

DAYTONA FURY SERIES

Scoring Position



C.L. ROSE

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BOOK 2

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To anyone who's ever held on too long.

*May you find the beauty in letting go and the happily ever after you've
always deserved.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains sexual scenes that are rough in nature. They include degradation, humiliation, breath play and similar acts that may be triggering to some readers. Everything that happens between the characters is agreed upon and consented to. It also includes talk of a character being recorded without their consent, as well as the loss of a parent/guardian. (Both of these are only discussed, and do not happen on-page.) Please use caution when moving forward if you have sensitivities to this type of content.

As always, please research thoroughly before engaging in any type of kink with an experienced partner.

xoxo,
Candice

PLAYLIST



1. My Girl - Scotty Sire
2. Nasty - Bryce Fox
3. All For You - Dean Lewis
4. Boyfriend - Justin Bieber
4. The Machine - Reed Wonder, Aurora Olivas
5. A Tear in Space (Airlock) - Glass Animals
6. Love Somebody - Morgan Wallen
7. Belong Together - Mark Ambor
8. just friends - keshi
9. Electric Love - BØRNS
10. Mean It - Lauv, LANY
11. If You Love Her - Forest Blakk
12. I GUESS I'M IN LOVE - Clinton Kane
13. You Are In Love - Taylor Swift
14. Die With A Smile - Lady Gaga, Bruno Mars
15. Begin Again (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift
16. Candy - Doja Cat
17. Sugar (Gimme Some) - Trick Daddy, CeeLo Green, Ludacris
18. Shape of You - Ed Sheeran

19. One And Only - Chanin
20. Rodeo (Remix) - Lah Pat, Flo Milli
21. Hot for Teacher - Van Halen
22. PORNSTAR - Dutch Melrose

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PROLOGUE

ACE

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I don’t have enough credits to graduate?” I ask, my brows pulled tightly in confusion. “My advisor told me at the beginning of the year that I’d be good with the nine credit hours I signed up for.”

I hear the rapid clicking of a keyboard as my knee bounces with anxiety, because if I don’t let it, I might climb right the fuck up these walls.

“Okay,” the woman replies. “I see the problem.” I breathe a sigh of relief, hoping she has some good news for me. “One of your courses had a mandatory lab that required you to be on campus to complete your work. Since you did your lessons remotely, your attendance in that lab was never counted, resulting in a zero for the accompanying course. So, you still need three more credit hours in order to earn your diploma.”

I let my head fall back, dragging a hand down my face in exasperation. “I was approved by the dean for independent study. I was excused from all on-campus instruction.”

More tapping. I clench my fist on the table in front of me, trying not to freak out on this poor woman. It’s not her fault that I’m dealing with this shit.

But it isn’t mine, either.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Mathers, you didn’t complete the work for this course, so you’ll either have to retake it and be on campus for the lab portion, or choose another elective to earn those credits. There are a few left

for the summer semester if you want to graduate as soon as possible. I'm sure, given your situation, the dean will have no problem approving you for independent study again. You can register right on the app if one of the open courses strikes your fancy."

"Thank you," I say, completely defeated as I end the call. *Fuck*. I promised my grandma I would graduate college when I was a kid. We were very close, and although we both knew I was destined for the MLB, she told me she wanted to see me walk across the stage to accept my diploma before she died. I would be the first in the family to do so, and it was important to her, so I vowed that I would earn my degree. Unfortunately, she passed from a blood infection six months ago, but I refuse to let her down. I have to see this through.

I slump back in my chair, huffing an annoyed breath as I pull up the university's app to search for open courses. The ones that are full are grayed out, leaving only three electives for me to choose from. I begin to look them over, not sure which one would be easiest. It's my rookie year and I need to focus on our season that's already in full swing, but I also know I want to get this over with so I can be done with school forever.

"What's up, Rook?" my teammate, Jackson Blake, says, pulling out a chair and sitting down. It's a game day, and a lot of us get here early so we can meet with one of the trainers before we have to start preparing for warm-ups. As a catcher, I always make sure my legs are thoroughly stretched and massaged so I don't get any cramps while squatting and standing when I play.

"Not much, man," I reply. "Just found out I need one more elective to graduate. I'm trying to choose between the three courses nobody on campus wanted to take so I can get this shit over with."

He shoots me a toothy grin. "I gotta say, I commend you for following through with this whole college thing. I did one year of that shit while I was in the minors, and it was hell trying to juggle it all. But you're almost at the finish line."

He's right. It has been hell. I was drafted right out of high school and spent just over two years in the minors before I was called up to catch for the Daytona Fury. I figured an associate's degree in business administration would be the easiest route to go, so that's what I went with. It's been far from the cakewalk I expected when I promised my grandma I'd graduate. Unfortunately, with my busy schedule, it's taken a bit longer to complete

everything, but I'm finally nearing the end. Now I just need to bang out one final course.

"Thanks. I'm just not sure which of these will require the least amount of brain power." I scroll through my options again, but I'm cut off when Jack swipes the phone from my hand.

"Let's see," he says as he scans the available options. "Intro to Ballroom Dancing." He purses his lips as he considers it. "Sounds innocent enough, but they go kinda hard on that dancing show with the celebrities. You might get hurt."

My brows bunch together in confusion. "I'm taking it independently. How would I get hurt if I'm by myself?"

He shrugs. "You never know, dude. It's not worth the risk." Looking back down at my phone, he moves on. "Beekeeping. Is this seriously a college course? Why is everything so dangerous?"

"I'm allergic to bees, anyway," I reply, shaking my head rapidly. "That one's out. What's behind door number three?"

He scrolls to the bottom of the list, a knowing grin tugging at the corners of his lips. "Your fucking layup class, man. You could nap through every lesson and still pass, no problem. Matter of fact, you could probably teach it!"

I blow out a relieved breath, thankful that I won't have to take much time away from baseball to study. I was one of the top prospects my senior year and was drafted in the first round, but I'm young and still have to prove myself to this team. I'm not the only catcher on the Fury roster, and I can be moved back down to the minors at any time if they feel like I'm slacking. I may be a fan favorite, but as soon as my game starts to suffer, that won't matter.

"Alright," I reply with a big smile. "What course?"

He winks, turning the phone toward me, and my stomach drops right into my ass as I stare at the words typed in bold across the screen. **Human Sexuality.**

Fuck.

ONE LARK

“LARK, WAIT,” Ryan says from behind me as I make my way to the courthouse exit. I squeeze my eyes shut, exhaling a slow breath before turning to him. I honestly just want to get the hell out of here, away from him and Gail.

Seriously, who brings their mother to their divorce hearing?

I turn on my heel, trying to find whatever patience I have left after this shitshow of a day. “What?” I snap, failing miserably at not sounding like a raging bitch.

He stops, his heaving breaths telling me he probably ran all the way here from the courtroom in his ugly penny loafers—a fashion choice that I’ve overlooked for the last eleven years because I love him.

Loved. Past tense. Not anymore.

“Are you mad at me?” he asks.

Jesus Christ. *I’ll take “Things I Don’t Have Time For” for five hundred, Alex.*

I look up to the sky, collecting myself before I say something I definitely mean, but still shouldn’t articulate. “No, Ryan. I’m not mad at you. I just think all of this could’ve been avoided if you had been willing to work it out in mediation. We’ve been going back and forth over this for a year now, and I just want to move on with my life.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” he says, turning to look behind himself to make sure we’re still alone before continuing. “It’s my mom. She just doesn’t think

you should keep our family name since you're choosing to move forward with a career that might put us in a bad light, you know?"

I narrow my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. "First of all," I sass, "there's absolutely nothing shameful about being a sex therapist. Every couple does it. Some care enough about their partner to decide to get help when things aren't working—not that you'd know anything about that."

His brows pinch in, confusion evident in his expression, because *of course it is*. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I want to scream. Before we separated last year, Ryan and I had been together since our sophomore year of college. He wasn't my first sexual partner, but there were only a couple before him, and they were just one-night stands after I vowed to have fun and experiment. Being in a serious relationship, I thought it meant that we would grow together—find out what the other liked and try new things. But after the initial excitement and newness wore off, our intimacy slowly became monotonous. I told him I wanted to try spicing things up in the bedroom after we got married, but he made it clear we were on completely different wavelengths. I didn't feel that was a good enough reason to throw away the life we'd started to build, so I let it go, falling back into the same old routines we were used to. The sex was never bad, it was just *meh*. I'd love to be able to describe it another way, but there just isn't a better word.

"Never mind," I say, thinking better of opening this can of worms with him. I made him aware several times throughout our five-year marriage that I wanted to explore different kinks, but that wasn't who he was. That's fine, and bringing it up again now that we're officially divorced won't help anything.

He turns and looks toward the courtroom exit again, and I finally realize what he's doing. *This guy is such a bitch*. "So," he says quietly, "do you want to go get lunch or something?" I roll my eyes because he's been doing this since we separated. He wants to continue seeing each other quietly so Mommy Dearest doesn't find out. How he thinks I'd be okay with that is mind-boggling to me. We were together for over a decade, and now he wants to hide me like some dirty little secret.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Absolutely not," I spit. "And the fact that you're even asking me that just solidifies what I already knew. That you'll continue to put your mother ahead of everything because you know she'll stop paying your way if you don't. I couldn't say this before because I

didn't want to cause any problems between the two of you, but now that I'm not legally tied to your family, I finally can. You need to grow a set of balls, Ryan. I used to think it was cute that you were a mama's boy, but now it's just gross."

The moment he opens his mouth to speak, we hear a set of chunky heels making their way across the marble floor. He turns abruptly, and a smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth because I know I don't have to hold back if she tries starting shit with me. I've put up with it for too long, trying my best to spare Ryan's feelings. But now?

Fuck his feelings. And fuck hers too.

"Hello, Lark," she says in her signature, snooty tone. Reaching out, she brushes a rogue strand of hair from his forehead, and it makes me want to vomit. She treats him like he's eight years old, and he allows it because she pays almost every one of his bills. Even when we were married, she paid for the things he was responsible for, leaving me in charge of the rest.

"Gail," I say flatly.

She forces an exhale. "That was all unnecessary, wasn't it?" she asks. "Over a year of this nonsense, and all you had to do to make it easier was give us our last name back."

I grit my teeth, trying to rein in my anger before I lose my shit. Inhaling through my nose and slowly letting it out of my mouth, I reply, "First of all, my divorce wasn't any more of your business than my marriage was. Secondly, Dawson is just as much my last name as it is yours. I'm not changing my entire identity simply because you think I'm not worthy of it."

To be completely real, I don't even want to be Lark Dawson anymore. But everyone backs down to this woman—usually because she strong-arms them—and this is a way for me to remind her that she can't control anything I do anymore.

"Alright," she says, raising her chin. "But let me warn you, Lark. This isn't over. You will *not* make our family look foolish with your trashy career choice."

I look over to Ryan. I'm not sure why since he hasn't taken my side a single time for the entirety of our relationship. True to form, he's standing there with his shoulders hunched forward, averting his gaze and looking as small as ever. It justifies the fact that I did the right thing by going through with this divorce. Our marriage was destined to be mediocre, and I want more than that.

“Sounds fun, Gail,” I quip. “Good luck with that.”

I turn swiftly, walking toward the exit with my head held high, leaving them in my past, right where they belong.

TWO ACE

“STUDYING HARD?” my pitcher, Riggs Valentine, says, startling me from where I have my face buried in my Kindle. We’re currently flying from Daytona to Philadelphia to kick off a new series. I was able to secure my spot in the Human Sexuality elective for the summer semester, but after flipping through the textbook a couple of times earlier today, I opted for a smutty romance novel instead. I have to admit, I wasn’t expecting this course to be as in-depth as it seems to be, but with a few days left before my first assignment is due, I’ll try again later. At least the people in my books use terms I can understand. All that scientific stuff doesn’t really make sense to me.

“Uh, yeah,” I stutter, clicking the power button and pulling up the generic screensaver I use so none of the guys see what I’m reading. I’m sure if they saw the covers of some of these books, I’d never live it down. I can only imagine the shit they’d give me if they saw me carrying around an e-reader with a picture of a shirtless dude on it. I’ll stick with the images that come preloaded on the device, thank you very much.

He plops down into the seat next to me, reclining back slightly. “Jacks said you’re taking Human Sexuality. That seems like a pretty easy class. Do you even need to look at the book for that, or can you just send video proof from any given Saturday night?”

I snap my head up to look at him, but recover quickly. I’ve never talked about my past with any of the guys, and I definitely don’t want to start now.

Even though I'm still fresh meat, they've surprisingly welcomed me into their family already. But if they knew everything, they'd probably think twice about inviting me to go out with them. I've put on a good front that I'm just as much of a playboy as the rest of them, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Do I make out with girls on the dance floor? Hell yeah, I do. Kissing is one of my favorite pastimes. Sometimes I'll let them grind on me for as long as I can take it before I come close to embarrassing myself, but that's usually as far as it goes. I have more baggage than the cargo hold of this airplane, and I'd like to keep it locked up in the same vault it's been in for the last three years.

I laugh, hoping he doesn't hear how nervous I am about this even being the topic of our conversation. "Nah. I think I'm going to have to do the homework the old-fashioned way for this one."

"At least it's not something hard like calculus," he says. "This won't break your focus from the game. I need you sharp out there to make the right calls so I can look like a star."

I chuckle. Riggs got himself into some trouble earlier this season, but now that his girlfriend, Monroe, is living with him in Daytona, he's calmed down a lot. I'm not sure he really needs me to look like a star, but I'm happy he's giving me some of the credit. It feels good to be a part of the team.

"Right," I agree, resting my head back on my neck pillow and closing my eyes. Although I do need to keep my head in the game, he's far from the truth in thinking this class will be a cakewalk for me. I definitely give off the impression that I know a lot more about human sexuality than I do, which will make passing a little more difficult. Hopefully, I can figure out a way to get this over with before it starts affecting the way I catch.

At twenty-one years old, I'm still young in this league, and I know my spot on the Fury roster is not guaranteed. There are plenty of other catchers who have more experience than I do, and if I lose the competitive edge that's carried me this far, there's a strong possibility I could see myself back in the minors. Since I was a kid, I've dedicated every waking moment to becoming the best, so that someday, I could make it to the MLB. It's a dream to be here, and I can't let any distractions get in my way. I just need to get through this class so I can graduate and focus on my career.

I have to admit that when I looked at the syllabus for the semester, I almost shit my pants. It's taken me three years to get through a two-year degree because of how demanding my baseball schedule is, and that's with classes that have three-month curriculums. This one still has the same amount of work, but the course only runs for six weeks. So, if I thought it was hard before, this is going to be nearly impossible.

I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to give up on graduating since I started. But I understand why it was so important to my grandmother that I see it through. When my mom had me, she was only sixteen years old. She dropped out of school before I was born, but for her, having a social life became more important than taking care of her son. She left me at home with her mom almost every weekend, until she finally moved out when she was eighteen. The problem was, she didn't want to take me with her.

My grandma stepped up, being the best parent she could possibly be. We lived just a couple hours from Daytona, in a small town where a lot of people never get the opportunity to leave. But from the very first t-ball game I played, I knew I wanted more—and she did everything she could to make it happen. Baseball is an expensive sport, so she had to work several odd jobs to pay for everything, and somehow still managed to make sure she never missed a game. Even though a career in the MLB was the only option I gave myself, she wanted me to have a backup plan. She agreed to continue to foot the bill for all my lessons, equipment and traveling fees as long as I promised to get a college degree, no matter what.

I could've given up after she passed away, but it just didn't feel right. She bent over backward and worked her fingers to the bone to make sure she held up her end of the bargain—the least I could do was hold up mine. Plus, I was already almost there. The spring semester should've made me eligible for graduation, but the hiccup with my final elective was a setback I didn't see coming.

I sit up, reach into my bag, and remove the Human Sexuality textbook again. Opening to chapter one, I get about three paragraphs in before the words start melting together in front of me. After closing my eyes tightly, I attempt once more to read through the cloudiness that seems to be overtaking the pages. I don't know if it's because I'm tired or if it's just a lost cause, but I might end up needing some extra help to get through this. I'm not even off the first page, and none of the shit makes sense. Failure

isn't an option this time. I need to pass this class and finish school before it starts affecting my job.

That'll have to be a problem for future Ace. Right now, I have a game to play.

THREE

LARK

“WHAT THE FUCK?” I mumble to myself, waving my lanyard over the keyless entry screen to the building. I just got to work, and for some reason, the door won’t open for me. It’s a brand-new security system, so I suppose there could be some bugs that need to be worked out. But if I don’t get in there in the next five minutes, I’m going to be late. And I’m *never* late. In fact, in the three years I’ve worked in the university’s registration department, I haven’t missed a single day.

“Hey, Lark,” Hailey says, her heels clicking along the sidewalk as she approaches with her venti coffee in hand. On a normal day, said coffee would have her strolling in fifteen minutes late, but I’m not going to question it because at least I’ll be clocked in before eight. “Is that stupid thing not working?”

“Guess not,” I reply with a shrug, stepping aside so she can try her key card. She pulls her lanyard from her tote bag, and as soon as it hovers over the pad, the bulb blinks green and the lock on the door disengages. My brows pull together in confusion, and I make a mental note to swing by IT during lunch to have them check it out. But right now, I just want to get to my computer and sign in so I don’t get in trouble for not being on time.

I speedwalk down the corridor, leaving Hailey and her gigantic cup in my dust. I don’t even bother saying hello to anyone as I rush to my cubicle, frantically jiggling my mouse to wake up my monitor. When it comes to life, the bright welcome screen prompts me to enter my username and

password to clock in. I type as fast as I can, hitting the enter button with one minute to spare before I'm officially late. But when the red error message pops up, telling me my access has been denied, panic sets in. I watch as the digital number at the bottom of the display turns to one past eight.

Fuck.

You know what? It's fine. It's the first time this has ever happened, and if they really want to make it an issue, they can see me enter the building on the security cameras. I just need to figure out why none of my stuff is working so I can get started on my tasks for the day.

I pull my messenger bag off my shoulder, setting it on my desk before exiting my cubicle. Just as I round the corner, I run into a tall, lanky wall of bones. "Oh, hey Craig," I say in greeting to the head IT guy. He's about six-foot-five, weighs roughly the same amount as I do, and always smells like pencil shavings. That's probably why it takes him so long to answer our tickets on a regular basis. He's probably just in his office sharpening pencils for no reason.

"Lark?" he says, turning his head slightly as if he wasn't expecting to see me in my own office. "What are you doing here?"

"Umm," I say, because *why wouldn't I be here?* "I'm on the schedule every weekday from eight to four."

He laughs nervously, pushing his slipping glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, I was told to disable your key card and login last night. I thought maybe you got fired or something."

Fired? That's ridiculous. Not to toot my own horn, but I'm the best worker they have here. Even though I've been taking night classes on campus for the past three years, I've never slacked off on my responsibilities. As a matter of fact, I've been more dedicated to my job because it's the only way I can afford to earn my degree.

This school offers free part-time courses to its employees, which was one of the main reasons I took the job. Although I got my bachelor's in accounting, I never really wanted it as a permanent career. I was initially undeclared, but after I met Ryan, he talked me into majoring in the same thing as him so we could do everything together. It was dumb of me to agree, but at that point, I couldn't put my finger on what I really wanted to do with my life, so I settled. I hated every minute of my job before, so when I finally decided to become a sex therapist, I didn't hesitate to make the necessary changes. I quit my job at the accounting firm and used my

connection with Gail to get in here so I could earn my degree for free. I swear, it's the only kind thing she ever did for me, but I'm guessing it's because I only said that I was entering the psychology program. What specialty I intended to pursue wasn't her business, and I knew she'd judge me for it, so I kept it to myself. Since the day she found out, she's been doing everything possible to get me to change my mind.

"Who told you to disable my credentials?" I ask, trying to remain calm. Either this is a mistake, or I know *exactly* who's behind it. "Umm..." Craig says nervously, trailing off while looking everywhere but at me, which confirms my assumption.

I exhale harshly, throwing my head back in exasperation as I turn without a word and head through the department door. The dean's office is in this building, which I'm grateful for, because without a working key card, I won't be able to enter anywhere else on campus until this is sorted out. This is the last fucking straw, and I'm about to put an end to this bullshit.

I push the door to her office open roughly, startling the receptionist as it bounces off the wall behind it. "Oh my God, Lark!" she says, standing abruptly, her eyes widening in surprise. "Can I help you?"

"Nope," I reply, blowing past her and down the hall, turning into the first door on the left with her hot on my heels, yelling my name in an attempt to stop me.

"What's going on, Gail?" I say as she looks up at me from behind her desk. The nonchalant look on her face tells me this visit isn't exactly a surprise to her. "Why aren't my key card or computer login working? Craig said he was told to disable them, but the funny thing is, I never got a call explaining why." I'm practically vibrating with anger as she stares back at me, completely unaffected. It's taking all my self-restraint not to walk over and rip that ugly brown paisley scarf off her neck.

She sits up straight in her seat, clasping her hands together in front of her as a devious grin pulls at the corners of her mouth. "Good morning, Lark," she says smugly. "I was going to call you to let you know we wouldn't be needing you in the registration office anymore, but I got sidetracked. Sorry, you came all this way just to have to leave again."

My fists clench at my sides, and I do my best to keep control of the rage that's bubbling under the surface. I should've known after what happened at the courthouse on Friday that she wouldn't make my life easy. I always

suspected that she helped me get the job here at the university as a way to control me. At the time, I was only concerned about how I would be able to pay for my education, so I pushed those thoughts aside. If I hadn't, I'd have been prepared for this.

"Gail," I say, trying to remain calm. "You can't fire me just because Ryan and I got divorced. That's not fair." There has to be some kind of rule or law against this type of treatment toward employees—not that she gives a shit about rules.

She pushes her chair back from the desk, standing and turning away from me to walk over to the wall of windows in her office. She doesn't even look me in the eyes as she speaks so quietly that the receptionist, who's the only other person near us, couldn't possibly hear. "As the dean of this school, I can do whatever I want, dear. I told you it wasn't over between us. I tried to play nice. You had multiple opportunities to give back our last name, but you wouldn't budge. I won't let you make my family look foolish while you teach deviants how to have sex. Good luck affording your classes when you don't get them for free. Now, please leave the premises, before I have you escorted out of here in front of everyone."

I blink rapidly, attempting to rid my eyes of the tears beginning to fill them. I don't know if I'm crying because I'm frustrated, or because I've worked so hard for the last three years, just to have it all ripped away over something so stupid. I could just do what she wants. I could go back to my maiden name and beg her to keep my job, but fuck that. Gail Dawson is nothing but a bully, and she gets away with it time and time again because nobody ever stands up to her. That ends with me. If she wants to stop me from graduating and starting a career that can truly make a difference, too fucking bad. I'll find a way to get there without her.

"Fine," I spit, removing my lanyard from around my neck and slamming it down on her desk. She startles, turning around and finally giving me the eye contact I deserve. "But if you think this means you're getting your way in the end, you're dead wrong. One day I'll open a practice of my own, and your last name will be in great big letters on the front of the building."

She chokes on a gasp as I turn and leave the office with an even brighter fire for the future I want. I don't know how I'm going to make it happen, but I need to find a way to pay for classes on my own and achieve all the things she thinks she just yanked from my grasp.

FOUR ACE

“OKAY, WAIT,” I murmur to myself as I reread the words on the page of my textbook. “So, the average vagina is only about three point six inches deep, but the average erect penis is almost six inches? How does that even make sense?”

I've been at this assignment for the last hour, and it's not any clearer now than it was when I began. My eyes are crossing from the amount of time I've spent staring at this book, trying to understand the shit I'm reading. The first part of the lesson wasn't so bad because all we had to do was take a quiz about our own sexuality and answer some questions. We didn't even have to turn it in—we just had to go online and confirm that it was completed. But now that I've moved on to the actual coursework, I'm completely lost.

The very first part of this assignment went over the male anatomy, which worked out well for me since that's exactly what I have. But once we moved on to the female body, everything stopped making sense...especially when it came to arousal and how we differ in that area. For guys, it's simple. We get turned on, we get hard, and we're ready to go. But a woman's body is so much more complex, and I'll admit I had no idea. The more information I'm trying to soak in right now, the less it's making sense.

“Fuck,” I groan, closing the book and dragging my hands down my face. I'm supposed to have the quiz that accompanies this chapter done by noon, which definitely isn't going to happen. As it is, I had to email the

professor and ask for more time because we had a game yesterday. She was kind enough to extend the midnight deadline by twelve hours, but there's no way I'll be able to do it.

I need help.

As much as I didn't want to have to do this, I really don't have much of a choice. I'm already behind on my work and the semester has barely even started. If I wait much longer, I'll lose control and fail this class. Then I'll be stuck in school even longer.

I set the book on the couch beside me before grabbing my phone and pulling up the number for the registration office. I'm sure there's a department dedicated to this sort of thing, but I don't have time to figure out which one it is, so hopefully, they can point me in the right direction. I wait on the line as it rings, a familiar voice answering quickly.

"Sun State University registration. This is Hailey. How can I help you?"

I clear my throat. "Uhh, yeah. This is Ace Mathers. I think we spoke a few weeks ago regarding an elective I needed to take for the summer semester."

"Oh, yes!" she replies cheerfully. "Were you able to get everything set up okay?"

"Yeah. That's actually why I'm calling," I say. God, this shit is embarrassing, but I'm out of options. "I registered for Human Sexuality, but I'm having a little trouble keeping up with the assignments already. Can you tell me if the school offers any type of tutoring?"

"We normally do," she replies, "but not during the summer semester, since nobody is on campus. Plus, if I remember our conversation from before, you travel a lot. You would probably want to hire someone privately to help you. Everyone we employ here is a student, so they'd need to stay in the area."

I lean my head back, looking up at the ceiling in frustration. I swear, it's been one thing after another with this. I'm about to give up. But every time I think about it, I remember everything my grandma did for me, and I just can't. "Do you know of anybody that would be able to help me? I'd definitely need them to travel with me to away games sometimes, but I'd cover all their expenses and make sure they were taken care of on the road." I know it's probably unconventional, but at this point, I'm desperate. I need to get through this class.

She pauses for a moment, thinking before she answers. “Actually, I might know someone, but you have to promise you won’t tell anyone you got this information from me. I know for a fact that she took that course and passed with a perfect score. I can’t guarantee that she’ll say yes, but it’s worth a try.”

“Respectfully,” I say, putting her on speakerphone and pulling up my Notes app, “I’m fucking desperate right now. This girl could be a serial killer or one of those people who puts mayo in their coffee, and I’d still ask her.”

She laughs before rambling off the info for the girl I need to get ahold of. I don’t ask questions, assuming this is a college student from the area who could use some extra cash over the summer. Well, she’s in luck, because I’ll empty my bank account if she can help me pass without it becoming detrimental to my game.

We end the call, and I immediately dial the number I was given, tapping the tip of my middle finger on my knee as it rings. Nerves wash over me, because what if I can’t convince her? What if she’s busy and can’t travel with me? What if she has a jealous boyfriend who doesn’t like the idea of her going all over the country with me for the next month and a half? Letting my grandma down isn’t an option, but if I have to drop out of this course and take another one in the fall—while we’re hopefully in the middle of playoffs—it’ll be impossible to fully focus on either one.

Every bad outcome plays over and over in my head until the ringing stops and a feminine voice comes over the line.

“Hello?” she says in greeting.

Fuck, she sounds kind of sexy. Now I’m even more nervous.

Clearing my throat, I somehow locate my balls long enough to respond. “Hi. Is this Lark Dawson?”

“Yes, that’s me,” she answers, clearly confused about the unknown number and strange man on the other end of the call. “Who is this?”

I swallow, knowing that if I don’t present this in the most appealing way, I’ll likely end up failing this course. I could do what all of my teammates do and tell her I’m a famous professional athlete to spark her interest, but I actually hate doing that. I love playing for the Fury, but I don’t do it for the money or notoriety. I do it because I live and breathe this sport, and it’s all I’ve ever wanted. Using it as bait to get women to talk to me has always felt wrong.

“My name is Ace Mathers, and I got your number from Hailey at the university. I’m looking for a tutor for my summer Human Sexuality course, and she thought you might be able to help me.”

She pauses for a moment, and I wait in anticipation for her reply. Just as I feel the need to fill the awkward silence with something, she speaks again. “I don’t work for the school anymore. I’m not sure why she gave you my name, but there are plenty of tutors on their staff that can give you the help you need.”

“No,” I rush out. “I’m actually looking to hire someone privately. It’s a summer course, so it’s only six weeks long, but I travel a lot for work. I would need you to come along with me so I could get my assignments done on time. We can be gone anywhere from two to five nights a week, and we go all over the country. I’m already a couple of days into this course and I’m concerned about falling behind because there’s so much work. I’m kind of desperate right now.”

God, I sound like such an idiot.

“I, ummm...” she trails off. “I don’t think I’ll be able to help you, Ace. I just got let go from my job, and I need to pay my bills. Tutoring fees definitely won’t cut it, so I need to find a full-time job that’ll cover my expenses. I’m sure if you call Hailey back, she can give you the name of someone else.”

Shit. I really didn’t want to have to sink to this level of douchebaggery, but it doesn’t look like I have much of a choice. I exhale slowly, my shoulders slumping forward at what I’m about to say. “Money is no object. I’ll pay you whatever you want.” A full-body shiver racks my limbs because I even grossed *myself* out with that line, and I wait with bated breath to hear her reaction.

“Unless you can pay me about four thousand dollars a month, I really can’t help you,” she says with an incredulous laugh. I get it. That amount would be astronomical to most people. I know that growing up, my grandma worked around the clock for a fraction of that, but I’m blessed enough to have the means to give this girl what she needs in exchange for helping me through this course.

“Done,” I say. “A thousand dollars a week to travel with me and provide any assistance I might need so I can get this done and graduate at the end of the summer. I’ll probably want some extra time with you to make sure I’m prepared for the final, which has to be turned in one week after the course

of study is complete. If that works, I'm happy to write you a check for the whole seven grand right away so you can have your bills taken care of ahead of time."

She goes silent. I pull the phone away from my ear, looking at it to make sure she hasn't hung up before speaking again. "Lark? Are you there?"

"Is this a joke? Did you really get my number from Hailey, or is Dean Dawson being a sneaky bitch again?"

Dean Dawson? Why would I—

"Wait? Are you related to the dean of the university?" I question. The last name isn't super uncommon, but she could be her daughter or something. I've met the woman once, and I practically had to get on my knees and beg her to allow me to take all my classes remotely. The school offers online courses, but some of the ones I needed were supposed to be done in person. I remember the way her top lip curled when she told me I didn't deserve special treatment just because I was famous. I tried explaining to her that I didn't want special treatment and would do the same work as everyone else, but I needed to be excused from on-campus instruction because of my job. Trust me—being in the classroom would've made this shit a million times easier. I never once asked her for a lighter workload, and prior to this week, I've never turned in an assignment late. But she still made me feel like I was a waste of space for even asking. After initially telling me no, I received a phone call from her assistant saying that she had changed her mind. I have a feeling it was discussed, and they decided that my enrollment at the school might do something to lure new students in.

Lark scoffs in disgust, bringing my attention back to our conversation. "Not anymore, thank God. She's my ex-husband's mother."

The words are a shock to me. This girl doesn't sound old enough to be married and divorced. Plus, she sounds hot as fuck. I bet whoever this dude is, he's regretting the fact that he dropped the bag right now.

"I swear the dean didn't send me. I called the registration office to see if they could help me find a tutor, and Hailey told me that everyone who works there is gone for the summer. She suggested I hire you privately, and to be honest, I feel like it's the perfect situation for both of us. I'll pass my class, and you'll make enough money to pay your bills. You'll get to see

some cool places while we're traveling too," I tack on, trying to make this gig sound as interesting as possible. I really need her to say yes.

"What do you do for work that has you traveling all over the country while in college?" she asks.

"I play baseball. For the Daytona Fury."

"Like, the MLB team? *That* Daytona Fury?" she replies in surprise, making me chuckle. She's cute.

"It's the only team with that name, as far as I know," I reply. "And yes. I'm their catcher."

She gasps. "Are you the one with the butt? That dances to all the show tu—" She cuts herself off mid-sentence, and a quiet gasp comes over the line. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. That was inappropriate. I didn't mean to—"

I laugh again. "It's fine. Would it make you say yes if I told you that I am, in fact, *the one with the butt*?"

"You're serious," she says. "You'll really pay me a thousand dollars a week to help you pass Human Sexuality?"

I smile to myself. "Honestly? I'd pay you more than that if you asked. I have to graduate, and this is my one and only shot before my career gets kind of crazy. I'm a rookie, so everyone is watching and waiting for me to mess up. If I do, I could be sent back down to the minors, and I may never find my way back. I really need you, Lark. Please?" I'm not above begging her to do this. If Hailey is right, and she's the only one around to do it, I'll give her whatever she wants.

She sighs. "Alright. I'll tutor you. But let me at least do a little bit of research on you in the meantime. That probably sounds weird, but you can never be too careful. You could be a serial killer."

My brows shoot up into my hairline. "Funny. I thought the same thing about you. But here we are, about to embark on a nationwide adventure together, pending your Google investigation. If it speeds up the process, I promise I'm a perfect gentleman. I've never even gotten a speeding ticket. And I'll make sure that when we're on the road, you have a room of your own and a rental car in case you feel like you need to leave."

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she mumbles, and I internally fist pump because once she finds out I'm not a criminal, she's in.

Looks like I'm going to graduate, after all.

FIVE LARK

"I'M HERE FOR ACE MATHERS," I say to the security guard at the front gate of the stadium. He asked me to meet him here today so we could get to know each other a little bit before we start working. I did an extensive search on him and found out that he's actually just a regular guy who happens to play a professional sport. From what I gathered, he was raised by his grandmother and doesn't have any other family in the picture since her passing late last year. He also doesn't have any kind of a criminal record, just like he said, and seems to keep his nose fairly clean. I know that sometimes, these professional athletes can be plastered all over the tabloids, partying and hanging with women. There's nothing wrong with that, but I didn't find anything of the sort for Ace. It could be because he's only twenty-one years old, and from our conversation, he made it sound like baseball is his life right now. Either that, or he hides what he does in his spare time very well. I read no less than a hundred articles on everything from his high school life to the beginning of his rookie year in the league, and there wasn't a single attack on his character. People love him, his teammates speak highly of him, and that's good enough for me at the moment.

"Name, please?" the guard says, picking up a clipboard.

"Lark Dawson," I reply, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. I understand that they can't just let anybody in when it isn't open to fans, but this feels so formal. Maybe I should have suggested that we meet

somewhere on neutral ground where we'd both be comfortable. I've watched a couple of games here before, but I've certainly never met any of the players. This is his turf.

"Gotcha," he says, setting his list back down and pulling a set of keys from his belt loop. He inserts one into the lock on the gate and turns, pulling it open for me to enter. "Head toward the right, and when you get to the teal hallway, take your first left. He should be in there waiting for you."

"Thank you," I say, shyly pushing a piece of my long blonde hair behind my ear while I move past him. He nods, and I hear him close the gate behind me as I follow his directions. I find the teal brick hallway, making my way to the first door on the left. Before I get there, I stop, smoothing out my sundress and making sure I look somewhat professional before turning and going inside. I spot him immediately, sitting at a round table, looking down at a textbook. He doesn't see me at first, so I take a second to catalog his features. He looks every bit of twenty-one, with his smooth skin and plump lips. His nose is perfectly proportioned to his face, and I can tell without even looking at them that he has the deepest ocean-blue eyes I've ever seen. But what doesn't look young? His body. I've never seen anyone up close that's built the way he is. His neck and shoulders are thick and muscular, and his biceps bulge with every turn of the page. Wide veins wrap around his forearms, leading down to hands that I swear are much larger than normal.

Sweat beads at the back of my neck, and my mouth goes dry as he swallows, still completely unaware of my presence. I watch his Adam's apple bob under his tan skin, and I follow the movement, unable to tear my eyes away.

Holy shit, this guy is fuck-all hot. If I were ten years younger, there's no way I wouldn't embarrass myself by rubbing on him like a cat in heat right now.

Jesus Christ, Lark. You need to get laid.

It's been over a year since I've had an orgasm that wasn't self-induced. I didn't necessarily mean for it to happen that way, but it just felt weird thinking about sex with someone new when I was still married to Ryan. It wasn't my fault that our divorce ended up being dragged out for more than a year, but now that I'm not bound by my stupid morals, I'm hornier than ever. That's probably why I'm looking at Ace like he's a piece of meat instead of the younger guy who's hired me to tutor him. I need to stay

professional here, starting with not thinking about how tightly those long, thick fingers could wrap around my throat while he—

“Are you Lark?” he says, snapping me out of my extremely inappropriate fantasy. My eyes dart up to his, and just as I thought, the fuckers are ocean blue and so goddamn deep that I don’t stand a chance of looking away.

They certainly didn’t make them like this when I was twenty-one.

“Yes! That’s me!” I say in a high-pitched voice that I’ve never heard before. It has to be my nerves or something. I’ve been all out of whack since I lost my job, and I’m relying on this meeting with Ace going well because I really need the money. I have a small amount in my savings, but with how time-consuming the divorce was, it isn’t nearly as much as I had when Ryan and I first split up. Now that I have to find a way to pay for my tuition, I need all the extra cash I can get. I’ve uploaded my resumé to every career site on the internet, but in the meantime, traveling the country for a grand a week isn’t a bad deal.

He stands, a boyish grin stretching across his face as he makes his way over to me. I wipe my sweaty hands on my dress, hoping he doesn’t notice, before taking the one he’s extended between us and shaking it.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he says. “I’m Ace. Let’s sit down and get to know each other, yeah?” I nod in response, walking to the side of the table opposite from where his book is still splayed open. Before I get there, he rushes behind me, pulling the chair out and winking as I step in and slowly lower myself down into it.

Stop it, you charming little shit.

Once I’m settled, he rounds the table, sitting down and leaning back with his legs spread wide. It’s not one of those manspreading things where they just like to take up space to show how dominant they are. I’m pretty sure he just sits like that because he’s gigantic. I can’t get over how toned and muscular he is, but I’m going to need to figure out a way to block it out so I don’t get distracted. He’s hired me to do a job, and that’s what I need to focus on. My only objective is to make sure he passes this class so he can graduate.

“Tell me about yourself, Lark,” he says, my name rolling off his tongue like butter. I internally cringe because if I really tell him about myself, he’s going to think I’m the lamest person he’s ever met. I’m sure he has so many younger friends and teammates that party and have fun. And here I am,

thirty-one, jobless, divorced, and trying to start over. I'm in bed by nine o'clock most nights, and I can't remember the last time I got drunk just for the hell of it.

Wow. I *am* lame. That sucks. Clearly, being married to a wet blanket who gaslit me into thinking my enthusiasm was an annoyance made me lose my spark. As sad as it is, I don't even know when it happened, but I definitely miss the girl I used to be.

I clear my throat, trying to think of what to say that leaves out the fact that I'm a boring-as-fuck divorcee who wouldn't know a good time if she were choking on it. "Well, I'm thirty-one, I live here in Daytona, and I'm working toward a degree in psychology."

There. That's fine, right?

"Psychology, huh?" he replies. "You going to be one of those shrinks who makes you lay on a velvet couch and asks how you *feel* about everything?"

I laugh quietly. "No. I want to be a sex therapist for individuals or couples that are struggling with intimacy, but in order to do that, I need to start with my bachelors. Then, I'll get my masters."

His brows shoot up. "Wow. I didn't even know that was a thing. That's...pretty cool, actually."

"Thank you," I say shyly. I'm used to people reacting much differently when I tell them my plans. Maybe it's just because of the social circle I was in with Ryan and Gail, but I can't tell you how many times I heard that it was an unnecessary profession or that it was unbecoming of me to want to insert myself into people's sex lives. But it's so much more than that. Too many relationships fail because of things that could've been worked on or prevented when it came to intimacy. Sex is such a taboo subject that people are afraid to say when there's a problem. And even if they do admit it, it's hard to find help outside of their partner. If I can assist people in feeling comfortable enough to voice the things they want or need out of their physical relationships, I could potentially be changing their lives. That's all I really want.

"What about you?" I ask. "You seem to already have your career figured out. Why bother finishing school when you don't need to?"

The brightness of his smile dims a little. "When I was younger, I promised my grandmother that I would be the first in our family to walk across the stage for their diploma. She passed about six months ago," he

says, looking down at his hands clasped together in front of him before shrugging. “I owe it to her to follow through, even if she isn’t here to see it.”

I swallow hard, giving him a sympathetic look. “I’m so sorry, Ace.”

He shakes his head. “It’s cool. You didn’t know.” We sit there in silence for a beat, mainly because I feel terrible for drudging up something I’m sure is hard for him to talk about. I knew his grandmother had passed, but I didn’t realize she was the reason he was in school to begin with. I hope he knows how admirable that is, especially since he’s probably set for life with whatever he makes playing baseball.

“So,” he says, his adorable smile making a reappearance. “You’ve already taken Human Sexuality, right?” He crosses his arms over his thick chest, every bulging muscle firing off under his sleeves with the movement. I avert my eyes to the book that sits in front of us so I don’t get caught staring like some perverted old lady—even though that’s exactly what I feel like right now. I can’t make out the words on the page, but there’s a small picture in the bottom corner of a man on top of a woman with a bedsheet barely pulled above his waist. My whorish brain immediately goes where it shouldn’t, conjuring up an image of Ace on top of me while I writhe beneath him, begging for more. I only see it for a split second, quickly slamming my eyes shut before opening them again. Swallowing thickly, I attempt to find a non-sexual item in the room to focus on until I can get out of here. I need to take care of the ache between my legs while thinking about anything besides Ace Mathers.

I’m spiraling.

As if he can sense my awkward discomfort, he resumes the conversation. “Hailey said you passed with flying colors and that you’d be the best option to ensure that I get through it.”

I nod my head. “Sorry. Yes, I took it and got an A. I had the same professor as you, and we used the same textbook. I kept my notes, so that’ll be helpful. There’s nothing in the school’s policy saying that you can’t study with them, as long as I’m not giving you test answers or doing your graded assignments for you.”

He sighs in relief. “Okay, good. I logged into the student portal a few days ago, hoping to find some direction, but it was just a bunch of posts showing what we needed to read and the work that was due for each chapter. Even the message boards were empty.”

That's typical for an online course during the summer. Many times, they're full of adults who are going back to school but want to do things on their own as opposed to working together like a lot of the younger students. These streamlined summer semester classes are not for the faint of heart. They're fast-paced, and if you fall too far behind, you're fucked.

"Were you able to finish the assignment?" I ask. When we talked on the phone, I could sense his frustration, so I'm guessing we'll need to play catch-up.

"I did the first one, which was basically just a quiz with a bunch of personal questions. We didn't have to turn it in, but we got credit for checking off that we had done it. The second one was on anatomy, and I started it, but kept losing focus. Then there was another one assigned today that I haven't even had a chance to look at."

I reach into my bag, pulling out the notebook I used when I took the course last year. Flipping to the page for the assignment he started—a quiz on the male and female sexual anatomy—I slide it across the table to him. "I can't tell you the answers, but I will say that they're all in here somewhere. Professor Stockton allows open note testing, so this should get you through it. The next assignment is a short essay followed by another quiz, which we can work on tomorrow."

He looks down, taking in the very poorly drawn diagrams on the paper. I'm a visual learner, so I had to draw a penis and a vagina with arrows pointing to the various parts. I should be mortified, but whatever. He'll be thanking me when he sees how much this'll help him through the stuff he's fallen behind on.

"Nice cock," he says with a smirk. "A little small, but not everyone's blessed in that aspect, I guess."

My face heats with embarrassment, and I raise my hands to my flushed cheeks, trying my best not to let my smile break free. "I guess not," I reply quietly. "But I bet he has a great personality." We stare at each other for a few seconds before we burst into a fit of laughter, unable to hold back any longer. He throws his head back, running his hands down his face with a groan before looking at me again and flashing a charming grin.

"You're going to be a handful, aren't you, Sweets?" he says, and even though it shouldn't, my stomach flips at the nickname. It's not like I'm employed by the school, so there's no reason we can't have a little fun together while I tutor him, but I also need to remember that I'm newly

divorced, and he's ten years younger than me. The last thing he wants or needs is some older woman making eyes at him. He probably has a different girl for every night of the week anyway, but that's a good thing. At least it'll stop me from thinking inappropriate thoughts about him when I see a hot model on his arm.

"I'm worth every dime of that seven grand, Ace," I reply with a smile. "If you listen to me, you'll pass this class with no problem. I promise."

He gives me a tight nod before leaning back in his chair. "That's what I like to hear. As far as tomorrow goes, we're heading to Cleveland for two games, and then we'll be back to play at home. If you're available to start right away, I'll get you a plane ticket and a room at the hotel we're staying at. I've already let the team know that I'll need you with me for the remainder of the semester, and they're cool with it as long as I don't get distracted. We can work on assignments after games, since that's when I'll have downtime. Sound good?"

"Let's do it," I say, cringing internally at my choice of words. "Yes, it sounds good."

He arches a brow. "You said you're divorced, but do I need to be aware of any jealous boyfriends before we do this? Or anyone who might need you to be here during the next seven-ish weeks?"

I scoff, shaking my head. "No. Definitely not. I'm single, and I moved to Florida for college, so I don't have family here. I'm not really close to my parents right now because they hated my ex and didn't want me to marry him. We're working on it, but they certainly won't be randomly asking me to come home for a visit, so I'm all yours until the semester ends."

"Alright," he says, standing and rounding the table before stopping in front of me and extending a hand. I assume he wants me to shake it, but when I slide my palm against his, he captures it with his thick fingers, pulling me to my feet. Not expecting it, I stumble into him, bringing my free hand to his chest to stop myself. He looks down at me, his breath hitching before his eyes go wide, and he breaks the connection by stepping back and releasing me.

I clear my throat, looking down at my feet to ground myself before painting on a professional smile. "Call me as soon as you have the ticket info, and I guess I'll see you in Cleveland."

"Looking forward to it, Lark."

SIX ACE

I PACE the floor of my hotel room, checking the clock for the fifteenth time. It's five to eight, and Lark is supposed to be here to help me with my next assignment any minute. I'm so fucking nervous, although I'm not really even sure why. When we met yesterday, it started off well. I immediately noticed how hot she was with her long blonde hair and big blue eyes, but I stayed cool. We talked and laughed, and I even made a joke about the awful dick drawing in her notebook. But as soon as she fell into me when I pulled her up from her chair, everything inside me went haywire. Between her hand on my chest and the way she looked up at me like a deer in headlights as I towered over her—I felt things I'd never felt before.

I chalked it up to first meeting jitters, hoping that once we got to know each other a little better, I'd see her more as the girl who's helping me with my schoolwork, and less as the sexy bombshell I want pressed against me.

I've *never* wanted to kiss someone as badly as I did yesterday at the stadium. My heart was racing behind my rib cage, and it felt nearly impossible to stop myself from pressing my lips to hers. It was all I could do to back away before I fucked everything up.

I can't kiss my tutor. It's not an option. First of all, I need her help. Making any kind of move on her, especially if she doesn't feel what I felt yesterday, would have her running for the hills. Plus, she's ten years older than me. I have no problem with the age gap, but I'm sure she wouldn't be

interested in someone who can barely warm his own SpaghettiOs without burning his fingers on the bowl.

When I called her with the details of her plane ticket, I couldn't help but strike up a conversation. We talked for a bit—mostly about surface-level things—and I'm afraid to say that the urge to be near her and get to know her more only grew stronger. But I need to be realistic when it comes to Lark. She's the key to passing my class, and that's what's most important to me right now. I can be attracted to her and not act like a horny fuckboy. Maybe we can even be friends. But we can't, under any circumstances, kiss...no matter how much I want to taste those pouty pink lips.

