

GAME Plan



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ADRIANA LOCKE

GAME PLAN

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CONTENT WARNING

Dear Reader,

Your reading experience matters to me, and I want you to feel comfortable knowing what to expect before diving into Game Plan.

This story contains references to domestic violence in a character's past. **The abuse does not occur on the page**, but it is discussed as part of the character's backstory and emotional journey.

While Game Plan explores some difficult experiences, it is ultimately a story about love, trust, healing, and finding the courage to let someone in.

As always, this romance ends with a happily ever after.

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SYNOPSIS

A football player needs a fiancée. Too bad that his former friend with benefits—his sister's best friend—has benched him for good.

Finn Miller and Poppy Quinn from End Game are back in Game Plan.

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EXPOSÉ TOP STORY: MILLER MAKING MOVES

What do we love more than a hot guy? A hot guy with a baby, of course. And that's the move Finn Miller, tight end with the Illinois Legends, has made during this offseason.

Settle down. It's not *his* kid. Miller is still on the market.

(We join you in a collective sigh of relief.)

An eagle-eyed Exposé reader snapped these photos of Miller on a beach on Lake Michigan (cute baby cropped out because we're not assholes). We suspect the little girl is the daughter of Miller's sister, Layla, and his best friend, Legends wide receiver Branch Best.

If Miller is into role-playing, we're more than happy to call him Daddy.

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CHAPTER ONE

POPPY

“It’s way too people-y in here,” I mutter, practically strangling my carry-on bag.

A man in a business suit plows his way through the thick crowd. On a good day, I’d plant my feet and take up all the space I need. If I loathe one thing in life, it’s a man who thinks having a penis makes him superior. But today is not a good day, nor has it been a delightful week, and I fear that if I don’t get out of his way, I might trip the suit on purpose.

Or worse.

“Attention passengers traveling on Flight 1104 to Chicago,” a voice says overhead. It’s practiced and professional—void of any emotion. Somehow, I can still hear the bad news coming. “Unfortunately, our departure time has been pushed back again. We expect to begin boarding at five twenty with a departure time of six o’clock this evening. We apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your continued patience as we wait for Mother Nature to cooperate.”

You have to be kidding me.

I make my way to the windows, where there are arguably fewer people, which reduces my chance of being arrested. Rain comes down in sheets, rendering the tarmac nearly invisible as it pelts the glass sideways. The sky is so dark that it looks more like three in the morning than the afternoon, with occasional bolts of lightning illuminating the airport long enough to see the wind ripping across and through everything in its path.

The past few days have been a lot, and every muscle in my body bears the consequences. It's been one thing after another—seven days packed with a class reunion, an alumni banquet, and a hometown carnival. And when I wasn't doing any of those things, I was spending time hanging out and reminiscing with my mom and grandma.

A lot of tequila was consumed in the past week, and I'm paying the piper for it now. *Oof.*

I need a dark, quiet space where I can hide with my Kindle for a while.

"Is this seat taken?" I ask an older gentleman resembling a modern-day Santa Claus, hoping he's not as jolly as St. Nick. I love a positive, optimistic personality. But sometimes, you just want to rot with your own kind.

He looks up from a crossword puzzle. "No. Help yourself."

"Thanks."

I sit, groaning, and drop my bag at my feet. It hits the ground with a thud.

"Are you waiting on the flight to Chicago?" Santa asks.

"Aren't we all?"

He chuckles. "I think so. I'm Sam, by the way."

"I'm Poppy."

"It's nice to meet you, young lady."

You, too, but I really just wish I was home already.

I shift in my seat, thinking about the laundry that'll need to be washed because I didn't get to it at Mom's, and how there's nothing to eat in my refrigerator. That does nothing for my twitchiness.

Sam watches me out of the corner of his eye before placing his crossword puzzle on his lap. "Is everything okay? Forgive me if I'm intruding, but apparently, it's become a grandfather's trait."

"Yeah, everything is okay. I just had a few too many encounters with a man named Jose Cuervo, if you catch my drift."

He chuckles. "He's an old friend of mine. *Very old.* I don't play with him anymore."

"I think we're on the outs, too." I hold my stomach as it churns. "Sitting isn't agreeing with me. If you're going to be here for a while, would you mind watching my things if I put them on my chair? Seats are going like hotcakes with all the delays, and I don't want to lose mine."

"Sure thing. I'm not going anywhere until we board the plane."

“Great. Thanks, Sam.”

I haul my bag onto the chair and head toward the wall of windows again.

As much as I loved my visit to my hometown—and my soul needed it—I’m ready to go home. The life I’ve built for myself in Chicago is something I’m truly proud of and enjoy. My job pays me ridiculously well to do something that I’m great at and don’t particularly hate. My townhome is adorable and backs up to one of the only greenbelts in the area. And when I’m not busy, I have a *very* satisfying friends-with-benefits situation with Finn Miller.

My phone vibrates in my hand, snapping me back to the present. Layla’s name splashes across the screen, and I answer my best friend without thinking twice.

“Hey, you,” I say, smiling.

“Hey. Are you back yet?”

“Nope.” I glance around at the sea of bodies covering nearly every sittable surface. “I’m considering having a tent and pillow delivered and just setting up a residence by the candy shop.”

“Oh no. Is it that bad?”

I sigh. “My flight was supposed to leave at ten o’clock this morning, and I’m still here. I don’t think a plane has taken off or landed in like six hours.”

“That sucks. But how was your trip? I’ve been dying to hear about it. Did you have fun? Did you tell Mama Quinn that I said hi and that I love her?”

“I did, and she said to tell you hello and to send more pictures of Sunny. Aside from me, Mom said that your daughter is the cutest baby in the world.” *But of course, she did. Sunny is the sweetest little thing ever.*

Layla laughs.

“The trip was good,” I say, circling back to her question. “I saw a lot of people I haven’t seen in years. I’m happy to report that the assholes from high school all peaked in their teens and are now living the lives they deserve. And I would be remiss if I didn’t mention how impressive it sounded to tell them that I’m an assistant vice president of one of the biggest commercial insurance companies in the Midwest.”

“Bet you hated that.”

“I did not.” I grin even though she can’t see me. “I also made a point to find Mrs. Johnson and let her know that her prediction that I would, and I quote, *become nothing to be proud of*, was, in fact, wildly incorrect. That felt so damn good. Might’ve been the highlight of the whole trip, really.”

“Wait. A *teacher* said that to you?” she asks, horrified.

“Yup. Granted, she was having a very bad day thanks to the junior class in the biology room above us. But I still stand ten toes down that her comment was inappropriate.”

“*You think?* Did she get fired or something? Because that’s just wrong.”

“Nope, but I got my very first suspension.” I roll my eyes. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about that. I have a better story for you. A grenade sort of exploded by the cotton candy vendor, and I’m still picking shrapnel out of my brain all these days later.”

“I hope to God you’re not being literal.”

I laugh. “Do you know what I love most about this? It’s that you think that I could take a grenade to the head and still be coherent. I love your faith in my survival instincts.”

She sighs, making me smile.

Layla Miller is the best friend a girl could ever hope for. She’s funny and smart, loyal and kind. And she never expects me to be anything other than what I am, which is a beautiful quality to have.

“Okay, back to what I was saying,” I say. “One night, Mom and I were going through some of Dad’s stuff just to reminisce. She likes these built-in moments of emotional overflow, and I just go along with it. I mean, I’m not participating in the emotions, but I’ll pat her on the back and tell her she’s pretty.”

Layla’s snort-laugh makes me giggle. I love when I can make her do that.

“We found a little notebook that I’d forgotten all about. It was one of those yellow ones with the spiral on the top, and as soon as I saw it, I knew exactly what it was.” A soft smile slips across my lips. “It used to sit on the table by Dad’s recliner, and he’d make notes, write down phone numbers, draw little pictures—that kind of thing. I was leafing through it, going down memory lane, when I found notes that I can’t stop thinking about.”

“What was it?”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Dad’s famous word was *someday*. *Someday*, Mom and I will go to Hawaii. *Someday*, I’ll go back to

school. *Someday*, I'll play in a poker tournament, climb a mountain, see Yellowstone. But someday never came for him. The cancer got him first."

"Oh, Poppy," Layla says softly.

"No, it's okay," I say to ease her mind. She has enough to worry about. I don't need or want her wasting her time worrying about me. "I'm good. But I can't stop thinking about this blueprint he drew up for a charity that would help everyday people make *someday* into *now*. And I just ... I love it. And I want to see if I can make that happen."

A chill ripples through me as I consider this yet again. The idea feels big and bold, and I have no idea where to start *or* if I can actually make it happen. But I want to try. I *really* want to try. I haven't felt this passionate about anything in a long time.

"But," I say before she can jump in, "that's not where this story is going. That was a preface."

"I thought this was way too feely for you. I was starting to worry."

Very funny.

I pace in a small circle, relieved as the swell of emotions rising inside me begins to subside.

"Mom and I were at the carnival getting cotton candy, as one does, and someone touches my shoulder. I turn around to see Cade Samuels." I fight a smile as I recall the handsome quarterback from our high school team. "Cade was a couple of years older than me and was, arguably but not, the hottest guy to ever come from my hometown. I haven't seen him in probably twelve years, and time has done nothing but favors for him."

Layla stays quiet, and I know what she's thinking. Even though her brother and I are explicitly friends with benefits, she likes to forget that and pretend that we're more. I'm sure she's wondering why I'm telling her, of all people, this story.

Patience, sweet Layla.

"Turns out that Cade works for a nonprofit, and I mentioned that I might be starting something similar. We chatted for a couple of minutes, and then he asked me out. Now, keep in mind that there was a time in my life when I would've done incredibly vile things to be asked out by Cade, okay?"

"Okay ..."

"I figure that he's asking me to dinner to talk shop, right? So I tell him that I don't have a solid direction yet, but thanks for the offer."

I can almost hear Layla's relief. "That makes sense and was so nice of him."

"Except that he said he didn't care about that and was hoping we could go out. On a date." I pause for dramatic effect. "*And I said no.*" I throw up the hand not holding my phone. "I didn't even think about it. I'm not sure I really even processed what was happening until he walked away and all I could see was Finn's smirk in my head."

And that's a problem. A big one.

"I'm sure Finn will be happy to hear this," she says, making no effort to hide how happy she is about this, too.

Yeah, I bet he will.

"My phone is about dead," Layla says. "I took way too many videos of Sunny today without charging it."

My heart squeezes. "How is my beautiful little goddaughter?"

"She's sleeping in Branch's arms right now while he watches a sports show because, God forbid, she sleeps in her crib."

I groan. "I hope they're not watching basketball."

"Why?"

"Because I've been teaching her that if she's going to go for an athlete, we look at the football players and the hockey guys only. We tune out the rest."

"And why would you tell her that?" she asks, laughing.

"Because she's clearly going to be exposed to lots of football with Branch and Finn, and you and I like football. It works. It fits. And hockey guys are hot, and the game is fairly entertaining, so I think we can make an exception if she goes that route. But basketball players? What the hell would we do with one of those?"

She laughs again. "I think Branch is telling her no guys *ever*, no matter what, so the two of you can hash this out."

"If there's one person that I'm not worried about, it's Branch," I joke, remembering that I forgot my phone charger at Mom's and my phone is probably about dead, too. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"What time are you supposed to land?"

I glance at the empty spot where a plane should be parked, waiting for us to board. "I don't know. They're saying we're taking off at six, so I'd land around nine thirty. But I bet we get delayed again."

"How are you getting home?"

“Social Ride, probably.”

She gasps. “No, not that late. That’s when the creeps are out.” She says something off the phone, but it’s muffled. “Poppy?”

“Yeah?”

“I need to go. Call or text me when you get home so I know you made it.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“Love you. Bye.”

I end the call and head back to my seat, a bit less edgy than when I left it. Life is always more manageable once I’ve spoken to Layla. *And she loves it when I gift her with my jumbled thoughts, whether she admits it or not.*

“Feeling better?” Sam asks as I move my bag and take my seat.

“A little.”

He nods and goes back to his crossword.

I start to put my phone away when it vibrates again.

Finn: The weirdest thing happened to me today.

I smile as my fingers fly over the keys.

Me: Really?

Finn: I had a dream that I was driving in the pouring rain. I looked over and saw the hottest woman sitting next to me. How weird is that?

Me: Sounds very, very weird.

Finn: Did I tell you that it's raining here today?

Me: You didn't. I wondered where this dream intersected with reality.

Finn: It hasn't yet, but it will at, say, ten o'clock tonight in front of the baggage claim.

You charming bastard.

I’m not sure if Layla called her brother, or if he happened to be at her house while she and I were talking. Either way, I’m not surprised to learn that he found out I’m taking a ride service home and isn’t happy about it.

Me: Good luck. I'll wave at you if I see you.

Finn: You can do a lot more than that since your ass will be in the passenger's seat.

Me: 😬 I don't need a ride, but thanks.

Finn: Yes, you do.

Me: No, I don't.

Finn: You're going to get home late, so you'll be sleepy and irritable. And I know you, so I know you haven't eaten much today, and I guarantee you're dehydrated.

I narrow my eyes at the screen and try not to grin.

Me: So?

Finn: So, there's no reason to put someone else through that torture. I'll be there.

Me: Finn ...

Finn: I'll bring you a snack. 😊

Me: 😊 Like a double cheeseburger with no onion?

Finn: I could make that happen.

My stomach rumbles as I respond.

Me: I love it when you talk dirty to me.

Finn: I know. 😊

Me: See you tonight? I'll text if we're delayed again.

Finn: 😊

I shove my phone back in my bag and rest my head against the seat.

No matter how bad a day has been, ending it with Finn Miller is always a good thing.

Back in the day when I wanted a relationship, I would've begged for a chance with Finn. I would've done a hell of a lot more for a date with him

than Cade Samuels, that's for sure. Because Finn isn't just gorgeous. He's every woman's dream—fun, smart, and great with his tongue.

But I'm older now, and so much wiser, I know better than to get involved with anyone on that level.

Even gorgeous, perfect Finn.

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CHAPTER TWO

POPPY

“Welcome to Chicago,” a flight attendant says, smiling as I step out of the jetway.

The terminal looks a lot like what I left in Denver. Bodies are huddled around flight information boards, checking whether their flights are leaving on time or if they should get comfortable on the floor. The sky is the same eerie shade as it was in Colorado, and I’ve never been happier to have my feet on solid ground ... at home.

I weave through the crowd, spotting a restroom just before the escalators descend to baggage claim. There are crumbs on my shirt from the little cookies the stewardess handed out. I feel crusty, and I know my hair is a rat’s nest.

There’s no way in the world that I’m knowingly seeing Finn Miller while looking like crap.

I squeeze through a bachelorette party and slip into the restroom. *What in the actual hell is this mess?* My reflection in the mirror over the only open sink is a jump scare.

As bad as I thought I looked, it’s worse.

“Of all the times to look like shit,” I mumble, digging through my bag for something to make me somewhat presentable. But because I was meant to be home hours ago and Finn wasn’t supposed to be part of the equation, I didn’t prepare for this. At all.

Giving up, I clean the black confetti off my cheeks as best as I can, finger-comb my hair into a rudimentary bun, and dab on a bit of lip balm

that smells faintly of perfume.

“That will have to do,” I say, heading for the exit again.

I check the time as I ride the escalator down to the ground floor, wondering whether to text Finn to let him know I’m here or wait until I have my luggage. But as I step off the escalator, I look up straight into his eyes.

Oh.

Finn is leaning against a pillar, one thick shoulder resting on it. A white T-shirt stretches across his ridiculous shoulders and worn jeans clad his muscled thighs. I’d wager my access to caffeine that he rolled out of bed this morning, put on the first thing he could get his hands on—probably off the floor—and still looks like *that*.

After I’ve just spent ten minutes in the airport bathroom trying to look presentable. *Fucker.*

He stands straight, towering over me as I approach him, peering down at me with his gorgeous green eyes. I can’t stop a slow smile from stretching across my face. Every woman who passes gives him a lingering once-over, and a group of men whispers among themselves, undoubtedly trying to figure out whether this is *the* Finn Miller, the star tight end for the Illinois Legends. *But Finn?* He doesn’t look anywhere but at me with a steady, mischievous gaze that makes me shiver.

This is why he’s so much fun. I don’t have to have him naked to enjoy him. Even a look from the man is foreplay.

“Hey, Poppy Quinn,” he says, the dimples in his cheeks doing the devil’s work.

“Hi, Finn Miller.”

“Looking as beautiful as you did in my dreams.”

“Shut up,” I say, my cheeks aching from smiling at him.

He plucks my carry-on out of my hand. “I already grabbed your stuff.” He lengthens the handle of my ruby-red suitcase at his side. “I didn’t see any others that looked like yours. Unless, of course, you did one of your infamous shopping sprees because you hated everything you packed ...”

I bump him with my shoulder, which he absorbs like nothing, and then walk next to him toward the doors.

“You always bring that up,” I say. “But I only did that once.”

“No, you’ve done it *twice*. Once in New York City and I had to carry that duffel bag for miles. And the other time in Kismet Beach, because you

swore you could live out of a carry-on for a four-day trip, and that lasted about forty-five minutes from the moment we landed.”

“There were sales,” I say, making a face at him. “I bought all that stuff for the price of one pair of shoes. It was practically free.”

He shakes his head as if I exhaust him. I might even believe him if his dimples weren’t sinking deeper into his cheeks.

In our two years as friends with benefits, we’ve honed our craft. I get the best parts of Finn Miller—flirting, fucking, and an actual friendship—without having to deal with icky stuff like feelings. He gets the best parts of me—banter, blowjobs, and breathing room—without having to deal with gross expectations.

It’s an incredible setup for both of us. When it works.

The air is thick and balmy, laden with rain and exhaust fumes, as we reach the sidewalk. Finn’s black SUV is parked along the curb with its hazard lights flashing.

“Benefits of coming in so late,” he says, opening the passenger’s side door. “Hop in.”

“Thank you.”

He closes it behind me and tosses my bags in the back.

The leather seat, already preheated because I hate how cold he keeps every living space he controls, is soft and inviting. I sink into it, letting the heat soak into my muscles, and sigh happily.

“Did you see your burger?” he asks, climbing in and buckling up.

“Huh?”

“Your burger.” He checks his blind spot and then pulls away from the curb. “I got you a Dr Pepper, too.”

I glance at the center console. A fast-food bag is perched behind the gear shifter, and a to-go cup is in the holder.

“You’re the best,” I say, dragging the bag to my lap. “I haven’t eaten since ... last night, I think. Well, I had a crappy breakfast sandwich in the airport. I’m starving, and I’m nasty.”

“Just how I like you.”

I laugh, roll my eyes, and open the bag. “What have you been up to this week?”

“Not much. Getting ready for training camp. Working out, watching tape, going over new installs—that kind of thing. Frutter called a couple of days ago and wanted to throw some passes, so I met with him at the park

and ran some routes.” He shrugs. “Just flipping the switch from summer to season, you know?”

I nod, unable to speak because my mouth is full of a delicious burger.

This is one of the things, besides his dick, that I like most about Finn. His work ethic is unmatched. He takes his job seriously, and that’s *such* a turn-on, even if it means that I only get to see him a day or two a week during the season. Because if there’s one thing I learned growing up, it’s to appreciate hard work. Both of my parents worked their asses off and were still the best, most involved parents. It’s easy to imagine Finn doing the same.

With his future wife. Not with me.

I’m here for a fun time, not a long time.

“Had a meeting with Chuck, too,” he says, gripping the steering wheel. The muscles in his forearm flex with the movement. “He’s pissed because I’ve been turning down every endorsement that hits his desk. Apparently, I’m making it very hard for him to make money off me.”

“Chuck’s your agent, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you turning the deals down?” I ask, reaching for my drink.

“Because if I’m handing over my name and image and slapping it on an energy drink or whatever, it’s gotta be worth it. I learned a lesson when I took that deal with the gambling website, and then they turned out to own all kinds of seedy shit. Remember that?”

I shrug. “Vaguely.”

He chuckles. “You really don’t care about my football life, do you?”

“Of course, I do. I hope you play great, don’t get hurt, and sell lots of jerseys. But I’m your fuck buddy, not your finance manager, my man.” I take a quick sip and return the Dr Pepper to the cup holder. “I’m happy to be your sounding board, just like you’re mine when I start talking about whether to cut or color my hair.”

“I love that you’re equating my multimillion-dollar deals with whether you should get bangs,” he says, chuckling.

“We live in very different worlds, Miller.” I take another bite. “But do you want more endorsements? Or are you just done with people wanting your face on their shit?”

He glances across his shoulder and grins at me. “Depends. Do you want my face on your shit tonight? Or was that hypothetical?”

Fuck me. I stop chewing and stare at him for a moment, making his grin turn into a smirk.

I want his face on my shit at every opportunity, and he knows it.

“Yeah, I’d like a deal,” he says, turning his attention back to the road. “Who doesn’t love money? And I’d like one bigger payday in case I decide to retire after next year. But it has to be the right one. Lots of cash with little work.”

“When you find that, let me know if they want to endorse a thirty-one-year-old assistant VP with a penchant for burgers, bangs, and golf. I could use some money.”

He laughs, adjusting the thermostat to combat the fog inching up the windshield. “What do you need money for?”

I bite my lip and consider telling him about my idea for the *Someday Now* foundation. He has much more experience with charities than I do, considering he’s always in the community volunteering as a player for the Legends. Maybe he has some insight ... considering I didn’t get any from Cade thanks to him.

“I’m thinking of starting a foundation or a charity or a nonprofit. Honestly, I don’t know what the differences are because I’m about four days mentally into this. But I found one of my dad’s notebooks, and I really think it’s something I’d like to do in his honor.”

“Hey, I love that.”

“Really?” I ask, not surprised by his support, but pleased at his enthusiasm. “It would help people do things on their someday list. It would help people make someday *now*. That’s what I’m thinking of calling it. *Someday Now*.”

Finn grabs my thigh and gives it a gentle squeeze. “I think this is an amazing idea, Pop. Tell me what I can do to help.”

“Well, what do you know about charities?” I ask. “I know nothing and am not sure where to even start.”

“I don’t know much when it comes to the mechanics of them. I show up, sign some stuff, take some pics. But I can hook you up with people who do know.” He lifts a brow, nodding subtly. “Are you fundraising? I’d love to help get you started financially.”

You’d like to help me start a charity? Oh, Finn.

His kindness tightens my chest because this is such a Finn thing to do. He’s so generous and thoughtful—the kind of guy who picks you up, brings

you a burger, and has your seat heated so you don't have to sit on cold leather. He's just *that good*—total relationship material.

And we don't have one of those. By design.

I study his profile as my mind begins to swirl.

Spending a week away from Finn has made me consider how blurred the lines of our situationship have become. It wasn't more apparent than when I turned down Cade without thinking twice. It was so automatic that I didn't realize that I had a choice. The answer was just Finn.

And now, as I sit beside him as he chauffeurs me home at nearly midnight—after having picked me up from the airport with dinner in tow—and listen to him offer to seed a charity that's still in concept mode, I'm unsteady. The groundwork that gave me so much assurance and safety when we started this thing has eroded slowly over the past two years. I've been so caught up in the easiness of us that I haven't paid attention to this very important fact.

I can't unsee it now. I can't ignore it, either.

Finn and I are operating in a very gray area that makes my insides squirm. If we don't get a handle on this and recalibrate our situation back to where it belongs, we'll slip further into uncharted and unwelcome territory.

Toward a real relationship. Something I'm not interested in.

I sigh, frowning as he glances at me.

Yeah, I think it's time we had a talk.

CHAPTER THREE

POPPY

Thunder rumbles around us, shaking the car. The rain picks up again with large droplets of water smashing against the vehicle. Finn turns the wipers on full speed and messes with the thermostat again.

“Let’s have a chat,” I say, stretching my head from side to side.

“What about?”

“Oh, nothing. Mostly about you.”

“Me?” He grins. “What about me?”

“Honestly? You’re a little too good at this friends-with-benefits thing, and it’s starting to become a problem.”

He snorts, amused by my reply. “My apologies.”

“I mean it.” I sink into the warm leather and wrap my arms around my middle. “I was just thinking about how we’ve gotten a little off track lately.”

“Here we go,” he says, rolling his eyes. “You’re about to Poppy me, aren’t you?”

I roll my eyes, too.

“Listen,” I say. “I’m just not sure that friends with benefits are supposed to offer financial support to their fuck buddy’s charity or go out of their way to pick them up from the airport close to midnight.” *With snacks.*

“And you’re mad about that?”

“No, I’m not mad. I mean, how could I be mad when you’re doting on me? That’s literally the definition of an ego boost.” I laugh. “But it is getting a little too ... easy. Too routine. Too *this is just how we are*. And I

think we need to put us back into our lane, and it would help if you'd stop being so boyfriend-y."

I sit up and smile. *That was a damn good explanation.*

Finn, however, doesn't seem to agree. His brows pull together as he grips the steering wheel. His forearms flex, and I have to rip my gaze away from them and refocus.

"My behavior hasn't changed, Pop."

"Then the way I internalize it has because it used to feel like you were doing nice things to get me naked. Now it feels like you do them because you like me," I say. "There's a difference."

He side-eyes me but doesn't say anything.

"I just don't want to let this go unchecked, and then everything gets messed up," I say. "I quite like fucking you, Finn Miller."

"Are you saying that you don't think you act girlfriend-y?"

"Um, no. I don't."

He hums. "Okay. So, the reminder that went off yesterday to ensure that I make a dentist appointment was because ... why?"

I stare at him. "Because you can't get in when the season starts, and I don't want to hear you complain about a cavity until February."

"Oh, all right. What about my hoodies? Where the fuck are they? I tried to find one last night after my workout, and that entire side of my closet is empty."

I point at him. "If you didn't leave your apartment so freaking cold, I wouldn't have to bundle up like it's Antarctica and then accidentally wear them home. That's on you."

"Then what about all of your shit that prevents me from actually using my en suite in my own house? Because there are tubes, cans, sticks, and cotton balls everywhere, Poppy. *Everywhere.*"

He smirks like he's just proven his point.

"That's not girlfriend behavior," I say. "You're so mistaken. That's the aftermath of me visiting your house to, *what?* Oh, yeah. *Fuck you.*"

"You're so full of shit."

His cheeky grin makes me feel a little sorry for him—and a lot turned on—but that's not helpful at the moment, because he's only making my argument for me. *We need to redefine our situation.* Because the things I'm seeing as the aftermath of our banging sessions, he's seeing as examples of our growing ... *intimacy?*

Ew.

“Let me try to explain this to you another way,” I say. “Cade Samuels asked me out.”

Finn’s head whips to mine. “Who?”

“It’s just a guy I knew growing up. And he asked me out, and I said no.”

He smirks.

“No.” I laugh. “No smirking. This is not a good thing.”

“The United States Football League and I disagree.”

“Why does the league care?” I ask, curious where he’s going with this.

“Because I can’t play football in prison, and that’s where I’d be if Cade or whatever his name is thinks he’s going to take out my girl.”

My stomach wobbles, and I fight a grin. “I’m not your girl, Miller.”

“Oh, I wholeheartedly beg to differ.”

For fuck’s sake. I take a breath and blow it out slowly, ignoring the wobble in it. *At least, now we’re getting somewhere.*

“See? You’re internalizing things the wrong way, too,” I say. “Because this thing between us is not a relationship.”

He rolls his eyes, slowing the wipers. “I don’t think I’m confused about shit,” he says, taking an exit ramp. “Do you want to go to your house or mine? I gotta go left or right.”

“Home. I don’t have a clean piece of laundry to my name, and I dropped my toothbrush on Mom’s bathroom floor this morning.”

“Like you don’t have those things at my house, but okay,” he says, making a left at the intersection. “Now back to your ever-entertaining side quest. We’ve operated like a couple for a while now. I find it curious that you only have a problem with it when another guy asks you out.”

He faces forward, the vein in his temple pulsing. Seeing him jealous that I might be interested in someone else is so ridiculously hot, and it’s so tempting to tell him to pull over so I can ride him like a rodeo. But I’m not trying to make him jealous and don’t want to muddy things more than they apparently already are.

“This may be a terrible boost to your ego.” I grin. “But this has nothing to do with another guy. My reaction just opened my eyes to how we’re starting to behave like a couple. Trust me when I say that I’m not looking to be with anyone else. You keep me a very happy and fulfilled woman.”

His smirk is heavenly.

“If not, I would’ve been having sex with someone else these past two years.” I shrug.

“It’s so fucking hot to hear you say that.”

I laugh. “It’s not supposed to be hot. It’s supposed to illustrate my point.”

He glances at me. “For the record, I haven’t been with anyone else since the night we walked from Branch’s to that bar on the river. And then we got caught in the snowstorm on the way back.” He laughs. “Do you remember that?”

“Oh my God, it was so freaking cold.” I laugh along with him. “I think I wore your sweatshirt home the next day, too, actually.”

“I was trying to impress you by giving it to you and nearly gave myself frostbite in the process.”

I drag my fingertip down his jawline. “I think I warmed you up when we got back to Branch’s, if I recall correctly.”

He snaps at my finger with his teeth as I withdraw my hand.

Memories of that night flood my mind, sending a pool of heat through my body. Branch wasn’t home, having gone somewhere and gotten stranded, and the power went out. I’d had no clue until then that I was capable of more than one orgasm a night.

I shift, trying to quell the ache between my thighs.

We have had so many fun, hot experiences together, and they all go back to one thing. *Sex*. It’s the foundation of what we are. It’s what makes us work.

It’s what keeps me safe.

And we have to get back to that before it’s too late.

“If we’re not fucking anyone else,” he says, “and we have fun together, what does it matter if we’ve drifted away from our original agreement? Can’t we just admit that we’re in a relationship? What’s the harm in that?”

I groan, facing forward again.

I was hoping our conversation would go smoother than this. And I certainly didn’t expect such pushback from Finn. In the past, he’s been perfectly fine to follow my lead, whether that meant going a few days without interacting or clarifying to a server or fellow patron of a restaurant that we’re not an item.

But, then again, perhaps fuck buddies shouldn’t be going out to dinner together.

Abandoning the argument that we were never supposed to be a couple in the first place, I go another route.

“You and I work because we’re *not* in a relationship,” I say, ignoring the way his lips press together. “Think about it. If we were together, I wouldn’t be okay with only seeing you a day or two a week during football season, and you don’t have the capacity to give me any more time than that. But it’s fine because I don’t expect it. You’re not hurting my feelings, just like I don’t hurt yours when I need space and don’t call you back for two days and you text me to see if I’m alive.”

He sighs, gripping the steering wheel harder.

“And can you imagine if we were really sharing a life?” I lift a brow and giggle. “We’d kill each other. The first time you said something cocky about me not putting my clothes away, I’d strangle you with a sock.”

His attention slides to mine. “Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve used an article of clothing to restrain me.”

His tone sends a shock wave through my system. My breathing grows shallow. *Holy hell.*

I can’t think again until his eyes release me.

“So, you think we’d be terrible together,” he says as if he’s working his way through the idea.

I quickly gather my wits. “No. *I know we would.* Right now, if you want to buy a new pair of sneakers, you just do it. You don’t ask me if I think you need them. And I’m not hiding credit card bills from you, so you don’t see how many books or tchotchkes I buy in the middle of the night. That kind of stuff comes with the relationship territory, and it’s ... not for me.”

My heart starts to pound as memories that I’ll never discuss play through my head. I squeeze my eyes shut to blur the sight of the empty brown gaze I never want to think about again.

No. Don’t go there.

I turn to Finn and catch him watching me with a concerned look in his eyes. It makes me smile ... and breathe.

“If you don’t remember—and considering that you tune me out when discussing my contracts, I don’t expect that you do—I have a lot of money, Pop. A lot of it. Enough where you can buy all the books and tchotchkes that you want, and I probably wouldn’t notice. And I promise you I wouldn’t care.”

“That’s what they all say.” I roll my eyes. “Once you had to put up with me for real, you’d hate me.”

Finn scoffs, blowing out a breath. “This is the most Poppy Quinn shit I’ve ever heard—and that’s saying something.” He parks the SUV next to the curb in front of my house and turns off the engine. Then he turns to me, his eyes searching mine. “What were you trying to get out of this chat?”

“I just want to remind both of us that we aren’t serious. That we’re here for a good time, not a long time.”

His eyes darken again, but not in a good way.

“A relationship between us would never survive because our foundation was built on sex,” I say. “Sure, we have fun together and whatever. But that’s an accessory to the fucking. The fucking isn’t an accessory to *us*.”

“What if I disagree?”

“Then you are wrong.” I grin, hoping to ease his frustration. “What we have is so good because we know what it is. I just don’t want us losing that.”

And I don’t want to wake up one day and realize that I’m in the middle of something I can’t get out of.

“I think you’re wrong,” he says with a smirk that sets off a warning alarm in my brain. *Oh fuck. What’s he up to?* “I think we’re already in a relationship, and for some reason, you don’t want to acknowledge it.”

“Aw, I hate that for you.”

He chuckles softly. “Me, too. So you’re going to get your wish. I’m going to stop acting like your boyfriend.”

My eyes narrow. This was easy. He gave in way too easily.

“Good,” I say carefully. “So we’re back to friends with benefits with nice, clear boundaries?”

“Oh, the boundaries are crystal clear. We’re friends. *No benefits.*”

“Excuse me?” I ask, flinching. *He can’t be serious.* “I asked that you stop acting like my boyfriend so we don’t blur the lines, not that you stop fucking me. Don’t be crazy.”

He sighs, resting a wrist over the steering wheel. “Listen, I can’t agree with you that the only reason this works is because we’re fucking. And if you think that I’d hate you—ever, let alone because you’re my girlfriend—then you’re out of your mind.”

“And you think that not sleeping with me is going to fix anything? *Sir.* If we don’t have sex, we don’t have anything.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to prove you wrong.”

I know I’m overgeneralizing this because we do have a real friendship, too. And I value that. *So much*. It’s one of the losses I’d take if we were serious about each other when it failed.

The risks are not worth the rewards. Not even a little bit.

“I’m taking sex off the table to show you that we’re more than that,” he says. “That we have a connection, whether you want to ignore it or not. That I like you, Poppy Quinn, not just your pussy.”

I fill my lungs with oxygen in hopes it’ll douse the fire burning in my core.

“Maybe I’ll put your theory to the test, too,” I say, returning his shit-eating grin. “I’m going to make you want me so badly that you’ll abandon this stupid experiment and prove me right.”

Our gazes lock over the middle console as a delicious tension swirls around us.

It’s nearly impossible not to climb over and plant myself in his lap. Bring his hands to my tits. Crash my mouth against his. Although that’s totally a *me* move, we’re still early in this game, and he might be able to resist me for a day or two. I don’t want to be so forward that he wins round one.

I just want to torture him enough that he goes home and rethinks his position.

Then comes back and fucks me.

“You know,” I say, placing my hand on his thigh. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “I need to go inside and take a hot shower.”

He fights a smile, picking up my hand and kissing my palm. Then he rests it on my lap. “Good try.”

Dammit.

He climbs out, making his way toward me. I watch him come around the front of the vehicle, raindrops soaking through his shirt as he opens my door, then grabs my bags from the back.

I jog to the stoop and find my keys, unlock the door, and step inside. Finn is right behind me with my things. He sets them on the floor.

“Thanks,” I say, studying his face. “You went out of your way for me tonight, and I appreciate it. I appreciate you. I always do.”

“Anytime.”

I trace his sternum with my fingertip, holding his gaze with my own. “You know, I could thank you properly if you stay.”

My body heats, begging for me to give in and say whatever he needs to end this game he wants to play. It’s been too long since I had him between my thighs, since his fingers touched every part of me in a way only he can. But I don’t, because I’m not giving in to his challenge when the boundaries we originally agreed on are still necessary.

Besides, he’ll give in. And, when he does, it’ll be mind-blowing ... for both of us.

“Make sure you lock the door behind me,” he says, grinning.

I giggle, dropping my hand to the side. “How long do you think you can keep this up?”

“As long as it takes.” He winks. “Sweet dreams.”

He makes a face before turning toward the road. I laugh as he jogs down the sidewalk and gets into his SUV. He’s gone before I know it.

As soon as he’s out of sight, I close the door and lock it. Then I press my back against the wall and sigh.

I don’t know what to make of this, or how we took this wild departure from focusing on sex to not having sex at all. But if I know Finn, *and I do*, the man has needs. And I know better than anyone how to meet them.

“I just have to wait him out,” I say. “And, who knows? This might be fun.”

The thought of Finn in his wet shirt flashes through my mind.

I need a cold shower.

Probably one of many to come.

CHAPTER

FOUR

FINN

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, laughing at the chaos strewn across Branch’s living room floor.

Cardboard leans against the couch, and cellophane and packing material cover every flat surface. Boards are stacked into piles, and hardware kits form a mound on the coffee table. And in the middle of it all is Branch with an electric screwdriver in his hand.

He narrows his eyes. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Something way above your pay grade.” I laugh again, moving a tool kit off the recliner. “Seriously. What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to build three bookshelves that your sister did *not* want the contractor to handle when he built the house because she wanted the space open,” he says, waving his hand through the air like Layla does. All levity falls from his face. “But look what got delivered today.”

“Sounds about right.”

“I’ll be honest. I was going to call one of those handyman places and have them come by and put these things together. But then Dad called, and I mentioned it like an idiot. I spent the next ten minutes listening to a lecture about why I should want to do things at home myself, and that this is what men do. *We build shit.*” He shakes his head, lowering his voice like his father’s. “I didn’t mention that I’ve never seen him build one damn thing in his life.”

I sit, chuckling at the frustration on Branch’s face.

Branch Best has been my best friend since we joined the Legends six years ago. We met at a party the night before we had to report to the facilities—a party neither of us had any business attending, considering we had to work the following morning. It was a very late night that I still can't completely remember. But that night our friendship began, and I've talked to him nearly every day since.

Things come easily to Branch. So seeing him so frustrated over a bookcase is funnier than it should be.

"Did you read the instructions?" I ask.

"Yeah." He looks around. "Sort of. I didn't think it'd be this hard. I mean, it's a rectangle with some shelves inside it. How is it this complicated? How are there this many parts?"

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees. "I think you've overcomplicated it because I'm pretty sure you've mixed the parts together from different boxes."

"Yeah. Sure did. I just emptied all the boxes and put it all in piles."

Lord, help me. Did he never play with Legos as a child? "Are all the bookshelves the same model, at least? They were all the same style, right?"

"I think so."

"You don't have any idea, do you?"

"Nope."

I survey the mess, trying to find something to keep Branch occupied. It's clear I'm going to have to put these together, or they won't get done. And if Branch doesn't stay busy, he'll try to help, and I'll wind up killing him.

If I'm going to prison, I'd rather it be for something more exciting and badass than killing a retired, five-eleven wide receiver over DIY furniture.

"We're going to need room to work," I say, getting to my feet. I pluck the screwdriver out of his hand before he decides he's *Branch the Builder*. "I'm going to figure out what we're working with. You're going to pick up the trash."

He groans.

"Grab a razor blade or a knife and cut the boxes down so they lie flat, then put them in the garage for recycling," I say. "Then get a couple of lawn and leaf bags and get rid of the packing material."

Branch stands, wincing as he straightens up. "Fine. But if Layla asks, I built these."

“Where is she, anyway?” I ask, locating the instruction manuals at the bottom of the hardware mound.

“Poppy’s,” he calls from the kitchen. “I thought that’s where you’d be, considering she was gone for a week.”

“Yeah, well, me fucking too.”

“So why aren’t you?”

I half laugh, shaking my head as I try to put last night into words. “Let’s just say that Poppy’s Poppy-ing.”

“That’s always fun. What’s she up to now?”

I’m not sure how to answer that, so I focus on the project in front of me. All three bookcases are the same, thank fuck, so I begin by creating three piles. *One for each piece of furniture.*

I was up most of the night thinking about her and our conversation. Granted, I think about her every day, and she’s been on my mind even more lately because I haven’t seen her for a week. But there was no distraction, nothing remotely interesting to keep me from playing our interaction over and over last night.

The woman is chaotic and impulsive, which are two of the things that I like most about her. It’s not unusual to show up at her house to find that she’s painted half of the living room and then quit. Once, she decided at midnight that she had to have a two-thousand-dollar poodle that was six hours away, and there was no talking her out of it. But, as predicted, by the time the sun came up, she’d changed her mind.

But this relationship thing? This is a little much. Even for her.

“Are you going to tell me what she’s up to or not?” Branch asks. “I’m not sure if you’re avoiding the question or if you forgot to answer me.”

I blow out a breath. “I’d answer you if I knew how.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I’ll put it to you like this—we’re no longer fucking.”

Branch flinches, his eyes widening. For the first time in our friendship, I’ve rendered him speechless.

“She decided that I act too much like her boyfriend and need to back things up,” I explain. “And, if we were really together, it would fail.”

“You’re not together? That’s news to me.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t alone because I thought we were, too.”

I hate that I didn’t see this coming, that I didn’t pick up on the warning signs that she was feeling trapped. I’ve seen them a few times over the

years and eased up. Given her space. But no matter how long or how hard I think back over the past few weeks ... there was nothing. No signs.

I thought she was happy.

“Did you do something to piss her off?” Branch asks. “Is this like the time she wouldn’t talk to you until you apologized for not taking Layla’s side in an argument between me and your sister?”

“No. It’s interesting because apparently I’m great.” I smirk at Branch. “I mean, I knew that, but she said it, too.”

He rolls his eyes as he grabs a box.

“It seems to have been triggered by a guy asking her out last week,” I say, trying to make sense of the instructions. “She turned him down, and that threw her into this panic mode.”

That’s true on the surface, but I don’t think it’s the root of the problem.

“That’s what they all say. Once you had to put up with me for real, you’d hate me.”

The more I replay what she said, the more convinced I am that she thinks that *she’s* the problem. That she believes something is wrong with her, and she’s saving me the trouble of figuring it out.

The thought makes me physically ill.

It would explain so much. Why it bothers her when I do nice things because I like her. Why she thinks we’d fight over money. Why she doesn’t think I have “the capacity” to give her more time during the season when I see her as much as she’ll let me.

And that look in her eyes when she talked about relationships? It’s haunted me for hours. I can’t figure it out.

Poppy has always been emotionally closed off in a lot of ways, and I’ve never pushed her for more for fear that she’d bolt. I won’t push her now. She’ll open up to me when she’s ready. All I can do is be patient and show her that I’m safe. That sex is the bonus, and she’s the catch.

That she’s my person.

“What’s Layla doing at Poppy’s? Just hanging out?” I ask as Branch comes around the corner, tossing a box of trash bags on the floor.

“Yeah. Poppy called this morning and said she was too busy to come by, but she missed the girls. Then this shit got delivered.” He hits a box with his toe. “So, Layla took Sunny and went over there. I think they’re getting lunch or something. But I didn’t ask too many questions because I was just happy that Layla was getting out of the house and getting some fresh air.”

I hum, checking the instructions again. *I'm definitely missing two hardware packets.*

"Have you heard from Poppy today?" Branch asks.

"Once. Around three this morning." I shift as my body reacts to the memory of her text. "She sent me a picture of the tops of her tits and the word *oops*."

"Why *oops*?"

I chuckle, finding the last two hardware kits under the couch. "Because when I told her we weren't fucking so I could show her that we're more than that, she took it upon herself to tell me that she's going to prove that we're not by, essentially, making me beg."

That's not exactly how she said it, but that's what she meant. I could see it in her cheeky little smile.

"That's a hell of a tactic. One I personally wouldn't have used, but if you think this is the way, then more power to you."

The hell if I know if this is the way.

Is this what I wanted to do? Fuck no. But there's no way that she truly believes that sex is the only reason what we have feels like more than a friendship. I just don't believe that she thinks that.

But I don't know why she won't admit it.

"Have you given any thought to what will happen if your brilliant plan doesn't work?" Branch asks, sliding a knife down the fold of another box. "I'm not saying it won't. I'm just saying that I know Poppy Quinn, and if she wants something, she's gonna get it."

His insinuation isn't veiled, and it's a legitimate concern. *What if she fucks someone else because I won't?*

But that isn't going to happen. That's my whole damn point. And the fact that she won't find another guy will only strengthen my argument.

"It'll work." I go back to the bookshelves, gathering the pieces for *step one*. "Hey, did you ever hear from Chauncey?" I ask, ready to change the subject. "I saw him in the Legends facility last week when I was meeting with Coach Gold, and he said he was going to hit you up."

Branch laughs. "Yeah, I talked to him a couple of days ago. He just wanted to pick my brain about a few things and to see if I'd be interested in studying some film with him before the season starts."

"What did you say?"

“I told him I would. I’m kind of getting itchy about not getting ready for training camp, so maybe it’ll help scratch the itch.”

I squint at the instructions as if my eyesight is the reason I can’t concentrate on attaching *piece B* to *piece C* with *screw 2*.

“Retirement is starting to feel less like a vacation and more like boredom,” he says, gathering the pieces of cardboard. “I hope I’m cut out for this.”

“Ah, you’ll be fine. But you do need to find a hobby or something.”

He nods, lifting the broken-down boxes and carrying them to the garage. As soon as he’s gone, I sit back and sigh.

