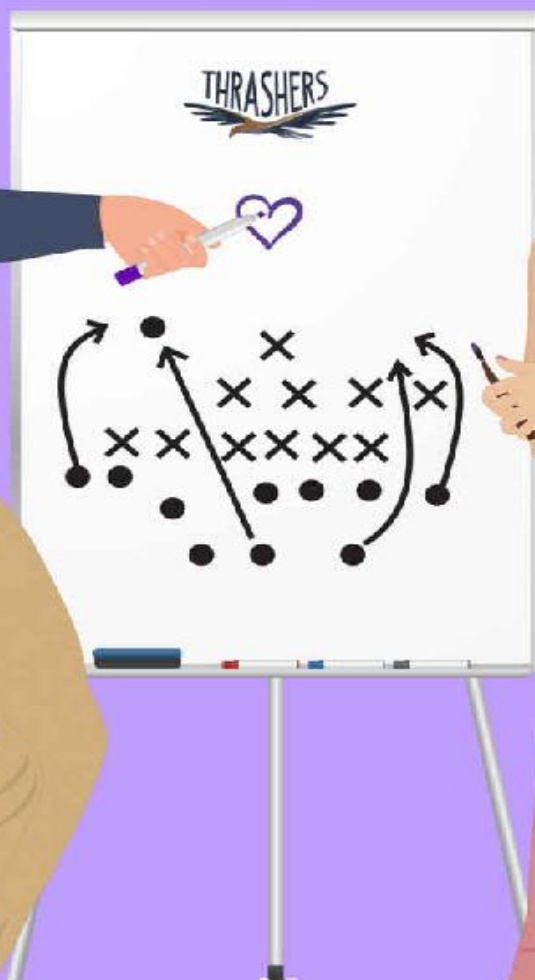


ONE LAST

A SWEET
ROMANTIC
COMEDY

Play



ANNAH CONWELL

One Last Play

ANNAH CONWELL

Copyright © 2023 by Annah Conwell

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Alt 19 Creative

To Grandmommy, I miss you all the time. I think you would have loved the sassy Sweet Peach girls. You definitely would have made some inappropriate jokes about the guys. I can't wait to hug you in Heaven.

*I don't mind my business, but I'd like to mind you, call you my missus a
lifetime or two.*

-Shiny Universe, Johnnyswim

Contents

Content Warnings

1. Meadow Jane Carter

2. Sebastian Holt

3. Meadow Jane Carter

4. Sebastian Holt

5. Meadow Jane Carter

6. Sebastian Holt

7. Meadow Jane Carter

8. Meadow Jane Carter

9. Sebastian Holt

10. Meadow Jane Carter

11. Sebastian Holt

12. Meadow Jane Carter

[13. Sebastian Holt](#)

[14. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[15. Sebastian Holt](#)

[16. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[17. Sebastian Holt](#)

[18. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[19. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[20. Sebastian Holt](#)

[21. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[22. Sebastian Holt](#)

[23. Sebastian Holt](#)

[24. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[25. Sebastian Holt](#)

[26. Meadow Jane Carter](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Coming Soon...](#)

[Also By Annah](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About The Author](#)

Content Warnings

This is a closed-door romcom with no cursing of any kind. The romance is limited to kisses/make-outs only.

Grief is a recurring theme in this book, both of the main characters have lost loved ones.

The main female character has strict dietary restrictions due to chronic migraines, but she has also developed strong opinions about certain foods. Her opinions are not to be taken as fact or medical advice, merely as opinions of a fictional character.

CHAPTER ONE

Meadow Jane Carter

Middle schoolers have more of a love life than I do. It's fine, though, because their zeal for relationships makes them immune to common sense.

"He's *my* boyfriend!" Zena shouts as she tangles her manicured hands in Georgina's hair.

"I saw him *first*. We kissed at Garrett's party last week!" Georgina growls as she yanks on Zena's uniform polo, trying to rip it but failing.

"I kissed him *last month* at Kyle's party."

"*GIRLS*." I use what I call my 'dad voice', what some might call a 'drill sergeant voice' which would be accurate since my dad was in the military most of his adult life. It's a learned skill of lowering a few octaves and almost barking the words.

The two seventh graders freeze, then jerk away from each other and spin toward me. I cross my arms for maximum intimidation, something needed when you're only five feet tall and often compared to a pixie.

"Fighting doesn't solve any issue." I can hear my four brothers—and dad for that matter—laughing hysterically in my mind. They would mark 'strongly disagree' with that statement on a survey. "And fighting over a

boy makes no sense. Especially if said boy is kissing you both behind each other's backs. You should be angrier at him."

They glance at each other but quickly turn their attention back to me, scowls twisting their faces.

I sigh and shake my head. "Get your things and head to the dean's office. If either of you lays a hand on the other again you're going to scrape acrylic paint off my floor as detention. And it certainly won't be good for your manicures." Their eyes get big and they nod. In a school where the average girl spends a hundred dollars on her fingernails alone, this punishment is akin to torture.

They scurry down the hall to the dean's office, keeping a few feet of distance between each other. I'd bet my next paycheck that they're best friends again tomorrow. I step back into my classroom, the smell of paint and pencil shavings a balm to my nerves. It's officially my lunch break, and one of the perks of working at an exclusive private school is they have dedicated teacher's aides to monitor meal times.

My chair lets out a puff of air when I sink into it. I take a generous sip of water from my Hydroflask, then pull my lunch bag out of the mini fridge next to my desk. The fridge is stocked with Evian water bottles, something I've stated is a waste plenty of times in staff meetings, but no one listens. Who cares if the kids throw away half-full water bottles when their mommies and daddies pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for them to go here?

The thought of my rich students leads me to reflect on Georgina and Zena's fight. In the last ten years, I can't recall ever liking a guy enough to want to fight over him. The feeling seems foreign, incapable of being grasped. Most of the guys I date are so low risk that I don't even care when

our relationship ends, much less care enough to fight over them. Shaking my head, I open up my lunch tote.

My gluten-free pasta salad has been calling my name for the past hour. But right as I dig my fork in, my classroom door opens. They say there's no rest for the wicked, but I'm pretty sure they meant no rest for teachers. Inhaling a cleansing breath, I lift my head and my frustrations float away like dandelion seeds in the wind.

One of my favorite students, Maddie, is walking toward my desk, wringing her hands. You're not supposed to have favorite kids, but since they aren't *my* kids, I do. Madeline Holt, aka Maddie, is one of those. She's kind and funny and cares about art, which is a rarity. Most of the kids I teach are only in the class because they assume it's an easy A. They quickly find out they're wrong though. I know not everyone is an artist, but I don't tolerate the half-hearted attempts some students tend to give on their first few assignments.

"Hey, Maddie, everything alright?" I set my fork down and sit back in my chair.

"Not really." She frowns and stares down at her brown loafers. "My dad was supposed to get the photos printed for the photography unit project, but he forgot and I left my flash drive at home so I can't print them off here either." She says all of this with her eyes trained on the ground.

Sutherton Prep has stringent rules that I'm supposed to dutifully adhere to, one of those is that due dates for assignments are non-negotiable. Maddie is one of my sixth-graders, and I tend to go easier on them, but this is one area I'm not supposed to give special treatment in.

"Maddie, I'm sorry, but you know the rules. I'm not supposed to give extensions unless there's an emergency or you came to me ahead of time."

With some of the more arrogant students in my class, I wouldn't feel a thing over them missing a due date. But Maddie has spent the first month of our time together dedicated to learning and treating everyone around her with kindness. She reminds me a lot of one of my close friends, Lottie. They're both the type of person you'll always catch smiling. It's a stark contrast to my own more reserved disposition.

"Is there anything I can do? I promise I did the assignment, I loved it so much. My dad is just super busy and-and I left the flash drive, but my gram has a doctor's appointment today and couldn't bring it to me." Her eyes well up with tears, though I can tell she's trying not to get emotional.

I'm not a sentimental person by nature, but this little girl tearing up over a project is poking at the black cloud in my chest, threatening to turn it into something that resembles an actual heart.

"Okay, I'm going to help you out *this one time*. If your dad can get here with the photos before my office hours are up today, then I will accept the assignment. I'm out of here at 4:30 sharp; if he's a minute late then I can't help you."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Carter. He will be here. You're the best!"

"You're welcome. Now get to lunch before one of the monitors finds you and gives you a slip."

"Yes, ma'am." She rushes out of the room, her backpack bouncing with every step.

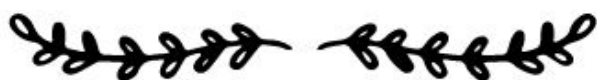
This shouldn't be a big deal, meeting the forgetful dad of a good student. It's happened many times over the course of my career. But not all of my students' dads are Sebastian Holt, famous head coach of the Georgia Thrashers' football team. More importantly, he's also the man whose name is on the Thrashers jersey hanging in the back of my closet right now.

My family bleeds Thrasher blue, and though my love of maxi skirts and painting may not always show it, I do too. I watched Sebastian Holt carry the Thrashers defense the entirety of his career there, then kept up with him when he went to the NFL, and even after that when an injury cut his playing time short.

The man is a legend, and his name was firmly secured in that spot after becoming a head coach at twenty-nine and leading the Thrashers to multiple championships. Not to mention the documentary that just came out revealing how he adopted Maddie after his sister died giving birth to her. People say he's a saint, and I've even got personal testaments from my friends agreeing. One of my best friends, Sophie, got married to the Thrashers' athletic surgeon this past spring, and she says Sebastian is kind and funny.

I don't get nervous, but I might be on edge waiting for him for the remainder of the day. My brothers would freak out if they heard I was meeting him. They'd drop whatever they were doing and swarm the halls just to get a glimpse of him.

He's just a man, I tell myself. A very successful, admirable man, but a man nonetheless. My guard will be up, and I will remain professional no matter what. Will my brothers kill me for not asking him to autograph something? Probably. But I refuse to appear anything other than calm and professional in front of all the parents I meet. I won't change that now. Not even for Sebastian *Coach Bash* Holt.



Well, looks like he's not showing. So much for being a saint. I sigh and start putting the photography portfolios I was looking over into my canvas messenger bag. It's 4:27 and no one has come by my room today. He could have at least sent an assistant or called. Poor Maddie is going to fail because the guy couldn't handle printing out a couple of photos at CVS.

I'm erasing my whiteboard when the echo of footsteps makes me turn around. There in my doorway is none other than Sebastian Holt. My eyes meet his, which are shadowed beneath the brim of his Thrashers ballcap. I'm not sure if anyone has ever looked at me with such intensity before in my life. I steel myself and clear my throat.

"If you're here for my office hours, you're late."

"It's 4:29."

I press my lips into a tight line, fighting against the stupid tingle that shoots down my spine at the rich sound of his voice. "How can I help you?" I give him a hard stare. I refuse to resemble anything close to the fan I actually am.

"I'm here for Madeline Holt, to drop off her project." He steps further into the room, and suddenly my wide-open classroom feels like a coat closet in a New York City apartment. "I'm sorry I'm cutting it close, had a meeting today." He's wearing a crooked grin that is hammering away at the stone fortress that is my resolve.

Why does he have to be so attractive? He looks even better in real life than on TV. This would be a whole lot easier if he looked like a toad instead of being practically edible in his athletic gear. I shake off the unbidden—and *inappropriate, get it together, MJ*—thought.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Holt. In the future, I would prefer that you arrive earlier, as this doesn't show much respect for my time."

His grin falters, confusion threading his brows together. I'm sure he thought I'd fawn over him like I assume most women do, but no, that is not the case.

"You can call me Sebastian. I apologize again for running late, but I'm a little busy." He chuckles. "It wasn't easy to get over here at this time. You seem to not know much about me, which checks out, I guess." He gestures to me with the portfolio he's holding as if it would explain his rude statement. "But I'm usually working right now, and it was hard to get away."

I narrow my eyes at him. Sophie said he was *kind* and *funny*?

"Sebastian Holt. Number sixteen. Played as a safety for the Georgia Thrashers. Had three hundred and forty-three tackles, eighteen sacks, seven forced fumbles, and fifteen interceptions. Then you went on to the NFL where your career was cut short, but you still managed five interceptions." He blinks at me in shock. "Please don't assume that because I'm a *woman* I can't know anything about football."

"Woah, woah, I didn't say anything about you being a woman. I just meant that you don't look like the football type. I have a daughter, Ms. Carter, I wouldn't assume anything like that." He adjusts the cap on his head, a frustrated sigh escaping his lips. "Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot here. I'm actually friends with Bennett St. James. You're friends with him and Sophie, right?"

"Yes, I am." I pause and study him. "I'm not sure what your angle is by mentioning my friends, but it won't work. You've thoroughly secured your first impression, no matter what Sophie and Ben have said about you." I jerk my messenger back onto my shoulder. "I'll take Maddie's portfolio and be on my way."

“Angle? I don’t have an angle; I was just trying to show you I’m not a bad guy. Since I put my foot in my mouth, I thought some character references might do me good. I can call up Bryan Colt since you’re a football fan, he’ll tell you I’m a good guy too.”

My mouth twitches, but I don’t give in to the desire to smile. Bryan Colt was our quarterback last year, and he won the Heisman trophy. It’s a decent ploy to try and get on my good side, but it won’t work.

“The portfolio, Mr. Holt.” I hold out my hand, but he doesn’t give it to me.

“No reaction to Colt? Are you a true Thrashers fan then, or did you just Google me before I got here?”

He’s goading me, I *know* he’s goading me. I should snatch the portfolio out of his hand and leave. But I can’t back down from a challenge.

“Quiz me,” I say and the triumphant grin that takes over his face informs me that I fell into his trap. A thrill runs through me, something I haven’t felt in a long time. Getting to prove him wrong will be a rush.

“What year did the thrashers win their first championship?”

I roll my eyes at his basic question. “1956.”

“What coach has the most wins in Thrasher history?”

“Are you going to make this difficult anytime soon?” He smirks at my question and I cross my arms. “Daniel H. Porter, also who our stadium was named after.”

“Okay, I’ll make it a little harder on you. Who was the quarterback-running back duo when we won the championship in 2004?”

“Richie Thompson and Caleb Crenshaw.”

“Alright, so you might know a little something. What was the down and yardage, and what play was run at the end of the last championship game?”

My heart rate shouldn't be this high over football stats. It must be the thrill of showing him up. "It was 4th and 12 at the Lion's 36-yard line with four seconds left. The Thrashers ran a flea flicker and hit the post route for a touchdown to win the game." I remember being on the edge of my dad's couch that whole game—it was intense.

"Last question. Can I take you out sometime?"

"Wh—no," I sputter, caught off guard by the sudden shift in subject. "*No*. Why would you ask me that?"

He laughs, eying me like I'm a puzzle he's eager to solve. "I was going to ask you to marry me, but I figured we should get dinner first."

I think my eyes might be bulging out of my head. *Sebastian Holt just said he wanted to marry me*. Even in jest, it's not something I ever thought would happen. I think the last time I entertained that possibility I was twelve and he was playing in the NFL. My brother Grayson read my diary where I detailed the dream and laughed at me. If only he could see me now.

It should be weird to think about our eleven-year age gap, but time has been good to Sebastian Holt. He's still in great shape, as made evident by his form-fitting joggers and t-shirt stretching over his broad chest. It's a view that no woman would label as *old*, that's for sure.

"How often does that line work for you?" I ask when I can manage to form words again. I'm not one to keep up with the love lives of college football coaches, but I can't imagine a man like him is without company very often. He's probably well-versed in flirty lines and snagging numbers.

"This is my first time using it, you'll have to let me know."

"I almost believe you," I say and he frowns.

"I'm not a liar, MJ."

My spine stiffens at the use of my nickname. It's not like it's an incredibly intimate nickname, but it's personal enough that I don't need to hear it off his lips. "Ms. Carter," I correct him. "MJ is a nickname used solely by my close friends."

His eyes light up like I just gave him another clue to the puzzle. Regret swirls in me when I realize that I told him another personal detail about me. He now knows I love football and that MJ isn't my name, but a nickname. That's more information than any of my coworkers I've worked with for years know. I'm not an open book. My brain is more like a chest at the bottom of the ocean with thick chains wrapped around it and a padlock the size of a football keeping it shut.

"What's MJ short for?" *Don't say it, please don't say it.* "Is it Mary Jane, like from *Spiderman*?" There it is. It's a pet peeve of mine when guys assume that because my initials are MJ my name must be the same as the famous superhero's girlfriend.

"No." I walk closer to him, even though my common-sense radar is going off, telling me to stay far, far away from the gorgeous football coach. I have to tilt my head back to look at him. Since I know his stats from when he played, I know that he's six-foot-one, which makes him over a foot taller than my five-foot self. My stomach flips when I get a better glimpse at his blue eyes.

"I would like to get home at a decent hour today. Could you give me Maddie's portfolio now, please?"

He finally hands it over, and relief courses through me. I can leave.

"You're not going to tell me your name?" he asks, still wearing that infuriatingly attractive half-grin.

“No, I’m not. You don’t need my name, I’m just your daughter’s teacher. At best, a friend of a friend.”

“And you’re not going to go out with me?”

“No, I’m going to leave, knowing that by tomorrow you’ll have found a new woman to give your flirty lines to and you’ll forget all about me.”

“You’re wrong,” Sebastian says, his piercingly brilliant blue eyes staring into mine. I swallow, my throat suddenly dry. “I’m going to go to work tomorrow and find out everything I can about you from Bennett, and then I’m going to pursue you with everything that I’ve got, Ms. Carter.”

My dusty, cobweb-covered shell of a heart is shuddering to life in my chest. I almost ask him why, but I know that would be playing into his hand. Then he could compliment me, shower me with empty flattery, until I give in. No, I can’t afford to get caught up in a silly fling with a man like him. He can play cat and mouse with another girl, not me.

“That’s a fruitless endeavor, Mr. Holt,” I say and take a step back, hoping some distance will clear my head.

“And why is that?” I hate the goosebumps that cover my skin at the silky sound of his voice. Each one is a traitor.

“Because I know we won’t work. I’m not interested in dating you. Ever. Ask Bennett about my resolve, he’ll attest to it.”

I turn and walk out the door. The security staff can lock up my classroom later, I just need to get out of his presence.

“You know enough about football to know that you’ll get nowhere if you give up easily. Well, the same goes for me. I’m not the type to just give up. Even if you won’t date me, I’ll win you over, you can bet on it.” His voice echoes down the empty hall. I leave him behind, pretending not to hear the words that make my nerves vibrate in anticipation.

CHAPTER TWO

Sebastian Holt

I knew my instincts were right about her. When I saw MJ at Bennett's wedding in May, I was drawn to her. It's why I immediately asked about her when Bennett came back from his honeymoon. He chuckled when I asked and told me she wasn't my type and was on a hiatus from dating. I shouldn't have listened to him. I grip the steering wheel tighter as I drive home, thinking of the three months I wasted that could have been spent getting to know her.

He was right in a way, she's not my usual type, but that's because she can't be forced into any one box. No, MJ is the kind of woman you lay awake in bed at night thinking about—replaying the things she said and did because while her mouth was saying one thing, those stunning hazel eyes of hers implied another. She's an enigma. A mystery wrapped up in an exquisite package.

Also, she knows football, a fact that almost made me drop down and propose right in the middle of her classroom. A woman with killer good looks like her should not be allowed to love football. It's a dangerous

combination. She could bring many a man to his knees. Not that it was her intent.

A sigh escapes me when I glance at the clock. Unless MJ lives near the school, she's probably in this rush-hour traffic too. That's not going to make her any fonder of me. I really didn't intend to show up so last minute, but it's not easy getting away from practice at this point in the season. Not to mention I forgot the photography project, which likely made me look like an incompetent dad. If I would have had more than MJ's last name on Maddie's report card, I definitely would have shown up at the school sooner for a chance to see her.

This year has been a big shift. It's always difficult to balance work with Maddie's school and activities. Now that she's in middle school, though, it's only gotten harder. Suddenly she has more dance competitions, more homework, and more field trips. Her fifth-grade teacher didn't prepare either of us for this change. I guess it wasn't her job to prepare *me*, but a pamphlet or something would have been nice.

I pull down the road to my house, stretching my neck side to side to relieve the tension. These are the days when the ache for someone to share the burden with becomes intense. I don't regret adopting Maddie, but it would be easier to do this if she had a mom. Twelve years ago, I was planning on being the fun uncle, and here I am without my baby sister, raising a little girl who is the spitting image of her when I barely know anything about kids.

I've learned a lot over the years, but big changes like these steamroll me. This leads to things like forgetting to print out photos, and not being a part of any of the parent activities at her school. Not that they need me anyway, there are plenty of rich housewives to run things at Sutherton. The one

parent meeting I made it to was all women. I felt like a bucket of chum in a shark tank. They surrounded me immediately in sharp smiles and cloying perfume. Even if I could swing the meetings, I don't know that I'd want to after that one.

I park in my garage and press the button so it closes behind me. It's all too tempting to sit in the car alone a little while longer after the day I've had, but I know Maddie's babysitter needs to get home. And as hard as being a single dad is, the best part of my evening is hearing about Maddie's day.

The smell of roasted marshmallows greets me when I walk in through the garage door, making me smile. I let Maddie pick out a bunch of candles last week and she probably chose ten with the word 'marshmallow' in the title.

"Maddie, I'm home!" I shout, throwing my keys on the kitchen counter.

"Hey, Sebastian," Alyssa, Maddie's babysitter, greets as she walks into the kitchen. "Maddie is out back taking photos." Maddie is close to being old enough to stay home on her own, but with the number of fans and *not*-fans I have out there, I feel safer having someone here with her. It's way too easy to find out where people live nowadays. Having Alyssa here helps ease my worries, since she's trained by the security company I hired to be more of a bodyguard than a nanny.

"Thanks, Alyssa, you can head out." She gives me a nod and walks toward the front door. I turn in the opposite direction, going to find Maddie.

The sun is still out, the long days of summer hanging on here in Atlanta even in September. Maddie's golden hair is braided and she's stuck tiny flowers in it. She's set up one of our kitchen island stools in the backyard and is posing on it in front of our hydrangea bushes. I lean against the door, watching her.

“Dad! Don’t be such a creep.” She laughs when she spots me.

“It’s my backyard too. I thought your photography unit was over, is there another project I don’t know about?”

“Another project for you to *forget about* you mean?” She shoots me a look as she studies the screen on the back of the DSLR camera I got her. The school had rental options, but I knew every other parent would buy their kid one, so I didn’t want her to be left out. Even with all the money I have, it felt ridiculous buying a sixth grader a professional camera.

“I gave Ms. Carter the portfolio, it’s all good.” My feet practically thank me when I flop down in one of our Adirondack chairs.

“I’m lucky she made an exception.”

“Are you going to tell me why you’re taking more photos or are you going to stay mad at me?”

She grins and my heart twists. *Why does she have to look so much like Mallory?* Twelve years is a long time, but it’s hard for the grief not to feel fresh when she’s still so present in Maddie’s mannerisms and appearance. I push down the ache and focus on the moment in front of me, refusing to let pain steal this joy.

“Being mad at you is fun.” She laughs and I shake my head at her. “I really like photography, and Ms. Carter says you have to be disciplined to hone your craft. She said it’s like training a muscle, you can’t get strong if you don’t work at it often. If I want to enter the art competition next month, I need to practice as much as I can.”

“I wouldn’t have put art and discipline together,” I say and Maddie shrugs. I’ll admit, I’m not into the art scene. The only piece of art I bought myself was at a charity auction years ago and I’d chosen that based on

feeling alone. The painting was a sign for me to keep going when I felt like giving up.

“Ms. Carter is so talented, so I trust what she says.” She presses a button on the camera and then rushes back to pose again.

“You’ve talked about her a lot lately, is she your favorite teacher?” I work to keep my tone casual.

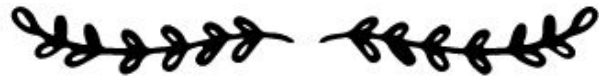
Since it’s been just me and Maddie her whole life, she’s gotten pretty good at sniffing out any ulterior motives on my part. And she’s also been adamant I find a wife lately. If she knew I was interested in MJ, she might try to get involved. While I appreciate all the help I can get, I don’t need her getting hurt if MJ stays true to her word.

“Definitely.” Maddie grins. “She always explains things well, she’s so talented, and none of the guys ever do anything dumb in class because they’re afraid of her.”

I snort. MJ is rather intimidating for a woman of her stature. I can see middle school boys being on the timid side. “That’s good, I’m glad you have a teacher you like so much.”

It’s then that I notice how Maddie’s hair is braided similarly to how MJ’s was today. It’s messier, bits of hair poking out like she couldn’t quite get it right. Maddie might already be attached before I even make a move. If this was just a fleeting attraction, I’d step back now to remove the potential of Maddie getting hurt. But I felt something today that I haven’t felt before, and I always go with my gut.

After all, Maddie already liking MJ could be a sign that I’m going in the right direction.



“Morning, Coach Bash!” Charlene, the kind, elderly receptionist greets me as I walk into the athletics department office building. Her smile is lined with deep wrinkles and her eyes are bright. She’s been here for years now, since I was a student at the university, and her knowledge of the department is impressive to say the least.

“Good morning, Charlene.” I nod to her as I pass. Normally, I’d stop for a chat, maybe see if she has any homemade fudge behind the wall that hides her desktop. But today I’m on a mission.

I’m going to be plenty busy today, so I need to get to Bennett’s office and hope he’s there and has a moment to spare. I don’t plan on wasting any more time when it comes to MJ and learning more about her.

I walk through a hall with life-size photos of past players, spying my picture from my days as a safety on the Thrashers. Having my picture on the same wall alongside other boasted players, like one of my favorite quarterbacks from forty years ago, Andy Salts, used to intimidate me. Now it motivates me.

Each step through the halls bolsters my confidence more and more. Not that I need confidence to talk to Bennett, but I have a feeling I’ll need every shred of it to win over MJ.

Tapping on the doorframe, I step into Bennett’s office. He’s unwrapping something that smells delicious, reminding me that I haven’t eaten yet today. The protein bar in my desk drawer is sad in comparison to the steaming sandwich in Bennett’s hands. I was in such a rush to get here I didn’t stop to grab any food, much less make anything at home. Maddie’s

school offers breakfast, and she'll eat better there than at home because the place has what equates to five-star dining.

"Oh! Hey Bash." Ben grins up at me from his desk. "I was actually going to text you if you didn't stop by. Sophie made you a breakfast sandwich." He slides a foil-wrapped sandwich to me, and I eagerly sit down in the chair opposite him, reaching for it.

"Your wife is an angel," I say and he laughs around a bite.

"She is *not* an angel. I woke up to her tickling me with a feather so I'd hit myself in the face with shaving cream," he says wryly. "The breakfast sandwich was a bribe to not prank her back."

I chuckle and take my first bite of the delicious sandwich. Bennett and Sophie constantly pranked each other as best friends, and it seems that hasn't let up after their vows. "Are you going to return her prank anyway?"

He snorts. "Of course." He looks at the sandwich in his hand. "Even if she made my favorite prosciutto, egg, and mozzarella sandwich." He takes a bite and hums.

"Do you need a minute alone with your sandwich?"

"I just might." He laughs and so do I. After using a napkin to wipe his mouth, he gestures to me. "So, what brought you in here? Did you just follow the smell of food?"

I shift in my seat. After taking a deep breath, I tell him what I'm here for. "I want to know more about MJ."

His eyebrows shoot up. "I know you already told me we wouldn't work, but I disagree. I met her yesterday, she's Maddie's art teacher."

"If you want to know more about her, why don't you just ask her out?" Confusion etches two lines between his eyebrows.

"I did." I scratch the back of my neck. "She said no."

Bennett laughs while I scowl. “Of course she did. I tried to tell you, man.”

“Well, you left out some key facts about her too. She’s a Thrashers fan. That makes her marriage material.” That last part is *mostly* a joke...but it does make a difference.

Bennett sighs. “I forgot about that, but there are plenty of women who are fans. You of all people should know that.”

“I’m sure there are, but they aren’t her.”

“Why are you so set on her? You don’t even know MJ.”

“That’s why I’m here.” I sit back in the chair and set my gaze on him, giving him the look I shoot at new recruits. The narrow-eyed one that shows I’m serious and honed in. “I think she said no for a reason deeper than not liking me.”

“Just because a woman turns you down doesn’t mean something is wrong with her.” His tone is half-exasperated. I roll my eyes.

“I’m a grown man, Bennett. I know that. But I also know that there’s something deeper here, I feel it in my gut. Regardless, I’m not giving up after one failed attempt.” I tap my fingers on the arms of the chair. “I’m just here trying to learn a little more about her.”

“You and your gut,” Bennett grumbles while crumbling up his sandwich wrapper. “I don’t like getting involved in this sort of thing. The girls are tight-knit, practically sisters.”

“I’m just asking about my daughter’s teacher,” I say and it’s Bennett’s turn to eye me.

“You’ve already told me otherwise, so I can’t hold onto a half-truth if this all goes up in flames. I think you’re a great guy, Bash, but MJ is one of Sophie’s best friends and you two are like night and day.”

“Opposites attract.”

“Sometimes, but often they repel.” He rakes a hand through his hair. I keep my eyes on him, not letting up. “Fine,” he groans. “It’s not like I have a wealth of information about her anyway. She’s a vault of a woman.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get.” I sit up in the chair, resting my hands on my knees. Anticipation pulses through my veins. As hungry as I was for breakfast this morning, I want this information even more. To know a little bit more about the woman behind the scowl and flashing hazel eyes.

“You know she’s an art teacher,” Bennett says to start. “But she *breathes* art. I’ve seen her at work, it consumes her.” It’s easy to picture that. The way she spoke shows a tenacity that would naturally transfer over to her craft.

“She loves plants and essential oils, too.” Bennett pauses, looking up as if he’s thinking. *Is she really so closed-off that this is all he can think of?* “Oh, she has four brothers. They’re very close, and I’m pretty sure they all could kill a man with no weapons ... blindfolded.”

I laugh, but he seems serious. “Okay, that’s good to know. What about the guys she’s dated in the past?”

“All artsy guys. The kind who go to poetry slams and have their own galleries.” He gives me a look like this proves his point about us not being right for each other, but I ignore it.

“And she’s not dating anyone now, right?”

“Nope, she’s on a man ban.”

I laugh at his wording. “Wasn’t Sophie on one of those before y’all got together?”

He smirks. “Yes, but I used my overwhelming charm to get her to break it.” I throw my rolled-up foil at him, and he bats it away with a laugh. “MJ

and Sophie made the pact together, actually. Sophie told me a while back that MJ is still holding strong. No dating until January first.”

I remember Bennett being distraught over Sophie making that declaration to him at the beginning of this year, but I’m not worried. Bennett married Sophie a few months after she said that, so hope still rises like the tide within me.

“I’m not sure what else to say,” Bennett interrupts my thoughts. “You can ask me any questions you’d like, I guess.”

“I think I can work with what you gave me.”

Bennett is right that MJ has a lot of different interests than me, but I can learn about essential oils and art if it means getting her to look my way. And if all else fails, she’s clearly a dedicated Thrashers fan. I have a feeling we could talk about that for hours.

Now I just have to get in the same room as her. I wrack my brain for a way of doing that without involving Bennett since he seems averse to helping. My back straightens when an idea unfurls. I could see what school events she’s a part of and be on the volunteer team of the next one coming up. It’s not like she can turn away a parent volunteer.

My stomach sinks at the thought of going to one of those awful parent meetings again, but I’d brave the sharks for MJ. My gut tells me she’s worth the effort, and it’s never been wrong before.

CHAPTER THREE

Meadow Jane Carter

Grayson: Is this shirt too tight?

I look at the photo on my phone and shake my head. My older brother Grayson is notorious for bothering our sibling group chat with fashion advice requests. The shirt he's wearing in the photo is *absolutely* too tight, but before I can tell him, my other brothers respond.

Levi: Are you sure someone didn't paint that on?

Maverick: It looks like a wet suit.

Adrian: Why are you bothering us with this?

I laugh at their responses as I make my way through the school hallways. There's a meeting tonight about the upcoming school events and I was chosen to be the one teacher supervising to make sure they don't do anything against school policy. *Unfortunately*. Most of the women here are callous and catty, which is a stereotype for rich housewives, but they play into it. There are a few sweet women in the meetings though, so that helps me make it through. Also, the honey lavender tea in my thermos should help me calm down and not throw my notebook at any of them. Maybe.

Grayson: I'm buying us matching shirts, Adrian, so I thought you'd want a say in the fit.

Adrian: I've told you a million times, just because we're twins doesn't mean we need to wear matching clothes. We're adults. Or at least I am.

MJ: The shirt is too tight. Maybe size up?

Grayson: It's not like you wear the shirts on the same day as me anyway. You just hate seeing me happy.

Grayson: Thank you for your opinion and lack of hurtful comments, MJ. You're number one on the pyramid this week.

He sends me a graphic of me above my two brothers on a pyramid that looks similar to the kind from *Dance Moms*. I don't watch the show, but he sends me enough related memes to make me concerned about his taste in television. I laugh at the photos he's chosen of my brothers, all highly unflattering ones where they were clearly caught off guard.

Levi: Have you been watching *Dance Moms* again? I've told you reality TV melts your brain.

Grayson: My TV-watching habits are none of your concern.

Maverick: If that was the case you wouldn't send me episode recaps every night.

Adrian: I'm going to mute this group chat if you guys don't shut up. Buy the shirts, I don't care. I'm trying to work.

I can practically hear Adrian's growl through the text. I glance up as I turn down another hall, then look down at my phone again. This school is way too big to have such a small number of students. But I guess indoor pools and sprawling libraries have to go somewhere. It makes your step count high, that's for sure.

Grayson: I own half of our company, so I know you don't need to be working right now.

Levi: You'd never mute the chat, you'd be too worried something would happen without you knowing.

Grayson: Let's make a new group chat without Adrian, that'll show him!

Adrian: Please do.

MJ: I'm going into a meeting so I can't mediate your fighting. Play nice.

Maverick: Working past 6? That fancy school of yours better be paying you overtime.

Grayson: We should host a strike! The signs would look great since you're an artist, MJ.

I'm about to respond that I don't think you *host* a strike, but my typing is cut off when I run into something hard. I realize it's *someone*, not *something*, and my apology dies in my mouth when I look up to find none other than Sebastian Holt grinning over his shoulder at me. Of all the people's backs I could run into, it had to be his. He turns to face me, and I have to tilt my head up to look at him.

"Distracted, Ms. Carter?" His low voice is practically a purr as he regards me. I clench my abdomen against the swirling heat the sound tries to manifest within me.

"Mr. Holt, I didn't see you there." I glance around him to find a group of moms narrowing their eyes at me. No doubt their deadly gazes come from me stealing Sebastian's attention.

"And here I was thinking you ran into me on purpose."

“I’m not carrying anything sharp, so I don’t know why you would think that.” I smile sweetly up at him, ignoring the gasps behind him. There’s no reason to worry about the onlookers reporting me, they’ll be too busy snatching the spotlight from each other for the next hour to even remember I was here much less the words I spoke.

Sebastian’s blue eyes dance as if he enjoys my barbs. The playful smirk he wears heats my skin, but I will myself to stay icy. I am Antarctica, an iceberg, the freezer section in Whole Foods.

“We should really get started, Coach Bash,” Karina, the head of the mob—I mean, *parent volunteers*—coos from behind Sebastian. Her long burgundy nails wrap around his bicep, and he flinches in response. Smirking, I push past the group and leave him with the cluster of overbearing mothers.

It’s only when I sit down at the glass conference table that a realization rolls over me. *Sebastian is here*. He saunters in and takes a seat right across from me, a mischievous twinkle in his too-blue eyes. *Is he here for me?* I pour black ink on the pathetic thought in my mind, blotting it out. He has a daughter who goes here, maybe he wants to help because of her. Or maybe it’s for him to brag about during his next interview. Even if he was here for me, it doesn’t matter, because I’m *not* interested in him.

“Okay, ladies,” Karina pauses, looking at Sebastian from her seat at the head of the table. “And gentleman. We’ve got a lot to talk about this evening so let’s jump right in. The first item on our agenda is the field trip schedule.”

I frown at this, looking down the table at her. “The field trip schedule is set by the teachers,” I say, and Karina gives me a tight smile. Most of the time, I avoid talking in meetings like this, but as the only representative for the teachers here, I have to speak up.

“We know that, Ms. Carter. This discussion is about chaperones. Do you think parent chaperones magically appear for your field trips?”

I grip my ballpoint pen so tight I think it might snap. *She's not worth losing your job over.* I trade my pen for my tea and take a sip before replying. “Continue,” I say, instead of trying to formulate a reply. My eyes catch Sebastian's, his annoying smirk still present. I turn my focus to my blank notebook page, ignoring the feeling of being watched.

“We will need to create invitations for each of the field trips and send them to the appropriate parents. Shelby, you have the spreadsheet with the parents who are willing to make time for field trips, correct?”

“Yes, Karina. I will use that and send e-vites out this week.”

“Do you have the field trip schedule here?” Sebastian's voice draws my eyes back up. I don't know what it is, but his voice has this magnetic quality to it. It's frustrating because I can't seem to quell the instinct that draws me to look at him whenever he speaks.

“Yes, we do!” Karina wears a feline grin as she sashays over to him, placing a flyer in his hands. She uses the flyer as an excuse to lean over him, pressing into his back and shoulder. Sebastian looks far from happy about this gesture and keeps his eyes on the paper, murmuring a quick thanks to her. Karina heads back to her seat, likely mentally readying her next ploy as this one failed.

“How do you sign up to be a chaperone? It's my first year here,” he says with a crooked grin.

“Oh, you can just tell us which one you'd like to sign up for and then we'll do the rest,” Shelby speaks up.

“Put me down for the art museum field trip next week, please.” Sebastian turns his grin on me. My pulse quickens because my pathetic assumption

earlier might not be ridiculous after all. He might actually be here for me.

“Of course. How sweet of you to volunteer to help Ms. Carter. It so rarely happens.” Karina laughs, but it sounds hollow. She’s right that most parents don’t volunteer to help the art department. Most of them see my class as pointless until it comes time for the art competition, then they all pander to me, asking me to put in a good word with the judges for their kids. I understand art isn’t the most practical subject, but it’s still important. You’d think they’d be more supportive since some of them drop millions on paintings to hang in their homes, but no. Art falls to the bottom of the list.

“They’re missing out. I think it sounds like a great field trip.”

His gaze doesn’t leave mine, and I refuse to be the first to turn away. It’s unfair that his eyes are so startlingly bright, it makes it more difficult to maintain my scowl. Their color rivals the most vivid paints in my collection. At first, they look almost like a cerulean oil paint I own, but there’s a touch of warmth to them that lends to being ultramarine instead. I’m certain if I set out to capture his likeness—*not that I would*—it would be impossible to match the color. The sound of Karina babbling on about other events becomes white noise. It’s not until she gets to the arts and crafts fair that Sebastian releases me from our staring contest. I blink a few times, feeling like someone just took my photo using flash without warning me.

“I’d like to volunteer to help with the fair.” I set my pen down hard when he speaks.

“Oh, of course. We will put you down for that as well.” Karina gives me a look designed to have me shrivel up in my chair. I give her one right back. She blinks and clears her throat. “I think that’s all for tonight. Lisa will send out the notes she transcribed and we will meet again next month. Dismissed!” she trills.

I shoot up to my feet, collecting my things as fast as I can while avoiding Sebastian's lingering gaze. There's a pull in me to fight with him, but I can't give in. He shouldn't have volunteered for *just* the art events; it makes it look like he's favoring me. Gossip is gasoline to these women, they'll set this school ablaze with rumors. I can feel their stares on my skin, their disdain thick in the air like ash after a volcano eruption.

