the time she was eight and Nick and I were trying to get her to jump off the diving board into the pool. I finally walked out onto the board and held her hand so we could jump off the side together. But today, no amount of hand holding is going to take the fear from her or from any of us.

For a moment after Charlotte is taken away, the room is silent. No soft words exchanged between Mom and Aunt AnnMarie. No gruff, low tones from Uncle Bo or Dad. No sounds from Nick's Nintendo DS. It is eerie. Then Aunt AnnMarie begins sobbing, and her cries are so awful I have to leave the room. I have to leave the hallway, but no matter how much distance I put between Charlotte's hospital room and myself, I can't escape the sounds. They are embedded in my brain. I sink down into a chair in the waiting room on the PICU floor and clutch my head in my hands. If I could rewind time, I think I'd never get up this morning.

I hear my Dad and Bo enter the waiting room and pick my head up. Nick is with them.

"The surgery will take a couple of hours, maybe longer. Why don't you

take Grace and the boys home to get some rest? We'll call you as soon as she's out," Uncle Bo says.

Dad looks at Uncle Bo and then grabs him. The two stand there clutching each other, and that's all it takes for Nick to break. Dad reaches out, and the three of them huddle together. The only one I hear is Nick, nearly choking on his tears, but Uncle Bo's shoulders are heaving with grief.

Dad and Bo served as Marines together, years ago. They were teenagers when they enlisted. Dad came from a dirt-poor family with an asshole father who died before I was born. Bo's dad was just as bad. We have no grandfathers. Not on our mom's side either. *Her* dad died when she was kid. None of us felt the lack because we had each other, and Dad and Bo had a legion of old Marine buddies. Once a Marine, always a Marine even if you separated early instead of retired.

Charlotte, Nick, and I grew up together. We live in the same condo building on the same floor, our nearly identical penthouses separated by a wall. My dad and Charlotte's mom formed a hedge fund that they partnered into a billion dollar investment firm. Our families are so intertwined, we are almost one unit. Even though we sometimes fight, we are family. But now it's being threatened. My safe, perfect life is being ripped apart. If Charlotte doesn't make it, we're doomed. I just know it.

I walk in the opposite direction, toward the windows. The air conditioning is leaving condensation on the window, and the glass feels both cold and wet against my forehead. Outside, the city is running like nothing out of the ordinary is happening, like two families aren't breaking down inside this hospital. Like our whole future isn't dependent on Charlotte making it out of surgery in one functional piece.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, but I feel dazed when Dad places his hand on my shoulder.

"We're going to go home for a bit," Dad says, drawing me away from the window.

“Don’t want to,” I reply. I want to be here when Charlotte wakes up. She might need me.

“We need to take care of your mom.” Dad squeezes my shoulder. I nod because Dad isn’t asking. His tone is mild but when it comes to taking care of Mom, he’s implacable.

Home isn’t much better. Mom started crying in the car and hasn’t stopped. Dad carries her into the elevator and then down into their bedroom. Nick trails behind. The other side of the penthouse floor is silent and dark. Empty.

I stand in the entryway, unsure of what I should do.

Five minutes later, Dad comes out looking like he’s aged about ten years in this one day. He drags a hand through his hair.

“Why don’t you go work out some of that energy?” he suggests.

It’s as good of an idea as any. I’m happy for the direction. If he hadn’t said something, I might have stood frozen in the entry until the surgery was over.

After changing into a pair of gym shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, I walk down the stairs into the private workout facility on the floor that separates the penthouse apartments in this building from the rest of the units. My entire body rebels when I see the long padded mat that Charlotte uses to practice her gymnastic moves. The mat she may never use again.

I can’t be here.

Working out in common gym, I text my dad.

OK.

As I am boarding the elevator, the phone pings again.

Love you son.

U2, I respond.

On the way down to the gym that is open for all building residents, the elevator stops on the eleventh floor. Madeline Short steps on. Madeline is a freshman at one of the city colleges. I don't know her well, but she is definitely in my mental spank bank. My brain screams, "Welcome distraction." She's tall for a girl. The top of her head hits me around my mouth. I can rest my chin on the top of Charlotte's head, something that irritates her to no end.

Madeline has a tight body and a tendency to say outrageous things she thinks might make me blush. Like I've never had a girl before. I've never said anything to dissuade her because I've enjoyed watching her lick her lips and rub the shadowed valley between her big tits.

Madeline stands so close to me you'd think that there were dozens of others in the elevator car instead of just the two of us, but I don't move away. Her body is warm and, for the first time in hours, I feel like I'm thawing out. When her arm brushes mine, I start getting hot. The look in her eyes is an obvious invitation, so when the elevator stops at the sixth floor, I don't get off. And I don't protest when she presses the close door button, and I don't say anything when she presses the button for her floor.

I follow her silently into her family's empty apartment. She leads us confidently down the hall toward a bedroom. I don't say anything when she pulls down my gym shorts or pushes the T-shirt off my head. I'm afraid if I do talk the sounds of Aunt AnnMarie's cries or my mother's sobs will come back, and I don't want that. I don't want to think at all.

When Madeline leads me to her bed, when she takes off her clothes, when we lie down together, I shut down my brain and just concentrate on the physical feeling of release.

chime from my phone wakes me out of a doze. I jerk upright and grab my

A phone.

She made it. She's asking for you.

I can't get dressed fast enough. My motions jostle Madeline, or maybe she was awake all along. I don't really care. I've got to get to the hospital.

"Hey, where are you going? I told you my parents are gone."

"Gotta run." My mouth feels dry, and my throat is sore as if all the tears I've suppressed are glass shards scraping my insides raw as they travel from my eye sockets into my stomach.

Madeline leans toward me and hooks a finger through the waistband of my shorts. "What's your rush? I'm ready for round three if you are."

But this particular distraction is over. I can't even stand to have her touch my clothes, but my dad would kill me if he knew I was rude to a woman, particularly one I'd just fucked.

"I'm sorry." I give her a tight smile. "Family thing."

She shrugs. Ten minutes ago, the lift of her naked breast would've gotten me hard, and I'd have fallen on her. Now I only have Charlotte on my mind; there's no room for Madeline without making me sick.

"I'll call," I say and then pull on my T-shirt and grab up my socks and shoes. I don't look back, even when she calls my name out in a bewildered fashion. I can't tell her Charlotte's situation. It's a family thing.

By the time I get to the hospital, my clothes are back together and I'm winded. I run to the door, and Dad is standing there looking grim. I falter. "Did she. . ." I'm afraid to finish the sentence.

"She's fine. A fighter," Dad says with approval. I move toward the entrance, and he stops me. I hear him inhale and then he pushes me back. I strain against him, but my seventeen-year-old body isn't strong enough to overtake him. Dad was a professional fighter back in the day, and he's still as strong as hell now. I'm proud to be his son, but right now I'm confused as to

why he's keeping me from Charlotte.

"Sorry, hoss, I can't let you go in there stinking like sex and perfume. You'd embarrass your mother, piss off your Uncle Bo, and break Charlotte's heart. AnnMarie'd have your nuts on a platter."

I flush and turn away, embarrassed by my behavior. Dad grabs my head and brings me close to him.

"This is going to be a tough. Loving people is tough." His hard stare burns through me. "Are you strong enough to see it through?"

"I am," I say and straighten. "Sorry, Dad. Won't happen again." And it won't. I'll apologize to Madeline at my first opportunity because using her to ease my pain was very wrong. And if Charlotte found out? She'd never look at me with the same trust and adoration again. Charlotte was meant to be mine. I knew it when she was born. Nick is her brother, but I'm her protector. I've let her down this time, but never again.

“

Do you think I should just shave my head or wait until the hair falls off during radiation?” I close one eye and lift my long hair off my neck. The mirror says it’s a bad look. At the base of my head, there’s a shaved patch of skin where they opened me up to remove the cancerous cells; they were so precise that they only needed to shave a small section. The upper strands of hair cover that bare spot . . . but not for long.

“Are you going to get a pirate patch?” Nick asks. He is lying on the hospital bed next to me, playing on his DS. Mom and Dad had an extra wide hospital bed moved in here after the surgery because someone is always lying next to me. Not that I minded, but I didn’t even know that they made beds bigger. The nurses grumbled because apparently it is harder to take my vitals when one side is squished by the body of some teenager.

Friends from school started coming over when I could finally have visitors, three days after surgery, and invariably they end up beside me. Most of the time, though, it’s Nate. He is here every night like a giant, muscle-bound teddy bear. He’d disappeared after my surgery but came back late that night and sat with Mom for hours until she left to get something. Then he nudged me over. I like it more than I should because I’m sure that Nate is just

being brotherly. But it's a nice change from him always giving me a hard time.

His default mood for the last year has been pissed off. Even Nick gives him a wide berth. When I got sick, I was sure he was thinking I'd ruined something for him and that's why he ran off during my surgery. But now he's back to being big brother Nate. Unfortunately, I have some not-so-fraternal feelings toward him.

But a girl with a tube in her neck, a slightly enlarged noggin, and a bald head isn't going to get someone like Nate to notice her in *that* way, particularly when the only attention I got from him before was mostly criticism about everything from how messy my hair was to how short my skirts were. I should probably just enter the nunnery now.

"No, why? You think that goes with a bald head?" I ask Nick, trying to shove Nate out of my thoughts. I have weird feelings toward Nate, and I'm not really up for dissecting them right now.

"I'm wondering why you are closing one eye."

I punch Nick in the shoulder. "I'm just trying to see it from a different perspective."

Nick sets down the DS and pushes me upright. He pulls up the hair tight and away from my face. And then *he* closes one eye and then the other. "I think we should shave our heads today."

"We?"

"Hell yeah." Nick looks at me like I'm bonkers. "You know I'm shaving my head in solidarity. A bunch of us are. Even your gymnastics team is talking about it."

Maybe it's the drugs, but I start to cry. It's too kind of a gesture.

"Ah shit, don't cry." Nick awkwardly pats me on the shoulder, but I can't stop leaking water everywhere. I'm afraid and I'm grateful to my friends and I love my family and everything that is going on is overwhelming me.

"Shit, shit, shit," I hear Nick say as he moves off the bed. I want to call

out to him that I'm fine, but I can't because I'm really not fine. What Nick doesn't say and that we both know is that I have to shave my hair off because they've already taken a hunk of it off to operate on my head. And who the heck cares about my hair when they are planning to stick a plastic tube down the back of my neck to drain off the excess fluid that is now collecting in my brain? And there's the fact that since the surgery I have had a hard time comprehending reading or writing words down. It'd be a struggle to compete at a second grade spelling bee right now.

I know I should be so happy that I made it out of surgery, but all I can think of is how my seven years of gymnastics training are being flushed down the toilet; how everyone will stare at me when I go back to school; how my mom won't stop looking at me like she's afraid the next breath will be my last. My mom is never worried. She's this business powerhouse who can climb giant mountains. But she's afraid, which tells me I should be shitting my pants.

So I can't stop crying even though I'm making Nick feel so bad he has to leave the room. The bed dips and a pair of strong arms gather me up. It's Nate. I recognize his smell, and it makes me cry even harder because I have such a stupid, idiotic crush on him and I'm afraid no one will want to marry me because I don't have any hair.

"You've done what legions of other girls at school wish they had the power to do."

"What's that?" I mumble into Nate's cotton-covered chest.

"Make Nick leave them alone."

Nate's bad joke prompts a watery giggle, and I'm able to quell my hysterics. Pushing away, I wipe ineffectually at my wet face. Nate nudges my hands aside and sops up the tears with a couple of hospital tissues that are about as soft as notebook paper. I notice that the clock says it's just after one in the afternoon.

"Isn't your dad making you guys go to school?" It's Thursday. At least I

think it is. I've been here since Saturday.

"Nope. Your little brain tumor is getting us out of school for the week. Mom's orders." Nate leans back against the pillows of the hospital bed. Even though the bed is slightly larger, his big frame takes up most of the space so that when I lean back I have to rest partially against his chest. I remind myself that Nate is like my brother. Just a brother. Like Nick.

If only I could just convince myself of that.

Mom and Dad kick Nate out later that afternoon to share "good news" with me.

Unfortunately I don't understand what they're saying. Like, I know what all the words mean individually, but I am having a hard time putting it all together. And it's making me angry. "Stop. Just stop," I say. Or maybe I shout it because Mom presses her lips together, a sure sign she is disappointed.

The doctor had come in earlier to tell me that they didn't think the tumor had resulted in any brain damage and that I was still as smart as always, only that now I might see some changes in how I used the information in my head. And that I might be more emotional now because I had a reduced ability to control my feelings.

I guess that explains why I am crying all the mother loving time. I am sick of crying. I am sick of the hospital. I don't want to go to surgery this afternoon to have a port put in so that it is more convenient for them to put drugs into my body. I don't want to undergo several courses of radiation therapy to make sure all my tumor cells are killed off.

I guess the good thing is that after I get the port put in, I can wear actual pajamas and not the hospital gown. And they'll move me out of the main hospital into an adjacent facility with a big room that overlooks the city. Just like at home. Only it will still be in a hospital.

I'm missing school and gymnastics practice. Nick tried to cheer me up

earlier by saying that I'd gotten too tall for gymnastics anyway. I had grown a little in the last year, and some of the maneuvers weren't as tight. Maybe I would've given it up soon, but I wish that I could've made that decision, not have it taken away from me like my stupid hair. Or where I am going to go to school after I'm discharged.

"I can't believe you'd make me leave school and move to Switzerland." I glare at my mother and then look pleadingly at my dad. He's a softie, always trying to make Mom and me happy. Living with the two of us has taken a lot out of him, he likes to say. I love my mom, but we grate on each other's nerves. Dad says it's because we're too much alike. I don't think we're anything alike. For instance, I would not make my daughter leave her only friends and take her to another country to get better.

No wonder they kicked Nate out. He would not be in favor of me moving away. Nick is my best friend, and Nate, well, I couldn't leave him either. He is going away to college soon, and I want to enjoy him being around while I can—even if he is a jerk to me most of the time. I'll miss Aunt Grace and Uncle Noah too.

"The transition would be easier for you. We'll hire a tutor to go with us so you won't get behind, and when we can, we'll travel around Europe. It will be a big adventure for us." Mom is using her *Let me explain to you why Freedom Funds is the best hedge fund in the world* voice. Irritating much?

"You can stop talking to me like I'm some prospective client. I'm not leaving North Prep. Last year sucked because I was a freshman, but I'm a sophomore now. I have status!"

"Don't say suck," Mom says automatically, without any real force behind it. She is too busy staring at Dad. They've developed this technique where they can communicate with each other just by looking. No words. I've seen Aunt Grace and Uncle Noah do it too. Sometimes the looks they exchange make me feel uncomfortable, like I'm seeing something private I shouldn't be looking at. But it's like the sun, and I can't look away. I want to

have that kind of connection. I've decided that's the sign you've found your one true love.

It's never worked with Nate. I tried it once when he started seeing Yolanda from school. Yolanda was a senior last year. Older girls have always had a thing for Nate. I don't get it. Why don't they stick with the guys in their own grade and leave Nate alone?

Yolanda was always touching him. I'd see her run her hands down the side of his arm or over his back or sometimes even around the waistband of his jeans. I thought it was disgusting how she pawed at him, and I glared at him one day trying to tell him silently how gross it was, but he just stared at Yolanda with a stupid grin on his face. So even if I thought Nate was my one true love, he doesn't return my feelings. He's too busy sleeping with all the seniors. Like Yolanda.

When Yolanda left for college, I was thrilled but her place was quickly taken by another senior girl. Plus there's this girl who lives downstairs from us who's in college, and she's always looking at him like he's a side of beef and she hasn't eaten in a year. I haven't seen Nate give her the stupid grin, so it seems safe to assume that they aren't doing it. *Yet*. I asked Nick once if he thought his brother was hooking up with the girl downstairs, and Nick gave me this weird look and told me that he wasn't going to talk about stuff like that with me.

Dad clears his throat, and I do a mental fist pump. That Dad is talking and not Mom means I won this round. "We'll take it a day at a time. If North Prep gets too much for you, the Switzerland idea is still available."

Mom leans over and gives me a kiss on my forehead. Her lips are trembling like she is trying not to cry, and I just don't understand what she is so upset about. How could North Prep be too much for me? All my friends go to North Prep. Nothing bad could happen to me there.

“

Oh, Nate! What're you doing here?" Aunt AnnMarie comes around Charlotte's empty hospital bed. AnnMarie isn't really my aunt. Charlotte isn't my sister. Our families have been one forever, though. I hold out my books and give her a confused look. I've been coming every night after football practice for the past week. What does she think I'm doing here?

"I'm here to study," I say. "And hang out. Where is everyone?" I look around but don't see Nick or Charlotte. Aunt AnnMarie places a hand on my elbow and starts moving out of the room, but I pull back. "Where's everyone?" I repeat.

She doesn't give me a direct answer. Instead, she tightens the grip on my arm. For some reason she wants me to leave. I'm several inches taller than her and probably a hundred pounds heavier. My height and weight make it impossible for most people to move me when I'm refusing to follow them. Aunt AnnMarie is no different. She turns to me and places her hands on her hips.

"You were so much easier to manage when you were a child, Nate."

"But not as cute, right?" I wink at her because even though she looks a little exasperated with me now, I know she loves me.

“No, you were pretty darn cute as a baby.” She sighs and then shoots a glance at the bathroom door that I just now notice is shut. A buzzing sound is coming from inside and then I hear voices. I can’t make out the words, but because I’ve grown up listening to these voices I know it’s Nick and Charlotte. I start for the door. There’s no way that they need privacy.

Aunt AM places her hand on my arm again and this time the tone in her voice, warning and wary, stops me. “Nate.”

“What’s up?” I don’t understand. I hear giggles which are from Charlotte and then a lower chuckle from Nick. My muscles tense up as they do before I’m about to kick the heavy bag in the gym. I’m short of breath and can feel anger pooling in my stomach.

Nick should not be in the bathroom with Charlotte. They should not be together, laughing behind closed doors. What is with the buzzing noise? The irritating hum shuts off, and I hear my name being repeated in low tones.

“Nate, Nathan, Nathan Jackson.” Aunt AnnMarie finally breaks through, and I look down at her, wondering why she’s repeating my name so many times.

“Yeah?” She still doesn’t have my full attention because I have to know what’s going on in there. There’s a silence in the room and then I hear crying. It’s Charlotte. Shaking off Aunt AnnMarie’s hand, I take three strides across the room and have my hand on the bathroom door. I’m so close now that I can finally hear Nick comforting Charlotte.

“It’s fine, Charlotte. You look fine,” Nick says. Charlotte replies, but I don’t understand her. Neither does Nick. “What?” he asks.

“It’s not fine,” Charlotte says more clearly. “Look at me. I look like a penis head.”

Nick bursts out laughing. “Have you even seen a penis?”

Aunt AnnMarie was tugging at my arm but stops at Nick’s question. I guess we both want to hear the answer to this.

“Um duh, pictures. Remember when Francine forwarded the picture of

her brother looking at himself in the mirror?” Silence reigns while we all contemplate this for a second.

“Yeah, that was unfortunate,” Nick snickers. “But you look nothing like Francine’s brother’s penis.”

“Only because he had hair around his dick and I don’t,” Charlotte says. Aunt AnnMarie releases a tiny moan of dismay. I don’t know exactly how I feel that Charlotte has seen some guy’s penis, but it isn’t pleasant.

Nick makes a gagging sound. “Can we never talk about Francine’s brother’s penis again? I’m going to need some brain bleach.”

“I can’t be seen like this,” Charlotte says unhappily. “I look hideous. I’m so glad we did this before Nate came.”

My back bristles. I don’t get why I was shut out of this. Charlotte had talked about shaving off her hair, but I thought it was just that, talk. I’d have done it with her. I wanted to do it. I’m her rock, not Nick.

“Yeah, well, you know I’m standing behind you when he comes because he’s going to be pissed off you did this without talking to him first.”

“He’s not the boss of me,” declares Charlotte. “I’ve already got two parents. I don’t need a third one.”

Is that what she thinks? That I’m trying to be her parent? Disheartened, I allow her actual parent to lead me out into the hallway.

“Nate, honey,” she says, reaching up to brush my hair out of my face. Hair I shouldn’t have. Hair I should’ve shaved off with Charlotte so she could see we’d all be penis heads together if that is really what she looks like. “Charlotte is at a delicate stage. She’s fifteen. She’s starting to notice guys and have guys notice her.” This statement makes me ball my hands into fists, which Aunt AnnMarie notices because she hurries on, “And not that she likes anyone, but she’s very conscious of how she looks. Her emotions are all over the place because of the medications and the surgeries and just all the unknowns of the future.”

Unknowns? “What’re you saying?” I ask sharply. “She’s going to be

okay, right?” I thought after they took the tumor out of her head, it was all good. “The radiation is just precautionary, right?”

Her smile is a little watery. “We hope so, Nathan. We hope so.” She pulls me in for a hug. “Be patient with her, will you?”

I nod. I can be patient. I can. She releases me. A nurse catches her attention and Aunt AnnMarie follows her to the nurses’ station, and I take the opportunity to head back to Charlotte’s room. The bathroom door is still closed. I decide to employ some of that patience and drop into the armchair next to the empty hospital bed. My forbearance is rewarded when a second later the bathroom door flies open and out walks Nick and Charlotte, looking like two freshly shorn lambs. I cast Nick a dark look and he slides behind Charlotte, all six-foot-two of him.

“See, told ya he’d be pissed.”

“I’m not pissed.” Rising up, I position Charlotte directly in front of me and pretend to examine her carefully. I don’t really care what Charlotte looks like without hair. She could be bald for the rest of her life and she’d still be the prettiest girl around, but I figure out pretty quick that she’s not going to believe that. I draw a finger down the middle of her face, from the top of her forehead to the tip of her chin. Then I bisect that imaginary vertical line with a horizontal one. I trace another line from her eyes to the sides of her mouth.

“What’d you learn in biology about symmetry, Charlotte?” I ask her. My voice is a little husky, and her eyes widen. She’s trembling a bit under my hand. Something is building again inside of me, but it’s not anger. It’s an emotion of another kind—one that is stronger, more compelling, and so wrong. I push it down, but this time I can’t replace it with anger like I usually do because I don’t want to hurt Charlotte anymore. I know the past year I’ve done nothing but harp on her. My surly attitude isn’t something I completely understand. One day she’s my little Charlotte, and the next day she’s wearing a tiny white bikini and waving her ass in the air. She makes me feel things I shouldn’t feel toward her, and I’ve reacted badly. I push that all aside. This

isn't about me.

"That nature loves symmetry."

"Right." She's caught on quickly. "Your face is pretty damn symmetrical. You're the type who's gonna look good with long hair, short hair, and no hair."

Her lips are shaking a bit, and she presses them tight to hold back her tears but a couple slip out of her eyes anyway. I swipe them away with my thumbs, but I see comprehension behind the surface sheen of tears. As a wide, beautiful smile spreads across her face, all my good brotherly intentions flee. The *thing* I've spent the last year or so trying to ignore springs up between us so tangible that she senses it.

Her mouth opens in wonder, and my whole body reacts as if she's issued an invitation—one that I can't turn away from. I forget where we are, who's in the room with us and with deliberate intent lower my head toward hers.

Until Nick slaps me on the back. "Smooth, big brother. Very nice."

Nick's words make my actions look like a joke, and the glow in Charlotte's eyes turns from appreciation to bleakness in an instant. I reach over and cuff Nick harder than he expected.

"Ow, goddammit, that hurt." Nick rubs the back of his head, but it's too late. No amount of head slaps is going to bring confidence back into Charlotte's eyes tonight.

I wait until Nick is done with the last rep of his leg extensions before confronting him.

"What was that all about with Charlotte today?"

Nick shoots me a look but says nothing. Ignoring me, he climbs off the machine and wipes it down before heading for the free weights. I follow. "If you've got something up your ass, just spit it out instead of stewing about it."

"What do you care?" He picks up a twenty-five-pound barbell and starts doing biceps curls. When I pick up the thirty-pound weights, Nick just rolls

his eyes.

“Seriously? You’re giving me crap over the fact I can lift more than you?”

“Whatever,” he mumbles.

I set the barbells onto the rack and pull Nick on the shoulder so he will stop and talk to me. “Nick, what’s wrong?”

For a moment, I think he might shrug me off. Then he releases a huge sigh and places his weights next to mine. Leaning down, he picks up his discarded towel and walks over to the water cooler. I trail behind, waiting impatiently for him to spill it.

Either intentionally or because he isn’t sure what he wants to say, Nick makes me wait until he’s drained two glasses of water. When he starts peeling a banana, I lunge for him. He starts laughing, the little fucker, and dances away. “I wondered how long you’d wait.”

“Fuck you.” I laugh. Nick and I can never stay mad at each other for long.

“Uh-oh, you owe me five or I tell Mom.” Mom hates hearing us cuss and makes us put five dollars in a jar that we then donate to the Widows and Orphans Charity. Dad fills it up about once a month.

“Yeah? And how are you going to explain all the porn Tumblrs you’ve been looking up on your computer? I screenshotted your history, FYI.” I haven’t, but Nick doesn’t know that. His quick temper flares again, and I think he might try to force feed me the banana. “Just kidding.” I back away, holding up my hands in surrender.

Nick’s face grows serious. “You know they are thinking of shipping Charlotte to Switzerland, right?”

That stops me in my tracks. I am glad I am near a weight bench because the thought of Charlotte being moved out of the country leaves me more winded than my hour-long workout. “When did you hear that?”

“Charlotte told me yesterday.”

“And you’re just telling me now?” I yell at Nick.

“Volume, please.” Nick jiggles his ear.

“Sorry,” I reply curtly, but I’m not sorry at all. This is vital information. “Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?” What are her parents thinking? Charlotte needs to be with me—I mean, us. She needs to be here, where her family and friends are, not in some strange country with people who don’t know her.

“Where’d you go the night Charlotte had her tumor out?” Nick asks in an abrupt change of subject.

Caught off guard, I stammer, “Uh, here. The gym.”

“Really? Cuz when we got the call that Charlotte was out of surgery, I came down here to the gym and then down to the common one on the sixth floor. You weren’t in either one.” Nick doesn’t look at me, but I know what I’d see in his eyes.

Disappointment.

Suddenly I feel angry at Dad for ratting me out. Surging to my feet, I start for the door. Nick stops me. “I saw Madeline yesterday in the lobby. She asked about you. Where you’ve been. How come she hasn’t seen you. I told her you were at the hospital with Charlotte. She asked me if that was where you’d taken off to in such a rush the other night.”

“Goddammit.” I lean my head against the glass door of the gym. “What’d you say to her?”

“I told her it wasn’t any of her fucking business where you went and what you did.”

We’re going to fund some kid’s entire college education at the rate we’re spitting out profanities.

“Did you really?” Dad has always taught us to be respectful to women, and I just can’t see Nick saying that. Even to Madeline.

Nick looks down at his feet and shakes his head. “No, but I wanted to. I just said that Charlotte was our number one priority now.”

“Did you say anything to Charlotte?” That’s the most important question.

I hold my breath as he answers.

“No.”

The sheer relief at his response makes me weak. “Thanks.”

It’s inadequate but heartfelt. I push away from the door and gesture for Nick to follow me to the condo. He doesn’t get up, and worry is all over his face.

“I think AnnMarie knows, though, because after Charlotte told me I hung around outside the room when Mom came. They were talking about this new clinic in Switzerland, and AnnMarie said it’d be good to get Charlotte away from us for a while.”

“What’d Mom say?”

“I couldn’t hear. They moved away from the door.”

“Fuck,” I curse, and this time Nick doesn’t threaten to tell Mom. “So you think Aunt AnnMarie knows about Madeline and wants to move Charlotte away because of that?”

Nick spreads his hands. “Why else?”

I can think of a thousand reasons but instead of enumerating them, I run upstairs to Dad’s library and burst in. He’s on the phone and unhappy at the unannounced interruption. He gestures for me to sit down but then notices I’m in my workout clothes. Muting the phone, he barks at me, “Don’t sit on my leather chairs until you’ve showered.”

I stand because I’m not leaving to shower or eat or shit or anything until I find out what’s going on.

Dad doesn’t hurry through the phone call. Instead, he listens as the other person seems to talk without breaks, all the while eying me speculatively. I take the time, as he intends, to gather myself until I’m no longer ready burst out with some inappropriate profanity-laced diatribe. I firm my lips and give him a nod that I’m ready. He nods back and quickly wraps up the call.

“Summarize the details and email them to me by tomorrow morning. I’ll give you an answer in forty-eight hours.” He doesn’t wait for a response and

hangs up. Leaning back in his chair, he folds his arms behind his head. “I didn’t say a word to your momma about your indiscretion with that girl downstairs, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

My mouth falls open in surprise at his ability to precisely peg my issue. “I, ah,” I stammer and wish I had showered so I could sit down. “Why’re they talking about taking Charlotte away then?” There’s a whiny quality to my question that makes us both wince.

Dad squints at the ceiling, tipping farther back in his chair and then lets it come forward with a bang. “I’m not entirely sure, son, but it isn’t that. Frankly, I’d think AnnMarie would be grateful your attentions are fixed on someone other than Charlotte. It’s been a contentious year for the two of you.”

I flush. Ever since Charlotte turned fifteen, everyone seemed to start noticing her. And by everyone, I mean other guys. She doesn’t seem to care that she gets stared at constantly. When I suggested that maybe she should stop wearing yoga pants outside of the actual yoga studio, she didn’t talk to me for a week. “She’s hormonal,” I mutter finally.

At this Dad shouts with laughter. “*She’s* hormonal.” He pushes away from his desk and stands. Walking toward the door, he gestures for me to follow. “Son, you’ve got so many suppressed hormones, they are screwing with your head.”

I follow him into the kitchen where he pulls out the makings for sandwiches. Silently we make ourselves one, and Dad pours me a tall glass of milk. I don’t remember the last time we’ve talked, just the two of us. Some of the stress of the past couple of weeks just drains away as we sit down and talk about the Bears’ chances to win the Super Bowl this year—not good—and the Cubs’ chances of winning the pennant next year—even worse.

“How’s practice going?” he asks, eating half his sandwich in one bite.

I shrug. “I don’t love it. I know I should, but I’m bored half the time. It was more fun when I could play both offense and defense.” North Prep’s

football team is mediocre at best, and during my sophomore year I got to play the tight end position and defensive back. My senior year, however, I'm playing solely the tight end position. Because our current quarterback sucks, I rarely get the ball thrown to me, and when it does come my way, it's either too long or too short. Nick should be the starter. Everyone on the team knows he's the best quarterback but Hudson Firth is a senior whereas Nick's a sophomore so Firth starts even though Nick can throw rings around him.

"Team sports are a good experience for you, Nate," Dad says. "Getting along with others is a chore but a necessary one. You can at least use the opportunity to understand the different dynamics of your teammates and how each one is motivated. Later on that skill will come in handy."

After we polish off the sandwiches and milk, I help Dad clean up the kitchen. I'm not ready for our time to come to an end so I linger, spending more time than necessary cleaning off the center island.

"You think Charlotte is going to be okay?" That's really the only question I need answered.

"Yeah, but I don't think it's going to be easy."

"Because of hormones," I joke.

Dad doesn't laugh, though. The side of his mouth quirks up in a sad half smile. "It's going to be everything, and I'm worried about you, hoss."

"How so?" I don't like this somber tone from him. Maybe chat time should be over. I throw the cloth I was using to clean the counter into the sink, showing that I'm ready to be done.

"Charlotte is going to go through several months of radiation. Maybe a year. She's going to be sick for a long time—"

"And I'm going to take care of her," I interrupt. Holding up my hand to forestall any other lectures, I tell Dad, "I got this."

Dad just shakes head. "I love Charlotte like she's my own, and I'm gut sick about her illness, just like you. But she's got her family to take care of her. You and Nick need to be focused on finishing school, enjoying

yourselves, and then planning for college.”

“Sounds like you are all for Charlotte being moved away.” I scowl at him.

“No, but I can tell you that Charlotte is going to want to be with a boy who sees her as more than someone to be taken care of. Around here, there’s going to be a lot of sympathy and a lot of people trying to do stuff for her.”

Dad runs a hand over the top of his head and frowns. “Maybe Bo and AnnMarie are right in thinking Charlotte’d be better off where everyone doesn’t know her.”

I gape at him. ““You’re all wrong because Charlotte needs us. She needs me.”

I'm grateful that the school keeps the bathrooms so clean because I've spent far too much time in them during the last month I've been back. After a month in the hospital and then a month at home, they allowed me to come back to school so long as I could hold up. Not wanting to be at home for another day, I've been lying to my parents for the first time. If they knew I was in the bathroom sick every day, I'd be pulled out of school in a heartbeat.

I pull out a water bottle from my backpack and swish out my mouth. Reaching up, I close the lid of the toilet seat and rest on the edge, leaning against the stainless steel barrier. The cool metal of the bathroom stall is relieving. Just one more minute, I tell myself, and then I'll go back to class.

Everyone has been so helpful since I've been back, too helpful. I've gone from Charlotte Randolph to *the sick girl*. Someone is always around to carry my books and walk me from room to room. Nate is constantly holding my elbow as if he thinks I'll fall if he lets go. My tongue is sore from biting back my frustration. I'm trying not to be ungrateful, but I'd like to just be Charlotte Randolph again. Sophomore, gymnast, student.

But every time I try to be normal, something happens to remind me that it's all different. I have a hard time concentrating in class. Reading at night

was once my favorite pastime, and now it is a chore. I'm behind everyone else, and I've completely forgotten some basic principles of algebra and geometry. But none of the teachers complain about my lack of progress. Instead, I get smiles of encouragement for just signing my name on the top of a pop quiz or a homework assignment.

It's early yet, I know this, but I'm afraid if I don't show regular progress that I'll be shipped out away from my friends, away from Nate and Nick. I can't have that happen, so I'm not telling anyone that I'm sick on a constant basis, that I can't understand even the most basic principles during class, and that I feel like I'm only capable of doing fourth grade work at the moment.

I squeeze my eyes tight and concentrate on breathing. *I'm not going to cry*, I chant silently. *I'm not going to cry*.

The bathroom door slams open, and the chatter of several girls tells me I am not alone. I start to stand but the vomiting and the lack of nutrition makes me feel lightheaded, so I sit back down.

"You hosting the Halloween party this year, Claud?"

"Of course, what's your costume?"

"Pepper Potts, and Ryan is going as Iron Man."

The conversation gives me the clues to the group outside. It is Claudia Amsden, student body vice president and co-chair of the homecoming committee. Her dad is a plastic surgeon. The girl going as Pepper Potts would be Nina Franchetti. The Franchettis own a number of restaurants in the city. Claudia has a thing for Nate, but I don't think that he's given her a second thought. Not because Claudia isn't gorgeous, but because she's the same age as Nate. For some reason he's never dated anyone at school, preferring older girls who go to other schools. He's probably sleeping with some college student right now. The idea makes my sore stomach clench.

"Have you invited Charlotte Randolph yet?" asks Nina.

Nothing good comes from eavesdropping so I slowly rise to make it known I'm inside, but before I can get the door open, I hear Claudia respond.

“Of course. How else are we getting the Jacksons to come? The problem is getting them to stay because Charlotte’s probably too sick to stay long.”

I sit back down. She’s not wrong. I doubt I could last for more than an hour at Claudia’s party or at anyone’s party. And if I have radiation that day, I’ll count it as a success that I can walk from the treatment room to the car, let alone go to any event.

“I don’t really understand why Nate and Nick won’t go to parties just because Charlotte can’t. Do you think she threw a tantrum and they feel sorry for her?” Nina asks.

Ugh. I hate that anyone feels sorry for me.

“Who knows,” Claudia responds. “It’s annoying, but what can you do? They’re not going to do anything without her.”

I don’t want to hear anything more. Opening the door, I smile at Nina’s shocked expression. “I don’t tell Nick or Nate what to do. They have minds of their own.”

Claudia purses her lips. Unlike Nina, Claudia is unfazed by my appearance. Maybe she knew I was there.

“Maybe so, but they are obviously not doing anything without you. At least when it comes to extracurricular activities.”

“Like you said, that’s annoying.” I steady myself against the door jam and walk slowly toward the exit. I am going to have to talk to those boys. The idea that they are not having fun because of me is infuriating. I don’t need anyone’s pity.

Nate is lounging against my locker after last period. His one foot is braced behind him against the metal while his other leg supports his weight. Claudia Amsden is sidled up next to him so close I doubt I could fit a piece of paper between the two.

I grimace, slightly disgusted with myself for caring. My illness has made me weak physically and mentally. Before getting sick I wouldn't have given Claudia a second thought. She would just be one more girl who liked to kiss up to Nate in hopes that he might ask her out, which hadn't ever happened to my knowledge. Nate and Nick didn't do girlfriends. I teased them once that they were saving themselves for marriage but dropped the subject after the two exchanged looks I couldn't interpret. Nick muttered something like, "Don't need to," but he clammed up after Nate punched him in the shoulder.

Nick was probably alluding to the fact that they just messed around with girls and didn't want the hassle of a relationship, but I pretended ignorance. All three of us got along better that way. God forbid I bring up any three letter words to them like *boy* or *sex*. The last time I tried, they'd both turned pale. Well, Nick turned pale and Nate got red in the face and gave me a long lecture about how none of the guys at North Prep were worth my time of day and how I had to wait until someone special came along like our moms had waited for our dads.

I yelled at him that he was being sexist because I highly doubted that either of our parents waited.

We may have continued arguing but Nick, the peacekeeper, made a joke about how we were both so full of air we could float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. After that, none of us talked about girls or guys with each other again.

But that day in the hospital. . . the air between Nate and me had crackled, and for a hot, exciting minute, I thought he was going to kiss me. Since then, though, he's not made any move toward me. Wishful thinking on my part, I guess.

As I get closer, I can see Nate's expression and it is not a pleased one. Whatever Claudia is saying isn't something that Nate wants to hear. Perversely this makes me happy, and I want to give myself a mental head slap for being such a jealous twit over nothing.

Nate sees me and pushes away from the lockers and Claudia. I'm not moving fast enough apparently because he hurries down the hallway to grab my arm. Claudia gives me the same pitying look that she pinned on me in the bathroom. The one that says, *Poor Charlotte, can't even muddle down the hallway by herself.*

I jerk my arm away from Nate, which causes me to stumble. "Hey, I got you," Nate says and pulls me to his side. I'm awash in both frustration and happiness. Frustration that he thinks I need help and that he may be right, and happiness because I'm tucked against his side.

I wonder if radiation has totally screwed with my brain and I will no longer be able to think rational thoughts again. Resigned, I allow Nate to lead me down the hall. "Thanks, Claud," he says as we pass her. He has one arm angled across my back with his hand curled at my waist. This is the embrace that girlfriends and boyfriends enjoy, and for a tiny illicit moment I allow myself to think of what it might be like to be Nate's girl.

My fantasy is interrupted when he stops at the girls' and boys' locker rooms. "I don't need to go to the bathroom," I hiss, mortified.

"I know." He looks both ways and then pulls the door of the boys' locker room open. "Incoming," he yells. "Cover up."

There's a rustling of activity and metal clanging against metal as I surmise that guys are dressing or, as Nate ordered, covering up. "What are you doing?" I gape at him.

He gives me a quick smile but it dies almost as quickly as it appeared. "Claud told me you were puking up a storm today."

"That little—" I don't finish my statement. Instead I am turning to the door to chase Claudia down and give her a piece of my mind, but Nate's hands take hold of my shoulders.

"Look, I know why you're trying to hide this. You think if our parents know that you'll be yanked out of school and put in some special treatment program, maybe in Switzerland."

My mouth drops open. “Have you heard something?” I ask. Fear makes my heart race. I wasn’t aware that Nate knew of my mom’s desire to take me out of Chicago, out of the country.

“Only that it’s an option, and we all want to make sure it’s an option that doesn’t become necessary.” Nate stops talking and leans toward the interior of the room. The clanging noises have stopped. “All good?” he calls.

“Yup.” It sounds like there is more than one guy in here. I’m so embarrassed.

“Nate, I can’t be in here.” I’m feeling queasy, and it’s not due to my condition. Perhaps other girls would love to be in the boys’ locker room, but for me it’s kind of stinky and I don’t want to see a bunch of my classmates’ underwear or worse. I’d never be able to look them in the eye again.

“Yes, you can.” He drags me into the room. Along the way I see several guys who give Nate chin nods and questioning looks, but no one stops him. Maybe girls in the boys’ locker room is an ordinary occurrence.

We stop at the end of the locker room where there is an office door that says “Head Coach” and then another closed door that says “Training Room.” Nate opens the training room door. Inside are two long metal tables. Nate curses when he sees the bare tables. “Hold on,” he says and then leaves.

I stand there like a fool, wondering what I should do. I don’t really want to walk out and see things that should be unseen, but I also don’t want to wait around until someone who is supposed to use this room shows up.

I’m about to leave when Nate returns, shouldering his way in, his arms full of clothes and towels. He gives me a frown when he sees my hand on the doorknob and I guiltily pull it away. Curiously I watch Nate spread out the materials. There are a couple of pairs of workout pants, the kind that have snaps on the sides so that the players can quickly disrobe. Stripper pants, I liked to think of them, although I’m sure if I said that to any of the guys they’d give me deeper frowns than the one that Nate shot me when he returned. Nate carefully positions the pants so that there isn’t much overlap.

Over the pants go three large sweatshirts. When he's done, he pats the table.
"Hop up."

"What?"

"Hop up," he repeats.

I stand there like a dummy because I don't get what he wants me to do. Nate shakes his head and in two steps reaches my side and propels me forward. "Charlotte, you spent your lunch hour vomiting, right?"

I really hate Claudia. She must have heard me before and decided to rat me out to Nate. "So what if I was?" I sound snippy, but I don't even care one bit.

"So you've got to be worn out. You go home and pass out, our parents are going to suspect something. Work with me here," Nate pleads. Understanding dawns. Nate wants me to take a nap while he practices football, and he hopes the extra sleep will make me appear healthier at home.

"This is really nice of you, Nate, but you don't have to do this for me. I'm fine," I lie, giving him a big smile.

"Charlotte, stop. If I was sick, wouldn't you do anything you could to make me feel better, help me heal?"

I give a reluctant nod of my head.

"Then why is it pity or wrong for me to want to do the same for you?"

Shamed, I look down at the bed of garments that Nate had spread out. My throat tightens at the gentle care he's showing me. Not wanting Nate to see me cry, I climb onto the makeshift mat and immediately I am struck by how very tired I really feel. My whole body seems to loosen up. Nate lays two towels on top of me like a blanket.

"We'll get some better bedding in here for you," he murmurs, stroking the side of my cheek with one long finger.

"How will you keep this a secret?" I close my eyes and revel in the sensation of his caress. I don't know that he's ever touched me so tenderly before.

“Only a few guys know, and they won’t say anything. They don’t care.”
His voice is sounding further and further away.

“I love you, Nate,” I whisper as I let go and let sleep take me away. I
dream that I hear him say “I love you” back.

Charlotte, Nick, and I go to the Halloween party. Charlotte insisted when Nick and I suggested we just have an Xbox tournament and hand out candy to the kids in the building.

She is Peter Pan, which she says fits her short hair, which is growing in downy soft. Somehow Nick got to be Hook, and I got shoved into wings and a scratchy tutu. I drew the line at tights and makeup, though. A dozen different girls and a couple of guys have stroked their hands down my legs, making me wish I'd chosen a longer skirt. It is like bare legs and a short skirt are an invitation for people to touch. I'll have to make sure Charlotte never wears a short skirt again.

"What's this thing made of?" I ask Charlotte, bringing her another cup of punch. Claudia Amsden's condo is full of people, although Charlotte and Nick are among the youngest ones here.

"Tulle," she says.

"It's scratching my tool," I joke, but when I see Charlotte flush I want to curse at myself for making such a stupid joke in front of her. "Sorry," I mutter and sit down next to her.

"Sorry I blush so easy?" she asks, taking a sip of the punch. She tries to

hide a grimace, but I see it. My parents have said that her chemo and radiation can screw with the taste buds. By the look of Charlotte, I wonder if there is anything that she enjoys eating anymore. Before she got sick, she was slender but muscular. Now, her bones are becoming more and more prominent. I know if I say anything it will make her feel bad, so I bite my tongue and pretend I don't notice. I'm doing a lot of that lately. Pretending to not see that she doesn't eat or that she's throwing up a lot or that she looks exhausted all of the time.

We both survey the crowd. Most of the girls are wearing the barely-there version of some costume, like a police uniform transformed into a shirt that buttons only at the waist paired with hot pants and platform heels or a construction uniform transformed into a jumpsuit that is unzipped to the belly button and ends just slightly below the girl's ass. Surprisingly there are a number of guys dressed up like me, fake cross dresser. A couple of guys are wearing Wonder Woman costumes, and one guy is dressed up as fake Katniss Everdeen. We all look like fools, but it's Halloween. I think we're supposed to look silly. Or sexy.

Charlotte looks neither silly nor sexy. Instead, the slight flush that had appeared earlier has faded and her skin looks almost translucent with a slight green tint to her complexion. I wonder if it is from the costume. The glass in her hand shakes lightly, and she cups her other hand to steady it. Even her mouth looks tired, as if she doesn't have the energy to show any emotion. All the signs worry me, but I know that if I suggest leaving, Charlotte will be even more distressed. She worked on us for the last three weeks to convince us to attend this thing.

"Can I find you a quiet place?" I ask.

She glances around and then nods, revealing exactly how poorly she feels. If she had any resources left, she'd say she was having the best time of her life. I want to lift her in my arms and carry her out of here, but I allow myself just to help her to her feet. She leans heavily against me and again, I

tamp down the urge to sweep her up and carry her away. Across the room, I see Nick rise from his seat, but I give him a short shake of my head. Charlotte isn't going to want to see both of us Jacksons rushing to her side. He gives me a reluctant nod and sits back down.

Down the hall I find an empty guest room and give in to the urge I've been fighting. Sweeping Charlotte into my arms, I carry her to the bed. She doesn't even protest, only sighs with relief. I lay her down on top of the comforter, and her head lolls to the side. She isn't even awake. Panic sets in. There's no way she fell asleep in the time it took to enter the room and for me to place her on the bed. I tap her cheeks lightly, cheeks that are waxen and cold.

"Charlotte!" My voice is loud and insistent, but she doesn't respond. I tap her a little harder but she still lies like she's out cold. Fear is chasing down my spine as I lean over and place my head on her chest. Her heart is beating, but I don't know if the pace is normal or too slow or too fast. It feels fast. I place my fingers over my own pulse at the base of my throat and count. God, what did I learn this past summer about CPR? Count the beats for fifteen seconds and then multiply by four, but, fuck, my heart is racing. I press my fingers hard against Charlotte's neck and count. About thirty beats go by in the fifteen seconds. Charlotte's heart feels like a bird.

I fumble in my pocket and call my dad but he doesn't answer. Uncle Bo's phone just rings and rings too. Then I remember that they are hosting a party for clients at Dad and Aunt AnnMarie's office. Scrubbing my hand over my mouth, I rifle through a bunch of options. Calling 911 seems extreme. Charlotte would be so pissed at me if I dragged EMTs to break up Claudia's party. But fuck, fuck, fuck. She's nonresponsive.

Giving her another chance, I shake her lightly. Nothing. There's a bathroom attached to the room. I race inside, gather water into my hands and, leaving the faucet running, run back to drop the water onto Charlotte's face. Still nothing. My heart in my throat, I type in the emergency number. But I

wait. A second. Then two. Charlotte lies there, her heart racing, looking like a waxen doll.

Hesitating only one second more, I press send and make the call. I recite my location, Charlotte's symptoms, and am told someone will be there shortly.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte, but I'd rather have you hate me than for you to be dead." I kiss her cold cheek and then run out to get Nick.

"Charlotte's sick. I've called 911—" Before I can get the rest of my words out, Nick runs into the bedroom. I hear him shout Charlotte's name. I pull Varner, a friend of mine and a defensive lineman on our team, aside.

"Charlotte's sick. EMT is coming. Make sure they get up here ASAP."

Varner claps me on the back and says, "On it, brother." I don't waste another minute and head back to Charlotte. Inside, Nick has her in his arms. His eyes are wide and a little red. "Has she said anything?" But I can see it's a useless question. Charlotte's arms hang down by her sides like there is no life in them.

"No," he answers and hugs her closer. I want to be hugging Charlotte too, but I need to keep an eye out for the EMTs. Each minute seems to drag by, but the EMT services arrive quickly. Claudia's address is a wealthy one, and there are no delays for rich people.

The EMTs won't allow either Nick or I to ride to the hospital in the ambulance. Nick has to hold me back when I almost deck the EMT driver when he bars me from the back of the ambulance. We catch a cab, and it is on the way to the hospital that I finally get Dad on the phone.

"What's wrong?" he barks into the phone.

"Charlotte," I choke out. The emotions of the evening are catching up to me, and my throat is thick with them. My dad doesn't hesitate.

"Where should we meet you?"

"Hospital," I say.

This time there is a moment of silence before I hear my dad curse.

“Which one?”

“Rush U.”

“We’ll be there.” He’s gone before I can say another word.

“She going to be okay?” Nick asks, his voice sounding small and scared. I put my arm around him and that he allows it, that he actually puts his head on my shoulder like he used to when we were younger, makes me feel horrible. Guilty and sick inside.

“Yeah,” I say trying to overcome those feelings, trying to put on a good front. “Charlotte is a fighter. Stronger than both of us.”

Because Charlotte can’t die. She can’t die and leave us. I won’t allow it to happen. Charlotte belongs in this world, with me. With all of us but mostly me. Inside my head I’m screaming and praying and bargaining. *Please, please, please*, I plead silently, *I’ll do anything. Anything.*

By the time that we arrive at the hospital, Charlotte is nowhere to be seen and no one is telling two teenagers anything. We wait in the lobby for our parents and hers to arrive. They burst through the doors. AnnMarie and Bo run past us to the desk. Dad stops in front of us.

“What happened?” he commands. Bo turns toward us. He looks big and menacing.

“We were at the party, and she looked tired. I thought she needed to lie down so I took her to the guest room, but by the time we got there she must’ve passed out.” I ran through the next events. “I tried to rouse her, but she wouldn’t come to. I called you both, but there was no answer.” I hear AnnMarie’s voice catch and then a cry which brings my mom to her side immediately. My gaze swings back to Dad. “I called 911.”

Uncle Bo steps forward and squeezes my shoulder with his big hand. I’m almost as tall as him, almost as tall as my dad, I realize absently. “You did good, son,” Uncle Bo says and gives Dad a chin nod.

Dad leads both Nick and I away, but we don’t want to go. We drag our heels, anxiously trying to overhear something, but Dad is implacable and we

do what he says. Mom comes over and holds our hands. It's a little comforting but not much.

It seems like hours before we get any news, which I figure must be good. Finally someone comes out and speaks to Charlotte's parents. Whatever the news is I can't hear because Dad is standing in front of Nick and me, like he's blocking us from getting to them. When AnnMarie collapses into Bo, I try to break away from my dad but his big arm stops me.

The doctor walks over to us with Charlotte's parents right behind him.

"How long has she been vomiting at school?" the doctor asks us. Nick and I share a glance, a guilty one, that my mom reads instantly.

"Nathan and Nicholas Jackson, what have you been hiding?" she asks sternly.

Nick pipes up immediately. "She didn't want to say anything because she knew you would take her out of school."

"This isn't something you can keep to yourself. It's not like drinking my Scotch on New Year's Eve and pretending you don't know anything about it. Pretending like Charlotte isn't sick doesn't make her better," Dad growls

"I was making sure she rested too," I stupidly say.

"Where?" Uncle Bo asks.

"The training room." I look down at my shoes and realize for the first time that I'm standing here in a fucking tutu and wings. I tear the wings off and pull down the tutu so that I'm now just wearing gym shorts and a tank. Unfortunately, taking off the ridiculous costume doesn't make me feel one ounce better. I shouldn't have covered for her, but how was I supposed to know that she was too sick to be at school. Maybe I should've known. Maybe all this is my fault.

I've messed up bad. Dad's face looks like a thundercloud, and Mom looks like I've danced all over her heart.

"You and those Jackson boys," Mom mutters. I've never heard her refer to Nate and Nick as the "Jackson boys." Those guys are like her sons.

"Mom, it's my fault. I begged them to not tell you."

Mom closes her eyes, I guess praying for patience. "Your doctor says your throat looks like you ate a Brillo Pad, it's so red and sore. You must be vomiting daily, at least once or twice a day. I know you've been losing weight, but I thought maybe if I just kept quiet, you'd eat."

I press my lips together to keep from crying. I was trying to be strong, but obviously I'd gone about it in a stupid way.

Mom continues, "So now, you're going to have to be fed intravenously until your weight gets back up. You're dehydrated and undernourished. We can't allow you to go back to school, either." She presses her face to my fingers. "Baby girl, we love you, and if you can't take care of yourself then we're going to do it for you."

"I'm sorry." My tears are coming, and her tears are wetting my hand. "I'm so sorry. I was stupid. Please don't blame Nick or Nate. Please."

“We won’t.” Dad finally breaks his silence and sits on the other side of the bed. “Those two would break their arms off before they’d hurt you intentionally. But, Charlotte, this is one reason we thought you might be better off leaving Chicago to get better. Those boys, they love you so much, but they’re too young to know how to help you. You three are bumbling around like blind mice inside a big maze. It’s okay when you’re all healthy but like it or not, you’re a sick little girl. You can get better but not by hiding stuff from us.”

I nod, but Dad presses on. “You oughta think what you are doing to those boys. Think hard because your illness could be distracting for them. Make it hard for them to study or focus on their other stuff because they’re too worried about you.”

He’s right. I look down at my sheet-covered body. Tonight Nick and Nate had to be talked into going to the Halloween party. If I hadn’t insisted, they would’ve stayed home. I can see it now. Every party or event or invitation will be weighed against whether I am well enough to go and if I’m not, they’ll both stay home. They’ll laugh and tell me that they’d rather be with me, but the truth is my illness will be making them prisoners—just like it is holding me hostage. I won’t do that to them. To either of them. I love them too much. I don’t want them to miss even one thing because *I* am sick. That seems too stupid for words.

I squeeze my mom’s hand. “I’ve always wanted to go to Switzerland.”

Getting into Charlotte's bedroom isn't exactly easy but it's doable. Both penthouse condos have security, but it's outwardly focused, meaning that the cameras and alarms are on the elevators and the entrances. When Uncle Bo built the Randolph Towers, he put a long hallway between the kitchens of the two condos. There's a service elevator there, but it shuts down every night at 7 pm. Anything sent up after that would set off an alarm.

Dad explained this to Nick and me when I was ten and Nick was eight after he caught us trying to pry open the elevator doors to see if we could climb down the shaft and pretend we were Woody and Buzz from *Toy Story*. Shortly after, we found ourselves enrolled in rock climbing classes so we'd have harnesses for the next time we thought about rappelling down the inside of an elevator shaft.

Nick and I've had some dumbass ideas over the years. Mom says it's a miracle we're still alive, so there's some kind of sick ass irony over Charlotte being the one so sick, her health so fragile that she has to move away. She never tried to climb down the rooftop terrace onto the balcony, and she covered her eyes when Nick and I played Frogger on Michigan Avenue.

But of all the stupid ideas that Nick and I have come up with over the

years, not one of them comes close to Charlotte's belief that leaving me—us—would make her better. The edict came down from Mom today that Charlotte would be leaving us. Her lip quivered while Dad sighed a lot. Nick stormed off and sat stone stupid at the table. I need to talk her out of it, which is why I'm creeping down the service hallway between our two homes and into her bedroom at midnight.

Earlier today I'd been in Charlotte's kitchen, ostensibly because we were out of milk or at least that's what I told Donna, the Randolphs' housekeeper. She rolled her eyes, handed me a carton and kicked me out. I stuffed some putty into the lock when she wasn't looking, and sure enough the door opens soundlessly, lock unengaged. Score.

There is a little light over the stove, but I've been in Charlotte's home enough to walk through it blindfolded. Silently moving over the marble tile and then on down the hall to the bedrooms, the darkness hides the figure leaning against the wall right past the entrance of the living room.

"You got a death wish, boy?" rumbles Uncle Bo's voice. My heart stutters and then I trip on the smooth surface, nearly falling on my face. A hand passes over my mouth, and I'm jerked upright. Blood pounding in my ears, I look up into the shadowed face of Charlotte's dad. He looks like he can see every dirty thought I've had about his fifteen-year-old daughter. Almost sixteen though, well, in May and that's only like five months away. As the silence lengthens between us, I remind myself that Uncle Bo loves me. I'm like his firstborn son, really.

"Hey, Uncle Bo," I mumble into his hand.

His hand drops from my face to my shoulder, and he turns so that we are looking straight at each other. I'm close in height but not as bulked out. I wonder briefly whether I could take him and that must show on my face because he busts out a huge grin. "No, you can't take me, son."

"In a couple of years," I say only half in jest, still wondering if my nuts are in danger of being chopped off because there's really only one reason I

could be standing in this hallway.

Whatever Bo is thinking, he doesn't let on. Instead his hands fall away, and he turns on his heel and walks toward his own bedroom. Over his shoulder he says, "She needs her sleep."

I'm momentarily paralyzed. I think he's given me permission to enter Charlotte's bedroom, but it could also be a trap. The darkness at the end of the hall swallows him up, and I quickly dart into Charlotte's room before Bo can come back.

Charlotte isn't asleep. She's lying on top of her covers listening to something, no doubt a female artist. Charlotte says she doesn't like to hear male voices, or maybe she just doesn't like what men sing about. Who knows. I've never given it much thought. The lamp on her nightstand is the only illumination in the room.

She doesn't even move when I come in, although the carpet pile is so thick in here that an elephant could walk in and the sound would be swallowed up. Puzzled I sit on the side of the bed and pull down her headphones. Does she have so many midnight visitors that my appearance here is just normal?

"Nick texted me." She holds up her phone, and I see a huge number of texts between the two. My mouth falls open as I take in the sheer volume of exchanges. They must text each other like every day, several times a day. A kernel of something dark unfurls inside of me, and I don't like it. There's always been a closeness between Nick and Charlotte, but it's just a friendship. That's what I've always believed. "And I told Daddy so he wouldn't shoot you when you tripped the alarm."

"You have interior alarms?"

She looks at me like I'm stupid, and I guess I am. "Yes, don't you?"

"No, I don't think so." At least, I didn't up until this moment. Nick and I will have to do some snooping. "I think your dad did threaten me out there in the hall, but I'm not sure what the consequences will be."

“Oh, it’ll be castration,” she says impishly like it’s no big deal, but I think my nuts are shrinking just at the thought. “That’s his go-to threat.” She moves over on the bed to make room for me. I stretch out beside her, still a little tense, but then I tell myself her dad is three doors down and I’d be able to be on my feet and in the armchair before he even twists her doorknob.

“Real comforting, Charlotte.” I suppress the urge to cup myself protectively.

She smirks, but the expression fades away quickly at my next question.

“Why are you really leaving? There’s no way there is better medical care somewhere else in the world than you can get here. Is it because we hid you were sick? We won’t do that anymore.”

We both look at the other side of the bed, where an IV stand sits like a creepy skeleton. Charlotte has had to have one bag of IV nutrition a day since Halloween. It’s nearing Christmas, and she looks a lot healthier now. The bones in her wrists and shoulders don’t look as sharp, and her cheeks are fuller. She can stand to gain another twenty pounds, but I keep that to myself. The last time I mentioned that she should eat more, she threw her sandwich at me and didn’t talk to me for the rest of the day. But I bet she texted Nick, I think sourly.

“I just. . .” She pauses and then squints at the ceiling as if she can read her thoughts up there. “It’s not just the hiding thing because that was my fault not yours. It’s everything. I’m so behind in all my classes, and everyone looks at me like I’m about to keel over. Where I’m going, you know, everyone there is kind of in the same boat I’m in.”

“We can take care of you better than anyone,” I tell her. She glances at me and smiles, and it’s the smile that she gets when she’s about to do something that she knows no one is going to like. I saw that smile when she agreed to play Never Have I Ever at the Carson’s pool party last summer, right after she’d turned fifteen. We’d had a big fight after that. She kept telling me that I couldn’t treat her like a child forever and that every other girl

played a round. Every other girl wasn't Charlotte though. I didn't care what everyone else did. I only cared what Charlotte did, but she didn't see it that way. She just thought I was being Nate, the no fun police when it came to her.

"You know, before I was sick you were pretty mean to me all the time."

"Was not." I was never mean to her. Watching out for her, yes. Mean, no.

"You were. You're always criticizing what I'm wearing or that I'm hanging out with the wrong people who—" she points a finger into my chest, "—are the same people you hang out with."

I grab her finger so the pointy nail doesn't dig any farther into my chest wall, and then I cover her hand with mine so her palm is flat against my pecs. "I'm just watching out for you."

She comes closer until her head is resting on my biceps, and then her hand curls underneath my arm. "Nate." My name is like a soft sigh escaping, and it sounds like nothing I've ever heard from her before. It's almost like a caress, a whisper of longing underneath a note of tenderness. My hand grips hers tighter, and I roll so I can face her, my palm still clasping hers over my heart.

"If I've ever made you feel bad, I'm sorry," I tell her. There are a few strands of hair that are falling across her forehead, so I move them for her, tucking them behind her ear. Her eyes flutter shut, and this time I see contentment. She ducks her head, and I run my fingers through her hair, rubbing her scalp. Her new hair is slightly wavy, honey gold, and soft. The moan that she releases is so sexy that it goes from my fingers straight to my dick.

Do I tell her that the only times I've ever seemed angry were when I was scared or jealous and sometimes both? That she grew from kid to someone who made my pants too tight with just a smile in what seemed like overnight; and that if she was affecting me this way, she had to be affecting every male around her in that fashion, except for Nick who apparently still sees her as

Charlotte, his five-year-old playmate?

“No, I know it’s because you care.” Her hand slips out from under mine and creeps up to my shoulder. My hand stills and merely cups the back of her head. She begins a small exploration, feeling my clavicle and then down over the ridges of my biceps and back up again. Goosebumps freckle my skin at her touch, and I wonder if she knows what effect she has on me. Nah, because if she did, she wouldn’t be lying here so angelic next to me.

Or maybe she would. Maybe all those times she was challenging me to do *something*.

“I do care,” I say, pulling her head closer to mine. “Did you know I was the first one outside of your family to hold you? Nick was still a baby, so Mom was holding him, and Dad was getting cigars out for everyone. Your mom had the nurse place you in my lap.”

“How do you remember these things? You were like two.”

“I just do.” I shrug and the motion makes her hand fall away. It slips under my arm and then finds its way to my chest. I wonder if she can feel the thunderous beat of my heart. I don’t think she’s ever touched me this much, this closely, with this kind of attention. My loose sweatpants are suddenly too confining as every part of me strains toward her feather-light caresses.

“I can’t remember anything.”

The back of her head has a surgical scar, and under her skin lies a shunt, a tube that drains out any excess fluid. Charlotte thinks her head is too big in the back, but it feels okay to me. I’m surprised she is allowing me to touch her there, but I don’t question it nor do I fiddle with her scar, knowing that if I pay too much attention to what she thinks are flaws our little moment will be over.

“I remember when you turned two. You got cupcakes instead of a birthday cake and none of us could eat until you’d take a bite, but you were confused by the paper around the cupcake. Nick got impatient and stuck his fingers in your frosting and made you cry.”

“I don’t remember that either.”

“I do,” I say curtly. I remember all of it. I clench her hand tighter to me as a flood of images march in front of my eyes. Charlotte at five, running from the clown that had been hired, straight into my arms. Me at nine, holding her hand when we were at the Navy Pier riding a carousel. Her at twelve dancing in her room to a Taylor Swift song pretending her hairbrush was a microphone, singing that she was Juliet and I was Romeo. I sat through the whole horrible thing. She is not a good singer. Me at seventeen watching her lift a swimsuit coverup over her head and realizing she turned from child into a smoking hot girl. So yeah, I remember everything. She’s mine. *I was born for you and you were born for me.* “Don’t go. Stay here with us.” I say *us* because it’s safer.

“I’m going because it’s better for all of us,” she responds and then tugs on my shoulder until our faces are so close together I can count the individual lashes that veil her eyes. “But, Nate, before I go, I want—” she stops and then ducks her head into my chest. I feel her say something against my shirt, but I can’t make it out.