The living room is filled with light, thanks to the tall windows facing the lake. Sunny’s toys are scattered everywhere, and pictures hang on the walls and sit on the mantel. A fuzzy blanket that Layla bought when she, Branch, Poppy, and I went to the Water Festival earlier this year is tossed over the back of the couch.

A soft smile touches my lips.

Seeing this makes me so happy for Branch and my sister. They’ve built a warm home, created a beautiful family and a wonderful life for the three of them. It hasn’t been easy, but they’ve stuck together, and the payoff is all around me.

I sigh again—deeper this time.

This is what I want in life. A real home. A happy family. I want to build something tangible that has nothing to do with statistics or trophies.

And for a while now, Poppy has completed that picture. I just didn’t realize she was so far away from seeing it, too.

“So,” Branch says, coming into the room. “This threat you made to Pop. You gonna be able to follow through on that?”

I pick up a small piece of wood and chuck it at him. He dodges it easily, and it lands on a chair.

It wasn’t a threat. It wasn’t an ultimatum, either. *It’s a challenge.*

Poppy doesn’t believe things just because she hears them. She has to see them. Experience them. So if I have to suffer the effects of not having her in my arms to prove that our connection is deeper than she’ll admit, then I will. She’ll try to tempt me into giving in—goading me with pictures and videos, touching me every time she can when we’re together. And that’s fine. It’ll suck, but it’s fine. I’ll hold my ground. Because once she realizes that she’s my person whether we’re fucking or not, I win.

At least, that's the game plan.
I'm calling her bluff and hope I'm right.
Because I'm not really sure what I'll do if I'm wrong.

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CHAPTER FIVE

POPPY

“For the fifth time, yes,” I say, popping Mom on speakerphone.

I open my shopping app. Finn’s coffee maker has been on the outs for weeks, and he refuses to buy a new one. When I was not sleeping at three this morning, I found a great deal on a fancy machine that he’ll love but would never buy. So I did.

“You bought the vitamins, and you’ll take them?” Mom asks.

“Yes. For the sixth time.”

Mom blows out a breath, and I can hear the frustration in it. “Fine, fine. But please do it, Poppy. The doctor reiterated how important it is to take supplements—especially as we age. I think we all need to be on the regimen that he prescribed for Grandma. It’s thorough, and the brand is pharmacy backed. This is important.”

Yeah, but we all don’t need a supplement for macular degeneration.

“I love you,” I say. “And I appreciate your ever-present concern for my health. But I think I’m doing pretty well for thirty-one, and that it might be useful for you to spend more of your time making sure that you don’t roll the fabric cutter wheel thing over the tip of your finger—”

“Hey—”

“Or pull a box off the top shelf in a way that means they all topple onto your head and give you a black eye. Or when Grandma tosses you the remote from across the room, you actually turn to catch it instead of waiting until the last minute so that it hits you in the chest and practically throws you into cardiac arrest.”

I was there for the last one. She nearly gave *me* a heart attack with her dramatics.

Guess the apple didn't fall far from the tree, after all.

She babbles on about the new fence her neighbor is putting up and how the town is trying to move next year's carnival to the park. None of it matters to me, but these are the things that make up my mother's life—and she's happy. So I listen, thankful I still have her in my life to drive me crazy about things like vitamins and let my gaze travel across the kitchen and living room.

My luggage is open in the middle of the floor, and half of the contents are spread around the room like the suitcase got sick and vomited my clothes and toiletries all over the place. A load of clean laundry that I started folding but never finished is scattered across one end of the couch and chair. When I gave up on the laundry, I started cleaning the kitchen. Naturally, it's messier than it was when I got home, too.

The shit I do to keep myself busy.

"Carmen and I are going over to start cleaning out Grandma's garage tomorrow," Mom says, pulling me back into the conversation. "We've put it off for far too long. We were going to do it when Kat comes home for a couple of weeks next month, but the weather is so nice now that we said to heck with it. We'll just get it done."

"I love the can-do spirit."

"I'm sure it'll be more of a boo-hoo spirit once we start," she says, laughing. "But I try to stay positive. I mean, it's really a privilege to be able to sit with my sister and do these things for our mother."

"I'll never know that feeling because I don't have a sister."

"Nope. You'll be doing it all alone. Maybe Kat will help you."

"Shut your mouth."

"Poppy!"

I roll my eyes, pushing off the counter. "Sorry. That was a little harsh. But *no*. Kat will not be helping me do anything."

"What's wrong with Kat?" Mom asks. "I thought you two got along."

There's nothing inherently wrong with Kat. She's fine. But she smells like pickles, talks constantly about politics, and you can't have music or the television on in the background because it's too distracting for the conversation, job, or joy at hand.

I grin. "Okay. Would *you* want to be locked in a hot garage with Kat for days on end?"

"Well, no."

"I have nothing more, Your Honor. I rest my case." The doorbell echoes through the house. "Mom, Layla and Sunny are here, and I haven't had baby snuggles in days. I need to go. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart. Tell Layla that I said hi and give her the vitamin regimen."

I will not. "Okay. I love you."

"Love you more. Bye."

"Bye."

I shove my phone in my pocket and head to the door. Sun streams inside, filling the entryway with bright beams when I pull it open.

"Hey," I say softly, stepping to the side so Layla and a sleeping Sunny can enter.

"She just fell asleep."

I pout. "I wanted to play and bond with her ... and make sure that she knows that I'm her favorite person."

Layla shakes her head, amused by me. "Where can I lay her down? She could go on the floor since we'll be right here if she wakes up."

I close the door, then quickly make a nest on the living room floor with a couple of blankets. As Layla places her daughter in the middle of the square, I kneel to get a better look at her.

Sunny's little chubby fingers are the cutest. Her cheeks are flushed from the heat outside, looking like she dusted on a little blush before she left the house. A little pink bow gathers a lock of blond hair straight up on the top of her head, and my heart squeezes with how much I love this little girl.

"My God, she just gets prettier every time I see her." I gently touch the top of her foot. "Don't worry," I whisper loud enough for Layla to hear. "I'll keep my eye on this hair situation and make sure it's stopped before it gets embarrassing. Your godmother has your back, girlie."

Layla laughs, sitting in a chair by the window—the one without laundry stacked on it. "Godmother duties don't extend to fashion. You're just supposed to guide her spiritually."

"Trust me. Her spirit will be broken if you let anyone see her with hair like that for much longer."

"She's fourteen months old."

“And if she doesn’t grow more hair in the next six months, we’re going to have to retire the bows, Mama.”

She rolls her eyes, placing the diaper bag on the floor.

I consider getting up and grabbing her a drink—a Dr Pepper never hurt anybody—but instead, I sit with her. We haven’t had much alone time together since she got pregnant, and even less since Sunny arrived. Something tells me she needs a moment to adjust. To breathe. To remember how to navigate girl time.

“Looks like you’ve been cleaning,” she says finally.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Well, it’s generally the only time that your house looks like an actual tornado ran through it.”

I shrug. “Some of us don’t have someone come by a couple of times a week to help them keep things in order.”

“So I married well. Bite me.”

We exchange a laugh, catching ourselves when Sunny stirs.

“How are you?” I ask.

Layla sinks back against the chair and smiles. “Feeling better. I went grocery shopping by myself last week, and that was nice. Branch booked me a massage. And I let Mom keep Sunny one night, which was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but I did get a good night’s sleep.”

“I’m glad.”

“Me, too.” She holds my gaze before looking away. “Having a baby is such a mindfuck, but I think I’m starting to find a rhythm. Branch keeps reminding me that I just made a whole human being and the only one putting pressure on me is myself.” A soft smile touches her lips. “We stopped and picked up dinner from a little place the night Sunny stayed at Mom’s. While we were waiting on our food, a lady started chatting with me, and I mentioned Sunny and that she’s fourteen months old. She had the audacity to tell me that she bounced right back to her pre-pregnancy weight. Was into her old jeans four months after giving birth.”

I narrow my eyes. “Where was this restaurant?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to find her and fight her.”

Layla grins. “My feelings *were* a little hurt because I’m nowhere near my pre-baby pants. But I didn’t say anything, obviously, because that would’ve been even more awkward.”

“Did you tell her to fuck all the way off?” I ask. “And where was Branch?”

“He had gone to the bathroom. But he caught just the tail end of the conversation and didn’t put it all together until she’d left.”

“Lucky for her,” I say, knowing my boy Branch. He would’ve done me proud.

She smiles softly. “When we got back in the truck, we sat in the parking lot, and he told me that he loves me just how I am, and that I’ve never been more beautiful than when I’m being a mom. That definitely helped take the sting out of it.”

The smile on her face hits me right where my feels would be if I had them.

“You were right. You did marry well,” I say, smiling back at her.

“I usually think that. But this morning he made a comment about how great it would be if our next pregnancy was twins.” She makes a face. “Can you even imagine?”

“Nope. I can’t imagine having one baby. That’s why I’m Auntie Poppy forever.”

A hesitant yet curious look crosses her face. “You seriously never want kids? I didn’t know we were back to that.”

I give her a look, then get up and head to the fridge.

This is a conversation that Layla and I have had a number of times offhandedly over the years—more so since she got pregnant with Sunny. It’s a fluid topic for me, rolling with whatever mood I’m in. Sometimes, I think maybe I’d like a baby ... eventually. Other times, like lately, I don’t think I want any at all.

It isn’t something I want to discuss or even admit out loud because I know how it’ll sound. But *no matter* how it sounds, it doesn’t change the truth. And that is I’m not sure I’m selfless enough to have children.

I love sleeping in, not having to deal with other people’s routines, and being able to go where I want at the spur of the moment. If chips and a stick of beef jerky sound good for dinner, so be it. If I want to blow my money on books, fancy coffee machines, and ridiculously priced shoes—that’s my business. And I don’t want it to be anyone else’s business.

Besides, the idea of someone depending on me to keep them alive every single day terrifies me. *And logistically?* It’s a nightmare because I would

want a baby to be raised like I was, with a mom and dad in the same house. And God knows that's a deal-breaker.

"Well, it seems like the odds of me having kids anytime soon got super slim last night," I say, handing her a drink. "Because your darling brother cut me off."

Her brows pull together. This is clearly news to her. "What?"

"I'm no longer having sex with your brother."

"As much as it weirds me out to talk about your sex life with Finn, I'm riveted." She opens the can. "What happened?"

"I told him that we need to reestablish the parameters of our ... *of us*, and he decided that to prove to me that we're more than just a physical relationship, he's taking sex off the table."

Her eyes light up.

"Why do you look happy about this?" I ask.

"No reason."

I lift a brow.

"*Fine*. Because maybe this will ..." She looks at the ceiling as she searches for the words. "I don't know. Maybe it will develop the relationship."

There's that word again.

"You two have been together for a long time and say that you're not in a relationship even though you act like you are," she says. "Just suck it up and admit it already—you're together. You turned down *what's-his-name* because of Finn. That's a big thing for Poppy Quinn."

I roll my eyes but don't have the energy to correct her. I used all my Finn-ergy tossing and turning last night.

We're not even twenty-four hours into our new arrangement, and I hate it. And I hate even more that it's the physical connection that I miss. Not just his dick, but his body next to mine. His smile from across the room. His voice asking me what I want to order for dinner. It's infuriating.

And, on a surprising note, he seems to be taking this better than I am. I sent him a picture of my cleavage last night, and he still didn't come over. *What is happening?*

I'm going to have to up my game.

"So what does this mean?" Layla asks, too entertained by this for her own good. "Are you both coming to Branch's birthday party?"

“I don’t quite know what this looks like. We haven’t exactly worked the kinks out.” I pout. “That was the first time I’ve used *kinks* in a negative connotation when it comes to Finn.”

She laughs. “*Poppy.*”

Sunny stirs and Layla goes to her, shushing her until she settles again. I take the opportunity to check my phone.

Finn: Hope you’re having a good day.

This man.

I grin, typing my response in a flurry.

Me: I am. Got a new vibrator today. Excited to give it a try.

Finn: That’s great. Good luck. Remember to fully charge it first so it doesn’t die midway through. That situation makes for one very angry Poppy. 😏

Is he serious right now?

Me: Want to come over? We could learn how it works together. 🐈

Finn: I’d be happy to pick you up for dinner.

Me: 😏 You’re so boring.

Finn: That’s funny. I’ve never heard you say that before. 😏

Me: You could prove me wrong.

Finn: That’s exactly what I’m trying to do. Have a good day, friend.

I don’t dignify that with an answer.

CHAPTER SIX

POPPY

“The Cinos Agency has been with us for twenty years,” Joshua says, folding his hands on the conference room table. “They love us and don’t want to leave. But when they’re getting quoted fifty thousand dollars less from Hambrill National, how can we expect them to stay?”

The room falls silent. The question is rhetorical, and it’s one we’ve asked ourselves several times this afternoon about a list of accounts, but that doesn’t mean it’s any easier to answer.

Everyone hates these meetings but me. *I love them*. Looking at the data, figuring out how to retain accounts and acquire new business—and coming up with a plan to slaughter the goals we have to hit to stay profitable—is such a rush. There’s no feeling like walking out of a meeting knowing that everyone around you is impressed by your problem-solving skills and values your opinion.

If only I could solve my personal problems.

“Let’s look at it,” I say, opening a file on my laptop. “Where do we need to be to retain Cinos?”

“We don’t know,” Joshua says. “They would only say that we need to come to the table with our best number.”

“How many claims have they had?” Peter, the vice president of finance and actuary, rubs his temple.

I take a quick sip of cold coffee, scanning the file. “Three, none of which were significant.” I turn to my assistant, Kelly. “What is their financial status?”

“Great,” she says. “Their account demonstrates solid financial strength.”

“Then let’s put them in our best rating tier,” I say, setting the cup down. “It’ll still be profitable despite the twenty percent credit right away. I mean, we are going to lose fifty thousand dollars in premium retention, so acquisitions will have to make up for that. But Cinos is such a great client, and their risk factor is practically nonexistent.”

Peter nods. “I agree. Joshua?”

“If Poppy is okay with adding another fifty grand to her new business goal, then I’m in.”

“Well, I don’t love it,” I say, mentally cursing the soft market. “But you know me. I never fail.”

“That’s why we love you, Poppy.” Peter smiles. “If our pricing is not within the marketplace, we should consider R&D to file for better rates.”

“I’ve added it to the list,” Walter says.

Peter concludes the meeting, and we all shuffle out the door. Once I’m in my office, I promptly close the door and collapse into my chair.

Numbers and statistics roll through my brain. Production goals, drop rates, and retention figures mingle together in a fog. I love it, but it is exhausting sometimes.

“Oof,” I mumble, peeking at the clock. *At least the day is nearly over.*

I begin gathering my things when my phone rings with an unfamiliar number. My first thought is to let it go to voicemail, but something tells me to answer it.

“Hello,” I say, withholding a sigh.

“Hello. This is Ann Walsh, calling for Poppy Quinn. Is she available?”

I flinch. “Yes, this is Poppy.”

“Oh good. Hi, Poppy. As I said, I’m Ann Walsh, an attorney with Walsh, Wallace, and Sila.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask, confused.

She laughs. “Yes, everything is fine. I thought you were expecting my call, so I apologize.”

Expecting her call? Why would I be expecting a call from a lawyer?

I hold my forehead. *What did my mother do now?*

“Chuck Lansing, a sports agent with whom I share many clients, asked me to give you a call,” she says. “Apparently, you’re interested in starting a foundation.”

A sports agent, huh? I smile, leaning back in my chair and shaking my head. *Okay, Finn. My friend.*

“Yes, actually, I am,” I say. “I’ll be honest with you, though. I know nothing about how these things work. So I’m not sure what terminology even to use to explain what I’m trying to do—or want to do, rather.”

“Not a problem. Why don’t you tell me a little about your vision, and I’ll see where I can fill in the blanks?”

“Okay,” I say, swallowing. *This is getting real.* “My late father had an idea. He wanted to help people turn someday into now, meaning he wanted to help people turn their dreams into reality. He had so many things he wanted to do in life, but unfortunately, we didn’t have the money.”

And the money we did have, my parents spent on me, ensuring I had everything I needed ... even if they had to go without. I didn’t even realize that until I was older, and I still feel guilty about that.

A wave of emotion hits my chest, settling a lump in my throat. I squeeze the bridge of my nose in hopes the burn will stop, and tears won’t gather in the corners of my eyes. *Must be getting close to having my period or something.*

“That’s lovely,” Ann says. “Do you intend to raise money publicly or fund this yourself?”

I look around. “Considering that I’m sitting in my office now so I can pay my mortgage, I’m not funding it myself.”

“Okay. Depending on your funding and activities, you’ll likely want to choose between a public charity and a private foundation. This is pretty straightforward, but there are rules to follow. For example, a charitable organization generally cannot pay to fulfill just anyone’s dreams. You’ll need a qualifying charitable purpose and meet eligibility criteria—but we can go into that later. And now that I have a better idea of what you’re doing, I’d love to meet with you and see if I can help you get the ball rolling.” She pauses. “If you would like my help, of course. I don’t mean to be presumptuous.”

My eyes widen. *What?*

I can’t fathom what just meeting with an attorney would cost. I haven’t even thought that far ahead. But something tells me I don’t need to speculate much to know I can’t afford Ms. Ann Walsh.

“I appreciate this very much,” I say slowly. “But I’m still in the very early stages of this. It’s practically still a concept.”

She laughs sweetly. “I understand. These things can feel enormous and overwhelming. But that’s my job—to help you break them down into smaller, more manageable chunks.”

“It’s not that I doubt you, ma’am. It’s more that I’m pretty sure I can’t afford you,” I say, cringing.

“Oh, that’s not a problem. My services are covered. It’s all been taken care of.”

Finn!

Tears flood my eyeballs, and I grit my teeth to keep them from falling.

“Why don’t I shoot you an email so you can reach out when you’re ready?” she asks. “I feel like I threw this in your lap, and I apologize for that.”

“No, don’t apologize,” I say, swiping a tissue from the pack in my desk. “This was very kind. Just unexpected.”

“What’s your email, Poppy?”

I give it to her, thank her for her call, and then place the phone beside my keyboard. But before I can gather my wits, a knock raps against the door. *Shit.*

I dab below my eyes and clear my throat. “Come in.”

Joshua steps into my office. His light-blond hair looks as if his fingers have combed through it a million times, and his tie is loose around his neck.

“Am I interrupting anything?” he asks, his brows pulled together.

“Only a slow spiral into the abyss.” I clear my throat again and laugh. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to stop by and tell you that your confidence today really helped the rest of us not *spiral into the abyss*,” he says, laughing too. “I’ve worked here for six months, and this was the first meeting where I expected someone to start crying.”

I shrug. “Well, we usually, like true professionals, wait until we get home to cry.” *Or do it at our desks when our not-boyfriends do something incredibly wonderful that they shouldn’t have done.*

My heart swells as I imagine Finn’s handsome face. Sure, this flies in the face of what I told him I wanted, but I should’ve expected something like this when I shared my idea. Because this is what Finn does. It’s who he is. And somehow this feels different from when he’s just doting on me, because this foundation? At the end of the day, it isn’t for me. It’s for other people. I could never be upset with him for that.

“You’re funny.” Joshua chuckles. “You know, since the first time I met you, I thought it was so odd that you were in commercial insurance.”

“Really? Why?”

“You’re just so outgoing. I mean, you’re brilliant, too, of course. But it’s hard to imagine you sitting behind a desk every day crunching numbers.” He cocks his head to the side. “You know how people say that people on the radio didn’t have the face for TV? Well, you’re like a person doing radio that should definitely be on the television.”

I laugh. “Joshua, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were flirting with me.”

“It’s a good thing you know better then,” he says, chuckling. “What are you up to this weekend? Anything fun?”

Fun exited stage right days ago. “No. What about you?”

“Not really. I’m planning a party to celebrate my husband passing the bar. I’m going to scope out this place called O’Dells that’s not too far from here. Do you know it?”

I nod. “Yeah. I love that place. A bunch of us used to walk over there on Thursdays after work and have a drink.”

“Would it be a good place to meet up with friends for a little celebration?”

“Absolutely.” I hesitate, but then remember that I’ll probably be home alone all weekend. “When are you going to check it out? I could meet you there. I’m fairly good friends with Henry, the owner’s son, who is there more often than not. I might be able to get him to rent you the back room that they rarely rent out anymore. It’s the perfect gathering spot.”

His eyes light up. “Poppy, that would be amazing. How’s Saturday around two?”

“I’ll be there.”

He thanks me and then leaves quickly with a bounce in his step, shutting the door behind him. As soon as the clasp locks, I release a sigh.

This is Finn’s idea of being friends? This man ...

I unlock my phone and touch Finn’s name. It rings twice before he answers.

“Hey, Poppy Quinn.”

My smile is instantaneous, and the rush of energy that swoops through me is exhilarating. I get to my feet, unable to sit still.

“Hey, Finn Miller. What are you up to?”

“I was trying to decide whether I want to go to the grocery store or just order it all and have it delivered. I don’t have my personal shopper to go with me, so that kinda takes the fun out of it.”

Charmer. “Well, I could go get everything for you, since you probably don’t know what you usually buy anyway since I pick it out. While I drop it off, I could, I don’t know, ride your cock.”

His reaction is a chuckle mixed with a groan.

“You start training camp in, what, a week? Two?” I ask, toying with him. “This is really the last few days where we can just fuck whenever. Once you report to the team, I only get you here and there.” I grin mischievously. “And I miss you, Finn. And that dick.”

“Poppy ...” He hisses a breath. “If you need something—besides the obvious—please get to it because I need to go jack off.”

“I could help with that, too, you know.”

He groans again, and I laugh.

I mosey around my office, wishing I was with him. I imagine him at his house in nothing but a pair of shorts, stretched out on his sofa with a house remodeling show on the television. His hair is probably messy, and his skin wears the effects of the workout he did an hour ago because he was bored.

The thought makes me smile. It also makes me a little sad.

So, I shove that imagery out of my brain and get back to why I called.

“A very nice woman called me a few minutes ago,” I say.

“Huh.”

I grin. “Do you know anything about that? Because she apparently got my information from a sports agent named Chuck, and I’m pretty freaking sure that’s your agent’s name.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, what?”

“You know my agent’s name? I’m impressed.”

I laugh again. “She also told me that her services are paid for, so thank you.” My heart squeezes tightly. “It does concern me since I told you on the way home from the airport that offering me money for my charity idea wasn’t exactly friends-with-benefits behavior.”

“I thought about that. But since there are no benefits to this friendship anymore, and I’m not technically giving *you* the money, it falls perfectly under Poppy’s Rules of Non-Relationships.”

“Finn ...” I sigh happily. “I’ll pay you back. Eventually.”

“You’re not paying me back. Stop it.”

“It might take the rest of my life,” I say, grinning. “But maybe we could work something out. I mean, it might be illegal to trade sexual favors to work off a debt, but I won’t tell. Hell, I’d prefer it.”

His laughter winds its way around my heart.

The silence that follows melts away some of the day’s stress. I find my seat again and let Finn’s breathing steady my own.

“In all seriousness,” I say, “thank you. I don’t know, and don’t want to know, how much that phone call cost you, but I’m thankful. It really means a lot that you ...” *It means a lot in so many ways.* I swallow. “Just thank you for supporting my idea like this.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s a great idea, and it honors your dad. I just wish I knew more about him so I could understand the concept better.”

My smile wavers. We’ve talked briefly about my parents—more about my mom. She’s easier to discuss because she’s still here. I know Finn would love for me to tell him every childhood story that I can remember, like he’s shared with me. But I can’t.

The more information you give others, the more ammunition they have to throw back in your face later.

I grit my teeth, hating that thoughts like this trickle into my brain. That they’re a part of my operating system. That I can’t just override it and be a normal person.

I know how much it would mean to Finn if I could. I just can’t.

“How about I come over tonight and show you just how grateful I am?” I ask.

He hums. “What are you going to do? Take me out for dinner? Mini golf?”

“Kind of. There would be oral activities and balls involved.”

His chuckle is low and vibrates through my body. “I miss you, Pop.”

“I bet you do,” I say, redirecting him before he gets gooey. “You haven’t had sex in how many days?”

“Think I could take my friend to dinner this weekend?”

“I don’t know. I might be able to pencil you in if I get to pick dessert.”

Tension fills the air as we sit quietly, waiting for the next volley to fly. As frustrating as this is, and as painful as the growing ache in my core is becoming, this is fun.

“Call me if you decide what you want,” I say, teasing him.

“Knowing what I want isn’t the problem.”

“You just think you know what you want.” My smile slips. “Thank you again. Truly.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome. Hey, are you going to Layla’s tomorrow night for Branch’s birthday dinner?”

“Yes. I’m assuming that I’ll see you there.”

“You will indeed. See you then.”

“See ya.”

He sighs. “Bye, Pop.”

I end the call and fall back in my chair.

“Knowing what I want isn’t the problem.”

It’s such a compliment that he thinks he wants me, and it’s one I probably don’t deserve. Unfortunately for him, he doesn’t realize that if he got what he wants, it would fail dismally.

Lucky for him, I know what he needs.

And *that* I can deliver.

CHAPTER SEVEN

POPPY

“Hey!” I say, coming into Layla’s kitchen. Balloons cover the ceiling in blues and golds, and a spread of food lines the island like this is a *Last Supper* situation. “Where are you guys?”

“We’re in the living room,” Layla calls from across the house.

My pulse quickens as I place my purse and Branch’s gift on the small table by the door. Finn’s SUV was already in the driveway when I arrived, and although I was expecting it, it still caused my heart to race.

It feels like I haven’t seen him in months, yet it’s only been a few days. It’s not like we usually see each other every day anyway, but after not seeing him for a full week and then just for the ride home the other night, I miss him. And knowing that I can’t yank him into the bathroom and have my way with him is really irritating.

Because *someone* has to prove a damn point.

Ugh.

“But at least I came with weapons,” I say, smirking as I take in my carefully curated outfit.

I had just enough time after work to swing by the house and change into the clothes that I laid out last night. I really wanted to wear a sexy black dress that’s a time-tested orgasm inducer, but this is a family event. So, I opted for a pair of jeans that make my ass look great, and a white crop top that hugs my curves perfectly.

Finn has a storied history with me and crop tops. He has a very hard time keeping his hands to himself.

“Happy birthday,” I say, sweeping the living room for Finn to no avail. *Where is he?* I pull Branch into a quick, distracted hug. “Have you had a good day so far, birthday boy?”

“How could any day be a bad day with my life?”

Layla beams on the couch as I reach for Sunny.

“Come see your auntie Poppy,” I say, lifting her off Layla’s lap.

“Pop!!” Her fingers go straight into my hair. “Pop!”

“Easy on the hair, my girlie.” I pluck my strands from her fist a second before it winds up in her mouth. “Can I borrow a hair tie, Lay? I was a little distracted when I left the house—ouch! Easy, Sunny.”

She squeals as she reaches for another fistful of my locks.

“Yeah,” Layla says. “I think there are a couple in the drawer in the guest bathroom down here.”

I hand Sunny to Branch, much to her dismay, and enter the bathroom on the other side of the staircase.

My heart patters as I search for the hair tie, wondering where Finn is hiding. *How have I been here for five minutes and haven’t seen him? Is he not excited to see me?*

The thought annoys me as I locate the elastic. I reach for it, but instead of my hand moving forward toward the drawer, it joins the rest of my body falling backward ... against Finn’s chest.

My breath hitches as my brain registers the contact—the hard, sturdy wall of a man—and I melt into him.

“Hey,” he says as our gazes tangle in the mirror. His lips twitch. “You just had to wear that top, didn’t you?”

I smirk. “Would you rather me take it off?”

His eyes darken, and I get to see his sexy-as-hell dimples, as well. *Stupidly sexy man.*

“Behave,” he says.

“If I don’t, will you spank me?”

He steps back, smacks my ass, and closes the door.

The heat in the room explodes as Finn faces me. My pulse pounds through my veins. Finn watches me with lust that typically results in my back pressed against the wall, followed by his cock deep inside my pussy. But this time, instead of cutting the space between us, he keeps a respectful distance.

The bastard.

“I got the coffee maker,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting. “Nice little note you added.”

“I was trying to be helpful.”

He lifts a brow. “*I can’t have you making bad decisions and bad coffee, too.* That was you being helpful?”

“Well,” I say, sauntering toward him. “I’m not as good at helping with things in the kitchen as I am ... other things. Just doing my best to be your *friend.*”

“I like it.” His eyes sparkle as I stop in front of him and wrap my arms around his waist. “How have you been?”

I breathe in his clean, familiar scent, skimming my hands beneath his shirt and gliding my fingers across his lower back. Each brush of my skin against his sends a ridiculous rush through me. Something inside me fills up even though I didn’t realize it was empty.

“Lonely.” I pout, earning a grin. “What about you?”

“Lonely.” He pouts, too, making me laugh. “I ordered groceries, and I don’t like any of it. I’ve been starving all week.”

“Poor baby.”

He cups my cheeks, brushing a strand of hair out of my face. “Have you remembered to drink anything besides Dr Pepper?”

“No. This guy, who’s supposed to be my friend, made it his mission to make me drink water. But he recently decided to take a step back from our friendship, so I’m on my own.”

“That’s *not* what happened.”

I smile as his thumbs stroke my cheeks.

A warm, lazy contentment settles into my bones, spreading through my chest. Instinctively, I lean into his touch. I need this connection. I need his touch.

I knew I missed him, but this? Being here—not quite in his arms, but not out of them either—soothes an ache that I didn’t realize hurt so much behind my ribs.

“We should get back out there,” he says softly. “I just wanted a few minutes of you to myself.”

“You can have more than a few minutes. Just let me know when you’re ready to admit that I’m right.”

He smirks, dropping his hands. “Your overconfidence is adorable.”

I palm his cock through his pants. "And your dick is impressive. But that doesn't change anything, does it?"

"Do you see what you're doing right now?"

"Imagining your reaction if I drop to my knees and wrap my lips around you?"

He groans, flexing his hips against my hand. "As soon as things get too real, you yank the conversation back to sex."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do," he says, tapping me on the nose. "Don't get me wrong. I love talking about my cock going down your throat. But your blow job skills, while exceptional, aren't close to the most interesting thing about you."

Oh. I'm not sure how to internalize that. I want to make a joke, but none come to mind.

"It throws you off your game when you can't fuck me to shut me up, doesn't it?" he asks, thoroughly entertained by this development.

I roll my eyes as he opens the door. "Go bother someone else. I have to find a hair tie."

"I'll see you out here."

I wait until he's gone before I exhale. *Damn him.*

He's managed to frazzle my brain with his bullshit. As if my blow job skills are less interesting than other parts of me.

That's ridiculous, Finn Miller. Get a grip.

I find the elastic again and pull my hair back.

Maybe I'm the one who needs to get a freaking grip.

After a long, cleansing breath to dispel this apparent weak energy, I lift my chin and join everyone in the kitchen.

"Finn, Finn, Finn," Sunny sings, ending the chorus by blowing a raspberry.

My thoughts exactly, kid.

"Do you want a beer or a Dr Pepper?" Finn asks from the refrigerator with Sunny on his hip.

The view does something weird to my ovaries.

"A beer, please," I say. "Today was a long one."

"Work kicking your ass?" Branch asks, motioning for me to fill a plate.

I fill everyone in on the basics of my day, skipping over the technical stuff because they don't care about the details. While I'm talking about

insurance, we all get our food and take our spots at the table.

“Want me to take Sunny?” Layla asks Finn.

“Nah, I got her.” He nuzzles the side of her face, making her giggle.

“Do you want to stay with Uncle Finn or go to Mommy?”

“Finn, Finn, Finn!”

Layla rolls her eyes, but I can tell that the way her daughter loves her brother means the world to her.

“Hey, Lay,” I say, getting situated. “Did you see they opened a new yoga studio on Pike Street?”

“No. Did they? That’s pretty close to here.”

I scoop a forkful of coleslaw and bring it to my mouth. “We should go. They have Saturday morning class. I checked.”

Her eyes light up. “Yeah, we should.”

“If you need bent into a pretzel, I can help,” Branch says, looking at his wife like he wants to devour her.

Finn looks at me and smirks.

“What?” I ask quietly. “Are you ready to give in and give me the pretzel treatment?”

He fills his mouth with chicken and rice, making me laugh.

We eat our food, chatting back and forth about everything from yoga to football to taxes. The kitchen glows from the final rays of the evening sun, filling the room with a magic that I think we all feel. It’s moments like this that make me pause and say a prayer of thanks that these people are in my life.

I’m not sure what I would do without them ... especially Finn. And I don’t love that.

I take a potato chip off his plate. “Do you report to training camp this coming week or the next one?”

“A week from Monday.” He blows on a small bite of mashed potatoes before feeding it to Sunny. “I have some media shit to take care of tomorrow, and a few meetings at the facility next week. Then, it’s on.”

“I keep feeling like I should be in prep mode,” Branch says, getting up from the table.

Layla frowns. “Are you regretting retirement?”

“Hell no. I’m sure I’ll miss it, but I won’t miss feeling like I’m dying from internal injuries most days of the week. And it’s pretty hard to feel like

I'm missing out on anything when I'm curled up on the couch with you and our baby."

I exchange a grin with Finn.

"How are you feeling about retirement, Finn?" Layla asks.

"Oh! Wait a second," I say, laughing as a blob of potatoes dangles precariously off Sunny's chin. I grab it with a napkin. "You're a messy girl."

She blows another raspberry. I don't speak baby, but I wonder if that wasn't "fuck off" in her language.

"I've been thinking about it," Finn says, handing me Sunny. Then he gets up and takes his plate to the kitchen. "I waffle back and forth about it. Like Branch said, it wouldn't suck not to have your ass whipped every week. I'm starting to get too old for it. But I'm still really good. It's hard to turn down that kind of money, especially because I won't have a chance to make it for much longer."

Especially when you offer to give it away to charities that don't exist yet. The thought makes me smile.

"That's a weird take for someone who apparently has enough money just to give it away," I say, grinning at him.

He winks at me.

"What's that mean?" Branch asks, picking up the present I brought. "Hey, is this gift for me?"

"Yeah. It's from me," I say.

He carries it to the island and opens it.

"Poppy just means that she had an idea for a charity, and I offered to help her get it started," Finn says, opening the fridge. "But, in Poppy fashion, she took it as a personal affront to her independence, so that didn't go far."

I roll my eyes. "He also had an attorney call me to help get it set up." I take the bottle of water that Finn hands me as he walks by. "Because *he* seems to take a personal affront to me not wanting his money."

Branch's eyes light up when he opens the box and spots the elegant glass bottle filled with amber-colored liquor.

"Nice," he says, holding it up proudly. "Thanks, Pop."

"That was two hundred bucks. If you mix Coke with it, I'm taking it back."

He laughs.

“Was that the bourbon that we had in New York?” Finn asks, taking a drink of water.

I nod. “Yeah. In the hotel bar.”

“You found it? We looked for that for, what, six months afterward?”

“I asked the guy who owns the liquor store by your house to keep an eye out for it, and he called me a few weeks ago.” I take another chip from his plate. “Spoiler—I got you one for your birthday. Don’t think I left you out.”

He smiles. “Good, because I was getting butt hurt there for a minute.”

Branch laughs, capturing my attention. I look at him across my shoulder to find him and Layla grinning.

“What?” Finn asks, taking Sunny as she starts chanting his name again. “What are you two smiling about?”

Branch shakes his head. “You two are fucking weird.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I say, taking my plate to the kitchen.

“You can take it however you want,” Branch says.

Finn motions for me to get a washcloth for Sunny.

“You two act more married than we do,” Layla says, as I pop over to the laundry room and nab a towel for the baby.

“Except we’re not having sex.” I come back into the room and moisten the cloth, ignoring the look Finn’s firing my way. “I bet you two are ...” I glance at Sunny. *Watch your language around the baby.* I grimace. *Yet another reason why having a kid might not be good for me.* “Doing that a lot more than we are.”

“And they probably let the other be nice to them, too.” Finn lifts a brow, taking the washcloth from me. “Don’t you think?”

I hum as if I’m pondering his question—and maybe I am. Because I like it when he’s nice to me. I probably like it more than I should. But there’s a difference between letting someone take care of you and letting them see you bleed.

Branch and Layla watch us with bated breath, and I’m not sure what to say. But I gotta say something because Finn’s smirk grows a little more with each passing second.

I take my seat, lifting my foot to Finn’s crotch—getting the briefest wide-eyed response, and smiling.

“I’ll be as nice to you as you want me to be,” I say, staring at him. “Just say when.”

He lets his attention linger on me long enough to make me so hot that I nearly melt in the chair. Then he sets his sights on Sunny and her mashed potato face.

Branch and Layla lose interest in us and banter back and forth about taking a vacation during the winter. I watch Finn clean Sunny's mess and wonder how he does it.

How does he leave me wanting him so badly, but still feeling so good?

That's the magic of Finn Miller, I guess.

I really like him as a person, which made the friends-with-benefits arrangement work for both of us. Even better, I know he thinks of me as a friend, too.

But that doesn't mean we can be any *more* than that.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

FINN

I place my finger on the pad beside the door and wait for it to buzz me in.

The sights and sounds of the Legends facilities welcome me as I step inside. Staff scurry down the hall, from one office to another. Some give me a wave or a hello, and others are too busy with their nose in their devices to look up.

The start of the season always reminds me of getting ready for the first day of school. The break was refreshing and a much-needed respite—time to recharge and heal from the constant physical play—but something is comforting about getting back into the swing of things. Finding the rhythm of this blessed life I’ve worked my ass off for.

But this season in particular has a lot riding on it, and I already feel the pressure. It’s our first season without Branch, and that’ll require a shift in our offense. So much of it was built on the defense being unable to effectively cover him and Chauncey at wide receiver, and me at tight end, at the same time. I’m not sure how, or if we can, compensate for that loss. And as a veteran and championship MVP, everyone will look to me to lead a locker room teeming with rookies.

It’s both a compliment and a burden.

“Hey, Miller,” Chauncey says, clasping my hand and pulling me in for a quick man hug. The wide receiver has filled out, clearly having been working out during the offseason. “Good to see you, man.”

“You, too. What have you been up to?”

“I have a couple of media things today, and then I’m going to see Hannah. I fucked up my shoulder last week, and she’s been helping me rehab it.”

I laugh as we turn down the media corridor. “I bet she has.” It’s no secret that Chauncey has a thing for Hannah. “Who are you meeting with today?”

“Filming some marketing pieces for the team, and then they’re doing a documentary or some shit about quarterbacks, and they asked me if I’d say a few things about Frutter.”

“That’s cool.” I stop, nodding to the door on our left. “This is me. I have an interview with Kylie Gross with Exposé, and then I’m out of here.”

Thank God. I’m not in the mood to chitchat about anything, let alone anything with Exposé. I have no idea why they’re allowed media access to us since they’re essentially a gossip magazine. Just because they opened a sports page on their website doesn’t mean they’re interested in actual sports. It’ll just be question after question about who I’m dating, if I’m single, and why I was caught on camera doing *this* at *this place* on *this date*. A pointless fluff piece at best.

And none of it is any of their fucking business.

This kind of shit is the only thing I downright hate about my job. I used to love it. I used to love sitting down with someone with a camera in my face and being the center of attention. But something changed a couple of years ago, about the time Branch started dating Layla, and I started to see it differently.

The way they don’t see us as human beings, only commodities. Their refusal to distinguish anything as sacred. I used to think it was fun to share my opinions on everything. Now, I want to keep some of those things to myself and not feel like they’re being pried out of me and sold to the highest bidder.

“Later,” Chauncey says as I step into the interview room.

“Finn Miller,” Kylie says, extending a hand. Her smile stretches from ear to ear. “It’s great to see you.”

“Yeah, it’s great to see you, too,” I say, ignoring the way her hand lingers in mine. “How have you been?”

“I’m great, thanks for asking. How has the offseason treated you?”

“It’s been nice. Quiet.”

She turns to the hair and makeup artist standing beside her with a brush in her hand. “Have you met Deanna? If it’s okay, she’ll make sure you look great under the lights. Not that you need much help there.”

I smile at the redhead beside the Legends PR representative, who stands quietly in the corner. “Sure. Want me to sit here?”

“Yes,” Deanna says, getting to work on my hair and face as soon as I get situated. “Your smile is a showstopper.”

“Thanks.”

“My parents tried to buy me a smile like that, but they failed. My front tooth is still slightly crooked,” she says, dusting something on my nose and forehead. “I say it gives me charm now because it makes me feel better about it. But my parents should’ve really demanded a refund from our dentist.”

I grip the armrests. “Fixing it would be a mistake. It’s cute.”

Her cheeks flush as she continues her work. She doesn’t attempt further conversation, and I don’t force it. I was just being kind.

A few years ago, I would’ve flirted shamelessly with her, but I’ve grown beyond that. *Finally*. Back then, I lapped up the attention and got a rise out of watching women react to me. Maybe my ego needed it. But these days, I don’t care. I really don’t even notice when women bat their eyes my way. I have no interest in managing all of that.

I’ve also not wanted Poppy to think I was interested in anyone else ... even though she seems to think she wouldn’t care if I did.

I grin. *I call bullshit, Ms. Quinn.*

The silence gives me a moment to get my head together—to wrap up any lingering thoughts about Poppy and shift my thoughts to work.

We had such a good time together last night at Layla’s and ended up staying far later than we usually do. Once Sunny went to sleep, we hung out on the back patio, telling stories and laughing as the breeze blew in over the water.

Poppy curled up on my lap, placing her head between my collar and jaw. I had half a notion to make her get up because if I give the girl an inch, she’ll take two miles. But it felt too good to have her on me, fiddling with the edge of my shirt like she always does, and in my arms.

God, I’ve missed her. I’ve missed her even more than I imagined. It’s not even sex that I miss the most, although I think I’m getting carpal tunnel

from all the jacking off I've had to do. It's ... nights like last night. Feeling her presence, hearing her laugh—knowing she's safe and happy.

Yeah, she's going to be the death of me ... and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"There you go," Deanna says. "You look great."

"Thank you. I appreciate your help."

She grins. "*Please*. You could've filmed without me and still looked gorgeous."

I smile at her as a guy gets my mic situated on my shirt and Kylie gets organized across from me, just out of the shot.

"Thanks for sitting down with me today, Finn," Kylie says.

It's not like I really had a choice. "Yeah, of course."

"If you don't mind, Laura Cardone is here," she says, pointing at a younger woman standing by the window. "She's going to take some notes and run a few smaller stories for us leading up to, and after, the feature. Is that okay?"

I shrug. "Sure. Sounds fine to me."

"Great. Are we ready?" She looks around at the lighting crew. "Okay, let's get into it." She crosses her legs, adjusting the iPad on her lap. "So, Finn, this is your first year on the Legends without Branch Best. How does it feel going into the season knowing that number eleven won't be there?"

"I don't think it's really hit me yet. But I'm sure once I walk into the locker room and don't see him, it'll feel weird."

"But he's married to your sister, so I'm assuming you see him all the time outside of work."

That's not a question, Kylie. Bringing Layla into the conversation, whether directly or indirectly, puts me on edge. Layla hates this shit—hates her name in the media. Rightfully so considering how they treated her when she and Branch first started dating. And if I wasn't contractually required to talk to Exposé, there's no way in hell I'd even consider it.

I give Kylie a pointed look as I smile. "Yes, I do." I pause so the editors can cut the next part out. "I'm not talking about my sister. I'll walk out of here if you bring her up again."

"Oh, Finn, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. Trust me, I know she's off limits." She holds up a hand in apology, then redirects her line of questioning. "How do you think Branch feels about not playing this season?"

Conflicted but happy.

“I’m not going to put words in his mouth, but from my perspective, he’s very happy at home with his family. Again, I’m sure when the season starts, there’ll be a bit of adjusting, considering he played the game for so many years.”

“Is that something you see for yourself?”

“Retirement? Yeah, eventually. But I still have a few good years left in me, I think.”

“No, not retirement, although I’m sure you’ll make fans happy with that admission,” she says, laughing. “But I meant a family. Seeing Branch with his family, does it make you want one?”

I shift in my seat, mentally applauding her for crafting a question about Layla but not *about Layla*. “Sure. I think about it, but marriage is a big deal to me. I’m only doing it once.”

“I can’t imagine that you have a hard time finding candidates.”

Yeah, but the one I want doesn’t want me like that. I shove Poppy out of my head.

“You’d be surprised,” I say, running my hands down my thighs. I can’t be too specific with this answer, or the media will start a witch hunt. *Keep your answer in generalities.* “Finding a woman to spend time with is one thing, and finding one who wants to put up with me and football is another.”

Not bad. It’s true, at least.

Kylie studies me. “I imagine that you’re sick of being asked about these things, but you are one of the, if not *the* most eligible, bachelors in the league.”

Thanks for reminding me.

But, of course, I can’t say that either, which is one of the reasons I loathe these types of interviews. Ask me about football, for fuck’s sake.

I plaster on a smile. “Yup, I do get tired of being asked about it. The interest is bizarre.”

“Is it really, though? You’re handsome and charming and wealthy. You’re basically the man women read about in fairy tales who comes in on their white knight and sweeps them off their feet.”

Not all women. Not the one I want, anyway.

“As soon as you’re no longer available, I think the interest will settle down,” she says, swiping the screen of her device.

“Maybe I’ll tell people I’m engaged.”