The last thing I need is a target on my back. All of my events and fundraisers will be more difficult if they think there's anything going on between us. They're so starved for men in the school and many of them are divorced. A rich, absurdly handsome single dad coming into their midst is like placing a baby gazelle in the center of a lion pride. I'd be a casualty in their fight for him. So, as much as I want to scold him for being bold, I need to get out of here. They can eat him alive for all I care.

I rush out of the room and speed down the dimly lit hallway. My shoes slap against my heel, making me wish I would have worn different ones today. It's not easy to speed walk in a maxi skirt and slide on sandals.

Sticky summer air bathes my skin when I push out the doors into the parking lot. My little green SUV is among the few cars still in the lot and I beeline toward it.

"MJ! I-I mean Ms. Carter." Sebastian's voice is carried by the breeze, brushing over my skin like silk. I almost trip over my own sandals in surprise, but I manage to stay on my feet. Even yelling across a parking lot his voice is disorienting.

"How can I help you, Mr. Holt?" I say as I turn around and glower at him. If he ran to catch me, it's impossible to tell. He looks unruffled and annoyingly happy standing in front of me with his hands tucked into his jean pockets.

“I’ve told you to call me Sebastian.” He sighs, but his eyes have a playful glint to them. “You could even call me Bash, if you’d like.”

“I would not.” He laughs at my retort and I find my lips trying to twist into a smile. I fight it off.

“You are a delightfully sharp woman, Ms. Carter. I could listen to you take jabs at me all night.”

“Don’t tempt me with a good time, Mr. Holt,” I say, but immediately regret it. I sound playful and flirty instead of guarded and contemptuous. What is it about him that makes me want to talk so much? I don’t even like talking to people. My friends and family have questioned why I became a teacher. If I didn’t think art was necessary for kids, I probably wouldn’t be one.

“Can I ask why your pretty eyes are throwing daggers at me tonight?” Something warm and fluffy threatens to take hold at his compliment, but plenty of guys have praised my eyes before. I even had one boyfriend write a poem about them. It was a terrible poem and we broke up the next day, but still.

“Why did you only sign up for the art events?”

“Because those are the ones you’ll be a part of,” he says like it’s obvious.

“People are going to be suspicious of us. Those women are terrible gossips, they’re going to tell everyone we’re dating.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad to me. Then when we actually start dating, people will have gotten used to the idea.”

“We are *not* going to date.” I huff and cross my arms. “Sebastian.” I pause and he looks like I gave him a present just by saying his name. “I work here. I have a reputation to keep. And you can’t go around doing things like this just because you’re bored or whatever.” He frowns, and the

expression looks out of place on his face. “I have to work with these women on events and teach their children. I can’t have rumors flying around that I’m dating the only single dad they’ve met this year.”

“I am not *bored*, I’m trying to spend time with you. I’m sorry if some people don’t have more to do with their lives besides talking about the people actually living theirs, but I’m not going to pander to them. You don’t seem like the type of person to care about what others think.”

It’s my turn to frown now. He’s right. I never care about what other people think, much less those women. Something about him being here has me riled up. It will be more difficult to work with them, but that’s not the problem. The real problem is that he’s not giving up. He’s sticking around and not just that, he’s going out of his way to see me. *When is the last time a guy did that for me?*

“It doesn’t matter,” I say because I can’t let it matter. “You shouldn’t sign up for these events expecting anything out of me, Sebastian. I’m going to be working the whole time and I have already told you I don’t want to go out with you.”

He shrugs, seeming unaffected by my rebuff. “I don’t expect anything out of you. I just want to get to know you.”

“You won’t get to know me very well by watching me work. Even if we work on the art fair together, I’ll be busy.”

“Then you have nothing to lose,” he says with a half-smile. “You’ll have an extra pair of hands, which it sounds like you need, and I won’t learn anything about you.”

I don’t like how he turned my logic back around on me. He’s making it sound like I’m getting the better end of the deal, but I’m not sure that’s true.

My best plan of action is to escape this conversation before he cons me into something else.

“Well, I can’t refuse you, so I guess I’ll see you next Thursday for the field trip.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Goodnight, Ms. Carter.” There’s something about the way he says *goodnight* that sends unwanted chills down my spine, like we’re sharing a pillow instead of a parking lot.

“Goodnight, Sebastian.”

I finish the walk to my SUV, all the while aware of his eyes on me. When I drive away, I see him lift a hand and wave in my peripheral, but I don’t return it. I have to hold my boundaries. It feels like he’s taking a battering ram to my castle walls and we haven’t even spent time together yet. *I’ll just have to avoid him*, I think. He’ll give up and move on eventually, they all do.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sebastian Holt

I am going to crush this whole chaperone thing. I bought coffee from The Sweet Bean for MJ and me, plus a couple dozen doughnuts for the kids. Something in me says MJ cares a lot about her students, so doing something nice for them might get me on her good side. Plus, Maddie will be extra popular with her friends since she has a dad who brought doughnuts. Or maybe they'll all think I'm lame, you never can tell with middle schoolers.

The charter bus taking us to the museum leaves in fifteen minutes and when I pull into the parking lot it looks like kids are already boarding. My stomach sinks when I see how many other chaperones are there. At least half of the women from last week's meeting are present and I can feel their eyes on me as soon as I get out of my car. There are also a few other parents I don't recognize. This can't be a coincidence.

I balance the two coffees on top of the doughnut box and search for MJ in the crowd. She's definitely on the short side, making it difficult to spot her in a large crowd. When I get closer, I find her at a table sorting through paperwork and envelopes.

“Coach Bash!” Karina calls out to me as I approach. Covering up my grimace with a smile, I turn to her. “We’re talking about seating arrangements, what section of the bus would you prefer?”

Whatever section is furthest from you, I think and then cringe. That wasn’t the nicest thought, but the woman is driving me mad. She keeps rubbing up on me even though there’s a giant diamond on her left hand.

“Let me get some things settled and I’ll let you know,” I say and turn back around. MJ is eying me from her seat at the table. I set down the boxes of doughnuts in front of her, then pick up the black coffee I got her. Something tells me she’s not one for frilly drinks.

“Good morning, Ms. Carter.” I grin. Her guard is all the way up today; the scowl I’ve become accustomed to twists her beautiful berry-colored lips. She still manages to look mesmerizing even when she’s glaring at me. Her hair is in a braid again, but today there’s some kind of burgundy and rust-patterned silk threaded through it. I have the urge to tug on the silk and see if her braid unravels.

“Since you’re here, I’m assuming you’ll be paying for anything Maddie needs today? Or do you want an envelope to put payment in?” She slides a black AmEx into an envelope marked *Penelope Bridges*.

“I’ll pay for her,” I say then extend the coffee toward her. “I brought you a coffee. It’s black, but there’s some sugar and creamer in my car if you want it.”

She scrunches up her nose and doesn’t take the cup. “I don’t drink coffee.”

“Come on, just because you don’t like me doesn’t mean you have to lie.”

She sets her papers down with a *thump*, then gives me a look that might shrink a more timid man.

“I am not *lying*, Sebastian. I don’t drink coffee. Coffee lowers your quality of sleep, increases your anxiety, and is terrible for your insulin levels.”

I stare at the two cups in my hands, now second-guessing my addiction to espresso. My cup has four shots in it with a bit of vanilla and some milk to cut the bitterness. It can’t be *that* bad for me, right?

“Okay, well how about a doughnut then? Chocolate, glazed, sprinkles?” I gesture to the boxes and almost throw my coffee cup when she shakes her head. *Does this woman hate all that is good in the world?*

“I can’t eat them.”

“I don’t think it’s bribery since I brought enough for everyone. Please don’t tell me you hate doughnuts, too,” I joke.

She tucks a stray hair behind her ear, the gold bangles on her wrist tinkling like bells with the movement. “I do like doughnuts, but unless you happened to buy ones without gluten, dairy, and refined sugar, I can’t have one.”

I can’t help the frown that comes to my face. “Are you allergic to all of those things?”

She sighs and pushes herself to stand. “It’s not important. We need to get going, anyway.” All of the papers and envelopes go into a patchwork tote bag that looks handmade. She shoulders it and steps around the table.

“Where are you sitting?” I ask, feeling like I’m in middle school myself.

“Up front, and my bag is sitting next to me.” *Ouch*. I guess she did warn me not to expect anything from her.

“Dad!” Maddie’s head pokes out one of the bus windows. I’m sure she’s not supposed to do that, but her bright smile makes me not care. “Did you bring the doughnuts like you said?”

“Sure did. Do you want to hand them out for me?” I look to MJ. “Is that alright?” She nods, a ghost of a smile on her lips as she looks at Maddie. Maddie ducks back in and soon enough she’s bounding down the stairs toward us. Her hair is down today, the wild blonde curls bouncing with her every step.

“Are we leaving soon, Ms. Carter?” Maddie asks. I set down the coffee cups and then hand her the doughnut boxes.

“Yes, I was just about to get on the bus.” MJ’s voice is softer when she speaks to Maddie, the harsh edges smoothed out. It’s a bittersweet thing to experience. I’m happy she’s fond of Maddie but jealous she doesn’t speak to me that way. *Patience*, I tell myself, *she doesn’t know me yet*.

“Yay!” Maddie tucks a curl behind her ear, balancing the boxes in her other arm. “I brought my camera and I’m going to take aesthetic photos of Ophelia and Gigi.”

“That sounds fun, just be mindful of the other people in the museum, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Maddie chirps then rushes back on the bus, announcing that there are doughnuts. A round of cheers erupts and I grin, picking up the coffee cups again. Food wins over everybody.

“Do you know what she meant by *aesthetic*?” I ask, both out of curiosity and to make conversation as I follow MJ up the charter bus steps. True to her word, she claims the seat closest to the front and plops her tote bag right next to her. It looks like most of the seats were taken up while we were talking. I stay standing, not sure where I’m going to sit. None of my options look very appealing at the moment, what with the various moms eying me like I’m a rare designer bag.

“She’s using it in a way that means pretty, maybe even trendy. Honestly, the word has lost all meaning at this point.”

“So, I shouldn’t feel old for not understanding half the words she blurts out to me each night?”

A breath of a laugh escapes MJ and she shakes her head. The corners of her mouth are slightly tipped up and it’s not much of a smile, but it makes my heartbeat stutter in my chest anyway.

“Are you going to sit down?” she asks, changing the subject entirely, likely to avoid any show of happiness around me. It only makes me all the more determined to coax a real smile out of her.

“I’m trying to decide the best option. None of them look great. Maybe I’ll follow in my car.” I look down at the two paper cups in my hand. Not sure who is going to drink this black coffee now, but I’m not going to offer it to anyone else because they’ll get the wrong idea.

MJ heaves a sigh and then yanks her tote bag off the seat next to her, placing it on the floor by her feet. “Here,” she says. “Just don’t make me regret it.”

I grin and sit down before she can change her mind. That’s another win in my book. Not that I’m keeping score ...

The bus driver turns around and checks with MJ that he’s good to drive. She stands up and counts each student and chaperone, giving me time to admire her while her attention is elsewhere. She’s wearing a brown dress that hits her ankles, leaving her Birkenstock sandals on display. There’s a splotch of sage green paint on the top of her foot that makes me smile and a matching one on the outside of her bicep. I bet she doesn’t even realize the marks are there.

The way she acts toward me makes her seem tightly wound, but her appearance contradicts that thought. It adds to her allure and has me eager to uncover each layer of her personality. Since she invited me to sit next to her, I have a feeling I'll get the chance to. Or rather, I hope I get the chance to.

The bus driver gets the okay to go and MJ settles into the seat next to me, putting as much distance between us as possible. I'm quite broad, but she manages to create space due to her petite stature. I set the two coffee cups in the cup holders attached to the railing in front of us. It seems like it was designed for a teacher or supervisor because it has a small table big enough for a book or laptop, cupholders, and a charging port.

"So, you're a window seat kind of girl?" I ask and she keeps her eyes on the window. "I'm an aisle seat guy myself, gotta be able to stretch out my legs."

Her gaze flicks over, trailing down the length of me to where my left leg is poking out into the aisle then back up. I barely have time to wonder if she's checking me out before she turns her attention to the window again.

"Am I getting the silent treatment now?" Her head turns at my question. Her hazel eyes appear more brown than green today, probably because of the dress she's wearing. Flecks of gold sparkle in them each time sunlight breaks through the trees.

"I don't like small talk." *Fair enough.*

"Okay, tell me about your childhood, then. What is one of your favorite memories?"

"I'm not talking about my childhood with you, Sebastian. We don't know each other."

“So we can’t have small talk and we can’t have a deep conversation because we don’t know each other. That makes sense.”

Her mouth twitches and she shakes her head at me. “Fine, we can talk about art, since this is an art field trip.” She probably thinks that will deter me, but I remember Bennett talking about how much art means to her, so I’m going to take this subject and run with it as far as she’ll let me.

“Okay, who’s your favorite artist?”

Her nose scrunches and I realize the expression has quickly become one of my favorite things. It’s unfortunate how much she’s worked her way under my skin when it’s clear I’m barely more than a nuisance to her. *A nuisance she’s willingly talking to*, I remind myself. Can’t get too caught up in pessimism.

“That’s like asking you which of your players is your favorite. I couldn’t choose.”

“Okay, what about your favorite—what’s it called? Genre, type?” Amusement glitters in her eyes at the question even if her expression remains neutral.

“Do you mean medium, as in painting? Or era, as in the Renaissance?” she asks and the humor in her voice makes me feel marginally better about not knowing the right terminology.

“Medium, but I’m curious about era, now.”

“It depends on my mood, but I’m partial to oil paints. I also like to sketch with charcoal. But since I teach a variety of mediums, I try to use different ones and not attach myself to just one.”

“So what mood were you in today?” Her brows furrow and I reach up to brush the green paint on her upper arm. She stiffens, her muscles visibly

tensing beneath my touch. Bits of paint flake off on my fingertips. “I’m assuming you painted today.”

Her eyes hold mine, and it seems as if forever passes in the span of a breath. Then she blinks and clears her throat. I brush the paint off on my jeans, my hand tingling from the contact with her skin. She’s silent long enough for me to think she’s not going to answer. I pushed her too much. *Now we’re going back to square one.* I avert my gaze, training my eyes on my hands. Some of the green paint flecks are still stuck to my skin. A sappy part of me hopes they never leave.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she says. My head snaps up. She’s looking out the window, her voice barely loud enough to hear over the sounds of the kids and parents talking. “When I can’t sleep, I paint. Well, sometimes the painting is the reason I can’t sleep. It feels like I’m going to burst until I get it on the canvas.”

Surprise and satisfaction swirl in my chest at her admission. Every conversation with MJ is like going on a treasure hunt. I slash through thorny bushes and scale cliffsides and read faded texts in other languages for clues to take me where I need to go. Every time she shares something with me, no matter how small, is a clue on the journey. It makes me forget about how difficult it was to find the clue in the first place, instead filling me with endorphins that scream *more*.

“Ms. Carter!” A boy’s voice shouts and shakes us from our moment. MJ stands up, holding on to the rail in front of her, and turns to look for the source of the voice.

“Yes, Lionel?”

“Jameson says that if you touch any of the art the security guard will shoot you.” I snort and MJ cuts her eyes to me. I press my lips together, but

my shoulders are shaking trying to hide my laughter. I've never been able to keep from laughing at Maddie and their friends when they say something odd or break a rule in a funny way.

"They won't shoot you," MJ says, somehow maintaining her composure. "But you will get in trouble with the museum and the school if you touch any of the pieces."

"See, I told you, Jameson..." The boy's voice lowers and trails off. MJ sits back down, shooting me a look when a laugh escapes my control.

"I don't know how you keep from laughing."

"It's easy when you're a mature adult."

"Are we back to jabbing at my ego?"

"I took a break since I know it's so fragile," she says and I grin at her. Her eyes smile at me while her lips are in a straight line.

"Fragile, huh?" I lean in closer to her and I swear I hear her suck in a breath. "Is that what you think of me, Ms. Carter? That I'm easy to break?" A heavy pause has my heart pounding. I sought to tease her, but now I'm staring into her eyes and wondering how I measure up beneath the weight of their gaze.

"I don't know what to think of you," she replies, not a hint of discernible emotion in her tone. I want to push her to say more, but MJ doesn't seem like a woman you push. She'd turn into stone if I tried, I'm sure. I stare into her eyes though, unable to break away before she does.

Suddenly, the bus lurches forward, and on instinct, I use my arm as a bar to keep MJ from falling forward. My other hand grabs the rail in front of us. I glance back at MJ, who's staring down at my arm like it's a sword or a hot poker pressed against her collarbone. I pull back as the bus driver glances over his shoulder, a sheepish look on his face.

“Sorry about that, but we’re here!” the bus driver shouts.

All of the kids cheer and the sound of their chatter swells. MJ picks up her bag, but I wrap my hand around the strap that’s already sliding down her shoulder.

“Let me, Ms. Carter,” I say, and something warm flickers across her expression.

“Okay,” she responds in a low voice as she lets me take the bag. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Meadow Jane Carter

“*That* is not art,” Sebastian says, much too loudly, as we walk through the modern art exhibit. This section of the museum rotates to feature different artists every two months. We’ve toured much of the museum already, listening to a rather boring guide who wore disinterest like lipstick on her downturned mouth. Now, we’re exploring this exhibit before breaking out into smaller groups to complete the assignment for the day, a group report on an art piece of the student’s choosing. I’m hoping letting the students choose will redeem the field trip because so far it has been a dud. At least for my students, who I’ve seen yawning on multiple occasions.

“Art is not objective,” I say to him, trying to spear him with a look, but failing when his tropical ocean eyes crinkle at the corners in amusement. “You are not the deciding factor on what is and isn’t art.”

“Then who is?” His question is a challenge, but I’ve been in this argument before and know how to win it.

“The artist.”

He rolls his eyes and gestures to the piece. “You cannot possibly think this heap of trash is art.”

I set my eyes on the sculpture he's criticizing. It's not a thing of beauty, but I can appreciate the work and message behind it. The sculpture is made in the likeness of a rubber duck, but instead of smooth yellow rubber and a happy smile, it's got lumps of trash for skin and glowing red eyes. The title card reads *Swimming With The Fishes*. It seems to be commenting on pollution, which I'm against, so it doesn't bother me that it's more ghastly than pleasant. Pollution isn't pleasant, either.

"Art is meant to evoke feeling and this does," I comment.

"Yeah, a feeling of revulsion and disbelief that someone thought of this and then *made it*." It's really difficult to keep a straight face around Sebastian. The inside of my mouth is going to be sore from biting my cheeks. He's kept me on the verge of laughter all day. At least when he's not being fawned over by the other chaperones. He's been dragged away multiple times, but he always finds his way back to me, bringing his quips and boyish grins with him.

"A feeling nonetheless."

He shakes his head in my peripheral. "As much as I enjoy that smirk of yours, I'm going to be nauseous if I stand by this *thing* any longer. It even smells like trash." I fight to straighten my lips. The sculpture does have a distinct smell, not unlike a landfill. And while I want nothing more than to laugh at the look on his face, I hold it in. It's clear that nothing escapes him, not even a smirk. If I laugh, he'll think that I'm warming up to him. And I'm not.

"It's time to break out into groups anyway," I say, unable to keep the humor out of my voice. He practically sags in relief. "But maybe your group will want to stay here."

He gives me a look that says he's not a fan of my joke. "I'm certain none of them will want to do a report on trash."

"We'll see," I say even though I know he's right. The students are already congregating near the door. "Alright everyone, get into groups of three and then I will assign chaperones." I raise my voice a few octaves, easily getting the attention of everyone in the quiet exhibit.

The students sort themselves into groups, trying to stick with their friends. I planned on assigning the group members myself, but I thought after the awful tour I could make up for it by letting them choose. I want this trip to be a good memory for them. Art history is important and it would be better if they thought it was fun and not deathly boring.

After they're standing in their respective trios, with one group of four, I assign chaperones. It's tricky deciding on where to put certain parents. I know not all of the kids would want to be with their own. I try to do the best with what I know and listen to the requests of everyone. In the end, every group has a chaperone. I'm not even needed to fill in.

"Okay, you have the last thirty minutes of the trip to revisit an exhibit of your choice and gather information for the group project. You may use your phone to take photos and research additional information, but if I find out you're just playing on them, I've got a book of pink slips in my bag waiting." My look of warning is returned by understanding nods.

I dismiss them, intent on wandering through my personal favorite exhibits, when Maddie comes skipping up to me, tugging her friends along. "Ms. Carter! Will you go with us? You said during the tour you loved eighteenth century art and that's where we're going."

Sebastian stands a few feet back, watching with a warm smile. Maddie asked if he could be her group's chaperone, so he's with them. I want to say

no to her. I've spent too much time today with Sebastian. But Maddie's golden curls and hopeful eyes break me far too easily, and I find myself nodding. The grin that Sebastian wears at my agreement sends me into flight mode, but I can't back out now.

"Can't get enough of me can you, Ms. Carter?" he murmurs as he falls into step next to me. The girls are leading the way, out of earshot.

"Careful, if your head gets any bigger you won't be able to hold it up," I remark drily. He laughs and Maddie turns over her shoulder, giving a curious look before turning back around. This look quiets Sebastian, which I'm grateful for.

The hallway shifts from cream to deep burgundy in color, the frames changing from clean lines to ornate engravings. Past monarchs stare us down from within their portraits on the wall. The earthy scent of dust mingles with a lemony smell that must come from the museum's cleaning agent of choice. Artifacts gleam in acrylic cases under bright lights. Joy bursts through me as I take in the magnificence of it all.

We walked through here quickly earlier, too quickly for my taste. My ideal museum day takes up just that, a whole day. I could spend hours here, soaking up the history and—to Sebastian's dismay—the current art as well. Though I will admit I prefer these paintings over the trash-scented duck in the other exhibit.

"Ms. Carter, come look at what we chose," Ophelia calls out from beside an acrylic case. I already know the contents without having to walk over, as I've spent plenty of time in this area of the museum. A soft smile comes across my lips as I step up to the group of girls. Sebastian's gaze burns into me, but I choose to ignore it.

“The lover’s eye locket,” I say and the girls nod in unison. “This is one of my favorite pieces.”

“What is it?” Sebastian’s voice is low as he approaches and when his arm brushes mine I take a quick step away, not able to handle both his touch and voice in such close proximity again. When he touched me on the bus I was afraid of being set ablaze. He’s a magnetic man, the kind it would do me no good to get caught up with, even if I was open to dating. *No matter how gorgeous he is...* I shove the thought off a cliff in my mind. At the bottom of the cliff is a pit of fire, ready to burn up anything that puts my heart at risk.

“It’s a locket with the painting of an eye inside,” I explain. “Prince George of Wales sent one to his forbidden beloved as a token of his affection. It started a short-lived trend of similar pieces. They were used to keep a loved one close when they were physically apart.”

“That’s so romantic,” Maddie says with a dreamy sigh.

“Seems a little odd to me. Who wants a painting of an eye?” Maddie gives Sebastian a reprimanding look at his words.

“I think it’s romantic, and so do Ophelia and Gigi.” The girls nod, then stare back at the case with lovestruck smiles. “Ms. Carter, what do you think?” Her question shouldn’t startle me, but it does. My face feels hot all of the sudden.

“I think it’s romantic as well,” I reply, keeping my eyes on the lockets and broaches within the case. Curiosity tugs on me, willing me to gauge Sebastian’s reaction to me calling something *romantic*, but I don’t dare give in. “Eyes tell a lot about a person. Giving one to someone is like giving them a piece of your innermost self in a way.” I tell myself I’m saying this

to the girls, and not the man studying me like I'm one of the masterpieces surrounding us.

I clear my throat and step back. My pulse thrums in my ears and the room feels much too small all of the sudden. This isn't like me. I don't share these things with people. I don't feel this way just by being in proximity to a man, even attractive ones like Sebastian. The last time I felt attracted to a man in this way I ended up heartbroken. Letting someone in is not an option for me. It became clear to me years ago that I'm too much to handle and that my emotions are best kept inside, or on a canvas.

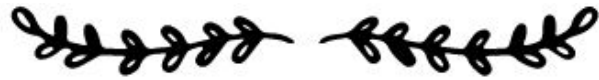
"I'm going to go check on the other groups," I say, keeping my voice level in spite of the emotion swirling within. My heart is still raw from pouring my emotions into my painting last night. That's what this must be—residual emotion leaking out. This isn't anything special or new, it just means I have to be careful to keep myself in check. I can do that. I've done it long enough now. Sebastian won't be the one to change that, to change me.

"We'll see you back on the bus," Sebastian says, watching me like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. And yet if he really knew all that I was hiding, he'd give up his pursuit. That would be a good way to get him to leave me alone ... if I was willing to share with anyone. But since I'm not, I have to hope that continual rejection will be the solution.

You haven't done a good job rejecting him today, I scold myself as I walk away. I'll do better from now on though. As I walk down the hall, pretending to check on the other groups, I pull back my shoulders and lift my chin in determination.

From this moment on, I'm dedicating myself to keeping my distance from Sebastian. There will be *nothing* remotely romantic between us. I

mentally sign the agreement in my mind with a flourish. Nothing like an invisible contract to boost your resolve. He can throw all the flirty lines and sexy grins my way, I'm prepared now.



Sticking to my mental contract was surprisingly easy. I avoided Sebastian for the remainder of the field trip, even managing to sit alone on the bus. One of the single moms, Lexi, snatched him up before we boarded, telling him she wanted to talk about their daughters having a sleepover. The way she said *sleepover* in a way that implied that he'd be staying over too, made me throw up in my mouth a little. But hey, her bold advances made it easier for me to keep my distance, so I'm thankful.

I was a little surprised when Sebastian gave in, not even trying to make an excuse as to why he would need to sit somewhere else. Maybe he liked Lexi's pouty lips and flirty arm touches. It would make my life easier if he did. Then he'd pursue her instead of me. The thought settles in my stomach like I ate an artificially-flavored, chemical-filled snack cake. I should want him to go after someone else. I *do* want him to go after someone else. So why did it bother me when Lexi loudly proclaimed how funny he was from the back of the bus? Disappointment and jealousy try to make a home in my chest, but I kick them both to the curb before they can settle in. There's no room in here for anything but bitterness and stubborn resolve, *thank you very much*.

I kept my distance from Sebastian and Maddie after the field trip, only waving goodbye to them when we got back to the school. It's for the best, even if it created an odd ache in my chest.

I lose count of the essential oil drops I'm pouring into the diffuser in my living room as I recall the day. *He's in my head.* My mind conjures an image of Sebastian's triumphant smirk and twinkling blue eyes rejoicing over being in my thoughts. I huff and twist the cap back on the peppermint oil bottle, hoping that I didn't put too much in there. If I did, my eyes are going to be burning like crazy which will only make me more frustrated with myself.

I shake out my hands, feeling my irritation rising like Atlanta's temperature in July. *Charcoal, I need charcoal and paper.* My bare feet pad across the hardwood floors as I make my way to my studio. After all of my friends moved out, we didn't renew our lease on our townhouse. I found a small home in a neighborhood in the suburbs and bought it. It's a two-bedroom house, nothing special, but having a second bedroom meant I could have a space for my art that wasn't also where I slept.

The smell of paint and clay and plants washes over me like seafoam on my ankles at the beach when I enter the room. The tension in my chest releases partially, but not completely. I grab a charcoal pencil from the recycled jar on the desk against the wall. Papers are scattered over the desk, each depicting sketches in various stages of completion.

Charcoal is the way I get out my most intense emotions. Often when I'm angry or frustrated I turn to charcoal. There's something about the scratch of the pencil and the smudge of my fingers that helps me feel like I'm expelling the emotion I keep inside so often. My fingers sift through the papers and books on my desk until I find a sketch pad with blank pages. Once I have my tools, I walk to the window that looks out on my tiny backyard and plop right down on the floor beside it for the natural light.

My hands work out the frustration in sweeping strokes. I feel myself slipping out of the room and into the page, pushing all of my energy and consciousness into it. An hour later my fingertips are black and the tight pinch in my rib cage has eased almost entirely. The golden tinge of sunset bathes the book in my lap. A drawing of a lover's eye locket stares up at me.

CHAPTER SIX

Sebastian Holt

“I didn’t know old people had birthday parties,” Maddie says from the passenger seat. We’re almost to Bennett and Sophie’s new house to celebrate his birthday. It’s also the first party they’re having in their home.

“Bennett isn’t old, he’s not even thirty yet. The first time you met him you told me you thought he was hot.” I shudder at the thought of my sweet, innocent daughter thinking a man is hot.

“I think Henry Cavill is cute and he’s a year older than you.”

“Why do you know Henry Cavill’s age?”

“Because he’s a national treasure. The better question is why *don’t* you know his age?”

I run a hand over my face and sigh. Nothing could have prepared me for raising this spitfire. Bennett’s house comes into view on the street, several cars parked out front already.

“Please don’t call Bennett old when you see him,” I say as I park.

“I won’t. My plan is to eat all of Aunt Sophie’s food and watch TikTok.”

Maddie has taken to calling Sophie, *Aunt* Sophie, and Bennett, *Uncle* Ben. Yes, after she told me Bennett was *hot*—of all words to use, why that

one?—she had dinner with them both and deemed them her honorary aunt and uncle. Maddie seems to say whatever comes to mind, but I’m certain there are still some things she doesn’t voice. I have no desire to know them though. They’d probably scare me.

I pull in and park, looking over at her. “You need to socialize, Maddie. Bennett said there would be kids your age here, his cousins I think.” We both get out of the car and Maddie groans.

“I have friends, Dad.”

“It can’t hurt to meet some new ones.” Maddie isn’t a recluse, but she’s more introverted and can tend to stay inside of her shell, even with her bubbly personality. That’s the reason I brought her instead of coming alone. Well, that and I hate missing out on any time spent with her during football season. My life is pure chaos right now, so a free Friday night before a home game is rare and I try to take advantage of that.

“It can if they’re weird,” she mumbles and I throw an arm around her.

“You’re weird, so I’m certain you’ll get along.” I ruffle her hair and she pushes away from me, laughing. Bennett instructed us to head straight into the backyard, so we do just that. As soon as we walk through the gate of the privacy fence, I’m unashamedly searching for MJ. I’m assuming since she’s friends with Sophie and Bennett that she’ll be here, but she might be busy or have heard I was coming and bailed. The latter seems likely even with her less icy attitude yesterday.

“Is that Ms. Carter?” Maddie asks, pointing across the lawn filled with people. Under a large magnolia tree on the far end of the yard is MJ, looking as gorgeous as ever. I want to stand here in awe, but Maddie is peering up at me, expecting a response.

“Yes, she’s friends with Ben and Sophie.”

A giant grin comes over Maddie's face. "Let's go say hi!" She grabs my arm and drags me toward the group MJ is talking to. There are more people than I expected to be here, and we get a few looks as Maddie barrels through the crowd. We're almost hit with a bean bag when she decides to run through the middle of a corn hole game. I grimace and give what I hope is a placating wave to the guys playing.

"Ms. Carter!" Maddie yells out as we get closer, her voice laced with excitement. MJ looks our way with wide eyes.

"Maddie, I didn't expect to see you here," she says with a soft smile. Maddie gives her a brief hug.

"Bennett said she could come with me," I explain and MJ meets my eyes. I want nothing more than to know what's hidden within their hazel depths because right now I can't read much of anything. *Is she happy to see me? Is she pretending for Maddie's sake?*

"That's nice of him." She lifts her hand, gesturing to the couple next to her. "These are my friends, Charlotte and her husband Callum." A smiley blonde waves with one hand, her other hooked around a serious-looking guy.

"Nice to meet you." I smile at them both. "I'm Sebastian, and this is my daughter Maddie."

"Your hair is so pretty," Maddie blurts out at Charlotte, who grins at her. Charlotte's blonde, curly hair is similar to Maddie's, but Charlotte's curls are a bit springier.

"Thank you! I found a new method to try and it's been amazing for my hair. Your hair is gorgeous too."

"What products do you use? I feel like my hair dries out so fast and frizzes up," Maddie says, surprising me. I know she's eleven and probably

talks about these things with her friends, but she doesn't talk this way around me.

Charlotte's baby blue eyes light up and she grabs Maddie's hand. "I have got *just* the thing for you. My phone is inside the house, want to come with me? If your dad says it's okay," Charlotte says and looks at me. I give her a nod and Maddie's face brightens. "I have this app that my husband developed to put the routine in..." Charlotte's voice trails off as she guides a giddy Maddie away.

"She'll be gone for a while. I'm going to go play some corn hole. Nice meeting you, man," Callum says and MJ huffs a laugh at him.

"Wyatt was playing earlier. I know how competitive you both are. Try not to get into a fight before cake," MJ says and Callum shoots her a lopsided grin as he backs away.

"No promises."

Silence settles over us like the shade from the tree above. I look over at MJ while she's watching the party. Her hair is in a braid again today, but this time she's tucked pieces of lavender in it to match the pale purple skirt currently swaying in the breeze around her ankles.

"You look beautiful today, Ms. Carter," I say quietly, tearing my eyes from her and looking at the game to pretend like I care about what's going on in front of me.

"Sebastian." Her voice is sharp, and I wait for the cut. "What is your play here?"

"Why do you think I have a playbook when it comes to you?"

"You *are* a football coach." I glance over at her and see a slight smirk on her berry lips.

“I prefer to keep my plays on the field,” I respond, watching for her reaction. She hums, like she doesn’t believe me.

“So what would you call infiltrating my school functions?”

“Being a good dad?” She looks at me, raising an eyebrow. We both know I was there for her, not Maddie. “I haven’t done anything wrong. At worst I’m just trying to get to know you.”

“That’s the problem.”

“That I want to know you?”

“You think that you’re entitled to know me simply because you decided to. That you can flash those pretty blue eyes at me and I’ll spill my life’s story to you. Well, that’s not the case.”

“You think I have pretty eyes?” I grin and she gives me a flat look.

“I think you’re obnoxious.” My grin holds. She complimented me, whether it was sandwiched between insults or not, still a compliment.

“For someone who looks like a field of flowers, you’re far from delicate in conversation.” Her eyes cut to me, fire blazing behind them. Something must be wrong with me because I’m drawn in rather than pushed away by the piercing look.

“Who told you?”

“Told me what?” My eyebrows scrunch together.

She rolls her eyes. “I know you didn’t call me a field of flowers by accident, Sebastian.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I feel like I’m an intelligent man, but I can’t follow this conversation at all. Charlotte and Maddie are walking back toward us, but MJ doesn’t seem to notice.

“Someone must have told you my name.”

“Unless it actually is Mary Jane, then no.”

“Yikes. No one warned you not to call her that?” Charlotte laughs as she comes to stand under the tree. “She *hates* it. Meadow Jane is much more unique anyway. Prettier too, in my opinion,” Charlotte says with a smile. Her bright expression wilts a little when she sees MJ’s scowl.

“Meadow Jane Carter,” I try out the name. Something in MJ’s eyes flickers. “You’re right, Charlotte. Much better than Mary Jane.”

“Glad we all like my name,” MJ remarks drily. “Let’s never say it again.”

“You don’t like your name, Ms. Carter?” Maddie speaks up and MJ’s eyes jump to her. I had forgotten she was there too for a minute. I need to be more careful what I say around her, but teasing MJ is an addiction that I don’t know if I’m capable of resisting.

“I do love my name. It’s just that I took on my nickname in school around your age and now no one uses my full name.”

“I think I prefer Meadow to MJ,” I say and receive a nose scrunch from MJ in response.

“Of course you do.”

Maddie eyes us both but says nothing. Someone shouts that it’s time for cake and Maddie takes off toward the house. She has a huge sweet tooth and tends to react on impulse when she hears things like *cake*.

“That girl has her priorities straight,” Charlotte remarks with a laugh. “I’m going to get cake too. Y’all have fun.” Charlotte shoots us both a mischievous grin before skipping toward Callum, who was playing cornhole a few feet from us. He throws an arm around her and they walk toward the house together.

“*Perfect*,” MJ grumbles. “Now my entire friend group is going to be invested in our nonexistent relationship.”

“You’re assuming they’ll like me.” I sound smug and I don’t even care.

“I’m not assuming, unfortunately. Sophie and Bennett have talked you up to the others plenty. It’s not my fault they have bad judgment.”

“If everyone else likes me but you, wouldn’t it make more sense that *you’re* the one that has bad judgment?”

“I’m going to get cake,” she says instead of answering and starts to walk away. I don’t say anything for a moment, but then it hits me.

“You can’t even eat the cake,” I say once she’s a few steps ahead and I swear I hear her laugh, but the sound gets lost in the noise of the party.

I follow, but don’t try to catch up to her. When I enter the house, almost everyone already has cake. Maddie is sitting on a bar stool, laughing with a girl her age. My heart warms seeing her branch out. Mallory was a social butterfly, so I know she’d be proud of her daughter. Grief mixed with love sticks in the back of my throat like cold medicine and I have to swallow a few times to tamp it down. *Now is not the time to cry, Bash*, I tell myself. *The girl is making a friend, not graduating high school.*

My emotional overwhelm subsides when Sophie barrels toward MJ and starts talking a mile a minute. I take a few steps closer so I can hear them better, but Sophie’s loud enough that I probably didn’t have to.

“Ben told me Sebastian asked you out and you said *no*. Are you crazy? He’s—” MJ slaps a hand over Sophie’s mouth to cut her off. Maddie is only a few feet away, her head whipping back and forth between me and MJ like she’s at Wimbledon.

MJ’s eyes meet mine instantly like she knew where I was in the room without having to look for me. Her expression is softer than usual, worry furrowing her brows. She must be concerned about Maddie. Even though her concern is likely because she thinks we won’t get together and doesn’t want to hurt Maddie, it sends warmth rushing through me all the same. I’ve

been waiting for a woman who cared more about Maddie than her own desires and here she is. She pushes me away constantly, but still, she *exists*. I can work with that.

“We’ll talk later,” MJ says to Sophie with a ferocity that doesn’t match the gentleness I saw moments ago. Her hand slips off Sophie’s mouth. “Ugh, your lip gloss is so sticky.” She frowns at her hand and I chuckle.

Judging by Maddie’s raised brows, I’m going to have to address this with her on the ride home, but for now, I’m going to eat cake with a smile. Because the woman I like cares about my daughter. I can worry about everything else later.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Meadow Jane Carter

“I’m sorry, MJ, I forgot Maddie was here,” Sophie says, staring at me with wide puppy dog eyes that are slightly hidden by her lavender bangs. This is her sixth apology and I’m still not sure if I want to accept it. She started apologizing every time she passed me during the party. This is the first one since everyone has left. Leftover party food surrounds us in their large kitchen and Bennett is occupying himself by packing it all up.

“Maddie is my *student*, Sophie. I can’t date Sebastian even if I wanted to, which I don’t by the way. It would be unprofessional and risky.”

Bennett lets out a laugh and I narrow my eyes at him. “Sorry, I was just thinking of how Sebastian says some things are worth the risk. He helped me realize confessing my feelings to Sophie was worth risking our friendship.”

Sophie smiles up at him and he bends down to kiss her forehead. I roll my eyes.

“That’s wonderful. I’m happy for you two. But none of this changes the fact that now *Sebastian’s daughter* knows he asked me out.”

“I’m sure Bash will talk to her and handle it. He’s laid back, but he cares about Maddie. He’s told me plenty of times that he’s careful when he brings women around her,” Bennett explains.