“Want what?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

My request for a kiss doesn't result in Nate rolling me over and pinning me down on the bed. Oh no, he jumps off the mattress like I've stuck a burning iron into his side. His athletic instincts kick in, and he's halfway across the room before another breath is taken by either of us.

"What the fuck?" he almost yells at me and then, tossing a worried glance toward the door as if my dad will bust through any minute, he lowers his voice and repeats the question sans profanity. "What did you just ask me?"

Scowling, I answer, "I asked for you to kiss me, not kill me."

He places one hand on his hip and another he scrubs through his hair, looking exasperated, but his irritation is nothing compared to my mounting annoyance. My earlier shyness is chased away by my frustration. This is classic Jackson brother behavior. Because I'm a girl, I can't possibly want the same things that they do.

"Charlotte, I—" he begins, but I cut him off. I don't even want to hear what he has to say. I roll over on my side so I'm not facing him.

"Forget it. I'm not going to beg you." I would if I thought it would do any good. It's just . . . since I've been sick Nate's been different to me. He's been nicer, and he's held me closer. His behavior is not so brotherly. I catch him

looking at me with a gleam in his eye, and it makes me feel warm all over. At this moment, though, he's looking everywhere *but* me and so I turn away.

I feel his body depress the side of the bed, and he rolls me toward him.

"What's this all about?"

"Nothing, just go away." I keep my eyes covered so he can't see my hurt at his instant rejection. He didn't even have to think twice about it. He can kiss—and more—any number of girls at school or other schools or, heck, even a couple of girls who live in our building, but the idea of kissing me results in curse words and discomfort.

"I'm not going away," he insists. His palm is on my shoulder, and I feel electrified just from that small touch. I wonder what it would feel like if he touched me other places.

"All that talk about me being important to you seems like just that—talk," I mumble, still refusing to look at him. He pulls on my wrist that is covering my eyes, but I resist. It would be easy for him to overpower me, but instead he just lets go . . . and even that makes me sad.

"It's not just talk, but you're fifteen, and I think we should wait."

"I'll be sixteen in five months, and it's not like you weren't kissing girls when you were fifteen."

"You stay here, and we'll kiss when you're ready."

My heart sings at the words "we'll kiss." He wasn't rejecting me! I drop my arm and sit up abruptly. Nate reaches out to steady me, and we are only inches apart. If I leaned forward I could kiss him. Instead I say slowly and clearly, "I'm ready now."

"You're not."

"How do you know? You were like twelve the first time you kissed Molly Masterson at her birthday party. And you had sex when you were fourteen with Olivia Petrzeka in her parents' rec room."

He gapes at me. "Goddamn Nick. I'm going to beat him until he can't remember his own name let alone anything about me."

“Nick? If you want to shut down the gossip pipeline, you better start picking better partners.”

Nate does a double take. “Are you saying that it’s the girls?” He draws out the word *girls* in shocked disbelief.

“What do you think we’re talking about?” I drop to the bed and stretch out like a starfish. “I’m going to kiss someone someday. Do you want that first kiss to be yours?”

He glares at me and presses his lips together, but behind his glower I can see something else, something that maybe if I was more experienced I could identify. I just know it’s there, and it’s something other than anger.

I stretch farther, making tiny linen angels in my bedsheets. Nate’s attention is diverted, and at first I think he’s staring at my chest, where my IV port is but then I realize his gaze is lower, much lower. A devilish impulse comes over me, and I drag one foot up my leg, around my slender calf, up to my thigh and then allow my knees to fall apart. Despite my illness, I am still limber from years of gymnastics training. As I watch beneath my eyelashes, Nate does not look away. He’s riveted, and my gaze falls down his body past his chest and down to his sweatpants that hide absolutely nothing.

I’ve seen erections before, on the Internet, but I couldn’t decide whether I thought that penises were disgusting or attractive. I prefer looking at the naked chest, the abs on a male model, or even his back. Somehow I know that Nate’s erection would be different, amazing. Girls in the locker room talk about blow jobs and oral, but I haven’t done any of that. I pretend like I know what they are talking about, but the closest I’ve ever come to anything remotely sexual is a few Tumblr gifs. No one is willing to brave the Jackson brothers to get to me, and I haven’t been too interested in breaching the line either.

Saliva pools in my mouth as I think about taking Nate inside me, and I wonder what it would feel like if *he* touched me between my legs. As quickly as the wanton spirit had spread over me, it leaves, and I lock my legs

together, rolling to the side, embarrassed at my thoughts.

Nate groans, my motions awakening him from his trance. He turns to face the wall, and presses his forehead against a palm. Shame sets in, and I'm sorry for what I'm doing to him, what I'm doing to myself.

"I'm going to Switzerland. I'm leaving after the first of the year and I just don't want my first kiss to be with someone other than you." I bite my lip and then touch him tentatively on his back and wait for his response. I'd like him to be my first everything, but he's skittish and I don't want to scare him off. His hard on, though, must mean something.

When my palm hits Nate's back, his muscles bunch tightly under his T-shirt—as if he is anticipating a blow. Remorseful, I lean into him, resting my cheek in the middle of his spine, and slip my arms around his waist. I'm not sure why I'm pushing him tonight. I think it's because I'm scared of what is going to happen to us when I go away, but my claim on him has never been one of girlfriend/boyfriend. We're family and no matter what he gives to the other girls in his life, I'll always mean something to him. I should be satisfied with that.

I should be, but I'm not.

"I'm sorry," I whisper against the worn cotton. I rub my face tenderly against his back as if I am his old dog Hobo, seeking forgiveness from my owner.

I feel him exhale, and then he grabs each of my hands in his to pull me tighter. We sit like that for some time, his head bowed and mine nestled in the curve of his back.

"You're going no matter what, right?" he finally says.

"Yes."

I'm not able to explain to Nate why I feel compelled to go and how I really believe that this is the right thing for all of us, but especially me. I'll never get better here because it will be too easy to rely on Nate and Nick to do things for me. Nick will cover for me in classes, and Nate will glare all my

detractors away, and I'll be smothered in sympathy and pity. It would be easy to stay and that tells me more than anything I should go.

If I tell this to Nate, he won't get it. His response will be that he can take care of me, but that's not what I want. If I'm ever to mean something more to Nate than little Charlotte, the girl he remembers crying because her cupcake was smashed, then I've got to learn to stand on my own two feet.

My illness has only accelerated this problem. I suspect that if I let him he'd still be cutting my food ten years from now. But while his hands would be feeding me from his fork, his attention would be wandering. I'd be a needy invalid, and he'd want someone who could walk beside him.

"You're breaking up the Three Amigos," he says lightly, but I can hear a faint accusation there. I dread facing Nick tomorrow.

"You're just mad because you don't get to leave first. And because you like to tell Nick and me what to do."

"I resemble that remark," he quips. Gently, he unwinds himself from my embrace and rises. My heart catches as I fear he's going to leave. I'm not ready for him to go. I push up on my knees and reach out for him. He towers over me on the side of the bed, a fierce look on his face. Cupping my cheek and chin in one hand, Nathan rubs my face with the back of his little finger. It's a light caress, but I savor it all the same. "I can't figure this one out, but I'm not going to argue tonight."

He pulls me to my feet and then reaches over to pull down the covers. "I'm going to hold you tonight, even though your dad or mom may kill me in the morning, but that's all we're going to do." Was this a warning for me or him?

We lie down together, our sides barely touching in the large bed. He reaches over and links his fingers through mine.

"How long?" he whispers.

"Three weeks. Right after New Year's."

His fingers tighten almost painfully on mine for a moment, but I don't

move at all.

“We’ll figure this out,” he says.

I’m not sure what we have left to figure out, but I’m too tired to ask. He’s beside me, and we’re lying together, our hands entwined. It’s enough for now.

I spend most of the night with one eye open just waiting for Charlotte's parents to burst through the door, but even with that anxiety hovering around the edges of my consciousness I don't leave. Charlotte's hand tucked into mine is more effective than a chain bolted to the floor. I can tell that she is confused by my response to her, and I am as well. These feelings came on so fast, and neither of us are prepared. I had some vague idea Charlotte and I would end up together, but that was in the future. Her being sick, nearly dying has changed things. But we aren't ready. I'm not ready.

The memory of the last time I had sex flicks through my mind. It's been a while. Months. I know other guys would either be having sex with other girls or be taking Charlotte up on her offer. Although what she is offering, I'm not sure.

And it's not like Charlotte and I are dating or even a couple. We're connected though.

For so long I've just taken for granted that she'll be around when I'm ready for her. And right now she's too young, and I'm trying hard to push away those physical feelings. Emotional ones are okay, but I feel two inches high whenever I get hard around her.

But going off to another girl?

That seems just as wrong now. Before, yeah, it was easy. The idea of not having sex for some interminable amount of time in the future is bleak. I wonder if I can die from a build up of sperm or if my dick really will fall off if I jerk it too much in the shower. Maybe it would be better if she left. If she was gone, wouldn't it be easier for me to go without? No temptation around.

I hold myself immobile so I don't disturb her sleep, but she finally lets go right before dawn. It's about the time I usually get up and lift weights, so I tell myself it's okay to leave her. She mumbles something, but I don't catch it. Leaning over, I tuck the blankets around her and kiss her forehead.

"Naaaate." She sighs out my name, the word sounding like one long breathy syllable, and it sends shivers down my spine. And I'm hard. Just like that. Adjusting myself, I creep out, glad that the hallway is quiet. All doors are shut, and I can escape into my own home unnoticed. The kitchen is dark except for the range light over the hood.

"You can spend as much time as you like with her before she leaves, but she is leaving."

My hand is on the doorknob, but my heart is somewhere around my knees. If I had poor bladder control, I would have pissed myself. At least my boner died.

"Jesus Christ, Aunt AnnMarie," I swear, forgetting myself. In the shadows across the room sits Charlotte's mother, a mug in her hand and her tablet in front of her on the breakfast table. I hope she didn't see me tenting my pants earlier. I won't die from sperm build up. One of Charlotte's parents will kill me instead. "I d-didn't see you," I stammer out.

"No kidding." I can hear the smirk in her voice. "The fog comes on little cat feet."

"Huh?"

"Carl Sandberg." When I show no understanding, she shakes her head. "Schools these days. It's about the Chicago Harbor! 'The fog comes on little

cat feet. It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on.' You've never heard that?"

It rings a faint bell so I nod, but she isn't buying it. "Come," she orders. "Sit down."

I trudge over, my feet slapping heavily against the tiles. She kicks out a chair, and I drop into it.

"Why?" I ask sullenly, feeling like I'm a toddler again and Aunt AM is taking away my favorite toy.

I can feel her looking at me, but the light from the range hood doesn't extend over here. The only light is from her tablet, which has flickered off. Gone to sleep I guess.

"If Charlotte wanted to go to the Navy Pier, would you take her?"

I know that there is a trap here. I hesitate, and it's my first mistake. "No," I say.

"How do you stop her? Physically restrain her? And if she tells you that it is fine and that her doctor has okayed it, do you call her a liar?" The questions come rapid fire, and I can't process them all at once. "You eventually give in because you love her and you think she must know, after this most recent episode put her in the hospital, that she can't keep hiding her weakness."

I nod slowly at this assessment, but I'm uncertain. Would I keep Charlotte from doing something she said she was safe to do? Charlotte can talk me into anything, and if she said that it was safe I'd believe her. My tongue is still frozen by doubt. Aunt AM continues on, using my silence against me.

"And if she had an episode, a seizure or passed out, would you blame yourself?" I nod again because anything else would be an obvious lie. "We want to prevent that from happening. Where you're blaming yourself and Charlotte avoids placing all of you in a bad situation."

"How long?" I ask.

“Six, maybe nine months. We hope to be back before her junior year starts.”

I’m glad now that we can’t see each other because what I’m feeling right now is something like relief. I shouldn’t feel that way, but it’s like Charlotte’s absence will give me time to sort out everything.

“Before May 21st?”

As she raises one eyebrow, I fight hard not to flush under her knowing gaze. Yes, I am counting down the days until Charlotte turns sixteen.

With a small smile, she responds, “Maybe before her 16th birthday. It depends on how hard Charlotte works at getting better. Does she do everything her doctors ask, or does she try to hide her symptoms and pretend she isn’t as sick as she is?”

“Okay,” I say. I mean, it’s not like I have a choice in the matter. AnnMarie gets to her feet and gives me a hug. Standing up, I return her embrace, already feeling a hundred times better.

“It’s the right thing for all of us,” she murmurs to me.

“Thanks. I get it.” I’m nearly at the connecting door when she calls out.

“Don’t let Bo know you are marking when Charlotte turns sixteen, or you might not live to see your next birthday.”

Because I am a stupid and reckless shit I give her a salute and a grin. She mock tosses her tablet at me, and I disappear down the hall. My cocky belief that all will work itself out reasserts itself. Six months? Nothing can happen that would affect us in six months. By then Charlotte won’t be so young. Sixteen is perfect. Six months is perfect.

There are different colors and sizes, and I'm a little stumped by the choices I have. "Where does your sister get all these?" I ask Greta. She's on my old gymnastics team and a fellow North Prep sophomore. We've been friends for a while, although not close. It's been hard to make friends with girls as I've gotten older due to the Jackson brothers, because the boys, rather than me, are the main attraction. Greta has expressed interest in Nick which is why I picked her to come over instead of someone else, someone who might like Nate.

"I think when you go to college they're in your welcome packet." She runs her fingers through the pile, messing them up, and then she re-sorts them. Greta has a lot of nervous energy. One of her extremities—an arm or foot—has to constantly be in motion. I'm too weak for nerves these days. I only have the energy for *doing*.

"I can't wait." But really I'm not even sure if that's a truthful statement. College was once a foregone conclusion. Nick and I had talked about it often—arguing about whether I would go to Notre Dame where he hoped to get a football scholarship. Nate, now that I think about it, never participated in those discussions. I've lived so much in the moment with the future this

nebulous forward mass that was simply full of opportunity, hopes, and dreams. *Was* being the key word now. My future is still nebulous but the shape of it has changed, and I don't like looking at it anymore.

"I know. Me either."

She picks up a gold foil one and one that is lime green. I can't imagine putting one of these on Nathan and definitely not a lime green one. I pluck the gold foiled one out of her hands. "I'll take this one."

"The green one tastes like lemon-lime," she sings.

I make a face and stick the gold one under my pillow. We chat a little while longer until Dad comes by and says that the car is ready to take Greta home.

As I'm getting ready for bed, it occurs to me that I should have had Greta bring over something sexy to wear. I have nothing that might stir a boy's interest. My bras are plain and so are my underwear, and what's not plain is rather juvenile.

Perhaps I could filch something from Mom. I creep out of my bedroom and down the hall to my parents' bedroom. Their door is closed, but I hear their voices which means there is no way I can get inside. Turning I start to head back to my room when I hear my name and then Nathan's. Instead of leaving, I draw closer and press my ear to the door.

"Aren't we just saying 'Sure, Nate, come and defile our angel all you want. In fact, let me buy you the condoms. Need any help slipping them on?'" It is Dad, sounding surly and gruff, a pretty unusual state for him. He's always easy-going with Mom and me. I make a sad face for him. I hate that my daddy is sad because of me, but does he really think I'm never ever going to have sex? That sounds pretty dismal. How would I ever have kids? How would they have grandkids?

"If her current medical regime wouldn't have made birth control contraindicated, I would have put her on the pill." Mom's voice is farther away, and I can barely make out her words. My guess is she's standing in the

adjacent bathroom and Dad is sitting on the sofa in front of the fireplace in their bedroom. He's probably drinking Scotch or something amber in color. I've learned that anything darker than, say, a Mountain Dew is going to make me sick.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that, sunshine. "

Mom laughs. "Didn't we make the decision together that we'd rather have Charlotte experience safe sex than explore it with strangers without protection?"

"Sure, but we made that decision when she was eight and still called me Daddy unironically. I thought I had a good twenty years before she'd start thinking about sex."

Really, Dad? When I was thirty? I stop making my sad face for him. Now I'm frowning.

"Would you really not want your baby girl to enjoy sex, Bo? That's your wish for her?"

"I feel like this is a trick question. Like there's no right answer."

I hear him shift on the sofa and then footsteps. Mom's voice is louder, clearer now. She's joined him on the sofa. "I'm not ready for her to grow up either, but I don't see how we stop it, and I'd rather she learn about stuff from someone like Nathan who'd gnaw off his own arm before he hurt her than some other stupid North Prep punk."

"When you put it like that . . ." Dad sounds reluctant, but he's obviously given up the fight. I grin to myself.

"Besides it's only for a short while, and I put the fear of God into Nate this morning."

"You did? Because I worked him over last night with the whole 'I trust you not to betray the goodwill of your aunt and me.'"

There's a slapping of hands as if they've just high-five each other. My parents. *Gah*.

"We make such a good team," says my mom.

“I know,” Dad says smugly. “Now swing your leg over here, sunshine, and let’s practice some of our other team moves. Like the one where you—” His voice is abruptly cut off, and there aren’t any more words, just noises that gross me out.

Wrinkling my nose, I straighten up only to run into a Nate-sized wall. He places a hand over my mouth to stifle a yelp of surprise and then winks at me, slowly dragging me down the hall to my bedroom.

“So your parents still get it on regularly?” He grins.

Inside my room, I flop onto the bed and try to shut out the visual. “Gross, Nate. Really.”

“Why’s that gross you out? How do you think you were born?”

“Do you really want to think about your parents having sex?”

He shrugs. “It’s not like I’m thinking about it every day, but don’t you think that it’s cool that they’re so into each other even after all this time? I mean, yeah, it’s not like I want to watch my dad chase my mom around the living room every night, but it makes me glad that they still work for each other years after they met. Don’t you want that?”

I do, and I know who I want it with.

He nudges me over and climbs onto the bed next to me. Plumping the pillow his hand brushes something and it crackles. *Oh no, the condom.* Nate sits up and pulls it out.

“What’s this” His face looks hard.

“A condom?”

“I know, but why do you have it under your pillow?”

I make a pffft noise. “Why do you think?”

There’s nothing for me to do but brazen it out.

“Who gave this to you?” His hand crumples the condom making me worry about the integrity of the rubber.

Reaching over, I pluck it from his hand and try to smooth it out, a little perturbed he’s jumping to some crazy assumptions and ruining my plans. “I

think you ruined it.”

He takes it from me and throws it across the room. “I didn’t ruin it, and you’re not going to need it.”

“Geesh, Nathan, you’re as bad as my dad.” I lean up on one elbow to stare at him, acutely conscious that I’m wearing an old snoopy T-shirt and some sweatpants. I get cold really easily these days. I’m unsexy and frail and probably the last thing that Nathan wants. These past weeks the attention he’s given me has probably all been out of pity. Fine then, I’ll use the damn condom with someone else. I drop onto my back and start rifling through all the North Prep guys that might help me out. I’ll ask Nick tomorrow. He’d make a face, but ultimately he’d help me.

Nathan runs a hand through his hair and falls back on the bed. “It’s not like that.”

Not like what? I think. I burst out, “Is it because I’m too thin? My port is too ugly?”

“Do you really think I’m that shallow?” He looms over me now, his big body like a plank of wood. Stiff, straight, and hard.

“What is your problem then?” I yell at him.

He slaps a hand over my mouth to stifle the noise. Sitting up, he drags me over to sit on the edge of the bed, and then he drops to his haunches between my legs. He lays his head sideways so that one cheek rests against my knee. It’s the most intimate position I’ve ever had with a boy, and it’s setting my heart racing. He kisses the scar I got on my knee when I dragged myself over the carpet in the television room, not realizing that Nick had left his Leatherman tool open. I’d cut myself, and then Nick and I were afraid to tell anyone so it got infected and healed badly. Nick got a whooping and so did I. Nate was mad at both of us for a week and hid Nick’s pocket knife. I’m not sure if Nick has ever gotten his original one back, although one of our dads’ friends gifted him a new one a couple of years ago.

“You’re beautiful, Charlotte. With your soft hair and your port and your

scars, you're everything I would want in a girl. Don't you believe differently." He turns his head again, so I can see his brown velvet eyes staring straight at me.

I believe.

He kisses up a little higher, to the top of my thigh. "I love your laugh. Your willingness to put up with the Jackson boys' shit constantly. Your endless optimism. No one has your spirit."

He rises and pushes me backward on the bed so that I'm caged on either side by his muscular arms. *Why, Nate, you haven't been skipping arm day, have you?* I think ridiculously because I'm nervous and excited and I'm trying not to squeal.

He is going to kiss me. His face comes closer, and I lick my lips in anticipation. This is it. This is what I've been waiting for my whole short life. This is why I have to keep living so that I can remember this event over and over and over. Slowly his lips brush mine. I want to keep my eyes open, but they are dragged down as if there is a string attached to my lips.

"I just want to take things slow. Make them right for you. Do you trust me?"

I nod.

"We can't go back. What we have between us," he waves his finger back and forth, from his chest to mine, "will never be the same. We will have to fight to keep Nick with us. We will have to fight to keep together. No matter what. Will you do that?"

"I will," I vow. I loved him so much for remembering Nick—that we are all one unit—and for wanting me to fight for him and for us.

He bends forward then and presses his mouth against mine again. His arms are shaking with the effort of something, some unknown force either holding him back or pushing him forward. He's straining with the power of it, but his lips against mine are featherweight, light and without pressure. It's a *hello* kiss. It's a *we're going to get to know each other one new second at a*

time kiss. It's endlessly sweet and wonderful, but it's not enough.

So I grab hold of his wrists and it's easy to tumble him down, but he turns at the last minute so he's lying on his side, still kissing me, still telling me that kissing me is all he wants for now. He threads his left hand through my right, but his other hand is no longer occupied with holding him up, and so it drifts downward until it finds the curve of my waist. There it stops and finds purchase, gripping me tight. He won't let me get closer, but as our lips move against each other I feel his fingers bite into my skin and that movement tells me that he's so close to the very edge of something that he doesn't even notice that his touch might be a little too tight. I revel in that—that I'm making Nathan Jackson feel out of control.

But his iron will is still in charge, and so we are just kissing, loving each other with the soft movement of our lips.

When Nick and I were ten and Nate was twelve, we went to the Shedd Aquarium for a school field trip. I had a crush on a boy named Lancelot. Everyone did, but I think it was because his name looked like it belonged on a Valentine's Day card. In the basement of the big aquarium there was a dark room devoted just to showing off jellyfish. Attached along one carpeted wall was a grouping of fake squishy jellyfish made of some kind of weird translucent polymer. You could stick your finger against the pliable rubber and bisect the jellyfish in half and when you released it, the half-moon body would spring right back. Lancelot was standing next to me, and I was transfixed as he stuck his finger inside the jellyfish repeatedly.

He whispered to me that this was what sticking his finger up a girl felt like. If Nate hadn't been there hovering behind me, maybe all I would have done was blush or maybe *I* would have hit him. But before I had a chance to react, Nate had pulled Lancelot around and stuck a fist in Valentine's Day's face. Lancelot tried to punch back, and the entire class was sent back to the bus for causing a ruckus.

Later that night Nate relayed the whole story to our families, much to my embarrassment. Dad ruffled Nate's hair, and Noah patted him on the back.

But the rumor got out that Nate and Nick would beat up any guy who even looked cross-eyed at me. It was Lancelot's revenge, and an effective one because until right now, I hadn't ever been kissed. Not once. Not even a not-so-accidental brush of my lips against a Y-chromosome during a birthday party game, mostly because every co-ed party, birthday or not, has also included at least one—if not both—of the Jackson boys.

But as I lie in my bed, my lower legs entangled with Nate's and my hands trapped between our bodies, feeling his soft, gentle lips move across mine, I'm so glad I've never kissed anyone before. The shivery sensation inside me that is being generated by Nate and only him. This is the safest thrill ride I'll ever be on, but I want so much more.

Parting my lips, I give a silent plea for him to take my offering and lead me deeper into the heart of our connection. Right now I feel like we are standing on the periphery looking down, and I want to dive in and be subsumed by sensation. He hesitates for just a moment and then I feel it. His tongue running lightly across my bottom lip. The shivers are turning into quakes, and my body seeks purchase against his. When his tongue sweeps inside my mouth, I stroke it with my own. His barriers melt, like an icicle in winter under the heat of the midday sun.

He's no longer holding me a safe distance apart. His hands are in my hair, and then he's rolling me over, pressing his long body into mine. A hard ridge in the middle of his body settles between my legs, and I clutch him even closer—my legs hitching up around his hips and over his thighs. His tongue feels huge in my mouth, and he's licking every inch inside me as if I'm the tastiest thing he's ever had the opportunity to savor.

All the locker room gossip suddenly makes so much sense. Kissing is the best thing in the world. It's more exciting than a roller coaster at the Navy Pier. It tastes better than a root beer float from The Brown Cow in Franklin Park. It feels better than sitting by the fireplace after eight hours on the slopes in Aspen. I wish I had the courage to reach down and palm him. To feel what

Greta was so shocked I'd never touched before. But I'm also distracted by the way the weight of him between my legs makes me feel and how that rigid length between *his* legs is making me pulse and itch. My fingers are digging into his muscular shoulders, and my hips are moving, almost as if they are independent of the rest of my body. I'm moving and pushing and pulling against him all at the same time.

My sudden flurry of activity causes Nathan to pull his mouth from mine and bury his face in my neck. He groans out my name, "Charlotte. *God*." Then he's pressing down against me hard, and I'm whimpering. I don't know what I need or want right now, but I instinctively know that he can give it to me.

"Please, Nathan," I plead.

"Oh, Charlotte," he repeats as if in pain. Then with a giant sigh he pulls away from me and flops onto his back. His chest is heaving as if he's run a very long distance, and I hear myself panting lightly. I lean forward to kiss him again, to restart all those lovely feelings, but he holds me away. "I need a moment," he says.

"Why?" I'm genuinely puzzled. "We don't need to stop." I start to roll out of bed to find the condom wrapper that Nate had thrown aside, but a large hand on my wrist makes me pause.

"I do." Rolling to his side, he props himself on one elbow and pats the space right next to his body. I climb back into bed and cuddle next to him, staring up with big eyes. "I want this all to be special for both of us, Charlotte. There's no rush."

His hand has burrowed its way under my T-shirt and just that action makes my breasts feel a little heavier and a little more sensitive. "But I want more now," I say a little petulantly.

"Me too," he responds with a rueful laugh. "It's just that I want to do this so right for you that when we finally do it, it will be one of the best memories of your life."

“It will be,” I promise, because how could it not?

He shakes his head as if I’m not really understanding him. “It’s your first time—no, our first time,” he corrects.

I scrunch up my nose, remembering that he’s had other girls before me, ones with more experience who aren’t as fragile as I am. Maybe he’s afraid I won’t be very good at this and that he’ll be sorry for all the promises he felt like he had to make because he’s Nathan Jackson and I’m Charlotte Randolph.

“Is it because I don’t have enough experience? If I’d done this before, we’d be having sex right now?” I ask in a small voice.

“No!” He shakes his head and pulls me closer to him. “I’m glad, selfishly, that I’m your first. And I wish I’d waited too because we could be learning together. I just think that we should take our time.” He gives a small shrug. “I didn’t come here tonight or last night just because I want to have sex with you, Charlotte. I want to hold you. Make some memories before you leave.”

“So let’s make the best memory,” I beg, but Nathan is resolute. I know I’m not going to be able to move him from his path, so I allow myself to vent some of my frustration in the form of a punch on the arm—the one he’s leaning on. I hit in just the right place, and he collapses next to me with a huff of laughter.

“I’m going to make it so good for you, Charlotte.” Tucking my head against his shoulder, he draws up the blankets around us. “So good.”

It's torture, as in actual real torture, lying next to Charlotte after she's basically told me she wants to have sex. Worse, I'm the one putting her off, and though she's lying silently beside me I can feel the waves of frustration vibrating off her. But I didn't expect her to want to have sex tonight. Hell, we hadn't even kissed yet.

Part of me is annoyed that she went and told Greta that she needed a condom. Maybe I'm a complete hypocrite, but I want Charlotte to look to me for anything to do with sex because God only knows what her friends are telling her. I'd like to wrap Charlotte up and just Velcro her to me so that I can control all the information that flows her way.

Sex is going to be good, and it's going to be with me. Full stop. Period.

That's all she needs to know. Everything else is fake bullshit. Greta might be telling her the only way to keep a guy is to spread her legs, and I don't want Charlotte to feel pressured like that. Even though I can probably make her body ready, I want her ready in the head, otherwise it'll never be good like I promised.

Her tense body finally relaxes, and when her hand falls away from my arm I can tell she's asleep. I wish I could follow her into dreamland, but my

mind is still racing.

I want her first time with me to be something she remembers forever. I want to imprint myself on her so that no matter where she goes, she can feel me, smell me. She doesn't know it yet, and I'm not prepared to tell her, but we're going to be apart longer than the few months that she's going to be away in Switzerland.

While we're separated I know that Charlotte will be pursued by other guys, so I've got to make every encounter with her be one that she can't forget. I can't rely on Nick to cock block everyone, even though I know he'll do his best.

Maybe that's why I've held back from Charlotte, just watching her and being irritated to the nth degree when she dresses in her short skirts or her cropped tops or her fucking tiny bikinis. I know that I might lose her and that would kill me.

I guess I thought I had more time. Time to wait until she was completely ready. I'd fixed her sixteenth birthday in my head. When that day came, I'd show her that she was mine and that we were meant to be together. I'd show her that there wouldn't be anyone else she'd meet who would ever fit her better than me.

But waiting until she's sixteen isn't an option anymore.

I slip out in the pre-dawn hours again. This time Aunt AM isn't hiding in the kitchen, and I don't go and wake Nick up. Instead I fall into my bed and finally get some rest. I only get a little shut-eye before my mom is at my door telling me I have thirty minutes before the car is taking us to school.

Groaning, I get up. This is good practice for my future, I tell myself. There'll be times when I'll go without sleep for days.

But I'm pretty much worthless through most of my classes, so when Greta comes up to me during lunch and asks me about the previous night I just stare at her blankly. Unfortunately, my pause only causes her to

raise her voice.

“So you and Charlotte last night?” And the tone of her voice is so loud that everyone in a ten-foot radius stops eating. Her hand spins a milk carton around. I remember Charlotte telling me that Greta is always in motion, or some part of her is.

“Shut up, Greta.” Nick’s on her before I can clear the cobwebs, and I throw him a thankful glance. He silently tells me to nut up and get with the program before Greta announces to the whole school that Charlotte and I are screwing.

“What’s the matter, was it bad?” Greta asks in a mock whisper. I say mock because it’s still loud enough for everyone at the table to hear. A collective hush settles over the table.

I tilt my head and just look at her, trying hard to remember my dad’s admonishments to respect every woman who comes into my orbit. Of course, if Dad heard this chick talking about Charlotte like this, he might change his mind. “I don’t know why you think I’d answer any question of yours about my personal life.”

Greta proves herself to be one dumb bitch when, instead of leaning back or just leaving, she presses on. “Um, because I gave her the condom she asked for so she could *do* you.” Her lips frame the last two words in a big oval. She probably thinks this is a sexy look, but it reminds me a fish. “I told her that I didn’t think her frail little body could handle a big boy like you.” She winks. “But you probably did her out of sympathy. Let me know if you want a different kind of ride.”

The milk carton is still spinning in circles. I take my fist and crush the carton and milk spurts all over the table, some of it catching Greta right in her fish lips.

“I don’t even know who you are,” I tell her. With a jerk of my head, I head out knowing Nick is right behind me. And behind him are the rest of the guys from my table. We’re all jocks, but this is Nick’s crew even though he’s

a sophomore because he's the guy with the golden arm. I'm the reluctant, couldn't-care-less player who can't wait to graduate and do real fucking things, so I let Nick lay down the law to the crew as I stand behind him, arms crossed, feet planted wide like a looming, angry asshole. Which is exactly how I feel at the moment.

"You asswipes say one word about Charlotte that is remotely sexual and Nate and I will give you a beating that will have you shitting out your piehole."

"No worries, dude." Kenny claps Nick on the back. "We got your girl's back." He gives me a nod and glides down the hallway. One by one they pat Nick on the shoulder and give their promise to keep it locked down.

Nick's eyes turn to me with fury in them. "What the hell is up with that bitch?"

"No idea," I say. "Charlotte knows her through gymnastics."

"You gonna talk with her?"

I glance back at the door. "No. She wants the attention. Best way to teach her a lesson is to make sure she gets none."

Nick nods, and we separate to head to our next classrooms. Good thing Charlotte isn't coming back to North Prep until next fall. Hopefully she'll have better taste in friends when she gets back.

By the end of the day it's clear that what started at lunch has spread like a venereal disease throughout the entire school. Guys are smirking at me, and girls are looking speculative. No one but Sinclair Pennington has the guts to talk to me. Sinclair's a sophomore and has had a few classes with Charlotte, but I never knew that they were friends.

She stops me after last period before I'm headed home. Nick is waiting for me by the exit doors—and by waiting, I mean he's got one hand on some random's ass while his head is buried in her neck. I can't tell from this distance who it is, nor do I care. Dad told us to respect girls. As far as I can tell, Nick's version of respecting females is giving each one the same amount

of attention.

“Um, hey Nathan,” she says as I pull my jacket from my locker.

“Yeah?” I fish around the side pocket for my keys. Flipping them in my hand, I whistle. Nick pulls his head from the girl’s neck and gives me a nod.

After seeing my acknowledgment he returns to his girl, this time plastering his mouth against hers. She tries to climb him like a tree, so I guess it’s all good.

“Is Charlotte better? Rumor has it she’s coming back to school soon.” She trots alongside me because I don’t make any effort to regulate my pace to match hers. Sinclair’s an awkward girl, all limbs, braces, and terrible haircut. She trips right when we reach Nick and falls into his back. Even I cringe at this. Grabbing her arm, I set her upright. Her face is bright tomato red, and I choke back a laugh because the last thing this poor girl needs is anyone snickering at her.

Nick catches his balance and tightens his grip on his companion, who I now see is senior Abby Halifax. She’s a friendly sort of girl, and one that probably doesn’t mind that Nick’s attention is shorter than the lifespan of a lightning bug. They both turn to look at Sinclair, whose eyes are pinned to the floor. She clearly wishes that it would swallow her.

“Sorry,” Sinclair mumbles into her shoes.

“No worries.” Nick gives Abby another quick kiss and a pat on the ass that is clearly designed to signal her departure, but she sticks around, leaning against his body as if he’s her personal resting post. But her eyes aren’t on Nick; they’re roving over me, and I feel a little uncomfortable as she rubs herself against one Jackson while stripping the other mentally. I allow my jacket to fall forward, covering half my chest and my crotch.

“Spoilsport,” she mouths.

Shaking my head, I brush by all three of them. I want to get home and see Charlotte. Behind me I hear murmurs and then two sets of footsteps. Christ, I hope Nick isn’t bringing Abby home with us. Spinning around, I open my

mouth to confront him only to see Nick and Sinclair. There's a worried look on her face, and since she mentioned Charlotte, I figure I better find out what it is.

"Did you have something you wanted me to tell Charlotte?" I ask.

Sinclair grimaces and blurts out, "It's all over school that she's pregnant and doesn't have cancer at all."

Nick and I exchange looks filled with equal parts anger and alarm.

"She's not. And the assholes that say she doesn't have cancer are sick in their heads." Other words, ones that are more profane, sit on the tip of my tongue. The rumor mill at North Prep is crazy. From Charlotte and I having sex to her being pregnant and faking cancer in under three hours? That must be some kind of fucked-up record.

"I just thought . . ." she trails off.

"Yeah?" Nick prompts, not so visibly angry like me. Sinclair melts under the heat of his smile, so before she turns into go, I snap my fingers. They both jerk to attention.

"What?" I bark. This flusters her again, and Nick glares at me. I gesture for him to take over.

"He's more bark than bite," Nick tells her in soothing tones. "But we all care about Charlotte. What's going on?"

"I know Charlotte would never lie about anything like this, but some girls are jealous of how protective of her you are. How *both* of you are so careful with her and that maybe now that everyone is older she's worried she's losing you, so she made up this story to tighten her hold." She barely takes a breath through the whole . . . what. Confession? Warning?

"Her hold?" I stare at her incredulously. This conversation is over. Behind me, Nick is thanking Sinclair and telling her that everyone will get their turn with him. *That* makes me laugh.

"That's pretty fucking strange," Nick comments as he catches up with me. "You telling Charlotte, or am I doing it?"

“I’m not telling her jack.” I shake my head. There’s no reason for Charlotte to ever find out about this crap.

Nick frowns. “If we don’t tell her, she’ll hear it from someone else and it’s going to be even more distorted.”

I hit the locks, and we both climb into the Audi that is designated for our use. Dad has told me a hundred times this isn’t my car. He thinks we’re going to end up completely worthless if we are given everything, but since we’re the only ones that drive this car, it seems like an empty lesson. But I get it and I want to do it all myself, have an identity separate from my dad’s.

Ever since I was a sophomore people have been asking me where I’m going to college, but a degree in business has never held any interest for me. There’s a way for me to live up to my dad’s expectations, but it doesn’t involve more school when I graduate.

“No.” I’m emphatic. “She’s got three more weeks here. By the time she gets back from Switzerland, they’ll have moved on to something else. I want her to be able to enjoy her last years at North Prep without this hanging over her head.”

Nick screws up his face but while he might disagree with me, we’re a unit. He’ll back me one hundred percent. “I’ll keep my ears open. If anything changes . . .”

“Agreed. If something changes, then we tell her.”

At home, Nick starts in on his homework and I open my emails.

I’ve made contact with your local recruiter. He’s expecting a call from you. Appreciate it if you’d let your parents know. Don’t like keeping this from your old man.

GP

I send a quick response.

Thanks! I’ll call ASAP. Situation with Charlotte tense. She leaves in three weeks. Will tell them after.

NJ

“Why not tell us now?” I whirl to see Nick standing slightly behind me and obviously reading my emails.

With a defensive shrug, I say, “Because if I tell Mom and Dad, they’ll tell Bo and AnnMarie, who’ll tell Charlotte, and I’m not ready for her to know.”

“Because she’ll go ballistic.”

“Yeah.” I grab the football and throw it to Nick. He catches it, settles back into his chair and tosses it back. This is how we think. “I figured I’d have all this time with her, but with her going away, the most I’ll have is seven weeks. Three now and four when she comes back.”

“If she comes back by then,” he points out.

There’s a little more heat on the return pass I send Nick’s way and he grunts when the ball thuds against his chest. “When she comes back.”

Because if she doesn’t come back by her birthday in May I might not see her until I’m done with Basic. And from there I’ll be shipped out to who knows where.

“I’ll be here,” Nick reminds me.

“But I want to be.” I hold the ball and flip it in the air and catch it myself.

“Then don’t go.”

As if it’s so easy.

“I don’t want to go to B school. I’m not interested in sports like you. Serving like Dad or Bo or Gray did is the right way for me to do something meaningful. Otherwise I’m standing around with my thumb up my ass taking advantage of everything that Dad and Mom worked so hard to achieve.”

“You could do AmeriCorps or volunteer for a year instead of doing something that might end up with you dead. Not easy to protect Charlotte if you’re not around.”

I scoff. “Not gonna happen to me.”

At 3:45 pm I get a text from Greta.

u need to talk to ur boy nate. He totes got a rager today over innocent comment.

The text makes me frown because that doesn't sound like him at all. He's the patient, steady one. Nick is the hot head. I don't send her a text back immediately because I'd rather hear from Nate what went down. The phone dings again, but I don't read it. I just know it isn't either of the Jackson boys.

It's hard not to be in classes with them because my whole day consists of eating, sleeping, and working on booklets that are my temporary replacement for classes. I've no motivation for doing any of those things. Occasionally, if the weather isn't too cold, one of my parents will take me out for a walk like I'm the family dog. You faint one time on the elevator, and you're never allowed out of the house alone.

The one part of leaving that actually appeals to me is the idea that I might have a little more freedom. But for now, I spend most of my time waiting for the boys to get home because that's when my real life starts.

I don't rush them, though. They might need to work out, or they might have homework. But every nerve in my body strains toward their side of the building. The walls are too thick and too well-insulated for me to hear the doors slam shut or the thud of their footsteps against the tile or wood floors, but my heart is so attuned to them, particularly Nate, that I know instantly when they arrive home.

I can see them in my mind's eye jostling each other as they walk down the hall, their backpacks hanging off one shoulder. Nick enters his room first, tosses his backpack on the floor, and flops down into his red and black gaming chair. He'll play some kind of networked game with kids halfway across the world. He once told his parents that he was learning a second language. It wasn't a lie either; they just didn't know the second language was primarily sex words.

Nate follows. He's slower, the more precise of the two. Or maybe he's just looking out for Nick like he does for me. Nate is always watchful. He sets his bag on his desk carefully and unpacks everything that he needs to address. In the past, we would have made plans on the way home from school. I'd do my homework and come over. But now I wait.

He must decide I'm more important than gaming or homework because my stomach does cartwheels at about 4:35 pm. He's coming. I hear him greet Dad and then the sound of a hand slap. That's probably Dad hitting Nate a bit too hard to remind Nate who's in charge. But tonight Mom and Dad and Noah and Grace are going to a business function—a party really. They won't be home until late. We'll be alone for hours.

I try to suppress my wide grin so that Dad doesn't have a heart attack when he sees me. There's a knock.

"Nate's here, honey," Dad says through the door. He never opens it anymore, not since that one time when Greta stayed over and changed in the middle of the bedroom instead in my en suite bathroom. It was like she wanted to be seen, which would be utterly gross. I get that girls think Dad is

attractive, but please. He's my dad.

"Okay Daddy!" I throw open the door, and my gaze skips by him and his furrowed brow right to lock on Nate, who is standing slightly behind him at the doorway.

"Mom says you should come over and have dinner tonight. She ordered in Lou Malnati's for us."

Lou Malnati's is famous for its deep dish pizza. The crust is different, almost pastry-like in its flakiness.

"Sounds great."

"Bring some homework. I've got about three chapters of American history to read, along with a biochem quiz to study for."

The recitation of all Nate's homework has inverse reactions from me and Dad. The lines on his forehead disappear, and he turns slightly to clap Nate on the shoulder. "Charlotte has plenty of work to keep her occupied, don't you, honey?"

"Yes," I say glumly and go over to my desk and pick up a couple of my booklets. They are mostly full of rudimentary math concepts as well as logic quizzes and memorization drills. The radiation and chemotherapy used to kill the cancer cells in my skull have affected my brain function, so I guess I'm brain damaged. Literally. I hate this, but my doctors say that with time, I should be able to catch up with my peers. With time. Everything is going to take time. I kind of hate that saying.

"Have fun tonight, Daddy." I give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Your mom will be by in thirty minutes," he says with a return hug. I trudge behind Nate as we walk down the service hall that connects the two units.

"Think if we move that the new people will want to close this down?" he asks.

"No," I gasp. "No one's moving from this place."

"Charlotte," he chides. "We aren't going to live here forever."

“Why not?” I know I sound grumpy, but the idea that I have to do homework better suited to fifth graders instead of spending time exploring Nate’s fine body has already set my mood to sullen. Now he’s trying to tell me that we aren’t going to be neighbors forever? It’s like he wants me to be grumpy all night long.

“Because we should be somewhere that has a lot of space.”

“We?” I ask, perking up.

“Yes, we.” He smiles down at me, and suddenly I’m happy again.

Nate’s parents say hi to us as we walk down the hallway toward the bedrooms, but we don’t stop. Instead Nate opens the door to his room. After I slip inside, he enters and closes the door behind him.

Taking the booklets from my hands, he tosses them on the desk and then picks me up and tosses me right onto the bed.

“Nate!” I squeal when he launches himself and lands right beside me.

With a laugh, he buries his head into my neck, which causes my entire body to melt and tingle. “Did you really think we were going to do homework all night?”

I bat uselessly at his shoulder. “Um, yes?”

He rolls onto his back but pulls me with him so that I’m tucked next to his body, my head pillowed on his shoulder and his arm is wrapped around my back. His fingers are curved around my waist, and I feel fully surrounded by his warmth.

“Nah, we had the biochem test today. Pop quiz. And I read my history homework during study hall.” He tilts his head awkwardly down at me. “Do *you* need to study?”

“No,” I state emphatically.

He smiles and then rests his head back against the pillows. “Good. We’ll eat, watch a movie with Nick, and then . . .”

His voice trails off, but I know. I know exactly what that silence stands for.

Finally.

We do exactly as he says. Nick throws open the door to tell us the pizza is being delivered. Thankfully we are merely lying next to each other as I force Nate to recount any and all North Prep gossip. He says he can't remember any and looks relieved at the interruption. The pizza, sodas, milk, and water are all set up in the media room. Outside the room, Mom appears to give me a hug and a bland admonishment to *be good*.

Grace Jackson comes in on a cloud of perfume and gives me a warm kiss on the forehead. Her eyes are glowing with affection as she looks at the three of us sitting on the floor, ready for the movie to start. We're watching *The Outsiders*, a movie that was old even when Aunt Grace and Mom went to college. Uncle Noah gestures for Nate to step into the hallway.

"You'll need these." She hands me a box of tissues.

"Thanks, Mom," Nick mocks, ripping the box away from my hands. He pulls out a tissue and dabs away pretend tears from his hazel eyes, a replica of his mother's. I punch him at the same time that Grace ruffles his hair. He ducks both of us but tips over, causing us all to laugh.

"Love you both."

"Love you too," we chorus in unison. He's still lying on his back, so it looks like he's saying it to the ceiling.

His mom rolls her eyes and leans down to pat me on the cheek. "Follow your heart," she says and turns to walk out the door.

"As long as it leads into Nate's pants." Nick waggles his eyebrows, but unfortunately for him Nate has returned from the hallway and he delivers a punch to Nick's arm that sends him tipping backward again. This time when Nick is rolling on the floor it's because of pain and not laughter.

"Ratdick," Nate calls him.

"Assface," Nick returns.

"Pigbreath."

“Dicknugget.”

“Rumpleforeskin.”

“Fuck knuckle.”

Before Nate can return yet another insult, I shove a piece of pizza in his face. Unrepentantly, he simply takes a giant bite of the pizza and winks at me over the slice in my hand.

“This movie is supposed to be about brotherly love.” I shove another slice toward Nick, and the insults die down as the movie starts.

“This looks like it should be in black and white,” Nick comments.

“With no sound,” Nate adds.

All is well in the world again. I settle back against Nate’s hard chest as we watch the three Curtis brothers fight, fall in love, and die. By the end of the movie I’m making good use of the tissues and even the Jackson boys are looking suspiciously tense.

“I’m calling you Ponyboy from now on,” Nate finally says after clearing his throat a couple of times.

“Better than Sodapop,” Nick retorts.

“No, I’m Darrel,” Nate says. “I’m the oldest.”

“You’d both be Socs,” I interject, throwing my tissues into one pizza box that the boys emptied by the middle of the movie. “Not Greasers.”

“We’d never be Socs, Charlotte,” Nick explains. “No one wants to be Socs, even the Socs.”

With a pointed look around the room, I pick up the box and head for the kitchen. The media room has theater seats and a projection screen that is the size of an entire wall. Ponyboy would just about die if he saw this place.

“Do you think we have too much?” I ask Nate, who has followed me out with the empty bottles and remaining pizza.

“All the time,” he answers. Taking the box from me, he throws it into the incinerator and places the rest of the food into the refrigerator. His words sound so fervent, as if our privilege is something he needs to apologize for.

“I can’t see you being mean to someone who wasn’t as fortunate as you,” I say.

“No, but I want to see if I can make it without the Jackson name or the Jackson money.” His eyes bore into mine with some deep meaning I can’t decipher.

“I believe in you.” I lean into him, and his arms curl around me. He buries his face into my hair, and we stand there, holding one another while the appliances hum quietly in the background. I don’t understand what he needs, so I give what I can—my heart, my faith.

“I won’t let you down,” he whispers, but while his volume is low his words are firm and commanding.

“I know. I trust you.”

He trembles almost imperceptibly in my arms, and I squeeze tight as if I can deliver all that emotion right into his veins and into his heart. Without another word, he lifts me in his arms like I’m a feather and carries me out of the kitchen, down the corridor, and into his bedroom.

“Goodnight, Nick,” he yells out.

“Glove up. I’m too young to be an uncle,” Nick yells back.

I bury my face into Nate’s chest, embarrassed that Nick will know exactly what we’re doing in Nate’s bedroom.

He sets me gently on the bed and crouches down in front of me. Rubbing the inseam of my jeans along my calf, he assures me, “Nothing happens tonight that you don’t want.”

But I’ve wanted for so long, it seems. I’ve always looked up to Nate, always viewed him as the ideal male. I believe we were born for each other.

“I want it all,” I declare. This time I have no embarrassment because it is Nate and this is right. He gives me a slow smile that makes me hot and excited. It’s not exactly *the* look his mother gets from his dad or my mom gets from my dad, but it’s close enough.

“All right,” he says, and those are his last words for a long time. He rises

up and places both arms on either side of my body and fixes his warm mouth on mine. We fall back onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. When his tongue slides over the seam of my lips, I part them and am rewarded with a hot, open-mouthed kiss.

Everything about Nathan feels different right now. His skin is warmer and firmer under my fingers. I glide over the curve of his shoulders and then down his back, where his muscles bunch under my touch. The weight of his legs against mine is even better when I part my thighs. He settles between them as naturally as if we've been in this position a hundred times instead of only one.

And he is thick and hard against my most sensitive region. My heart trips a couple of times in excitement and even a little fear. But the fear fades with each passing kiss and each caress. His entire body seems propped up by one strong arm bent at the elbow, while the other hand finds the delicate skin at my waist. I shake in response to that small touch.

His mouth breaks away from mine so he can murmur softly against my temple, "We aren't doing anything that you aren't ready for."

"It feels wonderful," I tell him and seek out his mouth again. When he returns to kissing me, I pull my shirt up higher so that there is more skin for him to touch, and this time it is his body that responds with a tremor.

I never want to stop kissing him, but as his fingers trace along my ribs and move higher until his palm is resting just below my right breast, I think it's possible that I may never breathe again. When he breaks away a second time, it is so he can kiss my neck and then lower. As his head moves down my body, his hand pushes my shirt higher, until my breast is exposed to the air, to the dusky light, to his hot gaze. And to his mouth. The sensation is so foreign, so delicious, so amazing, my back bows and I clutch at his head. "Nathan," I say in shock and delight.

Somehow he is able to interpret this correctly, and he continues his attentions. He uses his lips, tongue, and even his teeth on first one and then

the other breast. Inside my head and my body, I've lost all control. It's as if I'm hurtling into space, and I'm out of my mind with joy and excitement. When he moves even lower, I suck in my breath. He places soft kisses all along the top of my jeans. They are wet kisses, and I can hear the sounds he's making as well as feel the wet, warm trail he's leaving across my abdomen.

"Can I take these jeans off, Charlotte?" he asks, his voice gruff and tender.

I squirm on the bed. "Yes, please. Please do."

His deft hands pop my button and lower my zipper. I've my nicest pair of panties on. They aren't super sexy, but they have lace around the top and a small bow at the front. He releases a long, slow sigh—almost a moan—and the air from his body dances across my skin, alternately warming me and raising gooseflesh.

The jeans come off and he's between my legs again and he places his mouth directly over the center of my panties. "Oh my God," I cry out at the sensation. His laugh is low and naughty.

"No God here," he says smugly, his lips against my inner thigh. "Only me, Nathan."

"Are you going to . . ." I ask breathlessly.

"Yes," he says, and he does. At first I am embarrassed, but after a few licks, I'm too caught up in the sensations he's wringing to be self-conscious. This is what he meant when he said he was going to make it so good for me. I can't believe how amazing his mouth feels between my legs. And from the sounds he's making, it's evident to me he is enjoying this too, which makes me even more excited.

And as he licks me and gently strokes me with his fingers, I close my eyes and let euphoria take me away. It's one giant endless loop of pleasure and fierce happiness. When one of those fingers pushes inside of me, my eyes fly open.

"Oh, Charlotte," he moans, and the vibration rumbles through every part

of my body. “I’m so glad that I’m your first. I know I shouldn’t care, but I do.” He climbs on top of the bed again so that he’s half draped over me, his heavy leg lying over one of mine and his head tucked close to my shoulder. All the while, he’s slowly gliding his finger in and out of me, until that feeling of tense ecstasy begins to build again. He doesn’t stop stroking me, not even after I’m crying out his name again and shaking like a leaf from the sensations that he’s eliciting with just his finger and his mouth.

“I’m glad it’s you,” I say after my shuddering has stopped. He slides his finger out of me and disrobes quickly. My eyes widen at the sight of his erection. It’s at least four fingers in diameter and far, far longer than even his middle finger. I gulp and turn away so as to not become frightened. He sits me up and removes my shirt so I’m nude except for the panties he had pulled back up.

He kisses me again, soft at first and then demanding—his hard length lying rigidly against the side of my hip. He dips his hand inside my panties again, and the fear that I had after seeing his penis is quickly forgotten under the onslaught of desire he stokes. This time he pushes two fingers inside, and soon I’m arching toward every touch.

“Promise me it will always be me,” he says fiercely.

“I promise.” How could I not promise? I’ll never want another person to touch me in this way. Never. But a fierce surge of possessiveness washes over me. “And you’ll never have another besides me?” I demand.

“Never,” he vows. “It will always be Nathan and Charlotte.”

“
Never,” I vow. “It will always be Nathan and Charlotte.”

Her lips looked shiny and big, puffed up from my attentions. I can barely breathe. Worse, I’m afraid I’m not going to last long enough to make it good for her. I lean down to kiss her again. I wish I had saved myself for her. I wish I had never kissed another girl, touched any breasts other than hers, slid my fingers inside any other female.

With each kiss and caress, I wipe away memories of everyone but her. When her clever tongue flicks across my lips and rubs against the side of mine, I’ve never tasted anything sweeter. The heady scent of her arousal and the faint peach fragrance from her lotion surrounds me. My hands mold her body, memorizing each curve and arch. I’m absorbing her essence so that I’ll carry her with me forever.

“I’m ready,” she says. Her words are punctuated by tiny pants that make my heart beat faster. In an effort to collect myself, I lean forward and lick her breasts again—first one and then the other until she’s convulsing around me again. I’m torn because I don’t want to pull my fingers from her hot, wet embrace, but I also want my dick inside her so badly. I worry that it might break off if I don’t get relief. I pump my fingers, and she tightens all around

me.

“Oh please, Nathan.”

I don't want her to beg me even though it sends an illicit thrill down my spine. Regretfully I pull my fingers out, and we both groan, one part dismay and one part pleasure.

“Shh,” I whisper and stretch out to grab a condom from under the pillow where I stashed it before I left this morning. She reaches down toward my stiff dick and I jerk away. “I'm sorry,” I tell her. “I can't have you touch me.”

“Why? Am I not doing it right?” Her voice sounds plaintive.

“God no.” I grab her hands and place them on my chest. “I'm just a hair trigger away from embarrassing myself and making your first time a huge disappointment.”

“You'd never disappoint me.” Her fingers skim over my chest.

“I will if I don't start thinking of something other than getting inside you,” I say ruefully. I pull her hands away from me and fold them between mine. Pressing a kiss on the backs of her fingers, I pull her hands over her head. Instinctively she arches her back, thrusting her breasts toward my mouth. Her rigid nipples are taunting me. And somehow she knows how tempting she is in this position because she undulates seductively.

Hurriedly, I grab a condom and sheath myself.

When I reach between her legs, she's still wet. There are streaks of blood on my fingers, but rather than turning me off, the sight of it thrums like a drumbeat in my head. *Only mine*. This is the proof of how she'll belong only to me. I hide my look of smug satisfaction by surreptitiously wiping my fingers along the side of my comforter.

With one hand bracing my body, I grab my dick and rub the head against her soft opening. She smiles tremulously at me when I slide slowly inside her. At the first contact, I nearly blow my load, and there's a little devil that is urging me to plow her hard and fast. The heat of her body is setting me on fire. Squeezing my eyes shut, I concentrate on breathing slow and steady and

the pressing need to rut like an animal eases off enough so I can gather a little self-control.

When I open my eyes, I see hers tight around the edges. This is painful for her, and I hesitate, thinking I should shove off because I can't stand hurting her even the tiniest bit anymore. I used to get mad at her when I started thinking and feeling things I knew I shouldn't be thinking or feeling, so I'd lash out with a sharp criticism. All I want now is to see her smile and make her laugh.

But she senses my reluctance and pulls me down. "It doesn't hurt at all," she lies.

"Don't." I shake my head. "Always tell me how you feel so I can make it better. It's all I want—all I'll ever want."

Waiting for her body to adjust to mine is the hardest thing I've ever done. My legs are starting to shake, but I'll stay in this position with just the tip inside for as long as it takes. When I feel her relax I push in a little more, and we do this dance of pausing and inching forward a little at a time until I'm fully seated. When I'm snug against her, her mouth forms a little circle as if she can't believe we fit. But we're a perfect match. She's made for me and I for her.

"Put your arms around my neck," I tell her. "I'm going to move now. You'll need something to hang on to."

She does as I instruct, and by the slumberous gaze and the way her limbs have tightened all around me, I know she's with me. I press my forehead against hers and watch her expressive eyes as I stroke in and out of her in slow, measured movements. Each drag along her tissues is the first of its kind, and the wonderment and delight is driving me out of my mind. I'll never forget this moment.

As the path becomes slicker and easier, I begin to speed up, and her thighs cling to my hips. I kiss her, sipping from her lips at first and then thrusting my tongue into her mouth as I'm thrusting between her legs. She

moans and shudders under me. I can feel my orgasm building, and I need her to come before me. Her need before mine—always. I move my hips, altering my pattern and listening intently until I hear her breath hitch as I catch the right spot. Then I work that over and over until her moans turn to cries.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper against her mouth.

Dipping a hand between us, I circle and press her tender flesh until I can actually *feel* the rhythmic clenching and unclenching of her body as she comes. It’s the sign I’ve been waiting for, and all my control vanishes. Mindlessly I thrust into her as my own pleasure overtakes me. Her hips rise to meet mine and her nails dig into my shoulders. She’s taking everything I have and demanding more. I’m no longer gentle or caring because I’m beyond that. I’m in another plane where I’m controlled by my lust and desire for her, but her passionate cries in my ear tell me she’s there too. Finally I jet what seems like buckets of come into the condom, my body jerking against hers.

I collapse on the bed and roll to the side, careful to remain inside her. I should immediately withdraw and take care of the condom, but I need to hold her. She’s shuddering against me, her whole body shaking with the bliss of our joining. I stroke her shoulders and press small kisses along her shoulder and neck, inhaling the scent of her hair and of *us*. I pull out, holding the base of the condom so there aren’t any leaks and tie it off. I toss it onto the T-shirt on the floor that I figure I’ll have to throw away after tonight.

After we both catch our breaths, she speaks with deep satisfaction, “God, Nathan, I want to do this again a thousand times.”

Grinning at her, I say, “Me too.”

She runs her fingers through my hair and laughs, and the sound of it goes into my ears and straight into my dick. The sudden hardness against her soft skin causes her eyes to widen. “So soon?”

“Yup.” My grin gets bigger. Hope she’s not too sore tomorrow.

“Nathan.” She clutches at my shoulders, which are slippery from the

sweat I've worked up loving every inch of her body. My name is a trembling whisper on her lips, and like every other word, sigh, and exclamation that has come out of her mouth, I tuck it into my memory bank, overwriting every other girl who has ever been with me before.

Leaning down, I gently press my lips against hers and lose myself in her taste. Kissing her is more erotic and more moving than all the other times I've stuck my dick into someone's body. I can't envision wanting more than her, ever. I pull out another condom and roll it on. Her legs curve around me as I press inside once more.

I hiss at the sensation of her tightening around me, hugging me so tautly that it's hard to withdraw. Instinct takes over, and my hips begin thrusting against her harder and faster until I release all the tension that has pooled at the base of my spine. Replete with satisfaction, I collapse on her. She doesn't even flinch at the heaviness of my body pressing her further into the mattress.

"Sorry," I mumble against the damp skin of her neck.

"Mmmhmmm," she says. Her hands trail over my shoulder blades and down, parallel to my spine. Despite having just enjoyed the hell out of her for the second time tonight, I feel myself harden, in response.

"No," she laughs. "I can't. Not again."

"Just ignore me," I say. Jesus, I've never been this horny. I should be satisfied, and I am, really. It's just that everything about her turns me on right now. With what I feel is a superhuman effort, I push off from her body and tug the condom off carefully. In the bathroom, I wrap it in toilet paper and shove it to the bottom of the trash can along with the previous rubber victim.

I gulp down two glasses of water from the sink and then fill the third one up for Charlotte.

"Here," I offer.

She takes the glass with a grateful look and drains half of it before handing it back to me. I set it down on the nightstand.

"Now what?" she asks.

I glance at the clock. Our parents are likely to be home in a half hour. “Now we go to your room, and I lie like a nice boy on top of the covers while you’re underneath them.”

“What’s the point of that?” She raises an eyebrow.

“It makes us look good. Like we’re not fooling around, just spending innocent time together.”

“My dad only thinks one of us is innocent.”

I wink at her. “Me, right?”

She tosses a pillow at me, but it falls far short. I pull on my discarded sweatpants and a T-shirt and gather up her clothes. Tossing them on the bed, I head to tell Nick where we’ll be going.

“Over to Charlotte’s for the night,” I say. “Thirty minutes until the ‘rents are home.”

I hear enough scuffling to recognize that Nick’s got another person in his room.

“Who’s in there with him?” Charlotte whispers to me. Turning I see she’s dressed and her hair has lost that just-fucked look that I am starting to love. I suppose I’ll find long strands of dark hair in my brush tomorrow but rather than being irritated, I’m kind of looking forward to it. Not that I’m going to weave a friendship bracelet, but I like having things that Charlotte’s touched in my possession. I figure it will make our separation easier.

“Don’t know.” I shrug. I take her hand and walk down the hall toward the service hallway. “Don’t care either.”

There are a few girls in our building that Nick could be nailing, but I’m not going to guess which one. He’ll tell me in the morning. I wonder if Charlotte knows what a manwhore he is. Probably.

“I wonder if it is Josie,” she muses. Yup, she knows all about Nick’s tendencies. We’re as close as one family, so secrets are hard to keep around here. Our newfound physical connection isn’t one we’ll be able to keep from our parents for long. I wonder how bad Uncle Bo will hurt me when he

figures it out. He is my godfather, but I'm guessing he won't go light on me.

Maybe Dad will intervene and explain that it was inevitable, because it was. Our timeline just sped up because Charlotte got sick and now she's leaving. I know I need to tell her about my plans before she goes, but I don't want to ruin everything now. I'll wait. I'll tell her about the recruiter the day before she leaves. If she thinks about it, she'll know that this is as inevitable as us getting together.

"What kind of treatment are you going to get over there?" I ask as we climb into Charlotte's bed.

"Just chemo and radiation followed by intensive physical therapy." She snuggles under the blankets, her thin body needing the extra heat that mine does not. "What'll you do this summer?"

This would be the time to tell her that I plan to enlist in the Navy right after she leaves so that I'll be able to start boot camp immediately upon graduation. The Delayed Entry Program allows me to sign up before graduation and then request the earliest possible boot camp date. It's the one secret I've kept from everyone except Nick, but I'll need my dad's signature on the papers since I'm seventeen. I know if I say this that she'll beg me not to go, and I'll cave because I've never been able to say no to Charlotte. Not ever. But if I enlist then I'm bound by a contract to the U.S. government to not only go to boot camp but stay in the military for four years. I'm hoping that contract is enough of defense against her.

"I'm planning for our future," I say.

"I love you," she whispers as I pull her against me, the blankets serving as a pretty damn effective barrier. I can't feel even one curve of her body through them.

"Love you too," I say and kiss her temple. As we fall asleep, my mind wanders to that scene in another old movie where the elf princess wanders through the forest, grief stricken because she outlived her king. That's not going to be Charlotte and me, but the image persists and despite all the

evening activity my sleep is restless.

Nate is gone when I wake up. He was restless last night, but I pretended to sleep. Cowardly I guess. I was afraid he had regrets, and I didn't want to hear them. *I* have no regrets. Sitting up, I enjoy the pull on my muscles. The muscles in my upper back are tight from clutching his shoulders, and between my legs I'm sore in places I didn't realize got sore. My lips curve up in a sly smile. I feel so knowledgeable this morning. Like every risqué joke ever told finally makes sense.