I'm broken from my mental pep talk by a quiet knock on the door. Taking a deep breath, I shake out my arms, then rise to my full height before walking over and pulling it open. Lark stands on the other side with her arms piled full of supplies. Her golden hair is in a messy bun on top of her head, and her face is completely free of makeup. I immediately notice the smattering of freckles across her nose, dragging my eyes down to her plump, gloss-coated lips.

"Hey," I say, taking the items from her arms and stepping aside. "Come on in." As she walks past, I try not to inhale deeply, but it's a lost cause. As soon as her fruity perfume permeates the air around me, I take it in like it's the last thing I'll ever smell. My heart speeds up again, and I remind myself how ridiculous I'm being. I may not have a lot of experience beyond kissing, but I'm not a fumbling teenage virgin.

So why the fuck do I feel like one right now?

She makes her way to the table in the corner of the room, putting her bag down as I follow with her laptop and books. "I hope it's okay that I showered and got ready for bed before I came," she says. "I'm pretty lame, so I'm not used to being out this late at night. I'm thinking we'll probably need an hour or two to get through this lesson, and sadly, that'll put me way past my bedtime." The corner of her mouth tips up in a smile, and I can't help but return it.

"Sorry," I reply. "My schedule is awful with practices and games, so we kind of have to work when we can. I'll do my best to get through everything fast so you can get back to your room." I feel bad that she has to work around what I have going on, but I guess she would've declined my offer if she was really that concerned about it. Plus, since I'm usually out of here pretty early every morning, she'll get to sleep in most days.

Her eyes go wide. “Oh, no. I didn’t mean— You’re fine, Ace. I’m thirty-one, not eighty. I have no business being in bed this early. Maybe working with you will remind me that I’m still young enough to hang if I ever want to rekindle my old social life.”

“What do you like to do for fun?” I ask. I hope I’m not crossing a line with the personal questions, but I want to get to know her.

“Fun?” she asks, eyebrows furrowed as if she doesn’t understand the word. “What’s that?”

“Wowwwwww,” I say, drawing out the word. “That sounds bleak, Sweets. Am I going to have to show you how to have a good time?”

“I’ll have a good time if you pass this class,” she shoots back playfully as she sits down.

Shaking my head and taking the seat across from her, I smirk. “How about we make this interesting? For every assignment I pass, you have to do something fun with me.”

Her jaw drops open. “Are you bribing me? If I recall correctly, you need this class to graduate. Shouldn’t that be the only motivation you need?”

I shrug, sitting back in my chair and crossing my arms over my chest. “I respond best to positive reinforcement. I’m just saying, a little reward would make this a lot easier on both of us. If I get the work done right the first time, you can be in bed by nine when I’m not showing you the time of your life.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a master at sweet talk?” she asks, pausing to think. She chews at the inside of her cheek, and I cross my fingers under the table, hoping she’ll agree. “Okay, fine,” she relents, rolling her eyes. An ear-to-ear grin spreads across my face, and she points a serious finger my way. “But we aren’t going out every time. You’re going to have to come up with some hotel room activities because I’m not trying to die from exhaustion here.”

I give her a tight nod, trying my best to keep my composure even though I’m internally celebrating like I just won the goddamn lottery. “Of course. I can think of lots of fun things we could do in my bedroo—” I cut myself off, my eyes going wide as I realize what I’m saying. “I mean, my hotel room. Or yours,” I rush out on a nervous laugh. “There doesn’t have to be a bed. It’s not like we’ll be fu—”

“Ace,” she says, stopping me from word-vomiting anything else that’s going to make me want to crawl into a fucking hole any more than I do

right now. What the hell is going on with me? My limited sexual experience is a personal choice. It doesn't mean I don't know how to talk to women. I flirt all the time, but I never get flustered like this. Lark is completely off-limits, and even if she wasn't, she's way out of my league. I need to relax and stop thinking about what she'd look like in my bed.

"Yeah?" I answer, taking a deep breath and reeling myself in before looking back up at her.

"Do you want to get started? You were a little late on the last assignment, so the professor will definitely dock some points. But this one should get you full credit as long as it's in by midnight." She gives me a confident smile, tucking a strand of golden hair behind her ear. The gesture calms my nerves, making me jerk my head in affirmation.

"Good idea," I reply, reaching into my backpack to take out my laptop. I pull up what I have so far, sliding my chair around the table so she can see the screen. "I tried to get some of the essay done during batting practice, but I was kind of distracted."

She leans over, using her fingertips to scroll along the document. It's supposed to be five pages, but I barely got three paragraphs down before I gave up. "Okay," she says when she's done reading what I've written. "So, this assignment focuses on the physiology of sexual response. In nineteen-sixty, Masters and Johnson conducted extensive research on the way we respond physically to sexual stimulation. They came up with the EPOR model, which says that there are four phases the body goes through during sex. The first one is the excitement phase. This can occur from kissing, touching, fantasizing, or any other activities that get us aroused."

She looks my way, and I shift in my seat. I can read the smuttiest books all day long by myself and not blush, but the way she's talking about *us* getting aroused has me unable to sit still. I know she means humans—not me and her—but for some reason, I can't stop my brain from wandering.

I'm acting like a horny teenager. This poor girl has put her life on hold to tutor me, and I'm over here thinking about all the ways I want to make her wet.

Calm the fuck down, Mathers. You're an adult.

If she notices my internal battle, she doesn't let on. Instead, she continues her explanation.

"Phase two is called the plateau phase. This is when we're at the height of our excitement, and where we see the physical changes that happen to

our bodies. Erectile tissues fill with blood, causing the penis to get hard and the vaginal opening to reduce in size, making it tighter.”

Dear God, it's me, Ace. If you get me out of this lesson without popping a chub from the way she says the word tighter, I promise I'll never swear again. I'll brake for squirrels. I'll even send a Christmas card to my seventh-grade archnemesis, Riley Fletcher, who told the whole school that I peed myself after spilling a cup of yellow Gatorade on my white baseball pants.

I clear my throat, doing my best to focus, but it just gets worse. So much fucking worse.

“The third phase is orgasm,” she says, looking me dead in the eye like we’re discussing the weather. “It’s the shortest phase, lasting only about fifteen seconds. Leading up to orgasm, respiration and blood pressure increase, pulse speeds up, and there’s usually some loss of muscle control throughout the body, especially in the hands and feet. Fists clench, toes curl, and shaking can occur, depending on the intensity of the impending climax.”

I’m sweating at this point, having completely abandoned any plans of pushing her out of my mind as my thoughts go from somewhat innocent to utterly pornographic. I imagine pounding into her, watching as her fists grip the sheets and her tits bounce with every thrust before she soaks my cock, screaming my name so loudly that the hotel kicks us out.

“Ace?” she says, breaking me from my creepy-as-fuck daydream, staring at me as if she’d definitely been trying to get my attention for a lot longer than I’d noticed.

I swallow thickly. “Yeah?”

“Are you okay? You look flushed.” She reaches out, pressing the backs of her fingers to my cheek, and I have to fight my instinct to lean into her touch. Her sugary perfume envelops me, and a quiet groan gets caught in the back of my throat as I breathe her in.

“I’m good,” I reply, locking my eyes onto hers. She’s sexy as hell, but there’s also a comforting quality to the way she looks at me—like I know I could tell her anything and she wouldn’t judge. Not that I’d ever unload all my baggage onto her. To this day, the only people I ever talked to about what happened the night of the MLB draft are my grandma and my lawyer—and that’s only because I didn’t have a choice. The last thing I want to do is dig all that shit back up and tell Lark what a mess I am.

“Are you sure?” she asks, genuine concern for my well-being apparent in her expression. “If you aren’t feeling well, we can turn the assignment in late and ask for extra credit to offset the partial grade.”

I shake my head, slumping back in my chair. “No, I’m alright. Let’s finish up and get this thing written.”

She eyes me skeptically, standing and gathering our belongings before dropping them onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask, looking from her to my computer that’s now sitting on the mattress.

She pulls down the comforter, rubbing the pillow in invitation. “You were fine a few minutes ago, but now you look like you’re going to throw up. If you insist on continuing, you can get in bed while you do it. Now, come on.”

I breathe a long, slow sigh of defeat, rising from my chair and walking toward her as she holds up the comforter, waiting for me to slide under. Although this is stupid, since the only reason I got worked up was that I imagined her in situations I’ll definitely never have her in, I appreciate the fact that she wants to take care of me.

I stop in front of her, looking into her big blue eyes as she stares up at me. She’s curvy in all the best places, but she still looks so small as I tower over her, smiling softly before I finally relent and lie down on the soft mattress. She lays the blanket over me, and I pull myself up so that my back is against the headboard as she hands me my laptop.

“You too,” I say, patting the spot next to me. “We still have one phase left for you to explain and a whole essay to write.”

She hesitates, pressing her lips together as she considers my request. “I probably shouldn’t be in your bed, Ace. I’m your tutor,” she replies, shaking her head slowly.

“So.” I shrug. “It’s not like you work for the school. You aren’t grading my papers. Plus, this is completely innocent. No different than when we were sitting next to each other at the table.” Now that I have my imagination under control, I find my normal, flirty self. I know I can’t turn the charm all the way up, but shit almost got weird for a second, and I need us to be comfortable in these types of situations. We can be friends who sit next to each other in bed and talk about tight vaginas without anything happening.

It’s fine.

Everything is *fine*.

“You’re right,” she says, crawling across the mattress and settling in next to me. I want to offer for her to come under the covers, but that might be too much for us both. For her, because it would mean we’d actually be *in bed together*, and for me, because I was already fighting to keep my dick from getting hard just sitting there. I doubt this lesson is going to get less arousing as we write the essay.

“What’s next?” I ask, running my hands over the edges of my laptop because I honestly don’t know where else to put them. I’m trying to act natural, but my brain and my body are at odds with her close proximity.

“Umm...” she begins, trying to remember where she left off. “Resolution. This is the last phase of sexual response, where the body returns to its pre-aroused state. This can happen fast, especially with the man after ejaculation. The penis softens, and the scrotum relaxes, along with the heart rate and pulse slowing. For women, it can take longer, depending on whether or not orgasm was achieved. If it wasn’t, the body returns to a relaxed state much slower than it would if a climax had occurred. Blood flows out of the erec—”

“Wait,” I reply, cutting her off. “Is it normal for the woman not to have an orgasm during sex?” Her eyebrows pinch in, prompting me to go on with my question. “I mean, I know it’s harder for some than for others, but is the girl getting left unsatisfied really something that happens so regularly that you’re pointing it out to me right now?”

She looks down at her lap, where her open notebook sits. “It’s pretty normal. Some women need clitoral stimulation, whether it be with fingers or a toy. That can be a source of embarrassment for the man if he thinks he can’t get his partner there with penetration alone. Other times, I think maybe people can just be selfish when it comes to making sure the person they’re with is enjoying themselves too.”

I know I should leave it, but I’m fucking intrigued. I can’t stop the questions from coming out.

“Doesn’t that hurt? Wouldn’t it be painful for her if she got through the first two phases and couldn’t have an orgasm? All that blood gathering down low, waiting to be released—isn’t that uncomfortable? I can’t even think straight if I’m turned on and don’t take care of it.”

I look over, meeting her gaze, and I can’t explain the expression painted across her face. If I had to take a stab at it, I’d say she was perplexed. And

maybe a little awestruck. Like she's surprised I'd care enough to ask that.

"Yeah," she rasps. "It's uncomfortable. I wouldn't say it hurts. It just... aches."

Fuck.

She says it like she has personal experience, and it makes me want to find out just how neglected her body has been. Then find whoever did it and tell them how fucking stupid they are for not treating her like the queen she is—but it's none of my business. That's not why we're here.

I clear my throat, breaking our connection and returning my fingers to my laptop, where I delete everything I had typed out earlier.

"What are you doing? You had a good start," she says.

"I'm changing direction," I reply. "The essay can be on any topic as long as it has to do with the physiological response, so I'm going to write about the female orgasm. I want to understand it more, so what better way than by researching it like this?"

She huffs a quiet laugh. "Okay. Do you want help?"

I smirk. "Nah. I think I've got it. But will you hang out a little longer in case I get stuck?" I know I won't. Now that I have a topic I'm interested in, a book that explains it, and the entire internet to fill in the blanks, this should be a breeze. I just want her to stay a while. I like the way she smells and how warm the bed is with her in it.

"Sure."

SEVEN

LARK

SOFT SNORES slowly bring me to consciousness, and the first thing I register is how stiff my neck is. When I was in my twenties, I could sleep wherever I wanted—no pillow or blanket necessary—and wake up feeling rested and refreshed. Now, if I turn my head wrong for ten minutes, I can't move for a week.

This is thirty-one, I guess.

The snoring gets louder, and I stop focusing on my sore neck long enough to realize that I'm not alone. My eyes shoot open, and the first things I see are the head of thick hair on my chest and the muscular arm banded around my waist. I'm sitting halfway up, slouched against the headboard, and Ace is on his side, cuddled into me like I'm his favorite life-sized teddy bear. His laptop is lying on the other side of him, wide open as if it slid off before he rolled my way.

I take a moment to replay the events of last night, trying to recall exactly how I got here. The last thing I remember is Ace deleting his essay to start over and asking me to stay in case he needed extra help. Everything after that is a complete blank, which isn't really a surprise since I was already exhausted when I got to his room. I tried to play it cool and act like I don't have a strict nine o'clock bedtime routine, but I guess the jig is up since I fell asleep as soon as we were done with our lesson.

How fucking embarrassing, Lark.

I attempt to slide away from him, hoping I can sneak out of the room before he realizes that I stayed all night, but as soon as I move, his arm tightens around me. His head slips down, resting on my boob before he nuzzles his face into it, sighing contentedly. The tank top I'm wearing has a low-cut neckline, leaving his mouth directly on my bare skin as warm puffs of air ricochet off it with every exhale from his open lips.

Realizing I'm not escaping his iron grip without waking him, I muster up all the courage I can find and wiggle my body, nudging him in the process.

"Ace," I say quietly, hoping to get out of this in the least embarrassing way possible, but he doesn't rouse. He just presses his mouth even tighter to my breast, the low rumble of a satisfied moan coming from his chest. His lips move just slightly as a small amount of drool slides across my skin, and my traitorous nipple hardens under the thin lace of my bra. I point my head up to the sky, praying for the heavens to just open up and take me wherever I'm headed.

Hell, probably. What with the hard nipples for this unassuming guy who's ten years younger than me and all.

"Ace," I try again, louder this time. He stirs, humming against my skin before he stiffens, clearly aware of the position we're in.

He sits up straight, pointing directly at my boob. "I had my mouth on your—"

"Yeah," I say, not allowing him to finish. Whatever embarrassment I thought I'd feel in this moment skyrockets as he reaches out, swiping his thumb across the saliva he left behind and making my nipples harden even further right before his eyes.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

Just kill me. Right now.

"Sorry," he whispers, not removing his gaze from my tits. "I don't know how that happened."

I cross my arms over my chest and clear my throat, snapping him out of the staring contest he's having with my boobs. He brings his eyes up to mine as a small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

"What?" I ask, my brows pulled tight in confusion. He went from *deer-in-headlights* to *cool, calm and collected*, when I'm anything but.

"I've never had a girl spend the night before," he replies.

I roll my eyes. Why am I not surprised that he's the kind who makes them leave when he's done with them? He's so hot that he probably has a calendar with time slots for all his hookups. Good for him, though. He's young, rich, attractive and single. He should be living it up while he can.

"I'm not a girl. I'm your tutor. Me falling asleep in your bed was purely accidental and extremely unprofessional. That can't happen again, Ace."

He tilts his head, pressing his lips into a tight line. "Why not, Lark? We can do this and be friends. It doesn't have to be this stuffy situation where you show up, get me through an assignment and leave. We can enjoy spending time together. Maybe even hang out when we're not working, especially since we'll be stuck in hotels a lot of the time."

I scoff. "What are you going to do? Put a sock on the door when you're hooking up, so I know to go back to my room? I'm not here to cramp your style," I say. "I'm here to help you graduate. Plus, I've already promised you a night of wholesome, fully clothed fun for every passing grade. Anything more than that, and I can guarantee you'll be sick of me."

"First of all," he says, putting a finger in the air, "I don't hook up—and even if I did, I wouldn't if I knew you wanted to see me. Secondly,"—he adds another finger—"we never discussed our fun being fully clothed, but I can respect that. I guess I'll have to cross naked Twister off my list. And third," he says with another finger, "I'll never get sick of you, Sweets. You're way too pretty for that."

"You're a flirt," I deadpan. "Quit it."

He smirks, nudging my shoulder with his. "Come on, Lark. Let's be friends."

Wrinkling my nose, I consider what he's offering. He's right. I don't work for the school, and I can't alter his grades in any way. I really *will* be alone a lot when we're traveling to away games, which will be often. It wouldn't hurt to be alone...*together*. It's not like it'll go beyond that. It can't.

I attempt to nudge him back, but he's practically a brick wall. I ignore the warmth that seeps from his skin to mine through the sleeve of his t-shirt, chalking it up to the fact that I'm in a tank top and it's a chilly room. "Fine," I reply on an exhale. "Since you're obviously so hard-up for friends, I guess I could help you out."

A wide grin blooms across his face, and he brings a muscled arm around my shoulder, pulling me into him. "I'm going to friend you so hard,

Sweets. You won't regret it."

I roll my eyes. "We'll see. Did you get everything done last night?"

"Yep," he replies with a nod. "Turned it in at eleven forty-five, and I'm officially an expert on the female orgasm. Seriously. Quiz me."

"Okay," I say, turning my body toward him. His arm falls from my shoulder, and I immediately regret not staying still, even though it's probably better that I didn't. "How long does the typical female orgasm last?"

"I'm glad you asked," he replies confidently, straightening himself and angling toward me. "Generally, they last anywhere from three to fifteen seconds. However," he says, pointing a knowing finger in my direction, "if you incorporate acts such as edging, regular exercise of the Kegel muscles during and after sex, and stroking of the upper left quadrant of the clitoris, you can achieve extended orgasms, which have been known to last minutes."

My brows shoot up. I honestly didn't know that last part. He must've done very in-depth research. "Wow," I reply, trying to contain my surprise. "Good job. That's very...informative."

He clicks his tongue, nodding his head with a cocky grin. "It is, isn't it? I definitely learned a lot."

"I'm sure you did." I snort a laugh. "I bet the next girl you bang will be very grateful."

His expression goes solemn, and I fear that I may have overstepped. I probably shouldn't have said that, but all this talk of being friends has me acting like I can just blurt out anything. I shake my head. "I'm sorry. That was—"

"No, it's good," he rushes out, putting a cautious hand between us. "It's just...I don't really..."

"It's none of my business, Ace," I say softly. "I don't even know why the thought popped into my head."

"No, it's not that at all, Lark," he replies. "I like that you're joking around with me. I want that." A sincere smile spreads across his lips as his bright blue eyes connect with mine. "Really."

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I should go. I'll see you after your game tonight, *friend*."

He gives me a tight nod. "Yeah. See you then."

I slide out of bed, gather my belongings, and give him an awkward wave before leaving the room and heading to the elevator. As I wait, I replay the last twelve hours, wondering if I made a mistake agreeing to be friends with Ace. We're ten years apart, in completely different places in our lives, and I have no idea what's okay to say and what's going to make him uncomfortable. The way his whole demeanor changed when I talked about him hooking up with someone was strange, even though he said it was fine.

I cringe at the memory as the metal doors open, welcoming me to return to my own floor, where I should've gone last night. Instead, I'm doing a walk of shame that has a whole other meaning.

Fuck my life.

EIGHT ACE

“YOUR FASTBALL IS HOT TONIGHT,” I tell Riggs as we jog into the dugout after the sixth inning. We’re down by a run, but not because the pitching is off. The infield made a couple of costly errors in the second, but he hasn’t allowed a man on base since. He’s had a handful of strikeouts and easy pop outs—and to be honest, I think he has another inning or two in him before our manager, Clyde, takes him out.

“Too bad I can’t get my cutter under control. We’d be up if I could.” The man is an absolute legend as far as I’m concerned, but he’s his own biggest critic. If we lose on a night he’s pitching, he’ll carry it with him for days, obsessing over what he did wrong and how he can fix it next time.

“Your cutter is fine. Jacks missed that one that hopped wrong. Then Hawk bobbled the ball before making the throw to first. Both of those were off changeups, so there goes your theory.” I smirk, making him shake his head in faux annoyance.

“How’s school going?” he asks as our center fielder, Tyler Cruise, heads to the plate.

I shrug. “Pretty good. I hired a tutor to make things easier, and the team agreed to let her travel with me. You’d know that if you unlatched your lips from your girlfriend long enough to catch up.”

He huffs a laugh. “Yeah. That’s me. *The obsessed boyfriend*. Anyway,” he implores, rolling his eyes sarcastically.

“She showed up last night after our game. I was so fucking beat, we both ended up falling asleep in my bed. I woke up with my mouth inches away from her nipple, then shit got weird. Now I have to see her again tonight for another lesson, and I don’t know how to act. It’s hard enough talking about sex with someone you barely know, but she’s so fucking hot, dude. She’s got these perfect curves and she’s soft in all the right places. She should be locked up for being so goddamn sexy, and I have to sit there like everything is fine while she talks about erectile tissue.”

“Talks about *what*?” he chokes out, laughing as Cruise smacks a line drive right to the other team’s shortstop. I side-eye Riggs, who continues to take enjoyment in my misery, doubling over as he loses his shit. “Did you say *erectile tissue*? That’s really what you’re learning about?”

“Yeah,” I reply, scrubbing my hands down my face as the crowd roars in both cheers and boos for Hawk Mason. I don’t know why they bother with all the fanfare for the guy, to be honest. It’s not like he’ll ever crack a smile. He’s the best third baseman I’ve ever had the honor of playing with, but unless you’re our second baseman and his best friend, Jackson Blake, the likelihood of him acknowledging your existence is slim. “I wish that was the worst of it,” I continue. “I had to write an entire essay on the female orgasm as she slept with her head on my shoulder. Some of the research I did was so detailed that it took everything in me not to imagine it was her I was trying it all out on. How the fuck am I supposed to do this? She’s thirty-one, and I had to pull out all the stops just to get her to agree to be my friend.”

“So, make a move,” he says matter-of-factly. “If you’re attracted to her, what’s stopping you?”

I whip my head in his direction. “My grade in this class, for starters. And did you miss the part where she’s definitely not interested? She’s not some random girl at a bar that would sell her soul for five minutes with one of us because we play ball. She’s different.”

He looks into the stands beyond third base, where his girlfriend Monroe would be sitting if this were a home game. Even though they look like they want to kill each other sometimes, I know he misses her when we travel. “I hear that,” he says quietly as Hawk sends a deep ball past center field, sailing over the wall as the crowd voices their disappointment at the now tied-up score.

Our shortstop, Dante Cole, walks up for his turn at the plate. I put on my helmet and grab my bat off the wall, heading toward the on-deck circle. I watch him get into his stance, and I do the same, not willing to waste a single minute of my time here. The pitcher waits for the signal, nodding before winding up and firing a low slider right at Dante. When it passes the plate, I swing, visualizing my bat connecting with the ball and sending it out of the park. I repeat this with every pitch until Cole hits a single, leaving me with the opportunity to put us ahead by three runs if I can just slam one out of here. It's not uncommon for me to hit a home run, but it's also not the easiest part of the job.

If we were playing at home, I'd be making a show of dancing to the plate while whatever walk-up song I chose for the evening blared through the stadium speakers. It's been my thing since I was in the minors, and it made me a fan favorite, bringing people from all over to watch us play. When I was called up, I honestly thought the Fury would tell me to stop and focus on the game, but so far, it's been the exact opposite. The gimmick was embraced by the organization—after much convincing from our public relations manager, Taylor, I'm sure—and they've used it to sell tickets and merchandise.

I like the attention it brings. My grandma would call me her *little ham* when I was younger, always wanting all eyes on me, but the truth is that I just like having fun. Life is too damn short not to, which is why I'm so excited to bring that side out of Lark. From what I've seen so far, she doesn't have anyone to break her out of her shell. I want that person to be me.

I step into the batter's box, stretching my legs one last time before pulling my bat up over my back shoulder.

"Come on, Acey boy!" Riggs yells through his cupped hands. "Why don't you slap a tater for your new tutor? She'll love it!"

Holy shit. I'm going to kill him.

I seriously hope he's not near a hot mic. That'll be all over the sports news channels tonight, and I'll have to explain to Lark that I wasn't trying to show off for her by hitting a home run. Unless she actually *is* impressed by that sort of thing.

I'll hit one for her every goddamn night.

The pitcher gets his signal, winding up and throwing a curveball low and outside. I swing because that's my sweet spot, but end up missing by

just a few inches.

“Damn, Mathers,” Cleveland’s catcher, Vince Edwards, says. “Almost gave me a cold with that wind.”

“Fuck off,” I say with a grin, knowing I’m going to shut him up in just a minute. One way or another, he’ll be eating his words.

The next pitch comes, and I know immediately it’s a beauty. Low and way outside, but I take a swing anyway, the sweet *crack* of a connection reverberating through my hands and up my arms as I drop the bat and take off. It doesn’t quite have the distance Hawk’s did, but when it goes over the head of their left fielder, ricocheting off the wall and taking a very lucky bounce, I know it’s at least a triple. I blow past second base as he finally locates the ball, hurrying over to it and reaching out. I lose sight of him as I slide headfirst into third, knowing it has to be coming—but it doesn’t.

“He errored! Go!” the third base coach shouts as I shoot to my feet and take off like a bat out of hell toward home. I know it’s going to be close by the way Edwards’ eyes widen as he waits to make the catch. I stay as far left of him as I can, sliding again and grazing the plate with the tips of my fingers just as I feel his mitt touch my elbow.

“Safe!” the umpire yells, throwing his arms out wide as the crowd gets louder. I squint because I took about a pound of dirt straight into my eyes, slowly returning to my feet and dusting myself off.

“That cold really slowed you down, Vince,” I quip. “Get well soon.”

“Fuck you,” he replies with a quiet laugh as Dante runs up and jumps on my back. Pain radiates up my hip at the contact, and I wince, trying not to let on that I got hurt on the play. If Clyde finds out, he’ll bench me for the rest of the game—and I can’t afford that. I have to be in top shape at all times so I can prove to the organization that I’m worth keeping.

“Hell yeah, baby!” he yells as he hops down, slapping my shoulder. I laugh, walking into the dugout where my team awaits, ready to congratulate me. Taking it all in, I accept the high fives and fist bumps before sitting on the bench. I immediately feel the sting from my pants rubbing against the now-tender skin of my thigh, and I’d bet every dime I have that I’m going to be dealing with one hell of a friction burn when I get back to the hotel.

In the end, we win by a run, capping off our road trip on a high note. Despite my injury—which I tell no one about—I’m excited on the bus ride back, ready to see Lark again and get to work on my next assignment. I just hope the awkwardness from earlier doesn’t bleed into tonight.

NINE

LARK

“HEY, SWEETS. COME ON IN,” Ace says as he opens the door for me. His hair is damp, and he’s wearing only a pair of low-hanging basketball shorts, clearly fresh from the shower. I try my best not to stare as I step into the room, taking in how amazing he smells as I pass.

Walking over to the table, I set my laptop and books down, noticing the giant bag of mixed bulk candy in front of the chair I used last time. For some reason, I fixate on it, taking in all the colorful, sugary pieces as my mouth waters. I have the biggest sweet tooth, and this bag is full of some of my favorites.

“I wasn’t sure what to get you,” he says over my shoulder, making me jump at how close he is. “I figured you can’t go wrong with the classics.”

I turn my head, looking up at where he towers over me. “These are mine?”

He shrugs. “A little thank you gift for letting me put my mouth on your boob.” A boyish grin blooms across his face, making me turn and slap his shoulder playfully. He laughs, rubbing the spot as though I hurt him. “Yes, they’re yours.”

I smile shyly, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Thank you.” I don’t know why I’m shocked at the offering. It’s just a bag of candy. Maybe it’s because after we got married, I put on some weight, and Ryan was always criticizing my sugar intake. Every time he saw me with a treat, he’d make a comment about how it would affect my body.

I'm happy with the way I look. I'm not stick thin, and I definitely weigh more now than I did in college—but I'm healthy. I work out and eat plenty of vegetables and proteins...I just also happen to never turn down a sour gummy worm. It's taken me a long time to reach this level of comfort in my own skin. I have days from time to time when I wish I looked like the models on the covers of fashion magazines, but that's just not my body type—and I'm okay with that.

"You're welcome," he replies, rounding the table and pulling out his chair. He winces as he slowly lowers himself down, shifting his weight to one side.

"What's wrong?" I ask. He's clearly in pain, which is jarring to see because he's so big.

He shakes his head. "Just a little parting gift from tonight's win. It's no big deal." He moves again, trying to find relief against the hard pleather he's sitting on.

"Ace, you're not going to be able to focus if you're uncomfortable. Let's get on the bed so you can lie down."

He hesitates before exhaling a heavy sigh. "Alright, but I really am fine. It happens all the time." He reaches over and gathers my belongings, candy included, and sluggishly makes his way to the bed. I follow, waiting for him and noticing how his hand hovers over his hip as he lowers onto the mattress before settling on the opposite side.

"Can I see it?" I ask, immediately realizing how terrible of an idea it is. From where he was holding it, I know the injury is up high enough that he'd need to pull his shorts down to show me. But I want to help him.

His brows pinch in as though he's considering it before he finally relents, pushing his fingertips under his waistband and sliding the black mesh and his boxer briefs down his hip. My eyes focus on his round ass right away, and I instantly regret the whole thing.

Fuck. It's perfect.

I knew Ace had the most exquisite butt, even with pants on. But seeing the smooth skin stretched over his tight muscles is making me feel things—things I definitely should *not* be feeling about the guy I'm tutoring. I do my best to peel my gaze away, which isn't that hard once his injury comes into view.

"Oh my God," I whisper, bringing my hand over my mouth in shock. "Ace."

“I’m okay, Sweets,” he replies quietly, as if he’s trying to calm me down. “Hazard of the job. I slid into home at a weird angle. It’s just a friction burn.” The skin is raw and bruised, with angry scrapes scattered along the surface. It looks extremely painful, and I immediately shift into caretaker mode, needing to make him feel better.

“Do you have a first aid kit?” I ask. “You need ointment on this. You cleaned it well, but it’ll get infected if you aren’t careful.”

He looks toward his luggage that’s piled in the corner of the room. “I don’t think so. Maybe the hotel stocks them in the bathrooms. I’ll go look.” He pulls his waistband up and attempts to sit, but I place a gentle hand on his shoulder, pushing him back.

“I’ll get it. Stay here.” He nods in understanding as I turn and head through the door, opening drawers to see that they’re all empty. Thankfully, when I check under the sink, I find what I’m looking for as a small white box with a red cross on top comes into view. I pick it up, pop the top, and remove the gauze, medical tape and antibiotic ointment.

“They have everything we need,” I say, returning to his side. “Can you hold your shorts down for me again?”

He swallows thickly, obliging as he angles his head away from me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was uncomfortable, so I double-check. “Is it okay for me to touch you? I’ll be careful.”

“Yes, please,” he replies on a breath, and I watch his eyes close before uncapping the tube and squeezing some of the clear gel onto my fingertips. It’s a pretty decent-sized wound, so I’ll need to do this more than once.

As tenderly as I can, I apply the ointment, doing my best to cover all the open skin without causing him too much pain. “You okay?” I ask, listening to his quickened breath as I move my hand along his hip.

“Yeah,” he whispers. “It feels good.”

“Good,” I echo quietly, ghosting gently along his warm skin and feeling the firm muscles contract slightly under my touch. I continue, making sure the whole thing is covered before replacing the cap and setting the tube on the nightstand. Picking up the gauze, I unfold the biggest one to make it large enough to cover the entire burn, thankful to find that it’s just the right size. Any smaller and we’d have had to leave his ass hanging out all night, which would be *detrimental* to my focus. My eyes keep wandering as it is.

I carefully lay the dressing over the wound, reaching for the tape and pulling off long strips before affixing them to the edges to hold it down. He

sucks in a quiet gasp as I graze my fingers along them to make sure they're pressed down, and I pull back in fear that I've hurt him.

"I'm sorry," I reply. "All done. I promise."

He turns his head, locking his gaze onto mine. It's intense—like he's trying to see inside my soul as he stares without blinking. "Don't be sorry. I liked it. Thank you." I can't help but think about how different he is from what I'm used to. He's not being macho and telling me he doesn't need my help. The only reason he said he was fine to begin with was because I was concerned. But when I offered to take care of him, he let me instead of acting like I was blowing everything out of proportion. I'm sure he wasn't lying when he said things like this happen all the time, but he still allowed me to try to make him feel better. Ryan used to tell me I was doing too much when I tried to care for him, yet he would let his mom come into our home and treat him like a child if he so much as sneezed. As his wife, that was never an easy pill to swallow. I always felt so unimportant.

But Ace made me feel the exact opposite.

"You're welcome," I say quietly, finally breaking our connection and gathering the supplies before hurrying to the bathroom as fast as my feet will carry me. I close the door, setting everything on the counter as I turn on the faucet and wash my hands, abruptly scrubbing soap between them as I try to rid all the strange things I'm feeling from my mind.

"You don't really like him, Lark. You just haven't touched a man's ass in a long time, and you're thinking with your vagina," I mumble to myself quietly, turning off the tap and looking into the mirror. "He's so young. You're his tutor. Get your shit together."

I return the first aid supplies to their spot under the sink before smoothing my hair and opening the door. Ace is now propped up against the pillow, typing away on his laptop as he focuses on the screen. I almost crawl up beside him on the bed but think better of it, taking a chair from the table and pulling it toward him. He pauses, giving me a skeptical look.

"I see how it is," he says. "I'm good enough for a booty rub, but not a cuddle. Got it."

I roll my eyes. "First of all, it wasn't your *booty*. It was your hip. And secondly, I'm here to help you with tonight's assignment. Not to cuddle."

He types for another thirty seconds, pressing the enter button and closing the laptop before looking back over at me. "It's done."

“What?” I reply, scowling. “You’re telling me you answered all the vocabulary questions while I was washing my hands?”

He shrugs, setting the computer aside. “I figured you were taking a shower or something with how long you were in there.”

Shit.

Looking at the clock on the wall, I realize that my little pep talk lasted fifteen minutes. I also notice how raw my palms feel from the amount of time I spent lathering them up. I clear my throat. “The ointment was hard to get off.” It’s a lie, but he lets it go, adding to the many reasons I find him endearing. He’s cocky, but it’s more playful than anything. He can obviously tell I’m a little flustered, but he isn’t pointing it out or making me feel embarrassed over it.

Nothing like a guy being a decent human being to make you realize how low the bar actually is.

“Oh. Okay,” he says. “And yes, I did the vocabulary assignment. I just have to do the quiz, and I’ll be done with the Physiology module.”

“Good job,” I say, and he smiles at the praise. “Do you have any questions or want to revisit any of it? Since this is a streamlined course, there isn’t a midterm. But all the stuff you just learned will definitely be on the final, which is a huge part of your grade.”

He shakes his head. “I think I’ve got it. The notes you gave me were really helpful, and I’ll use them when I study at the end of the semester.”

I guess my work here is done. The weekly assignments are always posted on Sunday evenings, but the quizzes don’t go up until Thursday. So, as far as this week goes, Ace has done everything he can.

“Well, I’ll see you back in Daytona, then,” I say, standing from my chair and turning toward the door. I don’t even get a single step before he shoots up and wraps his large hand around my wrist. Heat travels up my arm, and I freeze. Not because I don’t want him to touch me—but because it feels better than it should.

“Not so fast, Sweets. You owe me a night of fun.”

TEN ACE

“EXCUSE ME?” Lark says, looking at me like I just told her I wanted her on her hands and knees, legs spread wide on my bed. Which I fucking do, but she doesn’t have to know that. She yanks her arm from my hand, confusion written all over her face as I chuckle.

“You promised me a night of fun for every assignment I passed. My essay grade just posted while you were in the bathroom, and I got a B, so I’m cashing in.”

She eyes me like she doesn’t believe it. I turn, swiping my laptop off the bed and opening the student website, where my most recent grade is front and center in bold black font. As soon as her eyes home in on it, a bright smile blooms across her face. “Oh my God, Ace! That’s amazing!”

God, she’s fucking pretty. I could look at her all day.

I nod, a cocky grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Time to pay up, Sweets.” She rolls her eyes as I bend down, digging out the large bag I had delivered during our game. I knew that essay was good enough, so I made sure to prepare. Holding the plastic bag from the toy store out between us, I wiggle my brows.

“You’re scaring me,” she jokes. “What are you going to make me do?”

I reach in, pull out the contents, and lay them on the mattress while she watches.

“Board games and a video game console?” she questions. “I almost forgot how young you are.”

I scoff sarcastically. “At least I know how to have a good time, granny,” I quip. “I’m aware that it’s past your bedtime and all, but you made a deal. Now you have to play with me.” As soon as I say it, I realize how dirty it sounds, but I don’t take it back. I want us to be able to joke around with each other. It feels natural for me, and I want it to be the same for her. We may not be able to date, but a little harmless banter and flirting won’t hurt.

“Oh my God,” she says. “One game. Then I’m leaving.”

I throw my head back in mock exasperation. “Fine. But I get to pick, and you can’t complain.” She scans the options, finally relenting by sweeping a dramatic arm out as if to say *Be my guest*.

I appear as though I’m thinking carefully, tapping my bottom lip for a little extra razzle-dazzle as she waits, shifting from one foot to the other impatiently. The truth is, I know exactly what I’m picking. My hip is going to hate me for it later, but I really want to get close to her again, and this might be the only way.

I reach forward and pick up the winner.

“Twister?” she says with a laugh. “Ace, you can barely walk. We’re not doing this. Let’s hook up the PlayStation instead.”

I look down at her, shaking my head confidently. “Nope. I worked really hard on that essay, and I deserve my reward. Are you really going to go back on your word, Sweets? That’s not a very redeeming quality. I’m so disa—”

“Jesus Christ, *fine*,” she groans, cutting me off. “One game of Twister—and if you hurt yourself even more, I’m not helping you again.”

Fuck yes.

“You and I both know you’re not saying no to another peek at my ass, but whatever you have to tell yourself,” I reply, making her scowl as I open the box. I walk over to the table, pulling it out of the way before laying the mat down on the floor. It’s definitely a tight fit, but I’m determined to make this work. With any luck, the lack of space will cause us to get tangled up even more. Next, I take out the spinner, and she gives me a smug look.

“So much for your plan, smart guy. If we’re both playing, who’s going to spin for us?”

I hold it up in the air before flinging it over my shoulder. “You really are an old lady, aren’t you?” Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I open the spinner app and show it to her. “This spins once every fifteen seconds and

tells us out loud what it lands on, so we don't have to move once we're settled on our colors."

She huffs a resigned laugh, taking the scrunchie from her wrist and using it to pull her hair into a messy bun. Some of the shorter pieces that frame her face fall out immediately, and she tucks them behind her ear. I can't help but notice the slope of her neck and the smooth skin that's begging to be licked. *I wonder if she tastes as sweet as she smells.* Shaking my head rapidly, I try to rid myself of the inappropriate thoughts I keep having about her, but they never seem to go away. Playing a game where our limbs could end up intertwined probably isn't the best idea, but I can't think of anything I want to do more right now. Even if I do end up getting hurt further, it would be worth it.

"You're going down, Mathers. I'll have you know I'm very flexible," she says, and my eyes go wide with surprise at the playful look on her face. Apparently, all it took was getting her into a competitive mood to see her sassy little attitude, and I have to say I don't hate it.

"That's adorable, Lark," I mock, fake pouting. "I'm a professional athlete. I don't think a tiny thing like you is going to be much of a match." I reach over to the bed, grab the bag of candy, and twist off the tie that's holding it closed. Dipping my hand inside, I fish out a sour rainbow bite and pop it into my mouth. She watches the movement, swallowing thickly as my jaw works. Pulling out another one, I step closer and hold it up in front of her lips. She hesitates, her gaze landing on my hand. I'm afraid that it's too intimate of a gesture, but she surprises me by leaning forward, her eyes connecting with mine as she slowly takes it. Her tongue grazes the tips of my fingers, and I have to bite back a groan at the way it feels against my skin. Wet and soft and so perfect.

"Thank you," she says, not breaking eye contact as she chews and swallows, licking the last of the sour sugar from her bottom lip.

"You're welcome," I say softly. "But now I have to kick your ass at Twister."

"Bring it," she replies with a wink, pinching my cheek before walking over to the mat. I laugh, starting the app and setting the phone down on the bed before taking my spot across from her.

"Player one. Right foot, red," the robotic voice instructs, and I motion to Lark.

“Ladies first,” I say, waving my hand in invitation. She gives me a side-eye, stepping her foot onto the circle closest to her as we wait for my turn.

“Player two. Right foot, green.” I extend my foot to the green dot. We couldn’t be further away from each other, but it’s only a matter of time before that changes. She looks at me, and I wink, making her roll her eyes.

“Player one,” the app continues. “Left foot, yellow.” She steps fully onto the mat, standing on the yellow circle right in front of my green one. I chose one toward the middle of the mat, making it so she’d be right next to me no matter what side she went with. Our faces are so close that I can smell the sour candy she just ate every time she breathes. I do my best to act unaffected as I await my turn.

“Player two. Left hand, blue.”

I choose the circle near her foot, bending down and placing my hand in the middle of it. I’m not sure if it was a dumb idea or the best one I’ve ever had because, my face is right in front of her spread legs. I look up at her, a cocky smile stretching across my lips before I bring my focus to where her thin black leggings cover her core. I honestly wasn’t expecting this to go my way so quickly, but the hours I spent researching and writing that essay are already paying off in spades.

“Player one. Right hand, blue.”

I internally fist-pump as her eyes go wide, realizing that there’s absolutely no other choice but to lean backward. It’ll put her in a crabwalk position, bringing her pussy even closer to my face than it is now. She takes a minute to work out the details, but there’s only one logical way to do this. I’m blocking the rest of the blue dots with my body, and if she uses the one between her legs, our faces will practically be touching.

She bends her knees and puts her hand on the blue spot behind her as I chuckle quietly. “You’re an ass,” she replies, but when I look at her, I notice how she’s biting back a smile.

“Player two. Right hand, green.”

Fucking perfect.

This couldn’t be better if I had rigged it myself. I have two choices. I can either bitch out and choose the green circle directly in front of my right foot, or I can make a move and essentially lay myself on top of her by skipping a couple.

I think for a fraction of a second before throwing caution to the wind and leaning over her, caging her body in with mine while making sure she

doesn't have room to adjust herself too much.

"Oh my God," she mumbles. "You planned this." Her tone is playful, so I match her energy as I paste a look of faux shock on my face.

"What?" I gasp. "I would *never* do that. It's the way the game works, Sweets."

"Yeah, okay," she replies as the voice tells her what's next.

"Player one. Right hand, blue." It's already there, so she doesn't move. The app is set to spin every fifteen seconds, and I make the most of it, leaning forward just enough to put some weight on her. I can feel her limbs shaking as she attempts to hold herself up, wobbling more and more while I push into her.

"Player two. Left hand, red."

She scoffs as I bite back a laugh, extending myself wider over her. The stretch forces me to press my body even tighter to hers, and she finally accepts defeat and falls to the floor, taking me with her. We both laugh as we crash down, our limbs a tangled mess until I'm lying on top of her with our faces just inches apart. We stay there for a while as the app continues spinning, unable to tear our gazes away. I know I should get up. I had my fun. I got close to her. But for some reason, I just *can't*.

Seconds tick by as we lie there, and I take a chance because she's so fucking pretty that I can't stop myself. Bringing my hand up, I push a strand of golden hair from where it's draped across her forehead. She leans into my touch, and even though I want to kiss her more than I want my next breath, I don't. I'd be crushed if she rejected me, so it'll have to be her decision to take this any further than some playful flirting.

"How's that flexibility working for you?" I mock softly, making her shove me away in fake annoyance. I bark a laugh, pushing back onto my knees and standing before extending a hand to help her. She takes it, and sparks ignite under my skin as I pull her to her feet, stepping away as soon as she's steady because I need to put some space between us. As much as I want to be close to her, I didn't anticipate that the urge to press my lips to hers would get stronger the more I tried being her friend. It was already hard to fight before—now it's damn near impossible.

"Well," I say smugly, "as long as we're both on the same page that I'm the superior Twister player, you're free to go. I'll let you off the hook on the *night of fun* business since it's late, and we have planes to catch in the morning."

She smiles, walks over to the bed, and picks up the bag of candy before reaching in and popping a piece into her mouth. “Fine,” she sasses. “But I’ll be practicing for next time. You won’t beat me twice.”

I scoff. “The only way you’re beating me is if we play with no clothes on because I’d be far too distracted to concentrate. But since that goes against your *wholesome and fully clothed* rules on our nights of fun, it looks like I’ll remain undefeated.”

She tilts her head, contemplating before closing the space between us. My eyes widen as she wraps a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me down and pushing to her tiptoes so her mouth is right next to my ear. “You know what they say. You’re only remembered for the rules you break.” She pulls back, smiling sweetly as I sit there gaping like a fish without a single human thought in my brain. “Good night, Ace.”

Sauntering toward the door, she exits the room, leaving me to wonder what the fuck just happened—and how I can get her to do it again.

ELEVEN

LARK

“SO, you’re telling me that people thought jerking off would kill them in the 1800s?”

“Yep,” I say with a giggle. “Doctors warned men that if they masturbated, they’d become intellectually stunted and eventually experience memory loss. For women, it was even worse. They were told that if they dared to touch themselves, they’d fall ill with a dry cough and pale complexion that would eventually turn into weakness and death.”

After the away trip last week, we returned to Daytona, where Ace had half a day off before playing twice at Fury Field. We were able to get some studying in before the quiz, which he passed with a C, then read ahead a little bit for the Sexual Behaviors module that officially started yesterday. We still ended up a little behind because we spent all of yesterday traveling to Los Angeles, so we’re catching up now at the hotel. It’s a smaller room than last time, and there’s no table to sit at, so we’re huddled together on the queen-sized bed. It’s not exactly ideal, but we’re making it work.

After our flirty game of Twister the other night, I’m doing my best to stay on task, but it’s been hard. I acted way out of character before I left his room, yet for some reason, I haven’t felt weird about it. I probably should, since I’m his tutor and we’re ten years apart, but he’s fun to hang out with, and he makes me feel like I can just be me. Even though we’ve only known each other for just over a week, I feel so comfortable around him—like I don’t have to hide. I can be silly and flirty, and he gives it right back.

His brows pull in, confusion written all over his face. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. I’m dumber if I don’t jack off at least once a day. I can’t focus if I’m backed up.”

I shrug, looking down at my notes as I try to erase the mental image of Ace fucking his hand from my mind. I wonder if he lies on the bed or stands in front of a mirror. Does he do it in the shower? Does he moan, or is he silent when he orgasms? Does he stroke with his fist, or does he fuck into it with his hips?

Holy shit, Lark. You truly have no shame. Focus.

I clear my throat. “There are a lot of benefits to masturbation, both physical and psychological. The reason why it was looked at in that way back then was because nobody was comfortable talking about it. Even conversing about sex between a married couple was off-limits. Unless it was for procreation, the act of intercourse was frowned upon. People rarely did it for pleasure alone, and if they did, they never discussed it.

“That’s why researchers in the nineteen-eighties developed something called the Sexual Opinion Survey, or *SOS*. They wanted to be able to study people’s reactions to certain thoughts and behaviors regarding sex, and how comfortable they are with certain topics. You took one as your first assignment for this course. Professor Stockton always has her students do them at the beginning, then again toward the end to see if anything has changed. It’s really more for yourself since nobody sees them but you, but it’s interesting to see how people’s attitudes and comfort levels shift when they’ve been exposed to more information.”

