

Endgame

ZOE REED



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Endgame

Chapter 1

The lady's locker room was buzzing with excited talk. The start of the fall semester was only a week away, with the beginning of season only a week after that. What that meant was that today was the day Coach Salles started seriously considering who would be captain this season, and if I had anything to say about it, it'd be me. The other girls had a lot to say about it, too, but I tuned out most of the conversation as I opened my locker at the back of the room and set my duffle bag on the middle shelf.

It was my senior year – my final year to take the position of captain and lead our team to national championships. I'd worked hard for it during the pre-season, running scheduled practices with the team, frequenting the gym in my off time, and eating right and not drinking at parties. I was in the best shape I'd ever been, and I was focused. I was ready.

I stripped my tank top and swapped it for my green and black jersey that read 'Caplan' and number nine on the back. I was so anxious about today that I was in my pre-game state of meditation, and didn't notice the locker beside mine had opened until Zulema waved a hand in front of my face and said, "*Audrey.*"

My gaze snapped to her. "Hm?" She had one eyebrow raised in expectation, but the amused smile she was wearing lit up her umber cheeks and her dark sepia eyes. I winced. "Sorry."

"I said 'big day today,'" she announced with a laugh, reaching into her duffel bag for her different, neon green goalie jersey, "but that was an understatement. You're wound tighter than usual."

"Just nervous," I told her. I undid my shorts and pushed them down my hips while I kicked out of my shoes.

"Don't be." She pulled on her jersey and grabbed her headband, slipping it onto her forehead and under the tight bun at the back of her head. "Coach knows what kind of player you are, the spot is yours." I smiled half-heartedly while I finished putting on my black soccer shorts, but Zulema reached over to grab my face before they were halfway up my thighs,

forcing me to look at her stern expression. “Audrey, get out of your head before you spiral.”

“Okay,” I laughed, pulling out of her grip to finish dressing. “Okay, I’m out.”

We went back to getting ready, but only moments later, the chatter in the locker room quieted enough to be noticeable. Something had grabbed everyone’s attention – probably Coach Salles – so I leaned out from my end-locker to see down the rows toward the front of the room. But it wasn’t Coach who’d distracted everyone. A girl had walked in with a duffle bag just like mine and Zulema’s and the rest of the team’s, with the New Hampshire University logo on the side. Only, I’d never seen her before.

I couldn’t see her too well from the back of the locker room, but she was a few inches taller than Judith, who instantly went to greet her, which put her at about my height. Her skin was sun-tanned from the summer and filled with warm gold undertones, and her light brown hair was pulled back into a medium length ponytail. She was wearing short jean shorts that showed off her strong thighs, and her left bicep was cut as she reached over to adjust the bag on her right shoulder so she could shake with Judith.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

Zulema leaned over my shoulder, her head cocking with interest. “I don’t know, but I’ll go find out.”

She left our row as the new girl picked the first empty locker toward the front of the room. I’d introduce myself when I got a moment on the field, but right now, I needed to focus on the task ahead – keep impressing Coach, keep playing smart, and keep showing that I could lead the team. I sat down on the bench in front of our lockers to put on my cleats. Zulema returned two minutes later, but she didn’t say anything and went right back to her locker, and that was suspicious.

“Well?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I just got the basics. Morgan Bailey, transferred from some fancy school in Oregon. Center forward.”

But she wouldn’t even look at me while she said that. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing,” she said innocently, sitting on the bench beside me with her cleats in her hands. “She just asked me if Coach had picked a captain yet, that’s all.”

“That’s *all*?” I leaned sideways off the bench to try and get a good look at the new girl, or maybe to glare a little, but I couldn’t see her anymore. “You think she wants the position?” You couldn’t just come to a brand-new school and expect to make captain after your first week of practice, especially not when *I* had worked so hard for it. The audacity. The nerve. What even made her think-

“*Audrey.*”

I glanced over at Zulema, reading the look on her face before she could say it. “Yeah,” I told her, “yeah, I’m out of my head.”

She hummed her disbelief, but let me finish dressing without another word. I got done putting on the rest of my gear, flipped my head over to pull my long black hair into a pony tail, and then tossed a wave at Zulema that I’d meet her on the field. Out on the field, I sat down near the few other girls that were already there, and since I’d gone for a jog before practice, I kicked my legs out to begin stretching. It was a gorgeous day, still with all the clear blue skies and sunshine of summer, but with the beginning breeze of coming fall to keep it cool. I shut my eyes as I grabbed my toes, basking in the sunshine. Until someone blocked it out. I opened my eyes and looked up.

“Hi.” It was the new girl, and she plopped down across from me without invitation, stretching her legs out beside mine. “I’m Morgan.”

“...Audrey...” I said, taking her in as she bent over her legs to stretch deeply. She was even cuter up close. She had a strong jawline and a delicate neck, and her eyes were a sparkling brownish hazel while her hair was streaked with natural honey highlights. But that wasn’t going to distract me from the fact that she wanted my position as captain.

She stretched a bit deeper for a moment, then raised her arms above her head and fell back into the grass with a sigh. “You’ve got clean air out here. I’m relieved.”

She was... attempting small talk... which I was terrible at and not entirely interested in at that moment. I’d been hoping to stretch in silent focus, but she’d shattered it. So I gave her a noncommittal, “Yep.”

Only, she didn’t take the hint, and lifted onto her elbows to look at me. Her head tilted as she studied me, which then made me think that maybe she did get the hint and just didn’t care, because she said, “You have really pretty eyes,” which was the last thing I expected to come out of her mouth, and my eyebrows furrowed. “The green in your jersey brings them out.”

That was me – green-eyed, pale-skinned, freckled Audrey. Not very exciting if you asked me, but I murmured an unsure, “Thanks?”

“What’s up?” Zulema greeted, dropping down beside me and passing a friendly smile at Morgan.

Morgan sat up fully and nodded toward me. “Trying to get her to say more than one word.”

“Good luck,” Zulema laughed. “She’s like Fort Knox. I’ve been her best friend since freshman year and I only learned last month that she has a sibling.”

“You’ve been to my house a million times,” I mumbled.

But Morgan grinned a bright smile full of perfect teeth, and her only imperfection seemed to be that her grin was totally lopsided, but even that added to her charm. “Well now I’m ahead of the curve, thanks.”

I passed Zulema a look that told her to stop fraternizing with my potential competition, but that only caused her to ask what she knew I wanted to know. “So, you’re going out for captain?”

“I guess,” Morgan shrugged.

I scoffed. “You can’t just try out for captain on a whim.”

One of Morgan’s eyebrows lifted, and Zulema muttered out the side of her lips, “Be nice.”

“It’s not really a whim,” Morgan said easily, unfazed. “I was slotted for captain at my old school. I know it’s a long shot here, but I came with a glowing recommendation and figured it couldn’t hurt to try.”

A whistle and shouted, “Ladies!” ended that conversation, and Morgan hopped to her feet to jog off in the direction of the coach.

“You hear that?” I asked Zulema as we stood to trail after her. “She came with a glowing recommendation.”

“Would you relax?” she laughed.

“I can’t,” I groaned. “I worked so *hard*, ZuZu, what if I lost the spot to someone who *just* got here?”

“I forgot to tell you that I’m trying out for captain too,” she said.

“Shut up,” I smiled.

“And I ate an entire pizza all by myself last night, so you’re in trouble.”

As anxious as I was about this week, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t make me kick your ass.”

Zulema challenged playfully, “Score one goal on me today and I’ll let you.”

We gathered around in front of Coach in a half circle, waiting while she went through our faces for attendance. “Okay,” Coach Salles said, dropping her clipboard to her side, “we’re running scrimmages most of the week while I decide our next captain,” and her eyes briefly met mine, “which means I want you all to hit the gym at least once in your free time for weight training.” Nods all around. “And I want to welcome our newest addition, Bailey. I’ve seen some of her footage and she’s going to be a *great* addition to this team, I’m really excited about it.” I held back a groan while everyone else said hi, but Zulema knew me well enough to elbow me in the ribs. “Alright, take a couple laps.”

The team jogged off to start laps around the field, with me at the head. It wasn’t ten seconds into the run that Morgan reached my side, and she beamed that lopsided smile at me when I glanced over at her. But I didn’t want her running at my side. As far as this week went, she was competition, and I’d be damned if she was going to show me up on anything on her first day here. I increased my pace to take a lead, but she refused to leave my shoulder. I sped up again. So did she. By the time we reached center field on the opposite side, we’d left the rest of the team behind.

Only the threat of another lap kept me from full-on sprinting, but I’d never done warmup laps this fast in my life. I was winded, and my thighs were burning, but Morgan was still right beside me and that pushed me to keep pace. The rest of the team was only a quarter done with their second lap by the time we finished.

We stumbled to a halt in front of Coach, and Morgan buckled over to put her hands on her knees. “Jesus, you’re fast,” she panted.

I was gasping for air, but I stood straight and tried not to let it show exactly how out of breath I was. “It wasn’t a race.”

“Why not?” she asked, straightening up and then leaning back with her hands on her hips. “It was fun.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Didn’t know how to handle her ‘having fun’ when I was facing the most important week of my athletic career other than by being annoyed about it. So I didn’t say anything, and balanced on one foot to stretch my quads while we waited for the rest of the team to catch up.

Coach gave the rest of the team thirty seconds to catch their breath before saying, “One more warmup drill before scrimmage. One v. ones to goal. Guppa, start on defense. ZuZu, you’re in the net.”

The rest of us lined up at the soccer balls Coach had dumped on the field during our laps, while Guppa went to defend inside a small square of cones and Zulema stood in goal. I took a spot closer to the back because Morgan had lined up second, and I was curious about what exactly she could do. When it was her turn, she took the ball to the cones she’d have to attack through to get to the goal, and then dribbled to try and trip up the defender. She dribbled for a few moments to get a feel for Guppa’s defense, and then dashed forward. She feigned left, kicked the ball behind her to the right with the rear of her left foot, and followed. And she was clear. She took the shot, scored, and ran back around in line.

Okay, impressive. A few players later, it was my turn. I dribbled forward and went right for it. I acted like I was going to kick hard left to take it around wide, but made the pass a lot softer and caught it with my left foot, directing it straight through. Guppa and I bumped hips with the move, but I got by and took the shot, which Zulema blocked. I almost wished she had let it in just so I could show off a bit...

Coach blew the whistle right after my shot, which meant to switch. I took Guppa’s place on defense, and she took the head of the line for offense. I blocked a few of my teammates’ dribbles, missed a few more, and then Morgan was up. I could tell she’d been watching my defense by the intense look of focus on her face as she stepped up to a ball, but she dribbled with confidence. She dashed forward and tried to get around me, but knew by the kick of my foot I would’ve stolen the ball, so she tried to go the other way, with the same result. I thought I had it, thought I’d shaken her enough that she’d mess up and I’d win this round, but then she went hard right.

The moment I followed, she stopped her momentum on a dime, kicked the ball crossways behind her and past me. By the time I spun around to follow, she was already lining up her shot. Another goal.

Coach blew the whistle as Morgan was jogging by me to return to line, so she stopped where I was and passed me that crooked grin. “Your move.”

Like hell I was letting her keep the drop on me after that cocky remark. I hurried to the line to grab a ball, and then dribbled up to start my attack. I didn’t give her time to get in my head, I took the ball left, and as soon as

she took a wide step to follow, I passed it right between her legs and sprinted around her. I shot and scored, and Morgan still had that smile on her face when I ran past her to get back in line.

The drill went on for another ten minutes before Coach blew a long whistle for us to stop. We all gathered around her for our next instructions. “Scrimmage,” she announced, and tossed me a bag of orange-colored vests. “Caplan and West, pick your teams.”

We picked our teams, and even though Morgan was on the other team and I kept her in my vision during the game, we didn’t interact any more than she did with the other players because we both played offense. She was good, though. Really, really, intimidatingly good, even if a bit of a show off. I had to play at my best just to keep up with her, and after thirty minutes of the scrimmage, it ended in a tie. Even then, the only reason we scored as many goals as we did is because the other team didn’t have Zulema in their net.

“New teams!” Coach yelled as we ran toward her. “Bailey, Rockhardt, pick your players.”

Coach was making Morgan a team captain... that was... not a good sign. That was actually a really bad sign, because it meant she wanted to see more, and she’d only want to see more if she was considering that Morgan might be a good captain for the season and-

“Caplan,” Morgan called.

I froze with my eyes wide. Morgan had called *me*? She wanted me on *her* team?

“That is your last name... right?” she asked when I hesitated for too long.

“Yeah,” I murmured, and stumbled forward to stand beside her. *Only* her, because I was the first person she’d picked. What was she trying to pull?

She picked Zulema next, and her and Rockhardt took turns filling up their teams. As we jogged off to take sides and start the scrimmage, Zulema leaned into my side.

“You’re on the same team as Bailey now,” she whispered, “get that competitive look out of your eyes,” and she smacked me on the butt as she sprinted off for the goal.

I glanced at Morgan as we took positions for the other team to throw in, only for her to gesture curiously at her spot in the grass, offering me her

post as center forward – probably because I’d played striker during the last scrimmage.

“I’m center mid,” I called.

She nodded, and we were off. I did my best not to focus on the fact that Morgan was going out for captain, and instead put all my attention on the ball and the game. The result surprised me. I’d always been a smart player, using my head as much as my body, and Morgan was intuitive. She was always exactly where I wanted her to be, and knew exactly where I’d be. She passed, I scored. I passed, she scored. I passed, she dribbled and passed, another player scored. And it went on like that for the entire scrimmage, and we stomped our other teammates. By the time coach blew the whistle for the end of practice, the other half of our team seemed relieved.

“Great practice,” Coach told us as we gathered around her. “Rest up, be ready to go tomorrow afternoon. I know classes haven’t started yet and it’s a lot to ask of college students, but let’s get back into the routine of not having too many late nights.”

A few girls laughed ‘yeah right,’ and we were dismissed back to the locker room. I headed to my locker and reached into my duffel bag to grab my shaker bottle of pre-scooped protein powder.

“Dude,” Zulema said as she reached my side.

“What?”

She gave me this *look*, like I should know exactly what she was thinking. “You and Morgan are totally in sync. We’re going to win nationals this year.”

I laughed. “We’ll see.” I carried my bottle to the water fountain at the side of the locker room, but Morgan was already there, bent over and drinking.

She finished, straightened, and turned around while wiping the back of her hand across her chin. “Hey,” she said, dropping her hand to reveal that signature grin.

“Hi.” I tried to sidestep her to get to the fountain at the same time she tried to get out of my way, but we ended up going the same direction. “Sorry,” I said, feeling my cheeks flair, and I always blushed so easily that it only made it worse. We both scooted again, almost bumping right into each other. “Just-”

I stepped again, and so did she, three more times in quick little jerks before she laughed, “Okay, stop,” and reached out to grab my shoulders and hold me in place. When she was certain I’d stay there, she angled sideways and gestured. “Your move.”

Only, I didn’t take the opportunity to skirt past her. “Are you cocky on purpose?”

She huffed a laugh, gave me an up and down once over, and laughed again. “You really don’t pull punches.”

“You’re flashy on the field,” I pointed out.

“You didn’t seem to mind when we were winning.” She reached out and grabbed the bottle from my hands, and I was too stunned by her boldness and the fact that she was still smiling to stop her.

I watched her in confusion as she unscrewed the lid, and she’d turned around to begin filling the bottle with water before I realized it was my turn to say something. “Yeah,” I said, “but there’re easier ways to score goals.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, turning around while she screwed the lid back on the full bottle, “but flashy is fun,” and as she began to shake it to mix up my protein powder, she added, “and girls dig the flair.”

My mouth fell open as I inhaled to respond, but I froze because what do you say to something like that? She just came out and said it. One hundred percent said it, no reservations.

She put the bottle back into my hand while she studied my expression, and then said, “Oh god, you’re not a homophobe, are you? ‘Cause that would be awkward.”

“What, no,” I blurted. “I’m not- I’m- I just- I-” I like girls too, is what was on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t go around announcing it to people I just met, especially not off-putting lesbian soccer players. “Are you screwing with me?”

“What?” she asked through a laugh. “Why would I do that?”

“You’re like...” I gestured with my free hand, “trying to get in my head or something.”

“Wow, you’re intense,” she said, one side of her mouth pulled into an amused smile, and she watched me for a few silent moments while she thought. “Tell you what, enjoy your protein,” she stepped around me, walking backward and wiggling her fingers in an easy wave, “and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She turned around to walk away before I could even remember the word 'bye,' and then that whole conversation hit me as I glanced down at the full shaker bottle in my hand. *How annoying.* She acted all nonchalant about being good at soccer and going out for captain, and made comments to throw me off and pretended to be all smooth filling up my bottle, and then walked away before I could regain my bearings and make a rebuttal. She was totally screwing with me. She had to be. At the very least she was finding amusement at my expense, which wasn't amusing at all. Annoying. Morgan Bailey was annoying.

Chapter 2

Before hitting the gym for a pre-practice workout, I stopped by the administration office to fix my schedule. It being less than a week before fall semester, there was a short line to meet with a counselor, so I signed in and took a seat on the small empty couch in the waiting area. As I set my gym bag on the floor at my feet, someone walked through the door. The movement caught my eye, and I glanced up and locked gazes with Stephanie. My ex...

She looked at the empty expanse of couch around me, and then at the two vacant chairs between other students before deciding next to me was the safest option. Maybe it *was* the safest option... for her. But simply seeing her face-to-face when I hadn't spoken to her since she broke up with me four months ago was painful.

"Audrey," she said with a somewhat hesitant smile as she sat down beside me, and her soft brown eyes darted back and forth between me and her backpack as she set it on the floor.

"Hey, Steph," I greeted, trying not to be hyperaware of how close she was sitting and not to think about if I wanted her to scoot closer. She had hurt me, and I was still upset about it and I sure as hell shouldn't be feeling *this* way.

"Are you dropping a class?" she asked.

"Changing," I told her. She made a long hum while her lips pulled into a smile, a signal for me to give her more information that was so endearingly familiar it made my chest ache. "I need Chem four-forty-eight, they gave me three-eighty."

"On Tuesdays and Thursdays?" she asked, and I nodded. "That's the class I'm trying to get into."

"Oh," I said, trying to force a smile, "cool." I was a kinesiology major, and she a nursing major, and I'd known it was likely that we'd have another class together – that's how we met sophomore year. I just thought the universe would give me a break instead of dropkicking me in the heart.

One side of her mouth pulled into a sympathetic smile. “I can take it a different day, if you want...”

“What? No.” And I chuckled like the idea of her changing was absurd. “We can take a class together.” I’ll just suffer and possibly pine the whole time. No biggie.

“Okay.” She gave a genuine smile, and I caught myself staring at her lips and immediately glanced down at my hands in my lap. That drew her attention downward too, and she noticed my gym bag. “Oh! This week is tryouts for captain, right?” I nodded. “How’s that going?”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

Steph laughed. “I know you, Audrey. When you say ‘fine,’ things are usually not fine.”

My cheeks shaded as my gaze darted up and then down again. “There’s a new girl,” I admitted, “she’s really good. I’m just a little worried.”

“As dedicated as you are, you never did give yourself enough credit.” She nudged me with her shoulder and sent my stomach into a flurry. “I’ve seen you on the field, the whole team looks up to you.”

I nodded even though my mind went somewhere else, and I was totally *not* thinking about Steph in my dorm room in nothing but my soccer jersey. I cleared my throat. “Thanks.”

“Audrey Caplan,” called a man from the door of the counselors’ offices. Thank god.

“Good luck this week,” Steph said as I grabbed my bag and stood.

“Thanks,” I said. “See you.”

My meeting with a counselor was fast and easy, and even though I considered changing my schedule so I wouldn’t be in the same class as Stephanie, a part of me thought it might do some good. Maybe she’d want me back... or maybe being around her more would finally give me some closure and let me move on.

After that, I headed to the gym, stuffed my bag into a locker in the bathroom, and put my earbuds in to listen to music while I worked out. I went through one of my many routines to lift weights – leg presses, squats, deadlifts, crunches – and my last one was the bench press. I slipped a moderate amount of weight onto the bar and laid back on the bench beneath it, closing my eyes to breathe and focus in preparation, mouthing the words to the song I was listening to. When I was ready, I opened my eyes, meeting

a pair staring down at me. My heart jumped as I bit back a yelp of surprise, and even though I couldn't hear with my earbuds in, Morgan clearly laughed a 'sorry.'

"What the hell?" I breathed, pulling the bud out of my left ear. "Where did you come from?"

"I just got here," she said as I sat up. She was leaning forward with her hands on the bar. "This is in my routine so I thought we could spot each other."

I looked from her to the weight I'd put on the bar. I'd added enough to get a decent workout without reaching muscle failure, so I didn't really need a spotter. "I'm good, thanks."

"Okay..." she drawled, but she didn't remove her hands. "Do you think you could spot me, though?" She set her teeth in a hopeful grin. "It's just that I'd kind of rather have you above me than ask one of those football players who'll just stare at my boobs."

I looked in the direction she glanced, only to lock eyes with one of the guys working out and who gave me a chin nod when he caught me looking. I rolled my eyes, and I really couldn't say no to Morgan after that. "Fine," I told her, pulling out my other earbud while I laid back on the bench. "Throw an extra ten on."

"Thank you," she sighed, grabbing two five-pound weights to put on each end of my bar.

I went through my set without any need for help, and she put another ten pounds on before taking my place on the bench. She winced a bit as she lifted the bar off the rack, but then lowered it smoothly to her chest.

"What were you listening to?" she asked as she lifted it back up, and then lowered it again.

The last thing I expected her to do during her set was talk, and I watched the bar rise and fall again before processing that she'd asked me a question. "Oh, um, rock."

Rise and fall. "Indie, soft, hard, metal?" Rise and fall.

"Indie, mostly." Another rep.

"Nice," she said, and she struggled a bit with the next couple of lifts. "You have a favorite band?"

"No," I answered, watching her strain for the next rep. "Are you even counting?"

“Nope...” She dropped the bar to her chest and took a deep breath before lifting it again.

“How do you know if you’re improving?”

“I get,” she began to answer as she got the bar halfway up, “help.” I was trying to figure out how ‘help’ was part of her reply when she grunted, “Audrey, the bar.”

“Oh.” I reached out to help her lift the bar back onto the rack. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” she said, sighing a heavy breath before sitting up. “I get stronger.”

“How do you know?” I asked, taking off the extra ten pounds she’d added and then switching places with her.

She shrugged. “I add more weight.”

“But how do you *know*?” I asked again from my spot lying on the bench. “How do you know when you go from barely being able to do eight reps to doing fifteen without counting?”

“When it feels easy,” she answered. She kind of just stared down at me while I stared up at her, and then her lips pulled into her crooked smile. “You like structure,” she observed.

“You lack structure,” I countered.

She gave a soft laugh, and stayed quiet while I did my set in order to let me count. We switched places again with her extra ten pounds back in place. As soon as she had the bar off the rack, she asked, “What’s your major?”

“Shh,” I muttered, “I’m counting.” She let me count her reps too, and got through ten before she started hitting muscle failure. She needed me on the thirteenth. “You should add more weight,” I told her as she stood.

But when I began to slide a five-pound weight off of one side, she pushed it back on with her finger. “So should you.”

I cocked my head. “Were you counting my reps?”

“You did twelve easy,” she said. “You’re not pushing yourself.”

“I’m not trying to burn myself out this week.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But you’re trying to burn me out.” My mouth fell open with a lack of response as my face flushed red. That really *hadn’t* been my motivation for trying to get her to lift more. “I’m kidding,” she laughed. “You’re not that devious.”

“How would you know?” I asked, dropping down onto the bench without removing the extra weight.

“You don’t seem like the type,” she said. “If you were that mad at me for going out for captain, you would’ve just told me to fuck off already.”

“Mm, well,” I laid back and lifted my arms to the bar, “fuck off, yeah?”

Morgan beamed a wide grin, and even though I was somewhat serious – which I suspected was part of the reason she found it so funny – I had to purse my lips to keep from smiling too. She helped me through a difficult set with the additional weight, and watched me with something playful in her eyes while I took the liberty of throwing ten extra pounds onto her last set.

“What’s your major?” she asked again as she laid down and gripped the bar in her hands.

“Telling my competition to fuck off,” I said. She huffed a laugh as her arms fell away from the bar so she could stare up at me. “What?”

“You *seriously* don’t pull punches.” She reached up again and lifted the bar off the rack. “Is it literature?” I furrowed my eyebrows curiously. “You give off kind of an uptight librarian vibe.”

“You’re an asshole,” I laughed.

“You just told me to fuck off,” she chuckled, pausing with the bar against her chest because she couldn’t lift the weight while she was laughing. “Twice.” I shrugged, and she chuckled again at my silence before doing another rep. Her eyes were on me the entire time she did it, and as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t look away. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Probably not,” I answered with a coy smile.

“What if I said please?” she asked, adding that lopsided grin.

“How about, if I make captain, I’ll tell you.”

She paused again with the bar to her chest to pass me a playful glare. “Trying to bribe me, Caplan?”

“Not if anyone asks,” I said, and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth to try and hide her smile. I thought she was a masochist. She did a few more reps and then had me help her lift the bar back onto the rack. “Are you done?” I asked. She let her arms fall out to her sides to stretch her chest while she nodded. “Okay, see you later.”

I turned around to leave as I lifted my earbuds back into my ears, hearing her call, “Bye!” just before the music cut her off. I looked behind me and found that she’d scooted up on the bench to let her head fall off the

edge, and she was watching me walk away upside-down. She didn't seem to care that I looked back and caught her, and flashed me an upside-down peace sign and just kept watching until I'd disappeared into the bathroom.

I grabbed my bag and headed out, purposefully avoiding looking at Morgan while I left the gym. There was only an hour before practice, so I went back to my dorm room for a tiny meal to hold me over until practice was over, and then headed to the field. Monday was the only day we had to wear our jerseys, so all I had to do to get ready in the locker room was put on my cleats and shin guards. On the field, I went through the usual routine of sitting near my teammates who were stretching, and made sure to focus on my quads because of the exercises I'd done at the gym. Zulema came out to stretch with me, and Hailey Rockhardt came out a minute later to plop down beside us with Elizabeth Lopez.

"Hey, Audrey," Hailey greeted.

"Hey," I passed them both a smile. "What's up?"

"Are you busy tomorrow morning?" Liz asked, pulling her knee to her chest to stretch. I shook my head. "We wanted to see if you could help us run some drills to practice D."

"Of course," I answered. "What time?"

"Eleven?" Hailey suggested, and I nodded. "How about you, ZuZu? You in?"

"You got it," Zulema said.

We continued stretching while everyone else filtered out of the locker room. Morgan came out to stretch a few minutes later, but after passing a glance my way, she didn't so much as look at me. She didn't even smile, which, after how outgoing she'd been yesterday and at the gym today, it was little off-putting. When we ran our warm-up laps she didn't try to race me again, and she didn't pick me to be on her team for the scrimmage game she was a captain of. It almost felt like she was ignoring me, but I hadn't been that aloof with her... had I? So, what? Was she playing head games?

Just thinking about what the deal was and wondering if she wanted captain more than she was letting on distracted me enough that I wasn't playing at a hundred percent during the scrimmages. And it showed in the score. Her team was beating us when Coach blew the whistle for a water break.

I jogged over to the water jug Coach had set on the bleachers to grab a cup, and then strode away as I lifted it to my lips, but someone bumped my

shoulder. It was Morgan, and she'd done it on purpose and I couldn't help but narrow my eyes at her.

"You burned out from the gym?" she asked with her own paper cup in hand, following me farther away from the group.

"No."

She gulped down her cup and crumpled it up, tossing it cleanly into the trash can ten feet away. "You're not bringing the competition like you did yesterday."

The fact that she'd noticed irked me. "I'm playing fine, shut up." She lifted her hands to signal that she'd back off, and picked up a ball nearby with her foot to dribble it while we stood there. I couldn't keep the question down. "Why didn't you pick me for your team?"

"You didn't pick me either," she said, a teasing glimmer in her eyes as she tossed the ball up with her foot to bounce it off my thigh. When I didn't say anything, she toed the ball up again, rebounding it off my knee.

"Stop," I said, kicking out with my foot to try and nudge it away from her, but she dribbled out of my reach with a grin like she'd wanted me to engage.

She dribbled a circle around me while she said, "I've talked to you more than I've talked to anyone else on the team. I'm trying to get to know everyone." She passed the front of me to go around again. "Besides, I think we'd both improve more playing against each other during practice." That... actually made sense, and it made me feel kind of bad for assuming the worst. She stopped when she reached the front of me. "I still know the least about you, though. Give me *one* thing."

And because I felt bad, I said, "Alright. What?"

"What's the T in your middle name stand for?" she asked.

My eyebrows met. "How did you...?"

She beamed that lopsided grin and reached into the pocket of her gym shorts, pulling out my student ID card. "I found this in the bathroom at the gym." It must've fallen out of my bag. I reached for it, but she pulled it back. "Middle name?"

My hand shot out a second time to try and steal it from her, but she yanked it away with a laugh. "You're so annoying," I chuckled. She simply cocked an eyebrow at me, waiting, so I rolled my eyes and sighed, "Fine. Thea."

“Thank you,” she said, finally holding the card out to me. I grabbed it fast in case she’d tease me again, which only made her laugh. In an attempt to wipe the smile off her face, I made a kick for the ball at her feet the moment after I’d put the card into my pocket. How she knew I’d do that was a mystery, but she drew it away and passed it behind her, kicking it up and over my head so it landed behind me. She spun around my shoulder to retrieve it right as Coach blew the whistle for the end of the water break. “Your move, Caplan,” she said with a smirk, toeing the ball up to my chest so I’d catch it and then jogging away to resume practice.

That cocky little shit.

Chapter 3

Friday's practice was more grueling than the entire week put together. With the start of season nearing, Coach didn't have us running scrimmages, but rather made us do intensive drills to prepare us for the coming week. It was also the day she'd be announcing this season's captain. As hard as practice was, I was grateful for it. It kept my mind off of being anxious about the coming announcement.

When practice was over, we gathered around Coach for the dismissal. "Great practice, ladies," she said loudly. "Our first game is Wednesday night, we're kicking off the season against Northern State." A few of the girls cheered because games against Northern State were always fun and challenging. "Before I let you all go for the weekend, I want you all to congratulate your new captain." Coach's eyes scanned all of us as I held my breath, and after a torturously long pause, she smiled. "Caplan, congrats."

I was so happy and relieved that I couldn't help but laugh, and the other girls clapped and shook me by the shoulders and patted me on the back. In spite of it all, my gaze searched for Morgan's, and even though she hadn't moved closer to give me the praise everyone else had, she was grinning.

"Okay," Coach said, "I'll see you Monday." We all turned for the locker room, some of my teammates still congratulating me. "Caplan," Coach called. I glanced back over my shoulder. "Come see me in the office before you leave."

I nodded and headed off with the rest of the team. As we walked through the doors, Zulema wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed me to her. "See?" she said happily. "All that stress and the spot was yours. You did good, kid."

"Thanks," I said with another ecstatic laugh.

God, it felt good. Like an immense weight was lifted off my shoulders, and I could finally breathe again and start enjoying practices for the game. I stripped off my shin guards and cleats and slipped into my tennis shoes, waved bye to Zulema, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed to Coach's office

near the exit of the locker room. I knocked before going in and then pushed open the door, and Coach smiled at me from the other side of her desk.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I told her, closing the door behind me.

“Thank yourself,” Coach said, “you earned it.” She stood to come around the desk, leaning back against the edge of it and folding her arms across her chest. “It’s a big responsibility, I’ll need you to dedicate extra time to going over game footage before our watch sessions, and being captain means caring for the other girls on *and* off the field. If you’re not up for it, I need you to tell me now.”

“I’m up for it,” I said instantly. “I’ve always wanted to be captain, I know what to do.”

“Good,” Coach said with a small laugh. “I want you to consider some of our weaknesses as a team, and come up with a few drills we’ll run at practice on Monday.” I nodded eagerly. “Alright, have a good weekend.”

“You too,” I said, and turned for the door. But I stopped before leaving, facing Coach again with an intense curiosity that I couldn’t ignore. “Actually, can I ask you something?” She nodded her consent. “Did you consider Morgan for the position?”

“I did,” she answered, and paused for whatever I’d say next. Only, I didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know how to ask why I got the position when Morgan’s natural talent was mind-blowing. Coach seemed to read that question on my face, though, because she offered a smile. “You’re a hard-working leader, Audrey, and being captain is about more than who’s the better player. The other girls know you. They trust you.” I smiled gratefully, and Coach returned it before taking in a breath and saying, “I will suggest that you take Bailey under your wing.”

“What?” I asked in surprise.

“I’ve seen good chemistry on the field,” she explained, “but your play styles are really different. Sometimes you pull back to defend on attacks that you could win if you gave it your all. I think you’d both benefit from studying each other.”

“Right...” I murmured. There was a stirring in my gut against getting to know Morgan as well as Coach wanted, but my first move as captain wasn’t going to be refusing a suggestion. “Okay.” I turned for the door again. “See you Monday.”

Coach said bye, and I headed out into the locker room. It was empty now, so I exited through the main doors into the setting summer sun, but I stopped when I saw someone leaning against the wall outside.

“Hey,” Morgan greeted, pushing off the wall to come to my side. She’d been waiting for me?

“Hi.”

She fell into step beside me as I ambled along the sidewalk that bordered the parking lot, heading in the direction of the main campus. “You did it,” she said, “congrats.”

I glanced over at her, and the slanted smile on her lips was nothing but genuine. “Thanks.”

A beat of awkward silence passed between us, and she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her track pants as her smile faded. “So... can I stop fucking off now? Or do you still want nothing to do with me?”

I couldn’t help looking over at her in shock, and after a moment of taking in the uncharacteristic timidity, I couldn’t help but huff an amused laugh. Was this week what she’d considered leaving me alone? Because the teasing and comments that had continued the entire time had given me the opposite impression. But despite the fact that she wasn’t competing with me for captain anymore, there was still something about her that scared me. She was easy and outgoing and *insistent*, when I didn’t like people getting too close too fast.

At my amusement, she turned to walk sideways and meet my gaze with confusion. And a little bit of vulnerability. So I teased, “You don’t have to fuck off as hard.”

“You’re ruthless,” she laughed, but she was clearly relieved by my playfulness. She pulled her hands out of her pockets, one of them carrying a set of keys. “Alright, well, I just wanted to tell you that I’m happy for you.” And she gestured toward the parking lot as she took a backward step away from me. “I’ll see you next week.”

“You drove here?” I asked, stopping. She dropped off the curb to stand in the gutter as she nodded. “You don’t live on campus?” Our college was an open school. The main part of campus was central, but it had buildings spread out all over the small town we were in. Most of the students walked everywhere.

She toed the corner of the curb. “No. I live with my mom and aunt outside of town.”

“Oh.” I wanted to ask questions, but I also didn’t want to over-encourage her friendliness with my newfound curiosity. “Okay. Well, have a good weekend.”

I turned to walk away, but didn’t get three steps before she called, “Hey, wait.” I stopped and faced her again. “You were supposed to tell me your major.”

I don’t know why I couldn’t resist teasing her, but I held back a smile and said, “Science,” then made to walk away again.

“Hey!” she protested, jogging to catch up. “Whoa, whoa, hold up.” She hopped in front of me to stop my stride.

“What?” I asked innocently. “I told you my major.”

“I was wrong about you being devious,” she laughed, and her usual playful grin was back on her face. “You told me what kind of major. Come on, throw me a bone.”

I stood there for a moment, taking in her endearingly lopsided smile while a smirk tugged at my lips. “Kinesiology.”

She let that sink in while her head cocked and she studied me, and then she breathed, “Huh.”

“Huh?” I repeated. “What? It doesn’t fit your idea of me as much as uptight librarian?”

“No,” she said amusedly, “it totally fits.” Her eyes scanned my face, and she said more seriously, “I didn’t mean that, by the way. I don’t actually think you’re uptight. A little guarded, maybe...”

I didn’t want to talk about that, so I asked, “What’s your major?”

She hummed while her lips pulled to one side like she was considering it, and then she grinned. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

My mouth fell open with offense. “You’re not serious.”

“Look at this face, Caplan,” she said, doing her best to stop smiling. “I never joke.” And she stepped wide around me, turning around to walk backward toward the lot just so I could see that she was, in fact, still beaming.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m making you run suicides the entire practice on Monday.”

She turned her back to me and threw her hands up triumphantly. “Suicides are my favorite!”

As hard as I tried, I couldn’t keep from laughing. I watched her saunter over to an old, beat-up, two-door blue pickup truck and hop into the driver’s

seat. She rolled down the windows as she started it up, the sounds of a familiar indie rock song flowing from the cab. She was still smiling as she put it in drive and pulled out of her spot, and passed me a wave as she left the parking lot. I really wanted to know what her major was then...

After that, my weekend passed leisurely. I went out to dinner with Zulema and a couple of other girls from the team to celebrate making captain and the start of the coming season. The two classes I had on Monday were easy, Coach loved the drills I came up with for the team, and life was good. Until Tuesday, when I was faced with my first chemistry class. With Steph.

I got to the lab before she did and picked a spot at a table near the back. Other students filtered in, filling up spots at my table and the others, and as the seats near me filled, I couldn't decide if I wanted there to be an open seat beside me when Steph arrived. The hurt part of me didn't even want her to come, but there was another part of me, a part that didn't feel like I'd gotten the closure I needed, that wanted to be near her. In the end, the decision wasn't mine. She came in a few minutes before class was supposed to start, scanned the empty seats, and headed toward the one directly beside me. It was like my stomach lodged in my throat.

"Hey," she greeted, dropping her lab book and single notepad onto the table and gesturing at the stool. "You mind?"

I swallowed hard and shook my head. "Of course not."

Her perfume hit me as she slid onto the stool, and I busied myself with flipping through my lab book so she wouldn't see on my face how my chest tightened. Four months. I should be over it by now.

"So?" she asked expectantly.

"So, what?"

"Soccer," she said. "Did you make captain?"

I held back a shy grin. "Yeah."

"Oh, Audrey, that's great!" She didn't hold back her grin one bit. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Your first game is tomorrow, right?" she asked.

I nodded.

"And?" She rolled her hand through the air. "Who are you playing? Are you nervous?"

“Northern State,” I answered. “And yeah... first game as captain, you know? It’s a lot of pressure.”

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” she said. “I think I’m going to be there to watch.”

“Oh?” My heart stuttered. She was coming to the game? Even while we were dating, her interest in soccer had just been enough to barely keep up with my passion for it. She didn’t care much for sports.

But she hummed an affirmative. “Some friends have been dying to try out tailgating, and football is a little...” She paused for the right word, and I waited patiently for her to finish, “Hetero.”

That wasn’t exactly the word I expected, and couldn’t help but laugh. “Your group with Remy and Teagan?”

Steph shook her head, saying a bit elusively, “It’s sort of a new group of friends.”

There were some implications there that I didn’t want to think about, and was relieved when the professor walked in to begin the class. We ended up doing an easy lab to kick off the semester, and Steph, having never been great at chemistry, was relentlessly grateful about letting her work with me. It was almost easy to forget about the pining when we were distracted and working together easily, and I actually had fun.

We finished the work a few minutes early, and riding the back of our lab-work conversation, I asked, “What else have you been up to lately?”

“You know,” she said casually, “the usual. Hanging out, going to shows, going to parties.” Being the social butterfly I could never quite keep pace with. “There’s a great local band that opened a show at Javelin a few weeks ago, you’d really like them. Mockery Swap.”

“I’ll check them out,” I told her with a smile. An increased shuffling from the students around us marked the end of class, and Steph and I both picked up our books and stood.

“Anyway,” she said as we headed for the door, “good luck tomorrow. I’ll be cheering from the stands.”

“Thanks. See you Thursday.”

As we exited the room, a girl across the hall pushed away from the wall, and hurried forward as Steph went to meet her. My stomach lurched the moment they hugged in greeting, and my chest filled with lead when they kissed. I averted my eyes even though I knew it wouldn’t help, and caught sight of Morgan leaving a room down the hall. I was desperate

enough for an escape from the sight of Steph and her new girlfriend that I hurried over to catch Morgan as she was walking away.

“Hi,” I said.

Morgan stopped, met my eyes, and then made a show of glancing around her in confusion. “Me, hi?”

“Who else would I be saying hi to?”

“Well in the week I’ve known you, you haven’t once instigated a conversation with me,” she said. “So literally anyone else.”

Way to make me feel like a jackass on top of the heartbreak. “Okay. Bye.”

I turned to walk away, but Morgan reached out to catch my arm. “Hey, wait,” she chuckled, “come on, I’m kidding.”

“Kind of not in the mood,” I murmured as I faced her again, but the masochist that I was, I passed a lingering look down the hall at Steph and her girlfriend.

Morgan’s smile faded. “You okay?”

“What? Yeah.” I averted my gaze to meet Morgan’s. “Fine.”

She studied me, and then stared down the hall in the direction I’d been looking. “I won’t pretend like I believe that, but okay...”

Distraction. I tossed my chin toward the door she’d come out of. “Are you a science major too?”

“Absolutely not,” she said. “This is general education science. I put it off for as long as possible.”

“Oh.” I finally stopped focusing on the pain in my chest long enough to take Morgan in. She was wearing short jean shorts and a black and gray flannel with the sleeves rolled up, and her shoulder length hair was flipped to the right side in the random kind of way that it fell like she’d just run her fingers through it. But god, she had gorgeous hair. “What is it, then?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

I chewed the inside of my lip while I thought about it. All I really knew was that she clearly didn’t like science. “Is it literature?”

“Why?” she asked with a smile. “Do I strike you as the uptight librarian type?”

“No,” I chuckled. “You’re more of the hot eccentric English teacher type.”

Morgan’s head gave the slightest tilt as one side of her mouth pulled into a smirk. “You think I’m hot?”

My cheeks were on fire the very moment she finished that question, and I *knew* she was teasing me, but that only made it worse. “Uh...”

That smirk widened into her signature grin, but instead of making me regret this entire conversation more than I already did, she said, “It’s not literature.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I could tell you,” she mused in playful consideration. “Or I could torture you a bit like you did to me last week.”

“History,” I guessed. “Law, art, philosophy, computer science-”

“You’re just naming every non-science degree you can think of,” she laughed. She didn’t give me a chance to take any more guesses. “Where are you headed? Can I walk you to class?”

That was such a genuinely nice offer that I kind of just stared at her for a moment. Maybe it was a little too nice. “I’m actually done for the day,” I said, and she nodded. “I’ll see you at practice though?”

“I’ll be there,” she confirmed.

“Okay.” And I didn’t know what to say now. Didn’t know exactly how much more conversation with her I was comfortable instigating. “Um, bye.”

Her eyes looked me over like she was amused with my awkwardness. “Thanks for coming to say hi to me. Whatever the motivation was.”

“Yeah,” I said, giving a small smile that she returned. But as playful as she’d been, I finally noticed that it hadn’t been as open as usual, and that she hadn’t tried to lead the conversation as much as she had previously. Finally noticed that maybe she wanted to walk me to class because *she* needed the company. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good,” she answered, but passed a glance toward the room she’d left. “Subjects with math are really hard for me, but bio was full so...” She gave a humorless laugh. “That’s what I get for putting it off. I struggle a lot, but I’ll be fine.”

“Oh.” My lips pursed with sympathetic understanding while I thought of Coach’s advice about caring for the other girls on *and* off the field. “If you ever need any help...”

“Yeah?” she asked with genuine surprise. I nodded. “Yeah, maybe. I’ll keep it in mind.” Her lips pulled into an authentic and grateful smile. “Thank you, Audrey.”

I shrugged. “Alright, uh, see you later.”

“Bye.”

I stepped past her and headed for the exit of the building, doing my best not to look back. The only thing was, I wasn't sure if I was avoiding a glimpse of Steph and her girlfriend, or avoiding finding out if Morgan was staring after me.

Chapter 4

Zulema dropped her duffle bag onto the bench beside me with a heavy thud, something she always and deliberately did when we were preparing for a game. She knew I was nervous, and to keep me from getting stuck in my head, she immediately said, “I hung out with Rodney today.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, grateful for the distraction because the fluttering in my stomach had, in fact, been calling to me. “How was it?”

“So much fun,” she answered. “And he *finally* asked me out. We’re going on a date this weekend.”

“Ooh, la la,” I teased. “Where’s he taking you?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, stripping off her t-shirt to put on her jersey. “How was chemistry yesterday?” I made a noncommittal grumble. “That bad, huh?”

“It *wasn’t* bad,” I sighed, slipping one of my shin guards on. “It was great, and we were talking and laughing, and then we left and her new girlfriend was waiting outside class for her.”

“Ouch,” Zulema winced.

I finished strapping on my other shin guard, and pulled my socks up over them as I breathed, “Yeah.”

“Look, Audrey,” she sat down on the bench beside me, “I know I’ve said this before, and I know it’s no use telling you that you’ll find someone better than Steph, because Steph was fine, but you just weren’t right for each other.”

“Right,” I said, “because I’m boring and she’s not.”

“You are not boring,” Zulema scolded.

“That’s not what she said,” I murmured.

“You didn’t like the same things,” she countered, “that doesn’t make you boring.”

I let out a heavy sigh and shrugged. Sure, Steph and I didn’t like a lot of the same things, but we liked each other, and I thought it’d be enough. It *had* been enough for me, but it stopped being enough for her. *I* stopped being enough for her, and it still hurt.

Sensing that I was done talking about it, Zulema changed the subject, telling me about her week thus far to keep me distracted while she finished getting ready for the game. It worked just as well as it always did, and we headed out together. But she left me to run to the net for warmups, and the moment I took my first step onto the spot-lit field, I froze. The nerves hit me, and I just stood there.