In the short time it takes to roll out of bed and pick up my phone from the nightstand, I'm already missing him. When Mom laid out exactly why going to this specialty clinic in Europe made sense, I bought into it totally. I'd only be gone for a short time. The boys wouldn't feel responsible for me if I overextended myself. And, maybe most importantly to me, the strongest memory they have of me won't be that I was a sick girl. Instead I'll return, strong, healthy, and smart.

The brain stem radiation and chemotherapy may result in the loss of gross and fine motor skills, they warned me. I was lucky I had stopped growing when the tumor appeared otherwise the treatment could have damaged developing organs. Gingerly, I cup the back of my head. Fluid is collecting

there. We're watching it, and by "we" I mean Mom, Dad, and my team of doctors. None of the Jacksons know. I don't want them to. It's rare for an older kid to get hydrocephaly or "water on the brain" and even rarer for it to develop months after the craniotomy.

"You've always been special," Dad joked weakly when the doctors told us that they'd never seen a case like mine. That's the real reason I'm going to Switzerland—to be studied and treated by an international team of experts and—more than likely—to have a permanent drainage tube installed in the back of my head.

Dr. Mosher said that there are plenty of functioning adults with permanent shunts. It just means no contact sports and no activities where I could fall on my head and break my shunt. In other words, no gymnastics. He suggested volleyball. I was too numb by then to respond, so I shook my head and he probably took it for agreement.

But all that seems like a distant memory now. My usual morning routine is checking my phone for messages from friends at school. But right now I'm too busy examining my body.

My face doesn't look different. I guess I thought I'd be able to see some outward sign that I am no longer a virgin. My hair is still short, growing out in wispy baby curls, and my skin is pale from lack of exposure to the sun. There are faint bruises on my hip bones and a few marks on my collarbone, but Nate was apparently careful not to leave anything too incriminating. I'm both disappointed and relieved.

I flick off the Do Not Disturb on my phone, and there about twenty text messages. Three of them are from Nathan. I skip the rest.

***You pushed me off the bed when I tried to kiss you good morning.
Miss you already.***

U still sleeping? RU OK? Text me. On my way to class but will

check phone.

Charlotte. For real. Text me.

I stop and take note of the time. It's almost noon. I've slept for hours. No wonder he's worried. I send him a response right away.

I just got up. Don't know why I'm sooooo tired. ;)

He texts me immediately as if he's been waiting.

Christ. Gave me a heart attack. I won't live until graduation at this rate.

I giggle at his exaggeration. I can just picture him making serious face while his eyes smile at me.

Can't have that now that I've just learned exactly why all the North Prep girls are chasing after you.

There are other girls at North Prep? I only see you.

Oh. My. God. He slays me. I clutch my phone to my chest, and the mirrored reflection shows that I'm wearing the silliest, stupidest, biggest grin ever. I text him again.

You need to come to my room immediately after school.

Nope. Meet me at MY room at 3:45.

Why?

Because when you're gone I want to lie in that bed and be surrounded by our memories.

I want to stick Nathan in my suitcase and carry him with me. My resolve wavers, but a press of a hand against that soft spot on the back of my skull reminds me that my primary goal is to get better so that all my tomorrows are spent with Nathan, having a family, growing old together, making new memories.

I love you. Too much. Like my heart isn't big enough to hold it all.

My heart is big enough for both of us. I'm always going to take care of you C-girl.

Hurry back.

Always.

I can't erase my smile, and it's the thing that gives me away. Both my parents are in the kitchen when I finally leave my bedroom. Normally it's just one of them during the day, and often they only pop in to check on me and then they're gone for a few hours doing work stuff. Mom's cheeks look flushed and Dad's wearing a smug and very satisfied grin. I recognize that grin. It's . . . holy shit, my parents are home for a nooner.

"Sleep well, dear?" Mom asks, her tone completely cool despite the tinge of red around her cheeks.

"Yup," I say. "Nathan's a big comfort."

Dad coughs and shifts around with some discomfort, as if he's still trying

to hide that sex exists in this world. I wonder if he was a horndog before he met my mom. I bet he was and that's why he's all embarrassed now. Past sins and all. He should be grateful I'm in love with his best friend's son. And I tell him so.

"You should be happy it's Nathan and not some random jerkface from school."

"We are," Mom answers and shoots Dad a repressive look. He merely grunts.

Inside the refrigerator I find the makings for a sandwich. Humming, I assemble bread, turkey, a couple slices of bacon, and tomato along with lettuce, cheese, and mayonnaise. I'm ravenous, and it takes me almost no time to demolish half the sandwich.

There's a weird silence, and when I look up from my plate I see both parents gaping at me.

"What?" I ask wiping a finger along the side of my mouth. "Do I have mayo on my face?"

Mom smiles, but her lips are trembling with suppressed emotion. Dad clears his throat, and this time he talks for both of them. "It's just nice that you have your appetite back."

I take a big bite of the second half of my sandwich. "Um, okay. But it's because of Nathan, you know," I say slyly as something occurs to me. "He's always on me to eat more."

I hadn't had much of an appetite before, but now? Now I do. And I'm going to need to have a lot of fuel for the next two weeks that I have left with Nathan if last night was any indicator. My big ass grin is back, and I hide behind my food this time.

My parents stare at me, but eventually their faces hold big smiles too.

"Nate's welcome any time," Dad says as he watches me finish the last of my meal.

Even if it means that his baby is having sex, I mentally translate. I'll let

Nathan know he can sleep under the covers tonight.

“I’m going to sleep here tonight,” I whisper to Nathan as he and his brother and two other random people on the Internet work together to kill enemies in the game. He pauses the game and whips off his VR glasses.

“Hey,” Nick objects but cuts himself off when he sees Nate’s look. Nick says something in his microphone and pushes out of his chair. “I’m going to piss.”

Nate waves him off. When the door to the game room closes, he turns to me. “How did you get the okay for that?”

“I ate an entire sandwich today.”

“Is this code, because I don’t have the key to decipher it.”

I reach for the hair on the nape of his neck and feel him shiver against me. “I told my dad you were responsible for my increased appetite.”

“You didn’t,” he groans, but his head dips down in an unspoken gesture for me to pet more of his head. Taking advantage of Nick’s absence, I straddle Nathan’s lap, ostensibly so I can get a better angle for the head scratching, but really I want his body next to mine. He’s so warm all the time. I love it. It’s like having my own personal heater.

His hands drop to my hips and pulls me closer until the centers of bodies are flush against each other. This contact heats me up in a completely different way—from the inside out. I start to rub against him, drawing on the memories of our interaction last night. He made me feel amazing, and I want to replicate those emotions over and over and over. As many times as I can.

He groans and tightens his hold on my hips but doesn’t push me away. I tug on the hair at his nape, and his face falls back obediently. When I kiss him, his lips are firm and soft and his hard length pushes insistently against me.

We kiss for a long time. They are lazy kisses. The types of kisses you exchange when you have all the time in the world, sitting on the beach or

lying on a blanket at a concert in the park. They're kisses that shut out the whole world so that it's just you and him and everything on the periphery is a beautiful blur, like an Impressionist painting.

"I need to tell you something," he says, finally pulling away from me. I don't want to stop, so I follow him as he draws back. Talking isn't half as interesting as licking his tongue or having him give me tiny bites along my lower lip. I know what it is that he wants to tell me, but I don't really care about that nonsense. However, he isn't deterred and pushes me back.

With a serious face on, he holds me an arm's width away. "Charlotte."

"I already know," I say. His surprise weakens his grip, and I dive in for another kiss. Nathan dodges me, and I end up with my lips on his ear. Fine. I haven't spent much time here. I wiggle closer and run my tongue along the outer edge and down to his lobe. As I suck, he moans and his fingers clench on my butt.

Ohh.

He's sensitive here. I smile to myself and store this knowledge away. He's not able to speak until I pause to switch sides.

"Wait," he pants out, "I have to—"

"What? That everyone at school thinks I'm pregnant because they know we're having sex?"

He tenses and then lets out a breath, like he's relieved. "Yeah. Who told you?"

"Greta texted me. Are you the father?"

"Who else?" He's affronted that anyone else could have provided the sperm for my fake baby.

"Would you like that?"

"Yes," he answers without a moment of hesitation.

His surety fills me with so much joy. We'll have a family together someday. I can picture us now, taking our kid down to Navy Pier for the first time and riding the carousel.

“But not now,” I tease him.

He smirks and presses his lips against the base of my throat, which sends a bolt right between my legs. I tip my neck back to give him greater access.

“How many will we have?”

“Two? Ten? I don’t care,” he murmurs against the soft, vulnerable skin of my throat.

“Two. I’m the one having them.”

“Good for me.” He swings me up in his arms. “Let’s go practice.”

I fasten my mouth to his, licking the inside of his mouth so thoroughly I could recreate it from memory. His response is to pick me up and carry me across the hall. The sound of him kicking the door shut no doubt declares exactly what we’re doing inside his bedroom.

Alone, we become frenzied. I’m pulling his T-shirt off, and he’s got his hands at the buttons of my blouse. Somehow I find myself on my knees before him, pulling his jeans down. His erection is right at my face, and it occurs to me that I’ve never done this before. I’ve never *wanted* to do this before, but now, as his shorts jut out in front of me, it’s irresistible. Saliva pools under my tongue. Slowly I slide my hands up his thighs, the light, coarse hair unfamiliar under my hands. I didn’t get to touch him enough last night.

Above the waistband of his shorts, I see his abdomen contract. The surrounding air is thin, as if Nathan has sucked it all inside him. My fingers stop at the bottom of his boxer briefs, and he rocks back slightly on his heels.

“Do you want me to?” I ask, looking up at him through my lashes. His face shows strain, and his eyes glitter in the afternoon light.

“Only if you want to,” he answers hoarsely. At his side, his fingers are clenched like he wants to reach for me but is holding himself back.

“You’ll have to tell me what to do.” I slip my fingers over his shorts.

There’s a wet spot on the material where it looks like the tip of his head is, and it’s got me all kinds of curious. Grabbing his waistband, I pull down

until his dick is released. It pops out and points straight up. There's a drop of liquid on the end, which grows larger as I stare. In fact, I think his penis is also growing larger, or maybe it's the angle because so close up, it looks huge. I dab my finger on the fluid and suck it off.

"Salty," I say. "Not bad."

"Shit, Charlotte," he groans. "You're killing me."

I shrug. "I'm just surprised. Other girls say it's gross."

"You don't have to do this." But his actions say that he wants it bad. He's nearly trembling with the effort to not grab my head between his hands. Despite the fact that I'm on my knees, I realize I have so much power over Nathan right now. Like he'd do anything I'd ask of him.

"I want to." I stroke my finger over the dark red tip. It's velvety soft. "I can't stick the whole thing in my mouth though."

There's a big vein on the top, and I trace that from the top to the root. His dick bobs as if it knows what I'm saying, seeking more of my touch. With a choked laugh, he grabs the base and wraps a big fist around it. "Slide your lips down to the top of my hand."

"Where do I put my hands?" I ask, wishing it was my hand around the base.

"Anywhere you want."

"Here?" I place my hands against his rock hard thighs.

"Yes." He pauses and then opens his hand to release himself. "Or you can hold on with both hands."

I make a tunnel with my palms and slide it down over his penis. "Like this?"

He stumbles. "Shit. I can't stand up." With a breathless laugh, he toes off his jeans, which I hadn't gotten around to completely discarding. He pulls me up to my feet.

"But I want—"

He cuts me off with a firm kiss. "I know, and so do I. But I'm going to

fall over because I'm so turned on, so if you don't mind, I'd like to sit on the end of the bed."

"You're going to teach me to give you a good blow job, though, right?"

His eyes bright with desire and laughter, he croaks out, "The best."

My time with Charlotte flies by. I had taken her presence in my life for granted, and it isn't until she is gone that I realize how much she is part of my daily routine. Even before we touched each other in ways that I'd fantasized about, she was always *here*.

And now she's not.

Nick feels it too. In the week following her departure, after the whispered private promises and the tear-filled public goodbyes—her tears, not mine—we are both uncharacteristically quiet.

“Miss her, man.” Nick powers down the car window as we speed to class. “Didn't think I would because Skype and shit. And because she's been out of school for weeks. But I still expect her to be home, ready to hear all the crap that went on at school.”

“Yup,” I answer. My feelings are too intense to give them much verbal play. I don't want to sound like a preteen who is so insecure that he keeps checking his phone to see if the girl he likes has responded to his last text. But Christ, I do miss her in so many ways.

I miss her small body next to mine at night. I miss her fingers running through my hair as I sit on the floor to study. She'd lie on the bed and prop

her chin on my shoulder, pretending to read but more often distracting me because she claimed I smelled too good not to lick.

Taking a deep breath, I drive those thoughts away so I don't walk into the school with a hard on so massive my backpack won't cover it. Yes. *Fuck*. I miss her.

"Guess you'll have to get used to missing each other if you're going to spend four years after graduation in the military," Nick muses.

Guilt spears me because I *still* haven't told Charlotte. I meant to, but then I was distracted by sex. I'm a seventeen-year-old male whose girlfriend wanted to be taught how to give a blow job. Nothing would have steered me away from that course of action. Not a tornado, a five-alarm fire, or confessions about future plans.

And there I go again. The jeans are feeling too tight again. I have to stop thinking about Charlotte and sex. At least for the next eight hours or so. After? Once I'm back in my bedroom, I'll be jerking it like a madman. My hand will probably be calloused by the time she gets back. I can just picture it.

"Why, Nathan, your hand is so rough. Been working out much?"

"Yeah, I fapped every night for three hours looking at your pictures, smelling your pillow, and remembering your tongue all over my body."

I'm not sure whether she'll be disgusted or turned on. As if he's reading my mind, Nick asks, "Think it will be hard to go without? I mean, like I can't not have sex every weekend, or I think my brain processes shut down."

"Nice, Nick. Real classy."

"What?" He raises his hands, trying for the innocent look. "There are guys out there who are only pleasuring one woman, and there are guys—like you—who aren't having sex at all. I'm doing both genders a favor by picking up the slack."

Shaking my head, I snort. "If that helps you sleep at night. Hope you are wrapping it up. No need for little Jacksons running around before you

graduate. Not to mention disease.”

“Thanks a lot for jinxing me. Next girl I see, I’ll impregnate. And I’m going to blame it on you.”

“You can blame anything you want on me. You’re the one whose life will end when Dad finds out.”

This shuts Nick down. “I’m mostly just sleeping with Josie and she’s more concerned about pregnancy than I am. I swear she’d prefer it if I wrapped twice. As it is she’s on the pill, wears a diaphragm and requires condom use.”

Josie is a senior at an all-girls Catholic school. She lives on the eighth floor. I’m sure Nick picked her because of the easy access. “Better than dating a girl who doesn’t know the first thing about birth control.”

When we get to school, I check the time. Charlotte is seven hours ahead, so right now she’s probably getting out of treatment or tutoring. We don’t have a good lock on her schedule yet. I send her a quick text.

Heading to class. If you’re learning German, get all the good curse words. And then how to say I want to lick your breasts.

As soon as I send it, I realize that this is a bad idea. I don’t want Charlotte asking anyone about sex over there. What if her tutor is a guy and thinks she’s coming on to him?

Scratch that. Just the curse words. English is fine for me. I know a lot of ways to say I want you in English.

(1/2) ROFL. My tutor is a Swiss Miss. She looks like she belongs on the package of those horrible hot chocolate drink packages that had the dried marshmallows. Remember those? Why do I love those so much?

(2/2) She's actually not teaching me anything because I'm still in the testing stage so basically she just has me reading. I'm supposed to call her Frau Kielholz but since she looks like she might only be a few years older than me she agreed I could call her Sandrine.

The bell rings. I try texting and running into the building.

"Ask her if Sandrine is hot," Nick says waving his phone at me. Charlotte is texting us both at the same time. He speeds off toward his class, and I run up the stairs for Advanced Comp. "Because Sandrine sounds sexy as fuck."

Is she hot? N wants to know

Please. It's like hot genes barfed all over here. Everyone is hot. Even the 90 year old grandmothers are hot. It's depressing. Never come here Nate. Promise me.

Promise to find no one hotter than you

Lame. Luv Ux1000

Luv U

When the noon bell rings, I lope down to the entrance, taking the stairs two, three at a time. Near the bottom, I use the railing and catapult myself past three sets of slowpokes. As I'm adjusting my backpack after the vault, I feel a shove against my shoulder. More like in my pectoral area than my shoulder. Looking down, I see the angry face of Charlotte's friend Greta.

"Whoa there. You drunk this morning?" I straighten her by her shoulders and set her out of my way. I hear the click of a camera phone. It's another girl whose name I can't ever remember. Sarah, Susan, Shelly. One of those. I

don't really care though, so I just continue to walk past them until Greta's next words stop me in my tracks. "Your girl off to get her abortion?"

Over the blood rushing to my ears, I hear my father's voice repeatedly telling me to respect the other gender, to be cognizant of my size and how it can be used to intimate without meaning to, how I should treat women in the manner I would want my mother—or Charlotte—to be treated. With his admonitions in my head, I manage to bite back the word *bitch* and say evenly, "What do you want, Greta?"

She smiles, but there's no affection there. Not for Charlotte at least. "Just kidding. I know she's having treatment. She okay?"

I wonder at their closeness if she's asking. Wouldn't she have heard from Charlotte if they were friends? I never really paid attention to Charlotte's female friends. They didn't interest me. And she has no close male friends; if any of the sausage holders tried to kiss up to her, Nick and I made short shrift of them.

"She's fine." I've had enough of the conversation. As I turn, the camera shutter sounds again. "What the fuck?"

"Sorry, Nathan," another girl mumbles and looks at the floor. *Seela*. Her name pops to the front of my memory bank. Her father is a tech venture capitalist, and Seela has all the latest gadgets including camera-embedded glasses. They aren't allowed in school, however. Reaching over, I pluck the frames off her head. Behind me I sense Nick coming up for support. As Seela attempts to grab her glasses from me, I toss them to him. He squeezes the camera apparatus between his fingers until it cracks.

"Looks like your camera is broken." Nick smirks as he hands back the lenses. "You'd think they'd be able to make those a little less fragile after all these years."

I give him a chin nod, and we take off.

"What was that all about?" Nick asks when we are driving to a nearby restaurant for lunch.

“That was about Greta being a complete asswipe. How good of friends are her and Charlotte?”

Nick shrugs. “Not real close. They were on the same competitive gymnastics squad and my guess is that their friendship is more of a frenemy thing.”

“Frenemy?”

“Yeah, like they compete but are teammates.”

I let that thought marinate for a few moments. “Charlotte asked her for condoms, so I figured they were like best friends or something.”

“Nah. Charlotte probably went to Greta because her older sister is in college.”

“Got it.”

It made sense now. Charlotte and Greta were friends of convenience. This didn’t excuse Greta, but it did explain a little why she was trying to get her digs in.

“We going to the Milhawk party this Friday?” Nick asks, done with the conversation about Greta. I am happy to let it drop as well.

“Why not? We got anything better planned?”

“Nope. Can’t drink though, so if you want to get shitfaced, I’ll drive your weak ass home.”

“Thanks for the offer,” I say dryly. Maybe I should tie one on this weekend. It’d make the time fly by a little faster.

Jason Milhawk lives in South Loop where old money and new are on display between the historic row houses and the newly furbished townhouses. Milhawk comes from old lumber baron money and lives in a row house which has seen a lot of cocktail parties but only a few ragers.

Milhawk has a fully stocked bar and game room in the basement that his parents had built and sound-proofed so he could practice with his band. Milhawk’s band is terrible, but when you’re drunk it all sounds good.

And I am really drunk. Milhawk dragged me behind the bar the minute that Nick and I got to his house, and we proceeded to see how many shots of Patron we could drink in ten minutes. A lot is the answer to that. I stopped counting after the tenth one because . . . well, I couldn't count anymore.

Nick's not allowed to drink because North Prep athletics has a zero tolerance policy. One drop and you're out and I obviously don't give a damn but for all his careless attitude, sports mean something to him. I suppose that is why he sleeps around so much. It's the only vice he's allowed that won't affect his eligibility.

If Charlotte were here, I wouldn't be downing shots either because I'd be too concerned about keeping an eye on her. But she left me and went halfway around the world to hang out with *Fraus* and *Frauleins* and people she says have been puked on by the good looks fairy. I wonder if she means guys too. A chill skitters down my spine. I've never been uncertain with Charlotte before. She's never looked at another guy with any interest . . . but she was a virgin before.

She was nearly animalistic with me before she left. After we had sex that first time, it was like a dam had broken, and she wanted me all the time. Which was great in the moment, but now I'm worried. What if she's horny and she looks to some other guy close to her to fulfill her needs? *Fuck me sideways.*

I fumble with my phone to see if I can call her. What's the time zone difference again? Would I be waking her up? What time does it say on my phone, anyway? I peer at the screen, trying to get a fix on the numbers that keep moving. Is that a ten? Is it ten? Or is it ten minutes after one?

A slim arm hooks under my arm, and little fingers curl around my biceps. For a minute I think it's Charlotte, but then the overwhelming scent of musk hits me. The obvious cologne is something Charlotte would never wear. Peering to my left, I see Greta. Something is smudged around her eyes, making her appear alarmingly like a raccoon.

“You’ve got shit under your eyes.” I make a circling gesture in the general direction of her face.

She rolls her eyes at me. “It’s eye shadow, genius.”

I grunt. Looks like raccoon eyes. “Charlotte doesn’t wear her eye shadow like that.”

Greta rolls her eyes even harder. So hard that I wonder why they don’t actually fall out of her eyes. Maybe her eye shadow is like a force field and holds them in. Hmm. I’ll have to ask Charlotte about that. I pick up my phone again, but Greta pulls my arm down.

“Nathan,” she breathes against my neck. “I’m sorry about earlier this week. I was just kidding. I know Charlotte was sick and that she’s not pregnant.”

The air is warm, and her breath smells like she just chewed five mints. There’s an almost medicinal feel to it, and it reminds me uncomfortably of the hospital. I try to move away but realize that I’m sitting on one end of the sofa with the arm against my left side and Greta plastered to my right. I shake my right arm a little to let her know that I need room. When she doesn’t move, I scowl at her.

“Even if she was pregnant, so what? Kid would be mine, and all of us would be happy.”

That’s not entirely the truth. Her mom and dad would frown. A lot. But in the end, Charlotte and me having kids is the culmination of both our families’ dreams. They’d get over it real quick. And we’re going to have kids. Not now, I mean, but later after I’m out of the Marines. We should talk about this. I tap the glass of my phone and the hazy shapes form into the numbers 1:15.

With a finger hovering over the call button, I contemplate the time difference. She might be up. Or I might wake her up. Before I can dial, though, the phone is plucked from my fingers. Greta holds it behind her.

“What the fuck?” As I reach over her body to grab it, she leans backward and I collapse on top of her, somehow falling between her open legs. Her

thighs grip my hips, and she rubs against me as I try to get my phone back. A flash of light followed by a shutter sound goes off. I turn toward the offending noise, and it's that S girl. Fuck. I can't remember her name again.

"Need some help?" Nick's there and plucks the phone from Greta's hand. Shoving off her body, I catch the phone that Nick tosses me because even drunk my hand eye coordination is sharp. Muscle memory.

Greta is remains on the sofa, her legs slightly sprawled, looking up at me beneath her eyelashes. She probably thinks she looks sexy, but instead it looks a bit grotesque. "You should cover yourself. This desperate look isn't going to get you anything but a disease."

I pocket my phone. To Nick I say, "Let's get out of here."

He nods but before we leave, he turns back to Greta. "You've got issues, girl. Better work them out, or these parties will be closed to you."

He high fives Milhawk as we exit.

"No worries about that chick," Milhawk says. "She's off the list."

"Whatever," I say. I'm more interested in talking to Charlotte than talking about one messed up girl from North Prep.

"She's trouble," Nick mutters as we walk toward the car. "Don't underestimate her."

"What could she possibly do?" I scoff.

I hate it here. I hate living in this hotel in this beautiful country surrounded by these beautiful people. When I look out my rented bedroom window I can see the Alps and clear lakes fed by melting glaciers. It's a postcard-worthy scene. And all the unadulterated, breath-stealing beauty sours my disposition even more. I *should* like it, but I don't.

I want to be home, gazing onto the fog-covered skyscrapers of the city and off into the horizon of the stormy waters of Lake Michigan. I want concrete and smog and biting cold wind, not the pastoral setting of northern Switzerland.

Everyone here seems happy, even the other sick kids. And there are kids worse off than I am. Terminal cases here for last ditch experimental therapy. Young kids whose intensive radiation and chemotherapy could stunt their growth and their brain development. What a sucky trade off.

I feel the base of my skull, the soft spot high up on the neck where the head and neck meet. There's the round plastic of my shunt. A foreign object will live inside me for as long as I have a beating heart. It's a permanent reminder that at one point, a big old grapefruit pressed against the base of my skull and screwed me up inside.

Breathing deeply, I try to count my blessings. My test results are good, and I'm only going to have to be here for six months. They don't think the radiation and chemo will need to be as aggressive, and since my brain and body have stopped developing, they don't think it will be a big problem to catch back up with everyone else and transition back into high school in the fall.

So, decent health.

My family is here. Mom's here this week and the next, and then Dad will be here. The Jacksons are going to come in May for my birthday. I'll spend the hot summer months in a cool climate.

Good weather. My family. My boys are coming.

My boys. There it is. The source of my real discontent. I flip my phone over. Seela Carr, a junior who I hardly know, had texted me a picture that appeared on my phone first thing this morning, which would have been last night Chicago time. Seela's a popular girl. Glee Club and yearbook staff, she's almost never without some recording device. Ostensibly she's always capturing North Prep's best moments, but her always present camera has also recorded painful moments. Breakups. Fights. *Cheaters*.

The picture she sent me of Nate collapsed between the legs of Greta in Jason Milhawk's basement causes me actual pain whenever I see it. Nate's clearly drunk, probably from doing shots with Milhawk. He has a glassy-eyed surprised look on his face in the picture.

Seela is only trying to stir up trouble, but I'm not sure what Greta's doing. Probably just talking to Nathan. I know, deep down, that he would never humiliate me in front of anyone else. Family is number one in his mind, and no one has ever been allowed to tease me or Nick without retribution from Nathan. But still, the image of him in someone else's arms hurts me, literally.

Every time I see it, my heart squeezes tight. Despite the fixed and glazed stare, Nathan is so beautiful. His dark hair frames his perfect face. In the

photo, he's bracing himself, and the muscles in his arms are highlighted by the harsh glare of the flash. I remember what it is like to be under him when he's in that position. There's no doubt someone pushed him over, but he was still next to Greta. I didn't even realize that they knew each other, that they were friendly.

I toss the phone aside.

"Charlotte? Shall we do maths again?"

It's Fraulein "call me Sandrine" Kielholz. She has beautiful blonde hair, not the colored stuff you see at home, but true blonde, like spun gold. She's fairly tall, and her skin is milky white. Sandrine is very curious about the U.S. and would like to come and visit, or so she tells me during each session.

"Sure." I drag myself away from the window.

"Great." She pushes a set of problems toward me. "Compare these sets and identify which are the irrational numbers. Why don't you tell me again what irrational numbers are?"

"A number that cannot be written as a fraction," I mumble.

"Good. Good." Clapping her hands, she gestures for me to get started.

As I apply myself, she starts talking about Chicago again. "Maybe you will need a tutor when you go back home. I could come and visit, yes?"

"Sure," I answer but with little enthusiasm. I'm afraid to place Sandrine and her Nordic beauty anywhere near Nathan. I never felt this way until I came here, but two weeks away from Nathan and Nick has made me nervous and homesick.

And everyone back home other than the Jackson boys seems intent on sending me picture proof of how much they don't miss me. Irrational numbers? I feel pretty irrational right now.

My phone beeps, and I want to answer it but Sandrine taps her watch. She wants me to finish so I apply myself, but considering I don't like math and don't see the point of trying to figure out what square roots are irrational and which are not, I don't get many right.

Thirty minutes later, she is pressing her lips together and looking concerned as she peruses my answers. “We will review this again, yes.”

Sandrine ends nearly every sentence with yes even when she isn’t asking a question.

“Yes,” I say.

She spends the whole morning trying to show me which square roots and cube roots are irrational, and I spend the entire time pinching myself to prevent screaming about how I think this is all ridiculous. My mother interrupts us around ten and sends Sandrine away.

“Baby, you look tired,” Mom says, smoothing my hair away. She sets a tray of tea, hot chocolate, and pastries next to my math papers. I will say that the pastries are freaking awesome here, and I’ll miss them when I go back home.

“I am. Why am I studying these things?” I whine a bit.

“It’s not so much the numbers themselves, but the processing and analyzing data that will become important.”

“No offense, Mom, but I have no desire to work at Freedom Funds and analyze numbers all day.”

Mom smiles serenely over her tea cup. “No offense taken. I’ve always thought you were more like your father in that regard. You enjoy physical things too much.”

I duck my head to hide the blush that rises at the thought of exactly what kinds of physical things I enjoy. But she’s my mom and can read my thoughts.

“Missing the Jackson boys? Or just one particular Jackson?” she asks softly.

“Both,” I answer. It’s true. I miss them both. Impulsively I ask, “Did you and Dad have many separations?”

Her face softens and her eyes look past me as if she’s picturing the two of them as young lovers. “No, this is the longest that we’ve ever been separated.

We met in biology, remember? And we saw each other every other day, and once we started dating, we were quite inseparable.” She sets down her tea and considers me for a moment. “But Noah and Grace were separated for several years. Almost six. They wrote letters to each other. They both say that they treasure those years apart as much as the time they finally were able to be together regularly.”

“Letters?”

“Yes. Noah was deployed with your Dad. Grace and Noah wrote letters and mailed them to each other.” Mom filches a croissant from the pastry plate. “I’m a bit envious. Grace has this lovely collection of hand-written notes from Noah. It’s quite romantic.”

“That’s weird. I can’t imagine Uncle Noah writing letters.”

Mom shrugs. “It’s true.” Leaning over, she smooths a hand around my cheek. “If it’s meant to be, love survives anything, even separations.”

“But you and Dad weren’t separated,” I protest. “You just said so.”

“We had our own tests,” she said. “And we passed because that’s what love is. It’s about overcoming the obstacles in your path—both the ones you erect and the ones people throw your way. But in order to do that, you have to decide whether it is worth your time and effort.”

I heave a sigh. Before I left, everything was amazing, and now I feel so insecure. “Are you telling me to grow up?” I ask, a bit disgruntled.

“Nope,” she says with a slight smile. “I kind of want you to be my baby forever. You’re growing up, even if your dad, myself, and you aren’t ready for it to happen.”

“But you are saying that if I want something, I need to work hard to keep it.”

Mom grabs my hands and squeezes tight. “Not just work hard, baby, but fight. You’ve got to fight for what you want. You fought to beat this cancer. Everything else is so easy from there.”

“Is it?” There’s a hitch in my voice I can’t hide. “Because it seems like

fighting for what you want can be really painful.”

“Anything worth having is.”

Nate doesn't text me until the early evening hours. The seven hour time difference usually means I get a text in the middle of the night, which I read in the morning, and then one when Nate gets up in the morning, which is about tea time here.

I wonder all day whether Nate will bring up the party or whether I should. Mom gives me covert stares of worry as I pick at my food at lunch. The pale light of twilight settles in before I finally get a text, only it's not Nate but his brother.

We partied late. Didn't get to sleep until three this morning. Go easy on him.

Miss you. Heard you were coming over for my birthday.

After, I think. Have baseball. When will you be back?

Aug or Sept. Things are going well.

Great. We'll have a rager when you get back. c ya soon.

Nate's texts are followed on the heels of Nick's, as if Nick told him it was safe.

Sorry I didn't text you this morning. Slept in. Epic headache.

From an epic hangover?

How'd you guess? Nick?

No. North Prep telephone ring.

***Milhawk's basement. Had to do the shots that Nick couldn't.
Keeping him on the straight and narrow.***

Sounds fun.

Three texts. No mention of the picture.

Missed you.

Me too.

Let's Skype later. What time?

I don't want to. He didn't bring up the picture. Maybe he'd been too drunk, and he didn't even know it was taken. Maybe. Whatever the excuse may be, my feelings are still hurt, and I want time to get over it. I don't want to be *that* girl—jealous and clingy and needy. Not only would Nate not like that, but I wouldn't have much respect for myself. So until I can get into the right frame of mind, I don't want to talk to him in a setting where I'm apt to blurt out some baseless accusation.

Can't. Treatment. Studies. In fact, I've got to run.

Sorry C. Should've gotten up early. Know that's the best time for you.

It's okay. Love you.

I power down my phone so I'm not tempted to read any responses.

"I'm going down to the game room," I tell my mom. She waves a pen at me. All this technology and she still marks up reports with a pen.

The hotel is adjacent to the hospital, and many of the patients and their families stay here. There are mostly two or three room suites or mini apartments along with an indoor pool, gym, and a game room for the kids.

"New girl," a voice barks when I walk into the room. The game room contains arcades, a pool table, multiple televisions with different game consoles, and, the favorite, a virtual reality room.

"You there," the voice calls again. I turn and see a boy about my age sitting in a lounge chair just outside the VR room. I haven't seen him before so *he* must be the new person.

Despite his rudeness, I stroll over because I'm one of the oldest of the under-eighteen set. Most of the kids here are younger, which makes it both bittersweet and a bit boring. Insolent or not, he's more intriguing to me than the rest of the crowd.

As I draw closer, the fine features under his beanie cap look very familiar. "Oh, wait aren't you—"

Before I can say his name, though, he cuts me off. "Yes," he says with an imperious wave for me to come forward. Like royalty, I guess he expects me to genuflect or something. "Who are you?"

I've never been this close to someone famous. There were a few times we sat in the front row of a concert at the United Center, but this guy's parents are on the cover of some magazine nearly every week. "Um, no one. I mean, Charlotte Randolph, but my parents aren't famous . . ." like yours, I finish silently. I can tell he doesn't want me to say their names out loud. Maybe no one else recognizes him here. I glance around and see that no one is paying us any attention. But if he stepped out in any U.S. mall, he'd be mobbed, and

not just because of his parents' fame but his own. His dark eyes and cut torso were part of a major label's campaign last summer. It surprises me to see him here.

"But they must have a lot of money if you are here." He narrows his eyes at me, as if squinting will bring clarity.

"I guess. My mom runs an investment fund, and my dad's in construction." I sit myself in a chair opposite him.

"So what're you here for?"

"Tumor. It's excised. I have a shunt and am undergoing chemo/radiation."

"With drugs not allowed in the U.S.?"

I nod.

"Ha, me too. Stem cell washing. Lots of drugs. And weed, of course." He pats his lap where I see a small metal container.

"Weed?"

"Yeah, don't you get any?"

I shake my head.

"Shit, your parents must be withholding from you. Poor girl. Let me know if you want some." He wiggles the box at me.

"No thanks. Did you just get here?"

"Yeah, my cancer was in remission all of a year. Isn't that grand? But now it's back, and I'm here. I thought I'd be bored but maybe not." The examination he gives me is rather insulting, but in spite of that I can see how we're going to end up spending time together. There isn't anyone else around. We're on our own desert island.

"You looked great in the ad campaign," I say lamely. "And you still look great. Really healthy." That is no lie. His face is full, and his hair is shiny. He looks ruddy and built—not the slender gauntness that marks so many of us.

"Have to bulk up between bouts. Plus steroids and human growth hormones are considered appropriate treatment." He flexes, and I see the

outline of biceps. He's not as muscular as Nathan or Nick, but I give him a smile of approval. I don't want him to feel bad. Looking good is probably very important where he lives. "What's your story? You got anyone back home?"

"Yes," I nod emphatically. "His name is Nathan. You?"

"Nah, I'll probably hook up with one of the nurses. Did my tutor the last time I was here. But maybe I'll have other options this time." This time his perusal makes me frown because I know what he's suggesting and I'm not interested. "What's your Nathan like?"

"Strong, smart. Very kind." *Wonderful but maybe not being entirely truthful with me.* I don't say the last part out loud. That's between me and Nathan, and not to be shared with this rude stranger.

"No, I mean, does he have the hero syndrome, or is he a narcissist?"

"Neither," I scowl at him.

He waves off my answer. "Don't be naive. He's either the hero because he gets off on this idea that he's saving you—like a firefighter who starts fires so he can save people—or he's a narcissist who gets off looking like a good guy by being with you."

"You have a really dismal outlook about people. Nathan isn't like that. We were friends a long time before we became a couple." I don't even know why I'm explaining myself.

"So you guys dated before you got sick?"

"No. We were friends. His father and my mother are in business together. His dad and my dad have been best friends since junior high school."

He chews on his thumb. "Did you sleep together before you were sick?"

"No." I pinken. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Then narcissist. He's boning you because it makes him appear like he's making a huge sacrifice. 'See Nathan willing to have sex with the gimp. What a hero!'"

"I'm not gimpy," I protest.

“Hey, it’s your funeral. I had a girl I dated before I got sick. She even shaved her hair in solidarity when I got the diagnosis. Everyone told her how brave she was. I was the one fucking losing my hair, but she’s the brave one. I punted her. Screwed her two best friends.” He stretches out his arm and cracks his knuckles. “Then I took her back and licked her tears of sadness. Best boner ever. Screwed her and kicked her out like the pathetic narcissist she was.”

“You’re really kind of horrible, aren’t you?” I say, feeling a bit shocked by his commentary. Then I remember seeing Internet articles about him during his first round with cancer. Many of the comments *were* that the girlfriend was so awesome for sticking by this guy as if she was doing *him* a favor. The memory chills me a bit.

“I’m a realist, sugar. And you will be too by the time you’re done with treatment.”

“So it’s a bitter party for one now?” I ask. I shift in my seat wondering if I should leave or face him down. We’re going to be thrown together because of language and age and *illness*. If I turn tail and run, he’ll needle me forever, but I’m not well equipped for this kind of fighting.

“It’s common sense, not bitterness. Who’s your tutor?”

“Sandrine Kielholz,” I say stiffly, feeling uptight and hating it as if I am horribly uncool. This famous boy has a way of making me feel awkward.

“Ah, she’s got a tight—”

I turn away abruptly. I don’t know what he’s going to say, but I’m positive it will be crude and demeaning. At that moment I don’t care if he torments me until I go back to Chicago. I’m not staying another minute.

“Wait, just wait, dammit.” He shoots up from his chair, his tin of contraband spilling onto the floor as he reaches for me. He doesn’t want me to leave, and I reluctantly turn back.

“Sit down. I won’t say another word about her. Let’s start over. Colin Matthews.” His outstretched hand hangs between us.

“Or any other girl?” I press.

“Shit, why not.”

“Charlotte Randolph.” I take his hand, but just the fingertips so he knows I don’t trust him very much. He gestures for me to sit, and I settle gingerly into the club chair opposite his. Colin’s hair is long and unruly. I wonder if he’s had it cut since it grew back. There’s a long swoop that he pushes back to reveal his mother’s famous blue eyes. “Does everyone call you Colin, or do you have a nickname you go by?”

“No, it’s Colin. Why, do you have a nickname?”

“Everyone calls me Charlotte, but my mom’s friends all call her AM.”

“Like the time?”

“No, radio. Like AM/FM radio.”

“That’s weird.” He pulls out a pack of spearmint gum from his pocket and offers me one. It’s a peace offering I guess.

“Mom says it’s a life marker. High school people know her as AnnMarie, but her best friend started calling her AM for short and it stuck in college, so you know how long people have known her by what they call her.” I’ve always thought that was neat. Daddy calls her Sunshine sometimes, but I don’t share that with Colin.

“I’m going to make up a nickname for you.”

“I don’t think so.” Nicknames are for friends. I don’t see Colin as my friend.

“You’ll like the nickname I give you.” He smirks. I can’t even imagine what horrible thing he’d come up with. Colin is a weird mix of arrogance and uncertainty. I’m intrigued against my better judgment. Nate would probably despise him though.

“Is this your second time here?”

He holds up three fingers.

“Three times?”

“I want to get better. I guess I’d take anything at this point.” I’m way

underweight, which is part of the reason I'm here. His glowing health makes me envious.

"I figure I'll die before I'm eighteen. I want to live as much as possible until then."

I don't know his situation, so I don't give out the reassuring platitudes that adults reflexively offer. Maybe he will die before the age of eighteen. Sometimes I think you know. That there's a place inside you that holds the truth of your future, but only the brave or stupid or hopeless look. I'm none of those things . . . yet. "You'd think with all these advancements they could make some elixir that would make us completely healthy in an instant."

Colin leans back and stares at the ceiling. "There's always a catch. Like if you took the elixir, you wouldn't be able to ever have sex again or it you'd take 25 years off your life at the end of it. No one lives without paying a price for it."

Greta has taken to texting me repeatedly, telling me she's so sorry about last night and how she was drunk and it was all an accident. At first, I agreed it was an accident, but the more that she keeps assuring me that it was—the more that she fucking will not leave me alone—makes me wonder about her motivations. Nick told me to watch out, and maybe I need to pay closer attention.

I haven't said a word to Charlotte about the picture, and I regret it. I should have brought it up first thing and that I haven't makes me look like I'm lying to her—at least by omission. But what am I going to say?

Hey, your weird friend fell on top of me, and someone else took a picture. It's nothing?

That sounds like I am trying to concoct a cover up as well.

The photo's already being passed around. It has been sent to me by about four different people.

“What'd Charlotte say about the picture?” Nick asks. I told him I wasn't interested in another party, so we're playing a video game.

“I didn't tell her,” I admit.

He glares at me and then closes his eyes. “You're determined to fuck this

up, aren't you?"

"Shut up," I snap back. The whole thing is giving me a headache the size of Lake Michigan. "It's no big deal. I'll talk to her in the morning." If I stay up late enough, I can catch her when she wakes up, and I'll explain everything. Greta's weirdness. The photo setup. Everything.

"Just remember that it's not just your relationship that will get screwed. It's my friendship. It's our families' connections."

"Yeah, I got it." The steel in my voice sinks in, and Nick stops hassling me. But he's not wrong. If I hurt Charlotte, I hurt all of us.

I stay up until two in the morning so I can catch Charlotte right after she wakes. Nick has fallen asleep behind me, the game controller still clutched in his hand. He's dead to the world. I switched over to a movie, but I'm not really seeing the super soldiers fighting the aliens. I'm thinking about everything. My future. Charlotte's health. Where we are all going in a year or two years. I'm having uncharacteristic second thoughts. I never have doubts. Doubts are for people still trying to figure it all out.

I'm not saying that I know it all, but I know myself. I want to join the military, do something worthwhile. I want to be with Charlotte. I want to have a family. I want us all to be healthy and safe forever. Kind of in that order. Otherwise, I'm just a dudebro getting drunk, hanging out, and leeching off my old man. Thanks but no. Of course part of not being *that* guy is making sure you aren't crushing your girl's self-esteem by ignoring that there are somewhat questionable pics being sent to everyone the two of you know.

Said old man would be all over my ass about talking to Charlotte about this issue right away, just like Nick was. I get up and head to my room, abandoning Nick to the company of the infomercials flickering silently on the television screen.

"Hey baby," I say when she picks up on my first ring.

"Nathan." My name surfs out on a tide of relief and gratitude which

makes me feel doubly the asshole. I'm responsible for making her feel insecure by not addressing the weird things that Greta has been doing.

"I completely screwed up," I start. "I want—"

"You'll never guess who's here," she interrupts. Without waiting for a response, she hurries on, "Colin Matthews."

"Huh?" I don't know any Colin Matthews.

"You know. The son of the actress and the baseball player? He had cancer and then was in remission, but I guess not anymore because he's here. It's his third time. They're doing some kind of experimental drug therapy on him that's not allowed in the U.S. yet."

I rub my forehead as I digest this information. "Okay, that's interesting." Not really, other than the fact that some Hollywood asshole is far closer to my Charlotte than I am. That's actually not okay at all. I bite back a few choice words that would likely place me in the dickhole category. Words like "Don't fucking talk to him again" and "Does he know you belong to me?"

She blithely ignores my lack of enthusiasm. "When I saw him in the common room last night, I was so surprised. But he wasn't very nice to me."

My emotions swing wildly the other direction. This douche was being mean to my Charlotte? "Sounds like I'm going to have to come over and teach him a lesson in manners."

She snorts. "He's got cancer. You can't beat up anyone who has cancer."

"Oh yeah?" I challenge. "Is there some book that says that? Is that in your medical handbook?"

That draws out a full-fledged laugh, one that comes from her belly not her throat. She likes when I joke about her illness because it's more normal for both of us, according to her. "Yes, it's number five, right after 'All your hair falls out.' But his hair looks great. I was really impressed. I guess because guy hair grows back so fast, and it doesn't need to be long. Nick's hair grew out right away."

My eyelid is twitching. She likes his hair? Thinks it's great? I can't even

remember what I was supposed to say when I first called because the whole time we've been talking it's been about this asshole from California. And she's bringing up the fact that Nick shaved his head when she was diagnosed but not me?

"I thought you didn't want me to shave my head," I say, hardly concealing my disgruntlement.

"What? Of course I didn't," she says. "I was just complaining. My hair makes me look five. Do I look five to you?"

She cares what she looks like? "I wouldn't have slept with you if you looked five." I know that was a mistake before the last words leave my mouth.

She sucks in her breath and then to my utter relief, laughs again.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"No, it just sounded funny. Like, I hope you wouldn't sleep with five-year-olds." She giggles again and then sighs. "I miss you."

God, how weak am I that I need her to say those words to me? *I miss you*. And with that, equilibrium is reestablished. I settle into bed. "How much?"

"So so so much. Like I wish I was there right now and we were holding hands."

"That's all?" I ask softly. There would be a lot more than just hand holding I'd do if Charlotte were here.

"Um, and other stuff."

I can almost hear her blushing. Hating to ruin the moment, the reason why I called resurfaces. "About Greta . . ." I begin.

"She's being weird, isn't she?" Charlotte interrupts. "I think she has a crush on you or Nick or both."

"Weird isn't the right word. Stalkerish maybe? I don't really know, but I can't say I like it."

"It's okay. Or rather, while I don't like it, I know it's not your fault. It just

made me feel . . . embarrassed and even a little insecure.”

Her voice has gotten soft and small. Is it distance that feeds those feelings? I feel it too, but I’m worried about how she’s going to take the news that I’m leaving after school to go right into Basic. That particular piece of information isn’t ready for consumption I decide. “You don’t ever have to be insecure about us, baby. I love you.”

Her initial response is a huff of laughter. “I love you, too.”

“We okay then?”

“Yes. Totally okay.”

I feel good after our phone call. We Skype a few times later that week, and while Colin’s name is mentioned quite a bit, it’s generally referencing how he’s managed to piss her off again. We have a good laugh about how he struck out with her tutor, Sandrine, and how I’ve managed to avoid Greta. She stopped texting me after I didn’t respond.

By Friday, everything is back to normal between us, which is why I don’t hesitate to say yes when Nick asks me if we should hit Juliette Waite’s party at her parent’s house in the North Shore. Juliette Waite is a North Prep graduate. She attends Northwestern and is well known for initiating the young men in our crowd into the pleasures of the female body. A lot of us have learned how to make a girl scream based on lessons taught by Juliette.

She’s an icon in North Prep history. I had my own time with Juliette when I was fourteen and she was sixteen. Good times. Of course, what goes on in Juliette Waite’s bedroom stays there. That’s the code, and weirdly we’ve all kept it. But her parties are legendary.

Not going never occurs to me. Charlotte is grumpy when she hears it’s that time of year during a Skype session.

“I can’t believe I’m missing Juliette’s party.” She wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Instead I’ll end up eating popcorn watching episodes of Space Patrol 2050.”

“I thought you hated science fiction,” I say absently. My phone is

blowing up with people asking where Nick and I are.

“My T. Rex arms aren’t long enough to grab the remote from Colin’s hands and that’s all *he* likes. But maybe Mom and I will do something. At least I won’t spend the whole night with you glaring at me.”

“I didn’t glare at you,” I protest. “I was making sure none of the assholes made a play for you. What was Bo thinking, letting you out of the house with that bikini on? I spent the whole night reminding everyone you had just turned fifteen.”

She smirks. “Got your attention, did it?”

“So you did wear it to piss me off,” I exclaim. I knew it. Last year Charlotte had stripped off her demure bell-shaped knit dress to reveal a white bikini with gold rings holding the various tiny triangular pieces of cloth together. When she spun around on her wedge heels and announced she was thirsty, nearly every male there surged toward her. “You could have started a riot.”

“I bought it for you,” she says with a naughty smile. “I’d overheard you telling Nick during one of our boating trips that you loved white bikinis.”

This makes me raise my eyebrows. “Really? I don’t remember having a preference.” But I do now. In fact, I think I still have a picture of Charlotte in said bikini. I scroll through my phone and find it. Mmmhmm. I know what I’ll be looking at later tonight.

“Stay away from the white bikinis tonight,” she says, but I’m not paying much attention because a photo of one of the lacrosse players losing control of a beer bong and getting a facial from the excess beer was just shared on the school forum. I show it to Charlotte.

“You’re obviously very occupied,” she sighs.

“No, sorry.” Hurriedly I put the phone face-down, but she’s waving her hand at me.

“Go on. I’m super tired anyway. Mom would kill me if she knew I stayed up this late to Skype with you.”

We exchange I love yous, and then it takes an impatient Nick and I about forty-five minutes to head out of the city. We have to park about a half mile away because a crap-ton of cars have arrived before us. Thankfully Nick doesn't say a word about our late start, only asks how Charlotte is.

"Good. Spending a lot of time with the douchebag Colin."

"I looked him up."

"And?"

"You don't have anything to worry about."

"Why would I worry about him?"

Nick throws his hands up. "No reason."

Since we're nearly at the door of Waite's house, I don't pursue this any further. Charlotte doesn't like Colin. She's forced to spend time with him. There's no reason at all that I have to worry about the two of them.

Inside the house there are wall-to-wall people. Thankfully Nick and I can muscle our way past the crowd. It only takes a couple of people to drop away before a path is cleared for us.

Juliette is sitting on the patio in a lounge with several sycophants around her. She languidly raises her hand in greeting. "The Jackson boys are here. I suppose we can now start the party."

A few of the guys look older—college aged—and they glare at us, but Nick and I are solidly built. We could take them. In fact, it might be kind of fun. I haven't had a brawl for a long time. It's not like I'm beating on someone weaker than me. I step back and allow my arms to hang loosely at my side. Nick steps to the side to provide spacing and adopts a similar stance.

Three of Juliette's subjects get to their feet, their Greek letters straining across their drug-assisted chests.

"'Boys' is right," says the one in the middle. He must be the leader. The music continues to play, but the energy on the patio has changed. There's a charge in the air, and everyone out here senses it.

"I've got the guy in the middle," I say softly to Nick. "You take the guy

on the right. The one on the left looks like he'll flail around searching for a partner."

"Got it." He nods.

The leader charges me, and I spare a glance to Juliette. Her eyes are sparkling with excitement. Yeah, she knew exactly what she was doing inviting these meatheads here. She probably talked up the fact that we were high schoolers, and these frat guys showed up to teach us a thing or two. Good luck.

I meet their leader in the middle, about five feet from Juliette's lounge, and he swings at me. It's an obvious that is meant to lay me out with one punch, but I can tell by the wide sweep of his right arm as it moves toward me that he's never fought before. Or if he has, it's been with people as inept as he is. His primary move seems to be the right jaw punch, only it doesn't land. I step sideways, and he stumbles between Nick and me.

Nick grins at me but has to turn back to his smaller, but more experienced, opponent. I watch as Nick swerves to avoid a combination and then counters with an open-palm slap to the face. It's a complete insult, and his opponent draws back to blink in surprise while everyone around them giggles. I shake my head. One of these days Nick's arrogance will be the end of him, but not today. The slap spurs his opponent to charge, and Nick allows himself to be pushed back into a table.

I'm prevented from watching more when my guy comes roaring back. He's watched too many mixed martial arts fights on television because this time he tries an elbow to the forehead. It's not a bad move as an elbow can have a greater impact on a target than a fist. But it has to land to do any damage. I duck, hook his elbow and draw him close until we're flush together. Then I press my other hand on the low of his back and pretend for a moment we're dancing. This draws a roar from the crowd and a fevered look of rage from my opponent.

"Don't like dancing?" I mock. Spittle is starting to form at the sides of his

mouth. “You really picked a mouthbreather this time, Juliette.”

I push him away before he slobbers all over me. Yeah, okay. I’m as arrogant as Nick. The leader motions to the third guy, who has been watching us, and they both rush me. One of them gets a lucky fist to the side of my jaw, and I feel another fist in my gut. The adrenaline is flooding me, and since I’ve not had sex in weeks, this feels almost as good.

The third player is about six inches shorter than I am. He must have gotten the body shot in. He needs to go down first. I duck to avoid a punch from the big guy and then turn my body toward the third player. Two knees into the rib cage have him folding in half. I finish him with an elbow strike to the temple since he’s lower than me, and he crumples to the ground.

The leader steps back, bounces around on his heels, and rolls his shoulder like we’re in some cage match.

“You toying with your prey?” I hear Nick say. He must have sent his opponent to a sweet sleep. “Dad wouldn’t approve.”

“Nah, but he’d think this was sweet,” I answer. Opening up my stance, I rise to the balls of my feet and, in one swift roundhouse kick, strike the asshole in the temple with my right leg. Shock widens his eyes before the lights go out in his brain, and he falls backward onto the ground. No one catches him. In fact, everyone moved out of the way.

A silence falls and then cheers erupt, probably from North Prep kids. Juliette hasn’t moved an inch from her lounge, although I see a few blood spatters on the cushion.

“Very nice,” she says.

“I’m guessing you didn’t tell them that your high school friends were sons of a professional fighter?” I swipe the back of my hand across my mouth, but there’s no blood there. It must not be mine. A quick check of Nick reveals he’s fine too.

She presses a finger to the center of her lips. “Hmm. I may have forgotten to mention that. Now which one of you victors is going to celebrate with me

tonight?”

“That’d be me,” Nick says, bending over and scooping Juliette into his arms. I drop into the now vacated lounge chair, and someone shoves a beer bottle into my empty hand. This has the makings of an epic party. I place an arm behind my head and prepare to be entertained.

The video makes me sick. Literally. I watch it once and then a second time before running to the bathroom to puke up my fruit and yogurt breakfast. I shouldn't watch it again, but I can't help it. I return to the computer with a sore throat and the taste of acid in my mouth. The freeze-framed image on the still video is of Nate sprawled out on a bed with Greta and another girl I don't know on top of him.

His jeans are down around his thighs, and his shirt is off. There's a white substance painted on his chest, and I think it must be whipped cream by the bottle in the unknown blonde girl's hand. Nate's head is positioned away from me. I can't see his eyes. I want to see them. I want to know what he's thinking at that point. Did he even remember I exist?

The tears come now. Or maybe they've been flowing the whole time, and I'm just now feeling them. The salt and the acid mix in bitter harmony inside my mouth. I guess that's what heartbreak tastes like.

I press play one more time and watch the whole three-minute video. It's dark, and the recording is shaky. I don't know who's holding the camera. By the sounds of the harsh breathing and the barking laugh, I know it's a man. Not Nick though. He comes in later.

For now it's just Greta. She climbs onto Nate's prone body, straddling him. She's holding his hand as he reaches up to cup her breast over her shirt, and then she seems to help him remove her shirt.

"Fuck yeah." It's the camera man urging her on. Greta's actions spur the other girl to climb on the bed, and she takes off her shirt and then her bra. She sprays her tits with whipped cream and leans over to offer one decorated tip to Nate. His face is turned away, but she when rises, the whipped cream is smeared. Bile threatens again. I press my thumb against my inner wrist, a technique I learned in treatment, to make it subside. It works about a quarter of the time, and I still feel sickness sitting at the base of my throat. I force myself to watch the rest.

"Come over and give me a taste," the cameraman orders. Greta flicks him off, but the other girl obeys. The camera dips to the floor, and I hear the moans and pants of what sounds like a hundred people. I dash the tears away because they're blurring my vision.

"You're fucking up," Greta hisses. There's no action on the screen. Instead there's a blurry blot, like the guy has pressed his camera phone to the back of the girl he's snacking on.

"Fuck you," he drawls but then rights the camera.

When Greta and Nate come back into view, she's got her skirt rucked to her waist, and she's hovering over Nate's face, a leg on either side of him. "Don't get my face in it," she orders.

"Whatever, bitch," the camera guy mutters but positions the camera so it's just Greta from the neck down.

"Marie, come over and get some," Greta says.

Marie, the other girl, goes over and takes up Greta's old position, straddling Nate around his crotch. His boxers are still on, but that means nothing. Greta rearranges herself so that she's facing Marie, and she pulls Marie's shoulders until the two girls are almost touching each other. Nate is motionless this entire time, except when his hands creep up to stroke Marie's

legs and knees lightly once or twice before falling away.

Nothing that is going on in this video fits the Nathan I know. Nothing.

“I want to see fucking tongue, ladies,” the camera guy says gleefully. “Pinch those titties.”

“Shut up and film, asshole,” Greta snaps. And he does. The camera is readjusted to cut off the heads of the girls, and then there’s a full minute of gyrations and moaning and the wet sounds of sucking.

My head pounds, and the skin around my face is stretched so tight it hurts to keep my eyes open. I press my lips together tightly to keep the whimpers in, but oh my god the pain in my chest is like a knife wound. It hurts worse than all the times I’ve had to stab myself with a needle to administer my daily cocktail of drugs. We first do this under the supervision of a nurse and then left to do it ourselves because when we’re home and we have to do it, no nurse will be there. It hurts worse than post-surgery, after they split my brain open to remove the tumor.

It hurts so bad that I wish the tumor had taken me because at least then I wouldn’t have to see this. Oh Nate, why?

At the end, Nick bursts through the door. He shouts something, the camera is knocked to the floor, and the video cuts off. But it’s too late at that point for Nick to save me because it’s already been captured.

“Charlotte, baby?”

It’s Daddy. He’s here with me this week. I slam the laptop lid down and wipe away the tears as best I can. I’m tempted to tell him, to climb into his lap and bawl my eyes out, but I’m afraid if I do, he’ll take the first plane back to Chicago and beat Nate bloody. And while I want to see Nate suffer, I know that telling Daddy about this will ruin everything. It won’t be the Jacksons and Randolphs together as a unit anymore. There’ll be a rift, and I don’t know if anything would be able to heal it.

I’m not going to be the one that destroys everything good in life. I’ll leave that to Nate.

“Yeah, Daddy?” I answer.

“You okay? I thought I heard you getting sick in the bathroom.” The bedroom door is shut, and he won’t come in because mom had a long talk with him about the importance of me having privacy now that I am older.

“Yup,” I say as cheerfully as possible. I get up and grab a few tissues. My face is blotchy, and my eyes are red. Mom would know I was crying for sure. Daddy? I’ll tell him that I watched a video about kittens being rescued.

“You been crying, baby?” he asks with concern when I open the door.

“Just watching a kitten video.” I wipe my eyes. “I can’t stand to see those animals hurt.”

“Oh honey, I know.” He pulls me into his arms and I rest my head against his broad chest. There’s no place safer in the world than your dad’s embrace, I think. I allow him to hold me for a long time, until the warmth of his love seeps into my bones and chases away a little of the chill. But the images from the video play out in my mind on an endless loop. I need to occupy my mind with something else.

“I’m going down to the commons to watch television,” I say, pulling away.

He tucks a finger under my chin and lifts my head to search my face for clues. “All right then. You go down, and when you’re ready to talk about what had you crying your eyes out in your room, I’ll be right here.”

He doesn’t believe it’s kittens. My lip quivers and the whole story is on the verge of spilling out, but I manage to give him a weak smile. “Okay.”

He kisses me on the top of my head. “You and your momma. You’re the most important things in my life. You remember that, baby.”

I nod because if I open my mouth I’ll start bawling, and I’m just not ready to cry again.

Down in the commons room I find two young kids watching cartoons in French. It’s mindless entertainment and just what I need. I’m so engrossed in trying to translate the idioms that I don’t even notice Colin is sitting next to

me until he lets out a laugh at the mouse grabbing the cheese from a trap before the cat can catch him.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Long enough to wonder what your asshole boyfriend did.” He pops a nut into his mouth and then shakes the bowl toward me in offering.

I turn him down. I may never eat again. “Why do you ask that?”

“You have the look.”

I remember then how his girlfriend cheated on him when he was sick the first time around. Hotness prickles at the backs of my eyes, but I clench my jaw hard to keep the tears in. Last thing I want to do is cry in front of him.

“I guess you’d know,” I retort.

Instead of being offended, Colin just shakes his head in amusement. “I don’t understand how you’re so soft, Charlotte. You gotta build up your defenses, or you’ll just be a rug by the time he’s done with you. Flattened out and matted down.”

“He’s not like that.” The protest comes automatically.

“Right. Because good guys always cause their girls to look like they’ve been to a funeral. You’re at a crossroads here. You can either forgive him, which will teach him he can treat you like shit time and again, or you can get revenge.”

“Those are my only two options?”

“The only good ones. So what’s it going to be?”

And then he places his hand palm up between us.

His smooth palm, pink and white, almost babyish sits between us like the apple in the Garden of Eden. And part of me is tempted. Colin is clever and sneaky and vengeful. He probably has a whole book on how to mete out retribution. But what would be the point?

“No.” I shake my head. “Hurting him won’t make me feel better. And I don’t want to contemplate exactly how I’m supposed to exact revenge. Sleep with you?”

“If that’s how you want to play it.” He gives me a fake leer.

“What happens? We videotape it and send it to him?” I shudder. “No thanks and no offense, that’s not my thing.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” he responds lightly. But despite his smug words, his eyes show a hint of relief. I don’t think that is *his* thing either. “Is that what they did? Send you a video?”

I nod and push my hands through my short hair in utter frustration. “I don’t get it. I can’t believe he’d do this to me. You know, he never dated North Prep girls before.”

“How come?” He’s genuinely curious.

“His brother says you don’t shit where you eat.”

He purses his lips together and nods slowly. “Makes sense. The brother live by that rule too?”

This makes me laugh. “No, Nick sleeps with everyone. That way no one’s feelings are hurt.”

“Damn, that’s smooth.”

We share a grin as I briefly forget what is sitting on my computer, but my memory loss isn’t long lasting. The scene nags at me. The whole setup doesn’t feel right. Nate having sex at a party. Nate sleeping with a girl from North Prep. Nate videotaping this. Nate cheating on me. None of it makes sense.

“And with Greta. He doesn’t even like her.”

“Hate to tell you this, but if he cheated on you by having sex with a girl he a) doesn’t have to like her and b) that’s not dating.”

“But his girlfriends have all been either older, like college, or from other schools. Like Jefferson West or something.” I try to understand.

“Miss C, he’s not dating. It’s not his girlfriend. It’s a hookup. A shag. A *fuck*.” He emphasizes the last graphic word as if I don’t know what the meaning is.

“I know.” I whimper, and then I can’t stop crying which embarrasses me

to no end. I shove my palms hard against my eyes as if the pressure can stop the river of tears, but they keep coming.

“Oh fuck. I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.” He dabs his sleeve on my face. “Shit, please just stop crying.”

“I’m sorry,” I blubber. “I’m trying.”

He stands up abruptly. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I ask. His swift change of subject jerks me out of my self pitying episode.

“I’m watching this stupid video.” He marches out of the room and I trail behind. We take the elevator up in silence and are down the hall in no time.

“I heard the elevator,” Dad explains as he opens the door.

“Hey Mr. Charlotte’s Dad.” Colin offers his hand and Dad shakes it, his eyebrows raised.

“Don’t worry. I’m a eunuch. The radiation kills my equipment. We’re going to watch a movie,” Colin lies.

Dad frowns, his gaze drifting south briefly, and then jerks his eyes back up to Colin’s. Clearing his throat, Dad gruffly directs us to my room and wanders off.

“Is that really true?” I whisper as we scurry into my room.

“Nah, I made that up so he wouldn’t stand there with the door open. I’m guessing you don’t want him to see this.”