“Did yours change a lot?” he asks. “I mean, after you took the course?”

I shake my head. “Well, I sort of knew I was comfortable talking about sexual behaviors before I signed up for the class because I had already started on my path to becoming a sex therapist. At least, that was my path—until I found out I wouldn’t be getting my tuition covered anymore.”

He frowns, tilting his head to the side. “So, you completely dropped out?” he asks.

I shrug, exhaling a defeated breath. “If I can come up with the full amount for the year, plus books and supplies, I can at least get a few more classes under my belt. It all happened so fast. I didn’t really have a backup plan until you came along. One minute, I was working at the college with free tuition, and the next, I was in my ex-mother-in-law’s office being fired.” His eyebrows pull together, and he scratches his cheek, clearly

confused, so I continue. “She wants me to go back to using my maiden name because she doesn’t like the thought of me tarnishing her family’s prim-and-proper reputation by helping people work through their issues with sex.”

He smirks knowingly. “And you don’t want to give her the satisfaction.”

“Exactly.” I pop a shoulder. “I *could*. I’m sure it would make my life a lot easier, but she always bullies people. She did it to me throughout my whole relationship with her son. We never made any decisions together, even when they affected us both. If he needed something, she basically pushed me out of the way to take care of it. I always knew she was overstepping and inserting herself into our marriage, but I thought it was just a bad habit. I didn’t realize she was sabotaging the entire thing until the damage was already done. I lost so much respect for them both that I couldn’t come back from it.”

My eyes go wide. I just word-vomited all my baggage on this poor guy. He probably thinks I’m a fucking basket case. Who does that?

“That was way too much,” I rush out. “I’m sorry, Ace. I didn’t mean to—”

“Fuck her,” he says. “Fuck them both. You deserve better than that, Lark. I’m sorry they treated you like you didn’t have anything to offer. Just so you know”—he looks up, his gorgeous blue eyes burning into mine—“I think you’re amazing. And I admire the way you’re standing your ground.”

I bring my gaze to my hands, which are twisted together in my lap. “Thanks,” I reply. “I just hope all this fighting isn’t for nothing. Even if I do make enough to get myself through school, then what? Opening my own practice would be a risk in this economy. Not to mention, specializing in sex therapy instead of just general therapy or marriage counseling may be a bad choice. Society still places such a stigma on asking for help when it comes to issues with sex, whether they’re personal or with a partner. Will I even be able to build a clientele?” I shake my head. “I want to help people, but these thoughts get me every now and then, making me second-guess everything I’m working so hard for.”

His hand extends between us, curling a finger under my chin and lifting it so I’m looking at him. “You’re going to make a difference, Lark Dawson. Don’t doubt yourself.” The way he says it is soft, but also like he’s fully confident in his words. So much so that it makes me believe them too. In this moment, I realize that there’s more to Ace Mathers than just some

young, professional athlete who likes to flirt and joke around. Sure, he does those things. They're what make him so much fun to spend time with. But there's also a man underneath all of that who's supportive and caring...and even though he's famous and has tons of money, he doesn't judge.

I swallow thickly, not knowing whether I want him to pull his hand away or lean in and kiss me, but I'm definitely confused as our gazes only become more intense. I can't tear my eyes away. Looking at him makes me feel...warm. Like I'm being wrapped in a fluffy blanket and held tight.

We sit there for what feels like minutes, his hand finally dropping down to grab mine and pull it free from where it's being gripped by the other. He laces our fingers together, indecision slipping over his expression for just a moment before he exhales and speaks again.

"My mom had me when she was sixteen years old," he begins as I listen intently. I can tell that he's uncomfortable with whatever he's about to say, so I squeeze his hand gently in a silent show of support. "She dropped out of school to take care of me but got sick of motherhood really quick. She'd go out with her friends, leaving me with my grandmother and not coming back for days. When she did, she was almost always hungover. She'd sleep it off, doing the bare minimum as a mom, just to take off again the next night. Eventually, she said she didn't want me anymore and just...*left*."

I sigh, bringing my other hand to where ours are intertwined and rubbing his knuckles with my fingertips.

"As I got older, my grandma made sure I knew the consequences of having sex. She would warn me that having a kid would ruin my life, and I'd end up not being able to play baseball. The thought scared me so much that, before I knew it, I was an eighteen-year-old virgin."

I shake my head slowly. "Ace, a lot of people wait until they're adults to have sex. Between the way society views it as taboo—and how we've placed more importance on preaching purity than actually teaching people how to be safe—it's hard to make an uninfluenced decision. It's okay to wait in the same way that it's okay to explore."

He looks down at where my thumb is ghosting over the back of his hand. "It didn't really bother me much through school because I was constantly playing travel ball. My only focus was standing out to scouts as a top prospect, which I did. But right after the MLB Draft, it all changed."

He takes a shaky breath, looking up at me for just a moment before averting his eyes back down. "There was this girl. I went to school with her,

and she was super popular. She dated the captain of the football team for a few years, but they broke up that night. She said it was because she realized how unmotivated he was. She told me all these things about how amazing I was and how she was proud that I'd been drafted and was going to do such big things. I was completely inexperienced when it came to even talking to girls, so I ate it up. She seemed so genuine.

"One thing led to another, and we ended up in her bed. I was nervous, but I had watched enough porn to know what went where. I was fumbling like the virgin I was, but I did my best not to let on because I was honestly embarrassed and didn't want her to know I'd never done it before. But when the time came, I blew my load in seconds. It was mortifying."

"That's normal for the first time," I reassure him, and he nods.

"Yeah, I know," he continues. "Anyway, she said it wasn't a big deal and kissed me goodbye, so I stupidly thought maybe we were going to try to date each other. When she showed up on my doorstep two days later with a recording of our entire experience, I went into panic mode. She said I was the worst lay she'd ever had, and that she was going to send the video to the whole school. She purposely had her head turned away from where the camera was hidden, so even though it was in her room, nobody could technically prove it was her. But there was no mistaking my face."

He swallows, keeping his eyes lowered to my lap. "She told me she'd delete it if I paid her, but I didn't have any money. Just because I had been drafted didn't mean anything. I wasn't given a contract or signing bonus right away, so I was backed into a corner. I had no choice but to ask my grandmother for help.

"She was so angry with me—telling me how irresponsible I was and how I had ruined my life after she tried so hard to teach me. I was safe. I used a condom and did everything I could to protect myself from getting her pregnant or getting an STI, but I never expected that I would be recorded without my permission and blackmailed for it."

This poor guy. He was so careful, yet his privacy and trust were still obliterated. I can't even begin to imagine how hard that was for him.

"Did you tell the police?" I ask. "What she did to you is so illegal."

He shakes his head. "We talked to a lawyer, and while he encouraged me to press charges, he also said that if it went to court, the whole thing would be public record. Media would find out, and the team might've seen me as more trouble than I was worth with all the bad PR it could've

brought. So, I decided not to report it. We sent her a cease and desist letter, which apparently scared her because she came to me and said she had deleted it and that it would never see the light of day if I promised not to go public with what she did. I had a lot to lose, but so did she with all the laws she broke, so we let it go. The lawyer made her sign a non-disclosure agreement as another line of defense, and that was that.”

I squeeze his hand again, wishing there was more I could do to comfort him. This only happened three years ago, so I’m sure he still deals with the emotional aftermath from time to time. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Ace. And I’m sorry your first time was tainted by everything that went down after.”

“It was my *only time*,” he says quietly. At first, I don’t think I heard him right. I mean, there’s no way this gorgeous, funny, hotter-than-sin man who touches and flirts so confidently could have virtually no sexual experience.

Right?

Thankfully, he continues because there’s not a chance I’d ask for more information. I’m comfortable with him, and he’s obviously comfortable with me, but we haven’t even known each other for two full weeks. I can’t just assume he’d lay every single one of his cards on the table right now—but he does anyway.

“The whole thing shook me to my core. It made me afraid to trust anyone. If I thought something like this could be detrimental to my life and career before, it’s even more so now. That was just a girl from my hometown who wanted a few bucks. The women who throw themselves at me now are a whole other story. Some of them have enough decency to at least act like they like us. But others are completely open about just wanting to fuck us because we play pro ball. I’ve had teammates warn me with all sorts of horror stories, not knowing that I already have one of my own.” He shrugs. “So, it’s safer to just not put myself in the position. I’m twenty-one years old, and I’ve had sex for a total of fifteen seconds—and that’s a *very* generous number.”

He looks embarrassed and ashamed as he says it, and it breaks my heart. I want to make him feel better, but what do you say to someone who was violated so badly that they stopped trusting others because of it?

“Well,” I say, looking at him with an understanding smile, “I’m not a therapist, so I won’t offer you advice as one. But as your friend, do you want to know what I think?”

“Yeah,” he replies.

“I think that it’s okay to move forward. I understand being scared of people with bad intentions, but not everyone is like that. You have so much to offer, and I know that there are women out there who would trip over each other for a chance to get to know the real Ace Mathers. You deserve good sex with someone who sees how amazing you are and treats your trust like the gift it is. Don’t give up on that because some people can’t see what they’re missing out on.”

He swallows thickly as he brings his free hand up to my cheek, rubbing his thumb along the warm skin as he leans in closer. My heart pounds like a drum in my chest, but I don’t move. I can’t. I’m frozen—at war with myself about what I even want to happen next. Do I want to kiss him? *God, yes.* So much. But should I? There are a million reasons why the answer is no. All of which I’ve gone over in my head more than once since the first day I met him and realized how attractive he is. But this is different. We just opened up to each other in a way that was so raw, and it was almost as easy as breathing.

It’s just a kiss, right? We can let ourselves have this.

I hold still as he closes the distance, stopping when our lips are just inches apart. I can practically taste him already as his warm breath ricochets off my parted lips, and my pulse quickens in anticipation of his mouth finally pressing to mine—but it never does.

“Please, Lark,” he pleads on a whisper. “Please put me out of my misery. I’m fucking begging you.”

That’s all it takes for me to annihilate every rule I had when I walked into this room.

I shoot forward, smashing my lips to his in a bruising kiss. He sighs in relief, untangling our fingers so he can hold my face with both hands as if he’s afraid I’ll back away if he doesn’t. That would be the smart thing to do, but the longer we stay connected, the less likely it is.

“Mmm,” he moans from deep in his chest as his tongue runs along my bottom lip, coaxing me to open for him. As soon as I do, he plunges inside, hungrily claiming the breath from my lungs like he needs it for his own survival. Ace may not have experience when it comes to sex, but he definitely knows what he’s doing in this department. I’ve never been kissed—no, *devoured*—so thoroughly in my entire life, and I don’t think I ever

will again. It's needy, but not sloppy. Desperate, but not forceful. Dominant, but not controlling.

He's fucking my mouth with his, and I never want him to stop.

"Fuck, Sweets," he groans against my lips as he slides his hands under my ass, lifting me until I'm straddling his lap. His erection is unmistakable as I lower down on him, and I can't believe he's this hard just from kissing me. This should be raising a million red flags, but I can't see any of them as I press myself against his length. Even through our clothes, I have to hold back a gasp when I feel how big he is, and my clit pulses with the need for friction. I shift my hips just barely, hoping it'll help, but it's not enough. I haven't been touched by a man in over a year, and now that I am, I want more.

"Goddamn it, Lark," he says as he squeezes his eyes shut. "You feel just like I knew you would. I've wanted to kiss you since the second we met, and it's been making me crazy."

"We shouldn't be doing this," I murmur, breaking away for a second before diving back in toward his lips. My hips move along him in long strokes, sparking to life a sensation I haven't felt in what seems like forever.

"You stop, then," he replies against my mouth. "Because there's no fucking way I'm going to. You can ride me like this all night. I'll come in my pants over and over until you tell me I can't have you anymore."

I pull back, resting my forehead on his as we both gasp for breath. As much as I want to keep going, we need to think before we act. The hormones raging through our bodies right now have us acting on instinct, and with everything he just told me, I don't want to make any reckless decisions.

He sighs in defeat, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me into a hug. I return the embrace because I still want the connection. I just want to be sure we both know what's at stake if this thing gets out of hand.

Leaning my head on his firm shoulder, I feel his heart pounding against me. I stay there, holding him until I feel it return to its normal rate, only speaking when I'm sure we're both cooled off. "I didn't *want* to stop," I say, sitting up to look him in the eyes. "I just think we need to slow down. You just told me something very heavy and personal. I'm glad you trusted me with it, but I don't want you to regret anything we said or did tonight in the morning. Plus, I literally *just* got legally divorced. We were separated over a year ago, but the ink isn't even dry on the official papers. You're the first

person I've kissed since him, and I don't want to rush into anything without us both being sure that we can handle the consequences."

His brows pull in. "What consequences?" It's not his fault that the reality of this whole situation isn't clicking in his head. He's a young guy with the world in the palm of his hand. He's been through stuff, but not in a way that would make him aware of what could happen if we took this too far.

"Ace, I'm ten years older than you, divorced, unemployed, and I have no idea if I'm even going to be able to go back to school to finish my degree. I'm sure I'm nothing like those women who throw themselves at you. I don't dress up or wear a ton of makeup. I have *going-out* yoga pants that I wear when I go to the fancy grocery store, and ratty ones for when I'm just going to the one on the corner by my house. I'm in bed every night by nine, and I can't remember the last time I went out and got drunk. You literally had to bribe me to have fun. What do you think I could really offer you that you couldn't get from some nice girl your own age who you have more in common with?"

His eyes harden as he looks at me, and suddenly, I feel like I'm in trouble. "First of all," he says firmly, "don't you dare act like you're not fucking incredible. You're smart, caring, beautiful and strong. You may feel like your future is up in the air, but it's not. You're about to be the best sex therapist there is, and I'll be proud to tell the world I got to make out with you." I roll my eyes, and he gives me a boyish grin. "And this ass?" he says, lowering his hands and squeezing. "I bet it looks just as good in your old, ratty yoga pants as it does in the fancy ones. You don't need to get all dressed up or wear layers of makeup to look like the sexiest girl I've ever seen. You're a ten, no matter what you have on. Trust me when I tell you that. I was *seconds away* from actually coming in my pants just now. That's what you do to me." He pulls me forward, and the proof slides along my center, making me stifle the moan that wants to escape from my lips.

I nod my head, leaning down and giving him one more quick kiss before climbing away and finding the floor with my feet. He adjusts his still-hard length, and I can't hide the way my lips tip up at the corners.

"What?" he says, sitting up straight as though he isn't embarrassed in the least.

He shouldn't be. That thing is massive.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “You just got really hard, and all we did was kiss.” I giggle, watching as his jaw drops in fake shock.

“Wow,” he says sarcastically. “I poured my heart out to you, Sweets. I told you I don’t have much experience, and now you’re making fun of me? That’s cold.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I say. “It’s just been a really long time since I’ve gotten that reaction. Actually...”—I pause to think—“I’m not sure I ever have. I feel...sexy.”

He darts his hand out, curling it around my wrist and pulling me down on top of him as we fall back onto the mattress. He rolls us over so he’s on top of me, dropping his mouth to mine once more. “That’s because you *are* sexy, Lark,” he says. “Tell me the name of every guy who’s ever made you feel like anything less. I just wanna talk.”

I bark a laugh, rolling my eyes. “Oh my God, no.” He goes to argue, but we’re interrupted by the quiet vibration of his phone on the nightstand, indicating that he has a new notification.

He scrambles off me, climbing up and unplugging it from the charger before swiping to the home screen like his ass is on fire. Seconds later, his eyes light up, and a bright smile stretches across his face.

“You owe me another night of wholesome fun,” he announces proudly. “I got a B on the last assignment.” Turning the phone, he shows me his grade, and I can’t stop my heart from squeezing in my chest at how happy he is.

“Nice work!” I reply excitedly before narrowing my eyes. “Is it going to be *actual* wholesome fun? Because I still think you had ulterior motives last time.”

He shrugs. “Thought maybe you’d want a rematch. I told you I’d be easier to beat if we weren’t wearing clothes.”

I scoff. “That monster in your shorts could probably spin for us, so we don’t have to use the app I’m positive you rigged again.”

He barks a laugh. “Look at you, making jokes. What a great way to kick things off.”

“Okay, fine,” I say, rolling my eyes in resignation. “What are we doing this time?”

“Stay with me tonight,” he replies. My brows pull in, and I go to argue, but he interrupts. “Nothing has to happen. I just want to watch a movie and cuddle. I promise I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

I shake my head slowly, trying to think of an excuse. When I stayed last time, that was completely accidental. I was so tired while he was writing his essay that I passed out sitting up. If I stay tonight? That would be a conscious decision.

“Ace,” I say hesitantly. “It’s not a good idea. I like you, but we haven’t even known each other for two weeks. Do you really think we should be purposely sleeping in bed together? Plus, won’t you get in trouble with the team?” Hopefully, those reasons are enough to make him second-guess his request.

He reaches forward, taking my hand. “Who cares how long we’ve known each other?” he replies quietly. “I’m happy when you’re around, and I think you like being with me too. I just want to hold you, Lark. I swear I have no ulterior motives. I like the way you feel in my arms...that’s all. And no, I won’t get in trouble. They know who you are and what we’re doing. You have permission to be in my room.” His bright blue eyes connect with mine. “Please?” he pleads.

How can I say no to that? Not only is he adorable, but he’s right—I do like being with him. I can’t explain it, but I just feel different with Ace than I do with other people. Like I don’t have to have my guard up so high. It’s possible I could be reading him wrong since I don’t really know him very well, but my gut is telling me that I’m not. It’s just a movie and some cuddling. That never hurt anyone, right?

“Alright, I’ll stay,” I say, and his face lights up with excitement. I point an accusing finger his way. “But seriously. No funny business.”

He lays a dramatic hand over his heart as though I’ve wounded him. “Sweets, I’m practically *virginal*. What could a good boy like me possibly do with a knockout like you that would be considered *funny business*?”

I raise a brow, crawling up toward the pillow. “You may not have on-field experience, but I have a feeling you’re a lot less innocent than you’re letting on right now.” I smirk at him as he reaches for the nightstand, tossing a bag of mixed candy my way before sidling up beside me and throwing an arm over my shoulder. I stifle a smile as he takes the remote and flips through the streaming app on the TV.

“What are we watching?” I ask, snuggling into him as I pop a sour rainbow bite into my mouth. I forgot how much I loved them until he fed me one the other day. Now they’re all I’ve been craving.

He scoffs playfully. "Only the best movie ever." As soon as the opening scene begins to play, I laugh. I may not be into professional baseball that much, but I'm a sucker for good cinema when it comes to the sport.

"*Rookie of the Year*?" I question. "Ace, this isn't even the best *baseball* movie ever. Now you have me concerned about your taste. You said I was the prettiest girl ever, but then you turn around and snub *The Sandlot* in the next breath. I don't know if I can believe you."

He looks down at me, shock written across his expression. "First of all, my taste is impeccable. Look at you. Secondly, maybe I was exaggerating a little, but the owner in this one reminds me of Mr. Durst. He owns the Fury, and he's always wearing his three-piece suit with a bag of Cracker Jacks in his hand. So, I guess I'm a little biased."

"Okay, fine," I say on a sigh. "But next time, I'm choosing. Benny was my first crush as a little girl, and I won't have you disrespecting him."

He chuckles, leaning down and dropping a kiss to the top of my head. "I wouldn't dream of it, Sweets."

TWELVE

ACE

“HOW’D it go with the tutor?” Riggs asks, plopping down in the empty seat next to me. We’re on the team plane, headed back to Daytona after a rough loss earlier today, but I’m still pretty giddy about my night with Lark. I should be mad about the fact that we got shut out and I went one for four, but I’ve been holding back a smile that’s been trying to break free since I woke up this morning with her in my arms.

As I told her I would be, I was on my best behavior all evening. After the way our kiss got hot and heavy so quickly, I knew I needed to respect her wishes to slow things down, or I’d scare her away. We were both pretty vulnerable sharing things about our pasts, and maybe she was right that we need to think before we act. I honestly wasn’t expecting to put everything that happened with the video out in the open like I did, but when she was second-guessing whether she could make a difference, I knew I had to prove that there are people out there whose lives she could truly change. Had I had a therapist who specialized in sexual trauma and overcoming issues like mine back then, maybe I wouldn’t be a twenty-one-year-old guy who’s absolutely terrified to go any further than kissing with a stranger.

I know my teammates have one-night stands all the time. Before Riggs had a girlfriend, he’d find someone new in every city. The options have always been there for me too, but I’ve just never been able to get over the fear of being violated again. I haven’t really had the opportunity to build

that kind of trust with a woman, considering my career has been on the fast track since the day I was drafted.

“Really good,” I say quietly. The guys are split in how they treat me when it comes to sex. Some think I’m this huge playboy, while others—like Riggs—razz me for usually leaving the bars and clubs alone. I always make excuses about not wanting to hook up and get distracted on the road, but for some reason, I feel like he sees through them. “I convinced her to stay the night in my room. We watched a movie and fell asleep.”

He raises a dubious brow. “That’s it?”

“Yep,” I reply. “It was fucking amazing, but I think it scared her a little. She kept trying to come up with reasons for why she had to leave, but I knew she didn’t really want to. She thinks because she’s older than me and at a different stage in her life, that we couldn’t be more than friends. But I’m telling you, man—there’s something about her. Underneath that serious, reserved exterior is a carefree girl just dying to have fun.”

He shrugs, playing with the straw wrapper from his drink. “Women are complicated, dude. But trust that instinct. If you’re seeing something, don’t let it go. Sometimes they just need to know you’re there and that you’re not going anywhere while they work through shit.”

“Is that what it was like when you first met Monroe?” I ask. They seem like they’re perfect for each other, from what I’ve seen.

He huffs a laugh. “That girl turned my world upside down the second I laid eyes on her. She’s a fucking hurricane, but I wouldn’t trade her for anything. I’d spend a lifetime peeling her layers back if it meant showing the world how amazing she really is.” He looks over at me. “If this girl needs some fun in her life, I can’t think of anyone better to show it to her. But be patient. If she’s anything like Mayhem, she’ll fight you tooth and nail to prove that what you’re seeing is wrong.”

I give him a tight nod, understanding what he means. Lark thinks that because she’s thirty-one and unsure about her future, there’s no time to let loose. I’m grateful that working for me is taking some of the financial burden off her, but I’m sure she’s worried about the long-term stuff. I get that, but she still deserves all the experiences she never got when she was married. It’s never too late to live your life.

“When do you see her again?” he asks.

“I have an assignment due soon and a quiz to study for, so she’s coming to my place tomorrow to see how much we can get done. The work for this

course comes in so fast that we have to fit it in every chance we get. I was thinking I'd cook her dinner and ask her to hang out after. I doubt she'd be comfortable staying the night at my apartment, but I want to keep her there as long as possible."

He grins at me. "I bet you do. Sounds like you have the whole thing planned. If she's as smart as you say she is, I think she'll love it."

I force a laugh. "I hope so."

LARK

HAILEY:

So, how's it going with the hottie baseball player?

LARK:

It's going fine. Thanks for springing that on me with no warning, by the way.

How's the office? Everything going well?

HAILEY:

Eww. Fuck that place after what they did to you. If selling feet pics was as lucrative as reality TV makes it sound, I'd have walked out right behind you. But the rent's due on the first of every month, so here I am. Also, you're welcome for springing him on you. I googled him after we hung up that day and again, YOU'RE WELCOME.

LARK:

He's definitely easy on the eyes. But it's not like that. I'm just tutoring him.

HAILEY:

What a wasted opportunity. That man is fine as hell. And have you seen the videos of him dancing up to the plate when he bats? If that's how he moves on the field, imagine how he does other things off it.

LARK:

He's barely an adult, Hailey. Plus, I just got divorced 5 seconds ago. I have no business trying to go all cougar on a younger guy right now.

HAILEY:

Says who? That trash-bag ex-husband of yours was out slinging his lame, limp dick in all directions the week after you were separated, even though he could barely make you come. You haven't been on a single date the entire time. It's okay to do something for yourself, Lark. And if that something is a 21-year-old pro baseball player with a phenomenal ass, so be it. Let him rail you into next week with all that stamina he has.

LARK:

Thanks, Hailey. I needed to hear that, although I still don't think it's a good idea.

HAILEY:

It's a fantastic idea. I'll be checking in again. You better have some spicy news for me.

LARK:

Whatever lol. Bye. 🙄

I set my phone on the counter, moving to the sink to wash my hands before pulling the salad ingredients I had delivered earlier out of the refrigerator. I feel bad lying to Hailey, but I can't very well tell her that Ace and I kissed and now it's complicated. It's not the bad kind of complicated where you go through your days with a pit in your stomach because you don't know what to do next. It's just...confusing.

I sound like a broken record with all the reasons Ace and I can't go any further than we did the other night in his hotel room, but I'm starting to think maybe it wouldn't be so bad to enjoy each other's company as long as he's still getting good grades. It's not like he's trying to date me and parade me around in front of the whole world. We made out—and it was the hottest experience of my fucking life. We both have issues we're working through, but if we're comfortable messing around on occasion, is it even that bad? Maybe it'll be good for us both. I can show him that not all people have bad intentions with him, and he can show me that I deserve someone who makes me feel good about myself. Ryan stopped giving me affirmations and encouragement a long time ago, and I'll admit that hearing such kind things from Ace was a boost I didn't know I needed. He was a little over the top with his praises and reactions, but they definitely made me feel beautiful.

I pour the spinach and chopped lettuce into a bowl, adding all the vegetables I cut up earlier. My stomach growls as I reach for the grilled chicken and cheese, adding a little bit more of both than I probably need. I haven't been able to sit down for a meal all day, so I'm hungrier than normal. I didn't realize how much of my housework would be neglected by going on the road with Ace. In less than three weeks, I've managed to pile up a mountain of laundry, and there's a thin layer of dust on the furniture and floors from everything sitting stagnant while I was gone. I'm meeting him at his apartment later to work on this week's module, but I need to finish cleaning this place first.

I finish preparing my salad, leave my mess behind, and head to the living room to eat while I catch up on the latest true crime videos in my queue. But just as I hit play on the first one, my phone dings with a text notification. Assuming it's Hailey again, I roll my eyes playfully, only to find that it wasn't her at all.

ACE:

Hey, Sweets. Miss me yet?

LARK:

I saw you two days ago. 😞

ACE:

It's only been two days? Feels like a million years. I miss you.

LARK:

You're cute. I suppose I miss you too. The tiniest bit.

ACE:

I'll take it. Since you're coming over tonight, I'm making you dinner. But I wanted to check with you first in case you have any allergies or food aversions.

LARK:

You don't have to cook for me. It's your day off that's not really a day off since you're stuck doing work. I just made a salad, so I'll be good.

ACE:

Well, don't fill up. As long as you like rosemary lemon chicken and asparagus, that's what we're having. And if you don't like it, I have a menu for Chinese delivery. I want to do this for you tonight.

LARK:

That sounds nice. I'll be there around 5 if that's still good.

ACE:

Can't wait.

THIRTEEN

ACE

“FUCK!” I whisper-yell, trying my best not to burn my fingertips on the tinfoil as I check the chicken in the oven. It still needs a little longer to bake, so I wrap it back up and close the door before reaching into the refrigerator for a beer. I don’t normally drink at home, and if I do, it’s during the offseason. But Lark is going to be here any minute, and I’m nervous as hell. I’m not really sure why. It’s not like I don’t know how to talk to women. Just because I choose not to close the deal doesn’t mean I’m an idiot when it comes to the opposite sex. I kind of feel like it with her, though.

I want to impress her. I acted like I knew what I was doing when I told her I was making dinner tonight, but the truth is—this might be the second time I’ve used an appliance in this kitchen that isn’t the microwave.

I don’t even get the cap off my beer before the sound of the doorbell fills the apartment. Taking a deep breath, I place it back in the refrigerator and shake out my jittery hands before heading to the entryway. I gave the front desk attendant Lark’s name, and I’m not expecting anyone else, so I have no idea what possesses me to look through the peephole...but I immediately regret it. She looks hot as fuck in a cropped gray t-shirt and black cotton shorts, with so much delicious skin on display that my dick immediately begins to harden.

“Nooooo,” I groan quietly, looking down at it. “Don’t fucking do this to me. We’re not fourteen anymore. You can’t just pop up whenever you see

this particular pretty girl, dude!” The doorbell rings again, and I think quickly, tucking my erection under the waistband of my boxer briefs and shorts. The entire head peeks out from the top, so I cover it with my shirt, hoping it’s hidden enough that she won’t notice when she walks in. I try to think of every disgusting thing that comes to mind to make it go away, from rancid, moldy food to that one time Jackson told me he was drunk while eating a girl out and puked all over her pussy. But nothing works. I’m hard as stone from just a single look at Lark.

“Fuck it,” I mumble, reaching out and pulling the door open. She looks even sexier in person as I take her in, from her long, wavy hair to the pink polish on her toes.

“Sorry about my clothes,” she says, noticing the once-over I’m giving her. “Everything else was in the washer, and I didn’t want to be late. Is this okay?”

I try my best to clear the lump from my throat before speaking, but it still comes out as a quiet rasp. “You look perfect.”

I step aside, gesturing for her to come in as she smiles shyly. She walks past, setting her backpack down on the floor before kicking off her sandals and pushing them aside with her foot. Everything she does is so goddamn adorable. I could watch her do the most mundane shit every day and be completely captivated.

“I just have to pull dinner out of the oven,” I tell her. “Want to come in and keep me company?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “Anything I can do to help?”

I shake my head, taking her hand in mine and leading her to the kitchen. The same sparks that I’ve gotten every other time we’ve touched zap up my arm, going straight to my heart like I’m being electrocuted in the best way. I wonder if it’ll always be like this. Will my body get warm, and my dick get hard every time I see her from now on?

My guess is yes.

I usher her to a bar stool, placing a hand on her lower back as she climbs up, even though she’s fully capable of doing it on her own. I don’t know if I’ll be able to touch her much tonight, so I’m taking what I can get. Thankfully, the thought of finishing dinner has made my dick stand down a little bit, but I’m going to need to find a way to stop this shit from happening in the future. I can’t keep hiding the way my body reacts to her.

“Can I get you a drink?” I ask, walking over and putting on an oven mitt before pulling the chicken out and setting it on top of the stove to cool. I unwrap the foil, praying for the best, and I’m pleasantly surprised with how perfect everything looks. It was my grandmother’s recipe, but I’ve never tried it without her. I’m glad I didn’t fuck it up for Lark.

“Water would be good,” she replies. I take off the oven mitt and walk over to the fridge, grabbing a couple of bottles and twisting the top off one before setting it in front of her. “Thank you,” she says quietly, taking her long hair and gathering it in one hand before pulling it over her shoulder. The movement exposes her neck, and all I can think about is how I want to get my lips on it tonight. I hope she lets me.

“So,” I begin, taking two plates from the cupboard and preparing them, adding the chicken and asparagus, along with some Italian bread that I picked up from the bakery earlier today. “What are we working on tonight?”

“The first part of the new module focuses on the positive and negative effects of sexual fantasy. There’s a quiz in the textbook that the professor wants you to take. Like last time, you can keep the answers private, then just go into the class portal and mark that you’ve completed it. It’s meant to get you thinking about your own sexual fantasies and how they vary from reality.”

Well, that’s fucking easy. My fantasies are wild. But my reality?

Self-induced blue balls. All the time.

Bringing the plates over to the bar, I slide one in front of her, keeping mine on the opposite side. The polite thing to do would be to sit next to her and eat, but to be honest, I want to look at her. This woman is an absolute knockout, and when I’m away from her, I miss her face so much. I need to get my fill every chance I can.

“This looks amazing,” she says, cutting into the chicken before taking a bite. The moan that escapes her plump lips has my dick threatening to embarrass me by making a reappearance, so I focus on my own plate, stabbing a piece of asparagus before biting into it. “I can’t believe you made this,” she says, covering her mouth with her hand as she continues chewing. “It’s so good.”

I swallow, taking a sip of my water before I speak. “Thanks. My grandma used to cook dinner every single night, without fail. Even when I had a game that kept us out until after dark, she’d come home, tell me to

wash my hands, and get to work making a meal from scratch. I loved helping, even though I probably made it worse most of the time, but she never told me to go away. She just went about her business, always making sure I got what I needed to grow big and strong. I didn't really learn much as far as cooking, but I have a million memories from being in the kitchen with her. This was in the recipe box I brought here after she passed away."

She stands, rounding the bar and wrapping her arms around my waist in a tight hug. I sink into it, soaking in all the comfort it gives as I open up to her once again about a part of my life that I don't share with many people. It wasn't easy growing up without my real parents. My mom was gone before I could even remember, and we have no idea who my dad even is. All I know is that he was over eighteen and my mom was a minor, but she refused to give my grandma his name, fearing she'd get the guy arrested. Which, he should've been.

"That's a wonderful story," she says quietly, still holding me tight. "I bet you miss her so much."

I fight the tears that sting the backs of my eyes. "I do. She made me who I am. I just wanted to make her proud, you know? I wanted her to see me graduate, knowing that she was the reason I did. I promised her I would, and now she's not even here to enjoy it." I press my cheek to the top of her head, breathing in her sweet scent.

"Hey," she says, looking up at me. Her eyes are shining with emotion, and it makes me feel like I'm not alone. I consider my teammates to be my friends, but we haven't known each other long enough for me to get this deep with them yet. It's mind-boggling that I've known Lark for just under three weeks, but I've felt comfortable enough to open up to her on multiple occasions with zero regrets. She knows me better than anyone else in this world already. "She's so proud of you, Ace. I'm sure of it. Just because she's not physically here doesn't mean she won't be cheering for you on graduation day. I'll save her a seat."

Tears roll down my cheeks as I cup her face, pressing my lips gently to hers. I'm not doing it with the objective of taking things further. I just want to show her how I feel and how grateful I am that she's here. "She'd love you," I say softly, leaning my forehead against hers. "Although I think you'd be trouble together, ganging up on me left and right. Every day felt like a *Comedy Central Roast* with that woman."

She giggles, loosening her hold on me before returning to her seat, and I wipe my face, settling back in front of my plate across from her. “She sounds amazing.”

We eat our dinner and keep the conversation light and fun while cleaning up. I insist on her relaxing while I load the dishwasher, but she refuses, standing beside me to help. We make quick work of getting the kitchen back to its previous, unused state before heading to the living room and sitting next to each other on the wraparound sofa.

“Wait!” I say, standing and running back to the kitchen, returning with the plastic container I picked up for her earlier. “I almost forgot about your dessert.” She smiles as she takes it, looking up at me with her brows pulled tightly in question.

“How come you always have candy for me?” she asks. “Don’t get me wrong—I love it. But why?”

“Well,”—I plop back down beside her—“when I was a kid, my grandma always told me that if you like a girl, you should bring her a sweet treat every time you see her.” It feels oddly intimate telling her that, considering I’ve been giving her candy since our second lesson together. It’s like I’m letting her in on my master plan to make her mine. But fuck it. *I am.*

“Thank you,” she says softly, a sincere look of gratitude on her face as her eyes connect with mine. She gets prettier every day, and I feel so lucky that she’s giving me the opportunity to really get to know her.

“You’re welcome,” I reply. We stay locked in the moment for a little longer, sitting in a comfortable silence before she remembers that we actually have work to do. At this point, though? If I had to choose between staring at Lark’s beautiful face for hours or passing this class, sign me up to retake it next semester.

Setting her candy aside, she takes the textbook out of her backpack and opens it up. “So, here’s the quiz you’re supposed to take. You don’t have to answer out loud. Just think about it, and then we’ll go in and mark that you’ve completed the assignment. Which, by the way, you won’t be getting a reward for, since it’s the easiest thing ever.”

I scoff. “Nope. That doesn’t work for me. How about we make it not so easy? You read me the questions, and I tell you my answers. If I do every one with complete honesty, no bullshit, I get my day of wholesome fun.”

She narrows her eyes at me, looking down at the page in front of her. “There’s some pretty personal questions on here,” she says. “You sure you want to expose all your deepest, darkest fantasies to me?”

You star in every one of them, Sweets.

I raise my chin confidently. “If it means getting my prize? One hundred percent.”

“It’s your funeral,” she says under her breath. “And you better not lie, because I’ll be able to tell.”

I nod my head tightly in agreement as she reads the first item out loud. “Letting my partner watch me masturbate. Just fantasy, fantasy you’d do in reality, or neither?”

“Fantasy I’d do in reality,” I say, making sure I look her in the eyes so she knows I’m telling the truth. She swallows, cheeks pinkening just the slightest bit as she focuses on the book in her lap.

“Sex in a public place.”

“Fantasy,” I reply. “I don’t think I could risk being seen. Or someone seeing what’s mine.” The thought of another person looking at Lark’s body while I fuck her makes me irrationally mad. She’s not mine. Not yet, anyway.

But she fucking feels like it.

“That’s understandable, given your past experiences,” she replies, smiling softly for a moment before reading the next item on the list. “Experimentation with sex toys.”

“Fantasy that I’d do in reality,” I say. “I think it would be hot to use a vibrator to make my girl scream until she begged me to stop. Or a paddle to turn her ass red before making it all better with my tongue.”

She sucks in a quiet gasp. “Jesus, Ace.” It’s barely a whisper, and I’m not even sure if she meant to say it out loud, but it makes my confidence grow by leaps and bounds. Since the day I met Lark, she’s been in control. The way my body reacts to her and how she commands the room every time we’re together is something I’ve gotten used to—and certainly don’t hate—but it’s time to show her that I’m not just some fumbling young guy who doesn’t know what he’s doing. I may not have sexual experiences like all my teammates do, but I know how to treat a woman. I can be whatever she needs.

“Experimentation with dirty talk,” she says, looking back up at me with wide eyes. This is my bread and butter. I’ve been reading romance novels

since I was a teenager. My grandma always had these old, worn-out paperbacks with half-naked couples on the covers. She thought she was keeping them hidden, but as a naturally curious kid, I couldn't help but look inside. From the first one I read, I was hooked. Yeah, the sex scenes were cheesy, and a lot of the dialogue made me cringe, but for some reason, I got sucked into the stories and found myself sneaking into her room to read every time she left for work.

When I got drafted, I quickly realized how lonely life on the road could be. I got an e-reader and filled it with contemporary romance, which has gotten *a lot* better since the days of hiding under the bed with those old, yellowed copies so I wouldn't get busted. Today's smut is full of dirty activities and even dirtier talk, all of which I've paid close attention to. I have no doubt that I could make her head spin with the shit that comes out of my mouth.

"Definitely fantasy I'd turn into reality," I rasp, watching as her lips part. "I've read dozens of smutty books this year and took *lots* of notes. In fact, I bet I could make you come with my words alone." A shuddered breath leaves her as she shakes her head. "That's highly unlikely. It might be common in books, but very few women can actually achieve orgasm with no physical touch. Most require a lot of time, patience, and centralized clitoral stimulation."

"Most?" I question, moving closer so I can ghost my hand over the skin of her bare thigh. "Do you fall into that category? Does this gorgeous body need some extra attention? Or has nobody ever talked dirty to you the right way before?" I lean in so my mouth is pressed to her ear. "Because I bet I could make you soak these tiny shorts of yours by telling you all the filthy things I want to do to you."

A moan tumbles from her lips, her eyes fluttering closed as her fists curl into tight balls at her sides. She wants this just as badly as I do. There's no fucking way I won't come in my pants from it, but I'm cool as long as she does too. The desperate urge to show her that I can blow her mind if she lets me is overwhelming all my rational thoughts at the moment.

"I need your consent, Sweets," I whisper, darting my tongue out to lick along her earlobe. "Tell me I can try."

She nods her head frantically, keeping her eyes screwed shut. "O-okay."

"Mmm," I hum. "Good girl. Do me a favor and squeeze those sexy legs together tight. I want you to feel the way your clit throbs while I turn it into

a greedy, begging slut to come.”

She sets the book to her other side before obeying my request. I’m nervous as hell, but I’m not a stranger to dirty talk. I’ve done it during make-out sessions before, and I almost always do it when I masturbate, most recently while fantasizing about Lark. I’ve already said half this shit to her in my head—now it’s time to give her the real thing.

“Keep those eyes closed, baby,” I instruct. “I want you to imagine me slowly pulling this shirt off. My fingers grazing your skin, tickling as I work it up your sides and make you squirm in your seat.” I watch her hips shift slightly, and my cock stirs, knowing she’s already starting to fall into the fantasy. I wish I had a direct line to her brain so I could see what it looks like to her.

“God, I bet those tits of yours are gorgeous. I can’t wait. Tell me, Lark. What color is the bra I’m about to take off of you?”

She exhales a shaky breath. “Pink.”

I chuckle darkly. “Of course, it is. Because you’re such a sweet girl. Do your panties match? Am I going to find a dark pink spot between those legs from how wet you’re getting for me?” She nods her head, swallowing. “Mmm,” I moan in approval. “That’s a good girl, making it nice and slick for me. I know you felt my cock the other night. It’s going to be a tight fit, isn’t it? But I’ll take it nice and slow when I feed it into this beautiful body. I’ll make you forget any other man who’s dared to try making you theirs. You’ll know once you feel it press against all your walls at once, Sweets. You were built for me.”

“Ace,” she whines as her hips move back and forth, desperately looking for a way to create friction. My name coming from her plump lips makes my dick so hard it’s almost painful, but I don’t fucking care. I need more.

“I’m right here, baby,” I say, cupping her cheek as I continue talking quietly in her ear. “Oh, yeah. These tits are breathtaking. And look how hard your nipples are. They’re aching for my tongue, aren’t they? You poor, poor girl.”

“Y-yes,” she stutters, arching her back off the couch so her chest is pushed out. I can see the pebbled buds under the fabric of her shirt, and it’s taking all my self-control not to blow all over myself. But fuck that. She goes first, always.

“Okay. Let me get them nice and wet for you. Fuccckkkk,” I grit out. “You taste so good. I can’t wait to eat that soaked cunt and drink straight

from the source. I bet it's like honey."

She sucks in another breath, and her thighs part for a moment before she crosses one over the other, shifting from side to side.

"I know what you're doing," I rasp. "You're masturbating that hot little clit to the sound of my voice. Not exactly what we agreed to, but seeing you desperate like this is making me so fucking hard, baby. You're perfect. Keep going." I change tactics, trying my best to talk her through it. This is no longer a fantasy like it was when we started. We're in it. "Why don't you use your fingers?" I suggest. "Stroke yourself under your shorts to my words, Lark. Let me help you make yourself come."

She doesn't even hesitate. She's way too worked up to argue. Instead, she dives her hand inside and begins rubbing wildly, her hips thrusting up to meet it. I'm leaking so much precum, I'm sure it's soaked through my boxers and basketball shorts, but I don't give a fuck. I'm too mesmerized by her to care.

"There you go, Sweets," I praise. "You're so fucking pretty when you feel good. Are you wet for me?" Pulling her feet up to rest flat on the couch cushions, she spreads wider, lowering her hand. I look down and almost lose it as I see the space between the crease of her thigh and her shorts, where her glistening pussy peeks out from under the soaked fabric. I have to slam my eyes shut and breathe slowly to stop myself from leaning down and licking it clean. Her fingers plunge inside, and I can hear the sound of her arousal as she retreats before pushing right back in.

"Oh God, Ace," she whimpers. "I've never been this wet before. Holy shit. You...y—"

"I know I did, baby," I say, cutting her off and rubbing my thumb along her warm cheek. "Now keep fucking yourself. I'm so goddamn jealous right now. I bet that tight pussy is all swollen and ready to clamp down on those fingers when you come for me." I press a kiss to the side of her neck, feeling her muscles wind tight under my lips as she nears the summit.

"I'm so close," she breathes, her toes curling in pleasure. I need to do something to help push her over the edge. I'm barely hanging on myself.

Gripping the hair at the back of her head, I angle it toward me and wait until her gaze locks onto mine before I go in for the kill. "Come with me," I grit out, grabbing my dick through my shorts with my free hand and tightening my fingers around it. One thrust into my fist is all it takes for my entire body to seize. She watches, unblinking, as I orgasm from barely a

single touch, so turned on by her getting herself off right next to me. As I explode, cum pushes through the fabric, and the sight triggers her climax, launching her into bliss right behind me. She screams my name as pleasure washes over her, burying her fingers to the hilt while she rides it out. I can't look away. I watch her chest rise and fall rapidly as she returns to earth, trying my best to slow my own heart rate at the same time. But the attempt is futile, because as soon as her eyes connect with mine again, I know we aren't done. Her gaze is dark and heated as she pulls out, showing me the wetness that drips down her fingers and palm. Instead of offering it to me like I'm internally begging for, she reaches that same hand down, swiping the cum still pooled on the front of my shorts and sucking it into her mouth. Her eyes roll back as she tastes the mixture of us both, slowly pulling her fingers from her plump lips, and I can't fucking hold myself back anymore.

I reach out, gripping her cheeks between my thumb and fingers before squeezing tightly. The force makes her jaw drop open, and I surge forward, plunging my tongue inside her waiting mouth. Her eyes go wide with surprise at first, but she eventually returns the kiss as we play with the remnants of our orgasms, licking and sucking it off one another before giving it right back.

It feels like hours have gone by when we finally break the connection, pressing our foreheads together as our hurried breaths begin to even out once again.

"Holy fuck," she says, throwing her head back onto the couch. "What book is that from?"

I bark a laugh. "I don't know. All of them. And maybe I mixed in some original content."

"For someone who says he's inexperienced, you know what you're doing when it comes to kissing and talking dirty. Ever think maybe you're just a natural at sex?" She looks up to find a shit-eating grin on my face, and she rolls her eyes as I sit back, pulling her into my side.

"Maybe. What's the next item on the fantasy list?" I ask. She snuggles into me, reaching blindly for the book and going rigid with panic as she holds it up. About a chapter's worth of pages are completely obliterated, looking like she accidentally balled them in her fist while she was chasing her orgasm. She turns to me, scowling.

"Ohhh no, Sweets," I say, shaking my head. "None of that was my fault. You were acting like the exorcist, but both of my hands were up here." I

hold them in front of us in demonstration before pointing a finger at her. “*You* did that. Looks like we’re done for the night.” I shrug, kissing her head.

“I can still see some of the bottom,” she says, squinting. “Role-play. Fantasy, fantasy that you’d turn into reality, or neither?”

I think carefully before answering. “Fantasy that I’d turn into reality. I’ve watched my teammates take girls back to their hotel rooms to fuck, but I’ve never gotten that far. If I could find someone I trusted, it might be fun to act it out. To see what it feels like to be adventurous and say yes.”

She nods thoughtfully. “That makes sense. You deserve it, Ace.”

“I don’t necessarily know if I *deserve it*,” I reply. “But I really wish I could get over this shit somehow. I know there are NDAs and ways to make sure everything stays between me and whoever it is, but I can’t get past the fear of it happening again. It’s too early in my career to get in trouble. And what if you’re wrong about me? My only experience with actual intercourse ended in me coming before I was even all the way inside. I could be shit at it.”

She shakes her head. “You’re not. I promise. It might be awkward the first time, but you’ll be great. Whoever she is will be so lucky to have a man who cares if it’s good for her. The fact that you’re even worrying about it right now tells me what kind of a partner you are.”

She has no fucking clue how badly I want it to be her. I know she’s already made it clear that she’s not ready—and I don’t know if I am either—but if I could choose any girl in the world to try with, it would be Lark.

I’d give anything for her to let go with me, just once.

FOURTEEN

LARK

I TURN down the radio in my car, double-checking the address Ace had me put into my GPS as I approach what looks like a desolate wooded area. I passed several nature parks on the way here, and this one looks similar but abandoned at the same time. When he initially gave me the details about our wholesome day of fun, I wanted to Google it right away. But he made me promise that I wouldn't, saying the surprise was going to make the whole thing even better for me. If there's one thing I don't do, it's break a promise. So here I am, driving into what could be my final moments before a serial killer jumps out and guts me like a fish.