I always got a little bit nervous before games, but this was my first game as captain. It was up to me to be a leader on the field, to make calls during the game when Coach was too far away to communicate with us, to help us win this game. Not to mention that Steph might be watching. And what if I did horribly? What if I made the wrong calls? Or what if I was so preoccupied with trying to make the right calls and think critically about the game that I forgot how to let my body do the work? What if I-

Someone bumped into my shoulder, and Morgan stepped up to my side. She took in the look I passed her and said amusedly, "You really don't like it when I do that."

"It's a little jarring when I'm not expecting you," I said.

"Sorry," she said, "I'll start saying hi like a normal person."

"You can do it," I told her, and it wasn't like she ever did it hard, but I said, "just do it more gently."

"Like," she mused, and leaned into me to give the barest nudge with her shoulder, "that?"

"Yeah, sure."

She nodded, and leaned into me to nudge me again, smirking as she said, "Hi."

I rolled my eyes, cracking a smile. "Hi."

She gestured toward the field. "You going to warm up, or just stand here?"

"I'm just..." I waved my hands toward my chest. "Collecting myself."

Even though I wasn't looking at her, I felt her glance over to study me for a few seconds before saying, "Ah, you're nervous. I get it."

"Are you nervous, too?" I asked.

"Soccer doesn't make me nervous." She twisted to the side to stretch her back muscles.

"Does anything?" I asked sarcastically, because she really didn't seem like the type who feared much.

“Yeah,” she said, grabbing her knee to pull it to her chest. “You make me kind of nervous.”

“What?” I laughed, feeling my cheeks warm. “Why?”

She glanced over to lift an eyebrow at me. “I was under the impression we were doing a one for one system with the questions. I just told you something about me.” She stepped farther onto the field and turned around to face me, saying before jogging off, “Your move, Caplan.”

I cupped my hands over my mouth and called after her, “That was only half about you!”

She deliberately ignored me and received a pass from one of our teammates to start her warmups, but not before I caught the smile on her face. At least she’d done a good enough job of making my nerves go away that I felt confident to follow. I joined the drills the rest of the girls had already started, and soon after that, the game began.

Northern State was a challenging team to play, but I played hard and with all my focus, barely thinking about adjustments to strategy or the pressure of being captain. The ball went up and down the field for the whole first half without either of us scoring. At the interval, Coach Salles gave us all a few minutes to hydrate and then rallied us in for a pep talk.

“Bishop and Kerry, take a break. Lyons, Rogers, you’re in.” Coach motioned for us to get closer. “You’re doing great, ladies,” she said. “Keep talking out there and keep the pressure up. Don’t worry about the other team. This is *your* game, make them play it.”

“I can’t keep up with twenty-seven,” Guppa told her. “She’s too fast for me.”

“Alright,” Coach replied, “we’ll change this up. Audrey? You got eyes out there, what do you think?”

I glanced around at my teammates. “Guppa and Lopez can switch. Lopez, you got the speed to keep up, and Guppa, you have the footwork to take Lopez’s mark. Good?” Both of them agreed, and Coach gave me a short nod of approval before rolling her hand for me to continue. So I did. “We can win this game,” I said. “Like Coach said, keep the pressure on. We might be tired, but so are they, stay on your marks and they’re bound to mess up. We got this. Hands in.”

We all layered our hands in the center of our circle, I shouted to three, and we cheered, “Comets!” A few of the girls made high speed whistle

sounds as we turned our backs to the circle, and then yelled a boom like the crashing of a comet before clapping as we ran to take our spots on the field.

I peered around at my teammates as the other team rejoined us, catching sight of Morgan as she lifted the bottom of her shirt up to wipe the sweat off her forehead, and I immediately looked away. I was *not* getting distracted by my unreasonable attraction to abs in the middle of a game. So not happening. No matter how tempting they were.

The other team finished marking up, and we were back on. We dribbled, passed, battled, lost, and gave chase down the field. Our defenders took possession back and the ball made its way up the pitch again. I received a beautiful pass from our left back, dribbled past my opposition, and looked around for my split-second decision pass. Morgan was in deep and in perfect position for a goal, but she was too close to her defender. Cusatelli was also being guarded, but her defender was giving her more space, so I threw the pass her direction. She received it, swiveled around to dribble, and lost the ball.

The other team's defender kicked a pass to get the ball down field, and our right mid battled the other player to an out of bounds. In the few seconds of pause as we lined up for the throw in, Morgan sprinted over to me.

"Hey," she said.

"What?"

"Stop hesitating when the pass to me isn't crystal clear," she said quickly, already backing away to get in position.

"This isn't a scrimmage," I told her.

"Have some faith," she said. "Stop thinking so much."

She stopped to make sure I heard her, but our moments of pause were over. "Go," I said, waving her away. "Okay, go."

Northern State threw in, and the game resumed. Ten more minutes passed by as we battled for possession, and then our right back kicked a sailing pass right to me at center field. I flew by the NS defender guarding me, glancing right and left at my teammates to gauge my options, judging their positions. Morgan was guarded, but she had some space. Without thinking, I lobbed a chancy pass to her on the left side, thinking that if anyone could dribble around a guard, it was her. Only, she didn't dribble for the fancy goal. She received the pass and immediately kicked the ball across to the right side, where the few moments of play had given Cusatelli

the opportunity to get in perfect position. Cusatelli received, wound her leg up for the kick, and shot. The ball soared through the air and into the upper left corner of the net for our first goal of the night.

Our teammates screamed happily as Morgan sprinted across the field to meet Cusatelli for high fives and hugs, and then jogged toward me. “That was it,” she said, slapping her hands against mine.

“And you did it without showing off,” I teased.

“You mean that assist wasn’t impressive?” she quipped with a grin, and her hand swatted at my shoulder as she took off to retake her position on the pitch. She waved to someone in the stands as she ran, but there were so many people that I couldn’t tell who she was waving to.

That was the only goal for the rest of the game, and we ended the night victorious. The girls celebrated in the locker room, cheering Coach’s post-game speech about how proud she was of how we played. It was good spirits all around. My first game as captain had been a success, and I was in such a good mood that I half expected Morgan to take advantage of it and come talk to me. I caught sight of her as she was leaving the locker room, and to my surprise, all she did when she met my eyes was smile and toss a casual salute before disappearing out the door. Maybe she had someone waiting for her outside. Maybe it was a girl.

The next day I met coach an hour before our regular watch session with the rest of the team, and we ran practices for the rest of the week just like we usually did. The second week of classes started Monday, and by Wednesday, I was already swamped with homework. I spent the evening studying in the library, and only left at eight because the library closed. I took a shortcut through campus toward the dorms, and was passing around the back of the administration building when I saw the last person I expected to see at that hour.

Morgan was just standing there, staring at the wall of the admin building, doing god knows what. My curiosity got the best of me, and I strode over.

“You’re here late,” I said.

Her head whipped toward me, but her surprise faded rapidly into a smile. “I was working on a project.”

I reached her side to finally see what she was staring at. There was graffiti on the wall, illuminated by the soft yellow light attached to the building and fresh enough that I could still smell spray paint in the air.

Morgan didn't even have a backpack on her, and there were no cans around, but as I searched the area, I discovered that her hands were covered in dark paint.

"You know," I mused, "as team captain, I'm not sure I approve."

She looked sideways at me, brow furrowed in confusion for a few moments before she followed my gaze to her hands. "This wasn't me," she laughed. "My dad pays my tuition."

I didn't know what that had to do with anything, and spent a long handful of seconds trying to figure it out before I said, "I don't understand."

She gestured toward the graffiti. "It's commentary." I glanced from her to the wall, still at a loss for exactly what she meant, and when she realized it, she said, "Stop looking at it as vandalism. What do you see?"

I inhaled a breath to study the work, ignoring the nerves in my stomach about us being found near fresh graffiti while Morgan had paint on her hands – something I still couldn't account for. The graffiti was the mascot of our school – a comet – but amongst the stenciled craters were the stripes of the American flag. The comet's mouth was open and a pair of feet were dangling out, and in front of it was the outline of another person holding up money, behind that person was a long line of other, increasingly less detailed people. It also didn't escape my notice that the layout of the comet and line also resembled a ball and chain.

"The unfairness of tuition," I murmured, finally realizing what it had to do with her dad paying for school. "Huh."

"Impressive, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," I admitted. We stood there for another minute in silence, admiring the graffiti, and then I couldn't handle the mystery anymore. "What's your major?"

She held up her paint covered hands with a laugh. "Art."

Of course... she was an art major, but all I could really find to say was, "Oh."

"Surprised?" she asked.

"Kind of," I said, but she'd officially piqued my interest in a way I couldn't ignore. "So, you're an art major standing in front of fresh graffiti, and you're sure you didn't do this?"

She laughed, glanced around at where we were standing, and gestured in the direction of the dorms. "Were you walking this way?" I nodded, and

when she picked up a stride, I walked with her. “Graffiti isn’t in my skillset.”

“What kind of art do you do?”

“Sculpting,” she answered. “I love working with clay. It’s what I’m doing for my senior project.”

“That sounds cool,” I said, and she hummed her agreement. “Why’s it your favorite?”

She shrugged, holding her hands out in front of her to try and pick some of the paint off. “I like working with my hands in big ways. I never really had the patience for drawing and painting unless it was mapping out ideas for sculptures.”

“What were you doing here so late?” I asked.

“Testing out colors for my project,” she said. “I kind of like having the unlimited supplies in the workshop all to myself.”

“What’s your project?”

“A surprise,” she said, passing me a lopsided smile. “And it’s my turn to ask some questions, because you’ve asked me at least five.”

“Okay,” I chuckled.

“Why’d you pick kinesiology?” she asked.

I gave a strained hum. “Ask me something else.” She glanced over at me awkwardly, and I said with a wince, “Sorry. It’s personal.”

“Fort Knox,” she teased with a soft laugh. “Okay, um...” She trailed off to think while she hopped up onto the planter beside her, walking along the brick. “Are you from here? Did you grow up here?”

“Sort of,” I answered. “My hometown is two hours away.” She nodded. “You’re from Oregon?”

“It’s still my turn, nosy,” she said, and laughed when I reached up to nudge her off balance on the planter. She grabbed my shoulder to steady herself before letting go and asking, “When’s your birthday?”

“November sixth.”

“Oh, a Scorpio,” she mused. “Are you into girls?”

I couldn’t help laughing at the boldness of that. “Mostly, but not exclusively.”

“Favorite restaurant in town?”

That gave me pause, and I hummed in consideration. “Attalos,” I said, and when she passed me a curious look, added, “Greek food.”

“Nice.” She hopped off the end of the planter and resumed walking at my side. “Favorite place on campus?”

“My dorm room,” I answered.

“Ever the introvert,” she laughed. “Okay, one more.” I nodded my consent. “Is being team captain everything you dreamed of?”

“Yes.” I adjusted the backpack on my shoulders, accidentally bumping her with my elbow in a way that made my stomach flutter. I ignored that, and because she’d been so open with me about her major, I said, “I’m still kind of nervous about failing, but I love it.”

“How come you’re so afraid of failure?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I said. “It’s failure... nobody wants to fail.”

“I know, but people fail all the time. It’s normal.”

“Not me,” I told her, and my cheeks warmed when she laughed at that. “Did that sound stuck up?”

“No,” she said, still smiling. “You work hard to succeed, I can tell.” I shrugged, which only prompted her to ask, “What’s the last thing you failed at?”

My mind immediately went to Steph, and I swallowed to keep the pang off my face. “What’s the last thing *you* failed at?”

She answered readily, “Making a good first impression on you.”

“And you call me Fort Knox,” I said. She looked at me in question. “You deflect with flirting when I ask serious questions. You did the same thing about what makes you nervous.”

“Maybe I’m being honest,” she said.

“Maybe I don’t believe you,” I countered.

We reached my dorm building, but something in me wasn’t ready for this conversation to be over – it didn’t seem so scary to be a little open if she was going to be too. So I sat down on the high planter beside the stairs. Morgan watched me for a few moments while she stood in front of me, thinking about what to say.

“Okay,” she murmured, and blew a puff of air through her lips. “Are you going to tell me if I tell you?”

I hesitated, taking in the similar hesitation on her face, surprised at just how vulnerable she looked. “Sure,” I said.

She inhaled deeply, held it, and finally said, “I failed at cheering my mom up when my dad left her.”

My eyebrows met with sympathy as I shook my head. “That’s not your fault.”

She shrugged. “That’s half of failure, isn’t it? Unrealistic expectations.”

“When was it?” I asked softly.

“Two months ago,” she answered. But she deflected again with, “It’s fine, he’s a cliché, whatever. What’s the last thing you failed at?”

I could take the hint that she didn’t want to talk about it, so I told her honestly, “My last relationship.”

“How long were you together?” she asked.

“About a year,” I told her, and I could see what her next question would be, so I added, “we broke up four months ago. Well, she broke up with me.”

Morgan gave a sympathetic smile and observed, “You’re not over it.” I shook my head. “You want to know why me and my last girlfriend broke up?” I nodded. “My dog didn’t like her.”

I cracked a smile. “What?”

“Any time she’d come over, she couldn’t get close to me without him glaring at her.”

“Dogs don’t glare,” I laughed.

“They sure as hell do,” Morgan argued, smiling. “I told her it wasn’t personal, he’s protective, but she hated it. I can’t be with someone my dog doesn’t like.”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Rudy,” she answered, and pulled her cellphone out of her pocket. She clicked a button to light up the lock screen, showing me a picture of an adorable, floppy-eared, black and white mutt. But as I looked, her phone started ringing, the display flashing ‘Auntie Pip.’ She checked the caller ID and then put the phone to her ear, answering with, “Woodland Weed Dispensary, Cherry Bomb or Purple Haze?” I couldn’t hold back a laugh, and Morgan grinned at me. “No, you’re a smartass,” she countered with a playful lisp. Her aunt said something, to which she asked, “What flavor?” Another pause. “Okay, I’ll be home soon.” She hung up and slipped the phone back into her pocket. “They’re craving ice cream. Delivery is my sole responsibility in life.”

“What flavor?” I asked amusedly.

“Strawberry,” she answered.

“At least they’re easy to please.”

“Yeah,” Morgan laughed.

Her laughter tapered off, but the smile stayed as she studied me for a few seconds. It was long enough for me to feel the need to say something, so I told her, “Thanks for walking me.”

“No problem,” she said. “Thanks for not calling campus security on me.”

“Next time I’ll catch you in the act,” I teased.

“You can try.” She took a step backward, giving a small wave. “Bye, Audrey.”

“See you,” I said.

I sat there watching as she turned around to make her trek to the campus’s main parking lot, and couldn’t bring myself to move until she was out of sight.

Chapter 5

The knock that sounded on my dorm room door was insistent, but mostly excited and followed by Zulema calling, "Let's go!"

"I'm coming!" I called back.

I stopped at the full-length mirror on the back of the door to make sure I was ready. The top half of my hair was pulled back while the rest of it fell over my shoulders, I was wearing more makeup than usual, and I'd tried to dress a little better than the casual clothes I usually wore around campus. Tight black jeans, calf high boots, and a loose, olive-green, V-neck t-shirt that brought out my eyes. I was ready for the party... physically anyway. I never could completely psych myself up for the crowds.

After another knock from Zulema, I quickly glanced back at my roommate, Monica, and her friend and said, "Last chance. You sure you guys don't want to come?"

They had headphones on while watching something on Monica's laptop, but she'd heard me, because she shook her head and flashed a peace sign.

When I finally swung the door open, Zulema lowered her hand from the next knock she was about to give as her eyes looked me up and down. "Who are you trying to impress?" she asked.

"Every frat boy that I can," I answered sarcastically. I glanced over to the guy standing beside Zulema. He was tall, with broad shoulders, a chiseled jaw, and a warm russet complexion and brown eyes. "Hey, Rodney."

He nodded in greeting, but gave a tug at the lapels of his green jacket. He had a white shirt on underneath, but was also wearing black jeans, and said, "Well, one of us is going to have to change."

"No time," Zulema said. "You'll have to deal with me mixing up your names all night."

I laughed and stepped out into the hall, patting my pockets for my wallet and keys before pulling the door shut behind me. We were headed to fraternity row in town, for the annual kickoff party that Sigma Nu threw

every year after a month of classes. It was one of the biggest parties of the semester, and as much as it wasn't my ideal Saturday night, I indulged Zulema occasionally.

We left my dorm and trekked the mile into town where all the frat houses were, the boom of music audible from almost a block away. By the time we got through the front door, the party was in full swing. There was a full stock of alcohol in the kitchen, people smoking and lounging in one of the living rooms, dancing in another, and more dancing and swimming and playing party games in the backyard.

"Let's dance," Rodney suggested.

Zulema glanced over at me, but I shook my head. "You two go ahead, I'll make a round and see who else is here."

They left for the makeshift dance floor, and I toured around the house. There were some other girls from the team in the backyard, challenging a group of guys to a game of cornhole, so I said hi and stayed to watch for a few minutes. Then I made my way back into the house to the lounge living room. I dropped down on the couch beside a familiar face that was engaged in watching two others play FIFA on TV, and it took him a second to look over at me and see who'd sat down.

When he finally did, he grinned. "Audrey!"

"Hi, Kev," I greeted. He was the captain of the men's soccer team, and a decent person to socialize with every once in a while.

"You want to play?" he asked me, and when I shrugged, he smacked his hand sideways against his friend's arm. "Brighton, give my girl a turn."

"Thanks," I said as the guy passed the controller to me. "So, I heard you guys lost on Thursday."

One of the guys who'd been standing behind the couch set his hands on the back to lean over a bit. I recognized him as their goalkeeper. "It was total bullshit," he said.

Kevin nodded his agreement. "The ref's fault."

I concentrated for a moment on the buttons I was pressing to pass in the game, and then teased, "Yeah, it's always the ref's fault."

"It really was this time," he said. "The other team was taking dives left and right."

"You've been on a win streak though," Kevin said. "Maybe we just need you as our captain instead."

"Maybe," I agreed with a laugh.

I scored in FIFA, and Kevin threw his hands up, screaming, “Goal!” He chugged the rest of his beer and then reached out to the guy I was playing against. “Loser’s out.” The guy handed him the controller.

“You got a new player on your team, right?” asked Brighton.

“Oh, yeah,” said the guy behind me. “Bailey. She’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes, because of course that was the first thing they observed. Kevin glanced over just in time to laugh and ask, “What? You don’t think she’s hot?”

“I’m definitely not answering that question,” I told him, and swatted at his controller to try and mess up the pass he was making in the game.

“She kicks ass, too,” Brighton added.

I nodded my agreement. “She’s pretty good.”

Kevin lobbed a pass down field, shot, and scored. “Can’t win them all,” he said with a playful grin.

I passed my controller to one of the other guys and stood. “Thanks for the game. Good luck next week.”

“You too,” he said, and then screamed, “Comets!” Everyone in the small living room, and even a few in the hall, screamed it back and cheered.

Not knowing what else to do with myself, I wandered out to the backyard again, and stood watching an intense game of truth or dare Jenga. I was there for a few minutes before someone brushed my shoulder, but it wasn’t the kind where someone accidentally touches you on their way past. It felt more deliberate, and I looked over and locked eyes with Morgan.

“Hi,” she said. “How was that nudge? Gentle enough?”

“You’re improving,” I said, and she laughed. “Did you just get here?”

She nodded. “Just walking around and seeing who I know.”

“There’s some other girls from the team here too,” I told her.

“And some people from my classes,” she said. “I’m still deciding what I want to do.” I nodded while trying to figure out what to say, but keeping people entertained, especially at parties, was not my forte. “You want to dance or something?”

“I’m not much of a dancer,” I told her with a wince. “And I don’t really do that with teammates.”

“Do what?” she asked. “Dance?”

“Get too friendly,” I answered. Her eyebrows furrowed, so I added, “It causes drama on the field.”

Her mouth pulled to one side as she considered that, or maybe tried to figure out what *she* should say now. I'd definitely made things a little awkward, but after a few moments, she asked, "Can I get you drink? I was a bar back for a couple months, I learned a few things." She took one look at my apologetic expression, and before I could even respond, laughed, "You don't drink, do you?"

"Not often," I said.

As she nodded, I caught sight of Steph and her new girlfriend coming in the side entrance of the backyard. They hurried over to a group that was crowded around the beer pong table, greeting everyone excitedly and with hugs and enthusiasm. Her new girlfriend immediately jumped into animated conversation with three of them, in the outgoing kind of way I never could, and was received with the kind of excitement I never could coax out of people. I was simultaneously hurt, annoyed, intimidated, and challenged.

"What about darts?" Morgan asked, gesturing toward a dart board mounted on the wall outside the house. "You can't say no to darts."

"You know what?" I said, forcing my gaze away from the group. "I will take that drink."

One of her eyebrows lifted as she asked, "Really?" I nodded, and she grinned. "Okay." I followed her back into the house and to the kitchen, where we maneuvered around others mixing drinks into a corner. "Pick your poison," Morgan said.

I glanced over the bottles on the counter. "Vodka."

"Two screwdrivers, coming right up." She grabbed two plastic cups and set them in front of her. "How strong are we talking?"

"Surprise me."

She stopped her reach for the bottle of vodka and looked at me, seeming more confused than pleased. "That's a dangerous privilege, Caplan..."

Maybe it was the odd sense of determination at seeing Steph and her girlfriend, but I had the sudden and haphazard desire to prove that I *could* have fun. "Your move, Bailey."

The confusion in Morgan's eyes shifted to amusement as her mouth pulled into a smirk. She unscrewed the lid on the vodka and poured what must've been the equivalent of at least three shots into each cup, and then filled the rest with orange juice and a splash of lemon soda from an ice bucket.

“What do you think?” she asked as she handed me a cup.

I took a sip, and it wasn't nearly as cringeworthy as I expected for how much alcohol was in it. “Not bad,” I praised. “Darts?”

“Absolutely.”

She led the way out of the kitchen and to the backyard, where we were able to slide in after a game of darts that was just ending.

“I'll have you know,” she said, lining up for her first shot, “I'm pretty good at this.” She threw the dart, and it landed on the outmost circle at the bottom of the board. “Did I say good? I meant awful.”

I laughed and playfully motioned her aside so I could line up for my shot. “Let me show you how it's done.” I threw, and it stuck into the wall completely off the board.

“That... Wow.” She snorted. “You really showed me who's boss.”

“Impressive, right?” I took a gulp of my drink. “I'm just getting warmed up.”

“I can't wait to see your drunk aim,” she laughed. As she aimed her next shot, she asked, “Who'd you come here with?”

“ZuZu,” I told her. “She's dancing with her new boyfriend.” I watched Morgan take a few drinks from her cup. “Who'd you come with?”

She shrugged. “I'm here with you now.” She balanced a dart on the tip of her finger, adding, “Till you get sick of me.”

“You're keeping me from being a third wheel,” I said, and threw my next dart. It struck nearer the center than it had yet, and as I grinned at Morgan, I glanced past her and locked eyes with Steph. She gave a small wave, but Morgan distracted me with a high five, and I was kind of grateful for it. I took a massive gulp of my drink to steel my nerve as Morgan lined up her next shot.

By the time we finished our game of darts, I was nearly done with my drink and definitely feeling it. Morgan threw back the rest of hers and set the empty cup on a table, and asked, “What's next?” She looked around the yard and inhaled an excited breath. “Cornhole!”

I followed her gaze over to the bean bag game, and then watched as she looked from me to my drink, and back at me. Taking the prompt, I chugged the small amount left in my cup and then dropped it into hers. I'd just started trailing her over to the boards when someone from the other side of the yard yelled, “Beer pong! Any new challengers!” I looked over and

saw that Steph and her girlfriend were lined up on one end of the table, her girlfriend tossing a ping pong ball in her hand while they waited.

“Beer pong!” I said, grabbing Morgan’s hand and dragging her toward the table.

“We have some takers!” the same guy shouted excitedly, pressing a ball into my free palm.

“Hey, Audrey,” Steph said, with a genuine smile that, instead of making my chest ache, fired up the competitiveness in me.

I waved with the ball, and Steph’s girlfriend said, “I’m Alyssa.”

“Morgan,” Morgan announced across the table, and cast me a curious look.

“How good are you with a ping pong ball?” I asked her.

She peered at the third-full cups of beer in front of us. “Just drunk enough to be amazing, I think.”

I grinned, drunk enough myself that my lips were numb and I could barely feel the smile. It was only then that Morgan’s hand shifted in mine and I realized I was still holding it. I let go quickly, and gestured across the table for a distraction, saying, “You first. Ready to get destroyed?”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Steph laughed, and told Alyssa, “go ahead, babe.”

My eyes swept over Alyssa as she lined up her shot. She was cute, if you were into the hipster type. Neck-length brown hair, gray beanie hanging halfway off her head, black t-shirt and ripped blue jeans with a red flannel tied around her waist. Steph was definitely into it, because she watched Alyssa with an endeared smile while she tossed the ping pong ball across the table.

It sailed directly into a cup in the middle of our collection, and Morgan said, “Nice shot,” and picked up the cup to drink. “You want to throw?” she asked me.

I shook my head and pressed the ball into her hand. She aimed and pulsed her arm. Stopped and squinted one eye. Took a breath and pulsed her arm again.

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

“A little...”

“Maybe you should kick it,” I teased.

She laughed and pushed me with her elbow. “Don’t make me laugh, I’ll miss.” She finally threw, and it bounced off the rim of a cup and up into the air, coming back down and landing in a different one. “Yes!”

“Woo!” I held up both my hands, and Morgan slapped hers against them.

“Okay, okay,” Steph said, grabbing the ball while Alyssa drank. “Here we go.” She tossed it, and it landed at the edge of a far cup, barely making it in.

“Boo.” I grabbed the cup and chugged its contents.

As I lined up for my shot, Steph challenged, “Let’s see it, Shooter,” and I’m glad I wasn’t in the process of throwing when she said that.

It was an old nickname she’d given me while we were together. Short for ‘straight shooter,’ a nickname that had always felt like a jab when she said it no matter how affectionately she meant it. It stung, and that stirred my already competitive flare.

“Oh, it’s on,” I murmured. I chucked the ball across the table, directly into the center cup.

“Yeah!” Morgan yelled, holding up her palm for another high five.

I cheered, and faced her as I said, “Secret handshake, go.” She grinned, and we slapped our hands together awkwardly as we tried to coordinate some on-the-spot handshake, but it was sloppy and ridiculous and we both devolved into laughter.

“It needs some work,” she snorted.

Alyssa threw next, and then Morgan, and we went through turns for a few rounds. We missed some, but every time Morgan or I made it, we tried to make a stupid handshake again. The more we drank, the worse our attempts were, and the funnier it got as we added clumsy foot touches or hip bumps, until we could barely even try because we were laughing too hard the moment we faced each other.

We threw and laughed and drank until there was only one cup left each, and I was up. The pressure was on.

“You got this,” Morgan urged. My vision was wobbly and my aim was just as bad, and I swayed for a moment before steadying myself. “You can do it.”

“Shh,” I whispered, reaching over with my free hand to poke her on the side of the nose.

She snickered and took a step back to let me focus. I took aim again, inhaling and holding my breath to make my shot as stable as possible. The ball flew across the table and landed against the edge of a cup. It swirled around the inner rim as Morgan took in a pre-triumphant gasp, but Alyssa

bent down to the table. In accordance with the rules, she blew hard into the cup as the ball spun, popping it back out.

“No!” Morgan shouted while I threw my hands to my head.

Alyssa grabbed the ball, lining up her shot while Morgan and I tensed. She threw it, and it bounced off the table.

“Ha!” Morgan caught the ball before it hit the floor, taking stance for her toss.

I stepped behind her to watch her exact aim, grabbing the back of her shirt in my fist – partly out of the stress, but also to stabilize myself as I leaned in to watch. She pulsed her elbow, huffed a breath out, and threw. The ball sailed in a perfect arc, swooshing directly into the beer in the last remaining cup. We yelled, and when I went to give her a victory hug, she jumped so I was holding her up. I spun her in a circle while she threw her arms in the air, and then set her down so we could watch Alyssa and Steph drink their last cup and ours.

They chugged and then came around the table to us, extending their hands for sportsmanlike high fives.

“Good game,” Alyssa said.

“Yeah,” Steph agreed as her hand hit mine. “It’s nice to see you finally cutting loose, Audrey. I knew there was a party girl in there somewhere.”

My smile faded, but Steph had shifted her attention to Morgan to give her a high five, and Morgan was the only one who seemed to notice my sudden tension. Or the way my mouth fell open with a pending response, caught between sarcastic, hurt, or a good old-fashioned ‘fuck you.’

“Thanks for the game,” Morgan said, throwing her arm around my shoulders and already pulling me away from the table. “See you around!”

“*Finally* cutting loose,” I repeated as she led me away, and I recovered enough from the surprise of it to have registered the response I wanted to give. Good old-fashioned. I turned to make my way back.

“Nope,” Morgan grabbed me again, gently pulling me in the opposite direction. “Sober Audrey might regret it. Let’s get out of here.”

I let her lead the way while I seethed. Instead of winding back through the house, we cut through the gate in the fenced yard to get back out to the street.

“I knew there was a party girl in there somewhere,” I mimicked in a mocking voice as we stopped on the sidewalk.

“That was the ex, I take it,” Morgan said.

“The ex and her new girlfriend.”

“What was that all about?”

I tossed a hurt glare back toward the house. “She broke up with me because she thinks I’m boring.”

“She said that?” Morgan asked in surprise.

“Her exact words were ‘I’m bored,’” I told her, and she winced. “I’ll show her boring. Let’s do something. Let’s, um...” I glanced around while I thought about it. “Oh! Let’s go sneak into the pool.”

“What?” Morgan laughed in disbelief.

“You can swim, right?” I asked, and she nodded. “Come on then, let’s have fun. Let’s go to the pool.”

I grabbed her hand as I passed by, intent on taking her to the pool, but she stood firm and stopped me. “We’re not sneaking into the pool, Audrey.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not risking my dad not paying for school,” she said. “And you’re not risking your spot as captain. Besides, you don’t have to prove that you’re not boring.”

“You don’t think... You don’t want to do something crazy?”

Her mouth pulled into a softer version of her lopsided grin as she shook her head. “I don’t want you to be someone you’re not.” My mood sobered, and my gaze dropped timidly. “Come on,” she said, nodding for me to follow as she started walking. “I know a diner with a waitress who makes the best malts in the world.”

“Milkshakes?” I trailed after her, taking place at her side.

She hummed. “I need to sober up before I can go home. You do like milkshakes, right?”

“I’m not a complete alien.”

She glanced over at me but didn’t laugh. “She really did a number on you, huh?” I shrugged. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

She let it go, and we jogged across an empty street to venture into a different part of town. Neither of us said anything, but we walked side-by-side as she led the way to a small corner diner that I’d never been to before. It was mostly empty except for the few other drunk college students who’d wandered in, and a lone older guy at the counter. We strode in and Morgan took us straight to a booth, where we sat on opposite sides and I grabbed a menu to keep from feeling awkward, because I didn’t know what to talk

about anymore. Buzzed as I still was, my antagonized recklessness was gone, and I was back to being shy and lame.

“Look who it is,” said the waitress as she arrived at our table, setting down two cups of water with her bright brown eyes trained on Morgan.

“Hey,” Morgan greeted her with a grin. “Audrey, this is my Aunt Pip. Pip, Audrey. She’s the team captain.”

“Oh, hi!” Pip flashed a grin a lot like Morgan’s and extended a slender hand. She was younger than I expected, maybe in her mid-thirties. Her short brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she had an aqua bandana tied on her head like a cute headband, and it matched the color of the diner uniform shirt she was wearing. “I saw your game the other day, you played great.”

“Thanks.” I shook with her, wondering if she’d been who Morgan was waving at during the game. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she said. “So it’s midnight and Morgan looks drunk, I know what she wants.” Pip flashed her a teasing look, and Morgan laughed and rolled her eyes. “Do you need a minute to look?”

I set the menu down and shook my head. “I’ll just have a chocolate malt, please.”

“No, no, no,” Morgan protested, reaching across the table and pushing the menu closer to me. “We’re going to scratch that adventurous itch you had, you got to pick something different.”

“Okay, fine,” I chuckled. I flipped open the menu to read the list of shakes. There were some wild flavors to choose from, including cereals and alcohols, but eventually I said, “I’ll get the peanut butter crunch,” and looked at Morgan for approval.

“Still on the safe side,” she said, “but I’ll take it.”

Pip was in the process of nodding when I said, “Actually,” and pointed to a different item on the menu that was labeled as a root beer float with a twist, “I’ll try the sideshow surprise.”

“Look at you,” Morgan beamed, “getting crazy.”

I grabbed my straw and launched it spear-style across the table at her, much to her amusement.

“I’ll have those right out for you,” Pip said. Before walking away, she tapped the table in front of Morgan and said, “My shift ends in two hours if you need me to drive you home.” Morgan nodded.

“That’s nice of her,” I said as Pip walked away.

“Yeah,” she agreed, “until she reveals that her true motive is to tease me about bringing you in for the best malts in the world.”

“Oh, is this your secret spot that nobody knows about?”

“Yes, so don’t you dare tell anyone about it.” She used the opportunity to throw the straw back across the table at me.

We both laughed when it hit me in the chin, but I set it down to take a gulp from my cup of water while an idea struck me. “If you don’t want to worry about your car at all,” I said, “my roommate told me earlier that she was going to a friend’s tonight. I’ll take her bed and you can have mine.”

One of Morgan’s eyebrows lifted. “Trying to get me in your room, Caplan?”

“Are you always such a flirt?” I asked.

“There’s the Audrey I know,” she laughed, and I narrowed my eyes at her. “Don’t worry, I remember you don’t do that with teammates. I won’t try anything, but I will take you up on the offer. Thanks.”

I nodded and took a gander around the diner I’d never known was here, just like I’d never known Morgan’s aunt. “How long has your aunt lived here?”

“Forever,” Morgan answered. “She and my mom grew up here, and my grandparents left them the house.”

“Did you ever live here?”

She shook her head. “My mom moved to Oregon,” and she paused for a moment, saying with less enthusiasm, “when she met my dad.”

“Sorry,” I murmured. She shrugged. “Do you... never mind.”

“Go ahead,” she encouraged.

I took a cautious breath, gauging her reaction while I asked, “Do you resent him?”

She blew a long puff of air and looked around. “I don’t know. I mean, he’s still my dad, but I haven’t really talked to him much since... if that answers your question.” I nodded, wanting to ask more but not sure how much she wanted to say. I think she could see that on my face, because she said, “He left my mom for someone he works with.”

“The cliché,” I whispered.

She nodded. “At least she was his age and not mine.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and she shrugged again. “You guys were pretty blindsided, huh?”

She hummed. “They had their problems, but my mom thought they’d work it out.”

“So that’s why you came here?” I said. “To be with her.”

“Yep,” she said. “My dad wanted me to stay and finish school there... We had some fights about it, but he didn’t have any good reasons to say no.”

“Are you going back after you graduate?” I asked.

She gave a long-winded noise and said, “I don’t know,” and then thought about it for another few seconds. “It’s too soon to tell. I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” I said, and her eyebrows rose with surprise. “You’re going to take us to championships.”

She laughed. “You mean *you’re* going to take us to championships. I’m just here to make it look good when you do.”

“There’s the Morgan I know,” I teased.

While she grinned about that, Pip came by and dropped off our desserts. Mine was a creamy root beer flavored shake, and the twist on it was the chocolate-filled rolled wafers crunched up in it, with the one sticking out the top like a straw. Morgan’s was a soft yellow color with crushed nuts in it – almonds probably, because there were more on top with some tiny marshmallows.

“What did you get?” I asked, making a questioning reach across the table.

She passed it to me with a smile. “Banana bash. Bananas, marshmallow fluff, and roasted almonds.”

I took a sip through the wide straw, and it must’ve been the liquor-induced munchies, because I moaned. “That’s so good, oh my god.”

“Told you Pip makes the best malts.” She gestured to mine. “Can I try that?”

I nodded and slid it across the table. She took a sip. “Oh yeah, good choice.” Then she took another sip, looking up at me and taking two more before I caught on.

“Hey!” I protested, laughing as I reached across the table to steal it back. “Don’t drink it all, that’s mine.”

She let me have it back with a mischievous smile, and watched me take a gulp before asking, “You grew up nearby?” I nodded. “What made you come here?”

“Best soccer team in the state,” I said proudly. “And it’s close enough I can visit my family often.”

“You have a car?” she asked.

“It’s a lug,” I laughed. “I only use it to go home.”

She smiled at that, and poked at her shake with the straw before saying, “So... sports medicine?”

“What?”

“Your career,” she said, “with your kinesiology degree.”

“Oh. No.” I took a busy sip of my shake.

She gave a slow, thoughtful nod. “That job’s not cool enough for you?”

“That’s not it,” I said. “Almost everyone in the program wants to do it. We’re covered on sports rehab.”

“What do you want to do, then?” she asked. I shrugged. “You don’t know, or I’m being too nosy?”

I gave a timid smile down at my drink, and she seemed to understand because she didn’t respond, instead contemplating something else to talk about. But she’d opened up to me and told me about her dad, and maybe letting her know some things wouldn’t be the end of the world...

“Occupational therapy,” I said before she could change the subject.

“Oh.” She took her hand off her drink and leaned back in her seat, thinking about that for a minute while I avoided eye contact. “I want to ask if there’s a reason, but... if you don’t want to talk about it...” I stirred my shake, picked at the end of my straw, and drew in a deep breath. I glanced up to meet her patient expression, and she gave a small smile and said, “It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

She inhaled to start talking about something else, but I said, “My sister,” and she stopped to listen. It took me a long handful of seconds to continue. “She was in a climbing accident when she was in high school. Spinal cord injury left her with paraplegia and,” I took in a shaky breath, “and a severe case of depression. She survived but... we still lost her for a while.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan said quietly.

“She started going to rehab with an occupational therapist,” I said. “I went with her sometimes, so I got to see how they helped – not just her, but everyone who went there. It gave her her life back, convinced her that just because she’s in a wheelchair doesn’t mean it’s over.” I shrugged once

more, busying myself with another sip of my shake. “I want to do that for other people.”

It took me a few moments to finally glance up at her, and she gave me a sincere smile. “That is the *furthest* thing from boring.” My gaze darted down again even though I grinned. “Thanks for telling me.” I nodded. “Is she older than you? What’s her name?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anna. She’s twenty-eight and lives near my parents. She’s married to an architectural engineer named Wayne and they’re grossly happy.”

“Ew,” she teased.

I laughed, but told her seriously, “He’s a good guy, though. And she’s still climbing. Her biceps are,” I made an indicative grab toward my arm, “bigger than yours.”

“I have no doubt,” she chuckled, flexing, “these things are pitiful.”

I really wouldn’t have called anything about her physique ‘pitiful,’ but I wasn’t about to tell her that, even if my eyes lingered longer than they should have. “What about you?” I asked. “What are you going to do after school?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I always wanted to open a studio, but not the upscale, inaccessible kind. I want to sell and create, but I also want to have classes to make art more available.”

“That’s an awesome idea,” I praised.

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Who wouldn’t?”

“My dad,” she sighed. At my curious look, she explained, “He thinks turning a studio into a community service decreases its value. What he really means is it lowers the appeal to bougie snobs who think the masses can’t properly enjoy it.”

“That’s stupid,” I said, and she nodded her agreement as she lifted her shake straw to her lips. “Well, apparently I’m really good at telling people to fuck off. I can give him a call if you want.”

She snorted into her cup. “Write me an ‘I owe you’ for that, I’ll save it for later.”

“Deal.” I stuck out my hand, and she shook with me as she held back a laugh. “What about your senior project?”

“Top secret,” she said instantly.

“You’re really not going to tell anyone about it?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Only person who knows is my professor.”

“Is that usually how it goes?” I asked.

Her cheeks shaded the barest tint of pink. “No... but it’s kind of inspired by my mom, so it’s a surprise.” I nodded my understanding. “Oh! You should come to the show at the end of the year and see it! There’s a lot of good artists in the program.”

“Oh, uh,” I hesitated, “sure.”

Her excitement faded into unmistakable disappointment. “You don’t want to?”

“No, it’s not that,” I said quickly, reaching out like I was going to set my hand on hers for reassurance, but I chickened out and set it awkwardly in the middle of the table. “It’s just that I don’t know a lot about art. I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to appreciate it as much as I should.”

“I mean, I could tour you around the show if you want. There’s actually an elective display in a couple weeks if you want to go with me to see what it’s like.” She eyed my hand in a way that said she recognized my intent with it, that said she was thinking about completing the motion, and it made me draw it back and set it in my lap. “But seriously, Audrey...” she met my eyes, “no pressure...”

I suddenly felt soberer than I had all night, and I didn’t know what answer to give. A part of me wanted to go – she’d been so excited about it before I ruined it – but another heart-achy part of me was afraid to. So I simply nodded, and was grateful that she took it for what it was and diverted the conversation by loudly slurping up the remainder of her milkshake.

“Every time I come in here,” she said as she reached into her pocket to pull out her wallet, “I tell myself I’m going to try every flavor, and I always end up getting the same thing.”

“Thwarted by the banana bash,” I said.

She laughed as she slapped ten dollars onto the table. “It’s a defeat I can accept.”

“How much do I owe you?”

She shook her head. “Consider it my official congratulations for making captain. And also payment for a favor I’m about to ask.”

I sucked down the last of my shake and said, “Should I be scared?”

She gave a wincing smile. “Only if you’re as bad at physics as I am.”

“Something tells me I’m not,” I teased. “You need help?”

“Desperately,” she groaned, dramatically setting her elbows on the table and burying her face in her hands. But when she removed her hands, she wasn’t smiling at her antics or amused by the struggle. She actually looked worried, and a little bit embarrassed. “I won’t last the semester without a tutor and I can’t graduate without it. And you sort of offered...”

“Coach would kill me if I let you fail,” I said, trying to lighten her sudden stress. All she did was blow a hard breath through her lips. “I don’t want you to fail either.”

“I owe you,” she sighed. “Big time.”

“A national championship?”

She finally cracked a smile. “Done.” She stood up, and I followed her lead and slid out of the booth. “Is it still cool if I sleep over?” I nodded, and she trailed me out so I could start guiding the way back to the dorms. As we walked, she asked, “So tell me the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever done during a soccer game.”

I thought about it for half a second before my face turned red from residual embarrassment. “No,” I whined.

She laughed. “It can’t be that bad.” I gave her a look. “Oh, come on.” I shook my head. “*Please*. I’ll beg.”

“Morgan,” I protested.

She nudged me with her elbow. “Let’s hear it. Please, please, please.”

“Fine,” I said, and pointed a stern finger at her. “You can’t tell anyone. I never even told ZuZu.” She made a show of zipping her lips. “Okay, once in high school I forgot my cleats and had to borrow some from another player. But the only girl who had any extra also had gigantic feet.” Morgan snorted, already annoyingly amused. “Shut up,” I mumbled, and shoved her shoulder. “I could barely run in them without them almost falling off, it’s a wonder I didn’t break an ankle. Anyway, I got set up for the most perfect goal of my athletic career. It was game-winning, we were tied up in the last two minutes. I fell out of my left shoe as I received the pass, kicked the ball with my right, and that shoe went flying. And I mean *flying*, Morgan. I could’ve won a field goal tournament.”

She laughed. “Did you make the goal? That’s not so bad.”

“I made the goal...”

“And the shoe?” she prompted, her lips pursed to contain a grin.

“Sailed right into the face of my high school crush.”

She bellowed with laughter, stumbling forward several steps as she buckled over. “Oh my god,” she cackled. “I mean, were they okay? But also, *oh my god.*”

I tossed my head back and groaned. “He had a horrible black eye and I completely wimped out of ever asking him to the Sadie Hawkins dance.”

“What?” she snickered. “That would’ve been the best ‘how we got together’ story.”

“No,” I whined, “everyone was laughing. It was mortifying.”

She chuckled but forced herself to stop, even though it clearly wasn’t easy. “Okay, I’m sorry,” she said, the smile still in her voice. “I won’t laugh.”

“It’s fine,” I murmured, “you can laugh.” And she did, for a few more seconds before I said, “It’s your turn.”

“Only fair,” she agreed. “Also high school, and I was trying to impress a girl.”

“Of course you were,” I teased.

“It’s what I’m good at,” she laughed. “Anyway, it’s an intense game. We’re winning but the other team is fighting hard for a goal. I get sent a chest high pass, and I should’ve just let it drop and kicked it but, you know, pretty girl is watching. So I went in for a diving headshot right in front of the net.”

“Morgan,” I scolded with half a laugh.

“So I throw myself toward the ball, but somehow it gets caught between my shoulder and chin. I hit the ground face first right on top of the ball, and all I register at first is that the ball is still right under me. So I shoot up and kick it toward the net, it goes right in and I turn around and throw my hands up to celebrate. But everyone is staring at me.” She paused, and I hummed for her to continue. “It completely busted my nose, and everyone is staring at me because I’m bleeding everywhere, and the second I realized that, I started to feel the pain.” I winced. “Well, first pain... and then just nausea...”

“Oh no,” I whispered.

“The ref had run over to check on me, and when she got to me I projectile vomited all over the front of her shirt.” I covered my mouth with my hands, my disgusted noise broken by a laugh. “She ran off the field gagging.”

“That’s awful!” I said, devolving into giggles. “Ugh, that’s so gross!”

“Tell me about it,” she chuckled. “She never refereed any of our games after that. Wonder why.”

“Did you win?”