She laughs. “I like it. Slightly unorthodox angle, but creative, nonetheless. Now about this upcoming season. The Legends won the championship last year. Does that change how you approach this season, or do you approach them all the same?”

I breathe a sigh of relief and fall easily into talking about football. I’m sure Kylie won’t stay in this lane and will try to bounce back to my personal life at least once before this interview is over. But, for now, discussing the game is a welcome transition. I can do it on autopilot—which is good because my brain is still on Poppy Quinn.

If I could figure out a way to spend more time with her, I could make faster progress. I need her to see what a life with me could be like and realize that there’s nothing to worry about. The problem is time. She works all week, and I’m about to spend six days a week here, working my ass off, too. Living apart doesn’t help.

I just need a way to get her closer.

I check back into the interview just in time to catch Kylie’s question. “There’s a thing going viral on Social right now where people share what they think about most in a day. Have you participated in that trend?”

“Nah, social media really isn’t my thing these days.”

“What would your answer be if you did?”

Poppy. “I don’t know. How to land an airplane, probably. I’m pretty sure that I could get one to the ground in an emergency.”

“That’s an answer that I haven’t heard before,” she says, segueing into her next question. “What do you think you know more about than anyone else on your team? Chauncey said ... Well, I can’t say what Chauncey said.”

I laugh. “I can imagine.”

“Frutter said he knew more about Chauncey’s assignments on a play than anyone else, including Chauncey.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right, too,” I say, nodding.

“What about you? What is Finn Miller an expert about?”

Again—Poppy.

“I’m not sure I know much about anything,” I say. “But I can name every establishment in greater Chicago where you can find a Dr Pepper on a whim.”

“That’s so incredibly random, but I guess if you’re a Dr Pepper connoisseur, it’s a handy skill to have.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

She ventures off into another line of questioning, and I fight myself not to think about Poppy. If I don’t figure out how to handle this, how to make her see reality, I’m going to be distracted all season.

Or longer.

Because I won’t stop until she trusts me.

Until we both agree that she’s mine.

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CHAPTER NINE

POPPY

“Hey, perfect timing.” Joshua smiles, coming toward me from the other end of the block. Clouds partially block the afternoon sun, and the tall buildings on either side of the street cast funky shadows over the sidewalks. “Is parking always so hard to find down here?”

I adjust my purse on my shoulder and join him in front of O’Dells. “No. There’s an art festival a few streets over on Graber Avenue, and this is the overflow.”

“I wound up parking at the office. Do you think they’ll tow me?”

“Not if you have your parking pass visible. Trust me,” I say as he pulls open the door. “I’ve used that many nights when I’m out this way. Just don’t tell the others. If there’s only one or two of us doing it, we can probably fly under the radar.”

He laughs, waiting for me to step inside the neighborhood pub.

O’Dells reminds me of walking into a sitcom—one of those hole-in-the-wall places that somehow hold up an entire community. The patrons are regulars and the staff consistent. It’s a place where everybody, or most of them, knows your name.

“Oh, I like this,” Joshua says, following me inside. He takes in the tray ceilings, worn wooden floors, and walls peppered with pictures of customers throughout the decades O’Dells has been in business. “It’s so cozy.”

“I love this place, and it *is* cozy. But don’t come down here on a weekend night and expect to leave with that adjective in your brain.”

He grins as we reach the bar. It's mostly empty, with only a few stools and tables filled. And, if the sound of the billiards balls clanking in the background is any indication, there are some patrons playing pool and throwing darts, too.

"I believe that. You can feel it. It gives a very hometown hangout during the day and a hip hotspot at night."

"Perfect analogy," I say, grinning at him. "Let's grab a seat, and I'll see if I can sweet-talk someone into showing us the space in the back."

Henry peers up from the other end of the bar with a curious look on his face. I wave, certain he's wondering why I'm in the pub on a Saturday afternoon with a man who isn't Finn. He shakes his head, amused, before he returns to his conversation with a pretty brunette.

"So," I say, turning to Joshua. "Your husband passed the bar? Is that right?"

He beams. "Yes, but we found out in April. We wanted to throw a party when his parents were in town, and they just finalized their travel arrangements last week." His eyes sparkle. "I'm so excited to put this party together and celebrate Darren. He's worked his ass off and just deserves the world."

I rest my chin in my palm, grinning at Joshua. He talks about Darren like Branch and Layla talk about each other. There's genuine warmth, a true sincerity that drips from every word. A small part of me aches with envy. *What would it feel like to be that in love, that safe, with someone else?*

My mind drifts to Finn and Thursday night, where I sat on Layla's back porch with Finn's arms around me. I took a risk, unsure whether it helped my case or his, but I needed some form of physical contact from him. So, I climbed into his lap and rested my head on his chest. He stiffened for the briefest moment before pulling me closer and releasing a contented sigh.

I felt safe with him then, *but how could I not?* With his arms stretched around me, his thick fingers locked at my waist, the world may as well have been a million miles away. If it were, if we were cocooned away from the pressures and stressors and nastiness of the world, I may be able to squash the soundtrack playing quietly in the back of my mind and simply trust the feeling. Maybe I could believe in *us*.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Henry says, chuckling. "How are ya, Poppy?"

“I’m good. Thanks for asking.” I turn to Joshua. “Joshua, this is the infamous Henry that I’ve been telling you about. Henry, this is Joshua.” I face forward again. “Joshua is looking for a space for a party, and I told him how amazing your old party space was and that maybe we could talk you into letting us see it.”

Henry gives me a look.

“*Please?*” I ask sweetly. “Just let us look at it and see if it’s even a contender. Who knows? It might not even work for him.”

“You know I closed that room down a year ago,” Henry says.

I lean forward. “And you know that I wouldn’t bring you a potential new customer if I didn’t promise they’d pay in full and leave the place intact.”

“Oh, yes, definitely.” Joshua smiles. “First of all, my husband is an attorney now, so we’re fancy and have money.”

I laugh, knowing that’s not necessarily true but loving his optimism.

“Second, my mother’s coming to this event,” Joshua says. “She has a hard and fast rule that you never leave a place worse than you found it. The last party that she attended, they tried to hire her afterward because she left the place so spotless.”

Henry looks at me, and I shrug. “I’m just trying to keep things local for ya, Henry.”

“Let me see if I can find the keys,” he says, grumbling.

“Thank you,” I say.

He rolls his eyes at me and heads to the office.

“Are you playing in the charity golf tournament next week?” Joshua asks. “Our department’s sending a team, and I wasn’t going to play but got talked into it. I think you usually play, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. I do. I actually love golf. And getting paid to be out of the office to play while supporting the women and children’s charities is a total win.”

He nods. “Are you good?”

“I’d say I play pretty well, but I don’t have an official handicap.” I shrug. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’m decidedly terrible.” He laughs. “But I love it. And I figure that if it’s for charity, no one can get mad if I suck, right?”

Before I can answer him, Henry is back with a set of keys in one hand and my go-to grapefruit summer shandy in the other. A mischievous curl of

his lips raises a flag of concern.

"I didn't order this," I say, confused.

Henry makes a point to look over Joshua's head. "I know."

I swallow, following his stare to the back corner of the room.

Finn's smirk is delicious—and *dangerous*—as he tips his beer toward me when our eyes meet.

He's beyond gorgeous in a black shirt that hugs his torso and the black baseball hat that I bought him for Christmas. He watches me with curiosity but also irritation, and it's the second part of that equation that pulls me back to reality.

And allows me to notice his teammate Chauncey sitting across from him with a grin like the cat who ate the canary.

I narrow my gaze briefly, getting a lifted brow from Finn, before turning my attention back to Joshua.

Shit.

My pulse quickens as I try to figure out what to do about this. Finn must think I'm up to no good, and he's clearly bothered by it, too. While I'd normally be annoyed at his aggravation because I'm here helping a friend, we aren't operating under normal circumstances. The last thing I want him to think is that I'm here with another guy in his place.

Like that's possible.

I turn in time to catch Henry's smirk.

"Joshua, can you give me a second?" I ask. "I need to talk to ... a friend for a second."

Henry jams a thumb over his shoulder. "I can show you the room now, if you don't want to wait on her."

"If you don't mind, I will go ahead and check it out," Joshua says to me. "I have an appointment in an hour across the city and can't stick around long."

"Then let me go with you and then I'll—"

He leans toward me. "If your friend is the guy sitting in the back looking like he wants to devour you, you won't be going anywhere but toward him if I have anything to say about it." He lifts a brow, pulling away. "I refuse to stand in the way of *that*."

"Trust me," I say as we get to our feet. "You aren't the one getting in the way." I glance at Henry. "Remember how much you love me when you give him a quote, okay?"

“Yeah, whatever,” he says, grinning.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” Joshua says. “Thanks for coming down here with me.”

I sigh. “Of course. Any time. I hope you find the right spot for the party.”

He follows Henry, and I pick up my shandy, take a long drink, and then pivot on my heel. Finn’s gaze collides with mine, nearly knocking me over. He practically sees through me as he searches my eyes, halfway ignoring Chauncey as he says goodbye.

My body comes alive as I grow closer to Finn. The beer is stronger on my tongue, and the air swirling around the room warms my skin. The lights are brighter, the smell of Finn’s cologne muskier—and the ache in my core nearly throbbing out of control.

He sits back, one arm draped along the top of the booth, narrowing his eyes.

“Hey,” I say, sliding onto the seat beside him.

He doesn’t move. Doesn’t budge. There’s not even a twitch in his jaw.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, grinning at him.

His lips twist. “Chauncey and I ran some routes this morning at Merricomb Park. Neither of us was ready to go home, so we came by here to throw some darts and shoot the shit.”

“Oh. Fun.” I bite my lip, and his gaze drops to my mouth. “I thought maybe you got word that I was meeting Joshua here and decided to stalk me.”

A long pause settles between us—long enough to give me an opening to mess with him. I rest my hand on his leg, pressing my palm into his thigh as I run it closer to his cock.

He snatches my wrist just before I come into contact with his dick and fights a smile. “If I thought there was any chance that you were meeting another man *like that*, I wouldn’t do anything about it.”

“Why?”

He laces our fingers together before bringing them to his lips. His focus never leaves me as he presses a soft kiss to the back of my hand.

“Because,” he says, letting my hand go. “If you were on the hunt for another guy, then I totally misread us. And if I’m wrong about us, then I have bigger problems than you falling for ...”—he glances over my shoulder at where Joshua and I were sitting—“an accountant.”

I laugh. "An accountant? Not close." I pick a piece of lint off his shirt. "Are you curious about who he is?"

Finn shrugs. "Not really."

"Come on," I say, poking him in the side. "You were jealous. Admit it."

"Well, I mean, I think it's a natural instinct to loathe seeing your woman out with another guy you don't know."

My heart skips a beat, and then another when his smile softens.

"I said I wouldn't interfere," he says. "I never said I wouldn't care."

My fingers itch to touch him, to lift the hem of his shirt and skim my palms over his chest. It's a craving like I've never had before. But his words hit me a little differently than normal, and instead of wanting to straddle him, I just want to cuddle him.

"I said I wouldn't interfere. I never said I wouldn't care."

I don't even know who I am anymore.

"That's not what you said about Cade," I say, searching for levity.

He sighs, sliding his arm down the booth and around my waist. Slowly, he scoots me toward him until I'm tucked into his side.

Bliss. Every damn time.

The ever-present hum beneath my skin settles, and the tension in my stomach unclenches. It's as if my body knows something my brain won't accept because my body simply *exhales*.

"That's true about Cade," he says, stroking his fingers down my arm. "But that was different because it wasn't you having lunch or whatever with a guy. You came home trying to break up with me. Then you tell me there's this guy who was interested in you, and that it triggered you to feel that you needed space from me."

My spirits sink. I sag against him, wishing that's not how he took this—because it's not true. I thought I made that clear.

"Cade doesn't matter to me, Finn. I don't want you to think that."

He shrugs, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. I shouldn't like it as much as I do, and I shouldn't feel such tranquility meander its way to the tips of my toes, either.

"Joshua is an underwriter. We work together," I say, surprised that I want to give him this information.

I generally balk when I think someone assumes they have a say in what I do or the decisions that I make. It makes me cagey. But Finn never does that—he never questions me or pressures me.

“I said I wouldn’t interfere. I never said I wouldn’t care.”

“He’s trying to find a space to throw his husband a party, and I suggested here,” I say, feeling his muscles twitch with every move he makes.

“His husband, huh?”

“Yes. Darren. He just passed the bar exam.”

“Good for Darren.” Finn blows out a sigh of relief, and I can’t help but feel it in my chest. “What else are you doing today?”

“I don’t know. Want to come home with me?”

“So that you can have your wicked way with my body?”

“Absolutely.”

He chuckles. “I woke up this morning with all the blankets, the television off, and no hair in my mouth. And, I have to admit, it wasn’t a good way to wake up.”

“You love my hair.”

He leans forward, pressing a kiss to my forehead, letting his lips linger. “I fucking love your hair.”

The words are heavy, as if he means more than that, but I won’t allow myself to process that.

“If this were any other Saturday, we would’ve lain in bed for far too long until you decided that you’re starving and that we have to order food,” he says, searching my eyes. “Then we’d have taken a shower, and I would’ve washed this crazy hair of yours, and then we would’ve gone for a walk, or you would’ve catcalled me while I worked in the yard.”

I groan. “I love you shirtless and sweaty.”

He laughs, his voice lowering. “And we would’ve had sex. But that’s not all we would’ve done, Pop. It would’ve been the cherry on the pie, not the whole pie.”

Oh.

My smile fades as I catch a glimpse of our fingers laced together again. I don’t know how long they’ve been that way, or whose hand grabbed whose. I only know that it calms a part of my soul.

I take a breath as my heart races, thinking about our challenge. I thought this thing would be over by now and we would’ve been back to our normal routine. But I’m not sure if we’re closer to the end or further from it now.

The ache that bloomed in my chest when I listened to Joshua talk about Darren grows. It spreads, uncurling itself until it’s touched every part of me.

And as it continues to cloud my brain and make me consider things I swore I never would, Finn kisses my forehead again.

I wish, Finn. For the first time, I wish with all of my heart that I could be the woman Finn seems to think that I am. If I could be her, I would in a second. But wanting something and doing it are two very different things. Unfortunately for us, I know myself well enough not to confuse the two.

I breathe him in one final time before pulling away. "I need to go." I should leave it there and get up and walk out. But I'm so drawn to him that I can't. Not without knowing when I'll see him again. "Maybe we could get dinner tomorrow?"

His eyes light up. "Of course. I'll pick you up around six?"

"Six?" I grin.

"If you're giving me a chance to spend time with you, I'm taking every fucking minute that I can get, and I thought three was pushing it."

I scoot out of the booth. "Pick me up at four."

"Four it is," he says, nodding. "See ya then."

"Later."

I walk out while I can.

CHAPTER TEN

EXPOSÉ TOP STORY: Finn-ally Engaged?

Grab a stiff drink and a box of tissues, friends, because we have an exclusive bombshell for you.

Finn Miller, our favorite tight end, is off the market.

We'll pause for a second to let you grieve.

We'd love to call this hearsay, but we heard it firsthand. Finn Miller is officially engaged. For whom the bells toll? That part we don't know. But you can trust us to get to the bottom of the story ... just as soon as we get to the bottom of this shot of tequila.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

FINN

“Shit,” I groan, rolling onto my back.

My shoulder screams and my right hip throbs, the result of having the audacity to sleep on my stomach. I move slowly, stretching each body part to ensure nothing’s locked up and can handle my weight when I stand. Being a professional athlete is not for the weak.

The blackout curtains hanging over my bedroom windows are pulled tight, making it impossible to determine the time of day. Or the day at all.

I close my eyes, getting my bearings.

Memories of working out so late last night that it was technically early morning slide through my foggy brain. *Yesterday was Saturday. I met Frutter and Chauncey at the park.*

And then I saw Poppy.

The pain riddling my muscles eases as my focus shifts to the raven-haired beauty driving me crazy in every way possible.

“Maybe we could get dinner tomorrow?”

My head presses against the pillow as I chuckle sleepily. *I’d have dinner with you every night, Pop. Just say the word.*

I heard that question a hundred times last night while I tried to focus on a set of plays Coach uploaded into my portal. The part I couldn’t shake was that she asked for dinner. She didn’t ask for sex, or to ride my cock, or to give me a blow job.

She asked for dinner.

It gives me hope that she misses me and realizes our connection is based on things outside the bedroom. This week has been terrible, and I nearly threw her over my shoulder at O'Dells and brought her home with me. But if holding out and torturing myself will make her believe that we could be so much more, then so be it.

Because I just don't see another ending for me.

When she noticed me at the bar, the first thing she did was ensure I didn't believe she was out on a date with someone else.

"She knew that would have pushed me but chose to clarify instead," I say, sighing.

She then closed her eyes when she realized how close we were sitting and that she'd taken my hand in hers, as if being that close and not touching didn't make sense. As if the two just went together. She'd looked ... pained.

"I want you to open your eyes, Pop, and think about all these incidental moments when you're so comfortable with me. I want you to crave more of it. I want you to need it like I do."

But just spending time together isn't the only answer. We've spent two years around each other, and that hasn't changed her viewpoint.

How in the hell do I do that?

I rip off my blanket, the cold air enveloping my body as my bare feet hit the floor. The hallway is bright, and I squint as I make my way down the steps to the kitchen.

"What time is it?" I mumble, scratching the top of my head. The last time I remember was five this morning when I made a milkshake.

My phone rings from the living room, and I pause, considering making coffee before I start my day. But the call ends and then starts again, so I find the device behind a pillow on the couch—wondering how the hell it got there—and answer it.

"Yeah?" I ask after seeing that it's Branch.

"I was starting to think you were dead."

"It'd probably feel better than I do this morning." Yawning, I run a hand down my face and head for the kitchen again. "I feel like I wrestled a tiger last night."

Branch chuckles. "Hell, maybe you did. Seems like things got super interesting for you at some point."

I eye the new coffee maker that Poppy sent me, then shove a Keurig pod into my old machine. *I'm not awake enough to figure that thing out.* "I'm

not awake enough for your bullshit. What time is it?"

"One."

I flinch, taking in the sun shining through the window over the sink. "It's one in the afternoon?"

"Yes." He chuckles again. "I called just to give you shit, but now I'm curious—and concerned. You never sleep this late. Hell, you're up first thing even with a hangover."

I sort through my memories of last night, but they're hazy. I have vague memories of signing a stack of magazines my agent sent over last week, of a fire alarm going off because I burned a frozen pizza, and doing push-ups in my bedroom in hopes of exhausting myself so I could sleep.

At four o'clock this morning.

"Couldn't sleep," I mutter, grabbing my coffee and taking a cautious sip.

"You couldn't sleep because you were off getting engaged?" he asks. "And you couldn't even tell your best friend? Or your sister? We're hurt."

His tone is teasing, and it has me rolling my eyes.

"Yeah," I say, nodding my head. "I picked up dinner and fell in love with the girl in the takeout window. Engagement was the next logical step."

"So, I hear."

"What are you doing today, anyway?" I ask, taking another sip of my breakfast. It's just enough to start cutting through the fog to make me feel like a whole human again.

"Throwing you a bachelor party."

"Can you just ... stop?"

He chuckles. "I know it's just clickbait, but I take it that you haven't seen the headlines out today."

My stomach tightens. *Oh shit.*

"I was up early this morning making a coffee cake for Layla, and the news anchor was talking about your engagement."

I flinch. "My what?"

"It seems Exposé broke an exclusive story this morning that you're engaged."

"What the fuck?" I set my coffee down so I don't spill it all over me. "Obviously, I'm not getting married. Why would they run that?"

"Probably because when I tried to go to their website to read the article, it had crashed. Apparently, you're very popular today."

Fuck me. I clench my teeth and blow out a heavy breath because I know exactly where this started.

“Maybe I’ll tell people I’m engaged.”

“Kylie.” I shake my head, pissed at myself for letting my guard down. “I had an interview with Kylie from *Exposé* a couple of days ago. We were talking about ... I don’t even know how she led me there, but it was something about being in a relationship. And we joked that it might be easier to just say I’m engaged to get people off my back.” I groan. “She took it and ran with it.”

“Well, it’s all over the media now so expect some calls.”

I tilt my head back and sigh.

This is the last thing that I want to deal with today. Or ever. Most headlines can be ignored because they don’t matter. They just exist to make someone—*not the subject of the gossip*—money. But this rumor does matter because it’s not a dead end. It’s not like I was seen at the beach with Sunny. *Great. Who really cares?* But if I’m engaged, there’s more to know. *Who is the girl? When did it happen? Are there pictures?*

Do I have a fucking statement about it?

My phone chirps with an incoming call, and I pull it away from my face long enough to see the screen.

“Hey,” I say, putting it back to my ear again. “My agent’s calling.”

“I’m surprised it’s taken this long.”

“Well, I left my phone downstairs last night, so ...”

“All right. You better go handle this. Call me if you need anything, and I’ll tell my wife that there’s no wedding in the near future.”

A thought crosses my mind.

I know Poppy won’t believe this. We’ve been together long enough to have seen a number of asinine headlines. But the timing of this—when I’m trying to show Poppy that a life with me could be great—really blows.

“Hey, do you know if Poppy has seen this?” I ask.

“Don’t know. I haven’t heard anything about whether she has.”

Maybe she’s oblivious, and I can tell her about it. At least that way I can make it seem like it won’t be a bother to us.

Fuck.

Chuck buzzes in again. “Gotta go, Branch.”

“Talk to you later.”

I give myself a second to recenter, then answer my agent's call. I'm sure he's thrilled to deal with this on a Sunday.

"Hello?" I say, bracing myself.

"There you are. I've been trying to get ahold of you all day."

"Well, here I am. What's up?" I ask like I don't know.

"I'm assuming that you've seen the headlines today."

I'm not caffeinated enough for this. I lift my mug and down half of it, grimacing as it burns my throat. "Yeah." *Sort of. I've heard about them.*

"I'm also assuming it's not true."

"You're two for two." I gaze out the window, watching the trees blow in the breeze. "I'll get with Nova in your office about getting a statement put together."

"Not so fast."

Huh? That makes no sense. We usually want to get on these stupid things as quickly as we can. "What? Why not?"

He takes a long breath and blows it out slowly. It's the sound he makes when he's about to introduce something that he knows I'm going to fight him on.

This doesn't bode well for the rest of the afternoon.

"It seems that your *engagement*," he says, pausing long enough for the sounds of his fingers against a keyboard to break through the phone, "is potentially lucrative."

"Except there is no engagement."

"Maybe not. But my phone has been going nonstop this morning, and emails are starting to pile up from companies who want a piece of this."

I roll my eyes. *Of course, they do. Vultures.* "I get offers all the time, Chuck. What's your point?"

"My point is that right now you're looking at ... I don't know. Siggy's jewelry, Ruma luxury hotel chain, Landry Vineyard—that's the level of endorsements we're already seeing. I'm thinking you could easily cash in three to four million dollars, and that's just from what's being floated today. *And it's Sunday.* Once tomorrow rolls around, it's going to be a shit show."

I swallow, giving my befuddled brain a chance to wrap around this information.

Four million dollars because I'm getting married?

"That's nuts," I say. "My usual offers aren't even a million each, and you got this much in one day?"

“No. The day’s not over.”

Holy shit.

I haven’t been accepting endorsements over the last two years, but I have been wanting one—a big payday before I retire. This would be a big payday.

“I guess I don’t understand,” I say, trying to make sense of it. “I don’t get this kind of money.”

“Finn Miller doesn’t. But Finn Miller with a fiancée does. Which is why I called to tell you not to do something stupid and tell the world it’s not true.”

“Yeah, but it’s not.”

He groans. “I know that. You know that. The world doesn’t need to know that yet. Let’s sit on it for a few days and see where this takes us. Let’s see what offers come through the door and then make some educated decisions.”

This is all so stupid.

“Are we in agreement?” Chuck asks. “We’ll just sit on it until at least midweek?”

I sigh. “Yeah, I guess. You know I report to training camp next week, right? I want this shit wrapped up before then.”

“And so do the Legends. I already got a call from the GM warning me that this better not affect the locker room. After Chauncey’s mess last year, Kepner isn’t messing around.”

“That’s understandable,” I say, remembering Chauncey’s drama last season. And the season before that—it just didn’t get picked up by the press. “I don’t want it to either.”

“We won’t let that happen.”

Chuck is a pretty decent guy as far as sports agents go, and I do take him at his word. He’ll handle this the right way and make sure the story is squashed as soon as he’s milked it for all it’s worth. And hopefully that’ll include some cash in my pocket for the trouble.

“Let’s make sure of that,” I say.

My phone buzzes again, and when I glance at the screen, my twisted stomach knots.

“Kepner is calling,” I say. “I better take it.”

“Yeah. Just make sure you don’t put out any statements to the press until we talk later this week, okay?”

“Okay. Talk to you then.” I don’t wait for his goodbye and switch to the Legends GM instead. “Hello?”

“Hello, Finn. It’s John Kepner.”

“Hey, Mr. Kepner. What can I do for you?”

He sighs. “I’ve already been in touch with your agent about things floating around in today’s news cycle. But I wanted to personally touch base with you.”

I nod. “I understand.”

“We’ve agreed not to discuss your contract extension until after the season. I would’ve liked to have this done before training camp started, but I respect your desire to wait. *However*,” he says, his voice sterner, “I would hope that the respect goes both ways, and that if something is changing in your personal life that affects your plans with the Legends, I’d like to know sooner rather than later. You’ll be a hard, if not impossible, player to replace. All the lead time you can give us would be appreciated.”

I glance at the clock on the microwave. I haven’t even been up for an hour, and the day has already fallen apart. *Damn*.

As I start to tell him that the engagement isn’t even real, Chuck’s words tumble through my head. “*Just make sure you don’t put out any statements to the press until we talk later this week, okay?*”

“Mr. Kepner,” I say, trying to dance around the truth but still be honest. Lying isn’t something I like or am good at, and I don’t want to be dishonest with him or break my word to Chuck. “I assure you that when I make a choice that affects my playing status, you will be the first call I make.”

“That’s great. Thank you, Finn.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No. No, not at all. I just wanted to make sure you and I are on the same page. We’ve had a great working relationship, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“So would I.”

We exchange our goodbyes, and I end the call.

Motherfucker.

I take a breath, and a slow chuckle of disbelief falls from my lips. I’m not sure what to think or how to handle any of this, because none of it is true, and that is amusing. If I don’t see it that way, I’ll be on the phone with Exposé and making an even bigger mess of things. *What if someone in the*

room beats me to it and tells the world that it was a play on words? That I didn't say I was engaged?

I grab my phone and open my email, sending a quick note to Chuck to let the Legends office know that I refuse, under any circumstances and regardless of any penalty, to be interviewed by Exposé again. Period. End of. Not up for debate.

Then I toss the device onto the counter.

What a clusterfuck.

I lift my mug and take another drink, pacing around the kitchen. This wasn't a problem I imagined dealing with today, and it's not quite as simple as it seems. Because denying it might kill this particular story, but it'll likely create another round of headlines speculating that where there's smoke, there's fire.

Who is Finn's mystery woman? Miller has secrets.

I can see headlines now as they set out on a witch hunt to find my nonexistent fiancée.

Alternatively, if I had a fiancée, there's really no story to tell. Sure, they'd plaster it on Social and their websites for a week before moving on to something juicier. And endorsements from reputable companies would be great for my image after the whole gambling advertising debacle.

If only I had a fiancée ...

A slow smile splits my cheeks as the heavens open and wisdom rains down on me.

This kind of money would be great for someone wanting to start a foundation. And it would be even better for someone who wanted to spend time with another person to show how well they are together in domestic, intimate moments.

I could control the story, deflate the media, get an influx of cash, and spend more time with Poppy.

"If that isn't a game plan, I don't know what is," I say, chuckling.

Now I just have to convince her.

God help me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

POPPY

I much prefer working at home over working at the office.

My eyes are a little fuzzy from staring at the computer for the past hour. I was driving myself crazy waiting for a reasonable time to start getting ready for Finn to pick me up, so I decided to check out the insurance policies up for renewal this week. There are a few big scores if we play our cards right, and going into the office tomorrow with this in my back pocket will help start the week off on the right foot. I also spent some time reviewing the information Ann emailed about foundations and charities. I told Joshua he didn't have to buy me a coffee tomorrow morning for setting him up with Henry. Apparently, he booked the room and got a great deal.

I stretch my arms overhead and start to get up for a shower, but my phone glows from beside my keyboard.

Finn's name is splashed across the screen.

Finn: Hey.

Me: Hey.

Finn: Can I come by early?

"If you would've just shown up, I couldn't have said no," I say, tapping out my response. "But it's not like I'd tell you no anyway."

Me: Depends. 😈

Finn: I have a business issue that I want to talk to you about before we go out for dinner.

Me: That sounds like a downer.

Finn: I don't know if I'd say that. I just have to make a choice, and I'd like for you to weigh in.

Me: Wanna call me?

Finn: No, I think this one is better if we talk about it face-to-face.

Me: Do you just want to see my face? 😊

Finn: I miss more than that.

I stare at his words. I normally would've had a smart-ass reply fired back his way already. But I'm either weak from not having dick for so long, or I need that pile of vitamins that Mom wants me to take, because this asshole has found my feels.

Me: Be a good boy and I'll let you see it from various angles tonight. 😊

Finn: Dirty girl.

I glance around the house, calculating how long it'll take me to get things into some semblance of order. Plus, I still have to take a shower and figure out what I'm going to wear before he gets here.

Me: How long until you think you'll be here?

Finn: Thirty minutes?

I glance at the clock. "Shit. That's an hour early."

Me: I'm not going to be ready to leave when you get here.

Finn: That's okay. We're not in a hurry.

Me: Okay. See you soon.

Finn: 😊 See you soon.

I shove away from my desk and head to the bathroom. First things first—a shower.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

POPPY

“This freaking laundry,” I grumble, shoving the pile I dumped onto the sofa yesterday back into the basket. Unfolded. “It’s going to be the death of me.”

I lug the plastic bin to my room, then give the house a quick once-over. It’s seen better days, mostly because I’ve been trying to clean it, but it’ll have to do. I can’t work miracles in thirty minutes.

The doorbell makes me jump, and I hate how I respond to it like Pavlov’s dog, knowing Finn is on the other side.

Drool. Panting. Trying not to beg.

I guess it fits.

I clear my throat, stopping to inspect my appearance in the mirror in the entryway—tugging the top of my robe so it displays more cleavage and scrunching up the ends of my damp hair—and then I pull open the door. The plan was to appear fine and fuckable. But the asshole showed up looking downright edible.

Fuck me.

“Hey, Poppy Quinn.”

I grip the edge of the door as his gaze sweeps down my body. His grin, cocky yet measured, makes the dimple settle deep into his cheeks. He swallows as he lifts his attention to my bare legs, over the edge of the shortest robe I own, and across my barely covered breasts.

“Hey, Finn Miller,” I say, smirking.

He rolls his shirtsleeves up to his elbows as he walks inside, giving me a straight shot of his sinewy forearms.

The sight of him in my house, wearing a green button-down and my favorite pants I bought for him in Kismet Beach—even though *he objected*—makes me whimper.

“You’ve been cleaning, I see,” he says, entering the living room. “Glad to know some things stay the same.”

“Yes, it’s a mess, I know.” I blush, wishing I had picked up instead of working this morning. “I logged on to see if—”

“Hey.” He lifts a brow until I take a breath. “Why are you justifying yourself? This is your home. You can do whatever the fuck you want.” He comes to me. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I’m sorry.”

I roll my eyes like it’s nothing ... and hope he believes that. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

He presses a sweet kiss to my forehead, flooding me with warmth that touches places in my heart I didn’t know were still accessible.

It steals my breath, and I swallow before taking a gulp of air.

“Sorry for not being dressed,” I say, peering up at him. “I just got out of the shower and didn’t have time to put clothes on.”

He smirks. “Liar.”

“I mean, I didn’t try that hard. But thirty minutes wasn’t a lot of time.”

His arms wrap around me, dragging my body against his. I can feel his cock pressing against me and his heart thundering against my palm. His eyes sparkle as he searches mine.

“You are so beautiful, Pop.”

I fiddle with his collar, basking in his attention. “All I can think about is getting you out of these clothes.”

He laughs. “For the record, it’s taking every bit of restraint not to pull up the inch of fabric covering your ass and become reacquainted with your sweet, little body.”

“So, what exactly would I need to do to push you over the edge?”

“At this point? Just keep talking.”

I giggle.

“I’ve missed that sound,” he says softly. “My sheets are starting not to smell like you anymore.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

He shakes his head, fighting a grin.

“That’s gross!” I laugh, stepping away from him. “I remember, *very vividly*, the last thing we did on those sheets. If you’re *still* sleeping on them ...”

“If you come over, I’ll change them.”

I point at him as he sits on the sofa. “Do you know what that sounds like to me? A man who sounds an awful lot like he’s about to give in.” I lift the end of my belt and twirl it. “Should I go ahead and untie this, or do you wanna do it?”

He groans, exhaling through his nose.

My temperature surges as I absorb the heat in his gaze. Despite my loose robe, it feels too tight. My skin feels too tense. I can feel my heart pounding beneath my ribs as I wait for his reaction.

He has to be the one to give in. If he caves first, there will be no way for him to pretend we’re not simply friends with benefits. He’ll have to put the benefits back on the table.

Then, hopefully, he puts my back on the table.

“I need to talk to you,” he says, swallowing.

I study him as an uneasiness descends upon me. “I thought you said you had a business decision to discuss. Because that sounds a whole lot different from you need to talk to me.”

“Can you sit? On a chair?” he asks before I can make a lewd suggestion.

“Fine,” I say, taking the seat farthest from him. “This isn’t how I saw this going.”

“Well, if you stay calm and hear me out, this conversation could put you right back in the driver’s seat.”

My ears perk up at this bit of information. “Oh, really? Do tell.”

“I had an interview last week with *Exposé*.”

My lips press together in disgust. Ever since *Exposé* made Layla’s life hell when she and Branch started dating, I’ve hated that organization with every fiber of my being. Finn knows that. He knows I’m not following them on Social or buying their shitty magazine.

“You can imagine that it had very little to do with football,” he says.

“Shocking.”

He frowns. “Kylie said something about me being a bachelor or whatever—I don’t even really know how we got there, just that it’s not surprising that we did. And she made a comment that when I settle down,

interest in my personal life will stop. So, I said that maybe she was right and I should just tell people I'm engaged so they'll leave me alone."

His gaze finds mine and holds it tight. And the longer we watch each other across the room, the more unnerved I become.

Why is he telling me this? Why do I care what he said to a reporter?

"If this is going where I think it's going," I say, "my advice is to never talk to Exposé again. But I've suggested this before, and you clearly ignored me."

"You'll be happy to know that I informed the Legends today that I will not interview with them again, regardless of whatever fine they impose. I'm done."

My brows pull together. "Good." *But why did he do this now?*

"Here's where I need your advice," he says, the vein in his temple pulsing. "The headline going around is that I'm engaged."

What? We've seen some crazy stories printed about him since we've known each other, but there's never been one like this.

"Okay," I say, lifting a brow.

"And I have two options on how to handle it, and I'm not sure which one to take."

"Probably the one where you say you aren't and they should fuck off." I shrug. "That's my suggestion."

"So, my options look like this. I can issue a statement sometime this week, because I told my agent that I'd sit on this for a few days, and say that Exposé got it wrong," he says. "Or I can roll with it and say it's true."

He runs a hand along his jaw like he does when he's nervous. That makes *me* nervous because Finn rarely gets nervous about anything. Slowly, my heartbeat picks up its pace.

I don't know what he's getting at or why he's entertaining the idea of pretending to get married. The concept alone is harmless enough. But I'm disturbed by the idea that there might be conversations happening about Finn and another woman—even if she's not real. *Or is she real? Was he caught in the act with someone else?*

My stomach smashes against the floor.

That's not a world I want to live in, and the whole thing makes my skin crawl.

"The advantage of saying I'm not getting married is that it's true," he says. *Thank God.* "It's clean and simple. But the disadvantage is that no

guarantee'll stop the gossip, and that kind of crap isn't something I need following me into the locker room this season. Kepner is already pissed that this is what people are talking about this close to the preseason."

"Point out to Kepner that this wouldn't have happened if they wouldn't let Exposé have access to you."

He smiles. "You're right, of course. But being a smart-ass to the GM is usually a bad idea—especially when you haven't decided whether you'll retire or negotiate their extension offer."

Fair.

"My other choice is to say that they're right, and I do have a fiancée," he says, cracking his knuckles absentmindedly.

"Why would you do that?" I ask, pulling a knee up and wrapping my arms around it. "That feels like death by publicity."

He nods. "Yeah, it does. But it could be that either way. If I say Exposé made the whole thing up, the story still has teeth. It's still juicy. It gives people a reason to keep digging around in my life." He pauses. "But if I say *there's nothing to see here*, then that sort of takes the piss out of it."

True. Because if he says they're right, all they will get is the initial scoop since Finn won't ever interview with them again. It's clickbait, but it won't bring them more than a day or two of views. They'll move on. They always do.

"I guess." I make a face. "So what are you proposing? Rolling with it and saying you're engaged?"

"Yeah. Maybe."

I bite the inside of my cheek and try to appear unfazed by the concept of Finn parading around town with a fake fiancée.

But I *am* fazed by it. I'm *enraged* by it. Mount Saint Helens has nothing on the boiling emotions sputtering in my gut at the idea of his PR team setting him up with a model, an actress, or some other wildly attractive woman to pretend to be his soon-to-be *wife*.

I might have to move. To Antarctica.

"I hate that idea," I say before I can stop myself. "The season's starting. You can't have someone distracting you. And she would distract you, Finn. You have to have time to study tape, and you can't just go out and eat pizza. You have to rest and ... That's a terrible idea."

His lip twitches as he cocks a brow. "You're very passionate about this."

One shoulder shrugs. I know I'm caught in the act of caring, but he just sprang this on me. Besides, I have way too many hormones that need to be released because he's refused to do it.

I hope he gets a mean fiancée, and they fight all the time.

Bastard.

He takes a deep breath. "That's not all of it."

I grip the armrests to push myself up. "I think I've heard enough."

"There's also a few *million dollars* on the table."

Excuse me? "I'm sorry. What? Why?"

"My agent called, and companies are reaching out about working with me on deals. He said there's already a jewelry company and a hotel company ... and I don't remember what else. But he expects there to be even more as the day goes on and then tomorrow."

I blink twice. "That makes absolutely no sense. Are you for real?"

"Yeah."

"Holy shit."

He chuckles. "Apparently, there's a market for love stories."

I try to wrap my brain around this. "You live such a weird life, Miller."

I sigh, wishing that he hadn't come to me with this. My instincts tell me to make him run away from this as fast as he can. But I know that's really because I know that'll benefit *me*. It'll make *my* life easier. In reality, what's best for him is to take the money.

But what does that entail? Will he have to pose in pictures with someone? Have media campaigns with a stunning future Mrs. Finn Miller on his arm?

The thought makes me want to puke up my French toast sticks from breakfast.

"Well, if you're wanting my advice, which I guess you do since you're here, then I say take the money if you can," I say. "You wanted a payday anyway, and this seems lucrative. If you can figure out how to pull this off, that's the ticket."

He nods slowly. "I think so, too."

Great. My stomach knots. "Okay. That was easy. You're welcome."

"But there's still a problem."

"What now?"

His eyes lock onto mine. "I need a fake fiancée."

If he thinks I'm going to sit here and brainstorm women for him to dote on, he's certifiable.

Why would I do that? So I can watch him with another woman tucked under his arm, as he does with me? So he can be so busy with her, making sure they look realistic, that he doesn't have any time for me? So I can see pictures of them every time I go to the grocery store or log on to the internet?

My stomach drops as I imagine *her* with Layla and Branch ... and my Sunny girl.

Thoughts spiral through my brain, showing me glimpses of what it might look like to sit across from Finn and his fake fiancée on Layla's porch, with her on his lap because she's not terrified of being in a relationship. Or running into the two of them at the grocery store and watching her choose what they're going to eat all weekend while they lie in bed and watch old movies. *What if I pass them on the path by the lake on an evening walk, their hands joined together and swinging between them like ours do?*

I swallow. Hard.

His life would be so full, and I'd be so ... alone. While I know how to be alone and I can do it with the best of them, being alone and being without Finn are two wildly different, terrible things. And if he thinks that I'm going to somehow participate in this selection process, he can go jump in the freaking river.

"That's a problem you'll have to answer on your own," I say, my lips forming a thin line.

His lips twist into a small smirk. "I didn't ask for your help with this part of it ... yet."

"Good." I get to my feet, shivering despite the warmth coming through the window. "If we're done here, I need to dry my hair and get ready for dinner."

Finn stops me with a look so intense and a smile so mischievous that I nearly stumble over my own feet.

"What?" I ask, growing more leery by the second. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He takes a long breath. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

He licks his lips. "Would you do it?"

Time slows down as he stands, too. The air shifts as it grows hotter and an unseen electricity crackles around us. *What's he talking about?*

"Will I do what?" I ask, my throat going dry.

"Will you be my fake fiancée?"

Excuse me?

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

POPPY

I stop my jaw just in time before it smashes against the floor.

My eyes widen as I try to make sense of his question, but it's impossible, if I heard him correctly, because it's ridiculous.

Asinine.

Unbelievable.

It's a joke ... right?

Finn watches me with a flicker of gold in his eyes and his bottom lip pulled between his teeth. He hasn't moved, hasn't budged a muscle. His attention sits squarely on me, reading every emotion that crosses my face.

He's entirely too serious to be kidding around, and way too calm to be serious.

"I'm sorry," I say, a half laugh carrying the words. "What did you just say?"

He wipes his hands down his thighs. "I suggested that you do it. You pretend to be my fiancée."

Nope. I heard him right.

The man has lost his damn mind.

He can't possibly be serious. I've been trying to reestablish the boundaries of our current situation. *Now he wants to catapult over it and pretend to be getting married?*

"I know it sounds crazy," he says, smiling nervously as I grip the back of the chair. "But I thought a lot about it, and it really is the simplest solution. It solves a lot of problems."

I stare at him, taking a moment to find my voice in the haze. “Let me get this straight. You sat down and thought this through, and the simplest solution was to pretend to be engaged to *me*?” I point at myself, both brows raised. “The woman who has spent the last week or more reminding you that we aren’t even dating.”

His eyes sparkle as if he’s not surprised by my reaction, and he might be a little amused.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “That was my conclusion.”

“How many times have you been tackled? Because I think it’s been one too many.”

He chuckles.

Nothing about this is funny. Not a piece of it is entertaining. He was supposed to stop by to discuss a business decision before we went out to dinner, and then, hopefully, we’d find our way back to the bedroom. We weren’t supposed to be discussing marriage—pretend or not.

“Can I explain myself?” he asks.

“I don’t know. Can you? I mean, this seems like the kind of thing that only makes sense when you’re drunk in Vegas.”

His chest bounces as he laughs.

I sit as my knees start to wobble from the adrenaline coursing through my system. “Talk. Explain. Let’s get it over with so we can go back to reality.”

“Okay,” he says, clearing his throat. “I know this is asking a lot of you.”

“You think?”

He grins. “So, I want to sweeten the pot.” He rests his elbows on his knees, pinning me to my seat from across the room. “If you’ll do this with me, I’ll give you half of the endorsement money.”

“*What?*” My eyeballs nearly fall out of my head. I clutch my chest as if my heart might stop beating from shock. “What did you say?”

“As I said, Chuck seems to think I can bring in a few million dollars with this engagement—which is crazy, I know. I agree. But if you’ll do half the work, I’ll give you half the money after I pay Chuck and the government.”

I’m too in shock to even blink. “You’d give me *hundreds of thousands of dollars*. Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. And I was just thinking about how that would be such an easy way to fund Someday Now. I mean, if you have to fundraise the startup

costs, it could take years, Pop. Why not let corporate America pay for it? They're going to use my fame to make more money. Why not use it to your advantage, too?"

Words seem too far away to grasp, which feels weird to me.

I try to squash the bubble of excitement rising in my chest at the thought of getting a jump-start on the foundation. The information that Ann sent over said exactly what Finn is saying—I need operating money and program money ... and I don't have either.

Getting my hands on that amount of cash would be a huge accelerant.

"This feels illegal," I say finally, shaking my head.

"It's not. You can marry or pretend to marry anyone you want so long as you're not close blood relatives." He sighs. "Think of it as a business transaction. We do this, we get that. No one gives a shit as long as you pay your taxes."

That's probably true. "But it feels ... wrong. I mean, do the companies that pay you know that it's not true?"

"Come on. They're there to use us. As long as we ride the wave long enough for them to exploit it, they don't care."

"And how long would that be—hypothetically, of course?"

He shrugs. "It would be in the contracts. Not our engagement, of course, but they'd have campaign and deliverables dates, stuff like that. We'd have to keep this going through whatever we agreed to." He thinks for a moment. "If Chuck got everything moving pretty quickly, and they'll want to strike while the story is hot, then I'd bet we'd be done by the end of the season."

Okay. So, seven months or so? That's doable.

"But what if one of us wanted out?" I ask, thinking of contingencies. Nothing is as simple as this seems. "What if you decide you can't stand me or I get on your nerves? What then?"

"Not going to happen—not on my part, anyway."

"But it might."