Sophie looks down, twisting her wedding bands, her bottom lip slightly poked out. *Why is it so hard to stay mad at my friends?* I think it’s because they love me even though I keep them at a distance. Or maybe it’s because I know they’ll pester me until I forgive them.

I sigh. “You’re probably right. It’s okay, Soph. I’m done being mad. Maddie is one of my favorite students, so I got upset because I don’t want to hurt her.”

It’s true that I don’t usually care what people think, but I am a little nervous about seeing Maddie on Monday. Will she hate me because I turned Sebastian down? Hopefully he explains the situation to her in a way that doesn’t paint me in a bad light. It didn’t feel right for me to go up to her during the party.

“I understand,” Sophie says with a smile. “Since I’m forgiven ... can we talk about how you’re making a huge mistake by turning a guy like him down?!” Her demeanor shifts from apologetic to energetic far too quickly.

“No, we cannot. Especially because it’s not a mistake.” I go to find my tote bag so I can get my keys and leave. Sophie trails me through her house.

“MJ, he’s kind, successful, loves football like you, and has a kid. You love kids. By the way, it doesn’t make sense to me that you hate people but love kids.” She’s flitting around me in her living room like a hummingbird, talking faster and faster as she goes.

“Ben, did you let her have an energy drink today?” I yell out as I lift throw pillows and look beneath them.

“I’ve banned them from the house, but sometimes she sneaks them in,” he shouts from the kitchen.

“I haven’t had any,” Sophie defends herself with a huff. “I just know you’re running away so I’m trying to get my point across fast.”

“Where is my bag?” I turn toward her and cross my arms. A sheepish grin appears on her face.

“Answer why you won’t date Sebastian and I’ll tell you.” I roll my eyes and walk around her, heading down the hall to her bedroom. If I know Sophie—and I do—she’s hidden my bag in the top of her closet. She has six inches on me, so over the course of our friendship she’s used her height to her advantage several times.

Her bedroom door swings open when I push it to reveal a crisply made bed and a lack of decor that shows they just moved and haven’t settled in yet.

“MJ,” Sophie huffs as I walk toward her closet. “This is an invasion of privacy.”

I snort and fling open the door. Sure enough, at the back of her walk-in closet on the top shelf is my macrame tote bag.

“You stole my stuff, you’ve lost your right to privacy.” I step on one of the plastic totes yet to be unpacked and use it to boost me up to my bag. After retrieving it, I step around Sophie who is pouting again.

“Come on, MJ, throw me a bone here.”

“I know you mean well, Soph, but I’m not dating Sebastian or anyone else. You broke the man ban, but I’m not going to,” I tell her as we walk back down the hall.

“But why not?”

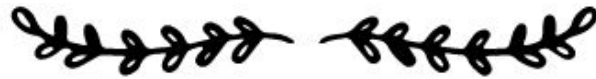
“I made a commitment to myself,” I say, which is true. I’m leaving out other reasons, but she’ll try to refute them all if I tell her. We’re back in the kitchen now and I beeline toward the side door that leads out of their house.

“It sounds like you’re making excuses,” Sophie says as I open the door. Warm September air bathes my skin.

“You asked for a reason and I gave you one.” I step out the door. “Happy birthday, Bennett,” I say over my shoulder.

“Thanks, MJ,” Ben chuckles. “He’s not going to give up, you know that right?” Ben’s tone is jovial as I walk to my car.

“He really should.”



“I’m here!” I yell out as I kick off my sandals.

“Baby sis!” Grayson’s yell is my only warning before I’m buried in a hug that smells of smoke and cologne. My face is mashed into his Thrasher’s jersey, the old material scratching my face.

“Hi, Grayson.” My voice is muffled.

He squeezes me tighter and lifts me up off the ground, my toes brushing the floor. I groan but let him do it. I’m not a hugger by nature, but Grayson very much is. It’s much easier to just let him hug me than it is to fight him. Fighting turns into him throwing me over his shoulder and then into my dad’s pool. And I didn’t pack a change of clothes this time.

“Quit squeezing the life out of her.” Levi laughs and suddenly I’m lifted away from Grayson. Levi hugs me too, but it’s quick and gentle.

“I haven’t seen her in forever,” Grayson half-whines.

“You saw me last weekend,” I point out.

“I’m making up for lost time, then.”

“You can’t keep pulling that card,” I say with a laugh, pushing him away when he tries to wrap me up again. Grayson used to be an air marshal, which meant he traveled a lot. He recently decided to put down roots and started a private security company with my other brother and his twin, Adrian.

“Did I hear MJ?” My dad’s voice makes me smile. I walk into the living room, fending off Grayson as I go.

“Hey, Dad,” I say, and he lifts his whiskey glass in greeting to me.

“Hey sweetheart, food just came off the grill. If it’s bad, Grayson made it,” he says, his gruff voice laced with humor.

“Noted.” I laugh and start toward the kitchen while Grayson argues that his steak is the best of all time. My dad’s house is on the smaller side since it’s just him here, but his backyard is huge and boasts an in-ground pool, fire pit, and pizza oven. He’s always been more comfortable outside than in. My mom was the same way. She’d spend her days in her garden while my dad worked on some kind of home improvement project.

I find Maverick and Adrian in the kitchen, piling their plates high in the way that men who work out religiously tend to do.

“Look who finally showed up,” Maverick says with a grin, his scruff hiding the dimple I know is there. He used to be fairly clean cut, but after his fiancée broke up with him a couple months ago he started to let his hair and beard grow out a little more.

“Is there a start time I was unaware of?” I ask as I grab a plate of my own. “Kick off isn’t for thirty minutes.”

I smile at the variety of food. My family knows about my restrictions and does their best to accommodate them, so I know I’ll be able to eat plenty.

After high school, I started having chronic debilitating migraines. I still have flare ups on occasion, especially when I'm stressed, but I've found that going without dairy, refined sugar, and gluten helps me keep them at bay. It also helps me feel better overall.

"No, but you know Dad won't let us eat unless *the baby* is here," Maverick teases and I roll my eyes. Being the youngest and only girl in a house of boys ups the 'baby of the family' factor by a thousand. All of my brothers tease me about it, but they also treat me like the baby in their own way too.

"I didn't ask to be born last," I say as I scoop grilled veggies onto my plate. "Plus, you both were already making your plates when I came in, so it's not like you actually had to wait."

"You're not wearing your jersey," Adrian changes the subject, his lips downturned.

"Why?" Adrian asks and I stiffen in my spot for a moment, but quickly recover. Adrian is a former CIA agent and nothing gets past him. I feel sorry for his future kids because they'll never pull anything over on him, if he ever has any children. He's more of a recluse than me and speaks mostly in growls.

"I just felt like wearing a t-shirt today," I lie and spoon some sweet potatoes onto my plate. He can't see my face right now, so maybe I'll get away with this. It's not like I can tell him *Sebastian Holt asked me out and now I feel awkward wearing a jersey with his last name on it*. The problem is I've worn the jersey every game day for *years*. It felt like a sin to leave it in my closet at home. My dad bought it for me and it's become a staple.

"Did you lose it in the move to your new house or something?" Maverick asks as my other brothers and dad walk in.

“Lose what?” Levi asks, grabbing a plate.

“Her jersey. She’s not wearing it,” Adrian supplies. I want to glare at him, but that would give away that something more is going on. Now all of my family is staring at me like I grew another head.

“I think it’s stuck in a box somewhere,” I lie again. *I am the worst*. This is another thing I’m going to blame Sebastian for. I can’t wear my favorite jersey *and* he’s turning me into a liar. “I didn’t want dad to think it was lost for good. I’m sure it’s at home though.”

The stares don’t let up, but I’ve been through plenty of Carter men stare downs in my lifetime. Sure, they might be intimidating to everyone else with their muscles and intense focus, but I’m the baby sister. I can handle it.

I continue to make my plate as if I’m not being studied like a textbook the night before a test. If I appear calm, they’ll let this go ... *maybe*.

“What’s the line for the game today?” I ask, hoping that one of them will take the bait. The line on a football game—or really any sport—is essentially a score prediction. It’s used in sports betting, but it’s also used by journalists when discussing the outcome of a game. My dad and brothers always argue over if it’s right or not, so I’m hoping that chaos will ensue at the mention of it.

“The Thrashers are a ten-and-a-half-point favorite, which is crap because everyone knows we’re going to crush the Penguins today,” Grayson says, the first to give in. This triggers Levi’s response, and he starts to argue that the Penguins are pretty good this year.

I exhale in relief and walk into the living room undisturbed. That should keep them busy until the game. I hate deceiving them but telling them the truth isn’t an option right now. They’re all huge Coach Bash fans, which makes sense because Sebastian does have an amazing record. So, they

might push me into dating him, or they'll go into overprotective mode and try to kill him for even asking me out. Not to mention the age gap between Sebastian and I, which could be seen as a lot to some people. I don't think eleven years is that much—*not that it matters*.

Adrian enters the living room first and sits next to me on the large sectional that takes up most of my dad's small living room. I wish Grayson or Maverick would have come in first. They're much more laid back. Adrian is all logic and intensity. He's not as easily distracted either, so it's unlikely that I've completely deterred him from asking about my jersey. The only thing about Adrian that works in my favor is his enjoyment of silence. It's something we typically bond over. So, maybe he'll leave me be if I stay silent.

My eyes are trained on the TV as I eat, trying to avoid eye contact with my brother. Sebastian's face comes on the TV and I drop my fork. It catches on my plate with a slight clang but doesn't fall to the floor. I can feel Adrian's scrutinous gaze burning a hole in the side of my head, but I ignore him and carefully pick up my fork again. My other brothers and dad come in and someone turns up the TV to hear Sebastian's pregame interview.

Sebastian is talking about the game and the players, but all of the words go over my head. Instead of listening, I'm thinking of how just yesterday this same man was telling me I looked beautiful and comparing me to a field of flowers. His lips tilt in a devastatingly handsome grin that has the female journalist swooning. Really, a man shouldn't be allowed to have a mouth like his. The mothers at school that flit around him like moths around a flame would, and do, pay to have lips as pillowy as his appear.

The word *perseverance* breaks through the fog surrounding my brain and the sheer determination displayed in his bright blue eyes has my skin

heating. And not because it's highly attractive when a man is passionate about what he does—which it is—but because it reminds me of something.

It reminds me of when he looks at me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Meadow Jane Carter

I made it through the day. Relief makes my body sag in my desk chair. It might have been foolish of me to think that Sophie's comment would have mattered to Maddie, but I was tense all the way until she left my room after her class period today. She was her usual bubbly, happy self, and didn't seem to hate me or want to get me fired. I'm counting that as a win, even if it seems pathetic to do so.

My office hours are officially over, which means I can go home and rest. I can practically smell my herbal bath and taste my restriction-friendly cookies. They'll be my reward for making it through without doing something dumb like asking Maddie if she was upset with me. I don't know what it is about this little girl and her dad, but they're turning me into someone who *cares* about what people think. I shudder at the notion. It's a good thing I decided to distance myself from Sebastian. He's clearly trouble wrapped up in attractive packaging and Maddie is the adorable bonus that I can't afford to want. They don't need someone like me messing up their perfect life, anyway.

If I was too much for *he who shall not be named*, then I will be for Sebastian and Maddie too. Yes, I'm better off by myself. No disappointments, no heartbreak, just a little loneliness. I've been lonely for years now; it's second nature.

My door clicks open as I'm putting the last of the charcoal sketches from today in my bag. I lift my head to say that office hours are over, but I hold my tongue when I see Maddie standing in the doorway.

"Maddie, is everything alright?" I keep my tone calm, even though inside I feel as though I'm on a rollercoaster climbing up with no dip in sight. Maybe she waited until the end of the day to talk to me about the incident.

"Yes," she says with a nervous smile, shifting back and forth on her feet. "I told my dad that I was getting a ride with Gigi after piano practice today, so he gave my babysitter the day off. But Gigi left early today, so now I don't have a ride home. I could call my dad, but he's coaching practice right now. I just need to get to his office and then I can wait for him to get off."

I frown and tilt my head to the side. "Are you asking me to take you to your dad's office?"

She nods. "I thought since you're Uncle Ben and Aunt Sophie's friend that Dad would be okay with it. I can try calling my grandma, but she lives across town and won't be able to get here for a while."

I school my expression so that the surprise I'm feeling doesn't show through. I'm glad she's not upset with me, but it's strange that she'd choose *me* of all people to drive her to Sebastian's office. She's a smart kid, she has to know that it would be weird for me to see Sebastian after rejecting him, right?

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea. I can wait with you until your grandma gets here, though." Her expression crumples like an old receipt in

the bottom of a purse. Maddie's hair may remind me of Lottie, but her puppy dog eyes are straight out of Sophie's repertoire.

"My dad is going to be mad if my grandma has to come all the way over here, because driving is bad for her knees. Please, Ms. Carter? I don't want to get grounded." Something in my gut tells me Sebastian wouldn't be mad over a simple mistake, but Maddie's giant eyes blinking at me have my resolve cracking.

This is a terrible idea, say no.

"Okay, I can take you," I say instead, because I have a vendetta against my sanity.

"Yay!" Maddie's expression immediately shifts into a giant grin as she claps her hands together. "Thank you, Ms. Carter, you're a lifesaver."

No, I'm weak is what I am. I can't believe I let an eleven-year-old convince me into going to see the one man I just made a mental contract with myself to avoid. But surely I can avoid him easily enough. I'll make sure Maddie is with a responsible adult that she knows and then be on my way. No unwanted run-ins with Sebastian.

"Come on, let's try to beat some of the afternoon traffic." I sigh and shoulder my bag. Maddie walks beside me to the parking lot, bouncing with every step.

Since I attended the university, I know how to get there without GPS, which is good, because I *hate* using GPS. I don't need some robot telling me what to do. Sometimes I wish we could go back to using physical maps, even if they were a little inconvenient. At least maps don't shout at you through your car speaker to make U-turns where they're illegal.

"How was your day?" Maddie asks after she buckles her seatbelt and we get going.

“It was fine,” I say out of reflex. Usually I wouldn’t bother elaborating, but I feel guilty leaving a sweet girl like Maddie hanging. “Charcoal is one of my favorite mediums, so I’m enjoying teaching this unit. How was your day?”

This one question launches Maddie into a lengthy story that details everything from the drive to school to what the cafeteria served for lunch to her friends’ love lives. I let her talk, grateful that I’m not expected to do more than nod or give monosyllabic answers. She’s talking enough for the both of us.

We get to the campus as she’s detailing her piano practice and how she wishes she had longer fingers because hers look like stubs (they do not, but she leaves me no room to refute). She pauses her recap to direct me to a staff parking lot near the athletic department building. I’ve seen these buildings on campus, but I’ve never been this close to them. If the inside is as impressive as the exterior, I’m sure it’s something to behold.

“Okay, do you have someone I could drop you off with until your dad is done with practice?” I ask her and she nods, grabbing her backpack out of the backseat.

We get out of my SUV and Maddie immediately starts down a concrete path ... *away* from the building we parked in front of.

“Where are we going?” I ask her as I try to keep her fast pace. “I thought we were going inside the department building.”

Her face screws up and she waves a hand in dismissal. “It’s just a bunch of offices. The lobby is pretty cool, but there are much better places to go.”

I narrow my eyes at her in suspicion, but she doesn’t look at me. She’s avoiding my question. A large building comes into view, one that resembles a warehouse. My stomach drops. *Georgia Thrashers Indoor Practice*

Facility. Sebastian—and the entire Thrashers football team—are going to be in there.

“Maddie, I don’t think this is a good idea,” I say as she riffles through her backpack, stopping outside the doors. “We shouldn’t interrupt practice.”

“We’re not *interrupting*, we’re *visiting*. I do it all the time,” she says as if it’s no big deal to crash the closed practice of a highly revered football team. A lanyard appears in her hand and she lifts it like a trophy. “Found it!”

Before I can protest anymore, she swipes the lanyard and pushes through the metal doors. I follow behind her, nerves swirling in my stomach. I’m not sure the last time I made this many poor decisions in a row.

My trepidations dissipate, however, when I enter the facility. It’s air conditioned and bright, decorated in Thrashers’ brown and baby blue with reminders of past championship wins hanging from the walls. On the turf field the team is scrimmaging while the staff oversees and shouts from the sidelines. I follow a few feet behind Maddie as she skips ahead, trying to keep my mouth from falling open in awe.

If I ever planned on telling my brothers about this, they’d be so jealous. Since I was a little girl, I’ve been a Thrashers fan. I’d shout with my brothers and dad at the screen each game like the players and coaches could hear us. Every team spirit day at school my mom would dot my face with blue and thread matching ribbons through my hair. My favorite childhood memories involve Thrasher football, which is another reason why I denied telling Sebastian any of them when he asked. It would have only encouraged him, I’m sure.

As if he could hear his name in my thoughts, Sebastian’s head turns in our direction. Confusion covers his face when he sees me, and his smile is

hesitant. Maddie is hugging him when I catch up.

“Maddie needed a ride,” I explain and he frowns down at the head of blonde curls pressed into his torso.

“Why didn’t Alyssa pick you up?” he asks as Maddie steps out of his arms.

“I have to go to the bathroom!” Maddie blurts instead of answering, then darts down the nearest hallway, leaving me and Sebastian behind.

Someone clears their throat and it’s then that I notice practice has halted. Every eye is on us, probably eighty or more guys are here. I’m not a shy person, but I definitely prefer to be in the background rather than the spotlight. Sebastian turns back toward the field and tells the first string offense and second string defense to scrimmage, then he instructs an offensive coach to run things for a minute.

“I should go, I’m interrupting you,” I say and Sebastian shakes his head.

“You’re never an interruption,” he replies, gesturing toward an empty bench a few feet away from the sideline and coaches.

“I’m the very definition of an interruption,” I argue him. “You should be working.”

“I’m the head coach, I can do what I want.” He winks as he sits down. Our knees brush when I sit next to him and I quickly slide down the bench. He smirks at me, his Caribbean blue eyes twinkling.

“It would seem that I’ve been tricked,” I say, glancing back at the hallway that Maddie disappeared down.

“She must have told her babysitter she didn’t need a ride today. Clever kid.” He chuckles.

“Why would she want me to drive her here? I figured she’d hate me after finding out I rejected you.”

“You’re her favorite teacher,” he says and my heart warms. “As much as she loves me, she might choose you over me.”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. His eyes glance down at my mouth then back up. If I wasn’t paying attention to his every move, I would have missed it. I shift on the bench, more aware of his intense gaze than ever. Add this conversation to my tally of mistakes for the day, because I *really* shouldn’t be here.

I haven’t known Sebastian very long, but every conversation we’ve had shows me that when you have his attention, it’s undivided in an unnerving way. I don’t know if a man has ever been so focused on me in conversation. Not my body, but me as a whole. It’s like he only has eyes for me and the feeling could become addicting. Sirens, red flags, and alarm bells all go off at once in my brain.

“I should go,” I repeat my sentiment from earlier. Shouting draws my attention to the field though, and I’m sucked into the scrimmage. “Lincoln is hesitating too long in the pocket,” I say as I observe the quarterback scramble with the ball, only gaining a few yards instead of throwing it to the open wide receiver.

“I’ll let him know your thoughts,” Sebastian says. I shoot him a glare. I know appeasing when I hear it. He might joke about marrying me because of my love of football, but he probably doesn’t take me seriously.

“Don’t patronize me, I’m right.”

He picks the whistle up off his chest and blows it twice, the piercing sound making everyone freeze in place.

“Lincoln, my beautiful friend here says you’re taking too long in the pocket, it’s going to get you sacked on Saturday.” His eyes don’t leave mine the entire time he’s speaking. My heart stutters in my chest and face flushes

with heat. “Run the play again,” he commands and blows the whistle once more, sending everyone into motion.

It takes way too much willpower for me to turn toward the field and watch the play. Lincoln moves a little faster this time and makes the pass. I feel Sebastian’s gaze burning into me. His eyes don’t leave me, he doesn’t even watch the play.

“How’s that?” he asks, his voice low and silken.

“Better.” My voice comes out breathier than I would have liked.

“Good.” He pauses. “One thing you should know, Meadow Jane, is that I’m never going to underestimate you or dismiss your thoughts.”

I keep my eyes on the field, pretending to watch the next play. When most people say my full name it sounds clunky and awkward, like it gets stuck in their teeth on the way out. But when Sebastian says my name it’s like honey dripping from the comb or a strawberry swirled in melted chocolate, smooth and indulgent.

“You underestimated me when we first met,” I say, because I can’t acknowledge that his words are wiggling in between my ribs like vines, threatening to bring life to the heart I’m determined to keep desolate.

“And I told myself I wouldn’t do that ever again. Have I made you feel that way since then?” His tone is soft, but I know he’s challenging me.

“Asking questions you already know the answer to is a waste of time,” I reply and he swipes a hand across his mouth, barely concealing a grin that sends tingles down my spine.

“Let me give you a tour after practice,” he says, apparently choosing not to acknowledge my retort.

“I’ve already stayed too long.”

“I’ll take you to the stadium and you can see inside the locker room.”

Maybe it won't hurt to stay a little while longer...

“Fine, but this is *just* a tour. Nothing more.”

“Of course, just a tour,” he says, but it sounds more like a joke than a simple fact.

I should leave, but if I'm going to make this many bad decisions in a row, I should at least get to fulfill a lifelong dream in the process.

CHAPTER NINE

Sebastian Holt

I keep thinking that I'm going to plateau when it comes to my affection for Meadow. But no, every moment spent with her makes me like her even more. And every time she leaves I'm left wishing I had more time with her, counting down the days until I get to see her again.

"It's weird being here when it's empty like this," Meadow says, dragging me out of my reverie. *Meadow Jane*—there's no going back to 'MJ' now. Ever since I saw her standing under the magnolia tree, looking like a field of beautiful and rare flowers, and learned what her initials stand for, it's *Meadow* for me.

She's standing in the middle of our game field, looking out of place in her long peach dress and baggy cardigan. She looks like she should be strolling through a garden with a basket in her hand, not standing on the fifty-yard line.

"It does have a different feeling compared to game day. I actually come here a lot when it's empty. There's something peaceful about it that helps alleviate the stress of the job." I drift closer to her. I've been keeping my distance throughout the tour, even though I want nothing more than to grab

her hand and never let go. Her agreeing to let me show her around is a big deal and I don't want to ruin it by invading her personal space.

"I can't picture you stressed," she says, her hazel eyes curious.

I'm not one to share my innermost thoughts with people. I like to be the easygoing guy, the one you grab a beer with and tell your problems to without you having to listen to mine in return. Plus, there are too many people out there ready to use what I say as a weapon. I can't afford to have a moment of weakness broadcasted on every sports network out there, not when I have Maddie to protect. So I keep my circle small. I feel like I could share with Meadow, but I need to get to know her more still.

"I'm like a duck on the pond. On the surface everything looks calm, but beneath the water those little feet are churning a mile a minute." She surprises me with a laugh, her full smile stealing my breath.

"You did not just quote *The Replacements* at me."

I want to respond, but my mouth can't form words because she's *smiling* at me. Not a quirk of the lips, not a smirk, but a full-blown smile. It's not bright like the sun, no, it's more like the moon. Full and mesmerizing, a soft glow that you could stare at all night long.

"I did," I say because my ability to be charming or suave disappeared when her laugh echoed through the stadium. She'd hit me if I tried to take a photo of her right now, but I'm almost willing to risk bodily harm if it means getting to keep this moment forever.

"That's so cheesy," she says with another laugh, making me grin.

"I didn't think cheesy movie quotes would be the thing to make you smile." She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "I'm going to go home and rewatch all of the best ones now so I can have a notebook of quotes ready. Whenever you get mad at me, I'll read you a line from it."

“Interesting how you’re anticipating that you’re going to make me mad,” she teases as we walk toward the tunnel that leads to the locker room.

“I may not know much about you, Meadow Jane, but you’ve made it clear I know how to annoy you,” I say and she laughs again. My heart might burst from being so happy if she keeps this up.

“You know more about me already than a lot of people,” she says after her laughter subsides. Cool air washes over us as we walk side by side in the tunnel. On game day, there’s a projection on the tunnel walls with a hype video playing, but today it’s just the sound of our footsteps and the wind. I imagine a life where I steal a kiss from her before running onto the field with my team.

“Here’s the locker room.” I scan my lanyard to open the door. “The locker room in the practice facility is where all of the fun stuff like the massage chairs and therapy pools and championship trophies are, but the guys are obviously all in there right now after practice,” I explain and she nods, stepping through the door I’m holding for her.

“Wow,” she breathes out. I hang back, watching as she spins in a slow circle, taking in the sky-blue seats with each player’s name above it and the motivational words on the walls in huge vinyl letters. On the right wall are my own words, *worth the risk*.

“You said I know more about you than others. Is that true?”

“I don’t make a habit out of lying,” she replies. Her tone is heavier than it has been and she keeps her back to me. “You’ve made talking to you unavoidable, so yes, you know more about me than most.”

“I don’t regret a thing,” I say truthfully with a grin. She shakes her head, her black braid swinging. “What about your friends, though? The ones I met at the party. They must know more than me.”

She shrugs. "They probably do, because we all used to live together until this summer."

"So not because you decided to let them in," I state and she turns toward me.

"I thought this was just a tour. It's beginning to feel like an interrogation."

"I'm just trying to get to know you, Meadow."

"Why?"

Her one-word question hangs in the air between us. How do I tell her I want to know her because every new thing I learn makes me fall a little more? I'm certain if I confessed that she'd say I was lying and run out of here faster than I could blink.

"Because I like you," I say, hoping that isn't too forward for her. "And when you like someone, you want to get to know them better."

"I told you I don't want to date you," she says and I watch as her once open expression closes like a slamming door.

"You can like someone without dating them. There's this thing called friendship; I don't know if you've ever heard of it."

She rolls her eyes, her lips twitching as if she wants to smile again. "You want to be *friends*," she says, disbelief coating her voice.

"Yes," I reply with a smile. "I want to be friends with you, Meadow Jane." People always say the best relationships start with friendship, right?

She scrunches her nose up. "I don't trust you."

"You don't trust me, or you're worried that if we spend time together you'll fall in love with me?" I smirk and she bites back a smile.

"You're ridiculous." I raise a brow, a silent challenge extended. "Fine." She sighs. "We can be friends. That's all. And if anyone asks I'm only

friends with you because you're the Thrashers' coach."

I laugh and a small smile breaks her stony expression. I've won a lot of games and awards in my lifetime, but her little smile outweighs them all. "Alright, I'll be sure to make that clear." I glance down at my watch, it's past seven. "Shoot, we should head back. Maddie has probably raided the office kitchen for snacks already."

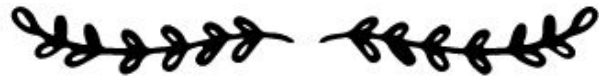
She texted me earlier saying that she was going to hang out in the athletic director, Paul's, office. We're close friends and he's watched Maddie before, so I said it was fine. He does spoil her though and she's likely going to be hopped up on sugar and cappuccinos when I get her.

"What should we tell Maddie?" Meadow asks as we walk to the door. "I don't want her to be confused." There's that warm feeling in my chest again, it's like sunshine on my skin after a rainstorm. *She really does care.*

"I'll explain to her that we're just friends. She's a smart kid, she can handle it." I'm not sure if that's true, though. Maddie *is* smart, which is why after I told her that I liked Meadow, but she wasn't interested, Maddie organized this whole meetup to push us together. I have no illusions that this was a coincidence.

While it worked out in my favor, I am going to have to tell her she can't meddle in my dating life. It's not healthy at all. Hopefully she's not too disappointed when I tell her we're just friends. I promised a long time ago I would be cautious with dating when it came to Maddie. Getting involved with her favorite teacher is the riskiest thing I've done since she was born.

I look up at my words in bold, blue letters on the wall, then back at Meadow as she breezes past me, the scent of lavender and vanilla following her. I have to trust she's worth the risk.



“Weren’t Aunt Sophie and Uncle Ben best friends before they got married?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, squeezing my eyes shut. This conversation is not going how I wanted it to. I took Maddie out to our favorite burger joint after giving Meadow the tour and we just finished scarfing down our giant greasy burgers. She’s now sipping a peanut butter fudge milkshake that she conned me into buying and blinking at me innocently as if she isn’t pure chaos right now.

When I picked her up, she was bouncing off the walls with excitement. She asked me a million questions about my time with Meadow and then proceeded to tell me how cute we are together. There were mentions of stadium proposals and a destination wedding. She’s out of control.

“They were, yes.” I sigh. “But the point of this conversation is to manage your expectations.”

She frowns and swirls her straw around. “I thought you said you liked Ms. Carter.”

“I do,” I tell her, because I can’t lie now. “But we decided to be friends. I don’t want you getting your hopes up or trying to meddle to bring us together. We need to have our own relationship, without interference.” I give her a pointed look and she sits back in the red faux leather booth, crossing her arms.

“I thought if I could get you both in a place y’all loved that maybe something would happen,” she says, sounding dejected. Those blasted puppy dog eyes appear, threatening to shred my resolve to pieces.

“I’m happy that you like Ms. Carter and approve of her, but it’s not good for you to get involved like this. She’s your teacher, which makes things even more complicated.”

“Is it against the rules for her to date you since I’m her student?” She sits up straight, eyes wide. I open my mouth to reply but she continues. “I’ll switch electives!” she blurts out. “Then you two can date.”

“Maddie, you’re not going to switch electives. Art is your favorite subject.” She squirms in the booth, looking like she’s at war with herself. “I don’t think there’s a rule against teachers dating parents anyway.” She sighs in relief and I resist the urge to groan. When this girl gets an idea in her head, she doesn’t let it go.

An unexpected pang of grief pokes me like a needle to the chest. Mallory was just like this. She’d hook into an idea and wouldn’t let go until it came to fruition. She used to tell me before every one of my games, from little league to high school to college, that I was going to the NFL. Whenever I started to doubt, she’d flick my ear and tell me NFL players didn’t whine. Little did she know they do, and it’s annoying too. But that very tenacity seems to be an inherited trait. I take a sip of water to help swallow down the lump of emotion in my throat.

“You’re getting old,” Maddie states plainly, making me choke on my water.

“Thank you for that *lovely* observation,” I wheeze out then cough the remaining water into my elbow.

“Well, it’s true. You’re almost *forty*, that’s practically ancient. You need to find a wife soon or else I’m going to be an only child forever. And you’re not allowed to be one of those creeps who dates when he’s like eighty.” She shudders.

“I appreciate your concern,” I say drily. “I’ll be sure to find a wife so you can have a sibling.”

“I’m not asking for much here,” Maddie says with a grin.

“No not at all, just eternal commitment and bringing life into the world.”

“You wouldn’t be the one bringing life anyway, Ms. Carter would be the one having to grow the baby for nine months.”

“Maddie!” I scold her. “We just talked about this. Ms. Carter and I aren’t dating or anywhere near having kids. Please do not go around talking like that.”

Maddie groans like *I’m inconveniencing her*.

“I was joking, Dad.” She takes another sip of her milkshake. “I do think you guys would be really great together, though.”

Me too, Maddie, me too.

“What makes you say that?” I can’t imagine she knows enough about her to make a true judgment call, so I’m curious about her reasoning.

“Just a gut feeling.”

CHAPTER TEN

Meadow Jane Carter

“For the last time: I don’t want to talk about it,” I tell Sophie as we push a grocery cart down the candy aisle of Walmart. I don’t eat any of this sugary dye-filled nonsense, but the other girls do, and we’re preparing for a sleepover tonight. There’s plenty of snacks at my house—which is where we’re staying—already, but they all insisted on getting more. Lottie and Grace are in the ice cream aisle right now, filling their own cart.

“I’m glad that’s the last time you’re going to say that,” Sophie says with a grin. I scowl at her as she throws a bag of sour gummy worms in the cart. “Ben says Sebastian has been glowing all week. And that Maddie told him you went on a tour of the stadium with *just the two of you*. That’s cause for interrogation.”

“There’s nothing to say beyond what you already know,” I grumble and grab a box of sour punch straws for Lottie. I feel contaminated just by touching the package, but I know it’s her favorite.

“I know you’re lying. You can’t go on a private tour with Sebastian Holt and nothing happen.”

“I’m not lying, I’m withholding.” More candy gets thrown into the cart. I’m not sure how they’re going to eat all of this junk, but as long as it leaves my house with them in the morning, I don’t care.

“Haven’t you heard of a lie of omission?”

I sigh as we leave the candy aisle and head toward the chip aisle. “I will tell everyone the simple, unworthy of discussing story when we get back to my house.”

“Yay!” Sophie grins at me and I roll my eyes.

“Takis!” I hear Lottie say from behind, making me look over my shoulder. “We need Takis for sure.” She throws a bag in the cart while Grace trails behind her, pushing their ice cream bar supplies toward us.

“How is this for just four people, three since I’m not eating any?” I ask, eying the mountain of cane sugar and hydrogenated oils in our carts. I can feel the flora in my stomach dying just by being in proximity to all of this. Even though I started restricting myself to help with my migraines, after learning so much about nutrition and health I began to see that even if I didn’t have migraines, I’d still want to eat the way I do. It just makes sense.

“You’ve been away from us too long, MJ,” Lottie says with a grin. “You forget my love of junk food. I’m a certified Gilmore girl when it comes to sleepovers.”

“I haven’t lived on my own *that* long. I think my brain just blocked out all of the candy you ate as a coping mechanism for the horror I experienced watching you eat it.” Lottie laughs at me and throws a bag of Cheetos in my cart.

“Callum finds my love of junk food endearing,” she says as we all start toward the check out.

“Callum finds everything you do endearing,” I say drily. “Plus, the man has a donut addiction. He can’t judge you for your vices when he has his own.”

“What about you, MJ? Do you have any vices?” Sophie asks with a smirk. “Maybe yours has to do with a certain football coach.” Lottie makes an *ooo* noise and Grace raises her eyebrows suggestively.

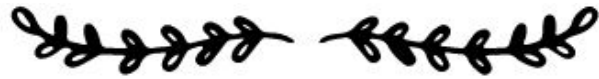
“I’m going to cancel this sleepover if you don’t quit,” I say and all the girls laugh.

“You love us too much to cancel,” Lottie says, throwing an arm around my shoulder and squeezing me into her.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” I reply in a cool tone, but they all know I’m lying.

I do love them, which is harder on me than they probably realize. That whole *better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all* saying is not something I subscribe to. I’d rather not lose the people I love. I lost my best friend—my mom—in high school and it almost made me shut myself off to everyone, even my own family. And then there was the awfulness that was my last real relationship, though it could be argued that when a relationship was as one-sided as that one turned out to be, it’s not a relationship at all.

After those events, it was only through Lottie’s sheer willfulness that I made friends in college. Now here I am, stupidly attached to a group of girls who could up and leave me at any point in time. They already have in a way, all married and living on their own. I imagine that one day we’ll grow apart. The thought is a stone in my stomach.



“We should just watch *Pride and Prejudice*,” Grace says, throwing a piece of popcorn in her mouth.

“You’ve seen it a million times,” Lottie says, shooting her a look. “We need something different.”

“Why didn’t we choose the movie before this?” Sophie asks her valid question as she snuggles up under one of my crocheted blankets.

“Because we never think ahead,” I state, earning a glare from Lottie.

“I thought it would be fun to choose the movie together.”

“Having four very different women settle on one movie is your idea of fun?” Grace asks and I laugh.

“If y’all don’t focus and help we’re going to watch *Legally Blonde*,” Lottie threatens us with her favorite movie. I don’t mind it, but I’ve seen it way too many times over the course of our friendship.

“What about *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*?” Sophie asks, looking down at her phone. “I don’t think we’ve watched that one during movie night before. It’s a romcom, but I think we’d all like it.”

We all agree on it and Lottie presses play. Right as the opening credits begin to appear, my phone buzzes in my lap.

Sebastian: Does this count as art?

His text is paired with an absurd statue of a rooster playing football. I press my lips together hard to suppress a laugh. He must be at the campus of the school the Thrashers are playing tomorrow. The Roosters aren’t the best team, and they don’t have a menacing mascot to help them out either.

The Thrashers mascot is a measly bird, but they have the championship rings to make people overlook that fact.

MJ: Yes.

Sebastian: It's a rooster. Playing football.

MJ: Whoever sculpted it would be offended if you said it wasn't art.

Sebastian: I'm offended that it exists.

I bite my cheek. If I so much as huff in front of these girls they'll demand to know who I'm texting. I narrowly avoided telling them about the tour thanks to the movie choice dilemma. There's no way they'd ignore this.

MJ: Art doesn't have to be beautiful.

Sebastian: What about this? Is this art?

He sends a photo of a dry erase board with a series of plays for tomorrow. My eyes rove over the screen, noting each x and o.

MJ: I don't know if it's art, but it is beautiful. The Roosters aren't going to be able to move on Sunday from the beating they're going to get.

A GIF of someone gasping and fainting appears in our message thread.

Sebastian: Did someone steal your phone or did you actually just compliment me?

I'm about to respond when my phone buzzes again. Grayson is blowing up the siblings group chat.

Grayson: Someone tell Adrian to stop working.

Grayson: *GIF of a man with his face pressed against a computer monitor*

Grayson: He's going to go blind from staring at his laptop for too long.

Levi: I just got off duty, I'm way too tired to deal with this.

Grayson: Well so am I! The man is a machine. He's making me look bad to the other employees.

Levi: He has good work ethic.

Grayson: That's because he stole all mine in the womb. Besides, I enjoy having a life outside of work.

I shake my head at their bickering, glancing around to make sure the girls' eyes are on the TV before responding to Sebastian.

MJ: I wasn't complimenting you, I was complimenting your work. There's a difference.

I press send and then my heart drops. *Oh no.*

Levi: Uh, who are you talking to?

Grayson: WAIT A MINUTE. Was that text supposed to go to a guy? Please say no.

Maverick: What's going on? Why are there so many messages?

Adrian: What's this about a guy and MJ?

I throw my phone down, my heart beating out of my chest. That's enough texting for tonight. My phone starts buzzing like I'm getting a phone call and in my frazzled state I knock it off my lap and to the floor where Lottie is sitting on a pallet of blankets and pillows. She glances down at it, the screen lit up with a photo of Grayson.

"Oh, it's Grayson! He's the best." She smiles and picks up the phone. "Want me to pause the movie?"

"No!" I pause, softening my tone. "No, it's okay. I want to keep watching." Her eyebrows shoot up so far that they disappear behind her curls. I need to get a handle on my emotions. I've never felt this way before, or at least not in a long time.

Lottie pauses the movie and everyone looks at me.

“What’s going on?” Sophie asks, but her tone is less concerned and more mischievous.

“Nothing, just some sibling drama,” I say with a shaky smile. I don’t smile much in general though, so I don’t know why I’m forcing one now. The suspicious looks on all my friends’ faces prove that it was a bad move. *What is wrong with me?*

“You suck at lying,” Grace says and I glare at her. The call ends, but the phone lights up again and Lottie looks down then gasps.

“Sebastian texted you!”

“Did he? How strange.” I try—and fail—to keep my tone aloof.

“Are you two dating? Did you break the man ban? Are you in love? Did he kiss you?” Sophie pelts me with questions. I snatch my phone back from Lottie and clutch it to my chest.

“No to all of those questions.” The bite in my voice makes Sophie’s eyes widen.

“Testy,” Grace says with a smirk. “It’s almost like you have something to hide.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “No, I have nothing to hide. I just don’t appreciate this invasion of privacy.”