She shook her head. “They canceled the game because of the vomit and we had to have a rematch.”

“No,” I laughed, “I’m so sorry.” She shrugged. “And the girl?”

“Oh I totally hooked up with her after she made sure I brushed my teeth. She thought it was hilarious.”

“Unbelievable,” I snickered. We reached my dorm building, and I led her inside and upwards toward my second-floor room. “Just don’t take any dive shots this season, okay?”

“I make no promises.”

I unlocked my door and let her go in first, flicking on the light as I shut the door behind us. “That’s my bed,” I said, pointing, “you can have it.”

“Thank you,” she said, stumbling forward and falling onto it. “I’m so tired.”

I was too – parties always exhausted me – and so I waited for her to take off her shoes and jacket and get situated under the blankets before I turned off the light and wandered to Monica’s bed on the other side of the room. The sleepiness caught up with me in the comfort of being home, and I was too tired to change, so I stripped my jeans and climbed into the bed in my shirt and underwear, settling into the sheets.

“Wow,” I mumbled, and Morgan made a curious noise in the dark. “My roommate’s pillow is like a rock.”

She laughed. “Here,” she said, and a moment later my own pillow landed on my stomach. I swapped it with the one under my head and tossed the second pillow back across, but I must’ve hit her in the face, because she grunted and said, “You did that on purpose.”

“Sorry,” I snickered.

She made a lighthearted noise of disbelief, and we lay there for a few quiet minutes in the dark before she said, “Hey, Audrey?” I hummed to let her know I was awake. “You’re not boring.”

I turned to face her silhouette, and watched it respond to my shift by turning to face me. “Thanks,” I said, giving a small smile even though she couldn’t see it. She didn’t say anything, and it got so quiet for the next couple of minutes that I even wondered if she’d already fallen asleep. “Hey, Morgan?”

“Hm?” she asked sleepily.

I hadn't had something I wanted to say. Now that I thought about it, I wasn't even sure why I didn't just let her drift off. But what came out of my mouth was, “I want to go to the art thing.”

“Yeah?”

I considered it for a moment, unsure of if the pull in my gut was from nerves or the alcohol. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” she said, and shifted deeper under the blankets.

I did the same, watching her silhouette for another minute before my eyes drifted shut, and in the morning I woke to a couple of aspirin and a bottle of Gatorade on the nightstand, along with a note that said, ‘See you at practice :).’

Chapter 6

I'd been driving away from town for fifteen minutes, passing houses with less and less neighbors the farther I got. I'd driven this road plenty of times before on my way home to family, and always admired the cute farmhouses, with their long dirt driveways that had their own street names, and their gardens and huge grassy plots. My GPS said I was only two minutes from Morgan's house now, and I wondered which one it was. Which one I'd passed multiple times a year without ever knowing who it belonged to.

I watched the arrow on my phone until the only house it could be was the one. *That* one. One of my favorites on the drive. The small white two-story, with gray stone around the porch instead of normal railing, and navy-blue trim around its big windows and on the porch beams. The one that always had bright red flowers everywhere in the spring, but since it was late in the fall it had warm-colored leaves on the few almost-bare trees. I pulled my old station wagon all the way up the drive and turned it off, getting out of the car while I couldn't help but smile at how homey it was. This was where Morgan lived.

Before I could take my first step toward the front porch, a familiar black and white dog ran out of the large shed twenty yards away from the house and right up to me. It wagged its tail as it did three quick circles around me, and then poked its head between my legs from behind to look up at me and wait for attention.

"You're Rudy," I laughed, and reached down to scratch behind his floppy ears, which was impossible because he wouldn't stop licking my fingers. While I tried to pet him, I recognized the tune of a song coming from the shed, and couldn't imagine it was anyone but Morgan blasting the music. "Come on, buddy," I said to Rudy, and after my first step toward the shed, he took off to lead the way.

At the shed, I poked my head through the large, cracked-open barn-style doors, and stopped at the entrance to take in the sight. It was Morgan alright. With her back to me and bobbing her head so hard her hair was

almost falling out of its bun. She was working on a piece of glass, making rhythmic strokes on it with the paint brush in her hand.

“What is that?” I called over the music.

She whipped around, eyebrows high until she realized it was me, and then her cheeks went pink. I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face as she skirted sideways toward her speaker, but it wasn’t her surprise that delighted me. It was her clothes. She was wearing denim overalls with paint spattered all over them, one shoulder completely undone and the other side barely hanging on her shoulder at all. The thin gray sweater she had on underneath was frayed and she had the sleeves rolled to just above her wrists, and there were spatters of paint on the white Converse sneakers she was wearing too. It was a completely different look from the athletic or put-together style she usually had, but I’ll be damned if it wasn’t... adorable.

“You’re early,” she said, clicking off the music.

“No, I’m not,” I said with a smile. It was noon, just like we planned.

She pulled her cellphone out of her pocket to check the time. “Oh.” And she scrambled back over to where she’d been working and started pulling together all the supplies. “Sorry, let me just clean up really quick.”

“Don’t rush, it’s fine,” I told her, trying my best to hold back my amusement at the fact that she actually seemed flustered. I nodded toward the glass as I strode over to it. “Is this part of your senior project? Was I not supposed to see it?”

She dumped her armful of paint tubes into an already messy cabinet, shut the door, and turned around to face me again. She seemed to realize then how scattered she was acting, because she took a deep breath and then huffed the tension away. “I lost track of time,” she said, and wandered over to me. “This is an assignment to do something out of our comfort zone. So it’s not very good and, well, you know, I kind of wasn’t lying when I said you make me a little nervous.”

I glanced over at her, and when the tiny smile she gave made my cheeks warm, I diverted from the comment. “What is it?”

“I’m trying my hand at light play.”

“Mhm,” I said, “I know exactly what that is.”

She laughed and moved behind me, grabbing my shoulders to position me a step over. “Stand here.” And she walked away to turn off half the lights in the shed and grab a flashlight. “It’s not finished, okay?”

“Okay,” I smiled.

“It’s a parrot, right?” she said, standing beside me again and gesturing to the bird painted on the glass. I hummed my agreement. “Well, I shine a green light through it, and the green disappears.” She clicked on the flashlight with a green lens and pointed it at the glass, so that a completely different image was displayed on the wall behind it in different colors. I grinned at the projection of a lion, visible only in the light on the wall and not in the painted parrot on the glass. “*Shit.*”

“What?” I asked, looking over at her worriedly.

She motioned both hands at the wall and whined. “I forgot about the light color mixing with the other paint colors.” I stared at her blankly. “It’s chartreuse, Audrey!” she said in exasperation. “The lion is yellow green!”

“It’s still cool though,” I reassured her, trying not to laugh. “It’s dreamy.” The lion might have been yellow green, but the outlines were almost black from mixing with the red, and it was shrouded in emerald green from the actual light. “I think it’s awesome.”

“Thanks,” she sighed in defeat. “Stupid art. This is why I don’t paint. Just let me sculpt a goddess with perfect boobs and call it a day.” I snorted with laughter, and she looked at the genuine amusement on my face and cracked a smile.

“Can you salvage it?” I asked.

“Probably not,” she said, “I’ll just scrape it clean and start over.” She held the flashlight under her chin and made a tortured face that was exaggerated in the beam. “And now to reward myself for a job well done with some physics.” And she gave an exaggerated grin that looked manic in the light.

“You can show me around first, if you want,” I said, taking a gander around the shed that appeared to be her studio. My eyes landed on a bench with ceramic sculptures on it. “Whoa.” I paced to it and bent over in front of one in particular. It was a woman’s head with so much detail it almost looked real, and her hair appeared to be blowing in the wind as it splayed across her face and away from the rest in detailed strands. “Did you make this?”

“Yeah,” she said, walking over to stand next to me.

“Whoa,” was all I could say again. And I just stared at it, for several long seconds before saying, “You’re *good*. Like, you’re actually *really* good.”

“Thanks?” she chuckled.

“No, seriously,” I began to say, but stopped short when I looked next to the art and my eyes locked on to what appeared to be dog poop. “Um...?”

“Ceramic,” she said, picking it up off the bench and turning it upside down so I could see the unpainted bottom. “I leave it around the house sometimes. Pip hates it.”

“You’re a child,” I laughed, and she beamed at me. “What’s the biggest thing you ever sculpted?”

Her lips pulled into a huge smile, and she stepped a few strides sideways and set her hand on the seat of a Harley Davidson. “This.”

I didn’t believe her at first, and just stared at her as she stood there next to an actual motorcycle. “Shut up.”

“I swear on my life,” she laughed. “Touch it.”

I hurried over and set my hand on the leather seat. Not leather at all. I gave it a gentle knock, and when the ceramic clink rang out against my knuckles, all I managed was a dumbfounded, “What.” She huffed amusedly. My eyes still didn’t believe what I was feeling. The textures of the seat and tires, the shine on the metals, it all looked one hundred percent real. “How?”

“Piece by painstaking piece,” she said. “I actually won a really big national contest with it.”

“Morgan, this... holy shit.”

“Thanks,” she said, gaze dropping with humble timidity. “I got some offers on it, actually, but I was thinking of making it the window display when I finally open a studio.” She passed a glance up and down the bike. “Though, now that I’m thinking about it, maybe I should’ve only painted half of it. If no one believes it’s ceramic...”

“No, it’s perfect,” I said. “I’d totally stop into a studio if I saw this in the window.”

She grinned as she met my eyes, and I was feeling such a rare amount of awestruck that all I could do was stare back. Until I realized I was staring, and then my cheeks shaded, and I cleared my throat and said, “Physics?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “physics.”

She led the way out of the shed, calling for Rudy to follow us as she took me up the porch steps and through the front door of her house. The front door entered at an open, farmhouse kitchen and dining room, bright with natural light coming from the large lattice windows. There was a

woman standing at the L-shaped kitchen counter, who was uncorking a bottle of red wine and glanced up at us as we strode in. She looked like she'd only recently woken up – her light brown hair was messy even though she'd tried to put it up, and she was in sweats and a baggy shirt – and she and Morgan locked eyes for a heavy moment before she returned to her task.

“Mom,” Morgan said, making her way across the dining room and around the counter into the kitchen. She kissed her mom on the cheek as she took the bottle of wine out of her hand, leaving her with half a glass as she corked it and slid it to the far side of the counter. “This is Audrey, from soccer. She’s going to try and help me pass physics.”

Her mom took a sip of wine and set the glass down as I strode over. She smiled at me in what seemed like the friendliest way she could, but there was an unmistakable sadness and exhaustion in her hazel eyes. “I’ve heard a lot about you,” she said, extending her hand across the counter.

“Thanks,” I said, shaking with her. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You two are going to study?” she asked, and Morgan nodded. “Have fun,” she said. She reached an arm around Morgan’s shoulders and kissed her on the side of the head, and then let go to grab her drink. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

She disappeared farther into the house with Rudy following her, and it took a handful of awkward seconds for Morgan to finally look at me. She gave a pursed-lip half-smile and blew a heavy breath out her nose. “Come on,” she murmured, “we can study upstairs.”

I trailed her out into the hallway and up the stairs, wondering what I could say to help ease the sudden discomfort. But I wasn’t even sure if she wanted me to say anything, or to acknowledge that I’d noticed. So I didn’t, and just let her lead me to the second door at the top of the stairs. Her room was about as messy as I would’ve expected, with a few scattered clothes on the floor and hanging halfway in the hamper. There were a couple of band posters and art drawings hanging on the pale blue walls, and while the rest of the room was messy, her bed was made and her desk was organized.

“Would you believe me if I said I cleaned up for you?” she said, but the jest lacked her usual lightheartedness.

“Yeah, and the clean bed really points to your priorities.”

“Quit flirting with me,” she said sarcastically, “I don’t do that with teammates.”

I rolled my eyes and dropped down onto the foot of the bed. Morgan dug through the closet for a moment to pull out some clean clothes, and faced half away from me as she took off her overalls and began to slide some jeans on. *Don't look at her legs. I didn't do this with teammates. Just don't look at her legs.* I was still fresh out of heartbreak and I wasn't looking for anything. I didn't even want to look toward the prospect of looking for anything. But god I was a sucker for abs, and once she stripped her sweater to swap it for a t-shirt, it was more temptation than I could bear. I peeked out of the corner of my eye, and then I just sat there, staring out of the corner of my eye.

"Knock, knock." Two knocks sounded against the doorframe as Pip poked her head in, and while Morgan casually turned around as she finished pulling her shirt on, my eyes zipped to Pip and then looked anywhere else. "Oh, hey, Audrey." She caught me staring. She totally caught me staring.

I pursed my lips and gave an awkward wave. "Hey." She was smirking. Great.

At least she didn't acknowledge it, and said to Morgan, "I'm forcing your mom out of the house. Want anything from the grocery store?"

"Orange juice," Morgan told her. "Audrey? Any study snacks?"

I still felt like Pip was smug about catching me, and gave a quick shake of my head. "I'm good, thanks."

"Alright, be back in a bit." Pip turned and left.

"Pip!" Morgan called after her. "M&M cookies too!"

"Okay," Pip called back from down the hall.

Morgan grabbed a physics textbook and brought it to the bed with her, and I turned around to face where she'd sat in the middle. But after getting situated, she didn't say anything. She listened to the sounds of her mom and aunt filtering out of the house, and then the car pulling out of the drive.

"Do you, um..." I met her eyes and then looked down. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shrugged and picked at the corner of her textbook. "We probably should've just studied at the library."

"Hey," I reached out and briefly touched her hand to stop the fidgeting. "I'm not judging."

Her shoulders lifted with the large breath she took in, and she let it out as she glanced toward the window. "Sometimes I don't know if I should be mad at her or my dad for it." She resumed the fidgeting, staring down at her

hands. “I mean, she’s been drinking for years, it just got worse when my dad left. I just... didn’t expect I’d be losing both of them in the divorce.”

“Is she that different?”

“Sometimes,” she said, and added in a whisper, “enough of the time.”

“Maybe you could tell her how it makes you feel,” I said. “I’m sure she’s not trying to hurt you.”

“I know, she’s just trying to cope.” Morgan glanced up just long enough for me to see the moisture in her eyes, and then she looked away again. “But I’m not trying to make her feel guilt on top of the heartbreak.” She inhaled deeply again, and then huffed with empty humor. “I’m twenty-two years old. Too old to be acting like a kid with their adult problems.”

“You *are* their kid,” I said. She didn’t respond, and she didn’t look at me, so I grabbed her hand and held it between both of mine. “Morgan, how you feel about all this matters just as much as how they feel, even if they don’t act like it.” She nodded, still without looking at me. “We’re friends, you know? I’m here if you ever want to talk about it.”

Of all the things I could’ve tried to say to help her feel better, that made the tiniest smile grace her lips, even if her eyes were still moist. “We’re friends?”

“I mean... yeah.” And because I thought it might help, I added, “Not like you’re growing on me or anything.”

The laugh she gave reached her eyes, and I couldn’t help but smile at the way that seemed to cheer her up. She squeezed one of my hands and then took hers back, and let out a heavy sigh to clear the emotion. “Alright, enough of the boring stuff, let’s do something fun.” She flipped open her physics book and grimaced at me.

“That’s the spirit,” I laughed.

She flipped through the pages to try and find the chapter they were working on, but once she found it, she stopped for a moment. “Audrey?” she said eventually, and I hummed. She looked up at me, and paused for another couple of seconds before saying, “Thanks.”

I smiled in response, and she smiled at me, and before I could get a chance to think I’d been too friendly or open or available, she looked down at her book again. “Doppler Effect,” she read, “teach me your secrets.”

Chapter 7

Chemistry was not high on my ‘want to do’ list as I walked into the class, and Steph already sitting at our usual table was a big part of why. It might’ve been irrational, but I was still holding on to my irritation about how she’d upset me at the party. I hadn’t had to talk to her at all last week, because Tuesday we’d spent the whole class reviewing for the test we had on Thursday, but there was a lab today, and no excuse to avoid her. So I trudged over to our table and dropped down beside her, and the smiled ‘hey’ she gave let me know that, without the alcohol, my irritation was pure hurt.

My only response to her greeting was a pursed smile as I flipped my lab book open to the page written on the board. She did the same as she asked, “How do you think you did on the test?”

“Fine,” I said, shrugging without looking up at her.

“The review helped a lot,” she added. When I hummed, she seemed to catch on that I wasn’t in a good mood. So she tried to lighten things up by saying, “I had fun at the party last weekend.”

“That’s good,” I murmured, hoping she’d get the hint and let it go.

But then she said, “Your girlfriend seems nice.”

And I finally looked at her for the first time, my brow furrowed with surprise. “What?”

“Morgan,” she said. “From beer pong.”

That made all the blood rush to my face, and not knowing why that embarrassed me made it even worse. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oops,” she laughed. Her eyes ran over my face, taking in my blush. “Do you like her? You seemed to get along really well, and she’s super cute, I think you-”

“*Steph*,” I interrupted, a stern mix of irritation and desperation, “I’m not ready to be friends like this.”

Her demeanor changed instantly, and she sank back on her stool. “Sorry,” she said, with a genuinely apologetic smile. “You’re right, I’m sorry.”

I sighed, and maybe it was a good thing that the professor walked in to start class then, because I didn't know what else to say. Things were awkward between Steph and me for the entire lab. She didn't seem to know what the boundaries were anymore, and it was clear to her that I wasn't in a mood to work it out, so we barely said more than necessary to each other. It was a relief when we finished right at the end of class, and I said a quick 'bye' and headed into the hall to look for Morgan.

The art show was today, and since our last classes were in the same building at the same time, we decided to go right after the block. I watched her step out of class and look down the hall to find me, and she smiled and waved when she spotted me. I bypassed Steph and Alyssa without a glance and met Morgan halfway. She was wearing tight ripped jeans today, with a baggy long-sleeved shirt and a backwards hat. She looked good, and her lopsided grin made me want to forget all about the stress of Steph.

"Guess who understood almost everything in physics today?" she asked happily.

"Almost everything is progress," I told her, smiling because she was so proud of herself.

"You're damn right it is." She pulled her backpack around off her shoulders. "Here, put your book in here and we can go to the art show."

She unzipped it, and Steph and Alyssa walked by right as I was dumping my lab book into Morgan's bag, and Steph tried not to let me see her knowing smile and I nearly groaned. At least Morgan didn't notice as she led the way out of the building to navigate campus. Well, she didn't notice at first. But when we'd gone over two minutes without talking, and every time she looked over I was staring at the ground straight ahead, she caught on.

"You good?" she asked.

"Fine," I said.

She didn't believe it for a second. "Steph?" My heavy sigh answered for me. "Is it seeing her and Ally together?"

"It's Alyssa," I said.

"Alison, yeah," Morgan teased, "that's what I said."

I couldn't help but crack a smile, and she laughed when I shoved her with my elbow. She waited for me to respond though, so I said, "I don't even think it's seeing her with her new girlfriend anymore. I mean, I wasn't over it a few weeks ago, but then the party... and I just..." I inhaled a deep

breath and shrugged. “It’s not that she broke up with me, I think I’m over the feelings. It’s *why* she broke up with me. If she thinks I’m so boring, why does she want to be friends?”

“She wants to be friends?” Morgan asked, with such a tone that she may as well have said ‘that’s bullshit’ out loud.

“Right?” I agreed. “She was trying to talk to me about girls and stuff.”

“I thought she was with Alishia.”

“*Morgan*,” I scolded, trying to sound annoyed even though I smiled. “And she was trying to talk to *me* about girls, like asking about you and stuff.”

“Me?” Morgan asked, and then, “*oh*.” She side-glanced at me, and then asked slowly, “Were you offended?”

“Of course,” I answered, but when she winced, I realized she didn’t mean about Steph asking in the first place. “No, wait, I meant no. Not that she thought we were together.”

“Phew,” she gave an exaggerated sigh, “almost took a hit to my ego.”

“You could use it,” I teased.

“Ouch,” she chuckled, throwing a hand over her heart. “But touché.” I laughed, and felt her look over at me a couple more times before she asked, “How *did* you feel when she asked about me?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but the warmth spreading in my cheeks was a good reminder. “Embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?” she repeated. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said again, and to keep her away from the blush on my face, I shot her an accusatory look. “What are you fishing for?”

“What? No, nothing. You don’t do that with teammates.”

I peeked over at her, and she was blushing too, and I didn’t know what to say. We strolled along in charged silence before the ringing of my phone in my pocket saved me. I pulled it out to find that Anna was video calling me, and stopped walking to gesture my phone at Morgan.

“It’s my sister,” I told her, and she nodded. I answered the call and waited for Anna’s face to load before smiling. “Hey!”

“Hey, baby girl,” she greeted happily. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to an art show with my friend Morgan,” I told her, swiveling my phone to show her Morgan, who waved.

“Hi, Morgan,” Anna said, and when I turned the camera back to me, she whispered, “she’s *cute*.”

“She can hear you,” I murmured through pursed lips. Anna and Morgan both laughed. “What are you doing?” Anna wasn’t in her work clothes. Her black hair was pulled up into a messy bun, she didn’t have any makeup on her freckled face, and she was wearing her favorite comfy t-shirt with her couch cushion directly behind her. “You’re not at work?”

“I’m taking a mental health day,” she said. “How’s your captainship?”

“It’s good.” I shrugged. “But you don’t usually video call me... what’s up?”

“I have to tell you something,” she said. “But also, I wanted to show you these cool new brakes I got on my chair. A startup company made them, they lock when I stop touching the rims and unlock when I touch them again.” She moved her camera to her wheelchair beside the couch, demonstrating as best she could.

“Anna, that’s so cool!” I squinted to try and see it better through the phone. “Where’s the brake?”

“Underneath,” she said, pointing to a small box mounted on the chassis.

“That’s amazing,” I said. She hummed her agreement and moved the camera back to her face. “What else did you want to tell me?”

“Okay, I know you’re hanging out with your friend, so I can call you back later if you want.”

“No, it’s fine,” I told her, glancing at Morgan to double-check that she didn’t mind another minute of delay. She smiled and nodded that it was okay.

“Are you sitting down?” Anna asked, not waiting for me to answer before she said, “sit down.”

“Okay...” I mumbled, leading Morgan to a nearby planter where we both took a seat. “I’m sitting.”

“Are you ready?” she asked. I nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Anna,” I giggled, “what?”

“I’m pregnant.”

I shrieked and vaulted to my feet. “No way! Are you serious?” She was grinning ear to ear as she nodded. I shrieked again. “Ah! I can’t believe it! Oh my god! Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” she laughed.

“Do Mom and Dad know yet?”

“Nope,” she said, “I’m going to call them next.”

It took an immense amount of self-control not to scream again. “I’m so excited! I’m going to be an aunt!” I looked at Morgan. “I’m going to be an aunt!”

Morgan was on her feet again and grinning too. “You are!” She leaned in to say into the phone, “Congratulations, Anna.”

“Thanks, Morgan.” Anna was beaming. “I’ll let you know when I find out more, but Wayne was happy for you to be the first one we told.”

“Tell him thanks and congrats.”

“I will,” Anna said. “Have fun at the art show, I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay, love you.”

“You too,” she said, and hung up.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and looked at Morgan. There was nothing I could do to contain my excitement, so I let out another tiny squeal and jumped on her, throwing my arms around her neck.

She laughed and returned the hug, bouncing me up and down a few times while she said, “You’re going to be an aunt!”

“I’m going to be an aunt,” I repeated as she let me go. I was shaking with giddy excitement, and really wanted to keep screaming even if it’d earn me some concerned looks. “This is going to be such a good day.” I squealed low in the back of my throat and stomped in place to let it out. “Okay, let’s go to the art show,” I said happily.

Morgan laughed. “I don’t know if I can top that news with an art show.”

“No topping, just art,” I said, locking my arm through hers to lead the way. She snorted, side-glancing at me like she was waiting for me to get it, and it took me a few moments to realize she was amused at ‘topping.’ “Shut up,” I laughed, letting go of her arm and giving her a playful shove.

“You said it,” she chuckled, regaining her stride beside me. “So, this is your sister’s first kid?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I knew they’d talked about it, but I wasn’t sure when they were going to start trying.”

“That’s really exciting, Audrey,” she said with a genuine smile. “I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks,” I told her, returning her smile. “So, tell me what I need to know about this art show. Will there be wine and cheese?”

“No,” she laughed. “This will be more of a school fair than upscale display.”

“Do you have anything there?”

“A couple of sculptures,” she said with an easy shrug, “nothing too fancy.”

“Goddesses with perfect boobs?”

She shook her head. “I only break those out for wine and cheese.”

“Of course,” I agreed in amusement.

The show wasn’t much farther. It was like she said – a school fair kind of setup right in the middle of a busy courtyard, with booths and music and the faint smell of food. They were getting plenty of traffic, with some older people who looked like they’d wandered in from town, and it was a lot bigger than I imagined when I thought about the kind of art Morgan did.

“How many art students go here?” I asked, stopping at the start of the show to take in the lines of booths that took up every inch of the courtyard.

“Out of all the arts?” she mused. “A lot.”

“All the arts?”

She looked over at me, a slow smile spreading across her face before she laughed. “You’re such a jock.”

I pretended to glare at her. “Are you going to teach me, or what?”

“Okay,” she chuckled. “A few of the art programs put on this show together, to raise interest at school and hopefully raise some money. We’ve got fine arts, some of the performing arts, game design, fashion design, and…” She looked around the show for a second to think about it. “Oh, yeah, photography.”

“So, the music I hear?” I asked.

“Live,” she confirmed. “Anything you want to see first?”

“You tell me,” I said with a smirk, “I’m just a jock.”

She grinned that lopsided grin and nodded for me to follow her. She led me through groups of students to one of the first booths hosted by the photography department. There were a few students manning the display, teaching anyone interested about cameras or talking about the pictures at the booth.

“They’re selling stuff?” I asked, glimpsing price tags on large posters and boxes with prints in them.

Morgan nodded. “I donated some sculptures too.”

I stepped up to one of the boxes to flip through the photos. There were artsy ones of local landscapes or models, or action shots from the college's sports games. There were beautiful photos with inspirational or funny quotes on them, or ones that were edited to look spectacular or otherworldly.

"Did you ever want to do photography?" I asked, leaving the box and the booth and leading the way farther into the show.

"When I was like twelve," Morgan said, and snorted. "I tried to do wildlife photography, and then realized I couldn't sit still long enough and kept scaring the animals away." I laughed at that, not at all shocked. "Did you ever try any art?"

"I joined theater for a week in high school," I told her. She cocked a surprised eyebrow at me. "A girl I liked was doing it. It was *not* my thing, and it conflicted with my soccer schedule."

"Wasn't your thing," she repeated, squinting at me analytically. "I can read you like a book, you know. Spit it out."

I blew a hard puff of air through my lips. "We had to make our own costumes and props, and I accidentally superglued a rubber chicken to the school piano."

She laughed openly. "God, I wish we went to high school together." And I couldn't help giving a small laugh either. "What about sports? Did you only do soccer?"

I shook my head. "I did cross country in the fall and track in the spring." I stopped walking when I spotted a stage through a few of the booths. "Hey, that's where the music is coming from!"

She followed me to it right as the music stopped, and a group of students in dresses, or slacks with button up shirts, filtered out into the empty space in front of the stage. A guy in similar slacks and shirt took the mic while the band who was playing switched with some other students with different instruments.

"Alright everyone," he announced. "Introducing some musicians from our concert band, along with some of our wonderful dancers." The band got situated on stage quickly, and immediately started playing some upbeat jazzy music. "We'd like to welcome everyone in front here to learn a swing dance! Grab a partner. The person to your left or right, the person behind you, your best friend, we don't care! Get on over here!"

Plenty of students who'd been around listening to the music jumped in excitedly, pulling friends or pairing off with other outgoing onlookers. The band was into every note they played while they waited for everyone to get ready, and looked like they were having a blast already. And I might've just been satisfied hanging out on the outskirts, watching everyone learn a new dance. But when I glanced over at Morgan, she was looking at me, nodding her head side to side as if to say, 'we could if you wanted to.'

I looked from her to the collecting dancers, already being placed in position with their partners by the dance students who were there to teach. "Okay," I agreed.

Morgan's face lit up. "Really?" I couldn't help smiling at her excitement, and nodded. "You sure?"

"Hesitate too long, and I'll chicken out," I told her.

She didn't hesitate a second longer, and grabbed my hand to pull me amidst the crowd of students in front of the stage.

"Basic step now folks," the guy at the mic said in an enthusiastic voice. "Watch our dancers up here."

Everyone turned to watch the dancers up front, and they demonstrated a slow forward and back combination of steps while the host narrated and told us to try. Morgan and I followed along, and between how excited she was and how self-conscious I felt, it was impossible not to smile even if I was blushing.

The steps weren't too hard, and after a few moments of practice, the host said, "Pick it up, y'all!" And he danced along as everyone's pace increased to match the music. "Throw in a kick! Let me see those jazz hands!"

I was focused on getting the steps right with the speed, but Morgan buoyed her eyebrows at me as she threw in a kick and flared hand at the same time. It went in perfect rhythm with the music, but it still made me buckle with laughter.

"Grab your partner's hands!" the host announced. "Face to face, keep those steps up!"

Morgan and I faced each other and grabbed hands, and she was having so much fun and dancing so zealously that I just couldn't stop laughing. By watching the dancers and listening to the host's narration, we learned how she could spin me around in front of her, and then how she could pass around the side of me while my hand skimmed her waist, and then how to

go from being farther apart to being closer, with her hand around my waist and mine on her arm and our other two clasped near our shoulders.

Once we'd learned, the host set us loose to dance on our own. I followed Morgan's lead to the lively music, spinning when she twirled me out, dancing inward when she pulled me closer. And the whole time I was laughing at her antics and how much fun I was actually having, I also got jolts of unexpected jitters every time her hand hit my lower back. Because every time she pulled me close enough that I could see the heat rising in her cheeks, mine burned a little hotter.

After a few minutes, the student dancers took off on more advanced swing moves to put on a show, and everyone else stepped back to watch and clap along to the music. Morgan and I wound our way to the outside of the crowd, still smiling and laughing as we directed ourselves toward the rest of the art show.

"That was so fun!" Morgan said, continuing the steps as she bopped along at my side.

"You're a good dancer," I laughed.

"You're not so bad yourself, Caplan," she said, taking off her hat to throw in another kick and arm flare. I snickered, but outside of the group of students, I started feeling self-conscious again, and grabbed her sleeve to pull her to my side so she'd stop dancing. She put her hat back on, but took my hand and lifted it, and she was so happy that I let her spin me around one last time while she asked, "What now?"

"I want to see your display," I said, not daring to look at her so she wouldn't see how pink my cheeks still were.

"Okay." She made a big look around the booths. "I think it's this way." I strolled along at her side for less than a minute before she stopped and said, "Wait, wait, wait, we have to do this first," and pulled me to a booth.

There were canvas boards with colorful water balloons taped side by side along the tops of them, and cups filled with darts on the booth counter. It looked like a carnival game. "What is this?"

Before Morgan could answer, the girl behind the booth grinned and waved. "Hey, Morgan!" And she gestured theatrically to the canvases. "Finally want to do some painting?"

"Only if I get to stab something," Morgan beamed, and the girl laughed. "This is Audrey. Audrey, Stella."

"Hi, Stella," I said with a smile.

“Nice to meet you,” Stella smiled back.

Morgan already had her backpack around and was digging her wallet out of it, and handed Stella ten dollars for the activity while she explained to me what it was. “This is called drip art. The balloons are filled with paint. You pop them with the darts, and they drop paint on the canvas.”

“We both know how good we are at darts,” I teased.

“Yeah, we might be here a while,” she laughed.

Stella pointed to some shapes on the wall. “Want to throw in a silhouette? We got a tree, a butterfly, football player, trophy, cat...”

“Trophy,” Morgan said instantly, and then grinned at me, “that way you can’t say I never got you one.”

I tried not to smile as I said, “You’re not getting off that easy.”

“A girl can try,” she shrugged.

Stella grabbed a trophy shape and peeled the back off the large sticker, then pasted it to a canvas. “Have at it,” she announced, stepping out of the way.

Morgan and I both grabbed a cup of darts, and I challenged, “Want to see who can hit the most balloons?”

“You’re on,” she agreed.

The race began, and in our frantic competition to hit the most balloons, we both did horribly. Darts went all over the place. They hit the canvas, they hit the floor, they hit a balloon on an entirely different canvas. Any time one of us hit a target, we cheered and the other started throwing even faster. It was near impossible to hit a balloon through the speed and the laughter, but after going through about thirty darts, we’d finally hit every one.

“Five,” I announced happily.

“Well, shit,” Morgan said, “I hit five too.” We mock glared at each other while our shoulders shook with amusement. “We’ll have to settle this on the field.”

“Pick the time,” I said with as serious an expression as I could.

“You’re going down, Caplan.” She stared me down, and I stared her down, until she lit up and did some more swing moves and I burst into laughter.

Stella had been cleaning up our mess, and set a full cup of darts on the counter. “It’ll be dry in a bit if you want to come back for it.”

“Thanks, Stella,” Morgan said.

I smiled at Stella and waved goodbye, and then finally followed Morgan to a booth with all kinds of mixed art in it. There were ceramic sculptures, sculptures made of other odd materials, stained glass, mosaics, and art I had no idea how to classify. But they were all amazing.

“Which ones are yours?” I asked. “Wait, no, I want to guess.”

“Okay,” Morgan said amusedly.

She trailed me around the booth while I took in all the ceramic stuff. Some of it was so abstract that I couldn’t even tell what it was. There were a couple of cool dragons and mythical creatures. There were some cute ones like dinosaurs and dogs and an astronaut, and others that looked like the kind of pottery and vases only millionaires had in their houses. But I stopped at a group of sculptures that would’ve looked real in the right setting. A green sprout growing out of a piece of driftwood. A human hand with detail right down to the fingerprints. Donuts with icing and sprinkles. Frail-looking butterflies.

“These ones,” I said.

Morgan nodded. “How’d you know?”

I pondered it for a moment, thinking of how to explain what I’d thought was just a gut instinct. “I guess because the ones I saw in your barn were super realistic. That’s your style.”

One corner of her mouth pulled into a small smile. “That’s actually pretty insightful.”

“For a jock?” I teased.

“No,” she chuckled, “you did good.”

I smiled my thanks and reached out to touch the pieces, just like I’d had to touch the motorcycle in her barn. The hand wasn’t painted, so I could feel every grooved wrinkle and fingerprint. The piece of driftwood was so rough that the only thing that gave it away was how cold it was.

“How do you do it?” I asked in awe.

“I don’t know,” she said almost timidly. “I just know what I want to do, and I do it.”

I turned to look at her. “It’s just that easy for you?”

“It’s definitely not always easy,” she said. “But the ones that are the biggest challenge are usually the most rewarding.”

She shrugged again as she held my gaze, and I felt it then. The weight. Of Steph asking about her, of sharing the news about Anna with her, the

swing dancing and the jitters, and the look she was giving me. And not even turning around to look at the sculptures again could lift it.

“Well, you’re really talented,” I said casually.

Maybe too casually, because there was something missing when she said, “Thanks.”

I faced her once more and offered the easiest smile I could. “What else is there to look at?”

She took it in stride, and said, “I think there’s improv somewhere, if you’re up for some comedy.”

“Definitely.”

It was easy enough to get back into the lighthearted groove we had before. The improv helped, seeing as most of it was hilarious, and after a bit we headed back to the drip art booth and collected the canvas. Stella had peeled the sticker off so there was a white silhouette of a trophy amidst the rainbowed streaks of color, and Morgan was genuinely pleased when I assured her that I’d hang it in my room.

When we’d had enough of touring the booths, she walked me back to my dorm, and as we neared the steps of the building, she said, “Thanks for going with me.”

I stopped and turned, realizing she wasn’t going to walk all the way to my room with me. “I’m glad I went. I actually had fun.”

“Good,” she said with a genuine smile. She pulled her backpack around to take my lab book out of it. “Here’s this.”

“Thank you.” I tucked it under my arm, and stood there as that weight returned and I tried to figure out what to say next.

She seemed to be thinking the same thing, and after a long span of awkward silence passed, she laughed. “I’ll see you in a couple hours.”

Right... practice. “Okay.”

She headed down the steps, but when she reached the bottom, she did one final swing dance kick, and I couldn’t help but laugh. She turned around to grin at me and wave. “Later, Caplan.”

I waved back, still smiling. “Bye.”

Chapter 8

Steph walked into chemistry and took a seat at my side, with nothing but a kind smile in greeting. It was a relief after how Tuesday went, and the rest of class while we watched the instructor demonstrate a lab we'd do next week was... peaceful. I even smiled at her as I prepared to leave afterward, and headed out of class to get some things done before practice.

But the moment I stepped out the door, she called after me. I stopped and turned to meet her as she said, "Hey."

"Hi?"

"I just wanted to apologize again for Tuesday. I hadn't considered that you might never want to be friends with me, but I can respect that."

"It's not that I *never* want to be friends with you," I said, immediately regretting that I was even engaging in this conversation. I didn't want to talk about feelings with Steph, but when I stopped, her eyebrows met like she was urging me to continue. So I sighed. "It's just... unresolved stuff I'm working through first."

"Unresolved?" she repeated with concern. "Between us?"

"No," I said instantly. "I mean, kind of. I don't know. Yes." Past Steph, I saw Morgan come out of her class down the hall and smile at me, but she took one look at my face and saw who I was talking to, and tossed a casual wave as she left the building.

Steph gave a sad smile. "It's been almost six months, Audrey."

"No," I said again, a rising frustration in my chest. "God, I'm over you, Steph."

When I didn't say anything else right after, she said, "We can talk about it. What is it?"

"*You called me boring,*" I blurted.

"What?" Steph asked in shock. "No, I didn't."

"I'm bored, Audrey," I repeated angrily. "That's what you said and that's fucked up. So excuse me if I need to convince myself I'm not boring before trying to figure out why you want to be friends with me." I was too

frustrated, and this was the last thing I wanted to talk about in public. I felt cornered, so I pushed past her to leave without saying anything else.

“Audrey,” she called, “wait.”

I didn’t. I had a few hours before practice, and the last thing I wanted to do was anything that would give me time and space to think about Steph. So I hurried to my dorm room and didn’t say anything to Monica – who was on her bed on her laptop – as I opened my drawers to pull out some running clothes.

She was watching me tensely while I changed and put my watch on, and waited until I was done to ask cautiously, “Want to get some food?”

“Maybe later,” I said, and shoved my keys into my shorts pocket and rushed out the door.

I pushed my earbuds into my ears as I stomped down the stairs, and had music blasting by the time I reached the outside. And that was it. The music was too loud for me to hear myself think, and all I had to focus on was keeping an easy pace as I started a long run through campus and into town. I concentrated on breathing with my stride, inhaling for three strikes of my feet and exhaling for two. I didn’t have to feel frustrated or hurt or insecure because this was the one thing that kept me from getting stuck in my own head. I ran until it was time for practice, and then went straight to the locker room.

Zulema was already changing into workout clothes when I got to my locker, and I felt her looking at me as I reached for my lock with one hand and pulled my earbuds out with the other. “You ran before practice?” she asked. I hummed a confirmation. “You want me to leave this one alone?”

“Yep.” I dropped my phone into my locker and pulled my cleats and shin guards out, sitting back onto a bench to put them on. But once I sat down, I finally exhaled and got my mind back enough to feel a little bit better. “I snapped at Steph,” I told ZuZu. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” she agreed, dropping down at my side. She let that settle for a few moments before asking, “You ready for the game tomorrow?”

I glanced over at her, doing my best to set aside any of the day’s frustration and give her a smile. “I’m ready to kick ass.”

“Hell yeah!” ZuZu said happily, throwing an arm around my shoulders and squeezing. “That’s my girl!”

The smile I gave then was genuine, and I was ready to practice with a more positive attitude. I still wasn’t at one hundred percent, but when we

got out onto the field and Morgan looked at me with concern behind her searching gaze, I waved at her. I was plenty warmed up, so I dropped down in the grass with some teammates to stretch.

“I’m just saying,” Lopez continued saying to Cusatelli after I’d sat down. “She shouldn’t flirt if she’s not interested.”

“She’s a player,” Cusatelli said, and they both passed glances over at Judith. “You knew that going in.”

I would’ve just bit my tongue, seeing as drama on the field was exactly why I didn’t get involved in the dating politics of sports. But it was my job as captain to make sure everyone was performing at their best and we had good chemistry as a team, so I wasn’t about to let them keep gossiping in front of me. “Is there drama I need to know about?” I asked, keeping my tone friendly rather than accusatory.

Lopez looked at me, sighed, and shook her head. “No, we’re all good.”

“Okay. Just let me know if we need to work something out.”

Lopez nodded, and Cusatelli asked, “What’s the game plan for tomorrow?”

“I don’t know yet,” I answered. “We’ll see what Coach has to say.”

We stretched for a minute more before Coach came out to start practice. She called us all around her, and Morgan floated in at my side and gave me a greeting nudge. “Ladies,” Coach announced, “how about an offensive refresher before our game tomorrow?” A few of the girls cheered happily. “Vermont has a killer defense, so we’re going to run offensive drills for the entire practice. Let’s start with diamond shooting drills. Take a lap and then set it up.”

We broke the circle to take a warm-up lap around the field, and ZuZu and Morgan kept pace on either side of me.

“Want to race?” Morgan asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to make you look bad today.”

“It’d be temporary once we started offensive drills,” Morgan quipped.

“Oh,” ZuZu laughed, “you’re playing with fire, Bailey.”

“I don’t know,” Morgan said, passing a flirtatious smirk at me, “she hasn’t burned me yet.”

“I’ll race you,” ZuZu volunteered.

“One,” Morgan counted, “two, three, go!”

They took off, but just as she said ‘go,’ I grabbed the waist of her shorts and slowed down, adding resistance to give ZuZu a head start.

“Foul play, Caplan!” Morgan screamed with a laugh, trying her hardest to sprint with me slowing her down. “What kind of example are you setting?”

I beamed at her when she looked back at me, and since ZuZu had a good twenty-yard lead, I finally let her go. As she took off after ZuZu, she yelled, “I take it back about you burning me!” And I laughed and watched her try her hardest to catch up.

She didn’t, and they were both still trying to catch their breath by the time I reached them. Once all the girls were finished with their lap, we started the drills. It was exactly what I needed. A good night of soccer. The perfect mix between working hard and having fun, and between the run I took and practice, I was exhausted by the end. I could barely pick up my feet as we all filtered back to the locker room, but it was the best kind of exhaustion.

“Caplan,” Coach called down the lockers before I could reach mine, and nodded toward her office. I changed direction and trudged back to the entrance and into her office. After closing the door, she made her way around her desk and asked, “How are we looking for tomorrow?”

I dropped down in the chair opposite hers while she took a seat. “I think we’re as ready as we’ll ever be.”

“Good.” She passed a couple of papers across her desk. “I want you to make the line-ups for the game. I’ve noticed some tension out there.”

I knew instantly that she was talking about Lopez and Judith. “Yeah,” I sighed. “I’ll figure something out. You want me to talk to them?”

She shook her head with an amused smile. “It’s standard drama, it’ll blow over.” I nodded. “How’s Bailey acclimating?”

“Really well,” I answered. “I think she’s getting along good with all the girls.”

“Great. That’s good to hear.” She stood and grabbed her backpack off the floor, slinging it over her shoulder. “Get some rest tonight.”

“I will.” I followed her to the door and then wandered out first. “See you tomorrow, Coach.”

She waved and said goodbye to ZuZu and Morgan, who were lounging around near the exit of the locker rooms and seemed to be the last two here.

“It’s raining now,” Zulema told me. “I’ll wait in my car if you want me to drive you to the dorms.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ll be right out.”

She left, and I all but slogged to my locker while Morgan trailed behind me with a soccer ball in her hands. “Wait, don’t sit down.”

I was halfway to the bench already, and stood back up with a whine. “I’m so tired.”

She dropped the ball to her feet and dribbled it between them. “You got to get the ball from me.” All I managed to do was pout at her. “Alright,” she said smugly, “if you want to forfeit the dart tiebreaker.”

“What?”

“You said pick the time,” she said, flashing a toothy grin at me. “I pick now.”

“And you want to do it when I’m exhausted,” I teased, “that sounds fair.”

“Like you grabbing me when I was trying to race ZuZu?” she asked. She dribbled the ball some more. “Come on, Caplan. Burn me.”

I looked from her, to the ball, and back at her, acting like I was contemplating so it’d catch her off guard when I made a kick for it. She was waiting for it though, and she pulled it back and dribbled it around. I gave chase, making swipes for it while she laughed and tried to keep it away. I was laughing too. No matter how tired I was, she was too playful not to have fun with it, and it didn’t matter if I’d be able to get it from her or not. She dribbled down the line of lockers with me kicking between her legs, ducking around the front of her so she had to turn on a dime, and using so much body to try and knock her technique off that I would’ve been carded for it in an actual game. But it only made her laugh harder.

I eventually managed to kick it from her grasp. We both went after it, but I blocked her with an arm to get ahead and caught it first. I turned to meet her once I had possession, but I was still wearing my cleats, and the swivel was too fast for how slippery they were on the tile floor. The momentum threw me around right as she reached me, and I crashed her into the nearest locker. I managed to catch my hands against the locker on either side of her head so I didn’t full-on body slam her, and through the clumsiness and the laughter, it was a wonder neither of us hit the floor.

But I’d caught myself inches from her face, and even though I had my balance again, neither of us went for the ball. Our eyes met and we both stopped, and the ball was completely forgotten. Morgan’s laughter died down, and mine faded as I stood there regaining my breath, feeling her rapid exhales against the lower part of my face. And I knew what this felt

like. Knew what was going through her mind when her eyes left mine to drop to my lips, and knew that I should've just backed away.