He sits back, sighing, and it's about as serious as I've seen Finn for a while. There's no smirk, no mischief in his eyes. Just determination ... and something else I don't know how to label.

"I've been following your lead for a long damn time. If I'd had my way, I would've been seeing you every chance I could. The only one of us who might want out is you."

His features darken, and his lips twist together. There's a flash of annoyance, or maybe pain, across his handsome face. The sight of it causes my heart to squeeze.

"If you want out, it'd be over," he says.

"What about the contracts?"

"There are always clauses that deal with situations in which one side doesn't see it through. I'd cancel the contracts and pay the cancellation fees myself."

I narrow my eyes. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm not trying to ruin your life or trap you into something. I genuinely think this could be good for both of us. If you disagree, I'll never bring it up again."

My breath is shaky. I don't want him to walk away from this. I really don't want him to walk *toward* it with someone else. But despite being the easy answer right now, I'm not the answer in the long run.

"Have you thought about asking someone else?" I ask as my heart pounds out of control.

"Nope."

I exhale slowly.

"I'm not saying this to put pressure on you," he says sincerely. "It was just an idea I had for the two of us. But if you're not into it, I'm not into it. This isn't something I'd entertain with anyone else." He swallows, his eyes searching mine. "If you think I'd even pretend to be with another woman, you haven't been listening to a thing I've been saying."

Finn.

My shoulders slump as his words prick my heartstrings.

There's too much energy building inside me to sit still, and I can't sit across from him and let him keep reading my features like I'm an open book. I just need some space to think without his presence and cologne filling the air.

I rise, heading to the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

"Nah, I'm good."

What do I do?

I can't believe I'm in this position—being offered a life-changing amount of money to ... *what? Hang out with Finn?* It's more money in one swoop than I can wrap my head around.

It would save me a trip to Antarctica, too.

But wouldn't it just make this thing between us even messier? Wouldn't it go against everything that I've been saying?

Yes. But still ...

I mull it over, imagining being fake engaged to Finn, and a smile tickles my lips. We'd have so much fun with it. I can see him hamming it up for photographers on the sidewalk before we went into a restaurant for dinner. The way he'd introduce me to people as his fiancée, knowing I couldn't argue. It would be so, so nice to slip back into how things were as long as he knows the truth.

As long as he didn't start to believe in what's not real. I don't want to be responsible for that.

"Hey," I call out.

"Yeah?"

"If we're exchanging money for sex, isn't that prostitution?"

His laugh is loud, and it makes my smile grow wider.

"No. That part's free," he says.

I take a drink. "Does this mean that if I agree to this, you'll start fucking me again?"

"What kind of a fiancé would I be if I didn't fuck my soon-to-be wife?"

My core heats as I head back to the living room. Finn remains on the couch just like I left him. His eyes find mine as soon as I round the corner and he comes into view.

"If I agree to this," I say, setting my drink on a coaster. "We'd have to be sure that we're on the same page about a few things."

"Of course. What do you propose?"

"Well," I say, taking my seat again. "What would be required of me? I wouldn't be in your contracts, right? It's just you."

"I'll clear everything with you beforehand. You'll have the authority to nip all of it in the bud."

Wow. Okay. I settle against the cushions. "What do we tell people in our lives? Like, how do we explain this to Branch and Layla? My mom? Your parents?"

He takes a long, deep breath, and I nod. This is a complication.

I'm surprisingly fine with lying to the world, but I won't lie to our family. Sure, that conversation with my mother might be a little awkward, but she deserves to know the truth. I can only imagine the amusement Branch and Layla will find in this—if we do it.

“We can discuss it,” he says. “Personally, I want to be honest with the people close to me. But, yeah, we can talk about it.”

I smile. *You’re such a good guy.*

He leans forward, his elbows back on his knees again. This time, his gaze is intense. His smile slips. Lines form around his eyes.

“I do have one request,” he says, his voice softer this time.

A bubble of anxiety forms in my stomach. “This is the catch, huh?”

“No. I said it’s *a request*. That doesn’t mean it’s a catch. You can turn me down.”

“Turn you down about what?”

He licks his lips. “You’ve been very clear that you’re not a relationship kind of woman. I think I’ve been pretty clear lately that I’d love to have one with you.”

He pauses, searching my face for a reaction. I try my best not to give him one because I don’t know where he’s going with this. All I’m certain of is that the ground has started to wobble.

“Again, this is a request,” he says gently. “But I would love it if you went into this with an open mind and just gave me a chance to show you how good we can be.”

“Finn ...”

“Don’t freak out on me, okay? I’m not pushing you for anything. All I’m asking is that over the next few months while we’re pretending to the world that we’re getting married, you allow me to earn your trust.” He licks his lips again. “I don’t really know why you’re so against being serious with me, but I’d love a chance to take care of you. To make you smile. I want to be able to show you how important you are to me without worrying that you’ll never answer my call again.”

The way he watches me makes my heart swell, and the bridge of my nose burn with unshed emotions. I can feel how much he wants to do this. I know this means a lot to him. The sad part is, I have no doubt he can do all the things he said he could. I just wish he understood that when it gets serious, I’m not the girl who can return the favor.

“If it doesn’t work out, then we go back to the way things are,” he says. “I’ll know I had my chance. That’s all I want.”

“What if we can’t go back to the way things are now?”

“Then I guess you’ll have a nice chunk of cash to take with you when you move on.”

My eyes flutter closed as I gather my courage.

This is a terrifying proposition. But, in reality, Finn and I were never going the distance anyway. *If it would give him closure one day to know he gave it a real shot, who am I to deny him that?*

Besides, I could finally relax and just enjoy him without worrying about having to remind him that we aren't a couple. We would be ... for a while.

My disbelief is being overtaken by a swell of excitement. I move so that my robe falls a little farther open and grin.

"If we do this," I ask, "when exactly does it go into effect?"

His smirk is devious. "What are you getting at?"

My phone ringing makes me jump, and my insides shrivel at the ringtone. *Are you serious right now?* "Shit."

"Who is it?" Finn asks, brows lifted.

"My boss. On a Sunday." I pause to release a sigh. This happens so infrequently that it's the equivalent of an emergency beacon. "Someone just fucked up."

He laughs.

"Something has caught fire or a major accident has occurred, and he wants to discuss our potential liability," I say.

Finn gets to his feet and is in front of me in a second. He takes my hands and pulls me up.

His arms are around me, his chest pressed to mine, as he peers down into my eyes.

I can't sort all the feelings swirling inside me, mostly because I never imagined I'd be here. With him. Talking about fake engagements. But now that I am, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Could this be the best of both worlds? Could I have Finn without worrying that he's misconstruing us? How could I have gotten so lucky?

"I tell you what," Finn says, grinning easily. "Why don't you deal with work? I have a few things I need to take care of, too. And then I'll come back in a couple of hours, and we can go to dinner?"

I start to make a joke about how I'd like to be on the menu, but something stops me.

"That sounds nice," I say instead.

He cups my cheeks as he lowers his lips to mine. They move together slowly, lazily, as if they don't have to hurry because they've been promised more is to come. My hands find his shoulders before moving down to his

pecs as shots of adrenaline zing through me. But before we can deepen it, before I can find the buttons of his shirt and undo them, my phone chirps with a voicemail.

I sag against him. *Nooooooooooooo.*

“Go,” he whispers against my lips. “I’ll be back.”

I grin before pressing one last kiss in the center of his pout. “See you then.”

He lingers, his fingers pressing into the small of my back, before he lets me go. He gets to the door when I realize something.

“Finn!”

With his hand on the knob, he turns, looking at me over his shoulder.

My cheeks flush as I smile at him. “I’ll do it. I’ll be your fake fiancée.”

I see the relief sweep over him like a tidal wave. His shoulders relax, his face softens, and the brightness that I love in his eyes comes alive.

He winks at me. “You won’t regret it.”

The door opens, and he disappears into the sunshine. I blow out a breath.

I hope not. I really hope not.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FINN

The sky is bursting with color. Oranges, purples, and pinks hover over the buildings and trees. *Poppy will love this.*

I stop at the curb and put the vehicle in park, shutting off the engine. She said yes. And because of that, I had my first taste of her lips in over two long weeks.

My new fiancée. Fake or not, I love the sound of that.

Holy fuck.

Not only am I excited to see her again, but my dick has definitely woken up at what could happen next.

I gaze at her townhome, halfway scared to go to the door. I've glanced at my phone a hundred times since leaving her earlier this afternoon, wondering if I'll pick it up to see a text from her calling this off. Or, even worse, agreeing to the engagement but backing out of giving *us* a chance.

But that didn't happen.

The only texts I got from her were three pictures of outfits, asking me to choose one for tonight.

I exhale, the stream shakier than I'd like to admit, and grab the vase of flowers I picked up from a florist near my house, then head to Poppy's front door.

My heart pounds harder the closer I get. I've done this so many times, and it's never felt like this. Yes, this is pretend between us, but it's not only that. It's a chance. An opportunity. My one shot to show the woman of my dreams that I might be the man of hers, too.

I straighten my shirt and knock on the door.

“Hey,” she says, the words getting to me before I see her smiling face.

My heart skips a beat as she steps into the light.

Her dark hair is soft around her shoulders, full and *blown out*, as she likes to say. Her lashes are thick, her lips pouty, and she’s wrapped in a pale pink dress with a deep V-neckline that showcases her insane body.

“My God,” I say, whistling through my teeth.

She giggles. “Do you like it?”

“Do I like it?” I laugh. “What’s not to like? You’re a fucking knockout, Poppy Quinn.”

“I didn’t want you showing up thinking you made a mistake and should’ve asked someone else to be your fake fiancée.” She slides her hand down the door, swinging her hips as she grows closer to me. “The more I think about it, the more I realize that it’s a role I’m uniquely qualified to handle.”

I swallow. “Is that so?”

“Yup. And I’ll prove it to you later.” She smirks. “You’re devastatingly handsome tonight, but I’m going to prefer those clothes on my floor.”

Her eyes twinkle, and I know what she’s trying to do—sidetrack me into scooping her up and carrying her inside where we’ll forget all about our date.

But that’s not going to happen. As much as I’d love to lose myself in her, this isn’t about me. This is about her.

This is about *us*.

Poppy’s attention moves to the vase in my hand. “Those are *gorgeous*. That purple is stunning.”

“They’re for you.”

She takes them. “Did you know that ranunculus are my favorite flowers, or did you get lucky?”

“That would’ve been one hell of a coincidence.”

“How did you know?” she asks, admiring the blooms.

“Last year at the Christmas Bazaar. We were talking about mistletoe, and you said it was ugly, and that you’d rather hang ranunculus around the house.” I shrug. “I went home that night and googled it.”

Her cheeks turn the same color as her dress. “You don’t miss anything, do you?”

“Not when it matters to you.”

The flush deepens as she places the vase on the table in the doorway.

“Are you ready to go? We have reservations at Picante in forty-five minutes,” I say.

I expect her to make a play to stay home. Poppy’s answer is always sex, and it’s one I’ve never balked at until recently. But tonight, she surprises me by stepping outside and locking the door behind her.

She faces me with a contented smile that steals my breath.

I take her hand in mine. *I’m the luckiest fuck in the world.*

“Thanks.” I leave the driver’s side door open for the valet and round the front of the SUV. Another attendant heads for Poppy’s door, but I give him a small nod to hold up.

He steps away, and I reach for Poppy’s handle.

“Thank you,” she says, taking my hand before stepping onto the curb. The air around her is perfumed with citrus and warmth, and her palm is small and soft in mine. “Hey, look at that. No one with a camera.”

“Were you worried there would be?”

She smiles. “Worried? No. Curious? Yes.”

“It’s one of the reasons I chose Picante. Fenton Abbott’s restaurants have tight security. If you want a photo op, you better go elsewhere.”

“Oh, I get it,” she says, laughing. “You chose somewhere safe in case I bailed, huh?”

I shrug, because the thought did cross my mind. Bombarding her with cameras and questions on day one of our fake engagement seemed a little risky. That’s especially true, considering I’ve deemed her a flight risk for two years.

We step inside the restaurant with our fingers locked together.

“I’m disappointed,” she says as the hostess leads us to our table.

“Why?”

She angles her mouth toward me. “Because you should know me better than that.” She waits as I pull out her chair, then grins mischievously. “I’m not bailing until I get to fuck you at least once.”

My insides burn, my balls pulling tight while I get her situated, and then I take my seat beside her. We’ve gone to dinner so many times, but it feels

different tonight.

“Have you said anything to Branch or Layla?” she asks, brushing a lock of hair over her shoulder.

I adjust my tie. “No. I talked to my sister briefly last night, but she was dealing with a cranky Sunny, and it didn’t seem like the right time. Besides, I didn’t want to say anything until I knew whether you would agree.”

Poppy sits back as a server appears and asks if we’d like still or sparkling water. We wait until he’s gone before we resume our conversation.

“I have a question,” she says once we’re alone.

“Sure.”

“Will you make an announcement that the engagement was real? Or will you just not deny it?”

I hesitate, considering how to answer this. It feels like a trap, like she’s waiting on me to say what she doesn’t want to hear so she can talk her way out of this or renegotiate our agreement.

Where’s she going with this?

“I don’t plan on making a statement, if that’s what you mean,” I say carefully. “But I’m sure it’ll come up in interviews.”

She hums. “When that happens, when it comes up, will you say my name?”

“That’s up to you. You don’t lose agency over yourself in this arrangement, and I want to make sure you understand that.”

Her features soften.

“If you don’t want me mentioning you by name, I won’t,” I say. “Now, I can’t promise that our picture won’t be taken somewhere, or someone won’t go digging and figure out how much time I spend with you and put two and two together. But if you don’t want your name in my mouth, then say the word, and it’s done.”

“That’s not all I want in your mouth.”

I chuckle, dropping my hand beneath the table to adjust myself.

“On a serious note, thank you for that,” she says, her voice soft and sincere.

“For what?”

She starts to answer but stops and reconsiders. “For not assuming anything, I guess. For letting me have a say in it.”

“For letting you have a say in it?” I reach for her hand, confused. “Pop, we’re in this together.”

“I know. And I want you to say my name.”

Really? I give her hand a gentle squeeze, trying not to act surprised as a warmth spreads through my chest. “You do?”

“Uh-huh. Maybe having my name attached to the word fiancée will make these women stop staring at you like they want to rip your clothes off in the middle of the restaurant.”

Laughing, I bring our joined hands to my lips and kiss hers. “That’s funny. I thought we were here alone.”

“Charmer.”

I release her hand as Patrick, the server, returns. He greets me and then turns to say hello to Poppy, but the words are tripped up. She smiles politely, having no idea, or no care, that he’s floundering because of her beauty.

That makes me smile. And proud. *She’s with me.*

We order drinks and dishes before Patrick leaves, but not without another lingering gaze at my girl. She, however, is busy taking in the room around us.

“I swear,” Poppy says, leaning toward me after Patrick is gone. “Women always stare at you, but it’s worse tonight.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Yeah. A little.”

I grin, enjoying her jealousy. “They’re probably just wondering if the gossip is true. It’ll be better when we get your engagement ring, and it’s obvious.”

“A ring?” Her eyes widen. “No. We don’t have to do that.”

“The hell we don’t. Besides, it’s already in the works.”

She stares at me as our drinks are delivered.

“If you think my fiancée won’t be wearing a ring, you’re crazy,” I say. But it’s clear she’s a bit unnerved by the idea. “Maybe this will make you feel better. When I left your house earlier, I called Chuck to let him know what was going on.”

“Okay ...”

“And one of the first offers to come in was from Siggy’s.”

Her mouth hangs open. “Siggy’s? You’re joking.”

“I take it you’re a fan.”

She shakes her head, laughing softly. “I think I’m living in a twilight zone.”

I laugh, too. “Part of their offer includes an engagement ring and a wedding band—which we won’t need,” I say, adding the last part so she doesn’t squirm. “I have an email right now with a preliminary offer.”

“You don’t have to pay for the ring, right?”

“Nope. Consider it a perk.”

Our food arrives, and Patrick refills our water glasses. Poppy chitchats with him, to my amusement. His face is flushed as he scurries away.

“This looks great,” I say, appreciating the steak, crispy potatoes, and seasonal vegetables. “How’s that truffle mac and cheese?”

She smiles. “It looks delicious. Patrick promised it was the best thing on the menu. So far, so good.”

We enjoy our meal, the food melting in our mouths. Poppy tells me about Joshua and the party he’s planning and how she’s always wanted to throw a big celebration. This is news to me. But it’s also a piece of information I tuck away in case it’s helpful later.

“Excuse me.” An older woman, dressed impeccably, stops by our table. “Poppy Quinn? I thought that was you.”

Poppy looks up. “Marie, hi. How are you?”

Marie glances at me before sliding her attention back to Poppy. “I’m great. I saw you come in but wasn’t totally sure it was you. How have you been?”

“Great, actually.” She swallows, humor toying on her lips. “Marie, I’d like you to meet my fiancé, Finn Miller. Finn, this is Marie Huntington. She’s an independent insurance agent that I’ve known for years.”

“*My fiancé, Finn Miller.*” I bite back a grin as fire rolls through my veins. *Fuck, I like the sound of that.*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I say, not looking at Poppy. If I do, things might get R-rated fast.

“It’s very nice to meet *you*,” Marie says. “You’re a football player, aren’t you? My late husband was a big fan.”

Poppy grins beside me.

“That’s very nice of you to say,” I say, stretching an arm across the back of Poppy’s chair. “And I’m sorry to hear about his passing.”

“Thank you. It’s been a couple of years, but the pain never quite goes away.” She sighs. “But let’s not make this about me. You two are engaged.

How wonderful. Have you set a date?"

I glance at Poppy to see if she wants me to take this question, but she has it under control.

"We're not in a hurry," Poppy says. "It'll probably be sometime next year. I think an autumn ceremony would be beautiful, but we have to wait and see what Finn decides to do about retirement."

Wow. I'm impressed.

And turned on.

I rest a hand on her thigh, squeezing it hard enough for her to feel it. Poppy continues chatting away with Marie, not acknowledging me at all. Yet she grabs my wrist and pulls my hand higher up her leg.

My fingers slip beneath the fabric of her dress and trail up the inside of her thigh. Her skin is so soft, so *hot*, that the contact sends a ripple of heat through my body.

Fuck me.

Marie wishes us the best and, with a wave, continues her way to the exit.

"You're killing me," she whispers, her eyes hooded.

"How do you feel about telling Marie about us?"

"The entire insurance community will know all about this by morning."

I scoot my chair closer to her. "And how does that make you feel?"

"The only thing I can feel right now is—*oh*," she says, moaning softly as my finger reaches her pussy. She's soaked, her thighs sticky as I toy with her. "We're going to need to wrap up this date and go home."

I lean over, dusting her lips with mine and withdrawing my hand from between her legs.

"No," I breathe against her lips.

She pulls back. "What?"

"There's no sex tonight."

Her jaw sets, and her irritation is adorable.

I adjust myself again. "Trust me. I want you as badly as you want me. But this is our first real date."

"You nearly had your finger inside me at a table in a very nice restaurant. I don't think now is the time to discuss ethics."

I laugh. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Does this mean I won our little challenge?"

I sit back in my chair, admiring the smug grin on her face. She doesn't realize that I won. I get my chance with her, and that's all I really wanted. Sure, maybe it's under strange circumstances, but I'll take it.

Beggars can't be choosers, and I'd beg for this woman any day.

"Sure," I say. "You won. Happy now?"

Her eyes sparkle. "I think so."

Me, too, Pop. Me, too.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FINN

I throw the last pillow, covered with a clean case, onto the freshly made bed.

My bedroom is reset and clean. Poppy's favorite candle is on the table beside her bed. I loaded the en suite with towels—because I've never seen a woman use more towels for one shower in my life—and I replaced the candles around the tub. My girl loves a bath in the middle of the night.

All that's left is her.

I haven't been able to wipe the smile off my face all damn day. Hell, I think I've worn it since I picked Poppy up last night. She seemed so ... happy—relaxed, even—to tell her friend that we were engaged. And that has given me a tentative hope that I recognize as dangerous.

She's going along with the fake-fiancée bit because the benefits outweigh the drawbacks for both of us. Although I asked her to give me a chance to show her that we are great together, I know she's not doing it because she woke up and realized that I might be right and she should test the waters. But she *is* going into this with an open mind, and that's what I choose to lean into.

This is a huge step. An even bigger one because she's the one making it. Poppy Quinn, the woman who doesn't get pressured to do anything, revolts at expectations, and fights tooth and nail not to be placed in a box is going along with this with a smile?

Okay. I can live with that.

Even though I'm acutely aware that if this goes the wrong way, what we've had will collapse, and I'm not sure any version of us will be salvageable. *Don't think like that, Miller. Stay positive.*

My phone chirps, jostling me out of my thoughts, and I dig it out of my pocket.

Chuck: Check your email.

I open my email and take the stairs, heading to the kitchen to finish putting away the groceries I had delivered. There's a list of emails from Chuck's office. I start at the one marked urgent at the top.

From: Lansing, Chuck

To: Finn Miller

Re: Offer | Siggy's

Finn,

Offer confirmed from Siggy's. See attached. Please review and call with questions. If it looks good, sign electronically.

One thing—see Addendum A to the offer. If you agree, they request your size and jewelry selections ASAP. They want any pictures that come out with their rings.

Chuck

I nibble my bottom lip, skimming the contract.

"Eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars distributed in four equal payments." I shrug. "Sounds fair. One photo shoot. Sharing two social media posts—ugh. Blah, blah, blah."

It all looks pretty standard to me. *Don't disclose contract terms, don't promote another jewelry company during the term of the contract, usual moral clause.*

I lean against the kitchen cabinet and open the second attachment. A catalog that's double the size of the preliminary one Siggy's sent yesterday unfolds on my screen. "Holy shit."

Rings of all shapes and designs, with everything from diamonds to rubies to precious stones, are displayed for Poppy. I try to imagine each of them on her finger, but they all seem like contenders. It's exciting to think

that in a few days, one of these will be on her left hand as her commitment to me ... even if it's not exactly real.

Yet.

I hit forward on the email and send it to Poppy. Then I fire her a text.

Me: Hey, gorgeous. I sent you an email. 😊

Poppy: I hope this is the least exciting thing I get from you today. 😊

Me: I hope that a contract for eight hundred and fifty grand, plus a catalog of Siggy's rings to choose from, doesn't hold a candle to me ... but I won't hold my breath. 🙄

Poppy: Believe it or not, I'm MUCH more excited about seeing you tonight than I am about picking out a ring.

Poppy: Although that will be fun.

Poppy: HOLY CRAP FINN DID YOU LOOK AT THESE???

I laugh, loving that she's enjoying this.

Me: Yeah. I tried to predict which you'd like, but I had no idea.

Poppy: I would feel like such a brat wearing some of these when people are starving. 🙄

"Look at Poppy having feelings," I say, smiling softly at the phone. I can feel her excitement in her texts, and that is almost a relief. She's not backing out, not getting cold feet.

I've known for a long time that behavior is a defense mechanism. It's why she deflects or turns things into a sexual joke when she gets feel-y, as she calls it. I just haven't been able to figure out why.

Poppy: Look at KM202. That's stunning! But I could never. I mean, can you imagine hauling that thing around? No boat rides for me. It'd sink a ship.

Me: 🤔 Is that your favorite?

Poppy: I don't want that one. It's too much.

Me: You can have any one you want.

Poppy: WM535 is nice. I like the shape of it a lot.

Me: I like the shape of your ass a lot.

Branch's name appears on my screen, but I silence the call. *I'll call him back.*

Poppy: Wait until you see what I packed for tonight. 😊

Me: Does that mean you're coming straight here from work?

Poppy: I have a meeting at 3. I'm going to make Peter talk fast so I can get out of here as fast as I can. If all goes right, I'll be there by 4:30.

Me: You'll be naked by 4:31.

Poppy: 😊

I grab the case of Dr Pepper off the counter and place it in the fridge.

Me: We have a few contracts to consider. I can send them your way if you're bored at work.

Poppy: I wish. That call that came in yesterday while you were at my house was a massive fire. It's thrown my whole day off. Not to mention that I'm interrupted every 20 minutes by someone asking me if I'm really engaged.

I try to read between the lines but can't.

Me: How do you feel about that?

Poppy: A couple of ways. One, I know never to tell Marie anything that I don't want to spread in less than 12 hours. 🤔 And two, it's kind of fun. My coolness factor goes way up when I tell people that I'm marrying you.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

Poppy: People think you're a very big deal. 😊👑

Me: They aren't wrong. 😊

Branch's name pops up again. The second call coming in so quickly after the first is peculiar.

Me: Branch is calling. Repeatedly. Text me if you find a ring you want and your size, and I'll get it ordered.

Poppy: See you soon.

Me: Not soon enough.

I exit the app and press Branch's name.

We need to tell Branch and Layla before they find out from someone else.

Poppy

“I can't believe this is my life,” I say with a laugh as I scroll through the rings. After such a chaotic morning, I deserve this little break. “Here, just pick one. Forget that they're half *a million dollars*.”

The thought of wearing something each day worth as much as my house makes me squirm. *But when will I ever have the chance to do something like this again?* Never. And when this is over, maybe I can sell it and donate the proceeds to Someday Now.

My heart squeezes at the thought of this being over. It's been fun so far, and we haven't even gotten to the good part.

I glance at the clock. *Five hours until the meeting with Peter, and then I can get to that.*

My core clenches as I imagine what Finn has in store for us tonight. I wanted it, wanted *him*, last night, but he was so adamant that our first date be a real date. Even though it was unnecessary, it was sweet. It meant something to him. And a part of me really loves that a simple date with me was important to the man who could have anyone and anything.

I look up as a knock echoes through my office, and Joshua pokes his head around the corner.

“Hey, you,” I say, smiling at him.

“You and I need to talk.” He chuckles, coming inside and closing the door. “Word at the coffee station is that you’re engaged to a man named Finn Miller. Now, you can imagine my face when a little bell went off in my head.”

I laugh.

“So?” He crosses his arms over his chest. “You didn’t introduce him as your fiancé on Saturday. Did this just happen or what?”

“Yeah. It did. It was a total surprise.”

He makes a point of looking at my finger.

“I don’t have my ring,” I say, holding up my left hand. “It’s getting sized.” *Way to think on your feet, Pop.*

“Well, congrats. I’m so happy for you. And, just saying, if you have an engagement party, I buy great gifts.”

I laugh as he opens the door. “We’re taking it slow, so if you don’t get an invite, don’t take it personally.”

“Congrats again, Poppy.”

“Thanks.”

I turn back to my email and spot the one from Ann Walsh that’s been in my inbox since Friday afternoon. I’ve read it repeatedly but have been afraid to answer it.

It doesn’t feel real, along with everything else in my life.

A ball of excitement begins rolling in my stomach. This is real. My gaze lifts to the email Finn forwarded me. This is going to happen. Even if just the Siggy’s deal goes through, and my math is right, that’s about two hundred thousand dollars in my pocket after Finn pays Chuck and his taxes and before I pay mine.

That’s enough money on its own to start Someday Now.

We have a few contracts to consider. I can send them your way if you're bored at work.

I click on Ann's email, copy her assistant's email address, and start a new message.

From: Quinn, Poppy
To: Belcher, Kennedy
Cc: Walsh, Ann
Re: Schedule

Hi, Ms. Belcher,

I spoke with Ms. Walsh last week and would like to schedule a meeting with her at her earliest convenience. She asked that I reach out to you to do that.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your assistance.

Best,
Poppy Quinn

I should return a few calls from this morning but find myself opening the jewelry catalog again. The details of yesterday's fire were devastating, and they left me in a negative headspace all morning—a place that Finn's texts pulled me out of.

It's not the beautiful rings that brightened my day. It was him. It was the easiness that has settled between us once again. It's that somewhere in Chicago, Finn is going about his life thinking about me. He's excited to send me a catalog of rings, something most men would roll their eyes at.

I like being on his mind like this. I knew I would, which is why I wanted to reset our friends-with-benefit parameters. But this is safe. It's fun. Temporary.

And I plan on doing just that. I'm not one to squander a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"But I would love it if you went into this with an open mind and just gave me a chance to show you how good we can be. All I'm asking is that over the next few months while we're pretending to the world that we're getting married, you allow me to earn your trust."

"Oh, Finn." I sigh. I know he wants me to give this a real shot, and I said I would, but as he said, he doesn't know why I'm against it in the first

place. And that's on me. But it's not even about not trusting him. "I'll try. I promise. But I have a feeling that you're going to regret this."

I frown.

In the meantime, before he's the one backing out of our agreement, I'm going to enjoy this. Suck up as much fun as I can while it lasts—and apparently get a kick-ass ring out of the deal that I can hopefully put to use helping others when this is all said and done.

That I can live with.

I glance at the clock. *I can take a ten-minute break, and then I have to get back to work.*

The file opens on my computer, and page after page of the most beautiful rings are lined up for my choosing. Siggy Mason, the owner of the luxury jewelry line out of Savannah, is the go-to jeweler of the stars. Everyone with a recognizable last name has a piece of her work.

And now I'll have one, too.

I giggle, flipping through the pages, imagining each one on my finger, until I hit the last page. And there it is.

The one that's meant to be mine.

It's an Asscher cut on a gold band with tons of details that mean nothing to me. I've never been a big jewelry girl, and I'll sweat the whole time this is on my finger, but there's an element to this one that grabs my attention immediately. It's beautiful and elegant, like it's not trying too hard.

I lift my phone and find Finn's name.

Me: I found the one. BM333. 🥰 Size 6 according to the online measurement guide. Hope I did that right.

I start to set my phone down when Layla's name flashes on the screen.

"Hey," I say, grinning. *I should've had her help me pick my ring. She would've loved that.* "What's up?"

"Pop ..."

The wobble in her voice causes my heart to skip a beat.

Instantly, adrenaline rolls through my veins. "What's wrong?"

"Branch's dad had a heart attack," she says, barely holding it together.

"Oh my gosh. *Layla.*"

"Branch is devastated, Poppy. I mean, beside himself. His mom called a little bit ago and told him. They took his dad by ambulance from the golf

course, and someone there got in touch with his mom.”

My pulse quickens. “Is he going to be okay?”

I look down at Finn’s incoming call but ignore it.

She snuffles. “I don’t know. It doesn’t sound good. Branch told his mom he’d be there as soon as he could because she’s the only one who has him. So I’ve been trying to comfort him, find tickets, rent a car—”

“What do you need?” I open my email and type out a message to my boss that I’m leaving early due to a family emergency. I copy Kelly, asking her to clear my schedule for the rest of the day, and to notify Peter that I’ll miss our meeting. “Tell me how I can help.”

I start to get up but turn back to my computer. I still have a stack of loose ends to deal with today, and a list of the most important ones passes through my mind.

Even if our meeting is canceled, Peter will need my file on the Gent Group. And someone needs to reach out to the client affected by the fire at some point today to ensure they don’t have questions. I also wanted to go over the financials for three renewals this week because I think I found ways to make them more profitable. There are three or four emails from agents needing quotes with a quick turnaround, and I haven’t even looked at them.

My brain moves faster than my fingers as I fire off email after email. I hate putting work onto other people, and I have no business leaving the office today ... but Layla comes first.

Family always comes first. It was Dad’s motto, and he ingrained it into my head from birth.

“I don’t even know what you can do,” Layla says, panic rising in her tone. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of my mom and dad to see if they’d come back and take care of Sunny, but they’re on a cruise for two weeks in the Mediterranean for Dad’s retirement and their service has been crap. And I have to get us packed and figure out where we’ll stay because the hospital is a couple of hours away from Branch’s mom’s and—”

I shove away from my desk and toss my things in my purse. “Leave her with me.”

“What?”

“Leave Sunny with me.” I grab my keys and head for the door. “She’ll be safe, and I’ll spoil her rotten. We could use some girl time away from you, anyway,” I say, hoping to make her smile a little. “You don’t need to

be lugging her around an airport or a hospital, so let me take this off your plate.”

She cries softly. “I’ve been worrying about how I’ll take care of Sunny and protect her during this. I don’t know what this is going to be like, and I don’t want her around a bunch of sick people. She’s too young. And Branch wanted me to stay home with her, but I can’t let him go alone.” She hiccups. “I just need to be in two places at once.”

“That’s impossible.” I flip off the lights and make a beeline for the parking lot. “Have you gotten your tickets yet?”

“I found two that leave tonight, but I haven’t purchased them.”

“Get them.” I step into the warm sunshine, the breeze hitting me in the face. “I’m on my way to you. We’ll get the details sorted when I get there.”

“How are you going to take care of Sunny? You have to work.”

“I can work from home, or I’ll take vacation days.” My heart pulls in my chest. Of course, Layla’s thinking about everyone but herself. “You’re family, Lay. I’ll figure work out. You worry about Branch.” I unlock my door and climb in my car. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes. I’m in the car now.”

Her tears grow louder. “Thank you, Pop.”

I clench my teeth so I don’t cry. “Don’t thank me. I’ll see you soon.”

Before I set my phone down, I send a quick text.

Me: Did you hear about Branch’s dad?

Finn: I’m on my way to their house.

Me: Me, too. See you there.

I toss my phone on the passenger’s seat and throw the car in reverse.

Poor Branch.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

POPPY

I enter Layla's house through the garage, not bothering to knock or announce myself. It seems like a moot formality, considering they know I'm coming, are likely handling important things, and Finn is already here. I parked by him in the driveway.

My heart is in my throat as I stand in the kitchen and listen for voices. Vaguely, I detect Finn's coming from the living room. But upstairs, it's Layla's awful singing of the ABC song, and Sunny's laughter.

I take the steps two at a time and find them in Layla's room. Sunny stands, holding on to Layla's bed with one hand, and watches her mom carry clothes from the closet. When Layla's eyes meet mine, tears spill down her cheeks.

"Oh, Lay," I say, starting toward her. But my voice catches Sunny's attention. She whips around and spots me.

"Pop Pop!"

"Hey," I say, squatting down. "There's my little bestie."

She gets off the bed and takes the wobbliest steps toward me.

"Look at you," I say, catching her as she collapses into my arms. "You're getting so good at that."

"She fell and bumped her forehead on the edge of the couch last night. Scared the crap out of me," Layla says.

"Up!" Sunny says, so I stand and put her on my hip.

I press a kiss to Sunny's cheek. "How are you? How is Branch?" I ask my friend.

Layla sighs, sitting on the edge of the bed. “He’s a mess. His mom called ten minutes ago and said it doesn’t look good. She’s alone and terrified.”

“Did you book your tickets?”

“Yeah. The earliest we can get out of here is seven tonight. I’m glad Finn is here because I can’t be with Branch and get things ready to go at the same time.”

I’m glad Finn is here, too.

“I still need to get a rental car secured,” she says as Sunny babbles away. “And book a hotel. They were talking about transferring Leon to another hospital closer to Nashville, so I’ve tried to wait and see where he’ll be for sure.” She toys with Sunny’s fingers. “But since she’s not going, I’m less worried about that. Branch and I can just sleep at the hospital if we have to.”

“Call me when you know where you’ll be, and I’ll get something booked for you. Please don’t worry about that. If there’s anything I do well, it’s shopping, and making travel arrangements is basically shopping.”

She glances at me and grins through unshed tears.

I sit beside her on the bed, resting a squirming Sunny on my lap. “What else do you need? What else can I do to help?”

“Honestly, just being here right now is more than enough. I don’t know what I would do without you, Poppy.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’ll never know. Because if you even think about trying to get a new best friend, it won’t end well.”

She laughs, and I want to warn her that I’m not joking. One of the reasons I’m currently fake-engaged to her brother was so I didn’t have to see another woman at her dining room table snuggling my goddaughter.

I lift Sunny and kiss the back of her head. She leans for her mom with grabby hands, so Layla takes her, pulling her close.

“This is so hard,” Layla says, stroking her daughter’s hair. “I don’t know if I can leave Sunny. I’ve only been away from her for one night out of her entire life.”

“Mama,” Sunny says, clinging to her mom. She squeezes Layla’s cheeks with her little fingers, bringing their noses so close that they touch. “Mama.”

Sunny’s voice breaks, like she’s going to cry, clearly picking up on her mom’s feelings, and her inherent empathy destroys me. I find her favorite

stuffie and play peek-a-boo with it, hoping to make her smile.

Fuck, this is so hard.

My thoughts go to Branch. We knew Dad was sick for months before he passed. Not that you ever have time to prepare, but it gave us time to say the things we needed to say. I can't imagine thinking I wouldn't make it to say that I love him for the last time. It's unfathomable to think of not being beside my mother in her grief.

God, please be with them.

Layla sighs heavily. "I feel like a crappy mother if I leave her."

"Well, stop that right now. You're a great mother who is keeping your child safe. It doesn't get more *great mom* than that." I hand Sunny her stuffie. "And I promise to send tons of pictures and videos, and you can FaceTime whenever you want." I frown at the look on her face. "I know this is hard, and I'm not trying to minimize it. But maybe it'll help if you just imagine us hanging out, having some milk and coffee, maybe painting our fingernails. And if she has a new wardrobe when you get back, you just mind your own business."

She rests her head against my shoulder. "Thanks, Pop."

"Anytime."

"Are you sure this is okay?" She sits upright. "I don't know how long we're staying, or when I can come back. And if he passes away ..."

I shake my head. "One day at a time, or you're going to overwhelm yourself." *Take your own advice, Poppy.* "And if you're there longer than you want to be and miss Sunny, I'll fly down with her. I'll bring her to you. We'll visit, and I'll bring her back," I say, coming up with every option to help Layla feel better about this. "You know me. I'm a nomad at heart."

"But what about your job?"

I laugh, prying Layla's hair from Sunny's fist. "Will you seriously just worry about your stuff and let me worry about mine?"

"But you just took a week's vacation."

And I'm still not caught up from that. But I can make this work. I have to. I'll just have to work when Sunny is sleeping and squeeze in what needs to be done when I can. It'll be fine. It has to be.

"I'll take another one if I have to. Suppose they don't like it, tough sh—crap. It's a soft market, anyway. I wouldn't be brokenhearted to opt out until things turn around."

I'm apparently rich now, so I could technically do that. I flinch, almost snort-laughing. *I still can't believe this is real.*

We look up as movement at the door catches our peripheral vision. I think all three of us are relieved to see Finn standing beside Branch. At this moment of uncertainty, Finn is a fortress filling the doorway—the calm in the storm. Somehow, this whole scenario is more manageable because he's here.

Our gazes connect across the room, and I want to go to him so badly and put my arms around him. But Layla and Branch don't know we're back together on fake fiancée terms. Now seems like the wrong time to share that information.

"Finn Finn!" Sunny says. "Up!"

I stand, heading to Branch. Finn passes me, letting his fingertips trail across my stomach as he moves. A flurry of goose bumps ripples across my skin, and I can't help but think that tonight is going to look vastly different from what I anticipated.

"Branch, I am so sorry," I say, pushing thoughts of Finn from my mind.

The watery gaze with which Branch looks back at me slices my heart in two.

I pull him into a hug, something I've done exactly twice since knowing him. "Is there anything you need? Anything your mother needs?"

"No thanks, Pop." He pulls away, sniffing. "I just need to get there to be with her. But I think Layla has the tickets and everything taken care of. Right, Sunshine?"

I grin at his nickname for his wife, one that inspired Sunny's name.

"Yes," Layla says. She looks at me, then at Finn. "Our flight is at seven, and I have no idea when we're coming back. Can you guys pick up our mail and bring it inside?"

"That's not a problem," I say. "I'm sure I'll need to swing by and pick up something for Sunny, anyway."

Finn's brows pull together. "Why?"

"Poppy's keeping her."

Slowly, they lift to the ceiling. "Oh, really?" he asks with a small grin.

I give him a pointed look that only makes his grin grow wider.

"We didn't want her flying," Branch says. "She has too many problems with her ears to risk her being miserable the whole time. And we're going to be at the hospital, and it's just going to be a sad time. We don't want to put

her through any of that.” He looks at Layla. “And my wife refuses to stay home.”

The way he looks at her might get her pregnant again. It’s with such reverence, such appreciation ... such love. Tears fill Layla’s eyes as she returns the look in spades.

She clears her throat, pulling herself back together. “The only thing that worries me, Poppy, is where she’s going to sleep. I guess you could put her Pack ‘n Play in the living room. But what about when you’re working?”

I shrug. “I’ll make it work.”

“Or,” Finn says slowly, testing each word as he speaks. “You and Sunny could just stay with me.”

All heads turn to Finn.

He smiles. “I mean, under the current circumstances, I don’t see how this is a huge deal.”

“What circumstances?” Branch asks.

Finn and I watch each other, and my heart beats faster. His eyes narrow slightly, asking if I want to tell them. He’s taking my lead.

I was torn about what to do, afraid that bringing this up would be disrespectful given the reason we’re here. But it might also hurt their feelings if they find out elsewhere. And I can’t just lie to them now, either.

“This isn’t the way we wanted to tell you,” I say. “But since you’re curious ...” I take a deep breath and go for it, spilling all the words at once. “Finn and I are fake-engaged.”

“What?” Layla asks, her eyes widening.

“It’s a long story,” Finn says, amused by my delivery. “And it just happened yesterday. But after the Exposé article came out, some things happened that we can talk about later—nothing bad—and it made a lot of sense to do this. We both benefit from it.”

“I bet you do,” Branch says, smirking.

“This is one of those moments that I can’t believe I’m witnessing, but also that I feel like was always going to happen,” Layla says. “Minus the fake part.”

Finn sighs. “So, now that the cat is out of the bag, I have an extra bedroom that Sunny can use. She can have her own space, and no one will trip over her. And, Poppy, your office is technically closer to my house than yours.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be going in if I have Sunny.”

“I don’t have anything two days this week. So I can keep her, and you can go in if that helps.” He smiles. “It’ll be much easier to tag team this if we’re in the same house.”

“Finn Finn!” Sunny says, wiggling her fingers at her uncle. It’s like she’s cosigning his idea.

I’m not sure what to say to that.

Excitement ripples through my stomach. The idea of actually caring for Sunny—the reality of it, the mechanics of it—hasn’t really set in until now. It was just something that I had to do, and I was going to do it.

But doing it with Finn?

He’s so good with her, so calm in emergencies. *What if she chokes? What if she cries for hours on end? What if she develops some weird disease and I don’t pick up on the symptoms fast enough?*

I’m relieved to share the responsibility with Finn, and I secretly love the excuse to get to stay with him for a few days. I hate that I need to justify it to myself. I hate that it makes me more comfortable being there if he thinks I’m there because I need to be, instead of because I want to be. It’s ridiculous. Finn always wants me to stay over, and I’m always the one pushing back. Mostly, because I’m scared if he’s with me too much, he’ll see through me and stop asking me to stay.

That would destroy me.

It’s so much easier not to arrive at that destination.

Branch’s phone rings, and he pivots toward the stairs as he answers it.

“I need to finish packing,” Layla says. “And I need to get some stuff together for Sunny.”

“How about I put her car seat in my SUV?” Finn asks, looking at me. “You’re probably going to need to go home and get a few things, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, thinking about more logistics. I only have enough clothes and sex toys to get me through tonight. *Which I probably won’t need now.* I sigh. “I need my computer and extra clothes.”

Finn nods. “Okay. Why don’t I take Sunny home with me, and you can come by when you’re ready?”

I shrug. “Sounds good.”

“The stroller is in the garage,” Layla says. “And her Pack ‘n Play is in the bedroom downstairs. Could you grab it, Finn?”

“Sure thing.”

He gives me a little smirk before he disappears around the corner. *He's enjoying this way too much.*

Layla sits Sunny on the floor. "So, you're engaged to my brother, huh?"

"Fake engaged."

"No," Sunny says, shaking her head violently.

Calm down, child.

"I agree with Sunny," Layla says, laughing.

"I'm not really marrying him, Lay. Don't get this confused."

She grabs a few things out of a dresser drawer. "He hasn't told Mom and Dad?"

"No. We were going to figure out when to tell everyone tonight. This just happened, you know."

"What made you agree to this?" She drops the items in her hand into a suitcase. "I see why Finn did. There's no surprise there."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She gives me a look. "But I *am* surprised you went along with it."

I start to answer her but stop before anything comes out of my mouth. *Where do I start? Do I tell her that he didn't want to put the media on a witch hunt? Do I tell her that I'm getting an absurd amount of money to play this part? Or do I tell her the truth? The part I haven't even wanted to admit to myself... that I like it?*

It's only been twenty-four hours as the fake future Mrs. Finn Miller, and it's been nothing but fun. Freeing, even. I don't have to second-guess calling him back or answering his texts too soon. It hasn't occurred to me once that he might be taking my cues the wrong way.

"Honestly?" I say, sidestepping the question. "I'm surprised too. But here we are."

"Well, fake or not, this is the only bright spot in my day so far. Imagining you as my future sister-in-law is something I've always dreamed about."

"Keep dreaming," I say, chuckling, needing desperately to change the subject. "Do you want me to pack a few things for Sunny? Clothes, diapers, butt cream?"

"Yeah. I took a small suitcase in there a little while ago but didn't put anything in it. Most of the toys she loves are downstairs, so I'll throw them in a bag. And then her bottle and sippy and stuff are in the kitchen, so I'll get it all put together and send it with Finn." She looks around the room.