“If you aren’t hiding anything then show us your phone,” Lottie says with a too-sweet smile. If I show them the messages they’ll make them into something they’re not, but if I refuse to show them they’ll assume it’s because we’re dating. I pull my phone away from my chest, looking at the latest message from Sebastian as I weigh my options.

Sebastian: Had to walk past the rooster again and couldn’t resist. Think you could turn us into a portrait?

It's a selfie of him next to the helmet-clad rooster. He's smiling this goofy smile and his eyes are squinty because of the flash he used. Something stirs deep within me. It's light and sweet and fluttery. I clench my toes to distract from it. *What is this odd feeling?*

"MJ," Lottie says, her voice soft. "You don't have to show us. We were teasing." I cut my eyes to her, and she gives me a sheepish grin. "*Mostly* teasing. Share when you're ready," she says with a nod, her curls bouncing with the motion.

I don't say anything and she starts the movie back up. After a few minutes, I sigh.

"We're friends," I say, my voice barely louder than the TV. "I told him we could be friends."

Sophie's eyes get big and she opens her mouth, but Grace slaps a hand over it before she can say anything.

"That's nice, MJ," Grace says and then moves her hand.

"Why is everyone always covering my mouth?" Sophie grouches.

"Because you tend to say too much," Grace says.

"More people should say what they're thinking," Sophie argues.

"If I said what I was thinking all the time, I couldn't be a teacher," I say and Grace, who is also a teacher, laughs.

"Ditto."

We settle back in and I find myself getting swept up in the moment when the guy stares at the girl in her beautiful dress. The fluttery feeling returns and even clenching my toes doesn't make it go away. Movies like this always poke at my black hole of a heart, trying to force some light into it. But I'm always able to reason my way out of the dumb, gooey nonsense.

Tonight, however, the feeling lasts longer than I'd like to admit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sebastian Holt

“You’re so strong.” Karina purrs from beside me as I heave a box full of pottery off the truck. I signed up for this arts and crafts fair to spend more time around Meadow, but somehow I’ve seen her *less* instead of more.

As the head of the art department, she’s organizing the whole event. She delegated transporting her booth’s materials to me. I was more than happy to help until she disappeared to make sure the other booths were in order, leaving me with the newly divorced PTA mom, Karina.

I’ve been ignoring Karina’s blatant advances since the day we met—when she was *still married*, by the way. I pride myself on having good manners, but I’m close to blowing up on this woman. If the roles were reversed, she’d call the cops on me for harassment.

I gingerly set the box down beside the booth and dust off my hands. Meadow had all of her classes make pottery to sell during the event. We’re both going to man the booth once the fair starts, a gesture of goodwill on Meadow’s part that is not lost on me. But for now, she has to finish making sure everyone is in order.

“Since we finished early, why don’t we go grab a drink from the winery booth?” Karina asks, fluttering her lashes at me. Yes, this event has a winery booth. All the proceeds of every booth go to charity, so I can’t complain too much, but it seems inappropriate to serve alcohol at a school fair.

“I’m helping Ms. Carter with this booth, so I shouldn’t leave,” I say, beyond grateful for the excuse. Karina purses her lips hard in distaste.

“Yes, I forgot that you volunteered to work so closely with her. It’s rather kind of you, considering her department is ... underdeveloped.”

I frown at her word choice. She’s making it sound like Meadow is the cause of the state of the department rather than the school’s choice of funding combined with the parents’ lack of help.

“Well, Maddie loves her class with Ms. Carter, so I thought it deserved my time more than any other department.”

I’m not sure how it’s possible, but Karina manages to look even more displeased. Thankfully, Meadow is heading our way, which means Karina will disappear in no time. My girl doesn’t mince words and Karina’s passive-aggressive way of speaking can’t hold a candle to Meadow’s blunt force.

If Karina keeps talking, I wouldn’t be able to tell you what she said because Meadow has taken me captive with her looks. Her gorgeous, tan legs are on display because of the sage green romper she’s wearing. Her hair is twisted up off her neck, and I have a distinct urge to run my lips over the exposed skin.

“You’re just in time,” I say to her when she stops at the booth. “We got everything off the truck and I think I managed to not break anything.”

She tucks a stray piece of dark hair behind her ear, her hemp bracelets sliding down her arm with the movement. “I was looking forward to yelling at you for breaking something. Now my fun is ruined,” she jokes, the corners of her mouth raising just barely to reveal the humor behind her words.

“If you want, I can break something later. Wouldn’t want you to leave bored.”

“I’ll consider your offer.”

Karina lets out an indignant huff. “I’ll be going now since you two seem to have things handled.”

“We do,” Meadow replies and I grin. Karina spins around and stomps away, likely off to spread rumors about us.

“I should be mad at you for sticking me with her,” I say as Meadow starts to unload the boxes. She unwraps a bowl that has swirls of brown and teal in it, setting it on the stand.

“I didn’t tell Karina to help you, she must have decided you needed assistance.”

“No, she decided to verbally accost me and try to get me to drink with her. I think she might have drugged me if I’d said yes.” Meadow gives me a look that tells me she thinks I’m dramatic. “I’m serious! The woman is a vulture.”

“She’s the size of a toothpick and likely not evil enough to drug you, so I think you’re safe.”

“I’m only safe because you showed up. She’s scared of you.” I start to help her unpack the pottery pieces as well, looking at the bottom of each one to see if Maddie’s name is on any of them.

“She’s not scared of me, she dislikes me.”

“She’s intimidated by you,” I correct her and she shakes her head. We’re making quick work of unpacking, which is good because the fair is scheduled to start soon.

“Focus on the display, drama king.”

“I resent that sentiment.”

She shrugs like she couldn’t care less and starts arranging pieces artfully on the display. It’s clear she has an eye for these things because the arrangement looks professional even though all of the pieces were made by middle schoolers.

Soon enough, the booth is finished and we’re ringing customers up left and right. Many of them are parents or grandparents buying their own student’s work, but there are some who just buy because they like the pieces.

“Baby sis!” A guy’s voice shouts over the hustle and bustle of the fair and Meadow groans from beside me. I follow her line of sight to find two men, almost identical in looks, walking toward us. They both have dark hair and light eyes with similar builds. But where one guy has a relaxed hairstyle and clothing, the other has shorter hair and is wearing business clothes.

“I thought you guys couldn’t make it,” Meadow says, her voice sounding strained.

“I convinced Adrian to—” The relaxed-looking guy’s mouth drops, cutting off his sentence when he sees me. “*Sebastian Holt*,” he whispers. The guy next to him—I’m assuming his twin brother—is much more reserved, but even he looks shocked.

“Sebastian, these are my brothers, Adrian,” she gestures to the uptight guy, “and Grayson,” she motions to the wide-eyed brother. “They’re fans,”

she explains with a grimace.

“It’s always nice to meet fans,” I say with a smile. “Even better when they’re related to Meadow.” Adrian’s brows scrunch together and he glances between Meadow and me, looking as if he’s analyzing us. So they don’t know Meadow and I are friends.

“I can’t believe you’re here! Are you a celebrity guest or something?” Grayson asks, confirming that they don’t know about our relationship.

“No, my daughter Maddie is one of Meadow’s students, so I volunteered to help.”

Adrian keeps eying me like I’m a suspect of some kind. I’m reminded of how dangerous Bennett said they were when he was telling me about Meadow. I don’t feel threatened per say, but watched for sure.

“A legend and a man of the people,” Grayson declares and I chuckle. I’m used to being described this way, but it’s still strange at times.

“So, what are you guys doing here?” Meadow asks before I can respond to Grayson’s compliment.

“Grayson wouldn’t leave me alone. I told him we could come if he stopped talking while I finished my email.”

“Longest fifteen minutes of my *life*,” Grayson says and Meadow laughs. My eyes are drawn back to her, and I lose my breath seeing her smile again. The look of her so bright and relaxed has me smiling like a fool in no time.

“Have you been by Mav’s booth yet?” Meadow asks. I tear my eyes away from her to look back at the twins. Now Grayson is wearing the same calculating look as Adrian. Is my admiration of Meadow that obvious? Or are they suspicious of me for some other reason?

“Not yet, but I’m going to buy him out. I’m in desperate need of some chocolate chip cookies. Do you want some of those pecan bars you love?”

Grayson asks her and she shakes her head.

“No, I already asked him to set some aside for me. Thanks though.”

“Who’s Mav?” I ask.

“One of our other brothers, Maverick. He owns a bakery and has a booth here. The last brother is a slacker who couldn’t make it tonight.”

“Levi had to work like we should be doing,” Adrian states.

“There’s more to life than work,” Grayson says with a huff. “We should get going before Adrian combusts on account of having to be around people for too long.”

Meadow shakes her head, but there’s a small smile tugging at her lips. It’s clear she loves them. “Tell Mav I’ll be by later when I get a chance,” she says.

Grayson wraps her up in a giant hug that she barely reciprocates and then shakes my hand vigorously. “It’s an honor to have met you, Coach Bash.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I say with a smile.

“Oh!” he exclaims, rushing over to the pottery display. “I need to buy something.”

“Grayson, you don’t need any of this. Just give a donation so we don’t have to carry a bunch of stuff to the car,” Adrian tells him, procuring a wad of cash from his wallet that he hands to Meadow. She thanks him and puts the money in a lockbox.

“You don’t know what I need.” Grayson starts stacking bowls and mugs up, effectively clearing half the display. “I think that’s plenty.”

“You’re doing this to make a point, aren’t you?” Meadow asks and Grayson shoots her a mischievous grin.

“No one will ever know.” He winks.

“Yes, they will, because I can hear your conversation.” Adrian sounds like a man at his wit’s end. Grayson swipes his debit card and then shoulders two bags filled with pottery.

“Adrian if you don’t quit being so grouchy I’m going to put you at the bottom of the pyramid again this week,” Grayson says as they start to walk away.

“I don’t care about your pyramid, I care about getting out of here fast.” Adrian’s voice borders on a growl. After they disappear into the crowd, Meadow turns to me.

“He creates a pyramid each week, at the top is the favorite sibling,” she explains before I even have to ask.

“He’s a character,” I say and she laughs.

“He’s basically the human equivalent of a golden retriever. Adrian is the opposite if you couldn’t tell. They’re twins, but their similarities end at their looks.”

“I noticed.” She adjusts the booth, having to spread out the merchandise after Grayson’s shopping spree. “So were you planning on introducing me to Maverick, or were you going to pretend he wasn’t here?”

“I hadn’t decided yet,” she answers. “My brothers aren’t used to meeting men in my life.” Her eyes flick up to my face and then back down to the booth. “I’m not sure how they’ll interpret our ... friendship.”

“Judging by the looks I was getting, they don’t think we’re friends.”

“You used my first name.” She shoots me a look. “No one does that.”

“That can’t be the only reason they think there’s something between us, can it?”

She inches a planter to the left and then to the right again, not answering me. “There might have been an incident of sorts and they’re all so absurdly

observant that they'll put two and two together."

"What incident?" I ask, making a face. She bites her lip and it occurs to me that she's nervous. Have I ever seen her nervous?

"I accidentally sent a text to my siblings' group chat that was supposed to go to you."

I grin so big my cheeks hurt. "This is officially the best day of my life. Meadow Jane Carter sent a flirty text to her brothers by accident. This moment will live on forever in my memory."

Meadow scowls at me, unamused. "It was *not* flirty."

"Then why would they be suspicious?" I lower my voice, leaning close to her ear. A shiver courses through her and I smirk.

She hesitates, at a loss.

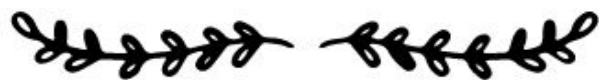
"You don't have an answer. Admit it, you were flirting with me," I say, keeping my voice low.

She takes a step back. "I was not. You have the text messages, you know that I wasn't. It was ... harmless banter. That's all. *Friendly* banter."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, beautiful." She shoves my shoulder and I laugh.

"I stand by my no dating statement. This doesn't change that."

"I know, but it does make it more interesting."



"You did it!" I cheer for Maddie and wrap her up in a hug. She giggles and hugs me tight in return.

"I can't believe I got first place," she says when I let her go. Maddie won first place for the photograph she entered into the art competition.

“You deserve it, Maddie,” I tell her truthfully. She may be my pride and joy, but I truly believe she created something beautiful and worthy of winning. The blue ribbon hanging off the edge of her frame is proof of that.

“Ms. Carter!” Maddie squeals and pushes me out of the way to get to Meadow. She smiles at Maddie and my heart constricts. Seeing the woman I’m falling for interact with my daughter makes it all the more difficult to be *just friends*.

Maddie throws her arms around Meadow, who looks thoroughly caught off guard by the sudden action, but softly returns the hug.

“Thank you for teaching me. I couldn’t have done this without you,” Maddie tells her.

“I taught you the basics, but you turned it into a craft of your own. Your use of lighting and contrast here is stunning, Maddie. I’m so proud of you.” Meadow pats Maddie’s curls with a sense of familiarity that makes me want to buy a ring and forget all this friendship nonsense. If I didn’t think Meadow would run away at the mere mention of it, I would.

Maddie steps out of the hug and her attention is quickly snatched from us.

“Gigi is over there! I want to show her my plaque,” she says and grabs the plaque out of the bag sitting by her photograph.

“Okay, we’re leaving soon though so don’t–” She runs off before I can finish talking, making me shake my head.

“She’s so happy,” Meadow says and I smile at her.

“She’s been glued to that camera ever since the photography unit. I’m happy her efforts were rewarded.”

“I don’t have control over the judging, but if she didn’t win I had plans on making the judges recant their decision.”

I laugh at how calm she sounds, like it's perfectly normal to threaten the judges of a middle school art competition. "Good to know you're on her side."

"She's a sweet girl. It makes it hard not to want to protect her."

I nod in agreement. "She likes you a lot, too."

"I can't imagine why, but I'm glad."

I frown at her, preparing to list off the reasons why she's amazing, but a parent comes up complaining about where their kid placed in the competition. She mouths *sorry* to me and guides them out of the gallery tent before they can make too big of a scene.

Meadow puts on this air of confidence, but her comment tonight has me wondering if maybe there's something she's hiding underneath the surface. I can only hope she'll allow me to see past the image she puts on so I can dispel those insecurities.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Meadow Jane Carter

I stare down at the text on my phone, my throat constricting.

Sebastian: Can you keep an eye on Maddie today? It's her birthday, which is a hard day for all of us. She insisted on going to school and that she was fine, but I'm not sure.

Maddie's mom died giving birth to her, so it makes sense that her birthday would bring about mixed emotions. Sebastian sent the text this morning and I responded saying that I would, but I didn't say much more. Guilt weighed on me all morning for not asking him if *he* was going to be okay today. I know grief, I deal with it every day, so I know he's likely to be hurting.

MJ: How are you doing?

I press send on my message before I can overthink it anymore. *We're friends.* I've discussed my grief with Sophie before, so it's not like friends don't talk about this stuff. It just feels like a vulnerable part of his life to ask about. There's also the fear creeping its way up my throat that says if I talk about *his* grief he'll want to talk about *mine*.

Sebastian: I'm making it. Probably should have taken off work today. Feel pretty useless.

I bite my lip and look at the time. My next period starts soon—Maddie's class. I can't be on my phone much longer.

MJ: You should do what's best for you today, don't worry about being useful. Think about what you'd do to take care of Maddie and do that for yourself.

Sebastian: So I should take myself to the mall and then out for ice cream?

I smile and shake my head. Even hurting, he's always trying to make light of things. The bell rings, so I quickly type out my response.

MJ: You know what I meant. Take care of yourself.

I lock my phone and slip it into my pocket as students start filing in. Maddie walks in with her friends, but while they're babbling nonstop, she's as quiet as a mouse. Her blue eyes are dim and it looks like she's one bad thing away from breaking down.

"Okay everyone, get your sketchbooks from the back of the room and continue working on your still-life drawings." I pause, my eyes catching on a cup of paintbrushes sitting on the counter nearby. "Maddie, could you come help me wash these paintbrushes outside?"

She blinks up at me from her desk. Slowly, she nods and stands up. I snag the cup of brushes and she follows me out. I pop my head into the neighboring classroom and ask the teacher there to keep an eye on my class. Once she agrees, I lead Maddie in silence down the hall and into the courtyard.

"Ms. Carter, the brushes don't really need to be washed," Maddie says as I walk over to the nearby water spigot.

“I know. I thought you might need to talk.”

She fiddles with the hem of her uniform cardigan and I turn the water on to clean the brushes and give her some time to think.

It’s early October and there are marigolds and mums in clusters throughout the courtyard. The air always smells sweet and earthy here, unlike the disinfectant smell of the buildings. It’s a calming space and I’m hoping that will help Maddie open up if she wants to.

“I’m not sad,” Maddie finally speaks, drawing my eyes back to her. She continues to stand but keeps her eyes on the cobblestones beneath us.

“Okay,” I say because I know better than to push her for more or try to fill in the blanks.

“I should be sad, right? She was my mom.” She meets my eyes now, hers pained.

“There’s no *should* in feelings, Maddie. No one can tell you how to feel.” I run the brushes under the water.

“Dad is a wreck,” she says. I have to grip the brushes in my hand to curb the visceral reaction that courses through me hearing that. “He says he’s fine, but his eyes were puffy this morning and his smile was weak.”

I hate hearing that. Why do I hate that so much? Have I ever cared like this before?

She shakes out her hands and starts to pace. Ten steps away, ten steps back. Repeat. I keep washing the brushes, swirling the hairs against my palm and watching the colors flow.

“I didn’t know her,” she bites out. “All I know is what Dad and Gram have told me. And photographs. How can I be sad about someone I didn’t know? I’m sad I don’t have a mom sometimes, but that’s different.”

“It is different, but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong of you.”

Ten more steps away, but this time she pauses, her back to me.

“I’m angry,” she says in a quiet voice. I nod even though she can’t see me, feeling like we’re getting closer to what’s really going on. “It’s my birthday, everyone used to tell me happy birthday until the documentary came out. Now they just stare.” Her fists clench by her side. “I’m angry at myself for being upset about not getting a normal birthday when she doesn’t get to live.” She turns around and her cheeks are damp and red.

I drop the brushes and cross the ten paces to get to her, drawing her into a hug. Her arms wrap around me tight, her fingers digging into my skin through my thin sweater. “It’s okay,” I tell her and rub her back. “You’re allowed to be upset, Maddie.”

“I just—” She sniffles. “I just want to hit something. Or—or break something. Anything to get this feeling out.”

I squeeze her tight and then pull back to look at her. Watery blue eyes stare back at me, mascara trailing down her face. “I have an idea. Can you make it through the rest of the school day?” She takes a shuddery breath in and bobs her head. “After school, you can come home with me. We’re going to help you release some of this pent-up emotion. Does that sound good to you?”

She nods and swipes at her face with the sleeve of her cardigan. “That sounds good. Can you call my dad and ask him? I don’t want to upset him, and he’ll rush here if he hears me like this.”

“I can do that. Why don’t you go clean up in the bathroom and take some time before coming back to class?”

“That’s probably a good idea. I think I accidentally bought regular mascara instead of waterproof.” She laughs, but it’s half-hearted. “Thanks, Ms. Carter.”

“MJ,” I correct her with a gentle smile. “When it’s just us, you can call me MJ.”

She returns my smile and nods, her eyes a little brighter. After one more hug, she leaves the courtyard and I sigh as I turn off the water and gather the brushes. I’m getting way too tangled up with the Holt family. Maddie has quickly jumped onto my *people I care about* list. The list is rather short and it’s rare for anyone to be added to it. I thought my family and few friends took up all the space I had in my heart, but Maddie came in and staked her claim over a part I thought was lost to grief and betrayal.

And Sebastian ... I pull out my phone and stare at the black screen. Sebastian wants more than I can give. A true relationship isn’t something I can have. That was made clear the day my now ex-boyfriend, Paul, broke up with me.

In my sophomore year of college, I’m mourning my mother as it gets close to the anniversary of her death, and he sits me down for a talk. He says he’s sorry but my emotions are *too much* for him right now. We’ve been together for almost two years now and he’s *exhausted*. Tired of helping me with my grief. I say I’m in love with him and he says my feelings are too strong, too big. Then he says he found someone else who makes him happy. I deduced that sharing all of me must have made him *unhappy*.

That was the day I shut down. I’ve never been a talkative person, but that day changed everything for me. The man I loved thought the real me was too much. So it became safer to hide my emotions in art, and that’s what I’ve done. And what I’m going to continue to do. I won’t be hurt that way again.

My phone lights up when my thumb shifts onto the screen and I'm reminded of what I'm out here to do. I find Sebastian's contact and press call. He answers after one ring.

"Meadow?" He sounds breathless and worried. "Is Maddie okay?"

"She's okay, just a little shook up. I was wondering if you'd be okay with me taking her to my house after school?"

"Oh," he says, sounding surprised. "Of course. If Maddie wants to do that, it's fine by me. I can come to get her after I get off work around 5:30?"

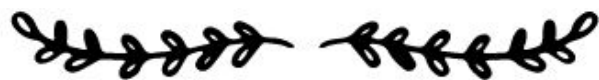
"That works for me. I'll text you my address." My stomach flips at the thought of Sebastian knowing where I live. *Friends*, I remind my nerves, *we're friends*.

"Okay." He pauses, his voice gravelly when he speaks again. "Thank you. I—" He clears his throat. "Just, thank you."

"You're welcome." I don't know what else to say that I won't regret later. I'm stepping over so many boundaries, ones that I created myself, and I can't make it any worse by getting closer to Sebastian.

We say stilted goodbyes. My hand shakes as I slip my phone back into the pocket of my overalls.

I'm on a tightrope here. One wrong step and I'm tumbling to the ground, ending up broken and empty just like I was all those years ago.



"Wow, you have a lot of plants." I laugh at Maddie's awestruck look when she walks through my living room. My dad says I inherited my mom's green thumb and love of plants. I think I just learned to love it from spending so much time in the garden with her when I was younger. That

love transferred into my home. Every space with access to a window has a plant. Or rather, multiple plants.

“I guess I do, yeah.” I throw my bag on my couch and look at Maddie. “You’re going to need to borrow some of my clothes or your school uniform will get ruined.”

She eyes me, the suspicion in her gaze almost bringing me to laughter again. She and Sebastian both make me smile more than most people, I’ve come to find out. It’s unsettling if I think about it for too long.

“Okay, so what are we doing?” She follows me to my bedroom. I don’t let many people into my personal space, so it’s strange to have a kid walking around. But at the same time, it doesn’t feel wrong, just different.

She looks around my room and I try to imagine what she sees. My bed is made the way my dad taught me—crisp corners and tucked-in sheets. But there are layers of crochet blankets and pillows that soften the look of it. Since I have my own studio now, there’s less artwork in here, but it’s still covered in finished and unfinished pieces. It’s full, but not cluttered.

“We’re going to throw paint.” I pull a t-shirt out of my dresser drawer and then a pair of soft shorts. “Here, you can wear these.”

“*Throw* paint?”

“I’ll show you when you’re dressed,” I say with a smile.

She rushes to get dressed in the bathroom then comes out with a tinge of excitement in her demeanor. I can tell she’s still emotionally raw, but hopefully, this will help her both process some of the emotion and have fun.

While she was getting dressed, I set up an easel with my largest blank canvas in my small backyard. Then I grabbed some cans of paint I had stored away as well as some glitters that I think Maddie would enjoy using. Plus a Bluetooth speaker to play her favorite songs.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Her eyes bounce to the open cans of paint then to the canvas and back to me.

“Put on a song you like first,” I say and hand her my phone. She puts on some pop song I don’t recognize and I walk over to the cans of paint, pushing my sweater sleeves up my arms.

“Wait, you’re not going to change?”

“Nope.” I plunge my hand into a can of royal blue paint and she gasps. Then I fling my hand at the canvas as hard as I can, mimicking the baseball pitch my brothers taught me growing up. Blue paint splatters the canvas, surrounding grass, and my clothes. I rarely ever wear something I wouldn’t get paint on, so I don’t even flinch at the possibility of stains.

“That was *awesome*.”

I laugh and gesture for her to try it. She plunges her hand into crimson paint, takes a deep breath, and flings it toward the easel. Red splashes onto the canvas and mixes with some of the blue.

“You said you were angry, right?” I ask and she gives me a firm nod. “Try this, then.” I dip my opposite hand into the yellow paint. I fill my lungs with air and let it all out in a yell as I throw the paint. Do I look and sound ridiculous? Probably, but I have a feeling this is what she needs.

Maddie’s eyes are wide for a moment, but then they narrow in determination and she plunges her opposite hand into the blue I used first. Her chest rises as she inhales and raises her dripping arm. When she slings her arm forward, she lets out a noise resembling a war cry that makes me grin. Thankfully, my neighbors are all gone right now, or else they’d be alarmed. This girl has some lungs.

We keep going, washing off our arms with cold hose water in between colors and squealing when the water splashes onto our bare feet. I can’t

remember the last time I let go like this. Our yells turn into laughter faster than I anticipated. Maddie is dancing around my backyard with paint dripping off her fingertips. Her eyes are wet, but her smile is big.

“You’re a great dancer,” I tell her over the music as I use my hands to mix certain areas on the canvas. When we’re done, this will fit in at any gallery. If Maddie doesn’t want it, I’ll keep it. The memories of laughing with her make it all the more beautiful. *Ugh, since when did I become so sentimental?*

“Thanks.” Her smile dims. “That’s actually another reason I was upset today. I have a solo this weekend and my dad can’t come to my dance competition. Neither can my gram. So I have to ride with my friend and her mom.”

Caution tape is all over this situation. Bright yellow caution tape ... that I take giant scissors to and cut to pieces because I have no self-preservation when it comes to this little girl.

“I’ll take you,” I say and her eyes get big. “If you want,” I add.

She squeals so loud it nearly bursts my eardrums and wraps me in a paint-coated hug. Good thing I don’t care about getting paint on my clothes.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She bounces, forcing me to bounce with her. “You’re the best, MJ!”

“It’s not a big deal,” I say, more to myself than her. It’s just a dance competition for a student. That’s all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sebastian Holt

My heart pounds in my chest as I step onto Meadow's small porch. I have no idea what I'm going to find behind this door. Hopefully, Meadow was able to help Maddie through some things without getting overwhelmed. She volunteered to take Maddie today, but maybe she didn't understand what she was getting into. This could break our already fragile friendship.

My knuckles rap against the door as I look around. There are a lot of plants out here. I don't know anything about plant life, I have a gardener that keeps up our landscaping at the house. So I don't know what most of these plants are, only that there are a lot of them and they all look healthier than anything I've ever tried to take care of. One time I got a cactus to teach Maddie how to care for something and we killed it. *A cactus.*

The door swings open to reveal Meadow and all I can do is stand there and gape. Her black hair is down, the waves almost reaching her waist. Droplets of water fall from the strands to her bare feet. She's wearing pajamas with a floral print that shows just how well the plants here on the porch suit her. Since she's in shorts, her legs are on display and I spot a swatch of paint on her thigh that looks half-scrubbed. My neck gets hot.

Seeing her in her pajamas with wet hair is too much. Why does she have to be so tantalizingly beautiful?

“Sebastian?” I blink a few times and meet her eyes, which are a warm chocolate brown today.

I clear my throat. “Sorry, long day,” I say, my voice rougher than intended, and she gives a sympathetic nod. She’s looking at me different and it does nothing to stem the unfurling desire to pull her to me and kiss her. I’d like to blame all of this on the raw emotions that have been beating me with a stick today, but the truth is that the woman is just so gorgeous it should be illegal for her to simply stand on her front porch.

“Come inside, Maddie is on the couch.” I step in, the smell of lavender and eucalyptus washing over me. The tight muscles in my neck release a little at the calming scent. Even though I’ve never been here, something about this place feels peaceful.

I follow behind Meadow as she leads me into her living room, taking note of her home along the way. There are plants everywhere there’s light, and different art pieces hanging on the walls. Most of them are nature paintings. I’ve never seen Meadow’s art, so I don’t know her style or if any of these are hers. They are beautiful, though. I’d classify these as art, that’s for sure.

“Hey, Dad!” Maddie chirps from where she’s sitting on the couch, eating something from a bowl. I don’t know what I expected to see when I came in here, but it certainly wasn’t Maddie with wet hair, eating while cuddled up on Meadow’s couch like she’s lived here her whole life.

“How are you doing?” I ask her and she cranes her neck to look up at me. When she smiles, it looks real, albeit on the tired side.

“I’m doing a lot better! MJ and I painted and then she made me dinner while I got a shower.”

“That’s why our hair is wet,” Meadow explains from beside me. “Paint got in it so I thought it would be good to go ahead and wash it out fast.”

“That’s good,” I say with a tired smile. I’m not sure how to process all of this. Maddie looks at home watching a show about wedding dresses under a quilt that looks handmade. I’ve been worried about her, but she seems fine—no, great, actually.

“Have you eaten?” Meadow asks and I shake my head. “Come on, there’s plenty of food left.”

I should turn her down. She’s already done so much. But after the day I’ve had, I’ll take the unusual kindness. A strange mixture of garlic and sugar scents the air in her kitchen. When she opens the oven and reveals a pan of brownies, the sweet scent makes sense.

“You didn’t have to do all of this,” I tell her as she puts rice in a bowl and then some sort of chicken stir fry mixture on top. She passes the bowl and a fork to me.

“I know, I wanted to help Maddie.”

Is it wrong that I wish she helped Maddie because of our friendship *and* because she loves her?

“Well, thank you.” I take a bite of the food and she leans against the cabinets across from me.

It feels too domestic, standing in the kitchen. Her in her pajamas and me eating the—delicious—food she made. When you add in the fact that Maddie is in the other room... I feel like we’re playing house. It makes my chest hurt. All day I wished I still had my sister and Maddie had her mom. Being here with Meadow is like coming home to the smell of apple pie, only to

get into the kitchen and find it's really a candle burning. It's just a shadow of the real thing I want with her.

"You didn't take my advice," she says and I look up from my bowl.

"What?" I ask, too tired to remember what she's talking about.

"You were supposed to take care of yourself." Her voice is softer than usual, a tone I thought she reserved only for Maddie. I set my bowl down on the counter and rub my face with my hands a few times.

"Will you think I'm stupid if I say I don't know how to?" Her lip quirks up at the corner and she shakes her head.

"No, because you're acting like my brothers do about things like this. I usually have to take care of them." *Great*, now I've been placed in a category with her brothers. I think that's worse than being just a friend. I shouldn't be thinking about our romantic potential right now, but I'm too tired to fight off the intrusive thoughts.

"My mom died while I was in high school," she says, surprising me with the sudden vulnerability. "She had cancer."

"That sucks," I say, because anything else wouldn't be enough anyway.

"Yeah," she whispers, her eyes cast downward. "So I know that days like this are hard. If you need someone to help, I'm here."

She's offering to take care of me, I realize, my heart stuttering in my chest. Maybe she likes me more than I thought.

"You've already done a lot for us," I say and then smirk, trying to lighten the mood. "Unless you want to offer to cuddle..." I trail off and she rolls her eyes.

"You ruin everything. This is why I'm not nice to you."

I laugh and I can tell she's holding back a smile. Meadow sharing about her mom is a big deal, but I've realized over my time spent with her if I

focus on it, she'll pull away again.

The oven timer goes off, so she takes the brownies out and sets them on the stove. If they taste half as good as they smell, I'll have to eat the whole pan.

She pulls down small plates to place the brownies on and warmth courses through me. She's doesn't seem to mind that Maddie and I spend a little more time here. A sprout of hope springs up within me.

"So, I was talking to Maddie and she mentioned her dance competition," Meadow says as she cuts the brownies. I make a happy note in my brain that she's not the type of person who lets them cool first. Brownies should burn the roof of your mouth on the first bite, or else you're not really enjoying them.

"Yeah." I sigh and rake a hand through my hair. "I hate that I can't make it. The fall season is always hard on her."

"If you're okay with it, I offered to take her."

I stare in shock at her back.

"You want to take Maddie to her dance competition?" I repeat, sure that I heard wrong. This can't be the same woman who's been trying to keep me at arm's length—*or further*—since we met.

"Yes," she answers before turning around and handing me a steaming brownie. "She said she has a solo and seemed upset about not having anyone there of her own."

"I don't want you to feel obligated to do this because of our situation."

"I don't do anything I don't want to do."

I chuckle at her directness. This is the Meadow I know. Looking down at the plate in my hand, it occurs to me that based on her words, she wouldn't feed me and let me stay here if she didn't want to. "Okay, then I would be

extremely grateful if you did go. I know Maddie will be over the moon. I'll send you the email with all of the information and let her instructor know you'll be taking her."

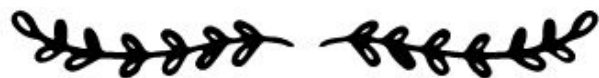
"Good. Now come on, let's go into the living room before Maddie gets any ideas about us in here."

I raise an eyebrow. "What kind of ideas?"

A smirk plays on her lips as she brushes past me, her hair skimming my arm. She doesn't answer.

"Evil woman," I grumble from behind her and hear a breath of laughter. She hands Maddie a brownie then sits down next to her on the couch. Maddie starts filling her in on the show in between bites. I feel as though I'm looking into what my future could be. Flirting with Meadow, talking football, loving Maddie as a team instead of by myself.

It's what I want more than anything in the world. I've gone without it for so long though, that even this glimpse of it feels too good to be true.



"Sebastian whatever-your-middle-name-is Holt! Get over here and tell me everything about you and MJ," Sophie yells from her food truck window as Bennett and I walk up. Ben invited me to lunch, saying that Sophie's truck parked near campus today. Her food is some of my favorite in the city, so I said yes, but now I'm regretting it. There's no one else here now that the lunch rush is over, so that frees Sophie up to interrogate.

"Why don't you talk to Meadow?" I ask and she raises her eyebrow.

"Why don't you tell me why you call her *Meadow*?" she counters.

Bennett chuckles from beside me and I send him a dark look I think Meadow would be proud of.

“It’s her name. Can I get some chicken tenders and jalapeno popper fries, please?”

“Not until you tell me something. MJ won’t say a thing,” she pouts.

“If she doesn’t want you to know, I don’t want to betray her trust by telling you.”

She narrows her eyes, hands on her hips. “I respect that and hate it all at once.”

“Does that mean I get chicken tenders now?”

“Yes,” she huffs. “I’m glad you’re not a jerk because MJ deserves the best, but it’s also frustrating when I’m trying to be mad at you.”

“Thank you,” I say with a grin. She rolls her eyes, but she smiles back at me and then takes Ben’s order.

“You’ve got it bad, don’t you?” Bennett asks while we wait on our food. I run a hand over my mouth and avoid answering him. “Oh man,” he groans.

“What? It’s not a big deal, we’re moving slow.”

“She’s Sophie’s best friend. We’re either going to be brothers or it’s going to get awkward real fast.”

“I get that, I really do, but she’s—”

He cuts me off. “If you say she’s *worth the risk* I swear I’ll tell the next player that comes into my office about her and your next practice will look like a beauty parlor with all the gossip.” Laughter bursts out of me, both at his threat and because I was going to say just that.

“You thought my judgement was sound when you needed advice about Sophie,” I point out. “Why are you worried now?”

“Being in love might cloud your judgement.”

“I’m not in love.” *Yet*. I feel as though I’m on the edge of a precipice, just waiting for a nudge from Meadow to give me permission to fall headfirst.

“Just be careful, okay? None of us know much about MJ’s past, but Sophie seems to believe a lot has happened to her. As much as I say the girls are like sisters, it’s not just Sophie that cares about MJ. I do too.”

“So do I,” I grit out, a little frustrated that he seems to be forgetting that.

He sighs, looking apologetic. “I’m sorry, Bash. You’re a good guy and I should trust you more. It’s just me being overprotective.”

“I’m glad Meadow has people like you and Sophie on her side. I’m just trying to become one of those people too.”

“I hope you do, man. I really do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Meadow Jane Carter

“*Mad Dog’s Crew*,” I read Grayson’s shirt aloud, letting out an incredulous laugh. He puffs his chest up and gives a firm nod.

“We’re your posse,” he tells Maddie, who has just been handed a shirt that says *Madeline ‘Mad Dog’ Holt*. “Anyone who messes with you, messes with us.”

When I called my brothers to ask if they’d come support Maddie this weekend, Grayson was so excited he demanded to know if Maddie had a stage name. She did not, so he came up with one. *Mad Dog*, apparently, was his choice. He also created t-shirts for everyone.

“She’s a dancer, not a fighter,” I say and Grayson gives me a look.

“She’s both and now everyone will know it. What do you think, Maddie?”

Maddie is a heart eyes emoji come to life staring up at my four brothers. Levi and Maverick look slightly uncomfortable but manage to smile at her. Adrian is full on scowling and staring past us. The fact that he put the t-shirt on at all is a miracle. Grayson’s ice blue eyes are hopeful as we all await Maddie’s verdict.

“I love it! Thank you,” she squeals and throws her arms around Grayson. He grins and hugs her back. She goes down the line of my brothers, hugging each one. Adrian’s scowl softens when she gets to him and he pats her back softly.

“Okay, we need to get you to the dressing room,” I tell her. “Your *crew* will be watching with me when you take the stage.”

“Okay!” Maddie pulls her shirt on over her dance company one, pushing her curls out of her face after. The convention center where the competition is being held is filled to the brim with people. They swarm around us, making me grateful for my large, muscular brothers who circle Maddie and me. People give them a wide berth along with a few stares. It’s not going to be fun to leave their protection, but they can’t come behind the scenes with us.

“We’re going to test out all the seats in the auditorium to make sure we get the best ones,” Grayson says.

“Really?” Levi asks with raised brows. “I don’t know if that’s necessary.”

“You know *nothing* about the world of dance.”

“Neither do you,” Levi retorts and Grayson glares at him.

“Come on,” I whisper to Maddie and she giggles before walking with me away from my brothers. I’ll have to hope that they don’t cause too much of a scene.

“Thanks for inviting your brothers, MJ. I’ve never had this many people at one of my competitions. All of the other girls are going to be so jealous.”

It would be so much easier to protect my heart if she’d stop throwing emotional daggers at it. Her words make me want to do irrational things like promise to be at every single competition and invite everyone I know to come and wear these stupid t-shirts (*yes, I’m wearing one too*).

I'm saved from having to come up with a response to her heart-wrenching admission because we've arrived at her dance company's dressing room. I open the door to the smell of hairspray and the high-pitched squawking of preteen girls. Reaching into my purse, my fingertips brush the glass rollerball containing a calming oil blend. I take it out and rub it behind my ears and on my wrists. Something tells me I'm going to need it.

"Maddie, there you are!" A woman wearing a Sweet Tea Dance Company shirt power walks up to us. "You need to get your hair and makeup done fast. We're going to line up in half an hour."

"The schedule said to be here now and that she doesn't line up for over an hour," I say, frowning. A few of the mothers break out into whispers followed by snickers.

"You must be new to all of this," a mother applying way too much red lipstick to her daughter speaks up. Her tone is patronizing, and it makes me clench my teeth.

"It's okay, MJ," Maddie says from beside me. "There's enough time to get ready." She doesn't sound as sure as I'd like for her to.

"There's an empty vanity over there," the woman who came up to us, who I assume is Maddie's instructor, points out. The vanity is right beside the mom who just spoke. Perfect.

I guide Maddie to the chair and sit her down. She takes out her phone and shows me a photo of a girl with way too much makeup and a hairstyle that probably requires a whole package of bobby pins.

"This is the look for the group dance. I can work on the makeup if you can help me with my hair."

“Of course, anything you need.” I try to manage a smile, but I feel a little numb. This is a lot more than I thought I was getting into.