But I couldn't. I was frozen. Stuck there, watching her eyes wander back to mine, searching. And she hadn't moved. Her back was still plastered to the lockers and her hands were still hanging at her sides. The silence and the staring lasted so long that I shouldn't have still been breathing so quickly, and her breath shouldn't have trembled as she whispered, "Your move, Caplan."

I was barely thinking even before she challenged me to do it, but that banished any inhibition I had left, and I kissed her. I kissed her hard and fast and I didn't stop. Not when her hands set on my lower back, or when she pulled me against her, or when her mouth opened to mine. I kissed her deeper. I slid one arm around the back of her neck and slipped my other hand up into her hair, meeting the touch of her tongue with mine like I'd been starving for it. Meeting her taste with an eagerness I didn't know I had in me, and she was salty and sweet and... burning.

God, she was hot. I felt the heat of her against me, and in me. Spreading with every movement of her lips on mine. Rising in my cheeks with every blazing breath that feathered against my face. I wasn't thinking at all, too caught up in how her fingers dug into my back or how she pushed harder into the kiss whenever my fingers clutched in her hair.

Not a single thought ran through my mind until a honk from outside the locker rooms scared me enough that I jumped away. I left her lips and her arms and her heat, breathing harder than ever from the excitement and the rising panic. She was panting for air too, searching me deeper than before like she was trying to figure out what to say to ease the sting of pulling away. A sting I knew we shared, because I felt the separation in a way I didn't know how to process. So we stood there, staring at each other until Zulema gave two more short blasts on the horn.

Morgan inhaled and opened her mouth to say something.

"I can't right now," I murmured.

And I left. I hurried out of the locker room and climbed into the passenger seat of Zulema's car, slamming the door shut before any more of the rain could chill the heat away. "Fuck," I whispered, reclining the seat all the way back and covering my face with my hands.

"What?" Zulema asked.

I didn't know how I felt. I was dead tired and dazed, and my head was buzzing with leftover excitement and every reason I shouldn't have done that.

"Audrey?"

"Please drive," I begged.

She pulled away from the curb, and waited till we were halfway to my dorm to say, "You're starting to freak me out."

I mumbled into my hands, "I kissed her," and then peeked out through my fingers just in time to see Zulema vibrate in her seat. I straightened my seat up again. "What was that?"

"What?" she asked innocently.

"That little... thing you just did."

"I didn't do anything," she said. She glanced over at me several times without saying anything else.

"*What?*" I asked. She hummed curiously. "Oh my god, say it."

"*You want to talk about it?*" she asked in surprise.

"*I don't know,*" I groaned. I tried to think about whether or not I wanted to talk about it, but... "I can't think." I groaned again in frustration and dropped my head onto the dashboard. "I'm so tired," I whimpered.

She stopped her car in front of my dorm. "Alright, look," she said, "go get some rest. Whatever dilemma you're having will be there tomorrow."

"That's reassuring," I said to the floor.

"Audrey, you're going to be fine, okay?" She hesitated for a moment and then laughed. "Honestly, this exhaustion is saving your life right now."

"Ugh." I sat up and pushed the door open. "Bye."

"Call me if you need me!" she yelled before I closed the door.

I jogged up to the building to get out of the rain, and then clumped up the stairs to my room. Monica was still on her bed with her laptop, but she was absorbed in a movie and didn't acknowledge me other than giving a small wave. That was for the best anyway, just like the complete fog in my head was for the best. I didn't have the energy to process what just happened, and the exhaustion really was saving my life, because otherwise I'd have been in full-blown panic. As it was, I kicked off my cleats and took off my shin guards, flipped over to bury my face in my pillow, and shut down.

Chapter 9

Whatever last night was, I did not figure it out by the time of the game. I'd spent every ounce of energy I had all day avoiding even thinking about it, that way I wouldn't be stressed during any of my classes. It'd been my full intention to carry that into tonight's game, but I stepped foot into the locker room and immediately locked eyes with Morgan at her locker, and I knew I was screwed. She didn't try to come and talk to me. She didn't do anything but give a small smile and go back to getting ready, but as I paced to the back of the room and to my own locker, my mind was already racing a mile a minute.

I barely heard Zulema say 'hey' from the bench she was sitting on as last night flashed on repeat in vivid detail. "You good?" she asked as I opened my locker. But Morgan's hands were on my back again. "Audrey?" Her lips meeting mine and my yearning. "Earth to Audrey." Her tongue... "Cool, we're so fucked tonight." I dropped my head against the locker, gently bumping my forehead a few times against the cold metal. Focus. "Maybe it'll rain already and they'll postpone."

"I'm fine," I forced out, dropping my duffel bag on the floor to pull my uniform out of it.

"Have you talked to her?" ZuZu asked. I shook my head. "Maybe you should. Like now, like right now before the game starts."

"Zulema," I said in plea, finally turning to look at her.

"We need you tonight, Audrey."

"I know. I'm trying."

"Okay," she said. She finished lacing her last cleat and stood. "See you out there." She left and headed for the field.

I *was* trying, but as I changed into my uniform and kept getting distracted by the whys and what ifs and what to dos and long strings of profanities, I realized trying wasn't good enough. So, what were my options? I could tell Coach I wasn't feeling good and get one of the other girls to fill in for me tonight. But would Zulema be satisfied with that? Would the team? And what would Morgan think? She'd know I wasn't

really sick. Would she think I was avoiding her? Would she think I never wanted to talk to her again? Maybe I did have to talk to her now, before the game. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know what I wanted. But maybe if I told her that I wanted to talk about it later, that definitive plan for resolution would ease my mind enough for me to focus for two more hours. I didn't even know if I was ready to talk about it, but I had to try something.

So I rushed to finish dressing and hurried to the front where her locker was. She was already gone. And it'd taken me longer to get ready than I thought, because I was the last one there. My adrenaline spiked as I worried that I'd taken so long the game already started, and I sprinted to the field to find that there were two minutes left of warm-ups. No time to talk, no time to do anything, because the moment Coach saw me arrive on the field, she called for a huddle. Anything she said went in one ear and right out the other, and the captains' meet with the refs to start the game was a blur.

What would I say to Morgan? Talking to her about it was inevitable, but I couldn't start a conversation with her about it until I knew what I wanted. Until I knew what the kiss meant. So... what did I want? I thought I knew what I didn't want. I didn't really want another relationship, I didn't think I was ready for one. But did I want one with Morgan? Maybe... Maybe I just wanted to kiss her again. Or maybe I wanted more. Or maybe I should *focus on the ball coming up center field*.

I received the ball and finally realized how off my positioning was, and lobbed a frantic and sloppy pass to our right forward before the girl defending me could steal it.

Those maybes were getting me nowhere. And what did Morgan want anyway? It's possible she was just going with it. Just got caught up in the heat of the moment and didn't want anything other than that kiss. But that didn't seem right. I thought she liked me. She wanted to hang out a lot and she flirted and she told me personal things about her family. She looked at me sometimes like she was waiting for me to say or do the right thing to give her a next step. And she kissed me back. She wanted that, and maybe she wanted me.

The ball went out of bounds and Morgan took the throw in. She was focused as she watched us move around defenders, waiting for an opening. She was focused, and passionate, and just as driven as me, in her own ways.

I definitely wanted to kiss her again. I liked kissing her last night and I still got worked up thinking about it, and I *did* want to kiss her again. But

why?

Whistles blew as Vermont scored their first goal. I was already in position, so my eyes tracked Morgan as she jogged to hers, lifting the hem of her shirt to wipe the sweat off her forehead as her abs tensed with how out of breath she was.

Attraction. Obviously. She was gorgeous, and she had the cocky but sweet attitude to go with it. But that wasn't all of it. I'd never let my body get the best of me. It didn't make my decisions, not when it came to relationships. It didn't matter if she had sexy hair, or perfect abs, or killer biceps, or an award-winning smile. That wasn't enough on its own to get me to break one of my biggest rules.

Oh my god. My rule. Don't date teammates. I didn't date teammates. *You don't date teammates, Caplan, you idiot.* But we weren't dating. We kissed, that was it. Not the end of the world, right? Except the tension between Lopez and Judith yesterday had reminded me of exactly why I made that rule, and I'd gone and kissed Morgan anyway. *I kissed her.* Sure, she gave me the perfect opening and implied she wanted me to, but I was the one that went through with it. Would she have done it if I never did?

Whistles blew again as the first half ended. My teammates ran off the field, and Zulema plopped down on the bench beside me. "Any hope of me pulling you out of your head?" she asked. "How far gone are you?"

"Completely," I mumbled, setting my elbows on my knees and burying my face in my hands. "I'm sorry."

She sighed heavily, but her arm went around my shoulders. "It's just a game," she said, giving me a squeeze. "I mean, I'm going to kick your ass later." I managed a huff of laughter. "But it's just a game. It's okay."

Except it wasn't okay. Because I'd just wasted half a game and I still didn't know what I wanted, and I certainly didn't figure it out by the time halftime ended and we trekked back onto the field.

Okay. I kissed her because I wanted to, so there's a want. And I wanted to kiss her because... because she made me laugh, and she made it easy, and she made my stomach flutter. Because I liked her.

That sent my stomach into a flurry. Or maybe it was the ball heading my way. But I sent the ball up the field and the flurry was still there, so it was definitely the conclusion. I finally had a starting point, too. I liked Morgan. So, what? What did I want to come from that?

There were really only two ways that could go. Way number one: nothing comes of it. We don't start dating and we don't kiss anymore and that's that. How did that make me feel? Well, I couldn't feel much aside from the way my lungs were burning and the cold sprinkles against my skin. Oh... it was drizzling. Okay, no more feelings. I was too deep in my head and too occupied with keeping my feet moving to delve that deep. Fine, that's not what was going to solve any of my problems right now anyway. I could logic my way out of this one.

Nothing comes of it. That would be okay, wouldn't it? We could still be teammates, and friends. We could still hang out and have fun and talk about things that I rarely said to anyone else. Would Morgan want that? What if she didn't want to be just friends anymore? What if I didn't want to date her and she decided it was too hard to be just friends? I didn't want that. That was one of the few things I was sure of. She'd finessed her way into my life, and I enjoyed her too much to want to ruin it. I *liked* her too much to want to ruin it. God, I really liked her.

So we date. What then? Things could go great. *We* could be great. Or I could fall for her harder and faster than I already was, and she could break my heart. She could want this for a while before realizing that what she's already seen was all she was going to get. I spiraled into my own head too much and I shut down when I couldn't put my emotions into words and I spoke too sharply sometimes when things got hard, and most weekends I just wanted to relax. I didn't want to party or hang out in big groups all the time, and often I prioritized school or soccer over my relationship and what if Morgan didn't like that? What if she got tired of it? What if she got bored?

Feelings. I could feel things then because all I could feel was fear. I'd already let Morgan in and maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I'd already let her get too close and messed everything up, so that I wasn't ready to be in relationship even if I'd possibly given her hope for more, and so that I was already attached to the idea of having her in my life *somehow* and she didn't want it anymore.

And I was going to let her down, like I was letting my team down because Vermont scored another goal and there were only a few minutes left in the game. I was supposed to be good at being a leader, but you couldn't be a leader in a relationship. You had to be an equal. Steph and I were never equal. We were too different. She tried to lead me into social

situations, and I followed and tried and it never worked because my attempts were never good enough. I tried to lead her in the emotions, and she tried to follow, and it never worked because I shut down and she didn't understand and she got frustrated and I shut down more.

The whistle went off for the end of the game and we lost and that just made everything worse. I was nowhere closer to figuring out what to do about Morgan, and we'd just lost a game that we'd prepared for and should've won.

I trudged into the locker room after the rest of the team, and zoned out while Coach gave us a speech about how we tried and would do better next time, or something like that. When she was done, I lumbered to my locker to change out of my uniform.

"I got to go," Zulema said, hurrying into her casual clothes. "I'm going out with Rodney tonight."

"Have fun," I said blankly.

"Hey," she set a hand on my shoulder and turned me toward her, "you going to be okay?" I shrugged. She set her free hand on my other shoulder. "Okay, look, you're going to sort this out. And don't worry about the game, alright? We'll take the next one." I nodded. "Audrey... just do what makes you happy."

I met her eyes and the genuine sentiment behind that statement, and gave her a small smile and nodded again. As she left and I finished changing, I tried to figure out what made me happy. I mean, Morgan made me happy, sure. But getting hurt didn't make me happy, and I wasn't ready to get hurt again.

I finished getting dressed and stuffed my uniform into my gym bag, and then headed out... into the rain. I couldn't decide if it was good or bad that the weather had waited until *after* the game to get worse, but it was pouring.

There was a truck next to the curb outside the locker rooms, and Morgan rolled down the passenger side window and called from the driver's seat, "Get in!"

I blew a hard breath through my lips. Ready or not for whatever conversation was about to happen, I didn't want to walk to the dorms in the rain. So I jogged over and got in, sliding onto the bench seat of her truck and throwing the door closed behind me. She pulled away from the curb and started toward the dorms as I set my bag on the floor, and we sat there. I

didn't know what to say or how to start or even if I wanted to, and I don't know if she was trying to judge my mood or what, but she didn't say anything either.

Not until we were halfway there, and then she asked, "Where were you tonight?"

"What?"

"On the field," she said. "You were all over the place."

I inhaled to snap that I'd played fine, but we both would've known it was a lie, and I didn't want to start whatever this was by snapping at her because I was frustrated with myself. So I held it in, and shut my eyes and leaned my head back.

"Audrey?" she asked worriedly. "What's going on?"

"You know what's going on," I murmured.

"I know it's about last night," she said, "but I have no idea what you're thinking, and I'm really worried I messed up."

I glanced over at her, and even though she didn't look at me, I could see the vulnerability on her face. "You didn't," I said quietly.

"Didn't I?" she asked. "You're hardly saying anything, and you've been completely shut down all night."

And because she'd pointed out how I was shut down, it only made it worse. It was defensive, and I was already so frustrated with myself that that frustration boiled over. "This is why I don't do this with teammates," I said. "It causes drama."

We reached the dorms, and she huffed with unamused laughter as she stopped in front of them and put the truck in park. She turned in her seat to face me, but whatever frustration my statement had provoked in her, she swallowed it. She inhaled deeply and dropped her head back against the window, saying calmly to the ceiling, "You're the only one causing drama, Audrey. We don't have exes on the team to make jealous. We're not leading anyone else on. Nobody cares what we do."

I didn't know what to say to that. I was stuck at a standstill and all I could do was stare straight out the windshield. But she was right, wasn't she? So, what now?

After a few moments, she pulled her head forward to look at me, her voice soft and pleading. "Please don't throw up walls now. I'm just trying to understand." And that got me to look at her, because those two sentences made me understand more than I had all night. She didn't want to force me

to lay myself bare. She didn't want to argue about what she thought was right. She wanted to understand, and I could see in her eyes that that meant even if what I was feeling or thinking was messy. "If we crossed a line last night, I'm sorry. Say so, and we'll forget it ever happened."

But all I could think then was: when had she ever just not wanted to understand? When had she ever made me feel anything but safe opening up to her? When had she ever pressured me for more than what I was willing to give? She wasn't even doing it when I could see on her face that it was killing her. When I could see exactly what she wanted and how much she wanted it.

"But if you want it too," she continued, "then I don't understand why it has to be complicated. If you want to kiss me, then kiss me. If you don't, then don't. Just please don't sit there and think that you can't talk to me about whatever."

I slid halfway across the seat and grabbed the collar of her shirt, pulling her lips to mine and cutting her off with a kiss. And I'd only intended to kiss her once to show her what I was thinking and feeling, but then she leaned into me and kissed back, and I couldn't stop. All the heat from last night came rushing back, filling my face and my chest and igniting to my very core. I cupped her face and scooted closer, but she pressed forward to meet me and I let her push me onto my back on the seat.

My arms slid around her neck as she laid on top of me, her lips never leaving mine while she planted her hands on the bench. But the pressure of her above me was just as intoxicating as her lips, so I moved my arms from around her neck and slipped my hands to her waist, running them to her back and pulling her down to feel the entirety of her weight. Her legs between mine. Her hips against mine. Her chest on mine. It was impossible with the exhilarating feel of her not to move. Not to run my hands up her back to encourage every time her lips opened against mine. Not to press myself harder into her every time they closed again. Not to let the heaving of my chest stunt whenever her tongue grazed mine.

I hadn't thought about getting this far, and I hadn't thought about how far I'd let it go, but I trusted myself to know. Better still, I trusted Morgan to know. One of her hands left the bench and set on my thigh, caressing down to the bend of my knee. I thought *yes* and *wait* at the same time, wanting her to touch but also knowing that any more than that was my limit. And that faith in her wasn't misplaced, because she brought her hand up to my

hip and set a gentle but firm pressure against it, as if to hold me in place if I kept trying when she stopped kissing me.

She stopped a moment later, letting her forehead rest against mine as she panted for air. Her mouth grazed mine once like she was thinking about diving back in, but she didn't. She stayed there, the heat of her breath tickling my lips and meeting every hard, short huff I let out. I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes, and for almost a minute we were both content just to stay like that.

When she finally had enough breath to speak, she whispered without moving, "Go out with me tomorrow."

"On a date?" I asked. She hummed, and even though I'd already decided what I wanted, I'd been so tortured since yesterday that I couldn't resist torturing her a little. "Why?"

She finally lifted herself off me a bit, and I opened my eyes to see the amused smile on her face. "That's such a *you* question," she laughed.

"I don't do this with teammates," I reminded.

She shrugged. "I'll quit the team."

I snorted, but just like I couldn't resist teasing her, I couldn't resist bringing one of my hands between us to trace her jawline with my thumb. "You can't quit the team, you owe me a championship."

"Ugh," she groaned. "Fine." Her eyes met mine, and she watched me for a minute to see if I'd finally give her a serious answer, and when I didn't, she said again, "Go out with me tomorrow."

I slid my arms back around her neck and asked with a smirk, "Why?"

But even though she clearly knew I was messing with her, she said seriously, "Because I can't stop thinking about you."

That sparked a feeling, one that echoed from the skip of my heartbeat straight to the fluttering in my stomach. I pushed up just enough to give her a soft, slow kiss, and then dropped back down. "Okay."

She grinned. "Really?"

"Oh... did you want me to say no?" I asked. "Because I can take it back if you-"

"No, no," she said quickly, "yes is good." I laughed, and she varied between watching my mouth and my eyes for a few moments with a growing smile before she asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"You asked me out," I said, "you're supposed to pick."

“Yeah,” she agreed, “but if I want to get a second date out of you, I got to make sure you have fun.”

“We’ve made out twice and I’m breaking my only rule for you,” I said, bringing my hands down to grab her face. “I think you’re safe.”

Her eyebrows rose high, and she asked with feigned shock, “Do you have a crush on me, Caplan?”

I fake-grimaced. “Maybe just a little one.”

She huffed amusedly and dropped her face to my shoulder. “Just a little one?” But the combination of her nose and breath grazing my neck tickled, and she caught on when it made me twitch. “Just a little one?” she asked again, nuzzling even more into my neck. I snickered and wriggled beneath her, trying not to give in as she kept tickling her nose against me amidst my building laughter. “Tell me the truth.”

I squeaked, bursting into giggles. “Okay!” I surrendered, and she stopped and pulled back to look at me with a triumphant grin, which only made me want to keep playing with her. “I have an *average*-sized crush on you.”

Her mouth pulled to one corner like she was thinking about it, and then she nodded side to side with mild satisfaction. “I’ll take it.”

“Good,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She took the cue and pushed herself off me, sitting back in the driver’s seat. “For our date.”

I hummed innocently as I grabbed my bag and pushed the door open.

“It’s a *date*, Audrey,” she insisted with excited humor as I climbed out of her truck.

“It’s a date,” I laughed. “Go home.”

“Bye,” she said with a grin.

I jogged up the stairs to stand under the awning of the building out of the rain, and turned around to watch Morgan drive away. There might have still been some nervousness about how all of this would turn out, but regardless of that, this was a decision I was comfortable with. No. It was a decision I was happy with.

Chapter 10

The pop-up of a text on my phone screen let me know that Morgan was outside and waiting, and despite my lingering nerves from last night, I was excited for our date. She'd told me to wear athletic clothes and we were doing lunch instead of dinner, which didn't enlighten me on where we were going, but it did make me think I should bring water. So I grabbed my bottle, keys, and phone, tossed a wave to Monica, and hurried out the door.

Morgan's truck was idling by the curb outside and she had her window down, so I stopped outside the passenger door and gestured my arms out. "This okay?" I asked about my attire.

"Perfect," she grinned, and leaned across the bench to pull the handle of my door. "Get in."

"Where are we going?" I asked, climbing into the passenger side and shutting the door.

She pulled away from the curb to start the drive and said, "Guess."

I knew she wouldn't take me to the gym for a date. "Um..." There was a backpack on the floor between our seats with a water bottle sticking out of a side pocket, and she was wearing gym shorts and a thin t-shirt. "...Yoga?"

She snorted. "Would you actually ever talk to me again if I took you to yoga for our first date?"

"Sure," I laughed, "I like yoga."

"Alright, change of plans," she said. "We're going to yoga."

"Good," I said, and buoyed my eyebrows at her, "I want to see how bendy you are."

She did a double take at me with genuine surprise, but teased, "Audrey Caplan, are you flirting with me?"

"Nope," I pursed my lips and stared straight out the windshield, strumming my fingers on my knees, "not at all." She laughed and gave an unconvinced hum, and I asked, "Where are we really going?"

"Hiking," she answered. "Well, not really, it's more of a walk. But it's one of my favorite places to go, and I packed lunch." She patted her backpack.

“Sounds nice,” I told her.

“Yeah?”

I nodded, passing her a reassuring smile. “Yeah.”

It was the perfect day for a walk. All the rain the last few days had temporarily cleared the skies. The sun was shining, it was cool but not cold, and the air flowing in through my still-down window was clean and crisp. I reached for the auxiliary cord plugged into the new radio of her old truck, and hooked my phone in for some music. Morgan nodded with approval when I picked a song, and continued to bob her head as she turned it up. I never was much of a casual dancer, but I was happy to watch her bop along, one hand strumming on the steering wheel while the other rode the breeze outside her open window.

We were driving down the same long highway her house was on outside of town, passing some small farms and large plots of land, until eventually she turned down a road that separated two farms. A forest was visible in the distance, and that made me even more excited for today. I’d been on plenty of hikes and walks right outside town and on the borders of school, but as pretty as they were, I was always aware of just how close to town it actually was. I’d never thought to explore this far out.

It being the beginning of October, the trees were at the pinnacle of their fall colors. The forest ahead of us was an array of greens, oranges, yellows, reds, and even some purples. I couldn’t imagine there was a farm out here that *wasn’t* on the border of a hill or mountain, and the skyline was littered with vibrant peaks. Our drive took us into the woods, where we followed the road for another mile or two before turning off onto a gravel drive. Another minute later and Morgan was pulling into an empty parking lot at the trailhead.

“Here we are,” she said, turning down the music and rolling up the windows.

I pushed my door open and hopped out with my water in hand, stretching my arms high as I turned a slow circle to take in the air. “Do we have a destination?”

“Yup,” Morgan answered from across the truck as she put her backpack on.

“What is it?”

She threw her door closed and smiled at me. “A surprise.”

“You and surprises,” I said, and trailed after her when she waved for me to follow. “Well, how far is it?”

“Um,” she slowed enough for me to catch up and stay at her side, “about a mile and a half.”

We started our walk along the worn path, lined on both sides by dense foliage and colorful trees. “How’d you find out about it?”

“Pip stopped at a vegetable stand on one of the farms up the road,” she said. “They told her about it.”

“It’s one of your favorites,” I said, and she hummed. “So how long have you been coming here?”

“Oh, a long time.”

She paused for a moment to sit down on a large fallen log across the trail and swing her legs over. Then she watched me do the same, holding out her hand to get me back on my feet. I didn’t need the help, but gave her my hand anyway so she could pull me up. And she didn’t let go of it after that. She slipped her fingers between mine as we picked up walking, and it was so smooth, so seamless that my heart skipped the nervous beat entirely and my stomach went straight into the excited fluttering. A warm and impressed smile settled across my lips, and she glanced over at me and smiled too, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

“We used to visit Pip and my grandparents at least a couple times a year,” Morgan continued. “My dad makes pretty good money and his schedule is open, so we always came for longer trips in the summer when I was out of school.”

“What does your dad do, anyway?” I asked.

“He’s an art broker for private clients. Paintings, hyperrealism mostly.”

“Hyperrealism,” I said, “kind of like your sculpting style?”

“Yeah,” she said, and looked over at me as her brow furrowed thoughtfully. “I guess maybe that is where my style came from.” She cocked her head and thought about it for a second more, as if that had never occurred to her before. “Huh.”

“Would you rather talk about something else?”

“No, it’s fine,” she said instantly.

“You sure?”

She met my eyes and gave my hand another light squeeze. “I wouldn’t have asked you out if we couldn’t talk about this stuff.”

So I nodded and asked, “Was it nice having your dad know about art? I know you said he wants you to have an upscale studio...”

“In some ways,” she said. We reached a creek, and she let go of my hand so we could cross over large stones one at a time. When I got to the other side, she held out her hand again with a hopeful smile, and I happily slipped my own into it. “He always encouraged my creativity and bought me all the supplies I wanted to explore whatever my phase was. I was really lucky in that way.” She shrugged. “But he also has his ideas about what I should do with my career, and he’s stubborn about it. But being rich isn’t the most important thing to me. Not as important as sharing what I’m passionate about.”

“I think you should do what makes you happy,” I told her.

She held my gaze for a long moment and with a tender smile. “I am.” And I couldn’t help but return the smile as I glanced down at my feet. “What about your family?” she asked. “What are your parents like?”

“I don’t know,” I said, focusing on the trees and path ahead of us. “They’re... normal.”

“Normal is good,” she laughed. “How long have they been married? What are their names?”

I had to think about it for a second before answering, “Thirty-one years. John and Nicole.”

Morgan let out an impressed whistle. “I’ll have to ask them what the secret is.”

“I know what *their* secret is,” I said.

“Really?” Morgan asked, and then grimaced while she teased, “is it kinky?”

I snorted. “Super.” And her eyebrows rose with curiosity. “They’re always nice to each other, even when they don’t want to be.”

“John and Nicky!” she exclaimed in mock scandal, and I laughed and rolled my eyes. She bumped our hands against her hip and said seriously, “That’s really sweet though. They sound like good people.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “They are.”

“How long have you been out to them?” she asked.

“Since high school,” I answered, “they knew there was no way I signed up for theater without a reason.” Morgan laughed at that. “They were surprised when they found out that reason was girl, but they took it well.” She nodded. “What about you?”

“Freshman year of college,” she said. “I didn’t really tell them... I kind of just kissed my girlfriend in front of them because I was excited about the game I just won. But I guess they already knew because, and I quote: you never brought any boys home and the content of your art paints a pretty clear picture.”

I burst into laughter. “Well, when your art is goddesses with perfect boobs, it’d be hard to miss the point.”

“Exactly,” she snickered. She studied the trail for a few seconds and then said excitedly, “Okay, this is our last turn before we reach the end. You ready?”

I nodded, and she swung our hands along at her side as we took another turn in the trail. It was only another fifty yards or so before we reached the end.

“Tada!” she said, letting go of my hand to gesture both of hers at the water.

It was a large pond, lined around the edges with the same vibrant trees we’d seen all along the trail. The water reflected all the clear blue of the sky, broken only by the gentle ripples caused by the breeze and the scattered lily pads. I left Morgan’s side to stride across the pebbled shore and stand at the edge of the water, catching sight of the tiny fish that scattered from my shadow.

“This is gorgeous,” I mused.

“Yeah,” Morgan agreed, coming to stand beside me. “It is at any time of year. Throughout the spring and summer the water lilies bloom, and now all the trees are colorful, and in the winter everything is white.”

“It might be my new favorite spot too.”

She grinned at me and then slipped one arm out of her backpack. “Lunch?”

I watched her set her backpack on the ground and pull out a small insulated lunch bag and a blanket. She sprawled the blanket out right on the edge of the water and motioned for me to take a seat, and then plopped down at my side.

Once she’d pulled the lunch bag to her, she took out a red apple and a banana and said, “Take your pick.”

I squinted thoughtfully before saying, “Banana.”

She passed it to me and I set it down in my lap, and then she pulled out two sandwiches in plastic bags, handing me one of those as well. “In true

romantic fashion,” she said, “bologna and cheese.”

“Breaking out the big guns for our first date,” I laughed, “nice.”

“Wait for it,” she said, reaching into the pack again. She retrieved two single-serving mini bottles of white wine and held them up triumphantly.

“Now it’s a date.”

“Damn right it is,” she said with a smile, passing me a bottle. She took a bite out of her apple and watched me for a few seconds while I peeled my banana, and then asked, “Is this really okay, though?”

“The sandwiches or the wine?” I asked amusedly.

“All of it,” she said. “I thought about taking you somewhere nice, but then, I don’t know, I thought this would be more... intimate.”

“This *is* nice,” I told her. “I like this.” She gave something of a relieved smile, and I couldn’t help but ask, “Are you really that worried about me not wanting to go out with you again?”

“A little,” she admitted with a shrug. “It’s just, you know, you are a little guarded. And when we met you were still working through feelings and stuff about Steph.”

“I’ve been really open with you, Morgan,” I said softly, hoping she understood exactly what that meant. Hoping she knew exactly how easy she made it. “And I’m completely over Steph. I have been for a while.” I gave her a small smile and then glanced down at my food. “You had a little bit to do with that.” If anything, I was more afraid of Morgan getting bored of me than she was of me not liking her enough.

I felt the tentative smile on her face even without looking at her as she asked, “Because you like me?”

As much as I’d teased her last night, and as hesitant as I might’ve still been about playing my cards too far from my chest, there was something in her voice that said she needed to hear it. That she needed further reassurance that I was here with her because of how I felt. “Yeah,” I answered, inhaling a nervous breath even though we were literally on a date, “because I like you.”

She was doing her best to hold back a grin when I looked over at her. “I like you too.” And I returned the smile, and we both fell quiet to take a few bites of our sandwiches before she asked, “So, are you planning on staying here after you graduate? Or are you going back home?”

“I’ll definitely still be here after I graduate,” I answered, and washed down a bite with a sip of wine. “I mean, I’ll be here after I graduate anyway

to get my masters. But then I was thinking of getting a job here when I'm done. There's a clinic in town that's always looking for people, since most of the students aren't local. I already talked to the lead therapist there and she wants to give me a technician job once summer comes. And my family's close enough for me to still see them a lot."

"You have it all planned out," she said.

"Did you expect any less?" I asked, and she laughed and shook her head. "Hey, look," I pointed, "a turtle!"

"Where?"

"Right there." I leaned forward as if that would help direct my finger better.

Morgan scooted closer and followed my gesture with her eyes. "Oh yeah!" she said happily. The top of its shell and its head were sticking out of the water less than ten feet away. "You think it likes apple?"

"Maybe," I said. She bit a small piece from what remained around the core, and then chucked it to the turtle. Its head recoiled a bit from the surprise, but then it extended its neck curiously and gulped down the piece. "I think it likes apple."

"I love bringing food to feed the ducks when they have babies," Morgan said, and she fell back to lay on the blanket and fold her arms behind her head. "They're so cute."

"That sounds like fun," I said.

I leaned back on my hands and watched the turtle disappear beneath the surface of the water, and then sat there listening to the soothing sounds of the pond. The barely audible ripples of the water on the shore, the slight breeze rustling the leaves of the colorful trees around us, the chirping of birds that would stay here through the winter. There was one lonely cloud in the sky, but the sun was just past its peak above us, and Morgan had her eyes closed against the brightness as she basked in it.

She may have been nervous about this not being a good enough first date, but I thought it was perfect. It was exactly my brand of relaxed, and with Morgan being stretched out at my side, it wasn't just the pond that offered the perfect view. She looked beautiful in the sunlight and as at ease as she always did. I was glad she'd shared this with me, and I didn't want to forget it, so I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened the camera. I flipped it to front facing and held it out above me, getting Morgan looking like she was asleep in the background. It made a loud shutter click when I

snapped the picture, and I glanced over to see that Morgan had cracked an eye to look at me. It was obvious what I'd done, but I stashed my phone on the opposite side of me and wrapped my arms around my knees, staring at the water innocently.

"Let me see," she laughed.

"See what?" I asked without looking at her.

"Audrey," she said in a playful scold. I kept my gaze trained forward, even though a smile cracked my lips. "Let me see," she said again, reaching her arm behind me.

I snatched my phone up, holding it out away from her. But she laughed and pushed up enough to try and grab my arm to pull it down. I leaned away, and she stretched forward as we both started laughing harder, me trying to keep my arm elevated and her trying to tug it down. It was hard to keep leaning without using my arm to hold myself up, and especially with her added weight pushing against me. After another few seconds I fell sideways, trapping her arm under my back so all she could do was lay there. Her chin set on my hip as we both giggled, but she stopped and stared up at me with that crooked smile as butterflies danced through my stomach.

I held her gaze for several long seconds, taking in the feel of her while she simply looked at me. But then she took her arm out from under me and lifted just enough to slide up my body. She let me adjust so she could settle her hips over mine, and hovered over me while her eyes held my gaze.

"Do you, uh..." she began playfully, "do you kiss on the first date?"

I set my phone down beside my head and slid my arms around her neck. "I do if you make a move."

She glanced down at my lips, and her mouth followed her eyes. She kissed me softly and ignited another flurry of butterflies in my stomach, and this was why I was afraid of getting into another relationship. It was so easy to resist and stay closed when every answer you gave was 'no.' But the moment I said 'yes,' the moment I let myself stumble even a little, the ground gave way and there was nothing to keep me from falling. And as terrifying as that feeling of falling was, it was also exhilarating, so that even with one hand on the ripcord, I wouldn't pull it.

So I let her kiss me. Soft and slow and for several long seconds while I lost myself in the heat of her. Then she stopped, yelled, "Got it!" and rolled off of me.

I was so dazed that I didn't even realize at first that she'd grabbed my phone, until I managed to look over at her and she was holding it above her. "You are *such* a brat," I laughed.

"Aw man," she pouted, showing me the screen. "Can you unlock it for me?"

I rolled my eyes and told her, "Nine, one, one, six," as I shifted onto my side to face her.

She unlocked it and opened the pictures, clicking on the one I'd just taken. "Look at that smile," she said, zooming in on my face, and she lifted her head enough to plant a quick peck on my cheek. Then she opened the camera app and puffed her cheeks and crossed her eyes, snapping a selfie. She snorted when she reviewed the new picture and showed it to me. It was ridiculous.

"Nice," I teased, "that's your new call ID photo."

"Oh my god, no!" she protested. "I have to take a better one for that."

"Nope," I said, reaching for my phone, but she held it away. "Don't you dare delete it," I laughed, stretching further, but I couldn't quite reach as she snickered and her thumb aimed for the trash icon.

So I cupped the side of her face instead, turning her head toward me and catching her lips with mine. She hesitated to give in as she kept my phone out of arm's reach, but more than I wanted her to save the photo, I was chasing that feeling I'd had when she kissed me. And it only took a moment more for her to give it to me. Her lips softened and parted against mine, her arm came in, she dropped the phone and her hand set on my ribs. And that was it.

I scooted into her and kissed her deeply, but slowly enough that I could focus on every small detail. The warmth of her cheek against my palm. The way she held her breath every few seconds like she kept forgetting to breathe. The way her hand hesitated as it inched around my ribs to my back, and she angled herself more toward me like she wasn't sure if she could pull me closer.

And this wasn't scary. Maybe it was fast, and maybe I should've saved more kissing for a second or third date, but it didn't matter because I didn't want to. I recognized that desire and I didn't want to resist it. Just like I recognized that the reason I'd been so afraid of opening up to her to begin with was because I desired to. I'd wanted it from the start, but I was finally

at a place where that didn't terrify me, and it felt good. And why shouldn't I do what Zulema told me? Why shouldn't I do what made me happy?

I kissed her until I lost track of minutes to the way her tongue grazed mine, and to the way her hand explored my back. I kissed her until her hand had found the bare skin beneath the back of my shirt, and mine had gotten mixed up in her hair. Until my elbow got sore from propping myself up and it forced its way into my focus more than her lips did.

The kissing slowed, and then stopped. I unraveled my fingers from her hair and brushed my thumb over her cheek as her eyes met mine. She looked like she'd expected that as little as I had, and neither of us knew what to say. My cheeks flushed while her lips pulled into a shy smile and the silence between us lengthened and turned awkward. We started missing eye contact because staring at each other in the quiet was too full of unspoken words. And then there was nothing to do but laugh about it.

I rolled onto my back as we both laughed, and it eased the tension enough for her to stretch one arm out, so I could rest my head on it and scoot close to her side. I set the back of my hand on her stomach, and she took the prompt and put her free hand onto it to begin playing with my fingers. We lay there in a new, comfortable silence, watching the single cloud that had made its way across the sky.

Eventually we started talking again. We lay there for another hour or two, talking and laughing, peppering kisses where we could amidst conversation. I didn't know why Morgan had been so nervous about me not wanting to go out with her on a second date. I couldn't wait just to spend time with her again.

Chapter 11

Morgan dropped onto her back on the bed beside me, groaning about the current concept she was trying to learn from her physics book. I'd been at her house for an hour without any progress, and she was getting frustrated.

"Come on," I encouraged. "You can do it."

"I can't," she complained. "This is stupid." Her hand slid across my back to my hip. "Let's do something else." And her flirtatious smile told me exactly what that something else was.

"No," I laughed, "you need to learn this." She frowned. "Don't give me that face," I begged, but it only made her frown deeper. "*Morgan.*"

Somehow the downward curve of her mouth increased even more, and I just couldn't resist. I rolled my eyes as I dropped back onto my elbow and leaned over her to kiss her.

She hummed into it, mumbling against my lips, "Yeah, this is motivational."

I pulled back and poked her in the chest. "You get five more seconds and then we go back to studying."

"Shh," she teased, and pushed up onto her elbows so she could reach my lips again.

I let her kiss me, and might've let her get away with an even longer delay if the doorbell didn't ring exactly five seconds later. I sat up again, trying not to laugh at her disappointment. "That's the universe telling you to study," I said.

"Fine," she whined, throwing her arms up and then down, using the momentum to sit up too.

She stole one more second by planting a kiss to my cheek, and then slid the textbook into her lap to reread the paragraphs she was struggling with. She probably got through half of it before whoever had rung the doorbell knocked on the frame of her open bedroom door. A middle-aged man stood in the entrance in business casual tan slacks and a light blue polo shirt. He had short brown hair peppered with gray, and blue eyes, and

purposefully groomed stubble on his face that said ‘easy-going professional.’

“Dad?” Morgan said in surprise.

“Hey,” he said softly, with a timid smile like he was uncertain of his reception. Morgan was too surprised to say anything else, so he gave a gentle nod toward me. “Friend of yours?”

“Girlfriend,” Morgan answered, the confusion still clear in her voice.

He mouthed ‘ah,’ and stepped forward to extend his hand to me. “Ethan.”

“Audrey,” I told him, shaking with him.

After he released my hand, he retreated backward to his spot in the doorway, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“What are you doing here?” Morgan finally asked.

He cleared his throat and glanced awkwardly at me before meeting her eyes again. “Your mom and I had some things to discuss.”

“A phone call wouldn’t have been enough?” she asked, and while her voice was mostly a mixture of confusion and hurt, there was an edge to it that made him visibly cringe.

“It would’ve,” he said, and pursed his lips as he sighed through his nose. “But I wanted to talk to you, too... in person.” He looked at me again and added quickly, “I can come back later, though, if you want.”

“You’re staying?”

“For a few days,” he said, “at a hotel in town.” And he shrugged. “Thought I’d try to catch one of your games.”

A heavy silence ensued as Morgan just sat there, uncertain of what to do. But it was obvious that I was a hindrance to candid conversation, so I said, “I’ll go downstairs.”

I met Morgan’s gaze, trying to see on her face if that was what she wanted, but she looked conflicted. She nodded regardless, so I gave her thigh a comforting touch and got up, passing Ethan an awkward smile as he made space for me to skirt out the door. As I treaded down the stairs, I caught sight of Morgan’s mom outside on the porch swing, and decided I’d go to the kitchen for a glass of water. Pip was standing at the counter making a sandwich when I walked in, and she passed me a knowing grimace.

“Tense?” she asked.

I abandoned my quest for a drink and went to stand across the counter from her, sighing, "Very." She grabbed a knife to cut the sandwich in half, offering me half of it. "Thanks," I said.

She nodded, and then gave a slow shake of her head. "I told Daisy she should've warned Morgan he was coming."

"Why didn't she?" I asked, and took a bite of the sandwich.

"He was worried Morgan wouldn't want to be here when he showed up."

"She is pretty upset with him," I said in understanding. "Said they didn't see it coming."

Pip let out a heavy breath and directed a sad look in the direction of the porch, where Daisy was sitting. "They didn't *want* to see it coming," she told me. "I did. From a mile away." I gave her a curious look. "Daisy and Ethan are both so stubborn," she explained. "They could talk for days about each other's problems without ever getting to the root of them, and at the end of it they were both too stubborn for outside help."

"Like couple's therapy?" I asked.

She hummed through the bite of food she'd taken and then swallowed. "Ethan was too prideful for it and Daisy was too stuck in trying to solve everything herself. He wanted out for a long time, but Daisy held on and... you know, I think he stayed for Morgan." She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment and then frowned. "That's been the hardest part for Daisy, though. Feeling like it's her fault because she failed to solve everything."

I understood that hard acceptance of failure, and sighed sympathetically. "I hope it all works out... I want Morgan to be okay."

"That kid's got more heart than anyone I've ever met," Pip said reassuringly. "As soon as all of this blows over I can start getting Daisy back on her feet, and Ethan can fix things with Morgan without her having to feel protective of her mom." I nodded, and if I was already anxious for that to happen, I couldn't imagine how Morgan felt. We sat there for a minute in pensive silence, eating in something of a mutual discomfort about the situation. "Anyway," Pip said eventually, "Morgan said you're a science major?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I'm taking a tech job this summer at a physical therapy clinic in town."

"Oh! Brightside PT?" she asked hopefully. I nodded. "Yeah, I went there a few years ago because I broke my ankle at work. That place is the

best. That's great, Audrey."

"Thanks." I couldn't help giving a blushing smile. "How long have you been at the diner?"

She thought about it for a second and then answered, "About twelve years now." My eyebrows lifted with surprise. "Yeah, long time," she laughed. "I know Daisy doesn't really get it – me wanting to be a waitress and everything – our parents never did either."

"But you like it?" I asked.

"I actually like dealing with people," she said as she turned around to put her sandwich supplies away. "...Most the time." I snickered. "Plus, I get my days free *and* the drunk college kids here are surprisingly great tippers."

"I believe it," I laughed. I watched her rinse dishes and put ingredients back in the fridge before I said, "You know, your house is one of my favorites on this road."

"Really?" she asked, coming back over to stand at the counter with me.

"I always drive by when I go home to visit my family. The yard is beautiful."

She grinned. "I spend a lot of time out there gardening and stuff. It's nice to know it pays off."

"It does," I praised.

Neither of us got to say anything else before Ethan came down and stopped in the kitchen, looking around searchingly. "Have you seen Daisy?"

"I'll go get her," Pip volunteered, and before I could stand there any longer and let things get awkward, I gave a tense smile and headed upstairs.

Morgan was on her bed when I got there, staring across the room at an empty spot of wall. I made my way over and cautiously lowered myself at her side, asking, "Are you going to be okay?"

She blew a hard breath through her lips. "Eventually I will, right?" she asked. "I mean, that's how it goes, and he knows that, so I don't understand why *right now* he feels like he has to come here and try to explain it all and make everything better. Because what can he say that'll make me not feel betrayed? What does he honestly think he could say to make me take his side in this even a little bit? He can't. Because I had to grow up listening to them argue thinking I couldn't hear them. I had to grow up eavesdropping on my mom's phone calls with Pip because she was trying to fix everything while he was, what? Out running around with Jane? Like, what the fuck

does he expect? That I'm going to be cool with the fact that I kept hoping they'd work it out while my mom tried and he just gave up?" She reached behind her for a pillow, and shoved it to her face so she could groan her frustration into it while she fell onto her back.

I had no idea what I could possibly say, so I grabbed her hand in mine, and lifted it to my lips to press a gentle kiss to her knuckles. She let out a heavy sigh into the pillow and then set it aside, meeting my eyes with a pursed smile even though she looked like she was holding back tears.

"You want to know what sucks the most?" she asked, and I gave her a gentle nod. "He said that he didn't start a relationship with Jane because he was lonely or upset with my mom. I guess he tried not to let other feelings get in the way, and I could see it on his face that he meant it. And it sucks that *I get it.*" She couldn't help it then, and reached up to wipe away a tear that slid down her temple. "A lot of my friends' parents were divorced. It's not like people always work out no matter how hard they try. I just... they tried for so that long I kept thinking, 'Soon. Soon they're going to fix it.'" She paused to take a breath. "He's my dad and I *do* love him, and I can tell that this is hurting him too. But it doesn't change the fact that he stayed and made things worse when he should've just left, and I don't know what to do. I don't want him to be scared that I hate him or that I don't ever want him in my life anymore, but I don't know how to fix that because I'm just... pissed at him."

She stopped and sniffled, and I used the moment to lay down beside her, setting my head on her shoulder and an arm over her stomach. It took me a minute to figure out if I should try and comfort her or just be there with her, but eventually, I said, "My parents almost got divorced."