“Why don’t we do that first? I can deal with the rest of this once Sunny is squared away.”

“Good plan.”

She heads downstairs with Sunny, and I enter the baby’s pink bedroom. It’s seriously the cutest, most tranquil place in the world, and I take a moment to just soak in the peace.

It’s been a wild ride since Layla found out she was pregnant. Kids weren’t on her radar, but once she heard Sunny’s heartbeat, everything changed for her. And now she’s the best mother ever.

Watching her grow into this role has been nothing short of inspiring—not for having kids, but for handling life’s curveballs. She’s handled things with grace. She’s exuded nothing but love. I hope I can be as beautiful a human as her one day.

But I wouldn’t count on it. I’m too mean.

I pass the window toward the closet, but spot Finn outside putting Sunny’s car seat in his SUV. My heart tugs in my chest as his big frame handles the tiny seat with all the care in the world. In typical Finn fashion, he double- then triple-checks that he got it all right.

The way he cares for the people he loves and goes out of his way to make sure they’re cared for is what women write books about. He’s the greenest green flag of them all.

And for the next few months, he’s mine.

The corner of my mouth lifts as he looks up at me.

And I have no business being this happy about it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

POPPY

“Thanks, Marlon,” I say, waving at the man in the guard shack.

“Of course. Have a good evening, Poppy.”

I wait for the gate to swing open, then pull slowly into Finn’s neighborhood.

So much has happened in the last day that I almost feel like I’m walking in someone else’s shoes. I had a few minutes at home to decompress, and I made some calls to the office, letting them know I wouldn’t be in for a couple of days but would be working from home. I know my boss wasn’t thrilled about it, but I have vacation time to use. And he knows that if I say I’ll get shit done at home, I’ll do it.

The streetlamps lining either side of the road begin to flicker on, casting a warm, amber glow across the street. I’ve always loved this area. Aside from the fabulous houses and cars in the driveway being in a tax bracket that mine doesn’t understand, it’s cozy. Flags hang from porches alongside baskets of ferns. Rocking chairs and porch swings are so common that I wonder if they’re required. And the few people I’ve met while on walks with Finn have been friendly—one even inviting us in for a glass of lemonade.

My pulse races as Finn’s house comes into view at the end of the cul-de-sac. The heavy wooden front door is open, allowing the lights from inside to glow through the glass. Knowing that Finn is inside with Sunny sets off a warmth blooming in my chest, spreading outward in a slow, steady wave.

I pull into the driveway and park, grabbing my bags out of the back seat. The bag I packed this morning to stay overnight looks vastly different from the bags I put together an hour ago. There was one objective, one point to staying here tonight when I left the house for work. *Now?* I'm not sure what the night, or the next few days, will look like.

"Hey," I say, entering the foyer and removing my shoes.

I like to tease Finn by saying you wouldn't know a bachelor lives here. It's always so clean, decorated tastefully in soothing creams and grays. And it always smells crisp and fresh. I tell him that I can't overstay my welcome or I'll ruin the ambiance with my chaos.

"We're in here," Finn calls out from deeper inside the house.

I drop my bags at the base of the spiral staircase leading to the second floor, then continue to the family room. Finn stands at the other end of the kitchen, in the middle, wearing only a pair of sweatpants. Sunny is on his hip, smacking his shoulder and laughing at whatever he's telling her about something that's happening outside the window over the sink.

"Hi, guys," I say, smiling at the scene before me.

Finn turns around. As soon as his gaze lands on me, he heads my way, as if on instinct. I know the feeling.

"Hey, you," he says, scooping an arm around my waist and tucking me into his other side. I tilt my chin up as he bends down for a kiss.

A sweet, chaste kiss.

Not the one I wanted tonight.

When he pulls back, his amused grin seems to say that he shares the sentiment.

"We'll figure it out," he says.

I laugh, stepping out of his embrace and tickling Sunny's bare feet. "Yeah, we will. How's Sunny doing?"

"We haven't said the M or the D words that end in an a," Finn says warily. "Not sure how much longer that's going to hold, but fingers crossed. Did you get your stuff brought in or do you need me to go out and get it?"

"I got it. I set it at the foot of the stairs. Wasn't sure where I should put it."

He rolls his eyes. "Clearly, your clothes go in my room where you'll be sleeping—or not sleeping, if I have my way."

"Say less, Miller."

He chuckles. “If you want to work from my office, you can put your work things in there. Or work from the couch or bed. Whatever makes you happy.”

Whatever makes you happy.

This isn’t boyfriend behavior. This isn’t the behavior I wanted him to stop to make it easier for me to draw boundaries between us. This is more than that—deeper than that. More intimate than that.

Sharing space. Making room. Welcoming me into the nooks and crannies of his personal life.

He asked me to give him a chance to prove we’re good together, and I agreed. But I thought I could hold on tighter to reality. To every reason the two of us could never be ... on the way to this. But with every hour that passes, I slip further into his world. And every inch I slip is another reason to worry.

Except I don’t want to. For the first time, I want to enjoy this for whatever it is.

I want to block out the warning bells and the voices that haunt me in my dreams.

“Pop Pop,” Sunny says, wiggling her fingers. “Want me.”

“You want me?” I ask.

“Want me,” she says, bending over the side of Finn’s arm.

I laugh, taking her from Finn.

“Juice,” she says.

Finn grimaces. “I don’t have any juice. I had groceries delivered today, but that’s before I knew we were going to have company.”

“That’s okay. She’s not supposed to have more than one sippy cup of juice a day, and we’re supposed to cut that with water. Layla gave me way too many details before I left her house, and then she sent me about sixty texts with instructions.” I laugh. “I’m pretty sure she’s already had her juice today, and even if she hasn’t, we’re not going to give her sugar this late.”

“Ah, good point. We definitely need the little princess to sleep tonight.”

I twirl Sunny in a circle. “How about some milk?”

“No.” She shakes her head adamantly. “No, no.”

Finn shrugs. “Let’s try it anyway.” He plucks the backup sippy cup that Layla sent with him off the counter and fills it with milk. “I have a few meetings tomorrow morning that will last into the afternoon, but I’m off

Wednesday. Are you good with Sunny tomorrow? I can be back around three, maybe four.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I told my office that I’d check in tomorrow and that I’d do what I can, but I didn’t know how productive I’d be this week.”

He brings the cup to Sunny, who takes it without objection. *Thank God.*

“Well, I have no other plans on Wednesday, so if you need to do anything, I got you covered,” he says.

A slow grin slips across my lips as one bit of uncertainty eases, making it easier to breathe. Because although Finn *is* great, we’ve never been *here* before. It’s never been his job or mine, his time or mine. We’ve always kept our lives separate so that those choices didn’t need to be made.

A memory I buried a long time ago is triggered and fires through my mind.

“Don’t be fucking stupid, Poppy.” His eyes narrowed into serpent-like slits. “You make minimum wage. Don’t act like anything you do matters because it doesn’t. Hell, you barely fucking matter.”

“Hey,” Finn says, his brows pulled tight. “What’s the matter?”

I smile, shaking my head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.” I take a deep, shaky breath as the dark eyes fade from my mind. “Thanks for letting me know about Tuesday.”

“Yeah, of course.” His gaze lingers on me for a long moment before he lets it go—superficially, anyway. I’m not sure Finn lets anything out of his head. “Since you’ll be here with her tomorrow, do you want me to take the car seat out of my vehicle and put it in yours?”

“No. I can’t imagine we’ll go anywhere.”

“The stroller is in the garage if you want to take a walk.”

“Great. Thanks.”

He turns but watches me out of the corner of his eye. *Nope. He did not let it go.*

“Hey, have you heard from Layla or Branch?” I ask, carrying Sunny to the living room and setting her on the floor.

Finn opens the fridge and peers inside. “I haven’t. Well, I did get a text from my sister a bit ago that they were leaving for the airport. Branch was antsy, and they didn’t want to get caught in traffic, so they left super early.” He closes the door. “Are you hungry?”

My stomach growls at the question, as if it’s afraid I’ll overlook its emptiness.

“I am,” I say. “I didn’t eat lunch. We had meetings all morning, and then I took a little break to text you, and then Layla called.”

“I only have snacks because I figured we’d be too ...”—he glances at Sunny—“preoccupied all night to have an actual meal.”

“Yeah, I think tonight will look a lot different from what we imagined.”

“Hey, even babies have to sleep sometime.” He grins. “Sunny, are you going to sleep for Uncle Finn tonight?”

“No,” she says around her sippy.

We laugh.

Finn and I sit on the couch while Sunny stretches out on the floor. She plays with her hair like she does when she’s sleepy. I want to hold her and cuddle her, but I’m afraid that, if I do, she’ll be jostled out of her milk coma and want her mom.

I’m not sure how to play this, but leaving her be seems to be the winning option.

“What did you think about the rings today?” Finn asks, pulling the remote from between the cushions.

I sit back and sigh happily. “I can’t believe that I get to pick one. That’s what I think.” I giggle. “There were so many beautiful choices that narrowing it down was a chore.” I wink at him. “But I figured it out.”

“You texted me your choice, right? I think I remember seeing it when I was on the phone with Branch, but I haven’t had time to go back and look at it.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Which one did you go with?” he asks.

“It was between BM333 and KM202,” I say. “But the more that I looked at them, the more I thought that the KM202 was just too much. It was so big and bold. So I went with BM333.”

He tilts his head. “But you like BM333, right? Because you can have either one. It makes no difference.”

“I know. I just feel like the other one should be on a Hollywood starlet’s finger, not mine. Who am I to wear something like that?” I laugh at the audacity. “The BM333 is more restrained and safer to cross bridges with it on my finger.”

Finn grins. “Okay. I’ll let the team know, and we’ll get it ordered.”

“Great.” I yawn, the day starting to get the best of me. “Now, food. Why don’t I place an order for actual groceries so we have things to eat? I’m sure

you don't have anything Sunny-appropriate anyway. That'll let us relax and get situated tonight."

"That's a good idea because you're right. I don't have much for her to have. I ignored a call from Chuck earlier, and he left a message, so I need to check on that. I also know his assistant sent me several emails today that I need to look at. I think most of them are contracts that you and I will need to go over together."

I grab a throw blanket off the back of the couch and place it beside Sunny. She grabs it and pulls it against her cheek. *Sweet baby.*

"Honestly, Finn, I don't know anything about contracts. I've never seen one before. So if you look at it and think it's a good thing, then I trust you."

He shakes his head. "No. That's not how this works."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this ... some of these contracts are going to directly affect you. If it's a sneaker thing that has nothing to do with you, obviously, you don't need to look at that. But if it's something that involves you, like a photo shoot or using your name or your likeness or our engagement as a selling point, then you need to know what's going to be said. You have every right to control your own image, and you must decide what's right for you and have your opinions be heard."

I scoot across the couch to him and place my head on his chest. His arms come around me, and he presses a kiss to the top of my head. I could close my eyes, stay here forever, and be happy.

Finally, he sighs. "Why don't you go upstairs and get changed and settled in? I'll order takeout from the Vietnamese place you love."

"Oh, we haven't had that in a long time."

"Sound good?"

I sit up. "Definitely. Can I have my usual?"

"You got it."

"I'll go up and change and order groceries. Is there anything you want in particular?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing you can get from a store."

A bolt of heat rips through me from the look he sends my way. It's a strange kind of torture to finally have him all to myself, but still be unable to have him. I'm being cockblocked by a toddler.

"It's like the universe isn't on my side," he says, adjusting himself.

I grin. "Well, I don't give a royal fuck what the universe has to say. Tonight, my dry spell ends one way or the other."

"Oh, I can guarantee you at least three ways it's going to end."

"Keep it up, and we're going to have a problem on our hands."

He chuckles. "Go get yourself sorted, and I'm going to order dinner."

Sunny whimpers, sitting up. "Mama."

"You sure?" I ask, my stomach tightening. "I can stay in case ..."

He gets up, picks up his niece, and sways back and forth. "Go. I got this."

I hesitate but finally turn away, because he does have this. He's going to take care of her and dinner, just like he said he would.

Best of all? He isn't going to throw it in my face later.

My lungs fill with air as I internally fight against my instinct to compare everything to Jordan. He doesn't get headspace anymore. And Finn certainly doesn't deserve to be compared to him, whether Finn wins that comparison or not.

And he always will because he's Finn.

I grab my bags and head up the steps to change and unpack. Like I belong here. Like I'm going to be here for a while.

Breathe, Poppy. I blow out a breath as I reach Finn's room. *Everything's going to be fine.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FINN

“My little sleepy Sunny bunny,” I whisper-sing, cradling her in my arms as I move slowly around the family room. The lights are dim, and the house is quiet as I try to get my niece to sleep. “Sleepy Sunny.”

She holds her bottle, her lashes fluttering as she fights sleep.

If you love me at all, please go to sleep.

Tonight has been a test of my restraint—one that I’ve barely passed. I’ve so many times wished to have Poppy here, her guard down and willing to let me be affectionate, not just physical. And she’s here, relaxed, and not shying away when I kiss her forehead or hug her.

She’s participating like I asked.

Sunny, however, is running interference.

I pat her bottom, swaying her back and forth. “Little sleepy Sunny bunny.”

Poppy’s soft footsteps come down the stairs. I turn to catch her entering the room.

My lord ...

One of my T-shirts hangs to her mid-thigh, dusting against the skin that I’m dying to touch. Her feet are bare, and her hair is messy, spilling over her shoulders. She looks ... at home.

It steals my fucking breath.

This is what I want. This is so ... right.

“Hey,” she whispers. “How’s it going down here?”

I glance at my niece. The bottle has fallen from her mouth, and her little lips are still pursed. It's the cutest thing ever.

"I think she might be asleep," I say.

But as soon as the words hit the air, Sunny's eyes pop open. "Mama."

Poppy and I exchange a look.

"Guess not," I say, frowning.

"It's nine o'clock," Poppy says, wrapping her arms around me from behind and kissing my shoulder. "Aren't babies supposed to go to bed early?"

"Mama," Sunny says again, wiggling in my arms. "Want Mama."

Poppy steps around us and takes the bottle. "I want Uncle Finn, Sunny girl. I've waited for this for a very long time. So, if you could do me this one little favor and go to sleep, I'll buy you a new sippy cup tomorrow."

I snort. "Buying her love at fourteen months."

"Buying her *cooperation* at fourteen months. And if you knew how badly I want to tackle you to the floor and climb on top of you, you'd be surprised that I only offered a new sippy." Her brows pull together. "How about one of those little cars you can drive? Want one of those?"

"No," Sunny says, her lip trembling.

Poppy and I exchange a grimace as Sunny starts to cry.

"Let me try," Poppy says, lifting the baby from my arms. "Hey, girlie. Don't cry. Auntie Pop Pop is here."

"Mama," she says, burying her head into Poppy's shoulder.

I stand beside her, feet rooted to the floor, watching the woman of my dreams fall into the role that I've never been brave enough to imagine. But it's so natural, so beautiful—having her in my home at bedtime, in my clothes, holding a child—that I'm not sure I'll be the same person as I was before this moment.

I've always wanted Poppy. I've wanted a relationship with her. *But now?* I want *this* with her, and only her.

If she wants it for herself.

You better stop this while you're ahead, Miller.

My hand falls to the small of her back. "I'm going to finish cleaning up the kitchen."

"You don't have to do that," she says, patting Sunny's back. "I can do it later—or even tomorrow. I'll be here all day."

"And you have to work tomorrow *and* watch Sunny. I got the kitchen."

The smile she gives me hits me right in the chest.

I wink at her, then pick up the rest of dinner we left on the table to bathe Sunny.

“What time do you have to leave in the morning?” she asks, moving side to side with the baby against her.

“Around seven, probably. I have another round of media obligations, then a training session. Then Frutter is having a few of us get together to run some routes and just kind of get back into it again.” I dry my hands on a dish towel. “I’m also meeting with Chuck in the afternoon.”

“Okay.”

“Is that all right?” I lift a brow, watching her closely.

She nods, soothing Sunny. “I’ve just never been here alone before, and it occurred to me that maybe you didn’t think about that. I could totally take Sunny back to my house for the day and then come back—”

“Poppy.”

I toss the towel on the counter, studying her. “If you’re not comfortable here and want to go home tomorrow, then let me know, and I’ll get the car seat in your car, so you don’t have to wrestle it. But if you think that I don’t want you here ...” I grin. *Silly girl*. “Running the risk of you freaking out on me, but I’ll put it to you like this—if you never left again, I wouldn’t be mad about it.”

As if having her here isn’t something I’ve begged the universe for all the damn time.

Her entire body sighs. It’s evident in her shoulders sinking and the tension dissolving from her features.

“I’d be careful using that language,” she says, grinning.

“Why?”

“Have you stopped to think about what this house will look like in a week when I have to do laundry? Or when I’ve been to the office five days in a row, and I come home, strip my clothes, and rot in bed with a pint of ice cream and the remote control until Monday morning.”

I snort. “You think I’d have a problem with you naked in my bed for three days? It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Well, in a few weeks, you’ll be in a hotel on Saturday nights for your Sunday game. So, you won’t even be here to take advantage of it.”

I cross the room, stopping in front of her. My hands dip beneath the fabric covering her body. My fingers bite into her hips. “You underestimate

how much I like the thought of you being in my bed when I'm gone."

Her eyes light up as a slow smirk settles on her lips. "I'm not sure you fully understand how much I want you in your bed right now."

I slide around to her back, letting my palms drag roughly against her skin. She moans softly as I press my hips against her ass so she can feel just how hard I am.

"I beg to differ," I whisper against the shell of her ear.

She turns her face to speak, but I catch her mouth with mine, capturing another moan against my lips.

My body reacts instantly. Wanting her. Craving her. *Needing her.*

Our tongues meet in a slow, deliberate dance that they've done many times before ... but not quite like this. Her lips are soft, her breath hot, and the taste of her is achingly familiar. Still, kissing her tonight feels new.

Her eyes are wild when I pull away.

"Do you think she's asleep?" I ask, peering over her shoulder. Sunny's eyes are closed. "Let's try to lay her down."

"No," Sunny says without opening her eyes.

Poppy giggles quietly. "Do you think that was a response or just a reflex?"

"Let's hope to God it's a reflex."

I follow Poppy upstairs into the guest room. My hand stays on the small of her back. It isn't intentional, but an unconscious need to touch her—to remind myself, and her, that this is really happening.

We're *this close* to having the night to ourselves.

"Shhh," Poppy whispers, placing Sunny on her back in the Pack 'n Play. She touches her chest gently until Sunny settles and her breathing evens out. "There you go."

A night light is plugged in on the other side of the bed, casting a hazy glow around the room. The white noise machine that Layla sent over hums softly. It's the definition of cozy and peaceful.

This kid better sleep.

We exchange a hopeful look and turn toward the door. But we don't make it halfway there before Sunny's voice breaks through the air.

"Mama!"

I look at the ceiling as Poppy whimpers.

I've waited two years to have this woman as mine, and now Sunny won't sleep? She naps just fine here when she's visiting. She crashes out on my

shoulder for hours when I'm holding her at Layla's. *But not now? When I really need her to?*

Little shit.

"I think she hates us," Poppy says.

When our eyes meet, we both begin to laugh.

"Mama!" Sunny shouts, louder this time. "Want Mama."

"Shhh," Poppy says, holding a finger to her lips and trying to stop giggling. "Stop laughing, or she'll really wake up."

"I thought she'd be my little wingwoman. Instead, she's running interference."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out.

"It's Branch," I say.

"Go take it. I'll get her to sleep."

I press another kiss to her lips, unable to help myself, before slipping out of the room.

"Hey," I say, moving to my bedroom.

"Hey, man." He sighs, the day's exhaustion evident in his tone. "How's my girl?"

"Poppy is with her, putting her to bed. But she's been a little angel. Only asked for her mom approximately eighty-six times."

He chuckles. "Sounds about right."

I sit on the edge of my bed. "How are you? How's your dad?"

"We're waiting on our rental car now. I checked in with Mom, and he's stable at the moment, but they have him in intensive care. He had another small heart attack during the transfer to Nashville. But he seems to be hanging in there."

Thank God. "I'm glad to hear that. Do you need anything? What can I do to help?"

"You're already doing more than you know." He sighs. "I'm not sure I thanked you for stepping up with Sunny like this. You have no idea how much it helps knowing she's with you and Poppy."

You and Poppy. I like the sound of that.

"It's been fun." *Until the last hour.* "We sent you and Lay some pictures and videos at dinner. Don't know if you've seen them yet."

"I haven't, but I think Layla did. She was tearing up at her phone when we got off the plane, so I figured that was why."

I smile. "If you guys need anything, give us a call."

“We will. Tell Pop thanks, too, please.”

A chuckle that needs no explanation passes my lips. “I’ll thank her very thoroughly.”

“Bet you fucking will.” He laughs half-heartedly. “Okay, we’re up next. Gotta go. Keep my baby safe.”

“I’ll protect her with my life.”

“I know you will. Later.”

He ends the call.

I toss my phone on the bed and listen ... to nothing. *Silence*. No baby crying, no Poppy shushing, no rustling coming from across the hall.

Thank. Fuck.

I stand and tiptoe across the hallway and peer into the guest room. Poppy is bent over the edge of the playpen, my shirt barely covering the bottom of her ass.

My cock throbs so fucking hard, and I grip the doorframe so tightly that the wood protests. Poppy leans back slowly before turning to face me. There’s a wicked smile on her lips that matches the twinkle in her eye.

I step back, my heart pounding, and motion for her to come to me.

She bites her lip, slinks out of the room, and gently closes the door behind her.

The soft click is followed by a sigh from both of us. Poppy pivots, facing me, her cheeks already flushed.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask, walking backward into my room with a smirk. “Get over here.”

She giggles, jumping to me, her legs wrapping around my waist in one smooth movement.

“It’s about damn time,” she says, cupping my cheeks in her hands.

“You can say that again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

POPPY

The way Finn looks at me is downright filthy.

It's been absolute hell trying to act like a mature grown woman and take care of Sunny with this motherfucker running around shirtless in gray sweatpants. His body is too perfect—smooth, tanned skin that screams power with muscles crafted by God himself.

And then to watch him hold Sunny so tenderly?

It's unfair. I'm not even sure I want kids, and my ovaries ache.

He smirks. "You've been walking around all night with nothing on under that shirt?"

"I was hoping," I say, nibbling his bottom lip, "that you might take pity on me and bend me over the bathroom sink or something."

He growls as I tug his lip with my teeth, pressing my pussy against his stomach.

"You're fucking soaked," he says as if this is a surprise. He presses kisses across my jaw, his fingers digging deeper into my ass cheeks. The burn of the pressure heats my core even more.

"Listen," I say, tilting my head to the side to give him better access to the crook of my neck. "If you want me to stay here and not be wet the whole time, you're going to have to start wearing a shirt."

He chuckles against my shoulder. "Funny, because I was thinking that if you're going to stay here, I prefer you not wearing a shirt."

I lean back and grin. "Ask and you shall receive." I grab the hem and yank it off, tossing it somewhere across the room.

My thighs are coated in my need for him. My nipples are peaked, begging for his mouth. I can barely manage the throbbing between my legs as his lips find mine again.

His tongue slides into my mouth without restraint. Demanding. Taking. *Owning*. There's an urgency hiding beneath the surface of his collected demeanor. It's as if he's struggling between wanting to ravage me and wanting to take his time tonight.

I'm always for ravaging. But there is something to be said for being present and just enjoying this without getting inside my own head—something that I've managed to do so far. Besides, that's what I told him, and myself, that I would do. And with his attention so acutely focused on me, it suddenly doesn't seem like such a bad plan.

"You get more beautiful every time I see you," he says.

I laugh against his lips. "I'm already naked, Miller. You don't have to charm me."

He pulls back, narrowing his eyes playfully. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Stop deflecting when I say something nice," he says, the head of his cock pressing against my ass. "Take a compliment."

"I take a compliment just fine. Don't believe me? Wait until I'm riding your cock in a minute and see how well I take your words of affirmation."

He laughs, tossing me onto the bed.

My pulse trips over itself as he strips his sweats off and steps out of them. Watching him move is foreplay. I slide my hand between my legs and moan, unable to go another minute without some relief. He palms his cock, eyes glued to mine, as he strokes it from root to tip.

"Have you missed me?" he asks. A bead of precum forms on the head of his dick. "Because I've dreamed of that pussy every single night."

My insides tighten. "Really? What was I doing?"

"Sitting on me. Squatting on my face. Bent over every fucking surface of this house." He hisses. "I've been in your mouth, your cunt, and your ass more in the past two weeks than I was in the month prior."

I tremble as I remove my finger from my clit and crawl to the edge of the bed. His grin grows deeper, more mischievous, the closer I get. I sit up on my knees in front of him, his length pressed against my torso, and grin.

"Did I like it?" I ask coyly.

He takes my hand that was just between my legs, folding each finger down except the two I used to touch myself. Both of them go to his face, past his lips, and into his mouth.

“*Fuck*,” I moan, as he sucks them clean. “Why are you so damn hot?”

“The irony.”

He smirks, wrapping an arm around me before I see it coming, and tosses me onto my back. My legs are over his shoulders, and his face is buried between them before I can catch my breath.

“Yes,” I say, hissing through my teeth. “*Oh my gosh*. Yes. Just like that.”

He manhandles me, lifting my butt to give himself better access. When my knees aren’t open wide enough, he moves them. When I won’t stay still, he places a hand on my stomach to keep me in place.

“Don’t,” he growls into my center, causing goose bumps to pepper my skin. Another lick from my opening to my clit has me writhing against him. “I love how your body reacts to me.”

He draws a circle around my clit before nipping it. The sensation is so sharp, so teasing, and my hips buck on their own accord.

His chuckle rumbles against my flesh. “Can’t resist, can you?”

“It’s not like you’re making it easy,” I say, squirming for more contact—for the release that is almost mine.

“The best things in life are worth the wait.” He flicks his tongue against me, sending sparks catapulting through my body. “Now lie there and behave, and let me enjoy you. I promise to take care of you. You know that.”

I do. He always does.

Something is deliciously freeing about having the choice removed from you and all you have to do is enjoy it. There’s no room for overthinking, no space to be self-conscious. No performance necessary. But that’s the beauty of being with Finn. He gives more, and better than, he takes.

“Don’t stop,” I beg as my thighs begin to tremble.

His mouth works me like he’s been starved. Each circle and flick—each hum against my swollen clit—is a firework detonating inside my brain.

I hold his head, pressing him against me and grinding my body against his face.

God, this feels so good. And when he adds two thick fingers inside me, bending them perfectly to hit the spot that sends me over the edge, I do, in fact, lose all sense of control.

Not that I had any. But I definitely don't now.

I fist the blankets as my back arches off the mattress, and I try not to scream. But the pleasure is so intense that it's a fine line from pain. I bite down, clenching my teeth so hard that I can hear them slip against each other, and try to pull away.

To no avail.

Finn licks and sucks my clit, pumping his fingers into my pussy, not stopping until every last drop of my orgasm has been wrung out of me.

I collapse against the bed with my heart ricocheting against my rib cage and my pulse pounding through my body.

He stands, licking his lips and grinning. "Welcome back."

I chuckle as the bits of glitter falling through my vision begin to lessen. "It's good to be back. I—"

The baby monitor rustles across the room, and Finn's eyes go wide. My stomach tightens at the thought of Sunny waking up. *No. No, Sunny, girl. Please sleep for Auntie Pop.*

But as quickly as the sound comes, it goes. And silence fills the air again.

"This is a new reason I question having kids," I say, climbing off the bed. "It's terrible for your sex life."

"What are you doing?"

I kneel at his feet. "I'm going to suck your cock."

"Fuck." He groans as I wrap my hand around the base and swipe the precum off the head. "The picture of your mouth wrapped around me is the sexiest thing ever."

"Then let me paint that picture for you now."

I cup his balls in one hand and run my tongue down his shaft. His fingers lace through my hair as I trace the lines of his dick. He trembles as I lick the head in slow, lazy motions with my gaze pinned to his.

Seeing his attraction to me and just how wild I make him is the biggest aphrodisiac of all time.

My pussy begs for him all over again.

"Suck it," he says. "Take me down your throat."

I bat my lashes, lift higher on my knees, and without breaking eye contact, I slide my mouth over him. He's soft yet hard, smooth yet thick with veins. There's a saltiness already on my tongue, and that turns me on even more.

“Dammit.” He flexes his hips until his cock hits the back of my throat. “You’re fucking incredible, Pop.”

I hum, licking the head, before pulling my lips over him again.

“You’re so sexy,” he says, his muscles tightening. “And don’t you dare stop to deflect that.”

I giggle before taking him into my mouth harder. Deeper. More intentionally.

It takes me a second to find a rhythm but, when I do, he widens his stance and fucks my mouth. He grips my head, urging me to take him deeper and faster. He thrusts on the rebound, meeting me move for move.

To think that I can affect a man like Finn in this way is heady and powerful in its own way.

Carnally. Viscerally. *Undeniably.*

He tightens, and I think he’s about to come. Instead, he steps away with a wild look in his eyes. I rock back on my heels, surprised and uncertain what’s happening. Before I can process the moment, he hauls me to my feet and deposits me on the chaise lounge facing the wall.

Oh fuck.

My pulse begins to race as I grip the back of the chair and hold on tight. I barely get my grip onto the wooden edge before he’s behind me, arm under my stomach, and slamming into me.

The chair moves with the effort, the legs sliding against the hardwood floor. I let out a yelp and the sound blends with Finn’s guttural groan.

His cock stretches my opening, and he gives me no time to acclimate. He drives into me again, then three times, and on the fourth, the chair hits the wall. He yanks my hips back and holds me in place as he pumps into me with the force of a man who has waited far too long.

That makes two of us.

I can’t think or breathe, and God forbid I try to move.

“Fuck me,” I say through my clenched teeth. “Harder.”

“You want it harder?” He drives so deep into me that I scream. “Then keep.” His cock hits the back of my pussy. “Your.” *Again.* “Voice.” *Again.* “Down.”

Shit.

“Show me you missed me,” I say, knowing I’m flirting with danger by taunting him. But it’s such an irreplaceable high to affect him like this. “Prove it.”

The sound of his dick sliding—pounding—through my soaked flesh fills the room. My palms sweat as I try to hold myself steady. My pussy begs to come again.

His hands slide around me, cupping my tits. I moan as he toys with my tight buds.

“I want to come,” I say, each word broken by his movements. “Make me come.”

“How do you want it?” His voice is deep and scratchy as if he’s barely holding himself back. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want to ride you.”

He pulls out, twists me around, and tosses me over his shoulder. I giggle, gasping for breath as he carries me onto the bed. I’m placed on a pile of pillows near the headboard as he lies beside me.

His eyes shine. The greens are clear and vibrant, alive and ... happy. It does something to my chest because I find myself leaning forward to kiss him—something I don’t do a lot of when we’re fucking.

Finn seems to register this strange little fact, because he pulls me into him as I kiss him.

It couldn’t be more night and day from thirty seconds ago. On the chair, it was absolutely fucking. A means to a very satisfying end. *But now?* He’s holding me. I can feel his heartbeat against my palm.

And I have a strange ache in my chest that, instead of making me want to pull away from him, pushes me to kiss him harder.

He takes my hands and steadies me as I straddle him. Our eye contact never breaks as I position myself over him and take his cock inch by inch into my pussy.

I don’t move. I just sit with him filling me, letting the fullness register. He takes my hands in his again, lacing our fingers together, and smiles.

“Tell me what you want,” I say softly, not sure what I even mean.

He lifts to press a simple kiss to the center of my mouth. “I just want you to be happy, Poppy Quinn.”

Oh. The sincerity in his tone and the honesty in his eyes kill me. A lump settles in the back of my throat, and I can’t respond. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how not to make it weird. So I do the only thing I know how to do, which is show him how I feel.

I move, but it’s in much the same way he kissed me tonight. Slowly. Leisurely. Like we have all the time in the world.

Although Sunny could wake up and the morning will come a lot faster than either of us would like, we do have time. And instead of the idea panicking me, it soothes me.

I'm not sure why, but I have a feeling that it's going to be okay.

I'm safe here, in his arms. And this is the first time I've ever let myself feel it.

Being the future fake Mrs. Finn Miller has its perks.

This is definitely one of them.

For as long as this adventure lasts, anyway.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

POPPY

“Give me another one,” I say, opening my mouth.

Finn’s hand rustles inside the bag before dropping a piece of freeze-dried candy onto my tongue.

Moonlight streams through the windows, thanks to the open curtains and blinds. Shadows dance along the walls as tree limbs blow in the breeze outside. The candles Finn lit around the bathtub earlier flicker in the adjoining en suite, scenting the air with vanilla and lavender. I couldn’t be more relaxed if I tried.

“What about this one?” Finn asks, opening an email on the computer on his lap.

I squint into the brightness radiating from the screen. “What is it?”

“It’s from a mattress company. I’m trying to find the details.”

“Don’t bother.” I crunch the fruit-flavored ball, resting my cheek against his bare chest. “It’s a no.”

He chuckles. “That fast?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a mattress,” I say, sticking out my tongue so Finn drops another candy onto it. “First of all, what are they going to do? Give us a mattress? This one is fine.” I stop chewing, catching myself. “And my mattress is fine at home.”

Finn’s face buries into my hair, and I feel him smile. My cheeks heat, but I don’t dwell on my misspeak. It’ll only make it more awkward.

“Besides,” I say, pushing on. “I don’t want to think that people will see the commercial and imagine our sex life. It’s ... no.”

“Okay,” he says, clicking off the message. “Moving on ...” Before my eyes can adjust, he starts laughing.

“What is it?”

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and say the pleasure toy company is probably a no, too.”

I giggle. “There’s not a chance in hell.” I sit up, pulling his hand away from the keyboard. “Oh, but I do like the look of that thing. How many speeds does it have?”

He elbows me to push me back and opens a new tab. I burst out laughing as he searches for the item, adds it to his cart, and has it purchased in sixty seconds flat.

“That’s one way to market your product,” I say, still giggling.

His grin fans the flame rebuilding in my core. How that’s possible after the number of times that I’ve climaxed tonight, I don’t know. But it’s true.

I rest my head against his bicep, feeling the muscle ripple as he scrolls his email. My eyes flutter closed, and I breathe him in. Whether it’s his scent, the orgasms, or simply his body next to mine that loosens the tension in my shoulders like this, I don’t know. But this level of relaxation doesn’t happen anywhere but with Finn.

“How about this one?” he asks, opening another message. This one is from Landry Family Wines. “Chuck negotiated this one.” He highlights lines with his cursor as he reads from the attachment. “They want one photo shoot, max two hours, in a celebratory engagement setting. It looks like I have to share their social media posts within a certain number of days, and we get ... seven hundred thousand dollars.”

My eyes widen, and I lift my head. “For that? You’re joking.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?”

“The word asinine was coming to mind, but sure, we’ll go with crazy.” I sigh. “I just don’t understand your life,” I say, accepting another piece of candy. “These companies throw this kind of money around for pictures, and there are people starving in the world. It makes no sense.”

“Agreed. But with Landry Wines, in particular, I know they do a ton for charity and give back to their community. I did a sports benefit a couple of years ago with Lincoln Landry—not sure if he’s their kid or sibling. Either

way, very nice guy.” He grins. “I wouldn’t say humble, necessarily, but a good person.”

I smile. “Oh, I know Lincoln Landry.”

Finn reaches across me and pinches my nipple, making me laugh.

“Is this one a go or a no?” he asks. “I’ll ensure there’s an addendum that Lincoln Landry is nowhere near the photo shoot if we do it.”

I press a kiss to Finn’s chest. “He might be gorgeous, but he would melt into the background if you were around.”

He lifts my chin with the tip of his finger, lowering his mouth to mine. His lips are warm and soft, slightly swollen from the action they’ve received tonight. He kisses me gently but with such intention that it’s clear—there’s no place he’d rather be than here, kissing me.

“Let’s do that one,” I say when he pulls away. “Seems easy enough.”

He waits until I’m cuddled against him again before he continues scrolling.

“This one is interesting,” he says. “I’ve been waiting to see where this one wound up.” He clicks on an email. “Have you ever stayed at a Ruma hotel?”

I shake my head. “No, but Branch took Layla to one for their babymoon, and she said it was incredible.”

“They are super nice. And they’re willing to give us a million bucks to say that.”

Holy shit. “Where does it say that?”

He highlights a line on the screen. “We’ll have to film a few spots at one of their pre-selected resorts, but it looks like they’ll give us a choice of a few locations. Seems like it’s a honeymoon-style shoot. And there’s a few social media things that make no difference to me, so this one is up to you.”

“A crap ton of money *and* a free vacation? Sure, I’ll lie on a beach chair and have you look at me like you love me and get paid for it.”

Finn chuckles, typing out a quick response to Chuck before opening the next message. “Oh, this one is great. It’s like they know you.”

“Artherion Travel Systems?” I squint, reading the email. “What’s it for?”

“Travel luggage. They must’ve found out that you never take enough shit, so they want to give us free bags and two hundred thousand dollars to do an advertising segment.”

“Hell, I can’t say no to that. I mean, I would’ve done it for the free luggage.”

He laughs. “What about ... oh, this one is just for me.”

“What is it?”

“Underwear by Stotle James. It’s a luxury house known for their minimalist, high-fashion styling offering ... fancy cotton and silk, it seems.”

“Hard no.”

He flinches. “What?”

“Hard no,” I say, shaking my head.

“And why not?” he asks smugly.

I sigh. “Because you’re supposed to be my fiancé. It’s hard enough to take you anywhere without women staring. If they see you in underwear, there’s a good chance you’ll get attacked by a mob, and I’m not a good fighter. I mean, I will defend what’s mine, but if this nose gets broken, I’m going to be pissed.”

My cheeks flush because I didn’t mean to say all of that. But it’s not a lie.

“I love this jealousy thing you have going on.” He smirks. “It’s super sexy.”

My leg slips across his as I curl toward him and open my mouth. “Candy, please.”

He feeds me two pieces.

“What’s next?” I ask, stretching my arm across him again.

“There’s one more, and it’s a car company.”

“Which one?”

“Soltom Motors.”

I exhale. “That’s a no.”

He laughs. “You haven’t even heard the terms.”

“Don’t care. My dad hated those cars, and he’d haunt me forever if he knew I was helping them sell their shit.” I pull back to see Finn’s face. “Dad hated few things in his life, but the top two were persimmons and Soltom Motors. I’m nothing if not loyal.”

Finn shrugs. “Can’t argue with that. It’s a no to a new car.” He settles against the pillows. “So that’s a yes to Siggy’s, Ruma, Landry Wines, and the luggage company. Right?”

I do a quick bit of mental math. *That's about 2.75 million, minus Chuck's fee and Finn's taxes. That leaves around 1.4 million, which gives me about 700,000 before I pay my taxes.*

Holy crap.

"Sounds good to me."

"I'll call Chuck tomorrow and relay the message."

He tosses his computer to the side and burrows down into the blankets, pulling me tighter against him. The bag of candy next to him crinkles with our movement, reminding me of the time we were in this very position and a bag of cookies got caught under us.

Oh, the mess that made.

We lie in the darkness, Finn stroking my arm with his fingertip, listening to the baby monitor as Sunny coughs and moves around. I thought that hearing her in the middle of the night would give me anxiety and that I'd stand over her and watch her breathe just to make sure she was fine. But it's not that way at all. Having her here is almost more calming than anything. Sure, she cries and tries to put everything in her mouth, but so do I, depending on the moment. I can forgive a girl for demanding to be heard.

As if she knows I'm thinking of her, her little voice comes across the speakers in a faint little cry.

Finn brushes my hair out of my face as we listen to see if she'll get louder or if she'll go back to sleep. But as the seconds tick on, she gets more irritated, and her little cries become more than Finn can handle.

"I think I've gotta go get her," he says.

I want to go get her too, but it's fun to tease him, anyway.

"You know, there's a whole theory about letting babies cry it out," I say, grinning.

He bristles, pulling away from me. "What kind of a monster would subscribe to that?"

I laugh. "I don't know. Not me. Go get her."

"Thank God," he says. "I was starting to question you as a person. Not sure we can go through with this marriage if we're not gonna agree on basic level shit."

He smiles at me as he slides on a pair of shorts from the floor. I climb out of bed and find one of Finn's T-shirts and put it on. By the time I'm back under the blankets, I can hear him on the monitor. He speaks softly to Sunny, and she instantly quiets.

That makes my heart swell.

He changes her diaper, singing her a nonsensical song that I've learned is his thing. Listening to him sing to her might be the sweetest thing I've ever experienced, and I have no idea what to do with that.

"Here's your auntie Poppy," Finn says softly, carrying Sunny into the room.

"Pop," she says, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands.

"Hey, baby," I say, holding my arms out for her. She falls into them and snuggles into my shoulder.

The feeling of her little body against mine, trusting me and loving me, makes a lump form in my throat. *What a precious little girl.*

"Mama?" she asks. "Want Mama."

"I know," I say, patting her back. "She'll be here soon."

"No."

I grin at Finn as he slips into bed beside us. "Mama will be here in a little while. Why don't you lie down with Auntie Pop and Uncle Finn? Let's go back to sleep, okay?"

"No," she says, popping the pacifier that Branch and Layla have argued about her having into her mouth and closing her little eyes.

Finn lies on his side, propping his head up with his hand. "Want me to take her to the living room so you can get some sleep?"

I watch as Sunny reaches for Finn's finger, wrapping her whole hand around it.

Something warm and achy spreads through my chest. For a second, I wish I could freeze us right here. Like this. Just the three of us, in the darkness, with no distractions or complications.

"You have to work tomorrow," I say. "Maybe I should take her to the couch."

Embarrassment colors my cheeks that I didn't think of this before he did. It was the first thing that came to his mind. He was thinking about Sunny and me before he thought of himself.

Finn presses a kiss to my forehead. "If you think for a second that I'd *willingly* let you out of this bed, you're out of your fucking mind."

"But you just said that you would."

"Yeah, if you needed me to get up for any reason, I would. But there's absolutely no way I need you to." A shy smile teases his lips. "Pop, this is what I've wanted for a long time—and I don't just mean you in my bed."

His words wrap around me, comforting and terrifying me at the same time. But it's a different version of fear than I'm used to. I'm not worried that he's misunderstanding what we are or that we're crossing a boundary we can't see. I'm scared because a part of me wants him to fight to keep me here, regardless of how unequipped I might be for a life like this—or the danger of him seeing me for who I really am.

"Speaking of tomorrow," I say, avoiding responding to his reaction. "I was thinking that we probably need to tell our parents. If my mom finds out online or in the news that I'm engaged, fake or not, I will never survive the level of dramatics that she will undoubtedly hurl my way."

He starts laughing. "Oh, is that where you get it?"

I laugh, too. "You could say that."

"Well, I can't tell my parents until they either call or they get back from their cruise. And this is not really something I want to tell my mother over the phone because all she'll hear is *engaged* and *Poppy*, and then she'll lose her damn mind. She'll have our engagement party planned in two minutes."

My stomach tightens. "Well, we can't have that."

"I mean, we could," he says, chuckling. "But, yeah, I see your point."

"I might mention it to my mom tomorrow when I talk to her," I say, "unless there's some reason you want to be present for the delivery."

"No," he says. "I mean, if you want me there, I absolutely will be there. But if this is something you think you should handle on your own, then handle it. Just let me know if you need anything from me."

I lift my chin to look in his eyes, and he's unsurprisingly looking at me. It's like he knows when I need the contact or when I need the reassurance—or when I just need a little look like this.

Sunny's breathing evens out, and her pacifier hangs out of her mouth.

I yawn. "I'm getting sleepy."

"Then go to sleep, babe."

My eyes are too heavy to stay open, so they flutter closed. "But I'm pretty sure you can't sleep with a baby in your bed. I'm no expert on the matter, but I've heard Layla say this before."

"That's probably right."

"Think about it," I say, grinning sleepily. "If I rolled over right now, what would happen? And I can imagine that in the next ten minutes, my body will want to find yours, and she'll be right in the middle."

"Does your brain ever slow down?"

“Nope,” I say, yawning again.

“I tell you what,” he says, getting comfortable. “Why don’t you go to sleep? And when I finally get tired, I’ll put her back in her bed.”

I open my eyes. “When I fall asleep, you’re not going to go to the couch, are you?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No,” I say honestly. “If I wake up and you’re not in here, I’m gonna be really sad.”

He smiles. “You do know that’s a possibility, right? Because I have to work in the morning, and I have no intention of waking you up if you two are still sleeping.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling myself start to drift away.

“Go to sleep,” he whispers.

“But I feel bad leaving you up while I sleep.”

He kisses my forehead. “It’s okay. I’m afraid that if I go to sleep, I’ll wake up and none of this will be true,” he says, his words barely above a whisper. “I kinda want to stay up and just enjoy it.”

His words fill me with a happiness that, if I were much more awake, I’d probably fight. I’d wrestle with his admission until I figured out how to make it untrue. But I’m too tired, too worn out, to appropriately defend my heart. I just let his words sink into me and fall fast asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

POPPY

I pick my way through the minefield of toys strewn about the living room. Sunny took them out of the basket that Finn brought from Layla's one at a time. And each one held her attention for a whole thirty seconds.

The empty paper towel roll? A solid five minutes.

Go figure.