I start on Maddie’s hair while she applies liberal amounts of foundation to her already perfect skin. What does it matter if she’s wearing makeup, anyway? The competition is supposed to be about dancing, not face painting.

My frustrations immediately rise the more I try to push Maddie’s hair into this style. It’s clearly not meant for girls with curly hair.

“Do you need any help?” Viper Mom—the nickname seemed fitting—coos from beside me. I’d accept her help if she didn’t ask it like I was a four-year-old in need of juice.

“No, thanks,” I say with the fakest smile I can manage.

“I’m sure it isn’t easy coming to your first competition. I bet you didn’t count on having to be an actual mom when you bagged Sebastian.”

My blood turns to fire. I meet Maddie’s eyes in the mirror, and I can tell she’s angry too. It’s a pleasant surprise since I thought she’d be embarrassed. Even so, Viper Mom shouldn’t have said anything like that around Maddie.

“It makes sense for you to be hateful. When you have so much ugliness brewing inside of you, some of it’s bound to spew out.” My tone is flippant as if I’m barely paying attention to her. I finally get a section of Maddie’s hair pinned and I smile down at her.

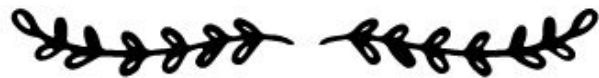
“You did not just say that,” Viper Mom screeches, drawing the eyes of other moms and daughters in the room.

“I did and if you speak like that again in front of Maddie, I will do much worse.” *Like rip your hair extensions out of your head.* Best to keep that to myself for now.

She storms off toward the instructor, who looks unhappy to see her. Maddie giggles and swipes blush on her cheeks.

“I can’t wait to tell Dad about this. He’s going to laugh so hard.”

I pinch my lips together to keep from smiling. Picturing Sebastian laughing about my quips is one thing, but I also know that when he finds out he’s going to get that look in his eye. The look that says he knows just how much I care for Maddie and loves it. He gave it to me the other night sitting on my couch eating brownies with us. It’s a look that makes me want to give in to his advances.



“And first place solo overall goes to...” I hold my breath. Grayson grips my hand on one side, Maverick is on the other side of me, rubbing my upper back. This is the big one. Maddie told me this is the highest award she can get today.

This whole day has been pure chaos. After putting ten pounds of makeup and a whole bottle of hairspray on her, she did her group dance. Only to come back and need a completely different look for her solo. It was all worth it though to see her up there with a smile on her face doing what she loves.

“Madeline Holt from Sweet Tea Dance Company!” I barely have time to process that they said her name before Grayson is yanking me up, yelling at the top of his lungs.

“GO MAD DOG!” Grayson shouts. The rest of my brothers shout something similar as we jump and clap together. Maddie takes her trophy

and smiles so big. My hands are shaking but I manage to get a picture of her on the stage.

I wish Sebastian were here. The thought stings like a fresh cut. Because I know that I'm not just wishing it for Maddie's sake, but because I want him here beside me. He'd whistle and yell along with my brothers, maybe even pull me into his arms. I'd push him away and he'd wink at me.

The announcer says the closing statements for the ceremony, pulling me out of my thoughts before they can continue the path they were on. I focus on pushing through the crowd to get to Maddie. We're supposed to meet her in the convention center lobby with all of her team.

My brothers help me get to Maddie faster than my five-foot self could on my own. She's bouncing when we arrive and I throw my arms around her.

"I'm so proud of you," I say as I hug her.

"Thank you," she whispers and squeezes me tight.

Once we pull apart, Grayson is next in line, lifting her up in the air. Maddie squeals as he boosts her onto his shoulder and starts chanting, "Mad Dog, Mad Dog, Mad Dog!" She bounces up and down, laughing. He lets her down then lifts a store-bought bouquet of roses off the ground. "For you." He bows like a gallant knight and Maddie melts into a puddle of giggles.

It's strange seeing my brothers interact with Maddie. None of us are married or have kids, so I haven't thought about what it would be like when we do. Grayson is being his usual over the top self, but I can tell that it's more than a fun game to him. He's doing this to make Maddie feel special. It's touching and has me wondering if this is what he'll be like as a dad.

My other brothers each hand Maddie a bouquet. Between the flowers and her trophy, her arms are overflowing. I snap a photo of her grinning and

send it to Sebastian. He should get to see it before the game as long as he feels his phone go off. They kick off in an hour.

“Okay, we need to get your dance bag from the dressing room then we can go get some food.” I look at the chaos around us then at Levi. “Can y’all keep an eye on Maddie while I go get it?” Levi is the oldest and he’s fairly level-headed, always sticking to the plan and never straying. While I trust all my brothers, he’s definitely the ideal babysitter in the midst of this pandemonium.

“Yep. We’ll wait by the east entrance for you.” Of course he already knows all the possible entrances and exits of this place. I don’t tell him that I have no idea where the east entrance is because he’d give me a look that would make me feel like I should. His career as a detective, plus our upbringing, has made him more conscious of things like that.

“Thank you,” I say and then barrel into the swarm of people. I feel like I’m swimming upstream the entire time, but I manage to get Maddie’s dance bag and find the east entrance without much trouble.

What I see when I arrive at the entrance makes me drop Maddie’s bag. There, to the right of the doors, are my brothers and Maddie ... doing a TikTok dance. They’ve propped her phone up using her trophy and are standing in a line dancing, Maddie in the center with two brothers on each side.

“What is going on?” I ask, convinced that this is some sort of hair spray poisoning induced mirage. Grayson is shaking his hips like he’s the next Shakira, Levi is performing each move with precision, Maverick can barely quit laughing long enough to dance, and Adrian looks murderous, but is participating. Maddie is in the center of it all looking like a true princess of dance with her oddball ‘crew’.

“I told Grayson the girls on my dance team wouldn’t let me be in their TikTok and he said we’d make an even better one,” Maddie says after they finish their dance. “This is our third try and I think we got it!”

She runs over to her phone to check and I raise my eyebrows at my brothers.

“You’re all suckers.”

“She had really convincing puppy dog eyes,” Levi says with a shrug.

“Grayson also threatened to shoot us with a paintball gun in our sleep if we didn’t do it,” Maverick supplies and I laugh. Grayson looks the furthest thing from apologetic, studying the video with Maddie on her phone. I look to Adrian who is wearing his favorite facial expression: a scowl.

“It’s for Maddie.” His gruff explanation leaves no room for questioning. It doesn’t surprise me that Maddie was able to wrap all of them around her finger so fast. She has this effervescent quality about her that makes you want to bend over backward to see her smile.

“Well, Mad Dog and crew, we need to head home or we’re going to miss kickoff.” My words get everyone moving out the door. All of us know that today is a big game. The Thrashers are going up against the Sharks and it has a chance of being a close game. I’m sure Sebastian is flooded with adrenaline right about now. I never got a text back, so he must not have seen his phone.

My brothers pile into Maverick’s truck while Maddie and I drive back to my place in my SUV. I’m grateful to get to watch the game with my brothers. It doesn’t always work out because of all of our schedules. When we’re all together like this it makes me think of Mom, which hurts, but it’s one of those bittersweet kinds of pain. One part sting, one part soothe.

Maddie chatters about the parts of the day she spent apart from me and then starts giving me updates on the views on her TikTok video. Since she's already semi-famous being Sebastian's daughter, the views are climbing pretty quick. My brothers are going to go viral. Adrian is going to *hate* it.

As soon as we're back home, we all rush inside and I turn the TV on the game right as the kicker makes contact with the ball. I'm a little disappointed we missed Sebastian's pre-game interview, but I stuff that disappointment into a box in the corner of my brain because I don't want to analyze *why* I'd feel that way.

Maddie murmurs something about needing to go to the bathroom and I nod while focusing on the game. Lincoln throws the ball to Williams, one of our wide receivers, who jukes out a defensive back and sprints toward the end zone. He's almost grabbed but avoids it and as soon as his foot crosses the goal line I'm on my feet with my brothers.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Levi yells.

We are rehashing the best parts of the play when I hear my name from another room.

"MJ?" Maddie's voice breaks through the noise and my heart jumps to my throat at how worried she sounds. I push past my brothers and rush toward the bathroom.

"Maddie, honey, what's wrong?" I say into the door.

"Um—" She sounds like she's crying. "I-I think I got my period, and I don't know what to do. I've never gotten it before." I let out a brief sigh of relief that it's not something worse, then come up with a plan.

"You have overnight clothes in your bag, right?" I ask, hoping she remembered to pack them. Sebastian is coming to get her tonight, but he wasn't sure how late he'd be, so she was supposed to pack pajamas.

“Yes, they’re in my duffle bag.”

“Okay, you go ahead and start the shower. I’ll get your clothes and a towel for you. There should be some pads under the sink, you can use those for tonight, okay? The box tells you how to put them on.”

“Okay...” She trails off and I can tell something else is on her mind.

“Do you need anything else? Are you hurting?”

“My stomach is hurting some but...will your brothers know what’s going on? I-I don’t want them to be grossed out.”

I’m thankful my mom raised my brothers right and what I’m about to say next is true. “I won’t tell them anything, but they wouldn’t be grossed out even if they knew. They’re good guys and good guys don’t freak out about this kind of stuff.”

“Okay.” Her voice is weak and my heart hurts for her. I’m glad I’m here so she doesn’t have to go through this alone, but I hate that she has to at all. Being a girl sucks sometimes.

“I’ll be right back with your stuff.” I grab her bag, a towel, and some of the salve I make for cramps. At my knock, Maddie cracks open the door and takes her bag from me. I hold onto the salve for after her shower.

“Thanks, MJ,” she says before closing the door. I sit by it in case she needs any help, listening to my brothers shouting at the TV while I wait.

Adrian pokes his head into the hall with a furrowed brow; he’s ever the observant one, so it makes sense he was the first to notice we were gone. I wave him off and he follows my direction. Which is good, because the bathroom door opens shortly after he leaves.

I jump up and study Maddie’s face, looking for any signs of distress. Her expression is a little pinched, but not panicked.

“How are you feeling after the shower?” I smooth back her hair some, which she put in a top knot to keep from getting wet.

“Better, but not great.” She grimaces.

“Did you have trouble with the pad or anything?”

“I think it’s fine.”

“Okay good, I’ve got a salve that helps with cramps and there’s a heating pad in my room. Why don’t you lay in my bed and rest?” I put a gentle hand on her upper back and lead her to my room.

Once she lays down on the heating pad and puts the salve on her stomach, she starts to look more relaxed. I put some water and a soothing essential oil blend in my bedroom diffuser then bring her some ice water. After I get everything I think she could need, I sit down on the edge of the bed by her feet.

“So this is going to happen every month?”

I almost laugh at the clear disdain in her tone. “Pretty much, yeah. You’ll get used to it though and find what works best for you and your body.”

“I learned about this whole thing in biology, and I don’t see any upside. We have to get periods *and* birth babies? Why do we get all the painful stuff?”

This time I do laugh and she does too. “It sucks, but hey, you can convince your dad to bring you whatever you want each month.”

“Like a peanut butter milkshake?” she asks dreamily.

“Yes.” I chuckle. “He might wise up eventually and realize that you don’t need milkshakes to survive your period, but at least for a while you can probably get one every month.”

I choose not to tell her how bad dairy and refined sugar is for her body, because the girl just got her period, and she doesn’t need to hear that sugar

is bad too. She might have a breakdown.

“Thanks a lot, MJ,” she says around a yawn. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

My throat constricts at the thought.

“Get some rest, Mad Dog.” She giggles and I pat her feet then leave her to sleep.

When I go back into the living room, Sebastian is talking to a reporter about the first half of the game. I can barely stand to look at him because every time I do my mind conjures up the first moment we met in my classroom when he said he wanted to marry me. Getting close to him and Maddie has softened my stone of a heart. I’m in too deep and it’s so tempting to just let myself sink beneath the surface of his affection instead of fighting like I have been.

I’m so tired of fighting.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sebastian Holt

I'm scrubbing sleep out of my eyes when Meadow opens her front door. This time, instead of wet hair and pajamas, she has a messy bun and a Thrasher shirt on. Even though I want to collapse from exhaustion, I'm not too tired to notice how utterly gorgeous she is. Seeing her in Thrasher's colors is what I imagine a groom feels on his wedding day seeing his bride in white. Okay ... that might be the sleep deprivation talking. She looks *good* though.

"If I passed out from exhaustion right here, would you kiss me to revive me?" I ask in lieu of a greeting.

Her lips turn up at the edges and she shakes her head at me. "No, because you made a stupid play call in the fourth quarter that almost lost us the game."

She walks inside and I follow her. I pretend to look around her living room like I'm searching for something, picking up blankets and throw pillows to look underneath them.

"What are you doing?" she asks, confusion coating her tone.

“Looking for your contract with the Georgia Thrashers. You must be on the coaching staff since you’re speaking with so much authority.”

She grabs a throw pillow and smacks me with it, making me laugh. “You drive me up a wall.”

I’d rather push you up against one, I think to myself. Thankfully, my filter is still somewhat intact. I should get out of here though before I say something that gets me hit with something harder than a pillow.

“What can I say? It’s entertaining.” She rolls her eyes. “Where’s Maddie?” I ask and her expression softens.

“She’s asleep in my bed. She ... well, she got her period today, after the competition.”

I freeze in place, unable to comprehend what I just heard. Did I mishear her? It has been a long day.

“What?” I ask, to be sure.

Meadow sighs. “She got her period,” she repeats. “Luckily, she got it at my house instead of at the event. She’s been in bed most of the night, only getting up to eat. She wasn’t hurting too much last time I checked, but she’s worn out from the long day combined with all the emotions of this happening.”

I slump down onto Meadow’s couch and she sits next to me. When she places a gentle hand on my knee, I think I must be dreaming. Though I don’t know why my subconscious would choose this scenario. Maddie, my little girl, got her *period*? I knew we were getting close to this stage, but I thought we had maybe another year. I scrub my face with my hands.

“So she’s okay? Was she scared?”

“She’s alright now. She was a little bit at first, but we talked it out.”

“Good, that’s good.” I nod to myself, my brain feeling like an engine that’s been running on empty too long. This is too much after the anniversary of Mallory’s death. I haven’t been able to take a full breath all week it seems like. Then there was the intensity of the game today, which always leaves me drained.

“Hey.” Meadow grabs my attention. “Why don’t you stay here? I don’t have any clothes for you, but I don’t think you should try to drive like this. I know it’s been a rough week.”

I pinch my knee hard, but nothing happens, so I do it again.

“Sebastian.” Meadow’s voice is laced with humor. “Are you okay?”

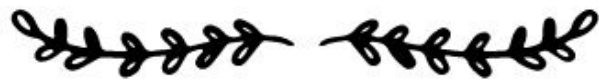
“Just trying to see if this is a dream,” I say and she laughs.

“If you make this into a *thing*, I will stuff you into an Uber and you can find your way back to get Maddie tomorrow.”

“I’ll stop.” I laugh. “You go to bed, I know it’s late.” I pull one of the blankets up off the back of the couch.

“Goodnight, Sebastian,” she says and I smile at her.

“Goodnight, Meadow Jane.”



I wake up to the smell of maple syrup and the sound of laughter. My neck and back are killing me, proof that my college days of crashing on couches are very much over. I’m closing in on forty and not afraid to admit I prefer my custom-filled adjustable mattress back home. I can’t believe I used to do this *often*.

My back protests, but I push myself up to sitting. I stand and stretch my arms above my head, my bones cracking with the movement. Being in

Meadow's house is surreal. Everything is so her. The essential oils in the air mixing with whatever she's cooking in the kitchen, the paintings on the walls, and the plants bringing life to each room. This is her oasis and she let me stay in it overnight. That has to mean something.

I shuffle toward the kitchen, following the sound of Maddie's giggles. What I see when I get there stops me in my tracks. This is truly a dream come to life. Meadow is pouring batter onto a cast iron skillet while Maddie adds chocolate chips to each pancake.

Maddie glances down at her phone sitting on the counter. "Six million views!" she cheers. Meadow throws her head back and laughs. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever heard. They haven't noticed me yet, so I act on impulse and pull my phone out of my pocket. It's barely alive, the tiny red bar showing it's going to die any second. I open my camera app and take a photo of them. This memory needs to live beyond this moment.

"Adrian is going to combust when he finds out. I have to get Grayson to film his reaction."

"He won't be mad at me, will he?" Maddie asks and Meadow shakes her head.

"He could never."

"What's going on in here?" I ask and Maddie jumps in surprise, but Meadow doesn't so much as twitch.

"I was wondering when you were going to quit spying on us and say something."

"You heard me?"

"You weren't very quiet when you got up, you sounded like a dying cat and a glowstick cracking at the same time." Maddie laughs at my scowl.

“Yes, make fun of the guy who slept on the couch while you two got the bed,” I grumble and walk over to the platter of pancakes. I snatch one and Meadow tries to hit me with her spatula, but I jump out of the way and wave the pancake at her before biting it. She shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips.

“I got the bed because I’m on my period,” Maddie states with finality and it takes me a second to recover. I almost forgot everything that happened yesterday.

I pull Maddie into a hug. “I’m sorry I missed your solo and you getting your first period. Not my best moment as a dad.”

“It’s okay, MJ was there the whole time and her brothers came and cheered for me at the competition. Plus, she was probably better at the girl stuff than you would have been.” I look at Meadow while Maddie is still hugging me. She’s watching us, a swirl of emotions hiding in her hazel eyes.

“I’m glad she was with you over me, then.” And I mean it. I grew up with a sister and I’m not afraid of things like picking up tampons or hearing about cramps, but I don’t know that I could have handled this as well as Meadow did. The fact that Maddie doesn’t seem in pain or anxious but is laughing instead shows me just how much Meadow did for her.

We pull apart as Meadow turns the stove’s burner off. “Alright, pancakes are done.”

“Can I watch *Dance Moms* in the living room while I eat? Grayson talked about an episode yesterday and I think he’s wrong about who should have won that week, so I wanted to rewatch it.”

“That’s okay with me,” Meadow says, handing Maddie a plate with pancakes and fruit on it.

“Thanks, MJ!” Maddie skips out of the kitchen.

“Thanks for letting me stay last night and taking care of Maddie yesterday. You’ve done too much for us lately,” I tell her as she places strawberries on a pancake stack.

“It was nothing.” Her voice is off, so I step to her and lightly grab her arm, turning her to face me. Her head tilts back and her eyes meet mine, a mesmerizing mix of brown and gold and green.

“It wasn’t nothing, Meadow.” I pause, searching her expression. “If we’ve crossed too many lines, tell me.” It goes against every instinct inside of me to give her an out. I want all of this every day, only for it to be me sharing the bed with her. But if she feels like it’s too much, then none of this is worth it.

“No,” she whispers and tilts her head down. “I’m the one who has stepped over boundaries.” She pauses and I let my hand slide down her arm and interlace our fingers. My stomach flips when she doesn’t pull away.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her, keeping my voice soft and low.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Sebastian. You *stayed the night*. Even though it was just on my couch, I’ve never had a guy other than my brothers do that.”

I tip her chin up with my other hand so she’ll meet my eyes again. Rare vulnerability shines in her eyes.

“I can leave if you want,” I say softly. “I know I flirt and tease, but I never want you to feel backed into a corner.”

Her eyes flick down and back up, a smirk toying with her full lips. “He says, as he backs me into a corner.”

I press my lips together, but I can’t stifle my chuckle. I have quite literally backed her into a corner of her kitchen. “You could move if you

wanted to,” I say and see heat flash in her eyes.

“And if I told you to leave right now?” She likely means for her question to sound ominous, but the breathless way she says it betrays her true feelings. I cup her face, eliciting a sharp intake of breath.

“I’d leave, no questions asked.” It would be a knife to my chest, but I’d do it. None of this means anything if my gut reaction was off and she doesn’t want me after all.

“And if I didn’t?” I focus on her slightly parted lips then drag my gaze back up to her eyes. The meaning isn’t lost on her, my observant artist. She licks her bottom lip, and my iron resolve flits away like a feather in the wind. I lean down, my lips a mere centimeter away from her own. I finally get to do what I’ve dreamt of since seeing her walk across the dance floor at Ben and Sophie’s wedding.

“AHA!” Maddie yells and we jump apart. My heart pounds in my chest and I whip my head around, but Maddie isn’t behind me. “I was right!” She shouts from the other room. “MJ, can I have Grayson’s number to tell him he’s wrong?”

I rake a hand through my hair and resist the urge to groan. Meadow lets out a breath and I can tell our moment is slipping away, like sand through my fingertips. She grabs her plate and speeds past me to go to the living room without a word. Her walls are going up again, but I’m not worried. I got through them once, I can do it again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Meadow Jane Carter

People say you can't avoid your problems. I say: *watch me*. Sebastian almost *kissed* me Sunday, so I've avoided him all week. It's Thursday now and I've been able to thwart all of his attempts to see me. I sent vague responses to text messages, dodged phone calls, took my office hours in a different part of the school every day, telling every parent but him where to find me. It's not the most mature thing I've ever done, but I need breathing room to figure out what's going on between us.

I don't trust myself to even have a conversation saying I need space, so I chose avoidance instead. So far, so great. Well, except that the stress of the past few weeks has caught up to me in the form of a migraine that started yesterday evening and has slowly gotten worse even though I've tried every trick in the book to get rid of it.

I've been diffusing my migraine essential oil blend, drinking a headache relief tea, using the special green lamp I got that's supposed to combat migraines. I've done everything and it still hit me like a ton of bricks again this morning. I had to use voice command to call in sick today, because my vision was in and out. Now I'm lying in bed, blackout curtains drawn,

praying for sleep and trying not to move because even the slightest twitch of my muscles makes me want to throw up and gasp in pain all at once.

You'd think I'd be exhausted from not sleeping last night due to the growing pain, but no. Sleep eludes me, running away every time I try to grab on to it. My phone starts buzzing and the vibration against my nightstand feels like someone is dropping a cinderblock on my head over and over. I press around on my phone, hoping to hit the end button. Instead, I hear a faint voice. Even though the entirety of my being protests, I pull my phone to my ear with a groan.

"Meadow?" Sebastian's voice fills my ear and I let out a weak whimper when the throbbing increases. "What's wrong?"

"Migraine," I whisper and hope he hears me because there's no way I'm repeating myself.

"I'll be there in ten minutes." He hangs up before I can protest, not that I have the energy to. My phone slides out of my hand. I clutch one of my crochet pillows and curl up into the fetal position. It's been a while since I've had a full-fledged migraine. My diet and the tricks I've learned have helped me keep them at bay, but it's not a fool-proof method. I hate the medicine the doctors have prescribed me in the past, so I just buckle down and deal with them when they come.

When I lived with my best friends, they'd help me through it even when I told them not to. This is the first one I've had since living alone. I know I could have called any of my friends or family this morning and they would have come, but I hate the idea of relying on anyone else, especially when I'm like this. This version of me is weak and whiny. I'm not looking forward to Sebastian seeing me this way, but it's not like I had a chance to tell him no.

Since I'm refusing to look at any screens, I have no idea how long it's been when I hear my front door open. I also don't know if I left my door unlocked or if Sebastian just broke into my house.

My bedroom door opens next and I blink open my eyes to see Sebastian in the dim light of my bedroom. He doesn't say a word, just sinks down on the floor next to me and brushes my hair out of my face with the most gentle touch. His fingertips brush over my eyes next, closing my eyelids.

"Can I do anything for you?" he whispers, managing not to trigger too much throbbing with his voice.

"No, I just want to sleep, but I can't." My voice cracks and I hate how helpless I am in this moment.

"I'll be right back," he says, still keeping his voice at a whisper.

I keep my eyes shut while he's gone. When he returns, the smell of tea tickles my nose. The last thing I want to do is sit up to drink tea, especially when my headache blend didn't work, but I don't know how to tell him that.

"This is a sleep tea," he says, surprising me. I would have thought he brought the tea marked for migraines. "I stopped at the store on the way over and the package says that the valerian root in it can help with headaches too. Do you want to try to drink it?"

I can't believe he did research on how to help me. A warm, fuzzy feeling creeps into my chest. After I avoided him all week, he still went above and beyond, leaving work to come take care of me.

I start to push myself up and he immediately supports me as I do. Which is good, because the room is spinning. I clutch his forearms, digging my nails in when the pain and nausea assault my senses.

“Sorry,” I whisper once I’ve gathered my bearings and notice the crescent moon marks from my nails in his skin.

“Don’t be, I can take it. I’m stronger than you think,” he whispers with a soft smile. I’m tired and hurting, but I make out the double meaning of his words. They’re like a night light, keeping away the monsters in the dark—the ones that say I’m a burden, that I’m too much to handle.

I let go of his arms so he can pick up the mug off my nightstand. The familiar taste of lavender and chamomile soothes my senses when I take a sip.

“Sophie said that a cool compress helps you sometimes. Do you want to try that after you drink the tea?”

He called Sophie, too?

“There’s one in my freezer. I haven’t been able to make it to the kitchen to get it.” A look comes over his face, one that says he wants to admonish me, but he just nods and leaves the room.

Tears sting my eyes as I drink. I can’t comprehend why Sebastian would do all of this for me. I’m not totally devoid of self-confidence, but to deem myself worthy of this level of pursuit seems almost vain. This just doesn’t add up. I’m sarcastic, I insult him, and I run away when he gets too close. And yet here he is in my home, bringing me tea and letting me hold onto him.

Light enters the room for a split second before Sebastian shuts the door behind him. I blink back my tears, not wanting to worry him any further.

“How are you doing on your tea?”

“It’s around halfway gone,” I answer. My muscles have relaxed some and while the pain in my head is still there, it’s less pronounced than when he first arrived.

“Why don’t you try to lay down again? I’ll lay the compress over your eyes and hopefully you can sleep.”

He helps me get situated in bed again, pulling my blankets up over me then covering my eyes with the compress. Relief courses through me as soon as the cold sinks in. It’s not magically curing the throbbing ache, but it’s the best I’ve felt all day. My limbs feel heavy and sleep seems to be on the way. As desperate as I am to rest, I fight off the feeling for a moment longer.

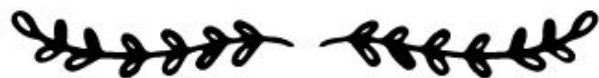
“Bash?” I whisper his nickname into the dark. His hand finds mine and squeezes it.

“Yes, beautiful?”

“Don’t leave.”

“I’m here as long as you’ll have me.”

My previously dormant heart whispers *forever*. I fall asleep without saying anything more, soaking up the comfort of his hand in mine.



My mouth feels like it’s full of cotton balls when I wake up. The compress is no longer on my face, but my room is pitch black. I go to rub the sleep out of my eyes but freeze because one of my hands is very much occupied.

I turn my head to the right and blink. There in the dark, I make out the shape of Sebastian propped up against my nightstand, his hand holding mine. His head is slumped over against my bed, his lips parted as he snores lightly.

He didn’t leave. The thought brings a wave of warmth then a weight of anxiety. My heart wants me to wrap my arms around him and never let him

go. My head is stomping on the breaks and screeching warnings at me.

I look down at our joined hands and study them, running my thumb over his skin. My hand looks small in his, but instead of feeling overpowered, I feel ... safe. It's a foreign feeling, one that sits uncomfortably in my chest. It's like putting on new shoes and going for a run right after. I want time to break the feeling in, but I don't know if I have that luxury with someone like Sebastian. He might be sticking around now, but he won't forever.

"If you're studying me to draw my likeness, I'd recommend my face over my hands. I've been told I have a fantastic jawline," Sebastian rasps, making me laugh and lifting my eyes to his face. He stretches his neck from side to side, no doubt hurting plenty from however long we've been here.

"Who told you that?"

"Sports Illustrated."

"When, fifteen years ago?"

He lets out an incredulous laugh at my question. "Are you calling me irrelevant?"

"I'm just saying it's been a while since you've been on a field as more than a coach."

"I can't believe this." He laughs. "I wait on you hand and foot and in return, I get told I'm washed up."

I grimace because here I am, doing exactly what I said I shouldn't. A normal girl would thank him—probably with a kiss—and tell him how wonderful he is. Instead, I'm knocking down his ego. Sure, he's laughing, but eventually, he won't want to put up with this. I haven't even added in all the emotional baggage I lug around in secret. He'd really run away if he saw that.

“Meadow,” he says, his voice gentle. “Don’t pull back again, please.” His thumb brushes over my hand, sending tingles through my arm.

“I’m sorry.” I pause and turn to look at the ceiling, unable to face him even in the dark. “You took care of me and I haven’t even said thank you yet.”

“I’m sure you were getting around to it,” he says like it’s no big deal. “And anyway, it doesn’t matter, because I’ve gotten to spend time with you.”

“You can hardly count me whining until I fell asleep as spending time with me.”

“For a teacher, you’re not great at defining a phrase. I’ve been here, with you, and time has passed. Therefore, we spent time together.”

“You’re going to give me another migraine,” I mumble and pull my hand from his. I want to keep holding it which is why I need to stop. My heart and my head need to get on the same page.

“How are you feeling, for real?” The concern in his voice is undeserved, making me sigh.

“Much better, thank you. What time is it? Do you need to get home to Maddie?”

“My mom is watching her. It’s eight o’clock.”

“*At night?!*” I shoot up and immediately regret it, the remnants of my migraine making my head spin. I fist my comforter and feel Sebastian’s warm hand rubbing my back. He’s been here since this afternoon. I think it was two when he got here.

“You need to take it easy.”

“You’ve been here for *hours*. This is too much.”

“I told you I’d be here for you. I’m where I want to be.”

“You have an away game this weekend. Did you miss practice to stay here with me?”

“Meadow, stop.”

“I can’t, Sebastian.” I rub my eyes and it feels like someone glued sand to the inside of my eyelids. “I’m doing better now, you should go.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time. I stare at my hands in my lap, wondering if I should take the words back.

“You shouldn’t try to do too much right away. I’ll check on you tomorrow.” He’s distant—I can hear it in his voice—and I caused it.

He pushes up off the floor and doesn’t even bother to stretch before walking to my door. When he opens it, faint light spills through, illuminating his broad shoulders and the jawline he joked about earlier. *Sports Illustrated* wasn’t wrong.

For a moment I think he’s going to say something else because he hesitates in the doorway, but he just leaves, clicking the door shut behind him. I listen to his footsteps followed by a second door shutting.

Tears slide down my face and onto the pillow beneath me. It’s stupid to cry over him leaving. We aren’t together, and he said he’d check on me tomorrow.

Did he mean it, though? Or did he just want an easy way out of your mess?

My chest aches as I fight to control my emotions. When my hands start to shake, I get out of bed and hobble to my art studio. If I can’t say any of it, I’ll paint and sketch until it’s out of my system. Or until I’m too tired to think about it. Whichever comes first.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sebastian Holt

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I grouse as Bennett walks up to me. He raises his hands up in defense.

“Don’t start swinging, I haven’t said anything.”

“I know Sophie talked to you, which means she sent you to talk to me.” I mash the button on the espresso machine and cross my arms.

This is my second trip to the breakroom this morning for espresso. I didn’t sleep well last night after seeing Meadow. I would have had even more coffee, but every time I go to make it, I think of Meadow and her disdain for it. Then I think of her holding my hand in the dark—of her telling me to leave. This train of thought usually leads to me wanting to hit something. Thus, I’ve been avoiding caffeine until I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer.

“She told me you went to take care of MJ yesterday, but I’m not here to interrogate you. I came to the breakroom to get my lunch out of the fridge. I had no way of knowing you’d be here.” He opens the fridge and pulls out a black lunchbox, waving it to prove his point.

“I haven’t slept,” I tell him. “Sorry if I snapped.”

“Considering you look like you’ve been in a fight, I believe you and accept your apology.”

I take my paper cup out from under the machine and pour some sugar into it. Bennett leans against the countertop and watches me.

“She likes me,” I grit out, not wanting to talk about it but knowing that I need to. I’m going to see her soon and I don’t need all of this pent-up frustration to go to the wrong place.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is when she won’t act on it, or even just let me show her how I feel.” I rake a hand through my hair. “She’s giving me mixed signals and I don’t know what to do with them.”

“You’re sure she likes you?”

I think back to when we almost kissed in her kitchen. She wanted me to kiss her, there’s no doubt about that. “Yes.”

“Then don’t give up.”

“I didn’t plan on it,” I grumble. “I’m just upset that things didn’t go right yesterday. Every time I think we’re getting closer, she backs off.”

“MJ has been closed off since the day I met her. You can’t expect that just because she likes you that your presence is going to be the key that unlocks all of her. Her four best friends have spent years getting close to her and they’re still under the impression that she’s hiding parts of her life.”

“It’s annoying when you’re right.”

“You should be used to the feeling by now.” I shove his shoulder and he laughs, shoving me back. “It’s not like you haven’t given your fair share of wise counsel.”

“How come I knew how to help you, but I don’t know how to help myself?”

“I think when you fall in love you subconsciously hand over all your common sense.” We both laugh.

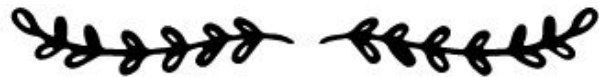
“Sounds about right.”

“So are you going to see her before you have to leave tonight?” I look down at my watch and then throw back the rest of my espresso. Hopefully, I’m not shaking from the caffeine when I see her. I have a small window of free time before I have to be here to travel for our away game.

“Yes, but I have to go right now.”

“Good luck,” Ben says, slapping me on the back as I walk toward the door.

“Thanks, man!”



When I get out of my car at Meadow’s house, music is playing nearby. Maddie said Meadow wasn’t at school again today, so I assumed she would be home, and based on her car in her driveway, I was right.

As I’m walking to her porch to knock, I pause. The music seems close. I veer to the right, following the sound of the lilting classical melody. It leads me to a waist-high iron gate. Meadow is a few feet away, swaying to the music and facing an easel with a paintbrush in her hand.

She swipes her brush in a large stroke across the painting, depositing a streak of purple in what looks like a painting of a desert sunset. I get tunnel vision as she works, so captivated by her each and every movement that nothing else around me matters.

Every flourish of her hand brings new life to this two-dimensional scene. It’s just a canvas and paint, but I swear I could step into it as if it were a

portal. I can sense the sand beneath my feet, smell the aloe plants, and feel the stinging prick of the cactus. With every swipe of color, I'm mesmerized because I think she'll step away, call it done, and label it a masterpiece. But she doesn't. She adds a spec of white to the sky and then a touch of black to the rich green of the cactus. It gets better with every touch. Just like her. She gets better the more I get to know her.

I'm in love with her. The internal admission should feel like jumping into arctic water, shocking and surreal. But instead, I feel as though I've been wading into warm tropical waters, not noticing until I was up to my neck in love and adoration for this enigma of a woman.

"Meadow," I call.

She whips around to face me, her braid swinging with the movement. "Sebastian." Surprise—and maybe relief?—seeps into her voice. "I didn't think you'd come." She sets her paintbrush in a cup.

I open the gate and walk through. I haven't been in her backyard yet, but it's just as much of a haven for flora as the inside of her home. All of the greenery and life are a direct contrast to the desert on the canvas beside her.

"I told you I would."

Her hazel eyes are wary as I close the distance between us, but she doesn't move. "I thought you were angry."

"Not angry." I sigh. "A little frustrated, but I'm better now. I shouldn't have stormed out."

"It was warranted. You took care of me and I was snarky and rude to you."

I furrow my brows in confusion. "I wasn't upset because you were snarky, Meadow. I was frustrated because you told me to leave—you pushed

me away.” At her puzzled look, I continue. “I laughed at your teasing, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes.” She blinks. I close the remainder of the distance and reach for her hands. They’re covered in paint and it rubs off on me, making me smile. She’s a woman who leaves a mark.

“Meadow, I enjoy your attitude. It’s *fun* to spar with you. In fact, there are plenty of times I push your buttons for the sheer satisfaction I get seeing you react.”

Her lips twitch as if she might smile. “Sounds sick.”

I laugh and the barest of smiles breaks through her veil of caution.

“Is it so bad that I get a little thrill watching your eyes flash when I tease you?” One of my hands skates up her arm, making her shiver. I slide my hand under her jaw, my heart hammering in my chest. “Or that I want to kiss you after every smart remark that falls from this beautiful mouth of yours?” My thumb slides over her bottom lip and I’m rewarded with a sharp intake of breath.

I stare into her eyes, searching for any sign of hesitation. I find none. Desire blazes in her irises, sending white-hot flames through my veins. I slide my other arm around her waist, pulling us together. Her berry lips are calling to me like a siren song, and when her dark lashes flutter shut, I’m undone.

My lips crash into hers like cymbals in the symphony playing in her backyard. For a moment I wonder if I read the situation all wrong, but then she kisses me back. It feels as if I’ve been standing in that desert of a painting my whole life waiting for rain and her kiss just cracked open the sky. She’s a thunderstorm of fervent passion, her hands gripping my shirt to drag me closer.

I slide my hand into her hair and deepen the kiss. She matches me movement for movement, touch for touch, as if even now we're throwing remarks back and forth. When I break the kiss, a breathy sound escapes her that makes my knees weak. I brush my lips over the corner of her mouth, down her jawline, over the shell of her ear. Her hands find my face, the torrential need from before softening into something reverent and languid as she pulls my lips back to her own. She kisses like she paints, I realize: when you think she's done, she comes back for more.

This time when we separate, she gazes up at me, her fingertips roaming over my cheekbones and then down to my jaw. Each featherlight touch sends tingles down my spine. Her eyes are soft as she seems to study my features. She's open right now, blossoming like her very namesake.

"I've wanted to do that since the moment I saw you," I whisper, breathless.

"My backyard is a better location for a first kiss than a middle school," she says and I chuckle because she doesn't know.

"That's not when I first saw you."

"Hm?" She's dazed, tracing the edges of my smile.

"The first time I saw you was at Sophie and Bennett's wedding. You walked across the dance floor looking like Grecian royalty and I knew I had to know you." Her eyebrows jump up her forehead, her hands dropping to my chest.

"What? Why didn't you come up to me?"

"Maddie called and when I got off the phone you were gone. I asked Bennett about you, but he said you weren't my type." I smirk. "Then I officially met you, and you told me you'd never date me."

“I haven’t agreed to date you. What if I only kissed you just to see what it would be like? Maybe I don’t want anything more.” She toys with the collar of my shirt, a teasing glint in her eyes.

“So if I tried to kiss you again ...” I lean in close, keeping a mere centimeter in between our lips.

“I would stop you,” she breathes out.

“I’m calling your bluff, Meadow Jane,” I whisper, but right as my lips brush hers something cold and wet smears against the side of my face. I jerk back in surprise and Meadow giggles, her hand wet with a mixture of green and purple paint. I hadn’t realized how close we were to the stool with her supplies on it.

“I can’t believe you just did that.” And I genuinely can’t. The light in her eyes is usually doled out in small doses, like cracking the blinds inside a dark house. But right now she’s ripped the blinds down and opened the window. She’s smiling and giddy and all I want to do for the rest of my days is see to it that she looks just like this.

Before she can respond, I drag my hand through the paint and run toward her. She squeals and tries to get away, but she stumbles to the ground, laughing. I flip her over and she lays in the grass, chest heaving and sporting a triumphant smile. Hovering over her, I drag my paint-coated hand from her temple to her collarbone. Somehow the paint doesn’t look out of place on her, as if she’s an art piece all on her own. She reaches up and rubs what’s left of the paint on her hand across my chest, ruining my gray t-shirt.

“I’ve trapped you and yet you’re smiling like you’ve won.”