"What?" she breathed in shock. "I didn't know that."

"I've never told anyone before," I admitted.

"How?" she asked. "Why?"

"It was after Anna's accident," I told her. "She was having the worst time, and my parents were trying to figure out how to adapt all of our lives and no matter what they did, nothing helped her emotionally. They were scared, you know?" Morgan hummed her understanding. "They argued a lot about what was best. They argued about stupid everyday things because they were stressed. One day it got really bad, and my mom went for a drive because she was too upset to be in the house. Neither of them had ever said the word 'divorce' in front of us, but I felt it and I had a panic attack." Her

arm wrapped around the backs of my shoulders as her cheek rested against the top of my head. “And my dad did his best to make me feel better, but he couldn’t say that they weren’t getting a divorce, and that made it worse. The only good thing from that day was that Anna took care of me even though she was so depressed she could barely take care of herself.”

I shrugged against her. “I think they took the consequences more seriously after that, because they started seeing someone. And it helped, but even though they stayed together, and things got better eventually, I didn’t understand it for the longest time. I was mad at them for a while.”

“But everything is good now,” Morgan said knowingly.

“Yeah,” I said, and I propped myself up on one elbow so I could look at her. “I know it’s not the same, but I kind of know how you feel. And I know it’s never the answer anyone wants to hear, because you’re hurt *now*, but yeah, it will get better. It’ll just take time.”

“I mean, I know that,” she said, and gave me a small smile, “but it helps to hear someone else say it.” I returned the smile. “And I guess something good is coming out of this.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

She hummed and said, “I met you.” It was obvious that was what she’d say, but I blushed anyway. “And you’re pretty awesome,” she continued. “And I’m going to win you a championship.”

“That *is* a good thing,” I laughed.

She beamed that lopsided grin at me, and I couldn’t resist kissing her. She kissed me back for a few long seconds and then said, “To be honest, I was kind of embarrassed that you were here when my dad showed up. But I’m glad you were.”

“Me too,” I said as I set my hand on her stomach.

She played with my fingers for a minute, watching hers run between them or over the backs of them, before finally looking at me. “I really can’t focus on studying anymore,” she said, and I nodded my understanding. “You want to get out of here? See a movie or something?”

“Sure.”

She looked relieved as she got up and gathered her phone, keys, and wallet, and then took my hand to lead me out the door. We snuck down the stairs in hopes that no one would see us leaving, or that Morgan wouldn’t get drawn into any more serious conversation. Pip was outside watering

plants, but even though Morgan hesitated when they locked eyes, Pip smiled and nodded toward Morgan's truck.

"Call me if Mom needs me," Morgan told her.

"I got your mom," Pip said, stepping forward and setting a hand on her back to push her toward the vehicle. "Go. Do fun college kid stuff."

Morgan practically dragged me at a jog to the truck, and I let her blast the music as loud as she could and take me wherever she wanted.

Chapter 12

I was doing my best to pin up the hair of Monica's wig like the picture she'd given me, but she kept pulling it down her forehead or rolling her neck. She even got the chills once, and that made it hard to make it look perfect.

"Hold still," I laughed.

"Ugh." She scrunched up her face in the mirror with the effort to stop moving. "This is why I never cosplay characters like this anymore. Wigs *are so itchy and hot.*"

"I'm almost done," I assured her.

She was even more of an introvert than I was, and the Halloween party tonight was the only one she went to all year. She was dressing up as a video game character with long hair, and since hers was short and... not blue... wig.

As for me, I'd borrowed some of Morgan's paint-stained clothes and an apron covered in clay. I added a few dabs of white paint to my face like they were clay smears and, best of all, Morgan had made me some miniature ceramic tools and put them on a chain as a necklace, so it was more obvious that I was a sculptor.

"Okay," I told Monica, "done."

"Yes!" she said, and turned her head in the mirror to check it out. "Perfect, thank you."

I nodded as a knock sounded on our dorm room door. I opened it to Zulema and Rodney, and checked them out in their old west get-ups while they came in. "Alright, I'm still surprised," I told them. "Who are you?"

ZuZu tipped her cowboy hat at me. "I'm Kissin' Kate Barlow." She threw her arm around Rodney. "And this is my Sam."

"Tragic..." I mused. "Fun!"

ZuZu laughed and glanced around. "Where's your sculpture?"

She meant Morgan, and I pulled my phone out of the convenient apron pocket to check when she'd texted me. "She should be here any sec-" But I was cut off by another knock on the door. "Right now."

I threw the door open and grinned before I even looked at what Morgan was wearing, but when I finally saw her, my grin vanished as my mouth fell open. She was my sculpture, classic and Greek and... not wearing as much as I thought she'd be. She had on a long white toga skirt with a high slit up one side, so her leg stuck out as she struck a pose. She'd dressed as one of those topless sculptures, and while she wasn't completely nude up top, all she had on was a white bandeau. Just a strip of material that wrapped around her breasts and back. Her skin and hair were all painted a statue white, but the brightness of the color only accentuated the shadows in every dip of muscle she had – and God did her abs look incredible.

I was speechless, and stammered for a long few seconds before Zulema appeared at my side and exclaimed, "Hot damn!"

"Statuesque enough?" Morgan asked, striking another classic pose. But her eyes were fixed on me, and the tiny smirk at one corner of her mouth said she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Perfect!" Zulema praised. "Audrey, isn't it perfect?"

"Perfect," I croaked.

Morgan finally laughed, and bent past the doorway to kiss me on the lips. "You look so cute," she said, grabbing my hands and holding my arms out so she could get a good look at me.

"Thanks," I said, resisting the urge to touch her stomach with every ounce of self-control I had. And I wasn't sure if 'cute' was quite good enough when she looked so fucking *hot*.

"Everyone ready?" ZuZu asked.

We all said yes, and then filtered outside to Zulema's sedan. I drove, since I wasn't planning on drinking and wanted everyone else to have fun, and we arrived at the sorority house with the party already in full swing. The house was decorated outside with inflatable witches, and jack-o-lanterns, and orange and purple lights. We couldn't get into the house, however, without first going through the house next door – which, just like every year, was a haunted walkthrough.

Morgan took my hand as we stepped up to the door, her vice-like grip a clear tell that she wasn't expecting it.

"Are you scared?" I asked.

"How scary is it?" she prompted.

"Not too bad," I said. She took a deep breath and nodded. "We don't have to go through," I told her, setting my free hand on her forearm.

“They’ll let us in the front door.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

Zulema high-fived her and led the way in. I kept a firm hold of her hand as we navigated the maze that the house had been turned into, walking in front of her and with Monica at the back. There was so much fog from fog machines that we couldn’t see the floor, and only particular parts of it were lit to illuminate the scary decorations or moving figures. The theme this year was haunted hospital, so we passed spooky scenes, and students dressed as dead nurses that were standing still and waiting for someone to jump out at. Most of them didn’t, they just slowly turned their heads and watched you walk by, so you were tense the whole time you expected them to scare you. It also lured you into a false sense of comfort.

There wasn’t a single real scare until we were passing by an operating scene on our right, and because all of us were facing it and it was so dark, we didn’t realize the wall behind us was a curtain. A guy in ghostly white paint and with gory makeup opened it enough to stick his head through and yell. All of us whipped around, and while most of us gasped or gave a quick yelp, Morgan *screamed*.

It was long and ear-piercing, and when she realized she wasn’t about to die it faded off and devolved into hysterical laughter. “Oh my god,” she cackled, and the rest of us laughed at her so hard that we stumbled as we moved on. “How many times do you think he’s been punched?”

“He’s in my design class,” Monica said from behind us. “He’s been punched at least twice.”

Morgan snorted. “That actually makes me feel better.”

There was one more big scare at the end, but Morgan handled it better and managed only a brief shriek rather than a blood-curdling scream. The haunted maze ended in the backyard, at the fence that connected this house to the party house next door. Right at the entrance of the backyard was a table with a large jar of candy corn in it, and the sign said that whoever was closest to guessing how many were in it would win an expensive bottle of alcohol and four front row tickets to the next football game. We all filled out a strip of paper with our guesses and deposited them into the basket, and then strode into the party.

The backyard was full of games. Instead of corn hole there were boards with cones on them painted like witches’ hats, and you had to throw a ring over a cone. Of course there was beer pong, but the cups were white

with ghost faces and the ping pong balls looked like eyeballs. In one corner of the yard, there were a ton of orange and purple balloons on the ground, and we watched people stomp around trying to pop them for the candy inside – the more obviously drunk the person, the funnier it was to try and watch them pop a balloon. At another part, teams of two competed against each other, one teammate had to spin while the other wrapped them like a mummy in toilet paper. They had to spin until they were completely wrapped from shoulders to ankles, and then hop across the yard – dizzy and bound in toilet paper – to the end.

Inside, it was crowded, and a majority of the light was coming from the blacklights that had been put up throughout the house. The main living room was a large dance floor, with deafening music courtesy of the massive speakers on either end. The kitchen was set up with a full bar, and several large cauldrons of cold punch spewed smoke from the dry ice inside.

Our group poured their drinks, and Morgan took a sip from a cup of punch and then handed it to me, saying, “Here, there’s no alcohol in this.”

“Thanks.” I took a gulp while she grabbed a beer.

When everyone was equipped with something, ZuZu asked, “Anyone want to dance?”

Monica gestured to the yard. “I’m going to go play some games.”

Zulema and Morgan looked at me, and I glanced at the dance floor visible from the kitchen. There were so many students that I didn’t think I’d feel too self-conscious. “Sure.”

“Woo!” Zulema grabbed Rodney’s hand and dragged him over.

I took Morgan’s and followed after them. I really wasn’t much of a dancer, but another bonus of having *just* enough courage to do it – Morgan. Or, more specifically, Morgan’s scarcely clad body right up against mine. I was a little worried about smudging her body paint off if I touched her too much, so I set my arms over her shoulders, but it was enough. Because even though she kept it light by mixing seductive rolls of her hips with silly shakes of her upper body, I was completely focused on her.

Focused on the turns of her hips against mine, and the way her hands explored my waist and back. Focused on how the adorable smile on her face changed into a tantalized grin every time she glanced between us at our proximity. Or how I got teasing glimpses of her stomach or thigh every time she tried to be playful and spin me around. I understood the appeal of dancing on the rare occurrences I’d danced with Steph in the past, but with

Morgan, I *got* it. I got it from the tingles under her hands straight down to the sparks of desire low in my stomach.

We danced until I started sweating in my heavy clothes and apron, and Morgan had finished her drink, and then we went to the kitchen to get her another and ventured out into the yard.

“Let’s do the mummy game!” I suggested.

“Who’s getting wrapped?” Morgan asked as we made our way over.

“You,” I said, and she laughed. “Definitely you.”

We lined up with four other teams, Morgan with her arms at her sides and me with a roll of toilet paper in my hands.

“On the count of three!” the student overseeing the game said. “One! Two! Three, go!”

I undid the roll and tucked the end into Morgan’s armpit. “Spin!” I told her.

And off she went, spinning in rapid circles while I held the roll, adjusting it up and down so it covered her completely. It got harder when I reached her legs – she was already dizzy and with her legs wrapped she could barely move her feet to spin. Two teams finished a split moment before we did, and Morgan jumped after them. The rest of us who were watching cheered and hollered and buckled over laughing as our teammates tried to hop in a straight line, often having to hop sideways at an angle to stay upright. One of the other team’s mummies was so off balance that he faceplanted, and without his arms, it was a hilarious spectacle watching him try to get back up.

What we hadn’t realized when we’d first seen the game was that there was a donut on a string at the end, and the mummies had to eat it before hopping back. But the donuts were strung up just high enough that most of them had to jump every time they wanted to take a bite. More than half the time they missed, and the chocolate frosted donuts smeared frosting on their faces.

Morgan and another mummy finished at the same time and started their way back. I screamed to cheer her on as she raced forward, bunny hopping as far as she could with each jump. She reached me only a second after the first mummy reached her teammate, and she collapsed in the grass by my feet, panting and laughing.

“You have chocolate all over your face,” I giggled, kneeling in the grass to start ripping the toilet paper off her.

“Want some?” she asked, sitting up to wipe her cheek against mine.

I squealed and shoved her back down, both of us still laughing. When she was free of toilet paper, I helped her up, and she grabbed a baby wipe off the table nearby to clean the chocolate off her face, also wiping off the small spot she’d put on mine.

“What now?” she asked.

“Want to see what ZuZu and Rodney are doing?”

She nodded, and so we headed back in. We found them on the dance floor, but when they saw us, they left it, and plopped onto a half-empty couch to catch their breath. Morgan and I sat down beside them.

“Where’d you guys go?” Rodney asked over the music.

“Mummy game,” I told him.

“Oh! Did you win?” Zulema asked.

Morgan shook her head, pinching her thumb and index finger together. “We were this close!”

One of the sorority girls grabbed a microphone near a speaker as the music volume lowered. “Can I have the attention of everyone on the dance floor?” she said, and people went quiet to listen. “We’re about to do the Monster Mash!” People cheered and hooted. “My sisters are watching, and the person with the best Monster Mash gets this sash-” One of the other sorority girls walked by her, modeling a sash that said ‘Mash Master’. “And a fifty-dollar gift card that you can spend anywhere!”

Everyone screamed and cheered, and when she called everyone around the dance floor to start, Zulema hopped up. “Come on!” she told us, and didn’t wait before pulling Rodney back to the dance floor with her.

“Want to get your mash on?” Morgan asked, standing up and doing a rhythmic zombie arm.

But this wasn’t the same as dancing before, where nobody was watching and nobody cared. This was a contest, where people weren’t just watching, but judging, and I didn’t even know how to do the Monster Mash. “No, no,” I said, “I’m good.”

“You sure?” Morgan asked.

I nodded. “But you should go.”

“Nah,” she said, and dropped back down at my side. “It’s alright.”

But that made everything inside me freeze up as a sense of familiar dread and discomfort settled in my chest. “Don’t just sit here for me,” I told her.

I'd been in this exact situation with Steph, probably at this exact party. She'd say it was fine if I didn't want to do something, but it was never really fine. I always heard about it later: *You never do anything spontaneous with me; It's no fun if you're not doing it too; I thought you'd change your mind if I didn't do it without you.* But the guilt trips never made me want to do stuff in the future, it only ever made me feel... well, guilty.

"I'm not," Morgan said.

"I'm serious," I told her, "if you want to do it, go do it."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "...Do you want me to do it?"

"I don't care," I said.

"Okay..." she drawled.

But she continued to sit there, glancing over at me every couple of seconds while I watched her out of the corner of my eye. It only made it worse that she kept looking, because at any moment she was going to ask if I'd changed my mind. She was going to check if she was guilt tripping me bad enough that I'd do what *she* wanted. And if she *really* wanted to make me feel bad for saying no in the first place, then the moment I changed my mind, she'd change hers and not want to do it anymore anyway.

She glanced over at me a few more times before I couldn't take it anymore. "What?" I blurted.

"Are you mad?" she asked, her face and voice a mix of caution and confusion.

"No," I said defensively.

Her mouth fell open with a pending response, and after a handful of seconds of thought, she breathed, "Okay," and stood up. But she didn't go to join the dance. She extended her hand to me. "Come with me?"

Thinking she was going to try and drag me into the dance anyway, I said, "No, I don't want to--"

"Please?" she said, hand still out and her brow furrowed with plea.

I sighed and took her hand, and reluctantly let her lead me away from the dance floor. She took me to a bathroom that didn't have a line in front of it, and closed and locked the door behind us, leaving us in a muffled quiet.

She watched me trudge over and lean back against the sink counter, and then asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Audrey," she said softly, and stepped forward to take my hand. "I can tell you're upset... Did I do something wrong?"

“No,” I answered quickly, and then added slowly, “I mean, I don’t think so? I don’t know.”

“You don’t think so,” she repeated thoughtfully.

I sighed in frustration. “I just don’t want you not to do things that you want because I don’t want to.”

“But I wasn’t.” She let out a huff of still confused laughter. “Or I was... I don’t know, that sentence was kind of confusing.” I let out a puff of breath and stared at her, because I wasn’t in the mood for her to be amused. “Sorry... I wasn’t.”

“You say that now,” I told her. “But then how long until you start thinking, ‘Audrey never wants to do anything,’ ‘Audrey can’t just do one fun thing for me?’ ‘Audrey never wants me to have any fun.’”

“What?” she asked. “I’ve been having a blast with you tonight.”

“No,” I protested, and then groaned. “You don’t get it.”

“Audrey, I’m trying,” she said, gently squeezing my hand between both of hers. “I just... Why do you think I’d think that?”

“*Because,*” I said, wracking my brain for clarity. Searching for a more concise way to say it, because I *wanted* her to get it. I took my hand from hers and rubbed my eyes, then dropped it to my side. “I don’t want me to keep you from doing things that you want to do, because eventually you’re going to miss out on things that you want. I just don’t,” I let out a dejected sigh, “I don’t want you to get bored.”

Her eyes scanned my face for several seconds before, “*Oh.*” She watched me a little bit more while she thought about that, while it sank in, and then she said, “Okay,” and stepped closer. When she held out her hand, I gave her mine, and she kissed my palm before holding it in front of her. “Look, I know that we’re still building trust here, but I’m going to make you a promise. And I’m going to do everything I can to back it up, but until I can earn that trust, I need you to take this as seriously as you can, okay?” I gave her a hesitant nod. “I was just as happy to sit with you on that couch as I would’ve been to dance. So I promise you, Audrey, that I will never lie to you about what I’m okay with. But...” She paused, and I nodded for her to continue. “I also need you to promise that you won’t lie about how you feel. If you’re going to trust that I’m honest about what I want, then I need to trust when you say that you’re okay with it.”

I watched her eyes and took in the sincerity and the concern, and I couldn’t hold back a sigh of relief as I gave her another tiny nod. “That’s

fair.”

“Yeah?” she asked, and I hummed. “Okay, come here.” She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, and I slid mine around her waist and hugged her back.

“I’m sorry I got testy,” I said into her neck.

“It’s okay,” she said, and pulled back to press a kiss to my forehead. “We’re still figuring things out.”

We let each other go, and I felt worlds better than I had just moments ago, so as I set my hands against the edge of the counter behind me, I said, “I have to be honest with you about how I’m feeling.”

“I’m listening,” she said hesitantly.

I blew a hard breath through my lips. “I’m feeling oppressed.”

She squinted at me unsurely. “By?”

I gestured to her. “You barely have any clothes on, and I can’t touch.”

She snorted with laughter, clearly relieved that I didn’t have an actual problem. “My lack of clothing is oppressing you?” she asked, and I hummed. “Well, who said you weren’t allowed to touch?” She took a step closer even though we were already so close, so that the front of her body was pressed against mine. “I didn’t say that.” She leaned in so her nose brushed mine. “In fact,” she whispered, “maybe I wore this hoping it’d encourage you to.”

“Was that your goal?” I asked, smiling as her lips hovered a hair’s width away.

“Okay, no... but it is now.”

I smiled but didn’t laugh, because we locked eyes for a moment that was heavy with anticipation as her lips got so close that they tickled. There was nothing I wanted more than to kiss her, and touch her, and let her feel just how much I liked and appreciated her. If my anxiety a minute ago had been a test, she’d passed with flying colors, and the only thing I could think of that was sexier than her abs was her patience. And maybe that was a weird thing to think, but her patience was the one thing keeping our lips apart. The thing that was teasing me with the promise of a kiss so that I had all the time in the world to think about just how much I wanted it.

When she finally pressed her lips to mine, it was slow, and soft, but the kiss deepened when they opened again, and then we were gone. I set my hands on her waist to pull her harder against me as she kissed me openly, and I had no reservations about touching her. I ran my hand along the curve

of her lower back, traced the line of her hip with my thumb, followed the dips of her abs with my fingertips.

Every touch I gave had her kissing me more heavily, more desperately, and every time I felt her easing up, I stopped my exploration just long enough to dig my fingers into her back, encouraging her not to stop. The next time I did it, she slid her arms around me and lifted me to sit on the edge of the counter. I wrapped my calves around the backs of her thighs, she grabbed my hips to pull me against hers, and it'd be a bold-faced lie if I said I wasn't already desperate to lose some layers of clothing myself.

The feel of her grinding against me, the graze of her tongue every time her lips parted, the heat of her skin beneath my hands, it caused a blossoming heat between my legs. And every time we moved together, I could feel it. The moisture. The want. The need to feel more of her, or as much of her as possible, before we decided we should slow down.

That need drove my hand up her ribs, and I hesitated just long enough at the height of them that she could stop me if she wanted to. But she didn't, so I slid my hand over the bandeau, over her breast and up to her collarbone, testing her reaction to it. Seeing if her need matched mine. Her chest gave an approving pulse against my touch, so I lowered it again, squeezing gently as I started to massage her over the band of cover.

She stopped kissing me then. Her lips were still touching mine, but they hovered there as her forehead rested against mine and she panted for air.

“Want me to stop?” I whispered, stilling my motions.

“No,” she said, pecking my lips reassuringly between breaths. “No, it feels really good.”

And the material of the bandeau was so thin. Thin enough that I felt it perfectly when my thumb found her nipple, and she let out a sigh against my mouth when I circled the stiff bud of it. Her eyes opened and delved into mine as her eyelids fluttered with pleasure. As she gathered enough air to kiss me again. And when she did, it was harder and deeper than it had ever been.

Her lips were as purposeful and direct as the motion of her reaching behind me. She untied the strings of my apron, pushing the front of it aside so she could slip her hands up under my shirt. As affectionate as we'd been with each other since we started dating, she'd never touched my bare skin. The moment her fingers landed on my stomach, the jolts that sparked from

her touch made my breathing stop. I inhaled and then couldn't exhale. I just sat there for several long seconds in a lull while the tickle of her hands running across my stomach and up my ribs sent a flurry of yearning between my hips.

I couldn't let that breath out until her mouth left mine. Until it grazed across my jaw and landed on my neck. She latched on to the tender muscle there, her lips open so I felt the flat of her tongue sample my skin, and I finally released that breath in one hard rush. And that lull was over. My hands left her chest, one threading into her hair to encourage her mouth on my neck, the other clutching at her hip to pull her as hard against me as I could.

Oh, and she listened. Her hands were everywhere. My stomach, my back, my chest. One of them pressing between my shoulder blades while the other ran down my thigh, reinforcing my legs' embrace as she ground against me in rhythm with the heat of her mouth.

I wasn't thinking about slowing down anymore. I wasn't thinking about anything other than how good it felt to want to give myself to someone. How good it felt to like someone so much that I stopped thinking at all. There was only feeling and impulse, and maybe we were still building trust in a lot of ways, but it spoke volumes to the trust she'd already built that I wasn't in my head. That I could stop thinking and let my body make this decision. And my body knew exactly what it wanted, and it didn't want to leave her figuring that out up to chance.

All I could do to try and tell her was to pant her name, but it got her attention. She left my neck, pressed a kiss to my cheek, and pulled back to meet my eyes. It was clear she thought I was telling her to stop, because even though she was breathing as hard as I was, her hands slid out of my shirt and set on my hips. So I leaned back on my hands as I held her gaze, hoping she'd get it. Hoping she'd realize that the space would make it easier for her to get to the button of my jeans.

It took her a few moments, but then her eyes dropped, and she understood. She met my gaze briefly as she reached for the button, searching to make sure that's what I meant. When I offered no protest or hesitation, she undid it as she leaned in, lips meeting mine in a kiss that was as slow as when we first started, but so much heavier with intent. I kissed her back, letting her take her time as she pushed down my zipper, and her fingers searched for the hem of my underwear.

I was so focused on her hand, so desperately anticipating her touch that I barely registered the sound of someone jiggling the door handle. It wasn't until I started wondering why she'd stopped kissing me, and why her hand had paused, that I realized what that sound was. That I remembered where we were.

We both froze, waiting, and I could see in her eyes when they met mine that she was hoping as much as I was whoever had tried the handle would move on. But then they knocked, and Morgan whined, "No."

I dropped my forehead against hers with a disappointment that was almost painful. "Should we ignore it?" I whispered.

But whoever it was knocked again. "Come on, I'm going to pee my pants."

"Alright," Morgan called, "just a sec." She looked at me, and I think it sank in for us both at the same time that we'd almost had sex in a bathroom at a party, because we laughed. She was still smiling when she pecked me on the lips, but it was sincere when she asked, "Are you okay?"

I knew what she meant, but I said, "Absolutely not." And she knew exactly what I meant, because she snickered. "But I'll live."

"Okay," she said amusedly, and once I'd hopped off the counter, she twirled her finger. "Turn."

I turned around so she could tie my apron while I redid the button and zipper of my jeans. Another impatient knock sounded on the door as we finished.

"I am literally begging you," the person said. Morgan snorted as she opened the door, and we were barely out of the bathroom before the person groaned, "*thank you*," and bolted in behind us.

Morgan took my hand as we wandered back out to the dance floor and found ZuZu and Rodney. It was getting late already, so we decided to dance until the rest of our group was ready to go. Of course, that didn't make being interrupted any easier. If anything, being close on a dance floor – while knowing exactly how far we'd been prepared to take our make out session – made it worse. Morgan's hands were bolder, every meeting of our eyes was full of silent flirtation, and I couldn't resist kissing her deeply, if briefly, every few minutes to temper the lingering burn between my legs.

When it was finally time to leave, we gathered our group and headed for the car. Monica was explaining the plot of the game her costume had come from as we walked, and since Morgan and Rodney were interested,

Zulema grabbed my arm and slowed us down so we were walking a few paces behind them.

“Dude,” she whispered, “did you and Morgan bone?”

I rolled my eyes even though my cheeks flooded. “Okay, first of all, *bone*? Really?” She laughed quietly. “Second, why do you think that?”

She dropped her chin and gave me a *look* through her eyelashes. “You haven’t taken your hands off each other since you disappeared during the Monster Mash.” She watched me, waiting for me to answer, but all I did was give her a pursed-lip smile. Her jaw dropped, and she gave a tiny squeal. “Oh my god, you did!”

“Shh,” I threw my arm around her shoulders and cupped a hand over her mouth, smiling innocently at Morgan, who glanced back at us. “No, we didn’t,” I whispered. “...We got interrupted...” She grabbed my hand and pulled it away from her mouth, hopping from one foot to the other with excitement. “You know, sometimes you use your ability to read me for evil, and you’re the worst.”

“You love me,” she said with a grin. “Just like you love-”

I clapped my hand back over her mouth. “Nope, not yet, don’t you dare.”

It was muffled, but I understood it when she said, “Move your hand.” So I did, only for her to say, “You suck.”

I gave her a playful push as we reached the car, and I got into the driver’s seat and took us back to the dorms. Zulema and Rodney parted ways with us to do their own thing, and Monica, Morgan, and I headed up the stairs to my room. At the door, Monica said bye to Morgan and then left us alone in the hall.

There were still enough lingering feelings from earlier in the night that I wished I had Morgan all to myself, and a private place to take her, but maybe it was good I didn’t. Nothing bad could come from us waiting.

“You’re okay to drive, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. And we stared at each other, and we were both definitely still thinking about earlier, because after a long silence Morgan looked at my lips and said, “A quick one for goodbye, no teasing.”

I hummed my agreement. “A quick one.”

She leaned in to peck me on the lips, and it *was* quick. But my hands set on her hips and she took a step forward, and our lips met again.

“One more,” she murmured against my mouth.

She kissed me, and I instantly said, “One more.”

Our lips met solidly, and she pushed forward even more with her arms outstretched over my shoulders, until my back was against the wall and her body was pressed against mine. And we didn’t stop kissing. We didn’t keep it from escalating either, not until my hands were tempted to wander to too intimate places, and hers were dangerously close to the button of my jeans.

“Okay,” I breathed, forcing myself to set a hand on her collarbone and put some space between us. “Okay, we have to stop. This is already torture.”

Her arms dropped, and she glanced up and down the hall and said, “Nobody’s around...” I lifted both my eyebrows in disbelief. “Kidding!” she laughed. “I’m kidding. But I do have a perfectly good bench seat in my truck.” And she beamed at me with a half-teasing grin.

“We’re not having sex for the first time in your car,” I giggled.

“No,” she teased, “because a bathroom is way classier.”

“Alright,” I said amusedly, “you got me there.” We both snickered about that for a moment before we stopped just to look at each other. For how worked up I still was, and for how awkward I would’ve thought navigating our first confrontation with sex would be, it was surprisingly comfortable. Comfortable enough that I cupped her face, giving her a gentle kiss as both of us seemed to exhale all the tension.

She reached up to take one of my hands, kissing the side of my thumb before holding it by her side. “Do you think we’re rushing too much?”

I shrugged honestly. “Do you?”

One corner of her mouth pulled. “I don’t know either.” We both fell quiet for a minute, during which I watched my hand play with hers. Eventually she asked, “Will you tell me what you’re thinking?”

I glanced up to meet her eyes, and could see in them that there was some concern in the question. Like she was worried I thought we were rushing but was too afraid to say it. So I gave her a reassuring smile. “I was just thinking that, I don’t know, you keep surprising me in the best ways.” I gave a shy laugh. “And it’s kind of a turn-on.” She laughed too, her head falling to my shoulder just a moment too late for me not to catch the blush creeping into her cheeks. “What were you thinking?”

She lifted her head, some of the blush still lingering. “I was thinking that I kind of don’t care if we’re rushing too much, but maybe that’s just the hormones talking.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, and set my arms over her shoulders, fidgeting with my fingers behind her neck. “Rationally, I can’t really think of anything good or bad either way. Emotionally, the world might end if we don’t do it right now.” Morgan let out a series of breathy laughs. “But, you know, when are you ever thinking rationally when you’re falling for someone?”

She held my gaze for a long moment after I said that, with the hint of a smile on her face that let me know she understood the weight of it. “So...” she said, “maybe we take it in stride? And if it feels right...”

I nodded. “If it feels right. *And* we have the privacy.”

“Okay,” she laughed. She wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me, giving me a gentle kiss before she pulled away. “Thanks for being honest with me tonight.”

“Thanks for being so sweet about it,” I said, and pulled her to me for one last kiss. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

She squeezed my hand, holding it for as long as she could as she started down the hall, and I didn’t move until she’d disappeared down the stairs.

Chapter 13

I sat down in lab and flipped open my book to today's work. There was an odd number of students in class, and ever since I'd snapped at Steph and hadn't really wanted to talk to her, I'd left her table and partnered up with the odd student out. It seemed a little harsh now that I'd gotten over it, but I didn't want to move back and give her the wrong idea. I still didn't necessarily want to be friends.

It was early enough that my partner hadn't arrived yet, but other students scattered throughout the room, and the next one to come in was Steph. She walked over to our old table and set her stuff down, but instead of sitting afterward, she wandered over to me.

"Hey," she said quietly, standing at the edge of my table.

"Hi." I glanced up at her, and my curiosity about what she could possibly want was replaced by concern. She looked exhausted, and sad, and she wasn't wearing any makeup which was practically unheard of. "Are you okay?"

She shrugged. "Me and Alyssa broke up."

I wasn't exactly sure what that meant about why she was standing there talking to me, but she looked broken up about it enough that I felt bad. "What happened?"

"We got in a big fight about her never wanting to do stuff alone," she said. "We're always with friends."

I inhaled as the thought crossed my mind that that sounded familiar, because we used to fight about that too. But I didn't say anything because it wouldn't have been true. The difference seemed to be that when we were together, we both *tried* to compromise, even if it didn't work.

"She didn't agree?" I asked.

"She didn't think it was a problem," Steph sighed. "She ended up saying maybe I just liked her more than she liked me."

"Ouch," I murmured.

She nodded. "The worst is that I can't really talk to anyone about it. Anytime I bring it up to our friends, they're assholes and take her side."

“So... you want to talk to me about it?”

“Oh no, no,” she said quickly, with eager reassurance. “You said you’re not ready to be friends, and I respect that. I was only answering your question. I came over because I guess I just... was looking for some positivity? And I’ve seen you and Morgan around campus, and I just wanted to say that it’s really nice to see you so happy.”

“Oh.” I could see on her face how sincere that was, and I gave her a warm smile. “Thanks.”

She returned the smile, the comforted kind like she was glad I’d received that well. “Okay,” she said, turning back toward her table.

“Steph?”

She faced me again. “Hm?”

“If you’re ever desperate enough for someone to talk to, you know where to find me.”

She nodded and gave a tiny smile. “Thanks, Audrey.”

Lab went by fast after that, and things between Steph and me were way less tense. It was good enough that I gave her a casual wave as we left the room.

That was my last class of the day, so I made a pitstop at the locker rooms to grab my soccer stuff and then headed back to my dorm. We didn’t have practice because we had a game, and I managed to get some homework in before it was time to leave. It was a visiting game at a school an hour away, so I met the rest of the team at the bus, threw my duffle bag in the undercarriage, and sat next to Morgan.

Ours was a three-person bench in the back, so when Zulema found us, she plopped down on the other side of me with, “What’s up, what’s up?” She leaned forward to glance across me at Morgan. “How many goals are you scoring tonight, Bailey?”

Morgan pursed her lips to one side to think about it. “One goal, one assist.”

“You sound pretty sure,” ZuZu mused. “Audrey, what do you think?”

I looked over at Morgan, laughing when she buoyed her eyebrows at me. “One assist.”

She nudged me with her elbow. “How do you expect me to win you a championship with so little faith?”

“Well,” I said, “how much faith does ZuZu have?”

“Oh, I’m with Morgan, one hundred percent.”

“Traitor,” I mumbled.

“And if we’re right,” Zulema continued, “you buy us protein smoothies from Smoothie Shack.”

“Fine,” I laughed, “but if I’m right, you both buy me one.”

“Deal,” Morgan said, sticking out her fist, which both Zulema and I bumped with our own.

Once everyone had boarded, the bus pulled away from the curb to start our trip. While Zulema settled into her seat and pulled some earbuds out of her backpack, Morgan slipped her hand into mine and said, “I got my physics test back today.”

“And?” I asked.

“I got a B,” she answered, grinning.

“Yes!” I squeezed her hand and bumped into her happily. “I knew you could do it. So you’re going to pass the class?”

She shrugged. “As long as I don’t get below a C on anything else, I’ll pass the class.”

I held up my free hand for a high five. “You got this.”

She laughed and slapped her hand against mine, but then held onto it so she could press a playfully loud smooch to the back. We didn’t notice Coach was coming down the aisle toward us, and even though plenty of the girls on the team knew Morgan and I were dating, we’d been keeping it low key. I could tell Coach was surprised by the affection because she did a double take. She was far from displeased, though, judging by the hint of a smile on her face.

“Aren’t they cute?” Zulema squealed teasingly, throwing an arm way over me to Morgan’s shoulder and shaking us both.

“As a button,” Coach laughed. She handed me the piece of paper she was holding. “Starting line-up for the game.”

“I’ll take a look,” I told her.

“Good,” she said. “This game’s a big one, if you want to start hyping the girls up when we get a little closer.”

“You got it, Coach.”

Once she left, Morgan asked, “How do you get everyone hyped?”

“Usually we bump a ball around with our heads,” I told her, “and try not to let it touch the ground. And we sing.”

Lopez, who was sitting in front of us, overheard and turned around. “Can we do the name song?” she asked excitedly.

She was sitting next to Michaels, who also turned around and gasped.
“We need one for Bailey!”

“Well, what’s yours?” Morgan asked me.

“Caplan! Caplan!” Lopez shouted, clapping rhythmically.

“Our center forward’s happenin’!” Michaels continued.

A girl toward the front of the bus picked it up. “Caplan! Caplan!”

Several other girls finished, “Caplan fever’s catchin’!”

“Bailey!” Lopez yelled.

From somewhere up front, Cusatelli chanted, “Bailey! Bailey!”

There was barely a pause before someone replied, “Striker game don’t fail-ey!”

Morgan, I, and a few other girls burst into laughter, but the rest of the team continued, “Bailey! Bailey!”

There was a brief pause this time, and then Lopez finished, “She’ll drop you on your tail-ey!”

“Woo!” Morgan cheered through her amusement.

And it hadn’t been my intention to get the team excited yet, but Morgan shouted for ZuZu’s chant, and once they got going, they just didn’t stop. ZuZu stood up to dance along to their cheers.

“ZuZu! ZuZu!

Our goalie’s too fast for you-u!

ZuZu! ZuZu!

She won’t let nothin’ through-oo!”

Then it was ZuZu’s turn to pick, and she pointed both hands toward the front of the bus and yelled, “Cusatelli!”

And Cusatelli stood up to dance while the rest of the team cheered and continued a rhythmic clap.

“Cus-a-tell-i! She serves game up nightly!

Cus-a-tell-i! Goal? I think it’s likely!”

They kept going until they’d done the chant for every girl on the bus, *including* Coach, and then picked other pop songs to sing that everyone knew the words to. I think it was safe to say that the team was sufficiently excited for the game, and we carried that energy to the locker room and then onto the field. We were pumped, and the fact that we were playing so well in a game that’d get us so much closer to playoffs got us even more worked up. It wasn’t an easy game by any means, but even if we lost, I don’t think it would’ve mattered. Everyone was having fun.

Morgan scored her first goal right before the first half ended, and when we got to the sidelines for a break, she grinned at me.

“That’s the goal!” she said, and threw an arm around Zulema’s shoulders. “Just one assist and we’re getting smoothies.”

“I’ll just have to use my captain’s authority,” I teased, “and tell no one to score if you pass it to them.”

“You trying to throw the game, Caplan?” she asked.

“For the sake of a bet?” I said innocently. “Never...”

She laughed and let Zulema go to wrap her arm affectionately around me, and we joined the rest of the team around Coach for a pep talk.

After the usual-themed speech, Coach called, “Caplan, Bailey, Guppa.” We all hustled over to her. “Let’s get one more goal,” she told me and Morgan, and looked at Guppa, “and keep them from scoring. I’m going to sub you guys out towards the end and get some of the other girls in.”

“I’m running out of steam, Coach,” Guppa said. “You can sub me out now.”

Coach patted her on the back and directed her toward the bench. “Michaels!” Michaels trotted over. “You’re up, you good for the last half?”

“Hell yeah,” Michaels said.

“Good, get out there,” Coach told her, and to Morgan and me, “go hydrate some more, you got another minute.”

Morgan and I dropped down onto a bench to keep catching our breath, and she watched me take a swig from my water bottle before holding out her hand for it. “I forgot mine,” she said.

“Drink the rest,” I told her, “I brought two.”

She breathed her thanks and chugged the rest of it without coming up for air, and once she passed it back to me, it was time to return to the field. Guppa had every right to be as tired as she was. The other team was giving their all, and they had the ball almost as much as we did. But we were on fire, barely letting them get anywhere near the goal before turning it over and carrying it down the field. In true spirit of her confidence, Morgan ended up getting her assist at the fifty-sixth minute. We were up two to zero, and she beamed at me proudly as we made our way to the bench after being subbed out.

“I know what smoothie ZuZu wants,” I told her, trying to act indignant about the fact that she’d won the bet, even though I was smiling. “What do you want?”

“Pineapple mango,” she said with a grin.

“Got it,” I said, and we both dropped onto the bench. “And I’ll get you another one when you get me that trophy.”

“I love free smoothies,” she said, like she already knew we’d make it to *and* win the championship. She let me laugh about that before leaning in and asking quietly, “You think Coach is fine with us dating?”

I shrugged. “One of the first things she ever said about you was that we had good chemistry on the field.” She huffed amusedly at that. “I don’t think she cares as long as we stay focused.”

She nudged me with her shoulder. “Then I guess you should stop checking me out on the field, huh?”

“Well, right back at you then,” I said, giving her a harder nudge in return. “I’ve seen you staring.”

“Hey,” she laughed, “I can multitask.”

I hummed my playful doubt, and we sat there for a minute watching the game. Then I said, “Can I ask you something?” She nodded. “It’s about Steph.”

“Okay...” she said curiously.

“In lab today, she told me that her and Alyssa broke up.” I glanced over cautiously and added, “She can’t talk to any of her friends about it, and I told her that she could talk to me if she really needed someone.”

Morgan nodded slowly, and then looked over at me. “So... What’s your question?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay with it,” I said, “if she did come talk to me.”

“Sure,” she answered with a shrug. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I didn’t know if it would make you jealous,” I said honestly. “And you said you’d be honest about what you’re okay with.”

She hummed and nodded again. “Well, do I have a reason to be jealous?”

I told her with certainty, “No.”

“Then I’m not,” she said, smiling so I knew she meant it. “I trust you, Audrey.”

I couldn’t help smiling either, and set my hand on hers and leaned over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. We watched the rest of the game along with the other girls on the sidelines, yelling and cheering our teammates on. We finished two to one, and what with another victory

putting us one step closer to championships, the energy on the bus home matched it on the ride up. It was surprising, considering how tired everyone must've been, but they were happy and it showed.

As happy as I also was about the win, I was happier with how well everything was going. I held one of Morgan's hands and hugged that arm, slouching down in my seat to rest my head on her shoulder. Minutes after that, I fell asleep to the sound of her and ZuZu talking, and didn't wake up until she nudged me because we'd arrived back at school.

"Want me to drive you to the dorms?" she asked as we followed everyone else off the bus.

I nodded, and after retrieving my duffel bag and saying bye to Zulema, we headed to Morgan's truck. Even though I got in on the passenger side, I slid across the bench seat to keep holding on to Morgan's hand and arm and put my head back on her shoulder, and after she'd backed out of her parking spot with some one-handed difficulty, she laughed.

"You're cuddly tonight."

I shrugged against her. "I'm just happy."

"Yeah?" she asked, and angled her head just enough to press a kiss to the top of mine. "About what?"

"I don't know," I answered, "everything?" I stopped resting on her shoulder to sit up a bit. "In lab today, Steph said it's nice to see me so happy, and she meant it, and I don't think that class is going to be as awkward with her anymore. We're having one hell of a season, and you're just... amazing in every way. Life is good, you know?"

She glanced over just long enough to smile at me, and gave my hand a squeeze. "I'm really glad you feel that way."

"But," I said, not missing how she hadn't agreed, "how are *you* doing?"

We arrived at the dorms, and she pulled up to the curb outside and put the truck in park before turning toward me. She met my eyes, managed to smile, and leaned in to give me a soft kiss. "You make everything amazing," she said, "and you're happy. I don't want to ruin that right now by talking about my parents."

I cupped her cheek and studied her expression for a few moments. I might've continued to bask in how happy I was if she could return it, but she looked tired from the game and didn't seem to have the energy to keep on a carefree face anymore.

“Are you sad?” I asked, dropping my hand to hold hers.

“Stressed,” she answered, and I nodded for her to continue. “My dad’s been pressuring me to come see him during Thanksgiving weekend, but I’m not ready to spend time with him *and* Jane.”

“You can’t tell him no?”

She sighed. “He knows Mom and Pip don’t really do anything, and I know he misses me. I just don’t want to make him feel awful when I tell him I don’t want to come, but I really don’t want to.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “If you’re looking for a solution,” I told her, “I might have one.” Her eyebrows rose curiously. “Even before you said that, I was planning on inviting you home with me for Thanksgiving.” One corner of her lips pulled into a faint smile. “You know, you could see my house... meet my sister and parents...”

That smirk widened into a big smile. “You want me to meet your family?”

“I mean... yeah.”

“Yes,” she said with genuine joy. “One hundred percent yes. Because I want to, not because I want to get out of going to Oregon.”

Then I was grinning. “Okay. I’ll let my mom know you said yeah.”

She pressed her lips to mine, giving me one long, deep kiss and then only pulling away enough to set her forehead against mine. “Thanks, Audrey.”

“You deserve to be happy,” I told her sincerely, because she did. She deserved to be as happy as everyone else thought she was all the time.

“I’m happy with you,” she said, pecking me on the lips. “When I’m with you.” She kissed me briefly again. “When I see you.” Another kiss. “When I think about you.”

“Think about me a lot?” I laughed. When she pursed her lips in feigned innocence and bobbed her eyebrows at me, I grabbed her face to give her a proper kiss. Then I planted a quick one on her nose before pulling away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Night, Caplan,” she said playfully.

I grabbed my duffel and hopped out of the truck, passing her a flirty smile in parting. “Night, Bailey.”

Chapter 14

It was eight at night when I pulled my old hatchback into the driveway of my parents' two-story house. I parked behind Anna and Wayne's SUV, relieved that they were there already because I didn't want all the attention on Morgan and me.

I turned off the ignition, undid my seatbelt, and looked over at Morgan. "You ready?"

"Ready to ask your mom for baby pictures?" she teased. "Absolutely."

"Nice try," I laughed, "but I made her promise not to embarrass me the first time you came over."

"Does tomorrow count as the second time I've come over?" she asked with a pout, but I set my lips decidedly until all she could do was roll her eyes and smile. "Fine."

We got out and grabbed our duffel bags from the back seat, and then headed up the ramp to the porch and front door. I unlocked it with my key, calling for anyone inside as we stepped in and closed it behind us. Anna was the first one to appear, pushing fast around the corner from the living room with a huge grin. I dropped my duffel bag so I could hug her, and saw Wayne and my parents follow from the living room.

"This is Morgan," I told Anna as I let her go.

Anna held out her arms, and Morgan laughed and gave her an introductory hug as I also gave hugs to Wayne and my parents. "Mom, Dad, Wayne," I said, "Morgan."

"Hello," Morgan said, smiling and shaking hands all around.

"I'm glad you could make it," my mom told her.

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Did you eat?" Mom asked us, and started leading the way into the kitchen. Anna and Morgan followed us while Wayne and my dad went back into the living room. "We were waiting for you."

"You didn't have to do that," I said, but she reached the kitchen counter and looked at me, waiting for me to answer her question. "No, we didn't eat."