After the other night, and the way he gave me his complete honesty on the fantasy quiz in the textbook, I finally agreed to give him his reward. Although, I felt like I was the one getting the real prize when he basically talked me to orgasm. It's been on replay in my head since it happened, and I still can't stop his voice from creeping into my mind whenever I close my eyes. Getting myself off has been a full-time job since then. I can't remember the last time I masturbated this much.

Today is one of the team's rare days off. They just finished two home games at the end of one series and play another two at Fury Field starting tomorrow. It's supposed to be a day for rest and relaxation, but apparently, those words are not in Ace's vocabulary.

My phone prompts me to slow down just as an old wooden sign comes into view. I can't make out what it says since it's covered in colorful

splatters of paint, but this is where I'm supposed to be, so I turn onto a long driveway that leads to a small white building. As I pull up to it, a young man wearing a camouflage jumpsuit steps out, walking toward my car.

"Please don't murder me," I mumble to myself as I roll the window down just a crack, because I'm not about to make it easy for him to stab me with a rusty blade.

"Hey, there!" he says cheerfully, deep dimples sinking into his cheeks. There's a small chip in one of his front teeth, but it's endearing with his boyish features. He looks like some kind of adrenaline chaser, which makes me wonder what this place is. "You must be Lark. I'm Adam, and my family owns the park. Ace asked me to send you back, but I need you to sign this waiver for me first." He shrugs, handing me a clipboard. "It's my parents' rule. For liability and stuff."

Liability?

Red flags wave wildly in my head, but I smile and nod as I take it from his hand, reading the print on the top of the paper. My eyes widen as realization washes over me. "Paintball?" I question.

"Yep!" he says proudly. "Ace and his teammates paid to close the place down for the whole day, so you guys have all fifty acres to yourselves!"

"Wow!" I say, trying not to sound like I want to drive right the hell out of here. "Sounds...fun!" I remove the pen from the clipboard and scribble my signature on the dotted line, if only so I can get to Ace to tell him this isn't really my thing. I understand why he thinks it would be, considering he's a young guy who probably loves extreme sports. But me? My idea of a good time is going to HomeGoods and sniffing candles. If I'm running and it's not on a treadmill, rest assured it's because my life is in danger.

I hand the waiver back to the kid, and he checks it halfheartedly before jutting his chin toward an open gate. "Everyone is through there. Take the path until you get to the fork. Go right, and it'll be the second set of picnic tables on your left. Have a good time!"

"Thank you," I say with a wave, parking my car in the lot before following his directions and starting down the dirt path. I was only given a few details for what we'd be doing today, one of which was that I'd need to wear clothes I didn't care about getting messy, as well as a pair of comfortable athletic shoes. I thought maybe we were hiking or something. Paintball wasn't even in the realm of possibilities for me.

I come to a fork in the road, veering off to the far right and looking for the picnic tables. Just as I'm passing the first set, I hear grass rustling before a thick arm wraps around my waist from behind, lifting me off my feet. I try to scream, but it's cut off by a hand over my mouth as a quiet voice speaks into my ear.

"It's just me, Sweets," Ace says, carrying me beyond a high stack of hay bales, out of sight from anyone who might be able to see, and setting me down. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted a second alone."

I put my hand over my heart, exhaling a relieved breath as it thumps under my palm. "Jesus," I say, trying to calm myself. "I thought you were a murderer. I almost had a heart attack."

He chuckles. "I'm sorry. The whole thing was a lot cuter when I played it out in my head."

I raise a dubious brow. "How the hell did you sneaking up on me in a strange place and carrying me off while muffling my screams look *cute* in your head?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Guess I didn't plan for the scream. Come here," he says, taking me by the hand and pulling me back out to stand on the trail. "Walk, but this time, maybe trade the shrieks of terror for a surprised gasp."

"Fine," I reply, rolling my eyes and trying my best to hold back my smile as I turn away from him and take a few steps. Once again, his arm wraps around my waist, lifting me from the ground. I dramatically gasp while he walks us back behind the hay bales and returns me to my feet, spinning my body to face him as he looks down at me with a smile.

"See," he says, bringing his hand up to cup my cheek. "Now we're all by ourselves, and I can do this." He slowly leans down, pressing his lips to mine in a soft kiss. I melt into him as he tilts my head back and deepens the connection, even though we probably shouldn't. We're technically in public, and anyone could catch us back here. But every time we do this, it makes me miss it more when we're apart, so I don't move to stop him. That fact alone should have alarm bells blaring in my head, but I can't hear a single one of them while he's devouring me this way. Kissing Ace Mathers is a religious experience—one that has me nearly abandoning every rule I've ever made for myself and dropping to my knees to worship him. The thought of feeling the weight of his heavy length on my tongue makes me moan into his mouth as he reaches under my ass and lifts me, pressing my back against the bales. I wrap my legs around him, feeling his hardness as

he grinds it into me. I'm wearing thick leggings, but I may as well be completely exposed with the way fireworks explode behind my eyes when he pushes it directly into my clit.

"Fuck, I missed you," he says. "I've been thinking about the other night non-stop...regretting that it wasn't my fingers you came on. I was licking the taste of us off my lips for hours after you left."

"Oh my God, Ace," I whimper quietly right before he takes my mouth again. "I want your fingers inside me so bad." I don't know how, but I turn into another person when I'm with him. He brings me back to the girl I used to be, wanting to experiment and have fun with sex—the girl I lost during my marriage. As much as I've told myself it's inappropriate to have a physical relationship with Ace, I can't say it's not exciting to feel like myself again.

"Don't fucking say that," he groans, rutting into me. "I'm holding back right now because we're here. But if we were at my place, I'd already have your sweet juices pouring into my palm. I'm not making the same mistake twice."

As good as it feels, he's right. We have to stop before someone sees us. It's not like we're in a hotel room, or even a private nook. We may be behind a hay bale, but there's open land to our left and right. It's too much of a risk to keep going, even though my body is begging for it.

"We have to stop," I say against his lips, making his entire body go still before he sighs in defeat. He presses his forehead to mine as we catch our breath, eventually lowering me to my feet as I giggle quietly.

"What?" he says, adjusting his erection under his sweatpants.

"Nothing," I reply, righting my clothes and doing my best to brush the hay from my back and butt. "I just realized how young you are. You go from calm to feral in seconds. Only a twenty-one-year-old dick gets hard that fast."

He takes a step forward, crowding me against the bales before bringing both hands up to my face. "This doesn't happen with anyone else, Lark. I've kissed and let girls grind against me while we danced a million times. Never once has my cock wept at just the *sight* of a woman. I went from being terrified of sex to wondering how much longer I'll be able to restrain myself. I won't say you're different, because that's such a cliché expression—but *we're* different. I think you feel it too."

I swallow thickly because, yes, *I do*, but I'm still struggling with some of it. Obviously, the age gap is a thing. Maybe not to him, but being an entire decade older makes me feel like I'd be slowing him down. I've already lived through those younger years. I was in a relationship for a lot of them, but my nights of drinking and dancing at clubs until two in the morning seem like they happened ages ago. I don't want to stop him from enjoying that time. He already spends half the year holed up in hotel rooms or going to bed early on game nights—there's no way he wouldn't resent me for my strict bedtimes and weekend cramming sessions during midterms and finals weeks.

I know Ace doesn't want just a physical connection. He's not like that. He might think he wants more with me, but it's hard to explain all the things that would come along with it without sounding like I'm making excuses. If I'm completely honest, I wish we could be more too.

"I do," I say, giving him a weak smile. "But your best years are ahead of you. You don't want to spend them stuck to an older woman who wouldn't know a good time if it smacked her in the face."

He puts a hand up between us. "I'm gonna stop you right there," he says sternly. "First of all, my entire life has revolved around playing baseball. If I go out, it's with my team after a win, and I always leave alone. I spend most nights reading or watching TV until I fall asleep so I can be up early for practice. Being with you is the most I've truly lived in twenty-one years. We don't have to tell anybody what we're doing, but please just open your mind a little bit, okay? I won't push you into anything more if you don't want it, but if you're trying to preserve my youth by pushing me away, don't. *This is what I want*," he says, gesturing between us. "We could be so good together, Lark."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to think of an argument, but I just can't find one. Everything he's saying is right. And it's not like he's pressuring me to be in a relationship with him right now, or even to define what we are. He just wants me to consider it as an option.

"Okay," I say quietly. "I'll keep an open mind. I like you, Ace...a lot. But I also need *you* to be realistic. We live completely different lives, and you can't deny that. So please *see it*."

He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me into him. "I see it, baby," he says. "But so far, there isn't a single thing about you that I'm not obsessed with." He kisses the top of my head before stepping back and

weaving his fingers through mine. “Now come on. I want you to meet my friends.”

I nod, smiling nervously as he leads me out from behind the hay bales. He must notice my hesitation because he looks down at me, and I can see the understanding painted across his expression. “They’re nice, Sweets. I promise they’re going to love you. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I reply, holding my head high as the others come into view. I’m still worried about not being accepted because I’m new to them, but I believe Ace. I don’t think he’d lead me into a group of people who were going to judge me.

“I swear to God, Riggs,” a dark-haired woman says loudly as we approach, “if you pick me to be on your team, I’ll be pissed.”

“Jesus, Mayhem,” the man next to her replies, “if you think I’m going to willingly put myself in harm’s way by giving you a weapon and permission to shoot me with it, you’re wrong. You’re coming with me and staying right by my side where I can keep an eye on you.”

I look at Ace, confused, but he just rolls his eyes and chuckles as we stop in front of them before making introductions. “Everyone, this is Lark. Lark, this is Jackson, Hawk, Riggs and Monroe. If you’re wondering if they’re always like this, the answer is yes, and I’m pretty sure it’s a sexual thing.”

I try to hold back my laugh but fail miserably as I reach out, shaking each of their hands one by one. Everyone is smiling except for Hawk, who I’m pretty sure only has the one expression. He doesn’t look mean—he’s just...broody. I notice he doesn’t say too much unless Jackson is speaking to him. It’s almost like they have their own little language as they quietly talk to one another.

“Glad to have another girl around,” Monroe says, keeping my hand clasped in hers and pulling me her way. But a thick arm snakes around my waist, restraining me.

“Nope. My tutor, my team,” Ace says, pulling me back toward him and lifting his chin to Riggs. “Make your pick, Val.”

He crooks a finger at Monroe, and she throws her head back in annoyance. “Come on, Mayhem. You heard Acey Boy. It’s my pick, and you’re with me.” She huffs a frustrated breath before stomping over to him, mumbling something that sounds a lot like *Big mistake* as he laughs quietly.

But he ignores her, pulling her in and leaning down, biting at the skin of her neck. She gasps loudly before halfheartedly pushing him away.

“This is one of those things where I’m going to turn a corner and see someone’s bare ass, isn’t it?” Jackson says. “Is anybody going to actually try?”

I raise my hand. “I have no idea what I’m doing, but I’m not opposed to engaging in some shady shit in order to win.”

“Ooh,” Jackson says, a boyish grin crinkling the corners of his bright green eyes as he steps our way. “Riggs, no offense, but your girl looks like she’s plotting your demise, so you can take Hawk. I’m with these two.”

“Whatever, dude,” he replies. “We’ll take him.” He holds his arm out, pointing. “Look at the guy. He’s a stone-cold killer, aren’t you, Mason?”

“Sure,” Hawk mumbles. He really is a man of few words, but I have to admit, I’m intrigued by his personality. He’s quiet, covered in tattoos, and hasn’t cracked even a hint of a smile, but there’s something in his eyes that tells me there’s more to him than what I’m seeing.

“Alright,” Jackson says with a clap, walking over to where several paintball guns are lined up on the picnic table. “Come here, Lark.” He extends his arm in invitation, and I step toward him. “You get first pick since you’ve never played. They’re all the same, but I have a good feeling about this one. Looks extra powerful.” He points to the weapon on the far left, and I reach out to carefully pick it up. It’s much lighter than I expected, but that’s probably because it’s not fully assembled.

He bends down, picks up a shiny black can, and screws it onto the back of the gun while I hold it out. “This is your compressed air. It’s what propels the balls out of the barrel. We’ll load up this hopper,” he says, pointing to the empty container on the top of the unit, “and it’ll feed them down into the marker as fast as you can pull the trigger. Do you want to try on a target first?”

I look at Ace, and he gives me a gentle nod. “Please,” I say back to Jackson as he leads me over to another stack of hay bales with white and red bullseyes painted on them. He takes a plastic jar of pink paintballs from a nearby cart, opens the top of my gun, and pours them in before closing the lid and toggling a switch on the side of it.

“Okay,” he says, moving to stand behind me. “What you want to do is hold it up and look down the side of the barrel. Make sure to keep both eyes

open, and when you feel like you're in the center of the bullseye, pull the trigger."

I do as he says, holding it far enough away from my face that it isn't touching, but close enough that I can at least kind of see where I'm pointing. When I think the placement is good, I squeeze, carefully adding pressure with my finger until the ball leaves the barrel with a quiet *pop*. It startles me at first, but excitement washes over me when I see pink splatter onto the hay just to the right of the red dot.

"Holy shit," Riggs mumbles from behind us, making me giggle quietly.

"Nice!" Jackson praises. "Now, do it again. But after the first ball hits, adjust your aim wherever it needs to go to hit the middle."

Just like before, I raise the gun, focus on the target, and pull the trigger when I feel like I'm in a good position. This time, it lands directly above where I wanted it to, so I lower the barrel just a touch before squeezing again. Bright pink decorates the very center of the target, and I turn to Jackson to find a surprised look on his face.

"Looks like your tutor is a ringer, Mathers," he says to Ace, making his chest puff out with pride.

"Damn right, she is," he replies, and my heart thumps wildly in my chest as he walks over and throws an arm around my shoulder, pressing a quick kiss to the top of my head. It looks friendly enough from the outside, but the gesture sends my stomach tumbling with giddiness. "She's smart as hell too. And obviously beautiful."

"What a couple of lucky guys we are," Riggs pipes up, attempting to try the same move on Monroe, but he's met with the barrel of her gun being pointed at his knee. It doesn't have the canister on the back, and I'm assuming there are no paintballs inside, but he backs up anyway, raising his hands in surrender. "Or not," he mumbles.

I laugh quietly as everyone assembles their weapons, filling them with pink and blue balls. Ace helps me into my protective gear, making sure the face mask is tightened enough so it won't move while I run. He follows by readying himself, ensuring that we have enough extra paintballs to last the entire game. They quickly explain the rules to me, and we all head over to our teams' starting points.

"Thanks for going along with this," he says quietly as we wait for the whistle to sound. "It's more fun with a larger group, but I didn't want you to be overwhelmed by a bunch of strangers. These guys are my closest friends,

and I knew you'd get along with them. I wanted you to feel comfortable so you'd be able to enjoy yourself."

I roll my eyes playfully. "Not sure I'll enjoy being chased by young, spry professional athletes while they shoot pressurized paint at me. I'm about to regret skipping cardio as much as I do."

"Nah," he argues. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe you aren't, in fact, an elderly woman?" He smirks, and I lunge toward him, slapping his shoulder as he barks a laugh. But he's right. Thirty-one is still young, and being with Ace makes me realize that I'm the same girl I was before I got caught up in all the boring monotony of adulthood.

Maybe letting him show me how to have fun wasn't such a bad idea after all.

FIFTEEN

ACE

“WHY DO YOU LOOK SO NERVOUS?” Jackson asks as I fasten my chest protector. We’re in the locker room, getting ready to take the field for our first game of a new series. Usually, I’d be going over what dance moves I’m going to do during my walk-ups, but right now, I can barely even dress myself.

“Lark’s coming,” I grunt out, tightening the strap around my waist. “This’ll be the first time she’s seen me play. What if I fuck up, and she thinks I’m awful?”

His brows shoot up. “Do you *like* your tutor?”

Oh, fuck.

I told Lark we could keep things between us for now because I understand her reservations. If she doesn’t want people to know that we agreed to see where things go until she’s sure, I respect that. I meant what I said when I told her I saw the differences in our lives, but I also meant it when I said none of it bothered me. If it were up to me, I’d be telling anyone who’s willing to listen that she’s my girl, even if she technically isn’t yet. But I want her to know that I’m serious about moving at whatever pace she needs to.

“No,” I rush out. “It’s not like that. We’re friends and we have a good time together. But I still don’t want to play badly in front of her when it’s her first game. It’ll ruin the experience.”

“The experience,” he echoes as if he didn’t believe a single word of what I just said. “Riiiiight.”

I throw my arms up in exasperation, huffing an annoyed breath and walking away before he asks any more questions. I’m not a great liar as it is, so allowing myself to be grilled by my teammates about the whole thing won’t end well. I have to keep deflecting until I can convince her that it’ll be okay if we decide to be together in public. Or at the very least, in front of my friends. I know they wouldn’t judge, and they’d offer whatever support they could. They may think I make my way around the women who approach us, but they also know I haven’t had a girlfriend since I was drafted. I haven’t told any of them about my past or why I never go home with anyone, but I assume they think it’s just because I’m focused on my game—which is what I had convinced myself it was. That was a hell of a lot easier than admitting my trauma had such a negative impact on my life. I didn’t even realize how much it had until Lark came along and brought all those feelings to the surface. It’s good, though, because it’s made me think long and hard about what I need in order to move forward.

We head toward the dugout, setting up our gear as fans clap and cheer from their seats. I got Lark a ticket just to the left of home plate, about ten rows back from the field. I told her it was because she’d be able to see all the action, which isn’t a lie, but my motives for wanting her so close were a bit more selfish. I want to impress her...and maybe giving her a decent view of my ass as I squat will work in my favor too.

“Let’s fucking go, boys!” Riggs yells, bouncing around like he always does before we take the field for warm-ups. Normally I’d be getting in on the action and hyping up my team, but I’m so busy scanning the stands for Lark that I barely even register what’s going on around me. Fans are still slowly funneling down the steps, making sure to stop by the concession stands to load up on all the amazing ballpark foods before the first pitch is thrown.

“Hello?” Riggs says loudly, waving a hand in front of my face. I snap my eyes to his, giving him my attention as his brows furrow in confusion. “You okay?”

I clear my throat. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” I can’t tell him I’m obsessing over her being here. After our day at the paintball park, when he asked me about things, I told him that she and I were still just having fun and that I didn’t want any distractions while I finished up my course. The

truth is, I've been even more focused on my assignments lately, because I want to learn everything there is to know about making her feel good. Ever since she agreed to open her mind to the possibility of us being more, I haven't been able to get the thought of fucking her out of my head.

Sure, I've considered doing it with other women before. But when the time came, I froze up. As soon as they made it clear that they wanted to take things somewhere private, I ran like a little bitch, afraid that they were baiting me to carry out some terrible plan that would violate me all over again. My brain didn't care how unlikely it was—it still refused to let go of the past in order for me to say yes.

The funny thing is, I haven't had those thoughts *once* with Lark. Not only have I opened up to her about the things I've been through in ways I never have with anyone else, but I've also done more with her physically than I have with other girls since my first time. The idea that she'd hurt me is the furthest thing from my mind when we're together. The only thought that goes through my head when she's in my arms is how desperate I am for more.

"Jesus Christ, *hello?*" Riggs says in exasperation, bringing me back to reality again. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I swallow, squeezing my eyes shut to recenter myself. I need to get my shit together so I can focus on doing my job. It won't be very impressive to her, the fans or my team if I'm fucking up left and right because I can't keep my head in the game. "Nothing. Sorry," I reply, turning my hat backwards and picking up my mask from where I set it on the bench. "I didn't sleep great last night, but I'll be good." I hate lying, but it's a hell of a lot easier than telling him I'm all twisted up over my tutor after I already claimed it wasn't like that.

We step onto the field, and I head straight to home plate to warm him up. It takes all my self-control not to look back into the stands again, because whether she's there or not, I know I'll end up distracted. I squat down, extending my mitt out in front of me while Riggs fires a few throws my way. I cycle through the signals, wordlessly telling him what to pitch next as we fall into an easy rhythm, just like we always do.

I may be a rookie—and we have several pitchers on our roster—but from my very first day playing for the Fury, Riggs and I just clicked. He took the time to get to know me on a personal level, which made me feel a lot more comfortable behind the plate. That's why I know that if there ever

comes a time when I need advice regarding Lark, he'll be the one I go to. It may not be the soundest advice, but still—he'd be there for me.

We finish warming up, and I turn back toward the dugout. My eyes immediately find a familiar head of golden-blond waves blowing gently in the warm Daytona breeze. My heart squeezes in my chest, and I lock eyes with the most beautiful girl in the world as a soft smile blooms across her face. I raise my hand in a wave, which she returns before pushing her wild hair back and almost knocking me on my ass with how fucking gorgeous she is. I notice that her hands and cupholder are empty, which just won't do—especially since I made sure all purchases to her seat were billed to me.

I step into the dugout, walk over to the corner where I left my bag, and reach inside, discreetly lifting my phone from the side pocket just enough to pull up my texting app.

ACE:

Where are your snacks?

LARK:

Why are you texting me? You're going to get in trouble!

ACE:

You're in trouble. I remember telling you to get yourself some candy on your way in. You know how seriously I take your sugary treats, Sweets.

LARK:

I'm fine. I don't need anything. Now will you please stop texting me before you get caught?

ACE:

Ok, but if you want to be a bad girl, I'll have to take matters into my own hands. 🐈

SIXTEEN

LARK

LARK:

What do you mean?

Ace, you better not embarrass me.

ACE!

“WHAT THE HELL?” I say, placing my phone into the cupholder as I watch the Fury take the field. The crowd cheers loudly, yelling for their favorite players while they run across the dirt and grass. Ace looks hot as hell in his gear, and a dull throb pulses between my thighs as he adjusts his backwards hat before pulling his mask over his face. He squats down, taking a couple more practice pitches from Riggs, and my eyes home in on the firm muscles of his ass as they strain against his tight pants. I’ve never had the urge to bite into any part of a man’s body before, but fuck. What I wouldn’t give to feel that thing between my teeth. “Excuse me, Miss,” a young guy says from beside me, making me turn his way with wide eyes. I feel like a kid who just got caught with their hand in the cookie jar, except it wasn’t a cookie I was after. “This is for you.” He hands me a large plastic cup with the Fury logo printed across it.

“I didn’t order anyth—” I begin, but stop when I look inside to find it filled to the brim with gummy bears. I huff a laugh, looking back at him. “Thank you.” He nods, making his way up the stairs as I plop back into my seat, returning my eyes to where the first batter is walking toward the plate.

Ace turns his head, glancing at me quickly before focusing back on his pitcher. Just as I go to reach into the cup, a furry purple hand wraps around my wrist.

“What the fuck?” I yell, much louder than I should, considering this is a family-friendly event, but *Jesus Christ*. Scanning my way up the creature’s arm, my eyes slowly follow its length until I’m staring into what I can only describe as a nightmare on Earth. I look back to the cup in my hand, focusing on the mean black and green dragon on the team’s logo before once again sliding my eyes up to whatever the hell this thing is supposed to be. It can’t possibly be the Fury’s mascot. It’s not even the right color.

“H-hi,” I stammer, unsure of what to do next. But before I can ask, he hands me a white baseball jersey, clapping wildly as I take it from his grip. Without a word, he points to it, then to me, dramatically extending his arms one at a time as though he’s putting them into sleeves.

“Friggle wants you to wear it!” a little girl says from beside me, a wide smile stretched across her face as she looks at the mascot adoringly. “He gave you a present. You have to put it on!” She’s freaking adorable, and I’m a sucker for a kid in pigtails, so I oblige, throwing it around my back before working my arms into the sleeves.

“How do I look?” I ask her, spinning around so she can see the back.

She sucks in a surprised gasp. “An Ace Mathers jersey! He’s my favorite! He dances funny when it’s his turn to bat! Have you seen it?” She giggles, her tongue poking through the space where her baby tooth used to be as she does.

I smile. “I haven’t seen it yet, but he sounds like a lot of fun!”

“He is!” she replies, turning to the mascot. “Friggle, can I have one?” He stands there frozen for a moment before I tap his shoulder and lean in. “Go grab one in her size. Charge it to my seat.” He nods emphatically, awkwardly walking up the stairs with his long arms flapping at his sides. I’ll pay Ace back for it tonight. I couldn’t resist when I saw how excited she was about mine.

By the time I’m settled back in my seat, the top of the first is over, and Daytona is already two batters in. Ace is on deck, swinging his bat methodically with every pitch that’s made. But when it’s his turn at the plate, after the guy before him hits a ground ball right past the second baseman, no amount of information from my new little friend can prepare me for what happens.

“Sugar” by Trick Daddy blares through the speakers and the crowd jumps to their feet, watching as he twirls his bat around dramatically before turning toward where I’m seated. My eyes go wide as he points right at me. I turn to look over my shoulder so people don’t realize that I am, in fact, the subject of his attention. He lip-syncs the lyrics—which I’m surprised he even knows, considering how young he is—doing body rolls as the women surrounding me scream for more.

Hailey was right. If this is how he dances, I can’t even imagine how he fucks.

“I love you, Ace!” a girl not much older than him yells loudly as he pushes both hands down his chest, stopping before things get indecent and wagging his finger as if to say *Uh-uh*. I cover my mouth to hide my laugh, but he catches it, giving a sexy wink before turning toward home plate while the music fades slowly.

“I told you he dances funny!” the little girl says, her mouth dropping in surprise as Friggle returns, handing her a miniature version of the jersey I’m wearing. She jumps into his flappy arms, and they celebrate together as the first pitch lands right into the catcher’s mitt.

“Strike!” the umpire shouts, but Ace is unaffected as he readies himself for the next one. He’s cool and calm, choking up on his bat when the pitcher winds up and sends another ball barreling in his direction. As fast as lightning, he swings, and it flies into the air, eating up the distance of the field as the crowd holds their breath in anticipation. Cheers ring out from every direction as it sails over the wall, landing into the waiting glove of a fan about fifteen rows back. Fireworks shoot into the sky, and the word *HOMERUN!* flashes on the Jumbotron as Ace leisurely heads toward first base. As he rounds it, he looks right at me, making a heart with both hands and smiling brightly. I try to look annoyed, but it only takes a few seconds before the corners of my lips tug up and I’m covering my burning cheeks with my hands.

He’s so cute, I can barely stand it.

Throughout the remainder of the game, several more treats I didn’t order show up at my seat, including a bowl of cotton candy ice cream that is quite possibly the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Ace’s next two at-bats result in a single and a strikeout, but they play great and win the game by two runs. As I’m gathering my trash, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

ACE:

Are you all sugared up and agreeable?

LARK:

I wasn't, but the ten pound helmet full of ice cream with actual cotton candy on top pushed me over the edge. Thank you.

ACE:

You're welcome. Will you come over tonight? I want to get a start on this week's assignment so we aren't up late doing it while we're on the road.


LARK:

Yeah, that works. What time?

ACE:

They roped me into doing press, so I'll probably be a couple hours. I should be there by eight, but if I'm not, I'll text you the lock code and you can wait for me in the living room. Or in my bed. Whatever.

LARK:

 Living room. I'll see you at eight or shortly after.

ACE:

Sounds like a date. And Sweets?

LARK:

Yeah?

ACE:

Keep my jersey on. You look so fucking hot, and I need to see it up close.

LARK:

Maybe.

SEVENTEEN

ACE

“YES, BABY,” I groan, stroking my erection as the warm shower beats down on my shoulders. “You take this cock so fucking well. Open your throat for me.” I screw my eyes shut, tightening my grip while I imagine Lark greedily swallowing my entire length and making me see stars as she gags on it.

“Good girl,” I continue. “So fucking perfect.” I fall deeper into my fantasy, trying my best to envision her mouth instead of my hand so I can come before she gets here.

I managed to get out of the interviews Taylor set up for me after the game, rushing out of the stadium like a bat out of hell so I could get home. My first thought was to call Lark and tell her to swing by earlier, but then I started thinking about everything that happened last time she came over, and it made my dick hard. I figured a quick wank in the shower would take the edge off so I could focus on this assignment and not be bricked up the whole time. If she wears the same shorts she did before, I’m a fucking goner, so I have to at least *try* to prevent it.

“Fuck, Lark,” I grit out loudly, so close to my orgasm that the tips of my fingers and toes have already begun tingling with the need to release. Just as I feel my balls start to draw up tight, the bathroom door swings open.

“Ace, are you okay? I heard my na—” We both freeze with wide eyes as we stare at one another, and I don’t so much as let go of my dick as she approaches the glass of the shower door. It’s barely fogged up, so she can

see everything, from the flush on my chest to my steel cock as it leaks precum onto my hand.

“I’m sorry,” she says, staring down at where I’m gripping myself. “You sounded like you were in pain. I got here early, and it was quiet downstairs. I thought you were still gone until I heard your voice. I—I’ll go. I’m so sorry.”

She turns, hurrying toward the door. I should let her go. I should be mortified that she caught me masturbating while moaning her name, but for some reason, my mouth betrays me right before she leaves the room.

“Wait,” I rush out, making her stop dead in her tracks before she slowly spins back around. “Come here.” I don’t expect her to obey my order. She shouldn’t. It’s one thing to come in my pants while she touches herself with her clothes on, but this is a line that we’re about to cross. I’m ready for it. But is she? I wait with bated breath to find out.

Her chest heaves with shallow pants as she takes a few tentative steps, stopping when she reaches the glass door. I push on it with the hand that’s not slowly moving up and down my shaft, opening it wide so there’s no barrier between us. Neither of us says a thing as I look her up and down, admiring the sight of my jersey draped over her delicious curves. She’s wearing a plain white tank top underneath it, and those same goddamn cotton shorts that gave me a phenomenal peek at her gorgeous pussy while she rubbed herself on my couch.

“You said my name,” she repeats, her voice barely a whisper as she stands there playing with the hem at her thighs.

“I was thinking about you,” I reply.

She swallows thickly. “What was I doing?”

Fuck.

I’m barely holding myself together with the way she’s watching me stroke myself. Now she wants me to tell her the images that play in my head while I do it? The thought alone makes me feel like I could blow, so I halt my motions, taking a deep breath before I speak.

“You were on your knees, sucking me.” The words come out choked. If she’s surprised by my confession, she doesn’t let on. She just nods slowly, looking down at my erection as it pulses against my palm. I’m so hard it’s almost painful, but the way her eyes lock onto it makes me feel warm all over.

“Has anyone ever done that to you before?” she asks.

I close my eyes, shaking my head. “That night...she wanted to, but I was too nervous.”

“Are you nervous now?”

Am I nervous? I don't *think* so. And if I am, it's definitely not the same as it was back then. If anything, I'm worried that my inexperience is a turnoff for her. I've done my best to show her that I can be confident, but deep down, I don't really know what I'm doing. I've read hundreds of books and watched more porn than I'm proud to admit, but I've barely done any of it in real life, and I don't want her to think I wouldn't do whatever it took to satisfy her.

“No.”

She says nothing as she shrugs the jersey off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor before stepping forward and entering the shower. The water soaks her tank top immediately, and her nipples harden through the thin fabric of her lace bra. Stopping when her toes are touching mine, she breathes rapidly, her breasts brushing my bare skin with every inhale. Just as I'm about to beg her to kiss me, touch me, *anything* to stop my heart from twisting in my chest, she lowers herself down, settling on her knees in front of my aching cock.

“Is this okay?” she asks quietly, looking up at me through wet eyelashes like the fucking dream she is. Her hands ghost up my thighs, and I nod in consent. That's all it takes for her to lean forward, dragging her tongue from the seam of my balls, all the way up the underside of my shaft. I moan loudly, my hands shooting out to grip her hair as she sucks just the tip into her mouth, and I'm absolutely certain there's no better feeling in this whole world.

“Jesus Christ, baby,” I choke out, watching as she parts her lips and slides them about a quarter of the way down before pulling back and licking my head. She swirls her tongue around it, lubing me up with saliva and trying again, wiggling from side to side in an attempt to take more of me. Her hand comes up to my base, stroking as she sucks, expertly covering the entire length of my cock as stars explode behind my eyes.

“Shit,” I say on a harsh breath, tightening my fist in her wet blonde locks and feeling her moan against me in response. “You like it a little rough, Sweets? Do you want me to pull like this?” I ask.

“Mhmm,” she hums, bobbing up and down as she looks at me with watery eyes. She pulls back, still jacking me off as I tower over her. “Fuck

my face until you come in my mouth, Ace. I've been dying to taste you again."

Holy fucking fuck.

I want to ask her to repeat the words because I'm not sure I heard her right, but I definitely did. Loud and clear. I bring my thumb to her cheek, biting my lower lip as I consider what she's asking for. "I don't know if I can be as aggressive with you as you want me to be. I'm afraid to hurt you."

She shakes her head rapidly, moving her hand up and down faster. "I've always wanted it, but nobody's ever given it to me. I want to know what it's like to be treated like a toy." Her expression is pleading as she stares up at me from her knees. "Please use me."

Goddamn.

Reading and watching it is one thing, but can I be this guy? Especially during my first time? I'm not sure, but I know I'm not leaving this shower without trying. Even if I only last a few pumps—which is currently my worst fucking nightmare—I can't deny her what she wants.

I cup her face with both hands, bending down and pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. She sighs against me, and I use my tongue to trace the plump softness until she opens, giving me the opportunity to deepen our connection. I breathe her in, and she whimpers as I pull back just enough to speak. "I really fucking respect you, Lark. Remember that, okay?"

"Yes," she replies, her bright blue eyes locking onto mine and conveying all the trust she has in me with a single look. My heart cracks in my chest, and I vow to do whatever it takes to make this perfect for her.

"Tap my thigh if you want me to stop," I say as I stand to my full height, fisting her hair with one hand and gripping the base of my cock with the other. She opens for me, and I slowly feed her as much of my length as I can before hitting the back of her throat. When she gags, constricting around me, I almost lose it. But I somehow manage to keep my shit together long enough to pull back and take a breath, sinking all the way into her mouth again in one long stroke. This time, when she gags, I don't let up, holding her head while steadily moving in and out.

"There you go, Sweets," I say through clenched teeth. I already feel like I'm nearing the edge and I've barely even started—but I refuse to finish until she gets what she needs. "Relax and let me fuck this drooling little hole." She obeys, letting her jaw fall slack as I thrust harder, loving the way she looks on her knees at my feet. My whole body hums with satisfaction as

I get lost in the feel of her wet mouth sliding up and down my length, her eyes watering more every time my head bumps against her gag reflex. She's sputtering the most obscene sounds I've ever heard, but her hands remain flat on my thighs, letting me know that she's still comfortable with everything. I'm holding off a lot longer than I expected, but when I notice her shifting around—rubbing her thighs together for friction—I decide right then that I won't be coming just yet.

"Put your hand inside your shorts and rub your cunt for me," I demand, and like the good girl she is, she obeys immediately. She moans as soon as her fingers make contact with her clit, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my balls, and I feel the movement in her body as her hips buck up to meet them. "That's it, Lark," I praise. "It's all swollen, isn't it? What a sweet, desperate little slut you are. Getting so turned on by me fucking your face that you have to touch yourself while you do it."

"Mhmm," she whines, her eyes squeezing shut as we both use her body to chase our releases. I can tell she's getting close by the way her muscles are tightening, and I'm glad because I'm right there, too. But I don't want her to come on her fingers.

I want her to come on mine.

"Hands on your thighs, Sweets," I say abruptly, and she hesitates before doing as she's told. Her eyes are pleading for the orgasm I just took away, and I almost feel bad for stopping her. "I promise I'll make it all better. I need to come, though. Do you want it in your mouth?" She said she wanted to taste it, but she's practically choking with the way I'm fucking her, so I want to make sure she hasn't changed her mind.

She brings her eyes to mine, doing her best to nod, and that's all it takes for me to explode. Electricity like I've never felt before zaps through my body, gathering in my core as thick spurts of cum paint her tongue. I continue thrusting with jerky movements until I've given her every last drop, slowing my hips and pulling from her mouth as she swallows and sticks out her tongue to show me.

"Fuuuuuuuck, baby," I say on a breathy laugh, hauling her to her feet and turning our bodies so her back is pressed against the shower wall. I grip her face, slanting my mouth over hers as I slowly lower my hand inside her soaked shorts and panties. I might be more nervous about this than I was about the blowjob, because if I'm shit at getting her off, that'll be a huge problem.

As soon as the pad of my finger presses to her clit, she melts back, widening her stance so I can slide in further. I oblige, pushing past her entrance to the first knuckle as her slick, warm, wetness coats my skin. “How are you this turned on from sucking my dick?” I ask. “Look at you. Soaked and needy—this little clit so tight and hard. I could probably make you explode with just the lightest touch, huh? Like”—I pull out of her, brushing her arousal over the sensitive bundle of nerves and making it jump under my fingertip as a high-pitched whine leaves her lips—“that.”

“Please, Ace,” she pleads. “More.”

I groan, rubbing harder and faster. “There’s no way I could ever deny you when you beg so pretty. You’re going to be the first woman to ever come on these fingers, Lark. And I need you to look me in the eyes when you do. I need you to see that it’s me making you feel this way.” Part of me wishes I had stripped her down before I started so I could watch her wet skin flush as she neared the edge, but she was already aching so badly that my only concern was making her feel better. My cock is as hard as granite again already, and I swear cum just keeps flowing from the head as if it never stopped in the first place.

Fuck. This girl turns me inside out, and she doesn’t even realize it.

Remembering my research, I sink two fingers deep inside, curling them forward until I feel her G-spot pressed against them. Her knees buckle and I quickly band my arm around her waist, supporting her weight as her legs wobble violently.

“Oh my God,” she breathes. “I’m going to come. Please,” she says, squeezing her eyes shut.

Abso-fucking-lutely not.

“Look at me, or I’ll stop,” I growl, and she opens wide, her gaze locking onto mine as I smirk back at her like a cocky asshole. Having her literally in the palm of my hand like this is making me feel like a god among men right now. “Good girl, baby. Do me a favor and clench around my fingers, okay? Let’s get that cum out.”

She nods frantically as I continue stimulating her from the inside, and when her muscles squeeze tightly, I know she’s tipping over the edge. Her entire body goes rigid as she cries out, her hands shooting to my wrist and digging into my skin while she convulses with an intense orgasm. Her eyes fight to stay open, but when it becomes too much, she slams them shut, riding out the waves of pleasure that are flowing through her.

“Atta girl, Sweets,” I praise. “Fuck, you’re so tight when you come.” I get lightheaded at the thought of feeling her choke my dick while I pound into her, and suddenly I can’t think of another thing in this world I want more.

“Mmmm,” she hums as I slow my movements, lazily stroking her pussy as it softens around my fingers. Her muscles slowly relax, and she rests her head against the wall, inhaling deeply while she floats back down to earth. I lean in, trailing gentle kisses across her face and neck, licking the water from her soft skin and reveling in the way she tastes.

“Holy shit,” I whisper. So many firsts just happened for me, and the fact that I didn’t hesitate—not for a single second—speaks volumes about how different my feelings for Lark are compared to anyone I’ve ever met.

Her eyes flutter open, and for a moment, worry crosses over her expression. “Ace,” she says, her brows pulling in tightly as if she’s in pain. “Are you okay? I shouldn’t have—”

I cup her cheek, pushing the pad of my thumb to her bottom lip to stop her. “I’m *perfect*. That was more than I could’ve ever imagined. Thank you.” I rest my forehead against hers and exhale a relieved breath. “*Thank you.*”

She sighs, nodding her head and kissing me this time. “Do you want to talk about anything? How’s your headspace? I hope I didn’t cross any lines.”

I huff a laugh. “No, Sweets. I wanted every bit of that. I feel indescribable right now. No negative feelings or regrets at all, other than not getting you naked.” I look down at her waterlogged clothes. “What possessed you to get in here like this, crazy girl?”

She smiles, grabbing the sides of her shorts and squeezing the fabric to wring it out as though we aren’t still under the shower stream. “Honestly, I have no idea. I saw you stroking yourself, and the only thought in my head was that I needed to feel you on my tongue. Nothing else mattered.”

“Did you like it?” I ask nervously. “Was I...good?” Vulnerability hits me like a bag of bricks as I stand there completely naked. My fingers clutch the material of her shirt as I lower my gaze to the floor, unable to look at her while she answers. I know she came, so that’s a weight off my shoulders, but she asked me to be rough and I don’t know if I did it the way she wanted. The need to be absolutely perfect for Lark is so overwhelming at this point that I don’t know what I’ll do if she says I wasn’t.

She places a gentle hand under my chin, lifting it so I'm looking at her. "It was *everything*," she says quietly, with nothing but sincerity in her eyes. "My ex—he wasn't really into exploring new things, so after being turned down a few times, I stopped asking. But you gave me exactly what I wanted. It was the hottest experience of my life."

"Thank fuck," I reply, wrapping my arms around her. We stand there, just holding each other for a moment before she reaches back and takes the shampoo from the shelf, squeezing it into her hand and stretching up to smooth it over my hair. I can tell providing aftercare right now is important to her because she thinks I need it, so I don't say anything as she works up a lather, lowering my head to give her better access. But honestly, I'm feeling happier than ever. Like I'm no longer some broken boy who fears physical intimacy. As stupid as it sounds, I feel like a man—one who acts on his urges when it comes to the girl he wants and gives her everything she deserves. There's so much more I want to try with Lark, but I know we need to take it one step at a time. It won't do either of us any favors to push things before we're completely ready.

I ghost my fingers along her waist, enjoying the solemn moment while she massages my scalp, making me feel cherished and warm. Before the night she helped me bandage up my hip, it had been a long time since someone cared for me in such a gentle way. Sure, the team has trainers and doctors that we can see if we get injured, but that's different. Lark doesn't do it because it's her job. She does it because it makes her feel good. Her ex-husband obviously dismissed her when they were together, and I refuse to do that. So, if this is what she needs right now, she can wash my hair until the shampoo runs out.

Pulling the detachable shower head down, she rinses me, rubbing the excess suds away as they slide down my body. Her soft hands feel so good against my hard muscles, and I inhale contentedly while she continues doting on me. When she's finished, I take her face gently in my hands and press my lips to hers. "Thank you. That was really nice. Can we get these wet clothes off now?"

She laughs. "Yeah. I'm going to need to borrow yours. And use your dryer."

I pull her tank top over her head, unclasping her bra and letting it fall to the floor between us. I try my best to keep my eyes from bugging out as I look at her tits, but it's not fucking easy. They're perfect. Round and heavy,

with tight pink nipples that I want to run my tongue over so I can hear the way she'd moan for more. But this isn't the time for that. We're sharing something special right now, and I don't want to ruin it by acting like a horny idiot. Dropping to my knees, I work her shorts and panties down her legs, where they plummet to the tile in a wet heap. As she steps out of them, I notice how her arms are hugged tightly around her waist. I reach out, attempting to pull them away, and she fights me for a split second before finally letting them fall to her sides.

"You're beautiful," I say quietly, leaning forward and kissing along the stretch marks that run under her belly button. She sucks in a breath, tensing as I move my lips along her stomach, and without even knowing the exact thoughts that are filling her head, I want to make them go away. "You turn me on so much, baby. I love everything about this body." Slowly melting into the wall, her hands smooth over my shoulders until they're cradling the sides of my neck. Lifting my head, I watch as tears spill over, falling down her cheeks. "Hey," I say, standing and pulling her into me. "What's wrong?"

She wraps her arms around my waist, pressing her bare body to mine as she shakes with quiet sobs. I do my best to soothe her, rubbing my hands along her back and kissing her hair as she allows herself to let go with me.

"Nobody has ever said those things about me," she says with her face buried in my chest. "I've never had a partner that's made me feel as sexy as I do with you. I feel like I don't have to hide the parts of myself that aren't perfect."

I loosen my hold on her, and she lifts her head, looking up at me. "Why don't you tell me what parts of yourself you think aren't perfect, and I'll worship them until you realize how wrong you are?" I shake my head in disbelief. "You're the girl of my dreams, Lark Dawson. Every fucking inch of you."

She gives me a watery smile before pushing up on her toes and kissing the breath out of me. We cling to one another for what feels like seconds and hours all at once, lazily making out and breathing each other in without a care in the world. When we're done, I step out, taking two towels and wrapping her in one of them before drying myself off and leading her to my room. Pulling one of my comfy Daytona Fury t-shirts from the dresser, I slip it over her head, loving the way she brings it to her nose and inhales my scent. I dress myself quickly, scoop her up from the floor as loud giggles fill

the air, and drop us both onto the bed before peppering sloppy kisses all over her face.

“Ace!” she gasps through her laughs, trying to push me away. “Come on! Quit fucking around and get your stuff so we can get to work!”

“Fiiiiiiiine,” I say, pushing up to my feet and reaching for my computer. “What’s tonight’s lesson?”

She waggles her eyebrows. “Kinks and fetishes.”

EIGHTEEN

LARK

“SO, this week’s extra credit assignment is to take a kink quiz. It’s completely optional, and you aren’t turning in your results, as always. It’s basically just to find out more about what you like. Professor Stockton is big on self-discovery, which is why she encourages these quizzes but never expects you to submit anything,” I say from where I’m snuggled up next to Ace in his bed. After we got out of the shower, he helped me into his clothes and threw my wet ones in the washer while we huddled up under the covers and started our lesson. It was a short one on nontraditional sexual interests. We blew through the reading and critical thinking questions at the end of the chapter, and now we’re moving on to the bonus assignment. Even though we’ve been stopping every once in a while to make out or touch each other, we’re still working pretty efficiently now that we’re both dry and dressed.

My mind is still reeling over what went down in the bathroom. As much as I said we had to slow down, and with all the pushback I’d been giving, when I saw Ace touching himself while my name fell from his lips, I couldn’t stop myself. My feet propelled me forward, any semblance of common sense and reasoning leaving me as I dropped to my knees and begged to be objectified. And he gave me *everything* I asked for.

Despite his inexperience, Ace is already proving to be the most caring partner I’ve ever had. It’s like he has a direct line to my thoughts, knowing exactly what I’m feeling and how to react to it. Any reservations I had

about our ages and maturity levels not matching up disappeared into thin air when he reassured me as he kissed all the parts of my body that make me feel self-conscious. Although I'm comfortable with myself for the most part, the vulnerability I felt as I stood before this Adonis of a man, completely naked, made me realize how different we are. But he showed me that I deserve to be adored and worshiped, and that was a first for me.

"I'll take it if you do," he says, pulling up the kink quiz on his laptop.

I raise a brow. "First of all, I already took it. And secondly, what makes you think I'd share my results with you?"

He smirks. "It would be in your best interest to tell me what you're into, since my new mission in life is to make all your fantasies come true. You can check *Being face-fucked like a filthy little toy* off your list, but I need to know what's next."

I bark a laugh. "Be careful with your generosity before you have all the facts, Mathers. What if the things I'm into are on a whole other level? What if one minute you're offering to give me what I want, and the next, you're getting pegged by a sparkly pink dildo? You never know what a person's deepest, darkest desires are."

His eyebrows fly up. "Is that what you're into?" he asks. "Would you want to...fuck me?"

My head jerks back, surprised by the way he worded that. "I—" I stop, because I was honestly just joking around, but now that I'm thinking about it—would I want to? "I guess, hypothetically, that might be something I'd try if the opportunity presented itself with someone."

He turns, looking directly at me. I avoid eye contact because, as comfortable as I am with the idea of discussing other people's sex lives, it's not as easy talking about the things I want. He grips my chin, turning my face so I'm looking at him. "I'm not talking about *someone*. I'm talking about *me*. Would you want to fuck me if I said yes?" His blue eyes burn into mine, and a throb pulses between my legs at the thought of taking him that way.