I pluck her off the kitchen floor. "How do you keep getting in here, you little rascal?" I kiss her cheek. "I need you to stay in the living room where there are not as many dangerous things for you to find since you can open cabinet doors."

"Dog," she says, nodding seriously.

"I like dogs. They're super cute." I pop her on my hip and carry her back to her designated play area. "We had a Jack Russell terrier when I was your age until I was eight or nine. His name was Beau, and he used to lick me in the face." I flinch, not having thought about that in years. "You know, now that I think about it, there were probably so many germs on his tongue that I kind of want to puke."

She babbles, looking me right in the eye as if we're having a late-afternoon gossip session. I nod, giving her the occasional *really?* and wow that I give my mom when she's two minutes into a story about a lady at church that I don't know.

We make it to the rug in front of the couch, and I stop to take a moment to breathe.

The house is a disaster. There are toys, a pack of diapers that Sunny somehow got ahold of—*how?* I'll never know—and deposited them one by one around the room like Easter eggs. There's a pack of baby wipes under the table in the kitchen and actual wipes sprinkled through the living room like glitter. I spot two pacifiers that she's not supposed to have during the day, but this is essentially a vacation for her, and *who am I to deny my girl her version of a margarita?*

They're calming, perk up her mood, and they're a pretty color.

I'm not wrong.

My shoulders sag as I scan the area and wonder how the hell people do this on a daily basis. It doesn't seem like it would be this hard to get some work done while she entertains herself ... except she doesn't. Or she does, but it's with something that might kill her.

"Are you allowed to watch cartoons?" I ask her.

"No." She nods her head before expounding on her stance in baby babble.

"Good." I set her down and grab the remote, finding an app on the television that has cartoons. Finally, I recognize one and press play. "Listen, Auntie Pop needs to do a few things before Uncle Finn gets home."

"Finn Finn!"

"Yes, I'm excited, too. But before he comes back and sees that we've destroyed his house, I need to pick it up. And I need to make two phone calls before the end of the business day, and I'd love to answer a couple of emails." Not to mention that I haven't brushed my teeth or gotten dressed other than to put on a pair of shorts under Finn's shirt that I slept in.

Sunny points at the TV. *That's a good sign.*

"These little geniuses are going to take you on their rocket ship and teach you about music, okay?" I ask, standing up and putting the remote on the couch. "Let's just pretend this is preschool."

She looks at me with her beautiful blue eyes. "Okay."

"Okay?" I smile at her. "Did you just say okay?"

"No."

I laugh as my phone begins to ring. I pick it up and see Layla's name on the screen.

"Sunny, this is your ..." I'm not about to say Mom. "Your favorite person. You cannot scream or fall down, and please, *please* don't cry. Because, if you do that, she's going to come straight back home and leave

your ... other favorite person. And I know they don't let you have frozen waffles for breakfast or have day pacis, so think about that while I'm on the phone."

"No," she says, wiggling her fingers.

God help me.

I let out a breath and answer the phone. "Hey, Lay," I say, sounding much more pulled together than I feel.

"Hey," she says. Exhaustion is thick in her tone. "How are things going?"

"It's going *great*. Sunny is a happy little girl."

"Oh, good. That helps. Did she take her nap today?"

I laugh. "No. No, she did not. We had a little skirmish about that, and she won. Branch would be very proud of her ability to hold her ground."

Layla laughs, and it's music to my ears.

"We're now learning about classical music and the alphabet," I say, glancing at the spot that Sunny just occupied ... and now does not.

Shit! I race around the couch, pulse racing, and find her up one of the steps leading to the bedroom. "No," I mouth at her as I scoop her up.

"I'm impressed," Layla says.

"How's Branch?"

She sighs. "Good now that Leon is stable. I'm trying to talk him and his mom into going back to the hotel and getting some sleep. I told them that I'd stay here in case anything happens and I'd call so they can come back."

"How'd that go over?"

"Like a cement block in the ocean." She laughs. "A specialist will be here in the morning, and depending on what he says, I think things will settle down. I hope so, anyway. I miss my girlie."

"Have you gotten any rest?" I ask. "You sound really tired."

As if she were waiting on the opening, she yawns.

I plop Sunny back down and point at her. "Stay," I whisper.

"Not much," she says. "I caught a little in the waiting room. We checked into our hotel early this morning, and I lay down while Branch jumped in the shower. But he hasn't closed his eyes once. I don't know how he's still going, honestly."

I look over just in time to see Sunny with an ink pen in her little fist heading toward her eyeball. My heart drops, and I rush to take it from her.

Except I trip over the pack of wipes and catch myself on the back of the couch.

“Oof,” I mutter, springing back into action. I catch her seconds after the pen takes a turn and winds up in her mouth. “Stop it.”

She pouts, reaching for it as I yank it away.

“I need to go,” she says. “The Wi-Fi here is shit. Every time I try to FaceTime you, it won’t connect. When we hopefully get to the hotel tonight, I’ll try from there.”

“Sounds good,” I say, wondering if I have time to put a load of dishes in the sink before Finn gets home. I’m not sure how they all got dirty today, or where the day even went, but the thought of him coming home to this mess—both the house and me as a person—throws me into an anxiety spiral.

“I love you, Poppy. Thanks again. Tell my little girl her mommy and daddy love her so much. We will be home soon.”

“I will. Love you, too. Goodbye.”

“Bye,” she says.

Sunny rubs her eyes with her fists. Her little lips start to pucker.

“No.” I scoop her up before she can start wailing. “Hey. Where’s my happy girl?” I ask, bumping her up and down.

“Mama,” she says, her lip trembling faster. “Mama.”

“Oh, your mama wants you too. But she wants you to be a happy girl and let Aunt Poppy get a few things done today.”

My phone rings again. This time it’s my boss. But at the same time that it rings, Sunny starts to cry. All I can do is stand in the middle of the living room with my phone in my hand and Sunny on my hip and feel myself frazzling.

Panic creeps in, and I can hear a ticking clock in my head. Nothing got done today. I failed on almost every level. And I can’t even give myself much grace because I signed up for this. *It’s working from home with one baby. This should be manageable.*

Before I can talk myself down or plan how to salvage this, the front door opens.

Sweat dots my palms as I wait for him to round the corner and judge me.

“Hey, Pop,” he calls, his voice echoing through the house. “I’m back.”

He walks through the doorway and stops in his tracks. His brows lift as he takes in the chaos. I hold my breath the entire time.

Finally, after what feels like forever, a smile tips his lips. “Looks like you guys had a good time today.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, taking a shaky breath. “It’s been a day. She’s been up since eight o’clock, wouldn’t nap, but learned how to climb stairs, so that’s been fun.” I pause, waiting for her to finish babbling to Finn before I continue trying to explain myself. “She fell three times, and I was pretty sure she had a concussion for a while, but she seems fine now. Every time I turned my back to log on to my computer or take a call, she just disappeared or shoved something in her mouth. I haven’t even brushed my teeth today or had time to pick up or do the dishes or ... anything, really.”

I swallow as a voice echoes through my mind.

“For fuck’s sake, Poppy. You’re so fucking lazy. How in the hell have you not managed to do a load of laundry today? Why is there still a bowl in the fucking sink? So fucking disrespectful after all I do for you. Must be nice.”

He chuckles softly, coming to me and pulling me into his side. Sunny clings to me as Finn rubs my back and presses a kiss against the top of my head. “You know what?” he asks.

“What?” I blink, meaning the question in every way. *Why isn’t he upset? How can he see this mess—me—and not be frustrated?*

“The house is still standing, and Sunny is alive and happy, as far as I can tell,” he says. “I’m pretty sure everything’s gonna be okay.”

Oh, Finn. I pull back with tears clotting my eyes. “I feel like I failed today.”

“You feel like you failed?” He plucks Sunny from my arms and carries her to the kitchen, swiping her sippy cup off the floor in the process. “Explain to me how you failed.”

I sniffle, looking around. “I don’t know. Survey the damage. I feel like all I got done today was trying to keep her from hurting herself while I pretended in small doses of time that I was a functioning adult. I just don’t think I’m cut out for this. This is just ... I’m just really, really bad at this.”

“Let me ask you a question,” he says, washing the sippy cup and then filling it with half apple juice, half water. I don’t tell him that she’s already had two of those today. “Who decided that you were supposed to be able to do all the things that were asked of you today and to do them well? Whoever said one person should be able to manage a toddler, keep a house

immaculate, be a badass businesswoman, and have clean teeth in the process?”

He looks over his shoulder at me with a lifted brow as I snuffle again.

“Whoever they were, they were dumb,” he says, handing the sippy cup to Sunny and facing me. “Whoever made you think that those expectations were realistic lied to you, babe.”

He comes over, sitting on the couch and taking my hand. Gently, he guides me down beside him.

“My mom was a stay-at-home mom for Lay and me, and Dad worked. And I remember our house was never perfect. I mean, it was clean, but I wouldn’t eat off the floor.” He chuckles as Sunny strips him of his hat. “Yeah, I’m talking about your nan.”

“Nan,” Sunny says.

He settles her on his lap. “Mom was the best,” he says, returning to his story. “All of our friends wanted to be at our house. She’d make cookies at midnight, and she’d throw us passes as we ran routes. We went to the lake and played cards, and she sat with us while we did our homework.” He puts his arm around me as I lean my head against him. “Dad would come in after work and ask us what we did that day. Who did we see? What did we eat? He wanted all the details. Then he’d look at Mom and tell us to go wash our faces because we were going out to dinner.”

I smile as his memory touches my heart. It reminds me of my parents and how my father could read my mother like a book. She’s said many times that it’s one of the things she misses most about him—not having to explain things to someone because they know you so well.

Once upon a time, I believed in that. I wanted that for myself. Then Jordan happened, and my dream went up in smoke because my reality didn’t reflect it at all. I sat alone in the kitchen late at night so many times and wondered if I was the problem or if this is just what happened when you were newlyweds. *Would it get better as the pressure eased and you fell into this rhythm, managed the bills, and figured out how to live together?*

That didn’t happen. And every day, every month that went by, my dream fizzled out a little more. Jordan saw me as less—as a wife, as his lover, as a human being. I became this entity whose purpose was to make his life easier by following whatever orders and expectations he thrust upon me. My spirit died a little more with every breath.

Until one day in October when my father had enough and reminded me who I was ... and who I was not.

The burn in my chest grows hotter and more uncomfortable as I acknowledge the life that I shed and the one that I grew after. And as I look into Finn's beautiful green eyes and take in the strength and tenderness—a dazzling mix that tugs at emotions I thought I'd locked away—I wonder if it might be safe for me to dream again.

"I always just thought Dad must not like Mom's cooking or something," he says, bouncing Sunny on his knee. "But then when I was older, he explained to me in no uncertain terms that Mom's job was to teach us and keep us healthy and happy. His job was to make that possible, and they could split the rest." He squeezes my waist. "That's what you did today. Plus, you worked as much as you could."

My body melts against him as relief rushes through me.

"I don't know why you thought that picking up Sunny's toys or doing the dishes was your job," he says, smiling at me.

"Because I was here."

"And now, I'm here. You pass the ball to me, and I run with it as far as I can go. Then we reset and try again."

A tear that's been trapped for years streams down my cheek.

"This little rugrat and I," he says, tickling Sunny's stomach, "are going to go to the store to get some steaks. Then we're coming home, picking up the house, and making dinner. And, while we're gone, you're going to go upstairs and send emails or make calls or take a bath or a nap—I don't care. But you've cared for her all day. Now you're going to care for yourself, my girl."

My chest aches so much that I press a hand against it.

This man is too much. Too kind. Too ... everything.

How would my life have been different if I had met Finn instead of Jordan? If I was supported like this instead of belittled and shamed? If I always felt this strong and not broken?

Memories I've spent years avoiding come back in soft waves. But instead of slicing me open like they used to, they feel strangely distant. Like there's a buffer—a tall, handsome, kind buffer—between them and me.

For a split second, I consider saying this aloud. Telling Finn that I was married and that Jordan fucked me all the way up, and that Jordan's the reason I'm so reluctant to consider getting serious with him. But I don't.

Because admitting this to him would mean telling him the details—the embarrassing, humiliating, nasty details that he doesn't need to know.

That I don't want him to know.

I just want him to know me as this Poppy Quinn ... his girl.

Finn pulls me closer, dropping a kiss to my lips, then he stands. "Okay, this little thing and I are going. Do not pick up a damn thing while we're gone. Got it?"

I smile, knowing there's no use in arguing. Somehow, he'll win. I'll probably even let him.

"You know she hasn't napped today, right?" I ask, standing with him and resting my head on his chest. "I got a little taste of a sleepy toddler today, and an angry linebacker has nothing on her."

He chuckles. "You do listen. Nice linebacker reference."

"Well, you know ..." I laugh. "I can keep her here."

He taps my nose, ignoring that altogether. "Steak, potatoes, and salad good with you?"

"It's perfect."

"I'll only let her get a quick nap in if she does fall asleep," he says with a wicked grin. "Because she's sleeping tonight so I can enjoy my dessert."

"Amen."

He laughs, carrying Sunny to the garage. In some respects, I don't understand Finn Miller ... but then I realize that I do.

I'm me because of my experiences. I've picked up pieces of the things I've done and the people I've met. Mostly, I've learned that family is everything, loyalty is required, and that if you don't keep a neat line around your heart, someone will erase it, plant a bomb, and blow it up.

Finn is no different. Only his life has taught him that you love unconditionally, you keep your word, and when the game is on the line, you carry the ball across the finish line, even if you have to carry a whole team on your back to get there.

This is Finn. The real Finn. The Finn I've always known, who has never blinked when things get messy or when I make them difficult ... the man who understands both the good and the bad that come with me.

As I watch him walk out the door with our little goddaughter babbling in his ear, I have to consider that he might be carrying a piece of my heart with him. And decide whether I ever want it back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FINN

“Everything looks good,” Hannah says, taking a step back from me. “Your range of motion is pretty solid, and your shoulder looks great. I don’t see anything that should really give you a lot of trouble at camp.”

I hop off the table. “That’s exactly what I like to hear, Hannah.”

“I bet. But I am serious. Make sure you stay on top of things. Make sure you’re stretching. You’re drinking a lot of water. You’re getting sleep.” She lifts a brow. “You’re not twenty-five anymore, Miller.”

I gasp like I’m offended. “You know, I liked you better when you just told me that everything looked good.”

She shakes her head, clearly not entertained by me. But then again, if I had to deal with an entire team of football players, I probably wouldn’t be that entertained either.

“I’m paid to tell you the truth,” she says. “Now get out of here. I have somebody else coming in behind you.”

“Thanks, Hannah,” I say. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Can’t wait,” she says, rolling her eyes but smiling, nonetheless.

I hit the hallway, heading toward the cafeteria. It’s arguably the best part of the Legends program. The food is phenomenal and the selection is pretty wild. We’re known for having the best dietary staff in the entire league.

I take out my phone as I walk, just in time to see a text from Poppy. I fight the smile tugging at my lips. Just seeing her name on the screen, knowing she’s in my house—probably making a mess of it—brings me more happiness than it should.

She relied on me even though she had tears in her eyes when I walked through the door the other night. There was no sarcastic or flippant response to my offer of support, just an expression of thankfulness. *Of trust*. It finally feels like she's starting to lower her shields.

Despite the chaos, she almost seems more relaxed, especially with my affection.

She really is giving us a chance.

Against my better judgment, I have hope. *A lot of it*.

Poppy: Do you think eating half of a banana (maybe), a mouthful of applesauce, and a little bit of sausage (like two bites) is enough to feed a fourteen-month-old when it's three in the afternoon?

Poppy: And the beginnings of a remote control if I don't get over there soon.

I laugh, imagining the scene.

Me: I'm pretty sure she'll eat if she's hungry. But I don't know where the remote fits into the food pyramid.

Poppy: Is that still a thing? Didn't they turn it upside down or something?

Me: No clue. There are people here who are paid to know that. I just eat what they put in front of me.

Poppy: 😏 Oh, the life you live.

You could live it, too. Just say the word.

Me: Is everything else going okay?

Poppy: I'm afraid to say yes because that feels like inviting trouble. So ... maybe?

Me: Well, it's Friday. Why don't we celebrate surviving the week with a baby?

Poppy: 😈 I like the way you think.

Me: It's one of my best qualities. 🤪

My phone rings, and I type out a quick text to Poppy.

Me: Mom is calling. See you in an hour or so.

Poppy: xo

I exit the text app and answer the call. “You didn’t forget me!”

“I don’t have time for your jokes today, young man,” she says. “I feel like a terrible mother. Layla’s messages just came through when we docked in Naples. And I’ve tried to call her back, but she’s not answering. What’s going on?”

“First of all, breathe,” I say, chuckling.

“*Finn.*”

I motion for the guys in the cafeteria to give me a moment, then move around the corner of the hallway for a bit of privacy. “Everything’s okay. I just talked to Layla. Leon is out of ICU, and she’s optimistic that they can come home in a day or two.”

“How is Branch holding up? How is Gina? I wish I could hug her right now. She must be so scared.”

“He’s okay. He took the first flight he could to get home to his mom.”

“Good. Branch is such a good boy.” She sighs. “I feel absolutely horrible that we’re not there. I can’t imagine Sunny being stuck in the hospital and not being able to toddle around. I’m sure it’s good for Gina to see her, but at least I could’ve gone down there with them and given them a break.”

I smirk. “You’re the one who wanted to go on a cruise around the Mediterranean instead of being here for your kids.”

“Finnegan Miller. Enough.”

I laugh. “I’m kidding. Relax. We’re adults. You’re allowed to have a life.” She’s so wound up that I know she needs a distraction—a little bright light in her day. “Besides, Sunny isn’t with them.”

“She’s not? Where is she?”

My stomach tightens as I brace myself for the fallout of this news. “Poppy and I kept her.”

There’s a pause. A long one. “You and Poppy kept her?” she asks, her tone a little too high. “What does that mean, exactly?”

The concern and curiosity, mixed with amusement, are enough to make me smile.

Mom loves Poppy. Dad, too. They've spent time with her on multiple occasions over the past couple of years, including Christmas when her flight to Denver got canceled on Christmas Eve this past winter. They get along great, having known each other before Poppy and I became a non-thing. And Mom has made no bones about her wish that Poppy and I go from a non-thing to a big, real thing.

"It means that we both had things to do this week," I say. "We decided to tag team. And it was better for Sunny to stay in one location than switching back and forth, so we just decided to watch her at my house."

"Oh. And how is that going?"

"It's working very well," I say, teasing her.

"Is there anything else that I should know?"

I laugh. *Mother, you are not ready for this little bomb to drop.*

"Do you already know anything else?" I ask, just making sure she's oblivious to our fake engagement scenario.

"No, and now I'm getting worried. What's going on, Finn?"

"Well, since you're on a cruise ship completely uninvested in your children's lives, you've missed the headlines."

"That say what?"

"That your son is engaged."

She gasps loud enough for it to be heard on every level of the cruise ship and half of the Legends facility. "Finn? *Oh my God.*"

"You didn't let me finish."

"What is there to finish? You and Poppy ... I've been praying for this, Finn. I've been hoping and praying. I'm so happy for you—"

"Mom."

She takes a breath. "What?"

"You didn't let me finish," I repeat. "It's not real. It's a fake engagement."

"You better be kidding me."

I wish.

I pace down the hallway as a burst of excitement trickles through my veins. This isn't real, but it gives me a small taste of what it might be like if it was. And the idea of having Poppy as my fiancée, or even as Mrs. Finn Miller, fills me with pride. She's so smart, so funny, and so fucking beautiful that if I ever get lucky enough to make this a forever thing, I swear that I'll be the best husband to her that I can possibly be.

“How did this happen?” Mom asks.

“It was Exposé’s handiwork. They printed the headline after an interview where they took something out of context. I was going to deny it, but a lot of things happened, and it was easier, and more lucrative, for us to pretend we’re engaged. She wants to start a foundation and needs the cash, and I’m considering retirement, as you know. It just made sense.”

Mom hums. “That’s actually a reasonable response, I think. Might as well get something out of their exploitation.”

If anyone hates the media, specifically Exposé, more than my sister and me, it’s Mom. Their attack on Layla devastated her. The Legends requirement that I work with them has eaten her alive. It’s the only thing in her life that truly makes her furious, so it’s no surprise that she sees it this way.

“I’m glad you agree,” I say.

“You know,” she says coyly. “You could use this as an opportunity ...”

I roll my eyes at my mother’s arbitrary way of not talking about sex. “You know, Mom, that’s a fantastic idea. I never thought of that.”

“Oh, stop it,” she says, chastising me. “You know what I mean. You could use this to your advantage.”

I switch the phone between my hands. “You don’t think I already thought of that?”

“I would hope so,” she says, as if she’s pleasantly surprised.

“Let me be real about this. I’m trying to work some magic here, and I’ll keep you informed if there’s any big updates. In the meantime, I am at work, and I do need to get this wrapped up so I can get home to my fake fiancée and my niece.”

“Yes. You do,” Mom says. “One more thing. Do I need to come home now? Dad’s checking into flights. We can come back and help with Sunny or whatever you guys need from us.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” I say. “I think they’re coming back this weekend. But if anything changes, we’ll try to get ahold of you.”

“Good. I’m gonna try to call your sister again. If I don’t get through, please, please tell her that I am heartbroken for Branch, that we are praying for him, that if she needs anything, just leave me a message, and I’ll be on the next flight home.”

“I will. And, Mom, she’s not mad. Layla knows that you’re enjoying yourself, and she knows you’d be here if she needed you. Relax and enjoy

the rest of your trip.”

“Okay. I love you, and you tell my future daughter-in-law that we love her too and thank her for taking such good care of our sweet granddaughter.”

“Yeah, let’s scare the shit out of her before I get this locked down,” I say, laughing. “I love you. Go have fun. Tell Dad I love him.”

“I will. I love you, Finn.”

“Love you, Mom. Bye.”

I end the call.

The cafeteria is bustling with people. Players have lunch between appointments and staff members swing by for a bite to eat before returning to their desks. It’s a slow version of what next week will be like when training camp starts. A part of me is so ready ... and a part of me is not.

“There you are, Miller,” Frutter says as I approach his table with a container of chicken and rice. “I saw you with Hannah. How’d it go?”

I set my things on the edge of the table, but don’t sit. “She said the shoulder looks good and the cartilage in my knee is wearing down, but not enough to keep me off the field.”

“Glad to hear it,” he says.

“What about you guys?” I ask, looking around the table at him, Chauncey, and Wes, the rookie wide receiver that they’re hoping can somewhat replace Branch.

“I fucked up my knee a bit at the end of last college season, but Hannah said it was stronger than she expected,” Wes says. “I’ve been rehabbing it all offseason, so I am cautiously optimistic.”

“You better be more than that,” Frutter says. “I need you catching the fucking ball. Do you understand?”

Wes nods, shoving his sandwich in his mouth like he’s not quite sure yet how to navigate this level of play or instructions from a veteran like Frutter.

“All I know is I’m fucking ready for this to start,” Chauncey says. “I have never been more ready in my damn life.”

“Why? What’s going on?” I ask.

He scoffs. “Literally, my house makes me fucking crazy. It is a madhouse, to say the least. Kids in and out of the door all day long. My wife with a list of fucking shit she wants me to get done before the season starts. There’s never anything decent to eat. You can’t relax. I’m ready to get here and avoid that mess.”

I start to respond but then stop. It would be weird if I said something, considering I don't technically have any of those things in my life. When the guys asked me about being engaged during our workout the other day, I just played it off. They know Poppy. They weren't really surprised and didn't really poke around about it.

What I want to say is that I've had my first taste of those things. Messy houses, loud kids, being expected to take the trash out and move the car seat and get up with the baby at night. And it's been the best fucking week of my life.

Football has always been a game that I love, something I could never imagine my life without. But over the past few days, I've started to wonder if it isn't the love of my life anymore.

That space could be taken up by Miss Poppy Quinn.

The girl who's been in my bed every night, in my kitchen every morning, and in my living room every evening. I can't get her out of my mind, and I don't want her out of my house. I'm just not quite sure how to make any of that happen.

Branch's decision to retire makes a lot more sense now. He worships the ground Layla walks on, and I've never seen him happier than when he's holding Sunny. He'd do anything for either of them.

I've watched him navigate this season of his life with respect and curiosity. I've wondered if he'd regret his decision to walk away from the game. It was his whole life—his identity—for so long.

But he won't. I get it now.

Branch is building something at home that makes football a thing of the past. It can't compete with early mornings with his daughter and late nights with his wife. He didn't lose a team. He built his own.

"Hey, guys. I gotta go," I say, picking up my things. "I'll see you on Monday."

"Later," they all say in various forms as I walk away with my thoughts in one place—and it's not on the football field.

It's that I want to build my own team, too. With Poppy.

The ball is in my hands. I just can't fumble it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

POPPY

I creep out of Sunny's room, gently shutting the door behind me. Despite her two naps today, she fell asleep pretty easily tonight. She had dinner, curled up in Finn's arms while I cleaned up the kitchen, and passed out.

Been there, done that, kiddo.

Our room's quiet, the bed unmade from this morning's hurried tryst before Finn had to leave for meetings. I haven't figured out how to be a work-from-home auntie yet and do all the domestic things, perform my employee obligations, and keep the kid alive. Thankfully, Finn seems fine, maybe even amused, that the domestic things go undone.

I take a quick shower and throw on one of Finn's T-shirts, mulling over how to tell Mom that we're fake engaged. I've put it off all week. But now that Finn has told his parents, it only seems right that I tell mine.

Besides, I don't want her finding out some other way.

I grab my phone off the nightstand and place the call before I chicken out.

"Hey, baby girl," Mom says. "I was just thinking of you."

"You were?"

"Yes. I was just in the attic looking for my extra crock pot for the church potluck and found a box full of those little outfits you made me make for your baby dolls. Do you remember those?"

I smile. "I do."

“You drew little outfits on paper and then picked out scraps of fabric from my bin. You were so specific with your instructions. And you *loved* the gold rickrack.”

“It seemed so fancy.”

“It was so fancy back then—for baby dolls, especially.” She laughs. “You were always independent and determined to get what you wanted. Dad used to call you Miss Ambitious.”

My heart swells at the memory—one I’d forgotten.

“What’s going on?” Mom asks. “You never call me this late.”

“It’s not late. It’s nine thirty.”

“You still don’t call me at nine thirty.”

Fair. I probably don’t.

The pasta we had for dinner sloshes in my stomach. It’s not something I expect her to be upset over, per se. I just worry that we’ll both be reminded of the last time I called with engagement news ... and how that ended.

I fear she’ll think I’m making another bad decision, and I don’t want to hear that in her voice.

Might as well get it over with.

“You’re right. I do have something to tell you,” I say.

“So tell me.”

I take a deep breath. “Do you know my friend Finn that I’ve told you about?”

“The football player who you seem to spend a lot of time with but refuse to let me meet?”

I roll my eyes, grinning. “Yes, that one.”

“What about him?”

“Well, earlier this week, an article was written that he’s engaged. It’s not true. But as soon as it was released, he started getting a ton of endorsement deals. Because I’ve been talking about starting a foundation like I talked to you about when I was visiting, Finn offered me half the money if I’d play along.”

“As his fiancée?”

“Yeah. As his fiancée.”

Mom is quiet, and my pulse starts to race.

“It’s just until football season is over,” I say, feeling the need to fill the silence. “And it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a situation where we spend

time together and get paid for it. It's really no big deal at all. I don't want you to worry."

She sighs, the sound slipping through the phone. It does nothing for my rising anxiety.

"I never know what you're going to say when you call," she says. "And I always think that you can't surprise me at this point after all of your shenanigans. But I have to say, you've proven me to be a liar because I'm shocked."

Fuck. "Good shocked or bad shocked?"

"I'm not sure. How do you feel about this?"

I flinch. *How do I feel about it?* That's not what I was expecting.

"This is a good thing, Mom. Really. Finn is ... he's great."

"Why?"

She asks the question pointedly with all the confidence in the world because she knows that she's finally gotten me in a corner. There's nowhere for me to run.

I move slowly around the room, letting my mind drift to Finn. "Layla's father-in-law had a heart attack," I say.

"Oh no. Is he okay?"

"I think he'll be fine. But she and Branch went to Tennessee and left Sunny with Finn and me." I pause to take a breath. "Today, I had to work, and Finn had meetings, too, because training camp starts Monday. I stayed home with Sunny and did the whole stay-at-home-aunt thing, and *holy shit, Mother*. This is not for me."

She laughs. "I would've paid big money to see that."

"It went about as well as whatever you're imagining right now. And Finn got home, like he has all week, and looked around at the disaster of his house because Sunny is hell on wheels. And he just smiled, put us in the car, and took us for ice cream." My chest aches as I recall the look in his eyes—the sparkle and kindness, free of judgment or irritation. "He gets up with Sunny at night if I'm asleep and he hears her first. He makes dinner if I'm overwhelmed. I'm included in every single thing that has to do with the endorsements—no questions asked. He's good to everyone in his life, not just me." I swallow around a lump in my throat. "I think you'd like him."

There's a silence for a moment, but Mom fills it this time. "I think I would, too."

I bristle, not expecting that reaction, and wonder if she's just being nice about it because it's too late to talk sense to me.

"I know you're probably worried," I say hurriedly. "The last time I was in this position, Dad had to come pick me up and almost got put in jail. But I promise you, this isn't like that. Finn isn't like Jordan at all, and you don't have to worry about me."

"Do you know what, Poppy?" Her voice is bright. "I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No. I would've been had you texted this to me or sent an email. And thank God I didn't hear it from someone else because I would've panicked and thought someone kidnapped you."

I grin, still uncertain where this is going.

"Jordan stole a lot from you," she says. "But over time, you've found those pieces and put yourself back together. You've blossomed in every way except this one. And I've been worrying that you'd never find that part of yourself again."

My bottom lip quivers, so I bite down to keep it from moving.

"Hearing you talk about Finn changes everything," she says. "You sound happy. Confident. You don't sound like you're carrying two spears and an axe around with you anymore." She pauses. "I feel like I just got the last piece of my baby girl back."

I look at the ceiling, refusing to blink so I don't cry. *Damn her.*

"Thank you for telling me," she says. "And I know you're over there trying to find a tough girl line to hit me with, so you don't feel like a girl with emotions. But just know that, fake or not, I'm happy for you."

I laugh. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome. By the way, have you been taking your vitamins? Because I really think I'm feeling better already. I went on a walk tonight and just felt sprightly."

"Don't ruin this moment," I say, laughing.

"Fine." She laughs, too. "I love you. Call me later."

"Love you, too."

The call ends, and I'm certain she's calling Aunt Carmen to tell her the news. *Gossips, both of them.*

I turn to put my phone on the nightstand when my gaze is captured by a pair of gorgeous green eyes. Finn stands, filling the doorway, watching me with a softness that makes my knees go weak.

“Hey,” I say.

“I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?”

“No.” I toss my phone on the bed. “I was just telling my mom that I’m officially your fake fiancée.”

“How’d that go?”

I blow out a breath, the corners of my lips curling upward. “Good. Really good, actually.”

My cheeks flush, and I look at my toes, wishing I was better at navigating this kind of thing. But the lines around us are too faint, too nondescript, and I don’t know what that means. Or what’s safe. What’s ... real.

Or what I want to be real.

My gaze lifts, and Finn catches it. “Come here.”

I move across the room as he heads to me, meeting him at the foot of the bed.

“Did you know that this has become my favorite part of the day?” he asks, brushing a piece of hair from my cheek.

I grab the hem of his shirt and lift it over his head. “Why would that be?”

He smiles as my hands roam freely over every ridge and valley of his body.

“Because I come upstairs and instead of this room being empty, you’re here. You’re in my shirt, fresh out of the shower, ready to crawl into bed with me and turn on one of your stupid documentaries.”

“I didn’t know you hate my documentaries,” I say, running my fingers over his shoulders.

“It’s the last thing in the world I want to watch.”

“Why haven’t you objected?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer until I look up at him. “Because I watch you instead. And that’s my favorite show.”

I can’t hide the smile flirting on my lips. I would’ve called bullshit on that line before. *But now?* I like it. And I kind of think he might mean it.

“Wanna know something?” I ask, staring up at him.

“Sure.”

“This is becoming my favorite part of the day, too.”

“Why is that?” he asks, grinning.

I open my mouth to make a joke about him taking his clothes off but stop myself. Because while I do love a naked Finn, that's not why I've been looking forward to this time of day.

And that realization knocks me sideways.

I could make a joke. I could turn this sexual and keep things light and easy between us. That's familiar, and I could do that blindfolded.

But ... I don't want to.

Maybe for once I want to tell him how I feel.

"Because you come in the room and close the door. And it's just you and me," I say.

There's more to it, but I think this is enough to make my point.

Finn's grin softens, and his tender expression makes the bridge of my nose burn. It's as if he's waited a long time to hear me say this—and maybe he has.

He slides a hand into his pocket and pulls out a blue box with Siggy's written in delicate white script. My eyes widen as they settle on the iconic jewelry box that looks so small in Finn's hand.

"This came today," he says softly. "I haven't opened it."

I take a step toward the bed until the backs of my knees hit the edge. My heart thumps a mile a minute, my pulse racing just as fast. I sit, drawing in a breath, and look up at him.

He sits beside me. "You're still here. That's good."

I grab his bicep and squeeze it, my attention still on the box.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yes."

He opens it slowly, and the ring I chose is right there. The diamonds catch the light and twinkle as Finn lifts it from its place on a pillow of blue. I can barely feel my body as he takes my finger and slides the beautiful piece onto my left hand's ring finger.

My heart is in my throat as I look at it, taking it in—absorbing the fact that Finn just put an engagement ring on my finger.

Holy shit.

Finn just put an engagement ring on my finger.

"What do you think?" he asks.

I wrap my fingers around his before he can pull them away. "It's ..." I lift my gaze to him. "Is there a word for this? I'm searching and coming up blank."

He grins. "I hope that means you like it."

"Like it?" I raise my brows, giggling. "It's stunning. And I hate that word. It's so ... trite. But I can't think of another one that comes close."

"Good. I was afraid you'd have wished you got the other one."

I rest my head against his shoulder. "Maybe if I were a princess. But, no, this one feels most ... like me."

He kisses the top of my head, his thumb rubbing my palm, while I admire the rock that he just gave me.

This engagement isn't even real, yet somehow, it's more special than my first one. I hate comparing Finn to Jordan. It isn't fair to Finn, and there's really no comparison anyway. But I can't help remembering what it felt like to wear Jordan's ring. I don't know how he looked at me when he put it on my finger. I do know, however, that I didn't feel like this.

I wait for the discomfort to settle in—the panic. The feeling of being suffocated by a piece of gold and my freedom being whittled away. But Finn sits beside me, gently stroking my palm, his breathing steady. He doesn't ask me anything or press me for a reaction. He just gives me room to feel whatever I need to feel.

And the panic never comes.

Almost from the moment Jordan placed a ring on my finger, I wanted it off. I thought it was itchy or that I was allergic to the metal. In reality, I think I just knew it shouldn't be there. But the idea of removing this ring delivers the panic I was waiting on moments ago and I realize something.

I'm not afraid of wearing Finn's ring.

I'm afraid of taking it off.

A slow shiver dances its way down my spine.

"You didn't ask me to marry you," I say, letting go of his hand.

He chuckles. "I didn't want to push my luck."

I glance up at him, taking in his simple smile and honest eyes, and I reach for him. Not to avoid my feelings, but because of them.

To get closer to them.

To get closer to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

POPPY

“Kiss me,” I say softly, lifting my lips to his.

He meets me in the middle, cupping my face as I grip his shoulders.

I’ve kissed Finn Miller countless times over the years. We’ve kissed in bedrooms, kitchens, and cars. At barbecues, by the lake, and in the rain at a Beau McCrae concert. I’ve kissed him because I was happy, turned on, and to shut him up when he was being annoying.

But I’ve never kissed him quite like this.

His lips brush against mine once, then twice. A shiver races through me, and suddenly it’s not enough.

I want more of his affection, and the thought makes it hard to breathe. The need that would usually feel gross feels natural. Perfect, even.

When he pulls back just enough to look at me, his eyes are shining.

“What?” I ask, blushing.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

He grins. “This is just going a lot smoother than I expected. That’s all.”

I slide my hand along his jaw, stubble scratching beneath my fingers. My chest aches as I consider how he felt walking up the stairs with the ring in his pocket. I hate that I probably made him feel nervous about it.

“You’re pretty great, Miller.”

“Well, you’re pretty, and you’re great.”

I laugh, climbing onto his lap. One knee on either side of his thighs, I brace myself against his chest. My ring catches my attention, and I lift my

hand, wiggling my fingers and watching it catch the light.

“Does it fit okay?” Finn asks.

“Like a charm.” A smile slips across my face. “It feels so ...” I’m not sure what to say or how to verbalize the feeling in my body. The warmth, the peace, *the happiness*.

“So what?” he asks, lacing his hands together at the small of my back.

I shrug, setting my hand back on his chest. “It just feels different from what I imagined, that’s all.”

“Good or bad different?”

“Definitely not this good.” I smile as I kiss him. “It’s ... I’m very happy right now.”

He pulls me to his chest, pressing a kiss against my shoulder. Even if he used words to explain how he feels, it wouldn’t be as clear as this. That’s not surprising, though. Our bodies have never had a problem communicating.

Heat unfurls inside me as I lean closer to him, wanting more of everything. Of his touch, his kisses, his body. But mostly, I want more of the way he makes me feel when I’m all wrapped up in his arms.

I want him to know that I want more than an orgasm.

I want him to know what he means to me.

“Have I ever told you that you make me happy?” I ask.

He stills.

“You’re probably expecting a joke now,” I say, listening to his heartbeat quicken. “Probably something insinuating that I have a way that you could multiply my happiness.”

He chuckles but doesn’t say anything. I grin against him.

“Which is true,” I say, just so he doesn’t get it twisted. Serious or not, I always want his cock. “But besides sex, you do make me happy, Finn. And I’m not sure I’ve ever told you that.”

He sighs, holding me tighter. “That’s really good to hear.”

“I imagined you coming upstairs tonight with this ring and worrying about how I might react, and I hate that. You go out of your way to make sure that I know how you feel all the time. It’s only fair that I do the same.”

“I love hearing that. More than you know.” He pulls back, pushing my hair away from my face. “But you don’t owe me anything just because there’s a ring on your finger, Pop. You know that, right?”

I nod, nibbling my bottom lip. *How does he do that? How does he take the things I fear the most and make them almost obsolete?* I've given him many things he could weaponize against me, and he never has. Not once. If anything, he's picked them apart and used them to make me stronger.

He's also challenged my internal narration without even knowing it.

He swallows, searching my eyes. "I want you to share things with me because you want to, not because you think it's fair."

"I know. I want to. That's why I'm telling you."

I rise on my knees, pulling his shirt over my head, and bring my mouth to his. His fingers feather up and down my back, over the curve of my hip and ass. Usually, I'd focus on how those touches turn me on. I'd keep them tucked safely inside our benefits package.

But tonight? I let myself feel everything with this man.

"Wow, Pop," he says, pulling back and breaking our kiss. His grin is ridiculous.

"What?"

He chuckles, but not from laughter. From disbelief. "Nothing."

"You don't say *Wow, Pop* for funsies," I say, lifting a brow.

"I was just wondering how many times you can blow my mind."

"I've kissed you a thousand times before. What's mind-blowing about that?"

He brushes our lips together once more, nipping my bottom lip as he leans back. "Because you almost seem like you like me tonight."

"Shut up," I say, laughing.

He laughs, too. "You know what I mean."

"I fear I don't." Although I absolutely do. "But should I take it as a hint that you're still wearing pants after I've been completely naked now for five full minutes?"

"If you think I'm going to ask you to get off my lap or move your tits out of my face for any reason, you're crazy." He grins devilishly. "But if you'd like to get up, I'm more than happy to get naked for you, my lady."

I crawl off him, the air way too cold without the shirt, and make my way to the headboard. "The things I want to do to you disqualify me from being a lady."

"Always the sweet talker."

I burrow myself beneath the blankets. He follows me close behind, sans pants, and joins me under the covers.

“You’d save a fortune if you didn’t keep it the temperature of a freezer in here,” I say, curling up to his side and shivering.

“It was all a ploy to get you to cuddle with me.”

I wrap my arm around his chest, pressing up. “Then I shouldn’t reward this behavior.”

“It’s a little late for that now.”

His arms tighten around me, and I consider squirming away. But the thought of not being in his arms makes it clear that I don’t really have a point to prove. I do, however, climb over his body and curl up to his other side, throwing my arm over his chest.

“Weird, but okay,” he says, repositioning the blankets over us.

I hold my hand up. “I wanted to be able to see the ring.”

He chuckles, kissing my forehead. “I’ll admit that I felt like a loser when I didn’t know which ring you’d like.”

“Why should you have known that?”

“I don’t know. It just felt like something I should know.”

“It’s not like I wear a lot of jewelry,” I say. “Especially rings. And it’s not like we were having engagement conversations like a lot of couples do before the big day so these choices can be informed decisions.”

He traces designs against my skin. “Why don’t you wear jewelry? Do you just not like it?”

“Mom had a thing growing up about wearing necklaces to bed. She was afraid I’d choke in my sleep.” I smile against him. “I don’t know how I wouldn’t know that I was choking, or why I couldn’t get help if I woke up strangled, but whatever.”

Finn chuckles.

“I just never got in the habit of necklaces. And rings ...”

I once again consider telling him about my first wedding ring and all that it wound up representing to me. *But ... why? Does he really need to know something so caustic about my past?*

I consider it. Then again, I’d probably be a bit salty if Finn kept something so life-altering from me, particularly when unpacking my first marriage would explain so much about me.

Still, this night is special, and I don’t want that part of my past to touch it in any way. Finn would understand that.

I will tell him.

Just not tonight.

“Rings sometimes bother me,” I say. “They don’t always feel good on my finger.”

“But this one feels okay?”

Oh, Finn. You have no idea.

I slide a leg over him and then straddle his body. My heart beats steadily as I look down at his handsome face.

“This ring ...” I say, sinking down onto his cock. I pause, moaning as my pussy stretches around his girth.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “I wasn’t expecting that.” He flexes his hips, but I’m already filled with him. “You’re so tight. So fucking wet.”

I tip my chin up, my still-damp hair caressing my back. Finn’s hands find my chest, and I moan again as I begin to move. Each circle of my hips is a delicious torture. This is the moment I’d typically go straight for the kill, knowing if I come quickly, he’ll just make me do it again.

But tonight, I don’t want to do that. I want him to know that it’s not just about the orgasm. It’s about ... us.

“This ring what, babe?” he asks, gripping my thighs.

My chest tightens as I drop my gaze to his and smile. “There has never been a ring that’s felt more like mine than this one.”

“That makes me truly happy.”

“Good.” I grind harder against him in the way I know he loves. “Because making you happy is quickly becoming my favorite hobby.”

“Well, if I can be of help to get this to the number one spot, let me know,” he says, smirking.

I moan as he captures a nipple in his mouth, flicking his tongue against it. “This helps.”

He laughs, moving to the other breast.

I ride him harder, mentally blaming it on him for messing with my chest. He knows it’s my weakness—the way to turn me on in an instant.

“I was trying to be patient,” I say, groaning as I grind harder against him. “But I’m tired of pretending to be something I’m not.”

He laughs, falling back to the pillows and thrusting himself deeper inside me. “I appreciate the attempt. It’s always good to see what you’re capable of every now and then.”

“For the record, I was going to be super sweet tonight and try to get in touch with my emotional side, but all I can think about right now is coming all over your cock.”

He moans, his fingers biting into my hips. “My fake fiancée has a dirty little mouth.”

A lump forms in my throat as I watch him enjoy me. I’m not sure what to do with the tightness in my chest or the wild thoughts barreling through my mind. I fight them off ... all but one.

I slow my movements, planting my hands on his chest. The ring sparkles as if it’s encouraging me.

“Finn?”

He opens his eyes. Once they find mine, he grins softly. “Yeah?”

I swallow. “Just for tonight, can we forget the fake part?”

I can’t believe I asked him that. But even with my heart pounding and the silence stretching around us, I don’t want to take it back.

Finn reads my reaction, his features melting as if he understands my internal battle. And, in typical Finn fashion, he knows what I need.

“I already have, Pop,” he says, leaning up and kissing me softly.

He wraps an arm around me and pulls me beneath him, hovering over me with a look on his face that means more to me than any word or ring ever could.

Like I matter. Like he sees me. Like I mean something real to him ... just like he does to me.

It’s exactly what my heart needs.

I place my hand on the side of his face. “Remember when I asked you to be less perfect?”

He grins. “Yeah.”

“Don’t listen to me.”

He chuckles, sliding his cock into me. “I didn’t plan on it.”

His lips find mine, and I melt into him, giving up all excuses and bullshit reasons I should keep us apart. Because that’s exactly what they are—bullshit excuses to keep myself safe.

Why would I do that when the safest I’ve ever been is in this man’s arms?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

EXPOSÉ TOP STORY: Caught in the Act

Our favorite football hottie was spotted out for a sweet treat earlier this week with his new fiancée and an adorable toddler.

(We're 99 percent sure the cutie pie is the daughter of former Legends wide receiver Branch Best and Miller's sister, Layla James.)

Can we have a moment for that rock on her left hand?