“We ordered pizza,” Anna said.

Mom added, “Figured we’d leave all the cooking for tomorrow. It’ll be here soon if you want to take your stuff upstairs.” I nodded, and she smiled. “Make yourself at home, Morgan. Drinks are in the fridge, cups and dishes are in the bottom cabinets here.” She pointed. Even though Anna didn’t live here anymore, everything had been in the same accessible location since we were teenagers. “I’m going to help John and Wayne clean up.”

“We were playing Yahtzee,” Anna said as Mom left the kitchen.

But that wasn’t what I focused on once Mom was gone. I grinned at Anna’s baby bump and hurried over, bending to grab her waist. “Tiny baby,” I called.

“They can’t hear you yet,” Anna laughed.

“Shh,” I cooed, “we won’t tell Mommy that I’m already your favorite person.”

Anna looked at Morgan and said, “She’s more excited than I am...”

“Oh yeah,” Morgan agreed. “She’s already talking about how she can’t wait for summer so she can babysit.”

Anna mussed my hair because she knew it would get me to back off, and I gave her hand a playful shove as I straightened up and returned to Morgan’s side.

“I’ll let you change all the diapers you want,” she said.

I stuck my tongue out at her, and Morgan asked, “Did you pick a name yet?”

Anna nodded. “Ryan, whether it’s a girl or boy.”

I gasped and threw an arm around Morgan’s shoulders. “You should do one of those little ceramic handprint things when they’re born.”

“I can do that,” Morgan agreed, but then her face lit up. “Oh! Or I could take a mold of one of you and Wayne’s hands, and imprint Ryan’s in the palms.”

“Yes,” Anna said. “Oh my god, that would be so cute! I want to tell Wayne! You guys go put your stuff away.” She didn’t even wait for us to say anything before leaving the kitchen to go tell Wayne about the idea.

“I think she liked that,” I laughed.

“Good,” Morgan said, “one impressed family member down, three to go.”

I kissed her cheek. “You’re doing fine. Come on, I’ll give you a tour on the way upstairs.”

She followed me back to the entranceway where we'd left our bags. I pointed out the living room, and the office down the hall – it used to be Anna's room, and was still where she and Wayne slept when they stayed over. The downstairs bathroom was also down the hall, and the dining room had been attached to the kitchen. We headed upstairs, where my parents' room was at the top, there was a guest room, a bathroom, and then my room at the other end of the hall.

My room was still the same as it always was, seeing as I lived at home outside of the school year, though it was a bit bare during semesters. My closet and dresser were mostly empty, and Mom had put a fresh pair of sheets on my full-sized bed instead of it being made. There was a wall-shelf with some soccer trophies from when I was younger, a bookshelf full of novels, and another bookshelf with picture frames and my Bluetooth stereo. My organized desk only had some school supplies on it since my laptop was back at the dorms, but there was a soccer ball underneath it.

Morgan dropped her duffel bag by the door and went straight for the ball, toeing it out from under the desk and then kicking it up into her hands. She tossed it from hand to hand as she walked around, looking at the trophies and then moving on to the pictures. She picked one up to show me.

It was me and ZuZu. "The end of summer soccer camp freshman year," I told her with a smile. We'd been best friends ever since.

"You looked like such babies right out of high school," she laughed, setting it down.

She moved on, looking at others of me with family, or other friends, or past soccer teams. I'd started to unfold the sheets and make the bed while she explored, but eventually she turned around and noticed, and set the ball down to help me finish.

"So..." she said as she tucked the second pillow into its case, "I should go put my bag in the guest room?"

"Oh." We hadn't talked about what the sleeping arrangements would be for the weekend, but we hadn't slept together yet either. And it wasn't just sex... we hadn't *fallen* asleep together. At least not in a bed. At the back of my mind, I'd known that was a thing that we'd have to figure out, but I'd kind of assumed it'd be a thing we'd both silently agree on. Only, Morgan was asking, which gave me doubts. "I mean, you don't have to... You could sleep in here with me."

She looked from me, to the bed, to the door. “Your parents won’t care?”

I shook my head and gestured to the bed. “Two pillows, one set of sheets. They don’t care. But it’s okay if you don’t want to, I can get more and set you up in the guest room. If you want.”

“No, I don’t,” she stammered, “I just. I’m trying to be respectful.” She paused, finally managing to make eye contact with me for more than a moment. “Do *you* want me to sleep in here?” I nodded, and when she gave something of a relieved smile, I couldn’t help but snicker. “What’s so funny?”

I strode around the bed and slid my arms around her neck. “You’ve never been so squirmy.”

She sighed, dropping her forehead to mine as her hands set on my hips. “It’s just that I know how big a deal it is to you when you let people in like this, and I really want your family to like me.”

It wasn’t like her to be so lacking in confidence or to care so much what anyone thought. But she cared. She cared a lot, and she was more nervous than she’d let on and I didn’t want her to worry. I gave her one soft peck, but she relaxed against me and I couldn’t help cupping her face and parting my lips. Hers parted too, closing again with mine for a long, tender moment before I pulled back to look her in the eyes.

“Morgan, I brought you here because of how much I like you. Not to see how much I could.” My eyes dropped from hers to her mouth, where I watched my thumb trace the corner of her lips. “This isn’t a test, okay? You don’t have to worry.”

She didn’t say anything, but when I finally met her eyes again, they were full of something powerful. Something deep and important, yet so vividly clear it made my heart skip. I kissed her again with the same warm intensity that I had a moment ago to let her know that I saw it. Then I pulled away and held out my hand. She took it, and together we went downstairs to find my family.

Pizza arrived only a few minutes later, and because we’d be doing so much cooking and socializing tomorrow, everyone was content to simply eat and watch a movie before bed. And when I crawled into bed with Morgan afterward, it was exactly what I hoped it’d be. Easy, and comfortable, and I fell asleep with my head on her shoulder and one arm set around her waist.

The next morning, she was pressed up against my back with her arm wrapped around me. I scooted into her a bit more and grabbed her hand, thinking I could go back to sleep for a little longer, but she shifted and gave a waking hum.

She nuzzled into the back of my neck and mumbled, "You're awake?"

"Yeah," I said, and turned over to face her. "I just woke up."

She inched closer to make up for the space we'd lost when I turned. "How'd you sleep?"

"Really good," I answered, sliding my own hand around her waist. "I like this."

"Me too," she smiled, and when I kissed her, she hummed again and said, "I like that even more." I couldn't resist scooting into her as much as I could, so that our legs were intertwined, and her hips were almost pressed to mine. "Even better," she whispered.

Then she kissed me, and the moment her lips met mine, I didn't want it to stop. I kissed her back, clutching at her hip to pull her against me as her arm clutched tighter around my waist. I slipped my tongue past her lips, and her hand slid down my back to my thigh, gripping as she tried to get even closer.

I was just getting into it, *really* into it, when a knock on my door sent Morgan flat onto her back as she yanked the blanket over her head.

"Audrey," my mom called through the door, "breakfast is ready."

"Okay," I told her, "thanks."

That was it, she didn't say anything else and I imagine she walked away, but it had scared Morgan so bad that she was barely peeking out at me over the edge of the blanket.

I snorted with laughter. "Oh my god," I snickered, "you got so scared."

"*What if she walked in?*" Morgan hissed.

"She wouldn't," I said. "Not without asking. And, you're not going to believe this, but... they *know* we're dating."

She lowered the blanket a little more, took in the amusement on my face, and gave an embarrassed smile. Her cheeks were a deep shade of crimson, and she still looked so nervous about almost getting caught kissing that it was adorable. I grabbed her face and planted quick pecks all over her forehead, cheeks, and nose.

"You've been in one too many precarious situations, huh?" I asked.

“A couple...” she admitted, blowing a relaxed breath through her lips as I let her go.

“Okay, then tomorrow morning I’ll make sure to sneak you out the window.”

She gasped. “Audrey, you rebel.”

I feigned nonchalance. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“It’s actually nice that they don’t mind.” She pushed up onto her elbow and leaned over me to kiss me one more time. “But now that she said breakfast, I can smell it.” She inhaled deeply through her nose. “Cinnamon rolls?”

I took a breath too. “I think so.”

“Yes,” she groaned, and jumped out of bed completely. “Let’s go!”

Neither of us bothered changing out of our pajamas before heading downstairs. My parents and Anna were already in the kitchen, sitting around the dining table with coffee and breakfast.

“Good morning,” I said happily. “Where’s Wayne?”

“Sleeping in,” Anna said. She pushed away from the table with her coffee cup, and brought it over to Morgan and me as we reached the pot. “Top me off?”

I filled her cup, and Morgan asked my parents, “Anyone else need a refill?”

My mom shook her head, but when my dad said ‘yes, please,’ Morgan went to get his cup and brought it over too. We filled up our coffees and took them over to the table, delivering my dad’s and sitting down. Mom passed us each a plate so we could take cinnamon rolls from the baking sheet on the table, and Morgan was practically drooling as I scooped one onto her dish.

“I love these,” she whispered, with nothing short of euphoria.

“Have as many as you want,” my mom laughed, “there’s more in the fridge.”

Morgan nodded and smiled her thanks, and my dad said, “We’ve been watching every game of yours that they’ve played on TV.”

I already knew that, but Morgan gave a surprised grin. “Really?”

“He likes soccer more than Audrey does,” Anna teased.

“I don’t believe it,” Morgan laughed.

“Don’t test him,” I whispered.

“Too late,” Dad joked. “You win your game next week and you’re going to the championship. I bet-”

“Here we go.” Anna rolled her eyes.

Dad wasn’t fazed. “You’ll be up against New York in the semis, and then you can beat Arizona in the championship.”

“He makes it sound easy,” I said.

Morgan shrugged. “I like his confidence. But,” she gestured to my dad, “I think we’ll be playing Washington in the finals and I’ll tell you why.”

Anna and I exchanged a look, and she cupped a hand to the side of her mouth and said, “Dad just met his new best friend,” and I laughed and nodded.

“Let’s hear it,” my dad said, as if neither of them could hear Anna.

“One word,” Morgan answered, “Lyons.”

“Okay,” Dad conceded with an amused smile. “This is her season. I’ll give you that.”

My mom said to Morgan, “You should ask how Audrey told us you were together.”

Morgan looked at me, but I groaned and buried my face in my hands.

“She called us up, oh...” My dad began to explain, pausing to look at my mom. “A month ago?” She nodded. “A month ago, to talk about a game. I said, ‘you haven’t said anything about the new girl, she’s really good.’ And what’d you say, Audrey?”

“Dad,” I whined.

My mom laughed, “She says, ‘oh yeah, about that... we’re dating.’”

Morgan snorted. “That sounds like Audrey. She didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, huh?”

“I’ve told Anna stuff!” I protested.

“Hardly,” Anna laughed. “I know you’re an art major. You’re really nice, and... Oh, yeah, she actually likes that you’re cocky.”

“I hate you,” I mumbled.

“It’s okay,” Morgan said with a smirk, but she set her hand on my thigh under the table, “I already knew that.”

I rolled my eyes, but not without letting her catch the endeared smile on my face.

“So, you’re an art major,” my mom said. “Sculpting?” And Morgan nodded.

“What do you do with a sculpting degree?” my dad asked.

He didn't mean anything by it, but I complained anyway, "Dad, she gets asked that all the time."

"Really? Sorry."

"I do," Morgan said with a friendly smile, "but it's okay. And you'd be surprised. The people who make prototypes for industries' new products – sculptors. They make props and stuff for movies and TV too. There're lots of options."

"What do you want to do?" Anna asked.

Morgan explained about opening a studio, and my dad said, "I think that's a great idea."

"Thanks," Morgan grinned.

"Do you plan on opening one near the college?" my mom asked. "Or are you going back to..."

"Oregon," Morgan supplied, but her hand gave an affectionate pat on my leg as she looked at me and smiled. "But I don't think I'm going anywhere."

Despite my face turning red from my mom asking such a loaded question, I couldn't help grinning too. We hadn't talked about where Morgan wanted to go after college since that night in the diner. I'd been afraid to bring it up. But she wanted to stay here, with me, and I grabbed her hand and dropped my head on her shoulder.

"That's adorable," Anna teased.

I stretched my leg under the table and pushed the frame of her chair, and even though her new brakes kept her from rolling back, she felt the jerk and laughed.

Wayne strolled in a minute later, and kissed Anna's temple as he sat down beside her. We kept talking while he ate breakfast, and then went back upstairs to get ready for the day. There was a lot of cooking to do for our late Thanksgiving lunch, but with everyone helping, it was easy and fun.

Even better than my hope that Morgan would simply get along with my family, they seemed to genuinely enjoy each other. Morgan had gotten over her nerves, and she was so outgoing and confident that within a couple of hours she was talking and joking with them as if she'd known them for years. Every time she made one of them laugh, she'd look over at me and grin. Every time my dad found something to connect with her on, he winked at me. And every so often my mom would stop at my side, long

enough for my eyes to find Morgan again, and then she'd give me a squeeze or a kiss on the side of the head as if to say she was happy for me. It was everything I could've wanted out of bringing Morgan home, and then some.

By the time the evening rolled around, everyone was full of food and exhausted from it. My parents were the first to head upstairs to sleep, and left the rest of us downstairs playing Uno. Anna tapped out next, and even though Wayne had slept in, he said goodnight and followed Anna to their makeshift room in the office.

After Morgan and I got ready for bed, I slid under the covers beside her, and scooted in to bury my face against her collarbone as she rolled to face me.

"I'm glad you came," I said against her chest.

"Me too." Her arm wrapped around my back to hold me close. "They like me, right?"

"Definitely."

"I like them too," she said, and met my eyes when I pulled back enough to look at her. "Your dad's really cool, and I could tell your mom was going out of her way to make me feel welcome."

"Anna really likes you too. She thinks you're a good match for how competitive I am."

"She said that?" Morgan asked. I nodded. "Well, that's bullshit because I'm way more competitive than you."

I inhaled to tell her there was no way she was more competitive than me... only to realize she was being sarcastic. But I'd given myself away just by the look on my face, and she snorted with laughter.

"You're such a brat," I giggled.

She grinned at me, and we both lay there for a few moments, smiling at each other until the goofiness passed, and we locked eyes. I reached up to cup her face and trace her jawline with my thumb, thinking about how much fun the day had been with her there. About how much deeper my affection for her had grown. And that it couldn't get much deeper before it wasn't just strong affection.

"Are you really going to stay?" I asked. "And open a studio here?"

Her eyes dropped from mine to my lips and then came up again. "Yes." Her embrace left my waist so she could reach between us and set her hand on the back of mine, the tips of her fingers trailing down the back of my arm. "I don't think my mom's going anywhere, and I've been thinking

about it. I can see a future here.” She glanced down to watch her fingers make another gentle run up my arm. “With you.”

It took her a few moments to finally look at me again, and there was a tiny smile at the edge of my lips when she did. It made her smile too, but she watched me patiently while she waited for me to say or do something. Only, there was so much I wanted to say and do. I wanted her to stay, and I wanted to hug her to show her how happy it made me. I wanted to tell her how much it meant that she would, and I wanted to kiss her.

It took me so long that her warm smile changed into an amused one, and she said in an almost whisper, “Your move, Caplan.”

But words didn’t seem good enough for what I was feeling, and they weren’t what I excelled at anyway. So I shifted instead, guiding her onto her back as I rose, and slid one leg over her hips until I was straddling her. I leaned over to set my forehead against hers, feeling all the air between us disappear when she inhaled and didn’t let it out again. I kissed her once. A slow, tender peck that finally brought the air out of her lungs, and then put barest amount of space between us.

Her hands landed above my knees as her eyes met mine, and then she looked toward the door and murmured, “Here?”

I followed her gaze to the door, and then pursed my lips with a mischievous smile as I buoyed my eyebrows at her. “Your move, Bailey.”

She hesitated just long enough to caress her hands up my thighs. To round my hips and set them on my waist, and then she pushed up so her lips could catch mine in a deep, open kiss that sent a burst of yearning through my chest. I braced one hand against the bed while my other slid to the back of her head, but we’d been here before. At the Halloween party. In the hall. A few times afterward in her bedroom.

It was her taste, and the brush of her tongue. It was the familiarity of this course that made my body skip the buildup entirely and go straight into burning desire. I didn’t wait to slide my hand down her neck to her chest. I was already so eager to feel as much of her as I could that I cupped a breast through her shirt, smoothed my palm across her ribs, slipped my hand beneath her back to complete the arc of her waist. Searching for any part of her body that might feel new.

And she was just as eager to feel me. Her hands found the hem of my shirt and slipped underneath, following the outline of my hips up and around to my back. One kept course and traced up my spine, stopping

between my shoulder blades to pull me down against her. The other sought lower, gliding underneath the back of my shorts and underwear to grab a handful of bare skin, and *that* was new.

I responded instinctually to that grasp by pushing my hips down into hers, and earned a hard breath against my lips. It made her other hand join in the clutch beneath my clothes, guiding my hips against hers once more, and then twice, until the pulse of our bodies was automatic, and she could explore elsewhere.

Oh, and she did. She touched my thighs. My ribs. My stomach. She caressed the tender flesh between my hips while her thumbs grazed a line beneath the hem of my shorts. It stirred me in ways that were so hard to ignore, but I hadn't had nearly enough of her to want this to be over, or to beg for release.

When I almost couldn't take it anymore, I shifted the attention to her, leaving her lips and dropping lower while I pushed the bottom of her shirt up. My mouth landed beside her naval, and gave another open peck between her ribs. I glanced up to meet her gaze as my hand slid up her side, taking in the desperate way she shifted between watching my eyes and my lips, and I couldn't resist trying to draw as much hunger from that look as possible. The next time I kissed her stomach, I let the tip of my tongue touch first as my hand worked under her shirt to her breast. It made her eyes roll shut as her head fell back, and even though I'd started this to distract myself from the growing ache between my own legs, I should've known it wouldn't work.

Because exploring her was every bit as exhilarating as her exploring me. The way her breath quivered when I kissed a particularly sensitive spot on her ribs. The way her hand set lightly over mine to encourage my effort on her chest. The way her hum bordered on a whimper when my free hand pulled the front of her pants down, so I could kiss low enough between her hips that I felt the bare tickle of hair against my chin. And I don't know how long she could've lasted before needing more, but I gave in first.

I left her stomach to find her lips, kissing her deeply while I cupped her face, guiding her to rise with me as I sat up and back in her lap. My hands dropped to her shirt, and she lifted her arms so I could slide it up and over her head, and not a moment after I threw it to the floor did she reach for mine. Our mouths met again after she discarded my shirt, but only

briefly before her arms wrapped around my back and she kissed away from my lips and along my jaw.

The heat of her mouth reached my neck, and my head lolled sideways as her hands stroked down to my waist, pulling me into her so I could feel the press of her chest against my stomach. All I could do was tangle my fingers in her hair, hoping she'd understand that there was no such thing as too hard when her lips sealed around the muscle beside my pulse. Hoping she'd feel by my grinding in her lap that, even if I was content with this, she could have me the very moment she wanted to.

It didn't take long until one of her hands set solidly against the center of my back, while her other braced against the bed. She pushed up against the weight of me and turned, shifting us over and laying me gently on my back in one fluid motion. She pressed a slow kiss to the center of my chest as she sat back on her knees, dragging her hands down my stomach to the line of my shorts. And she paused. Her eyes met mine as she lingered there, waiting for some kind of consent. I gave it readily by lifting my hips, making it easier when she finally slid my shorts and underwear down my thighs, past my calves, over my feet, and tossed them to the floor.

Her hands and eyes landed on my knees, and even though she didn't push, I let them fall open as I watched her pull her bottom lip between her teeth. Watched her chest rise with a slow, deep inhale. Watched her stare linger between my legs for several long seconds before moving up my torso and face to look at me again. She smiled with her lip still gripped between her teeth, and along with the kindled glimmer in her eyes and her sitting half-naked in front of me, it was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

I smiled too, and let my gaze fall deliberately to her pajama pants. "Your turn?"

She huffed with laughter, and with an almost giddy excitement she shimmied her pants down to her knees, then dropped onto her rear between my legs so she could pull them completely off. It wasn't nearly as elegant as her taking my clothes off – she almost fell backward when she lifted her feet to pull her pants past her ankles – but it made me smile even wider, and the lack of grace and the fact that she could be this adorable even during sex was more endearing than anything so far.

By the time she threw the last of her clothing to the floor, I was beaming, and she narrowed her eyes as she laid over me with her hips

between my legs. “We’re about to have sex,” she said with feigned annoyance, “and you’re laughing at me.”

I slid my arms around her neck and pulled her forehead to mine. “It’s not my fault you manage to be the cutest and sexiest at the same time.”

“You think I’m sexy?” she teased.

Instead of rolling my eyes or making a witty comeback, I uncurled my arms from her neck and reached for one of her hands. She let me take it. Let me guide it between us until the tips of her fingers set against the moisture at my core.

“That answer your question?”

She let out a heavy sigh and dropped her head into the crook of my neck. “*Fuck, Audrey.*”

But it was all the encouragement she needed to know that I was ready, and her middle finger dipped down for more of that moisture, bringing some with it when she circled my clit and made me draw in a shallow gasp.

“What do you like?” she asked into my neck.

“Anything,” I whispered. I reached up to set my hand on the side of her face, guiding her head back up. “Everything.”

Her eyes lingered on mine for only a brief moment before her lips were back on mine and her finger set into motion against me. And this – being able to lie here with her for as long as we could want, being able to kiss her, and feel her in a place where there wasn’t even a thread of clothing between us – it was worth the wait. Because when the depth of her kiss made my hands itch with desire, I could run them down her bare back. When she had to put some space between us so she could keep touching me, I could fill that space with a roll of my body or my continued exploration of hers. And when the stroke of her finger robbed me of air and I had to leave her mouth, I could let my open lips tease her earlobe with every hot, panted breath.

She didn’t have to try. She didn’t have to spend time figuring out the perfect way to touch me because it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that it was her. It was *Morgan*, and she’d already done the work. She’d been doing it since the day we met, and my body answered to every stroke, every circle, every graze. I was vibrating with building tension, and the only thing that could’ve possibly made it better was if it was shared.

So I slid one appealing hand down her stomach and kissed the corner of her mouth between gulps of air, until I had the breath to say, “I want to

touch you too.”

Her hand paused, but only long enough for her to shift to the right, moving one leg to the outside of mine so she was straddling it, and had created enough space for my hand. Her lips hovered above mine as I familiarized my fingers with her. As I slid a finger down to her entrance to discover how wet she was, and as I grazed several slow circles upward to memorize the shape of her. I added more pressure to every stroke, gauging her reactions to try and find the place she liked best, and eventually it drew a quiet moan from her throat as she nodded.

I focused on that spot as her finger picked up its circles against me and her lips returned to mine, and this *was* better. It was perfect. Because I got more sensitive to her touch any time she reacted to mine. Whenever she dipped her finger for more moisture, my body ached so badly for her return that my breath hitched when she did. And when that got me so caught up in the pleasure that I slowed my hand, she'd grind her hips or nip gently at my bottom lip, and I'd answer with a redoubling of effort that earned another moan against my mouth.

It was a give and take that made me conscious of every firing nerve in my body, from the heat of her lips on mine to the desperate throbbing between my legs. There was nothing short of her stopping that could've stopped the building tension at my core, because everything she did brought me closer, and I didn't want it to stop.

It had been a month of knowing we were both ready for this and not finding a moment to. A month of carrying the desire for deeper intimacy that neither of us had another outlet for. I'd felt it whenever she stopped holding my hand to caress my palm. Or whenever she kissed me and it took her a few extra moments to pull away. Or certain times when her eyes caught mine, and even though I could tell she was trying so hard not to give her thoughts away, she surrendered one longing look at my lips or my hands. And that accumulation of desire was just as evident in her. In her ragged breathing. In the desperation of her kiss. In the tremble of her lower stomach against my forearm.

I stopped kissing her so she'd pull back and look at me. I wanted to know if she was as near to the end as I was, but her eyes met mine and everything between us froze. I could still feel her fingers moving. I could still feel the tightening coil of pleasure between my hips and knew that I

was still touching her too. But there was an intensity in the quiet of her gaze that I felt mirrored in my own chest, and it was so much more than desire.

It was familiarity. Comfort. It was a shared understanding of how intimate it was to be looking – staring – at each other in a moment like this. And I wasn't self-conscious about the fact that I felt vulnerable under that stare, because with that intimacy came an understanding of the trust in this. It was trust we'd worked for. Trust we'd built. We were looking at each other because we were in this together. Giving ourselves together. Falling in love together.

It was the significance of that intimacy that took me from close to right on the edge in a matter of moments. My eyes lidded with the battle between pleasure and patience, but Morgan lowered her head to press a delicate kiss to my cheek and whispered, "Go ahead."

I couldn't hold it back. My chin tipped up as the fingers of my free hand dug into her shoulder blade, and I hit the peak. My body tensed as my back arched away from the mattress, and my breathing stunted as waves of euphoria rolled out from every continued stroke of Morgan's finger. It was those waves that set the rhythm for me to keep moving my own finger, and her climax followed as I was halfway through mine.

Her head fell beside mine, and while she tried to stay quiet and not moan, she let out hard, fast, hot breaths against the crook of my neck. Her body pressed so close to mine that I felt each matching wave of pleasure roll through her. Felt each tight jerk of her hips against my hand. Felt each of those hard breaths from her chest to mine.

My climax ended first, but she kept pressure against me while I drew as many pulses from her as I could, enjoying how every gasp and every tense of her body put jolts of lingering excitement in my own stomach. It made the euphoria last well after I was done, until she finally had no more to give and not even a stroke against the perfect spot could earn another.

I withdrew my hand, and she pulled hers out from between us and set her hips back between my legs, and then she collapsed on top of me. She let out a satisfied hum and kissed my cheek while she shoved her arms beneath my back to wrap them around me, squeezing me hard and then relaxing into an affectionate embrace. I smiled and wrapped my arms around her too, happy to continue lying there for a minute as we finished coming down from it, content to keep enjoying the feel of her bare body on mine.

It took a bit, but she eventually murmured without lifting her head, “Is it safe to sleep like this?”

“You mean without putting our clothes back on?”

She rose, bracing herself on her elbows to look down at me and give a toothy grin. “Yeah.”

I laughed and tilted my head up to look at the door. It wasn’t likely anyone would walk in... “Sure.”

She pressed a playful peck to my lips and dropped off me to lay at my side. I turned to face her, scooting in close when she slid her arm over my waist, folding my arms between us to tap my finger against the side of her chin. A handful of comfortable seconds passed as we admired each other, and then a remnant of that intimacy turned it into something even softer. She looked at me looking at her, her fingers tracing their range of motion up and down my spine, my hand settling against her jaw, and I couldn’t help but smile too.

“What?” she asked.

And somehow, I found the simple words to say what I’d felt before this started. “I’m glad you want to stay. I want you to stay too.”

“Good,” she said, inching forward until we were pressed together, “because you’re stuck with me.”

“No, not stuck.” I wrapped my arm around her and tucked my head under her chin, blanketing myself in her warmth. “Happy.”

Chapter 15

Thanksgiving break was too short, and by the time the first lab of the week was almost done, I was itching to get out of class. Tonight was the game that determined if we'd go to the championship, and to say I was anxious would've been an understatement. I tried to be patient and not rush my partner through tasks that we needed to do together, but watching Steph finish her experiment and get to leave before me almost made me regret not being her partner anymore. I managed to stick it out, and we finished with only a few minutes left in the period.

Steph was still outside when I left the room, and since I was planning on waiting for Morgan to get out of class, I stopped. "You got to stop finishing early," I told her, "or I'm moving back to your table."

She laughed. "Sorry, I'll slow it down next time."

I smiled and glanced around the empty hall. "You weren't waiting for me, were you?"

She shook her head. "Alyssa, actually."

"Oh."

"Yeah, we got back together."

"Well, that's good," I said, taking in her noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "Right?"

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, I think so?" My eyebrows furrowed. "I really love her, it's just..." She glanced around warily. "I don't know, things feel a little different now."

I nodded and studied her for a few seconds, trying to decide whether she wanted me to say anything or just listen. I decided she wanted me to say something. "I know we had our issues, but even though we weren't right for each other, it wasn't because we didn't try." I shrugged. "You deserve someone who's going to try as hard as you do."

"Thanks, Audrey," she said with a tiny smile. But then she hesitated before saying anything else, and I recognized the forthcoming look in her eyes as she took in a breath.

“I’m going to,” I gestured to the opposite end of the hall, “go wait for Morgan. Big game tonight.”

“Oh, right,” she said, almost looking defeated. “Good luck.”

I gave an awkward wave and retreated to the other end of the hall just as Morgan’s class was getting out. She grinned when she saw me, and hurried over to give me a happy kiss in greeting.

“How was class?” I asked, grabbing her hand as I leaned back against the wall.

“Okay,” she answered, “I’m definitely going to need help with the new section though.”

“Study date at your house?” I asked.

She grimaced. “Date date at my house?”

“*Study.*” I poked her in the chest, which only made her frown. “Then we can make out.”

That cheered her up, and she leaned forward against me and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “You’re the best.” When she pulled away, I grabbed the collar of her sweater and pulled her in for one more kiss. “How are you feeling about tonight?” she asked. I groaned, and she laughed, “Thought so. What’re you going to do?”

“I need to get rid of some extra energy. I’ll probably listen to music and go for a hike around campus.”

“I’ll call you when I’m out of my next class? We can grab something to eat before we have to be at the bus.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said.

She gave me one more kiss, said, “Bye,” and then left to head to class.

I trekked to my dorm room to change into a warm set of exercise clothes, and then grabbed my earbuds and went outside. It was a gorgeous, crisp day, and there were plenty of natural paths that cut through campus for me to explore. I’d walked them all before, but it was like a new experience every time when I had different music to listen to. It did a good enough job of distracting me too, and before I knew it, Morgan was calling.

“All done?” I asked when I answered.

“Yeah,” she said. “Where you at? I’ll pick you up.”

“I’ll meet you outside the engineering building. Should I call Zulema and see if she wants to come?”

She hummed her agreement. “I’ll be there in ten minutes and then we can get her.”

“Okay, bye.” I hung up and dialed ZuZu, telling her we’d be there soon when she agreed to go.

Morgan picked me up at the engineering building in her truck, and then we drove by Zulema’s dorm to get her.

“Where are we going?” she asked, sliding onto the bench seat beside me as Morgan pulled away from the curb.

“Street tacos?” I suggested, passing a smug look at her.

She glared. “I will murder you.”

I snorted, and Morgan said, “There’s a joke here.”

ZuZu and I looked at each other, me with my lips pursed in a poorly contained grin until she laughed. “*Fine*. Last year I had shitty tacos right before a game.”

“Oh, no,” Morgan murmured.

“‘Oh, no’ is an understatement,” ZuZu said. “My stomach started gurgling twenty minutes in.” I was already laughing, which made Morgan snicker preemptively. “I couldn’t even wait for a sub. I sprinted off the field the second there was a whistle and barely made it to the bathroom in time.”

“You’re forgetting the best part!” I cackled. “She’s sprinting off the field and all of us are watching her, wondering where the hell she’s going, and she just screams, ‘tacoouooooos!’ We almost got carded for wasting time because some of us were laughing so hard.”

Morgan burst into laughter, barely managing to ask, “What did Coach say when you got back?”

“She couldn’t even stop laughing when she asked if I felt better,” Zulema chortled.

“Oh my god,” Morgan laughed. “That’s priceless.”

“Yeah. It only took Audrey explaining it from their perspectives for me to find it funny too.”

I inhaled to get my amusement under control, and said, “There’s been a team-wide ban on game day tacos ever since.”

“Smart,” Morgan said. “So, no tacos, then. Want to get burgers instead?”

We agreed, and she took us through a drive-thru for burgers and fries, and then we headed to the locker room to get our gear before meeting everyone else at the bus. It was a little longer of a drive than our last away game, but we were all so excited and anxious for it that the ride went by quickly. I changed into my uniform with the rest of the team, and then

headed onto the field to warm up. We were supposed to start with a lap on our side of the field, but I'd gotten relaxed on the drive with how happy everyone was, and I didn't want to get too serious and give my nerves a chance to come back.

So, before Morgan could take off on her lap, I jumped onto her back and shouted, "Go!"

"Seriously?" she laughed, bumping me up into a more secure position. "Hey, ZuZu, want to race to the other side?"

Zulema looked around for another teammate who hadn't started running yet. "Lopez! Jump on!"

Lopez yelled, "Woo!" and jumped onto ZuZu's back.

"We'll switch across the field and do another quarter," I said.

Zulema cheated and spat, "One two three start!" as she started running. "Hey!" Morgan took off after them.

Lopez and I were both screaming to try and speed them up, and a few other girls who were beginning their lap jogged alongside to cheer us on. Morgan had just caught up as we reached the other side of the field, and she dropped me off her back and then hopped onto mine when I turned around. She reached out and pushed Lopez's shoulder as Zulema was about to get on her back, knocking her balance off so she staggered sideways a step.

"Cheater!" ZuZu yelled.

It messed us up too since I was laughing about it, and they caught up, so we were running side by side. I went as fast as I could, but we ended up reaching the half-lap mark at the same time. I dropped Morgan and buckled over with Zulema to catch our breath, holding up my hand to her and Lopez for a high five. After a few more seconds of recovery, we finished the rest of our lap and then went into drills with the rest of the team. And soon after that, the game was on.

It was a tough game – we knew it would be – but I was more motivated than ever to win, and that energy carried to my team. We played with heart, sprinting faster, passing cleaner, and communicating more than we ever did. The other team wanted it too. They bodied up and challenged in ways that only forced us to try harder. No one had scored by the half, and I could tell my team was getting tired.

After Coach's pep talk, I tried to motivate them too. "Hey, I know you're all tired," I said, "but you're playing damn good." They nodded and patted each other on the backs. "Keep it up. We're going to get our goal and

we're going to semis. This is our season, right?" They nodded again. "Right?"

"Right!"

"*Right?*"

"*Right!*"

"That's right!" I held my hand out. "Comets on three!" Other hands piled on top of mine. "One! Two! Three!"

"Comets!"

That short break, three fresh subs, and a little enthusiasm was exactly what we needed. We went into the second half with the same amount of energy as we'd started the game with, and fifteen minutes later, we finally scored our first goal. We celebrated as much as we dared, but the game wasn't over yet, and that goal only made the other team play harder. They upped their intensity, fighting and charging with more assertiveness, and after only ten more minutes, they pushed it too far.

We gained possession and I sent a pass up midfield to Morgan. She turned to start running with the ball, eyes up to look for another pass, and the girl defending her went for a slide tackle. But she missed the ball and collided right into Morgan's leg. Morgan went down face first as whistles blew. And she didn't get up. I sprinted over while she pushed onto her elbows, fists clenched as she set her forehead against the grass. The girl who'd performed the tackle had been ushered away by the ref even though the worry was clear on her face, and she took a knee several feet away while I slid to my knees at Morgan's side.

"Hey, hey, hey," I murmured, "what's going on?"

Coach and the ref had come over, and both of them squatted down.

"My knee," Morgan said, rolling onto her back. "It popped."

Shit. "Okay," I said as calmly as I could, "do you think you can get up?"

She tried to sit up, but even that small amount of pressure on her leg made her grimace. She shook her head and dropped back down. The game medics came out with a stretcher and slid her onto it, and I followed as they carried her off the field. They dropped her off to let her lay on the ground by the bench, and even though I had to rush because the refs weren't going to wait to start the game back up, I squatted down next to her.

"Give me ten minutes," she said, "and I'll be back out there kicking ass."

She was joking, but I took the cold pack the medics had prepared and set it gently on her knee. “Keep that on there, and I don’t care if it stops hurting, you stay here. Trying to play again will make it worse.”

“I actually don’t think I could try if I wanted to,” she admitted with a sigh, but she took one look at the concern on my face and tried to smile. “But don’t worry about me, focus on the game.” I nodded, glancing down at her knee. “Audrey,” she said seriously, “we’re down a player now. I want you to focus on the game, okay? If you don’t want me back on the field, then you better get out there and win for me.”

“Okay,” I said, and the determination on her face got me to smile. “I will.”

I pressed a quick kiss to her cheek, got hasty guidance from Coach to switch to a defensive formation, and ran onto the field.

“I’m dropping back,” I called to my teammates as we lined up for a throw in. “Three center backs, four defensive mids. Guppa, play center back. We got this, let’s go!”

They adjusted like I said, and the game was back on. The only reason I was able to think about the game – instead of how bad Morgan’s injury likely was – was because it’s what she wanted, and I knew that if I let myself be distracted then I’d never hear the end of it. And at least the consequences of the other team’s intensity got them to tone it down a bit. They still played like hell, but we didn’t need to score. All we had to do was keep them from scoring, and the alterations to our strategy worked well. They got close to scoring a few times, but Zulema was the hero of the game, and we ended one to zero.

It looked like the team celebrated all the way to the locker room, but I didn’t follow them off the field, and dropped onto the grass beside Morgan. Coach and Zulema hung around too, and Morgan was smiling as she gave ZuZu a high five.

“Thanks for sitting out,” Zulema teased, flexing her arms, “and sharing the spotlight.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Morgan laughed.

“How’s your knee?” I asked.

“Still hurts,” she answered.

“Can I see it?”

Morgan removed the cold pack and undid the bandage that had been wrapped around it to show us. It was swollen, and while it was a good thing

that she hadn't been taken from the game for a broken bone, that didn't mean it wasn't bad.

"What did the medics say?" I asked.

Morgan pursed her lips, and I glanced up to see Coach giving me the same look.

I steepled my hands over my nose and mouth, asking through them, "It's your ACL, isn't it?"

"Probably," she murmured. "But they still want me to go to a clinic tonight and make sure nothing's fractured."

"Okay," I sighed. And I didn't really know what else to say, so I looked at Coach again and told her, "Me and Zulema got this, Coach, we'll take Morgan to the bus."

She nodded, patted Morgan on the shoulder, and went in the direction of the locker room. I reached for the wrap Morgan had removed, and pressed a soft kiss to the point of her knee before I started to wrap it back up.

When I finished, I met her eyes and tried to lighten the disappointment in them. "You know, I really love the trophy you got me at the art show."

And she looked at me and smiled. "I guess it's a good thing I got it for you."

"Come on, let's get you to the bus."

Zulema and I each took one of her hands as she dug the heel of her uninjured right leg into the ground, and we pulled her up. Her arms went around our shoulders, and we helped her walk to the bus and into the seats we'd had on the way there. I sat down next to her, and when she shifted sideways in the seat to lean her back against the window, I helped her stretch her legs out over my thighs.

"I'll get your bags," Zulema said. "You need anything else?" We shook our heads, and she gave Morgan a sympathetic smile before leaving the bus.

Morgan and I sat there for a minute in silence, and then I asked seriously, "How much pain are you in?"

"It's bearable," she answered. She sighed and dropped her head back against the window. "I'm going to need surgery, huh?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "We'll make sure nothing else is going on tonight, and then tomorrow you can try to see an orthopedic."

"You know what sucks the most?" she asked, and I hummed. "I really wanted to have a championship goal to my name."

I huffed with laughter, but I knew her, and I knew how she used humor. I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips, kissing the back and then tucking it under my chin. “What are you actually worried about?”

Her eyes lingered on mine for a handful of seconds before she gave a sad smile and looked down. “I’m worried I won’t play soccer as well. I’m worried that when I do play, I’ll be scared of hurting it again. I’m worried that’ll make me not like playing anymore.”

I leaned sideways to lay my head on her shoulder as I wrapped my arms around her torso. “You’ll play again. Whether or not you need surgery, you’ll have physical therapy and you’ll get your strength back. You’ll play.” I squeezed her and then sat up so I could look at her. “Then you can start trying to kick my ass on the field again.”

“Trying,” she repeated with a snort.

I laughed and leaned in to kiss her. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Thanks.” She set her forehead against mine and kissed me once more, then reached under the seat for her backpack. “I guess I should tell my mom we’re going to the doctor tonight.” I nodded while she pulled her cell phone out of her bag. “Hey,” she said when her mom answered. There was a pause. “The game was good, we won.” But whatever her mom said next, she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a heavy breath away from the speaker of her phone. “I hurt my knee tonight. I’m going to the urgent care before I come home.” Another pause. “No. Don’t worry about it. No. No. *Mom*, I’ll drive myself, just get some rest.” She didn’t wait for much of a response before she hung up and dropped her phone back into her bag.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Her eyes fell to her lap. “She didn’t sound like she was in the right condition to drive me anywhere.”

I took her hand again. “Pip?”

“Night shift,” she answered.

“I’ll take you.”

She met my gaze. “You sure? You have class tomorrow, it’s going to be a long night.”

“So?”

And she shrugged. “School’s important to you.”

“Morgan, *you’re* important to me.”

“I know,” she said, thinking about it for a second before giving an amused laugh like she was embarrassed she’d implied otherwise. “I know,

it's just, it's not like I'm dying or anything."

"Uh huh... okay, then how were you planning on getting into the urgent care if you can't walk on that leg?"

She looked at me, then at her leg, and then back at me while her lips pulled into a smile. "That's a good point," she laughed.

"I'm taking you," I said. "And then I'm staying the night so I can make sure you keep it elevated and iced."

"You just want to cuddle with me," she accused.

"I also just want to cuddle with you," I admitted.

She held out her arms, and I leaned sideways against her and got comfortable as she wrapped them around me and rested her head on top of mine. "Thanks, Audrey."

Chapter 16

After my classes ended on Friday, I went back to my dorm room and did some homework to kill time until Morgan texted me that I could come over. She'd spent all day at doctors' appointments to figure out what was wrong with her knee and what she'd have to do about it, and as anxious as I was to hear the news, I didn't waste any time once she texted before leaving my dorm and driving over. Pip was outside on the porch swing when I pulled into the driveway, bundled up with a hot mug in her hands.

"No more gardening?" I asked.

"Nope." She took a sip from her mug. "Now it's time to sit on the porch until it gets too cold."

"Have fun."

She lifted her cup at me as I passed by and walked into the house. Morgan wasn't in the kitchen or living room, so I headed upstairs and found her in her bedroom. She was lying on the bed with her left leg elevated and her hands folded behind her head.

"Close the door?" she asked when I walked in.

I did, and hopped onto the bed on her right and planted a kiss to her lips, but she didn't look happy. "Is your knee worse than we thought?"

"Sort of," she sighed, "but not far from what we thought."

"Why do you seem more upset than that?"

She gestured angrily toward the door. "The second we got home, my mom started pouring a glass of wine. Like... can she just chill for one day in case I need anything?"

I frowned and stretched out beside her, wrapping an arm around her stomach while I laid my head on her shoulder.

"Sorry," she said. "I am happy to see you."

"It's okay. You're allowed to be frustrated." I propped my head up in my hand. "Did you guys get in a fight?"

She shook her head. "I just came up here to mope."

"Want to tell me what the doctors said?"

“It’s my ACL and meniscus,” she said. “I’m going to need surgery but at least I can finish out the semester first and not have to take time off.”

“What kind of recovery time are you looking at?”

“At least six months till I can play again.” She shrugged. “But it’s the last year of school anyway, I’d be waiting till I graduated to find an intramural league.” I nodded, setting my hand on her stomach to try and offer comfort. “And I talked to my dad...”

The way she said that gave me pause, but I asked, “What did he say?”

“He said he can get me a better surgeon and physical therapists in Oregon.”

The weight of her eyes was heavy as I stared down at my hand on her stomach. “Physical therapy too,” I murmured. “So, he wants you to finish school there.”

“It’s what he’s wanted ever since I left.” she said, and blew a hard breath through her lips. “Now he just has a guaranteed excuse to get it.”

“Can you even change schools in the middle of the year?” I asked. “What about application deadlines?”

She shrugged. “He’s an alumnus with friends in high places.” I nodded but didn’t say anything, and after a moderate pause, she asked, “What are you thinking?”

I finally looked away from my hand to meet her gaze, and I’d promised her that I wouldn’t lie about how I felt. “I don’t want you to go,” I said honestly. “It scares me.” I shrugged, pursing my lips in acceptance. “But if it’s the best thing for your recovery, then you should go.”

“It’s one semester,” she said in reassurance. “Four months, five max. I’ll just do the hardest parts of PT there.”

I couldn’t look her in the eyes when I asked, “And then you’ll come back?”

“Yes,” she said. I nodded, still without looking at her, and she set one hand under my chin to direct my gaze to hers. “Audrey, of course I’m coming back.” She smiled. “You know, when we were driving around for my appointments today, we passed by Brightside PT. There’s a vacant unit just a few buildings down the street, with huge windows and big space. It’d be perfect for a studio.”

I managed a small smile. “Yeah?”

She hummed. “It cheered me up today, thinking about renting it, and about how when you’re working at Brightside we can have lunch together

every day.”

And that finally got me to smile for real. “It’s right across from Center Street Park.”

“Yeah,” she nodded happily. “During the summer, we can sit and eat beneath a tree, and when it’s cold we can keep some soup or hot chocolate in a thermos and hang out on a bench before we have to go back to work.”

“And if you’re sculpting when I get off work,” I added, “I can come and watch you.”

“Sure,” she laughed. “You can be the goddess with perfect boobs that I sculpt.”

I poked her in the chest. “I’m not modeling nude in the studio.” She pouted. “But I’ll do it at home.”

“*Our* home,” she said, and when I nodded, she set her hand over mine, holding it to her chest. “I was serious about wanting a future with you.”

I gave her one deep, slow kiss and then said, “I know.”

And whatever sober mood she’d had earlier was lifted, because she said, “Where would I even display a nude sculpture of you...”

“*Not* in the studio,” I said instantly.