No, I do not want my dad to see the video. Colin sits down at my desk, acting as if he owns the place. Flipping open the cover, he watches the video as I lay on the bed with a pillow over my head. He watches it a couple of times without sound and twice more with sound. The pillow does nothing to mute the voices or the moans.

“Shit, this guy is totally passed out. You kill Greta’s cat or something?” he says.

I bolt upright, the pillow still clutched in my hands. “What do you mean?”

“This, what’s his name, Nate? He’s not even moving.” Colin gestures with disgust toward the screen.

“He moved his hand all over her breast,” I argue.

“No, she held his hand against her tits.” He says these words slowly as if I’m too dumb to comprehend, and maybe he’s right. I lean forward as he explains, “He isn’t moving even once. And if a guy’s got two hot chicks grinding their pussies all over him and he ain’t moving, guy is dead or passed out.”

“Why would they do this?” I argue. I want to believe him, but I’m afraid.

“Revenge. What’d you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I cry. “I’ve been here. And before I was sick Nate and I didn’t even date.”

“So it’s him. Did he do something to one of them?”

“I don’t even know the guy or the girl. Just Greta and . . .” I stop. “He mentioned to me that he’d had a run-in with her, but I wasn’t there at the time so I don’t really know what went down.”

“Meh. This isn’t even good porn.” Colin kicks out his legs and folds his hands behind his head. He’s officially over the video.

“Thank God.” I guess I can be done too. Although I’m still feeling hollow inside. I don’t know if it’s relief or the remnants of fear. I know I won’t be whole again until I talk to Nate.

“What? We can’t be friends without having watched porn together.”

“You watch porn with all your friends?” I give him a skeptical look.

“Not the guys, ‘cause that would be weird.”

“I’m not watching porn with you.”

“You are such a killjoy, Miss C.”

I do not want to talk about porn with Colin, but I recognize his act. He’s trying to make light of something to make me feel better, which is actually kind of nice, porn references notwithstanding. “What do you think I should do?”

“About this?” He jerks his head toward the computer. I nod. “Call your boy. Tell him you love him and get back at Greta.”

“Why are you being nice to me?”

“Eh, why not? Being an asshole to you takes effort. You’re too nice. It’s like kicking a kitten.”

“There was a compliment in there somewhere.”

Colin rises and stretches and then ambles over to give me a kiss on the top of my forehead. “It is. Wish I had a girl like you, Miss C. I’ll see you tomorrow. Let me know how it goes.”

I ring Nathan almost before Colin has left. He doesn’t answer.

I hang up and dial again. It would be early evening there. It rings several times.

I get on the computer, but he’s not available on Skype.

I text him.

Love you babe. Miss you.

Nothing back.

I text Nick next.

Hey, miss you. Hope to be home soon. What’s happening?

He responds immediately.

Miss you too. You shouldn’t have left. We’re a mess without you.

I haven’t heard from Nate. He okay?

There’s a long pause.

Yeah. Why?

I decide to confess.

Got the video.

Shit. He did not cheat on you. He was totally out of his head. They drugged him.

Colin was right.

Greta?

Yeah and this guy from Northwestern that Juliette Waite brought. She set us up so we'd fight them then bc the asswipe got his pants kicked, he decided to get back at Nate. N would never do this to you.

No, I know. I figured it out. But I texted him and called him.

I don't mention that I needed help.

He's sick. He'll call you promise.

Okay. Tell him I love him. Give him a kiss for me.

Yeah, not doing that. But love you too. Take care of yourself. Hurry back.

And with that, a little of my hollow parts are filled out.

“
Are you sure?”

I nod, refusing to look up. Dad exhales heavily. He’s frustrated with me and casts a beseeching expression of help toward my mother. He wants me to say it out loud, but my mouth is sealed shut. I’m afraid of what will come out if I open it. But she’s not going to convince me to change my mind. The sadness and fucking pity on her face are the exact reasons I’m sure of my decision.

“You’re going to miss Switzerland.” He makes a last ditch effort to change my mind. What he doesn’t get is that he’s barking up the wrong tree, chasing the wrong ball—whatever wrong metaphor there is, he’s doing it.

“You mean Charlotte.”

There. I’ve said her name. Acknowledged her existence. The piercing agony that slices through me as the vowels and consonants reverberate through my head is less this time than the last. I’ll keep saying it until I can’t feel anything any longer. Not pain, humiliation, shame, or even . . . love. I just want to stop feeling.

Because if I went to Switzerland and the first thing I saw on Charlotte’s face was the expression my mom is currently wearing I’d . . . well, it

wouldn't be good.

We sit there in silence, waiting. I'm waiting to be dismissed. Dad's waiting me to say something, anything. I'm hollow inside. I retched out every ounce of liquid in me earlier today when I woke up nearly bare-assed in my bed with only vague memories of what happened the night before.

I dry heaved for half an hour after Nick anxiously recited how he found me in a room on the third floor of Juliette's house starring in my very own personal porno.

After I kicked Nick out, I sat in shock and horror watching the video while texts from Charlotte came in, first cheerful and then worried. After my continued silence came the calls and the unplayed voicemails.

The sounds echoed in the bathroom, and I turned the volume off to shut out the barf-inducing fake porno sighs from the two girls in the video. One of the girls I hadn't ever seen before. She's kissing me, or at least her face is on top of mine. I look dead. My mouth was slack, and my eyes were closed. Greta was grinding on top of me. It looked like they were fucking a corpse. Nick swears we weren't fucking. That it was all for show. I don't even care at this point. What I know is that someone took something precious from me: Charlotte's trust.

What could I say to her? No matter how many times everyone says it wasn't my fault, I know that isn't true. I could have made different choices. Like staying home and not going to Juliette's. Or walking away when the fuckhead challenged me. Or paying more attention to Nick's warnings about Greta.

"You're not at fault," Dad says gently, as if he can read my mind. Maybe he can. And if that's true, it's just another reason to get away. I don't want to be where everyone knows me and can tell every little thing I'm thinking. Where everyone looks at me with pity. "You're the victim."

I fucking hate that word. I'm over six feet tall. Over two hundred pounds. "I'm no victim," I bite out.

Mom sucks back a sob, which tears at me. I should have protected all of us. That's my job. But I let everyone down, and now I'm weak and used up. Worse, the guys at school are acting as if I'm some kind of fucking hero. The texts they'd sent? All congratulatory with a whiff of jealousy. No, no one would believe that I'd been done wrong, no matter that I was drugged. No matter that I didn't want it.

Man, you got some at JW's. Major props.

We're not worthy!

Shit man. 2 at 1 time. Your getting your bucket list done!

Charlotte would have made me text back "It's *you're*, you dumbass." I didn't respond to any of them.

No one is going to believe that I was forced to do something against my will. No one would believe I was . . . I can't even say the word in my own head.

Dad sighs again. "Okay, hoss. You're going to have to come to your own conclusions. But let me repeat my words. You didn't do anything wrong. Not by going to the party. Not by fighting some asshole. Not by drinking. No one deserves what happened to you. Not a female and not a male. With time, you'll come to that realization too. I called Gray. He's expecting you at the beach house, where you'll spend time with Sam and him and the kids."

I open my mouth to protest, but Dad gives me the *I'm talking* look. "Only for a week. No arguments or you don't get to enlist early and you'll have to cool your heels here until your eighteen."

It's a compromise I can live with. "We done?"

At his nod, I rise and walk toward the door. As I'm leaving, he says, "I'm proud of you. Proud that you're my eldest. You're a good boy, Nathan, and

you'll be a good man. Don't listen to the rest of the shit that's swirling around your head. We love you."

He draws my stiff body into a hug, and I'm tempted to lean into him like I'm a child again, but right now, I don't deserve it. Mom is next.

"You think you see pity in my eyes, but it's not. It's anger. You can be angry too. You have the right to be angry about what happened but don't hold that inside you. Let it out. We love you so much, honey." She clutches me tight.

I squeeze her back because, shit, I can't help it. She's my mom. But the hug is all I can give.

Nick comes in while I'm packing. "Charlotte texted me. Said she was having problems connecting."

Unspoken is the question of when I'm going to call her. "Yeah, I just . . ." I run a hand through my hair. "You gotta take care of her now, Nick."

His return gaze is somber, and he allows me to leave without another word.

Dear Nate,

I'm sorry you weren't here for the birthday party. We had ice cream cake, and the restaurant served limoncello which Dad encouraged me to drink. It was so awful! I hated it, and everyone at the table laughed including our waiter who brought it. Dad says that all liquor is that awful and I should stay away. It's like he thinks I've never snuck sips of his brandy with you. ;)

Your mom gave me a writing set, which is why you are getting this handwritten letter. It's beautiful paper, isn't it? I already ruined about ten pages trying to write in a straight line. How do people write without lines? This time I'm using a ruler, and it's working out better.

Anyway, she said that your dad and her used to write letters when he was in the Marines. Isn't that cool? I can't see your dad writing love letters. He gave me a weird look the other day, asking if he had some leftover dinner on

his nose, which he didn't. But I couldn't stop staring at him because you know he seems so imposing and, well, not a little uptight at times. Don't get me wrong. I totally adore Uncle Noah, but Daddy is so much more easy-going, and I could totally see him writing my mom corny love letters. When I asked Daddy if he wrote to Mom, he said no. That he couldn't bear to be away from her long enough to write a letter. That and he didn't know Mom while he was in the military.

Your dad told me that you are joining up, though, because you want to be a Navy SEAL, which seems both awesome and dangerous at the same time. I wish you would have told me, but I guess I understand why you didn't. I probably would have begged you not to go and because I was sick or whatever, you might have changed your plans. I didn't realize what a selfish girl I've been! It's so easy to get caught up in my own problems like the stupid things about losing your hair or your eyebrows! Who needs eyebrows???! No one, right? They are like . . . the appendix. Unnecessary things. My new resolution in life is to stop worrying about stupid things. I'm going to save my energy and worry about big things like . . . when am I going to see you again? I miss you so much.

Is it selfish of me to say that? I hope not. Because I tried not to say it, but it spilled out here at the end, and now that I'm almost done, I don't have the will to try to write another version tonight. I know that I'll just end up saying the same thing. I can't keep it inside.

I love you and miss you, but I'm trying to understand that our lives are both changing and that you just need a little space. I get that. Okay, I don't really get that, but I'm trying to. I'm including a picture that Colin took of the family. I should be going home in three months.

I hope you'll be home then. Your dad wasn't sure of your schedule. Let me know, though, so I can keep sending you these letters. Wow, this pen is really awesome. Your mom picks out great stuff.

Love and miss you a thousand times,

Charlotte

Dear Nate,

It's been weird being back at North Prep. I feel like I don't even know anyone here anymore—that I'm disconnected with it all. If it weren't for Nick, I think I would ask my parents if I could go somewhere else. You may have heard that Greta transferred before the fall semester started. She originally enrolled at St. James Academy, but I guess word had gotten out about what happened with you and she had to drop out. The last I knew she was going to public school. No one here talks about it anymore. There's new scandals, like the substitute chemistry teacher who got caught having sex with Alison Morrissey. Do you remember her? Really quiet girl? Long, curly auburn hair? Her hair was gorgeous, and apparently the chem teacher couldn't keep his hands off her.

He's getting prosecuted. Poor Alison claims she loves him. It's a pretty big mess. Speaking of messes, everyone is upset with Nick and me because we ruined prom. Some girl—I don't know who as she hasn't fessed up to it—nominated Nick for prom king. He threatened to quit the team if anyone voted for him. There were several write-ins, but his threat was effective enough to see that he came in a distant third. He wanted me to go with him, but I didn't

feel up to it, so he decided to stay home. Word got around that he wasn't going and half the team ended up at your place, which made all the folks at the dance furious.

Somehow this is my fault, of course, rather than Nick's. He tries to solve this problem by glaring at everyone, which only makes matters worse. I seriously cannot wait for school to be done. This probably sounds stupid and dumb to you as you're traipsing across the jungle or wherever you are currently, but that's the boring stuff that's going on at home.

*Love and miss you,
Charlotte*

Dear Nate,

Is paper in such scarce supply that you had to rip off the bottom of my letter to write your little message? I don't even know if it counts as a letter. "Fuck em, keep writing" barely exceeds the length of your greeting. I think in the days of the telegraph, people exchanged longer dispatches. I'm sending you this book of letters between John Quincy Adams and his wife Abigail so that you have a better idea of what a real letter looks like. You could send me a message over the web, you know. Even a picture. We could Skype even. I know. I know. That's an irrational suggestion because in this day and age of technology, where there's virtual reality eyewear on every street corner, why would we ever try something like that out.

Your mom told me that when she and your dad wrote to each other they pledged only to write letters rather than send electronic messages. At the last Sunday dinner, I asked her what they wrote about, and she said the weather and that your dad complained about how hot it was. Your dad smirked and said that it was always very hot around your mom. Nick gagged, and your dad playfully cuffed him. It's adorable that your parents are still so in love with each other. I want that, though. I want what your parents have and what my parents have, don't you?

Nick and I got in a huge fight the other day. He got a full ride scholarship to Notre Dame for football, which I'm sure you already know. When I told him I hadn't even applied and I'm not going to, he totally lost it. He'd said that I ruined it. It being all of his plans. I've decided not to go to college. It's just not for me. I'm barely eking by right now, and it's taking everything I've got. I don't even want to think about how horrible college would be when I'd have to read a thousand pages a night and then be able to spit it out the next day in some coherent fashion. And then there'd be the students who read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky for fun! I had to look up how to spell those names, by the way.

I'm going to stick close to home. I tried to explain to Nick that even if I had applied, I wouldn't have gotten in. And did he think we would just room together? He'd have to live with the football players, and I'd live in my tiny apartment surrounded by people smarter than me. I'm tired of being around people who are all smarter than me.

He came around. Did he tell you we've been playing video games together? It's good therapy for my hand/eye coordination, according to the docs. One of these days I'm going to beat his ass. If you were here, you would be impressed. I miss you. I wish you were here. Write me longer letters next time.

*Love you,
Charlotte*

Dear Nate,

I'm sorry I asked for longer letters. I didn't realize it was going to make you stop writing at all. I've enclosed a full sheet of paper for you in case you don't have any of your own. Now that Nick is gone, it's so quiet around here. Your mom and dad drive over for every home game. I've taken to going with them because it's like a tomb at home. I think we should get a dog or something.

I got a job. Dad said that I could work for him, so I started as an assistant to his assistant. He's really disorganized. Mom says that my scatterbrained behavior comes less from the radiation and mostly from genetics. My day consists of getting up, going to his office trailer, and filing. I had no idea there was so much paperwork when it came to building things. I can safely say that I'll be looking for another job soon. I've never been so bored. Ever.

Nick is loving college, but we are both worried about you. He said he hasn't heard from you in months. And while that is disturbing, it also made me feel good because at least I know that you weren't just ignoring me. I'm still waiting for you, just like I promised.

*Miss you a thousand times more than the last letter,
Charlotte*

Dear Nate,

I've come to the conclusion that letter writing is cathartic. It's the only rational reason I keep writing despite the fact that you never respond. Did the paper I sent you get destroyed? You'd better not be writing anyone else on my paper. Ha ha ha! Just kidding. Actually I'm not kidding. What are you doing with my paper? You certainly aren't sending it to me.

I don't mean to be nagging or negative, but what is going on? I feel like I'm writing into the void.

Speaking of void, I've been filling my time with community college. Mom said if I was bored doing filing that I should learn a trade. I'm enrolled in City College downtown, and I confess that I kind of love it. I'm not sure what I want to do, so I'm taking a bunch of weird courses, trying a little of everything. I took a welding course which was pretty neat. This one guy, Paul, is like an artist. His welds are so perfect and hardly need any grinding, which is like sanding with the metal disc. He helped me with my own poor technique.

We got to go to a job site and Paul stuck with me the entire time, making

sure no one tried anything funny and helping me perfect my welds. I told him that I wasn't interested in welding as a career, but it fit him perfectly. I introduced him to Dad to see if there were any jobs for Paul after he was done with his apprenticeship and classes.

I think you'd like Paul. He's a straight-up, no bullshit kind of guy. I asked him what it meant when a guy told you he loved you, promised to love you forever, and then took off without ever saying goodbye. Paul said that the guy wasn't interested any longer and didn't know how to tell me. Or was a coward. But I know you aren't a coward. You're fearless. He doesn't know you like I do.

More likely you are busy, doing something dangerous, and you just can't write back. Right? I can't even begin to tell you how much I miss you.

Write back. Please.

*Love your loneliest girl,
Charlotte*

Dear Nate,

OMG really? You can't write me one letter in return, but you sic poor Nick on me? He came driving down from Notre Dame in one day because he had to check out some asshole named Paul. I cannot believe you. Seriously. Paul is married with two kids and a gorgeous wife. He's also like ten years older than me.

I'm not even in welding anymore. I told you that I was trying out a bunch of different classes. Just FYI, I'm taking floral design and my instructor Neil is fucking amazing.

*Love,
Charlotte*

PS: Don't you dare send Nick again. He's not your errand boy.

Dear Nate,

That's all you're going to write? I don't even know what you are "sorry" about. Sorry that you don't write to me? Sorry that you can't bring yourself to break it off? Sorry that I'm too dumb and too stubborn to give up on us?

I was out with my co-workers from the vet clinic and my supervisor, Emma, kept asking me why I never dated anyone. I guess I had too many beers because I spilled the whole story about us. About how we grew up together and that after I was diagnosed with the tumor, you told me that you loved me. You made me promise that it would always be "only you."

Emma said that I was a fool and I was wasting the best years of my life. You will be happy to know the other girls at the table said if a Navy SEAL really could hold his breath for like ten minutes straight, I should at least give you one chance to make me see heaven before I got rid of you for good. There are so many people that keep telling me that I'm too dumb for words to be spending my evenings writing letters to you when I get nothing in return.

I'd like to say that they don't know you like I know you, but honestly? I don't know if I do know you anymore. It's been years, Nate, and in all that time, I've only received a handful of responses from you. I still love you, but I need you. I need you to tell me you love me too.

Love,

Charlotte

Dear Nate,

I'm sorry I was so pissy in my last few letters. I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me. I just miss you so so much.

Love you,

Charlotte

Dear Nate,

I think this is going to be my last letter to you. I can't take it anymore. The years of your absence are literally killing my heart. I feel myself being diminished every day. I kept hoping, thinking that if I just gave you time, you'd come back to me like you promised. "It will always be Nathan and Charlotte," you told me once. I held on to that for years now, but as each week, month, year has passed, I've come to the conclusion that I'm the only one who still believes in that concept anymore.

These things on my letter aren't tears. They are splotches made by this soda can — oh, what the hell. Of course they are my tears. I've shed what seems like a million of them. Seeing you at the rare holiday and never being able to touch you. Hardly ever getting a response from you, despite the fact that I've written my damn hand off. All of those things eat away at me as if tiny insects are nibbling at my skin, sucking my blood until one day I will wake up a hollow shell.

And I don't get it. I see the longing in your eyes. I know that look because I see it every day in my mirror, but you keep rejecting me, pushing me away. I can't take it any longer. When I had to have my shunt replaced, I know that was you in the room. I felt you. You were gone when I woke up, but I didn't need to ask my parents or yours who sat with me through the night. I SMELLED YOU even in my sleep. Yet you left. Why did you never even speak to me once? Why haven't I felt the touch of your hand or the press of your lips against me? I don't have the answers to these questions, and they haunt me. You, our love, our past is haunting me.

My friends say that it's completely unhealthy for me to be hung up on you. I think even Nick has given up hope that you'll ever come around. He's not even apologizing or explaining things away anymore. Like "Nate's on a mission" or "He talks about you all the time" or "Just give him space."

I've waited so long for you. And for what? To be given what reward? To turn twenty-two and not have you around? It's been six years! Six. I'm so

dried up, I don't even remember what it feels like to interact with other guys. I've turned away men in the prime of my dating life because I believed in the words "It will always be Nathan and Charlotte."

I'm just done, Nate. Done.

I love you. I will always love you, but for my sake and probably for yours too, I have got to move on.

Yours,

Charlotte

PART TWO

I t's been three years since I received Charlotte's last letter. It was the first letter she didn't sign with love. The paper is crumpled from my reflexive anger when I first received it. It was anger directed at myself. But it's also worn due to the many times I've read it and re-read it. I know it by heart. I know all her letters by heart. I've written her back a thousand times in my head, but only a few words have ever made it to the page. I couldn't describe to her what I felt like in those early days. How much I hated myself. Greta. Women. Everything.

I trace the splotches, her tears, like a morbid tic-tac-toe. I've started so many letters to her and wanted to kiss her so many times. It was fucking awful to see her and not touch her. As she grew older and more beautiful, each visit home was more painful than the torture they did in Special Forces to prepare us for capture. So I went home less and less, until I just stopped going home altogether.

I stayed away, telling myself it was better for her to find someone else. That she'd be happier. That the whole "Nathan and Charlotte" thing was a child's dream. I thought that she'd give up over time, but she never did. She held on so long. And the longer she held on—the more amazing she showed

herself to be—the more I realized I didn’t deserve her, no matter how much I wanted her.

It’s been nearly two years since I last saw her in person. Mom and Dad and Nick have learned that if they want to see me, they come to me because I can’t go back to Chicago.

I pull up her profile on my phone. It’s still the first entry. Every new phone I’ve ever gotten, I’ve punched in her number first and added her picture. I’ve got recent ones that Nick furtively sends me. They are still good friends, maybe even best friends, but Charlotte would be so angry if she knew that 99 percent of the pictures of Nick takes of the two of them are for my eyes.

“Who’s the hottie, Monk?”

Some new recruit peers over my shoulder at Charlotte’s smiling face. I turn the phone screen face down and give him a glare that has new seamen crying in their boots.

“Don’t even look at her. He’ll kick your ass,” calls Bride. He’s a teammate of mine. I can’t wait until we get off this fucking ship. Most of the time we fly in and out of these carriers, but right now we’re cooling our heels, waiting on orders to see whether we’ll be going in to rescue some rich guy and his wife who were kidnapped in the Mediterranean.

“She looks like she’s worth an ass kicking or five.”

“Move the fuck along,” I bark.

The seaman hesitates, but when I start to rise from my seat, he scuttles off.

I shouldn’t call her, but I can’t help it. Not after the last mission. Not after the journalist we’d rescued looked me in the eye and said that bravery was living, not pretending to live. Not after spending another evening reading through all of her letters. I have a lot of apologies to make, a lot of fences to mend. I have a lot to make up for, but after spending nine years running, I’m ready finally ready to face her and tell her that I still believe in Nathan and

Charlotte.

With a deep breath, I press send and the phone rings once, then twice.

“Hello?” A man’s voice. A sleepy man’s voice is answering Charlotte’s phone in the middle of the fucking day.

“Is Charlotte there?” I bite out.

There’s a rustling and then the sleepy voice says, “Charlie, someone’s on the phone for you.”

Charlie? This guy, who’s sleeping close to her phone, has a fucking nickname for her? It takes superhuman effort not to crush the phone in my hand.

“Who is it?” I’d recognize her voice in hell. I feel like I’m already headed there.

“Dunno.”

“Oh my god, is it two already? I need to go. Where’s my shirt? Reese? Don’t go back to sleep. Help me find my shirt!”

The phone must lie forgotten on the . . . bed? Bile rises in my throat.

“I can’t go without my shirt. Get out of bed, you bum, and help me find it.”

“Here it is. It was under the bed. I must have tossed it there last night.”

“Can you do up my skirt in the back? I can never get that hook. I think my hands are broken from all the rubbing you made me do last night.”

I hang up before I can hear another word. Dropping the phone to the table, I take deep, gulping breaths to corral my burgeoning rage, but concentrated breathing isn’t doing a thing for me. With a roar, I shoot to my feet and grab the side of my table. With one heave, I flip it over. Plates go flying, and the guys on the other side look shocked and pissed off, but I don’t give a goddamn. I start throwing around chairs, benches, anything I can get my hands on. People are shouting and running, but I’m in full Hulk mode now. Destroy. Destroy. Destroy. Four hands grab at me, two at each arm, and they drag me backward out of the room. It’s Bride and another teammate,

Cabby.

“Whoever she is, she’s not worth it,” Bride says as we clear the door. They drag me all the way to the head and shove me into the shower. I get in a punch on one of them before the cold water hits my head and the shock of it snaps me out of my rage-fueled mania.

“Not worth it,” Bride repeats.

“No pussy ever is,” Cabby agrees.

As the water drips down my face into the tiny drain, I lean back against the hard metal wall. Regret swarms me like locusts, and I stare at the two of them who look back at me with concern and disbelief. Rubbing that left area of my chest where my heart once resided, I tell them the shitty truth. “She was, and I fucked it up.”

I pull on the T-shirt Reece threw to me and ask, “Okay, how do I look? Slutty bartender?”

“Not really. More, I slept too late and I’m too lazy to do anything about it.”

“Thanks. That’s really nice, Reece.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “That’s what girlfriends are for. Who was it on the phone?”

I look. Unknown caller.

“Must’ve been a telemarketer.”

“What time do you have to be at Stack’s?” Reese asks me, pushing up from the sofa where we’d both fallen asleep. We were up all night massaging the belly of his pregnant horse. Reese’s family ranches the same land his great grandfather settled on just after the first World War. Reese loves his family and his horses but hates ranching. He’s currently my right hand man and one of my best friends, but currently I’m cursing him because my fingers are stiff and sore and I’m going to be late.

“I’m opening it up. Lainey has a pediatric check up with Cassidy at four. It’s the only time they could fit her in. I’m wondering whether I’ll even be

able to grip a glass.” I raise my hands and flex my fingers, wincing at the ache.

“You look like you’re auditioning for Cat Woman,” Reese jokes. “Or doing jazz hands.” His fingers waggle obscenely at me.

“No, thanks.”

“You should take that cool drink of water home with you tonight,” he advises, lying back on the sofa. Obviously he has no plans to get up.

“Who’s that?” I ask absently, checking to see that I have everything I need. Keys, credit card, ID. Bag full of notebooks. Phone.

“The head bartender. Martin? Maxwell? Mysterious Man?”

“You mean Michael?”

“Yeah, him.” Reese growls low in appreciation.

“Michael is . . .” I pause because I’ve never really noticed Michael. I have a vague memory of someone dark haired and tall.

“Tall, built, hot. Did I mention built? Did you not see him at the flag football game last week? We were sitting right next to each other!” Reese is completely affronted.

“There were a lot of nice chests on display,” I say weakly. I remember the flag football game, or at least I remember going to the park with Reese and Lainey, but I was making out my schedule for this week.

“It’s all those professional athletes, you know,” he accuses. “You’ve become numb to ripped bodies. You think everyone has them.”

“I don’t,” I protest. But maybe he is right. There’s no shortage of sculpted abs and amazing physiques in my circle. Maybe I have become desensitized to them.

“Get out of my sight,” he says, throwing a pillow at my head. “I can’t be around someone who doesn’t drool over a good man chest.”

“I promise to work on my drooling. I’ll even try to sexually harass Michael during work. In the meantime,” I throw the pillow back, “will you please double check my schedule and plane tickets? I’ve got a million and ten

things to do when I get to San Diego tomorrow.”

“I liked you better when you were a romantic!” Reese calls out after me. “When you cried at soda commercials and tampon ads.”

It’s not until after the door closes that I answer him. “I didn’t,” I say to the empty stairwell.

When I was a girl I used to think writing letters, for example, was super romantic. But after years of writing and receiving almost no response, years of waiting only to be left alone time and again, I woke up finally and realized that romanticism is simply a cover used to conceal decay and sickness.

Men cheat on their girlfriends. Girlfriends cheat on their boyfriends. At least some guys know that they can’t be in a relationship because they’re too busy sampling every type of woman, as if God created the female in a buffet form just for their pleasure.

It’s not that I don’t believe in love. I just don’t believe it’s for me. I had my one great chance at love, but when it was exposed to a few harsh conditions, it collapsed like a shitty ass umbrella in the Windy City.

I believe in friendships like the ones I have with Nick and Reese and Lainey. I believe in the love of my parents. God knows they’d do anything for me. I believe in long walks in the park, the surprise pleasure of a warm summer rain, the rotation of the spiral pass, and the glory of the no hitter. I believe in a lot of things, but I don’t believe in love.

When I arrive at Stack’s, the doors are propped open. The summer heat is baking into the concrete, loosening the odor of the Las Colinas streets. For a swanky neighborhood in Dallas, sometimes the smell of progress stinks.

“Why do you have the doors open?” I ask Lainey, my other best friend and current manager of Stack’s.

“Smelled like someone died in here last night,” she explains.

“It’s awful out there.”

“Was worse in here.”

Seeing that I’m not going to win this battle, I stick my purse under the bar

and tie my apron on. “Should I cut the limes first?”

She nods and checks her watch. “I’m going to be in back counting bottles. When Michael comes in, tell him to record the opening bank and then he can come back and finish up inventory.”

“I’ve got this covered.” I shoo her toward the door. “You go on and get Cassidy to her appointment.”

“Seems like it was only yesterday you plopped down here asking me about all the good places around the Mustang’s training facility, and now you’re telling me what to do,” she replies with a wry smile.

“A good bar owner knows everything,” I say affectionately.

Looking around, I take in the wide oak-paneled walls, circular wooden tables, and cheap stage that have been my home away from home for three years and sigh. Maybe I’m still a teensy bit romantic because this rundown joint looks beautiful to me. When I came here three years ago, I was heartsore and trying to find myself. Here I found Lainey, a bar waitress with one kid, a bad boyfriend, and a big heart. And Reese, a man child looking for love in every conceivable wrong place but still smiling no matter how many times the guy of his dreams turned out to be a cheating bastard.

I’d started a business and found comfort in new friends and a good career. On most days, this is good enough.

When Nick got drafted by the Mustangs, I came with him to ensure the transition from college to pros went as smoothly as possible. I bought groceries for him, made sure his clothes were cleaned, paid his bills, and generally made it so all he had to do was concentrate on football. Oh, and women. He had plenty of time for women. I was the buffer between him and everyone who wanted something from him. Every rookie he came into contact with envied him.

When he won the Super Bowl his second year out, my little business expanded from one player to ten. And in the past year, it has grown from ten players to twenty-nine, and I’ve had to leave the bar to keep up with demand.

After Lainey's job was threatened by the old manager because she'd had an emergency at home, Nick, Reese and I bought this bar—although Nick is a silent partner because Lainey and him don't get along.

Forget Me Not, or F'Me as my players like to call it, now aids the transitions of professional athletes in nearly every major city and for every major sport as they are drafted or traded. Each athlete is handled by one person.

I find them places to live close to the training facility along with restaurants, grocery stores, schools, nannies, dry cleaning, and churches. And I take care of all the details back home—getting a house sold, making sure all the bills are taken care of, finding that lucky pair of shoes that was left behind. All the player has to do is pick up his bag and leave. I—or one of my employees—take care of all the details.

And because I am scatter-brained I have to write things down. I have written lists, electronic lists, and a master list of my lists. When it was just me managing my small herd of players, I kept track of them by assigning them to a single notebook, color coded according to their new team colors. Reese is my admin because he likes a job without responsibility, or so he says. Even Lainey pitches in from time to time when she can. If there's an emergency or something falls through the cracks, one of the three of us take care of it.

And tomorrow I'm flying out to San Diego to patch one of those cracks. A baseball player, Christian Glass, has just been traded from the Royals to the San Diego Commandants. This is his second trade in two years, and his family is anxious and unhappy. I promised Christian I'd come out personally and help with the transition.

This is a big deal for me, even though Christian doesn't know it, because I never, ever go to San Diego. That's where Nate is stationed, part of the West Coast SEAL teams. Despite San Diego being a huge city, I always worry about seeing him in some random place—like a shopping center or a bar or a grocery store. In every scenario he has his arm draped around a

woman and I know if I ever see that, whatever is left of my childhood will be crushed. As I told him in my last letter, I will always love him.

I just don't want to.

The tension hits me the minute I walk into the suite that Christian's family is currently staying in. Despite the hefty per night price tag, this place is too small for Christian, Peyton, and their two year old. I make a note to move housing up to the top of the list. Ideally their child should have stayed behind while I looked for the right property and Christian met with his new team.

I'm not sure whose idea it was to have the whole family here, but no one is happy making the large three room upper-story suite feel like a stifling linen closet. My eyes slide from the scowl-lined face of Christian to the tense one of Peyton. Only Peyton even attempts to smile at me when I arrive.

"How is sweet Christie doing today?" I ask as I advance toward the sofa and scoop up their beautiful baby girl into my arms. I rub my nose against her soft skin, enjoying the pats of her tiny hands against my cheek.

"Fine, despite the ungodly flight. I don't understand why they didn't send the team plane for us," Peyton says with a dark look.

"Babe, I couldn't ask for that."

"You asked for the trade," she shoots back. "Maybe think about your family next time."

I settle onto the sofa next to Peyton. "Hey, Peyton. I'm here. I'm going to

take care of everything. You will love it here. The beach and the sand will be awesome for Christie. And the Commandants are a great family organization. You know Shelly Hoffman, too, so it's not like everyone here is a stranger."

Some of her anger is deflating. "I haven't talked to Shelly in forever," she admits.

"I'm sure she understands." Why wouldn't she? Being the significant other of an athlete is its own special club—harrowing, exciting, but with a lot of emotional baggage.

"Thanks, Charlie." She gives me a hug. We play with the baby for a little while longer until Peyton takes her off to have a mid-morning snack in one of the other rooms, giving me time and privacy to talk to Christian.

"It's a mess," he admits when we sit down at the table. "Get us out of here ASAP. And go to Tiffany's. This is something Pey Pey has been wanting for a while now. I was going to buy it for her birthday but. . ." he trails off. He's worried that she won't be around for her birthday. A bracelet isn't going to convince her not to leave, but I'm not a couple's counselor. I am an errand girl though. I take a photo of the diamond and gold bracelet he has on his phone. "Do your magic."

"I will. You concentrate on making this trade worthwhile." We run over a few broad ideas of what he wants in a home and a nanny, and then I dismiss him to get into the details with Peyton. Having facilitated their move two years ago on the opposite coast, I'm able to show her three properties I've already bookmarked online as recommendations when she returns from feeding baby Christie.

"I'm thinking Rancho Santa Fe. You'll be living next to other athletes, bankers, and even the occasional movie star. There's not a lot of racial diversity, but it's better than it was, say, ten years ago."

Peyton presses her lips together. "I'm having my mother move up. She wouldn't have liked Baltimore, but San Diego would be okay."

"See," I nudge her slightly. "This isn't so bad. I'm sure Christian was

thinking of you when he asked for the trade.”

When she gives me a *don't bullshit me* glare, I raise my eyebrows and move on. We both know Christian thinks of his career first and his family second, but I do think he loves Peyton. They've been together five years, which, for athletes, is like thirty in real-life terms. After contacting a real estate agent as well as giving Peyton instructions to two different parks and an indoor play area that she can take Christie to, I head over to the Fashion Valley Mall and the nearest Tiffany store.

When I get there, I pause to peruse the small black box displays of necklaces and watches for gifts for my family. I haven't seen Mom and Dad in months, what with my business taking off. I need to get back to Chicago. I talk to them once a week, but it's not the same. A delicate necklace with a citrine oval unfaceted gemstone with tiny delicate gold leaves curling around the edges catches my eye. It has my mom written all over it, and the price tag is one that even I can afford without dipping into my trust. Just beyond the black display block mounted on a thin steel pole, my gaze is arrested by a tall, broad-shouldered man leaning over a counter. As he straightens and his dark, military short hair comes into view, my heart skips a beat.

No, Charlotte. It is not Nathan. Not every tall, dark-haired male in San Diego is Nathan.

But I can't tear my eyes away. I will him to look at me. The sales assistant is pulling out a tray and setting it in front of him. He lifts a shiny object from the tray and holds it up, turning slightly so that the light catches it. And I see it. And then *him*. The drumbeat in my ears is so loud it's as if the percussion section of the entire band is standing right next to me. My breath is becoming shallow and harsh, but I can't wrench my eyes away. I eat up this glimpse of him. My eyes hungrily rove over his lovely face, the strong nose and square jaw and full lips that are pursed slightly. His head cocks to the side, as if he's trying to peer around the window display . . . at me? I duck to the side, pressing up against the gray granite exterior that frames the glass

windows. Numerous mall shoppers walk by, probably staring at the strange girl plastered flat against the wall unmoving. Minutes pass, but I can't leave. Nor can I go inside.

"Miss? Miss? Miss? Lady!"

The last word filters through my muddled brain, and I look up to see a police officer and a mall security guard standing in front of me. Their hands are on their hips, close to their weapons, and they appear confused and unhappy.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I'm just leaving." The security guard follows me all the way to the parking lot. When I climb into my rented Honda Fit, though, I'm still too shaky to drive off. Instead, I fumble in my purse and grab my phone. The second speed dial button is Nick.

His voicemail message kicks in almost immediately. *Can't answer the phone. Text me because I don't listen to messages.*

Ignoring his instruction, I babble a message. "I'm in San Diego. I saw Nate at Tiffany's. He was buying a ring. Or looking at one. Is he getting married? Is he really getting married, and no one told me?"

Hanging up before Nick hears me sob on the message that he might never listen to, I start the car and drive back to my hotel. I could call Aunt Grace, his mother. I could call *my* mother. Both would know the truth about Nate's relationship status. Unless . . . unless this is some woman he's kept secret, and he's going to marry her and spring her on us the next time we all get together as a family.

Finally, I break down and call Reese. "I need you to come here," I say without preamble.

"You having problems with Christian?"

Oh god, Christian and Peyton. The bracelet I'm supposed to buy to soften the trade is still unpurchased, and the whole to-do list for them sits untouched in my purse. Sitting up, I fumble for my bag and find the little orange notebook that I've picked out for Christian. Opening it up, I glance unseeing

down the list. I can't concentrate. Throwing the book across the room, I say, "No. Not yet. That's not important. I saw *him*."

"Who? Christian? You're supposed to see him. He's your client."

"No, Reese. Pay attention. Nate. He was in Tiffany's looking at diamond rings." I start crying, sobbing really. "He's getting married."

"Back up the horse, honey, what happened? Start with why you are even at Tiffany's."

Hiccupping, I try to get myself under control. "I had to go to buy a bracelet for Peyton. She's pissed about the trade. Christian was trying to buy his way back into her good graces. When I glanced in the window, I saw him. He was staring at a tray of engagement rings."

"You don't know that," Reese says. "He could have been buying something for his mom—like a cocktail ring or something. Why do you think it was an engagement ring?"

"He was holding one up as if he was trying to decide if it was big enough."

"She's probably a huge bitch, and they'll be divorced within the year." Reese tries to comfort me.

"Maybe." But what if I run into them during my time in San Diego? He'll be all smiles and wanting to introduce me to her. She is probably tall and really, really gorgeous. Like a Nordic goddess. I need a barrier, something or . . . *someone* to deflect some of that pain. "Come here. Be my boyfriend," I beg.

"Oh, honey. You know I don't swing that way."

"No, I mean, come to San Diego and do this job with me. That way, if I run into him and his fiancé—" I almost gag at the word "—I can smile and say, here's my super hot boyfriend Reese. Nice to meet you."

I hear rustling and then a zipper being pulled. "Okay, I'm packing. I'm not posing as your boyfriend though. That never works because, according to all the books I've read, you'll fall in love with me and then I'll have to break

your heart.” I start laughing just as Reese intended. “But I am flying out on the first plane because I love you and you’re my best friend. At the very least we can stalk him and find out exactly who this wench is, and then you’ll be all prepared for a random meet and greet. How hot is it there?”

“Really hot,” I answer. Drawers are being opened and shut as Reese selects his Southern California wardrobe.

“How many guys you been with since him?” he asks suddenly. I can’t answer, but he reads the silence perfectly. “Charlie. No.”

Defensively, I say, “I dated.”

“You’ve been separated for how long?”

“Nine years,” I mumble.

“Nine fucking years?” He yells into the phone. “You haven’t played hide the sausage in nine years? Charlie, I’m so disappointed!”

“I’ve done other stuff,” I stammer. “I tried but whenever it came down to it, I couldn’t do it. I felt like I was cheating on him.”

“No wonder you are hung up on this guy. I’m packing right now. We are going down to the Gaslamp District, and you are going to get laid. Dr. Reese prescribes at least three one night stands. Then we can think about a nice guy that you will date for a period of six months or so before moving on.”

“Why *three* one night stands?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“It takes at least two to actually enjoy it.” A zipping sound signals he’s done packing. “You are a grown-ass woman, but you’re still stuck on your high school sweetheart because you don’t know what kind of sex you can have with a man. Let me tell you that being with a guy who actually knows his way around a body is a hell of a lot different than a teenager. Plus, older guys have more stamina and are just way more damn creative.”

Telling Reese that I thought Nate was pretty amazing as a seventeen-year-old would only result in more lectures about boys versus men, so I keep my mouth shut.

Reese sighs. “Repeat after me: I’m a grown-ass woman.”

When I don't immediately parrot his sentence back, he barks, "Say it, Charlotte."

"I'm a grown-ass woman."

"I'm a grown-ass woman, and I deserve to have an adult relationship."

"I'm a grown-ass woman, and I deserve to have an adult relationship," I repeat obediently. "What's the point of the one night stands?"

"Shock to your system. It's like a cleanse. You need to flush the bad toxins out of your system and put new, good ones in."

"Isn't a cleanse like fasting, which I've done for, oh, nine years?" I point out.

"Unfortunately for you, the cleanse has gone on for so long, that you've been revirginized. A one night stand or three will wake you up to the possibilities. Shit, you've enshrined this guy for so long. You're going to need three one night stands because the first guy who even breathes on your lady parts is going to set you off."

"Okay, that image is kind of gross, particularly coming from you."

"I've got more where that comes from. Prepare yourself," he sings into the phone before he hangs up.

Reese's irreverent attitude is just what I need. Picking up the discarded notebook, I start in on the list of to-dos. My business has saved me these last few years. Letting myself fail at this is not an option.

The operation to rescue the wealthy American couple is green lighted. It's almost a relief to concentrate on something else other than Charlie and that soon-to-be dead motherfucker Reese. In fact, as we practice our extraction moves over and over, there isn't room to think of anything other than where I'll be, the positioning of my teammates, when we'll take the shot, and how we'll infiltrate the ship to rescue the hostages.

This wasn't going to be like the mission we undertook six months ago trying to rescue a journalist. After we'd failed, the journalist had been moved and it took another ninety days to find her again. One of my teammates lost his mind during that time period. He'd tormented himself every day, every hour that ticked by.

One day he'd turned to me and said, "You lost someone. I get it now."

"I haven't lost anyone," I'd answered because everyone I loved was alive. Charlotte didn't talk to me anymore, but she was alive.

He looked confused. "Then why do you look like I feel?"

"How's that?"

"Like I'm dead inside. Like losing that girl killed whatever I had in here." He thumped his chest.

The pain in his eyes was so strong I wanted to look away, but he was my teammate. He deserved to have my attention.

“Yeah, okay, I lost my girl only she’s still alive.”

“She cheat on you? Find a Jody back home?”

Jody’s the nickname we give every guy who fucks the women that stay while the men are off risking their asses for God and country. I shake my head. “No. I . . . I let her go.”

He looked away swiftly, but not before I saw the contempt in his eyes. “Never thought you were a coward, Monk. A fool, maybe. But not a coward.”

When I got back, I pulled out Charlotte’s letters. I read them the entire night and when dawn lit up the sky, I’d known that he was right. I’d been a coward for far too long, and I had to do something about it.

All too soon the op is over, and we are riding in the helo back to land where we’ll catch a flight on the oh-so-comfortable C5 Galaxy back to San Diego.

While everyone else around me is sacked out like good little seamen, lying on a crate or propped up against a pallet using their rucksacks as pillows, I can’t sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I see my Charlotte being molested by some asshole named Reese. When I got back to land, I was going to need a leave of absence. Three or four days are all I would need to find out everything about this Reese dude and destroy him. Then I’d . . . my plans fell apart there. Mostly I thought I’d pick up Charlotte, shove her in my rental, and bring her back to San Diego with me. I’d put her in my bed and wouldn’t let her leave until she admitted she still loved me.

Lieutenant Daniel Sykes, the CO of my SEAL Team Nine, must notice my agitation because he gets up from his cozy bed of wood, metal, and rough cloth to come sit next to me. “When I was a Petty Officer Second Class, my girlfriend who I’d dated since the ninth grade broke up with me because she was in love with her lab partner, Darryl. Maybe his name was Dennis. I

decided that Dennis could go to hell and that Alyson was missing me. So I fly home after a two month mission and head straight for her apartment. Alyson was entertaining the asshole. There was some shouting. Some tears. I punched him out. And if it wasn't for the fact that she had some feeling left for me, old Dennis might have called the police and then my CO would be called and I'd have gotten kicked off the teams."

"LT, you know I'm not going to do anything that would dishonor the teams," I assure him. I knew how to play this game. We'd gotten into plenty of trouble off base in the past, but so long as no local law enforcement had to be called, it was all good. My destruction of Reese would be silent and deadly. The law enforcement wouldn't even know I was in town.

"I'm merely saying I recognize that look on your face. Probably every one of us has worn it at one time or another. Don't let your heart lead you into trouble. I'd hate for you to end up having a black mark on what has otherwise been a stellar career. You given any thought to OTS? You'd be a good mustang."

Mustangs were guys who went to Officer Training School and made the jump from enlisted to officer. As an officer you got paid more and you had more responsibility. I don't really care for either. I like being enlisted. It's where work gets done, not that I don't admire the shit out of LT Sykes, but I don't want to deal with his headaches either.

Plus, enlisted men are more fun to hang around, and even though rank is pretty fluid on the teams, when we're out of the theatre and back at base, there are definite lines of separation.

"I'll think about it, sir," I hedge, but LT has known me long enough and is smart enough to read my hesitation.

"You do that." He stands. "And get some sleep. That's an order."

I force myself to sleep by mentally assembling and reassembling my gun and then pointing it. I wake up to Petty Officer Second Class Tom Cheung describing his next door neighbor. "Girl is so stacked I don't know how she is

able to walk upright.”

“You offer to help her like a gentleman, right?” laughs Senior Chief Michael “Cabby” Hale.

“Course I do. I say, ‘Miss Emily, why don’t you take my arm and press your precious titties against my biceps while I walk you to your car?’”

“That’s real courtly of you, Bride.” Everyone calls Cheung Bride because one night, he somehow got his sheet tucked into his shorts, and it trailed behind him like a goddamned train on a wedding gown.

“She let you stick your face in those tatas?” Ensign Ryan Alison pipes up. Alison’s so new he squeaks when he walks. He’s eager to please and desperately wants to fit in, but he’s replacing a guy that we all really liked who’d bitten it on a fucked-up training mission. None of us hold it against Alison, but even he knows that immediate acceptance isn’t going to come.

“Ensign Alison, this is a delicate mission. A man only gets a few chances in his life to see a rack this spectacular. I’m not going to rush it.”

“You’ve been gone for two months,” Cab interjects. “She’s probably moved.”

“Am I a SEAL?” Bride asks. It’s a rhetorical question. “Do I not know how to plan, execute said plan, and then achieve my objective?”

“I thought I was in charge of planning,” LT says wryly, and we all laugh when Bride flicks him off.

“What’re you doing when you get back, Cab?” Bride asks

“I’m going to see if the sweet honey over in Oceanside still has room in her bed for me. Her going away blow job was stellar. I need to measure it against her welcome home one.”

“And if the going away one is better?” Ensign Alison asks.

“Shit, sir, then I’ll get a going away one, which I’ve already told you was spec-fucking-tacular. I’ll get gone with a smile on my face. Even a bad blow job is just fine.”

“What about you, Jackson?” Alison asks.

“I’m going to propose,” I say. It pops out, but it sounds right. To everyone else, it’s so surprising there’s silence for once. Everyone gapes at me as the thump of the engine beats loudly against the metal sides.

“Shit, didn’t even know you were dating anyone.”

“It’s the letter girl, right?” Bride offers.

“Who’s the letter girl?” asks Elison. He doesn’t know my history with Charlotte—unlike Cabby who’s been with me through BUD/S, the naval school where they try to sort out the SEALs from the wannabes by trying to kill you every day. Cabby stares at me like I’m half out of my mind. And I am. No question. I won’t ever be right again if I don’t get Charlotte back.

With a sigh, he turns away and redirects attention at Elison. “Ensign, we need to give you a nickname.”

Elison sits up straighter. A nickname means he belongs.

“I’m leaning toward Howdy Doody,” I offer.

“Fuck you, Jackson,” he retorts, which is good. We don’t want a mealy mouthbreather serving with us.

“He doesn’t do that,” Bride laughs.

Elison immediately colors and stammers out an apology. “I-I-I didn’t mean it like that. And if you are gay, I’m okay with that. Not that you have to tell me. It wasn’t an advance. I wasn’t coming on to you.”

This makes Bride laugh all the more. “Don’t you know why we call Jackson Monk, Howdy?”

His blushing makes the nickname stick, and as Elison’s face falls in dismay, he mutters a little sullenly, “No.”

“Because in all the time he’s been on the teams, he’s never touched a person. Not a guy or a girl, isn’t that right, Monk?” Bride says. He used to sneer it, but after a few fists in the face and then a lot of liquor afterwards, we’d come to an understanding. We didn’t talk about my sex life . . . until now I guess. I let it go because he isn’t wrong.

I’ve had plenty of opportunity. Every SEAL does. There’s always

someone out there who wants to say they banged an elite warrior and many who look at us as tickets out of whatever poor circumstances they're in, only to find that it was better to be single than tied to a guy who is gone half the year on secretive missions that he could never talk about. A guy who spends more time with his SEAL team members than his own family. Lots of women got sick and tired of that quick.

I'd tried a few times. I'd accepted a few women's invitations to their homes or apartments or hotel rooms, but ultimately I'd left them dissatisfied and angry. As for me, each time renewed my belief that celibacy was my punishment. I'd turned my back on Charlotte. My unwillingness to follow through with any other woman has to do with the fact that while I was able to walk away from her, every part of me—including my stupid cock—still believes we belong to Charlotte Randolph.

"So is it the letter girl?" Elison is the only one brave enough to ask. He doesn't know better, but I don't care—not at this point.

"It's the letter girl," I affirm.

"Will she say yes?"

"Am I not a SEAL that knows how to plan, execute said plan, and achieve my objective?" I mock, but my anger is self-directed.

Elison nods his head. Truthfully, I think she'll say no, but I'll keep asking until I am too old to form words and my body is dust.

After we land, after we are debriefed, after we are given instructions on our next training session and then debriefed again, I am free. I drive to the only jewelry store I know of, look at a bunch of sparkly things, and then got distracted by a head of blonde hair flying by the store windows. Deciding that today is not the day to make this decision, I call Nick.

"Hey, big bro! Good to hear your voice." His relief is evident although unstated. I know he worries—that they all do. I wonder if she still does.

"I was thinking about coming out. I've got shore leave starting in a

couple of days.”

“That’d be awesome. I’m back at camp, but I’m sure you can find something to do to occupy your time.”

“Great. I’m booking a flight right now.” I hesitate because I’m going to ask him about Charlotte—a subject that has been off limits for a couple of years now, since we got into a fight about how I never should have started that shit with her. “Is anyone else in the family around?” I ask casually but he knows. We’re brothers. How could he not?

“Charlie? She’s actually close to you. A boy of hers got traded to the SD Commandants . . . in fact, I got a call from her the other day. You got shit to tell me?”

Charlie? That’s what the Reese fuckhead called her. “Since when has Charlotte suddenly got a boy’s nickname?” I’m annoyed and ignore the rest of the question.

“Since when do you care?” he shoots back. “And answer the goddamned question. Are you bringing home some girl to Mom?”

Nick’s abundant use of profanity rivals almost anyone on my team, and we are all notorious for being unable to have a conversation without at least a fuck spit out every other sentence.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Where’s Charlotte?”

“She’s in fucking San Diego. I just told you that.”

“I’m not bringing anyone home to Mom,” I say. “Where in San Diego? This is a big fucking town.”

“I don’t know,” he huffs. “I’m guessing wherever it is you buy rings because she apparently believes you are planning to propose to some Southern California girl that none of us have ever met.”

I filter through his words, turning them over in my head, trying to grasp the full meaning of them, and as they tumble into place, I’m both elated and worried. “I’m only ever going to marry one girl, Nick.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. “Well . . .” he says. I’ve apparently

dumbfounded him. “Well. Good. Good.” He begins to laugh, a loud but almost kind of painful sound. “I can’t fucking believe it. It’s taken you longer to get your head on straight than the mission to the moon, but you have, right? I got her cell phone number. You need that?”

“No.” I stole it from his phone the last time we saw each other.

“She usually stays in those boutique hotels, so who knows where she’s at in the city. Fuck. Let me check my messages again . . . no, she never said where she was staying. Hold on. Let me text her.”

While I wait for a response, I feel a burn of jealousy toward Nick. He knows where she is. He can text her with ease. But all of this is a situation of my own making. I’m the one who broke us, and I’ll be the one to put us back together.

“She’s at the Del,” he says finally with a laugh. “You lucky son of a bitch. She’s right next door.”

“Thanks.” We spend the next fifteen minutes catching up on everything else. He doesn’t like the rookie wide receiver they drafted, thinks he spends too much time yukking it up to the media. Nick likes everyone to keep their excesses on the down low. Want to bang a supermodel? That’s fine, just don’t brag about it when you do. He thinks it’s a distraction. The only thing you should be known for is your play on the field, not off of it.

After I ring off, the blonde hair I saw in the window at Tiffany’s when I was holding one of the diamonds up to the light springs to mind. I didn’t even consider at the time that it could have been Charlotte, because what were the odds? But she’s here and, like Nick said, next door. The Hotel Del Coronado is an institution that sits right up the beach from where we train. The island of Coronado is a small postage stamp piece of land across the bay from San Diego.

I settle in for the night. Tomorrow I’ll shave, put on one of my service uniforms, and throw myself at her feet.

The next morning, a knock at my apartment door while I’m shaving sets

my heart thumping. I know it's not Charlotte, yet I can't stop hoping.

"From the look of disappointment on your face, I'm guessing you thought I was the pizza delivery guy," Cabby says. "Want to go for a run?"

I glance at my watch. It's barely past six and, though the sun is shining, begging forgiveness probably works better if I don't wake her up too early. "Yeah. Let me finish up, and I'll be out."

"You really going to propose to letter girl?" Cabby asks, following me to the bathroom.

"Charlotte," I say. "And yes. Why not?"

"Because relationships don't work for guys in the field. You got to have the ability to de-stress yourself in the time-honored fashion of fucking."

I scrape the soap and hair off my face, tapping my straight edge against the sink. I want to be smooth when I see her again so that if she allows me to kiss her—no, *when* she allows me to kiss her—I don't scratch one inch of her smooth skin.

"That's not a problem," I say.

"Are you fucking serious?" Cabby asks in astonishment. "Have you really gone without sex for nine fucking years? Are you even human? I thought the Monk nickname was a joke. Like calling a tall guy Shorty or the lean guy Fat Bastard."

There's no reason to respond. I look at him steadily in the mirror while finishing my business. "More to life than getting your rocks off."

"I've seen you with women. I've seen you leave bars with women," he accuses and trails behind me as I move to the bedroom to pull on shorts and a pair of running shoes. There's no such thing as privacy around Cab. After spraying myself down with sun screen that will be sweated off around mile six, I grab my keys and phone. "Are you impotent?" he finally whispers.

"Nah, man." I rub my nose. "It never felt right. None of those girls were Charlotte. I knew I was breaking her heart by shutting her out. Couldn't compound it by sleeping with another woman."

“You are a monk. A sick one,” Cabby mutters. “If she doesn’t say yes, will you finally have sex? You’d be a better teammate if you had sex.”

“She’s going to say yes, and fuck you, Cabby. I’ve been the best damn teammate you ever had.”

“No sex for nine years?” He shakes his head and starts the Jeep. Then shuts it off. Turning to me, he cries, “Nine years? I can’t go without for like nine days.”

That’s an exaggeration since some ops take months in a desert where there’s nothing but sand and the occasional wild dog. I just shrug.

He resettles into his seat and starts the Jeep again. “You are the best goddamn teammate I’ve ever had because if you can function with that much sperm backed up in your pipes, you’re a super hero of some kind.”

When Reese arrives, we head out for some reconnaissance before we hit the clubs to find victim number one. I need to see Nathan. Knowing he's so close without laying my eyes on him one more time is intolerable.

"This is a bad idea," Reese says. "Seeing him will only fuel old fantasies. You need to move forward."

"I promise you will enjoy this." We stop before we reach the guards who prevent tourists from getting too close to the training sailors.

Spreading a blanket out, I pull Reese beside me. "Pretend like we're having a romantic breakfast."

I feel like the biggest perv, but they're too far away for me to see anything but sweaty flesh and facial hair, so I pull out my binoculars

"Do you see him?"

"No, I . . . wait." I zoom in, and there he is. Bare chested, his skin glistening in the sun from oil? Sweat? He's wearing black shorts with a thin white stripe down the side. There are tattoos on his shoulder and arms but none on his chest. His hair is short, but not in the buzz cut so often associated with military men. These were special forces men who needed long hair and bushy beards but his face is completely smooth. There's his square jaw and

his dark brows, furrowed. His lips are slightly open. I wonder if he breathes out of his nose or mouth as he runs. As he moves, his pectoral muscles bunch and release. The binoculars slip lower, and I trace my way down his ridged abdomen to the tops of thighs and down to his feet clad in black boots. I guess he must run in those rather than tennis shoes for training purposes. I want to watch him all day.

“This is a bad idea,” Reese says and grabs the binoculars. He adjusts them and sucks in a breath. “Oh my god, Charlie, I could get into this stalking thing. The guy on the right totally tickles my bear fetish. I thought all the military dudes had to shave. I dated this one Army guy. Baby face. He could’ve used a little facial hair.”

“Special forces,” I mutter as two bare-chested men jog up to the guard, point at us and then run off. “Um, maybe we should leave?”

“I’m not done stalking,” Reese says, pulling away from my hand. Finally he drops the lenses on the blanket and falls back to stare at the sky. “Now that you’ve seen him, are you ready to go out and forget him?”

“I just had to see my Nate one last time.”

“He hasn’t been your Nate in nine years.”

The bucket of water Reese throws on me is ocean cold. With a deep breath, I get to my feet. “You’re right. Come on. Let’s go home. I have so much to do for Peyton and Christian before we go out tonight.”

“Not to mention going to the pedi/mani and blow out appointment I made for you.” Reese bends over to pick up the blanket.

“Leaving so soon?” I whirl around and there’s Nate, not even remotely out of breath, with two other guys standing slightly behind him. I’m the breathless one. In fact, my heart is pounding so strong and loud, I’m afraid it’s going to burst out of my chest. My airways are closing down, and I’m lightheaded. Reese shoots me a worried glance and wraps his arm around me just as I begin to sway. “We’re bird watching, asshole.”

We all swivel to look at the nearly empty sky. “Oh, sure there aren’t any

now, but this is the migratory path of the fondue biplatypus, and it only flaps through North America during a very discrete time period. If you'll excuse us, we don't want to miss it." Reese flicks the blanket and sand goes everywhere. I'm the only one who flinches though. Nate and his crew stare impassively at us, arms at their sides as if they're ready to draw on us, but given their shirtless chests and tiny shorts, I'm not sure what they'd pull out. Reese tucks the now-folded blanket under his arm and then grabs me and starts marching us off. I follow in a daze.

"Charlotte," I hear behind me. Nate sounds almost . . . anguished.

I turn back, but Reese won't let go of me. "Come on, Charlie. We've seen enough to know that bird is never going to land here. It's a flightily, stupid bird. We've been waiting for it to come home for years, but it never did. It was off in other countries and places feathering the nests of dozens of other birds and has been too busy to fly home. It's dead by now, and if it isn't, it should be."

"Fondue biplatypus? What the fuck is that?" we hear another guy mention.

"Charlotte," Nate says again, but Reese is right. Nate and my relationship is dead now. And if it isn't, it should be. I turn away and thread my fingers through Reese's.

"You're right. That bird is dead."

Nathan

Her name wrenches from me like my heart is being pulled from my chest. She turns to look at me, and I see her anguish which compounds my own pain. What can I say? I didn't mean to hurt you? Intentions are meaningless. Acts matter.

The guy by her side tugs on her hand again. I want to drag him by his neck and throw him into the ocean. Roll a few logs over his face until he is unrecognizable. Doesn't he know that Charlotte is mine? That she's been

mine since the day she was born? Time, distance, separation, none of that will sever our bond. None of it.

I hold my breath for what seems like forever. She's more beautiful than I can remember. How long has it been since I last laid eyes on her?

Only seven hundred days, eight hours, and forty-two minutes. Nearly two years.

"I want to see you," I manage to gasp out. My tone is a mistake. It's too harsh, and she shrinks closer to her companion.

The boy toy next to her places a protective arm around her shoulder and glares over his shoulder. Cabby and Bride step up beside me, which is even worse. Three SEALs scowling down at two innocent people. Or one innocent person. The other one—the male—is two heartbeats away from being demolished.

"Is there a problem here?" One of the gate guards designed to keep the public from bothering us while we train wanders over to diffuse what he sees as a tense situation.

"No, we're leaving," she says and reaches up to squeeze the man's hand. Yes, he's definitely losing that hand first before I dismantle the rest of him.

"I'm on shore leave in two days. I'm coming for you," I yell after her.

Her gait breaks, and the boy has to reach down and right her. But she doesn't glance back. Not once.

My best friend, Bride, and some random gate guard are looking on as my woman leaves me on the arm of another guy, but the only burn I feel is from loss, not humiliation. I don't care what these guys think of me. What matters is that Charlotte is walking away from me with a man who she knows well enough that he answers her phone.

But she's here, and she's not doing any goddamn bird watching. There are two types of people who come down to this stretch of the beach. Those who want to run and those who are watching us run. She wanted to see me and . . . that's as far as I can process why she's here, given that she won't talk

to me.

“I thought you were confident she’d say yes? Since she’s turning you down, the best option is to get drunk and laid. I say an early evening visit to Flannery’s.”

“She looks good walking away. I’ll say that,” Bride cackles. He makes a slapping motion with his hand against the air.

“Do you want to get drowned?” I say evenly, despite the adrenaline firing through my body. I’ve got aggressions, and I want to take them out on someone. Bride’s a good target. “Because that’s how a guy gets drowned.”

“Not now, man,” Cabby says, recognizing the tenseness in my frame.

“When?” Bride is unhappy we aren’t having fun with each other. Taking the piss out of a team member is our version of a kiss and hug.

“Never,” I answer and start running. The sting is too sharp, and though I run for miles, it doesn’t fade. My legs are tired, my lungs scream for air, but the only thing on my mind is her.

Charlotte

“You look wrecked,” Reese says when we get back to the Del.

“I am. Seeing him in the flesh is heart-wrenching.”

“When did you last lay eyes on him?”

I drop onto my bed and curl into Reese’s warm, comforting body.

“Nearly two years ago. He was on leave and visiting his parents. They have this home on Lake Michigan north of the city. I was in the city too, helping Adnan Rabanah move. His wife wanted to see a home next to Michael Jordan’s old house. I popped in to say hi to Aunt Grace, and Nate was there, drinking chocolate milk at the kitchen table.” I smile ruefully at the memory. “He looked up and there was this brown milk mustache framing his upper lip, and he was shirtless, wearing shorts and tennis shoes. I wrestled with the urge to leap over the counter and table to lick the chocolate off his mouth and then start exploring other areas.”

I’m not sure who was more surprised—him or me. He bolted out the back

door, saying he was going for a run. I waited there for over three hours, and he never came back. I think that's when I realized I was waiting for nothing.

"But you still haven't moved on."

"I want to." I stare into the white ceiling of the hotel room, searching for answers. "I don't enjoy being lonely. Most of the time, it doesn't matter. I have such good friends. You, Lainey, Nick. There's always someone who will go out with me. And if I really want someone to get physical with, there are lots of available men. But I've felt tethered to Nate since forever, and it's more than having lost a boyfriend or a lover. It's losing my best friend."

Reese sighs. "I don't believe that three one night stands are going to do it for you."

"I need more?"

"I think you need to sleep with someone you care about. Maybe Nick?"

"I couldn't sleep with Nick!" I shudder. "It would be sleeping with my brother. Which is gross."