Sources tell us that the woman who managed to snag football's most eligible bachelor is none other than Layla James's best friend, Poppy Quinn. We don't know much about her (yet), other than she's from Colorado and works as an insurance executive. But don't worry, we're wearing our investigative hats and will follow up with our findings.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FINN

The evening air is warm, but there's a chill to it. Clouds roll across the sky in dark, angry-looking masses. Thunder rumbles off into the distance and the smell of rain dances through the back porch as Branch and I stand at the railing, looking across the valley below.

Poppy and Layla are inside with Sunny, catching up. Branch hasn't said much since they returned and remained mostly quiet while we loaded his daughter's stuff up in his car. Once we were finished, I suggested we head back out in case he needed a moment to decompress. And by the way he accepted my suggestion, I think I was right.

He grabs the rail with both hands, letting his head droop between them. "Thanks for stepping up and helping with Sunny."

I pat him on the back. "Of course. Glad to do it."

Branch stands, blowing out a breath that I suspect he's been holding for days, and we make our way to the swing hanging from the side of the porch. It creaks as we sit, groaning with our weight. We've joked many times that it's going to crash some day and we're going to land on our asses.

His face is marred by stress lines, something I don't often see on my friend. Branch has only been serious a few times since I've known him. It takes a lot for him to lose his goofiness like this. But it's clear tonight that while Leon might be out of the woods, Branch is still there and looking around, wondering how he can clear out the trees.

"This has been a reality check," Branch says, wiping his hands down his thighs. "You grow up watching your dad be a fucking superhero. Hell, I

remember when we won our first championship. One of my first thoughts was how proud he was going to be of me.”

I grin. “Nah, I get it, man. It doesn’t matter how much taller or bigger I am than my pops, he still seems like a giant to me.”

He nods. “And then to see him lying in the hospital bed, hooked up to all these machines *just to keep him alive*—watching him look at my mom like he needs her—*really needs her* ... I’ll never get that picture out of my head.” He looks across his shoulder at me. “For the first time in my life, my dad was mortal, and that really fucked with me.”

I sit back, giving him a minute to sit with that. I’m not sure he’s said any of that aloud before now. Hell, I’m not sure he’s even let himself think it.

“I can’t say that I know how you feel,” I say. “But I can understand how that would fuck a guy up.”

“Dad was always the alpha, you know? We were *his* family. He was invincible. But I’m wondering if the roles haven’t reversed, and now I have to step up and be the decision-maker, you know? Have we just hit the point where they need me more than I need them?” His eyes are wide as he watches me. “I’m not ready for that. I don’t even know if I can do that, to be honest.”

“Sure, you can.”

He shakes his head warily. “I don’t know shit, Finn. I can’t even put a fucking bookshelf together.”

I chuckle. “Lucky for you, I’m not sure putting a bookshelf together is what your parents actually need from you. And, if they do, you happen to have a very competent best friend who can help you out.”

“You’re an asshole.”

I nod, shaking my head in amusement.

He sighs. “You know, the one thing that I keep thinking about is how fast life changes. Dad was just giving me hell about figuring out what I want to do with the rest of my life. He said that I was lucky that I got to decide when football was over for me because lots of guys don’t. But that I need to take that philosophy and apply it to the rest of my life—make choices while they’re still mine to make.” He shakes his head. “And look at him now. The bear of a man has tubes going in and out of him while Mom and a bunch of doctors make his decisions *for him*. It’s wild.”

“Well, you can also look at it this way,” I say. “Maybe the lesson isn’t that life changes fast. Maybe it’s more about the choices we make. He’s spent a lifetime making choices that put him where he is now—surrounded by people who love him unconditionally. People who drop everything to be with him and your mom when they need it most. Not every family has that.”

I can’t help but think of my parents when I say that because they’ve done the same thing. Loved so many unconditionally.

Branch nods slowly as my words sink into his head. “You might be right.”

“I’m always right.”

“We’ll see about that.” He sighs, standing and stretching his arms over his head. “I think I’m going to see if Layla is ready to go. I need a hot shower and about twelve hours of sleep.”

“You can always leave Sunny here if you and Lay need to rest.”

He laughs. “Do you really think I’m going home without either of my girls?”

“Yeah, well, just offering.”

“I know. Thanks for that.” He holds my gaze before looking away. “Seriously, thanks, Miller. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d be miserable, consistently underprepared, and you wouldn’t have any bookcases, for starters.”

He shakes his head and heads to the house.

“Hey,” I say, waiting for him to stop. “I know you feel out of your depth right now, but your parents are lucky to have you. You’ll figure this out as you go. And, all joking aside, if you need me, I’m always here.”

“All joking aside ...” He smiles. “I know.”

I return his grin. “Tell my sister that I’ll call her tomorrow. If I go back in there, the girls will order takeout, and you’ll never leave.”

“Good call.” He opens the door. “Thanks again, Finn.”

“Anytime.”

I wait until he’s in the house before I exhale.

The swing goes back and forth as I stare off into the distance, unable to shake off my conversation with my friend. Branch is rarely shaken, and this hasn’t just shaken him. It’s making him think about life in a way I don’t think he ever has.

“One thing I keep thinking about is how fast life changes.”

His words tumble through my mind on repeat, my brain snagging bits and pieces and shoving them in places in my own life.

Life does change quickly. The fact that Poppy has been in my house, moving around like she belongs there, is proof enough. But the changes won't stop there. They never do.

"He said that I was lucky that I got to decide when football was over for me because lots of guys don't."

I take a long, deep breath and let this soak in. It's something I've been pondering quietly for a long time.

When is football over for me?

Every year that I take the field, I'm gambling with my body. I'm not twenty-five anymore, like Hannah so politely pointed out. And it's taking longer to recover from the bangs and bruises. But I still love the game. The competition, the adrenaline, and the camaraderie of going into battle week after week with the guys continue to drive me. I've spent most of my life working for this—for a career in the pros. For the chance to prove myself capable of extraordinary things. To leave a mark on the game. I know how lucky I am to have made it this far.

But loving the game this much makes it hard to see things clearly. I know the injuries are adding up. Eventually, my age, my body, or some younger guy will force my hand, and I'll have to retire.

Yet, every year, I convince myself I have one more season left. I can do it all one more time. Hell, it would almost be irresponsible not to play another season and make that kind of money.

I don't want to walk away too soon and spend the rest of my life wondering what I left on the field. But I don't want to stay so long that the game makes the choice for me, either.

"Hey, you," Poppy says, stepping onto the porch as a boom of thunder ripples through the air.

"Come here."

She doesn't hesitate to tuck herself under my arm, and the ease in which she does it feels like we've come so far.

"It's so quiet," she says, laughing softly. "I keep having this internal panic that Sunny's somewhere eating something she shouldn't be."

"Oh, she probably is." I chuckle. "It's just not our problem anymore."

She hums, resting her head against my side. "This week was a lot."

"Yeah. But it was kinda fun, though."

“A little.” She presses a kiss to my chest. “I waffle back and forth about wanting to have kids. I figured that I’d be sure about it one way or the other when Sunny went home, but I’m still as waffley as ever.”

I laugh. “Waffley, huh?”

“Yup. Waffley.”

I pull her closer. “I can understand that. I mean, it feels like such a trade-off. You give up your freedom and sanity, if we’re being honest—”

“And sleep.”

“And clean house. Not that it would be a major lifestyle change for you,” I say, teasing her. She punches me playfully in the stomach, making me laugh. “But it’s a lot to consider giving up.”

We stand together, wrapping our arms around each other, watching the birds swoop over the valley. Neither of us say anything for a few minutes. I think we’re both recalibrating ourselves to life without a toddler in the house.

“You’re right,” she says finally. “It’s a lot to give up, but then I think about when she said okay for the first time. Or how happy she is to eat.” She giggles. “The way her little lips press together when she’s sleeping is the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s how they lure you into having kids. They make all the good times seem so good that you get suckered into it.”

She laughs. “You want kids, right?”

I nod.

“Well, yesterday, I didn’t. Today, I might. I’m just not sure, you know, in case it matters.”

I hear the concern in her voice that her uncertainty about having a family might be a deal-breaker for me. And, honestly, I really do want a family and cannot imagine my life without one. But I can’t imagine my life without her, either.

“After this week, I don’t think anyone should be making a decision about kids.” I chuckle, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Right now, I never want to see another diaper again.”

She laughs, her body relaxing against mine. “Me either. But you have to admit, we tag-teamed everything pretty damn well.”

“Yeah, we did.”

“And, to celebrate, I think we should try out that new Mexican restaurant on Mayview Street. Have you seen the advertisements for it?”

“I agree. How about Tuesday night? I should get out of practice a little earlier than I will tomorrow.”

“Tuesday night it is.”

I take her hand, lacing our fingers together, and head inside. Poppy plops down on the sofa, and I grab her a Dr Pepper and me a bottle of water before joining her. She stretches her legs over my lap and pulls the blanket from the back of the sofa over her.

“Seeing Branch so ... wrecked broke my heart,” she says as I place our drinks on the coffee table. “I think seeing his dad like this fundamentally changed something inside him.”

“He’s always been really close with his parents. He tried to buy them a house when he got his first big check, but they refused. They still live in the little house he grew up in.”

She smiles. “I tried to get my mom to move here with me when Dad died. She wouldn’t leave her house, either. Said there were too many memories there and she couldn’t imagine leaving them behind.”

“I get that.”

“Me, too. But even though she has my grandma and aunt Carmen there, I still hate the idea of her living alone.” She frowns. “But she told me the last time I brought it up that if I mention it again, she’s going to move my grandmother in with me so I’m not alone.”

I laugh, rubbing her feet. “I like the way she plays.”

“She thought she was cute.”

“I think that’s what bothered Branch so much,” I say. “He thought he’d have more time with his dad, and then that foundation was ripped out from under him.”

Poppy stills. “I think about that all the time.”

“What part?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, worrying that I’ve pushed a little too far. This is in the realm of emotions that Poppy avoids like the plague. But she’s been so much more open lately that the question came off my tongue without the extra second of processing that I usually take.

She sighs. “I thought I’d have more time with my dad, too. I had so many plans for us and so many things I needed to still thank him for. But he died before I could.” She gazes up at me with her eyes filled with unshed emotion that strikes my heart. “I didn’t know if I’d ever feel sturdy again. And then I met you.”

My mouth goes dry as I watch her fight with her feelings. I'm gobsmacked at her honesty, but even more by the trust it takes for her to tell me this. This is the most open she's ever been with me.

"You're the first person since Dad who's always there for me whether I deserve it or not," she says softly. "You answer when I call. You always show up, and you never judge me—out loud, anyway. You're way too good for me, Finn."

"Stop it," I say, sliding a hand under the blanket and guiding her onto my lap. My heart cracks at her tone—like she really believes what she's saying. "I show up for you because I want to. Because you're the person I want to spend my time with, not because I expect you to earn it before you get to deserve it."

She settles against me, her pulse racing. "This is the only place I've felt safe since my dad died."

Oh, Pop. The wobble in her tone kills me, and I hold her tighter. Then the tears begin to drip down her face, and I swear I feel every single one of them.

"Hey," I say, using the pads of my thumbs to dry her face. "It's okay."

She laughs softly through the tears. "I'm such a baby. Just look at me."

"I am looking at you. And I've never seen anything more beautiful."

As if looking into my eyes is a step too far, she rests her cheek against my chest again. I sigh, holding her close, wondering when I'll ever consider it okay to let her go.

"This is why the foundation is so important to me," she says after a long moment of silence. "It's my way of thanking my parents for all they did for me. For being my foundation, I guess. For putting off their lives to make mine better." She exhales. "I think about that a lot, too. I put off a lot of things in my life and think I'll get to it, or I'll deal with it later. Maybe this thing with Leon is a wakeup call for all of us."

"You might be right."

I find myself thinking about Branch's words again, about how quickly things can change. How easy it is to convince yourself that there's always more time. And I wonder for the first time if maybe I've been too focused on what comes next and not focused enough on what's already here.

Poppy's breathing grows steady, her eyes fluttering closed. "Finn?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Now that Sunny is gone, should I go home?"

“No.”

She grins sleepily. “You didn’t even think about it.”

“Because I didn’t have to.”

She snuggles against me, her fist gathering my shirt. Her words have gutted me.

“I didn’t know if I’d ever feel sturdy again. And then I met you. This is the only place I’ve felt safe since my dad died.”

This.

This is what I’ve wanted in our relationship for so long, and as I sit with her in my arms, I’m almost too scared to let go.

No, Poppy, I don’t want you to leave because you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

Because I love you.

Because if this is where I start, to recognize just how good my life is right now, I know with absolute certainty ... I’m already damn lucky.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

POPPY

“Do you have any questions for me?” Ann asks, taking her black-rimmed glasses off her face and setting them on her desk.

The sun shines brightly, illuminating Downtown Chicago sitting stories below Ann’s floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s an amazing vantage point, and I can’t imagine coming to work every day and not feeling like you’re literally on top of the world. I’ll be leaving this office shortly with that feeling rattling around inside me.

I look at Ann, then at Kennedy, her assistant. Kennedy and I met this afternoon and have the makings of a new friendship. She’s smart and funny, and we both love O’Dells.

“I don’t have any questions right now, although I’m sure I’ll have a hundred as soon as I get home,” I say, laughing. “So much information has been thrown at me today, and I’ve tried to take as many notes as possible, but this is really like speaking a new language.”

Ann nods. “It’s a lot. I know it’s a lot. But you’ve got a great mission statement and the initial funding. I think our next steps are to get with the accounting and legal teams and have them take a look at our plans.”

“I agree,” I say.

“It’s always better to get their go-ahead before you get too far into the process,” Kennedy chimes in. “Especially in this case. We need to see whether it would be better for Finn to contribute the endorsement money directly to the foundation rather than sending it to you personally. It’s not

my area of expertise, nor Ann's, but the tax implications may be massive if mishandled."

"Yes," Ann agrees. "It's much easier to get a foundation right from the beginning, no pun intended, rather than to untangle problems later. You wouldn't believe how much initial transparency and organization can affect the longevity and success of a project."

I nod along, agreeing with everything they're saying. So much, in fact, that my mind begins taking these lessons and applying them elsewhere.

Mostly, to Finn.

My heart skips a beat as I imagine his handsome face. It's bothered me for a while that I haven't been completely transparent with him about my past. I've wanted to. I've opened my mouth so many times with the words on the tip of my tongue, but before I could press them into the world, I stop.

I don't believe Finn will be angry with me for not telling him, and it's not that I specifically think he'll judge me. He'll be angry and will probably have strong opinions on the matter, but they won't be aimed at me.

That's not Finn.

What I'm concerned about, mostly, is that the way he looks at me won't quite be the same. Right now, I'm just the Poppy Quinn that I've shared with him. Fun. A little goofy. Loyal. A good time who is up for anything, who had previously dodged emotions and relationships. Although when I asked him to remove the "fake" element from our relationship, he'd been so quick to say he already had. And then he'd been so quick to tell me that he didn't want me to go home after Sunny left. And when I confessed that he was the first person I felt safe with since losing Dad, he didn't budge. Didn't blink. He just held me tighter. He's just so ... certain about everything. About us.

But what happens to the light in his eyes when he looks at me with the full knowledge of my past? Will he see me differently? Will the way he treats me change?

Even if it's not in a bad way, I don't want anything to change at all. I don't see how it won't. And, once he knows, I can never take it back. We can never go back to the way things are right now.

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly, nodding along as Ann goes over a list of items that I hope she emails to me. My mind is focused on Finn.

If I want a future with him, he deserves to know all of me. I can't put more care into building the foundation of a charity than I put into the future with the man I'm pretty damn sure that I love.

No, the man I know I love. I love the fuck out of Finn Miller. And I have to tell him everything—free myself of this burden so we can move on together—tonight.

"Well, I think that's it," Ann says. "Do you have anything else for her, Kennedy?"

"No," Kennedy says. "But it's been very nice to meet you, Poppy, and I look forward to walking down this new path with you. It's very exciting. Congratulations."

I stand, hoisting my bag on my shoulder. "It was nice meeting you, Kennedy, and thank you, Ann. As always, you have been such a wealth of information and a pleasure to work with, and I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today and for all the effort you've put into this already."

Ann stands and shakes my hand. "The pleasure is truly all mine. Now, if you have any questions, like I said, don't hesitate to reach out to one of us. Otherwise, I will get back with you as soon as I hear more."

"Have a great rest of your week, Poppy," Kennedy says.

"You, too."

I follow Kennedy out and enter the elevator feeling buzzed on my way down. This is such a good feeling, something that I've been after for such a long time. It's one of the two missing pieces in my life. Funny how I just think I found both of them.

Leaving the office, I step onto the sidewalk, making my way to the parking garage. My car comes into view, and I unlock it as my phone rings in my pocket.

"Hey, Lay," I say, opening the door. I know something's wrong before she even speaks. "What's the matter?"

"Are you out of your meeting?"

"Yes. Why? What's going on?"

"Shit," she says, sighing. "Have you been online? I mean, I take it that you haven't, considering you're still this calm."

My stomach sinks as I slide into the driver's seat, close the door, and lock it. Chills roll down my spine. *Have I been online? Why?*

“Is everything okay with Finn? What’s happening?” I ask, growing irritated at the delay.

“You’re not driving. Right?”

“No, Layla. I’m not driving. What is going on? You’re making me panic here,” I say, my voice rising.

“There was an article today. I think you need to read it, but I don’t want you driving when you do.”

“*Fuck.*” I put her on speakerphone and pull up my web browser. “What kind of an article?”

I imagine a photograph of me from a bad angle, or from someone suggesting that the engagement between Finn and me is fake. I brace myself for my irritation level to skyrocket into oblivion.

“Why don’t you drive over here, and we’ll read it together?” she asks. “Or I’ll come to you?”

“I’m sitting in a parking garage downtown. I cannot wait to figure out what’s going on until I get to your house or you get to me. I’m pulling it up right now. Where do I look?”

“Exposé.”

I recoil like I just took a bullet. My mind races with a million things that Exposé could’ve said. I knew the last post they made about Finn and me—a picture of him looking at me with hearts in his eyes as we had ice cream the other night—was too good to be true. It was too easy. It was too ... nice. I should’ve expected there to be more.

There always is with them.

I open the website for Exposé, my hands shaking, and gasp. The headline is spilled across the top of the page in big, bold letters.

Exclusive: Finn Miller’s Fiancée’s Ex-husband Accuses Poppy Quinn of Battery and Financial Exploitation

Oh my God. I cover my mouth as vomit begins to force its way up my throat. I exhale a breath, unable to take another, shaking.

Jordan Callahan, the former husband of NFL star Finn Miller’s fiancée, Poppy Quinn, is breaking his silence today about their tumultuous marriage, alleging that Quinn was physically abusive, financially manipulative, and willing to do whatever it took to get where she wanted. Callahan claims that

Quinn will “do anything to get what she wants” and that includes “physical violence.”

“And once she gets what she wants, there’s a new side that comes alive inside her,” Callahan says. “There’s a monster buried in that woman. My son had nightmares stemming from her behavior and the situations he witnessed for over a year after the divorce.”

Callahan claims their marriage ended following a violent confrontation involving Quinn and her father that resulted in a police intervention. When asked about Quinn’s recent engagement to Finn Miller, and the substantial financial opportunities surrounding the relationship, Callahan offered a warning.

“I just hope Miller figures out who she really is before it’s too late.”

“Oh my God,” I say, staring at my phone. *“Oh my God.”*

“Are you okay?” Layla asks.

Tears well in my eyes. *This motherfucker.*

His lies ... they’re going to destroy everything.

And Jordan’s lies aren’t just fired at me. They’re aimed at Finn, too.

In front of the whole world.

Oh my God.

“Poppy?” Layla asks. “Talk to me.”

“Layla, I’m sorry.” My voice breaks, and my bottom lip quivers.

“What are you sorry to me for? Who is this Jordan guy?”

I cover my face with my hands as the tears fall. *Why? Why the fuck is he spewing such garbage?*

It’s been years since our divorce.

Why am I still on his mind? Why come after me now?

“Poppy, I’m getting really nervous here,” Layla says. “I need to know that you’re okay.”

“No. I’m not okay,” I say, hiccuping a breath. “I cannot believe this is happening.”

“Please talk to me.”

What will Finn think when he reads this?

I stare straight ahead into the cinder block wall of the parking garage and wish that I could go back to last night, or even to this morning, and tell Finn about Jordan. Because now he’s going to think I’m telling him because

it came out in *Exposé*, and not that I'd planned to tell him so we could take another step forward in our relationship.

Layla says something to Branch, and my heart pulls again. I wish I would've told her, too. She's been my very best friend, and now she has to wonder who I really am.

Like Branch said, life can change in the blink of an eye. This is what happens when you let yourself live ashamed.

"Jordan was my husband," I say, the words hollow. "We were married for about a year when I was eighteen. My parents begged me not to do it. He was older than me, had a couple of kids—one of whom lived with him. They kept telling me that it was a mistake and that I was being foolish, but you couldn't tell me a damn thing. I thought I was in love." I choke back a sob. "It ended really badly, Layla. Everything he said is bullshit. You have to believe me."

"Poppy, of course, I believe you. But why haven't you told me this?"

"Because I wanted to forget. I wanted a life where Jordan didn't exist. And it was a great plan until today."

My tears fall harder again, and I wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

What will Finn think? What will his teammates say? Is he going to be embarrassed because of me?

I rest my forehead against the steering wheel and consider leaving town. I don't want to see Finn and know that I hurt him. That's the last thing I ever wanted to do. But, if I leave, I'm handing Jordan more control over my life. And I'll be damned if I let him have the last word.

"Let us come pick you up. You said you're downtown. Branch and I can be there in twenty minutes, thirty tops. But let us come get you. I'll drive you home, and Branch will pick me up from Finn's."

Finn's. I'm going to have to have this conversation there—the place we've shared so much lately. The irony kills me.

"No. I'm okay," I say. "I don't want you running around town because of me."

"You're my best friend. You're my fake sister-in-law," she says, and I can hear the grin in her soft words. "I'd do anything for you, Pop. Let me come pick you up."

I shake my head and turn on my car, wiping my face with the edge of my shirt. I glance at the clock and do a little math. By the time I get back to

Finn's, he'll probably be walking through the door. And I don't need an audience for the conversation we're about to have.

"Layla, I love you. Thank you for giving me a heads-up on this, and I'm so sorry that your brother is probably having a really shitty day because of me."

My stomach clenches at the thought of conversations probably swirling around the locker room. *On the first day of training camp, damn it.*

"I love you, too," she says. "And I'm less worried about Finn than I am you. He's a big boy. He can handle himself."

I hope so. "I'm going to get myself together and try to beat him home. I want to talk to you later and explain things, so you don't think I have all of these big, dark secrets."

"You don't owe me anything."

I grin sadly. "I used to think that. But lately, I've learned that we do owe the people we love certain things. Like not letting our fears and regrets control us."

My gosh, how that's true. And only now is it so abundantly clear ... but I know why.

Because I love Finn.

I just hate that I can admit it to myself on the day that my past might've taken a knife to his professional life.

"The advantage of saying I'm not getting married is that it's true," he says. "It's clean and simple. But the disadvantage is that there's no guarantee that'll stop the gossip, and that kind of crap isn't something I need following me into the locker room this season. Kepner is already pissed that this is what people are talking about this close to the preseason."

"Be careful driving," Layla says. "And text me or something when you get to Finn's. I want to know that you made it."

"Okay."

"Again, I love you. Call me if you need me."

I sniffle. "I love you, too, Lay."

"Bye."

I end the call and drop my phone into the cup holder.

Fuck. I rest my forehead for a moment against the steering wheel, trying to pull myself together. *Why, Jordan, you fuck?*

Nothing could have prepared me for such a betrayal, and I have no clue whether he will win here—destroy me emotionally again—or if Finn’s and my relationship will survive something so seemingly irrevocable.

When I think about Finn’s kind, loyal heart, another thought spins through my mind.

Could having everything—the truth—out in the open free me from Jordan once and for all?

I sit up and start the car.

I hope. I fucking hope.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

FINN

At least she's home.

I zip into the driveway a little faster than is reasonable and pull to a stop next to Poppy's car. My pulse has been racing for an hour now, ever since one of the linebackers pulled me aside after practice and showed me his phone.

My head spins as words from the article race through it on a torturous loop.

Exclusive: Finn Miller's Fiancée's Ex-husband Accuses Poppy Quinn of Battery and Financial Exploitation

"There's a monster buried in that woman."

"I just hope Miller figures out who she really is before it's too late."

It's all bullshit—complete and utter bullshit. And Jordan fucking Callahan better be glad that I don't know where to fucking find him or I'd be on his doorstep and not mine.

Not calling or texting her was a feat I didn't know I was capable of. But the last thing I wanted to do was to interrupt her meeting with Ann Walsh about this, and I didn't want to blindside her while she was driving. I didn't even return one of Layla's dozens of calls.

All I need is to understand what happened to Poppy before I hear anyone else's interpretation.

I need to know she's okay.

Taking a deep breath as the garage door opens, I try to steady my pulse as I make my way around the workout equipment where a vehicle should be

and into the house. My eyes dart around the kitchen, then into the living room, until I find her.

My bag hits the floor with a thud. The sound makes her bristle ... and I hate it.

“Hey,” I say, moving toward her. Tears stain her cheeks and her shirt, and my heart splinters at the sight. “Are you okay?”

She sniffles, her eyes wary and swollen. “Finn, I’m sorry.”

You’re sorry? I sit beside her, hauling her onto my lap. As soon as my arms wrap around her, she buries her face in my chest and sobs.

Fuck Exposé.

Fuck Jordan.

Fuck everyone involved in this.

Each whimper cracks another piece of my heart. All I can do is hold her, trying desperately to be the glue that keeps her together, and wait until she’s ready to talk.

Seeing her so devastated is worse than anything printed on that fucking website. I have no clue what happened—what *really* happened—but I know there’s a damn good reason she hasn’t told me.

Slowly, she pulls away, releasing my shirt that’s been bunched in her hands. I brush the remaining teardrops from her soft cheeks with my thumbs, trying to get her to look me in the eyes.

“I need to talk to you,” she whispers.

“I’m glad you think so.”

She tries to smile but comes up short.

I’m not sure how to ease her fear, but it’s written all over her pretty face. She’s never looked at me like this—scared and leery. Once I figure out what this is about, we’re going to make one thing clear: no matter what, this will never happen again. She’ll never have to fear my reaction to anything.

Ever.

Again.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” I say as she slides off my lap. I want to pull her right back. Maybe for me, but more for her because I know how much physical contact means to Poppy. But because I don’t know what this is about, I don’t want to make her any more uncomfortable. “But to get it out of the way, yeah, I saw the Exposé headline. In case you think I’m mad about it, I’m not. But I *am* scared shitless, because I can’t help you if I don’t know what all this is about, and I hate not knowing what you need.”

Poppy scoots farther away until we're no longer touching. It's like a dagger piercing my heart.

"Jordan Callahan is my ex-husband," she says with little to no emotion at all. "I met him when I was seventeen. He was thirty. No one knows what happened between us aside from my parents, my grandmother, and my aunt Carmen. But only my parents know the whole thing."

My eyes widen. This is the woman who tells me almost everything about her day, yet she's carried an entire marriage all alone. *For years?* That hurts in so many ways, but this isn't about me and my feelings. I stay quiet and let her continue.

She brushes a strand of hair out of her face. "I was working at the mall in a clothing store. He came in one day with a little boy, one of his two kids, and whisked me off my feet. He was handsome and charming. His son was adorable. And out of all the other girls in the store, he was interested in me ... and that made me feel so special, as stupid as that sounds."

"That doesn't sound stupid at all. When you walked over to me the first night we met, I felt that way. Out of all the guys in the world, you wanted to talk to me. I was on top of the world."

I reach for her hand, and she relents, laying her palm against mine.

"Now, I can see that Jordan love-bombed me," she says. "I didn't know what that was then. But he said everything I wanted to hear, bought me gifts, and promised me the world. And at seventeen, I didn't have the experience to see the red flags. My parents did, though, and forbade me from seeing him. That only drove me closer to him."

I squeeze her hand softly, letting her know I'm here. I'm here for her and her truth, and no matter where this goes, I'll be right fucking here.

"A few months later, I turned eighteen," she says. "And he was in my ear that we should get married. My parents were never going to give their approval anyway, and I was an adult. We were in love." She rolls her eyes. "We got married a couple of counties over, and when I told my parents, it broke my mother's heart. It devastated my father. It was ... awful."

I shift in my seat, finding it hard not to interrupt her. She was seventeen. A baby. She was still figuring out who she was and that motherfucker knew exactly what he was doing.

So help me God ...

"The first couple of months were exactly what he'd promised me," she says carefully. "But then he came into my work one day when I was helping

a guy choose a pair of jeans. When I got home that night, his expression was the coldest I'd ever seen on someone. It was the first time I was scared of anyone." Her gaze drops to the couch, and she takes a breath. "A few days later, he insisted that I quit and stay home—framing it as a gift. He made great money, so I could just hang out at home and have an easy life. I didn't want to quit because I liked my job, and I liked working with people. But wasn't not having to work supposed to be the dream? I had this man wanting to give me that, and when I tried to push back, it was the first time he called me a brat."

I force a swallow, stroking her palm. *He was stripping her of her choices.* Shrinking her world. Controlling her.

"Mom found out that I quit," she says. "And that I didn't enroll in college like Jordan promised her that I would. But I swore that it was just because I needed a gap year and insisted she calm down. I think at the time I believed that, too, which is sad."

I try to imagine a young Poppy in this situation, getting her spirit crushed by a man who knew better. A man with whom I would love to have a conversation in a dark alley.

Her eyes grow foggy, and I brace myself, focusing on my breathing to stay calm.

"Shortly after that," she says, her words muffled like she's speaking through a layer of cotton, "he decided that we should have a baby. We'd talked about it before, and I said I'd always wanted kids, which, at that time, was true. But it suddenly felt like a trap—another excuse that meant I wouldn't be able to go to school or work. There wasn't really a choice in that conversation, so I agreed. But I kept taking my birth control pills." Her hand begins to shake. "One night a few weeks later, he found them in my purse." Her gaze lifts to mine as tears fall onto her cheeks again. "That was the first night he hit me."

My hand tightens around hers, and my body goes rigid. *The fuck?*

I want to fucking find this prick, but the look on Poppy's face hauls me back to reality.

I can't leave her. Not now. Not even to destroy the man who hurt her.

"This is the only place I've felt safe since my dad died."

I choke back my own emotions and stay as quiet as I can. Anything that comes out of my mouth right now will not be conducive to this conversation.

“Jordan called me an ungrateful liar,” she says, laughing through her tears as if even she can’t believe the audacity. “Said I broke his heart not wanting a family with him. That I was going back on the promises I made to him. And ... I felt sorry for him. It sounds absolutely ridiculous now, and it’s embarrassing, but it’s true.”

“You were trying to protect yourself, Pop. Nothing about that is embarrassing.”

“Well, he blamed it on my parents brainwashing me and refused to let me see them,” she says. “My life became childcare for his son who lived with us, cleaning, and meeting his standards—which I usually failed at doing. Slowly, he took away my access to his money. He earned a good salary, but I only received enough cash to buy groceries. Anything more and I had to ask.” She smiles sadly. “One day, I looked into the mirror, and I didn’t recognize myself. When I met him, I was confident and strong and pretty. That day, though, I looked ten years older and worn down. I was pretty sure my life was over.”

I sit back as pieces of the past click together like magnets.

Her refusal to accept financial help. The way she ferociously guards her independence. The way she keeps her feelings locked away.

God, I hate him.

She sighs. “I decided that day that I was going to demand a bit of autonomy—to take some of my life back. I made sure his son was fed, bathed, and in bed, and when he got home, I sat with him while he had his dinner. I calmly let him know that I wanted to go back to school, to get a job, and to see my parents for Sunday dinners.”

I hold my breath.

“He threw his plate of pot roast across the kitchen, and it smashed against the wall,” she says, staring into the kitchen as if she’s reliving the moment. “I got up and ran into the bedroom and locked the door, desperate to get my cell phone. He jerked the door off the hinges.” She stills, her palm sweating against mine. “I remember thinking he looked like the Hulk when he barged in with his veins sticking out and muscles flexed. He plucked my phone from my hand and sent it sailing into the hallway before shoving me on the bed.”

Breathe, Miller.

“He screamed that I was manipulating him,” she says, with a strange, distant expression on her face. “That I was pushing him so he’d leave me,

and I could take half of everything in the divorce. He accused me of sleeping with other men at the store. Called me a whore. A slut. Then he hovered over me with this sick look on his face and told me that he'd been messing with my birth control pills, trying to knock me up."

I release her hand before I squeeze it too tightly.

This asshole wasn't just trying to get her pregnant. He was trying to ensure she could never leave him.

My stomach churns wildly.

Hell, he weaponized *everything* against her.

It's no surprise that Poppy has fought like hell to keep her independence. To keep our friends-with-benefits boundaries clean. To keep me out.

I look at her, emotion burning my nose.

But she's starting to let me into places she's let no one else in since Jordan.

The realization hits me hard, and I want to hold her, to kiss her, to promise to protect her always. But there's more to this story. And with every bit she shares, I can see the small changes. Her shoulders are easing. She clutches the blanket on her lap a little less tightly. Her voice is slightly less pinched.

And that's what's important.

"I pushed him," she says, "trying to get him off me. And he hit me so hard in the stomach that I thought I was going to die. I tried to scream, but I couldn't get enough air to make the sound. Somehow, his son woke up anyway, and Jordan went to settle him back down." She swallows. "I got to my knees and crawled into the hallway and called my daddy."

Tears flow like rivers, and I can't help myself anymore. I pull her back onto my lap, and she lets me, almost like she needs it as much as I do.

"I couldn't talk," she says, hiccuping a sob. "But somehow, he knew. And he said he'd be right there. He made the forty-five-minute drive in twenty."

I wipe a tear from my eyes, wishing I could've met her father. She needed him, and he came, no questions asked. Just like my dad would've done. Just like Branch would do. Just like I would do in a heartbeat.

"I locked myself in the bathroom by his son's room because I knew that was the room he'd mess with me the least," she says. "And when I heard the gravel crunch outside, I climbed through the window to get outside."

My God.

“Jordan beat me out there,” she says, crying. “They got into a fistfight, and a neighbor called the cops. Jordan told the officers that Dad showed up and attacked him, and to the neighbors, that’s what it looked like happened, too. Somehow, and I don’t remember how, Jordan got me aside and told me that if I pressed charges, he’d do the same and ruin my dad’s life. And I was nineteen and believed that. But he said that if I left and never came back, he’d let it go.” She shrugs. “So I did. I left everything there, got in Dad’s truck, and went home.”

“You did what you had to do—what you thought was right. That took a lot of courage, Pop.”

“I promised myself that night that I would never, ever get into that situation again.” She looks up at me with a watery gaze. “Because I lost more than my freedom and who I was as a person. I lost confidence in my own judgment. I thought he loved me. I believed him. And I’ve been terrified of being wrong ever since.”

I wipe her cheeks again before kissing her forehead.

Now it all makes perfect sense. She hasn’t been rejecting me. She’s been protecting herself from her own decisions ... just in case.

“It was really easy until I met you,” she says, staring into my eyes. “No one else got close enough to matter. But you,” she says, poking me in the chest and grinning, “you were different from the start. I was drawn to you immediately. I felt safe with you. You were this big, funny, powerful man, but when I’m with you, I feel ... free. Free to say no and to be chaotic and change my mind a million times.” Her bottom lip quivers. “When I’m with you, I feel loved.”

Oh fuck.

My chest tightens so fiercely that I can barely breathe.

She feels loved.

I sigh, holding her face in my hands.

All this time, I’ve wondered if she understood me—that everything I did was because she was special to me. Because I loved her. And she did. She knew.

I brush my thumbs over her cheeks. “Good answer,” I say, my voice breaking. “Because you are, Poppy Quinn. You are loved so fucking much.”

She rests her forehead against mine, her body shaking with tears.

“And you don’t have to do a damn thing to keep it,” I say. “It’s yours for the taking.”

I just hope you choose to take it.

“I wanted to tell you this before,” she says. “I almost told you last night and the night before that. At Ann’s office today, before I knew about the article, I decided to do it. To tell you tonight.” She lifts her gaze to mine. “But this isn’t how I wanted it to go.”

“Well, this is how it went. And it’s over now.”

“Is it? Because your whole team must’ve seen it by now. Your family.” She shakes her head. “You have to be humiliated.”

“Me?” I grin. “Come on. I’m friends with Branch. I’ve been humiliated before, and this isn’t it.”

She tries not to grin. “I’m being serious. You told me that the GM has already warned you about being a distraction. I’m guessing that hearing that your fiancée is a ... monster ... is going to be a talking point in the locker room.”

“What if it is?”

“It’s your job.” She pushes my hands down, irritated. “This situation has caused me so much grief. I can’t stand the thought of it hurting you, too.”

“Poppy, I don’t give a fuck about any of this.”

“But I do.” She climbs off my lap and stands, straightening her shirt. “And I believe you when you say you don’t. But this is a lot, Finn. For both of us. I’ve spent years being afraid of what would happen if someone knew everything about me. And now ... you do.” She takes a breath. “And I’m okay.”

She says the last part as if the idea is just settling into her brain.

I stand, too. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that this isn’t over. It’s not that easy. And I think ten minutes after we’ve discussed this is way too soon to write it off into the past.”

“You think you know how I’m going to feel tomorrow? Because *I* know how I feel, and I feel the same way about you right now as I did yesterday and the month before that and the year before that. You don’t get to spare me consequences that I haven’t asked to be spared—that you don’t even know will happen.”

“Okay. Do you think I’ll ever want to be around your friends? To go to a game? Knowing that they’ve all read this crap and probably somewhat

believe it. Because you know where there's smoke, there's fire."

I stare at her. "What are you getting at, Pop?"

She takes a breath, lifting her chin. "I'm saying that I'm going home tonight and giving us both some space."

"I don't want space. It's the last thing I want tonight."

"I know you don't want it. *But I do.* Not because I think you're going to change your mind about me. But because for the first time in a decade, I'm not afraid of what happens next." She swallows. "I've told you more than I've ever told anyone. Every dirty part. Everything that I've been ashamed of. Things I've tried to run from my whole adult life." She reaches out and touches my cheek. "And you still look at me the same way."

"Of course, I do."

Her eyes fill with tears again. "I need to sit with that ... and I need to let it process. To believe it. To wrap my head around the fact that I can be me and still be loved. And I want you to have time to think about this, too. I need us both to know that whatever happens next happens because we want it to. Not because we felt obligated or like we had to."

"Dammit, Poppy."

Her words hurt. A lot. Not necessarily because she's leaving, although that feels like a punch in the gut. They hurt because I know what she's thinking, what she's feeling, and I just want to make it better. Erase everything that fucker said to her, made her believe. Hold her in the way I know she needs.

But if she thinks she needs time, then I'll give that to her. I'd give her the world if she asked. And at the end of the day, I guess this is the only way to prove it.

Just like I had to prove to her that we were more than friends with benefits.

At least she's not running from me. She's not making a decision out of fear. She's making one because she knows she can, and she's just asking me to respect her choice even though it's the last damn thing I want. It sucks, badly, but I can't tell her that I love her exactly the way she is and then refuse to let her be that person.

"Fine," I say, the words scraping my throat. "If you really want to go home, then go. You know where I'll be. And I'll be wherever you are if you call. Or text. Or yell loud enough from the other side of town."

She grins. "Noted."

I smile. “Just know that I’m not happy about this. I want you here.”

“Noted, too.” She kisses me softly, then takes a step away. “I’m going to grab a few things upstairs.”

I nod because I can’t speak. If I do, I’m going to tell her that I love her. That none of this is fake to me, and it never has been. That I don’t give a shit about what anyone else thinks or says about me or her or our relationship—any of it.

But I’ve told her everything short of those three words, and she’s still walking away. All I can do is let her go. I have to let her make the decision to let me love her on her own.

I stand in the middle of the living room, listening to her footsteps overhead, trying to convince myself that giving her what she asks for is the right thing to do. That overriding the voice yelling in my head is the answer. That what I want doesn’t matter at the moment.

Because I know what I want. I want Poppy Quinn. Every chaotic, stubborn, gorgeous piece of her. I want the life we’ve been pretending to have, and I want it forever.

And this time, when she comes back to me, I want her to know she can have it all—all of me, all of this life together—without giving up a single thing.

I want her to choose herself. Then to know I choose her, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY

FINN

I sling my bag over my shoulder and make my way through the parking lot, squinting into the bright morning sunlight.

Half the parking lot is filled with my teammates' vehicles, which annoys me. I like to be one of the first, if not the first, guy in the building every day. It sets a tone, sets expectations of what's expected in the locker room.

But this morning, I'm dragging ass because the night took forever. I kept reaching to Poppy's side of the bed only to find cool sheets. Without her next to me, my bed felt too big, too cold, too empty. I wound up crawling out around three this morning and adjusting the thermostat even though I knew the temperature wasn't the problem.

Wes meets me at the door and does the honors of opening it for us. He steps to the side, letting me go first, and I give him a nod as I pass.

"You ready for day two?" he asks, following me inside.

"As ready as I'll ever be. You?"

"Can't wait. I've been waiting for this since I was a kid."

I smile at his eagerness, hoping the newness doesn't wear off too fast. It's always interesting to watch the rookies come in and see who folds the fastest. I have a feeling that Wes will be okay.

He heads straight for the locker room, but I'm not ready for that madhouse just yet. The guys will be loud, full of piss and passion, and it's usually a damn good time. But the idea of listening to their stories and dick-measuring contests is the last thing I want to do today.

I don't even want to be here.

I pull out my phone to see if Poppy replied to the text I sent her before I left the house. There are no missed messages. I sigh, sliding it back into my pocket. Hopefully, she's still asleep. It is still early, and I know from talking to Layla last night that Poppy took the day off work.

At least she texted me last night. That's a good sign.

I turn toward the cafeteria, hoping to score a smoothie before the day kicks off. My mind, though, is still on Poppy and the story she told me last night. I had to keep myself from looking up her ex. I'm not sure that I trust myself to have his address or other contact information. But restraining myself from doing it was one of the hardest things I've ever done—almost as hard as watching Poppy leave.

What I still don't fully understand is why the fuckhead talked to Exposé. As Poppy said, it has been over a decade. He'd threatened her dad's freedom, and she's kept her promise to stay silent. *So why say something now?*

The only semi-reasonable excuse, apart from the fact that he's a controlling narcissist piece of shit, is that there was money on the table for him if he gave them something controversial. It was low-hanging fruit for a scumbag.

"Hey, Miller." Gunther, the tight ends coach, stops in front of me. "Did you just get here?"

I've seen him a couple of times over the past couple of weeks, and we briefly shot the shit yesterday. "Yeah."

"Kepner wants to see you in his office," he says, swirling a wooden stick around in his coffee. "I told him that I'd send you his way if you hadn't been there by the time I saw you."

My jaw sets. *Surprise fucking surprise.*

I expected this development. The article yesterday was in poorer taste than the first one that he called me about. There was no way I wasn't getting a talking-to today.

"I'll head up there now," I say, heading toward the bank of elevators.

"See ya on the field."

Maybe. I nod at him and keep walking.

My hackles are raised as I step out of the elevator onto the top floor. Kepner's assistant waves me through, apparently waiting for me to arrive. That's never good.

I rap my knuckles twice against the open wooden door, and Kepner looks up and over the top of his glasses, jerking them off his face when he sees me.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask.

“Come in and grab a seat.”

He sits back in his chair, crossing an ankle over the other knee, and watches me get settled across from him. I set my bag at my feet and don’t bother getting too comfortable. Something tells me that I won’t be here long.

“You probably know why you’re here,” he says.

“I have a pretty good idea.”

He sighs, sitting up. “I thought you and I were on the same page.”

He and I? I blink. Does he think I’m to blame for this?

“Well, Mr. Kepner, with all due respect, I’m pretty sure we are on the same page. We might even still be on the same page. The one who is not is Exposé.”

“If they hadn’t broken the story, someone else would’ve.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. “That story? They must have paid that asshole a nice chunk of change to go on record, and the shit he said wasn’t true. Not that it’s really any of your business.”

“If it affects my business, then it is my business.”

“Then I would reconsider having them in your media room. Because the shit with Branch, the shit with Chauncey, and this shit with me—they’re the common denominator.”

“I don’t need you explaining how business works, Miller.”

I sit back, taking him in. I’ve worked with Kepner for a number of years now, and I can’t decide if he’s always been this way or if his people skills have slipped this much.

Who does he think he is, talking to me like this?

“Let’s cut to the chase,” he says, resting his forearms on the desk. It’s easy to see how he’s a formidable general manager. His stare is unnerving. “Yesterday afternoon, I was presented with more headlines swirling around you. And I was informed that my locker room was talking about this and not the shit we pay them good fucking money to do.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m not any happier about it than you.”

“No, Miller, it doesn’t.”

I shrug. There's not a lot I can do about this. I don't know what he wants from me.

My conversation with Branch has played out in the back of my head over the past twenty-four hours.