She hummed thoughtfully. “You know, it could make a nice entrance piece in our house.” She passed me a teasing grin. “Somewhere for guests to hang their coats.”

“Oh my god, no!” I squealed, shoving her hip playfully.

“Ow,” she complained through her laughter. “No roughhousing, I’m injured.”

“Sorry,” I winced. “Did they give you painkillers?”

“No, just Ibuprofen.”

I frowned, but it flipped almost instantly as I began to walk my fingers down her stomach. “Maybe I can find a way to distract you.” But I stopped when I reached the hem of her sweatpants. “Unless it’s not allowed because you’re injured.”

“Yeah, no, yeah,” she stammered, “it’s allowed.” I slipped my fingers under the edge of her pants. “But, wait... I don’t know how I could return it. You can’t lay on me, I can’t lay on you. I can’t even lay on my side easily to- Nope, never mind, got it.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her, and she made a picturesque frame with her hands and then motioned them down on either side of her face. I snorted

with laughter, burying my face in the crook of her neck to cackle into it, “You seriously want me to do that?”

“Yeah,” she chuckled, “why not?”

“I just always thought it was one of those things people said but didn’t really do. What if I add a neck injury to your list of problems?”

“I mean, don’t *actually* sit on me,” she laughed. “You just, you know, with your legs here,” she gestured, “and then you... here...” She indicated again. “Just where I can reach and... you know- why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m having fun watching you try to explain without too much detail.”

“Don’t tease me,” she whined, with her own teasing smile, “I’m injured.”

“Yeah,” I said sarcastically, “and you won’t let me forget it.”

She gasped with mock offense. “You,” she said sternly, reaching up and grabbing my head with a smile, “are the worst.”

She pulled me down to catch my lips with hers as I finally slipped my hand into her pants, and it was a good thing we didn’t have school tomorrow, because I wasn’t going home tonight.

Chapter 17

Morgan's truck was sitting in the parking lot, and from our spot on the dropped tailgate, we watched the bus pull up to the curb near the soccer field. It was the weekend of national championships, and in a few hours, the rest of the team and I would be getting on a plane and flying to California. We might even win. And even though Morgan wouldn't be able to play, she was in good spirits. She had her injured leg stretched out across the tailgate as I sat on the edge of it with my legs dangling over, and her head was in my lap.

"Ready?" she asked, fishing another corn nut out of the bag in her hands as she looked up at me.

I nodded, and she tossed the piece up into the air. I opened my mouth wide and dipped my head down to try and catch it, managing to snatch it on its downward arc.

"Woo!" I threw my hands up triumphantly.

She held one of hers up for a high five, and after I slapped my own against it, she dumped a handful of corn nuts into her palm. "Rapid fire," she spat, "go!"

She barely gave me time to swallow the one I had before throwing one after the other into the air as fast as she could. It was raining corn nuts, and by the way Morgan burst into laughter while she kept throwing them, I knew I looked awkward as hell as I swayed quickly with my mouth wide, trying to catch as many as I could. Most of them landed like pellets on the tailgate and the asphalt, but she threw so many that several landed in my mouth out of pure luck.

"How man-" She wheezed. "How many did you get?"

I felt around my mouth with my tongue. "Four."

She stopped laughing to stare up at me blankly, holding her hands out by her shoulders and cutting her head left and right with her mouth wide open in an exaggerated imitation of how I'd looked. I nearly choked as we both started laughing again.

We watched another teammate get dropped off with her duffel bag and then head into the warmth of the locker room. It hadn't snowed yet, but it was getting colder every day, and the warmth of Morgan's head in my lap helped me ignore the icy feel of the metal beneath me.

"I'm glad you're coming," I told her. "I was worried you'd be too uncomfortable." She'd gotten a brace for her knee to help her walk, but she still used one crutch to bear weight because of the pain.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss it for the world. I even got my mom and Pip to promise they'd have snacks and beer while they watch, and I bought them confetti poppers for when you win."

"You really think we're going to win?" I asked. "You've seen the updated brackets, you know-"

She shoved her fingers in her ears. "La, la, la, you're going to win, I can't hear you."

I rolled my eyes, but was smiling when I scrunched over to kiss her. We hung out there on the tailgate, enjoying our last real alone time for the weekend before everyone had arrived and we were ready to leave. We piled onto the bus and it shuttled us to the airport, where we waited at the gate for an hour until it was time to board the plane.

"I call aisle seat!" Zulema yelled as we headed along the ramp to the plane.

When she looked back at Morgan and me, Morgan patted her crutch with her free hand. "It's not like I could beat you there."

"Lucky me," ZuZu laughed.

Morgan wanted the window seat anyway, and after she'd gotten comfortable, I gave her single crutch to a flight attendant to store in a closet. It took less than twenty minutes after take-off to figure out why Morgan wanted that seat – she was passed out. She'd slumped down as much as she could, and her head rested against the window while her mouth hung open. We let her sleep for almost forty-five minutes before Zulema passed me a wrapped stick of gum.

"Put this in her mouth," she snickered.

I couldn't resist, especially not since I knew Morgan wouldn't hesitate to mess with me if I was the one sleeping. So I stuck the end of the gum into her mouth. She didn't move. It hovered there, more than half of it sticking out as she slept away.

Not two seconds later, Zulema leaned over me in the middle seat. She'd rolled the corner of a napkin, and she stuck that corner up Morgan's nose so the napkin was hanging out. Still, nothing.

"Oh my god," Zulema snorted as she sat back in her own seat. "What kind of meds is she on?"

"None," I laughed. I pushed up in my seat a bit to see which other teammates were sitting nearby, and then told ZuZu, "Ask Cusatelli for some lipstick."

Zulema leaned out into the aisle, and only a few seconds later Cusatelli had passed her some perfectly red lipstick. "What are you going to draw on her?" ZuZu asked as she held the lipstick out to me.

"A dick."

"I know you way too well to take that seriously," she laughed.

I smiled, but since I didn't have a mirror, I gestured to my mouth. "Put it on me."

She did, and then I leaned over and planted a deliberate kiss to Morgan's cheek, leaving the unmistakable red print of lips behind. *That* finally made her stir, but it was more of a sputtering awake. She spat out the gum as she sat upright and swiped at her nose, and the confusion lasted another moment until she was awake enough to look down at the items.

Then she looked over at us and laughed, "You guys are so annoying. ...Are you wearing lipstick?"

"No."

Her eyes narrowed, and she considered it for a moment before realizing it was a kiss that had finally woken her up. She pulled out her cell phone to open the selfie camera and get a look at her face. "Where did you even get lipstick?"

"Cusatelli," I said, "here," and I reached for her face to wipe it off.

"No!" She karate chopped my hands away and gave me a toothy grin. "Joke's on you, I'm keeping it."

Zulema and I both laughed. Since Morgan was awake, I pulled out some earbuds and gave her one of them so we could watch a movie together, and Zulema started the one on her screen at the same time so it'd be synced up with ours. We managed to watch two movies before our plane finally landed in California. Morgan and I had packed one bag together so she wouldn't have to worry about me carrying an extra one, and after

everyone had retrieved their luggage, we headed out to the bus that'd take us to a hotel.

The hotel was nicer than I expected. There was an indoor pool with an outdoor lounge area, a gym – not that any of us would be working out – and a restaurant. Morgan and I were sharing a two-bed room with Zulema that even had an outdoor balcony, and after we dumped our bags and changed, we met a bunch of the other girls at the pool.

We hung out and talked and laughed for a while before sitting on the pool chairs became uncomfortable for Morgan's knee. Even though I'd offered to go back upstairs with her, she insisted I stay and keep having fun with the team, so I kissed her and told her to text me if she needed anything. I'd been lounging in a chair with her so she wouldn't feel too separated from everyone else in the jacuzzi, but once she was gone, I dropped out of the chair. I sat down on the edge beside Zulema to put my feet in.

"You don't want to come all the way in?" ZuZu asked, ducking half her face under water and then spitting a small stream at my shin.

I shook my head, glancing up at the clear sky of a warm California winter. "It's nice out here."

"Hey, Lopez," Guppa said from my other side, "I'll give you five bucks if you jump straight into the pool."

Lopez peered out from the jacuzzi at the much colder pool. "Five bucks?" Guppa nodded, and Lopez hopped right out of the spa, yelling, "Suck it!" as she jogged over and jumped straight into the pool.

She surfaced with a screech, and the few other girls in the jacuzzi laughed and followed suit.

While they resurfaced with their own screams of protest, I looked at ZuZu and nodded toward the pool, saying, "Five bucks."

"Hell no," she said, and I snorted with laughter. She chuckled too, stretching her arms out along the edge of the spa and relaxing back against a jet next to where I was sitting.

"Is Rodney going to watch the game tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, unable to mask a proud smile. "He's having some friends over too. They'll be cheering us on."

"That's awesome," I said happily.

"And as soon as we're done with all our soccer stuff," she added, "you and Morgan got to start going to his basketball games with me."

"Can we make signs and embarrass him?"

“Morgan’s rubbing off on you too much,” she accused, holding a straight face for a few moments before grinning at me. “Of course we’re going to make signs and embarrass him.” We both laughed, and then she laid her head back over the edge of the pool to look up at me. “For real though, how does Morgan feel about this weekend?”

I shrugged. “She’s bummed about not getting to play.”

“I figured.”

“She’s fine though.”

Zulema blinked up at me for a moment, and then straightened up and turned toward me. “You used the bad word.”

“What?” I huffed amusedly.

“Fine,” she quoted. “Spill it.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, “seriously?” She simply lifted her eyebrows at me. “I promise you, she’s good.” She nodded, pursing her lips in a somewhat unsatisfied smile until I blew a surrendering sigh through my lips. “*She’s fine,*” I said, “I just...” I braced my hands against the edge of the spa and leaned forward. “Her dad’s making her finish school in Oregon so she can get surgery and rehab out there.”

“No shit,” Zulema said, leaving the bench to move directly in front of me. “For real?”

I hummed, adding quickly, “But I’m okay with it. We’re okay.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded again, but after another moment I met her patient gaze with a more honest shrug. “I mean, I don’t want her to go, but there’s not much either of us can do, so...”

“Are you worried?” she asked.

I inhaled deeply before shaking my head. “I was at first. That much distance is,” I paused, but couldn’t find a better word than, “scary.” Zulema nodded her understanding. “But it’s not like she’ll be gone for a long time. It’s one semester. I should be able to handle that.”

“Well, what makes it scary?”

“I don’t know,” I said quietly, thinking about it for several long seconds. “It’s long distance. I’ve never done that before... I don’t know how to sustain something like that.” I stared down and watched the jet foam swirl around my calves. “But like I said, it’s only one semester.”

“Yeah, that’s not too long,” she agreed. “Besides, she’s crazy about you.”

I grinned at my feet, and Zulema nudged my knee with her hand to get me to look at her, and we grinned at each other.

“Alright,” she said, standing up in the shallow jacuzzi and looking at the pool. “Five bucks?”

“Yeah,” I laughed.

“You coming over?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to head up.”

“Night,” she said, climbing out of the spa and saluting as she walked backward toward the pool. “Pay me later.”

I stuck around just long enough to hear the shriek she let out when she came up in the cold water.

Chapter 18

The locker room was buzzing with excited and nervous chatter as I folded my sock down over my shin guard. Morgan was sitting on the bench beside me, and passed me the second shin guard from my bag on the other side of her. Even though she couldn't play, she was still wearing her jersey, had a ball cap with our school logo on it, and had painted one green stripe and one silver on each of her cheeks.

"How you feeling?" she asked.

Before I could answer, Zulema said, "Nervous as hell." She turned from her spot on the opposite side of my bag as Morgan. "Oh, you mean Audrey. She's ready to kick ass."

Morgan laughed and looked at me, and I said, "I guess I'm ready to kick ass."

"Seriously, though," ZuZu added, "you don't look as nervous as usual."

"Oh, I am," I told them. "But I'm also just really excited. I mean, we made it to the championship. Even if we lose, *we made it.*"

"Hell yeah, we did!" Zulema held out both her hands, and Morgan slapped hers against them. Then she cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted, "Championship!" and every other girl in the locker room screamed happily. But she wasn't done. She stood, repeating 'champs' in a beatbox rhythm while she danced around the bench to me. "Let's see it, Captain."

And how could I refuse when we'd made it to championships? I gave a tiny sigh so she'd know not to take my compliance lightly, but was still smiling as I stood and copied her running man while she kept chanting. I danced with her for half a minute while Morgan watched with a grin, and then I was blushing too much to continue. I dropped back onto the bench while ZuZu danced back to her spot.

It didn't take much longer to get ready, and then Morgan followed me out onto the field and took a seat on the bench while I went to warm up. Between the nervousness and the excitement, the drills, warm-up laps, and stretches went by in a blur. Before I knew it, the coin toss was over, and we

were taking the kick-off. I watched the ball sail down the pitch. Washington caught it, and the game was on.

They dribbled, passed, and battled the ball toward our goal, taking a chancy shot from about fifty yards out. Zulema stopped it easily, and kicked it back in without a pause. We followed suit. I received a pass from our center back and immediately sent the ball up to our side midfielder. She went into a full-on sprint to get around her defender and passed up to our center forward. Cusatelli took a shot that was blocked, and then we were running back down the field.

I stayed on my mark as best as I could, but as we passed the center circle, Rockhardt's mark made the perfect amount of space between them to receive a clear pass. The Washington attacker dribbled in, and it didn't matter how hard any of the remaining defenders ran, that player took the ball into the goal area and didn't wait for her shot. She lobbed it toward the upper right corner. It caught the edges of Zulema's fingers and flew right past them, hitting the back of the goal.

My eyes went to the time on the scoreboard as Zulema dug the ball out of the net. It hadn't even been five minutes, and I didn't dare look toward the bench for fear of seeing whether Morgan was disappointed. It's not what she'd want anyway. She'd want me to focus, so that's what I did.

We all walked crestfallen back to our positions while the other team celebrated their goal. I gave a few of my best words of encouragement to the teammates I passed along the way, and soon the ball was placed back at center field. Cusatelli passed back to me to restart the play, and I gave it back to Guppa so we had more time to set up our offense. Guppa tossed the ball up to Judith, Judith dribbled in until she had a clear pass to me. I received it and dashed forward, whirling around my defender and past center field. As I scanned the pitch ahead of me, I saw that Rockhardt could get clear for a pass, so I kicked the ball just ahead of her while she sprinted after it. My own defender had swiveled around to track my pass, and I saw an opportunity, so I took it. I ran past her and in as fast as my legs would carry me, breaking free so I could book it toward the penalty area.

Cusatelli's defender saw me going for it, and left Cusatelli on the far side to make her way inward toward me. There wouldn't be long before I was covered again, but Rockhardt had received my pass perfectly and was looking for her next move. She didn't hesitate to send the ball straight back to me. I caught it on the inside of my foot and eyed the goalie – my last

obstacle – as I drew my leg back for a shot. I let it fly before the goalie could come too far out of the net, and it soared to the right as she made a dive to try and catch it.

It was just out of her reach as it sailed into the goal. I threw my arms up as I ran to the rest of my teammates, jumping onto them to celebrate with hugs and back pats and cheers. I tossed a quick glance at the bench to see that Morgan was *screaming*, and I couldn't resist. I sprinted over and nearly plowed her backward over the bench with a hug, and then I high-fived Coach and every other girl on the bench.

After that, I jogged back to my spot below center field, and soon Washington had restarted the game with a backward pass to their center mid. Judith ran in to cover her. She dribbled around Judith and Judith gave chase, but she stopped just as Judith got close and passed backwards to a teammate. That teammate came in and tried to give it back, but Judith toed the ball at the same time as Washington's player and it went careening inward as they chased after it. And Judith was faster.

She'd get there first, and in my excitement at such a quick turnover, I overestimated exactly how fast that would happen. I darted toward the goal thinking Cusatelli would follow with her own defender, to get in position for another hopeful pass as Judith gained possession and sent the ball far up to me, but I'd barely touched it before a whistle sounded and stopped the play. Checking in with the referee let me know that I'd run alone. I'd been offside, and I dropped my head back to sigh my frustration. As I panted for breath amidst the exertion and the adrenaline – and got back into position – I looked at the teammates behind me. Two goals in less than ten minutes, and I'd also messed up. This game was too fast-paced. Both of our teams desperately wanted this win, but we weren't going to get it by scrambling.

"Slow it down," I called to my teammates. And to the ones not close enough to hear me, I gestured my palms downward to signal the same thing, and then tapped my temple and mouthed, 'play smart.' Everyone who saw it nodded, and the game started up again.

We *did* play smarter. We took our time with the ball, putting more importance on cleaner, better passes than simply trying to rush up the field for a shot, and it kept either team from scoring again so quickly. But Washington was in this championship against us for a reason. They matched our playstyle with measured patience, fighting for turnovers anytime we

had the ball, and doing their best to get close enough to shoot when they had the ball.

It went back and forth, and by the time the first half was over, neither of us had scored again. I walked to the bench with the rest of the team, my hands on my hips as I regained my breath. Morgan passed me my water bottle when I got there, and I gasped my thanks before gulping down half of it.

“You’re killing it,” Morgan said.

“Thanks,” I panted.

“Seriously,” she added. “That goal was gorgeous. And Cusatelli’s really picking up the slack for me.”

“She’s doing great. They all are.” I threw an arm over her shoulders and squeezed her to me. “And here, since I know you miss the sweat.”

“Thanks,” she laughed, grimacing when I planted a kiss to her cheek that was as equally sweaty with the moisture on my face.

Coach gave us another few minutes of rest before bringing us in for a pep talk. “It was a weird start,” she said, “but you’re all playing amazing. You’re making great decisions. Your passes are spot on. I don’t have much to say other than keep it up and you could win this.” She looked around at all of us. “Champions?” Everyone cheered, with a ‘hell yeah’ or two mixed in. “Alright, rest up. I want to see just as much energy going into the second half.”

We did our ‘comets’ cheer, and then took the remainder of the break to hydrate and regain some strength. Then, with two fresh subs, we started the second half. The short amount of rest was exactly what we needed, and we went into it exactly like Coach wanted – with the same energy as we started.

Washington battled us to a turnover shortly after the start, but their opportunity to shoot was cut off by Lopez, and she kicked it up to Guppa as the rest of us started our run up the field. Guppa passed it to Judith, Judith dodged her defender and passed it to me as I sprinted past mine. I dribbled left to meet Cusatelli near her mark, and in a quick give-and-go, I passed it to her and ran ahead of her defender only for her to pass it right back to me.

The Washington goalie came out to try and cut me off, but I sprinted toward the corner line with the ball as Rockhardt burst inward beyond her own defender and cleared herself for a shot. I toed it hard into the penalty area, and she received it in front of a wide-open net. Her shot was spot on.

The ball sailed into the goal, and Cusatelli and I sprinted at her to give her a giant group hug before we had to run back to position.

It was two to one, and as I hurried back to my spot, I shouted to my team, “Hard on D!”

And I don’t think we’d ever gone harder on defense. We gave it everything we had, and then some. We battled, we passed, we blocked, we volleyed the ball back down the field multiple times just to reorganize, and we made it so hard for them to shoot that whenever they did, Zulema made easy work of her position. For almost twenty minutes, our defense was near impenetrable.

But Lyons. The reason Morgan predicted we’d play against Washington in the first place. She received a beautiful pass from one of her teammates and dribbled so perfectly around Lopez that Lopez tripped and fell. And just when it looked like Lyons was going to shoot, she passed it to her teammate on the other side of the net. Zulema had positioned herself to block Lyons, and there was no way for her to recover in time to block the shot from the other player. They tied up the score with only ten minutes left in the game.

No matter how much we worked to score after that, Washington was trying just as hard. We dipped into energy reserves we didn’t even have, pushing ourselves well past our limits to get even a fraction of a second ahead of our competition. It was a mad dash on both sides – just like at the start of the game – to try and get the final goal. And that’s probably the reason nobody scored again.

With the game ending two to two, we’d go into overtime.

Coach gathered us around quickly for water and a talk before overtime would start. “Okay, take a breather,” she said. “I know you want to go out there and give it two hundred percent, but I want you to use your heads. This is it, it’s make or break. Don’t rush in, I don’t want you committing too many players to offense. We play defense first, alright? The only thing worse than not scoring is if they do. Got it?”

We all said, “Got it.”

“Lopez,” she added, “I want you back on sweeper. Cusatelli, play striker. Audrey, get up on attacking mid but not too deep, yeah?”

I nodded. “Got it, Coach.”

“The rest of you know what to do?” she asked. Everyone nodded. “You got this. Get out there, let’s go.”

Morgan had stood with the rest of us, and before I went back onto the field, she grabbed the back of my head and pulled it down so she could kiss the top of it. Then she swatted at my back. “Go get ‘em.”

I jogged out, adjusting my spot to the change of positions Coach had wanted, and the game was back on. As much as I felt compelled to dive with the other offensive players when we had the ball, I kept repeating to myself not to go too deep. The last thing I wanted was to overcommit and leave too few players back on defense. It wasn’t easy. Knowing that the game was on its last legs, the pressure to score was heavy, and I was desperate to see that ball go into Washington’s net one last time.

We played the first ten-minute period without a goal on either side and went into the second period with all the determination and control we could muster. We came so close multiple times, and had I been farther in, we might’ve even scored. But it was worth it not to let them get a goal, and as the minutes ticked up, I reminded my teammates every chance I got to keep playing smart.

And when there was just one minute left in the game, we got our opportunity. I ran headfirst into offense because the chances were that they wouldn’t have time to take advantage of it. I went deep with Cusatelli and Rockhardt, passing to Rockhardt. She passed it back. I gave it to Cusatelli. Cusatelli immediately sent it to Rockhardt and headed for the net. Rockhardt faked a pass to me but sent it up instead as Cusatelli booked it to reach the pass. She didn’t even receive it to set herself up better. She saw her chance and she wound up for the kick.

She shot. The ball soared. And Washington’s goalie made a gorgeous dive to catch it right against her chest.

The goalie knew they didn’t have time to score, so instead of giving us another opportunity, she punted the ball as hard as she could down the field. The second overtime period ended before we could even get it back up field.

My heart was pounding as we all ran to the bench to get directions for the shootout, and if I’d thought the pressure of scoring was bad during overtime, I was wrong. A shootout was infinitely more terrifying, and I could only imagine the stress Zulema felt as Coach called out our ten shooters. Once Coach had named us all, I threw my arm around ZuZu’s shoulders while we walked back onto the field.

“You good?” I asked.

She blew a hard breath through her lips. "Fuck if I know."

I huffed a laugh and patted her on the chest. "You're the best goalie I've ever met. You can do this."

She nodded, returned my pat with one to my back, and jogged off toward the net. I joined the rest of my teammates in the center circle at mid field, standing with them shoulder to shoulder, our arms around each other as Judith went up to the penalty spot for the first shot. She lined up the ball, took several measured steps back, and trotted forward for her shot. She did perfectly at not giving anything away to Washington's goalie, and the ball sailed right into the net.

She ran back to us happily as Washington sent their first shooter up. The player went for a high right shot, and even though Zulema misread and dove left, the ball hit the crossbar and missed. Rockhardt was up next, and left our line for the penalty area. She loped forward for her shot and stopped short to try and fake out Washington's goalie, but the goalie got lucky. As she dove early, Rockhardt shot, and the ball collided with the goalie's thighs and was blocked.

Washington's next player was up. She shot and scored in the upper left corner. Lopez shot, scored. Washington shot, scored. Cusatelli and Washington's fourth shooter both scored. It was four to four and I was up.

I set the ball down on its mark and stepped back as I made eye contact with the goalie. She stopped looking at my face to watch my body language, and as I cantered forward for my shot, I did my best not to foretell my move. I leaned my balance hard left as I took my shot so she'd think I was shooting left, but twisted at the last second. As the goalie dove left, the ball went flying into the right side of the net. I turned around with a clap, running back to my cheering teammates as Washington set up for their final shot. If they made it, we'd keep going. But if ZuZu kept that ball out of the net, it was all over.

And Zulema's face as she stared the player down was set with determination. Her knees were bent and wide, strung tight with the tension to dive as soon as she guessed the direction of the kick. I'd never seen her focus as hard as she did while the player lined up.

It was like slow motion as that player ran forward. Her foot connected with the ball. Zulema dove right with her arms stretched out as far as she could reach. The ball sped through the air in the same direction, and there

was the loud thud of it hitting ZuZu's gloved palms as she dropped to the ground in the most glorious save I'd witnessed in my entire life.

The ball ricocheted away from the net, and Zulema was on her feet instantly, arms outstretched in triumph as we sprinted toward each other. She jumped as she reached me, and we collided so hard into each other in our excitement that I almost toppled over. But my teammates were right behind me, and crowded in as I wrapped Zulema in a tight hug amidst the screams of victory.

We embraced our way to the bench, and I grabbed Morgan to squeeze her and kiss her for the few moments I could before we were both pulled away by the enthusiasm of everyone else around us as we were delivered the trophy. There were no words for the emotions I felt when I set a hand on it, but it was so overwhelming that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Champions. We were goddamn champions. And the only thing that really kept me from crying was the unparalleled amount of jostling I got from my euphoric teammates as we celebrated, jumping and hugging and yelling. It was hard work rounding us all up for pictures, but somehow the photographers managed to snap a few before we were released for more celebrating, and we cheered our way clear to the locker room.

Even when we got there, everyone was still practically screaming, taking pictures of themselves and each other with the trophy. Coach stood by the door with a grin on her face, watching the antics and letting us all celebrate for a few more minutes. When she was ready, she called us all around, and the girl who was holding the trophy dropped to one knee to present it to her.

"Thank you," Coach laughed, taking the trophy and cradling it against her hip. "Listen up," she announced, and with some difficulty, everyone slowly fell quiet. "You all worked so hard this season, so thank you, for all the dedication and heart that you poured into every practice and every game. You earned this!" She held the trophy over her head, and everyone screamed and cheered until she lowered it again. "You're an amazing group of young women, and not only did you make it easy for me to work with you this season, you made it a blast. I am so proud to have been your coach, so I want you to give a round of applause for yourselves and for your team captain."

More screaming and cheering as everyone clapped, and I shouted over the ruckus, "Give it up for Coach!"

Somehow, the girls got louder, and after a few seconds of cheering for Coach, Lopez yelled, “And honorable mention to ZuZu for that *game-winning save!*”

Zulema waved off the applause and shouts of ‘MVP’ with exaggerated humility, and Coach let us all cheer for a long minute before holding up her hand so she could speak again.

“I’m not going to stand in the way of any celebrations tonight,” she said. “Go out, have fun, but don’t get too wild. The flight home is at eleven tomorrow, and the bus leaves the hotel at eight. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

There was more celebration as Coach made her retreat to wait for us on the bus back to the hotel. For what might’ve been the hundredth time already, I had to resist the urge to jump into Morgan’s arms when I turned and caught her beaming at me, but I still threw my arms around her neck and planted an enthusiastic kiss to her lips.

“You did it,” she said. “You really freaking did it.”

“We did it.” I couldn’t stop smiling, and grabbed her face to give her another hard kiss. “You’ve got a championship to your name.”

She heaved an exaggerated sigh of relief. “I really thought I was going to have to flunk out so I could play again next year.”

I laughed and kissed her one more time before we met ZuZu at the lockers we’d chosen. It didn’t seem like anyone bothered to change out of their uniform as we got onto the bus outside – everyone was too eager to get back to the hotel to shower and then celebrate. Which is exactly what we did. We got cleaned up and then took a few rideshares to a local bar that some of the other girls had picked out. The moment we walked in, the other half of our teammates who were already there screamed and cheered. It seemed like some of the regular patrons had experienced it already and knew what was happening, because a few of them clapped along when each new teammate walked in.

It didn’t seem like the kind of bar that was usually service to large groups of people – it was more of a dive bar that didn’t even have an official dance floor – but that didn’t stop our teammates from having fun. And, fortunately, the staff were happy to cater to us. They’d already turned up the music and pushed aside a few tables to provide somewhere to dance.

“I’m going to get us some shots,” Zulema announced.

We nodded, and Morgan and I grabbed a high table right as Cusatelli and Guppa walked in, so we cheered and clapped for them along with the rest of the team and some patrons.

“You know,” Morgan said, “this entire season, I never really got the chance to sit back and just watch you. You played like hell today.”

I grinned. “Scale of one to ten, how hot was it?”

She teasingly swiped at her forehead. “Twenty. I might kick ZuZu out of the room tonight.”

“No, you won’t,” Zulema said, sliding onto a chair and setting three shots on the table. “You’ll wait twenty-four hours like respectable adults.”

Morgan passed me a wink and said, “I might need help getting to the bathroom on the plane tomorrow.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” Zulema passed us both a shot and held hers up. “To the best team in the nation.”

I raised mine. “To my best friends.”

Morgan lifted hers. “To one beautiful freaking trophy.”

“Woo!” Zulema shouted, and we clinked our glasses together and tossed the shots back. “Okay, serious question,” she asked. I lifted my eyebrows at her. “What are my chances of getting you to dance with me?”

I squinted toward where the rest of the team already was, but Morgan grabbed her single crutch and hopped off her seat, saying, “It might not be pretty, but I’m definitely dancing.”

And she and ZuZu both looked at me.

I looked from them to the dance floor, and then back at them. “Screw it. Let’s dance.”

“Yes!” Zulema screamed, and barely waited for Morgan and me to follow her over.

And normally, I would’ve been self-conscious about the fact that we were in a small bar. About how there weren’t a bunch of bodies all packed together to reduce the amount of people that might be looking at me. But we were champions, and if there was one thing that I wanted to do to celebrate, it was make sure that the rest of the team and I were having the night of our lives.

So I danced. I danced with Zulema and every other teammate in that tiny area. I danced with Morgan, and laughed with her about how clumsy she looked because of her knee. She bopped her head and swung her arms, running through every obnoxious dance move she could think of –

including the sprinkler. And I was so happy that after I got over the initial hesitation, I didn't think once about who might be watching. I was having *fun*. So much so that when Morgan needed a break because her knee started hurting, I stayed. I kept dancing with Zulema and the other girls, every once in a while glancing toward Morgan just so I could smile or blow a kiss at her.

It must have been an hour before I was ready for a break too. I headed for the table to see if Morgan wanted me to grab her a beer, but when I turned, she wasn't sitting there. I checked for her at the bar because I thought she'd beat me to it, but she wasn't there either. Nor was she in the bathroom. I poked my head outside, and almost missed her because I didn't see her, but then I heard her voice from around the side of the building.

"I don't care about prestige," she said into her phone, glancing up as I rounded the corner. She held the phone away from her face and told me, "It's my dad."

"Do you want me to go back in?" I whispered.

She shook her head and put the phone back to her ear. "No, *you're* not listening. That's bullshit and I'm not doing it." There was a pause as he said something. "Are you fucking serious right now? ... No, I'm not going to watch my tone. You're being fucking ridiculous." Whatever he said next, she gave a dry laugh. "You know what? I'm not doing this tonight. Bye."

She hung up on him, and growled as she squeezed her phone so hard that her knuckles went white.

"Are you okay?"

She stared down at the phone for several seconds before looking at me so I could see the tears in her eyes.

I rushed to her and wrapped my arms around her neck. "What's wrong?"

She didn't say anything at first, and just slid her arms around my waist and hugged me tight. Then she sniffled and lifted a hand behind my back to wipe at her eyes. "Not tonight," she said. "I don't want to ruin the fun."

But I was already concerned, and there was no way I'd be able to go back in without worrying or assuming the worst. I let her go so I could look at her. "Morgan, what's going on?"

Her soggy eyes watched mine for a handful of moments while she thought about it, and then she took in a deep breath, using it to say, "My old

school isn't going to accept all of my credits from this semester because they're so high and mighty."

I didn't understand right away what that meant, and I stared at her blankly until it sank in, and my heart sank with it. "But... that would mean you'd have to repeat classes." She nodded, and I tried to keep the fear that was creeping through my gut off my face. "What does... what did he say?"

"He wants me to graduate there." She sighed and leaned against the wall behind her, dropping her head back. "He thinks it's worth it because it's a private school, and it's prestigious in the art scene."

I was already trying to form arguments in my head. It would delay her graduating for an entire semester. It would cost him more money because she'd have to retake classes she'd taken here. But she'd been outside the bar for some time before I'd found her, and I didn't doubt that she'd tried to convince him. And sure, all that stuff mattered, but it didn't matter as much as the pressing question that made my throat tighten.

"How long would..." I couldn't even get the whole question out, but I could see the fear on her face as she studied mine.

"Next semester, over summer, and fall."

A year. She'd be gone for a *year*, and my gaze dropped as the reality struck me of how long that was.

"I tried, Audrey," she murmured. "I tried to tell him." Her eyes filled with fresh tears. "But he said he won't pay for school if I don't come back and I don't know what to do. I'm just..." She wiped at her cheek again. "I'm frustrated. I'm so frustrated. And you were scared about me going for one semester and now it's a year."

"No, it's okay." I pulled her into another hug, because that was the right thing to say, wasn't it? She was frustrated, and scared, and I didn't want her to cry. And whatever concerns I might've had, whatever fear I might've felt, this wasn't the place to talk about it. I wouldn't have even known what to say if we *did* talk about it because, other than the fear, I didn't know yet how I felt. "We'll figure it out, okay?"

Her arms hugged me tight as she asked, "Yeah?" and I nodded against her. "Because my first thought when he said it was that I was worried how you'd take it."

How *was* I taking it? What could either of us do about it even if I did tell her I was holding back panic? I didn't want to ruin anyone's night. I didn't want to start an argument with her or cause tension between us about

something we couldn't change. I wanted everything to be okay because that was the only option, even if it wasn't. I could make it okay. I could handle it. I had to.

"We'll figure it out," I said again.

She let me go just enough to look at me, searching my eyes for the same comfort my words offered. I cupped her face and kissed her because it was a comfort I needed too, and she relaxed against me and kissed me back for a long handful of moments before I felt her smile.

"Thank you," she said, leaning her forehead against mine.

"For what?"

"For being so amazing any time I have a problem with my parents." She pecked my forehead and leaned back against the wall. "For being the best girlfriend in the world."

I smiled, hoping it would cover the pang I felt when I said, "I try."

She reached for my hand and laced her fingers with mine. "Are we good? Do you want to go back in?"

That was my chance. I could tell her how hard I was trying to be okay with it all, but I hadn't even given myself enough of a chance to try yet, and I didn't want to make her worry any more if she didn't have to. So I nodded and let her lead me back in, because we'd just won a championship and this was supposed to be the night of our lives. Because I wanted to be the best captain. And, more than that, I wanted to be the best girlfriend.

Chapter 19

Two weeks. That's how long I had to try and be okay with it all, and I tried the best way I knew how – by doing everything I could not to get trapped in my own head. Not to think about all the things that could go wrong when Morgan left. I tried not to think about how she might realize that she missed Oregon and decide to stay forever. Or how long a year was, and how I'd never done a long-distance relationship before and how I didn't think I could keep her from getting bored without her actually being here. How I didn't always have much to say, and how if every time she called or video chatted with me and I didn't have anything to talk about, it eventually wouldn't be enough anymore.

Okay, so I didn't do as good of a job of not thinking about it as I wanted to. Even with all the studying for finals, and with Morgan constantly trying to do as much as she could with me because she was leaving right after, it still wasn't enough. But this was the last day of finals we had, and her flight was leaving tomorrow morning and if I just didn't say anything, then she'd be gone, and I'd have no choice but to be okay with it all.

Then Steph happened.

She dropped down at our lab table because she'd begged me to be her partner for the final, and she heaved a heavy sigh while she did.

“Nervous?” I asked.

“Nope.” She cracked her knuckles. “I had a shitty night, but it's a new day and I'm ready to ace this thing.”

And seeing as I'd been desperate for distractions lately, I made the mistake of asking, “Why'd you have a shitty night?”

“Oh, Alyssa finally broke up with me for good.” She shrugged. “Apparently she started talking to an old fling when she went home for Thanksgiving, and they've been hitting it off the last few weeks. I'm kind of relieved though? Things have been weird between us ever since we got back together and-”

But I stopped listening. That was something I hadn't considered, and it dropped my heart right into my stomach. Morgan knew people at her old

school. What if she couldn't help it, and her spark for an old flame got rekindled and she broke up with me? A year was such a long time. Enough time that she'd be hanging out with friends while the distance between us grew, and she could get feelings for someone she used to like without even realizing it was happening.

That terrified me so much that I wasn't sure how I got through the lab final, but before I knew it, it was over. The *semester* was over. Morgan had taken her physics final earlier in the week, so I drove to her house with the fresh, cutting doubt in my mind, and the state of her room only hammered it home. There were full boxes that hadn't been there yesterday. Her closet and walls were bare. Her suitcase was packed and zipped, and even though she hobbled over to kiss me in greeting, my stomach turned because it already felt like she was gone.

"Packing is exhausting with one leg out of commission," she said, leading me to the bed. "Can we just cuddle and nap?" She stretched out, pulling me down until I was laid beside her with my head on her shoulder. "How was your lab final? Does it feel good to be done?"

My mind was racing a mile a minute. I was spiraling and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"Audrey?"

I'd been suppressing and burying for two weeks, and I couldn't dig any deeper and it all came bubbling up into one confession: "I broke a promise."

She shifted beneath me, and I felt her looking down at me as she whispered, "What?"

I swallowed hard. "I promised I'd be honest about how I feel."

"How you feel," she repeated. She scooted out from under me to sit up, and watched me do the same while she processed what I meant. "About me leaving?"

I nodded, and I got one look at the fear in her eyes before I had to stare down at my lap. "I don't know if I can do it."

The silence that followed seemed to last forever. It was heavy, and suffocating, and she must've felt it too, because I didn't hear her breathe until she inhaled shakily. "I d-... I don't understand."

I finally glanced up, but I didn't know what to say. I hadn't thought this far ahead. All I'd thought was that I couldn't pretend or try and force myself anymore, and that was it. But she didn't say anything either. We

stared at each other, for another heavy span of silence while her bottom lip trembled.

“You ha-” Her voice cracked, and she swallowed. “You had two weeks to talk to me about this, Audrey... my flight leaves tomorrow. You said it was okay. I thought we were okay.”

“I tried,” I breathed. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to slow the racing of my heart because it was making me feel sick. Because I knew what was happening, but I didn’t know how to stop it. “I tried to be okay with it. I thought I could force myself to be okay. I thought that I could handle it until you were gone, because then if you were already gone it’d be easier than...” I lost track of what I was going to say. I met Morgan’s eyes and they were full of tears, and I forgot everything because all I wanted to do was go back to forcing myself to be fine.

“Easier than what?” she said. “Easier than breaking up with me in person?”

“What? No.”

“That’s not what you’re doing right now?”

I had no idea what I was doing. “I don’t want to.” I stood and steeped my hands over my mouth as the feeling in my stomach finally reached my eyes. “That’s not what I want.”

“What *do* you want?”

“I want you to stay,” I said, my voice breaking with plea. “I want you to stay here, where I can make sure that I’m everything you need to me be. Where I can make sure you don’t get tired of me and find somebody else.”

“Are you serious?” she asked, and I knew that I’d said that the wrong way, because her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. “After everything, you trust me that little?” The offense faded to a severe hurt as the first tear finally fell. “You think I’d do that to you? After seeing what my mom’s been through?”

“No. No, Morgan, please, that’s not what I meant. Not like that.” I sniffled, unable to keep the first of my tears back. None of this was going the way I wanted it to, but I didn’t know how to fix it. I didn’t know any other way to make it go. “I trust you, but I don’t trust myself because I don’t know how to do this.”

She wiped her palm over her cheek. “So, you’re just not going to try?”

“I’ve *been* trying,” I said. “I’ve been trying so hard to convince myself that it’d be fine, but I can’t.” I dropped down onto the bed again, and half-

turned to face her. “I don’t know what else to do. Please. Please don’t go.”

“I don’t want to go,” she said, pleading as much as I was. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Can’t you just...” I glanced around in desperation, holding out hope that there was *something* we could do. “Take a student loan or something?”

“I thought about it,” she said. “But then I’d start my life with debt when I wouldn’t have to. Do you know how much harder it’ll be to pay for a loan for a studio when I already have student debt?”

“What about Pip?”

“Pip’s a waitress, Audrey. I can’t ask her to do that.”

“What if you got a job?” I asked.

“At the diner with Pip?” she asked rhetorically. “So I can pay for one or two classes a semester and still add an extra year or more to school? I’m paying out of state tuition, it’s almost twenty-thousand, did you know that?” She shook her head as the corner of her mouth pulled into a frown. “I don’t have any other options. None that come without a cost to my future.”

The first thing I wanted to say after that was, ‘what about our future?’ But I was glad I didn’t. It wouldn’t have been fair, and any spark of hope I might’ve felt about us coming up with a solution was gone. I just sat there, staring at her, teary-eyed and with a growing lump of despair in my throat. When neither of us said anything else, her head fell, and she stared down at her hands as a tear dropped into her palm.

We sat there for what had to have been minutes. I was too afraid to open my mouth and make this worse. Too afraid of what I’d started to be the one to see it through.

Maybe she knew that, because eventually she sniffled and said, “I was happy to chase you in the beginning, but I can’t chase you forever. And I spent my entire life watching my parents try to convince themselves, and each other, that they should be together.” She looked up at me while she wiped again at her cheek, and the corners of her mouth twitched like she was trying so hard to keep from crying harder. Trying so hard to keep from breaking down. “I won’t let that be me. I don’t want to be in a relationship that I have to convince you is worth it. Especially not if it’s you.”

“What does that mean?”

She pressed her lips tight together and blinked rapidly, clearing the fresh brimming tears. “You’re the most determined person I’ve ever met,” she said quietly. As hard as she tried not to, she whimpered, and rushed to

brush away the stream that broke from her eyes. “If you’re not willing to fight for this,” she cried, “then it can’t be what you really want.”

That hurt. God, it hurt so fucking bad, and it wasn’t true. I did want this. I wanted her. But I was paralyzed by fear, and what good was saying it if I couldn’t prove it? Because at the end of the day, my fear wasn’t just about her breaking my heart. It wasn’t just about losing her. It was about every day leading up to her breaking my heart. Every day that I’d feel her losing interest. Every day that I’d feel more and more inadequate, until the time came that she ended it and reinforced my dread that I’d never be enough. No matter how hard I worked. No matter how hard I tried to be what she needed.

If she was going to break my heart no matter what, then what terrified me the most was being left behind just to wait for it.

It took me far too long to finally meet Morgan’s gaze, only to find that her eyes were pleading with me to tell her she was wrong.

My mouth fell open as I took in a trembling breath, searching for something that would ease the pain on her face, which mirrored the ache in my chest. But I didn’t think there was anything I could’ve done to make this better. Nothing I could do to take it back. “I don’t know what to say.”

She nodded slowly as her gaze and head fell. “You don’t have to.” She hiccupped with a held-back sob, and barely managed to whisper, “You should go.”

She didn’t look up at me once while I just sat there for half a minute, wanting anything but to leave her like this. She didn’t look up at me when I finally decided leaving was the only thing I could do, or when I headed for the door. And she didn’t look up at me when I gave one glance back before closing her bedroom door behind me.

I got into my car to head back to the dorms, but I didn’t make it far down the street before it all *really* sank in. Before I realized exactly what I’d just done. My eyes blurred so badly I could barely see the road, so I pulled over onto the shoulder just in time for a sob to rack through my chest. I don’t why I thought it’d hurt any less for things to end sooner rather than later. I’d been lying to myself. But even though it hurt just as much, I wasn’t sure if it’d been the wrong choice. I didn’t know if I’d just done us a favor, or if I’d destroyed any chance at success we might’ve had if I’d just kept my mouth shut. The only thing I *did* know was that I was far too

paralyzed by my confusion, and pain, and fear, to do anything but sit there and cry.

Chapter 20

I heard Zulema knock the first time, and the second, and by the third knock and a concerned call of my name, it was impossible to ignore her. I slid off my bed and trudged over to the door, opening it to her standing there in her workout clothes.

She looked me up and down, appearing confused about my state. “Practice started twenty minutes ago, dude, you never miss. I know you’re bummed about Morgan leaving, but...” She stopped and scanned me again. “What’s wrong?”

I left the door open, turned, trudged back to my bed, and sat on the edge. “I think we broke up.”

She’d had her back to me to close the door behind her, but she whirled around and slammed it the rest of the way. “*What?* Did you just say *that you broke up?*” She rushed over and dropped down next to me. “What the hell, Audrey? What happened?”

“I got scared,” I whispered, worried that if I spoke any louder my voice would crack. But it didn’t help, and tears flooded my eyes. “I told her I didn’t know if I could do it. And I didn’t mean for us to break up, but I couldn’t get a handle on what was happening and now she’s gone.”

“Wait, so... did you break up with her? Or did she break up with you?”

“*I don’t know,*” I whimpered, and wiped hard at my cheeks. “She thought I was breaking up with her, and then said that she didn’t want to have to convince me to be with her.”

“Jesus, okay.” She scooted closer and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Well, look,” her hand rubbed my arm as she squeezed me to her, “if you didn’t mean it, maybe you can call her and fix it.”

“But I did mean it,” I cried. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“It’s just long distance,” she said softly, “people do it all the time.”

“I don’t. I’ve *never* done it before, and a year is a long time. Do you know how much I’ve changed in the last year?” My head fell and I stared down at my blurry lap. “I don’t know how to act in a relationship when I’m

this far away from the person I-" I stopped short, taking in several shallow, rapid breaths as I tried to hold back a sob.

"It's okay," she whispered, cradling my head and guiding it onto her shoulder. "I know it's scary, but you should say it."