“I’m always covered in paint, so this isn’t new to me. You on the other hand, have to catch a flight to Oregon and I’m willing to bet you’ll still

have paint on you during your postgame interview tomorrow.”

“Is this your way of ensuring I’ll think of you while I’m gone?” I lean down to her ear, lowering my voice. “Because your kiss already did that.”

“Maybe I just wanted to mess with you, since you admitted to pushing my buttons for fun.” I take pleasure in how breathless she sounds as I kiss the space below her ear.

“Is that so?” I kiss her jaw. I’m certain I’ll get paint on my mouth soon, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“Yes,” she rasps out and I smirk against her skin. “What will you say if a reporter asks you?”

“What do you want me to say?” I risk the question and press a kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“I’m not a publicist.” I sigh at her deflection.

“Meadow, I have to go soon, but I don’t want to leave without knowing where we stand.” I can see the fear springing to life in her eyes, so I scramble to continue. “I’m not asking for you to have it all figured out, just tell me you’re not going to lock me out once I’m back in Atlanta.”

She relaxes beneath me. “I won’t lock you out. Not after this.” She gives me a weak smile. “But I need to go slow here, Sebastian.”

“I can go slow,” I say and kiss her in a way that both proves my point and negates it all at once. She pushes on my chest, smiling against my lips.

“You’re trouble.”

“I think you like trouble.”

Soon we’re tangled up again, a mess of paint and grass and laughter. My heart is so full it might burst. *This is what I’ve been missing.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Meadow Jane Carter

“If you overreact I will leave,” I warn my friends, clutching one of Lottie’s throw pillows to my chest.

Earlier today, I called an emergency best friends meeting—something I’ve never done because the name alone is ridiculous—and everyone determined we should meet at Lottie and Callum’s house while Callum is hanging out with his friend Brad. Poor Grace had to drive a few hours from small town Sweet Oak to be here, but she looks content flipping through the pages of her latest fantasy romance.

“We won’t overreact,” Sophie reassures me.

Grace looks up from her book with a raised brow.

“I won’t overreact,” Grace corrects in a dry tone. “You and Lottie are ticking time bombs.”

“Excuse me,” Sophie huffs. “You’re the one who told me I’d lost my mind when I agreed to fake date Bennett.”

“You needed to hear that,” Grace defends herself and I laugh at their bickering.

“Oh, hush you two,” Lottie says in her lilting Southern voice. “I didn’t frantically clean my house for the past twenty minutes so y’all could argue on my couch.”

“You cleaned?” Grace looks around with a playful smirk. Lottie hits her with a throw pillow and she laughs.

“Okay,” Lottie begins, setting her hands primly in her lap like she didn’t just assault Grace with a cushion. “Now tell us why you called the meeting.”

I swallow down my nerves and clutch my pillow shield tighter. It’s not like me to share about romance with my friends. Sure, I’ve told them about dates gone wrong, but none of those really mattered. They’ve all been open about their own love lives though, and now they’re happily married. Not that I want to get married. A lifetime of being vulnerable and giving my heart to a person who could walk out at any second? *No thanks*. I’m good.

But even as I think that my heart squeezes painfully in my chest. I haven’t felt this way in so long, I don’t know what to do with it. It’s like posing for a photo where the photographer doesn’t give any instructions. So you’re just standing there thinking: *What do I do with my hands?* And that’s why I called this dumb meeting, because even though the last thing I want to do is admit feelings for Sebastian, I’m in uncharted territory here.

“Sebastian kissed me yesterday,” I blurt out before I can talk myself out of sharing.

My admission is met with silence. I lift my head and wait for my best friends to react. This is just the calm before the storm of questions, I’m sure.

“Did you kiss him back?” Sophie—unsurprisingly—breaks first.

“Yes.” *A lot.* A blush heats my skin as I recall laying in the grass kissing him until he had to leave. His husky voice telling me I’m impossible to leave...

Lottie gasps. “You’re blushing!” She points a finger at me, wearing a giant smile. “You never blush.”

“I’m not blushing.” I will my face to cool down. It doesn’t work.

“Are you in love with him? Are you going to marry him? Is Maddie going to be your flower girl?” I stare blankly at Sophie as she spits out all the questions in her mind.

Grace smacks her with a pillow, making her lavender bun go lopsided on her head.

“Ow,” she whines and slings the pillow back at Grace, who blocks it easily.

“That was your punishment for overreacting,” Grace tells her then looks to me. “Are you going to date him?” She asks her a much more practical question.

“I don’t know.” I bite my lip and look at my hands, smiling a little when I see flecks of paint still on them. “I told him I wouldn’t push him away again when he came back from Oregon.”

“That’s a good first step,” Lottie replies. She’s not condescending in the slightest either, she really means that. “He’s okay taking things slow—assuming that’s what you want?”

“He says he is.” I scratch at a fleck of purple paint on my knuckle.

“You don’t believe him?” Sophie speaks up, sounding calmer than before.

“I want to, but he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to do slow. He’s so...” *All-consuming.* “Driven. I can’t imagine he’d be patient enough to

wait on me. Plus, there's Maddie, who complicates things."

"I think he'd be okay taking things slow, especially because of Maddie. He can't rush into things if he has her to think of."

"That's true," I admit. This is why I called on them. They can be wild and ask intrusive questions, but they can also be levelheaded. And they know me better than most people, even if I haven't given them much. Guilt swirls in my stomach. I've always thought my privacy was the most important thing, but lately it seems like my fortress is hurting me more than protecting me.

But if I open up and then they leave me, I'll have gutted myself for nothing. Even if our friendship is a little one-sided, it's better than no friendship at all. My head is swimming.

"I don't know him that well," Lottie says. "But he seemed like a nice guy at the party, and Ben loves him. I don't think he'd intentionally hurt you."

What she's saying would soothe me if it weren't for the fact that it's just a hope, not a sure thing. Sebastian could take one look at my tattered and bruised heart and be the one to ruin it for good. That's the risk of all of this. There's always a chance something could go wrong. That chance has me wondering if I made a mistake telling him I wouldn't lock him out.

But when I stared up into his blue eyes, I couldn't resist him. His kiss made me weak. Even now, as much as I'm thinking I made a mistake, I know that if he walked through the door I'd jump into his arms. Now that I know the feel of his lips, the taste of him, I don't know if I can let him go. Even if it destroys us both.



“What kind of call was that?” I shout at the TV, standing on Grayson’s couch. The Thrashers’ offensive coordinator just made a terrible play call, resulting in us losing yards instead of gaining them. Oregon is a point ahead in the fourth quarter, we *need* to score.

“He shouldn’t be able to even get on the plane with the team tonight,” Grayson says from beside me. He’s standing on the floor, not at all disturbed by my feet on his couch cushion. If this was Levi’s couch, I’d be promptly removed so he could clean the nonexistent dirt off the fabric.

“Sebastian should fire him right now. Don’t even let him finish the game. He clearly has never seen a football before in his life.”

“If we lose to Oregon, I’ll never forgive your husband.”

I smack Grayson on the back of his head. “*Ouch*,” he laments and rubs his head.

“He’s not my husband.”

“Yeah, well, he will be soon if your starstruck look every time his face comes on the screen is any indication.” Grayson doesn’t know we kissed, which makes his observations even more annoying. I’ve always kept my emotions under the radar, but evidently, I fail when it comes to Sebastian.

“I should have watched the game at Adrian’s.”

“Take that back! I bought you pecan bars from Mav’s.” He crosses his arms with a huff. “And Adrian is probably still working like the robot he pretends to be.”

“I thought the whole point of you two starting your own business was to work less,” I say as the team takes a time out. The camera zooms in on Sebastian and my stomach flips. His jaw is tight and his blue eyes are icy. My skin flushes seeing him so in his element.

“I thought so too,” Grayson grumbles.

I try to read Sebastian's lips to see what he's saying to the players, but it's hard to focus when I know what those lips feel like on my own. His hands make sharp movements as he talks and a twisted sense of satisfaction rouses in me that I know how soft they can be.

"Should I be worried about smudges on my TV?" Grayson asks, amusement in his voice.

I scrunch my nose. "What?"

"You look like you're about to start making out with the screen." He laughs and I glare at him.

"If I had a pyramid you'd be at the bottom of it."

"You wound me, dear sister," he says in a way that shows he's not the least bit hurt.

"I'm really going to *wound* you if you don't quit talking about Sebastian."

The game starts up again and we both watch to see what adjustments were made. The next play is a hook and ladder. I hold my breath until the wide receiver dives into the end zone for the touchdown. I jump on Grayson's back as soon as we score and he runs me around his couch, hollering the Thrasher fight song at a volume I doubt his neighbors will appreciate.

"A genius, your man is a genius," Grayson says as he lets me down off his back.

"He is," I say instead of denying my claim on him. Because seeing Sebastian's triumphant grin splayed across Grayson's eighty-inch TV has me wanting to stake my claim on him. I don't know if I've ever been the possessive type before, even with my ex, Paul. But as the team rushes the field in celebration of our win and a pretty blonde reporter bats her lashes at

Sebastian while interviewing him ... I get the urge to fly to Oregon just to paint a big red x on him that says he's mine.

I watch the post-game press conference like I'll be quizzed on it tomorrow. Grayson teases me, but I tune him out. It's not hard when Sebastian rolls up his sleeves mid-interview, exposing toned forearms. He lifts a hand to rake it through his hair, showing off the streak of purple paint still there. His eyes lock on the camera and I feel like he's staring right at me. When he smirks, I know he knows I'm watching.

I can't decide if I want to kiss him or hit him. Even hours away he's teasing me. A tingly thrill skates down my spine as I gaze into his sparkling blue eyes. He gets under my skin like no one else. I hate how much I love it.

When the conference goes off I grab the box of leftover pecan bars from Grayson's fridge, give him an obligatory little sister hug, and leave. After the week I've had, you'd think I'd be exhausted, ready to crawl into bed, but no. I'm on edge waiting on Sebastian to come home. He told me he would fly back tomorrow morning, so I'm sure he's on his way to the hotel right now. Before I climb into my SUV, I send him a text.

MJ: Congrats on the win. You saved us in the fourth quarter with that call.

I don't wait for him to text back, because he probably won't. He just won a crazy game and traveled yesterday. The last thing he's thinking about is me. I'm pulling out of Grayson's neighborhood when my phone rings over the car speaker. Sebastian's name is flashing on my dash and I quickly press the button on my steering wheel to answer.

"Hello?" I say, trying to keep my voice level.

“Hey, beautiful.” His smooth voice comes over the speaker, filling my car.

“I thought you’d be busy right about now,” I say and I’m proven correct by the cacophony of voices and noises on his side of the phone.

“I’m never too busy for you.” I smile in the dark of my car, turning on my blinker when I come to a stop sign. “What are you doing?”

“Driving home,” I say as I turn left. “I watched the game at Grayson’s. What are you doing? Or what should you be doing?”

He chuckles and the sound reverberates through the car. “I’m riding to my hotel. All people want to talk about is the game.”

“And you don’t?”

He hums and I feel it in my bones. “I’ll talk about the game with you. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

My face flushes with heat.

“Miss me already?” I tease him in an attempt to cover up the effect his words have on me. It doesn’t work.

“Immensely, Meadow Jane. And you miss me too.”

“I saw the paint on your arm,” I change the subject.

“Yeah?” I can hear the smirk in his voice. “I knew you would.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“You liked it.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s right. I loved it. It was like a secret message just for me.

Someone says his name and I hear doors opening and closing along with more voices. He must be at the hotel.

“You have to go,” I say quietly, turning onto my street.

“No, I’m about to walk into the hotel, we can talk all night.” In the span of his one sentence, I hear *Coach Bash* eight different times. He sighs. “Say the word, and I’ll quit right now.”

I laugh. “It’s not that bad. Plus, I’m only with you so that I can make changes to the playbook.”

“Oh well, in that case, they’ll have to drag me off the field because I’m never quitting.”

I shake my head even though he can’t see me. “Hang up, Sebastian.”

“I want to pretend we’re in high school and say ‘you first,’ but I’m afraid with your attitude you’d really hang up on me.” More shouting of his name comes through, this time he shouts back that he needs a minute.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say as I park in my driveway.

“You will?” He sounds surprised. My face heats in embarrassment. Maybe I shouldn’t have expected to see him.

“If you want me to, that is.”

“Meadow Jane, there is nothing that would make me happier.”

“Text me when you land tomorrow,” I say, secretly hoping he’ll text me before he takes off too.

“I will. Goodnight, Meadow.”

“Goodnight, Sebastian.”

The line clicks off, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the sound of my car running. Everything about this feels so normal, so *right*. Like we’ve been calling each other after games for years.

Can anything this good last?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Meadow Jane Carter

Pulling up to Sebastian's estate—there is no way someone could think of this as merely a *house*—has my stomach in knots. I should have told him I'd see him another day this week, but my stupid hormones turned me into putty this morning when he called to tell me good morning on his way to the airport. The man's morning voice would make millions if he recorded it. He could read a book about tires and every woman out there would clamor to have a copy.

"Welcome, Ms. Carter," the security guard greets me as he hands back my driver's license.

"Thank you," I say and give him a nod before rolling down the winding driveway.

Trees clothed in the oranges and browns of autumn line the drive, scattering leaves over the paved road. Sebastian's mansion looms over the property, a vision of modern architecture boasting so much glass it's a wonder I'm not struck blind by the reflective panes as I pull into the circular driveway.

Sebastian is waiting at the bottom of a staircase that looks like it would be annoying to bring groceries up every week, though I doubt the man buys his own groceries. I twist my lips, trying not to match the grin on his face. He'd tease me for missing him too much if he saw it.

Getting out of my car, I resist the urge to run and jump into his arms like he's been gone for years. Instead, I step around my car and stroll toward him as if I have all the time in the world. The wicked grin he's wearing sends warmth swirling through me. I stop in front of him, keeping a couple steps between us, and have to tilt my head up to meet his twinkling blue eyes. His jaw is stubbled this morning and my fingers itch to run over his skin, but I hold back. I won't break first.

"Meadow Jane," he greets in his silky voice.

"Sebastian," I reply coolly.

"How was your drive?" he asks, as if I'm a work colleague at a business event.

"Pleasant. How was your flight?"

He crosses his arms, his muscles bulging with the movement, shown off in his fitted gray tee. My eyes flick down to his arms and back to his face, but he catches the stolen glance and smirks.

"My flight was fine." He takes a step toward me and my heart picks up speed. *He's going to break first.* I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my winner's grin from breaking loose.

"Just fine?"

Another step closer. I keep my feet glued to the ground. One more step and we'll be toe to toe.

"I had a little too much pent-up energy to be stuck in a confined space," he says and I raise my eyebrows.

“Really? I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve been relaxing all weekend.”

“Is that so?” He reaches out and snags one of my hands, which is covered in tiny bits of paint I tried and failed to scrub off before I came and holds it up. “Couldn’t sleep?”

I regret ever telling him about my painting habits, now he knows my tell. He presses a kiss to the palm of my hand, then the inside of my wrist, his eyes never leaving mine.

“That’s from this morning.” I’m not technically lying, *some* of it is from this morning.

He pulls me into his chest so suddenly I almost melt into him, but I manage to refrain.

“You are so stubborn.” He makes stubborn sound like a term of endearment. “Tell me you want me to kiss you, Meadow Jane.”

“Why would I do that?”

He tips my chin up and I wonder if he can feel my heartbeat with how close we’re pressed together. Desire fights restraint in his eyes. “Because if you don’t, I won’t kiss you.”

“You already kissed me,” I breathe out. “Twice.”

“Is that enough for you? A kiss on the hand, the wrist?” He leans in close, his breath fanning my face. I swallow and manage to stand firm.

“I’m content,” I whisper, my lips almost brushing his. He chuckles and the sound sends a delicious chill down my spine. He backs away, surprising me.

“If you’re content, I’ll show you around the house.” His muscles are taut and I know it’s taking everything in him to stay back. Unfortunately, my resolve is fraying. I don’t think I can make it through a tour of this huge

mansion without kissing him, and Maddie is inside, so if she follows us around, then who knows when we'll be able to sneak away.

I reach out and grab his arm, turning him around before jumping into his arms. He catches me as if he were waiting to the entire time. His arms wrap around me, my legs wrap around him. I grab the back of his neck to pull his lips to mine, but he stops short.

"Tell me." His words are more of a plea than a command. The unbridled fervor in his voice breaks me.

"Kiss me." He swallows up my words, taking my mouth with his own. The anticipation of our game gives way to bone-melting desire that has me thankful I'm being held up by him. He guides me backward until my back lands against my SUV door, the cool metal pressing into my back, making me gasp into the kiss.

He deepens the kiss and groans when I rake my hands through his hair. He tastes like sweet mint and smells like citrus and sandalwood. For a moment I wonder if he'd notice me stealing his cologne during the tour. The thought is swept away when he leaves a trail of kisses from the corner of my mouth down to the space below my ear. He nuzzles into my neck and sighs, sending a shiver through me.

"We should go inside," he murmurs against my skin, making me want to do the exact opposite. "Maddie knows you're coming and I'm afraid she'll stop editing her photos long enough to realize I'm not inside."

"If you would have kissed me right away, we would have had more time."

"But that would ruin the fun," he says and nips my earlobe before setting me down. I push at his shoulder halfheartedly, my face flooded with heat and my lips swollen from our kiss.

“Come on, show me around your glass castle.” I take his hand and he intertwines our fingers.

“If this is a castle, that must make me a king.” He grins and I roll my eyes.

“More like the jester.”

“I do make it my mission to win your smile.”

He opens the imposing door to reveal a foyer boasting high ceilings, a stunning black iron staircase, and a fresh floral arrangement that likely costs thousands of dollars sitting on a table in the middle. It’s crisp and modern, but not devoid of life. Though if I owned a home with all of these windows, there would be a lot more plants.

“Let me show you the living room first, and then we’ll go find Maddie in her room,” Sebastian says and leads me through a long hallway lined with photos. Some are of Maddie and Sebastian, some are photos that Maddie took for her portfolio, and there’s even one of Sebastian covered in confetti, holding the championship trophy. Each photo burrows into my chest, snuggling up to my heart like a baby kitten.

The moment we turn into the living room my heart stops. Sebastian’s hand tugs against mine and he looks back at where I’m frozen in place. Above his black marble fireplace is a painting I haven’t seen in almost a decade.

“Where did you get that painting?” The question comes tumbling out before I can stop it.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” He smiles and walks me over to it. “I got it at a charity auction maybe eight or nine years ago. I think Maddie was two at the time. She wasn’t sleeping and since she wasn’t, I wasn’t. My life was pure chaos and I wanted to hide away from the world, but my publicist

committed me to going to this auction. I remember seeing this painting and feeling like it saw me. Does that sound crazy?” He huffs a laugh and I shake my head.

“No, not crazy at all.” I study the familiar painting. It’s an ocean sunrise scene, but it’s not this peaceful array of pastels and wispy clouds. No, the sky is so dark blue it’s almost black, and there’s the faintest burst of orange and yellow on the horizon, barely illuminating the rough waves below. My throat is tight and I have to work to swallow.

“I bought it because it said *hope* to me. I don’t know anything about art.” He laughs, no doubt recalling our time in the museum. “But it was like a sign to keep going. It reminded me that no matter how bad the night is, there’s a new day coming. I wanted to thank the artist for creating my favorite painting, but they donated it anonymously.”

Yes, I did do that. I didn’t want any recognition or to be involved with the elite. I just wanted to support a cause that spoke to me: cancer research. I painted this around the time of my breakup, which was also around the anniversary of my mother’s death. The darkness was what I wanted to paint, but the light broke through anyway.

What are the chances that Sebastian has *my* painting hanging in his home? The only one I’ve ever sold, at that. It seems impossible. Have we been so intertwined all along? The thought makes my palms sweat and I hope Sebastian doesn’t notice.

“It’s very beautiful,” I tell him because I don’t think I can reveal that he’s staring at the artist of his favorite painting. “Your taste in art might not be totally tragic.” Maybe if I tease him he won’t notice I’m on the verge of a mental spiral.

“Careful there, that was almost a compliment.” He winks and leads me away from the painting. I’m grateful he didn’t notice anything off about my reaction to the painting. Sharing the vulnerability of that time in my life is not something I’m prepared for in the slightest.

The house is an open concept, so you can see the kitchen and dining room from the living area. There’s also a wall of windows that shows off the backyard. I spot the bushes that Maddie must have taken her self-portraits in front of, along with a pool and a firepit surrounded by Adirondack chairs. It’s a massive home, but it doesn’t feel oversized. It is odd that only two people live here, which I voice.

“When I took the job with the Thrashers I knew I was putting down roots. I didn’t want to buy a small house when I had hopes of filling up a big one someday,” he explains, leading me down a hallway.

“How much were you planning to grow?” He could fit a few generations in a house this big.

“I’ve always wanted a big family. What about you? You grew up with four brothers, did that make you want a lot of kids?” he asks the question casually, but it’s more than just making conversation to me.

I haven’t talked about my future with anyone in *years*. It’s a fact that startles me, like seeing a shadow on the wall and panicking before you realize it’s your own. I made the choice to be private, but it’s only recently that I’ve begun to notice just how isolated I’ve become.

“I like big families,” I answer him when we get to Maddie’s door. “My house was loud and chaotic growing up, but I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.”

He gives me a look that makes my heart warm and gooey. “You’ve got a soft center hiding under all that attitude, Meadow Jane.”

I bite my lip to stifle a smile and knock on Maddie's door before he can say anything else. The door whips open and I'm stumbling backward as Maddie barrels into my arms.

"I *knew* you two would get together!"

I give Sebastian a look and he shrugs. "I didn't tell her. She guessed when I said you were coming over."

"Friends can visit friends," I say and Maddie pulls back to give me an eye roll.

"Yeah, and I'm sure friends make out in the driveway too."

I gape at her. Sebastian rubs a hand over his mouth to hide a smile.

"You were spying on us?" I ask, trying to keep my voice level.

"I get the security alerts to my phone, so I looked out the window to see you." My skin flushes in embarrassment. She did not need to see *any* of that. "Don't worry, as soon as I saw you getting all spicy I ran back to my room. I didn't want to see all of that."

"*Spicy?*" I choke out and she shrugs as if it's no big deal.

"I heard the word on TikTok." Definitely convincing Sebastian to delete her account. "Wanna see my room?" She doesn't give me a chance to answer, just drags me inside.

She gestures wildly with her hands as she explains every item in her room. I try to pay attention, but my eyes keep drawing back to Sebastian. He's leaning in the doorway, with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at us with a fondness that makes my chest ache.

I rub the patch of skin between my collarbones and listen to Maddie talk about how she wants her own studio in the house so she can take portraits with professional backdrops.

“You have to help me convince Dad. He says I have to practice more so that he knows it’s not a phase before he buys a whole studio.” She smiles at me, mischief in her baby-blue eyes. “I bet he’ll listen to *you* if you tell him.”

I give her a smile and tug on one of her curls. Sebastian and I are barely a couple and she’s already trying to leverage me. She’s too clever for her own good.

“I think you should listen to your dad, he knows best.”

“What’s that?” Sebastian smirks from his place in the doorway. “Did you just say I know best? I’ll remember that for future arguments.”

“For *Maddie*,” I emphasize and he laughs.

“Too late, you should have been more specific.”

“Is he always this unbearable?” I ask Maddie and she lets out a long suffering sigh.

“Yes, I should get a reward for my endurance.” I snort at her word choice.

Sebastian narrows his eyes and then stalks across the room, picking Maddie up with ease and throwing her on her bed to tickle her. She shouts at him and kicks, but it’s no use. The man is pure sculpted muscle. I’m laughing at both of them when Sebastian’s arm shoots out and snakes around my waist, throwing me down next to her. I shriek when he tickles me too. His evil grin is giant as he somehow manages to torture us both with ease.

When he finally lets up, he plops down on his back to the left of me while Maddie is on the right. Our laughter subsides leaving just the sounds of our breathing for a moment. I stare up at the canopy over Maddie’s bed, wondering how this is my life. Sebastian’s hand finds mine and he squeezes

it. I turn my head to look at him, meeting his soft gaze. There's a tsunami of affection pouring from his expression. I have to turn away to avoid the tears threatening to surface.

Sebastian has opened the door to my little fixer-upper heart, rolled up his sleeves, and gotten to work. With every reassuring word, he sweeps out the cobwebs. Each sweet kiss is like a fresh coat of paint. And moments like this feel like he's repairing cracks in the very foundation of my heart. It's overwhelming and I can't decide if I want to push him out or ask him to stay forever.

When Maddie reaches out and grabs my other hand, the part of me wanting forever gets a little bigger. Maybe I'm allowed to have this after all. Maybe I don't have to be alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sebastian Holt

“If the word *cheerleader* comes out of your mouth I will kick you in the ribs,” Meadow says, giving me a warning poke with her toes. She’s splayed across my couch, her feet draped across my lap. Her hair is an ebony waterfall, cascading down to the floor in shiny waves. She looks at home here.

“You’d make a cute one though,” I tease and she scowls at me, making me laugh. “What did you go as last year?”

Charlotte—or Lottie, as Meadow calls her—is hosting her annual Halloween party this Friday. Apparently, costumes are necessary, and you don’t get in without one. It’s the Friday before a huge game, but if Meadow is inviting me to something, I’m not going to miss it.

“A Monet painting,” she says with a faint smile. “I painted my arms and face and wore coordinating colors.”

“I’d let you paint me. It’s not too cold this week, and if I don’t wear a shirt you’ll have plenty of space to be creative.” I smirk and she pokes me in the side again, this time harder.

“Be serious!” she scolds me, but I see the playful glint in her hazel eyes. “We only have a few days to get a costume together. Everyone has been planning their costumes for weeks, we can’t be outdone.”

“It’s adorable when you get all competitive,” I hum and lift her leg up to kiss her ankle. Her expression remains passive, but her cheeks tint pink, giving her emotions away. “What about a play on your name? You could be a field of flowers.” She almost always has some sort of flower on her, whether real or fake. Even now her jeans are embroidered with yellow daisies down the hip.

“What would you be then? A gardener?” She scrunches her nose, but I shrug.

“Works for me. It would be an easy costume for both of us. You’ll be so gorgeous no one will even glance at me anyway.”

“You should know by now I prefer vinegar over honey in conversation. Empty flattery will get you nowhere.” The challenge in her eyes has me pushing out of my seat and crawling so I’m hovering over her.

“And you should know by now that my flattery is never empty when it comes to you.” I brush my lips over hers.

“Your flattery is full alright, full of delusions.” She stumbles over the end of her sentence when I dip my head down to kiss her neck.

“You beautiful, cynical, dream of a woman,” I whisper against her skin. She’s traded her usual lavender scent for something that smells of freshly peeled oranges and vanilla. “No lavender today?” I question, pressing a kiss below her ear, feeling the thrum of her pulse.

“I wear lavender when I’m stressed,” she says, toying with the hair on the back of my neck. “Well, I suppose I like the scent enough to wear it just because, but it’s usually for the aromatherapy.”

My mind flashes through all the times I've smelled lavender on her. Is she really stressed so often?

"Does that mean you're not stressed today?" I lift my head and peer into her eyes, the green in them brighter than usual. Her dark lashes flutter, those berry-stained lips of hers tipped up in an almost imperceptible smile.

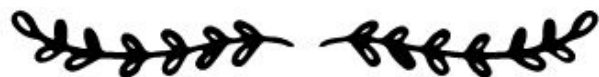
"Will you gloat if I say I'm not?"

"Most definitely." I grin and she shakes her head, her fingertips still absentmindedly toying with my hair, brushing it back from my forehead now. Her touch creates a spiral of want within me. It's just like her to be my undoing and not be aware of it. I'm better off with her not knowing though, because I'm certain her hazel eyes would sparkle as she brought me to my knees. And I would love it.

"Then I won't say it."

"Good. I was worried you were going soft on me."

She rolls her eyes, but her smile stretches her lips a little more. When she pulls me down into a kiss my world tilts. I'm in danger of her seeing right through me and figuring out just how in love with her I am. She needs time and I want to give it to her. If she sees my heart before she's ready, it might scare her away. I can tell she's holding something back from me, though I don't know what it is. I'm taking every little piece of her she'll give me and hoarding it like the treasure it is. As long as I can maintain control, maybe I'll get to have all of the pieces to this gorgeous puzzle of a woman.



"Wow," I breathe out when Meadow answers the door.

“Is it too much?” She spins around, showing off the cascade of fresh flowers pinned into her waist-length hair. I have no idea how she managed to secure them; it seems as if they just sprouted out there. As if she truly is a meadow.

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect,” I say when she faces me again.

Her nose wrinkles, crinkling the weave of vines she’s painted across her face. The vines extend down her neck and arms as well. Flowers of various colors and species are growing from the vines, and there are even thorns and thistles which makes me smile. A field of flowers, yes, but always with an edge. Her dress is a beautiful green with embroidered dandelions all over it.

“You certainly look the part.” She laughs. I’m wearing cargo pants and a henley, plus I have a belt with different gardening tools attached to it hanging from my hips. I even smeared some potting soil on my clothes to make it look realistic.

“Thank you,” I say with a cheesy grin. “Are you ready to go?”

She grabs a crocheted bag from a hook by the door then steps out, locking up. “Let’s go.”

I open the car door for her and she takes a moment to settle in, not wanting to ruin the flowers in her hair or have her long dress get caught in the door. After she’s settled, I close it, get in the car, and head toward her friend Lottie’s house.

Meadow is quiet during the drive and when we get there she doesn’t hurry to get out of the car. Instead, she stares straight ahead at the full driveway.

“What’s wrong?”

She turns to me, trepidation in her hazel eyes. “I’m not nervous.”

I smile at her blunt delivery. “That’s good.”

“I mean, I don’t get nervous. Or at least I haven’t for a very long time.” She tucks her hair behind her ear, a sprig of lavender moving with it.

“It’s okay if you’re nervous tonight. I know some of your friends, they can be a lot.”

She lets out a light laugh. “They can be, yeah, but I’m not worried about them. I don’t do *this*.” She gestures between us. “I don’t know what to say to people about you, about us. There are a lot more than just friends behind that door.”

“What do you want to say to them?”

“That our relationship is none of their business.”

I shrug. “Then say that.”

She blinks at me, glances at the front door as more people walk inside, then looks back at me again. “It won’t bother you?”

“I’m pretty sure the fact that I won’t be able to keep my eyes or hands off you all night will say enough.” She gives me a disapproving shake of her head, but she wears a timid smile.

“What if I say I don’t like PDA?”

“I’d refrain, but then we’d both be in agony all night.” My lips stretch into a smirk. “But maybe that would be fun. How long do you think you could last before you gave in?”

Her eyes darken in a way that makes me want to pull out of this driveway, park somewhere private, and kiss her senseless.

“Let’s play,” she says, and my skin tingles in anticipation. “We can hold hands, that’s it. Whoever does anything more loses.”

“You’re on, Meadow Jane.”

We get out of my car and head inside, hand-in-hand. Her sweet floral scent wraps around me and I'm already dying to pull her close. I am a stupid, stupid man. I should have locked the car doors until she agreed to stay tucked under my arm all night, letting me kiss her when no one was looking. Or when everyone was looking because I wouldn't mind everyone knowing that the woman who looks like some sort of ethereal garden fairy is mine and mine alone.

"MJ!" A feminine voice squeals before Meadow's hand is ripped from mine in order to be attacked in a hug by a flurry of lavender hair.

"Hey, Soph. We saw each other not that long ago. You can let go now." Meadow grimaces as Sophie squeezes her once more then steps back, bouncing like she's dressed as the energizer bunny tonight instead of what looks to be a detective.

"You both are the cutest couple ever," Sophie coos and I chuckle.

Meadow doesn't grab my hand back right away, but I don't want to be the first to give in. Her eyes meet mine and when she raises a dark brow, I know that a new level has been added to our tortuous game.

"Thank you," I say to Sophie as Ben walks up. He's got fake blood going down the side of his head and dirt all over his t-shirt and jeans.

"So, what are you two supposed to be?" I ask, which seems to be the magic question because Sophie lights up, her gray eyes wide as saucers.

"I'm a detective, and Ben is the murder victim! He was left for dead in a ditch off the highway and I am the genius detective on the case."

"That's ... morbid." Meadow laughs beside me.

Sophie frowns as if she's just now thinking about this. "I thought it was cute."

“It is,” Ben says and kisses her temple. “Now, let’s go see if you can find any more clues.”

“Clues?” Meadow questions and Sophie grins.

“Ben hid clues throughout the house so I can solve the case for real! Best husband ever.” She kisses him, marking his lips with burgundy lipstick. His skin tints red and he drags her away, likely so we won’t tease him.

“Come on, let’s go say hi to Lottie so when we leave early she can’t complain too much.” Meadow starts to reach for my hand but stops.

I smirk. “Already thinking of sneaking away with me?”

Her eyes meet mine, holding my gaze in defiance. Hidden in the swirl of green and brown is a river of desire she’s putting on display just to taunt me.

“You’ll have to give in to find out,” she replies and saunters away, leaving me to follow her like a lost puppy. And follow her I do, because I’d follow her to the ends of the earth if she’d let me. She’d roll her eyes *for sure* if I said that out loud.

Lottie has her wrapped up in a hug in the living room before she can even utter a greeting. I’m caught off guard when the petite blonde drags me in for a group hug. My chest presses into Meadow’s back and this is the least romantic thing in the world with Lottie gripping my arm and babbling about how she’s so happy for us, but I don’t make a move to leave the awkward embrace. If Lottie wants to force me to be all over my beautiful girlfriend—a word I’m only using in my head until Meadow confirms it—then so be it. I will soak up this loophole all night long.

Meadow pushes out of the awkward hug sandwich and shoots me a glare. I give her a crooked grin back. Out of the corner of my eye I see Lottie’s

husband, Callum leaning against a wall watching us. He looks as if he's avoiding everyone here.

"MJ, you look gorgeous. I love the flowers in your hair," Lottie gushes.

"Thank you, you look beautiful as well. Barbie suits you," Meadow says wryly and Lottie grins, tugging Callum toward us.

"Doesn't Sterling make the most darling Ken?" She pats his cheek and he glowers. "He wanted to be Superman and Lois Lane, but I won our deciding bet."

"Sterling?" I question, wondering if I misremembered his name.

"Last name," Meadow explains. "It's their thing."

"Like how you call her by her first name." Lottie sighs with a faraway look in her eye. "We always hoped someone would sweep MJ off her feet—"

Meadow cuts her off. "Do not start spouting your hopeless romantic mush or I'm leaving," she warns, and Lottie huffs her assent.

"You can't leave before you try the special cookies I bought for you! They're in the kitchen and they have a special label and everything."

Meadow's expression softens and she reaches out to squeeze Lottie's hand. "Thank you, that was sweet of you. I'll go get some now so I don't forget, okay?"

"You're welcome. You two have fun!" She winks before dragging a reluctant Callum off to another group of partygoers. I get the impression he's not much of a people person.

"I think your little hug should count as a loss," MJ says over her shoulder as we walk to the kitchen. The house is packed, so single file is necessary even if we weren't avoiding touching each other.

"Lottie forced me into that, it does not count in the slightest."

“You *lingered*,” she says as we enter the kitchen. Surprisingly, it’s much quieter in here and devoid of people. It looks like most of the food is on a table in the living room, but Lottie put the cookies for Meadow in here.

“I can assure you, if I broke, it would not be debatable. You would know.”

I cross my arms and lean against the kitchen island. She copies my movements opposite of me, leaning against the cabinets. Her eyes rove over me with reckless abandon.

“I think you want to say I lost because you desperately want to touch me,” I challenge her, and she gives me a signature eye roll.

“What a brilliant conclusion, you should steal Sophie’s detective costume.”

“I don’t need to play detective. I know how to get under your skin, Meadow Jane.” I cross the space between us and plant a hand on either side of her but keep my distance.

“Careful there, you’re playing a dangerous game, *Coach*.” She keeps her arms crossed and a teasing grin on her full lips, but I see the anticipation in her eyes.

“I have a pretty good record, I think I’ll be okay.”

“Maybe on the field, but not here.”

“I seem to remember you jumping into my arms during a game just like this.”

She leans in, her sweet scent calling me to close the distance. “And I seem to remember you begging me for permission to kiss me,” she whispers against my lips.

“That’s not how I recall it,” I rasp out, but I know she’s right in a way. If anything, our last game was a tie. It was foolish of me to bring that moment

up, because now it's all I can think about. She smirks like my thoughts are on a billboard above my head for her to read.

"Kiss me," she taunts in a silky voice.

I could hold back. I could back away and make her laugh by sticking my head in the freezer or something equally ridiculous. But I waited a long time for someone like Meadow Jane to walk into my life, and then I waited more to have her say yes to being in it. So I might let go of my fierce competitive streak occasionally if it means I get to kiss her.

"Torturous woman," I growl and crash my lips into hers. She smiles into the kiss before gripping my henley and kissing me back. She tastes like honey and happiness. I'm lost in her without a care.

When someone clears their throat, forcing us to part, the pretty blush on Meadow's skin makes my already thumping heart skip.

"Reminds me of us last year," someone drawls, and I turn to see Meadow's friends Wyatt and Grace standing in front of the kitchen door. Grace hits Wyatt, her face flushing.

"Don't listen to him. We did *not* kiss. I was still very much mad at him."

"She was checking me out the whole night," Wyatt whisper-shouts conspiratorially. Somehow, Grace's face gets brighter. Meadow laughs near my ear, her breath hitting my neck.

"They're the ones making out in the kitchen! We should be making fun of them, not turning it back on me."

"But you're so cute when you blush, Angel." Grace turns on her heel and leaves, Wyatt chasing after her, laughing.

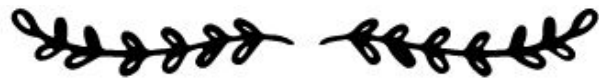
"We should probably go before everyone comes in for a show," Meadow says and kisses my jaw.

"Or we could sneak out of here ..." I trail off.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.” She lets out a heavy sigh. “*But* this is my best friend’s biggest party of the year. As much as I’d rather be home with you, we should stay.”

Home. She said *home*. My heart is soaring. I dip down for one more honey kiss and then smile at her.

“Alright, we’ll socialize for a little while, then head home.” Yes, I could get used to that word.



“In your FACE, Sterling!” Lottie bumps Callum’s shoulder with hers as she walks past him. He glares at her, but it’s a teasing one.

“You’re ahead by *one* point.”

“A win is a win,” she says then sits down on the bench. Callum grumbles something unintelligible and snatches a bowling ball off the rack.

Yes, our plan of hanging out and then sneaking away turned into staying until the party ended and Sophie suggested going to a bowling alley. I had no idea bowling alleys were open past midnight, but now I have that information on hand. However, Meadow’s clear disdain for bowling will keep me from using that information in the future. She only agreed to come because Sophie and Lottie both begged her to.

“We’d be ahead by more if *somebody* participated.” Lottie shoots a pointed look at Meadow, who is curled up against my side, not unlike a kitten, hazel eyes drooping.

“OH! Strike, baby!” Callum shouts and leans down to kiss Lottie’s cheek, who pushes him away with a faux scowl. Sophie gets up next for her turn.

“I agreed to come, not to play,” Meadow says. “Bowling is for people who can’t play real sports.”

“You don’t play any sports,” Grace points out with a laugh.

“Just because I don’t doesn’t mean I *can*’t.”

I kiss the top of her head, my shoulders shaking with barely contained laughter.

“I think you don’t want to play because you’re bad at bowling,” Lottie sasses.

“Of course, I’m bad at bowling. I never bowl. Because it’s a *dumb activity*,” Meadow says like it’s obvious.