"I don't get how sleeping with Nick, who is not related to you, is incest, but sleeping with Nate, who is Nick's brother, is not."

"You don't have to understand. It just *is*."

He knocks his fist against the top of my head. "You need someone like me, but who's straight. Who loves you and would be invested in making it good for you. Plus if you like him, you'll feel less like cheating and more like . . . a friendly get together without clothes on."

"I . . . I actually know someone like that."

"Who?" Reese thought he knew all my friends, but my relationship with Colin Matthews is quiet. We like it that way because it's pressure-free for him. But he'd sleep with me. He'd made advances before, and I've always turned him down—not because of Nathan, but because I want Colin to have someone who loves him with her whole heart, not just a portion of it.

Could we sleep together without ruining our friendship?

"Just a guy. It's someone I met when I was in treatment in Switzerland."

“The LA guy?” Reese says knowingly.

“Yes him,” I admit. If there’s a job in LA, I always take it. Colin and I knock around privately. If you don’t want to be photographed and aren’t really into the scene, it’s easy enough to get around anonymously. Colin would always roll his eyes at the fake outrage by some celebrities when they are photographed eating at the “motherfucking Grove.”

Reese’s eyes are glowing with curiosity, but before he can interrogate me, his phone rings and then mine.

“Charlotte Randolph here.”

“It’s Lainey. Why did we decide to buy a bar? Why?”

“Because it seemed like a fun investment at the time?”

“I’m tearing my hair out. We lost another server because she started sleeping with one of the Mustangs and after he stopped calling, she couldn’t be here when he flaunted his single status. Her words; not mine. Our policy of no sleeping with the customers needs to be better enforced.”

“Should we require them to take oaths of chastity before allowing them to don the apron?” I joke.

“We should have opened a trendy bar somewhere other than here, a place where we serve drinks with umbrellas.”

“Then order umbrellas, and we’ll see if we can drive the Mustangs away.”

“And Nick will start wearing them behind his ear, and we’ll have to put up a velvet rope to keep everyone out,” she grumbled. Lainey and Nick are like oil and water. She says he plays too hard, and he says her inability to smile more than once a week is scarring his young adulthood. Reese and I speculate that it is a sexual attraction, but a lot of the time it does appear that they don’t like each other. Lainey, in particular, doesn’t seem to respect Nick. And Nick, God love him, doesn’t appreciate all that Lainey has gone through.

And if there isn’t any respect between two people, any kind of sexual attraction will leave them both unhappy. I don’t want that for either of my

friends.

“Because she quit, I need to stay here and tend the bar, but Nick came in this morning to tell me that there’s a rookie who needs help transitioning. He signed his rookie contract, and he’s got a boatload of family obligations. I can’t really deal with it all, so Reese needs to come home. I gave the rookie Reese’s number.”

I glance over at Reese, who is throwing things into his case, with his phone pressed between his shoulder and ear.

“I think they’re talking right now.”

“Great, and I’m sorry for taking him away from you.”

“No problem. I’m going to get things wrapped up with Christian soon. Maybe a week.”

“I made a reservation for you at Tower23 if you’re tired of the Del,” she suggests.

“Out of the zone of danger?”

“It seems to me that if you’re a recovering alcoholic, you don’t stay next to a brewery.”

This makes me laugh. “The naval base is a brewery?”

“I hear from Reese that they are churning out high-quality products on a daily basis,” she proclaims. I laugh a little more and say goodbye.

“Sorry, honey.” Reese kisses me on the cheek. “Call your LA guy. Go down to the Gaslamp district. Pick up a nice guy, take him to a nearby hotel, screw his brains out, and come back here for the night.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” I say, hugging him back.

“Do something,” he orders. “Don’t stay here. Don’t go to the beach. Get out and enjoy yourself.”

“Yes, dad.”

He opens the door and leans down to give me another kiss on the forehead. “I hate leaving you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. Call me when you land.”

“I will.”

We hug again. I linger in the door as he walks down the hallway, past a few room service trays and a guy fiddling with a lock. The man, a big one with broad shoulders, watches Reese’s retreating back before turning to face me.

“Nate,” I gasp. My hand flies to my throat. Hurriedly, I back into my room, but I’m not fast enough. His foot and hand are in the doorway, and it flies open.

“It’s been a long time, Charlotte,” Nate says grimly.

“
What are you doing here?” she spits at me. I stalk her until she crumples into a nearby sofa. Leaning forward, I place one arm on the back near her head.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“Really?” She scoffs. “You had nine years to say something. The time for talking is over. Get out.”

Her arms are folded at her side, and she refuses to look at me.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me why you were on *my* beach.”

“Your beach,” she sputters, but I interrupt her.

“The only people that come to that part of the beach on Coronado Island are frog hogs, curious tourists, and wannabes. Which one are you?” I demand angrily. I want to rage at her that I’ve been faithful to her for nine years while she’s sleeping with some guy, sharing a hotel room with him, bringing him to my beach. Who is he? I want to howl.

“I should slap you right now.” She stands up, pushing my arm away. We’re about two inches apart now.

“For what? For not touching another woman in nine years? For thinking of you every minute of the day? For reading and re-reading your letters until

they are almost worn through?” I want to shake her, kiss her, make love to her until we can’t move a finger.

She gapes at me in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

“I haven’t slept with, fucked, had a blow job, gone down on another woman, brought her off, had a hand job by anyone other than myself in nine years. That’s what I’m talking about. I haven’t had sex. Not the Bill Clinton kind and not any other kind with another woman since I slept with you when I was seventeen and you were fifteen. No one. That’s what I’m talking about. Can you say the same thing?”

“Yes, dammit, I can,” she shouts back. She claps a hand over her mouth, but it’s too late. I don’t know who that guy is who walked out of the room, and I don’t care now because he never had her. He’s never been inside her. He’s never licked her sweet juice or touched her sweet pussy.

“You’re mine, Charlotte Randolph.” I pull her flush against me with one hand and drag her hand away from her mouth with the other. She says something, but I don’t know what it is because my mouth is on hers. My tongue traces the seam of her lips demanding entrance.

She tastes of salt.

And home.

And forever.

Her lips part, and I’m inside her. I’m licking every square inch, from her teeth to the cheek to the sensitive roof. Her tongue rubs against the side of mine. I can feel her lips moving when it hits me: she’s kissing me back! I spear my fingers through her hair to angle her head so I can kiss her deeper . . . I want to embed myself in her senses so that she can’t remember anything but me. We sink into the cushioned sofa until her whole body is pressed under mine. I can feel her from shoulder to thigh. Her hardened nipples jut into my pecs.

She kisses me, and I’m thrown back to a time in my life where everything was innocent and sweet. When I’d taken her virginity and wished I’d saved

my first time for her.

Her fingers run restlessly along my waistband, as if she wants to touch me but is afraid. And I'm afraid. Afraid if I stop kissing her she'll turn me away. I have to show her that she can't live without me. I have to make her need me.

Slowly I push my way down her body, pressing my lips against the hollow of her throat and along the neck of her shirt. I want to take it slow. I know I should. Then I hear her groan. Her legs pull up, and her thighs tighten against my hips. I feel the slight pump of her pelvis against my stomach. I fall on her like a hungry beast.

She still has the shorts on that she'd been wearing at the beach. I run a hand over the leg closest to the sofa back, enjoying the feel of the delicate ankle up to the fleshy, creamy thigh. Her breathing hitches when my thumb creeps under the shorts hem.

"Oh, Nate, we shouldn't," she says, but her movements make my thumb slip even higher until I'm touching the elastic of her panties. I pull up her shirt with my teeth and expose her smooth, flat belly to my hot gaze.

"Yes we should," I say hoarsely and press my thumb against the dampened cotton. "Charlotte, baby, you are wet for me. Just from kissing. I know you're aching down here." I rub my thumb back and forth, and the cotton gets even wetter. "Let me take care of this."

"Nate. . ." she says hesitantly.

"After, baby. We can talk after." I slide my thumb underneath the panties. My whole hand is under the hem now. My fingers are gripping her hip, and my thumb is seeking heaven. "I can feel this little spot needs my attention. I'm going to make this up to you, baby, starting right now."

With my free hand, I unfasten her shorts and pull them down her gorgeous thighs. She lifts her legs to help me. Whatever protestations she might have, they aren't in control now. Her passion is driving her. She sits up, and I help her remove her shirt and then mine.

When she reaches for my waistband, I stop her. “No, this is for you, baby. This first time is all you.”

I run my hands over her chest, down the sides and up to cup her breasts. “These are bigger than I remember,” I whisper reverently. Leaning over I press my face into the valley of her cleavage. “Softer.” I kiss the plump tops that aren’t covered by the satin of her bra. “More delicious.” I tug the cup down on one side and draw her nipple into my mouth, gentle at first and then harder, until I hear her gasp and her fingers grip my head. *Yeah, my baby likes it a little rough.* I’d been so careful with her before because she was ill, but I knew from regularly probing my family that her health had been steady and that she had officially been in remission for years. Now her cheeks are plump, she has a slight curve in her belly, and I feel like I can do all the dirty, hot things I’d fantasized about.

I slip my fingers inside her panties, past the soft curls until I reach her plump, wet sex.

“Nathan. . .” Her words are a plea not a protest.

I suck at her breasts, first one and then the other, while my hand is busy reacquainting itself with the tender flesh between her legs. I think of torture, of BUD/S training week when the naval officers tried to kill us. I think of Somalia, Ghana, Iran. I count baseball statistics and all the times the Cubs have fucked up their chances for a pennant. I bring all of these to the forefront of my mind so I don’t come from the mere feel of her body next to mine.

“Can you tell me how you like it?” I ask. She shakes her head wordlessly, flushing a violent shade of red. I grin at her, and I can tell seeing me smile is almost—almost—as good as my fingers rubbing her pussy. My internal emotions are at war with each other. There’s regret for all the shit I put her through; resolve for how I’m going to make up for it; and craving to have her a million times and a million times more. “I’ll see for myself.”

I dip my head back to her breasts. Her thick, erect nipples are begging to

be in my mouth. I slide my index finger inside, and she clenches down as if I'm some foreign invader. "Shhh." I lean up and press my mouth against hers. "It's just me. God, baby, you are so tight. It's like our first time, isn't it?"

She nods and grabs my shoulders to press me down harder on top of her. I take her mouth, demand her tongue, and as she kisses me, I press my finger all the way until my palm slaps against her outer sex. It's all she needs, and she's coming—clenching me, squeezing me everywhere. Her hands dig into my skin, and her breasts press against my chest as her back bows.

As she comes, I push another finger inside her, preparing her because she's so tight I'm afraid I'll hurt her. Our kiss has turned frantic and sloppy as she shakes around my fingers.

Rising up on my knees, I suck her liquid off my fingers. Her eyes widen in shock. "That's one," I say.

"One what?"

I lay my palm on her upper chest and drag it down to her stomach. Under my hand, she trembles. "One orgasm. I owe you nine tonight. One for every year we've been apart. When I'm done, those years will be part of our past."

"Orgasms aren't going to make up for everything." There's a dark warning in her words, but I recklessly ignore them.

"Let's see what you have to say in the morning. Take your bra off," I order as I move down her body. I'm desperate for the taste of her. I pull her panties down her legs and toss them on the table. Lowering myself to the floor, I kneel down between her legs. "Look at how beautiful you are. Your pussy is so pink and swollen. It looks like an exotic fruit. I can't wait to eat it."

She makes a strangled noise and puts her hand between her legs to cover herself. "I don't think—"

"You're right," I interrupt. "No thinking. Only feeling."

I realize that I'm going to have to be on all night because if I stop once,

doubts will creep in. Well, game on. I have the stamina of a warrior, and this is the greatest battle I will ever face.

“I never ate you out enough when we were teenagers. Tonight you’re going to experience what it feels like to have a man between your legs.”

I dive in, sucking those juicy lips into my mouth and tonguing every inch of her. Whatever objections she had die on her tongue as she grabs my head. She’s starving for pleasure, and I’m hungry to give it to her. I press her legs open, as far apart as she’ll let me. I lose myself between them. Her spicy aroma fills my head, and the tangy sweet flavor of her arousal flooding my tongue. The rock hard appendage between my legs is begging to thrust into her. She’s going to feel so fucking fine.

I lap at her, spearing her with my tongue in rhythmic thrusts. Her breath is weak and shallow, coming in short pants above me. I peek up to see her head thrown back, her breasts taut and bouncy as her hips pulse against my mouth. One of her hands is dug into the cushions, the nails scoring the fabric, while the other is caught in my short hair urging me closer. Then I remember: *she likes me to direct her*. She probably is too shy or doesn’t realize what she enjoys. So I bite her tiny clit, and she goes off like a rocket.

Her scream can probably be heard three doors down. I keep licking and nipping as she squirms and bucks under my mouth.

I stand up. My dick is so hard it hurts. I pull down my cargo shorts, and her eyes widen at the sight. I’m commando because I didn’t want to waste time after running and showering with stupid things like clothes. After the beach, I sped home, took the shortest shower possible and threw on the top two things in my dresser, which were a PT shirt and a pair of ratty old shorts. I grab myself and give my cock a rough hard stroke and squeeze. “I’ve saved everything for you, baby. This cock only wants to be inside you. It only wants to feel your hand, your mouth, your pussy.”

“I—I don’t know what I want.” She’s flushed, aroused, and confused. That’s okay.

“I do. Your pussy wants this. I’m not using a condom, baby, because I’ve only been with you, and you’ve only been with me.”

“But what about pregnancy?”

“I’ll pull out.” It’s reckless, these promises.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says, but she licks her lips like she’s hungry for the taste of me on her tongue. I squeeze my cock harder and pre-cum seeps out the tip.

“Don’t deprive me of something we both want. You know you want to feel me without a barrier.” I step out of my shorts and reach for her. I’m not fucking Charlotte on a sofa after nine years of separation. “Where’s the bed?”

I carry her into the bedroom and throw her on top of the king sized bed. “You’re more beautiful than you’ve ever been, baby. I can’t stop looking at you.”

I push her legs apart and climb between them. “I’ll pull out,” I repeat. “I want to see my cum on you anyway.”

“Don’t think that this solves anything,” she warns. “Just because I want to have sex with you doesn’t mean we’re in any kind of relationship.”

I smooth my hands down her inner thighs and over the tops of her smooth knees. “Course not. Just means that you won’t be having sex with anyone else.” *Ever again*, I finish in my head.

“For now,” she retorts stubbornly.

Forever. “Can we negotiate later when all my blood isn’t pooled in my cock? I need you. I need to be inside you. Let me in.”

“As long as you acknowledge that me sleeping with you doesn’t mean I forgive you or that I’ve forgotten. You haven’t explained anything to me.” She’s mad but she hasn’t moved.

“That’s fair.” Rational thought has fled, though. I wouldn’t be able to explain how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at this point. I place my hard cock at the entrance of her sex, for a moment enjoying the sight of her flushed, rosy flesh opening. “And, baby, we aren’t going to sleep a wink

tonight.”

I'm so torn. I love him and yet . . . part of me hates him and hates that he's making me want him. I'm pinned to the bed, not by his gaze or his hands, but my own fucked-up desire for him. The mixed emotions turn to anger. If this is all he's willing to give me and my body is begging for it, why not give in to him? Let him fuck me. Let him give me pleasure. If this is all we have, I'll take it. This one time.

I curl my heel into his back, right above his tight, bitable ass.

"Take me. If this is all you've got to give me, make it good. Make it so good I don't remember the last nine years."

His eyes widen, and I think he may pull away but he doesn't. He pushes the broad head of him into me, and he feels so big I'm afraid he'll split me in two. "I've dreamt about this moment," he says thickly. "Fantasized about it so many times. Wanted it to be true so many times."

Each word pierces me, a dagger in my heart. If only those words had been spoken in all those silent spaces years before. Now it's salt on the wounds of my heart. The wounds that started like small little paper cuts, only to deepen as each year passed and the bonds that tethered us together for so long grew thinner and thinner until they were weak like a single thread.

“Don’t talk,” I beg because I want to be able to close my eyes and revisit my own fantasies. The ones where he comes to my door on his knees and pours out his soul. The ones where I join him, and our tears of past regret but current joy mingle together.

Today, the only tears are mine, and they are bittersweet.

“Charlotte, Charlotte,” he pleads. “What is wrong?”

“I’m just . . . torn . . . apart.”

“Let me love you. I’ll make it better.”

I give in because the sensation of him being inside me is overwhelming. It’s been years. And I’m dying for it. My body is trembling with desire. And my flesh easily gives way with each slow push forward until he’s finally seated. “God, Charlotte. *God!*” He stands at the end of the bed, his nostrils flaring, his hands biting into my hips as he shakes with the effort of standing still. Every line of his body screams for him to pull out and plunge forward repeatedly until he spends himself, but he wants to make it good for me.

I can see the fierce determination in his face, the internal struggle between his mind and body. He wants to fulfill my demand that it be so amazing I’ll never forget it. His eyes are glazed over, and I wonder what he’s seeing—whether it’s me or young Charlotte or the Charlotte he’s created in his mind in the years of our absence.

“I want you so bad I’m afraid to move. It’ll be over in five seconds.” His chest heaves as he grapples for control. I wonder if he knows how sexy he is. If another person saw him right now, they’d fall over in shocked arousal. He’s a stallion—a perfect construct of muscle, bone, and flesh. Every inch of him is defined. If he’d told me he’d been hewn from a rock in the sea, I’d believe him. There is nothing soft. Even his cock is diamond hard, splintering me.

His hands roam everywhere, leaving behind a trail of raised hairs, goosebumps, and shivering nerve endings. Finally he moves, and the slow drag along my oversensitive tissues causes me to arch my back off the bed.

His head falls back, and his eyes close only to snap open.

“When I close my eyes, I see you in every position I’ve ever imagined. You sitting on my face. You riding me. You on your knees while I’m fucking you like an animal. You covered in soap and water as I eat you out and then fuck you against the tile. I’ve had you in my mind in every way possible and some not possible ones. I’ve dreamt of fucking you standing, sitting, bent over, and raised up. I’ve fantasized it all but none of it—*none of it*—came even close to what it feels like to be inside you.” He plunges forward, and I cry out.

His words, the fullness of him in my empty places are making me wild. My hands scramble for some purchase, and I find the padded headboard. I place my palms flat against the cushioned fabric, and he follows me forward. Like a pagan warrior, he kneels between my legs and pushes my thighs as far apart as they can go while he spears me with his heavy weapon. My traitorous body weeps around his, lubricating his every thrust.

“This body is mine,” he growls. “I love every inch of it, and it belongs to me.”

I close my eyes, trying to shut out his possession, but it winds around me, trying to repair the frayed bonds. It’s chaotic in my head now, and he’s frenetic too. His thrusts become less rhythmic as his control is leaving him.

“Oh no, baby,” I hear him say, “you’re coming with me.”

His hard, big thumb finds my clit, circling it, pinching it until now I’m the one writhing in jerky motions. He’s wrenching my orgasm from me, ordering it. Maybe my body does belong to him because it’s building, low and small. It grows and grows until it is too big for me to contain. My feet arch and my fingernails dig into the headboard and I hear myself scream, long and loud. Above me he’s grunting and growling. I want him to follow me into bliss. His hips jack fiercely against me when suddenly he pulls out.

“No,” I cry at the loss. Even though I’d come, I wanted him in my body still.

“Look at me, Charlotte,” he commands in a dark voice.

My eyes open in response, and I see him, thick and red in his hand. He pulls on himself, once, twice in motions so rough I fear that he’s hurting himself. But no. It’s what he wants, and his come spills all over me, striking my sex, my stomach and the valley between my breasts. It’s shockingly erotic.

“You are mine since the day you were born and until the day we die together.” His eyes glitter at me, but when his large hand lands on my belly, I can’t look away. He rubs his sperm into me, over my lower lips, all across my stomach, and over my breasts. “You know this.” His free hand comes up to cup my chin. “You know this.”

And then he kisses me, and I’m devastated all over again.

It is nearly dawn when I finally gather enough strength to leave the bed. He’s sleeping, sprawled across two-thirds of the bed, one large arm heavy across my chest and a leg entwined with mine. I wince at the soreness between my legs. My whole body aches as if I’ve just endured a heavy workout after a long period of idleness. Even though I’m slow and quiet, it only takes one movement to wake him. His head turns and he rolls onto his back, pulling me close to his body.

“We’ve three more to go,” he says. He’s referring to the six orgasms he’s given me. He’d have probably fulfilled his stated goal if I hadn’t passed out on him a couple of hours ago.

“I’m tired and sore.” Since he is awake, I make no attempts to be quiet. Instead I push away from him, relieved he lets me go without an argument.

In the bathroom, I turn the water on and stare at the disheveled mess that is reflected in the mirror. My hair is a matted mess. There might be a family of birds in there, but I wouldn’t know because it’s so damned tangled. There isn’t an inch of me that wasn’t touched by him last night. I hardly know what to think of the ache in my heart. Is it because he’s back or because I wish

he'd go away?

I need my friends. I need Lainey, Reese, even Nick. I need perspective and time. I'm so confused. The shower helps. It's hot and cleansing. I spend a long time under the water trying to figure out what to do. Reese is right. I've idolized Nate and, worse, romanticized our past to such a degree that I've been unable to move forward. Even if I was meant to be with Nate forever, I should have used our separation to meet other people.

Last night I wondered if he was looking at the old Charlotte or the new one, but who is the new Charlotte? Her heart is stuck somewhere in her sixteen-year-old body. I've done myself a disservice. I don't need to go out and have multiple one night stands, but I do need to be open to meeting new people—to finding a love that would make adult Charlotte happy no matter what teen Charlotte thinks. Draped in a hotel bathrobe, I take a deep breath and open the door.

Nathan is still lying on the bed, staring at the bathroom door. His expression is one of satisfaction. Lazily, his eyes follow me. "Come back to bed, baby. Let's cuddle."

His nonchalant attitude converts my unhappiness to anger. It's as if he *does* believe that sex solved all of our problems. My panties are on the coffee table. I shudder and make a mental note to wipe that down with some sanitizer. I gather up the rest of my clothes and the two pieces of his clothing—T-shirt and cargo shorts. His clothes go on the chair and mine into the dirty laundry bag in the closet.

"Don't call me baby. I'm not your baby."

"You should go on the pill. That way we don't have to do condoms."

"Why don't you get snipped if you want to have sex without protection so badly? That procedure's reversible."

He covers his groin as if I'm coming after him with a scissors to do outpatient surgery on the hotel room bed. "Fuck no."

"Then you'll have to keep using condoms. Actually I don't care what you

use,” I say, pulling out my suitcase. I need to get out of here and into a different hotel room. Actually I need to get out of San Diego. “I’m not sleeping with you again. This was a mistake. Sex solves nothing. If sex was the answer, I would have slept with any number of guys. If anything, our marathon showed me I was starving for sex. I should have been having it for years, that way I wouldn’t have been so vulnerable to your physical advances.”

“What?” he shouts and jackknives off the bed. His smug look is gone. “This was us reconnecting.”

“No, Nathan, this was about our bodies finding well needed released. Reconnecting would be you telling me why we had to reconnect. Since you don’t feel like it is necessary, why don’t you take yourself out of my hotel room. If I want to *reconnect* with you I’ll give you a call.”

I pick up his clothes and throw them at him. Shock fills his eyes, followed by determination.

Jerkily he pulls his clothes on. “I’ve got to get back to base, but I’m on two-week shore leave starting tomorrow. You can run, Charlotte, but there is nowhere on this goddamn earth I can’t find you.”

“Creepy much? I’m pretty sure that comes right out of the stalker handbook.” I cross my arms and glare at him.

“What the hell? We spent the night making love. You came *six* times. You love me, and I love you. We can work this out.”

“You want to work this out? Then start talking.” I drop into one of the two upholstered chairs in the room and cross my arms, waiting.

He starts pacing and I, the stupid twit that I am, follow his every move. I watch the muscles bunch under his tight T-shirt and the way the veins stand out on his thick forearms. I can feel myself softening inside because—*goddamn*—he is fine.

“I know I don’t deserve you,” he begins. His voice is so low I can barely hear him. “That you’ve been with no one in the last nine years blows my

mind. When some guys on the team get their Dear John letters or find out from a buddy back home that their girl is cheating on them, they go out and try to prove their virility by fucking everything that moves. Most of the time that's paid flesh, but sometimes its other service women—nurses, supply convoy members, helo pilots. That is how they deal with loss. You could have done that, but you didn't even though I'd cut you out of my life. I may pretend like it was fidelity that kept you away from other men, but that's probably presumptuous of me. I don't know why you were alone, but I'm not sorry." He grimaces. "Maybe I am a creepy stalker because I should simply want you to be happy. You weren't though, were you?"

I glare at him because he didn't deserve my fidelity even though he got it.

"Say something," he begs.

I snort, a humorless, short laugh. "That's what I said to you a million times in my mind. But you didn't say anything, and now you're waxing on and on about my state of revirginization. Why don't we talk about your supposed abstinence? A man like you going without since you were seventeen? Do you actually think I believe anything that you're saying?"

"You should. It's true." He squeezes the back of his neck.

I sit for a long time, waiting, but when he adds nothing, I rise. "If that's all you have, I think you should go. I'll think about it, and if I want to see you again, I'll call."

He crosses the carpet in two giant strides and pulls me against him. With his face in my neck, he pleads, "Charlotte, God, give me another chance. Let me love you again."

I stand motionless, doing everything I can to resist. He kisses my neck, the tender part behind my ear. He rubs my shoulders, but still I don't move. His lips move to my forehead, and he traces the small constellation of freckles along my cheeks and the upper bridge of my nose. "I've never stopped loving you," he whispers against my jaw.

"And now, after all these years you're ready to be a couple?" I finally

say.

“I want us to try, Charlotte baby, to be what it was we were born for.”

“I can’t. I’ve already been stupid for nine years. I don’t want to be this stupid again. I couldn’t even look myself in the mirror this morning. You hurt me so much, Nathan. I can’t even begin to tell you how painful it was, particularly toward the end. I deserve better than what I got from you, and I don’t believe you are the man who can deliver that better for me. Not anymore.”

My quietly spoken words stagger him. I feel him stumble and then right himself. “You don’t mean that,” he insists.

“I don’t think I can trust you.”

“Will you let me try to change your mind?”

“
You had sex with him, didn’t you?” Reese says with utter disgust. I should have never Skyped him when I got to my new hotel room.

“How can you tell?”

“You have that relaxed post-coital look to you. I can recognize it anywhere. Even strangers. It’s my gift.”

“I don’t feel relaxed,” I complain. “I feel awful and super tense.”

“Was it bad? Sometimes those good-looking guys are bad in bed. They hook up and never return for feedback, so they live in this blissful cloud of ignorance.” He waves a finger in a wide circle around his head which, I guess, is supposed to indicate a hovering cloud.

“I wish. It was so good. Too good.” I groan.

“Shit.”

Exactly. “He said he hadn’t slept with another woman in nine years.”

“Holy fuck. Nine years?” Reese’s eyes are wide doughnuts. Disbelief drips from every word.

“I know. I couldn’t turn him down after he said that.”

He nods in agreement. “Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know.” I want to believe him, but I’m afraid as well. If he has

been true for all these years, pushing him away might be a mistake. I don't tell Reese that Nate was insatiable and that he didn't let me sleep more than an hour at a time before waking me with his fingers or his mouth somewhere on my body. "What do I do now? Can it be this good with someone else? I mean, I wish it had been awful. Then I could pat him on the back and say, 'Gosh, I'm sorry you didn't write to me for nine years, but hey I'm glad we're friends again.' Instead, it's as if I've eaten the best thing ever and I need refills right away or I might die."

"You're not going to die, honey. Here's the problem: you care about him, which is affecting how you feel in the sack. I'm going to take back my prescriptions of meaningless sex. I think that will only make you feel worse. You need to start dating, and by that I mean, sign up on a website and start searching for guys that hit every mark you've ever wanted. Someone who is close to their family. Someone who is busy with their own career so that they don't mind the time you spend on yours but also someone who wants to build a future with you. Someone who makes you laugh and can communicate with you."

"Like you only not gay."

"Right, although we all know that I really can't stand my family. What about your LA guy? Who is he anyway?"

"Colin Matthews."

He sucks in a breath and follows this with a yell, "You know Colin fucking Matthews?"

I'm glad Reese is in his condo, although it's possible that everyone in his complex heard him. I wait until he settles down before admitting, "We've been friends for years."

"Charlotte Randolph, you have been holding out on me. How do you know all these fine specimens?"

"We were at the same treatment clinic in Switzerland as teenagers."

He looks at me with chagrin, and I shrug because that part of my life is

over. I used to take a cocktail of drugs daily, but I've been declared clean of the malignant cells since I was sixteen. I have checkups every three months, but they've become so perfunctory that I almost forget the reason why I have them. Check my blood. Check my urine. Make sure my shunt is still draining properly.

"I had forgotten he had cancer. Yes, go do him. He sounds perfect. And he looks perfect." Reese's eyes get a faraway look as if he's imagining how perfect Colin Matthews might look without his clothes on. I've seen Colin in a swimsuit, and his abs are movie star perfect.

"He's pretty gorgeous and a super guy," I admit.

Reese shakes his head. "Why aren't you on the phone with him right now? I'm disconnecting because you're wasting time talking to me." He blows me a kiss, and the screen goes blank.

Dumbfounded, I stare at the black tablet screen. I can't call Colin up and beg him to start dating me. I don't even think I can ask him for a date. But I can call him and tell him I've fucked up. Later, though. I'm not ready for that conversation.

As I sink into my work, a text message alert sounds. I read the bubble before I register the name.

I've spent nine years running from you and your sweetness. Biggest mistake of my life. If it takes nine more years to convince you that I'm worth a second chance, I'll consider those nine years well spent. I will do whatever it takes to get you back. Fair warning.

My heart stutters and may even briefly stop. I call Colin immediately because otherwise? I'd be driving to Nate's base and throwing myself at his feet.

"Hey Charlie."

I can hear traffic on the street. He must be going somewhere.

"Are you going surfing?"

“Are you following me?” he asks with laughing suspicion. My heartache eases a little bit hearing his voice.

“No, I guessed. It sounds like you’re driving, and since it’s fairly early in the morning, I thought you might be on the way to the beach to catch some waves.”

“You are a champion guesser because that’s exactly what I’m doing. In fact I’m pulling into the parking lot.” The traffic sounds dim as he exits the road and parks his vehicle in the quiet of the sandy beach. I’ve been with him a couple of times. I don’t surf, but I’m really great at lying under an umbrella reading a book while he catches waves.

“I’m in San Diego, and I’d love to visit you. I’m finishing up a project, and I thought I’d drive up,” I say.

“Actually I’d love an excuse to get out of LA right now,” he admits. He’s out of the car now. I hear the door open and close.

“Is it becoming stifling?” Colin flits from one flower to another, never settling. At one time, I thought he’d fallen in love. He’d called me and wanted me to come out and meet her, but before I could make the arrangements he had texted me that it was over and he was coming to Chicago to see me. It was during that visit he’d made his first pass at me.

“Yes, someone said the L word to me the other day. I want you to know that I didn’t jump up immediately and flee but waited until the next morning like a good boy.”

“Wow, so generous of you.”

“It took everything I had to stay. I literally was counting the seconds. If there is a purgatory, I deserve to reduce my time there based on last night alone.”

I laugh. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Incorrigible? Are you reading the dictionary?”

“Fuck you, Colin.”

“I’ve been trying to get in your pants for nearly a decade, so, yes, I accept

this invitation.” When I don’t immediately lob back a joking refusal as is my habit, he strikes. “Charlie, are you actually giving me a green light?”

“You know that one girl you dated?” I duck his question.

He sighs. “Which one? There were so many.”

“The actress. Gen? I felt like she was the one for you.”

There are several beats of silence before Colin replies. “She broke my rule. The no publicity one. It’s the only one I have.”

“I know, honey.” I can still hear the hurt even though he tries to pretend he is over it. “How can you be sure though?”

“She admitted it.”

“Did she ever call you or try to reach out?”

“Who knows? I flew to Chicago to see you if you recall.”

“She seemed so real, so genuine. It’s hard to believe she leaked anything to the paps.”

“Why are we talking about this? Gen is old news.”

“I just wish one of us was happy.” Colin is a great guy, and it pains me that he was hurt so badly by a girl who’d seemed perfect for him.

“I thought you were happy, Charlotte? In fact, the last time I saw you I suggested we see how far our friendship could extend, and you replied that you didn’t want to ruin anything because you were happy the way things were. And now you’re not happy?” He sounds amused instead of angry.

“Happiness is an elusive emotion. Maybe we shouldn’t pursue it. Maybe the thing we should run after is contentment.” I rub my head because this whole conversation is giving me a headache.

“Why did you call me?” he asks softly. “Did something happen?”

Then what I’m doing hits me. I’m trying to use my dear friend Colin to chase away my need for Nathan. How could I behave like this? Colin doesn’t deserve this. No one does. I stiffen my spine. “I’m calling you because you are one of my oldest friends. I was feeling blue and needed to talk to someone I cared about. I wish we could love each other in a deeper, more

physical way, but I think we both know that we're better off friends than lovers."

"I guess this means no, you're not going to drive up and give me the night of my life."

"I think you're still in love with Gen and I . . . I'm still screwed up over Nathan. I don't want to lose your friendship. My relationship with you is one of the great things in my life," I say.

"I hate to tell you this, but if a friendship with a guy you see twice a year is one of the great things in your life, you have a pretty sucky life." I don't deny it. He exhales. "Did you see Nathan recently?"

"A few hours ago," I admit. "I think you can guess what happened. You don't need to tell me I was being stupid. I know it already."

"I would be the last person to berate you." Colin laughs ruefully. "If Gen showed up, I'd throw her down on the bed and fuck her silly. After, I'd spend the next day drinking away my self-loathing. Since you're not going to forget your sorrows on my dick, why not go down to your hotel bar and get smashed? Once you're too drunk to stand up, you'll forget all about the asshole. It works for me."

"What happens when the alcohol wears off?"

"Rinse and repeat, Charlie. Rinse and repeat." He sounds so tired.

"Come down here. Spend the week with me. We'll go sailing or, hell, just lie on the beach together. And after, you and I can go somewhere. We could fly to Japan and eat at that sushi restaurant in that documentary you made me watch," I suggest impulsively. We need to get away from the source of our hurts, and maybe if we were alone we could open ourselves up to finding something better than happiness. It would be less painful.

"If I do, I'm insisting on double beds. I don't want you attacking me in the middle of the night because you're lonely. I'm not a toy."

He says this as a joke, but I think half of him is serious. He's tired of being treated like a toy by women and, honestly, I wonder if I'm Nathan's

toy. Something to pick up, play with, and discard. Colin hangs up, saying that he has a few things to take care of before he can drive down. He'll text me in a couple of days. I make another list of all the things I need to do for Christian and his family and buckle down to do my work. I manage to keep Nate out of my thoughts for thirty minutes at a time, which I figure is some kind of mild success. Work isn't as numbing as alcohol, but it's probably better for me.

I work through dinner, and it's almost ten before I put away my phone and computer for the evening. When I crawl between the clean, crisp sheets, I nearly cry tears of relief that I'm not back at the Del in the room where Nate imprinted himself on every surface in the short time he was there.

But when I close my eyes, I can see him—and me. I can see me pressed up against the mirror in the bathroom, my hands making starfish prints as I brace myself against his thrusts. I can hear his harsh breathing, his commands to *come, come now, Charlotte*. There was that passage of time that felt endless when he was between my legs, licking me softly and leisurely as if there wasn't anything in this world that gave him more pleasure than helping me find my own. I touch myself, but it's useless. My body wants one thing: Nathan Jackson.

I'm on fire and the ache of want is so acute it's like a knife in my chest. I've had multiple surgeries, chemo treatments, radiation but that's nothing compared to what I feel now.

Time and distance had dulled my pain and that my desire and love for Nathan had actually started to ease only to be stoked into high, hot flames by his reappearance in my life.

He is the poison and the antidote.

“
What do you think you’re doing?” Cabby demands. He showed up at my doorstep thirty minutes ago and used his keys to come in when I refused to let him in. He’s watching me pack.

“I’m going after Charlotte.”

“The letter girl,” he says flatly.

Annoyed, I snap, “Will you stop calling her that? She has a name.”

“Really? Because for like years you’ve never said her name once to us. We’re your family, man. Your brothers who have fought with you, and all I know is that for a while you got a shitload of letters from Chicago, Switzerland, and sometimes LA.”

LA. I never understood why she was ever in LA. Charlotte wasn’t a LA sort of girl.

“You took your letters and hoarded them like the fucking dragon in *The Hobbit*.”

“I didn’t want any of you assholes jerking off to her. She’s not spank bank material,” I growl.

“Are you fucking kidding me? She’s top shelf spank bank material! She’s like the porn star in the girl-next-door movies with her shiny hair and puppy

dog eyes.”

I know he’s baiting me, but shit I’d like to turn around and pummel him until whatever perverse images he’s created are drummed out of his head.

“You and everyone else need to excise her from your memory. She doesn’t exist for you in that fashion. She’s more pure than the Virgin fucking Mary.”

“Does the Virgin Mary like to bite? Because those are one hell of a set of bites around the top of your shoulder.”

I clap my hand over the offending marks—not because I’m ashamed of them, but because I want a reminder of how hot it was. After nine years, it was understandable that we’d have a good night, but it wasn’t good, it was epic. All my fantasies had failed to prepare me for how explosive sex with Charlotte would be. How tight her pussy was. How sweet she tasted. How willing she was to do anything.

“Treat her like your sister, and we won’t have problems,” I mutter, rubbing the teeth marks. Did she bite me that time in the shower? Or was it when she was riding me on the chair? Maybe it was both.

“I can’t even talk about her?”

“No.”

“She’s got you wired tighter than a guitar string, son.”

Cabby is disappointed. While I never took girls home with me, I had no problem playing wingman for him, and I could understand his disgruntlement at how his life would be changing.

“You might as well go to OTS since you’re leaving us single, enlisted schmucks behind.”

“Officer Training School? Since when are only officers married? What about Toller, Wright, and Barovsky?”

“Exceptions, dude. You got to be an LT pay grade or above to afford the wife and kids.” He pauses and laughs a little self consciously. “Although money’s not a problem for you.”

I shift uncomfortably. Most of the guys I serve with don't have family money like me. There are a few here or there but it's mostly men living paycheck to paycheck. You earn more as a SEAL because of Dive Pay, Jump Pay, Special Duty Assignment Pay, special bonuses to retain members but it still doesn't come close to what my trust fund generates in interest in a month. It's why so many SEALs violate the oath to avoid publicity or seek personal glory. They want cash.

Cabby throws himself on the bed, tipping over a pile of clothes. "How long are you going to be gone? You're packing like you're going on a six month mission." He picks up a pair of shorts and tosses them up. I grab them out of the air, roll them up, and stick them in my seabag.

Should I buy a set of luggage? I've been so used to carrying my gear around even when I visit my family, but Charlotte might not like the reminder of what I've been doing for the last nine years. Will she be able to be a seaman's wife? Or worse, a SEALs wife? We are gone a lot, either on training or missions. I won't be able to talk about my work with her, and I'd leave at a drop of a hat. The only positive was that, unlike a lot of other military guys, I've been stationed at the same base since I got my Trident pounded into my chest. The Trident is a gold pin that marks as us SEALs, elite warriors.

SEALs are stationed either on the West coast or East coast unless they get transferred to Joint Task Force or some other ultra-specialized Special Forces team. There've been nibbles around the edges of my service to test my interest, and I've always turned away because I like my brothers on the team. I trust them implicitly, even if we don't all have the same outlook on life.

Although if Cabby had a Charlotte in his past, he'd be chasing her down like a gazelle on the plain. He just hasn't met the one. "I'm going to spend however long it takes to convince her to take me back."

"Maybe you outta have written her, and she'd be standing on the dock willing to lay a big wet one on you when you stepped off the ship."

I ignore him and roll up the rest of my clothes. I have a lot of work out gear, uniforms, and jeans. Charlotte looked polished, and so did her friend. They both could have been models on a building ad along the Magnificent Mile back in Chicago. I haven't ever looked like that—even when I lived in my parents' multimillion dollar penthouse. My edges are rough, and the time in service has only made them sharper and more jagged.

“Shit.” I scratch my head. “I’m going to have to shop. You think Alison’s sister would buy me some clothes?”

“Just wear your dress blues. You know the ladies cream their panties over the sight of a man in uniform.”

“Why should I be taking advice from a guy who thinks dressing up is wearing something other than flip-flops on his feet?”

“Do you know that they call them thongs in Australia? That girl I almost hooked up with the other night kept telling she was going to bring her thongs as in plural. Scared me silly, and I left her at the bar. Bride told me the next day that she probably wanted to take her heels off and put on the flip flops. I turned her down because of a language problem. Fucking tragic as all hell. She had the nicest tits too.” Cabby holds up his hands as if remembering the feel of them. “I’m an idiot.”

“No argument from me.”

I pull out my phone and text Sam. She’s a friend of my mom’s and has been married to a Marine for over twenty years. She’d help me. Her husband, Gray, had helped me join up before I even told my parents.

What does Gray wear on a date?

Who is this? Just kidding, honey. Gray wears jeans!

“Sam says her husband wears jeans.” I flash the phone face to Cabby.

“You’re asking a married woman for clothing advice? Shouldn’t you be

asking a hot single chick?”

“Sam’s hot,” I say. As far as older women go, she’s a good-looking broad. I flick up a picture of her and Gray and their brood to show Cabby.

“I remember her. Shit, yeah, she’s a MILF. Her husband is your Marine friend, right?”

“Right. Why not ask a married woman? You don’t ask the guy who’s still tracking his prey for advice on how to make your capture. You ask the guy who’s got the wall of stuffed animal heads.”

Cabby mulls this over for a moment. “I guess that makes sense. So she says jeans. You got jeans. You got flip-flops. T-shirts. If all else fails, pull out the damn ceremonial service uniform. Or stick your Trident pin on your chest.” For some women, that’s all that they need to see and they’re ready to go home with you.

“Charlotte isn’t going to be impressed by some pin or the fact I can hold my breath underwater for ten minutes.”

“Are you sure? Because the whole breath-holding thing was why the Australian chick wanted in my pants. Technically I think she wanted me in her pants, but one thing would lead to the other.”

“Cabby, while talking about your failed bedroom exploits might be entertaining for some, I’ve got shit to do.” I stuff the last of my crap into the bag. Hoisting it over my shoulder, I grab my keys and head for the front door.

“Why don’t you let me come with you? That way it doesn’t look like you’re stalking her.”

“Instead it looks like two guys are stalking her?” I ask incredulously. “No thanks.”

“Come on, man. Help a brother out. I got shit all to do today,” he whines.

“Shore leave is killing you, isn’t it?” I say, pausing at the door.

He groans and rubs a hand over his face. “You have no idea. I fucking hate it. Why can’t we go rafting in Colorado? I got a buddy up there who runs an adventure service—”

I open the door and walk out, not waiting for him to say another word.
“Lock up when you’re done in there.”

He runs after me. “How about this? I’ll drop you off and take your Jeep back here. She’ll be forced to at least drive you home if she turns you down.”

Again is the unspoken word. I hesitate because that’s not a bad plan.
“Fine, but drop me off and leave right away.” The last thing Charlotte needs is two of us on her doorstep when she’s already spooked.

“You don’t even want me to wait and see if she lets you in?”

“She’s at a hotel. You going to wait in the hallway to see if I get shot down again?”

“Nah, I don’t like horror shows. Gives me nightmares that my moves might someday be rejected,” he jokes.

Cabby spends some time detailing the lost girl from Australia on the ride over to the Del, but I tune him out, watching the ocean bang up on the sand as we speed along the road. His voice blends with the road noise until it’s all one sound. When he pulls into the Del, I’m out the door like a flash.

“You’re welcome, shithead,” he yells after me. I flick him off but don’t stop moving forward. When I arrive on Charlotte’s floor, I take a moment to straighten my T-shirt. I should have put a collared shirt on at least. Fuck it. If she doesn’t like me in a T-shirt, she’s not going to like me wearing buttons. I knock on her door, but it goes unanswered.

I pound on the door a few more times and then rattle the doorknob. “I’m going to stand outside until you let me in.”

“Sir. Sir!” A maid rounds the corner with her cleaning cart. “There’s no one there. It’s empty.”

“Empty?” My mind doesn’t process her words well.

She nods. “*Si*, the lady checked out today. Room is vacant.” She pulls a key card from her pocket and opens the door. “See.”

I do see. The room is completely empty and but for a coaster on the coffee table, it is hard to tell that anyone was staying here.

“Thanks.” I slip the maid a tip and run toward the elevator calling Cabby.

“I need a pick up.”

“She already turned you down?” He sounds impressed.

“She’s not here. She left.”

“I’m on my way.”

It takes Cabby ten minutes to turn around and pick me up.

“You look like someone is going to have a bad day,” he says when I hop into the passenger seat.

I grunt, not looking up from my phone. I’m waiting for Nick to call me back.

“Where are we going?” Cabby asks.

“Not sure. Drive toward . . . La Jolla.” La Jolla is one of the wealthiest places along the coast. Charlotte’s used to living well, and if she isn’t going to stay at the Del, then my guess is she’s headed to La Jolla.

My phone vibrates, and I answer before the first ring fully plays. “Hey, Nick.”

“You owe me so hard,” he growls. “I had to talk to Lainey, who hates me and thinks I’m a walking, talking penishead. Her description, not mine.”

Lainey is probably right. My brother is a dog with a capital D. I don’t know why, and my parents aren’t very impressed with his inability to settle down, but Nick’s always been one to sample the world. As a pro quarterback, the world has offered itself to him too. I guess it’s a perfect match. Me? I’ve been a one-woman man all of my life. “She give you the info?”

“No. So I was reduced to stealing her phone and reading her text messages.” His voice sounds weird. I can’t figure it out, but I’m too worried about Charlotte to spend time deciphering his tone.

“So where is she?”

“I’m texting it to you. I can’t keep doing this for you, so either close the deal or leave her alone because Lainey isn’t going to let me near her phone again.”

“Did you break it?”

“I threw it into the toilet and then had to fish it out to read it.”

Ah, that explained the weirdness.

“Thanks, bro.”

“I’ll be thinking of how you can pay me off.”

“It’s yours, whatever you want.”

“Oh, really? Like the signed ball from Walter Peyton?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

He laughs. “I don’t want it then. I want what I can’t have. Isn’t that a pisser?”

He hangs up before I can ask what the hell that was all about.

“She’s at Tower23 off of Grand Avenue,” I inform Cabby.

“ETA would be five minutes then. Want me to stick around?”

I twist my mouth and reluctantly agree. “Yeah, just in case my intel is wrong.”

But my intel isn’t wrong because as we pull into the hotel property, I see her crossing the street. She’s wearing a short sundress, so short I wonder if it’s just a shirt and she forgot her shorts in her hotel room. On her feet are straw-colored shoes with thick wedges. Her legs seem endless, and for a moment, I’m struck dumb by the vision of them wrapped around my waist.

“Goddamn.” Cabby whistles. “I’ll be in my bunk.”

Fucking Cabby. I get out of the car before it rolls to a full stop. She sees me immediately and glares, which does nothing to diminish her jaw-dropping, knee-bending beauty. I suck in a breath and hold it, trying to gather some control.

“What are you doing here?” she asks accusingly.

I say the first thing that comes to mind. “I’m here for you.”

She opens her mouth to spit out a response when we hear her name called. Relief wipes away her glare, and she turns toward the voice.

I see some guy looking expensive. His white shirt is unbuttoned down to

his waist, and underneath he's wearing a wife beater. He makes shorts and sandals look like a magazine come to life on the street. His gaze flicks to me and then back to Charlotte's drawn expression. And like a light switch, something shifts on for him. Holding out his arms, wide, he says in a loud, almost shout, "Charlotte Randolph, as I live and breathe. How the hell are you? Jesus Christ, is it possible that you've gotten more beautiful?"

She turns slightly and in the small space she makes in the movement, his arm slips in. As deftly as any SEAL, he cut me out. She moves into his embrace, burrowing her face into his chest as if she is freezing and he is her only source of warmth. Another two steps and they are in the street. He holds up his hand like a traffic cop, and everyone obeys him. I'm slack jawed and frozen at this spectacle, just like the cars. I give myself a hard shake and put my feet in motion only to get my toes nearly run over by a passing car. Because he's done holding traffic back. Before I can take another breath, they are in a sports car that costs more than Cabby and I will earn from our U.S. government paychecks in ten years, combined.

"That was smoother than a SEAL at a bar full of Trident fuckers," Cabby observes.

"You should shut the fuck up."

“

If this is stalking then I can see why women are creeped out. I’m creeped out,” Cabby says.

We’re parked across the street from a restaurant where Charlotte is having lunch with her male friend. The one that Cabby calls smooth and whom I am privately referring to as *the fuckstick who is sitting too close to my girl*.

“No one asked you to come with.” If he touches her arm again, I am getting out of this Jeep and ripping his hand off.

“She knows you’re here. Women have this intuition.”

“Cabby, is your whole world broken down into male and female categories?” I ask impatiently.

He pauses for a minute. “Yes? Mostly because I think in sexual terms. Females have the pussy and we have the cock. That seems like a clear delineation.”

“There are other places to stick your dick, and the fact you only know of one speaks to your bankrupt imagination.”

He’s unmoved. “So this is Charlotte? You hardly ever talk about her. I’ve heard plenty about your parents and famous athlete Nick, but this girl?”

You've said maybe twenty words, tops, in all the years I've known you." I ignore him, but that doesn't stop him from continuing. "You're going to have to talk to get her back. Chicks like the talking. Consider me practice."

He places his hands under his chin and flutters his eyelashes at me. If I don't say something, I'm going to have to endure a barrage of Cabby-style complaints, questions, and theorizations. And he's not wrong. I do need to explain myself, but I don't even know how to begin.

I lean my arm against the car door, not taking my eyes off of her. "Charlotte is the best part of my life. The best part of me. I grew up with her. She's Nick's best friend and was mine from the moment she was born. Mine to protect. Mine to love. Only I failed in that. When she was fifteen she was diagnosed with a form of cancer. There was a tumor growing in her head. She'd been vomiting and complaining of headaches. Her dad took her to the doctor who said she should have a CT. The CT showed this giant ball pressing against her brain stem. Another two weeks and she'd have been dead."

"But she's fine now. Very fine," Cabby murmurs the last part to himself, likely remembering the vision of windblown Charlotte on the Coronado beach.

I clench my fists. I can't prevent people from looking. It's going to drive me crazy, but Cabby is a good friend. I'd have to talk to my dad about how he deals with this. "So she almost died but didn't. . ." he prompts.

"She got better, but she was still sick a lot. Her parents started talking about sending her away for treatment."

"Away from Chicago? There's better treatment than there?"

"Some of the best doctors are working in these posh resorts where you can do experimental shit without the government wagging its finger at you. There's this clinic in Switzerland where all the rich people of the world send their kids to be treated. Mostly, though, it was to get Charlotte away from me."

“Her parents disapproved?”

“Not for the reason you think. Charlotte was getting sicker. She wasn’t eating, and she was tired all the time. I thought—I don’t know what I thought, actually—but I helped her hide the sickness, and one day she collapsed at a party that I had brought her to. She was sent away afterwards.”

But not before I took her virginity. Not before I made her a thousand promises—none of which I kept.

Cabby could only look at me with raised eyebrows. *You done fucked up, boy*, his expression said.

I nod in agreement. “Everything I did after she left made things worse for her. Her mom basically said that she couldn’t trust Charlotte with me, and she was right because after Charlotte left, I started partying hard. Before I’d always been careful because I was semi-conscious of the fact that Nick and Charlotte looked up to me. With Charlotte gone, I drank a lot and put myself in some shitty situations. I ended up getting on film with two other girls—seriously, Cab?” I can see he wants to ask me details, but my repressive look shuts him up. He pretends to zip his mouth shut. “The video was sent to Charlotte. She said she forgave me.” I shake my head. “She deserved someone better than me. I’d hoped she would forget me.”

Cab looks thoughtful. “But she wrote you letters for years. Those aren’t the actions of someone who has forgotten you.”

“I know,” I sigh. Charlotte and asshole are done with lunch. He’s signaling to the waitress for the check. “I tried not writing back. At first it was easy because we were in basic and then there was a lot of training. I volunteered for the shitty posts and assignments no one wanted. I signed up for BUD/S. After I graduated, there was more training and we’ve been in and out of one conflict after the other. I thought she’d stop, but she never did. Not until the end.”

“What made her stop?”

“Shit.” I give a bitter laugh. “Suffering six years of assholishness.”

“Her last letter was three ago? Why pursue her now?”

“Remember the journalist we rescued in Iran six months ago?”

“Yeah.” Cabby fell silent. We’d found her in the desert rail thin, beaten on nearly every part of her body below the chin. The internal wounds weren’t visible, but we all knew they existed. “She broke Ford. He’s never been the same.”

Ford was a team member that moved on to DEVGRU, an elite counter-terrorist joint task force. He was the teammate that looked at me in disgust when I told him the girl I loved was alive and well. Cabby was right, though. Saving her turned him mean and hard and full of regret because he’d been on a team that tried and failed to rescue her six months earlier. If he went on to save a hundred more people, he’d still fault himself for failing that first time.

“I told her she was the bravest person I’d met. She pinned me to the side of the helicopter with those pale green eyes of hers and said that just getting up and facing tomorrow was the biggest act of bravery for many people and that it would be her hardest challenge. Surviving wasn’t brave, she said. It was living that was brave.”

“I tried to leave Charlotte alone, but I can’t. I’m not good enough. Or I’m too damn selfish. I don’t even know how to begin making it up to her, but this half-life I’ve been functioning with just isn’t worth it. I’m putting everything I have into winning her back. If I fail, at least I can comfort myself that I tried when I’m old and alone.”

I fall silent, exhausted from my confessions. The waitress brings out two cocktails and not the check as I’d thought.

Cabby glares at them. “They’re having the longest lunch in mankind just to fuck with us.” He’s probably right. “I can tell you what I won’t be doing when I’m out.”

“What’s that?”

“Cop work. This is boring as hell, and I’m even somewhat entertained by the soap opera of your life. It’s like Shakespeare threw up all over you.”

“You always surprise me when you pretend like you read.”

He flicks me off. Cabby’s mom is an English teacher and he’s better read than most of the officers on the team. The man likes fucking poetry.

They linger over their drinks, completely trolling Cab and I. Finally, when it’s almost time for the dinner crowd to show up, they climb into his fancy car again and speed off to Fashion Valley, the mall where I’d stopped to look at wedding rings.

“In or out?”

I grunt. “Not shopping. We’ll wait.”

But Cabby gets out of the Jeep anyway.

“Where are you going?” I call after him.

“I’m here. Might as well pick up some stuff.”

Cursing, I jump out and race to catch up. I don’t want to take the chance that he’s going to approach Charlotte and screw things up for me.

We go into a men’s store, and Cab starts talking up a sales clerk while I stand at the door looking for Charlotte. Much to my surprise she comes barreling toward me, carrying a package and a fierce expression.

“Here. You want to see me again?”

I take the package. “You know I do.”

“You owe me nine years of letters. Get writing.”

She stomps off to where her friend is waiting for her, threads her arm through his elbow, and they disappear into the crowd. I’m stunned motionless.

“What you got there?” Cabby asks.

I look in my hands. It’s a box of . . . stationary? She bought me a box of heavy paper edged in navy blue. And I start laughing. It’s either that or cry, and SEALs do not cry.

I howl as Cabby leads me out of the store and out of the outdoor shopping complex. I’m still howling when he shoves me into my Jeep. “You keep up that creepy ass laugh and I’m going to punch you in the face.”

Wiping away the moisture my laughter has generated in my eyes, I direct Cab home.

“You giving up on her?”

“Nope. She gave me an opening, and I’m busting through.”

Dear Charlotte,

Basic is about tearing you down until you’re in pieces so they can rebuild you into the machine they want you to be. The machine obeys orders without thinking. The machine can pick up and assemble its gun in under ten seconds. The machine can stay awake and be observant for more than forty-eight hours. The machine can trek twenty miles carrying a pack of one hundred and fifty pounds. A machine feels only for his fellow machines and no one else.

BUD/S training takes it even farther. BUD/S stands for Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training. SEAL is always in all caps or everyone on my side of the wall believes you are talking about the slimy flipper set. BUD/S is a six month course where older SEALs try to kill you. The easiest parts of training are when you’re underwater, with your hands and feet restrained, while you pick something up with your teeth. It’s the easiest because no one is yelling that you’re a shitstain motherfucker who is letting your teammates down. They actually are yelling, but you can’t hear them under the water. It’s when you break the surface that their glorious words of encouragement pound into your head.

Strong men break down in BUD/S but not me. Not because I’m more brave or strong or capable than the guy standing next to me or the guy at the end of the line, but because I’ve learned that focusing on the moment allows me to forget about the past. Under the water and bound like a pig is no big deal. Carrying a boat on my head? No problem. Lying on the beach with the tide crashing over my head, replicating the sensation of drowning repeatedly? A day with kittens. Thinking about you? More painful than a

knife to the gut. So I don't think about you. I push you aside. I'm weak, you see, so much weaker than you.

If I start thinking about you, I start missing you, and then I want to leave. Not only do I want to leave, I want to abandon everyone here. Screw AWOL. Who cares if I serve time in the brig so long as I can see you? But then the other memories creep in. The ones where I almost killed you by hiding your sickness from your parents. The ones where I was stupid and careless and drank too much while you were gone. The ones where I did kill your spirit by allowing myself to be videotaped with two girls.

In my sane moments, and I don't have many of those, I know that others would refer to this as "victim blaming." But it's not so much that those chicks violated me, but that I allowed myself to be used as a weapon against you. That's what gets me the most.

I know you were hurt, and I didn't respond right. I guess I'd hoped if I ignored it that it would go away. When I ran away to the Navy, I tried to bury my past by becoming the best sailor they could craft. Maybe I've achieved that. Maybe I haven't. I don't feel like a success because I'll never be complete without you.

It killed me not to answer your letters. At first, I didn't write because I thought you would move on, find someone else to make you happy, but whenever your letters mentioned another male fondly, I went crazy in my head. Sorry about Paul. I'm sure he was a nice guy. I'm glad he helped you learn to weld. Sorry I used Nick to keep track of you.

I was so messed up, Charlotte. And I can't say that I'm not messed up now, only that I can't function without you.

What I realized a few months ago, while facing down another brave woman, was that I didn't give you enough credit. I was utterly and inexplicably selfish. But I sold myself on the idea that everything I did was for you. I completely bought into this lie. It became my life.

I stayed away for your sake.

I was silent for your sake.

I broke it off for your sake.

But really it was for me. I didn't write back because it was easier to pretend like you and I didn't have feelings and promises. I charged back in whenever I felt my position was threatened. When the time came for me to return to you, I lied to both of us that it was better for us to be apart.

I told myself that you needed protecting and that I had failed in that position. I couldn't keep you from getting ill. I couldn't keep you from moving to Switzerland. I couldn't keep the girls off of me. I couldn't do any of these things. Worse, when I became a sailor and then a SEAL, I had more failures than successes. More people died than we saved. More people were killed than rescued. I was worthless as a protector. I was a machine, nothing more. Trained to aim, shoot, fire, reload. Again and again.

I told myself you deserved better than me because I was merely a bunch of broken bits called man. I underestimated your ability to love, your ability to cope. I took the decision from you. Made it for you like I was better, smarter, wiser.

I am none of those things.

Perhaps I knew this and hid fearing that you would see what kind of frail, jacked product you were getting in return.

This letter is a mess of words, a jumble of thoughts. Maybe there's not a coherent sentence in the above paragraphs. There is only one thing you need to know. I have never stopped loving you. You have always been first in my heart even when my actions didn't convey that message.

I come to you, on my knees, beseeching you for forgiveness to give me one more chance to show you that I am a man worthy of your heart. I will spend the rest of my days proving to you with my body, with my heart that I am the Nathan of the Charlotte and Nathan that we were meant to be.

Yours forever,

Nathan

CHARLOTTE

I'd promised myself at the Del that I'd shed my last tears over Nathan Jackson, but as they fall on the heavy linen paper I had bought earlier today I make no effort to stop them. They aren't really tears but a cleanse of my soul. I hadn't realized how broken I was until I received this letter, slipped under the door of my hotel room at some point before Colin had driven me back from dinner.

As I read, I realize that I am only the shell of a person with no heart or soul. I'd given everything to Nathan when I was a girl, and he kept them. It's why I've been so empty. But he is not only handing them back to me; he is giving me everything in return. Everything I have ever asked for and then some.

I pick up the phone.

"Yes?" His voice is a low rumble resonating in my belly. There's want and need and, yes, love, swirling inside my body, seeking an outlet.

"Yes," I say tearfully.

He exhales and the stream of air is so long and forceful that it is as if he had been holding his breath for days. "I want—" he stops himself, clears his throat and begins again. "May I see you?"

"Yes." This time my affirmation is a watery chuckle.

"When?"

The same urgency imbued in that one word courses through me as well.

"Are you sitting outside my hotel?"

"If I say yes, will you call the cops?"

"Only if you take too long to get up here."

I stand with the door open, waiting for him. The elevator is around the corner, out of my sight line, but there is a faint mechanical noise as it stops on the floor and a ping that signals the doors are opening. I pretend I can hear his footsteps, but the plush carpet is swallowing them. I devour him with my eyes, allowing myself to fully appreciate Nate's adult form. He fills up the hall space, sucks all the oxygen from the building. I've certainly stopped breathing.

"You shouldn't be out here, Charlotte," he says as he approaches. His voice has deepened and has a gravelly timbre to it that makes my insides flutter in response.

"Is it dangerous?"

"Very." He doesn't stop at the doorway but scoops me into his arms and strides into the hotel room as if he owns it. The door slams shut behind him, and in the next moment I'm sandwiched between the smooth wood at my back and Nate blanketing my front. "Last chance to say no."

His mouth is a whisker's width from mine.

"This is your last chance."

He nods somberly and sets me on my feet. I begin to protest, but he's not

leaving. He falls to his knees and presses his face against my belly. “I know it is.” The words are almost too softly spoken to hear, but I feel them. I feel his regret and sincerity. Nate needs absolution that only I can give him. I move away from the door and cross the room to settle on the end of the bed.

He watches me but does not rise. It’s as if he is afraid that if he does anything wrong, I’ll reject him.

If we hadn’t grown up together, if I hadn’t known what a genuinely good person he is, if I hadn’t felt the genuine torment in-between the spaces of the words he wrote, maybe he would be right.

But we’ve spent too long apart, and I’m ready to move forward even if he’s afraid.

“Would you do something for me?” I ask.

“Anything” is his immediate answer.

“Come over here and let me look at you.” I lean back on my two arms, allowing my loose-fitting nightshirt to fall around me. It’s not the sexiest of bedroom attire, but it’s a T-shirt of his—one that I’ve kept for nine years. He’s always liked it when I wear his clothes. “And take off your shirt while you’re at it.”

He rises immediately and walks toward me. Stalks me, more like it. His shirt comes off in the way that men do—one hand at the back of his neck and then over his head. The reveal is delicious. His arms are muscular and veiny, and his abs are magazine cover perfect without any need for Photoshop. Over the right shoulder are tendrils of a tattoo that covers his upper right back. Other than the arm tattoo there are no other marks on him but the scars evidencing his time in a military. My mind takes a million photographs so that I can pull them out when we aren’t together. He stops about a foot from my bent legs.

I motion for him to turn around. He puts his hands on his hips—as if to say, Really Charlotte?—but this is my show. He pirouettes, slowly, his arms stretched wide. I swear he could almost touch the walls, his wing span is so

wide.

“Colin told me that SEALs can hold their breath for a very long time. Is that true?”

His nostrils flare, either in jealousy or excitement or both.

“Five minutes without exertion, at least. But the challenge is doing stuff while holding your breath, like tying a knot in the precise way your instructor wants or doing a series of underwater maneuvers. Stress makes you lose oxygen at a quicker pace, so you learn to regulate your heart rate, learn not to panic.”

“And your heart rate now? How is it?”

“You tell me.”

He places a hand on either side of my hips and stretches his neck forward. His face is so close I can hear him breathing, soft, steady and slow. But when I press my fingers against his pulse, it is beating rapidly. The blood pumps quickly under my touch which, in turns, causes my breath to hitch and accelerate.