I held my breath for a few long seconds to keep from breaking down, and eventually managed to inhale deeply and shakily so I could say, "I love her, ZuZu."

"Yeah, you do. And I think she loves you too."

"But I don't know what to do."

She sighed and sat there, hugging me to her for a minute while we both thought about it. "I know I'm always trying to get you out of your head," she said, "but that's where you need to be right now."

I sniffled some more as I lifted my head off her shoulder, wiping my eyes to look at her. "What?"

"I think the only thing worse than what's already happened would be if you called her and still weren't sure." She gave a sympathetic smile and took one of my hands. "So, I think you should take some time to figure out what you really want to do about this." Her hand patted mine. "Don't give up yet, okay? You have time."

I nodded, took in a deep breath, and sat up a little straighter, hoping that having somewhat of a plan along with the changes to my physical demeanor would help my emotional state catch up. Then I blinked away the remaining tears and dried my cheeks. "Thanks."

She smiled and nudged me affectionately with her shoulder, then stood. "Alright, I need to get back to the field. You're still captain, though... and we have another week of practice. You should be there on Monday."

I stood with her, inhaling to try and clear the rest of the emotion. "I'll be there right now, just let me change."

"You don't need today?" she asked. "I can give Coach an excuse."

"No." I struggled to pull some workout clothes from my drawers and undress at the same time with alternating hands. "I'll have plenty of time to get lost in my own head this weekend. The least I could do is get some energy out."

I finished changing and followed Zulema out of the dorms, and we jogged together back to the soccer field. Practice was a good distraction, and I only noticed my mind was wandering during the idle moments

because of the occasional pangs in my chest. But Zulema was right – I was still captain – and I needed to keep myself as present as possible for the last few practices before campus closed for the holidays. It kind of made me wish we had practice over the weekend too, because, without it, there was nothing to break up the length of time I had to spiral into overthinking. I couldn't even decide if I was glad that Monica had left Thursday night after her last final. At least if my roommate was still at school, I wouldn't be free to just sit on my bed and stare at my wall without feeling weird about it.

Which is what I did. All day Saturday. Alternating between lying in bed to stare at the ceiling and sitting up to watch the wall, all while I did nothing but think, think, think. And it was miserable. And it didn't get me anywhere, because as soon as I started thinking that maybe I had it figured out, and I should just call Morgan, I started wondering if I'd messed up too badly. If I'd broken her heart or her trust and now *she'd* be the one who was afraid to be in a long distance relationship.

Eventually I couldn't take just sitting there with my own thoughts anymore, so I looked up lecture videos on my laptop about relationships, and then got distracted with a cat video in the recommended list because I thought I should reward myself with thirty seconds of serotonin after being so miserable. Then, before I knew it, I'd been sitting there for an hour watching animals be cute. And it felt great, until I remembered what I'd been trying to distract myself from.

I shut my laptop and reached for my phone. I opened my text messages and clicked on Morgan's name, but quickly exited before I could even type one letter. My thumb found the photos instead, and I scrolled through each picture we'd taken together, until I reached the ones from our first date. My eyes filled with tears as I flipped back and forth between them. I already missed her smile. And her affection. And her voice. And if we hadn't broken up, I could just call her and ease the ache, but I couldn't because I was stupid and let my fear get the best of me.

I dropped my hand and phone into my lap and leaned my head back against the wall, telling myself that crying for the millionth time in one day wasn't going to fix anything. I was in the middle of getting that under control when a knock sounded on my door. Thinking it was ZuZu coming to check on me, I didn't bother taking a moment to make it look like I hadn't just been crying. When I swung the door open and it was Steph, I wished I had.

Her eyes left the floor and met mine, and then they narrowed with concern. “Are you okay?”

“It’s really not a good time, Steph.”

“Did something happen with Morgan?” she asked. I started to close the door on her. “Wait,” she begged, “I won’t ask about her, I’m sorry, just wait.” I waited. “Can I come in?”

I stared at her to make it look like I was considering, but really, my mind was already desperate to check out. She furrowed her eyebrows in plea, though, and I sighed, stepped aside, and opened the door wider.

She came in and I closed the door behind her, asking, “What do you want?”

“I’m leaving tonight for winter break,” she said, “and I don’t know if I’ll have any classes with you, or see you, next semester.”

“Okay?”

She watched me for a few moments before taking in a deep breath. “We don’t have to be friends, and I know I could’ve been better to you when we were together, and I’m sorry. But... there’s something you said that’s been bugging me, and I don’t want to not see you next semester and graduate and never talk to you again without a chance to set it right.”

I dropped my head back and sighed to the ceiling. “Is this about you calling me boring? Can’t we just forget about it?”

“No,” she said, “because you brought it up six months after we broke up like you haven’t forgotten it.” She looked at me, and I shrugged as if to say, ‘and?’ “I didn’t call you boring.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “You did. You said you were bored.”

“Yeah, because I was depressed, Audrey. I was bored with everything.”

That stopped my rising annoyance in its tracks as I just stood there, trying to process. She’d never seemed depressed. She always wanted to go out and have a good time. Hang out with friends, party, drink, like she was having the time of her... Oh. Like she wanted distractions.

“Steph, I...” I felt stupid. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

She shrugged gently. “It’s not like I said anything the right way when I broke up with you. I just... I was at my worst, and I was having such a hard time separating my emotions that I couldn’t even begin to describe them to you.”

“I know the feeling,” I murmured. “How come you never said anything?”

“I thought you wouldn’t understand,” she said. “Or you’d want to help too much when it was something I needed to figure out. Plus, you always have your shit together, and your answer to everything was to just try harder.”

“Steph,” I said, holding my arms out with amusement, “I’m a fucking disaster.”

She barked out a laugh that was full of relief and held-back emotion. “You are, aren’t you?”

We both laughed as I nodded, and since I could see that she needed it, I extended my held-out arms. She came forward and gave me a hug, and I said, “Thanks for clearing the air. I actually was holding onto it.”

“I know,” she said, letting me go and taking a step back. “So, let me just say it outright, so there’s no more miscommunication: You’re not boring, I never thought you were boring. You’re pretty awesome, actually, we just weren’t right for each other.”

“Are you breaking up with me? Again?”

“You’ll get over it,” she teased, and we both smiled at each other. “I feel better about all of this, too. Thanks for letting me say it.” I gave a small nod of acknowledgment, but the distraction of the conversation was starting to wear off, and she saw that on my face. “I hope whatever’s going on with you and Morgan turns out okay.”

I sighed as my shoulders sank. “She had to go back to Oregon,” I explained. “She was okay with long distance, but...” I met Steph’s eyes, and she gave me a knowing and sympathetic smile that prompted me to finish, “I got scared.”

She hummed, and was quiet while she considered that. Then she asked, “Can I be brutally honest with you? You know, since we’re not friends.” I nodded. “You can be a bit of a control freak.”

“Why aren’t we friends, again?” I asked sarcastically.

She chuckled. “Seriously, though. What were you scared of? Her breaking up with you?” I nodded again. “So... you took control of a situation that felt out of your control by breaking up with her first?”

“No, that’s not-” But I stopped, and took a few moments to really think about that before whispering, “What the fuck...”

“And it doesn’t feel any better, does it?” she asked rhetorically. All I could do was stare at her in surprise. “You want my advice?”

“Actually... yeah.”

“There are some things you’ll be able to control,” she said, “and some things you won’t. You can’t control how she’s going to feel about you, not even when she’s *here*. That’s just facts. But what you can control is whether or not you give your all to a relationship that you clearly care about.” She paused, and her gaze fell briefly. “That’s something I always regretted with you, you know? Not being able to walk away and say that I did everything I could.”

But I shook my head and offered a comforting smile. “You were depressed. I was in the dark. I think we both did the best we could at the time.”

“Are you doing your best now?”

I looked down at my feet, unable to keep fresh tears from rising in my eyes. “I thought I was. But now I don’t know.” I met her eyes again and wiped at mine. “Thank you, Steph.” She nodded. “No, really. Thank you.”

She smiled and reached out to touch my shoulder. “I’m rooting for you. You guys seemed good together.”

“Thanks,” I said sincerely, and when she headed for me and the door, I opened it for her. “I hope I’ll see you around next semester.”

“Me too,” she smiled. “Have a good Christmas.”

“You too.”

I closed the door behind her with a renewed sense of determination. But as much as I wanted to talk to Morgan, Zulema had also been right. I needed to figure myself out before I made this situation any worse. And, thanks to Steph, I had a place to start instead of going back to staring at the walls for inspiration.

Ironically enough, I wanted to try getting control of my issues with control. Thank god for the internet...

Chapter 21

Zulema closed her locker and, even though she wouldn't look right at me, I felt every glance out of the corner of her eye. I knew what she was wondering, even if she hadn't asked since Monday.

"I decided," I said, and she immediately threw herself backward onto the bench beside me. "I don't want to lose her, even if it means we have to work our asses off for each other while she's in Oregon."

ZuZu grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. "So, are you going to call her? Or what?"

I shrugged. "Her surgery was only two days ago. I don't want to call and bombard her with this conversation if she's still really out of it."

"Text, then? To see how she's feeling?"

"Text." I nodded and pulled my phone out of my duffle bag while Zulema stood and leaned back against the lockers to give me some privacy. But I was suddenly nervous. I hadn't talked to Morgan in almost a week, and I had no idea if she even wanted to hear from me. Or if she was ready to talk about us.

Wanting to get a feel for how she felt about even talking to me in the first place, I typed out a quick, 'Hey... are you still mad at me?' But the moment I hit 'send,' I was flooded with the mortifying realization of exactly how stupid that was.

"Shit." It was too late to take it back. Shit, shit, shit. I jumped off the bench, and in my horror, I released the phone from my hands and watched it land face down on the floor. "No, god, ZuZu, I messed it up. *Shit.*"

"*What the hell, Audrey?*" she asked, bending down to pick up my phone. "What'd you do?"

"I said, 'are you still mad at me?'" I took my phone from her as she planted her forehead in her palm. My screen was shattered, but it was still on, and as I looked at it, I saw three dots appear to let me know Morgan was replying. "*She's typing.*"

Zulema swiveled to my side as we both stared at the fractured screen, waiting for her message. The dots blinked for almost a whole minute,

disappeared, started for another few seconds, and then disappeared again.

They didn't come back, and no message appeared. My heart sank.

"She's not going to answer," I murmured. I tapped rapidly on the screen to type out an apology for the insensitive way of starting a conversation, but my phone wasn't reading the input. *I'd fucking broken it.* "No, no, no." I tapped harder. Still, nothing. "SHIT."

I waved my arm, intent on flinging my useless phone into my open locker, but Zulema caught my hand before I could release it. "Probably not going to help," she said.

I dropped back onto the bench and buried my face in my hands with a groan. "I'm such an idiot."

"Alright, look," Zulema set my phone gently in the locker and sat beside me, "you said yourself that she might still be out of it. I bet she's on painkillers, and probably really tired."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"So, give her a little more time to rest and process that you're ready to talk." She squeezed me around the shoulders. "It's not the end of the world yet, okay?"

"I'll do anything," I whispered.

"I know," she said, giving me another gentle hug. "And when you finally talk to her, you can make sure she knows that."

I nodded, and Zulema patted my shoulder affectionately before standing up to finish getting ready for practice. I did the same, and went through the motions on the field while doing my best not to lose myself in worry about what Morgan was thinking. At least with the screen still on, I could see that she didn't text me back, and by the time I got a new phone Friday morning, I was afraid to try again.

I still had no idea exactly how to start, or if by not texting me back she was letting me know that she needed space. The one thing I thought I knew was that I couldn't just text. I had to call her.

But the prospect of it had me anxious, and I'd already depleted the small amount of packing I had to keep me busy. The last thing I wanted to do then was sit in my dorm room, but I couldn't leave for home yet because Zulema and I hadn't exchanged Christmas gifts. It would be another two hours before she could swing by and get her present, so I decided that instead of being stagnant and letting my mind get carried away, I'd go for a run.

I changed into workout clothes and headed out, jogging in the direction of town rather than sticking to the trails around campus. It worked as well as it always did. The music kept me from fixating on the stupid text I'd sent and all the unknowns surrounding Morgan's feelings. Worries about whether we'd ever be able to recover our relationship from this weren't much more than fleeting thoughts after I reminded myself to focus on breathing and got lost in the music again. I ran for a good thirty minutes without venturing too far from school before I'd passed Fraternity Row and came to a stop outside of a diner. Morgan's secret diner, where Pip made the best milkshakes in the world.

Once I stopped, I stood there for a minute with my hands on my hips, catching my breath as my eyes wandered around the inside. Pip normally worked the night shift, so when my eyes caught hers from inside, it scared me enough that my heart kicked into overdrive. I almost looked away out of embarrassment at being caught, but she waved for me to come in, so I took my earbuds out and paused the music, and I walked in.

She was too busy with the lunch crowd to come over and talk to me, but she gestured to the opposite end of the diner, and my eyes followed the motion and landed on Morgan's mom. Daisy was sitting in a booth with an untouched sandwich and a cup of coffee, but my feet were planted. I'd barely ever talked to her, and for all I knew she didn't really want to talk to me. But my eyes wandered from her back to Pip, and Pip's head gave an encouraging nod toward the table. Seeing as I'd already been caught, I didn't know what else to do. I wandered over and stood beside the table.

"Hi, Miss Daisy," I said quietly.

She looked up and, while she appeared as tired as she always did, she gave a small smile when she recognized me. "Audrey, hi. Do you want to sit?"

"Um." I glanced around awkwardly, but I was already there, and at that point it would've seemed ruder not to. "Okay."

She was holding something small and shiny in one hand, and lifted her coffee cup to her lips with the other as I sat across from her. "How are you?" she asked, setting her cup back down.

"Fine," I said with a tiny smile, even though I was twisting my earbud wire between my fingers under the table as an outlet for my discomfort. "I was just out for a run. I'm going home for the holidays today."

"That's good."

There were a few moments of silence before I realized it would be polite to ask, “How are you?”

“Okay,” she answered, but she hesitated and looked down at the shiny thing in her hand, and when she looked up and saw that I’d followed her gaze, she held it up with an embarrassed chuckle. “One day sober.”

It was a sobriety chip, and my next smile was genuine. “That’s great. How do you feel?”

“Exhausted,” she said lightly, but her face fell, and she stared down at her hands as she rubbed the chip with her thumb. She was pensive for a while before she sighed. “To be honest, Audrey, guilt about letting Morgan go cuts a little deeper without a drink.”

My brow furrowed, and I sat there long enough in stunned silence that she finally looked up at me. “I don’t-” I cleared my throat. “Why would you feel guilty about that?”

“She never fought me about anything as hard as she fought to stay here,” she said. “If I’d gotten back on my feet instead of wasting time; got sober, got a job... I could’ve paid for school.” She blew a hard puff through her lips. “She wouldn’t be ignoring my phone calls.”

“It’s not all your fault.” My eyes dropped. I’d had no idea Morgan had fought so hard to stay, and all I’d done was panic and shut down. “I messed up too,” I whispered. “I got scared and pushed her away, but that’s not what I wanted.”

Daisy didn’t say anything at first, and I was too hurt and ashamed to look up at her, but eventually she took in a heavy breath. “She watched me hold on for a lot of years when I should’ve let go. She’s good at hiding it, but she’s so scared of ending up like her dad and me that she’s quick to let go, I’ve seen her do it. But she held on tighter to you than she ever did before.” I finally looked up at her, and she gave me a sad smile. “I don’t know what you said to her before she left... whatever it was, I guess you hit the eject button.”

“It was my turn to fight for her, and I didn’t.” I shrugged. “Now I don’t know what to say to convince her I’m ready. Or if it’s too late.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned,” she said, “it’s that you have to say what’s in your heart. Even the scary things. The not-so-pretty things.”

I nodded thoughtfully, and we sat there for another few moments in silence before I gestured toward the coin in her hand. “She’ll be proud of

you, when you tell her.” She smiled her thanks, and I slid to the edge of the seat as I said, “I should get going.”

“It was nice to see you,” she said. “Merry Christmas.”

“You too.”

I stood and waved to Pip on my way out of the diner, and then I put my earbuds back in and jogged back to campus. There was just enough time before Zulema would come over for me to shower. So I grabbed my stuff and took it to the bathroom, got clean, and was rounding the corner back to my room at the same time as ZuZu was coming down the hall to it.

She passed over the gift bag she was holding when she reached me and said, “You’re not allowed to open it until Christmas.”

“But I can peek?” I teased.

She followed me into the room. “If you so much as shake that bag, I’m returning it to the store.”

“Fine.” I grabbed a wrapped present off my bed and gave it to her. “Then you can’t-” She shook it instantly, and I couldn’t help but laugh, “Are you serious right now?”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a grin, “I still have no idea what it is.”

I rolled my eyes. “So, you’re going to meet Rodney’s family for Christmas, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, “I’m actually a little nervous.”

“What? They’re going to love you.”

“I hope so.”

“If they don’t, they’re crazy.”

She smiled gratefully and glanced around at my packed suitcase. “You talk to Morgan yet?”

I shook my head. “I’m actually going to call her before I leave.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Do you want me to stick around for a bit? For emotional support?”

“No,” I said, slinging my arm around her shoulders and setting my head against hers. “Go be with your boyfriend. Tell him I say Merry Christmas.”

“Alright,” she turned to give me a proper hug. “Good luck. Love you.”

“Love you too.” I walked her to the door, and before closing it as she headed down the hall, I called, “Drive safe!”

“You too!”

She disappeared, and I turned to stare into my room for a minute in thought. I needed to build up the nerve to call Morgan, so instead of doing that right away, I busied myself with taking my duffel bag and suitcase out to my car. But other than my backpack, that was really all of my luggage. I'd have the same dorm room next semester, so I didn't need to take *everything* I owned out of it. All that was left was my backpack with my laptop, and there wasn't anything else standing in the way of that phone call.

Well, nothing but me. And I wasn't sure if I was ready, but the longer I waited, the more time Morgan had to think that I really didn't want to be with her.

So I grabbed my phone and sat down on my empty bed. I stared at it for several seconds, unlocked it, and stared at it again. I tapped on the phone and scrolled to Morgan's name, and then stared some more. My heart was racing, and even though I'd had days to prepare, I still didn't know what I wanted to say. But maybe hearing her voice and talking to her would help me figure it out.

Before I could lose the resolve, I clicked on her name and put the phone to my ear. It rang. And rang. And rang, with my heart beating harder every time, until it finally went to voicemail and my pulse was so heavy I thought I might choke.

"This is Morgan," her voicemail said, "sorry I couldn't answer. Leave a message and I'll get back to you someday."

A beep, and it took me several additional seconds to finally say, "Hey, it's me." *Shit, what now?* "I, uh," *her surgery*, "I wanted to see how you were doing. I hope the surgery went okay, I... I know the text that I sent you the other day was... it was stupid. I didn't know how to start, and I should've just asked how your surgery went but then I freaked out and dropped my phone and the screen broke so I couldn't tell you that it was stupid and-"

And I realized I was rambling, so I stopped myself short to take a deep breath. And then another. And it helped. It was like all the racing my mind had been doing for over a week was finally culminating into something productive. It finally slowed in the clear kind of way that, for the first time, I thought I could say what I wanted to.

"When I got sent to voicemail, I was just going to say I was sorry, and ask you to call me back. But... that wouldn't be good enough, would it?"

Because why would you even bother calling me back if I couldn't prove to you that I was ready to fight for this? That I was ready to speak from the heart? So, here it is."

I took another few moments to breathe. To steady the racing of my heart and the chronic fear that was rising in the pit of my stomach. And I swallowed it down.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," I said. "I never... I don't take risks. I plan and organize and control so that I always know what to expect. But then you happened, and I fell for you hard and fast and it was so unexpected. And then, just when I let myself get comfortable, when I finally started letting myself expect things from us, you had to leave. I just... I was so afraid of losing what little control I thought I had that I panicked, and in trying to keep myself from getting hurt, I ended up hurting us both."

I sniffled, and took another moment of pause to get control of the brimming tears.

"I was wrong about not being able to do this, because it doesn't matter how far away you are. It doesn't matter if I make stupid decisions with the idea that I'm protecting myself. None of it can change the fact that I'm in love with you. So, I'm saying sorry, and I'm promising that if you give me another chance then I will never let you down like this again. I'll do whatever it takes to prove that to you. If that means being long distance for a year, I can do that. I'll come visit during the summer. God, I'll... I'll move to Oregon after I graduate and stay there until you're done. Or as long as you want me to stay, if that's what it takes.

"Till then, I'm doing the most terrifying thing I can think of and giving up control. You don't have to call me back. You don't have to move back, or make any promises about us. Whatever happens, as much as this scares me, I trust you, and I'm ready to give you *everything* I have because-" I shut my eyes and took in a deep breath. "Because you're it, Morgan... You're endgame."

I sighed, and a final few moments of silence passed while I thought about whether I needed to say anything else. But that was everything I had in my heart, and I ended the call without another word. I'd taken a risk, and all I could do was hope it'd be enough.

Chapter 22

Christmas night I was sitting on the couch in my parents' living room, bundled up in the soccer-themed onesie they'd gotten me. The hood was pulled up over my head while I leaned back against Anna's side, taking comfort from the extra heat of the puppy onesie she was wearing. Wayne was sitting on the other side of her, and we were all cozied up under a blanket watching a Christmas-themed romance movie that was cheesy as hell but still made me feel awful. And when I sighed heavily for what must've been the thirtieth time and checked my phone, Anna leaned forward to grab the remote.

"That's it," she said. "I can't let you be this miserable on Christmas. Let's go."

She gestured for Wayne to move, and he stood without question while she transferred off the couch and into her wheelchair.

"Where are we going?" I asked, and since she'd moved while I'd been leaning back against her, I let myself fall pitifully onto the seat.

"To get you some fresh air," she answered, and called, "Mom, Dad! We're going to look at the neighbors' Christmas lights, want to come?"

They both came in from the kitchen, but Mom shook her head and said, "I just put the pie into the oven," and Dad quickly added that he'd stay with her. "But I can pour some hot cider to take with you?"

"Yes, please," Wayne agreed, and followed them back to the kitchen to get our drinks.

Anna just sat there, staring at me lying motionless for almost a minute before finally saying, "Come on. Let's go. Up. And no phone."

"What?" I whined, sluggishly sitting up. "What if Morgan calls and I miss it?"

She sighed, and I could see in her eyes that she wanted to say how it'd been days without a response, but she didn't. Instead, she said, "Alright, fine. But it doesn't leave your pocket unless you're getting a call."

To show my compliance, I stood and dropped my phone into a pocket of my onesie. After she nodded her approval, I followed her to the front

door, where we put on our warm boots and jackets, and then held the travel mugs of cider Wayne brought so he could do the same.

I knew Anna wanted to get me outside because she hoped it would cheer me up a bit, but as we started our walk down the street, all I could do was wonder what Morgan was doing. Was it as cold in Oregon as it was here? Was there snow lining the sidewalks and covering people's yards? Did it add to the ambiance of the lights they had on their houses? Why hadn't she called me back yet?

"It's only been a few days," Anna said encouragingly, pulling me from my thoughts. "Maybe she needs more time to process."

My head drooped. "I just thought she'd at least acknowledge me with a text or something."

"Well," Wayne added, "it took a while to know what *you* wanted to say, right?"

"Yeah," I said, blowing a hard breath through my lips.

All three of us were quiet for a bit, only half paying attention to the lights on the houses we passed. Then Anna said, "You remember when me and Wayne almost broke up?"

"Oh yeah," I said in recollection. "You got scared of the physical stuff."

"Because he was my first relationship after the accident," she finished, nodding. "Well, I apologized in person, but he still took time away to think about it before answering me."

I glanced past her at Wayne. "How come?"

He hummed, taking a few moments to think back on it. "Her pushing me away that hard was the first time I realized how scared she actually was. But, when she came back and said that she'd messed up, that didn't mean she'd gotten over the fear completely, you know?" I nodded my sincere understanding of that. "So, even though at that point I knew she was going to keep communicating with me, the issue became if I could give her what she needed. All I wanted was to make her feel comfortable, safe, and happy, but if I couldn't do that based on the needs she'd finally communicated to me, then I didn't want to do more harm than good."

"And you realized you could do it," I said.

"I realized I loved her enough that I *would* do it," he answered, "no matter what."

“And he was perfect,” Anna said with a grin, leaning over to wrap her arms around his hips. He chuckled and hugged her back.

“So,” I prompted, “you think maybe Morgan is doing something like that?”

Both of them shrugged, and Anna said, “I think that you took the time you needed to be sure when you called her, and she deserves patience while she does the same.”

“Alright,” I sighed, “point taken. I can be patient.”

At least, I did my best to be patient, and it actually did help a lot that Anna had gotten me out of the house. With my best effort toward a more positive attitude, I was able to walk with them and focus more on the lights than the creeping worry that Morgan simply wouldn't call at all. I was able to genuinely laugh for the first time all day, and able to be wooed by the annual laser light show from a house a couple of streets over.

We didn't go much farther than that, seeing as Mom had been cooking pie and we wanted to get some while it was still warm. But Anna and Wayne's talk had given me enough confidence that I'd almost forgotten about my phone completely. We were back in the dining room and at the table with Mom and Dad before I realized that I hadn't even checked it since we'd left for the walk.

As Mom scooped a slice of apple pie onto my plate, I took my phone out and gasped. Everyone stopped and looked at me in concern, and I flipped my phone to show them the screen. “Morgan called and I missed it!” The pocket of my onesie must've been too baggy for me to feel my phone vibrate, but there was a missed call and one new voicemail. My heart was racing as I shot out of my seat and toward the kitchen, calling behind me, “Be right back!”

I went into my voicemail, hit Morgan's message, and put the phone to my ear as I reached the kitchen.

“Hey,” her voice said, “I got your message,” and it was so hard to tell just by her neutral tone how she felt. But at least she didn't sound upset. “The surgery went good. I'm not supposed to bear weight yet, but I can get around with crutches, so, that's nice...” There was a brief pause. “It's probably good you didn't answer, actually. I can't really talk right now. I just didn't want you to think I was ignoring you.” She took a deep breath. “So yeah, um, don't worry about calling me back. We'll talk soon though, okay? I promise.” There was another pause as her message sounded like it

was coming to an end, but then she said with an audible smile in her voice, “Oh, and uh, Merry Christmas, Caplan.”

Every part of me was frozen with excitement except for my hand, which slid the time bar back to replay the part where she said, “Oh, and uh, Merry Christmas, Caplan,” at least three more times.

Then I screamed, sprinting into the dining room to see that I’d scared my parents and Wayne onto their feet. My dad took one look at the joy on my face and sighed, “Christ, Audrey.”

“She called me ‘Caplan’,” I told them with a grin.

“And that’s... good?” my mom asked.

I nodded rapidly, rushing over to sit down again beside Anna, and she gave me an excited hug. There was no way after that that I could sit still, and having a sugar-filled slice of apple pie and some coffee didn’t help one bit. But I was happy. Morgan hadn’t said much, but she’d said enough that I felt like things would be okay, and I started letting myself get my hopes up. I daydreamed the rest of Christmas night, and all of the next day, about what she’d say when she called me again.

Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten my hopes up so much if I’d known how long it was going to be before we talked ‘soon.’ Because the day after Christmas passed, and then the next day, and so on, until New Year’s Eve and I still hadn’t heard anything. Part of those daydreams was being able to video chat with her at midnight, but I hadn’t received so much as a text.

“Should I just call her?” I asked around the table, as all five of us sat there playing Blackjack with our party hats and champagne, while music played in the background.

“No,” Anna said.

I looked around for other opinions, and while my mom and dad refused to answer, Wayne gave a pursed-lip shake of his head. I sighed and motioned for Mom – who was playing the dealer – to hit me. The new card put me over twenty-one, and I groaned as I leaned back in my seat.

“Dude,” Anna said, sliding the champagne bottle across the table to me. “Have more, you’re stressing me out.” Her phone chimed, and she glanced at it quickly before returning to the conversation. “Speaking of champagne, I think we need more.”

“You’re not even drinking,” I said, pouring some into my glass out of the nearly full bottle. “And Dad hasn’t either.”

“I will when I get back,” Dad said, folding his hand and standing up. “I’ll go get some more from the store.”

As he left the table, I called after him, “I’m stealing your poker chips.”

“I was losing anyway,” he called back.

He disappeared out the front door as I combined his chips with mine. For everyone’s sake, I tried my best to relax, and even took a few hefty gulps of champagne to help the process. We also switched to a livelier game of Spoons, which kept me distracted for a while.

Before long, Dad had come back through the front door and asked loudly, “Can somebody help me?”

We were all so intently watching each other to see who’d steal a spoon that nobody responded. Dad hurried into the kitchen, asking toward the dining room, “Hello?”

I glanced around, and when still nobody responded, I set my cards down and stood. “I got it.” I met Dad in the kitchen and followed him back toward the front door, asking as we walked, “How many bottles of champagne did-”

But I stopped in my tracks when we rounded the corner. There were no champagne bottles, and he definitely didn’t even go to the store. Instead, Morgan was standing there. *Morgan*. Right there. Inside the house. Leaning with her crutches against the wall by the front door. I stared at her, wide-eyed for only a few short seconds before a wave of relief crashed through me and I ran forward, throwing my arms around her neck.

She huffed a breath of laughter as her arms circled my waist, and she said, “It’s good to see you too.”

My eyes found a duffel bag on the floor, and I pulled away from her to look at my dad. “You picked her up,” I said.

“From the airport,” he confirmed.

I looked back at Morgan. “How...”

“ZuZu gave me Anna’s number,” she said.

I turned a squinted glare on Anna, who’d come to peek around the corner, and she shook her head. “Don’t kill me,” she said, “I’ve only known she was coming for a couple of days.”

My eyes found Morgan’s as I began to process what all of this meant. “How long are you staying? What about my message? What are we- What do we-”

I had so much to say that I didn't know where to start, and even though Morgan inhaled to say something, she stopped and glanced past me. I followed the look to find that the rest of my family was nosily peeking around the corner at us.

My dad chuckled and nodded toward the hall. "Why don't you girls go talk in the office? I'll take Morgan's bag upstairs."

"Thanks," I told him, and Morgan followed me down the hall, into Anna and Wayne's office room where we could close the door.

She set her crutches on the floor beside the pullout bed and sat on the edge of it, then patted the spot next to her. I dropped down at her side while my mind was already racing a mile a minute. The last thing I wanted to do was miss the chance to make sure that we fixed everything, and I'd barely sat down before I started rambling.

"You got my message, right?" I asked, even though I already knew that she had. "I'm so sorry, Morgan. I was stupid and I never wanted any of this to happen. I'll do whatever I have to-"

"Audrey," she interrupted with an amused smile.

"Just," I finished urgently, "just tell me what I have to do."

"Did you mean what you said?" she asked. "About moving to Oregon, and visiting, and all of that."

"Yes." I took her hands in earnest. "All of it. When do you want me to come? Spring break? You can show me around, so I know what areas to look at if I move there and-"

"Audrey," she laughed.

"Sorry," I murmured as my cheeks tinted. "Anything you want, it's yours."

She shrugged, glancing down at our hands while she ran her fingers across my palm. "I just want you to tell me you love me again."

By the time she looked up at me again, I was grinning, and I let go of her hands to cup her face and pull her into a long, gentle kiss as happy, relieved tears filled my eyes. Then I set my forehead against hers and said through a sniffle, "I love you, Morgan Bailey."

She gave me a soft peck and leaned back, reaching up to stroke her thumb across my cheek as she examined my face. "These are good tears, right?"

I nodded and pulled away from her hand to wipe at the moisture, blinking away as much of it as I could. "I was so scared I'd lost you

forever.”

“Well, I have some good news for you.” She paused just long enough for me to meet her gaze, and then said, “I love you too.”

I laughed tearfully and dropped forward again, setting my forehead against hers for a few moments before she kissed me one more time. She also kissed the back of my hand and then held it between us, but before she could say whatever was on her mind, I said, “I’m sorry, Morgan. I need to know that you know it.”

“I do,” she said, giving a sympathetic smile as her hand squeezed mine. “But I don’t want you to feel guilty about this forever. All I want, Audrey, is for you to talk to me. Always.” I nodded, but it wasn’t good enough yet, because she said almost sternly, “You *cannot* let something this big build up. It can be on your time, but it has to be before it’s too late, alright? You can’t push it down. Never again, okay?”

I swallowed hard and nodded once more, having to rapidly blink away a fresh bout of tears. “Never again,” I said. “I swear.”

“Okay,” she said softly, and held out her arms. “Come here.”

I hugged her, and she hugged me, and it lasted so long that I thought I might start crying again. It just felt *so good* to be in her arms. To have her here, and to know that I hadn’t lost her.

“I love you,” she whispered as she held me. “And I forgive you, okay? We’re going to be okay.”

I nodded and sniffled away the threat of more tears. “I love you too.”

She smiled as she let me go and pulled away, and after I’d regained control of my fragile emotions, she held out her hand and said, “Go ahead. I know you’re dying to ask me.”

I put my own hand into hers, asking with a soggy laugh, “How long are you staying?”

Her smile widened to her beaming, lopsided grin. “For good.”

“No,” I said in disbelief, but I grinned too. “Oh my god, really?” She nodded, and I shrieked and pulled her into another brief hug. “Wait, but how? Did your dad change his mind?”

“Yes and no,” she answered. “I had to do something really drastic first...”

My brow furrowed. “...What did you do?”

“You can’t freak out,” she said. “Or feel bad, or anything like that.” I nodded, and she gave me an innocent grimace as she said, “I sold the

Harley.”

“The sculpture?” I asked, rising to my feet in shock. “What? No. Morgan, no. You wanted that to be your window display. You worked so hard on it. Can you get it back?”

“Audrey,” she said, grabbing my hand to pull me back down. “You said you wouldn’t freak out.”

I sighed and tried to relax. “You shouldn’t have done that for me,” I told her. “I meant it when I said we could be long distance.”

“I know,” she said. “But I didn’t do it just for you. I did it for you, and for my mom, and for me. I did it because I like it here. Because *I* want to be here.”

I nodded, and tried to stifle further protests because I had to trust that this is what she wanted. “So, it was enough to pay for school?”

“Almost.”

“Holy shit,” I murmured.

She laughed, “Yeah, as pissed as my dad was, he was also pretty impressed.”

“He was mad that you sold it?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He was mad because, deep down, he thought that all of this – wanting to stay here, not wanting to finish school in Oregon, selling the Harley – he thought it was all just to get away from him. He was mad because he was scared.”

I gave a pursed and sympathetic smile. “Sounds like you guys talked it out though.”

“Not at first,” she said, and huffed with amusement, “it was Jane, actually.” And my eyebrows rose with interest. “I could tell she’d been trying to stay out of everything, but when she saw that I was willing to sell something that meant so much to me just to get back here, she stepped in. She talked to me, and then she talked to him. I honestly don’t know if me and Dad’s relationship would’ve ever been the same without her.”

I brought her hand to my lips, smiling through the kiss I pressed to the back. “I’m really glad it worked out.”

“Me too,” she agreed, watching me with an endeared gaze for a few moments before she remembered she’d been explaining. “Anyway, after Dad and I talked for a long time, he finally realized he was pushing me away instead of keeping me close. Sound familiar?” She smiled amusedly at my toothy grimace. “So, he agreed to pay for school here.”

“And the Harley?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she sighed, “it was kind of too late to unsell it. But it’s okay! It gave me a good chunk of money to put toward opening a studio, and I seem to recall you saying I could use a nude sculpture of you as a window piece?”

“No!” I shrieked, laughing. “I did not!”

“Oh, you didn’t?” she teased. “Hm. Must’ve been someone else.”

“Shut up,” I giggled, and she laughed and pecked me on the cheek. We both smiled at each other for a little bit longer before mine faded. “I just want you to know,” I said seriously, “selling the Harley never crossed my mind. I never would’ve asked you to do that.”

She nodded. “It really didn’t cross my mind either. Not until I was already in Oregon, but then... you know...” She shrugged, giving me an apologetic smile. “It didn’t seem like something I should do if you weren’t all in.”

“I get it,” I said. “I wouldn’t have done it for me either.” She nodded, playing with my fingers for a minute while we sat there in comfortable silence. Then I asked, “Have you talked to your mom?” And she passed me a curious look about how I’d know. “I stopped by the diner one day, she was there. She said she felt bad that she hadn’t gotten back on her feet to help keep you here.”

“Oh.” Morgan’s head fell. “That was my fault. Between you, and her, and my dad, I was at my wits end before I left, and I said some things that... well... I kind of meant, but that could’ve been said a lot nicer than I actually did.”

I nodded my understanding. “Is she still doing good?”

“Yeah,” Morgan said, with a genuinely proud smile. “Still sober. She’s giving herself a little more time to recover before looking for a job, but she will soon.”

“That’s great,” I said happily, and then asked, “last question?” She consented, and I gestured to her leg. “How’s it healing?”

“Really well,” she answered. “I couldn’t bear weight when I called you, but I’m actually allowed to now. I just have to take it really easy.”

“Will you be able to do off-season practice next semester?”

“Maybe toward the end, but just running and some drills. No playing.” I pouted at that, and she added with exaggerated enthusiasm and a flex of her bicep, “I’ll hold your water, baby.”

“My girl,” I laughed, and we spent another minute staring happily at each other, because everything was just as it should be. We were okay, she was here, and everything was right. “You know, the most I was hoping for today was to get to video chat with you at midnight.”

“And leave my girlfriend without a New Year’s kiss?” she asked sarcastically.

I couldn’t help but grin, and it wasn’t just because she was here. She’d said ‘girlfriend,’ and even though we’d already used the ‘love’ word multiple times, it still felt really good to know that there was no mystery around our status. That even though I’d almost messed up beyond repair, it didn’t matter anymore. I was still her girlfriend, she loved me, and I knew that she’d do anything for me. Just like I finally knew, beyond a doubt, that I’d have done anything for her, fear be damned.

“So,” I said, “should we go and ring in the new year with that kiss?”

“Let’s do it,” she agreed with a smile.

I stood and offered my hand. And as she took it, and I walked with her back to the dining room, I knew that I wasn’t going to let fear get in the way ever again. Because that fear would never again be greater than my knowledge that Morgan Bailey was everything. It would never be greater than my knowledge that cocky, silly, golden-hearted Morgan Bailey was it: endgame.

Epilogue

Another semester over and school was at its end. My parents, Anna, and Wayne had driven down together for graduation for a few days, but tonight was all about Morgan. So, when Dad texted me that they'd arrived at the dorms, I took one last look at myself in the mirror of my room. It was time for the annual art exhibit, where we'd *finally* get to see Morgan's senior project, and even though she'd told me that I could dress casually, I'd wanted to look nice for her. Especially since she had to dress up a bit. I wasn't dressed formal, by any means, but I had on nice black pants, black heels, and a fancy white blouse.

Satisfied with my outfit, I headed out and down to the car, saying, "Hey, hey," as I jumped into the backseat with Anna and Wayne.

"Excited?" Anna asked.

My dad also turned around to look at me from the passenger seat and said, "You look nice."

"Thanks," I smiled. "And yes. She hasn't even let me peek at her project yet."

"We got her these," Mom said as she pulled away from the dorms, gesturing to a bunch of yellow roses laid over the center console. "Do you think she'll like them?"

"She'll love them," I said.

She smiled, and we chatted a little bit about the coming graduation as we drove to a spot of campus that was closer to the exhibit. We parked just as ZuZu was calling me, so I answered as we all climbed out of the car.

"Hey," I said.

"We're out front of the building," ZuZu said, "where are you?"

"Just parked," I told her. "We'll be there in a minute."

We hung up, and my family and I made our short trek to the art building where ZuZu and Rodney were waiting for us. I introduced Rodney to the rest of my family while ZuZu and Anna shrieked and hugged and ZuZu made a huge deal out of Anna's massive baby bump. Then, while they were all exchanging pleasantries, I texted Morgan to let her know that

we'd arrived. She'd had to be at the building a lot earlier to help set up, and to meet with all the recruiters that came to visit with other students, even though she had her heart set on opening her own studio.

There was an excited hum amongst everyone in the building as we entered. From art students to students who'd just come to look, and even townsfolk who were here to see the art, everyone was talking happily and bustling from piece to piece in the massive exhibit area. Morgan managed to get away and meet us near the entrance, and even she was glowing with joy.

She hurried straight to me in her fancy black pants suit and gave me a hug and kiss before moving on to embrace my family, and then ZuZu and Rodney. "I'm so glad you could make it," she told them.

"Wouldn't miss it," my dad told her.

"These are for you," my mom added, extending the flowers.

"Thank you so much," Morgan said with a grin, taking the roses and inhaling deeply into them. "They're beautiful." She hugged them to her side and nodded inward toward the exhibit. "I've been struggling to keep my mom and Pip away from the sculptures, but they really want to see mine. You all want to come? Or look around a bit first?"

I took Morgan's hand in mine in response, and ZuZu said, "Let's see this super-secret project."

Morgan nodded, and led us all to where she'd left Daisy and Pip to come and greet us. I introduced my family to them, and then we all let Morgan lead us to where her sculpture was. She stopped us right in front of it, with a timid gesture and 'here you are.'

In true Morgan fashion, it was ceramic and realistic – about hip height and mostly unpainted. And while I hugged myself to Morgan's side, I watched her watching her mom for a reaction. It was a sculpture of them, or, a past them. Morgan couldn't have been more than ten in the piece, and sculpted-them were sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, arms extended and ceramic paint brushes in hand. They were painting a basketball-sized elephant, and while there was a little bit of cartoony stars and night sky painted on the elephant beneath their brushes, most of the color was elsewhere.

It was between them. Where their shoulders were touching, where their legs were touching, flowing upward into their faces and smiles. Tiny butterflies and flowers and rainbows, and bright bursts of swirling colors to

signify every ounce of joy that radiated from the exchange. It was a beautiful display of Morgan's fondness for what had to have been a memory, and, if the moisture growing in Daisy's eyes was any indication, she'd captured it perfectly.

"What do you think?" Morgan asked her mom. "Do you remember that day?"

"Oh, of course," Daisy said, her voice soggy, "I think it's my favorite piece you've ever done." And I let Morgan go so they could hug. "It's gorgeous," Daisy added, as they embraced for a long handful of moments before letting go so Daisy could continue to admire the sculpture.

Morgan stepped back and grinned at me, her cheeks a light pink because of the slight moisture that had grown in her own eyes, and I smiled in return and raised a hand to rub her back.

"You know," Pip said, "it's definitely better than the ceramic poop you leave around the house."

Morgan laughed, "Well that's a relief."

She stood at my side while my family, ZuZu, and Rodney walked around the sculpture to look at all sides, muttering their 'wow's and appraisals as they did. And I was proud that my family could finally see what Morgan was capable of.

"I think you've got your new window display," I told her.

She cocked her head, observing the sculpture while her smile slowly widened. Then she turned that magnificent smile on me. "Huh," she huffed happily, "I think you're right."

I kissed her on the cheek, and we all stood around for another minute looking at it before Morgan got another phone call. Her dad and Jane had also come in for the show and graduation, and with Morgan's guidance on the phone, they navigated through the exhibit and to us. There were some introductions all around, and some comfortingly polite greetings between Daisy, Ethan, and Jane. We waited around for a little longer so Ethan and Jane could admire Morgan's project, and then it was time to move on.

I didn't want to capitalize *all* of Morgan's time when she also had her parents to tour around, so I gave her one more kiss and then followed my own group throughout the exhibit to admire the other pieces with them. Morgan got to join us for a little while, and then she was whisked away again, but not before making sure that I'd call her before leaving with my family so that she could walk us out.

Once we'd finally exhausted all the other art that drew our eyes, I did call her, and we waited near the exit for her to meet up with us. She said goodbye to ZuZu and Rodney as we walked out, thanked my family for coming and said bye to them, and then they walked ahead of us to the car so we could have a minute alone.

"Your sculpture really was amazing," I told her, while we stopped at the edge of the parking lot.

"Yeah?" she asked humbly, and I nodded. "I've never felt so much pressure around a project, I'm glad it paid off."

"It was perfect. And I could tell your mom *really* loved it."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Everything just worked out so perfect. It's kind of surreal, you know?" She took my hand. "It meant even more that she could see it when she's been sober for so long, and that my dad and Jane could be here too and everything was okay."

"You deserve this," I told her. "You deserved tonight."

She smiled, and pulled me into a long, warm hug before letting me go again. "Before I let you go," she said, reaching into her pocket, "I wanted to show you something."

I waited for her to pull a few folded pieces of paper out of her pocket and pass them to me. I unfolded them and flipped through, looking at the handful of rental listings on the pages. "Ooh," I said, "for the studio?"

She gave something of a shy laugh and shook her head. "They're apartments." And my eyes widened with realization. "I know we've kind of talked about moving in together, but we never made any solid plans, and I thought after graduation we cou-" I threw my arms around her neck and cut her off with a kiss, feeling her grin through it until I finally let her go. "So that's a yes to solid plans?"

I nodded enthusiastically, flipping through the pages again with a newfound excitement about the listings. "Absolutely, yes."

She was smiling ear to ear, looking so happy about it that she didn't know what else to do other than to say, "Okay."

I stuffed the papers into a back pocket of my jeans so my hands were free, so I could grab her face and kiss her again before saying, "I love you."

"I love you too," she said. Then she glanced past me toward where my family was waiting in the car. "I'll let you go now, I guess."

"Okay," I chuckled, and kissed her one last time. "Have fun with your dad, okay? I'll see you in a few days."

She nodded, walking backward as she smiled at me and passed me a characteristically casual salute. “See you at graduation, Caplan.”



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