“So snarky,” I tsk and she lightly pinches my knee.

“I’ve been around people for too long,” she grouses.

“Once the guys win, you can go home,” Wyatt says with a cocky grin that earns him an elbow to the ribs from Grace.

“Pride before the fall, Cowboy,” Grace warns, but Wyatt’s grin doesn’t fade.

It’s my turn to bowl, so I lift Meadow away from me. She scrunches her nose and I kiss it, making her giggle.

“You did *not* just giggle,” Grace whisper-shouts in a way she likely thinks I won’t hear while I’m grabbing the bowling ball.

“Shut up,” Meadow mumbles and I grin, barely able to concentrate on my turn. I shrug my shoulders up and down, trying to focus. Everyone here—except Meadow—cares *a lot* about this game, so I don’t want to make anyone mad by doing poorly.

“Are we placing bets on the wedding date yet?” Lottie asks right as I’m letting go of the ball. It slips out of my hand awkwardly and falls into the

gutter. A wonderful animation declaring my gutter ball plays on the screen for everyone to see.

“Bash, what are you doing out there man?” Ben asks, as if this is a Thrashers' game and my job is on the line.

“Sorry man I lost my grip,” I call back and grab another ball with shaking hands.

I really wish they wouldn't tease Meadow about marriage, even if that's something common in their group. As wonderful as this time with her has been, it feels too fragile to joke about a wedding date.

This time I manage to knock a few pins down, but it doesn't help much. I hope these guys like me enough for it to not affect their opinion of me. Meadow is her own person to be sure, but I know deep down she values her friends' opinions.

When I sit back down Meadow resumes her position of cuddling my side. I brush her hair out of her face, smiling at her closed eyes and peaceful expression, and kiss her forehead. The group goes silent, so I look up to find them all frozen, watching us.

Sophie sniffs, wiping under her eyes. Lottie looks like she might cry too. I blink, unsure of what's happening.

“Thank you,” Grace mouths and nods down to Meadow.

Oh. They're emotional over us. I manage to nod in acknowledgment of the odd show of emotion.

“Is it over yet?” Meadow murmurs and everyone snaps back into action.

“No!” Lottie shouts and springs up. “It's my turn.” She shuffles over to get the ball. I'm pretty sure it's not her turn yet, but no one says a word.

I guess I've gained their approval. My eyes are drawn back down to the woman I love. I wonder what it is about her that has her friends reacting so

intensely over me merely holding her. Of course, I know that she was on a hiatus from dating this year. But I don't think that would constitute this level of joy. It just goes to show there's even more to her than I thought.

As I gaze at her falling asleep in my arms, I'm overcome with a sense of honor that I get to be the one here with her. The one she feels safe enough to cling to like this, even in front of her friends. It gives me hope that I'll get to be the one to hold her forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Meadow Jane Carter

“Sebastian...” I trail off, staring at the lanyard in my hands. “This is too much.”

“It’s really not,” he says, smiling at me from his place on the couch.

“You gave me a VIP Pass. I don’t know what to say.”

This pass will get me into an exclusive box seat with an amazing view of the field and countless amenities. It’s no small thing.

“Say thank you and call your brothers to tell them they have box seats for the game this weekend.”

“You can’t be serious. They’re going to freak out. A *thank you* is hardly enough.”

“I’d accept other expressions of gratitude as well.” His smile morphs into a smirk. I push his shoulder, laughing.

“Thank you,” I say, unable to keep myself from beaming at him.

“Anything to make you smile like that.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, affection written all over his face.

“You can’t mean that,” I say with a flustered laugh. My face feels flushed under his warm gaze.

Get it together, MJ, I scold myself. *You are not the giggly, blushing maiden falling over the dashing prince. You're the villain with the dagger to the prince's neck and a twinkle in your eye.* Ugh, I should have never read that fantasy romance Grace recommended. Now my head is full of nonsense.

"Oh, but I do mean it, wholeheartedly." He presses a kiss to my lips. "Anything in the world, ask and it's yours."

"In that case, I want to be on the sidelines this weekend, not in a box." Using humor to deflect isn't my usual form of avoidance, but it's all I can do in the face of such an earth-shattering promise.

He chuckles and pulls me so I'm sitting on his lap.

"If I did that, I wouldn't be able to coach. I'm barely going to be able to focus knowing you're in the stadium." His thumb traces circles on my hip bone and heat radiates from the spot.

"I'll take your headset and coach then," I say with a grin.

"There's also the fact that several times a game, giant men barrel over the sidelines and knock into people. You're the strongest woman I've ever met, but you're also the size of a pixie." To prove his point, he stands up, taking me with him.

I don't even need to hold on to him. The man is basically a tree. I glower at him and poke his stupidly muscular chest as he holds me up.

"Do not call me a pixie, Sebastian Holt. There will be consequences."

"I said you were the *size* of a pixie. Put away your dagger, beautiful." Heat creeps up my neck because surely he couldn't hear my thoughts about daggers and princes earlier, right?

He kisses me, agonizingly soft, before setting me back on my feet.

"Now, are you going to call your brothers?"

I tilt my head to the side, dazed. The last thing on my mind is my family or even my new VIP Pass. Now I'm just wondering what he would look like in a crown. My blush worsens when he catches me staring and a knowing smile appears on his lips.

I clear my throat. "Yes, I'll call and invite them. Can I invite my dad, too?"

"Invite as many people as you want. If we run out of room, I'll buy another box." It's such an outrageous notion that I go to laugh, but he looks completely serious.

It's obvious Sebastian has money. I'm standing in a mansion made out of glass protected by an entire team of security guards. But he never flaunts it, so when he says things like that it shocks me.

My stomach twists. I hate thinking of the disparity between us. He's a famous millionaire who's eleven years older than me, with a daughter he's raised on his own. I'm a jaded art teacher with a heart so scarred you can barely tell it's a heart in the first place. And yet he showers me with affection and gifts. It makes no sense.

"What's smothering the light in your beautiful eyes?" Sebastian tips my chin up.

"Nothing," I say and try to bring a smile to my lips. I've never been good at faking a smile though. I've never cared enough to try.

"I know when you're pulling away, tell me why."

I wrap my arms around his waist, hiding in the fabric of his t-shirt.

"I'm not pulling away," I say, my voice coming out muffled. "Just a little doubt creeping in about this being a reality."

"It is real." He squeezes me tight. "*This* is what's real, not whatever is in your head." He kisses the crown of my head.

I want to believe him. But it just doesn't come naturally to me. My heart has been shattered in my chest for so long. I've been existing with mere pieces of it. I have to hope that he'll be okay waiting while I sift through all the broken fragments and try to fit them together again. And hope is such a scary, vulnerable thing.



"You're my favorite sister in the whole world," Grayson gushes and swings me back and forth as he lifts me off my feet in a hug.

"I'm your only sister," I deadpan as he sets me back on my feet.

We've just arrived at the stadium for the game today and I have all my brothers with me. My dad decided to stay home. He's the kind of guy who thinks his couch is better than even the finest stadium seat. He's likely where Adrian and I inherited our aversion to crowds.

"She didn't do anything anyway," Levi jokes and ruffles the top of my hair. "Sebastian is the reason we're here."

I scowl and smooth my hair back down, second-guessing my decision to let it hang free without a braid or ponytail. Sebastian has made it clear that he loves when my hair is down. He runs his fingers through it and calls me things like a *beautiful siren enchantress*. I'm pretty sure he stole that senseless fantasy book Grace lent me because I haven't seen it since he came to my house a few days ago, and that's when the compliments rose in their intensity. Unfortunately, my blush makes it impossible to refute any of his over-the-top compliments, so he continues to torture me with them. And I may or may not indulge him by wearing my hair this way.

“You act like he would have given us seats without being obsessed with MJ,” Grayson says and slings an arm around me as we walk to the entrance. “Our beloved sister has landed Atlanta’s most eligible bachelor. That deserves praise.”

I jab my elbow into his side, eliciting an *oof* and making him drop his arm. “Do not talk about me like I’m some gold digger. People could hear you.”

“No one would ever think that of you,” Maverick assures me.

“No, MJ’s right to be cautious.” Adrian surprises me by speaking up. “We know her, reporters don’t.”

“No one will pay attention to me. For all they know, I’m family,” I say. “Which is why I want everyone to be quiet about the nature of our relationship.”

I give Grayson a pointed look.

“You know that eventually you’ll be known as his girlfriend, right? Your name will be everywhere,” Levi oh so helpfully points out, effectively turning my stomach.

I don’t like being the center of attention in any capacity. The idea of so many people knowing my name makes my skin crawl.

“Stop trying to scare her,” Maverick says and tucks me under his arm, ever the gentle protector of the group. “She’s happy, let her be happy.”

“Thanks, Mav,” I say as we arrive at the VIP gate.

I hold up my lanyard for the attendant to scan and as soon as he sees it his eyes widen and he’s gesturing at one of his coworkers to come over.

“Take our guests to the *Coach’s* box and be sure that they have anything they might need.” The man’s voice is firm toward the other attendant, but

when he turns to me it softens again. “Welcome to Daniel H. Porter Stadium. We hope you enjoy the game.”

“Thank you,” I reply and then we’re escorted toward our box seats. The attendant is fast on his feet and clearly nervous, though we’ve given him no reason to be. My brothers are all laughing and messing with each other along the way and I’ve said nothing to intimidate the man. Is Sebastian’s name really all it takes to induce this level of service and awe?

We walk through the VIP lounge area, which sports state-of-the-art televisions, a full restaurant, and people in clothes that are the furthest thing from game day attire I’ve ever seen. They look like they’re going to a business meeting in a high-rise.

“Here we are,” the nervous attendant says in a shaky voice. “Let us know if there’s anything we can provide for you.” He opens the door for us.

“MJ!” Maddie squeals, jumping up from a leather recliner and barreling toward me.

“Hi sweetheart,” I say with a soft smile and hug her tight.

It’s been a wonderful few weeks with Sebastian, and Maddie has added to the beauty of it the entire time. She’s such a good kid and so easy to love.

“Gram is here and she wants to meet you.” My smile freezes in place. No one told me I’d be meeting Sebastian’s *mother* today. “Uncle Grayson!” Maddie cheers, launching herself into my brother’s arms. He picks her up and spins her around, both of them laughing.

“MJ, is it?” A woman with Sebastian’s kind eyes greets me from across the room.

“Yes, ma’am.” I swallow.

“I’m Sebastian’s mother, Virginia. It’s nice to finally meet the woman who my son and granddaughter are so enamored with.” Her gaze searches

me, but I can't tell if she finds me lacking in some way or not.

"It's nice to meet you as well." I offer what I hope is a polite smile. I don't know what to do here. Sebastian didn't even tell me his mom knew about us. I suppose it makes sense. She babysat Maddie when we were off other places, but still. I'm not sure what all he's told her or wants me to tell her.

"Maddie and I were going to stay home today, but she begged me to come when Sebastian said you'd be here."

Maddie hears her name and takes that as her cue to join the conversation after her fun with Grayson.

"MJ, come look at all the snacks Dad got for you." She grabs my hand and drags me to a table filled with food. "You can eat everything here," she beams, spreading her arms wide.

Each little label on the trays of food confirms what she's saying. There are mountains of fruits and veggies, sandwiches, cookies, and so much more. All of them fit into my restrictions. My throat tightens and I bite the inside of my cheek.

I love him. The words are a whisper in my mind, but they hit with the intensity of a tornado. I have tried so hard not to fall in love with him, but he's made it impossible, that wretched, wonderful prince of a man.

"Is everything okay?" Adrian asks in a low tone, watching me with his observant ice-blue eyes. *No, everything is not okay. I've fallen in love and I'm afraid of what that means.*

"Yes," I whisper around the emotion gathered in my throat. "This is great, Maddie, thank you for showing me," I tell her, but she's already talking to Grayson again. He listens to her as if she's the most important person in the world.

“May I ask why you have so many restrictions?” Virginia’s voice breaks through the haze of my mind and I turn toward her. She gestures to the large couch by the windows looking over the stadium. We both sit down together.

“I suffer from chronic migraines,” I explain. “I found out that restricting or limiting certain foods helps me keep them at bay. But I also feel better overall when I eat this way.”

“I suffer from inflammation in my joints, and I’ve heard changing my diet could help, but I have no idea where to begin.”

Our conversation picks up easily as I tell her all that I know about nutrition and herbs that could help her, even teas to ease her pain. Soon enough she’s laughing and telling me about Sebastian as a boy. He was as exuberant as he is now, according to her, and wild too.

By the time the game is about to kick off, I feel as if I’ve known her for years.

“I like you,” Virginia says, making me smile.

“Thank you, same to you.”

Gaining the approval of Sebastian’s mother, along with realizing my love for him, has me feeling raw and shaky at the start of the game. It’s hard to focus during the first half, even with my brothers shouting and commenting. It also feels odd to watch the game from inside an air-conditioned room with snacks and drinks and attendants, as nice as it is.

There’s a door leading out into the open-air stadium where we can choose to sit in a select few seats if we want to. Everyone else seems content to watch through the windows, but I step outside.

The sound of the fans hits me like a train as soon as I walk out. Fresh air fills my lungs and I smile. *This* is a football game.

Our seats are positioned under an overhang, and the lack of sun has me wrapping my arms around myself, wishing I was wearing more than a long sleeve tee. It also reminds me that yet again, I've left my jersey in my closet.

Wearing that in front of Sebastian would certainly reveal too much. If he knew I had a crush on him when I was so young, what would he think? My lips tip up in an involuntary smile. He'd probably tease me about it for the rest of our lives.

I'm lost in thought about a life with Sebastian when the other team breaks through our defense and scores right before halftime. I gape at the field. *What was Sebastian thinking?* Even half-watching the game I knew that was a bad play against this team. They got through so easily and now we're down by three points, and we won't get the ball first in the second half.

The team returns to the locker room and I give it ten minutes before snatching my phone out of my pocket and calling him. It rings three times before he answers.

"Meadow?" He laughs as if he can't believe I would be calling him right now. He should know better.

"If you don't start making better calls, I'm coming to confiscate your headset."

He laughs again, not at all concerned with my threats. "There was a communication error, not a bad call."

"Well, if you don't *communicate* better this next half I'm going to come down there."

"If this didn't involve anyone else's livelihood, I'd mess up just to see your gorgeous self march down here all riled up. Just thinking of those

pretty eyes glaring at me is giving me chills.”

Suddenly, I’m no longer cold. I can hear the smirk in his sultry voice and it’s sending sparks across my skin.

“I have to go, beautiful. Try to behave, at least until I’m around.”

The line clicks before my brain can catch up and formulate a response. Shortly after that, the team runs back on the field. Sebastian’s face flashes on the jumbotron and he’s wearing the exact smirk I pictured on our call. The cameraman needs to move off him quickly before every woman in the stadium has a heat stroke.

“What are you smiling about out here?” Levi asks as he steps beside me, jolting me out of my reverie. “Have you not seen the scoreboard?”

“I’m not worried,” I say. But I am. Not about the game though, but about my heart. Because it’s becoming more and more vulnerable lately. No longer made of steel, it’s soft and squishy and fond of a certain gorgeous football coach and his sweet daughter.

The problem is, even if I’m in love with Sebastian, I don’t know if he can be in love with me. Not when I’m hiding so much from him. I’d have to gather the courage to bare my soul to him. He’s stayed through my sarcasm, taken care of me during a migraine, and didn’t give up when I pushed him away after. Even just a few days ago, he assured me that my doubts weren’t founded. Maybe it’s time for me to share my secrets.

Levi shouting and shaking my shoulders yanks me into the present. The Thrashers just scored, so now we’re winning again. I laugh at Levi’s whooping and try to focus back on the game.

I can think about how to share my past another time. Right now, I just want to soak up this moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sebastian Holt

I lean against the podium, trying to smile at the reporters asking me questions about the game. Usually, post-game conferences are fun for me. I make a few jokes, talk about winning—having an undefeated record ensures I always get to talk about winning—and tell them what we should have done better so my team doesn't watch it back and have their egos inflated.

This time, however, I'm thinking about a raven-haired beauty waiting for me outside of the stadium. My patience wears thin when reporters start to ask dumb questions.

"Coach, you had a lead there at the end of the fourth quarter, I was wondering why Jones didn't come off the bench. We're all wanting to see him. Isn't he going to be the go-to next season?" a reporter asks.

"We just secured a victory over one of the stronger opponents in this conference, and you still want to question my personnel choices." I shake my head, laughing. "This press conference is over."

The reporters are laughing with me as I walk out. A few try to snag my attention again, but the only thing I care about right now is seeing my girl. I

speed toward my stadium office, breaking into a jog as I get closer. I told Meadow to meet me there after her brothers left.

I open the door and Meadow jumps before turning around. She caps the marker she's holding and bites her lip. Behind her on the whiteboard is a play I did not draw out.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask and she widens her eyes, trying for an innocent look.

"I was listening to the press conference," she says and hops up onto the edge of my desk. "I liked the ending."

"The part when they asked the stupid question?" I close in on her, standing between her legs.

She grins. "Yes. I like when you get all frustrated." Her fingertips toy with the zipper of my windbreaker.

"Is that why you changed the play I had on my board?" I place my hands on her hips. "To frustrate me?"

"No, that was because my play is better." Her smug smile makes me chuckle.

"Did you have fun in the box?" I change the subject, eager to know if she liked the food I had catered. Her playful demeanor shifts into something softer.

"Yes." She pauses, her hazel eyes growing misty. "Sebastian, you having that food brought in was so thoughtful. Thank you."

"I wanted you to be comfortable. Every home game it'll be set up like that for you if you want it." Her smile tightens and my brow furrows. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I've had a long day. Your mom came, so I met her. She was really nice, but it was a lot all at once."

I wrap my arms around her and draw her into my chest. She smells like lavender and it makes my stomach clench. She must be stressed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think she was coming today. I had hoped to introduce you myself.” I run my fingers through her hair, hoping to soothe her, but it’s also calming me down.

“It’s okay. We got along great. There’s just a lot on my mind.”

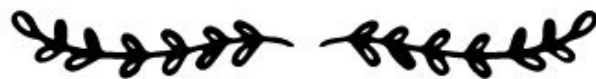
“Anything you want to share?” I kiss the crown of her head.

She pulls away and gives me a weak smile. “Not right now, but soon.”

I manage to smile back at her. I don’t want to push her, but moments like these do tempt me. She’s hurting, and I can feel the tension stretching thin. I’m worried that she’s going to snap, not out of anger, but under the weight of all she’s carrying. All I want to do is help her carry the load, maybe even help her to let some of it go.

“Okay, I’ll be ready to listen whenever you’re ready to share.” I kiss her forehead.

“Thank you.”



“It’s coming back on!” Maddie shouts from the living room. I rush in from the kitchen where I was grabbing coconut water for all of us. I drop the water bottles in between Maddie and Meadow, making them squeal when the icy plastic hits their legs. Then I hop over the back of the couch and plop down next to Meadow.

Suddenly, there’s a cold bottle pressed against my neck. I hiss and snatch it from Meadow, who’s laughing at me.

“I bring you a drink and this is how I’m repaid?”

“Shhh!” Maddie presses the remote and we all quiet down. Every Monday, the college football rankings come out. The Thrashers are undefeated, but so are our rivals, the Bobcats. So either of us could rank at the top this week.

“And finally, ranking in at number two ... is the Carolina Bobcats.” Maddie squeals at the reporter's words and Meadow hugs my arm. “Which means, for yet another week, the Georgia Thrashers are number one!”

I grin and turn to Meadow, who presses a soft kiss to my lips. “Not bad, Coach,” she says.

“The Thrashers and the Bobcats will go head-to-head this weekend, determining who will head to the division championship,” the reporter announces before Maddie mutes the TV again.

“You’re going to crush them, Dad,” Maddie says with a smile and I reach over Meadow to ruffle her blonde curls.

“Thanks, kiddo.” She crinkles her nose up at my words and my heart jumps to my throat. *Has she always done that? Or did she learn it from Meadow?*

“I’m in *middle school*, Dad, you can’t call me kiddo anymore.”

“I’ll call you kiddo when you’re thirty if I want to.” She rolls her eyes. “Don’t get an attitude with me or I’ll leave you here when we go to get ice cream later.”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t have an attitude!” she squeaks. “I’ve never had an attitude in my life.”

I laugh at her and shake my head. “Go finish up your homework and then we’ll go get ice cream.”

She scrambles off the couch and runs down the hall.

Meadow burrows into my side and I wrap her up in my arms, breathing in her sweet citrus scent. I'm happy she's not wearing lavender today, though I could have used a little of it waiting on the results. I don't care that much about rankings early in the season, but now we're getting into bigger and bigger games. Everything is high stakes.

"Are you coming with us to get ice cream or are you going to head home?" I ask her. She traces the Thrashers' logo embroidered on my polo shirt.

"I'll come with. I won't get to see you much this week with the big game this weekend."

"Aw, so you're saying you're going to miss me?" I tease her and she pushes up and away from me.

"On second thought, I'm going to go. I think a break from your ego will be refreshing." She stands up and I reach out, grabbing her by her waist and pulling her backward into my lap.

Her laughter fills me to the brim with happiness. I keep one arm secure around her waist and use the other to move her hair so I can pepper her neck and shoulder with kisses. She squirms in my lap, but she can't get away.

"Tell me you're going to miss me," I say, lightly biting where her shoulder meets her neck.

"No."

"Then I'm not letting you go." I kiss her again and she hums, making me smile against her skin. She doesn't want me to let her go.

"I finished my homework!" Maddie yells out. "I'm walking in with my eyes closed in case you guys are being spicy."

“I thought we said we weren’t using that word anymore?” Meadow yells back, then gasps when I taste the skin below her ear. “*Sebastian*,” she scolds and I chuckle.

“What? She said her eyes were closed.”

“Insufferable man,” she mutters and I steal one more kiss before letting her go.

“Irresistible woman,” I counter with a cheeky grin.

“Maddie you can come in and open your eyes now,” Meadow announces, parking herself beside me, keeping a couch cushion of distance between us.

“Can we go get ice cream now?” Maddie asks, peering over the back of the couch.

“Yes, go get your shoes on,” I tell her.

Maddie lifts her leg up by her head in one of her dance poses, a tennis shoe on her foot. “Done!”

“You are so odd sometimes. I don’t know where you get it from.”

“You raised me,” she says with a shrug, dropping her leg down and then turning her attention to Meadow. “Are you coming with us? They have smoothies at the ice cream shop.”

I smile at her being considerate of Meadow’s restrictions in our plans.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

“Can you take aesthetic photos of me when we get there? They have this cool photo wall with a neon sign.” Maddie is bouncing on her toes as she speaks.

“Sure, sweetie.”

“Awesome! I’m going to grab my camera.” She bolts off toward her room again.

When I look at Meadow, she's staring off after Maddie with a wistful smile. Having her around, even though she doesn't live with us, has made life so much better and easier with Maddie. They talk often and Meadow encourages Maddie's love of art and dance. Plus, the Carter brothers have all become honorary uncles to her.

It feels like we're merging our lives and families already, especially now that Meadow has met my mom—who approved and asked when I was proposing. But Meadow is still holding back from me, she's said so herself. So it's hard to see her so ingrained in my life but also so distant from me.

I love her too much to give up though. We can get through this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sebastian Holt

“Ben, I need you to give me some good news here.” I pace back and forth in the exam room. My quarterback, Ray Lincoln, sits on the table with his shoulder taped up. He started to feel some pain at practice on Monday, but now it’s Friday and we need to make sure he’s good to go for the game tomorrow.

“He can play,” Ben says, and my entire body sags in relief. We have a good backup quarterback, but the entire offense would have had to adjust if Lincoln was out. “Just have him rest as much as possible.”

“Got it. Thanks, Ben. Glad to see our friendship will still be intact.” Ray laughs while Ben shoots me a look.

“You can’t base our friendship on whether or not your players are injured.”

“I can when we’re playing the Bobcats.”

He shakes his head at me. “Get out of here before I change my mind and bench him just to be safe.”

I laugh and nod my head toward the door. “Come on, Lincoln, let’s get you in a massage chair.”

As soon as I walk out of the exam room and into the practice facility hallway, I'm approached by one of my assistant coaches. He waits for Ray to walk into the locker room where his massage chair is before speaking.

"Coach, we've got some bad news," Logan, my offensive coordinator, says with a grimace. I force myself not to spiral thinking of all that could be wrong.

I sigh. "Let's go to my office then."

He follows me to the small office I have set up in the practice facility. I have one here, one in the stadium, and one in the athletics department. I used to think it was excessive, but on chaotic weeks like these it becomes necessary.

"What's going on?" I ask as I fall into my desk chair. I can't remember the last time I sat down.

"It's going to rain tomorrow, hard. The east coast is getting hit with some massive storm and South Carolina is going to get a lot of rain. The game shouldn't get canceled, but we're going to have to adjust our offense."

Great. So it doesn't even matter that Lincoln is healthy, we're going to have to adapt our pass-heavy offense to a run-heavy one anyway, because passing in the rain would be a nightmare. I scrub my face with my hands, my stubble scraping against my palms. There hasn't been time to breathe, much less shave this week.

"Okay, go find Ray and let him know of the changes. Then find Sanderson and work with him on adjusting our defense, because the Bobcats are going to be changing their offense too."

"On it."

He leaves without saying anything more. The silence of my office is a haven. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. My serenity is short-

lived however because there's a knock at my door. I open my eyes to find one of our public relations managers, Nina, in my office. My stomach drops to the floor. Seeing a PR manager this close to game day is never good.

"Hey, Coach," she says with a shaky smile.

"Nina." I nod to her. "Go ahead, whatever it is, I can take it."

The wrinkle in between her brows deepens.

"Some rumors have surfaced about your love life," she begins, opening the manilla folder in her hands. All of my muscles tense up. "Reporters have photos of you with a much younger woman, who they have found out to be a teacher at your daughter's school."

"I am dating one of my daughter's teachers. I don't see how this is relevant to my career," I grit out, trying not to take out my frustrations on her. It's her job, but I don't have time for this.

"Well, it may come up during the press conference. They are accusing the woman of going after your money and accusing you of neglecting Maddie's wellbeing in favor of a playboy lifestyle."

I press my lips together hard. Why can't reporters let coaches and players live? I knew I shouldn't have given in and done that documentary about my life story. I wanted to spread a message of hope, but now the media knows about Maddie and thinks they have a say in how she's raised. While I don't care what they say because it's all rumors, it could affect Meadow and Maddie's lives.

"How far has the story spread?"

"It's hit a few major news outlets already. People are wanting a statement from you. That may calm them down before tomorrow."

"I need to speak with my family first and then I may make a statement. Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

She nods and then speeds out of the room, likely able to see the anger on my face.

I pull out my phone and call Meadow. She should be home by now, probably packing to travel to the game.

“Hey beautiful,” I say as soon as she answers.

“Hey,” she replies, her voice stilted.

“I take it you’ve seen the news.”

“My face is plastered all over every sports network. My dad was the first to call and tell me. Then my brothers. Then my friends.”

I wince. This is not good. This is the coldest I’ve heard her voice, maybe ever. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how this happened. They want me to make a statement, my PR manager says it would help calm them down.”

“What kind of statement?”

“About our relationship and the nature of it.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line. My chest gets tighter the longer it goes on.

“We haven’t even discussed this yet and you want to involve the media?”

“I don’t *want* to.” I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Then don’t.” The irritation in her voice is palpable through the phone.

“You’ve watched sports for long enough to know stories like this don’t just disappear overnight. I need to say something.”

“I thought you were going to be patient with me, Sebastian. I told you this kind of stuff doesn’t come easy to me. Now you want to define our relationship over one phone call and then tell the entire nation about it?”

My frustration rises, heightened by my lack of sleep and all of the work stress. “I’m not trying to force you into anything, but you have to

understand what's at stake here. This needs to be smoothed out for Maddie's sake." I rake a hand through my hair.

"I understand that, but I can't do this on the spot. I need time."

"Meadow, we've been together for weeks now." I stare up at the ceiling, my eyes burning.

"I know." Her voice breaks and my heart along with it. I feel her pulling away, and my desperation rises to meet her.

"I'm in love with you," I whisper into the phone. "And I don't expect you to say it back. I didn't want to say it like this. But I would have thought I could say we were in a serious relationship by now at least."

"I can't do this right now, Sebastian. There are things—" She cuts herself off. I hear her take a steadying breath. "There are things we need to talk about, not over the phone."

All I want to do is run to wherever she is and sort this out, but I can't. There are too many people counting on me.

"I think you should distance yourself from me," she whispers and suddenly I can't breathe.

"I disagree," I choke out.

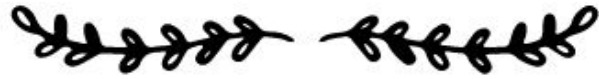
"Say what you need to say to protect Maddie. I won't come to the game tomorrow, so no one will be able to report that I'm there."

"Meadow, please don't do this."

Logan pokes his head in my door. "Coach, we need you to look over the change to the playbook."

"You need to get back to work. I'll talk to you later," Meadow says and hangs up before I can say anything. I clench my hand around my phone, the metal biting into my palm.

“I’m coming,” I tell Logan, and the bite in my tone has him leaving without another word.



Later never came. I tried to reach out to Meadow, but she won’t return my calls. I stare down at my phone before the press conference, looking at the last text I sent her.

Sebastian: Whatever is going on in your mind, let me fight it with you. I love you and I don’t want to lose you.

I don’t know if she read it, because her read receipts are turned off.

“Coach, they’re ready for you,” Nina says, opening the door to the room where all the reporters have gathered.

We won the rivalry game. I’ve been numb since yesterday, but thankfully I put a good enough staff and team together that they managed to secure a win even with my head somewhere else. The rain was brutal, and I’m still drenched from standing in it, but we secured our spot in the conference championship. I should be happy.

I should, but I’m not, because the one woman I want to share this with is hours away not speaking to me.

I walk into the room and stand behind the podium, taking a deep breath and plastering a winner’s smile on my face. They’re all vultures, waiting to swoop in and capitalize on one wrong gesture or word. I won’t give them the satisfaction.

“Hey Coach, the weather was rough today, and they’ve had a good defense all year. How did you decide on your game plan and what made you think it would work as well as it did?”

The first question lets a little bit of the tension out of my shoulders. It's basic and requires no thought to answer. Maybe Nina was wrong, maybe they don't care about the rumors after we won tonight.

"I worked with my coaches and players to create a game plan we thought would work and it did."

"You made it past your rivals this week, what are you thinking about for the championship game coming up?" another reporter asks and I start to settle in. This is good. I can make it through a normal round of questions.

"We're going to celebrate the victory tonight and then get right back into game plans and tactics next week. They're a tough opponent but I've got a good team and staff, so I'm not worried about it."

Another reporter stands and the smirk on his face makes me queasy. I know before he opens his mouth that my normal press conference is out the window. "Coach, how does your daughter feel about you having an illicit affair with one of her teachers?"

It is illegal to punch people in the face, even if they are smug idiots with no moral compass. This is what I have to tell myself to keep from lunging at him. I take a deep breath in through my nose and blow it out. The room is quiet aside from the click of cameras.

"This is a post-game press conference, not a personal interview."

"We're just concerned for the wellbeing of your daughter," he says with raised eyebrows. I consider once more the consequences of unleashing all my pent-up anger on him. Considering I *do* care about my daughter and my career, I suppose I'll refrain.

"If you had any concern at all for her you wouldn't have asked that question, because she isn't here to answer it herself and she's *twelve years*

old.” I white knuckle the edges of the podium. “Now, we can either talk about football or we can discuss the ethics of slander involving minors.”

No one says a word. I snatch my water bottle off the podium and storm out, not caring about appearances anymore. The university won’t fire me for something as petty as this, and my statement should be enough to shut down the rumors. If not, I’ll take an interview next week when I feel less like punching people.

A few people from my staff come up to talk to me but swerve away when they get a good look at my face. I don’t have the energy for pretense anymore. If I look like a raging bull, it’s because I am one.

“I need a car to the hotel,” I say to my assistant when I see her down the hall. She’s seen me angry like this before and thankfully isn’t fazed. She also loves Maddie, so she’s wearing a thunderous look as well.

“Already done, Coach. Out these doors and to the left. Black town car.”

“Thank you,” I say, because even while I’m angry I can’t forget how my mom raised me.

I slam the door to the stadium hallway behind me, the loud noise doing nothing to disperse the tension and adrenaline flooding my veins.

This night can’t get any worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Meadow Jane Carter

I stare at the TV in my hotel room through bleary eyes. My chest hurts from crying so hard and my throat is raw too. Everything aches and I feel weak and foolish. Sebastian is too good for me. Even in the face of cruel reporters, he still didn't deny our relationship. He could have easily thrown me away. He could have told them the photos were misconstrued and there is no relationship between us, but he didn't.

Meanwhile, I drove all the way to South Carolina just to watch the game in my hotel room with tears in my eyes instead of gathering the courage to go to it in person. The dried paint on my hands crumbles as I clench my hands into fists. He deserves more than this.

I wipe my eyes with the bottom of my jersey, the one with his name on the back. On the way here, I talked myself up. My plan was to figure out a way to see Sebastian before the game. I'd tell him I was sorry and that I loved him. He'd kiss me and then go win the game with my favorite lopsided grin on display.

But the closer I got to the stadium, the less sure I felt that I was doing the right thing. Uncertainty crept in and stole away my confidence like a thief

in the night. So I came to the hotel and curled up in the bed, trying to process all of the emotions weighing me down.

If Sebastian and I are going to have a real relationship, then he needs to know everything. But he has enough of his own grief over Mallory's death, he doesn't need to try to shoulder mine as well. Not to mention the pain from the breakup with Paul. I've made our relationship so difficult on him. He's just too kind and stubborn to give up on me.

My hands shake as I gather the charcoal sketches off the bed beside me. The cleaning crew is likely going to hate me for using charcoal on white sheets, but it was all I could think of to manage my emotions.

Unfortunately, every sketch looks so much like the man I'm avoiding. I don't even draw portraits usually, but every time I put pencil to paper my hands created strong jaw lines and piercing eyes. The muted grays and rich blacks do nothing to capture the true nature of Sebastian though. He's too bright, too wonderful, to be encapsulated in shades of gray.

I trace one of the portraits with my fingertip, smudging it and not caring. His last text to me comes to mind. I know he'd fight my demons with me, but he shouldn't have to. I wish I could have come to him a blank slate, absent of the scars that cover my past.

My phone rings and I see Grayson's face on the screen, he's got his tongue stuck out and his eyes are crossed. It makes me smile through my tears and since I'm desperate to be rid of this ache in my chest, I answer him.

"Hey," I croak out.

"Hey baby sis, I saw the press conference. Are you okay?" I know I must sound bad if Grayson is this somber.

“I’m breathing.” *Barely*. “Grayson, why am I like this? He’s so *good*, and I’m a mess.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this after seeing you around Sebastian and Maddie. I know you care about him, but you’re living a close-fisted life, MJ,” Grayson says and I furrow my brows.

“What?”

He sighs. “Hold one of your hands out and close it into a fist.” I follow his instructions, even though I don’t see where he’s going. “You’re holding everything in, like a tight fist. But when you do that, nothing can get in either. Now, open your hand.”

I do what he says. A fresh tear hits my palm and mixes with the charcoal.

“If you live your life with open hands, then you can give love and receive it easier. You’ve kept your own emotions locked up for years and now that someone wants to love you as you are, you can’t accept it because you’re keeping your hands clenched.”

“I answered the phone because I thought you’d say something to make me laugh, not reveal a life-altering truth.”

He huffs out a laugh. “My bad, next time I’ll pull out my book of knock-knock jokes and start reading them.”

I shake my head, smiling through my tears. “Thank you, Grayson. I needed to hear that.”

“That’s why I said it,” he replies in a cheeky tone.

Before I can say much more, my phone buzzes in my palm. I pull the screen away from my ear and check it, frowning when I see Maddie’s name.

“Hey Grayson, I need to go, Maddie’s calling me.”

“Okay, tell Mad Dog that her favorite uncle loves her!”

I hang up on him before I can start crying again. Thinking of my brothers as Maddie's uncles is not good for my fragile emotional state.

"Hello?" I answer Maddie's call, trying to keep my voice level.

"MJ, it's Virginia," Sebastian's mom says and I stiffen.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to Maddie?" My heart picks up speed.

"No, it's Sebastian. He's been in a car accident."

My vision tunnels and my breathing becomes ragged.

"Where is he? Is he okay?" I stand up, searching for my keys.

"He's at the university hospital in South Carolina. Maddie and I are on the way from Atlanta, but it will take a few hours to get there. I couldn't remember if you were at the game or not." She sounds as frantic as I feel.

"I'm here, I'm in town. I'm leaving my hotel now." I snag my keys and tote bag then rush out of the room. I don't explain why I'm not with him and she thankfully doesn't ask.

"Thank you. All I know is that he's stable and breathing. He had a head injury, but they're doing tests right now. I don't know if he's awake or not."

"I will get there and whatever I find out I'll let you know immediately. Will they let me back?" I rush down the stairs, not bothering to wait for the elevator. My knees buckle on the last step, but I push through.

"I'll give them your name. They should let you back. They said he's on the fifth floor."

Rain soaks me as I get in my car, trying not to drop my keys with how bad I'm shaking. "Okay, I have to put the address in my GPS. I'll text you when I see him."

"Thank you. I know he'll be happy to see you if he is awake."

I'm not so sure, but I know I need to see him even if he doesn't want to see me. I hang up and start driving. The rain has slowed down all the cars and I grip the steering wheel tight, wishing everyone would just go *faster*.

When I finally arrive at the hospital, I book it through the icy rain and into the hospital. I take the elevator up to the fifth floor rather than the stairs mainly because my lungs are already burning from crying and running.

I'm shivering when I walk up to the nurses' station and the woman sitting there looks at me like I might be an escaped patient.

"I'm here to see Sebastian Holt. My name is Meadow Jane Carter." I hand her my ID, which is also wet.

"He's in room 514, down the hall to the right."

I put my ID back in my bag.

"Are there any updates on his condition?" I ask instead of running straight to him like every cell in my body is screaming to do. Virginia needs this information and so do I for that matter.

"He's got some bruises and scrapes along with a head wound where he hit the car window." I flinch, not wanting to think of him being hurt in such a way. "They're still waiting on the CT scan results, but he's in good condition all things considered. He was awake and talking earlier but might be sleeping now."

"When will the test results be in?"

"It should take an hour or so."

"Thank you."

After texting Virginia, I speed off down the hall, my canvas sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. Everyone around me is a blur of pale blue scrubs and white coats. I burst into Sebastian's room and suck in a breath when I see him.

His head has a bandage around it and his arms are covered in scratches. My only comfort is the steady rhythm of his vital signs and the rise and fall of his chest under the thin hospital blanket.

I don't bother trying to stifle my tears as I rush to his side, falling down in the chair next to the bed and grabbing his hand. He's warm and I realize I could make him cold, so I quickly drop his hand. He starts to stir and I hate that I might have woken him up if he needs to rest.

"Shhh," I whisper, wringing my hands to keep from touching him again.

His eyes blink open, beautifully blue and terribly bloodshot. A groan slips from his lips and it feels like I'm shattering. I want to take every ounce of his pain and transfer it to me.

"Meadow?" His gaze lands on me and he squeezes his eyes shut for a moment before opening them again like he's not sure I'm really here.

"I'm here," I choke out. "I'm so sorry, how are you feeling?"

He reaches for my hand and flinches when he grasps it. "You're freezing."