“You’re stressed.”

“No, aroused,” he corrects me.

We are not touching at any point but my fingers against his neck, and it’s almost more arousing than having his hard body stretched across mine. Anticipation is stirring our appetites, and it’s intoxicating. I drop my hand and lean back so I can stare into his face, which is tight with want.

“Take off the rest of your clothes.”

His eyes widen in surprise. This isn’t the Charlotte he remembers. The only Charlotte he’s ever had his hands on was the young, sick Charlotte. She was followed by the desperate, needy one. I want him to see me as Charlotte the woman who runs her own life and is in charge of her own future as well as her own desires. My demands catch him off guard, but he’s not turned off. Not in the least.

His hands fumble at his waist, the least smooth move I’ve seen him

execute. He was right. He is a machine and most of his actions are executed with nearly careless ease. Except now he's excited. Very, very excited. And so am I.

He drops his pants to the floor, and his tight boxer briefs go with them. When he straightens, his penis is thick, long, and engorged. The head bobs eagerly in front of me, and there's a pearl of moisture on the end. I lick my lips, and he releases an audible moan in response.

I can't keep a wicked smile from curving the corners of my lips upward. I like being in control. I like it a lot.

"Place your hands behind your back."

He gives me a questioning look. "But I thought I could—"

"Now," I interrupt him. I know what he thought. He thought he'd come in here and overwhelm me with his mouth and tongue and fingers and all his moves. If he believes he is the only one who has built up a library full of fantasies, he is in for a big surprise. He slowly folds his hands behind his neck, his elbows pointing out toward the walls.

I slip off the bed and onto my knees. I run my hands over his ridged abdomen and down the tops of his muscular thighs. He shakes—shakes!—at my caress.

"Can you stand still?"

He nods.

"Do you promise not to touch me?"

"I want to—"

I interrupt. "I'm going to put my mouth on you and give you the greatest blow job you've ever experienced, but only if you don't touch me."

He opens his mouth and then closes it. Then opens it again. Then closes it. Again. Finally, he takes a deep breath and says, "No touching. Got it."

With a smile, I congratulate him. "You're catching on."

I run my nose along the side of his erection, from the base where his heavy sac hangs down to the very tip that is wet with his ejaculate. I repeat

the action on the other side, inhaling his masculine scent and reveling in the steel-hard silk.

“You’re very long,” I say throatily. “Do you think you’ve grown?”

“In the time you’ve started touching me or since I was eighteen? Because I swear the damn thing grew an inch the minute you said take off your clothes.” His voice is full of strangled laughter.

Steadying myself, I lean in for a taste. A light lick across the head causes him to jerk. Ten years ago, I barely knew what I was doing. I’ve spent those intervening years imagining Nathan in dozens of sexual positions. His head between my legs; mine between his. His body hovering over me. His front to my back. I’ve dreamt of this. My body has ached for it.

I open wide and take him as far as I can go. He cries out above me.

“Do you remember when you taught me this? How you introduced me to how it felt to have you in my mouth?”

His eyes widen in shocked memory. “Oh shit, Charlotte,” is all he can manage.

I use his thighs as leverage and begin a slow, steady rhythm. The hard length against my tongue is intoxicating and arousing. The sounds he’s making, the way he’s trembling under my touch is driving me crazy. And making me wet. So very wet.

I squeeze my legs together, turned on by the hardness of his erection and the desperate gasps he makes when his head hits the back of my throat.

So lost in the pleasure, he forgets my orders and his hand drifts down to the crown of my head, pushing my long hair aside. I stop immediately and release him with a pop.

I look up, and his eyes flick open. His gaze snaps to his hand, and he lifts it immediately back into place behind his neck.

“Good soldier,” I murmur.

“It’s sailor,” he corrects me.

“What?”

“I’m a sailor. Army has soldiers, Air Force—you know what. I don’t really care. Call me a soldier. Will you just put your mouth back on me?” he begs.

With a wicked smile, I fist the base of him and attack, hollowing my cheeks and sucking harder and faster than before. His sounds take on a rough edge, and his legs become tense. Above me he spits out single syllable words as if breathing is an effort.

Charlotte.

Your mouth.

So good.

Fuck.

I can’t.

Don’t stop.

Yes.

I’m coming. Shit, Charlotte. Now. I’m coming now.

He tries to jerk away, but I follow him, drinking him down until every drop of him has slid down my throat. And with his seed spent, his knees give way. He crumples in front of me, collapsing onto his knees.

“Charlotte, your gift. It was too much,” he says.

“It was no gift,” I drawl and take his hand to press it between my legs. “I wanted to. I did it for me.” All my modesty and shyness are gone because I don’t fear him. I don’t fear his rejection. When he asked me the other night to tell him what I wanted, I was afraid. I’m not anymore.

I want him to know that I’m turned on by pleasing him, by being with him, by him loving me.

He stills at the evidence of my desire and then slowly rubs between my legs. A slow, dirty smile spreads over his face. “My turn.”

He cups my face and draws me in for a fierce kiss—uncaring that I still have the taste of him on my tongue. The way his lips press against mine—it’s as if he wants to breathe only if he is attached to me. He conveys so much

need and love though his lips. His hands glide down my back and then, with a sharp jerk, pull me tight against him. My legs fold around his hips, and he rises in one swift, elegant move.

In another second we are on the bed, the weight of his heavy body pressing me into the downy comforter and the soft mattress. “Start counting, baby, because I’m going to show you exactly how long I can hold my breath.”

He moves down my body until his shoulders are pushing my legs wide apart, exposing my core to his gaze. He spends a long time taking me in long, slow licks, exploring every part of me, sucking my inner thighs, my sex, the tender crease at my hip. His ministrations are endless as he brings me to the brink time and again. His turn, indeed.

He slides a condom on and pushes into me, the ruddy head of his cock stretching the swollen tissues. I move restlessly under him, and he whispers sweet things to me.

Let me in. Relax.

Shh. Doesn’t this feel good?

Your pussy is so tight. So fucking tight.

I let my legs fall open as he pushes into place, thrusting in deep until his cock is fully encased inside of me. He begins to move in smooth, even strokes. Into my hair, he continues his litany of praise.

God, you’re beautiful.

You feel like heaven.

I don’t ever want to leave this place, this moment.

I love you.

“Love you too,” I answer back, squeezing him tight inside me. “Always have. Always will.”

“I was a fool, baby. Such a goddamn fool.”

The broken words elicit ones he’s been waiting to hear. The ones that have been on the tip of my tongue since I read his letter. “I forgive you.”

His sure strokes stutter, and his head falls to the comforter beside me.
“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

He repeats himself and begins to thrust harder, pulsing against me. His words are drawn out and guttural as if they’ve come from deep inside him, a well of need that is exploding.

A hand dips between us, and his sure fingers find me, pressing down, circling and bringing me over the cliff and into the free fall of space called ecstasy. His hips jackhammer between my legs as he finds his own release. He flops on top of me, a mass of unmovable man. He makes a half-hearted attempt to move, but I clutch him tightly to me. I want to be crushed into the mattress. I want to luxuriate in the weight of his body heavy against mine. I listen to his breathing and match him, breath for breath until it is as if we are one being, inhaling and exhaling together.

My nails lightly score his back, over his muscled trapezioids and down the valley of his spine to the top of his firm buttocks and then up again.

“You keep doing that and I’m going to get hard again,” he mutters into my hair.

Deliberately I inhale just to enjoy the sensation of him sinking even deeper into me. “Is that a threat or a promise?” I tease.

“Promise.” With a regretful sigh he pushes off of me and settles by my side. “Charlotte Randolph, you’re all grown up.”

“I am.”

We lie entwined together, hugging each other close.

“It’s still my turn,” he says, cupping the back of my head and delving in for a kiss full of carnality and passion.

“You’ve bossed me around for years,” I protest. “Surely I have several *turns* left.”

He chuckles and kisses me again. In the post coital aftermath, thoughts of the trauma Nate had suffered but so casually swept aside creep in. I hug him closely, as if I can ward off the past with my body.

“You do know you were a victim, right? She didn’t rape you, but she violated you in ways that hurt your soul. And here’s the kicker: it, like rape, was about gaining power over you.” Unstated is that she did gain that power.

He halts the circular rub of my back. “It’s hard for me to accept that. Even then I was bigger and stronger than the girls. And stupid. Very stupid.”

“If I’d gone to a party, been drugged and put in the same situation, would you have blamed me or expected me to blame myself for nine years? Would you have said, ‘Oh Charlotte, if only you hadn’t gone to the party, if only you’d drank less, if only you’d sat inside your house, not touching a lick of alcohol and not venturing outside the apartment, we would still be together. The separation would never have happened.’ Would you have placed that burden on me?”

Mutely, he shakes his head.

“Then why on earth, Nathan, do you blame yourself?”

An internal dilemma plays on his face while he struggles for the words. “I don’t like admitting I’m weak and not in control.”

“It’s better to shoulder the blame?”

“Easier to cope with.”

I have no response and so say nothing. He hasn’t coped with it, or rather his way of coping was shutting down. I can only hope that if we hit rough times in the future, he doesn’t turn away from me again, *for my own good*.

He pushes my face up to his for another kiss. I melt under his attention, but there’s a tiny part of my heart that I’m afraid to give, *for my own good*.

“

Is there a family joining us?” Charlotte asks. Her voice is husky from sleep. As she raises her arms to stretch, her oversized robe gapes in the front, revealing the edges of her delicate collarbones and the soft inner flesh of her breasts. Beyond her is the bed that we spent the better part of the afternoon, all of the evening, and some pre-dawn hours destroying. And I’m still ready for another round.

Trying to distract myself, I assess the room service cart that was just delivered. There are six silver-domed plates full of steak, waffles, bacon, three different types of eggs, fruit, and oatmeal. Seems reasonable.

“I see only enough for me,” I joke. “Unless it’s a family of mice, I think everyone but you and I are going to go hungry. Come on and sit down.”

I’m sprawled on the sofa, wearing nothing but a towel that has loosened at the side, and I pat the cushion beside me. She settles under my arm without argument or complaint. It’s not easy eating one handed, but I’m not taking my arm off of her. Part of me is unconvinced she’s real and thinks that the whole night was just one fucking vivid dream.

“What do you have going on today?” I ask.

“I’m finishing up with a client. We’re closing the sale on a house, and

then the wife and I are meeting with the principal of the new school.” She leans forward and takes a bite of the omelet.

“School’s already in session?” I ask. It’s July.

“No, but I want to make sure that the transition is smooth. That’s what I’m hired to do.”

I know about her job because I have grilled Nick constantly about it, but there’s something domestic and comforting about hearing her explain. “Let me come with you. I’ll be your assistant.”

The request causes her to fumble with her coffee mug. After a noticeable hesitation, she asks, “Is shore leave like some kind of vacation?”

Her uncertainty is disturbing, and my hand tightens around her shoulder unconsciously. She’s forgiven me, but she’s not forgotten, and her heart isn’t fully mine. If it was, she wouldn’t pause for a second to invite me along. She’s okay with fucking me, but she’s not convinced she wants me in every part of her life. I see it in the stiffening of her body and how she shrinks in my embrace.

I close my eyes for a minute and stifle my impatience. Did I really think one letter and several orgasms were going to make all the past years of heartache disappear? Apparently I did. Of course she’s skittish. My past history with Charlotte is abandonment and pain. Failure is refusing to keep trying. I’d failed her before. Not anymore. I had to prove myself, though—be a man of actions, not just words.

The key here would be to stay close and become so deeply embedded into her skin that she won’t be able to walk away from me. But I have to play it close to my vest. If I come on too strong, she might flee.

“Yes. Some of the guys will go fishing or spend time with their families.”

“And what would you do on past shore leaves?”

“Go fishing or visit my family.”

She flinches because my family should have included her. It did once.

“You’ll have to put on clothes.”

“I can do that.” *I will do anything.*

“Do you have a suit? Or is your entire closet uniforms and beach bum outfits?”

I try to keep the tone light. “It’s like you’ve seen my closet.”

I realize my error before the last word leaves my mouth. She doesn’t know what my apartment looks like, let alone the interior of my closet. Everything I say is just a reminder of how I’ve cut her out. Of course she hasn’t seen my closet. Of course she doesn’t know what I do on shore leave. Maybe sticking close is a mistake of epic proportions. Everything out of my mouth is salt in a wound.

After some internal struggle, she gives me a small smile and tucks a few strands of hair behind her head. “To the mall and then a few errands.”

I curl my hand around the back of her neck. “As long as I’m with you, I’ll wear a clown suit if I have to.” My lips meet hers tenderly, and as her lips part, I press her into the cushions. I hadn’t intended to take her there on the sofa with the eggs and coffee growing cold, but I can’t resist. When we’re connected like this, I feel invincible. Nothing and no one can separate us. Not even me. With a fumbling hand, I loosen the tie around her waist. “Charlotte, you are so beautiful.”

Her breath catches and her eyes grow luminous as I trail the backs of my fingers over the rise of her breasts, to her stomach, and then lower. At my touch, her thighs clench together in aroused discomfort. I waste no time in spreading her legs and delving between them. She’s swollen, tender, and wet.

“I think I’m too sore,” she whispers with regret.

“Not for what I have in mind.” I hook one of her slender legs over the back of the sofa and lower to my knees. My tongue strokes over the engorged lips.

“Okay, maybe I can endure.” Her words are a joke, but her voice is thready and weak.

As I apply myself, her words become short, huffed out moans. When I

add one finger and then another, those moans turns to pleas to make her come.

“I love this, Charlotte. I love being down here. I want to eat you for breakfast every morning.” I tongue her harder in small circular strokes. Every tiny inch of her flushed and engorged skin is explored. I hold her down as she writhes underneath me.

“I need more,” she cries. Her non-pinned leg wraps around my hip and tries to pull me closer.

My dick tells me to give her more and suddenly resistance is stupid. Pushing her thigh up higher, I take myself in one hand. “You sure you want this, Charlotte?”

She licks her lips and nods.

“Yes. Right now. I need you inside me.”

I don’t need to be asked twice.

“**Y**ou’re staring again,” Charlotte complains. Her mouth is slightly open, and she’s applying mascara to her eyelashes. It’s true. I can’t stop staring at her.

It’s all new to me—from the way she brushes her teeth with an electric toothbrush to the complicated blow drying of her hair with a big round brush only to end up with perfectly straight strands. Watching her dress herself is almost as erotic as undressing her. Her panties are pulled up her legs and smoothed over her sweet ass. Her delicate lace bra cups her tits and pushes them together, creating a small, delicious valley that I’d like to tongue repeatedly while she straddles me.

Unfortunately, she dons her robe again which covers her bare skin and the skimpy pieces of lace. But before I can argue, she starts applying makeup, which I find fascinating.

It’s like watching a behind-the-scenes documentary of a magic show. Not that Charlotte isn’t gorgeous without the makeup. She definitely could be

naked constantly around me, and I'd be happy.

"I didn't realize so much work went into not looking like you wore makeup," I observe from my perch on the edge of the tub. I'm trying to maintain some distance because every time I'm within about three feet of her, I get hard. Her body needs a rest. I might break something if I keep pounding her.

"Oh yes, the infamous natural look. I saw that report online where something like nine-out-of-ten men like women without makeup followed by men voting a girl wearing makeup is more attractive than one without."

"Why do you listen to anything we say?"

She drops her tube into a bag full of dozens of other sticks and tubes and bottles. "I have no idea."

Out in the room, she shrugs off her robe and pulls on the blouse, skirt, and jacket. I like that I'm the only man to have seen her this way, in this intimate setting. The other dicks in the world only get to see the Charlotte dressed in her work uniform. I get to see naked, aroused, fucking sexy as hell Charlotte.

"How come you have to wear a suit?" In Southern California, shorts and T-shirts are considered formal attire.

"My clients like it. It helps for them to take me seriously. For some of them, the only people who wear suits are the guys who sign their checks. The suit conveys that I know what I'm doing and smart enough to handle their problems."

"Like a uniform."

"Exactly." Her smile of approval makes me feel like I answered all the questions on *Jeopardy* correct.

When we arrive on the first floor, I start herding Charlotte down toward the lot where my Rubicon is parked. As the dark blue Jeep comes into view, I turn on my heel and usher her back toward the lobby entrance.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

“I think we should take your car. What is it?”

“Honda Fit,” she says bewildered.

I nod to the valet. “We need her Honda Fit. Under Charlotte Randolph.”

As we wait, she gives me a long perusal.

“What?” I ask finally.

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re going to fit in my rental. It’s kind of small.”

“I’ll be fine.” The Rubicon is completely stripped down. The doors are off, and the soft top is gone. It’s great for off-roading, but it’s not the vehicle for Charlotte to travel around in with her nice clothes and her glossy hair. The image of my bare apartment and my even more bare refrigerator springs to mind. My vehicle, my apartment, and even my clothes all scream single bachelor. The only saving grace is that everything has been carefully cleaned and put away.

“Was the Jeep yours?”

She doesn’t miss a thing. When the valet arrives, she waves him off. “I don’t need it, but here’s something for your trouble.”

Grabbing my arm, she drags me back to the parking lot and my Rubicon. “Is that your Jeep?”

I nod reluctantly. From her bag she produces a scarf which she ties around her hair. “I’m not a delicate flower, Nate.” She sounds disgruntled. “I can ride in your Jeep.”

I stare at her, sitting in my Jeep looking prettier than a picture, until she bangs on the dash with impatience. With a wide-ass grin, I round the front and climb into the driver’s seat. “Just admiring the view,” I murmur and lean over to kiss off some of her lipstick. “The mall first?”

She shakes her head. “No, let’s just get going. You drive a stripped-down utility vehicle and wear cargo shorts and flip-flops. That’s who you are, and I’m fine with it. I’m not forcing you into a uniform on your vacation.”

The Jeep’s engine throttles noisily as I shoot out of the parking lot. “You

weren't forcing me into anything," I say.

"We're both different people today than we were years ago. If we're going to make this work then we have to accept that and work with those differences. The car you drive, the clothes you wear—those things are the least of our worries."

"Sounds ominous." I try to be lighthearted, but she's right. After a mile or so of silence, I ask about her well-dressed companion from yesterday. "Tell me about your friend from the restaurant. He looks familiar."

Despite my attempt at studied nonchalance, the request comes out more like an order. She raises one eyebrow as if to say she doesn't have to tell me shit, or maybe the expression is saying that if I had been more present in her life, I'd know exactly who this guy is.

"It's Colin from Switzerland. He had cancer treatment at the same time. I wrote to you about him. We've kept in touch." Her words aren't meant to be accusatory, but like my earlier references, they are.

My mood darkens immediately as I make the connection. The least favorite period in my life was those months Charlotte was away from Chicago. I prefer to shut those memories out, as if that time didn't exist. Revisiting the past was painful enough when I wrote the letter. Colin from Switzerland is an enemy, as is any other person who might try to keep us apart. I will find out everything there is to know about him and then eliminate any possible dangers.

"He's not a threat, you know." She reaches across the center console and touches my arm. I force my tense muscles to relax. "He's a good friend. He . . . provided a male perspective of things when I was busy being lost in my own head."

"Intellectually, I get that. But I can't deny seeing you with him, seeing you touch him makes me crazy. I don't like you being around other dicks. I have about a dozen insane utterances I'm keeping to myself so that you don't jump out of the Jeep."

“When you meet him it will be different,” she assures me. “He’s a great guy, and I think the two of you will get along.”

Like hell we will. Unless you never utter his name again, I’m going to hate the dickbag. Out loud, I pretend to agree, “Sure, can’t wait.”

Apparently despite the long absence, Charlotte can read me better than anyone. She smirks and then laughs outright. At least she’s laughing. I grab her hand and place it on my thigh, as much for my benefit as it is for her. I need the constant contact.

We drive down a lane of expensive houses filled with equally expensive green lawns; the drought bans make watering lawns like these prohibitively expensive. She gestures for me to stop at one of the imposing structures. “Who’d you say this was again?”

“Baseball player. If you have a kid who can play all the sports, baseball is the most lucrative and longest-lasting career,” she answers.

Before she can climb out of the Jeep, I grab her wrist. “I regret not being there when you needed me. I dislike that this Colin guy was, but I’ll deal with it.”

With a small shrug, she says, “Our past is what it is. Nothing we can do is going to change it. I’d rather look forward, wouldn’t you?”

She hops out before I can reach her, and I’m left straggling behind. A bony blonde woman with a shit ton of makeup on runs up to Charlotte and hugs her. A lanky guy who I vaguely recognize from ESPN follows behind, carrying an equally blonde-headed baby. Charlotte holds out her arms and plucks the baby from the dad’s arms. My stomach clenches at the sight, and I grow half hard. I can hear Cabby standing beside me, mocking me.

It’s time to pack it up when you get a woody staring at a Norman Rockwell painting. You’ve lost your edge, gone around the bend—whatever you want to call it—but stick a fork in you, because you’re done.

So what? I want that. The family, the house, the kid. I want all of it with Charlotte. She’s right. Looking backward isn’t going to erase the past, but we

can make our tomorrow exactly as we once imagined it could be.

“

This is the perfect house. Thank you for helping,” Charlotte’s client says. Her name is Peyton, like the legendary Bears running back, although that’s probably not who she’s named after.

“My pleasure,” Charlotte says, but her voice is muffled because her face is stuck in the belly of Peyton’s baby. I suppress the urge to pick her up and take her back to the hotel so we can start baby making again. I stick my fists in my pockets to keep from sweeping her up and carrying her away.

“So, man, I have to admit I don’t know your team,” Peyton’s husband says apologetically.

“No team. I’m in the Navy.”

Having assumed I’m neither famous nor rich, he dismisses me and turns to run his eyes over Charlotte. My pockets are doing double duty now. Keeping me from hauling Charlotte away from here and preventing me from decking her client. It’s a wild guess, but I bet she wouldn’t approve of that. Although . . . if he keeps staring at her legs he’s going to have a hard time seeing the batters after I gouge both of his eyes out.

“Ohh, a military man,” Peyton stage whispers. Her husband shoots her an annoyed glance. I wink at them just to piss off the husband even more. “How

does he look in uniform?”

“I don’t know. How do you look, Nate?” Charlotte gives me a hungry look that causes my shorts to get a bit tight and the baseball player next to me to swallow his tongue. After that long, appreciative perusal, I’m not irritated with the guy next to me because I’m the one who’s going to be in Charlotte’s bed tonight. Not him.

“I look like a man in uniform.”

“Nate’s actually a Navy SEAL.” The words pop out unexpectedly of Charlotte’s mouth. I raise an eyebrow at her. I don’t care what these random civilians think of me. The wife’s expression says that she’d like to see me out of uniform, and the player is recalibrating his quick dismissal.

Then, because he’s an asshole, he asks the stupid question, “So how many ways do you know how to kill a man?”

“Too many and not enough,” I answer tersely.

Charlotte recognizes that I need to get out of here and quickly finishes her business. Watching Charlotte smooth ruffled feathers and close her deals shows me a different side of her, one unfamiliar but no less attractive. Various family members have told me that she’s begun to build an exciting and successful business. She’s come a long way from Cancergirl—the one that I was afraid couldn’t walk down the hall by herself, the one who I hid in the boy’s locker room at high school.

Mom told me that demand for Charlotte’s business has been so high she can’t keep up with all the requests. I get it. If I was a young athlete with no family going to a new territory, I’d want some bright young thing smoothing out all my details. It’s like having a hot wife without any of the responsibilities. But the women like her too, or at least Peyton does. And she doesn’t look at Christian with anything other than the fond regard you have for someone paying you five figures to help you move.

I’m anxious to get her alone.

A beep of my cell phone signals an incoming text message. I tip my head

toward Charlotte, but she waves me off. I smile to myself. We've already started our nonverbal communicating, as if there wasn't years of separation.

The message is from Cabby.

Bring your girl to Flannery's. That's an order from your LT.

Did you get a promotion when I wasn't looking?

No, but I'm sitting next to LT.

Next there's an incoming picture. Sure enough, Cabby is standing next to LT in front of a large, fake windmill. Fraternizing with officers is usually frowned upon but LT is a bit of a rule breaker and besides, Cabby does not like being alone.

You'll be drunk by the time we get there. I could bring a clown, and you'd hit on it thinking it was her.

We're golfing! This is the seventh inning stretch! . . . Wait, LT says it's 9 hole break. Ha! Golfing is dirty! Anyway don't bring the clown. You know I'm afraid of them.

"What's making you smile?" Charlotte taps me on the arm. Beyond her Peyton and Christian have moved toward the house.

"We done here?"

"Yes."

I take her hand, and we walk toward my Jeep. "The guys want to meet you." I tilt the phone her way so she can read my messages.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I'm afraid their version of welcoming might cause you to run away."

She scoffs. “I work with athletes. I’ve been in locker rooms before. It can’t be worse than that.”

“But you’ve never seen another naked man, right?” The thought of her around a bunch of unclothed athletes bothers me.

Her face turns away, but not before I see a smile she tries to hide. “Of course not, Nate. Yours is the only body I’ve ever seen without clothes.”

I can’t tell if she’s serious, but I’m accepting it as true, or I’ll have to do something like give her a ring of hickies so that everyone knows she’s off limits.

“Before I throw you to the wolves, want to come and see my digs? Maybe check out of the hotel and save a few dollars?”

The reference to saving is a joke, and she grins saucily. We both know that even if she didn’t have her job, she would have her trust fund—just like I have mine. Freedom Funds, our parents’ co-owned hedge fund, has made both her family and mine very rich. Charlotte’s dad has made a mint in construction too, so she probably never has to work a day if she doesn’t want to but from what Nick has told me, she’s worked her ass off to run her own business.

“Yes, I’d like that very much.”

“According to my government-issued timepiece, it’s been about four hours since I last kissed you.”

She reaches up and runs her fingers lightly across my forehead. “Is that right?”

Drawing her into my arms, I lean back against the Jeep. “That’s right.”

In the middle of this posh San Diego suburb, I pull her tight against me and kiss her. My jaw isn’t freshly shaven, but she rubs against me as if the burn feels good. Our tongues clash against each other, and soon I want to strip her clothes off and lay her down on the soft grass, uncaring what the residents might think. I break it off before I lose all control.

Panting roughly in her ear, I tell her, “We need to get going before I’m

arrested for lewd and indecent conduct. Navy frowns upon that.”

A smug satisfaction fills me at her glazed expression, and I help her into the Jeep. As we drive toward her hotel, I hold her hand against my thigh, not wanting to have any break in our connection. “I didn’t know you were proud of me,” I comment, recalling how she quickly corrected Christian’s impression of me as a no-name sailor.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I thought you might be resentful because it took me away from you.”

“It wasn’t your job that took you away from me,” she says quietly.

And she’s right. The mood is less passionate and more somber when we arrive at the hotel. I try to lighten it up by describing my ratty bachelor pad. “It’s in an apartment building with a bunch of other sailors and Marines. Cabby doesn’t understand why I haven’t moved away.”

“Why haven’t you?” she asks as she carefully stows away all of her clothes and sundry items. She’s as neat as a sailor.

“It’s not like I spend a lot of time there.”

“Still, it’s not like you couldn’t afford something better.”

“I don’t like to flaunt the family money. It’s not really mine. I didn’t earn it other than by being born, and a lot of the other guys don’t come from money.”

“No matter. Take me to your lonely bachelor apartment and make love to me in your virgin bed,” she declares, zipping her suitcase shut.

I grab it from her. “Is it still virginal if I’ve beat off to pictures of you?”

“It’s pure as the driven snow until you take me there and pleasure me in all the ways that you have fantasized about.”

I break a lot of laws getting to my apartment. Halfway there, though, she kills my erection.

“I live in Dallas now, near Nick.”

Nick. God, the poor bastard. I’ll need to call him, and so will Charlotte. “That’s right. Weren’t you living with him for a while?”

She nods. “For a few months after he first moved there. We didn’t know how long he’d need me and then, after a while, I became a really easy excuse for why he couldn’t bring women home.”

“He said you were his girlfriend?”

“No. His sister.” She grins. “But after the third woman showed up in a trench coat and heels, I moved out.”

We share a laugh, but when I pull into the parking lot of my building, Charlotte grabs my arm before I can jump out.

“I can stay a couple of days, but then I have to go back and take care of another client. My life is in Dallas, Nate.” The turmoil of our uncertain future is clear in her eyes.

“I’ll fly to Dallas for the rest of my leave. We can head up to Chicago and see the parents too.”

“What are we going to tell everyone?”

“Stay there,” I order. I can’t do this sitting in the Jeep. I need to be able to see her straight on.

“This whole situation is emotionally confusing for me,” she says.

I round the front of the Jeep and then haul her out. I hadn’t planned on doing this right now. There were better, more romantic ways, but I can’t wait another minute. The box in my pocket might burn a hole through the cotton. I picked it up right after Charlotte dropped the stationary in my arms and indicated there was a way she’d hear me out.

Ignoring the increasing number of male eyes pinned on the spectacle I am making, I grip her shoulders. “I love you, Charlotte. I want us to be together. I’ll do anything it takes to keep us together. I want you to come to see where I live. I want to see where you live. I want to meet your friends. I want you to meet my friends. I want our families to know we are together. I don’t want Nick to feel that he is in the middle of a bad divorce.”

“So you know it has been a strain on him.” She’s wide-eyed, wondering where I’m going with my crazy rambling.

“Of course I knew. Half the reason he can’t settle down is because I’ve screwed him up so bad. All he sees is his big brother turning his back on something wonderful and how much pain it has cost both of us. He’ll take the hits on the field but doesn’t want to suffer them off of it.” I hadn’t just pushed Charlotte away; I’d placed a wedge between our families, harmed my brother, and made my own life miserable.

I bend down on one knee, in the middle of the parking lot, next to my dirty Jeep, surrounded by salty military men and women.

I take her hand in mine. “Charlotte Randolph, since the moment I held you when you were an infant and I was two, I knew that we were destined to be together. I fought that destiny but no longer. Living without you is merely existing. And it’s impossible. I’ve tried it for so long. I’m only half a person. You are so courageous having fought for your life and then for me. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve another chance. But you’ve told me you love me, that you always have, that you always will, so I can’t turn away even if I should.

I am here before you, on my knees, to not only beg you to forgive me but to allow me to show you how much I love you for the rest of my life. Will you please marry me?”

Her shocking blue eyes, the blue the color of the pure ocean, of the clearest sky, fill with water that spills silently down her cheeks.

I don’t so much hear her response as feel it inside me. My entire body vibrates with her choked and shaking, “Yes!”

I sweep her up and crush her mouth to mine. Around us are laughter and cheers and people taking pictures that will be the source of mocking for years to come. But I don’t care.

I run up the stairs, still holding her, still kissing her. I somehow manage to fall into my apartment and into the bedroom. We rip at each other’s clothes, our mouths feverishly attacking one another until we are skin to skin. She takes me in her hand and guides me to the hot, wet center that I’ve come

to identify as home.

Her eyes are wide, and her body is welcoming. I take a moment to appreciate the vision. Strands of her wheat-colored hair are spread across the navy blue of my sheets. She's an angel spread for my enjoyment.

I bracelet her two wrists in one hand and pin them above her head, stretching her body to accommodate me in every aspect.

Her head thrashes as she moans my name, "Nathan, please." She strains against me. Her legs widen and the heels of her feet press hard against my ass. "I never imagined we would be together again."

"I know, baby. Push your hands here," I whisper into her skin. I press her palms against the headboard so I free my own hands. One I use to brace myself, and the other I reach under her bowed back. "I can't go slow, and I can't go easy."

She nods. "I want you. Take me hard."

Digging my knee into the mattress, I thrust between her legs with as much finesses as a juvenile. I have barely any rhythm and almost no conscious thought. I am only blood and nerves. My focus is narrowed down to the pinpoints of sensation that are electrified by each slam into her body.

Forward and retreat.

Forward and retreat.

We are animals, recklessly straining for pleasure. Beneath me, her body jerks with each deep thrust. I'm abusing her, but I can't stop. The way she's locked around my body, I don't believe she'd let me stop.

I kiss the valley between her tits, up the delicate column neck and along her jaw. Her head turns into the wall of my arm. She kisses the muscle, traces a tongue along the tendons and veins that jut out as I brace myself above her trembling body.

"Fucking come with me now," I roar as the familiar tension starts to coil inside me. Licking my thumb, I press the dampened tip on her sensitive clit. She screams in response, and her cunt grips me like a vise. We wind tighter

and tighter together until I feel her release shake her body.

I power forward, hips jerking, and then I'm coming. My hot seed jets inside her, coating her walls because in the heat of the moment I forgot to wrap up and so did she. That's right, I think, that's my seed marking my territory inside your sweet body.

After the storm is past, and we lie in a pile of destroyed sheets, abandoned clothes, and sweaty limbs, I press kisses all over her bare skin. There's the hollow of her throat that I've not paid enough attention to, and the valley between her breasts that calls for my touch. I haven't completely charted the rises and dips in her back or the location of each beauty mark. Even her toes are sexy. I want to suck and lick every part of her again and again.

"You're going to have to marry me now," I say.

"Because you didn't wear a condom?" she says lazily, tracing my back with her fingernails. She seems at peace with this. I hope so because I want us to have a family right away.

I shudder beneath her touch. "No, because Mom will force you to make an honest man out of me. You can't expect me to keep sleeping with you without the protection of marital vows." I fall to my back and clasp a hand over my heart.

She pounces on me, her fingers digging into my hard muscled sides. When I don't laugh from her tickling, she pushes her lower lip out. "I have serious doubts about how this is going to all work out if you aren't ticklish."

"I can pretend for you."

Her face grows sober. "Don't ever pretend. Let's always be real with each other."

"Always."

We lie together in silence, reveling in the closeness and the mere act of holding each other. I can't sleep, but I suspect she dozes off. The thump of her heart under my hand slows, and her breathing evens out. I'm too wired to sleep, too excited that she's here in my place. There are no parents to worry about. No sickness that will separate us.

I'm content for the first time in a very long while.

She rouses later as dusk sets in. The phone on my nightstand has vibrated several times. I glanced at the screen once or twice to read the onslaught of crude texts and pictures that the assholes think are going to get me out of bed and into Flannery's. I'll go if she wants, but I'd be fine lying here all night and for the rest of my leave.

"Should we go?" she asks sleepily, turning onto her back. She stretches her arms above her head, and the sheet drops down to reveal the tops of her breasts. I nudge the navy blue fabric down further to cup her fullness and tweak a quickly hardening nipple. "Again?" she asks, looking amused.

I dip my head and take the other nipple into my mouth so it doesn't feel ignored. Having a mouth full of tit makes it hard to answer. I just nod.

"My spirit is willing, but my body has to use the bathroom." She taps my

shoulder and, when I don't immediately release her, thumps me with a closed fist. Regretfully I release my prizes but am gratified to see her buds are tight and dark from my attentions. The sight of them makes me dive toward her, but she eludes me and scampers into the bathroom down the hall.

Tucking my hands behind my head, I wait impatiently for her return. She spends a long time in the bathroom, and then when the door opens, she doesn't immediately return. The sounds from the living room indicate she is moving around. The remote is picked up and placed back down. The refrigerator door opens, and my empty stomach grumbles in response.

Her footsteps become louder as she approaches.

"Why is your place so soulless?"

I rise to my elbows. She's wearing a T-shirt that she must have found in the bathroom. I probably discarded it this morning when I was dressing. Her bare legs stick out from underneath and it hides every curve, but I still love seeing her in it.

"Because you aren't here."

She snorts. "No really. You have no pictures up. The walls are white. The only decent pieces of furniture are your bed and your big television. I can't imagine Aunt Grace didn't want to decorate in here."

Charlotte trails a hand along the barren wall as she moves around the room.

I squirm uncomfortably on the bed, recalling the fights I had with Mom about this place. "She's never been here," I confess.

"What?" Her head whips around.

"When my family comes they stay at a hotel. I go spend time with them. I fly back to Chicago. We stay at the North Shore house." She continues to look confused. Throwing back the sheet, I push out of bed and in a stride pull her into my arms. "This isn't my home, Charlotte. It's just a place I sleep in between missions, training exercises, and when I'm not with my family."

She shakes her head and laughs softly, although there's no real humor in

the sound. “God, Nate, you’re making me feel sorry for you.”

I try to lighten the mood. “You should feel sorry for me.” I bend down for her to kiss me. “So sorry that you’ll have to kiss me all over to make me feel better.”

She ducks away and avoids my mouth.

“Why did you punish yourself like this?” Her eyes spear mine, and I’m caught off guard.

I start to mouth an immediate denial but then shut up. I haven’t thought of it as punishment, but as she says the word, I can’t deny it. At least in part, I have refused to allow myself to be comfortable and happy. I have only existed. But in another sense, I couldn’t see myself having a future without Charlotte, so it didn’t make sense to do anything with the place where I feed myself and rest my body. Since leaving her, my life has always been off kilter. It was empty, so I put no effort into creating something that would just be a mockery of the real thing I could have but shunned.

“Well you can’t live like this,” she says, wrapping her arms around me.

I press her body into mine with a hard arm wrapped around her shoulders and a firm hand at the small of her back. “When can you move to San Diego? We’ll buy a new place together.”

She stiffens under my grip. “Move to San Diego? My business is in Dallas.” She steps away from my embrace, frowns and pushes her hair out of her face. “How long do you plan to be a SEAL?”

Her question catches me flat footed. I drop to the side of the bed. “I don’t know. I’ve never given it any thought.”

“My business is just starting up. This is my third year. It’s a crucial time for me. I’m expanding my territories, hiring new employees. I fly all over the U.S. I’ve even got athletes overseas interested in my services, along with major teams wanting to hire me to handle this transition work for them.” She thrusts her hand through her hair and begins to pace agitatedly.

“I’d quit the teams,” I hear myself say.

They are words I never thought would come out of my mouth. Quit the teams? SEALs hated quitting. They stayed in until a military disability kicked them out.

But the smile she returns is blinding. “Would you?”

I nod and am met with an armful of Charlotte. I grab her ass and let the momentum carry us to the mattress. My dick is hard by the time I’m horizontal. With a little maneuvering, I’m right at the entrance of her bare pussy. She’s not wearing anything at all under my shirt. I cup the back of her head with one hand and, with more roughness than I’d intended, fuse our mouths together. She kisses me back without reservation. Between her legs I find that she’s ready for me, more than ready. Her thighs are slick, and it takes almost no effort to slide between her legs and arrow my cock inside her body.

“Nothing is more important than being with you. We want to have kids and raise them together, like our parents raised us. We’re a unit.” I grunt each word in her ear as I shove my hips upward. She cries out at the penetration. I’m abrupt because I want to stop talking about the things that could keep us apart and focus on what makes it right for us to be together. She gets the message when I slam my mouth against hers and kiss her with every ounce of need and want in me.

We touch each other feverishly. Our fucking is frenetic, and soon we’re both coming. Exhausted, I lie back. My legs are still dangling over the edge of the bed, and the hair around her forehead is wet from sweat. Maybe hers, maybe mine. My heart is racing like a freight train, and I’m not sure whether it’s fear or passion with its heavy foot on the throttle.

Quietly, I tell her, “There are two SEAL operations, one on the East coast and another on the West coast. I’m stationed here in San Diego. There’s been some sniffing around by the higher ups to see if I want to move to another team.”

“Another SEAL team?”

She shifts, and my dick slips out of her. A stream of cum follows, wetting her pussy, her thighs, and down my leg. I want to cup my hand around her cunt and press all my sperm inside her so she's pregnant with my kid. If she's pregnant, she can't ever leave me. These thoughts are sick and wrong, but I'm not going to deny their truth. I'm tying myself to her with everything I've got, no matter how wrong it is.

"Like a joint team such as DEVGRU or JSOC. They're a bunch of badassess from all different branches."

"How do you get picked for that?"

I laugh lightly because she won't believe it. I could hardly believe it myself when I was told. "Apparently they put your picture up on a wall and people write on it whether they think you'd be a good candidate."

"Like some fraternity?" She shakes her head in disbelief. The corners of her eyes crinkle in amusement. "Or SEAL Facebook? Like me a thousand times so I can go to the next level?"

"Yeah, it's very scientific."

We both laugh, and I'm relieved as if we've conquered our first mountain together.

"And if you did something like that where would you be stationed?"

"I'm not going to do that."

"But for the sake of argument?"

When I shrug her whole body moves with mine. "Probably Virginia."

"Not Dallas. Not Chicago."

"No."

She's silent for a long time and doubt begins to creep back in, but when she speaks it's about another fucking awful subject. "You know whose heart we're going to break?"

"Nick's." Baby brother needs to hear from me what's going on.

"Yes." She sighs and gets up. "Ugh, I need to go to the bathroom."

I eye her legs and the streaks of white on the insides of her thighs. "Don't

wash up on my account,” I murmur.

“Seriously, Nate?”

“As a heart attack.” I can’t look away. My cum all over her legs is about the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I want to take a picture of that, carry it in my sack, and pull it out whenever I need to spank it on a mission . . . except I won’t be going on missions anymore. I push down the anxiety that thought stirs up.

“I’ll call him.”

She taps her mouth in contemplation and then nods. “I’ll make us some dinner.”

“Sure. I have about five ingredients in the refrigerator, and two of them are liquid. Good luck.”

She flips me off as she exits. I pick up the phone, take a deep breath, and dial. Nick picks upon the second ring.

“Big bro. You close the deal?”

“How was practice today?” I ask, avoiding his question.

“I only spent one hour in the cold bath, so that’s a win.”

I frown. “Thought you were doing no touch practice with no pads.”

“Rookie clipped me.”

“Did you cut him?” The health of a starting quarterback is the foundation of every successful football team. Whenever I’ve watched Nick practice, which wasn’t often and sometimes only via videos I could find on his team’s web page, he was wearing a red scrimmage vest that designated him as off limits.

Nick laughs. “No, but he got an ass chewing from everyone from the coach to the kicker. You know it’s bad when the punter chews your ass. He’s feeling a little raw.”

“Harsh, man.” Then without any more preamble, I blurt out, “I asked her to marry me.”

Without skipping a beat, he retorts, “Are you calling me to cry about her

saying no?”

“She said yes.”

There’s a long silence on the other end of the phone. Finally he exhales. “You’re going to take her away, right? From Dallas?”

It’s resignation, not hurt that I hear. He could be hiding it, but I don’t think so. We’re too close. He always knew I loved Charlotte, even when I stayed away. He just didn’t understand it. “Only for a short while. I’m going to leave the teams as soon as I can. I’ll put in for separation. It’ll take maybe six months at the longest.”

“What the hell, man? You left for nine years because you wanted to be a SEAL, and now you’re saying you’ll just up and quit? That sounds like a fucking terrible idea. What happens a year from now when you’re sitting in some suburban home, looking at your stupid ass neighbors arguing about whose lawn is nicer? You’ll want to shoot yourself in the foot, and you’ll start taking it out on Charlotte.”

I don’t like what I’m hearing, but it’s only because he’s voicing what I’m too chickenshit to acknowledge. “What’s this all about, Nick?”

His retort is hard-edged. As much as I hate what’s coming out of his mouth, I swell with pride at his protectiveness over my girl. “I love Charlotte like a sister. Never loved her any other way, but she’s my best friend and other than the time I went to Notre Dame, we’ve been damn near inseparable. You’re taking my best friend away, and you’re talking about shoving your dream under your bed like it’s an old shoe you don’t like anymore. I’ve spent a long time watching you hurt Charlotte, and it’ll kill me if you do it again.”

“I know.” I can’t say more because my heart’s in my throat.

His voice is lower, hoarser because it pains him too. “I kept her safe for you. Watched over her like you asked me to.”

My head’s full of emotion too. “I know,” I choke out. “I couldn’t ask for a better brother or a better friend.”

A noise at the doorway catches me attention. I jerk toward it and see

Charlotte there, still wearing my T-shirt. Her eyes are big and watery, but she yells out, “I’m still going to be at all your games, you asshole, so you better play good this year. And don’t get sacked. I hate that. You hold on to the ball way too long.”

Nick bursts out laughing, and then I do too. It’s going to be okay, I think. By the time I hang up, I’ve got myself convinced that I’m not even lying.

Mostly.

My clothing choices don't give me many options for a night with a bunch of rowdy sailors. I have suits, dressy tops, and slacks along with a pair of very worn denim shorts and a tank top. I opt for the denim shorts and a silk sleeveless blouse.

Nate frowns. "If you bend over I can see your ass cheeks."

"Then I won't bend over, but I'm not wearing a suit to a bar where all your friends are hanging out."

"I'm okay with the suit," he offers. "Besides, if you wear those shorts, I'm going to be walking around with a semi the entire time, which is okay in the apartment but frowned upon by the general public."

I hook gold hoop earrings through my earlobes. "Blah blah blah. I can't hear you over the blanket of paternalism that is suffocating me."

He spins me away from the mirror and wraps his arms around me. They are tight bands, but not suffocating in spite of what I said. His eyes are glittery, a mix of need, banked jealousy, and a helluva lot of love. When his lips crash down on mine, it's hard to stay upright. His mouth is doing things to me that spin my head and make me question every decision but ones that keep me between his legs and in the circle of his arms.

In the long years of our absence, my memories of him had become faint. I tried to hold on to them for as long as I could, but things such as the motion of his hard body moving over mine and the rough but soft way he handled me were hard to conjure from the images and emotions I'd stored up in my head.

I'm still struggling with the reality of being able to touch him whenever I want. To know that the embrace is really happening. It's his mouth trekking its way around my jaw, down my neck. It's his rough, calloused fingers deftly undoing my blouse and dipping inside my bra to rub over my tender and sensitive breasts. It's his thick erection rubbing between my legs until I'm reduced to a mindless puddle of squirming want.

The shrill sound of his phone going off breaks our trance.

"Shit," he breathes harshly.

"We'd better go." With some reluctance I push him away and go about repairing the damage he inflicted to my makeup and clothes in about five minutes flat.

"I don't want to go," he whines, flicking his phone to silent. As he sits on the stool next to me, I bite my lip to keep from laughing. With his head hanging down, he looks like a sad little boy.

"If we don't, they're going to call all night, and pretty soon they'll show up at your door, pounding on the wood and disturbing everyone."

"You're right." He stands up and runs a hand through his hair. His mussed hair and heavy-lidded eyes are criminally hot. I'm not leaving the apartment until I've got a little armor, so I slick on a new coat of lip gloss and run a mascara wand through my pale eyelashes so I don't look totally hairless around my eyes.

"If anyone should be upset, it should be me," I say, watching him through the mirror.

He screws up his face in confusion. "Upset about what?"

Still holding my mascara brush, I point to his reflection. "Look at your tight T-shirt, how it shows off your big chest muscles and isn't even covering

the bulges in your biceps. It's like you want some girl to come over and run her hands all over your body."

He comes up behind me and crowds me with his big body. "Is that right? Well, I'd have to tell her that if she touches me, my woman will go apeshit on her."

"Then if anyone touches me inappropriately, I'll knee him in the balls and then tell him my boyfriend is going to hit him so hard, he'll be traveling back in time."

Nate can't suppress a laugh. Lightly swatting me on the ass, he chuckles. "All right. No more smart remarks about your shorts. For the record, my T-shirt is an extra-large. This is the way it fits."

"Are you bragging about your size?" I tease.

"Who needs to brag about this?" he shoots back, cupping himself through his shorts. His thick length looks so hot in his grasp that I have to bite my cheek to keep from moaning out loud.

Instead, I shoo him out and tell him to get dressed. When he leaves, I let out a sigh of relief. Another minute with him standing with his dick in his hand and I would've jumped him.

We finally get out of the apartment without ripping each other's clothes off again, although there was a tense moment at the door when he slammed it shut, pressed my back up against it, and proceeded to kiss me until I was weak-kneed and he was wearing all my gloss.

I'm going to have to buy two tubes of all my favorite colors at the rate I'm reapplying lip coloring.

Flannery's is a self-proclaimed Irish pub, not too far from the Del. A green sign with white lettering over the entrance says "Kiss him, he's Irish." Nate tells me that the front of the bar is deceiving because it looks no more than about ten feet long.

The real action is in the rear, no pun intended. Nate maneuvers me through a throng of people, half of whom look like tourists and the other half

military boys. You can generally tell which tribe each belongs to simply by haircut.

Over the bar hangs what appears to be at least a couple hundred glass mugs, each with a name etched on them. “How do you get a mug?” I ask.

“You buy it.” He grins at my disappointed face. “Wanted a more romantic story? Like I had to wrestle a bear or something?”

“Or maybe shoot an apple off the top of the head of the bartender.”

“I’m not sure Flannery’s workers’ compensation policy covers that,” he says wryly. His hand pushes me forward until we reach the patio, which is twice as large as the interior of the bar.

A group of men and women surround three small square tables pushed together toward the rear of the patio. As we approach, nearly all the males stand. One of them looks like a young Ron Howard barely out of his Mayberry days, with a smattering of freckles and wild reddish blonde hair. Next to him is a weathered face sporting the biggest grin I’ve ever seen on a person.

SEALs come in all sizes and shapes—tall, short, stout. Their one commonality is a superb physical state. Muscles . . . muscles everywhere.

I have no doubt that each one of them could break me in half without effort. Nate and the male next to the redhead are about the tallest, at a few inches over six feet. It’s easy to see why there are so many gorgeous women around, including the ladies sitting at the table.

It’s not easy to walk toward such avid interest, not knowing what’s coming next.

“Why are they all standing up?” I whisper out of the side of my mouth, dragging my feet a little.

“The guys are interested in you.”

“Why?”

“My nickname is Monk. That I’ve run off on shore leave with a woman is making them crazy.” He plants a quick kiss on my forehead and pulls me

forward.

By the back slapping and fist jabbing, it's easy to see Nate is well-liked. I hang back slightly to observe him. It's no different than it was in high school. Men look up to him and want to be with him.

Actually, there is a difference. The way that they greet him is like how Nick greets him. This is his family.

He laces his fingers through mine and says, "This is Charlotte. And, Charlotte, these fools are my teammates."

He introduces each one individually, and I try to memorize their names. It reminds me of the times I had to meet Nick's teammates both in college and then when he went pro.

There's something strikingly similar between these men and the ones that Nick plays with. Only, when these men go out to do their jobs, someone's life is on the line. The work isn't done for entertainment but for the protection of our country.

I have to remind myself that these men have hopes and dreams and heartaches like anybody else. It helps me to relax, but only for a moment because the interrogation begins before I even sit down.

"Tell us everything about yourself and don't leave anything out," orders the man named Cabby.

There are a few ways to handle being the new girl in an already established crowd dominated by certain male personalities, but my go-to one is that I'm confident, can take a ribbing, and spew my own flavor of bullshit.

"Well, my name is Helga, err Helga Charlotte, and I am an alpine skier. I met Nathan when he was vacationing with his family in Lake Tahoe. I was babysitting for a pro golfer's family while they were on holiday. I didn't speak any English, and Nate didn't speak any German. Ultimately we were left to draw pictures for each other. We would exchange our stick figure messages for days until he left. This continued until one day I broke my hand and could no longer draw stick figures. At that point I realized I could not

continue in a relationship where stick figures were our only form of communication, so we drifted apart. Then we discovered each other on the beach where the three of you were running. He convinced me that our stick figure romance could be revived, and so here I am.”

I lift my unoccupied hand palm up as if to say that is the end of the story. Nate coughs into his free hand and then pulls out a chair for me. Across the table, there are varying expressions of confusion and disbelief.

“Helga Charlotte?” Cabby’s one eyebrow is raised.

“I know, it’s a mouthful, right?”

“Your English has come a long way,” he replies.

“Thank you. I’ve worked hard on it.”

Nate’s humor is morphing into irritation. He doesn’t like to see me under attack, and there’s something about Cabby’s questioning—or perhaps the way that he’s looking at me—that is raising Nate’s hackles. He shifts and then leans forward, arms on the table. “You got a problem, buddy?”

Under the wooden table, I rub Nate’s knee to reassure him I’m okay, but he’s focused on his friend and teammate across the table. They stare at each other for what seems like a long time but is likely no more than a few seconds.

The freckled boy interrupts, “So does everyone call you Helga, but only Nate calls you Charlotte?”

The innocent question breaks the tension and everyone starts laughing. One of the guys cuffs the boy affectionately on the back of the head.

“What?” he asks, looking around. “I was curious.” But as the others start making fun of him, calling him Howdy Doody, he gives me a wink. By playing dumb, he’s drawn their attention away. Sneaky. I am super impressed and mouth a *thank you* to him.

None of this escapes Nate’s eyes. He flags down a waitress and whispers to her, “The redheaded guy in the corner? Everything’s on my tab tonight.”

With the ice broken, the conversation became easy. I admit that Nate and

I were long-time friends and grew up together. His arm never leaves the back of my chair, and my hand never stops rubbing his knee.

“How was the golf game today?” Nate asks Cabby.

Cabby glares, first at Nate and then at the imposing figure at the end of the table who Nate had introduced as his commanding officer. “I hate that fucking game and you all know it. But instead of reminding me I hate it, you lure me onto the course with offers of free beer.”

“We got thrown out after fourteen holes because Cab threw the club at the clown face,” Lieutenant Sykes explains.

“I fucking hate clowns, assholes.” Cabby shudders.

At my confused expression, Nate clarifies. “Mini golf.”

“It’s the devil’s game, Charlotte,” Cabby says. “Never play it.”

“I swear I won’t.”

He leans across and offers his pinkie. “Pinkie promise?”

I hook my little finger with his, amazed at how it’s dwarfed, as if his hands have muscles mine don’t. “Pinkie promise.”

We shake and Cab’s eyes glitter mischievously as he lets me go. “Now that we’ve bonded, do we show each other our tits now or after we break out the glitter bombs?”

Nate settles his own heavy hand on the back of my neck. “The near daily sight of your manboobs is why I was celibate for nine years. Don’t punish Charlotte by killing my libido once again.”

Hoots fill the air at Nate’s easy admission of his nine-year drought. There’s something awesome and incredibly sexy in his openness about how he’d stayed faithful to me even though we weren’t together, even though he had thought we would never be a couple again. His confidence doesn’t flow from his crotch like so many others. There are few men who would be as unconcerned as he about not having any action for months, let alone years. I’m used to men measuring their self-worth by the number of hookups they have in each city.

Cabby grins broadly. “How was it? As good as pissing after a long walk outside the wire?”

“If you think pissing is comparable to having sex, I’m concerned,” Nate replies. They clearly enjoy ribbing each other.

“At least I did piss on a regular basis, unlike some people I know.”

I decide to break up their love fest before it turns south. “It was spectacular, Cabby, if you need to know. But don’t worry, he still loves you.”

“Good. Good.” He nods and winks. “He loves you too. Just remember that when he calls out my name the next time you’re getting it on.”

Nate’s hand drops from my neck to my shoulder and pulls me against him. “Cabby’s sad because I was his best wingman. Now he has to hang with the rest of these fools and try to prove he’s the better choice when last call is made.”

“True story,” Cabby says mournfully.

After we establish that Cabby is capable of closing deals without Nate helping, the conversation turns to the latest crop of potential SEALs. Cabby and Bride think they’re worthless, but Lieutenant Sykes argues that the fail rate is no different. The argument becomes heated as Bride says that his BUD/S class was the best. Everyone jumps in, even Nate, who says that Cabby and his class had the best pass rate, best water rescue performance, best rifle marks, and so on.

They keep arguing until another round is delivered and a new group of young ladies waltz in wearing barely-there dresses and high heels.

“Cab, if you keep eye fucking that brunette across the room, I’m going to get pregnant,” jokes Bride.

“There’s a threat to our national security,” says a short, rough-looking male whose nickname is Gonzo.

“I’m not eye fucking her,” Cab protests. He looks at me earnestly. “Ma’am, we do not eye fuck. I promise you that we’re better than that.”

“Yeah?” I can tell he’s leading up to something rowdy and probably a

little raunchy.

“That’s right. Because an eye fuck is an empty promise, and a U.S. Navy SEAL does not give empty promises. We deliver.”

Next to me Nate rolls his eyes, but everyone else at the table laughs. “Then you best get over there and deliver your fucking, or she’s going to go home and tell everyone how you were a man of looks but no action.”

Bride hoots at this and tips his beer toward me. “I like this girl.”

Nate presses a kiss to my temple and says warmly, “Not as much as me.”

We all settle in and watch as Cabby sets off to reel in his fish. The camaraderie between the men is evident, and it makes me happy to think of Nate surrounded by good friends these past years. As miserable as I was, I never once wished that he was unhappy.

Bride and Gonzo role play Cabby’s seduction.

“Why, miss, you look parched and lonely over here. Mind if I buy you a drink?” Bride intones in a deep voice.

“My mother told me not to accept alcohol from strangers.” Gonzo adopts a high-pitched falsetto.

“If you tell me your name, we won’t be strangers.”

Gonzo fake titters, and we all laugh. “Ohh, it’s Tiffany.”

Across the room, Cab and the brown-haired girl are talking. He points toward the parking lot.

“Tiffany, I’m thinking that they don’t serve good enough liquor here for a treasure like you. There’s another establishment not too far from here that has top shelf booze,” Bride says.

“Is that right? Hee hee,” Gonzo replies. In his normal voice, he says, “Watch as the female preens by brushing her hair from her shoulder. Watch as she draws a hand across her chest. This is the classic sign from the Homo sapiens female in a small group setting that she is ready to be separated from the pack.”

Bride takes over. “Homo erectus is now engaged. The male stalks

forward and lightly beats his chest to acknowledge being chosen. He deftly severs the connection with the other creatures and secures his prey.”

Gonzo glances at his watch. “Shit, that took less than five minutes.”

Bride puts his hand palm up. “I’ll take cash. Small bills only. I’m going to the dollar store later.”

“Dollar store?” I whisper to Nate, still watching as Cabby places an arm around the brown-haired girl, lifts her over the cement fence running around the patio, and then vaults over it with one hand.

“Strip club,” he murmurs under his breath.

The guys at the table hoot and raise their beer in salute to Cab’s success. He gives a lazy wave and then picks up the girl and jogs toward the parking lot, disappearing into the dimly lit night.

After draining his beer, Nate rises and pulls me to my feet. “Let’s dance,” he says. Inside the bar there’s a tiny postage stamp of a dance floor made out of parquet tiles. The house band is rocking blues covers, and the floor is nearly empty.

“Since when do you like dancing?” I tease because the Nate I knew never enjoyed being the center of attention. At parties, he sat down away from the crowds, but people gravitated toward him anyway.

“I don’t like dancing, but I want to hold you.”

A hand on my lower back presses me closer until there’s no room for even a wisp of air to pass between us. I curl my arms around his neck and bury my face in the soft cotton of his T-shirt. His one hand is splayed across my back, and the other cups my head. We sway together, moving as one unit as the guitar twangs a rockabilly melody.

“Are you sure you want to leave all this?” I ask, wondering what exactly he’s giving up for me.

“Can’t stay in forever,” he answers. I’m not sure that’s a complete response, but I push it aside because I don’t want to mar the night.

My heart’s so full of joy that I could stand here forever—which may be a

possibility given that the floor is sticky from spilled alcohol. I release a nervous laugh which causes Nate's arms to tighten and his low voice to rumble in my ear, "What's funny?"

"I was thinking how I want to dance with you forever and that we might have to because the floor's stickier than a flytrap."

He chuckles, and the vibrations of his laughter climb into my body and swirl around, filling me up. The vibrations turn to shivers, and I stare at his eyes, wide-eyed as my joy morphs into excitement and my happiness into desire. His grip on me is almost painful.

"You ready to go?" he asks hoarsely. His eyes are begging me to say yes. When have I ever turned him down?

“
Let me run to the ladies room,” I answer.

He lets me go reluctantly. As I move toward the short hall marked with the universal female/male bathroom cartoons, his attention is hailed by a friend.

Inside the bathroom, I quickly do my business and then wash my hands. I’m about to leave when two ladies walk in, one locking the door while the other approaches me. I recognize them as women from the table on the patio—wives of Nate’s teammates.

“So you’re the infamous letter writer,” murmurs the blonde. Her name is Patricia, if I recall it correctly. The other woman is blonde too, but her hair is a few shades darker. They look similar, like friends often do, wearing thin-strapped tank tops, wedge heels, and miniskirts.

I smiled self-consciously. “Yes, I am.”

Patricia reaches into her small purse and pulls out a tube of rosy lipstick. She stares at her perfect complexion in the mirror. “Your man’s refusal to welcome any advances has been the subject of a lot of gossip.”

“Is that right?” Where she’s going with these questions isn’t clear, but it’s obvious she’s got something to say, and I’m not leaving the bathroom until

she gets it off her chest.

“Childhood friends, huh?” she says it as if she doesn’t believe it.

I grind my teeth together to keep in the retort that it’s none of her goddamned business. It’s not, of course, but I want to make friends, not enemies. There’s a queen in every female group. If you slight the wrong football wife, you are dead to the entire group. The stakes are higher here because these are friends of Nate who belong to a part of his life that he’s excluded me from until now. So I’m going to make nice with this Patricia woman, no matter how much I’d like to lay into her.

“Yes. Nathan, his brother, and I grew up together in Chicago.” I don’t tell her our families are almost one and that the penthouses that we called home for most of our childhood lives were connected by a hallway.

“How is it that you separated?”

“Nate joined the Navy.”

“That usually result in breakups.” She nods knowingly and the other woman joins her, like a strange silent puppet. “My daddy was career Navy. A major.” She’s very proud of her father’s rank as if that somehow elevates her. “I’ve seen it all—both the young relationships that were never going to last and the ten-year marriages done in by separation. It’s real hard. I bet you told him you didn’t want him to join.”

I bristle because this woman knows nothing about me and less than nothing about Nathan and me. I never got the chance. He left before I got back from Switzerland.

“No, I never told him anything like that.”

She purses her lips and starts applying a fresh layer, slow and measured, making sure that I’m watching every movement. “Being a SEAL is a special calling. They suffer for months, undergo physical hardships that you and I can’t begin to comprehend. Their bonds to each other are deeper than a family’s because they don’t just work together. They live each other’s lives. They are one unit, and Nate is part of that. What is it that you do?”

“I’m a fixer,” I answer. And then, deciding I’m done with the private interrogation, I move toward the door which is blocked by Patricia’s friend whose name I can’t remember. She looks past me toward Patricia but doesn’t resist when I gently push her aside. “I’m happy that you care enough about Nate to ask these questions, but there’s no need to ambush me in the bathroom. How cliché. We’re adults. If there’s something you want to know, feel free to ask, but we’re done here.”

With another small but soft shove, I clear the door and walk out, leaving a sputtering Patricia behind me. So much for placating the queen.

As I reach the end of the hallway, I see Nate across the room. He’s smiling and talking to another man. As if he senses me, his head raises and our gazes meet. Then his smile broadens as I sense Patricia and her silent friend behind me. He is clearly delighted that I’m making friends with the wife of one of his friends. I paste on a smile for him and turn to the nosy woman. “I own my own business. I help professional athletes relocate and make their trades or signings on new teams as effortless and frictionless as possible. I meet many men and women whose lives are different and extraordinary.”

She raises her eyebrows in disdain. Patricia made a judgment about me before I even entered the bar, although I’m not sure why. “Not everyone is cut out to be a SEAL’s woman.”

Casually I respond, “I suppose that’s a special calling as well?”

My retort doesn’t faze her at all.

“Yes, it is a special calling. Not every woman can handle the months of separation. As the girlfriend or even the wife, they can’t tell you where they were or what they were doing for six months at a time. They’ll leave at a moment’s notice. You have to handle your own life and his shore life by yourself. Your air conditioner breaks down? You need to fix it. You have a leak? Get to know a plumber. Your man comes home from a mission with a used condom at the bottom of his ruck sack, you just throw that shit away

because his life is so fucking stressful that sometimes he needs to let loose. You don't let that touch you, your relationship, or your kids. And you live in fear that every doorbell ring is a uniformed officer ready to share that the service of your man was honored." Patricia's nearly vibrating with emotion. The source of her unhappiness could be me, but I think it's the number of used condoms she's found at the bottom of her man's pack. Nate was faithful to me for nine years, and we weren't even together.

Her resentment over his fidelity and her man's lack of it is the root of her dislike. There's nothing I can do about that.

"I appreciate your concern, but whether I can handle being with Nate or he can handle being with me is solely our business." I turn to walk away, but she grabs my wrist.