"You know, the one thing that I keep thinking about is how fast life changes. He said I was lucky to get to decide when football was over for me, because lots of guys don't. But that I need to take that philosophy and apply it to the rest of my life—make choices while they're still mine to make."

I can't shake those words, can't stop thinking or feeling the weight of them.

Life does change fast. And my life has revolved around football since I was eight years old. I've said more times than I can count that I'll get to this or that when football is over. That I'll play one more season. That I'll cash one more check.

But what if all of this is just ... stuff?

What if it's just accolades and ego boosts, and I'm just afraid of walking away from that? What if the money is great but it takes me away from the things that matter?

Mom and Dad are getting older, and I'd love to spend more time with them. Sunny is growing like a damn weed, and it would be great not to have to miss July to February of her life every year. I'd love to travel, to grill out with Branch—maybe to start a family, depending on how Poppy feels about it.

And, of course, to spend time with my girl.

My heart isn't here anymore. My heart is ... out there. With my friends and my family. With all of the things that I've made this money to be able to afford and experience.

Maybe now is the time to do those things while I still can.

Before life changes again.

"Your obligation, your commitment, is to this team," Kepner says. "You've been a great player for us, and you know that I think you have a few more years in the tank to help us win another championship or two. But I need to know you're committed and this bullshit at home isn't going to become a poison in the locker room."

I sit taller. "Mr. Kepner, could you excuse me for just one second?"

"Sure," he says, surprised.

“Thanks.”

I get up and step into the hallway and pull out my phone. It takes a second to find Chuck’s number, but I do and call him.

“Hey, Miller,” he says after the third ring. We chatted briefly about the headline last night, so we’re on the same page about that. *But what I’m about to say?* Guess we’ll see. “Are you doing okay?”

I give myself one last chance to rethink this decision, but my choice is made. I don’t need more time.

“I’m good, actually. But I need you to send my notice of retirement to the Legends, effective immediately.”

The line grows quiet.

“I’m done, man,” I say, shaking my head. “My heart just isn’t in this anymore. And I’m not gonna go out there and play half committed because that’s when guys get hurt.” *I can guarantee my head isn’t going to be out there. I’ve already checked out.*

“Have you thought this through?” Chuck asks. “I know you’re not the kind of guy who makes impulsive decisions, but I gotta ask, man.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ve thought it through. This is what I want.”

“Do you want to think about it? There’s no rush.”

I grin. “Nope. Send it through, please.”

“All right then,” he says, exhaling. “We’ll get some papers together. We’ll have them in your email this afternoon. I’m gonna need you to approve them before I actually send them over to the team.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Check the areas that I highlight carefully,” he says. “There’s some tricky language in your contract that I need our attorneys to look over before we submit this. I’ll mark those spots—specifically the ones that deal with the financial implications of your decision. Call me if you have any questions.”

“Sure. One more thing.”

“Shoot.”

“I don’t know what happens with the endorsement deals we’ve been dealing with for the past couple of weeks. I’m assuming my retirement voids them. Let me know if I need to do anything on my end. If money has already switched hands, I’m happy to refund it immediately.”

“Let’s just hold off on that a second,” he says. “Yes, you’re retired. Yes, that’s a hiccup because you’re not gonna be on TV every single week, but

you are still one of the most popular athletes in the country, and your name will still be discussed through the year. So there's a chance that some of these companies will want to continue working with you, but they may cut their offers."

"That's fine," I say. "Just let me know, and we'll work it out."

"Sounds like a plan." He sighs again. "Finn, I hate to hear this. And I'm not gonna be the only one."

"I know. I appreciate that, but this is where I am right now." I pause. "I guess I have one more question. When does my retirement take effect, exactly?"

"Now."

"Great. Is it okay if I tell Kepner? He's called me into a meeting, and I'd like to tell him myself."

"Absolutely. Tell him that I'll be in touch soon."

"Will do. Thanks."

It feels like a load has been lifted from my shoulders. This has been what I needed to do for a while. It's obvious now that it's done.

I peek into the office, and Kepner looks up. I walk in and pick up my bag, put it on my shoulder.

"You'll be getting a call from my agent this morning," I say.

"Why is that?" he asks, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Because I'm retiring. Effective today. Now."

The statement hangs between us with the weight of a football season that probably just drastically changed trajectory without me in it.

"I hope like hell you're kidding," he says, lifting a brow.

"I'm not."

He sits up. "Have you talked to your agent? Considered the financial consequences of this?"

"Yes, to both."

He rubs his forehead as his face turns a bright shade of red.

For a moment, I feel bad for walking out on him and the team. But that guilt only lasts a minute. It's far outweighed by the lightness in my chest, knowing that I'm going to leave this all behind.

It's time. It's time to move on to something that fits this season of my life in a better way.

It's time to move on with Poppy.

“How about you go home and take a day to reconsider?” Kepner asks. “Is this about your contract renegotiation? Because if you want to start it up now, we can. I’m happy to talk figures with Chuck.”

I shake my head. “I don’t need a day. My decision is made.”

“May I ask why? What would make you do something so drastic?”

I smile, shrugging. “It’s pretty simple. You asked me to put this team over everything else in my life, and I’ve done that for years. I’m not willing to do it anymore. That’s not fair to you, or my teammates, or the fans.”

Or me. Or Poppy.

“Finn,” he says, leaning forward. “I’m pretty sure we can work this out. Nothing’s been done. We can still talk through this.”

“Do you want to have somebody escort me out of here? Or do you want me to go on my own?”

He looks at me in disbelief and then shakes his head.

“Thank you for taking a chance on me, sir. It was a pleasure playing for you and this organization. I’ll always be thankful to you for this opportunity.”

He shrugs. “You’re welcome, Miller. It’s been a hell of a run, and I’m sad to see you go.”

I walk out of his door weighing about a hundred pounds less than I did when I walked in. I should be having some existential crisis about the end of my professional life, but all I can think about is the beginning of my personal one, and that’s the one I’m much more interested in.

I walk by photographs lining the hallways. Pictures of championship games, packed stadiums, and legends who have played for this team. My heart has the slightest twitch. *I’ll miss this.* I’ll miss parts of it terribly.

But for the first time in my life, I’m more excited about what’s happening off the field than what’s happening on it.

And that’s a choice I can live with.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

POPPY

“Well, look at that,” I say, stepping into a clean kitchen. “Is this what night productivity looks like?”

Impressed with my handiwork, I grab a mug out of the cabinet and make myself a cup of coffee.

Last night was a roller coaster of emotions that even I had a hard time keeping up with. I sobbed when I got home, wishing I had stayed with Finn. Then I got angry with Jordan and the audacity of the son of a bitch for pulling this stunt. Then I was embarrassed, thinking about what Finn’s teammates would say today, followed by a profound sadness that this mess touched his life.

But when it was all said and done, and I texted Finn good night, the peace that I felt in my heart was the most wonderful feeling in the world. Because Jordan might think he’s won, that he’s hurt me and caused me grief, but he’s wrong. He can’t destroy me. He can accuse me of battery and financial exploitation and call me a monster, and sure, that sucks, but they’re only words. And his words have hurt me for far too long.

He’s clearly still miserable. *And me?* I have Finn. I have a man, *a real man*, who will be here to hold me, protect me, and love me.

I’m free.

“Because I know how I feel and I feel the same way about you right now as I did yesterday and the month before that and the year before that.”

Finn knows everything ... and he still wants *me*.

He still wants *us*.

My heart sings as I add some milk to my coffee.

I'm not sure how I'm going to broach this with Finn after he finishes work this evening, but I have all day to think about it. I wish I knew how he was feeling today, and how the locker room was treating him, and if he's handling it well. He said he didn't care what they said, and I believe that, but it would settle my nerves as I contemplate telling him that I love him.

With my whole heart.

Not because I'm afraid to be alone, or because I need anything from him.

I love him, and I want to do it loud and obnoxiously ... because I do. And I can.

"Shit," I say, jumping as the doorbell rings. My coffee splashes over the side of the cup and stings my hand. I grab a dish towel and give it a quick dry before heading to the door. "Give me a dang second," I say as the bell rings again.

I pull it open, ready to give someone hell, but stop when my gaze lands on a set of sparkling green eyes.

"Hey, Poppy Quinn."

I lean against the door, curious but confused. "Hey, Finn Miller. Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Nope. Because I'm unemployed." He grins. "Wanna let me in?"

I flinch, stepping to the side so he can enter my house. *What does he mean he's unemployed?*

"You cleaned." He lifts a brow, looking around the living room. "I'm impressed."

"Great. Now tell me why you're unemployed."

He taps me on the nose. "Because I retired today." He rolls his eyes. "Actually, the paperwork hasn't gone through yet, but I notified Kepner, and Chuck is working on it."

"Oh." I watch him go into my kitchen and pour himself a cup of coffee. "This is so much easier than that fancy one that you bought for me. Unless you're going to use it, will you bring this one over when you come?"

What? I narrow my eyes. "Did you hit your head or something this morning?"

He sips his drink, smirking. "No. Why?"

I hold my head, taking a seat at the table. He sits across from me.

"I'm going to need you to back up," I say. "What's going on?"

“Well, I retired, like I said.”

My heart sinks. “It wasn’t because of me, was it? Did something happen? Oh, Finn. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry to burst your ego, but it had nothing to do with you. It was just time that I moved on to other things. My heart isn’t in it anymore.”

Okay. That’s better. I think.

“Now that I don’t have a job and haven’t found a hobby to replace it yet—Branch was just telling me this is important, so I need to find something soon—I thought I’d hang out with you today,” he says.

He’s way too happy about this. Too nonchalant to have just quit the team.

I narrow my eyes, trying to figure him out.

“It’s okay that I’m here, right?” He sets his mug down. “If you want me to go, I will. You just said you wanted some space last night, and I thought, technically speaking, that would end at dawn.” He half grins, pointing out the window. “It’s past dawn.”

I settle back, crossing my arms over my chest. “You can stay.”

“Great.” He glances at my finger. “You’re still wearing your ring, at least.”

I wiggle my fingers at him. I did wonder for about thirty seconds if I should’ve taken it off. Technically speaking, it was because of Exposé and then the subsequent team branding that we faked our engagement. But when I saw the relief on his face as he saw the ring on my finger, I knew he wanted it there.

I think.

I fucking hope.

“Of course, I am. I had to take it off while I cleaned because it’s like lifting a weight. But it felt weird with it off.”

“That’s good.”

I grin. “You think so?”

He grins, too. “I do. Now that’s settled, how did the processing go last night?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you process all of this? Because I did. And unsurprisingly, I feel the same way I did yesterday.”

My chest warms as I take in the steadiness of his gaze. Of course, he showed up here this morning ready to work things out. He wouldn’t be Finn

if he didn't.

"You said we need to know whatever happens next happens because we want it to," he says. "I know what I want to happen. I just need to know if you're on board."

I'm not quite sure what he means, only that he's so fucking cute. The mischief in his eyes makes me so happy. My Finn is back.

My Finn.

He really is mine.

"Come on, Pop. You're killing me."

I shrug, laughing. "I don't know what you're after."

He groans playfully. "Did you make a decision? I told you that I did. I told you that I feel the same way today that I did yesterday." He makes a face as if he's urging me to respond.

"Oh, that."

"Yeah, that."

I grin. "Yeah, I made a decision." I lean across the table, wrapping my hand around his. "You're never getting rid of me."

His eyes widen and a slow smile unlike any other I've ever seen before slips across his lips. But before I can really appreciate it, he slips my ring off my hand.

"Hey!" I say, my brows pulling together. "Why did you do that?"

"I retired, remember? We have to send it back."

My face falls. I didn't think of that. "Oh. Right. My bad."

His lips twist as he stands, taking my hand in his.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my heart starting to pound.

"Hush."

"No," I say, turning in my chair as he comes around the table. "What are you doing?"

He sighs. "Can you just not talk for a second?"

"Finn Miller, I swear to—*oh. My. God.*"

My eyes fill with tears because apparently, I'm a crybaby now, as Finn drops to one knee in front of me. His eyes shine with sincerity as he holds both of my hands in his.

"Poppy Quinn, I've loved you since the first day I saw you, I think. You're the most beautiful, funniest, smartest woman I know. A giant pain in the ass sometimes, but it's what makes you *you*."

My lip quivers as he stares into my eyes. *He said it.* “You love me, Finn Miller?” I ask, wanting to hear it again.

“Yes, I love you, Poppy Quinn. And you love me.”

“Oh, I do, do I?” I giggle. *Of course, I do, but it’s fun teasing him.*

“Yes, you do. And we don’t really have to send your ring back,” he says, grinning. “But that ring will always be associated with our fake engagement that always felt real to me. But this one ...” He releases one of my hands and pulls a Siggy’s box out of his pocket. “This one is the real deal.”

“What have you done?” I whisper in shock.

He opens the box, and the ring that I loved but thought was too much sparkles inside.

“Finn Miller!” I gasp, looking from it to him and back to it. “Tell me you didn’t buy this.”

“Okay.”

“Finn ...”

“I bought this one on the day I ordered the other one,” he says softly. “Just in case this day came.”

“But this is too much. I know what this costs. I can’t ... Finn. Come on.”

He chuckles. “First of all, I have a lot of money. I know you don’t pay attention to that, but I do. Your reaction to this ring was special. This is the one you wanted. This is the one you get.”

I’m in shock. He could knock me over with a feather.

“I don’t want to change one thing about you,” he says earnestly. “I just want to spend the rest of my life loving you in every way that I know how.” He searches my eyes. “Will you marry me, Poppy?”

Will I marry him?

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I thought I’d hit rock bottom. Again. I wasn’t sure how Finn would react or whether our “relationship” would survive the storm, even if he is my safe place. And a month ago, I was sure I’d never marry again.

And now there’s this extraordinary man in front of me. On bended knee.

A man who never gave up on me, even when I made it hard. He’s been patient and transparent, and he’s given me everything I’ve needed, whether I knew it or not.

I'm in love. I'm loved by an amazing man. A man my father would have loved for me.

My laughter starts soft but grows into a full belly roar as I fling myself into his arms. He laughs, catching me, and capturing my lips with his. I could spend forever kissing this man. And I guess I just might.

"Yes, I'll marry you," I say as joy courses through me. "Of course, I'll marry you."

He moves the new ring out of the box and then takes my finger, sliding the band across my knuckle. My heart swells so much that I think it's going to explode.

"Finn?" I ask, admiring the stone.

"Yeah?"

A smile like I've never worn before splits my cheeks as I look at him. He's so handsome—beautiful, really. And he looks at me like I'm the only thing in the world that matters.

I know my dad is looking down on us, thinking that I finally did it. I found the kind of man he dreamed of for me.

I did it, Daddy. I made someday happen now.

My hands go to his shoulders as I study him. "I love you," I say. "I mean it. I never thought I'd say those words again. But there's no other word to describe how I feel about you."

"I've waited a long time to hear you say that."

"Great. Now get off your knees and carry me into the bedroom so the neighbors don't see what I'm about to do to you."

He laughs, the sound loud and free.

And the last piece of my heart is sealed into place by the love of the best man I've ever known.

EPILOGUE

POPPY

Eleven months later ...

Sunlight streams through the windows, filling the room with a brightness that reflects the mood. It's needed because whoever selected soft gray and olive green as the colors for the maternity ward didn't give *joy* a thought when decorating.

I glance at the clock, surprised but also not surprised that it's already midafternoon. We arrived at the hospital in the middle of the night, and there's been no rest since. *How do you rest when a baby is coming?*

I yawn, the past couple of days starting to catch up with me. I was up late the night before last, working on Someday Now, then giving my fiancé the best blow job of his life, before working all day yesterday. Finn and I barely had time for dinner with Joshua and his husband at O'Dells last night, followed by a quick trip to his parents' house to pick up fabric samples for the reception tables, before we rushed out the door to the hospital.

And now we're here.

And I'm exhausted.

I look across my shoulder, and my heart melts, just like it does every time I take in Finn holding the baby. I've never seen anything sexier. This man throws me around the bedroom with ease, carried half of a defense on

his back to score a touchdown, and single-handedly moved half of my belongings to his house after he proposed—officially. *Because God knows neither of us were sleeping alone again.* But to see those giant arms cradling a six-pound, four-ounce baby is a breath-stealing sight.

I simply could not love him more.

I grimace.

I might love him a bit more if he'd put the baby down and agree to go home.

"Finn," I say, yawning again, "please put her down. You're spoiling her."

Not that you can spoil a newborn by holding her, but it's enough to annoy Finn—hopefully enough to put the baby down.

"The irony of you calling me a spoiler is wild, Pop." He rolls his eyes. "We're bonding. This is what you do with newborns."

"You don't have to do it all in one day."

"And, you know, I'd like to hold my daughter again," Branch says, waking up from a nap. Bastard. "Give her to me, Miller."

Finn makes a face but walks by the foot of Layla's bed and gently lays Leonie in her daddy's arms.

"She's gorgeous, Layla," I say, as Branch pulls the blanket away from Leonie's face. "You two make the prettiest baby girls."

"That's half of my DNA," Finn jokes, moving behind my chair. He squeezes my shoulders. "You could have as many of those as you want."

I make a face, teasing him back. "Maybe. I was getting on board, and then I watched Layla push that out of her ... vagina." I recoil at the word, but I'm not sure what anatomical term you're supposed to use when referring to something other than sex. "I think I'm back to no again."

"Guess we'll have to keep practicing in case you change your mind."

"I do love a man with a backup plan," I say, laughing and getting to my feet. "Lay, Branch—we're going to go give you some much-needed alone time with your new baby." I shoot Finn a look. "Right?"

"I guess." He takes my hand and laces our fingers together. "If you guys need anything, call."

"We will." Layla smiles at her brother, then at me. "Thank you both for being here. I love you guys."

"We love you, too." I lift a brow at Branch. "And you're not too bad, I guess."

He chuckles, not taking his eyes off his daughter.

Finn says his goodbyes and I practically pull him out the door.

The afternoon is warm as we step outside and head to Finn's SUV. I sneak a peek at him as we walk, smiling at the peaceful look on his face. I was worried that he'd regret retirement or get so bored he'd lose his mind. But he's managed it all so well, exploring new opportunities, volunteering at a youth program, babysitting Sunny ... and helping with the foundation he funded.

I glance at my phone. "Kennedy texted me an hour ago and said the last bit of paperwork should go through on Monday."

"That's amazing." He smiles down at me. "I hope you're proud of yourself. What you're doing with Someday Now is pretty damn spectacular, Poppy Miller."

I laugh, his new name for me making my heart sing. He swapped out Quinn for Miller months ago even though our wedding is still six months in the future. He said he needed to test it out. But that's fine. I don't mind hearing it.

"Well, I think part of its spectacularness is because it was funded so quickly," I say, laughing.

"By a very generous donor."

I hit his shoulder with mine. "You're lucky I love you."

"No, *you're* lucky you love me. Think of the headlines it would've caused if I had to sit outside your house every day shirtless until you changed your mind."

My cheeks ache from smiling. He would've totally done that. And it probably would've worked. I'm weak when it comes to those shoulders.

After his retirement announcement, all but two of the endorsement deals fell through, and Finn offered to personally replace the money I'd expected to earn from the deals and donate it to Someday Now. My first instinct was to balk and say no. I've spent too many years ensuring that no one can ever hold anything against me, never being financially, or otherwise, beholden to a man. Jordan taught me that accepting anything from someone meant owing them something in return.

But Finn isn't Jordan. Not in the least.

And loving Finn isn't a debt I must repay. It's not a transaction. He doesn't keep score of anything but orgasms, and that's only so he feels like he did his job—which I find amusing, but I'm not arguing. We just love

each other, and sometimes that means letting the other person give more than they received.

Finn didn't offer to fund Someday Now because he wanted a seat at the table. He did it because he knew what it meant to me ... and what I mean to him. And for once I put my fears down and let him do something far too generous without wondering what it would cost.

We reach the SUV, and he opens my door, waiting until I'm inside and buckled before closing it. He climbs in the other side and slides his sunglasses over his eyes.

"Where to now?" he asks.

"Home. I need a nap." I yawn, settling back into my seat. I wish the Dr Pepper in the cupholder wasn't twelve hours old. "I have a video call with our moms and the wedding planner this evening, and I'm going to need all the energy I can muster for that."

He chuckles. "How many people are we expecting?"

"Three hundred, at the moment."

His chuckle grows louder. "Damn, Pop. I love it."

I squeeze his bicep, reveling in the happiness written on his face.

For a woman who thought she'd be single forever, things have certainly changed. I'm in the midst of planning a massive event that I could've never imagined I'd want but that I think about all the time. My mom is over the moon, as is Finn's, and they've become close friends as they dream up ideas they see online for the ceremony.

It's totally out of control, and I couldn't love it more.

Best of all? Finn encourages every bit of it.

As we pull out into traffic, I close my eyes against the sun and remember the rainy night Finn picked me up from the airport. The night I tried to put the brakes on us, and he decided to gently push back.

I thought I had it all figured out back then. I had a game plan to keep myself from getting hurt. To keep myself safe.

Thank God that Finn had a game plan of his own.

I smile, reaching across the console for his hand.

One thing hasn't changed. No matter what a day looks like, ending it with Finn Miller is always a good thing. But so is starting it with him.

And soon, we'll be doing it as husband and wife, and I can't wait to see what the future has in store for us.

Because I'm strong enough to battle life on my own. But I'm blessed not to have to do that.

I have the best teammate in the world.

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EXPOSÉ TOP STORY: GRAB A DRINK AND MAYBE A NAP

We at Exposé want to thank you for turning to us for your gossip needs over the past twelve years. However, there have been a few shifts behind the scenes, and Exposé is changing hands.

Please bear with us as the ink dries and we get acclimated to our new digs.

It'll be great. We promise.



Thank you for reading Game Plan.

If you haven't read Branch and Layla's book, End Game, it's available now. [Chapter One of End Game](#) is next for your convenience.

If you have read End Game, then you should check out the Gibson Boys, friends of Branch and Finn. [Chapter One of Crank](#) follows, too!

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CHAPTER ONE: END GAME

Exposé Top Story: Best Making Headlines

The temperature skyrocketed in Chicago this week and it had nothing to do with the weather. Our two favorite ballers went head-to-head (or should we say helmet-to-helmet?) on the practice field and there's video to prove it.

Sources tell us the (sweaty, aggressive, hot-as-hell) fight that got Branch "Lucky" Best, Finn Miller, and visiting Columbus quarterback Callum Worthington ejected from practice (you must see this video!) was not over a fumbled play. It was over nothing less than Layla James Miller, Finn's younger sister.

Does Layla's name sound familiar? It should. Until about five minutes ago, you could find her on Callum's well-formed arm . . . until he gave us whiplash showing up in Tahiti with the face of Ares Cosmetics, Carly Mathewson. But Callum and Layla aren't dating anymore, so where's the beef?

Give us a sec.

Layla James is now *scoring* with Branch. Yeah. We'll give that a minute to sink in.

Word has it Finn isn't all that hyped about his sister *playing ball* with his (former?) best friend. Branch's playboy image is well-known and even better documented. A keyword search of his name on our site alone brings up thousands of hits of him with women and rarely are two the same.

The question remains: why does Callum care?

We'll have to wait and see. In the meantime, we'll be crying in our Rosé and hoping our favorite bromance gets back on track. (And, seriously, go watch that video!)

Chapter One

Branch

A few months prior . . .

"This is why you're hot."

"Really?" I sit back, lifting a water bottle to my lips and smirk. My eyes don't leave hers. "I had no idea."

That's a lie. This look, the one that's currently melting her panties straight off her teeny little waist, has worked in my favor since I discovered it at the ripe old age of fourteen. Should it have worked on my math teacher? Probably not. But it did make acing algebra about a hundred times easier. I could use it then without even really knowing what I was doing. Now, with fifteen years of experience under my belt, I can play this look like a fiddle.

Fanning her face with a stack of index cards outlining the questions she's supposed to ask me for *Exposé Magazine*—something I don't even think she realizes she's doing—she blinks rapidly. "Tell me something no one knows about you."

I place the bottle on the little table beside me and shift in my seat. Her last question is the only question that is asked in every single interview I've ever done. Every last one. And they all think it's so original.

I used to humor reporters and give them something to print, but in the last couple of years, I've thought better of it. Maybe my self-promotion has gotten better. Maybe there's less to tell (since they already know so damn much). Or maybe I'm simply a little more cynical than I used to be. Either way, I loathe this question. It's like just because I'm a public figure they're entitled to every detail of my life.

"Branch," she gulps, her cheeks turning a shade of crimson, "my notes from this interview aren't going to be very . . . helpful."

"And why is that?"

She refuses to look at me.

“Let me see your notes,” I say, reaching for the index cards.

“Um, no.”

“Oh, come on,” I tease. “What’s on there?”

“Just . . . I need something substantial so I don’t get fired.” The slightly pouty lips, dipped chin is a look women give me all the time.

“Nice tactic.”

“Tactic?”

“Yeah. You’re appealing to my emotions.”

“I don’t know what else to appeal to.”

Roaming my eyes down her face to the low-cut blouse that showcases a nice set of B-cups, I let them linger for a long couple of seconds before bringing them back to her eyes. I lift a brow. “I’m sure you have no idea other than appealing to my . . . *emotions*.”

“Well . . .” Her gaze drops to the paper on her lap as she turns an even deeper shade of red.

“How many interviews have you done?”

“Total? Or sports?”

“Total.”

“Five,” she admits with a sigh. “I only got this one because the sports writer got meningitis.”

“So you’re here by default?” I ask, leaning forward. My arms resting on my knees, I clasp my hands in front of me.

“No. I’m here because I begged for the opportunity.”

“To interview me?” I nudge.

“Something like that.”

“Do you beg often?”

Her tongue darts across her lips, leaving a trail of wetness. “Only when necessary.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. There’s something about the gesture, a tinge of normalcy behind the overt sexiness, that makes me reconsider. As I try to talk myself out of giving in, I also wrack my brain for some fun fact that can help her save her job just in case she’s not feeding me a load of shit like I suspect she is.

“I hate dogs.”

Her eyes light up like a scoreboard. “You hate dogs?”

“I know, I know—this is a complete asshole thing to say. I get it. But the Blaney’s Doberman left a lasting mark on more things than the back of my right thigh. For some people, it’s clowns. For me, it’s four-legged beasts. To each their own.”

Her pen flurries across a legal pad, the sound reminiscent of Coach’s dry erase marker on the whiteboard at practice. “What else do you hate?”

“Oh, no. I gave you one thing,” I say, not falling into her trap.

“What do you love then?”

“My mama.”

The door leading into the makeshift interview room opens. Finn Miller struts in, yanking a pair of sunglasses off his face. “Ready, Party Boy?” he grins.

“Yeah, I think we’re done here.” I look back at the reporter as she gulps. “Got what you need?”

“More or less,” she says slowly, innuendo thick in her tone.

Finn chuckles beside me as I slide off the leather chair.

“Thank you, Branch. For everything,” she says, her voice all breathy.

“Dear Lord, what did you give this one?” Finn asks.

“An exclusive,” I joke, shoving my Legends hat backwards on my blond hair.

“Oh, that’s what we’re calling it these days?”

The reporter, whose name I didn’t catch, clutches her notes to her chest. “Maybe we can all three do something together one day.”

“That’s called a threesome and I’m in,” Finn deadpans.

Her mouth drops open. “I meant an interview!”

“Sure you did,” he chuckles, holding the door open for me. “Let’s go, Branch. Time’s a-wastin’.”

“Good luck with your column.” Giving her a nod, I follow Finn into the deserted hallway.

There’s a spring in his step that worries me a little as we make our way towards the elevators. Why I agreed to accompany him on a weekend getaway without actually getting details is beyond me. The last time I did this we ended up ice fishing in Michigan. Who does that?

“Where are we going again?” I ask, hoping he’ll forget he didn’t tell me and just spill it.

No such luck.

He punches the down button for the elevator and leans against the wall.
“You’ll love it. I promise.”

By the cheesy grin on his face, I have doubts.

[Read END GAME or listen in duet audio here.](#)

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CHAPTER ONE: CRANK

Walker

“I’m not taking you to the hospital.”

Peck teeters on the edge of one of Crave’s billiard tables. He sways back and forth, his sneakers squeaking against the cheap wood over the chatter of the patrons of the bar. “You don’t think I can land a back flip off here?”

The truth is I’m pretty sure he could. My cousin has the reflexes of a cat. The problem is he also has nine lives, and I’m sure he’s used up eight of them already.

“The question isn’t if you can land it. It’s how bloody the end result would be,” I say, taking a sip of beer. “And I’m not trying to splint a head wound. Can you even do that?”

“*You* could. Look at my arm.” He holds his left forearm in front of him, his watch catching the light from the new fixtures above. “This is some of your best work.”

Memories of splinting Peck’s arm with nothing but a belt, a bar towel, and a Playboy rush through my mind, as does loading him into the back of my truck for a quick trip to the emergency room.

“I really think I can do this,” Peck insists, working his shoulders back and forth.

Downing another drink, hoping I’m good and hammered before Peck attempts this disaster, I look across the table. My older brother, Lance, is watching me as he brings an Old-Fashioned to his lips. We exchange a look,

both of us waiting for Machlan to catch wind of Peck's antics and throw him out of Crave. Again.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Peck asks. "Another broken arm? I mean, I think I can get the rotation fast enough to not land on my head."

"I think it's your turn to take him to the hospital," I tell Lance.

He coughs, choking on his drink. "Yeah, I don't think so."

"Remember how hot that nurse was last time?" Peck asks, wiggling his brows. "Actually, that kind of makes me want to go for it now just in case she's on duty."

"She's not," Lance chimes in. "I think she was fired after the Hospital Administrator found her fuck-foundered in triage three the night of your broken arm."

"Peck! Get your fucking ass down." Machlan's voice rips through the bar, booming over the crowd.

Everyone quiets a few notches, not quite scared of my younger brother, but not willing to test his boundaries either. His reputation as a man you don't want to tangle with without a small army definitely helps his cause when it comes to managing his bar. Peck, on the other hand, just rolls his eyes.

"Just one jump, Mach! One. Uno. I got this." Peck gives Machlan his best shit-eating grin before looking at me and Lance. "If he throws me out, I'll be back in a couple days. Hell, he threw me out on Tuesday and I was back on Thursday for corn hole."

"I think that just means you're in here too much," Lance offers.

Peck starts to respond but his attention is redirected as Molly McCarter saunters by. The dim lighting does nothing to hide the exaggerated sway of her hips or the way she licks her lips as her sight sets on *me*.

Bracing for what may come out of her mouth, I fill mine with alcohol.

"Hey, Walker," she says, stopping at my chair. Her hands rest along the top rung, her fingertips sliding across the back of my neck. "Hey, Lance."

Lance tips his glass her way.

"I was thinking," she purrs, "my car is way overdue for an oil change. Maybe I could bring it to Crank sometime this week, Walker? Do you think you could *fit it in*?"

"I'm pretty full this week," I lie, ignoring her thinly veiled offer. "See what Peck has available."

A huff whispers through the air and she pivots on her heel. “Thanks anyway.”

“I can get you in ...” Peck’s voice drowns into the Crave chaos as he follows her towards the bar.

He tails after her, all but drooling, as she slides onto a bar stool. Her gaze flicks to mine, her knees spread just a little farther apart than a lady ever should. Then again, no one has ever called Molly a lady.

“Ever fuck her?” Lance asks, downing the rest of his drink as he turns back to me. “I’ve been tempted to a couple of times and did get a decent blow job one Halloween when she was dressed up in this nurse outfit.”

“What is it with you and nurses?”

“Think about it: they’re smart, make good money, work a lot so you have free time, and they’re used to getting dirty,” he smirks. “It’s like a straight shot to my dick.”

“And they’re good with needles, have access to medicines that can make you lose your mind, and I’ve never met one who didn’t have a warped sense of humor,” I counter. “They set off my crazy radar.”

Lance laughs. “Did that radar just start working? Because I distinctly remember you getting balls deep with some psychologically-challenged women. One in particular.”

“Are you feeling froggy tonight? Because if you keep that mouth runnin’ like that, I’m about to knock those glasses off your face.”

I’m kidding. More or less. The problem is Lance knows it.

“Oh, go to Hell,” he laughs.

“Already there, brother. Already there.”

He takes his glasses off his face and places them on the table. “I usually look at your life and think I’d hate to have it. But after the day I had today, I’d trade you places.”

“What? Did the high school kids refuse to learn about the American Revolution?” I laugh. “You have such a cush job.”

“I’m a professional.”

“A professional bullshitter, maybe.”

He makes a comeback, but it’s swallowed in the roar of the crowd as a popular song blares through the overhead speakers.

Crave, an old brick building along Beecher Street, is longer than it is wide, and pulses with the noise of the crowd and music. Alcohol ads, high school sports schedules, and a giant cork board adorn the walls. The latter is

a good read and filled with letters and notes from one townspeople to the next. Affairs have been called out, coon dogs found, marriage proposals made, and entire conversations about who is working what shift at the factory have taken place on that thing. It's been a mainstay of the bar since our uncle founded it almost fifty years ago. When our younger brother, Machlan, took over Crave thanks to Uncle George's failing liver, he extended the wall of corkboards all the way to the door.

"That's new," Lance says, moving over one seat closer to me. Motioning to the phallic design made up of yellow rubber duck Christmas lights on the wall between the pool tables, he laughs. "Let me guess: that's Peck's handiwork."

"Naturally. Machlan wasn't thrilled, but Peck rallied the masses and they convinced him to keep it."

"It is nicely done," Lance says, chewing on the end of his glasses. "I can see the art in it."

"Fuck. I should've been an artist if that counts as art."

"Apparently things didn't go well with Molly," Lance says, twisting in his chair.

"She's never gonna give Peck a chance."

At the sound of his name, Peck walks through the front door. He stops just inside, the glow from the exit sign giving his mop of blond hair a pinkish hue.

Peck makes a beeline for our table, a look etched in the lines on his face that sends a ripple of concern up my spine. After growing up with him and then working with him for the last few years, I can read him like a book. Something is wrong.

"What's going on?" I ask, scrambling to my feet as he gets closer.

"Walker, man, you need to get outside," Peck says. "Someone just bashed the front of your truck."

"What?" I hiss, sure I misheard him. "Someone did fucking what?"

"Yeah, man. You need to get out there."

Blood ripping through my veins, I plow my way through the bar. Machlan lifts his chin, sensing something is off, but I shake my head as we pass. I know he loves a good fight, but this one is mine.

Lance is on my heels as we make our way through the crowd. "Who did you piss off now?"

“Someone who wants to die, apparently.” My fingers flex against the wood of the door, the warm summer air slamming my face as I hit the sidewalk. “You sure you don’t want to stay inside? I think getting into a street fight is against your teacher code of conduct.”

“Fuck off,” Lance chuckles. “I’ll have Peck hold my glasses and I’m in.”

“You, my brother, are an intelligent heathen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

The top of my black pickup truck comes into view, sitting beneath one of the few lamps lining Beecher Street. There are two people standing on the sidewalk next to my truck.

“Do we know them?” I ask Peck through gritted teeth.

“I promise you we’ve never seen them before.”

“So it’s not ...” Lance doesn’t finish his sentence. “*Holy shit.*”

The two women turn to face us and I think all of our jaws drop. The first is tall with jet black hair and a strong, athletic build. It’s the second one who has me struggling to remember why we’re out here.

Long, blonde hair with faint streaks of purple and the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, she assesses me in the hazy streetlight. She doesn’t make a show of looking me over like most women do, batting their eyelashes like some damsel in distress. There’s something different about her, a quiet confidence that makes her almost unapproachable.

Unapproachable, but still hot as fucking hell.

My gaze drifts down her ample chest, over the white lace fabric of the top that hugs the bends of her body. Cutoff denim jeans cap long, lean legs that only look longer next to the Louisville Slugger half-hidden behind her.

It takes a ton of effort, but my eyes finally tear from her body and to the body of my truck. Sure enough, there’s a rip across the grill and a broken headlight that looks an awful lot like a slam from a baseball bat. It’s nothing that can’t be fixed in my shop, but that’s not the point. The point is the disrespect.

“Either of you know what happened?” I ask, leaning against the hood. They remain silent. The only response is a dashed look between them.

Settling my scrutiny on each one individually, watching them squirm, I save the blonde for last.

“Did you see anything?” I ask, turning back to the tall one.

Her weight shifts from one foot to the other as she runs a hand through her shiny hair like we're talking about coffee or having a beer later. "Me? No. I didn't see a thing."

"Really? You were standing out here just now and you didn't see anything?"

"No," she smiles sweetly. "Nothing at all."

Peck steps between us and inspects the damage. When he turns around, he bites the inside of his cheek. "If I were a betting man, Walker, I'd say it looks like someone walloped Daisy with a baseball bat."

The blonde lifts a brow, something on the tip of her tongue that she holds back.

"You got something to say?" I prod.

"You named your truck 'Daisy'?"

Her eyes narrow, almost as if she's taunting me. That she has the guts to challenge me combined with those fucking blue eyes throws me off my game. "I did. Got a problem with that?"

"No. No problem," she says, twisting her lips into an incredibly sexy pout that I want to kiss off her goddamn face. "Just never met a man who named their truck after a flower."

"Me either. Now, before I go calling the Sheriff about this, I'm gonna give you two a moment to consider telling me what happened. And," I say, cutting off the blonde, "I'll give you a piece of information before you decide what to say. Doc Burns' office has cameras installed that will show everything. Just let that sink in a second."

Their eyes go wide as they instinctively move together into a protective huddle. The tall girl points to the blonde who responds with a frantic whisper. She's guilty as hell.

On one hand, I want to break her down and get inside her in ways she's never dreamed. On the other, I can hear my brain issuing an alert to back away slowly.

The longer they confer, the more time I have to watch. The blonde controls the conversation, the other deferring to her as they talk amongst themselves. It's hot as hell.

The light bounces off the wounded plastic of the headlight and draws my attention back to the fact that Daisy is damaged, and in all likelihood, one of these two did it.

“You really calling Kip?” Peck whispers. “He’s not gonna do shit about this, you know.”

“He might throw them in the back of his cop car and fuck their brains out. Especially the blonde,” Lance whistles. “Can you imagine her in handcuffs? *Shit.*”

The thought shoots a flame through my veins that catches me off guard. The vision of her bound up with one of these assholes at the helm irks me. Bad. “You two stay out of this. Let me handle it.”

The sound of metal pinging against the ground rings through the air. The girls jump, the blonde leaping away from the aluminum bat as it rolls across the sidewalk and lands in the gutter with a flourish. Her eyes snap to mine, guilt etched across her gorgeous face. “It was an accident.”

“How, exactly, does a baseball bat accidentally strike the front of my truck?” I ask. “Did it just hop over there and smash itself into my headlight?”

“Well,” she gulps. “I ...”

“She was imitating her brother,” the dark-headed one says. “So we stop using pronouns, I’m Delaney. This is Sienna.”

“I’m Walker. That’s Peck and Lance.” I rest my attention on Sienna. She’s leaned against the grey car, her arms crossed over her chest. “So?”

“I was swinging the bat,” she says, “while Delaney puked over there and it slipped out of my hands.”

“I think we’re gonna have to see your swing,” Peck chuckles.

Sienna rolls her eyes. “You do *not* need to see my swing.”

Imagining her ass popped out, her body moving for our benefit, seems like a fair trade for the hassle of dealing with this tonight.

“How else do we know it was you? It could’ve been Delaney and you’re just covering for her,” I explain, loving the frustration on her beautiful face. “Gonna need to see the swing.”

“No.”

“Lance, call Sheriff Kooch.”

“Wait,” Sienna sighs. “It was an accident. I can cut you a check for the repairs but please don’t call the police. I ... I can’t have a record. You don’t understand.”

Looking away, it takes everything I have not to laugh. The plea in her voice is so damn adorable it almost makes me give in. Yet, she hasn’t shown any remorse, and that’s something I can’t get to sit right.

Swiping the bat out of the gutter, I extend it to her. The air between us heats, our fingers brushing in the exchange. The contact is enough to have her eyes flicking to mine. The light above may be dim, but it's bright enough to see the way her lids hood, her lips part just barely as she pulls her skin from mine.

A zip of energy tumbles through my veins and I remind myself I can't tug on the bat and pull her into me. There's no way I can cover her lips with my own, sliding my tongue across hers, making her attempt at resistance to this proposed swing futile.

Instead, I step back.

"Batter up." Peck motions for her to go. "Let's see it."

"Are you really going to make me do this?"

"Did you really just smash the front of my truck?" I ask. "The answer is the same to both questions, Slugger."

Her eyes narrow, but there's a fire in them that turns me the hell on. She steps away from her friend, zapping all the power I held just a few seconds ago with the flick of her tongue. It darts out, rolling across her bottom lip as the bat comes over her head. Sticking her ass out, bending her knees, her eyes still locked on mine, she slices the bat through the air ... and stops it at the last possible second before impact.

It's everything I thought it would be.

"Any questions, fellas?" she asks, propping it up on one shoulder.

"I have one," I say, forcing a swallow, trying to redirect my thoughts. "If you could stop it that fast, then why the fuck didn't you do that the first time?"

"Very funny." She tosses the bat into the back seat of the car and crosses her arms in front of her again.

"Can I ask why you have a baseball bat to begin with?" Lance asks. "Do you belong to some softball league or something? If so, I just took a huge interest in women's softball."

Sienna laughs as Delaney's face turns red. "Delaney's car is like a scavenger hunt. You can find anything in there. So while she got sick, I just rummaged around in the trunk, found the bat, and fooled around." She looks at me, her eyes softening. "Are you going to be here for a while? I'll go home and get the money. I didn't bring my debit card with me tonight."

It'll cost fifty bucks to fix the damage and about an hour's time. Definitely not worth her going out of her way tonight. But it is worth

making her come around again and say she's sorry. It might do her some good.

Might not hurt me either.

She clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, the motion driving me crazy.

"Come see me Monday morning at Crank. It's two streets over," I say, gesturing to the north, before I can talk sense in to myself.

"Smart," Peck whispers behind me, getting an elbow to the side from Lance.

Her jaw sets, a glimmer of resistance clouding her baby blue eyes. "I have plans Monday. I can try on Tuesday."

The nonchalant attitude cuts through me, like her fuckup is no big deal. I wasn't set on Monday morning, but I am now. "Monday or I call the Sheriff. Your decision, but make it quick. I got shit to do."

"Fine," she huffs. "Monday."

"Fine," I mock. "See you Monday morning."

We start back down the sidewalk, her gaze heavy on my back. I pause at the bumper of their car. "Peck got your license plate number, so don't think about not showing."

"I did not," Peck hisses, catching another elbow from Lance as their car doors open and slam shut.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" Lance asks once we're out of earshot. "Because I have a list of suggestions if you need them."

As we get farther away, the air clearing of Sienna's perfume, I realize it's not suggestions I need. It's a heavy dose of self-control.

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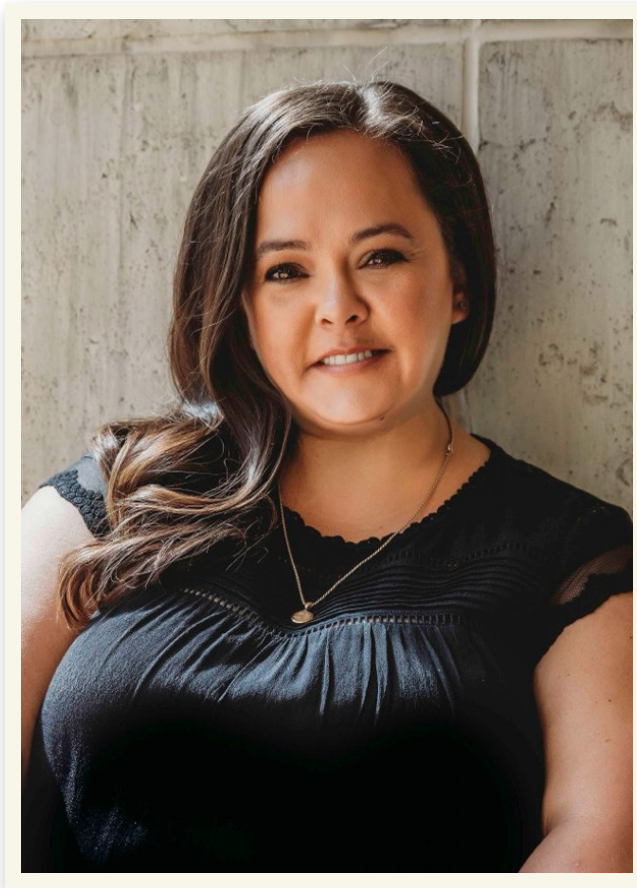
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Xo

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adriana Locke is a USA Today and Amazon Charts Bestselling author with a knack for writing swoony, unforgettable contemporary romances. At nineteen, she traded her small-town roots for big-city life, only to realize her heart beats for quiet mornings and cozy chaos. These days, she's living her happily-ever-after in Ohio with Mr. Locke—her high school sweetheart—four lively sons, and two hilariously hyper Jack Russell terriers.

When she's not penning love stories that will leave you laughing and sighing, Adriana is battling the epic quest of missing silverware, "gardening" (a.k.a. chatting with her plants), or leaving her grocery list on the counter as she heads to the store. Grab a cup of coffee, settle in, and let her books whisk you away to a world of heartwarming romance and irresistible heroes.

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