"I think I would," I reply quietly. "I don't necessarily think I'd like topping as a regular thing, but I'm curious about what that kind of power exchange would feel like."

He swallows. "I would be open to trying it if you wanted. As long as it's not some monster tentacle cock or anything."

I bark a laugh. “Tentacle cock? Is that from one of your smutty books?” I don’t know how he does it, but Ace always knows how to make me feel at ease, even during situations and conversations that should be wildly uncomfortable.

“As a matter of fact, it is,” he replies, pulling me against him. “One day, I’ll read to you. Or make you read to me while I reenact everything on the page.”

“That sounds nice,” I sigh, soaking in his warmth. “What about you? What are you into? Or would you rather just take the quiz and keep it to yourself?”

He scoffs. “Why would I want to keep that from you? I feel like this is something we *should* be talking about if we want to keep doing what we’re doing. Which I do.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek as he ghosts his hand up and down my arm. I want to keep doing this too, but I’m scared. The cards are stacked against us in so many ways, and as much as he wants to pretend like everything will always feel exactly the way it does in this room, there’s a great big world out there, ready to judge us and tear us down. But I like him a lot, and I love the way he makes me feel. So, we’re still on the same page about seeing where things go between us.

“I don’t really know what I’m into,” he says with a shrug. “I know what turns me on, but I’d have to try it all out to be sure. You want to help me with that, Sweets?”

I chuckle. “Unlike you, I need to know what I’m signing up for before I agree. What do you want to do with me?”

“Mmmm,” he hums. “Well, the role-play idea still sounds like fun. And I think I’d really like being in control. Making you crawl to me and spanking you when you’re a naughty girl. So many possibilities, baby. And I want to try them all with you.”

I tilt my head, pretending to consider everything he said, but truth be told, I’d love *all* of that. As much as I want to try topping just to see what it’s like, I know I’d enjoy submitting to someone I trust. I could definitely see us having a good time exploring together.

“I think I’d be into that too.”

NINETEEN

ACE

“HELL OF A GAME, ACEY!” Jackson says, smacking his hands on my shoulders as we enter the lobby of our hotel. We just beat Denver seven to zero, and I went three for four with two RBIs. Lark wore my jersey again, and I was on top of the world, knowing she was there while I was having my best game since being called up to the majors. She came back here right after, since I had to do some interviews, and I told her I’d text her when I got in so we could hang out. We managed to get ahead on my assignments for the week, so we planned on taking tonight off to chill and watch a movie. I’d love for other stuff to happen, but we’ve been going slow since the night she found me in my shower, so it’s all up to her. I’m ready to take the next step, but I respect her decision not to jump into anything without being completely sure. I’ll wait as long as she needs me to.

“Thanks, man,” I reply. “You going to get some drinks?” The guys always hit the hotel bar after a road win, and normally, I’d be with them. But I have a blonde bombshell waiting for me upstairs, and I’d much rather focus my attention on her.

“Yeah. You should come. You’ve been ditching us to do homework for weeks. We miss you, dude.” He gives me his signature puppy eyes, which would normally work, but not while she’s expecting me.

“I can’t tonight. Lark is waiting for me,” I say, tossing a thumb over my shoulder. “I have to get upstairs.”

“See if she wants to hang with us, too,” he says with a shrug. It’s not a terrible idea. It’s almost eleven o’clock on a weeknight, so other than the women that’ll come in looking for a hookup, it won’t be busy. It’ll give us an opportunity to spend time together in public without a million eyes on us.

“I’ll shoot her a text,” I reply, pulling my phone from my pocket. I open the Messages app, typing out a quick proposal.

ACE:

Hey, Sweets. The guys are going to the hotel bar for some celebratory drinks. Jacks wanted me to see if you’d like to join, but if not, I’ll come up and we can cuddle.

LARK:

No, that sounds like fun. I’ll come down after I get ready.

ACE:

Sounds good. See you soon, beautiful.

LARK:



“ANOTHER?” the bartender asks as I finish what’s left of the beer I’ve been nursing for the past thirty minutes. Riggs went back to his room to call Monroe, and all the other single guys are working on securing their after-hours fun, so I’m just sitting at the bar waiting for Lark to arrive. She said she had to get ready, which means she had probably already changed into her pajamas by the time I texted since we planned on a night in.

“I’m good,” I reply. “Can I just get a water, please?” He nods, taking my empty bottle and returning with a glass of ice water. Just as I go to take my first sip, a small hand with pink nail polish slides down my arm.

“Hey,” the woman says in a sultry voice. “I saw you sitting alone over here looking all cute and had to come say hello.”

I stiffen. I’m used to this happening when I’m out. Sometimes I lean into it, spending a couple of hours dancing and making out, and sometimes I decline, immediately returning to my room alone. Tonight, there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that I’m interacting with anyone else.

“I’m sorry, I have a girlfr—” I’m cut off as I look up, finding a very familiar set of icy blue eyes staring back at me. But her eyes are just about the only thing I recognize right now. Lark is wearing a full face of makeup

with her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders in large curls. She's dressed in black from head to toe, starting with a skintight top that shows off every one of her delicious curves. Her tits are pushed up high, the smooth, creamy flesh begging to be licked and sucked while I actively restrain myself from doing so in front of everyone here. A sliver of skin peeks out from above the leather miniskirt that barely covers her ass, and as my eyes trail down, I take in every inch of the phenomenal legs that I've been dying to feel wrapped around me.

She's a goddamn wet dream. And she's fucking *mine*.

"A girlfriend?" she says, pouting as she flutters her thick lashes. "Are you sure? Because you look *very* single over here all by yourself. What's your name?"

Okay. She wants to do a little role-play. We talked about this, and I'm definitely down for some fun tonight.

"Ace," I reply, reaching my hand out. She slides her palm against mine, and I lift her knuckles to my lips, never taking my eyes off hers as I kiss them. "What's yours, gorgeous?"

"You can call me *L*," she replies, giving me a flirty smile as I keep hold of her hand, rubbing my thumb across the top. My cock twitches behind my zipper as she touches my thigh, leaning in so her mouth is right next to my ear. "Why don't you buy me a drink, Ace?"

Jesus fucking Christ. I can barely keep my shit together with this woman when she's wearing her tank tops and cotton shorts on a lazy night in. How am I supposed to remain calm when she's intentionally trying to turn me on?

I guess if she's committing to the character, I can too.

Reaching out, I graze my hand up her side, watching as goosebumps rise along her flawless skin. I lick my lips, and she follows the movement with hooded eyes—a look that tells me I've got her right where I want her.

"What does a beautiful girl like you drink?" I ask, ghosting my thumb along her hip. A visible shiver makes its way through her entire body, and she steps in, clearly wanting more. Her hand slides closer to my dick as she does, and I want to pull her over my lap and spank her pretty ass raw for the way she's trying to make me hard in public. There really aren't that many people in here, but the idea of anyone seeing me with this gorgeous woman giving me all her attention makes me feel like a fucking king. I turn the tables, sliding my hands around her ass and pulling her against where I'm

sitting on the barstool. Her breath hitches, and I squeeze the supple flesh, waiting for her answer.

“Ummm,” she says, shaking her head rapidly to clear the fog I’ve created in her mind. “V-vodka cranberry, please.”

Smirking, I turn and raise my hand to the bartender as he makes his way to where we’re sitting. I order her drink, never removing my touch from her body while we wait for him to return.

“So, what brings you to Denver, L?” I ask, moving my fingertips over the bare skin of her lower back. Her pink nails gently scratch at my thigh as we both slowly work each other up, making everything else in the room fade away until it feels like it’s just us.

“Work,” she replies. “I’m just here for tonight, so I figured I’d come down to relax. But as soon as I saw you over here, I had to introduce myself. What about you?” The bartender sets her drink down, and she picks it up, wrapping her plump lips around the straw. I watch, becoming more aroused by the second as she swallows, and I follow the motion of the liquid as it makes its way down her throat.

“I’m also here for work. I play professional baseball. We had a game tonight, so I came down to celebrate our big win.”

“Oh, wow,” she replies, her eyes going wide with faux surprise. “That explains all the muscles.” Her hand abandons my thigh, running up my arm and settling on my bicep. I flex, and she giggles before taking another sip of her drink.

“Does that turn you on?” I ask, turning in the barstool and opening my legs so I can pull her between them.

“Mhmm,” she replies coyly, her gaze burning into mine. “You’re so fucking hot.” She bites her bottom lip, and I use my thumb to pull it free before leaning forward and pressing my mouth to hers. I coast my tongue along the seam, begging to taste more until she finally lets me in. Deepening the kiss, I swallow every quiet moan that escapes her as my cock grows harder with every passing second. She grips the front of my shirt in her fists, and I use my free hand to pull her even tighter against me while we make out right in the open, not giving a single fuck who’s watching.

It feels like hours have passed before she breaks the connection, slowly bringing her mouth to my ear. “Do you want to get out of here, Ace?” she whispers, nipping at my earlobe.

“Fuck yes.”

TWENTY

ACE

I OPEN the door to my hotel room, ushering Lark in with my hand on the small of her back before closing it behind us. On the outside, I'm trying to stay in control of the situation, but on the inside, my whole body feels like it might give out at any moment.

My heart pounds in my chest as she turns, her gaze burning into mine before she blinks those gorgeous doe eyes of hers, and my restraint snaps. I lunge forward, bringing my hands to her face and diving in for a passionate kiss. She wastes no time opening for me, and I take the invitation, plunging my tongue into her mouth as a moan rises up her chest. Her fingers tighten around the fabric of my shirt, and that's when it all clicks in my head.

This is it.

I pull away, resting my forehead against hers as I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to calm myself so I can get out the words. She chews on the inside of her cheek nervously as she waits, but I take my time because I want her to understand that this isn't a hasty decision. I'm one hundred percent sure.

"I want you," I whisper on an exhale, kissing her softly. "I want you so fucking bad."

"Ace," she breathes, flattening her hands over my chest. I'm sure she can feel my heart beating like I just ran a marathon, but I don't care. I'm nervous as hell, but I'm absolutely positive that this is what I want. "Are you sure you're ready?"

I nod my head, swallowing. “Yes,” I say, looking into her eyes. “But this isn’t part of our role-play. That ends here. You’re not some random woman. You’re Lark Dawson, and I want to give you all of me.”

She tucks her lips over her teeth, quietly reaching into her clutch to pull out her phone. Confused, I look down as she powers it off, walks to the dresser, and places it into an empty drawer. After pushing it shut, she turns back to me.

I stand there dumbfounded as the meaning of the gesture settles in, and as much as it makes my chest tighten with emotion, I need her to know how I’m feeling right now. “I know you’d never hurt me,” I say, stepping toward her. “And I trust you with everything I have. Let me show you.”

She nods her head, and I close the rest of the distance, pulling her into my arms as I kiss her again. Walking her backward, I don’t break the connection until the backs of her legs hit the mattress, causing her to fall onto the bed. I stand before her, taking in the way her golden hair looks like a halo around her head as she stares up at me with adoration in her eyes.

My angel.

That’s exactly what she is. She may not realize all the ways she saved me from a life of loneliness, but I do. Who knows if I’d have ever been able to trust again if she hadn’t come along?

I wrap my arm around her waist, climbing onto the bed and sliding us both up until her head is resting on the pillow. Nerves wash over me as the magnitude of the moment settles in, and doubt creeps into the back of my mind. What if I can’t make it good for her? What if I fuck it all up and shit gets awkward? I can’t lose her—ever.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her expression full of concern. “Do you want to stop?”

I shake my head, swallowing. This is fucking embarrassing, but I need to be honest with her. “What if I’m bad at it?” I say quietly.

“You won’t be,” she answers. “We’ll go slow. I’ll tell you what feels good, and you can do the same. But I know you won’t be bad at it, Ace. It’s not possible. You’ve already made me come harder than I have in my whole life, and that wasn’t even actual sex. I can’t wait to feel you inside me.”

Her words give me the confidence I need to continue. I press my mouth to hers once more, lowering my body down and grinding my hips slowly. Black dances around the edges of my vision as she widens her legs, her skirt bunching up as she bucks off the bed to meet my thrusts.

“Mmm,” she moans as I reach back, pulling her heels off one by one. “I’m so wet right now.”

“I can’t wait to feel for myself,” I reply, sitting back on my feet, pushing my hands up her shirt and shoving it above her tits. Her lacy blue bra makes my mouth water as her nipples peek through the thin material. They’re hard and desperate, and I can’t stop myself from leaning down and running my tongue over one of them. The abrasive fabric prevents me from being able to suction onto the dusty pink bud, so I hook a finger under the cup and yank down, exposing her full breast to me.

“You’re fucking stunning,” I say on a forced exhale, latching onto her nipple and sucking gently as she releases the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard. The only thing I can focus on is making her do it again as I reach around and unhook the clasp. I back away just long enough to pull off her shirt and bra, tossing them to the floor before swirling my tongue around the peaked bud and earning another soft moan.

“You’re so good,” she says. “I just want your mouth all over me.”

“Will you tell me if I’m doing it wrong?” I ask, trying my best to quell the nervousness that’s threatening to shake my voice. “I’ve never—”

“Of course,” she replies, rubbing her fingers along my cheek. I lean into her touch, turning and pressing my lips to her wrist before focusing back on her beautiful body.

“I’ll be so perfect for you, Lark. I promise,” I say quietly, unbuttoning her skirt before sliding it off. Kissing my way down her neck and stomach, I pay special attention to the parts that she’s most self-conscious about. She’s mentioned several times that she isn’t skinny like the women who try to hit on me, and that she used to be thin when she was younger, but I love this body exactly as it is. I wasn’t lying to her at the paintball park—I’ve never been turned on the way I am just from looking at her. It’s been like that since the first time we met, and I know without a doubt that I’ll never stop wanting Lark. I’m fucking obsessed with her.

“Ace,” she whines as I continue my descent, running my tongue along the edge of her panties. She lifts off the mattress, shoving into my face, but I turn my head, licking everywhere but where she needs me the most. The chances of me lasting long once I’m inside her are pretty much zero, so my plan is to work her up, make her come in my mouth, then work her up again so I can feel her squeeze my cock when she orgasms for the second time. I’ve done enough research throughout this course that I think I can get her

there more than once. I just have to remember the things I learned when I wrote that essay the first night she stayed in my room.

“Needy girl,” I coo, wrapping my fingers around the fabric covering her luscious hips and working it down at a pace that’s painful for both of us. I want to faceplant into her cunt and get her juices on my tongue as fast as I can, but I know I have to take my time. A body like hers deserves to be worshiped. I want our first experience together to be just as mind-numbing for her as I’m sure it’s going to be for me.

I freeze when my eyes lock onto her bare core. She’s completely shaved, her glistening arousal fully visible as I run my fingertip around the puffy skin that surrounds her slit. She’s so soft and warm—unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. I bring my finger to my mouth, and my eyes roll back as soon as her sweetness explodes on my tongue.

“Jesus Christ, baby,” I breathe. “This horny pussy looks so pretty. Do you even know how gorgeous you are down here?”

“Oh my God,” she moans as I resume tracing around her entrance, dipping inside every now and then just to feel how wet she is for me. When I can’t take it any longer, I lean forward, swiping my tongue up her entire length. My eyes threaten to fall closed, but I fight the instinct because the look on her face when I wrap my lips around her clit is something I’ll be seeing long after we’re done here. Her gaze locks onto mine, and I swear I almost come in my pants at the pleading look that blankets her expression. She wants me to eat her as badly as I want her to soak my tongue, and I can’t wait to finally pull the first orgasm from her body with my mouth. Diving in, I suck in soft pulses as her swollen nub twitches in response, and her hips push up toward me. Unable to stop myself, I dig my fingers into the supple skin of her thighs, inhaling her sweet scent as I feast like I’ve been starving for this my entire life. Whimpers fill the air in the quiet room, and it takes a minute to register the fact that they’re not coming from her.

They’re coming from me.

I’m so fucking turned on by the taste of her, that I’m making sounds I’ve never heard before. They’re the desperate, suffering noises of a man who can’t get enough, even though everything he wants is pressed right against his lips.

“You’re so good at that,” she says with a gasp, and I feel my blood run like lava through my veins at the praise. “Suck my clit again.”

I follow her request, latching onto the swollen bundle of nerves and tugging gently, using my tongue to massage it at the same time. Her thighs close around my ears, and I slowly pry them away with my hands, spreading her so I can have full access to every inch of her dripping center. She moans loudly, her hips circling as she chases her release while reaching down to hold my head in place.

“Ace,” she gasps. “Oh my God. Don’t stop. I’m going to come.” My cock is painfully hard inside my pants, but I’m so focused on getting her there that I can’t even think about myself.

“Please,” I whimper into her skin, continuing with the exact same patterns and pressures that got her to this point. “Lark, *please*. Come for me.” I should be embarrassed by the way I’m begging, but I don’t fucking care. I’m desperate for it.

Her legs shake until her ass lifts from the bed, and she screams out her release. I feel her pussy contract against me, and I push my tongue inside, barely able to breach the tight muscle as wetness floods the inside of my mouth. It’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted, and I know without a doubt that I’m fully fucking addicted to this woman.

Her body relaxes into the mattress, still trembling as she loosens her grip on my hair. “Thank you,” I whisper as I lick gently, cleaning up the mess she’s made so that not a single drop goes to waste. “Thank you, baby. *Fuck*.” I’m shaking with adrenaline, taking one last swipe with my tongue before slowly kissing my way up her stomach, chest and neck.

“You’re incredible,” I say quietly, taking her lips with desperation. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I need you so bad.”

“Then have me,” she replies, reaching down and pulling my shirt over my head before throwing it aside. Her fingers skate down my bare chest and abs, coming to a stop at the button of my pants as she works them open, sliding the zipper down and giving my aching cock the room it’s been fighting for. I loop my thumb inside the waistband, pushing them down my legs and over my feet before bringing them back up to fish my wallet from the pocket. Taking out a condom, I place it on the mattress next to us, tossing the pants to the floor beside the bed. Lark reaches down, helping me out of my underwear and dropping them onto the pile as well.

“Fuck,” I say on a breath as I press my body to hers. The feel of her bare pussy against my shaft has me gritting my teeth so I don’t come before

we even begin. I can't stop myself from thrusting forward to see what it feels like as I push my head between her slick lips.

"Can I help you with this?" she says with a moan, holding up the condom between us. "I'm on birth control, just to ease your mind. And I haven't been with anyone since my ex-husband. I was tested after we were separated, and everything was clean, so we're being safe." Part of me itches to tell her I don't even *want* to use the condom. That I trust her and want to feel her without anything between us. But this is a lot for us both, so I think it's smart to use it—at least this time.

I take the packet from her hand. "As much as I'd love that, I'm already hanging by a thread, baby. If you touch me, I might not make it inside you." She giggles as I push back onto my knees, tearing into the foil wrapper with my teeth and removing the condom before rolling it down my length. When I'm sure it's secure, I settle back on top of her.

"You sure about this?" I ask, rubbing my thumb along her cheek.

She smiles softly, her hands ghosting up and down my biceps. "Absolutely. Are you?"

I lean down, kissing her gently and resting my forehead against hers. "I've never been more positive about anything in my whole life."

She nods, and I exhale, slowly pushing the crown of my cock inside her. The entire world stops spinning, and the only thing I can hear is the sound of my heartbeat pounding wildly in my chest. She's so hot and tight, but as much as I should be focusing on how she feels wrapped around me, it's not the physical effects of being connected in this way that are hitting me like a freight train. It's the emotional ones.

Fuck. I think I'm falling in love with her.

"Oh, wow," she whispers, taking quick, shallow breaths as she adjusts. "I knew you were big, but I don't know if you're going to fit now that part of you is inside me."

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying not to laugh. If I was one of the guys from my books, I'd say something cheesy like *We'll make it fit*, then push forward anyway. But this is real life. I have to take my time, even if it kills me.

"Is this amusing to you?" she asks, smirking. "No wonder that girl thought you were a bad lay. You didn't even get to the fun part. She's probably *still* walking funny."

That's all it takes for me to break, nuzzling my face into her neck and shaking with laughter. She joins in, giggling against my shoulder as her legs drop from where they're wound around my hips. I press my lips to her soft skin in a chaste kiss, bringing my gaze to hers and realizing how amazing this moment is. Sex isn't passion and fire all the time. Sometimes it's awkward and clunky—but with the right person, it can be perfect.

"I'm sorry. You just really know how to feed a guy's ego," I say with a playful smile. All the nerves I was feeling before are long gone, and I couldn't be happier that it's Lark I'm sharing this moment with. Because while I've technically had sex before, this *feels* like my first time. It's monumentally different than anything I've ever experienced, and deep down, I hope it's the same for her.

I feel her inner muscles loosen, so I take the opportunity to sink in a couple more inches, never breaking eye contact as I slowly thrust my hips. Relief floods over her expression, so I pull back, pushing forward again gently to find her even wetter than before. Her ragged, uneven breaths turn into satisfied moans as I take my time, working inside and mentally high-fiving myself for not coming early. To be honest, being focused on her in this way has made me forget about my own needs altogether. Don't get me wrong...it feels better than anything in the world, but I can wait until she's completely ready before I take what my body craves.

Reaching between us, I press my thumb to her clit and rub in slow circles, making her tight walls relax enough for me to slide forward until I've bottomed out. She feels like heaven, and the contended sounds she's making tell me that the discomfort she was experiencing moments ago has morphed into the same pleasure that's consuming me right now.

"Look at you," I praise. "Such a good girl swallowing my big cock with that pretty pussy. You're doing great, baby."

"Ace, please move," she begs, and I pull back out before burying myself to the hilt, setting a steady pace as I fuck her. Her legs wrap around me, resting above my ass and urging me even deeper, although I don't think it's possible.

"Fuck," I curse quietly, finally letting myself feel the way she grips my length as I slide in and out. Nothing could ever beat this. Not only am I with the most perfect woman, who's an absolute dime seven days a week, but the emotional connection we've built is making this experience more than I

could've imagined in my wildest dreams. This isn't just fucking—it's *more*. "You're everything. You feel so good. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she replies. "I've never been this full."

I lean forward, driving into her as I take her mouth in a deep kiss, swallowing every moan that leaves her body. When I feel her muscles begin to squeeze me, I grind my pelvis against her clit and roll my hips in tight circles, praying like hell that I can get her there again.

"I can feel you getting close, Sweets," I grit out. "Are you going to be my special girl and show me what it feels like to have my cock strangled?"

She nods rapidly before turning her head and shoving it into the pillow. Her hair bunches and knots as she squirms, creating the most erotic sight I've ever seen. "Please don't stop doing that. Make me come. *Please*." She's pleading, but she doesn't have to. There's not a chance in hell I'd ever stop when she's writhing under me like this. I'll stay buried inside her pussy forever if it means bringing her this kind of pleasure.

"Come on, baby," I coax, feeling warmth begin to course through my limbs, snaking its way toward my core. I know I'm getting close too, but I'm determined to make sure she's completely satisfied before I finish. "Give it to me."

A few more deep thrusts and her orgasm hits like a speeding train, her back bowing off the bed as I work her through it. She cries out, a string of unintelligible words and curses falling from her plump lips. The sensation of her contracting around me is unlike anything I've ever felt, going on for so long that I'm unable to hold back.

My fists grip onto the edge of the pillow under her head as I piston my hips, finally letting go and fucking her without abandon. It doesn't take much for my movements to become erratic and jerky, with my loud grunts filling the air around us. Electricity shoots through me, and everything goes white as I bury myself a final time, emptying my thick, hot load into the condom. I envision what it would be like without the barrier, filling her so full of my cum that it would leak out between us as I fucked her until she owned every drop. I hope someday she lets me mark her as mine in that way.

I slow my hips, lazily moving in and out of her as we ride out what's left of our releases, taking in the sounds of our deep breaths while we come back down to earth. I'm on cloud nine right now with her satiated body

pressed against me, and even though I just came, I'm already counting down the minutes until we can do it again.

"Holy shit," I say on a quiet exhale, pressing my forehead to hers. "That was fucking insane. Are you okay?"

She nods, her chest heaving against mine. "That was the best sex I've ever had. And I'm not just saying that. It's like you knew exactly what I needed." Relief washes over me at her words. Going into this, my main concern was blocking out all the negative memories from my past and making it good for Lark. She deserves someone who gives her everything she could ever hope for, and I can't think of anything I want more than to be that man for her. "How do you feel?"

I huff a laugh. "I don't know if there are words to describe how I feel," I say, leaning down to kiss her. "Like the luckiest guy in the world." She looks up at me, her eyes full of emotion as I cup her cheek, unable to tear my gaze away. "Thank you...for being perfect for me. I've been scared for so long, and I knew life was passing me by. But it just never felt right—not like it does with you."

She slides her arms around my neck, pulling me in for a hug. We lie there, breathing each other in until I've gone completely soft inside her.

"I should probably take care of the condom and wash you up before this gets messy," I say reluctantly. She groans as I pull out, hating it just as much as I do. I wish I could stay wrapped in her warmth all night, but we'll be able to cuddle up once we're done. Hopefully, she'll stay tonight so I can wake up next to her again...and maybe go for round two if she's up for it.

"I'll be right back," I say, padding toward the bathroom and flipping on the light switch. I remove the condom, tossing it into the trash before walking to the sink and turning on the warm tap. As I wait for the water to heat, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and I'm frozen by my own reflection. I know I didn't just lose my virginity, but I look *different*. My eyes are a brighter blue, my skin is still flushed and glistening with sweat, and there's something else in my expression that I've never seen before. It may sound stupid, but I feel changed. Whether it's from the sex or *her*, I don't know. I'm guessing it's probably a little bit of both because I can't even imagine having this experience with anyone else.

I clean myself up, taking a second washcloth and getting it warm before returning to the bedroom. I know I didn't come inside Lark, but she made one hell of a mess all over herself, and I want to take care of her. Sitting on

the edge of the mattress, I gently pull her ankle out so she's spread open for me.

"Wha—you don't have to do that," she says as I carefully press the cloth to her sensitive pussy, wiping away the remnants of her orgasm. She winces slightly, and I pull back, looking at her with my brows knitted tight.

"Did I hurt you?" I ask, concerned that she's clearly in pain. I know I'm bigger than average, but I tried so hard to be careful. Maybe I shouldn't have kept going after she mentioned me not fitting.

She shakes her head. "I'm a little sore because it's been a long time, but I'm okay. It doesn't hurt like you think. I'm just overstimulated from the orgasms."

"It's swollen," I reply quietly. "Are you sure you're alright? Did I do something wrong?"

She sits up. "Ace, remember our first lesson. If I was properly lubricated, which I definitely was, why else would I be swollen right now?"

Gripping the back of my neck, I think carefully before realization dawns on me. We *did* talk about this the first time she came to my hotel room. I remember being distracted by how hot she was while she went through the chapter, talking about the body's physiological responses to sex.

"Increased blood flow," I reply, making her smile proudly.

"Exactly. I'm perfect. You did *nothing* wrong."

I shake my head, chuckling. "How unsexy is it that we're reviewing course material after we just fucked?" Then again, all of that was a little different than I expected. We laughed, we had fun, and now we're talking about it in a way that may not be normal for other couples, but for us—it just *is*.

She scoffs playfully. "I'm not here to be sexy. I'm here to make sure you pass Human Sexuality, and that was a learning moment."

Tossing the cloth to the floor, I tackle her to the mattress, kissing her face as she giggles. "You're sexy no matter what you're doing, Sweets," I reply, digging my fingers into her sides and reveling in the way her little laughs get louder.

"Ace, stop!" she says between heavy breaths. I take mercy on her, pressing my lips to hers once more before standing and pulling her to her feet. "Nooooo," she groans as I lead her to the bathroom, ushering her inside.

“Go pee,” I order. “Then get your fine ass back in my bed so I can hold you.” I close the door, hearing her mumble something about me being so *bossy* as I walk over and pull the blankets down, sliding under them while I wait for her to finish. I take a few seconds to think about everything that just happened and all the things I felt. There was no denying the emotions that washed over me as I pushed inside her for the first time. I’m falling for Lark Dawson, and I don’t know if she feels the same. I’d like to think there’s no way she doesn’t, but I’m also not dumb enough to believe all her reservations just magically disappeared because we had sex. I’m glad she agreed to open her mind to the possibility of us, but are the things I’m doing enough to make her think it would be worth the risk?

The bathroom door opens, and she emerges, still completely naked. Just like the first time I saw her, every breath is sucked from my body, and all the anxiety I felt moments ago falls away, only to be replaced by the warmth of being in her presence. We might have a lot to talk about, but for now, I just want to enjoy the rest of the night in our little bubble. Finals week is coming up, and if she decides to move on without me, I don’t want the last of our time together to be anything less than a perfect memory of the most amazing summer of my life.

“Come here, baby,” I say, lifting the sheet for her to climb in beside me. As soon as she’s within my reach, I pull her under my arm, wrapping it around her protectively as she snuggles her soft body into mine. “Will you stay with me tonight?” I can’t imagine sleeping alone after what we just did.

“Only if you promise to do that thing with your tongue again in the morning,” she quips, making me laugh.

“You liked that, huh? I suppose that can be arranged.” I kiss the top of her head, holding her tightly and hoping that this is only the beginning of a lifetime of nights just like this one.

TWENTY-ONE

LARK

“OH, FUCK. JUST LIKE THAT,” I moan, pressing my heel into Ace’s back. I thought I was being sneaky, slipping out of bed this morning to take a shower while he slept, but I barely even started washing my hair before he slid in behind me. The next thing I knew, he was on his knees, making good on his promise from last night.

“Like this?” he mumbles against me, latching his lips onto my clit and swirling his tongue around it. My knees almost give out, but he grips my waist with both hands, pinning me to the warm tiles as he eats me like I’m his favorite meal.

“Mhmm,” I reply, reaching down and clenching my fists into his hair to keep him pressed to my pussy. “I’m going to come.” He sinks two fingers inside, never abandoning my aching bundle of nerves while he works me toward the edge. Small whimpers leave him as he sucks, and his desperation sends me careening over the summit. I shove my hips into his face once more, my orgasm overtaking every one of my senses as I stiffen and explode around him.

“Atta girl,” he says, releasing my clit. He keeps his fingers buried inside me as I squeeze them tightly, riding out my climax until I have nothing left to give. My body slumps against the wall as he takes one last, long lick, savoring every drop of me. Standing, he grips my chin, forcefully pushing his tongue between my parted lips.

“Do you taste that?” he asks. “Your cunt is so fucking sweet, Lark. I’m so goddamn addicted to you.”

I moan into the kiss, wrapping my arms around his neck and pushing to my tiptoes as he stands to his full height. I love tasting myself on him, knowing it turns him on to share it with me. The man is *gifted* with his mouth, and if you had told me yesterday that it was his first time doing it, I’d have called you a liar. Then again, he wrote an entire essay on the female orgasm and reads smutty books written by women, so I shouldn’t be too surprised that he’s picked up a few things.

I’ve never been with someone so concerned with my pleasure. I’ve also never felt comfortable telling a partner what I liked because I was always afraid of making them feel inadequate. We’re programmed to sacrifice our own needs in exchange for not making men feel emasculated, but how can we both be satisfied if we don’t communicate? Ace wants to learn. He wants to know what I like, and I feel the same about him. It’s refreshing to know that he won’t take offense if I give him some direction—not that he’s needed it so far.

Last night was easily the best sex I’ve ever had. Initially, I went down to the bar with the goal of giving him the role-play fantasy we’d talked about, but I didn’t expect it to turn into a real experience between the two of us when we got back to his room. I know I’ve been hesitant about the idea of being with him, but I couldn’t stop questioning what was really holding me back. Sure, there’s an age gap, but if there’s one thing he’s shown me, it’s that I’m not some dried-up old lady. I’m still young—capable of playing and laughing. And being with him brings the absolute best out of me when it comes to that. I like who I am around Ace, and I’m done pretending I don’t feel the things I do. If we keep exploring and realize that we can’t make it work, I’m still walking away a better person because of him.

“I need a nap after that,” I say, sliding my hands down his body and dropping my head to his chest. The endorphins from my orgasm are slowly coursing through me, making me feel like I could go boneless and fall to the floor at any second.

“Here,” he says, spinning me around so my back is against his chest. I lean into him as he bands an arm around my waist and reaches for the body wash. He lets me go just long enough to squeeze some into his open palm, gently massaging it into my wet skin as I hum contentedly. As much as I love taking care of Ace, being held and pampered by him is equally as

satisfying. He makes me feel safe and wanted—like I’m not an inconvenience or *doing too much*, as I’ve been made to believe in the past.

He finishes washing and rinsing me, turns off the water, and reaches out to the towel hook. Spinning me back around, he wraps me up tightly before drying himself and lifting me off my feet, cradling me in his giant arms. I giggle as he carries me to the bed, pulling the covers back and laying me against the pillow.

“I have to brush and dry my hair, or it’ll get frizzy.” I attempt to sit up, just to be pushed back with a gentle hand against my shoulder. Resisting for a second, I lie back when he shoots me a sexy wink.

“Let me,” he says, walking to the bathroom and returning with a brush before sitting on the edge of the bed. “Up,” he orders. When I reach out to take it from his hand, he pulls away, circling his finger in the air as if to say *Turn*. Shocked, I obey, breathing a relaxed sigh as soon as the bristles make contact with my scalp. I’ve never had a man brush my hair before, and *oh my God*, I just want to melt right here. He’s careful not to pull as he works the knots free, and I can’t help but moan while he smooths it through one last time. He chuckles quietly, pressing a kiss to my shoulder before placing the brush on the nightstand.

“Can I have that?” he asks, pointing to the elastic band on my wrist. My brows furrow in confusion as he reaches forward, sliding it off over my fingers and settling back behind me. I’m expecting him to make a valiant attempt at a messy ponytail or something, but he shocks the fuck out of me as he separates my hair into three sections and begins weaving it into a braid.

“Where did you learn to do this?” I ask quietly, enjoying the small tugs as he makes his way downward. It feels so good—and oddly intimate, in the best possible way—that he’s doing this for me.

“During the end, when my grandma got too weak, she wasn’t able to lift her arms to do her hair. It knotted easily with all the time she spent in bed, so I learned how to braid so she didn’t have to deal with it.” My heart breaks every time he talks about her, knowing she was the only family he really had. That has to be hard to deal with alone.

I turn, taking his hand in mine. “You know, any time you want to talk about her, I’d love to hear more. She raised an amazing man, Ace. And I’m sure you were the best part of her days, because you’re the best part of mine.”

He smiles softly, cupping my cheek. "Thank you," he replies, leaning forward and kissing my lips. "Before I met you, I felt her absence everywhere. I was surrounded by people all the time, but I still felt like none of them really knew me. It doesn't feel like that now. It's like she sent you to me so I don't have to go through shit on my own. I'm glad you're here."

I blink away the tears that fill my eyes, returning his smile as I nuzzle into him. "Me too. Plus, she taught you that bit about the candy, and I couldn't resist, so maybe you're right about her sending me."

He wraps his arms around me, taking me with him as he leans against the pillow. "It's funny because when I tried it on Rachel Borden in the third grade, she called me gross." He purses his lips in thought. "Maybe it was because I gave her a handful of Skittles from the bottom of my backpack, but still. She wasn't quite as receptive to the gesture as you are, Sweets."

I snuggle into him. "Good thing she set you straight. I wouldn't have wanted dirty backpack candy either."

He laughs. "Noted. So," he says, steering the conversation in another direction, "we have one more night here. Want to switch it up and you pick a role-play for us? Something you want to try?"

I raise my brows in surprise. "We don't have to do that. I just knew you wanted to see what it was like to say yes to a woman when she asked you to bring her back to your room. I don't expect you to fulfill my fantasies."

"Fuck that," he scoffs. "I had a blast last night. And I think you did, too. Tell me what you want from me, and I'll make it happen."

I think carefully. There are millions of things I've wanted to try, but Ryan was never open-minded enough for me to ask. Some of the kinks I suspect I might be into would've freaked him out, but Ace isn't like that. We've had some pretty deep conversations already, and he's never judged, so maybe this is my chance to explore with someone I trust.

"I..." I pause, trying to find the right words to express what it is that I want. "I want to be degraded. And used...like you did in the shower. I want it rough."

He contemplates, smirking when an idea comes to mind. "I just read a bully romance that had a lot of degradation and humiliation in it. I'm sure I could come up with something good if you want to give it a try."

I nod, attempting to hide my excitement. "Yeah, I think I do."

“Okay then,” he says, turning my head so he’s looking into my eyes. “But we’re going to need a safe word for this one—and if there’s anything you don’t want me to do or say, tell me. I want this to be good for you. I never want to hurt you, Lark.”

I nod my head. “I think the traffic light system we read about is probably best for this. If I’m feeling uncomfortable, I’ll say *yellow*, so you don’t keep going in that direction. If I want you to stop completely, I’ll say *red*. I’ve never done this before, so I don’t really know what my limits are, but I trust you to lead it.”

To be honest, I’m already wet thinking of letting Ace degrade me. Normally, something like this would be scary, but I trust him and know he’ll take care of me.

He tightens his arms around me, dropping his lips to my ear. “I can’t wait to make you my dirty little whore tonight, baby. I hope you’re ready.”

Tucking my lips over my teeth to hide the giddy smile that’s dying to break free, I steel my expression, willing the butterflies in my stomach to stand down before turning my head toward him. “Looking forward to it.”

TWENTY-TWO

ACE

ACE:

Hey, Sweets. Looking hot as fuck up there in my jersey.

LARK:

How many times do you think you'll get away with texting me from the dugout before you get in trouble?

ACE:

Not sure.

Little change of plans for tonight. Stop by the front desk when you get back to the hotel. They're going to give you a key to Suite 4501. Go in and follow the directions I left for you on the table by the door. I'll be there as soon as I'm done with media.

LARK:

And if I don't?

ACE:

You don't want to find out what'll happen if you defy me, slut.

"CLYDE'S GONNA FUCK you up if he sees you on your phone," Jacks says, both hands clutching onto the gold chain he always wears around his neck. I jump, throwing the device back into my duffle bag and kicking it under the bench.

"What phone?" I reply, sitting back against the wall. It's the bottom of the eighth, and we're down by four runs. I'm trying to stay focused, but all I

can think about are the plans I have in mind for after this game. Thankfully, I haven't had any major fuckups, but I'm certainly not playing my best.

"Okay," he says with a laugh, nodding his head. "Tell Lark I said hey."

I roll my eyes, watching as our designated hitter, Dusty Brennan, hits his fourth foul ball in a row. There are two outs, and he's doing everything he can to avoid closing out the inning without at least an RBI, but it's not looking good. The opposing relief pitcher came in throwing heat from the second he hit the mound, and I'm not sure we'll be able to dig ourselves out from this big of a deficit. The ball leaves the pitcher's hand, and Dusty gets a piece of it, sending it up in the air between second and third base. He takes off, but the effort is futile as the shortstop makes the grab, ending the inning. Standing, I pull my mask down and fit my mitt over my hand before exiting the dugout. I try not to glance over at where Lark is sitting behind home plate as I walk, but like a magnet, my gaze is drawn straight to her. This is the third time I've seen her in my jersey, and it makes me feel like a fucking caveman knowing that she's wearing it after I've been inside that gorgeous body of hers.

Last night was easily the best night of my entire life. The way she let me control everything, while also making sure I knew what she wanted, was exactly what I needed. I'm grateful that she knows me well enough to make me feel completely comfortable exploring with her, but tonight is going to be a whole new ball game. She wants to tap into her degradation kink, and I'll have to draw from all the dark romance books I've read to give her the things she's asking for.

When she first suggested this kind of role-play, I wasn't sure I'd be able to pull it off. But she stepped out of her comfort zone for me with her little act at the bar, and I'm determined to do the same. Lark knows that I'd never say or do the things I'm about to in real life, which I'm guessing is why she asked me to do it. And what my girl wants, my girl fucking gets. I'll never tell her no.

The rest of the game flies by, unfortunately not ending well for us as we lose to Denver with a score of four to one. We'll be heading back to Daytona tomorrow, where we'll play them again at home the following day, so we'll just have to win the series on our own dirt. That's how I prefer it, anyway. There's nothing like the roar of a home crowd to get you hyped up and playing your best.

“Good game, man,” Riggs says, patting my ass as I walk to the locker room. He didn’t pitch tonight, but he’s always there for moral support, which is important after a tough loss—although tonight’s isn’t weighing on me nearly as much, knowing I’m about to give Lark the fuck of her life when I get back to the hotel.

“Thanks,” I reply solemnly. “Would’ve loved a different outcome, but we’ll get them next time.” He’ll be starting two nights from now, so we’ll hit practice hard together tomorrow afternoon.

He clicks his tongue. “Can’t win ’em all. Are we crying into our beers tonight, or are you seeing Lark?”

“Lots of studying to do,” I reply flatly. “Big final coming up.”

“Yeah, sure. You know, I saw her all over you at the bar last night after I got off the phone with Monroe. I also saw you leave with her after a full-on make-out session, which you never do.” I look up, furrowing my brows and causing him to put his hands out in surrender. “I’m not trying to give you shit. I’m just happy for you. That’s all.”

I relax, huffing a laugh. I don’t know why I was trying to keep things from him anyway. It’s not like the guys can’t tell what’s going on, especially after bringing her around them on multiple occasions. Maybe it’s okay to finally let the people I’m close to in on some of my story. God knows I could use the advice, since I honestly have no idea what I’m doing.

“I’ve...never done that before,” I reply quietly, looking around to make sure nobody is listening to our conversation. “Any of it. I’m sure you’ve noticed, but I never really told you why because I was embarrassed and didn’t want you to stop asking me to come out.

“Some stuff happened to me when I was first drafted, and it made me realize how easily someone with bad intentions could take advantage of my situation. It scared me away from letting anyone get too close, which is why you’ve never seen me go beyond kissing with any of the women who’ve approached us. It took me a long time to find someone I knew wouldn’t hurt me, and even though it wasn’t in my plan to fall for my tutor, I did.”

He nods approvingly. “That’s awesome, bro. She’s good for you. Sometimes, love comes from the place you least expect it, and no matter how much you try to deny it or push it away, it still gets you. And it’s the best fucking thing in the world. I’m glad you guys found each other.”

“Me too,” I say, zipping up my bag and tossing it over my shoulder. “The only good thing about a loss is that the interviews are short. Nobody

wants to talk to the losers.” He laughs, but he knows I’m right. “I’m out. Tell Monroe I said hi.”

“You got it, man,” he replies as I walk away, heading straight for the reporter I was assigned to speak to. Thankfully, it’s quick, and she just asks me where I think we fell short and what we can do to redeem ourselves back in Daytona. We’re trained to answer these types of questions in ways that don’t damage the camaraderie of the team or place blame on anyone—not that I would. We win together, and we lose together. That’s what baseball is all about.

The bus ride back to the hotel is agonizingly long, despite only being about ten miles from the stadium. It’s been over an hour since the game ended, and I hope that gave Lark enough time to get ready for our role-play with the instructions I left her. As soon as she went back to her room this morning, I made a few calls to some local shops, having everything delivered to the suite I reserved for us. I only had about an hour to set up, but I managed to pull it off. Hopefully, tonight will be everything she wants.

As soon as my feet hit the lobby, I make a beeline for the elevator, pressing the button for the forty-fifth floor. My heart pounds a heavy cadence behind my rib cage as I ascend, hyping myself up for what’s to come. I try to push down the nerves that threaten to bubble up to the surface, reminding myself that I’m playing a part here and need to stay in character.

The doors slide open, and I head to one of the only four rooms on the entire floor, inserting my key card into the slot and pushing my way inside when the light blinks green. The entryway is lit, but the rest of the suite is pitch black, save for the city lights bleeding through the curtains that hang from the floor-to-ceiling windows. The envelope I left on the table is open, the note I wrote out for Lark sitting face-up beside it.

SWEETS,

**I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU TONIGHT. BEFORE WE START,
PLEASE REMEMBER THAT I RESPECT YOU, AND THAT YOU CAN
STOP THIS AT ANY TIME WITH A SINGLE WORD.**

WHEN YOU'RE READY, GO DOWN THE HALL AND INTO THE SECOND BEDROOM ON THE RIGHT. TAKE YOUR CLOTHES OFF, UNDERWEAR INCLUDED, AND GET ON THE BED—FACE DOWN, ASS UP. I'LL BE BACK FOR YOU AS SOON AS I CAN, SO BE A GOOD LITTLE WHORE AND WAIT PATIENTLY.

ACE

I LISTEN CAREFULLY for any signs of movement but hear nothing as I set down my bag, shrug off my jacket, then untie my shoes and set them beside the chair that sits in the corner. Shaking out my hands and taking some deep breaths to center myself, I slowly move down the hallway and enter the dark room. I can feel her presence immediately, even though she hasn't made a sound, and my cock begins to thicken behind my zipper at what I know I'll find when I turn on the light. Reaching for the standing lamp to my left, I turn the knob just enough to cast a soft glow across the room, finding Lark on the bed with her ass facing the doorway.

"Fuck," I whisper so quietly I don't even think she can hear, which is good because I don't want her to know how I'm reacting to seeing her like this. She followed my instructions and is completely naked, on her knees with her pussy wide open, begging to be devoured.

I say nothing as I unbutton my dress shirt, peeling it off along with my t-shirt before unfastening my belt. She stiffens when she hears the sound of the metal buckle, and I smirk at the way she inhales sharply as I pull it from the loops of my pants. Removing them slowly, I kick everything to the side, walking toward her in only my black boxer briefs. My dick is already leaking precum, but I do my best to ignore it, focusing on Lark as she waits for me to do something.

"Look at this," I say, reaching out and ghosting my hand up the back of her bare thigh. She jumps at first, not expecting my touch, but relaxes into the mattress as goosebumps bloom across her skin in my wake. "A free-use set of holes in my bed, waiting to be fucked." She moans in response, and I look to where she's already dripping, swiping my fingers over her slick lips.

"You're soaked, baby. Are you so pathetic that just the thought of me treating you like a filthy whore makes your pussy wet?" I suck her arousal

into my mouth, and it takes all my self-control not to lean in and eat her until she makes a mess on my tongue.

“Yes,” she whispers, arching her back and wiggling around as if she’s uncomfortable. She’s clearly turned on, but she asked for this, and I need to make it good for her. So, I’m going to make sure she’s throbbing before I fuck her.

“Reach back and spread yourself apart,” I order. “Show me where you want my cock.” She hesitates for a moment, and I listen for her colors just in case I’m going too far, but she doesn’t use them. Instead, she takes an ass cheek in each hand and pulls, exposing her most intimate parts to me.

“Good girl,” I praise. I know she wants mean words, but I have to reward her for being so obedient right now. It’s not lost on me how vulnerable this position is, and I feel like the luckiest man in the world that she’s trusting me with her fantasies. “What a pretty little cunt. I can’t wait to jerk off into it.” She whines with need, and the sound sends a jolt straight to my hard dick. I was nervous to step into this role at first, but now that we’re here and I see how she’s reacting to it, I can’t get enough.

Walking toward the side of the bed where her head is facing, I make sure she can see perfectly as I push my underwear down my legs, stepping out of them and gripping my cock before stroking slowly. I squeeze, gathering the bead of precum from my tip and wiping it across her lips. She darts her tongue out, lapping it up like she’s starving for it.

“Hungry girl,” I mock. “Why don’t you get on your knees and let me feed you?” She scrambles up, shuffling across the bed and bringing her feet to the floor before dropping down in front of me. Just as she leans forward to take my throbbing erection into her mouth, I grip a large handful of her hair, yanking back so she’s looking into my eyes. She looks shocked, and I break character for just a moment to check in.

“You good? Can I have a color?” I trust her to tell me if she doesn’t like what we’re doing, but I think I need the reassurance, too.

“Green,” she rushes out quietly. “So green.”