"In the Navy, his home life is as much the team's business as anyone's. Get used to it."

I let her have the last word, and she stalks off.

Nate strolls over then and leads me out into the fresh air. I thread my shorter fingers between his and lean into his arm. "That looked like an intense conversation."

"Patricia was advising me that it takes a very special person to understand months of separation and silence."

He cringes and releases my hand to cup my shoulder and draw me under the shelter of his body. "Did you tell her you already know all about that?"

"No, why would I?"

When we reach the Jeep, he turns me to face him.

"It takes a special kind of woman to keep her heart open for so long and to be willing to forgive innumerable acts of stupidity. The inability to talk about my missions will be like cake for you."

"I noticed that several of your teammates are not married."

Running his hands over the goose bumps on my arms, Nate says, "Some think that they can't serve the team and be a family man at the same time."

Others believe they are too broken to have anything worth offering.” He tips my chin up with a finger. “I’m neither one of those, but I’m happy to leave the teams to be with you. We’ve spent too much time apart. Now that you are willing to let me back into your life, I want any scrap you will give to me.”

I want to retort that I’m not the one handing out scraps. He reappeared in my life a couple of days ago. I’m still reeling from the change, and now I’m supposed to make a life decision in the span of time it takes to snap my fingers? But what’s the alternative? Not being together? I don’t want that either. Fighting with Nate is unproductive.

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re sacrificing for me.”

“What’d Patricia say to you?” He shakes his head. “Is she trying to warn you off?”

“She was looking out for you. I love that you have friends who are fiercely protective.” I don’t love how she attacked me, but I can appreciate the sentiment behind it, regardless of how awfully she tried to convey it.

He snorts. “It’s as much loyalty as it is someone trying to prove her dominance.”

I release a small sigh of relief. He has her number. Leaning into him, I say, “I don’t care about Patricia or her role as the queen bee of the South Side SEALs. I only care about us.”

“Me too.” His head descends, and for a time he kisses away all the thoughts of his life in San Diego and my life in Dallas and our troubled pasts. But when we climb into his Jeep, my gut is churning and my chest feels tight. The words of the wife tumble inside my head even as I try to shut them out.

When we get home, I cling to Nate. I run my hands over every inch of his body, trying to replace my old memories with new ones. My throat is tight and hot, and I’m afraid to give voice to any of my fears—as if that will give them power. When he snaps on the bedside lamp as we maneuver into his utterly bland room, I throw an arm across my face.

“No light, please,” I beg.

He pulls me down to the bed but doesn't turn it off immediately. "What's wrong, baby?" His beautiful eyes search mine, and I try to hide away my unease and uncertainty.

"I want to feel you," I say.

"And I want to look at you." The left side of his mouth quirks up. "I can't get enough."

It's hard to turn down the plea in his eyes. The light stays on, and I focus on his beautiful face. His cheekbones are more prominent, all traces of *boy* have been erased and replaced with intense masculinity—from his forehead, down the straight line of his nose, and to his square jaw. I've always found him breathtaking, but as a teenager I didn't have many points of reference. Since then I've seen some of the most magnetic males with the most perfect bodies, but none of them compare to Nate.

I rub an arm over the hard swell of his biceps and under the short sleeve of his T-shirt. "Fill me up," I whisper. "Let's make new memories."

His eyes widen, and his nostrils flare. He tears at my clothes and then struggles with his own. I laugh, but the sound dies in my throat as his heavy erection springs free. Red and thick, the velvet-covered steel bobs in the air as he stalks toward the bed.

"Find me funny, do you?" he says in mock anger.

"I don't know how you walk around with that thing between your legs," I answer primly. I fold my legs together and rest my hands in my lap. It would be a perfectly ladylike pose if I wasn't nude.

"Maybe we should take a walk while you have this between your legs."

The thought of him carrying me about the apartment impaled on his cock is pretty damn exciting. I squeeze my thighs together, an action his careful eyes don't miss at all.

"Another time," he promises and then spreads my closed legs apart. The gaze he runs along my body is as erotic as any caress. "If the lights were off, I won't be able to see how pink you get everywhere." His hands slide from

my inner knees to my inner thighs until his thumbs meet at my core. “Or how very wet you become.” In agonizingly slow measures, he inches his thumbs inside me. Every part of me begins to tingle. Sucking in his lower lip, he hisses. “Or how fucking sexy you look with me inside you.”

“Or my scars?” A little self-consciously I rub my finger over the scar where my port once sat, receiving injections of drugs that tried hard to kill off only the bad cells and preserve the good ones.

“I love your scars.” He presses a hot open kiss against the shiny, slightly puckered skin. “It tells your story—one that involves me, the beginning of us, your survival.”

I throw my arms around him and tug him to me until the sparse, coarse hair of his chest rubs against my sensitive breasts. My nipples tighten upon contact, and my eyelids start feeling too heavy to hold open. “I love you, Nathan Jackson,” I whisper.

“I love you, Charlotte Randolph soon to be Jackson.” His mouth muffles any response I might have. He places light licks against my lips and resists my lures to deepen the kiss. Teasingly he nips at the corners of my mouth, my eyelids, and my cheeks. His touch is tender, and the love is evident in every stroke and heated whispered endearment.

His thumbs leave my sex as his hands travel north to cup my breasts in his large palms. He holds my sensitive flesh and bends his head to suck on the peaks he’s created with his rough palms and heavy thumbs. The devoted attention he gives them sends ripples of pleasure throughout me.

Gently pushing me against the bed, he takes himself in hand and slowly pushes inside me. When he enters, it feels almost as reverential as our first time. His possession of me, the ecstasy he pulls from my body is a graphic reminder that there will never be anyone for me but Nate. Careers, geographic differences, nasty people will never be more important than being together.

He latches onto a nipple again, sucking it hard into his mouth as he

thrusts all the way to the hilt. I can't keep my cry of abandon inside. It wails above us, and he responds with a deep, hoarse groan of his own.

"You okay, baby?" His voice is strained as if it is difficult to give volume to each word.

"Yes, more please." I squeeze my thighs against his hard hips, and my fingers dig into his shoulders.

His strokes are slow and measured, as if he is trying to discover every nerve ending with his shaft. Each movement of his body rubs against my clit and my breasts until I'm drowning in the vortex of dark sensation where there is nothing but Nathan and me and pleasure.

His mouth is wet and hot on my neck and shoulders. Then he's kissing me again, his tongue thrusting hard as he pounds into me. I pant meaningless pleas and writhe on the cotton under my body, begging for release. My legs hook around his hips as I try to keep him deep within me.

"Open your eyes," he commands. I hadn't realized they were closed. His teeth are clenched, and the skin is pulled taut over his cheekbones. He has never looked so commanding or so fierce. I'm helpless under his orders. Our eyes catch, and I see the fire of his love and his passion—all for me. "I love you," he shouts. "Goddamn, I love you."

His thrusts become ragged and disjointed as he jets his release inside me. His words, his utter love for me, his hot, wild release triggers my own orgasm. The friction of our bodies hurtle us over the cliff together, and our mouths find each other in a messy, breathless benediction of our love.

A minute, twenty, an hour? I don't know how long we lie together in sweaty satisfaction. With my head against his chest, the reassuring and steady beat of his chest soothes me.

"Don't worry about it, Charlotte. We'll work it out."

He sounds so confident. How can I do anything but believe him?

My body wakes up at dawn as it always does. Charlotte is on top of me, legs sprawled on either side of my hips and her head tucked under my chin. I've a raging boner and an equally strong need to piss. With great reluctance I shift her to her side, but the motion wakes her.

"Go back to sleep," I say, and she responds by mumbling something into the pillow.

In the bathroom, I take care of business, splash water on my face, and brush my teeth. As I turn to leave, the jetted bathtub catches my eye. It's about the only thing worthwhile in this entire dismal apartment.

I've had to soak away a lot of bruises and sore muscles after beachside and ocean training maneuvers. I flip on the hot water and go hunting for the right supplies. Under the kitchen sink, I find four Sterno cans from a camping trip I took with Cab a year ago. Two matches later, I have the bathroom lit up with makeshift candlelight. The room smells vaguely of alcohol from the gel fuel, and I have no fruity shit to erase the smell, but, fuck, it's the thought that counts, right?

In the bedroom, a sleepy Charlotte is sitting on the edge of the bed, yawning and stretching. Her heavy tits move enticingly, and my previous

boner perks up in attention.

Someday soon, I need to fuck those tits.

"I'm too sore for whatever you have in mind, and I have to pee." She holds up a hand as if to ward me off.

"I've a better idea." I stride over and scoop her into my arms. I nudge the bathroom door open with my shoulder and set her on the edge of the sink. "How about an early morning bath?"

Charlotte looks at the tub full of water, steam rising in small wisps above the surface, and purses her lips together in approval. "I like this."

Then she sniffs.

"Don't have candles," I admit. "I'm using camping fuel."

"This is the most romantic candlelight bath I've ever taken," she declares.

I leave her to use the bathroom in private and scrounge up an apple and a banana and a couple of pieces of toast. I don't have much food, but there's no point in buying anything. We're going to take off to Dallas soon.

Charlotte is already in the tub by the time I return. I place the plate of food on the side of the tub and climb in behind her. "Want the jets on?"

She nods, and I flip the switch. As the jets motor up and the bubbles rise, Charlotte leans her head back to nestle into my shoulder. I tuck my rock hard cock into the hollow of her back and arrange her legs over mine. The tub isn't made for two people, especially when one is my size, but as her slippery body rubs against mine, I can't find a thing wrong with the situation.

"Mmm, this is a good idea . . . camping candles and all."

I remind myself that she's sore and that her soft moans and wet skin aren't an invitation. The big head is paying attention; it's the head between my legs that's acting like a heat-seeking asshole.

"Tell me about your business, baby," I ask, anxious to take my mind off of how easy it would be to lift her up and thrust my dick inside her hot hole.

"What do you want to know?" The little devil shifts again, and I'm half convinced she's mocking me with her body, testing the limits of my self-

control.

Desperation has me searching for a topic to get my decision-making process out of my cock. “Worst client,” I blurt out.

She ponders this thoughtfully and then says, “I don’t really have a worst client because I try not to work with assholes. I’ve only ever taken on clients who’ve been recommended, and that cuts down on the bad seeds. Plus, you have to keep in mind that they’re going through a huge change in their lives, so it’s going to be stressful. And you just have to take that in stride and know that whatever the source of their unhappiness is, it isn’t you. You can’t take it personally.”

“Like Patricia,” I grunt, thinking back to the scene at the bar last night. We’ve all had our Patricia run-ins, but like Charlotte we kind of understand why she’s uptight and unhappy. “LT is a good officer, but he fucks around on her a lot. She could probably report him for conduct unbecoming, but she likes her position as LT’s wife too much.”

“I thought the SEALs were a largely male organization.”

Before I answer, I flip off the jets. They’re noisy and Charlotte appears in the mood to chat. “Plenty of women around. When we’re stationed overseas, there’s a ton of support positions. There are women in supply, nurses, lots of women in the Air Force, and so there’s always opportunity. Plus, not every place is as restrictive as, say, the Middle East. Far East or South American assignments have plenty of, um, available ladies.”

“So your nine-year celibacy is a pretty big deal.” She tips her head back to stare at me.

She has no idea. A rueful smile tips one side of my mouth up. She pokes a wet finger in the corner of my lips.

“You can’t smile like that and not spill.”

Playfully, I bite her finger. Then I suck on it. Her mouth falls open, and her breath catches. *Yeah, how about a little payback, you tease.*

Out loud, I answer, “A guy on another team was gay but pretty far in the

closet. Even with the new policies, almost no one admits their sexual orientation. And in the Special Forces, we're all aggressively heterosexual." I correct myself, "Or at least we pretend we are. When I wasn't hitting on all the available women on leave, rumors started spinning. Never bothered me, but it led this guy to develop some ideas. He came on to me. I turned him down and shared a little about you."

"You sound mad." Little lines appear on her forehead. She's probably concerned because her friend is gay.

I hurry to assure her that who a guy enjoys fucking makes zero difference to me. "What I was pissed off about was that this guy thought I was going to rat him out to his teammates and so he retired. Last I heard he was working for a contractor and stationed somewhere in the Middle East. I've got no problem with one of my teammates being gay because who they spend time with says fuck all about their ability to handle a weapon and think on their feet. If he's a good teammate, a good brother, what he does in his bedroom is none of my goddamn business."

"It's too bad that he left then." She shifts again, and my cock slides between her cheeks. Fuck, that feels good.

"Um, yeah." What we were talking about?

She giggles and shifts again. The little minx knows exactly what she's doing to me. I pump between her ass cheeks, and she pushes back against me. Just when I think we might be getting somewhere, she starts talking.

"I think Nick was my worst client."

Muffling a sigh, I say incredulously, "Nick? How come you moved to Dallas with him anyway?"

"Because he needed me." Her shrug implies the answer was simple, but Nick wanted her to come to move to South Bend when he was at Notre Dame and she refused. "I didn't realize how truly lonely he was in college. Because he has so many people around him, it's easy to scoff at that notion, but when these high school boys go off to college they get as homesick as anyone."

There is the physical stress of bulking up and realizing that everyone on your team is awesome, not just you. The competition is fierce, and the pressure to win placed an immediate strain on him. I never really understood it until I saw what a mess he was leading up to the draft. So after the draft I went to down to help him out, run errands for him, and try to make it so the only thing he needed to worry about was getting to training camp at the right time.” She turns and rubs her cheek against my chest in a kittenish fashion. The small caress is enough to cause me to catch my breath. “He abused me though, and that’s why he’s my worst client.”

“How so?”

“He’d either use me as a shield or a voucher. He’d tell girls he wanted to avoid he was taken and then put his arm around me, or he’d say, ‘See, I’m with this nice girl Charlie, so I’m nice too.’”

I laugh hard because I can totally see Nick doing that. “So he calls you Charlie?”

“A teammate of his started calling me that, and it just caught on.” She lifts a hand and watches the water drip down. She does it again and again as if the answer to some terrible question can be seen in the drops. Finally she asks, “Why didn’t you ever tell me you wanted to join the Navy?”

My erection wilts at her obvious dismay, at the remembered pain, at the distrust. I need the *Men in Black* pen that erases memories.

“I was scared.” And weak, but I suppose that’s implied. “I figured if I told you and you objected I wouldn’t go. I wanted to do something with my life, Charlotte, and not live off being the son of Noah Jackson. I didn’t want to be one of those trust fund kids who got a job because his father called in some connections. Whenever Gray would visit, our dads would reminisce about their time in the Marines, and it just sounded like something I could do. It seemed like I could be part of something bigger than myself.”

A sigh big enough to lift her out of my arms runs through her body, as if she’s experiencing the hurt I inflicted on her all those years ago.

“I was resentful. I wanted to blame our separation on anything but me or you. Then I wanted to believe that our letters would see us through. When your mom came to me and showed me the pile of letters that she had exchanged with your dad, I conjured up this fantasy that the ink and paper would bind us together.”

Her words hang in the air, and I’m chilled despite the hot water. I’m the reason that our childhood bond was broken.

“I love those letters. I read them constantly, and they got me through a lot of hard times. Some guys in the service never get one thing. It was wrong to not write you back and expect you to continue to correspond with me, but I was selfish. I could not give those letters up.”

Charlotte turns in my arms and wraps a pair of wet arms around my neck, awkwardly lying sideways between my legs. “It doesn’t matter. Not now. Not anymore.”

I crush her to me, wanting to write those words in indelible ink on our skin. The only thing that matters is that we’re together now. The past is over. I plunge my tongue deep inside my mouth, letting her know exactly what I want and how I want it. She kisses me back just as aggressively, and my cock rises out of the water seeking appeasement.

Unfortunately, she breaks away and lays her head on my heaving chest. “Tell me what it’s like to be a Navy SEAL.”

“It’s a lot less romantic than the movies and books make it out to be. Every day is a training day, even the days in which you’re actually conducting an operation.” I don’t want to talk anymore, but I’m not going to push myself on her if she’s hurting.

“Nate,” she says after I fall silent.

“What, baby?”

“I don’t think I’m that sore after all.”

“Thank Christ.” I lift her and in one hard thrust fit my entire shaft in her cunt. Still holding her back firmly against my chest, I slide all the way down

to the end of the tub, jerking the handheld shower off the hook. With one hand I catch it, and with my other hand I hit the water.

“What are you going to do with that?” she asks suspiciously.

“Make you scream, baby.” I turn the shower head dial to pulse and place it directly over her clit. Kneeling against the tub base, I jack my hips against her from behind while the water strikes her tender pussy. Our bodies are slick and leverage is hard to attain and we slip around the tub as I pound into the tight clutch of her cunt until we reach the end of the tub. Our hands hit the tile, and she braces as I thrust. It doesn’t take long for a low keening cry to erupt as she convulses around me. The nonstop pressure from the dual assault triggers a second orgasm.

“Nate,” she cries. “I can’t take it.”

“Oh yes you can,” I grunt, digging my knees into the hard surface and thrusting upward with as much power as I can muster. I want her to come again and again until all that exists for her is me and the pleasure I can bring to her. Back arched, neck exposed, she allows the tsunami of feeling to overwhelm, and I finally allow myself to come, spurting hard threads inside her sex. When it is over, we rest against the wall, my heavy weight bearing down over her slighter one.

My arms are weak like Jell-O, but after I recover a small measure of strength, I carry her, half dazed, from the bathroom into the bedroom.

Laying her on the sheets, I cover her and pull on my jogging clothes. I should be tired, but I’m not. Every inch of me is alive as if I’ve just finished a successful mission. And I suppose it is a successful mission. Charlotte’s in my bed, wearing my ring, and sporting the best just-fucked smile this side of the Pacific.

She’s still sleeping when I return from my run. I toe-off my sweaty shoes and socks, tossing the smelly things into a laundry bag.

A knock on the door interrupts my journey back to Charlotte. A look through the peephole gives me a jolt a surprise. Yanking the door open, I

greet my former teammate. “Ford, what’s up man?”

“You got a minute?”

“Yeah, come on in.” I open the door wider and gesture for him to enter. He shakes his head in refusal.

“How about out here.” He jerks his head toward the hallway.

“Sure.” I can count the times Ford has sought me out on my one hand. The last time we really talked was during the CIAs search for the journalist, after we’d failed to rescue her the first time. He might be a spook now, but he was my teammate once. I’d do pretty much anything for a teammate. I step out and close the door behind me. “Sorry, I just got back from a run.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He glances around me to the closed door, rubs his head, and looks down the hall. I’ve never seen Ford nervous before, so it takes me a minute to recognize that he’s not checking for targets but searching for the right words to say.

“Heard your girl is fine,” he says, finally returning his attention toward me.

“Thanks.” He’s not coming on to her, but I can’t guess where he’s going with this.

“The journalist . . .” he trails off. “You remember her?”

“Yeah.” I’m still lost.

“She asked me to come with her. She was moving back to her hometown because she was tired of trying to kill herself in pursuit of the next big story. She’d had enough danger for three lifetimes, she told me. Her plan was to write a children’s story or something that was helpful and innocuous.”

“Sounds like that was a good plan for her.” The light is beginning to dawn.

“Yeah. She asked me to leave the team and come with her. We . . . ah, connected after she returned stateside. I couldn’t stay away.” His anguish and guilt is evident in every line in his body, every syllable of his words.

“Don’t know that you did anything wrong, brother. We all felt for her. If

you provided her a little comfort after it was over, it is no one's business but yours and hers." That's not technically accurate, but I'm not going to shovel any more shit onto this poor man's shoulders.

He ignores my lame attempts at reassurance. "I kept thinking I needed to save more people, like some kind of fucking penance. Then I got the offer to join the Joint Ops program, and I was chuffed about that. So I told her no. I regretted it almost immediately but didn't get to tell her that because I was shipped off for a mission and didn't get back for months. But the moment I'm back, I get in my truck and drive up the coast. She lives in Northern California. Found her small town. It was fucking beautiful. Right on the coast. Lots of water access. Trees. It was fucking Mayberry on the ocean. I asked around and found she was living with some other guy. I sat outside the house, saw them go into it together. Saw the lights turn off. I felt like I was living in a stupid fucking country song, so I punched myself and drove back to Coronado." He rubs a hand across the jaw as if remembering the blow. I kinda think he did punch himself, and it's not some kind of metaphorical thing. He continues, "And now? Now my life is drinking until I'm too numb to care that the only women around me who are willing to fuck are those who care more about my uniform than the man wearing it."

I was right that he was broken but wrong about the cause.

In the silence he presses on. "I regret my decision. My career makes a cold lover at night. No one will take the place of her in my mind, and I'll never have her."

"Jesus, Ford."

"Yeah."

That one word says so much. I stare at him, unable to look away from the torment in his eyes. Is this what I looked like day in and day out? As if I had lost all meaning in life and that putting one foot in front of the other was its own pathetic victory. He nods solemnly and places a hand on the back of my neck. Pulling me close enough that his forehead almost brushes mine, he

squeezes hard as if he can somehow impart his message, if not through words, through osmosis. “Don’t become who I am. Who you were.”

“What’s that?” I don’t really have to ask but I can’t help myself.

“Dead man walking.”

“

Are you nervous?”

I don't answer her because the question doesn't require one. She knows exactly how I'm feeling.

“Why are we flying commercial again?” I ignore the flight attendant who keeps staring at me as I stand in the aisle next to our seats. Charlotte has taken the first class seat next to the window, but I'm not sitting until I absolutely have to. Given that the coach class has a separate entrance and I'm not blocking incoming foot traffic, there's no reason I have to sit down until the door closes.

“I'm surprised you even asked that. I always fly commercial. How do you fly?” Charlotte is absently flipping through an airline magazine advertising mini mansions for pets and a pillow that doubles as a remote control. Essentially weird, needless shit which I suppose is exactly what you'd buy on a commercial flight. Out the window I can see the baggage handlers arriving with our carts of luggage.

“I can't remember the last time I flew on public transportation. Usually I can catch a ride on a military transport to just about any place I need to go. And the few times I haven't, I just chartered a plane.”

“Why, Nathan, you’re kind of a snob.” Her lips purse together hard as she suppresses a laugh.

“Sure, laugh at me. Next time you’re not so hot to do something, I’m going to cackle like an old man.”

“Sir, do you need something?” asks the flight attendant. Her tight smile is about as successful at hiding her annoyance as Charlotte is about hiding her perverse pleasure in my anxiety.

“Scotch, please.” I tack on the courtesy so I don’t go over the line from irritating to insufferable.

“We don’t have any actual Scotch, but we do have an assortment of whiskeys.”

“What kind?”

“Dewar’s, Canadian, and Jack Daniels,” she recites.

They all sound bad. Charlotte flicks her eyes in warning, which I translate to mean don’t get difficult about the poor ass selection of liquor offerings on this plane.

“Jack, neat.” I sigh and take my seat.

“Anything for you, miss?” she asks Charlotte.

“I’ll have a mimosa, thank you.” As the flight attendant leaves to prepare our drinks, Charlotte turns to me. “For all your Spartan living, you certainly have not forsaken all your expensive tastes. I saw that bottle of aged bourbon in your cabinet. Do your teammates know what they’re drinking?”

I stretch out my arms and legs, not to loosen my limbs but to take a measurement of the interior space. It’s cramped, even up here. I concentrate on taking measured, even breaths. “No. They only know I serve the best booze on the team. Most of these guys wouldn’t know the difference between whiskey and bourbon. What matters to them is that it tastes good and goes down smooth. That the burn is something to savor rather than endure.” As I inhale, a faint floral scent fills my lungs. I lean over and murmur into her pink shell ear. “Kind of like when I’m taking you.”

She flushes lightly and licks her lips, knowing exactly what I'm talking about. The past few nights we've enjoyed marathon love-making sessions. About the third round, she's tender and swollen and, despite my having jacked into her multiple times, very tight. I have to work my way into her cunt. Thinking about her slick, snug walls takes my mind off this tin can and its unknown pilot.

"I know something that would distract me," I say huskily. I slip a hand behind her neck, and with slow and deliberate pressure, I compel her toward me. Her eyelids begin to fall as if the sexual intent in my eyes is too much for her to look at. Our mouths are a scant inch apart when a discreet cough from the aisle causes Charlotte to jerk back.

"Here's your drink, ma'am." The stewardess stretches across me to hand Charlotte a champagne flute and then takes the shorter glass off her tray for me.

"Thank you," I mumble. The ice cubes clink against the side of the glass. Did I ask for ice cubes? I hadn't meant to. I swallow the entire contents down and suck one ice cube into my mouth. The interruption irritates me. Just another reason why we should be flying in a private plane. I could have Charlotte in my lap, my fingers in her jeans and my tongue in her mouth without any coughing flight attendants.

"Whatever you're thinking, it's not going to happen," Charlotte says and starts thumbing through the magazine again.

"The bathrooms are too damn small anyway," I grumpily respond as the doors close. The sense of suffocation hits me again, and I dig my fingers into the metal ends of our seats. I need about four more drinks. Maybe she should just bring me the bottle.

"You do dangerous things all of the time. Your job is literally risking your life on a daily basis. You jump out of airplanes and helicopters. You swim across the ocean. You go into situations where people are shooting at you, but you're a nervous flier?" Charlotte asks incredulously.

“The people who fly me are highly trained professionals. I have no idea about the people flying this plane. They could be former Air Force people, or they could be guys who learned to fly on puddle jumpers.”

She coughs into her hand, makes a strangled noise, and then bursts out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I snap.

“You! Big bad Nathan Jackson is afraid of flying. You’re so invincible. It’s nice to see you have vulnerabilities.”

“Thanks,” I say sourly. I can feel my own cheeks heat up.

Still laughing, she reaches over the wide console and places her soft hand on my cheek. With a light tug on my T-shirt, she pulls me down to place a warm kiss against my lips.

And she doesn't stop.

Since she doesn’t care what anyone else around us thinks, neither do I. With her lips on mine, it really doesn’t matter who’s flying the plane. It could be a monkey. The rest of the flight goes by fine after she orders me another drink and forces Dramamine down my throat.

Nick picks us up at the airport. After a moment of hesitation, he grabs me close for a bear hug. All’s forgiven.

“Good to see you, shorty.” He gives me two back-breaking thumps before releasing me. Turning to Charlotte, he lifts her up and swings her around. “I don’t know why you’d ever want to marry this ugly motherfucker,” he says as he sets her down and then slings her carry on over his shoulder. “I’m taller, better looking, and more successful.”

“It’s a hardship,” she says. “I view it as my act of ongoing charity. When I get to heaven and am asked what I did to deserve entrance, I’ll point to Nate’s picture and say that I had to sleep next to that face for decades.”

“You’re a good, giving woman, Charlotte, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Shaking my head, I grab my own bag and walk ahead of them as they continue to mock me in good humor.

“How was practice?” she asks.

“Good. I like the rookies. There is one wide receiver in particular who could be a great addition and maybe even start. Have you picked out a bridesmaid’s dress for me? I’m assuming I’ll be your maid of honor. Remember that yellow is not my color.”

“Haven’t really thought about it,” she admits.

“Really, what have you been doing?”

She laughs smugly. “If I have to explain to what I was busy doing, then I finally understand why you’re prone to one night stands.”

“Charlie, most women can’t handle more than one night with me. If they spend more than twenty-four hours in my presence, every other man in the world is ruined for them. It’s bad enough that I’m giving them a glimpse of heaven during our one night. To subject them to that pleasure repeatedly and then take it away is just too cruel.”

“I guess we all have our crosses to bear,” she replies with stifled laughter.

“So does this mean I’m an uncle yet?”

“Unless you have a sister we don’t know about who’s having a baby, then no. We’re not ready for that.”

I’m glad I’m front of them so Charlotte doesn’t see my expression of surprise. I shouldn’t be surprised. There’s no reason for us to have kids now. We’re both young, and we’ve just reconnected. We have a lot of issues to work out—like where we are going to live and what we’re going to do with our careers.

But the idea of her heavy with my kid? Pretty damn exciting. And there’s this sense of permanency. If we had children, she’d never leave. It’s pure stupidity, but there’s this niggling sense of dread that I want to eradicate. Pumping her full of my seed and seeing her round with my child is one way my hindbrain can deal with the unsettling feeling, but even I know that’s no

reason to start a family.

“You bringing Nate to meet the guys at the bar tonight?”

“Yes, but I need to talk to Lainey and Reese first,” she says very cautiously.

Nick makes a strangled sound that causes me to turn around. “What’s that about?”

“Let’s just say you don’t have a real fan base here in Dallas,” Nick explains. “Except for me, of course, but those other friends of Charlie’s don’t know you like I do.”

Despite Nick’s dire warning, Charlotte’s friends couldn’t be more welcoming. When we arrive at the bar around dinner time, it’s nearly empty. Charlotte explains that the majority of the money is made on the weekends and later, after the single guys are done with practice and realize they either have to cook for themselves or come to the bar.

Charlotte and Nick’s money has gone into big screens on the wall and maybe a new coat of paint. The floors are scarred, and the bar top doesn’t look much better. The dark blue walls are lit up with a smattering of neon signs.

Lainey is a dark-haired woman with an abundance of curves. With her large chest and small waist, she brings to mind the red-haired Jessica Rabbit cartoon. I recognize Reese immediately. Standing a little under six feet with a strong runner’s build, his model-perfect hair falls artistically around his face. Do I feel better that this male friend of Charlotte’s who even I recognize as attractive is gay? Fuck yes.

“So you’re Charlotte’s Nathan?” Lainey asks, but the greeting is warm instead of wary.

“I am.” I give her hand a firm shake.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” she says.

“It’s all true —both the good and the bad,” I admit.

She nods her approval. "Aren't we all made up of good and bad?"

Nick groans. "It's too early to be philosophical."

"I didn't know you read, Nick. I thought you only looked at books with pictures in them," Lainey shoots back.

"There are books without pictures in them?" Nick responds.

"Gah." She throws up her hands. The two continue to bicker throughout dinner which consists of damn good burgers, big fries, and several beers. There is clearly a history between the two that I'm going to have to know more about.

Shortly after plates are cleared away, Lainey stands. "I'm glad that you're here. Charlie is glowing so much that I have to leave because I forgot to put my sunscreen on, and if I stay any longer, I'm going to get burned."

"So soon?" Charlotte protests.

"Babysitter," Lainey says as if the one word explains it all. And apparently it does, as murmurs of sympathy go round the table.

"Danny flaked out on you again? I told you not to hire her." Nick throws down some bills on the table. As he stands, the chair legs scrape across the wood floor.

"What are you talking about? You flirted nonstop with her when I was interviewing her."

"Exactly. Cassidy shouldn't be watched by some girl who's got more interest in getting into my jock."

"So that's your test? If they want to sleep with you then they're not worthy to watch Cassidy?"

"That's right." He takes her arm and starts pulling her toward the door. "We don't want Cassidy to grow up to be all about boys. She needs to be an independent woman."

"Why don't you just stop showing up for my nanny interviews? Then they won't have anything to be hungry about," she retorts but doesn't pull away.

“I’m going to be around eventually. It’s better to know up front.”

Lainey rubs her forehead as if this is an argument she’s heard before, but by now they’re too far away for me to hear her response.

I look at Charlotte. “How long has he been wanting to sleep with her?”

Reese spits out his beer all over the table, and Charlotte has to flag down a waitress to come over to clean up the mess.

“Lainey and Nick have a complicated history.”

“That’s an understatement.” Reese snorts.

Ignoring Reese, she continues, “She dated a Mustang while she was waiting tables here, and she got pregnant. He accused her of tampering with her birth control and told her that he was not going to support the baby. She hired an attorney to prove paternity because she didn’t have a lot of money, not enough to support a child and herself.”

“The guy turned out to be an asshole?”

“Worse. The player then had a change of heart and said that if she was going to pursue paternity against him, he would challenge her for custody. And since she was an out of work waitress who slept around with football players, who was the judge going to side with?”

“So what happened?”

“I met her when Nick was drafted. We kind of bonded, and we all pitched in to help her. So, well, when the bar came up for sale, Nick and I bought it and hired her back. She runs the bar and helps with my business.”

“What’s with her and Nick?”

Reese must have kicked her under the table because she yelps, “Ow!” Frowning at him, she reaches down and rubs her leg. “He’s Nick’s brother and my future husband. I’m not keeping secrets from him.”

“This is Lainey’s secret,” Reese hisses.

“Nate’s not going to say anything to Nick.” She turns to me. “Promise me you won’t say anything to Nick.”

“Charlotte, baby, you know I can’t promise that.” I shift uncomfortably in

my seat.

“You will once you know the whole story. Nick sees Lainey and totally falls for her. He pursues her hard during his rookie season. This was before he knew of her circumstances.”

“So where's the player who knocked her up now?”

Reese gives Charlotte a hard look which she ignores. “He’s the quarterback coach now.”

“I see.” And I do. Nick has to maintain a good relationship with his coach, and knowing that the coach fucked over a girl he likes wouldn’t be the way to do that.

“Chip got injured Nick’s rookie year and went from backup to quarterback coach in a matter of a couple years. He comes here regularly to rub it in Lainey’s face. And we grin and bear it because we don’t want to affect Nick’s relationship with the team. He only knows that the father is an asshole and . . .” her voice trails off.

Reese and I turn to see a tall, blond-haired man heading toward our table. He’s clad in a navy polo and chinos, but his coiffed hair has an expensive look to it. By the tightening on Charlotte’s face, this must be Chip.

“Charlie, looking gorgeous as ever.” He places a hand on the back of her chair and another on the table in front of her. The cage he creates shuts the rest of the table out and her in. To say this annoys me would be an understatement. But I get the dilemma for Charlotte and Reese. This is Nick’s coach and someone they don’t want to create conflict with for the sake of Nick, but they also clearly can’t stand him.

Reese has turned away to stare at a nearby television, and Charlotte is suddenly entranced by the napkin in front of her.

Fortunately I can plead ignorance, so I stand up and place my hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “Baby, who’s this?”

At the endearment, Chip straightens and offers a big paw of a hand for me to shake. I take it and squeeze it tight. A slight grimace appears, but this is a

guy who wants to be perceived as invincible so he tries to exert his own power over me. Back when he was lifting and throwing balls all day he might've had a chance, but as a coach he's gone soft. You can see it in the softness of his hands and the slight paunch that he's trying to hide behind his tucked-in polo.

"Chip Peters, this is Nathan Jackson, my fiancé and Nick's brother."

"You're the Navy SEAL?" Chip pales beneath his dark tan.

"The very one." I give his hand one more bone-cracking squeeze and then sit down, drawing my chair close to Charlotte.

Trying hard to hide his pain, Chip folds his bruised fingers in the palm of his other hand. "Nice to meet you. Sorry I can't stay to chat, but I see my group's waiting for me."

We watch as he scuttles into a corner booth where two other similarly clad polo-wearing dudes are quaffing beers.

"So is Nick wearing her down, or is there absolutely no chance?" I ask.

"I think as long as she associates Nick with the football team, he'll never see the inside of her bedroom."

"What about you, Reese?" I turned to her other best friend.

"I'm a man in search of a soulmate," Reese says loftily.

"I hope you find him then." And I do. Maybe I should look up that old seaman and see if he's still single. Fuck, wait, am I turning into Cupid? Shaking my head, I turn to Charlotte. "You ready to leave, baby?"

I comb my fingers through her soft, fine strands, rubbing the back of her head. Behind her ear, I trace the path of her shunt that drains the excess fluid off her brain. She's a miracle. I don't know how I lived without her.

Her head turns toward me, and the slumberous need in her eyes tells me the massage isn't as relaxing as I had intended.

"When do you go in for a checkup?" I ask gently with a tap at her neck. Her early letters told of quarterly appointments.

"A couple of days."

“I’ll go with you.”

“Alright.” Her words are slurry, as if she has drank too much, but she’s not had a sip today. Time to go.

“See you later, Reese,” I say without looking at him.

“Yeah, yeah. You guys go on. Just leave me here all by my lonesome.”

“Sorry,” she says as she collects her purse.

“You’re not sorry,” Reese replies.

“You’re right. I’m not sorry, but I still love you. I’ll call you tomorrow.” She leans down and gives him a kiss goodbye.

As we step out of the air-conditioned bar into the hot, dry Texas night, Charlotte clings to my side.

“You worked up, baby?” I say, bending down so that my mouth is only inches away from her skin.

She breathes out heavily. “You know I am.”

“Tell me,” I demand. “Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

“I’m hot,” she says. Her words are barely more than a whisper. “And wet. Aching.”

The desire in her eyes must be the kind that lures sailors toward sirens.

I drag her down the side of the building to the darkest corner I can find. Under the eaves of the roof and partially shaded by a bush, I push her against the rough brick exterior.

“You need to start wearing skirts,” I mutter as my attempt to find exactly how wet is stymied by the fit of her shorts.

Her face tilts toward mine, and I capture her mouth. It tastes of tart sweetness. She curls her hand around my neck to bring me closer, and I manage to wiggle two fingers under the tight lace of her panties.

Some exotic and sexy sound vibrates as I shallowly fuck her with the tips of my fingers, but it’s not enough for either of us.

“Not here,” she moans.

Why not here? my cock asks petulantly. As I marshal the last bits of my

self-control, I pull my fingers out. The honey of her cunt glistens on the ends of my fingers. She stares at me as I suck my digits clean.

“Let’s go then,” I say roughly. The ride to her condo is too long, even though it’s only a few minutes away.

We give the security team in her complex a show as I devour her in the corner of the elevator. If she had been wearing a skirt, I’d have been inside her. I content myself with pushing her up against wooden panels and rubbing my erection against her cloth-covered sex. She wraps her legs around my waist as I dry hump her, kissing her savagely. If there was sound on the security feed, they would hear her moans, my grunts, and the wet smack of our mouths.

She’s rabid for me. Her hands are fused to the sides of my head, angling me for better access. Her tongue stabs inside my mouth as if she’s fucking me. Her aggressive desire turns me on even more.

We barely reach her doorway before I’m unzipping her shorts. Her hands are down my jeans, and her nails are making tiny divots in my ass. I’m inside her before her panties hit the floor, and I’m coming before I’ve thrust into her more than a handful of times.

“I love you so goddamn much, Charlotte,” I say. When I pull out, a flood of come drips down her legs.

“I love you too,” she says. I swing her up and carry her into the bedroom, where I spend the next hour making up for my hasty lovemaking at the entrance.

Returning to the office after a week away is intimidating. The paperwork has piled up so high in my full inbox it makes me never want to leave again.

“Free agency has started in basketball, and you have three new prospects. Antonio Spence has called twice,” Lainey announces, striding into my office with her tablet. “And Tuvane Richards got picked off the wire by the Wildcats.”

“Remind me never to go away again.” Tuvane got traded two years ago to the North Carolina Cougars and had me handle the move. In the meantime, he’s gotten married. Somewhere on the shelf is his notebook.

“You need to hire more people,” Lainey says.

“At least two.” I spot it. Tuvane’s notebook is on the bottom right in all its blue and orange glory. Thank goodness for team colors. It’s about the only way I can keep everything straight. “But I’m not sure I can even afford two at this point.”

I’ve only been officially in business for three years, and while the books are in the black, hiring two more people and opening another office is an expansion I’m not prepared for.

“Are you really leaving? Nick mentioned something last night.”

“Did you get your babysitter issue worked out?”

"Nice tactic," Lainey says with asperity. "Trying to avoid my question with an uncomfortable one of your own."

I smooth my hand over the cool surface of the walnut desk that my parents gave me when I opened my office here in Dallas. “Honestly the idea of moving is overwhelming. I don’t know anyone in San Diego. All of my friends are here. My business is here. My family is in Chicago. Half the time that I would be in San Diego, Nathan would be gone on some secret mission he can’t speak of. But if I want to spend any time at all with him, I have to be on the West coast because when he is not on a mission he would be in San Diego training.”

“And there’s no chance that he would leave the service to do something else?”

I give her a tiny shrug, which probably doesn’t convey the full amount of helplessness that I feel. “He said he’d quit, but I don’t think he would be able to. Even after telling me he would leave and come with me to Dallas, he kept talking as if we would be living in San Diego. It’s as if his brain wouldn’t accept the words he said to me. It’s a calling for him, so I don’t want to be living here five years from now with him resentful that he left.”

Lainey makes a face. “I get that you love him and have forever, but this is a shitty dilemma you are in.”

“There is no dilemma. The trouble is accepting the right decision.” I try to smile but fail. “Now cheer me up with some gossip. What happened last night?”

She shrugs as if Nick coming over to play house is no big deal. “We played with Cassidy until she fell asleep. That girl loves him so much.”

“He’s a good guy, Lainey,” I say for what seems like the hundredth time. And for the hundredth time, her nose scrunches up as if something stinks in the room.

“In the two hours that he was at the house, his phone rang more times

than a cash register on Black Friday.”

“He is the starting quarterback for one of the most watched football teams in the country. He’s rich, attractive, and has the body of a god. Of course his phone was ringing, but it doesn’t sound like he answered it.”

“Nick is a great guy to you because for all intents and purposes you’re his sister. To the rest of the female population, he is walking heartbreak.”

This is a familiar and old and boring argument, so I abandon it. No one is going to convince Lainey that the bogeyman in the closet is not a helmet-wearing, pigskin-carrying football player.

“Let’s hire a manager for the bar. You can run this office full time with Reese. I’ll cover all the West coast teams. You and Reese cover the South and Midwest. We’ll hire someone to cover the East coast.”

“I’ll put post an ad.” She makes a note on her tablet. At the doorway, she turns back. “I’m going to visit as much as I can. You’re not leaving your old friends; you’re making new ones.”

“I know.” But it’s sure nice hearing it.

My next task is a phone call is to my parents. It’s one that I’ve been putting off, but Nathan and I both agreed that they would need to be told today.

“Charlotte!” My father answers, and his deep voice is full of affection. No matter the distance or the time, I am secure in my parents’ love. I realize that it is not the move I fear, but the newness of Nate and my reconnection.

“Hey Daddy, when was the last time we saw each other?”

“Father’s Day,” he replies promptly. “You brought your friend that Nick has a hankering for and her sweet little girl. We all went up to the North Shore and had a picnic out on the beach.”

All but Nate, but he’s not been part of our “all” for a long time.

“That was too long ago.”

“Your mama and I can be on a plane tomorrow if you’re missing us. Besides, your mama’s got some news for you.”

His happiness tells me it's good news. "What is it?"

"She and Noah are selling out their interests in the fund."

I'm glad I'm sitting down. Dad sold out all his construction interests shortly after I finished treatment in Switzerland. He didn't want me to be by myself, and he wasn't interested in working like a dog anymore, as he put it. I loved having him with me, and it made my loneliness bearable when Nick went to college and Nate went AWOL on me. But Mom motored on, almost as if she was in a contest with Noah to see who could make more money.

"She's tired of it and wants to travel. Noah was relieved. He said he's been trying to convince her to chuck it all into the river for years now." Dad laughs. I can see him sitting in the library in the penthouse, a low boy full of some expensive liquor in his hand and his feet up on a cowhide hassock. His face is probably tan against his hair. He says I'm full of my mother's stock except for my blue eyes and blonde hair the color of wheat, which I inherited from him.

"I'm excited for you," I say truthfully and then wonder if they'd come out to San Diego for a few months to help with my transition.

"I can tell by your voice that you've got something on your mind," he rumbles.

"Where is Mom?" I don't want to divulge the news twice.

"In the office. Want me to call her?"

"Yeah."

There's a series of clicks and then I hear my mom's strong voice. "Your father says you have news."

"Apparently you do as well. I didn't know you were thinking of retiring."

"It's not so much as retiring as changing our scenery."

"I assume this means hotels and airlines because you once said that camping was for people who hated life."

"The outdoors and I don't get along."

That's an understatement. Mom's idea of enjoying the outdoors is lying

on a lounge chair next to a pool with a big hat shading her skin from the sun. “I’m sure Daddy appreciates the sacrifice you are making.”

He rumbles his amused agreement. “You’re welcome to come with us.”

“I was gone this week, and when I returned I found that my work was having babies faster than hamsters. So as much as I might like the idea of a vacation, I get enough traveling in the form of my job.”

“The invitation is always open. We’ll send you our itinerary, and if you find a break in your schedule, hop on a plane and we’ll take care of the rest. Now what’s so important that we are conferencing together?”

My delay tactics have run out. I don’t have a good way to break the news, so I just blurt it out. “Nate asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

There is a long silence on the other end of the line. So long that I wonder if they have hung up on me or if the connection dropped. “Hello?”

When I do hear a voice, it’s my daddy’s. “We’re still here, darling. We’re trying to wrap our heads around the bomb that you dropped.”

“I hope you’re happy for me.” My free hand is clenched so tight around the metal pen, I’m certain I’m going to bend it in half.

Mom clears her throat. “I think the question that we need answered is, are you happy? This came out of nowhere. I didn’t even realize you had any contact with Nathan in years.”

“I was in San Diego getting a player situated, and I had to buy a gift at Tiffany’s for his wife because she wasn’t happy about the move. In the weirdest coincidence, I saw Nate in the store. I admit that for a while I had convinced myself that it didn’t matter that Nathan didn’t love me like I loved him. I thought I’d find someone else, but there wasn’t anyone for me.” My voice is cracking as I relive the anguish of the moment when I believed Nathan was buying a ring for another woman. My parents remain silent. “But as I looked at him through the window I realized I would never, ever love anyone else like I loved him. And something happened to him as well. He’s loved me all along.”

It all sounds terrible as I try to explain it. I wind down, and Mom asks me the question that's been preying on my mind.

"Nathan lives in San Diego, and you and your business are in Dallas. How is that going to work?"

"Right. So I'm going to move." I wait, then, with my heart in my throat as I ready myself for the disapproval of the woman whose respect I value more than any other female in my life.

Finally she speaks, "Your daddy and I are so proud of the woman that you have become, Charlotte. My first instinct was to protest because he has hurt you so badly. But you are a wise and wonderful woman who is capable of making her own decisions. We support and love you. And should this decision have a negative outcome, we will still support you. No matter what you do in life, we know that you are doing your very best to make the right choices."

I can't stop the waterworks after that.

Dad interjects. "Sometimes you're the bug on the windshield, and sometimes you're the driver of the big truck. That's life. You're the driver now. If this is the direction you want to go, like your mama said, we support you hundred percent. And if you need an expansion loan, your mom has come into some money recently."

We all laugh a bit until Mom changes the subject.

"When is your next checkup?"

"Tomorrow. I'll call you right after."

"Alright, darling girl," Daddy drawls. No amount of time in the Midwest has totally eradicated his southern upbringing.

"How did it go?" Nate asks when we meet for dinner. He spent the day with Nick, having received special dispensation to watch practice.

"Better than I thought." I take a long drink of my beer, which causes him to raise an eyebrow. "How about you?"

“Well, someone is planning the wedding already. You better call my mom if you want to have any say in the matter.”

“I think she probably already knows. I may have talked to her once or twice about it,” I say guiltily.

He smiles. “The shore?”

“Yes, a gazebo. Maybe late autumn or early spring.” I’d planned the whole wedding out when I was eighteen and still believed that Nathan would come back to me after a four-year stint in the Navy. “Your dad proposed to your mom at the shore. It’s perfectly symmetry.”

The side of his mouth curls up and he reaches across the table to capture my hand. Pressing a hot kiss in the middle of my palm, he says, “Let’s do it this autumn, Charlotte. Let’s not wait.”

“Okay.” His enthusiasm is contagious. And I want everything else settled. “I’m moving to San Diego. Lainey and Reese are covering the office here, and I’m going to take care of all the West coast athletes. I’m going to hire someone to handle the East coast.”

He wipes his mouth and carefully places the napkin beside his plate. “I thought I told you I was quitting.”

“I don’t want that. I’m more mobile than you are, and from everything I’ve read and heard, your time as a SEAL is finite. You can’t do this forever, and so while you still can, you should.” I continue to eat even as he stares at me. He can pin his unwavering Special Forces Navy glare at me, but I’m immune most likely because I know he’s done hurting me, both intentionally or unintentionally.

“So you’re up and moving your entire business so you can spend lonely months in San Diego away from your friends and family? No.” He shakes his head resolutely.

“I’m moving the base of my very mobile operation to San Diego to be with my love so that he can properly attend to all of my very demanding needs.” He’s still unconvinced, but I can see a glimmer of relief in his eyes.

It's enough that he's willing to sacrifice it all for me. "When you're gone, I'll come back here, sleep in Nick's guest room and keep him out of trouble."

"And when I'm there, I promise to see to your every need," he says. The husky timbre of his words sends a shiver up my spine.

"Are we done here?"

"We're done having dinner." He stands and lifts me to my feet. "But the rest of the night has just started."

Sated, I draw aimless patterns on his chest. It heaves with every labored breath as he tries to calm himself. Nate's body is a machine, one that he works hard to bring me pleasure. There's something incredibly sexy about watching his big chest rise and fall in a rapid, uneven cadence. I did that.

His composure and iron will are somewhere under the bedcovers that lie in a haphazard pile at the end of the bed, and in these moments, in the afterglow, his power is banked and his aggression is tamed.

"What's the story behind your tattoos?" I ask. The one on his arm is a skull covered by a medieval helmet. Out of the helmet are two curling horns that wrap around the biceps.

He turns his head slightly and lifts his shoulder to eye the one I'm pointing to. "Mostly drunken stupidity."

"I thought that it was illegal to get a tattoo while under the influence?" The tattoo is still dark, but I can tell it's not one of his newest ones. There's a faded, subdued quality to the ink.

"Only in the U.S. I got this one in Finland. It's the Norse god, Hödr, a warrior who was tricked into killing his brother. He was exiled, and Odin had another son, sired for the sole purpose of killing Hödr."

"That's morbid."

"I've not been in a good place for a long time," he admits softly.

I gather him in my arms, pressing his face against my breast and wrapping my legs around him as if I could absorb his grief and his past

sadness. “The one on your shoulder is beautiful.”

“The dragon?”

“It looks like the dragon is chasing something.” The large colored wings are in motion, folding over the back onto the top of the shoulder, and the neck of the dragon is stretched out between the shoulder blades. His mouth is open, but there’s no fire coming out.

After a long moment, he sighs. “It’s me chasing you. I’m the dragon and you’re . . . not there. I was going to have a dove put on my opposite shoulder, but it never felt right.” He pushes up to look at me. “At least not until now.”

The glint in his eye is one half love and the other half sexual intent. My body protests. “Don’t look at me like that.” I laugh. “I’m too tired and sore.” He smirks, a look of pure unadulterated smugness. I slap his dragon right on the snout. “That’s the smarmiest smile I’ve seen you wear.”

He doesn’t even try to hide his smile. “I can’t help it. You just admitted that I wear you out in bed. That’s a point of pride. Smugness is a natural by-product.”

“A natural by-product of good sex is sleep,” I counter.

He disentangles his body and rolls onto his side, tucking me against him. “Then sleep, baby.”

We arrive at the clinic early as Charlotte has to give blood and piss at the lab. I avoid hospitals, having developed an aversion to them during our teen years when she was first diagnosed. Everyone here appears to know her, though, and she appears comfortable. I'm the one who can't sit still.

She ignores me and scrolls through a sea of white lace and satin on her phone. Our parents spent hours last night hammering out the details of the fall wedding. No one complained it was short notice, probably because everyone thinks we need to get to the altar before I flake out again.

Uncle Bo called me on a separate line.

"I'm sorry," I said before he even got out his greeting.

He heaved a long, heavy sigh. "Not going to lie to you, son. There were times I was mighty disappointed in you, but it looks like you righted your train. That said, let me tell you if you hurt her again, I'll forget you are my godson. And then I'll hand you over to AnnMarie."

"I'm not going to let anyone down again," I said.

"See that you don't."

Mom sent me a long email full of scolds and admonishments finished off by encouragement. Dad's email was succinct and to the point: "Not everyone

gets a second chance. Don't waste yours."

"Does it always take this long?" I ask, glancing at my watch. We've been in here for over an hour.

"No," she admits. "But it could be extra busy in the lab. They like to run a couple of tests before I leave."

"You still taking your shots?" After her chemo and radiation, she had to administer daily shots of human growth hormones to make sure that all her organs fully developed.

"I don't need them anymore," she answers, not looking up from the phone. "I'm fully grown. I take a few drugs to help my little thyroid along, but mostly I'm drug free." She wiggles her wrist, and her medical ID bracelet jingles. It's the sparkles of my diamond on her finger that capture my eyes, though. I can't stop looking at it—my little sign post of possession.

Taking a seat beside her, I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze her. "I love you."

"I know," she says. She lifts her chin so I can kiss her. That's a far better way to pass the time than pacing, I think. I massage her neck lightly as I trail soft kisses along her jawline to her ear. The little lobe with its small gold hoop adornment dangles in front of me. I bite the soft flesh and then lick the soft pink upper shell. Her phone clatters onto the counter next to her. I drag her onto my lap.

"There's a bed over there," I mouth against the hollow in her neck.

"It's not a bed," she laughs.

I drag my mouth away and glance over to the paper-covered exam table. "It's bed-like."

"Nathan, this is my doctor's office." She tries to sound scandalized but at least half of her, hopefully the lower half, is intrigued.

Before I can summon up more arguments, the door opens and the nurse bustles in.

"Charlotte, can you come with me? I need to move you to another room."

Charlotte stands and grabs her phone. "Sure, another test?"

"Oh no, the doctor just wants to chat."

The sense of wrongness that I pushed away earlier comes flooding back. The nurse won't look at us, and even Charlotte is starting to feel nervous. I rise and place my hand on her back.

"Just Charlotte, sir," the nurse instructs.

"Nate's my fiancé," Charlotte objects.

The nurse purses her lips together. "Let me check with the doctor."

She disappears, and Charlotte takes up the pacing. "I'm sure nothing is wrong," she says, but there is no conviction in her voice. I shove my hands in my pockets because I'm afraid I'm going to punch a hole in the wall if someone doesn't come in here soon and take away our anxiety.

I have the knob in my hand when the door pushes open. A slight, dark-skinned man with frameless glasses and a white coat appears on the other side. I move away so he can enter. Standing behind him, I cross my arms and look down my nose, daring him to give us bad news.

"Charlotte, why don't you take a seat," he begins.

She covers her mouth and stumbles into a chair. I'm frozen in my spot, unprepared for this news. I've been in danger, real danger where I thought I might not come out of a mission alive. I've walked among land mines with RPGs being cannoned around me, but the last time I felt this cold hand of fear was when Charlotte was fifteen.

"No," I say as if by my command I can stop whatever is happening.

The doctor gives me a pitying look. "There are anomalies in your blood. I want to get you in for a CT scan. They're ready for you now."

"What do you think it is?" Her voice is barely a notch above a whisper, but the room is so quiet, we'd be able to hear a mouse squeak.

He shakes his head. "I don't want to guess. Let's get these tests done, and then we'll talk."

The nurse arrives and leads Charlotte out because she's turned into a

wooden doll. I'm not much better. We shuffle down to radiology. I'm forced into a tiny sitting room while Charlotte is taken away.

Time moves sluggishly. After each test, she is increasingly worn out. The mental toll is exhausting her. Finally, they send us home after having taken a biopsy of her leg, a procedure so painful that Charlotte is biting back tears and I'm ready to tear the surgeon in half. They'll call us, we're told, but we don't need confirmation for the news we don't want to accept.

We stumble outside in shock. The late afternoon sunshine nearly blinds us as we stagger to her car.

"I can't drive," she says. Her hands are shaking. I look down and mine are too. I'm not in much better condition.

I call upon my training and somehow get us into the car and to her condo in one piece. I don't remember the drive or if we talked. It is all a blur. When we get home, Charlotte runs into the bathroom and locks the door. Inside, I hear her crying.

On the other side, I stand like a worthless fool wondering what I should do. I want to break the door down and pull her into my arms, but this is one fight I can't win with a gun or a knife or even a great plan.

There's only one thing I can do, and that is be with her. This time, I'm prepared. I'll go to every hospital visit. I'll research every article on healthy eating and alternative medicines. She's not in this alone. And no one is taking her from me. Not her parents, not my parents, and not the goddamned military.

I pull out my phone and call my commander.

"You're supposed to be enjoying your shore leave," my LT barks.

"I'm separating," I say.

"Didn't know you were married, son," he says in confusion.

"No, from the teams. From the Navy." I squeeze the back of my neck, trying to gather my thoughts into a logical and comprehensible form. "My fiancée has just been diagnosed with cancer, and I need to be with her."

“You’ve got two more weeks of leave, Monk. Plus we’re just training when you get back. There’ll be plenty of time for you to be with her while she has treatment.”

“No, sir. I’m telling you now that I’m filing my separation papers ASAP. No more missions. Nothing. I’m out.”

The door wrenches open suddenly, and Charlotte lunges at me. She plucks the phone from my hand and nearly yells into my CO’s ear. “He’s not separating. Forget that he called you.”

She punches the disconnect button and throws the phone on the bed. I make a grab for it, but she blocks me.

“What the hell, Charlotte?” I bellow.

“You’re not quitting,” she shouts back. Her hands are fisted by her sides, but her tears have stained her face. The mascara has created black circles around her eyes, and there are wet tracks down her cheeks.

“Fuck I’m not.” I snatch the phone up, but she clutches my arm and then starts to sob. “Fuck, okay, I won’t quit.” I’m bewildered and heartbroken and would do anything to make her stop crying. Collapsing on the bed, I hug her shaking body into mine. The tears I refuse to shed are burning the back of my eyelids and scorching my throat. Hoarsely I whisper stupid, meaningless things in her ears. That we’re going to be all right. That this is just a temporary setback. That she’s going to beat this.

She feels tiny and fragile in my arms. What did we do to deserve this? Hasn’t she suffered enough?

We lie together for hours until the phone rings. Charlotte rolls onto her back and covers her eyes with an arm. I thumb the answer button, put it on speaker, and rest the phone between us.

“You have osteosarcoma in the proximal tibia. It’s unrelated to the childhood brain tumor, and it’s just really unlucky.” The doctor’s voice is matter of fact, as if he isn’t announcing that Charlotte’s body is full of death-inducing cells. “Recommended treatment is a course of aggressive

chemotherapy followed by resection of any remaining tumor. It's smaller, and I feel we have a good chance of beating this, Charlotte."

She hasn't moved. I wonder if she'll ever move again. Picking up the phone, I walk out of the bedroom. "It's Nate Jackson, her fiancé. Charlotte is—she can't come to the phone. What's next?"

"We'd like to have her start chemo this Friday. We'll do six weeks and then consider resection."

"And is resection your way of saying amputation?" I ask grimly, wanting all the details laid out in brutal detail so I know exactly what we're dealing with. It's the only way I'll be able to deal with this. But I forget where I am and behind me I hear a gasp. Cursing silently I turn to see her leaning against the door frame, a hand covering her mouth.

"Yes, below the knee if the drug therapy does its job."

"Thanks." I pocket the phone and stride over to her, lifting her into my arms. "It's going to be okay, baby." The worthless words fall out. She snorts and then struggles to her feet.

"Tell me what they said."

The lump in my own throat is making it hard to talk. "Chemo and then amputation of the leg, hopefully below the knee."

Would it help to tell her about all the veterans who've suffered a loss of limb and how they're doing amazing things? I'm at a loss. She walks in a circuit around her living room, touching a few items: a signed football, a tall thin orange vase, a piece of driftwood.

"Your mom and I found this one day when we were walking. A year after Nick and I graduated, I was so lonely. I'd call her up, and we'd drive up to the house and take long walks along the shore. This piece was lying on the sand, and she picked it up and carried it back to the house. When I got home I realized she had stuck it in my car. There was a note in it that said that no matter what happened between you and me, I'd still be the daughter of her heart."

Her fingers curl around a small branch. "A couple of years later, when it looked like you were never coming back, she called me and said that I was the bravest girl she'd ever known and not to give up on my dreams. We never spoke of you again after that." She swallows. "I just don't know if I can be brave again."

The wood cracks and she stumbles. I leap over the back of the sofa and catch her.

"You don't have to be brave. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

I put Charlotte to bed, wipe my wet eyes and pick up the phone. The first call is to Nick.

"No," he says in disbelief. "No! Fucking not happening." There's a crash of something heavy being thrown against the wall. He screams profanities for a full minute. I clutch the phone in my hand, wanting to rail at the sky, God, every deity that anyone ever acknowledged. My throat is raw from all the emotions I've swallowed down. When he winds down, he pants, "I'm coming down."

Nick lives on the eighteenth floor and Charlotte on the seventh in this condo building, but I've got more phone calls to make and I can't deal with Nick's rage right now.

"No," I say. "She's sleeping. She needs to rest."

It takes another ten minutes to convince him that coming over would be more disruptive. I spend the rest of the night making phone calls. There's the call to her parents and then to mine. Everyone is crying. Even Dad choked up and said he couldn't talk anymore. They all are coming down tomorrow. I make arrangements for them to stay at a hotel nearby. The last thing that Charlotte needs is the entire family hovering outside her bedroom.

When I'm finished, my fingers are cramped from being clenched around the phone. The condo is silent. Seven floors up, the street noise is dulled from the distance and the solid walls and windows. I could use a distraction. Booze, danger, anything.

But the person who matters the most in my measly existence needs me, and for once in my pathetic life, I'm going to be there for her. As I stand in the doorway of the darkened bedroom, I can barely make out her slight form under the covers. She's always been a slight girl, more wiry than curvy. She might wish for bigger boobs or a bigger ass, but I've loved her since forever because of who she was, my Charlotte, rather than whether she had a big chest, lots of hair, or even two limbs.

Is it easier for a guy to lose a leg or an arm than a woman? Women have these impossible standards of beauty that they think that they have to meet: tits of a certain cup size and some magical hip-to-waist ratio. Guys just want to be able to make love to their women, protect their family, and pound a few beers.

Ah shit, that's not even true. If I couldn't run, jump, and climb like I'm currently able to, I'd be a basket case too.

But my love for her, my utter devotion to her will never change. It wouldn't matter if she was in a different body entirely. It's her, the essence that animates her body, that matters.

I strip off my clothes and crawl under the covers next to her. In the dead of the night, I close my eyes and search for the connection to a higher being and pray.

When I wake up, she's gone.

The sheets where her body laid are cold, and for a heart-stopping, ball-freezing moment, I think the worst.

"Charlotte!" I jump out of bed and run into the living room shouting her name. My heart's still pounding hard when I skid to a halt in the kitchen and see her at the table surrounded by her friends. A dozen magazines are strewn across the table with white dress-wearing, flower-carrying women adorning the covers.

Lainey's eyes widen, and Reese licks his lips. Looking down, I see that

I'm completely nude with my twig and berries dangling out for everyone's perusal. And I have morning wood.

"Good morning, babe," Charlotte smirks.

"Ah, yeah," I say and drop a hand to my crotch. Did I dream what happened yesterday? A careful inspection of Charlotte reveals dark circles covered in makeup. No, yesterday was not a bad dream. Gathering up my uncooperative flesh, I turn and march into the bedroom.

"Jesus, those Jackson boys are well endowed," I hear Lainey say.

"How would you know, young lady?" Reese asks.

"I'm just guessing," she protests. I can tell by the high-pitched tone it's a lie. I'll have to ask Nick about that later.

In the bedroom, I make use of the attached bathroom to piss and brush my teeth. After I'm done, I throw on briefs, sweatpants and a T-shirt.

When I arrive back in the kitchen fully clothed, Reese stands and offers his hand. I shake it but look at Charlotte in confusion. She grins.

"Thank you," Reese says. "I was all upset over hearing Charlotte's news, but seeing you completely nude has restored my good humor."

"No wonder Charlotte has agreed to move to San Diego," Lainey pipes up. "I wouldn't want to be more than ten feet away from that at any given time."

"He's big," Charlotte says, "but not that big."

Everyone laughs at this, and I don't give a damn because my dick can be the topic of jokes every morning if it makes Charlotte laugh.

"It's pretty damn big," I say and wink at Lainey. "Bigger than Nick's."

"Right, as if I'd know." Her wild, not-so-funny laugh ends in a hiccup. She stands abruptly, and her chair's legs catch on the carpet. I grab it before it can fall over.

"Lainey," Charlotte calls at her friend's retreating back.

"Let her go." Reese places a hand on hers. "It's a lot to take in."

"I need some coffee," I say and follow Lainey into the small alcove off

the kitchen where Charlotte stores all her appliances, including a fancy coffee maker. Lainey has her back to me, hands braced on the counter.

“I just need a minute,” she says.