"I'm fine, you're the one in the hospital bed." He reaches over and presses a button on a remote.

"Mr. Holt, do you need something?" A voice comes over a speaker nearby.

"Some more blankets, please." His voice is raspy and I realize how much I've missed hearing it in person, how much I've missed him.

"Someone will bring them by shortly."

"Thank you."

He scoots up in the bed and rubs my hands between his.

"Sebastian, stop. I'm okay, you need to rest."

"I hit my head, that's all."

“You were in a *car accident*. Your mom is driving here now, worried sick about you.”

A woman walks in with blankets and Sebastian asks her to set them on the edge of the bed, then thanks her as she walks out. He gives me a look. I huff and grab the blankets, standing up so I can drape one over the now wet chair.

“What are you wearing?”

I freeze in place and look down at the oversized jersey clinging to me like second skin. This isn’t how I pictured revealing this little fun fact to him, but nothing has worked out for me lately.

“A jersey,” I say and wrap myself up in a blanket before plopping down in the chair again.

“With my name on it.” A small smile stretches his lips, like he’s unsure whether he gets to be happy about this or not.

I swallow down the fear clawing its way up my throat. *Open hands*, I tell myself.

“My dad gave it to me when you were still playing because you were my favorite player. I wore it today because I was planning on seeing you.” My face heats and I look at my hands. “Then I panicked and watched the game from my hotel room.”

“You wanted to see me?” The hope in his voice makes me lift my head. Even bloodshot, his eyes hold a warmth I don’t deserve.

“Yes, to apologize for what I said.” I tug the blankets around me more, trying to gather my thoughts. “And to tell you ...” *Deep breath*. “I love you.”

The grin that spreads across his face is like the first rays of light breaking through at dawn. It’s better than my painting in his living room or any

sunrise I've ever experienced. It chases the darkness away and makes this dingy hospital room feel like a garden in full bloom.

"This is officially the best day of my life."

I shake my head in disbelief, fighting the smile trying to come to my face. There's still so much to say. "You're hurt and in a hospital bed."

"I could be at the bottom of a pit and hearing those words would make it feel like I'm on a tropical vacation." He scoots over in the bed and pulls back the covers. "Come here."

"I'm freezing and wet, you don't want me in your bed."

"I know what I want and I also know what you need. Get up here and tell me what's going on behind my favorite set of hazel eyes."

My body aches with longing for him, so I give in even though I shouldn't. There's no way this is good for him. I curl up into his side like I'm the one who's hurt. His fingers trace mindless patterns on my shoulder over the blanket. My muscles instantly relax beneath his touch.

"I'm scared that if I tell you all of this it'll be too much for you," I confess, closing my eyes.

"I'm stronger than you think," he says, repeating what he told me while taking care of me during my migraine.

"Is your head hurting though? I can—"

He cuts me off. "Meadow, I promise I'm okay. You don't need to protect me."

I pause, trying to prepare myself for what I'm about to say.

"My mom died before I graduated high school, from cancer," I blurt out the story I've never told anyone in full. "After she died, I was lost. She was my best friend, and even knowing it was coming didn't help. I felt like I was on a carousel and I didn't know how to get off. My dad was broken, my

brothers were all trying to handle their grief the best they could. I threw myself into my art to try to cope.

“When I got to college, I kept to myself, because I was afraid to love anyone new. All of my nightmares were about losing my brothers or my dad. I didn’t think I could handle losing someone I loved, it’s still one of my greatest fears.” I take in a shuddery breath. Sebastian squeezes my shoulder. “But there was a guy in one of my classes, Paul. He flirted with me and convinced me to go out with him and some friends one night. From there we spent most of our time together.”

“I feel like I’m going to want to punch Paul,” Sebastian says in a tight voice.

“Probably,” I admit, then continue. “It was hard being at college while my brothers and dad were doing their own thing. Grieving wasn’t easy when no one knew what was going on. After we had been together for a while, Paul told me I was *too much* for him.” Sebastian tenses beside me. “He couldn’t take all of my emotions and he had found someone else who made him happy. He broke my heart the same week of the anniversary of my mom passing. It hurt me so much to think that my emotions were a heavy enough burden to ruin our relationship.”

“Forget a punch, I’ll kill him,” Sebastian growls and I pat his chest over his hospital gown.

“If he wouldn’t have broken my heart, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“That’s the only thing saving him.” He pauses. “That, and my head injury.”

“After that day, I shut down. My art was my only outlet, aside from a few minor conversations with friends and family.” Here comes another big confession. “You know the painting in your living room?”

“Yeah?” His confusion is warranted. I haven’t said a word about it since the first time I saw it.

“I painted it. I was in the darkest time of my life and had this image of pure black over a raging sea, but while I was painting, I found myself adding that sliver of light on the horizon. It meant hope to me, too.” I fiddle with the hospital blanket. “I donated it because the charity was for cancer research. I wanted to honor my mom through the pain.”

Warm fingers tilt my chin up until I’m staring into Caribbean blue eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Meadow Jane, you are amazing.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “Look at me, please,” he whispers. I open my eyes again, tears flowing down my face. “You think that all of this makes you damaged, but it doesn’t. You created beauty in the midst of pain, trying to help others even while you were fighting for every breath.”

He presses a gentle kiss to my lips. “But you don’t have to do it alone anymore. I’ll be here with you, fighting back the darkness side by side, because I love you. All of you. You’re not too much, you’re *everything*.”

He kisses me again and it tastes salty from my tears. Each brush of his lips is a healing balm on my heart. I thought I couldn’t be loved, but he’s showing me just how misguided I’ve been.

“I love you,” I whisper against his lips when we finally break apart.

“Say it again,” he begs in a low voice.

I kiss him and whisper the words over and over in between each press of my lips. He holds me like he’s never going to let me go. For the first time in what feels like forever, I let go of all my hesitations and trust that when I fall, I’ll be caught by him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sebastian Holt

Two weeks later

Blue and white confetti rains down as everyone swarms the field. As many conference championships that I've won over my career, this feeling never gets old. And I feel even more blessed because I was cleared to coach after my concussion. I can't stop smiling. Every person I come across is trying to shake my hand or pat my back. My eyes scan the ever growing crowd for my two favorite girls.

I push through people, laugh at my players rolling around in the confetti, and walk in circles for what feels like forever when I finally spot them. Meadow runs toward me with her moonbeam smile and jumps into my arms. Her legs wrap around me and the momentum has us spinning.

"Not bad, Coach," she says in my ear and I laugh. Her lips find mine and my eyes burn with tears because this is all I've ever wanted.

As soon as I set Meadow down I pull Maddie up into a bear hug. She giggles and hugs my neck.

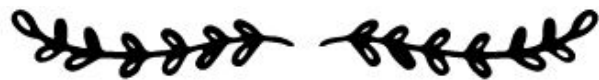
"Good job, Dad!" I ruffle her curls after I put her down and she crinkles up her nose.

There's not even a moment to breathe before security ushers me over to the makeshift stage set up in the middle of the field. I keep hold of Meadow and Maddie, intent on them sharing this moment with me. All of my players crowd around, smelling of sweat and grinning from ear to ear.

"It is our honor to present the SEC Championship trophy to the Georgia Thrashers!" The announcer yells into a microphone over the roar of the crowd and the giant trophy is lifted up over our heads.

I get my team to lower the trophy enough for both Meadow and Maddie to touch it, then they hold it high while I hug my girls and smile for the cameras. My heart is so full I can't help the few tears that slip out.

I'm whisked away again, this time on my own, to the press conference. The last time I had a press conference was terrible, but it feels like ages ago now that I have what I have. Even the media can't bring me down tonight. All of my dreams are coming true.



Hours later, I meet Meadow in my stadium office. The hallway is dark and most everyone has gone home at this point. My post-win adrenaline has dwindled, but the anticipation for what's about to happen next has me just as jittery.

"Hey, beautiful," I say, leaning on the doorframe. She looks up from where she's sketching with one of my pencils on a post-it note. Lately she's taken to leaving small sketches in my office whenever she stops by or hiding them in the house for me to find. It's her version of a love letter, and like the lovesick sap I am, I keep every single one.

“Are you ready to go home?” she asks and stands up, stretching her arms toward the ceiling. Her jersey rustles with the movement and I grin at the sight of her in it. My name has been on her back for years, before I even knew her, and tonight I hope she says yes to it becoming her name too.

“Yeah, I just need to stop by the practice facility first if that’s okay?”

She nods her assent to my question, yawning. “Sure, let’s go.” Her smile is sleepy and adorable as she takes my hand.

It’s been a long day for both of us, but I knew she wouldn’t expect a proposal tonight. She’s a difficult woman to surprise because of how observant she is. I didn’t want her to guess if I tried to take her somewhere on a day when we had more time. It was a risk to plan this on the night of such a big game. We could have lost, and it wouldn’t have been a good day to propose. But I took the risk, and it paid off. Or rather, it will pay off, when she says yes.

Meadow leans into me, holding onto my arm as we make the trek to the practice facility. I have to focus on breathing deep to keep my hands from shaking. She would know something was up right away.

I’m not worried that she’ll say no. As much heartache as we’ve walked through, I know with all that I am that Meadow Jane Carter is my future wife. I’ve known for a long time, but now I’m certain she feels the same. So my nerves aren’t based in uncertainty, but on wanting to make this moment worthy of the woman holding my hand.

I suck in another breath as I scan my lanyard to get into the building. My right hand pushes open the door while my left leads Meadow inside.

“Sebastian,” she whispers when we step into the facility. The rafters are strung with twinkle lights, there’s soft music playing over the speakers, and

wildflowers are strewn down the turf field, creating a path for us to walk to the center.

“Come on,” I say and walk her down the field.

As we walk through the flowers, I start the speech I’ve been agonizing over but have likely forgotten completely.

“The first time I saw you, I was enamored by your very presence. I knew you were special, I felt it deep in my bones.” She smiles softly up at me. “Then I got to talk to you and your attitude intrigued me, I became addicted to your quips and subdued smiles. Your love of football was icing on a very delicious cake.” I wink and she hits my shoulder, laughing. “I joked that I wanted to marry you in your classroom, but the moment I knew I wanted to was right here in this building.”

We make it to the fifty-yard line and I turn to face her, holding both her hands in mine. Her hazel eyes are misty and her smile has me wanting to pull her in and kiss her.

“You came in with Maddie and I saw my future. I saw you on my couch laughing, you and Maddie talking about photography, the both of you running toward me after winning a game like you did tonight. I knew right then that I would do anything to make you mine, to be yours in return.”

I pull the velvet box from the pocket of my khaki pants and get down on one knee in front of her. Tears stream down her face, but she’s smiling. It’s the rare kind of smile she saves just for me. The one that holds nothing back and makes me feel like I’m flying.

“Meadow Jane Carter, I love you, and I promise to choose you every day for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?” I open the box to reveal a diamond set in a thin gold band that twists like a vine.

“Yes,” she whispers, dropping to her knees in front of me. “With all my heart, yes.”

She throws her arms around my neck and I hold her like the precious treasure that she is. And then I pull back and kiss her with all that I have. When we pull apart, we’re both grinning with tears in our eyes. I slip the ring on her finger and she bites her lip.

“I’m so happy,” she says, sounding like she’s in awe.

“Are you going soft on me?” I taunt and mischief glitters in her eyes before she lunges at me, catching me off guard so that I fall backward onto the turf.

Her lips capture mine in a kiss that is anything but soft. She rakes her fingers through my hair and trails teasing kisses down my jaw until I’m breathless. When her teeth graze my earlobe I flip us over, cradling her beneath me. Fire burns in her eyes and the smirk on her lips sends tingles through me.

This is our forever. Flirting, teasing, giving and taking. A thrill runs through me at the thought of this woman being my wife, in the fullness of the word.

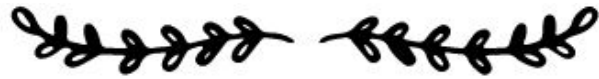
“My beautiful, stubborn, *perfect* future wife,” I murmur against her lips. She arches up trying to meet my kiss fully, but I stay just out of reach. “Ask me to kiss you,” I rasp out.

“Kiss me.”

“That didn’t sound like a question.”

“*Please.*”

I kiss her and we melt into each other, fitting perfectly just like I knew we would the day I saw her.



The door clicks shut behind us, the house dark and silent for a breath of a moment.

“She said yes!” I shout and Meadow looks at me with wide eyes.

All of the lights flick on and cheers erupt from our friends and family. Meadow gasps and then laughs as everyone rushes toward us to congratulate us.

Maddie runs up first, hugging us both at the same time.

“I totally called it that you guys would get married,” Maddie says, making everyone laugh.

The rest of our friends and family take turns hugging us and saying how happy they are for us. My face is going to be sore from smiling so much.

“So when are y’all thinking of getting married?” Lottie asks while admiring Meadow’s ring.

“It’s a little soon to be asking them that,” Callum says with a chuckle and she rolls her eyes.

“I didn’t mean an exact date, I just wanted to know the month at least.”

“Whenever she wants to get married, I’ll be there,” I say and kiss the top of Meadow’s head.

“Soon,” Meadow answers, looking up at me. “I don’t want to wait.”

“Vegas?” I ask and she scrunches up her nose, making me laugh.

“Absolutely not.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I say and tuck her into my side. “Let’s just celebrate tonight.”

“By the look of MJ’s hair, y’all already celebrated plenty,” Sophie says, poking her head into our group.

“Don’t say a word,” Meadow warns, her cheeks pink as rosebuds. Her hands lift to try—and fail—to smooth her hair down.

“I don’t think I have to,” I say. She elbows my side and everyone laughs.

I look around the room at all the people we love, then down at the woman I love above everything, knowing that I must be the luckiest man alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Meadow Jane Carter

Three weeks later

At the end of today, I'll be a wife. The thought has my pulse fluttering like a hummingbird's wings. I'm marrying Sebastian *Coach Bash* Holt today. I press my hand to my stomach and take a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself.

A knock sounds at the door to my hotel room and when I peek out the door I see Virginia standing there. She beams at me and pulls me into a rose-scented hug when I open it.

"You look so beautiful, dear," she says and walks into my room. I wanted a few moments to myself before putting on my dress, so all of my best friends are in a room down the hall waiting for me to come take photos with them.

"Thank you." I reach a hand up and run my fingers through my natural waves. With Sebastian's love of my hair being down, I had to let it run wild today. It also suits our wedding destination, Bali, quite well.

"I came by because—" She clears her throat and twists the pearl bracelet on her wrist. "Well, I know that the mother usually helps the bride into her

dress on her wedding day. And I know I'm not your mama, but I didn't want you to have to do it alone if you didn't want to."

Tears spring up in my eyes and I have to blink them back. I don't have on much makeup, but I don't want to ruin the little I did put on. Not having my mom here has been the hardest part of this whole process.

"Thank you, Virginia. I'm so thankful that you'll be my mother-in-law. I would love to have the help." I swallow down the emotion in my throat when she hugs me again.

"You have made my baby boy so happy, it's the least I can do."

I step over to where my dress hangs from the top of the door and pull it down. The thin, gauzy fabric is cool against my skin. I chose something relatively simple and lightweight since we're getting married on the beach.

Sebastian flew our friends and family out to be here with us and paid for them all to stay a few days before the wedding as well. This whole week has been filled with sun, sand, and laughter. Oh, and *so* many stolen kisses. My skin heats thinking of when Sebastian pulled me close on the beach late last night before we went to our separate rooms. I push the thought away, not wanting to blush so intensely in front of Virginia.

I slip off my robe in the bathroom and step into the dress, then walk out so Virginia can zip up the back. The moment is quiet and somber, but there's no bitterness today. I know my mom would have loved Sebastian and been close friends with Virginia. When the back is done, she hugs me once more with tears in her eyes.

"You are the most beautiful bride I've ever seen, MJ." She snags a tissue off the end table and dabs it under her eyes. "Look at me, a blubbering mess. Go look at yourself in the mirror while I calm down." She waves her

hands toward the full-length mirror across the room. I give her a warm smile and do as I'm told.

When I see myself in the mirror I almost can't believe it's me. Before Sebastian, I pushed away thoughts of marriage and white gowns for years. Even though I've tried the dress on already, seeing myself here, ready to walk down the aisle, is surreal.

My dress has a modest sweetheart neckline, with off-the-shoulder sleeves that are made of transparent chiffon. The simple white gown gathers at the waist and then flows to the floor, brushing the tops of my bare feet. I look sun-kissed and ... happy.

Another knock sounds at the door, making me jump.

"Delivery for the most beautiful woman on the island." Sebastian's low, sultry voice sends a cascade of tingles through me.

"You're not supposed to be here," I call out, smiling back at Virginia as I walk to the door to hear him better.

"I have a present for you. I won't look, but I wanted to hear your reaction."

I open the door and reach my hand out blindly. Sebastian presses a kiss to my palm, making me giggle before setting a box in my hand. I pull the present through the crack in the door and he sticks his foot through the opening to keep it from closing all the way.

"I didn't get you a wedding present," I say as I undo the lavender silk ribbon on the box.

"Tonight will be my gift." My face flames.

"Your mom is in here," I scold him and he chuckles. Virginia snickers behind me.

"Just open the gift, beautiful."

I lift the lid and gasp. Laying in a bed of white satin is a gold locket with my future initials engraved on it.

“It’s stunning,” I whisper.

“Look on the inside.” The tinge of excitement in his voice makes me feel like a kid on Christmas morning. I snap open the locket and let out a surprised laugh.

“It’s a painting of your eye. You got me a lover’s eye locket. I thought you said it was weird.” I brush my fingertips over the resin painting.

“It is,” he says and I laugh again. “But you said it was romantic. So I had it made to show you that no matter what, I’m going to do everything I can to make you smile, to make you feel loved.”

I can’t stop the tears from escaping now. Hopefully the mascara Lottie used on me won’t run.

“If you don’t leave I’m going to end up kissing you,” I say through my tears.

“Then I’ll go, because I don’t want to spoil the moment I see the love of my life walk down the aisle. I love you, Meadow Jane.”

“I love you, Sebastian.”

He slips his foot out the door and then he’s gone, leaving me a crying, overjoyed mess.



All of my best friends are married, and all of them have told me what this moment was like. The moment when you’re standing across from the love of your life at the altar. They said you feel like everyone else has faded

away and it's just you two up there. I didn't believe that I could be standing in front of a group of people and have them fade away, but now I do.

Sebastian takes my hands in his, smiling down at me with tears in his eyes as he prepares to say his vows. "Meadow Jane, you are an incredible woman. You drew me in with your beauty and wit, but I fell in love with you because of your heart. It was locked up tight at first," he says with a knowing grin. "But once you let down your defenses, I got to see just how loving and caring you are. You love with all you have, and I vow to cherish and honor that love for the rest of my life. I promise to put you first, to protect you, and shower you with affection even when you say you don't want me to." I laugh and he does too. "I love you."

I take a deep breath of ocean air and squeeze his hands for comfort.

"Sebastian, you showed me love when I couldn't accept it, when I was scared to love you back. You cared for me and showed me love could be light and safe. I didn't want to admit it, but I was attracted to you long before I even met you," I say and he gives me a smug grin while everyone laughs. "But I fell in love with you because of your thoughtfulness and generosity. I promise to put you first, to love with all that I have, and to correct your playbook whenever it's clearly wrong."

Sebastian throws his head back and laughs. The officiant walks us through the ring ceremony and as soon as it's over my stomach dips in anticipation.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife, you may kiss your bride!"

Sebastian's grin makes my heart skip as he settles one hand on my hip and slides the other under my jaw. The playful glint in his eyes has me wondering if he's going to make me say please in front of all our friends and family, but his lips crash into mine without a word.

I grip the front of his linen dress shirt and sink into the kiss. Everyone cheers behind us and the wind whips my hair around me. The air smells of salt and coconut lotion. My heart soars with the seagulls above us. When we pull apart the sheer adoration in Sebastian's eyes takes my breath away.

"Everything," he whispers to me, his voice barely audible over the wind. "You're everything and more to me."

He pulls me into a hug and kisses my shoulder.

"I hope you love me a lot," he says into my hair and I scrunch my nose up.

"We just got *married*," I laugh. "Of course I love you a lot."

"Good, then that means you'll forgive me for this."

Before I have time to even process his sentence, I'm scooped up in his arms, ironically in a bridal style. But instead of carrying me down the aisle, he turns and sprints toward the ocean.

"Sebastian!" I squeal as he rushes into the water. Laughter and whooping sound behind us, so I look over my shoulder. My brothers are running in too, Grayson carrying a giggling Maddie in his arms.

The cool, tropical water hits my back and I get barely a moment before a wave comes and splashes over us. I'm effectively drenched, but too euphoric to care.

"My beautiful siren enchantress," Sebastian says with a grin, giving me a salty sweet kiss.

"Once the bliss of this moment wears off, I'm getting payback," I say against his lips.

"I'm counting on it." He softly bites my bottom lip.

"Dad! MJ!" Maddie yells as she swims over to us, a huge smile on her face. "Can I ask her now?" Maddie asks, looking up at Sebastian, her

blonde ringlets falling over her eyes.

“Let’s get out of the water first,” he says.

“Ask me what?”

Carrying me out of the ocean in a soaking wet dress while his clothes weigh him down should be at least a *little* difficult, but he isn’t even breathing hard. He sets me down, my feet sinking into the wet sand as the water laps at my ankles. I look down at my dress, worried it might be on the translucent side now, but it seems to have fared well. I cross my arms over my chest just to be safe.

Adrian helps Maddie out of the water so she doesn’t have to swim out in her dress.

“Thanks, Uncle Adrian.” Maddie grins up at him and he pats her head with a faint smile.

“Anytime, Mad Dog.” I smile at his use of her new nickname. He walks over to where my brothers are all dunking each other in the ocean, shaking his head in disapproval.

“Go ahead,” Sebastian says to her and Maddie tugs on her pale blue dress, giving me a nervous smile.

“You’ve been treating me like a daughter for a while now,” she says and I smile down at her. “And I know that you haven’t tried to replace my mom or anything. But I think you’re a great mom and I was wondering...” She looks down at her feet in the sand. “I was wondering if you would adopt me, like officially.”

“Maddie,” I say, tears mixing with the ocean water on my skin. I didn’t think I could be any happier today. “Of course I will. I would be honored.”

I draw her into a tight hug.

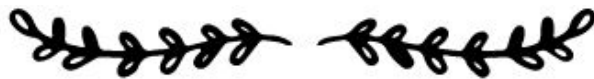
“A-and I also wanted to know if I could call you Mom instead of MJ now.” I squeeze her even tighter, unable to answer at first because of the emotion making my throat close.

“Yes,” I whisper and kiss the top of her head. “If that’s what you want, I would love that.”

Sebastian’s wet arms wrap around us, and we stand together as a family. After spending over a decade believing that I couldn’t have this kind of love and joy, I finally get my moment in the sun.

Epilogue

Author's Note: Since this is the last book in the Sweet Peach Series, I wanted to do something special. I decided to give you a glimpse into each of the Sweet Peach girls' lives in the future. I didn't want to skip too far ahead though, so these next few scenes are all set during the year after MJ and Bash's wedding. If you haven't read the other books yet, you can skim until you see MJ's name again for just their snippet and a peek at my next series. Otherwise, I hope you enjoy these scenes with your favorite couples! Thank you for reading my books and helping my author dreams come true. -Annah



Charlotte Sterling

“I told Callum I wouldn't cry,” I sniffle into the microphone and everyone laughs. Callum squeezes my hand from beside me. “I just wanted

to thank everyone for coming to celebrate with us tonight. This is a dream come true for both of us and none of it could have happened without your love and support.”

“To Curly-Q!” Brad cheers, lifting a glass of sweet tea. Everyone lifts their glasses and repeats after him around the event space we rented out for the occasion.

Tonight we’re celebrating the acquisition of our app, Curly-Q. A haircare company loved the idea of making curly hair care routines easy to follow and having a shop within the app for the products featured. So, they bought us out. We got to *finally* quit our jobs at Wreston because of it. Now, instead of dealing with corporate politics in conference rooms, I get to work with *my* Sterling every day. Plus our friends Brad and Zara.

Callum and I still argue, but now after each disagreement, we get to *make up*. There are times I rile him up just for the thrill of it. I’d feel bad if he didn’t do the exact same thing to me. Getting under each other’s skin used to be infuriating, but now it’s our version of fun.

“How do you feel, Mrs. Sterling?” Callum murmurs in my ear as we walk off the stage together. A shiver runs down my spine at the sound of his voice. It never gets old.

“Amazing,” I say with a grin and melt into his arms when they wrap around me. He tips my chin up and presses an agonizingly soft kiss to my lips.

“How much longer do I have to pretend to want to be here when I’d rather be home with you?” he says when he pulls back.

“Sterling,” I scold him. “Everyone is here to celebrate *us*. We can’t be the first to leave.”

“I’d much rather start our vacation early,” he says in a low voice, his brown eyes darkening. I bite my lip and his hands grip my waist tighter.

Callum and I decided to invest some of our money from the acquisition and use the rest to travel the world together, a long overdue vacation for both of us.

“Let’s make our rounds and then slip out,” I say and he grins.

“I love you.”

I grab his suit lapels and pull him down for another heated kiss. When we pull apart were both breathless, and I smile at the dazed look in his eyes.

“I love you more.”



Grace Parker

“This last song goes out to my wife and our baby boy. I wrote it the week after our son Caleb was born. Seeing Grace, my Angel, become a mother was the greatest blessing of my life since marrying her.”

Tears spring to my eyes as I watch Wyatt strum his guitar from where I stand in the wing backstage. Caleb is cooing in my arms, headphones protecting his sensitive little ears from the loud music and roar of the crowd. Wyatt cancelled his tour as soon as we found out Caleb’s due date, but he kept this show in Nashville on the schedule. It’s a charity show where all of the proceeds go to support helping homeless veterans.

I sing along, swaying Caleb to the tune of the music. We didn’t expect to be parents so soon after getting married, but I wouldn’t change a thing. Wyatt is the best father. He carries Caleb around our property, talking to

him like he knows what everything is. I never feel like I'm doing this on my own, and I know I don't have to be afraid of him doing what my biological dad did all those years ago. Caleb is well loved by many, including all of Wyatt's fans.

The song ends and Wyatt thanks everyone for coming out before jogging toward me, pouring sweat. I've gotten used to his post-performance state by now though, so I only squeal a little when he gives me a giant, damp hug.

He kisses me in a way that makes my knees weak, then presses a gentle kiss to the top of Caleb's head.

"Great show, Cowboy," I say with a smile. He grins at me and takes off his Stetson hat to rake a hand through his dirty blond curls.

"It was a good one," he agrees. "You should run out there and play a few songs before they leave."

I give him a flat look and he chuckles. As much as I've gotten used to the spotlight, I'm still not an extrovert by any stretch of the imagination. Being Wyatt Parker's wife is the closest to fame I ever want to get.

"One day I'll get you up there," he says with a grin. "But for today, let's get you and little man home."

"I like the sound of that. I know it's only been a few days, but I'm homesick."

"You just miss your library," he teases.

"You can't build a woman a library and expect her not to want to be in it every minute of the day."

"Fair enough, Angel. Fair enough."



Zara Jennings

“Do you think we could walk down to the beach tomorrow morning before everyone wakes up?” I ask Brad as he drives through the neighborhood of pastel homes in Charleston, South Carolina.

“Need a moment of peace before the chaos?” he asks with a grin.

“You get me. We don’t have to go if you want to sleep in, though.”

“I don’t mind. Anything for you, Z.”

My heart warms and I lean over the console to kiss his cheek.

We’re meeting up with all of my family for a week at the beach. Now that we sold our stock in Curly-Q, we have the time and money to travel more. My mom and dad have slowly come to speaking terms and agreed to meet us in Charleston. I think my brother Drake guilted them about their grandkids, but I don’t care, because we’ll get to see everyone in one place. We haven’t all been in the same city, much less the same house, since my parents divorced. They didn’t even get together for Brad and I’s wedding last month because my mom decided to bring a date and made my dad upset.

Brad turns on the wrong street, making me scrunch my brows together.

“My brother lives a street over,” I remind him, though I know he knows because we’ve visited a few times since we got together.

“Yep,” he says and I study his profile, taking in the secretive grin on his face.

“Bradley Jennings, what are you up to?”

He turns into the driveway of a sage-green beach house and puts the car in park.

“Come on,” he says and gets out. I unbuckle my seat belt and slowly step out of the car.

Brad slides a key out of his pocket and unlocks the front door, making me gape.

“Brad,” I whisper from where I’m frozen in the driveway. “Why do you have a key?”

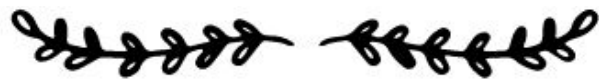
“They usually give these to a person when they buy a house.” He grins and holds out his hand to me. I slip my hand into his and let him lead me inside the house, my mouth opening and shutting like a fish.

My sandals slap against the tile and echo through the empty living area. It reminds me of my brother’s beach house, with coastal colors on the walls and sand-colored tile on the floors.

“This house came on the market after Curly-Q got acquired and I jumped on it right away. I know you hated losing your childhood home, and you love being around your brother’s family. We don’t have to live here full time if you want to keep our apartment in Atlanta, but I knew we needed a home in your favorite place.”

I throw my arms around him and kiss him. “Thank you. This is too much.”

“Nothing is too much for my girl.” He seals the statement with a kiss that takes my breath and makes my head spin.



Sophie St. James

“I can’t believe this is real,” I whisper as I stand in the middle of the dining area of my very own restaurant, Farm-To-Table. It opens tomorrow, so I wanted to come by tonight to see it one last time before it’s—hopefully—filled with people.

“It’s perfect, Soph,” Ben says, drawing me into his arms. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I sigh. “I know that I’ve got a whole fleet of food trucks now, but I still feel like I’m a baby chef sometimes.”

“It makes sense to feel overwhelmed when you’re doing something new.” He kisses the crown of my head. “But your food has won awards and even gone viral on TikTok. And all of your trucks sell out almost every day.”

“I know, but a restaurant feels *big*.”

“It *is* big, but you have everything you need to make this just as much of a success.”

“I wish I had your confidence in me.”

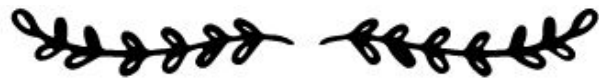
Ben chuckles and pulls back to meet my gaze. His green eyes always center me; they feel like a haven in a world of chaos. “You know I believe in you, but so does everyone else. You wouldn’t have investors if they didn’t think you’d turn a profit.”

“Your logic is sound, but I feel like an imposter.”

“Sophie, you’re the most talented chef I know and an amazing businesswoman. This restaurant is going to be a huge success and I can’t wait to add it to the list of things I tell everyone *my* gorgeous wife does. I know it’s hard to let go of the doubts, but you have no reason to doubt your abilities. I know I don’t.”

“Mush,” I whisper and he smiles then dips down to kiss me.

I wrap my arms around him and let myself sink into the kiss, into him. Every step of the way, Ben has been here encouraging and helping me. I don't think I could have done this without him. His confidence in me is priceless. Whenever I doubt myself, he's always there to show me what I can't see in myself. He's everything I could want in a husband and I'm so grateful I get to spend the rest of my life with my best friend.



Meadow Jane Holt

“How are you doing today?” I ask Sebastian when he walks into the kitchen after his morning run. He grabs a bottle of coconut water out of the fridge with a sigh.

“I’m doing okay, I think. The run helped.” He kisses my cheek and sits on a bar stool by the kitchen island while I flip pancakes.

It’s Maddie’s thirteenth birthday today, and it’s my goal to give her an amazing birthday. So I’m making her a big breakfast and I have a whole day planned for us. Sebastian and I both took off work, and my brothers all did too. It’s—hopefully—going to be a day of nonstop fun for Maddie.

But for Sebastian, today is also the day he lost his sister thirteen years ago. Which is another reason I took over all of the planning so that he didn’t have to worry about anything extra.

“If you need to, you can stay home. I know Maddie will understand.”

“No, I’d rather be with you two than at home by myself.”

I turn the burner off and set the platter of pancakes on the island beside the fruit tray and array of pancake toppings. Sebastian grabs me by the belt

loop of my jeans and tugs me over to him. He wraps himself around me, nestling his head in the crook of my neck and breathing deep.

“Lavender,” he murmurs against my skin. “You’re stressed.”

“Not stressed, worried for you.”

“I’m okay, beautiful. Just having a lot of emotions all at once. I can’t believe Maddie is thirteen. I feel old.”

I smile and rake my hands through his hair, eliciting a low hum that sends a tingle down my spine.

“You do have a few grays up here,” I tease and feel him smile against my skin. “I’m serious though, Bash. If you need some time to process, it’s not just you and Maddie on your own anymore. Your mom is coming later tonight, my brothers will be here in an hour, and Sophie said she and Bennett would come by for lunch.”

“My beautiful, caring wife.” He pulls back to look at me, warmth in his coastal blue eyes. “I will let you know if I need to step away, but for now, plan on me being glued to your side all day.”

“Sounds like every other day with you,” I say with a grin.

“I haven’t heard any complaints.” He brushes his lips against mine. “I can give you space if you want.” The smile on his lips shows me he doesn’t mean what he’s saying in the slightest.

“I’m sure you would.” Sarcasm coats my voice.

“If you could tell me to leave you alone and *mean* it, I would.”

“If I could say that I wouldn’t have married you.”

He shoots me a boyish grin that melts my heart. *I love him so much.*

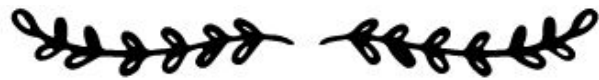
“Then it’s settled, you’re stuck with me.”

“I guess that’s okay,” I say with a shrug.

My attempt at nonchalance is stolen away though when he pulls me in to pepper my neck with ticklish kisses. I squeal and try half-heartedly to push him away.

“Are you guys being spicy again?” Maddie yells from the hall and we both fall over laughing.

This is my forever.

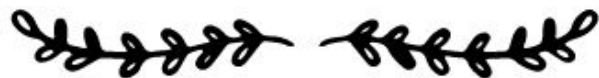


*Did you love MJ's brothers? Be sure to [sign up for my newsletter](#) to get a FREE book and find out when their series releases! **And keep reading to find out which brother gets the first book!***

Coming Soon...



Introducing the *But He's A Carter Brother Series*. A series based around MJ's four brothers finding love! Below is the blurb for the first book in the series, *But He's My Grumpy Neighbor*.



It's not stalking if he's your hot neighbor... right?

At least, that's what I tell myself when Adrian Carter moves in next door.

His scowl should make me want to run in the other direction, but when I catch him smothering a smile around me, it makes me want to get to know him more.

And when Adrian starts to open up, I find myself falling in love with the cinnamon roll center hidden beneath his gruff exterior.

But between my emotional baggage and his aversion to relationships, it's looking like we'll never be more than neighborly.

“But He’s My Grumpy Neighbor” is a grumpy/sunshine romcom for fans of sweet romantic comedies. It has all the sizzling chemistry you love, without any explicit scenes. Check out the first book of the But He’s A Carter Brother Series, a series based around four strong, protective brothers finding love.



Be sure to [subscribe to my newsletter](#) to find out when Adrian's book comes out!

Also By Anna

[The Love Audit](#) – A grumpy/sunshine, enemies to more, office romcom.

[One More Song](#) – A second chance romcom with a celebrity guy and bookish girl.

[Out of Office](#) - A FREE novella about two coworkers falling in love over a road trip.

[The First Taste](#) – A childhood best friends to more, fake dating romcom.

[One Last Play](#) – A reverse grumpy/sunshine, age gap, sporty romcom.

Author's Note

Hello lovely reader,

I am in shock. This is the last book in the Sweet Peach Series, my debut series. When I released the first book, *The Love Audit*, I had no idea it would be as well received as it was. I was terrified to put my work out there, to put a piece of my heart on display. But you all, my sweet readers, showed up and loved these couples more than I could have hoped!

Whenever I get to talk to a reader about their favorite girl or guy, my heart feels like it's going to burst I'm so happy. My dreams came true writing this series. I'm so grateful to this beautiful community for helping that happen.

So, the first time I wrote an author's note in *The Love Audit*, I added a few fun facts about the book in the back. I thought it would be fun to do that here too, as an end to the series!

1. The lover's eye locket is a real thing, and I own one. My amazing husband gifted me one with his own eye painted inside as my wedding present. He also thinks it's weird, but he loves me and my weirdness so he got it anyway.

2. There is a rubber duck in some shape or form in every book in this series. After TLA, I just decided to keep putting them in there. There's no reason for it, LOL.
3. At the beginning of each book, there is a song by the band Johnnyswim, which is one of my favorite bands ever. Their work inspires so much of my writing!
4. I used to think football was dumb and only went to games for the food, but after meeting my husband and joining his football-obsessed family, I enjoy it a lot! You can find me yelling at the TV in the fall. Roll tide!
5. MJ's book being last wasn't planned at all. I'm not a planner in general, but the other three girls' love stories fell into place much easier than hers. She needed someone special, someone who could get through her tough outer shell. Sebastian came to mind while I was finishing up *One More Song*, and I knew he'd be perfect for her. I wanted their lives to feel so intertwined that they bordered on the soulmate trope. Maybe it's not even bordering at this point, LOL. The jersey, the painting, and the timing of their losses. All of it came together to bring forth a story that I honestly adore and hope you do too.

Now for the wonderful question all authors get: What's next?

My next series is something I'm so excited about! I didn't know that the Carter brothers would become who they did when I first had MJ mention them in *The Love Audit*. But when I thought about my next series, I knew it had to be them. Let me know which brother is your favorite so far.

Be sure to come and find me on socials to chat! I love hearing from readers about anything and everything. It's my favorite part of being an

author.

Instagram: @authorannahconwell

Facebook group: Annah's Book Babes

And don't forget to [sign up for my newsletter](#) so you know when the next series comes out!

Happy reading,

Annah

Acknowledgments

Jesus, thank you for giving me love, life, and creativity.

To my husband Ryan, thank you for being the best husband any author and woman in general could ask for. I know how to write love stories because I get to live out the best one with you. This series couldn't have happened without your love and support. Thank you for looking me in the eye and telling me to stop doubting myself and just go for it. And for listening to me ramble about plot for hours. Also, you're really hot, so thanks for the eye candy.

To my critique partner and bestie, Dulcie, thank you for your unwavering support of me and this series. I've come to you feeling like I was the worst writer in the world and left feeling like the best. You helped make these books what they are!

To my best friends Kathryn, Baylie, and Bethany, thank you for supporting me and loving me the way you do. I see God's love in each and every one of you. I wrote the Sweet Peach girls because I wanted a group of friends like them. *You are those girls.* Thank you for being you.

To my editor Caitlin, thank you for being so kind and lovely when we work together. You make editing fun!

To my cover designer, Stephanie, thank you for working to make the things in my brain come to life. You're the best!

To my ARC team, thank you for being the very best team out there. You are all so wonderful and your support means the world to me.

And last but not least, thank YOU, wonderful reader, whoever you are. Thank you for buying my book and giving me a chance.

About The Author

Annah Conwell is a sweet romcom author who loves witty banter, sassy heroines, and swoony heroes. She has a passion for writing books that make you LOL one minute and melt into a puddle of ‘aw’ the next. You can find her living out her days in a small town in Sweet Home Alabama (roll tide roll!) with the love of her life (aka her husband), Ryan, and her two goofball pups, Prince and Ella. Most of the time she’s snuggled up under her favorite blanket on the couch, reading way too many books to call it anything other than an addiction, or writing her little hopeless romantic heart out.