Chuckling, I stretch my neck from one side to the other and take a deep breath as I slip back into the scene. I tighten my fist in her hair again, making her wince as a low moan slips from her lips. “Do you want to suck my cock?” I ask, taking it by the base and stroking upward right in front of her.

“Yes, please,” she whimpers, attempting to reach forward, but I don’t allow it.

“Beg,” I reply. “Show me how desperate you are for it.”

She swallows, shifting around so her thighs are pressed together. She’s getting more turned on by the minute. “Ace, please. I want to suck it so bad.”

“Hmmm,” I say, acting unaffected. “I think you can beg prettier than that. Do it right, or I’ll make you sit there while I blow my load all over your face. Then I’ll parade you around the halls so everyone on this floor can see what a filthy little whore you are.” I’ve completely abandoned all the lines I’ve read in books, going off on my own with how I’m speaking to her. As much as I didn’t think I had this in me, it’s easy when I’m feeding off her energy.

“I need you in my throat. Choke me with your big cock, please. I’ll do anything.” Her eyes are pleading, and I can’t deny her when she’s looking up at me like I’m the only man she’ll ever need. Having this kind of power over her is a heady feeling—one I could easily get addicted to if she decides this is what she really likes.

“That’s better,” I say, sticking my thumb between her lips and pulling down until her jaw goes slack. “Tongue out for me.” She obeys, and I move my hand to my aching dick, stepping in and giving her just the tip. She tries to close around it, but I retreat, gripping her jaw and bending so I’m right in her face. “Did I say to suck, slut? Are you that greedy that your sweet little head goes empty as soon as a cock touches your tongue?”

“I’m sorry,” she replies, panting as I squeeze her cheeks between my fingers. *Fuck, she’s loving this.*

“Let’s try again. Open.” She does as she’s told, opening her mouth and waiting for me to give her what she wants. I don’t hesitate, pushing my length past her lips slowly and watching her stretch to accommodate me as I hit the back of her throat. Her eyes well up with tears, and I can tell she’s trying not to gag, but she’s struggling.

“That’s a good girl, baby. You don’t need air, do you?” She looks up at me, and I shake my head, mocking her with a fake pout. “No, you don’t. You’d rather pass out than stop choking on me right now.” I thrust in and out, snapping my hips roughly. Her face starts to turn red, and I pull away, looking down as she sputters and gasps in an attempt to fill her lungs. I change tactics, already knowing I won’t last long in her mouth—she’s too

fucking good at sucking dick. Reaching down, I lift under her arms until she's standing. Her knees wobble, and I wrap my hands around her waist for support.

"You still okay?" I ask quietly. I don't want to kill the mood by checking in too much, but from our lesson on kinks and fetishes, I know it's normal to make sure both partners are still on the same page.

"Yes. Green," she replies, looking up at me adoringly. I lean in, kissing her gently because I can't fucking help it. She's so pretty, especially with her makeup running down her face and her hair all messy from my hands. As filthy as this scene has been already, we're still sharing something, and it's a bonding experience for us both. One I hope she never forgets—because I know I won't.

"Good. Then get back on the bed."

TWENTY-THREE

LARK

I'VE DIED *and gone to kinky heaven.*

When I told Ace I wanted to be degraded and humiliated, I had *no idea* he'd be so good at it. I figured maybe he'd call me a few names and then start to feel bad, but I couldn't have been more wrong. He's giving me everything I've craved and then some, and now I'm a hundred percent sure that this is something I'm into. I'm confident he's part of the reason, since I trust him wholeheartedly, but having him treat me this way has me wetter than I've ever been.

I turn, walking quickly toward the bed and lying on my back, waiting for him to instruct me further. Being in charge of our lessons and every other aspect of my life can be exhausting, so letting him have control feels really good. Knowing I don't have to make a single decision while we're in this room is allowing me to let go in ways I don't normally feel comfortable enough to do.

He climbs up, wrapping a hand around my ankle and pulling my legs apart before kneeling between them. His eyes lock onto my bare core, and I turn my head, still a little embarrassed by being on display as he studies my body like he's trying to burn every detail into his memory. Ryan and I rarely had sex with the lights on, and even when we did, he certainly didn't look at me the way Ace does.

He lies on his stomach, pressing his chest into the mattress and reaching forward to spread me further before shoving my thighs toward my ears.

“Hold these so I can play with you. And watch me while I do it.”

Damn it. The way this man reads me is unreal, considering we’ve only known each other for just under a month and a half.

I prop the pillow under my head, grabbing behind my knees and holding myself while he drags a fingertip from my clit, all the way down through my soaked slit. I suck in a gasp at the contact, and he holds it up, showing me.

“Look how wet you are from having my cock down your throat. Such a naughty girl.” He brings it to his mouth and sucks it clean before going back and gathering more. Crawling up my body, he shoves his finger between my lips, wiping it across my tongue. My eyes flutter closed, and I moan. “How does your desperate pussy taste?” he asks with a cocky smirk, resuming his position between my thighs.

“Ace, please,” I beg, not giving a single fuck how needy I sound. He’s barely even touched me, and I feel like I’m on the edge already. I want to scream and cry and plead for relief, but I can’t bring myself to end it with a color because I fucking love it so much.

“Please, *what?*” he asks, pushing a finger inside me just an inch and staying completely still, which only makes the ache more excruciating. I wiggle around, trying to take more of him, but he doesn’t allow it as I cry out in frustration.

“Please make me come.” My legs are trembling, and my fingers are gripping the backs of my thighs so tightly that I’m afraid I might draw blood. He pulls out of my pussy, watching as a drop of arousal frees itself from between my lips and rolls slowly down my hot, sensitive skin. Leaning forward, he catches it on his tongue and licks upward, pressing his lips to my clit as he finally gives me the relief I’ve been begging for.

“Fuck,” he mumbles. “I can’t stop. This throbbing cunt tastes too fucking good.”

“Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop,” I plead as he fills me with two fingers, pumping them in and out while he devours me. I’m already wound so tight—it takes no time at all before I’m teetering on the cusp of an orgasm. I buck my hips into his face, chasing my release as we both let go, giving in to our carnal instinct to fuck.

“Oh my God, Ace. I’m so close,” I whine, circling my hips as he punishes my sensitive clit.

“Come for me, whore. Right now. Come on my fucking face.” He removes his fingers, spearing his tongue inside me and making white hot pleasure shoot throughout my entire body. My orgasm tears through me, my back bowing off the bed as I shake against him. It goes on for what feels like forever, wave after wave ebbing and flowing while I chant his name as if it’s the only word in my vocabulary. The pleasure goes way beyond anything I’ve ever experienced in my whole life, and it’s all at the hands of the sex god between my thighs. This man, with his limited experience, has given me more in the handful of times that I’ve been with him than my own husband gave me throughout our entire relationship—starting with the way he places value on the things I want and need.

“That’s my girl,” he says, lapping at my sensitive skin as I attempt to find my way back down to earth. The euphoria is so intense that I break for him, tears flowing down my cheeks while I sob into the quiet room.

“Is this a good cry or a bad cry?” he says, lying beside me and pulling my trembling body into his. God, he’s so perfect and attentive. I’ve never felt this cherished, even after all the things he just said and did to me—for me.

“Good,” I whisper, trying to collect myself. I know it’s not uncommon to get emotional like this after a hard orgasm, but it’s never happened to me before. I’ve never had anyone put in the work to give me that kind of pleasure, and it’s all hitting me at once. “It was perfect.”

“It’s not over yet, baby,” he says, pressing his lips to mine. “Let’s just lie here for a minute, and when you’re ready, I’m going to fuck you deep and cover you in my cum.”

I crack one eye open and look at him. “I’m ready.” I’m exhausted, but still want more. I want him to mark me as his.

He barks a laugh. “Slow down, Sweets. You need a minute, and so do I. One day, I won’t feel like I’m fighting for my life trying not to come while I eat you out.” He brushes a thumb over my tear-stained cheek. “Did you like all of that? Anything you want more or less of next time?”

Next time.

The way he puts so much thought into making things good for me has me feeling a lot of big emotions, and I’m not sure if I should be. I didn’t come into this thinking I would fall for a man ten years younger than me—especially in such a short amount of time—but that’s exactly what’s happening. It’s terrifying because he could have anyone he wants, and as

much as I try to ignore my intrusive thoughts, they're always in the back of my mind. At the moment, he's all in on us, but as he slowly puts his past behind him, will he still feel the same way in five years when twenty-year-old women are vying for his attention and I'm pushing forty? And how will his fans react if we decide to go public? Will they tear me down and say I'm not good enough? Will that eventually get to him and make him second-guess things? It's all scary, but that doesn't negate the fact that I can't stop myself from falling for him, not that I'd want to. We've shared parts of ourselves with each other that nobody else has ever seen, and there's no denying the bond we've created in the process. I'm starting to believe that what we're building is worth fighting for, no matter the risks involved.

"It was all amazing. Thank you," I reply sincerely, wrapping my fingers around the back of his neck and pulling him down for another kiss. It starts slow and gentle, our hands roaming each other's bodies freely as we get worked up all over again. I open my legs, and he rolls on top of me, the velvet skin of his bare cock rubbing against my wet slit. He moans out loud as he thrusts his hips, his length grinding into my clit and making stars explode behind my eyes.

"Holy fucking shit. You're so warm. Could I—" he pauses, swallowing. "Could I just feel it for a second?"

I give him a soft smile, cupping both of his cheeks and making sure I have his full attention. "You're in charge, Ace. I told you, I'm on birth control, and I haven't been with anyone but you since I was tested. You can feel me for a second, or you can do it for longer. It's your decision."

He nods, his chest heaving as he breathes like he just ran a hundred miles. I can't pull my eyes away from him as he brings a shaky hand down to his shaft, taking it by the base and pushing the head just past my entrance. I expect the stretch to be uncomfortable, but I'm so turned on that it slides right in, quelling the ache inside me. He stills, the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunching as though he's restraining himself before he takes a few more inches, sighing in relief as my inner walls hug him tightly. I whine with the need to be filled when he retreats, and he thrusts forward again, this time not stopping until he's buried to the hilt.

"Lark," he whispers softly. His eyes are wide, and he doesn't even have to say another word, because I feel it too.

"I know," I reply.

He bends down, pressing his lips to mine as he begins moving in and out of me at a slow and steady pace. The room fills with heavy breaths and satisfied moans while he works my body like he owns it, hitting spots I never even knew existed. It's the most mind-altering pleasure I've ever known. We don't have to say it out loud—we're making love. Emotion floats in the air around us so heavily that it feels like I could reach right out and hold it in my hands. This may have started as a fantasy role-play, but I've never felt anything more real than what we're doing right now.

He picks up speed, pulling my thigh over his hip and angling me so he can drive in even deeper. I cry out as he fills me, barreling toward an orgasm that promises to be so intense, I feel like I may black out.

"Fuck," he curses, squeezing his eyes shut. "You're choking my cock. You're so goddamn tight when you're about to come."

A few more thrusts and I'm careening over the edge again, screaming in ecstasy as he grunts through clenched teeth. I know he's barely hanging on, but my orgasm is completely out of my control, my pussy clamping down on him so hard that I don't think he could pull out if he wanted to. It numbs all of my senses, and it feels like minutes have gone by before my vision comes back and I glance up to see an almost panicked look on his face.

"I have to come," he grits out. "I want to do it inside you. Is that okay?"

I nod my head rapidly, looking every bit as desperate as I feel. "Please, Ace," I beg. "Please make me yours."

Not a second later, his face twists in pleasure and his jerky movements go still as he surrenders to his release, shooting thick, warm ropes inside me as I hungrily accept every last drop. He rides it out until he's completely empty, slowly lowering his shaking body down on top of me and wrapping me tightly in his strong arms.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," he whispers in my ear, making tears prick at the backs of my eyes. "Thank you."

I bring my arms around his neck, digging my fingers gently into his skin as if he'll disappear if I let him go—even though I know he won't. "Thank *you* for reminding me who I am. I got lost for a while, but you found me and brought me back."

He picks his head up, brushing a sweat-soaked strand of hair from my cheek. "I'll always find you, baby. In this life and all the others."

We lie there for a while, breathing each other in until he finally reaches over, grabbing a bottle of water from the nightstand. "Drink for me," he

says, and I look at him with a questioning expression before taking it from his hand.

He rolls his eyes. “You need aftercare. I was rough and said some extremely mean things to you. Now you need water and candy.” He leans back over, swiping a bag of sour gummy worms and holding it up in front of me as I sip the water. I snag it quickly, biting one in half before offering him the rest. He takes it, settling in and pulling me into his hard body. “You also need lots of cuddles.”

“Mmm,” I hum contentedly, snuggling into him. “Somebody paid attention to their lesson on kinks and fetishes.” He’s doing a stellar job, but if I’m honest, I don’t even need aftercare. I feel like the sex was enough to make me feel respected and cherished.

“Well, between you and me,” he says, looking around dramatically as if he has a secret, “I have a major boner for my tutor, so I’m trying to impress her.”

I giggle, shoving at him playfully, but he just holds me tighter, making me sink back into his chest. “You’re such a little shit.”

TWENTY-FOUR

ACE

“WHY AM I HERE AGAIN?” Lark says, digging her heels into the ground in an attempt to resist as I pull her toward the door of the Fury practice facility. It’s All-Star weekend, so we have three days off in a row, which I plan on taking full advantage of. My final exam is coming next week, and I need all the study time I can get.

“Because,” I say, stopping and turning toward her. “I want you to read to me while I work out.”

She raises a brow. “You want me to read about the sperm’s journey during conception in front of your teammates while you lift weights?”

I reach for her hand, but she pulls away, turning so I can’t get ahold of her. “Yes,” I reply, annoyed. “Riggs will love it. All he talks about is how hot Monroe is going to be when he gets her pregnant.” He’s not even here, but I’m trying to ease her mind so she’ll stop being so combative. I need this review.

“That’s called a breeding kink, Ace. It doesn’t mean he wants to listen to me blather on about how babies are made. Everyone is going to wonder who brought the crazy lady. I’m not going in there.”

“Okay, fine,” I say, pretending to give up. As soon as she lets her guard down, I dart toward her, bending at the knees and throwing her over my shoulder.

“Put me down!” she shouts, beating on my back with the textbook she has clutched in both hands.

“Will you quit it?” I reply, arching every time she slaps the hard cover against me because, *shit, that stings*. I walk toward the door, swinging it open and marching past security with a wave as she fights to get free. As soon as we hit the empty hallway that leads to the gym, I slap my hand against her ass, making her stiffen.

“You did *not* just spank me, Mathers!” she says on a gasp.

“Yes, I did. Maybe if you’d do as you’re told, I wouldn’t have to punish you.” My voice is stern, but as usual, I’m having fun going back and forth with her. It’s who we are, and it’s why we work so well. When she needs some excitement in her life, I’m here to remind her that it’s okay to act like a kid every once in a while.

She slumps against me, hanging like a rag doll as I make my way toward the weight room. “I just didn’t want you to blow your back out. Jeez,” she mumbles quietly.

I stop, sliding her down my body until her feet hit the floor. She rights her clothes, and I grip her cheeks roughly between my thumb and fingers, forcing her to look up at me with wide blue eyes. “Don’t insult me, Sweets. You’re half my warm-up weight. I could lift you with two fingers. So, the only person who will be getting their back blown out”—I pause and press a kiss to her squished lips—“is you when we’re done here. Now let’s fucking go.”

She huffs a breath, throwing her head back dramatically and taking my offered hand as I usher her through the wide metal doors that lead to the Daytona Fury training center. It’s fairly empty today because we aren’t required to be here, and because some of the guys, like Riggs and Hawk, are playing in the All-Star Game. One day, I’ll get there. Until then, I’m happy paying my dues right here. Plus, it would’ve been a real shit show if I had to spend the last week I have to prepare for my Human Sexuality final in Houston doing all the public appearances that come with playing in the game.

“There’s my little sharpshooter!” Jackson shouts as he runs up to us, wrapping Lark in his arms and lifting her off the floor. “What’s up, girl?” She giggles as he puts her down, and I weave my fingers back through hers because pissing on her leg like a dog probably wouldn’t go over well. I know Jacks is a flirt, and his behavior doesn’t mean he’s hitting on her, but I still want to make it crystal clear that she’s mine.

“I’m good,” she replies, leaning into me slightly. The gesture makes my heart squeeze in my chest because just a few weeks ago, she was hell-bent on making sure nobody knew we were anything more than tutor and student. We never really talked about it, but I guess our night out at the bar was when everything shifted between us. Sure, we *knew* we were role-playing, but from the outside, the few people who were still there saw us—Ace and Lark—all over each other.

“This guy giving you any trouble with that?” he says, pointing toward the textbook she’s hugging to her chest.

She shakes her head, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “He’s been a model student. Very...*interested* in the course material.” I smirk, lifting my chin smugly because, damn right, I am. I’ve demonstrated my understanding of what I’ve learned *several times*, including once this morning when I made her ride my face while she gripped the headboard like her life depended on it. Then, I tossed her sated body onto the mattress and fucked her until she was dripping my cum all over the sheets.

Jackson sucks his teeth, sliding his knowing gaze over to me. “Yeah, I bet he is. You two kids have fun.” He ruffles Lark’s hair and extends his hand to me for a high five before taking off in the direction of the athletic trainer’s office.

“Come on,” I say, pulling her toward the squat machine. As a catcher, working my legs and glutes is important because I’m up and down a lot, often very quickly. I need to make sure my body is in top shape to do so. I slide a metal folding chair over so she’s close enough that I can hear as she reads, but not so far that everyone else in the place can. Motioning for her to sit, I make sure she’s comfortable before stretching so I don’t hurt myself. “Can we go over the development of the embryo before and after implantation? I think I get it for the most part, but I keep mixing up the stages.”

“Yeah,” she replies, opening the textbook. I finish warming up and walk to the machine, adding the correct amount of weight before settling my shoulders under the pads with my back facing her. “So, before it becomes an embryo, the zygote makes its way to the uterus, where the endometrial lining is thickening in preparation for its arrival.”

“Okay,” I say, standing to my full height to unlock the machine before bending at the knees.

“By the time it gets there, it’s divided into...umm...” she trails off for a second before finishing her sentence, “into anywhere from fifty to a hundred cells, making it a blastocyst. That’s when...” she drifts off again, “when it implants...” Her tone is breathy and broken, prompting me to stop and turn my head to see if she’s alright.

Not only is she alright, but her cheeks are completely flushed as her gaze locks onto my ass. She’s so entranced that she doesn’t even notice me looking until I bark a laugh, pulling her attention back to my face. Her eyes go wide because she knows she’s caught, and I can’t stop myself from messing with her. It’s nice to see *her* flustered for once, since it’s usually me who’s ready to drop to my knees and bark like a fucking dog for her.

“Be a good girl and keep going for me, Sweets,” I say in a low, gravelly voice, returning to my workout as she focuses back on the book.

“Once it’s implanted, the blastocyst is referred to as an embryo.” I squat down, going slower than normal and making sure she’s getting a good look at my glutes as they stretch the material of my athletic shorts. She exhales a shaky breath, continuing. “At this time, the placenta begins to develop, so...” *Here she goes again*, “so blood and nutrients can be transferred from the mother to the baby throughout the p-pregnancy.” I chuckle under my breath, loving the way this is affecting her.

I do a few more reps as she struggles through the chapter, standing to lock the machine before stepping away and wiping my face with a towel from one of the nearby racks. I’m high on her reaction to watching me work out, and all I can focus on is getting her more turned on as we move from one machine to the next, until we finally stop near the cardio equipment. Normally, I’d opt for a stationary bike since it’s the easiest on my joints, but today I have a better idea.

“You can sit over by the mirrors while I finish up,” I tell her. “I think I understand everything now. Just let me get some cardio in, then I’ll take you home.”

“Okay,” she says with a nod, walking over and plopping down on the bench as I take a jump rope from where it hangs on the wall. “Rodeo” by Lah Pat plays over the speakers and I can’t help but laugh internally at how perfect this whole thing just became with a simple song.

I start easy, slowly jumping and watching as she attempts to look anywhere but at me. We can’t have that, though. I need her undivided attention. Reaching between my shoulder blades, I peel my shirt over my

head, tossing it to the floor as her eyes slide down my exposed chest and abs like a magnet. She swallows thickly, crossing her legs and shifting around as though she's uncomfortable.

"You okay?" I ask, stifling an arrogant grin. "You look like you're struggling over there."

"I'm fine. It's hot in here," she replies, putting a hand on her flushed cheek. It's definitely not hot, but I don't call her out. I'm enjoying this too much.

"I'm almost done," I say, gripping a handle in each hand and resuming my workout. Her eyes bounce around my body as if she can't decide what she wants to watch most, but when they lock onto my groin area, it's clear that she's found something she likes. Unblinking, she stares at my dick unabashedly, obviously forgetting that there are other people in the room. Her thighs twitch as she squeezes them together, shifting again on the bench. As much as I'm loving this, it's only a matter of time before my body starts reacting to the idea of her getting aroused while watching me, so I cut it off before that happens.

I come to a stop, hanging the rope back on the wall and heading her way. Leaning down, I bring my lips to her ear and nip at the lobe, making her gasp quietly. "When you stand, am I going to find a wet spot where that needy pussy was crying for me?"

She exhales a shaky breath. "I don't know, but I'm never coming to the gym with you again."

I chuckle, extending my hand for her to take. She does, and when I pull her up, I'm both relieved and disappointed to see that the bench is still dry. She'd have killed me and died of embarrassment immediately after if it wasn't, so it's probably a good thing her panties contained the mess I know she made for me.

"Come on, naughty girl," I say, weaving my fingers through hers and leading her to the exit. "Let's go home."

TWENTY-FIVE

LARK

“OH MY GOD, LOOK AT YOU!” Monroe says as she approaches where I’m waiting for her outside the café. We ran into each other at the last home game and agreed to meet for brunch when she and Riggs returned from their trip to Houston for the All-Star Game. Other than Hailey, I don’t have many friends, so it’ll be nice to get to know her more.

I look down, smoothing the pink baby tee I paired with my cutoff jean shorts, knowing we’d be going out in downtown Daytona. I used to cover myself with yoga pants and oversized tops, but since I’ve known Ace, I’ve wanted to do more with my appearance. Not because he’s made me feel like I need to—but because I feel it myself. When I was married, Ryan never went out of his way to tell me I was beautiful or sexy. I stopped caring and started dressing like Adam Sandler whenever I wasn’t forced to wear business-casual attire for work, which was a far cry from the trendy outfits I loved in my younger years. But when I wear stuff like this and Ace can barely keep his hands off me, it makes me feel good. Plus, there should never be an age limit on looking cute, no matter what kind of clothing is involved.

“Hi!” I reply, caught off guard when she steps in and wraps me in a tight hug. I return it, pulling away with a smile as I reach forward, gripping the door handle and pulling it open for her. “How was your trip?” I ask, following her to the end of the line where people are waiting to place their orders.

“It was fun!” she replies, pushing a hand through her long dark hair. “I was expecting everyone to be super serious because it’s all the best players in the league, but honestly, all they did was fuck around. It was a nice little reprieve from regular games, where my boyfriend gets all bent out of shape if he doesn’t play perfectly.”

I laugh. I haven’t been around Ace long, but I notice the way his demeanor changes after a loss. He’s quick to snap out of it when we’re together, but I imagine it’s hard on them, knowing their positions are never really guaranteed. He’s told me many times that his biggest fear is getting sent back down to the minors, although I suspect he’s worried over nothing. His teammates love him, and so do the fans. They’d be crazy to get rid of him.

“I’m glad you guys enjoyed yourselves. Now it’s back to the real world tomorrow, huh?” The guys have two home games this week, followed by one on the road, and we’ll return to Daytona just in time for Ace to take his final over the weekend before the eleven fifty-nine deadline on Sunday night. He wants to do one more big review session, but I know he’s ready. He’s worked his ass off over the last six weeks.

“Yep,” she replies, stepping up to where the barista waits for us. “I’ll have a medium caramel macchiato and a chocolate croissant, please.” She turns to me. “What are you getting? My treat. Don’t argue.” She points an accusing finger my way, shooting me a playful side-eye. I relent, ordering a coffee and a muffin as we take our food and sit in a corner booth to eat.

“So,” she says, sipping her drink, “how’s life? You’re tutoring Ace, right?”

“Yeah. He needed some extra help with his Human Sexuality course, and since I already passed it, he talked me into taking the job.”

She laughs. “He looks like he could be very convincing. Riggs said he’s trying to graduate for his grandma, but what are you going to school for that you’d need that class?”

“Well,” I say, pausing to take a bite of my muffin, “I’m not technically going to school at the moment due to some unfortunate tuition issues, but I was taking night classes to become a sex therapist.” I look down, because as laid-back as she seems, I’m used to being judged by the people in the Dawson family’s circle when they find out about my prospective career change.

“Wow. That’s cool,” she says as I look up at her, my eyes full of surprise. “Imagine how many shitty sex lives could be turned around if people decided to talk out their problems with a professional. Before I met Riggs, I swore there was something wrong with me because of the things I liked. I had no idea they were normal, so I just settled for subpar experiences, hoping that one day my body would stop craving them. It would’ve been nice to have someone to work that out with. I wasn’t raised to be open about things like that, so I just kept it inside. That definitely didn’t do me any favors, you know?”

“Yeah,” I reply quietly. This is exactly why I wanted to go into the field in the first place. Coming from a situation where I settled for underwhelming sex with a partner who didn’t care enough to put in the effort, I understand wanting more. I also understand how not having someone to talk to can make you feel like *you’re* the problem, when in most cases, it just takes knowing yourself and your partner to make everything crystal clear.

“What kind of tuition issues are you having?” She pauses, putting her hands out between us cautiously. “You totally don’t have to tell me if it’s private. My best friend Grace is the nosiest person on the planet. She’s obviously rubbing off on me.”

I laugh. Normally, I’d be hesitant to tell the whole story to someone I don’t really know. But for some reason, I feel like I can trust Monroe. She just opened up to me about something pretty private, and it’s nice having someone to talk to besides Ace.

“Actually, my ex-mother-in-law is the dean of the school. I used to work there, and as a perk, I got free tuition. Ever since she found out I was going into a field that, in her words, is ‘trashy’, she’s been doing everything she can to get me to go back to my maiden name because she’s worried I’ll make her family look bad. I conveniently got fired after my divorce was final, and now I have to save up to continue pursuing my degree.”

“What a bitch,” she replies. “I hope you at least told her off.”

I chuckle, sipping my drink. “I told her I was going to open a practice with her last name in big letters across the front of the building.”

She shoots me a devious grin. “I knew you were a bad bitch. I could feel it in my bones the day we met.” I smile, taking a bite of my food as she changes direction. “So, you started tutoring Ace, and what? He just decided to use a *hands-on* approach to learning?” My eyes go wide, and I try to

speaking, but she cuts me off. “I get it. That man’s ass is immaculate. Good for you.”

I huff a breath, rolling my eyes playfully. “It was *not* my intention to sleep with him. In fact, I didn’t even want to be friends at first. Even at the paintball park, I begged him to keep things between us because I didn’t know how you guys would react. He’s so much younger than me, and he’s got his career all mapped out while I’m scrambling to start over. But he made it difficult to stick to my plan. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I know I like who I am when I’m with him.”

“Girl, you are in *love*,” she replies. “I’m guessing he doesn’t know yet.”

I shake my head. “I—no,” I sputter. “We both have baggage—mine being an ex-husband with a mother who’s still trying to have a say in my life—and I want him to decide if this is even something he really wants before we dig into the emotions.”

She looks at me, her expression going soft. “That’s understandable. I had a truckload of issues when I met Riggs. I pushed him away and pretended I hated him, but I think he saw through it. He was just waiting for me to let him in so he could show me what I deserved.” She reaches across the table, setting her hand on top of mine. “You’re going to do big things, Lark. Let Ace be the one you lean on while you build your new life.”

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes. It’s nice to feel this kind of support when everyone in my life has been complacent for so long. Now that Ryan is out of my life, I’ve been slowly mending the broken relationships with my parents, which were my own fault for choosing him. All they wanted was to save me from an unhappy marriage. But we aren’t even to a point where I’ve told them what I want for my future. And God knows Ryan and Gail were only on my team when it served them.

“Thank you,” I say as she squeezes my hand before pulling away and returning to her food. She’s right. I *am* going to do big things, and I can’t think of anything I want more than to celebrate every single one of them with Ace by my side.

TWENTY-SIX

ACE

ACE:

Last review night before the big exam, Sweets. You ready?

LARK:

You don't even need it. You know this material inside and out.

ACE:

So. Maybe I just want to hear my girl talk to me about dirty shit. Is that a crime?

LARK:

No, but you could be resting. You have some big games coming up.

ACE:

Speaking of games...the stuff we ordered came today and it's my turn to pick the role-play.

LARK:

Are you sure you want to do this?

ACE:

Yep. And you can say you were joking all you want, but we both know you're into it.

LARK:

Only one way to find out. 😈

I TOSS my phone into my duffel bag, pulling out my batting glove and fitting it over my hand. I'm at the practice facility for another hour. Then I'm meeting Lark back at my place for one last study session. The final exam will be posted to the student portal on Monday morning, and then we have until midnight on Sunday to turn it in. She's right—I don't really *need* the review, but I have plans for tonight that I think we're both going to enjoy.

"You're up, Mathers," the hitting coach yells as I put my helmet on and walk into the netted area. I take a few practice swings, loosening my shoulders before getting into my stance and awaiting the pitch. He throws it, and I bring the bat around, connecting and sending a grounder between second and third base.

"You're chopping down on your swing," he says. "Angle upward next time."

I nod, choking up on the bat and watching as he throws another one. This time, I follow his instructions, hitting the ball at a lower point. A loud *crack* breaks through the air as the bat makes contact, sending the pitch over the fence with plenty of distance to spare.

"Good. Again," he says, and I repeat the action several times, each one cleaner than the last. We spend a while perfecting my technique, making sure I'm ready for the next series before I return to the locker room to shower and gather my things.

By the time I'm driving along the ocean on my way home, the sun is already setting. Water rolls toward the shore, eating up the sand for a moment before pulling away. I look out the windshield, enjoying the view and the excitement of having a beautiful girl waiting for me when I get back to my apartment. I've convinced Lark that it's easier for me if she's set up and ready to work when I walk in the door, but I'll admit I have other reasons for giving her access to come and go.

After my grandma died, my life felt so empty. Although it was a bit of a trek, I visited her several times a week when I was in the minors and even got her to come to a few home games before she became too weak. But once she was gone, I was completely alone. Sure, I'd go out with the guys and dance with women, but at the end of the night, I'd walk into a dark house or hotel room and get into an empty bed. Even though I made the choices that got me there, it was still lonely as fuck.

Now, there are times when I find myself going well over the speed limit just to get home if I know Lark is there. And she never fucking disappoints. Whether we're here in Daytona or on the road, I know that beautiful smile will be waiting to welcome me back as soon as I step through the door. I don't care that we haven't known each other that long or how many years apart we are in age—I know, without a doubt, that I want her forever.

“Baby?” I say, walking in and setting my keys in the decorative bowl on the entry table. “Are you here?” The lights are dim, and music filters through the speaker system, but she's not curled up on the couch with her laptop like she normally is when I get home.

“Sweets, where are you?” I call out, making my way toward the bedroom, where I'm completely frozen by the sight in front of me as soon as I step inside.

“Welcome to class, Mr. Mathers.”

Fuck.

LARK

“Holy shit,” Ace chokes out as I sit on the edge of the bed, a devious smirk tugging at the corners of my lips. After he blew my mind with our last role-play, I wanted to do something extra special to celebrate him making it through his course. I did a little shopping for the perfect outfit to go along with tonight's study session, and I feel sexy as hell. My blonde hair is pulled into a bun on top of my head with rogue strands framing my face, and plastic-framed glasses sit on my nose for the full *naughty teacher* effect. His eyes lock onto the black lace bra that pushes my tits up so they're spilling out of the cups just the way he likes. Slowly dragging his gaze down my body, he stops at the indecently short plaid skirt that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination, including the matching lace thong underneath. Black patent leather stilettos adorn my feet, and by the look on his face, he likes what he sees—a lot.

I rise, sauntering over to where he's standing like a statue, barely breathing. Stopping in front of him, I drag a finger down his chest, watching his throat work as he swallows thickly. A mixture of nerves and

excitement radiate from his expression, and I take a moment to remind him that he's still in charge.

"Use your colors at any time," I say quietly, and he nods in understanding. We're both still experimenting to figure out what we like, so we need to communicate at all times to make it work.

"Good boy," I reply. "Why don't you have a seat on the bed, and we'll get started?" He doesn't hesitate, moving over and taking his spot at the end of the mattress as I open my textbook and stand in front of him.

"I'm going to quiz you on some of the material you've learned this semester. If you answer right, you'll be rewarded. If you answer wrong, you'll be punished. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he rasps, and my core clenches in response. Normally, as a woman in my thirties, I cringe whenever someone calls me that. But coming from his lips in this situation? *So fucking hot.*

"Okay," I reply. "First question. Where are most of the nerve endings inside the vagina located?"

He takes a minute to think, shaking his head several times as though he's trying to clear it of all the impure thoughts I'm sure he's having. I inwardly chuckle at the way he's already struggling.

Shifting from one foot to the other, I put a hand on my hip and give him a stern look. "Come on, Ace," I taunt. "You want a reward, don't you? Answer the question."

He furrows his brows, taking a chance. "The outer third of its length?"

I smile coyly. "That's right." He exhales a relieved breath as I step out of my shoes, pushing them aside with my foot before setting my book on the bed and straddling his lap. I take off my glasses, tossing them across the room to get them out of the way. His hands immediately go to my ass as I settle myself on his already semi-hard cock and lean in, licking across his lips. He opens for me, and I plunge my tongue inside, kissing the breath from him as he grinds me along his length. He moans into my mouth, clearly needing more, but I don't give it—instead, I stand back on my feet and grab the textbook before stepping away.

"Goddamn it," he mutters breathlessly, adjusting his erection while I pretend to act unaffected. Turning a few pages, I choose the next question.

"Where is pre-ejaculate fluid produced?" His brows pinch and he fidgets with the comforter while he thinks, but I can tell he's unsure.

“Can you repeat the question?” he asks, attempting to buy more time. This is a tough one, so I show a little mercy, leaning down so my hand is on his thigh as I look straight into his deep blue eyes.

“That pre-cum you leak every time you think of fucking me—where does it come from?” I say slowly, biting my lip as he groans in pain. I know he’s fully hard now because the evidence of his arousal is tenting his sweatpants. I want nothing more than to climb on and fuck him until we both explode, but this is his role-play, and I won’t stop until I’m sure he gets everything he’s asked for and more.

He clears his throat, swallowing. “The prostate gland?”

The corner of my mouth tugs up in a devilish grin as I shake my head. “Wrong. Clothes off, then get on all fours for me.” He obeys immediately, standing and undressing himself before climbing back onto the mattress, settling on his hands and knees with his ass facing me. Enjoying the view for a moment, I leisurely rid myself of my skirt, thong and bra, letting them fall into a pile at my feet.

“Maybe you need an anatomy lesson,” I say, sauntering over to where the box of items we ordered for tonight sits on the dresser and taking out what I need. I opened and cleaned everything before he got here, so it’s all ready to go.

Crawling up beside him, I set it down, then move my hand to his cock that hangs heavy between his legs and swipe the bead of moisture that leaks from the tip. I bring it in front of his face, showing him as I rub it between my fingertips. “During the plateau phase of arousal, pre-ejaculate is secreted from the Cowper’s gland, providing additional lubricant for intercourse.” He watches as I lift it to my mouth, sucking his sweetness onto my tongue with a satisfied moan. His head falls, and I don’t miss the small thrust of his hips, telling me that he’s so turned on that desperation is beginning to set in.

“The prostate gland,” I continue, “is where the largest portion of ejaculate is produced. It’s also an erogenous zone with several nerve endings that, when stimulated, can result in very intense orgasms.” Reaching over, I take the bottle of lube, squeezing a generous amount onto my finger before dripping more down the cleft of his muscular ass. He flinches at first, so I take a minute to check in.

“Do you still want to do this?” I ask quietly. We’ve talked about it on multiple occasions, but he knows he can change his mind at any time.

“Yes,” he whispers, lowering to his elbows and spreading his thighs apart to give me better access. I rub my fingertip around his rim, making sure there’s more than enough lube for me to slide around easily. Even though we’re pretending this is a punishment, I don’t want anything I do to hurt him, so taking my time during prep is extremely important. His breathing quickens, and he sinks down even lower, arching his back as he relaxes. When I’m sure he’s ready, I add pressure, entering him up to the first knuckle while his muscles clench around me.

“You’re doing great, baby,” I praise, and I feel him loosen in response. I retreat slightly, pushing back in further and earning a deep moan that tells me he doesn’t dislike how it feels. “Do you want more?”

“Mhmm,” he replies, so I push until I bottom out, stopping to let him adjust.

“You are so fucking hot, Ace,” I say, looking at where I’m buried inside him. “How does it feel?”

He exhales a shaky breath. “Like I need more. *Please.*”

“You have to earn it,” I reply, using my free hand to pull the textbook toward me. “What’s the name of the theory that suggests that romantic relationships are more likely to occur between people who spend time together in a physical space?”

His fists clench the comforter above his head as his body shakes with need. “P-proximity effect,” he stutters.

“Correct,” I reply, squeezing more lube over his tight hole before working another finger inside. A guttural groan leaves him as I twist my hand, finding his prostate and applying enough pressure to make his toes curl beside me. He pushes back in search of more, and I take the opportunity to slide the rest of the way in, giving him every inch I have to offer—at least for now. I pump in and out, and he meets me, thrust for agonizingly slow thrust.

“That feels so good, doesn’t it?” I mock. “I can tell by the way you’re trying to ride my hand.”

“Fuck,” he whimpers. “Please.”

“What, baby?” I question. “Use your words and tell me what you want.”

He swallows, rocking his hips gently as I rub my free hand up and down his back. “I want you to fuck me.”

I remove my fingers, earning a desperate moan of frustration, and reach for the strapless strap-on dildo we picked out. After doing some research,

we agreed that a regular strap-on harness was way too intimidating, so we opted for this one, which is geared toward beginners. The shaft is long, but barely wider than a few of my fingers, so it'll be comfortable for him. The end that goes inside me curves forward to rest against my G-spot, giving stimulation every time I thrust.

"I should lick your pussy first," he says. "I want to make sure you're ready."

I giggle. "Ace, I'm dripping down the insides of my thighs from playing with your ass. I'm ready, I promise." I swipe a finger between my legs, holding it up to show him I'm telling the truth.

"Fuck, that's hot," he says on a forced exhale, and I lean in, locking my mouth to his. Stars explode behind my eyes as his tongue slides against mine, and my clit throbs with desire. I'll never get enough of the way his kisses possess me.

"Are you ready?" I ask, and he nods in consent. I can tell he's nervous, but I know he wants it just as badly as I do. This role-play was his idea, right down to ordering the toy we chose and having it delivered.

Picking up the dildo, I drag my end through the wetness that leaks from my pussy before slowly pressing it inside. I sigh as it pushes against my walls, giving me a small taste of the relief I'm about to experience once I start thrusting into him. I need to be patient, though. As much as I'd love to chase my own orgasm, making it good for Ace is my main priority.

"Use your colors if you need to," I say, letting a generous amount of lube drip onto the toy before stroking up and down with my fist to coat it. I whimper quietly as I pull, the curved end inside me bumping against my most sensitive spot and nearly making me come with how good it feels already.

Squeezing a little more of the slippery liquid onto his tight hole, I toss the bottle aside and notch the head of the dildo at his entrance. I feel him clench against it immediately, so I rub my hand across his lower back, trying my best to comfort him.

"It's okay, baby," I say softly. "You're doing great. Just try to relax and let me in." I feel him sink into the mattress, so I carefully drive forward, watching with rapt attention as he swallows the first inch. A quiet exhale leaves his lungs, and to my surprise, he pushes back enough to take the toy even more.

"Slow down, Ace," I say. "Let yourself adjust. Are you okay?"

“Mhmm,” he hums. “I need more.” His body is trembling, but not with the nerves he was displaying just moments ago. He’s so desperate that I can tell he’s seconds away from begging me to sink the rest of the way in. So, I give him what he wants, gripping his hips and thrusting forward until my pelvis is pressed tightly to his ass.

A needy whine pushes past his lips as I pull back, slowly burying the dildo inside him again and making it press against my walls. Pleasure zips through my limbs as I pick up my pace, our moans and heavy breaths mixing in the air as I fuck him.

“Look at you,” I say, taking a cheek in each hand and pulling them apart so I can enter him even deeper. “Such a good boy taking your tutor’s cock in this pretty hole. I wish you could see how sexy you are right now.”

“Fuck,” he chokes out. “It’s unreal. I want to come so bad.”

“Sit up with your hands on your knees,” I order, reaching down and taking a fistful of his hair to guide him up. It’s a weird angle, so I have to shift myself a little, but I’m able to reach around, gripping his hard cock in my hand and stroking as I thrust. He whimpers loudly as I squeeze, jerking him in time with each snap of my hips.

“Fuck, Lark! I’m going to come! I can’t—”

“Come for me, baby,” I reply, cutting him off. “Come all over my hand while I fuck your ass.”

Seconds later, his body stiffens as cum shoots from his tip like a fountain, missing my hand entirely and covering the pillow and headboard in front of us. He convulses wildly as it goes on for what feels like minutes, crying out in ecstasy and nearly dropping forward. I wrap my arm around his chest, holding his large frame against me as tightly as I can. When I’m sure he’s spent, I loosen my grip, letting him slump onto the bed as the toy pulls from his ass. I remove it from my soaked pussy, ignoring the pulsing throb inside me as I focus on providing the aftercare I’m sure he needs.

I scoot beside him, where he’s hunched face-first over the pillow, breathing heavily as he recovers. Kissing his cheek, I bring my lips to his ear. “You did such a good job,” I praise. “I’m so proud of you.”

“You didn’t come,” he says, turning his head and peeling his exhausted eyes open to look at me.

“I don’t need to,” I reply with a reassuring smile. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.” Apparently, that’s the wrong answer, because he sits up, wraps a hand around my throat, and throws me down onto the mattress. I

gasp in surprise as he hovers over me, his eyes darkening in a way I've never seen before. He shoves my thighs apart, kneeling between them, and if I didn't trust him with every fiber of my being, I'd be terrified right now by the look on his face alone.

"I'm not *okay* until this wet little cunt is sobbing all over these sheets," he says, slamming his long, thick cock into me. A scream gets caught in my throat as he bottoms out, lifting my ass from the bed with his large hands and rutting into me. He just came two minutes ago, but he's as hard as granite, fucking me like an unhinged animal while I stretch and struggle to take him.

"Oh my God!" I moan loudly, succumbing to the numbness that's flooding my entire body as he fucks it like he owns it. "Ace!"

"That's right," he grits out. "Tell the world whose pussy this is, Sweets."

"It's yours!" I reply, clawing at his chest in an attempt to hold onto something as my orgasm barrels toward me. I'm so worked up from the way the toy was pressing against me while I fucked him that it doesn't take much to get me to the edge. Every muscle inside me is wound whipcord tight, just waiting for that final thrust to push me over. He leans down, plunging his tongue between my open lips in a demanding kiss, and that's it. I shatter around him, digging my nails into his skin and screaming unintelligible words as I come harder than I ever have in my life. He grunts loudly, a full-body tremor working its way through him as he empties everything he has left to give into me, not stopping until we're both unable to go on for another second.

"You're amazing, baby," he whispers, ghosting his lips down my face as I return to awareness. "So fucking perfect. Are you okay?"

I exhale a breathy laugh. "*I'm* supposed to be asking *you* that."

"I'm more than okay," he replies, smoothing a strand of hair from my face before dropping his lips to mine. "Did you like it?"

I nod my head. "Mhmm. Especially the part where you grabbed my throat and threw me."

His brows shoot up, surprise overtaking his expression. "Noted, dirty girl. We'll circle back to that during the next role-play." I smile, completely dick-drunk, as he stands, disappearing for a moment and returning with a warm washcloth. Bringing it between my legs, he carefully wipes away the mess we made, tossing it to the floor and climbing back into bed.

“You highjacked my aftercare,” I whine, snuggling into him, my heavy eyes falling closed as his heart beats against my ear.

“This is all I need,” he replies, kissing the top of my head. “Falling asleep with you in my arms, knowing your face is the first thing I’ll see when I open my eyes, is more than enough for me.”

I exhale contentedly, reality washing over me like a warm wave. Monroe was right. I’m so in love with this man that it’s almost impossible to hold the words inside. What started as giving him a small, terrified corner of my heart has turned into him consuming the entire thing. I’m powerless to stop it...not that I want to anymore.

Ace Mathers was made to be mine. And although I attempted to fight it for far too long, I know now that I am undeniably and unwaveringly his.

TWENTY-SEVEN

LARK

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I question as Ace sits behind the wheel of his truck. We’ve been driving for about an hour, but every time I ask, he just says he wants me to meet some friends of his. I can’t say I’m not a little nervous, because the last time he used those words, I ended up in a helmet, getting shot with paintballs while gasping for breath. He reassured me that there would be no running involved in today’s adventure, so at least there’s that.

“It’s a secret,” he replies with a smirk, reaching over and taking my hand in his. Warmth travels up my arm, and butterfly wings tickle the inside of my stomach. I never thought in a million years I’d feel this way about a man—let alone one that’s so much younger than I am. I was with Ryan for eleven years, married for five, and I can’t remember a single time he made a small touch feel as meaningful as Ace does. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was settling. I’m grateful that he’s opened my eyes to what truly being cherished feels like. Without him, I may have never gotten a chance to experience it.

I huff a frustrated breath, slumping back in my seat as he chuckles softly. It isn’t long before we’re pulling into the parking lot of a small white building with a row of lush bushes lining the front. The windows are covered in colorful art, and chalk drawings decorate the sidewalk leading to the entrance. I look at him confused, but he just winks, exiting the truck and running around the hood to open my door. Taking my hand, he helps me

slide down until my feet hit the pavement, pausing to press a gentle kiss to my lips before ushering me inside.

“Ace!” a young girl, no more than six years old, shouts gleefully, abandoning where she’s coloring at a small table and running toward him at full speed.

“Hey, Chuck!” he replies, catching her as she leaps into his waiting hands, giggling wildly. She wraps her arms around his neck, squeezing him as tightly as her little body can manage. He turns toward me, and my heart thumps in my chest as he smiles proudly.

“Lark, this is my friend Charlie. Charlie, this is Lark.”

She tucks her head into him shyly, waving at me.

“It’s nice to meet you, Charlie,” I say, returning the gesture.

She leans into him, whispering loud enough for me to hear. “Is she your girlfriend?”

He looks at me for a moment before cupping his mouth as if he’s about to tell her a secret. “I really want her to be. What do you think? Should I ask?”

“Yeah,” she says with another laugh. “She’s pretty.”

“I think so too,” he replies, tickling her neck and making her squirm in his arms before setting her back on her feet. “Why don’t you go finish coloring your picture, and I’ll come see it in a little bit?”

She runs off, settling back at the table and focusing all her attention on the paper in front of her. Taking a green crayon, she pokes her little tongue out in concentration as she works to stay inside the lines.

“What is this?” I ask quietly, my eyes bouncing around the room as kids of all ages, from toddlers to teenagers, enjoy various activities.

“I came here once a month when I was young. The connections I made had such a huge impact on my life that I try to stop by and visit whenever I can. It’s similar to a support group for kids who’ve been left behind by their parents. A lot of these guys live with other family members like I did, but a handful bounce around from foster home to foster home, so this gives them something to look forward to. For some of them, it’s the only sense of belonging they have.”