“Can you work that machine, or does it make coffee by itself?” I ask.

She whips around at the sound of my voice. “I thought you were Charlie . . . or Reese.”

“Nope, just the better part of the Jackson brothers.”

A half smile touches her lips and then dies off. She turns and busies herself with the coffee maker. “When Reese told me that Charlie had reconnected with you, I was worried and not a little angry on her behalf, but I told myself that I wasn’t going to complain about you or suggest she was making a mistake because what’s the point of telling your best friend that her man is rotten.”

I wince. Rotten? Lainey’s good at hiding her feelings because the other night at dinner, she was all smiles and welcomes. “Thanks, I guess.”

She flicks a hand but doesn’t turn around, either fascinated by the machine or not willing to look at me. The coffee machine hisses and gurgles as it heats up the water. Twisting a few knobs, she turns and shoves a steaming mug of coffee at me. “Don’t screw up this time. If you do a runner on her, I swear to God your little band of SEALs won’t be able to keep me from carving out your balls.”

Lainey may have thought her fierce words would scare me away, but they only make me smile. “My big balls and I are safe then because I have no intention of running away from Charlotte. She, and the rest of you, are going to have to get used to me.”

“Fine, but I’m watching you.”

She sweeps by me, but I ruin her exit line.

“By the way, Lainey, I won’t tell Charlotte that you’ve slept with Nick until you’re ready to come clean.” The shock and horror on her face is a little comic relief as I walk out. “Thanks for the coffee.”

Back in the dining room, I lean over Charlotte's shoulder. "What are you looking at?"

"Wedding dresses." She taps a magazine with the tip of her perfect shell shaped fingernail.

"How about this pink one?" Reese asks, showing her his phone.

"Pink?" I draw back in horror.

"Nathan's a traditionalist," Charlotte explains and pats my leg. "It's okay. I like white."

It's not the pink that I'm overly concerned about. It's that she's planning a wedding as if we didn't just find out she had cancer. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure." She picks up her coffee and follows me out into the living room.

Trying my best not to look confrontational, I clasp my hands behind my back. "Are you planning someone's wedding?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant, I am, sir." She salutes me like a smart ass.

"Seriously, Charlotte," I scold. "And I'm a Senior Chief Petty Officer. There are no sergeants in the Navy."

She falls onto the sofa and laughs. "You look so earnest, Senior Chief."

I stalk over to her and place an arm on the back of the sofa. "You have to start treatment this Friday."

"I know, babe." She lifts a soft hand to stroke my face. "I want to get married before my surgery. Next weekend. I've already called our parents, so they aren't going to fly down. They're expecting us."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Never been surer about anything." Her hand curls around the back of my neck and rises up to press her lips against mine. "We're going to be okay."

Nathan is more nervous than I am, I think, and it has nothing to do with the flight from Dallas to Chicago. For one thing, we're in his parents' home, far away from any airplane.

In the few days between my diagnosis and the return to Chicago, Grace has transformed the sunporch into a bedroom/sitting room. Custom motorized shades are being installed tomorrow, but for now I can sit on an oversized chair not too far away from the bed where the IV drip and hospital monitors sit silent. In an hour or so, the nurse and oncology doctor will arrive and administer the chemo.

This is what money does for you. I don't have to go to a hospital and lie in an uncomfortable bed in a sterile environment. For God knows how much an hour, the hospital is moved to the Jackson's North Shore estate, where Grace will watch over me as Mom and Noah wind down Freedom Funds.

Nathan is bewildered by it all. He stands, one arm folded over his head as he watches the tents being set up in the backyard for the wedding that will take place this week. We can't have it on the weekend because I wouldn't be able to stand after the treatment. So in five days we'll hold each other's hands under the ivy arch they are constructing and promise to love each other in

sickness and in health until death do us part.

“I want to write our vows, Charlotte,” he says, somehow reading my mind. “I don’t want to say those things.”

“What things? That you’ll love and obey me?” I tease.

“No, the death do us part things.” He’s serious—so serious. Ever since the diagnosis, I don’t think he’s cracked a smile once. I’m afraid his face is going to become petrified in the stern, never have laughed freeze frame.

“Then let’s write our own vows. It’s a very hipster thing to do. I’ll post them on Pinterest after our wedding with soft focus pictures of my bouquet.”

“What is with all the fucking jokes, Charlotte? Nonstop. One quip or mocking comment after the other. That’s not you.”

“How would you know?” I shoot back, stung by his criticism and cursing. “It’s not like you stuck around to find out. If I’d had my leg amputated before, would you have run off like a scared little boy?”

He stares as if he doesn’t recognize me and then pushes the door open and stomps out.

I struggle out of the chair and run after him. The wind has whipped up, and it slams the door behind me. The sharp crack alerts him, and he turns toward me, a towering mass of anger and hurt and fear.

I hurtle myself into his arms, and he clutches me tight against him.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter against the warm skin of his neck. “It’s either laugh or cry at this point, and crying has never done anything for me.”

“God, baby, I want to be strong for both of us, but I can’t get a grip on this. I’m scared shitless. Tell me what to do.”

“Just love me.”

“I do.”

“And be honest with me.”

“I am.”

Drawing back, I press his face between my hands. “I don’t want to be a charity case—someone you’re with because you think I’ll be an old maid if

you don't marry me."

Shock and then surprise flickers in his eyes. "Is that what you think? That I'm with you because I feel sorry for you? Jesus, I'm the lucky one here. A teammate of mine told me that the entire time he was with me, it was like looking at a dead man. I'm not alive unless I'm with you. How many limbs you have means fuck all."

"All right." I laugh with giddiness. "You owe your mom's curse jar a hundred dollars."

"If you don't marry me, I'm going to have to pour my whole trust fund in that jar because I won't stop cussing."

He swings me around until we're dizzy. Grace comes out to tell us that the doctor is here, and Nate carries me inside. He sits beside me while the drip is inserted. He holds my hair later that night when I'm sick. He feeds me little bits of toast and then curls his entire body around mine as we fall asleep.

"This dress is beautiful," Lainey says reverently. The stiff satin is folded strategically, baring my shoulders. It's nipped in at the waist, and a sea of organza floats over a heavy silk skirt. Grace's strand of pearls hangs around my neck, representing the old and borrowed, while my parents' wedding present, a sapphire and pearl bracelet, covers the blue and the new.

My hair is curled and falls down my back in golden waves, which is Nate's preferred style. He loves my hair loose.

I decide against high heels, choosing instead a pair of delicate crystal studded shoes with a kitten heel. I'm not certain how long I'll be able to stand. Treatment has left me as weak as I suspected it would.

"How's the office?" I ask.

"It's all motoring along perfectly," Lainey says.

Outside of the sunporch I can hear the sound of people chattering. Despite

the quickness of the wedding, a surprising number of people have shown up. Colin arrived yesterday and proceeded to flirt the pants off of half the female guests. Nate looks on with tolerant amusement while Nick scowls because Lainey has shown a surprisingly positive response to Colin's lures. And why not? He's handsome, famous, and he has this amazing ability to make the silliest things sound suave. He'd told Lainey upon meeting her that the only way he'd be able to live in the Windy City was if someone as warm as her would be by his side. Of course, it's summer so he has no idea how cold it can really get but panties hit the floor. No lie.

Our parents footed the bill for chartered planes from San Diego and Dallas to bring teammates of both Nate and Nick to the wedding.

The other night, our parents tried to convince us Nate should leave his team.

"We'll call in every favor and get you out early," Noah vowed.

"For a price, anything can be purchased," Dad said.

"No." I put my foot down. "I don't want that. I'm going to beat this, and so we're going to go forward with our plans. I'm staying here while I get treatment, and then after surgery and whatever amputation I have to get, I'll move to San Diego. There are veterans groups I can rehab with. Probably no one knows more about amputations than the military."

Nate was quiet throughout the debate, but finally spoke up. "My first inclination is to quit, but Charlotte has convinced me that this is the right thing for both of us, so we'll hope you support our decision."

In the face of our united front, our parents fell silent. Then, in a move that makes me tear up when I recall it, Nate put our hands in the middle of the table and everyone piled on top.

I feel so much love and support, I know that I'm going to beat this disease.

"I'm nervous," I say with surprise. My hands are clammy when I rub them together.

“I can take him off your hands for you,” Reese offers.

I wink at him. “You’re too much man for him, Reese.”

He guffaws.

The walk down the aisle between my parents is everything I had ever dreamed. A harpist plays Ave Maria and beyond the lyrical notes plucked by the musician, I can hear Lake Michigan lapping against the sand. In front of me, in his formal dinner dress uniform with its short-cut jacket, medals along his breast and his rank on the side, Nate looks gorgeous and imposing.

Beside him stands Nick, winking at Cassidy who dances down the aisle in front of us, tossing hydrangea petals on the guests rather than the white carpet.

I keep reciting my vows, worried I’ll forget them or flub them in front of all of our family and friends. Last night Nathan refused to sleep with me, telling me he had to practice.

I yelled jokingly that it wasn’t too late to go back to the traditional vows, but he only shut the door firmly behind him and escaped to his bedroom on the second floor.

“Who gives this woman’s hand in marriage?” the officiant intones. The shock of red hair, ruddy cheeks, and big belly are a dead giveaway. Inwardly I laugh. I have a flower girl dousing the guests with flowers while the mayor of Chicago marries us. For a wedding thrown together in a week, it’s gone off well.

“We do,” my parents say emphatically.

“We gather here today to see the joining of two people and two families in front of their friends, their community, and their God. If any of you has reasons why these two should not be married, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Behind Nate, I see Nick’s eyes light up in devilry.

“I swear to God, I will beat you until you’re bloody if you say one word,” Nate hisses out of the side of his mouth. Nick is nearly bursting with the need

to laugh.

The mayor says a few more things that I barely register, and then it's time to say our vows. I hand my bouquet to Lainey and take Nathan's outstretched hands. He grips my fingers tightly, the rough callouses reminding me of the struggles he endured without me.

The midday heat is pushed off by the wind from the lake, and all around me I can hear the sounds of our childhood. We played hide and seek among the bushes and boated on the lake. Nathan griped about the size of my swimsuit. At the time I thought he was angry, but I realize now he was confused about my changing body and his burgeoning feelings. He saved my dolls from drowning once. I should have known then he would be a SEAL.

The birds chirp their summer melody, and the harpist strums lightly in the background. Surrounding us is the love of our family enriched by the history of our past.

Even before he speaks, my heart is exploding with joy, filling every crevice in my body with light and peace and pleasure.

I'm so lucky. I grew up with the greatest parents with the greatest friends. So what that I had cancer. So what that another form is back. So what that I might not have a leg when treatment is over. So what?

I'm alive. I'm getting married to this man I've loved since forever. There is not a dream of mine that has not come true. All of the suffering has been worth it, just as Mom had told me so many years ago—that anything worth having was worth suffering for.

I appreciate everything today and not just the wedding, but the love of my Nathan, the pride of our families, the embrace of those who have come here to witness this amazing moment in time.

I'm so so lucky. The luckiest girl ever.

And then...

Then he begins to speak.

His voice is rough with emotion but each word is clearly stated and the

words are so beautiful that angels must carry them from his mouth into the air.

“When I first saw you, my heart knew what it took my head longer to figure out. My world is a dim, soulless place without you. Today I, Nathan Beauregard Jackson, vow in front of all of creation that I will be your weapon against your enemies, your shield against those that would wish you harm, your joy during times of heartache, your shared laughter when you are happy, the fulfillment of every want, desire and need. I am yours forever, and not even death will part us.”

The birds stop chirping. The wind stills. Everyone holds their breath as the weight of his promises sing through the air.

His eyes cling to mine as the vows he wrote weave through our bond, the one that was created when I was born, that was tested when we were teenagers, and that hardened as adults. What God has bound together, no one can sever.

I fight back tears and grab the last tendrils of composure.

“I, Charlotte Grace Randolph, pledge my troth to you. I adored the boy, and I love the man. I followed the boy but respect the man. I believed in the boy and trust the man. I pledge my eternal faithfulness, my undying love, and my forever devotion. Our journey has been long, but we have found our way into each other’s arms, and I will never leave you, never forsake you, never stop believing that you are the greatest thing that has happened and will ever happen to me. Our love will never die.”

Nathan carries me over the threshold of the presidential suite at The Drake Hotel. With its six rooms, it's likely bigger than my condo. "Princess Diana stayed here you know," I tell him as we sweep by the living room. I catch a glimpse of pale blue velvet covered sofas and ornate floor-to-ceiling drapery before I'm whisked into the bedroom and deposited onto a beige and white striped coverlet.

There's a bowl of roses and a champagne bucket on the glass coffee table. None of that interests Nate. He deposits me on my feet next to the bed but doesn't allow me to sit down. He kneels in front of me and lifts my skirt, slipping one shoe off and then the other. They are tossed carelessly to the side as if they didn't cost a fortune. Still kneeling, he struggles out of his jacket.

"What are you doing down there?" I can't keep the wide grin from my face as I watch his muscles bunch and move as he discards the coat. The tie, the shirt, and his undershirt follow leaving his gleaming chest highlighted by the golden lamplight.

"What do you think?" he says.

"Shouldn't I be removing my dress too?" I'm anxious to love him. I lift up my skirt, but he stays my hand.

“Undressing the bride is the groom’s job.” His hands slide up my stockings, stopping at the garters. “So old-fashioned. I like,” he murmurs. A finger traces the tops of the silk stockings, pausing to climb over the small bump made by the clip of the garter and then continuing around. He does this again and again until the sensations make me dizzy, until my thighs are on fire, and he has barely touched me. My legs can’t hold me, and when I begin to fall his strong hands encircle the backs of my thighs and thrust me upright.

“Whoa there, baby. You’ve got to be standing up for this.”

“I can’t,” I whimper. It’s not a plea, but a statement of fact. I can’t stand up. My legs are jelly, my core is aching, and desire is making me cloudy headed. His features are carved out of stone. His jaw is solid granite and his nose a sharp blade. He’s beautiful and harsh like the mountains and yet, there’s softness in his lips and tenderness in his eyes.

I am your shield. Your weapon.

I am the Nathan of the Charlotte and Nathan we were meant to be.

Our love will never die.

Can I come just from a touch, a look, a word? Perhaps. If the touch is Nathan’s, if the eyes are his, if the words come from his mouth. My breaths come in short, shallow pants, and the ache in my stomach spreads.

“You can,” he replies implacably and moves my feet shoulder-width apart. “Hold your skirt, baby. My hands are going to be busy.”

I crumple the expensive fabric between tight fists and rest them against my waist. One broad palm at the base of my spine steadies me. His other hand? One long finger rubs along the edge of the silk panties—the ones I have ruined by my inability to resist even one caress from this man’s hands.

“Nathan, stop teasing me,” I demand. I may even stomp my foot.

“No,” he replies, but his finger slips under the sodden fabric to stroke my swollen flesh. The contact is electric, pulling a soft gasp from me. I feel the heavy pulse of my heart at every juncture—on my neck, in my wrists, between my legs. My knees threaten to collapse, and I rock backward against

his firm hand. Two of his fingers bracket my sex, moving molasses-slow along my skin. “I’m here, on my knees, showing you my devotion.”

“Show me your devotion while we’re lying down and I can feel you,” I beg.

He ignores my pleas.

“All day and night I thought about what might be under this froth of a dress. After we walked down the aisle, after we were pronounced man and wife, I wanted to whisk you off to a private room. During the infernal never-ending dinner, sitting beside you, I wanted to ruck up your skirt and touch your knee, your thigh, your pussy.” He plunges both fingers inside me, and only because of his hands do I remain upright. A high-pitched cry escapes me, and I drench his hand. He laughs, a dark, throaty noise of satisfaction. With a twist of his fingers, he tears the delicate fabric and exposes me to his ravaging gaze. He attacks me with his mouth, sucking hard on my clit and thrusting his fingers inside me relentlessly until I hit the peak of ecstasy again. This time not even his hands can keep me upright.

I crumple, my body folding over his head as he continues to work me into a mindless frenzy. The mountain of fabric escapes my hands and flutters around him, like a curtain drawing act one to a close. God, if this is act one, I might not live to see act two. Certainly I’m blind. The sensations his tongue and fingers have wrought have set off explosions behind my closed lids.

He rises to his feet in a smooth, athletic move and captures my chin in his palm. Holding me upright, he devours my mouth, taking me over with ruthless intent. I cling to him as the storm rages around me. He grabs one edge of the buttons running down my back, and I feel his muscles tense as he prepares to tear through the dress. A sole kernel of preservation awakens, and I blurt out, “Zipper. There’s a zipper.”

After a moment of fumbling, he finds the zipper and I wriggle out of the dress.

“What in the glorious hell do you have on?” he asks, smoothing his hands

down the sides of my tightly-bound waist.

“It’s a corset.” I spread my arms out along the crisp coverlet in a sultry pose, displaying the nipped-in waist and my breasts, covered in ecru satin, ribbons, and lace.

“Yes.” He licks his lips. “I’m going to fuck you in this. Spread your legs.”

His hot eyes rove over me with greedy raw desire. I do as he commands. A wild urge overtakes me, and I dip my French-tipped fingernails between my legs, rubbing the very parts that he had just sucked and licked until I was shuddering with passion.

“Fuck,” he hisses.

The momentum has shifted, and I feel infused with power.

“Take off your pants,” I order. He responds with hasty, jerky motions. His pants are ripped off, and his hard desire juts out proudly from the curls of hair between his legs. I want to investigate his length with my hands and tongue. Sweeping my legs under me, I attempt to rise, but he falls forward.

“Oh no, you don’t. One lick and I’m coming all over your tits,” he says, crudely pushing me down. “And tonight? Tonight, I’m filling you up.” He rolls on a condom and takes his hot shaft in his hand and arrows into my ready heat. The staff between his legs is his real weapon, and he wields it mercilessly within my delicate flesh. Each stroke of his hips, each deep thrust is made with deliberate intent. On either side of my head he braces an arm. The prominent veins in his forearm proclaim the effort of his restraint.

I wriggle beneath him. The tight corset binds me like a rope, constricting my breathing and heightening every sensation. He is everywhere. Inside me, surrounding me. The smell of his plain soap and clean sweat invades my head. Above me are acres of golden, muscled skin. And between my legs is the relentless invasion of him against my most intimate nerves.

“I’m ready,” I moan.

“Not yet,” is his dark response. His hips thrust and drag against mine,

compelling me to some place I've never been. His clever tongue laves across my collarbone, up the delicate column of my throat to cleave to my mouth.

The sure, heavy strokes drive me deeper into the vortex of sensation. I grab at his arms, slick with perspiration as they strain to hold his body over mine, to hold his passion at bay until I'm there. At the ephemeral mountain that he keeps inexorably pushing me toward. Upward, forward, until the air is so thin, so wispy, so scant that I can only gasp in tiny, short breaths.

He does something with his body, some infinitesimal movement of his hips, some special caress deep within, and I can't hold on anymore. My grip on his arms loosens, and I dive into the spiral of sexual euphoria as the waves of pleasure crash over me. His eyes gleam with triumph as I fall.

"Tell me you're mine," he demands.

His heavy chest pins me to the mattress as he powers to his own release. Elbows replace hands beside my head and hunger stretches the skin taut across his cheekbones.

"I'm yours. Now. Always," I manage to choke out.

The words of submission light him up, and he tenses and then throws back his head shouting out his climax for so long and so loudly I fear the walls of The Drake Hotel might come down.

N*athan*

I roll to the side so I don't crush her. I should be exhausted. The day was long and tiring. Even on short notice, there were plenty of guests at the house wanting to congratulate us or maybe just stare at the spectacle we'd become. Charlotte's flat stomach was the subject of not-so-quiet whispers. I wish that was the reason we married so quickly. Instead, her negative pregnancy test was met with relief on all sides. If she had been pregnant? I shudder at the dilemma that would have presented.

The doctor warned me that we'd have to use prophylactics, as birth control pills couldn't be trusted during treatment. He'd also suggested that

sex might be too tiresome for her. In fact, his whole private discussion with me while Charlotte was receiving treatment was how I should keep my dick in my pants.

I had to stifle my urge to punch him. I went nine years without. A few months of celibacy while I still get to hold my girl in my arms? That's a cakewalk.

For now, though, I'm taking advantage. This is our goddamn honeymoon after all.

Charlotte lies in boneless repletion next to me. As pretty as her underwear is, I know she'll be more comfortable out of it. Besides, I have a strong yen to see her tits unbound and suck on her nipples.

A perusal of her front reveals no obvious fastenings. As I turn her over, a murmur of protest escapes.

"I need a minute," she sighs. "Maybe ten."

"Take all the time you need." I kiss her bare shoulder. "But I bet you'll be more comfortable if we take this straight jacket off."

"I thought you liked the straight jacket."

"I love the straight jacket, but I think your squashed internal organs probably need to breathe."

"You just want to look at my breasts."

"That too."

The corset has a silk cord interwoven between tiny eyelet holes and fastened at the base of her spine with a familiar mooring hitch with the one tie serving as the stationary object. A quick tug on the loop releases it. A shudder of relief chases up her spine. "If I didn't know better, I'd say a sailor was in the sunporch tying these knots."

"It was your mom. Maybe it's all those years of sailing."

A memory flashes before me of a rope lying half under the bed in my parents' room. I shake my head quickly to dispel the image of my mother, rope, and a bed all in one setting. Instead, I concentrate on the pale skin

before me. The corset sides fall away to reveal deep red marks running vertically along her frame.

“Poor baby. Do these hurt?” I press my thumbs against her shoulder muscles in long sweeping motions from the curve of her neck to the arm and back again.

She groans in delight. “No, but that feels good. Don’t stop.”

I apply myself with dedication to kneading out any soreness or cramping. Along the bruises made by the corset, I soften my touch. Around us is our wedding finery—my uniform that I’ve never treated so callously, her expensive dress, and fancy underwear.

“You’re my wife, Charlotte,” I exclaim in quiet wonderment.

After all this time, all of our years apart, after her disease, my fucked up head, we’re together. Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Jackson. She’s mine until time folds this world up and moves on. And even then, I imagine we’ll be two atoms bonded together floating out into the great unknown.

“Mmmhmmm,” is her sleepy response.

I keep massaging until her breath evens out and deepens and I know she is asleep. The bed in here is destroyed, but I manage to set one side to rights and tuck her in. Folding my body around her, I close my eyes and follow her down with a smile.

We make love for the next two days, stopping only to rest. The rest of the time, I’m touching her, inside of her, covering her. When we have breakfast, I hold her on my lap and feed her with one hand while the other one fingers her curls and rubs her pussy. When we shower, I take her up against the tiles, my arm holding her tight against my body as I pound into her from behind. The water sluices over us making everything slippery and wet.

This place has six rooms and a dozen flat surfaces. I’ve fucked her on all of them at least twice. By the day of her treatment, she is bruised, worn, and never looked more gorgeous.

When a knock on the door sounds, I think it’s room service and open the

door. Leaving it ajar, I walk toward the bar where my wallet is. “Come in. You can put it on the coffee table by the sofas.”

“Chief,” the voice at the door says. I spin around because no room service wait staff is going to call me chief. The gold bars on his uniform mark him as a lieutenant junior grade.

“No.” It slips out involuntarily.

“Sorry.” And he is. The officer rocks back on his heels, as awkward and unhappy as I am.

“Is it room service?” Charlotte calls. She meanders out of the bedroom, swallowed up in the hotel robe and looking sexy and disheveled. Her hair is a rat’s nest, and her gorgeous skin is flushed with exertion.

The officer can’t stop gawking at her. I clear my throat, and his gaze falls to the floor.

“Your phone is off, and you were unavailable. According to section—”

I cut him off. “What is it?”

“You need to come in ASAP.”

Of course I do. “I’m on shore leave.”

“Not anymore, Chief.”

He apparently isn’t leaving until I go with him. Charlotte presses her lips together and disappears into the bedroom. Inside she is throwing my clothes into a case. There are a million things I want to do right now and none of them include leaving her. Throwing the LT out the window is one. Slamming the suitcase shut and shoving it in the back of the hotel closet is another. Tossing her onto the bed and ramming myself into the wet heat of her body is on the top of the list.

Leaving is way down on the bottom. It’s not even on the list.

Charlotte can read every sad and sorry thought. “Even if you wanted to quit, you’d still have this mission or training exercise or super secret adventure, so you have to go.”

I don’t want her to be right, so I keep my mouth shut.

She runs over to the desk and pulls out The Drake Hotel stationery and shoves it into the suitcase. “You write me every night, no matter what, and it’ll be just like you were here.”

Grabbing my robe lapels, she pulls me down and plants a bruising kiss on my lips. The force of her kiss is the first—and maybe only—indication she’s not happy.

“I can’t send mail all the time.”

“Save them up and send them when you can.” She throws underwear and then jeans and then a T-shirt at me. I catch them and start dressing.

“I didn’t write before in part because I’ve got zip to say. I’m shit at writing.”

“This isn’t for me, it’s for you, babe.”

I pause in zipping up my jeans and watch her as she dresses. Delicate blue and white polka dotted panties and matching bra are quickly covered by a slouchy silk blouse in a navy blue trimmed with white over a pencil thin pair of navy pants that stop around her calves. “How so?”

“You feel guilty leaving me, right?”

“Right.”

Guilt and mad. She pulls out her hair from the back of her shirt and attacks it with a brush. I’ve gotten so little time with her, I think, I can’t leave now. All these little intimacies that I’m getting acquainted with are being taken away, and I want to howl like a toddler at the unfairness of it.

“I need to be here with you,” I argue. “You’re just starting treatment.”

“There’s nothing you can do here but hold my hand. I’ve got a lot of people to do that. I have only one Nathan who owes me a shit ton of letters. Write me all those letters you owed me during the nine years we were separated.”

The reminder of my delinquency makes me wince. “I’m supposed to be your shield.”

“You are,” she says patiently. “You’re merely going to be farther away.

Writing me every night will be doing something for me. I'll look forward to getting your letters, and eventually you'll think of me reading them and we'll be connected."

"It's not the same thing." Shit, am I whining? I think I am.

"It will mean a lot to me." She zips my suitcase shut and then pulls it off the bed. Her struggle with the luggage rouses me out of my stupor, and I rush over to take it from her. I push my feet into my boots and heft the case in my hand.

"Writing a few words every night?" Color me skeptical.

"Yes. Every night. Consider it your homework assignment."

Our argument, if we even had one, is over and I've lost. She's pushing me out the door with one hand, and the Navy is pulling me with the other. Resigned, I grab her before she walks out the door. I don't want our last moments to be morose. "I'm only doing this if we get to play teacher/student when I get back."

She smirks. "I have no problem slapping your fingers with a ruler."

"I was thinking of being the teacher, but if you want to dress up in a pencil skirt and have me nail you against a desk, I'm for that too."

She places a palm against my cheek. "You come back to me safe and sound, and we'll play out any fantasy you'd like."

I capture her mouth. The LT can cool his heels until I kiss my woman goodbye. I pour everything I have into the kiss, and she gives it back a hundred fold until we are left gasping and clutching each other.

My forehead meets hers, and we rest against each other trying to catch our breaths. "I am your shield, your weapon. Fight for me too, Charlotte."

She wraps her arms around my neck and buries her face into my chest. Through the thin fabric of my shirt, I feel the wetness of her tears dampen the cotton. "Our love will never die."

At the LT's cough, I separate from her and lift my bag. I don't look back because if I do I won't ever be able to leave.

Dear Charlotte,

I can't tell you where I am. I can't tell you what I'm doing. I don't even know if I can tell you who I'm doing it with, although you can probably guess. Looking back it's possible that my letter writing never took off because I never had much to say. What I know is I miss you like mad. You said that these letters would make us feel more connected, but they only remind me how far away you are. The morning after we learned you had cancer, you woke before me. The sheets were cold, and I had this terrible fear that you were gone.

Fight hard for me baby. I can't imagine this life without you.

Missing you,

Nate

Dear Nathan,

You were right. If you had told me when I was in Switzerland that you were going to enlist, I would have thrown myself at your feet and begged you to stay. I realize now why I got sent away. It was because I wasn't strong

enough to stand on my own two feet. At sixteen, though, few of us are, so I'm not going to beat myself up over it. But I leaned on you and Nick far too much.

In hindsight it is so obvious. With an ocean between us, I could concentrate on my sole mission of getting better. When I was near you, I wanted to pretend that I was a normal high school student who could keep doing all the things she had been doing. I'm sorry I placed the burden on you. And yes, it was a burden, even if you protest that you wanted to carry it. We were all too young for those kinds of expectations. And I was too fearful of everything.

Radiation and chemo are a lot easier this time around. I know what to expect. There's no real uncertainty. It doesn't hurt that I have such an amazing view. And your mother has been tremendous. Two days ago, she came in with her box of letters and read a couple that your dad had sent when he was deployed. He was so poetic! I think I made him blush with all my compliments about his mad correspondence skills.

I'm sleepy now. I need to be ready for surgery in a few weeks, so I'm going to put away my writing materials and get some rest. Learning to pay attention to my body is a lesson I'm still learning.

*Love you,
Charlotte*

Dear Charlotte,

I don't know when you'll receive these letters. The mail doesn't go out on a regular basis. Although that's probably more than I should be saying. Did I ever tell you that Cab reads poetry? His mom is a high school English teacher, and she got him hooked on Walt Whitman and E.E. Cummings. Whitman, if you aren't familiar with his work, didn't believe in rhyming. I told Cab that I was more of a Dr. Seuss man myself.

Not much makes Cab recoil in horror, but that was one of them. Since our

first deployment, he's been shoving Whitman down my throat. We're bunking together, as we always do, and he's reading it out loud. There's a whole section in Leaves of Grass about love. I think we skipped that in American Lit at North Prep. The only poet I remember is Cummings because Nick and I laughed like the juveniles we were at his last name. Cummings. HA HA HA. Right?

I also remembered he'd written that poem about fog and a cat. Oh shit, apparently that's not Cummings but Carl Sandberg. Your mom told me this in the kitchen after I snuck out of your room after spending the night. Our first night. Should I be proud that I know the names of more than one poet or ashamed that I'm messing them all up?

Cab says the perfect passage for you isn't Whitman at all but from Alfred Tennyson.

*Oh heart, are you great enough for love?
I have heard of thorns and briers.
Over the thorns and briers,
Over the meadows and stiles,
Over the world to the end of it.
Flash of a million miles.*

*Love your now learned husband,
Nathan*

Dear Nathan,

You wrote me poetry.

You wrote me poetry!

Yes, I realize that you were transcribing someone else's words but poetry? In a letter? I about orgasmed on the spot. Yes, orgasmed. ;) <- that's an old school smiley face. I have to type my letters because holding a pen in

my hand is a little challenging. It's cramped from over use. Hmm, what's the evil smiley face?

Don't worry though. Masturbating is never going to be as good as you touching me. Are you scandalized I'm writing this? I can't help it. God, it just occurs to me that maybe someone prescreens your mail for security purposes?

I should just go all out. I miss your body, the warm drag of your lips along my skin. I love your big hands and how they make me feel protected and delicate. When I close my eyes, I replay a few of our interludes. I have favorites, but I'm not going to tell you what they are until you get back because I'm evil like that.

*Hornily yours,
Charlotte*

Dear Charlotte,

Jesus Fucking Christ, baby. If poetry gets you to write dirty letters to me, I'll just copy the entire volume of Leaves of Grass in each letter. No, my letters aren't prescreened, and if they were, someone just got an unfortunate boner.

Mine is also unfortunate. The worst part of deployments or missions is the lack of privacy. You almost always bunk with someone unless you have "admiral" in your title. If there's one reason to be an officer, more privacy would be it. I can't tell you how many times I've heard some random squib jacking it. Welp, that's probably more information than you wanted to hear and thinking of my teammates walking the dog, so to speak, has killed my own boner.

Keep rubbing them out. The endorphin release is good for you. As for me? I'm saving it all up. Be prepared. Eat a lot of protein and drink a lot of water because it's going to be a marathon.

Nate

Dear Nathan,

I've been cleared for the resection of the tumor. This makes me all kinds of happy. Isn't it funny, though, how no one uses the words amputation at the hospital? It's all "tumor resection" and "radical intervention" but no "we're cutting off your limb!"

At first, I was very upset at the idea of losing my leg because I was struck by the vanity of it all. But each day that passes with that diseased thing still attached to my body, the more I want it off. Dr. Bhoraskar keeps telling me he's positive it will be a below-the-knee amputation, but I want him to cut it all off if it means I'll be cancer free.

It's been beastly hot up here. There's no wind and the lake looks like it's made of glass. Nick came up after the last of the preseason games. He's excited to start the new season. They are saying really good things about his team. Lainey traveled with him, and they could not take their eyes off each other. Grace and I wanted to keep Cassidy with us for the rest of the summer so that the two of them could fight or fuck away their issues. Probably a little of both. I haven't been able to convince Lainey yet, but I think she's coming around to the idea. She could use the break.

Watching someone else's relationship drama is a lot more fun than experiencing your own, that's for darn sure.

Happily bored with you,

Charlotte

Dear Charlotte,

Wait, we've barely been married for a month and already you are bored? Write me another dirty letter. Or better yet, let me tell you in exact and explicit detail what I want to do to you when I see you.

I'm going to eat your pussy. For hours. Long, endless hours. There will

be no part of your cunt that I will not have explored, tasted, licked, at least five times. I am literally going to devour you. Fuck, I miss the taste of you on my tongue and the feel of your body beneath mine. I plan to take you in a hundred different ways.

I want you completely drenched and ready because my dick is so hard and huge that you need to be wetter than you've ever been . . . shit, I just snapped my pencil in half.

Baby, I can't wait to see you. I'm going to come inside of you for a century.

Then we'll see how boring our marriage is.

Nate

Dear Nathan,

I am completely scandalized. I had to read your letter three or four times I was so shocked. Write me more.

Hungrily awaiting you,

Charlotte

Dear Charlotte,

We're writing postcard sized messages now? I deserve more than that.

Nate

Dear Nathan,

I humbly request that you forgive me for the brevity of my previous response. I was so physically and emotionally overcome by your message that I was not able to compose myself sufficiently to respond appropriately.

The whole family has moved, en masse, into your home. By that I mean Mom and Daddy, Noah and Grace, Reese and Cassidy. Lainey has given her

up for a few weeks. Her ostensible excuse is that she needs to devote more time to holding my business together.

This is undoubtedly true, but I'm guessing that it also has something to do with Nick as well. I'm being careful not to say anything because I want this to happen for them. I think they make the perfect couple!

I've had Mom's attorneys draw me up a new business agreement. I'm making Reese and Lainey true partners. After surgery, I need to spend most of my time focusing on therapy and recovery. Travel will be particularly difficult. Plus, there's you with your promise of sexing me up nonstop. I can't be in, say, Seattle while you are in San Diego. You have a big penis, but it's not that big. (And thank God for that).

I'm going into surgery in three days. I'm terrified but hopeful. I want this to be over, and God, I wish you were home with me. I didn't want to write that to you because I worry it will make you feel guilty about being away. Don't feel guilty, but do know that I'm half a person without you.

*Love you so much,
Charlotte*

Dear Charlotte,

I had a long day and didn't think I would have the energy to write tonight. I had just enough in my tank to dump a bucket of water over my head and then fall into bed. I still had my boots on, but even though my body was exhausted my mind kept telling me I couldn't sleep yet because I hadn't written you. I picked up the pen and started writing your name over and over again—dear charlotte, dear charlotte, dear charlotte—until I realized that those words were my heartbeat.

I fell asleep on the paper and woke up in the morning, pen still in my hand, your name scrawled all over.

It kills me to be away from you. I hate that you are scared and I'm not there to hold your hand. Remember that you have power in your fragility.

Lean on our families. We're stronger because of our connections. Draw from their love and strength when your reserves are low.

Know that I'm with you. That I love you. That I'm so proud of you.

Stay strong, baby. I'll be home soon.

Nate

Dear Nathan,

I do feel you on the other end of the pen. I envision you opening a letter and holding the paper in your hands. Your eyes moving back and forth as you take in my little writings. In that moment, we're together. No matter how far apart we are, our hearts are connected.

The surgery went well. I feel so much better, as if a dark mantle has been lifted. Preliminary results look very good but, of course, I'm told not to read much into it. (I'm reading everything into it. Going to live until I'm 101. Going to climb a mountain. Going to swim the English Channel.)

I've moved to San Diego. The whole family has. It's as if I have my only little entourage. Our parents are currently searching out the exact right home for us. There's a lot of disagreement as to what that might be. Mom is in love with this place in La Jolla that costs more than an arm and a leg. <- gimp joke. I can make those now.

We're not living in La Jolla, but the idea of being able to see the ocean every day is kind of irresistible. I'll keep you posted.

A friend of yours came to visit me. Ford Hughes? He said he was a prior teammate of yours who left to join some other military group with a lot of letters in the name. He told me that you are the best guy that he ever knew. And that I should wait for you. And not fall in love with any of the other guys in the ward.

He went around and told everyone I was taken. We had a good laugh about it. There's a story in his eyes. I don't know what it is, but it looks interesting.

I'm doing mirror therapy now. I place it between my legs—no, not to look at my vagina—to make it seem like I have two limbs. The goal is to trick my mind into believing that the mirrored image actually exists. If the brain thinks I have a limb, my phantom pain from cramping goes away.

I don't really understand how it works, but as long as I start believing I have a leg then the stupid fake cramps will go away. Hurrah! At least that's the theory. Our brains are wild, right?

In two weeks my sutures will come out and they'll fit me for my prosthetic. I'm excited about that.

You stay strong too. I'm here waiting for you.

Your loving wife,

Charlotte

“
Looking good, Charlie. Lose that extra weight, did you?” Shelly Tighe gives me the thumbs up as she leaves the therapy room. They’ve worked her hard. The front of her purple “Let’s Do It” T-shirt is drenched. I lean against a crutch and slap her hand.

“Yeah, all five pounds of it.”

“Shit, is that all these things weigh?” She jiggles one of her legs.

“It was just half the leg, and I got to keep the heavy thigh portion.”

“Win!”

Any time I start feeling sorry for myself, I just wheel around the recovery ward and see the amazing attitudes of everyone here. Shelly is a paraplegic who suffered nerve damage in a bad car accident. Like me, she’s here to learn to walk, but Shelly is using arm braces, and I’m going to have a bad ass prosthetic. It’s not a measurement of who is worse off, but being down on yourself is frowned upon by everyone—from the patients to the nurses.

And really, having the leg off that had all the cancer and disease in it is a relief. I still feel like I have a foot. If I concentrate hard, I swear I can rotate my darn ankle. The phantom limb pains are no fun. In fact, I can feel the leg aching right now.

I must've grimaced because Shelly clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth in sympathy. "Phantom limb pains?"

"I've been using the mirror, but my stupid brain isn't catching on as fast as I'd like."

She nods her head in understanding. "Saw your sweet new prosthetic in the therapy room."

"Like that? My parents bought it for me. This company makes custom covers for existing prosthetics. You can change them out, like a case for a phone, depending on what you wear and what types of activities you're doing."

"The tattoo must have meaning."

One of the interchangeable fairings I had made was a tattoo design of a dove with the snout of the dragon just off the edge. It's a somewhat strange design, but I know what it means and so will Nathan. It's a surprise.

"It's a dove. It's the second part of the story that my husband's tattoo starts."

"That's very cool. When do you think he'll get back?"

"Soon, I hope, but I don't know. He's been gone for a while. Almost eight weeks now."

"That's too bad. Is that normal?"

I laugh and tap my left crutch. "I have no idea. This is my first time—our first time. We got married, and he was hauled away during our honeymoon."

I admit to having a mass of anxiety anticipating Nathan's return. He left me at my most beautiful, all glamoured up by professionals for my wedding day. When he sees me, it will be with one of my legs gone. And as happy as I try to be, having one leg instead of two isn't as sexy.

"When he gets back, remind him that moving around is the best medicine for you." She winks and moves down the hall. At the other end I can see the therapist, Julie—the torturer—waiting for me. I swing the crutches forward.

"How's the flesh wound, Jackson?" Maurice Jeffries calls as I pass by his

room.

“I’m getting my new prosthesis today, so I feel pretty badass.” Maurice has an AK—above the knee amputation—and according to all the other AKs or hip disarticulations, a BK is akin to getting a sprain.

“Got a surprise in here for you,” Julie says in a singsong voice. It’s the same tone she uses to tell us that one more step after the fifty she’s had us do is good for us. I hate and love her at the same time.

“Can’t wait,” I say with real enthusiasm because getting a well-fitted prosthetic is my first—no pun intended—step toward becoming fully independent.

Inside, though, my new fancy prosthetic is the least interesting thing in the room. My eyes skip over the titanium fittings and the chrome- and flesh-colored covers to the gorgeous man holding them.

“Nathan!” I cry. I curse my lack of mobility. I wait for him to run to me, but he doesn’t. “You’re a sight for these eyes, baby.” He taps my prosthetic against his hand, grinning hugely. “Get over here.”

I plant my two crutches on the floor and motor over to him as fast as I can. The last two steps I fly forward, using my crutches to launch myself into his arms. He catches me and the crutches fall to the floor.

“You’re home. You’re home.” I smash his face between my hands and pepper kisses over every square inch of his precious skin. His hand curls behind my head and stills my frantic movements.

“I’m home,” he says huskily. He greets me with an open-mouthed kiss, devouring me as he promised. His strength is effortless, and it isn’t until this moment that I realize how vast the loneliness is when he is not with me. I return his kiss with fervor that has him moaning into my mouth.

The women I’ve met, some of the SEAL wives and girlfriends who have visited, have told me that reunion sex is the best. I can’t wait. Really, not another minute. I’m taking him here in the therapy room, and I don’t care who sees us. I take fistfuls of his cotton T-shirt and try to rip it over his head,

but he laughs against my mouth and sets me down, a few inches too many away from him.

He steadies me with his hand and looks me over.

“I thought I was going to do the boat thing,” I say with a bit of a tremble that’s one part desire and the other part anxiety. I had big plans to show up at the dock with all the other Navy families when the big ship sailed in looking gorgeous with freshly applied lipstick awaiting my man to walk down the gangplank. My stump is hanging down, and I’m standing like a weird flamingo in front of him except half my leg isn’t folded up underneath me. It’s just gone.

“We got a special ride,” he murmurs absently. He sweeps strands of my hair away from my forehead and tucks them behind my ear. His fingers run down the outer curve of my ear and tug on the lobe. “You look so damn beautiful.”

“Not as symmetrical though.” I hop forward and close my arms around his waist. Up close he can’t see my stump.

“Who the hell cares about that?” He rubs his hands down my back, those big hands that have featured large in my fantasies.

“You told me after I shaved my head when I was fifteen that I was beautiful because of my symmetry.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “You’re beautiful because you’re Charlotte. You’re my ideal, you know? When other guys point out some woman that they think is hot, I measure them against you. You’re the standard. One leg, two legs, no legs. Whatever you are is what is beautiful to me.”

I melt into him. “You’re pretty good with your words.”

“It’s the truth. How’s that leg? Hurt much?”

I shrug a little, not caring about the pain now that we’re together. I want to talk about other things like when we’re getting naked. “Not right now. How’d things go for you?”

He tenses in my embrace. “As well as could be expected.” He places a finger under my chin. “I’m leaving the teams. Already handed in my separation notice.”

“No,” I cry. “Why?”

“I missed you. My heart, fuck,” he snorts with chagrin. “My heart literally fucking ached being apart, and it was hard to concentrate on the task at hand. I missed you far more than I’ll ever miss the teams. My life is with you. I’m not going to regret this. At first it was killing me not to be here during the surgery, but then I realized you don’t need me to save you. You just need me to love you. But baby, I want to love you up close and personal all the time, not just a few months out of the year. There’s plenty of stuff I can do out of the service, but I spent nine years away from you and I don’t want to spend another moment without you.”

I search his eyes, but he doesn’t look away. He hides nothing, and in those dark brown depths is his sincerity. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” A lopsided grin appears. “Can we get out of here? I’ve got two months of fantasies that you need to start working on.”

“Oh yes.”

“I want to be gentle, but it's been so long.” His eyes plead for understanding.

“I’m just as needy. Look, my hands are shaking.” I hold out my trembling fingers as evidence.

“Good,” he grunts. He makes short work of my clothes and his. His fingers slip inside me where he finds me wet and ready. It’s been a long time for me too.

His hands palm my buttocks, and he lifts me in one swift movement so

that I'm level with his chin. His whole mouth engulfs me.

The shock of heat and wet against my sex wrenches a cry. He tips me back until I'm lying almost solely on my shoulders, my thighs resting near his ears. He makes loud sucking sounds, groaning with audible delight at the taste of me that is coating his tongue. Any self-consciousness I have over my lack of a leg is eaten away by his fierce, real hunger.

My body is so hot and so aroused that every pass of his calloused palm over my skin sets off minor detonations that are all building into something bigger, stronger, and more volatile than my simple self can contain. Pleasure streaks through me like lightning. I fling my arms wide and arch into his touch. I beg mindlessly for more, more, more until he wrenches his mouth away and plunges into me in one rough, sure movement.

"Shit," he stills and jerks out.

I shout my protest, "No, come back."

"Condom," he mumbles reaching over the side of the bed for his discarded jeans.

"IUD," I say, pulling at his arm.

He looks confused. "IUD," I repeat. "No need for a condom."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Thank Christ." He pushes my thighs apart and palms his shaft. The sight of his big hand surrounding his even bigger penis sends a shiver down my spine. A passage in his letters springs to mind and I suddenly remember that he had no privacy while he was away on his mission.

"You didn't touch yourself while you were gone?"

"Not once."

I shake my head at his ruthless control. I throw my arms over my head and stretch, knowing that the arching motion pushes my breasts upward. His gaze roves over me with intense concentration.

"I touched myself regularly. I'd think of you, of us together, and I'd need

to touch myself.”

“You’ll have to tell me what you prefer,” is his husky response. “Your touch or mine.” He enters me slowly this time. A hiss leaks from his lips as he watches his shaft spear into my delicate flesh. I push against the mattress, trying to swallow him faster, have him thrust harder.

“Don’t move, baby. Please. Give me a sec.” His chest heaves like bellows at a forge. His fingers bite into my hips, so deep that there will be impressions tomorrow which I can’t wait to see. Those marks will be a heady reminder of how drunk on lust he is at this moment.

He reaches between us and pinches the base of his penis, shuts his eyes tight and takes deep measured breaths. My body reacts to the invasion of his thrusts. I don’t do it on purpose, but I clench around him.

His eyes flick open. “Don’t move,” he says again through clenched teeth.

“Can’t help it,” I say and undulate beneath him. I really can’t. I need him deep inside me. I want to feel the deliciously heavy drag of his swollen flesh against my sensitive nerves. I want him to fuck me blind.

I must have said it out loud.

“Goddamn your filthy mouth will be the death of me,” he groans. He reaches one arm under my back, holding me tight against his hard push. Leaning forward, he captures a hard nipple in his mouth and sucks hard. Those pulls draw from my belly. No, deeper. The tension between my legs meets the coils of want he’s creating with his kisses, his touches, his thick, deep strokes.

This is it. Here in this moment with him so deep inside my body, his love surrounding me, I can’t hold on to reality for one single more instant. The explosions overtake me, leaking out of my eyes, escaping my throat in guttural animalistic pants, vibrating from my center outward as he thrusts fast and hard, retreating and invading time and again until the warm flood of his ejaculate fills me up.

Even then he doesn’t stop moving. Even as I turn into a quivering heap,

shaking from the pleasure. Even as I nearly levitate off the bed when he claims my mouth and reaches between us to press his hard thumb against my clit.

“Holy shit.” He laughs when he comes down to earth.

Holy shit indeed.

“I love you,” I whisper into his sweat dampened skin. “So much. There aren’t even words that really explain how much I love you.”

“I will never leave you again. I love you too much.” His lips press against my shoulder and then my neck and then my mouth to seal his promise.

EPILOGUE

Dear Son,

I remember the first time I heard your heartbeat. Your mom was only eight weeks along when we went into the clinic to confirm our positive at-home test. They hooked up the ultrasound at our insistence, and we heard the whump whump whump of your strong heart.

My own heart stopped. Here you were, my first born, swimming around in your mom's belly no bigger than a peanut. Conception is one of those amazing things that is hard to comprehend. My seed. Her egg. You!

Impossible.

Now you're fifteen, which seems even more impossible.

Do you know how proud I am to be your old man? Very. You wear the Jackson name well.

You watch out for your younger brother and never complain when little Grace uses you as her personal trampoline. You help your mom without asking and still want to play catch with me.

You've already learned that kindness can be a way of life and that loving someone makes you stronger and not weaker. These are important lessons that it takes others a whole life to learn.

That other boys don't understand the way you are choosing to live your life doesn't make your choices wrong. It only makes them different.

I wish I'd been more like you. When I woke up and realized your mom was the one for me, I'd already squandered that first time on someone whose face I don't even remember now. If there's ever a thing I regretted, and I don't regret much, it's that she wasn't my first.

A boy gives his body away to anyone. It takes a man to abstain. These suckers who are hassling you are envious of your fortitude, your strength.

You're worth a hell of a lot, and I'm glad you realize it. Waiting because you want to find the right one to share that momentous time in your life is not only admirable but an action that shouts leadership.

Like I said. I'm proud to be your dad. Proud that you're a Jackson. Don't let those other shitstains get you down.

Love,

Dad

A rustle at the door catches my attention. Four-year-old Grace is peeking through her hands at me. She spreads her tiny fingers as far as they can go as she runs toward me.

After having our two boys in quick succession, Charlotte and I thought we were done, but Grace came along when the boys were ten and eleven. She's a ray of sunshine, and I can't even envision my life before she came along.

I cuddle her on my lap as she shows me her fingers. "I washed my hands after I pottied."

"Good girl."

She wipes the droplets of what I hope is water on my shirt.

"Grammy and Grandpa are napping," she announces. "They were playing with us outside, but after Grandpa tickled Grammy, they were too tired to play. Grandpa said it was time for a nap, and they disappeared."

Out of my office window I see the two boys playing football with their cousins. My parents are sitting on a swinging bench watching the game, so it must be Bo and AnnMarie who have snuck off for an afternoon quickie.

“Your parents are insatiable.” I don’t need to look up to know Charlotte has walked in. The slightly uneven tread signals her arrival.

“What’s insaysible?” Grace asks.

Of course she does. “Sleepy. Very sleepy,” I lie and kiss her forehead.

“I’m not sleepy.” Worried that we’re going to make her nap, she jumps off my lap, runs to give her mother a hug, and then trots out as fast as her pudgy legs can carry her. She careens into the opposite wall, rights herself, and then clatters down the hall.

“It’s a good thing your parents are just having sex and not trying to nap because your daughter makes more noise than a five piece band.”

Charlotte laughs lightly and limps over to climb onto my lap. Her nose finds its way into my neck, and I shiver. Squeezing her waist, I draw her tighter against me. “I’m suddenly very tired. How about you?”

“I could be convinced to take a nap,” she murmurs against my throat.

“Good, let’s go.” I slide my arms under her body and stand up.

“I can walk.” The protest is perfunctory so I ignore it.

“That new leg of yours isn’t the right length?” I ask, jostling her in my arms. Charlotte’s been testing out a new biomechanical limb that is powered by the neurons in her brain. It’s amazingly lifelike. She can wiggle her toes and twist her ankle. Over time, she could even develop a stronger calf muscle—at least that’s the hope. But currently it doesn’t sound like it’s working right.

“We’re still in the testing stage. I ordered a pair of stilettos. I can’t wait to try them out. What do you think?” She pokes me in the chest. “I’ll be wearing fuck me pumps for the first time.”

“As if I need any encouragement,” I grunt. I’m still as randy as I was when I was seventeen. It takes very little to get me hard and even less to get

me into bed. “I’m easy.”

“Speaking of easy, did you find out what was bugging your eldest?” She reaches out to open our bedroom door.

“That wasn’t easy,” I protest and throw her on the bed. I watch appreciatively as her breasts bounce. She wastes no time in shedding her clothes, so I sit back and enjoy the show.

“Hunter?” she prompts.

“What about him?” My eyes are glued to the light blue lace concoction she’s got covering her tits. The material is so sheer I can see her rosy nipples clearly. “This is hot. Did you just get this? I don’t remember seeing it before.”

“Yes, it’s new. Don’t rip it,” she cautions.

“I want to see the bottoms. Do they match?” I tug at the waistband of the simple knit skirt she’s wearing.

“Of course they match, but you don’t get to see them until you tell me what happened with Hunter.”

“Who?” I mumble absently, pulling harder on the elastic waist so I can get a better view of her panties. She slaps my hand away. Sighing, I decide to undress myself. “Hunter told a bunch of his friends that he wasn’t interested in losing his virginity until he’d found the right girl, and they decided to hassle him over it.”

She gasps. “Those little fucking punks. I ought to beat them with my leg.”

The vision of Charlotte whipping off her prosthetic and bashing a bunch of horny fifteen year olds strikes me as so funny, I topple over with laughter. “I’d pay a lot to see that,” I gasp.

“This one is pretty heavy. It’d hurt.”

“I bet,” I say wiping my eyes. “But shit, you don’t need to do it on account of Hunter’s hurt feelings because he doesn’t have any. He told me that he didn’t give a fuck—fudge—what his friends thought. I wrote him a letter to tell him I was proud of him. Going to tuck it under his pillow

tonight.”

Charlotte grabs my face and gives me a helluva kiss with a lot of tongue.

“What was that for?” I’m short of breath again, but it’s not from laughing. She blows my mind. Sixteen years of marriage and three kids have not dampened my need for her one bit.

“Your dad actions are so damn sexy.” She wiggles out of her skirt to display a pair of sheer lace panties with ribbon ties at the hip. “Come and get your reward.”

I slink down the bed so I have a better view of her pussy. “Want to take this off?” I tap the leg.

“Nah, let’s give her a work out. See if it can make it through one of my most important activities.”

“Fucking?” I smirk.

“Making love to my husband.”

“Well, when you put it like that.” I open my mouth and suck her through the thin material. She spreads her thighs wide for me, opening herself to be devoured. I’ll never tire of hearing her call me her husband. It’s awesome.

And it’s even more awesome to be kissing her pretty pussy. She tastes like a sweet, tart fruit and looks just as juicy. I pull on the ribbon ties and enjoy the spectacle of the wet fabric clinging to her lower lips. I peel them away to see her cunt in all its aroused glory.

“What have you been thinking about, Charlotte?” I stroke a finger up one side of her swollen lips down the other. She trembles under my touch, under my gaze.

“You, of course.”

“What was I doing?”

“You were fucking me.” Her eyes are lit up with happiness.

I shove a finger inside her. She gasps but grinds down. Leaning forward, I take her mouth, sucking on her pouty lips, licking her saucy tongue. She moans—or maybe it’s me—and I feel the vibrations of our sounds of

pleasure.

I jack my fingers into her harder and faster while rubbing her clit with my thumb. She rides my hand, clinging to my shoulders and devouring me back. She comes around my hand, coating my fingers with her juice, jerking wildly in my arms. I swallow her cries and fumble with the button and zipper on my jeans so I can shove my aching cock inside her.

She shoves my inept hand away and releases me. Still holding me, she guides me to her hot center. I die a little. I am revived a whole lot.

Fucking, making love, it's all the same with her.

It's me inside of her body, coming home where there's nothing but love. We waited so long, fought so hard, because the prize was so goddamn worth it.

NEWSLETTER

Did you love this story? Sign up to read more about Nick, Colin, Lainey, Ford, Cab, and more!

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ALSO BY JEN FREDERICK

Undeclared

Undressed

Unspoken

Unraveled

Losing Control

Taking Control

Last Hit

Last Breath

Last Hit: Reloaded

Last Kiss

UNDECLARED

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

For four years, Grace Sullivan wrote to a Marine she never met, and fell in love. But when his deployment ended, so did the letters. Ever since that day, Grace has been coasting, academically and emotionally. The one thing she's decided? No way is Noah Jackson — or any man — ever going to break her heart again.

Noah has always known exactly what he wants out of life. Success. Stability. Control. That's why he joined the Marines and that's why he's fighting his way—literally—through college. Now that he's got the rest of his life on track, he has one last conquest: Grace Sullivan. But since he was the one who stopped writing, he knows that winning her back will be his biggest battle yet.

UNDRESSED

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

Noah and Grace's happy ever after hits a stumbling block in the form of one shady professor threatening Noah's scholarship eligibility. Noah is given the choice of throwing his New Year's MMA fight for a big payoff or accepting that the true meaning of love isn't measured by the thickness of his wallet but the depth of Grace's big heart.

This is a 22,700 word sequel to the full length novel, **Undeclared**, but can be read alone.

UNSPOKEN

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

Whore. Slut. Typhoid Mary.

I've been called all these at Central College. One drunken night, one act of irresponsible behavior, and my reputation was ruined. Guys labeled me as easy and girls shied away. To cope, I stayed away from Central social life and away from Central men, so why is it that my new biology lab partner is so irresistible to me?

He's everything I shouldn't want. A former Marine involved in illegal fighting with a quick trigger temper and an easy smile for all the women. His fists aren't the danger to me, though, it's his charm. He's sliding his way into my heart and I'm afraid that he's going to be the one to break me.

Impulsive. Unthinking. Hot tempered.

I allow instinct to rule my behavior. If it feels good, do it, has been my motto because if I spend too much time thinking, I'll begin to remember exactly where I came from. At Central College, I've got fighting and I've got women and I thought I was satisfied until I met her.

She's everything I didn't realize I wanted and the more time I spend with her, the more I want her. But she's been hurt too much in the past and I don't want to be the one to break her. I know I should walk away, but I just can't.

UNRAVELED

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

Twenty-five-year-old Sgt. Gray Phillips is at a crossroads in his life: stay in the Marine Corps or get out and learn to be a civilian? He's got forty-five days of leave to make up his mind but the people in his life aren't making the decision any easier. His dad wants him to get out; his grandfather wants him to stay in. And his growing feelings for Sam Anderson are wreaking havoc with his heart...and his mind. He believes relationships get ruined when a Marine goes on deployment. So now he's got an even harder decision to make: take a chance on Sam or leave love behind and give his all to the Marines.

Twenty-two year old Samantha Anderson lost her husband to an IED in Afghanistan just two months after their vows. Two years later, Sam is full of regrets—that she didn't move with her husband to Alaska; that she allowed her friends to drift away; that she hasn't taken many chances in life. Now, she's met Gray and taking a risk on this Marine could be her one opportunity to feel alive and in love again. But how can she risk her heart on another

military man who could share the same tragic fate as her husband?

LOSING CONTROL

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

I'd do anything to keep my mother alive.

Anything, including ask Ian Kerr for help. I don't know much about him, except that he has more money than some small countries. And he's willing to spend it on me. Just one catch: there's a string attached, and not just the one I feel pulling me into his arms and his bed. There's also the plan for revenge he wants my help with.

Every time he says my name, it makes my body shiver and my heart stutter. I know he's going to wreck me, know there won't be anything left of me but lust and sensation by the time he's done with me, but even though I can see the heartbreak coming towards me like a train, ready to crash into me, I can't get out of the way. I want what he makes me feel. Want what he's offering.

This may have started out as something to save my mother, but now... now it's about what he makes me feel. I'm in danger of losing everything that's important. Worse? Ian's whispered words and hot caresses are making me believe that's okay.

TAKING CONTROL

BY JEN FREDERICK

Available Now

A continuation of the love story begun in *Losing Control*...

I thought I needed only one thing in my life—the money and power to crush one man. But the moment I laid eyes on Victoria Corielli, my thirst for revenge was replaced by my craving for her.

No rule would keep me away; no obstacle too large to overcome. Not her will, not our differing social positions, not my infamous past. When she lost everything, I helped her pick up the pieces. When she trusted me with everything, she sealed her fate.

I've convinced Victoria she can put her heart in my hands. Now I have to protect it--from her shady stepfather and my business rivals, from enemies known and hidden. I'll do anything to keep her. And I might have to prove it, because now Victoria's risking more than her heart to be with me; she's risking her life.

LAST HIT

BY JEN FREDERICK AND JESSICA CLARE

Available Now

Nikolai

I have been a contract killer since I was a boy. For years I savored the fear caused by my name, the trembling at the sight of my tattoos. The stars on my knees, the marks on my fingers, the dagger in my neck, all bespoke of danger. If you saw my eyes, it was the last vision you'd have. I have ever been the hunter, never the prey. With her, I am the mark and I am ready to lie down and let her capture me. Opening my small scarred heart to her brings out my enemies. I will carry out one last hit, but if they hurt her, I will bring the world down around their ears.

Daisy

I've been sheltered from the outside world all my life. Homeschooled and farm-raised, I'm so naive that my best friend calls me Pollyanna. I like to believe the best in people. Nikolai is part of this new life, and he's terrifying to me. Not because his eyes are cold or my friend warns me away from him, but because he's the only man that has ever seen the real me beneath the

awkwardness. With him, my heart is at risk..and also, my life.

LAST HIT: RELOADED

BY JEN FREDERICK AND JESSICA CLARE

Available Now

With their explosively sexy novels, the bestselling authors of Last Breath, Last Kiss, and Last Hit have proven themselves “a force to be reckoned with.”* Now comes an all-new to-die-for novella in their acclaimed Hitman series...

There was a time when Nick loved the fear he instilled in his enemies. His tattoos alone promised danger, but it was the look in his eyes that delivered on it. A contract killer since he was just a boy, Nick has now forged a new life—and a new identity—with the woman who followed him, captured him, and changed him.

He terrified Daisy. Once. But she couldn't resist, and she ignored every warning. It paid off. Now she's part of a new beginning, a fresh start in America helping him to leave behind a reckless and violent past as a professional killer. But the past is never easy to outrun, especially when so much of it thrives on revenge.

A new threat has emerged from the shadows, and now Nick and Daisy have no choice but to rely on Nick's killer skills to protect them from everything they've tried so hard to escape.

Includes a bonus excerpt from Last Kiss.

LAST BREATH

BY JEN FREDERICK AND JESSICA CLARE

Available Now

Regan

I never really knew what misery was until the day I was kidnapped and sold for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Two months later, I'm at a brothel in Rio when I meet Daniel Hays. He says he's here to save me, but can I trust him? All I know of him are his sarcastic retorts and his tendency to solve every dispute with his gun. He's also the only safe thing in my world, and I know it's wrong to fall in love with him, but I can't seem to help myself. He says he'll protect me until his last breath but I don't know if I should believe him or even if I can.

Daniel

For the last eighteen months, I've had one goal: to find my kidnapped sister. I've left the Army, turned paid hit man, and have befriended criminals all across the globe. In every brothel I raid or every human trafficking truck I stop, her face is the one I'm desperate to see. In Rio, I find Regan Porter, bruised but not broken and still sane despite her weeks in hell. I should leave

her behind or send her home because the last thing either of us needs is to get involved. But with every passing minute, I find I can't let her go.

LAST KISS

BY JEN FREDERICK AND JESSICA CLARE

Pre order now!

From the bestselling authors of *Last Hit* and *Last Breath* comes the next dark and sensual tale in the Hitman series that crosses the line between danger and desire...

Naomi: When I was kidnapped I thought only of survival. I don't thrive well in chaos. That's why I gave my captors exactly what they wanted: my skill with computers. Making millions for a crime lord who kept me imprisoned in his basement compound kept my family safe. When he was taken out, I thought my ticket to freedom had arrived. Wrong. I traded one keeper for another. This time I'm in the hands of a scarred, dark, demanding Russian who happens to be the head of the Bratva, a Russian crime organization. He wants my brain and my body. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued, but I can't be a prisoner forever...no matter how good he makes me feel.

Vasily: At a young age, I was taught that a man without power is a puppet for all. I've clawed—and killed—my way to the top so that it is my heel on their necks. But to unify the fractured organization into an undefeatable machine, I need a technological genius to help me steal one

particular artifact. That she is breathtaking, determined, and vulnerable is making her more dangerous than all of my enemies combined. But only I can keep her safe from the world that she now inhabits. Soon, I must choose between Naomi and Bratva law. But with every day that passes, this becomes a more impossible choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Frederick lives with her husband, child, and one rambunctious dog. She's been reading stories all her life but never imagined writing one of her own. Jen loves to hear from readers so drop her a line!

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review or recommending this to a reader friend.



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Alfred, Lord Tennyson. “Marriage Morning”

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