I hold back the tears that are threatening to fill my eyes. I’m so grateful that Ace had a grandmother who bent over backward to make sure he was cared for, but I can’t even begin to imagine how lost he must have felt sometimes without parents—and never truly knowing where he came from.

“There’s our star!” a masculine voice says, bringing me back to the present. I look up to see an older man walking toward us with a bright smile on his face.

“Hey, Doctor Bosworth,” Ace replies, reaching out for a handshake before pulling me close. “I brought someone special with me today. This is Lark Dawson. She’s on the path to becoming a therapist too.” He looks down at me proudly as the man reaches out, and I slide my palm against his.

“Wow!” he replies. “Welcome to our little practice. You’re in for a treat today with all the kids. Generally, we let them roam around and pick their own activities. The older ones usually hog the video game consoles, and we have a few other therapists available in case they have anything going on they want to talk about. We find that not forcing them to meet with us makes them feel more comfortable. Unless you’re this guy,” he says, lifting his chin at Ace and winking. “It was like pulling teeth to get answers out of him.”

“I was a teenage boy,” he replies, rolling his eyes playfully. “I thought I knew everything.”

“Not much has changed,” I joke, earning a pinch to the side that makes me giggle.

Doctor Bosworth points at me. “I like her. Keep her around.”

“I plan to,” Ace replies, looking down at me with adoration before glancing around the room. “Where’s Dallas?”

“Out back, by himself,” the doctor replies, turning toward the window, where a boy—maybe sixteen or seventeen years old—tosses a baseball into the air before catching it in his glove. “His Aunt Rachel’s cancer came back, and she isn’t doing well. She’s starting treatments next week, so we’re trying to remain hopeful. He doesn’t have anyone else to take him in, which means he’ll be in the foster system until he turns eighteen if anything happens to her.”

“You okay in here for a while?” Ace asks. “I just want to go talk to him. I’ll be quick.”

I shake my head rapidly. “Take all the time you need. I’ll go color with my new friend over there.”

“Thank you, baby,” he replies, kissing my forehead before disappearing through the door. I walk over to the corner table, where Charlie works to finish her project.

“Can I join you?” I ask, and she looks up, sliding a second coloring sheet and the box of crayons my way. I pull out the small chair, lowering myself down with a grateful smile as I settle the page in front of me and get to work.

“Ace likes you,” she says matter-of-factly. “Do you like him too?”

I nod. “I do. I like him a lot.”

“Hmmm,” she replies, studying my expression as if she’s trying to gauge whether or not I’m being honest. She must find what she’s looking for, because she sits forward as seriousness blankets her tiny face. “I was going to ask him to be my boyfriend, but you can take him. I have a few others.”

I bark a laugh. “Well, thank you, Charlie,” I reply as she smirks back at me. “That’s very generous of you to share.”

She points an accusing crayon my way, eyeing me cautiously. “Don’t hurt him. He’s the best.”

I look toward the window, where he plays catch with a now-smiling Dallas. The boy looks happy as he talks animatedly to Ace, as if he understands him in ways nobody else can—which I’m sure is true. He’s been through so much, and the fact that he’s still here, being a constant in the lives of these kids who don’t get much of that in the outside world, just goes to show the kind of loving, caring man he is.

“I promise I’ll take good care of him.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

ACE

"I DON'T KNOW who looks into the stands more for their girl. You or Valentine," Jackson says as I peek from the dugout, scanning the crowd at Fury Field for Lark.

"Definitely Valentine," Hawk grunts out, adjusting the tape on his wrist. His best friend laughs, sidling up next to me as I drag my eyes across the empty section she always sits in, hoping she arrives before the first pitch is thrown.

"How are things?" Jacks asks. "Obviously pretty well if you're over here like a giddy schoolboy waiting for his crush to walk by."

I side-eye him, trying to tamp down the silly smile that tickles at the corners of my mouth. "Things are good. I took my final a few days ago, so I'm officially done with school. There's not a chance in hell I failed." My average going into the week was a B, so I'd have had to bomb the exam miserably to end up with a failing grade. I was relieved as I made my way through the questions, finding most of the answers in the notes Lark and I wrote into a fresh notebook while she helped me study.

"When do you find out?" he asks, walking over to sit on the bench, leaning back and gripping the chain that hangs around his neck.

I shake my head. "I'm not sure. Hopefully soon. I already applied for graduation, so pending my grade in this class, I'll officially have my diploma by the end of the month."

“Good for you, man,” he replies, and I look over to see a sincere smile on his face. “Your grandma would be proud that you stuck it out. I know we all are.” He circles a finger around the dugout, and I turn to see Hawk and a few other teammates looking at me the same way he is, with so much support filling the small space. My chest tightens with emotion because, for the first time in a while, I’m part of a real family. Between Lark and the guys, I’m not alone anymore, and that’s a hell of a feeling.

“Thanks,” I say, full of gratitude as he looks over my shoulder, a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. I turn to see my girl walking down the steps toward her seat. She’s looking as stunning as ever with her long blonde hair falling in waves over her shoulders, the tight white t-shirt she’s wearing under my unbuttoned jersey showing just the right amount of cleavage to make my mouth water. My eyes drag down to where her denim shorts hug her curves, and my mind is flooded with memories of waking her up this morning with my tongue. I ate her like a starving man until those gorgeous thighs clamped around my head, and she sang my name loudly, begging me to stop when she became too sensitive. No matter how many times I have Lark Dawson, I’ll always be hungry for more.

My stomach flips with excitement when she notices me, her bright smile lighting up the entire stadium as I approach. She’s hands down the prettiest girl in this place, and I’m the lucky motherfucker who’s been waking up next to her every morning. I have no idea how I’ve been able to convince her to stay over even though we no longer have assignments to do, but you won’t hear a single complaint about it. Holding her as I drift off peacefully every night has been an experience I’ll never forget, and one I hope to have even more of in the future.

“Hey there,” I say as she passes her row and heads toward the landing, stopping when she gets to the railing that separates the stands from the field. A handful of fans who have already taken their seats watch as we smile at each other like we’re the only two people in the world. As crazy as it is, neither of us even gives them a second look. It’s a far cry from the days when she wanted to hide everything because she was worried about other’s disapproval. There’ve been a few occasions when the media posted photos of the two of us together, but the Fury PR team made it clear that she’s my tutor, so I don’t think anyone is onto the fact that there’s so much more going on between us. Not that I care—I want the entire world to know she’s mine. As soon as we put a label on this thing, I plan on screaming it from

the rooftops. I won't be like her ex-husband. I'm proud of Lark and everything she wants to do with her life, and I'll make sure she feels it in the way I speak about her to others.

"Before you say anything, I was running late and didn't have time to stop at the concession stand for snacks, but I promise I will." I love that she knows what I'm thinking before I even voice it out loud, and that she places importance on how I've followed that particular piece of advice from my grandma. I wish she were here to see the way my relationship with Lark has grown and how happy I already am. I know that's all she ever really wanted for me.

Putting a hand up between us, I stop her. "No need, Sweets. Your fuzzy friend, Friggle, will be swinging by very soon with that cotton candy ice cream you love so much. All you have to do is sit back, relax and enjoy being waited on."

She scoffs. "That thing is straight out of a horror movie, Ace. I can't be the only one who thinks so."

"You're not," Riggs deadpans, stopping next to me. She lifts a hand in his direction as if to say *See, I told you*, and I can't help but laugh. Hopefully, there are no kids within earshot, because after he punched Friggle in the face earlier this season, they had to publicly make nice to prove they were friends. It's still one of the highlights of my rookie season, and sometimes, when I'm sad, I rewatch the video of them exchanging friendship bracelets before Riggs was forced into a furry hug as the fans cheered them on from their seats. It perks me right back up every time. "I swear that dude is paid to test my patience." He turns to me. "Ready for some warm-up pitches?"

"Yeah, be right there," I reply as he takes off toward the mound, leaving me to say goodbye to my girl. "I'll see you after the game, baby. Enjoy the show."

"The show?" she asks, and I wink, saying nothing else as I flip my hat backwards and make my way to home plate. Riggs fires a few throws into my waiting mitt as we loosen up, getting in as many as we can before we're called to the baseline for the National Anthem. I take it all in, knowing I'm at home with my brothers by my side and the woman of my dreams cheering for me from the stands, her perfect body showing off who she belongs to, with my name and number stretching across her back. The past seven weeks have flown by, but I feel like I've turned into an entirely

different man since she walked into that room and knocked me on my ass. I'll never be able to thank her enough for being everything I need.

We take the field first, and as excited as I am to play today, I'm more excited about the things I have planned for my walk-up dance. I'm notorious for picking songs from musicals, but lately, I've been venturing out into different genres. The fans really seem to like the change, and I have to say I'm having a lot of fun with it, too. I still can't believe the Fury lets me do this, since we're supposed to be laser-focused. But as long as it makes people happy and my game doesn't slip, it's a win-win situation for everyone.

The top of the inning ends, and we manage to hold them to only one base hit, which thankfully doesn't result in a run. They got a couple of good ones off Riggs, but our outfielders came to play today, so nothing hit the ground.

Clyde made a few changes to today's batting order, and I'm on cleanup, which means I'll be going fourth. I've been putting a lot of extra time into working with the coaches on my swing, and it's paid off in spades. My technique is finally on its way to where I want it, and I won't stop until my batting average is the highest in the league for a catcher.

Dante is our lead-off man today since he's our most disciplined hitter. He almost never swings at the first pitch, so I'm shocked as hell when he does, getting a solid piece of it and ending up on first base. He must've seen something he liked, because I've watched him let so many go by, gauging the pitchers' mannerisms and techniques as he did.

Jackson is up second, and he drops a beauty of a hit just short of the wall. The hot Florida sun works in our favor, essentially blinding the center fielder just enough so he loses the ball as it narrowly misses his glove. Jacks ends up on second base, advancing Dante to third just in time for Hawk to step up to the plate.

The first pitch is a ball, high and outside, followed by another that's almost identical. He's usually our best hitter, so it's pretty obvious they're trying to intentionally walk him. With no outs, it's a giant slap in the face from the Badgers—not only to me, but also to the two batters who are next in the lineup. They'd rather load the bases and hope for us to strike or fly out than give Hawk an opportunity to hit one out of here.

"Fuck you," I mutter, chuckling because, *like hell, I'm going to let that happen*. I'll make them regret underestimating me. But first, I have a pretty

girl to impress. The last two pitches are way outside, sending Hawk to take first base. He jogs slowly since my thirty-second timer for my walk-up doesn't start until his foot hits the bag, which is a league-regulated rule. I quickly hand my bat and helmet to the batboy before taking the spiked wig from his outstretched hand and pulling it over my head. The intro to "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen blares through the stadium, and the crowd cheers as I walk over to the baseline, where I have a clear view of Lark as she gives a stern look that tells me I'm in trouble later.

Worth it.

High-pitched screams from the girls surrounding her break through the air while I make my approach, but I can't see any of them. I only have eyes for my blonde bombshell as she cups her red cheeks in her palms. She tries to hide her smile as I point her way, breaking into the most epic air drum solo anyone has ever seen.

My teammates egg me on from the dugout, yelling the lyrics loudly while I bang my head until she finally breaks and starts laughing. Her arms fly into the air, and she shakes her ass to the beat as if she doesn't have a care in the world. The music begins to fade, causing her to stop and sit back down, dropping her head into her hands like she's embarrassed. She's fucking cute as hell, and I love the way she plays with me now, even though she knows people can see it. She's come a long way since that first night in my hotel room when I had to bribe her to have fun. I blow her a kiss as she peeks through her fingers, ditching the wig and replacing it with my helmet before I hurry to the plate with less than a second to spare.

"About fucking time," the catcher mumbles, making me bark a devious laugh. He's got the calls to strike me out all planned, so the only thing I'm focusing on is not taking the bait. They know what kind of pitches I normally swing at and what part of my bat hits the ball with each one. What they don't know is that I've been working to correct that. They're about to find out.

The first pitch is thrown, and I know before it even leaves the pitcher's hand that it's going to be low and far outside because I usually can't resist. Even now, it's difficult to hold still, letting it sail into the catcher's mitt with a *thwack*.

"Ball!" the umpire calls out, and the crowd claps at my restraint. I don't plan on letting them walk me, but not biting on that one should confuse them a little.

The pitcher winds up again, sending another low slider past me. It's inside, which I'm sure wasn't the intent, but I arch my body outward to avoid getting hit as it flies by.

"Ball two!" the ump says as I step out of the box, adjusting my helmet and taking a deep breath in an attempt to gather myself.

"Come on, Ace! You've got this!" a familiar voice yells, and I look over to see Lark with her hands cupped around her mouth as Friggle stands beside her with a mini helmet full of ice cream. It's funny how, in a stadium full of screaming fans, she's the only one I hear. Then again, she's my everything, so it makes sense.

Stepping back into the box, I tap my bat on the plate before raising it above my shoulder. The pitcher waits for his signal, nodding when he likes what he sees before sending the ball my way. It's low but perfectly placed as I take a swing, focusing on my form and making contact with the sweet spot. It cracks off the maple loudly, flying high through the air while the entire place holds its collective breath. At first, I don't think it's long enough to escape the left fielder's glove when he jumps, but I'm proven wrong when it lands just outside of his reach beyond the far wall.

I breathe a sigh of relief, pumping my fist into the air with an ear-to-ear grin as fireworks shoot into the sky to celebrate my first professional grand slam. The crowd goes nuts, their deafening cheers making my ears ring in the best way. Shock and excitement flow through me in waves while I round the bases, stepping on home plate just before I'm rushed and tackled by my entire team. They shower me with congratulations and praise, and while it feels amazing, all I can think about is Lark.

At the beginning of the semester, I had no idea how I'd graduate. I didn't know if I'd be able to balance work and school, finding a way to secure my spot on the Fury and still fulfill my promise. Because of that gorgeous, selfless woman in the stands, I was able to do both, all while discovering so much about myself in the process. I may have seen a lot of loss along my journey, but I've gained something so real that it made all the hard times worth enduring. They led me to her, and I wouldn't change that for anything in the world.

The guys get off me one by one, and Hawk extends a hand to help me up from where I was lying at the bottom of the pile. Wrapping my fingers around his wrist, I hang on as he pulls me to my feet, patting my shoulder with the closest thing to a smile I've ever seen from him.

“Nice dinger, bro,” he says, walking away as I stand there in complete shock. Making my way back to the dugout, my gaze connects with hers just in time for her hands to extend out in the shape of a heart. I wink back at her, returning the gesture before ducking inside and sitting on the bench to process everything that just happened.

We end up beating the Portland Badgers five to two, with four of those RBIs belonging to me. Baseball is a team sport, and everyone has good and bad days. It’s something we all come to expect. I’m just happy that my best one yet contributed to today’s win the way it did, knowing there will be times when I’ll need to lean on my guys for support. That’s what being part of a team is all about—and I couldn’t ask for a better group to have by my side as I find my way in the major leagues.

TWENTY-NINE

LARK

“WHAT A GAME, HUH?” Monroe says as we wait outside the locker room for the guys. Ace texted me from the dugout—which he still hasn’t been caught doing—right after the ninth inning, asking me to stay until he was done with press. I’m assuming he’ll be a pretty hot commodity after the way he played today, so who knows how long I’ll be standing here? But if he wants to celebrate his first grand slam, then that’s what we’ll do.

“So good!” I reply, leaning against the wall beside her where we’re out of earshot of the other wives and girlfriends. I’m sure everyone saw Ace and me blowing kisses and making heart hands at each other, so I don’t know why I’m hiding over here. I guess part of me is still apprehensive about being accepted because of our age gap and the way I look different from all of them. Although, glancing around...I really don’t. Now that I have more exciting places to go than the grocery store and post office, I’ve been taking the time to play with all kinds of new makeup and hairstyles. We’re all wearing some type of Fury gear, whether it’s our guy’s jersey like me or something custom-made like the dress Monroe has on. I can’t help but notice the way I’m blending into the sea of WAGs, even though I’m not technically Ace’s girlfriend.

“That grand slam deserves a blow job,” she says with a devious grin. I playfully roll my eyes, smirking back at her because, *of course, it does*. I plan on congratulating him properly as soon as we’re alone.

“Anyway,” I say, redirecting the conversation. “What are you and Riggs up to tonight?”

She scoffs. “I’ve been working all day setting up a marketing plan for the world’s most demanding client. Bless her heart, but if I don’t get fucked within an inch of my life tonight, I’m going to snap on her ass and get myself fired.”

I shrug. “I can’t think of a better stress reliever.”

She snaps both fingers above her head. “Amen, girl. A-fucking-men.”

Just then, her boyfriend pushes through the heavy metal doors, a wide smile stretching across his face as soon as his eyes lock onto her. They banter and give each other shit non-stop, but it doesn’t take more than a few seconds of watching them to see how in love they are. The way they’re so open with their affection in public makes me want that, too.

Ryan wasn’t a completely neglectful husband. He kissed me when he came home from work every night, and before we went to bed. He touched me while we were having sex. But when it came to stealing moments throughout the day or him not being able to keep his hands off me when other people were around, I’m not sure we ever really had that. At the beginning, maybe. But I never felt like he loved me loudly.

“Fuck, Mayhem,” he says, taking in her outfit. The short dress is made of a white jersey material, with his name and number on the back in teal sequins. Black thigh-high boots adorn her feet, zipping up the backs of her long legs and leaving just a sliver of skin visible below the hem. I understand his reaction because she looks absolutely beautiful. “I need to get you home before I do something you’ll probably like but will *definitely* get me kicked off the team.”

She throws her arms around his neck as he lifts her off the ground, carrying her toward the exit. “Bye, Lark! Text me!” she yells, waving over his shoulder until they disappear into the warm Florida evening air.

Players funnel out, finding the people who are waiting for them and leaving until I’m the only one left. Just as I’m about to text Ace to ask if I should take off, the doors fly open, and he walks through with his giant duffel bag draped over his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he says, concern written all over his face. “They made me do—oof!” He catches me as I launch myself into his arms, placing both hands under my ass for support when I wrap my legs around his waist. Cupping his cheeks, I press my lips to his in a searing kiss. His eyebrows

shoot up, but relax as he melts into me, sliding his tongue against mine. Dropping his bag to the floor with a *thud*, he turns and presses my back into the cement wall as we swallow each other's needy moans. His cock hardens between us, and I cross my ankles behind him, squeezing our bodies together as a dull ache blooms to life within me. I'm glad we're the only ones here, because as much as I said I wanted to know what it was like to be with someone who wasn't afraid to show their affection in public, *this* is not what I meant.

Thankfully, he pumps the brakes before we end up fucking right in the hallway, pulling back and resting his forehead against mine as we both try to catch our breath. My heart swells in my chest when his eyes open, locking onto mine as a soft smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

"Well, that was a nice surprise," he says, sliding me down his body until my feet hit the floor. "What did I do to deserve that?"

I smile up at him, tilting my head. "You're you." He presses his thumb to my bottom lip, kissing my hair as I nuzzle into his chest. Everything about him makes me feel so warm and adored, and I don't want to hide anymore. I want to show the world that he's mine.

"Ace?" I say quietly, listening to his heart beat steadily against my ear.

"Yeah, Sweets?" he replies.

"Will you be my boyfriend?" He pulls away, and I look up at him as a wide smile stretches across his face. Breathing a sigh of relief that the words are out of my mouth, I await his answer.

"Kinda already thought I was," he jokes. I sag into him, shaking with silent laughter as I nod my head.

"Yeah, well, I had to endure a very stern lecture from a six-year-old wielding a green crayon as a weapon before I could officially ask."

He squeezes me tightly, pressing his lips to mine as he smiles against them. "I was made to be your boyfriend, Lark Dawson. I'm going to make you so happy."

"You already have."

THIRTY

ACE

“ADMIT IT,” Lark says, popping a gummy bear into her mouth.

“I will do no such thing,” I reply sternly, shaking my head. Her jaw drops in shock as she points at the television, where the end credits are rolling up the screen. I’m off today, so we’ve been lounging around, watching movies and eating junk food in our pajamas. Well, I’m in pajamas—she’s in one of my oversized t-shirts, looking as sexy as ever with her hair in a messy bun on top of her head.

“You’re going to look me dead in the eye and say that *The Sandlot* is not a better movie than *Rookie of the Year*?”

I pause, pretending to think before giving her a tight nod. “Yeah.”

“I give us three months,” she mumbles, standing from the couch. I dart my arm out, wrapping it around her waist and hauling her back on top of me as she giggles loudly.

“What did you say?” I ask, tickling her sides as she squirms to get away. She continues laughing as I dig my fingertips into her soft flesh.

“I s-said...” she stutters between wheezes, “said I give us thr—” I cut her off with a chaste kiss, because if she repeats herself, I’m going to put her over my knee and turn her ass red.

“We’re forever,” I say, kissing down toward her neck. She tilts her head, giving me better access. “Say it.”

“Ace,” she moans as my lips warm against the heat of her silky skin.

“Say it,” I repeat, reaching up her shirt and pinching a peaked nipple between my thumb and forefinger, rolling it gently. She exhales a shaky breath, enjoying the onslaught of sensations a moment longer before she grants my request.

“We’re forever.” The words are barely a whisper, but she may as well be tattooing them on my heart with the way they make me feel. I’ve never been this happy in my entire life. Waking up next to her is a feeling that, even though I know I have so many amazing days ahead of me, can’t be topped. I’ll never tire of watching her pouty lips part as she snores softly, lost in what I hope are dreams of the future we’re going to build. The house with the big yard. Vacations in the mountains. Christmases in our home with as many babies as she wants to give me. I crave it all so badly that it causes a physical ache in my chest just thinking about it.

“That’s right, baby. You and me, no matter what.” I coast my hands along her body, earning the sweetest whimpers and moans as she squeezes her legs together for relief. Just as I’m about to part them with the back of my hand, a vibration rumbles against the wood of the coffee table. Ignoring it, I continue my descent, but she turns her head, sitting up abruptly.

“Wha—” I start to protest, but she leans forward, lifting my phone.

“It’s a notification from the university’s app. Your grade was updated.”

I sit up, pulling her into my lap. “Open it, Sweets.”

She hesitates, chewing the inside of her cheek nervously. We’ve been waiting over a week for these results, and the more time that went by, the more worried I became that I’d fucked it up. The last thing I want to do is let her down after all the work she put into helping me get through the semester.

“Look at me,” she says, cupping my face and capturing my attention. *Fuck, she’s pretty.* “Whatever happens, I’m proud of you. Your grandma is, too. I’m sure of it.” I blink back the tears that are threatening to fill my eyes, swallowing thickly. This is another one of those moments—where you feel everything shift. Where you know your life is about to change, and there’s nothing you can do but make the leap, hoping for a soft place to land. She’s that place for me. She has been since the first time I kissed her.

“I love you, Lark,” I whisper, losing the battle as a single tear falls down my cheek. I don’t know if it’s the nerves, the way she spoke for my grandma by saying they were proud of me, or just the magnitude of my confession, but I don’t want to hide the emotions as they flow through me. I

want her to see all of it. Taking her hands in mine, I bring them to my chest so she can feel the way my heart beats wildly for her. “If I’ve learned anything in my life, it’s that you shouldn’t wait to tell someone what they mean to you. You should do it as often and as loudly as possible because you never know what tomorrow holds. I’ve loved you for a while now, and I wasted precious time that we’ll never be able to get back because I thought it was too soon. I was afraid you wouldn’t feel the same. If you’re not there yet, that’s okay. I’ll happily wait forever to hear you say it back if that’s how long it takes. I just couldn’t go another second without telling you that I’m in love with you.”

Anxiety washes over me as I wait for her reply, praying that my admission wasn’t too much. It’ll break me if she doesn’t feel the same, but I need her to know where I’m at—that I’m all in on us.

Her eyes flutter closed, and she tilts her head to the sky as a smile blooms across her face. Inhaling deeply, she soaks in the moment for a few beats longer before finally returning her gaze to mine. She looks relieved, like the entire world has just been lifted off her shoulders, as she leans in and takes my lips in a soft kiss.

“I love you too. So, so much.” Her chin quivers, tears falling from her eyes as I cradle her cheeks and wipe them away with my thumbs. This is the only way I’ll ever make her cry—by overwhelming her with the love and support she’s deserved all her life. I’ll always be careful with her heart, knowing it’s the greatest gift I’ve ever received.

Suddenly, my test grade doesn’t exist—only Lark does. Lowering her back down to the couch, I fuse my lips to hers, licking at the seam until they go slack. I push my tongue inside, tangling it with hers as I settle between her soft thighs. She exhales a sharp breath as I grind my growing erection against her center, lifting her hips and creating the sweetest friction between us. I don’t stop kissing her, reaching down and pushing her panties to the side as I swipe my middle finger over her swollen clit.

“Fuuuuck,” I curse into her mouth as I press down, feeling her wetness coat my skin while I rub in tight circles. “Always such a good girl, getting wet and ready to take my fat cock.”

“Ace, please, I can’t—” she whines, sucking in a gasp as I sink two fingers into her tight heat. Pumping in and out slowly, I stroke her walls, leaking precum as she loosens enough to take me.

“You want it, baby?” I ask, removing my fingers and sucking them clean before I pull my pants and boxers down my legs. I rip her shirt and panties off, desperation fueling my actions as I throw them over the back of the couch. She’s braless, her nipples hardening as soon as they’re exposed to the cool air in the room. My mouth waters at the sight, and I lower down, enjoying the way they feel pressed against the firm muscles of my chest. Her hot, wet slit pulses against my bare shaft, and I have to grit my teeth so I don’t come all over her before I even get inside.

“No, I don’t want it. I *need it*,” she begs. I love when she’s desperate like this. Being in control of her pleasure is like nothing I’ve ever felt. I want to make her see stars until she breaks, crying big, swollen tears while pleading for me to stop.

“That’s my sweet girl,” I praise. “I can’t wait to feel you gush around me.” She whimpers at the dirty words, writhing around against the couch until I slowly surge forward, breaching her opening with the head of my cock. Her muscles clench in protest to the intrusion, attempting to push me out. I spit into my hand, smoothing the saliva over my fingers with my thumb before reaching down and splitting them around the spot where we’re joined. I massage the swollen flesh that’s hugging my girth, waiting for the breathy moan that tells me it’s safe to feed her a few more inches. Sliding deeper for a moment, I drag my heavy shaft back out before pushing forward again, this time continuing until I’m buried as far as her body will take me.

“Oh my God,” she moans as I keep a steady tempo, enjoying the feel of her wrapped around me. I encircle a gentle hand around her throat, holding her in place as I fuck into her.

“This cunt is mine,” I say, looking down as she swallows me whole with every thrust. “I’m going to paint your insides with my cum until you taste it on the back of your tongue. You’ll never forget who you belong to, because I’ll be dripping from your lips long after I’m gone.”

A low moan tumbles from her mouth, and her eyes roll back, so I squeeze my fingers against the sides of her throat, capturing her attention once again. Her hands shoot to my wrist, but she doesn’t pull me away. Instead, she holds me there.

“You want me to make you float, baby?” I ask, earning a frantic nod. We discussed breath play during our lesson on kinks and fetishes, and I

became obsessed with learning all about it. I wasn't sure if we had the level of trust it requires before. But now? There's no question.

"I want that too," I reply, letting her know that she has my consent to do this, as well. "Hold onto me. Only remove your hand if you want to stop." She nods again, giving me her full attention as I flex my fingers slowly, pressing into the delicate skin underneath. My heart beats wildly inside my rib cage with the power coursing through me, and I do my best to stay focused on her face as she slowly begins to fade away. Increasing the pressure on her pulse points, I stay present, ready to let go at the first sign that it's becoming too much. But she's as into it as I am. Her hand stays wrapped around my wrist firmly, never flinching with indecision for a single moment.

Pounding into her, I take in the sight of her tits bouncing, the sound of my thighs slapping against her full ass filling the room. I swear, she's like a work of art when she's getting fucked. Her pussy begins to contract as I steal the oxygen from her body, signaling to me that she's ready to fall over the edge. I relax my grip right before her climax tears through her, watching as she shakes violently from the sudden onslaught of adrenaline. Sucking in big gulps of air, she attempts to fill her lungs, but it's futile with the way she's screaming in ecstasy.

"That's my beautiful little whore," I praise, jerking into her as she rides it out. "Coming so hard from being choked and fucked at the same time." Her release flows through her in waves, finally ebbing away as her body settles back into the cushions.

Her eyes flutter open, focusing on me as I slow the movement of my hips, gently skimming my fingertips over her warm cheek.

"You okay?" I ask. "Can I have a color?" Even though we aren't in the middle of a scene, I still want to make sure what I'm doing is okay. It's been an emotional evening, and if any of my words or actions are missing their mark, I need her to tell me.

"Green," she says on a quiet moan before sinking her teeth into her bottom lip, obviously still riding the high from her orgasm.

"You're so perfect," I reply, leaning down and brushing my lips against hers. "Tell me if you need to rest." She nods in understanding, and I fuck her in slow, languid strokes, giving her time to recover. I feel like I could go all night, edging myself with her pussy until the sun comes up. If I had my way, I'd never leave her warmth.

“Ace,” she whimpers, looking up at me like I’m the center of her world. Her blue eyes are sparkling with emotion, and I can’t stop a smile from breaking free when I think about the fact that she’s all mine.

“What, baby?” I reply, leaning down and sucking a hardened nipple into my mouth. Her hands shoot to my hair, holding me close as she arches into me.

“I l-love you. You feel s-so good,” she stammers.

“I love you too,” I say against the pebbled bud, feeling her grow even wetter with every swipe of my tongue. “Give me another orgasm. Milk my cock so I can watch it drip out.” Leaning away just barely, I slide my hand between us, rubbing her clit as I pick up speed. I fuck her hard, feeling my balls draw up tight as my thrusts become sloppier. Her inner muscles clamp down, her face twisting with pleasure when she shatters again, this time pulling me under right beside her. My dick swells and pulses, spilling inside her until I’m completely empty. I lower down, careful not to crush her as I savor the post-nut high, my entire body humming with satisfaction. Nuzzling my head into her shoulder, I inhale the scent of her freshly fucked skin, which has become one of my favorite things to do. She smells like me, and it gives me a sense of possession that feels unlike anything else in this universe.

I sit up, reluctantly pulling out. She groans in protest, making me laugh as I scoot down the couch, settling between her legs. Using my fingers to spread her swollen lips apart, I wait impatiently for her to give me what I want.

“Push for me, Sweets,” I instruct. She does, and I watch as my cum slowly drips out, running over the sensitive skin between her pussy and asshole. Instinctively, I reach forward, using a finger to scoop it up before shoving it all back inside. It’s one thing to fill her up, but it’s something entirely different to force it where it belongs, making sure that not a single drop goes to waste.

I know I’m only twenty-one, and this relationship is in its beginning stages, but I can’t stop myself from dreaming about the way she’ll look carrying my child. I’ll give her everything she could ever want, even if it means rubbing her back for hours or making multiple trips to the grocery store in the middle of the night for whatever she and our baby are craving. I never had a dad, so I’m determined to be the best one ever. And I already know Lark will be an amazing mother.

Placing a gentle kiss under her navel, I work my way back up, breathing her in once more before pulling my phone from where it's been wedged between the cushions. Handing it to her, I wait nervously. "How'd I do?"

She swipes up on the screen, opening the app and giving it her full attention while it loads. Tapping a few times, I watch as her eyes light up and her jaw drops. "You got an eighty-two! You passed!"

"Fuck yeah!" I shout, pumping my fist in triumph before wrapping my arms around her and peppering sloppy kisses all over her face. She giggles in response, halfheartedly trying to break free from the assault. I show mercy, sitting up and pulling her with me as I hug her tightly. "Thank you," I say with a smile. "I couldn't have done this without you."

She cups my cheeks, kissing me softly before standing and reaching out to pull me from the couch. "Come on, Mr. Soon-to-be College Grad. You can show your appreciation by cleaning up the mess you made in the shower." I look down at where I marked between her legs, feeling like a caveman at the thought of caring for her that way. It'll never get old. I live and breathe to give this woman what she wants.

"Lead the way, baby."

THIRTY-ONE

LARK

"I DON'T GET IT," I mumble to myself, checking Ace's student portal for the millionth time. It's been over a week since we found out he passed his exam, but the final grade for the course is still pending, as is his graduation status. I've been enrolled at the university for years, and it's never taken this long. I averaged everything out and he ended the semester with a B-minus, so I'm not sure what could be holding the process up.

I close my laptop, standing and walking around my living room. Ace is on a week-long road trip, and I miss him like crazy. We're halfway through, but it's been dragging by, and I officially hate it. This is the longest we've been away from each other since we met, seeing that I traveled with him during the semester. I have no idea what to do with myself after I hit the gym each morning while he's away, so I come home and binge-clean, waiting for him to call or text—or for his games to come on TV just so I can see that face I love so much. Prior to tutoring him, I spent all my free time at home, studying and enjoying the peace and quiet of solitude. Now, my life feels so boring and empty when he's away. I know this is all part of his job, but not seeing him whenever I want is going to take some getting used to.

Just as I'm considering a complete overhaul of my silverware drawer to pass the time, my phone vibrates in the pocket of my hoodie. I fish it out, seeing Hailey's name on the screen. I haven't talked to her for a couple of weeks, so I'm sure she wants to be filled in on what I've been up to.

“Hey!” I say in greeting. “What’s u—”

“I’m hiding in the breakroom,” she cuts me off, talking quietly. “I just overheard the dean talking to Ace’s advisor about his Human Sexuality grade. They think he cheated, Lark. They’re starting an investigation.”

I freeze, my blood running ice cold through my veins. “What? He didn’t cheat. I helped him learn the material and studied with him, but he answered every question and wrote every essay on his own.”

“I know. I’m going to try to get more information, but I wanted to give you a heads-up. They’re saying that his grade in this course being so much higher than the ones he’s taken in the past, despite having less time to complete the work, is raising some red flags. I have no idea if they’ll go to the media or not—I just didn’t want you two to be blindsided.”

Anger flows through me as my hands ball into fists at my sides. With the number of photos that have been taken of Ace and me, I’m sure Gail knows I was tutoring him. She’s been trying to get me to back down for over a year, but she never had anything important enough to me that she could use to her advantage. She knows Ace didn’t cheat. This isn’t about him. It’s about me.

“What a fucking bitch,” I mumble, trying my best to keep my rage at bay. The last thing I need to do right now is act before I have time to cool down. That’s exactly what she wants—to catch me while I’m out of sorts so she can get what she’s been after.

“I have to go,” she whispers. “I’ll call you if I hear anything else.”

“Thank you.” I hang up the phone, tossing it onto the couch before leaning forward with my head in my hands. I know I have to make him aware of what’s going on, but I don’t want it to affect his game. They play one more in Boston tonight, then head straight to New York for two in a row. It’ll be better to tell him everything in person so I can reassure him that it’s going to be alright. I won’t let Gail make him out to be anything less than an amazing man who lives his life with honesty and integrity, no matter what he’s doing. If, in the end, that means giving her what she wants—so be it. As much as I’ve been empowered by not letting her bully me anymore, it’s not nearly as important to me as Ace being able to walk across that graduation stage with his head held high. I won’t let anyone take that away from him.

ACE

“What’s that?” Riggs says, looking over my shoulder as we make the short bus ride to the stadium. We’re about to take on the Boston Tide in the last game of the series, and then we’re hopping on a plane to New York later tonight. I hate being away from Lark, so I’ve been trying to stay busy during my free time in hopes that it’ll fly by.

Spoiler alert: It hasn’t.

I called earlier, but she seemed tired, only giving short answers and telling me she had a few chores to get done before the broadcast started. I love that she watches me play when I’m on the road, so we said our goodbyes and promised to talk when I got back to the hotel tonight. I ordered some snacks to be delivered to her house in a bit, so hopefully she feels me with her, even though I’m a thousand miles away.

“Nothing,” I say, shoving my Kindle into the seat, face down.

He raises a suspicious brow. “That looks like a book for grown-ups, Rook. Are you even old enough to have that?” He stands, rounding the seat and plopping down next to me as he continues. “Monroe was reading one last week where a baseball player was absolutely railing the shit out of his girl—although I’m not sure why since she has the real thing.” He shrugs. “Could be worse, though. It could be football.”

I roll my eyes because, *like hell, I’m admitting to anything*. This guy is a jokester, and I’m not setting myself up for any pranks involving smutty excerpts being taped to my locker. “How’s the shoulder?” I ask, attempting to steer the conversation elsewhere. We’re nearing the end of the regular season, and our bodies are starting to feel the effects. We’ve been trying to conserve his joints by taking it easy on the fastballs, but sometimes it’s necessary.

“Pretty good. I’ve been doing some prehabilitation with my trainer, and I’m feeling a hell of a lot stronger than I normally do at this point in the year. Maybe I’ll see thirty in this league, after all.”

I scoff. “You’ll see forty, Val. I’ll make sure of it.” He looks over at me with a smile, putting his fist up for me to bump. I’d love to still be taking pitches from him over a decade from now. Florida is my home, and I’m beyond lucky to say I’m living my dream so close to where I was raised, especially when the chances of being drafted by the team you grew up

cheering for are next to none. I want to retire in front of Fury fans someday, surrounded by my team, Lark and whatever family we're blessed with.

In less than three months, my life went from being alone and unsure to being excited about the prospect of a future with this team and the woman I love.

As long as she's mine, absolutely nothing in this world can stop me from having it all.

THIRTY-TWO

LARK

I PULL through the front gate of the university, slowly driving down the tree-lined road that leads to the administration buildings. It's been two days since I spoke with Hailey, and although I told myself I'd tell Ace what was going on so we could decide on a plan of action together, I couldn't just sit there doing nothing, knowing the kind of destruction Gail is capable of. He won't be back from New York until late tonight, and I didn't want to waste precious hours sitting at my house when she may be getting ready to go to the media. I need to at least try to stop her.

Is it still a little impulsive to be here? Probably. But for the last three years, Ace has done everything he could to avoid negative attention, even when it meant not getting justice after he was violated. If I can put a stop to this without him knowing—at least until it's over—I will. No matter what it takes.

I turn into an empty space across from Gail's Lexus, preparing to wait until she leaves for lunch. I'm sure there's no way security would buzz me into the building since I didn't exactly leave on good terms, so I don't have much of a choice. As impatient as I am to confront her, I can't do anything until she steps outside.

I pass the time by pulling up the Fury's social media account on my phone. There are rows of photos and funny videos of the team doing trendy dances and answering obscure questions. I click on a thumbnail of Ace, the

recording filling my screen as it plays. By the looks of the decal on the wall behind him, it was taken before yesterday's game in New York.

"What's your favorite food?" the interviewer asks, putting a miniature microphone up in front of his mouth.

"Hmm," he hums, pretending to be deep in thought. "I'm just a really big sweets guy." My shoulders shake with laughter at the innuendo and the adorable grin that blooms across his face as he says it. Butterfly wings tickle the insides of my stomach, and I kick my feet with giddiness as the interview goes on, realizing just how happy I am. I don't need giant declarations of love to feel wanted by Ace, although I'm sure he'd give them if he knew I'd be okay with it. It's the little things that make me feel important—like surprise treats when he's away or inside jokes that let me know he's thinking about me when I'm not there.

Just as I'm about to click on another video of him dancing with Friggle, an ugly-as-sin pantsuit catches my eye. Gail takes a few steps out of the building, checking her watch before looking from left to right as if she's waiting for someone.

"Perfect," I mumble, pulling my keys from the ignition and exiting the car. As soon as the door slams shut, she notices me, rolling her eyes like the snooty bitch she is.

"You're not supposed to be here, Lark," she says in a monotone voice, as though my mere presence is a giant inconvenience. That's nothing new since I can't remember her ever treating me any differently.

I walk her way, stopping with my shoulders back and my chin high. She needs to know I'm not the same woman who backed down to avoid drama for so many years. If she thinks she saw the new me at the courthouse or here on the day I was fired, she's wrong. She's fucking with the future of the man I love, and I refuse to let it happen without giving her a piece of my mind.

"Trust me, Gail," I spit, "the last place I want to be is here with you, but you haven't given me another option. What the fuck do you think you're doing accusing Ace Mathers of cheating? Are you that much of a heartless bitch that you'd fuck with a good, kind, *innocent man* because of a personal vendetta?"

"That's ridic—"

"Bullshit," I say, cutting her off. "I know this is about me. You're trying to get what you want, and now you finally have something to hold over my

head.”

She opens her mouth to reply just as a familiar BMW pulls up next to where we’re standing on the curb. I throw my head back in annoyance as Ryan steps out and walks toward us wearing a collared shirt, khaki chino shorts and those goddamn penny loafers. A visible shiver racks my body as I try to figure out how I ever found this douchey asshole attractive.

“Mom?” he says, looking from her to me before stopping at her side. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing,” she says, reaching out to smooth a wrinkle from his shoulder. I swallow the bile that makes its way up my throat at the gesture. “Lark was just leaving.”

An incredulous laugh bursts from my lips. “Like fuck, I am. I just got here,” I say, turning to him. “Your mother is launching a completely unfounded cheating investigation on a man who did nothing wrong because she wants to get back at me for not changing my name. Ace worked his ass off on every single assignment this semester. Every word he wrote was his own. But, because I was his tutor, she’s fully prepared to drag his name through the mud.”

He turns his head, looking at Gail. “Is that true?”

“Well...” she begins, pausing for a moment, no doubt to come up with a lie. “We don’t know for sure that he cheated, but he might have. His grades are slightly higher than they have been in the past, and—”

I put my hand up, stopping her as I look at him. “Ryan, we were together for eleven years. Not once during that time did you *ever* stand up to her for me. You watched her disrespect and belittle me time and time again, never intervening or telling her to back off. *You* gave me this last name, not her. I carried it as your wife for five years, creating an identity that I shouldn’t have to give up just because we didn’t work out. You have a chance to do the right thing for me, for once. Speak up and tell her to end this petty bullshit so we can all move on with our lives.”

He swallows, reaching up to grip the back of his neck as the seconds tick by, the deafening silence telling me everything I need to know. My shoulders slump as I shake my head in disappointment, although I’m not really sure why. I’ve known his true colors for a long time. It’s why I had to walk away.

Nobody ever gets married thinking *We’ll love each other until we don’t—then we’ll get divorced*. I thought Ryan and I would make it when we

were younger. I chalked his attachment to his mother up to our immaturity at twenty, convincing myself year after year that it would get better. I was dumb to think he'd grow out of it, but he promised me the future I'd always dreamed of, and I had faith in him. When our marriage failed, I blamed myself for not being a strong enough partner to make him feel like he didn't need his mom. I struggled for a long time, wondering if I'd ever find someone who would accept me for who I am, imperfections and all. But Ryan's *too much* is Ace's *just right*, and that's how I know I've found my other half in him.

Ace Mathers healed a heart he didn't break, encouraging me to live my life to the fullest and holding my hand while I found myself again after being lost for so long. Even with our ten-year age difference, he's shown me more love and support than Ryan and Gail ever bothered to in all the years we were together. I'm standing at a crossroads right now, and the answer to which path I should take has never been clearer.

"Okay," I say, lifting my head high. "You can have your name back."

"What?" they both say in unison. Gail's expression is blanketed in shock, but when I look over at Ryan, it's very clear that he's disappointed. If that's really the case, he had several chances to keep me even after we separated, but he made his priorities clear. He didn't choose me. Ace did—and I choose him right back.

"I'm done." I place my hands on my hips. "All this time, you were worried about me embarrassing your family by moving on as Lark Dawson. But I just realized that the only person who should be embarrassed in this situation is me. Gail," I say, looking her right in the eye, "you're a miserable woman. You spend so much time and money trying to guilt Ryan into picking you because you know nobody else can stand to be in your presence for longer than a few minutes." Her jaw drops, head rearing back as if I just slapped her. As much as I wish I had, her reaction to my words is just as empowering.

"And you." I turn toward my ex-husband, feeling much sassier now that I've given his mother a piece of my mind. The floodgates that have been holding back my anger and resentment are now wide open, and I'm not taking any of it with me after this. It's not my burden to bear anymore. "I'll never say I regret marrying you because I learned a lot about myself and what I deserve—but fuck if I'm not happy to be divorced. I have someone who goes out of his way to make me feel wanted, and I can't believe I

settled for being dismissed by you as long as I did. Good luck finding someone who doesn't think your Oedipus complex is disgusting and enjoys long walks on the beach with you and your mother." He drops his chin, his gaze burning into the pavement under our feet as if I've embarrassed him. *Good.* I train my attention back on her once more, pointing an accusing finger. "Call off the investigation and update Ace's graduation status."

I turn and walk back toward my car, but can't stop myself from delivering one last blow to the woman who made me feel like I wasn't worthy of her son. Spinning on my heel, I look at Gail. "That shepherd's pie you always made on Christmas Eve?"

"What about it?" she snarls.

"Grossest shit I've ever tasted. I tried feeding it to the dog once so I didn't hurt your feelings, but even he wouldn't take it."

She gasps, pressing her hand to her ugly-ass shirt as I turn one last time and walk away, proud of myself for leaving all the things that were weighing me down right here in this parking lot.

THIRTY-THREE

ACE

“WHERE’S MY GIRL?” I yell, barely making it inside the door before kicking off my shoes and heading toward the living room in search of Lark. After spending entirely too long away, I need to get her in my arms.

“In here!” she calls out, and I round the corner to see her snuggled up, watching one of the reality shows she said she wanted to binge while I was on the road. She looks all cozy and warm, and I can’t stop from launching myself onto the couch, enveloping her in my arms. She giggles, cuddling into me as I press kisses all over her face like I haven’t seen her in years.

“Fuck, I missed you,” I say, continuing my assault. “I’m sneaking you into my luggage next time.”

“I missed you too, but you couldn’t pay me to live in random hotels for half the year. I don’t know how you do it.”

I sit up, lifting her into my lap. “Okay, fine. But can we at least make it so you’re always here when I come home?” *Better yet—just never leave.* I know it’s fast, and I’m sure she isn’t ready to move in with me yet, but if she was, I’d absolutely want her to. Now that we’re moving things forward in our relationship, it’s only a matter of time before we take that step. In a perfect world, we’d live together while she went back to school, so she wouldn’t have to worry about extra bills and could focus on her classes. It’s definitely something we’ll need to discuss, but I want to support her in every way I can as she works to achieve her dream.

“That can be arranged,” she says, and my heart does somersaults in my chest at the thought of never having to walk into an empty apartment after a road trip. If I have to be away, knowing I’m coming home to her sweet smile will make it a hell of a lot easier.

“Anything interesting happen while I was gone?” I ask, and I can tell immediately that something is bothering her. She takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly before settling her eyes on mine.

“Actually, yeah.” Her expression is full of worry, and without even knowing what she’s going to say, I want to fix it. Her shoulders are hunched forward, and her hands are wrung together in her lap as she stares down at them like they have all the answers to her questions.

“Baby, talk to me,” I say softly, lifting her chin with my pointer finger. “What’s going on?”

She sighs, dragging a hand through her blonde waves. “I really wanted you to be able to come home and get settled in before I told you everything, but since you’re asking, we may as well just get it over with.

“Hailey called me from work the other day. She wanted to give me a heads-up because she heard Dean Dawson talking about her plan to open an investigation on you for cheating. I knew this was all part of her vendetta against me, since there’s no way they could prove that you did something you didn’t do. Even if they wanted to compare my work in the class to yours, they would see how different it all was. There were absolutely zero red flags, other than my involvement in tutoring you, that would make them think you didn’t do the work on your own.” My blood begins to boil inside my veins, rage bubbling up to the surface as I try to remain calm so she can continue.

“At first, I told myself I would wait until you got back so we could make a plan together. Even though I knew the investigation would prove that you did the work yourself, I was worried that word might get out and it would ruin your image. So, I decided to go to the university myself, and I confronted her.”

“Lark, you shouldn’t have done that,” I say firmly. “That woman has been nothing but a cause of stress for you. The last thing you need is to open yourself up to more of that because of me. I don’t give a fuck what she thinks. She can investigate and tell the media whatever she wants. At the end of the day, we know we did everything right and never had to compromise our morals in the process. If she wants to sink to that level

because she's mad that you're carrying on her last name, let her. Karma always has a way of finding people like that.”

She shakes her head, her brows pulling tight with worry. “We don't know who she knows or what she's truly willing to do. What if she figures out a way to make it look like you cheated? Your reputation would be ruined—maybe even your career. I couldn't let that happen without doing everything in my power to stop it.” She looks up at me. “I told her I'd go back to using my maiden name. I just want her to leave you out of it.”

My eyes go wide. “Baby, no. You're not doing that. You've been fighting against that tyrant for so long. I'm not going to let you give in to her because of me.”

Her expression softens as she takes my hand, linking our fingers together. “I'm not *giving in*, Ace. I'm *setting myself free*. All this time, I just wanted to give her a big *fuck you* for never hearing me when I spoke. I thought having this kind of control over something she wanted would make me feel fulfilled. But the truth is, it didn't. It just kept me connected to the people who caused me so much pain. In order to really move on and be happy, I know I need to let go of that chapter of my story so I can start a new one with you.”

I lean forward, pressing my mouth to hers in a soft kiss. Any protests I had about her decision died on my lips the moment she mentioned our future, and I'm glad she feels secure enough in what we have to let go of the things that no longer serve her. I'm ready to do whatever it takes to fill her life with all the love and happiness she needs. She'll never feel like her voice isn't heard, because it's the only one that truly matters to me.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you too. I'm the luckiest girl in the world.” She sits up, straddling my lap and pressing into me like she can't get close enough before kissing me passionately. I reach around, splaying my large hand across her lower back and pulling her even tighter to me, because there's absolutely nothing I want more than to be connected to her in any way I can. We make out, breathing each other in as we revel in another monumental moment that I doubt either of us will forget as long as we live.

I couldn't be prouder to call this smart, strong, resilient woman mine, and I'm excited to hold her hand wherever life brings us.

Realization dawns on me, and I pull away, my eyes going wide. “What?” she says, a blanket of worry slipping over her lust-filled gaze.

She's breathing heavily, her swollen lips parted as she waits for me to speak.

"Is it bad that I don't know my girlfriend's last name?" I ask, trying to look concerned as she reaches out and slaps my shoulder playfully.

"It's Whitlock," she replies, rolling her gorgeous blue eyes.

"Whitlock," I echo with a shrug. "It'll do...for now."

THIRTY-FOUR

LARK

“ARE you sure you want to do this?” Ace asks as we walk into the courthouse with my hand encased in his.

“Yes,” I reply, rolling my eyes as I yank him through the corridor. “Now let’s go before you’re late for warm-ups.” He insisted on coming with me to file for my name change, even though I told him I’d see him at the stadium. He claimed that he wanted to offer moral support in case I needed it, but I honestly feel like the weight of the world is about to be lifted off my shoulders as soon as I sign my name on the dotted line. I’m ready to put the past behind me and head into the new and exciting future I’m building with Ace.

“Can I help you?” an older woman asks from her seat behind a high, dark wood counter. She takes a look at my boyfriend, smiling brightly as he waves. “Oh, my goodness!” she says on a gasp, primping her gray, shoulder-length hair. “I’m your biggest fan! My name is Gloria!” She stands, extending her hand for him to take, lingering a little longer than normal for this type of greeting. I hold in my laugh, watching as he graciously lets her move his arm up and down for about thirty seconds, never breaking eye contact as she smiles at him with stars in her eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he replies with a charming wink as she all but floats back into her seat. “My girlfriend is looking to change her last name, and I was hoping to make it a speedy process since I have somewhere very important to be this afternoon.”

“Of course!” she says, looking over to me. “Depending on the reasoning for the change and what paperwork you have, we can get things done pretty quickly.”

I lay my folder down in front of me, flipping it open. “I was recently divorced and would like to go back to using my maiden name. I have my divorce decree with the name change provision, proof of address, my Social Security card and driver’s license.” I pull the documents out and hand them to her.

She takes them, double-checking each item. “It looks like you’re all set to get everything done today. I’ll just need to enter some info into my system, make copies of these papers, and then you’ll be good to go. You’ll have to swing by the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Social Security office to get those changes made, but otherwise, you’ll no longer be known as Lark Dawson in the eyes of the state of Florida.”

I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly in relief. I was worried this might be a long process, but I guess agreeing to the name change provision was a good choice on my part. I initially fought it in court but eventually gave in because I never had the intention of needing or using it.

“Hey, Gloria,” Ace cuts in as she types away at her computer. She stops, giving him her full attention. “Do you guys do marriage licenses here?”

I whip my head in his direction, eyes wide with surprise, but he ignores it as he looks down at her. He can’t be fucking serious.

“We do,” she replies, her gaze sliding my way as I stand there, gaping like a fish.

He taps his knuckles on the counter. “Good to know.” My shoulders slump, although I’m not sure if it’s from relief or disappointment as he grins in my direction. “What?”

I swallow, laughing nervously. “Nothing. I thought you were going to suggest we get married.”

He leans his elbow on the counter, smirking. “Make no mistake, Sweets. This name change is very temporary. I plan on making you Mrs. Mathers the moment I know you won’t turn down my proposal.”

“Who would ever do such a thing?” Gloria pipes up, her top lip curled in confusion before looking my way. “She doesn’t look like a stupid girl. I think you should give it a try.”

“You think?” he says, never taking his eyes off mine. “It’s a risk.”

She slaps a wrinkled hand against the wood, giving a tight nod before pointing a finger his way. “Some risks are worth taking, Ace.” Reaching down, she fishes a small rubber band from a jar on her desk, sliding it toward him. I look around the room, shifting from one foot to the other as he picks it up and drops down to one knee, taking my shaky hand in his.

“Lark Whitlock, since the day you came into my life, I’ve been happier than I ever thought possible. You showed me parts of myself that I didn’t know existed, and I’m a better man because of it. I know we haven’t known each other very long, and that there’s still so much to learn, but the one thing I’m certain of is that I love you, and I can’t imagine a world where you aren’t my forever. I don’t care if we stay engaged for ten days or ten years—I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy, and you’ll never go a single second without being worshiped in all the ways you deserve. Will you marry me?”

My face twists with emotion, and the hand at my side shoots to cover my mouth, tears blurring my vision until they finally spill over. Gloria and everyone in the sitting area across the room wait with bated breath for my answer. Phones are recording and people are whispering excitedly as Ace looks up at me with a soft smile.

This is fucking crazy. He’s right—we haven’t known each other long. He hasn’t met my family or seen my hometown. He doesn’t know that I buy a container of spring mix every time I go to the grocery store, never open it, and throw it away only to replace it with the next one. But if I’ve learned one thing in my life, it’s that those things don’t matter. You can spend years with someone, learning all their quirks and habits, only to discover after marrying them that despite your best efforts, it was never meant to last. Life is too short to waste time not doing what makes you happy. And that’s what Ace does...when I’m with him, I’m the happiest girl in the world.

I nod my head rapidly, swiping at my wet cheeks. “Yes!” I reply as he breathes a sigh of relief, slipping the rubber band onto my ring finger. He stands, wrapping his arms around me and lifting me off the floor as the room erupts in celebration.

Pressing his face into the soft skin at the base of my neck, he breathes me in. “Thank you,” he mumbles. “*Fuck*, that was scary.” I laugh in response, pulling back and kissing his lips as the whole place cheers loudly.

“It’s a good thing you said yes,” Gloria says as Ace returns me to my feet, clutching her hands in front of her chest. “Because if you hadn’t, I was

planning on shooting my shot.”

I laugh, spinning toward her as she slides the name change paperwork my way, picking up a pen and signing on the dotted line. Ace’s arms snake around my waist from behind, and he drops his chin to my shoulder.

“How does it feel?” he asks.

“Like this is the beginning of a whole new chapter.”

THIRTY-FIVE

ACE

“CONGRATULATIONS, LOVEBIRDS!” Jackson says, stepping into the elevator alongside Lark and me. We’re on our way up to the luxury suites for a last-minute team dinner. We didn’t win today, but it certainly softens the blow knowing I have a fiancée.

I still can’t believe she said yes. Truth be told, I’ve been toying with the idea of proposing since the minute I told her I love her.

I know what people are probably thinking. That it’s too soon. That I’m just young, dumb, and have no idea what real life is about. But they’re wrong. I was raised by a strong woman who taught me the meaning of love. When I lost her, I wasn’t sure if I’d ever feel whole again. I was too afraid to let anyone get close enough at the time, so the emptiness inside my heart was like a canyon—wide, deep, and I had no clue how I’d make it to the other side. But then Lark came along and showed me that people can be good, and that it was safe to open myself up to the possibility of having more. That’s why I took a chance and asked her to marry me today. We can wait forever if she wants to, as long as me being her husband is the endgame.

“Thank you,” she says, leaning into me and wrapping her small hands around my bicep. “I can’t believe how fast the videos from the courthouse went viral. I was all but bombarded by fans’ well wishes when I got to my seat.” I actually encouraged her to go to the WAG’s box for the game because, as much as I hoped people wouldn’t be rude to her now that the

news is officially out, I wanted to protect her just in case. Thankfully, from my quick scroll through social media while waiting for my post-game interviews, I know the reactions have been pretty positive so far. There were a few nasty comments about how I'm too young for her and how we'll never work with me having access to an endless string of women on the road, but fuck those people. They don't know us. She's the only one I'll ever want.

"Let me see your ring," he says. As soon as she raises her hand, proudly showing the miniature pink rubber band, his deadpan expression slides over to me.

I put my hands up in surrender. "It was a game-time decision. I'm taking her to the jeweler tomorrow. She's getting whatever she wants."

He eyes me suspiciously. "You better treat my girl right, or I'll steal her right out from under you." Pinching Lark's cheek, he winks. "Don't worry, Snookums. I'll take care of you."

"Get your own," I pout, pulling her into me as they both laugh. I never thought I'd be a possessive boyfriend—or fiancé—but the thought of anyone touching her makes me irrationally angry. I know Jacks is only messing with me, but it still makes my blood heat in my veins.

The doors slide open, and we exit the elevator, walking across the lush, carpeted area that leads to the stadium's most high-end suites. With my fingers wrapped around hers, Lark pulls me toward the door, giving Jackson a look that says they know something that I don't. I eye them suspiciously but don't have time to ask questions as she grips the handle and pushes her way inside. At first, my brain short circuits. I've been in these suites before, but they certainly didn't look like this. A long red carpet sits under our feet, leading off to the side where a small platform is set up. A podium with a microphone stands in the middle, and a big sign that says *Congratulations, Ace!* hangs on a teal sequined backdrop behind it. My teammates and other Fury employees are scattered around the room, clapping loudly as soon as they notice my presence.

"What's going on?" I ask Lark quietly.

"Well, I told Monroe that you were refusing to go to your graduation ceremony, and she hooked me up with Taylor from PR so we could bring graduation to you." She smiles softly. "You worked so hard, and we're all so proud. We just wanted to give you the celebration you deserve."

“Wow,” I say, fighting the tears that sting the backs of my eyes. I don't regret my decision to not walk across the stage at the university in the slightest. After everything Dean Dawson put Lark through, there was no way I was going to bring her anywhere near that place. And doing it without her by my side wasn't an option. She's my family. *This team* is my family. “This is so much better.”

She looks up at me, biting her lip nervously. “You're not mad? I know you try to be private about things, but I just hated the thought of you missing out on the experience.”

“No,” I reply, pulling her into me and kissing the top of her head. “I'm not mad at all. I love it.”

Huffing a sigh of relief, her shoulders relax as she laughs and steps away from me. “Okay, good. Keep that energy.” My face twists with confusion, and she gives me a look of pure guilt as Friggle traipses out of the shadows with something black draped across his long, purple arm. He walks toward me, placing a graduation cap on my head before rounding my back and throwing a matching gown over my shoulders. I look at my fiancée, who covers her mouth with her hand, giggling as the whole room begins to chant for me to put it on. Choking out a laugh, I oblige, sliding my arms through the wide sleeves. Once it's on, I give a spin, showing off as they erupt in cheers and whistles.

“Pomp and Circumstance” plays softly through the speakers, and I look to the platform, where Taylor motions for me to come up. Taking one last look at the face of the beautiful woman who made all of this possible, I head toward the stage. My long legs eat up the red velvet carpet under my feet, but I move slowly as I try to take in this moment that I worked so hard for.

If you had told me at the beginning of the semester that I would forego the university's graduation ceremony, I wouldn't have believed you. My grandmother's dream was to watch me walk across the stage for my diploma, and that was my only goal. But now that I'm here, I realize the location of the stage doesn't matter. What's important is being surrounded by the people who love you most during the big moments in life. And while there's a huge missing piece here today, I know she's looking down on me with so much pride. That's all I've ever wanted.

Taylor says some kind words, commending me on my dedication to both school and my job. Friggle makes a reappearance, presenting me with

a diploma that I'm guessing he made himself, since it looks like an elementary school art project. I take it from his hand, watching as purple glitter falls all over the floor at our feet, doing my best to keep it in one piece. As ridiculous as it is, this means more to me than any stupid piece of paper I could have gotten from the university, which not only dismissed my future wife and her dreams but considered taking me down as well.

Taylor leans back into the microphone. "Congratulations to this year's Daytona Fury graduating class. Ace, please move the tassel on your cap from right to left."

Reaching up, I pinch the fringes between my fingers, switching sides as the air around me fills with loud cheers and hollers. Monroe whoops loudly before tucking her tongue over her teeth and whistling as Riggs bounces on his toes at her side.

"Fuck yeah, baby!" Jacks yells, pointing my way as a smirk tugs at the corner of Hawk's mouth beside him. Dante, Tyler and all the others clap, the room bursting with so much joy that it makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

My eyes slide over, and my gaze locks onto the corner where Lark stands, clutching her hands in front of her. I know we have a long, crazy future ahead of us—one I'm sure will be full of ups and downs—but I'll never stop striving to be the best partner I can be for her. I want her to be proud to say she's mine.

As I exit the stage, walking toward her, I'm stopped by the team's owner, Mr. Durst. "Congratulations, Ace," he says, extending a hand for me to shake. "I didn't mean to pry, but when this event was brought up to me, it made me wonder why you were choosing not to participate in the graduation ceremony at the university. Taylor and Monroe filled me in on the details, and I just want to let you know that when someone comes for one of my players, they come for me, too. I've known Dean Dawson for a long time, and to be frank with you, I've never liked the woman. My wife is a Sun State alumna, and I've put a lot of time and money into helping the school grow. Rest assured that I'll be making some calls regarding Gail's treatment of Lark and yourself. It's not right, and I won't stand for it. Congratulations again on such a huge accomplishment." He beams. "I'm grateful to have such a hard worker as a part of the Fury family."

I swallow, nodding. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

He pats my shoulder, giving me a genuine smile before walking away. As soon as he's gone, Lark steps into my body, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Hey there, Mr. Sexy Graduate. Nice diploma." I lift it up, more excess glitter falling onto our clothes and shoes as we laugh at the absurdity. "Come on," she says, lifting her chin to the table where the guys and Monroe sit. "Let's go eat."

I usher her over, pulling out a chair and taking the seat next to hers once she's settled. Servers come around, setting plates on the fancy gold chargers in front of us. The whole event is so over the top, but it makes me feel good to know I was worth all the time and effort everyone put into making it special. I'll never forget this night—that's for sure.

"Fuck," Jackson whispers, holding his phone in front of his face as his forehead wrinkles with what looks like a mixture of confusion and worry.

"You okay, dude?" Riggs asks.

He shakes his head rapidly, snapping his attention back to us as he clears his throat. "Yeah. I just got a text from my mom. My stepsister got drafted by a new professional volleyball team here in Florida, and apparently, she'll be staying with us while she settles in. We talked about it briefly last week, but I didn't think anything would come of it."

Hawk's expression morphs into something I've definitely never seen before as his stare goes wide, and he sucks in a quiet gasp. "Arden's coming?" he asks, his eyes dancing with what I can't help but recognize as excitement.

What the fuck?

"Yeah," Jackson responds to his best friend and roommate. "I hope that's okay. I really thought her team would put her up somewhere, but I guess not. I'm sure she won't need to stay long."

Hawk shakes his head. "No, it's okay. No big deal."

I catch Lark out of the corner of my eye, and I can tell she has the same questions as I do—but I guess we'll find out soon. I have a feeling sparks are going to fly.

We finish our food, talking and laughing with the team until people start funneling out, and it's time to go home. It's been an amazing night, and I'm grateful that I got to spend it here at the stadium, surrounded by so much love and support.

"I have one more surprise for you when we get back to your place," Lark says quietly as I lead her to the elevator.

“Oh yeah?” I reply. “What is it?”

She taps her bottom lip, pretending to decide if she wants to let me in on what she has planned. I tickle her sides, and she barks out a laugh, finally relenting as she steps away from the assault. “I owe you one more wholesome night of fun since you left right after we got the results from your final exam. I can't tell you what it is, but I have a feeling you're really going to like it.”

“If it's with you, Sweets—I already know I'll love it.”

THIRTY-SIX

ACE

“IS THE BLINDFOLD REALLY NECESSARY?” I ask as Lark pulls me through the door of my apartment. My shoulder bumps into the frame, making me stagger, but she rights me with a hand on my forearm. “You know I’d literally follow you straight into hell with no questions asked. Whatever you have planned, I’m into it.”

She giggles, stopping. “I have some last-minute preparations to make, and I don’t want you to see anything until it’s all ready. Stand here.” I listen as she walks away, the unmistakable clicking noise of a lighter being ignited filling the air around us. The sound of fabric rustling across the room catches my attention next, and I throw up a silent prayer that she’s doing what I think she’s doing. The thought of Lark’s naked body makes my cock thicken behind my zipper, precum already beginning to moisten the inside of my briefs as I wait for her to tell me what to do next.

“Okay,” she says. “Take it off.”

Not having to be told twice, I reach up, tearing the black silk blindfold from my eyes and seeing a sight I’m sure I’ll be jerking off to years from now when I’m away.

Lark stands there, completely naked, illuminated only by several candles flickering wildly around the room. The light bounces off her flawless skin, and I have to bite my fist to stifle a groan. Moving my eyes around more, I notice a plush, white blanket laid out on the floor. But it’s not *just* white.

“Is this for real?” I ask, laughing as I step closer. Sure enough, colored dots are printed across it, with the words *Naked Twister* in big, red letters running along the top. “Where did you even *find* this?”

She shrugs, smiling coyly. “The internet has everything. What do you say, Mathers? Wanna play?”

“Fuck yeah, I do,” I reply, removing my clothes as fast as I can and hustling over to the opposite side of the blanket. She chuckles at my impatience, holding up her phone and showing me as she opens the same spinner app we used the last time we played.

“You’re going down this time,” she says, lifting her chin with confidence.

“With pleasure, Sweets,” I reply with a wink, my gaze dipping down between her luscious thighs. I can faintly smell her arousal from here, and I know as soon as her pussy is close enough to my mouth, I’ll be lapping it up. Resisting isn’t even an option.

“Player one. Right foot, green,” the robotic voice says, and Lark steps onto the colored dot in front of her. She looks up at me, pushing a strand of golden hair behind her ear as we wait the fifteen seconds for my turn.

“Player two. Right foot, blue.” Never breaking eye contact, I step in, skipping a few spots to close the distance between us and settling my foot on the blue circle. Sexual tension is already filling the room, and I can’t stop my dick from becoming harder as I stare at her mouthwatering curves. I want to say *fuck it* and drop to the floor, pulling her down with me so I can fuck her until she passes out, but I’m dying to see how this ends. Will I find my way on top of her like I did last time, or will she have control? Either way is good with me—and goddamn, I’m ready for it.

“Player one. Right hand, yellow,” the app instructs. Lark bends at the knees, pressing her hand onto the yellow dot near my foot as we wait for the next spin.

“Player two. Left foot, yellow.” A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth as I step onto the blanket, positioning myself so my hard cock is right in front of her face. Her eyes lock onto it as clear liquid leaks from the head, biting her bottom lip and sliding her gaze up to mine.

“I know you want it,” I mock. “Go ahead and have a taste.” I’m just goading her, so I’m caught off guard when she leans forward, swiping her hot, wet tongue across my tip quickly before pulling back.

“Fuck,” I whisper, gritting my teeth so I don’t grab her by the hair and shove my entire length down her throat. I want her so bad, it’s fucking killing me.

“Player one. Left foot red.” She slides her leg out, stretching across the mat, and I try to ignore the scent of her cunt as it permeates the air around us.

“Player two. Right hand, blue.” I bend down, settling on the blue circle in front of my foot. It brings our faces so close together that every exhale puffs against my mouth as she breathes. Leaning forward, I trail my nose along her neck, a quiet moan tumbling from her lips as goosebumps rise in my wake.

“Give up, Sweets,” I say against her ear. “I promise I’ll make it worth the loss.”

“Player one. Left hand, red.”

“Not a chance,” she replies, reaching out and planting herself on the spot that’s most comfortable. The way she shifted her position has her head lower while her ass sticks up in the air next to where I’m bent down. My intrusive thoughts are raging inside me, sweat beading at the back of my neck as I become more worked up by the second. I catalog her gorgeous curves, waiting what feels like forever for the next instruction, until I finally snap, unable to take it anymore.

“Fuck this,” I say, kneeling down on the blanket and gripping her hips, turning her so she’s on all fours in front of me. She swipes her phone from where it lies on the floor beside us, cutting off the spinner just as it announces the next turn. She tosses it aside, squealing loudly as I yank her back, diving my face into her wide-open pussy.

“Ace!” she gasps, pushing into me as I feast like a starving man. I feel wild and unhinged as her juices run into my mouth, the noises ripping from my chest sounding like an animal devouring his prey. Flattening my tongue, I start at her clit, dragging it upward until I’m pressed firmly to her asshole.

“Oh my God,” she breathes, spurring me on as I pull back and spit onto it, rubbing in small circles with my thumb as the muscles clench under my touch.

“Is this okay?” I ask, barely restraining myself even though I know I have to. With my size, I’ll likely never be able to fuck her here, but I can still make her see stars in other ways. I know how good it feels—now it’s her turn.

“So okay,” she replies, dropping to her elbows as her back arches. She’s so fucking sexy, I can’t even see straight as I push inside slowly, meeting resistance as I breach the tight entrance.

“Relax for me, baby. Take a deep breath and let me in.” I add pressure again as she exhales, sliding inside her to the first knuckle. She moans quietly, and I lean down, pressing a kiss to her full ass cheek while I sink in even further.

“Good girl,” I praise, stilling so she can adjust. “You’re doing great. I wish I could see your face right now.”

“You can,” she breathes, eagerly flipping around and lying back on the blanket as I settle on top of her. Pulling her leg over my shoulder, I lean down on one elbow before snaking my free hand under her ass. I enter her again carefully, this time with my middle finger. She’s still wet from my mouth, allowing me to slide in easily as she moans in pleasure. My cock is impossibly hard between us, and when she shifts her hips, the head nudges against her pussy.

“You want me to fill you all the way up?” I ask. “Finger in your ass, fat cock in your cunt. Can you handle it?”

“Please,” she whimpers, the desperation in her tone spurring me on as I thrust forward slowly, pushing inside with all the restraint I have left in me so I don’t hurt her. I can feel how swollen her walls are already, and she clenches against my finger as I begin rocking my hips into her.

“Look at you,” I say, taking in her lust-filled expression. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes flutter closed, telling me she loves the way this feels. “You’re a fucking vision when you’re filled to the brim. Kiss me. I want to be in all your holes at once.”

Her eyes shoot open, and she wraps her fingers around the back of my neck, yanking me down until my mouth is pressed to hers. She parts her lips, letting me plunge my tongue inside, and her satisfied moan vibrates against my chest as I begin fucking into her. It only takes a minute or two before I feel her tighten around me, her impending orgasm threatening to take us both under as it speeds toward us.

“Come on my cock, Sweets,” I say, timing the thrusts of my hips and finger so she’s getting as much of me as I can give. She clamps down, the leg on my shoulder shaking uncontrollably as she falls over the edge with a loud scream. I grit my teeth, doing everything I can to stave off my own

climax as she rides it out, slowing only when I know she's on her way back down to earth.

Sitting back on my heels, I kiss the inside of her calf, pulling my finger from her slowly and lowering her foot to the floor. Her entire body is trembling with aftershocks, so I give us both a few seconds to regroup, rubbing soft circles along her thighs with the pads of my thumbs.

"I'll never get over how pretty you come," I tell her as she gasps for air. "Do you want to keep going?"

"Mhmm," she hums. "I want to ride you." I bark a laugh, because *best idea ever*, before circling my arms around her waist and rolling us so she's straddling me.

"I'm all yours," I say with a grin, clasping my fingers behind my head and giving her free rein to do whatever she wants. She leans forward, her tits pressing into my bare chest as she reaches back and takes my length in her hand before lowering down. It doesn't matter the position or the angle—every time her body swallows me feels better than the last. I'll never get enough of it.

She starts slow, grinding her clit into my pelvic bone as she moans quietly, building herself up. I watch from below while she rides me like a pornstar, her pussy closing in on my cock with every snap of her hips. Reaching back, she rests her palms on my thighs, so I slide my thumb under the swollen bundle of nerves and rub while she takes what she needs.

"Your cunt is so stretched," I tell her, looking down to where she's hugging my shaft, her arousal glistening in the candlelight every time she pulls back. "So fucking gorgeous."

"I love you," she says on a breathy moan, her movements becoming jerky and uncontrolled as she chases her release.

"I love you too, baby," I reply. "Do you want me to take over?" She's clearly struggling, involuntary tremors racking her limbs as she attempts to keep a steady pace.

"Please," she whimpers, falling forward when she's unable to hold herself up any longer. I reach down, palming her ass with both hands and fucking up into her. The sound of my balls slapping against her wet, sensitive skin fills the room, only to be drowned out by her moans and my growls as I give her everything I have left in me. Her fingers curl around the blanket and a strangled gasp falls from her lips, her pussy gripping my length like a vise as she comes around me for the second time.

“That’s my girl,” I praise. “Now stay still while I fuck you full of my cum.” She whines, definitely from the overstimulation, but I’m so close that I can’t find it in me to slow down. “I know, baby. I know it hurts,” I grit out. “I just need to fill you.”

With my feet planted on the floor and my knees spread wide, I buck up relentlessly, bouncing her like a brainless doll as I approach the edge. Electricity starts deep in my core, flowing through me until my muscles are wound so tight I feel like I could shatter at any moment. And that’s exactly what happens when she turns her head, licking a hot line from the base of my neck up to my ear.

“Fuck!” I shout, my entire body seizing as I unload, shooting the thick, warm liquid deep inside her. It goes on forever, until she’s so full she couldn’t possibly take another drop. Slowing my hips, I make sure I’m completely spent before sinking back into the soft fabric and hugging her into my chest. Our hearts beat wildly as we attempt to catch our breath, and we revel in post-nut bliss until I feel her giggle weakly against my ear.

“What’s so funny?” I croak, turning my head and peeling one eye open to look at her.

A lazy smile blooms across her face. “I won.”

I chuckle, kissing the tip of her nose. “Yeah, you did,” I agree. “But we’re definitely washing this blanket and putting it on the bed so I can have a rematch.”

She scoffs playfully. “*You* can wash it. I’m going to need at least two hours of being a couch potato before we do that again.”

“Whatever you want, Sweets,” I reply, nuzzling into her neck. “Always.”

EPILOGUE

LARK - 5 YEARS LATER

“WHERE THE HELL IS HE?” I mumble to myself, checking the time on my phone for the millionth time. It wasn’t the smartest idea to schedule a grand opening in the month of October, but to be fair, the beginning of the season wasn’t looking very promising for the Fury. I should’ve known better than to count them out, since an unexpected run for the World Series is why I’m trying to hold off a little longer, even though people are waiting. My husband wouldn’t be happy if I did this without him being here to cheer me on.

After a long engagement, Ace and I tied the knot this past February, right before pitchers and catchers had to report for spring training. We didn’t feel like there was a need to rush after how fast everything happened leading up to his proposal, so we slowed it down. I moved into his apartment, enrolled back in school, and graduated with my master’s just a handful of months ago. Since then, I’ve been working to open my practice right outside of Daytona.

It seems like just yesterday that I was telling Ace about my dream to become a sex therapist. I was reluctant at first because I had been told so many times that it was a disgraceful career choice and that I’d be an embarrassment to my family if I followed through. But he didn’t just accept it—he encouraged me every step of the way. There were moments over the last five years that I wanted to quit. The work felt impossible, and I doubted

myself on more than one occasion. But there, in my weakest moments, he was my strength, holding me above water when I felt like I was drowning.

Last year, I almost put things on hold to take care of him when he tore his meniscus in a game. He was laid up in bed for a while after surgery, and my only concern was making sure he was okay. Some nights, I'd check on him and deliver pain medication between study sessions. I lost count of the number of practice quizzes I took in my car outside the physical therapy clinic—but, in the end, we made it work, and here we are.

"Sorry, Sweets. Practice ran late. I got here as fast as I could," he says, running up to me and pressing a chaste kiss to my cheek. He looks delicious in a pair of gray sweatpants and a tight white t-shirt, the wet tips of his freshly showered hair sticking out from under his backwards Fury hat.

Still fuck-all hot.

"It's okay," I reply, wrapping my arms around his waist and breathing in his fresh scent. The nerves I've been feeling since I woke up this morning fade away, and suddenly, I'm excited to get this thing going. "We should probably get started. The people from the Chamber of Commerce and some reporters have been here waiting."

He looks around nervously. "Can we hold off a few more minutes?"

"Why?" I ask, scrunching my nose. Something fishy is going on, and as always, I'm sure Ace is at the helm.

"Ummm..." he trails off, making me tilt my head slightly as I try to figure him out. But before I can, his eyes light up, and an ear-to-ear grin spreads across his face. I turn, looking toward whatever's caught his gaze, finding several expensive vehicles pulling into the lot. The crowd turns to watch, excited whispers filling the warm Florida air as Jackson, Hawk, Riggs, Monroe, Taylor, Brent—or Friggle, as he's also known—and both Mrs. and Mr. Durst emerge, making their way toward the front of the building. Looking up at my husband, I smile excitedly, so happy that our Fury family could make it on such a special day. I know it's a busy time of year for them, so I was afraid to ask. I should've known Ace wasn't going to let that fly.

"Yes, my little sex goddess!" Monroe yells, running up with her hand on her swollen belly. Riggs has done a pretty phenomenal job of proving me right about that suspected breeding kink, since they're now expecting baby number three. "I'm so proud of you!"

“Thank you,” I reply on a laugh. She’s been my comic relief over the last five years, always knowing exactly how to lighten things up when they seem too heavy. I consider her to be one of my closest friends, and I’m grateful to have her in my life.

One by one, the others give their well wishes and hugs, with Mr. Durst saving his for last. When Ace told me what he said at the graduation about not letting anyone come for his players, he wasn’t kidding. I’m not saying he had a direct hand in Dean Dawson resigning shortly after Ace was awarded his passing grade in Human Sexuality—but I’m not saying he didn’t, either. We’ll never know for sure, but this man is a true gift to the lives of every player who’s ever played for him, and all of their loved ones alike.

“I knew you could do it, sweetheart,” he says, tears pricking at my eyes as he takes my hand in his and squeezes. I’ve had many deep conversations with him about my hopes and goals, and he was always supportive, telling me what a difference I’d make in the future.

“Thank you, Randy,” I say softly, using the name he insists we call him. “I couldn’t have done it without you all.”

“Let’s fucking go, baby!” Ace shouts as the guys whoop loudly, just like they do before every game. I roll my eyes playfully, walking toward the front of my new practice and stepping behind the podium.

“Thank you all for coming today,” I begin. “Five years ago, I was unsure if I’d ever have a purpose. My life was changing, and I was full of resentment toward the people who told me that my dreams were worthless. I was on a path to carrying that heavy burden with me forever, not realizing that it was breaking my spirit. But then someone told me I’d be the best sex therapist there ever was, and that weight began to lift, until I was finally strong enough to let it go and allow myself to be happy.

“Happy really isn’t the right word for what I am today. I have a husband who’s supported me through all my good and bad days, parents who—although they couldn’t be here today—taught me that it’s always okay to make mistakes as long as you put yourself first in the end, and a found family here in Daytona that will drop whatever they’re doing at any time just to lend a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on. I’m blessed beyond words to have them by my side as I embark on this new adventure. So, without further ado, I’d like to welcome you all to the Dr. Lark Mathers Sex and Intimacy Center.”

The crowd claps, and our friends cheer as I pick up the giant scissors, cutting the bright red ribbon that stretches from one side of the door to the other. It floats to the ground, and I exhale a relieved breath, because I'm officially open for business. Stepping out of the way, I let people funnel inside, watching as they take in the beautiful interior. I chose everything, from the marble flooring to the soft, contemporary light fixtures—all of which give the place a calming quality as soon as you step inside.

"Congratulations, boss," Hailey says with a wink, playfully pinching my cheek as she walks past.

"I told you not to call me that!" I reply, which earns me a very sly middle finger hidden behind the clipboard in her other hand. She was a no-brainer when it came to finding someone that I could trust to manage this place. I knew she wasn't happy at the college, and I wanted to give her the opportunity to work somewhere that provided comfort, security, and a fifteen-minute grace period for her morning coffee runs. After everything she's done for me, and the friendship we've built, I couldn't imagine not bringing her along.

Just as I go to follow everyone, a large hand wraps around my wrist, gently tugging me back outside. I'm spun around and pushed up against the white brick wall as Ace drops a passionate kiss to my lips. I sink into it, letting him massage my tongue with his until I'm breathless, and he finally pulls away.

"What was that for?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I just wanted to tell you again how proud I am to see our last name in big, bold letters on the front of your building." I smile, remembering the threat I tossed at Gail all those years ago in her office. I wanted to do it to spite her, but what I have now is so much better. Knowing he's on my team, no matter what I do, is the greatest gift I've ever received.

He may have just been an impulsive college student when I met him, but he taught me how to live and love unapologetically—and I'm thankful every day that he chose me as his forever.

Keep reading for the prologue of Double Play, book three of the Daytona Fury series...

DOUBLE PLAY - PROLOGUE

ARDEN

“With the thirty-sixth pick of the inaugural Pro Volleyball Federation draft, the Florida Flare select Arden Levine, setter, Penn State.”

As soon as the words are out of the commissioner’s mouth, my whole body freezes. Cheers from my dad, stepmom and best friend Stella fill the air around me, but they’re drowned out by the sound of my own heart pounding in my chest.

When I got the call about a new professional volleyball league that was taking over North America, a fire that I thought had burned out within me stoked back to life. I never dreamed that I’d get another shot at playing again—especially not on this big of a stage. But here I am, a member of Florida’s first major league women’s team.

“Go!” Stella says, practically pulling me up from where I’m sitting like a statue in my chair. “Get up there!”

I shake my head rapidly, clearing the fog before standing to my feet and smoothing down the front of my black body-con dress. My legs shake with every step, so I focus on not tripping in my six-inch stilettos as I make my way to the stage. At five foot seven, I’m well under the average height for my position, so I chose the tallest shoes in my closet for tonight. The last thing I need is for everyone watching ESPN to wonder who let an actual child onto a team full of Amazons.

Carefully taking the stairs one at a time, I walk to the podium, where the league commissioner stands next to Dahlia Owens, my new head coach.

She's only a few years older than me and a former college teammate, so it'll be a strange dynamic at first. But I'm determined to show her that she made the right choice by drafting me to the Flare.

"Congratulations," the commissioner says, shaking my hand before offering the purple and blue jersey that's clutched in his fist. I take it, holding it up in front of me as a wide smile blooms across my face.

Holy fucking shit. I'm a professional volleyball player.

The rest of the ceremony is a blur as my mind begins to strategize. We ended up with two powerhouse outside hitters and a rookie libero who shows so much potential that I can't help but get excited. All ten teams in the league came into today with clean slates, so only time will tell how the upcoming season will pan out.

"I'm so proud of you, baby," my dad says, pulling me into his arms for a hug as soon as they find me in the crowd. "You're the real deal now." He steps back, allowing Stella room to wrap me in a tight embrace.

"It's true. My bestie is about to be famous. I can't wait to see your spandex-covered ass on my big screen every weekend."

I roll my eyes. "You guys said that last year." When I signed with a semi-pro team in Argentina last March, I was ecstatic to get back on the court. Unfortunately, volleyball players make next to nothing there, and it was impossible to juggle practice and work full-time in order to pay my monthly bills. I have a college degree, but my Spanish is subpar at best, so job options were limited and very low paying. I ended up having no choice but to step away and return to Pennsylvania before we even had our first game. It broke my heart, and I've felt like a piece of me has been missing ever since.

"Well, I mean it this time," my dad replies with a wink. I can't help the smile that breaks free at the sight of the proud look that's painted across his face. My father has always been my biggest fan. From the first time I touched a volleyball, he's been by my side, making sure I had every opportunity to go as far as the game could take me. He spent countless hours working overtime just so I could attend private lessons and play for the most prestigious—and expensive—club teams. He'd sleep in his car outside the arena between matches, never missing a single set, no matter how exhausted he was. I owe him everything, and I just want to continue to make him proud.

“I agree,” my stepmom Gina says, nudging my shoulder with hers. “I have a great feeling about this one. I’ve done a lot of research on the PVF, and it looks like they’ve got a pretty good plan. They already have a contract with ESPN to broadcast games, some pretty big sponsors have signed on, and their league minimum is almost double what you were making in Argentina. I’m sure we’ll be able to negotiate for more after the first season is in the books.”

“I hope so,” I reply. When Gina and my dad got married right before my senior year of high school, she immediately stepped in and helped me prepare for college. She played for Penn State too, and I was grateful to have someone in my life who had already been through the experience. Her career ended with an unfortunate ankle injury, but as soon as I knew I’d need an agent that I could trust to get me started in the pros, it wasn’t even a question that I’d pick her. I’m her only client, but her son plays in the MLB, so she has connections and has been working around the clock to learn everything she can about contracts and branding. With her very low fee of absolutely nothing, she’s about the only person within my budget at the moment—not that I’d pick anyone else even if I had millions. Nobody has my best interest at heart more than she does.

“I still don’t know how I’m going to afford to move to Florida until I sign my contract,” I say, my teeth digging into my lower lip. Being in Argentina while still paying bills in America left me with almost nothing in my savings, and I’ve been playing catch-up ever since.

She looks at me, and I can tell by her expression that she’s been plotting. “I think I have an idea, but I don’t know if you’re going to like it.” My brows pull in, but she stops me before I can fire any questions her way. “The Flare practice facility is only thirty minutes outside of Daytona. Jackson and Hawk just bought a five-bedroom, three-bathroom condo on the beach, and I’m sure they wouldn’t mind having you stay with them until you can get into a place of your own.”

My eyes widen, and I shake my head, anxiety flowing through my veins. “I don’t know, Gina,” I reply on an exhale. “I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Nonsense. You and Jacks have known each other since elementary school, and Hawk is practically family. It’s not like you’d be a stranger.”

I shrug. “I barely know Hawk. He’s spoken like ten words to me over the last five years. For all I know, he hates me.”

“Who could ever hate you?” Stella pipes in. “You’re a goddamn delight.”

“Let me call Jacks,” Gina says. “I’ll bring it up to him and see what he thinks. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Fine.

Living with my stepbrother and his grumpy, yet undeniably hot-as-fuck best friend is going to be anything but *fine*.

Coming Spring 2025

<https://a.co/d/5VMqyUr>

WILD PITCH - PROLOGUE

MONROE - TWO YEARS AGO

“God, you have pretty tits. What did you say your name was again?”

“I didn’t,” I reply on a breath, grabbing him by his collar and jerking him to my mouth. As soon as our lips meet, just like they did in the back of the car on the way to this swanky ass hotel, fireworks explode around us. I moan into his mouth, realizing this is way out of character for the girl I’m trying to be, but I want to melt right into his kiss.

I’m not here to fall in love.

I’m here to get some strange dick.

He pulls back. “You’re not going to give me anything?” he questions. “What am I supposed to yell out while I’m fucking you?”

I bark a laugh, surprised by his candor. “Who says I’m going to let you fuck me?” I ask.

“Babe, you’re topless in my hotel room and the muscles in your stomach are quivering. We’re fucking,” he says with a cocky smirk.

This guy is too hot for his own damn good.

I step back, slapping both hands over my abdomen, which is in fact quivering. I can’t let my body react like this. I need to stay in control. I gave all of myself to someone once, and it ended with me having to skip town and start all over. I just got here. I’m not doing that again.

“Listen, Val,” I say as he steps back in and digs his long, thick fingers into the flesh of my waist. My body goes hot all over again with the way his touch is so firm, biting into me in the most delicious way. As soon as he

traces his tongue in a wet line from the base of my throat to my earlobe, I moan loudly, almost losing my train of thought. "I..." I breathe. "I need this to be a one-time thing. No names. No personal details. Just sex."

He trails kisses over the side of my face, working his way back to my mouth. "I already gave you details," he murmurs. "I told you I'm in town for work, that I live in Florida, and that I'm going to blow your fucking mind tonight. The least you can give me is your name."

"How about I just suck your cock instead?" I say, dropping to my knees and bringing my fingers to the button of his dress pants. Hopefully the distraction will make him stop asking so many questions.

"Fuck," he groans, gripping my long, newly chocolate-brown hair. "I'm going to call you Mayhem. Because that's exactly what you look like down there. Chaos. Trouble. Like a riot I know I should run from, but I can't fucking look away."

I keep my gaze on his as I pull his pants and boxer briefs down in one go. My eyes widen and my mouth waters as his cock springs free. It's big and hard, with wide veins wrapping around it and a bead of precum sitting at the tip, waiting for me to drink.

I don't waste a fucking second. I need this so badly after everything I've been through in the past week. Packing everything you own into your small car and leaving the only place you've ever known to start all over by yourself takes a toll on you, and I just want to let go. The old Monroe needs to die so the new one can be born. I have a chance to be anyone I want now, and I'm choosing to be a bad bitch who takes what she wants and doesn't let anyone walk all over her. As far as everyone here knows, that's exactly what I am.

Leaning forward, I lap at the head of his dick before sucking it between my lips. I moan at the way he tastes as I feel myself growing wetter under my panties. Looking for relief, I squeeze my thighs together, but it's nowhere near enough friction to soothe the throbbing ache between them.

"Holy fuck," he rasps, gripping my hair tighter in his fist. "That's it, baby. Suck my cock." The sound of his voice, plus the way he's got his fist clenched tightly to my scalp has me taking him as far back as I can go, fighting against my gag reflex that's telling me to pull back. I've never done anything like this before, and I've never felt more alive.

Looking up, I almost orgasm without even being touched at the sight above me. Val's face is pointed up to the ceiling in pleasure, and I watch his

Adam's apple bob as I suck his cock like it's the most delicious thing I've ever tasted. It's not far off. I could live off the flavor of his skin.

"You suck me so good. *Fuck*," he grits out, thrusting his hips into my face. I feel powerful and owned at the same time, and it's making my blood run like lava through my veins.

I feel him get impossibly hard against my tongue and he pulls away with a jerk. A string of saliva connects us as I look up at him through my lashes, both of us gasping for air as we stare into one another.

"Up," he growls loudly. The tone of his voice has me on high alert, and while I should be running for the hills, it makes the throb between my legs intensify almost to the point of pain. I scurry to stand, willing to wait for further instruction, but I don't even get a second to think before I'm lifted off my feet and tossed onto the bed. I push up onto my elbows, watching as he stalks my way with a look in his eyes that I can only describe as predatory. Prowling toward me, I stare, not blinking a single time as he crawls over my body and leans down, pressing his mouth to my throat. I arch up to him, throwing my head back as he licks and sucks, but when he sinks his teeth into the sensitive skin of my neck, I hiss a breath through my teeth as pain radiates down toward my shoulder.

"I want to take you rough," he says. "Are you okay with that?"

I shouldn't be. His voice is dark and chilling...and it's possible that he just broke through my skin when he bit me. But *fuck*. I want more.

"Yes."



I blink my eyes rapidly, waiting for them to adjust to the early morning sun that's peeking through the blinds of the hotel room. Memories from last night slowly come back to me as I lie there, trapped under Val's muscled arm. The biting. The clawing. The way he worked my body until I was a desperate, writhing mess, begging for more pain to go with the pleasure he was giving me.

It was *everything*.

But I can't stay here. I need to sneak out somehow without waking him. He already had a million questions that I wasn't willing to answer last night,

so I know if he gets the chance, they'll start right back up. Plus, I don't want to be late for my first day at the boutique, so I need to skedaddle.

Wiggling down the bed, I inch myself out from under his gigantic arm. Whatever this guy does for work has to be some type of manual labor. I bet he can pop someone's head right off their body with the inside of his elbow while chugging a beer with the other hand. I try to hold in my laugh at the mental image as I continue working my way down the mattress.

As soon as I'm out from under him, I rush around the room, picking up my clothes. My shirt and bra are right by the door, where he pulled them off of me as soon as we walked inside, unable to wait another second. I get them on, spinning quickly to look for the rest of my belongings. The pink linen micro skirt I wore to the bar last night is tossed over by the window. I run over, swiping it and sliding it up my legs before tiptoeing to where my panties lie bunched up by the bed. But when I go to put them on, I realize they're completely ruined. Memories of Val literally ripping them from my body flood my brain and I want to swan dive right the fuck back into the bed with him for another round. But I'm just going to have to settle for keeping last night's festivities in my spank bank for future use, because this can't be anything more.

I grab my clutch off the back of the armchair, moving to the door and taking one last look back at Val before reluctantly leaving him without saying goodbye.

Forty-five minutes later, I pull into the parking lot behind Praya, the luxury boutique where I just got hired. The drive from Boston to Hope Harbor wasn't too bad since I made it through the city before rush hour. I had to touch up last night's makeup and steer with one knee while I brushed the wild knots out of my hair, but I managed to make myself presentable.

And keeping an emergency pair of panties in my glove box?

What a power move.

I rush to the door with about ten minutes to spare before the store opens, smoothing my clothes down and walking in like a normal, confident individual who has her life together, even though I definitely don't.

"You must be Monroe!" an adorable blonde girl says as she stands and comes my way. "I'm Grace. I'm the assistant fashion buyer here. It's nice to meet you." I take her extended hand, returning her smile. She can't be more than a couple of years younger than me, if that, and I have a feeling we're going to get along really well.

“Likewise,” I say, looking around. “Where is everyone?”

“Oh!” she replies. “The ladies always meet for tea on Monday mornings before they come in, so they’ll be a little behind. It’s just us for about an hour. Until my brother gets here. He’s a professional baseball player and his team is playing in Boston tonight, so he’s dropping in to say hello before he has to be at the stadium.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” I offer. “What’s his na—”

“Riggs!” she squeals, cutting me off as she runs to the door. She jumps into her brother’s waiting arms and I turn around, smiling as I watch them embrace.

“Hey, Bunny,” he says, and my blood goes cold when I hear his voice. As soon as she steps back, my eyes lock onto his. Eyes that I was just looking into hours ago as he ripped orgasm after orgasm from my exhausted body.

This lying motherfucker.

Want more of Riggs and Monroe? Wild Pitch is out now!

<https://a.co/d/29LqY0W>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.L. Rose is a wife and mother of two. She lives in Northeast Ohio with her husband, son, daughter, and dog, Tank. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading in front of a space heater, wrapped in a thick blanket, probably complaining that she's cold.

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